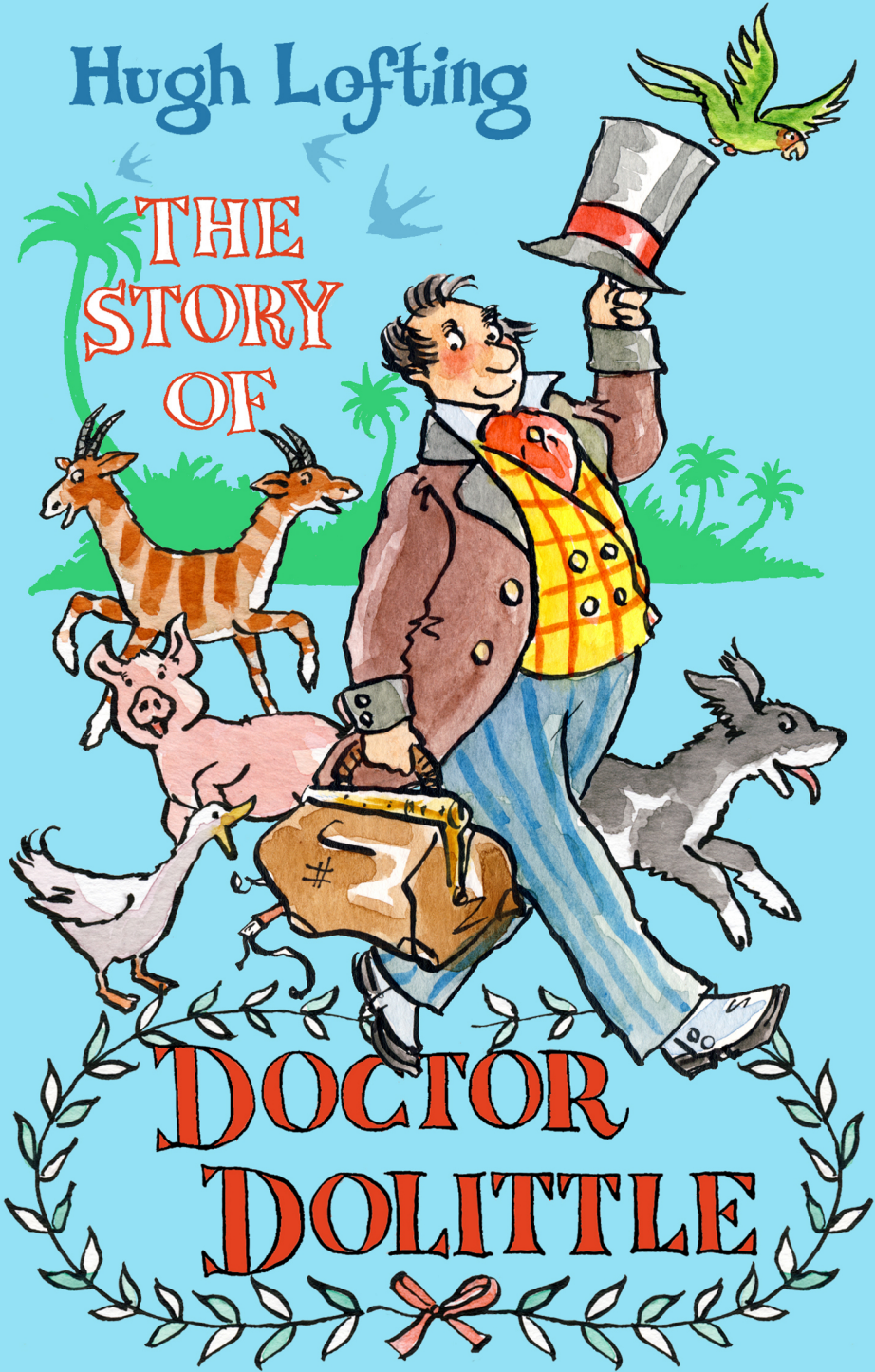


Hugh Lofting

THE
STORY
OF

DOCTOR
DOLITTLE



*The Story of
Doctor Dolittle*

Hugh Lofting



ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS LTD
3 Castle Yard
Richmond
Surrey TW10 6TF
United Kingdom
www.almaclassics.com

