

THE LION AND THE GNAT

Author Unknown

Far away in Central Africa, that vast land where dense forests and wild beasts abound, the shades of night were once more descending, warning all creatures that it was time to seek repose.

All day long the sun had been like a great burning eye, but now, after painting the western sky with crimson and scarlet and gold, he had disappeared into his fleecy bed; the various creatures of the forest had sought their holes and resting-places; the last sound had rumbled its rumble, the last bee had mumbled his mumble, and the last bear had grumbled his grumble; even the grasshoppers that had been chirruping, chirruping, through all the long hours without a pause, at length had ceased their shrill music, tucked up their long legs, and given themselves to slumber.

There on a nodding grass-blade, a tiny Gnat had made a swinging couch, and he too had folded his wings, closed his tiny eyes, and was fast asleep. Darker, darker, darker became the night until the darkness could almost be felt, and over all was a solemn stillness as though some powerful finger had been raised, and some potent voice had whispered, "HU—SH!"



Just when all was perfectly still, there came suddenly from the far away depths of the forest, like the roll of thunder, a mighty ROAR—R—R—R!

In a moment all the beasts and birds were wide awake, and the poor little Gnat was nearly frightened out of his little senses, and his little heart went pit-a-pat. He rubbed his little eyes with his feelers, and then peered all around trying to penetrate the deep gloom as he whispered in terror—"What—was—that?"

What do you think it was?... Yes, a LION! A great, big lion who, while most other denizens of the forest slept, was out hunting for prey. He came rushing and crashing through the thick undergrowth of the forest, swirling his long tail and opening wide his great jaws, and as he rushed he RO-AR-R-R-ED!

Presently he reached the spot where the little Gnat hung panting at the tip of the waving grass-blade. Now the little Gnat was not afraid of lions, so when he saw it was only a lion, he cried out—

"Hi, stop, stop! What are you making that horrible noise about?"

The Lion stopped short, then backed slowly and regarded the Gnat with scorn.

“Why, you tiny, little, mean, insignificant creature you, how DARE you speak to ME?” he raged.

“How dare I speak to you?” repeated the Gnat quietly. “By the virtue of right, which is always greater than might. Why don’t you keep to your own part of the forest? What right have you to be here, disturbing folks at this time of night?”

By a mighty effort the Lion restrained his anger—he knew that to obtain mastery over others one must be master over oneself.

“What right?” he repeated in dignified tones. “Because I’m King of the Forest. That’s why. I can do no wrong, for all the other creatures of the forest are afraid of me. I DO what I please, I SAY what I please, I EAT whom I please, I GO where I please—simply because I’m King of the Forest.”

“But who told you you were King?” demanded the Gnat. “Just answer me that!”

“Who told ME?” roared the Lion. “Why, everyone acknowledges it—don’t I tell you that everyone is afraid of me?”

“Indeed!” cried the Gnat disdainfully. “Pray don’t say all, for I’m not afraid of you. And further, I deny your right to be King.”

This was too much for the Lion. He now worked himself into a perfect fury.

“You—you—YOU deny my right as King?”

“I do, and, what is more, you shall never be King until you have fought and conquered me.”

The Lion laughed a great lion laugh, and a lion laugh cannot be laughed at like a cat laugh, as everyone ought to know.

“Fight—did you say fight?” he asked. “Who ever heard of a lion fighting a gnat?”

Here, out of my way, you atom of nothing! I’ll blow you to the other end of the world.”

But though the Lion puffed his cheeks until they were like great bellows, and then blew with all his might, he could not disturb the little Gnat’s hold on the swaying grass-blade.

“You’ll blow all your whiskers away if you are not careful,” he said, with a laugh—“but you won’t move me. And if you dare leave this spot without fighting me, I’ll tell all the beasts of the forest that you are afraid of me, and they’ll make me King.”

“Ho, ho!” roared the Lion. “Very well, since you will fight, let it be so.”

“You agree to the conditions, then? The one who conquers shall be King?”

“Oh, certainly,” laughed the Lion, for he expected an easy victory. “Are you ready?”

“Quite ready.”

“Then—GO!” roared the Lion.

And with that he sprang forward with open jaws, thinking he could easily swallow a million gnats. But just as the great jaws were about to close upon the blade of grass whereto the Gnat clung, what should happen but that the Gnat suddenly spread his wings and nimbly flew—where do you think?—right into one of the Lion’s nostrils! And there he began to sting, sting, sting. The Lion wondered, and thundered, and blundered—but the Gnat went on stinging; he foamed, and he moaned, and he groaned—still the Gnat went on stinging; he rubbed his head on the ground in agony, he swirled his tail in furious passion, he roared, he spluttered, he sniffed, he snuffed—and still the Gnat went on stinging.

“O my poor nose, my nose, my nose!” the Lion began to moan. “Come down, come DOWN, come DOWN! My nose, my NOSE, my NOSE!! You’re King of the Forest, you’re King, you’re King—only come down. My nose, my NOSE, my NOSE!”

So at last the Gnat flew out from the Lion’s nostril and went back to his waving grass-blade, while the Lion slunk away into the depths of the forest with his tail between his legs—beaten, and by a tiny Gnat!

“What a fine fellow am I, to be sure!” exclaimed the Gnat, as he proudly plumed his wings. “I’ve beaten a lion—a lion! Dear me, I ought to have been King long ago, I’m so clever, so big, so strong—oh!”

The Gnat’s frightened cry was caused by finding himself entangled in some silky sort of threads. While gloating over his victory, the wind had risen, and his grass-blade had swayed violently to and fro unnoticed by him. A stronger gust than usual had bent the blade downward close to the ground, and then something caught it and held it fast and with it the victorious Gnat. Oh, the desperate struggles he made to get free! Alas! he became more entangled than ever. You can guess what it was—a spider’s web, hung out from the overhanging branch of a tree. Then—flipperty-flopperty, flipperty-flopperty, flop, flip, flop—down his stairs came cunning Father Spider and quickly gobbled up the little Gnat for his supper, and that was the end of him.

A strong Lion—and what overcame him? A Gnat.

A clever Gnat—and what overcame him? A Spider’s web! He who had beaten the strong lion had been overcome by the subtle snare of a spider’s thread.