

## The Expedition

Standing on his back legs, Lord Windsor pulled a scented kerchief from the pocket of his silk dressing gown and held it to his nose. It seemed to him as he peered out of the window that the world was coming to an end. It had started three weeks ago, first there had been a noticeable slowing in the flow of the river, and then the level of water had diminished day after day until the village waste, with nowhere else to go, began to amass and attract the flies.

Never in his time as lord of the manor had anything like this happened before. He recalled his father telling him of the river bursting its banks and flooding the village some years before he was born, but no one could recall the river ever running dry.

‘Has no one any idea where the water might have gone, Quigg?’

Windsor’s voleservant nervously clutched at the chain of the pocket watch attached to his waistcoat, short black and grey tail shivering. ‘No, my lord. I asked the residents of the village as you requested, and they are as befuddled as us.’

Quigg had been with Windsor for thirty-seven years, and before that, in the service of his father, Lord Warfield.

The weasel peered down at his servant. ‘It is too exasperating, Quigg. We will have to get to the bottom of it.’

The vole’s eyes opened wide. ‘We, my lord?’

‘Of course we, Quigg.’ Windsor peered over his glasses. ‘There is no *I* in team.’

Over the past two days, the stench had become worse. It had seeped into everything. The inhabitants of the village were walking about with makeshift masks covering their noses, and as the lord of the manor he had a responsibility to ensure its

upkeep, which included the river. Something had to be done, but what?

Then it came to him. 'You and I will lead an expedition up river, Quigg. It will be like the good old days. We will locate the source of the problem, find a solution, and return the river to its old glory.'

The vole swallowed with difficulty. 'We will, my lord?' Quigg had spent many years on expedition with Windsor, but now, at fifty-seven, he was well past the age at which voles should be going on expedition.

'We will, Quigg. It is our responsibility. Get my expedition clothes and equipment ready, we will leave before lunch.'

With hunched shoulders Quigg shuffled out. 'Yes, my lord.'

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Jangling and clanking Windsor and his voleservant left the manor house with their rucksacks full to bursting. They sounded like a troop of scouts passing through the village. The noise was enough to wake the sleepy moles in the ground beneath their feet.

Reaching the path that snaked along the riverbank they noticed Spike, the hedgehog, sitting on a tree stump staring at the arid artery of village life. Listless rivulets of water struggled between the parched rocks, and fish crowded into unconnected pools to stay alive.

'The world is coming to an end n'all,' the young hedgehog muttered to himself.

Windsor knew the orphaned hedgehog was not the brightest inhabitant in the village, but he had hit the mushroom on the head. 'Not if I can help it, young Spike, not if I can help it.'

Spike jumped at Lord Windsor's voice, turned and doffed his cap. 'Sorry me lord. Didn't mean no harm by it n'all.'

'None taken, young Spike, none taken.' Windsor leaned towards the hedgehog. 'Quigg and I are off on an expedition to get to the bottom of the absent water. A youngster like yourself would be of great assistance to our cause. What say you, Spike?'

Spike scratched his whiskers with his forepaws. 'I ain't been anywhere outside the village before, your lordship 'n all.'

Windsor's eyes opened wide. 'Then it's about time you did, Spike. A youngster needs to get out into the world, seek adventure and... Let me tell you about my very first expedition...'

'Are you sure we have time for this, my lord?' Quigg interrupted.

'Ah Quigg, ever the clock watcher.' Windsor stared at the hedgehog. 'Another time Spike, another time. Are you with us?'

Spike's face lit up at the very idea of accompanying Lord Windsor on one of his expeditions. 'Do I need to bring anything with me n'all?'

'Not at all, Spike, not at all. Between Quigg and I we have everything that is required for an expedition of some considerable length.'

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Following the course of the river, the three set off with a spring in their step. As they passed the schoolhouse, Miss Sally popped her head out of the door and called, 'Off on another expedition Lord Windsor?' The village schoolteacher, a shrew of considerable intelligence, influence and countenance, had on a bright yellow dress, and although she addressed her question to Windsor, her eyes fluttered at Quigg.

Quigg blushed, lost his footing in a hole, and fell on his face.

The pupils crowded around the windows of the schoolhouse to see the lord of the manor starting off on one of his famous expeditions, and to laugh at his bumbling voleservant.

