



The Piggy, the Owl and Moonbeams

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Mystery

The Piggy, the Owl and Moonbeams

Book I

Chapter 1

Two tiny sojourners, a piggy named Sassyfrass and an owl named Otis, had recently been granted a vacation for their exemplary supervision of an animal refuge. The haven they managed offered shelter and love to young animals that had either been orphaned or rescued from mistreatment.

The two had worked long and hard to make the new arrivals comfortable and happy. Otis read stories and played games with them. Sassyfrass ensured that everyone had plenty of good food to eat and cozy clean straw to sleep in. She sometimes shared with them the stories her mama used to tell before Sassyfrass and her siblings were taken from the farm where they were born.

When the hard-working little managers received news of their time off, they knew exactly what they wanted to do. The unlikely companions, driven by their need for adventure and knowledge, decided to make the acquaintance of animals living in the wild. They were curious about these self-sufficient, hardy critters that relied solely on their own resources.

In keeping with their mission, the two wandered far into a dark woodland where they hoped to meet wild creatures of the forest. They spent the day following a hiking trail marked by rock cairns, which were little piles of rocks used to guide the way. They crossed streams, using fallen logs as bridges. They traveled through thick

underbrush, sometimes tripping on stones or roots. They went uphill and then they went downhill.

Occasionally, they would stop so that Sassyfrass could snuffle for truffles.

Just as the sun was ready to dip below the horizon, they came to a clearing where there stood a lone cabin.

Distinct from its forested surroundings, the structure looked like something someone had just plopped there.

“Could it have fallen from a giant’s pocket?” queried Sassyfrass, the little piggy.

Otis, although smaller than even Sassyfrass, was the much wiser of the two. Once a creature of the forest himself, he was somewhat familiar with the ways of those who lived there.

“I don’t think there are any giants around here, Sassyfrass,” said the wise little owl. “I think maybe the cabin grew here.”

“Well, why aren’t there any others, Otis?”

“It’s pretty big! Maybe, it ate the others!” hooted Otis.

Since they were both tired and hungry and cold, for the temperatures had dropped and there was a hint of snow in the air, Sassyfrass and Otis decided to stop there, despite the suspicious surroundings.

“Perhaps, we should ask for permission,” said Sassyfrass, always mindful of her manners.

Chapter 2

Because their previous involvements were a mixture of both good and bad, the two small travelers proceeded with caution. Sassyfrass decided to take the lead. Otis was standing right behind her.

Sassyfrass politely rapped on the door with her little snout. She waited several minutes and then rapped again.

There was still no response.

They were about to declare to themselves that no one was at home. They would need to venture off, hoping to set up camp elsewhere, but they would have to hurry. The shadows were growing long and the chill in the air had increased. Soon, the wild creatures of the forest would be scouting about for dinner.

Just as they were turning to leave, they heard shuffling sounds from within the cabin. The door handle began to turn with a loud squeak, creating the impression that it rarely ever turned. Sassyfrass and Otis stood back, their eyes wide with dread as the door creaked open.

The evening gloom made it difficult to see inside. They strained to peer around the door of the hut.

After a few moments, a screechy voice said, “What do you want? Why are a piggy and an owl standing on my door stoop? Why are you bothering me?”

Sassyfrass nervously cleared her throat in preparation to speak. Otis, sensing that this was a situation requiring skill and finesse, quickly took ownership of the conversation.

In his most formal tones, he said,

“Good evening, My Good Lady. I hope you are faring well. My little piggy friend and I were hoping to partake of your hospitality. We are embarking on a most excellent adventure, eager to become familiar with the animals of the forest.

“After we make their acquaintance, we shall venture into mountainous territory to become familiar with the rugged individuals who lead their lives up on the rocky slopes. But, it is growing dark and we are afraid of losing our way. Would it be acceptable for us to pitch our tent next to your cabin in this little clearing?”

Sassyfrass, who had finally found her voice, interrupted Otis’s monolog,

“We were hoping you wouldn’t mind if we erected our tent on that little open area. We would then build a small camp fire to toast what little food we have left. We are very neat and will clean up any messes we might make.”

