



The C.K. Thompson Collection

Tiger Cat

by

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CHAPTER ONE.

THE BUSH BURGLAR.

DASYURE, the tiger cat, was a handsome fellow and his brown body and tail, spotted over in white, was always sleek and clean. He lived in a hollow log which was wedged between two rocks in a thick tea-tree scrub, and terrorised the bush within a wide radius of his home. There was only one entrance to the log. The other end was jammed up against a big rock.

There was not one bird or beast that could scare Dasyure. A pugnacious animal, he would fight anything, whether he had to or not. He was both brave and bold and was not above taking on a creature he had no chance of beating.

Of course Dasyure, like his smaller relatives, the native cats, was not a cat at all. He did not even resemble a domestic cat very much. He ate flesh and he roamed at night, but he did not sit on rooftops or fences singing his love songs to the moon or to female tiger cats, or spend his nights squalling and howling and being made the target for old boots hurled by sleepless human householders. Above all, he was a marsupial, and was proud of the fact.

No, Dasyure had other things to do, and as he poked his nose from the hollow log and threw a wary eye around as

much of his domain as he could see, he pondered thoughtfully upon where his first meal was coming from.

Dasyure was not very hard to please as to food. He liked young nestlings and he liked their parents, too. He had a taste for bandicoots, mice, birds' eggs and small lizards. He would even eat a frog if times were tough. A rabbit, big as it was, would meet with his hearty approval, and he was not the least bit averse to visiting a poultry run and sampling a fowl or two. He liked fish, but this was very hard to get.

He was not one of those animals who pushed themselves forward and sought publicity. Like a human burglar, whom he resembled a little in his habits, he was shy and retiring. There, however, the similarity ended. Burglars were not brave persons, but Dasyure was a brave animal—absolutely fearless.

Creeping out of the log, he paused and thoughtfully rubbed his whiskers with one of his front paws. It was dusk and time to begin the hunting round. Already the eager early stars were twinkling in the sky.

For most of the bush creatures, the time for rest and sleep had arrived, but for many others the serious business of living had just commenced.

Dusk in the bush was something like the changing of a shift at a big industrial works, where some men went home to rest while others began to work.

But there was no co-operation of that kind in the bush.

The worker in industry took up the tools another worker had laid down and there was a continuation of effort. The workers were friends and fellow employees, toiling for their own and for their country's prosperity. Among Dasyure and his kind, it was each for himself, and the tooth, the claw, the talon and the fierce beak for his neighbour. Kill or be killed.

Not one of the smaller birds or animals which settled

down to sleep each night in the bush had any guarantee that it would see another sun rise. During the daylight hours small birds and animals, in between collecting food for their young ones and themselves, had to keep a watchful eye on their homes and themselves lest hunting hawks, butcher birds, snakes, goannas and other marauders should turn them into a convenient meal.

That was bad enough, yet night's black wings were scant protection for them, because darkness brought with it the menace of prowling owls, nightjars, tiger cats, native cats and other devilish slayers. Truly, it was each for himself, only the fittest, and the luckiest, surviving.

Thoughts like these, of course, never entered Dasyure's head. He was out for what he could get all the time, and it was just bad luck for anything eatable that crossed his path.

He had little hope of finding a meal near his hollow log. No birds nested or roosted there. Dasyure saw to that.

There had been an occasion, long since, when a pair of blue wrens were indiscreet enough to build a nest in one of the tea-trees right near the hollow log. They were pretty little creatures—Bluecap in his resplendent plumage and his demure little brown mate. As they chirped and twittered about their nest-building, proudly and jauntily carrying their cocked-up tails, they presented a charming picture.

To Dasyure, lurking in his hollow log, their beauty made no appeal. To him they were merely a couple of mouthfuls of meat and as soon as the time was ripe, he intended to deal with them rather severely. The two wrens roosted near their nest at night, but Dasyure did not interfere with them. Neither were they troubled by any other prowling tiger or native cat. Dasyure was lord of all he surveyed in that area.

