

Histah Has A Bad Day

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A python with a jungle tale!

It was well that Histah, the snake, did not realize the low regard in which the other beasts of the African jungle held him. Having no legs, Histah perforce had to make his way through the undergrowth, trails and trees of the equatorial rain forest on his belly. Others more fortunate flitted through the branches on sprightly legs or winged high above the great trees below. Not so fortunate was Histah, the snake.

Although Histah's scales were dry, these appeared to be slimy, or so his detractors, Manu, the monkey, principal among them, insisted. Yes, Histah, the snake, was misunderstood, but at the moment, Histah, the snake, did not care. There were more pressing matters at hand.

This beautiful tropical day found the great snake in a particularly foul temper. Histah was somewhat large for his species, almost three times the height of a tall man, and he was very hungry.

Histah Has A Bad Day

His last meal had been a careless parrot taken the previous day which had only served to whet the great green serpent's grim appetite.

Histah coiled in the concealment of a thick bush at the bank of a gently-flowing river. Sooner or later, all creatures great or small must drink. So here hungry Histah waited to feed.

First came Buto, the rhinoceros. Buto was much too large and formidable for even so large a snake as Histah, who fought down his rising irritation. Would the huge lout never leave? At last Buto drank his fill and, with a shake of his horned head, splashed across the river to disappear into the foliage cloaking the far bank.

Ah! What was this? Histah's flickering tongue tasted the thick humid air. Did his senses lie? No! Now his red eyes confirmed it. Bara, the deer, came hopping through the shallow water directly toward him! This would be a fine feast indeed! Histah tensed his mighty muscles in anticipation. Only a little closer now!

A great splash sprayed muddy water into the waiting snake's eyes. Histah recoiled in anger at this startling interruption. He lifted his wedge-shaped head to confirm his worst suspicions.

No! It couldn't be. Gimla, the crocodile, had snatched Bara right before Histah's eyes! The old crocodile's big tail paddled side to side as it carried its succulent prize to the opposite shore. Histah's long tongue flicked in frustration.

The snake intuitively knew that because of this commotion, no wary prey animal would soon come again to this riverbank to drink. Like flowing green

Histah Has A Bad Day

water, Histah glided back into the deeper brush, then up into the spreading limbs of an acacia tree where he hung, sulking and hungry.

As Histah's hunger grew, his temper grew proportionally shorter. A brightly colored horn-bill flapped lazily past and the green snake struck out at it, knowing full well that the bird was probably out of reach. Squawking in terror, the horn-bill flew quickly away.

Overhead a gang of monkeys, witness to the poorly executed ambush, howled in derision at the snake. Some were bold enough to cast dry twigs at their ancient enemy, but when Histah lifted his thick head, and his red eyes fastened on those of the small primates, the chattering troop fled screaming into the forest. The long hot steaming jungle afternoon wore on and on. At last Kudu, the sun, sunk low in the western sky.

Thirsty now as well as hungry, Histah, the snake, half dazed, slithered down to the river. At least he could drink. As Histah glided through the underbrush, a great hairy body leaped aside.

"Kreegah! Kreegah!" the great ape screamed. "Histah! Kreegah!"

One among these great apes had taught them the value of posting sentinels. Once again today, that benefit was reaffirmed.

The snake had blundered into a recently arrived tribe of anthropoid apes. How careless! Even dazed by the sun, how could he have missed so many of the great shuffling hairy monsters? Not even Numa, the lion, or Sheeta, the leopard, trifles with the mighty Mangani in such numbers!

Histah reversed his course and retreated toward the acacia tree, but the great apes were now fully aroused. There were shes and babies; the bulls rallied in their defense. Among these was Goblat, the massive young bull that had discovered the snake, with their infant balu

"I am Goblat!" bellowed the great bull ape. "Goblat bundolo!" That Histah had sought to devour his own little balu, Goblat had no doubt. "Goblat bundolo! Goblat kill!"

Among the Mangani was one strange ape unlike the rest of the bulls. He was tall—taller than most of them. But where their mighty thews bulged in great massive knots, his sleek musculature resembled that of Sheetah, the supple and deadly panther. His black hair was tied back with a strip of lion hide. That and the leopard skin loin cloth at his waist comprised this Tarmangani's savage ensemble.

"Kreegah, Goblat! Beware!" the Tarmangani warned. "This Histah is very large!"

"Goblat bundolo!" roared the mighty bull ape, beating his great breast. Such was the rage of Goblat that his bristling gray fur stood on end.

Mighty indeed was Goblat. Standing nearly six feet tall with massive muscular arms that nearly dragged the ground, Goblat weighed close to three hundred pounds. Almost every inch of that colossal frame was covered in thick gray fur. Large fighting fangs were bared in a savage snarl, gleaming white between flabby, pendulous lips; beady red eyes were narrowed in concentration. Of all the creatures that dwelled in the jungle Goblat hated none so much as Histah, the snake.

Histah Has A Bad Day

From a distance, Goblat's mate, Sheekah, screamed encouragement while her terrified balu clung tightly to the hair of her chest. The other shes joined in, inciting their own mates to emulate the commendable example of Goblat.

Several large bulls now sidled over to Go-blat, each posturing and pounding his own great chest with ham-like fists. All were united in their hatred of Histah, the snake. Here, now, was a rare chance to wreck their vengeance on this stealer of balus.

