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THE OWL AND THE GENERAL

by John Kelly Ross, Jr.

Union General Alexander S. Asboth was the commander at Columbus, KY, from January to August 1863. Asboth soon acquired a reputation with his superiors for panicking at rumors of possible attacks by Confederate soldiers. Asboth would frequently call for large reinforcements to deal with nonexistent or grossly exaggerated threats. Eventually Asboth would lose his job because of this.

Asboth's well known gullibility was remembered after the war with the following story. From the COLUMBUS DISPATCH of January 26, 1871: "A CRUEL JOKE: The late General Asboth, who commanded the post of Columbus a part of the time during the war between the States, is well remembered by most of the citizens then residing here. He was a Prussian by birth and education, with many good social qualities, which won him a number of warm personal friends even among his bitterest enemies in war. He was a thorough soldier, well educated in engineering and the science of war, and, besides a great admirer of birds and flowers, though he was neither a botanist nor ornithologist. He took a special delight in taming the birds and cultivating the flowers indigenous to the forests of the locality where he resided, and of these, had accumulated quite a choice collection.

Among the General's acquaintances was one Mr. S---, a gentleman well known in the country, who had been attracted by the General's genial disposition, but who loved a practical joke better than it was possible for him to like any Federal Officer.

One day while the General was showing Mr. S--- his collection of pets and telling him what delight he took in their care. Mr. S--- said, 'General, there is one bird that inhabits this section of the country which I am surprised to find you have not secured.' 'Ah,' said he, 'What kind of a bird is that -- is it beautiful?' 'Very pretty, indeed.' 'And does it sing?' 'Yes, it is an elegant singer; and what is more, it sings in the night when all other birds are asleep. Its notes are loud and clear, and so sweet, you would almost think a woman was singing to you.' (The General was a great admirer of the ladies.)

'Oh, I should like to have one very much. I want to get every kind of bird that is in this country, and keep them in this one great big cage together, you see. What is the name of it?' 'It is called an owl.' 'How can I catch one?' 'Oh, I can bring you one, if you want it?' 'Oh, I should like to have one so much; I would be very obliged very much to you.'

In a few days this 'beautiful singer' was brought, and the General caused him to be placed in the cage with the mocking birds, robins, etc. His Owlship gave the General a few knowing winks, and sidled up to one corner, as much as to say, 'It's all right General; just you go to bed and sleep quietly, and I'll do the singing when the proper time comes.'

The General took the hint and in due time repaired to bed. Not hearing his new pet sing any during the night, he supposed it was because he was not use to his new quarters; but he nevertheless repaired to the cage early in the morning to cultivate the acquaintance of the strange bird, when - - Lo! -- all that remained of his other pets was a few quill feathers and well picked bones. This time the owl greeted his host with another knowing wink -- as much as to say, 'It's a good joke, General; don't say anything about it.'

The General's feelings can better be imagined than described. At least Mr. S--- had a presentment of what they would be, and kept at a safe distance for some days, until fully assured that General Asboth had recovered equanimity. When at last they did meet the General said, 'Mr. S---, that was a very strange bird you sent me. He ate all by other birds up, and I killed him for being so bad.' Mr. S--- expressed his regrets, and explained that he should have cut off his claws and fed him before putting him in the cage. But the General was inconsolable."
