



Chapter 24

 The Frogs' Birthday Treat 

And so it came to pass that, just a week after the day when my Fairy-friends first appeared as Children, I found myself taking a farewell-stroll through the wood, in the hope of meeting them once more. I had but to stretch myself on the smooth turf, and the 'erie' feeling was on me in a moment.

"Put oor ear welly low down," said Bruno, "and I'll tell oo a secret! It's the Frogs' Birthday-Treat—and we've lost the Baby!"

"What Baby?" I said, quite bewildered by this complicated piece of news.

"The Queen's Baby, a course!" said Bruno. "Titania's Baby. And we's welly sorry. Sylvie, she's—oh so sorry!"

"How sorry is she?" I asked, mischievously.

"Three-quarters of a yard," Bruno replied with perfect solemnity. "And I'm a little sorry too," he added, shutting his eyes so as not to see that he was smiling.

"And what are you doing about the Baby?"

"Well, the soldiers are all looking for it—up and down everywhere."

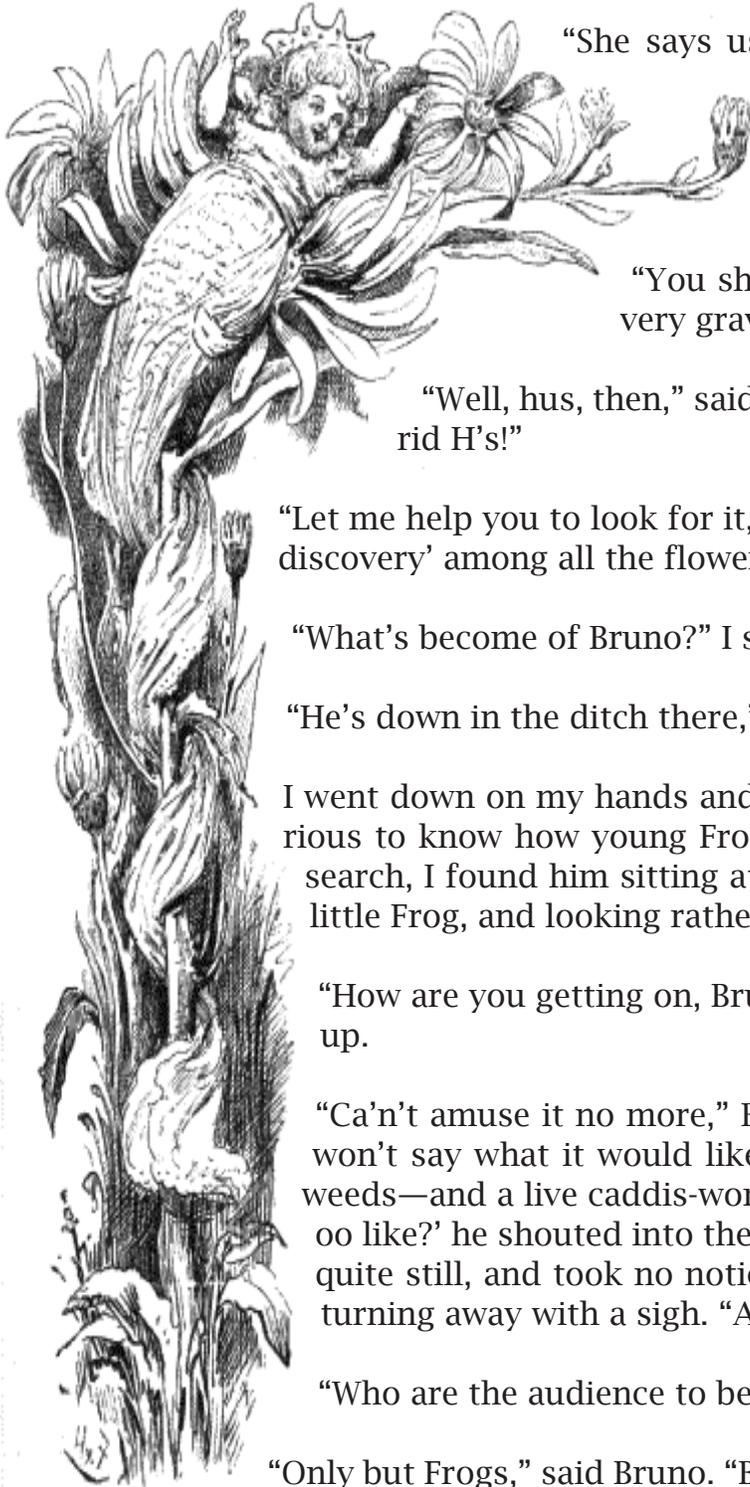
"The soldiers?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, a course!" said Bruno. "When there's no fighting to be done, the soldiers doos any little odd jobs, oo know."

