

A Tiger's Skin



By

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WILL OWEN



HE travelling sign-painter who was re-painting the sign of the Cauliflower was enjoying a well-earned respite from his labours. On the old table under the shade of the elms mammoth sandwiches and a large slice of cheese waited in an untied handkerchief until such time as his thirst should be satisfied. At the other side of the table the oldest man in Claybury, drawing gently at a long clay pipe, turned a dim and regretful eye up at the old sign-board.

"I've drunk my beer under it for pretty near seventy years," he said, with a sigh. "It's a pity it couldn't ha' lasted my time."

The painter, slowly pushing a wedge of sandwich into his mouth, regarded him indulgently.

"It's all through two young gentlemen as was passing through 'ere a month or two ago," continued the old man: "they told Smith, the landlord, they'd been looking all over the place for the Cauliflower, and when Smith showed 'em the sign they said they

thought it was the George the Fourth, and a very good likeness, too."

The painter laughed and took another look at the old sign; then, with the nervousness of the true artist, he took a look at his own. One or two shadows—

He flung his legs over the bench and took up his brushes. In ten minutes the most fervent loyalist would have looked in vain for any resemblance, and with a sigh at the pitfalls which beset the artist he returned to his interrupted meal and hailed the house for more beer.

"There's nobody could mistake your sign for anything but a cauliflower," said the old man; "it looks good enough to eat."

The painter smiled and pushed his mug across the table. He was a tender-hearted man, and once—when painting the sign of the Sir Wilfrid Lawson—knew himself what it was to lack beer. He began to discourse on art, and spoke somewhat disparagingly of the cauliflower as a subject. With a shake of his head he spoke of the possibilities of a spotted cow or a blue lion.

"Talking of lions," said the ancient, musingly, "I s'pose as you never 'eard tell of the Claybury tiger? It was afore your time in these parts, I expect."

The painter admitted his ignorance, and, finding that the allusion had no reference to an inn, pulled out his pipe and prepared to listen.

"It's a while ago now," said the old man, slowly, "and the circus the tiger belonged to was going through Claybury to get to Wickham, when, just as they was passing Gill's farm, a steam-ngine they 'ad to draw some o' the vans broke down, and they 'ad to stop while the blacksmith mended it. That being so, they put up a big tent and 'ad the circus 'ere.

"I was one o' them as went, and I must say it was worth the money, though Henery Walker was disappointed at the man who put 'is 'ead in the lion's mouth. He said that the man frightened the lion first, before 'e did it.

"It was a great night for Claybury, and for about a week nothing else was talked of. All the children was playing at being lions and tigers and such-like, and young Roberts pretty near broke 'is back trying to see if he could ride horseback standing up.

"It was about two weeks after the circus 'ad gone when a strange thing 'appened: the big tiger broke loose. Bill Chambers brought the news first, 'aving read it in the newspaper while 'e was 'aving his tea. He brought out the paper and showed us, and soon after we 'eard all sorts o' tales of its doings.

"At first we thought the tiger was a long way off, and we was rather amused at it. Frederick Scott laughed 'imself silly a'most up 'ere one night thinking 'ow surprised a man would be if 'e come 'ome one night and found the tiger sitting in his arm-chair eating the baby. It didn't seem much of a laughing matter to me, and I said so; none of us liked it, and even Sam Jones, as 'ad got twins for the second time, said 'Shame!' But Frederick Scott was a man as would laugh at anything.

"When we 'eard that the tiger 'ad been seen within three miles of Claybury things began to look serious, and Peter Gubbins said that something ought to be done, but before we could think of anything to do something 'appened.

"We was sitting up 'ere one evening 'aving a mug o' beer and a pipe—same as I might be now if I'd got any baccy left—and talking about it, when we 'eard a shout and saw a ragged-looking tramp running towards us as ard as he could run. Every now and then

he'd look over 'is shoulder and give a shout, and then run 'arder than afore.

