

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Twenty-First A Visit to the Zoo

by

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(based on COTY)

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League HQ

The last thing I wanted today was another encounter with the Metropolitan Police. I don't mean any offense by that. They're good men, and they take their jobs seriously. It's just that I had a feeling the next thing they'd ask would be for me to come around the station house again. In uniform. On horseback.

No, today I wanted nothing to do with policing. It's not often that I get that feeling, but I've learned to listen. My work's the better for it afterwards. I can't stand idleness, though, so I thought for a while; that's how I wound up seeking out the apartment where J. said Dorothy's lodgings were. If she was anything like me, and I suspected she was, at least in this, she was probably getting pretty tired of being cooped up in four walls by now. Constable Deadman's comments the day before had left me wondering about what the local zoo was like, since I'd never been to a proper zoo in my life. I figured if nothing else, a trip like that would be educational for Dorothy. (That reminds me. I ought to check and see what kind of arrangements J's made for Dorothy's schooling. They start the school year here pretty soon, as I recall.)

At any rate, I took Prince and went around to the place where they've got Dorothy staying. It isn't exactly in what I'd call the best part of town, but it's a safe enough sort of area and there's nothing particularly outstanding about the building. It's as grey and dingy as the city streets. How anyone can live in a place like that day in and day out is beyond me. Why, Dorothy's floor didn't even have any windows- at least, none that I could see. There might've been some opening onto the back side of the building, but somehow I doubt that. London doesn't look like it was built with much regard for open space. Mind you, the building was just as bad inside- dark, cramped, and smelling of cabbage. I don't think I've ever been so homesick for good honest pitch and wood smoke in my life. How can people do that to themselves?

Since there wasn't any kind of an answer forthcoming, I had to settle for knocking at the door to Dorothy's rooms. I was expecting Miss Poppins to answer, since she's the girl's governess, but no. I had an instant's glimpse of a small room lined with bookshelves before I realized who'd opened the door. "Good morning,

Dorothy..."

It's been a long time since anyone but Prince was that happy to see me. She gave one of the brightest smiles I've ever seen; I don't like to think how long she must've been stuck in that place. "Mister Preston!" she exclaimed, leaning over to scratch Prince behind the ears. "Hello!"

"I hope I'm not disturbing anything," I said, taking my hat off, "but it's a fine morning outside and it seemed a shame to stay cooped up in here." Prince closed his eyes happily, tail wagging at the attention.

"Oh, no, not at all. I was just reading." She held up a book- a copy of *The Water-Babies*. "Seems a little bit silly now, really."

"You've been reading that too, eh?" I shook my head. "I wasn't all that fond of it myself." 'Not fond of it' wasn't entirely accurate. I didn't care for it much at all, and was glad to be done with it when I finished. The things we do in the name of research.

Of course, I wasn't there to talk books. Dorothy set her copy aside and asked, a bit wistfully, "What's it like outside today?"

"Oh, sunny and bright. Perfect day for going to the zoo, if you ask me. Wouldn't you agree, fella?" Prince let out a small bark. "You see? He agrees."

She started to smile again then. "I'll have to ask Mary," she said, a bit tentatively.

I nodded. "That's a fine idea. I think she'll probably agree, anyway. Fresh air does a body good."

Dorothy hurried off then; Prince and I stayed where we were. I didn't think she'd take long about it, and I was right. Barely a minute or two later she came back, all but skipping, carrying a good-sized packet and a sun hat. "It's all right!" she exclaimed. "Mary even gave us sandwiches, look!"

"Miss Poppins is a very sensible woman. Good for her." Prince sniffed towards the sandwiches curiously. "It's all right, boy, I've got you taken care of myself."

As she called, "Toto! Toto, we're going outside!", I quickly snapped Prince's leash onto his new collar. He wasn't very happy about it- the collar was wider and stiffer than anything I made him wear as my lead dog- but the Zoo had wolves, and I didn't want anyone to make Constable Deadman's mistake. We were walking the whole way, after all.

The trip took a little longer than I thought, mostly because of Dorothy. I'd almost forgotten she was a frontier child, and hadn't had the chance to get out and about. She seemed almost as interested in the details of London as she did in the idea of

going to the zoo, so every now and again we had to stop and look at this or that landmark. Sometimes it wasn't even landmarks- just some building or vehicle she'd never seen before. The place still made me uncomfortable, but at least someone was enjoying it- even if she did murmur that it wasn't as clean as the Emerald City. As I haven't gotten started on the Oz books yet, the most I could do was comment that London probably had more people, and leave it at that.

When we did reach the Zoo, there wasn't much of a line to get in. Too early in the day, I suppose. The woman at the ticket desk smiled indulgently at Dorothy and handed me a map 'for you and your little girl'. I didn't bother to correct her. It wouldn't have been worth the effort. We stopped at a wire and brick cage stocked with ravens and looked over the map of the zoo. "There's a Children's Zoo if you'd- oh, wait, it's still under construction..."

Dorothy peered at the paper. "What's a 'Mappin'?" she asked, pointing to an area not far away from the entrance.

