

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Twenty-Seventh Beggarin' Belief

by

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(based on COTY)

At any rate, when I returned from the visit to Mr. Otani, there had been some progress. According to Bunter, the first telegram hadn't gone over very well, so they'd sent a second. That one had yielded a telephone number and orders to phone Miss Thompson directly. Since the conversation was restricted to Dorothy, Miss Poppins, and Lord WPeter, the rest of us were left to our own devices.

As I settled down in one of the parlour chairs, Tom said, "We're going to Oz, aren't we?" It didn't really sound like a question.

"So it would appear," Cranston said very sourly.

"You don't sound very pleased."

"Should I be?" Cranston looked over at Tom. "Take a moment and think, Mr. Swift. Fairies. Neverland. Oz-"

"Don't forget the Sirens," murmured Hugo. He wasn't quite smiling, but he did have a certain gleam in his eye.

"Yes, thank you so much, Mr. Danner. That's exactly what I needed." Cranston stood up stiffly and began to pace. There was a tense, unhappy line to his shoulders that I knew all too well. In that moment, I felt- well, I felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I believe I know what you mean," I said, leaning forward. He paused in his pacing, looking towards me. "I've seen a lot of things in my career. A lot of the cases I've had to handle have had people- good, sensible people- swearing that magic or spirits were involved, or other things like that... but I haven't had a case yet that involved anything genuinely supernatural. Every last one's turned out to have a perfectly reasonable, rational explanation. No magic at all."

"Thank you," said Cranston, nodding fiercely. "He understands what I mean. This is not how things are supposed to be. Things have a reason, and magic isn't it. Why, back in New York there are those who attribute my own ability to conceal myself to some kind of 'mystic power to cloud men's minds', some kind of- of magic, or hypnosis-"

That was as far as he got. Prince looked up eagerly as the parlour door opened;

it was Dorothy and the others, and they were smiling. Well- Miss Poppins was looking quietly, insufferably pleased, but Dorothy and Lord Peter were smiling. "Mr. Preston!" cried Dorothy. "The Wizard's coming! Miss Thompson's been talking to him, and she says he's been looking for me, and he's going to come to England! Isn't it wonderful?"

Cranston made a choking noise, but I had to smile back at her. Aside from the glowing gemstones, this was really the first time she'd had news from Oz, or anyone to do with Oz. In her shoes I'd have been just as excited. "He'll be here in a week," she went on. "Miss Thompson says he'll be meeting her in a day, and then it'll be four days before he can leave for England, but he's coming!"

"That leaves us enough time to check on Oz," interjected Miss Poppins. "Miss Thompson told us that the Wizard hasn't been able to reach Oz himself, and would be interested in any news we had-"

Cranston grimaced, sitting down as his hands went to his temples. Lord Peter looked at him, then said in a solicitous voice, "I say, are you all right?"

"I could use a drink," Cranston muttered. "I don't suppose your man's any good at Irish coffee?"

"Oh, Bunter's right brilliant at anything. Bunter?"

The manservant appeared at the parlour door. "Yes, sir?"

"Irish coffee for our American friend, if you would."

Bunter glanced towards Cranston. "How Irish, sir?" he asked. "Dublin, or Cork?"

"Belfast," said Cranston.

"Very good, sir," said Bunter, bowing as he left.

"Well!" said Lord Peter brightly, flopping into one of the chairs. "Off again, off again, is it? I shall pack my things directly, of course, but that does beggar the question of what we're going to tell our man upstairs."

"Downstairs," said Hugo.

"Beg pardon?"

"J.'s downstairs." Hugo made a snaking gesture with one hand. "Remember the tunnels?"

"Ah, yes, quite right, quite right." Lord Peter smiled. "'tis his blimp, after all, so we owe him some explanation. Not the whole of the thing, obviously- can't quite put full faith and credit in a fellow who doesn't put full faith in us- but something."

I nodded. "I don't like the idea of deceiving the Crown," I said slowly, "but given the situation..."

"And what you were saying earlier about imperialism, Sergeant." That was Cranston.

"Right."

"All right, we don't tell them we're going to Oz. What are we to say instead? Neverland? Fairies? That'll keep them off our trail, all right." Cranston got up and started to pace again.

"Pirates," said Miss Poppins. Everyone looked at her in surprise. "We've received intelligence from the fairies of Neverland, after all; if they can reach Britain, so can other people. I should think the pirates constitute a sufficient threat to Britain's security to be investigated, don't you?"

"Well-"

"Indicate that we intend to travel to Neverland- which I daresay we shall, later- and tell them what Cowslip said, that the pirates are too much of a threat for the natives to so much as forage for food."

"Fairies can get to our world from Neverland, but they can't go outside?" muttered Hugo.

