

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Thirtieth Conversations

By

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(based on COTY)

Day Forty-Three / First Day in Oz
Somewhere Over the Forests of Ev
Late Afternoon

Things are beginning to look up, if only a little bit. I won't say more than that. This hasn't been a good day for optimism.

Dorothy's venture into the castle's other rooms wasn't a random dash. She'd spotted something when we'd moored the dirigible- a flagpole, with the flag of Ev still flying. As we made for the forests, she brought it out, along with a white sheet she'd taken from the same closet as the blanket. "I'd like to try something," she said, "but I'm going to need some paint, and a stick. Mister Swift, have you got any paint?"

"Sorry," said Tom. "I didn't think we'd be needing it."

"That's all right, dear." Miss Poppins reached into her carpet-bag. "I presume you want blue, green, lavender, and pink?"

"I don't think we've got time for that," Dorothy said soberly. "Just the green, please."

Miss Poppins silently produced paint-jars, paintbrush, needle, and thread. I'm starting to think she could carry a year's worth of supplies for the Yukon in there.

At any rate, Dorothy immediately set to work painting the monogram of Oz on the sheet. "I'd like Mister Cranston to take us back to where we saw the people," she said. "I think they'll let us talk to them if they see we're friendly. Can I borrow the magic carpet?"

I winced. "I don't know if that's such a safe idea, Dorothy. Someone might take a potshot at you before you got the flag up, and you might get knocked off."

"Oh, I'll be careful, Mister Preston," she said. "I won't go low enough to get hit until they stop shooting, I promise."

I shook my head, but what could I do? She was absolutely determined to go. I just didn't have the heart to stop her. Miss Poppins would have to be the one to intervene if anything went wrong.

Miss Poppins seemed to be having somewhat different thoughts. "It's all very well to contact them this way, but we ought to establish proper communications if we're going to accomplish anything. Ferrying people up and down on the carpet isn't very practical."

"Actually, Miss Poppins," said Tom, "I may be able to help with that. I've been working on something." He stepped out of the room for a moment and came back with a box. "I was thinking about Glasgow- you know, when we were split into two groups? Since none of us want that to happen again, I've been working on these." He started handing the devices around. "Wireless radio transmitters and receivers. Press the button there and speak; let go of the button and receive. They've got a pretty good power cell inside, but I haven't had the chance to test what their range is like."

Miss Poppins nodded, looking to Dorothy. "All right, then; we shall give that a try."

Dorothy was busy attaching her flags to the piece of wood she'd been given. "What's this, Miss Poppins?"

"We need to speak with Tom for a few moments, dear."

After that there really wasn't anything for it. Tom gave Dorothy one of the wireless devices, and passed the other to Miss Poppins. They unrolled the carpet, opened the hatch, and floated right out. I'll be the first to admit I don't like flying in this dirigible, but the idea of having to ride over a forest of hostile natives on nothing but a scrap of cloth..... well, that's not something that sits well with me at all. That's one brave young woman we have with us. I'll admit she looked a little scared when she started waving the flags, but who could blame her? The spears could've come at her any second. I'm a little surprised she knew semaphore at all- at least, that's what it looked like she was trying to do. I couldn't make out the exact words, as Tom had the telescope.

Either the people of Ev knew semaphore too, or the sight of the flags was enough, but I didn't see any spears this time. The carpet moved further down towards the trees with Mary and Dorothy on it. Still nothing.

"Think they're going to land?" asked Hugo, echoing what was in my head.

"No, I'm not-" Tom frowned, adjusting the telescope. "Hey, I think they're coming back." He picked up one of the other wireless handsets. "Dorothy?" he asked, pressing one of the buttons. "Dorothy, can you hear me?"

When he let go of the button there was only a hissing noise. He frowned, then tried again. "Miss Poppins?"

"I should get the hatch open if I were you, Mister Swift," came Miss Poppins' voice.

"And point your telescope towards the city proper."

Hugo stepped away from the window to open the hatch, but Tom stayed where he was. "I don't think I- holy cow!" He handed me the telescope. "Cranston! We gotta move, we've got company coming!"

Even without the telescope I could make out the grey column on the ground, slowly advancing from the city in our direction. It was Lord Peter who spoke the words of confirmation, though. "Soldiers," he said grimly. "Rather a lot of them, too. Gentlemen, we've been spotted."

I didn't bother looking after that, but went over to help Hugo get the ladies into the dirigible instead. The sudden roar of the engines being kicked into life drowned out his question to Dorothy. It wasn't until we closed the hatch and he repeated himself that I heard what he'd said: "What happened to your wireless?"

"Prince Evring," Dorothy answered. "He thought it was something to eat at first, but I 'spect he's figured it out by now- oh, Miss Poppins, can we try to reach him? Is yours all right?"

"Yes, dear." She held out the handset to Dorothy, who took it and rushed to the windows. The rest of us followed; I could just about make out a boy quite a few years younger than Dorothy below if I squinted. Through Tom's telescope I could see that he was fumbling with a handset of his own.

"Evring!" cried Dorothy. "Evring, can you hear me?"

There was a little crackling from the handset. "Dorothy?"

She beamed. "Yes, it's me, Evring! Are you-"

"Where's Ozma? Is she with you?"

Dorothy blinked. "Why, I- I don't know, Evring. She's not with me. Isn't she in the Em'rald City?"

The radio was silent for a little bit. "I... don't know?"

