

10. Escaping the Soup-Kettle

The shaggy man got up and felt of himself to see if he was hurt; but he was not. One of the heads had struck his breast and the other his left shoulder; yet though they had knocked him down, the heads were not hard enough to bruise him.

"Come on," he said firmly; "we've got to get out of here some way," and forward he started again.

The Scoodlers began yelling and throwing their heads in great numbers at our frightened friends. The shaggy man was knocked over again, and so was Button-Bright, who kicked his heels against the ground and howled as loud as he could, although he was not hurt a bit. One head struck Toto, who first yelped and then grabbed the head by an ear and started running away with it.

The Scoodlers who had thrown their heads began to scramble down and run to pick them up, with wonderful quickness; but the one whose head Toto had stolen found it hard to get it back again. The head couldn't see the body with either pair of its eyes, because the dog was in the way, so the headless Scoodler stumbled around over the rocks and tripped on them more than once in its effort to regain its top. Toto was trying to get outside the rocks and roll the head down the hill; but some of the other Scoodlers came to the rescue of their unfortunate comrade and pelted the dog with their own heads until he was obliged to drop his burden and hurry back to Dorothy.

The little girl and the Rainbow's Daughter had both escaped the shower of heads, but they saw now that it would be useless to try to run away from the dreadful Scoodlers.

"We may as well submit," declared the shaggy man, in a rueful voice, as he got upon his feet again. He turned toward their foes and asked:

"What do you want us to do?"

"Come!" they cried, in a triumphant chorus, and at once sprang from the rocks and surrounded their captives on all sides. One funny thing about the Scoodlers was they could walk in either direction, coming or going, without turning around; because they had two faces and, as Dorothy said, "two front sides," and their feet were shaped like the letter T upside down. They moved with great rapidity and there was something about their glittering eyes and

contrasting colors and removable heads that inspired the poor prisoners with horror, and made them long to escape.

But the creatures led their captives away from the rocks and the road, down the hill by a side path until they came before a low mountain of rock that looked like a huge bowl turned upside down. At the edge of this mountain was a deep gulf--so deep that when you looked into it there was nothing but blackness below. Across the gulf was a narrow bridge of rock, and at the other end of the bridge was an arched opening that led into the mountain.

Over this bridge the Scoodlers led their prisoners, through the opening into the mountain, which they found to be an immense hollow dome lighted by several holes in the roof. All around the circular space were built rock houses, set close together, each with a door in the front wall. None of these houses was more than six feet wide, but the Scoodlers were thin people sidewise and did not need much room. So vast was the dome that there was a large space in the middle of the cave, in front of all these houses, where the creatures might congregate as in a great hall.

It made Dorothy shudder to see a huge iron kettle suspended by a stout chain in the middle of the place, and underneath the kettle a great heap of kindling wood and shavings, ready to light.

"What's that?" asked the shaggy man, drawing back as they approached this place, so that they were forced to push him forward.

"The Soup Kettle!" yelled the Scoodlers, and then they shouted in the next breath:

"We're hungry!"

Button-Bright, holding Dorothy's hand in one chubby fist and Polly's hand in the other, was so affected by this shout that he began to cry again, repeating the protest:

"Don't want to be soup, I don't!"

"Never mind," said the shaggy man, consolingly; "I ought to make enough soup to feed them all, I'm so big; so I'll ask them to put me in the kettle first."

"All right," said Button-Bright, more cheerfully.

But the Scoodlers were not ready to make soup yet. They led the captives into a house at the farthest side of the cave--a house somewhat wider than the others.

"Who lives here?" asked the Rainbow's Daughter. The Scoodlers nearest her replied:

"The Queen."

It made Dorothy hopeful to learn that a woman ruled over these fierce creatures, but a moment later they were ushered by two or three of the escort into a gloomy, bare room--and her hope died away.

For the Queen of the Scoodlers proved to be much more dreadful in appearance than any of her people. One side of her was fiery red, with jet-black hair and green eyes and the other side of her was bright yellow, with crimson hair and black eyes. She wore a short skirt of red and yellow and her hair, instead of being banged, was a tangle of short curls upon which rested a circular crown of silver--much dented and twisted because the Queen had thrown her head at so many things so many times. Her form was lean and bony and both her faces were deeply wrinkled.

"What have we here?" asked the Queen sharply, as our friends were made to stand before her.

"Soup!" cried the guard of Scoodlers, speaking together.

"We're not!" said Dorothy, indignantly; "we're nothing of the sort."

"Ah, but you will be soon," retorted the Queen, a grim smile making her look more dreadful than before.

"Pardon me, most beautiful vision," said the shaggy man, bowing before the queen politely. "I must request your Serene Highness to let us go our way without being made into soup. For I own the Love Magnet, and whoever meets me must love me and all my friends."

