

*Professor Jonkin's
Cannibal Plant*

Howard R. Garis

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Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant

BY HOWARD R. GARIS

A triumph of cultivation which threatened a tragedy in mastication.

After Professor Jephtha Jonkin had, by skilful grafting and care, succeeded in raising a single tree that produced, at different seasons, apples, oranges, pineapples, figs, cocoanuts, and peaches, it might have been supposed he would rest from his scientific labors. But Professor Jonkin was not that kind of a man.

He was continually striving to grow something new in the plant world. So it was no surprise to Bradley Adams, when calling on his friend the professor one afternoon, to find that scientist busy in his large conservatory.

"What are you up to now?" asked Adams. "Trying to make a rose-bush produce violets, or a honeysuckle vine bring forth pumpkins?"

"Neither," replied Professor Jonkin a little stiffly, for he resented Adams' playful tone. "Not that either of those things would be difficult. But look at that."

He pointed to a small plant with bright, glossy green leaves mottled with red spots. The thing was growing in a large earthen pot.

It bore three flowers, about the size of morning glories, and not unlike that blossom in shape, save, near the top, there was a sort of lid, similar to the flap observed on a jack-in-the-pulpit plant.

"Look down one of those flowers," went on the professor, and Adams, wondering what was to come, did so.

He saw within a small tube, lined with fine, hair-like filaments, which seemed to be in motion. And the shaft or tube went down to the bottom of the morning-glory-shaped part of the flower. At the lower extremity was a little clear liquid.

"Kind of a queer blossom. What is it?" asked Adams.

"That," said the professor with a note of pride in his voice, "is a specimen of the *Sarracenia Nepenthis*."

“What’s that? French for sunflower, or Latin for sweet pea?” asked Adams irreverently.

“It is Latin for pitcher plant,” responded the professor, drawing himself up to his full height of five feet three. “One of the most interesting of the South American flora.”

“The name fits it pretty well,” observed Adams. “I see there’s water at the bottom. I suppose this isn’t the pitcher that went to the well too often.”

“The *Sarracenia Nepenthis* is a most wonderful plant,” went on the professor in his lecture voice, not heeding Adams’ joking remarks. “It belongs to what Darwin calls the carnivorous family of flowers, and other varieties of the same species are the *Dionaea Muscipula*, or Venus Fly-trap, the *Darlingtonia*, the *Pinguicula* and *Aldrovandra*, as well as——”

“Hold on, professor,” pleaded Adams. “I’ll take the rest on faith. Just tell me about this pitcher plant. It seems interesting.”

“It *is* interesting,” said Professor Jonkin. “It eats insects.”

“Eats insects?”

“Certainly. Watch.”

The professor opened a small wire cage lying on a shelf and took from it several flies. These he liberated close to the queer plant.

The insects buzzed about a few seconds, dazed with their sudden liberty.

Then they began slowly to circle in the vicinity of the strange flowers. Nearer and nearer the blossoms they came, attracted by some subtle perfume, as well as by a sweet syrup that was on the edge of the petals, put there by nature for the very purpose of drawing hapless insects into the trap.

The flies settled down, some on the petals of all three blooms. Then a curious thing happened.

The little hair-like filaments in the tube within the petals suddenly reached out and wound themselves about the insects feeding on the sweet stuff, and which seemed to intoxicate them. In an instant the flies were pulled to the top of the flower shaft by a contraction of the hairs, and then they went tumbling down the tube into the miniature pond below, where they were drowned after a brief struggle. Their crawling back was prevented by spines growing with points down, as the wires in some rat-traps are fastened.

Meanwhile the cover of the plant closed down.

“Why, it’s a regular fly-trap, isn’t it?” remarked Adams, much surprised.

“It is,” replied the professor. “The plant lives off the insects it captures. It absorbs them, digests them, and, when it is hungry again, catches more.”

“Where’d you get such an uncanny thing?” asked Adams, moving away from the plant as if he feared it might take a sample bite out of him.

“A friend sent it to me from Brazil.”

“But you’re not going to keep it, I hope.”

“I certainly am,” rejoined Professor Jonkin.

“Maybe you’re going to train it to come to the table and eat like a human being,” suggested Adams, with a laugh that nettled the professor.

“I wouldn’t have to train it much to induce it to be polite,” snapped back the owner of the pitcher plant.

And then, seeing that his jokes were not relished, Adams assumed an interest he did not feel, and listened to a long dissertation on botany in general and carnivorous plants in particular.

He would much rather have been eating some of the queer hybrid fruits the professor raised. He pleaded an engagement when he saw an opening in the talk, and went away.

It was some months after that before he saw the professor again. The botanist was busy in his conservatory in the mean time, and the gardener he hired to do rough work noticed that his master spent much time in that part of the glass house where the pitcher plant was growing.

For Professor Jonkin had become so much interested in his latest acquisition that he seemed to think of nothing else. His plan for increasing strawberries to the size of peaches was abandoned for a time, as was his pet scheme of raising apples without any core.

The gardener wondered what there was about the South American blossoms to require such close attention.

