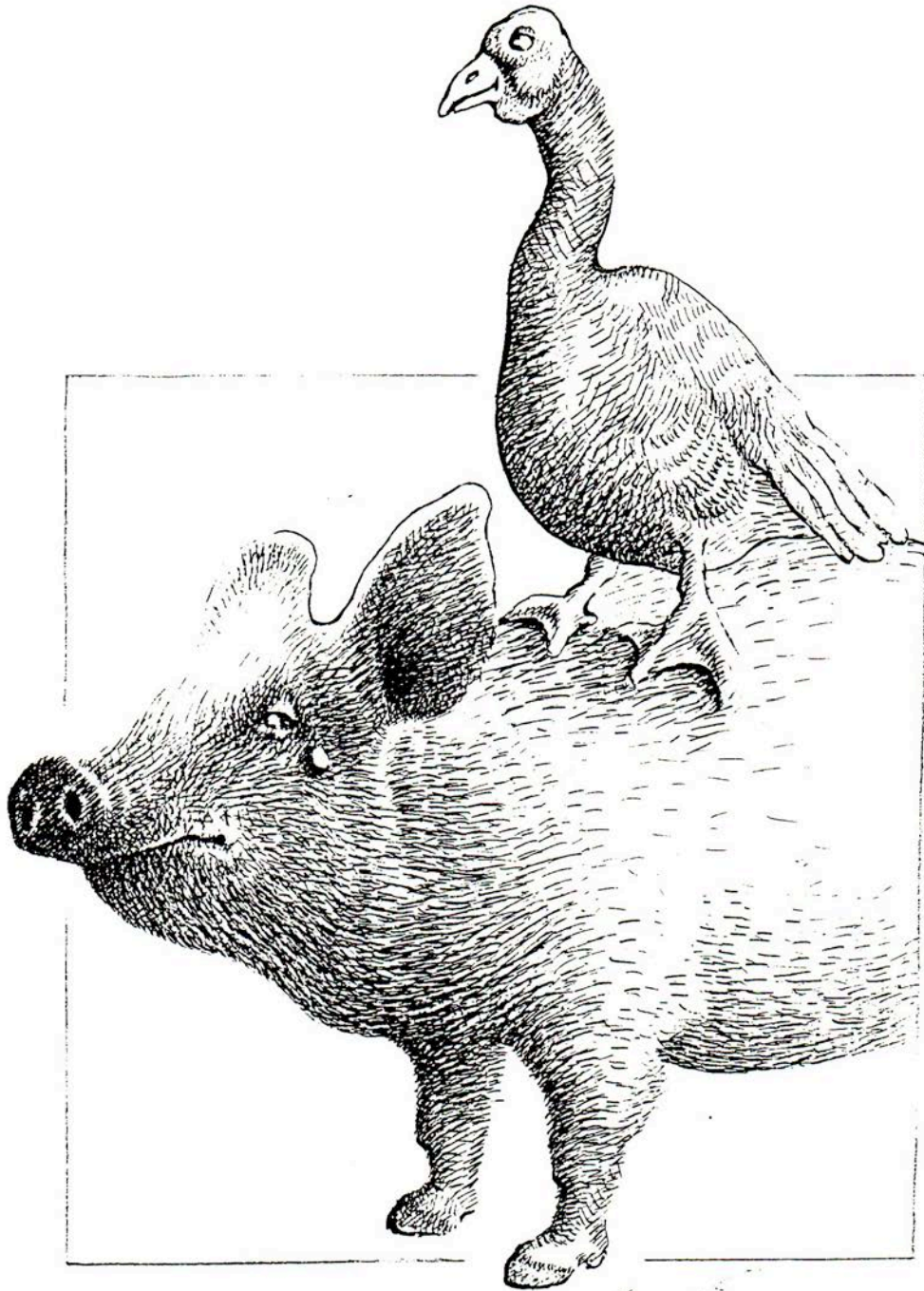


# **Mr. Murphy and the Fallen Angel**

by

**Brian Cleeve**



**To All the Children  
and particularly you**

## Chapter 1

Once upon a time, and not a very long time ago, there was an angel who fell into the River Liffey with a broken wing. This sounds unusual, and so it was, except that this was only an apprentice angel, even though of the seventh class, and nearly matriculated to senior status. As you probably know, angels prefer to stay in Heaven, but now and then they are sent to Earth to deliver messages, or warn sinners, or encourage good people to become saints, and this is what the angel of our story had been doing when she noticed the row of bridges over the river, from the Toll bridge near the mouth of the Liffey, to Heuston bridge a long way inland.

"What fun it would be" she thought, "to fly under all those bridges, with one long swoop!" And spreading her wings as wide as possible, she made a tremendous dive - under one bridge and two and three and four, when she met a seagull coming the other way. She had a swift choice - either to obliterate the poor innocent gull, or zoom sideways, and hit the stone wall of the quays at ninety miles an hour.

Being an angel, she chose to sacrifice herself in order to spare the seagull. And also because she was an angel, the impact didn't kill her - but it did break her wing. Angelic feathers fell like snowflakes into the dark and dirty water, and she fell with them, making a tremendous splash.

This happened at two o'clock in the morning. Not a soul was about. Not even a policeman, except for one disreputable and drunken man trying to find his way home. Hearing the splash he staggered to the river wall, and peered over.

"Help!" cried the angel, "Help me please! I've broken my wing and I'm going to drown." (It should be mentioned here that when angels play silly tricks like flying under bridges - a thing they seldom do of course - they must suffer the consequences just like human beings. As an immediate penance their angelic powers are withdrawn for so many days - ten in this particular case)

So there was the angel, trying to swim in the horribly dirty river with her broken wing trailing beside her and her beautiful white gown clinging to her in a most immodestly revealing way like a soaking wet nightdress and there above her was the drunken reprobate staring down at her in disbelief.

"Holy Mother!" cried the drunk, "It's an angel in the Liffey; I swear before God I'll never touch another drop" and he turned away in horror, thinking that delirium tremens had caught up with him at last.

"Please, please!" the angel called after him, "don't leave me to drown! I'll reward you with anything you ask for if only you'll help me. Look, you could climb down those steps."

The word "reward" struck home to the drunken man's intelligence. Delusions don't offer rewards. Whatever or whoever it was down there in the river must be real after all. So back he turned, and down he climbed, and at the cost of getting very wet, and almost sober, he managed to pull the angel out of the water, and, hoisting her on to his back, carried her up to the roadway.

"And now, miss" he said, "how about this reward you were promising me?" But look as he would, he could see neither handbag nor pocket in which she could be keeping it.

"If we could go somewhere where I could get dry" she answered him, her teeth chattering, "we could talk about it in more comfort. What kind of reward would you like?"

"How about ten pounds?" the man suggested, quite sober now. A young one from Trinity College, he was guessing, on her way home from a fancy dress party dressed up as an angel, and probably as drunk as he had been ten minutes ago. Drunk enough to fall in the river God love her. He felt quite a kinship for her as a fellow drunk, and was sorry for sounding so mercenary. "If that's too much, well a fiver would be a help."

"Five pounds?" the angel said. "I was thinking of something much more valuable. Long life. Health. Wealth. You've only to name it, and it's yours. But please, if I don't get dry soon I'll catch pneumonia."

"Long life? Health? Wealth?" the man wondered, shaking his head to see if he was still drunk. "She's still drunk, and that's for certain!" But he brought her at a good pace to the street where he lived, not far away, and into the house where he had two rooms at the very top, in the attic, and there he turned on the gas fire and made her a pot of strong tea on a little gas ring he used for cooking, and found her some digestive biscuits, and a blanket to wrap herself in while her heavenly robe dried in front of the gas fire.

Now you'll easily understand that to have an angel in one's sitting room, even an angel dressed in one of your blankets and suffering a penance for flying under bridges, is an experience that creates a powerful impression on anyone, even a drunken scallywag like the man in our story. And to have her there for ten whole days, while her wing mended and her lost feathers were replaced with soft, downy new ones, and the days of her penance were counted out, was an experience to change his life, and his whole way of thinking.

First of all, he gave her his bed, and slept himself on the couch in the living room, in spite of its broken springs. He fed her on fish and chips, and pizzas from the Italian cafe round the corner. He gave up drinking, and bought her the morning and evening newspapers every day, and hired a television set to keep her amused while he was out collecting the dole. (He couldn't restrain himself from telling a few of his friends that he was looking after an angel with a broken wing, and she was sitting in his flat at that moment watching TV, but they all knew him too well to believe him, and wouldn't waste their energy climbing the stairs to see her.)

On Sunday he suggested going to Mass with her – he hadn't been for twenty years, so you can imagine the effect she was having on him - but she said she couldn't go, her wings would upset the priest, let alone the congregation, so they stayed in the flat and read the Sunday papers, and had ice cream with their lunch. Whenever he thought about the way he had asked her for five pounds - no, be honest, ten at first! - for saving her out of the river, he grew hot with shame, and on the ninth day he went out and bought an expensive clothes brush so that he could brush her new feathers.

Then it was the tenth day - her penance was almost over and in another hour she would be free to leave. "You have been very good and kind," she said to him, and I really appreciated having my feathers brushed. Now, the reward I promised you - "

"No, no!" he protested. "I'll never forget these last ten days so long as I live. That'll be reward enough."

"I insist," she said. "I really do. How about a passport to Heaven? In another hour I can write you one."

Heaven? Me?" the man asked her, amazed. "I'm afraid I haven't lived what they call a good life."

"I know that" she told him. "But suppose I bend the rules a little? I can copy the recording angel's handwriting so well that poor old St. Peter will never tell the difference - he's got very short sighted these last few hundred years. I can write that you've lived a saintly life, admired by your parish priest as an example to everyone."

"And no one would cop on? None of them up there? Our Lord and so on?"

She shook her golden head. "Once you're in, you're in. Everyone assumes St. Peter has checked you in as having been truly good."

"But you'll know," he said "and worse still, I'll know." He too shook his own far from golden head, rather balding in fact, and dingy grey, and dandruffy.

"No, no it's very kind of you. More than kind, But I couldn't do it. Every time I saw one of them my knees'd knock and I'd want to confess. And that'd get you into trouble. No. Just leave me - leave me one of your feathers," he suggested. "I'll be able to look at it and remember you being here, and you watching the TV and reading the sports results and eating ice cream with me and - and I'll feel life isn't so bad after all."

She took a new, downy feather out of one of her wings and laid it on the mantelpiece, beside the alarm clock. "I'll tell you what. It will be more than a souvenir. It will help you live a good enough life to enter Heaven on your own merits, with a genuine passport. So long as you behave well, it will stay beautifully white, the way it is now. But if you - well - if you backslide a little the feather will turn grey, while, Heaven forbid! If you were to behave really badly it will turn black as a raven's feather, until you start behaving well again. It will be like a thermometer for your real health, your soul," And with that the alarm clock struck twice - two in the morning of the tenth day of her penance. She opened the window, climbed out on the sill, spread her mended wing like a white sail and away with her into the night sky, with never a downward glance at the river or its wretched stone bridges tempting angels to destruction.

The no longer drunken man gazed after her, feeling his heart swelling with pride, and cracking with sadness, until she was no more than a little white dot in the darkness among the pale Irish stars. At last he closed the window and looked at the feather. "My thermometer" he told himself. "By all that's holy, I'll get into Heaven along with the best of 'em! My poor mother'll be proud of me!"

But the years are long and memory is short - and good resolutions even shorter. It began with a pint or two on St. Patrick's Day. It continued with a good many whiskies - or one ought to say a bad many whiskies - over the Easter holiday. And before very long the reprobate was back in his old ways and the poor feather on the mantelpiece was black as pitch. Now and then the remembrance of the angel would overcome the love of Drink, and the drunken man would sober up and make new resolutions. The black feather would turn seagull grey, and almost white - but then there would be a new fall from grace and the feather would turn black again, seeming to reproach the man as if the angel herself were saying to him, "Shame on you! Oh shame on you!"

Until one day, in a passion of guilty rage and drunkenness the man seized the feather and flung it at the gas fire, which he had just lit. "Damn you" he shouted at it as it began to burn, "May the Devil take you!"

And with that there was a great roar of flame, a clap of thunder to deafen an elephant, and the Devil was there, horns, hooves and tail and a broad grin of delight.

"My fine fellow!" he said in an insinuating voice. "My joy! My dear friend? What a gift you've just given me. An angel's feather, no less! A bit singed, admittedly, but practically as good as new. What can I do for you in return?" He smiled at the drunken man, who was cowering in the corner like a mouse hiding from the cat. "Why, I know the very thing for you! What was it you turned down? A passport - a forged passport to Heaven? I don't blame you in the least. What a shabby gift! Don't you believe that story about Peter being half-blind. The moment you showed him that forgery you'd have been on your way down to me faster than you could blink. Now me, I don't deal in forgeries. When I give anyone gold, it's 24 carat genuine. And when I give you a passport to Heaven, that will be genuine too. Stolen, yes, but one hundred percent genuine."

He cracked his tail like a whip. Sparks flew and a passport appeared in his claws, shining white, with the Papal Arms stamped on the cover in gold leaf. "Here you are, my good fellow, catch!" And he threw it to the poor soul quivering behind the broken sprung couch who dropped it on the bare floor boards from his trembling hands.

"Me? A genuine passport? To Heaven" he quavered. "I thought - "

"That I'd want you down there?" the Devil said with a smile that sent shivers up the drunken man's spine, and into his stomach. "Oh no, I'm in a generous mood. Don't bother to thank me - all you need do is read page one - "

The drunken man picked up the passport and read the page. "To admit ten perfect souls" was written on it in a fine flowing educated hand.

"Ten?" the drunken man asked in amazement? "D'you mean I can take in nine of me pals?"

"Well, not exactly" the Devil said, half of him disappearing into the gas fire. "I'll choose the other nine. Don't worry your head about that. Just live your life, a little drop of the hard stuff now and then never hurt anyone - just live your horrible little life to its natural end. A bit before that the other nine will join you. All you've got to do is keep that passport safe. Put it by the alarm clock there." He had almost entirely disappeared by now. Only his

rather chilly smile remained visible, and his black moustache. "Oh, there's one more thing - it won't change colour, no matter what you do."

Then he was gone, leaving behind the white passport and a rather strong smell of sulphur as the only traces of his visit.

At first, the terrified wretch swore that he would never touch another pint of stout or gill of whiskey, so long as he lived. But then he looked at the passport, white and shining beside the alarm clock; with its promise to admit "ten perfect souls" and he wondered if there'd be any harm in say half a pint of light ale. After which he examined the cover, with the Papal Arms embossed on it in real gold. The Papal Tiara over a pair of crossed keys. The keys of Heaven, the man vaguely remembered from long, long ago catechism lessons.

He also remembered the hearty smack of the brother's leather strap for not knowing the answers. "Religion is all a load of bosh," he told himself, and he went out to get a drink to steady his nerves, which certainly needed steadying after such an experience. One drink followed another, and he finished the Night in the Garda station, under arrest for assaulting another drunk and telling him he could get anyone into Heaven that he liked. It wasn't exactly that that got him arrested, but the language he used together with the assault.

Things went from bad to worse. His nose turned a nasty shade of purple from the drink. His hands began to shake; He saw horrible visions on the stairs at night, and had to have another drink to recover from them. At last one winter's night he staggered home to find not visions on the stairs outside his flat; but a crowd of terrible looking men and women, and a peculiar looking little dog that tried to bite him.

"Who are you all?" he asked them muzzily. "What do you want?" The dog barked and sank its sharp little teeth in his ankle. A young man with his hair in pink spikes and a black leather coat with metal studs all over it banged him on the shoulder.

"You Mr. Murphy?" The drunken man admitted that he was.

"Then we're here. The nine of us. For the passport remember? Plus the dog."

A girl in a black plastic skirt that hid next to nothing of what it was supposed to hide shoved her face into the drunken man's with a look so threatening it drove him back against the wall of the landing with a thud. "Don't tell us you've forgot," she said, "or we'll do you over." She took the key out of Mr. Murphy's hand, where he had been holding it ready as he climbed the stairs, and opened his door, banging it back as if she meant to break it. All nine of them and the little dog poured into the sitting room.

"What a muck heap", the girl said. The little dog raised its leg against the gas fire. Three young men in dirty jeans flung themselves onto the couch. Another girl with very thick arms and legs rooted in the cupboard and pulled out two cans of lager and a half bottle of whiskey that poor Mr. Murphy had been keeping for emergencies.

"This all you got, you mean little squeaker?"

The first girl began frying his rashers on his gas ring. The dog barked. The nine young people yelled insults at one another and worse insults at their bewildered host, who you now know was called Mr. Murphy. He tried to get hold of his half bottle of whiskey, to have at least one swallow out of it, but it was already empty.

