

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Tenth The Water-Baby

by

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(based on COTY)

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Three Fishes Inn

I suppose I could have written this last night, but if there's one thing you learn on the trail in the Yukon, it's that a man can only go so long without sleep and expect to do his best the next day. I expect most of us probably wanted nothing more than for the night to end. Not that today's likely to be any easier.

Prince and I didn't have to search for Miss Gale after all. Miss Poppins brought the pillow down all right, and Prince got the scent right away. Funny thing, though. When Danner went to open the door, there they were- Dorothy and Lord Wimsey, side by side. Lord Wimsey had his hand up to knock, but his attention wasn't in front of him. No, he was focused on Dorothy and I don't blame him one bit. That little girl had a pearl in her arms, a pearl as big as a man's head! Plastered with kelp, too, and smelling of salt and sea.

"Are you sure you don't want me to carry that?" asked Lord Wimsey. The girl shook her head.

"That's all right, Mister Wimsey," she said. "I can carry it the rest of the way. But you should get a nice soft blanket for it- oh, Miss Poppins, Mister Danner, everyone, look what we found! Mister Wimsey thinks it's an egg!"

An egg? That was enough of a surprise to take the words right out of my mouth. Out of everyone's, I think. Even Cranston looked too stunned to speak. Of course, the silence only lasted a moment or two. Then the questions started to fly. They didn't get answered, though, because Lord Wimsey had found that blanket and was disappearing into the dining room. Dorothy went after him, and the rest of us followed.

"We found this down by the docks," said Dorothy. Lord Wimsey set the blanket down a little distance from the fire, and Dorothy nestled the egg into it. "There, that looks nice and warm. Aunt Em used to do that with eggs on the farm, sometimes, when the hens wouldn't sit right."

"Dorothy," I asked very quietly as the others started crowding around the egg, "what were you doing down by the docks? You were supposed to stay here with

Lord Wimsey."

She looked up at me. "Oh, I know, Mister Preston, but you see I couldn't just sit around when everyone was doing something, could I? And anyway, Mister Wimsey asked what I wanted to do, so I told him I wanted to follow you."

Cranston and Swift had crouched down on opposite sides of the egg. Cranston looked like he expected it to leap up and bite him at any moment. Swift murmured something, tapping gingerly at the egg and looking to the others expectantly. "You could've been hurt, you know," I murmured.

Dorothy shook her head. "No I couldn't," she said earnestly. "I've got the Nome King's belt, you see. I can't be hurt as long as I'm wearing it." Sure enough, she still had on the huge prizefighter-style jeweled belt.

"We tested that," volunteered Lord Wimsey. "When Miss Gale here told me about the belt, I thought we had better make sure it worked the way she said it did. So I tried to hit her- with her full permission, I assure you," he added hastily, looking at me.

"Go on," I told him.

"Ah- yes. Damnedest thing, really- I couldn't do it. Couldn't even come close. My hand just bounced right off some invisible shield an inch from her head."

"Anyone got a stethoscope?" It was Swift. Miss Poppins began rummaging through her bag.

"So that was how Mister Wimsey knew I couldn't get hurt," said Dorothy. "After that, why, he said he couldn't think of a single reason why we ought to stay cooped up here, so we went out to look for you. Only he-"

"Gentlemen," said Miss Poppins firmly, "there's something in there, all right. I can hear it."

All of us turned to the egg. Dorothy had to edge between Danner and Cranston to get a proper look. It might've been my imagination, but it seemed to me that by the firelight I could almost make out a mass of some kind inside. It wasn't properly pearlescent any more, or at least it didn't seem that way. I suddenly felt sure that if I were to put my hand on it, it'd be leathery to the touch.

"I think it's moving," said Swift in a hushed voice. Sure enough, the thing gave a quiver.

"I think it's hatching," said Dorothy.

The thing inside gave an enormous kick, and my hand went straight to my revolver.

"What is it going to do when it hatches?" asked Cranston, his eyes fixed on the thing. His fingers were flexing as if they itched to reach for something. "It could attack us."

"Well," said Dorothy, "if it's anything like a chicken egg, it'll think whatever it first sees is its mother."

"Do we want it to hatch?" That was Danner.

"I'm not sure we have a choice. It's right next to the fire."

"Maybe we'd better move it?"

"A wise idea," said Miss Poppins, and she reached for the egg. It spasmed again; her hand stopped. The thing inside gave one more mighty kick, and a piece of shell popped away.

