The Bears’ Famous Invasion of Sicily
Once upon a time, in the ancient mountains of Sicily, two hunters captured the bear-cub Tony, son of Leander, King of the Bears. But this occurred some years before our story begins.
Characters

King Leander. He is the King of the Bears, the son of a King who in turn had a King as father. He is therefore a bear of most ancient lineage. He is tall, strong, valiant, virtuous and intelligent too, though not as intelligent as all that. We hope you will like him. His coat is magnificent and he is justly proud of it. Faults? Perhaps he is a little too credulous, and in certain circumstances he will show himself somewhat over-ambitious. He wears no crown upon his head, but may be distinguished from the rest both by his general appearance and by the fact that he carries a great sword suspended from a tricolour sash. He will live for ever as the leader of his beasts in the invasion of Sicily – at least, he deserves to.

Tony. King Leander’s little son. There is little to be said about him. He was still extremely small when two unknown hunters captured him in the mountains and bore him down to the plains. Since that time nothing has been heard of him. Who knows what has happened to him?
**The Grand Duke.** Tyrant of all Sicily and sworn enemy of the bears. He is extraordinarily vain and changes his clothes eight times a day, but in spite of this he never succeeds in looking less hideous than he is. Children laugh at him behind his back because of his large, hooked nose. But woe to them if he ever discovers this.

**Professor Ambrose.** A most important personage, whose name you would do well to learn at once. He was Court Astrologer – that is, in plain English, he studied the stars every night (unless it was cloudy) and according to their position foretold things to the Grand Duke before they came to pass; all this by means of very difficult calculations – or so he said. Naturally not all of them were successful: sometimes he hit the mark and sometimes he did not – and then there was trouble. By guessing right he recently put the Grand Duke in a tremendous rage – we shall see why later – and was expelled from the palace with ignominy. As well as this, Ambrose claims to be a magician and to know how to work spells, but so far he has never worked any. He does in fact own a magic wand which he guards exceedingly jealously and which he has never used. Indeed, it appears that this wand can only be used twice, after which its power is exhausted and it can be thrown away in the dustbin. What does Professor Ambrose look like? He is very tall and lanky, with a long pointed beard. On his head he wears an enormous top hat, over his shoulders a very old greatcoat, greasy and dirty. Is he a good man? Is he a bad man? That you must judge for yourselves.
THE BEAR SALTPETRE. One of the most eminent bears, and a friend of King Leander. He is very handsome and a great favourite with the she-bears. He is always elegant, is a distinguished orator and would like to rise to high office in the State. But with what high office can King Leander ever entrust him amid the solitude of the bleak mountains? No, he was not made for a harsh life among the rocks and snows: Saltpetre would feel at home only in the great world, amid receptions, balls and banquets!

THE BEAR TITAN. A giant, perhaps the biggest of them all. They say he is a whole head taller than King Leander himself – and moreover he is very valiant in war. Without his providential intervention, the invasion of Sicily would have ended in utter disaster on the very first day.

THE BEAR THEOPHILUS. He is the wisest of them all. Growing old has taught him many things. King Leander frequently asks his advice. In our story he will appear only for a few moments – and then, as you will see, not in flesh and blood. But he is such an excellent bear that it would be wicked not to mention him.

THE BEAR MERLIN. Of humble stock but noble disposition, and full of good will. He stands apart from the others, lost in marvellous dreams of battle and renown. Will these ever come true?
Unless we are much mistaken, more will be heard of him one day.

**The Bear Marzipan.** Of undistinguished appearance, but worthy of admiration for his ingenuity. He spends his time in inventing a quantity of machines and devices which are undoubtedly brilliant – but the necessary materials are lacking in the mountains, so until now he has not been able to put anything remarkable into practice. In the future, however, who knows?

**The Bear Dandelion.** Gifted with rare powers of observation, he can discover things which people more learned than he fail to see. One fine day he will become a kind of amateur detective. He is a worthy beast, and one can have complete confidence in him.

