

Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

THE WICKED FLEA

by J. U. Giesy



Stories by
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Greya La Spina
Seabury Quinn
Alanson Skinner
and other authors

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Weird Tales

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Author of "The Magic of Dai Nippon" and "Ashes of Circumstance"

*Big fleas have smaller fleas upon their backs to bite 'em,
And these in turn have smaller fleas, and so ad infinitum;
And larger fleas have larger fleas, and larger fleas to go on,
And these in turn have larger fleas, and larger fleas, and so on.*

—JONATHAN SWIFT.

"WHAT," said Professor Xenophon Xerxes Zapt, the eminent investigator of the unknown in science, sometimes called "Unknown Quantity" Zapt, both from the line of his research, as well as the double X in his name; "is life?"

"Why—I don't know." Bob Sargent, fiancé of the professor's motherless daughter, Nellie, glanced from the record he was just removing from the phonograph in the living room of the Zapt home, to the little man, with graying mutton-chop whiskers, his body clad in the limp and comfortable if somewhat antiquated black alpaca coat he customarily wore about the house. "That is—I'm afraid I don't just appreciate the bearing of your question."

Xenophon Xerxes nodded. "I didn't expect you would." He continued to stare at the stalwart young attorney through the heavy lenses before his near-sighted eyes. "And you

are not alone in your lack of comprehension, Robert. Nowadays the rising generation seems to consider life as something akin to that form of syn-copated phonetic vibration commonly denominated—jazz."

"Well—possibly." Sargent slipped the record into the cabinet. "Does our music annoy you, professor?"

"That, Robert, is entirely aside from the point. Music is no more than sound, and—er—sound is a form of vibration, as you are presumably aware. And"—Xenophon Xerxes paused as though to give weight to the ensuing climax—"so is life, Robert—so is life."

"Oh, yes, of course," Bob hastened to agree. "I see what you mean now. And if both sound and life are vibrations, isn't that possibly the reason jazz has enjoyed such a vogue? Isn't it possible that there is a difference in the rate of vibration, and that this particular form of music quickens the ratio of the human—"

"Exactly!" Xenophon Zapt rubbed his hands together. There were times when he did not wholly approve of the young man his daughter had declared she intended to marry, but now—he beamed. "God bless my soul, Robert—you surprize me. Really I am amazed to find your mental perceptions so active. Can you perhaps see where the established truism leads?"

"Why—naturally—I suppose it means jazz will have a long life."

"Jazz is merely an illustration," Xenophon Xerxes frowned. "It has nothing to do with the case. Given a hypothetical cause it should be possible to predicate a theoretical effect."

"The trouble is that theory doesn't always work out in practise," said Bob.

"Admitting that—the failures are indubitably due to some fallibility in the original premise, Robert. And—such things lend zest to the investigation of nature's laws."

Sargent turned his eyes to Nellie seated on the living room couch, with a handsome Persian Angora cat in her lap. He sighed. Once the professor got started, the best thing was to let him talk himself out. "You are—considering some serious life problem, then?" he remarked.

"All life is serious, Robert." The professor compressed his thin lips. "And facetiousness is not an inherent characteristic of my nature. I am not prone to idly employ those variant vibratory fluctuations of the vocal organs, briefly designated speech."

"Certainly not, sir," Bob protested. "I meant that you had some application of the established relation between the correlated facts in mind."

"Goodness," said Nellie softly, with a twinkle in the blue eyes under her soft brown hair.

"Exactly." Xenophon Xerxes gave her a glance. "The word 'correlated'

is well chosen, Robert. It is the correlation on which the whole matter hinges, in fact. Life being vibration, what, in your estimation, would be the effect of increasing the vibratory ratio, upon the phenomenon of cell multiplication we are in the habit of calling growth?"

"Why—er—," Bob lifted his gaze to the ceiling as though for inspiration; "possibly—if you increased your cell multiplication numerically as well as in rapidity, you might get a—a giant."

"Precisely." Professor Zapt nodded. "You not only *might*—you necessarily would. There are times, Robert, when I feel that were you to devote yourself to the endeavor you *might* develop a really excellent mind. But—no matter. Were one to apply this principle in the right direction he would almost certainly gain some interesting results. Take the ant or the flea, for example—what would be the result were either multiplied indefinitely in size?"

"Jazz," Sargent said out of an irrepressible sense of humor. "If you applied it to the flea, that is. They'd make everybody dance—"

"Bob!" Nellie cautioned, while her father put up a slender hand and stroked his whiskers as was his way when thinking deeply or annoyed.

Sargent subsided, and the professor, after a dignified interval, resumed: "I referred to an experimental application, rather than to one at large. Both insects are possessed of a remarkable proportionate strength. Were man endowed with an equivalent commensurate to his size, he could easily cover a league at a single leap."

"That would be as bad as the fairy story of the Seven League Boots, wouldn't it?" Nellie looked up smiling from tweaking one of the Angora's ears.

Xenophon Xerxes sniffed. Without deigning a reply he rose and

passed from the room, disappearing up a stairway in the direction of the laboratory he maintained on the second floor of the house.

