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THE DAWN OF ADONIS

PHIL EARLE



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For Charlie Sheppard, who understands stories
more deeply than anybody I've ever met.

PROLOGUE

The mountain howled: in warning and in fear.

The matted canopy couldn't contain or silence it, the rock faces above the treeline magnifying the sound to a terrifying echo. Birds flew to the highest branches, insects blended effortlessly into bark and foliage. But for the larger beasts, safety did not come as easily. They could only run, through the oppressive heat, feet pounding, chests flattening anything that dared fall into their path.

Their noise gave them away. How could it not? So as soon as their stampede began, the hunters' began too: with feet lighter, much lighter than their intentions, spears flexed, and senses tuned to their prey's frequency.

Occasionally the mountain fought back, tripping a hunter, fooling another with a low-hanging vine. But these men came as a pack, and as one fell, three more stepped forward, increasing their pace, heartbeats as loud as the branches beneath their feet.

The animals split up. Sixes became fours and twos. They spread themselves across all corners of the map, forcing the hunters to choose, hoping to throw them down false routes while they scampered to safety.

Yet the men were as devious as the animals were resourceful and had littered paths with plans of their own: pits dug then hidden, branches sharpened and wedged at the deadliest angles.

Twilight hid these perils, as did panic, the beasts thundering naively straight into their midst.

Sensing this, the hunters ran faster, not bothering to conceal their bloodlust, their voices catching up with the prey they chased so single-mindedly.

In the end, it was not a pit that brought them victory, nor a dart-sharpened bough. Instead, it was a vine, woven and threaded into a deadly knot; a hangman's noose laid amongst dying leaves and twigs.

It didn't snare the first beast, his feet merely caught the edge. Nor did it trap the second. But the third?

The third was not so lucky, the loop snagging and pulling tight round the creature's foot as it thundered past.

The animal – an ape – was a mighty foe, stronger than any of the men chasing it, yet the cry that flew from its mouth was so shrill it belonged in the throat of a terrified child. The sound shook the canopy, maddening every animal beneath it, and they in turn shouted a warning, a rallying call for the other apes to return and pull their friend free.

The hunters were now making a din of their own, whooping and clucking in celebration as they circled the prone animal, spears raised, jabbing. There was no greater prize on this mountain than the one they had ensnared, and despite its heft, the hunters had no doubt that the ape would be returning to their village with them. Alive if possible, though even in death it carried great value.

But as they set about their task, soaked darts primed, there

came a final twist to the tale that would be told for years to come.

Through the foliage burst the most ferocious of sights, a second gorilla rearing up and moving at a pace which left the hunters little time to think, let alone react.

Two fell quickly, smothered and clawed, whilst two more threw their quivering spears, drawing not blood but fury from the beast – which soon left them lifeless too.

Revenge, though, wasn't what this gorilla had returned for. Crouching, he pulled at the other's leg, mighty brow furrowing when the noose tightened further. Both apes roared, in pain and frustration.

They did not see the rifle being raised, but they heard its explosion, albeit too late. The free ape saw cordite blossom from the gun's barrel, the grey flower of death, then felt the force of it blow him clean off his feet. He did not feel the impact as his back hit the ground, merely the rattle of the final breath that trickled from him. And now all that could be heard was the anguished cry of the imprisoned ape.

The remaining hunters closed in. The end of the hunt was in sight, which brought relief as they could smell the rains coming.

The mountain howled. The jungle cried, and as the heavens parted, the sky wept.

1

Rats were a common sight on Tobacco Dock. They poured off boats moored from every point of the compass – dirty, disease-ridden carpets of them, scurrying around the boots of sailors desensitised after living for months with them in their bunks, latrines and food.

Cats were brought in regularly to control them, turning the docks into a battlefield, the hubbub of bartering traders fighting the hissing of the hunters and the squeals of their prey.

Shadows were not uncommon on the docks either. They were at their longest from twilight onwards when paltry oil-lights flickered, throwing sinister shapes onto walls and into puddles.

There was one shadow, however, that was greater than any of the others cast: one that enveloped every inch of the docks whenever it chose, regardless of the season or time of day.

It belonged to a *man*, a monster of a man. *Goliath Deeds.*

If ever a name suited a person, this was it. If ever a name could send a shiver down your spine, Goliath Deeds was it.

