

MACLEAN'S

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The



Cat Who Could Fly

Sarah would have been a bigger circus attraction than Gargantua and Jumbo riding a tandem bike. But little Joey, who owned the winged kitten, wouldn't sell her for \$50—no sir, not even for \$100,000

By HAROLD HELFER

DEAR Uncle Timothy," the letter began. "How are you? I am fine. We are all fine. There's a boy I know who has a cat that can fly. I thought I would tell you because you are in the circus business. His name is Joey Clark. He only lives two blocks from me. My favorite circus act is sword swallowing. Tell Aunt Sadie hello for me. Your nephew, Ronnie."

I turned to the missus and said, "Sadie, how old is little Ronnie—about 9, isn't he?" "Something like that," Sadie said. "Kids that age sure have an imagination, don't they?" I said, handing the letter to her. Her eyebrows went up a little as she read it and she said, "Hey! A cat that can fly!"

The next day I wrote a letter that said, "Dear Nephew Ronnie: As always, it is a pleasure hearing from you. I would have written you some time ago but have been very busy whipping the circus into shape for the new season. I hope that we will again play near enough Monroeville this year so that you can come and see it. Your Aunt Sadie is fine and sends her best to you and all the folks. Your loving uncle, Timothy. P. S. What do you mean that this cat flies? How can a cat fly?"

"Dear Uncle Timothy," Ronnie's next letter said, "it sure was nice to hear from you so soon. We are all fine here. I sure hope your circus comes near Monroeville. I still don't see how that man got shot out of the cannon without getting exploded. About Joey Clark's cat. I don't exactly know how to explain about it. It doesn't quite fly like an airplane and it doesn't quite fly like a bird. I guess mostly it just flies like a cat. Your nephew, Ronnie."

My next letter said, "Dear Nephew Ronnie, I can't help but be a little interested in this cat you mentioned. As you know, I am always on the lookout for new and interesting acts. I do not wish to seem sceptical, but how can a cat possibly fly? Your uncle doesn't doubt you, of course, but it does seem sort of fantastic. Your loving uncle, Timothy."

"Dear Uncle Timothy," went Ronnie's following letter. "We are still all fine here. You asked about Joey Clark's cat, how it could possibly fly. It can possibly fly because it has wings. It was born that way. The wings seem to be part of his shoulder blades except that instead of just stopping short under the skin of his back like most shoulder blades they keep on going and stick out. They look a little like chicken wings except they're covered with cat hair like the rest of her. When she flaps those wings she just sails through the air. It is really something to watch. I seen her fly to the top of a tree then fly to the roof then fly down into Joey's lap. She always makes a real good landing. She is mostly just a kitten yet too. Your nephew, Ronnie."

When I showed Sadie Ronnie's letter this time she almost fell out of her chair. "Say!" she said. "It sounds like there's really something to it."

"I won't believe it until I see it," I said, shifting the cigar in my mouth, "but if it's so— I say if—why it would be the biggest attraction of all time! We could charge \$5 a head for that one and they'd be standing in line from Halifax to Hamilton. We could give the rest of our show away. We'd be millionaires in three months! A flying cat—why P. T. Barnum himself never

had anything like that! Why it would draw more money than Jenny Lind singing 'O Promise Me,' smoking a cigar out of her left ear and doing a striptease all at the same time!"

Then I simmered down some, sighed and said, "But, of course, I don't believe there's such a thing."

"Well," said Sadie, "you're going to be in Moncton to see about those new trailers. Why don't you just go on over to Monroeville? What have you got to lose?"

I rubbed my chin and said, "I was thinking of that."

I wrote one more letter to Ronnie. "Dear Nephew Ronnie," I said, "I have been thinking very seriously of coming up to Monroeville to see you and the rest of the folks. So, since I probably will be seeing you in person, I will keep this letter short. By the way, what sort of a boy is this Joey Clark, the boy who owns this flying cat? Please tell me something about him. Is he rich or poor? Your loving uncle, Timothy."

Ronnie's answering letter went: "Dear Uncle Timothy. Except that Uncle Tolly sprained his wrist swishing after a fly with a fly swatter, we are still all fine here. I will now tell you something about Joey Clark like you asked. He lives with his grandmother down the street. They live by themselves. It is about two blocks from the house where I live. His father was killed in the war and his mother went to work and was killed in the plant. She got caught in some machinery. He went to his grandmother to live. He is very serious about everything but he is very nice just the same. Almost everybody likes him. I guess *Continued on page 34*

Illustrated by Mabel McDermott



The Cat Who Could Fly

Continued from page 11

he is poor instead of rich. His grandmother gets some kind of pension but I don't think it is so much. Their house is very small and sags a little. His grandmother has to stay in bed nearly all the time but she gets up long enough to cook meals and to sew patches on Joey's pants. Joey goes to the store and buys the groceries though. He is very good about knowing what to pick out so it won't cost so much. He also does the washing."