"'It's the tiger!' ses Bill Chambers, and afore you could wink a'most he was inside the house, 'aving first upset Smith and a pot o' beer in the doorway.

"Before he could get up, Smith 'ad to wait till we was all in. His langwidge was awful for a man as 'ad a license to lose, and everybody shouting 'Tiger!' as they trod on 'im didn't ease 'is mind. He was inside a'most as soon as the last man, though, and in a flash he 'ad the door bolted just as the tramp flung 'imself agin it, all out of breath and sobbing 'is hardest to be let in.

"'Open the door,' he ses, banging on it.

"'Go away,' ses Smith.

"'It's the tiger,' screams the tramp; 'open the door.'

"'You go away,' ses Smith, 'you're attracting it to my place; run up the road and draw it off.'

"Just at that moment John Biggs, the blacksmith, come in from the tap-room, and as soon as he 'eard wot was the matter 'e took down Smith's gun from behind the bar and said he was going out to look after the wimmen and children.

"'Open the door,' he ses.

"He was trying to get out and the tramp outside was trying to get in, but Smith held on to that door like a Briton. Then John Biggs lost 'is temper, and he ups with the gun—Smith's own gun, mind you—and fetches 'im a bang over the 'ead with it. Smith fell down at once, and afore we could 'elp ourselves the door was open, the tramp was inside, and John Biggs was running up the road, shouting 'is hardest.

"We 'ad the door closed afore you could wink a'most, and then, while the tramp lay in a corner 'aving brandy, Mrs. Smith got a bowl of water and a sponge and knelt down bathing 'er husband's 'ead with it.

"'Did you see the tiger?' ses Bill Chambers.

"'See it?' ses the tramp, with a shiver. 'Oh, Lord!'

"He made signs for more brandy, and Henery Walker, wot was acting as landlord, without being asked, gave it to 'im.

"'It chased me for over a mile,' ses the tramp; 'my 'art's breaking.'

"He gave a groan and fainted right off. A terrible faint it was, too, and for some time we thought 'e'd never come round agin. First they poured brandy down 'is throat, then gin, and then beer, and still 'e didn't come round, but lay quiet with 'is eyes closed and a horrible smile on 'is face.

"He come round at last, and with nothing stronger than water, which Mrs. Smith kept pouring into 'is mouth. First thing we noticed was that the smile went, then 'is eyes opened, and suddenly 'e sat up with a shiver

doing that there was the chance for the others to get 'ome safe. Two or three of 'em took a dislike to Smith that night and told 'im so.

"The end of it was we all slept in the tap-room that night. It seemed strange at first,



"FOR SOME TIME WE THOUGHT 'E'D NEVER COME ROUND AGIN."

and gave such a dreadful scream that we thought at first the tiger was on top of us.

"Then 'e told us 'ow he was sitting washing 'is shirt in a ditch, when he 'eard a snuffling noise and saw the 'ead of a big tiger sticking through the hedge the other side. He left 'is shirt and ran, and 'e said that, fortunately, the tiger stopped to tear the shirt to pieces, else 'is last hour would 'ave arrived.

"When 'e 'ad finished Smith went upstairs and looked out of the bedroom winders, but 'e couldn't see any signs of the tiger, and 'e said no doubt it 'ad gone down to the village to see wot it could pick up, or p'r'aps it 'ad eaten John Biggs.

"However that might be, nobody cared to go outside to see, and after it got dark we liked going 'ome less than ever.

"Up to ten o'clock we did very well, and then Smith began to talk about 'is license. He said it was all rubbish being afraid to go 'ome, and that, at any rate, the tiger couldn't eat more than one of us, and while 'e was

but anything was better than going 'ome in the dark, and we all slept till about four next morning, when we woke up and found the tramp 'ad gone and left the front-door standing wide open.

