



A. E. COPPARD (1878-), short-story writer and poet, began writing—or at least publishing—stories and poems comparatively late. His first volume of tales, "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," appeared in 1921. Since then, stories have come in steady succession from his gifted pen. The best-known collections are "Clorinda Walks in Heaven" and the "Field of Mustard." He writes mostly about the country. His first editions are in great demand among book-collectors.

THE TIGER

THE tiger was coming at last; the almost fabulous beast, the subject of so much conjecture for so many months, was at the docks twenty miles away. Yak Pedersen had gone to fetch it, and Barnabe Woolf's Menagerie was about to complete its unrivalled collection by the addition of a full-grown Indian tiger of indescribable ferocity, newly trapped in the forest and now for the first time exhibited, and so on, and so on. All of which, as it happened, was true. On the previous day Pedersen the Dane and some helpers had taken a brand new four-horse exhibition waggon, painted and carved with extremely legendary tigers lapped in blood—even the bars were gilded—to convey this unmatchable beast to its new masters. The show had had to wait a long time for a tiger, but it had got a beauty at last, a terror indeed by all accounts, though it is not to be imagined that everything recorded of it by Barnabe Woolf was truth and nothing but truth. Showmen do not work in that way.

Yak Pedersen was the tamer and menagerie manager, a tall, blonde, angular man about thirty-five, of dissolute and savage blood himself, with the very ample kind of moustache that bald men often develop; yes, bald, intemperate, lewd, and an interminable smoker of Cuban cigarettes, which seemed constantly to threaten a conflagration in that moustache. Marie the Cossack hated him, but Yak loved her with a fierce deep passion. Nobody knew why she was called Marie the Cossack. She came from Canning Town—everybody knew that, and her proper name was Fascota, Mrs Fascota, wife of Jimmy Fascota, who was the architect and carpenter and builder of the show. Jimmy was not much to look at, so little in fact that you couldn't help wondering what it was Marie had seen in him

when she could have had the King of Poland, as you might say, almost for the asking. But still Jimmy was the boss ganger of the show, and even that young gentleman in frock coat and silk hat who paraded the platform entrance to the arena and rhodomontadoed you into it, often against your will, by the seductive recital of the seven ghastly wonders of the world, all certainly to be seen, to be seen inside, waiting to be seen, must be seen, roll up—even he was subject to the commands of Jimmy Fascota when the time came to dismantle and pack up the show, although the transfer of his activities involved him temporarily in a change, a horrid change, of attire and language. Marie was not a lady, but she was not for Pedersen anyway. She swore like a factory foreman, or a young soldier, and when she got tipsy she was full of freedoms. By the power of God she was beautiful, and by the same gracious power she was virtuous. Her husband knew it; he knew all about Master Pedersen's passion, too, and it did not interest him. Marie did feats in the lion cages, whipping poor decrepit beasts, desiccated by captivity, through a hoop or over a stick of wood and other kindergarten disportings; but there you are, people must live, and Marie lived that way. Pedersen was always wooing her. Sometimes he was gracious and kind, but at other times when his failure wearied him he would be cruel and sardonic, with a suggestive tongue whose vice would have scourged her were it not that Marie was impervious, or too deeply inured to mind it. She always grinned at him or fobbed him off with pleasantries, whether he was amorous or acrid.

“God Almighty!” he would groan, “she is not good for me, this Marie. What can I do for her? She is burning me alive and the Skaggerack could not quench me, not all of it. The devil! What can I do with this? Some day I shall smash her across the eyes, yes, across the eyes.”

So you see the man really loved her.

