



Chapter 24

# The Beggar's Return

"Your Imperial Highnesses!" he began. "It's the old Beggar again! Shall we set the dogs at him?"

"Bring him here!" said the Emperor.

The Chancellor could scarcely believe his ears. "Here your Imperial Highness? Did I rightly understand--"

"Bring him here!" the Emperor thundered once more. The Chancellor tottered down the hall--and in another minute the crowd divided, and the poor old Beggar was seen entering the Banqueting-Hall.

He was indeed a pitiable object: the rags, that hung about him, were all splashed with mud: his white hair and his long beard were tossed about in wild disorder. Yet he walked upright, with a stately tread, as if used to command: and--strangest sight of all--Sylvie and Bruno came with him, clinging to his hands, and gazing at him with looks of silent love.

Men looked eagerly to see how the Emperor would receive the bold intruder. Would he hurl him from the steps of the dais? But no. To their utter astonishment the Emperor knelt as the beggar approached, and with bowed head murmured "Forgive us!"

"Forgive us!" the Empress, kneeling at her husband's side, meekly repeated.

The Outcast smiled. "Rise up!" he said. "I forgive you!" And men saw with wonder that a change had passed over the old beggar, even as he spoke. What had seemed, but now, to be vile rags and splashes of mud, were seen to be in truth kingly trappings, broided with gold, and sparkling with gems. All knew him now, and bent low before the Elder Brother, the true Warden.

"Brother mine, and Sister mine!" the Warden began, in a clear voice that was heard all through that vast hall. "I come not to disturb you. Rule on, as Emperor, and rule wisely. For I am chosen King of Elfland. To-morrow I return there, taking nought from thence,

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save only-- save only--" his voice trembled, and with a look of ineffable tenderness, he laid his hands in silence on the heads of the two little ones who clung around him.

But he recovered himself in a moment, and beckoned to the Emperor to resume his place at the table. The company seated themselves again--room being found for the Elfin-King between his two children--and the Lord Chancellor rose once more, to propose the next toast.

"The next toast--the hero of the day--why, he isn't here!" he broke off in wild confusion.

Good gracious! Everybody had forgotten Prince Uggug!

"He was told of the Banquet, of course?" said the Emperor.

"Undoubtedly!" replied the Chancellor. "That would be the duty of the Gold Stick in Waiting."

"Let the Gold Stick come forwards!" the Emperor gravely said.

The Gold Stick came forwards. "I attended on His Imperial Fatness," was the statement made by the trembling official. "I told him of the Lecture and the Banquet--."

"What followed!" said the Emperor: for the unhappy man seemed almost too frightened to go on.

"His Imperial Fatness was graciously pleased to be sulky. His Imperial Fatness was graciously pleased to box my ears. His Imperial Fatness was graciously pleased to say 'I don't care!'"

" 'Don't-care' came to a bad end," Sylvie whispered to Bruno. "I'm not sure, but I believe he was hanged."

The Professor overheard her. "That result", he blandly remarked, was merely a case of mistaken identity."

Both children looked puzzled.

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“Permit me to explain. ‘Don’t-care’ and ‘Care’ were twin-brothers. ‘Care’, you know, killed the Cat. And they caught Don’t-care’ by mistake, and hanged him instead. And so ‘Care’ is alive still. But he’s very unhappy without his brother. That’s why they say ‘Begone, dull Care!’ “

“Thank you!” Sylvie said, heartily. “It’s very extremely interesting. Why, it seems to explain everything!”

“Well, not quite everything,” the Professor modestly rejoined. “There are two or three scientific difficulties--”

What was your general impression as to His Imperial Fatness?” the Emperor asked the Gold Stick.

“My impression was that His Imperial Fatness was getting more--”

“More what?”

All listened breathlessly for the next word.

“More PRICKLY!”

“He must be sent for at once!” the Emperor exclaimed. And the Gold Stick went off like a shot. The Elfin-King sadly shook his head. “No use, no use!” he murmured to himself. “Loveless, loveless!”

Pale, trembling, speechless, the Gold Stick came slowly back again.

“Well?” said the Emperor. “Why does not the Prince appear?”

“One can easily guess,” said the Professor. “His Imperial Fatness is, without doubt, a little preoccupied.”

Bruno turned a look of solemn enquiry on his old friend. “What do that word mean?”

But the Professor took no notice of the question. He was eagerly listening to the Gold Stick’s reply.

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"Please your Highness! His Imperial Fatness is--" Not a word more could he utter.

The Empress rose in an agony of alarm. "Let us go to him!" she cried. And there was a general rush for the door.

Bruno slipped off his chair in a moment. "May we go too?" he eagerly asked. But the King did not hear the question, as the Professor was speaking to him. "Preoccupied, your Majesty!" he was saying. "That is what he is, no doubt!"