In due course the wrens laid their eggs and hatched three young ones. Dasyure waited until they were a fair

size and then one night he quietly climbed the tree and, in two meals, ate them all. He got Bluecap asleep on a twig near the nest and quietly ate him without disturbing the rest of the family. The mother bird was surprised on the nest and quickly disposed of. Then, licking his lips with satisfaction, Dasyure leisurely returned to the ground and went off hunting through the bush. On his return home at dawn he scaled the tree and made an early breakfast of the three nestlings.

Since then, no other birds had nested in the tea-trees which sheltered the hollow log, or even within a wide radius of it. Whether the news of the massacre had travelled through the bush in some mysterious fashion and warned all the other birds to give the place a wide berth, is not known.

Dasyure had been born in that hollow log and had lived there all his life. He had taken it over from his mother after she had been killed. When that tragedy had occurred, he himself was only half-grown.

She had been a fine old mother, and had reared successive litters of kittens during her long life; but not in this hollow log. She had been something of a wanderer, sometimes making her home in a hole among rocks, sometimes in a small cave, sometimes in a hollow tree trunk. She had even used a deserted wombat's hole at one period.

The log in which Dasyure was born was destined to be her last home. The old tiger cat was feeling very tired of life, but that did not cause her to take her maternal duties less seriously. She kept watch and ward over her two kittens, Dasyure and his sister. Though some tiger cats and native cats were known to have as many as seven kittens in a litter, the most she had ever had was five and the least, two—Dasyure and his sister.

Both of them were very attractive little animals and when

they were old enough to leave their mother's pouch and run about, often played with each other like domestic kittens.

Their hard bush training commenced as soon as they were old enough to learn. The natural caution which was inborn in every bush animal was most marked in the tiger cats. During daylight hours they mostly slept and therefore were of little trouble to their mother. At night, however, it was a different proposition. The kittens, though young, were as equally creatures of the night as she was, and therefore apt to wander. But they didn't. They stayed in that log ready to receive any tasty tid-bits their hunting mother might bring to them.

And rarely did she fail. If the hunting was good, then they benefited considerably; if a meal had been hard to find, they had to go on short rations; but the old tiger cat put her children first. She did not eat until their hunger had been satisfied or, if not satisfied, at least allayed. She went hungry herself before they did. The tiger cat family in the old hollow log was reduced to two in distressing circumstances.

One night while out hunting, the old mother came across rabbit sign and felt quite excited. Though rabbits abounded all over Australia, this particular piece of country was singularly free of them.

The old cat did not know the reason for this and did not care, but the rabbits around here had been practically exterminated by every method a determined settler could employ.

The bushlands were extensive and, in parts, very dense, but a few human settlers had carved homes out of the scrub and had cultivated the land. These farms were miles apart, the nearest—to the hollow log—being about two miles away. This was owned by a farmer named Jack Holland, who lived there with his wife and sturdy young son Ted,

and worked the property with the aid of a farm-hand and also with the minimum assistance of young Ted. The boy worked only when he could not dodge it.

Mr. Holland, when he first started to clear the land, noticed a few rabbit burrows and determined to wage war on the pests from the very outset.

“They don’t appear to be very numerous here, and I don’t intend that they should be,” he told his farm-hand, Dave Chisholm. “We’ll dig them out and we’ll poison them. I’ve had experience of these things in other parts. Once they get the upper hand, you may as well chuck the game in. In the outback they have practically eaten the heart out of the country. Well, they’re not going to do it here. This land cost me a lot of money and I’m going to get it back with crops. Those crops are going to feed us and to feed the people. I’m not going to raise produce and grain simply in order that useless rabbits may live well.”

So Holland and Chisholm waged war on the rabbits, setting traps, using poison, digging them out, blasting them skywards and generally making their lives miserable—if they had any lives left to make miserable. The result was that not one rabbit was left in the area by the time Holland’s first crops were ready for harvesting. As to the future, however, he had his doubts, and frankly admitted them.

“They’ll come again, Dave,” he told Chisholm. “You can’t keep rabbits down for good. If everyone acted as we have done, there would be a good chance, but most farmers let them rip and hope for the best.”