One day he thought he would find out, and he started to enter that part of the conservatory where the pitcher plant was growing. Professor Jonkin halted him before he had stepped inside and sternly bade him never to appear there again.

As the gardener, crestfallen, moved away after a glimpse into the forbidden region he muttered:

“My, that plant has certainly grown! And I wonder what the professor was doing so close to it. Looked as if he was feeding the thing.”

As the days went by the conduct of Professor Jonkin became more and more curious. He scarcely left the southern end of the conservatory, save at night, when he entered his house to sleep.

He was a bachelor, and had no family cares to trouble him, so he could spend all his time among his plants. But hitherto he had divided his attention among his many experiments in the floral kingdom.

Now he was always with his mysterious pitcher plant. He even had his meals sent into the green-house.

“Be you keepin’ boarders?” asked the butcher boy of the gardener one day, pausing on his return to the store, his empty basket on his arm.

“No. Why?”

“The professor is orderin’ so much meat lately. I thought you had company.”

“No, there’s only us two. Mr. Adams used to come to dinner once in a while, but not lately.”

“Then you an’ the professor must have big appetites.”

“What makes you think so?”

“The number of beefsteaks you eat.”

“Number of beefsteaks? Why, my lad, the professor and I are both vegetarians.”

“What’s them?”

“We neither of us eat a bit of meat. We don’t believe it’s healthy.”

“Then what becomes of the three big porterhouse steaks I deliver to the professor in the green-house every day?”

“Porterhouse steaks?” questioned the gardener, amazed.

“Do you feed ’em to the dog?”

“We don’t keep a dog.”

But the butcher boy questioned no further, for he saw a chum and hastened off to join him.

“Three porterhouse steaks a day!” mused the gardener, shaking his head. “I do hope the professor has not ceased to be a vegetarian. Yet it looks mighty suspicious. And he’s doing it on the sly, too, for there’s been no meat cooked in the house, of that I’m sure.”

And the gardener, sorely puzzled over the mystery, went off, shaking his head more solemnly than before.

He resolved to have a look in the place the professor guarded so carefully. He tried the door when he was sure his master was in another part of the conservatory, but it was locked, and no key the gardener had would unfasten it.

A month after the gardener had heard of the porterhouse steaks, Adams happened to drop in to see his friend the professor again.

“He’s in with the *Sarracenia Nepenthis*,” said the gardener in answer to the visitor’s inquiry. “But I doubt if he will let you enter.”

“Why won’t he?”

“Because he’s become mighty close-mouthed of late over that pitcher plant.”

“Oh, I guess he’ll see me,” remarked Adams confidently, and he knocked on the door that shut off the locked section of the green-house from the main portion.

“Who’s there?” called the professor.

“Adams.”

“Oh,” in a more conciliatory tone, “I was just wishing you’d come along. I have something to show you.”

Professor Jonkin opened the door, and the sight that met Adams’ gaze startled him.

The only plant in that part of the conservatory was a single specimen of the *Sarracenia Nepenthis*. Yet it had attained such enormous proportions that at first Adams thought he must be dreaming.

“What do you think of that for an achievement in science?” asked the professor proudly.

“Do you mean to say that is the small, fly-catching plant your friend sent you from Brazil?”

“The same.”

“But—but——”

“But how it’s grown, that’s what you want to say, isn’t it?”

“It is. How did you do it?”

“By dieting the blossoms.”

“You mean——?”

“I mean feeding them. Listen. I reasoned that if a small blossom of the plant would thrive on a few insects, by giving it larger meals I might get a bigger plant. So I made my plans.

“First I cut off all but one blossom, so that the strength of the plant would nourish that alone. Then I made out a bill of fare. I began feeding it on chopped beef. The plant took to it like a puppy. It seemed to beg for more. From chopped meat I went to small pieces, cut up. I could fairly see the blossom increase in size. From that I went to choice mutton chops, and, after a week of them, with the plant becoming more gigantic all the while, I increased its meals to a porterhouse steak a day. And now——”

The professor paused to contemplate his botanical work.

“Well, now?” questioned Adams.

“Now,” went on the professor proudly, “my pitcher plant takes three big beefsteaks every day—one for breakfast, one for dinner, and one for supper. And see the result.”

Adams gazed at the immense plant. From a growth about as big as an Easter lily it had increased until the top was near the roof of the greenhouse, twenty-five feet above.

About fifteen feet up, or ten feet from the top, there branched out a great flower, about eight feet long and three feet across the bell-shaped mouth, which, except for the cap or cover, was not unlike the opening of an immense morning glory.

The flower was heavy, and the stalk on which it grew was not strong enough to support it upright. So a rude scaffolding had been constructed of wood and boards, and on a frame the flower was held upright.

In order to see it to better advantage, and also that he might feed it, the professor had a ladder by which he could ascend to a small platform in front of the bell-shaped mouth of the blossom.

“It is time to give my pet its meal,” he announced, as if he were speaking of some favorite horse. “Want to come up and watch it eat?”