**Count Molfetta.** A noble of some importance, cousin and ally of the Grand Duke. He has at his disposal a truly strange and terrible army, such as no other ruler possesses. At present we will say no more – and it is useless to press us.

**Troll.** A wicked old ogre who lives in the Eagle’s Nest Castle. He feeds preferably on human flesh, the more tender the better, but he eats bears too, when he can. Old and solitary as he is, he would probably
not succeed in procuring any by himself – but in his service, and charged with this very task, is Marmoset the Cat in person.

Marmoset the Cat. A fabulous and most ferocious monster. We think it best not to speak of him at length here. You will be frightened enough when he suddenly appears on the scene. There is no point in being frightened now. “Bad news will keep,” as the bear Theophilus – bless him – used to say.

The Sea Serpent. Another monster still more gigantic and no less perilous. To make up for this, however, he is a great deal cleaner, since he lives in the water all the time. He has the body of a serpent, as his name implies, but the head and teeth of a dragon.

The Werewolf. A third monster. It is possible that he may not appear in our story. In fact, as far as we know he has never appeared anywhere, but one never knows. He might suddenly appear from one moment to the next, and then how foolish we should look for not having mentioned him.

Various Apparitions. Ugly but harmless. They are the ghosts of dead men and bears. It is difficult to tell one from the other. In fact, when they are turned into ghosts, bears lose their coats, and their
noses get shorter, so that they differ little from human ghosts—although the ghosts of bears are a trifle plumper. In our story the very small ghost of an old clock will also appear.

**THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS.** A most powerful spirit of the rocks and glaciers, of an irascible temperament. None of us has ever seen him, and nobody knows exactly where he lives, but we may be sure that he exists. For that reason it is always better to keep in his good books.

**A SCREECH-OWL.** We shall hear his voice for a moment in Chapter 2. As he is hidden in the depths of the forest, we shall not be able to see him, the more so as dusk will already have fallen. For that reason the portrait printed here is completely imaginary. The screech-owl will merely give one of his melancholy hoots, as we have said. And that is all.
The Scene

First we shall see the majestic mountains of Sicily, though there are no longer any mountains in Sicily (so many, many years have passed since then!). They are all covered in snow.

Next we shall descend to the verdant valley with its villages, streams, woods full of small birds – and houses scattered here and there – a most beautiful landscape. But on each side of the valley the mountains still tower, not so high and steep as those we first saw, but also full of perils: there are for instance enchanted castles, dens with venomous dragons, other castles inhabited by ogres and so on. In short, there is always something to beware of, especially at night.

Then, little by little we shall approach the fabulous capital of Sicily, of which today not even a memory remains (so many years have gone by!). It is surrounded by very high walls and fortified strongholds. The chief stronghold is called Cormorant Castle. What things we shall see there!

At last we shall enter the capital, famous all over the world for its palaces of yellow marble, its towers which touch the sky, its churches overlaid with gold, its gardens
in perpetual bloom, its equestrian circuses, its amusement parks and its theatres. The Grand Theatre Excelsior is the finest of all.

And what of the mountains we first left? Shall we ever return to our ancient mountains?
Chapter 1
Sit still as mice on this occasion
And listen to the Bears’ Invasion
Of Sicily, a long, long while
Ago when beasts were good, men vile.

Then Sicily, unlike today,
Was formed in quite another way.
Her snow-clad mountains rose so high
That with their peaks they touched the sky,
With sometimes in the mountains’ stead,
Volcanoes, shaped like loaves of bread –
And one had a peculiar manner
Of puffing smoke out like a banner:
It used to roar like one possessed
And even today it is still rumbling away with the best.

There in the gloomy mountain lairs
Above the snowline lived the bears,
And they fed on lichen and truffles and fungi
And chestnuts and berries – and never went hungry.

Very well, then. Many years earlier, when Leander, King of the Bears, was looking for fungi on the mountains with his little
son Tony, two hunters had stolen his child from him. The father had wandered along a steep crag for a moment, and they had surprised the cub alone and defenceless, had tied him up like a parcel and lowered him down the precipices, down to the valley at the bottom.