The Story of Doctor Dolittle first published in 1920
This edition first published by Alma Classics in 2018

Cover image © Susan Hellard, 2018

Extra Material © Alma Books Ltd

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84749-745-1

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TO
ALL CHILDREN

CHILDREN IN YEARS
AND CHILDREN IN HEART

I DEDICATE THIS STORY

*The Story of
Doctor Dolittle*

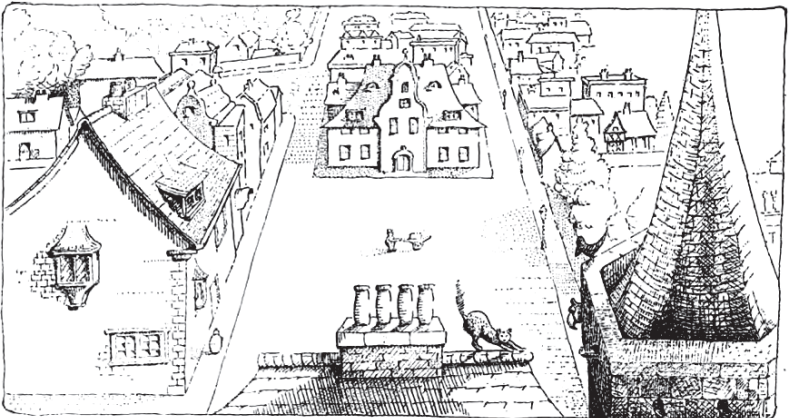
1

Puddleby



ONCE UPON A TIME, many years ago – when our grandfathers were little children – there was a doctor, and his name was Dolittle – John Dolittle, MD. “MD” means that he was a proper doctor and knew a whole lot.

He lived in a little town called Puddleby-on-the-Marsh. All the folks, young and old, knew him well by sight. And whenever he walked down the street in his high hat everyone would say, “There goes the Doctor! He’s a clever man.” And the dogs and the children would all run up and follow behind him, and even the crows that lived in the church tower would caw and nod their heads.



The house he lived in – on the edge of the town – was quite small, but his garden was very large and had a wide lawn and stone seats and weeping willows hanging over. His sister, Sarah Dolittle, was housekeeper for him, but the Doctor looked after the garden himself.

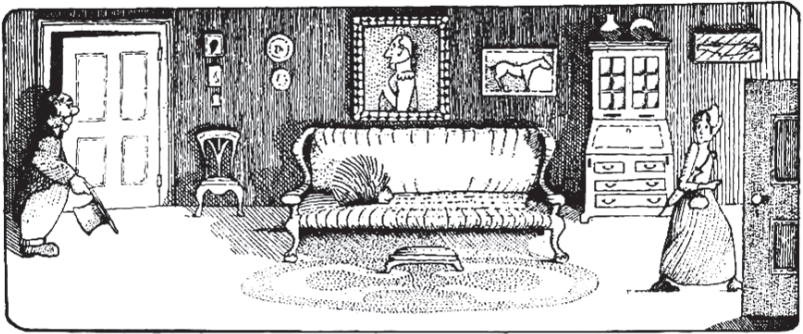
He was very fond of animals and kept many kinds of pets. Besides the goldfish in the pond at the bottom of his garden, he had rabbits in the pantry, white mice in his piano, a squirrel in the linen closet and a hedgehog in the cellar. He had a cow with a calf too, and an old lame horse – twenty-five years of age – and chickens, and pigeons, and two lambs, and many other animals. But his favourite pets were Dab-Dab the duck, Jip the dog, Gub-Gub the baby pig, Polynesia the parrot and Too-Too the owl.

His sister used to grumble about all these animals, and said they made the house untidy. And one day when an old lady with rheumatism came to see the Doctor, she sat on the hedgehog who was sleeping on the sofa and never came to see him any more, but drove every Saturday all the way to Oxenthorpe, another town ten miles off, to see a different doctor.

