

Pig Tales

by Shane Norwood

Being an unabashedly sentimental, frequently funny, lovingly lyrical, warmly whimsical and wistfully inspirational tale about how one little pig, aided by his magically memorable menagerie of mates, learns how to conquer his fears and overcome his shyness, discombobulate the despicable deceiving dastards, and emerge victorious from a hair raising series of vicissitudinous cliff hanging catastrophes, and give the perpetrators a right proper pasting. Something like that, anyway. Oh, and it has songs too! (And yes, I am aware that vicissitudinous is not a real word, but it should be. So there!)

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Chapter 1. Pigs, Pals, and Proposals.

One bright, sun-speckled afternoon, when the first airy breath of autumn had begun to whisper through the leaves, touching them with the palest hues of red and gold, Shortstraw and Swinestein, respectively the world's unluckiest and smartest pigs, were preparing to venture forth on a mission of great importance.

They had an appointment at the residence of the ancient and formidable old tusker Colonel Bristle, at which Shortstraw was to ask for the hand in marriage of the Colonel's radiant daughter, Porcetta.

Swinestein, being very particular about his appearance, stood before the mirror making final adjustments to his attire. He fussed with his cravat, smoothed out his breeches, removed an imaginary, offending piece of lint from his waistcoat front, and polished his round rimmed, silver spectacles with his roseate silk handkerchief, before carefully arranging it in his top pocket. Finally, with a flourish, he donned his white Panama hat, adroitly fitting his protruding ears through the holes cut through the brim for that very purpose. With his generous chops assuming a stern demeanor, he gave himself a final once over, and, satisfied at last with the fine figure of swinehood which gazed back at him, pronounced himself almost ready to proceed.

While all this fussing, and smoothing, and polishing was going on, the diminutive Shortstraw, who was no where near as particular about his appearance as Swinestein, or hardly particular at all, or in actual fact downright careless, and who had been ready for ages, was becoming impatient.

"My cause will not be in the least assisted if we are late! We are not invited for breakfast, you know," he said, in a querulous tone.

"Which means you are finding my sartorial preparations tiresome," replied Swinestein.

"Which means do you suppose there is any chance of you accidentally being ready to leave before tomorrow morning?"

"Patience, my boy, is a virtue you would do well to adopt." quoted the bigger pig, continuing to regard his image with an approving eye, "and a little spit and polish would not come amiss, either."

Short straw was extremely nervous about meeting with the fearsome Colonel Bristle, and was in any case, quite an emotional little pig. His snout began to quiver in frustration, and he looked as if he were about to cry.

Swinestein put a consoling arm around his shoulder.

"There, there," he said, "don't upset yourself, my anxious little friend. Come. Let us go forth together, and seek out the Colonel."

"I'm sorry, Swinestein," said Shortstraw, in a small voice, "but it's just that I'm so very concerned about our meeting, and you always take so long to get ready."

"Well, we pigs really must take care to present our selves at our best at all times you know," said Swinestein, as he bundled his considerable bulk through the door, "given the entirely undeserved reputation we have for slovenliness".

Shortstraw, having heard this argument innumerable times before, and knowing very well where it would lead, wisely decided let the matter drop, and so followed his friend out into the street without comment.

The two pigs shared a little cottage together, in a small country hamlet called Upper Scratchingmudwallow in the Mead. It was a very pleasant dwelling, made of big yellow stones, with a thatched roof, and a little red brick chimney. There was a fine lawn at the front, bordered by scarlet roses, whose, proud, gorgeous heads nodded to each other in the slight breeze, like gossiping ladies at a picnic. At the back, bordering another immaculate lawn, apple and plum trees bent their bows under the weight of their shiny fruit, and behind them, fat vegetables pushed their rich green tops through the dark soil, in neat rows.

The cottage had a patio at the front, and a verandah at the back, and was built facing the East so they were able to enjoy the sunshine all day long. Surrounded by a peach painted picket fence, it was the very last house on their lane, and set on a slight rise, affording them had an excellent view of the surrounding countryside. On one side, they were able to look down the windy cobbled road, into the village, and see the church spire. On two others they could see the deep dark woods, which stretched out into the distance, as far as the eye could see, and into which people hardly ever went. And finally, to the West, they had a view over rolling hills, and fields of waving wheat, to the horizon, where the land stopped abruptly at steep cliffs, and fell away to the sea.