Three days later I was in Monroeville. And after a couple of hours of handshakes, backslaps, pecks on the cheek and three helpings of potato pancakes with sour cream, Ronnie and I were walking down the street together.

"It is awfully nice of you, Ronnie, to offer to take me to this Joey Clark's house," I said. "I'll buy you a big banana split at the drugstore on the way back. You know, son, I was really touched by your last letter. This Joey Clark has not had things too easy."

Then, sort of giving Ronnie a glower from the corner of an eye, I said, "I was thinking I might offer him as much as 50 bucks for that cat of his. Providing it's still flying around, of course."

Ronnie gave me a quick look. "Fifty dollars?" he said. "That's not so much for a cat that can fly, is it?"

I shifted my cigar to the other side of the mouth and said, "Well, \$50 is \$50 you know. But maybe you're right. Maybe, under the circumstances, I should go even higher still. I might make it \$100."

Then, after a little pause, I said, "Do you—ah—think that he'd take \$100 for it?"

"I don't know, Uncle Timothy," Ronnie said. "I never asked him about that. I just told him I had an uncle who had a circus who would like to see his flying cat and could I bring him around and he said all right. He did say, though, he didn't think he wanted to sell it."

"Oh," I said, taking my cigar out of my mouth and flicking off some ashes, "a cagey little—ah—youngster, eh?"

"He said he asked his grandmother about it and she told him that since his cat had had the kitten with the wings why that this cat was his too and that he could do what he wanted to with it and that it was up to him whether he wanted to sell it or not," Ronnie filled me in.

"I see," I said good-naturedly. And then there we were, in front of this little frame bungalow. Ronnie led me through a gate that took us to the back yard.

A KID of 9 or 10 was on his knees on the ground. He seemed to be engaged in filling up a hole. "Hello, Joey," Ronnie said. "This is my Uncle Timothy I was telling you about. He came all the way from Ontario."

Joey hurriedly finished covering up the hole with dirt, then stood up. "How do you do, sir?" he said. He was a tow-headed youngster with a considerable quota of freckles.

"Hello, there, Joey!" I said, real friendlylike.

Then I saw it—the cat. It was a young cat, but looked like it was almost full grown. It was a grey alley-looking cat. It was moving across the yard in a slinky catlike fashion. And, sure enough, there they were—the wings! They sprouted out from his back, near his neck. They were flat against his back now, but there was no mistake.

"He doesn't fly all the time," Ronnie said. "Just some of the time." Ronnie said. "Just some of the time."

"Can you get him to fly?"

"Sometimes I can," Joey said.

"Sometimes he flies just on his own hook," Ronnie said.

"Would you get him to fly for me, Joey?" I said, turning on my most pleasant voice, the kind I usually reserve for mayors and sheriffs.

"I'll do it," Joey said. "But I'll have to charge you for the demonstration."

My eyebrows went up a little.

"Well," I said, managing as hearty a chuckle as I could, "I suppose that's fair enough. What're you going to charge?"

"Twelve dollars and 50 cents," he said, promptly.

I dug into a pocket, came up with the proper amount, shifted my cigar a bit over to the left and said, "All right, young man, here you are."

Joey took the money without a word and stuffed it into the pocket of his somewhat frayed but clean shirt. Then he made a whistling noise and the cat suddenly stopped in its tracks, turned and sauntered over to him. The cat rubbed against his legs and Joey reached down and patted it. Of course, all I kept seeing were those two believe-it-or-not wings.

Then Joey said, "Ronnie, there's a bottle of milk and a saucer on the back porch. How about pouring some of the milk in the saucer and bringing it out?"

Ronnie obliged. Joey took the saucer and held it down for the cat, who greedily began licking it. Then, giving it little more than a chance to wet its tongue, Joey straightened up and started walking away with the saucer. He walked over to a ladder, leaning against a coal bin, and climbed it carefully. He balanced the saucer on top of the bin, then he came slowly down.

The cat seemed to become completely motionless for almost a solid minute. Then, suddenly, there was a swishing sound and something streaked through the air and, almost before I knew it, there was the cat atop the bin, licking away at the saucer of milk.

I still couldn't believe my eyes, though. My mouth on the open side, I kept staring at the coal bin. The cat, quite unconcerned about everything, kept lapping away. I was about convinced that the whole thing was some kind of an illusion, when something darted out of a nearby tree. It was a bird. The cat suddenly stopped lapping, looked up, stiffened, then—swish!—and it was no longer on the coal bin. It was zooming through the air after the bird.

I watched flabbergasted. The bird kept whirring away, trying to escape the cat's clutches, and the cat kept sailing around through space hot on its trail.

