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Mr. Peavey's Tiger

By Holly Wolcott

Remember when you were a child, and you played with invisible playmates? Maybe it's something that could happen to a grown-up too . . . like Mr. Peavey.

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

MR. PEAVEY had a tiger. This was rather unusual in several respects, not the least of which was that no one but Mr. Peavey had ever seen it. In the second place, Mr. Peavey was the last man in the world anyone would expect to have a tiger.

Of course, when he was a boy, he used to dream of having one. Then he'd ride on its back and they'd say, "There goes Peavey with his tiger," and not jump on him or push him in the face or sing out, "Peewee is a scardy cat." It was true that he was smaller than the rest of the boys and he couldn't jump as far or fight as long but he could run fast and he wanted, so very hard, to be liked. When he found out that they didn't want him, he began to read books and dream about rescuing fair maidens from cruel fates while riding his tiger.

When he grew up, he was still smaller than anyone his age so he practiced being inconspicuous so that no one would

notice him and push him around. At the office, he worked efficiently and quietly. Probably the girl who gave him his weekly salary check would not have recognized him outside since a bowler hat changes a man's looks. He lived in a furnished room in a boarding house near the lake and outside the reading, about the only time he felt anything resembling happiness was the hour he walked to the lake front and just looked at the water. Then a pure peace would flood his being and he rested in the beauty of nature.

It was in a moment like this the tiger turned up. Mr. Peavey became conscious that someone had stopped beside him. He thought to himself, "If I don't look maybe he'll go away."

A very deep, growly sort of voice spoke up then, "Nights like these make me think of that old Hindu poet who said,

*The stars look down to touch the
lake
And leave pieces of themselves for*

mortals to admire.”

Mr. Peavey turned around then and saw the tiger. The night was so enchanting that he did not realize how remarkable it was that he should be talking to a tiger on the edge of Lake Michigan until sometime afterwards. Instead he said, “That’s a very beautiful thought but not very poetically expressed.”

The tiger seemed somewhat annoyed. He sniffed a little as he answered. “I didn’t think you’d understand it at all if I said it in Hindustani but in that language it is exquisite.” So he said it over again in Hindustani and Mr. Peavey had to admit it was much more beautiful. They talked for quite awhile about various things that had often been on Mr. Peavey’s mind. He found the tiger to be a remarkably well read fellow and quite a philosopher in his own way.

Finally Mr. Peavey had to own he was cold. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you,” he said. “I’d like to know your name so that I can remember this night.”

The tiger obliged but out of the long string of syllables, Peavey only got the part that went . . rajamuri . . so the tiger said rather smugly, “Call me Rajah, or Raj for short. I don’t mind. How about spending your weekend with me? I’d like to show you some fine scenery on the Dunes. We might even go in

swimming.”

Mr. Peavey didn’t really expect anything like that would happen so he agreed to meet the tiger at the end of the rail line that went out to Highview on Saturday morning about ten and bring a lunch with him.

“What a remarkably superior sort of fellow that tiger is,” he told himself on the way home. “If I thought he were real I might be a little annoyed by his condescending manner.” It wasn’t until he had got into bed that he began to realize just how amazing the whole thing had been but by then he was so tired he fell asleep.

Saturday came along and Mr. Peavey found himself getting up at six-thirty to make the sandwiches and coffee. He told himself that a picnic wasn’t a bad idea but he quite frankly ignored the fact that he was packing more than enough for two people. He didn’t really believe the tiger would be there but it gave a slight glow to the morning and he found the train ride more exhilarating than usual. He normally spent travel time with his head in a book. This time he kept watching the other people and wondering what they would say if he were to tell them about his conversation with a tiger.

He got off at Highview feeling surprisingly let down. Of course,



The tiger was leering at every beautiful girl that went by.

there wasn't any tiger out here among the sand scrub trees or open-faced wooden shed that acted as a waiting room for the train. He sat down for a moment while he made up his mind what to do.

