

The Tigress Terrible

by S. Ten Eyck Bourke



FRENCHMAN once wrote a story about a panther and a soldier who, fleeing from the enemy, loses himself in a desert, and crawls into her cave to sleep.

The panther does not molest him, and in time they come to love each other until in a fit of jealousy she turns on him.

That's the way with the beasts; they're all killers in the end.

Either it's love, and because their jealousy has been aroused, they turn on the particular object on which they have centered their affections; or like the elephant an Englishman named Reade told about that left a trail of murdered keepers everywhere he went, they're plain rogue—which is what showmen call an animal that turns murderer, and mostly happens because some trainer loses his nerve, and lets the brute get the upper hand for a moment. Just once is enough!

In both cases nothing short of prussic acid or a cannon ball will get the blood-lust out of their systems.

Neither of those writer chaps knew anything about the inside workings of animals from practical experience, such as we trainers

get, but they had it reasoned out right. Things like that are constantly happening in the show business.

Take Mme. Erica, for instance.

She doubled on both stories by mixing a jealous "cat" and a rogue elephant in a single experience—and then some!

Rightly, Mme. Erica didn't belong in the show business—which is a profession like any other, only that it's different because mostly performers and trainers inherit it, the children growing up in it with the old folks, and taking a turn in a family act just as soon as they're big enough to stand alone on their two little legs.

A thoroughbred Mme. Erica was from the tips of her little boots, right up her lithe body, to the small head with its sleek coronet of brown braids that she carried like a queen. Her father was a naturalist, who had spent most of his life in jungle countries, studying the way the beasts live and act and talk among themselves.

The little girl's mother was dead, and he took her everywhere with him; which is how she came to know so much about animals and how to handle them, though she did it different from any other trainer I ever knew.

She wouldn't carry a pistol, and she never used a whip or anything but kindness and soft words; except that last time when she used the lion-fork. (She had reason then that was stronger with her than anything else could be.)

But that was Mme. Erica's way. She always got what she went after, too; it didn't take long to discover that when she wanted a thing, man or beast just took it for granted she should have it without argument or opposition.

It wouldn't have done for us other trainers, though. As Old Man Beaseley, one of the cagiest showmen in the business, used to say to me:

"There's *trained* wild animals, Billy Fox, but never *tamed* ones. The brutes is always laying for you. Blank cartridges and a rawhide is all that keeps 'em in their places—and that only so long as you keep your nerve. If you lose that, 'ware the beasties!"

It was while the scientist party and the girl were in India that she met Aschman. He was a slim, tight-set chap, with a trainer's way of standing; not batting an eyelid or moving a muscle, just looking steadily at you while you talked.

A "cat" trainer he was—he'd gone out there to buy some tigers for an act of his own—born to the show business, but a gentleman just the same, with a college education and the easy bearing that comes with travel and mixing with all kinds of people, high and low.

The girl's father, being an aristocrat, shied at a circus-man for a son-in-law, but the girl herself had the quick, passionate, southern temperament she got from her Italian mother, along with a pair of fine black eyes that could glow as warm as a flame or chill you with a look like frosted steel.

She snapped her fingers at her own world and married Aschman. She said she loved him. The way things turned out, I guess she did, just as he loved her from first to last and

through all the black days when they were adrift from each other.

They came back to the States, and to the show business, with two Bengal tigers and a magnificent tawny hybrid tigress, which is about the most dangerous animal a trainer ever handles—hybrids always inheriting the strength and cunning of the parent beast with all their bad traits and none of their good ones.

But Aschman seemed to have picked a winner. The big hybrid was docile and quick to learn from the first, and she kept the tigers at their work. Aschman soon found, though, she wouldn't work well herself unless the girl was somewhere in sight of the cage, and then she'd cuddle against the bars after each turn, with a huge fore-paw, big enough to fell an ox at a single stroke, thrust out for her to stroke.

Aschman worked alone with the beasts for a while, then he let his wife try her hand at it. The tawny tigress fawned all over her, purring like a pet kitten, ready to jump at her least word.

She saw to it, too, that the tigers behaved; they were willing enough, seeming anxious from the go-off to please Mme. Erica—that being the way Aschman had billed the girl.

He'd gotten over his jumpy feeling at seeing her in the cage with the great brutes. The instinct of the showman came uppermost; before long they were doing a hippodrome act together—a sort of Christian martyr rescue, with the maiden down under the tigress's paw and the hungry tigers prowling round their prey.

