

Diary of a Mountie, Part the Twenty-Fifth Uninvited Guests

by
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(based on COTY)

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At last, at long last, things are beginning to happen. Thank Heaven!

Reckoning that it'd been a month since Glasgow, Miss Poppins called a meeting of the League today. Since she wanted to discuss our progress (or lack of it) away from prying eyes and ears, Lord Wims Peter volunteered the use of his own flat here in London. His manservant Bunter greeted us at the door and showed us in. Prince came with me, of course. He looked amazingly out of place in that setting- but then, so did I. Lord Peter's rooms reminded me of some of the finer suites in the Palace Hotel back home, but without the feeling of day-in, day-out use that hotels seem to get. As our host, Lord Peter spoke first. He kept his usual offhanded tone of voice, but there was a kind of tightness around his eyes. He'd passed four or five young women in the direction of the Prufrock organization, he said, and only the very latest one was making any kind of headway whatsoever. Too many background checks for the others to pass. Even if she did get hired, he was of the opinion that it'd take months or more before she reached a position of any use.

Cranston- who is currently using the name Craig Lamont, and not going to any effort to explain why- seemed to be having similar problems. While he assured us he'd brought one of his best investigators over from America, he hadn't gotten anyone into the organization either. Neither had he been able to get any information out of people already inside the company. Just approaching them and trying to talk was running a risk of discovery.

There were a few looks thrown my way at that point, but all I said was that I hadn't made much progress either. I have a feeling that's all they expected of me. They had Lord Wimsey Peter- I will get that right one of these days- to do the investigating, after all; why would they need me? J. brought Lord Peter on board for his detection. As far as the paperwork is concerned, I'm just here to make sure we keep going when someone else would lie down and die.

I still don't entirely trust the reason J. gave for hiring me. England's got much too

long a history of persistence for me to be the best example they could find. There's got to be more to it than that, and I intend to find out what it is- eventually.

At any rate, we went on from there to Tom. That was a relief, since I didn't relish telling anyone but Miss Poppins and Dorothy how I'd been spending my time. Tom hadn't spent his time investigating, but he hadn't been idle, either. Turns out he has access to air travel of his own- got his own dirigible, and even a small airplane! He went back to America early on and spent most of his time in one of his invention labs. The first thing on his list was synthetic peach extract, so that future encounters with Sirens wouldn't require the toting of fruit. Once he had that, he set to work trying to formulate a waterproof paint that could be used on ships. Said that was still in the works, but that he was making progress. He mentioned that he'd tried to get in touch with some South American allies of his, but hadn't had much luck finding them. If all he managed to accomplish was the peach extract, I think we're still ahead of the game.

Neither Hugo nor Dorothy had anything particularly much to report, Dorothy for obvious reasons. Hugo said he'd tried, but the Prufrock workers- normally just the sort of people he's best at dealing with- were sealed up tighter than an oyster, or else spoke no English whatsoever.

That left Miss Poppins, who smiled as she stood up. "I, of course, have been looking after Miss Gale- as well as compiling the information I've received from each of you to date. Unfortunately, that hasn't been much. I'm sure each of you is doing his best, but-" She gave a bit of a sigh.

"Looks as if the trail's gone cold," supplied Lord Peter. "We've no pressing leads of any kind, not the least little bit."

"I'm afraid that is, in fact, the case." Her lips pursed in a disapproving expression. "The Prufrock company remains a threat. I do not think they have wasted their time this past month, despite losing the Mermaid Queen. Gentlemen, it would appear that we need to change our tactics."

I started to put up my hand, but Cranston spoke first. "Perhaps it's only that the trail's gone cold here," he said, looking to Lord Peter. "I've been thinking over this myself. Might we not have a better chance of getting our information somewhere else?"

"An excellent idea, Mr. Cranston," said Miss Poppins. "Where do you suggest, then?"

Cranston shrugged. "The Mermaid spoke of Maine," he said.

"Maine's a big state," Hugo murmured.

"This is true, but it's considerably smaller than the islands of the South Seas."

Cranston shot him a look. "Not to mention that we speak the same language. There's only so much coastline to the state, at any rate."

"I don't recall seeing anything about Maine in those maps we got," began Lord Peter, "but that doesn't mean much. They might've written down something we missed-"

Tom groaned, but Miss Poppins shook her head. "There may not be a need," she said. "Miss Gale has an idea of her own."