Then his sister, Sarah Dolittle, came to him and said:

“John, how can you expect patients to come and see you when you keep all these animals in the house? It’s a fine doctor would have his parlour full of hedgehogs and mice! That’s the fourth person these animals have driven away. Squire Jenkins and the Parson say they wouldn’t come near your house again – no matter how ill they are. We are getting poorer every day. If you go on like this, none of the best people will have you for a doctor.”

“But I like the animals better than the ‘best people’,” said the Doctor.



“You are ridiculous,” said his sister, and walked out of the room.

So, as time went on, the Doctor got more and more animals, and the people who came to see him got less and less. Till at last he had no one left – except the cat’s-meat man, who didn’t mind any kind of animals. But the cat’s-meat man wasn’t very rich, and he only got sick once a year – at Christmas time, when he used to give the Doctor sixpence for a bottle of medicine.

Sixpence a year wasn’t enough to live on – even in those days, long ago – and if the Doctor hadn’t had some money saved up in his money box, no one knows what would have happened.

And he kept on getting still more pets, and of course it cost a lot to feed them. And the money he had saved up grew littler and littler.

Then he sold his piano and let the mice live in a bureau drawer. But the money he got for that too began to go, so he sold the brown suit he wore on Sundays and went on becoming poorer and poorer.

And now, when he walked down the street in his high hat, people would say to one another, “There goes John Dolittle,

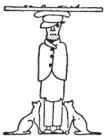
THE STORY OF DOCTOR DOLITTLE

MD! There was a time when he was the best-known doctor in the West Country. Look at him now – he hasn't any money and his stockings are full of holes!”

But the dogs and the cats and the children still ran up and followed him through the town – the same as they had done when he was rich.

2

Animal Language



IT HAPPENED ONE DAY that the Doctor was sitting in his kitchen talking with the cat's-meat man, who had come to see him with a stomach ache.

"Why don't you give up being a people's doctor, and be an animal doctor?" asked the cat's-meat man.

The parrot, Polynesia, was sitting in the window looking out at the rain and singing a sailor song to herself. She stopped singing and started to listen.

"You see, Doctor," the cat's-meat man went on, "you know all about animals – much more than what these here vets do. That book you wrote – about cats – why, it's wonderful! I can't read or write myself, or maybe *I'd* write some books. But my wife, Theodosia, she's a scholar, she is. And she read your book to me. Well, it's wonderful – that's all can be said – wonderful. You might have been a cat yourself. You know the way they think. And listen: you can make a lot of money doctoring animals. Do you know that? You see, I'd send all the old women who had sick cats or dogs to you. And if they didn't get ill fast enough, I could put something in the meat I sell 'em to make 'em bad, see?"

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

“Oh, I didn’t mean real bad,” answered the cat’s-meat man. “Just a little something to make them droopy-like was what I had reference to. But as you say, maybe it ain’t quite fair on the animals. But they’ll get ill, anyway, because the old women always give ’em too much to eat. And look, all the farmers round about who had lame horses and weak lambs – they’d come. Be an animal doctor.”

When the cat’s-meat man had gone, the parrot flew off the window onto the Doctor’s table and said: “That man’s got sense. That’s what you ought to do. Be an animal doctor. Give the silly people up – if they haven’t brains enough to see you’re the best doctor in the world. Take care of animals instead – they’ll soon find it out. Be an animal doctor.”

“Oh, there are plenty of animal doctors,” said John Dolittle, putting the flowerpots outside on the window sill to get the rain.

“Yes, there are plenty,” said Polynesia. “But none of them are any good at all. Now listen, Doctor, and I’ll tell you something. Did you know that animals can talk?”

“I knew that parrots can talk,” said the Doctor.

“Oh, we parrots can talk in two languages – people’s language and bird language,” said Polynesia proudly. “If I say, ‘Polly wants a biscuit,’ you understand me. But hear this: *Ka-ka oi-ee, fee-fee?*”

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

“That means ‘Is the porridge hot yet?’ in bird language.”

