

What the Tyger Told Her

Kage Baker

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Kage Baker (www.members.tripod.com/~MrsCheckerfield) grew up in Hollywood and Pismo Beach, California, where she still lives. She's now writing a lot, but has worked as a graphic artist and mural painter, at "several lower clerical positions which could in no way be construed as a career, and (over a period of years for the Living History Centre) playwright, bit player, director, teacher of Elizabethan English for the stage, stage manager, and educational program assistant coordinator." She says "Twenty years of total immersion research in Elizabethan as well as other historical periods has paid off handsomely in a working knowledge of period speech and details." Baker is best known for her series of SF novels and stories about "The Company," stories of time travelers from our future delving into various periods of our past to rescue lost art and other treasures. She published a number of fine stories this year, including the action-packed novella "The Caravan from Troon."

In "What the Tyger Told Her," a neglected pet becomes the instrument of a family's destruction. This evocative story, which appeared in Realms of Fantasy, skirts the boundary between genre fantasy and psychological fantasy in the form of daydreams. We prefer the genre interpretation.

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"You must observe carefully," said the tyger.

He was an old tyger. He had survived in captivity more years than he might have been expected to, penned in his narrow iron run in such a cold wet country, in all weathers. He was just the color of toast, and white underneath like bread too. His back was double-striped with black streaks, and the rippling shadows of the bars as he paced continually, turn and turn again.

The little girl blinked, mildly surprised at being addressed. She had a round face, pale and freckled like a robin's egg. She had been squatting beside the tyger's pen for some minutes, fascinated by him. If anyone had seen her crouched there, crumpling the silk brocade of her tiny hooped gown, she'd have been scolded, for the summer dust was thick in the garden. But no one had noticed she was there.

"Power," said the tyger, "comes from knowledge, you see. The best way to learn is to watch what happens. The best way to watch is unseen. Now, in my proper place, which is jungle meadow and forest canes, I am very nearly invisible. That," and he looked with eyes green as beryls at the splendid house rising above the gardens, "is your proper place. Are you invisible there?"

The little girl nodded her head.

“Do you know why you’re invisible?”

She thought about it. “Because John and James were born.”

“Your little brothers, yes. And so nobody sees you now?”

“And because...” The child waved her hand in a gesture that took in the house, the garden, the menagerie, and the immense park in which they were set. “There’s so many uncles and people here. Mamma and I used to live in the lodging house. Papa would come upstairs in his uniform. It was red. He was a poor officer. Then he got sick and lived with us in his nightgown. It was white. He would drink from a bottle and shout, and I would hide behind the chair when he did. And John and James got born. And Papa went to heaven. And Mamma said oh, my dear, whatever shall we do?”

“What *did* you do?” the tyger prompted.

“I didn’t do anything. But Grandpapa forgave Mamma and sent for us.”

“What had your Mamma done, to be forgiven?”

“She wasn’t supposed to marry Papa because she is,” and the child paused a moment to recollect the big words, “an indigent tradesman’s daughter. Papa used to tell her so when he drank out of the bottle. But when she had John and James, that made it all right again, because they’re the only boys.”

“So they’re important.”

“They will inherit it all,” the child explained, as though she were quoting. “Because Papa died and Uncle John is in India, and Uncle Thomas only has Louise.”

“But they haven’t inherited yet.”

“No. Not until Grandpapa goes to heaven.”

“Something to think about, isn’t it?” said the tyger, lowering his head to lap water from his stone trough.

The little girl thought about it.

“I thought Grandpapa was in heaven when we went to see him,” she said. “We climbed so many stairs. And the bed was so high and white and the pillows like clouds. Grandpapa’s nightgown was white. He has white hair and a long, long beard. He shouted like Papa did. Mamma turned away crying. Mr.

Lawyer said It's only his pain, Mrs. Edgecombe. Uncle Thomas said Dear sister, come and have a glass of cordial. So she did and she was much better."

"But nobody saw *you* there, did they?"

"No," said the child.

"Who's that coming along the walk?" the tyger inquired.

"That is Uncle Thomas and Aunt Caroline," the child replied.

"Do you notice that she's not as pretty as your Mamma?5"

"Yes."

"And quite a bit older."

"Yes. And she can't have any children but Cousin Louise."

"I think perhaps you ought to sit quite still," advised the tyger.

The woman swept ahead in her anger, long skirts trailing in the tall summer grass at the edge of the walk, white ringers knotting on her lace apron, high curls bobbing with her agitation. The man hurried after her, tottering a little because of the height of his heels, and the skirts of his coat flapped out behind him. He wore bottle-green silk. His waistcoat was embroidered with little birds, his wig was slightly askew. He looked sullen.

"Oh, you have a heart of stone," cried Aunt Caroline. "Your own child to be left a pauper! It's too unjust. Is this the reward of filial duty?"

