

18. Castle in the Air

Higher and higher they climbed, in search of the castle and the two banished princesses—from one crest to the next, from jagged rock to jagged rock, up frightful crumbling cliffs and along desperately narrow ledges where a single mis-step meant only good-bye. An ominous silence dropped like a curtain around them and, except for the scuffling of their frantic footsteps, there wasn't a sound. The world that Milo knew was a million thoughts away, and the demons—the demons were *there* in the distance.

"They're gaining!" shouted the Humbug, wishing he'd never looked back.

"But there it is!" cried Milo at the same instant, for, straight ahead, climbing up from atop the highest peak, was a spidery spiral staircase and at the other end stood the Castle in the Air.

"I see it, I see it," said the happy bug as they struggled up the twisting mountain trail. But what he didn't see was that, curled up right in front of the first step, was a little round man in a frock coat, sleeping peacefully on a very large and well-worn ledger.

A long quill pen sat precariously behind his ear, there were ink stains all over his hands and face, as well as his clothing, and he wore a pair of the thickest eyeglasses that Milo had ever seen.

"Be very careful," whispered Tock when they'd finally reached the top, and the Humbug stepped gingerly around and started up the stairs.

"NAMES?" the little man called out briskly, just as the startled bug reached the first step. He sat up quickly, pulled the book out from under him, put on a green eyeshade, and waited with his pen poised in the air.

"Well, I... " stammered the bug.

"NAMES?" he cried again, and as he did he opened the book to page 512 and began to write furiously. The quill made horrible scratching noises, and the point, which was continually catching in the paper, flicked tiny inkblots all over him. As they called out their names, he noted them carefully in alphabetical order.

"Splendid, splendid, splendid," he muttered to himself. "I haven't had an M in ages."

"What do you want our names for?" asked Milo, looking anxiously over his shoulder. "We're in a bit of a hurry."

"Oh, this won't take a minute," the man assured them. "I'm the official Senses Taker, and I must have some information before I can take your senses. Now, if you'll just tell me when you were born, where you were born, why you were born, how old you are now, how old you were then, how old you'll be in a little while, your mother's name, your father's name, your aunt's name, your uncle's name, your cousin's name, where you live, how long you've lived there, the schools you've attended, the schools you haven't attended, your hobbies, your telephone number, your shoe size, shirt size, collar size, hat size, and the names and addresses of six people who can verify all this information, we'll get started. One at a time, please; stand in line; and no pushing, no talking, no peeking."

The Humbug, who had difficulty remembering anything, went first. The little man leisurely recorded each answer in five different places, pausing often to polish his glasses, clear his throat, straighten his tie, and blow his nose. He managed also to cover the distressed bug from head to foot in ink.

"NEXT!" he announced very officially.

"I do wish he'd hurry," said Milo, stepping forward, for, in the distance, he could see the first of the demons already beginning to scale the mountain toward them, no more than a few minutes away.

The little man wrote with painful deliberation, finally finished with both Milo and Tock, and looked up happily.

"May we go now?" asked the dog, whose sensitive nose had picked up a loathsome, evil smell that grew stronger every second.

"By all means," said the man agreeably, "just as soon as you finish telling me your height; your weight; the number of books you read each year; the number of books you don't read each year; the amount of time you spend eating, playing, working, and sleeping every day; where you go on vacations; how many ice-cream cones you eat in a week; how far it is from your house to the barbershop; and which is your favourite colour. Then, after that, please fill out these forms and applications—three copies of each—and be careful, for if you make one mistake, you'll have to do them all over again."

"Oh dear," said Milo, looking at the pile of papers, "we'll never finish these." And, even as he spoke, the demons swarmed stealthily up the mountain.

"Come, come," said the Senses Taker, chuckling merrily to himself, "don't take all day. I'm expecting several more visitors any minute now."

They set to work feverishly on the difficult forms, and when they'd finished, Milo placed them all in the little man's lap. He thanked them politely, took off his eyeshade, put the pen behind his ear, closed the book, and went back to sleep. The Humbug took one horrified look back over his shoulder and quickly started up the stairs.

