

TOLD BY THE COLONEL

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TOLD BY THE COLONEL.

AN ORNITHOLOGICAL ROMANCE.

Four Americans were sitting in the smoking-room of a Paris hotel. One of them was a grizzled, middle-aged man, who sat silent and apart from the others and consumed his heavy black cigar with a somewhat gloomy air. The other three were briskly talking. They had been three days in Paris, and had visited the Moulin Rouge, the tomb of Napoleon, and the sewers, and naturally felt that they were thoroughly acquainted with the French capital, the French government, and the French people. They were unanimously of the opinion that Paris was in all things fifty years behind the age, and at least sixty behind Chicago. There was nothing fit to eat, drink, or smoke in Paris. The French railway carriages were wretched and afforded no facilities for burning travellers in case of an accident. The morals of French society—as studied at the Moulin Rouge—were utterly corrupt, owing possibly to that absence of free trade in wives and husbands which a liberal system of divorce permits. The French people did not understand English, which was alone sufficient to prove them unfit for self-government, and their preference for heavy five-

franc pieces when they might have adopted soft and greasy dollar bills showed their incurable lack of cleanliness.

Suddenly the silent man touched the bell and summoned a waiter.

“Waiter,” he said, as that functionary entered the room, “bring me an owl.”

“If you please, sir?” suggested the waiter, timidly.

“I said, bring me an owl! If you pretend to talk English you ought to understand that.”

“Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. How would you please to have the nowl?”

“Never you mind. You go and bring me an owl, and don’t be too long about it.”

The waiter was gone some little time, and, then returning, said, “I am very sorry, sir, but we cannot give you a nowl to-night. The barkeeper is out of one of the materials for making nowls. But I can bring you a very nice cocktail.”

“Never mind,” replied the American. “That’ll do. You can go now.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said one of the three anatomizers of the French people, speaking with that air of addressing a vast popular assemblage which is so characteristic of dignified American conversationalists. “Would you do me the favor to tell me and these gentlemen why you ordered an owl?”

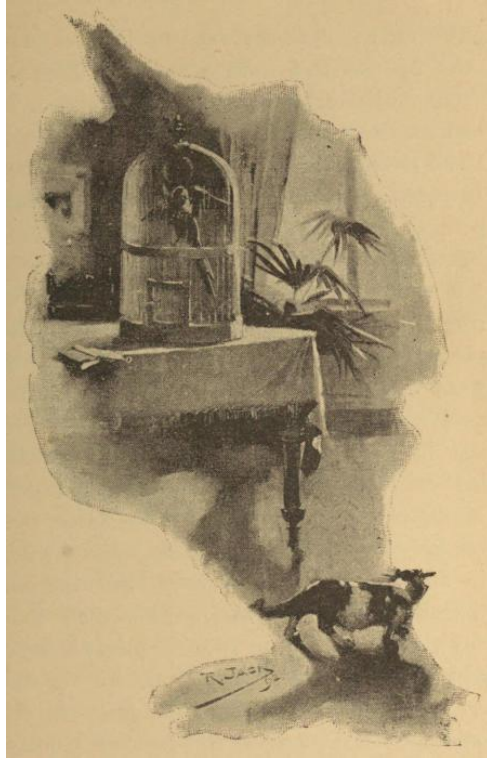
“I don’t mind telling you,” was the answer, “but I can’t very well do it without telling you a story first.”

“All right, Colonel. Give us the story, by all means.”

The elderly American leaned back in his chair searching for inspiration with his gaze fixed on the chandelier. He rolled his cigar lightly from one corner of his mouth to the other and back again, and presently began:

“A parrot, gentlemen, is the meanest of all creation. People who are acquainted with parrots, and I don’t know that you are, generally admit that there is nothing that can make a parrot ashamed of himself. Now this is a mistake, for I’ve seen a parrot made ashamed of himself, and he was the most conceited parrot that was ever seen outside of Congress. It happened in this way.

“I came home one day and found a parrot in the house. My daughter Mamie had bought him from a sailor who was tramping through the town. Said he had been shipwrecked, and he and the parrot were the only persons saved. He had made up his mind never to part with that bird, but he was so anxious to get to the town where his mother lived that he would sell him for a dollar. So Mamie she buys him, and hangs him up in the parlor and waits for him to talk.



