

Prickly Mystery

by Angie

*To live in joys that once have been,
To put the cold world out of sight,
And deck life's drear and barren scene
With hues of rainbow-light.*

- Lewis Carol

Mary returned to her chamber after lunch to find a large paper shopping bag, its open end folded neatly over. Her name was handwritten in large block letters on the side. She smiled. Someone must have found some yarn for her. She picked up the bag, glanced inside – and while it did have yarn, it also had embroidery floss and pieces of upholstery fabric. She upended it onto her bed for sorting.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and separated the pile of yarn balls from the rest, then cringed when something sharp pricked her. She carefully shifted the balls, then gasped in shock as she found the culprit. Quickly, she put the thing into her work box and shut the lid.

She sat there some time, wondering what to do next. Making a decision, she got up and tapped a message on the nearest pipe. A few minutes later, Vincent arrived and greeted her.

“You asked for help, Mary?”

Mary nodded and beckoned him to her workbox, opened the lid and pointed. Vincent gazed inside, curious, and then stiffened with a grunt. He didn't pick it up. It looked malevolent. And with Halloween just a week away, it seemed more horrific than it would have otherwise.

“It was buried in a lot of yarn and oddments I received,” she explained, and pointed at the paper bag.

Vincent moved to pick up the bag and examined it carefully. It was a plain, tough brown shopping bag, without handles, of the sort that he had often seen in Catherine's apartment when she brought in groceries. They rarely got them below, preferring to use boxes or crates for anything they picked up here and there.

“I do not recognize the handwriting,” he commented at last.

“Where could it have come from?” Mary asked, now more concerned than ever.

“I cannot guess,” he replied slowly, “but I will try to find out. Perhaps someone gave it to one of the children. There's probably a logical explanation, Mary. Whoever delivered this probably thought you could find a use for it.”

“Which means that it was intended for me,” Mary pointed out.

Vincent looked at her, and his brow furrowed. “I do not think it was intended for you, Mary precisely,” he said bluntly, “but I dislike it.”

With that he left quickly. Mary sighed and decided to put the oddments back in the bag, for the time being. She had lost all interest in them.

The item itself, though, had to be dealt with - now. It couldn't be left around where a child might see it. She looked around until she located a small metal lozenge tin. Mouse often gave them to her to store snap fasters and other small sewing notions.

She pulled out what she decided to benevolently call a pincushion, and put it on her lap. She had never seen the like. It was disturbingly odd - a small stuffed teddy bear, fairly bristling with needles of all sizes, dozens of them. There was barely a spot that didn't have one sticking out of it.

She began pulling out the needles one by one and placing them in the little tin. Some were so long they barely fit diagonally. They looked like quilting needles. After she had got the initial needles out, she depressed the bear in various places and found yet more, much smaller and finer ones, generally. She depressed the bear's head and a very long needle emerged, one too large for the tin. It was so long it made her shiver. It had been straight down the body of the bear and into the leg. She stuck it into the box anyway. It was an upholstery needle, the longest one she had ever seen.

Finally, having found as many needles as she could, Mary looked at the toy and sighed. There was no way she could trust this with any child. She reached into her workbox and extracted a seam ripper. Carefully, she opened the bear along its tummy seam and began to pull out the stuffing. More needles came with it, very fine ones, and they went into the box. She continued to rip all the seams along the sides, legs, arms, and even the head, until the toy's body was laid out flat and all the stuffing exposed. And still she found more needles, tiny ones, hidden in a leg seam or down the neck. How on earth would anyone have extracted some of these needles? She had to assume it had taken many years to accumulate them, as some were spotted with rust and one looked like an antique; dull metal and large-eyed, in a style she had never seen before.

Finally, her work done, Mary wrapped the remains of the toy in part of the brown bag and tied it with a bit of wool. It would go out with the garbage. It wasn't worth saving, and it would always disturb her. She was also afraid there might still be another bit of metal somewhere, despite her care.

She looked at the tin of needles, and with the point of the long one which wouldn't fit, counted up the total in the box. Eighty-two! Unbelievable! There were needles for every conceivable purpose, some with triangular points. Leather needles! And some chisel point canvas needles too. They were hard to come by below. With a sigh, she closed the tin and stuck the largest needle into the pincushion in the lid of her workbox.

Vincent meanwhile, was regarding the children in Father's chamber in their history class. When he had everyone's attention, he asked if anyone had delivered a brown bag of yarn for Mary. Kipper put up his hand.

"Where did you get it, Kipper?" Vincent asked.

"It was inside the old warehouse by the elevator. I went up there with Mouse to pick up the supplies Dr Alcott had left for us. I almost missed it, but when I saw Mary's name on it, I brought it down and put it in her chamber."