When the audience was all worked up, Aschman, with two big Dane dogs, came to the rescue, cowed the red-jowled, ferocious beast that first balked, then backed away snarling, till the man and the dogs were between her and the girl. Then the great tawny brute would rear up on her hind legs, her jaws slaverling, her fangs glistening hungrily, and drop those great forepaws on his shoulders.

It was a thriller!

All would have gone well, only the tigress got to thinking she owned the girl. She turned surly whenever she spoke to the tigers or the dogs, and the look she'd shoot at Aschman if his wife smiled at him was positively human in its hate.

Aschman wanted to cut the act out, but the zest of danger had got in the girl's blood by then. She wouldn't hear of it—she didn't know beasts as he did, and wasn't willing to believe what he told her.

"Afraid—for *me*?" she said with a maddening little lift of her eyebrows that made him want to shake and kiss her into being reasonable at the same time—after all she *was* only a girl—"Are you quite sure it's not for yourself, Frank?"

After that, of course, Aschman couldn't do anything but go on with it. But the thing got on his nerves and made him jumpy—which is the worst thing but one can happen to a trainer, animals being mighty sensitive and responsive to the moods of humans. The hybrid couldn't get any uglier with him than she was, but it reacted on the tigers, and the act didn't go so smoothly as it had.

That touched Mme. Erica's pride, and she took it out on Aschman by avoiding him, except when they were in the arena together. He lost his head finally, and spoke to her one night—he'd been mighty careful to avoid even looking at her before, not to rouse the tigress's jealousy—when he came into the cage for the rescue.

"This can't go on, Etta," he said. "You're ruining the act, the way you treat me. We've got to come to an understanding."

"I should say we had done so already," she said. Her voice was like chilled steel, and she gave him a little contemptuous smile. "At least, *I* understand you."

That finished Aschman. He started back—it wasn't more than the space of a breath he forgot himself, but it was enough for that

tawny devil of a tigress, that was just laying for her chance to vent the jealous spleen she'd been nursing for days.

She'd seen the smile—not knowing anything about the psychology of humans, her brute mind didn't sense the difference between contempt and love—and it wasn't meant for her.

Like a flash she pounced on the girl she loved, and was jealous of.

After they pried her loose, and the girl came out of hospital, her own father wouldn't have known her, except for her glorious eyes and graceful carriage. But she hadn't lost her way of getting what she wanted, for all her scarred face; and she kept her nerve.

One thing both Aschman and she knew. Now that the tigress had tasted blood, if anybody's life was to be safe in handling her, the tawny brute must be broken, and that only happens—once an animal turns rogue—when a trainer comes back and beats it down by sheer will power.

The problem was, which of the two would the beast hold responsible for giving her the whip-hand—the man whose forgetfulness had brought about the trouble, or the girl she had mauled! The tigress settled that by reverting to type—the vicious, treacherous, hybrid nature in her cropping out with everybody till all hands in Jason's Circus, where the Aschmans were showing, were afraid for their lives of her, and proud to own it. Old Jason himself swore he wouldn't keep the beast on, not even for show purposes,

"I ain't running a private Bengal Suicide Club, Mme. Erica," he said "Give the beast suicide pills—Aschman carries a revolver, even if you won't—and we'll cook up a pretty little act with them two tigers. At least *they* don't use their claws for a Bowie knife every time any one comes in reaching distance—which they got to so long as *she's* got to be fed!"

"I'll take her over to Beaseley's Royal

Animal Arena by myself, Frank, till I have her broken," Mme. Erica told him after that. She'd taken it for granted from the first it would have to be up to her; she didn't expect Aschman to come back after letting the woman he claimed to love, be so cruelly mishandled.

"Beaseley boasts he's get more rogue animals, and gets their turn out of them, than all the other shows in the business together. He'll be glad to sign me on—for a while," she said quietly.

What could Aschman, eating out his heart with shame and grief, say? He knew she had him branded as a coward, and she wasn't coming back to him. The worst was, the girl said nothing more—which didn't give him a chance to explain.

Beaseley cooked up an advertising story that brought the crowds to see the little girl who'd been mangled, and come back and cowed the Striped Death—we trainers named the hybrid when we saw the rims of her tawny eyes go red, the sure sign of a killer, every time Mme. Erica swished into the cage and put her through her paces like she didn't know the magnificent demon was laying for her.

