



Chapter 14

Bruno's Picnic

As bald as bald," was the bewildering reply. "Now, Bruno, I'll tell you a story."

"And I'll tell oo a story," said Bruno, beginning in a hurry for fear of Sylvie getting the start of him: "once there were a Mouse--a little tiny Mouse--such a little Mouse! Oo never saw such a tiny Mouse--"

"Did nothing ever happen to it, Bruno?" I asked. "Haven't you anything more to tell us, besides its being tiny?"

"Nothing never happened to it," Bruno solemnly replied.

"Why did nothing never happen to it?" said Sylvie, who was sitting, with her head on Bruno's shoulder, patiently waiting for a chance of beginning her story.

"It were too tiny," Bruno explained.

"That's no reason!" I said. "However tiny it was, things might happen to it."

Bruno looked pityingly at me, as if he thought me very stupid. "It were too tiny," he repeated. "If anything happened to it, it would die--it were so very tiny!"

"Really that's enough about its being tiny!" Sylvie put in. "Haven't you invented any more about it?"

"Haven't invented no more yet."

"Well, then, you shouldn't begin a story till you've invented more! Now be quiet, there's a good boy, and listen to my story."

And Bruno, having quite exhausted all his inventive faculty, by beginning in too great a hurry, quietly resigned himself to listening. "Tell about the other Bruno, please," he said coaxingly.

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Sylvie put her arms round his neck, and began:--

"The wind was whispering among the trees," ("That wasn't good manners!" Bruno interrupted. "Never mind about manners," said Sylvie) "and it was evening--a nice moony evening, and the Owls were hooting--"

"Pretend they weren't Owls!" Bruno pleaded, stroking her cheek with his fat little hand. "I don't like Owls. Owls have such great big eyes. Pretend they were Chickens!"

"Are you afraid of their great big eyes, Bruno?" I said.

"Aren't 'fraid of nothing," Bruno answered in as careless a tone as he could manage: "they're ugly with their great big eyes. I think if they cried, the tears would be as big--oh, as big as the moon!" And he laughed merrily. "Doos Owls cry ever, Mister Sir?"

"Owls cry never," I said gravely, trying to copy Bruno's way of speaking: "they've got nothing to be sorry for, you know."

"Oh, but they have!" Bruno exclaimed. "They're ever so sorry, 'cause they killed the poor little Mouses!"

"But they're not sorry when they're hungry, I suppose?"

"Oo don't know nothing about Owls!" Bruno scornfully remarked. "When they're hungry, they're very, very sorry they killed the little Mouses, 'cause if they hadn't killed them there'd be sumfin for supper, oo know!"

Bruno was evidently getting into a dangerously inventive state of mind, so Sylvie broke in with "Now I'm going on with the story. So the Owls--the Chickens, I mean--were looking to see if they could find a nice fat Mouse for their supper--"

"Pretend it was a nice 'abbit!" said Bruno.

"But it wasn't a nice habit, to kill Mouses," Sylvie argued. "I ca'n't pretend that!"

"I didn't say 'habit', oo silly fellow!" Bruno replied with a merry twinkle in his eye. "'abbits--that runs about in the fields!"

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"Rabbit? Well it can be a Rabbit, if you like. But you mustn't alter my story so much, Bruno. A Chicken couldn't eat a Rabbit!"

"But it might have wished to see if it could try to eat it."

"Well, it wished to see if it could try--oh, really, Bruno, that's nonsense! I shall go back to the Owls."

"Well, then, pretend they hadn't great eyes!"

"And they saw a little Boy," Sylvie went on, disdaining to make any further corrections. "And he asked them to tell him a story. And the Owls hooted and flew away--" ("Oo shouldn't say 'flewed'; oo should say 'fled'," Bruno whispered. But Sylvie wouldn't hear.) "And he met a Lion. And he asked the Lion to tell him a story. And the Lion said 'yes', it would. And, while the Lion was telling him the story, it nibbled some of his head off--"

"Don't say 'nibbled'!" Bruno entreated. "Only little things nibble--little thin sharp things, with edges--"

"Well, then, it 'nubbed'," said Sylvie. "And when it had nubbed all his head off, he went away, and he never said 'thank you'!"