I think we all held our breaths then. Now, I've seen birds hatch- geese mostly- but I've never seen anything like this. The shell didn't fracture so much as tear, coming apart in slow motion and peeling away like the skin of an orange. I could just make out what looked like tiny fingers grasping at the edge of the shell for a moment before they vanished and the thing started kicking once more. A few more huge pieces fell-

"Oh, my!" gasped Dorothy. "It's a water baby!"

She was right, I think. I don't know what else you could really call a nearly human infant that had just hatched from an egg. I say nearly because no human child I know of has webbed, clawed fingers at birth, or glittering black eyes, either. It was a little girl, just the size of any normal newborn ("why, it looks like my nephew!" was Lord Wimsey's comment), and almost as soon as the eggshell fell away it took a huge breath and started screaming. We clapped our hands over our ears, but Miss Poppins dropped hers almost immediately. "It's all right, gentlemen," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the cries. "She's just crying. It's not like the harbour."

I lowered my hands, as did Dorothy. The others were a bit slower to do the same. Miss Poppins bent over to pick the child up, cradling it just as if it were a human baby. "There, now, little one," she crooned to it quietly, "hush, hush, all will be well..."

There was a knock at the door. Swift got up and opened it; it was Albert. "Here," he said roughly, thrusting a baby bottle full of milk at him.

"How did you-"

"I've got ears, haven't I? If you're goin' to be fool enough to hatch out mermaid

eggs in my inn, someone's got to feed 'em, eh?"

"How did you know it was a mermaid egg?" asked Cranston suspiciously, rising to face the man.

Albert snorted, a sound of deep disgust. "Idiot. I'm not blind. Where else are y'goin' t'be gettin' a wee babe like that at this hour of the night? You got yerselves a mermaid egg an' hatched it warm, so you got one that looks like a human."

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, if you'd kept it cold you'd've hatched out the kind that wants t'kill you for bein' such fools as t'hatch out a mermaid egg on land! What d'you think?"

"And what if we'd left it in the box?" interrupted Lord Wimsey. "We found it in a wooden box, all surrounded by wet seaweed."

"Of course you did! That keeps 'em in stasis."

"There were an awful lot of those boxes," continued Lord Wimsey slowly, watching the man. Albert shrugged.

"That's no business of mine, is it? My business is this Inn, and not havin' it torn apart by angry mermaids lookin' for the idiots that stole their children. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got other things t'see to." He slammed the door before Lord Wimsey could say another word.

The only sound then was the popping and hissing of the logs on the fire. Miss Poppins was too busy feeding the infant to say anything, and the rest of us were thinking our own thoughts about what'd just happened. Eventually, Lord Wimsey cleared his throat. "You know, there really were an awful lot of boxes."

"How many is an awful lot?" asked Cranston warily.

"Oh, several hundred, I should think."

Cranston glanced down at the shards of eggshell that remained, and then over at the baby. "That could be a problem," he murmured.

"That it could, old man, that it could."

"We ought to check it out." He jerked his chin towards the door. "Think you can show me back there? I'd like a look at this myself."

"I'm coming too," volunteered Danner. "If anything happens-"

Swift started to say something, but just then Miss Poppins looked up. "That's quite enough for now," she said. "Mister Swift, Sergeant Preston, I'm going to have to ask that you remain here in case anything else turns up on our doorstep."

Mister Cranston and Mister Danner will accompany Lord Wimsey. I trust the three of you will report back as soon as you have something to report on?"

They chorused their assents; she nodded. "Very well. Good luck, gentlemen."

When they were gone, Miss Poppins sat back with a sigh. Swift had gathered up the fragments of eggshell, I assume to analyze them. Prince sniffed at the blanket that had held the egg, but mostly just seemed interested in stretching out in front of the fire. As he did so, Dorothy- who had been very quiet the entire time- looked up at me. "What's stasis?" she asked softly.

"Hmmm..." I tried to think of how to explain it so a girl her age would understand. "It gets pretty cold in the winter in Kansas, doesn't it?" She nodded. "Have you ever found a frog frozen in ice?"

She frowned then, an earnest, puzzled expression. "No," she said at last, "I can't say I have."

"I see. Well, up in the Yukon, where I come from, it gets incredibly cold in the winters. Sometimes it gets so cold that the frogs freeze solid in the ice before they can get back to their holes in the riverbanks."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." I smiled. "I found a few of them myself when I was a boy. They're frozen in the ice just like that, perfect as glass. When the ice melts in the spring, though, some of them get out and hop away. They spend the whole winter frozen, but they come right back to themselves. That's stasis."

Dorothy nodded slowly then, but didn't ask any more questions. Just sat back and stared into the fire. After a while, she said, "It sounds like being an ornament."

