

## The Tale of Hermann Limpitt

The early morning sun emphasised the structured ranks of Hermann's flowers in his inordinately neat garden. That the garden received early morning sun was, in itself, the merest chance. It was allowed by a gap in the forest trees created by the meandering of a river which passed no more than a hundred yards from the back fence, the back fence which kept the same forest at bay from the rear, vegetable, garden. The vegetable garden was victim of the same despotic martinet that tended, with fervent pride in weed-free straight lines, the front garden with its marigolds and dahlias. Hermann took a great, and probably deserved, pride in the dahlias; the days could be very hot and the nights very cold hereabouts, not, as he had been frequently told, the ideal circumstance for such flora. He had, it must be inferred, an eye for detail and a mind for a challenge.

"You can't grow dahlias here, Hermann, old chap." one unobservant ex-pat from the old country had once remarked while standing knee deep in some magnificent blooms of double pom-pons in blush pink while Hermann fretted about his well raked tilth and anxiously fidgeted to go inside before more damage was done, or, better still, to get this pompous idiot off his domain altogether. Why, he wondered, in some agitation, can't people stick to the evenly raked path of

uniform sized white gravel constructed solely for the purpose of keeping uneducated feet off his beloved herbaceous borders and precisely tended lawn. Little did he know that, in fairly short order, there would be a greater invasion of his property than one portly Yorkshireman.

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Malcolm leapt into the air with great glee, pounded his chest and gave out with a deafening roar. He was jubilant. Cynthia cringed and watched him run over to his favourite rock, jump on it and bellow out

"I'm going to be a DAD! Everyone come here at once and congratulate me."

"Grow up, Malcolm," said Cynthia "Other people have become Dad's without all this fuss."

She slunk off shaking her head and tut-tutting. "It's supposed to be my hormones that are all over the place, not his!"

"But, Cynth., it's what us Gorillas do. We roar and beat our chests and things and, anyway, I'm so chuffed."

Cynthia glanced over her shoulder "It's the twentieth century, why can you not send a messenger with a note to all our friends. I believe you've been watching too many documentary makers." She tutted some more and disappeared into

the jungle to make lunch for them. It was possible, she mused, she was prone to musing, was Cynthia, that it would have been better not to tell him at all and then they could all have had a bit of peace. Meanwhile there are practicalities to be taken care of. She would find young Rupert directly after lunch and bid him to go to Uncle Herbert with the news; Uncle Herbert would be mightily cheered by becoming a Great Uncle for the eighteenth time - but for the first time by her, his favourite niece.

"Congratulations, Cynthia." The quiet voice in her ear startled her.

"My word, Dilys, you are the quiet one - how did you know so soon?"

"Malcolm is very loud."

Cynthia told Dilys when it was due and bade her to be sure to inform Hawksworth. She knew, of course, that Dilys would tell Hawksworth as a matter of course as she was, after all, the King's adjutant. A gentle smile played at the edges of Dilys' beak.

"He will want to see it. He will bring some of the pride."

"All will be most welcome," said Cynthia "we will be delighted to see His Majesty again - it has been a long while since we were last on the edge of the plains and we know he is reluctant to come into the forest."

"Aye, he likes the sun on his back, that's for certain" asserted Dilys "And now I shall be on my way."

Marabou storks need a bit of room to get into the air and, although this clearing was quite large, as clearings go, she still had to flap mightily to get above the treetops. Cynthia watched her go and had a gentle muse to herself about flying and living in the open plain before turning back to the preparation for lunch.

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Hermann was wont to lean on the front gate of an evening with his back to the rest of the world and stare intently over the rim of a coffee mug at his property. A white path bisected, precisely, two lawns trimmed to three-quarters of an inch and measuring twenty yards square each. A one-yard wide strip, exactly halfway down the lawn on each side, connected the lawns to the two-yard wide central path - the white one. The flowerbeds were, apart from the irksomely necessary grass access strips, a precise six feet of border around the lawn. Between the central path and the lawn were the marigolds and the dahlias, of all types, filled the rest of the borders along both fences and under the windows of the bungalow. Since everything could be seen perfectly well from the central path,

why on earth would anybody wish to step onto the lawns - let alone into the flowerbeds? Ye Gods, some people!

The nearest house to his own was an equally small colonial style bungalow some eighty miles to the east on the edge of the vast grasslands that swept up to the foot of the hills where Hermann was located. He had seen the occupants of the house but didn't know them. They never took the bus to town as they had, he noticed, a large and vulgar vehicle of what appeared, by all reports, to be of Japanese origin. Certainly it had a large spare wheel hanging on to the back door for grim death instead of perching neatly where spare wheels should be on such cars - on the bonnet. He considered, for a moment, the original owner of his own house whom, not so long since, had returned from whence he came, wherever that was. He had sold the house to Hermann for a bargain price, Hermann thought, some years previously in order to fund his search for the source of King Solomon's diamonds - said, by local lore, legend and superstition, to be around these parts. He had given up and gone, presumably home, disappointed but having had a wonderful time. Hermann didn't know about King Solomon's diamonds and wouldn't have cared if he had.