"We took a careful look-out, and by-and-by first one started off and then another to see whether their wives and children 'ad been eaten or not. Not a soul 'ad been touched, but the wimmen and children was that scared there was no doing anything with 'em. None o' the children would go to school, and they sat at 'ome all day with the front-winder blocked up with a mattress to keep the tiger out.

"Nobody liked going to work, but it 'ad to be done, and as Farmer Gill said that tigers went to sleep all day and c'nly came out towards evening we was a bit comforted. Not a soul went up to the Cauliflower that evening for fear of coming 'ome in the dark, but as nothing 'appened that night we began to 'ope as the tiger 'ad travelled farther on.

"Bob Pretty laughed at the whole thing and said 'e didn't believe there was a tiger; but nobody minded wot 'e said, Bob Pretty being, as I've often told people, the black sheep o' Claybury, wot with poaching and, wot was worse, 'is artfulness.

"But the very next morning something 'appened that made Bob Pretty look silly and wish 'e 'adn't talked quite so fast; for at five o'clock Frederick Scott, going down to feed 'is hins, found as the tiger 'ad been there afore 'im and 'ad eaten no less than seven of 'em. The side of the hin-'ouse was all broke in, there was a few feathers lying on the ground, and two little chicks smashed and dead beside 'em.

"The way Frederick Scott went on about it you'd 'ardly believe. He said that Govinment 'ud 'ave to make it up to 'im, and instead o' going to work 'e put the two little chicks and the feathers into a pudding basin and walked to Cudford, four miles off, where they 'ad a policeman.

"He saw the policeman, William White by name, standing at the back-door o' the Fox and Hounds public-house, throwing a 'andful o' corn to the landlord's fowls, and the first thing Mr. White ses was, 'It's off my beat,' he ses.

"'But you might do it in your spare time, Mr. White,' ses Frederick Scott. 'It's very likely that the tiger'll come back to my hin-'ouse to-night for the rest of 'em, and he'd be very surprised if 'e popped 'is 'ead in and see you there waiting for 'im.'

"'He'd 'ave reason to be,' ses Policeman White, staring at 'im.

"'Think of the praise you'd get,' said Frederick Scott, coaxing like.

"'Look 'ere,' ses Policeman White, 'if you don't take yourself and that pudding basin off pretty quick, you'll come along o' me, d'ye see? You've been drinking and you're in a excited state.'

"He gave Frederick Scott a push and follered 'im along the road, and every time Frederick stopped to ask 'im wot 'e was doing o' 'e gave 'im another push to show 'im.

"Frederick Scott told us all about it that

evening, and some of the bravest of us went up to the Cauliflower to talk over wot was to be done, though we took care to get 'ome while it was quite light. That night Peter Gubbins's two pigs went. They were two o' the likeliest pigs I ever seed, and all Peter Gubbins could do was to sit up in bed shivering and listening to their squeals as the tiger dragged 'em off. Pretty near all Claybury was round that sty next morning looking at the broken fence. Some of them



"'PUT THE TWO LITTLE CHICKS AND THE FEATHERS INTO A PUDDING BASIN AND WALKED TO CUDFORD.'"

looked for the tiger's footmarks, but it was dry weather and they couldn't see any. Nobody knew whose turn it would be next, and the most sensible man there, Sam Jones, went straight off 'ome and killed his pig afore 'e went to work.

"Nobody knew wot to do; Farmer Hall said as it was a soldier's job, and 'e drove over to Wickham to tell the police so, but nothing came of it, and that night at ten minutes to twelve Bill Chambers's pig went. It was one o' the biggest pigs ever raised in Claybury, but the tiger got it off as easy as



"ONE O' THE BIGGEST PIGS EVER RAISED IN CLAYBURY."

possible. Bill 'ad the bravery to look out of the winder when 'e 'eard the pig squeal, but there was such a awful snarling noise that 'e daresn't move 'and or foot.