Father gazed at Vincent in some puzzlement. "Is there a problem, Vincent?"

"I do not know, Father. Right now it is only a mystery."

Vincent thanked Kipper, and then excused himself. The obvious next place to go was the warehouse. It was still daylight, but the building was closed, so he was not overly worried. Better to see what might be seen in daylight.

He made his way to the freight elevator and up to the warehouse. He looked carefully around and saw where the dust had been disturbed by the boxes most recently moved, and found what he thought might be where the bag had rested. Then he searched for footprints and found slight scuffings. No one moved around this building much, so the footprints tended to be in a line from where a vehicle was parked to the elevator. Ergo, it was a good bet that any other footprints he found were not theirs, or their delivery helpers in vehicles.

The floor was dusty as some of the windows around the walls were cracked and the building was old. Vincent followed the slight marks in the dust to a door at the opposite end to the garage door opening. He looked at the handle of the door, but there were no marks, not even a fingerprint that he could discern in the bright sunlight. Then he opened the door enough to get a good look at the outside. The door was battered and scraped, but he could tell it had not been pried open and the keyhole had not been damaged. The alleyway gave him no clues either, as it was dim, and cluttered with dumpsters that the tunnel folk made use of on occasion.

Vincent was thoughtful as he made his way back to the home tunnels. He went to Father's chamber and found the patriarch regarding a battered sheaf of ledgers. He waited patiently to be noticed, which didn't take long.

"Vincent?" Father frowned up at his tall son.

"Father, who has a key to the outside door in the warehouse?"

Father frowned even more and looked up at the roof of his chamber, obviously wracking his memory.

"That's an interesting question, Vincent. Peter purchased that warehouse under the name of a company he set up, many years ago. He has a key, of course, as do I, although I've never used it. I believe Catherine has one now as well. She may need to open the vehicle door sometime and the same key is used to unlock and lock that." Father paused.

"Um ... I think some of our helpers have one ... Sebastian, certainly. He sometimes visits and prefers to use the freight entrance. He picks up things here and there too and delivers for anyone who needs help. He lives where there's no tunnel access nearby and he doesn't like to use the subway entries in case he's spotted, being not as nimble as he used to be. I don't know if Lou had one, but I don't think so. He sent messages by bottle and never visited except at Winterfest. He usually came with someone or other via one of the shop entries in the Village. I can't think of anyone else. Why do you ask?"

"I'm trying to track down the origin of a bag of oddments that was addressed to Mary."

"The one you asked about earlier?"

"Yes."

"Is something wrong?"

"Possibly, Father, but I can't be sure until I know who sent it. It could have been given to a helper, who assumed we could put to good use."

"Ah. So I presume this delivery person used the warehouse door you're concerned with."

"Yes. I know neither Peter, Catherine or you used it in this instance, so I'll talk to Sebastian."

"Ask Pascal to send a message for delivery to Clarence. He knows Sebastian. They sometimes work together."

“Good idea, Father. Thank you.”

Vincent visited Pascal and asked him to contact Sebastian via Clarence, and for the former to meet him at Clarence's apartment at 8 pm the following evening, if convenient to them both. Pascal nodded and immediately tapped out a message that would go through several people before reaching the street musician. It took several hours before a reply was received, but Vincent was happy he would be meeting his two friends. He saw them rarely, most reliably at Winterfest.

In the meantime, he visited Mary again and asked about the pincushion.

“I took care of it, Vincent. I found 82 needles in it. I took it apart and threw the remains out.”

“Thank you, Mary.”

“We got some useful needles out of it, Vincent. It must have been used for many years. So I'm grateful.”

Vincent nodded, still wondering who would use such a thing for a pincushion. It probably wasn't aimed at anyone in particular when it was created. But who would have found such a thing, and who decided to send it to Mary? These questions needed an answer, in his opinion.

The following evening, Vincent arrived at Clarence's apartment building a few minutes early, via a basement entry that forced him to squeeze past the furnace. He waited until he was sure there was no one around before he went up the stairs and knocked on Clarence's door. It was opened immediately and he entered, to find Sebastian in unaccustomed casual garb, just a jeans and sweater. But then he wasn't performing now, Vincent reminded himself. Clarence looked as he always did, the perfect gentleman.

His host offered him tea, but Vincent declined and sat down on a nearby chair. Clarence seated himself next to Sebastian and both looked at their visitor expectantly.

Briefly, Vincent told them about the bag of oddments Mary had received and the unusual pincushion included. Sebastian's eyebrows went up, but Clarence's did not; he just nodded.

“Can you shed any light on this, Clarence?” Vincent asked, noticing the lack of reaction.

Clarence sat back in this chair and his face became a little animated as he sifted through his memories. He looked at his visitor.