‘For goodness sake, what are you doing on the ground, Quigg?’ Windsor said. ‘Whenever we see Miss Sally, you fall over or drop something.’

‘Sorry, my lord... a hole... tripped.’ He clambered up, and brushed himself down. The embarrassing sound of laughter emanating from the schoolhouse echoed inside his head.

‘Good afternoon Miss Sally,’ Windsor said. ‘We’re off to solve the riddle of the missing water.’

‘Hurrah,’ the youngsters shouted. ‘Three cheers for his lordship.’ And they cheered loudly.

‘No need for cheers, but thank you anyway,’ Windsor said slightly embarrassed. ‘It is my responsibility after all.’

‘The youngsters and I have been making pies,’ Miss Sally said. ‘You must take some with you.’

‘Quigg, take young Spike and acquire the pies from Miss Sally if you will.’

Quigg’s eyes open wide with horror. ‘Me... my... lord.’

‘Yes you, Quigg. We can’t spurn the offer of pies. And try to stay on your feet this time.’

‘Come on Mister Quigg,’ Spike said setting off towards the schoolhouse, which was wedged between the exposed roots of an old beech tree. ‘We’ll get the pies and be on our way. It weren’t that long n’all that I was making pies in Miss Sally’s schoolhouse myself. We won’t go hungry with Miss Sally’s pies.’

Mumbling under his breath, Quigg followed Spike up the hill to the schoolhouse. He thought his heart might burst from his chest, sprout legs, and run back down the hill of its own accord.

‘Mister Quigg,’ Miss Sally greeted him, her voice sounding like treacle being poured into a dish. She took his forepaws in her own and said, ‘How are you? I haven’t seen you for such a long time. You should come and visit me.’

The vole swallowed with difficulty. ‘Hello... Miss... Sally. Oh, I will visit... I’m sure. Can we take the pies... please? In a... hurry.’ He hopped from one leg to the other, perspiration trickling down his back.

The youngsters stood around giggling. ‘Are you going to kiss him, Miss Sally?’ one adventurous young rabbit enquired.

‘Now Prudence,’ Miss Sally retorted, ‘don’t go embarrassing Mr Quigg.’

Spike took the two sacks of pies proffered by the youngsters, and slung them over his shoulder. ‘When you’re ready, Mister Quigg. If you’ve finished kissin’ Miss Sally n’all.’

Quigg’s head shot round too fast. He was about to remonstrate with the hedgehog when he became dizzy and fell against the door.

‘Oh, are you all right, Mister Quigg?’ Miss Sally asked, concern evident in her voice. She grabbed at his arm to stop him falling, and as she leaned down her lips brushed against his. Standing up surprised, she let go of him, and he slid to the ground and sat on his tail.

The youngsters roared with laughter.

Spike helped Quigg up. ‘I think we’d better go Mister Quigg, before you become a laughing stock n’all.’

‘I think you’re right Spike. Let us depart with all haste.’

‘Come along, Quigg,’ Windsor said as they returned. ‘We haven’t got time for romantic assignations.’

Quigg’s mouth dropped open. ‘You sent me, my lord. I am like a moth caught in the flame that is Miss Sally.’

‘You’re being over-dramatic as usual Quigg. You’ve been single for far too long. Miss Sally would suit you admirably.’ Windsor strode off down the path. ‘Anyway, we have no time for matchmaking. Pass the pies round Spike, let’s see what all the fuss is about.’

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News of the expedition spread throughout the village. The occupants of each dwelling they passed came out to wish them luck, to cheer them on, and to provide them with food, hot and cold drinks, binoculars, torches, fold-away chairs, sleeping mats, tents and a myriad other things they didn’t need and couldn’t carry. By the time they reached the edge of the village they were full to bursting, very sleepy and unable to progress due to the weight and quantity of the gifts bestowed upon them.

‘We will have to rest here, Quigg,’ Windsor said. ‘I don’t know about you or Spike, but I can’t go another step until I’ve had an afternoon nap.’ Removing his rucksack, he lay down with his back against a tree and proceeded to snore.

‘What are we going to do with all these *things* n’all, Mister Quigg?’ Spike said. ‘We can’t take them with us and we can’t leave them here.’

