

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

**The
Bramblewood
Chronicles -
Chapters 1 & 2**

John Henry Carrozza

The Bramblewood Chronicles, Chapters 1 & 2

By John Henry Carrozza

Chapter 1 - In Which Hedgehog Plans a Party

Hedgehog and Dormouse stood outside of the Hollow Pine Stump and chatted wildly. They were planning a party for the next day, which was the First Day of Spring, and as it was Hedgehog's idea, he could hardly contain his excitement. Twilight shrouded The Wood as the two decided what kind of dessert would be appropriate, and night was upon them as they finished the guest list, which included everybody in The Wood, even Old Turtle, who probably wouldn't come anyway.

Armadillo, who lived beneath the Hollow Pine Stump, awoke from his nap and heard the babbling voices of the two mammals, who were now sitting on top of the stump, and came out to see what was all this.

"What's all this?" he asked when he saw the pair.

"Oh, hello there, Armie," Hedgehog greeted.

"Good evening to you," added Dormouse.

"Yes, good evening to the both of you," Armadillo replied. "Now, what is all the commotion about? All the babbling and whatnot?"

Hedgehog leapt down from the stump and told him proudly: "I'm planning a party for tomorrow."

"A party, eh?"

"Yes, and it was my idea."

"Was it now?"

"It's a First Day of Spring party," added Dormouse. "And everybody is invited."

"Including you," said Hedgehog.

"Why, thank you kindly, I'm sure." Armadillo bowed his head courteously. "I will make every effort to attend."

"It's at the riverside, by the footbridge. And we're having acorn and walnut cakes for dessert!" Dormouse grinned widely.

"Sounds delicious! Is there anything I can bring?"

"No." Hedgehog paused thoughtfully. "Excepting for yourself, that is."

"Of course."

The chirping of crickets resounded though The Wood, accompanied by the buzzing of jitterbugs and the occasional "Hoo Hoo" of the magician, Owl, and his lady friends.

Armadillo looked around at the crisp darkness and noticed the almost constant spangling of tiny lights flicking on and off all around them.

"The lightning bugs are all out tonight," he announced.

"I was just about to say: 'My, look at all of the lightning bugs out in The Wood on the beautiful Eve of the First Day of Spring'," explained

Dormouse breathlessly.

"Well, why didn't you, then?" Hedgehog questioned.

"Because, our friend Armadillo here began speaking first, and it would be unkind to interrupt him."

"Fair enough." Hedgehog turned to Armadillo. "You're so full of the lore of The Wood and predictions," he told him. "What does it mean when The Wood is full of lightning bugs on the Eve of the First Day of Spring?"

Armadillo rubbed his chin momentarily in thought.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Let me get my book and see what it says."

With that, he turned and headed back into his house, which was hardly more than a hole between the roots of the Hollow Pine Stump, and returned shortly thereafter with a tattered, and seemingly heavy, book. The volume was as thick as Armadillo's head and was falling apart at the spine. From what remained of the faded cover could be discerned the words: *The Farmer Al _____ 19__*.

"Let's see what old Al has to say," Armadillo suggested as he dropped the tome on the ground, creating a cloud of dust and pollen. He opened it up and began flipping pages and mumbling words at random until he found what he was seeking.

"Here it is," he announced, sticking his finger into the book. "Lightning bugs."

Hedgehog moved closer to peer over Armadillo's shoulder, and Dormouse leapt down from the stump and followed suit.

"It says here," Armadillo began, "that when The Wood is filled with lightning bugs just after nightfall, that this is a foreboder of rain."

"Rain!" shrieked Hedgehog. "But it can't rain! Not tomorrow! What about my party?" He began pacing around and waving his arms nervously. "Don't they know I'm having a party?"

"What's a foreboder?" asked Dormouse quietly.

Hedgehog was standing on top of the stump and shouting. "Hey bugs! Go home! I'm having a party tomorrow! I don't want it to rain!" He was spinning in circles and making himself dizzy. "You're all invited!"

"It's like a kind of prediction," whispered Armadillo.

Hedgehog hopped down and ran over to the book and riffled the pages wildly.

"What do we do?" he asked excitedly.

Armadillo held up a foot. "Be patient," he said. He ushered Hedgehog aside and took control of the book. "I'm looking ... let's see ... here ... here it is."