"That were very rude," said Bruno. "If he couldn't speak, he might have nodded--no, he couldn't nod. Well, he might have shaken hands with the Lion!"

"Oh, I'd forgotten that part!" said Sylvie. "He did shake hands with it. He came back again, you know, and he thanked the Lion very much, for telling him the story."

"Then his head had growed up again?" said Bruno.

"Oh yes, it grew up in a minute. And the Lion begged pardon, and said it wouldn't nubble off little boys' heads --not never no more!"

Bruno looked much pleased at this change of events. "Now that are a really nice story!" he said. "Aren't it a nice story, Mister Sir?"

"Very," I said. "I would like to hear another story about that Boy."

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"So would I," said Bruno, stroking Sylvie's cheek again. "Please tell about Bruno's Picnic; and don't talk about nubby Lions!"

"I wo'n't, if it frightens you," said Sylvie.

"Flightens me!" Bruno exclaimed indignantly. "It isn't that! It's 'cause 'nubby' 's such a grumbly word to say-- when one person's got her head on another person's shoulder. When she talks like that," he exclaimed to me, "the talking goes down bofe sides of my face--all the way to my chin--and it doos tickle so! It's enough to make a beard grow, that it is!"

He said this with great severity, but it was evidently meant for a joke: so Sylvie laughed--a delicious musical little laugh, and laid her soft cheek on the top of her brother's curly head, as if it were a pillow, while she went on with the story. "So this Boy--"

"But it wasn't me, oo know!" Bruno interrupted. "And oo needn't try to look as if it was, Mister Sir!"

I represented, respectfully, that I was trying to look as if it wasn't.

"--he was a middling good Boy--"

"He were a welly good Boy!" Bruno corrected her. "And he never did nothing he wasn't told to do--"

"That doesn't make a good Boy!" Sylvie said contemptuously.

" That do make a good Boy!" Bruno insisted.

Sylvie gave up the point. "Well, he was a very good boy and he always kept his promises, and he had a big cupboard--"

"--for to keep all his promises in!" cried Bruno.

"If he kept all his promises," Sylvie said, with a mischievous look in her eyes, "he wasn't like some Boys I know of!"

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"He had to put salt with them, a-course," Bruno said gravely: "oo ca'n't keep promises when there isn't any salt. And he kept his birthday on the second shelf."

"How long did he keep his birthday?" I asked. "I never can keep mine more than twenty-four hours."

"Why, a birthday stays that long by itself!" cried Bruno. "Oo doosn't know how to keep birthdays! This Boy kept his a whole year!"

"And then the next birthday would begin," said Sylvie. "So it would be his birthday always."

"So it were," said Bruno. "Doos oo have treats on oor birthday, Mister Sir?"

"Sometimes," I said.

"When oo're good, I suppose?"

"Why, it is a sort of treat, being good, isn't it?" I said.

"A sort of treat!" Bruno repeated. "It's a sort of punishment I think!"

"Oh, Bruno!" Sylvie interrupted, almost sadly. "How can you?"

"Well, but it is," Bruno persisted. "Why, look here, Mister Sir! This is being good!" And he sat bolt upright, and put on an absurdly solemn face. "First oo must sit up as straight as pokers--"

"--as straight as a poker," Sylvie corrected him.

"--as straight as pokers," Bruno firmly repeated. "Then oo must clasp oor hands--so. Then--'Why hasn't oo brushed oor hair? Go and brush it toreckly!' Then--'Oh, Bruno, oo mustn't dog's-ear the daisies!' Did oo learn oor spelling wiz daisies, Mister Sir?"

"I want to hear about that Boy's Birthday," I said.