"Louise is not an especially dutiful girl," muttered Uncle Thomas.

"I meant your filial duty! One is reminded of the Prodigal Son. *You* have obeyed his every wish, while he thundered up there. Wretched old paralytic! And Robert disgraces himself, and dies like a dog in a ditch with that strumpet, but all's forgiven because of the twins. Are all our hopes to be dashed forever?"

"Now, Caroline, patience," said Uncle Thomas. "Consider: Life's uncertain."

"That's true." Aunt Caroline pulled up short, looking speculative. "Any childish illness might carry off the brats. Oh, I could drown them like puppies myself!"

Uncle Thomas winced. He glared at Aunt Caroline's back a moment before drawing abreast of her, by which time he was smiling.

"You'll oblige me by doing nothing so rash. Robert was never strong; we can pray they've inherited his constitution. And after all it would be just as convenient, my dear, if the wench were to die instead. I would be guardian of John and James, the estate in my hands; what should we have to worry about then?"

They walked on together. The little girl stared after them.

"Do you think they're going to drown my Mamma?" she asked uneasily.

"Did you see the way your uncle looked at your aunt behind her back?" replied the tyger. "I don't think he cares for her, particularly. What do *you* think?"

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There were fruit trees espaliered all along the menagerie wall, heavy now in apricots and cherries, and when the chimpanzee had been alive it had been driven nearly frantic in summers by the sight and the smell of the fruit. Now stuffed with straw, it stared sadly from a glass-fronted cabinet, through a fine layer of dust.

The little girl, having discovered the fruit was there, wasted no time in filling her apron with all she could reach and retiring to the shade under the plum tree. The largest, ripest apricot she bowled carefully into the tyger's cage. The others she ate in methodical fashion, making a small mound of neatly stacked pits and cherry stones.

The tyger paused in his relentless stride just long enough to sniff the apricot, turning it over with his white-bearded chin.

"Your baby brothers have not died," he said.

"No," the little girl affirmed, biting into a cherry.

"However, your Aunt Caroline has been suffering acute stomach pains, especially after dinner. That's interesting."

"She has a glass of port wine to make it better," said the child. "But it doesn't get better."

"And that's your Mamma coming along the walk now, I see," said the tyger. "With Uncle Thomas."

The child concealed the rest of the fruit with her apron and sat still. She needn't have worried: Neither her mother nor her uncle noticed her.

Like her daughter, Mamma had a pale, freckled face but was otherwise quite attractive, and the black broadcloth of her mourning made her look slender and gave her a dignity she needed, for she was very young. She was being drawn along by Uncle Thomas, who had her by the arm.

"We ought never to question the will of the Almighty," Uncle Thomas was saying pleasantly. "It never pleased Him that Caroline should bear me sons, and certainly that's been a grief to me; but then, without boys of my own, how ready am I to do a father's duty by dear little John and James! All that I might have done for my sons, I may do for yours. Have no fear on that account, dear Lavinia."

"It's very kind of you, brother Thomas," said Mamma breathlessly. "For, sure we have been so poor, I was at my wit's end—and father Edgecombe is so severe."

"But Robert was his favorite," said Uncle Thomas. "The very reason he disowned him, I think; Father couldn't brook disobedience in one he loved above all. If Henry or I had eloped, he'd have scarcely noticed. And Randall does what he likes, of course. Father was too hard on Robert, alas."

"Oh, sir, I wish someone had said so while he lived," said Mamma. "He often wept that he had no friends."

"Alas! I meant to write to him, but duty forbid." Uncle Thomas shook his head. "It is too bad. I must endeavor to redress it, Lavinia."

He slipped his arm around her waist. She looked flustered, but said nothing. They walked on.

"Mamma is frightened," said the child.

"There are disadvantages to being pretty," said the tyger. "As you can see. I imagine she wishes she could be invisible, occasionally. Your uncle's a subtle man; notice how he used words like *duty* and *alas*. No protestations of ardent passion. It's often easier to get something you want if you pretend you don't want it. Remember that."

The little girl nodded.

She ate another cherry. A peahen ventured near the wall, cocking her head to examine the windfall fruit under the little trees. As she lingered there, a peacock came stalking close, stiffened to see the hen; his whole body, bright as blue enamel, shivered, and his trailing train of feathers rose and spread behind him, shimmering in terrifying glory. Eyes stared from it. The little girl caught her breath at all the green and purple and gold.

“You mustn’t allow yourself to *be* distracted,” the tyger cautioned. “It’s never safe. You see?”

“What, are you lurking there, you little baggage?”

The little girl looked around sharply, craning her head back. Uncle Randall dropped into a crouch beside her, staring at her. He was young, dressed in tawny silk that shone like gold. His voice was teasing and hard. He smelled like wine.