"ASKING THE CAT IF HE HAD EVER SEEN A MOUSE."

"It turned out that the parrot couldn't talk anything but Spanish, and very little of that. And he wouldn't learn a word of English, though my daughter worked over him as if he had been a whole Sunday-school. But one day he all at once began to teach himself English. Invented a sort of Ollendorff way of studying, perhaps because he had heard Mamie studying French that way. He'd begin by saying, 'Does Polly want a cracker?' and then he'd go on and ring the changes. For

example, just to give you an idea of the system, he'd say, 'Does Polly want the lead cracker of the plumber or the gold cracker of the candlestick maker?' and then he'd answer, 'No, Polly does not want the lead cracker of the plumber nor the gold cracker of the candlestick maker, but the large steel cracker of the blacksmith.' He used to study in this way three hours every morning and three every afternoon, and never stop for Sundays, being, as I suppose, a Roman Catholic, and not a Sabbath-keeping bird. I never saw a bird so bent on learning a language as this one was, and he fetched it. In three months' time that parrot could talk English as well as you or I, and a blamed sight better than that waiter who pretends that he talks English. The trouble was the parrot would talk all the time when he was not asleep. My wife is no slouch at talking, but I've seen her burst into tears and say, 'It's no use, I can't get in a word edgewise.' And no more could she. That bird was just talking us deaf, dumb, and blind. The cat, he gave it up at an early stage of the proceedings. The parrot was so personal in his remarks—asking the cat if he had ever seen a mouse in his whole life, and wanting to know who it was that helped him to paint the back fence red the other night, till the cat, after cursing till all was blue, went out of the house and never showed up again. He hadn't the slightest regard for anybody's feelings, that bird hadn't. No parrot ever has.

“He wasn't content with talking three-fourths of the time, but he had a habit of thinking out loud which was far worse than his conversation. For instance, when young Jones called of an evening on my daughter, the parrot would say, 'Well, I suppose that young idiot will stay till midnight, and keep the whole house awake as usual.' Or when the Unitarian minister came to

see my wife the parrot would just as likely as not remark, 'Why don't he hire a hall if he must preach, instead of coming here and wearing out the furniture?' Nobody would believe that the parrot made these remarks of his own accord, but insisted that we must have taught them to him. Naturally, folks didn't like this sort of thing, and after a while hardly anybody came inside our front door.

"And then that bird developed a habit of bragging that was simply disgusting. He would sit up by the hour and brag about his superiority to other birds, and the beauty of his feathers, and his cage, and the gorgeousness of the parlor, and the general meanness of everything except himself and his possessions. He made me so tired that I sometimes wished I were deaf. You see, it was the infernal ignorance of the bird that aggravated me. He didn't know a thing of the world outside of our parlor; and yet he'd brag and brag till you couldn't rest.



“THE PARROT BEGAN BY TRYING TO DAZZLE THE OWL WITH HIS CONVERSATION, BUT IT WOULDN’T WORK.”

“You may ask why didn’t we kill him, or sell him, or give him to the missionaries, or something of that sort. Well, Mamie, she said it would be the next thing to murder if we were to wring his neck; and that selling him would be about the same as the slave-trade. She wouldn’t let me take the first step toward getting rid of the parrot, and the prospect was that he’d drive us clean out of the house.

“One day a man who had had considerable experience of parrots happened to come in, and when I complained of the bird he said, ‘Why don’t you get an owl? You get an owl and hang him up close to that parrot’s cage, and in about two days you’ll find that your bird’s dead sick of unprofitable conversation.’

“Well, I got a small owl and put him in a cage close to the parrot’s cage. The parrot began by trying to dazzle the owl with his conversation, but it wouldn’t work. The owl sat and looked at the parrot just as solemn as a minister whose salary has been cut down, and after a while the parrot tried him with Spanish. It wasn’t of any use. Not a word would the owl let on to understand. Then the parrot tried bragging, and laid himself out to make the owl believe that of all the parrots in existence he was the ablest. But he couldn’t turn a feather of the owl. That noble bird sat silent as the grave, and looked at the parrot as if to say, ‘This is indeed a melancholy exhibition of imbecility!’ Well, before night that parrot was so ashamed of himself that he closed for repairs, and from that day forth he never spoke an unnecessary word. Such, gentlemen, is the influence of example even on the worst of birds.”

