

The flea and the professor

There was an aëronaut, and things went badly with him. His balloon burst, hurled him out, and went all to pieces. Just two minutes before, the aëronaut had sent his boy down by parachute - wasn't the boy lucky! He wasn't hurt, and he knew enough to be an aëronaut himself, but he had no balloon and no means of getting one.

Live he must, so he took to sleight-of-hand tricks, and to throwing his voice, which is called ventriloquism. He was young and good-looking. When he grew a mustache and wore his best clothes, he might well have been mistaken for the son of a nobleman. Ladies found him handsome and one young lady was so taken by his charm and dexterity that she eloped with him to foreign lands. There he called himself "The Professor" - he could scarcely do less.

He continually thought about how to get himself a balloon and sail through the air with his little wife. But they still lacked the means to do so.

"That will come yet," he said.

"Oh, if only it would," said she.

"We are still young people," he said, "and I'm a Professor."

"Crumbs are also bread!"

She helped him all she could, and sat at the door to sell tickets for his entertainments. In the wintertime this was a chilly sort of pleasure. She also helped him with one of his acts. He would put her into a table drawer - a large table drawer - and she would creep into the back drawer. From in front she was not to be seen, and as far as the audience was concerned she was invisible. But one evening, when he pulled out the drawer she was invisible to him too. She was not in the front drawer, not in the back one, and not in the whole house. She was nowhere to be seen or heard, and that was her contribution to the entertainment.

She never came back. She was tired of it all, and he became tired of it too. He lost his good humor and could not laugh or make jokes, so people stopped coming to see him. His earnings fell off and his clothes wore out, until at last all that he had was a large flea, an heirloom from his wife; that's why he liked it so well. He trained the flea and taught it to perform - to present arms, and to fire off a cannon. Of course it was a very small cannon.

The Professor was proud of the flea, and the flea was proud of himself. He had learned a thing or two, and had human blood in him. He had been to the largest cities. Princes and Princesses had seen him and given him high praise, which was printed in the newspapers and on the billposters. He knew he was a famous flea who could support a Professor, yes, a whole household.

Proud he was and famous he was. Yet when he and the Professor traveled they went by fourth-class railway carriages, which took them along just as quickly as those of the first-class. They made a secret pledge to each other that they would never separate. Neither of them would marry. The flea would remain a bachelor and the Professor a widower. That made them even.

"Where one has the best luck," said the Professor, "one ought not to go back a second time." He was a student of human nature, which is a science in itself. At length he had traveled through all countries except the savage ones, and to those he decided to go. There they eat Christian men. The Professor knew this, but then he was not much of a Christian, and the flea was not much of a man, so he thought they might venture successfully into the wilds, and make a lot of money.

They traveled by steamship and they traveled by sailboat. The flea performed his trick along the way in exchange for free passage, and thus they came to the country of savages. Here a little Princess ruled the land. She was only eight years old, but she ruled just the same. She had taken away the power from her papa and mamma, for she had a will of her own and was uncommonly beautiful, and uncommonly rude.

As soon as the flea presented arms and fired off his cannon, she took such a fancy to him that she cried, "Him or nobody!" She fell madly in love with the flea, and she was already a madcap in all other respects.

"My sweet, level-headed little child - " her papa said, "if only there were some way to make a man of him."

"Leave that to me, old fellow," said she, which was no way for a little Princess to talk to her papa, but then she was a savage. She set the flea on her fair hand:

"Now you are a man, ruling with me, but you must do what I want you to do, or I shall kill you and eat the Professor."

The Professor had a large room to live in, with walls

made of sugar cane. He could have licked them, but he didn't care for sweets. He had a hammock to sleep in, and that reminded him of being in a balloon, where he had always wanted to be. He thought of this continually.

The flea lived with the Princess. He sat upon her delicate hand or on her fair neck. She had taken a hair from her head and made the Professor fasten it to the flea's leg, and kept it tied to the big red coral pendant which hung from the tip of her ear. What a delightful time the Princess did have, and the flea too, she thought.

The Professor was not so delighted. He was a traveler, who liked to ride from town to town, and to read in the newspapers about how persevering and ingenious he had been to teach the flea tricks of human behavior. Day in and day out he lay lazily in his hammock. He ate good food: fresh bird's eggs, elephant eyes, and fried giraffe legs. Cannibals do not live entirely on human flesh. No, that is a special delicacy!

"Shoulder of child with pepper sauce," said the Princess's mamma, "is the most delicate."

The Professor was bored with it all, and preferred to leave this savage land, but his flea he must take with him, for it was his wonder and his bread and butter. How could he catch it? How could he get hold of it? This was not an easy thing to do. He racked his wits, and at last he declared:

"Now I have it! Papa of the Princess, give me something to do. Let me teach your people to present themselves before Your Royal Highness. This is what is known as culture in the great and powerful nations of the earth."

"Can I learn to do that too?" the Princess's papa asked.

"It's not quite proper," the Professor told him, "but I shall teach your Savage Papaship to fire off a cannon. It goes off with a bang. One sits high in the air, and then off it goes or down you come."

"Let me bang it off," the Princess's papa begged. But in all the land there was no cannon, except the one the flea had brought with him - and that was so tiny.

"I shall cast a bigger one," said the Professor. "Just give me the means to do so. I must have fine silk cloth, a needle and thread, and rope and cordage, besides stomach drops for the balloon. Stomach drops blow a person up so easily and give one the heaves. They are what make the report in the cannon's stomach."

"By all means." The Princess's papa gave him everything that he asked. The whole court, and all the

populace gathered together to see the casting of the big cannon. The Professor did not call them until he had the balloon all ready to be filled and to go up. The flea sat there upon the Princess's hand, and looked on as the balloon was filled. It swelled out and became so violent that they could scarcely hold it down.

"I must take it up in the air to cool it off," said the Professor who took his seat in the basket that hung underneath.

"But - I cannot steer it alone, I must have a trained companion to help me. There is no one here who can do that except the flea." - "I am not at all willing to permit it," said the Princess, but she held out her hand and gave the flea to the Professor, who placed it on his wrist.

"Let go the lines and ropes!" he shouted. "Now the balloon is going up." They thought he said "the cannon." So the balloon went higher and higher, up above the clouds and far away from that savage land.

The little Princess, her family, and all of her subjects sat and waited. They are waiting there still, and if you don't believe this, just you take a journey to the country of savages. Every child there is talking about the Professor and the flea, whom they expect back as soon as the cannon cools off.

But they won't be back. They are at home here with us. They are in their native land. They travel by rail, first-class, not fourth. For they have a great success, an enormous balloon. Nobody asks them how they got their balloon, or where it came from. They are wealthy folk now - oh, most respectable folk - the flea and the Professor.

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