When Pedersen returned from the docks, the car with its captive was dragged to a vacant place in the arena, and the wooden front panel was let down from the bars. The marvellous tiger was revealed. It sprung into a crouching attitude as the light surprised the appalling beauty of its smooth fox-coloured coat, its ebony stripes, and snowy pads and belly. The Dane, who was slightly drunk, uttered a yell and struck the bars of the cage with his whip. The tiger did not blench, but all the malice and ferocity in the world seemed to congregate in its eyes and impress with a pride and ruthless grandeur the

colossal brutality of its face. It did not move its body, but its tail gradually stiffened out behind it as stealthily as fire moves in the forest undergrowth, and the hair along the ridge of its back rose in fearful spikes. There was the slightest possible distension of the lips, and it fixed its marvellous baleful gaze upon Pedersen. The show people were hushed into silence, and even Pedersen was startled. He showered a few howls and curses at the tiger, who never ceased to fix him with eyes that had something of contempt in them and something of a horrible presage. Pedersen was thrusting a sharp spike through the bars when a figure stepped from the crowd. It was an old negro, a hunchback with a white beard, dressed in a red fez cap, long tunic of buff cotton, and blue trousers. He laid both his hands on the spike and shook his head deprecatingly, smiling all the while. He said nothing, but there was nothing he could say—he was dumb.

“ Let him alone, Yak ; let the tiger alone, Yak ! ” cried Barnabe Woolf. “ What is this feller ? ”

Pedersen, with some reluctance, turned from the cage and said : “ He is come with the animal. ”

“ So ? ” said Barnabe. “ Vell, he can go. Ve do not vant any black feller. ”

“ He cannot speak—no tongue—it is gone, ” Yak replied.

“ No tongue ! Vot, have they cut him out ? ”

“ I should think it, ” said the tamer. “ There was two of them, a white keeper, but that man fell off the ship one night and they do not see him any more. This chap he feed it and look after it. No information of him, dumb, you see, and a foreigner ; don't understand. He have no letters, no money, no name, nowheres to go. Dumb, you see, he has nothing, nothing but a flote. The captain said to take him away with us. Give a job to him, he is a proposition. ”

“ Vot is he got you say ? ”

“ Flote. ” Pedersen imitated with his fingers and lips the actions of a flute-player.

“ Oh ya, a vloot ! Vell, ve don't want no vloots now ; ve feeds our own tigers, don't ve, Yak ? ” And Mr. Woolf, oily but hearty—and well he might be so for he was beautifully rotund, hair like satin, extravagantly clothed, and rich with jewellery—surveyed first with a contemplative grin, and then compassionately the figure of the old negro, who stood unsmiling with his hands crossed humbly before him. Mr. Woolf was usually perspiring, and usually being addressed by perspiring workmen, upon whom he bellowed orders and such anathemas

as reduced each recipient to the importance of a potato, and gave him the aspect of a consumptive sheep. But to-day Mr. Woolf was affable and calm. He took his cigar from his mouth and poured a flood of rich grey air from his lips. "Oh ya, look after him a day, or a couple of days." At that one of the boys began to lead the hunchback away as if he were a horse. "Come on, Pompoon," he cried, and thenceforward the unknown negro was called by that name.

Throughout the day the tiger was the sensation of the show, and the record of its ferocity attached to the cage received thrilling confirmation whenever Pedersen appeared before the bars. The sublime concentration of hatred was so intense that children screamed, women shuddered, and even men held their breath in awe. At the end of the day the beasts were fed. Great hacks of bloody flesh were forked into the bottoms of the cages, the hungry victims pouncing and snarling in ecstasy. But no sooner were they served than the front panel of each cage was swung up, and the inmate in the seclusion of his den slaked his appetite and slept. When the public had departed, the lights were put out and the doors of the arena closed. Outside in the darkness only its great rounded oblong shape could be discerned, built high of painted wood, roofed with striped canvas, and adorned with flags. Beyond this matchbox coliseum was a row of caravans, tents, naphtha flares, and buckets of fire on which suppers were cooking. Groups of the show people sat or lounged about, talking, cackling with laughter, and even singing. No one observed the figure of Pompoon as he passed silently on the grass. The outcast, doubly chained to his solitariness by the misfortune of dumbness and strange nationality, was hungry. He had not tasted food that day. He could not understand it any more than he could understand the speech of these people. In the end caravan, nearest the arena, he heard a woman quietly singing. He drew a shining metal flute from his breast, but stood silently until the singer ceased. Then he repeated the tune very accurately and sweetly on his flute. Marie the Cossack came to the door in her green silk tights and high black boots with gilded fringes; her black velvet doublet had plenty of gilded buttons upon it. She was a big, finely moulded woman, her dark and splendid features were burned healthily by the sun. In each of her ears two gold discs tinkled and gleamed as she moved. Pompoon opened his mouth very widely and supplicatingly; he put his hand upon his stomach and rolled his eyes so dreadfully that Mrs.