"Excuse me?"

She looked back up at me. "Oh, when the Nome King enslaved the royal family of Ev, he turned them all into ornaments for his underground palace. An' then when we rescued them, well ... I rescued Prince Evring first, and he said he didn't remember anything about being an ornament; just being sold to the Nome King and then nothing. Is that what stasis is like?"

"I- why, I don't know, Dorothy. You'd have to ask one of the frogs, I imagine."

She nodded and went back to watching Prince and the fire. I got up to stretch my legs, heading over to the windows. It's funny, but her question didn't seem to want to leave me. The Yukon's a huge, exciting place, full of all kinds of people with all kinds of dreams. Next to a city like London, though, or even just a city like this,

I imagine it must seem pretty dull by comparison. Frozen and still, just like one of those frogs. I've seen enough to know better, of course, but... well. There are times when even a policeman's life seems like one long stretch of the same. Funny thing, that.

Of course, given that I was standing in a room with a man who'd invented an electric rifle, a woman who was feeding a baby mermaid with feet, and a girl who'd been to some kind of fairy land, there wasn't going to be much more of that feeling any time soon.

I came back around the table and sat down next to Dorothy. She yawned a little—it was, after all, pretty late for a girl her age. There came a knock at the door, and Albert poked his head in. "Where'd the rest of 'em go?" he demanded.

Miss Poppins looked up, setting aside the empty baby bottle. "Why, down to the docks," she said. "Is that a problem?"

Albert shook his head in utter disgust. "You're lookin' to get killed, the lot of ye," he muttered. "It's not safe to be on the streets tonight. I've got to lock this place down if you don't want to be fish food."

"Excuse me?" Miss Poppins' eyebrows rose at that. Even Prince looked up from his nap.

"D'you mean t' tell me you didna see the shutters? What did you think they were for, decoration? They're t'keep the unwanted guests out. Now, if your friends aren't back from this trip of theirs before I get all of the windows shuttered, they're just goin' to have to fend for themselves. I'm not openin' the front door once I get it locked."

Swift whistled, a long, falling note. "Sounds like we might have visitors," he observed as Albert left again. Miss Poppins' lips thinned, her only sign of visible emotion.

"We can't abandon them," I said. "We ought to go out and bring them back here ourselves. At least we'd have the rifles with us."

"That's true," said Miss Poppins, "but I don't think leaving is a very wise idea. If this place is about to be assaulted, then the last thing we need is for all of us to be outside when the danger strikes."

"But—"

"No buts, Sergeant. I'm terribly sorry, but we're going to stay here, at least for now." There was iron in her tone; I clenched my jaw a moment, then nodded. "Very good, Sergeant."

Dorothy patted my knee encouragingly. "It'll be all right," she said. "You'll see."

Couldn't help but glance down at her then. "I must say, you're taking this awfully well." I couldn't really think of anything else to say, and it was true anyway.

"What do you mean, Mister Preston?"

"Well- you don't seem frightened. Most girls your age would be pretty scared- and a lot of boys, too."

"Why, I suppose that's so," she said, "but it only makes sense. I've had lots of adventures and I've never gotten hurt at all. So there's not really much point in being scared, is there?"

"No, I suppose there isn't." She really did seem to mean it, but something else occurred to me. "Dorothy- you say you've never been hurt. But what about the people around you?"

She drew breath to speak, then stopped. "I- I don't believe they got hurt either," she said slowly, "but then again most of them can't get hurt. There's the Scarecrow, he's made of straw; the only thing he's afraid of is a lighted match. And there's the Tin Woodsman, who can't be hurt either since he's made of tin. He might rust a little, but as long as he gets his joints oiled he's just fine. The Cowardly Lion's so big and strong that nobody's ever really managed to hurt him. So's the Hungry Tiger. Tik-Tok... He's a mechanical man, not really alive exactly, but he can move and talk and think if he's wound up to; he's made of copper. And of course there's Ozma, but she's much too powerful a fairy for anybody to hurt." She sighed; it sounded much too sad for any child her age. "I miss them."

"Well," I asked carefully, "do they know where you are?"

She pressed her lips together for a moment- not like Miss Poppins, but more as if she was trying to hold words back and knew she was about to fail. "I don't KNOW!" she suddenly wailed, loudly enough to set the baby in Miss Poppins' arms to fussing again. That made her drop her voice. "Ozma said she was going to keep watch for me every day. She said she'd look in on me with the Magic Picture at four o'clock, reg'lar." The words were costing her a lot to say, I could tell. "She said she'd bring me home if I made the signal then. Only- well. I did it every single day at four o'clock when they took me to the asylum. I did it for four whole months. And nothing ever happened."