“What an absolutely splendid day,” said Swinestein striding purposefully down the lane with his customary swagger.

“I would be enjoying it a lot more if we were on our way back,” replied Shortstraw, “I’m scared stiff. The Colonel is such a gruff old boar.”

“Now don’t you worry about the Colonel.” Swinestein said, “He’s a fine old gentleman.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” said the smaller pig “You are not the one who is trying to marry his daughter,”

“Courage, my friend, courage,” said Swinestein, “You know what they say, faint heart never won fair pig!”

The two friends continued in silence down the meandering country lane, Swinestein enjoying the scenery, and Shortstraw mentally rehearsing his speech to the Colonel. Swinestein was a most imposing beast, with the learned air and cultured manner of a professor, and he strolled along with measured tread and dignified gait, with his great round head held high, as if floated aloft by all the lofty ideas it contained. His vast shadow trailed behind him on the road, like the cloak of a Spanish grandee.

Shortstraw was small, and timid, and because his little legs were only half as long as those of Swinestein, he had to scuttle along, with his little trotters clicking on the path like a typewriter, in order to keep up with his friend. He was a shy, unassuming little pig, and quite ordinary in appearance, without any of the self-confidence or wisdom of his friend, but what he lacked in other ways he more than made up for with a most pleasant disposition. He was affable, and helpful, and was well liked by everybody, although all agreed that he was fortunate to have his good friend Swinestein to protect him, because he was the most accident prone animal that anyone knew, and was always getting into one scrape or another. Shortstraw and Porcetta had been sweethearts since they were piglets, and over the years, their friendship had blossomed into romance, and now they just loved to be together, and do the things that people in love, love to do, and that people who are not in love think are silly.

They could sit and talk together for hours about nothing at all, and Porcetta always laughed really hard at Shortstraw’s jokes, even when they weren’t very funny. She called him her ‘Strawby’, and he called her his ‘little Chopsie’, and sometimes they did it in front of other people, which made the other people cringe, but the two little pigs never noticed.

They liked to go for long walks in the spring, and pick wildflowers and mushrooms, and to sit on the roof of the cottage, and hold trotters, and watch the sun sink over the fields.

And on warm summer evenings they loved to sit by the pond, on the village green, and watch the reflection of the moon in the water, and always kept the ducks awake with their giggling. And in the depths of winter, they liked to bundle up in warm clothes and skate on the frozen pond, and laugh at their white breath, coming out like puffs of steam when they spoke, and eat the warm current buns that Porcetta made. All the other animals in the village knew they were in love, and everyone thought they were an ideal couple.

Everyone, that is, except the fierce Colonel Bristle, was an old fashioned, and severe old boar, who didn't hold a very high opinion of Shortstraw, whom he thought unkempt, and frivolous, and unlikely to amount to anything. Porcetta knew that her father would forbid her to see Shortstraw anymore if he found out about their romance, so they kept it a secret from him, even though it meant that they were not able to see each other as often as they would have liked. All their friends in the village joined in the conspiracy, including Lady Bristle, Porcetta's mother, who liked Shortstraw, and didn't care who amounted to what as long as her daughter was happy. In fact it had been Lady Bristle who had first alerted Shortstraw about the intentions of Rudy Rootsuffle.

Rudy Rootsuffle was a pompous and arrogant little pig, with tiny, nasty, squinty, eyes, and sticky out teeth, who wore his hair slicked down flat with perfumed pomade, and made horrible little snorting noises when he laughed, like someone with a bad cold blowing their nose. He came from a very wealthy family, and thought that his money made him better than everybody else, and he was obnoxious to everyone he felt superior to, which was just about everyone. Lately, he had begun to call at the Colonel's house in the evenings, bringing chocolates for Lady Bristle, and brandy for the Colonel, and flowers for Porcetta, who he always asked to sit with, on the garden porch.

