

THE POORLY BEAR

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“Atchoooo!” said Bear, and all the crockery and ornaments in the little cedar-wood lodge where they lived shook.

“Bless you,” said Bison, for the twenty-ninth time in the last half-hour.

“Thang doo,” said Bear, through his bunged up nose.

“Don’t mention it,” said Bison, for the twenty-ninth time.

They were silent. On the mantelpiece the clock ticked slowly, as though it, too, was very, very bored and would soon drop off to sleep.

“Atchoooo!” said Bear.

“Rattle-rattle” went the crockery.

“Bless you,” said Bison.

“Thang doo,” said Bear.

“Don’t mention it,” said Bison.

“Tick.....tock.....tick.....tock,” said the clock.

Bear blew his nose loudly. “I don’d feed veddy veld,” he said.

“Don’t you?” said Bison, trying to sound surprised once more. “I’m sorry,” he added, trying to sound as though he was. And in truth, he was beginning to feel very sorry, though not just for Bear.

“Tick.....whirrrrr.....clunk,” said the clock. And then, almost like an afterthought. “whirrrrr.....clunk.”

“Doo-o’glock,” said Bear.

“Whirrr.....clunk,” said the clock.

“Doesn’t time fly” said Bison, cheerfully, “when you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I’m nod,” retorted Bear.

“Aren’t you?”

“No!” Then, just in case no-one had noticed: “I feel poorly. I’b god a gold.”

Bison looked idly out of the window. It was a late October day, and the leaves on the trees were gold and yellow, going on brown. Some had already

decided that the autumn had come, and spun gently to the ground. A thrush pecked amongst them, looking under each one as though she had lost something. It really was a shame to be indoors on a day like this. But Bison knew that he could not leave Bear on his own; the poor creature needed company.

“Atchooo!” said Bear.

It had all started the previous day. They had been fishing. At least, Bear was. Bison was lying on his back in the long autumn grass, with his legs in the air, watching the high fluffy clouds play hide-and-seek, first behind one large foot, then behind the other, before making a rapid dash to hide again behind the overhanging trees. He was thinking: “It’s a shame that my legs are on the bottom really; my feet would make a much better sunshade if they were on the top.”

He watched another cloud slide hurriedly by.

“And when it rained, they’d keep me dry,” he thought.

“I wonder why they weren’t made like that”

He considered asking Bear, but decided against it. Somehow, he knew that Bear wouldn’t really understand. He’d pretend to. He’d know the answer. And it would, of course, be very sensible and scientific. But he wouldn’t understand.

“It just shows,” he mused, “what nonsense all this evolution stuff is. I’m sure they’d be on top otherwise.”

He lay there a little while longer, wondering if he should write up his great discovery for a PhD. He’d have to learn to write first of course. But it would be worth it; it would make him famous. He would be known as Doctor Bison Fud (he assumed that was how you pronounced PhD). And it would be known as Bison’s conjecture. Or perhaps Bison’s law. Yes, a law. That was definitely better than a conjecture. It was easier to spell for a start.

There was a sudden noise in his head, like an army of feet marching through his brain. He shook his head violently, and an ant, that had accidentally crawled in and been blundering around noisily in the dark caverns of his ear, plopped out onto the grass and scampered away.

“Maybe that Darwin fellow had it right after all,” he thought. “At least they help to keep your ears further away from the ants, the way they are.”

He looked across at Bear. “Do you want some help?” he asked.

“Eh – oh, what? Is it time to get up?” said Bear.

“You were asleep!” Bison challenged. “No wonder you aren’t catching anything”

“No I wasn’t! I was just – pretending. It’s an old trick. We bears often use it. At least, those like me who’ve learned it. Not many of us have, of course. Only the cleverer ones. It lures the fish into a false sense of security. It’s very successful, you know.”

“Yes, I can see,” said Bison, looking at the still empty catch-net that hung on the bank by Bear’s side.

There was a small tug on the line that hung disconsolately in the water.

“Hold on. I think I’ve caught something.” He began to reel in the line hurriedly.

Bison watched from amid the grass, the whole scene upside down.