By now she was curled up into a ball, even tighter than when I'd made that first mistake of telling her I'd never heard of fairy countries. She really looked like she was fit to collapse into a puddle of tears, and that just wasn't right. All I could do was ask, gently, "Four o'clock where?"

She sniffled, but blinked up at me, surprise coming into her saddened face. "Why-what do you mean, Mister Preston?"

Well, that seemed like a start- might as well see how much good talking did. "The world's a very big place, Dorothy. It's not the same time here as it is back in the Yukon, or Kansas, either. When it's ten o'clock at night here, it's two in the afternoon back in the Yukon, and four P. M. in Kansas."

That put a little bit of a frown on her face. At least it was a puzzled one. "But it only stands to reason it's the same time everywhere," she said slowly. "All the world's one piece, isn't it?"

I never got to explain the rest, because just then Albert came back. "That's it, we're locked," he said. "I'd get back to your rooms if I were you. And keep those shutters closed!"

Swift gathered up the bits of shell, and we headed up to the second floor. By common consensus we all ended up in my room- if need be, we could always open the shutters for a moment or two and have a look outside. It was on the second floor, after all. What kind of danger could reach us there, unless the Sirens carried spears? I mentioned this to Miss Poppins, who seemed to think it was a sensible idea. The shutters stayed closed for the moment anyway, since there was no real reason to open them. Dorothy settled herself on the floor, Indian-style, and Prince curled up next to her. He's a good dog, Prince. Didn't even mind it when Toto clambered up and fell asleep on his back.

Swift tossed me one of the rifles and picked up one for himself. "Did yours give you any trouble at the docks?" he asked me. He had a look I'd seen before. A miner who's been in town too long wants to get back to his gold, so I suppose an inventor who's gone a full day without inventing something wants to get back to his ideas.

"Seemed a little bright, if you ask me. Was it supposed to backfire on us that way?"

He shook his head, producing a screwdriver from somewhere. "Not really, but then again I'm not sure how much I can do about it. It's light, after all, and that radiates in all directions unless it's blocked. Maybe we should wear smoked glasses next time."

"At night, though?"

"Mmm, you're right, could be trouble..."

He'd already started mucking with the stock of the thing, and a thought occurred to me. "Swift?"

"Hmm?"

"I was wondering something. We had a little trouble communicating down at the docks."

"Yes, the wax."

"Right. I don't suppose you could invent something that'd block out the sounds of the Sirens' screaming, but let ordinary speech come through?"

A thoughtful, faraway look came into his eyes, the rifle forgotten. Ultimately, he shook his head. "Maybe," he said regretfully, "but not right now. I have some notes back at my lab on a metal that seems to have vibrational properties, really unusual ones. I'm pretty sure I can do something with it to make it absorb sounds, but that's years of testing and research away. Sorry, Sergeant."

"That's all right. Just thought I'd ask."

"What was that sound?" asked Miss Poppins suddenly. All of us- the half-asleep Dorothy included- looked up at that.

"I didn't hear anything-"

"There it is again," she said, turning towards the window. "From outside, I think."

"Albert said to keep the shutters closed," noted Swift.

Miss Poppins shook her head. "That's as may be, but we do have three compatriots outside. If they're trying to reach us-"

"I'll have a look," I said, getting up. Halfway to the window I remembered Albert's comment about fish food and jammed the wax plugs back into my ears. Then I shouldered my electric rifle and carefully poked the shutters open.

Nothing- at least not on the first pass. No sign of Cranston or the others anywhere. It all looked as normal as-

"Wait a minute." I pulled back from the window, looking over my shoulder as I cleared my ears. "Miss Poppins, is the dirigible supposed to be taking off?"

"Excuse me?" She came forward, baby in her arms, and had a look of her own. "Oh my. Well, I suppose if they couldn't get into the Inn..."

I wasn't really listening, though. Something looked wrong about the distant harbour. The water was frothing like the port of Skagway during a storm, but there wasn't a single tree or mast moving. If there was any storm at all, it was coming from under the waves. That, or something else was churning the water.

No. Not the water. The land. Down in the darkness there were shapes humping their way across the ground, wriggling forward one heave at a time like woollybear caterpillars.

"Miss Poppins," I said, "we have company. I don't like to say it, but I'm afraid our companions might have it, too."

She peered downward, then looked at me. "You're thinking they reached the dirigible," she said quietly. I nodded. "Well, it can't do any harm to check. Sergeant, how are you with children?"