"Sarah! Sarah!" Joey called out. "Sarah's the cat's name" Ronnie informed me.

"Come back here, Sarah!" Joey yelled.

But I doubted if Sarah could hear him. She was way up there now, a matter of several hundreds of yards up in the sky. In fact, once or twice I lost her while she was chasing the bird high above our heads through some cloud or other.

I guess, all in all, the cat was up there some five, six minutes before she lost the bird up along the horizon somewhere and finally came down again. She came settling back to earth just as pretty as you please, a perfect four-point landing, coming down on all four legs just about the same time. Then she went strutting off.

I couldn't take my eyes off her for I don't know how long but when I turned to Joey I noticed he was still looking up in the sky. His face was frowning so that his freckles seemed to be all running into one another.

I PUT an arm around Joey's shoulder in my best friendly, man-to-man manner and said, "Come on, let's sit down, always believed in relaxing when it came time to talk business. More sociable that way."

We sat down together on a back porch step. Ronnie sat a step above us. My arm still around Joey I said, "That's some cat—no question about it. Yes sirc! It ought to make a pretty fair act."

Then, taking a quick gander from the corner of my eye at Ronnie and shifting my cigar around, I said, "Tell you what, young fellow, I'll give you \$100 for the cat—cash."

Joey shook his head. "That's a pretty good price now, Joey," I said. "But I'm not a man to haggle. I'll give you \$125 for it."

Joey still shook his head. "Well, being as you and Ronnie are such good friends and everything," I said, "I'll make it \$150. Now, as you know, that's really quite a bit of money. Why you could buy a pony with that!"

Joey still shook his head. I rubbed my chin. "Tell you what, Joey," I said, giving him one of my most fatherly, now-let's-all-be-good-fellows hugs, "you're such a deserving kid. I'll throw in enough for a saddle—I'll make it \$185."

Ronnie said, "Aw, why don't you make it a straight \$200, Uncle Timothy?"

I suppressed a frown, sighed a little and said, "All right, then, \$200—whataya say, Joey?"

"No," Joey said.

I shifted my cigar and re-rubbed my chin. "Well, of course, it's up to you, young man," I said. "But I'll make you one last final offer. \$250—take it or leave it."

Joey shook his head. I got up, "Come, Ronnie," I said. "It's his cat and if he doesn't want to sell her why that's up to him."

I started walking away. Joey didn't budge. I walked a little farther. He didn't call out to me.

I turned around. "Three hundred, and that's the best I can do," I said. The freckle-faced kid just shook his head.

"Well, let's go, Ronnie," I said. "Aw, why don't you make it \$1,000, Unk," he said. "That's a more even figure."

My right toes ached to make contact with a certain part of my nephew's anatomy so bad I almost lost my balance. "Well, Ronnie," I said, "\$1,000 is a powerful lot of money. You could buy an elephant for that."

"But not an elephant that can fly," Ronnie said.

I almost bit my cigar in two. But I sighed. I rested my hand in my best fatherly manner on Joey's head and said, "Kid, I guess I'm just a sentimental guy. When I take a fancy to someone, well, money just seems to become meaningless. Know what I mean? Anyway, kid, I like you. I'll give you \$1,000. How would you like it?—in cash or cheque? That's an awful lot of money, you know."

Joey shook his head. "I don't want it," he said.

I sighed and sat down. I took off my hat and fanned my face. Then, shifting my cigar, I let loose one of my most winning smiles and said, "You're a tough man to do business with. But I like a man who stands up for his own. Yes, sirc. Tell you what—I'll make it \$1,025."

Joey shook his head. So I upped it to \$1,050.

"Make it \$2,000, Unk," Ronnie chimed in.

I had to do a neat bit of fast neck manipulation to keep from swallowing

my cigar. "Let's go, Ronnie," I said. "I've got to check on the train schedule. I have to be back with my circus pretty pronto, you know."

Joey didn't say anything. I reached down, patted his head and said, "You got a perfect right to keep your cat, if you want to—even if the \$1,200, which I am now prepared to offer you, would buy you not one but two ponies, a new bike, and all the comic books, ice cream and candy the drugstore could furnish you for the next year."

Joey just looked straight ahead, almost as if he didn't hear me. I started walking away again. But I finally turned around and, with my most forlorn sigh, said, "I'm in rather a hurry—there's a lot of problems to running a circus—I'll give you \$2,000, and that's my last offer."

"I don't want to sell Sarah," Joey said.

"Now, Joey," I said, sitting down by him again, "that's a pretty good bargaining tactic, but you got to remember I been around. I know every man has his price. But there's a limit to everything. There is even a limit to how much a flying cat is worth. And \$2,000 is it—take it or leave it."

Joey just shook his head. "Make it \$3,000, Unk," Ronnie said.