Business picking up after that—it had been an off season until then—salaries came in regular, and having Mme. Erica to thank, we all were ready to lay down and let her little feet walk over us as she pleased.

She was always sweet and gracious, but kept to herself. We understood she wasn't our kind, and only stayed in the show business because she was too proud to go back to her father.

That is we all did except Moretti, who was an Italian, and had a foreigner's queer notions about things. He was a handsome chap, and from the first it was plain he meant to get her by fair means or foul.

I suppose her splendid courage caught him—he himself being afraid of neither man

nor the devil; not even of Imperator, the big rogue elephant he had charge of, that was so wicked even Beaseley only used him for parades, and kept him shackled; which hadn't improved his temper!

It wasn't my business, but when Moretti began to annoy Mme. Erica, it seemed to me she ought to have a man to take him in hand. Being a "cat" trainer, I didn't take her view of Aschman's slip—bad as the consequences had been for her.

I knew from experience how easy a man can come a cropper, when he mixes up training and business with the natural primal passions between humans and the big jungle beasts, without being a coward.

But I knew it wouldn't do any good to try to make that little girl see how she'd misjudged Aschman—who deserved more sympathy than she—so I slipped him a line telling him how things were.

About this time Beaseley decided Mme. Erica's experience was getting shopworn as a puller-in. He thought up another stunt to electrify the public, with the girl as star performer. He put all our worst rogue beasts—a pair of Nubian lions, a leopard, two chronic "sore-head" polar bears, all of them trick beasts—in with Aschman's wicked hybrid, and billed it

THE HAPPY ROGUE FAMILY!

A Marvelous Exhibition of Woman's Magnetism and Patience Over THE PRIMAL PASSIONS OF SAVAGE BEASTS.

We none of us liked it, but Beaseley never did take advice, and Mme. Erica was even worse. All we trainers could do was to wait lynx-eyed for the catastrophe and have the lion-forks ready.

"Looks like she's bent on suicide," I

thought. "I bet, in spite of how she acts, she's eating out her heart for Aschman and trying to forget it in the excitement."

Things being the way they were, I was glad the afternoon of the day we were to open in Denver, with the "Happy Rogue Family" scheduled for its first performance, when I picked up a slim chap with a couple of Great Danes trailing him like slate-colored ghosts, outside the big top.

"Aschman?" I says, holding out my hand. None of us in Beaseley's had ever seen him, but I knew I wasn't mistaken.

"Shake!" he says. "You're a white man to put me wise in time!"

He said it sort of questioning, and I eased his mind by telling him how things stood.

"Come round back for the performance to-night," I told him. "I'll fix you up just behind the runway that leads from the cages to the arena. The performers can't very well spot you there. Besides, it's handy to the performing cage in case of trouble. You can deal with the man after you're through with the beasts—he's worse than they, at that."

The air had been sultry and heavy all day and by night storm-clouds banked in the sky, streaked every once in a while with vivid flashes of lightning. The animals were all restlessly pacing their cages and when the thunder began to blare and cannonade they punctuated it with a chorus of howls in every key of the scale.

As if that wasn't enough, we found the big steel cage in which the Happy Rogue Family rehearsed was stalled somewhere along the road with the other heavy properties, when we came to set it up.

We had to make shift with a smaller cage which spelled trouble in capitals—a change of stage-setting being the thing above all other trick animals hate. Some of them won't even work when that happens.

The only thing kept me together, thinking of Mme. Erica, was the occasional glimpse I

had of Aschman. I didn't believe any man with that steady poise under such stress had ever really lost his nerve—or if he had he'd come back all right.

We had our hands full from the beginning of the performance, but the Happy Rogues were the worst. It took us five to fight the hybrid tigress down the runway to the arena, and then she took her own time, brushing aside the heavy iron forks like they were straw.

But when the big striped demon did condescend to show up in the back drop of the performing cage her tawny eyes glaring like golden incandescents, her gorgeous head wagging, and swishing her black tail, the mob forgot everything else; and when the girl followed her in, in her spangled skirts, bowing and smiling and flirting the little whip she carried for the first time, they went wild with applause.

That edged the animals up a bit more. We keepers knew there was trouble ahead for Mme. Erica, and it started right from the start.