The bus would come past on the road, which lay between his back garden and the river, every Wednesday morning and

returned the same night. What it did for the rest of the week was treated, by Hermann, to the same disregard as he viewed King Solomon's stones or the opinions of a certain Yorkshireman on dahlias and cricket. He had, in truth, pondered the possibility that it went to another continent given the time available and the fact that the driver was a complete lunatic. It was a hundred miles into town - past his neighbour's house, the journey invariably took three and a half hours including several stops. It arrived in town at eleven thirty. Hermann collected his weekly letter and posted one in return. Nobody knows where the letter came from or, for that matter, where Hermann's letter went. He would shop, have lunch and then climb back on the bus, make himself as comfortable as possible on the hard seats and doze until the driver awoke him at his house. Hermann was not one for taking in the scenery and probably fretted about being away from his beloved garden for so long. Arriving back at nine o'clock in the evening was far too late to do anything other than shoo out the mosquitoes and make his supper. This particular evening, Hermann casually wondered how the previous owner was faring and then, as quickly, forgot about him as the sun gently set. The sun, it must be said, actually vanished at about four thirty, depending on the time of year, behind the forest trees but the darkness didn't come until about six thirty. Not that the trees were excessively tall but that they

were growing on the hills rising to the west. The sun's disappearance was a signal for a drop in the temperature and the darkness called for another, sharper, drop. At this point Hermann went inside and locked up after a brief search for snakes, as was his habit. Why he insisted on this cursory examination each night was a complete mystery to him as he had never found one in all the time he had lived there. How long had it been now, he pondered? He gave up on that train of thought. The days here are interminable but years go in a flash. Why, it seemed like only yesterday that the map was all red and now all the countries were free to be bankrupt. Hermann was familiar with this view from listening in at the Club where he would, occasionally, have lunch on Wednesdays. He lacked patience with such people. If they don't like it here why do they stay? Hermann's orderly and logical mind could not accept such opinions. He was always glad when the bus came so that he could pack his shopping and himself on it and go home to where his one-day's absence was already making its mark by the encroachment of weedlings into his beds. Hermann would tut-tut his way into the kitchen to put away his purchases. How can anyone be bored, he considered, when there are always weeds to pull out?

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The celebration was under way at last. After many years of trying the Gorilla family now had a little one to cosset. There had been much fuss made over Cynthia as the time for the birth approached and, indeed, during the birth she had been surrounded by fussing experts to ensure that not the slightest hitch could occur. Malcolm, the future father, had been on absolute tenterhooks for weeks and had been so impossible to live with that Cynthia had been forced to take recourse to a plethora of ploys to get him out of the way. He imagined himself a fine and immensely useful fellow indeed constantly searching out rare and delicious tid-bits for Cynthia to taste as the whim came upon her. Often.

Hearts had leapt with joy early one afternoon when the jungle had resounded to the sound of infantile screams and the shout of Gladys, the midwife, announcing the arrival of a bonny wee boy. Malcolm had immediately wondered if Cynthia, after all, would accept 'Malcolm Junior' as a name for the little one but, deep in his heart, he knew it was a lost cause. He was certain her mind was made up on naming him after her favourite Uncle - Herbert. Of course Malcolm was biased, the name of Herbert always evoked the memory of an inordinately old and wrinkled up, grey-haired chap who was prone to dribbling when he ate. That may be appropriate for a little one, except for the grey hair, while he was a baby he



didn't think it would suit a young man. Worse, he feared the nicknames he might get from the other youngsters later - especially 'Herbie' which is particularly sensitive among plant eating people such as themselves. Oh, well, perhaps he was over-dramatising while caught up in the frenzy of the situation. He was, after all, indecently excited about the prospect of having a child at all; now that he actually had a son he was, equally, terrified out of his wits that he would be able to do the job of fatherhood properly. Had he thought through all the details? Schooling, for example, was such an important thing these days what with...calm down, he told himself. Remember the breathing exercises the Doctor had taught him. Let your calmer side assert itself. Did he have a calmer side right now? Ever? Oh, no! What shall I do if I don't have a calmer side? Breathe in, one, two, and out, two, three, four. He looked down and examined the marks his nails had left in the palms of his hands. I really must settle down, he thought, I'm absolutely no good to Cynthia in this state. Malcolm smoothed down his hair with his fingers and strode manfully off to view the baby.

Several weeks later a crowd was assembling for the christening party. News travels fast through the jungle and everyone who was anyone would attend - or had indicated that they would be there. Folk came from far and wide - all so

happy that Malcolm and Cynthia had achieved success with their dream at last and that they had a son to carry on the family traditions. Hawksworth brought Maxine, Debbie and Enid from his pride of seven leaving the other four to carry on with the business of the cubs, etc., while he was away performing his official functions as King of the Beasts. Naturally, nobody came out with the old fireside joke about absentee royalty - you know, King of the Jungle that lives on the grassland, the one that ends in the coarse and tasteless spoonerism. Well, we certainly shan't be repeating such tattle and vulgarisms here and, certainly, as we said nobody came out with it while Hawksworth was present. Equally, nobody mentioned Maxine, the new member of the pride. Pretty svelte little veldt number, that one, to be sure. Someone offered Hawksworth the canapés which he politely declined, as ever, with a slight inclination of the head and engaged Dilys in quiet conversation. Marabous, it is common knowledge, make great politicians because they talk much but say little; they see everything and are not as stupid and empty-headed as many people might wish to make out. There were a few there who were a little envious of Dilys' position with the King but none who would challenge it. There was, however, considerable surprise at the appearance of Mortimer. Mortimer was, and still is, I shouldn't wonder, Malcolm's great uncle from several hills away. Now stricken with terrible, and crushing, arthritis, he had insisted on