"Er- well, Louise and I never had any children of our own, but- I've been told I'm good with other people's-"

"Very good." She handed me the water baby.

I wasn't prepared for that.

She couldn't have weighed more than a good-sized hare- six pounds or so- but I had the terrible feeling I might drop her anyway. I sat down on the foot of the bed immediately. Miss Poppins was saying something about keeping our wax ready and not opening the shutters again without some kind of signal, but I wasn't paying attention. I'd just enough of my wits about me to get one hand under the baby's head. She yawned as I did that, stretching one tiny webbed hand in the air. If it weren't for that delicate stretch of skin between the fingers, and the puppy-claw fingernails, it would have been very easy indeed to mistake that hand for a human child's.

"All right then, gentlemen," came Miss Poppins' voice, "I am leaving by the upstairs window and shall return shortly." She stepped out into the hallway, and Swift closed the shutters as she left.

I didn't need to look up to see the smile on Swift's face. I could feel it. I don't know how much of it was him trying not to laugh at my predicament and how much was relief that he hadn't been stuck with the infant instead, but then again I didn't care to find out. I've never really had to handle babies before. Puppies, yes, but the last time I held anyone's baby was during a diphtheria epidemic in a Yukon Indian village. That was years ago.

She wriggled in my arms a little. I started to put her down, but she stopped squirming- just wanted her arm free to try and grab at my nose. She missed, of course. I wasn't about to let those claws get that close to my face. They might've been tiny, but so are the claws on lynx kittens, and those are sharp as needles. Besides, she'd just torn her way out of an egg. She had to be strong to do that.

She. Not it, she. It was awfully hard to think of this child as related to the things

that had tried to kill us down at the docks. True, she had a scowling sort of look, but so did the Indian babies at the village. I think most babies look like that, at least at first. She might have had webbing between her fingers, but- well, at that size it hardly looked like more than the webbing between my thumb and forefinger, or any man's. Her toes looked just as normal and natural as any child's, without the slightest hint of tail to 'em. Why, as I was counting them over, she wriggled her toes and kicked out- just a little bit of a kick. Nothing that suggested she could punch through a thick, leathery eggshell. I patted her foot then and apologized for the intrusion, but she didn't seem to understand. She just stared at me with those black eyes of hers and waved that pudgy little hand.

It occurred to me then that you couldn't properly call a baby like this human. She had no mother- at least, not the way most people would count it. She was hatched, not born. The laws of the British Empire don't exactly cover people hatched from eggs. If I were to bring her before a court and ask them to decide what she was, why, they'd probably argue about it for months on end. I expect they'd call her an animal, when everything was said and done. I could understand that being the case with the ones at the docks, but this one... well, she had fingers and toes, feet and hands. Everything about her, except the webbing and the claws, was exactly what you'd find on a human baby. But she'd hatched from an egg, and if that egg had been kept cold she'd have hatched out with spines and fangs and a tail, and if I knew my law at all that would be enough to call her an animal. Somehow, that didn't sit right with me.

Dorothy was watching me when I looked up. "She's pretty," she said softly.

I nodded. "Are there many water babies in Oz?" I asked.

"Well, no, not really," she said thoughtfully. "Oz is a beautiful country and all, but it's got the Deadly Desert on all four sides. There's Sea Fairies in the ocean, but that's miles and miles and miles off, clear on the other side of Ev. But I've heard stories about 'em, and Trot- she's from California, she got to Oz in a giant whirlpool- she had a magic ring from the Mermaids, so that if she ever got in trouble on the water, they'd help her."

I had enough sense not to ask further. Not because of the subject matter- it's hard to be a skeptic when you've got a fresh-hatched mermaid's baby in your arms- but because I suspected any more questions would reduce her to tears again. Instead, I resettled the baby so she could see her a little better. "We're going to have to give her back to her parents, you know," I said. "Assuming they don't try to eat us."

Dorothy's face brightened at that. "I bet I could do it," she said. "As long as I have the Belt on."

"Maybe," I conceded. "But, you know, we couldn't send a little girl like you down to face all those mermaids alone, could we? Some of them might still be angry,

and give you trouble. We'd have to come with you, and we don't have the Belt."

She grew thoughtful at that. "Huh," she said. "That's so, I s'pose; but the Belt's got magic powers. The Nome King used to use it for all his magic transformations. Maybe I could use it to hide someone so the mermaids wouldn't bother 'em."

Since I wasn't paying attention to her, the baby made another grab for my nose. If I hadn't shaved off my mustache years ago (Louise said it itched), she probably would've caught hold of it. "Oh no you don't, Missy," I told her- but really, I had to smile, even if she was scowling furiously.