“Tony! Tony!” loud he cried,
But vainly did he waste his breath;
Only the echoes still replied,
Around a silence as of death.
He sought him up, he sought him down.
Could they have taken him to the town?

Eventually the King had returned to his lair and said that his son had fallen off a crag and been killed. He had not had the courage to tell the truth, which would have been a disgrace for any bear, let alone the King. After all, he had allowed the cub to be stolen from him.

From that day onwards he had known no peace. How many times he had thought of going down among men to look for his son! But what could he do by himself, a bear among men? They would have killed him, or chained him up, and that would have been the end of him. And so the years went by.

Then there came a winter more terrible than any of the other winters. It was so cold that even the bears shivered under their heavy fur. Thick snow covered all the small plants, and there was nothing left to eat. They were so hungry that the smallest
cubs and the bears with weak nerves used to cry all night. They could not stand it any longer. At length one of them said: “Why don’t we go down to the plains?” In the clear morning light they could see the bottom of the valley free of snow, with human habitations and smoke coming out of the chimneys, a sign that something was being prepared to eat. It seemed as if Paradise itself were down there. And the bears from their high crags remained for hours gazing at it and heaving deep sighs.

“Let us go down to the plains. Better fight with men than die of hunger up here,” said the more venturesome bears. And to tell the truth, the idea did not displease their king, Leander: it would be a good opportunity of looking for his little son. The danger would be far less if all his people descended in a body. Men would think twice before confronting such an army.

None of the bears, King Leander included, knew what men were really like, how wicked and cunning they were, what terrible weapons they possessed, or what traps they could invent to capture animals. So they decided to forsake the mountains and go down to the plains.

When our tale begins, the Grand Duke was ruler of the land.
Ugly, thin, conceited, grim,
We shall hear some more of him.
Who could ever be aspirant
For the love of such a tyrant?
Now you must know that some months earlier the Court Astrologer, Professor Ambrose, had prophesied that an invincible force would come down from the mountains, that the Grand Duke would be put to rout and that the enemy would make themselves masters of the whole country.

The Professor had said that because he was sure of his facts, thanks to his calculations by the stars. But think of the Grand Duke! He fell into a passion and ordered the astrologer to be flogged and banished from Court. However, as he was superstitious, he ordered his soldiers to climb up the mountain sides and kill every living thing they found. Thus, he thought, nobody would be left in the mountains and so no one would be able to come down from them to conquer his kingdom.

Off went the soldiers, armed to the teeth, and they killed without mercy every living thing they encountered up there – old woodcutters, shepherd boys, squirrels, marmots and even innocent little birds. Only the bears escaped, hidden in the deepest caves, and so did the Old Man of the Mountains, that grand, mysterious old man who will never die and who lives no one has ever quite known where.

But one night in haste a messenger cried
“A snake has been seen on the mountain side!”
And a serpent appeared, made of little black dots,
He-bears and she-bears and bear tiny tots.
“Bears?” laughed the Duke. “Just leave them to me,
And soon you will see a great victory!”
The bears, driven by cold and hunger, go down to the plains and engage in battle with the seasoned troops of the Grand Duke sent to repulse them. The intrepidity of the bear Titan puts the Grand Duke’s soldiers to flight.
And then there was heard a fanfarone
As the Grand Ducal army came out on parade.
“Forward, you dogs! Quick march, you cattle!
Tomorrow at dawn we go forth to battle!”
The great encounter may be described
In the coloured print on the other side.
The bears above, as on the plan.
The Duke below. And the slaughter began.
For what could bears do, armed with arrows and spears
[ and such trifles
Against culverin, cannon and grapeshot, and muskets
[ and rifles?
The rifles crack, the unsullied snow turns red;
Who’ll dig a grave to hold so many dead?

