

Winston's Puzzle

Dilys was, as Marabous go, a cheerful soul. This was difficult to determine by her normal countenance which made her appear as if the woes of the world were resting squarely on her narrow shoulders.

"Hawksworth?" She intoned quietly.

Hawksworth raised his head and bleared at her through very sleepy eyes. Affairs of state had kept him up until late the previous evening. The girls had made an excellent kill this morning so the combination of late night and full stomach was completely soporific.

"Hawksworth?" Dilys repeated, unnecessarily.

"Umm. I hear you, Dilys. How may I be of assistance to you in this, your apparent, hour of need?"

"It's Winston."

"Winston? Zebra Winston?"

"Yes."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Please tell me he has a new problem. I beg you to tell me that he has found some new form of oppression?"

"Yes."

"New?"

"Yes."

"Oh, goody. Do tell."

"He wishes to tell you himself."

"Dilys. Winston is a paranoid individual. What was his last theme? Oh, yes. How do they, the Zebra kin, know when it is their turn to be selected for the Royal Lunch? Like there's some sort of rotation for this."

"Well, actually, your Highness, there is. The girls do tend to rotate to keep things even and so as not to show favouritism. Of course, this also depends on the migrations. Sometimes the Wildebeest have to donate more because of their long-term absence. It's only fair. Besides, they get a lot of sick ones in that crowd."

Hawksworth knew that the annual migrations had started and wondered how Gardner would get on this year. He wasn't getting any younger, 'like all of us' and it was a very long journey for the poor old fellow. He hoped he wouldn't get into trouble on the way. He had heard terrible tales of the crocodiles up at the great wet crossing. Perhaps he should go north and speak with Nathan about it.

"Sire?"

"Sorry, Dilys. Wandered off a mite there. Thinking about Gardner and that awful trip the lad takes each year. Crocodiles and such, you know."

"Quite. Gardner is well used to it and feels the need to look after some of the youngsters en route, as it were."

"Absolutely. Winston, you say? Feels the need for assurance about the fate of the universe, does he?"

"I know not, Sire. He will only speak to you on the matter. He says it is of a delicate and personal nature such that you might understand but few others would."

"Oh, dear. Is he alone?"

"He is. Very fearful, but alone."

"He has more courage than I had thought of him."

Hawksworth sighed. "Show the lad in, Dilys, if you would be so kind?"

"Certainly, Sire."

#

Hawksworth had re-arranged himself into a more regal, he fancied, pose and adjusted his face into what he rather thought to be a benign and kindly expression.

Winston entered, looking this way and that but, mostly, behind. He turned and faced Hawksworth and misunderstood the expression to be one of extreme hunger. He almost fainted.

Hawksworth noticed the knees wobble a touch and strove to reassure Winston.

"Please--Winston, is it? Winston, dear chap. Do relax. Can't have you all edgy before lunch, can we?" 'Damn!'

Hawksworth thought. 'Must try and choose the words a tad more carefully.'

Winston's eyes had gone big and round and he snuffled a

touch in fear but held himself from running away.

"Just a little joke, old fellow. Do try to relax and pour it all out."

Winston peered around to assure himself that they were, in fact, all alone. "Well, Sire, it's like this, see. I ain't up to speed on the old courtly type talk an' all that, am I? But I'll jist put over what it is, if I can, without all the 'thees' an' 'thous', kinda thing, see?"

"Make yourself at home, old thing. Just pour it out as best you see fit." Hawksworth found himself surveying Winston's throat and wondered how long it would take before he was sorely tempted into applying a death grip on it.

Winston looked around nervously. "Well, see, it's like this, see. I was wondering, kind've thing, about what I am, wasn't I?"

"You are, in fact, a Zebra, Winston. There are, you know, different types of Zebra. But you are definitely one of those types." Hawksworth wasn't sure what the different types of Zebra called themselves and refrained from mentioning that they all tasted the same. Quashing that, somewhat uncharitable thought, he went on "Were you pondering the possibility that you are a Hartebeest, or something of that ilk?"

"Oh, now, your Highness, I ain't nothing in the least like a dreadful Hartebeest, so to speak, ain't it? No. No.

I knows what I'm a Zebra."

