

Diary of a Mountie — Part the Ninth Or Goblin Damned

by

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(based on COTY)

Day Nine- Late Night

Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!

The Sirens are real. I've seen them with my own eyes. They're every bit as dangerous as we were told, and then some- and there are well more than twenty, though I'd be lying if I said I knew how many more. The reports didn't know the half of it...

We went down to the harbor as it started to get dark. Swift had finished his work; each man had his own modified electric rifle. Lord Wimsey agreed to stay behind at the Inn and watch over Miss Gale, which was a relief, since neither Miss Poppins nor Prince could be spared. Business had dropped off considerably since I'd last seen the place- although that wasn't at the harbor itself so much as among the warehouses on the way. We had only gotten partway down the streets when Miss Poppins called a halt.

"Gentlemen," she said, "it's just occurred to me. These Sirens are supposed to lure men to their unfortunate ends by their singing." We looked at each other, not quite sure what she was getting at. She gave a faint little sigh and reached into her carpet bag. "Oh, come now, gentlemen- surely you've read your Homer? J. did ask if we remembered our mythology, after all."

As I haven't touched Homer since my schoolboy days, and don't remember much more than being disappointed to find the Trojan Horse wasn't even mentioned in the Iliad, I didn't say anything. Danner, on the other hand, was smiling. "I've got my own, ma'am," he said as he held up a tin the size of a pack of cards.

"Own what?" asked Swift.

Danner opened his tin and held up a blob of whitish stuff. "Wax," he said, returning the tin to his pocket and starting to roll the stuff between his hands. "I read the Odyssey in college. Ulysses wanted to hear the Sirens' song, but without crashing his ship- so he had his men stuff their ears with wax and tie him to the mast. They'd know they were past the Sirens when he stopped trying to break free of the ropes."

Miss Poppins had already started passing around tins of the stuff herself.

"Sergeant," she said as she handed me my tin, "you'll find some extra for Yukon Prince in here."

Now, Prince understands a good deal of what I say. I've had him since he was a pup. In the seven years we've known each other I have never once had to put anything into his ears, except to remove ticks and other biting insects. I think he knew how ill at ease I was with what I had to do; he whined a little and thumped his tail against the pavement as I crouched down next to him. "Prince, old boy," I started, "I'm going to need to..."

That was where I stopped. Couldn't for the life of me figure out how to explain that I had to stop him from hearing me. "It's not going to be safe for you to hear, boy-"

"Having a little trouble, Sergeant?" It was Miss Poppins. She smiled as I turned Prince to face her, and within minutes of talking to him had his ears stoppered as neatly as you please. Didn't even paw at his head when she was done. One day I am going to have to have her teach me to do that.

Turns out we didn't plug our ears a moment too soon. We'd hardly gotten started towards the harbor again before the running began. Screaming too, I assume; the people who started streaming out of the harbor area shot past us like they were trying to outrun an avalanche, and no one alive can pull off a run like that in silence. Couldn't hear a thing myself. Didn't have to. Every late-working businessman, dock worker, deck hand, stevedore, and traveler in the city of Glasgow wanted to put as much space as they could between themselves and the harbor.

Since we had to get past them, you can imagine the time we had of it. Good thing Danner's a one-man battering ram- people cleared out of his path without even thinking about it. The ones he couldn't turn aside bolted at the sight of Prince. We made it through the streets and down to the docks without being trampled.

There was no sign of anything visible in the water, but then again darkness had already begun to fall and Glasgow Harbor had been murky during the day. We stood in the street, looking up and down the rows of ships; I'd been just about to step forward when I felt a tap on my arm. It was Cranston, pointing at a vessel too far down the quay to make out the name. Big ship- some kind of freighter- and starting to list heavily towards the open water. I nodded to the American as the other men got their rifles out. We had enough understanding of hand signals between us to pass around a basic plan: fan out along the quays. Move in the direction of the listing ship only after we'd formed a long enough line to cover the spaces between and keep Miss Poppins safe. I powered up my rifle, but I had one modification to the plan. I crossed my fingers, crouched down, and pulled the wax out of Prince's ear. He didn't bolt. That was good enough for me.

"All right, boy," I told him, "here's your chance. I'm going down there, and I need

you to go ahead of me." He- well, I assume he barked at that. Couldn't tell, since I still had my own wax in. "Go down the dock ahead of me. Stop if it's dangerous. Sit down if you smell anything strange. All right?" He cocked his head then, the way he's done since he was a pup, and made a silent whuf. I smiled. "Good boy, Prince," I murmured. "Now hold still while I put this wax back. You need this as much as I do."

Like I said, Prince and I have worked together for his entire life. He's as good as any man, like his grandfather, and has more sense than most human beings I've met. He trotted down the quay ahead of me, nose low, tail high as always. I had my eyes on the ship. Cranston, Swift, and the others moved along just as we'd planned, sweeping their rifles in covering arcs. It looked as if we'd be all right.

Lucky thing Prince is more silver than grey, or I wouldn't have spotted his motion in the shadows. He stopped halfway down the dock, pawing the wood; his tail drooped suddenly, all but clamped between his legs. He ducked his head, shivering at something. Then, as carefully as the wet wood would allow, he slunk off the dock like a frightened puppy and hid behind my legs. Let me repeat that: Yukon Prince, the best lead dog it's ever been my privilege to know, hid. He once fought a half-grown black bear to save my life. And he hid from what was in the water.

We men exchanged glances. Miss Poppins looked to me as I crouched down to scratch poor Prince behind the ears; he whined and licked my hand. With what looked like a sigh, Miss Poppins pulled the wax from one of her ears, gesturing to me to do the same. "That's not good, is it," she asked.