“No, thank you,” responded Adams. “It’s too uncanny.”

The professor took a large steak, one of the three which the butcher boy had left that day. Holding it in his hand, he climbed up the ladder and was soon on the platform in front of the plant.

Adams watched him curiously. The professor leaned over to toss the steak into the yawning mouth of the flower.

Suddenly Adams saw him totter, throw his arms wildly in the air, and then, as if drawn by some overpowering force, he fell forward, lost his balance, and toppled into the maw of the pitcher plant!

There was a jar to the stalk and blossom as the professor fell within. He went head first into the tube, or eating apparatus of the strange plant, his legs sticking out for an instant, kicking wildly. Then he disappeared entirely.

Adams didn’t know whether to laugh or be alarmed.

He mounted the ladder, and stood in amazement before the result of the professor’s work as he looked down into the depth of the gigantic flower, increased a hundred times in size.

He was aware of a strange, sickish-sweet odor that seemed to steal over his senses. It was lulling him to sleep, and he fought against it. Then he looked down and saw that the huge hairs or filaments with which the tube was lined were in violent motion.

He could just discern the professor’s feet about three feet below the rim of the flower. They were kicking, but with a force growing less every second. The filaments seemed to be winding about the professor’s legs, holding him in a deadly embrace.

Then the top cover, or flap of the plant, closed down suddenly. The professor was a prisoner inside.

The plant had turned cannibal and eaten the man who had grown it!

For an instant, fear deprived Adams of reason. He did not know what to do. Then the awful plight of his friend brought back his senses.

“Professor!” he shouted. “Are you alive? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” came back in faint and muffled tones. “This beast has me, all right.”

Then followed a series of violent struggles that shook the plant.

“I’ll get you out! Where’s an ax? I’ll chop the cursed plant to pieces!” cried Adams.

“Don’t! Don’t!” came in almost pleading tones from the imprisoned professor.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t hurt my pet!”

“Your pet!” snorted Adams angrily. “Nice kind of a pet you have! One that tries to eat you alive! But I’ve got to do something if I want to save you. Where’s the ax?”

“No! No!” begged the professor, his voice becoming more and more muffled. “Use chloroform.”

“Use what?”

“Chloroform! You’ll find some in the closet.”

Then Adams saw what the professor’s idea was. The plant could be made insensible, and the imprisoned man released with no harm to the blossom.

He raced down the ladder, ran to a closet where he had seen the professor’s stock of drugs and chemicals stowed away on the occasion of former visits, and grabbed a big bottle of chloroform. He caught up a towel and ran back up the ladder.

Not a sign of the professor could be seen. The plant had swallowed him up, but by the motion and swaying of the flower Adams knew his friend was yet alive.

He was in some doubt as to the success of this method, and would rather have taken an ax and chopped a hole in the side of the blossom, thus releasing the captive. But he decided to obey the professor.

Saturating the towel well with the chloroform, and holding his nose away from it, he pressed the wet cloth over the top of the blossom where the lid touched the edge of the bloom.

There was a slight opening at one point, and Adams poured some of the chloroform down this. He feared lest the fumes of the anesthetic might overpower the professor also, but he knew they would soon pass away if this happened.

For several minutes he waited anxiously. Would the plan succeed? Would the plant be overcome before it had killed the professor inside?

Adams was in a fever of terror. Again and again he saturated the towel with the powerful drug. Then he had the satisfaction of seeing the lid of the pitcher plant relax.

It slowly lifted and fell over to one side, making a good-sized opening. The strong filaments, not unlike the arms of a devil fish, Adams thought, were no longer in uneasy motion. They had released their grip on the professor's legs and body.

The spines which had pointed downward, holding the plant's prey, now became limber.

Adams leaned over. He reached down, grasped the professor by the feet, and, being a strong man, while his friend was small and light, he pulled him from the tube of the flower, a little dazed from the fumes of the chloroform the plant had breathed in, but otherwise not much the worse for his adventure.

He had not reached the water at the bottom of the tube, which fact saved him from drowning.

"Well, you certainly had a narrow squeak," observed Adams as he helped the professor down the ladder.

"I did," admitted the botanist. "If you had not been on hand I don't know what would have happened. I suppose I would have been eaten alive."

"Unless you could have cut yourself out of the side of the flower with your knife," observed Adams.

"What! And killed the plant I raised with such pains?" ejaculated the professor. "Spoil the largest *Sarracenia Nepenthis* in the world? I guess not. I would rather have let it eat me."

"I think you ought to call it the cannibal plant instead of the pitcher plant," suggested Adams.

"Oh, no," responded the professor dreamily, examining the flower from a distance to see if any harm had come to it. "But to punish it, I will not give it any supper or breakfast. That's what it gets for being naughty," he added as if the plant were a child.

"And I suggest that when you feed it hereafter," said Adams, "you pass the beefsteaks in on a pitch-fork. You won't run so much danger then."

“That’s a good idea. I’ll do it,” answered the professor heartily.
And he has followed that plan ever since.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant* by Howard R. Garis]