

**L'AFFAIRE EXOTIQUE**

by

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## L'AFFAIRE EXOTIQUE

### Characters

RINGMASTER, ageless, a mostly traditional circus Master of Ceremonies.

LOVELY ASSISTANT...exactly as you imagine.

STROMBOLI, male, four months, a flea circus trapeze artist, casting optional.

BABETTE, female, three months, a flea circus strongwoman, casting optional.

VERMIN, male, three months, Stromboli's flea rival, casting optional.

### Time

Present.

### Setting

A circus featuring a flea circus.

## L'AFFAIRE EXOTIQUE

*RINGMASTER enters confidently into a spotlight CS. He wears a traditional red-white-and-black outfit with coattails, knee-high black boots, and white gloves. The only departure from tradition is his clownish face paint.*

RINGMASTER

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to The Salon Exotique. We hope our little entertainment will surprise and delight you. We will tell you of the truest love that ever was. Between the two noblest creatures that ever lived.

The lovers were members of the *Siphonaptera* family. They were, if I may be blunt, bloodsucking fleas.

No, no, no, please don't let that shock or disgust you...Don't think, just because a "man" or a "woman" is a flea, that he or she doesn't bleed, laugh, love, and die like an actual man. Or actual woman, as the case may be.

I knew such fleas once. She was a circus strongwoman. He started out as the guy that holds the base of the rope ladder that the trapeze artists climb to get up to their trapezes.

This is a reenactment of their tragic tale of love.

*LOVELY ASSISTANT carries out a three-legged table and covers it with a green baize, tasselled cloth, upon which she sets a microphone pointing downward. Under the microphone, in the center of the table, she places a raisin as if it were a teeny-weeny box of something mysterious and good.*

[NOTE: Under no circumstances allow members of the audience to see that the mysterious box is indeed a raisin. They did not pay good money to become disillusioned.]

*RINGMASTER removes his white gloves and pockets them. All the while he speaks, he does a continuous bit of business with the apparent teeny-weeny box-- opening it, helping the fleas out with their possessions, getting them in harness, etc. A stream of soft, indecipherable flea chatter accompanies this.*

*LOVELY ASSISTANT* brings in a box that might be a grape and from it they set up the flea circus tent, a colorful circle of cloth strung with dental floss. The result appears to be a Big Top the size of an overturned teacup.

*RINGMASTER* introduces the microscopic *STROMBOLI*, who is of course too small to see. However, the audience should take the *RINGMASTER*'s word for this as well as the other similarly described events to come.

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

Let us begin with Stromboli, here in a fabulous rhinestone-studded, peach-colored leotard. His many-times-great ancestors came thousands of miles from the Old World and settled in a Chicago flophouse.

Somewhere along the line, Stromboli's branch of the *Siphonaptera* family joined a circus, sharing the beds of humans and animals alike. Inspired by the pomp and spectacle they saw daily, the family launched a circus of its own, one that took up no more space than a dinner plate. And that was the world into which Stromboli was born to fly.

When Stromboli first arrived at the Salon Exotique nearly four months ago, he was a lowly larva. But as he matured, his potential was undeniable. Stromboli grew to become the greatest trapeze flyer of them all, and he plied his trade here in the Exotique's Big Top, high above where a net would be if he did not disdain a net.

*RINGMASTER* holds his hand about six inches above the table.

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

Now you may think that such a jump is nothing to a flea. But consider that Stromboli was the first and only trapeze artist in the world to complete five somersaults during a single swing and catch.

*RINGMASTER* traces five loops in the air with his finger. A tiny appreciative flea crowd responds with faint high-pitched cheers.

And now I introduce to you the other half of the Love that Dare Not Bite. This is Babette. Isn't her physique under her tiger-striped, form-fitting singlet simply awesome?

*RINGMASTER presents the tiny BABETTE with an elegant two-handed gesture. A tiny brass band plays "ta-da."*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

From birth, Babette was constantly active. Almost immediately she climbed the top of the larva pile and there she stayed, feasting on the finest in dead organic matter.

Later Babette trained with the Exotique Big Top until the day she could lift the equivalent of ten Strombolis.