"And now he's mad again," Miss Zapt complained. "Bob, why can't you behave when he has something he wants to talk about?"

"Me?" Sargent protested with more vigor than grammatical correctness. "You were the one who mentioned fairy tales."

"But you made it worse. Anyway I don't care. Think of fleas as big as men—"

"I'd rather not. It sounds weird. I wonder how far it could jump."

"Oh—miles." Nellie smiled. "I s'pose I shouldn't have said that about the Seven League Boots, but—I could have done worse. You know that doggerel about fleas, don't you, Bob?"

"Can't say I do." Sargent shook his head. "But—almost any doggerel should harmonize with fleas."

Miss Zapt giggled. "'Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em. An' little fleas have littler fleas, and so—*ad infinitum*,'" she recited.

Bob nodded. "Just so: *ad infinitum*. Only this thing of your father's is the reverse. It's crescendo, rather than diminuendo. And that brings us back to music. Let's have a little more jazz."

2

"Bob," said Miss Zapt the next evening, "do you know what I saw Father doing this afternoon?"

"Rather not." Sargent grinned. "What was Father up to?"

"He was coaxing neighbor Brown's dog into our yard with a piece of meat, and then when the brute came over he took him into the garage."

"To hunt fleas!" Sargent sat down and eyed the little beauty before him. "Good Lord!"

"Bob!" Nellie's blue eyes widened swiftly.

"Sure!" Bob began to chuckle. "When your paternal ancestor get's an idea in his headpiece, Sweetness, the only way to get it out is to let it exhaust itself."

"But—you—you don't think he really means to try to—to—"

"Raise fleas? *Ad infinitum*," Bob harked back to her quotation of the previous evening. "Translated, *ad infinitum* means 'no end', as our English cousins put it. Sure! I think he means to do just that."

"But—if he brings them into the house!" All at once Xenophon Xerxes' lone heir appeared a trifle aghast.

"Oh—he'll keep 'em shut up somehow," Bob soothed.

"But—if they should get out! If they should get on Fluffy!"

There had been times past when the eminent investigator had not hesitated to make use of her cat during the enthusiasm incident upon some experiment, without Nellie's prior knowledge. And although thus far her pet had escaped any serious consequences, Miss Zapt never knew what might happen next. Because of that she knit her brows as she went on: "It would be just like him to expect me to let him use her as a—a sort of incubator for this monstrosity he thinks he's going to raise."

Bob shook his head. "Not very long if he succeeds. He'll have to keep the thing on a chain—"

"Bob!"

"Well—you never can tell about an *ad infinitum* flea. It's apt to hop off six or seven miles at a jump. He'll probably cage it and feed it on raw beef."

"Bob!"

"Or blood. He'll have to. If he gets anything like what he's after, rather than feeding off Fluffy in the ordinary sense it's more apt to chase her around the house."

"Bob—you're simply teasing, and I think you're—horrid." Miss Zapt wrinkled the end of her nose.

"As a matter of fact I don't know whether I am or not," said Bob. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but—"

"But imagine a weeny-teeny thing like a flea grown that big!"

"I'm trying to. It's an appalling thought. I can't imagine how he expects to bring the thing about." Sargent sighed.

"Neither can I. But he spent the whole morning in the laboratory."

"And in the afternoon he made gustatory advances to friend Brown's dog." Sargent chuckled again. "He was ready to start the job. Honey—that father of yours knows a lot about natural laws."

"But—this isn't natural!" Nellie protested. "How do you suppose a flea that size would look?"

"Not having considered the matter before, I'm hardly qualified to state—except that it would look like a flea in a telescope, I guess." Bob glanced toward a bookcase in the corner. "There's the encyclopedia—we might find a picture of the brute."

Nellie rose, and returned from the case with a good-sized volume. She began turning leaves. "F1-Fle-a. Here it is."

Bob bent to inspect the paragraph on which her finger was resting. "'Flea—(entom.) An insect of the genus *Pulex*, remarkable for its agility and troublesome bite. The common flea is *Pulex irritans*,'" he read, and paused to stare at a small illustration of the object in question. "*Pulex irritans*. *Irritans* is Latin for 'irritating' or 'annoying.' *Pulex* is his family name. Seems appropriate all right. The irritating or annoying *Pulex*."

"The whole thing is annoying." Miss Zapt closed the book with considerable force. "Why under the sun do you suppose father wants to waste his time enlarging or magnifying—

or whatever he intends doing—a thing like that?"

"At first glance there does seem a reason for some such question," Sargent smiled. "But—I presume it's the principle involved."

"But—what's the use?" Nellie's tone showed exasperation.

"Why—I don't know. Don't they train 'em? Seems to me I've heard of trained fleas. Now if he could raise about a dozen *Pulexes* the size of a mouse or a—rat—"

"Bob! Talk sense. A flea that large would be—dangerous. Didn't you read what it said about their bite?"

"Yes. Troublesome, my child. But—he might use 'em in a moral crusade. A dozen turned loose on the beaches would discourage one-piece bathing suits. Mermaids would need a suit of armor and a club. And if he'd stencil 'em with anti-vice badges—"

"Oh, well, go on and be funny if you want to! I think it's simply crazy," Nellie declared with an irritated laugh.