Otis, just slightly perturbed by the interruption, resumed,

“We promise not to be any trouble. Perhaps we can help you with some chores tomorrow morning to repay you for your kindness. Before we leave in the morning, we can gather sticks for the fireplace for you, if that would be of help.”

“We would be ever so quiet and neat,” squealed the nervous Sassyfrass, “absolutely no trouble at all.”

The old lady just stared at them. It had been so long since she had had any company, she couldn’t think of an appropriate response.

After a moment, a plan began to form in the old woman’s mind.

“Come in, My Peculiar Little Travelers, and pull up a chair. We shall discuss arrangements.”

Otis and Sassyfrass hesitated, each looking at the other. Otis shrugged. After wavering for yet another moment, they ventured in.

Chapter 3

Their eyes opened wide with awe. The cabin’s austere exterior had not prepared them for the cozy interior. There was a fireplace in the kitchen and a huge wood stove in the backroom. Light streaming through the gigantic skylights offset the gloom created by the dense forest surrounding the cabin. It was so cozy, that it reminded them of their farm. And for just a moment they both became homesick.

The peculiarity of the cabin was that the kitchen walls were lined with shelves from top to bottom. And the shelves were cluttered with Mason jars—the type of jars mothers once used to preserve fruits and vegetables. These Mason jars were filled, not with fruit or vegetables, but with pebbles. That is, with the exception of two of the jars.

Nervous little Sassyfrass cleared her throat, but there was still a catch in her voice when she spoke,

“You have, umm, a beautiful cabin here, Madam. Did you build it yourself?”

The room grew so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

After a long and awkward silence, the old woman responded,

“My husband and I built this cabin together. But he has vanished into the forest. I have been alone for several years now. I have no idea what has happened to him, but we were always very happy when we were together. I suspect that a magic spell has been cast on him.”

She looked sad, but resolved.

“You see those jars on the shelves?” She asked, rousing herself from her memories.

“Y-yes,” Sassyfrass and Otis spoke in unison.

“Well, before the next full moon, which is tomorrow night, I need to dig holes for each of those jars that you see on the shelves. The colorful pebbles in them will absorb the moonbeams, creating a powerful magic. As the moon fades, we will bury the jars so that the moonbeams cannot escape. Each jar must have its own hole. If the jars are buried together, the magic of one jar begins to compete with the magic from another jar. That interaction causes the energy from the moon to dissipate.

“I see,” said Otis, blinking his eyes very wisely.

“What do you see, Otis?” whispered Sassyfrass, one very confused piggy.

The old woman continued,

“I will leave the jars buried for exactly one month so that the power of the pebbles can gather strength. At the end of that month, the night of the next full moon, I shall dig up the jars. The pebbles will give off a very strong light of their own. Their light, combined with the light from the full moon, will be so powerful that it will defeat any dark, evil spell that may be holding my dear husband captive. The power of the pebbles’ magic will depend on how many of these jars I get buried.”

Otis and Sassyfrass looked at each other and then each gave the other a confirming nod.

They both looked at the sad old woman and said in unison,

“We can help you. We will dig the holes during the day and carry out the jars. Then when the moon is waning, we will help you bury each of the jars.”

Tears filled the old woman’s eyes.

“Would you really do that for an old woman? You are the answer to my dreams. It has taken me two years to fill those jars with the proper pebbles found in the creek bed. But I have become too tired and weak to dig the holes and bury all of them myself.”

“Well, Otis, we had better get into our tent and get some sleep. We have a big day ahead of us.”

Otis nodded his head in agreement. The two left the cabin to crawl into their sleeping bags. As they were lying

there, Otis was the first to break the silence,

“You know, Sassyfrass, she never told us what those two empty jars were for.”

“I was thinking the same thing, Otis. I have a bad feeling about those two jars.”

The two weary little travelers soon fell into a deep slumber. While they slept the sleep of the weary, the old woman, despite her age, became very spritely and danced about the cabin in excitement,

“My feet are fleet. Soon my energy will grow and my mission will be complete.”

