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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

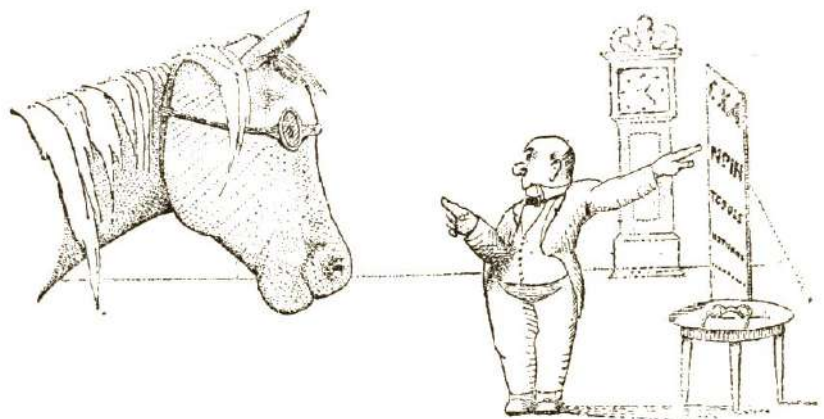
Dr. Dolittle learns animal language (2/21)

It happened one day that the doctor was sitting in his kitchen, talking with the Cat's-meat Man who had come to visit him with stomach pains.

"Why don't you give up being a people's doctor and become an animal doctor?" asked the Cat's-meat Man. The parrot, Polynesia, sat at the window looking at the rain and singing a sea-song to herself. She stopped singing and began to listen.

"You see, doctor," went on the Cat's-meat Man, "you know all about animals, much more than what these veterinarians here know. That book you wrote, about cats, well, it's great! I can't read or write myself or I'd certainly write some books. But my wife, Theodosia, she's a scholar, she really is. And she read me your book. Well, it's great— that's all that can be said— just great. You could have been a cat yourself. You know exactly how cats

think. And look: you can make a lot of money by treating animals. Do you know that? Look, I could send all the



old women with sick cats or dogs to you. And if they don't get sick quickly enough, I could put something in the meat I sell to make them ill, see?"

"Oh, no," said the Doctor quickly. "You mustn't do that. That wouldn't be right."

"Oh, I didn't mean really ill," answered the Cat's-meat Man. "Just a little something to make them drowsy, that's what I meant. But, as you say, perhaps it wouldn't be quite fair to the animals. But they'll get sick anyway, because the old women always give them too much to eat. And look, all the farmers around who had lame horses and weak lambs—they'd come. You really ought to be an animal doctor."

When the Cat's-meat Man had gone, the parrot flew from the window to the Doctor's table and said,

"That man has sense. That's what you ought to do. Be an animal doctor. Give up these silly people. If they haven't brains enough to see that you're the best doctor in the world, let them go. Take care of animals instead. They'll soon see. Be an animal doctor."

"Oh, there are plenty of animal doctors already," said John Dolittle, putting the flower-pots outside on the windowsill to catch the rain.

"Yes, there are enough," said Polynesia. "But none of them are any good. Listen now, Doctor, I'll tell you something. Did you know animals can talk?"

"I knew parrots could talk," said the Doctor.

"Oh, we parrots can talk in two languages—the language of men and the language of birds," said Polynesia proudly. "If I say, 'Polly wants a cracker,' you

understand me. But if you heard this, 'Ka-ka oi-ee, fee-fee?'"

"Good gracious!" cried the Doctor. "What does that mean?"

"That means, 'Is the porridge hot?' in bird language."

"My goodness me! You don't say!" said the Doctor.

"You've never talked to me like that before."

"What would have been the use?" said Polynesia, wiping some cracker-crumbs off her left wing. "You wouldn't have understood me if I had."

"Tell me again," said the doctor, now completely excited. He ran to the chest of drawers and came back with a notebook and a pencil. "Don't go too fast now, I'll write it down. This is interesting - very interesting - something very new. First give me the Bird A.B.C. - but slowly now."

And so the doctor found out that animals had their own language and could talk to each other. And all afternoon, while it rained, Polynesia sat on the kitchen table and gave him bird words to write in the book.

During tea, when the dog Jip came in, the parrot said to the doctor: "Look, he's talking to you."

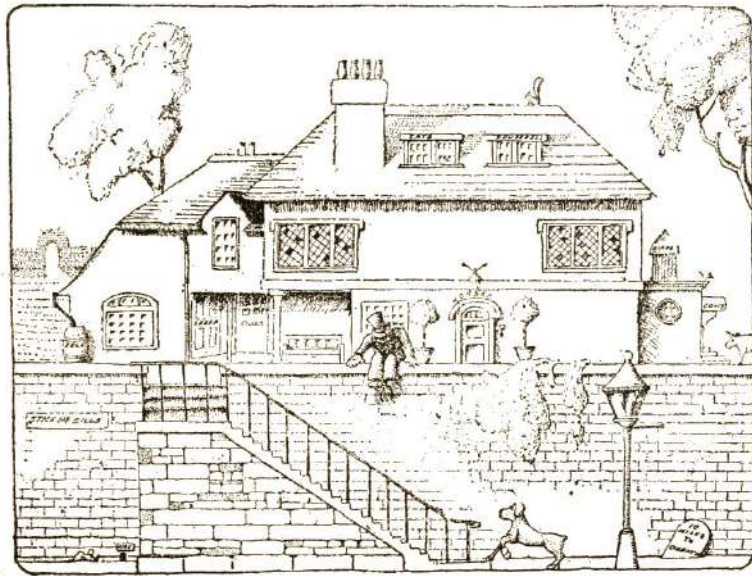
"It seems to me more like he's scratching his ear," said the doctor.

