

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Twenty-Fourth On Dogs

by

Jessica McGeary
(based on COTY)

Day Thirty-Two - Tuesday, September 8
Richmond Park

I spent this morning in a fruitless search through the mustiest public archives I could find, looking for anything to do with the registration of American or other foreign companies to do business in the port of London. The only mention I found anywhere of Prufrock was on a list, in the middle of a bunch of other companies. I may have to look them up tomorrow individually just to make sure they weren't related, but if you're not affiliated with the local courts you're only allowed a certain amount of times in the files. Between the condition of the archives and the amount of crowding, noise and traffic in the streets outside, I'd about all I could take of the city. I headed for the nearest children's bookseller.

The Lost Princess of Oz was waiting for me, like I'd asked. The bookseller, a man named Denslow, had taken it on himself to set aside a few other books that 'your children' might like. If that kind of thing keeps up much longer I'm going to have to hire someone to do my shopping for me... anyway, I bought the lot of them without complaining and took them with me to the park today. I thought I'd at least look at them on the chance that there might be something that I'd missed, related to the Prufrock papers. I didn't see anything especially fantastic straight off, but there was one book that stood out for some reason. *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*, by Felix Salten. Takes place in the Black Forest. The main character's a roe deer. Would've mostly ignored it, really, since it's got none of the magic or fairyland material that the Prufrocks were after, but... well. According to Dorothy and the books, the animals of Oz can talk. So can animals from everyday countries who happen to come to Oz. I've seen Miss Poppins communicate with both Prince and Toto as easily as if they were human beings. All my life, I've been sure that Prince- or Duke, or King- would have spoken to me if they could. If only because I haven't got enough sense to smell the things they do, or notice the trails they pick up on! The Oz books aren't supposed to be much more than histories, so naturally they don't touch on what the talking animals are thinking. Salten, on the other hand, wrote his book from the animals' point of view.

The first part of the book wasn't anything much, really. It's all typical children's-book stuff at first. I almost put it down in favor of *Lost Princess of Oz*, but as I

glanced down the page, one of the deer mentioned "Him". That was how they referred to human beings- Him, or He, or His. Every time. Hunters, poachers, farmers- all men were Him, and He was a terrible mystery too powerful to comprehend.

It caught my attention. I'd never really given much thought to what most animals must see of men and women; dogs maybe, but others? Never even thought of it. Wolves stay back from people unless the winter's made hunting too hard for them, or unless they smell blood. If you catch one young enough, you can tame it, at least some of the time. Bears aren't bad creatures, unless some fool's been tormenting them. Why, bear-cubs make fair pets, as long as you treat them kindly and keep them outside where they're happier. Caribou just... are, I guess. Mink, martens, sable- they don't really mean much until they're on a trapper's load of pelts. They're beasts. It hadn't occurred to me to think about them. But where we would be going, the animals could not only think, they could talk- and if the Oz books really were true histories, then they had a lot to say.

I kept reading the Salten. There were two parts that stuck with me. The first came when one of the deer was struck by a hunter's bullet. After an older stag misled the hunter and his dog, the wounded young stag limped off to hide and recover. Now, I've never been in that hunter's position, but I've had to follow a lot of blood trails- animal and human alike. I'm proud to say that when it's been animal, I've caught up and put the poor beast out of its misery every time. Hunters who give up on their quarry only encourage the wolves. I haven't always been able to track them myself, of course; that's what dogs are for. King was my first really fine tracker, but I'd swear Prince was his equal any day of the week. What I miss, he finds, and he makes sure I see it too. I've been in the RCMP long enough to know that I can trust him when I fail.

Maybe it's a little strange to say so, but it's exactly that which made the other part of the book stick in my head. After the young stag recovers, a dog comes into the forest on the trail of a dying fox. There's a stretch of that chapter that burned itself into my brain:

"Let me go," said the fox beginning to speak, "let me go." He spoke softly and beseechingly. He was quite weak and despondent.

"No! No! No!" the dog howled.

The fox pleaded still more insistently. "We're relations," he pleaded, "we're brothers almost. Let me go home. Let me die with my family at least. We're brothers almost, you and I."

"No! No! No!" the dog raged.

Then the fox rose so that he was sitting perfectly erect. He dropped his handsome pointed muzzle on his bleeding breast, raised his eyes and looked the dog straight in the face. In a completely altered voice, restrained and embittered, he growled, "Aren't you ashamed, you traitor!"

"No! No! No!" yelped the dog.

But the fox went on, "You turncoat, you renegade." His maimed body was taut with contempt and hatred. "You spy," he hissed, "you blackguard, you track us where He could never find us. You betray us, your own relations, me who am almost your brother. And you stand there and aren't ashamed!"

The creatures of the forest go on to denounce the dog as a filthy traitor and a spy at the top of their lungs. And the dog answers:

"What do you want? What do you know about it? What are you talking about? Everything belongs to Him, just as I do. But I, I love Him. I worship Him, I serve Him. Do you think you can oppose Him, poor creatures like you? He's all-powerful. He's above all of you. Everything we have comes from Him. Everything that lives or grows comes from Him." The dog was quivering with exaltation.

The creatures argue. The dog's rage wins in the end:

At last the fox could not fight any more. In a few seconds he was lying on his back, his white belly uppermost. He twitched and stiffened and died. The dog shook him a few times, then let him fall on the trampled snow. He stood beside him, his legs planted, calling in a deep, loud voice, "Here! Here! He's here!"

The others were horrorstruck and fled in all directions.

"Dreadful," said Bambi softly to the old stag in the hollow.

"The most dreadful part of all," the old stag answered, "is that the dogs believe what the hound just said. They believe it, they pass their lives in fear, they hate Him and themselves and yet they'd die for His sake."

I had to put the book down there.

All my life, I've been around dogs. When I was a boy of seven, my father- one of the first of the Northwest Mounted Police- brought me my first pup, Shep. Helped me raise him and train him- even bury him, years later. It was the Mounties who taught me how to drive a dogsled and look after a whole team. Yukon King would've been mine from the days when he was a tiny pup if the breeder bringing him to me hadn't had that accident on the trail. Even though Old Three Toe the she-wolf raised him, he only ever bit me once, and that was only because a lynx had just attacked him. He seemed happy enough to stay with me after that, and saved my life more times than I can count. I always treated him well, and in ninety cases out of a hundred, he was all the partner I needed. I did my best to do right by him and his son, Duke.

And, yes, by his grandson Prince. I owe my life to that dog. I could never knowingly do him wrong. I've always thought he served me willingly, and I've tried to be good to him in return. He's not like his grandfather, though. He's never

known any life except with people. Yes, his mother was a she-wolf, but dogs and wolves alike can be incredibly loyal creatures. It's just that- well, when you don't know any other way to be, is it really loyalty? Or is it just habit- or fear?

And even if it is loyalty... The fox and the hound were almost brothers, and the hound still broke the fox's neck. Prince is half a wolf. "You betray us, your own relations, me who am almost your brother." Prince is as much of the forest as he is of men's making. Maybe more. He's fought the creatures of the forest for the sake of men; most of the time he's fought them at my order. He's never seemed the least bit hesitant about it, but ...

I really don't know what to think. I can't even begin to say how much this bothers me.