

20. Good-bye and Hello

As the pleasant countryside flashed by and the wind whistled a tune on the windshield, it suddenly occurred to Milo that he must have been gone for several weeks.

"I do hope that no one's been worried," he thought, urging the car on faster. "I've never been away this long before."

The late-afternoon sun had turned now from a vivid yellow to a warm lazy orange, and it seemed almost as tired as he was. The road raced ahead in a series of gentle curves that began to look familiar, and off in the distance the solitary tollbooth appeared, a welcome sight indeed. In a few minutes he reached the end of his journey, deposited his coin, and drove through. And, almost before realising it, he was sitting in the middle of his own room again. "It's only six o'clock," he observed with a yawn, and then, in a moment, he made an even more interesting discovery.

"And it's still today! I've been gone for only an hour!" he cried in amazement, for he'd certainly never realised how much he could do in so short a time. Milo was much too tired to talk and almost too tired for dinner, so, without a murmur, he went off to bed as soon as he could. He pulled the covers around him, took a last look at his room—which somehow seemed very different than he'd remembered—and then drifted into a deep and welcome sleep.

School went very quickly the next day, but not quickly enough, for Milo's head was full of plans and his eyes could see nothing but the tollbooth and what lay beyond. He waited impatiently for the end of class, and when the time finally came, his feet raced his thoughts all the way back to the house.

"Another trip! Another trip! I'll leave right away. They'll all be so glad to see me, and I'll... " He stopped abruptly at the door of his room, for, where the tollbooth had been just the night before, there was now nothing at all. He searched frantically throughout the apartment, but it had vanished just as mysteriously as it had come—and in its place was another bright-blue envelope, which was addressed simply: "FOR MILO, WHO NOW KNOWS THE WAY." He opened it quickly and read:

Dear Milo,

You have now completed your trip, courtesy of the Phantom Tollbooth. We trust that everything has been satisfactory, and hope you understand why we had to come and collect it.

You see, there are so many other boys and girls waiting to use it, too. It's true that there are many lands you've still to visit (some of which are not even on the map) and wonderful things to see (that no one has yet imagined), but we're quite sure that if you really want to, you'll find a way to reach them all by yourself.

Yours truly,

The signature was blurred and couldn't be read. Milo walked sadly to the window and squeezed himself into one corner of the large armchair. He felt very lonely and desolate as his thoughts turned far away—to the foolish, lovable bug; to the comforting assurance of Tock, standing next to him; to the erratic, excitable DYNNE; to little Alec, who, he hoped, would someday reach the ground; to Rhyme and Reason, without whom Wisdom withered; and to the many, many others he would remember always.

And yet, even as he thought of all these things, he noticed somehow that the sky was a lovely shade of blue and that one cloud had the shape of a sailing ship. The tips of the trees held pale, young buds and the leaves were a rich deep green. Outside the window, there was so much to see, and hear, and touch—walks to take, hills to climb, caterpillars to watch as they strolled through the garden. There were voices to hear and conversations to listen to in wonder, and the special smell of each day.

And, in the very room in which he sat, there were books that could take you anywhere, and things to invent, and make, and build, and break, and all the puzzle and excitement of everything he didn't know—music to play, songs to sing, and worlds to imagine and then someday make real. His thoughts darted eagerly about as everything looked new—and worth trying.

"Well, I *would* like to make another trip," he said, jumping to his feet; "but I really don't know when I'll have the time. There's just so much to do right here."