

19. The Return of Rhyme and Reason

Sailing past three of the tallest peaks, and just over the outstretched arms of the grasping demons, they reached the ground and landed with a sudden jolt.

"Quick!" urged Tock. "Follow me! We'll have to run for it."

With the princesses still on his back, he galloped down the rocky trail—and not a moment too soon. For, pounding down the mountainside, in a cloud of clinging dust and a chorus of chilling shrieks, came all the loathsome creatures who choose to live in Ignorance and who had waited so very impatiently. Thick black clouds hung heavily overhead as they fled through the darkness, and Milo, looking back for just a moment, could see the awful shapes coming closer and closer. Just to the left, and not very far away, were the Triple Demons of Compromise—one tall and thin, one short and fat, and the third exactly like the other two. As always, they moved in ominous circles, for if one said "here," the other said "there," and the third agreed perfectly with both of them. And, since they always settled their differences by doing what none of them really wanted, they rarely got anywhere at all—and neither did anyone they met.

Jumping clumsily from boulder to boulder and catching hold with his cruel, curving claws was the Horrible Hopping Hindsight, a most unpleasant fellow whose eyes were in the rear and whose rear was out in front. He invariably leaped before he looked and never cared where he was going as long as he knew why he shouldn't have gone to where he'd been. And, most terrifying of all, directly behind, inching along like giant soft-shelled snails, with blazing eyes and wet anxious mouths, came the Gorgons of Hate and Malice, leaving a trail of slime behind them and moving much more quickly than you'd think.

"FASTER!" shouted Tock. "They're closing in."

Down from the heights they raced; the Humbug with one hand on his hat and the other flailing desperately in the air; Milo, running as he never ran before, and the demons just a little bit faster than that. From off to the right, his heavy bulbous body lurching dangerously on the spindly legs which barely supported him, came the Overbearing Know-it-all, talking continuously. A dismal demon who was mostly mouth, he was ready at a moment's notice to offer misinformation on any subject. And, while he often tumbled heavily, it was never he who was hurt, but, rather, the unfortunate person on whom he fell.

Next to him, but just a little behind, came the Gross Exaggeration, whose grotesque features and thoroughly unpleasant manners were hideous to see, and whose rows of wicked teeth were made only to mangle the truth. They hunted together, and were bad luck to anyone they caught. Riding along on the back of anyone who'd carry him was the Threadbare Excuse, a small, pathetic figure whose clothes were worn and tattered and who mumbled the same things again and again, in a low but piercing voice: "Well, I've been sick—but the page was torn out—I missed the bus—but no one *else* did it." He looked quite harmless and friendly but, once he grabbed on, he almost never let go.

Closer and closer they came, bumping and jolting each other, clawing and snorting in their eager fury. Tock staggered along bravely with Rhyme and Reason, Milo's lungs now felt ready to burst as he stumbled down the trail, and the Humbug was slowly falling behind. Gradually, the path grew broader and flatter as it reached the bottom of the mountain and turned toward Wisdom. Ahead, lay light and safety—but perhaps just a bit too far away. And down came the demons from everywhere, frenzied creatures of darkness, lurching wildly toward their prey. From off in the rear, the Terrible Trivium and the wobbly Gelatinous Giant urged them on with glee. And, pounding forward with a rush, came the ugly Dilemma, snorting steam and looking intently for someone to catch on the ends of his long, pointed horns, while his hoofs bit eagerly at the ground.

The exhausted Humbug swayed and tottered on his rubbery legs, a look of longing on his anguished face. "I don't think I can " he gasped, as a jagged flash of lightning ripped open the sky and the thunder stole his words.

Closer and closer the demons loomed as the desperate chase neared its end. Then, gathering themselves for one final leap, they prepared to engulf first the bug, then the boy, and lastly the dog and his two passengers. They rose as one and...and suddenly stopped, as if frozen in mid-air, unable to move, staring ahead in terror.