“Ha, she’s stealing fruit! You can be punished for that, you know. They’ll pull your skirt up and whip your bare bum, if I tell. Shall I tell?”

“No,” said the child.

“What’ll you give me, not to tell?”

She offered him an apricot. He took it and rolled it in his hand, eyeing it, and hooted in derision.

“Gives me the greenest one she’s got! Clever hussy. You’re a little woman, to be sure.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she said nothing. He stared at her a moment longer, and then the tyger drew his attention.

“Aren’t you afraid of old Master Stripes? Don’t you worry he’ll break his bounds, and eat you like a rabbit? He might, you know. But I’m not afraid of him.”

The tyger growled softly, did not cease pacing.

“Useless thing! I’d a damn sight rather Johnnie’d sent us one of his blacks,” said Uncle Randall. He looked down at her again. “Well, poppet. What’s your Mamma’s favorite color?”

“Sky blue,” said the child.

“It is, eh? Yes, with those eyes, she’d wear that to her advantage. D’you think she’d like a velvet scarf in that color, eh? Or a cape?”

“She has to wear black now,” the child reminded him.

“She’ll wear it as long as it suits her, I’ve no doubt. What about scent? What’s her fancy? Tell me, does she ever drink strong waters in secret?”

The child had no idea what that meant, so she shook her head mutely. Uncle Randall snorted.

“You wouldn’t tell if she did, I’ll wager. Well. Does she miss your Papa very much?”

“Yes.”

“You must say ‘Yes, Uncle dear.’”

“Yes, Uncle dear.”

“There’s a good girl. Do you think you’d like to have another Papa?”

The child thought about it. Remembering the things Papa had said when he raved, that had made her creep behind the chair to hide, she said: “No.”

“No? But that’s wicked of you, you little minx. A girl must have a Papa to look after her and her Mamma, or dreadful things might happen. They might starve in the street. Freeze to death. Meat for dogs, you see, do you want your Mamma to be meat for dogs?”

“No,” said the child, terrified that she would begin to cry.

“Then you’ll tell her she must get you another Papa as soon as ever she may,” Uncle Randall ordered. “Do you understand me? Do it, and you’ll have a treat. Something pretty.” He reached down to stroke her cheek, and his hand lingered there.

“What a soft cheek you’ve got,” he said. “I wonder if your Mamma’s is as soft.”

The peacock was maneuvering up behind the hen, treading on her feathers. Seeing it, Uncle Randall gave a sharp laugh and shied the apricot at her, and she bolted forward, away from the peacock.

Uncle Randall strode off without another word.

“Now, your Uncle Randall,” said the tyger, “is not a subtle man. Nor as clever as he thinks he is, all in all. He talks far too much, wouldn’t you say?”

The child nodded.

“He uses fear to get what he wants,” said the tyger. “And he underestimates his opponents. That’s a dangerous thing to do. A bad combination of strategies.”

Wasps buzzed and fought for the apricot at his feet.

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The summer heat was oppressive. All the early fruit had fallen from the trees, or been gathered and taken in to make jam. There were blackberries in the hedge, gleaming like red and black garnets, but they were dusty and hard for the child to reach without scratching herself on the brambles.

There was a thick square of privet in the center of the menagerie courtyard, man-high. Long ago it had been a formal design, clipped close, but for one reason or another had been abandoned to grow unchecked. Its little paths were all lost now except at ground level, where they formed a secret maze of tunnels in the heart of the bush. There was a sundial buried in the greenery, lightless and mute: It told nobody anything.

The little girl had crawled in under the branches and lay there, pretending she was a jungle beast hiding in long grass. She gazed out at the tyger, who had retreated to the shade of the sacking the grooms had laid across the top of his pen. He blinked big mild eyes. He looked sleepy.

“How fares your Aunt Caroline?” he inquired.

“She’s sick,” the child said. “The doctor was sent for, but he couldn’t find anything wrong with her. He said it might be her courses drying up.”

“Do you know what that means?”

“No,” said the child. “But that’s what Uncle Thomas is telling everybody. And he says, you mustn’t mind what a woman says because of it. He’s very kind to her.”

“How clever of him.” The tyger yawned, showing fearful teeth, and stretched his length. “And he’s even kinder to your Mamma, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Very kind.”

“What do you suppose will happen if your Aunt Caroline dies?”

“She will be buried in the graveyard.”

“So she will.”

They heard footsteps approaching, two pairs.

The child peered up from under the leaves and saw Cousin Louise with one of the stableboys. She was a tall girl with a sallow complexion, very tightly laced into her gown in order to have any bosom at all.

The stableboy was thickset, with pimples on his face. He was carrying a covered pail. He smelled like manure.

“It be under here,” he said, leading Cousin Louise around the side of the privet square. “The heart of it’s all hollow, you see? And you can lie inside in the shade. It’s a rare nice place to hide, and there ain’t nobody knows it’s here but me.”

