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If
I WERE
You

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

IF I WERE YOU

FITTINGLY, it was a dark and blustery night when the Professor died. The summer storm had come yelling in from a scorching afternoon to tear at canvas and yank out stakes and stab bright fury at the big top. The rain bucketed down with a shock of coldness and then settled to a ceaseless cannonading which, after seven hours, had turned the lot into a swamp so tenacious that not even the rubber mules could budge the wagons. Banners wept from their staffs; lot lice shivered in scant cover; somewhere a big cat, excited by the tropical aspect of the storm, moaned and paced in his cage.

And although a waxen yellowness was already upon his face and his skin was falling away from his bones, the Professor managed an evil smile. He was waiting, hanging on and waiting. For he had sent half an hour since for Little Tom Little, king of the midgets. And as he waited, his thoughts roamed over the past, the better to savor what he was about to do.

The Professor was the gypsy camp's bird of bad omen. Whence he had come, no man knew, but with him had come a chain of disaster. Tall and bony, he had always been more a cadaver than a man; his scummed eyes hid behind thick, dark lids; his hands seemed always ready to throttle a victim;

his black hair was matted about his face, just as his clothes were matted about his form.

He had come as a mitt reader. Mrs. Johnson had not wanted to take him but, boss of the show though she was, she had not been able to refuse him. Hermann Schmidt, ringmaster and governor de facto, powerful figure though he was, had been unable to resist the eerie command of those eyes. And the man had become “The Professor” to the gypsy camp, and Yogi Matto to the chumps.

There had been uneasy speculation about him for weeks, for the breaks had been many—and all bad. But men were afraid of him and said nothing. As though finding flavor in his tidings, he had accurately forecast each and every disaster, even to this storm which had kept the crowds away tonight. And, weirdly, he had forecast, again with relish, his own death.

Some had said he was a Russian, but then a Hindu had come out of the crowd and the two had spoken in the Hindu’s tongue. And when they had dubbed him as being from India, they found that he spoke Chinese and Turkish as well. A razorback had once seen the insides of his trunks and had pronounced their heaviness occasioned by fully a hundred books of ancient aspect, filled with mysterious signs and incantations.

That the Professor did possess some remarkable power was apparent to all. For no matter how much anger might be vented against him for driving clients into hysteria with his evil forebodings of their future and thus hurting the show, no man had ever been able to approach those eyes.

No man, that is, but Little Tom Little.

Just how this was, even the Professor could not tell. But from the first, Little Tom Little, an ace at the heartless art of mimicry, had found humor in the Professor and had won laughter by mocking him. The matter had developed into nearly an open feud, but Little Tom Little, inwardly caring desperately what the world thought of him, but outwardly a swaggering satirist, had continued merrily.

The mockery always went well with the crowd, just as the Professor did not. Little Tom Little, in the sideshow, would get the crowd after the Professor was done and, very cunningly, would tell their fortunes in a doleful voice which made the tent billow from the resulting laughter. These crowds, sensing evil, had not liked to believe what the Professor had said.

And the gypsy camp had laughed with Little Tom Little, even though no man but he dared to affront the Professor.

The Professor had not forgotten his powerlessness to turn aside those quips. He had not forgotten that a man just thirty inches tall had held him up to ridicule for months. He had said nothing.

But he was dying now. And he was glad to die, secure as he was in a knowledge of the glories which awaited him elsewhere. In dying he would find himself at last. But he could not forget Little Tom Little. No! He would remember Little Tom Little with a legacy. He had already made out the paper.

Someone was coming up the aisle of the car, and then the doorknob rattled and Little Tom Little entered the stateroom. Water ran from his tiny poncho as he took it off.

The Professor moved a little on his pillow so that he could see his visitor, whose head was just above the height of the bunk.

Little Tom Little's handsome self, usually so gay, was now steeped in seriousness. He felt that he ought to feel highly sympathetic, and yet he could not understand exactly why, out of the whole crew, he had been sent for at this moment—for the physician outside had told him that the Professor could not last long. He was repelled, as always, by those filmed eyes, for Little Tom was not a brave man, for all his front. He waited for the Professor to speak.

"You are wondering," said the Professor, "why I have sent for you." His voice was very low and Little Tom had to put his ear close to the evil-smelling lips. "In your mind," said the Professor, "you are turning over the reasons for this. I must put you at ease, for I have always respected you."

Little Tom was startled.

"Yes," said the Professor, "I have seen much to admire in you. On the lot about me, men are afraid. They spread away from me when I approach. But you . . . you were brave, Tom Little. You did not cower away. You had steel enough in you not only to meet me and speak to me, but you also had courage enough to risk my wrath—a thing which all other men feared."

Little Tom had not considered that his mockery required so much nerve.

"It was not courage," he protested, trying to say something decent to a dying man. "You just imagined—"

"No, I did not imagine. Men slink from me for a peculiar

reason, Little Tom. They slink from me because I impel them. Yes, that is the truth. I force them away. I want nothing to do with men, for I loathe all mankind. I impelled them, Little Tom Little. Long before now you must have realized that I command strange and subtle arts beyond the understanding of these foolish and material slaves of their own desires.”

Whatever Little Tom Little had expected to hear from a dying man, this certainly was far from it. In common with everyone, he had suspected these things, but he had been urged to derision instead of terror, not through understanding, but by nature.

“By such command,” continued the Professor, “I am now able to leave this world for one far better, knowing exactly where I am going. But behind me I shall leave a little more than a corpse. I have a few things here—”

“Oh, you’re not going to die!” said Little Tom Little.

“If I believed that, I should be very sad,” replied the Professor. “But to return to why I brought you here; you must know that I was unable to make any impression upon you.”

“Well . . . I never felt any.”

