

## 17. Unwelcoming Committee

The Humbug whistled merrily at his work, for he was never as happy as when he had a job which required no thinking at all. After what seemed like days, he had dug a hole scarcely large enough for his thumb. Tock shuffled steadily back and forth with the dropper in his teeth, but the full well was still almost as full as when he began, and Milo's new pile of sand was hardly a pile at all.

"How very strange," said Milo, without stopping for a moment. "I've been working steadily all this time, and I don't feel the slightest bit tired or hungry. I could go right on the same way forever."

"Perhaps you will," the man agreed with a yawn (at least it sounded like a yawn).

"Well, I wish I knew how long it was going to take," Milo whispered, as the dog went by again.

"Why not use your magic staff and find out?" replied Tock, as clearly as anyone could with an eye dropper in his mouth.

Milo took the shiny pencil from his pocket and quickly calculated that, at the rate they were working, it would take each of them eight hundred and thirty-seven years to finish.

"Pardon me," he said, tugging at the man's sleeve and holding the sheet of figures up for him to see, "but it's going to take eight hundred and thirty-seven years to do these jobs."

"Is that so?" replied the man, without even turning around. "Well, you'd better get on with it then."

"But it hardly seems worthwhile," said Milo softly.

"WORTHWHILE!" the man roared indignantly.

"All I meant was that perhaps it isn't too important," Milo repeated, trying not to be impolite.

"Of course, it's not important," he snarled angrily. "I wouldn't have asked you to do it if I thought it was important."

And now, as he turned to face them, he didn't seem quite so pleasant.

"Then why bother?" asked Tock, whose alarm suddenly began to ring.

"Because, my young friends," he muttered sourly, "what could be more important than doing unimportant things? If you stop to do enough of them, you'll never get to where you're going." He punctuated his last remark with a villainous laugh.

"Then you must be..." gasped Milo.

"Quite correct!" he shrieked triumphantly. "I am the Terrible Trivium, demon of petty tasks and worthless jobs, ogre of wasted effort, and monster of habit."

The Humbug dropped his needle and stared in disbelief, while Milo and Tock began to back away slowly.

"Don't try to leave," he ordered, with a menacing sweep of his arm, "for there's so very much to do, and you still have over eight hundred years to go on the first job."

"But why do only unimportant things?" asked Milo, who suddenly remembered how much time *he* spent each day doing them.

"Think of all the trouble it saves," the man explained, and his face looked as if he'd be grinning an evil grin—if he could grin at all. "If you only do the easy and useless jobs, you'll never have to worry about the important ones which are so difficult. You just won't have the time. For there's always something to do to keep you from what you really should be doing, and if it weren't for that dreadful magic staff, you'd never know how much time you were wasting."

As he spoke, he tiptoed slowly toward them with his arms outstretched and continued to whisper in a soft, deceitful voice, "Now do come and stay with me. We'll have so much fun together. There are things to fill and things to empty, things to take away and things to bring

back, things to pick up and things to put down and, besides all that, we have pencils to sharpen, holes to dig, nails to straighten, stamps to lick, and ever so much more. Why, if you stay here, you'll never have to think again—and with a little practice you can become a monster of habit, too."

They were all transfixed by the Trivium's soothing voice but, just as he was about to clutch them in his well-manicured fingers, a voice cried out, "RUN! RUN!"

Milo, who thought it was Tock, turned suddenly and dashed up the trail.

"RUN! RUN!" it shouted again, and this time Tock thought it was Milo and quickly followed him.

"RUN! RUN!" it urged once more, and now the Humbug, not caring who said it, ran desperately after his two friends, with the Terrible Trivium close behind.

"This way! This way!" the voice called again. They turned in its direction and scrambled up the difficult slippery rocks, sliding back at each step almost as far as they'd gone forward. With a great effort and many helping paws from Tock, they reached the top of the ridge at last, but only two steps ahead of the furious Trivium.

