

# **Diary of a Mountie - Part the Twenty-Ninth Since I Left Plumtree Down In Tennessee**

by

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Day Forty-Three / First Day in Oz  
Somewhere Over the Deadly Desert  
Afternoon

I am never going to look at that Service poem the same way again. In fact, if I can help it, I'm not going to read that poem again at all.

Most of our trip was accomplished before dawn. We took it in turns to rest on the way here, with Tom taking the controls from Cranston when it was his turn to rest. That didn't last long- Cranston's learned some kind of trance or something that makes three hours' rest do the work of eight. He was back at the controls when the sun came up. According to the Prufrock charts, the area we had to aim for was somewhere over the region of French West Africa. We'd had pretty smooth sailing thus far, so the sight of clouds over our target coordinates wasn't especially worrisome. Cranston piloted us into the cloud bank. I didn't like the idea, thinking they looked a bit like thunderclouds, but we had no lightning or storm-winds. After a few minutes, we came out over a coastline.

I could say a number of things here about how I recognized what we were looking at, but what it really came down to was this: French West Africa has a southern coastline. Unless we'd been severely turned around inside that cloud, we were looking at a northern one.

Somewhere off to one side, I heard a soft, happy sigh. "That's it," said Dorothy, leaning forward to press her forehead against the dirigible window. "That's Ev."

"Should I take us down here?" came Cranston's voice from the cockpit.

Miss Poppins shook her head. "Not just yet," she said. "Dorothy, what do you recognize?"

"Well- those trees, there-" She squinted. "I b'lieve those are the lunchbox trees. I can't really tell, though."

"Hang on a minute." Tom, who had been shading his eyes with both hands against the glass, turned around. "I've got a telescope around here somewhere."

Hugo, still at the window, frowned. "Is it just me, or does that look like smoke in the distance?" he asked of nobody in particular. "Coming from over there?"

Tom glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Can't tell- give me a second-" From his traveling bag he produced a polished brass spyglass, which he handed to Hugo. "Give it a look, and then pass it on to Dorothy, would you?"

"Sure thing." Hugo fiddled with the telescope for a bit before turning it on the suspicious smudge. "Yeah... yeah, that's not cloud. That looks like smoke, all right. Can't make out any of the details from here, though."

"Sorry," said Tom. "That's just for recreational purposes. If you want better, I could probably work something up-"

"Maybe later." Hugo handed the scope to Dorothy. "We're heading that way anyway- right, Miss Poppins?"

"It is the lunchbox trees!" Dorothy called out, interrupting anything Miss Poppins might've said. "And- there's people! Although they're acting awfully strange."

"Strange how, Dorothy?" Miss Poppins moved forward, her eyes moving for just a moment to the distant smoke.

"Well- they're in among the trees, and they don't seem to be coming out." She looked up at Miss Poppins, frowning. "And I know we're all this way up in the air, but I could swear one of them looked right at me, just before he ran away into the trees."

"That's pretty much impossible at this distance," Tom commented. He'd ignored Hugo and started sketching out telescope designs on a scrap of paper. Miss Poppins murmured something to Dorothy and slipped out of the room.

We were coming in closer to the trees all the while. Dorothy turned her attention back to the scope. She frowned for a moment. "There's people," she reported, "but they're all hiding. I can't see very much of any of 'em."

"Don't suppose there's a chance of it being a hunt in progress?" Lord Peter wondered.

"There's no hunting in Oz," Dorothy answered. "And not in Ev, neither." She tried peering through the scope again, but the frown never left her face. "Huh..."

Miss Poppins returned. "Mr. Cranston regrets that he cannot take us down low enough to get a better view," she reported, "as he has no wish to see this dirigible gutted on the treetops of Ev. However, if you gentlemen- and you, too, Dorothy- can wait but a moment..." She rested her hand on her parrot-headed umbrella; if she were anyone else, I'd have called the look on her face a smile.

Lord Peter chuckled. "Going to pay them a call yourself, hey? Good thinking, that."

"What about the carpet?" Hugo asked, indicating the rolled-up broadloom in the corner.

"Not just yet, Mr. Danner. We've arrived in a potentially delicate situation." Miss Poppins adjusted her hat and started towards the entry hatch. "Let's not leap into this before we look, hmm?"

I only flinched a little when Hugo threw open the hatch and Miss Poppins stepped out, protected only by her umbrella. It probably says something about the ability of the human mind to adapt to things. I'm not sure what, exactly, but something. Tom and Lord Peter leaned over to watch for a moment before everyone flocked to the windows to get a safer view of what was going on below.

