

Diary of a Mountie Prologue

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(based on COTY)

(with apologies to the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

being a tale in 26 Chapters)

www.megaloceros.net/preston.htm

It was a cold day in Fort Munn, and the pot-bellied stove in Inspector Moore's office did little to dispel that cold. Positively disgusting, he thought, that the manufacturers in Ottawa should charge such tremendous prices for equipment that failed to live up to its purpose. True, it wasn't nearly as bad as the cold outside, but then nothing was that bad. He'd served in the Yukon ten years now, and this was the first September he'd ever seen that put such a chill in his bones. If this was September, he didn't like to think what the winter would surely bring.

There were other, more pressing matters to attend to than the malfunctioning stove. The most pressing of the bunch was the paper before him. It was a simple enough thing, an official request for reinforcements, potentially in the long term. He'd processed plenty such forms before. True, the number of requested reinforcements - thirty-two - was a little high, but nothing extraordinary. In fact, there were only two extraordinary things about the paper: the reason for the request, and the signature at the bottom.

Inspector Moore sighed, not for the first time, and ran his hands through his thinning blonde hair. "Sergeant Preston," he said wearily, "as you can see, I've received your request. . ."

"Yes, sir." The other Mountie, of an age with Inspector Moore, stood at attention on the opposite side of the desk. To look at him, you'd never know the room was anything less than perfectly comfortable. The stories said Preston looked at an oncoming storm and built igloos Eskimos would envy, that the great grey half-wolf at his feet led him to caves and overhangs any other man would miss. Of course the blue-eyed man looked comfortable. This was positively tropical, by comparison with the trail.

That, however, was not the matter at hand. The Inspector dragged himself back to the everyday. "And I have to say," he resumed, "that I'm. . . more than a little nonplused. What, exactly, does this part of the paper say?" He tapped the form, hoping against hope that he'd read the thing wrong.

Sergeant Preston leaned over and peered at the words a moment. "Oz, sir," he

said.

The Inspector's heart sank. "Oz," he repeated.

"Yes, sir."

"As in the children's books."

"Afraid so, Inspector."

"You want me to loan you thirty-two Mounties to assist in the pacification of Oz," the Inspector said slowly.

"That's right."

"Sergeant. . . I don't even know where to begin. By all rights I ought to have you in Doctor Munro's office for even considering such a request." Doctor Munro was the only physician for a hundred miles who had any skill at all with cases of mental derangement.

"I know that, sir."

Then why are you standing there looking like you're a hair away from smiling ear to ear? thought Inspector Moore sourly. He concealed the confused resentment, and said instead, "I thought you were on extended leave."

"Technically, yes, sir," said the Sergeant. "But only for administrative reasons."

"Administrative reasons," repeated the Inspector.

"It would foul up the chain of command for me to be reporting to two different authorities at once, sir."

"Two. . . may I ask what the other one is?"

Sergeant Preston smiled faintly, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing an envelope. "This should explain a few things, sir."

The Inspector accepted the crinkled, cream-coloured envelope, opening it with fumbling fingers. The paper within was of the sort of quality he hadn't seen since - well, ever, really, except for one or two missives of commendation from-

He all but dropped the letter, eyes riveted to the words. "Prime Minister Mackenzie King," he read, mouth unaccountably dry, "hereby orders the release of - wait, what is this? The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen's a myth!"

"Afraid not, Inspector. Although I felt much the same way, when the letter originally arrived in my hands."

Inspector Moore shook his head. "Oz. The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. I suppose next you'll be telling me Paul Bunyan chopped down all the trees in Quebec."

"Why, no, sir. Paul Bunyan's a cheap advertising gimmick for the Red River Lumber Company of Minnesota."

Despite himself, Inspector Moore smiled. He bit it back quickly and looked up. The other man didn't seem the slightest bit off his pace. He might just as well have been waiting for news about a new sled dog. It wasn't right, it wasn't natural, for a man to be that calm when he'd just dropped such a bomb. Why, you'd think there was nothing at all unusual going on! Damn it, what was Preston thinking?

