

The Tramp and the Baby

by L. Frank Baum

It was a hot day and the road was dusty. It was not even good road, being full of bumps and ruts; but it was a pretty road and wound in and out of the woods and up and down the numerous hills.

A man was trudging along with a slow and dragging step. His feet shuffled through thick dust as if the white, snufflike atoms floating in the mist about him were preferable to the exertion of raising his ponderous boots, in the tips of which his ragged trousers were carelessly tucked. The traveler's appearance, as he scuffed along, was not especially prepossessing. He had an unwashed skin and noisome clothing. A heavy, unkempt beard covered the lower part of his face and a slouched hat the upper. His hands were in his pockets, and beneath his left arm he carried a small bundle tied in a red handkerchief.

At the top of an ascent he paused, raised his stooping shoulders, took off his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. While thus engaged he made a cursory examination of the scene before him. The country was peaceful and pleasant enough to view on any side. At the right a seep of broad pasture extended far into the distance and lost itself in a row of hills at the horizon. The range was broken now and then by a stately oak or a clump of straggling beeches, while at the bottom of the little valley a tiny stream wound in and out like a silver ribbon on a green gown.

There must have been an innate love of the beautiful in the nature of the man who could stand so long regarding

this bit of landscape, executed by the one brush that never errs; but presently he turned to the left, where a gentle slope led down to a high and thick evergreen hedge. Beyond this was an enticing grove of young apple trees, while still farther along his eye discovered a garden and an emerald lawn surrounding a handsome and substantial brick mansion.

His eyes brightened at the sight. They were large blue eyes, with a cow's calm and and ruminative expression in their depths. There was nothing to indicate intelligence, nothing to inspire confidence; but a square view of them relieved the repulsive appearance he presented when his hat was drawn over his face.

"Looks like a snap," he muttered in a hoarse, growling bass. "Folkses what live in such style as that ain't likely to turn a pore man away hungry. But the time," he added, glancing at the sun, "Ain't strictly favorable. Say it's two o'clock; prob'ly they'll hev dinner at six, an' that's the right time fer me to turn up at the back door. If I likes their looks I may come the sick wife 'n' four children dodge, an' git a basketful to carry away. Fortune knocks a good many times, an' gits the best show-down."

He looked around again, scratched his head reflectively and then, putting on his hat, deliberately stepped from the road to the grassy bank at the left.

"Hedges an' I is old chums," he muttered. "It'll be cool an' shady 'longside o' this one, an' four hours' sleep won't hurt me a bit."

It was but a few rods to the hedge, yet it took him a long time to reach it. Languidly he made for a big maple that stood beyond the hedge, but threw its leafy shade far into the lane. Here, the grass being thick and velvety, seemed an ideal spot for a summer's nap.

Our traveler threw down his bundle, removed his coat and rolled it into a pillow for his head, and with a sigh of content reclined at full length in the shade. Sleep did not come to him, however. The place was quiet and peaceful enough. Insects chirped merrily in the grass about him; a tree-toad barked occasionally from above and the busy hum of bees came fitfully to his ears. From far across the meadow he heard the faint lowering of a heifer; but aside from these languorous sounds the whole world seemed to dream.

Yet sleep did not come, and he began to speculate concerning the reason.

"Le's see; I climbed inter that haymow las' night at about sundown, an' slep' till after the farmer had milked his cows an' gone inter the field to work--'bout fourteen hour I guess. I needed the rest. Then I got nine eggs from the hens' nests, put 'em in my pocket, an' jogged along. I built a little fire in the woods back there an' roasted the eggs fer breakfast. Then I jogged along an' come here. Funny how I can't sleep!"

He lay upon his side, resting his head upon his elbow and staring absently at the broad landscape before him. Then he tired of this position and turned upon the other side; but here the hedge obscured his range of vision. So he sat up, yawned, and pulled a soiled and torn newspaper from his pocket. Reposing again at full length, he flattened out the sheet and proceeded to read, following the lines carefully and slowly with his finger and moving his lips in formation of each word he spelled out.

