



16. He That Took the City

Marmaduke trudged up the road. And the road went up, up, up the hill. First he thought that road was like a great worm, always squirming ahead of him, but then he decided that, although it twisted, it didn't squirm, it was too still for that. After all, it was more like a ribbon, a wide brown ribbon, tied around the green shoulder of the hill.

He wondered where that ribbon road went—over the hill and far away—perhaps clear round the World! But, no, it couldn't do that, for there was the Sea between, and it must stop at the Sea. Anyway, he would have liked to have travelled over it, to the very end, to see all the people and animals that walked over it, and the cities and churches that stood by its side.

But first he must find the Toyman. That is what he had come for. And the Toyman had just gone over that very road. Marmaduke had seen him from the valley below, his long legs climbing up that hill and the little boy had hurried after him, calling and calling.

“Llo, Toyman, ‘llo, Toyman!” he shouted.

He heard an answer and put his hand to his ear to hear more clearly.

“Llo, Toyman, ‘llo, Toyman!” came the mocking answer, faint and far-away.

But it wasn't the Toyman. It was Echo, calling back from the hills.

Marmaduke had always wanted to meet Echo, but so far he never had. He thought she must be something like the Star-Lady, whom he had met, only not quite so bright. Her voice sounded a little sadder, too, like the Bluebird's in the Fall when he says “Goodbye” to the fields and flies to the South. Often he had run after Echo, but he never could catch up with her, nor even see a glimpse of her silver and green dress. She always played Hide-and-Seek with him, and he was always “it.”

However, he didn't worry long about friend Echo this morning. He was thinking of the Toyman. For the Toyman's face had looked worried—far away and sad. It had looked somehow as Echo's voice always sounded. What was it Mother had said? “Poor Frank!”—that's what she called him; “he's in trouble,” she had whispered to Father.

Marmaduke didn't know what he could do, but he wanted to catch up with him, and put his hand in his, and tell him not to worry at all, and say, if he needed money he could have all there was in Marmaduke's bank—every last penny, even the bright ones.

Across the road a big jack-rabbit jumped—jumped sping—sping—sping—like a toy animal made of steel springs. Wienerwurst ran after the rabbit, but his master didn't stop to chase Jack. He was afraid if he wasted any time he would never catch up with the Toyman.

At last the ribbon road reached the top of the hill and wound along it a little way before it started twisting down the other side. For a moment Marmaduke's eyes followed it down hill, and he wanted to follow it with his legs too, there were so many wonderful and mysterious places where it went, but just then he caught sight of the Toyman.

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He was sitting right on the top of the hill, sitting with his chin in his hands, and his eyes on the West far away. And he said never a word.

So Marmaduke just stole up softly, and put his face against the Toyman's, and sat down beside him.

And then the Toyman's eyes came back from far away and looked down on the little boy and smiled again.

"Don't you worry, Toyman," the little boy said to him, "don't you worry about anything . It'll all come out in the wash."

The Toyman didn't ask what he meant by that, for he knew it was a proverb, a boy's proverb that was as good as any King Solomon ever made.

"Sure, sonny," he repeated, "it'll all come out in the wash." And he patted the hand beside him.

You see, Marmaduke never asked the Toyman what his trouble really was, or anything at all. And that is always the very best way—when a friend's in trouble, don't bother him with a lot of questions—and pester the life out of him—but just take his mind off his troubles by suggesting some nice game to play—like marbles or "Duck-on-the-Rock," or going fishing, or something; and if you can't do that, just sit beside him, "quiet-like," and be his friend.

For a while they sat so, drinking in the cool air, and looking down at the valley, and the white houses, and red barns, and the yellow haystacks, and the horses and people like ants crawling here and there. There were two ribbons in the valley now, one brown and one silver, the Road and the River. And from the Church with the Long White Finger Pointing at the Sky, came the sound of bells—pealing—pealing—up the hill to the Sky.

