

Tarzan of the Alps

Brian W. Aldiss

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*“How miraculous is life!” Brian Aldiss emailed us exuberantly following our acceptance of this delightful whimsy. We had obviously caught him at a good moment. “I am wild with a sup-pressed excitement concerning the writing of The Walcot Novel (working title), in which I am now 55,000 words deep,” he went on. “My main characters are sailing down the Grand Canal in Venice—as I too seem to be.” In 2005 Brian will have two new novels available: *Jocasta and Sanity* and *the Lady*, the latter scheduled from PS.*

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An old and weary van, travelling southwards across the plains of Patagonia, stopped ten kilometres out-side the village of Esperanza. The driver of the van, a corpulent man by the name of Jose Pareda, climbed out and walked slowly round his vehicle. He looked under the bonnet. He scratched his head and returned to the steering wheel.

When he started the engine and went into gear, alarming noises sounded. Pareda switched off the engine.

Again he climbed out, to stand on the shady side of the vehicle, where a faded sign read, “Pareda’s Mobile Cinema.” He scanned the horizon hopefully.

The horizon was flat and un-promising, bereft of trees or foliage. However, movement soon appeared on it. Pareda waved his hat and shouted to attract attention.

A heat haze made the distant fig-ures uncertain. As they drew nearer, a man could be seen with a dog and perhaps a dozen head of cattle. The man left his hound to guard the cattle and came on alone. He was middle-aged and presented a dusty appearance.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “What made you stop in this

barren place?”

Pareda explained he was hoping to get down to the city of Rio Gallegos, but his clutch was broken.

“You’re in luck, friend.” said the other. “My son Pedro works in a garage in Esperanza. He can fix the problem. Leave your vehicle here. Come with me to my house.” He said his name was Alejo Galdos.

So Pareda went with Galdos. Galdos had eleven thin cattle. They drank at a spring, after which Galdos and his dog drove the herd back to his estancia. As they were securing the animals, Galdos’s wife, Maria, came out of their dwelling to enquire about their visitor.

Maria was warmly consoling regarding the broken clutch and pressed Pareda to come into their house and make himself comfortable.

The house was poor and built of adobe, and showed many signs of neglect, but the two men sat themselves down on benches while Maria fed the dog, after which she produced a jug of thin red wine for her husband and their guest.

She was a well-built woman, matronly of figure, who complained of sciatica and failing eyesight. Almost the first thing she said to Pareda was that they were down on their luck. The men also had their complaints, and warmed to one another when they found they had something in common: the stupidity and failure of their fathers.

Pareda’s father had owned a flourishing cinema in the brilliant city of Comodoro Rivadavia. Unfortunately, he had allowed the cinema to be burnt down. The fire had spread to the whole street. He was sued for a great deal of money and threatened with death by several irate house-holders. In desperation, he hanged himself. Pareda, then a teenager, had managed to save a good many reels of film from the blaze. With them, he escaped from town and had established his travelling cinema.

“But, alas, these days people have television and computers and no longer wish to see my films. Admittedly, some are very old, but are not old things valuable?”

Galdos agreed that old things were better than new and sipped his wine sparingly.

“And old dreams are better than new ones,” said Maria, but her husband would not go as far as that.

Alejo Galdos admitted that he and Maria lived very poorly. They had recently bought a PC with an email facility, but had never possessed a television set. It was all the fault of his father. This terrible man with gold teeth had become rich from banking in the distant capital, Buenos Aires, and had amassed a fortune through his liasons with a corrupt governor. The governor had been shot and now there was a law suit over the money which had been going on for years—the very money Galdos claimed was his by right.

So Galdos was parted from wealth and the comfort wealth could bring. He had taken up ranching, but his heart was not in it. His life and Maria’s had become more and more empoverished. After many hard years, he had even forgotten how to read or write, and it was all the fault of his beast of a father with the gold teeth.

The two men shook hands across the table. Fathers were a bad lot. But they were now friends, and already Maria had emailed their son Pedro at the garage in Esperanza to repair Pareda’s clutch, and to give the vehicle a general overhaul.

Pareda was more than grateful and tucked into the meat dish Maria provided.

