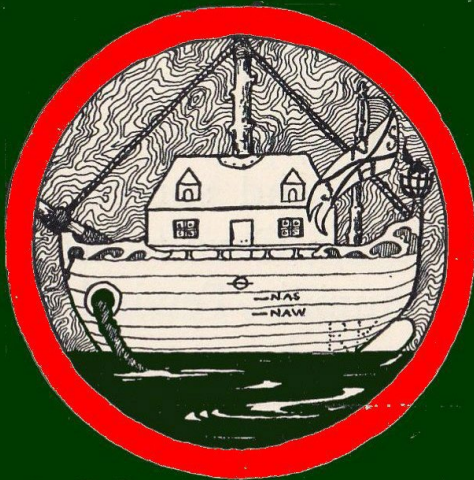




Ham and the Porcupine



WHEN ALL the Animals lived in Big Nursery, before it was time to go into the Ark, Big Nurse had to brush their hair. She told them to stand still while she did it or it might be the worse for them. So they stood still. The Lion stood still and had his hair brushed into a splendid mane with a blob at the tip of his tail. The Horse stood still, and had his hair brushed into a beautiful mane and a noble tail. The Cow stood still and had her horns polished, too. The Bear stood still and got a Lick and a Promise. They all stood still, except one Animal, and he wouldn't. He wiggled and kicked sideways at Big Nurse.

Big Nurse told him, over and over again, that he would not make anything by behaving so. But he said he wasn't going to stand still for anyone, and he wanted his hair to grow all over him. So, at last, Big Nurse washed her hands of him and said: 'On-your-own-head-be-it-and-all-over-you!' So, that Animal

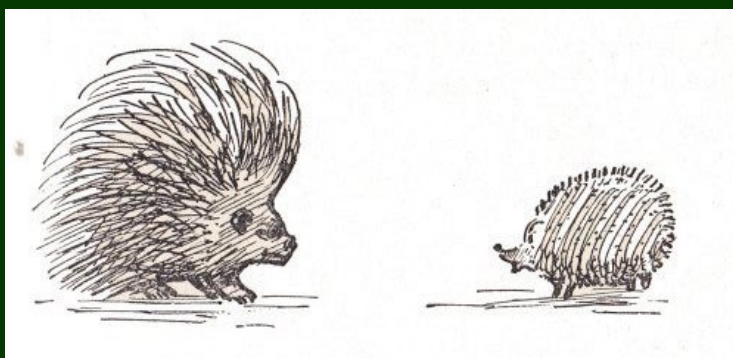
went away, and his hair grew and grew—on his own head it was and all over him—all the while that they were waiting to go into the Ark. And the more it grew, the longer, the harder, the harsher, and the pricklier it grew, till, at last, it was all long spines and jabby quills. On his own head it was and all over him, and particularly on his tail! So they called him Porcupine and stood him in the corner till the Ark was ready.

Then they all went into the Ark, two by two; but not one wanted to go in with Porcupine on account of his spines, except one small brother of his called Hedgehog who always stood still to have his hair brushed (he wore it short), and Porcupine hated him.

Their cabin was on the orlop-deck—the lowest—which was reserved for the Nocturnal Mammalia, such as Bats, Badgers, Lemurs, Bandi-coots and Myoptics at large. Noah's second son, Ham, was in charge there, because he matched the decoration, being dark-complexioned but very wise.

When the lunch-gong sounded, Ham went down with a basketful of potatoes, carrots, small fruits, grapes, onions and green corn for their lunches.

The first Animal that he found was the small Hedgehog Brother, having the time of his life among the blackbeetles. He said to Ham, 'I doubt if I would go near Porcupine this morning. The motion has upset him and he's a little fretful.'



Ham said: 'Dunno anything about that. My job is to feed 'em.' So he went into Porcupine's cabin, where Porcupine was taking up all the room in the world in his bunk, and his quills rattling like a loose window in a taxi.

Ham gave him three sweet potatoes, six inches of sugarcane, and two green corn-cobs. When he had finished, Ham said: 'Don't you ever say 'thank-you' for anything?' 'Yes,' said Porcupine. 'This is my way of saying it.' And he swung round and slapped and swished with his tail sideways at Ham's bare right leg and made it bleed from the ankle to the knee.