The line swung in and Bear caught it. The worm had gone, but the line was not empty. There was a piece of paper hooked over the end. Bear unhooked it, turned it over and read it slowly. “Thank you for the worm. But can we have some bread next time,” he read.

“Cheeky beggar!” Bear said, crossly. “And it was my last worm, too.” He looked across to Bison. “Pass me the bread, will you.”

“Er – I can’t, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?”

“I ate it.”

There was a long, tense silence. Bear, Bison knew, was counting to ten. Not that it ever made any difference. He was always just as cross at the end.

“You could try fly-fishing,” Bison suggested, and he snatched one of the many flies that were buzzing around his head. “Here.”

Bear came across and took the fly and threaded it onto his hook. “It’s not the same,” he muttered. “Not the same at all. And the water’s not right for fly-fishing.” All the time, he stared at Bison, making his displeasure felt. “Ouch!” he said, as he stuck the hook in his paw. “Now look what you’ve made me do.”

He went back to the streamside, and whipped the rod backwards. Bison ducked as the hook whistled past his head. As it looped back again, a late

wood swallow, who had overslept when all the others left to go south, and who was now looking for a last meal before racing off to catch up with them, swooped and grabbed at the fly – and the next moment found itself underwater.

Bear felt the tug on the line, immediately. “I’ve caught something already,” he cried. “I told you we should have been fly-fishing.” Again, he reeled in the line.

The wood swallow dangled in front of him, dripping.

“It’s a flying fish!” said Bear. “I’ve heard they’re around here. That’s why I used that special fly.”

“It’s a thwimming thwallow,” said the wood swallow. “But it wathn’t meant to be.”

Bear took hold of the swallow, and began to unhook him. “I thuppothe you think that wath futthy,” said the swallow, spitting out the fly. Then he shook himself in Bear’s face and, before Bear could do anything, spread his wings and swooped away, heading south as fast as he could fly, leaving a little trail of water behind him.

Bear rethreaded the fly. “Silly swallow,” he said. He felt really cross now. Very, very cross. In fact he was almost cross-eyed with crossness. He squinted fiercely at the fly. Behind him, he could hear Bison breathing heavily as he tried not to snigger. “I’ll teach them how to fish,” he muttered to himself. “Just let them watch this.”

Standing right on the bankside, he whirled the rod around his head. The hook flew out in a wide and fast circle. Bison cowered in the grass each time the hook swished above his head. Faster and faster the line went. In better circumstances the fly would have been proud and excited – he must be the fastest fly on earth. Faster and faster went Bear’s arms. Little pieces of river bank beneath his feet crumbled under the strain and splashed into the water. “Wisshhh...wishhhh” went the line. “Wheeeee” went the fly, with its eyes firmly closed.

And then, with one big heave, Bear whipped the rod forward, towards the stream – just as the hook caught in a branch of one of the trees and stuck fast. The jolt jerked the rod from Bear’s paws. He did a neat pirouette, first on two feet and then, as he teetered on the edge of the bank, on one. And then,

gracefully, arms spread out like a high diver doing a particularly dangerous and difficult dive, he toppled over backwards into the stream.

“Spplooosh!” went the water.

“What was that? Attack – attack! Landslide! Tidalwave!” quacked all the ducks in alarm.

Which was how Bear had caught his chill. By the time Bison had managed to pull him out of the water (not easy with a panicky bear) and escort his dripping friend home, he had already been shivering. They had dried him and put him straight to bed with a big hot-water bottle, but it had clearly been too late. Bear had a cold. Bear was poorly. And a poorly bear is a very sorry bear indeed.

“Atchoooo!” said Bear.

“Rattle-rattle” went the crockery.

“Bless you,” said Bison.

“Thang doo,” said Bear.

“Don’t mention it,” said Bison.

“Tick.....tock.....tock.....tick,” said the clock, in an attempt to break the monotony.

“You need cheering up,” said Bison. “That’s what you need. It would make you feel a lot better.”

“Thang doo,” said Bear. “Thad would be dice.”

“If you weren’t ill, for example, we could take you on a picnic,” Bison suggested.