"Dicky Weed's idea was for people with pigs and such-like to keep 'em in the house of a night, but Peter Gubbins and Bill Chambers both pointed out that the tiger could break a back-door with one blow of 'is paw, and that if 'e got inside he might take something else instead o' pig. And they said that it was no worse for other people to lose pigs than wot it was for them.

"The odd thing about it was that all this time nobody 'ad ever seen the tiger except the tramp, and people sent their children back to school agin and felt safe going about in the daytime till little Charlie Gubbins came running 'ome crying and saying that 'e'd seen it. Next morning a lot more children see it and was afraid to go to school, and people began to wonder wot 'ud happen when all the pigs and poultry was eaten.

"Then Henery Walker see it. We was sitting inside 'ere with scythes, and pitch-forks, and such-like things handy, when we see 'im come in without 'is hat. His eyes was staring and 'is hair was all rumped. He called for a pot o' ale and drank it nearly off, and then 'e sat gasping and 'olding the mug between 'is legs and shaking 'is 'ead at

the floor till everybody 'ad left off talking to look at 'im.

"'Wot's the matter, Henery?' ses one of 'em.

"'Don't ask me,' ses Henery Walker, with a shiver.

"'You don't mean to say as 'ow you've seen the tiger?' ses Bill Chambers.

"Henery Walker didn't answer 'im. He got up and walked back'ards and for'ards, still with that frightened look in 'is eyes, and once or twice 'e give such a terrible start that 'e frightened us 'arf out of our wits. Then Bill Chambers

took and forced 'im into a chair and give 'im two o' gin and patted 'im on the back, and at last Henery Walker got 'is senses back agin and told us 'ow the tiger 'ad chased 'im all round and round the trees in Plashett's Wood until 'e managed to climb up a tree and escape it. He said the tiger 'ad kept 'im there for over an hour, and then suddenly turned round and bolted off up the road to Wickham.

"It was a merciful escape, and everybody said so except Sam Jones, and 'e asked so many questions that at last Henery Walker asked 'im outright if 'e disbelieved 'is word.

"'It's all right, Sam,' ses Bob Pretty, as 'ad come in just after Henery Walker. 'I see 'im with the tiger after 'im.'

"'Wot?' ses Henery, staring at 'im.

"'I see it all, Henery,' ses Bob Pretty, 'and I see your pluck. It was all you could do to make up your mind to run from it. I believe if you'd 'ad a fork in your 'and you'd 'ave made a fight for it.'

"Everybody said 'Bravo!'; but Henery Walker didn't seem to like it at all. He sat still, looking at Bob Pretty, and at last 'e ses, 'Where was you?' 'e ses.

"'Up another tree, Henery, where you couldn't see me,' ses Bob Pretty, smiling at 'im.

"Henery Walker, wot was drinking some beer, choked a bit, and then 'e put the mug

down and went straight off 'ome without saying a word to anybody. I knew 'e didn't like Bob Pretty, but I couldn't see why 'e should be cross about 'is speaking up for 'im as 'e had done, but Bob said as it was 'is modesty, and 'e thought more of 'im for it.

"After that things got worse than ever; the wimmen and children stayed indoors and kept the doors shut, and the men never knew when they went out to work whether they'd come 'ome agin. They used to kiss their children afore they went out of a morning, and their wives too, some of 'em; even men who'd been married for years did. And several more of 'em see the tiger while they was at work, and came running 'ome to tell about it.

"The tiger 'ad been making free with Claybury pigs and such-like for pretty near a week, and nothing 'ad been done to try and catch it, and wot made Claybury men madder than anything else was folks at Wickham saying it was all a mistake, and the tiger 'adn't escaped at all. Even parson, who'd been away for a holiday, said so, and Henery Walker told 'is wife that if she ever set foot inside the church agin 'e'd ask 'is old mother to come and live with 'em.