All else was still. But after they had listened for a while they discovered that it wasn't so still as it had seemed. Every bird and insect, each leaf and blossom, was busy, preparing its dinner, or else just growing. A twig rustled as a little garter snake squirmed into the thicket. A little gray nuthatch looked for its lunch on a locust tree, crawling over the trunk head-downwards, while, on a branch overhead, a crested flycatcher perched watching, watching, then all-of-a-sudden swooped down and pounced on a fly, swallowed him, flew back to its perch, and watched again.

In the tall grasses which rose like a miniature forest around his head, green katydids jumped, as spry as monkeys. And, as he lay on his back, he could see, way up in the middle of the sky, and right on a line with his eye, Ole Robber Hawk himself, or else one of his relatives or friends. He was brown, of course, but against the blue of the sky he looked like a little black speck with a couple of thin wavy lines for wings.

There was music, too, for a woodthrush sang, oh ever so sweet, and the oriole whistled as clear as a flute, while a locust rattled away like the man who plays the drum and all the noisy things in the theatre-orchestra. But, busiest of all, at his feet an army of black ants hurried around a little hole in the ground, seeming quite as big as the people and horses in the valley below.

"It's just like a little city here, isn't it, Toyman?" Marmaduke said, "all the katydids, and

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bugs, and snakes, and things, workin' an' workin' away."

"Yes," said the Toyman, as they watched Robber Hawk swing round and round in the sky, "how any one can feel lonely in the country I can't see. I can understand it in the city, where you can't speak to a soul without his putting his hand on his watch, but here there's always a lot of folks with beaks and claws and tails, and all kinds o' tongues an' dialecks, that you don't need any introduction to, to say 'howdy!'"

But Marmaduke remembered that morning and how the Toyman had seemed in trouble. He had certainly looked lonely when Marmaduke and Wienerwurst had found him sitting up there on the hill, and the little boy couldn't help asking,— "Don't you ever feel lonely? You haven't any wife, and Mother says she pities a man without chicken or child—'tleast she said something like that—and how it wasn't good for a man to live alone—an' you do—out in your bunkhouse."

For the first time that afternoon the Toyman, who had been so worried, laughed his old hearty laugh, and Echo sent it back from her cave in the hill.

"No!" said he, "I don't want any ole wife. Like as not she'd talk me to death. Besides I don't feel lonely when you're along, little fellow."

The little boy felt very happy over that, but, for some reason or other, he felt quite embarrassed, too. Often, when he felt happiest, he couldn't put his happiness into words—he just couldn't talk about the particular thing that was making him happy. And, strange to say, he would usually talk about something quite different. So he said,—

"Let's see your knife."

The Toyman took it out. It was a beauty, too, with five blades, all of different sizes, and a corkscrew.

Marmaduke tried to open one of the blades, but he couldn't, they were too strong for his fingers.

So the Toyman took it.

"Which shall it be?" he asked.

"The very biggest," came the answer, "and oh, Toyman, let's play 'Mumbledy Peg!'"

"A galoochious idea!" exclaimed the Toyman, "how did you ever think of it?"

"Oh!" said Marmaduke, "I thought of it—just like this"; and he snapped his fingers to show just how quick. "But pshaw! I could think of lots more galoochious than that." Then he added in delight,— "The one who loses has to pull the peg out of the ground with his teeth."

Meanwhile the Toyman was driving that peg into the ground. When it was in so far that it seemed as if no Thirty White Horses could ever pull it out, they began the game—the famous game of Mumbledy Peg.

First, Marmaduke put the knife in the palm of his right hand and made that knife turn a somersault in the air. And it landed right on the blade point and stuck upright in the ground.

Then, taking the knife in the palm of his left hand, he made it turn another somersault in the air. Again it landed on the point of the blade and stuck in the ground, quivering de-

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liciously.

“Neat work!” said the Toyman. Probably he said it too soon, for on the very next try Marmaduke missed, and the Toyman had his turn.

He took the knife and got just as far as Marmaduke with his tricks, then he missed, too.

