

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Eleventh I Have Heard The Mermaids Singing

by Jessica McGeary
(based on COTY)

Day Ten - Evening
Somewhere Over Scotland

The events of today are rattling around in my head like loose pebbles. I wouldn't be surprised if they set off an avalanche.

We slept aboard the dirigible last night, as the Inn was still locked down. Besides, we'd lost the canvas tarpaulin when Cranston had been forced to launch the beast without warning. No hope of disguising it in the field now. Prince still wasn't happy about being aboard the thing, but he had enough room to curl up next to my bed despite the smaller quarters. When morning came we had to put down, of course. I half expected Cranston to make an escape of his own, the way that man was complaining about the dirigible's lack of coffee. Didn't matter to me much, as they had plenty of tea left and I still had the peach Albert had thrown at me the night before.

Speaking of which, the man was about as forthcoming as a brick. All of us except Lord Wimsey and Danner headed back to the Inn once we'd eaten. Lord Wimsey wanted to speak with the harbour master about JAP Shipping, and Danner said he expected the stevedores' union might be able to help a bit more now that we had a name to go on. I went looking for Albert while they were gone, figuring anyone who knew as much about mermaids as he seemed to know had to have some kind of reason for it. All I got for my troubles was a string of insults, some of which weren't even in English, and a door slammed in my face. Either he's the fastest innkeeper I've ever seen or that place is built like a magician's cabinet- he'd disappeared by the time I got the door open. That kind of thing doesn't sit well with me, so I thought I'd take Prince out for a walk while I considered my next move. As I was attaching the leash to his collar- not that he needs it, but the good people of Glasgow can't be expected to feel safe in an apparent wolf's presence- Dorothy asked if she could bring Toto along. I didn't see why not.

We headed over to Elder Park on the south side of the Clyde River. I thought at first that it must've been named for being the first park in the city, but it wasn't long before we came across a statue of a dignified-looking woman. The base of the statue said she was Isabella Elder, and that she had donated this land to the city as a park in honor of her husband, George Elder. As we were looking her over,

Dorothy piped up with, "There's a statue of me in the Winkie Country."

"Is that part of Oz?"

She nodded. "Oh yes. It's in the west. There's the Munchkins in the north, and the Quadlings in the south, and the Gillikins in the east, and right in the center is the Emerald City."

They didn't sound like any Indian names I'd ever heard, and somehow I doubted a girl like this could have found such people in Africa or the Orient. After the events of the night before, I was prepared to believe just about anything might be real- at least until proven otherwise. It couldn't hurt to find out more. "Hmmm. Are they all different countries, or are they-" I stopped before I could say 'provinces' and adjusted the words. "-just part of the same country? You know, the way Kansas is part of your country and the Yukon is part of mine?"

Toto yipped the way small dogs do and started chasing one of the little white butterflies that seemed to like the park so much. "Well, each of them has its own ruler, but Ozma's the Royal Ruler over all of them," said Dorothy. "It's all one country, really."

I nodded. "I see. You must've done something pretty big, if they put up a statue to you."

She giggled. "Not really. I melted the Wicked Witch of the West with a bucket of water, but it wasn't on purpose. But the Winkies were just awfully glad that someone had got rid of her."

I was going to ask her then if there was no one in that country to cut off wickedness before it started. I couldn't remember ever hearing of a fairy country with policemen when I was a boy, after all- but she was still talking. "That was the first time I'd ever been to Oz, and I was scared and lonesome and just wanted to get back home to Kansas." She heaved a great sigh, so big it made Prince look up. "And now I just want to get back to Oz."

She looked awfully small just then. I found myself wishing I could make her smile somehow; it's one thing for an adult to feel like that, but a child... "I suppose I can't blame you, Dorothy. It's hard for people to be a long, long way from home, and from the people who love them."

"Like the mermaids' Mother," said Dorothy.

I blinked. Now that she mentioned it... well, somehow the idea hadn't occurred to me. The Mermaid Mother was an egglayer, after all. Then again, I'd held her baby just last night, and one of the other mermaids had nursed it like any human would; how different could they really be? They looked human enough when they changed shape. Perhaps they felt like we did, too. "You know, I suppose you're

right. I hadn't been thinking of her, but she probably does miss all her family."

That seemed to be enough for the girl for the moment. Her Toto had finished romping after the butterfly and came running back, flopping down at her feet. There wasn't anyone around so far as I could tell, so I undid Prince's leash for the moment. As I stood back up, she suddenly asked, "Do you miss your home too, Mr. Preston?"

Now what was I supposed to say to a question like that? I didn't belong in a city like this. I didn't even belong in a country like this. Canada's a young country and the Yukon's only just beginning to grow civilized, but here I was standing in the greatest port city of a country so old that even the Romans had been afraid to come here. But how can you say a thing like that to a little girl? All I could do was try my best to find some answer she'd understand. "I suppose I do, Dorothy. This country isn't anything like where I come from, and it's hard not to want to go home sometimes."

"What's it like where you come from?" she asked curiously.

"Wide open, and cold. Even in the summers, the Yukon Territory- that's very far north in Canada- gets cold. At least, compared to here it does. It's still mostly frontier, too, all trees and mountains and rivers where hardly anyone except the Indians and Eskimos have ever been. There's a few cities, but most of the time it's towns and lone cabins, and nothing between them but miles and miles of trail." I could have gone on about it for longer, I imagine, but that seemed like enough. I'm no poet, but I've spent most of my life on patrols all over that territory, and a man who doesn't remember the awe a place like the Yukon puts in him is a man who hasn't got a soul.

Dorothy smiled. "It sounds lovely."

Prince had found himself a spot to roll around on the grass. I reminded myself to check him over and make sure he wasn't rolling in something foul-smelling. "Oh, it is," I said, "if you like that kind of thing. A lot of people don't." She cocked her head curiously, so I explained, "A lot of men come up to get rich on gold or furs, and then they go home to their families. Sometimes they go home without getting rich at all, because it's too lonely for them. I've lived all my life there, though- most of it, anyway. I like the North Country, myself."