*Tiny crowd noises, nothing more than squeaks really, emanate from the table.*

Now you may think that such a feat is nothing to a flea. But consider that Babette was the first and only female strong enough to carry Stromboli's heart away.

*An exchange of tiny flea endearments.*

There is a third player in this tale, of course. I did say it was a "tragedy," did I not?

Vermin was a three-month-old *Siphonaptera* cousin. Bold, but with the temperament of a tick--skulking, easy to anger, and vile. He was also extremely handsome and utterly fearless, a world-renowned ant-lion tamer. And Vermin, like his trapeze artist rival, soon became obsessed with Babette's ravishing charms.

*RINGMASTER "conducts" the following activities with quick and expressive gestures. LOVELY ASSISTANT plays to the audience, charmingly conveying a silent running commentary that suggests "Isn't that amazing? Yes, it is. Let's have a round of applause. Please." And repeat as needed.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

Three times a day, Stromboli climbed to the top of the flea circus tent and leaped into danger.

*The tiny crowd oohs and aahs.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

While Babette watched with a lump of anxiety in her thorax, holding her breath until Stromboli perched safely on the trapeze platform once more.

Three times a day, Babette displayed her might by dead-lifting bluebottle flies and bench-pressing roaches.

*Tiny crowd applause.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

While Stromboli watched, smitten beyond repair, eager to return to the chitinous embrace of Babette's muscular limbs.

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

And three times a day, Vermin faced almost-certain death from the terrible jaws of the fierce ant-lions.

*Tiny roars, tiny screams.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

While Babette watched, mesmerized by the ant-lion tamer's perilous choreography, all the while yearning to know what it would be like to have such a hero as Vermin be her protector.

*RINGMASTER pauses, becoming deadly serious.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

I'm not going to sugarcoat it. This was a recipe for a triple disaster. Three such passionate hearts could not long keep eighteen such flexible legs from intertwining in a spiral dance of doom.

In short, Stromboli and Vermin contested for Babette's affections. She tried to please them both, individually, but that only fueled their respective ardor and their rivalry. Each day, each hour, they encountered each other on the circus grounds, driving the friction among them to such a degree that a single spark was all that was needed to bring down their unmitigated destruction.

*RINGMASTER pauses to compose himself.  
LOVELY ASSISTANT has become an  
empathetic wreck.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

That spark came in the form of a confrontation during a sold-out performance in South Beloit. From what we have been able to piece together from witnesses, the audience--led by Babette--gave Stromboli an enthusiastic ovation in response to the world's first six-somersault swing on the flea-ing trapeze.

Vermin, infuriated, attacked Stromboli with his whip. Babette rushed to separate them, but in the fray she caught the lash across her left spiracle. Down she went.

*LOVELY ASSISTANT clutches her ribcage  
under her arm.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

The two rivals rushed to Babette's side, colliding viciously, which enraged them further, leading them to renew their attacks. In the mêlée, the ant-lions escaped. The crowd panicked and surged for the exits. Babette was crushed under dozens of feet.

*Signalling an emergency, a tiny version of "Stars and Stripes Forever" plays as LOVELY ASSISTANT frets.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

And so it ended: Love that burned so brightly that the world around it also was consumed in the conflagration.

*The music dies away...*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

Yet, which of us does not commend this brief affair. Which of us does not envy this unrelenting yearning despite its violent conclusion. Which of us would not trade places with any one of these three self-destructive romantics in an instant, if only we could, just to feel once such an all-consuming passion in our miserable lives.

*RINGMASTER pauses, his eyes boring deeply into his audience. He resumes quietly, with a rising vehemence...*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

Do we ridicule these parasitic lovers? No.

Do we begrudge their flea-flicker of existence? No.

Do we pity them? No!

*RINGMASTER slams his hand flat on the table. LOVELY ASSISTANT jumps, then edges up to the table to assess the damage. RINGMASTER regretfully wipes his hands with a white kerchief.*

RINGMASTER (CONT'D)

No, we must salute them. We must revere them. We must model our lives after them. For they are our betters.

*RINGMASTER folds and pockets the kerchief, dons his white gloves, and exits. LOVELY ASSISTANT sweeps up the flea circus remains and follows.*

*Fade to black.*

THE END