making the journey claiming that light exercise was just the thing to get the joints loosened off and ease the 'soreness' - his euphemism for the awful agony he must have felt getting up each morning and starting the 'loosening off' process. He was, it must be said, comfortably ensconced between two young ladies so that their body heat would ease the aches and pains (he claimed) and few guests missed how they were feeding him choice morsels. He neither refused the food nor did he object to their ministrations; a perk, he would whisper, of being old and decrepit and, thus, no threat to these lovely young things. You old dog, Malcolm thought, there's more life in you than those young ladies would care to know about and then, before he could think any more about it, he was swept away in the tumult of the gathering. Malcolm was kept busy. He made sure that the food and drink flowed as it should, greeted each new guest as they arrived and received their congratulations. It was wearing late into the evening when Malcolm noticed a gap in the crowd where, he was sure, Great Uncle Mortimer had been. The two girls were there giggling over some private and, no doubt, libidinous joke such as youngsters are apt to do, but no Mortimer. Perhaps the evening had tired him and he had gone for an early nap; he must remind himself to check shortly and then, as was the norm, it had slipped from his mind as deftly as the other little details that he had meant to attend to - given the time. He spotted his Dad coming over for a chat

and even that did not stir the memory. His Dad was fond of intoning, at regular intervals "a short note is better than a long memory, Malcolm, my son". Dad was full of such maxims. Were other Dad's the same? Well meant but irritating now that he was grown up with a family of his own. What a proud thought - a family of his own. He made a mental note not to inflict these sayings on his own son and knew immediately that he would. He smiled at his Dad and they talked about the baby, the party and all manner of things. Malcolm dutifully listened.

Mortimer had not, in fact, retired to bed. He had been extremely comfortable lying with the two nubile pieces of simian pulchritude and had immensely enjoyed what he rather fancied were envious glances from some of the younger chaps. Ah, the benefits of age and infirmity when you're no threat to anyone. If only they could have read his mind where he remained, eternally, a teenager! At some point in his wonderful evening it had occurred to him that he, in common with most of the others present, had not gone to examine the object of the evening's celebrations. He had been so full of his own hedonistic rapture that he had been frightfully impolite, he should make amends immediately - if not sooner. Excusing himself from the accompanying delights, he struggled to his feet with some difficulty and the odd grimace of pain

and made his way over to the pram where the baby was sleeping blissfully through all the hubbub of the party.

"Let's have a lookatcha, Littl'un." Mortimer muttered as he grasped the edge of the blanket that Lysander, the midwife's assistant, had made for him. He eased back the blanket - the better to scrutinise the small body that lay beneath it. Well, there's no doubt that they have a wee boy there, alright, he thought, and was about to cover the little chap back up when a frown fleetingly swept across his, normally cheerful, face. He looked again into the pram. Something was not as it should be and yet...

"My God!" Mortimer exclaimed through his teeth, or would have done had he any left.

"I do beg your pardon, Old Chap" came a gruff but affable voice beside him. "I wasn't aware that you were religiously inclined, don't you know. Monotheistic?"

"Well, yes, actually." Mortimer was, momentarily, confused by the turn of events and unsure quite how to proceed with his discovery. "Er, well, one has always had an inkling that there was some controlling force - call it a deity, in charge overall and, logically - to my way of thinking, not tread on anyone else's views, you understand, it would have to be a singularity since the thought of multiple Gods arguing over directions is just too awful to contemplate if they were

prone to the same sort of processes that we have with just our simple things. Oh, er, sorry to go on."

"I know exactly what you mean" replied Gardner, the Wildebeest, who would often say that he 'gnu' things - his little joke. "We have all manner of problems debating where to go next for a decent feed and always end up going the same way to the same place. I don't know why the council of elders bothers. They raised a right stink about me coming into the jungle for this 'do', I can tell you, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Poor Cynthia and Malcolm - after trying all that time to have a baby and then not having a representative from the open plains to celebrate their success? Well, the thought just sends me cold all over."

Mortimer knew - gnu, he couldn't help it, that Gardner was one of the more intelligent, and learned, of the Wildebeest but would never get on in their hierarchy because his philosophies clashed with 'accepted wisdom', whatever that may be in Wildebeest circles. Ah, he had to remember not to mention circles to Gardner - he had a vague recollection that Gnus suffered from an insect larva that got into their brain and caused them to walk around in circles until they died. Something to do with balance, apparently. Still, Gardner was a pleasant enough chap and always good for an intelligent conversation - hard to come by these days in the ordinary course of events. Their meetings on the edge of the jungle

were, in truth, becoming more and more infrequent with the passing of time, something they both, Mortimer felt, regretted.

"Speaking of their success, Gardner, old fruit, I have made the most dreadful discovery and I really don't know whether to tell Malcolm and Cynthia or not. I wonder, really, if they already know."

"But, my dear Chap, what can it be that has you in such a fluster? You've gone, uncharacteristically, all of a tizzy."

"Well, the fact is, and I really don't know how to put this delicately, that the baby - Malcolm and Cynthia's little boy, the new arrival, as it were, has no knees. There are no joints in the middle of its dear little legs."

"Surely, Mortimer, you are having some strange jape with me? Mayhap the pain of your affliction has caused you to seek relief by a spot of merriment at poor old Gardner's expense. Now, I must say that I don't mind for myself as you are counted as one of my dearest friends, but, really, old Chap, the baby, don't you know - great heavens above!"

