



Chapter 20

Gammon and Spinach

My landlady's welcome had an extra heartiness about it: and though, with a rare delicacy of feeling, she made no direct allusion to the friend whose companionship had done so much to brighten life for me, I felt sure that it was a kindly sympathy with my solitary state that made her so specially anxious to do all she could think of to ensure my comfort, and make me feel at home.

The lonely evening seemed long and tedious: yet I lingered on, watching the dying fire, and letting Fancy mould the red embers into the forms and faces belonging to bygone scenes. Now it seemed to be Bruno's roguish smile that sparkled for a moment, and died away: now it was Sylvie's rosy cheek: and now the Professor's jolly round face, beaming with delight. "You're welcome, my little ones!" he seemed to say. And then the red coal, which for the moment embodied the dear old Professor began to wax dim, and with its dying lustre the words seemed to die away into silence. I seized the poker, and with an artful touch or two revived the waning glow, while Fancy--no coy minstrel she--sang me once again the magic strain I loved to hear.

"You're welcome, little ones!" the cheery voice repeated. "I told them you were coming. Your rooms are all ready for you. And the Emperor and the Empress-- well, I think they're rather pleased than otherwise! In fact, Her Highness said 'I hope they'll be in time for the Banquet!' Those were her very words, I assure you!"

"Will Uggug be at the Banquet?" Bruno asked. And both children looked uneasy at the dismal suggestion.

"Why, of course he will!" chuckled the Professor. "Why, it's his birthday, don't you know? And his health will be drunk, and all that sort of thing. What would the Banquet be without him?"

"Ever so much nicer," said Bruno. But he said it in a very low voice, and nobody but Sylvie heard him.

The Professor chuckled again. "It'll be a jolly Banquet, now you've come, my little man! I am so glad to see you again!"

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"I 'fraid we've been very long in coming," Bruno politely remarked.

"Well, yes," the Professor assented. "However, you're very short, now you're come: that's some comfort." And he went on to enumerate the plans for the day. The Lecture comes first," he said. "That the Empress insists on. She says people will eat so much at the Banquet, they'll be too sleepy to attend to the Lecture afterwards-- and perhaps she's right. There'll just be a little refreshment, when the people first arrive as a kind of surprise for the Empress, you know. Ever since she's been--well, not quite so clever as she once was-- we've found it desirable to concoct little surprises for her. Then comes the Lecture--"

"What? The Lecture you were getting ready ever so long ago?" Sylvie enquired.

"Yes--that's the one," the Professor rather reluctantly admitted. "It has taken a goodish time to prepare. I've got so many other things to attend to. For instance, I'm Court-Physician. I have to keep all the Royal Servants in good health--and that reminds me!" he cried, ringing the bell in a great hurry. "This is Medicine-Day! We only give Medicine once a week. If we were to begin giving it every day, the bottles would soon be empty!"

"But if they were ill on the other days?" Sylvie suggested.

"What, ill on the wrong day!" exclaimed the Professor. "Oh, that would never do! A Servant would be dismissed at once, who was ill on the wrong day! This is the Medicine for to-day, he went on, taking down a large jug from a shelf. I mixed it, myself, first thing this morning. Taste it!" he said, holding out the jug to Bruno. "Dip in your finger, and taste it!"

Bruno did so, and made such an excruciatingly wry face that Sylvie exclaimed in alarm, "Oh, Bruno, you mustn't!"

"It's welly extremely nasty!" Bruno said, as his face resumed its natural shape.

"Nasty?" said the Professor. "Why, of course it is! What would Medicine be, if it wasn't nasty?"

"Nice," said Bruno.

"I was going to say--" the Professor faltered, rather taken aback by the promptness of Bruno's reply, "--that that would never do! Medicine has to be nasty, you know. Be good

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enough to take this jug, down into the Servants' Hall, he said to the footman who answered the bell "and tell them it's their Medicine for to-day."

"Which of them is to drink it?" the footman asked as he carried off the jug.

"Oh, I've not settled that yet!" the Professor briskly replied. "I'll come and settle that, soon. Tell them not to begin, on any account, till I come! It's really wonderful", he said, turning to the children, "the success I've had in curing Diseases! Here are some of my memoranda." He took down from the shelf a heap of little bits of paper pinned together in twos and threes. "Just look at this set, now. Under-Cook Number Thirteen recovered from Common Fever--Febris Communis.' And now see what's pinned to it. 'Gave Under-Cook Number Thirteen a Double Dose of Medicine.' That's something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"But which happened first?" said Sylvie, looking very much puzzled.

The Professor examined the papers carefully. "They are not dated, I find," he said with a slightly dejected air: "so I fear I ca'n't tell you. But they both happened: there's no doubt of that. The Medicine's the great thing, you know. The Diseases are much less important. You can keep a Medicine, for years and years: but nobody ever wants to keep a Disease! By the way, come and look at the platform. The Gardener asked me to come and see if it would do. We may as well go before it gets dark."