That had been two years previously when the old tiger cat had not been a resident of the district. At that period she lived in another hollow log many miles to the west. It was good country from her point of view and she probably would have been content to stay there if conditions had

remained unaltered. But they did not.

During the hot summer a bushfire destroyed her hollow log and nearly destroyed her too. Fortunately, the pungent smoke which drifted into her sleeping quarters drove her into the open and away through the burning bush until she found a safe refuge among some rocks. After that adventure, she decided to leave the district for good, and eventually arrived in her new domain and established her home in the present hollow log.

Rabbits, of course, were not new to her. She had killed and eaten many before and had found them greatly to her taste. That was the reason she felt so pleasantly excited when she happened upon the trail of one on this particular night.

The bunny that had made the trail was nowhere in sight, but that was a minor detail. Cautiously the old tiger cat followed the trail which led across a grass patch and through some bushes. When the old hunter slid into these and pushed her nose through, she was rewarded with the sight of the prey nibbling the grass not three feet from where she crouched.

All unconscious of impending disaster, the rabbit continued to feed. The tiger cat silently slid from the bushes and flattened herself to earth. The night was pitch dark and a light breeze which stirred the leaves of the trees and sighed softly through the bushes and undergrowth, aided the hunter in her design. The rabbit certainly had ears long enough to catch any sound, but those ears played it false tonight. It did not hear the cat and, as it had its back towards her, did not see her.

When the marauder was within two feet of the unsuspecting bunny she made one leap and landed on its back, immediately sinking her sharp teeth into its neck. The rabbit gave one sharp squeal and died, its assailant's teeth

still buried in its soft flesh.

The rabbit was not fully grown, which made it easier for the tiger cat to transport. Half-carrying and half-dragging it, she set off for home, eventually reaching the log, where two pairs of shining eyes greeted her as she entered.

The three tiger cats, old and young, dined sumptuously that night. There was more than enough for all and Dasyure, a bit of a glutton, ate so much that he fell asleep with a mouthful still unswallowed. The old mother did not stint herself either, but the other youngster, who was feeling a little off colour, ate sparingly.

There was no more hunting that night. It was unnecessary.

When daylight came, the three cats were sound asleep, but Dasyure's sister was a little restless. She was still not feeling very well. Her mother and brother, who had both eaten so heartily of the rabbit, were sleeping off the effects of that meal, but she had no effects to sleep off.

Presently she awoke, yawned and stretched herself. A glance showed her that the rest of the family were still in a very deep sleep. She prodded Dasyure with her paws in a half-hearted attempt to wake him up and invite him to play with her, but he was unresponsive. Then she began to tweak her mother's tail. The old cat took no notice, nor did she awaken when the younger female climbed over her and began to creep down the log towards the entrance.

Had the old mother not been so fast asleep she would have awakened instinctively and checked her offspring. Both Dasyure and his sister had been warned time and time again that they must not leave the hollow log alone, especially during the daytime. Dangers abounded on every side, especially when the sun was up. In any case, it was not the right time for tiger cats to be abroad. Work at night, sleep during the day. That was the routine and had been

ever since the first tiger cat had appeared in the bush.

The young cat reached the entrance to the log and blinked at the strong sunlight outside. For a moment she hesitated, changed her mind, and returned to where Dasyure was sleeping. Again she tried to awaken him, this time to invite him to share in her adventure, but he did not stir. She looked at her mother thoughtfully, but did not attempt to awaken her. She knew what the old lady's views would be on such a crazy suggestion that they should go wandering around in the sunlit bush.

The only excuse that can be offered for the young cat is that she was not feeling very well and therefore did not quite know what she was doing. Had she had her wits completely about her, she might not have ventured into the open. On the other hand, being a female, she possessed the waywardness of her sex and, therefore, was unpredictable.

Be that as it may, she did leave the hollow log, and did creep out into the sunlight. What is more, the young villain actually enjoyed it. As the warmth penetrated her fur, she began to feel better. This, she told herself, was a bit of all right. What harm was there in it? Why had her mother been so insistent that neither she nor Dasyure venture into the daylight? Why, it was very pleasant out here. It was always the same with grown-ups: they hated to see their children having a good time.

