

## The Bath

It was a very ordinary bath. It was old fashioned, and was made from cast iron and stood on four short legs. It had served very well the various families who had lived in the house since it was built in the 1920's. It was about six feet long with plenty of elbow room. No one had ever complained about its behaviour, its size, or eccentricities. Harry thought it must have been installed as a special order for a large person. It had not been boxed in and the rusty iron pipes were visible here and there. He had central heating put in, and had intended to make many improvements as time went by, but he had never got round to it until he met Joanie.

From that time he would lie in the bath and lazily plan all the things she had asked him to do in the house before they got married. One task which she urged him to do was to paint the bath-room in her favourite colour, pale pink.

One day he noticed that one of the legs had fallen off the bath. As he could not reach it with his hand, he hooked it out with a walking stick only to find that it could not be put back very easily. There was no room between the wall and the bath to manoeuvre his body. He put the leg in the garden shed until such times as he could fathom out a way to do it.

He decided to give the bath a first coat of paint using up some white paint, and then went over it with pale pink, and covered the floor with pale grey covering. When Joanie saw it she was entranced!

"Oh Harry! It does look lovely! I like it better than having it boxed in. It gives it a trendy, 'with it' look."

All went well for some days with Harry using the bath feeling rather pleased with himself for his dash of inspiration. About two weeks later, he and Joanie were planning their wedding day, and putting finishing touches to the house when, looking at the legs of the bath, Joanie had an idea.

"Why didn't I think of it before?" she asked herself. The legs were curved and moulded like the paws of a lion. She went to her hand-bag and, taking from it her scarlet nail varnish, she painted each claw a vivid red.

"Harry! Come and see what I have done to the bath!" she called.

Harry came and together they looked at the legs of the lion. He put his arms around her.

"You are a little nit!" he said, "but I like it. It gives the bath a touch of class. Yes, I definitely like it."

Later that evening Joanie decided to have a bath before going home, since she felt rather bedraggled after unpacking all the things they had brought from her old flat. Packing cases and cardboard boxes were everywhere, as well as curtains draped over furniture. She looked at the time.

"I'm going to have a bath!" she called out. She ran her bath and wallowed in the warm water.

"This is the life." she said to herself. As she relaxed with her mind in a sort of blank haziness, she thought she heard a sound like a deep groaning coming from under the bath.

"It must be the creaking floor boards." she thought. After she had let the water out, she wrapped a towel around herself and went downstairs.

"You know, Harry, those floor boards in the bath-room creak and groan like some

one in pain!"

"It must be the poor old lion. He has to stand all day long on three legs. It must be rather tiring for him, don't you think?"

"I wonder how he likes his red toe nails."

"They may make him feel like a bit of a Cissy-lion." said Harry. They both laughed and danced fandango round the room.

"I must go home," said Joanie, "I have a stack of work to do before I leave the office. It is all your fault. If you had not asked me to marry you, I would have gone on auditing for many years to come."

"Get your glad rags on and I will see you safely on your way. I too have lot of work to do. I have to go to Leeds tomorrow to get my dear old Granny, who is to stay with my mother until after the wedding."

After seeing Joanie to her car, Harry felt a strange reluctance to enter the house. It seemed too quiet except for the gurglings and noises coming from the bath-room. He started to ran a bath for himself and sat down to wait.....

"Oh, lord! I forgot the bath."

He ran up the stairs two at a time. The bath was full of lukewarm water. As he plunged his hand in the water to reach the plug, the chain seemed to twist in his hand. He let some of the water out, and stepped into the bath.

"The best things in life are free-ree-ee", he sang as he sank down into the water. He had a feeling of utter contentment. After a while, he became drowsy as he often did when in the bath, but this time he felt a rocking motion. Rocking motion..? The bath seemed to be moving, as if creeping along on all four legs. Or, rather, on three feet as the motion was a sort of 'one-two-three-hop, one-two-three-hop'. He opened his eyes and looked around. All was still, but he saw something on the window-sill that gleamed like an angry eye.

"What on earth is that?"

He lay there and puzzled over it, but was too lethargic to get up to investigate. He did move his hand once, but it felt so heavy that he let it slip back into the water. He realised that he felt heavy all over. He decided to make this a quick bath, and to spend what was left of the evening with a book. He made an effort to get out of the bath, but he found that his toe was trapped by the chain on the plug.

"This is damned silly." he muttered, "Come on, man, shake yourself and get out!"

