

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Fourth **The World Turned Upside Down**

by

Jessica McGeary
(based on COTY)

Day Eight- Evening

London, England

League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Headquarters

I'm having some trouble putting my thoughts just now into words, as I'm finding them drawn back to a fact I learned as a schoolboy. When Lord Cornwallis surrendered to the American armies and their French allies at Yorktown, it's said his men marched out of Yorktown to the tune "The World Turned Upside Down".

Right now I could use a tune like that.

Today started normally enough, and it went on normally enough. The dirigible had to be moored halfway across London from our destination- the Parliament buildings. Can't say I blame them; I wouldn't want a monster like that tied to the roof of anything important in Dawson, let alone the houses of Parliament! They had carriages waiting for us. I suspect they'll send motorcars next time. The horses didn't take well to Prince at all. He wasn't happy with the carriage ride himself, but that's only because he'd rather have been at the head of a team doing the pulling. Behaved himself admirably, though. It was an uneventful ride for the most part, so I took the opportunity to snatch a bit of a nap. I woke up to find that we weren't stopping outside Parliament, but in what I assumed was one of the Lords' carriage-houses. Before I could ask exactly where we were, the drivers had opened a door and Miss Poppins was leading us down a corridor more reminiscent of a mine than a Government institution.

That should have been my first warning.

To be honest, I was a little suspicious at this point. Still, it was England, and the Government buildings have been around longer than anything in North America. I reckoned it was some kind of access tunnel dating back to the medieval kings, so Prince and I followed her without a fuss. Cranston looked altogether too much at home for my liking, and as for the others- well, I could hear Swift speculating on how they'd cut the tunnel and run the lighting into it, Danner didn't speak up much, and Lord Wimsey seemed to have worn out his supply of questions before he got off the dirigible. Even Swift was quiet by the time we reached the modern part of the corridor. I'm not much good at navigating underground, but we had to have been somewhere near the heart of the Houses of Parliament by then.

The room at the end of the corridor was nothing I've ever seen in a textbook; instead it was some kind of meeting room, long, narrow, low-ceilinged, and fitted out with a table long enough to seat twenty men around. There were group paintings on the walls, a little grubby from years of gaslight smoke- no windows anywhere in sight. One of the chairs was already occupied by a small blonde girl who couldn't have been more than twelve. I couldn't imagine what she was doing there, but I didn't ask to get the question. We'd barely got farther than names (hers being Dorothy Gale) when a door at the other end of the room opened, admitting a severely dressed man of middle years. He informed us that we were to address him as J.

Prince settled himself next to my chair as the man began handing around folders, which looked as if they came from the same store as the one Miss Poppins had originally given me. "These folders," J. said, "contain all the information available on your fellow League members, as well as such information as we feel is appropriate before the beginning of your mission."

"Yes, about that..." It was Lord Wimsey, whose monocle seemed to be giving him trouble. Cranston snorted.

"What about it?" The man arched an eyebrow, which fazed Lord Wimsey not one bit.

I missed exactly what he asked, as Prince had come to his feet and padded over to Miss Gale's chair. She had a Cairn terrier in her lap, an elderly one if I'm any judge, and was wearing a belt over her dress that looked like something a prizefighter might win. Didn't seem afraid of Prince, though. All she did was set her dog down on the floor and tell him to be a good boy. Then she waved at me with a bit of a smile. It took me a moment to realize she'd been given a folder, too.

Lord Wimsey's question might have gotten away from me, but J.'s answer grabbed my attention like a gunshot. "Glasgow, Lord Wimsey," said the man crisply. "The lot of you will be going to Glasgow, to work out an answer to a recent string of ship sinkings." I saw Swift lean forward out of the corner of my eye. "You have each been selected for the League for different reasons. Your detective prowess-"

Lord Wimsey nodded.

"Your inventive genius-"

Swift smiled.

"Your sheer, blind, bloody-minded persistence and stubbornness-"

He looked directly at me as he said that. I started to salute.

"Your experience with fairy realms-"

"WHAT?" That was Cranston, Swift, and Danner all at once. The cry of "Oh, I say, excuse me?" went up from Wimsey. I don't think I did more than choke on my tongue, myself.

"Fairy realms, Mister Cranston." J. nodded to the girl next to me. "Miss Gale is well acquainted with such things. The matter for which you have been summoned is no ordinary case. The city's harbor is apparently under assault by sirens, of the classical sort. I trust you're familiar with your Greek mythology?"

"You must be joking," said Cranston, looking up from his folder. There was a picture of a dubious-looking Danner visible on one page; Cranston looked even more skeptical than the American's photograph. "Sirens? As in lovely young fish-women singing sailors to their doom?"

"As in razor-toothed, spike-finned piranha creatures capable of chewing through the belly of the pride of the ports of Europe, Mr. Cranston." J. indicated the folders. "You'll find what information we currently have on the matter in your dossiers. The short version of it is that for some weeks now, ships arriving in Glasgow have run afoul of these creatures. They let loose with their song; the men on the ships go over the edge or fall down in trances; they chew through the ships and devour the sailors inside."

Cranston's look was ... well, I didn't know whether to laugh at his expression or admit I felt the same way. Surely this fellow had to be joking- didn't he? Fairy realms? Sirens? Good God, this was 1936! Who believed in such things any more?