All around her the bush was quiet, and danger seemed to be very far away. The only living thing she could see was a small skink lizard, which scampered across the hard ground in front of her.

Presently she decided to go for a stroll and to do a bit of exploring. It could only be described as a stroll, because she did not adopt any of the most elementary precautions. She just marched along carelessly, as if the whole bush

belonged to her.

And that was her undoing.

About half a mile from the hollow log she came upon a heap of rocks and scrambled up on top of them. The warm sun continued to beat down upon her and was so pleasant that she stretched herself on top of a flat rock and blinked herself into a lazy doze. Her illness, or whatever it was that had upset her, had disappeared and although she knew full well that she should be back in the hollow log with the rest of the family, she was too comfortable to move.

Now, just above her head and a little to the left, was a ledge of rock covered with tufts of grass. Presently two of these tufts began to waver and tremble as if stirred by a gentle breeze—but there was no breeze blowing. Then, between the two tufts, a flat head slowly projected itself and two wicked eyes glared down upon the unsuspecting young tiger cat not two feet away. The head belonged to a carpet snake—twelve feet of it—and in the small animal below, the reptile, which had been fasting for quite a longtime, saw a convenient meal.

Raising its head and retracting it so that the first few feet of its body could form a spring, the snake suddenly struck forward and downward, its head hitting the unfortunate tiger cat and crushing the life out of it. The reptile then picked up the body in its capacious mouth, withdrew to its own ledge of rock and there settled down to enjoy its easily-won feed. It would take some time to swallow and digest the young animal, but the carpet snake was in no hurry and had no other plans or engagements for the day.

CHAPTER TWO.

DASYURE GOES HUNTING.

THE DISAPPEARANCE of her young daughter was accepted by the old mother tiger cat as just one of those things that occur in life. In any case, the time had been fast approaching when both youngsters would have had to get out and fend for themselves. She was getting too old now to be bothered with them. Still, the youngster had been rather young, really, to leave home. However, there it was, and nothing could be done about it.

Such was the attitude of the old mother, but Dasyure missed his sister a little. They had had great games together in the hollow log. He wondered vaguely what had become of her, but as the days slipped by she became a dim memory and then not even that.

Dasyure was now old enough to go out at night with his mother to learn hunting lore, and the old cat taught him a lot. He was quick to learn, but the pair often went hungry. At times Dasyure was too eager and too impatient and often missed his prey, while his mother, being well past her prime and far from agile now, could hunt down only the easiest of meals. Birds' eggs, when she could find any, small lizards trapped unawares, and even frogs, were converted

into food. Dasyure did not take kindly to frogs, but they were better than nothing. Anyway, he was a better hand at catching them than his mother was. There was one good thing about frogs—one did not have to climb tall trees to get them. That was hard work, especially for the old mother.

Conditions—and meals—improved as Dasyure improved, which he did, rapidly. Natural instinct and habit came to his aid, supplying what his mother either could not or would not.

Of course, Dasyure should have been thrown out of the hollow log a long time ago to find his own home and go his own way, but the elder tiger cat couldn't be bothered with that. The log was big enough for them both and she had no intention of seeking another mate. Another and very strong point was that she had to rely upon her fast-growing son for sustenance.

On his side, the young tiger cat was content with the arrangement, but there were occasions when he felt that he should not have to do most of the hunting.

They were out one night in the bush not a great distance from home when they came to a gum tree in which Dasyure felt convinced there was something to eat. What it was, he did not know, but something deep down inside him kept insisting that he scale the tree and explore it. He did so. His mother stayed on the ground and watched his progress with interest and anticipation.

Presently he was lost to sight among the leaves and branches, so the old cat crept across to the trunk of another tree about twenty yards away, with some vague idea of scaling it to see if there was anything worthwhile up it. She climbed a couple of feet and then decided to give it best. Dropping back to earth again, she sat on her haunches and began to lick her whiskers.

In the meantime, Dasyure had reached the first branch and was about to climb up higher when he noticed a dark blob squatting on it about six feet from the trunk. He could not make out what it was. Whether the small animal saw him or not, it suddenly gave expression to a gurgling shriek which ended in a stream of bubbling sounds, which momentarily startled the tiger cat.