He made another effort to move. This time he managed it, but as he tried to sit up, the bath shook. He thought he heard a low rumbling noise from beneath the bath near the tap end. It continued to rumble, but as he stood up the bath seemed to heave from one side to the other like an animal getting onto its haunches. Harry lost his balance somewhat and sat down in the bath once more.

"This is more than daft! What on earth is the matter with me?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. He found he had trouble in keeping awake. The light became dim until it was almost dark. The halting, trotting motion he now felt became fast and powerful, then it was a springing, leaping movement. Harry could do nothing but hold onto the mane. The mane? Harry felt the texture of a lion's mane between his fingers. He felt the rippling of the creature's muscles. The lion, for such it was, loped with great strides, covering the ground. Harry felt the rush of wind, and the warmth of the animal as it pawed its way through the undergrowth. He heard the panting breath and occasional deep growl from his mount. He tried to see where he was, but it was too dark. He could only see the angry gleam in the lion's eye as it turned

its head to look at him with shining eyes. Harry now began to feel exhilarated. He did not feel at all nervous, but bent over the lion's back like a motor cyclist at a rally. He wanted to shout and wave his arms about, but he dared not leave go of the lion's mane. When he had travelled about three miles, or so it seemed to him, he became aware of being at the head of pride of lions. He listened to their grunts and growls which he now began to understand. He heard his name being mouthed from one to the other. They were displeased about something, for they snarled and glared at each other as they ran. The pace was beginning to slow down now. The lion on whose back Harry had been travelling stopped for a moment, and brought its tail round to its side giving Harry a stinging slap with its tufted end. Before he had time to yell out it was off again. He discovered he had his voice back again.

"Whoa-! Whoa-back, you great, thundering jungle beast!"

At the sound of Harry's voice, the lion slowed down to a stop, to be followed by all the other lions. They formed a semi-circle around him. He slid from his lion's back on to the cool grass. He could just see the shapes of the lions as he peered through the gloom. He lay there panting for a moment while the lions watched him out of their yellow eyes. They were sitting up with their tails curled round their feet, with just the tufted ends moving slightly. The look in their eyes was almost human. Harry turned to identify the lion on whose back he had ridden from the bathroom to the jungle. The bath-room! The jungle! He stood up.

"I've got to wake up in a minute."

He tried to make his mind work properly. He was dreaming in the bath! He must have had the water too hot and was feeling faint! He tried to feel around for the soap, or the sponge - anything to reassure him that he was not out of his mind, but he could feel nothing solid, just a rushing wind and a warmth that came from the animals. One of the lions approached him with open eyes. It was the lion from the bath-room. It stood before him scratching the ground with its scarlet claws which it lifted up one after the other, growled and shook its head, and said,

"Cissy-lion! Cissy-lion!"

The truth dawned on Harry.

"Not you! A Cissy-lion? Never! Look here, I'm getting cold in this jungle. I would like to be home if you don't mind. I'll take the red off tomorrow. Now, please..."

The lion charged him and he fell over on to the grass. Once more he felt the texture of the lion's mane in his hand and the rippling muscles as it tore through the undergrowth. He felt a pain in his big left toe as it caught on a bush. He jerked it free. The lion turned to look at him. He saw the brilliance of its eyes. He blinked, then found he was in the bathroom of his own house with his left big toe caught in the chain on the plug. He freed himself and was letting out the now cold water when the phone rang. It was Joanie.

"Hello! Did I get you out of the bath? Sorry, but did I leave my engagement ring behind? I think it must be in the bathroom. I put it on the window sill, I think."

"Hold on! I'll go and have a look."

Harry went upstairs and as soon as he got into the bath-room, he saw the ring. It was on the window-sill, just to the left of his shaving mirror. He stared at it for a moment, thinking he saw it move. It shone with the look of an all-seeing eye, flickering and bright. It followed his movements as he went to get it. He glanced at the bath with its scarlet claws.

"Take hold of yourself, Harry," he thought. He went back to the phone.

"It's alright, Joanie, you left it on the window sill."

"Are you alright, Harry? You sound as if you have had one over the eight! Take care, See you on Monday. I love you."

"I love you!"

Harry turned out the lights and went upstairs to the bathroom.

"You are no Cissy-lion! I'll paint your claws grey tomorrow, but I must never tell Joanie about this!"

He looked at the floor, then went down on his knees for a closer look. There were faint, red scratches on the floor under the bath which he had never noticed before. As if made by the claws of some animal...