"Well Peavey, I see you made it." The deep voice in his ear made him jump a good foot into the air. When he came down, Mr. Peavey looked around. The tiger sat grinning at him in the friendliest way and he really couldn't deny that it made him happy to see him. They exchanged greetings and then the tiger stood up and stretched his full length (which was considerable) and said, "Let's go."

Now Mr. Peavey hadn't been outdoors in the daytime for more years than he liked to remember. An accountant gets more familiar with electric light than sun light. On Saturdays, Mr. Peavey was used to reading all day or spending his time at the museums, which amounts to the same thing. The tiger set off at a pretty good clip, leaving Peavey to carry the basket of food. At first he enjoyed the parklike nature of the terrain. He hadn't known there were so many trees on the Dunes nor how pretty they could look on a summer day. Then they started climbing what appeared to be small hills but half way up seemed to turn into small mountains. Peavey slipped and slid on the

leaves of the trails, alternately drenched in sweat and gasping for breath at the few moments the tiger decided to stop for a moment. Pretty soon though he began to get angry. It was all very well for the tiger to run through the woods but it was too much for him to get to the top and then to say, "Really, I didn't think you'd be so out of condition, old man. Think you can make it over the next hill?"

That did it. Even if he had to crawl from now on, Mr. Peavey would not admit he was licked. His soul was not made for resentment, however, so when they surmounted the last hill and came to a place surrounded by trees and looking out over the intense blue of the lake, he flopped flat on his back and lay there waiting for his heart to quit shaking him to pieces. The tiger sat looking out over the water too and then smiled at Peavey. "That was a good show you put up back there. To tell you the truth, I was sort of trying you out. So many people look good at first sight but they give out on you when you put the pressure on."

Mr. Peavey felt a glow of intense happiness steal over him. He realized that this bit of admiration was the first he'd had in years. Suddenly he felt rested and sat up. They decided to stay where they were and he began to lay out the lunch. There

was some cold water in an iron pipe nearby and a couple of wooden benches with backs but when he sat down to eat the tiger wouldn't join him.

"Dear me, no," he said. "I had a good meal last night and I won't be hungry again until tomorrow."

"But how do you manage to get food?" Mr. Peavey asked with visions of the tiger slinking around behind houses to steal a bite whenever he could. "From what you say, you're all alone in the world. And I always thought tigers ate meat."

The tiger smiled reminiscently and licked his lips as though tasting something over again. "Oh, I get along," he said. "There's always something around for someone with imagination and courage."

There was such a gleam in his eye that Mr. Peavey forbore to ask any more questions. As the afternoon wore on and they sat together peacefully looking at the lake and dozing, he found himself looking at the magnificent animal and wondering uneasily just what he had meant. He was so big, he'd have to eat a large amount and where would a tiger . . . who was alone in the world . . . get such an amount . . . of meat? Quickly he pulled his thoughts together. It wouldn't do any good to follow that line of reasoning. It wasn't any of his business

anyway.

About four the tiger stirred again. "How about going down to the beach and having a dip?" he said as he bounded to his feet and stretched. He seemed to do a lot of stretching but evidently it agreed with him for he looked every inch what a tiger should be. Indeed, he was quite the most beautiful tiger Peavey had ever seen.

Mr. Peavey looked down the beach with the crowds of people running up and down and crying out to one another and covering up the sand. "Won't you cause something of a sensation down there?"

The tiger smiled. "No one will notice me. Most people only see the things they want or expect to and not anyone down there will admit to himself he really sees me so . . . they won't."

They slithered down the sandy foot path, Mr. Peavey clutching the wicker basket that now was light enough to carry easily. Once they got to the beach he saw that the tiger knew what he was talking about. No one paid any attention except a small boy who screamed, "Mamma, mamma, see the man with the tiger," but his mother slapped him hard for lying and no one else looked up.

They walked along looking for a place to sit down and presently Mr. Peavey noticed that the tiger

was leering at all the pretty girls who went by, paying special attention to their ankles. What's more, he began to make various comments on portions of female anatomy as they passed. Mr. Peavey was wretchedly unhappy. He himself, never noticed such things and the thought of what the girls would say if they could hear the tiger was embarrassing.