She nodded, and I found myself asking, "Have you got family in Oz, Dorothy?"

"My Uncle Henry and Aunt Em. I lived with them in Kansas. But when Uncle Henry lost the farm, Ozma agreed to bring them both to Oz, and we've all lived there ever since."

Well, that almost explained why no one from America had come looking for her.

If she was an orphan and her guardians weren't here to know... Very gently, I said, "I see. No parents, then?"

But she wasn't listening. The thought of Oz had set off some chain of ideas that had won her attention instead. "It worked that time. It did work. I made the signal, and Ozma brought me there, direc'ly."

You don't get far interrogating people if you don't let them talk about what's on their mind once in a while instead of what you want to know, so all I asked was, "What time was this?"

"Four o'clock," said Dorothy, "just like we said."

"Oh- I meant when did this happen. Were you in Oz then, or was it Kansas?"

"Kansas," said the little girl. "And Ozma brought me to Oz, and then did the same for Uncle Henry and Aunt Em."

I nodded slowly. "I think it's probably just a matter of time then, Dorothy. I'll bet that if you made the signal when it was four o'clock in Kansas, it'd work properly."

She frowned, shaking her head. "I still don't understand that."

"Well," I asked, "have you ever seen a globe of the world?"

"They had one in the reading room at the asylum. It didn't have Oz on it."

Inside I winced, but all I said was, "I imagine it wouldn't, since globes don't show fairy places. The world's round just like a globe, and it turns all the time- very slowly, so we don't notice it any more than someone in a boat would notice the boat moving if they had their eyes shut. That's what makes it different times of day. It's noon when the sun's directly over the town hall, isn't it?"

"I s'pose..."

"Well, that's how it is. And since the world is round, if it's noon on one side it's midnight on the other, and other times in all the places in between. I bet if you made the signal when it was four o'clock in Kansas, your friend Ozma would see you. That'll be- if I remember right, that'll be at ten o'clock tonight."

"Huh," she said, getting very thoughtful indeed.

I might've said something else then, but Prince's tail suddenly perked up at the sight of other people in the park. That meant it was time to put his leash back on, and once that was done, we didn't really have much reason to stay there. Dorothy called Toto over to her, and the lot of us went back to the inn.

Lord Wimsey was already there when we got back, with Danner close behind him.

"Ah, good, there you two are, was beginning to wonder what'd become of you," he said breezily. "We've got a bit more of a lead- a proper name, this time."

Prince settled himself at my feet as we all sat down around the table where we'd hatched the egg the night before. "Go on."

"Seems JAP stands for J. Alfred Prufrock Shipping. Harbour-master didn't seem to know much about 'em- they're a standoffish bunch as companies go, keep to themselves a lot. They pay an astonishing amount of money to keep it that way."

"The stevedores' union says they hire their own workers," volunteered Danner. "All foreigners."

"Quite right, quite right, old chap. Likely they're South Seas islanders, as that's where the harbour-master says the company hails from."

Danner nodded. "The union didn't know, since the Prufrock Shipping workers don't even drink at the same places the others do. They just unload the boats and work in their warehouse."

"They've got a warehouse?" I asked. "Where?"

Lord Wimsey produced a scrap of note-paper from one pocket. "Managed to convince the harbour-master to at least give me the address. Seemed to think I was some kind of lunatic for offering to invest in the company. They don't even take outside backers, never mind workers- quite a peculiar concern, wouldn't you say?"

Cranston peered at the paper. "That's not where the eggs were," he said after a moment. "Those boxes were ... that's halfway across the harbor, isn't it?"

"Right," said Danner. "The warehouse is right on the water- I went down to have a look. It's partly built on the pier, but part of it stands on pilings out over the water. They've got guards on the place, but I don't know how many. Two that I know of, for sure."

All of us looked at each other then. I'd lay good gold dust that we were all thinking the same thing: that warehouse with the guards was where the Mermaid Queen was being held prisoner.

"Well, gentlemen," said Mary Poppins, "it looks quite as if we have our work cut out for us. Some of us are going to have to release the Queen, and some of us are going to have to return those eggs to their rightful home."

"Don't you think that's being a little hasty?" asked Cranston. "We need to do some proper reconnaissance first. No offense meant to Mr. Danner, but someone's got to confirm whether that warehouse is the place we want- and if there are any more

guards- or if it's just a diversion."

"Are you volunteering, Mr. Cranston?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." He smiled, a faintly disturbing expression.

"Very well. Mr. Cranston, go and see what you can see, then report back to us. In the meantime we shall discuss our options based on what we know so far."

He rose and left. I found myself hoping he was as good at his style of finding things out as he seemed to think he was; you don't call yourself 'The Shadow' if you haven't got stealth to back up the name. That wasn't on my mind for long, though. Tom Swift was earnestly discussing his original metal net.

"That what you were working on during the blimp ride up here?" asked Danner.

"Yep. Got a pretty good-sized one built, too. I was thinking that if this warehouse hangs over the water, we might not have to worry about guards at all, so long as someone could swim in there from below."

"So what would you need the net for?"

Tom shrugged. "Just because our mermaid friend says they'll hold off on us for twenty-four hours doesn't mean there might not be other things in the water. It'd be easier to hold them off in a good strong net than to learn to use spears and knives under water this quickly."

"A valid point," murmured Miss Poppins. "Mr. Swift, can you swim?"

"Ah- no, not really..."

"I can," said Danner. "And you wouldn't have to worry about me holding my breath, either."

"It's a big net, Hugo. We're going to need two men for it." Tom looked over at Lord Wimsey, who shook his head regretfully.

"I can swim," I said, a little surprised to hear myself saying it. They all looked at me. "Well enough to survive, anyway. It can't be much harder than keeping my head above water in the Klondike River."

"All right, then, that's two- assuming we pursue that particular course of action." Miss Poppins pursed her lips in thought. "It might not be a bad idea to have our swimmers come up from below while some of us approach on foot, or from above."