“Or to a circus – if there was a circus,” he added reflectively.

“Yes,” said Bear. “It’s a real shabe.” Then just for good measure, he added: “Dowing thad make be feel really mudge bedder already.”

Which was when Bison had his good idea.

Bear might not be able to go to the circus. But the circus might be able to come to Bear.

Not a real circus, of course; he couldn’t possibly find one of them at such short notice, let alone persuade it to come and perform just for Bear. But a circus nonetheless. Bear would not know the difference. And it would certainly cheer him up.

“Just excuse me a moment,” he said to Bear. “I need to attend to something.

Why don't you play a game of eye-spy while I'm out. I'll be back by three."

An hour later it was all arranged. Ceilidh and Seamus, the two Irish wolfhounds, had taken a little persuading, but eventually they had agreed. Badger had thought it was a wonderful idea. "I've always wanted to be a trapeze artiste," she said. They hadn't had any time for rehearsals, of course, and they had had to draft in some extra help from Abigale, Albertina and Angustina, the three sheep. Costumes had also been a bit of a problem. Clowns faces, for the sheep, were not difficult with some of the ingredients from the pantry in the big house, and they had quickly made Badger a really quite effective tutu out of an old shopping bag. Bison had also found a top hat and a riding whip that would do for his role as ring-master, hanging up in one of the cabins. But the costume's for the two wolfhounds, who at one moment were meant to be horses, and another lions, and later on the world's strongest men, had been more difficult. In the end, they had resorted simply to painting lots of different colours onto the dog's backs, using spray paints they'd found in the garage. The musical accompaniment was also a little limited, since none of them knew how to play an instrument and the only thing they could find was an old squeeze-box accordion with a hole in the bellows. But they added in a base drum, made out of the biggest saucepan they could find and two wooden spoons, and by three o'clock on the dot they were ready.

Leaving the others outside, and holding his ring-master's hat and whip behind him, Bison went into Bear's room.

"Atchooo!" said Bear.

"Whirr....clunk, whirr.....clunk, whirr....clunk", said the clock. Then, after a moment's further thought, and just in case it had miscounted: "Whirrr....clunk."

"Bear," said Bison. "I've a surprise for you."

"Led be guess," said Bear, unenthusiastically. "You've found volube doo of War and Peace do read do be agaib."

"No, Bear."

"Then you must hab found the scrabble kid widout ady vowels, so dad we cad hab a gabe," he suggested.

"No, Bear."

"Then it mud be the gabe ob Tribial Pursuids, widoud the answers," he said.

“No, Bear.” Bison whipped his hat from behind his back and banged it onto his head. “It’s a real surprise. I’m proud to announce Bison’s Amazing Circus!”

From outside, there was something that was meant to be a drum roll, but sounded like a washing machine falling downstairs, as Ceilidh banged the saucepan for all he was worth, and then another noise, like a cow in pain from the accordion, and in danced the whole troupe.

Bear’s eyes went wide with astonishment and he forgot to sneeze. The clock missed a beat, and spent the next five minutes trying to make up for it.

“Bears and dogs – and cats... and sheep...” Bison began, suddenly realising that being a ring-master wasn’t quite as easy as he had thought. “And that spider that I can see watching from behind the picture-rail. We are here to entertain and enthrall you, to show you things you would never believe. We offer you – “ there was another roll on the saucepan, more drum-like this time, “the lovely Freda, the flying cat!” Badger danced across the floor, tail swishing seductively.

“Lenny and Leo, the world’s fiercest lions!” The two wolfhounds loped across the room, making what was really quite a good impression of two lions, roaring.

“Prince and Princess, the amazing appaloosa ponies, all the way from.... Er, Apploosa.” Ceilidh and Seamus, pranced back, a little less readily this time, and seeming to squabble a little over which was which.

“You will laugh like you’ve never laughed before, with the wonderful skill and tomfoolery of ... the Three Sheep!” Abigale, Albertina and Angustina trotted across the room, looking rather like three sheep who had had a really bad experience with a dough-mixing machine.

“And Brian and Nigel, the world’s strongest men.” The two wolfhounds strutted past Bear’s bed, on their hind legs, flexing their muscles.