This time I swallowed the cigar. At least part of it. I gasped and spluttered.

"I won't go into all the harrowing details. But I finally did go up to \$5,000. And that wasn't all. I went up—by stages, of course—to \$10,000, \$15,000 and then \$20,000.

But the freckle-faced kid just shook his head. I believe I was up to around \$23,725 when Ronnie spoke up and said, "Unk, offer him \$100,000. And if he doesn't want it let's go. I'm getting tired. Remember you promised to buy me a banana split."

I will spare you the soul-searing agony I went through and the strain stifling homicidal impulses. It left me weak, shaking and desperate. "All right," I said, "we'll see if he really wants to sell that cat or not—I'll make it \$100,000. Cold cash!"

Joey still shook his head.

"Come on, Ronnie," I said. "Let's go."

THIS time I really started out the gate. But when I got there I turned and said, "I'm leaving town around noon tomorrow. I'll drop by on you in the morning just to make sure you haven't changed your mind."

As we walked away I said to Ronnie, "Why do you reckon that little st—, I mean that little youngster, is so hard to do business with?"

"I don't know, Uncle Timothy," Ronnie said. "He's kind of funny. He never has much to say. Everybody likes him, though."

"He's a real slicker," I said. "Clipping me for \$12.50 right off the bat—and then coaxing me up to \$100,000. If there was one born like him every second instead of the kind that Barnum mentioned I'd be out in the street starving."

"Sometimes, Unk, I get the feeling when he looks way off into space the way he does that he's thinking of his papa and mamma," Ronnie said. "He's just a very funny fellow. Maybe he won't sell after all."

"Oh, he'll sell, all right," I said. "He's just using the old stall system. There's nothing that anybody won't sell for a price."

"Well, here's the drugstore, Unk," Ronnie said. "Remember what you said."

"Yes," I flared up, "and you're going to have a single-scoop ice cream cone and like it. Ah—what I mean is—it's better for you, you know."

THE next morning, on my way over to this Joey Clark's house, I felt quite a bit better about things, though. After all, I reminded myself, it was worth \$100,000—easy. Why, I'd get it back in a month. And cats lived quite awhile, six or seven years. Why I'd have so much money I'd have to hire an income tax adviser to advise my income tax adviser how to make out my tax forms. The movies alone would be willing to pay \$250,000 or \$250,000 a picture for Sarah. A flying cat—why even Disney hadn't come up with anything like that! And television would eat her up.

When I stepped into the back yard with Ronnie, though, a feeling of trepidation did come over me. The towhead was such a peculiar little kid, so brooding and serious. Oh, well, I said to myself, if I have to go to \$150,000, I'll just have to.

He was sitting on the back porch step when we got there. "Hello, there, Joey," I said, in my most chipper manner. "Just thought I'd drop by one last time to see how you felt about selling your cat for the fabulous price I last mentioned."

"Sure, you can have Sarah now if you want her," he said promptly.

It was so unexpected I had to chomp down hard on my cigar to prevent it from getting away.

"Well," I said, "Fine. Fine. Now let's see what was it?—\$50,000 or something like that, wasn't it?"

"It was \$100,000, Unk," Ronnie piped up.

While I was trying to get the gasket inside me back in line again, Joey said,

"Oh, \$50,000 would be quite all right. Only I don't think you'll want Sarah now."

My eyebrows went up a little. "She can't fly now," Joey went on.

"Why not! What happened!" I wanted to know.

"A veterinarian told me he would take the wings off for \$12.50," he said. "That's what I spent the money for."

There was a purring noise and I looked down and there was the young grey cat I had watched so goggle-eyed yesterday—only now it looked like a million other young cats. Its wings were gone.

I sank down on a step. I felt weak. In the twinkle of an eye the line from Halifax to Hamilton had vanished.

"Why—why did you do it, Joey?" I asked. "Why with \$100,000 you could have lived like a prince the rest of your life? Didn't you know that?"

"Yes, I knew it," Joey said.

"Then why in the name of a monkey's mustache did you do it?"

"Because the birds weren't safe from her," he said. "She could follow them wherever they went, even if they flew away in the sky. She would sometimes kill three or four birds in the sky in one afternoon. I was burying one yesterday when you showed up. I don't like for something to kill something else."

I guess I was too speechless to say anything. My cigar seemed to be half way down my throat anyway.

Joey added, "The veterinarian he told me too that there wasn't more than a millionth chance Sarah would have kittens with wings like she had."

After a long while I found enough strength to get up. "Well, let's go, Ronnie," I said. "Kum see, kum saw."

"What does that mean, Unk?"

"Got it from the Wild Man of Borneo," I said, sticking a new cigar in my mouth. "It means something like easy come, easy go."

Before I left, though, I ran my hand through towhead's hair and gave him a little pat. I don't know why I did it. ★