"So our friends tell me, Mr. Danner."

"Excuse me," said Cranston. "Where's that coffee?"

A somewhat more haggard-looking Bunter poked his head into the parlour. "Begging your pardon, sirs," he said. "I did not mean to take so long." He handed Cranston a tray with several glasses and a bottle of Bushmills. "Belfast it is."

That may have been the first time I saw the American smile.

I couldn't help it. "Bunter?"

"Yes, sir?"

I saluted. He'd earned it.

Since Miss Poppins offered no further explanation for the fairies' pirate problem, Hugo fell quiet. Tom, on the other hand, was looking thoughtful. "Dorothy," he said, "didn't you mention something about a desert around Oz?"

"Yes, the Deadly Desert," the girl answered. "Anything that touches the sands dies. There's signs all 'round it in Ev."

"Hmm."

"I've crossed it several times," Dorothy went on. "Once in a sandboat. Once on a magic carpet that unfolded itself as we walked, so that it kept going in front of us. And the Wizard and me flew over it, of course."

"So a carpet's enough to keep us from being affected, but our shoes aren't?"

"Well, it was a magic carpet," Dorothy reminded him. "I don't think even the Silver Slippers would've been enough to walk across, really."

"Right, right....." Tom was looking very thoughtful indeed. "I could bodge together a sailboat in a hurry if you gave me a drawing, but that might take us a while. How high would we have to fly to get there safely in the dirigible? Never mind, you probably wouldn't know... are there any other ways?"

"Underground," I commented. "The Nome King tunneled under the sands once, when he was trying to invade."

Dorothy blinked, turning towards me with a look of wide-eyed surprise. "You've been reading the Histories!" she exclaimed, delighted.

"Well- yes. It seemed like it might be a wise idea..."

She smiled at me. It was very nearly her visit-to-the-zoo smile.

"I've been reading a lot of things, Dorothy," I admitted. "I don't like being caught unprepared... that reminds me. Tom? I know shoes aren't worth much against these desert sands, but still- is there any chance you have some kind of material you could work up to protect Prince's paws? Even if it's just against sharp objects. He hasn't liked walking around the London pavement very much."

"I'll see what I can do."

There was a long, loud sigh from Cranston. Even Bushmill's isn't enough sometimes, I guess. "Why couldn't this be an ordinary criminal mastermind's plot?" he asked of no one in particular.

There was something so aggrieved about his air that I had to say it. "Believe it or not, I know how you feel. I'm half expecting to run into Sam McGee myself, at this point."

He smiled humorlessly at me. "Who's Sam McGee?" asked Dorothy.

"A man in a poem- did you ever read anything by Robert Service?" She shook her head. "There was a poem called 'The Cremation of Sam McGee', about a man from Tennessee who came to the Yukon to search for gold. The Yukon winter was so cold that when he died, his last request was to be cremated so that he'd at least

be a little warm-

I never got any further than that, because there came a knock at our door. We weren't expecting visitors, naturally, not even from the telegram company; imagine then what the atmosphere in the room must've been like when the door opened to reveal J. "I expect you're going to need this," he said, and held out- well, he held out a rolled-up Persian carpet, which was accepted by a dumbstruck Hugo Danner.

I looked at Tom then. He was shaking his head. "But the telephone wasn't being monitored," he said slowly. "The telegrams-

J. smiled dryly. "It wasn't the cables, either, Mr. Swift. Set your mind at ease. It was your visitors- the glowing ones. You've got rather a lot of them."

He didn't say more than that, except to request a full report when we returned from Oz. Then he was gone, and we were left with the Persian carpet (and, for me at least, the knowledge that we weren't going to have to deceive the Crown after all). "What did he mean, 'rather a lot of them?'" wondered Hugo aloud as he looked towards the kitchen.

"Dunno. Hugo, bring that thing in here and roll it out, would you?" Tom was clearing the furniture out of the middle of the parlour floor. "I want to see- hey, where'd Dorothy go?"

"She and Miss Poppins are in the kitchen with Bunter," I said, as I'd seen them leave. "I'm pretty sure this isn't her carpet, though. That one didn't have any kind of Persian designs or fancy work on it."

Tom looked up from prodding at one of the frayed spots- it was really a rather large carpet. "You're sure?"

"Positive. Although....." I glanced at the wall. "If this is anything like the one Dorothy used, it should be able to unroll in the front while it's rolling up in the back. I wonder if we could use it to walk up one of the walls."

"Well, then!" exclaimed Lord Peter, crouching to unroll it the rest of the way himself. "You've said the magic words- it's not every day a man gets to see 'down' redefined in his own parlour! I say we give it a try right h- oh."