"We been waiting for you" one of the young men yelled. "A right old age pensioner you are - we thought you was never going to kick the bucket - two years I been waiting for tonight - " and he threw an empty beer can at the dog. "Shurrup!"

"Who are you all?" pleaded Mr. Murphy. "Why are you here?"

"To go to effing Heaven with you, stupid?" the fat girl shouted. She had found the Heavenly passport on the mantelpiece and was trying to read it. "Ad - mit ten - per - fick - souls - ha ha ha! That's us, eh? Nine of us at least. Plus Fido here - " and she took a kick at the little dog. "My effing sister's. It just came along. Want to go to Heaven, Fido?"

"But why - how -?" Mr. Murphy cried. "I mean I'm not dying - am I?" He had suddenly felt very ill, his heart beating too fast, and a queer noise in his ears. The room seemed to be going round and round.

"I bin waiting six months" the first girl said," and I'm not waiting any longer." She picked up the bread knife from beside the gas ring and looked at Mr. Murphy in a very meaningful way. "Are you ready or not?"

"Of course I'm not ready," he cried in desperation. "I'm not ill - I need a priest — a doctor - it's not the time yet -" The girl advanced on him, and he backed against the window. "Please! No! Don't touch me! Why d'you all want to go to Heaven?"

"To have fun," the girl said. "Just wait till we get there, we'll turn it upside bloody down. Start a Rock group - heavy metal - "

"Pushin' drugs!" one of the boys on the couch yelled.

"Teach the effing angels to smoke pot -"

"Cocaine!"

"Heroin!"

"Smack!"

"Perfect souls!"

"Sex orgies!"

"Gay rights for the effing saints!"

"P... on earth an' ill will to all men -" " - an' all effing women too – 'cept us!"

The little dog barked, frantic with excitement, and bit the fat girl in the calf.



"No! no! no!" cried Mr. Murphy in terror. The vision of his own angel came back to him in a blinding flash of contrition. These monsters invading Heaven. Because of him. Pushing drugs on the angels, She was exactly the one who'd try them, just to see what they were like, like the way she had flown under the bridges. His beautiful, golden angel spaced out on smack. Little cherubs sniffing glue in corners. Rock music instead of hymns. And all his fault. For throwing her feather into the gas fire. With a sudden lunge he grabbed hold of the passport from a boy who was examining it with a sneer, tore it in half and quarters and flung it out of the window.

"You'll not go!" he cried, and dropped to the floor with a heart attack as if he had been shot. There was a sudden blaze of whiteness at the window, and his angel was climbing through into the room, tall and splendid and furious. - The nine invaders took one look at her and fled for the door, crushing each other in their anxiety to escape. Inside twenty seconds they were all outside and pounding down the stairs. Only the little dog had stayed behind. Not even barking, but gazing at the angel in wonder, and what seemed very like the beginnings of devotion.

"You can get up now," the angel told Mr. Murphy. "They've gone."

"I can't" Mr. Murphy answered her. "I'm dead." The angel pulled him to his feet and dusted him down a little. "I know that."

To his amazement Mr. Murphy found that he could stand up quite well. And yet there he was too, lying on the floor. There were two of him. One dead on the floor with a silly expression. And one standing up beside the angel. The little dog rolled on its back at the angel's feet and waved its paws in ecstasy, its tongue lolling out of its mouth like a pink sausage.

"Those - those people - " Mr. Murphy quavered. "Were - are - they dead too?"

The angel nodded indifferently. "They've been waiting for you. One dead here, one there - we were wondering what you'd do when the time came."

"Could they - have got in?"

"On your passport, yes."

"And - done all those things?"

The angel nodded, slowly. "Why not? He's succeeded down here. Now he's trying up there."

"But - but Them? They'd allow it?"

The angel stared out of the window for a moment, before answering. "Every one has free will."

"You mean the Fall an' all that?" More memories of catechism classes floated back to Mr. Murphy. "But that was ages ago."

"Nothing is ages ago" the angel said, her voice suddenly very sad. "Everything is now."

Mr. Murphy tried to make sense of that and failed. But the word "now" woke him to immediate concerns. Or at least, his immediate concerns. "What about me? I suppose - I suppose I've got to - " and unable to say the words he pointed to the floor.

The angel shook her head. "You're to come with me."

"With you?" Hope fluttered in what had been Mr. Murphy's heart, and what indeed felt as if it still was his heart.

"To - to Heaven?"

She shook her head again. "Neither of us" she said. "I've been expelled."

He stared at her. "Expelled? You?"

"Yes. They weren't a bit pleased about my offering you a forged passport. The Recording Angel made a formal complaint."

"But I didn't accept it!"

The angel sighed. "That was recorded in your favour. Not in mine."

"How did they find out?"

"They know everything. It makes life difficult."

The little dog was licking her toes. "Good Fido" she said, bending down to rub its ears. Its tail came up like a white plume, and it danced on its back paws. "We'd better be going."

"Going where?"

"You'll see," she told him. "Is it far?" He was looking round the room, trying to believe he was really dead.

She drew him towards the doorway, and down the narrow smelly stairs. The little dog followed them, and out into the street. It was empty, and suddenly unfamiliar. The buildings across the way wavered as if he was seeing them under water. Mr. Murphy screwed his eyes shut to steady his vision. When he opened them again the buildings were gone. And the street. And his own house. Only himself and the angel remained standing together, and the little dog at their feet. A grey expanse stretched in front of them, featureless, barren, seemingly endless, the line where it must meet the equally grey sky so distant that it was invisible.

"Where is this?" Mr. Murphy whispered. "Why are we here?"

"This is nowhere" the angel said, a touch of anxiety in her voice, "or at least, the edge of nowhere. And we're here to find ten perfect spirits. Remember?"

"You - you mean the - the ones back in my room?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder rather than look round, for fear of what he might see behind him.

"Those ones? Of course not" she said. "They're for someone else to look after. Ours are waiting for us out there", and she pointed into the grey distance. "Nine of them. And you too. To match your passport."

Mr. Murphy looked down at his old brown boots with the cracks across the insteps, and the legs of his shabby blue suit. Ten perfect souls the passport had said. He had been mad to accept it, stark mad. If he only looked like a perfect soul! Handsome. With curly black hair and good teeth.

"One thing I have to warn you about" the angel was saying. But he was too intent on the sudden vision of himself as young and handsome to listen to what she was saying. A good suit, and a hat with a curly brim, and a walking stick with a gold knob, and the landlord of Dillon's treating him with respect and calling him Mr. Murphy, and the parish priest asking his advice –

"No! no!" cried the angel, "listen to me! Don't start wishing!"

"Why not?" said Mr. Murphy. "All I'm wishing is that I looked a bit better - you know, a bit of all right, curly hair and that - and a bit younger -" He was ashamed to tell her the rest of what he had wished, or why. "I do wish it", and he had a sudden, dizzy sensation as if all his wishes were really coming true. Even his hair seemed to be growing and his legs getting younger. And there in his hand was a handsome Malacca cane with a gold handle. The landlord's voice seemed to be echoing in his ears - "You're a right one, Mr. Murphy, a real high flyer!" And the parish priest catching him by the arm saying, "I've been wondering if you could help me, James. I've this problem with the bishop, and -"

He struck a pose for her, his head tilted, putting up his hand to caress the brim of his smart new hat. But his fingers found themselves touching long furry ears. And instead of thick black curls, harsh dusty fur. "What - what's happened!" he cried, and his voice came out in a donkey's dreadful bray. The Malacca cane in his hand turned to a length of old straw rope that was twisted round his monstrous donkey's neck.

"Braaaa!" he cried in terror. The angel reached into the pocket of his new blue suit and took out his handful of silver pebbles. She threw them into the air with an expression of near despair on her face. "Eight promises!" she cried furiously. "All your promises wasted!" As she said it they exploded into eight tiny puffs of silver smoke. He felt the weight of his donkey's ears vanish, along with his new suit and restored youth and everything else he had wished for. He stood staring at his old, familiar boots, feeling sullenly rebellious.

"What's wrong with wishes?" he said. It was only then, stealing a sideways glance at her, that he saw the change in her appearance. Her wings were gone, and she was dressed in a rough brown tunic with a rope girdle. Her golden hair had been shorn close to her head and she looked like a young boy, with her legs bare from the knees down. Handsome, yes. But no longer an angel. And all his fault!

"No" she said, reading his thoughts. "All my fault. But you're kind to try and take the blame. I'm sorry I shouted at you about your wishes, but you see, here in the real world wishes come true. Only not the way you'd like them to. They come really true. And use up your promises."

"What promises? Those pebbles?"

"Yes. I was given twelve and you were given eight, not for ourselves, but for the people we're being sent to rescue. As promises of help if they get into really desperate trouble."

She took him by the arm and they started walking. He was afraid to ask her any more questions. Even though she no longer had her wings, or her splendid white dress there was still an air of authority about her that overawed him. The little dog trotted beside them, its pink tongue hanging out with joyous excitement, every now and then giving the angel a look of adoration.

## Chapter 2

They had walked until Mr. Murphy could walk no further. She had kept him going for a while with encouragement, and finally by putting her arm under his and almost carrying him along. But at last he had simply folded down on his knees like a camel, and fallen on his side, asleep before he was stretched out on the ground. The little dog was in no better case. As soon as Mr. Murphy and the angel stopped moving it flopped on to its belly, legs stretched out behind, tongue stretched out in front, too tired to pant.

"Poor Fido" the angel said, and stroked the dog's silky head - no longer so silky indeed with all the dust on it and the fragments of dry twigs caught in its ears and black and brown coat. It seemed to feel better when she touched it, and rolled over on its side and went to sleep. The angel sat with her knees drawn up, considering the grey landscape. For all the difference in it since they began walking they might as well not have walked at all. Sand. Thorn bushes. Rocks. Patches of a rambly heather-like plant that looked as unpleasant as it felt. Beyond that, not a living thing. No birds. No animals. Not so much as an insect. Nowhere. She thought about that mad swoop under the bridges. The ten days in Mr. Murphy's flat. "What did you do during those ten days?" the prosecuting angel had asked in a dangerously gentle voice. "Did you try to convert him? Bring him to repentance? Invite his friends and relations to meet you to discuss higher things? Or did you concentrate on converting his landlady and fellow tenants?"

The angel could only hang her head in shame. She had done none of those things.

"I see," said the prosecuting angel, who quite clearly knew everything she had done and failed to do. "You contented yourself with a thorough investigation of earth's culture? You read the Lives of the Saints, I expect? Visited the Cathedral? Went everyday to Mass and Benediction? Paid your respects to the archbishop?"

The apprentice angel had continued to hang her head, crimson with shame from forehead to slender, lovely throat.

"No!" thundered the prosecutor; "You did not so much as go to Mass on Sunday!"

"My wings -" the poor angel had whispered. "I would have been -"

"Could you not wear a cloak? You seem to have been happy to wear a blanket! Alone with a man! In his flat!"

"I had to get dry and warm," the wretched prisoner whispered. "I -"

"And the television? The evening paper? The fish and chips? All that was essential? Lying in bed until eleven and twelve in the morning?" The prosecuting angel had waited for an answer, and when, as she had expected, none came, she had moved on to the chief item in the list of accusations. "Now, this promise you gave to Mr. Murphy to forge a passport for him into Heaven -"

At the word "forge" a murmur of horror had run through the heavenly courtroom. The prosecuting angel had glared at her victim. "You! An apprentice angel of the seventh class! What have you to say in your defence?" A long, dramatic, condemning pause and

the prosecuting angel turned in triumph to the assembly of Thrones and Powers, Dominions and Archangels, Angels and - far in the back - apprentice angels of the various classes.

"Expulsion" the assembly cried with one terrible voice, except for a small apprentice in the very back row who cried out "No! Give her another chance, please." But no one heard her except a few other small apprentices nearby, who stared at her in such alarm and terror that she burst into tears.

The prosecutor turned to the poor condemned angel, and read out her sentence - a sentence obviously prepared before the trial had so much as began. Expulsion. And to find ten perfect souls, in order to fulfill the terms of the Devil's stolen passport - a passport certainly torn into quarters and thrown out of Mr. Murphy's sitting room window down on the earth, but one that had a permanent, indestructible existence in Heaven. It had to be fulfilled.

"Go and find them!" the Prosecutor commanded. "Ten of them. Including your disreputable friend Mr. Murphy. Make him perfect!" A vivid picture of Mr. Murphy as he was at that exact moment, his elbow on the mahogany bar of a public house, a pint of stout in his right hand and his swollen nose a luminous purple, was projected onto a fleecy white cloud like a giant television screen. A ripple of laughter swept over the court, the heavenly, golden laughter of angels. The poor condemned angel knelt with her hands clasped together, her beautiful head bent. The prosecutor came forward with golden shears and in one sweep cut off the prisoner's golden hair. As it fell in soft waves to the floor of Heaven several more apprentice angels broke down and sobbed aloud.

"You will keep your wings and white robe long enough to bring you to Mr. Murphy's rooms - where indeed, he will soon need you most urgently. After that you will bring him with you to the edge of "Nowhere". There you will become as you deserve. The prosecutor held out a leather pouch. There are twelve silver pebbles in this bag. Each pebble is a promise you can give - a promise within the Law, do you understand? And here are eight more for Mr. Murphy".

The angel bent her shorn head still deeper. "I understand," she whispered.

"And no wishes!" the prosecutor said. "You can't wish yourself back here, or to have your wings again. The wishes would go very wrong, I warn you. And warn Mr. Murphy."

She looked down at him, asleep beside her. To make him perfect! Well no, not make him - help him make himself perfect - which in a way would be even harder. Had he ever tried to be better? In his whole life? And now, here, on the edge of Nowhere, he would have to do it all. And if he didn't? She shuddered. As an apprentice almost the first lesson she had had was to be shown what happened in Nowhere. Or rather, what didn't happen? Because in Nowhere nothing happens, nothing at all, for ever and ever.

Like wanting to cry, and not being able to. Never. Never. Never. Wishing, wishing that one could.

"Wishes and prayers," her teacher had told the class. "Those are the two great mistakes people make. They are even worse than wanting. When people say, "I want" they do at

least put some energy into it, even if what they want is wrong. But when they wish they just sit there waiting for it to happen by magic."

"But - " a rather bold apprentice had asked, ruffling her wing feathers, "aren't prayers what they're supposed to use?"

Instead of being cross at being almost contradicted, the teacher had been pleased. "What a good question! Real prayers, yes, but they almost never are real prayers. Which mean giving something instead of asking for something. The prayers I'm talking about are just wishes in disguise, asking for magic."

"And mustn't they ever ask for anything?" the bold apprentice had insisted. The other apprentices had looked at one another in astonishment at her courage.

"Why yes, yes they can. But not often, and only in the really worst moments, when they simply can't go on without help. But they mustn't do it too often, or at the wrong moments - if they do, then their prayers will come true, but in ways they won't like at all."

None of the apprentices, including the bold one, had dared to ask any more questions about that.

She sat thinking about Heaven, and the school, and the other apprentices, and all the laughter and the jokes - and the ambitions! The kind of angels they would make! Arch angels! Cherubim! They'd change everything! Heaven was so old-fashioned! All the rules! Only such goody goody people let in and all the exciting people kept out! It was so dull!

And now - if only she could creep back again, be the smallest, smallest apprentice at the bottom of the first class.

Those wretched bridges! That mad promise about Mr. Murphy's passport! She had been mad! So proud of her wings - and being trusted with a message! A promise no less, to an old woman in Dublin saying her prayers about her awful son.

They had been good prayers of a kind - not really wise ones, which leave all the decisions to Heaven, but better than all the others that people were saying at that moment "Please let me give my life," the old woman had been offering. "Take me, please, if only he can be shown what will happen to him if he goes on the way he is."

"He will be shown. And you will be taken," she was to tell the old woman. In a dream. And in his dreams the son was to be shown Nowhere.

"Of course I can!" she had told the angel teacher when she was asked if she thought she could manage it all.

"Now, obey the Rules, remember!" the teacher had said. But she had already been on her way, laughing at the word "Rules", the way all the apprentices laughed among themselves. Rules, rules, rules! "Obedience is the chief lesson" written up in golden letters over the teacher's throne. Oh, the excitement of flying down to earth, like a falling star. She had been so excited she had scarcely been able to feel sorry for the old woman, and not at all for her horrible son.

That had been another item in the prosecuting angel's list. "Did you love them both when you entered their dreams?"

And she hadn't.

Two great silver tears rolled down her cheeks then, and two more rolled down them now. The little dog whimpered at her feet and she picked him up and cuddled him on her lap. "Oh Fido, how could I have been so stupid?" He seemed to understand and sympathise, and she fell asleep holding him.