The Colonel didn't really like Rudy Rootsuffle, but he did like brandy, and being a very practical pig, was pleased that Porcetta was being courted by a pig of substance. Lady Bristle, on the other hand, did not like chocolates, which she thought were sticky and slippery and smelled funny, which is exactly what she thought of Rudy Rootsuffle. She was appalled at the thought of her daughter ending up married to the insufferable little beast, and was determined to do everything in her power to prevent it.

When she had told Shortstraw about Rudy Rootsuffle, and his sly approaches, Shortstraw had gone immediately to his friend Swinestein for advice.

"Oh dear, Swinestein," he had cried, "Whatever shall I do?"

"Shortstraw," his friend had replied, "you must take the bull by the horns, or in this case, the boar by the tusks."

"You mean I have to fight the Colonel?" Shortstraw had gasped, mortified at even the very thought.

"No, no, no," Swinestein had answered, "it's just a figure of speech. I mean you must go at once to the Colonel, and announce your intentions".

"That's almost as bad as fighting him" Shortstraw had said, weakly, "he hates me!"

"Of course he doesn't hate you, you silly, no one hates you. He just doesn't know you, and doesn't realize what a sterling fellow you are. I am telling you, my friend, it's the only way. Come let us prepare ourselves. I shall accompany you, and give you moral support"

"Yyyou mean we have to go NOW!" Shortstraw had said, horrified.

"Now, immediately, at once, this very instant, post haste, tout suite, without delay, without further ado, there is not a moment to lose."

"Oh my goodness!" Shortstraw had declared, "What a petrifying proposition."

"I do believe you mean petrifying proposal, old boy." Swinestein had said, laughing, "Now, come along, let us prepare."

That conversation had taken place that very morning, and now as they walked together down the lane, Shortstraw felt as if moths and mice were dancing round and round in his stomach, wearing Wellington boots, and his legs felt like wiggly jelly. They followed the path across the green, past a small bubbly fountain that gurgled into a duck pond, where a stately flotilla of emerald green drakes sailed in a slow circle among the floating leaves and feathers. The drakes kept dipping their bills underwater, and bobbing upside down to display their bright bottoms to the coterie of admiring ducks who were doing their washing in the shallows, and laying it on the grassy bank to dry.

“Afternoon ducks,” said Swinestein, in an affable voice, doffing his hat with a theatrical gesture.

The ducks stopped admiring the drake’s bright bottoms, and stared at them. The drakes stopped showing off their bottoms, and joined in the staring.

“We know you,” said one of the ducks, wagging a wing feather at Shortstraw.

“You’re the moonlight giggler,” added another.

“Who always keeps us awake,” said a third.

“And not just us,” the first duck said, sniggering into her wing and nudging her companion.

“I saw you kiss her on the cheek, cheeky.” another announced, causing all the ducks to erupt into laughter, clacking their beaks.

Shortstraw’s face had turned bright red, and he was staring down at his trotters in an agony of embarrassment.

“Now then, ladies,” said Swinestein, smiling broadly, and replacing his hat, “a little decorum, if you please.”

And, so saying, he took Shortstraw by the arm, and led his rosy-cheeked little friend off across the green.

On the other side of the green, the path rose steeply, and on either side were big imposing houses, and stately mansions, which got bigger and more imposing and more stately as they climbed, until finally they came to the gate of a mansion which was the biggest, and most imposing, and stateliest of all.

“This is it,” said Swinestein, standing before the huge iron gate.

“Oh dear,” said Shortstraw, drooping his shoulders, and hanging his head.

On the front of the gate was a massive brass knocker, in the shape of a bull’s head, which Swinestein grasped and pounded firmly against the gate three times. Clang! Clang! Clang! it went loudly, the somber sound echoing down the cobbled hill. This was one clang too many for the already frightened Shortstraw, and his nerve deserted him.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” he said, quickly, and turned as if to run away.

“What have you got under your coat, hairs or feathers?” Demanded Swinestein, sternly, grabbing the back of Shortstraw’s collar, “Come back here.”