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Bruno returned to the story instantly. "Well, so this Boy said 'Now it's my Birthday!' And so--I'm tired!" he suddenly broke off, laying his head in Sylvie's lap. "Sylvie knows it best. Sylvie's grown-upper than me. Go on, Sylvie!"

Sylvie patiently took up the thread of the story again. "So he said 'Now it's my Birthday. Whatever shall I do to keep my Birthday?' All good little Boys--" (Sylvie turned away from Bruno, and made a great pretence of whispering to me) "--all good little Boys--Boys that learn their lessons quite perfect--they always keep their birthdays, you know. So of course this little Boy kept his Birthday."

"Oo may call him Bruno, if oo like," the little fellow carelessly remarked. "It weren't me, but it makes it more interesting."

"So Bruno said to himself 'The properest thing to do is to have a Picnic, all by myself, on the top of the hill. And I'll take some Milk, and some Bread, and some Apples: and first and foremost, I want some Milk!' So, first and foremost, Bruno took a milk-pail--"

"And he went and milked the Cow!" Bruno put in.

"Yes," said Sylvie, meekly accepting the new verb. "And the Cow said 'Moo! What are you going to do with all that Milk?' And Bruno said 'Please'm, I want it for my Picnic.' And the Cow said 'Moo! But I hope you wo'n't boil any of it?' And Bruno said 'No, indeed I wo'n't! New Milk's so nice and so warm, it wants no boiling!' "

"It doesn't want no boiling,' Bruno offered as an amended version.

"So Bruno put the Milk in a bottle. And then Bruno said 'Now I want some Bread!' So he went to the Oven, and he took out a delicious new Loaf. And the Oven--".

"--ever so light and so puffy!" Bruno impatiently corrected her. "Oo shouldn't leave out so many words!"

Sylvie humbly apologized. "--a delicious new Loaf, ever so light and so puffy. And the Oven said--" Here Sylvie made a long pause. "Really I don't know what an Oven begins with, when it wants to speak!"

Both children looked appealingly at me; but I could only say, helplessly, "I haven't the least idea! I never heard an Oven speak!"

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For a minute or two we all sat silent; and then Bruno said, very softly, "Oven begins wiz 'O'."

"Good little boy!" Sylvie exclaimed. "He does his spelling very nicely. He's cleverer than he knows!" she added, aside, to me. "So the Oven said 'O! What are you going to do with all that Bread?' And Bruno said 'Please--' Is an Oven 'Sir' or 'm', would you say?" She looked to me for a reply.

"Both, I think," seemed to me the safest thing to say.

Sylvie adopted the suggestion instantly. "So Bruno said 'Please, Sirm, I want it for my Picnic.' And the Oven said 'O! But I hope you wo'n't toast any of it?' And Bruno said, 'No, indeed I wo'n't! New Bread's so light and so puffy, it wants no toasting!' "

"It never doesn't want no toasting," said Bruno. "I wiss oo wouldn't say it so short!"

"So Bruno put the Bread in the hamper. Then Bruno said 'Now I want some Apples!' So he took the hamper, and he went to the Apple-Tree, and he picked some lovely ripe Apples. And the Apple-Tree said--" Here followed another long pause.

Bruno adopted his favourite expedient of tapping his forehead; while Sylvie gazed earnestly upwards, as if she hoped for some suggestion from the birds, who were singing merrily among the branches overhead. But no result followed.

"What does an Apple-Tree begin with, when it wants to speak?" Sylvie murmured despairingly, to the irresponsive birds.

At last, taking a leaf out of Bruno's book, I ventured on a remark. "Doesn't 'Apple-Tree' always begin with 'Eh!'?"

"Why, of course it does! How clever of you!" Sylvie cried delightedly.

Bruno jumped up, and patted me on the head. I tried not to feel conceited.