That wasn't the worst of it either. Pretty soon the tiger began nipping the prettiest heels that went by. Peavey tried to stop him but there was such a look of devilish amusement in the tiger's eye that he couldn't bring himself to do more than remonstrate. Suddenly a couple of them screamed and turned around. They looked straight into Mr. Peavey's eyes and when they saw his red face they immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had done it somehow. One of them opened her mouth to scream but before she could get her breath, Mr. Peavey was fifty yards down the beach. They found a place after that and he sat down with his head upon his knees. The tiger came up to him after awhile and said coaxingly, "Oh, come on, Peavey. It wasn't that bad." Then he saw that Peavey really felt awful and started to sing. The melody began to insinuate itself between Mr. Peavey and his embarrassed feelings after awhile and presently

he was able to sit up and really listen. The tiger was singing it in Hindustani and it was a very beautiful thing.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"It's a hymn to the beauty of women," the tiger explained, smugly. "I'll admit, Peavey, I was a little exuberant awhile ago but that's all it was, just my way of expressing my admiration of beauty. And what is more beautiful than a beautiful woman?"

They were silent after that for a long time. The sun dropped lower and lower into the water and the noises of an afternoon beach crowd began to fade away. People started to leave. Families first, then single people and finally couples started to wander homeward arm in arm. They went in the lake a couple of times then and in the hush of evening, Peavey asked to learn the Hindustani song. He practiced it all the way back to the station which they reached by following the cement roadway that by-passed all the hills they had come over.

"It's been a wonderful day," he told the tiger while they waited for the train. "Won't you come home with me?"

But the tiger shook his head. "No, but I'll see you in a few days," and disappeared in the shadows behind the station at the approach of the headlights of the train.

Mr. Peavey spent the next

two days in agony. He had acquired a complete case of sunburn that made wearing the alpaca coat he used in the office an impossibility. He couldn't bear anything against his skin but the softest silk shirt he owned and so he did his work in unaccustomed nudity. For the first time since he had started to work, other members of the staff stopped at his desk to ask him how he was and comment on the magnificent condition of his burn. The boss's secretary said to her girl friend on their way to lunch, "You know, I would have sworn Peavey was sixty but he doesn't seem to be any more than thirty-five, if that. And not bad looking either."

As soon as he got over the sunburn, he and the tiger made a regular practice of the week-end trips and he slept out of doors more than once that summer and fall. He got brown and hard and began eating again. He got his hair cut short because it got in his way and somewhere along about October he began to learn to speak Hindustani. It was a beautiful language when the tiger spoke it and the condescension of his attitude toward ignorance of the classics in that tongue finally stirred Mr. Peavey into going out to the University of Chicago and arranging for lessons. He even stopped reading novels for books on travel and geography. The tiger had been

everywhere and wasn't at all reluctant to display how much he knew and Mr. Peavey didn't like being outdone.

Mr. Peavey brought the tiger down to the office one day when most everyone was gone. In spite of knowing by now that no one would notice, he kept feeling there would be some kind of disaster. Nothing happened unless you could call the complete disdain the tiger showed toward the whole thing a disaster.

He prowled around among the desks, switching his tail impatiently at the narrow spaces and stuffy air. "How can you bear to shut yourself up in four walls and do the same thing over and over?" he demanded. "It reminds me of the time the Sultan of . . ." and he was off on one of his interminable tales that always fascinated Mr. Peavey but also managed to put the tiger in the most favorable light.

Mr. Peavey began defending his job as furiously as though he hadn't begun to doubt its value himself. "The story of the world's commerce is told in these figures." He copied the tiger's own tones and got a sort of sneaking enjoyment out of seeing the tiger wince a bit.

"Do you know your stuff?" the tiger asked point-blank. Mr. Peavey, who was picking up some of his directness answered, "Yes." He forgot about this however,

when they went to visit the tiger's uncle who was living at the Lincoln Park Zoo.

