

Tigerman's Whang Doodle

by Gary Lark

Past the sea green lake and over the hill there lives a hermit named Tigerman. And because he lives alone he is used to talking to himself. He also talks to his cat, his chair, or the wind that whistles by his door, but mostly to himself. One day he was finishing his breakfast when he spilled some rice.

"Holy crackers, rice on the floor! I suppose I'll have to give it to the birds," he muttered looking for the broom.

To his surprise he heard, "And what about me? You're always spilling things on me. Walking on me. Paying me no mind."

Tigerman hopped and jumped and landed on a chair.

"Who's that a yammering at me?!"

"And who else but your floor would be saying that you walked on me? The ceiling?"

The floor gave a dry chuckle beneath the chair.

"I'll be a possum's tail," the old man said, looking down at the same floor he'd been traipsing across for 40 years. "Just why have you decided to talk now, after all this time."

"Floors are very patient," said the floor.

"What do you have to say for yourself then?" asked Tigerman.

"Do you remember when you first came here, all puffed up about being *the* Tigerman?" Not giving him time to answer the floor went on. "We, I speak for the rest of the house, feel that if you were so great you would have wanted to live in the village, where people could admire your past glory. If all that stuff about saving the village from the tiger is true."

"You waited 40 years to ask me this?"

"Time means little to a floor."

"How come now? Why not 20 years ago?"

"Are you going to answer the question?"

"And why do you, the floor, care how I live?"

"I'll answer yours if you'll answer mine," said the floor.

"All right, all right. I didn't want the fuss. There was always somebody wanting me to go after a tiger, an alligator, or some other menacing creature."

"Shouldn't *the* Tigerman protect the village?" Asked the floor.

"Well, I, ah, only did what I needed to do at the time. I'm not the person to do their bidding," said the old man.

"Not the person people can rely on, you mean?"

"Listen here, you weren't there. The tiger was prowling around the edge of the village. It had eaten several children. I saw the tiger, grabbed my gun, crept over and shot it. Simple as that." Tigerman was getting irritated. "Everybody talking at me. What's it to you, Your Royal Flatness?"

"Take it easy. We just thought if you were really somebody worth knowing that you'd have a little company," said the floor curling a little at the edges.

"So that's what this is about. You want somebody else here."

"Not exactly. Not somebody else. We find being a house for one person a bit dull."

The walls seemed to lean in slightly and the rafters creaked some tiny squeaks.

"Speaking for myself I could use more foot massage, more tickling with the broom. And the walls have had little laughter or music in years."

The old man stared down at the floor. He pondered. Could this be, his house ordering up some company? He thought about the dances when he was young. And the laughter. By living an out-of-the-way life he had avoided the wrangling and arguing, the snip snip of gossip. But what about the laughter, the music, people playing games? Holiday decorations? He had avoided those things too.

He pondered.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Tigerman. "I'll throw a birthday party. How would you like

that?"

"I think that's a grand start," said the floor. "But who do you know after all these years?"

"You got a point there."

"How old are you anyway?"

"I forgot."

"How are you going to have a birthday party if you don't know how old you are?"

"If *I* don't know, who's to know?"

"Got a point there."

"How about the next time you go to the village for supplies you tell everyone you're going to be 100 years old?"

"They wouldn't believe it."

"Have a look in the mirror."

The old man walked over to the mirror, not knowing quite how to walk on a talking floor.

"It's alright. I like being walked on, even better--danced," said the floor.

Tigerman took a few skips.

"That's better."

He looked in the mirror. "Yeah, they just might believe it. *I* just might believe it."

"So, is it a deal?" asked the floor.

"It's a deal."

"I'll guarantee they'll never dance on a better floor."

"How can you do that?"

"We floors have our ways. No tired feet in the morning, either."

So off went the Tigerman. The village was used to him coming once in a while to trade for a few things and as usual paid him no mind. He went by the kids playing in the street. He saw people chatting over fences. As if he had new eyes, he began to see what he had been missing. He went into the store. After picking out some tea, flour and sweets he approached the counter.

The young girl behind the counter asked, "This all you need today?"

"I guess that'll do," said Tigerman.

She put his things in a bag.

"Nice day isn't it?" Tigerman said, trying to work up his courage. It had been 40 years, after all, since he had tried to make conversation with someone other than himself.

"Yes, it is. Did you see the full moon last night? Harvest moon," said the girl.

"Oh yes," said Tigerman, thinking of the moonlight that had come through his window. It was so big and bright he had put his boots back on and gone outside, watching the moon for half an hour. "Yes, I had to go back out and have a look."

"Me too," she said.

The girl's father came over to the counter.

"How are you doing?" said Tigerman.

"Name's Pete," said the man extending his right hand. "And this is Jessie," nodding toward the girl.

Tigerman had forgotten people shook hands when they greeted each other. "Mine is Tigerman." There was no recognition on the counter man's face. Could it be that no one remembered the tiger? Or the hubbub around him killing the tiger? "Bill Tigerman," he said, after hearing the odd ring of the word Tigerman by itself.