Fascota sent her little daughter Sophy down to him with a basin of soup and potatoes. Sophy was partly undressed, in bare feet and red petticoat. She stood gnawing the bone of a chicken, and grinning at the black man as he swallowed and dribbled as best he could without a spoon. She cried out: "Here, he's going to eat the bloody basin and all, mum!" Her mother cheerfully ordered her to "give him those fraggiments, then!" The child did so, pausing now and again to laugh at the satisfied roll of the old man's eyes. Later on Jimmy Fascota found him a couple of sacks, and Pompoon slept upon them beneath their caravan. The last thing the old man saw was Pedersen, carrying a naphtha flare, unlocking a small door leading into the arena, and closing it with a slam after he had entered. Soon the light went out.

II

AFTER a week the show shifted and Pompoon accompanied it. Mrs. Kavanagh, who looked after the birds, was, a little fortunately for him, kicked in the stomach by a mule and had to be left at an infirmary. Pompoon, who seemed to understand birds, took charge of the parakeets, love birds, and other highly coloured fowl, including the quetzal with green mossy head, pink breast, and flowing tails, and the primrose-breasted toucans, with bills like a butcher's cleaver.

The show was always moving on and moving on. Putting it up and taking it down was a more entertaining affair than the exhibition itself. With Jimmy Fascota in charge, and the young man of the frock coat in an ecstasy of labour, half-clothed husky men swarmed up the rigged frameworks, dismantling poles, planks, floors, ropes, roofs, staging, tearing at bolts and bars, walking at dizzying altitudes on narrow boards, swearing at their mates, staggering under vast burdens, sweating till they looked like seals, packing and disposing incredibly of it all, furling the flags, rolling up the filthy awnings, then Right O! for a market town twenty miles away.

In the autumn the show would be due at a great gala town in the north, the supreme opportunity of the year, and by that time Mr. Woolf expected to have a startling headline about a new tiger act and the intrepid tamer. But somehow Pedersen could make no progress at all with this. Week after week went by, and the longer he left that initial entry into the cage of the tiger, notwithstanding the comforting support of firearms, and hot irons, the more remote appeared the possibility of its

capitulation. The tiger's hatred did not manifest itself in roars and gnashing of teeth, but by its rigid implacable pose and a slight flexion of its protruded claws. It seemed as if endowed with an imagination of blood-lust, Pedersen being the deepest conceivable excitation of this. Week after week went by and the show people became aware that Pedersen, their Pedersen, the unrivalled, the dauntless tamer, had met his match. They were proud of the beast. Some said it was Yak's bald crown that the tiger disliked, but Marie swore it was his moustache, a really remarkable piece of hirsute furniture, that he would not have parted with for a pound of gold—so he said. But whatever it was—crown, moustache, or the whole conglomerate Pedersen—the tiger remarkably loathed it and displayed his loathing, while the unfortunate tamer had no more success with it than he had ever had with Marie the Cossack, though there was at least a good humour in her treatment of him which was horribly absent from the attitude of the beast. For a long time Pedersen blamed the hunchback for it all. He tried to elicit from him by gesticulations in front of the cage the secret of the creature's enmity, but the barriers to their intercourse were too great to be overcome, and to all Pedersen's illustrative frenzies Pompoon would only shake his sad head and roll his great eyes until the Dane would cuff him away with a curse of disgust and turn to find the eyes of the tiger, the dusky, smooth-skinned tiger with bitter bars of ebony, fixed upon him with tenfold malignity. How he longed in his raging impotence to transfix the thing with a sharp spear through the cage's gilded bars, or to bore a hole into its vitals with a red-hot iron! All the traditional treatment in such cases, combined first with starvation and then with rich feeding, proved unavailing. Pedersen always had the front flap of the cage left down at night so that he might, as he thought, establish some kind of working arrangement between them by the force of propinquity. He tried to sleep on a bench just outside the cage, but the horror of the beast so penetrated him that he had to turn his back upon it. Even then the intense enmity pierced the back of his brain and forced him to seek a bench elsewhere out of range of the tiger's vision.

