

## Chapter 20: Diamond Learns to Read

The question of the tall gentleman as to whether Diamond could read or not set his father thinking it was high time he could; and as soon as old Diamond was suppered and bedded, he began the task that very night. But it was not much of a task to Diamond, for his father took for his lesson-book those very rhymes his mother had picked up on the sea-shore; and as Diamond was not beginning too soon, he learned very fast indeed. Within a month he was able to spell out most of the verses for himself.

But he had never come upon the poem he thought he had heard his mother read from it that day. He had looked through and through the book several times after he knew the letters and a few words, fancying he could tell the look of it, but had always failed to find one more like it than another. So he wisely gave up the search till he could really read. Then he resolved to begin at the beginning, and read them all straight through. This took him nearly a fortnight. When he had almost reached the end, he came upon the following verses, which took his fancy much, although they were certainly not very like those he was in search of.

### Little Boy Blue

Little Boy Blue lost his way in a wood.

*Sing apples and cherries, roses and honey;*  
He said, "I would not go back if I could,  
*It's all so jolly and funny."*

He sang, "This wood is all my own,

*Apples and cherries, roses and honey;*  
So here I'll sit, like a king on my throne,  
*All so jolly and funny."*

A little snake crept out of the tree,

*Apples and cherries, roses and honey;*  
"Lie down at my feet, little snake," said he,  
*All so jolly and funny.*

A little bird sang in the tree overhead,

*Apples and cherries, roses and honey;*  
"Come and sing your song on my finger instead,  
*All so jolly and funny."*

The snake coiled up; and the bird flew down,  
And sang him the song of Birdie Brown.

Little Boy Blue found it tiresome to sit,  
And he thought he had better walk on a bit.

So up he got, his way to take,  
And he said, "Come along, little bird and snake."

And waves of snake o'er the damp leaves passed,  
And the snake went first and Birdie Brown last;

By Boy Blue's head, with flutter and dart,  
Flew Birdie Brown with its song in its heart.

He came where the apples grew red and sweet:  
"Tree, drop me an apple down at my feet."

He came where the cherries hung plump and red:  
"Come to my mouth, sweet kisses," he said.

And the boughs bow down, and the apples they dapple  
The grass, too many for him to grapple.

And the cheeriest cherries, with never a miss,  
Fall to his mouth, each a full-grown kiss.

He met a little brook singing a song.  
He said, "Little brook, you are going wrong.

"You must follow me, follow me, follow, I say  
Do as I tell you, and come this way."

And the song-singing, sing-songing forest brook  
Leaped from its bed and after him took,

Followed him, followed. And pale and wan,  
The dead leaves rustled as the water ran.

And every bird high up on the bough,  
And every creature low down below,

He called, and the creatures obeyed the call,  
Took their legs and their wings and followed him all;

Squirrels that carried their tails like a sack,  
Each on his own little humpy brown back;

Householder snails, and slugs all tails,  
And butterflies, flutterbies, ships all sails;

And weasels, and ousels, and mice, and larks,  
And owls, and rere-mice, and harkydarks,

All went running, and creeping, and flowing,  
After the merry boy fluttering and going;

The dappled fawns fawning, the fallow-deer following,  
The swallows and flies, flying and swallowing;

Cockchafers, henchafers, cockioli-birds,  
Cockroaches, henroaches, cuckoos in herds.

The spider forgot and followed him spinning,  
And lost all his thread from end to beginning.

The gay wasp forgot his rings and his waist,  
He never had made such undignified haste.

The dragon-flies melted to mist with their hurrying.  
The mole in his moleskins left his barrowing burrowing.

The bees went buzzing, so busy and beesy,  
And the midges in columns so upright and easy.

But Little Boy Blue was not content,  
Calling for followers still as he went,

Blowing his horn, and beating his drum,  
And crying aloud, "Come all of you, come!"

