

CHAPTER 5 - SIR HOKUS OF POKES

It was long past sunup before Dorothy awoke. She rubbed her eyes, yawned once or twice, and then shook the Cowardly Lion. The gates of the city were open, and although it looked even grayer in the daytime than it looked at night, the travelers were too hungry to be particular. A large placard was posted justinside:

THIS IS POKES! DON'T RUN! DON'T SING! TALKSLOWLY!
DON'T WHISTLE! Order of the Chief Poker.

read Dorothy. "How cheerful! Hah, hoh, hum-mm!"

"Don't!" begged the Cowardly Lion with tears in his eyes. "If I yawn again, I'll swallow my tail, and if I don't have something to eat soon, I'll do it anyway. Let's hurry! There's something queer about this place, Dorothy! Ah, hah, hoh, hum-mm!"

Stifling their yawns, the two started down the long, narrow street. The houses were of gray stone, tall and stiff with tiny barred windows. It was absolutely quiet, and not a person was in sight. But when they turned the corner, they saw a crowd of queer-looking people creeping toward them. These singular individuals stopped between each step and stood perfectly still, and Dorothy was so surprised at their unusual appearance that she laughed right in the middle of a yawn.

In the first place, they never lifted their feet, but pushed them along like skates. The women were dressed in gray polka-dot dresses with huge poke bonnets that almost hid their fat, sleepy, wide-mouthed faces. Most of them had pet snails on strings, and so slowly did they move that it looked as though the snails were tugging them along.

The men were dressed like a party of congressmen, but instead of high hats wore large red nightcaps, and they were all as solemn as owls. It seemed impossible for them to keep both eyes open at the same time, and at first Dorothy thought they were winking at her. But as the whole company continued to stare fixedly with one open eye, she burst out laughing. At the unexpected sound (for no one had ever laughed in Pokes before), the women picked up their snails in a great fright, and the men clapped their fingers to their ears or to the places where their ears were under the red nightcaps.

"These must be the Slow Pokes," giggled Dorothy, nudging the Cowardly Lion. "Let's go to meet them, for they'll never reach us at the rate they are coming!"

"There's something wrong with my feet," rumbled the Cowardly Lion without looking up. "Hah, hoh, hum! What's the use of hurrying?" The fact of the matter was that they couldn't hurry if they tried. Indeed, they could hardly lift their feet at all.

"I wish the Scarecrow were with us," sighed the Cowardly Lion, shuffling along unhappily. "He never grows sleepy, and he always knows what to do."

"No use wishing," yawned Dorothy. "I only hope he's not as lost as we are."

By struggling hard, they just managed to keep moving, and by the time they came up with the Slow Pokes, they were completely worn out. A cross-looking Poke held up his arm threateningly, and Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion stopped.

"You--" said the Poke; then closed his mouth and stood staring vacantly for a whole minute.

"Are--" He brought out the word with a perfectly enormous yawn, and Dorothy began fanning the Cowardly Lion with her hat, for he showed signs of falling asleep again.

"What?" she asked crossly.

"Under--" sighed the Poke after a long pause, and Dorothy, seeing that there was no hurrying him, began counting to herself. Just as she reached sixty, the Poke pushed back his red nightcap and shouted:

"Arrest!"

"Arrest!" shouted all the other Pokes so loud that the Cowardly Lion roused himself with a start, and the pet snails stuck out their heads. "A rest? A rest is not what we want! We want breakfast!" growled the lion irritably and started to roar, but a yawn spoiled it. (One simply cannot look fierce by yawning.)

"You--" began the Poke. But Dorothy could not stand hearing the same slow speech again. Putting her fingers in her ears, she shouted back:

"What for?"

The Pokes regarded her sternly. Some even opened both eyes. Then the one who had first addressed them, covering a terrific gape with one hand, pointed with the other to a sign on a large post at the corner of the street.

"Speed limit 1/4 mile an hour" said the sign.

"We're arrested for speeding!" shouted Dorothy in the Cowardly Lion's ear.

"Did you say feeding?" asked the poor lion, waking up with a start. "If I go to sleep again before I'm fed, I'll starve to death!"

