

The Life of Armchairs

If there was anything strange about having wildlife rampant through the house late at night, then Mr and Mrs Rottenborough did not give it any consideration. It was just something which had happened, crept up on them, like wrinkles on the backs of their hands; or the gradual decrepitude of the freezer, now so inefficient that it had lifted a good six inches off the floor with the ice which had seeped underneath, making life in the kitchen a trifle dangerous as it skidded out of position at any moment, performing a Triple Lutz. Some years ago there had been no wildlife at all in the house, and now there was: it had just happened. And, having happened, was there any good reason to fight back? They thought not.

But their children had other ideas. As soon as they were old enough, they had elected to leave home, tired of ushering visiting friends outside when night fell, for fear they might be grabbed by a crocodile, or pounced on by a tiger, or even simply brushed by a flock of bats. The children had, as teenagers, remonstrated, but to no avail: their parents considered the protests simply as teenage tantrums, adolescent argumentation; had sighed and shaken their heads at each other; then gone to their beds, bolting the door firmly behind them.

For, as night fell, summer and winter, wild animals emerged from their hiding-places, and made the rooms of the house their own, calling in anger or in love, stampeding up and down the stairs. The sofa transformed into an elephant. The cushions on the seats became again antelopes, which cavorted across the floor, dodging the snarling maws of the lions, who had emerged from the shapes of the armchairs. Out in the hallway, the old grandfather clock, inherited from a long-departed uncle, and keeping bad time come rain or shine, shook its long neck and stepped out with ungainly grace as a giraffe.

As the night went on, and all around, the sounds of the city had died away to almost nothing, the stealthier animals emerged: the wash-basket turned out to be a termite-nest, much to the amusement of the Hoover, which made its appearance as an anteater, shuffling through the rooms, looking for armies of insects just such as these. The colonies of bats which spent the day pretending to be socks in the sock-drawers had, many hours before, flittered out of the bedrooms and were now hunting in and out of the windows.

When it had first started, about ten years ago, Mr Rottenborough had decided to stay up late to watch how the wildlife emerged. He armed himself with a host of candles stuck into candlesticks, knowing as anyone does that the flickering flame would keep all the wild beasts at bay. In most cases, the change from (say) armchair to lion was a gradual affair, one which in all honesty you could only really see with peripheral vision. You noticed a slight movement on the armchair; but if you stared straight at it, nothing happened. You looked away and then a huge paw, or a golden mane began to appear. And soon enough, a great lion, yawning its head off, appeared, and sniffed the air. Similarly with the grandfather clock. The antelopes were different - one moment there were just cushions lying placidly on the sofa, the next moment they had bounded to the ground and were leaping away in all directions, their fine nostrils quivering, scenting danger blown to them by the savannah winds across the carpet. What caught Mr R. completely by surprise was the slow transformation of the candlesticks into vultures and secretary-birds. Not that these huge ugly avians did anything: they just appeared and glared at the concealed watcher. Who, on witnessing this, and taking into consideration his

precarious position, decided to flee to the safety of his own bedroom, where his wife awaited him in some trepidation.

The attention of the Environmental Health Department had been drawn to the wildlife after an episode involving blocked drains. A plumber had been summoned to the Rottenborough house, after a delay of perhaps only a week, to investigate why the waste-pipes from the bathroom were blocked. Mr Tubes (or so his van proclaimed him to be) sent his apprentice down below the bath to investigate. The lad was a bright one, and knew his wildlife. "You've got sea-turtles down there, you have," he stated, brushing tarantulas from his hair. "And it's the one night of the year when they come ashore to lay their eggs. About fifty to a clutch." There was a sharp intake of breath from Mr Tubes: "You don't want them turtles in your waste-system, madam," he said, shaking his head gravely. "Worst thing you can have. Clogs up the whole works. I'm duty-bound to contact the Council, of course," he added, whilst making up his invoice. "Once you get the turtles out, I'll come back and sort something out for you." And with that, plumber and apprentice left the house. To be replaced a couple of months later by two men from the Environmental Health, who examined every inch of the plumbing, but could find no trace of the turtles, only some scattered remnants of eggshell. The plumber's apprentice could have told them that baby turtles only took three weeks to hatch, and as soon as they were hatched, they made their way to the sea with great expedition.

It was curious that the wildlife never sought to invade a bedroom when a member of the family was asleep in it. But this was decidedly not the case when a friend was asleep in a bedroom. Over the years, there was a dwindling number of people willing to spend a night in the Rottenborough home. Word got around, after Stan and Jane from London, on their way to a holiday in the Northern Isles, had fled the house at 2am, moments after waking to find that their duvets had developed horny skin and huge maws of sharp teeth, and were attempting to drag both the visitors off to a crocodile lair. The experiences of the children's friends were less catastrophic; but sleep-overs which got in the way of the migration-routes of wildebeest were never going to be repeated often.

Life settled to its own rhythm when the children fled the family nest. Many was the morning when husband and wife would emerge bleary-eyed from another night of mating-calls, howls, snarls and screams, and the relentless cricketing of the tree-frogs, to consider the devastation in the kitchen, where a disembowelled cushion lay centre-stage, picked clean by the teeth of kitchen-stool, and jealously guarded by a row of candlesticks perched on the wall-cupboards. There was nothing for it but to clear up the mess around the watering-hole, push the armchairs, the tv and the sofa back into the living-room, and get on with making the toast.