Hedgehog leaned over to listen intently.

"The rain can be prevented," Armadillo said, "by catching all of the lightning bugs in The Wood before morning."

"What?" Hedgehog fell back with a start. "But that's impossible." He looked around and saw tiny dots of light in all directions - high and low, near and far. "There must be hundreds of them."

"A hundred hundreds," added Dormouse unhelpfully.

"How can I possibly catch them all in one night?" Hedgehog asked, looking to Armadillo for help.

"One at a time," Armadillo replied.

"But I'll need a jar to keep them in."

"Two jars," corrected Armadillo.

"A hundred jars," offered Dormouse.

"I have one jar," Hedgehog said solemnly.

"Well, I suppose you could fill one jar and carry it back to your house," suggested Armadillo. "Empty the jar there, and then go back out and catch more, return those to your house, and so on."

"Yes," Dormouse said. "That's a good idea."

Hedgehog thought about this for a moment and then decided that it was his only hope.

"Well then I suppose I had better get started," he said, "if I hope to finish by morning."

And so, Hedgehog went back to his house to get his jar, and Armadillo and Dormouse went inside and began a game of checkers, pausing only for Armadillo to go back outside and get his book, so that it would not get rained upon.

After the fifth game of checkers, by which time it had gotten rather late, Dormouse exclaimed that he was tired and should go home and sleep, so he could be rested for the party tomorrow.

On his way home, he noticed that the lightning bugs were still just as abundant as ever, flickering dizzily all through The Wood, illuminating his path. Occasionally, he would see in the distance a small clump of lights all tight together, bobbing up and down, which he took to be Hedgehog's jar, chasing the other spangles in every direction.

Poor Hedgehog, he thought. He'll never catch them all.

The black of night was tinged with a hazy orange when Hedgehog brought the last of the lightning bugs to his house. He shut the door tightly and emptied his final jar load into the living room.

His house could be seen from all the way across The Wood, shining like a lantern from its three tiny windows. He had to wear sunglasses when he was inside to keep from being blinded.

It had taken him all night, but he had finally done it. And he was thoroughly exhausted. He went back outside, where it was not quite so bright, and sat down against the side of his thatched-roof house to rest. He felt the first rays of morning on the bottoms of his feet, and in a few moments he was fast asleep.

He was awakened by a tap on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes slowly, stretching his tired limbs.

“Oh,” he yawned. “Good morning, Dormouse.”

“Morning?” Dormouse exclaimed. “It’s nearly evening now. Where have you been?”

“Nearly what? I don’t know. What?” he blinked his eyes curiously.

“We had a splendid party. You missed it all. It didn’t rain, even though you didn’t catch all the lightning bugs.”

Hedgehog stood up. “But I did catch them all! See!” He opened his door and pointed inside. The whole house was so full of lightning bugs – not lit up though, because it was daytime – that one could not even see an inch of the walls, floor, or ceiling.

“There were two of them at the party,” Dormouse informed his friend. They said they saw you collecting all the others, so they hid up in a tree all night. And anyway, they said you invited them to the party, too.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess I did,” Hedgehog sighed. “So, I did all that work last night for nothing? And missed my own party, too!”

“It’s okay, Hedge.” Dormouse patted him on the shoulder. “Armie invited both of us over for a checker match. And we saved you some walnut cakes!”

Chapter 2 - In Which Peacock Falls in Love

Peacock was in love. There was no doubt about it. This young peahen was the most beautiful creature he had ever set his eyes upon.

She was sitting idly in the middle of the glade and gazing into a vanity and generally looking quite stunning, to the effect that Peacock, who had been out for a walk in The Wood and, quite unprepared for the discovery of such a fountain of beauty, had all but forgotten where he was going and walked right into a tree.

“Ooof,” came the muffled cry from his gut, and the peahen looked up from her mirror, startled.

“Hello?” she asked coyly. “Is somebody there?”

Peacock heard her dreamy voice and felt as if his heart would explode, and he was certain that it would have, had he not been so tightly wrapped

about trunk of the tree. It was a sultry, angelic voice - like Greta Garbo, only an octave higher.

“Hello?” she queried again.