“That is it,” said the Professor. “I cannot touch you. And that means that you have it subconsciously in your power to handle and control all phases of the black arts.”

“Me?”

“You. And I appreciate this. I respect you for it. I have a generous heart, Little Tom, for I am a learned man and can understand all things. Behind me I shall leave my books. They are ancient and rare, and most of them in mystic languages. But I have translated many of the passages into English.

These volumes contain the black lore of the ancient peoples of the East. Only a few men have any notion whatever of the depths of such wisdom, of the power to be gained through its use. And you, Little Tom, are to be my heir. The paper here is witnessed. I give it to you.”

Little Tom took the sheet and glanced wonderingly from it to the Professor.

“You did not believe I was truly your friend,” said the Professor. “Now, what greater proof is there than this legacy so freely given? Does that prove my good regard, Little Tom?”

“Why . . . yes. Sure.”

“When I am dead, then, add my trunks to your own baggage. Study my volumes well. Can I give you any greater gift than wisdom?”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say. This . . . this is so much—”

“Do not mention it, please. It is a little thing, for I shall need them no longer. Now go, for in the few minutes which remain to me I wish to concentrate all my powers upon the world which lies awaiting me.”

Little Tom was still so astonished that he stumbled going to the door. Somehow he got into his poncho and fumbled up the aisle. After a little he found he still gripped the paper in his minute hand and put it away. He was upset to such an extent that he went down the train, not remembering to get off and seek his own car.

And so it was that he opened the door to Hermann Schmidt’s private car and was halfway down it before he realized where he was. And then it was too late!



*“You did not believe I was truly your friend,” said the Professor.
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Hermann Schmidt, as ringmaster and tacit governor of Johnson's Super Shows, was known to have the temper of a Prussian drill sergeant and, as a near giant, could afford to give it vent. He was sitting at a writing table, checking piles of currency into a capacious tin box. So pleasant did the task appear that not until the door—held for a time by the hydraulic shock absorber—closed did he realize that his *sanctum sanctorum* had been invaded.

Schmidt whirled like a bull suddenly stabbed from behind and came half to his feet, gripping the chair as though about to hurl it. But he looked in vain for a moment, for he instinctively searched a level about two feet over Little Tom's head, where a normal man's face would have been. And then he saw Little Tom who, in this crisis, was paralyzed by the ringmaster's terrible wrath, which seemed all out of proportion to so small a crime.

With a hair-singeing oath in German, Schmidt expressed both relief and rage. He lunged forward and grabbed Little Tom by the front of his poncho, lifting him bodily three feet off the floor as he might a sawdust doll.

"So! You are spying!"

And Little Tom was shaken so violently that he could not have answered even if Schmidt's grip and the resulting strain on the poncho were not choking him. Little Tom, even in this instant of terror, could not comprehend why Schmidt should be so mad.

"You think this is a runway! You come in! Maybe you think you own the show? Maybe you just bought it! Maybe Mrs. Johnson just to you gave it! A lesson you need, you tenth of a human being!"

And as though he was putting out a cat, he rushed to the vestibule, Little Tom dangling high, and with a final, ferocious shake, lifted him over the edge and let him fall the eight feet down into the mud.

Little Tom was stunned. He could hear Schmidt's voice, far away, bidding him to let himself be taught so to walk around the next time he came to this car.

Dimly he saw Schmidt up on the car platform, much as a drowning sailor might have seen the Colossus of Rhodes. Little Tom dazedly pried himself out of the mud. His shoulder was full of lightning and he could barely support even his meager weight upon his twisted ankle. In him a rage was kindled, to run along like a dot of fire eating the length of a fuse. A fuse which was to burn for weeks ere it reached the dynamite.

"If I have to be a midget another minute," cried Little Tom Little, "I'll—I'll use a stretcher on myself!"

And indeed he sounded very desperate, sitting there on his stage in the heat of the newly deserted tent. Somewhere at hand the circus band was oompahing in preparation for the entrance of Gordon—"the wuruld's gr-r-r-atest wil' animal trainah who performs the suicidal feat of putting through their paces ta-wenty ferocious tigahs from Bengal and ta-wenty man-eating lions, all at one and the same time. Ladees and gennulmun—"

Little Tom Little winced as the faraway spiel reached him. How he hated cats!

Maizie was putting away their paraphernalia and looking

sad. Only an inch taller than Little Tom Little, she felt that his recriminations against his own lot somehow damned hers. And then, too, he was handsome and he had wit, and tiny though he was, there existed no better showman in the gypsy camp than himself.

“I’m sick of it!” said Little Tom with even greater emphasis.

“But why?” said Maizie, shutting down the lid of the small trunk and making things ready for the next act. “You’re a genius, Tommy. Of all the sideshows, yours and mine draws best. You know how to keep them—”

“Keep them!” shouted Tommy, leaping up to all his thirty inches of height. “Who wants to keep them? Who wants to stand up here day after day with them packed up against this stage, rubbering and giggling and sweating and saying, ‘Ain’t he cute, Joe?’ ‘Ain’t she the dearest thing, Martha?’ Why do they like us? I’ll tell you why. Because we’re freaks! It isn’t because we’re good. It isn’t because I give them a show. I’m a freak, see? *A freak!*”

The outburst subsided and he sank back into the small chair. Some of the other attractions glanced toward him from their remote platforms. Maizie patted his shoulder consolingly.

“Tommy, it’s better to be the best midget star in the world than a failure as a big person.”

“It’s not! I’d rather dig ditches, if I could stand up and look my fellow man in the eye instead of examining his shins!”

“But, Tommy, that’s senseless! No matter how hard you wish it, it will never come true. You’re a midget and a very handsome one, and you’re an artist—”