

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Fifth Story Time

by

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(based on COTY)

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League Lodgings

The others are still doing their research on the Sirens. It's not a field I can contribute to much, any more than if it were a plague or pestilence breaking out instead. I did my best to find what information I could, but it seems as if everything I want is either in Glasgow or not considered material that we need by our superiors. Maybe I'm wrong, but I had the impression that we needed all the information we could get if we were to come up with a plan to stop these creatures. I wanted a list of ships attacked, their cargoes, their ports of origin, their crew manifests, their registries and their shipping lines. I don't think that's too much to ask. You never know where a pattern might emerge; there was a case back in Dawson where a ferry-boat operator tried targeting his competitors' ships with dynamite... Like I said, they don't appear to have that information here. It's just going to have to wait until we get to Glasgow. Unless I miss my guess that means more dirigible travel, so I'm going to see if I can't get some sleep now and do any reading that I can on board the blimp.

I couldn't help but notice I wasn't the only one frustrated by the library. Cranston stepped out almost as soon as J. sent us off, muttering about reaching his people. He was scowling like a thundercloud when he came back. I'm going to assume that means that either he couldn't reach his people, or that they had even less knowledge of what was going on than we did. I'll ask him tomorrow. Swift spent most of the time taking notes and sketching in the margins, occasionally speculating out loud about the supplies he'll need to make a metal net. Danner and Miss Poppins wound up at the same table. I believe they were planning on finding out more about our adversaries once we reached Glasgow. What I could hear of their conversation seemed more about legends and phenomena than physiology. Wouldn't be surprised at all if the two of them tried to negotiate with the creatures when we got there, or at least communicate—

Speaking of communication, it seems Miss Poppins can talk to dogs. More importantly, she appears to understand them when they talk back. If I hadn't just been reading an extremely complicated Government report on the inner workings of the bodies of mermaids, I would've written this off as a joke, but right now it's

just one more log on the fire. Miss Gale's terrier, Toto, didn't seem very happy with the idea of staying with Prince outside the library. I don't blame the little fellow- Prince is a good ten times Toto's weight, and smells like a wolf. Just as I was going to tell Prince to lie down and leave Toto alone, Miss Poppins stepped in. She crouched right down and looked Prince square in the eye. "You're a fine fellow, Yukon Prince," she said, "so I trust you to behave yourself."

I could swear I saw Prince nod when she said that.

"Good boy. Toto's not very fond of other dogs, and he's never met a dog like you; do you think you can be polite in spite of that?" She watched his face for a moment, then nodded. "Good. Very good. I'll have your paw on that, if you don't mind." She held out her hand, and Prince put his paw squarely into hers and let her shake it- which he never, ever does unless I've given him permission. She turned away and started talking to Toto about Prince after that. I wasn't listening. Prince was looking up at me, and for the first time since he was a tiny pup, he looked- well, embarrassed. As if he didn't mean to make himself understood to someone who wasn't me.

I overheard Cranston making some kind of comment about 'talking to animals now, are we', but he hid it well. Besides, Toto had just shuffled over to Prince and bumped him with his nose. I watched them for a few minutes and they seemed to be getting along, so I patted Prince on the head and followed the others into the library.

As I said, the research wasn't really helpful for me. I expect Miss Poppins and Mr. Danner will give us a distillation of their ideas in the morning, before we leave for Scotland. Swift, obviously, was designing something, God alone knows what. We'll see that in the morning, too. Cranston vanished into the library long before I ran out of documents I wasn't allowed to see, so in the end I found myself left with only Miss Gale for company. She had crept up behind me and was looking over my shoulder at the dossier information on mermaids-

No. Not the information, the pictures.

"Miss Gale," I said, trying to turn the folder away a little, "you probably shouldn't be looking at this. It's dreadful stuff."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Preston," she said. "I only wanted to see what the fish ladies did to those poor men. I might as well see what we're supposed to be fighting, after all."

It occurred to me then that any child with a good imagination would be able to come up with a mental picture after what they said in our reports. Better to head that off by giving her the truth. It'd just run around loose in her head otherwise.

I opened the folder and laid it out in front of her. Got to give her credit; she turned

a little pale, but all she did was frown, shake her head, and say, "These fish ladies have got to be stopped, and that's flat."

I smiled then. "You're right, Miss Gale. That's what we're here to do, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes indeed," she said. "It's a pity Ozma isn't here."

"Ozma?"

Miss Gale nodded. "If Ozma were here, she could tell them to stop it and they'd have to listen. On account of she rules over all the fairies." I believe I opened my mouth then, but nothing came out. Miss Gale kept right on talking. "See, she was one of the fairies that first turned Oz into a fairyland, and Queen Lurline made her the ruler over it..."

"Fairyland, Miss Gale?" I asked. "I ...never learned about any fairy lands in school."

"Oh, you wouldn't have. Most people don't know about 'em. But there's Oz, and there's Ev, which is separated from Oz by the Deadly Desert, and..."

She kept on talking, but I only had half an ear open. J. had said Miss Gale had experience with fairy realms- had he been serious? There wasn't anything in the folder-

No, wait. GALE, DOROTHY- there, I'd missed her pages-

"... and Billina, the yellow hen. Only Dr. White didn't like me talking about that."

"Doctor White?" I asked, putting the folder down.

She nodded. "At the asylum," she said very soberly. "See, Glinda figured out that the magic things like the Silver Slippers and the Nome King's belt worked even after you took them out of the fairy lands, so the Wizard and I tried to cross the Deadly Desert to find the Slippers again. Only the balloon crashed and we got lost, and when I finally found people again I started asking them about the Wizard and Oz, and they thought I was crazy. So they put me in an asylum, and Toto had to stay in a kennel."

My hands suddenly felt like ice. It's not polite to stare, but I couldn't help it. An asylum? For a child? If she weren't mad when she went in, she'd be completely insane by the time she got out! "Miss Gale," I asked very slowly, "how long ago was this?"

She frowned thoughtfully for a moment. "Four years ago," she said.

"Four-!" I pushed the folder away from me. "But you're- so this happened when you were eight? That's horrible!"

She nodded. "Well— sort of— I'm around twelve, but I was born a lot longer than twelve years ago. Only nobody gets older in Oz, or any of the fairy lands."

What I wouldn't have given for a cup of good strong tea just then. "You know, Miss Gale," I said very slowly, "up until this morning, I would have sworn there weren't any such thing as fairy lands."

That was the wrong thing to say. Miss Gale's expression crumpled, and she all but folded up like a pillbug. "Dr. White used to tell me all the time that there were no such things as fairies," she said very quietly. She wasn't meeting my eyes, the poor girl. "Or Oz, or my friends, or any of those things. He got very angry when I told him it was true."

I had to think fast. "But that was this morning," I said, "and, you know- before this morning, I didn't know about any fish women, either."

Miss Gale looked up then, blinking. "It's all right," I told her. "Just because I didn't know, doesn't mean it's not true. It just means I never heard of it before."

Understand, please- I've never once seen anything in the North Country that couldn't be explained, in the end. The shamaness who could kill with her shadow turned out to have a husband with access to arsenic powder. The voice of Yokko, God of the Mountain turned out to be wind over a cave mouth after a poorly handled bit of dynamite. Every time I've seen someone make a supernatural claim, it's turned out to be nothing but fancy and superstition.

But this- well-

The Crown seemed to think it was real. If they believed her story enough to include her in the League, then I could believe her too. At least, until I got the chance to see the Sirens with my own eyes and decide the truth for myself.

"So it's all right," I said. "I don't think you're crazy."

She smiled.