"I go out there now and then to see the old boy. He gets a hankering to talk a bit with someone who understands him though he's happy enough on the whole," the tiger explained. "Bit of a bore though."

Mr. Peavey was impressed by the magnificence of the tawny color and the coppery eyes though he still preferred his own tiger, if only for sentimental reasons. Raj wandered off somewhere after introducing them, leaving Mr. Peavey standing before the cage somewhat at a loss for words. He needn't have worried. The tiger's uncle seemed to like the sound of his own voice. The upshot of it was that they had quite an interesting conversation about the conditions in the hills of India, which were the best rivers for hunting and other matters that had always made Mr. Peavcy curious. He didn't notice anyone else until he started to scratch the place the tiger itched, just behind his left shoulder blade. He had to reach through the bars of the cage to do this and the tiger just purred with satisfaction.

There was an "Ah!" of amazement and Mr. Peavey woke up to the fact that he collected an audience composed of a dozen children with their mouths and their eyes wide open, the white

faced Zoo keeper and a couple of young men wearing raincoats and carrying cameras. They all seemed very impressed by Mr. Peavey's bravery.

The Zoo keeper alternated between anger and admiration. "I never saw anyone get within six feet of that brute before. What's your secret?" he kept asking.

Mr. Peavey knew better than to tell them he'd been scratching the tiger's back because he asked him to, so he told them he spoke Hindustani and most animals liked him. They took a couple of pictures and interviewed him right then and there before Mr. Peavey remembered he had lost Raj somewhere. He told them he had to meet a friend and went off to find the tiger.

Raj was resting by the front entrance. He seemed preoccupied but when Mr. Peavey told him about the photographers, he said, "It's always good to have the press on your side. Cordial relations and all that. You never know when they'll come in handy." They went home for a snack after that. While they were sitting on the bed together, talking about women (which Mr. Peavey had learned to do) he looked at the magnificent length and breadth of his friend and sighed.

"What's the matter with you, my young friend?" The tiger raised his eyebrows gently.

"Oh, how I wish I could be a

tiger too," Mr. Peavey said from the bottom of his heart.

The tiger smiled the warmest, most beautiful expression he'd ever seen. "You know, Peavey," he said. "That's what I like about you. You have the capacity for big ideas. That's why I don't understand why you don't put them into practice."

Mr. Peavey said, "Huh?" but he knew very well what the tiger meant. All this talk about women and no real woman in his life. All this talk about travel and he'd never been outside the state of Illinois. Oh, he knew very well what the tiger meant.

Instead of answering, the tiger got up and went to the window which he used for a door most of the time in order to avoid the landlady. "I have to make a trip out of town for a few days," he informed Peavey. "I'll look you up when I get back." Then, with a single fluid motion, he was through the window and out of sight.

Mr. Peavey missed Raj at first, but as the days went by he began looking over the girls he knew with the view to asking one of them for a date. He finally picked on the Boss's secretary and they went dancing. But in spite of her pretty ankles, she didn't speak Hindustani and didn't seem to be particularly interested in strange countries or in tigers. He tried one after the other of the ones

he knew and had begun to keep an eye out wherever he went for the girl who might fill his specifications before he realized that Raj had been gone for a long time.

He was walking down Michigan Avenue one March day when he heard the sound of people screaming in front of the Art Institute. A year ago he would have glanced over briefly to see where the disturbance was and crossed the street to keep out of the crowd. Now he moved quickly toward the center of the greatest noise. It was a bright day, sun shining and a false note of spring in the air. Even the screams had a note of brightness in them. He pushed and squeezed between shoulders and elbows. When he got to the front lines, he discovered a young woman with the prettiest ankles he had ever noticed standing up on the ledge with the Art Institute lion, holding a little boy behind her and staring at his tiger who was pacing back and forth in front of them, switching his tail and making growling noises in the back of his throat.

"Raj," Mr. Peavey called out but his voice was drowned by the voices around him. Now that he could see, the whole thing had a sort of comic opera air since obviously Raj didn't mean anything. Then he realized that for

the first time, other people were seeing his tiger too. He had just a minute to notice this before he was recognized by the two bright young photographers who had taken his picture at the Zoo.