Peacock quietly broke from the tree’s embrace, regained his composure, quickly memorized some opening lines, struck a proud, stately stride, tripped over his tail feathers, and rolled head over feet over tail into the glade, coming fully to rest in a tousled heap in front of Greta (he did not know her real name, of course, and nor can I recall it, so I suppose that Greta will do), who was giggling almost uncontrollably when he looked up.

Peacock felt terribly embarrassed and wanted to kick himself in the head, which he could have done quite easily from his unsightly position; but instead he wrangled his way to his feet and dusted himself off, clearing his throat unintentionally all the while, and then once again purposefully before he spoke, for effect.

“M’lady,” he greeted casually, bowing his head. We would have tipped his hat, except that peacocks seldom wear hats, and anyhow his would not have survived the tumble if he had indeed had one on his head.

Greta was still giggling.

“It’s a fine day, isn’t it,” he offered.

The peahen finally stopped her giggling and abruptly turned to her vanity once again, as if ignoring his presence.

“Mmm hmm,” she breathed off-handedly, plucking at her topmost feathers with a tiny brush.

“Yes, well you see ...” began Peacock earnestly. “I was just out for a walk, you see. And then ... well, it’s such a beautiful day, you know – it being full of Spring and such, that ... well, then I happened to see you here, by yourself, you see, just seeming as though ... well, that would like some company, or to chat or some such ... as that ... well ... you see?”

Greta kept looking at her gorgeous feathers in her mirror and tilting her head this way and that, and Peacock was losing composure and feeling awkward with every word, which was foolish, because she wasn’t listening anyway.

“Mmm hmm,” she hummed to no one in particular.

Peacock began again. “It’s just that, well, you seem to not be so busy, and well then neither am I, except that, well, I was just out for a walk, you see, and if you would like to, well, walk with me for a while, you see, then I think that would be a splendid idea on such a fine day. It is a fine day, isn’t it?”

“Mmm hmm.”

Peacock wanted to scream. Indeed, if he had, she might not have even noticed – except maybe to giggle. Here was this beautiful creature – more beautiful than all of creation – sitting right in front of him, and the two of

them alone in a glade, and she would scarcely look at him, let alone hear his words. He felt as if he were stranded at sea with a flare gun and no flares and a cruise ship about to run him over.

He decided that, as she was paying him no mind at all, a different tactic would be needed. So, he would just walk a little longer and think of something.

"I'll be back," he said sheepishly, knowing she would not hear him.

"Mmm hmm."

With that, he turned ruefully and headed out of the glade, pondering his quagmire.

Watching the whole affair from behind a nearby gorse bush and chuckling under his breath was hedgehog. Being a friend of Peacock's, Hedgehog was amused and full of pity at the same time. An idea had occurred to him that could help Peacock, and he decided to summon his friend and relay his advice.

"Oh, Peacock!" he called when the bird had left the glade and was wandering aimlessly in his direction.

Peacock looked up from his watching his feet. "Oh, hello there, Hedge."

"Hello." Hedgehog knew this to be a n awkward moment for Peacock. "You seem rather sad, old chum. Is there something the matter?" It was a loaded question, he knew, but what are friends for?

"No, no," he lied. "Nothing at all. Just out for a walk is all. Now if you will please excuse me, I'd like to be alone."

"Are you sure?" Hedgehog prodded.

"Of course. Yes, I'm sure."

"Isn't there anyone you'd like to be with? Like ..." his eyes wandered to the glade. "Like that pretty young peahen, perhaps?"

Peacock looked up, obviously taken aback, and stared blankly at Hedgehog, who grinned.

"I saw you were talking to her just now."

"What?" Peacock stammered. "You ... you weren't listening, were you?"

"All I know is that she barely seemed to notice you at all, and now you want to know how to get her attention. And I think I can help." Hedgehog grinned again, feeling as though he were about to do something very clever.

"Help? How can you do that?" Peacock's face was suddenly ablaze. "Can you really get her to notice me?"

Hedgehog winked and drew his friend aside as if someone might overhear a secret plan, which is what the whole affair seemed like to him. And if there is anything Hedgehog liked more than a plan, it was a secret one.

"I have something here that will gain you instant affection from your pretty Miss Peahen."

At this, Hedgehog pulled out a small glass sprayer from somewhere behind him and held it out all glittery-like in the shadowy light. A word was etched into the crystalline surface. It read: *Ferimones*.