Hawksworth cringed at the grammar. For some reason educating Zebra was like plaiting smoke. He must have a word with Monty and Tristan, the ant-eaters, about that. They seemed to know more than was good for them. Must have something to do with having an incredibly boring diet. He could imagine the post-priapal conversation "Damn, I'm stuffed--must've had two or three hundred thousand of the little buggers. Tongue's just about had it, don'tcha know?"

"Yerss. Like I said, it's a bit more kind've personal like than that, ain't it?"

"Well, I'm not sure how much further I can go in my help. Perhaps you could explain a little more, shall we say, deeply?" Hawksworth was getting bored; Winston's throat was looking more and more tempting as time went by. He took a very long and leisurely breath to compose himself.

"Right you are, Guv...er...your Highness. Well, see, it's like this, ain't it. What I don't know is this. Am I white with black stripes or, do you reckon, I'm black with white stripes?"

"Well. Um. Well. Off the top of my head, as it were, I'd say, er-um, well." Hawksworth rapidly cogitated the situation and, discreetly, studied Winston.

"Uh, Winston, old thing. I have to wonder, does it make any difference? Really? You will still be the same person,

sort of style, as you were all along."

"Nah! It's been nagging at me for ages now. I really, really need to know, know what I mean?"

Hawksworth was at a complete loss. "Well, I really don't know what to advise for the best. Perhaps I could do some research on the matter--discreetly, of course, and see what I can come up with. I shall let you know, in due course, how the land lies."

Winston looked uncomfortable. "I don't want for the others to know, sort of thing. I think they'd kind've have a go at me about it, know what I mean? I don't think they'd understand, ain't it?"

"Discreetly, Winston. Discreetly. Trust me. Nobody shall be any the wiser as to the originator of this query."

"I ain't a queer, am I? Nah! It's like the main thing is I wouldn't want anybody to know it was me, like, asking, was I?"

"Mum's the word. Mum's the word."

Winston went out, frowning. Hawksworth had the nagging feeling that he was wondering what his Mum had to do with it.

#

Later that day, Hawksworth joined the pride. Dilys was chatting with Maxine and Debbie was looking after the cubs. Enid had wandered off in search of something to amuse the little ones with. She returned, as Hawksworth arrived,

carrying a small rat. Hawksworth rather thought it had an offensive odour about it and imagined that it might be bad for the cubs but they seemed not to mind and played happily with it.

"Try not to terrify it, children." He admonished them. Lesser animals are for eating and not for causing anguish. Besides, too much fear makes the meat bitter, you know. Play with it gently and then let it go."

"You seem distant today, Hawksworth." Enid mentioned to him when the children had quietened down a touch.

"Strange thing. Strange thing. Had an earnest young lad come to me with a problem that, for the life of me, I do not know how to deal with. Never heard such a thing. How does a basically ignorant lad like that come up with an idea of that nature? Who put it in his head? Surely he cannot have had the thought himself. Still, you never know."

Enid was perplexed. "What problem?"

"Are Zebras black with white stripes or white with black stripes? Or, are they all different? Or, does it depend on where they come from? This has opened a real bag of worms."

"Can, dear. I think you'll find that the expression is a 'can of worms'."

"Well. Quite. Whatever. Thing is. What do I tell him and what if it gets around? What are the repercussions?"

"I believe you'll have to speak to Amabelle." Enid

noded as if this was the answer to everything.

"Amabelle?"

"Yes. You know Amabelle. Lives over in the west woods near the edge of the great cliff."

"Oh, Amabelle the owl. Yes, I know. Why should I speak with her?"

"Because, dearest heart. She knows more than do we about such strange things. She has 'The Knowledge'."

"That sounded as if the initials were capitalised. Knowledge of what?"

"Knowledge of mysterious things that animals are not supposed to know. Humans know even less, as is the correct order of things. Amabelle is the one you should seek."

"Whose territory is that?"

"Really, dear. You are getting forgetful in your old age. Your brother, Cameron, has a pride over there. You remember the fuss when he took up with that young thing, what was her name?" Enid sank into an inward looking expression "Constance. That was it. Connie, we called her. We still think she's after ruling the roost and ousting the first wives. Anyway, Cameron will be happy to see you and will, very likely, take you to see Amabelle himself."