When she woke it would not be correct to say that the sky had brightened, still less that dawn had come, but there was a dull increase in visibility and even a suggestion of a horizon, a line between earth and sky far far ahead. But much nearer, so near that it was a wonder she had not seen it before she fell asleep, there was a most extraordinary sight - a kind of sumptuous encampment, consisting of a great bell tent, almost a marquee, of white canvas, with a flag, gold and red and blue, hanging limply above it.

Surrounding the enormous tent were smaller tents and beyond it the shimmer of metal or glass reflecting the vague light from the sky. She stood up to see better. There was movement among the tents; people moving about and the angel felt a tremor both of anticipation and foreboding. There, not half a mile ahead, lay the reason for her journey, and Mr. Murphy's. She bent down to shake him out of his sleep. "Wake up! We have found what we were looking for!" The little dog barked and jumped on Mr. Murphy's stomach and licked his face. His tail waved in the air and his whole manner suggested that he knew it was going to be a wonderful and exciting day, and he couldn't wait to begin it.

Mr. Murphy was much less pleased. He was stiff all over, and even at the best of times, the early morning was the worst moment of his day. He grumbled a great deal at being made to stand up and he swore that he couldn't see any tents or people and that he wouldn't move until he had had a cup of strong tea and a rasher.

"Come on," commanded the angel, and still grumbling, he followed her, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, and finding new pains in his legs and feet with every step he took. The little dog trotted ahead, his tail waving like a white plume, his head turning every few seconds to make sure they were following. "I know the way!" his tail said.

Before they were half way to the strange encampment they saw two men walking towards them, both wearing a uniform of dark blue shirt and sky blue breeches, with long black boots up to their knees.

"Halt!" the bigger of the two men commanded them. "Move a step and we'll fire." He had a pistol in his hand and an expression on his swarthy, fat, unpleasant face that looked as if he was well used to shooting strangers and didn't mind it a bit.

"Put your hands up!" cried the second man, a smaller version of the first, but just as ugly. He had thick, fat cheeks, blue black where he had shaved, and shining greasily.

Mr. Murphy had his hands as high over his head as they could reach. The little dog growled, avoiding a sharp kick from the bigger of the two men by turning a somersault in mid-air as he ran in to attack his boots.



A third man came hurrying up behind the first two, old and rickety, but clearly still active enough, as he skipped and scurried over the stony ground. He had on a butler's swallowtail coat and black trousers with fine white lines down them, and neat little black shoes of patent leather. "Who are they?" he cried in a falsetto voice. "Are they our guides? For pity's sake put away those dreadful revolvers!" And turning to the angel, and mistaking her for the young man she looked like, he asked her, "My dear young fellow! I do apologise! Her Highness's bodyguards -" nodding his head rather helplessly towards the two uniformed ruffians, "they expect every stranger to be an enemy -"

"That's right, so we do, and so we should! That's what we're paid for," the larger bodyguard said belligerently.

"We have come to help you" the angel said, keeping her hands by her sides, and telling Mr. Murphy sharply to lower his.

The old gentleman gave a little skip of delight. "Oh just wait till Her Highness hears," and he waved his hands in the air as if there were no words to describe how pleased she would be. "We were on our way to Africa," he said confidentially, "a safari you know, when the ship began to sink - " He looked bewildered, shaking his head at the memory. "And then we were suddenly here. Of course we knew the authorities would send help as soon as they heard of it - but - it's been so long! Anyway -" he gave another small skip, "here you are now at last. Come quickly, we must prepare to start at once, oh, oh, oh!" and he skipped again, turning to lead the way towards the tents.

By now a number of other people had seen them and were standing looking at them in excitement as the old gentleman hurried back to them with his news. The angel and Mr. Murphy followed him more slowly, flanked by the still growling and grumbling bodyguards.

"Any tricks!" said the one.

"You'll be sorry," said the other.

Beyond the tents it was now possible to see what had caused the shimmering reflection of glass and metal - a very large truck like a removal van, and two enormous automobiles. A Rolls Royce, and an American limousine of the kind that only the most important people possess. A man was at that moment polishing it with a large cloth, increasing its shine until even in that dull light it winked and glittered.

A second old gentleman was now holding the first by the arm, preventing him from going further. "But I insist, my dear Schifoso, I simply insist on being the one to break the news to her. You know how she has been with me ever since we found ourselves here."

He wore black knee breeches and a velvet coat of a handsome plum colour with gold buttons, and a very old fashioned powdered wig.

Without allowing the old gentleman he had named Schifoso to say another word he scurried towards the great tent on his high-heeled red shoes. "The Cavaliere," Signor Schifoso said resignedly, as if the word alone explained everything. In a few moments the Cavaliere was on his way back to them, beckoning imperiously, his face alight with

importance, waving aside two women, one of them no more than a girl, who had begun to approach the new comers.

"You are to see Her Highness at once!" he announced, breathless with excited authority. "You will bow very low - I hope you know how to bow properly?" He asked the angel. Quite clearly he thought it a waste of breath to ask the same question of Mr. Murphy. "You will stay here," he said to him.

"He will come in with me," the angel said. "We are together." And Mr. Murphy felt a rush of gratitude, and reproached himself for all the grumbling he had done, and the complaints he had made about being dragged along at her heels.

"That's right!" he said challengingly. "Her and me is together." The Cavaliere turned to the angel in amazement. Her? She? You mean - you are not a young man?"

"A young man?" Mr. Murphy said scornfully. "She's an a - " The angel kicked his ankle.

"A young woman?" the Cavaliere was saying in near despair. "Her Highness will never - we assumed - oh dear oh dear!"

"Cavaliere?" a very aristocratic voice reached them from inside the great tent. "Where are these persons? Can you do nothing without endless conversations? Bring them to me at once?"

The Cavaliere crossed himself in his anxiety. "Hurry, hurry, what are you waiting for?" as if it was their doing and not his. "Remember, wait until Her Highness invites you to speak!"

Inside the tent there was such luxury as made Mr. Murphy open his eyes wide in amazement. A tent? It was like a room in a palace! Gold lanterns, Persian rugs, a parrot in a gold cage, a huge cat on a silk cushion - and an old lady lying on a bed covered in blue silk, with a soft red woolen rug drawn up over her knees, and a red shawl round her shoulders. And such a look of arrogant ill-temper on her face as made Mr. Murphy hot and cold with anger.

She put a gold lorgnette to her eyes and looked at Mr. Murphy as if she had never seen anyone like him before, and didn't wish to again. "The old so and so!" Mr. Murphy thought. "I bet I'm as good as she is!"

"So you are to be our guide?" the old lady was demanding of the angel. "You look a very young man for such a great responsibility." The Cavaliere coughed to interrupt.

"Young woman, Your Highness. The-this, er - young person is a young woman."

The painted arches of Her Highness's eyebrows rose towards the edge of her auburn wig - less obviously a wig than the Cavaliere's, which was meant to look like a wig, but still clearly a wig as if Her Highness didn't care who knew it.

"A young woman?" she said in a tone that made Mr. Murphy still angrier, although why it should he scarcely knew, because he and his pals had used it a thousand times

apiece. As if women were like cats and dogs, belonging to a different, totally inferior species of creature. (She's a woman herself! Mr. Murphy thought indignantly. And to call his angel a "young woman" like that - !)

"I cannot imagine how the authorities could expect me to trust my self to a young woman as a guide. Do you claim to be competent to guide me to my destination?"

(As if all those others outside didn't even exist, Mr. Murphy thought, and it was just her to be guided. I know what I'd tell her!)

"Well?" Her Highness was demanding.

"No" the angel said calmly. "That is not the question to ask."

The Cavaliere gasped in horror. The old lady seemed to swell under her rug and shawl. "What -?"

"The correct question" the angel continued, "is whether you are competent to be guided. And you" she said, turning politely to the Cavaliere. "And your companions outside."

"Silence!" cried the old lady. "Go back to your employer and tell him that I have never been treated with such insolence in my whole life! I shall see to it that you are well punished, and I demand that your employer come to me at once to apologise, and guide me himself. Cavaliere -" She gestured with her lorgnette in dismissal.

Outside the tent the waiting men and women scattered like geese at the Cavaliere's furious expression. The two bodyguards looked nastily triumphant, and fingered their revolvers as the angel led Mr. Murphy away from the camp. The little dog Fido, who had stayed unobtrusively by the angel's heels until then, ran ahead, barking and waving his white plume of a tail.

"Well, I never!" Mr. Murphy said. "D'you still mean to try an' help them? I wouldn't, an' that's flat!"

"I have to," the angel answered him, her tone resolute. "And we are only just in time. Look over there!"

There was a cloud of dust on the horizon, that moments later showed its self as a galloping crowd of horsemen, waving rifles in the air. As they swept closer Mr. Murphy could see more weapons - bandoliers of cartridges, daggers thrust into silver belts, pistols in garishly decorated holsters. He lay down behind a rock, pulling at the angel's sleeve and praying that Fido would lie still and keep quiet. The angel ignored him and remained where she was. The horsemen raced towards the camp, yelling now and firing their guns in the air.

Mr. Murphy saw the two bodyguards fling their revolvers away, and fall to their knees. "Don't shoot us," they cried. "We're poor men like you. The treasure is there in the big tent." After that it was all fury and confusion, men and women running, horses galloping, guns firing, people crying for mercy, the bandits yelling curses and orders. The inhabitants of the camp were lined up, their hands tied behind their backs. All except Her

Highness, who had been rolled up in a Persian rug, with her bald head deprived of its wig sticking out at one end of the roll, and her feet sticking out of the other. Two of the bandits flung her over the saddle of a packhorse like a piece of baggage and tied her with a length of rope.

Other bandits were manhandling the treasures out of the tent; the rugs, the silver lamps, the parrot in its cage, even the huge cat on its cushion. Two men staggered out with an ebony chest, bound in brass. Flames rose up from the tents, from the huge baggage truck, from the Rolls Royce and the Cadillac. The chief bandit yelled an order, and the prisoners were pushed and beaten into single file, the two bodyguards still pleading with their captors that they were innocent poor men.

"Avanti!" cried the bandit leader. "March!"

The angel stood up, Mr. Murphy still pleading with her in a piercing whisper to hide behind a rock as he was doing and hope they wouldn't be noticed. But she stayed calmly standing in the way of the bandits, and when the bandit chief, on his black stallion, was no more than a few paces from her, she held up her hand and said "Stop!" quite quietly, but her voice somehow carrying against the trample of hooves, the oaths of the bandits and the lamentations of the prisoners.

Mr. Murphy hid his eyes, expecting every second to hear the horrible noise of the angel being trampled to death, but instead there was a gathering silence. Mr. Murphy opened his eyes and saw the column coming to an uneasy halt.

"Your prisoners, please!" the angel said, still quietly, but with such authority as Mr. Murphy had never yet heard in her voice. "They belong to me! You may take all the things you have stolen, but not the people."

Again Mr. Murphy expected something terrible to happen. But nothing did, except that the bandit chief leaned forward in his saddle, staring at the angel long and hard.

"So you're one of Them!" he said. "I should have known it!" And with horrible curses he ordered his men to untie all the prisoners and unroll the old lady out of her rug. "Take them! Take that bald old witch too, although by all the rules they ought to belong to us! What right have you got to interfere eh?"

The angel only smiled at him, gently. "You could come too. All of you."

"Oh could we?" the bandit sneered. "Not likely!" He pointed at the angel, or rather, at the leather pouch hanging at her girdle. "What have you got there? All the things belong to me, you said that yourself."

Before the angel could answer him a look of triumph came over his fiercely bearded face. "I know! Wishes! Promises! That's it! Those silver pebbles you use! Well, give 'em over!"

"No!" the angel cried. "Never!"

"Then I'll use 'em now, for you!" The bandit's voice was filled with malice. "That's in the rules too. There has to be a ransom, you have to pay! And they have to pay too, what

they owe us? Well, I'll tell you what the ransom is." He looked at the new freed prisoners, standing nearby naked and shamefaced, surrounded by the bandits. "I wish you joy of 'em!" He seemed to be thinking for a long moment. "I know! Let each of 'em - an' him too" he said turning suddenly and pointing at Mr. Murphy, "let each of 'em turn into what they've really been, what they've made themselves! I wish it, with all your twelve promises an' wishes! You've got twelve of 'em haven't you?" He held up his rifle and fired it into the air. "That's my right!" he yelled, "an' see what you can do with 'em then!"

He wheeled his great horse away in a jingle and clatter of harness. His men leapt onto their horses. In a moment they were galloping away, carrying their treasures, cursing and laughing. But Mr. Murphy had no eyes for them. He was staring in amazed horror at what they had left behind. Where there had been nine people, there were now nine ill-assorted creatures. A goat, a goose, a peacock, two sheep, ridiculously wearing what looked like wolf skins over their dirty fleeces and silly heads, a huge pig, a lamb, a turkey and a donkey.

In fact, as Mr. Murphy looked, there were not nine, but eleven of them. Behind the domestic farm animals, there were two more. One was a great hound black and brown sitting on his haunches and seeming to be gazing at Mr. Murphy with an almost sorrowful, pitying expression, although why that should be Mr. Murphy couldn't imagine. The other animal was far stranger. A great black panther with a heavy, triangular head and golden eyes that seemed to blaze with what Mr. Murphy could only describe as amusement.

And indeed, well it might be amused, he thought. He was himself once the shock had worn off. So that was what the bandit chief had meant - let each of 'em turn into what they've really been, what they've made themselves? And much quicker than it is to tell it Mr. Murphy looked at the woebegone creatures and tried to identify them. The two sheep in wolf's clothing? That was easy - they must be the two bodyguards. And the turkey? Was that the Cavaliere? And the goose? The butler, Signor Schifoso? No. He must be the nanny goat, it had exactly his expression. But Her Highness? Which one was she - and he saw the peacock trying to spread its tail and look impressive. But half its tail feathers were gone and the rest were no more than hairy quills, with not a dab of colour in them except a rusty, dingy brown. Even the peacock's head was almost bald of feathers. Only its eyes had the beady arrogance of Her Highness's.

As for the other animals - they must be the two women he had seen - maids? And who else? Who was the pig? And the donkey? And the lamb?

But at that moment he became aware of something rather strange about himself. In the first place he was on all fours. And in the next, when he looked down at his feet, instead of seeing his familiar old brown boots, cracked across the insteps, he was looking at little sharp trotters. No! No! it wasn't possible! Thin, hairy, pink pig's legs. He tried to look at the rest of himself and found it impossible to turn his head. He had a vague impression of fat pink hairy sides and a horrible thought came into his mind. Bacon! Rashers! Him! "Oinnk!" he squealed, "why? why a pig?"

But he knew very well why, with all the beer and whiskey he had poured down his throat, until at times he had been no more than a stomach on legs. And all the other animals too knew why they were as they were and looked at each other in shame and horror. Mr. Murphy's fellow pig, who had been Her Highness's chef, and had stuffed

himself with the delicacies he prepared for her guests until his belly swelled up so much that he could no longer see his toes.

There was Her Highness's companion, the goose, who had never used her brain. And the Cavaliere who was now a turkey, swelling and gobbling, which was really all he had ever done. And the butler, became a goat, who had butted and bullied the under servants. And Her Highness the Peacock! Still trying to spread the non-existent glories of her tail. Only the lamb and the donkey, Her Highness's little maid Anna, and her chauffeur, Signor Melancolia, had no real reason to be ashamed. Indeed, but for their loyalty to Her Highness they might well have gone somewhere else, instead of accompanying her as they had done, to this edge of Nowhere.

But the panther? And the huge hound? Something in the hound's eyes and expression told Mr. Murphy the answer. Fido! the little dog, became the huge dog he had really believed himself to be! And had been, in his heart. And the panther? It must be Her Highness's cat –

Indeed, only the angel and the parrot had remained unchanged. The parrot was sitting, or rather, standing on the donkey's back, looking extremely pleased with himself. Suddenly he spread his green wings as wide as he could and screeched, "Lay an egg! Lay an egg!" looking hard at the peacock. The peacock turned her back – or being a peacock and not a peahen one ought to say his back - on the parrot. The lamb, the little maid Anna, came and nuzzled her, going "baa baa!" as much as to say "Oh your Highness? if only I could dress your poor tail!"

"Lay an egg," screeched the parrot at the goose and the turkey. The two sheep were trying to look fierce in their wolf skins. The panther stretched and yawned, its eyes narrowed to golden slits. Fido, the great black and tawny brown hunting dog, came padding over to sniff at Mr. Murphy. The angel stood looking at them all, despair in her grey eyes but trying to look brave. Behind them the camp had burned to the ground.

"We have a long way to go," the angel said. "You, you poor fellow," she said to the donkey, "Will you carry Her Highness?" The donkey, who had spent his life carrying Her Highness here and there in her Rolls Royce (the Cadillac had been for the Cavaliere and the butler and the chef, and had been driven by one of the body guards,) - the donkey brayed his willingness, and the angel set the peacock on his grey, patient back, being rewarded for her concern by a sharp peck on her hand. The turkey was put on the chef's broad pink back, and the goose on Mr. Murphy's.