3

IT WAS some ten days before Bob saw Miss Zapt again. A legal matter called him out of town the next morning, so suddenly that he said good-bye by telephone. Consequently, the next time they were together it was some time before their conversation turned on any topic save themselves. Then Nellie changed it rather abruptly:

"Well, you were right. Father is having me buy beef."

"Seems to agree with you," Sargent said, without taking his eyes from her face or his arm from about her waist.

"I'm not eating it, silly," she rejoined. "What's the use of being stupid? You know I mean you were right in saying he'd feed it to—those fleas."

"Oh! And how is the irritating Pulex—or Pulexes?" Bob grinned.

"I don't know. I haven't seen them, and I don't want to see them. But he's got them in the laboratory, and every morning I have to order meat. First it was one pound, then two, and yesterday four—"

"Four!" Bob erupted. "Four pounds of meat to feed fleas? Holy Smoke!"

Nellie sighed. "He takes it up there and that's all except that he's been quite excited the past few days, and spends all his time in the laboratory except when I call him to his meals. I don't believe he's slept much the last two nights."

"Hm-m-m!" Bob seemed suddenly lost in silent consideration of Nellie's statement.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked all at once.

"Eh? I was thinking." Sargent flung up his head.

"And I wasn't speaking to you," Miss Zapt returned tartly. "What is it, Fluffy? What's the matter?"

Bob became aware of the Angora. She had slid into the room and was standing in the center of the floor with a bushily expanded tail held very nearly erect. Her entire bearing was one of hesitation and doubt. She seemed vaguely disturbed.

For a moment after her mistress had spoken she made no move, and then, without warning, she sat down on her haunches and turned her head in an almost quizzical way in Nellie's direction.

"Meow!" She emitted a whimper between anathema and perturbed complaint, and began to quiver, finally lifting a hind leg toward her back in tentative fashion and discovering it would not reach. Yet instead of being returned to the floor that leg remained extended and commenced to twitch.

"Bob! She's going to have a fit!"

"Wait." Sargent laid a hand on Nellie's arm, while he regarded the cat out of speculative eyes. "Give her time to reach a conclusion."

"Time?" Miss Zapt's tone resented the suggestion. She advanced upon her pet.

And Fluffy drew back. In a series of amazingly rapid lurches she retreated like a poorly tuned motor thrown into the reverse, toppled all at once sidewise, became in an instant a wildly gyrating ball of long hair, head, tail and feet.

"Bob!" Nellie went to her knees beside the madly contorting body. "Telephone for a veterinary! Quick! Fluffy!" With a swoop of anxious arms she gathered the Persian to her breast, staggered to the couch and dropped down upon it. "Bob!"

"Wait," Sargent said for the second time. "I think I can do quite as much for Fluffy as a vet. Hasn't it dawned upon you yet, Sweetness?"

"What?"

"Fleas—or a flea perhaps. *Pulex irritans*. She couldn't reach it to scratch it and—it annoyed her. She's an irritated cat."

Miss Zapt sniffed very much as Xenophon Xerxes might have done in a similar instance. At the same time Bob's suggestion appeared to find weight with her, to judge by her expression. She dug slender fingers into Fluffy's hair in search of the possible cause of her actions. And Fluffy seemed actually pleased. She began purring gently—stretched.

A minute, two minutes passed. "I don't see it," said Miss Zapt.

"Well, keep it up anyway," Bob said. "It seems to soothe her."

Nellie turned actually angry eyes back to her quest. Of a sudden they focused intently. "Bob!"

"What?"

"I saw it. But it moved."

"It would." Sargent knelt beside girl and cat. He parted the pelt in investigation—revealed a darkly mov-

ing object, jammed down a thumb and finger and withdrew an object the size of an ordinary bean. "Got it," he announced and rose to obtain a better light on what he had found.

"What—is it?" Nellie joined him. "Woodtick?"

"No-o. It's a flea all right. Well—I'm darned." Sargent's accents were those of a slightly awed wonder. "It's an honest-to-goodness flea, but—Good Lord!" The blood-swollen body between his digits burst and left them stained.

"You've—killed it!" Nellie accused.

"Looks like it." Bob viewed the remains in rueful fashion. "Where's your father?"

"Upstairs. Do you think it's—one of his?" Nellie's eyes were wide.

"Judging by its size. Come along."

SARGENT started for the stairs. Nellie went with him. Outside the laboratory door they paused and Bob rapped.

"Well? Well?" Xenophon Kexes replied in the tone of one not wishing to be disturbed.

"It's Sargent, professor," Bob called. "I've something that belongs to you, I fancy."

"You've what?" The laboratory door was jerked partly open and Xenophon Kexes peered out.

Bob extended his hand with the dead flea upon it. "It was on Fluffy. It was disturbing her a good deal, and we caught it, and—it burst."

"Naturally. But—it doesn't matter, Robert." The professor drew the door farther open. "Come in—and I will show you a really interesting exhibit of the scientific application of modern knowledge applied to the metabolic processes, and the use of vitamins."

"You mean—you have—others?" Bob edged into the room behind Nellie.