I was amused at the idea of its being a 'little odd job' to find the Royal Baby. "But how did you come to lose it?" I asked.

"We put it in a flower," Sylvie, who had just joined us, explained with her eyes full of tears. "Only we ca'n't remember which!"

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“She says us put it in a flower,” Bruno interrupted, “‘cause she doosn’t want I to get punished. But it were really me what put it there. Sylvie were picking Dindle-dums.”

“You shouldn’t say ‘us put it in a flower’,” Sylvie very gravely remarked.

“Well, hus, then,” said Bruno. “I never can remember those horrid H’s!”

“Let me help you to look for it,” I said. So Sylvie and I made a ‘voyage of discovery’ among all the flowers; but there was no Baby to be seen.

“What’s become of Bruno?” I said, when we had completed our tour.

“He’s down in the ditch there,” said Sylvie, “amusing a young Frog.”

I went down on my hands and knees to look for him, for I felt very curious to know how young Frogs ought to be amused. After a minute’s search, I found him sitting at the edge of the ditch, by the side of the little Frog, and looking rather disconsolate.

“How are you getting on, Bruno?” I said, nodding to him as he looked up.

“Ca’n’t amuse it no more,” Bruno answered, very dolefully, “‘cause it won’t say what it would like to do next! I’ve showed it all the duck-weeds—and a live caddis-worm—but it won’t say nuffin! What—would oo like?” he shouted into the ear of the Frog: but the little creature sat quite still, and took no notice of him. “It’s deaf, I think!” Bruno said, turning away with a sigh. “And it’s time to get the Theatre ready.”

“Who are the audience to be?”

“Only but Frogs,” said Bruno. “But they haven’t comed yet. They wants to be drove up, like sheep.”

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"Would it save time," I suggested, "if I were to walk round with Sylvie, to drive up the Frogs, while you get the Theatre ready?"

"That are a good plan!" cried Bruno. "But where are Sylvie?"

"I'm here!" said Sylvie, peeping over the edge of the bank. "I was just watching two Frogs that were having a race."

"Which won it? "Bruno eagerly inquired.

Sylvie was puzzled. "He does ask such hard questions!" she confided to me.

"And what's to happen in the Theatre?" I asked.

"First they have their Birthday-Feast," Sylvie said: "then Bruno does some Bits of Shakespeare; then he tells them a Story."

"I should think the Frogs like the Feast best. Don't they?"

"Well, there's generally very few of them that get any. They will keep their mouths shut so tight! And it's just as well they do," she added, "because Bruno likes to cook it himself: and he cooks very queerly." Now they're all in. Would you just help me to put them with their heads the right way?"

We soon managed this part of the business, though the Frogs kept up a most discontented croaking all the time.

"What are they saying?" I asked Sylvie.

"They're saying 'Fork! Fork!' It's very silly of them! You're not going to have forks!" she announced with some severity. "Those that want any Feast have just got to open their mouths, and Bruno 'll put some of it in!"

At this moment Bruno appeared, wearing a little white apron to show that he was a Cook, and carrying a tureen full of very queer-looking soup. I watched very carefully as he moved about among the Frogs; but I could not see that any of them opened their mouths to be fed— except one very young one, and I'm nearly sure it did it accidentally, in yawn-

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ing. However Bruno instantly put a large spoonful of soup into its mouth, and the poor little thing coughed violently for some time.