"We'd like to, very much!" Sylvie replied. "Come, Bruno, put on your hat. Don't keep the dear Professor waiting!"

"Ca'n't find my hat!" the little fellow sadly replied. "I were rolling it about. And it's rolled itself away!"

"Maybe it's rolled in there," Sylvie suggested, pointing to a dark recess, the door of which stood half open: and Bruno ran in to look. After a minute he came slowly out again, looking very grave, and carefully shut the cupboard door after him.

"It aren't in there," he said, with such unusual solemnity, that Sylvie's curiosity was aroused.

"What is in there, Bruno?"

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“There’s cobwebs--and two spiders--” Bruno thoughtfully replied, checking off the catalogue on his fingers, “--and the cover of a picture-book--and a tortoise--and a dish of nuts--and an old man.”

“An old man!” cried the Professor, trotting across the room in great excitement. “Why, it must be the Other Professor, that’s been lost for ever so long!”

He opened the door of the cupboard wide: and there he was, the Other Professor, sitting in a chair, with a book on his knee, and in the act of helping himself to a nut from a dish, which he had taken down off a shelf just within his reach. He looked round at us, but said nothing till he had cracked and eaten the nut. Then he asked the old question. “Is the Lecture all ready?”

“It’ll begin in an hour,” the Professor said, evading the question. “First, we must have something to surprise the Empress. And then comes the Banquet--”

“The Banquet!” cried the Other Professor, springing up, and filling the room with a cloud of dust. Then I’d better go and--and brush myself a little. What a state I’m in!”

“He does want brushing!” the Professor said, with a critical air. “Here’s your hat, little man! I had put it on by mistake. I’d quite forgotten I had one on, already. Let’s go and look at the platform.”

“And there’s that nice old Gardener singing still!” Bruno exclaimed in delight, as we went out into the garden. I do believe he’s been singing that very song ever since we went away!”

“Why, of course he has!” replied the Professor. “It wouldn’t be the thing to leave off, you know.”

“Wouldn’t be what thing?” said Bruno: but the Professor thought it best not to hear the question. “What are you doing with that hedgehog?” he shouted at the Gardener, whom they found standing upon one foot, singing softly to himself, and rolling a hedgehog up and down with the other foot.

“Well, I wanted fur to know what hedgehogs lives on: so I be a-keeping this here hedgehog--fur to see if it eats potatoes--”

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“Much better keep a potato,” said the Professor, “and see if hedgehogs eat it!”

“That be the roight way, sure-ly!” the delighted Gardener exclaimed. “Be you come to see the platform?”

“Aye, aye!” the Professor cheerily replied. “And the children have come back, you see!”

The Gardener looked round at them with a grin. Then he led the way to the Pavilion; and as he went he sang:

“He looked again, and found it was
A Double Rule of Three:
'And all its Mystery', he said,
'Is clear as day to me!' “

“You’ve been months over that song,” said the Professor. “Isn’t it finished yet?”

“There be only one verse more,” the Gardener sadly replied. And, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he sang the last verse:

“He thought he saw an Argument
That proved he was the Pope:
He looked again, and found it was
A Bar of Mottled Soap.
'A fact so dread', he faintly said,
'Extinguishes all hope!' “

Choking with sobs, the Gardener hastily stepped on a few yards ahead of the party, to conceal his emotion.

“Did he see the Bar of Mottled Soap?” Sylvie enquired, as we followed.

“Oh, certainly!” said the Professor. “That song is his own history, you know.”

Tears of an ever-ready sympathy glittered in Bruno’s eyes. “I’s welly sorry he isn’t the Pope!” he said. “Aren’t you sorry, Sylvie?”

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“Well--I hardly know,” Sylvie replied in the vaguest manner. “Would it make him any happier?” she asked the Professor

“It wouldn’t make the Pope any happier,” said the Professor. “Isn’t the platform lovely?” he asked, as we entered the Pavilion.

“I’ve put an extra beam under it!” said the Gardener, patting it affectionately as he spoke. “And now it’s that strong, as--as a mad elephant might dance upon it!”

“Thank you very much!” the Professor heartily rejoined. “I don’t know that we shall exactly require--but it’s convenient to know.” And he led the children upon the platform, to explain the arrangements to them. Here are three seats, you see, for the Emperor and the Empress and Prince Uggug. But there must be two more chairs here!” he said, looking down at the Gardener. “One for Lady Sylvie, and one for the smaller animal!”

“And may I help in the Lecture?” said Bruno. “I can do some conjuring tricks.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a conjuring lecture,” the Professor said, as he arranged some curious-looking machines on the table. “However, what can you do? Did you ever go through a table, for instance?”

“Often!” said Bruno. “Haven’t I, Sylvie?”

The Professor was evidently surprised, though he tried not to show it. “This must be looked into,” he muttered to himself, taking out a note-book. “And first--what kind of table?”

“Tell him!” Bruno whispered to Sylvie, putting his arms round her neck.

“Tell him yourself,” said Sylvie

“Ca’n’t,” said Bruno. “It’s a bony word.”