The American lit a fresh cigar, and pulling his hat over his eyes, fell into profound meditation. His three auditors made no comment on his story, and did not repeat the inquiry why he had asked the waiter for an owl. They smoked in silence for some moments, and then one of them invited the other two to step over to Henry’s and take something—an invitation which they promptly accepted, and the smoking-room knew them no more that night.



JEWSEPPY.

“Yes, sir!” said the Colonel. “Being an American, I’m naturally in favor of elevating the oppressed and down-trodden, provided, of course, they live in other countries. All Americans are in favor of Home Rule for Ireland, because it would elevate the Irish masses and keep them at home; but if I were living in Ireland, perhaps I might prefer elevating Russian Jews or Bulgarian Christians. You see, the trouble with elevating the oppressed at home is that the moment you get them elevated they begin to oppress you. There is no better fellow in the world than the Irishman, so long as you govern him; but when he undertakes to govern you it’s time to look out for daybreak to westward. You see, we’ve been there and know all about it.

“Did I ever tell you about Jewseppy? He was an organ-grinder, and, take him by and large, he was the best organ-grinder I ever met. He could throw an amount of expression into ‘Annie Rooney,’ or, it might be, ‘The Old Folks at Home,’ that would make the strongest men weep and heave anything at him that they could lay their hands to. He wasn’t a Jew, as you might suppose from his name, but only an Italian—‘Jewseppy’ being what the Italians would probably call a Christian name if they were Christians. I knew him when I lived in Oshkosh, some twenty years ago. My daughter, who had studied Italian, used

to talk to him in his native language; that is, she would ask him if he was cold, or hungry, or ashamed, or sleepy, as the books direct, but as he never answered in the way laid down in the books, my daughter couldn't understand a word he said, and so the conversation would begin to flag. I used to talk to him in English, which he could speak middling well, and I found him cranky, but intelligent.

“He was a little, wizened, half-starved-looking man, and if he had only worn shabby black clothes, you would have taken him for a millionaire's confidential clerk, he was so miserable in appearance. He had two crazes—one was for monkeys, who were, he said, precisely like men, only they had four hands and tails, which they could use as lassoes, all of which were in the nature of modern improvements, and showed that they were an advance on the original pattern of men. His other craze was his sympathy for the oppressed. He wanted to liberate everybody, including convicts, and have every one made rich by law and allowed to do anything he might want to do. He was what you would call an Anarchist to-day, only he didn't believe in disseminating his views by dynamite.



“SHE WOULD ASK HIM IF HE WAS COLD OR HUNGRY.”

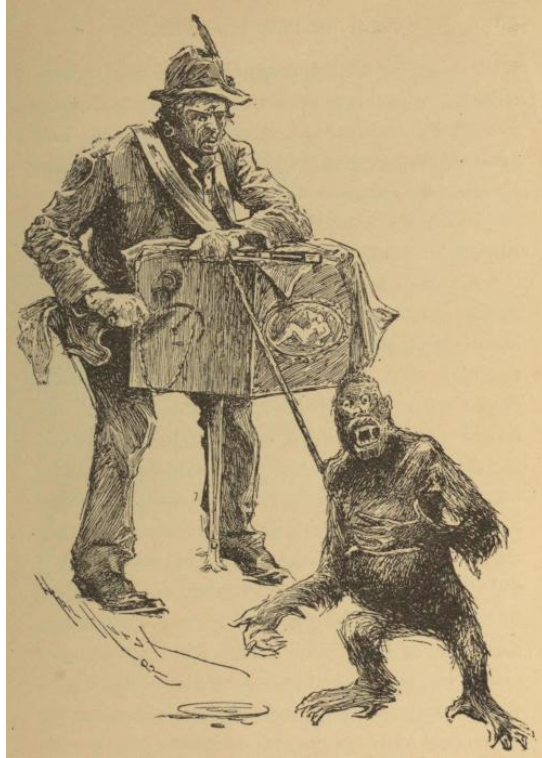
“He had a monkey that died of consumption, and the way that Jewseppy grieved for the monkey would have touched the heart of an old-fashioned Calvinist, let alone a heart of ordinary stone. For nearly a month he wandered around without his organ, occasionally doing odd jobs of work, which made most people think that he was going out of his mind. But one day a menagerie came to town, and in the menagerie was what the show-bill called a gorilla. It wasn't a genuine gorilla, as