“And, of course, me! Bison the circus-leader!” The saucepan banged and the accordion wheezed, and the three sheep baa-ed in unison.

Bison looked at Bear expectantly. “You’re supposed to clap,” he said.

Bear clapped weakly. From its perch on the picture rail, the spider made a better show of applause, with six of its eight legs. At the noise, several other young spiders crept from the rafters and also began to watch.

After that, things went surprisingly well. They started with the Three Sheep, who did all the sorts of things that clowns always do, like fall over and slap each other, and make rude noises, and generally cause mayhem. It was not very funny, though the sheep themselves laughed a lot - but that, Bison thought, just made it all the more authentic. It was just a shame about the jug of water that had been standing by Bear's bed.

Then Ceilidh and Seamus, or rather Prince and Princess, came on and did their act as circus ponies. They ran round and round the room, while Bison cracked his whip in the middle. Then, lightly as anything, and with her claws only a little way out to stop her slipping, Badger (or rather Freda the Flying Cat) leapt onto their back, and jumped from one to one as they galloped round. "Snap, snap," went the whip. "Ola, ola," cried Freda. "Ouch....aarrh....gerrofff," chorused the galloping dogs.

Next it was the turn of the Three Sheep again, this time trying to ride a monocycle (which they had made by borrowing the front end from the mountain bike which had been left lying the garage while the rest of the frame was repainted). That, too, was a success, though it was a shame about the big Chinese pot by the fireplace.

They were followed by the lion act. This really went very well. Bison used a chair and his whip, and made Ceilidh and Seamus balance on two footstalls and jump through an old bicycle tyre and they played the part extremely well, growling and pawing like real lions. In fact, Bison felt quite proud by the command he had over them, but a little bit scared in case they should forget who was boss. Though they spoiled it a little at the end by coming up to him and giving his nose a great big friendly lick.

Then it was the Three Sheep again, pretending to be magicians. All of their tricks went wrong; one with a pack of cards went so wrong it actually worked, which wasn't meant to happen. They did a sawing the lady in half trick, using a dress-dummy they'd borrowed from the sewing room in the big house, and after they had balanced the top half back on the bottom half you really couldn't tell what had happened to it. They also did levitation, though if you looked carefully you could see that it was really Abigail (or was it Albertina or Angustina) under the tablecloth, with her head and legs raised a little above and poking out either end. The young spiders liked it especially, and clapped

so much that they fell off their perch and dangled around on their silken threads. It was just a bit of a shame about the vase.

This was the cue for Freda to return. While the others had been performing, she had rigged up a trapeze for herself, by stretching the pull cords for the curtains across the room and tying them round one of the bedposts. She climbed up onto this, and first of all did a high-wire act, walking across the stretched curtain cords. Then she slid down and caught the big bobble at the end of one, where it dangled over Bear's bed, and did lots of gymnastic type things, all without any apparent effort. Finally, she swung from cord to cord, going faster and faster, and at the end leapt high into the air, twisted twice and landed lightly in the middle of Bear's bed. Bear seemed to like it immensely, and the noise he made as she landed was probably more in awe and surprise than in pain – though it was rather difficult to tell. Only the spiders didn't seem that impressed; everyone else clapped enthusiastically.

After that, it was the Strongest Men on Earth. Ceilidh and Seamus – or rather Brian and Nigel – launched into this act with even greater enthusiasm. They strutted around the room, showing off their muscles; they picked up bigger and bigger items to show how strong they were; they had a tug-of-war, in which each one took on all the other animals at once, and beat them every time. Or at least they did until Bear's dressing gown cord, which they'd borrowed for the rope, broke. Then, as the highlight of the act, they showed how they were strong enough even to tear a telephone directory in half. It really was very impressive, though it didn't so much end up in half as in lots of tiny, rather soggy and chewed bits. And Bison did wonder whether it really would ever be quite so useful again for looking up the numbers of the doctor's surgery, or Mr and Mrs Patel down the road.