Hawksworth considered that. It was true that he had not seen Cameron, his brother, for a long time and a visit would be a pleasure just for its own sake. Perhaps, he thought, he

could return via the great lake in the north to see the Flamingos and, at the same time, visit with MacDonald and Nathan.

"Enid, you are blessed with genius. I shall leave at first light."

Debbie and Maxine looked up, "Leave? Where?" Debbie asked.

Hawksworth rolled over on the floor and let Enid explain while he felt the youngsters clamber over him to play 'King of the Mountain'.

#

True to his word Hawksworth was up bright and early the very next morning.

"Are you sure you won't have breakfast before you go?" Enid fussed. "It won't take us long to sort out a small deer, or something, for you."

"No, no. I shall be fine, thank you, dear." He breathed deeply of the fresh morning air. "I haven't seen a sunrise for some time. I think I rather like it." He smiled at the pride. "Well, must be off. Things to do, people to see and places to go. Take care of yourselves--I shall be back before you know it."

Dilys took a few steps and a few flaps and soared into the air. 'How odd' he thought 'that someone who looks so ungainly on the ground can look so elegant in the air'.

He set off due west feeling the young sun on his back and having, for the first time in a very long time, a sense of purpose.

#

It took him a day and a half before he saw Dilys circling impatiently overhead. She watched him creep slowly towards where she was indicating until, at last, he was directly underneath her and greeting Cameron.

Dilys regarded the camaraderie balefully and waited for them to come to the point.

"Well, besides an ardent desire to see me and the girls, what brings you this far west?"

"Curiosity."

"Really? Didn't know you had any, brother of mine."

Hawksworth swatted him playfully around the head with a mighty paw.

Dilys considered that it would have taken the head off any lesser animal but Cameron just laughed.

"Had an odd sort of cove come to me and ask a bloody stupid question. Still, it piqued the old grey cells a bit and sent me out here to ask of that Amabelle type what her advice might be."

"Go on, give me the question."

Hawksworth retold the story and Cameron blinked. "But it makes no difference." He said. "They all taste the same."

He laughed again.

"My thought exactly but the chap was most earnest. If it puzzles him it puts him off eating. Can't be doing with thin meat, you know. Bad for the digestion." They both laughed.

"See what you mean. I'll take you over in the morning. She's a night person so the best time is really early before she gets her head under her wing. Grumpy otherwise, you know."

They flopped down onto the grass, drying out now, and chatted amiably about their families, the old days and days to come.

"Coming up to the difficult times. Have to start pulling in the old tummy."

"Aye. We'll be going around the hyenas and jackals to stop them getting greedy and killing for the sake of it. Still, the cubs'll be well catered for."

Towards late afternoon Connie called them over for dinner. The girls had brought down a lame giraffe and were loathe to drag it over to where the boys were deep in conversation.

"It's too heavy to move, you'll have to come over yourselves if you want anything to eat." She shouted.

"Women!" Cameron raised his eyebrows and looked skywards. "Always an issue to be made. Why can't they just say nicely 'dinners ready over here, lads'?"

"Possibly they're just jealous because we're better looking than them."

They laughed and hauled themselves up onto their feet.

#

It was still dark when Cameron led the way silently on soft, padded feet, to the woods. Both of them were accustomed to making their way around the grasslands at night, their night-vision was superb. Their ears were pricked up and alert for the slightest sound that was alien to the environment. Neither of them spoke. Hawksworth followed Cameron, allowing Cameron a few paces start. Once or twice they heard a hyena backing off through the occasional thickets knowing that it would be unwilling to challenge both of them right now--even with the pack in attendance.

The sky over the eastern ridge was just starting to glow faintly so that they both knew the great cliff on that side was about to give birth to a new sun. They moved into the wood, Hawksworth stopped at a motion from Cameron who walked very gently on. After several body lengths he stopped, looking up, and flicked his tail in the 'come forward' way.

Hawksworth slid silently alongside, also looking up into the tree. He saw nothing.

"Amabelle?" Cameron whispered.

"Ooooo--Cameron." Amabelle replied.