"He was a quiet man, was George, but when 'is temper was up 'e didn't care for anything. Afore he came to Claybury 'e 'ad been in the Militia, and that evening at the Cauliflower 'e turned up with a gun over 'is shoulder and made a speech, and asked who was game to go with 'im and hunt the tiger. Bill Chambers, who was still grieving after 'is pig, said 'e would, then another man offered, until at last there was seventeen of 'em. Some of 'em 'ad scythes and some pitchforks, and one or two of 'em guns, and it was one o' the finest sights I ever seed when George Kettle stood 'em in rows of four and marched 'em off.

"They went straight up the road, then across Farmer Gill's fields to get to Plashett's Wood, where they thought the tiger 'ud most likely be, and the nearer they got to the wood the slower they walked. The sun 'ad just gone down and the wood looked very quiet and dark, but John Biggs, the blacksmith, and George Kettle walked in first and the others follered, keeping so close together that Sam Jones 'ad a few words over his shoulder with Bill Chambers about the way 'e was carrying 'is pitchfork.



"ARE YOU BRAVE LADS A-LOOKING FOR THE TIGER?" HE ASKS.

"It was all very well for parson to talk, but the very night he come back Henery Walker's pig went, and at the same time George Kettle lost five or six ducks.

until they'd walked all round the wood without seeing anything but one or two rabbits. John Biggs and George Kettle wanted for to stay there till it was dark, but the others

"Every now and then somebody 'ud say, '*Wol's that?*' and they'd all stop and crowd together and think the time 'ad come, but it 'adn't, and then they'd go on agin, trembling,

wouldn't 'ear of it for fear of frightening their wives, and just as it was getting dark they all come tramp, tramp, back to the Cauliflower agin.

"Smith stood 'em 'arf a pint apiece, and they was all outside 'ere fancying themselves a bit for wot they'd done when we see old mar Parsley coming along on two sticks as fast as 'e could come.

"'Are you brave lads a-looking for the tiger?' he asks.

"'Yes,' ses John Biggs.

"'Then 'urry up, for the sake of mercy,' ses old Mr. Parsley, putting 'is 'and on the table and going off into a fit of coughing; 'it's just gone into Bob Pretty's cottage. I was passing and saw it.'

"George Kettle snatches up 'is gun and shouts out to 'is men to come along. Some of 'em was for 'anging back at first, some because they didn't like the tiger and some because they didn't like Bob Pretty, but John Biggs drove 'em in front of 'im like a flock o' sheep and then they gave a cheer and ran after George Kettle, full pelt up the road.

"A few wimmen and children was at their doors as they passed, but they took fright and went indoors screaming. There was a lamp in Bob Pretty's front room, but the door was closed and the 'ouse was as silent as the grave.

"George Kettle and the men with the guns went first, then came the pitchforks, and last of all the scythes. Just as George Kettle put 'is 'and on the door he 'eard something moving inside, and the next moment the door opened and there stood Bob Pretty.

"'Wot the dickens!' 'e ses, starting back as 'e see the guns and pitchforks pointing at 'im.

"'Ave you killed it, Bob?' ses George Kettle.

"'Killed wot?' ses Bob Pretty. 'Be careful o' them guns. Take your fingers off the triggers.'

"'The tiger's in your 'ouse, Bob,' ses George Kettle, in a whisper. 'Ave you on'y just come in?'

"'Look 'ere,' ses Bob Pretty. 'I don't want any o' your games. You go and play 'em somewhere else.'

"'It ain't a game,' ses John Biggs; 'the tiger's in your 'ouse and we're going to kill it. Now, then, lads.'

"They all went in in a 'eap, pushing Bob Pretty in front of 'em, till the room was full. Only one man with a scythe got in, and they wouldn't 'ave let 'im in if they'd known. It a'most made 'em forget the tiger for the time.