"Over here! Over here!" advised the voice and, without a moment's hesitation, they started through a puddle of sticky ooze, which quickly became ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then hip-deep until, finally, they were struggling along through, what felt very much like, a waist-deep pool of peanut butter.

The Trivium, who had discovered a mound of pebbles which needed counting, followed no more, but stood at the edge, shaking his fist, shouting horrible threats, and promising to rouse every demon in the mountains.

"What a nasty fellow," gasped Milo, who was having great difficulty just getting his legs to move. "I hope I never meet him again."

"I believe he's stopped chasing us," said the bug, looking back over his shoulder.

"It's not what's behind that worries me," remarked Tock, as they stepped from the sticky mess, "but what's ahead."

"Keep going straight! Keep going straight!" counselled the voice, as they continued to pick their way carefully along the new path.

"Now step up! Now step up!" it recommended and, almost before they knew what had happened, they had all taken a step up and then plunged to the bottom of a deep murky pit.

"But he said *up*!" Milo complained bitterly from where he lay sprawling.

"Well, I hope you didn't expect to get anywhere by listening to me," said the voice gleefully.

"We'll never get out of here," the Humbug moaned, looking at the steep, smooth sides of the pit.

"That is quite an accurate evaluation of the situation," said the voice coldly.

"Then why did you help us at all?" shouted Milo angrily.

"Oh, I'd do as much for anybody," he replied; "bad advice is my specialty. For, as you can plainly see, I'm the long-nosed, green-eyed, curly-haired, wide-mouthed, thick-necked, broad-shouldered, round-bodied, short-armed, bow-legged, big-footed monster—and, if I do say so myself, one of the most frightening fiends in this whole wild wilderness. With me here, you wouldn't dare try to escape." And, with that, he shuffled to the edge of the pit and leered down at his helpless prisoners.

Tock and the Humbug turned away in fright, but Milo, who had learned by now that people are not always what they say they are, reached for his telescope and took a long look for himself. And there, at the rim of the hole, instead of what he'd expected, stood a small furry creature with very worried eyes and a rather sheepish grin.

"Why, you're not long-nosed, green-eyed, curly-haired, wide-mouthed, thick-necked, broad-shouldered, round-bodied, short-armed, bow-legged, or big-footed—and you're not at all frightening," said Milo indignantly.

"What kind of a demon are you?"

The little creature, who seemed stunned at being found out, leaped back out of sight and began to whimper softly.

"I'm the Demon of Insincerity," he sobbed. "I don't mean what I say, I don't mean what I do, and I don't mean what I am. Most people who believe what I tell them go the wrong way, and stay there, but you and your awful telescope have spoiled everything. I'm going home." And, crying hysterically, he stamped off in a huff.

"It certainly pays to have a good look at things," observed Milo as he wrapped up the telescope with great care.

"Now, all we have to do is climb out," said Tock, placing his front paws as high on the wall as he could. "Here, hop up on my back."

Milo climbed onto the dog's shoulders. Then the bug crawled up both of them and, by standing on Milo's head, just managed to hook his cane on the root of an old gnarled tree. With loud complaints, he hung on doggedly until the other two had climbed out over him and pulled him up, somewhat dazed and discouraged.

"I'll lead the way for a while," he said, brushing himself off. "Follow me and we'll stay out of trouble."

He guided them along one of five narrow ledges, all of which led to a grooved and rutted plateau. They stopped for a moment to rest and make plans but, before they had done either, the whole mountain trembled violently and, with a sudden lurch, rose high into the air, carrying them along with it. For, quite accidentally, they had stepped into the callused hand of the Gelatinous Giant.

"AND WHAT HAVE WE HERE!" he roared, looking curiously at the tiny figures huddled in his palm—and licking his lips.

He was an incredible size even sitting down, with long unkempt hair, bulging eyes, and a shape hardly worth speaking of. He looked, in fact, very much like a colossal bowl of jelly, without the bowl.