Meanwhile, the derision of Marie was not concealed—it was even blatant—and to the old contest of love between herself and the Dane was now added a new contest of personal courage, for it had come to be assumed, in some undeclarable fashion, that if Yak Pedersen could not tame that tiger, then Marie the Cossack would. As this situation crystallized daily,

the passion of Pedersen changed to jealousy and hatred. He began to regard the smiling Marie in much the same way as the tiger regarded him.

"The hell-devil! May some lightning scorch her like a toasted fish!"

But in a short while this mood was displaced by one of anxiety; he became even abject. Then, strangely enough, Marie's feelings underwent some modification. She was proud of the chance to subdue and defeat him, but it might be at a great price—too great a price for her. Addressing herself in turn to the dim understanding of Pompoon, she had come to perceive that he believed the tiger to be not merely quite untamable, but full of mysterious dangers. She could not triumph over the Dane unless she ran the risk he feared to run. The risk was colossal then, and with her realization of this some pity for Yak began to exercise itself in her; after all, were they not in the same boat? But the more she sympathized the more she jeered. The thing had to be done somehow.

Meanwhile Barnabe Woolf wants that headline for the big autumn show, and a failure will mean a nasty interview with that gentleman. It may end by Barnabe kicking Yak Pedersen out of the wild beast show. Not that Mr. Woolf is so gross as to suggest that. He senses the difficulty, although his manager in his pride will not confess to any. Mr. Woolf declares that his tiger is a new tiger; Yak must watch out for him, be careful. He talks as if it were just a question of giving the cage a coat of whitewash. He never hints at contingencies; but still, there is his new untamed tiger, and there is Mr. Yak Pedersen, his wild beast tamer—at present.

III

ONE day the menagerie did not open. It had finished an engagement, and Jimmy Fascota had gone off to another town to arrange the new pitch. The show folk made holiday about the camp, or flocked into the town for marketing or carousals. Mrs. Fascota was alone in her caravan, clothed in her jauntiest attire. She was preparing to go into the town when Pedersen suddenly came silently in and sat down.

"Marie," he said, after a few moments, "I give up that tiger. To me he has given a spell. It is like a mesmerize." He dropped his hands upon his knees in complete humiliation. Marie did not speak, so he asked: "What you think?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and put her brown arms

akimbo. She was a grand figure so, in a cloak of black satin and a huge hat trimmed with crimson feathers.

"If you can't trust him," she said, "who can?"

"It is myself I am not to trust. Shameful! But that tiger will do me, yes, so I will not conquer him. It's bad, very, very bad, is it not so? Shameful, but I will not do it!" he declared excitedly.

"What's Barnabe say?"

"I do not care. Mr. Woolf can think what he can think! Damn Woolf! But for what I do think of my own self. . . . Ah!" He paused for a moment, dejected beyond speech. "Yes, miserable it is, in my own heart very shameful, Marie. And what you think of me, yes, that too!"

There was a note in his voice that almost confounded her—why, the man was going to cry! In a moment she was all melting compassion and bravado.

"You leave the devil to me, Yak. What's come over you, man? God love us, I'll tiger him!"

But the Dane had gone as far as he could go. He could admit his defeat, but he could not welcome her all too ready amplification of it.

"Na, na, you are good for him, Marie, but you beware. He is not a tiger; he is beyond everything, foul—he has got a foul heart and a thousand demons in it. I would not bear to see you touch him; no, no, I would not bear it!"

"Wait till I come back this afternoon—you wait!" cried Marie, lifting her clenched fist. "So help me, I'll tiger him, you'll see!"

Pedersen suddenly awoke to her amazing attraction. He seized her in his arms. "Na, na, Marie! God above! I will not have it."

"Aw, shut up!" she commanded impatiently, and pushing him from her she sprang down the steps and proceeded to the town alone.