“I may have an inkling, Vincent. The bag was left at my door a few days ago. I mentioned it to Sebastian and he delivered it to the warehouse. I didn't know what was in it, except that it was probably wool and fabric ... but that ... item ... doesn't surprise me.

“An elderly lady died on the top floor. Her niece, who I've talked to a few times and who knows I deliver second-hand goods to people who need them, was probably the one who left it at my door.

“The old lady was a bit eccentric, never married, no children. The niece lives in New York.”

“But I think the story goes much further back.

“When I first got here, there were three sisters living in that apartment. Two left to get married. One had a child, who died of some childhood disease, and the sister died not long afterwards. The other sister moved to California with her husband and they had one daughter, the niece, who moved back to New York a few years ago to work. She dropped into her aunt about once a month to see if she needed anything.

"The old lady hasn't been able to manage the stairs for some years. There's no elevator here. She was getting in a housekeeper to clean, make a meal a day and do some shopping. I dropped in occasionally too, because she liked company, and she liked my music.

"From what she told me, the death of her sister and her child was a shock to her. The sisters were close and she had bought a gift, that stuffed toy. She was very good with her hands and did a lot of embroidery and knitting, even some upholstery, for clients. I guess she thought she might as well use the toy. Her niece was a little shocked – she told me about it. But after all, there were no children visiting, so there was no harm intended.

"I figured the bag had fabrics and such because it wasn't heavy, and I gave it to Sebastian, who I suppose put Mary's name on it."

"I did," Sebastian confirmed. "I wrote it on a train, so my printing was a little shaky."

Vincent nodded. That explained why he hadn't recognized the handwriting. "Mary has removed all the needles, and there were a great many of them. She obviously used this 'pincushion' for years."

"I believe her sister died at least 35 years ago," Clarence said. "Sorry for the upset, Vincent."

"Now that I understand, I can forgive," Vincent responded. "But both Mary and I found it a little ... disturbing."

"People are strange," Clarence commented, thinking, although not saying, that the person in front of him was a lot less strange than many people above, for all his unique appearance. The people he saw on the street, even the ones who sometimes gave him money when he played, would raise eyebrows anywhere. Sebastian was even more engaged with them – but he made them smile.

"A mystery solved," Vincent commented, and rose from the seat. He said goodbye, listened at the door, and was gone.

The two men sat in silence for a few moments, then Clarence got them both a cup of tea with a little rum in it. It was a chilly night and the old radiator didn't heat well, although it made a lot of noise. Needed draining ... again, Clarence supposed. They sipped companionably.

"Was that story for real?" Sebastian asked at last.

"Yes, but I didn't tell everything," Clarence replied.

"And the rest?" Sebastian prodded. Curiosity was often rewarded and gave him ideas for his acts.

Clarence spoke slowly.

"I visited the old lady first some time ago. After she was no longer able to get down the stairs, I visited her more often, thought she might enjoy some music. She did. She always had a lot of fabrics piled around her apartment, balls of yarn in bags, projects that were half-done, as well as embroideries on frames and such. Her chairs were beautifully upholstered, some were embroidered in fancy patterns. They were obviously her pride and joy ... and they impressed her customers. They were always uncovered - nothing but people's bottoms were allowed on them.

"She was a nice person, friendly, but she was bitter about that lost sister and child, Sebastian. That pincushion was always there, right at her elbow. She was always working on something, although she stopped when I came and stabbed that pincushion with whatever needle she was using. The way she did it told me she enjoyed it, that it gave her pleasure to do it. Maybe she even gave a silent curse as she did so.

"She told me her story only fairly recently, after she became housebound, although I already

knew most of it. I've lived here almost as long as she has ... and people talk. I think that pincushion was her way of displaying her anger at the world, a world which had killed her sister and child, removed her other sister out of reach, and had now reduced her to living the rest of her life in a small apartment. She was not the type of woman to complain or bewail her fate, nor sit and brood and sink into depression. That pincushion represents a lot of frustration, Sebastian."

Sebastian nodded. "And now it's with Mary, who no doubt has a few frustrations of her own, but who will find a use for every one of those needles."

"Thus breaking the 'curse'," Clarence mused. He believed objects could take on the qualities of their owners. The pincushion was not something he would want nearby. He liked to think his horn with its mellow tone, reflected him ... in a positive way.

"Needles removed are merely useful ... and I'm sure that toy is no more," Clarence stated with assurance.

"A fitting end," Sebastian commented.

They toasted each other and mused on the vagaries of the human spirit.

END

Author's Note: I bought an object just like the one described here, from a thrift store. It disturbed me, but I never discovered its story. I did extract dozens of needles from it - and also took the toy apart to find many more.