"Above?" asked Danner, a little surprised. "I thought that-" Miss Poppins smiled, glancing across the room to where her umbrella stood beside the door. "Ah. Question withdrawn, ma'am."

"Very good. We'll decide who handles the egg question once Mr. Cranston comes back. I believe, in the meantime, that we ought to assume no more than two or three remain available for the land approach... two guards, you said?"

"That's right."

"Well, then. The question of the hour is: how do we get them out of the way?"

"I could run up to them crying," suggested Dorothy, "and say I was lost, or that my papa was in trouble. I bet they'd try an' help then."

"I don't know, Dorothy. Mr. Danner said they were foreigners. Even if they spoke English, they might just send you away."

"Oh." The girl frowned a little, but nodded.

It was probably the best suggestion to be thrown out for a while. Most of the other possible distractions had too many flaws in them to work. The discussion got frustrating quickly. I have to say, I was relieved to see Mr. Cranston come back. There was an odd, almost haunted look to his eyes. I've seen it before, when innocent people've stumbled across a murder victim. I never expected to see it on him.

"Well?" asked Miss Poppins.

"The warehouse is the right place," said he, sliding back into his seat at the table. "I've seen for myself... There are two guards flanking the main entrance, but they don't patrol the property very often." There was scorn in his voice, I can only assume at their carelessness. "It gave me enough of an opening to climb one of the side walls; the building's barely two storeys tall, and there's a skylight on the roof."

"Locked?" asked Danner.

Cranston smiled again. "Not any more." Then he sobered. "I got my look inside. It's going to be... difficult. The entire warehouse is filled with tanks, and each tank is filled to the brim with water- and eggs- and ice. How close they are to hatching I couldn't say, but..." He gave a quick shake of the head. "I saw no guards inside, human or otherwise, but from such a height it would be impossible to say for sure. What I do know is this: beyond a doubt, they have the Mermaid Queen. Our guest didn't exaggerate in the slightest."

"Sizable lady, then?" Lord Wimsey.

Cranston looked at him, a long, cool look. Finally, he said, "Are you familiar with the stories of the monster in Loch Ness?"

"You're joking!"

"I assure you, I'm not." Cranston passed a hand over his face. "I'm not talking about size alone, either. That creature- or something very much like it- IS the Mermaid Queen. She resembles nothing so much as a Charles Knight painting. They've got her strapped down over an extra-huge tank full of water. It might've been the light playing tricks on me, but I would swear there were eggs lining the bottom."

"So... they've got a dinosaur laying mermaid eggs by the score..."

"Which are being hatched out into a seagoing army of inhuman monsters." Cranston's expression was grim. I think all of ours were, at that point. "It looks like this is why they needed the League, gentlemen; today Glasgow, tomorrow the British Empire."

"Then there is no time at all to lose," said Miss Poppins. "Gentlemen, we are going to pay a call on J. Alfred Prufrock Shipping."

"How do you intend to get past the guards?" Cranston asked.

"Why, by telling them an army of mermaids is storming the warehouse," she said simply. "Either they will be accustomed to this and be easily distracted as they look for their allies' arrival, or they- like everyone else in Glasgow- will run for their lives. Mr. Danner, Sergeant Preston, you won't be swimming today."

"Good," I muttered. "I didn't bring trunks."

There might have been a ghost of a smile on her face, or not. I couldn't tell. "You will, however, be needed down at the warehouse- out of sight until the guards have been removed from the picture. Unless-" She looked inquiringly at Danner.

"How big is that skylight, Mr. Cranston?" asked the big fellow. Cranston indicated an opening about as long as he was tall, and some three or four feet across. "All right, I could fit through that... problem is, if I don't land exactly right I could punch through the floor. Is it over the part of the warehouse that juts into the water?"

"I think so."

"Might need to bring a rope, just in case." Danner steeped his fingers in thought. "I can jump up there, Miss Poppins. Two storeys won't be a problem. And when it comes time to let her Majesty out I can probably punch right through the pilings holding the place up."

"One step at a time, Mr. Danner. But thank you for keeping the end in mind. You'll be coming to the warehouse, as will Mr. Cranston. Lord Wimsey, if you

would be so good-" Her eyes lighted a moment on Dorothy. "Someone's got to begin opening those boxes that aren't in the warehouse."

"But I won't be in any danger!" protested Dorothy. "And I can help Mr. Wimsey sneak in! Watch!" She got up from her chair and called Toto over to her. "Now, Toto, I'm going to turn you invisible again for these nice people-"

"Again?" Tom murmured, eyebrows raised.

Dorothy didn't seem to notice. "-so be good." She closed her eyes, making a very determined face- and the little terrier vanished from sight. Not from the room, though. His familiar barking started up almost immediately, sounding just like the dog was running in circles about her.

I'll tell you, if I didn't believe in the magic of this Oz place before, I did now. I've seen conjurers before. They have to do all kinds of things to distract the audience and hide their target if they're going to make something disappear, and when you've been a policeman as long as I have you recognize that kind of behavior. She didn't show a single sign of it. This, as far as I could tell, was real. From the sound of the exclamations, the others felt the same way.

"Now," said Dorothy with some satisfaction, "I'm going to turn him back." She concentrated again for a moment, but the dog failed to appear. "Toto?"

More barking. The edge of Dorothy's skirt suddenly moved, looking for all the world as if two little paws had just pressed up against it. She smiled. "Oh, there you are." As she closed her eyes again, the dog suddenly reappeared, jumping into her arms as if nothing had happened at all.

Danner sat back in his chair, looking stunned. Tom's expression as he watched the dog was thoughtful- you could all but see his invention idea taking shape. Lord Wimsey, on the other hand, looked like a small boy about to come down the stairs on Christmas morning. "Try it on me now, Dorothy," he urged. "I'd quite like to see."

"All right, Mr. Wimsey." Setting Toto back down on the floor, the little girl concentrated again. I don't think there wasn't an eye in the room fixed on Lord Wimsey, so you can imagine the general reaction when- well-

There's no kind way to put this. The magic went wrong. Instead of turning invisible, Lord Wimsey lit up like a lightbulb.