"Sergeant," said the Inspector slowly, "this is patently ridiculous. There is no such place as Oz. The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is the subject of bad pulp writers with no respect for literature." He looked down at the letter in his hand. "And yet, you bring me this, which I cannot deny gives every impression of being real. . . How is this possible, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Preston shrugged, answering, "The world's a stranger place than any of us give it credit for, sir. Neither you nor I can claim to know everything that goes on."

"I suppose not. . ." Abruptly, Inspector Moore shook himself. It was too easy to nod, to say yes, yes. This wasn't right. These things didn't happen. This couldn't be real, and he wasn't going to turn that many constables over to a man who proposed to take them to somewhere out of a fairy story!

Ah, that felt more like his own thinking. Lifting his head to meet the Sergeant's eyes, he said, "What you are asking for is impossible, Sergeant. Quite impossible. I might consider it if the problem had to do with, say, Alaska. It might upset the Americans a bit, but they're usually good about such things. Or if it were an internal Canadian matter. But this-

"I realize it looks like a problem on the surface, Inspector," said the Sergeant gently. "But once you accept the reality of the League, it's really not as difficult as it looks."

"You're asking an awful lot, Sergeant-

"No more than the Prime Minister asked of me, sir."

There it was again, that urge to believe, that feeling. . . He couldn't help it. There was something about the man that precluded the possibility of trickery and lies. He knew, rationally, that it was quite impossible- but, damn it, he

wanted to believe. Or, at least, to try...

For a while there was no sound in the office save the faint thump-thump-thumping of the Sergeant's dog scratching at an itch, and the softly hissing crackle of the pot-bellied stove. Eventually, Inspector Moore said, "I don't know, Sergeant. I just don't know."

"Sir?"

Moore pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "Sergeant, you have to admit, this isn't exactly normal procedure."

"I don't see why not, sir. Aside from Oz being a foreign jurisdiction, that is. The Crown's trying to establish diplomatic relations with the local head of state and assist the natives in repelling invaders. The threat the situation poses is big enough to endanger the entire British Empire. As far as I'm concerned, that calls for extraordinary measures - and the Crown will back me on that, if the question comes up."

Moore closed his eyes.

"All it needs is your authorization, sir," said the Sergeant's deep voice.

Without opening his eyes, Moore said, "Give me one good reason to believe you, Sergeant. Just one. That's all I ask. One good reason."

"Of course, sir." There was another stretch of quiet, this one much shorter. Moore thought he could hear Preston pulling something out from under his scarlet tunic. "But I'd like to ask you a question, first."

Inspector Moore spread his hands. "Ask away."

"Would you say I'm an imaginative man, Inspector?"

"Excuse me?" Moore opened his eyes and peered at Preston. The Sergeant's expression was earnest, curious.

"You know my reputation, Inspector. I've served under a couple of superior officers before, so you've read the reports about me. Am I what you would call an imaginative man?"

Puzzled, Moore shook his head slowly. "I . . . why, Sergeant, I don't believe I ever thought of that before."

"Think of it now, Inspector. Please." Preston's fingertips were resting on the edge of the Inspector's desk. "My service record's as long as yours. Have I ever given the Mounties a report that was too wild to believe?"

"No. . ."

"Have I ever been accused of spreading tales, or deceiving a fellow officer?"

"No, of course not."

The Sergeant leaned forward a little further. "Has there ever, in all my years as a Mountie, been a single incident where I failed in any aspect of a case because of insufficient evidence?"

"Sergeant, you've got the closest I've ever seen to an unblemished record."

"Then you'll agree that I'm not the sort to fabricate a record of events?"

"I. . . no, Sergeant, you're right. You're . . . you don't make things up."

Preston nodded. "That's what I thought you'd say," he said in a satisfied tone. He held out a brown paper envelope, held shut with a length of twisted red cord.

Moore accepted it hesitantly. "What is this, Sergeant?"

Preston smiled. "My diary for the past eight weeks, Inspector," he said. "Or maybe you'd rather call it your good reason."

Moore thumbed through the dog-eared contents of the envelope. "It's a hundred and fifty pages long, man!"

"Read it," Preston said. "And tell me if you honestly think I could make that much up."

The inspector passed one hand over his face. "All right, all right. . . Dismissed, Sergeant. Go and feed that dog of yours, or something."

Preston saluted smartly and strode out of the office, Prince at his heels.