We turned and looked at Dorothy. She smiled, lifting her chin a little. "I was thinking," she said, "that ... well, we might go to Oz."

The Americans fell completely silent. Lord Peter smiled merrily, as if he were in on some kind of secret. Dorothy went on. "Well, we aren't having much luck here," she pointed out. "And that man did say he'd try to find a way to get me home. Those maps we found show how to get to Ev, and Ev's right across the Deadly Desert from Oz."

A bit of an argument broke out there. Mostly it was Cranston pointing out, and rightly so, that the threat from the Prufrocks wasn't the sort of thing you could simply walk away from. I don't remember the details, exactly, because I was too busy thinking about the idea- and watching the others argue. By the look of her, Miss Poppins had already known about Dorothy's idea, and so had Lord Peter. That meant there had to be some kind of merit to it. For all that she doesn't say much more than she has to, Miss Poppins has yet to steer us wrong. It occurred to me that the trip might not be irrelevant to the case after all; the Prufrock papers did include maps of Ev, Pingaree, and the other countries lying near to Oz. There was a very real possibility of getting their hands on some fairly powerful artifacts, too, if the objects in the books still existed. And hadn't Dorothy said Glinda had discovered that magic items worked in the civilized countries? An organization out to conquer the Empire couldn't do much better than magic if it really wanted an unstoppable super-weapon.

I brought up that very point then. Lord Peter had been making very similar points, apparently. It didn't take long to bring the discussion around to the question of how we were supposed to get to Oz to begin with, assuming we went at all. According to Dorothy, Glinda's spell to keep outsiders out of Oz didn't seem to apply to air travel- at least, not any more. That gave us a number of possibilities. There was the League dirigible, of course, but using that all but demanded we inform J. of what we were doing and where we were going. There was the possibility of Tom's dirigible, which would've called for either Tom or Cranston as the pilot; that wasn't a problem, but figuring out how much information to give J. was. I was just beginning to wish for Inspector Moore- we might not always have gotten along, but at least I could trust him- when Prince lifted his head. His ears

were pricked forward, as if he were straining to hear a sound, and he was focused on the window.

For good reason. There was a small, bright circle of light wobbling uncertainly back and forth just outside. "Lord Peter?" I called.

"Hmm?"

"Who knows we're here?"

The arguments ended right there. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, dropped whatever they were talking about and turned to see what I was pointing at. The light was still there, circling and flickering back and forth. "Someone with a torch, you think?" I asked.

Lord Peter shook his head as the group clustered around the window- at a safe distance, of course. "We're two storeys up," he murmured, eyes narrowing. "The light would be bigger if someone on the ground were using a torch- and probably not half so bright."

Tom leaned forward a little farther, peering at the light. Suddenly he let out an exclamation of surprise. "It's a person!"

Cranston and Danner looked at him as if he'd lost his mind, but Dorothy let out an "oh!" and walked right up to the glass. Lord Peter whistled in surprise and followed her. Miss Poppins just looked a bit more closely, nodding to herself as if she'd suspected something all along. As for me, I looked to Prince. He hadn't bothered to bristle at the strange light, and he wasn't on guard now, just wary. That was as much as I needed to know; I leaned past Dorothy to get a proper look myself.

Tom was right. It was a tiny person, no longer than my thumb- glowing and winged, but definitely human shaped. It didn't look especially male or female, but at that size I'm not sure it mattered. I couldn't tell whether it was paying attention to us or not. It flittered from one side of the window to the other and down to the sash, like-

"I think it's trying to get in," whispered Dorothy. Lord Peter nodded in agreement.

The tiny person paused, peering through the glass straight at us, and I suddenly remembered the books back at headquarters. "I could be wrong, Miss Poppins," I said, "but I think that's one of the fairies from Peter Pan."

"I believe you're right, Sergeant," she said. "In which case, we ought to let it in."

"Excuse me?" Hugo said, his voice incredulous.

"Not far, Mr. Danner. Only far enough to catch it, and be sure that it's harmless."

Lord Peter stepped back, framing the window briefly with his hands as if he were setting up a picture. "We could put something over the window- Bunter!"

His man poked his head out of the kitchen. "Yes, sir?"

"Have we got an aquarium lying about here anywhere?"

"I do not believe so, sir. I will, however, check."

As he turned away I called, "If you can't find one, we could probably use a roasting pan. A big one."

"Very good, sir." Bunter vanished again.