Gardner's eyes, already large, luminously brown and full of affection for everyone, had nearly popped out of their sockets as Mortimer had carefully peeled back the blanket so lovingly crafted by Lysander. Chimpanzees are so very clever with their hands that people are apt to take them for granted, very often.

"I now appreciate your dilemma. Hmm. Wait here. I shall go and talk to Hawksworth if he hasn't already gone."

"I say, Gardner, don't you think you should be a touch careful - do make sure he's had dessert before you get too close."

"Oh, don't fret yourself, my friend. Hawksworth and I go back a long, long way, I'm certain he'll be alright with me and, besides, you know what a stickler he is for protocol. Munch lumps out of me at a function like this? Great heavens above, that would do his image no good at all. Why do you think I felt safe about coming here tonight? Try not to lionise Hawksworth too much, my Friend." Gardner gave a sardonic smile while Mortimer winced at this misplaced levity. "Please, Mortimer, we must, in any case, put the baby first and our own fears and prejudices behind us for the common good. Look after little chap. I shan't be long."

Snuffling into his beard, Gardner strolled casually off into the, now diminishing, throng and approached the place where Hawksworth was gathering the girls together in order to make their way home.

"Just a minute, your Majesty. A quick word - if you don't mind, before you go off."

"Oh, hello, Gardner. I didn't realise I was starting to smell badly. Just my little joke, Gardner," he explained noting the look of distraction in Gardner's eyes. "I must say



that you have a rather more pronounced air of distress about you than is usual. How may I be of assistance to you since it is clear that you are in need of help?"

"Humph! Yes, Sire." Gardner nearly snorted. 'Distressed air', indeed. Do I really? Harrumph. "You are, as ever, correct, Sire, in your assertion. Although 'help' is, I feel, a trifle less needful than advice."

"Trifle. Hmm, yes, that was a glorious trifle. Should I have a touch more, I wonder?" said Hawksworth patting his tummy and glancing, oddly enough, at Enid. Gardner didn't remark on it. "Anyway, Gardner, old chap, always pleased to chew the fat with you. Fire away."

Gardner mentally winced at the King's choice of words but put a brave face on it. He knew that Hawksworth had a devilish sense of humour.

"Mortimer, who is the baby's Great, Great Uncle, as you undoubtedly appreciate, has scrutinised the child and discovered that the poor little mite has no knees. We feel certain that the parents know but, with all the commotion for the celebration and the excitement, and all, well, you never know if they do or not and then, after all, what to do? We are all here enjoying the fruits of their labour" Gardner was careful to emphasize, ever so slightly, the word 'fruits' and, from the twinkle in Hawksworth's eyes he guessed that it had not gone unnoticed "and we should all pitch in and help - if

we can. What, Sire, would you suggest? A gorilla with no knees is going to be a bit limited when he grows up."

There was a Royal ponder. Debbie and Enid glanced at each other and frowned. They knew the normal way of solving problems with the sick and infirm. It was, on this occasion, unpleasant to contemplate. Maxine preened herself and eyed Gardner with a calculating look. Gardner eyed her back with as much of a sneer as he felt he could, reasonably, get away with; ah, she was little more than a kitten and you know what youth is like. Still, a petulant little girlie with that much power and claws to match... Gardner reproached himself for getting carried away in his head. He looked back at Hawksworth who was still deep in thought and appearing to be trying to come to a difficult decision. Enid was shaking her head as if expecting something rash. At length the King's forehead cleared and he took a deep breath.

"Summon Malcolm and Cynthia to my presence. At once." He commanded quietly. Hawksworth rarely found it necessary to roar except to recalcitrant younger would-be kings. Gardner recognised the 'at once' part and was on his way before the full stop at the end of the royal sentence. He didn't bother replying. It would have been deemed a waste of time and earned him a rebuke - possibly a swift swipe across the nose. He felt that going back to the herd with a red, four-line, stripe across his left nostril was not going to enhance his

reputation among the council members as being a Gnu of good character, sense and thoughtful demeanour. Scuffling in public, indeed, and with a lion to boot - the very shame of it! And, of course, asserting that it was *THE* Lion wouldn't help, just bring a round of disbelief and derision like the time he'd seen the humans in the lorry that had aimed things at him and he hadn't fallen over and died. Oh, yes, they'd had a ball with that one - in fact he was still trying to live it down. No, no, best to just get on with it quickly, as instructed. Do as you're told when you're told, that's the thing of it.

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Hermann stretched luxuriously and contemplated a bright red semi-cactus dahlia. What day is it today, he wondered, idly to himself? Have I missed something? He stood up. Now that the thought had occurred to him it was niggling him. Something *was* missing. What? He went through the house to the back to fetch the lawnmower.

"A quick cut will do the grass a power of good then I can feed it as soon as the sun goes off it." He surprised himself by speaking out loud.

"Do I often speak out loud?" he asked himself, speaking out loud. "I suppose I must. But today I can hear me. That's

what's missing - noise. The forest is quiet. Now, why would that be?" he mused. He was given to musing. It comes with living alone. Musing is like talking to yourself but quieter. He could hear himself musing. Very odd.

"I expect," he mused on "that the animals are having a party somewhere else." He chuckled at his little joke to himself and closed the shed door. He rolled the mower over the paper he had laid on the hall floor to protect it from stray bits of grass and mower wheel treads since the only access to the front from the back was through the house. He had, at one time, contemplated putting a path around the side but, horrors, that would have upset the symmetry and, in any case, the fence posts were well bedded down into concrete with pitch paper around their feet. He felt disinclined to pull up the posts then and even less so now.