Milo slowly raised his weary head and, there on the horizon, for as far as the eye could see, stood the massed armies of Wisdom, the sun glistening from their swords and shields, and their bright banners slapping proudly at the breeze.

For a moment, everything was silent. Then, a thousand trumpets sounded—then a thousand more—and, like an ocean wave, the long line of horsemen advanced, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until, with a gallop and a shout, which was music to Milo's ears, they swept forward toward the horrified demons.

There, in the lead, was King Azaz, his dazzling armour embossed with every letter in the alphabet, and, with him, the Mathemagician, brandishing a freshly sharpened staff. From his tiny wagon, Dr. Dischord hurled explosion after explosion, to the delight of the Soundkeeper, while the busy DYNNE collected them almost at once. And, in honour of the occasion, Chroma the Great led his orchestra in a stirring display of patriotic colours. Everyone Milo had met during his journey had come to help—the men of the market place, the miners of Digitopolis, and all the good people from the valley and the forest.

The Spelling Bee buzzed excitedly overhead shouting, "Charge—c-h-a-r-g-e—charge—c-h-a-r-g-e." Canby, who, as everyone knew, was as cowardly as can be, came all the way from Conclusions to show that he was also as brave. And even Officer Shrift, mounted proudly on a long, low dachshund, galloped grimly along. Cringing with fear, the monsters of Ignorance turned in flight and, with anguished cries too horrible ever to forget, returned to the damp, dark places from which they came. The Humbug sighed with relief, and Milo and the princesses prepared to greet the victorious army.

"Well done," stated the Duke of Definition, dismounting and grasping Milo's hand warmly.

"Fine job," seconded the Minister of Meaning.

"Good Work," added the Count of Connotation.

"Congratulations," proposed the Earl of Essence.

"CHEERS," recommended the Undersecretary of Understanding.

And, since that's exactly what everyone felt like doing, that's exactly what everyone did.

"It's *we* who should thank... " began Milo, when the shouting had subsided, but, before he could finish, they had unrolled an enormous scroll. And, with a fanfare of trumpets and drums, they stated, in order, that:

"Henceforth,"

"And forthwith,"

"Let it be known by all men"

"That Rhyme and Reason"

"Reign once more in Wisdom."

The two princesses bowed gratefully and warmly kissed their brothers, and they all agreed that a very fine thing had happened.

"And furthermore," continued the proclamation,

"The boy named Milo"

"The dog known as Tock,"

"And the insect hereinafter referred to as the Humbug"

"Are hereby declared to be"

"Heroes of the realm."

Cheer after cheer filled the air, and even the bug seemed a bit embarrassed at having so much attention paid to him.

"Therefore," concluded the duke, "In honour of their glorious deed, a royal holiday is declared. Let there be parades through every city in the land and a gala carnival of three days' duration, consisting of jousting, games, feasts, and follies."

The five cabinet members then rolled up the large parchment and, with many bows and flourishes, retired.

Swift horsemen carried the news to every corner of the kingdom, and, as the parade slowly wound its way through the countryside, crowds of people gathered to cheer it along. Garlands of flowers hung from every house and shop and carpeted the streets. Even the air shimmered with excitement, and shutters, closed for many years, were thrown open to let the brilliant sunlight shine where it hadn't shone for so long.

Milo, Tock, and the very subdued Humbug sat proudly in the royal carriage with Azaz, the Mathemagician, and the two princesses; and the parade stretched for miles in both directions. As the cheering continued, Rhyme leaned forward and touched Milo gently on the arm.

"They're shouting for you," she said with a smile.

"But I could never have done it," he objected, "without everyone else's help."

"That may be true," said Reason gravely, "but you had the courage to try; and what you *can* do is often simply a matter of what you *will* do."

"That's why," said Azaz, "there was one very important thing about your quest that we couldn't discuss until you returned."

"I remember," said Milo eagerly. "Tell me now."

"It was impossible," said the king, looking at the Mathemagician.