An acorn bounced off Quigg’s head. ‘Ow,’ he said glancing up.

Windsor continued snoring.

‘Sorry, Quigg,’ Seedy the squirrel said as he slid down a branch and hopped onto the ground. ‘I collect *things* you know.’ Stalking around the hoard of gifts from the villagers, he touched and sniffed each item. ‘I heard you mention *things*. I collect them. Nuts and acorns mainly, but other *things* as well. Do you want me to take these *things* off your paws? Sometimes I sell *things*, but mainly I collect *things*. You do want to get rid of these *things* don’t you?’ The squirrel rubbed his forepaws together, eyes twitching between Quigg and Spike.

‘Hello Seedy,’ Spike said. ‘As you can see, we have lots of *things*, but it wouldn’t be right to just let you have them. The villagers gave the *things* to us for our expedition. If we gave them to you, you would sell them back to the villagers. That wouldn’t be right would it Mister Quigg n’all?’

‘No it wouldn’t Spike, but what options do we have? As you have eloquently pointed out, we can’t take the *things* with us and we can’t leave them here.’

Seedy had already begun moving the *things* into piles based on similarity: A pile for food, one for camping, and another one for liquids. ‘I could take the *things* off your paws, hold onto them for a little while. If you reclaim them within say... two days, you can have them back for a small fee, but if you fail to claim them, they will belong to me and I can do what I want with them. What do you say? Have we got a deal, Quigg? Well?’

‘What do you mean by a small fee?’ Quigg asked.

‘Mmm...’ Seedy glanced at the piles. The food pile was clearly the largest. ‘What about the food? It will soon go off. I could eat it so that it’s not wasted.’

‘Not Miss Sally’s pies,’ Spike said grabbing the two sacks off the food pile. ‘We’ll take them with us.’

‘Oh!’ Seedy squinted. ‘We could share them, split them, halve them, bisect them so that you get an equal share and I get a larger share.’

‘There are three of us, but only one of you,’ Spike said clutching the sacks close to his chest. ‘That means you get a quarter, and we all get a quarter. That’s fair isn’t it Mister Quigg n’all?’

‘That’s fair Spike, you split the pies into four equal shares, and give Seedy one share.’

Seedy began shadowing Spike as he emptied the sacks and carefully placed each pie on the ground in one of four piles. ‘One for me, one for Mister Quigg, one for his lordship, and one for Seedy. One for me...’

‘Can’t you go any quicker? Do you want me to count them? I have a special contraption for counting pies, which would make the process quicker, easier, and fairer. We could be sure that each pile had the same amount of pies. Oh no! Have you thought about quality? Is each pie the same size? Have they all got the same amount of filling? What about...’

‘One for Seedy...’ Spike had one pie left over.

‘That extra pie should be mine,’ Seedy said eyeing the pie in Spike’s paw. ‘I mean, I’ve got to move all these *things*, and that won’t be an easy task taking them to my premises.’ He looked up towards a nearby tree.

Spike popped the pie into his mouth.

‘Oh no! Did you see that Quigg? Did you see what that sneaky hedgehog did? I should get compensation. I’ve a good mind to call the deal off, let you fend for yourselves. Why should I bother? I’ll get the *things* anyway. You can’t carry them. I was being friendly, kind, but now... well, it’s a betrayal, a double-cross, treachery, trickery... there should be laws.’

‘Take the food,’ Quigg said. ‘A quarter of the pies, and the liquids.’

‘Done,’ Seedy said and began moving the food pile towards his premises.

Windsor jerked in his sleep, woke himself up, stood and stretched. ‘Well, now that we’ve all had a rest, we’d best be off. I’ll lead the way.’ He put his rucksack back on and set off. ‘Come on Quigg, keep up.’

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The three huddled together in the darkness listening to strange noises coming from the river.

‘We’ll camp here tonight,’ Windsor whispered. ‘In the morning, I think all will be revealed.’

‘I can hear gnawing, chewing, munching and splashing,’ Spike hissed. ‘What do you think it means Mister Quigg n’all?’

‘Whatever it is Spike,’ Quigg concluded, ‘I think we might have found our water thief.’