“Audacious rogue!” Cousin Louise giggled. “I’ll tear my gown.”

“Then the Squire’ll buy thee a new one, won’t he? Get in there.”

The child lay very still. She heard the branches parting and the sound of two people awkwardly arranging themselves inside the privet. Turning her head very slightly, she caught a glimpse of them six feet away from her, mostly screened off by green leaves and the base of the sundial. She watched from the corner of her eye as they made themselves comfortable, handing the pail back and forth to drink from it.

“Aah! I like a cool drop of beer, in this heat,” the stable-boy sighed.

“It’s refreshing,” said Cousin Louise. “I’ve never had beer before.”

“Like enough you wouldn’t,” said the stableboy, and belched. “Sweet wines and gin, ain’t that what the fine folk have to themselves? The likes of me don’t get a taste of your Madeira from one year’s end to the next.” He chuckled. “That’s all one; I’ll get a taste of something fine anyway.”

There was a thrashing of bushes and Cousin Louise gave a little squeal of laughter.

“Hush! The keeper’ll hear, you silly slut.”

“No, no, he mustn’t.”

There was heavy breathing and a certain ruffling, as of petticoats. Cousin Louise spoke in an almost trancelike voice.

“How if you were a bold highwayman? You might shoot the driver, and there might be no other passengers but me, and I might be cowering within the coach, in fear of my very life. You’d fling the door wide—and you might look at me and lick your chops, as a hungry dog might—and you might say—you’d say—”

“Here’s a saucy strumpet wants a good futtering, I’d say,” growled the stableboy.

“Yes,” Cousin Louise gasped, hysteria coming into her voice, “and I’d protest, but you would be merciless. You’d drag me from the coach, and throw me down on the ferns in the savage forest, and tear my gown to expose my bosom, and then—”

“Oh, hush your noise,” the stableboy told Cousin Louise, and crawled on top of her. When they’d finished, he rolled off and reached for the beer pail. Cousin Louise was laughing, breathless, helpless, but her laughter began to sound a little like crying, and a certain alarm was in the stableboy’s voice when he said: “Stop your fool mouth! Do you want to get me whipped? If you start screaming I’ll cut your throat, you jade! What’s the matter with you?”

Cousin Louise put her hands over her face and fell silent, attempting to even her breath. “Nothing,” she said faintly. “Nothing. All’s well.”

There was silence for a moment, and the stableboy drank more beer.

“I feel a little ill with the heat,” explained Cousin Louise.

“That’s like enough,” said the stableboy, sounding somewhat mollified.

Another rustling; Cousin Louise was sitting up, putting her arms around the stableboy.

“I do love you so,” she said, “I could never see you harmed, dearest. Say but the word and I’ll run away with thee, and be thy constant wife.”

“Art thou mad?” The stableboy sounded incredulous. “The likes of you wedded to me? The Squire’d hunt us sure, and he’d have my life. Even so, how should I afford to keep a wife, with my place lost? It ain’t likely you’d bring much of a dowry, anyhow, be the Squire never so willing. Not with everything going to them little boys, now.”

“I have three hundred pounds a year from my mother., once she’s dead and I am married.” Cousin Louise sounded desperate. “I have! And she’s grievous sick. Who knows how long she will live?”

“And what then? Much good that’d do me, if I was hanged or transported,” said the stableboy. “Which I will be, if you don’t keep quiet about our fun. Better ladies than you knows how to hold their tongues.”

Cousin Louise did not say another word after that. The stableboy drank the rest of the beer, and sighed.

“I’ve got the mucking out to do,” he announced, and buttoned himself and crawled from the bush. His footsteps went away across the paving stones, slow and heavy.

Cousin Louise sat perfectly still for a long time, before abruptly scrambling out and walking away with

quick steps.

The little girl exhaled.

“He didn’t speak to her very nicely,” said the tyger.

“No.”

“And she didn’t seem to have much fun. Why do you suppose she’d go into the bushes with a person like that?”

“She said she loved him,” said the child.

“Does she?” The tyger licked his paw lazily. “I wonder. Some people seem to feel the need to get manure on their shoes.”

The child wrinkled her nose. “Why?”

“Who knows? Perhaps they feel it’s what they deserve,” said the tyger.

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The little girl had found broken china hidden in the green gloom behind the potting shed: two dishes, a custard-cup and a sauceboat. She carried them out carefully and washed them in the horse-trough, and then retired to the bed of bare earth under the fruit trees with them. There she set out the broken plates to be courtyards, and inverted the cup and sauceboat on them to be houses. Collecting cherry pits, she arranged them in lines: They were soldiers, marching between the houses. The rationale for making them soldiers was that soldiers had red coats, and cherries were red. The tyger watched her.

“There are visitors today,” he said. The child nodded.

