

13. Unfortunate Conclusions

With his mouth shut tight, and his feet moving as fast as thoughts could make them, Milo ran all the way back to the car. There was great excitement when he arrived, as Tock raced happily down the road to greet him. The Humbug personally accepted all congratulations from the crowd.

"Where is the sound?" someone hastily scribbled on the blackboard, and they all waited anxiously for the reply.

Milo caught his breath, picked up the chalk, and explained simply, "It's on the tip of my tongue."

Several people excitedly threw their hats into the air, some shouted what would have been a loud hooray, and the rest pushed the heavy cannon into place. They aimed it directly at the thickest part of the fortress wall and packed it full of gunpowder. Milo stood on tiptoe, leaned over into the cannon's mouth, and parted his lips. The small sound dropped silently to the bottom and everything was ready. In another moment, the fuse was lit and sputtering.

"I hope no one gets hurt," thought Milo and, before he had time to think again, an immense cloud of grey-and-white smoke leaped from the gun and, along with it, so softly that it was hardly heard, came the sound of—BUT.

It flew toward the wall for several seconds in a high, lazy arc and then struck ever-so-lightly just to the right of the big door. For an instant, there was an ominous stillness, quieter and more silent than ever before, as if even the air was holding its breath. And then, almost immediately, there was a blasting, roaring, thundering smash, followed by a crushing, shattering, bursting crash, as every stone in the fortress came toppling to the ground and the vaults burst open, spilling the sounds of history into the wind.

Every sound that had ever been uttered or made, from way back to when there were none, to way up when there were too many, came hurtling out of the debris in a way that sounded as though everyone in the world was laughing, whistling, shouting, crying, singing, whispering, humming, screaming, coughing, and sneezing, all at the same time. There were bits of old speeches floating about, as well as recited lessons, gunshots from old wars, babies' cries, car horns, waterfalls, electric fans, galloping horses, and a great deal of everything else.

For a while, there was total and deafening confusion and then, almost as quickly as they'd come, all the old sounds disappeared over the hill in search of their new freedom, and things were normal again. The people quickly went about their busy talkative business and, as the smoke and dust cleared, only Milo, Tock, and the Humbug noticed the Soundkeeper sitting disconsolately on a pile of rubble.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Milo sympathetically as the three of them went to console her.

"But we had to do it," added Tock, sniffing around the ruins.

"What a terrible mess," observed the Humbug, with his knack for saying exactly the wrong thing.

The Soundkeeper looked around with an expression of unrelieved sadness on her unhappy face,

"It will take years to collect all those sounds again," she sobbed, "and even longer to put them back in proper order. But it's all my fault. For you can't improve sound by having only silence. The problem is to use each at the proper time."

As she spoke, the familiar and unmistakable *squinch-squanch, squinch-squanch* of the DYNNE's heavy toot-steps could be heard plodding over the hill and, when he finally appeared, he was dragging an incredibly large sack behind him.

"Can anyone use these sounds?" he puffed, mopping his forehead. "They all came over the hill at once and none of them are awful enough for me."

The Soundkeeper peered into the sack, and there were all the sounds which had burst from the vaults.

"How nice of you to return them!" she cried happily. "You and the doctor must come by for an evening of beautiful music when my fortress is repaired."

The thought of it so horrified the DYNNE that he excused himself immediately and dashed off down the road in a great panic.

"I hope I haven't offended him," she said with some concern.

"He only likes unpleasant sounds," volunteered Tock.

"Ah yes," she sighed; "I keep forgetting that many people do. But I suppose they are necessary, for you'd never really know how pleasant one was unless you knew how unpleasant it wasn't." She paused for a moment, then continued: "If only Rhyme and Reason were here, I'm sure things would improve."

"That's why we're going to rescue them," said Milo proudly.

"What a long, hard journey that will be! You'll need some nourishment," she cried, handing Milo a small brown package, neatly wrapped and tied with string. "Now remember: they're not for eating, but for listening, because you'll often be hungry for sounds as well as food. Here are street noises at night, train whistles a long way off, dry leaves burning, busy department stores, crunching toast, creaking bedsprings and, of course, all kinds of laughter. There's a little of each and, in far-off lonely places, I think you'll be glad to have them."

"I'm sure we will," replied Milo gratefully.

"Just take this road to the sea and turn left," she told them. "You'll soon be in Digitopolis." And almost before she had finished, they had said good-bye and left the valley behind them.

The shore line was peaceful and flat, and the calm sea bumped it playfully along the sandy beach. In the distance, a beautiful island, covered with palm trees and flowers, beckoned invitingly from the sparkling water.

"Nothing can possibly go wrong now," cried the Humbug happily, and as soon as he'd said it he leaped from the car, as if struck by a pin, and sailed all the way to the little island.

"And we'll have plenty of time," answered Tock, who hadn't noticed that the bug was missing—and he, too, suddenly leaped into the air and disappeared.

