

## The Benefits of Blindness

By c h cummingS

Stokley Faruthian discovered his third great terror on birthday number ten at *State Home Nine*, the unintended consequence of a miraculous act of kindness.

Several weeks before, Matron Maggote welcomed three blind brothers, ages six, seven, and eight, and their nine-year-old sister who, though lacking a right arm and left leg, had perfect vision. Arousing Stokley's skepticism, Maggote accepted the siblings in spite of her infamous unwillingness to take in what she referred to as 'strays,' unless obligated by the authorities.

The first of what became daily performances exposed the true nature of the headmistress's generosity. Compelled by the choir of sightless siblings, the local peasantry accumulated around the front steps of *State Home Nine* like moths to a flame, if moths could be trained to pay for the privilege.

Two weeks after their arrival, the eldest of the brothers, Almy, let it slip that their parents still lived in a shack on the far side of the city.

*They aren't even real orphans? If they've got parents, how did they lose their eyes? They couldn't all have been born like that. And what happened to the sister?* Stokley thought.

Discovering how any parent could let such a misfortune occur to their own child--not to mention an entire quartet--quickly became Stokley's obsession.

Upon discovering his interest Almy discerned an opportunity and offered Stokley a deal. If he could solve a simple

riddle, the blind boy would reveal how he and his siblings had been maimed. If he guessed wrong, Stokley would give up his breakfast eggs to Veda, their sister.

“Okay, what’s the riddle?” Stokley brimmed with confidence, considering two years, not to mention two eyes, quite the advantage over the boy, even if he could sing like an angel.

“You *sure*? Almyr asked, innocent as a newborn viper.

“I said so, didn’t I?” Stokley loved puzzles, too. Proctor Pontius was always telling him how smart he was, though no one else did. Stokley would have no difficulty with whatever challenge the boy had in mind, surely.

“Okay, here it is: as I was going to Pye-Run, I met a man with seven sons, each son had eleven bags, each bag had seven bitches, each bitch had seven pups. Pups, bitches, bags, and sons, how many were heading to Pye-Run?”

After losing his eggs, Stokley tried again the following day. This time Almyr required his breakfast eggs and his crust of bread for the youngest brother, Chappey, in order to hear the next riddle.

“Alright, fine. It’s a deal,” Stokley replied. Fortunately, he had pilfered a whole loaf from the pantry the night before. “What’s the riddle?”

“My pa’s favorite bard came up with this’n. He was a clever one, so listen close. Here goes: this thing, all things it eats. Birds, bees, trees and sheeps. Bites the irons, breaks the steels, it grinds all flowers in the fields. Slayer of crowns, devourer of towns, capable of bringing even mountains down.”

And thus, he challenged Almyr every morning. And every morning Stokley went hungry as the blind boy had a new, even more sublime mental puzzle waiting, for which he always required

more food in an ever-increasing fashion. Eventually, Stokley was planning his entire day around which half of which meal he would eat and which he would be shoveling into the depths of Almyr and his siblings' bottomless stomachs.

Of varying complexity, Almyr's riddles consistently dumbfounded Stokley while their answers always seemed right in front of his face the moment they were revealed. Of course, believing the next would be easy, which was never the case, Stokley eagerly jumped at every opportunity to defeat the increasingly smug fake orphan. This became a self-perpetuating cycle only broken on the afternoon of his tenth birthday when Veda finally took pity on the near-starved boy and gifted him their story.

The brothers' ruined eyes and her own missing limbs had been sacrificed at the hands of those same parents still living within walking distance. Hunger-mad Mother and alcoholic Father (peasant farmers who fled to the city with far too many mewling mouths to feed) found their children were more efficient at begging with blinded eyes and broken bodies than when fully abled. This happened many years before, when alcoholic Father first used the funny smelling rag to steal the sight from the eldest of his fourteen children.

Since maiming their first born, Veda's parents created several such troupes out of their talented offspring, though they were by no means alone in this practice. Most of the blind and missing limbed children singing for their suppers throughout the city's streets were crippled by their own kin, or so Veda claimed.

Hoping to find his own parents one day, or that they might come marching through the State Home's doors and claim him, Stokley was horrified to discover the folly of such desires. That it

was better to go without parents than risk the likely eventuality of being tortured by terrible ones: Better to be a lonely orphan, than to be blinded by one's own family.

Stokley never again cried himself to sleep for lack of mother and father. Those tears he replaced with screams as he woke from nightmares every few nights. Tortured by giants with red hot pokers chasing him down ever narrowed caves until trapped, their molten needles on the edges of his eyes. He regularly emerged from sleep deliriously wailing and shamefully wet. '*Soakley*,' they branded him thereafter, and '*Soakley*,' he remained no matter where he went.