

## PIERS AND THE BEGONIA

By Joan Lennon

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**P**iers was embarrassed.

He knew he should be proud; after all, he was the Keeper of the Threshold Beast at Castle Camphor in the Land of Whelm, and that was a most important thing. Every castle needed a Threshold Beast to sit at the front gate and guard against the Dangers of the Day and the Night. Some castles had Lions or Wolves to guard them, some had Sharp-Tusked Boars or Great-Horned Bulls, and one castle Piers knew of even had a Mythical Griffin. But Castle Camphor didn't have anything like that.

Castle Camphor had a Pot Plant—a Begonia.

Piers knew, of course, that the Begonia was no *ordinary* Pot Plant. It was ancient and wily and wise, and some said that if the need were great enough, it could even speak.

“Oh, ahrrr,” the oldest men-at-arms would say, “I’m minded of the year of the plague of woolly cats, oooh, terrible it were, cats everywhere. ‘Tweren’t no place at all that didn’t have woolly cats tumbling out of it. And what it were that the Begonia said to them I can’t at this moment bring to memory, but it made them scat and no mistake. Oh. Ahrrr.”

The oldest men-at-arms could tell you a lot of stories like that, but they didn’t really help Piers.

Verily and forsooth, he thought, I feel the fool. Instead of walking a Wolf or grooming a Griffin or polishing up the sharpest of a big Boar’s teeth, I am, alas, only in charge of a Pot Plant. All the other Keepers point at me behind my back and giggle and make jokes. ‘Tis awful.

Piers was not mistaken. At the Annual Keepers’ Parade, amidst all the fierce Beasts, people couldn’t help but notice Piers and his Begonia.

Now it must be said that all the while Piers was going on about being embarrassed and the Begonia was sitting upon the threshold looking harmless and pretty, none of the Usual Dangers ever came near Castle Camphor—not for a long, long time.

But then, one day, a New Danger came into the Land of Whelm—a Danger no one had met before. His name was Ravening Scourge, and he was big and hairy and scaly and ugly and, more than anything, he was *hungry*.

Up came Ravening Scourge to the castle gate.

“ROAR!” said the Lion or the Wolf or the Boar or the Bull or the Magical, Mythical Griffin.

“MERGLE!” said the Ravening Scourge, and without fail, the Threshold Beast would go “Gulp!” and turn a little pale, shuffle its feet, and then suddenly run away. Not one of them had seen anything like the Ravening Scourge before!

Ravening Scourge then lolloped into the castle and began to eat. And eat. And eat. If you could run or fly, you were all right, but things that couldn’t move, like potatoes or porridge or all the grain stored for the winter—anything like that didn’t have a chance.

People began to get worried. The oldest men-at-arms began to say, “Ooooh, ahrrr, ‘tis worse than the plague of woolly cats,” and everyone else began to say, “But what will we eat till spring?”

But the Ravening Scourge didn’t care. He had it all his own way and he ate and he ate and he ate, until he had eaten all the other castles out of house and home.

And, then, he came to Castle Camphor.

Piers could hear him coming, lolloping over the hills, his great stomach rumbling. Piers hid in the shadows of the gateway while the Begonia sat peacefully in the sunlight. And there, suddenly, was the Ravening Scourge. His huge eyes tolled in anticipation and his hairy nose dripped and he was all set to go straight into Castle Camphor. Suddenly the Begonia Spoke.

“Prithee,” said the Begonia, “thou shouldst not lollop past me without a word. By mine honor, ‘tis not a courtesy.”

Piers was surprised, but the Ravening Scourge was astounded.

“Mergle!” gaped the Scourge. He had met very few Pot Plants before, and none that had ever spoken to him.

“Mergle to you, too,” said the Begonia, “and if you have come here to eat us out of house and home, you may forget it. I am the Guardian of the Gate, the Threshold Beast, and none pass here against my will. Dangers may not enter Castle Camphor, except they eat me first.”

“Nerk!” said the Scourge. An idea was coming to him very, very slowly.

“Do you know what you are doing?” Piers whispered anxiously from the shadows.

The Begonia whispered back, "Verily and forsooth, I do."

While they were whispering together, the Scourge's Idea finally arrived. Without another word, he leaped forward and in three gulps he had eaten the Begonia, practically down to the soil.

Piers let out a shriek.

"You Horrible Hairy Scourge!" he cried. "You Ghastly Gruesome Great Galoot! You Slimy Scaly Smelly Sneaky Slummocker! You Big..." And Piers ran out of breath.

The Ravening Scourge had been looking rather smug because he had had an Idea *and* a Begonia, but now his expression started to change. He began to look uncomfortable and to shift about on his scaly feet. His huge eyes began to roll in different directions, and his great nose began to sniff. Then he turned green. Not a spring-meadow green or a tree-in-summer green, but more of a moldy, seasick, stomachache green.

Begonias do not make good eating.

"Erp!" said the Scourge. He did not feel hungry anymore. He did not like the Land of Whelm anymore. He did not think he would ever come here again. And having thought so much, the Ravening Scourge lolloped unsteadily off and was soon out of sight.

Poor Piers hugged the pot of the Begonia in his arms and cried and cried. But then, as he sat there in the gateway, he heard a voice coming from the pot.

"Verily and forsooth," it said. "What a palaver! 'Twas but a good pruning the Scourge gave me. Cease your weeping, Piers, and leave me in the sun. You shall be my Keeper these many years hence."

And it was true. The Begonia grew again, leafier than ever, and for many years, Piers was the Keeper of the Threshold Beast at Castle Camphor in the Land of Whelm. At the Annual Keepers' Parade, he carried his Begonia in front of everybody else. And he wasn't embarrassed anymore.