Just then, they heard labored footsteps behind the gate, followed by the noise of a heavy latch being lifted, and the gate began to swing open with a sinister creak.

“Oh dear, too late!” said Shortstraw

“Good afternoon Colonel,” said Swinestein.

“Gentlemen,” came the reply, in a voice so deep and rumbly that it made Shortstraw’s ribs vibrate, and he gazed fearfully up to see the intimidating face of the Colonel peering down at him through the open gate with one cold eye. The Colonel’s other eye was covered

with a black, piratical eye patch. Shortstraw looked at the enormous, stern, scarred, visage of the white whiskered old boar, and his knees began to tremble.

“Gggggood aafternoon, Sssssir,” he stuttered.

Colonel Bristle led them to his study, which had tall sash windows looking out onto a tidy garden, and which was filled to overflowing with thousands of books. Rows and rows of books on shelves all around the walls, books on a huge polished oak desk, books on chairs, and books on the floor. Books of all kinds, some in foreign languages, some very old and fusty, some bound in cloth and in leather, with brass edges, some opened, and some with bookmarks in them. Also on the desk was a large antique globe, from which all the colors had faded, and from which the North Pole had been quite worn away by all the spinning, and turning this way and that. Taking up almost the whole of one wall was an ornate, framed atlas, with tiny flags sticking all over it. In one corner were four heavy, worn, leather chairs, smelling of age and polish, set around a low stout table, next to which was a trolley containing all manner of coloured bottles, in a bewildering number of different shapes and sizes.

The Colonel bade them sit in the chairs, and selecting a deep amber bottle from the trolley, filled three glasses.

“Brandy?” He said to Shortstraw, handing him a glass “You look as if you need it.”

Handing a glass to Swinestein, he eased himself into his own chair, and fixed Shortstraw with his piercing eye.

“Thank you sir.” said Shortstraw, who didn’t really drink brandy but was too afraid to say so.

“It looks like you are very busy,” he continued, “I hope we didn’t come at an inconvenient time. We can always.....”

“Memoirs. India and all that, you know.” interrupted the Colonel, “Now then, what’s all this nonsense about you wanting to marry my Porcetta?”

Summoning all his resolve, Shortstraw stood up, and in as firm a voice as he could muster, said

“Yes sir, I love your daughter, and I have come to ask you for her hand in marriage”

“Now, why do you suppose I would allow my daughter to marry a fellow like you,” said the Colonel, sharply, peering intently at the little pig with his fierce eye.

“Why look at you! You look as if you were raised in a pig sty.”

“Well, actually, I was” said Shortstraw, meekly.

“I’m sorry, but it is quite out of the question,” The Colonel continued, “Porcetta has been all but promised to someone, and is to be married this very Sunday, on the village green, assuming I agree terms with the groom’s father, Mr. Graspus Rootsuffle, of Rootsuffle Roads, whom I shall be meeting for dinner this Saturday evening.”

At this news, all the blood drained from poor Shortstraw’s face. He sat back heavily into his chair, and big fat tears welled up in the corners of his eyes.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” he sniffed.

“There there, never mind.” said Swinestein, consolingly, standing up and draining his glass. “Come along, there’s a good chap.”

“Thank you for the brandy, and for your time, sir,” he said to the Colonel, somewhat coldly, feeling very sorry for his friend.

Just at that moment, the door to the study opened, and in walked Porcetta, accompanied by her mother. She was wearing a lacy dress with yellow polka dots, and had a yellow scarf tied around her ears, with a red rose displayed in it, and was just the most perfect, pretty

little plump picture of a pig that you ever saw. She rushed over to Shortstraw, and, seeing him sobbing, pulled the ribbon from her hair, and began to wipe away his tears with it.

“Whatever is the matter?” She asked, and turned to look at the Colonel.

“Father, what have you been doing to him you horrid old meanie?”

“I have simply been explaining my dear, that is quite out of the question for this young chap to marry you. A, because he is entirely unsuitable as a suitor, and B, because, subject to my discussion with Graspus Rootsuffle, on Saturday evening, you are to marry Rudy Rootsuffle, this coming Sunday.”

