

CHAPTER 16 - DOROTHY AND HER GUARDIANS MEET NEW FRIENDS

While all these exciting things were happening to the poor Scarecrow, Dorothy, Sir Hokus and the Cowardly Lion had been having adventures of their own. For three days, they had wandered through a deserted part of the Winkie Country, subsisting largely on berries, sleeping under trees, and looking in vain for a road to lead them back to the Emerald City. On the second day, they had encountered an ancient woodsman, too old and deaf to give them any information. He did, however, invite them into his hut and give them a good dinner and a dozen sandwiches to carry away with them.

"But, oh, for a good old pasty!" sighed Sir Hokus late on the third afternoon as they finished the last of the crumbly sandwiches.

"Do you know," said Dorothy, looking through the straggly fields and woods ahead, "I believe we've been going in the wrong direction again."

"Again!" choked the Cowardly Lion. "You mean still. I've been in a good many parts of Oz, but this--this is the worst."

"Not even one little dragon!" Sir Hokus shook his head mournfully. Then, seeing that Dorothy was tired and discouraged, he pretended to strum on a guitar and sang in his high-pitched voice:

A rusty Knight in steel bedite And Lady Dot, so fair, Sir Lion
bold, with mane of gold And might besides to spa--ha--hare! And
might beside to spare! The dauntless three, a company Of wit and
bravery are, Who seek the valiant Scarecrow man, Who seek him
near and fa--har--har, Who seek him near and fa--har!

"Oh, I like that!" cried Dorothy, jumping up and giving Sir Hokus a little squeeze. "Only you should have said trusty Knight."

The Cowardly Lion shook his golden mane. "Let's do a little reconnoitering, Hokus," he said carelessly. He felt he must live up to the song somehow. "Perhaps we'll find a sign."

"I don't believe in signs anymore," laughed Dorothy, "but I'm coming too." Sir Hokus' song had cheered them all, and it wasn't the first time the Knight had helped make the best of a tiresome journey.

"The air seemeth to grow very hot," observed Sir Hokus after they had walked along silently for a time. "Hast noticed it, Sir Cowardly?"

"No, but I've swallowed some of it," coughed the Cowardly Lion, looking suspiciously through the trees.

"I'll just step forward and see what it is," said the Knight. As he disappeared, the truth dawned on Dorothy.

"Wait! Wait! Don't go! Please, please, Sir Hokus, come back, come back!" cried the little girl, running after him as fast as she could.

"What's the matter?" rumbled the Cowardly Lion, thudding behind her. Then both, coming suddenly out of the woods, gave a terrible scream, which so startled Sir Hokus that he fell over backwards. Just in time, too, for another step would have taken him straight on to the Deadly Desert, which destroys every living thing and keeps all intruders away from Oz.

"What befell?" puffed Sir Hokus, getting to his feet. Naturally, he knew nothing of the poisonous sands.

"You did," wheezed the Cowardly Lion in an agitated voice.

"Was it a dragon?" asked the Knight, limping toward them hopefully.

"Sit down!" The Cowardly Lion mopped his brow with his tail. "One step on that desert and it would have been one long goodnight."

"I should say it would!" shuddered Dorothy, and explained to Sir Hokus the deadly nature of the sands. "And do you know what this means?" Dorothy was nearer to tears than even I like to think about. "It means we've come in exactly the wrong direction and are farther away from the Emerald City than we were when we started."

"And seek him near and fa--hah--har," mumbled Sir Hokus with a very troubled light in his kindly blue eyes.

"And seek him near and far."

"Fah--har--har! I should say it was," said the Cowardly Lion bitterly. "But you needn't sing it."

"No, I s'pose not. Uds helmets and hauberks! I s'pose not!" The Knight lapsed into a discouraged silence, and all three sat and stared drearily at the stretch of desert before them and thought gloomily of the rough country behind.

"It's a caravan," wheezed a hoarse voice.

"I doubt that, Camy, I doubt it very much." The shrill nasal voices so startled the three travelers that they swung about in astonishment.

"Great dates and deserts!" burst out the Cowardly Lion, jumping up. And on the whole, this exclamation was entirely suitable, for ambling toward them were a long-legged camel and a wobbly-necked dromedary.

"At last! A steed!" cried the Knight, bounding to his feet.

"I doubt that." The dromedary stopped and looked at him coldly.

"Try me," said the camel amiably. "I'm more comfortable."

"I doubt that, too."

"The doubtful dromedary wept, As o'er the desert sands he stept,
Association with the sphinx Has made him doubtful, so he thinks!"

chortled the Knight with his head on one side.

"How did you know?" asked the Dromedary, opening his eyes wide.

"It just occurred to me," admitted Sir Hokus, clearing his throat modestly.

"I doubt that. Somebody told you," said the Doubtful Dromedary bitterly.

"Pon my honor," said Sir Hokus.

"I doubt it, I doubt it very much," persisted the Dromedary, wagging his head sorrowfully.