“Nonsense!” laughed Sylvie. “You can say it well enough, if you only try. Come!”

“Muddle “ said Bruno. “That’s a bit of it.”

“What does he say?” cried the bewildered Professor

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“He means the multiplication-table,” Sylvie explained.

The Professor looked annoyed, and shut up his notebook again. “Oh, that’s quite another thing,” he said.

“It are ever so many other things,” said Bruno. “Aren’t it, Sylvie?”

A loud blast of trumpets interrupted this conversation “Why, the entertainment has begun!” the Professor exclaimed, as he hurried the children into the Reception Saloon. “I had no idea it was so late!”

A small table, containing cake and wine, stood in a corner of the Saloon; and here we found the Emperor and Empress waiting for us. The rest of the Saloon had been cleared of furniture, to make room for the guests. I was much struck by the great change a few months had made in the faces of the Imperial Pair. A vacant stare was now the Emperor’s usual expression; while over the face of the Empress there flitted, ever and anon, a meaningless smile.

“So you’re come at last!” the Emperor sulkily remarked, as the Professor and the children took their places. It was evident that he was very much out of temper: and we were not long in learning the cause of this. He did not consider the preparations, made for the Imperial party, to be such as suited their rank. A common mahogany table!” he growled, pointing to it contemptuously with his thumb. “Why wasn’t it made of gold, I should like to know?”

“It would have taken a very long--” the Professor began, but the Emperor cut the sentence short.

“Then the cake! Ordinary plum! Why wasn’t it made of--of--” He broke off again. “Then the wine! Merely old Madeira! Why wasn’t it--? Then this chair! That s worst of all. Why wasn’t it a throne? One might excuse the other omissions, but I ca’n’t get over the chair!”

“What I ca’n’t get over”, said the Empress, in eager sympathy with her angry husband, “is the table!”

“Pooh!” said the Emperor.

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"It is much to be regretted!" the Professor mildly replied, as soon as he had a chance of speaking. After a moment's thought he strengthened the remark. "Everything", he said, addressing Society in general, "is very much to be regretted!"

A murmur of "Hear, hear!" rose from the crowded Saloon.

There was a rather awkward pause: the Professor evidently didn't know how to begin. The Empress leant forwards, and whispered to him. "A few jokes, you know, Professor--just to put people at their ease!"

"True, true, Madam!" the Professor meekly replied. "This little boy--"

"Please don't make any jokes about me!" Bruno exclaimed, his eyes filling with tears.

"I wo'n't if you'd rather I didn't," said the kind-hearted Professor. "It was only something about a Ship's Buoy--a harmless pun--but it doesn't matter." Here he turned to the crowd and addressed them in a loud voice. "Learn your A's!" he shouted. "Your B's! Your C's! and your D's, Then you'll be at your ease!"

There was a roar of laughter from all the assembly, and then a great deal of confused whispering. "What was it he said? Something about bees, I fancy--"

The Empress smiled in her meaningless way, and fanned herself. The poor Professor looked at her timidly: he was clearly at his wits' end again, and hoping for another hint. The Empress whispered again.

"Some spinach, you know, Professor, as a surprise."

The Professor beckoned to the Head-Cook, and said something to him in a low voice. Then the Head-Cook left the room, followed by all the other cooks.

"It's difficult to get things started," the Professor remarked to Bruno. "When once we get started, it'll go on all right, you'll see."

"If oo want to startle people", said Bruno, "oo should put live frogs on their backs."

Here the cooks all came in again, in a procession, the Head-Cook coming last and carrying something, which the others tried to hide by waving flags all round it. "Nothing but

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flags, Your Imperial Highness! Nothing but flags!" he kept repeating, as he set it before her. Then all the flags were dropped in a moment, as the Head Cook raised the cover from an enormous dish.

"What is it?" the Empress said faintly, as she put her spy-glass to her eye. "Why, it's Spinach, I declare!"

"Her Imperial Highness is surprised," the Professor explained to the attendants: and some of them clapped their hands. The Head-Cook made a low bow, and in doing so dropped a spoon on the table, as if by accident, just within reach of the Empress, who looked the other way and pretended not to see it.

"I am surprised!" the Empress said to Bruno. "Aren't you?"

"Not a bit," said Bruno. "I heard--" but Sylvie put her hand over his mouth, and spoke for him. "He's rather tired, I think. He wants the Lecture to begin."

"I want the supper to begin," Bruno corrected her.

The Empress took up the spoon in an absent manner, and tried to balance it across the back of her hand, and in doing this she dropped it into the dish: and, when she took it out again, it was full of spinach. "How curious!" she said, and put it into her mouth. "It tastes just like real spinach! I thought it was an imitation--but I do believe it's real!" And she took another spoonful.

"It wo'n't be real much longer," said Bruno.

But the Empress had had enough spinach by this time, and somehow--I failed to notice the exact process--we all found ourselves in the Pavilion, and the Professor in the act of beginning the long-expected Lecture.