“Well I don’t want to marry that silly Rudy,” cried Porcetta, stamping her trotter, “he speaks funny, and he wears perfume. I love Shortstraw.”

And at this, she burst into floods of tears.

Shortstraw now took the ribbon from her, and began to dry her eyes, and he put his arm round her heaving, roundy little shoulders.

Lady Bristle stepped forward, a deep frown on her normally chubby and cheerful countenance.

“Must we go through with this, my dear?” she asked of the Colonel, “The poor dears are obviously in love.”

“This love business is all very well, my dear” replied the Colonel “But we shan’t be here for ever, you know, and Porcetta will need someone who can take care of her when we are gone. I very much doubt that this young fellow is up to the task. That is why I’m considering the marriage with this Rootsuffle chappy. He’s from a very good family you know.”

“I don’t care about good families,” said Lady Bristle, her voice beginning to crack, “I just want my little girl to be happy!”

And SHE burst into floods of tears.

“Good grief!” Said the exasperated old boar, “I can’t be doing with all this bursting into floods of tears nonsense. Look here, I don’t especially care for this Rudy fellow myself, but one must think of the future.”

“Colonel,” began Swinestein, who had been pondering the situation while all this bursting into floods of tears tears had been going on. “If you would permit me to intercede on behalf of my distressed friend, suppose he could prove to you in some way that you have underestimated him, would you be prepared to reconsider?”

“Why, whatever do you mean, Swinestein? Reconsider what?”

“Well sir, with all due respect, I understand that the reason you won’t allow Porcetta to marry Shortstraw, is that you don’t consider Shortstraw to be the kind of pig who would be able to take care of her. Am I correct?”

“Well, in a word, yes,” replied the Colonel, a deep frown etched on his stern features.

“And you don’t have anything personal against Shortstraw, other than you don’t think he is very resourceful?”

“No indeed,” replied the Colonel, “he strikes me as a personable enough fellow”

“Well then, sir” continued Swinestein, “if Shortstraw were able to prove to you that he is a much better and more capable pig than you now believe, someone who is worthy of respect, and well qualified to take care of Porcetta when you are no longer with us, would you be prepared to change your mind?”

“Well, it would be very short notice,” replied the Colonel, “but nothing is engraved in stone, as it were. I suppose I might consider it, if the young fellow proved himself, just to keep everyone happy, and stop all this bursting into floods of tears all over the place. Fellow can’t concentrate with it you know.”

“Why then, sir” continued Swinestein, “Don’t you set my friend a test, perhaps some difficult task to accomplish? Let’s say before Saturday. And if he manages it within the allotted time, you could give him your consent.”

The room became silent as the Colonel stood and strode over to the globe, and rested his trotter upon the North Pole, twirling the world, gently, too and fro. He stared out of the window, with a far away look in his one shining eye. The others looked at each other, nervously, while Colonel Bristle pondered his decision. Shortstraw held his breath. He knew his future happiness depended upon the Colonel’s next words. Finally, he spoke.

“Well, this is all highly irregular, you know,” he said, a devilish grin momentarily revealing his gnarled tusks, “but I have always enjoyed a bit of a challenge myself. Why, back in my younger days I

He paused, remembering Lady Bristle, and coughed.

“Ahh Hmnn, yes, well, never mind that,” he continued, resuming his former stern expression. “For the sake of harmony, I am prepared to accept. I shall consult my library in order to devise a suitable examination. Now then, young Shortstraw, you come and see me tomorrow morning, early, and I shall tell you what task you are to perform. In the meantime, I would appreciate it if everybody would kindly stop sniveling, and allow me to continue with my memoirs.”

Lady Bristle stopped sniveling, and giving Swinestein a huge secret wink, said good day, and led Porcetta, who was no longer sniveling but who was definitely sniffing, out of the room. Porcetta gave Shortstraw a small, shy, tearful smile, and a little wave of her trotter as she left.

The two friends thanked the Colonel as he walked them to the gate, and saw them out into the street.

“Early tomorrow, Shortstraw,” he said, closing the gate behind them.