“My! You don’t say so!” said the Doctor. “You never talked that way to me before.”

“What would have been the good?” said Polynesia, dusting some biscuit crumbs off her left wing. “You wouldn’t have understood me if I had.”

“Tell me some more,” said the Doctor, all excited, and he rushed over to the dresser drawer and came back with the butcher’s book and a pencil. “Now don’t go too fast – and I’ll write it down. This is interesting, very interesting – something quite new. Give me the birds’ ABC first – slowly, now.”

So that was the way the Doctor came to know that animals had a language of their own and could talk to one another. And all that afternoon, while it was raining, Polynesia sat on the kitchen table giving him bird words to put down in the book.

At teatime, when the dog, Jip, came in, the parrot said to the Doctor, “See, *he’s* talking to you.”

“Looks to me as though he were scratching his ear,” said the Doctor.

“But animals don’t always speak with their mouths,” said the parrot in a high 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 noise. Do you see now the way he’s twitching up one side of his nose?”

“What’s that mean?” asked the Doctor.

“That means ‘Can’t you see that it has stopped raining?’” Polynesia answered. “He is asking you a question. Dogs nearly always use their noses for asking questions.”

After a while, with the parrot’s help, the Doctor got to learn the language of the animals so well that he could talk to them himself and understand everything they said. Then he gave up being a people’s doctor altogether.

As soon as the cat's-meat man had told everyone that John Dolittle was going to become an animal doctor, old ladies began to bring him their pet pugs and poodles who had eaten too much cake, and farmers came many miles to show him sick cows and sheep.

One day a plough horse was brought to him, and the poor thing was terribly glad to find a man who could talk in horse language.

"You know, Doctor," said the horse, "that vet over the hill knows nothing at all. He has been treating me six weeks now – for spavins. What I need is spectacles. I am going blind in one eye. There's no reason why horses shouldn't wear glasses the same as people. But that stupid man over the hill never even looked at my eyes. He kept on giving me big pills. I tried to tell him, but he couldn't understand a word of horse language. What I need is spectacles."

"Of course – of course," said the Doctor. "I'll get you some at once."

"I would like a pair like yours," said the horse, "only green. They'll keep the sun out of my eyes while I'm ploughing the fifty-acre field."

"Certainly," said the Doctor. "Green ones you shall have."

"You know, the trouble is, sir," said the plough horse as the Doctor opened the front door to let him out, "the trouble is that *anybody* thinks he can doctor animals, just because the animals don't complain. As a matter of fact, it takes a much cleverer man to be a really good animal doctor than it does to be a good people's doctor. My farmer's boy thinks he knows all about horses. I wish you could see him: his face is so fat he looks as though he had no eyes, and he has got as much brain as a potato. He tried to put a mustard plaster on me last week."

“Where did he put it?” asked the Doctor.

“Oh, he didn’t put it anywhere – on me,” said the horse. “He only tried to. I kicked him into the duck pond.”

“Well, well!” said the Doctor.

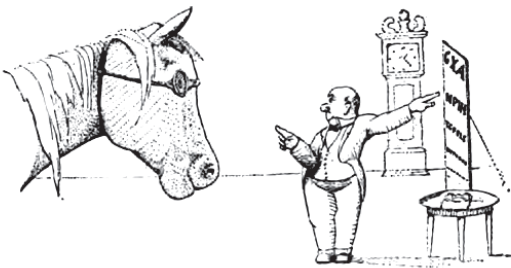
“I’m a pretty quiet creature as a rule,” said the horse, “very patient with people, don’t make much fuss. But it was bad enough to have that vet giving me the wrong medicine. And when that red-faced booby started to monkey with me, I just couldn’t bear it any more.”

“Did you hurt the boy much?” asked the Doctor.

“Oh no,” said the horse. “I kicked him in the right place. The vet’s looking after him now. When will my glasses be ready?”

