

Adventure in the Wind

Penelope turned to her disagreeable loungeroom neighbour and asked once again,

“Tibbens?”

“Oh, what now?” the dog muttered from his tattered cane basket, pausing halfway through a very slow scratch to scowl at her. How he could be so miserable when he had the best spot in the cottage, right in front of the fire, Penelope never knew.

“Please answer my question from before. I know you’ve heard of the sea because that’s where the sailors go.”

Tibbens lazily tried touching his nostril with his tongue, as though some food might lie inside,

“I’ve told you once, there’s no such thing. If there were, I would have seen it. Where do you get these ridiculous ideas from anyway?”

Penelope rolled her eyes,

“And why do you always have to be so difficult? I heard it from the sailors down by the river. Just the other day I heard them say there are cities out there even bigger than Calladin.”

“Utter tripe,” he said dismissively, “you probably just overheard some rats talking sewer talk, and you know what rubbish they go on with.”

“Are you trying to tell me you haven’t heard of the most beautiful thing in the world?”

Tibbens tried to find another way inside his nostril,

“I am the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Penelope sighed. Tibbens was truly frightful. He was old, yellow, mangy and ugly as a mule, and just as lazy. He smelt of bad cheese and rarely barked because it used up too much energy, or so he said. He sat, as he always sat, gloomily in his basket, and had just finished complaining about the weather when Penelope asked her question,

“I want to go to the sea Tibbens, and you are not helping

me. I want to take a holiday. I've never gone anywhere in my eight years in the Garden and now I'm bored."

He turned to her with a look of surprise,

"You? A holiday? From what? All you do is sleep. Are you going to take a holiday from napping? Ha! You'll probably die in a ditch somewhere, hungry and tired. That'll teach you for going outside in the cold."

Penelope looked out the window at the overcast sky. True, it wasn't really the type of day to start an adventure, she thought, angry that Tibbens was right for once. On top of that, adventures were things best commenced in the morning. But she had to get out of the cottage. Tibbens smelt so bad it was like he had already died, and Cornelius was busy reading another of his adventure stories about the sea, so he wouldn't want to go for a walk. When she noticed what the old man was reading, 'Voyage of the Dawn Star', she nodded to it,

"Look Tibbens, there. That's the sea. So stop lying and tell me where it is, because I'm going to look for it, and if I get lost and never come home, then it will be your fault because you didn't tell me."

"And good riddance I'll say, ha! Fancy, the sea."

"Tibbens..."

"Oh, for the mercies of silence – it's at the other end of the river, alright? Just follow that and you'll get there in few years. And when you're all alone, lost and dying somewhere, just think of me and how I told you it was too far for a cat to go. The sea! What madness in a cat's head!"

This response angered Penelope so much that her nose wriggled. She never knew why, but whenever she was particularly angry, such as only Tibbens could make her, her nose would wriggle as though she were about to sneeze,

"It. Is. Not. So. Far!" she said hotly. "I bet I could get there in a couple of days. But I won't write you a postcard, that's for sure. I'll be too busy sailing and catching fish. I've already decided I'm going, and I will. Just you wait and see. Me and Knuckles are going together."

Tibbens gave a short laugh,

"That fellow! He's soft as butter! Some traveller he'll make."

Once again Tibbens was right. Knuckles Chesterfield was exactly the opposite to what one might expect from his name, for he was, as he himself had once put it, ‘a lover of picnics and not a fighter’. He was also the only squirrel she knew to be frightened of heights, and no matter how generous he was or how much Penelope liked him, she knew he took a very dim view of adventures.

“And anyway Penelope,” Tibbens carried on, “you need an owl to go with you, not a squirrel.”

“What?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard the old story, ‘the owl and the pussycat...something something something...pea green boat bla bla, wedding ring and all that. I think they wind up drowning anyway, so it just goes to show – cats and oceans don’t mix. There, I’ve warned you now, so there is no excuse to go. Stay here where it’s warm and don’t go mixing yourself up in adventures that you don’t have to.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied stubbornly, “and I’ve already decided. Just watch me.”

She got up and poked her tongue at Tibbens, who rolled his eyes. After rubbing her flank along Cornelius’ footrest, the gardener looked down and remarked,

“Hello Penelope. You want to go outside, do you? It’s not such a nice day. You’ll have to take care.”

She meowed. Of course she would take care, and she lifted her head a little, just to show Tibbens she was old enough to do it too. The dog watched her curiously for a moment, frowned, and then suddenly laughed,

“Be sure to take plenty of money, and plenty of honey. Ha!”

Penelope ignored him, keeping her head held high as she followed Cornelius to the door. Tibbens fell into a fit of coughing as Cornelius scratched Penelope behind the ear,

“Keep warm and don’t get into mischief. No lies and no hurting people. And don’t stay out too long, because there’s a storm brewing. And be back before midnight. Do you understand me?”

She meowed, and he tickled her chin,

“I hope so. We’ll miss you if you don’t come back.”

“No we won’t!” Tibbens barked from his basket. “Let her

die in the cold. That will teach her to put her nose where it doesn't belong!"

As usual, Cornelius misunderstood what Tibbens meant by the bark, because he said as he unbolted the door,

"There, even Tibbens will miss you. You're our special green-eyed lucky charm Penelope, one with the finest silver coat in all the Garden. Isn't that right Tibbens?"