As Histah slipped into the concealing foliage overhead, Goblat leaped up and seized the snake's tail. Tugging with all the might of his three hundred pound frame, the powerful bull ape yanked the hissing, spitting python out of the tree.

Now indeed was Histah, the snake, enraged. Gone was all thought of escape. Gone even was his hunger. Histah would have his revenge on this great hairy brute that tormented him. He would have it now! Histah had at last reached his breaking point.

Suddenly sobered by the sight of the eighteen-foot long, hissing python now bearing quickly down upon him, Goblat beat a hasty retreat. Histah pressed the attack. The mighty snake would have his revenge if nothing else!

For all of his great strength and agility, Goblat nearly died at that moment for one of his large hairy feet became tangled in a creeper vine that stretched across the sward; the big ape tumbled heavily to the ground. Closing in, Histah lifted his head, mouth open to strike. Although not venomous, pythons secure their prey with a vicious bite. Backward--

facing teeth then hold the victim fast while powerful constricting coils are looped around the unfortunate prey's body. The coup de grace then follows.

No sooner had Histah reared his head to strike than a long sliver of wood suddenly appeared in the snake's neck. Sluggish is the nervous system of Histah, the snake, but the python knew at once that he had taken a serious, perhaps mortal wound. Blind with rage, the snake turned to face the hairless one as he placed another stick on the curved branch that he grasped in his hands.

The strange white-skinned hairless ape drew his bow and fired a second arrow. This struck full into Histah's neck not a hand's breadth from the first.

Free at last of the liana, Goblat scrambled away. He spied something on the ground. A thin smile spread across his thick, pendulous lips.

Badly wounded, Histah now sought to retreat toward the brush but found himself surrounded by a dozen growling bull apes. Some began to pelt Histah with rocks. Hissing in rage, Histah turned to escape through the other side of the closing ring. No sooner had Histah turned than everything at once became red and then blackness overwhelmed him.

Goblat stood with one foot on the back of Histah's neck. Histah's head was now mashed flat and bloody. In one great shaggy paw, Goblat brandished overhead the thick bloody club with which he had brained the snake. Three hundred pounds of savage muscle had driven the twenty pound cudgel full onto the skull of the now dead snake. Histah

had not had a chance.

Histah's body still twitched and jerked with the unnatural vitality of the reptilian sort. On most days, the Mangani would have been content to stand back and watch Histah die, but not today.

Goblat, still standing on Histah's neck, now threw down his club, threw out his chest and roared forth the victory cry of the bull ape. As if on cue, the other bulls, the tarmangani excepted, fell on the snake and began to savagely rip it apart. No, it definitely had not been a good day for Histah, the snake!

Elmo did not join the others who, after ripping dripping chunks of flesh from Histah's ruined frame, ate it raw and with relish. Elmo instead ate a large orange fruit because he did not fancy the taste of snake flesh. Perhaps after the fruit, he would investigate a nearby rotting log. There should be plenty of succulent grubs beneath it for the taking.

As he ate, Elmo pondered Goblat's surprising attack on Histah. Having been raised by the great apes himself, Elmo knew full well the terror in which the Mangani held Histah, the snake. Yes, the apes would happily eat small harmless snakes when chance brought such fare to the table, but the mighty pythons that haunted the lower terraces of the equatorial forests were the stuff of their nightmares.

And yet, Goblat had led the assault on Histah. Was it because he felt that Sheekah and his balu had been in danger? Quite possibly so. Elmo well knew that the Mangani had a sense of both family and community that set them apart and above many

other jungle creatures.

A second thought then came to Elmo's ever curious mind. Had Goblat picked up the shattered tree branch to use as a weapon because he had seen Elmo use a weapon? Was Goblat clever enough to realize that armed with the club, he could strike Histah with greater force and less danger to himself? The possibility was not out of the question.

Elmo pitched aside the husk of the fruit and turned over the log. There was much about the Mangani that still puzzled Elmo. But this much he knew: these hairy progenitors of men were more than mere beasts. They had taken the first small yet necessary step up the evolutionary ladder; that if time permitted, someday they might possibly rise to some approximation of manhood. After all, Kala, his mother, was a Mangani, and no more devoted mother ever walked the Earth.

Elmo also knew that in all of Africa there could not be more than five hundred or so Mangani. Given the perils of the apes' day-to-day existence, as represented by Histah, the snake--and more terribly, by man the destroyer--it was unlikely that this branch on the evolutionary tree would persist much longer. That which had endured for eons would someday reach an inevitable tragic end.

Elmo, ever the fatalist, put aside that melancholy thought and seized a succulent pink grub between strong tan fingers. At that moment, in London, at an exclusive club no great distance from Parliament, several of Greystoke's peers from the House of Lords enjoyed fine claret with their chops. Before they left for the smoking room and their

Histah Has A Bad Day

Havana cigars, they dipped their fingertips into finely-wrought silver finger bowls of scented water, and dried their hands on clean, white linen napkins.

Elmo, still hungry as had been Histah, the snake, popped the grub in his mouth and fed. He wiped his greasy fingers on his naked thighs. Nearby the Mangani feasted on the remains of Histah. The fittest had survived once again. And the fittest of the fit was Elmo of the Apes.