“I’ll have them for you next week,” said the Doctor. “Come in again Tuesday. Good morning!”

Then John Dolittle got a fine big pair of green spectacles, and the plough horse stopped going blind in one eye and could see as well as ever.



And soon it became a common sight to see farm animals wearing glasses in the country round Puddleby, and a blind horse was a thing unknown.

And so it was with all the other animals that were brought to him. As soon as they found that he could talk their

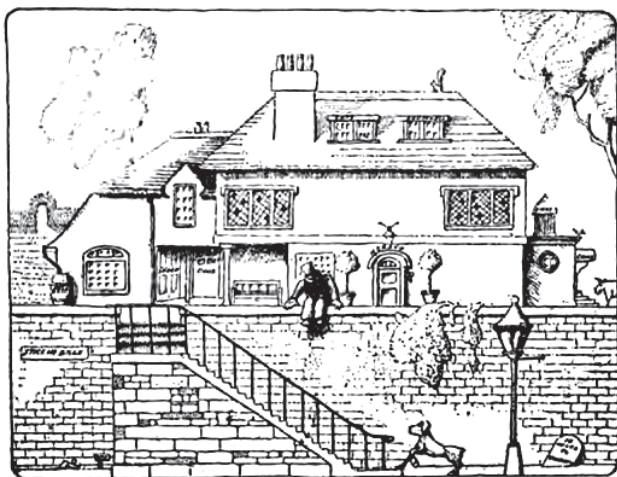
language, they told him where the pain was and how they felt, and of course it was easy for him to cure them.

Now all these animals went back and told their brothers and friends that there was a doctor in the little house with the big garden who really *was* a doctor. And whenever any creatures got sick – not only horses and cows and dogs, but all the little things of the fields, like harvest mice and water voles, badgers and bats – they came at once to his house on the edge of the town, so that his big garden was nearly always crowded with animals trying to get in to see him.

There were so many that came that he had to have special doors made for the different kinds. He wrote “HORSES” over the front door, “COWS” over the side door and “SHEEP” on the kitchen door. Each kind of animal had a separate door – even the mice had a tiny tunnel made for them into the cellar, where they waited patiently in rows for the Doctor to come round to them.

And so, in a few years’ time, every living thing for miles and miles got to know about John Dolittle, MD. And the birds who flew to other countries in the winter told the animals in foreign lands of the wonderful doctor of Puddleby-on-the-Marsh who could understand their talk and help them in their troubles. In this way, he became famous among the animals all over the world – better known even than he had been among the folks of the West Country. And he was happy and liked his life very much.

One afternoon, when the Doctor was busy writing in a book, Polynesia sat in the window – as she nearly always did – looking out at the leaves blowing about in the garden. Presently she laughed aloud.



“What is it, Polynesia?” asked the Doctor, looking up from his book.

“I was just thinking,” said the parrot, and she went on looking at the leaves.

“What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about people,” said Polynesia. “People make me sick. They think they’re so wonderful. The world has been going on now for thousands of years, hasn’t it? And the only thing in animal language that *people* have learnt to understand is that when a dog wags his tail he means ‘I’m glad!’ It’s funny, isn’t it? You are the very first man to talk like us. Oh, sometimes people annoy me dreadfully – such airs they put on – talking about ‘the dumb animals’. *Dumb!* Huh! Why, I knew a macaw once who could say ‘Good morning!’ in seven different ways without once opening his mouth. He could talk every language – and Greek. An old professor with a grey beard bought him. But he didn’t

stay. He said the old man didn't talk Greek right, and he couldn't stand listening to him teach the language wrong. I often wonder what's become of him. That bird knew more geography than people will ever know. *People!* Golly! I suppose if people ever learn to fly – like any common hedge sparrow – we shall never hear the end of it!"

"You're a wise old bird," said the Doctor. "How old are you really? I know that parrots and elephants sometimes live to be 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 eighty-two. But I know that when I first came here from Africa, King Charles was still hiding in the oak tree* – because I saw him. He looked scared to death."