"May we go and see him?" Bruno repeated. The King nodded assent, and the children ran off. In a minute or two they returned, slowly and gravely. "Well?" said the King. "What's the matter with the Prince?"

"He's--what you said," Bruno replied looking at the Professor. "That hard word." And he looked to Sylvie for assistance.

"Porcupine," said Sylvie.

"No, no!" the Professor corrected her. Pre-occupied, you mean."

"No, it's porcupine," persisted Sylvie. "Not that other word at all. And please will you come? The house is all in an uproar." ("And oo'd better bring an uproar-glass wiz oo!" added Bruno.)

We got up in great haste, and followed the children upstairs. No one took the least notice of me, but I wasn't at all surprised at this, as I had long realized that I was quite invisible to them all--even to Sylvie and Bruno.

All along the gallery, that led to the Prince's apartment, an excited crowd was surging to and fro, and the Babel of voices was deafening: against the door of the room three strong men were leaning, vainly trying to shut it--for some great animal inside was constantly bursting it half open, and we had a glimpse, before the men could push it back again, of the head of a furious wild beast, with great fiery eyes and gnashing teeth. Its voice was a sort of mixture--there was the roaring of a lion, and the bellowing of a bull, and now and then a scream like a gigantic parrot. "There is no judging by the voice!" the Professor cried in great excitement. "What is it?" he shouted to the men at the door. And a general chorus of voices answered him "Porcupine! Prince Uggug has turned into a Porcupine!"

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"A new Specimen!" exclaimed the delighted Professor. "Pray let me go in. It should be labeled at once!"

But the strong men only pushed him back. "Label it, indeed! Do you want to be eaten up?" they cried.

"Never mind about Specimens, Professor!" said the Emperor, pushing his way through the crowd. "Tell us how to keep him safe!"

"A large cage!" the Professor promptly replied. "Bring a large cage," he said to the people generally, "with strong bars of steel, and a portcullis made to go up and down like a mouse-trap! Does anyone happen to have such a thing about him?"

It didn't sound a likely sort of thing for anyone to have about him; however, they brought him one directly: curiously enough, there happened to be one standing in the gallery.

"Put it facing the opening of the door, and draw up the portcullis!" This was done in a moment.

"Blankets now " cried the Professor. "This is a most interesting Experiment!"

There happened to be a pile of blankets close by: and the Professor had hardly said the word, when they were all unfolded and held up like curtains all around. The Professor rapidly arranged them in two rows, so as to make a dark passage, leading straight from the door to the mouth of the cage.

"Now fling the door open!" This did not need to be done: the three men had only to leap out of the way, and the fearful monster flung the door open for itself, and, with a yell like the whistle of a steam-engine, rushed into the cage.

"Down with the portcullis!" No sooner said than done: and all breathed freely once more, on seeing the Porcupine safely caged.

The Professor rubbed his hands in childish delight. "The Experiment has succeeded!" he proclaimed. "All that is needed now is to feed it three times a day, on chopped carrots and--"

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"Never mind about its food, just now!" the Emperor interrupted. "Let us return to the Banquet. Brother, will you lead the way?" And the old man, attended by his children, headed the procession down stairs. "See the fate of a loveless life!" he said to Bruno, as they returned to their places. To which Bruno made reply, "I always loved Sylvie, so I'll never get prickly like that!"

"He is prickly, certainly," said the Professor, who had caught the last words, "but we must remember that, however porcupiny, he is royal still! After this feast is over, I'm going to take a little present to Prince Uggug--just to soothe him, you know: it isn't pleasant living in a cage."

"What'll you give him for a birthday-present?" Bruno enquired.

"A small saucer of chopped carrots," replied the Professor. "In giving birthday-presents, my motto is--cheapness! I should think I save forty pounds a year by giving --oh, what a twinge of pain!"

"What is it?" said Sylvie anxiously.

"My old enemy!" groaned the Professor. "Lumbago-- rheumatism--that sort of thing. I think I'll go and lie down a bit." And he hobbled out of the Saloon, watched by the pitying eyes of the two children.

"He'll be better soon!" the Elfin-King said cheerily "Brother!" turning to the Emperor, "I have some business to arrange with you to-night. The Empress will take care of the children." And the two Brothers went away together, arm-in-arm.

The Empress found the children rather sad company. They could talk of nothing but "the dear Professor", and "what a pity he's so ill", till at last she made the welcome proposal "Let's go and see him!"

The children eagerly grasped the hands she offered them: and we went off to the Professor's study, and found him lying on the sofa, covered up with blankets, and reading a little manuscript-book. "Notes on Vol. Three!" he murmured, looking up at us. And there, on a tab near him, lay the book he was seeking when first I saw him.