The newspaper interested him. It mattered little what the date might be; sequence of events in the great world so far removed from his sphere was of no importance whatever. The world and he were two; nevertheless, he liked to peep at its doings occasionally.

After a period of laborious reading he laid the paper upon his knee.

"It's queer," he mused, "how they always hustle and bustle in the big cities; an' how they sweats and worries ant makes theirselves miser'ble, jest to earn a living. People gits rich, sometimes, a-wrastlin' with business an' stocks, an' sich horrible things, but it don'r do 'em no real good. They're so busy they can't spare a second to take life easy. For me, I don't want no money myself; I'm better off as I am seein' the world an' makin' the most of it. Money can't buy this soft, cool grass all aroun' me, the blue sky lookin' down through the trees, ner them birds a-whisperin' together at my elbow. I ain't what you might call re-spectible; no, I s'pose not," with a solemn shake of his head; "but I'm free an' my own master, an' when I wants ter travel I jes' travel, an' when I wants ter rest it's nobody's business but mine. City life may do fer nervous folks an' idjits, but not a feller what knows real life."

He brushed a fly from his nose, put the newspaper into his pocket, and, lying back upon his impoverished pillow, resigned himself to contemplation of nothing. The drowsy influence of the summer day finally stole over him; his eyes were closing, his senses deserting him, when suddenly he was aroused by a succession of unusual sounds.

"Ghlee--ghu--oo! Gwoo--oo--oo-ghu!"

The man raised his head and gazed about him in astonishment. There was nothing in sight, no beast or bird, that could have utter this incomprehensible language.

"Ee--yee! Oog--oo--ghu-ee!"

"Well, well! What in the dickens--" He broke off short; a ray of intelligence crossed his vacant face and he nodded his head three times with much gravity.

"It's t'other side the hedge. A calf; or a--owl--or, or--p'r'aps a--"

"Gru--oo--oo--ee! Co--goo--ewoo--ghu!"

"Blamed if it's anything I ever hearn tell of! Mebbe it's ghostes, or rats, or --or-- Hm!"

He felt of his head, shook it with a bewildered air and glanced helplessly toward the hedge. There was a place near the ground where the evergreen had been broken or pushed aside which seemed sufficiently large for him to crawl through. Being at the moment of an investigating turn of mind, he rose on his hands and knees and crept softly toward the hole in the hedge. It was even larger than he had suspected. He crawled into it, thrust his head through to the other side and became motionless from surprise.

Three feet from his head was a baby, sitting on a thick blanket and playing with its bare toes. It was beautifully and richly dressed and chubby and sweet, with ringlets of fair hair framing its little face. A dozen yards away a hammock swung from between two dwarf apple-trees, and reclining within it was a young woman with a nurse's cap upon her head and a white apron thrown over her face. Her book had fallen to the ground; she breathed heavily; evidently the dreamy quiet of the summer afternoon had wooed her to slumber.

The baby lifted its eyes suddenly and became aware of an enormous head projecting from the hedge and covered with matted hair and bristling whiskers, from which two mild blue eyes were staring fixedly into his own. The baby

stared back. Its eyes were blue, too. They held a curious expression, as of surprise and awe and trust intermingled. Those innocent orbs were guiltless of fear, having known no evil within their brief experience.

The baby laughed, crowed, jumped its little body up and down ecstatically. Then it held out two tiny arms appealingly toward the tramp. It had found a new playfellow.

The man's eyes fell; a ruddy glow suffused his face. Well, well ! when had this creature blushed before? He looked uneasily toward the hammock. The little one crowed again--more imperatively--and reached his little hands as far as he was able toward his new acquaintance.

The expression of dismay upon the tramp's face gave way to one of resolution. He extended two brawny hands, clasped the baby firmly, but gently, and drew it through the hedge to his own retreat.