Miss Poppins cruised serenely over the trees, her umbrella clutched firmly in one hand as she drifted downwards. At first there was no response that any of us could see. A moment later, there came motion among the trees. Dorothy, who still had Tom's telescope, announced, "I can see people- they're looking up at her-"

Then she almost dropped the telescope, but it didn't matter. We all saw it. That was when the people in the trees started firing on Miss Poppins. I've been on the wrong end of Indian bows once or twice. Fortunately, I've talked my way out of it, but I've seen them fired. They're built for close stalking, and can't shoot all that far. They'd have been preferable to what I saw, because these people were firing wooden spears that tore through the air like rifle bullets. Some of them passed perilously close to Miss Poppins. Fortunately she knew her flying and started evasive maneuvers immediately, but the people concealed in the forest kept up their fire until she'd all but been pulled back into the dirigible.

"I'm all right, I'm all right," she announced, shaking off Tom's and Dorothy's worried questions. "No, I was not struck- but I have never been so rudely received in all my life!"

"It's not like them to do something like this," fretted Dorothy. "The people in Ev are just as friendly as the people in Oz! They wouldn't do this kind of thing!"

"Perhaps," said Miss Poppins. "Or perhaps something has happened to them..." She lifted her eyes to the smoke in the distance. "They may have reason to believe that anyone who comes from the air is an enemy. I think we'd better turn away from the forests and make for the city- perhaps we'll find some answers there."

Dorothy bit her lip as Miss Poppins left to relay the orders to Cranston. "But who would do that?" she asked of no one in particular. "It can't be the Wheelers, they made peace with the royal family years ago, and anyway they don't have any hands!"

I didn't say anything. I was starting to suspect, but that was all I had- and

anyway, we'd find out soon enough. Nothing harmless makes enough smoke to be seen from that far away.

The zeppelin moves pretty quickly when it has to. We pulled away from the lunchbox trees and were out of spear range almost immediately. It wasn't far to the city- at least, from up in the sky it wasn't. I don't like flying, but I'll admit it has its uses. Travel is one of them. Surveillance is another. We had a much clearer view of the outskirts of the city from the blimp than we ever could've on the ground. Mind you, there wasn't that much to see, since the streets of Ev's main city were completely empty. Not a single person seemed to be anywhere in sight, whether we used the telescope or not.

I glanced over at Lord Peter as we turned towards the royal castle. His expression was as grim as I've ever seen it. "Evacuated," he said, in a voice not at all like his own. "If we're lucky."

It sounded like an awfully strange thing to say. I started to answer him. Then I remembered his files in the dossier J. had originally given us. Lord Peter had served five years in an artillery regiment during the Great War.

I looked back to the window. The idea that I wasn't the only one thinking such thoughts wasn't comforting.

"Gentlemen," came Miss Poppins' voice, "I suggest you sit down. Mr. Cranston will be mooring our vessel to the castle roof shortly, after which we will all pay a visit to the Royal Family of Ev." She hesitated, then continued. "Or, rather, we will attempt to do so."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, who was already seated.

Miss Poppins indicated the view from the window. "See for yourself."

We couldn't make out as much detail from where we sat, but I'm not sure we really needed detail anyway. The small part of the castle that was visible from this angle- well, it didn't look good. It looked like the residents had boarded up the windows in a hurry and fled from some enormous fire, and a recent fire at that. There hadn't even been rain to wash away the worst of the smoke from the stone.

"Unless I am wrong," said Miss Poppins in a tone that fairly said 'and I am never wrong', "some catastrophe has befallen the Kingdom of Ev. Some human catastrophe."

"It would explain the spears," I muttered. "Peaceable people don't attack visitors unless they've been attacked first."

Dorothy blanched, her eyes never leaving the window. "Best we be careful," said Lord Peter. "Mr. Danner, would you mind taking the lead for us?"

"Not at all."

"Right." Lord Peter produced a cloth from somewhere and started rubbing at his monocle. "The rest of us had better arm ourselves, I think. I expect it's as much bad form here to go into the Presence armed as back home, but we can always leave our guns with the coat-check girl if we're wrong." He put the cloth away, considering something. "Dorothy, does that marvelous Belt of yours still work?"

"Why- of course, Uncle Peter."

Uncle? I wondered at that, but he'd started talking again. "Very well, then. Since our inestimable pilot's brought us safely alongside-" He nodded to Cranston, who had emerged from the cockpit wrapped in the hat and cloak he'd worn in Glasgow. "I do believe it's time. Let's go, gentlemen. And ladies."