Apparently it was the other kind of magic carpet. Fully unrolled, it hovered half a foot off the floor.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cranston reaching for the Bushmills again. Lord Peter, on the other hand, was delighted- and Prince was curious enough to get up and pad forward so that he could get a better sniff at the carpet. I just shook my head a little, standing back to watch as a series of experiments determined that

the carpet responded to voice commands from its rider. 'Forward', 'back', 'left', 'right', 'up', and 'down' all worked very well, but when Tom began speculating aloud about how it would respond to talk of forward-thinking philosophers and backwards nations, the thing actually bucked him off- or at least tried to, anyway. He took it in stride (I'd be surprised if he didn't), grinning as he hopped off. "Hey, Sergeant," he said, "will your dog be all right with riding this thing?"

"Why, I don't know. Prince?" I pointed to the carpet. "Up, boy."

Obediently, Prince hopped up onto the hovering carpet. It didn't sag under him any more than it had under a man's weight. Neither did it attempt to move. I followed my dog a moment later, curious to see whether it responded to sled-dog commands (it didn't, but it did seem willing to increase or decrease its speed on request). "I think we'll be all right," I said. "I don't know how long it can fly, though. This seems like the kind of thing we ought to ask Miss Poppins about."

"Fair enough."

We only meant to look into the kitchen long enough to call Miss Poppins out, but there was no chance of that once we got there. Bunter's odd weary look earlier, J.'s comment on how he found us- it all made sense now.

Cowslip had scores of friends. And they were all over the kitchen.

"I fear, sir," said Bunter with as much dignity as can be mustered by a man whose domain is under giggling fairy assault, "that our guests have made themselves quite at home. It will require at least one trip to the nearest off-license before our supplies are the least bit respectable again." With a restrained, aggrieved air, he reached up and removed an all-but-unconscious fairy from where it had wedged itself in his collar. "I must also beg your Lordship's pardon, but the pantry has been visited with similar enthusiasm."

Lord Peter was trying not to laugh. It wasn't working very well. Fairies are a strange enough sight to someone who's grown up in modern England, I suppose, but when you take someone whose body is smaller than the palm of my hand and give them access to an English lord's private stash of alcohol... well. There wasn't a fairy there who could fly a straight line to save its life. The wiser ones weren't even trying. I believe I saw one that had found its way into a wine decanter; it was sitting there, happily imitating a miniature lantern and letting out the occasional tiny belch.

"Look, Bunter," Lord Peter said at last when he'd got to the point of trusting his words again, "we've had a visit from our man with no proper name. Restockin' the cupboard can wait until we've got back-" He ducked as one of the fairies dive-bombed his head, then continued. "I don't suppose this lot's capable of finding their way to somewhere a bit more congenial? Picadilly's going to be awfully empty

for a few days."

Bunter eyed another of the fairies, who was standing on tiptoe on the edge of the sink. It gave him a wobbly salute, tinkling wildly. Miss Poppins, who appeared unaffected by it all, calmly noted, "They'll be all right soon enough- and their friends will help them find their way." ("How many more of them are there?" I heard Tom exclaim.) "Where is it you wish them to go?"

Lord Peter gave a broad, sunny smile. "Why, my brother's residence at Duke's Denver," he exclaimed. "Plenty of room for as many fairies as they can muster, and as much beef as they can eat, still on the hoof. Helen should be able to spare a cow or three, I'm sure."

A look of something suspiciously like relief crossed Bunter's face as Lord Peter earnestly described the route the fairy troop would have to take to reach Denver. It didn't last long- every last one of the fairies who had visited the kitchen began swarming out into the middle of the room, all erratically circling like a cloud of glowing, tinkling midges. Bunter took that as a signal; murmuring something about having to get started on packing straightaway, he hurried out of the way. The mess of fairies swirled along in his wake, headed for the parlour window. Outside there was an even bigger crowd of the creatures- sober, but no less blatantly out of place.

"Well," murmured Hugo, "that explains how J. found us."

Dorothy giggled and began guiding the more intoxicated creatures out the window. I looked down at Prince; he wagged his tail, apparently thinking none of this was the least bit unusual. "Keep that up, Prince," I said. "We're all going to need some of that spirit where we're going."

That's as far as things have progressed. There was some discussion among the men about weapons we might need to bring with us- Cranston in particular feared that there may be trouble, whether from the Prufrocks or from someone else, and that technological weaponry might not work. I told him there were guns in use in Oz, but just in case, we've decided to arm ourselves with extra care. I've got my service revolver, Tom's rifle, a good stout hatchet, and my skinning and gutting knife. More than that would be too much, I think. Besides, I'm not trained in the use of things like swords and fighting knives. There's very little more dangerous than a man with a weapon he doesn't know how to use.

We're going to Oz.