"Turn and turn about" the angel said. "Next time the sheep can carry them", at which the sheep in their wolf skins looked very ill-pleased. The angel took the lead; the parrot perched on her shoulder, and the panther and Fido the great hound pacing one on either side of her. Mr. Murphy found himself beside the other pig, Her Highness's chef.

"Do I really look like that?" he wondered miserably, looking at the pink curve of the chef's belly, the big snout and the small piggy eyes with their sandy eyelashes. "There's pigs and pigs," he told himself. "There's ugly pigs and handsome pigs". Oddly enough, the chef was thinking exactly the same thing. They trudged along in companionable silence, each comforted by contempt and pity for the other. The little maid Anna, now the lamb, skipped along beside the two bodyguards, unafraid of their wolf skins. The donkey paced solemnly and proudly, bearing Her Highness the peacock. The butler, Signor Schifoso

brought up the rear, every now and then lowering his horns and threatening to butt the two bodyguard sheep. He found he quite enjoyed being a goat. All his life he had dreamt of being something much wilder than a butler. Now he was.

"No!" cried the bigger bodyguard sheep, or rather "Baa baa!" as the butler drove his curved horns into his rump for the second time. "You do that again and I'll -"

"You'll what?" the goat enquired silkily. "I'll tell Her Highness," bleated the sheep. "Tell her" the goat sneered, and butted the other sheep. Fido the hound came padding back towards them and the goat made himself look as if he had been behaving perfectly.

"He was butting us," the sheep complained in one "Baa!"

"I know" Fido barked. "But he won't again, will you?"

The goat said nothing and Fido went to Mr. Murphy, with his burden of the goose, who had been Her Highness's companion. "Cheer up!" Fido barked. He bounded ahead, showing how it could be done, at least if you were an athletic hound, and not a rather heavy pig with a goose on your back.

"Oh Lord!" thought Mr. Murphy. "How long is this going to go on?"

### Chapter 3

It would be difficult to answer poor Mr. Murphy's sad question, how long is this going to go on? On the edge of Nowhere time runs in a different way. Even here, in this world, it sometimes runs very fast, when you're enjoying yourself, and very slowly when you're not. There, it seems to run differently for everyone, faster, slower, even standing still. And distance too seems different - all one can say is that it went on for a very long time. The angel led them across the grey immensity of the desert, and they followed her. They grumbled, bleated, squeaked, squealed, chattered (the parrot) shrieked (the peacock, in sheer rage) grunted, brayed, baaed.

For a little while that was all. And for what seemed to Mr. Murphy a very long while that was all. Until at last the angel allowed them to thump down on the hard ground and rest. It was then that he realised she was afraid. Or maybe afraid was the wrong word. Anxious. She kept looking back the way they had come, as if she expected to see something, or someone, following them, and threatening. He thought of the bandits. And the same horrible word came into his mind. "Rashers!" He could see it. Fine fat slices of bacon sizzling in a frying pan. Cooked in goose fat, I wouldn't wonder? he thought, looking at the poor goose.

And lamb chops! And boiled mutton! Sausages! Pig's trotters! Roast turkey! "Oink!" he squealed to his fellow pig. "Do you think?" the chef, turned pig, seemed to be having the same thoughts. So did the sheep. Their wolf skins had slipped during the long journey, and they looked even more ridiculous and sheep like than ever. They huddled together, and seemed very glad of the presence of the panther and Fido, not to speak of the angel. The goose hid his head - he was a gander really - under his wing as if that might protect him. The donkey looked mournful, and the turkey gobbled in alarm. The lamb stood beside the peacock looking at it sadly, as much as to say "I'd protect you if I could, Your Highness!"

Suddenly the parrot shrieked "It's getting dark! Dark? Dark!"

It was. Not dark the way it does here, in the night, but a queer sort of dark that seemed to be alive, and moving. Little bits of darkness moved about by themselves, creeping towards the animals, and then staying still when they thought they were noticed. Like shadows. Only there was nothing to make shadows. No sun. No moon. No stars. No light. And no people or animals to cast the shadows if there had been any real light. Just darkness.

And as some of the pieces got closer Mr. Murphy saw something that frightened him more than he had ever been frightened in his whole life. Where the shadows, the pieces of darkness came, whatever had been there a moment before disappeared. There was suddenly nothing there, just a hole.

It's hard to describe, because you expect things to "disappear" in the dark. But this was different. Mr. Murphy knew it was. He was not sure how he knew, but he did. The shadows were eating things, rocks, bushes, patches of sandy soil. Wherever they went there was nothing left. And as if he could hear the angel's anxious, frightened thought in his mind, he suddenly knew what it was. The shadows belonged to Nowhere, and wherever they reached became Nowhere. There was nothing left.



Behind the shadows, still far enough away, but coming closer all the time, was the great wall of darkness that the shadows belonged to. Even the thought of becoming bacon and ham and sausages and rashers no longer represented the worst of terrors for Mr. Murphy. Becoming nothing: Being caught away into Nowhere! He wanted to cover his eyes with his trotters and couldn't. And realised that if he could he would have been so terrified that he would have had to look again.

He thought of running away, but where to? The shadows were all round them. Closer. And closer. Oh! Oh! Oh! he cried. And saw the angel walking towards the darkest of the shadows. He wanted to cry out No! No! Don't! You'll disappear! The panther and Fido were with her, and the little lamb and the donkey followed, visibly trembling with fear, but still following bravely towards the darkness.

"Oh please!" cried Mr. Murphy, "Oink; Oink! Come back, we'll all disappear together at least."

But a strange thing was happening. The angel was surrounded by light. Not a very bright light, but a kind of glow, faint and fuzzy, yet clearly light of a kind that didn't even seem to belong in that grey landscape. And the panther and Fido were glowing too, and seeking to grow even bigger. The shadows crept back as the angel and the animals advanced on them. Back and back towards the wall of darkness.

The angel began walking in a wide circle, and wherever she walked she seemed to leave a trail of her faint light, like - like a fence Mr. Murphy thought. The shadows retreated from it still further, the wall of darkness seemed to writhe and boil with rage, as the individual shadows returned to it and were absorbed into it.

Mr. Murphy felt a huge weight of terror lift from him. In that moment he loved the angel with such a passion of gratitude he would have done anything for her. "I - I - I'd give her some of my own rashers if I could?" and he sniffled in an ecstasy of gratitude and generosity and relief such as he had never felt before. Tears ran down his snout, and he was not sure whether they were because he had been turned into a pig, or because being a pig he had no way of telling her how he felt.

But she knew without him telling her, and came and rubbed his rough, hairy head and smiled at him. And at all the other animals. And in that instant the lamb and the donkey were no longer animals. They were human beings again. Anna the little maid. And Signor Melancolia, the chauffeur. They looked at one another in amazement, and the other animals all stared at them, equally amazed, as if it was even stranger to be a human being than to be an animal or a bird.

"Bravo!" shrieked the parrot. "Bravissimo!"

Anna the maid went straight to the peacock and knelt down beside it, stroking its feathers with her gentle fingers. Signor Melancolia looked embarrassed, as if he felt it quite wrong and disrespectful to be a human being again when Her Highness was still a peacock. And such a scrawny, dilapidated one! But gradually they all settled down, and even slept, waking in spasms of panic to see if the faintly glowing fence was still there, and falling asleep again from the exhaustion of their journey.

In his sleep Mr. Murphy dreamed. He dreamt of his mother, on her knees scrubbing. Not their own kitchen, which was always untidy, and all too often with not much food in it, but other people's kitchens. So that he could have school books. And become a clerk with a collar and tie and suit.

In the dream he wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but she couldn't hear him, and only went on scrubbing and scrubbing at a stone floor that stretched away and away forever. Even when he'd got that first job she had gone on scrubbing. So he could have a better suit. And they could go on holiday together to the seaside. They had gone - and he had got drunk, and - He tried to stop dreaming, and managed to stop dreaming about her, only to find himself dreaming instead about Kathy. What had he done to her?

Oh! oh! oh! he cried in his dream. Oink oink oink! He grunted in his uneasy sleep. Her big sad eyes looked at him in the dream full of - not reproaches, only sadness. Sadness for him, he realised, not for herself. Oh Kathy! I never meant it! I meant to keep my promise; I really did, only -

Only the lads in the pub had laughed at him for being a softy. "Don't you go gettin' yourself tied up, boyo! That's all they think of, a weddin' ring an' all the trimmings. You mind yourself, or she'll have you slavin' away the rest of your days while she sits at home doin' her hair an' polishing her nails. Women! They're all the same! Have another drink, boyo!"

When he woke up properly at last the darkness and the glowing fence had disappeared, and there was only the grey twilight and the desert, and the animals yawning and stretching and complaining, and the angel and the maid and Signor Melancholia waking them and urging them on to their feet. Anna had the peacock in her arms, and Signor Melancholia carried the turkey. The goose sat on the back of one of the sheep, and the parrot came and perched on Mr. Murphy's broad pink shoulders, digging his little claws in to get a safe purchase.

"Why don't you fly?" Mr. Murphy oinked in irritation at having his skin pricked.

"Because they clipped my wings, silly," the parrot told him. "But she says my feathers may grow again." He nodded his beak towards the angel, walking ahead of them. Mr. Murphy wondered if the angel's feathers would ever grow again. Or would he ever walk on two legs again?

They went on and on. Time seemed to stand still and distance seemed to mean nothing. They camped again, and again the angel made her faintly glowing fence round them. The shadows were still there, but Mr. Murphy was less afraid of them - what he was afraid of, really afraid, was of going to sleep and dreaming.

In the pub again. With the lads. Where else had he ever been? What else had he ever done? The pub and the bookies office and those two scruffy rooms in the dirty old house in Dublin. Like a nightmare. Day after day. Night after night. Drunk. Why? Why had he done it? But there was no answer to that. Only his mother on her knees scrubbing. And Kathy looking at him -

If only I could tell them! he whispered, oinked in his dream. Tell them how sorry I am -

The next time he woke - how many times had there been? Ten, twenty? A hundred? There was no way of counting, no way of remembering, he went to clamber up on his trotters, and there he was standing on two feet, in old, cracked brown boots. Wearing his ancient blue suit. "I'm me!" he cried, and expected to hear the familiar "oink, oink" But it came out as words, "I'm me!" And all round him similar cries were sounding. "I'm -! I'm - !" The chef, the Cavaliere, the butler, the companion, the two body guards, Her Highness - every one of them on their two feet, looking at each other in amazement and joy. And then, replacing the joy, an ashamed embarrassment.

Mr. Murphy felt it too. He was ashamed to look the chef in the eye, as if the chef knew all about Kathy and Mr. Murphy's mother. And all the pubs. And the - oh! oh! oh! cried Mr. Murphy in his mind, and he could have died of shame. So could the others. They shuffled their feet and looked down at the ground, or up at the sky, or anywhere at all rather than at each other, after that first moment of joy. The angel went from one of them to the other, smiling at them. Fido barked and ran round in circles. The panther yawned and seemed to smile too with her long white fangs and her long black whiskers.

The parrot flapped his wings, and to his own amazement lifted into the air.

"I'm flying!" he squawked. "Flying, flying!" And so he was, unsteadily, and not very high or far, but he was flying. He made a circle and landed shakily on the panther's head. "Did you see me?"



Mr. Murphy looked from the triumphant parrot to the chef, who had been his fellow pig during he could not remember how many marches and through how many terrors, and for a moment he didn't recognise him. The great belly was gone. It would not be honest to call him thin, but he was certainly no longer monstrously fat. And his legs? They had looked skinnily pathetic, supporting such a tub of lard. Now they looked like anyone else's, and indeed quite strong.

The same sort of changes had taken place for all the others, too. They seemed to have grown younger and, and - "less themselves" was the odd phrase that came into Mr. Murphy's mind. Her Highness's companion who a moment ago had been a goose looked almost sensible, and so did the Cavaliere and the butler. While the two bodyguards, if they did not look brave at least looked much less like a pair of cowardly criminals. And Her Highness! She looked positively pleased!

Mr. Murphy wondered if - and was ashamed to put the hope into words, but he stole a look down at his legs, half hoping to see them transformed into a fine, athletic shape. But all he could see was his old, stained pair of blue trousers, frayed at the bottoms, and his shabby brown boots. He sighed deeply. He didn't deserve any changes, he knew.

"This is very wonderful!" the angel was saying, "and much more than I dared hope for you all, but we have to go on. We've such a long way to go and -" She turned away without completing what she had begun to say, and strode off ahead of them all. Mr. Murphy wondered what it was she had decided not to say. But he soon forgot the question in the effort of keeping up with her. The grey twilight still continued, without any day or night in it that anyone could notice, but it was certainly growing hotter, and the grey, desert-like ground more and more barren. There were no more bushes. Only sand and rocks. And then only sand.

Sweat poured down Mr. Murphy's face, and into his eyes, and down his back. Beside him the chef stumbled along as if he was in a trance. Now and then one of the others would call out to the angel, "Please, please, can we rest a minute!" But the angel seemed to go faster, calling out encouragements. Suddenly she called out over her shoulder. "Hurry, hurry! If you see anything, don't believe it - the shadows are here again!"

Mr. Murphy paid no attention. It was all he could do to keep on walking. He wanted to tear off his jacket and his old trousers, but even that effort was too much. Just one foot in front of the other, wiping the sweat out of his eyes with his fingers. And then he saw it - away to the left. A pub, unmistakably a lovely, cool looking public house, nice and old fashioned and welcoming, with beer and whiskey advertisements along its front, and a fat landlord in an apron standing in the doorway. He even recognised him. Mr. Dillon, always good for a pint or two on the slate, and a whiskey and a ham sandwich.

The word "ham" set off a momentary echo of unpleasantness in Mr. Murphy's mind, but he could no longer remember why it should. He broke into a stumbling run, away from the others. But then they were following him, all except the angel, who was crying after them "No! No!" Mr. Murphy could see a great barrel of stout in front of him, a large glass full of it, with a foaming, creamy head. The landlord smiling, welcoming, the sound of familiar, happy voices coming from inside, talking about bets, and racing and football and the stupidities and malice of women. He could feel the glass in his hand, the foaming head of stout almost against his parched lips, when he saw the shadow. Black, nothing. A hole in the air. Beckoning him.

And the dreadful thing was he didn't care. If only he could have the pint in his hand, feel its coolness flow down his throat. And another. And another. Until he could forget everything else.

There was a swift rush of black and brown, and Fido had swept the glass from his hand and was between him and the shadow, and was diving into it, barking and snarling defiance. It was Mr. Murphy's turn to cry "No! No!" He seized Fido by his great white feathery tail and hauled him back from the yawning emptiness. He even saw for a moment what Fido was seeing, a shining pool of clear water. Then they were in a heap together on the ground. And alone.

There was no one else there at all. No angel. No chef. No panther. No parrot. No one. All of them vanished, along with the public house. Where had they gone?

Mr. Murphy searched the horizon. Flat sand. Nothing. Fido stood beside him, seeming equally bewildered. They had saved each other, but - How - how could it have happened? It was all too obvious what had happened. The shadows had caught them. Whatever each of them had seen, they had believed it was real, as Mr. Murphy had, and Fido had. And like Mr. Murphy, he had ignored the angel's warning -

She could have told us a bit stronger Mr. Murphy thought bitterly. The state we were all in, how could we have known? But for Fido - and but for me Fido would be gone too - and much good its going to do us to have saved each other, all alone together in the desert. I don't know where we are, or where we're going, or how, far it is, or how to get there. Where had the angel gone? How had she got lost? Surely she hadn't gone and believed something that wasn't there?

Mr. Murphy felt a rush of superiority. Even the angel! At least we're still here, he told Fido, rubbing Fido's silky head. Good dog! Fido wagged his tail, slowly, but with no confidence in the movement, as if he was doing it simply to please Mr. Murphy.

"What'll we do now?" Mr. Murphy asked him, for the sake of saying something and hearing a human voice, even if it was only his own. Stay where they were in the hope that - that someone would come back? The angel would suddenly reappear? He turned round, trying to make out the direction they had been going in. But every direction looked the same. Except that far in the distance he saw a movement. Someone. Walking towards him. The angel? It must be the angel! And he began waving his arms and calling out to her. "Here! We're here?"

But it was not the angel. It was a little girl. About six years old. with fair hair almost hidden under the dust, and her face very thin, and her eyes with great blue shadows under them, and a ragged dress. She came towards him slowly. "Daddy!" she said. And then she was no longer there at all. Mr. Murphy fell onto his knees on the hard sand and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh! oh! oh!" he cried. "Oh! oh! oh!" when he took his hands away from his eyes again he did not know which would be worse, that the little girl should come back again or not. And then he saw another figure moving towards him - he no longer wanted to know who it was. He knew. She came towards him as slowly as the little girl had done, her steps tired and dragging, her head bent down. Her hair was no longer blonde, but grey, not only with the dust, nor even with age. Just with sorrow. And tiredness. It was Blondy.