"Oh! Oh, my..." I don't know if that was Dorothy or Lord Wimsey. Not sure it matters, really, since that covered pretty much everyone's sentiments. I mean, the man outshone the room's supply of sunlight! Judging from the look of horror on Dorothy's face, she hadn't been prepared for that at all. It didn't seem to bother Lord Wimsey, though- he was staring at his glowing hands in complete

fascination, turning them this way and that. "I can change you back, Mr. Wimsey, oh, please let me try and change you back!" Dorothy pleaded.

"No! No, no, that'll be quite all right- no need to worry-" I don't think I'll ever take a tooth polish advertisement seriously again. You don't get a more dazzling smile than one that's giving off light of its own. "It doesn't hurt a bit, and we did want a distraction, didn't we? I'd say I'm pretty distracting now."

"But-"

"I assure you, I'm quite all right. Why don't we just go with this and see how we fare for now, eh?" He leaned over and patted Dorothy on the head with one glowing hand.

With a sigh, Miss Poppins shook her head. "Well, that's something to keep in mind... Mr. Danner, Mr. Cranston, since access is easiest for the two of you, I'd like you to conceal yourselves in the vicinity of the warehouse. Lord Wimsey and the others, you'll be handling the egg-boxes- many hands make light work."

"Literally, in my case."

She ignored him. "I will handle the distraction myself. Useful as Lord Wimsey's condition may be, it's more important at the moment that we make headway on the boxes while we still have time. Dorothy, you're going to help them. Are we clear?"

"Almost, Miss Poppins," said Danner. "What if the guards don't believe the mermaid army story?"

She blinked at his words and said, in the most purely puzzled voice, "Why should they not?"

"Well, they-"

"Mr. Danner, I assure you that it will happen. We haven't time to argue. You and Mr. Cranston should take up your positions now, while the others obtain pry-bars and other such necessary equipment. I will meet you at the docks shortly."

Since the idea of trying to liberate a full-sized dinosaur (something I had only ever seen in textbook drawings before) didn't appeal to me, I made no objection. Dorothy looked very disappointed, though. As we filed out of the room to find our supplies, Prince and I fell in alongside her. "Something wrong?"

"People always want to leave me behind, or put me out of the way," she said, kicking at the floor. "I've had all kinds of adventures in Oz an' the other fairy countries, but they still treat me like I'm just a little girl. I don't get to do ANYTHING interesting here."

"You know, Dorothy," I told her, "she sent me to the egg boxes too. And Tom Swift and Lord Wimsey. I have a feeling a group like ours can make something interesting happen even if we're not in the same place as the Mermaid Queen."

I have got to learn to stop saying things like that. They happen.

We got our tools together and headed over to the docks where Lord Wimsey said the egg boxes lay. There were Mermaids- no, Sirens- lurking in the waters just out of reach. I don't think anyone not looking for them would have spotted them, as they did an excellent job of hiding in the shadows. None of them made any particular gestures towards us, but I could feel their eyes following the group. It wasn't a comfortable situation, so you can imagine my relief when the boxes came into view.

Several hundred was a bit of an understatement. You could have built Dawson City in miniature with that many crates. I'll admit, I was uncomfortable with tearing up a company's property at first, but as soon as I saw that all of the boxes contained the same sort of egg as we'd hatched- well. Where I come from, there's no particular need to respect private property if someone's being held there against their will. If it's a baby that's been kidnapped, the law presumes that it'd object. Given a few hours and a little warmth, the eggs would hatch out into proper water babies, and that was good enough for me. I set to prying those boxes open with no qualms whatsoever. So did the others; I think the only problem we really had was keeping the lids intact, as Tom was pretty enthusiastic about his wrenching.

We were making fairly good headway, and starting to wonder aloud about whether we should have someone bring the eggs down to the Sirens as a gesture of good faith, when Prince sat up and gave a low bark. I set down my crowbar and turned to see what had caught his attention.

"Oh, look!" Dorothy exclaimed, from the end of the alley that had led us to the boxes. We crowded around behind her.

Miss Poppins had summoned an army.

I am completely serious. serious. I didn't see Miss Poppins herself, but I can't imagine anyone else in the city could possibly have gotten the Sirens to swarm down the street in formation. I thought I had seen the worst of them the other night, when they were climbing the walls of the Three Fishes Inn. I'd been wrong. This lot wasn't merely angry, they were enraged. If those needle-toothed mouths could have spit fire they would've done it, and damn the consequences. They slithered and heaved their way down the street at a frightening pace, looking like a salmon run gone horribly, horribly wrong. God help any poor fool who got in their way! They'd have torn obstacles apart without batting an eye, I'm sure of it.

Stone, steel, or flesh, it would've gone to pieces if it got between them and the warehouse.

Prince growled softly, moving to position himself between us and the Sirens, but not a one of them noticed. Thank Heaven for small mercies. And I do mean small, because there was more to come. The greenish-silvery mass of Sirens wriggled their way past, only to be replaced by- erm- the other sort of mermaid. On foot. A lot of them. Blazingly angry too, I'm sure, but I couldn't say for certain as I wasn't looking. I have a feeling human propriety doesn't mean much when you're on the warpath against the people who stole your Queen and Mother. Doesn't make it any easier to see, but it's an explanation, at least... I mumbled something like 'dear Lord in Heaven', I don't remember what, and did my best not to meet the eyes of the others.

There were an awful lot of the walking mermaids, and if you looked over their heads towards the back of the group you could just about make out another mass of oncomers, colourful as tropical birds but as angry as the rest. "You know," I said, "I have a feeling that they're going to need us down at the warehouse very soon."

"Well said, old chap." Lord Wimsey glanced at the stream of Mermaids passing us. "There's a back way out of here. If we move quickly I imagine we can get there early and beat the mid-day rush."

