

## The Chewed-Off Willy

Hawksworth rolled over and cracked an eyelid open.

"Urgh!" he grunted as daylight stabbed the back of his eyeball and ricocheted around his skull. He lay there for a moment or two collecting his thoughts as best he could through the throbbing ache that spread from the top of his head down to his toes. There was no help for it but to get up. It was daylight and there were things to be done. What day was it? Is it today or tomorrow that the deputation is coming from the south about the grazing rights? Perhaps it was already tomorrow. Why can't elephants get on with other elephants? They have such long memories and recall the slightest slur said about them by anybody and everybody. He groaned inwardly and hauled himself to his feet feeling the bile rise with the effort and change of position.

"Why can't I just stay in bed today? Why can't someone else be King for a couple of days? How I need a holiday. Now!"

He fancied he was swaying slightly and wondered vaguely if anyone was looking. He went on to wonder if he cared. He wasn't sure. Damn he felt bad. That certainly was some party last night, if only he could remember it. Now there was another, and more pressing problem; which way to the waterhole - he absolutely had to do his ablutions while he had the will to move. Unhappily, the movement he made gave rise to an

urgent requirement to use the toilet and he absolutely would not be seen doing that in his bed area, perish the thought. He pushed his head up high, put himself onto autopilot and staggered off, as gracefully as he could, in what he fondly imagined was the direction of the waterhole.

He knew he'd successfully arrived when he felt the soles of his feet go cool. He was still trying to prise his eyes open as he washed his feet and then, with an effort of will, splashed his face. Next, the teeth. Scrub the teeth. He was having to talk his way through the simplest of tasks or they just would not get done. How his head hurt. What on earth had Elsa put in the punch? Ah, that was what the party was about, he now recalled. Elsa had come back from living with the humans. What a welcome they had given her. He remembered the excited talk that had gone on between Elsa and Enid with footnotes proffered by Debbie and, of course, Maxine who absolutely was not to be left out of this little adventure tale. Elsa had not been able to master the human talk as Enid had but was able to understand them only too well. Naturally Elsa had wanted to know all about it; Maxine had explained, at length, that the whole thing had only been made possible by her largesse and Debbie had, grudgingly, admitted that Maxine had been the perfect escort on the way home to poor old Gardner. Why was the mention of Gardner's name cause for distress, Elsa had wanted to know. Hawksworth paused in his

ablutions and a wave of maudlin sadness washed over him at the memory of Gardner's demise. Such a brave Gnu to go down with the Circling sickness after all those years. Many came to Hawksworth and asked him to put Gardner out of his misery - Dilys had said that Gardner had pleaded with her to get Hawksworth to do it. He could not bring himself to do it. Even Maxine, for all her bravado and scorn of the herbivores, made excuses. And so it was Debbie and Enid who gave old Gardener the last rites, as it were, and snuffed out his suffering. They said he looked grateful to them at the last. They left the body for the vultures and hyenas, walking off without a backward glance. Hawksworth flushed his face again. He guessed his eyes were red enough without snivelling over an old friend. He felt such a fool. Regal King of the Beasts, indeed, snuffling like a child. He reached down to relieve his bladder and jolted awake. His eyes big and round and all traces of hangover gone. Not only the hangover was gone but also, how could he believe this, his willy!

His fingers felt in vain and, eventually, he relieved himself anyway with the need and with the shock. His mind was reeling in disbelief and racing around in circles. How can he be King without a willy? He would be a laughing stock! He just could not accept it as a fact. He certainly didn't want to feel down there again for fear, no, terror of confirmation. What would the pride think? What would Maxine say? The thought

was like a bucket of cold water washing over him. He shivered. The shame, the humiliation. Then a thought occurred to him. Who had done it? Rage started to rise in his chest like an angry, burning lump. His lips curled back in the start of a mighty roar of defiance and anger that was snuffed out immediately. If he went around asking about it, people would know. They would, he was certain, laugh at him behind his back. His head went down again in total despair. There was no way out of this. Being impotent was bad enough, he was sure, but to have no willy at all was the pit of despondency. He felt himself falling down a black hole of grief and anguish. There were no footholds to haul himself out and no light at the end of it.