Professor Amariah G. Twitchell, of our university, proved after the menagerie men had refused to give him and his family free tickets. However, it was an animal to that effect, and it would probably have made a great success, for our public, though critical, is quick to recognize real merit, if it wasn't that the beast was very sick. This was Jewseppy's chance, and he went for it as if he had been a born speculator. He offered to buy the gorilla for two dollars, and the menagerie men, thinking the animal was as good as dead, were glad to get rid of it, and calculated that Jewseppy would never get the worth of the smallest fraction of his two dollars. There is where they got left, for Jewseppy knew more about monkeys than any man living, and could cure any sick monkey that called him in, provided, of course, the disease was one which medical science could collar. In the course of a month he got the gorilla thoroughly repaired, and was giving him lessons in the theory and practice of organ-grinding.

"The gorilla didn't take to the work kindly, which, Jewseppy said, was only another proof of his grand intellect, but Jewseppy trained him so well that it was not long before he could take the animal with him when he went out with the organ, and have him pass the plate. The gorilla always had a line round his waist, and Jewseppy held the end of it, and sort of telegraphed to him through it when he wanted him to come back to the organ. Then, too, he had a big whip, and he had to use it on the gorilla pretty often. Occasionally he had to knock the animal over the head with the butt end of the whip-handle, especially when he was playing something on the organ that the gorilla didn't like, such as 'Marching through Georgia,' for instance. The gorilla was a great success as a plate-passer, for

all the men were anxious to see the animal, and all the women were afraid not to give something when the beast put the plate under their noses. You see, he was as strong as two or three men, and his arms were as long as the whole of his body, not to mention that his face was a deep blue, all of which helped to make him the most persuasive beast that ever took up a collection.

“Jewseppy had so much to say to me about the gorilla’s wonderful intelligence that he made me tired, and one day I asked him if he thought it was consistent with his principles to keep the animal in slavery. ‘You say he is all the same as a man,’ said I. ‘Then why don’t you give him a show? You keep him oppressed and down-trodden the whole time. Why don’t you let him grind the organ for a while, and take up the collection yourself? Turn about is fair play, and I can’t see why the gorilla shouldn’t have his turn at the easy end of the business.’ The idea seemed to strike Jewseppy where he lived. He was a consistent idiot. I’ll give him credit for that. He wasn’t ready to throw over his theories every time he found they didn’t pay. Now that I had pointed out to him his duty toward the gorilla, he was disposed to do it.



“THE GORILLA WAS A GREAT SUCCESS.”

“You see, he reasoned that while it would only be doing justice to the beast to change places with him, it would probably increase the receipts. When a man can do his duty and make money by it his path is middling plain; and after Jewseppy had thought it over he saw that he must do justice to the gorilla without delay.

“It didn’t take the beast long to learn the higher branches of hand-organing.

“He saw the advantages of putting the money in his own pocket instead of collecting it and handing it over to Jewseppy, and he grasped the idea that when he was pushing the little cart that carried the organ and turning the handle, he was holding a much better place in the community than when he was dancing and begging at the end of a rope. I thought, a day or two after I had talked to Jewseppy, that there was considerable uproar in town, but I didn’t investigate it until toward evening, when there seemed to be a sort of riot or temperance meeting, or something of the kind, in front of my house, and I went out to see about it. There were nearly two thousand people there watching Jewseppy and his gorilla, or rather the gorilla and his Jewseppy. The little man had been elevating the oppressed with great success. A long rope was tied around his waist, and he was trotting around among the people, taking up the collection and dancing between times.

“The gorilla was wearing Jewseppy’s coat, and was grinding away at the organ with one hand and holding Jewseppy’s rope with the other. Every few minutes he would haul in the rope, hand over hand, empty all the money out of Jewseppy’s pocket, and start him out again. If the man stopped to speak to anybody for a moment the gorilla would haul him in and give him a taste of the whip, and if he didn’t collect enough money to suit the gorilla’s idea, the animal would hold him out at arm’s length with one hand and lay into him with the other till the crowd were driven wild with delight. Nothing could induce them to think that Jewseppy was in earnest when he begged them to protect him. They supposed it was all a part of the play, and the more he implored them to set him free, the more they laughed and said that ‘thish yer Eytalian was a bang-up actor.’

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