He said to the shadows, "Come after me;"  
And the shadows began to flicker and flee,

And they flew through the wood all flattering and fluttering,  
Over the dead leaves flickering and muttering.

And he said to the wind, "Come, follow; come, follow,  
With whistle and pipe, and rustle and hollo."

And the wind wound round at his desire,  
As if he had been the gold cock on the spire.

And the cock itself flew down from the church,  
And left the farmers all in the lurch.

They run and they fly, they creep and they come,  
Everything, everything, all and some.

The very trees they tugged at their roots,  
Only their feet were too fast in their boots,

After him leaning and straining and bending,  
As on through their boles he kept walking and wending,

Till out of the wood he burst on a lea,  
Shouting and calling, "Come after me!"

And then they rose up with a leafy hiss,  
And stood as if nothing had been amiss.

Little Boy Blue sat down on a stone,  
And the creatures came round him every one.

And he said to the clouds, "I want you there."  
And down they sank through the thin blue air.

And he said to the sunset far in the West,  
"Come here; I want you; I know best."

And the sunset came and stood up on the wold,  
And burned and glowed in purple and gold.

Then Little Boy Blue began to ponder:  
"What's to be done with them all, I wonder."

Then Little Boy Blue, he said, quite low,  
"What to do with you all I am sure I don't know."

Then the clouds clodded down till dismal it grew;  
The snake sneaked close; round Birdie Brown flew;

The brook sat up like a snake on its tail;  
And the wind came up with a *what-will-you* wail;

And all the creatures sat and stared;  
The mole opened his very eyes and glared;

And for rats and bats and the world and his wife,  
Little Boy Blue was afraid of his life.

Then Birdie Brown began to sing,  
And what he sang was the very thing:

"You have brought us all hither, Little Boy Blue,  
Pray what do you want us all to do?"

"Go away! go away!" said Little Boy Blue;  
"I'm sure I don't want you---get away---do."

"No, no; no, no; no, yes, and no, no,"  
Sang Birdie Brown, "it mustn't be so.

"We cannot for nothing come here, and away.  
Give us some work, or else we stay."

"Oh dear! and oh dear!" with sob and with sigh,  
Said Little Boy Blue, and began to cry.

But before he got far, he thought of a thing;  
And up he stood, and spoke like a king.

Why do you hustle and jostle and bother?  
Off with you all! Take me back to my mother."

The sunset stood at the gates of the west.  
"Follow *me*, follow *me*" came from Birdie Brown's breast.

"I am going that way as fast as I can,"  
Said the brook, as it sank and turned and ran.

Back to the woods fled the shadows like ghosts:  
"If we stay, we shall all be missed from our posts."

Said the wind with a voice that had changed its cheer,  
"I was just going there, when you brought me here."

"That's where I live," said the sack-backed squirrel,  
And he turned his sack with a swing and a swirl.

Said the cock of the spire, "His father's churchwarden."  
Said the brook running faster, "I run through his garden."

Said the mole, "Two hundred worms---there I caught 'em  
Last year, and I'm going again next autumn."

Said they all, "If that's where you want us to steer for,  
What in earth or in water did you bring us here for?"

"Never you mind," said Little Boy Blue;  
"That's what I tell you. If that you won't do,

"I'll get up at once, and go home without you.  
I think I will; I begin to doubt you."

He rose; and up rose the snake on its tail,  
And hissed three times, half a hiss, half a wail.

Little Boy Blue he tried to go past him;  
But wherever he turned, sat the snake and faced him.

"If you don't get out of my way," he said,  
"I tell you, snake, I will break your head."

The snake he neither would go nor come;  
So he hit him hard with the stick of his drum.

The snake fell down as if he were dead,  
And Little Boy Blue set his foot on his head.

And all the creatures they marched before him,  
And marshalled him home with a high cockorum.

And Birdie Brown sang Twirrrr twitter twirrrr twee---

*Apples and cherries, roses and honey;*  
Little Boy Blue has listened to me---  
All so jolly and funny.