Swift, who had been watching us the whole time, went back to fiddling with his rifle. "You know," he commented without looking up, "I could probably- what was that?"

"What was what?" Dorothy asked, but I'd heard it too.

"That thump?"

Swift nodded. "There it is again-"

"I heard it too," said Dorothy. "And a- why, what on earth are you doing?" That last was addressed to the baby. She was craning her tiny neck, peering over my arm towards the window. It reminded me of the look Prince got when-

Come to think of it, Prince was staring at the window too. And the fur on the back of his neck was beginning to bristle. I glanced over to Swift, but he knew what I was going to say already. Without a word he set the rifle down and pulled out his tin of wax. "Dorothy," I said quietly, "have you ever held a baby before?"

"Oh yes. Munchkin babies, mostly." I must've looked pretty blank, because she added, "They're people in Oz. They're just like reg'lar babies, only smaller."

"All right." The baby squirmed a little. "You had better put some of that wax in your ears, because I'm going to need you to hold this little girl for me." She nodded obediently, tucked the stuff in, and took the baby from me. I thought for a second and called Prince over; he let me block his ears as easily as he had Miss Poppins. Then it was only a matter of my own ears. (Let me tell you, neither deafness nor the feel of squishy wax is anything I care to repeat again. If another case like this ever comes up, I hope it's not until after Swift's finished his work on the vibrating metal.)

After that the whole thing seemed- well. There was an old prospector I knew in Forty Mile who told me once about a dream he had, a nightmare of sorts. He had fallen through the ice of the Yukon River in winter and floated downstream. There were people standing along the riverbank, talking and working. None of them seemed to see him. He tried to call out to them, but nobody heard. He kept trying

to yell in the dream, but there wasn't the slightest bit of sound coming out of his mouth. Said he was sure he was just about to freeze solid when he woke up.

It was a little bit like that. When I looked up from stopping my ears with wax, Dorothy was very earnestly talking to the baby. Couldn't tell what she was saying, of course, but that didn't matter. She wasn't talking to me. Whatever she was saying, it didn't seem to be having much of an effect. The baby was reaching towards the window with both her tiny hands, squirming as if she thought she could get loose and crawl away somehow. Swift's eyes were wide with alarm, maybe because he had one hand on the inside of the shutters. As I looked to him, he lifted his free hand and made a scratching- no, a clawing- gesture. Then he jerked his thumb towards the shutters.

J. had said the Sirens had chewed their way through the hulls of the Scottish fleet. Down at the docks, the Sirens we'd met had had claws long enough to climb up the pilings and onto the quay. And the baby had those selfsame claws.

I breathed easier as Swift turned from the window to pick up his rifle, but as I reached for my own, Prince nudged my leg. I looked up in time to see Dorothy silently reprimand the baby one last time- before she headed straight towards the window herself. Swift was shaking his head furiously, mouthing words at her that I'm sure she couldn't hear, but it didn't seem to have any kind of effect. Prince looked up at me piteously, one big helpless whimper made flesh. To tell the truth, I felt the same way. I could have ordered him to stop Dorothy, but with the wax, what would be the use? All I could do was point- then again, this was Prince, and that was enough. He wagged his tail and bounded towards the window, but too late. Dorothy already had her hand on the shutter-

The door to the room swung open, revealing the form of Mary Poppins. Prince tugged at the little girl's sleeve, turning her around. I pulled one of my earplugs out in time to hear her say, "Get away from those shutters, Dorothy."

It's been a long time since I've seen someone so young look so surprised. Between the order from Miss Poppins and the fact that Prince was still tugging at her sleeve, she couldn't help stepping away. Miss Poppins nodded. "Very good," she said. "Now, if you please, give her to me."

I thought I saw Dorothy's arms pull the water-baby in a little bit tighter at that. It didn't help the baby's disposition any- she let out a whimper and struggled to reach for the window again. Miss Poppins sighed. "Dorothy," she said, a bit more kindly, "I have just spoken with a proper Mermaid aboard our dirigible. The entire hotel grounds, particularly the walls and windows leading up to this very room, are overed with angry Sirens. They want this little one back."

Dorothy turned and stared at the shutters a moment, then looked down at the baby in her arms. "I'm s'prised at you," she said reproachfully. "Why, those fish-

ladies-

"Would like her back, Dorothy. Now, give me the baby."

With a sigh, the girl obeyed. It still made no difference to the water baby, who just kept struggling towards the window. "Thank you, Dorothy," said Miss Poppins. Dorothy murmured a "y'r welcome", which seemed to be enough for the nanny. "We're going back to the dirigible now," she declared, straightening up. "With any luck, this will all be cleared up quite soon."

