

*You'd think that being turned into an inside-out anteater would teach a person humility . . . but no—the witches had to go further.*

## PECKING ORDER

by Nils T. Peterson

"YOU MUST LEARN HUMILITY," said Witch Marguerite when she first put me in my cage. The length of my sentence I did not know. I didn't even know the cause of my sentence. It is impossible to tell in such cases. But whatever sin it was, the pride of helping or the greater pride of being helped, all that they ever told me was that I needed to learn humility.

My form was such that my punishment was not unendurable. In fact, I was rather handsome with my thick, silver-black pelt, my claws as sharp as a shrew's tongue, and my tentacles reaching out from above my forelegs to clasp together above my massive, toothy head (the tip of each tentacle tucked neatly in the opposite ear in moments of repose cutting off the sounds of the outside world so that I could contemplate more easily). As a matter of fact, I was one of the Zoo's outstanding attractions.

The Zoo was in a single room

of the Witches' house. The room was unbelievably large for such a small house. But there it was, the cages three deep, reaching until you could not see the end of them or the farthestmost wall of the room. The cages themselves did not look very big from a distance, but, as you drew closer to them and peered inside at the creatures contained, you began to realize their size. Mine, for instance, had lots of room for me and for a substantial imitation of what I imagine was supposed to be my natural surroundings. I would lower my head between my shoulders and hulk around. The customers thought that I was cute.

It always seemed gray at the Witches' house. To get there, you had to follow that narrow, winding road leading to nowhere in particular. People were always getting lost, though, for it had to be that winding road, and it had to lead to this nowhere in particular, the gray one.

Each morning the Witches would get up and eat their breakfasts of dozens and dozens of hard-boiled eggs, for witches never eat anything other than hard-boiled eggs, and then Witch Beatrice would tend to the door to let in the spectators and collect the admissions fee; Witch Marguerite would feed us all, going up and down the cages thinking food at us, and Witch Guinevere would clean up the Zoo by climbing on her broomstock and riding up and down the aisles between the cages at a great rate, sending the dust flying in every direction in decorative whirlwinds and an occasional dust devil. We always enjoyed watching Witch Guinevere clean up. We would sit in our cages and think at each other about the patterns that she made, and, when she was good, we thought applause at her, and she would think back a sweet little curtsey at us. Witch Guinevere was very polite.

They were quite strict with us when the spectators were in the Zoo. Very often I would get tired of letting the spectators look at me, and I would fold my tentacles on the top of my head letting the tips rest in my ears and contemplate. But soon the spectators would complain to Witch Beatrice that I wasn't doing anything, and Witch Beatrice would complain to Witch Marguerite, and Witch Guinevere, and Witch Guinevere

would come over and look at me, and then I would start feeling very warm, and I would open my eyes and see Witch Guinevere, and the floor would get hotter and hotter. Soon I would be hopping around the cage trying to keep my paws off of the floor. All of the spectators would crowd around my cage to look at me because even the water in my pond was steaming and my paws would be burned, and I would have tears of green running down my silver-black muzzle. The audience would laugh and the children, particularly the little girls, would clap their hands with glee to see me dance. Witch Guinevere would always be very careful with me, however, to see that I did not become badly hurt, but sometimes my paws would be sore for days and days.

I was one of the outstanding attractions at the Witches' Zoo because the children loved to see me pacing back and forth whirling and twirling my tentacles above my head, or occasionally grabbing the lowest branch of the tree that grew by my cave and chinning myself three or four times. Of course, some of the other creatures were popular too, such as the three-legged centaur, the inside-out anteater, and the haggard with no nose. At first Witch Beatrice was not going to allow the haggard because actually he was a freak. She said that they did not run a circus sideshow.

But Witch Guinevere said that he looked so evil that all of the little boys and girls would be sure to enjoy him very much. Witch Marguerite said that it was just too difficult to get the proper ingredients to do a really first rate job of enchantment any more. Witch Beatrice, since she was really a kindly soul, gave in.

The last creature that they let in while I was still a member of the Zoo proper was the Squelch. I can't really say what they wanted a Squelch for. He even looked like one, all gray and flatlike with hardly any length to his legs at all, and a single eyestalk sticking right up from the middle of his body. None of the spectators ever stayed at his cage at all. So, there was more pain for the rest of us. We treated him as he deserved to be treated.