“Uncle Henry and Aunt Elizabeth,” she replied. “They came to see John and James. Uncle Henry is going to be their godfather, because he’s a curate. They have a little girl, just my size, but she didn’t come, or she might have played with me.”

“Are you sorry she’s not here to play with you?”

The child lifted her head in surprise, struck by the question.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Would she see me?”

“She might,” the tyger said. “Children notice other children, don’t they?”

“Sometimes.”

“I think someone’s coming,” the tyger informed her. She looked up and saw Uncle Henry and Aunt Elizabeth strolling together along the walk.

“... not so well-stocked as it was formerly, alas,” said Uncle Henry. He wore black, with a very white wig. Aunt Elizabeth was plump, wore a mulberry-colored gown and a straw hat for the sun.

“Oh, bless us, look there!” she exclaimed, stopping in her tracks as she saw the tyger. “Dear, dear, d’you think it’s safe to keep a beast like that about, with so many little children in the house? I’m glad now we kept Jane at home, my love.”

“He’s never harmed anyone, that I’m aware,” Uncle Henry told her, taking her arm and steering her forward. “Poor old Bobo used to scream, and bite, and fling ordure; but I daresay it was because Randall teased him. Randall was frightened of this fellow, however. Kept his distance.”

“And very sensible of him too,” said Aunt Elizabeth, shuddering. “Oh, look at the size of it! I feel like a mouse must feel before our Tibby.”

“The same Providence created them, Bess.” Uncle Henry stopped before the pen. “Each creature has its place in the grand design, after all.”

“Tibby catches rats, and I’m sure that’s very useful indeed, but what’s the point of an animal like this one?” protested Aunt Elizabeth. “Great horrid teeth and claws! Unless they have giant rats in India?”

“I don’t think they do,” said Uncle Henry. “But I trust the Almighty had His reasons.”

“Well, I shall never understand how He could make something so cruel,” said Aunt Elizabeth firmly. “Look there, what are those? Are those parrots? Dear little things!”

“Budgerigars, I think,” said Uncle Henry.

They walked away to inspect the aviary, which was beyond the privet square.

“Stay where you are,” said the tyger.

“Oh, I could never,” Mamma was saying distractedly. “I couldn’t think of such a thing, with poor Robert’s grave scarcely green.”

“Tut-tut, Lavinia!” said Uncle Randall, as they approached. “There’s none to hear but you and I. Look as pious as you like before the world. The demure widow, meek and holy, if you please! I won’t repeat what passes between us; but you and I both knew Robert. He hadn’t enough blood in him to keep you contented, a lively girl like you. Had he, now? How long’s it been since you had a good gallop, eh? Eh?”

She had been walking quickly ahead of him, and he caught up to her in front of the tyger’s pen and seized her arm. Her face was red.

“You don’t—oh—”

Uncle Randall stepped close and spoke very quickly. “The blood in your cheeks is honest, Madam Sanctimony. Don’t play the hypocrite with me! I know London girls too well. You got your hooks into Robert to climb out of the gutter, didn’t you? Well, keep climbing, hussy! I stand ready to help you up the next step, and the old man may be damned. We’ve got those boys, haven’t we? We’ll be master and mistress here one day, if you’re not an affected squeamish—”

“You hound!” Mamma found her voice at last. “Oh, you base—*thing!*”

Uncle Henry and Aunt Elizabeth came walking swiftly around the privet square, and advanced on the scene like a pair of soldiers marching.

“What’s this, Lavinia?” Uncle Henry’s eyes moved from Mamma to Uncle Randall and back. “Tears?”

“We were speaking of Robert,” said Uncle Randall, standing his ground. “Poor fellow. Were we not, dear Lavinia?”

Shocked back into silence, Mamma nodded. Aunt Elizabeth came and put her arms about her.

“My child, you mustn’t vex your heart so with weeping,” she said solicitously. “It’s natural, in such an affectionate match, but only think! Robert would wish you to be happy, now that all’s reconciled. And you must have courage, for the children’s sake.”

“So I was just saying,” said Uncle Randall, helping himself to a pinch of snuff.

“We must endure our sorrows in patience,” Uncle Henry advised her, looking at Uncle Randall.

“Come now, Lavinia,” said Uncle Randall in quite a kind voice. “Dry your tears and walk with us. Shall we go view the pretty babes? John’s the very image of Robert, in my opinion.”

They bore her away between them.

“Your Mamma doesn’t wish to make trouble, I see,” said the tyger.

“She didn’t tell on him,” said the child, in wonderment.

“Silence is not always wise,” said the tyger. “Not when it gives your opponent an opportunity. Perhaps your Uncle Randall hasn’t underestimated your Mamma, after all.”

“Why didn’t she tell on him?” The child stared after the retreating adults.

“Why indeed?” said the tyger. “Something else to remember: Even bad strategy can succeed, if your opponent has no strategy at all.”