Shortstraw looked miserable as they slowly made their way down the hill.

“Don’t worry, my friend,” said Swinestein, in a comforting tone, “all will be well. You’ll see.”

“I hope so,” said Shortstraw, sniffing.

The two pigs arose early the following morning, while the cocks were still crowing, and had steaming mugs of tea, and hot cakes with butter. Then they fussed and flapped and fidgeted, and pressed and primped and polished for a whole hour, trying to get Shortstraw to look presentable. But the task was almost impossible, because no matter how much they fussed and flapped and fidgeted, and pressed and primped and polished, Shortstraw still looked like he had just fallen off a bicycle into a fishpond. His clothes just absolutely refused to cooperate. His tie kept untying itself, his trousers unpressed themselves on purpose, and his collar flapped about like a butterfly in a breeze. His shirt deliberately removed itself from the band of his trousers, and hung down over his backside like a Sunday wash. Finally, even Swinestein had to admit defeat.

“Oh well,” he said, “that’s the best we can do I’m afraid. Just as well the Colonel has only got one eye. Well, off you go”

“You mean by myself?” said Shortstraw, aghast, horrified at the thought of facing the Colonel alone.

“But, of course.” replied Swinestein, firmly, “You must show Colonel Bristle that you can stand on your own two trotters!”

And he ushered his reluctant friend out of the door and through the gate of the little peach painted picket fence, and watched, as the small hesitant figure slowly disappeared down the lane.

“Ah, my poor little friend,” he sighed to himself.

In the Colonel’s study, surrounded by the books and maps, Shortstraw, sat in one of the old leather chairs, with a steaming cup of tea in front of him that his little trotters were shaking too much to allow him to drink.

Opposite the frightened little pig sat the Colonel, fixing Shortstraw with a stare from his one fierce eye that seemed pierce him like an arrow. He listened intently as, with a profound air of gravity, the Colonel lectured him sternly on responsibility, and duty, and the seriousness of marriage, and how young people were innocent of the ways of the world, and why important decisions had to be made for them by people who were older and wiser. Every time the Colonel made a point Shortstraw would nod his head and stammer,

“Yyyyes Ssssir.”

“Now, of course I want my daughter to be happy, you understand,” the Colonel was saying, “and she is obviously very fond of you, but I’m afraid you just don’t seem like the kind of chap who has what it will take to care for her, and protect her, and provide for her when I am gone. Now, for the sake of harmony, and out of respect for the wishes of my wife, and what Porcetta believes she wants, although, I don’t think she is old enough to know what she wants, I am prepared to give you the opportunity to prove yourself. A pig needs to be brave, and resourceful, and determined, if he is to be successful in life. Now, young sir, are you familiar with the twelve labors of Porcules?”

“Nnnno Ssssir.” Shortstraw stuttered in reply.

“Humph,” snorted the Colonel, “doesn’t surprise me! Well, Porcules was a pig from ancient mythology, a tremendously powerful fellow, who was set twelve tasks to perform, which he did. Now, because of the time factor I’m only going to give you four. I give you my word as an officer and a gentleman that if you are able to successfully complete this assignment, before my appointment with Graspus Rootsnuuffle, on Saturday evening, I will give you my consent, and inform the Rootsnuuffles of my decision. But I give you fair warning. It will not be easy. It will not be easy at all, no indeed. You will need every ounce of pighood you can muster.”

And here, the Colonel paused, with an inquisitive look on his fearsome visage.

“I say,” he continued, “do you smell something funny? Something sickly sweet, and unpleasant, like cheap perfume?”

“Nnnno Ssssir,” replied Shortstraw, too intimidated to smell anything.

“Oh well, never mind,” said the Colonel, dismissing it from his mind, “now listen very carefully. Here is what you are to do.”

And little Shortstraw sat, the color draining from his face again, his heart sinking further with every word, as the severe old boar outlined the tasks he was set.

And, all the while, outside the study door, listening intently, one beady, squinty little eye pressed against the keyhole, was Rudy Rootsnuuffle!