"True," replied the Queen. "We love you very much; so much that we intend to eat your broth with real pleasure. But tell me, do you think I am so beautiful?"

"You won't be at all beautiful if you eat me," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Handsome is as handsome does, you know."

The Queen turned to Button-Bright.

"Do YOU think I'm beautiful?" she asked.

"No," said the boy; "you're ugly."

"I think you're a fright," said Dorothy.

"If you could see yourself you'd be terribly scared," added Polly.

The Queen scowled at them and flopped from her red side to her yellow side.

"Take them away," she commanded the guard, "and at six o'clock run them through the meat chopper and start the soup kettle boiling. And put plenty of salt in the broth this time, or I'll punish the cooks severely."

"Any onions, your Majesty?" asked one of the guard.

"Plenty of onions and garlic and a dash of red pepper. Now, go!"

The Scoodlers led the captives away and shut them up in one of the houses, leaving only a single Scoodler to keep guard.

The place was a sort of store-house; containing bags of potatoes and baskets of carrots, onions and turnips.

"These," said their guard, pointing to the vegetables, "we use to flavor our soups with."

The prisoners were rather disheartened by this time, for they saw no way to escape and did not know how soon it would be six o'clock and time for the meatchopper to begin work. But the shaggy man was brave and did not intend to submit to such a horrid fate without a struggle.

"I'm going to fight for our lives," he whispered to the children, "for if I fail we will be no worse off than before, and to sit here quietly until we are made into soup would be foolish and cowardly."

The Scoodler on guard stood near the doorway, turning first his white side toward them and then his black side, as if he wanted to show to all of his greedy four eyes the sight of so many fat prisoners. The captives sat in a sorrowful group at the other end of the room--except Polychrome, who danced back and forth in the little place to keep herself warm, for she felt the chill of the cave. Whenever she approached the shaggy man he would whisper

something in her ear, and Polly would nod her pretty head as if she understood.

The shaggy man told Dorothy and Button-Bright to stand before him while he emptied the potatoes out of one of the sacks. When this had been secretly done, little Polychrome, dancing near to the guard, suddenly reached out her hand and slapped his face, the next instant whirling away from him quickly to rejoin her friends.

The angry Scoodler at once picked off his head and hurled it at the Rainbow's Daughter; but the shaggy man was expecting that, and caught the head very neatly, putting it in the sack, which he tied at the mouth. The body of the guard, not having the eyes of its head to guide it, ran here and there in an aimless manner, and the shaggy man easily dodged it and opened the door. Fortunately, there was no one in the big cave at that moment, so he told Dorothy and Polly to run as fast as they could for the entrance, and out across the narrow bridge.

"I'll carry Button-Bright," he said, for he knew the little boy's legs were too short to run fast.

Dorothy picked up Toto and then seized Polly's hand and ran swiftly toward the entrance to the cave. The shaggy man perched Button-Bright on his shoulders and ran after them. They moved so quickly and their escape was so wholly unexpected that they had almost reached the bridge when one of the Scoodlers looked out of his house and saw them.

The creature raised a shrill cry that brought all of its fellows bounding out of the numerous doors, and at once they started in chase. Dorothy and Polly had reached the bridge and crossed it when the Scoodlers began throwing their heads. One of the queer missiles struck the shaggy man on his back and nearly knocked him over; but he was at the mouth of the cave now, so he set down Button-Bright and told the boy to run across the bridge to Dorothy.

Then the shaggy man turned around and faced his enemies, standing just outside the opening, and as fast as they threw their heads at him he caught them and tossed them into the black gulf below. The headless bodies of the foremost Scoodlers kept the others from running close up, but they also threw their heads in an effort to stop the escaping prisoners. The shaggy man caught them all and sent them whirling down into the black gulf. Among them he noticed the crimson and yellow head of the Queen, and this he tossed after the others with right good will.

Presently every Scoodler of the lot had thrown its head, and every head was down in the deep gulf, and now the helpless bodies of the creatures were mixed together in the cave and wriggling around in a vain attempt to discover what had become of their heads. The shaggy man laughed and walked across the bridge to rejoin his companions.

"It's lucky I learned to play base-ball when I was young," he remarked, "for I caught all those heads easily and never missed one. But come along, little ones; the Scoodlers will never bother us or anyone else any more."

Button-Bright was still frightened and kept insisting, "I don't want to be soup!" for the victory had been gained so suddenly that the boy could not realize they were free and safe. But the shaggy man assured him that all danger of their being made into soup was now past, as the Scoodlers would be unable to eat soup for some time to come.

So now, anxious to get away from the horrid gloomy cave as soon as possible, they hastened up the hillside and regained the road just beyond the place where they had first met the Scoodlers; and you may be sure they were glad to find their feet on the old familiar path again.