So Sylvie and I had to share the soup between us, and to pretend to enjoy it, for it certainly was very queerly cooked.

I only ventured to take one spoonful of it ("Sylvie's Summer-Soup," Bruno said it was), and must candidly confess that it was not at all nice; and I could not feel surprised that so many of the guests had kept their mouths shut up tight.

"What's the soup made of, Bruno?" said Sylvie, who had put a spoonful of it to her lips, and was making a wry face over it.

And Bruno's answer was anything but encouraging. "Bits of things!"

The entertainment was to conclude with "Bits of Shakespeare," as Sylvie expressed it, which were all to be done by Bruno, Sylvie being fully engaged in making the Frogs keep their heads towards the stage: after which Bruno was to appear in his real character, and tell them a Story of his own invention.

"Will the Story have a Moral to it?" I asked Sylvie, while Bruno was away behind the hedge, dressing for the first 'Bit.'

"I think so," Sylvie replied doubtfully. "There generally is a Moral, only he puts it in too soon."

"And will he say all the Bits of Shakespeare?"

"No, he'll only act them," said Sylvie. "He knows hardly any of the words. When I see what he's dressed like, I've to tell the Frogs what character it is. They're always in such a hurry to guess! Don't you hear them all saying 'What? What?'" And so indeed they were: it had only sounded like croaking, till Sylvie explained it, but I could now make out the "Wawt? Wawt?" quite distinctly.

"But why do they try to guess it before they see it?"

"I don't know," Sylvie said: "but they always do. Sometimes they begin guessing weeks and weeks before the day!"

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(So now, when you hear the Frogs croaking in a particularly melancholy way, you may be sure they're trying to guess Bruno's next Shakespeare 'Bit'. Isn't that interesting?)

However, the chorus of guessing was cut short by Bruno, who suddenly rushed on from behind the scenes, and took a flying leap down among the Frogs, to re-arrange them.

For the oldest and fattest Frog—who had never been properly arranged so that he could see the stage, and so had no idea what was going on—was getting restless, and had upset several of the Frogs, and turned others round with their heads the wrong way. And it was no good at all, Bruno said, to do a 'Bit' of Shakespeare when there was nobody to look at it (you see he didn't count me as anybody). So he set to work with a stick, stirring them up, very much as you would stir up tea in a cup, till most of them had at least one great stupid eye gazing at the stage.

"Oo must come and sit among them, Sylvie," he said in despair, "I've put these two side-by-side, with their noses the same way, ever so many times, but they do squarrel so!"

So Sylvie took her place as 'Mistress of the Ceremonies,' and Bruno vanished again behind the scenes, to dress for the first 'Bit.'

"Hamlet!" was suddenly proclaimed, in the clear sweet tones I knew so well. The croaking all ceased in a moment, and I turned to the stage, in some curiosity to see what Bruno's ideas were as to the behavior of Shakespeare's greatest Character.

According to this eminent interpreter of the Drama, Hamlet wore a short black cloak (which he chiefly used for muffling up his face, as if he suffered a good deal from tooth-ache), and turned out his toes very much as he walked. "To be or not to be!" Hamlet remarked in a cheerful tone, and then turned head-over-heels several times, his cloak dropping off in the performance.

I felt a little disappointed: Bruno's conception of the part seemed so wanting in dignity. "Won't he say any more of the speech?" I whispered to Sylvie.

"I think not," Sylvie whispered in reply. "He generally turns head-over-heels when he doesn't know any more words."

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Bruno had meanwhile settled the question by disappearing from the stage; and the Frogs instantly began inquiring the name of the next Character.

"You'll know directly!" cried Sylvie, as she adjusted two or three young Frogs that had struggled round with their backs to the stage. "Macbeth!" she added, as Bruno re-appeared.

Macbeth had something twisted round him, that went over one shoulder and under the other arm, and was meant, I believe, for a Scotch plaid. He had a thorn in his hand, which he held out at arm's length, as if he were a little afraid of it. "Is this a dagger?" Macbeth inquired, in a puzzled sort of tone: and instantly a chorus of "Thorn! Thorn!" arose from the Frogs (I had quite learned to understand their croaking by this time).