"Your dossiers contain full information on what we got back of the victims," continued J. "Miss Gale, your file's photographs have been expurgated-"

The girl looked up at me then and whispered, "What's 'ex-pur-gated'?"

"They took out the pictures," I told her as quietly as I could. She frowned a little bit, but nodded and started turning her pages.

"The Sirens don't appear to discriminate. They sing to boats full of men, chew through the boats, and devour everyone inside. When the boats are full of women they scream at the tops of their lungs to no effect, then chew through the boats and devour everyone inside..."

I confess I stopped listening then. Not for lack of belief, I assure you. No, I was too busy reading the pages which had been expurgated from Miss Gale's file. I'd seen sights like that before. Wolves interrupted in the act of devouring a caribou carcass left a mess like that.

"What's 'e-viss-er-ated'?" whispered Miss Gale, as J. continued her description.

I looked at Miss Gale. She really couldn't have been more than twelve years old at

the very most. She was probably the most calm, collected child I've ever met. Aside from the massive golden belt she wore, she had the look of- well, any frontier child, really. Nothing fancy to her clothes, just simple practicality. If her parents had released her to the League for some reason... no. No, no sane parent would put their child in the care of someone talking about fairy realms as if they were real, would they? Of course not. She deserved a straight answer, even if we weren't getting them ourselves.

"Have you ever been on a farm?" I asked.

She nodded happily. "I grew up on one."

Yes, that seemed right. She didn't feel like a city child. "Good. Have you ever seen them turn pigs into pork?"

"Oh, yes! Uncle Henry used to do that all the time."

"All right, then. When they cut the pig open and everything falls out-

"So it's guttin'?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I've seen guttin' lots of times." She went back to reading her file. "What's 'gelded'?"

I'm sure I must have matched my uniform at that. She was twelve! I mumbled something, I don't remember what.

"So it's what they do to turn a bull calf into a steer?"

"That's right," I said. "But we should listen to the man now."

She nodded. Thank God. I did my best to bury my nose in my papers.

"... yes, Mister Swift, we have tried that. We've shot at them; it doesn't do any visible good. We've stabbed them with swords; they scream, then rip off the swordsmen's arms." No survivors, said the report.

"Have you tried artillery? Or explosives?" The blonde American leaned forward, looking far too interested in the prospect to mean anything good for anyone. The next line of my report said estimates placed the Sirens' numbers somewhere in the vicinity of twenty.

"In the middle of Glasgow Harbour with ships passing in and out at all hours of the day and night? I think not." Eyewitness reports apparently ranged up as high as one hundred fifty of the creatures.

"What about fire?" volunteered Danner. It was the first time I'd heard him speak.

The file said no Siren had yet been captured alive.

"Again, Mr. Danner, we are talking about a harbour. If you have figured out how to make water ignite, share the method with us, by all means." The big fellow just grinned and sat back.

"Electricity?" Swift again.

"We would have to get a generator out to where they were, first."

"Nets?" suggested Miss Poppins.

J. shook his head. "That would require getting close enough to them to drop the net properly."

"Magic?" asked Miss Gale suddenly. I think all of us turned and looked at her then.

"No," said J., "not that. This is precisely why we have called the lot of you together. You have twelve hours in which to come up with a preliminary plan-"

"Excuse me." Lord Wimsey again. "I can't help but wonder if there's any information beyond this- it's a bit on the thin side, I'm afraid-" He riffled his dossier's pages with an apologetic look.

J. nodded. "You'll have access to all the information on Sirens in our library. And twelve hours in which to find it, so I suggest you begin as soon as you can."

I would have said something then, as it was getting into the realm of the purely ridiculous, when my eyes fell on one word: Autopsy. Not of the poor devils who'd been ripped to death- but of one of the creatures that had done the ripping, found floating dead at sea. Sirens, said the report, were possessed of a fishlike skeletal structure, enormously spiny fins reminiscent of some of the 'trash fish' of the Grand Banks, mammalian four-chambered hearts, oddly structured lungs but no gills, webbed fingers, fishlike tails, and more teeth than God granted any other creature save the shark.

They had an autopsy. A real, live, factual autopsy. Either I was the victim of one of the biggest hoaxes any prankster ever organized... or Sherlock Holmes was right. When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains- however improbable- must be the truth. It wasn't entirely impossible for something to be faked on this scale, but it was so close to it as to make no difference. And that meant these creatures, these Sirens, were real.

Cranston was asking about finding a telephone. I didn't listen. I closed up my folder and put up a hand. Must've looked like some kind of schoolboy, but I wasn't thinking of that.

"There's a telephone in the back, which you may use... yes, Sergeant?"

"Water closet?" I asked. J. rolled his eyes.

"The bathroom is behind the door on your left. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

We had twelve hours in which to research how to stop an invasion of mythical fish-women who just happened to be real. I didn't think a few minutes to splash cold water on my face and neck in the hopes of waking up from a very bad dream was too much to ask. As I did not wake up, and am still both awake and thumbing through very smelly old books in what I assume is the League library...

Lord Cornwallis, General Washington- whichever one of you chose the tune, I'd like to congratulate you on your taste. And ask, please, that you send your musicians along. I could use them right now.