

A Scientific Education

“Everybody, listen to me! We all need to jump off the roof before teatime! Please get a move on, Emmaline!” shouted the man at the bottom of the ladder. He had an American accent, a shock of wild gray hair and seemed to be some kind of escaped lunatic.

It was a windy, late-autumn morning. Fallen leaves swirled around the naked trees. Men lost their hats and chased them down the street, cursing. Small children were knocked over and cried for their mothers. Women in bulky, old-fashioned skirts stayed inside for decency’s sake.

At Mad Mrs. Butterworth’s house, three youngsters clambered up onto the roof. Mrs. Butterworth was a widow. Her husband had been an army officer. He had fallen off a camel, fatally, in India, or Afghanistan, or somewhere. Everyone in the village knew that. So everyone expected her to be respectable, sensible and a bit snooty. But Mrs. Butterworth wasn’t any of those things. She was short and stout, and collected nettles and leaves and roots to make strange cakes and pies and other things that didn’t bear thinking about. She had a tall, silent man in Indian dress as her butler. She had a niece who wanted to fly. She paid a lad from the village twice what an errand boy should earn to do odd jobs around the place. And now she had an American, an inventor, living at the house as well, teaching the niece and the errand boy and another girl—a

foreign-looking lass with a wild expression on her face. The lessons all seemed odd, too. It wasn't right. At least, everyone in the village said so.

The three youngsters stood on the sloping tiles of the roof. They all had wings attached to their arms, like bats. The one at the end was flapping them. Below, in the overgrown garden, their tutor blew a whistle. All three figures ran forward and plunged off the edge of the roof. Two of them immediately dropped into the bushes beneath. The one in the middle managed to glide forward as a gust of wind caught under the wings, then slipped into a shallow dive and gently wafted fifty feet onto a patch of wet earth.

The whistle sounded again. There was a burst of gleeful laughter from the garden, several voices tittering and guffawing and generally ha-ha-ha-ing. A small dog ran about, yipping playfully.

If anyone had been watching, it would have just proved what everyone thought.



“And that, my young friends, is why a human being cannot fly like a bird. The arms simply cannot carry enough wing area to attain and continue flight. Furthermore, human muscles are not designed to flap in the avian fashion.”

It was the man with wild gray hair speaking. He had a slow, drawling intonation to his voice and tugged on the tip of his small, pointed beard. He carried a bale of straw into the barn as he talked. The youngsters also carried bales; one of them, a tall and rather gawky girl of fourteen, had straw in her mousy brown hair and mud on her knees. Still, it was better to get straw in your hair than to fall on the hard ground. The girl was glad she had suggested putting the bales out as a soft place to land because their tutor had not thought of it.

“Yes, Professor Bellbuckle, we already knew that,” she

replied. "It was fun, of course, but it has long been established that the area of wing surface needed to—"

"Ha! Emma-line Cay-lee!" interrupted the girl behind her. "You so serious about things! Jump off roof with wings-a-flappy! Excellent! Not break no legs, neither. What a hooty-hoot! Trikk!"

This girl was shorter, with fierce dark eyes, black hair splayed in all directions (also with a certain amount of straw in it) and an air of wild excitement. Her accent was clearly "foreign," and her use of the English language was, well, different.

"What I mean to say, Purnah, is that there is no scientific value in disproving a theory that everyone already knows to be wrong." The taller girl spoke seriously because these things mattered to her.

"Ha! Porok! You might knows it! I doesn't know it! I considers myself much educated by fine Professor Bellbuckle this day. I be happy to jump off roof every day to get my lessons! And don't call me Purnah, you commoner, you! Is 'Princess Purnah.' Lucky you my friend. In my country, get strangled for rudeness! Glekk!"

Her Majesty made the actions that indicate execution by strangling. She grabbed herself by the throat, wiggled her head about and stuck out her tongue.

"I do wish you wouldn't do that," said Emmaline. "It's very ... um ... well, don't do it!"

"That were champion, that were!" said the small boy following behind. "Do all princesses pull faces like that?"

"In Chiligrit, stranglings is everyday-goings-on. Also other murderings, and kidnappings and daily thievings of sheep and goats. I miss it very much."

"Time for tea!" called out Aunt Lucy—which is what Emmaline called Mad Mrs. Butterworth, being her niece—

from the kitchen doorway. It was the left-hand kitchen, because the house had two, and you never knew where your next meal was coming from. “I’ve made a nice cake from dandelions and slugs, but not so many slugs as last time, when you didn’t eat it.”

Emmaline still didn’t feel like eating a cake made with any slugs at all, though Princess Purnah was willing to give it a taste. The small boy dived in and crammed his rosy red cheeks. His name was Robert Burns—after the poet—but he was generally known in the village as Rubberbones. He’d received this nickname for a very simple reason: you couldn’t hurt him. You couldn’t hurt him by knocking him off a wall, or throwing him down a flight of stairs, or tripping him up on ice, or throwing bricks at him. Ever since he was a little lad the village boys had known that there was something strange about “Rab,” as he was also called. He was quite tiny at that time, though he’d grown rather gangly in the past few months, but his indestructible body and ferocious enthusiasm meant that he was a hero in all the playground games and street scuffles. He’d take on grown men at football—big men who worked in the fields and mills—and run around them as they tried to kick his feet away.

And he could fly, which was another story entirely. But right now he was doing something astounding in its own right. He was enjoying Aunt Lucy’s cooking.

Emmaline tried not to gag.

Princess Purnah announced that eating slugs was against her religion. She was not exactly firm in following the rules of her faith on a day-to-day basis—and nobody else knew much about the strange old tribal religion of Chiligrít—but she knew about eating slugs. Hlunchee, the God of Eating, had forbidden it. He was dead set against slugs.

“God of Eatings say ‘No eat sliming things, is horrid abominations.’ He say—he say eat more chocolate!”

Emmaline thought this was probably not true at all. But she wished she could claim that her religion was against eating slugs. The old vicar had never mentioned it at all, and Aunt Lucy clearly took his silence on the matter as a “yes.” Apparently it had never occurred to him to throw in a quick “no slugs in the afternoon teacakes” reference in any of his sermons. Pity, really.

The dog, whose name was Stanley, was eager to take Emmaline’s leftovers, essentially the whole plate. Stanley belonged to the old vicar, who had left him behind while he was visiting his sister. He—the dog, not the old vicar—was small and brown and active, and had no reservations about Aunt Lucy’s cookery.