The Nubians opened the strike by squatting impolitely on their haunches at the front of the cage and refusing to mount their stands. Mme. Erica's pride flared up at that, and she finally got them in line. The bears just sulked; then she turned to the tigress, expecting more trouble there.

But the applause had pleased the striped faker. For once she seemed to have sloughed her vicious temper and to be on her mettle. Good as gold she was now, purring approval of everything Mme. Erica did, just like she had in the beginning.

It was the same when it came to her turn. She did some beautiful jumping over bars, and from shelf to shelf, and some other stunts, and wound up with a leap clear across the cage from her stand to one directly opposite, through a big golden hoop Mme. Erica held for her.

The girl looked relieved when the brute

gathered herself for the last jump; graceful as a kitten she was, too, balancing light as a feather on those huge padded paws, measuring the distance with her rippling neck outstretched. Then she leaped.

It never pays to count on anything in the show business; one little flash of temper, one slight miscue and the spots are knocked out of an act.

That's the way it was this time. For once in her life the tigress miscalculated her distance. She crashed down on the hoop, sending it spinning and almost knocking Mme. Erica down with the force of the blow.

The beast glared round to see if the rest of the "Happy Rogues" were laughing as she slouched to her stand. Fortunately they weren't—though they were having every known variety of high strikes on their own account.

But when Mme. Erica tried to make her take the jump over, the tigress wouldn't budge, just snarled like a fiend, lashing her tail, and slapping out viciously at the toy whip.

"It's plain suicide to go on with the act, even if the beast should be made to mind," I told Beaseley. "Those brutes are one bunch of crawly, quivering nerves!"

"The tigress won't be worth shucks if *madame* doesn't make her jump. But she ain't mine; I don't lose out on her," Beaseley growls, and ambles over to the cage. "That will be about all, Mme. Erica," he says low but mighty sharp.

Mme. Erica drew back with a proud, cold look of refusal. The red streaked her white cheeks, and a look came into her eyes that wasn't good to see.

Then a snarling scream rang out, and a woman's low cry of horror. Just as Beaseley was speaking Aschman, followed by the slate-colored dogs, jumped through the back trap into the cage. The tigress jumped the same

instant, straight for him, landing full on his chest, her big bone-crushing teeth pinning him through the thigh as he went down.

He must have fainted with the pain and shock; anyway he was unconscious when the big cat picked him up, carried him across the cage, and laying him at Mme. Erica's feet, crouched beside him, purring and looking up into her face. It was just as if she said:

"Here's the man who made a rogue of me and made me hurt you. Now we've got *him*—I'll be good again with you."

The other beasts were yowling, all ready to spring at each other's throats. Beaseley was yelling to us to get the lion forks, and to the girl not to take chances on the tigress if she valued her life and Aschman's, and firing his pistol pointblank at the beast all at the same time.

The tigress wasn't afraid of blank cartridges; and Mme. Erica didn't even seem to hear. Her whole heart was in her face, as she bent over the senseless man at her feet; calling on him to fight for his life; to help her get him to his feet, before those "educated" beasts got him.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she said over and over as she gripped him, tugging at his dead weight with her slender bare arms.

Why the tigress didn't jump for them I'll never know. Instead, she watched Mme. Erica with a puzzled look, as if she was trying to understand and couldn't—but I noticed she stopped purring.

It was that fearless devil Moretti, who got Aschman and Mme. Erica out of the cage before anything worse happened. The rest of us keepers just went crazy, and prodded through the bars at the fighting beasts.

I felt ashamed of speaking of him the way I did, when he insisted on caring for Aschman in the animal tent—that opened off the arena, and into the elephant enclosure where he stayed nights with Imperator—after the doctor

said we mustn't try to move him to the sleeping quarters till morning.

"He's not bleeding enough from that wound," the medic said. "I don't want an internal hemorrhage to start." Then he must have noticed Mme. Erica was all in herself. "He mustn't have any shocks to-night either," he said. "Best leave him alone with Moretti. You can take charge in the morning, *madame*."

She didn't want to leave Aschman, I could see. But she went off with the rest of us, after we rigged up a cot behind one of the cages. (It happened to be the hybrid's—the Striped Death.)