She looked to us for help as he said that. I don't think anyone knew what to say. Fortunately, Prince Evring started talking again. "No one's heard from her in ages! We thought both of you were dead!"

"What? What happened?" Dorothy cried, shocked.

"We- we haven't heard from Oz in years. Not since the grey men-"

"The what?"

"The men! They've been attacking us- the out- mostly- they just-"

Bursts of static were starting to interrupt Evring's words. Dorothy gave Tom a pleading look, but it didn't do much good. Tom gestured to the moving landscape out the window and mouthed 'out of range'. "Evring," Dorothy said then, "are you all right? What about the rest of the Royal Family? Do you hear me, Evring?"

The Prince's words weren't even comprehensible after that. Dorothy peered out the window, biting her lip. Then, with a great sigh, she dropped the handset and lifted one hand in a great, sweeping wave.

The all-but-invisible child below us waved slowly in reply before vanishing completely from sight.

Dorothy turned to Tom and silently gave him back the handset. I don't like to think how much effort that must have cost her. She was as pale as I've ever seen her. It looked like all she wanted to do- or all she could do- was pace back and forth, glancing out at the window now and again with a grimly bright look in her eye. I didn't have the telescope and I'm not sure who did, but even without it I could see the column of soldiers receding in the distance as we made for the Desert, and Oz. I grimaced at the thought of those men reaching the forests, but there wasn't anything we could do. Not yet, anyway.

Before I could say anything, though, someone else spoke- Lord Peter. "Dorothy?" he asked quietly. There was something almost haunted about his voice.

"Yes, Uncle Peter?"

"I've been thinking about something." He steepled his fingers, staring into the middle distance. "As we discovered at the castle, people don't die here. Does that apply to everyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Obviously the natives can't be killed, not after what we saw, but... People who come to this country from our world. Can they die here?"

"Oh yes," said Dorothy. "It's only the folks who're born here who can't die. Glinda always said."

"Good," said Lord Peter, and fell silent.

That was an even less comforting thought, if a true one. I expect Prince could tell how little I liked it, because he bumped his head against my leg and whined a little- but that made me think of something else. I wasn't sure how things stood in Ev, but it was worth a try.

I took a deep breath, and looked down at my dog. "Prince?"

He blinked, cocking his head the way he always does.

"Can you speak?" I asked. "English, I mean?"

"Of course," he said, very reasonably indeed. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering," I said, and he nodded.

Someone cleared his throat on the other side of the room. It was Cranston. He'd briefly stepped out of the cockpit, and was staring at Prince and myself. "Sergeant," he said, his expression almost exactly as I remembered it from Lord Peter's apartments, "did you just have a conversation with your dog?"

"Well, it wasn't much of a conversation, really."

He groaned, his hand coming up to cover his face.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" I heard a small unfamiliar voice cry. I had to suppress a smile at that sound. There was only one possible source for that. "There's no more food! All the food's gone!"

"I don't believe this," Cranston murmured. "I'm going to go fly the dirigible, if you don't mind."

"You do that," said Tom absently. He had the scope to his face, and was scanning the landscape below. "We're coming up on the desert."

I don't believe I've ever seen Cranston look so relieved as he did in that moment before he turned and walked away.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!"

"I'm coming, Toto."

Lord Peter shook his head briefly, then smiled. It wasn't a very good smile, but he seemed to be putting on a game effort. "Bunter?" he called.

"Yes, sir?"

Where he'd been hiding I don't know. I'm not sure I want to.

"Take Miss Gale and her canine companion down to the galleys, would you? He's got a bit more of an appetite than most of us at the moment."

"Of course, sir," Bunter said smoothly before leading Dorothy and Toto off.

Lord Peter sank back in his chair with a sigh. A moment later he leaned forward again. "What's got you so all-fired interested?" he asked of Tom, who was still at the window.

"There's ships," the American answered. "Sand-ships. They don't look anything like what I'd been expecting. They're practically submarines." There was a certain annoyance in his voice. It sounded almost as if he were more upset that he hadn't come up with the design first than anything else. "And- well, well, well... Hugo? Come here and have a look. Does that one ship say what I think it says on the rudder?"

Hugo squinted through the scope. "Dunno," he said. "Do you think it says JAP 5974?"

"Yep." Tom glanced at the rest of us. "Anyone here the least bit surprised?"

As we shook our heads, a new noise started from somewhere I couldn't pinpoint. It was an odd sort of tinkling, vaguely familiar-

I came to my feet. "I believe we've got guests," I said, gesturing to the others for silence. For a moment the noise stopped, but it started again almost as quickly.

"Fairies," said Hugo. Miss Poppins nodded.

Lord Peter blanched. "Tell me they didn't bring Helen!"

They hadn't, of course. They were in the galley- and they'd found the whiskey again. Bunter was about as pleased to see them this time as he had been in England. Is there a word for the kind of enjoyment you know you shouldn't be getting out of a situation? He really did look like a man whose limits were under heavy fire, and it was all I could do not to laugh at the sight.

That was unworthy of me. I shouldn't have written that.

I left the galley fairly quickly. Prince doesn't get along well with anything that tries to pull his ears or tail, and he's taken a liking to Toto. He started growling when several of the fairies tried to get at Toto's bowl. I didn't want to think of what would happen if he tried to eat one of them, so I led him away and let the others deal with our stowaways. For now, I'm waiting in the observation area. It's safer here.