"Hey," they shouted. "Here's the man to do something about this. He knows all about tigers. Even talks their language." They took his arms and hustled him across the cleared space the crowd was keeping between themselves and the tiger. There was a policeman who was alternately saying "Hail Marys" under his breath and swearing at the crowd. About every so often he would pick up his whistle and sent out a blast that made the tiger growl even worse.

"Let Peavey try to get the tiger away from the girl," the reporters said to the policeman. So Mr. Peavey, in a dead hush, walked slowly up to his tiger. At first, he didn't think Raj recognized him but when he got up close, the tiger winked one eye in his direction.

"How am I doing, kid?" he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"In heaven's name, what's going on?" Mr. Peavey pleaded.

"Oh, I happened to run across just the girl for you. She speaks Hindustani, she's been to India and a lot of other places, so when I saw you coming down the street, I tried her for you."

Mr. Peavey looked up at the girl and she did look beautiful. And brave too since she was protecting the child from what she obviously thought was a horrible fate. He smiled at her and she risked a tentative grin in his direction. He looked at the tiger again.

"How come everyone can see you today?"

The tiger was having trouble keeping up his pose of being an angry tiger. He was feeling proud of himself and didn't care if Peavey saw it. "Oh, once in awhile I scare somebody and then they see me. Then everyone else can see me too."

Right then, Mr. Peavey became aware that the crowd had been pulled away and while he'd been talking, in Hindustani incidentally, the police reserves had come. There were a dozen or more blue-clad policemen with riot guns and big sticks creeping up the steps to where he stood. Mr. Peavey had a moment to realize that the tiger might really be in danger before there was a single burst of sound from a machine gun and he felt, rather than heard it hit Raj. He made a dive for his tiger but it was too late. Raj sighed and sank down on the cement steps. Mr. Peavey dropped on his knees and reached out to touch Raj but there was surging forward of the crowd and before he knew what had

happened, many hands had hauled him away. There were a lot of voices, strange faces, flashlights popping and he couldn't see what had happened to Raj. No one paid the least attention to anything he said, until he was ready to weep with rage and frustration.

Suddenly he found himself being embraced by two young arms and a delightful bundle of femininity was kissing him. "You wonderful man," she cried. Then this girl, who was presumably thanking him for saving her life, was whispering in his ear. "Don't be afraid. I heard you talking to the tiger so I know you were friends. He got away." Then she was hugging him again for the benefit of the cameras.

He had to listen a couple more hours to the policeman saying, "I know we shot the tiger, see, there's blood on the cement. But how can he have disappeared?" And to the reporters who insisted on prying into his taste in socks and literature and to everyone else who had been there and wanted to shake his hand. Finally he managed to get away by taking the girl home with him.

She was sensible about everything. She kept saying over and over again, "He'll probably be waiting at home for you." And sure enough, when he ran into his room, Raj was lying on the bed, licking his leg and acting remarkably nonchalant about the

whole thing.

"Quite a hassle out there, wasn't it?" he said.

Peavcy had had enough. He swore in English and in Hindustani for some time and finally simmered down long enough to say, "I'm glad you weren't really hurt."

"The bullet hasn't been made yet that can kill me," the tiger quit licking his leg and got up lazily. "By the way, when I was in New York last week. I mentioned you to some friends of mine and they tell me they can use a man like you who knows India, Hindustani and figures. I'll give you the number and you can call them tomorrow sometime. You'll have to give up your job and travel." He actually stopped talking for a moment. Mr. Peavey wasn't paying much attention. The girl was really so pretty and was so much more interested in Mr. Peavey than the tiger that he couldn't take his eyes off her.

The tiger kind of purred to himself. Then he slipped out of the window and stuck his head back in with a definite leer on his face. "I have a previous engagement for the evening. Sorry I can't stay with you any longer. I'll see you tomorrow."

But neither Mr. Peavey nor the girl heard him or saw him go. Mr. Peavey had graduated from tigers.