I guess she meant to come back all along. She only waited for the rest of us to be under cover, and the lights all out; then she stole back to the animal tent. It was pitch dark there; but she could hear Imperator thrashing about behind the canvas wall, and Moretti's voice, low but harsh, as if he was trying to devil the big beast, that already had the devil in him.

She made her way to Aschman's cot; he was breathing quiet and regular with the medicine the doctor gave him, and she snuggled down beside him to watch.

Maybe she fell asleep; but suddenly she was conscious of a stealthy pad-padding on the tanbark near by, where the switch of the calcium light hung down. She first thought one of the cats was loose, and held her breath trying to make out just where it was. Then she realized that it was footsteps she had heard.

By now her eyes were accustomed to the dark; she could make out the faint blur of the white canvas at the farther end of the tent; then it seemed to move, and a black gap opened up. Next instant she heard Imperator squeal with rage, and the *thud-thud* of his huge feet as he charged straight from the elephant enclosure into the animal tent.

She sprang for the calcium light; first she thought she had missed the cord in the dark.

Then suddenly she knew! It wasn't there! That's what the stealthy footsteps had meant. Some one had cut the cord! The light was cut of reach!

For an instant she hesitated; she didn't want to betray her whereabouts to that rampaging brute charging down the runway. Then a sick feeling came over her. He wasn't stampeding! She heard a snuffling and blowing in the tanbark; the foxy beast had smelled the humans and was feeling round under the cages for her—for Aschman!

She didn't dare leave the helpless man on the cot to get help. She cried out and shouted to Moretti; but the wind and the storm outside drowned her voice, and the Italian wasn't letting anything interfere with his little game.

He hadn't tried to get Mme. Erica, of course—he didn't know she was there. It was Aschman he was after; but he must have realized at once she would tell about the cut calcium cord, and perhaps he was willing the big, double-ended murderer he'd loosened should have a chance at her rather than that.

When she screamed, Imperator stopped blowing under the cage and banging about it with his head. Then he trumpeted a challenge that set every animal in the tent yowling. It was pandemonium that drowned out the storm and brought us on the run from the sleeping quarters with torches and lanterns; anything that came handy for a light.

Imperator's big body was down in front, with his trunk, head, and fore-shoulders well under Striped Death's cage, when we burst into the tent. He was after the man and the woman behind it, if he had to capsize the whole business to get them.

Slowly the cage lifted; slid on its trestles; tumbled over, smashing the bar that locked the door. Next instant the tigress scrambled out, screaming defiance at the outlaw as she gathered herself like she always did for that leap through the hoop in the performing cage.

Like a striped streak in the flaring,

flickering light, the thousand pounds of sinew and bone and yellow hide sailed through the air and crashed down on Emperor's head.

The elephant, squealing with rage and pain, tried to shake off the biting, fighting, scratching hybrid, but she clung to him as he charged blindly about, crashing into the cages.

It was a Bedlam fit to rouse the dead. Aschman wasn't dead, and Mme. Erica's one thought was to get him out of the danger zone. Like in the performing cage, she was tugging and dragging at him, calling on us to help. It wasn't a minute; before we could get to her through that turmoil of overturned cages she'd got Aschman half up, with his arm over her shoulder.

It was signing his death-warrant! Busy as she was on her own account, the tigress sensed what was going on behind her. The primal passion of jealousy was at work in her again, and that's worse than rage. She broke loose from Emperor; whirling, as his big bulk stampeded for the rear of the tent, she jumped straight for the man she'd been nursing her wrath against all along, and this time we knew

she wouldn't miss!

But Mme. Erica was quicker even than that streak of striped passion. I was banging on the cages with my lion-fork—a regular iron spear it was, eight feet long—trying to get to her. In a white flash, her little hand shot out and grabbed it from my hand. Flinging herself down beside the cot, she swung the spear over Aschman's body as a kneeling soldier might cover a wounded comrade's body with bayoneted musket, bracing the butt against an upended cage just as the tigress leaped.

The tawny body crashed through the air, all four paws outstretched, right down on that deadly iron point. She gave one scream of almost human agony as it transfixed her; then the weight of her body jerked the fork from Mme. Erica's grasp, and the magnificent brute rolled over in her death struggle.

After that Mme. Erica fainted, and for a while we had two patients. When Aschman recovered from the wound in his thigh he walked with a limp; but he said it was worth it, considering everything. And Mme. Erica just looked at him and smiled.