"Of course." Xenophon actually beamed. "Did you imagine you had destroyed the only one? Not at all, Robert. Not at all. Here—" He led the way to a glass box pierced at each end by a metal bar from which wires led to a small electrical generator on an insulated table. "You can see how they are coming on."

"Ugh!" Nellie gave one glance and shuddered.

Bob stared out of suddenly narrowed eyes. Inside the glass were possibly a dozen of the insects even larger than the one he had found. They swarmed over a lump of raw beef. "Remarkable. I wouldn't have believed it possible," he said at length.

Xenophon Kexes nodded. "Man stands today on the threshold of things undreamed in other years, Robert. Today we are beginning to lay hold upon an understanding of life forces, and hence the processes of life itself. Organic therapy, the study of endocrine glands, has done much. But even the endocrines are powerless to function unless given the substance with which to build. There has been a missing link in our knowledge. Then came the discovery of vitamins—the essential growth-producing elements of food—the—er—essence of food. It was the application of that knowledge I found essential in this experiment."

"But—I thought you said life was vibration?" Sargent seemed a trifle dazed.

"I did, Robert. I did. Life is vibration. But let me ask you—what maintains vibration once it is brought into manifestation?"

"Why—er—force. Do you mean—food?"

"Exactly!" Xenophon rubbed his thin hands together. "You're coming on, Robert, upon my word! Therefore in order to obtain the success I aimed at, it became necessary to raise a vibratory rate in the presence of a

food excess, and at the same time supply the impulse for that food's use. The generator here furnishes the vibratory rate. The beef is the food—its juices. As you know, in all electrical devices there is a negative and a positive pole. The negative is the active—the change-producing. Current flows from negative to positive. Therefore in order to supply my third essential, that small sponge on the negative electrode you see entering the cage is soaked in water-soluble vitamins, which are carried by the vibratory current to become a part of the contained atmosphere. The hypothetical requirements being correctly deduced and furnished—the result—well, Robert, you can see the result for yourself."

"Rather." Bob turned his eyes to the cage again and started. "I say, professor—are those things getting larger? They look bigger—"

"They are growing, Robert." Xenophon Xerxes smiled. "Don't let that surprize you. Growth is a multiplication of cells. And since a cell in multiplying, reproduces itself—you will perceive that the ratio of increase is the square of the primary number. For that very reason it will soon become necessary to destroy all save the best developed specimen of the lot. Of course when I stop the current passing, the rapid development halts."

Sargent nodded. "It's a good deal like compound interest, isn't it?" he said a trifle vaguely.

"I trust you find it interesting, purely as a demonstration." Zapt eyed him in a suspicious manner.

"Oh, yes, indeed." Bob took a long, deep breath. "I never saw anything like it, in my life."

"Without wishing to seem egotistical, Robert," Zapt accepted the assurance quickly, "I feel that I am justified in the assertion that until I brought about the necessary correlation of environment, outside of what

has been called from time to time a freak of nature, neither did anyone else."

"I should hope not," Nellie broke into the conversation. "If he did, he probably thought he was drunk."

Her father viewed her in tolerant silence. He put up a hand and stroked his graying whiskers. "And as a matter of fact, Robert," he remarked, transferring his gaze to the already amazing products of his endeavors, "I may add that the experiment is scarcely more than begun."

4

WITH that statement Mr. Robert Sargent most emphatically agreed on a later occasion, when, having apparently heard his voice below stairs, Professor Zapt came down in his flapping coat and a pair of carpet slippers and invited him up to inspect advanced results.

There was a childlike quality about the little scientist at times, in that he desired to exhibit the fruits of his labors, as Bob had learned in the past. And he judged that Xenophon Xerxes was handicapped in the present instance by Nellie's attitude toward what she frankly declared was an unwarranted interference with nature's designs as affecting insect life. Moreover he was genuinely curious to learn to what extent the professor had succeeded as he accompanied him back up-stairs. Nellie went along.

Xenophon Xerxes threw open the laboratory door with the hint of a flourish and jerked his hand at the glass cage Bob had seen before.

"There," said he, "is *Pulex*."

Sargent stared and caught his breath. Where before had been some dozen surprizingly large fleas, there was now but one. And that one was immense. It was monstrous—huge—a swollen, bloated, overgrown, Brobdingnagian extravaganza of a flea, that nearly filled the glass walls inside

which it squatted, beneath a heavily weighted top.

"Call him *Pulex*, do you?" Bob began, and paused at Nellie's gasp.

He turned to her, found her gazing at the unbelievable inmate of the glass box with wide-open, pupil-stretched eyes. Her lips parted. "You mean—you've given—that thing—a name?" she faltered.

"Exactly. *Pulex*, my dear, from the entomological denomination derived from the Latin—*Pulex irritans*—genus *Pulex*—variety, *irritans*," Xenophon Xerxes announced.

Bob nodded. "Well—he looks irritable. Isn't he sort of cramped in that box?"

"Possibly," Zapt assented. "But you see, Robert, the process of growth has slowed the last two days. It is my opinion that development has about reached its limit."