"So the Apple-Tree said 'Eh! What are you going to do with all those Apples?' And Bruno said 'Please, Sir, I want them for my Picnic.' And the Apple-Tree said 'Eh! But I hope you

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wo'n't bake any of them?' And Bruno said 'No, indeed I wo'n't! Ripe Apples are so nice and so sweet, they want no baking!' "

"They never doesn't--" Bruno was beginning, but Sylvie corrected herself before he could get the words out.

"They never doesn't nohow want no baking.' So Bruno put the Apples in the hamper, along with the Bread, and the bottle of Milk. And he set off to have a Picnic, on the top of the hill, all by himself--"

"He wasn't greedy, oo know, to have it all by himself,' ' Bruno said, patting me on the cheek to call my attention; " 'cause he hadn't got no brothers and sisters."

"It was very sad to have no sisters, wasn't it?" I said.

"Well, I don't know," Bruno said thoughtfully, " 'cause he hadn't no lessons to do. So he didn't mind."

Sylvie went on. "So, as he was walking along the road he heard behind him such a curious sort of noise--a sort of a Thump! Thump! Thump! 'Whatever is that?' said Bruno. 'Oh, I know!' said Bruno. 'Why, it's only my Watch a-ticking!' "

"Were it his Watch a-ticking?" Bruno asked me, with eyes that fairly sparkled with mischievous delight.

"No doubt of it!" I replied. And Bruno laughed exultingly.

"Then Bruno thought a little harder. And he said 'No! it ca'n't be my Watch a-ticking; because I haven't got a Watch!' "

Bruno peered up anxiously into my face, to see how I took it. I hung my head, and put a thumb into my mouth, to the evident delight of the little fellow.

"So Bruno went a little further along the road. And then he heard it again, that queer noise--Thump! Thump! Thump! 'Whatever is that?' said Bruno. 'Oh, I know!' said Bruno. 'Why, it's only the Carpenter amending my Wheelbarrow!' "

"Were it the Carpenter a-mending his Wheelbarrow?" Bruno asked me.

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I brightened up, and said "It must have been!" in a tone of absolute conviction.

Bruno threw his arms round Sylvie's neck. "Sylvie!" he said, in a perfectly audible whisper. "He says it must have been!"

"Then Bruno thought a little harder. And he said 'No! It ca'n't be the Carpenter a-mending my Wheelbarrow, because I haven't got a Wheelbarrow!'"

This time I hid my face in my hands, quite unable to meet Bruno's look of triumph.

"So Bruno went a little further along the road. And then he heard that queer noise again--Thump! Thump! Thump! So he thought he'd look round, this time, just to see what it was. And what should it be but a great Lion!"

"A great big Lion," Bruno corrected her.

"A great big Lion. And Bruno was ever so frightened, and he ran--"

"No, he wasn't flightened a bit!" Bruno interrupted. (He was evidently anxious for the reputation of his namesake.) "He runned away to get a good look at the Lion; 'cause he wanted to see if it were the same Lion what used to nubble little Boys' heads off; and he wanted to know how big it was!"

"Well, he ran away, to get a good look at the Lion. And the Lion trotted slowly after him. And the Lion called after him, in a very gentle voice, 'Little Boy, little Boy, You needn't be afraid of me! I'm a very gentle old Lion now. I never nubble little Boys' heads off, as I used to do.' And so Bruno said 'Don't you really, Sir? Then what do you live on?' And the Lion--"

"Oo see he weren't a bit flightened!" Bruno said to me, patting my cheek again. "'cause he remembered to call it Sir', oo know."

I said that no doubt that was the real test whether a person was frightened or not.

"And the Lion said 'Oh, I live on bread-and-butter, and cherries, and marmalade, and plum-cake--'"

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"--and apples!" Bruno put in.

"Yes, 'and apples'. And Bruno said "wo'n't you with me to my Picnic?" And the Lion said 'Oh, I should like it very much indeed!' And Bruno and the Lion went away together." Sylvie stopped suddenly.

"Is that all?" I asked, despondingly.

