

The Dancing Bears

a fable by Roy Fuller

A long time ago, in Eastern Europe, there were three bears who used to appear at fairs and in the yards of inns, and dance and play the tambourine. They were quite famous in the district, for no human being appeared with them or was in charge of them. They travelled from appearance to appearance through the woods and fields so that if by chance they were observed *en route* they could be taken for wild bears, unless perhaps they let the tambourine be seen or the two little patriotic banners they waved at the climax of their dance. After their appearance the audience had learned to give them not only money but food, and so they survived not too badly and had got used to eating things pretty unsuitable for bears, like toffee apples and pickled cucumbers.

The history of the bears was as follows. Two of them, Adam and Mavra, had been cubs taken by a hunter when he had shot their mother. He had sold them to Robak, a travelling entertainer. Robak had acquired the third bear, Ivan, from a circus which had failed to train him to do anything more entertaining than shuffle about on his hind legs and clap his forelegs together more or less in time to the circus band. Even after a good few years with Robak he had never learned to do anything else (the circus band being replaced by a whistle played by Robak) and it was Adam and Mavra who waved the little flags, the latter also shaking and biffing the tambourine.

Robak was a mean and ragged man. When he appeared with his bears at an inn he never took a room but dossed down with Ivan, Adam, and Mavra in the stables or wherever the innkeeper allowed them to be, which was sometimes in an empty pig-sty or under the

eaves of an outhouse. Because Robak spent so little money he was thought to have a lot of it. Because he had no home but spent his whole life wandering about he was thought to carry the money hidden on his person, among the rags.

Some thieves heard these rumors and on a winter's night attacked and beat Robak and left him to die in the snow. They found his money in a greasy belt next to his skin. There were only a few copper coins. Usually very little money was put in the bag that Robak took round the audience after the high point of the performance when Adam and Mavra were waving the flags. The fact was, Robak was poorer even than the people who watched his show.

The bears spent the night of Robak's murder among the logs in a lean-to shed where their master had left them with the intention of returning to sleep there himself when he had begged a bowl of soup at the inn. The next morning, when Robak failed to appear, the bears made their own way to the next village, a road they had taken many times before. The following day they moved on again. And so began their human-beingless performances.

There were two men who, like the bears, travelled about entertaining casual audiences. In their act one man bound the other with chains, put him in a sack and then gave him a certain time to get free, which he always did. In terms of money they were not much more successful than Robak had been. At an Easter fair they found themselves performing next to Adam, Mavra, and Ivan, who had an audience just as large as theirs. The bears collected food to rather more value than the money collected by the two men, for the great disadvantage of the show with the chains and sack was that a collection could really only be taken when the chained man had freed himself, by which time the audience was already drifting away.

It struck the men that if they travelled about with the bears and combined the two shows they would be a good deal better off. They determined to capture the animals, using some of the chains they

employed in their act and if necessary some of the sacks they also transported about. When the bears were asleep at night under a stall that sold gingerbread, the men crept up and began to slip a chain through the leather collars which Adam and Mavra still wore from their days with Robak. In the case of Ivan, though he did not have a collar, they were able to use the ring in his nose, a relic of his circus employment. It was this part of the operation that led to its downfall. Ivan felt the chain going through his ring, awoke, saw his companions already chained and, greatly alarmed, began to use his sharp claws—but not for their more usual purpose of beating time. He brought down one of the men (he who was covered with the sack in the act); the other ran bleeding away.

Ivan pulled the chain out of the other bears' collars and the three fled from the fair, from the little town, and into the fields. The man of the chains act who had survived said that he and his partner had been suddenly set on by the bears, who obviously for some reason had turned treacherous; so a party with iron bars, rope, and even guns was organized by the police and set out after Adam, Mavra, and Ivan.

They were found in a haystack near a farm. Ivan, still upset from the previous encounter with humans, seeing the rope, imagined it through his nose-ring, and ran growling at the oncoming men. One of the police, his rifle at the ready, pulled the trigger and shot the huge bear dead. Adam and Mavra allowed themselves to be bound with rope and led away; eventually they were put in a menagerie.

As may be guessed, they were very unhappy in the small cage in the airless, darkish, smelly building, surrounded by other cages from which came the screeches and roars and howls of a miscellany of animals and birds, and gawped at all day by the visitors to the zoo. Fortunately, the keepers underestimated the intelligence and skill possessed by Adam and Mavra, and grew careless about locking the door of their cage. After long efforts during many nights, Mavra, by

standing on Adam's back, managed to put one foreleg through the door-grille, reach down to the padlock, unfasten it with her claws and slip the bolt. The menagerie was in a park at the edge of a town so the two bears were able to reach the countryside without being discovered. Eventually, following a number of adventures, they succeeded in getting back to the part of the country they had travelled in former days. They resumed giving their performances at inns and on village greens but avoided fairs in view of their terrible experience.

Very few members of the public felt the loss of Ivan, since he had contributed so little to the act, and when the two survivors had finished dancing and tapping on a tin can (which had replaced the lost tambourine) and waving branches (in substitution for the little flags) almost as many gifts were forthcoming as in the past, so that Adam and Mavra lived somewhat better than before. They, however, although only in a dim bearish way, now felt there was something important missing from their act and, indeed, from life itself.