"Didn't want to disturb you in your sleep. Tried to move

quietly."

"Heard yooooou." Amabelle spoke softly.

"Your ears are far better than ours, Amabelle. Could you use them to listen to a problem from my brother, Hawksworth?"

"Hawksworth. Yes. I have not been so far east for a long time. I used to see yooooou when I was younger and yooooou were a cub. Yes. Speak."

"Thank you, Amabelle." Hawksworth also whispered out of deference to the old lady. "I have been approached by an earnest young man who needs to know the answer to his puzzle."

Hawksworth retold the story of Winston's plea for information. "Then Enid said that you may be able to help."

"Enid. Yes. She had her cubs catch me mice when I was sick. For Enid. Yes."

Amabelle went into a thoughtful posture, finally ruffling her feathers and shaking her head. She looked all around her to make sure that nobody was spying on them and spoke very quietly to them. "You must tell this earnest young man that he should go to the round hill at midnight following mid-summer's day and ask the sky. The sky will tell him. Clouds will appear and a voice will speak from the clouds. It is the voice of the sky. The sky knows everything. It will tell him once only. Then he will know."

"I am sorry to trouble you Amabelle, but things will look different from the air. Where is the round hill?"

"Dilys. Yes. Dilys knows. Tell her the Flamingos know. She will know. Yes."

"Thank you, Amabelle. You are kind and generous."

There was no answer. Amabelle's head was under her wing and the great, round, eyes were closed. She was deep in sleep.

#

Hawksworth was recounting his journey to the girls when Dilys floated in, bounced a couple of times and came to a stop near him.

"Winston is on his way." She informed him dolefully.

"Excellent. Perhaps you would show him in to my private area when he arrives?"

"Certainly, Sire. I live but to serve and obey."

Hawksworth was certain there was a gleam in the stork's eye as she pattered off looking as if she was on stilts.

"So, there you have it. Everybody over there seems ghappy enough. Apparently there was a protracted conversation among the girls that put Constance in her place and now they operate as a decent pride should. Ah. Winston is here. Please excuse me, Ladies."

They grinned at him, anxious for him to go so they could interpret what he had said into the female versions.

"Men!" He heard Maxine say as he left. "Take everything at face value. How would they survive without us....?" He

voice faded to nothing as he rounded the corner and nearly bumped into Winston.

"Oh, hello, old thing." Hawksworth said.

"Yers. I'm Winston, your Royal wotsit--Highness."

"So I believe. Well, Winston. I have done some research and travelling and discovered an interesting little snippet. Do you know the 'round hill' up near where the Flamingos are?"

"Yers. Yers. I do. Up north, ain't it?"

"Absolutely. Well, the thing is, you have to ask the sky. Stand on the hill and aske the sky but you have to do this thing at midnight on the evening of the longest day--midsummer, don't you see?"

"Not much difference in day length here, know what I mean? Still, I could always ask Monty and Tristan. They seem to know things like that if I can get 'em to listen long enough, ain't it? So, what does I say, then, sort of thing?"

"Just stand on the hill at the appointed hour and ask the sky. I am told it will answer every animal once should they ask their question of it."

"Well, it's like this, innit? How do I convince the herd to go there at that time?"

"Tell them you've heard there's better grass up there. Maybe it's true since it's near the lake and, with all those Flamingos there, it's bound to be well fertilised, as it were."

"Yers. Could try that, couldn't I. Yers. Cheers then. I'll give it a go and let you know how it goes, then, know what I mean?"

"I believe I have the gist, sort of thing."

Winston nodded, as Zebra do, and left Hawksworth in peace.

Hawksworth went back to the girls, lay down on the grass and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. He dreamt of having a Zebra by the throat.

#

Several months later, Dilys flopped down in front of Hawksworth.

"He's here again."

"Who?"

"Winston"

"Who?"

"Winston. The Zebra."

"No."

"Yes."

"Ye Gods. What does he want?"

"You."

"Why?"

"Don't know. He said it is a matter of a personal nature and that he will divulge this only to yourself--in private."

"Why me?"

"Because, Your Royal Highness, you are the King. The responsibility for these things lie entirely with you. Should you no longer wish to be King I could go and speak with Nathan. He is, I believe, still active in local politics."