"Then keep awake," yawned Dorothy. By this time, the Pokes had surrounded them and were waving them imperiously ahead. They looked so threatening that Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion began to creep in the direction of a gloomy, gray castle. Of the journey neither of them remembered a thing, for with the gaping and yawning Pokes it was almost impossible to keep awake. But they must have walked in their sleep, for the next thing Dorothy knew, a harsh voice called slowly:

"Poke--him!"

Greatly alarmed, Dorothy opened her eyes. They were in a huge stone hall hung all over with rusty armor, and seated on a great stone chair, snoring so loudly that all the steel helmets rattled, was a Knight. The tallest and crossdest of the Pokes rushed at him with a long poker, giving him such a shove that he sprawled to the floor.

"So--" yawned the Cowardly Lion, awakened by the clatter, "Knight has fallen!"

"Prisoners--Sir Hokus!" shouted the Chief Poker, lifting the Knight's plume and speaking into the helmet as if he were telephoning.

The Knight arose with great dignity, and after straightening his armor, let down his visor, and Dorothy saw a kind, timid face with melancholy blue eyes--not at all Pokish, as she explained to Ozma later.

"What means this unwonted clamor?" asked Sir Hokus, peering curiously at the prisoners.

"We're sorry to waken you," said Dorothy politely, "but could you please give us some breakfast?"

"A lot!" added the Cowardly Lion, licking his chops.

"It's safer for me to sing," said the Knight mournfully, and throwing back his head, he roared in a high, hoarse voice:

"Don't yawn! Don't yawn! We're out of breath-- Begone--
BEGONE Or die the death!"

The Cowardly Lion growled threateningly and began lashing his tail.

"If he weren't in a can, I'd eat him," he rumbled, "but I never could abide tinned meat."

"He's not in a can, he's in armor," explained Dorothy, too interested to pay much attention to the Cowardly Lion, for at the first note of the Knight's song, the Pokes began scowling horribly, and by the time he had finished they were backing out of the room faster than Dorothy ever imagined they could go.

"So that's why the sign said don't sing," thought Dorothy to herself. The air seemed clearer somehow, and she no longer felt sleepy.

When the last Poke had disappeared, the Knight sighed and climbed gravely back on his stone chair.

"My singing makes them very wroth. In faith, they cannot endure music; it wakens them," explained Sir Hokus. "But hold, 'twas food you asked of me. Breakfast, I believe you called it." With an uneasy glance at the Cowardly Lion, who was sniffing the air hungrily, the Knight banged on his steel armor with his sword, and a fat, lazy Poke shuffled slowly into the hall.

"Pid, bring the stew," roared Sir Hokus as the Poke stood blinking at them dully.

"Stew, Pid!" he repeated loudly, and began to hum under his breath, at which Pid fairly ran out of the room, returning in a few minutes with a large yellow bowl. This he handed ungraciously to Dorothy. Then he brought a great copper tub of the stuff for the Cowardly Lion and retired sulkily.

Dorothy thought she had never tasted anything more delicious. The Cowardly Lion was gulping down his share with closed eyes, and both, I am very sorry to say, forgot even to thank Sir Hokus.

"Are you perchance a damsel in distress?"

Quite startled, Dorothy looked up from her bowl and saw the Knight regarding her wistfully.

"She's in Pokes, and that's the same thing," said the Cowardly Lion without opening his eyes.

"We're lost," began the little girl, "but--"

There was something so quaint and gentle about the Knight, that she soon found herself talking to him like an old friend. She told him all of their adventures since leaving the Emerald City and even told about the disappearance of the Scarecrow.

"Passing strange, yet how refreshing," murmured Sir Hokus. "And if I seem a little behind times, you must not blame me. For centuries, I have dozed in this gray castle, and it cometh over me that things have greatly changed. This beast now, he talks quite manfully, and this Kingdom that you mention, this Oz? Never heard of it!"

"Never heard of Oz?" gasped the little girl. "Why, you're a subject of Oz, and Pokes is in Oz, though I don't know just where."

Here Dorothy gave him a short history of the Fairy country, and of the many adventures she had had since she had come there. Sir Hokus listened with growing melancholy.

"To think," he sighed mournfully, "that I was prisoner here while all that was happening!"

"Are you a prisoner?" asked Dorothy in surprise. "I thought you were King of the Pokes!"