Finally, there was the finale. (Bison had thought about this hard and decided that the best place for the finale was definitely at the end.) The animal pyramid. The three sheep lined up first, with lots of baa-ing, and banging of the saucepan. Then the two wolfhounds leaped onto their backs. This they did with surprising ease, and the sheep, who were used to being bossed around by Ceilidh and Seamus, didn't even wobble or flinch. Next, it was Bison's turn. This wasn't quite so easy. In the last few weeks he had not

been taking much exercise (nor, actually, had he taken much before that), with the result that he wasn't quite as agile as a bison ought to be. So there was a lot of puffing and panting, and more than one hoof in an eye or an ear, before he made it to the top. There, he stood, swaying slightly, feeling just a little giddy and queasy and more than a little scared. He shut his eyes tightly.

Then, one of the sheep picked up the saucepan and played a very realistic drum-roll. At that, Badger (or Freda) climbed onto the mantelpiece. Pausing to let the drum-roll reach a climax, she leapt down onto the armchair, and with one huge "sprongggg" from the springs caterpaulted herself high into the air, did a graceful somersault and landed lightly on Bison's back.

Or at least, she would have done if, at that moment, Bison hadn't chosen to open his eyes. It was definitely a mistake. He had heard of your whole life flying before your eyes, but this was worse. What was hurtling before his was not his life, but a whole cat, legs and claws outstretched, manic look in its eyes. And it was hurtling not past but toward him. Bison did the only thing he could think of. He ducked. Badger sailed on, over his head. In desperation, she stuck out a paw and tried to grab whatever she could – which happened to be Bison's ear. He let out a squeal of pain and batted her aside. She clung tighter. Bison batted at her with another leg. She tried to grip tighter still. The pyramid wobbled. Everything seemed to freeze, as though suddenly aware of the momentous decision it was about to make...

And then...

Badger let go, for even Badger could not cling on to a protesting Bison's ear with one claw, while being battered by two bison hooves.

Bison tipped back as the weight was removed...

Badger bounced onto Ceilidh's nose, claws scrabbling for purchase...

Ceilidh twisted violently...

She banged into Seamus' nose...

Seamus let out a howl of pain and surprise...

She let go, and landed with a loud meow and a screech of claws on Abigail's head...

Abigail baa-ed and bucked; the whole teetering pyramid swayed; Bison grabbed for the lampshade that dangled above him and clung on desperately as beneath him the rest of the pyramid buckled and fell. Below him, he could

here groaning and bleating – and the single, enthusiastic clapping of Bear.

“Encore!” Bear cried.

“I don’t think so, just now,” said Bison. And, as his arms stretched and grew tired, he let go and fell ‘plonk’ onto the floor.

* * * * *

Next morning, when he woke up, Bison ached all over. He was lying in his bed; Seamus and Ceilidh, Abigail, Albertina and Angustina, and Badger too, were all lying around him. Each one had plasters or bandages somewhere about them. For him, it was his left leg and ear. For Abigail her ankle. Albertina and Angustina each had a black eye. The two wolfhounds had their noses bandaged up, so that they couldn’t even growl. Badger had her tail plastered out straight. There was no sign of Bear.

He lay there for a few minutes, trying to remember what had happened. Then, he heard a whistling from outside. The door opened and Bear peered round.

“Oh, hello, Bison.” He sounded very cheerful.

“How do you do, Bear,” said Bison painfully.

“Oh, I’m very well, thank you. Nothing wrong with me. That was a splendid performance yesterday, by the way. It really did the trick.”

He stood in the doorway, expectantly.

“So are you coming out to play?” he asked. “It’s after half-past-nine. You missed breakfast by the way. But don’t worry, I ate it.”

Bison moved his leg a little and groaned. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I feel rather poorly.”

Bear looked at him, with what seemed like surprise. “Well, if you say so. I’ll go on my own, then. It’s a lovely day out there.” He turned to leave, then stopped. “You know,” he said, in a kindly but rather critical voice, “the trouble with you Bisons is that you can’t take a bit of life’s rough and tumble. You give in too easily. You don’t want to let a little illness get you down.”

And with that, he closed the door, and sauntered off down the path, whistling happily.