"Hullo, Jamey! she said in a low voice. "How are you?" "Oh! oh! oh!" Mr. Murphy whispered, not able to say anything else. He thought he would die all over again, and then wished he could. Wished he could vanish out of her sight. But there was no reproach in

her eyes. "I loved you Jamey," she was saying. "Always. Did you see her?" He hid his eyes again, and when he opened them she too was gone.

He waited, knowing who must come next. He saw her far, far away, creeping towards him on her stick, bent double, her steps so frail it was a wonder she could walk, even so slowly. Only when she was very near to him she managed to raise her head, tilting forward as if she was about to fall, supported on her stick.

"Jamey son!" she whispered, "are you well, child? Are you happy?"

He wanted to cry "No! I'm lost and miserable and wretched, and worse still for seeing you the way you are, the way I made you." But he bit the words back and said "Yes, ma, I'm very well."

"Thank God," she breathed. "You were all there ever was for me, Jamey. All I ever wanted was to see you well and happy. Do you say your prayers still?"

"Not as often as I should, ma." "Oh say them, Jamey! And mean them. You have to pray very hard. And give things, too. Words aren't enough."

"I know that, ma. I know it now."

"Thank God," she said again in a stronger voice. And her body straightened, and her face grew young and all of her was young, and more beautiful than anyone Mr. Murphy had ever seen, except the angel. There was a white flame of light all round her, and a baby in her arms. Him. As a tiny baby, and his mother singing to him very low and soft. "My son, my darling."

Then she too was gone, and there was only her old, worn stick lying on the ground. He picked it up and held it against him. It seemed to move, to fit its self into his hand, and it was no longer an old woman's stick but a strong staff, as tall as himself, for a strong man to walk with, to help him over rough ground. Beside him Fido had grown small again, a little dog with a waving white tail like a flag, or a feather. Looking up at Mr. Murphy with an anxious expression, that said. "I'm only a little dog after all. I thought I was big, but I'm not really. Please look after me, and I'll try and look after you as well as I can."

## Chapter 4

Mr. Murphy and Fido had gone a long way before something occurred to Mr. Murphy. He hadn't forgotten the angel, and all the others, but he was acting exactly as if he had. Where were they? Why hadn't he looked for them, tried to find them, see if there was any way he could help them? Instead of being so absorbed in his own self-disgust that he hadn't spared them a thought. He stopped walking and looked back the way he and the little dog had just come. Go back? What else was there to do? He started to, but Fido ran in front of him, across and across his path, barking, as if he was trying to make him turn round again.

"We've got to go back" Mr. Murphy told him, "it's the only thing" - but Fido continued to bark at him and almost trip him up. And not only Fido. The stick, the long staff in his hand, seemed to be trying to do the same thing, as if it too was telling him something, if only he could understand. He stopped again. "Well?" he said to Fido. "What's up?" The little dog barked three sharp yelping barks and ran behind Mr. Murphy and away to a spot that seemed to Mr. Murphy exactly like any other in that horrible desert. Fido began to dig with his paws as if a bone was buried there.

But it was not a bone. It was a large, flat, roundish stone, buried under no more than an inch or so of sand. Mr. Murphy looked at it. There had been stones a plenty earlier on in their journey, thousands of them scattered everywhere across the desert. But for a long while now there had been none. Unless they were all buried just under the surface, like this one?

He began to scratch about with the end of his staff in the sand. But there was only sand. Here. There. Further on. Just sand. Fido's rock seemed to be special? The little dog had by now dug a deep hole and his head and shoulders seemed to be actually under the stone. A moment later only his tail was still visible, and then with a yelp and a sliding tumbling sandy sort of noise he was gone, leaving Mr. Murphy staring at a hole under the edge of the flat stone.

"Fido?" Mr. Murphy called. "Fido? Come back!" But for an answer there were distant yelps and barks, Mr. Murphy could not tell if they were of excitement or terror, more sliding, scrambling noises and then it was difficult to hear anything at all. Mr. Murphy bent down and put his head into the hole. A dry, dusty, sandy, stale smell. "Fido! Where are you?" No answer. Mr. Murphy pushed himself further into the hole. His shoulders were under the stone, he pressed and pushed and wriggled. The stone shifted, he was halfway in, feeling ahead of him with his left hand, unable to see anything. Further still, pulling his staff after him, and suddenly he too was falling, sliding head first, sand falling all round him, bumping down a steep slope.

Steeper and steeper. He tried to dig into the sand with his fingers and toes, felt it give way in another soft rush like a small avalanche, gave a yell of terror and landed head first in a pile of sand. For a minute or two he lay winded, wondering had he broken his neck. It was dark as pitch. The stale smell was worse. "Fido? Fido?" He managed to climb to his knees, and his feet. Where was the staff? He felt round for it, got onto his hands and knees and crawled slowly round. He touched it, picked it up, and to his amazement saw a faint glow of light at each end of it. Like luminous paint, only stronger. He could actually see by it. Not much, but a little.

It must have been like that since he got it, but above in the twilight desert, he hadn't noticed it. Here, it showed him a small circle of the fallen sand round his feet, and at the other end, the space just in front of him as he held the staff upright. He pointed it this way and that. He was in a tunnel, narrow, with smooth walls and a sloping floor. No longer as steep as the one down which he had just fallen, but distinctly going down further into the earth. Above him there seemed the faintest glimmer of greyness in the black hole, down which he had fallen. Could he climb back up?

He was tempted for a second to try, almost set his hands to looking for handholds. But Fido - He pointed his staff into the darkness. "Fido?" He began to walk slowly along and down the tunnel. After a few steps it began getting narrower and lower. And steeper. The ground under his feet was no longer sand, but rock with a sort of slithery skin of sand over it. His head touched the roof, his shoulders brushed the sides. He held the tip of the staff as far ahead of him as he could. Steeper and steeper. Even narrower and lower. And in the next instant his feet slipped and he was falling again, feet first this time, sliding down a rocky chute like a child's slide in a playground. On and on. Down and down.

Every second he expected to find himself falling sheer into space. He was bruised all over, he couldn't breathe, there was a strange new smell, and he was falling in empty space. He screamed, lost his hold on the staff, and in the light it gave as it fell beside him he saw the glisten down below of what looked like water. An instant later it was water and he was in it, with a tremendous splash, and sinking, not able to breathe, flailing his arms, water in his mouth, choking.

He came to the surface and saw his staff floating near him. He grabbed hold of it, and with a frantic sort of dog paddle held the staff up like a torch to see where he was. He could see nothing except water. Black. Oily. Smelly. And moving. He could scarcely tell how he knew it was moving because he was moving with it. But it was. Quite fast, like a river. He held the staff up as high as he could, and side ways as far as he could. Nothing. Just the black surface of the water. Until not quite under the surface and not quite breaking it, he saw something move.

His heart climbed into his throat and seemed to choke him. His mind filled with ideas of crocodiles. He tried to draw up his legs. Tried to swim. But he was afraid to take his eyes off that hump in the water moving towards him. He was paralysed with terror. He tried to say prayers and couldn't remember a single word. All he could say was "Ma! Help me!" as if he was a small child.

Then it was on him. He felt the jaws close round him. It was going to bite off his legs. "Ma!" Rough. Scaly. Horrible. Wet. And stiff. Bumping against him but not biting him. He thought he was going to faint, wasn't it - alive? He summoned all his courage and touched it with his free hand, holding up his staff over it. It was a log of wood, a tree trunk. When he touched it, it rolled over slowly and he nearly yelled again in terror that it really was alive, only pretending to be a tree trunk. But that was what it was. He got a grip on it, rested his weight on top of it. It sank a little deeper into the water, but not much.

He had a boat! Or a very rough sort of imitation of one. At least he wouldn't drown so long as he held on to it. He tried to climb on top of it but it rolled over and threw him off. How had it got there, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands of feet



underground? But he had heard of underground rivers, and rivers up above that disappeared underground. One of those could have carried the log with it.

He felt, not braver, but a little less frightened. Now and then he thought of crocodiles again, and water snakes, and slimy things that might wrap themselves round his legs, but there seemed to be nothing alive down there except himself. And Fido? Every now and then he called out the little dog's name, but nothing answered him. How could he still be alive? Although "alive" was a funny word to use when really they were all of them dead.

But were they dead? He didn't feel it. He felt more alive than he ever had back "there". Ten times more alive. Could one be dead again? And if one did die a second time, what would happen? Would he find himself still alive, but somewhere else? He remembered the angel saying that they were on the edge of Nowhere, and had to reach Somewhere. Was that how one did it? Dying again? He shivered, thinking of that sudden, horrible pain as he fell down with a heart attack in his little attic room in Dublin.

He also shivered with the cold. The water had been almost warm at first. Now it had grown icy. Really icy. The surface had a bluey white sheen on it, and splintered like thin glass as the log floated against it. Mr. Murphy touched it. It was ice. Thicker and thicker. Chunks and lumps of ice floating all round him. Then solid ice. The log bumped against an edge of ice too thick to break and began to be drawn under it. For a moment Mr. Murphy began to be drawn under the ice too, felt the current suck him along, his legs under the ice and only his arms hooked over the edge holding him safe.

It took a huge effort to pull himself free of the water. Inch by inch, the current not wanting to let him go. He had dropped the staff on the ice in front of him and by its glow he could see he was in an ice cave. He got his chest onto the surface of the ice. Clawed his way forward, and was lying spread-eagled, exhausted but safe - if "safe" meant anything down here except not being pulled under the ice and drowned.

"I'll get pneumonia" he thought. Wet through. Half frozen. Surrounded by ice. Ice walls. Ice floor. Ice roof he wouldn't wonder, only it was out of sight. Icy drips fell on him like rain. Or snow, rather. It was snow. It couldn't be, but it was. Snowing. He scrambled up, using the staff to help him, his legs were so stiff. Snow! Underground? But maybe he wasn't underground any longer? The air seemed somehow fresher. And then all other thoughts went out of his head as he saw, by the light of the staff, paw prints. In the skim of snow fallen on the ice. Paw prints? Fido!

"Fido?" He yelled. "It's me! I'm coming! Where are you?" And faint, faint, faint, far ahead, he thought he heard a bark. He began following the trail of Fido's paws. The snow was deeper and the marks more definite, four little toes in a neat pattern, going on and on in a straight line, over hummocks of ice and across flat stretches of snow. Mr. Murphy broke into a stumbling, stiff legged run, slipping and sliding, falling, faster and faster. "Fido!"

The answering barks became clearer. "Fido!" And the little dog was there, poised on a hump of ice, waving his tail furiously, yelping a delighted welcome. "Come boy come here!" But Fido stayed where he was, his head turned back to greet Mr. Murphy, but every line of his body eager to go on.

"Where? Where are we going?" Mr. Murphy asked him. For answer, Fido ran ahead. Mr. Murphy followed. He could feel a kind of breeze on his cheek. He could no longer see the ice walls, only the rough ice under foot. Was he out in the open air? How? And it was lighter. The ice its self seemed to be glowing, or reflecting light. He could see quite a long way ahead. Fido's barks were growing more and more frantic. Mr. Murphy hurried as best he could. The ice stretched ahead of him and on all sides, jagged and endless - except - except - ahead of him a wall of darkness. Of – nothingness. The same darkness he had seen again and again in the desert, when the shadows had attacked them, and when - when everyone had disappeared, except himself and Fido, saving one another.

He slowed his steps. "Fido! Look out!" But Fido was racing ahead. He could see him like a small dark arrow flying towards the black wall. It stretched as far as Mr. Murphy could see to left and right and as high as he could see. "No! Fido!" he shouted, but Fido was deaf to everything. What was he doing? What was he seeing? And in the next instant he was gone, into the blackness, his yelps and barks of excitement cut off as if he had never existed.

Mr. Murphy stood still. Shadows detached themselves from the black wall, came prowling forward. "Stay away from me?" Mr. Murphy yelled in fright. He held up his staff and the glowing ends seemed to drive the shadows back. But they made a circle surrounding Mr. Murphy, close at his back, further off in front, drawing away from him as he held out the staff towards them and closing in again as soon as he turned in another direction.

The only thing was to go back the way he had come. The wall of darkness cut off any hope of going on. This time Fido must have disappeared forever. Or had he? Was he in there somehow? Still - still alive? Mr. Murphy swallowed. He looked at the blackness of the, wall and felt his very heart and insides turn to ice with fear. Worse than any fear he had ever experienced. His legs refused to move. He was going to faint. But somehow he forced himself forward towards the wall. The shadows came with him, closer and closer round him,

"Fido!" he croaked. "Fido!" Was there an answering bark? "Fido?" The wall was a few steps ahead of him. The shadows so close round him he could reach out and touch them. He grasped his staff in both hands and shook it at the wall like a weapon. "Fido!"

The wall seemed to open - a narrow door creaking ajar. A stench came out of it, like rotten meat, and Mr. Murphy gasped in horror as it caught in his throat. He wanted to get sick and leaned for support on his staff. The shadows drew in closer, closer, grasping at him. "Fido!" Mr. Murphy whispered, and there seemed to be a tiny yelp answering him from deep in the blackness. Mr. Murphy lifted his staff, gripped it hard and plunged into the opening. The stench surrounded him, cut off his breath. He felt himself disappearing, losing all feeling in his body. He was disappearing, becoming nothing, falling into Nowhere.

Then he was through, still holding the staff. He was in the heart of the darkness but his staff was blazing like a torch, creating a circle, a globe of light all round him. "Fido!" And there was Fido, crouching and shivering, showing his little teeth at the dark, his tail bright. As soon as he saw Mr. Murphy coming he bounded forward, his tail like a white flame in the dark showing the way. On and on. The darkness so empty there was no air in it to breathe. Mr. Murphy's lungs were bursting. Only the stench, the dark, the emptiness.

Staggering with the effort of moving through nothing, unable to breathe, to drag in even a whisper of air. If he fell down he would be lost forever, he knew it. On and on and on. For seconds? Minutes? Hours? He couldn't tell, couldn't think. Until at the very moment he knew he was finished, the darkness ended, he was taking great gulps of air, dizzy with breathing.

He sat down and found he was sitting on grass. There was sky overhead. Trees in the distance. He thought he could hear birds, insects, "I'm alive!" he told himself wonderingly, "we're alive!" as Fido came and jumped up to lick his face. There was no sign of the darkness, the black wall, the shadows. There was no real sunlight, but after the grey desert and the cave and the underground river and the ice fields, this was brightness.

But Fido had caught his sleeve in his teeth and was dragging at him, his expression saying as clear as words "Come on! Hurry! We've more to do yet!"

"The angel?" Mr. Murphy said. "The others? Are you telling me you know where they are?" Fido barked in a frenzy of urgency. Mr. Murphy staggered to his feet. He was so tired he could have slept for a week. "Couldn't we rest just for a bit?" Bark, bark, bark for answer. Fido let go of Mr. Murphy's old coat and dashed forward. There was a low ridge in front of them and beyond that the tops of trees. A wood. No. As Mr. Murphy climbed the ridge he saw the trees stretch out ahead of him far into the hazy distance. A forest. The biggest forest he had ever seen.

Fido ran down the far side of the ridge and vanished among the trees. Mr. Murphy heard him barking and then the barking turning into frantic yelps of excitement. Mr. Murphy tried to run and couldn't. All he could manage was a kind of stumbling trot. He was among the trees - great oaks and beeches, beech must and old brown leaves underfoot, soft and smelling of mould and rich earth. The next instant the parrot was flying towards him, squawking and shrieking. "The tramp! Here's the tramp!"

Mr. Murphy was too tired - and in his heart too pleased to see the parrot - to resent being called a tramp.

"And the mongrel!" screeched the parrot.

"He's not a mongrel!" Mr. Murphy said, stung this time beyond restraint. "He's a fine dog!"

The parrot ignored him and did loops and victory rolls in the air between two trees. "Did you see me? Looping the loop?"

The next instant everyone was greeting Mr. Murphy as if he was their dearest friend. The chef. The companion. The bodyguards. The butler. The chauffeur. The Cavaliere. The little maid Anna. All surrounding him, asking him where he had been, shaking his hand. Fido leapt round them in wild circles barking. Finally Her Highness came slowly forward and said "So, you've arrived at last?" as if she really had been waiting for him and hoping he would come. She still looked her age but her face had changed, and it was possible to see how beautiful she must have been as a girl. And for a while after that until pride had turned her into a gargoyle.

"Let's go!" shrieked the parrot. But Mr. Murphy was looking round for the angel, and the panther. Her Highness guessed what he was wondering and laid a bony hand on his arm - an arm she wouldn't have touched with thick gloves on when they first met.

