

Chapter Ten

A Terrible Tumble Through a Tube

I suppose that Polychrome, and perhaps Queen Ann and her Army, might have been able to dispel the enchantment of Ruggedo's Chief Magician had they known that danger lay in their pathway; for the Rainbow's Daughter was a fairy and as Oogaboo is a part of the Land of Oz its inhabitants cannot easily be deceived by such common magic as the Nome King could command. But no one suspected any especial danger until after they had entered Ruggedo's cavern, and so they were journeying along in quite a contented manner when Tik-Tok, who marched ahead, suddenly disappeared.

The officers thought he must have turned a corner, so they kept on their way and all of them likewise disappeared--one after another. Queen Ann was rather surprised at this, and in hastening forward to learn the reason she also vanished from sight.

Betsy Bobbin had tired her feet by walking, so she was now riding upon the back of the stout little mule, facing backward and talking to Shaggy and Polychrome, who were just behind. Suddenly Hank pitched forward and began falling and Betsy would have tumbled over his head had she not grabbed the mule's shaggy neck with both arms and held on

for dear life.

All around was darkness, and they were not falling directly downward but seemed to be sliding along a steep incline. Hank's hoofs were resting upon some smooth substance over which he slid with the swiftness of the wind. Once Betsy's heels flew up and struck a similar substance overhead. They were, indeed, descending the "Hollow Tube" that led to the other side of the world.

"Stop, Hank--stop!" cried the girl; but Hank only uttered a plaintive "Hee-haw!" for it was impossible for him to obey.

After several minutes had passed and no harm had befallen them, Betsy gained courage. She could see nothing at all, nor could she hear anything except the rush of air past her ears as they plunged downward along the Tube. Whether she and Hank were alone, or the others were with them, she could not tell. But had some one been able to take a flash-light photograph of the Tube at that time a most curious picture would have resulted. There was Tik-Tok, flat upon his back and sliding headforemost down the incline. And there were the Officers of the Army of Oogaboo, all tangled up in a confused crowd, flapping their arms and trying to shield their faces from the clanking swords, which swung back and forth during the swift journey and pommeled everyone within their reach. Now followed Queen Ann, who had struck the Tube in a sitting position and went flying along with a dash and abandon that thoroughly bewildered the poor lady, who had no idea what had happened to her.

Then, a little distance away, but unseen by the others in the inky darkness, slid Betsy and Hank, while behind them were Shaggy and Polychrome and finally Files and the Princess.

When first they tumbled into the Tube all were too dazed to think clearly, but the trip was a long one, because the cavity led straight through the earth to a place just opposite the Nome King's dominions, and long before the adventurers got to the end they had begun to recover their wits.

"This is awful, Hank!" cried Betsy in a loud voice, and Queen Ann heard her and called out: "Are you safe, Betsy?"

"Mercy, no!" answered the little girl. "How could anyone be safe when she's going about sixty miles a minute?" Then, after a pause, she added: "But where do you suppose we're going to, Your Majesty?"

"Don't ask her that, please don't!" said Shaggy, who was not too far away to overhear them. "And please don't ask me why, either."

"Why?" said Betsy.

"No one can tell where we are going until we get there," replied Shaggy, and then he yelled "Ouch!" for Polychrome had overtaken him and was now sitting on his head.

The Rainbow's Daughter laughed merrily, and so infectious was this joyous laugh that Betsy echoed it and Hank said "Hee haw!" in a mild and sympathetic tone of voice.

"I'd like to know where and when we'll arrive, just the same," exclaimed the little girl.

"Be patient and you'll find out, my dear," said Polychrome. "But isn't this an odd experience? Here am I, whose home is in the skies, making a journey through the center of the earth--where I never expected to be!"

"How do you know we're in the center of the earth?" asked Betsy, her voice trembling a little through nervousness.

"Why, we can't be anywhere else," replied Polychrome. "I have often heard of this passage, which was once built by a Magician who was a great traveler. He thought it would save him the bother of going around the earth's surface, but he tumbled through the Tube so fast that he shot out at the other end and hit a star in the sky, which at once exploded."

"The star exploded?" asked Betsy wonderingly.

"Yes; the Magician hit it so hard."

"And what became of the Magician?" inquired the girl.

"No one knows that," answered Polychrome. "But I don't think it matters much."

"It matters a good deal, if we also hit the stars when we come out," said Queen Ann, with a moan.

"Don't worry," advised Polychrome. "I believe the Magician was going the other way, and probably he went much faster than we are going."

"It's fast enough to suit me," remarked Shaggy, gently removing Polychrome's heel from his left eye. "Couldn't you manage to fall all by yourself, my dear?"

"I'll try," laughed the Rainbow's Daughter.

All this time they were swiftly falling through the Tube, and it was not so easy for them to talk as you may imagine when you read their words. But although they were so helpless and altogether in the dark as to their fate, the fact that they were able to converse at all cheered them, considerably.

Files and Ozga were also conversing as they clung tightly to one another, and the young fellow bravely strove to reassure the Princess, although he was terribly frightened, both on her account and on his own.

An hour, under such trying circumstances, is a very long time, and for more than an hour they continued their fearful journey. Then, just as they began to fear the Tube would never end, Tik-Tok popped out into broad daylight and, after making a graceful circle in the air, fell with a splash into a great marble fountain.

Out came the officers, in quick succession, tumbling heels over head and striking the ground in many undignified attitudes.

"For the love of sassafras!" exclaimed a Peculiar Person who was hoeing pink violets in a garden. "What can all this mean?"