"George Kettle opened the door wot led into the kitchen, and then 'e sprang back with such a shout that the man with the scythe tried to escape, taking Henery Walker along with 'im. George Kettle tried to speak, but couldn't. All 'e could do was to point with 'is finger at Bob Pretty's kitchen—and *Bob Pretty's kitchen was for all the world like a pork-butcher's shop!* There was joints o' pork 'anging from the ceiling, two brine tubs as full as they could be, and quite a string of fowls and ducks all ready for market.



"BOB PRETTY'S KITCHEN WAS FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE A PORK-BUTCHER'S SHOP!"

"'Wot d'ye mean by coming into my 'ouse?' ses Bob Pretty, blustering. 'If you don't clear out pretty quick, I'll make you.'

"Nobody answered 'im; they was all examining 'ands o' pork and fowls and such-like.

"'There's the tiger,' ses Henery Walker, pointing at Bob Pretty; 'that's wot old man Parsley meant.'

"'Somebody go and fetch Policeman White,' ses a voice.

"'I wish they would,' ses Bob Pretty. 'I'll 'ave the law on you all for breaking into my 'ouse like this, see if I don't.'

"'Where'd you get all this pork from?' ses the blacksmith.

"'And them ducks and hins?' ses George Kettle.

"'That's my bisness,' ses Bob Pretty, staring 'em full in the face. 'I just 'ad a excellent oppertunity offered me of going into the pork and poultry line and I took it. Now, all them as doesn't want to buy any pork or fowls go out o' my 'ouse.'

"'You're a thief, Bob Pretty!' says Henery Walker. 'You stole it all.'

"'Take care wot you're saying, Henery,' ses Bob Pretty, 'else I'll make you prove your words.'

"'You stole my pig,' ses Herbert Smith.

"'Oh, 'ave I?' ses Bob, reaching down a 'and o' pork. 'Is that your pig?' he ses.

"'It's just about the size o' my pore pig,' ses Herbert Smith.

"'Very usual size, I call it,' ses Bob Pretty; 'and them ducks and hins very usual-looking hins and ducks, I call 'em, except that they don't grow 'em so fat in these parts. It's a fine thing when a man's doing a honest bisness to 'ave these charges brought agin 'im. Dis'eartening, I call it. I don't mind telling you that the tiger got in at my back-winder the other night and took arf a pound o' sausages, but you don't 'ear

me complaining and going about calling other people thieves.'

"'Tiger be hanged,' ses Henery Walker, who was almost certain that a loin o' pork on the table was off 'is pig; 'you're the only tiger in these parts.'

"'Why, Henery,' ses Bob Pretty, 'wot are you a -thinkin' of? Where's your memory? Why, it's on'y two or three days ago you see it and 'ad to get up a tree out of its way.'

"He smiled and shook 'is 'ead at 'im, but Henery Walker on'y kept opening and shutting 'is mouth, and at last 'e went outside without saying a word.

"'And Sam Jones see it, too,' ses Bob Pretty; 'didn't you, Sam?'

"Sam didn't answer 'im.

"'And Charlie Hall and Jack Minns and a lot more,' ses Bob; 'besides, I see it myself. I can believe my own eyes, I s'pose?'

"'We'll have the law on you,' ses Sam Jones.

"'As you like,' ses Bob Pretty; 'but I tell you plain, I've got all the bills for this properly made out, upstairs. And there's pretty near a dozen of you as'll 'ave to go in the box and swear as you saw the tiger. Now, can I sell any of you a bit o' pork afore you go? It's delicious eating, and as soon as you taste it you'll know it wasn't grown in Claybury. Or a pair o' ducks wot 'ave come from two 'undered miles off, and yet look as fresh as if they was on'y killed last night.'

"George Kettle, whose ducks 'ad gone the night afore, went into the front room and walked up and down fighting for 'is breath, but it was all no good; nobody ever got the better o' Bob Pretty. None of 'em could swear to their property, and even when it became known a month later that Bob Pretty and the tramp knew one another, nothing was done. But nobody ever 'eard any more of the tiger from that day to this."