"Why, I don't know," I said. "I don't think I've ever heard that name before in my life. Why don't we go see?"

"All right," she said, and we were off.

The place we were headed for was named the Mappin Terraces. I could see something that looked like an artificial mountain in that general direction, and supposed that was what we were heading for. Between the raven cage and the Terraces, there were quite a few smaller displays- tropical birds, monkeys that screamed at the sight of Prince, and a family of civet cats. Dorothy, of course, was rotating like a child's top, trying to take everything in at once. I couldn't blame her. Most of the animals were creatures I'd only ever heard of in books. There was even a building on one of the side paths that promised a troop of gorillas, and possibly a Borneo orang-utan. I turned to find Dorothy in front of the monkey cages, thinking that we might give the ape house a look next, only to see a surprisingly big crowd forming around a small Tudor building nearby.

According to my map the building was the Clock Tower, 'formerly the Llama House'. This didn't look like the sort of crowd you'd get for llamas, though. From what I remembered of my lessons, they were pretty ordinary creatures from Peru. I overheard someone in the crowd muttering, "... from Africa, you know, somewhere in deepest darkest..."

By this time Dorothy had noticed the people too. "Do you know what they're looking at, Mister Preston?"

"How does it, erm... how does it go?" said someone in the group.

I shook my head. "I've got no idea, Dorothy. Did you want to see?"

"Oh, let's."

"All right." I started towards the Clock Tower. "Excuse me- thank you... pardon me, please..."

The people were three or four deep, maybe more. It really wasn't a very big building, and there were a lot of people interested in whatever the creature was. Fortunately, at the sight of Prince they parted like the waters of the Red Sea. I gestured to Dorothy to go on ahead of me, thanked a few of the other onlookers, and followed her up to the rail that marked the edge of the Clock Tower's yard. The crowd closed in behind us just as Dorothy rose on tiptoe and called out, "Oh, look!"

It had two heads.

I'm quite serious. The beast had two heads. And not next to each other, either. That would have seemed more sensible to me, but- well, sensible simply didn't apply. It looked like some kind of antelope, or deer- no, that's not right. Like two antelopes, cut in half and stuck together end to end. That's right, end to end. No room for the normal termination of the digestive process at all, unless there was something going on that I didn't like to think about.

You'd think after the monstrous fish-women of Glasgow I'd be used to impossible sights, but you'd be wrong. "Good Lord!" I exclaimed, and I think most of the crowd agreed with me.

Dorothy, on the other hand, was absolutely enchanted by the sight. "Oh, isn't it beautiful?" she cried. Beautiful was not the word I would have chosen for it. (Though I did have to admit that it would've made a very fine-looking pair of antelopes, as long as the hindquarters were provided as part of the bargain.) "Did they say it was from Africa, Mister Preston?"

I got enough of my wits back to say, "I think so. There ought to be a sign-"

"Oh yes." She turned away from the fantastic creature long enough to read it over. "It says it's called a 'pushmi-pullyu', and that they found it in Africa, but..." She trailed off, and didn't continue.

PUSHMI-PULLYU (*Bicephalocapra africanus* (Doolittle)), said the sign. This animal, the only one of its kind known to science, was first described by- I stopped and looked over at Dorothy, who was frowning considerably. "Something wrong?" She fidgeted uncomfortably, like she didn't want to be heard. I bent down to make it a bit easier for her.

"But Africa isn't a fairy country!" she whispered to me, standing on tiptoe.

I glanced over at the beast. One of the heads was placidly eating a pile of hay; the

other was watching the crowd warily, as if it were only waiting for the eating head to finish before deciding to bolt. "No," I agreed, "it's not. Maybe it wandered out of a fairy country into Africa, though? No one really knows what's in those jungles, after all."

She looked at the creature again and smiled. "Maybe," she allowed. "Do you think there could be more of them, somewhere?"

I really didn't see how the thing could breed, but then again I didn't see how the thing could exist. "I suppose it's possible," I murmured. "I've never even heard of such a beast before, but if there's one there's got to be another, hasn't there?" She didn't answer. She'd got her feet up on the bottom rung of the railing and was leaning into the enclosure, holding one hand out towards the creature.

A quick look at the sign indicated that it was definitely vegetarian, but so are moose. "I don't think they like people doing that, Dorothy."

Looking up at me, she nodded and pulled back her hand. "All right," she said, stepping down from the rail. "Do you suppose they have any other fairy creatures in this zoo?"

My hand was halfway to the map in my pocket before I realised it wasn't exactly the sort of thing you put in print. "You know, I have no idea. It's awfully big, isn't it? They might very well have something else impossible around here somewhere."