"They are not with us," she said sadly. "We had to leave them behind." "Leave them - ?" Mr. Murphy began. "We had to! She ordered us to. That was the bargain she made with the darkness," the Princess said.

"And you let her do that?" Mr. Murphy cried with such scorn that he might as well have slapped Her Highness across the face. Her Highness bent her head so humbly that the gesture alone reproached Mr. Murphy. What did he know about what had happened, how it happened?

"We were in the power of the shadows" she said gently "They said that we could go free if she and the panther agreed to stay as their prisoners. We all wanted to refuse, but she commanded us. She said that if she had been stronger and better none of us would have been captured — "

"And you believed that? Oh, how could you?" Mr. Murphy shook his head in anguish.

"No, we didn't believe it," Her Highness went on, "but she told us we had to go. I wanted to stay with her, but she said I must lead the others out of the darkness, not because I was better than they are -" she lowered her eyes in shame, "but because they are my people and I am responsible for them."

"And she - and she —" Mr. Murphy could not go on.

"In a cage!" The parrot squawked. "In the dark!" Mr. Murphy started. "Is that true?" Several of the others said, "Yes," varying degrees of embarrassment, and shame, and sadness in their voices.

"But - but -" Mr. Murphy was lost for words. How could the angel be in a cage? "And the panther is with her?"

"In another cage" they told him. "She said we must go, or everything we had all done so far would be wasted. At least we'd get Somewhere even if she and the panther didn't. We were to come here and wait for you, and then go on"

"Go on where?" Mr. Murphy asked bitterly. No one answered "And where is she?"

"Nowhere" Her Highness said.

"Well" said Mr. Murphy resolutely, "I don't care what any of you do, but I'm going there. And if I can't get her out of her cage I'll stay with her until - until -" He couldn't go on, and stood with the tears running down his cheeks."

They stood looking at him and then at one another. "She said -" one of the bodyguards began in a timid voice.

Mr. Murphy shook his staff at him. "I don't care what she said! I'm going back for her. Just tell me the way and you lot can go where you like."

"But we don't know the way," Her Highness said, wringing her hands. "And it's very dangerous," one of the bodyguards broke in. "Terribly dangerous," the other added.

"I know the way," the parrot screeched. "I know it! Follow me!" And it flew in a circle round a treetop before settling on a high branch and putting its head under its wing. The little maid stepped forward. "If - if Her Highness could spare me I'd - I'd like to come with you."

"And me too" the chauffeur said, his voice as melancholy as ever, but his expression almost happy as if a burden had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders.

"I think it's very rash," the Cavaliere said, "very rash, but - but if - if - " and he looked at Her Highness for guidance. She in turn looked at the bodyguards, and her companion, and the chef, and the butler. "I am responsible for you all. I will not tell anyone to go or not to go. You must each choose as you think best."

There was a silence, and a shuffling of feet, until one by one each of them lifted their heads and said "Yes. We'll go." Her Highness nodded. "Good. I shall come too, very gladly. We have obeyed her and done as she commanded. Now we are free to do as we think right." She bowed to Mr. Murphy. "And you shall lead us because it is your suggestion."

Mr. Murphy felt suddenly and utterly lost. How could he lead them? When he didn't so much as know the way? That parrot - did it really know it? But it seemed to be fast asleep. Fido! He looked round for the little dog. Fido had known the way here, He had found the stone buried in the desert. He had known, seemed to know exactly where to go all along.

"Fido!" he called "where are you?" The little dog came bounding out from among the trees, stood for a moment looking at them and went running back again. Mr. Murphy set off to follow him, leaving it to the others whether to come with him or not, he was still so angry with them for abandoning the angel. The parrot woke up with a squawk as they all went by under his tree. "Where we going?" he screeched, and answered himself with another screech, "Nowhere!"

## Chapter 5

Without Fido to guide him he would never have found the entrance, and he could have passed it in the forest a thousand times without realising it was the entrance. It was a huge, ancient oak tree, that had been split by lightning who knew how long ago, and now had a great dark opening in its trunk, that ran from the ground up to higher than Mr. Murphy's head. Fido stopped in front of it and barked, and looked knowingly at Mr. Murphy and barked again, three short sharp barks that said, "Here it is!" before he disappeared inside. Mr. Murphy followed him, cautiously, expecting to find himself in a narrow space with maybe a hole at his feet.

But there was nothing. Not a hole. Not a narrow space Not a hollow tree. Nothing. Suddenly, in that one step, he was Nowhere. Not black. Not pitch black. But nothing. Not hot. Not cold. Not empty space. Nothing at all, and he was in it. He didn't know if he was falling, or moving up or sideways or forwards or backwards. All he could see was Fido's tail and the glowing ends of his own staff. Without those three tiny points of light he would not have been sure that he still existed. As to whether the others had followed him into the tree he had no way of knowing, and indeed no great concern. All his energy was going into holding himself together.

Because he seemed to be coming apart. Whatever it is that holds one's body - or anything else for that matter - whatever it is that holds things together seemed not to exist anymore. His legs not only seemed to be falling off, and his arms, and his head, every bit of him seemed to want to float away from every other bit, like a handful of snow disintegrating in a basin of warm water.

And it hurt. Not the way toothache hurts, or bruises. But an empty hurt. The pain of becoming nothing, of losing everything. And he knew that the only hope he had of staying together, remaining as Mr. Murphy, was to concentrate on Fido's tail and the two ends of his staff. And if the others had followed him that was their only hope too. He didn't know how he knew it, but he did. The pain became so bad that he wanted to scream, but there was no sound. There was no air. No breathing. Nothing. If being in the wall of darkness had seemed awful, terrifying, there were no words to describe how he felt now.

In fact the worst of it was that he didn't feel. To have been able to feel a pain, a real physical pain, would have been wonderful in comparison with this nothingness. No feelings. And no hope. No warmth. No love. No - his heart was bursting into tiny pieces. He had no hands, no feet, no head - oh! oh! oh! All he had was despair. Until a voice spoke to him out of the emptiness, saying, "You can go back. Forget the angel. Forget the panther. You can do nothing for them. No one can. They are lost forever. But you can save yourselves. Go back to the tree. Go on through the forest. There will be a guide to bring you Somewhere. Think of the sunlight. Happiness. Friends. Blue skies. The sea. Oh, I beg you as your friend, go back now, before it's too late."

Such a warm, kind, gentle voice! So sensible. To go back. To be - to be whole again - not to suffer this agony of nothingness and nowhere and not existing. To walk on firm ground, breathe air, see! No one could help the angel, it was true. Or the panther. He felt himself hesitating.

"Look at the ends of your staff!" another voice whispered. They were fading, going out. "No!" he tried to shout, although no sound came. "I'm going on!" And the two ends of his staff brightened, glowed fiercely like burning coals. And in the next instant his feet touched solid ground. His staff flamed like a torch, like two torches, one at each end. He could see. And what he saw was horrible. Two iron cages suspended in the air, high up over his head.

They hung from iron chains that ran up into the darkness. And in them crouched the angel and the panther; with so little space to crouch in they could not move.

"Oh my dear!" the angel whispered to him, "you should not have come! And you have brought the others!"

"We were ashamed," someone said, and there they were behind him. But for all they could do to help the prisoners they might as well never have come. They could not reach the cages, let alone break the chains, or bend open the bars. They stood staring up at the angel and the panther. The kind gentle voice that had urged them to go back spoke again, this time with a coldness of triumph.

"There are cages for all of you! If you have not freed them by the time I come back with your cages, you'll stay here with me for Never. Never, Never, Never!" There was a horrible, cruel, jeering laugh out of Nowhere.

"Who are you?" Mr. Murphy demanded.

"No one" the answer came, echoing in the dark, "No one no one no one", the voice fading, disappearing. They looked at one another by the light of Mr. Murphy's burning staff, horror on all their faces. "Go at once," begged the angel, "go at once, it's still not too late for you."

"I mean to stay here," Mr. Murphy said, his legs trembling under him. It took effort enough to keep his voice steady. "We'll stay too" the others said, one by one. Even the bodyguards. Even the butler, and the Cavaliere, and the chef. And Her Highness's voice the firmest of all. "Nothing is quite so bad" she said, "if we are all together".

"Oh please go!" the angel pleaded, and the panther gave a strange sort of growl that seemed to beg them to go too. And in that moment the parrot came flying through the light of the torches, doing dramatic aerobatics, and squawking, "I know about cages! Horrible cages!"

He flew up to the angel's cage and clung to the bars with his claws. His beak worked at something on the outside of the cage, gave a screech of delight and the door of the cage flew open, and the angel was able to push her arms and head out. "You'll have to catch me when I jump down" she said, her voice sounding almost frightened, and excited at the same time. The parrot was already opening the door of the panther's cage. The angel jumped into a dozen waiting arms, including Mr. Murphy's, and as he helped to hold her and set her on her feet he felt such a burst of love and pride and humility and embarrassment that he would have fallen down himself if the others all round him had not held him up by the sheer pressure of their bodies.

Then it was the panther's turn. "Quick!" the angel whispered. "We must hurry!" They began to run, the panther and Mr. Murphy with his torch leading them, and Fido with his bright tail. They had ground under their feet now, a steep upward slope. And they could see or not quite see - but sense where they were going, and feel they were getting near to the tree up above ground and freedom. Fido was almost there when the voice came back - a great rush of blackness, nothingness.

"No! no! no!" The voice cried, "you can't go, you can't, you mustn't!"

"Why not?" the angel called out to it. "Do you mean to try to hold us again?"

"I shall be alone!" the voice wailed, "all alone with no one else."

Fido was already at the tree's inside, Mr. Murphy and the panther close behind him. The angel touched Mr. Murphy's shoulder to keep him back. "Oh no one!" she called again, "come with us, we'll help you to become someone." But the voice only wailed in agony. "No! no! no! never, never - it hurts too much to be someone - but I'm so alone."

"I'll stay with you," the angel cried out. "I'll stay with you for ever, until you change your mind. I'll be your friend." "Not for ever, no! no!" the voice came whispering. "Only for never. Only for never. Stay with me for never."

"I can't do that," the angel said. "It would be against the Law". And to Mr. Murphy's astonishment she began to grow tall, and taller and taller, until her head was lost to sight far, far above him and all he could see was the white flash of her hands as she reached into the darkness. There was a scream of fury, of agony, of pleading, and then she was her own height again beside Mr. Murphy, and holding something tight in her arms that was struggling furiously to get free.

"Quick; Quick! Through the tree!" she urged Mr. Murphy, and when he hesitated in astonishment she pushed in front of him, whatever it was in her arms fighting and kicking at her and wailing in terror. Mr. Murphy followed her and all the others behind him, crowding round her in the forest clearing in front of the oak tree to see what she was holding, even more interested in that than in their escape to freedom.

The angel was holding a small child. It was quiet now, no longer fighting, staring at them all in wonder, as if it had never seen people before.

"Who are you?" Mr. Murphy asked her - "her" since she seemed to be a little girl. The child looked away from him, not answering.

"She used to be No one. Now she will be Someone," the angel said. "So she must have a name. What shall we call you?"

The child stayed silent, her mouth obstinate. She was very dirty and dressed in rags as dirty as herself. "Very well," the angel said. "I shall give you your name. Amanda, which means loving. Do you like it?"

The child stared at her and looked away, stubborn as a stone. As for being called "loving" Mr. Murphy thought he had never seen any child look less loving in all his life, and



he had seen some right little ruffians and gurrriers in his time. But this one! Her hair was so dirty it was impossible to tell what colour it really was.

"We must find a stream and wash you," the angel said. The child looked as if it had never heard of washing, and Mr. Murphy thought it probably hadn't. He had not been in favour of too many baths himself, he had always felt they were unhealthy for a grown man - but this child certainly needed one. She actually smelt. She stank. But the angel picked her up and held her as if she truly loved her, and led them all away to look for a stream.

They found one soon enough, and Her Highness held the child more or less still while the angel and Anna the little maid washed her hair and face and hands and as much of the rest of her as they could reach with bundles of leaves soaked in water. They dried her with handfuls of grass and rubbed her hair until it shone, but there was nothing they could do about her rags, and nothing at all about her sullen expression.

"Come" the angel said. "Hold my hand." The child put her hands behind her back. At that moment the panther came up and breathed in her face. She put up her hands to protect herself and the angel caught one hand and Her Highness the other. "Now we'll walk along and you can tell us all about yourself and we'll tell you all about ourselves." The little girl stayed mute as a fish, but she let her hands remain captive in theirs, and Her Highness began telling her about being a Princess with five palaces and then having nothing at all except a nightgown.

"This one," Her Highness said, holding out the ragged skirt of it, "It's almost as ragged as yours."

The chef came and told her about being a chef, and the butler told her about being a butler, and the parrot flew round and told her that there was nothing in the world so wonderful as being a parrot who could not only fly but loop the loop. He showed her how it was done, and in case she missed it the first time, he did it again. Everyone made a pleasant fuss of her and little by little she relaxed, and even laughed once when the Cavaliere was explaining to her how important it was to bow correctly and that there was a proper bow according to the rank of the person you were bowing to.

"I know, I know!" she laughed. "I used to be a Queen!" The Cavaliere stood stock still with amazement, and then gave her a most complicated bow, sweeping off an imaginary hat and making a kind of dance step, one foot behind the other and his body bent double. "Exactly!" cried the child, "Oh I remember so well!" She looked bewildered. "Where have I been since?"

"Nowhere," the angel said. "You came straight here to join us."

"Why of course, so I did!" And the child Amanda skipped a few steps exactly like any other child. And in the same instant of her skipping she was no longer in rags but in a brown tunic with a rope girdle, exactly like the angel's, only smaller of course. And from her hair being simply clean, or near enough to clean, it shone as golden as the angel's.

Mr. Murphy looked at the sudden transformation with something bordering on indignation. Forgiveness — yes. One ought to forgive of course, even someone who had behaved the way No one had - assuming that this was No one, which seemed the only possible explanation. But a new tunic! When all he had for himself was the same old blue

suit that was all holes and tears by now. Anyone would think it was her who'd led the rescue mission to save the angel!

As he was thinking it the angel turned to look at him and he had the feeling she knew exactly what was in his mind. He flushed beetroot red, from his bald patch to his shirt collar and from one ear to the other. In fact his ears were so hot with blushing that they seemed to be burning.

"Don't you think she suffered enough, being No one?" The angel didn't say it aloud, but he still heard her. He wanted to hide himself from her eyes, but she came towards him, and caught his hands. "Do you really want a new suit?"

"No, oh no," he mumbled. "Please, I didn't mean it - only - only she's so - she was so - if it was her, I mean."

"She was one of them," the angel said. "There are millions of them. You nearly became one, didn't you know?"

"Me?" he whispered. And knew it was true. Going Nowhere. Being Nothing. Wasting everything. Until there was nothing left. He wanted to kneel down and clasp the angel round her knees to beg for forgiveness. "Dear Mr. Murphy," she said, smiling, and bending forward she kissed him on the forehead. He blushed as beetroot red as before and longed to hide himself even more than before. "We'll camp soon," the angel announced. "We've all had a long journey." And soon they found a clearing in the forest and lay down to sleep.

During their next march the nature of the forest changed. Oak and beech gave way to pine trees. The air was crisper, and the ground rocky, with thin soil. They camped the next time on a high ridge from which they could see mountains, the peaks blue white with snow.

"We have to cross those," the angel said, pointing. And a silence fell on every one as they looked, and imagined the climb that lay ahead. But whatever they imagined it would be like, the reality was harder, and more dangerous. At first it was merely a steep climb, and even exhilarating, to be able to look back from a shoulder of rock and see how high up they were above the forest. There was thin, springy turf underfoot, and shallow mountain pools lying here and there like silver mirrors, and wild flowers like tiny stars, blue and red and yellow and purple.

But soon they were climbing over great grey rocks, and needed to use their hands as well as their feet, until they found themselves faced with a sheer cliff, up which they had to claw their way like flies on a window pane. Here and there the child Amanda had to be carried, and Fido given a push from behind, or dragged up by the scruff of his neck. Again and again someone called out that it was impossible - that they were stuck, and daren't move left or right, up or down. The poor companion, or the body guards, or the butler or the Cavaliere - then someone else would have to encourage them, show them hand holds, guide them where to put their feet next.

If I reach the top of this without falling off, I'll never complain about anything ever again, Mr., Murphy said. He had Fido under one arm and his face pressed against a sharp piece of rock. "Move your right foot a little bit up," the angel told him. "There's a ledge."