"It must be age." He thought with a momentary jolt of shock "Perhaps that's why the forest is quiet - I'm going deaf! Ah, but I can hear the wheels of the mower on the paper so it's not that. This hush is really getting to me."

He went back inside and did something he had never done before. He picked up the 'phone and called his nearest neighbours. The wife answered.

"Hello? Amy Thistlethwaite speaking. Can I help you?"

"Ah, this is Hermann Limpitt here. You won't know me but you are my nearest neighbour - I don't know if I am your nearest neighbour or not."

"Good heavens, Mr. Limpitt, we know of you but I don't believe we have ever spoken before - not even in the club. You are a bit of a recluse, you know, you really must get out more often."

Hermann winced. This is precisely why he didn't socialise with the other people. They were always too ready with the criticism and advice. If you don't conform to their ways and beliefs then you are definitely 'odd'.

"No doubt, Mrs Thistlethwaite, but I need to know something."

"Of course, if there's anything we can do we shall be only too pleased, you know, to help. You must call me Amy, of course."

He wondered why she had to use the phrase 'of course' so often. Perhaps she was trying to convince herself that she was right. Or something.

"Can you hear the outside? The forest?"

"Not from in here, Hermann, dear. Was there something special you wanted me to listen out for?"

He winced again. This had been a mistake. They would attach themselves to him like leeches now - anxious to help

and to save him from himself, no doubt. 'Hermann, dear' indeed!

"Would you be so kind as to go outside and listen and then tell me what you hear?"

"But, Hermann, it is frightfully hot out there at this time of day and I'm expecting friends over for tiffin and drinkies later. Why don't you pop over and join us and then you could listen all you want?"

How was he to 'pop over'? Tiffin? Drinkies? How appalling. How affected. He thought not.

"I am, I must say, a touch busy right now - perhaps another time. Thank you, anyway."

He put the 'phone down to forestall any further conversation and quietly cursed himself for calling in the first place. Now, he was sure, they would feel that the ice had been broken and they would visit him. Horrors! He had known a Thistlethwaite before. A nice chap, he had introduced himself as 'Thistlethwaite from Oswaldtwistle'. It had sounded like 'Ozzletwistle'. He recalled the man as something of a sailor. But so long ago across the ages, he could no longer bring the man's face to mind, only the impression of honest sincerity that he had left behind him. Hermann shrugged off the memories and went back outside to cut the grass, no closer to knowing why today was a quiet day in the forest but closer to a sense of foreboding concerning his immediate future.

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Thus Malcolm and Cynthia received the Royal summons and, in some consternation, hurried over to prostrate themselves before Hawksworth. Gardner huffed a little and Hawksworth tut-tutted. Somewhat impatiently he gestured for them to be seated.

"No need" he said, "to stand on ceremony. We have something. To discuss between us and I would wish for Gardner to remain here for verification - if needed. Is this agreeable with you both?"

The parents, now distraught, had thought that the King had summoned them to say goodbye and thanks for the party. They were now inordinately puzzled so hastily agreed, wondering what was at the end of this now inordinately puzzled so hastily agreed, wondering what was at the end of this extraordinary chain of events.

"Well, the thing is, and there is no delicate way of phrasing this, if you follow me." Said His Majesty. They did not. "Your lovely lad, the baby, has, it seems, rather oddly, been birthed, as you might say, incomplete."

Malcolm and Cynthia both gazed at him uncomprehendingly but vaguely alarmed.

"Gardner tells me, and it is entirely possible that you are already aware of this fact, that your little chap is not

in possession of his knees. You know those joint things in the middle of his hind...er...lower, in your case, legs. Damn, this is more difficult than I thought. You are not following me are you?"

They slowly shook their heads in unison.

"Excuse me, Sire," said Gardner. Maxine gave a snort of derisive impatience and sidled off into the background in an obvious huff. Gardner continued "If I might just interject a moment with, of course, your Majesty's permission?"

"By all means, dear heart. Feel free."

"My thanks, your Highness. Malcolm. Have you actually examined the baby yet? No. I see. Cynthia? Hmm. Too busy with the preparations for the bash and over-excited by his eventual arrival, no doubt. But I would have thought that the highly talented Lysander might have noticed. Usually very thorough, I'm told, is that one. Still, we all have our moments, don't we?" Gardner was painfully aware that Maxine was getting more and more impatient to go with each minute. She did not appreciate the delicacy of the moment - as Hawksworth did, and clearly felt that responsibility for the entire delay could be laid at the feet of Gardner. Gardner felt a shade uncomfortable but pressed on.

"His Majesty is perfectly correct in what he says - as you would, naturally, suppose. Mortimer - Great Uncle Mortimer, went to have a look at his new nephew and proud as



proud can be he is, too. It was he who noticed that the baby has no knees. We thought it best to come and ask the King for advice before proceeding any further.

Are you with us now? Sorry to break this to you so bluntly but it really is a difficult thing to, sort of, lead into, as it were, don't you know?"

Cynthia looked at Malcolm in complete anguish and Malcolm looked at Cynthia in complete bemusement.