Almost as soon as Miss Poppins had left the room, Swift turned to the shutters. He rapped on one with a knuckle, then nodded slightly. "The weight's gone," he said. "Bet you we can open them now."

"But Miss Poppins said-

"She didn't say anything about opening the windows after she left, now, did she?" Swift grinned. "Besides, I want to see."

He threw the shutters open. They kicked up a puff or two of sawdust and shavings. Apparently, the Sirens had been a quarter of an inch away from getting into the room with us. Swift started poking at the cuts, but I stuck my head out far enough to look down instead. There were still Sirens clinging to the building-headed downwards, true, but that just made it worse somehow. The yard looked like a pine tree fallen after a storm, there were that many spines and bristles casting shadows in the moonlight. Not one of the Sirens was moving, either. They were all staring up at Miss Poppins and the baby as she serenely glided away. That seemed to be what they were looking for; as soon as she'd passed over, they started inching their way back across the land in the direction of our airship.

"There's a sight I could have gone my whole life without seeing," I muttered, pulling back into the Inn.

"Oh, I don't know. They're interesting, in a dangerous sort of way."

"Swift-

"Call me Tom, Sergeant. We don't stand on ceremony in America."

"All right, Tom. I'd rather not have an interesting death, if it's all the same to you."

He laughed. "I thought Mounties were supposed to be brave!" he said, clapping me on the shoulder. I just smiled back.

"I thought Sirens were supposed to be myths."

"All right, fair enough....." He grinned, stepping away from the window.

"So what do we do now?" piped up Dorothy. "We can't really follow Miss Poppins and the others, can we?"

"Not while they're in the dirigible, no," I told her. "They might be a while, too. I think it might be a good idea if we were to get you to your bed now. You can get some sleep, and when Miss Poppins comes back, I'll wake you up."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

So we got her to bed, at least for a little while. Tom and I stayed up, taking turns watching at the window. I would've liked a nap myself, but it wouldn't be a good idea to fall asleep in the middle of a case like this. If anything went wrong we'd be up to our noses in Sirens again. We were lucky, though. In the end it was neither Miss Poppins nor angry Sirens that greeted us; it was Danner, clinging to the dirigible's ladder and knocking at the window with a vast grin on his face. "Come on up," he yelled. "Wait until you see our guest!"

Like any other sleepy child, Dorothy grumbled a little when I shook her awake, but we got her and Toto up the ladder easily enough. Danner had to carry Prince, which didn't go over well at all. The rest of us made it up on our own, and as soon as Prince could be coaxed out from under the furniture again, Danner led us to-

"That's the bathroom," stated Tom.

Danner nodded.

"People don't like being disturbed in the bathroom, Hugo."

"Oh, trust me," said Danner, "it won't be a problem." He threw open the door.

Lord Wimsey, Lamont Cranston, and Miss Poppins all stood gathered around the tub (I'm still surprised that a dirigible has a bathtub, but who am I to say what belongs on those things and what doesn't?). As the door opened, Miss Poppins looked our way, nodded, and stepped to one side. The tub, it seemed, was- ah- occupied, and by the 'proper Mermaid' she had mentioned earlier. At least, that's what I assume the lady was. She certainly looked the part, being covered in red-orange scales from the waist down and not much more than long blonde hair from the waist up. Someone had given her a cup of tea. I had just enough time to realise she'd been given the newly-hatched baby, too- seemed to be nursing it, in fact- before averting my eyes. A lady's a lady, half fish or no.

"Ah, the gang's all here!" exclaimed Lord Wimsey brightly. "Madame, these are our companions, Sergeant Preston-

I tipped my hat to her. "Ma'am."

She watched all of us with startled eyes as the introductions went on. "You've already met Hugo, of course," said Lord Wimsey merrily. "This is Mr. Tom Swift, he's an inventor of sorts. Comes from America, but that can't be helped. And this little lady is Dorothy Gale-"

"Oh, yes!" said the Mermaid, suddenly smiling. Her English was perfect, with an accent I couldn't quite place. "From Kansas!"

You can imagine the silence that descended over the room at that. Dorothy was the first to break it. "Why- why yes, that's so," she said. "But how on Earth do you know me?"

The Mermaid set down her tea a little awkwardly and waved one webbed hand. "It's not important."