The baby was delighted, and jumped and gurgled with joy. He had been left alone long enough, and here was a novel relief from playing with his rosy toes. The tramp smiled broadly and set the little one upon his knee, steadying it there while he gazed upon it admiringly. There were two great smudges on the dainty dress, where his grimy hands had touched it. He never noticed them. The baby never noticed them. Both were alike in this respect--they were wholly indifferent to dirt. They were equally unconventional, and each was pleased with the other at first sight.

The baby's sleeves were pinned with two heavy gold clasps; another, set with glistening diamonds, fastened the little bib to its waist. The tramp's eyes fell upon these baubles, admired them a moment and then came back to the face of his small comrade, whom he trotted gently upon his ragged knee.

The baby squealed rapturously; the blue eyes danced with joy and mischief, and suddenly he grasped a bunch of stubby whisker in each sturdy fist. The tramp chuckled softly and shook his head. The baby jumped and crowed and held on bravely. The man laughed.

The baby laughed louder. The play was repeated again and again. But the wee infant was observing. He finally released one tiny hand, clutched at a white object in his friend's vest pocket and drew forth a clay pipe. Relapsing into gravity, he examined it minutely. Then, as is the way with babes, he put it in his mouth and regarded his friend enquiringly.

This was too much for the tramp, who possessed a keen sense of the ridiculous. He lay back and shook with silent laughter, not daring to obey the impulse to roar aloud because of the occupant of the neighboring hammock; but the baby's face was so droll that he found it almost impossible to control himself within safe bounds. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, raised his head and saw the child make a wry face, look at the pipe doubtfully and throw it down. It didn't taste good. The tramp shook again with merriment, finding the act inexpressibly comical. He gave the baby a bear-like hug that was still tender, and when the child struggled to be free the man got upon his hands and knees and swung the youngster upon his back.

A pair of fat hands instantly fastened themselves in his shaggy locks, and then solemnly and slowly he moved around in a circle, the sort grass making a cushion for his hands, the baby swaying from side to side and crowing jubilantly at this improvised circus. Was ever so jolly and so docile a comrade known? The baby jerked at the thick hair all unreprieved; he kicked his little bare heels into his friend's ribs and no murmur arose in protest. The "horsey" was the most gentle and agreeable horsey in the world.

But babies like change. The tramp put him on the ground; he espied the red bundle and reached both hands toward it, glancing into his companion's face with his sharp, peremptory "Ghoo!" The tramp nodded, smiled, and gave him the bundle. The little hands turned it over and over and fumbled at the knots. Then he threw it down with a small snow of temper. The tramp laughed, reached within the bundle and brought out a bread-crust. This the baby seized, put it to his mouth, evidently favored the strange morsel and smiled again with ineffable sweetness upon his benefactor.

A heavy sigh from the hammock behind the hedge fell upon the tramp's ear. He started, glanced guiltily around, became reassured and turned to his playfellow with a smile. The little one was nibbling the bread contentedly. The man looked thoughtful and played with the diamond brooch, turning it so that a stray sunbeam caught it and made it sparkle. Then he looked bashfully into the baby's face, hesitated, put up both his brown hands and pressed the whiskers away from his mouth in all directions, and then he leaned forward and gently kissed the baby's soft white cheek.

Again the red blood surged to his forehead. He took the little one in his arms, crawled through the hedge, and placed the child upon its blanket, regarding it with a smile of amusement as it continued to maintain its interest in the

crust. Then he crawled back again and gathered up his belongings.

The maid awoke with a start, looked quickly toward her charge, became reassured and stood up to stretch herself with a regretful yawn. Her eyes reached above the hedge and caught the roadway beyond.

A tramp was jogging along through the dust, holding a small red bundle under his arm. He whistled as he walked, and the notes were borne indistinctly to her ear through the clear atmosphere. She gave a little shiver of repugnance.

"Thank goodness he didn't come *this* way!" she exclaimed.

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