So we wound up roaming the rest of the Zoo for a while, searching for impossible creatures. Didn't find any, although I admit I almost mistook the 'maned wolves' for something out of a storybook. At first glance they look almost impossible. They're perfectly normal beasts, though. They've been known to science for years. It's just that they happen to resemble extremely large red foxes, with legs even a greyhound would envy. They are, however, ordinary. Beyond the pushmi-pullyu, there really wasn't anything else you could rightly call a fairy animal. Dorothy had pretty high hopes for the Mappin Terraces, but it turned out there's no beast by that name. They were named after a benefactor of the Zoo, and all that lived there were Asian sloth bears and Indian langurs. That didn't sit well with her, but there wasn't any time to grouse. It's not far from the Terraces to the Zoo's lions. That got Dorothy's undivided attention. I believe she stood and watched the big male for ten whole minutes without so much as moving.

Now, I haven't read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* yet, but Dorothy's told me about her friends and acquaintances back in Oz. She'd mentioned the Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger more than once. There was a wistful sort of look on her face, watching that zoo lion. I knew what she must've been feeling; I've seen that look before. Quietly- I didn't want to disturb her- I put one hand on her shoulder. As she started leaning back against my arm, I told her, "You'll see him again, Dorothy. And all the others, too. We'll find a way."

She looked up at me for a moment. Then she smiled- a hesitant, fragile smile, not at all like her normal expression. For a moment- well, for just a moment she looked rather like Louise. She'd always wanted a daughter...

I shook my head a little and the moment passed. "Come on," I suggested. "Let's go see the wolves."

Now, I know wolves were exterminated in England hundreds of years ago, but you'd think they'd at least remember enough about the creatures to give them a livable enclosure. The wolf cages resembled nothing so much as a series of kennels, with a couple of concrete tunnels towards the back and a half-height wall that was probably a whelping pen of some kind. Wolves are big animals, and even a big dog needs a certain amount of room to stay happy. I didn't like the look of the wolf cages at all, although I had to admit that the animals I saw certainly seemed healthy. Even if they were asleep out in the open.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Dorothy glancing back and forth between the cage and Prince. That wasn't a big surprise. Other zoo visitors were being a lot less subtle about it. Prince's dog blood shows pretty strongly, though. Standing in front of the wolf cage, there really wasn't any way he could be mistaken for one of them. His coat is a more silvery colour than theirs. The Zoo's wolves had yellow eyes; his were dark brown, though slanted like a full wolf's. He had a very big patch of pure white over most of his chest and belly, which you don't often see in wolves, and his muzzle was a little shorter than theirs. The differences were as plain as the nose on my face.

That didn't seem to bother one of the wolves, though. A small, dark female came to her feet as I watched, padding over to the bars of the cage to yawn and give Prince a curious look. I almost smiled at his response- ears pricking forward, tail coming up, leaning in to sniff back at her- but there were people watching. Nervous-looking people. With a sigh, I took up the rest of the leash's slack. "Sorry, old boy," I said. "The last thing we want is trouble."

He flicked an ear in my direction. The female was straining to poke her nose out between the bars, sniffing with a good deal of interest. I looked over towards Dorothy, remembering that she'd brought her own dog along. Toto, at least, had the sense to be taking an interest in something close at hand- a pigeon. There didn't seem to be any kind of real tension in the air, so I turned back to Prince.

Apparently, I'd judged the situation too soon. Prince's ears were starting to slant back as a big, charcoal-grey male shouldered the female aside with a growl. "You know," I muttered to Dorothy, "I think the zookeepers would be happier if we went somewhere else now."

The girl looked back and forth between Prince and the wolves a moment. "Prob'ly,"

she agreed.

I got a good, firm grip on that leash and tugged at it once, to no effect. Prince weighs a hundred and forty pounds, and he did not want to move. The she-wolf had lost interest by now. The male, unfortunately, was another story. His hackles were very visibly rising along the back of his neck, and he was starting to rumble quietly.

He'd be snarling in another minute, I knew. "Prince," I said sharply. "Up. Now."

That was enough to get through to him. Prince came to his feet straightaway. Unfortunately, the wolf didn't approve at all. He bared his teeth immediately, letting out a ferocious growl that woke the other wolves and set the onlookers to backing away as fast as they could. That's when Dorothy stepped forward, facing the wolf. "Now, you STOP that!" she exclaimed sharply.

Just like that, he did. The growl turned into a shocked, rising whine, and the wolf fell back a pace with a look I can only describe as 'poleaxed'. Dorothy went on talking. "You ought to be 'shamed of yourself," she told him. "Prince is a guest here."

As Prince moved back a bit and settled himself against my leg, Dorothy looked down at him. Somewhat more gently, she said, "And you, Prince, ought to've been a little more polite."

He ducked his head, not meeting Dorothy's eyes. I couldn't blame him. I bent over to rub him behind the ears for a moment; he let out a sigh, his tail sagging behind him. "It's all right, fella. You'll be more careful in future, won't you?" He whuffed softly.

It hadn't been the best of days for him, really, and it was starting to get warmer on top of everything else. Besides, we still hadn't had our sandwiches.

"Dorothy," I said, "I think we've had enough for now. Why don't we go get out of everyone's way?"

She nodded, and we left the wolves and the murmuring crowds behind. That was more or less it for the day at the zoo, really. We came home not long after that. I've got just enough time to get washed up and head over to Oxford Street for the evening's lessons.