When Witch Marguerite wasn't looking, we would steal all of his food and transport it to our cages so that he was always hungry. After all of the spectators would go, we would sit around thinking terrible thoughts of slime and nastiness at him until he would writhe with discomfort. We justified our actions to ourselves by saying that it was all right since his sin must have been atrocious since he received such a terrible shape. He could barely move at all because of his short, stiff legs and wide flat body, and I used to delight in playing Witch

Guinevere's trick of heating the floor up under him. Naturally, I could not do the trick as well as she could, but I could heat up one spot on the floor until it would almost glow, and, since it took him such a long time to move (it sometimes took him as much as a full minute to get off the spot since in addition to being slow he was stupid), he once in awhile got quite badly burned.

Since I was the main attraction, I got first crack at him. Then the others would take their turns at tormenting him in various ways. One day he was so badly burned, tortured, and starved that he almost died. When Witch Marguerite discovered him, we were all terribly punished, because the Witches did not want any such blemish on their administration. I had fleas in my fur for two weeks and arthritis in my tentacles so that I could hardly move them at all. The anteater was given nothing to eat but fire ants and he complained for a month of indigestion. The three-legged centaur was inflicted with hoof-and-mouth disease.

Naturally, this did not make the Squelch any more popular. When we would think at each other in the long gray night, we never thought at him at all. We ignored any overture that he made to us. It got so that he never even moved, but would just squat there in his cage blinking his single eye

on top of its drooping stalk.

I don't know what gave him the power, or whether he had always had the power and had just discovered it, but we found out about it one particularly gray evening after all of the spectators had gone. All of us had the power to one degree or another. We used it to steal the food from him and in conversing when we would think at one and another. The Squelch discovered that he had more of it than any of us perhaps to compensate for his awful shape. The Squelch was strong enough to open the cages.

The three Witches had left the Zoo part of their house for the night. We could sense them eating in the dining room, cracking and peeling and devouring their hard-boiled eggs. All of a sudden we were aware of the movement of the top of the Squelch's cage. All of us had tried to move the tops of our cages at one time or another. The last time that Witch Guinevere heated the bottom of my cage, I tried so desperately to move the top so that I could leap out with my teeth slashing that I ended up with very bad blisters on the bottoms of my paws from standing in one place and concentrating at that top. I couldn't move it, of course. It is hard to live with Witches.

As soon as we realized the implications of what was happening, the inside-out anteater, the hag-

gard with no nose, and I thought a big stop sign at him. He must have been stronger than the rest of us put together at this time, but he was too stupid to realize it. He protested that he just wanted a little freshness, but he stopped taking off the top of his cage when I threatened to heat up his eye-stalk. After all, the Witches' dining room was right next to the Zoo, and they would be sure to hear the sound of the imploded air.

We waited until the wind stopped howling down the chimney, for that was the sign that the Witches were asleep. Then we told the Squelch that we wanted to escape. Naturally he was unwilling and kept insisting that he had been put there to learn a lesson in pride and that he would become a better man if he ever could learn it, and so he didn't want to escape. He concluded that he didn't see how he could escape in his present weakened condition and in the silly body that he had. The three-legged centaur threatened to burn off one of his seven legs. The haggard with no nose threatened to burn the fur on his back. I threatened to boil the inside of his single eyeball. He agreed that it would be better to escape.

When we were sure that the Witches were asleep, we had the Squelch remove the tops of all our cages. Once the cages popped

and we were free, we crept quietly from the Zoo. I led because my tentacles were handy for opening the doors, and, anyway, I was the main attraction. The others followed closely as we crept outside, all except the Squelch, who moved so slowly that he was still struggling to get out of his cage when the rest of us were out in the yard or on the road. I doubt if the poor wretch ever made it even out of the door.

The taste of freedom was sharp in my mouth. Just what the end would be I didn't know or didn't care. I certainly couldn't have gone home looking like that, but I was on the road running and breathing deeply of the crisp night air, and the others, the proud ones, were with me. The road was narrow and winding, of dirt, high-crowned, and with a muddy ditch on each side. On each side of the road were the dry, leafless sticks of an abandoned crab-apple orchard. The sticks seemed to make the night pull in on the tops of us as we travelled, galloping or

crawling, in the moonless night.

Suddenly there was Witch Guinevere standing in front of me, eight feet tall, red eyes piercing the gray. On the left was Witch Beatrice, eight feet tall, yellow eyes piercing the gray. On the right stood Witch Marguerite, eight feet tall, green eyes piercing the gray. I leaped, jaws open to slash, bounced from the wall of power, and fell muzzled to the ground. We were quietly herded back to the Zoo.

"All of this will be wasted," said Witch Guinevere when we were back at the Zoo room, "if you don't learn humility," looking at the centaur, the anteater, me, and the others who had made the escape down the road. "You'll never learn pride this way either," she said looking at the Squelch. "We'll just have to do something else."

They turned the whole bunch of us into hens to supply hard-boiled eggs for their table, all of us except one. The Squelch is the only rooster in the whole place.