It always baffled Penelope why Menfolk never understood what animals said. They spoke the same language after all, as did all the other creatures in the Garden, but they never seemed to listen. Perhaps Menfolk simply chose not to understand. Tibbens barked again,

"Let her die! Let her die in the gutter like the scum she is!"

"There now," Cornelius smiled, opening the door, "isn't that nice. Happy ventures little one."

The wind swept in as Penelope stepped out to see the dark clouds gathered on the horizon. Had she made a mistake by walking out in such a huff? She was about to change her mind but saw Tibbens looking at her with his bleary eye, still coughing, and still amused by her actions. She decided it would be better to stay out in the cold than return and listen to him make fun of her. Even if she had wanted to, it was now too late. Cornelius had already closed the door.

"Stupid Tibbens."

She muttered to herself, before lowering her head to the wind and starting off through the whirling leaves toward Knuckles' door.

There were two things that set the squirrel's treehouse apart from others in the Garden – those being a crooked chimney high up on the trunk, and a red arched door with its brass plate that read: *K. Chesterfield, Esq.* The chimney was whispering white smoke when she arrived, a sure sign he was home. She pressed the bell beneath the plate and called up,

"Knuckles! It's me, Penelope. Open up!"

There came the clattering of shoes and the words 'coming, coming,' then a shout of alarm followed by the sound of someone falling, then, shortly after, 'It's alright - I'm alright', before the door was thrown wildly open. Knuckles stood

panting on the threshold for a moment, regarding his visitor with small, clever brown eyes. He was far rounder than most of his kind and this fact made him very proud, for it was quite a claim to say that he, as a squirrel, had the belly of a mole. But that he did. In consequence, although they were not usually worn by his species, he had discovered waistcoats to be the perfect garment to highlight this shapely achievement. Today he wore one in lemon and orange, of tartan design, a pair of neatly pressed cream trousers, black shoes with silver buckles and a pair of suspenders. His tail waggled slowly behind him like an enormous wire brush. When satisfied Penelope was all she made out to be, he began,

“Penelope,” his long whiskers twitched, and she giggled, “if you don’t give me a hug, right now, I do believe I shall fall over backwards in surprise.”

Penelope laughed, jumped in and squeezed him tight. Then he shouted happily,

“You’ve been away for far too long! And, why, you’re quite simply mad. Fancy standing out there in the wind like that. Lucky for you I just put on some mead. Come in, come in, quickly now!”

He led Penelope up a narrow, circular staircase towards his living room.

“I’ve only been away two weeks,” she said, “and did you know you live in the spookiest part of the Garden?”

“Really? Spookier than the northwest quarter? Glad I don’t go out on such days then. In fact, why are *you* out on such a day, Penelope? You should be at home in front of the fire with that ghastly dog...Typhoid, or something, isn’t he called...hmm, maybe I see why you’re here.”

“Actually Knuckles, I told him I was about to go on an adventure.”

“An adventure! Please Penelope, don’t use such language in my house! You’ll give me indigestion.”

The stairwell came to an end and they stepped into Knuckles’ living room. A small pot-bellied stove glowed in the middle with a fully set dinner table beside it. A picture of Knuckles as a boy squirrel, very neatly dressed with his head fur parted in the middle, stood over on the windowsill, below

which he had tied one end of his hammock. On the stove there bubbled a pot of mead, and as he sprinkled nutmeg into the mix, Penelope sat at the table,

"I thought you'd say that," she frowned, "I can't understand why everyone doesn't like adventures. Don't you want to see what's out there?"

Knuckles looked out the window with a curious expression, "But I know what's out there. The Museum and the Garden."

"No, I mean way, *way* out there."

"What, you mean, over the river? In the...New City?" he hesitated.

The New City spread along the opposite bank of the river – an enormous grey metropolis of steel, rails, pipes and noise. It was not the place for animals, and no one from the Garden would want to end up there.

"Well, not just there," Penelope replied, "everywhere. Anywhere far away. I was thinking about visiting the sea."

The squirrel looked at her in alarm,

"The sea? Where on earth do you get your ideas from? That kind of talk is danger talk, Penelope. Mummy has a saying for that kind of talk – '*tales that lead to lost tails.*' And I am very fond of my tail and have no interest in losing it thankyouverymuch."

"Well, I don't want to go by myself, and I think you'd make an excellent travelling companion. You could be in charge of food."

Clearly this idea appealed to Knuckles, for he stared into space briefly,

"Hmm, like a food captain...no, what am I saying?" he shook his head and sipped a spoonful of mead from the pot. "No thank you, I'm very happy where I am. You'll have to find another. Hmm, more cinnamon..."

"But who Knuckles? There must be someone."

After a time Knuckles replied,

"The only 'adventurer' to have ever lived in this Garden disappeared a long time ago, and is now most likely in Hell. That's what happens to folk who go on adventures, Penelope. They wind up down there."

He tapped his foot.

“Who are you talking about?” she asked, suddenly intrigued. “Tell me!”

“Don’t you know him? I thought everyone knew him. His name was Boris, Boris Bones, and he was a gnome and as wicked as the day was long. There are certain types of folk welcome in this Garden, Penelope, and Boris Bones was certainly not one of them. Here, have some mead...”