He was not the tallest man in London, nor on the docks. There was many a sailor longer and broader than he. But not a single one of those men, nor any reprobate who plundered the seven seas, could match Goliath's intent.

Puddles parted beneath his feet, crowds did the same, only daring to move back when one, then two, shadows passed. For Goliath never travelled alone. With him, always three steps behind, followed a boy.

He didn't dress like a boy. Didn't dress like the common man either. His wardrobe was entirely of his own creation. The boy knew what he liked, and compiled his outfits from items he'd managed to pilfer from laundries, washing lines and gentlemen's outfitters. It was just as well he had these devious skills, as he rarely had a shilling to his name. Shirts, braces, shoes, there wasn't a garment the boy couldn't purloin, and his wardrobe bulged like a butcher's gut. The only problem he had was keeping his threads clean.

As a result, there was a strange contradiction to the boy: he *could* be described as a dandy, but a grimy, bedraggled one: the best example being the hat that seldom left his head. It was a bowler, black in colour, worn at a jaunty angle and complete with a feather that he replaced at regular intervals. Pigeon, pheasant, he wore them all. But like the rest of his outfit, there was a twist to the hat, as the top of it seemed to have exploded, with jagged shards reaching up to the skies, forming an uneven and chaotic crown.

'Blame my brain,' he'd retort when asked about it. 'The ideas I have, they're so big, there's not a hat that can hold them in.'

He was a card, a live wire and the oldest twelve-year-old you could ever meet. He'd seen things, done things, felt things

that people who lived for a century would never experience. Nor want to.

'Keep up, Squabble,' growled Goliath without turning.

The boy could've chosen to hate it when called by his surname for a number of reasons, the main one being that it wasn't his actual name. The same was true of his forename. That didn't belong to him either.

When he was found abandoned, mere days old, on the Foundling Hospital steps, wrapped in newspaper like a bag of chips, there was little indication of who the boy was or who had birthed him. All that he owned hung around his neck on a ratty length of twine: half a coin, beaten wafer thin then cut jaggedly in half. Tucked into the newspaper was a simple note with questionable spelling – '*I wil cum for you wiv the rest of the coyn*'.

He needed a name, so the nurses gave him one, like they did so many of the children in their care. Tom Teal: simple, and cheap on ink, which stuck until his seventh year, when a shadow fell on his life. A shadow that had loomed ever since.

Goliath Deeds arrived at Coram's Foundling Hospital from nowhere, a kindly expression on his face that clearly hurt to wear.

'His ma's half-brother,' he'd declared himself. 'Overseas till late. Din't know my sister had passed, let alone about the nipper!'

Tom had recoiled from the man. He had no memory of his mother, but this, this . . . character did not sit well with her image in his mind. She was soft and kind, smelled of

bread from warm ovens and flowers. This man smelled of anything but.

But, just as Tom had hoped that Goliath would be turned away as a charlatan, the man brandished an item that changed the boy's life irrevocably – an arc of hammered metal, that sat as tightly as a jigsaw piece against the shard Tom wore close to his chest.

'I am not a rich man,' Goliath had boomed, 'but I have ambitions and goals, ones that the boy can share in, if he works hard and follows direction. The world is growing, the docks are thriving and a boy can learn everything he needs to know there. Between the docks and me? We'll educate him. Make him a man.'

Regardless of what feelings Tom might have had on this, he soon found himself in the care of his new 'uncle', and Deeds was true to his word: they found themselves on the docks daily, though the many things he learned were not in any textbook.

The first thing that had to change was his name.

'Tom Teal is no name to carry all your life,' Goliath told him.

Tom's ears liked the sound of this. 'Am I a Deeds?'

'Not yet you aren't. Names are earned. And that surname would make you practically royalty. I've been watching you, though. Seen the pride you take in your appearance, as well as the fact you could start an argument in an empty pub.'

Tom couldn't disagree with either of those points and had

learned quickly that the man was not someone to contradict on anything.

'Tom Teal is dead,' Goliath declared, like he was officiating at a coronation. 'Long live Toff Squabble.'

It was a name that soon became known everywhere he went, and by the age of twelve, Toff wore it like a medal, even on a night as filthy as this one.