I'll admit, I was a little stunned to see the fairy. Not so much because of its looks, though. That was... well, pretty conventional, really. If you give a child a sheet of paper and a box of crayons and say 'draw a fairy', you'd get something an awful lot like that tiny glowing person. No, what had me boggling was something else: I'd been on the right track. All those books I'd read hadn't been a waste of my time or the League's after all. It really was the trail we were looking for. That was the moment I knew we'd be going to Oz if I had to convince the others myself.

About then, Bunter returned. "Very sorry, sir," he said, "but the aquarium is long since gone. Perhaps the Canadian gentleman's suggestion will suffice?"

He held out an enormous roasting pan, which Lord Peter took with a grin. "This'll do nicely, Bunter. Very nicely indeed- here, help us with the sash, won't you?"

The window opened easily enough, but the pan turned out to be useless. Our glowing visitor moved forward as we got the window open, but froze in midair and backed up at the sight of the pan. I'm almost certain I heard a very tiny 'thbtt' noise then. I couldn't swear to it, though. Not wanting to waste any more time I looked over at Miss Poppins.

"Not working, gentlemen?" She sighed. "All right... go ahead and let it in. Only do be careful. Fairies can be quite nasty when they have a mind to do so."

As soon as we lowered the pan, the ball of light zoomed into the room, jingling furiously and trailing a very faint sort of luminous dust. Prince yipped curiously, but it wasn't interested in him. No, it circled around towards me instead, stopping just in front of my face.

Fairies make some pretty rude gestures when they're angry.

I didn't exactly know how to answer that short of swatting the fairy out of the air, and that really wasn't called for. Instead I shrugged my shoulders and started to apologize. It didn't want to listen, of course. It flew off instead, tinkling madly as

it circled the room. I don't know who was watching it more closely, Prince or Cranston. I do know Cranston looked as if he expected the fairy to explode at any moment. It must've been a relief for him when Miss Poppins cleared her throat and said, "Over here, dear."

The conversation that followed was just about the most bizarre thing I'd seen yet, and that included Miss Poppins' first talk with Prince. She spoke English, of course, and the fairy seemed to understand. At least, it responded to what she said, but I couldn't tell you what it was saying if you paid me. Fairy speech, it seems, is all ringing bells and jingling noises. It sounds pretty enough, but from Miss Poppins' half of the conversation, the subject matter wasn't pretty at all:

"What do you mean, 'don't come'? Don't come to where?"

jingle

"Don't come to your fairyland. Why on Earth not?"

jinglejingle

"I see. How bad has it become?"

jingle

"The fairies are all starving? What does Peter have to say about this?"

JINGLEJINGLEJINGLE

"Missing?" exclaimed Miss Poppins. "Since when?"

jinglejingle

"What about the pirates?"

A motion at the edge of my vision caught my attention. It was Cranston, pinching the bridge of his nose with an expression of incredulity. "Excuse me," he said to no one in particular, "but are ALL children's books suddenly true?" For just a moment, I actually felt sorry for him. I knew exactly how he was feeling. The difference was that I'd prepared myself for this kind of thing, and he hadn't.

I started to say something, but Prince nosed at my hand. Lord Peter and the others, Bunter included, were gathering around the closed window. Apparently, our guest had not come alone. "Well, Miss Poppins," asked Lord Peter, "do we let them in as well?"

"Possibly," she answered. "It depends on the state of your pantry."

"Beg pardon? Oh- yes, this little- what's its name, anyway?"

"Cowslip."

"I see. Bunter, have we got enough on hand to show Cowslip and her friends some proper hospitality?"

"Of course, sir." The man's tone was injured, as if Lord Peter had insulted him by implying that they might not be prepared for an invasion of fairies.

"Righto, then." He slid the window open, admitting more of the creatures. "Take them into the kitchens and show them a proper good time, won't you?"

Bunter nodded, heading out of the room with the fairies in his wake.

I don't think I could chronicle the next few minutes if I tried. The room burst out in arguments, and the only thing that was absolutely clear was that several people wanted to try for Neverland instead of Oz. Not Cranston, of course. He looked like a man convinced he was trapped in a bad dream, and expected to wake up any second. I have to say that, Glasgow aside, I really am starting to feel sorry for him. It's only going to get worse from here on out; apparently we're sending a telegram to a young American woman named Ruth Plumly Thompson, the current Royal Historian of Oz. It may be some time before we get a reply, but no one's deciding anything until we hear from her.