"Completely impossible," said the Mathemagician, looking at the king. "Do you mean " stammered the bug, who suddenly felt a bit faint.

"Yes, indeed," they repeated together; "but if we'd told you then, you might not have gone—and, as you've discovered, so many things are possible just as long as you don't know they're impossible."

And, for the remainder of the ride, Milo didn't utter a sound.

Finally, when they'd reached a broad, flat plain, midway between Dictionopolis and Digitopolis, somewhat

o the right of the Valley of Sound and a little to the left of the Forest of Sight, the long line of carriages and horsemen stopped, and the great carnival began. Colourfully- striped tents and pavilions sprang up everywhere as the workmen scurried about like ants. Within minutes, there were racecourses and grandstands, sideshows and refreshment booths, gaming fields, Ferris wheels, banners, bunting, and bedlam, almost without pause. The Mathemagician provided a continuous display of brilliant fireworks made up of exploding numbers which multiplied and divided with breath-taking results—the colours, of course, being supplied by Chroma and the noise by a deliriously happy Dr. Dischord. Thanks to the Soundkeeper, there was music and laughter and, for very brief moments, even a little silence.

Alec Bings set up an enormous telescope and invited everyone to see the other side of the moon, and the Humbug wandered through the crowd accepting congratulations and recounting, in great detail, his brave exploits, most of which gained immeasurably in the telling.

And each evening, just at sunset, a royal banquet was held. There was everything imaginable to eat. King Azaz had ordered a special supply of delicious words in all flavours and, for those who liked exotic foods, in all languages, too. The Mathemagician had provided

innumerable platters of division dumplings, which Milo was very careful to avoid, for, no matter how many you ate, when you finished, there was more on your plate than when you began.

And, of course, following the meal came songs, epic poems, and speeches in praise of the princesses and the three gallant adventurers who had rescued them. King Azaz and the Mathemagician pledged that every year at this same time they would lead their armies to the Mountains of Ignorance until not one demon remained, and everyone agreed that no finer carnival for no finer reason had ever been held in Wisdom.

But even things as fine as all that must end sometime and, late on the afternoon of the third day, the tents were struck, the pavilions were folded, and everything was packed ready to leave.

"It's time to go now," said Reason, "for there is much to do." And, as she spoke, Milo suddenly remembered his home. He wanted very much to go back yet he could not bear the thought of leaving.

"And so, you must say good-bye," said Rhyme, patting him gently on the cheek.

"To everyone?" said Milo unhappily. He looked around slowly at all the friends he'd made, and he looked very hard so as not to forget any of them for even an instant. But mostly he looked at Tock and the Humbug, with whom he had shared so much—the perils, the dangers, the fears, and, best of all, the victory. Never had anyone had two more steadfast companions. "Can't you both come with me?" he asked, knowing the answer as he said it.

"I'm afraid not, old man," replied the bug. "I'd like, to, but I've arranged a lecture tour which will keep me occupied for years."

"And they do need a watchdog here," barked Tock sadly.

Milo embraced the bug who, in his most typical fashion, was heard to mumble gruffly, "BAH," but whose damp eyes told quite a different story. Then, the boy threw his arms around Tock's neck and, for just a moment, held on very tightly.

"Thank you for everything you've taught me," said Milo to everybody, as a tear rolled down his cheek.

"And thank you for what you've taught us," said the king—and, as he clapped his hands, the little car was brought forward, polished like new.

Milo got in and, with one last look, started down the road, with everyone waving him on.

"Good-bye," he shouted. "Good-bye. I'll be back." "Good-bye," shouted Azaz. "Always remember the importance of words."

"And numbers," added the Mathemagician forcefully.

"Surely, you don't think numbers are as important as words?" he heard Azaz shout from the distance.

"Is that so?" replied the Mathemagician a little more faintly. "Why, if... "

"Oh dear," thought Milo; "I do hope they don't start it all again." And, in a moment, they had faded from sight as the road dipped, turned, and headed for home.