Furtively, they moved away from the riverbank, through the undergrowth and into the forest where they found a sheltered dingle in a triangle of trees. With years of expedition experience, Quigg erected the tent, lit the lamp, and directed Spike to collect wood for a fire.

Windsor took off his rucksack and said. ‘Whilst you’re making us comfortable Quigg, I’ll go and see if I can find out what’s happening at the river.’

‘Are you sure, my lord? They might be peculiar or something.’

‘Remember, I’ve had training Quigg.’

Quigg scratched his head, then he recalled the half-day course on the subject of camouflage fifteen years previously, which had been run by a travelling chameleon. If his lordship had stayed awake longer than five minutes he might have learnt something.

Spike returned loaded up with wood. 'His lordship should be all right Mister Quigg, the din coming from the river will drown out the clatter he's making n'all. Whoever they are, it sounds as if they're building something.'

'Well done, Spike,' Quigg said as the hedgehog dropped the wood in the middle of the dingle. 'I'm fine here, but I would feel happier if you could keep an eye on his lordship for me. He's not as young as he once was.'

'It'd be my pleasure, Mister Quigg n'all.'

After fifteen minutes, Lord Windsor reappeared followed by Spike.

Quigg had the fire blazing with sausages and Miss Sally's pies sizzling in a pan.

'Something is going on, Quigg that's for sure. Did you here Spike?'

Spike looked nervously back towards the river. 'I did, my lord. Sounds unnatural n'all.'

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They stood on the riverbank looking at the wide curved construction made from trees, branches, and dead leaves. It stretched the whole width of the river and rose from the riverbed like an impenetrable wall. Fingers of morning sunshine poked through the canopy of trees, picking out insects in flight.

'What is it?' Spike asked.

‘Only once have I seen something like this,’ Windsor said. ‘Do you remember Quigg? It was in the early days when we were both young. A dam they called it, but I haven’t seen one since.’

‘Yes, I remember, my lord. It was that expedition to the Teifi in Wales.’

‘What type of animal builds such a bizarre contraption n’all?’ Spike said.

‘I have no idea,’ Lord Windsor said stepping on to the mass of wood. ‘We will have to find out.’ He began walking up and down, banging a stick against the branches and shouting, ‘Excuse me, anyone in? I say, Lord of the realm here. Anyone about?’

Spike climbed on the dam. ‘Seems no one’s at home n’all, but there’s something else, your lordship,’ he said pointing to a stack of branches in the middle of the river. ‘Maybe that’s where they live n’all.’

‘If it is, it will be a problem getting their attention,’ Quigg called from the bank. ‘How will we get over there?’

Windsor examined the structure. ‘Mmm...How strange.’ He squatted and after awhile he said, ‘Of course. That is what we will do.’

Quigg shook his head, knowing all too well that *we* meant *Quigg*.

‘Do you see them Quigg?’

‘See what, my lord?’

‘The leaves and twigs, Quigg. Watch where they go.’

Quigg observed, his heart in his mouth, as debris floated down the river and stopped at the edifice.

‘I would be too heavy, Quigg, and Spike is unsuitable, but you would fit very nicely on a large leaf.’

‘Me, my lord.’

‘Of course you, Quigg. Come along, let us try it.’ He leapt off the dam and strode up the bank towards a bend in the river where they could launch a leaf into the current leading to the wooden structure.

‘Now Quigg,’ Windsor said putting a large leaf in the water and holding onto it. ‘Off with your rucksack, empty your pockets and hop onto this leaf. Once you get there, climb on to the dwelling and start banging a stick to wake them up. I would like one of them to come and talk to me about this monstrosity.’

Quigg stripped off any surplus weight and said, ‘If I don’t come back my lord, it’s been a... pleasure working for you.’ He stepped on the leaf. It seemed to hold his weight. He smiled.

Spike passed him a twig. ‘You’ll need this to get their attention, Mister Quigg n’all.’

‘Excellent,’ Windsor said as he let go of the leaf. ‘Off you go then Quigg, we’ll move back to the dam.’

Quigg realised that in the rush no one had thought about him coming back. Maybe it was a one-way mission, for the greater good, one life sacrificed for the many. He puffed out his chest. If this were to be his final act, he would do his very best.

The leaf came to rest against the structure, which seemed to be larger than it had appeared from the bank. With his heart racing, he clambered up until he reached the top.