We ran through the back way after him. It's not as if we had another choice, really. The Mermaid army blocked the streets, the waters were simply out of the question, and the idea of climbing the buildings and racing across the rooftops of Glasgow was just ludicrous. Fortunately Lord Wimsey was as luminous as ever, so there were no stumbles or false footings. Even Dorothy managed to keep up with the group. Lord Wimsey stopped a fraction of an instant before reaching the end of the passageway between the buildings, holding up one hand. "Found the warehouse," he called over his shoulder, "but the army's not here yet- and the guards are still at their posts."

"What are we going to do?" asked Tom.

"We?" Lord Wimsey smiled at the American sunnily. "What do you mean, we?" And with that he stepped out into the street, waving both arms frantically.

"Oh, man, he's gonna get killed!" Tom shook his head, edging forward. "Here- Miss Gale, you be careful."

I poked my head out in time to see Lord Wimsey approaching the guards. They were foreigners, all right- dark-skinned and powerfully built, unlike any of the workers I'd seen in Vancouver. It was hard to tell at such a distance, but there was something about their stance that seemed to say the luminous man

approaching them had caught them at a loss. He was saying something- couldn't hear what- and pointing repeatedly at the main approach to the docks. As he spoke, the taller of the two men suddenly straightened and let out an exclamation.

"That," Tom said, "would be our Mermaids." He grinned. "And looky there, the short one's got some sense in him after all- he's taking Wimsey inside."

Just as he said it, the Sirens started to surge up the street. The taller guard braced himself warily, but stayed at his post. "I don't know, Tom," I murmured. "If you were one man with no gun, and you saw a sight like that... what would make you stay where you were?"

He opened his mouth, thought for a second, then turned and looked again at the warehouse. "He's expecting backup," he said slowly. "Lots of backup."

I nodded. "And we don't have the electric rifles."

"Well- no- but the people inside do-"

"And they're probably too busy with their own problems to hear any of this- someone's got to warn them!"

"I'll do it," said Tom, measuring the building with a glance. "I think I can probably get around the side and up there if there are enough handholds. What about you two?"

"I think we- Good Lord!"

The docks had erupted with Sirens, and not our Sirens, either. THAT would explain why the second guard hadn't gone anywhere: the reinforcements were waiting for their moment to strike from the water around and below the warehouse. As they lunged up onto the land, they flung themselves at our Sirens. The screeching began almost instantly, and I dug frantically into my pockets for the tin of wax. Prince yelped, pawing at his ears. They weren't directing the scream at us, thank goodness, but even so! I snagged Prince's collar for just long enough to jam the pellets of wax in before blocking my own ears. By the time I looked up Tom was gone. Didn't seem to have been hit by the Sirens, nor by the eggs- yes, the eggs, they'd gotten hold of a batch from somewhere and were flinging them at our lot. The walking Mermaids had joined the fray despite their lack of armament, tearing into the egg-throwers like maddened savages. I shuddered, wishing like mad for one of Tom's rifles. My revolver wasn't going to cut it against this bunch.

I couldn't fire into a crowd like that without hitting one of our own Mermaids or Sirens anyway. As I turned away from the sight I looked to Dorothy, planning to say something- but she wasn't there. She'd slipped around when I was plugging Prince's ears and was making for the warehouse at an amazingly good clip for a girl her age. Straight through the arc of fire of the egg-throwing Sirens, too.

"DOROTHY!" I bellowed, racing out into the open. She didn't hear me. If she did she certainly didn't show it. Probably too busy being clawed at by Sirens who couldn't seem to find purchase on her, or dodging eggs the size of her head. I drew my gun and took aim at the bunch nearest to her- if nothing else, I could distract them. Or... I reholstered the gun and slapped Prince's shoulder to get his attention. Then I pointed at the warehouse door. "That man!" I said, though I knew he couldn't hear me. "The one by the door! Get him before he gets the girl!"

I've known men who've said dogs are nothing but wastes of fur, or a way to get around the North Country. I've seen dogs that wouldn't have lasted two minutes in any life other than the life of a household pet. I've seen good sled dogs and bad ones, half-wolves, pure-breeds, and everything in between. But watching Prince bolt like a streak of silver lightning for the only warehouse guard left, I remembered something an American Marine once told me about the military dogs down in the States. They call them "the bullets you can recall."

I don't know about recall, since he did have the wax in his ears, but the bullet part? That much was true. The guard didn't stand a chance. Prince leapt at him, knocking him to the ground in a blink of the eye. Several of the egg-throwers started towards him, but they weren't the only ones with raised hackles and bared fangs that day. Prince stood over the fallen guard, growling and glaring at any Siren fool enough to dare approach. Dorothy had already slipped through the door and into the warehouse; with any luck that meant she was out of danger. It looked like my only chance, so I dashed across the open space, pulled the wax from my ears, and signaled Prince to step aside.

The dark-skinned man was too stunned to do more than whimper as I grabbed his collar and hauled him upright. For his size, he was surprisingly heavy. "These Sirens came from the warehouse, didn't they? Who's giving them orders?" His eyes were darting everywhere- wouldn't look me in the face. I gave him a shake and demanded, "Where's your boss? Answer me!"

Well, that got a response- a stream of terrified babbling any confessor would be proud to hear- but it was about as useful as a wet rag. I can understand a few words of Eskimo, but South Sea Islander is completely beyond me. "ENGLISH, man!" I roared, but it was no use; he repeated the babble, wild-eyed with what looked like terror. I snorted and dropped him. The Sirens were at a safe enough distance. Prince was all the protection he'd need, anyway, since it looked like our side had managed to drive the worst of them into retreat. As long as they stayed in the waters and well away from the warehouse pilings, we'd be all right. True, there were noises coming from inside, but by the sound of it Tom had got hold of one of the electric rifles and Cranston was having a field day with those .45s of his. Something was bellowing like a wounded bull moose, too. I assumed that was the Mermaid Queen; maybe they'd got her loose. If she was as big as Cranston said she could probably be a real asset in a fight.