"Uds daggers!" thundered Sir Hokus so suddenly that Dorothy jumped. "I am a knight!"

Seeing her startled expression, he controlled himself. "I was a knight," he continued brokenly. "Long centuries ago, mounted on my goodly steed, I fared from my father's castle to offer my sword to a mighty king. His name?" Sir Hokus tapped his forehead uncertainly. "Go to, I have forgot."

"Could it have been King Arthur?" exclaimed Dorothy, wide-eyed with interest. "Why, just think of your being still alive!"

"That's just the point," choked the Knight. "I've been alive--still, so still that I've forgotten everything. Why, I can't even remember how I used to talk," he confessed miserably.

"But how did you get here?" rumbled the Cowardly Lion, who did not like being left out of the conversation.

"I had barely left my father's castle before I met a stranger," said Sir Hokus, sitting up very straight, "who challenged me to battle. I spurred my horse forward, our lances met, and the stranger was unseated. But by my faith, 'twas no mortal Knight." Sir Hokus sighed deeply and lapsed into silence.

"What happened?" asked Dorothy curiously, for Sir Hokus seemed to have forgotten them.

"The Knight," said he with another mighty sigh, "struck the ground with his lance and cried, 'Live Wretch, for centuries in the stupidest country out of the world,' and disappeared. And here--here I am!" With a despairing gesture, Sir Hokus arose, big tears splashing down his armor.

"I feel that I am brave, very brave, but how am I to know until I have encountered danger? Ah, friends, behold in me a Knight who has never had a real adventure, never killed a dragon, nor championed a Lady, nor gone on a Quest!"

Dropping on his knees before the little girl, Sir Hokus took her hand. "Let me go with you on this Quest for the valiant Scarecrow. Let me be your good Night!" he begged eagerly.

"Good night," coughed the Cowardly Lion, who, to tell the truth, was feeling a bit jealous. But Dorothy was thrilled, and as Sir Hokus continued to look at her pleadingly, she took off her hair ribbon and bound it 'round his arm.

"You shall be my own true Knight, and I your Lady Fair!" she announced solemnly, and exactly as she had read in books.

At this interesting juncture the Cowardly Lion gave a tremendous yawn, and Sir Hokus with an exclamation of alarm jumped to his feet. The Pokes had returned to the hall, and Dorothy felt herself falling asleep again.

Up, up, my lieges and away! We take the field again-- For Ladies
fair we fight today And KING! Up, up, my merry men!

shrilled the Knight as if he were leading an army to battle. The Pokes opened both eyes, but did not immediately retire. Sir Hokus bravely swallowed a yawn and hastily clearing his throat shouted another song, which he evidently made up on the spur of the moment:

Avaunt! Be off! Be gone--Methinks We'll be asleep in forty winks!

This time the Pokes left sullenly, but the effect of their presence had thrown Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion, and the Knight into a violent fit of the gapes.

"If I fall asleep, nothing can save you," said Sir Hokus in an agitated voice.
"Hah, hoh, hum! Hah--!"

The Knight's eyes closed.

"Don't do it, don't do it!" begged Dorothy, shaking him violently. "Can't we run away?"

"I've been trying for five centuries," wailed the Knight in a discouraged voice, "but I always fall asleep before I reach the gate, and they bring me back here. They're rather fond of me in their slow way," he added apologetically.

"Couldn't you keep singing?" asked the Cowardly Lion anxiously, for the prospect of a five-century stay in Pokes was more than he could bear.

"Couldn't we all sing?" suggested Dorothy. "Surely all three of us won't fall asleep at once."

"I'm not much of a singer," groaned the Cowardly Lion, beginning to tremble, "but I'm willing to do my share!"

"I like you," said Sir Hokus, going over and thumping the Cowardly Lion approvingly on the back. "You ought to be knighted!"

The lion blinked his eyes, for Sir Hokus' iron fist bruised him severely, but knowing it was kindly meant, he bore it bravely.

"I am henceforth a beknighthed lion," he whispered to Dorothy while Sir Hokus was straightening his armor. Next the Knight took down an iron poker, which he handed to Dorothy.

"To wake us up with," he explained. "And now, Lady Dorothy, if you are ready, we will start on the Quest for the honorable Scarecrow, and remember, everybody sing--Sing for your life!"