As Lord Peter had suggested, Hugo Danner went first, and brought my dog with him. For some reason, Prince didn't look any happier to be on solid ground again. I found out why as soon as I joined them: the smell. 'Smell' isn't even the right word for it- 'stench' would be closer. The air around the castle reeked of smoke and other things- worse things. Not even Dawson City, the morning after the Fire, smelled like that.

Most of the city's people had been saved from the Dawson Fire. This was the smell of human burning.

I would've liked to cover my nose and mouth, but I had neither the time nor the means. All I could do was offer Prince a rub behind the ears- he was worse off than any of us, poor fellow- and check, very quickly, on my revolver. Whoever had done this might still be about. I had no way of knowing whether Tom's electric rifles would work here, but I knew for a fact that ordinary guns worked just fine in Oz. I had a feeling I'd be needing it sooner than I liked.

Lord Peter hopped off the last rung of the ladder, his face even grimmer than before. He said nothing as he helped Dorothy and Miss Poppins down. He didn't need to. I suspect every one of us, even Dorothy, was thinking the same thing. None of us much wanted to go through the only door that led down from that patch of the castle's roof, but none of us had a choice. Not if we wanted to know what had become of these poor people. I started to ask Miss Poppins if we shouldn't leave Dorothy behind on the blimp, but Dorothy had already slipped away from Miss Poppins' side. She was the first through the door after Hugo.

We started after her at a run, down the stairs into the castle proper. I'm still not sure if we didn't somehow run out of the light of day and into some waking nightmare instead. The reek on the rooftop had been nothing, nothing compared to this. Here the smoke still hung in the air, almost thick enough to touch. Black, greasy smudge and ash covered everything that remained- the floor, the walls, the

other doors, the bits of ceiling-beam that hadn't been entirely destroyed by the fire. Rippling lines of interlocking black ran along the floor in places, looking like nothing so much as the skin of the stuffed crocodile in the British Museum.

Tom bent over to examine one of the marks, pushing Prince and Toto to one side. "Incendiaries," he murmured as the dogs went off to sniff around the room. "Some kind of accelerant to ensure the place went up in a hurry- then incendiary weapons-"

I glanced sidelong at Dorothy. She'd gone all white in the face, and her hands were shaking, but she didn't falter. She moved very slowly into the middle of the room, looking around as if she half expected it to vanish at any moment. "How..." she began, then had to swallow. "How did this happen? Who did this? "

Before I could say a word, Hugo put up a hand. "Sergeant," he said, "I think you'd better come have a look at this. Right now."

He was standing on the far side of the room, near a heap that lay close to one of the doors. Dorothy started to follow me, but Hugo shook his head, and she stopped. As soon as I got there, he stood aside. "There," he said, pointing to a charred, blackened lump on the floor. "Tell me if that's what I think it is."

I bent down to get a closer look. It was about half the length of my forearm, tattered on one end, knurled and bent on the other. Its original shape was hard to tell, since the fire had twisted it up so tightly. I reached out to turn it over, thinking the underside might've escaped the fire.

It had a pale patch, I saw that first. Right where it had lain in contact with the floor. There was a wrinkle running through it, just like the one around my left wrist, and a lump like the bone-

And there, tucked under the bottom in the only place that hadn't been burned, I saw it. The thumb.

Someone's fist.

I looked up at Hugo, whose expression was nearly as terrible as Lord Peter's, and nodded once. I didn't trust myself to speak. "I'll warn the others," he said softly, and moved off- leaving me with the grisly relic.

I've seen death in my day, and I'd thought I'd seen the worst that people had to offer, but this... you didn't normally see things like this in the Yukon. Not unless someone made a mistake with a bear-trap, or gangrene was involved. It looked too neat somehow to be an accident- yes, the end was ragged, but it looked more like a badly tanned hide than something torn apart by the forces of fire- and anyway, where was the rest of the corpse? This looked deliberate.

Then it occurred to me, and I wished with all my might that it hadn't. The books said it again and again. Even if someone in Oz were to cut someone else into hundreds of pieces, they'd still be alive. The pieces would go on living. The person would still feel and hear and see-

I didn't even do it consciously. I only know that I saw my own hands moving as if of their own accord. One, to pick up the half-an-arm- and the other to brush the scorched wrist clean before searching for the artery. For just a moment, I felt nothing. I started to put the thing down again, and that's when I felt the pulse moving under my fingertips.

Funny, how some things can ring through your head in an instant, even if you haven't read them in years.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the  
furnace roar;  
And he wore a smile you could see a mile,  
and he said: "Please close that door.  
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and  
storm --  
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee,  
it's the first time I've been warm."