"Not quite all," Sylvie slyly replied "There's a sentence or two more. Isn't there, Bruno?"

"Yes," with a carelessness that was evidently put on "just a sentence or two more."

"And, as they were walking along, they looked over a hedge, and who should they see but a little black Lamb! And the Lamb was ever so frightened. And it ran--"

"It were really flightened!" Bruno put in.

"It ran away. And Bruno ran after it. And he called 'Little Lamb! You needn't be afraid of this Lion! It never kills things! It lives on cherries, and marmalade--' "

"--and apples!" said Bruno. 'Oo always forgets the apples!"

"And Bruno said 'Wo'n't you come with us to my Picnic?' And the Lamb said 'Oh, I should like it very much indeed, if my Ma will let me!' And Bruno said 'Let's go and ask your Ma!' And they went to the old Sheep. And Bruno said 'Please, may your little Lamb come to my Picnic?' And the Sheep said 'Yes, if it's learnt all its lessons.' And the Lamb said 'Oh yes, Ma! I've learnt all my lessons!' "

"Pretend it hadn't any lessons!" Bruno earnestly pleaded.

"Oh, that would never do!" said Sylvie. "I ca'n't leave out all about the lessons! And the old Sheep said 'Do you know your A B C yet? Have you learnt A?' And the Lamb said 'Oh yes, Ma! I went to the A-field, and I helped them to make A!' 'Very good, my child! And have you learnt B?' 'Oh yes, Ma! I went to the B-hive, and the B gave me some honey!' 'Very good, my child! And have you learnt C?' 'Oh yes, Ma! I went to the C-side, and I saw the ships sailing on the C!' 'Very good, my child! You may go to Bruno's Picnic.' "

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“So they set off. And Bruno walked in the middle so that the Lamb mightn’t see the Lion—”

“It were flightened,” Bruno explained.

“Yes, and it trembled so; and it got paler and paler; and, before they’d got to the top of the hill, it was a white little Lamb--as white as snow!”

“But Bruno weren’t flightened!” said the owner of that name. “So he staid black!”

“No, he didn’t stay black! He staid pink!” laughed Sylvie. “I shouldn’t kiss you like this, you know, if you were black!”

“Oo’d have to!” Bruno said with great decision. “Besides, Bruno wasn’t Bruno, oo know--I mean, Bruno wasn’t me--I mean--don’t talk nonsense, Sylvie!”

“I wo’n’t do it again!” Sylvie said very humbly. “And so, as they went along, the Lion said ‘Oh, I’ll tell you what I used to do when I was a young Lion. I used to hide behind trees, to watch for little boys.’” (Bruno cuddled a little closer to her.) ““And, if a little thin scraggy Boy came by, why, I used to let him go. But, if a little fat juicy--’ “

Bruno could bear no more. “Pretend he wasn’t juicy!” he pleaded, half-sobbing.

“Nonsense, Bruno!” Sylvie briskly replied. “It’ll be done in a moment! ‘--if a little fat juicy Boy came by, why, I used to spring out and gobble him up! Oh, you’ve no idea what a delicious thing it is--a little juicy Boy!’ And Bruno said ‘Oh, if you please, Sir, don’t talk about eating little boys! It makes me so shivery!”

The real Bruno shivered, in sympathy with the hero.

“And the Lion said ‘Oh, well, we wo’n’t talk about it, then! I’ll tell you what happened on my wedding day--”

“I like this part better,” said Bruno, patting my cheek to keep me awake.

“ ‘There was, oh, such a lovely wedding-breakfast! At one end of the table there was a large plum-pudding. And at the other end there was a nice roasted Lamb! Oh, you’ve no idea what a delicious thing it is--a nice roasted Lamb!’ And the Lamb said ‘Oh, if you

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please, Sir, don't talk about eating Lambs! It makes me so shivery!' And the Lion said 'Oh, well, we wo'n't talk about it, then!' "