I couldn't get to the waters, but then again, I didn't have to. Our little army was doing a pretty good job of handling that; by now the only enemy Sirens left were clustered around the warehouse proper, spines flaring furiously. They weren't bothering to scream now- a very real relief, believe me. The fangs and claws were bad enough. It occurred to me momentarily that there was just enough space along the quay now to bring in reinforcements. Carefully, since Prince was standing over the fallen guard and keeping the Sirens at bay, I made my way back towards the pavement. Nothing was coming up from the alleys that I could see, or from the street the army had just taken. At least, not so far as I could see. There were an awful lot of businesses about, though, and more places to hide a man or two than your average young forest. For all I knew, there might have been someone coming right-

click

- up behind me. I started to reach for my revolver.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said a dry, thin-sounding male voice. "This is an Enfield SMLE Mark 3. You don't stand a chance."

Under normal circumstances I would have set Prince on the speaker, visible or not. That, however, would have required Prince to be able to hear me call. I dropped my hand.

"Smart move," said the man. His voice was coming from a few feet behind me. "Now get your hands up... thank you. You're going to go inside and tell your friends to stop molesting my mermaids."

I calculated the odds of grabbing the rifle away at that distance should I whirl around, and they weren't good. When you've been threatened, shot at, and shot up as much as I have, you get to know this kind of thing. It's like an instinct. You also get good at instinctively judging people, and from the sound of it, this was a man who would pull the trigger on me- but not until he had what he wanted. Without turning around, I calmly asked him, "Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Mr. Prufrock. Now get moving."

Fangs and spines glistened, black eyes glittering as the fish-women turned away from the growling Prince to stare at us. "I think your Sirens might not cooperate," I pointed out.

Something whizzed past my head in a wobbly arc, landing with a squelch on the quay in front of me. The Sirens recoiled, hissing even more. "Pick it up," ordered Prufrock. It was an overripe, faintly rancid peach. "They can't stand the smell. You're only safe as long as you still smell of 'em. Take it and get moving."

I didn't seem to have much of a choice. Wonder dog or no, Prince had no way of getting past the Sirens without cutting himself to ribbons. I shook my head at him and mouthed 'stay!' before scooping the peach up and entering the warehouse, Prufrock's rifle squarely pointed at my back.

Outside had been chaos. Inside there was nothing short of war. The office we passed through barely registered- as soon as the door swung shut behind Prufrock, the noises of the fray within the warehouse proper surged up to meet us. Some immensely deep-voiced animal bellowing, the smashing of glass, the heavy thudding of weapons against flesh, the crackle of Tom's electric rifles; I couldn't have sorted it all out if I tried. I'd have been happier going into that mess with a detachment of my fellow Mounties, or even just Prince, but Prufrock had a way of clearing his throat that cut across the din. Not wanting to drop the peach, I kicked the door open with one foot.

The scene that presented itself was even worse than the sounds had led me to believe. There were Sirens everywhere- snarling, hissing, rage-maddened Sirens in full battle display. Their grey-green forms slid about the warehouse floor with unnerving ease, since the place was miserably slick. It looked as if someone had managed to open an enormous door in the part of the warehouse that hung over the ocean, and had somehow pumped in enough sea water to give the creatures a mobility advantage. Not that it could have been easy for them, given the sheer amount of shattered glass that glittered in the interior light- my fellow League members had been busy smashing tanks, it seemed. And they were doing amazingly well, too, given that they were under assault by the killer fish-women. I could see Miss Poppins still laying into one of the tanks with a sledgehammer. Danner was on the far side of the room, battling the Sirens unarmed- and, it seemed, unharmed! Could the stories from the War have been true? There wasn't a mark on him! Or on Dorothy, for that matter- for all that she was surrounded by Sirens, they seemed unable to touch her. They couldn't even get close to Wimsey, bright as he was. He wasn't fighting, though; he was using his advantage to work at the straps that...

Here I have to stop for a moment and try to sort out my impressions. When I first encountered the Sirens, I'd had a little time to get used to the idea of them. I'd seen the autopsies, and the photographs of the autopsies. I'd read the eyewitness reports. I'd even had a day or so to let the idea settle into my brain. The Mermaid Mother, on the other hand... Cranston hadn't been able to convey the half of it. The 'monster in Loch Ness' was just a story, a set of fuzzy photographs with no sense behind them. The creature in front of me, whom Lord Wimsey was trying to free, was real- vastly real, beyond what little power I have to describe. No wonder they needed a warehouse to hold her captive! A great mackerel-coloured creature at least as long from nose to tail-tip as ten men, she had a neck bigger than tree trunks. I've seen wilderness cabins smaller than her body, though no cabin ever

had such a twitching, heaving paddle of a tail, or clamped-down flippers, either. Nothing- NOTHING- that I have ever seen could have possibly prepared me for that sight, or the tortured, desperate moan she let out. It filled the enormous room, wiping out all the other noises, great and small alike.

When it passed, Prufrock cleared his throat. "Stop, the lot of you!"

There was silence, and every eye was turned to us. And somehow, for all that I was surrounded by Sirens who wanted to kill me and my compatriots, with an enemy holding a gun at my back, in the presence of something too ancient to comprehend, I don't think I felt the slightest bit afraid. I might not have been able to see them all, but I knew every one of our group was here somewhere. The League might not have been the Dawson City RCMP detachment, but as far as I were concerned... they were as good as the same thing.

"These are my mermaids," announced Prufrock. "And if you don't want me to blow the Mountie's head off, you'll quit bothering them right now. Drop the hammers and back away from the tanks, nice and slow-"

The Sirens had come away from the others at the sound of Prufrock's voice. They'd formed up into a hissing, scaly grey semi-circle around the two of us, glaring angrily at me- no, at the peach in my hands- as the man spoke. Knowing a piece of bad fruit was my only shield wasn't an especially comforting thought in the face of a sight like that, so I lifted my eyes to the others in the room. Miss Poppins had lowered her hammer as Prufrock ordered. Lord Wimsey had stepped away from the Queen, and had also run completely out of his glow. Dorothy was standing next to Lord Wimsey looking tense and brittle enough to snap. And over on the other side of the open space, amidst the wreckage of several tanks, was Danner. For all that he'd finally started to bleed, he looked remarkably calm, gazing up at the warehouse's ceiling.