"DESTINATION?" shouted the Senses Taker, sitting up again, putting on his eyeshade, taking the pen from behind his ear, and opening his book.

"But I thought " protested the astonished bug.

"DESTINATION?" he repeated, making several notations in the ledger.

"The Castle in the Air," said Milo impatiently.

"Why bother?" said the Senses Taker, pointing into the distance. "I'm sure you'd rather see what I have to show you."

As he spoke, they all looked up, but only Milo could see the colourful and exciting circus there on the horizon. There were tents and side shows and rides and even wild animals—everything a little boy could spend hours watching.

"And wouldn't you enjoy a more pleasant aroma?" he said, turning to Tock. Almost immediately the dog smelled a wonderful smell that no one but he could smell. It was made up of all the marvellous things that had ever delighted his curious nose.

"And here's something I know you'll enjoy hearing," he assured the Humbug.

The bug listened with rapt attention to something he alone could hear—the shouts and applause of an enormous crowd, all cheering for him.

They each stood as if in a trance, looking, smelling, and listening to the very special things that the Senses Taker had provided for them, forgetting completely about where they were going and who, with evil intent, was coming up behind them.

The Senses Taker sat back with a satisfied smile on his puffy little face as the demons came closer and closer, until less than a minute separated them from their helpless victims.

But Milo was too engrossed in the circus to notice, and Tock had closed his eyes, the better to smell, and the bug, bowing and waving, stood with a look of sheer bliss on his face, interested only in the wild ovation.

The little man had done his work well and, except for some ominous crawling noises just below the crest of the mountain, everything was again silent. Milo, who stood staring blankly into the distance, let his bag of gifts slip from his shoulder to the ground. And, as he did, the package of sounds broke open, filling the air with peals of happy laughter which seemed so merry that first he, then Tock, and finally the Humbug joined in.

And suddenly the spell was broken.

"There is no circus," cried Milo, realising he'd been tricked.

"There were no smells," barked Tock, his alarm now ringing furiously.

"The applause is gone," complained the disappointed Humbug.

"I warned you; I warned you I was the Senses Taker," sneered the Senses Taker. "I help people find what they're *not* looking for, hear what they're *not* listening for, run after what they're *not* chasing, and smell what isn't even there. And, furthermore," he cackled, hopping around gleefully on his stubby legs, "I'll steal your sense of purpose, take your sense of duty, destroy your sense of proportion—and, but for one thing, you'd be helpless yet."

"What's that?" asked Milo fearfully.

"As long as you have the sound of laughter," he groaned unhappily, "I cannot take your sense of humour—and, with it, you've nothing to fear from me."

"But what about THEM?" cried the terrified bug, for, at that very instant, the other demons had reached the top at last and were leaping forward to seize them.

They ran for the stairs, bowling over the disconsolate Senses Taker, ledger, ink bottle, eyeshade, and all, as they went. The Humbug dashed up first, then Tock, and lastly Milo, almost too late, as a scaly arm brushed his shoe. The dangerous stairs danced dizzily in the wind, and the clumsy demons refused to follow; but they howled with rage and fury, swore bloody vengeance, and watched with many pairs of burning eyes as the three small shapes vanished slowly into the clouds.

"Don't look down," advised Milo as the bug tottered upward on unsteady legs.

Like a giant corkscrew, the stairway twisted through the darkness, steep and narrow and with no rail to guide them. The wind howled cruelly in an effort to tear them loose, and the fog dragged clammy fingers down their backs; but up the giddy flight they went, each one helping the others, until at last the clouds parted, the darkness fell away, and a glow of golden sunrays warmed their arrival.

The castle gate swung smoothly open and, on a rug as soft as a snowdrift, they entered the Great Hall and they stood shyly waiting.

"Come right in, please; we've been expecting you," sang out two sweet voices in unison.

At the far end of the Hall, a silver curtain parted and two young women stepped forward.

They were dressed all in white and were beautiful beyond compare. One was grave and quiet, with a look of warm understanding in her eyes, and the other seemed calm and joyful.