"And how are you now, Professor?" the Empress asked bending over the invalid.

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The Professor looked up, and smiled feebly. "As devoted to your Imperial Highness as ever!" he said in a weak voice. "All of me, that is not Lumbago, is Loyalty!"

"A sweet sentiment!" the Empress exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "You seldom hear anything so beautiful as that even in a Valentine!"

"We must take you to stay at the seaside," Sylvie said tenderly. "It'll do you ever so much good! And the Sea's so grand!"

"But a Mountain's grander!" said Bruno.

"What is there grand about the Sea?" said the Professor. "Why, you could put it all into a teacup!"

"Some of it," Sylvie corrected him.

"Well, you'd only want a certain number of teacups to hold it all. And then where's the grandeur? Then as to a Mountain--why, you could carry it all away in a wheelbarrow, in a certain number of years!"

"It wouldn't look grand--the bits of it in the wheelbarrow," Sylvie candidly admitted.

"But when oo put it together again--" Bruno began.

"When you're older," said the Professor, "you'll know that you ca'n't put Mountains together again so easily! One lives and one learns, you know!"

"But it needn't be the same one, need it?" said Bruno "Wo'n't it do, if I live, and if Sylvie learns?"

"I ca'n't learn without living!" said Sylvie.

"But I can live without learning!" Bruno retorted. "Oo just try me!"

"What I meant, was--" the Professor began, looking much puzzled, "--was--that you don't know everything, you know."

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"But I do know everything I know!" persisted the little fellow. "I know ever so many things! Everything, 'cept the things I don't know. And Sylvie knows all the rest."

The Professor sighed, and gave it up. "Do you know what a Boojum is?"

"I know!" cried Bruno. "It's the thing what wrenches people out of their boots!"

"He means 'bootjack'," Sylvie explained in a whisper.

"You ca'n't wrench people out of boots," the Professor mildly observed.

Bruno laughed saucily. "Oo can, though! Unless they're welly tight in."

"Once upon a time there was a Boojum--" the Professor began, but stopped suddenly. "I forget the rest of the Fable," he said. "And there was a lesson to be learned from it. I'm afraid I forget that too."

"I'll tell oo a Fable!" Bruno began in a great hurry. "Once there were a Locust, and a Magpie, and a Engine-driver. And the Lesson is, to learn to get up early--"

"It isn't a bit interesting!" Sylvie said contemptuously. "You shouldn't put the Lesson so soon."

"When did you invent that Fable?" said the Professor. "Last week?"

"No!" said Bruno. "A deal shorter ago than that, Guess again!"

"I ca'n't guess," said the Professor. "How long ago?"

"Why, it isn't invented yet!" Bruno exclaimed triumphantly. "But I have invented a lovely one! Shall I say it?"

"If you've finished inventing it," said Sylvie. "And let the Lesson be 'to try again!'"

"No," said Bruno with great decision. "The Lesson are 'not to try again!'" "Once there were a lovely china man, what stood on the chimbley-piece. And he stood, and he stood. And one day he tumbleded off, and he didn't hurt his self one bit. Only he would try again."



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And the next time he tumbled off, he hurted his self welly much, and breaked off ever so much varnish."

"But how did he come back on the chimney-piece after his first tumble?" said the Em-press. (It was the first sensible question she had asked in all her life.)

"I put him there!" cried Bruno.

"Then I'm afraid you know something about his tumbling," said the Professor. "Perhaps you pushed him?"

To which Bruno replied, very seriously, "Didn't pushed him much--he were a lovely china man," he added hastily, evidently very anxious to change the subject.

"Come, my children!" said the Elfin-King, who had just entered the room. "We must have a little chat together, before you go to bed." And he was leading them away, but at the door they let go his hands, and ran back again to wish the Professor good night.

"Good night, Professor, good night!" And Bruno solemnly shook hands with the old man, who gazed at him with a loving smile, while Sylvie bent down to press her sweet lips upon his forehead.

"Good night, little ones!" said the Professor. "You may leave me now--to ruminate. I'm as jolly as the day is long, except when it's necessary to ruminate on some very difficult subject. All of me," he murmured sleepily as we left the room, "all of me, that isn't Bon-hommie, is Ruminati-*on!*"

"What did he say, Bruno?" Sylvie enquired, as soon as we were safely out of hearing.

"I think he said 'All of me that isn't Bone-disease is Rheumatism.' Whatever are that knocking, Sylvie?"

Sylvie stopped, and listened anxiously. It sounded like some one kicking at a door, "I hope it isn't that Porcupine breaking loose!" she exclaimed.

"Let's go on!" Bruno said hastily. "There's nuffin to wait for, oo know!"