The Duke has chosen a sheltered slope
To observe the scene through a telescope,
While the courtiers to show how victorious their team is
Have painted his lens with a bear “in extremis”,
So wherever he looks as the bloodshed increases
He sees only animals cut into pieces.
“Tell me, Your Excellence, what do you see?”
“A bear with his leg chopped off at the knee.”
“And now, Your Excellence, what see you there?”
“Nothing but dead bears everywhere.”
And the Duke in a state of the utmost delight
Hands out medals and titles to left and to right.
“Wonderful! Splendid!” says he. “Carry right on!”
But he reckoned without the great bear Titan…

In fact, careless of danger, the bear Titan, with his gigantic limbs and dauntless courage had climbed up a dizzy crag together with a few other bears worthy to accompany him and, having gained the top, was making enormous snowballs which he hurled down like avalanches on the troops of the Grand Duke.

With a heavy thud the white projectiles hurtled down, right in the midst of the Grand Ducal army. Wherever they fell, the terrible masses of snow made a clean sweep.

Fear, havoc and ruin to such an extent
May well terrify the Duke’s regiment.
The troops run hither and thither and shout:
“The Old Man of the Mountains has put us to rout!”
The bombardment of avalanches has told,
And has made the soldiers’ blood run cold.
Take flight! Take flight! For who will stop you?
When fear once starts it gets atop you,
And once a panic is on the wing,
No one is left to halt the thing.
Worms devour the slain,
The Grand Duke rages in vain.
The bears are victorious though gory,
And the battle ends in glory.
Chapter 2
If you carefully follow the plan
Depicting the battle scene,
You will notice a curious man
Away to the left in green.
This was Professor Ambrose,
Behind where the Duke’s oriflamme rose.

Now tell us pray, Professor, about your magic powers –
And whether, if you wish, you could turn pebbles into flowers
And flowers into precious stones, ruby and emerald posies,
And skunks and rats and warthogs into scented, crimson roses?

Gone are the days of old
When King Arthur was alive
And a wand turned all to gold
And made all the people thrive.

The Professor can wave his wand
But twice ere its power flies,
And when he has woven the spells,
Its magic for ever dies.
Useless is dragon’s gizzard,  
Or beak of raven boiled,  
Two spells and then all is spoiled,  
And the wizard no more a wizard.

But Ambrose is haunted still  
By a fear of becoming ill,  
And he jealously guards each spell  
To save it for making him well.

He might live at ease, have a lot  
Of money, do nothing but play,  
Or eat seventeen times a day –  
But for these things he cares not a jot.

And now that we have made that plain,  
Let us resume our tale again.

When the Grand Duke’s army went forth to war against the bears, Ambrose had asked himself whether this would not be a good opportunity to regain favour with the tyrant and get himself recalled to court. It would be enough for him to use one of his spells and the bears would be decimated, and the Grand Duke would erect a statue to him. For that reason he wandered about unseen near the battle, ready to intervene at the right moment.

But the discomfiture of the Grand Duke had been so unexpected that it took even the wizard by surprise. By the time he
Count Molfetta’s fighting boars attack the bears unexpectedly, but Ambrose the astrologer transforms them by a spell into balloons, gently rocked by the breeze. Hence the famous legend of Molfetta’s flying boars.
had drawn his magic wand out of his pocket to rescue the Grand Duke, the bears were well over the mountains shouting for victory, and the Grand Duke had given it up as hopeless. So then the wizard paused with his wand in mid air, struck by a new thought. “Why should I help that vile Grand Duke who drove me out like a dog?” pondered the Professor. “Why should I not instead become a friend of the bears, who are sure to be great simpletons? Why should I not make them nominate me minister? With the bears I need not waste my spells: I need only say a few difficult words and they will remain agape like so many idiots. What an opportunity!”

Then he put his wand back again, and in the evening, when the victorious bears had encamped in a wood to feast on the provisions abandoned by the Grand Duke in his flight – when the moon rose behind the pine trees, sweetly lighting the meadows (for at the foot of the valley there was no more snow) – when in the solitude of the countryside they began to hear the melancholy hooting of the screech owl, Professor Ambrose took courage, went down towards the bears and presented himself to King Leander.

Listen now to how he spoke, and to the wisdom which came from his lips.