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Just beyond the menagerie courtyard, five stone steps led down into a sunken garden. It was a long rectangle of lawn, with rose beds at its edges and a fountain and small reflecting pool at its center. At its far end five more stone steps led up out of it, and beyond was a dense wood, and farther beyond was open heath where deer sometimes grazed.

The roses were briery, and the fountain long clogged and scummed over with green. But there were men working on it today, poking with rakes and sticks, and it had begun to gurgle in a sluggish kind of way; and the gardener had cut back the briars that hung out over the lawn. He was up on a ladder now with his handkerchief, rubbing dust off the sprays of rose haws, so they gleamed scarlet as blood drops.

The little girl watched them warily, nibbling at a rose haw she’d snatched from one of the cut sprays. It was hard and sour, but interesting. The tyger watched them too, pacing more quickly than usual.

“Your Uncle Randall gave your mother a fine length of sky-blue silk,” he said. “Will she have a gown made of it, do you think?”

“No,” said the child. “She showed it to Uncle Thomas and Aunt Caroline and asked them if she ought to have a gown made for the christening party.”

“Really?” the tyger said. “And what did they say?”

“Aunt Caroline looked cross, and said Mamma mustn’t think of such a thing while she’s in mourning. Uncle Thomas didn’t say anything. But his eyes got very small.”

“Rather a clever thing for your Mamma to have done,” said the tyger. “What did she say in reply?”

“She said Yes, yes, you’re quite right. And Uncle Thomas went and talked to Uncle Randall about it.”

The tyger made a low percussive sound in his chest, for all the world like quiet laughter.

“If a rabbit’s being chased by a fox, it’s wise to run straight to the wolf,” he said. “Of course, the question then is whether it can get away safely after the wolf’s taken the fox by the throat. Wolves like a bit of rabbit too.”

“It’s bad to be a rabbit,” said the little girl.

“So it is,” said the tyger. “But if one has grown up to be a rabbit, one can do very little about it.”

“Only run.”

“Just so.” The tyger turned his great wide head to regard the sunken garden. “Why, your aunts have come out to take the air.”

The little girl retreated to the plum tree. Leaning against its trunk, she watched Aunt Caroline and Aunt Elizabeth coming along the walk.

Aunt Caroline was pale and thin, had a shawl draped about her shoulders, and Aunt Elizabeth half-supported her as she walked.

“Yes, I do think the bloom’s returning to your cheeks already,” Aunt Elizabeth was saying in a determinedly cheery voice. “Fresh air will do you a world of good, my dear, I’m sure. Whenever I feel faint or bilious at Brookwood, dearest Henry always advises me to take my bonnet and go for a ramble, and after a mile or so I’m always quite restored again, and come home with quite an appetite for my dinner!”

Aunt Caroline said nothing in reply, breathing with effort as they walked. There was a stone seat overlooking the sunken garden, and Aunt Elizabeth led her to it.

“We’ll settle ourselves here, shall we, and watch them making it ready?” suggested Aunt Elizabeth, sitting down and making room for Aunt Caroline. “There now. Oh, look, they’ve got the water going again! Really, this will make the prettiest place for a party. You’ll want to put the long table for the collation over there, I suppose, and the trestle tables along the other side. And I would, my dear, have two comfortable chairs brought down and set on a kind of step, ’tis called a dais in London I think, where the nursemaids may sit with the little boys and all may pay their respects conveniently.”

Aunt Caroline hissed and doubled over, clutching herself.

“There, my dear, there, courage!” Aunt Elizabeth rubbed her back. “Oh, and you were feeling so much better after breakfast. Perhaps this will help. When I’m troubled with wind, Henry will—”

“It’s a judgment from God,” gasped Aunt Caroline.

“Dear, you mustn’t say such a thing! It may be He sends us our little aches and pains to remind us we ought to be ready at all times to come before Him, but—”

“I prayed the boys would die,” Aunt Caroline told her. “I thought of having them suffocated in their cradles. God for-give me, forgive me! And it wasn’t a week after that the pains began.”

Aunt Elizabeth had drawn away from her. Her face was a study in stupefied horror.

“Never!” she said at last. “Those dear, sweet little lambs? Oh, Caroline, you never! Oh, how could you? Oh, and to think—”

Aunt Caroline had begun to sob hoarsely, rocking herself to and fro in her agony. Aunt Elizabeth watched her a moment, struggling to find words, and at last found them.