'What we even doin' here?' he moaned now. 'Weather like this gives me the willies. And the puddles are playing havoc with my spats.'

He wasn't kidding, the white material covering his shoes was far from pristine now, more a dirty, ratty brown, and he knew it would be a beggar to shift no matter how hard he scrubbed.

'That's what spats are for, you fool,' rebuked Goliath sharply. 'To stop you getting spattered.' He finally turned round to the boy, eyes just about visible beneath his woollen cap.

'But I ain't got a spare pair, Goliath.'

'Stop your whinging, do as you're told tonight, and you'll be able to afford a pair for every day of the week.'

'That's what you said about me waistcoat last week.' But Toff had the wisdom to say this quietly, not wishing to light Goliath's short fuse.

They stomped on, past ale houses promising more than just the delights of alcohol, and shops selling anything and everything, from paraffin to parrots, rope to rum.

Toff's eyes were drawn to the many exotic birds on offer.

Their rainbowed feathers didn't belong here, but the boy was glad of their presence. It made his own just about tolerable.

Toff was toying with asking how much further, when Goliath hastily applied the brakes. Toff did the same, avoiding walking straight into his back. He'd done it once before and worn the bruises for weeks. This was the way of life with Goliath. You might make a mistake once, but never twice.

'See this place,' Goliath said, pointing at a shop sign. 'See what it says?'

Toff looked at the elaborate, scrolling text and read it effortlessly, unlike most children of his age or standing.

'Jamrach's Animal Emporium,' he said aloud. Toff was smart, but Goliath had still done an excellent job teaching him his letters. The man may have been a thug, but he was a complex one.

'That's right. Know what it means?'

'Fancy word for shop, ain't it. Don't know who Jamrach is though.'

'Charles Jamrach.'

Toff shrugged, none the wiser.

'Jamrach was a rich man. And a lucky one, which makes him the worst kind. Every bit of wealth he inherited was off his old man, a German, who used to be chief of the river police in Hamburg. Made him friends with a lot of sailors, opened his eyes to a lot of the valuable cargo they was carrying: animals. And not just cats and dogs. *Exotic* animals.' Goliath's eyes widened as he said it. Toff swore he saw fires ignite in them.

'Like what?'

'You name it. Zebras. Camels. Lions.'

'Stroll on. Lions?'

'Tigers too. Forty years back, he had one in this very shop that escaped.'

'He never did.'

'Went on the rampage. Scooped up a boy. Jamrach himself had to get hold of the beast by the throat and pull the child free.'

'He weren't dead?'

'Saved his life, Jamrach did. Didn't stop the boy's parents getting the law on Jamrach, mind. Sued him. Three hundred pound they won.'

'How's his shop still 'ere then? Must've ruined him . . .'

'Ruined him? Made him a small fortune. Word got out that Jamrach had this deadly tiger and the dealers went crazy for it. Queueing up at the door, wanting him to supply things for their menageries and shows, they were. By the time he struck a deal with George Wombwell, that animal was the most feared in London. The crowds flocked in their hundreds to see him, day after day.'

Toff stared at Goliath, a tad confused.

'What's any of this got to do with us?'

It was unusual for Goliath to tell stories, unless there was something in it for him, or there was a threat at the end of it.

'I'm tired, boy.' Goliath didn't look tired. He looked like he was plotting, as he so often did. 'Tired of men like Jamrach

having it easy. I mean, look at this place. The old man's dead now, but his sons? They're richer than ever. Every time Barnum and Bailey or another circus needs to up their game, it's here they come. Well, it's time someone gave 'em a shock. A bit of competition. And that someone is me.'

This was news to Toff. Goliath was a legend in the East End; hell, the man was both famous *and* infamous. But he didn't tend to mix with those above him socially: Goliath broke bones rather than bread.

'I don't get it, Goliath. We buying something from 'ere?' Toff eyed the window suspiciously. There were parrots and songbirds a plenty, whilst inside a cage a snake swirled around a wooden cross. They looked exotic. Beautiful. Expensive.

'You ask too many questions, boy. No, we're not buying anything from them. We're going to get ourselves a slice of the action. I ever let you down yet?'

This was a loaded question, and one that if Toff answered honestly, would earn him a cuff round the head.

'Course not,' he said.

'Follow me then,' Goliath grinned. 'The high life is just round the next corner.'