"It's horrible." Nellie's face was white. "Bob—look at it—look at its—eyes. It—knows we're here," she chattered. "It's looking at us. It's terrible—wicked!"

"The wicked flea," Sargent said, smiling, as she paused with clicking teeth. "The wicked flea, and no man pursueth."

Miss Zapt broke into hysterical laughter. "The wicked—flea—and—no man—pur-su-eth! Oh, ha, ha, Bob! That's the best thing—you've said—in a month!"

Xenophon Xerxes stiffened before that outburst of what he plainly regarded as unseemly mirth. "Get her out of here, Robert," he directed. "Take her down-stairs. Women have no scientific appreciation. They prefer an untimely humor."

"Come along, Honey Lamb Child, we'll fly while no wicked flea can pursue us," Sargent prompted and led her back down-stairs.

Once there she subsided upon the living room couch. "Oh, Bob! Did you—see Father's face?" she gasped.

Bob grinned and nodded. "He looked almost as irritable as *Pulex*," he said.

Nellie giggled. "Well—don't let's talk any more about it. I shouldn't have made him angry."

"All right," Bob agreed. Nor had he any intention of reverting to the subject when next he passed beneath the professor's roof.

Neither did he contemplate coming into contact with Xenophon Xerxes himself. The seclusion the eminent investigator had maintained during his experiment rather precluded that. Consequently it was with a feeling of distinct surprize that he found him puttering about the lower floor.

Furthermore, Zapt's demeanor was a thing calculated to attract attention, though he manifestly aimed at the reverse. His bearing, indeed, was that of a man in a state of mental unrest. He replied to Bob's greeting in absent-minded fashion, went over and moved a chair out of a corner, tilted it on its legs and set it back in place. Immediately afterward he left the room, and in five minutes he was back. He hung about, twiddling his fingers beneath the tail of his shapeless coat, until, seizing a moment when he fancied himself unobserved, he bent and glanced under the couch.

"Father!"

Xenophon straightened at the sound of Nellie's voice.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing—er—that is, nothing." Xenophon went over and sat down in his favorite chair beside a table loaded with scientific journals and books. He sighed. For possibly three minutes he sat with forehead furrowed into a frown of what might have been consideration. Then he bounced up and went into the hall. Sounds indicated his investigation of a closet where umbrellas and raincoats were stored.

Nellie glanced at Bob, rose and passed silently to the archway through which the hall was reached.

"Father—what are you hunting?" she asked.

Silence followed, punctuated by the closing of the closet door. Xenophon Xerxes joined her, re-entered the living room and regained his seat. For a moment he drummed on the table with nervous fingers. He cleared his throat.

"As a matter of fact," he announced at the end of possibly a minute, "Pulex has escaped."

"Pulex?"

"Escaped?"

Bob and Nellie spoke at once.

"Yes." The professor got up again.

"It's really most annoying. I—I can only blame myself. Quite early this evening I fell into a doze while observing what I felt sure were the final hours of his growth. I—er—forgot to shut off the generator, connected with the cage. I can only presume that it continued to run and—er—Pulex became too large for the container. At all events it—burst. When I awoke it was in fragments and the—er—insect had disappeared."

"And," Nellie accused, "that's why you've been roaming around looking under things the last hour?"

"Yes, my dear," Xenophon Xerxes sighed. "I—er—confess I have been in hopes of coming across it—that it had—er—secreted itself. I've been intending to have it permanently mounted as a demonstration of—" He broke off at sounds of a commotion in the rear of the house, cocked his head as though seeking to appraise them, and then exclaimed: "God bless my soul! Perhaps—"

Without finishing the hypothetical conclusion, he started for the hallway.

SARGENT and Nellie followed quite as a matter of course. The trio made their way to the rear, Xenophon

Xerxes being the first to reach the kitchen and snap on a light.

His act revealed a remarkable sight.

Crouched on the floor was Pulex, and regarding him from a corner, half in terror and half in defiance, with every hair on her body in a state of furry excitement, was Nellie's cat.

"Fluffy!" Miss Zapt started forward to the rescue after a moment of breathless amaze.

"Hold on!" Bob swung her back, thrust himself before her, taking her task upon himself. He bore straight down on Pulex.

But Pulex did not wait. As Bob started he leaped.

"Catch him!" Xenophon lifted his voice in admonitory treble.

"Catch him yourself!" Sargent whirled. Pulex had leaped not from, but directly at him, and though he had ducked instinctively, a passing leg had rasped his cheek. As he turned, Pulex leaped again, missing him again as he dodged, and hit the farther wall with a heavy thud.

"Damn!" The expletive seemed jolted from Sargent's mouth.

Fluffy scampered between his legs, tripped him and sent him down to the floor with a bump.

"God bless my soul!" Xenophon Xerxes faltered. "The thing is—actually vicious. Did you notice that it seemed—inclined to attack you, Robert?"

"Yes." Bob scrambled up. "I noticed it." His eyes sought Pulex and found him squatted warily observant against a baseboard. "He's a wicked flea—but this time there's a man going to pursue him." He flung himself forward.

And Pulex exercised discretion. The kitchen window was open, and he lifted himself through it, butting headlong against a screen, tearing it loose along one edge and scrambling frantically through the resulting avenue of escape.