The noise-maker was a glider-possum, one of the most graceful little marsupials in the bush. It was sitting there having a light meal of leaves and attending entirely to its own business.

Distinguished from its common ring-tailed relation by its ability to spread its body parachute-fashion and volplane like a child's toy aeroplane, the glider-possum had nothing much to fear from the tiger cat, provided it saw the cat first and had a clear field of escape. Whereas the ring-tail had a long and tapered tail, the prehensile end of which was usually curled in a ring owing to its constant use in gripping branches when climbing, the glider's tail was fluffy and he used it as a rudder when he was flying.

Dasyure considered that the possum would repay closer inspection, so he began to creep along the branch towards it. The glider, however, saw him coming and, again uttering its rather unearthly shriek, stayed not upon the order of its going, but went.

Spreading out its graceful body and with its tail stuck straight out behind, it glided downwards swiftly, intending to land near the base of the nearest tree and then scale up it.

Unfortunately, the tree for which it was making was the one at the foot of which Dasyure's mother was sitting, and it was either stupidity or ignorance on its part that made the glider utter its cry again while it was in mid-air. This drew the old cat's attention to it. She saw it bearing down

upon her and was ready for it.

With its body flattened out so that it looked something like a miniature mat, the possum glided swiftly downwards and then, in order to make a safe landing, straightened out and looped upwards, intending to land on the tree trunk a few feet from the ground. But as it did so, the old mother cat, summoning what was left of her strength, sprang wildly into the air, her claws outstretched, and literally tore the possum to earth where a quick bite deprived it of its life.

Dasyure, up on the branch, had watched the proceedings with interest. It was the first glider-possum he had seen and he took it to be some kind of bird.

His interest gave way to real pleasure when the old tiger cat captured the little marsupial, and as quickly as he could, he scrambled down the tree and rushed to her side to get his share of the prey.

Great was his amazement and deep was his indignation when his mother, the possum beneath her paws, flattened back her ears, bared her teeth in snarling rage and indicated as plainly as she could that he was not going to get any more than a look and, possibly, a free smell, of the meal.

Well, thought Dasyure, this was a nice state of affairs, this was! This was maternal gratitude for you! Who had been the main food collector in recent weeks? Not her! Hadn't he worked his paws down to the very claws hunting so that they both might eat? He certainly had, and, by the flowering gum trees, he was going to eat now!

Returning snarl for snarl and threat for threat, Dasyure advanced upon his mother in a menacing manner. The old cat did not budge one single inch. She intended to stick to that glider-possum and fight for it to the death if necessary. She might be old and tired, she might be past her prime, but she was still a tiger cat, and no tiger cat had ever turned

tail, especially when a meal was involved in the argument. The young whipper-snapper! Who did he think he was? He could consider himself lucky she hadn't tossed him out of their hollow log long ago.

Dasyure crept right up to his mother and made a noise which indicated that he wanted a piece of possum and that right speedily. He thrust out his nose until it almost touched his mother's and she deliberately spat in his face. Dasyure returned the insult. The old cat had both paws on the possum, but, raising one with a swift motion, she scratched Dasyure down the side of one cheek. The youngster snarled and gave back a couple of inches.

His mother watched him warily, fully prepared to turn the matter into a free-for-all fight if Dasyure persisted in his unwelcome cadging. But that intelligent young animal, his cheek smarting and his feelings wounded by his mother's heartlessness, decided to go no further into the matter.

Being a tiger cat, though only a young one, his instinct told him that he had no chance of getting that possum away from his mother. Of course, he could fight her for it and, no doubt, could beat her, but she could have the thing. There were plenty more in the bush. Anyway, if this was going to be her attitude, she could look after herself in future and do her own hunting. He was through with her and was going home.

The old tiger cat watched him narrowly as he slunk away through the bushes, and when she was certain that he had gone for good, she picked up the possum and proceeded homewards.

She had gone only a few yards, however, when it occurred to her that probably Dasyure, too, was making for the family log. If so, there would be more arguments over the ownership of the glider, and she didn't want that. She

wanted the possum, not a fight, so, crawling under a low bush, she proceeded to eat the little marsupial.