"It's a dagger!" Sylvie proclaimed in a peremptory tone. "Hold your tongues!" And the croaking ceased at once.

Shakespeare has not told us, so far as I know, that Macbeth had any such eccentric habit as turning head-over-heels in private life: but Bruno evidently considered it quite an essential part of the character, and left the stage in a series of somersaults. However, he was back again in a few moments, having tucked under his chin the end of a tuft of wool (probably left on the thorn by a wandering sheep), which made a magnificent beard, that reached nearly down to his feet.

"Shylock!" Sylvie proclaimed. "No, I beg your pardon!" she hastily corrected herself, "King Lear! I hadn't noticed the crown." (Bruno had very cleverly provided one, which fitted him exactly, by cutting out the centre of a dandelion to make room for his head.)

King Lear folded his arms (to the imminent peril of his beard) and said, in a mild explanatory tone, "Ay, every inch a king!" and then paused, as if to consider how this could best be proved. And here, with all possible deference to Bruno as a Shakespearian critic, I must express my opinion that the poet did not mean his three great tragic heroes to be so strangely alike in their personal habits; nor do I believe that he would have accepted the faculty of turning head-over-heels as any proof at all of royal descent. Yet it appeared that King Lear, after deep meditation, could think of no other argument by which to prove his kingship: and, as this was the last of the 'Bits' of Shakespeare ("We never do more than three," Sylvie explained in a whisper), Bruno gave the audience quite a long series of somersaults before he finally retired, leaving the enraptured Frogs all crying out "More!

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More!" which I suppose was their way of encoring a performance. But Bruno wouldn't appear again, till the proper time came for telling the Story.

When he appeared at last in his real character, I noticed a remarkable change in his behavior.

He tried no more somersaults. It was clearly his opinion that, however suitable the habit of turning head-over-heels might be to such petty individuals as Hamlet and King Lear, it would never do for Bruno to sacrifice his dignity to such an extent. But it was equally clear that he did not feel entirely at his ease, standing all alone on the stage, with no costume to disguise him: and though he began, several times,

"There were a Mouse—," he kept glancing up and down, and on all sides, as if in search of more comfortable quarters from which to tell the Story. Standing on one side of the stage, and partly overshadowing it, was a tall foxglove, which seemed, as the evening breeze gently swayed it hither and thither, to offer exactly the sort of accommodation that the orator desired. Having once decided on his quarters, it needed only a second or two for him to run up the stem like a tiny squirrel, and to seat himself astride on the topmost bend, where the fairy-bells clustered most closely, and from whence he could look down on his audience from such a height that all shyness vanished, and he began his Story merrily.



"Once there were a Mouse and a Crocodile and a Man and a Goat and a Lion." I had never heard the 'dramatis personae' tumbled into a story with such profusion and in such reckless haste; and it fairly took my breath away. Even Sylvie gave a little gasp, and allowed

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three of the Frogs, who seemed to be getting tired of the entertainment, to hop away into the ditch, without attempting to stop them.

“And the Mouse found a Shoe, and it thought it were a Mouse-trap. So it got right in, and it stayed in ever so long.”

“Why did it stay in?” said Sylvie. Her function seemed to be much the same as that of the Chorus in a Greek Play: she had to encourage the orator, and draw him out, by a series of intelligent questions.

“Cause it thought it couldn’t get out again,” Bruno explained. “It were a clever mouse. It knew it couldn’t get out of traps!”

But why did it go in at all?” said Sylvie.

“—and it jump, and it jump,” Bruno proceeded, ignoring this question, “and at last it got right out again. And it looked at the mark in the Shoe. And the Man’s name were in it. So it knew it wasn’t its own Shoe.”

“Had it thought it was?” said Sylvie.

“Why, didn’t I tell oo it thought it were a Mouse-trap?” the indignant orator replied. “Please, Mister Sir, will oo make Sylvie attend?” Sylvie was silenced, and was all attention: in fact, she and I were most of the audience now, as the Frogs kept hopping away, and there were very few of them left.