"Is this how Gardner felt at the end," he thought. "No way out of this one, nowhere to turn and his greatest friend would not - could not, come and help him in his final moment of need."

The anguish engulfed him again and he sagged back down onto the grass at the edge of the waterhole and cried gently to himself.

"What is the matter, my dear" a gentle voice said in his ear. He looked up through blurred, tear-stained eyes and saw Debbie looking at him with great concern.

"I have become old. I have regrets about things done and, especially, things I have left undone."

"It's Gardner, isn't it?" She said kindly.

"Ah, you are perspicacious, Love, but I fear that is only part of it. The time has come for me to depart and make way for a younger Lion to take over as the King. Heaven knows there have been mutterings recently from those who feel they are more capable than I."

"Nonsense, Dearest, you have many years left in you yet. You are in your prime."

Hawksworth could not hold her gaze and looked away. He felt guilty and embarrassed and not a little ashamed.

"My mind is made up. You will have a new master and a new King today. I will go and retire to the edge of the grasslands. Perhaps I will visit the human again, who knows. The burden of rule has become intolerable. I need to rest." He still refused to look directly at her so that she knew there was more amiss than he was saying but, equally, she knew that he would never tell her if his mind was set on it.

"Was something said at the party that upset you?" she asked, knowing that it was unlikely that anyone would say anything to upset him however relaxed he became and he was certainly relaxed last night. He flushed at the mention of the party and looked over his shoulder away from her. Now she was convinced that something had happened at Elsa's 'do'.

"It was a good party," he said "and it is fitting that I should use Elsa's homecoming as my farewell." At this he

pulled himself heavily to his feet and walked off with dignity towards the rest of the pride.

They were, naturally, shaken at his pronouncement. Maxine started to say something but a glance at Debbie who was shaking her head and frowning warned her to keep her council. He thanked them, in turn, for their faithfulness and their diligence to their duty as consorts to the King. He also thanked them for what he regarded as their genuine affection for him, a rare thing, he mused, among modern prides. He gave one or two of the cubs an affectionate pat, bade the girls look after each other and to choose their next master with care and, with that, he held his great mane high and walked off towards the horizon.

He hoped that he looked better than he felt. Quite apart from the overwhelming sadness at losing his treasured part, he was leaving behind what had become his family and friends - his whole life was being rubbed out. He wondered if he was too old to start again as a hermit. How would he live? The collective of the pride had always been there; he had never had to fend for himself.

"Damn, I've been mollycoddled" he thought morosely to himself. "Now I'm to be punished for it. No, not for that - for enjoying myself at the party. I let myself go once too often and someone took advantage of the situation. But who could it have been? Why didn't I back off as usual and watch

everyone else make fools of themselves? I must stop this self-recrimination, it's completely pointless. No more wallowing in self-pity. Think, man, how am I going to live now. I've got to have a plan. Who? Who could possibly have done such a thing?"

He realised his mind was going around in circles and that he would get no peace until he had sorted out the probabilities. Who was at the party - that he could remember, anyway? That was a starting point. Well, the Zebras, the Gnus, a couple of Giraffes - such snobs, the pride, of course, and Eddie the Cheetah with his new mate were definitely there. Dilys? Had he seen Dilys? Not for a while, he fancied, not since Gardner had gone. A fresh wave of bitterness swept over him; he tried to shake it off and gave up. Let it run its course, that's the thing. He blinked a couple of times and focussed on the Zebras just off to his left.

"Still in your pyjamas, I see, Lads!" He forced gaiety but it came out sounding contrived. The Zebras looked at each other, frowning.

"You don't sound yourself, Sire," one said to him "Is there something we can do to help?"

Hawksworth took a deep breath. "Good party last night, wasn't it, Chaps?"

"Aye, it was that. You enjoyed yourself mightily, Your Highness, we thought that it was about time you let your hair down for a change - do you good, once in a while. Make a new

fellow out of you.”

“You’re right, it did just that, as a matter of fact. Oh, by the way, I don’t remember seeing the Thommies there. Couldn’t they make it?”

“They had a previous over with the Elands. One of them got married. Well, two of them, actually. But only one that was known to us and the Thommies.”