"HOW DARE YOU DISTURB MY NAP!" he bellowed furiously, and the force of his hot breath tumbled them over in his hand.

"We're terribly sorry," said Milo meekly, when he'd untangled himself, "but you looked just like part of the mountain."

"Naturally," the giant replied in a more normal voice (but even this was like an explosion). "I have no shape of my own, so I try to be just like whatever I'm near. In the mountains, I'm a lofty peak; on the beach, a broad sand-bar; in the forest, a towering oak and, sometimes in the city, I'm a very handsome twelve-story apartment house. I just hate to be conspicuous; it's really not safe, you know." Then, he looked at them again with hungry eyes and wondered how well they'd taste.

"You look much too big to be afraid of anything," said Milo quickly, for the giant had already begun to open his mouth wide.

"I'm not," he said, with a slight shiver that ran all over his gelatinous body. "I'm afraid of everything. That's why I'm so ferocious. If the others found out, I'd just die. Now, do be quiet while I eat my breakfast."

He raised his hand toward his gaping mouth and the Humbug shut his eyes tightly and clasped both hands over his head.

"Then aren't you really a fearful demon?" Milo asked desperately, on the assumption that the giant had been brought up well enough not to talk with a mouthful.

"Well, approximately yes," he replied, lowering his arm to the vast relief of the bug; "that is, comparatively no. What I mean is, relatively maybe—in other words, roughly perhaps. What does everyone else think? There, you see," he said peevishly; "I'm even afraid to make a

positive statement. So please stop asking questions before I lose my appetite altogether." Then, he raised his arm again and prepared to swallow the three of them in one gulp. "Why don't you help us rescue Rhyme and Reason? Then, maybe things will get better," shouted Milo again, this time almost too late for, in another instant, they would have all been gone.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," said the Giant thoughtfully, lowering his arm once more. "I mean, why not leave well enough alone? That is, it'll never work. I wouldn't take a chance. In other words, let's keep things as they are— changes are so frightening."

As he spoke, he began to look a bit ill. "Maybe I'll just eat one of you," he remarked unhappily, "and save the rest for later. I don't feel very well."

"I have a better idea," said Milo.

"You do?" interrupted the giant, losing any desire to eat at all. "If it's one thing I can't swallow, it's ideas: they're so hard to digest."

"I have a box full of all the ideas in the world," said Milo, proudly holding up the gift King Azaz had given him.

The thought of it terrified the giant, who began to shake like an enormous pudding.

"PUT ME DOWN AND JUST GO AWAY," he pleaded, forgetting, for a moment, who had hold of whom; "AND PLEASE DON'T OPEN THAT BOX!"

In another moment, he'd set them down on the next jagged peak and, with panic in his eyes, lumbered off to warn the others of this terrible new threat.

But news travels quickly. The Word Snatcher, the Trivium, and the long-nosed, green-eyed, curly-haired, wide-mouthed, thick-necked, broad-shouldered, round-bodied, short-armed, bow-legged, big-footed monster had already spread the alarm throughout the evil, unenlightened mountains.

And out the demons came—from every cave and crevice, through every fissure and crack, from under the rocks and up from the mud, stomping and shuffling, slithering and sliding, through the murky shadows. And all had only one thought in mind: destroy the intruders and protect Ignorance.

From where they stood, Milo, Tock, and the Humbug could see them moving steadily forward, still far away but coming quickly. On all sides, the cliffs were alive with this evil collection of crawling, looming, creeping, lurching shapes. Some could be seen plainly, others were but dim silhouettes, and yet still more, only now beginning to stir from their foul places, would be along much sooner than they were wanted.

"We'd better hurry," barked Tock, "or they're sure to catch us." And he started up the trail again.

Milo took one deep breath and did the same; and the bug, now that he knew what lay behind, ran ahead with renewed enthusiasm.