

Part I: “The Slow Getaway”

*Chapter 1: Tiger*

*In which we meet Professor James Byron, his Pony Horatio, and a Girl riding a Crocodile named Tiger.*

The weather was particularly foul for that time of year. Professor James Byron was in a foul mood as well. He sat behind the reigns of their pony, Horatio, who was doing his level best to pull the caravan wagon through nearly impassable roads of mud. Byron looked every bit like an exotic bird of some sort, a stork, albatross, or ibis. His long thin legs, in red striped pants, were pulled up close to his chest, knees pointed sharply outwards. His camel hair topcoat and tails drooped over his shoulders, drenched with rain water. His top hat, soaked as well, was pulled far down, nearly touching his long bushy eyebrows. The only thing about Professor James Byron that was withstanding the rain that day was his moustache, which stood proudly waxed and curled, extending a full three inches from each side of his face. It would have stood out farther, and in fact it sometimes did, if he hadn't waxed it into a stylish handlebar curl on either end. At it's full wingspan, Professor James Byron's moustache spread and impressive ten inches wide. A full foot if the humidity was right.

As impressive as his moustache was, his nose was equally impressive. Long, thin and pointed, it extended out past the brim of his top hat and collected a steady drip of rain which he had long ago given up wiping away. He instead chose to put his mind to work on other more pressing matters for him, his partner, Bartholomew Bing, and their pony Horatio.

This was the slowest they'd ever run away from a problem, but luckily the weather was slowing down the chasers as much as the chased. The mud on the road was now up to Horatio's knees, but he

gamely kept pulling the little red and blue striped wagon forward. Byron took a moment to turn to see his pursuers. There they were, less than 100 yards away. Their horses, wagon wheels, and boots just as stuck in the mud as his. He could hear their distant shouts of anger barely audible on the wind, not that Byron needed to hear them to know what they were saying.

Both parties were moving at about the same pace. Around the pace of a fat man perusing a candy store. The chasers were gaining no ground, so it came as a rare surprise to Byron when he heard the voice of a young girl next to the wagon.

“Oy there! Criminal!” her voice sounding simultaneously sweet and sour.

Byron twitched his moustache contemplatively for a moment before slowly turning in the direction of the little voice. She was a young blonde girl of about 9 or 10 years old riding a crocodile through the mud. The crocodile had a saddle and reins just like a proper horse, it even had blinders. This was obviously not the first time this crocodile had been ridden.

Byron smiled his widest grin, the large gap between the front two teeth was made more prominent by his massive overbite. His smile was not without its charm and bought his way out of many situations without him having to utter a word. This time, however, the glare from the little girl let Byron and his smile know that words would have to be used to get out of this situation.

“Pardon me, little girl, the wind is a bit loud! Couldn’t quite make out what you were saying!” he bellowed down to her, then made a clicking noise and urged Horatio on with the reins. Horatio, unfortunately, was already at top speed.

“You heard me darned well Mr. Criminal! Now, you pull this wagon over, or Tiger here is going to knock your little wagon over, pony and all!”

“Your crocodile’s name is ‘Tiger’?”

“What of it?”

“You know that name’s already been taken in the animal kingdom. Taken by the... Tiger.”

“It wouldn’t make much sense to name a Tiger ‘Tiger’, would it? I wouldn’t name my dog ‘Dog’ or my cat ‘Cat’, or my pheasant ‘Pheasant’, would I?!” she said as she turned Tiger sideways to the wagon, his tail swishing menacingly at the wheels. The tail made a snapping sound, like an iron-chain whip and Byron was certain that if it struck the wooden wheels they would splinter into a hundred thousand pieces.

Byron’s moustache twitched involuntarily. He disliked being proved wrong, but also admired those who could do so, and she had made a good point.

“That’s a lot of animals for a young girl to have!” he yelled conversationally, trying to keep things pleasant. If things remained pleasant, there was less of a chance of Tiger’s tail smashing the wagon.

“It’s not a lot! It’s a normal, regular amount of animals to have for a girl my age! And, don’t try to get me caught up in conversation, you pull this wagon over!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Just curious is all. Wondering how a fine beast such as that would earn the moniker of ‘Tiger’. Just curious.” his smile was steady and he hoped his eyes were showing the right amount of sincerity. Sometimes his eyebrows betrayed him.

“‘Tiger’ is a perfectly normal name for any animal. The name fits because he is fierce and cuddly. Alternating between the two when he wants. If you must know. Now pull this junkheap of a wagon over!”

“Can’t do that M’lady.”

“And why not?”

“If I do that, those men back there will catch up, sooner or later, and I’m certain they’ll have more than just choice words for me. More than likely they’ll have tar and feathers.”

“It’s either tar and feathers, or eaten by a crocodile.”