"You seem to doubt everything!" Dorothy laughed in spite of herself, and the Dromedary regarded her sulkily.

"He does," said the Camel. "It makes him very doubtful company. Now, I like to be comfortable and happy, and you can't be if you're always doubting things and people and places. Eh, my dear?"

"Where did you comfortable and doubtful parties come from?" asked the Cowardly Lion. "Strangers here?"

"Well, yes," admitted the Camel, nibbling the branch of a tree. "There was a terrific sandstorm, and after blowing and blowing and blowing, we found ourselves in this little wood. The odd part of it is that you talk in our language. Never knew a two-leg to understand a word of Camelia before."

"You're not talking Camelia, you're talking Ozish," laughed Dorothy. "All animals can talk here."

"Well, now, that's very comfortable, I must say," sighed the Camel, "and if you'd just tell me where to go, it would be more comfortable still."

"I doubt that," snapped the Dromedary. "They're no caravan."

"Where do you want to go?" asked the Cowardly Lion, ignoring the Doubtful Dromedary.

"Anywhere, just so we keep moving. We're used to being told when to start and stop, and life is mighty lonely without our Karwan Bashi," sighed the Comfortable Camel.

"Why, I didn't know you smoked!" exclaimed Dorothy in surprise. She thought the camel was referring to a brand of tobacco.

"He means his camel driver," whispered Sir Hokus, eyeing the soft, pillowed seat on the camel's back longingly. Besides the seat, great sacks and bales of goods hung from its sides. The Doubtful Dromedary was similarly loaded.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Dorothy. A sudden idea had struck her. "You haven't anything to eat in those sacks, have you?"

"Plenty, my child--plenty!" answered the Camel calmly.

"Three cheers for the Comfortable Camel!" roared the Cowardly Lion, while Sir Hokus, following the camel's directions, carefully unfastened a large, woven basket from one of the sacks on its side.

"You may be my Karwan Bashi," announced the Comfortable Camel judiciously as Sir Hokus paused for breath.

"Hear that, Lady Dot?" Sir Hokus swept the camel a bow and fairly beamed with pleasure. Dorothy, meanwhile, had set out an appetizing repast on a small, rocky ledge--a regular feast, it appeared to the hungry travelers. There were loaves of black bread, figs, dates, cheese, and a curious sort of dried meat which the Cowardly Lion swallowed in great quantities.

"Isn't this cozy?" said Dorothy, forgetting the long, weary way ahead. "My, I'm glad we met you!"

"Very comforting to us, too, my dear," said the Camel, swaying complacently. "Isn't it, Doubty?"

"There are some silk cushions in my right-hand saddle sack, but I doubt very much whether you'll like 'em," mumbled the Dromedary gruffly.

"Out with them!" cried Sir Hokus, pouncing on the Doubtful Dromedary, and in a minute each of the party had a cushion and was as snug as possible.

"Could anything have been more fortunate?" exulted the Knight. "We can now resume our journey properly mounted."

"I think I'll ride the Cowardly Lion," said Dorothy, looking uneasily at the high seat on the camel's back. "Let's start before it grows any darker."

They had eaten to heart's content, and now, packing up the remainder of the feast, the little party made ready to start.

Sir Hokus, using the Cowardly Lion as a footstool, mounted the camel, and then Dorothy climbed on her old friend's back, and the little caravan moved slowly through the forest.

"There's a tent in my left-hand saddle sack, but I doubt very much whether you can put it up," said the Doubtful Dromedary, falling in behind the Comfortable Camel. "I doubt it very much indeed."

"How now, what means this doubting?" called Sir Hokus from his perilous seat. "I'll pitch it when the time comes."

"Mind you don't pitch out when the Camel goes!" called the Cowardly Lion, who would have his little joke. Sir Hokus, to tell the truth, was feeling tossed about and dizzy, but he was too polite to mention the fact. As they proceeded, Dorothy told the Comfortable Camel all about the Scarecrow and Oz.

An occasional word jolted down from above told her that the Knight was singing. They had gone possibly a mile when Dorothy pointed in excitement to a road just ahead.

"We must have missed it before! Wait, I'll see what it's like." Jumping down from the Cowardly Lion's back, she peered curiously at the narrow, tree-lined path. "Why, here's a sign!"

"What of?" asked the Comfortable Camel, lurching forward eagerly and nearly unseating the Knight.

W I S H W A Y

read Dorothy in a puzzled voice.

"Looks like a pretty good road," said the Comfortable Camel, squinting up its eyes.

"I doubt it, Camy, I doubt it very much," said the Doubtful Dromedary tremulously.

"What does my dear Karwan Bashi think?" asked the Comfortable Camel, looking adoringly back at the Knight.

"It is unwise to go back when the journey lieth forward," said the Knight, and immediately returned to his song. So, single file, the little company turned in at the narrow path, the Comfortable Camel advancing with timid steps and the Doubtful Dromedary bobbing his head dubiously.