Swinestein went back into the kitchen and collected a big, fat, pink teapot, and some big, fat, pink mugs, and picked up the newspaper ‘The Evening Barnyard’, from where it had been pushed through the letterbox, and putting them all on a tray, went to sit out in the garden, where there were two canvas chairs, one large and one small, and a little round table, under a big blue and white striped parasol.

And there he sat, reading his paper, enjoying his tea, and the morning sunshine, and the smell of the flowers, and the relaxing buzzing of the bees as they hovered about collecting the pollen. Presently, he put down his paper, and gazed up at the beautiful blue sky, with just a handful of fluffy, white, cotton wool clouds, floating serenely past.

“Aaaah,” he said to himself, “Such peace.”

“Daydreaming, Swinestein old boy?” came a voice from over the fence.

Swinestein looked up, and was pleased to see his friend, Doctor Snoutington Drool, the hound, leaning on the fence. He was a jovial black Labrador, and also the village physician, and was quite advanced in years, so that the hair around his muzzle was beginning to turn gray. Doctor Snoutington Drool, or Doc Drool, as his friends called him, could always be relied upon in a crisis, and was very well respected in the community. He and Swinestein had been friends for a long time.

“Ah, the good Doctor D.” cried Swinestein, “come in, come in, have a cup of tea.”

“Love one.” said Doc Drool, taking the seat next to Swinestein’s, “Where’s young Shortstraw? Still in bed eh?”

“Better if he was I’m afraid,” replied Swinestein, sadly.

“What’s the problem?” asked the dog, a worried frown furrowing his furry brow.

The pig poured his friend a cup of tea and explained to him all about Porcetta, and the Colonel, and Rudy Rootsuffle, and where Shortstraw was.

Just as he had finished explaining, a long, large head, with a bushy black mane came protruding over the fence, its lips bared in a huge toothy grin.

“Any of that tea spare?” said the owner of the long, large head and the bushy black mane, who was a sturdy little piebald pony all the way from the Shetland Isles. Being a Shetland pony, he was very small for a horse, really not much bigger than Swinestein, but was renowned for his courage, and his prodigious strength.

“Ah, Angus Macanimal,” greeted Swinestein, pleased to see another good friend, “hop in, and have a cuppa.”

Angus obligingly hopped in, and was given a cup of tea, and listened gravely to the tale of Shortstraw’s sad dilemma.

And just as Swinestein had finished telling the story for the second time, a lithe, elegant, figure came slinking along the top of the fence.

“Tea for sree and none for me?” said the newcomer, who was a very fine white Persian pussycat from Paris, with peculiar pronunciation, named Mademoiselle Madeleine La Belle, but who everyone called Maddy Belly, for short, because her name was such a mouthful.

“Please join us Maddy,” said Swinestein, giving her a cup of tea, and beginning the story all over again.

And just as Swinestein had finished telling the story for the third time, the sad, hunched little figure of Shortstraw came shuffling down the garden path, with enormous teardrops rolling off the end of his snout and falling on to the grass like a leaking hosepipe.

All the friends stood at once, and ran to him. Helping him to the table, they sat him in the small chair, and giving him a cup of tea, waited for him to recover enough to tell them what had happened.

Swinestein prompted him.

“The Colonel hasn’t changed his mind?” he enquired in a concerned voice.

Shortstraw took a big gulp of his tea.

“No, no he hasn’t,” sobbed Shortstraw, “but he might as well have done. He set me some tasks to do before Saturday, but they are absolutely impossible. I’ll never be able to do them,

and my Porcetta will marry someone else.” And the big rainy teardrops welled up again in his eyes. One rolled down to the end of his snout, and hung there like a dewdrop.

“Well tell us,” said Swinestein, “Maybe it is easier than you think. Perhaps we can help.”

“It is awfully kind of you,” sniffed the poor little pig, wiping away the dewdrop with the back of his trotter, “but no one would be able to help.”

“We can’t help if you don’t tell us, now can we, hmn?” said Doc Drool. in a kindly voice.”

So Shortstraw began to tell them what the Colonel had demanded, and as he spoke, his little voice grew more and more frantic, and the words tumbled out, faster and faster.