They both said "But what can we do?" It was more a wail of helplessness than a cry for help. Even Hawksworth looked uncomfortable with it. Debbie and Enid were on the verge of tears - Enid, certainly, was indulging in some very heavy swallowing. They all knew what happens to deformed children, it was nature's way. What if he were to breed the defect into future generations? They all pressed their lips together, feeling for the young couple.

"Gardner."

"Yes, Sire?"

"You said, and I quote, 'before proceeding'. Before proceeding to do what? It strikes me that the options here are not only limited but tinged with doom for the sad little mite."

"Sire, it occurs to me that, well," Gardner paused, whether for effect or to summon courage it is hard to tell, "humans are pretty clever at all sorts of odd things. Perhaps

it is not beyond the realms of credibility that we could seek assistance from one of those - if anyone knows one, that is. Does anyone know how to communicate with them? They do have a very odd way about them, you know, and trying to get one to concentrate long enough, I'm told, to attempt to engage it in meaningful conversation without actually dying in the process...."

"Gardner, for God's sake stop babbling - we understand completely what you are saying and I'm sure we all get the gist of the problems associated with it. Nonetheless, the plan has some merit and I think it's worth exploring. We need to set up a project group...."

"Now you are babbling, Mortimer" interjected Hawksworth. "Who is looking after the baby if you are here and I was not aware that you were of a religious turn of mind?"

"Lysander is looking after the baby and I'm getting old now. Time to start worrying about what happens next. Why is everyone suddenly concerned about my theological views today?"

"Harrumph. We don't need a project group. We need someone who can communicate with humans."

"Percival could but Hyenas are too frivolous, he'd forget what he was there for in mid-conversation so I guess I'll have to volunteer to give it a shot."

"Enid?" said Hawksworth in some astonishment.

"Shut your mouth, Gardner, you're dribbling."

"Was not."

"Was."

"Trust you to notice, Mortimer."

"But now" said Hawksworth, shaking his head clear and silencing the other two with a sideways glance at the same time, "we have to find out two things."

"Only two?" asked Mortimer. "Things are definitely on the up."

"Yes, Mortimer, two. Firstly, which human is not only safe to approach but is isolated enough from other humans so that we can, hopefully, keep control of the situation and approach in relative safety?"

"OK, a tough one, Sire, but, mayhap, we have an answer for it."

Mortimer nearly jumped out of his skin and, he noticed, that Gardner, for all his usual apparent placid composure, took a couple of sharp blinks and a deep breath. Nobody had noticed Dilys creep up on the conversation. Marabous are, naturally, curious and the sight of several people in deep discussion was just too much to bear.

"Yes, Dilys, we are anxious for any viable input."

"Sire, there is a lone human who lives in a jungle clearing near the river where it slows down into a deep pool between two hills to the north-east. There is no other human for a long flight until you get to the edge of the grass. He

is the only target that matches the parameters that you describe."

"Thank you, Dilys. Any other input? No? We'll take that one. This brings us to point two. Many of us have seen the places where humans congregate and will be aware that they prize a yellow metal and small discs which they swap for items they value or wish to possess. An odd trait but necessary for us to know about. Do any of us have any yellow metal or any of these discs which we can exchange for that which we value?"

"The humans call it 'gold' and 'money'. I have heard them speak of them both. You are right, they trade these things for all that they need." Enid astonished everybody - not least Hawksworth, with her wealth of knowledge. Several eyebrows were raised in her direction.

"When I was younger I hung around with a mad, daring, crowd. We even thought of taking a human for lunch one day - just for a laugh and to see what they tasted like but we didn't, in the end. We were afraid of their killing us, in truth. We had seen them stand a long way from other creatures that had fallen over and died of a noise. We don't know how they do that but it frightened us and we went back to the open grassland."

"There, there, Enid, we'll look after you, there is no need to fear now." Hawksworth consoled her tenderly. Everyone else was stunned but held their counsel.

"Mortimer cleared his throat noisily "Has anyone" he called "got any of this gold or money that we need? Let's go among the guests," he said after noting the sad shake of the heads "and see if anyone has anything which a human may value. There's lots of people still here, you never know what may turn up and someone might know of something else that we could use."

"Agreed, Mortimer. Let's get on with it." The King has spoken and everyone scattered and 'got on with it'.

About an hour later the group reassembled itself looking pretty downcast. No one had anything. It looked as if the whole plan was to crumble.

"I don't suppose that it would be worthwhile going to see this human anyway and appealing to his better nature for help? Maybe he would help us if we asked? Maybe?"

"Sweet Enid, humans have no better nature. You, more than anyone, apparently, should know this."

"But, Dilys, there may be one or two that have a good heart?"

"You may well be right - but how will we know? How do we tell them apart?"

"Would this help?"

Heads turned towards Maxine. This was really becoming a night to go down in the annals of history. "And I was there" Gardner thought to himself. But Maxine? Offering help? Proud,

arrogant, supercilious, pretentious, self-serving Maxine?  
Gardner felt faint.

"I think" he ventured to Mortimer, "that my knees are going"

"Hush, my friend. Bad choice of words. You are deaf and your whisper isn't quite as quiet as you think it is. But I empathise, nonetheless."

Hawksworth, whose ears were extremely acute, gave a ghost of a wry smile and turned to Maxine.

"And what is it, my little dove, that you have which, you feel, may help us in this our hour of need?"

"This." She held out a small copper disc.

"What is it, my love?"

"I don't know what it's called. I found it on the human track we crossed on the way here - I don't know why I kept it, I suppose it looked pretty. Should I have told you earlier?"