“Well,” she said, “It’s—Henry would say, this is proof of the infinite mercy of the Almighty, you know. For, only think, if you had followed such a wicked thought with a *deed*, what worse torments would await you eternally! As it is, the sin is hideous but not so bad as it might be, and these timely pangs have made you reflect on the peril to your eternal soul, and you have surely repented! Therefore all may yet be well—”

Aunt Caroline toppled forward. Aunt Elizabeth leaped up, screaming, and the men stopped work at once and ran to be of assistance. Upon examination, Aunt Caroline was found not to have died, but merely fainted from her pain, and when revived she begged feebly to be taken to her chamber. Aunt Elizabeth, rising to the occasion, directed the men to improvise a stretcher from the ladder. She paced alongside as they bore Aunt Caroline away, entreating her to call on her Savior for comfort.

The little girl watched all this with round eyes.

“There’s one secret out,” remarked the tyger. “I wonder whether any others will show themselves?”

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The east wind was blowing. It swayed the cloths on the long tables, it swayed the paper lanterns the servants had hung up on lines strung through the trees in the garden. The tyger lashed his tail as he paced.

The little girl was walking from lantern to lantern, peering up at them and wondering how they would light when evening fell.

“Your Uncle Randall asked your Mamma to marry him today,” said the tyger.

“He did it in front of Uncle Henry and Aunt Elizabeth,” said the child.

“Because he thought she wouldn’t like to say no, if they were present,” said the tyger. The child nodded.

“But Mamma said no,” she concluded. “Then Uncle Randall had a glass of wine.”

The tyger put his face close to the bars.

“Something bad is going to happen,” he said. “Think very hard, quickly: Are you a rabbit, or do you have teeth and claws?”

“What the hell’s it doing?” said a hoarse voice from the other end of the courtyard. The child looked up to see Uncle Randall advancing on her swiftly. He had a strange blank look in his eyes, a strange fixed smile.

“Hasn’t it ever been told not to go so near a wild brute? Naughty, naughty little thing!” he said, and grabbed her arm tightly. “We’ll have to punish it.”

He began to drag her away in the direction of the potting shed. She screamed, kicking him as hard as she could, but he laughed and swung her up off her feet. He marched on toward the thicket behind the shed, groping under her skirts.

“We’ll have to punish its little soft bum, that’s what we’ll have to do,” he said wildly, “because a dutiful uncle must do such things, after all, ungrateful little harlot—”

She screamed again, and suddenly he had stopped dead in his tracks and let her fall, because Cousin Louise was standing right before them and staring at Uncle Randall. She was chalk-white. She seemed as though she were choking a long minute, unable to make a sound, as the little girl whimpered and scrambled away on hands and knees.

Uncle Randall, momentarily disconcerted, regained his smile.

“What?” he demanded. “None of your business if we were only playing.”

Cousin Louise threw herself at him. Being, as she was, a tall girl, she bore him over so he fell to the pavement with a crash. His wig came off. She beat him in the face with her fists, and found her voice at last, harsh as a crow’s:

“*What were you going to tell her?* Were you going to tell her you’d cut her tongue out if she ever told what you did? Were you? *Were you?*” “

Uncle Randall snarled and attempted to throw her off.

“Ow! Who’d believe you, stupid bitch? The guests’ll be arriving, I’ll say you’ve gone mad—”

The child climbed to her feet and ran, sobbing, and got behind the menagerie wall. There she cried in silence, hiding her face in her skirts.

When she ventured out again at last, neither Uncle Randall nor Cousin Louise were anywhere in sight. The tyger was looking at her steadily.

“That’s another secret come to light,” he said. “Now, I’ll tell you still another.”

Rubbing her eyes with her fist, she listened as he told her the secret.

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Mamma and Aunt Elizabeth carried the babies into the chapel, so the nurserymaid was able to spare her a moment.

“Lord, lord, how did your face get so dirty? As if I ain’t got enough to see to!” she grumbled, dipping a corner of her apron in the horse-trough and washing the little girl’s face. “Now, hold my hand and be a good child when we go in. No noise!”

She was a good child through the solemn ceremony. Mamma watched the little boys tenderly, anxiously, and Uncle Henry and Aunt Elizabeth smiled when first John, and then James, screamed and went red-faced at having Satan driven out with cold water. Uncle Thomas was watching Mamma. Aunt Caroline was tranquilly distant: she’d taken laudanum for her pain. Beside her, Cousin Louise watched Uncle Randall with a basilisk glare. Uncle Randall was holding himself upright and defiant, smiling, though his face was puffy with bruises.

Afterward they all processed from the chapel and up the long stairs, to arrange themselves in ranks before Grand-papa, that he might give them his blessing. He stared from his high white bed and had to be reminded who they all were. At last he moved his wasted hand on the counterpane, granting an abbreviated benediction on posterity, and they were able to file from the sickroom into the clean-smelling twilight.

The wind had dropped a little but still moved the lanterns, that had candles inside them now and looked like golden moons glowing in the trees. It brought the sweet smell of wood smoke from an early bonfire. The dusk was lavender, so lambent everything looked slightly transparent, and the milling guests in the garden might have been ghosts. The child wandered among them, unseen as a ghost herself, watching.