"Nathan is brave and clever but Elands do not evoke fear at the appropriate times to the appropriate animals."

Dilys knew who he meant but chose to let it ride.

Hawksworth acknowledged her silence and motioned for her to show him in. He felt tired already.

Winston snuffled around the corner.

"Hello, Guv--yer wotsit, thingy, Highness an' that. I'm back, ain't I?"

"As I see. What news, Winston?"

Well, it's like this, see. I been to the hill, see, like what you was saying. Yers. I been there an' I done like what you said, and all that, know what I mean? And then, well, see, the thing is, it spoke."

"What spoke, Winston?"

"The sky spoke, didn't it? Fair bloody messed meself, didn't I? Bloody frightening 'aving the sky bloody speak to you like that, ain't it?"

"I presume you asked it the same question as the one you posed to me?"

"Yers. I did, didn't I? I said to it, I says, I said 'Am I black with white stripes or white with black stripes?' I

says."

"And the sky replied?"

"Yers. It bloody did. Weren't expecting that, know what I mean? Fair bloody messed meself badly, didn't I?"

"What did it say, Winston?"

"It said 'You are what you are' in that rumbly way that skies speak in, sort of thing."

Hawksworth had never heard a sky talk so he was bemused that Winston seemed to find the speech 'normal'. He decided to ignore it and proceeded. "Ah. So you have your answer, then. You must be very comforted...."

"Nah! Nah! I don't know what it means, do I? I ain't no better off than what I was before. What does it mean--'You are what you are'? Just another bloody mystery, ain't it, know what I mean?"

"Well, I, er.... Let me ponder this and come back to you on the matter. Somebody will understand, surely. Monty? Tristan perhaps?"

"I dunno what they's talking about at best. They do rabbit on, know what I mean? It's like they got a private language all to they's own selves."

"Yes. I understand precisely what you mean." Hawksworth resisted the temptation to roll his eyes and got an immediate image of his teeth on Winston's throat again. "Leave it with me; I'll send Dilys when I have something for you."

"Right, you are, Guv, yer Royalness, sort of thing."
Winston was clearly out of sorts with himself as he bumbled off into his own world.

Hawksworth spoke to Enid. "Do you think it's worth bothering Amabelle again, Enid? Surely somebody must have an answer."

"Oh, yes. I do."

"Really?" Hawksworth was staggered.

"Of course. We females aren't all teeth, claws and blood dripping from the lips kind of people, you know."

Hawksworth cringed. He expected Enid to say 'know what I mean?' but she stopped, crucially, at the correct point.

"Shall I call Winston back?" He asked.

"No, no. He may be mortified if he knows that you have told me his innermost secret thoughts. Let me explain it to you and then you can tell him yourself. He will be impressed by your great wisdom and then we can go get dinner." She grinned wickedly. "No. Not Winston. Not yet."

#

Dilyls appeared. "He's here."

"Who?"

Dilyls just peered at him.

"Oh. Winston. Yes. Of course. He must have got quite a way."

"He feels uncomfortable being near the pride. Know what

I mean, sort of thing. It's like, you know, ain't it?"

"Shut up, Dilys. Not nice of you to eavesdrop."

"I didn't. That's how Zebras are all the time. Ask Monty and Tristan."

"No, thank you. Show the lad in, if you will."

Hawksworth thought Dilys had grinned but it was hard to tell with that massive beak. She paced off around the corner with her shoulders up and, moments later, Winston appeared.

"I just got back to the herd when the thingy appeared, know what I mean? It's like, you know, you was real quick there, your wotsit, Royal thingy--Highness, an' that."

"Dilys? She's called Dilys. Yes. Quite. Anyway. I am able to translate the sky's message for you."

"Bloody right on! You is one smart geezer, ain't ya? Know that?"

"Quite. Yes. Well. The thing is. You are white with black stripes. OK? Happy now?"

Winston looked puzzled. "How do you know that. I mean, how is it I ain't black with white stripes?"

"The sky said, and I paraphrase your words 'You are what you are'. Correct?"

Winston nodded, perplexed.

Had you been black with white stripes the sky should, very likely, have said 'Yo is what yo is'.