For answer, Queen Ann sailed up from the Tube, took a ride through the air as high as the treetops, and alighted squarely on top of the Peculiar Person's head, smashing a jeweled crown over his eyes and tumbling him to the ground.

The mule was heavier and had Betsy clinging to his back, so he did not go so high up. Fortunately for his little rider he struck the ground upon his four feet. Betsy was jarred a trifle but not hurt and when she looked around her she saw the Queen and the Peculiar Person struggling together upon the ground, where the man was trying to choke Ann and she had both hands in his bushy hair and was pulling with all her might. Some of the officers, when they got upon their feet, hastened to separate the combatants and sought to restrain the Peculiar Person so that he could not attack their Queen again.

By this time, Shaggy, Polychrome, Ozga and Files had all arrived and were curiously examining the strange country in which they found themselves and which they knew to be exactly on the opposite side of the world from the place where they had fallen into the Tube. It was a lovely place, indeed, and seemed to be the garden of some great Prince, for through the vistas of trees and shrubbery could be seen the towers of an immense castle. But as yet the only inhabitant to greet them was the Peculiar Person just mentioned, who had shaken off the grasp of the officers without effort and was now trying to pull the battered crown from off his eyes.

Shaggy, who was always polite, helped him to do this and when the man was free and could see again he looked at his visitors with evident amazement.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "Where did you come from and how did you get here?"

Betsy tried to answer him, for Queen Ann was surly and silent.

"I can't say, exac'ly where we came from, cause I don't know the name of the place," said the girl, "but the way we got here was through the HollowTube."

"Don't call it a 'hollow' Tube, please," exclaimed the Peculiar Person

in an irritated tone of voice. "If it's a tube, it's sure to be hollow."

"Why?" asked Betsy.

"Because all tubes are made that way. But this Tube is private property and everyone is forbidden to fall into it."

"We didn't do it on purpose," explained Betsy, and Polychrome added: "I am quite sure that Ruggedo, the Nome King, pushed us down that Tube."

"Ha! Ruggedo! Did you say Ruggedo?" cried the man, becoming much excited.

"That is what she said," replied Shaggy, "and I believe she is right. We were on our way to conquer the Nome King when suddenly we fell into the Tube."

"Then you are enemies of Ruggedo?" inquired the peculiar Person.

"Not exactly enemies," said Betsy, a little puzzled by the question, "'cause we don't know him at all; but we started out to conquer him, which isn't as friendly as it might be."

"True," agreed the man. He looked thoughtfully from one to another of them for a while and then he turned his head over his shoulder and said: "Never mind the fire and pincers, my good brothers. It will be

best to take these strangers to the Private Citizen."

"Very well, Tubekins," responded a Voice, deep and powerful, that seemed to come out of the air, for the speaker was invisible.

All our friends gave a jump, at this. Even Polychrome was so startled that her gauze draperies fluttered like a banner in a breeze. Shaggy shook his head and sighed; Queen Ann looked very unhappy; the officers clung to each other, trembling violently.

But soon they gained courage to look more closely at the Peculiar Person. As he was a type of all the inhabitants of this extraordinary land whom they afterward met, I will try to tell you what he looked like.

His face was beautiful, but lacked expression. His eyes were large and blue in color and his teeth finely formed and white as snow. His hair was black and bushy and seemed inclined to curl at the ends. So far no one could find any fault with his appearance. He wore a robe of scarlet, which did not cover his arms and extended no lower than his bare knees. On the bosom of the robe was embroidered a terrible dragon's head, as horrible to look at as the man was beautiful. His arms and legs were left bare and the skin of one arm was bright yellow and the skin of the other arm a vivid green. He had one blue leg and one pink one, while both his feet--which showed through the open sandals he wore--were jet black.

Betsy could not decide whether these gorgeous colors were dyes or the natural tints of the skin, but while she was thinking it over the man who had been called "Tubekins" said:

"Follow me to the Residence--all of you!"

But just then a Voice exclaimed: "Here's another of them, Tubekins, lying in the water of the fountain."

"Gracious!" cried Betsy; "it must be Tik-Tok, and he'll drown."

"Water is a bad thing for his clockworks, anyway," agreed Shaggy, as with one accord they all started for the fountain. But before they could reach it, invisible hands raised Tik-Tok from the marble basin and set him upon his feet beside it, water dripping from every joint of his copper body.

"Ma--ny tha--tha--tha--thanks!" he said; and then his copper jaws clicked together and he could say no more. He next made an attempt to walk but after several awkward trials found he could not move his joints.

Peals of jeering laughter from persons unseen greeted Tik-Tok's failure, and the new arrivals in this strange land found it very uncomfortable to realize that there were many creatures around them who

were invisible, yet could be heard plainly.

"Shall I wind him up?" asked Betsy, feeling very sorry for Tik-Tok.

"I think his machinery is wound; but he needs oiling," replied Shaggy.

At once an oil-can appeared before him, held on a level with his eyes by some unseen hand. Shaggy took the can and tried to oil Tik-Tok's joints. As if to assist him, a strong current of warm air was directed against the copper man which quickly dried him. Soon he was able to say "Ma-ny thanks!" quite smoothly and his joints worked fairly well.

"Come!" commanded Tubekins, and turning his back upon them he walked up the path toward the castle.

"Shall we go?" asked Queen Ann, uncertainly; but just then she received a shove that almost pitched her forward on her head; so she decided to go. The officers who hesitated received several energetic kicks, but could not see who delivered them; therefore they also decided--very wisely--to go. The others followed willingly enough, for unless they ventured upon another terrible journey through the Tube they must make the best of the unknown country they were in, and the best seemed to be to obey orders.