"But animals don't always talk with their mouths," said the parrot in a high-pitched voice, raising her eyebrows.

"They talk with their ears, with their feet, with their tails - with everything. Sometimes they don't want to make a sound. See how he's pulling one side of his nose now?"

"What does that mean?" asked the doctor.

"That means, 'Can't you see it has stopped raining?'" answered Polynesia.



"He's asking you a question. Dogs almost always use their nose to ask questions."

After a while, with the help of the parrot, the doctor learned the language of animals so well

that he could talk to them himself and understood everything they said. Then he gave up his work as a people's doctor.

As soon as the Cat's-Meat-Man had told everyone that John Dolittle was going to be an animal doctor, old ladies began to bring him their cats and poodles that had eaten too much cake. And farmers came from many miles around to show him sick cows and sheep.

One day a plough horse was brought to him. The poor animal was overjoyed to find a man who could speak in horse language.

"You know, doctor," said the horse, "that vet up the hill doesn't know a thing. He's been treating me for six weeks now, but it's no use. What I need is glasses. I'm going blind in one eye. There's no reason why horses shouldn't wear glasses, just like people. But that stupid man up the hill didn't even look in my eyes. He kept giving me big pills. I tried to tell him, but he didn't

understand a word of horse language. What I need is glasses."

"Of course - of course," said the doctor. "I'll order a pair for you right away."

"I'd like to have a pair of glasses like yours," said the horse, "only in green. The glasses will keep the sun out of my eyes while I'm ploughing the fifty-acre field."

"Sure," said the doctor. "You'll get a green pair of glasses."

"You know what the trouble is, sir," said the plough horse as the doctor opened the front door to let him out, "the trouble is that everyone thinks they can treat animals just because the animals don't complain. But in fact it takes a much cleverer man to be a really good animal doctor than to be a good people doctor. My farm boy thinks he knows everything about horses. I wish you could see him, his face is so thick he looks like he hasn't got any eyes, and he has as much brains as a potato beetle. Last week he tried to put a mustard plaster on me."

"Where did he put it?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, he didn't put it on me anywhere," said the horse.

"He just tried. I kicked him into the duckpond."

"My goodness!" said the doctor.

"I am generally a quite peaceful being," said the horse.

"Very patient with people, I don't make a fuss. But it was bad enough that the veterinarian gave me the wrong medicine. And when that red farmer boy started, I just couldn't take it anymore."

"Did you hurt the boy badly?" asked the doctor.

"Oh no," said the horse. "I just kicked him in the right place. The veterinarian is taking care of him now. When will my glasses be ready?"

"I'll have the glasses for you next week," said the doctor. "Come back on Tuesday. Then you'll be able to see as well as ever."

John Dolittle received a beautiful, large green pair of glasses, and the plow horse was no longer blind in one eye and could see as well as ever.

Soon it became a common sight to see farm animals wearing glasses in the area around Puddleby-on-the-Marsh. And a blind horse could no longer be found. And so it went with all the other animals that were brought to him. Once they discovered that he could speak their language, they told him where they were hurting and how they were feeling, and of course, it was easy for him to heal them.

The animals gladly came to his house on the edge of town. When they returned, they told their brothers and friends that there was a doctor in the cottage with the big garden who was a real doctor. And when creatures became sick – not just horses and cows and dogs – but all the little animals of the fields, like harvest mice and water mice, badgers and bats, they came straight to his house on the edge of town. His large garden was almost always full of animals who wanted to see him.

There were so many that he had to have special doors made for the different types. He wrote "HORSES" on the front door, "COWS" on the side door, and "SHEEP" on the kitchen door. Each type of animal had a separate door – even the mice had a small tunnel specially made

for them to the basement. There they stood patiently in rows, waiting for the doctor to come to them.

And so, in a few years' time, every living creature for miles and miles around knew about John Dolittle, M.D.

And the birds that flew to other countries in the winter told the animals in strange lands about the great doctor of Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, who could understand their animal language and help them with their problems. In this way, he became famous among the animals all over the world. He became even better known than he had been among the people of the West Country. He was happy and loved his life.

One afternoon, when the doctor was busy writing a book, the parrot Polynesia sat at the window – as she almost always did – and watched the leaves blowing in the garden. A moment later, she laughed out loud.

"What's the matter, Polynesia?" asked the doctor, looking up from his book.

"I was just thinking," said the parrot, still looking at the leaves.

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about people," said Polynesia. "People make me sick. They think they're so great. The world has been revolving around them for thousands of years, hasn't it? And the only thing people have learned to understand in animal language is that when a dog wags his tail, he means, 'I'm happy.'"

It's funny, isn't it? You're the very first man who talks like we do. Oh, sometimes people annoy me terribly. They have such arrogant judgments about 'dumb animals.'

"Stupid! – Huh? Why, I once knew a parrot who could say 'Good morning' in seven different ways without ever opening his beak. He could speak every language, even Greek. An old professor with a gray beard bought him. But the parrot didn't stay. He said the old man didn't speak Greek well, and he couldn't stand listening to him mangle the language. I often wonder what became of him. That bird knew more geography than people will ever know.

People, pffft. I suppose if people ever learn to fly – like any ordinary hedge-sparrow can – they'll never stop bragging about it."

"You're a wise old bird," said the doctor. "How old are you, by the way? I know parrots and elephants sometimes get very, very old."

"I can never be quite sure of my age," said Polynesia. "It's either a hundred and eighty-three or a hundred and two hundred and eighty-two. But I do know that when I first came here from Africa, King Charles was still hiding in an oak tree when he saw me. He looked absolutely terrified."