Hawksworth winced at the reference to the Elands. Everyone knew that an Eland had been the only non-Lion to challenge his supremacy back when he was a youngster and getting used to his responsibilities. They’d made it up and become friends afterwards but everyone else still remembered the incident. Actually, he pondered, I’d acted with remarkable constraint at the time. It was my first diplomatic success, really. He allowed himself a small smile and wondered how Nathan was. He hadn’t seen him for many a year now that they had moved north to be with friends. Another group had moved in almost immediately but he hadn’t taken to any of those. He was aware that the Zebras were looking at him curiously.

“Just a spot of reminiscing. Often think of Nathan. I might just wander up north and look him up. I could see a couple of my other mates while I was there.”

“We heard about Nathan. He is well but is getting a touch of arthritis and thinks in terms of lying down and giving up. If you’re going to see him you’d better go fairly soon before

it's too late."

"We are getting old, us friends. You don't realise how the years are catching up on you until loved ones start being absent." A tear welled up in his eye again. The Zebras had the courtesy to look to the north.

"The rains will be here soon. Another reason to go quickly. Lions don't like to travel in the wet, do they?"

He agreed, thanked them and bid them farewell and good grazing - as you do with Zebras. So, the Thommies weren't there but, then, they were herbivores. What would they be doing biting his parts off? No, he had to think who was more likely. At one time, many years ago, he might have suspected Elsa but not now. Now they were both less playful. Another regret? Possibly but that one was offset by maturity and experience. So who? Who could it be? Cheetahs? Eddie was a super chap and he absolutely would not believe it of him. Eddie's new piece of stuff was something, wasn't she? Talk about racy. He pondered that for a moment but rejected the thought as unlikely. She had eyes only for Eddie, obviously doted on him for some odd reason. No accounting for taste. Tut, tut! He caught himself, Eddie was a good catch for a young lady like that. He would teach her a thing or two and look after her better than her Mum had when she was a cub. He'd been a bachelor too long, it was about time he settled down and good luck to him for finding such a glamorous piece

to do it with, too. So that concluded that train of thought. It had to be someone at the party, but there was nobody at the party, that he could think of, that would do such a thing. If only his memory would clear. If only he hadn't drunk so much he would have been able to remember. Huh, if he hadn't drunk so much it wouldn't have happened. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. He beat himself with that mentally.

He found himself heading north after he left the Zebras. It seemed the natural thing to do, the least suspicious thing to do. Perhaps he would go and look up Nathan after all. It's always better to have a point to a trip, something to aim at. Heaven knows he had little else to aim at now - or aim with, come to that. Another wave of regret and self-pity threatened to engulf him.

"My, oh my. I am a sorry specimen. Yesterday I was all-powerful King of the Beasts, I had a pride (dare I say it?) to be proud of and friends everywhere. Today? What? Maybe some friends but they will laugh at me when they find out - as they surely will, and discover someone else to be friends with."

He was passing the edge of a vast herd of Gnus who watched him curiously as he walked slowly past with his head getting lower and lower.

"Good 'do' last night, man" one called out to him "Like good grass, you know? Keep mellow, man."

He smiled at the Gnu. They were all strangely informal

and nothing would ever change that. They used words like 'hip' and 'cool' in abundance so that, often, one wondered what they were talking about. It just went to show how special, what a cut above the rest, Gardner is - was, he caught himself in the slip and smiled at the young Gnu again in farewell.

In order to head north he found he had to pass through a semi-wooded area. Not thick with trees but there were more thorn trees than usual. He recognised Percival's larder tree by the carcass wedged up in it and immediately felt a slight pang of hunger. Later, he would defer eating until later on. He didn't feel like running and, besides, the day was getting hotter. Maybe he might take a nap shortly - perhaps over in that thicket of small trees where the shade would be more concentrated. There was a mighty flapping of large wings around his ears and he automatically, as he always did, flinched away from the sound.

"Hello, Dilys. What brings you to me? Gossipy wives, no doubt."

Dilys fixed him with one of her baleful stares and said nothing; she waited for Hawksworth to fill in the gap.