"No, ma'am, it's not. This dog is braver than any man in the Yukon."

She nodded. "Well, gentlemen," she said as she reached for her umbrella, "it seems we need a bit of aerial surveillance." With the faintest of smiles she tucked the wax back in her ear, lifted her umbrella over her head, and took off.

No, I am not joking. I wish I were. She lifted into the air as easily as the dirigible, even though there wasn't the slightest bit of wind to be felt. I imagine we must all have looked like fish, pop-eyed and gaping- at least for a moment, anyway, since I looked away as soon as I got my good sense back. Wouldn't do to stare at a lady in a compromising position, even if that position was twenty feet overhead. I had just started to roll my wax earplug back into shape when she landed, looking grim. "Yukon Prince is right," she said, looking to the other men. "They're coming."

I jammed the plug in. Danner, who was nearest, fell back to Miss Poppins' side. As one, we readied our rifles.

And the Sirens came.

My first glimpse was of a hand- a gnarled, clawed, webbed thing I hardly recognized at first. It lunged over the edge of the dock, digging into the wood, and my blood ran cold as I realized the creatures were climbing out of the water. My rifle's electric discharge would have set dry wood on fire, and this wood was covered in salt water. We'd have been dead in seconds if anyone had fired. I fumbled for the switch that moved the rifle from 'stun' to 'flash' as I backed up. One of the creatures heaved itself out of the water and into the light.

The Siren before me bore as much resemblance to Cranston's 'lovely young fish-women' as I do to a Hottentot witch doctor. It had the head and torso of a human woman, but its skin was a vile gray-green colour. Spikes protruded from its shoulders and back, fanning out like some kind of sick imitation porcupine on either side of its rippled dorsal fin. Its lower half was covered in silvery scales, down to the thick, heavy join between flesh and tail fin. Even at that distance its teeth were visible, gleaming needle-sharp in what was left of the evening light. It looked like something out of a Newfoundland fisherman's nightmare- and it wasn't alone. There were more of them crawling out of the water behind the creature every moment.

"Get back!" I shouted, momentarily forgetting that no one could hear me. "Get away from the water! Prince, look after Miss Poppins!" The thing turned towards me, black eyes glittering like cut glass, and bared its teeth. I had no doubt whatsoever that others of its kind were chewing through the collapsing ship at that very moment. Or that this one had heard me... "All right, you," I growled. Swift had said the triggers were a little sensitive; I took another step backwards. The creature planted its arms on the wood and heaved itself forward, wriggling like a seal. "Back off, or we'll blow you all to kingdom come!"

It planted its hands again and heaved forward. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

That flare was so bright, it seared purple spots into my eyes through closed lids. I can't have been the only one to fire. I stumbled over a paving-stone, throwing up a hand out of reflex; when my vision cleared I could see several of the Sirens lined up at the very edge of the join between wood and stone. Their companions rolled behind them in pain, pawing at their eyes before falling into the water. I only saw that for a moment, though, because the ones who could still see suddenly- well, they flared. Every fin, every spine, every last bit of unnatural defenses they had suddenly stood on end. They lifted their heads as one, drew back their lips, and screamed-

I couldn't hear it, but I could feel it in my bones. The great soprano Madame Cavalieri had visited Dawson City years ago and sung for the miners there, hitting notes that would have shattered glass. Her voice had nothing, nothing on these creatures, and I silently thanked God for the good sense of Mary Poppins. If they

did have the power to call men to them with that hideous song, we'd have been doomed for sure- and even if they didn't I expect we would have been collapsed on the ground, our eardrums broken and bleeding. I flipped the switch from 'flash' back to 'stun', but before I could fire on the things Danner picked up a rock and flung it at the nearest Siren. She didn't even pause in her screaming, only caught the rock out of midair and flung it back. It bounced off him and hit a lamp-post, where it left a vicious dent.

We opened fire then, which interrupted the screaming, but it didn't do us much good. Firstly, the Sirens were being joined by more of their hellish sisters, who were clambering up past the screamers to swarm for us. (Whoever said there had been only twenty must have been blind drunk at the time.) And, second, the ship chose that particular moment to give up the ghost. Timbers started cracking, flying into the air as the vessel heaved over. The spray of water it threw up was enormous. I would have kept firing, but Swift's muzzle suddenly went dark- he remembered what I hadn't, the salt water's danger. If the rifles' inventor wasn't willing to use them, I certainly wasn't going to, but aside from my service revolver I doubted we had any weapons on hand.

I was wrong- Cranston started emptying a pair of .45s at the Sirens as we retreated. He had excellent aim, even two-handed, not that it did him any good. J. hadn't been exaggerating when he described the uselessness of bullets against the things. I looked to Danner, who had already put up his rifle, and to Swift, who was earnestly gesturing to Miss Poppins in a manner that clearly meant 'run'. He saw me looking, pointed to me then, and made the same gesture. Miss Poppins nodded. I raised my free hand, signaling the other men.

The rifles went out and the Sirens paused in their course. It was all the time we needed. Somewhere between that moment and reaching the steps of the Inn we lost our pursuers, which was a relief until we discovered Miss Gale and Lord Wimsey had decided to leave. Where they went, I don't know. I asked Albert about that. Said the girl had wanted to follow us, so she and Wimsey left. As he hadn't been outside since we left he had no idea where they'd gone; the only help he could offer was dessert, in the form of a fresh peach. Before I could ask him anything else he stormed off, muttering under his breath.

Miss Poppins is fetching Dorothy's pillow at the moment so Yukon Prince can get her scent. Lord Wimsey seemed sensible enough that I expect they're holed up in a building somewhere, but I'm taking the electric rifle and Danner with me just in case.