



# The King's Camelopard

ALL DAY, THE DUKE AND THE KING WORKED TO BUILD A STAGE WITH a curtain and a row of candles for footlights. That night the house was filled with men coming to see the show. The duke came onto the stage in front of the curtain and made a little speech. He praised the show and said that it was the most exciting one that ever was. He told how Edmund Kean was the best actor in the world.

When the duke had got the men very excited and eager to see the show, he opened the curtain and the king came out. He was completely naked and his body was painted every bright color imaginable. He looked wild, but it was very funny. The people almost died laughing. The king did a kind of little dance, and the men laughed louder. They stood up and cheered louder, and the king returned and did the dance one more time. Then he left the stage.

The duke closed the curtain and bowed to the men and said that the show would be performed two more times. He said that he was sorry that they could not perform it more often, but that they must soon return to London. He said if they had succeeded in pleasing

them, to please ask other men in the town to come to see the show.

Twenty people shouted, "What? Has the show ended? Is that *all*?" Suddenly, the angry crowd stood up and began to move toward the stage. Then a tall, good-looking gentleman jumped up and stood on a chair, shouting, "Stop! Listen to me. We were tricked! We've been made to look like fools. But do we want the entire town laughing at us. No! What we have to do is to leave here quietly, tell the others that it was a great show, and try to get all the men of the town to come to see it. Then we'll all be fools together."

Everyone agreed that he was correct and left quietly. The following day, the men were busy telling other men about the great show. There was a large crowd the second night, and again the king appeared naked with his body brightly painted and again the show lasted only a few minutes. And again the men were angry, but left quietly.

On the third night, the crowd was very large, the largest that it had been. But I noticed that the men who had already seen the first or second shows were returning to see the third one. That seemed strange to me. Then the duke and I noticed that every man had a large object under his coat or in his pocket, and I knew from the smell that these objects were old and spoiled fruits, vegetables, and eggs. When the room was so full that no more men could fit into it, the duke said that it was time for him to go on stage and introduce the king. I followed him. When we came near the stage door, he said, "Walk quickly down the street. As soon as we are away from this theater, run to the raft."

I did as he said, and we both ran to the raft as fast as we could. Soon we were moving away from the shore and out toward the middle of the river. Neither of us said a word. I felt sad for the poor king who had been left behind with the angry crowd. You can imagine my surprise when I heard a voice call out from the tent on the raft, "What happened at the show?" The king had not left the raft to go to the show that night.

We did not dare build a fire or show a light until we were ten miles down the river. Then as Jim and I cooked supper, the king and the duke laughed and laughed at the way that they had tricked the

men of that town. They counted the money they had earned—465 dollars—and felt that was good pay for three nights of work.

Later, when they were asleep, Jim said, “Are you surprised at the way the king and duke act, Huck?”

“No, Jim, I’m not. Our duke and king are not honest, but then I don’t think any member of royalty has ever been honest.”

“That’s how I feel too, Jim. But we have them with us, and we’ll have to continue treating them like royalty.”

I didn’t tell Jim what I had suspected for a long time—that the two men traveling with us were not real kings and dukes. But real kings and dukes would have acted, in the same way that our two acted, so what difference did it make?

It was time for me to go to sleep, and Jim said that he would sit up and watch. Just before daylight, I heard him crying softly to himself. He was thinking about his wife and children and was missing them. It was the first time that he had ever been away from his home and he longed to be back with his family. I do believe that he cared as much for his family as white men cared for theirs.

I asked him about his family, and he said, “What made me think of my family now was a sound that I heard on the shore—the sound of a door closing with a bang. The sound reminded me of a time that I was mean to my Elizabeth. She was only four years old and she had been very sick. When she was no longer sick, I saw her playing one day and said to her, ‘Close the door.’ She didn’t do it. She just continued to smile at me and didn’t obey. Again I said, ‘Close the door,’ and again she didn’t obey. This made me so angry that I hit her with my hand and she fell to the floor. She lay there crying but still she wouldn’t close the door. I was going to hit her again, when suddenly the wind blew the door closed with a very loud *bang!* Elizabeth never noticed; she never moved. I called to her as loud as I could call, and she never looked at me. Then I knew that she couldn’t hear—her illness had caused a problem with her ears and she wasn’t able to hear. I began to cry and picked her up in my arms and said, ‘Forgive me,’ but she couldn’t hear me. I asked God to forgive me, but I never have been able to

forgive myself. And my little girl has never spoken a word since. She can't hear and she can't speak."