Peacock stared at the vial in wonder and said "Whatever is it?"

"It's a magic potion," Hedgehog explained. "Owl made it for me."

"What kind of magic potion?"

Hedgehog leaned even closer toward his friend and whispered "A love potion."

"Will it work for me?" Peacock began getting both nervous and excited, and he had a good mind to begin hopping on his toes.

"Of course it will. It works for me all the time. The ladies can't keep away from me."

Peacock curled his toes in the soft thicket soil and cuffed his feathers.

"How does it work," he asked eagerly.

"Well, I just squeeze this puffy thing, and ..."

Hedgehog squeezed the puffy thing, and a powerful spray of sparkling mist blew out of the misdirected nozzle and into his face.

Peacock's eyes widened as Hedgehog danced about blindly for several moments coughing and wheezing.

"I don't know about that," the timid bird began, standing back and leaning his neck away from the jostling, dizzy hedgehog. "It looks

dangerous."

"*Cawff*. Oh, no. *Cawff*. Don't be silly. *Wheeze*. It's perfectly fine. *Cawff*. Just had it pointed round the wrong direction. *Wheeze*. Is all. See?"

Hedgehog turned the sprayer nozzle around to Peacock, who covered his eyes, and squeezed the puffy thing several times in rapid succession.

When the cloud of mist had settled and the two had stopped hacking and bumping into one another, Hedgehog sat down on a nearby mossy stump.

"Well," he said. "There you go. Just like magic."

Peacock held up his wings and looked at them, and then around at his accomplice. "What do we do now?"

"Not we. You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You go back over there and talk to her. In fact, you don't even have to talk. Just stand there, and she'll be on you like flies on a magnet."

"I don't think that's ..."

"Trust me," Hedgehog assured. "I use it all the time." He paused. "Although not so much at once," he admitted.

"Alright," Peacock decided at last. "Here I go."

He left his friend on the stump, empty spray bottle at his feet, and strutted back into the glade.

There she was, as beautiful as ever, tossing her feathers piously. Peacock strolled amicably up beside her, spread out his feathers in his most majestic pose, and cleared his throat.

"Mmm hmm," said Greta, and batted her eyes into her mirror.

Peacock cleared his throat again.

Greta curled a purple feather.

"Hello there," said her suitor.

"Mmm hmm," said Greta.

Peacock was furious. "Look at me!" he yelled.

Greta batted her eyes again and curled a lavender feather.

"Hey!" Peacock began jumping up and down and running in circles around the calm, contented lady bird and her vanity. "What's wrong with you? Why don't you look at me? I'm sprayed full of magic Ferimones! Hey!"

Greta looked up momentarily to say "Mmm hmm," and then curled a vermilion feather.

Peacock opened his beak to scream, but was interrupted by a high-pitched squeal from across the glade. The squeal was followed by a chorus of countless others, and Peacock looked over to see an overexcited mob of perhaps a hundred young lady hedgehogs sprinting in his direction.

He screamed, but was drowned out by the sighs of the throng of doting mammals, and he ran for his life. The sea of furry creatures chased him in circles around the glade for several grueling laps before he came to his senses enough to spread his wings and escape to the bough of a nearby white oak, some twenty feet above the lusting, seething mob.

Hearing all the commotion, Hedgehog came running into the clearing and, after recovering from the initial shock of the scene and coming to terms with the situation. Fell over in a fit of laughter, rolling and clutching his belly.

Meanwhile, Greta, who had been collected for most of the goings on, caught the drama in the corner of her eye and turned to assess the situation. Upon seeing the totality of the situation, she gasped a haughty sigh, clutched her mirror, and strutted off in a jealous huff.

As the congregation began building a hedgehog pyramid round and round the tree below the shaking peacock's perch, Owl, who had also heard the commotion from across the forest, landed on a fig branch and shook his head wisely from side to side.

Peacock saw the magician and called to him.

"How long before this potion wears off?" he shouted.

"From the smell of it," Owl replied, "Not until morning."

"I suppose there is a moral to all this, isn't there?"

"Of course. There is a moral to almost everything."

"Well, what is it?"

"Perhaps you had better ask Hedge."

Sometime just before dusk, Hedgehog stopped laughing.