There was, and with an enormous gasp of relief he had both feet on flat rock. The ledge was only a few inches wide but it felt like the High Street after what he had been climbing just now. He even dared to look down - and nearly lost his hold on the rock above his head, and his grip on Fido. The forest looked like a flat carpet, thousands of feet below. Beyond it he thought he could see the grey desert. And if he were to fall he would go plunging through the air, down and down, until -

There was even worse to come. At the top of the cliff there was a long slope of loose stones. As soon as they set foot on it the stones began to slide, and they had to lie spread-eagled on the slope to avoid sliding down themselves and shooting over the edge of the cliff. Mr. Murphy felt his legs dangling over the edge before he stopped himself sliding, and in spite of the cold, sweat ran down his face like raindrops.

After the slope of loose stones came patches of ice, and a cold breeze to chill them into their bones. Until at last the angel called from far up ahead, "The top, we're at the top! There is the sea below!"

By "the top" the angel didn't mean the mountain peaks, which were still far above them, covered in ice and snow and impossible for anyone to climb unless they had ropes and climbing boots and ice axes and warm clothes. She meant a saddle of flat ground between two peaks where they could cross the range of mountains and go down the far side of them.

One by one they arrived there, catching their breath looking down at the sea far, far below, and then at one another the way people do when they've survived a great ordeal and feel proud of themselves and humble at the same time because it would only be by the skin of their teeth that they had succeeded, and they could have so easily failed. Mr. Murphy would have liked to put his arms round each and every one of them and hug them, and tell them that he loved them, he was so glad to be standing there safe and sound.

He no longer resented Amanda, who had been No-one, and had been given a new tunic in spite of it. Indeed her tunic was now as torn as his old suit, and not much better than the rags she had been wearing when the angel snatched her out of Nowhere. But her face was alive with excitement and triumph like everyone else's and suddenly she caught hold of the angel's hand and kissed it, and then Her Highness's hand, and Mr. Murphy found himself wishing she'd do the same to him.

Fido lay on his stomach with his paws stretched out before and behind and his tongue hanging out so far it nearly touched the ground. Even the panther seemed exhausted and lay on its side, its great black flank heaving with long breaths. The parrot was perched on a rock, its eyes shut. Parrots are not supposed to fly over mountains, and for the last part of the climb he had clung to the angel's shoulder and been carried.

They moved down off the saddle at last to be out of the cold breeze and the angel found a sheltered place where they could camp, if huddling down on a patch of grass between two huge rocks could be called camping. It became dark. There were no stars, but there was a feeling of nightfall about the darkness and Mr. Murphy no longer had the feeling that the shadows were there hidden in it.

"I showed them!" he said. And realised with a pang of loss that he no longer had his staff that his mother had given him. Where was it? He must have dropped it when the

climb became really difficult – so difficult he had not even noticed he no longer had it in his hand. But it had served its purpose. He lay propped up on his elbow thinking of his mother, and the blaze of beauty that had been his last sight of her, far back there in the desert. Would she ever come to him again?

"Amanda is going to sing a song," the angel was saying. She says it's a "thank you" song." Everyone stayed quiet and the little girl stood in the middle of their camp and began. It was a very childish voice, scarcely more than a whisper, but all her heart was in it, telling them how glad she was to be with them, and how grateful. Not for being rescued from Nowhere, and being No-one, because she had forgotten that as if it had never existed. Just for allowing her to be with them, and for loving her - and as she sang in her whispering little voice Mr. Murphy did love her. And he too forgot she had ever been No-one. Indeed, she never had been. For how can nothing and no-one and Nowhere ever be true? She and they had only thought it was true and when they stopped thinking it, it ceased to be true, and ever to have been true.

The song came to an end. Everyone clapped softly and Her Highness cuddled the child against her.

"Tomorrow we may reach the sea," the angel said, and it was the first time during all the journey that she had used the word "tomorrow", as if when they woke up it would really be dawn and morning, and the sun would be in the sky.

None of that happened, but the sky was brighter, and the slope down the mountain side was much easier than the climb up. There were no cliffs or slopes of loose stones. Only long valleys with turf underfoot, and the wild flowers, and here and there as they descended lower bushes of thyme and rosemary, fuchsia and Escalonia, Veronica and flowering currant, although indeed to Mr. Murphy, who had never had a garden, or visited the country much, they were just bushes with flowers on them.

The mountain became no more than foothills, gentle, grassy slopes running down towards the sea. They thought they could smell salt in the air, and the flat mirror of the sea's surface revealed itself to have ripples in it, long, slow waves breaking in white ribbons of foam on a yellow beach. They were among sand dunes, with a bitter-smelling creeping plant and rough sea grasses covering them. Four lines of dunes, and then, at long, long last down to the sea.

Amanda ran forward across the sand to paddle in the edge of the waves. Anna the little maid ran after her, half to make sure she was safe, and half to join her in paddling, because Anna was not really much more than a child herself. Everyone else followed, more slowly, but just as eagerly. Fido dashed into the water with joyous barks, and dashed out again when he found how wet it was. Mr. Murphy kicked off his old boots and let the cool lips of the water run over his feet and his ankles, and up to his knees. They all paddled, except the parrot and the panther. The parrot flew and swooped over the wave tops, and the panther sat on the beach, her golden eyes narrowed and sleepy.

There was a holiday air about everyone, a seaside holiday. All that was missing, Mr. Murphy thought, were buckets and spades and deck chairs and ice cream cones. And a bit of sunshine. He wondered idly why the angel had brought them there, and stared out to sea half expecting there to be little boats with white sails, and further out maybe a steamer.

But there was nothing except the endless slow, gentle roll of the low waves, and at their feet the ripple of foam up the dark wet sand.

"Shall we start?" the angel asked him, her hand on Amanda's thin little shoulder.

"Start? Start what?" he asked her.

"Why swimming, of course. We have to swim out there, to reach the other side."

He looked at her in disbelief, thinking she must be joking. The others had heard her and there were expressions of horror, or disbelief like Mr. Murphy's. "Out there? The other side? How? You can't mean it!

"I do mean it," the angel said. "We have to get to the other side, and the only one who can fly is the parrot." There was a depth of feeling in her voice as she said that, that struck Mr. Murphy to the heart. He thought of the wings she had had, and lost - lost because of him. He cleared his throat and said in a loud, confident voice that was the exact opposite of his true feelings, "Of course we can do it! We've managed everything else - we'll manage this just as well!"

The angel gave him a quick, grateful smile. "You'd better take off your suit," she told him. "You can't swim in it."

"Take off me suit?" he exclaimed in horror. All I've got under it is me shirt and - and - " he hesitated to say "me drawers". The angel smiled again.

"I shan't mind" she said and turned away to encourage someone else. Within a minute or two they were all knee deep and waist deep in the water. Mr. Murphy had expected the panther to hang back, but she was swimming before anyone else, paddling strongly with her great paws, the child Amanda clinging to the thick fur of her neck. Fido was beside Mr. Murphy, both of them swimming in much the same way, trying to keep their chins out of the water and terrified of it going up their noses. The parrot flew overhead squawking encouragement.

Mr. Murphy had begun swimming with his mind full of monsters - sharks in particular. But before long he was too tired to think of anything but how tired he was. He began to feel that it would be impossible to move his arms and legs much longer. He would have to stop, and if he didn't float he would sink and there would be nothing he could do about it. Fido was just as tired and paddled as close as he could to Mr. Murphy, hoping that Mr. Murphy might somehow, miraculously, lift him out of the water and carry him.

"I can't" Mr. Murphy gasped. "I can't go on myself and I - can't - carry - you -"

The angel was swimming towards them, looking tired herself. But as she came near to Fido she turned on her back and drew the little dog on top of her, holding him crouched on her breast. "Poor Fido!" she said and swam on her back with strong movements of her legs. One of the body guards, who had been born a fisherman's son and who swam like a fish himself, came and helped Mr. Murphy. "Turn on your back" he told him, and catching Mr. Murphy under the arms he towed him along.

The chauffeur was helping Her Highness, and the other bodyguard was helping the butler. The companion and Anna were helping the Cavaliere and the chef needed no one's help, swimming like a porpoise, now up and now down, and seeming to enjoy it.

Mr. Murphy was almost enjoying it too, until he noticed that the slow, long, low waves were becoming larger and faster, lifting them up very high and letting them slide down very low into the next trough, like a roller coaster. And it was getting dark. Very dark. He began to get more and more frightened. "Don't let go of me!" he called to the bodyguard, but in the next instant a bigger wave than ever tore him out of the bodyguard's grasp and he had to flail his arms to keep from sinking. Another wave lifted him, and broke over his head. His mouth and nose and eyes were full of water and he was tumbled head over heels, flung up and dropped down, choking and gasping. In the darkness he saw white foam, great plumes of it, breaking over what must be rocks.

A moment later he was flung against a rock, and trying to grip hold of it, until the next wave tore him away again. He shut his eyes in terror as the current swept him past the knife-edges and jagged points of black, streaming rocks. He was going to be smashed against them, broken to pieces. The parrot was screeching overhead, "Land ahoy! Belay there." And Mr. Murphy was lifted up on a wave and thrown onto a shelf of rock. He lay flat on his stomach, gasping, the water streaming off him, trying to find handholds so that the next wave would not be able to drag him off again. Whatever place this was it was better than being in the sea and drowning, or having his arms and legs and skull broken against the reef. But no more waves reached him. The sea grew calmer, A long way off he heard the rumbling sound of shingle being rolled and drawn at the sea's edge - which must mean a beach - must mean they had reached the other side, wherever that was, but he was too exhausted to think of trying to get to the beach, and had no way of telling what lay between it and where he was lying. He lay clinging to his rock and fell asleep as if he had indeed been hit on the head and knocked unconscious.

## Chapter 6

When he woke he had no idea in the world where he was. He had been having a nightmare, he knew, but all the details of it were jumbled up - a forest, swimming in a rough sea - lying on a wet rock - until he realized he was lying on a rock, and he had been swimming in the sea. He raised his head cautiously. It was bright daylight. More than bright. And the sky! The most brilliant blue sky he had ever seen. And in the sky a rainbow? For a moment he thought it must be a rainbow because what else could it be, even if there was no rain and no clouds? But rainbows have several soft, beautiful colours. And this - this whatever it was - had only two. Black. And a harsh, brilliant steel colour, not white and not silver, but just – like steel.

Yet it arched across the sky like a rainbow, and like a rainbow he couldn't quite tell how far off it was or where it began, or where it ended, except that the black part seemed nearest to him and the steel part further away, higher up along the arch and on into – not clouds but a silky, hazy mist that hid the rest of it.

He didn't know why it affected him as it did but his heart almost stopped as he saw it and his throat tightened and he could scarcely breathe. He felt he had never seen anything so wonderful or so strange, ever - not that he had seen all that many strange things before he met the angel. But since then he had seen things he couldn't have believed were possible – and now this! He knelt on the rock gazing at it, so entranced he didn't even bother to look closer round him to see where he was.

"Mr. Murphy! Mr. Murphy!" He came to himself again. The angel was standing on a shingled beach a good way off from him, calling him. All the others seemed to be with her and between him and them there was a flat, calm stretch of water, broken here and there by humps of black rock. Behind the angel was a low cliff, beyond which a green hillside rose quite sharply, making a dark line against the blazing blue sky. He waved his arms to show her where he was.

"I'm here! I'm here!"

They all waved and called out. He could hear Fido barking and see him jumping up and down beside the angel. Mr. Murphy stood up, but even before he looked to see how he could best scramble off his rock and reach them, he pointed at the rainbow, or whatever it was and shouted to the angel, "Look, behind you, what is it?"

They all turned round to look behind them, but obviously could see nothing strange, only the low cliff, that must cut off their view of the sky except directly over their heads and towards him. They turned back to him, calling questions but he didn't try to explain. He was already climbing down into the water. It was warm and shallow, and swimming a few strokes here, and stumbling chest deep there, over the rocky and sandy and stony bottom, he came close to them, and the beach, and was soon wading out to join them, and be greeted with cries of delight, and hugs, and barks from Fido, and screeches from the parrot perched on the angel's shoulders.

"What were you pointing at?" someone asked him, while the others were trying to tell him their own adventures, and how they had reached the shore in terror of being crushed against the rocks, and all the other things people long to tell everyone else when

they have been frightened almost out of their wits and have survived and are now safe. In answer to the question as to what he had been pointing at he could only shake his head and say he didn't know. It was something very strange in the sky. "Like a rainbow. Only it couldn't have been a rainbow because it was the wrong colour - really it wasn't a colour at all. Sort of black in one part - and - and it looked solid." He was beginning to wonder if he had really seen it or was simply remembering something from a dream he had been having before he was properly awake. But he noticed the angel looking at him with a strange expression, as if she knew what he had seen, and knew what it was. And he felt a heavy weight of anxiety bearing down on him all of a sudden, and the joy and brightness going out of the day.

"We'll see what it is when we get to the top of the cliff" she said, not meeting his eye, or anyone else's. She made herself busy with Amanda, combing her fingers through her hair, and straightening the remains of her tunic. "Is everyone ready?"

The cliff was easy enough to climb, and it was as well that it was, because they were all as stiff as boards after their enormous swim. Mr. Murphy had never known how many muscles he had and how badly each of them could ache, as he hauled himself up from one ledge to another. When he reached the top Her Highness and Anna and the two body guards were already there, gazing in awe and wonder at the extraordinary rainbow.

"It - it looks like a bridge!" Anna said.

"The rainbow bridge to Valhalla!" Her Highness exclaimed, "that only heroes could cross!" Her voice sounded excited. The others joined them, one or two at a time. Fido came scrambling over the edge of the cliff, and the panther followed with an easy, supple leap. The parrot flew overhead, screeching.

"Is it - a bridge?" Mr. Murphy asked the angel, already knowing the answer.

"Yes" the angel said. And to all of them. "It is the Sword Bridge, that we must all cross." She pointed. "There is the hilt. Black iron. And there is the blade, of steel. We should reach it by this evening and cross it tomorrow."

No one asked her any questions. They looked at one another fearfully, trying to imagine crossing such an enormous, unimaginably gigantic bridge. They began to walk towards it. Hour after hour - and they seemed to come no nearer to it. All day. There was no sun by which to tell the time, but the day brightened still more, until the sky was too dazzling to look at, and then it grew less bright, and became twilit and almost dark. The bridge was no longer visible, but it filled their thoughts, and that night when they had camped and he had fallen asleep, it filled Mr. Murphy's dreams. Valhalla. Heroes. How could one be a hero in one's shirt tails and underpants?

He woke several times in the dark, and heard some of the others stirring, or muttering in their sleep. He sensed the angel near him and that she was awake.

"Is it very hard to cross it?" he whispered. "I'm afraid it is," she whispered back to him. "But it has to be done. If only I still had those twelve promises that the bandits used as curses. It was this they were for. To give you all confidence, get you to trust me enough to go across safely."



He knew she was talking to herself more than to him, but nevertheless he felt a warm glow of pride that she was confiding in him. He wanted to say something to her to show his feelings, but he was too shy. What could he say to her, anyway? And about his own eight promises that he had wasted, and she was too kind to mention? "Go back to sleep," she whispered, and bent over him, or he thought she did, and the strangest sensation came to him that he was a baby, a few days, a few hours old and it was his mother bending over him. And then he was a young man and it was Blondy, smoothing his hair back from his forehead and saying, "Sleep now, my love," so gently that he could scarcely hear her.

He did sleep, and woke to the same brightness of yesterday. But this time there was no need for him to stir in order to see the bridge. He was lying on his back, and as he opened his eyes it was there above him, tremendous, frightening, wonderful and awful. The vast black hilt of the sword was like an iron tower, reaching up into the sky, he could not guess how many hundreds of feet, maybe a thousand. And beyond it, curving like the blade of a gigantic sabre, was the bridge itself, burnished steel, brilliant as diamonds, its edge turned towards the blue blaze of the sky.

They were all waking, looking at it, gasping in wonder. Only the parrot seemed unimpressed. The angel stood with her back to it, facing them. "There is no need to be afraid," she said. "You have all been very brave all through our journey. You came and saved me when you had every excuse to leave me behind -"

Mr. Murphy wondered what would have happened if they had left her behind in the cage. What was quite certain was that they would not be here.

"Your Highness, will you go first, to show everyone how safe it is?" Two red spots showed on Her Highness's cheeks, whether of anxiety or pride it was impossible to tell. They all walked slowly towards the great black iron tower. It had steps cast into it, or welded on to it, Mr. Murphy saw, and Her Highness set her foot on the first of them, and grasped one higher up with both hands. She began to climb slowly, one step after another, until she seemed like a tiny doll climbing, far, far up.

"You see how easy it is?" the angel encouraged them. "Anna? Will you go next?" And then the chauffeur - and the Cavaliere - and the companion - all of them, one by one. The parrot flew round and round. The bodyguards puffed their way up, calling down to Mr. Murphy with a kind of swagger, "It's not hard at all."