I stood up. "Miss Poppins!" I called out. "This one's still alive!"

The others gathered around in a hurry, crowding in to see. I did my best to keep the hand out of Dorothy's sight, though I don't know how much good that did. Tom insisted on checking for the pulse himself, not that I blame him. I'd've done the same in his shoes. As he handed me back the arm I had an idea, and whistled Prince over. "What are you doing, Sergeant?" Cranston asked.

I held out the arm for Prince to inspect. "We're in Oz, aren't we? Or close enough that it makes no difference?"

He nodded slowly, still looking a little wary.

"Well," I said, trying not to think too hard about what I was saying, "if this piece is still alive, then all of the pieces are still alive. Prince, find me the rest of- find me every piece that smells like this."

Prince wagged his tail once and immediately started sniffing around the room, Toto at his heels. I set the arm down carefully as he brought back what looked like its match from the other side; it was all a little too much like something out of Frankenstein for me. I had a bad feeling that someone was going to suggest sewing the burned parts together when Prince had found them all. Fortunately, the only suggestion anyone made was that we ought to look for something to cover

the parts and give them a chance to grow back together on their own. I believe that was Tom's idea. Miss Poppins led Dorothy off into one of the other rooms in search of a blanket, and I found a patch of almost-clean wall to lean against and close my eyes.

"Are you all right, Sergeant?" I heard Lord Peter ask. I nodded.

"I just need a minute and I'll be fine. Sorry, your Lordship," I said, "but I wasn't ready for this."

"No one ever is," he said a bit distantly. There was a dragging noise, and the sound of Prince dropping something. I didn't like to imagine what he must've found. "First time?"

"Afraid so." There was another vile thump. "Does it ever get any easier?"

"No."

"Hey," said Hugo, "I think we've got a full person here."

I opened my eyes. Prince was backing away from what did, indeed, look like an entire person. Dorothy and Miss Poppins had returned with a blanket, which was a mercy. As they unfolded the blanket and started to cover up the pile, I couldn't help but notice Dorothy's face. There was a hard, closed look to her features, a tightness about her eyes that I knew all too well. When that kind of rage snapped its leash, grown men would do just about anything in the name of revenge.

Then and there, I decided two things. One was that I was going to keep a very close watch on Dorothy from there on out. Miss Poppins might have been the finest nanny since the Pharaoh's daughter hired Moses' mother to look after her river child, but no woman should have to deal with that kind of rage. The other? No matter what she looked like, Dorothy definitely wasn't a little girl. Not any more.

A low noise I hadn't heard before brought me back to myself: Prince, growling. The big husky stood facing one of the interior castle doors, fur bristling furiously. Beside him, Toto was doing much the same. I caught Cranston's eye and pointed; he swore. "We've got company," he snapped to the others, drawing his .45s. "Time to go. Ladies first."

I whistled to the dogs and reached for my revolver. "They'll have to get through both of us," I said. "Toto, go with Dorothy. Prince, get ready-"

That's when it all dissolved into chaos and gunsmoke. The door got kicked open by armed soldiers. Cranston started firing in the same instant. I remember hearing Miss Poppins yelling, and Dorothy's voice protesting. Someone scooped up Toto as he dashed past me, looking for his mistress. Prince lunged at one of

the soldiers, barking furiously, a bullet missing him by inches. I kept listening for the sizzle of an electric rifle overhead, but none came. All I could do was keep shooting and falling back one step at a time-

"Sergeant! Lamont! Now!"

Cranston shot me a look. I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled to Prince. We were just at the stairs; he snapped at the soldiers one last time, then shot past me, running for all he was worth.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: he's as smart as any man. I followed him, and Cranston brought up the rear.

We're away from the castle now, heading back towards the forests. Hugo got a glimpse of our adversaries as we were leaving. Their uniforms don't seem to correspond to any military we know of, but they're a drab greyish colour that isn't in keeping with any of the fairy countries. Given a choice between Ev natives trying to down us with spears and Earthmen doing the same with rifles and flamethrowers, I'll take the spears every time.

Dorothy hasn't said much since we got away from the castle. Apparently when the soldiers came in, she bolted for one of the other rooms- that's what the yelling was about. She said she had an idea that might keep them from shooting at us again, but she hasn't spoken since. I don't know what's going on in her head right now, but I can guess.

All I know for certain is that we're going to have to resolve this situation as quickly and as cleanly as possible. Otherwise, there's going to be Hell to pay.