He explained that he was a wizard, a necromancer (which is the same thing), a diviner, a prophet and a sorcerer. He said that he could work white magic and black magic, that he could read the stars – in short that he knew a great quantity of extraordinary things.
“Good,” replied King Leander very cordially. “I am really delighted that you came, because now you will be able to find my young son for me.”

“And where is this son of yours?” asked the wizard, realizing that not everything was going to be as straightforward as he had imagined.

“What a question!” exclaimed King Leander. “If I knew, what need should I have to ask of you?”

“In short, you would like a spell?” stuttered the Professor, abashed.

“Of course I want a spell! And what bother can such a little thing be to a great sage like yourself? I am not asking you for the moon, after all!”

“Your Majesty,” begged Ambrose then, forgetting all the airs he had just put on. “Your Majesty, do you want to ruin me? I can only work one spell, only one in my whole life!” (Here he was telling a flat lie.) “You must wish to ruin me!”

So they began to argue, Leander determined to discover the whereabouts of his son, the wizard determined not to yield. The bears, tired and replete, fell asleep, but these two continued arguing.

The moon rose high in the sky and began to descend the other side – and still the two continued arguing.

The night grew shorter, bit by bit, and still the discussion was not over.

Dawn broke and the King and the wizard were still arguing.

But things in life always happen when they are least expected: so, in the first rays of the sun, a large black
cloud emerged from behind a neighbouring hill, like an advancing army.

“The wild boars!” cried a sentinel posted on the outskirts of the wood.

“The wild boars?” said Leander, surprised.

“The wild boars themselves, Your Majesty!” replied the bear sentinel, conscientious like all good sentinels.

It was in fact the horde of wild boars of Count Molfetta, the Grand Duke’s cousin, coming to the rescue. Instead of soldiers, this important nobleman had trained an army of huge, savage pigs to go into battle – and these were very wild and extremely brave, and celebrated all over the world. The Count cracked his whip from the hilltop on which he was standing so as to be out of danger. And on came the terrible boars at the gallop, their tusks whistling in the wind!

Alas, the bears were still asleep. Scattered here and there about the wood, round the ashes of the fires where they had bivouacked, they were at that very moment dreaming the sweet dreams of morning, which are always the most beautiful. Even the trumpeter was asleep and could not sound the alarm. In his trumpet, abandoned on the grass, the fresh woodland breeze whispered gently, sending forth delicate little notes, a subtle sound, and certainly not enough to wake the animals.

With Leander there was only a small band of bear fusiliers: they were the sentinels, armed with the firearms taken from the Grand Duke. There was no one else.

The boars lowered their heads and charged.
“And now?” stammered Professor Ambrose.

“Can’t you see?” said King Leander with a certain bitterness. “We are alone. And now we must die. Let us at least try to die decently!” – and he drew his sword from his scabbard. “Let us die like gallant soldiers!”

“And what about me?” begged the astrologer. “What about me?”

Must he, Ambrose, die too? And for such a stupid reason? He really did not wish to do so at all. But the wild boars were only a few hundred yards away – and they came on like a river in spate.

And then the wizard plunged his hand into his pocket, drew out the magic wand, pronounced a few strange words under his breath and traced some signs in the air. Oh, how easy it was to cast a spell when one was as frightened as that!

And behold, one of the wild boars, the foremost and biggest of them all, suddenly left the ground and swelled and swelled, gradually turning into a real balloon – a beautiful air balloon which floated up into the sky. Then a second followed, and then a third and then a fourth.

As fast as they arrived the fatal boars were mysteriously bewitched, and they swelled up like footballs.

Gracious! How they floated away, away with the breezes and the little birds, up among the clouds, gently rocked by the winds!

Fate had willed it thus. The first of the spells had had to be spent, and only one remained to Ambrose. One more stroke
of the magic wand and he would become a man just like other men – old and ugly into the bargain. What good had all his parsimony done him?

Meanwhile, however, his spell had saved the bears. The last wild boar vanished till nothing remained but a tiny black speck high in the face of the heavens.

Hence the legends, which caused such uproars,
Of Count Molfetta’s flying boars.