"That's better. Don't think you can stop me, you know. Even if you could, you can't stop the Prufrock Company, no matter who you are."

Danner's eyes dropped and met mine. One hand flickered in a gesture that could only mean one thing- get down. I nodded, once, and took a deep breath.

I hit the floor. From up above, on the other side of the open skylight, Cranston's shots rang out.

The Enfield barked almost instantly, but it was too late- the bullet whined harmlessly over my head. I spun around to face the man, who was crumpling before my eyes. There wasn't much to him- badly parted thinning hair, skinny arms and legs, white flannel trousers rolled up at the bottom, and rapidly growing bloodstains. As he stared at me, rifle sagging, I heard screaming- Dorothy's screaming- and realized we had more trouble than before. There was nothing to

hold the Sirens back now. Except, possibly, the one thing I had in my hands.

I've been shot before. It's almost impossible to use an ordinary handgun if the bullet's hit you anywhere near your shoulder. Cranston, bless his blackened heart, had plugged Prufrock squarely through the muscles of the upper chest. There was no way he could lift the Enfield without help, so I turned and hurled the peach to Lord Wimsey with all my strength. "It's the smell!" I yelled to him. "They can't stand the smell! Pass it around!"

Whether he did or not I don't know. To tell you the truth I don't remember very much of what happened next, precisely. I know I turned again and grabbed the Enfield from Prufrock's nerveless hands, but after that it's all a blur. Might've had something to do with one of the warehouse walls collapsing, or Danner leaping across the entire warehouse floor like some kind of giant grasshopper and wrenching the enormous bolt on the Queen's restraints out of the concrete floor as if it were nothing but a weed. There were more gunshots, and Dorothy was still screaming, and the Queen was writhing and bellowing as Prufrock ran like mad for the daylight- it was all too much for any man to follow, so I did the only thing I could. I ran after him. He had a good lead on me, but I had something much more important: the finest dog in the North Country. Prince leapt at Prufrock as soon as he burst out of the door, pinning him to the quay and waiting for me.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one waiting. There was an entire brigade of Sirens- led by Albert, the innkeeper.

I don't mind saying that I came very close to saying something downright unbecoming a gentleman then. After everything else that happened, after all the unbridled insanity in the warehouse- him? He was in on the whole sorry mess? It made sense, of course- it explained how he knew so MUCH- but between the insults, the half-helpful, half-spiteful dribs of information, and his amazing ability to be anywhere but where we could get anything USEFUL out of him- well. Let's just say that the warehouse melee and Prufrock's removal left me short of breath, and leave it at that. All I did was stare at him and let go of Prufrock, who slumped unconscious to the floor. Albert grinned. It was not a heartening expression. "Ye've done a good job, Mountie. You an' the others've done right well." He nodded to the bleeding man at my feet. "Now, why don't y'just hand him over to me an' the girls, and we'll take care of him?"

One of the Sirens made as if to heave herself forward. I waved one peach-reeking hand at her, and she fell back with a glare and a hiss. "We almost got killed by 'the girls'," I said, eyeing Albert.

He shrugged. "I gave ye the peach, didn't I? What'd you do with it?"

"I ate it! What else was I supposed to do with it?" Albert snorted. "Well, I s'pose ye don't need it any more," he conceded. Behind me I could hear the others filing out

of the building, and the soft thudding noise of someone hopping onto the quay. "You may as well-"

I caught his eye then. "I want to question him first," I said, with all the determination I could muster.

After a few moments' thought he nodded, and I turned to the others. It looked as if Tom and Lord Wimsey were still in the warehouse, and probably Dorothy, too. "We need ice," I said, "or smelling salts." Danner nodded once and headed back inside. As the Sirens started to round up the ones who had been throwing eggs at us before, Miss Poppins came forward and pressed a bottle into my hand. There was a nudge at my boots; Prince whined softly, shaking his head uncomfortably. He seemed none the worse for wear, only a little ill at ease. "Good boy, Prince," I murmured, pulling his ear-plugs out and wadding them into my pocket.

A flicker of shadow was all the warning I got. Prince and I hopped sideways just in time to give Danner room to land. I'd been too busy to notice the Sirens had formed into a complete ring around us now, or that Danner had managed to leap over the heads of every single person present- finny or otherwise. He seemed to think this was perfectly normal, handing me two huge fistfuls of ice before politely making his way back out through the crowd. Well, that explained how he reached the skylight...

Pouring ice water on a man's face doesn't work as well to wake him up as it does in the stories. Smelling salts, on the other hand, work very well indeed. Prufrock jerked sharply, coughing and letting out a groan as he came back to consciousness.

"It's over, Prufrock," I told him. "You may as well talk."

Pale, shaking, he still managed a look of utter disdain. "Oh, please," he replied. "I won't, and you can't make me. What do you plan to do?"

Cranston wedged his way past the rapidly thickening wall of Sirens. "We haven't got a plan exactly yet," he said, eyes fixed on the bleeding man. "Then again, I don't know that we need one. It looks like the, ah, ladies have a plan of their own."

Prufrock's gaze flickered past him for a moment. "Let them," he said diffidently. "Did you think I was the only one? Prufrock Shipping is bigger than me- you'll never stop the family-"

"And you're out to take over England," continued Cranston. "Is that it?"

Prufrock laughed, a harsh, rasping sound. "England? You've got to be joking! Why on Earth would we want England? It's a pathetic, grey, drizzling dump of a land!"

"The rest of the Empire then," I said. I could have been wrong but I thought I saw

a flicker of acknowledgment in his face. "Treason's a hanging offense-"

"That's if he gets to trial," said Cranston, addressing me. "Let the Sirens have him."

I stared at the grey-eyed man. He looked steadily back. "Let them," he urged. "It's what he's earned."