"Sorry, Dilys. Should've said 'ex-wives', shouldn't I? Can we go over to those trees over there? You don't seem to be bothered by the heat but it's starting to get to me, you know."

He walked slowly so that Dilys could keep up with her

strange, stiff walk in the style of Marabous. Soon, they reached the trees and Dilys watched Hawksworth carefully as he sat down heavily on the grass. He surveyed one of his paws, back and front, and waited for Dilys to say something. The silence stretched on until, with a sigh, Hawksworth capitulated.

"You have a very disapproving look, Dilys. Give me one of your inevitable pearls of wisdom." Hawksworth could have bitten his tongue off for that uncalled for, and somewhat churlish, remark. He clenched his lips and stared at his feet in contained remorse. Dilys gave no indication of having received a slight.

"You are hurting, aren't you, my dear old friend?"

Hawksworth glanced at her and turned to look at the distant horizon determined, this time, to be more careful with his words.

"What makes you think that?"

"Uncharacteristically, you let loose last night; you walked away from your family responsibilities this morning; we find you heading north when there is a delegation coming up from the south - thus you are shirking your Royal duties. This is unplanned, isn't it? This is a whim, isn't it? What is the root cause of this whimsy? It is a serious root, isn't it? Since you have refused to discuss it with anyone we must presume it to be a personal root. Is it? You need to get it

off your chest. You need to confide. I have never broken a confidence - as well you know. Tell me so that I may help, if I can."

"Dilys, Dilys, dear Dilys. You are right. It is most personal. I cannot divulge my reasons even to you. You who have been my most faithful and trusted aide. You can have no perception of how sad this makes me, to turn aside from my family and yourself. To abandon all my duties. I am mortified that it has become necessary. I should bid you to go to the pride and assist them, with all diligence, in wisely selecting my successor. Bear news of my abdication to all and ask that I may be left in peace so that I may finish my days in solitude..."

"And self pity" interjected Dilys. "Your decisions have always been regarded as wise but even the wisest must err occasionally. Put aside this monstrous aberration and return, with me, to the pride. Take up your duties once more. Whatever has happened cannot be irredeemable or insoluble. Trust your friends and allies. We will not, absolutely not, let you down in your hour of need."

"You are kind, Dilys, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your concern and fidelity but the problem is insoluble, it is irredeemable. There is no alternative -and, believe me, I have considered the alternatives, but for me to go away to where I am unknown."

"That, Sire, will be very far indeed. I see your mind is hardened on this. I should beg you to reconsider in due course of time when the bitterness has softened in your heart and you are able to think more clearly as to the needs of others rather than your own sadness and pain. It hurts me to say that as much as it hurts me to see you like this. I shall pray for you to find peace wherever you need to go to find it. Farewell, my friend."

Hawksworth saw the tear rolling down Dilys' cheek even as she turned and extended those huge wings for take-off.

"Godspeed, Dilys, my heart will always be with you."

He watched her until she was a dot against the early afternoon horizon then lay his head down on his feet, feeling the great weight of sadness pressing down on his head.

He must have nodded off for a while. He had heard someone speak he was sure. He shook his head clear and saw that the sun was quite low in the sky so that the rays from it were sneaking under the branches and making pleasantly warm spots on his hide.

"I say, Old Chap, are you alright. Look a bit peaky, what?"

Hawksworth focussed on the near distance and saw Tristan regarding him with a beady little eye.

"Oh, it's you, Tristan. I'm sorry, didn't notice you come

up - must have dozed off." Hawksworth felt he was rambling but needed a moment or two to clear the cobwebs out of his head. He felt like he'd eaten something inordinately unpleasant and yearned for a drink of water.

"Bad form, eh? What? Oh, yes, dashed bad show, and all that. Still, got to keep going, don't you know?"

Hawksworth struggled to make sense of what Tristan was saying. Anteaters always seemed to start conversations in the middle and then walk off, usually, before the end. One wondered at their thought processes. Do they really imagine they've said more than they have? They are, it is said, extraordinarily intelligent but are totally incapable of conveying their ideas to anyone else who they then regard, obtusely, as complete morons. Hawksworth imagined anteaters to live their lives out in total frustration at the world about them; they could be capable of so much if they only had hands.