‘Come along, Quigg,’ Windsor shouted. ‘You’re not out there to bask in the sun, get their attention.’

‘Well done, Mister Quigg. You made it n’all,’ Spike called.

Standing, he tentatively banged the end of the twig on the top of the structure. It seemed loud to him, but no one appeared.

‘Louder Quigg, louder,’ Windsor said. ‘Bang as loud as you can. Jump up and down, make a racket. Get their attention. You’ll be all right.’

Quigg realised as he jumped, banged and shouted, that his life was probably about to come to an end. What he was doing was the height of stupidity. If he ever got out of here in one piece, he promised himself he would ask Miss Sally to marry him.

‘Hey you,’ a voice boomed from the water.

Quigg stopped making a noise and peered into the water at an animal with small eyes, a large nose and buckteeth. ‘Hello...’ he said.

‘Is there a reason you’re causing a hullabaloo on top of Hickory’s lodge when he’s trying to sleep? He was on the night shift last night you know.’

‘I’m sorry, Sir, but Lord Windsor wishes to discuss the dam with you.’

‘Lord Windsor! What type of animal is that? And what’s to discuss? A dam is a dam, and Hickory builds the best dams on the river.’

‘Yes, Sir. It is a fine dam, but you’ve stolen all our water and the village is dying.’

‘Can’t help that. Beavers build dams. Hickory hears running water and he has to build a dam, no ifs or buts about it.’

‘What’s going on, Quigg?’ Windsor called. ‘Are you talking to someone?’

‘A beaver, my lord, he builds dams.’

‘Well, of course he builds dams, that is why we are here, Quigg. Tell him to come over here, I’d like to talk to him.’

‘A bit uppity this lord windsor animal isn’t he?’

‘He’s a weasel, a lord of the realm called Windsor. I am Quigg his voleservant, and standing with his lordship on the dam is Spike the hedgehog who accompanied us on our expedition.’

‘Expedition you say? Come a long way you say? Well, Hickory had better have a chat with this lordy then, see what he wants.’

‘You couldn’t take me back to dry land could you, Mister Hickory?’ Quigg asked as the beaver turned towards the dam.

‘Just this once, but don’t go thinking Hickory is a mode of transport that you can call on anytime you want to cross the river. Hickory builds dams, the finest dams on the river. If you want a dam, you come to old Hickory, for transport you go elsewhere, understand?’

‘Yes, Mister... Hickory.’ Quigg leapt onto the beaver’s wet head and gripped the sleek fur, as they sped through the water towards the dam.

Once there, Hickory jumped up and lowered his head for Quigg to leap off. ‘Well lordy, what’s this you want to say about my dam? Not complaining I hope, or commenting on the quality, the width, the height, the length, because I’ll have you know Hickory builds the best dams on the river and...’

‘It’s a fine dam,’ Windsor interrupted, ‘but it’s destroying our village. We should all live in harmony on the river. I mean, you wouldn’t like it if another beaver built a dam further up the river so that you had no water to live in would you?’

‘Hickory is the only beaver on this river. This is Hickory’s river, every other beaver knows that, but...’ and he leaned down towards Windsor, ‘...Hickory takes your point. Hickory’s got work to do tonight and he needs his sleep, so let’s cut to the chase. You’re asking Hickory to let some water through his dam so your village isn’t destroyed, is that it?’

‘Exactly?’ Windsor said, ‘Exactly.’

‘It’s against Hickory’s nature you know. The running water will drive him crazy. Couldn’t you simply move?’

‘It’s not just us, but a whole community. It would be easier if you moved.’

‘Ah, Hickory sees what you mean. All right then lordy, Hickory’ll let the water through. Not now, he must get his sleep, but tonight.’

‘Thank you, Hickory,’ Windsor said, ‘Most amenable.’

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‘We’ll be heroes n’all won’t we Mister Quigg?’ Spike said as the three meandered along the riverbank back to the village.

‘We certainly will, Spike,’ Quigg replied.

‘Are you going to go courtin’ n’all with Miss Sally, Mister Quigg.’

Quigg swallowed with difficulty. ‘It would seem to be the sensible thing to do.’

‘Ha,’ Windsor exclaimed. ‘About time, Quigg, about time.’