"You must be the Princess of Pure Reason," said Milo, bowing to the first.

She answered simply, "Yes," and that was just enough.

"Then you are Sweet Rhyme," he said, with a smile to the other.

Her eyes sparkled brightly and she answered with a laugh as friendly as the postman's knock when you know there's a letter for you.

"We've come to rescue you both," Milo explained very seriously.

"And the demons are close behind," said the worried Humbug, still shaky from his ordeal.

"And we should leave right away," advised Tock.

"Oh, they won't dare come up here," said Reason gently; "and we'll be down there soon enough."

"Why not sit for a moment and rest?" suggested Rhyme. "I'm sure you must be tired. Have you been travelling long?"

"Days," sighed the exhausted dog, curling up on a large downy cushion.

"Weeks," corrected the bug, flopping into a deep comfortable armchair, for it did seem that way to him.

"It *has* been a long trip," said Milo, climbing onto the couch where the princesses sat; "but we would have been here much sooner if I hadn't made so many mistakes. I'm afraid it's all my fault."

"You must never feel badly about making mistakes," explained Reason quietly, "as long as you take the trouble to learn from them. For you often learn more by being wrong for the right reasons than you do by being right for the wrong reasons."

"But there's so *much* to learn," he said, with a thoughtful frown.

"Yes, that's true," admitted Rhyme; "but it's not just learning things that's important. It's learning what to do with what you learn and learning why you learn things at all that matters."

"That's just what I mean," explained Milo, as Tock and the exhausted bug drifted quietly off to sleep.

"Many of the things I'm supposed to know seem so useless that I can't see the purpose in learning them at all."

"You may not see it now," said the Princess of Pure Reason, looking knowingly at Milo's puzzled face, "but whatever we learn has a purpose and whatever we do affects everything and everyone else, if even in the tiniest way. Why, when a housefly flaps his wings, a breeze goes round the world; when a speck of dust falls to the ground, the entire planet weighs a little more; and when you stamp your foot, the earth moves slightly off its course. Whenever you laugh, gladness spreads like the ripples in a pond; and whenever you're sad, no one anywhere can be really happy. And it's much the same thing with knowledge, for whenever you learn something new, the whole world becomes that much richer."

"And remember, also," added the Princess of Sweet Rhyme, "that many places you would like to see are just off the map and many things you want to know are just out of sight or a little beyond your reach. But someday you'll reach them all, for what you learn today, for no reason at all, will help you discover all the wonderful secrets of tomorrow."

"I think I understand," he said, still full of questions and thoughts; "but which is the most important?"

At that moment, the conversation was interrupted by a far-off chopping noise. With each loud blow, the entire room and everything in it shook and rattled. Down below, on the murky peak, the demons were busily cutting the stairway loose with axes and hammers and saws.

Before long, the whole thing collapsed with a tremendous crash and the startled Humbug leaped to his feet just in time to see the castle drifting slowly off into space.

"We're moving!" he shouted, which was a fact that had already become obvious to everyone.

"I think we had better leave now," said Rhyme softly, and Reason agreed with a nod.

"But how will we get down?" groaned the Humbug, looking at the wreckage below. "There's no stairway and we're sailing higher every minute."

"Well, time flies, doesn't it?" asked Milo.

"On many occasions," barked Tock, jumping eagerly to his feet. "I'll take everyone down."

"Can you carry us all?" inquired the bug.

"For a short distance," said the dog thoughtfully.

"The princesses can ride on my back, Milo can catch hold of my tail, and you can hang on to his ankles."

"But what of the Castle in the Air?" the bug objected, not very pleased with the arrangement.

"Let it drift away," said Rhyme.

"And good riddance," added Reason, "for no matter how beautiful it seems, it's still nothing but a prison."

Tock then backed up three steps and, with a running start, bounded through the window with all his passengers and began the long glide down. The princesses sat tall and unafraid, Milo held on as tight as he could, and the bug swung crazily, like the tail on a kite. Down through the darkness they plunged, to the mountains and the monsters below.