“So the Mouse gave the Man his Shoe.

And the Man were welly glad, cause he hadn’t got but one Shoe, and he were hopping to get the other.”

Here I ventured on a question. “Do you mean ‘hopping,’ or ‘hoping’?”

“Bofe,” said Bruno. “And the Man took the Goat out of the Sack.” (“We haven’t heard of the sack before,” I said. “Nor you won’t hear of it again,” said Bruno). “And he said to the Goat, ‘Oo will walk about here till I comes back.’ And he went and he tumbled into a deep hole. And the Goat walked round and round. And it walked under the Tree. And it wug

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its tail. And it looked up in the Tree. And it sang a sad little Song. Oo never heard such a sad little Song!”

“Can you sing it, Bruno?” I asked.

“Iss, I can,” Bruno readily replied. “And I sa’n’t. It would make Sylvie cry—”

“It wouldn’t!”, Sylvie interrupted in great indignation. “And I don’t believe the Goat sang it at all!”

“It did, though!” said Bruno. “It singed it right froo. I sawed it singing with its long beard—”

“It couldn’t sing with its beard,” I said, hoping to puzzle the little fellow: “a beard isn’t a voice.”

“Well then, oo couldn’t walk with Sylvie!” Bruno cried triumphantly. “Sylvie isn’t a foot!”

I thought I had better follow Sylvie’s example, and be silent for a while. Bruno was too sharp for us.

“And when it had singed all the Song, it ran away—for to get along to look for the Man, oo know. And the Crocodile got along after it—for to bite it, oo know. And the Mouse got along after the Crocodile.”

“Wasn’t the Crocodile running?” Sylvie enquired. She appealed to me. “Crocodiles do run, don’t they?”

I suggested “crawling” as the proper word.

“He wasn’t running,” said Bruno, “and he wasn’t crawling. He went struggling along like a portmanteau. And he held his chin ever so high in the air—”

“What did he do that for?” said Sylvie.

“’cause he hadn’t got a toofache!” said Bruno. “Ca’n’t oo make out nuffin wizout I ‘splain it? Why, if he’d had a toofache, a course he’d have held his head down—like this—and he’d have put a lot of warm blankets round it!”

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"If he'd had any blankets," Sylvie argued.

"Course he had blankets!" retorted her brother. "Doos oo think Crocodiles goes walks wizout blankets? And he frowned with his eyebrows. And the Goat was welly flightened at his eyebrows!"

"I'd never be afraid of eyebrows?" exclaimed Sylvie.

"I should think oo would, though, if they'd got a Crocodile fastened to them, like these had! And so the Man jump, and he jump, and at last he got right out of the hole."

Sylvie gave another little gasp: this rapid dodging about among the characters of the Story had taken away her breath.

"And he runned away for to look for the Goat, oo know. And he heard the Lion grunt-ing—"

"Lions don't grunt," said Sylvie.

"This one did," said Bruno. "And its mouth were like a large cupboard. And it had plenty of room in its mouth. And the Lion runned after the Man for to eat him, oo know. And the Mouse runned after the Lion."

"But the Mouse was running after the Crocodile," I said: "he couldn't run after both!"

Bruno sighed over the density of his audience, but explained very patiently. "He did runned after bofe: 'cause they went the same way! And first he caught the Crocodile, and then he didn't catch the Lion. And when he'd caught the Crocodile, what doos oo think he did—'cause he'd got pincers in his pocket?"

"I ca'n't guess," said Sylvie.

"Nobody couldn't guess it!" Bruno cried in high glee. "Why, he wrenched out that Crocodile's toof!"

"Which tooth?" I ventured to ask.

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But Bruno was not to be puzzled. "The toof he were going to bite the Goat with, a course!"

"He couldn't be sure about that," I argued,  
"unless he wrenched out all its teeth."

Bruno laughed merrily, and half sang, as he swung himself backwards and forwards, "He did—wrenched—out—all its teef!"

