

THE JUGGLER

The pawnbroker's shop was huddled among other tiny, dirty shops in a certain section of town. Its sign read "MUNI WEISENGRUND – LOANS AT LOW INTEREST." When the door was opened, a little bell tinkled and the thin, pinched face of the pawnbroker looked up: the rimless eyeglasses shown flatly in the light, he was hunchbacked.

An old man shuffled in. he placed some books, with a heave and a sigh, on the counter and the pawnbroker ambled over to look.

"This you're bringing me?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders, "I ain't a rich man."

The pawnbroker was wiping his eyeglasses with his handkerchief. He peered again, more thoughtfully, at the books. "Hmm," he said. "Worthless."

"Worthless! I spent the best years of my life poring over these."

He motioned for the old man to take a seat at the table. The old man did, huffily.

"Muni, if you weren't such a rich man I wouldn't ask: lend me –"

"Don't ask," he said.

The bell rang. The door was held open as a man with a dark beard entered. He was followed by another, who tapped a cane in front of him to find his way. They seated themselves at Muni's table.

It rang again. A dwarfish man entered.

"All this money," he was mumbling, "who keeps track of anything anymore."

"Have you made an accounting?" asked Muni, once they were assembled.

The dwarf shook his head and whistled. "Used to be better."

"In the old days it was easier, they left us alone."

"Old days? Who wants them back? I hate the circus life."

Muni counted the bills that were laid out on the table.

Someone was pounding at the shop door. Muni opened it.

"Hurry," yelled a boy on crutches, "get out while you can! The crowd is two blocks from here, yelling 'Dirty cripples!' and breaking –"

“What?”

“I just wanted to warn you,” he hobbled away.

The bearded man and blind man upset their chairs and fled. Muni’s wife came out from the back.

“What is it?”

“They’re coming. I can’t believe it, we just paid them!”

The dwarf got up. “I can’t take chances,” he explained and left.

Muni locked the door.

“Do something!” said his wife.

He went to the back of the store to change. In front of a vanity mirror he daubed on greasepaint, drawing huge black eyebrows, outlining his mouth in red. A wig of wild orange hair, a pink bulb nose.

A brick went through the shop window.

Muni stood in the doorway.

“Muni Weisengrund,” someone called.

He walked towards the crowd. From his pocket he pulled some colored balls and began juggling them, spinning around to catch them behind his back. He put the balls away and launched into a pantomime. The crowd gathered about him, laughing.

“Best hunchbacked clown around,” someone remarked.

Several minutes’ entertainment turned into an hour’s. Muni, in his finale, disappointed no one. Swallowing fire, belching it out, he threatened the crowd in mock fury like a dragon: they drew back. He performed cartwheels, handstands. He flipped himself over in the air, landing near his door, and slipped in.

“More! More!” they yelled.

Sweating, he gulped in fresh air as the crowd called his name.

Motioning for the old man to follow, Muni announced there would be an encore but after it, no more! He sang as the old man danced to his melody.

His accompanist retired and Muni stood alone before the audience. He told jokes, simple ones, but some were riddles with many meanings. He left them with one which left everyone laughing and slammed his shop door closed.

He looked at his wife and the old man. Would it grow quiet outside? Would the crowd go? The old man dared not go home.

When Muni awoke it was a little before dawn, the crowd had gone.

You see, he said to himself, you see what a little joking can do? He giggled, muffling the sound with his hand, and went off to bed again.