“We unfortunates must live without hope,” he said, with a gallant flourish of his knife. “Despair is a noble thing!”

“Yes, exactly!” Galdos agreed. “It is the Argentinian philosophy!”

He passed round some slender cigarillos. All three of them lit up and drank down the thin wine and felt happy in each other’s company.

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And so it was that young Pedro fixed up the old van and ‘Pareda’s Mobile Cinema’ was once more a going con-cern. Since Pareda had spent two nights at the Galdos estancia, enjoying their hospitality and getting quite drunk with Galdos, he determined to repay them with a free film show.

He drove his vehicle close to the porch of the adobe dwelling and set up his canvas screen so that Maria and Galdos could watch from their

bench on the porch. When dusk was fading fast into darkness, and the stars were appearing richly overhead, he began to project his film.

Maria and Galdos were immensely excited. Here was a little good fortune at last.

It was an old film, shot in black-and-white. The title came up on the screen with a blast of music.

“What does it say, Maria? What does it say?” asked Galdos in extreme agitation.

Maria screwed up her poor eyes and read. “This film is called ...”

“Yes, yes, what is it called, my dearest?”

“It is called ‘Tarzan of the Alps’. Yes. That’s it! ‘Tarzan of the Alps’.”

They watched the film enthralled. Mighty Tarzan swung through the great jungles from tree to tree. He gave his magical call. He was surrounded by elephants trumpeting and pushing down giant trees, by monkeys who were comical and loveable and obeyed Tarzan’s call, and by superb parrots who alighted on Tarzan’s shoulder. Tarzan also had a beautiful mate. She lived in a tree with him.

Tarzan outwitted a bunch of nasty white men. He fought with a lion and tamed it. He fought with a crocodile and killed it, wrenching its jaws apart. And all this happened in the won-derful tall jungles of the Alps, which seemed to stretch on to eternity. There, it was clear, one might be for-ever wild, forever free, and never ever have to herd cattle.

By the time the film finished, Galdos and Maria were in tears, over-come with emotion at the brilliance of the film.

Pareda packed his equipment away. They implored him, weeping, to stay another night, but he would not. After fond farewells, the ‘Pareda Mobile Cinema’ van trundled away and soon was lost in the gloom of the night.

But Alejo and Maria Galdos never forgot the impact of the film they had viewed. Night after night, they would close their door on the bleak open spaces surrounding their estancia and talk about the resounding cry of that great athlete, Tarzan, as he swung on lianas through the trees. They would try to recreate the call of the lumbering elephants and to mimic the chatter

of the monkeys. And above all they would remind each other of the wonderful forests covering the Alps.

They had heard of the Alps. They knew those mountains stretched across part of distant Europe. But never had they dreamed that those mountains were home to such splendid wild life, such splendid wildernesses of jungle.

Often in his longing for that fecundity, Galdos would swear he would sell their poor herd of cattle and go to visit those alpine forests. Alas, he knew in his heart that the cattle would not raise enough money even to get him and his wife back to Buenos Aires.

Worn out at last, Alejo Galdos died. Maria held his hand until he breathed no more. His last word, delivered in a sigh, was "Tarzan."

Maria mourned her husband deeply. She resolved to keep on the cattle as long as she could. And then, amazingly, luck changed. The long-protracted lawsuit in the capital was settled in favour of Galdos's estate. A man in a suit, driven by a chauffeur in a smart car that never broke down, called on Maria Galdos and gave her, as her husband's surviving widow, a large suit-case full of money.

"What shall I do with all this?" she asked, surveying the miraculous inheritance.

"You could travel," suggested the man in the suit, as he moved rapidly back to his automobile.

Maria felt she was too old to travel. She called Pedro on the email, summoning him to her.

"Pedro," she said, when he arrived at the estancia, "You must have this money. You must fulfill your father's wish. You must go to see the forests of the Alps."

Pedro embraced his mother and swore he would tell her everything on his return. He went to the capital, bought himself a new alpaca suit and booked himself a seat on the next flight to Europe.

At last the family dream would be fulfilled. He would feast his eyes on those eternal forests depicted in that wonderful film his mother called 'Tarzan of the Alps.'

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