"God bless my soul!" said Xenophon Xerxes again. "I fear we've lost him, Robert."

"I don't know whether we have or not." Bob's blood was up. He dashed at the kitchen door and vanished through it.

Nellie joined him outside.

Zapt followed.

The three stood staring into the gloom of the back yard, faintly illuminated by the rays of a second quarter moon. There came presently to their ears a rasping, scratching sound from overhead.

Bob ran farther out and sought for its source. "There he is," he announced, and pointed to where Pulex was ambling sedately along the ridge-pole of the house. As they watched, the fugitive gained the shadow of a chimney and disappeared.

"I'll get him out of that soon enough," Bob promised. "They can't stand water. Where's the hose?"

"I'll—bring it, Robert." Xenophon Xerxes hurried off, his coat tails flapping.

"Get a broom or a stick." Bob turned his glance to Nellie. "He'll jump when the water hits him. Be ready to swat him."

"Swat the flea," Nellie giggled and ran off to obtain the suggested means for so doing.

Zapt came back with the hose. He had turned on the water and thrust the nozzle into Sargent's hands.

Nellie reappeared with a broom and the handle of a mop.

Bob explained their purpose and Xenophon took the mop, stepping back from the wall of the house, with Nellie posted a short space from him.

"Now!" Bob lifted the stream of water against the chimney, and saw a dark object hurtle above him.

"Catch him!" he cried, turning toward Nellie and her father.

The hose turned with him. Its stream struck Xenophon Xerxes just below an uptilted chin.

"Professor!" Bob began in a tone of consternation.

"Ass!" The eminent investigator hurled his mopstick upon the ground and strode, dripping, into the house.

5

OFFICER DANIEL MC GUINNESS, patrolman of the district embracing the Zapt residence, rang in at the end of a round and gave ear to a question couched in the station sergeant's voice:

"Say, Mac, what sort of people are M. K. Brown and wife on Elm Street? Is the lady by any chance bugs?"

"Why," Danny frowned at the transmitter, "not that I know of, sargeant. For why do ye ask?"

"Well," the voice came back, "she called up a bit ago and wanted to know if we'd send out there. Said a flea chased her dog into the house."

"A—flea?" Danny steadied himself against the patrol box.

"That's what *she* said."

"Ut—chased her—dog?"

"Accordin' to th' lady."

"How big—was th' dog?"

There was a pause while Danny waited for an answer. When it came its delay seemed explained by the sergeant's intention to make it sufficient:

"See here, McGuinness, don't get funny! Go find out what sort of hootch they're using, th' next time you pass their house."

"Yis, sor." Danny hung up, removed his helmet and scratched his head. Resuming his beat he turned over the amazing information he had just received—a flea—had chased—Brown's dog—into the house.

"It ain't possible," said Danny to himself. "It's been hot th' last few days, though. Maybe—anyway, when I git over there, I'll stop—though if there are any sich anymiles about th' place, 'tis more a job fer th' sanitary squad."

Wherefore, when he approached the Brown residence, he turned in from the street, mounted the front porch and set a heavy finger to a bell.

His summons was answered by Brown himself.

Danny knew him. "Good evenin', Misther Brown," he said. "Th' sar-junt was sayin' as how—maybe I'd better stop."

"Yes. Come in, McGuiness." Brown held the door wide.

Danny removed his helmet and followed into a room where Mrs. Brown sat. He accepted a chair. "An' now just phawt was th' trouble?" he suggested. "Th' Sarge was sayin' something—about a—about a—"

"About a flea," Mrs. Brown declared in a tone of nervous excitement. "That is, it looked like a flea, except that it was so large. I never saw anything like it."

Danny nodded. "An'—ut chased—your dog?"

"Yes. He ran up on the porch and whimpered, and when Mrs. Brown went to let him in, this thing was right behind him," Brown said.

"Th' dog's a little felly?"

"He's a full-grown Gordon setter."

"You seen ut yourself?" Danny looked Brown full in the eyes.

"Yes." They did not falter.

"When Mrs. Brown screamed I ran out to see what was wrong and there it was in the hall. Oh, I know it sounds crazy, McGuiness, but a man believes what he sees."

"Yis, sor—sometimes." Danny sniffed. It was almost as though he were seeking some definite odor.

And Brown noted the action. He laughed shortly. "Oh—I'm not drunk, McGuiness."

"Yis, sor—no, sor," Danny corrected himself quickly. "An' so this here—whatever ut was—follied th' dog inside?"

"It did."

"An' where is ut now?"

"It's gone. We didn't keep it as a pet. I tried to throw my coat over it, but it jumped back through the door."

"Oh, thin—ye druv it off." Danny rose. "Thot bein' th' case I don't see phawt I can do at prisint. If ye see anything more of it—of course—"

Mrs. Brown spoke again. "I suppose it was foolish to report it. But—it was so strange—I thought somebody ought to know such a thing was at large. So—I rang up."

"Yis, ma'am," said McGuiness. "I'll report to th' sar-junt th' next toime I ring in, that I come over an'—"

He broke off at the sound of a feminine scream from the street, whirled quickly, clapped on his helmet and bolted out of the house.