"Not for you, maybe" Mr. Murphy said to himself. But he was carrying Fido. Behind him the angel was helping Amanda, holding her steady as she climbed. Mr. Murphy wondered for a moment how the panther would be able to climb the steps, which in reality were more like a ladder than real steps, but in the effort of balancing Fido under one arm while he used his other hand to climb he forgot about everything else.

The iron tower was vibrating as they climbed it, and swaying, until Mr. Murphy began first to feel dizzy and then seasick, if one can feel seasick when one is climbing a thousand or more feet into the air. A cold sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes, half blinding him, and stinging. He longed to wipe the sweat away, itched to do it, became frantic to do it, but he had no hand to spare. As it was he had to let go of one step in order to reach up and grip another, and for half a moment each time he was balanced with his feet on a narrow iron step and nothing to hold him against the swaying tower. If Fido

wriggled. If the tower swayed an inch too far. If he became even more seasick – and his free hand would find the next step and grip onto it and he would stop to catch his breath and try to see out of his sweat-stinging eyes. He was afraid to look down or up even if he could have seen properly. He could hear the sound of someone climbing a long way above him. How much further to the top? And then it would only be the top of the iron tower. The blade would still be to come. "Keep still," he begged Fido. "We're nearly there", although in fact he had no idea how far they still had to climb. Then the sounds above his head changed, became a kind of scrambling and grunting, followed by silence. Mr. Murphy risked a glance upwards. The ladder above him was empty. All he could see was the underside of an iron platform, or at least, that is what he imagined it must be. Twenty more rungs to climb. Fifteen. Five. He was beneath the platform, a narrow hole in it to climb through – and he was with the others, gasping at what they saw. The great blade of the bridge sprang from the centre of the platform, edge towards the sky - and the edge was like the edge of a real sword, razor sharp. There was no way on earth that anyone could even set foot on it, let alone walk on it. And it curved up and away into the blue immensity of the sky to lose its far end in a pearly, shimmering mist, a kind of heat haze.

"It isn't possible!" Mr. Murphy breathed. "No one can cross over on that!" Everything else they had done had been possible. All that was needed was endurance, and sometimes a little courage. Well, he thought modestly but honestly, now and then quite a lot of courage. But this! It wasn't a question of courage, just of the laws of nature. The first moment you set your foot on the edge of that blade it would cut your foot in half. And then if you - if you fell on it?

He looked down the way he had just climbed up. And saw to his horror that the steps seemed to have disappeared. Or else they had been constructed in such a way that you could see them when you were looking upwards, but not when you were looking down. Was that possible? He didn't know, but what was certain was that he couldn't see any steps now. His sea sickness was getting worse. The platform was swaying more than ever, and the blade of the bridge was making a terrible humming, thrumming sound as it vibrated.

The angel was touching him on the shoulder. "You came up the steps last," she was saying. "You can have the honour of going over the bridge first."

The honour? He wanted to get sick, no longer with mere sea sickness, but with terror. His stomach seemed to be churning, his legs shook and although he tried to say something, he couldn't. The angel was looking at him in a strange way. A trusting way. As much as to say, if you go first they'll follow. He wanted to tell her that he longed to be worthy of her trust, but what she was asking was impossible. She could see it was impossible.

But apparently she couldn't. Because she was an angel, and used to be able to fly, and so knew nothing about bridges? (Except that one shouldn't try to fly under them, he thought, with a kind of hysterical laugh caught somewhere in his throat, the way one does sometimes think of ridiculous things in the middle of terrors.)

Because she was an angel? Or because she knew? Knew that one could cross over if only - if only one had the courage to try? And if he refused? Somehow the idea of disappointing her was worse than that of having his feet sliced to bits on the sword bridge.

"Yes," he struggled to say, his throat barely working, "I'll go first." He left Fido for someone else to carry, if anyone really did try to follow him, and set his foot on the upturned edge of the blade. For a dreadful second he felt - he was sure he felt - the sharp steel bite into the sole of his foot, into the bones - and found he was walking on a smooth, broad surface. Springing and cool to his bare feet.

He turned round and asked the chef to give Fido up to him. "It's easy," he cried proudly, and with Fido in his arms like a trophy, he walked steadily forward, towards the mist. He looked down at the bridge, expecting to see a broad surface, like a pavement, because that was what it felt like, but with a clutch of fear again he could see nothing except that razor edge of steel blade. He seemed to be walking an inch or two above it, almost - almost floating above it. For a second he staggered, his foot sinking, touching the steel. The angel cried out in sharp alarm, "Keep on, Keep on walking!"

He made himself take another step and another. The invisible surface held him up, trembled and sprang under his feet. He clenched his teeth against his terror, went faster, concentrating his mind and his gaze on the mist ahead. It began to wreath its self round him and he realised it was moving, drifting up from below. It was smoke. There was a smell, faint at first, then stronger. Familiar. The stench of Nowhere. Sulphur. And rotten meat burning. The smoke was so thick he could no longer see where he was going. He hesitated, afraid that with the next step he would find himself falling, off the bridge into - whatever lay below.

He was afraid to look down and yet he had to. There was only the smoke. Thicker and thicker the further down it was. Then for a second there was a space in it between two greasy, dark coils and he was looking down into Nowhere. "Keep on walking!" the angel's voice reached him, faint, far behind him. The dizziness had come back, he couldn't walk, couldn't move. He was going to fall. Fido twitched in his arms, yelped and whimpered in fear, as if he knew what was about to happen, and Mr. Murphy forced himself to move, totter forward. The mist was so thick he could see nothing. At every step he expected to be over the edge and falling, falling. He might as well have been crossing the bridge with his eyes shut.

He did shut his eyes for a second, and when he opened them the mist seemed thinner, the stink from below not so horrible. He could see a glint of the blade far ahead. The curve of it seemed to be levelling out. A puff of wind made the mist swirl, thin out more. And he was beyond it, in sunlight. The sun! The sun! He felt its warmth on him, glanced up and saw its golden, blazing circle in the blue sky. How long had it been since he had last seen it? And truly he had never seen it as it was now, any more than he had seen such a sky - not even in films about the South Seas.

Blue and gold. And the silver brightness of the great blade. He almost ran with joy, on and on. He could see hills ahead, the far end of the bridge curving down towards green meadows. Noble trees scattered in parkland. He did run. Fido struggled in his arms and he set him down, knowing now that it was impossible to fall off the bridge. Fido scampered ahead of him, his white tail waving. Down the last slope of the bridge, onto soft grass, a wonderful scent of flowers all round him, a stream running.

He knelt by the stream and bathed his face. Fido lapped the water, and Mr. Murphy drank too. A phrase from Heaven knew where came into his head - the waters of Paradise. It couldn't be! Him? Here? He thought of the passport. Ten perfect souls! They had done it!

Done it! Someone else was kneeling beside him, and someone else again. One by one all of them kneeling on the bank of the little stream, catching up the water in the palms of their hands. Mr. Murphy looked round for the angel, and saw her standing behind him, smiling.

"We're here!" he said triumphantly. "Is this - it?" She shook her head. "Not yet." He stayed where he was, his mouth half open. He had never been able to tell exactly what the expressions of her face meant, and he couldn't now, but the sense of triumph died away in him. "Not - yet?" he asked her. She smiled encouragingly.

"It's not too much further. Come". She held out her hands to him, to take his as he got up. "You were very brave. Well done." He wanted to cry with embarrassment, and tried to find the right words to say, but he couldn't find any. "Come," she said again, and repeated it louder for the others.

"Where's the panther?" Mr. Murphy asked her suddenly, looking round, and counting that everyone was there.

"Gone ahead!" the parrot screeched. "Gone ahead!" But the panther couldn't have gone ahead, it had been behind him on the ground on the far side of the bridge.

"She has her own way of crossing" the angel said. "Don't worry about her, she'll be waiting for us."

They all got up from the stream, reluctantly, and began walking again. The meadows sloped upwards, but gently, and the air was so fine, so wonderful that walking was no effort. They seemed to grow younger with every step. Her Highness moved like a young girl, the chef like an athlete. Mr. Murphy felt as if he could run races, and strode along like a boy. He wanted to sing. They were on a mountain side, but not like the terrible mountains they had crossed long ago. Alpine pastures. Sweet grass. The air like champagne. Up and up. When he turned round to look behind and below them he could see the whole glittering immensity of the bridge, but all the land on the far side of it was hidden in clouds. And the bridge its self, had begun to seem smaller as they climbed, a toy bridge far, far, below them.

They came to the stream again, or a similar one, bubbling and rushing over rocks, not much more than a crystal strand of water falling and tumbling with a splashing sound like notes of music. Mr. Murphy saw it spilling over the edge of a flat stone in a miniature waterfall, and beside it a glint of gold.

It was a golden cup, chained to the rock beside a pool of water that must be the wellspring of the stream. The water bubbled up from below, fell with silver music over the stone lip, and the golden cup stood waiting. The angel took it and filled it with water.

"Drink" she said to Mr. Murphy, holding it out to him. But he shrank back.

"I'm - I'm not - not fit," he whispered. He didn't know why he said it, or what the cup was, or why he felt as he did. But he scarcely dared look at it, let alone drink from it. The angel held out the cup to Amanda and the child took it in both hands and drank, and as she drank she grew taller and even more beautiful in her ragged tunic, Her hair shone like the sunlight and she was no longer a child but a young woman, gentle and humble at the same time.

Her Highness drank next, and then Anna, and all of them. One by one. But Mr. Murphy still held back and he saw that the angel did not drink from the cup herself. She looked at him smiling, her eyes sad, and yet pleased. She didn't insist that he drank, but set the cup back on the stone. "We're nearly there," she said to them. "Look!" She pointed, but Mr. Murphy could see nothing, except what must be the top of the mountain, a strange, curving rim of bare rock, lifting above the meadow.

They climbed towards it, and it was further off than it had seemed. For the last of the climb they had to use their hands as well as their feet, scrambling and panting with the effort, and a strange feeling of urgency, of needing to hurry, of wanting to, of longing to see what lay beyond the sharp crest of the mountain top.

Amanda was first, and she stood up, stock still, her whole attitude expressing shock and wonder. Mr. Murphy climbed still faster, stood up beside her, and gasped in amazement. They were standing on the narrow edge of a volcano. Below them the red-hot lava bubbled and seethed. Smoke and steam rose up from it, the rocks under their feet were hot, almost burning. They were all standing in a line along the edge looking down into it - like - like a lake of fire, a vast, bubbling fiery cauldron of molten rock. The heat from it singed their hands and faces, and yet the sight was so wonderful they wanted to go on looking, even if it burned them.

"Who'll go first" the angel said.

"Go - first?" Mr. Murphy breathed. She couldn't mean it. He must have misheard her. But she was looking at him expectantly. "In - into - it?" He breathed. Except that he couldn't breathe. No! No! No! his body was crying. Not that! The angel came close to him, put her hand on his shoulder. "Take Fido with you. Don't be afraid."

Don't be afraid; of being burned alive? Of jumping into a furnace? Was she mad? After all they had been through? And at the same time he knew that he must. He had to give the others the example. The angel was lifting Fido up, putting him into Mr. Murphy's arms. The little dog was trembling, as if he knew what was going to happen and was as terrified as Mr. Murphy.

"Oh! oh! oh!" Mr. Murphy whispered. Took a firm grip of Fido. And jumped. The heat scorched him; he felt his hair, the bit he had left, flame on his head, his clothes burn, his body scorch and sear away from his bones. The pain was so terrible he couldn't shriek, couldn't think - He was in the fire, in the molten lava -

And there was no more pain, or the pain had become ecstasy, a surge of wild joy and wonder. He was made of fire, he was blazing like a burning torch, and he wanted it to go on forever. And in the next instant he was standing on a golden pavement, beside a balustrade made of crystal. A great staircase of crystal climbed up from where he was standing, and below the balustrade, a long way down, was a blue sea, and a lovely curve of golden sand.

Someone was beside him. Her Highness. He knew it was her, although she was changed from an old woman into a young girl. And the chef. And the Cavaliere. Anna. Amanda. The butler. The chauffeur. The bodyguards. The companion. And Fido. And the

parrot. Only those two had not changed. The parrot strutted along the crystal balustrade, his attitude saying clearly, "I didn't need to change."

The angel was with them. And down the crystal staircase the panther came gently padding towards them. "I told you she would be here," the angel said softly to Mr. Murphy. "Have you counted everyone?"

"Counted everyone?" He looked from her to the others, all standing by the balustrade, wonder on their faces. "D'you mean - is everyone here?" He did count them. One Two. Three. When he came to ten, as he counted Amanda he looked back at the angel, her meaning beginning to dawn on him. "The passport?" he whispered. "Ten perfect -?"

She nodded.

"You mean - " he whispered again. "You mean one of us -?"

"Yes". She said. "One of them won't be allowed in."

Amanda, he thought. It had been a mistake from the beginning. She had no right - he felt the angel looking at him. He turned to look at Amanda, standing beside Her Highness. How could she be so beautiful when only such a short while ago she had been -?

"Is it to be her?" the angel asked him. "It's your passport. It's for you to choose."

And he knew he couldn't. He hung his head. "She can have my place," he mumbled, his cheeks turning crimson. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right to ask such a thing of anyone, but since it had been asked -?

"Are you sure?" the angel whispered. "It's not too late to change your mind".

He shook his head. "No. No. I mean it."

"You may regret it. All you have to do is walk up those stairs ahead of her. I'll see she goes last."

"No!" he said, his voice firmer. "Let her go up."

The angel looked at him, her face unreadable. "You really mean it?"

He nodded, unable to speak, his heart was so full.

"Amanda!" the angel called out, "all of you! Go up the stairs. Someone is waiting for you." And without a backward glance they all began to move towards the crystal staircase. But suddenly Amanda turned towards the angel and Mr. Murphy and came and threw her arms round each of them, and kissed Mr. Murphy on the cheek. "I won't go up," she breathed to him. "How could I take your place?"

And it was Blondy looking at him, Blondy from long, long ago, a thousand times more beautiful than Blondy had ever been, and yet truly her. He clung to her, and kissed

her in return and pushed away from him. "Go!" he said urgently, "go on up! Ma'll be waiting for you, tell her - tell her I'm sorry and I love her and – and maybe I'll see her one day, if - if – go on."

She walked backwards to the foot of the staircase, her eyes full of tears. And the others were round him and the angel, kissing them and begging them to come too, each of them offering to stay behind.

"No, no" the angel kept saying. "You must go up. They are waiting for you." All of them crying, looking at them pleadingly. "Go on!" the angel commanded them.

They began to climb the stairs, higher and higher. Turning to wave, to call "Goodbye". Until Mr. Murphy and the angel were alone on the golden pavement with the panther and Fido. Suddenly the parrot came flying back down the crystal staircase, looping the loop as he came. He settled on the balustrade, and preened his feathers.

"What do we do now?" Mr. Murphy asked. The angel sat on the balustrade beside the parrot, and stroked its head with a fingertip.

"We go back," the angel said.

"Go back? To - "

She nodded.

"Where - where we started? Where - we found - them?" He pointed up the crystal staircase, but there was no longer anyone to be seen on it. It rose up into a haze of light and seemed to vanish. "I can't!" He thought. "Not all over again!"

"You can," the angel said gently. "We can." Fido barked, happy to be anywhere so long as he was with the angel and Mr. Murphy. The parrot stretched his wings. The panther yawned a great yawn, her eyes golden and emerald fire.

"Come," the angel said. "They'll be wondering if we'll ever come for them."

"Who will?" Mr. Murphy asked.

"Whoever it is". She led the way from the golden pavement to a gate in the balustrade, and down a narrow path towards the sea. But before they had climbed down very far the sea and the beach had disappeared, and when he looked back there was no balustrade. They were on a mountain path. Snow and ice and rocks. A cold wind blowing.

And yet - and yet - Mr. Murphy felt his heart lifting, growing young. "Oh angel!" he wanted to tell her. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere except here with you!" But he couldn't say it.

"There!" the angel said. "Look!" Far ahead of them, among the rocks, was a group of people, trying to shelter themselves against the wind. Huddled miserably together. They saw the angel and Mr. Murphy approaching and stood up to see them better and make out who they were.

"At last!" one of them called out. "Are you our guides? We've been waiting for you here for ever, freezing to death."

"We're here now," the angel told him, "Everything will be all right."

The parrot flew overhead doing victory rolls and screeching. "All right, everything will be all right?" Fido barked. Mr. Murphy looked round for the panther, but she was nowhere to be seen. Only a kitten, sitting on a rock and washing its face with its tiny paws.

The people they had come to find were surrounding them demanding information, their voices indignant. "To leave us here like this? It's monstrous? We're going to complain to the authorities!"

"And so you shall" the angel told them. "But first we must begin the journey." She turned to Mr. Murphy. "Take the kitten," she said, "and go on ahead, to show everyone the way."

### The End