I would have liked to question her a bit then, but Lord Wimsey spoke up first. "Ah- yes... so. Now you know the lot of us, that's settled. The lady here was just telling me about the trouble her people have been having- you see, their Queen's been stolen and she's being held captive. Seems that's where all those eggs in boxes were coming from. She and her, ah, sisters want them back, only they can't do it themselves-"

"Why's that?" asked Tom.

For answer, the Mermaid held up her webbed hand again. "They can't seem to get a proper grip, you see," said Lord Wimsey. "Not without harming themselves. I was just about to make them an offer when you lot arrived- seems the fangy crowd are just as much interested in getting their Queen and their eggs back. I was thinking- if we could have some time in which we'd be assured there wouldn't be any spiny interference, I don't see why our little group might not be able to locate this Queen and set her free, eh?"

"She could be anywhere," murmured Cranston.

"She is here, somewhere," said the Mermaid. "In this city. But we cannot reach her, because of the humans holding her captive."

I started to speak then, but Miss Poppins asked my question for me. "If we found your Queen and set her free, will the attacks on shipping here stop?"

"Yes," said the Mermaid. "All we want is our mother and our eggs back. They have taken our cove, but there are others. We must have our Queen back if we are to survive."

"How will we know her if we see her?" asked Tom.

The Mermaid stared at him, as if he'd just asked something very, very stupid.

"She's big," she said. "You'll know."

"Well, that settles it, then," said Lord Wimsey. "We'll find out where those boxed eggs are coming from, and that'll lead us to the Queen. After that it's just a matter of getting past whatever guards and locks the blackguards who've got her might have and letting her go."

It sounded simple, but in my opinion, there was something a little too simple about it. "Have we got any leads?" I asked cautiously.

"Why yes, Sergeant. There was a name on the boxes- JAP Shipping." Lord Wimsey looked to the Mermaid. "All right, then, miss. What d'you say? Can you ask your companions to let us do that? It's rather harder than you'd think to find people when you're being chased by carnivorous Sirens."

The Mermaid thought about this for a while. At least, I assume she did, as I was gauging the others' reactions. Dorothy, of course, seemed to think this the most natural thing in the world. Cranston's face had a calculating look. Danner seemed to be taking it all in pretty good stride, and Swift- well, he looked to be just bursting with unasked questions. Finally, the Mermaid spoke.

"I will go back to my sisters and tell them. You will have twenty-four of your hours."

"Thank you very much, miss," said Lord Wimsey politely, "but if it-

"Twenty-four hours," repeated the Mermaid. "That is all we can spare you."

"Well," said Miss Poppins, "if that's the case, then there's no use wasting time about it. Mr. Cranston, I believe your services are needed in the pilot's room." He nodded and left. "Dorothy, if you would be so kind, please get the lady a blanket."

"What for, Miss Poppins?"

The distant hum of the dirigible's engine changed in pitch. "We're going to return the Mermaid and the baby to their people," said Miss Poppins, "and she's got to get out of the tub."

I didn't see much of that part, you can imagine. The Mermaid handed her teacup back to Lord Wimsey and swung her tail over the side of the tub. I caught a glimpse of the end of her tail changing from translucent fish-fin to a perfectly ordinary pair of human feet before I looked away. It's downright unnerving to see something like that happen before your eyes. Like watching a glacier calve off an iceberg into the ocean, you see something that ought to be one way suddenly break up and fall into something else altogether. Doesn't really seem the sort of thing a man ought to be around to watch. Fortunately, it was done quickly and Dorothy came back straight away with the blanket. "Here you are, miss," she said

to the Mermaid.

"Thank you."

Lord Wimsey gestured towards the door then, so we all filed out of the room, the Mermaid at the end of the line. We were already over the harbour by then, and for a moment I wondered if we were going to keep flying out to sea. But no; we started to circle over the harbour, coming lower on each pass until we were barely a stone's throw away from the surface. It was dark out, but from the lights along the dirigible's bottom and the lights of the harbour I could make out the water's surface.

"Dear Lord," I breathed, and I think the others agreed with me. It was full of heads. Mermaids, Sirens, or other kinds of sea people- more than I could possibly begin to count. And every last one of them was staring up at us as Danner pulled the access door open.

"Thank you," said the Mermaid, the blanket falling to the floor at her feet. "Good luck. Remember- twenty-four hours!"

She stepped out the hatch. I could just make out the baby in her arms as she plummeted feet-first towards the water. There was a splash and a moment of silence; then she bobbed to the surface, or someone blonde did, and waved to us. As one, the sea of heads turned to watch us go.

I have had more than enough for today, I think. We have twenty-four hours. I intend to spend the next several of them sleeping. I expect I'll need it if I'm to face tomorrow with any kind of strength.