“Well, first of all, I have to get a big truffle for the wedding feast, and it has to weigh two pounds, and I don’t know where to find any two pound truffles, or even one pound truffles, and then I have to find a pearl for the engagement ring, and it has to be a pearl from an oyster from the bottom of the sea, and I don’t know how to find an oyster, and anyway, I can’t swim, and then I have to find a feather from an eagle’s wing, to make a quill pen to sign the register, and it has to be from an eyrie in the mountains, and I don’t know any eagles, and anyway I scared of heights, and then I have to get a ring for the wedding, but it has to be a ring from the nose of a bull, and I have to get it from the nose of a bull that is wearing it, and I don’t know where to find a bull that is wearing a ring in it’s nose, and even if I did know, how can a small pig get a ring from the nose of a big fierce bull? It’s all just too hopeless, and I’ll never get to marry Porcetta.”

And he buried his snout in his trotters and his little chest heaved and he burst into floods of tears.

And because he burst into floods of tears, Maddy Belly was upset, and her pert little nose wrinkled up, and SHE burst into floods of tears.

And then Angus Macanimal, who was rather sensitive for a Shetland pony was overcome by emotion and HE burst into floods of tears.

And then Dog Doctor Drool, who was really quite a sentimental old hound, couldn’t contain himself, and HE burst into floods of tears.

And Swinestein, who was really a very sensible pig, and didn’t believe in bursting into floods of tears said.

“Listen everybody, let’s not have anymore of this bursting into floods of tears business. Shortstraw is in a difficult predicament I know, but it is not insoluble. I believe I can formulate a scheme which will ensure him success, if we all help.”

Now, the animals all knew that Swinestein was a very wise pig, and very good at formulating schemes that would ensure success, and so they all stopped bursting into floods of tears and listened.

“Right,” said the portly Swinestein, taking center stage, “here’s how I see the situation. The meeting is set for Saturday evening. Today is Tuesday, that gives us three full days, not including today, and most of Saturday. Truffles, for your information, grow by the lake in the deep woods, but they need to be picked at first light. If we set off tonight, we can camp by the lake, and be ready for tomorrow morning. Then, we shall collect our truffle, and be back by midday on Wednesday, when we can go down to the sea, and see about getting our pearl. We can be back here on Wednesday night, and set off bright and early for the mountains, on Thursday morning. The mountains are a long way away, and very high, but if we use our wits, we should still be able to get our feather, and get back here by Friday night. That will allow us to get a good night’s rest after our exertions in the mountains, and give us all day Saturday to solve the problem of the ring from the Bulls nose. We can take our prizes to the Colonel on Saturday evening, in time for him to give his consent to Shortstraw, and

inform this Rudy fellow. Then, the wedding can take place on Sunday, as planned, except that instead of the objectionable Mr. Rootsuffle, the proud groom will be our good friend Shortstraw.”

As Swinestein finished outlining his plan, the others clapped and cheered in delight.

“Oh Swinestein” said Shortstraw, hopefully, “do you really think it is possible?”

“Why of course,” Swinestein replied, “never a doubt in my mind if we all pull together, and I’m sure our friends here will be happy to lend a hoof, or paw, or claw, or whatever.”

“A pleasure.” said Dog Doctor Drool.

“A privilege.” agreed Angus Macanimal.

“Ah will be delighted to ‘elp you, mah friend,” said Madeleine La Belle, in her smoky Parisian voice.

“Oh thank you, thank you all so much,” said Shortstraw, wiping the tears from his snout again, and sounding happy for the first time. “I’m sure that if Swinestein says we can do it, then we can do it.”

“Certainly we can.” agreed his friend, “Now we have preparations to make. Everybody go and get organized for the trip, and we will meet back here this evening, for supper. At midnight, we leave.”

All being agreed, Maddy, Doc Drool, and Angus went their separate ways, to gather themselves for the coming adventure. Swinestein poured more tea from the big, fat, pink pot, and he and Shortstraw, who was feeling much better, sat down to discuss the plans for the night’s journey.