So Marmaduke took another turn and clenched his right fist tight shut, and threw the knife in the air from that, and it turned another somersault clean, and landed straight up in the ground. And he did the same with his left hand clenched. He was getting on famously!

The next trick in the game of Mumbledy Peg was to twirl the knife from the tip of the first finger, then from the second, and so on. When Marmaduke tried it from the third finger, the knife fell on its point, quivered feebly as if it were sick, then fell over on its side, only part way up in the air.

“Can you get two fingers under it—between the blade and the ground?” said the Toyman eagerly. “If you can, it’s all right.”

“You try?” said Marmaduke.

“What—with these fingers?” laughed the Toyman, “you’d better try yours—you’d have more of a chance.”

So Marmaduke tried, and just managed to squeeze his two smallest between the blade and the ground. But when he tried twirling it from his last finger he failed. The knife fell over on its side, and he couldn’t squeeze any two of his fingers, even the smallest, between the grass and the blade.

“Oh dear!” he exclaimed, “I always miss with my ‘pinky.’”

However, the Toyman missed with his fourth finger, and Marmaduke was still ahead.

“I’m off my game,” the Toyman explained a little later, as he threw the knife over his left shoulder and failed, “and you’re in rare form!”

Now this was strange, for the Toyman was so good at work and games and everything, but I’m thinking it was like that time they played marbles—he did it on purpose, just to let the little boy have the fun of winning. That would have been like the Toyman.

Anyway, the last time Marmaduke threw the knife through the air, and it made its last somersault and stuck up in the ground, straight as straight as could be and quivering like a jews-harp, the Toyman said,—

“Congratulations, ole man, you’ve won!”

And somehow Marmaduke liked to be called “ole man,” and felt quite as proud over that as over winning the game.

Now the Toyman had to get down on his hands and knees and try to pull the peg out of the ground with his teeth. And oh, what a time he made of it, growling like a dog over a bone, all for the fun of the thing, until Marmaduke shouted in glee and Echo answered back from her cave again.

So for a long time they played Mumbledy Peg on the hill, while the shadows grew longer and longer on the grass at their feet. Then they stopped to rest and sat quiet “for a spell.”

Opposite them, in the West, were other hills, higher ones too, rising way up in the sky. And far above them curled great white clouds, standing still as still could be.

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For a long while they watched those clouds, the man and the boy, then Marmaduke said,—

“I wonder if you see what I see.”

“What do you see, Sonny?” the Toyman replied.

“A great big city—look, there it is!” And the little boy pointed straight at the clouds.

“Why, to be sure!” exclaimed the Toyman, “There it is, an’ it looks mighty pretty. But just what do you make out?”

“Well!” replied Marmaduke, squinting his eye thoughtfully, “I see a big wall and towers on it—a whole lot of towers. There’s about fifty, I guess.”

The Toyman squinted too, and pointed his brown finger at the clouds, counting slowly under his breath.

“Fifty-one towers I make,” he said as he finished— “some little and some big; and some have little peaks on ‘em, and some are all scalloped out on top.”

“And there’s a church—a whopper of a big one!” went on Marmaduke.

“Where?” asked the Toyman, craning his neck.

Marmaduke pointed at the Cloud City.

“There—just behind the biggest tower.”

“Just a little to the right, you mean?” again asked the Toyman, trying hard to see so as not to miss anything in that wonderful city. Then he added,—“oh, I get it now—it’s got a gold cross on it an’ little diamonds at the tips. My, how they shine in the sun.”

Then Marmaduke put in,—

“An’ there’s flags on the towers, red, yellow and blue—”

“How nice they look!” the Toyman murmured, “All a wavin’ in the wind.”

“And there’s soldiers in the streets, with helmets on their heads, an’ spears, an’ things—”

“You bet—an’ you kin hear the silver shoes of their horses on the cobbles—”

“What kind of cobbles?”

The Toyman thought a moment—

“Oh, let me see—wh-h-y, I’d say they were all cut outo’ agate like your shooters—least-ways they look like that at this distance. An’ the sidewalks, of course, are of gold—a blind man could tell that—”

“What else?” demanded Marmaduke, a little out of breath, and dazzled by all this sudden glory.