Chapter 4

The owl and the piggy awoke early the next morning. Scents of pancakes and eggs wafted through the open window. Both little critters, now extremely hungry, timorously knocked once again on the cabin door. They heard a voice from within saying,

“Come in, come in! Don’t be strangers.”

Sassyfrass and Otis pushed in through the heavy pine door. There on the table in front of them were piles of eggs and pancakes. There was also fruit and toast. But, first, they warmed themselves by the fire. Then, while they ate, the woman poured hot sweet tea in a bowl for each.

The piggy and the owl ate with unabashed gusto. When they were finished and were slurping their tea, the woman told them to call her Pretence, or Prety, for short.

“Now,” said Prety, “We should start digging the holes before the sun becomes too hot.”

Otis and Sassyfrass worked diligently throughout the morning. Otis scratched the frozen earth to mark and loosen the soil at each spot where Sassyfrass should dig. Sassyfrass pretended she was snuffling for truffles at each site. Soon, all fifteen holes had been dug.

Prety came along to inspect, softly humming a catchy little tune,

“My feet are fleet. Soon my energy will grow and my mission will be complete.”

“Sassyfrass took a moment from her snuffling to look up. There was dirt around her little snout from digging,

“What is that that you are singing, Prety? It’s quite catchy.”

Prety mumbled, “Oh, it’s just a little tune I made up to sing now and again.”

During the day, Sassyfrass and Otis lined up the jars, placing one near each hole. Then they eagerly sat under a tree and waited for night to fall. Both dozed off in the warmth of the sun, sleepy from their heavy meal and hard work.

When they awakened, night had already fallen. The moon was large and bright in the sky, casting its silvery light below. Sassyfrass and Otis glanced at the jars. Each jar seemed to be twinkling and winking, like

stationary fireflies.

Sassyfrass and Otis sat and watched in awe as the twinklings overlapped. Before their very eyes, the intermittent glow from each jar soon took on the intensity and steadfastness of a car's head light.

They're so bright, Otis. It's difficult to look at them. Otis agreed and then looked up at the sky, "Look Otis, the moon is setting. We should begin to bury the jars now."

So Otis went to the first jar. He first tried flapping his little wings, thinking that the breeze he created in this manner would knock the jar into the hole. No so! So he leaned his little body against the jar and pushed. Nothing happened and the jar was so warm, it singed a few feathers.

Sassyfrass, who had been watching his efforts, walked over and said, "I'm bigger and stronger, Otis. Let me push the jars in and then you can then start scratching soil over them."

So, the two worked as a team. Sassyfrass pushed each jar into its hole. While he did so, each jar seemed heavier than the last. Otis followed and scratched dirt over each, covering them so that the energy within could not escape. Before the moon had waned, their task was complete.

Exhausted, but happy, they knocked on the cabin door, wanting to share their good news with Prety. Their knock was met with silence. There was no cheery invitation to enter this morning. Nor were there tantalizing odors of freshly cooked food. Prety was nowhere to be found.

Sassyfrass put water on for tea while Otis perched on a window sill, hoping to catch sight of Prety. After they had slurped up their tea, Sassyfrass returned to the fridge.

"What are you doing now?" inquired Otis.

"I'm going to package food for our journey, Otis. After we pack up our tent and sleeping bags, we should leave."

"I think you are right," said Otis. "This was fun—but strange. We need to be moving on. Perhaps on our way back, we can stop in to see how the jars are holding up."

Sassyfrass shook her head.

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea, Otis. Those two empty jars still worry me. Have you noticed that they are a little larger than the others?"

With that thought, the two scuttled about. They threw their tent, sleeping bags, the food, and a bottle of water into their backpack in record time. They headed back into the forest in the direction of the mountains. As they walked, they heard faint chanting sounds,

"My feet are fleet. Soon my energy will grow and my mission will be complete."

Sassyfrass and Otis walked faster in a direction away from the chanting sounds. They walked towards the mountains, hopeful for other adventures and glad to have their last undertaking become little more than a

memory. At least that was their hope.

Snow began to fall, covering their tracks as they quickly and silently slipped through the forest, heading for the snow-covered mountains and safety.

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