There were stout old gentlemen with iron-gray wigs and wide-brimmed hats, who spoke at length with Uncle Henry about harvests and horse fairs. In high white wigs were young men and young ladies, lace-trimmed mincers of both sexes, who wondered why there were no musicians, and were quite put out to be told that there would be no dancing because of mourning for Papa.

Admiring gentlemen in silk stockings, slithery as eels, crowded around Mamma to pay her compliments, and Uncle Thomas held her arm possessively and smiled at them all. Aunt Caroline, on a couch that had been brought out for her, looked on dreamily. Uncle Randall edged through the crowd, telling first one inquirer and then another how his bruises had come at the hands of a low slut of a chambermaid, damn her eyes for a scheming hussy, wanted a guinea for favors as though she were the Queen of Sheba, screamed like a harpy when he'd paid her out in the coin she deserved! Ha-ha.

John and James lay in the arms of the nurserymaid and Aunt Elizabeth, who was glad to get off her feet, and the little boys stared in wide-awake astonishment at the glowing lanterns and ignored all their well-wishers, who moved on speedily to the collation table for cider and ham anyway. Some guests vanished in pairs into shadowy corners. There were perfumes of civet-musk strong in the air, there was wine flowing free. Someone got drunk remarkably quickly and tripped, and his wig went flying. It hit Uncle Henry in the face with a *poof* and a cloud of powder. People tittered with laughter.

The little girl walked through the shadows to the keeper's shed. She found the ring of keys where he had hung it up before hurrying off to the somewhat lesser collation for the servants. Nobody but the tyger saw her as she came and tried the big brass keys, one after another, in the padlock that secured the door of his pen. At last it clicked open.

She slipped it off. The bolt was a simple one, just like the bolt on the nursery door. Sliding it back, she opened the door of the pen.

The tyger paced swiftly forward, his green eyes gleaming. He looked much bigger out of his prison. He turned and gazed at her a moment; put out his warm rough tongue and slicked it along the pulse of her wrist, the palm of her hand. She felt a shock go through her body, an electric thrill of pleasure. She parted her lips but could find no words, only staring back at him in wonderment. He turned his head to regard the party in the sunken garden.

"Now," said the tyger, "we'll see, won't we?"

He stretched his magnificent length, gave a slight wriggle of his shoulders, and bounded across the courtyard. Standing beside the empty cage, she folded her little hands and watched.

He charged the party, vaulting from the top step into the sunken garden. Horrified guests looked up to see him land in the midst of them all, and gilt chairs were knocked over as people scrambled to get away from him, screaming in their panic. Some staggered on their high heels, some kicked off their shoes and ran in their slippery, stockinged feet. Aunt Elizabeth went over backward in her chair, clutching young

James, and both began to shriek. The servants fled for their lives. Aunt Caroline watched all from her couch, too drugged to care.

But the tyger leaped straight through the garden like a thunderbolt, overtaking Uncle Thomas, whom it felled with a sidelong rake of one paw. Uncle Thomas went down, howling and clutching himself, and blood ran red all down his white silk hose. The tyger didn't even pause, however, it sprang clean over him and continued forward, and the only person left before it now was Uncle Randall, who had broken a heel on the topmost of the opposite steps and was still there, frantically attempting to yank off his tight shoe.

Uncle Randall looked up into the tyger's eyes, but had no time to do more than bleat before it struck him. He broke like a doll, and rolled over with it into the darkness.

There was a second's hush, cries cut off abruptly in those who still crouched or lay sprawled in the sunken garden. Uncle Henry, who had crawled to Aunt Elizabeth's side, rose on his elbow to look and said, "O Lord God!"

The tyger appeared at the top of the steps, dragging Uncle Randall by the back of the neck. Uncle Randall's head hung at a strange angle and his body was limp. The tyger's eyes reflected back the light of the golden lanterns.

It stared at them all a moment before opening its jaws. Uncle Randall dropped like an empty coat. The tyger's beard was red.

It bared its fangs, and turned and bounded away into the night.

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When they asked her why, she explained. After she had told them everything, they made her explain it all over, and then explain once more. No matter how often she explained, however, they did not hear what she said.

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Finally they sent her away, to a convent school in France. It was by no means as bad as it might have been.

She made no friends, but her eyes being now accustomed to look for detail, she saw keenly the fond possessive looks or angry glances between the other girls, heard the midnight weeping or sighs, saw the notes hastily exchanged; watched the contests for dominance, and knew when the cloister gate was locked and when it was left unlocked, and who came and went thereby, and when they came too.

The heavy air buzzed like a hive. She no more thought of participating in the convent's inner life than she would have thrust her hand into a wasp's nest, but she watched in fascination.

Then, one morning at Mass, above the high altar, the crucified Christ opened green blazing eyes and looked at her. He smiled.