"It certainly couldn't be a nicer day," agreed Milo, who was too busy looking at the road to see that the others had gone. And, in a split second, he was gone also.

He landed next to Tock and the terrified Humbug on the tiny island, which now looked completely different. Instead of palms and flowers, there were only rocks and the twisted stumps of long-dead trees. It certainly didn't seem like the same place they had seen from the road.

"Pardon me," said Milo to the first man who happened by; "can you tell me where I am?"

"Pardon me," replied the man; "can you tell me *who* I am?"

The man was dressed in a shaggy tweed jacket and knickerbockers with long woollen stockings and a cap that had a peak both front and back, and he seemed as confused as he could be.

"You must know who you are," said Milo impatiently.

"You must know where you are," he replied with equal annoyance.

"Oh dear, this is going to be difficult," Milo whispered to Tock. "I wonder if we can help him."

They conferred for a few minutes and finally the bug looked up and said, "Can you describe yourself?"

"Yes, indeed," the man replied happily. "I'm as tall as can be"—and he grew straight up until all that could be seen of him were his shoes and stockings—"and I'm as short as can be"—and he shrank down to the size of a pebble. "I'm as generous as can be," he said, handing each of them a large red apple, "and I'm as selfish as can be," he snarled, grabbing them back again. "I'm as strong as can be," he roared, lifting an enormous boulder over his head, "and I'm as weak as can be," he gasped, staggering under the weight of his hat. "I'm as smart as can be," he remarked in twelve different languages, "and I'm as stupid as can be," he admitted, putting both feet in one shoe. "I'm as graceful as can be," he hummed, balancing on one toe, "and I'm as clumsy as can be," he cried, sticking his thumb in his eye. "I'm as fast as can be," he announced, running around the island twice in no time at all, "and I'm as slow as can be," he complained, waving good-bye to a snail. "Is that any help to you?"

Once again, they conferred in busy whispers until all three agreed.

"It's really very simple," said the Humbug, twirling his cane.

"If everything you say is true," added Tock.

"Then, without a doubt," Milo concluded brightly, "you must be Canby."

"Of course, yes, of course," the man shouted. "Why didn't I think of that? I'm as happy as can be." Then he quickly sat down, put his head in his hands, and sighed. "But I'm also as sad as can be."

"Now will you tell me where we are?" asked Tock as he looked around the desolate island.

"To be sure," said Canby; "you're on the Island of Conclusions. Make yourself at home.

You're apt to be here for some time."

"But how did we get here?" asked Milo, who was still a bit puzzled by being there at all.

"You jumped, of course," explained Canby. "That's the way most everyone gets here. It's really quite simple: every time you decide something without having a good reason, you jump to Conclusions whether you like it or not. It's such an easy trip to make that I've been here hundreds of times."

"But this is such an unpleasant-looking place," Milo remarked.

"Yes, that's true," admitted Canby; "it does look much better from a distance."

As he spoke, at least eight or nine more people sailed onto the island from every direction possible.

"Well, I'm going to jump right back," announced the Humbug, who took two or three practice bends, leaped as far as he could, and landed in a heap two feet away.

"That won't do at all," scolded Canby, helping him to his feet. "You can never jump away from Conclusions. Getting back is not so easy. That's why we're so terribly crowded here."

That was certainly the truth, for all along the bleak shore and clustered on the rocks for as far as anyone could see, were enormous crowds of people, all sadly looking out to sea.

"Isn't there even a boat?" asked Milo, anxious to get on with his trip.

"Oh no," replied Canby, shaking his head. "The only way back is to swim, and that's a very long and a very hard way."

"I don't like to get wet," moaned the unhappy bug, and he shuddered at the thought.

"Neither do they," said Canby sadly. "That's what keeps them here. But I wouldn't worry too much about it, for you can swim all day in the Sea of Knowledge and still come out completely dry. Most people do. But you must excuse me now. I have to greet the new arrivals. As you know, I'm as friendly as can be."

Over the Humbug's strenuous objections, Milo and Tock decided to swim and, protesting loudly, the bug was dragged along with them toward the sea. Canby hurried off to answer more questions, and the last thing he was heard to say was "Pardon me, can you tell me who I am?"

They swam and swam and swam for what seemed like hours and only Tock's firm encouragement kept Milo struggling through the icy water. At last, they reached the shore, thoroughly exhausted and, except for the bug, completely soaked.

"That wasn't bad at all," the Humbug said, straightening his tie and brushing himself off. "I must visit there again."

"I'm sure you will," gasped Milo. "But, from now on, I'm going to have a very good reason before I make up my mind about anything. You can lose too much time jumping to Conclusions."

The car was just where they'd left it and, in a moment, they were on their way again as the road turned away from the sea and began its long climb into the mountains. The warm sun and billowy breezes dried them as they went.

"I hope we reach Digitopolis soon," said Milo, thinking of the breakfast they hadn't eaten. "I wonder how far it is."