HE EMERGED to find a young woman clinging to the arm of a masculine companion and clattered heavily toward them.

"Phawt's th' matter?" he demanded, coming to a halt.

"I've—been bitten," the girl said in a gasping voice.

Danny eyed her escort in suspicious fashion. "Phawt was ut bit ye?" he asked.

"The—the—toad."

"Th'—toad?" Danny McGuiness stared. His words came like a belated echo at the end of an appreciable pause.

"Yes. At least I guess it was a toad. It hopped out, just as we were passing." The young woman released her escort's arm and faced Danny.

Danny considered. "It hopped out an' bit ye—how?" he asked at length.

"Why—with its mouth, I suppose."

"Th' toad did?" Danny was breathing deeply.

"Certainly." The girl's companion spoke for the first time. "See here, officer, what's the matter with you, anyway?"

Danny took a grip on his senses and his club. "There ain't anything th' matter with me, young felly," he averred. "Where was ut this here toad bit ye, ma'am?"

"Why, right here," the victim declared.

Danny nodded. "Yis, yis, but—whereabouts on—yerself?"

"Oh—why, on the ankle—just above the foot."

"'Tis the usual location of ankles." Danny nodded again. "An' afterwards—phawt did th' toad do after ut bit ye?"

"Just a minute, officer," the other man interrupted. "We were talking of a—"

"You were talkin' of a toad," said Danny gruffly.

"Yes. And there's no use in going at the matter as though it had been a holdup or a thug. It hopped out and bit Miss Grant and hopped off again down the road. Then you ran out and asked what had happened. That's all there is to it. Are you able to walk, dear?"

Miss Grant murmured an assent.

Her escort turned back to Danny. "So now that you know all the details, if you don't mind, we'll proceed."

"Yis, sor." Danny drew back. "I run out because th' young lady screamed. An' phawt ye told me filled me wid surprize, because"—for the life of him he could not resist a parting shot, in view of the other man's manner—" 'tis th' first toime I ever heard of a toad bite, by th' token that th' varmints haven't anny teeth. Good noight, sor. I hope ye git home all roight. Now if ut had been a flea—"

"A flea?" The other man eyed him, and all at once he laughed. "Officer, you've lost your sense of proportion. I saw it. It was as big as a— a scuttle of coal, at least."

"Yis, sor—'tis sort of dark along here." Danny watched the pair move off, before he removed his helmet and wiped his forehead with the back of a hand. "Phew!" He replaced the helmet. "Th' flea was big enough to chase th' kiyoodle an' th' toad was big as a hod o' coal. Somebody's lost their sines of proportion, all roight, I guess." He resumed his sadly delayed patrol.

"'Tis a funny noight," he mused. "Dog-chasin' fleas, an' bitin' toads. Domned if ut *don't* sound home brewed. An' as for my sines of proportion"—he gazed about him and chuckled—"iverything looks nacheral enough. Most loikely thim two was swateheartin' along an' th' poor toad hopped out an' scared her, an' she thought she was bit. Wimmen git funny notions, whin they're tuk suddint off their guard. As fer th' flea—beloike ut was somethin' th' fool dog treed."

But if Danny's line of argument satisfied him, what complacency he had evolved by the time he once more arrived at the end of his round was destined to receive a shattering jolt.

"McGuiness," the sergeant demanded, "what sort of a menagerie has broken out up there tonight? There's a man just come into th' emergency, says he was bitten in a taxicab."

"Bit-ten?" Danny faltered.

"Yes, bitten. Shut up and listen. He drove up there in a cab and went into a house. When he came out something was in the cab and bit him and jumped out of the window. He's got a wound on his leg and they're giving him anti-tetanic serum. He says he thinks it was a cat with hydrophobia—"

"A—a—cat?" McGuiness babbled.

"Yes. A cat—a mad cat. Understand? Now get busy and see what's broke loose. If you find anything—shoot it."

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The Wicked Flea

(Continued from page 448)

"Yis, sor." Danny was sweating from something besides the heat as he hung up.

"Howly Hiven!" he muttered as he closed the box with a slowness indicative of instinctive caution. "First ut was a flea—an' thin ut was a toad—an' now ut is a cat. Phawt th' divil *is* ut, I wonder—an' *is* ut wan thing or a menagerie loike th' sar-junt says? If ut is wan thing, how can ut be three things to wunst? I dunno, but 'tis surely somethin' or I've been overlookin' a bootleggin' joint. An' even so they ain't injectin' it intil folks in taxis. Thot felly has a wound."

Suddenly he tightened his grip on his stick, felt for his service weapon and started up the street with a newly acquired stealth.

"Shoot ut, th' sar-junt says. An' if I foind ut, begob I will. Maybe after ut's dead, we can foind out phawt ut is."

IN SUCH a frame of mind Officer Daniel McGuinness once more approached Brown's house. Trees lined the street before it and Zapt's residence next door, their branches casting a checkering of shadow across the pavement. And as Danny advanced, peering intently about him—one of those shadowy patches—*moved*.

At least that is how it appeared, until closer inspection convinced him that some dark object was progressing along the sidewalk.