"No, no, my sweet. This is very kind of you and may be just what is needed to solve this problem."

Gardner looked around. "So, who goes and when?"

His Majesty drew himself up to his full, imposing height.

"We go now. Gardner, you are excused this duty as it will be all jungle and forest - you are ill equipped for it. We thank you, however, for your input this night, it will go neither forgotten nor unrewarded - you have my word. Dilys will be our aerial spy and go ahead of us. Malcolm and

Cynthia, you will bring the baby and Enid will come with me. Mortimer must remain here, with the two young ladies, to recuperate in readiness for his long journey home. Maxine and Debbie will return to the rest of the pride to inform them of the state of play and our whereabouts. They will also give Gardner a safe escort home to his friends." He emphasized the 'safe'. "We can make the top of the hill before moonset and there we will rest for a few hours and set off again just after dawn. Any questions?"

Hawksworth was now in his element. A bit of organising to do and he was happy as a lamb. There were no questions and so, with a freak of the pram wheels, they set off in grim apprehension of what lay ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermann slowly straightened up, placing the flat of his right hand into the small of his back and forcing his shoulders backwards. His head went from side to side with the lifting of each shoulder to accommodate the loosening of each set of muscles in the back and arms. He finished the series of movements by interlacing his fingers and pressing his neck back against them. A happy sigh, a drop of the arms, a droop of the shoulders and he was ready to go in and put the kettle on for afternoon tea. Thursdays were always spent catching up

on the weeding and this Thursday was no exception. Every week there seemed to be more weeds than there were the previous week and yet, curiously, he always seemed to go in and switch the kettle on at four thirty - give or take a few minutes. For a moment or two he surveyed the orderly rows of dahlias and marigolds, cocking an ear towards the forest. It was a bit noisier now, he fancied, but still quiet by normal standards. He looked back at the flowers. The marigolds, of course, were all alike; golden blooms smiling happily up at the sky reflecting the last rays of the sun as it descended past the tips of the trees lining the western hill range. The dahlias, however, were a riot of different colours and shapes. The Lilliput Dahlias were in front and the bigger dahlias - some nearly five feet high, were at the back. He was rather proud of the apparently random mixing of ball, pom-pom, cactus, semi-cactus and all the other flower types which, in actuality, formed a complex pattern. He contemplated the possibility of introducing some more collerette and paeony-flowered dahlias but shrugged it off as being, potentially, too ostentatious. Another deep sigh and he turned towards the house. Time for a quick cup of tea and a sandwich. Tomorrow the grass would have a trim and then it was the back garden's turn for attention. Each Thursday was so much the same, indeed, so much the same as the other days except Wednesday and Sunday. The jungle itself also so unchanging that anything



that did change, anything out of the ordinary, would impinge itself on his consciousness like a hammer blow. He still worried over the quietness of Tuesday. But then, apart from that one occurrence and his subsequent ill-judged 'phone call to the Thistlethwaite's house, nothing ever did change. Nothing ever out of the ordinary. This was how things should be. He was happy with it. Contented. All the more disconcerting, therefore, when something did happen. He couldn't believe his ears. Surely he must be mistaken but no, impossible; he had thought, once when he was young, that he had been wrong but it turned out he was mistaken for sure then. And now, with absolute certainty, with the total confidence imbued in him by years of never having had anyone disagree with him, he was positive that he had heard an argument. Really and truly he had heard a grunt or two interspersed with growlings and a short, muted, squeal but he was completely assured, within himself, that there had been a heated discussion. Brief, certainly, but heated without a doubt and a discussion with equal certainty. Hermann stopped on the gravel path in mid-stride. He was loath to turn around and yet he was completely overwhelmed with curiosity. The need to disguise the curiosity won and he casually, or as casually as was possible, resumed his paces towards the front door and set his mind on the kettle and tea. Was there, he pondered, still some cream in the refrigerator? He might treat himself

to a spot of strawberry jam with it on a scone or two. There, he would insert some change of his own into the day and thereby re-assert himself upon it. Surely things would then revert to normal; he would be immersed in his normal routine once more.

Just as a feeling of contentment began to settle over him he heard the cough.

"A cough? A cough?" He was so astounded that he found that he had spoken out aloud! There was another cough accompanied by a sound rather like the clapping of a large beak. Hermann stopped. He slowly turned around and was aghast to see a singularly large and doleful marabou stork perched on his gatepost. Incongruously he wondered if it was going to defecate on his property. He rather hoped not - the acid in it, you know. The bird was making strange guttural noises and clacking its beak apparently at him, Hermann Limpitt. Why on earth, he wondered, would a marabou - or any other bird, for that matter, be attempting to establish a line of communication with him? It had become apparent that this was what the bird intended. He was so intent on the stork that he utterly failed to notice a large, and elderly, lioness peering timidly around the other gatepost. He also had failed to notice that the gate was open. Until she spoke.

"Very excuse me" she said.

"Great heavens above!" Hermann exclaimed. Inside himself he ordered calm and composure but that did not prevent him from sitting down heavily on the path. He really could not believe what was happening here. His day was totally shattered. Routine had flown out of the window, figuratively speaking. He really, really, felt that what he needed more than anything else right now was that cup of tea. Forcing his face into what he hoped was serene confidence and his voice to adopt a timbre of quiet authority - both failed, he replied.