“Oh, a lot else—” the Toyman replied, “for one thing, the door-knobs in all the castles are silver—but then that’s nothin’—silver’s so common even their frying-pans are made outo’ that. But you ought to see their lamp-posts in the street. Their poles are built of ivory from the tusks of elephants of the first water; an’ the glass on top is nothing but rubies—”

“Whew!” exclaimed Marmaduke, “That’s a great city.”

“Yes,” added the Toyman, “it’s a great city.”

So for a little while they watched that great Cloud City with all its towers, and flags and banners waving in the wind; and heard the horses prance over the bright cobbles, and the glorious music coming from out the great church doors. Suddenly Marmaduke asked,—

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“Do you ‘spose we could take that city?”

“Spose!” exclaimed the Toyman, “why, I’m sure of it. Just call up your horses an’ call up your men.” And he put his hands to his lips and hallooed through them as through a trumpet, Echo answering back as if she had a trumpet, too.

“Hurry,” the Toyman went on in excitement, “there’s your horse—come, put your foot in the stirrup an’ lick him up an’ away we’ll go!”

And he made all the motions of mounting a horse himself, and calling, “Charge!” to the soldiers. It was a beautiful game, and so real that Marmaduke felt he was actually flying through the air on a winged horse, at the head of a mighty column of soldiers, straight towards the Cloud City.

But alas! They didn’t take that city, for, as they came near it, a horn sounded from the valley below. They turned back to look and there far, far beneath them, they saw the White House with the Green Blinds By the Side of the Road, and Mother standing by the door. She looked ever so tiny, and she was blowing that horn over and over to call them to supper. They reined in their horses to listen, for they knew what they would hear in a minute. Yes, there it came, that other horn—it was Echo’s. And when they turned in their saddles to look at the Cloud City again, it had vanished—vanished at the sound of the horn, with all their horses and men.

“Oh dear!” said Marmaduke, when he found himself on the hill once more, the game all over and ended, “She’s always mocking us an’ spoiling things, that Echo. If I ever catch her, I—I’ll break her horn an’ throw it down the waterfall, so she can’t blow it again—ever.”

“Never mind, sonny, we’ll take that city some time,” said the Toyman.

“We had a lesson ‘bout that, in Sunday school today,” Marmaduke told him, “all about ‘he who taketh the city.’ But the teacher said ‘he who conquers his spirit is greater’n he who taketh the city.’ How can you conquer a spirit, Toyman, when you can’t see it? Did you ever conquer your spirit?”

The Toyman looked very sober for a while, as they rose and turned their faces towards the road and the valley.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s what I’ve been trying to do all day. I had some trouble an’ temptation, an’ it was getting the best of me. You know, something bad in me that was tellin’ me to do things I’d oughtn’t to. I tried hard to get my fingers around that bad spirit an’ throw him out by his heels. That’s why I came up here on the hill to fight it out. You’ll understand some day—when you’re older.”

But, strange to say, the little boy thought he understood even then—at least part of it.

“Have you conquered it, Toyman?” he asked at last.

“I think so,” the Toyman answered slowly—“leastways I hope so.”

“And when did you conquer it?” the little boy prattled on.

The Toyman thought for a moment.

“When you just crep’ up behind me, so still an’ quiet, an’ put your face against mine.” And at that the Toyman hugged him again. “No, I guess we won’t take that city tonight—we’ve done a better job.”

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As they walked to the brown ribbon road again, and over the hill to the valley, the sun was setting. They could see it perched like a gold saucer on the top of the hill, or like the shield of one of their soldiers. Gold bit by gold bit it sank below. Then it went altogether, out of sight, but the Cloud City came back again just for a moment, and a rosy light shone upon that Cloud City and all its banners, and towers, and spires.

Then suddenly it faded quite away. And the little boy and the Toyman walked home through the night, but they whistled together as they went.