McGuinness came to a halt and stared. And even as he did so the thing crawled into a patch of light thrown by the corner arc lamp.

"Howly—Mither!" The words were no more than a startled gasp.

This was the most amazing sight in Officer McGuinness' life. Whatever

the thing was, it was worthy of attention. It had an enormously bloated body, seemingly encased in a series of overlapping horny scales. And it dragged itself forward, mainly on a pair of grotesque legs that stuck up above its back, at the knees—or joints, or whatever one called them.

For a breath-taking moment Danny stood with an odd sensation as though the hair beneath his helmet was striving to push the latter off. Then his hand reached for his weapon. He was startled, amazed, dumfounded, but not actually afraid. He had been told to shoot the thing if he came across it, and not for an instant did he doubt that he had met up with it. He drew the deadly service gun and aimed it. His hand steadied, centered the muzzle on the target.

“Bang!”

“**W**HAT was that?” said Miss Zapt.

Bob Sargent frowned. “It sounded like a blowout—or a shot.”

At the last word Nellie’s blue eyes widened. “Bob! It was right in front of the house!” She ran to the door and through it to the porch.

“Good evenin’, Miss Nellie,” a voice she recognized as that of the policeman on night duty in their district called. “Don’t ye be scared. ’Tis nuthin’! I just shot somethin’ wid hydrophoby.”

“With—what?” said Miss Zapt.

“I dunno. ’Twas a funny-lookin’ son of th’ devil, askin’ yer pardin.”

“Father! Bob!” Miss Zapt ran down the steps and out to the street.

Xenophon Xerxes, once more in dry garments, followed with Sargent. They caught up with her where she stood beside Officer McGuiness.

“The wicked flea. He’s killed it,” she said, pointing to a dark and motionless object at his feet.

“Flea!” Danny began and paused

as though short of breath. "Was ut a flea, thin?"

"Yes. The wicked flea, and no man pursueth. Haven't you read your Bible, Mr. McGuiness?" She laughed.

Danny nodded. "I hov thot. Th' wicked flea, an' no man pursueth."

He put out a foot and pushed Pulex. "Sure thin—he looks wicked but—I've been pursuin' him half th' evenin'. An' by th' same token Missus Brown was roight in sayin' he chased her dog into th' house."

"God bless my soul!" Xenophon Xerxes exploded. "Did—did this—this insect do that, McGuiness?"

"'Tis phawt th' lady says, though till th' last few moments I've been misdoubtin' her word." Danny scowled.

"Marvelous!" The professor rubbed his hands. "Amazing! Ancestral instinct, perhaps. You see, he came off Brown's dog in the first place."

"He—phawt?" Danny dragged his glance from the body of Pulex. "Howld on, perfissor. D'ye mean to say this thing come offn th' dog?"

"Of course," Xenophon Xerxes nodded.

"Thin," said Danny with conviction, "sure I don't blame th' kiyoodle fer tryin' to escape him, wunst he had shook him off. Begorra—I—"

"Wait a bit, officer," Zapt interrupted. "Of course the creature was not originally so—large." He plunged into explanations.

Danny heard him in stolid silence. At the end he glanced once more at Pulex, removed his helmet and ran a finger about its dampened band. "An' ye raised him from—"

"A pup," Sargent interjected. McGuiness gave him a glance. "You raised him from an ordinary little wan, perfissor?" he said in a tone of wonder.

"Exactly," said Xenophon Xerxes Zapt.

"An' he escaped you th' noight?"

"Yes. Precisely. He escaped."

'An' chased Brown's dog, an' bit a young wumman on th' ankle above her foot, an' a man in a taxicab—"

"What! What's that?" Xenophon Xerxes exclaimed. "Do you mean—"

Danny nodded. "Tis th' truth I'm tellin' ye, perfessor. 'Twas most loikely some of his ancestral instincts again. But th' sar-junt told me to kill ut, an I did so, an' whilst 'tis a raymarkable dimonstration, as I ain't denyin', I'm thinkin' that after all ut's small loss. Fleas of thot size—"

"I agree with you, McGuinness."

Xenophon Xerxes thrust a hand into a pocket and withdrew a bit of crumpled paper to press it into Danny's unresisting fingers. "Here—is a trifle for your trouble. I do not regret your excellent marksmanship in the least. And I—er—appreciate your commendable fidelity to duty. As a matter of fact I intended giving it chloroform myself." He stooped and took up the carcass of Pulex. "Good-night, officer—good-night."

AN HOUR later, and for the third time, Officer Daniel McGuinness approached the telephone box at the completion of his round. He yanked it open and jerked the receiver off the hook. "Give me th' sar-junt," he demanded and waited till he heard that officer's voice.

"'Tis McGuinness," he said then, "an' I've claned up my district. I found thot flea an' killed ut—"

"What's that?" The sergeant's voice was gruff. "McGuinness—talk sense."

"I'm talkin' sinse," Danny retorted. "Listen." Then he explained.

"Oh—Zapt," the sergeant made comment when he had finished. "Well—that accounts for it, I guess."

"It does," said Danny McGuinness. He hung up and banged shut the box.