"My apologies, Madam, you startled me more than somewhat. I had not noticed you behind the hedge."

She emerged again, slowly, as she had darted away at his exclamation of surprise. Clearly, Hermann thought, she is extraordinarily nervous and yet it is I who should be most in fear. Damn, she's a big pussy.

"Mulching" she got out at last, her eyes darting hither and thither looking for a chance to escape. Hermann thought she was looking for an opportunity to eat him and was, similarly, thinking along the lines of flight. However, it became clear to him that she was not enjoying this one little bit. Hermann was now deeply puzzled. Surely they, for the bird and the lioness were obviously together, oddly enough, were not putting themselves through this ordeal solely to discuss gardening with him? Although, come to think of it, the bird

did seem quite at ease even if it was awfully sad of expression.

"Dilys say mulching you need today."

Hermann mentally shook himself.

"The bird is called Dilys?"

"And I - I am Enid being." Said the lioness, "Dilys say not extra weeds less water mulching can."

Enid looked exhausted after this marathon speech.

"Could I" asked Hermann "get you anything? Water? Sandwich?"

He was groping a bit here. Much clacking of beak.

"Dilys say sandwich good but later maybe can. Water good. Need plenty others for. Long trip we."

"Others?"

"Others we got Dilys lead I speak others follow."

"You had an argument just now?" Hermann needed to know for his own peace of mind. He hoped he was not embarrassing anyone by asking.

"I want all come they want me come first but Dilys come with me Dilys not frightened like me you got death noise?"

He wished she'd punctuate a little here and there but he had to admire her ability.

"'Death noise'? I do not understand 'death noise' so it is apparent that I don't have any of it. We try not to have death in this garden, if you don't mind. Now, what others?"

Enid gave some grunts and a curious retinue appeared out of the jungle. They were as nervous as Enid and looked anxiously about themselves continuously as they approached. Hermann saw the huge lion and the young silverback but it was a moment before he could see the young female gorilla behind them. He could clearly discern a look of intense sadness on her face and guessed that here was distinct possibility that herein lies the root of the problem. And then, the pram. She was pushing a pram!! His world was rapidly collapsing in on itself. He knew now for a certainty that today he was doomed. What on earth is a young female gorilla doing with a pram? He immediately knew it would be pointless to ask as it was transparently obvious that he would be told that the pram was to put the baby in. A sad, female gorilla pushing a pram accompanied by another gorilla, a marabou stork, a lion and a lioness that could speak to him. Yes, the world has gone completely mad. This is, clearly, not your average Thursday.

"Shall I" asked Hermann "get a few buckets for everybody to drink form?" He had an odd mental image of everyone sitting around with cups of tea and wondered how the bird, Dilys, would cope.

There were some grunts growls and clicks. "Yes. That would be good."

At last. Something constructive he could get to grips with. He busied himself going to the shed, getting out buckets

and the hose. At the same time, he supposed, they would be making themselves comfortable and, hopefully, more at ease. Enid, specifically, was a bag of nerves for all that she was, clearly, highly intelligent. He must not forget that she could wipe him out with a casual swipe of her paw. He put the buckets outside the gate on the pathway and handed the hose to the silverback who had arranged the buckets to suit. Once they were full Hermann noticed that they all waited for the lion to start drinking before they began. The male gorilla held up the hose for Dilys to get a couple of beakfuls. Hermann considered going to lean on the gate but, in all honesty, was somewhat fearful of that damned great beak that would be hovering above him. He eyed Dilys apprehensively, approached her and said,

“I prefer the aesthetic approach to gardening. Hence I have a well-hoed fine tilth even though I appreciate that certain mulchings would be of great benefit to the dahlias - horse manure, for example, or leaf mould. I do use these but I am inclined to mix them into the top couple of inches of earth.”

Dilys favoured him with a couple of curt clicks and a baleful glare. Hermann looked at Enid but she was engrossed in conversation with the lion. Hermann waited, occasionally glancing over at the marabou who continued to regard him with a definable air of superiority. Such arrogance, Hermann thought. Everyone is entitled to their own view and it is,

after all, my garden. Enid stood up and, after a backward glance, addressed Hermann.

"Hawksworth says we must get on as it is nearly full dark and we have places we would prefer to be at this time." She seemed to frown and then continued, "We had long journey tired and hungry maybe."

Hermann supposed that the lion must be 'Hawksworth' and, naturally, if the lioness and the stork had names, then, surely, everyone else would have names, too.

"I have lights and food here if it would make you more comfortable. You are all welcome to my hospitality should you so choose." Hermann assured them all. They did not look convinced and he wondered if it was only Enid and the bird that understood him when he spoke. He looked quizzically at Dilys wondering why the bird would understand him. It was strange enough that the lioness should not only understand but also speak to him. The whole thing was too strange. He felt that he was coming unhinged and that the world would never be the same again.

Enid started speaking to him, steadily at first and then more rapidly, heavily accented and without, as usual, punctuation. It all started out with some party. Party? For the baby. Oh, the baby. Yes. And then everything started to melt together in a sort of jumble which terminated in Enid gesturing furiously to the silverback who held out a rusty old

coin. Hermann frowned and examined the coin intently. He noticed that it was old as it had the head of King George VI on it - just visible under the patina of verdigris. He looked at the assembled group and said to Enid "Could we, do you think, just sort this out into simple terms? As I see it, it comes down to this. What you are really after, when all is said and done, is two ape knees for a penny."