"The man's right, Mountie," came Albert's voice. "The girls'll take care of him. After what he did to 'em, turning 'em against their own kin like that-"

"You be quiet." I looked back to Cranston. "There's more to it. I can't let them do that."

"Can't you?" The Shadow gave me a mirthless smile. "What do you plan to tell the judge? That your prisoner kidnapped the Queen of the Mermaids and held her captive until she could hatch out an army for him? There isn't a judge in the country who'll believe you. You know it. Let them have him."

At that moment I would have given almost anything in the world to wipe that look off his face. That wasn't the look of a human, nor the look of honest rage burning in the eyes of the Sirens. That was the look of something out of Hell. If he had pushed me even one bit farther I would have broken his nose for certain- but neither he nor I had the opportunity to find out. The quay on which we stood began to shake; the waters of the harbor suddenly kicked up a wave of foam and foulness, as chunks of the building fell into the sea.

And out of the remainder of the warehouse there rose the biggest neck I have ever seen. The Mermaid Queen gave a long, lowing moan as she twisted her head about to stare down at us. "Oh," said Alfred, "now ye've done it..."

I looked down. Prufrock had been pale before, but he was white with shock now. How much of it was the blood loss I didn't know, but-

I'd forgotten to stanch his wounds. If I didn't get him to a doctor, fast, all of this would be a moot point. "Prufrock," I said urgently, "listen to me." He looked up with terrified eyes. "You know what they plan to do. If we can get you to a doctor, you'll only have to worry about the British justice system. Hanging's a clean death compared to this. Talk, fast, and I can get you out of here!"

His gaze shifted to the Queen, who lowed again. "N- no," Prufrock croaked. "I won't... you can't..."

"Come on, Prufrock! It doesn't have to be like this! Just tell me how to find the others before this goes any farther!"

Around us, the Sirens were moving in closer, welling in even past Cranston. The

trembling Prufrock shook his head.

"I can't protect you if you don't help me!"

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. When he looked up at me... I had seen that look before. Corporal Tompkins got that look when the doctor in Fort Munn told him not even amputation could stop the gangrene. It wasn't a farewell to his leg, but a farewell to everything. Corporal Tompkins had made up his mind to die, and so had Prufrock. There was nothing left of Prufrock that a man could talk to; his heart might still be beating, but he was already gone.

I closed my eyes. "So be it," I said. "Into God's hands I commend your spirit, Prufrock..."

Prince whimpered softly as I turned around. "Up, boy," I told him. The Sirens parted in front of us, and we walked steadily away.

There isn't much to report on after that. The walking Mermaids and the Sirens had been joined by a great many strapping young men who seemed more than happy to rip the remains of the Prufrock warehouse apart and let the Queen out. I went down to the harbour-master to try and report the incident, but after I'd convinced him I wasn't confessing to anything, he just said something about blowing up a nice normal shipping company if I wanted him to make a fuss. By the time Prince and I got back, the remains of the warehouse had been smashed to bits. There wasn't enough left to make a proper box of matchsticks.

What we did have left had been recovered from the office and loaded onto the dirigible. The filing cabinets hadn't yielded any locations of other Prufrock offices, nor had they contained any leads on the rest of the Prufrock family, but they had been full of other papers. Maps, mostly. Maps of places that ten days ago I would have sworn didn't exist. Star charts of the sky over London, with the second star to the right of every possible place of significance marked out in red. A map of a country called Ev, with a note in the margin saying that on the other side of the Deadly Desert there lay an unmappable place called Oz-

That reminds me. We met the Mermaid who had come to the dirigible again. She was talking with Lord Wimsey and the others when I got back from the harbour-master. The gratitude of royalty's nothing to be turned down, so I imagine they were making arrangements for communicating with her people, or something- I don't know, and right now I don't care to guess. I only remember that she said her people would find another breeding-place, and that as much as they were grateful to us they were not going to tell us where the ones they used lay. She said something about the South Seas, and pirates, and when I asked her she did say that one Captain Hook had been exiled some time ago, but I don't remember the details. Then she mentioned something about Prufrock's people and the coast of Maine- I imagine we'll be checking that out at some point. With any luck it'll all

come clear after a good night's sleep. What I remember most, though, was Dorothy pushing her way forward.

"Scuse me, Miss," she said, "but I just have to ask, I've just got to- how did you ever know me?"

The Mermaid considered her question for a moment. "There was a man," she said at last, "who spoke about you. An old man, I think."

The girl was fairly vibrating with excitement at this. "Oh, what was his name?" she exclaimed hopefully.

"Oscar," said the Mermaid. "I believe his name was Oscar."

"Thank you, miss," said Dorothy. "That's just what I wanted to know."

The Mermaid has returned to her people. Every Siren, Mermaid, and other form of fish-person in Glasgow Harbour waved us good-bye as the dirigible left. We've got sixteen hours to finish our group report before we get back to London. At Lord Wimsey's suggestion, we're going to keep the majority of the papers ourselves, rather than turn them over to J.; he did, after all, refuse us access to information not directly related to the Sirens, and aside from one or two of the naval charts I don't think anything in those files directly related to the Sirens either. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd object to this kind of thing. Then again, under ordinary circumstances, Dorothy would still be in the asylum.

You see, I don't like the smell of this situation at all. No government that I can think of has ever offered to repatriate someone unless they were either a criminal in need of deportation, or a foreign national from a country with whom they had diplomatic relations. Dorothy's no criminal, and the government of Britain has no relation whatsoever with Oz or the other fairy lands. What it does have is a very long history of expansion and colonization, particularly into territories with valuable resources. Magic's pretty valuable, if you ask me. So's the fact that no one in the Oz territories gets any older. Can you imagine what'd happen if some of the peerage alive today found out about a place like that? They'd be pushing for a full-scale invasion and annexation before the day was out. And they'd get it, too; I can't imagine a country with no policemen can have much of an army. For all that the British Empire brings civilization along with it, I really don't think that anything good can possibly come of Britain having any kind of consistent contact with Oz.

Speaking of which, it's nearly ten o'clock. I had better go wake up Dorothy.