"I've seen you in here before haven't I?" asked the man.

"Oh, I come to town every now and then," said Tigerman.

"I was thinking of having a birthday party."

There, he said it. He waited for some response.

"Is that right?" the man said with little enthusiasm.

"Yeah, guess I'll be a hundred."

With this the man looked over at Tigerman. "You guess?"

"Seems about right," said Tigerman. "But I'm not sure anymore. I have a certain friend

who thinks the party is more important than the age."

"Well, why not?" said the storekeeper.

"Trouble is I don't know how to go about it anymore. You know, how to get everything together."

"Would you like some help?"

"Sure would," said Tigerman.

"I can help. I like parties," said Jessie.

"Can you come back tonight, so we can do some planning?" asked Pete.

"You bet I can," said Tigerman.

And with that the old man fairly skipped home. He didn't tell the floor that afternoon. Even when the floor asked, "Did you talk to anyone about the party?" He just whistled while he made soup and potato muffins. Finally he said, "Life is a mystery, my hardwood friend."

But the floor knew something was up. Tigerman was a little different, a little more fun. There was a spring in his step.

The house watched him leave that evening, walking toward the setting sun, his hat bobbing in the twilight. The porch and windows could see him to the first hill, then it was up to the roof, and finally the chimney reporting the last trace of Tigerman as he turned toward town.

"To tell you the truth I haven't been to a party in a long time," Tigerman explained to the storekeeper.

"I suppose they're about the same; food, music, room to dance, maybe a contest or a game," replied the storekeeper.

Jessie came into the room. "I could help with the decorations," she said, as she did a pirouette and landed by her father.

"I can make lots of food," said Tigerman.

"No need to make too much, we'll just put out the word for people to bring some along. I

know a Sarah Ann McDuff, she plays a mean fiddle, and she knows other musicians. Let's see, I'll bring extra plates, cups and bowls. You said you have room to dance?"

"Oh, I've got a mighty good floor."

"That's all we need. I'll put out the word, 'PARTY AND DANCE AT TIGERMAN'S PLACE' with directions. You see I love to dance," said the storekeeper.

"Me too," said Jessie, as Pete and Jessie began to spin around the room together.

As the big day approached he couldn't keep it a secret anymore. He stood in the middle of the floor, "I want you all to know there's going to be a party here Saturday night. We're going to have food and music and dancing, a real whang doodle."

"All right," said the floor.

Squeaks and rumbles rippled through the house.

"We'll be ready," said the floor. "I've been doing my exercises, just in case."

"Exercises?" asked Tigerman.

"Being a good dance floor isn't easy. You know how you have to learn to dance with a partner?"

"Yes."

"Everyone on the floor is my partner," said the floor, boasting just a little.

As Saturday grew near Tigerman could swear he could feel the floor in a different way-- the way it seemed to help him walk.

Saturday came. The old man cooked and cleaned, put up a sign by the front gate and waited with great anticipation.

The first to arrive was Jessie carrying her dancing shoes and a sack of decorations. In no time at all she turned the room into a party with streamers, flowers and her sunshine smile.

Then Pete arrived with the band: introducing Sarah Ann McDuff with her fiddle Akeem Mohammed the drummer, Alex Fellerman with guitar and banjo, and Molly Toe on piano. After muscling in the piano and setting-up the band they played a little to warm up.

The floor whispered, "This is more like it." Just loud enough for Tigerman to hear. The walls swooned slightly.

More people came. There was plenty of food, and they ate their fill. Most were raring to dance, so they pushed back the tables and chairs to expose a floor that seemed very inviting.

They danced in lines, squares and circles. They danced waltzes and polkas. Kids and grandmas, strangers and friends, everyone danced with everyone. Grandpa danced a jig. And the more they danced the better they felt. Not a leg was tired at midnight and they kept on dancing. They danced until the moon gave way to the early rays of sun coming through the windows. It was like a signal telling the dancers that there were other things to do.

So they drifted off to feed chickens, build boats, take children home, open the store, or sleep a whirling dancing sleep till noon.

Tigerman sat in his chair, tired with a warm, happy kind of tiredness. He might be a hundred but it didn't matter, he felt like he had done a lot of living in one night. His guests had cleaned up most of the dishes and put the furniture back in place.

"Now how do you feel, Mr. Floor," asked Tigerman.

"Just right, Mr. Tigerman," replied the floor creaking and popping. It seemed to stretch like cat.

The old man decided to go out to his garden and on the way he said, "We'll have to do that again sometime."

"How about tomorrow?" said the floor.

"How about next year?" said Tigerman.

"Next week?"

"Next month."

"It's a deal," said the floor.

As Tigerman went out the door he turned and said, "Yes, once a month, a real whang

doodle. Yes indeed." And as he walked down the porch steps he felt the whole house give a little shake.