"Would you be so kind as to start again, Tristan? I really do not comprehend what you are saying to me. What is bad form?"

"Oh, dear, sorry, and all that, but thought you'd latch on PDQ, what?" He regarded Hawksworth hopefully for a moment and, seeing no flicker of comprehension, he continued "Last night. The bash, don't you know? Elsa's thing. Don't remember much, do you, Old Bean? Not surprised, not surprised. 'Bout time you had a fling? Too stiff too long. All work - no play,

what? Time to break out. Good thing, good thing. What say you, eh?"

Hawksworth wondered when it was all going to end and lay his head down again.

"As you say, Tristan. As you say." He sighed wistfully and wondered how long it took for anteaters to get hungry. Ants are such small things to fill up such a large beast, he must eat an enormous number of them and so, he reasoned, he must need to constantly eat. Dear God, let it be so.

"So there it is," Tristan continued without seeming to notice that Hawksworth had not answered his question. Perhaps he thought that Hawksworth had regarded it as rhetorical, if he considered it at all. "Good bash, good bash, what?" He paused for a moment, looking at the horizon. With a pang of remorse for his uncharitable thought, Hawksworth prayed fervently that this was the end of it and that Tristan would now wander off from whence he had come. Hawksworth was not having a lucky day. "If it were not for bad luck," he mused "I should have no luck at all today."

"But, then, well, dash it all, what's a chap to do, eh? That's what I say. Not for me to criticise and all that. Chap's got to take his fancy where he can these days. Modern times, don't you know? Off to see the fellow now, are we? Don't blame you. Put things right discreetly. Best thing, what? Can't have gossip. Dashed bad form that, what? Haven't

breathed a word, Monty and I. Perish the thought. Rest easy, old Chap. Mum's the word, Monty and I always say, can't say something good then say nothing - that's the ticket. Still, bit of a surprise, don't you know, what? Must dash, meeting Monty for dinner. Good luck squaring it, old Fruit, keep a straight bat and all that, don't you know, what?"

With that he shuffled off. Hawksworth thought that Tristan had probably already forgotten what he was talking about with his mind intent on meeting Brother Monty for dinner. "Dinner! Ants! That'll make a pleasant change," he thought with uncharacteristic sarcasm. Much, apparently, today was uncharacteristic. But what on earth had Tristan been babbling about. Clearly something had happened last night which Tristan had regarded as unsavoury - not quite good form. Good form for anyone or was he thinking in terms of bad form for a king. Hmm, a puzzle there, all right. It must have been either something that only Tristan (and Monty, presumably) had seen or that only Tristan would find unseemly.

"Of course!" he blurted out loud. Tristan stopped and turned around.

"Did you call, old Chap?"

Hawksworth padded up to him. "You saw someone in intimate contact with me last night, didn't you?"

Tristan spluttered "well! I say, old Chap! Bit blunt, what? But, well, absolutely. I say! Can't remember, what?"

Dawn of realisation burst all over Tristan's face. "I say! Damnitall! Chap took advantage, did he? Frightful form, old Chap, frightful form, don't you know. Punished! That's it! Hang the bounder! What a cad, indeed. He's up here. Last tree in the copse. Flush the blackguard out. Need beaters, what?"

Tristan was bristling with righteous indignation. Under other circumstances Hawksworth would have burst out laughing. Today he felt himself go cold. Tristan coughed and spluttered into silence at the King's expression .

"Ah, quite. Quite so. Yes. Justice and all that."

"Describe him, Tristan" Hawksworth's voice was level, quiet and icy with threat. Tristan suddenly wished he was elsewhere even 'though he knew, with absolute certainty, that he was safe enough - that he would even go up in the King's estimation if he were to help. But a lion the size of Hawksworth with an air of cold, calculating murder about him was not the best person to spend an afternoon of companionship with. Tristan blurted out, as best he could, a description of the offender. "Dark, you know, damned dark. Late on, it was. Smell, you see, that's the thing - need to the smell. Smaller than you, of course. Slim, dark grey. Can't tell. Might be grey, dark, don't you know, very dark. Don't know the cad personally. Absolute bounder, what? The smell of him. Different. Don't know him. Foreigner, that's what, damn Johnny foreigner, don't you know? That's got him. Blackguard. Hang

him, I say. Disgraceful, what? Hang him, indeed, that's the ticket!"