"Why did the Crocodile wait to have them wrenched out?" said Sylvie.

"It had to wait," said Bruno.

I ventured on another question. "But what became of the Man who said 'You may wait here till I come back'?"

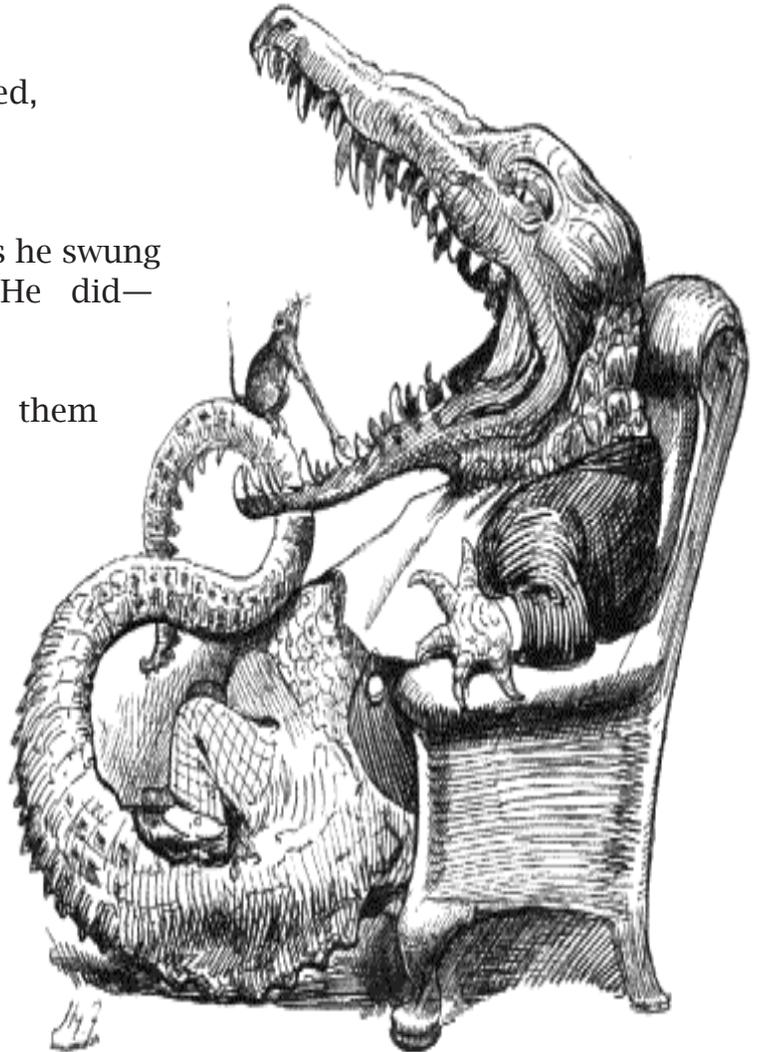
"He didn't say 'Oo may,'" Bruno explained. "He said, 'Oo will.' Just like Sylvie says to me 'Oo will do oor lessons till twelve o'clock.' Oh, I wiss," he added with a little sigh, "I wiss Sylvie would say 'Oo may do oor lessons!'"

This was a dangerous subject for discussion, Sylvie seemed to think. She returned to the Story. "But what became of the Man?"

"Well, the Lion springed at him. But it came so slow, it were three weeks in the air—"

"Did the Man wait for it all that time?" I said.

"Course he didn't!" Bruno replied, gliding head-first down the stem of the fox-glove, for the Story was evidently close to its end. "He sold his house, and he packed up his things,



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while the Lion were coming. And he went and he lived in another town. So the Lion ate the wrong man.”

This was evidently the Moral: so Sylvie made her final proclamation to the Frogs. “The Story’s finished! And whatever is to be learned from it,” she added, aside to me, “I’m sure I don’t know!”

I did not feel quite clear about it myself, so made no suggestion: but the Frogs seemed quite content, Moral or no Moral, and merely raised a husky chorus of “Off! Off!” as they hopped away.