She did not return in the afternoon; she did not return in the evening. She was not there when the camp closed up for the night. Sophy, alone, was quite unconcerned. Pompoon sat outside the caravan, while the flame of the last lamp was perishing weakly above his head. He now wore a coat of shag-coloured velvet. He was old and looked very wise, often shaking his head, not wearily, but as if in doubt. The flute lay glittering upon his knees and he was wiping his lips with a green silk handkerchief when barefoot Sophy, in her red

petticoat, crept behind him, unhooked the lamp, and left him in darkness. Then he departed to an old tent the Fascotas had found for him.

When the mother returned the camp was asleep in its darkness and she was very drunk. Yak Pedersen had got her. He carried her into the arena, and bolted and barred the door.

IV

MARIE FASCOTA awoke the next morning in broad daylight ; through chinks and rents in the canvas roof of the arena the brightness was beautiful to behold. She could hear a few early risers bawling outside, while all around her the caged beasts and birds were squeaking, whistling, growling, and snarling. She was lying beside the Dane on a great bundle of straw. He was already awake when she became aware of him, watching her with amused eyes.

"Yak Pedersen ! Was I drunk ?" Marie asked dazedly in low, husky tones, sitting up. "What's this, Yak Pedersen ? Was I drunk ? Have I been here all night ?"

He lay with his hands behind his head, smiling in the dissolute ugliness of his abrupt yellow skull so incongruously bald, his moustache so profuse, his nostrils and ears teeming with hairs.

"Can't you speak ?" cried the wretched woman. "What game do you call this ? Where's my Sophy, and my Jimmy—is he back ?"

Again he did not answer ; he stretched out a hand to caress her. Unguarded as he was, Marie smashed down both her fists full upon his face. He lunged back blindly at her, and they both struggled to their feet, his fingers clawing in her thick strands of hair as she struck at him in frenzy. Down rolled the mass, and he seized it ; it was her weakness, and she screamed. Marie was a rare woman—a match for most men—but the capture of her hair gave her utterly into his powerful hands. Uttering a torrent of filthy oaths, Pedersen pulled the yelling woman backwards to him and, grasping her neck with both hands, gave a murderous wrench and flung her to the ground. As she fell Marie's hands clutched a small cage of fortune-telling birds. She hurled this at the man, but it missed him ; the cage burst against a pillar and the birds scattered in the air.

"Marie ! Marie !" shouted Yak, "listen ! listen !"

Remorsefully he flung himself before the raging woman,

who swept at him with an axe, her hair streaming, her eyes blazing with the fire of a thousand angers.

"Drunk, was I!" she screamed at him. "That's how ye got me, Yak Pedersen? Drunk, was I?"

He warded the blow with his arm, but the shock and pain of it was so great that his own rage burst out again, and leaping at the woman he struck her a horrible blow across the eyes. She sank to her knees and huddled there without a sound, holding her hands to her bleeding face, her loose hair covering it like a net. At the pitiful sight the Dane's grief conquered him again, and bending over her imploringly he said: "Marie, my love, Marie! Listen! It is not true! Swear me to God, good woman, it is not true, it is not possible! Swear me to God!" he raged distractedly. "Swear me to God!" Suddenly he stopped and gasped. They were in front of the tiger's cage, and Pedersen was as if transfixed by that fearful gaze. The beast stood with hatred concentrated in every bristling hair upon its hide, and in its eyes a malignity that was almost incandescent. Still as a stone, Marie observed this, and began to creep away from the Dane, stealthily, stealthily. On a sudden, with incredible agility, she sprang up the steps of the tiger's cage, tore the pin from the catch, flung open the door, and, yelling in madness, leapt in. As she did so, the cage emptied. In one moment she saw Pedersen grovelling on his knees, stupid, and the next . . .

All the hidden beasts, stirred by instinctive knowledge of the tragedy, roared and raged. Marie's eyes and mind were opened to its horror. She plugged her fingers into her ears; screamed; but her voice was a mere wafer of sound in that pandemonium. She heard vast crashes of some one smashing in the small door of the arena, and then swooned upon the floor of the cage.

The bolts were torn from their sockets at last, the slip door swung back, and in the opening appeared Pompoon, alone, old Pompoon with a flaming lamp and an iron spear. As he stepped forward into the gloom he saw the tiger, dragging something in its mouth, leap back into its cage.



And in the opening appeared Pompoon . . .