"Cat?"

"What? Oh, absolutely, old Chap. Didn't I mention it? Can't think why. Must be going a bit in the old noggin, don't you know, what? Oh, yes, indubitably. Cat, indeed. Certainly. No doubt."

"Thank you, Tristan. I am indebted to you. Now, if you'd just point in the appropriate direction, I'll be off."

Tristan pointed and huffed a little "Cad. Absolute bounder, what? Somebody should do something, don't you know!" he huffed a bit more and pottered off to his rendezvous with Monty.

Hawksworth felt his bile rise with the rage that was engorging him. He was about to meet with the source of all his woes and was desperately trying to keep calm and logical about it. Of course he wanted to rip the fellows lining out but he needed to know why it had happened. What had he done to this stranger to deserve such a fate? He waited until Tristan, still muttering to himself, had gone a decent way off before he slid to his feet. He knew that Tristan had made a basic error in what he had made of the events he had seen.

Hawksworth had not turned to cross-species homosexuality, perish the very thought, as Tristan and, presumably, Monty had surmised initially and was thankful that Tristan was brave

enough to tell him the truth. As he thought. In some ways it would have been preferable to be known as a roué to what had actually come to pass. Hawksworth, the Royal Bisexual Rake; he thought of it as capitalised. While he was thinking these thoughts he had been flexing his muscles, ensuring that each one was working as he would wish after lying down for so long. With a face-cracking yawn he wrapped up the exercises and set off at a leisurely and, he imagined, menacing pace towards the trees indicated by Tristan. He was going to enjoy extracting the information and then examining the inside of this creature's head.

Although Hawksworth was looking quite hard for the fellow it was the other chap who saw him first. Hawksworth tried not to look startled when the voice sounded over his head.

"Hey, you really tied one on last night, didn't you, Bud?"

Bud? Bud? What form of address was this?

"Are you speaking to me, you insolent cur?" Hawksworth looked up. There, nestled comfortably in the fork of a branch, was a strange, cat-like creature the like of which Hawksworth had never seen before. It appeared to be nearly a leopard but without the familiar spots and, maybe, a touch more robust.

"Insolent? Cur? Cur's a dawg, ain't it? Ah ain't no dawg, Mister, an' I'll thank you to mind yer tongue on that account. But insolent I may be. Don't make no never minds, anyhow. Not

to you, at least. Boy, you really made yourself the fool of the show, cain't be insolent to no fool an' that's fer sure." The strange, cat-like creature stretched languidly on the branch and gave a mighty yawn - much as Hawksworth had done a few minutes ago. He licked his lips and stared down at Hawksworth.

"What you doing up in these neck of the woods, anyhow, Fella? Lost something?" He chuckled lightly to himself. Hawksworth felt his hackles rise, he really did not like this cove at all.

"I will have you to know that I am Hawksworth, King of the Beasts, to whom all here owe fealty and allegiance." He wondered if that sounded too pompous and then decided he didn't care what this maggot-ridden creature thought.

"I don't. I'm a Republican. Anyhow, you ain't much of a King now I've nibbled yer bits off. I guess you'd better just curl up in a ball someplace an' let the vultures pick y'over." He put his head in his paws and closed his eyes. "I guess you got other things to do so I'll have a nap while you go and rule over someone. Jeez, I'll be glad to get home."

Hawksworth was infuriated. The cheek of the thing, the downright insolence. If only he could reach him he'd tear him apart - ah, but he'd have to come down at some time or another especially if he wanted to go home, wherever that was. Hawksworth decided to forego the pleasure of slaking his

thirst and await this creature's exit from the tree.

"Might I know, just for the sake of curiosity, you understand, whom I have the pleasure of planning a long and painful death for?"

The strange, cat-like creature chuckled.

"Sure, Buddy. I'm a 2-Litre Jaguar\*."

\* = *Tool Eater Jaguar*

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