She had absolutely no maternal feeling or love for Dasyure. It had been different when he was a small, helpless kitten. Now he was merely another tiger cat and, what was more, a tiger cat that had tried to deprive her of a meal she had won entirely by her own efforts. She hadn't stolen it from him, had she? Who did he think he was, anyway?

Her hunger satisfied for the time being, the old cat went off through the scrub and presently came to a track that wound more or less in the direction of the hollow log. She slunk along this and in due course arrived at a small, open, sandy patch of ground.

She was crossing this without any thought of danger to herself when something stirred beneath her feet, something with a very broad head and a stout, yellowish-brown body about two feet long. The old tiger cat skipped high and sideways, but, quick as she was, the death adder was quicker. It struck like a lightning flash, its deadly fangs penetrating her face near her whiskers. Then it drew backwards and glided off into the thickets.

In a few seconds it was all over with the old hollow log dweller. The deadly poison worked quickly and her sightless eyes did not see the early light of the rosy dawn that heralded another day.

The hollow log now belonged to her son, who, still smarting under the indignity he had suffered, was hunting around the bush for something to eat.

Dasyure managed to obtain a meal in a rather unusual manner. He was creeping disconsolately in the direction of home when, at the foot of a banksia, he saw, moving very feebly on the ground, a small, blind, featherless bird. Where it had come from, he did not know, but where it was

going to, he knew full well. He was licking his chops and wishing heartily that it had been six times the size it was, when something struck him lightly on the back. He gave a startled leap and then noticed another quivering little morsel. That, too, went the same way as the first, with no questions asked.

The first act of the drama that had provided this unexpected feed had been played in the banksia tree several weeks before when a pair of honeyeaters had built their nest and, in due time, had laid their eggs. Their nestbuilding had been closely observed and followed by a bronze cuckoo, which had bided its time. It intended in the fullness of time, to make those honeyeaters hatch and rear its own offspring, which was the pleasant habit of cuckoos.

When the time was ripe, the cuckoo laid its egg on the ground, picked it up gently in one claw and, flying to the honeyeaters' nest, placed it therein. Then it picked up one of the honeyeaters' eggs and flew off with it, dropping it carelessly a quarter of a mile away. The honeyeaters still had three eggs, but only two of them were their own.

The young cuckoo was the last to be hatched. The baby honeyeaters were each twenty-four hours old before he pecked and pushed his way out of the egg. And that was the beginning of the end for the rightful occupants of the nest.

He was not quite twenty-four hours old himself when he began to resent the presence of the two little unfledged honeyeaters. Though he, like them, was blind and only a quivering mass of flesh, he was much bigger and he wanted the nest to himself. So he wriggled and manoeuvred around until he succeeded in getting a nestling on to his back when, with a convulsive heave like a miniature bucking horse, he literally catapulted the little honeyeater out of its nest. That was the small morsel Dasyure had found under the tree.

And, though the tiger cat did not know it, while he was eating that morsel, the young cuckoo in the nest above him was preparing to eject the second honeyeater, and did so.

Dasyure went home to his hollow log and went to sleep, but he had it in mind to visit that banksia tree again. Any tree that rained young birds was worth keeping under observation.

He wondered vaguely what had become of his mother, but her absence did not worry him.

He was back at the banksia tree at dusk. It was his first port of call after leaving home. For a long time he sat at the foot of the tree waiting patiently for small birds to fall out of it again, but nothing like that happened.

At last he grew impatient and resolved that if a cheap meal were not going to come to him, he had better go and look for it. He decided to climb the banksia and see what it had to offer.

He saw the nest on a branch only a few feet from the ground and as he looked it over, two small birds flew away in terror, twittering loudly as they did so. Dasyure looked after them in mild surprise, tinged with disappointment and then, creeping along the limb, poked his nose into the nest. There lay the young cuckoo. Quickly the tiger cat seized the helpless young bird and, withdrawing along the limb, scrambled down the trunk to earth where he made short work of the youngster.

That done, he set off through the scrub to see what he could find in other parts.