Ham hopped up on deck, with his foot in his hand, and found Father Noah at the wheel.

'What do you want on the bridge at this hour of high noon?' said Noah.

Ham said, 'I want a large tin of Ararat biscuits.'

'For what and what for?' said Noah.

'Because something on the orlop-deck thinks he can teach something about porcupines,' said Ham. 'I want to show him.'

'Then why waste biscuits?' said Noah.

'Law!' said Ham. 'I only done ask for the largest lid offen the largest box of Ararat biscuits on the boat.'

'Speak to your Mother,' said Noah. 'She issues the stores.'

So Ham's Mother, Mrs. Noah, gave him the largest lid of the very largest box of Ararat biscuits in the Ark as well as some biscuits for himself; and Ham went down to the orlop-deck with the box-lid held low in his dark right hand, so that it covered his dark right leg from the knee to the ankle.

'Here's something I forgot,' said Ham and he held out an Ararat biscuit to Porcupine, and Porcupine ate it quick.

'Now say 'Thank-you,' ' said Ham.

'I will,' said Porcupine, and he whipped round, swish, with his wicked tail and hit the biscuit-tin. And that did him no good. 'Try again,' said Ham, and Porcupine swished and slapped with his tail harder than ever. 'Try again,' said Ham. This time the Porcupine swished so hard that his quill-ends jarred on his skin inside him, and some of the quills broke off short.

Then Ham sat down on the other bunk and said, 'Listen! Just because a man looks a little sunburned and talks a little chuffy, don't you think you can be fretful with him. I am Ham! The minute that this Dhow touches Mount Ararat, I shall be Emperor of Africa from the Bayuda Bend to the Bight of Benin, and from the Bight of Benin to Dar-es-Salam, and Dar-es-Salam to the Drakensberg, and from the Drakensberg to where the Two Seas meet round the same Cape. I shall be Sultan of Sultans, Paramount Chief of all Indunas, Medicine Men, and Rain-doctors, and specially of the Wunungiri—the Porcupine People—who are waiting for you. You will belong to me! You will live in holes and burrows and old diggings all up and down Africa; and if I ever hear of you being fretful again I will tell my Wunungiri, and they will come down after you underground, and pull you out backwards. I—amm—Hamm!'

Porcupine was so frightened at this that he stopped rattling his quills under the bunk and lay quite still.

Then the small Hedgehog Brother who was under the bunk too, having the time of his life among the blackbeetles there, said: 'This doesn't look rosy for me. After all, I'm his brother in a way of speaking, and I suppose I shall have to go along with him underground, and I can't dig for nuts!'

'Not in the least,' said Ham. 'On his own head it was and all over him, just as Big Nurse said. But you stood still to have your hair brushed. Besides, you aren't in my caravan. As soon as this old bugga-low (he meant the Ark) touches Ararat, I go South and East with my little lot—Elephants and Lions and things - and Porcupig—and scatter 'em over Africa. You'll go North and West with one or other of my Brothers (I've forgotten which), and you'll fetch

up in a comfy little place called England—all among gardens and box-borders and slugs, where people will be glad to see you. And you will be a lucky little fellow always.'

'Thank you, Sir,' said the small Hedgehog Brother. 'But what about my living underground? That isn't my line of country.'

'Not the least need,' said Ham. And he touched the small Hedgehog Brother with his foot, and Hedgehog curled up—which he had never done before.

'Now you'll be able to pick up your own dry-leaf-bedding on your own prickles so as you can lie warm in a hedge from October till April if you like. Nobody will bother you except the gipsies; and you'll be no treat to any dog.'

'Thank you, Sir,' said small Hedgehog Brother, and he uncurled himself and went after more blackbeetles.

And it all happened just as Ham said.

I don't know how the keepers at the Zoo feed Porcupine but, from that day to this, every keeper that I have ever seen feed a porcupine in Africa, takes care to have the lid of a biscuit-box held low in front of his right leg so that Porcupine can't get in a swish with his tail at it, after he has had his lunch.

Palaver done set! Go and have your hair brushed!

