

Chapter Eleven

The Famous Fellowship of Fairies

After a short walk through very beautiful gardens they came to the castle and followed Tubekins through the entrance and into a great domed chamber, where he commanded them to be seated.

From the crown which he wore, Betsy had thought this man must be the King of the country they were in, yet after he had seated all the strangers upon benches that were ranged in a semicircle before a high throne, Tubekins bowed humbly before the vacant throne and in a flash became invisible and disappeared.

The hall was an immense place, but there seemed to be no one in it beside themselves. Presently, however, they heard a low cough near them, and here and there was the faint rustling of a robe and a slight patter as of footsteps. Then suddenly there rang out the clear tone of a bell and at the sound all was changed.

Gazing around the hall in bewilderment they saw that it was filled with hundreds of men and women, all with beautiful faces and staring blue eyes and all wearing scarlet robes and jeweled crowns upon their heads. In fact, these people seemed exact duplicates of Tubekins and it was difficult to find any mark by which to tell them apart.

"My! what a lot of Kings and Queens!" whispered Betsy to Polychrome, who sat beside her and appeared much interested in the scene but not a bit worried.

"It is certainly a strange sight," was Polychrome's reply; "but I cannot see how there can be more than one King, or Queen, in any one country, for were these all rulers, no one could tell who was Master."

One of the Kings who stood near and overheard this remark turned to her and said: "One who is Master of himself is always a King, if only to himself. In this favored land all Kings and Queens are equal, and it is our privilege to bow before one supreme Ruler--the Private Citizen."

"Who's he?" inquired Betsy.

As if to answer her, the clear tones of the bell again rang out and instantly there appeared seated in the throne the man who was lord and master of all these royal ones. This fact was evident when with one accord they fell upon their knees and touched their foreheads to the floor.

The Private Citizen was not unlike the others, except that his eyes were black instead of blue and in the centers of the black irises glowed red sparks that seemed like coals of fire. But his features were very beautiful and dignified and his manner composed and stately.

Instead of the prevalent scarlet robe, he wore one of white, and the same dragon's head that decorated the others was embroidered upon its bosom.

"What charge lies against these people, Tubekins?" he asked in quiet, even tones.

"They came through the forbidden Tube, O Mighty Citizen," was the reply.

"You see, it was this way," said Betsy. "We were marching to the Nome King, to conquer him and set Shaggy's brother free, when on a sudden--"

"Who are you?" demanded the Private Citizen sternly.

"Me? Oh, I'm Betsy Bobbin, and--"

"Who is the leader of this party?" asked the Citizen.

"Sir, I am Queen Ann of Oogaboo, and--"

"Then keep quiet," said the Citizen. "Who is the leader?"

No one answered for a moment. Then General Bunn stood up.

"Sit down!" commanded the Citizen. "I can see that sixteen of you are merely officers, and of no account."

"But we have an Army," said General Clock, blusteringly, for he didn't like to be told he was of no account.

"Where is your Army?" asked the Citizen.

"It's me," said Tik-Tok, his voice sounding a little rusty. "I'm the on-ly Pri-vate Sol-dier in the par-ty."

Hearing this, the Citizen rose and bowed respectfully to the Clockwork Man.

"Pardon me for not realizing your importance before," said he. "Will you oblige me by taking a seat beside me on my throne?"

Tik-Tok rose and walked over to the throne, all the Kings and Queens making way for him. Then with clanking steps he mounted the platform and sat on the broad seat beside the Citizen.

Ann was greatly provoked at this mark of favor shown to the humble Clockwork Man, but Shaggy seemed much pleased that his old friend's importance had been recognized by the ruler of this remarkable country. The Citizen now began to question Tik-Tok, who told in his mechanical voice about Shaggy's quest of his lost brother, and how Ozma of Oz had sent the Clockwork Man to assist him, and how they had fallen in with Queen Ann and her people from Oogaboo. Also he told how Betsy and Hank

and Polychrome and the Rose Princess had happened to join their party.

"And you intended to conquer Ruggedo, the Metal Monarch and King of the Nomes?" asked the Citizen.

"Yes. That seemed the on-ly thing for us to do," was Tik-Tok's reply.

"But he was too cle-ver for us. When we got close to his cav-ern he made our path lead to the Tube, and made the op-en-ing in-vis-i-ble, so that we all fell in-to it be-fore we knew it was there. It was an eas-y way to get rid of us and now Rug-gedo is safe and we are far a-way in a strange land."

The Citizen was silent a moment and seemed to be thinking. Then he said:

"Most noble Private Soldier, I must inform you that by the laws of our country anyone who comes through the Forbidden Tube must be tortured for nine days and ten nights and then thrown back into the Tube. But it is wise to disregard laws when they conflict with justice, and it seems that you and your followers did not disobey our laws willingly, being forced into the Tube by Ruggedo. Therefore the Nome King is alone to blame, and he alone must be punished."

"That suits me," said Tik-Tok. "But Rug-ge-do is on the o-ther side of the world where he is a-way out of your reach."

The Citizen drew himself up proudly.

"Do you imagine anything in the world or upon it can be out of the reach of the Great Jinjin?" he asked.

"Oh! Are you, then, the Great Jinjin?" inquired Tik-Tok.

"I am."

"Then your name is Ti-ti-ti-Hoo-choo?"

"It is."

Queen Ann gave a scream and began to tremble. Shaggy was so disturbed that he took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Polychrome looked sober and uneasy for the first time, while Files put his arms around the Rose Princess as if to protect her. As for the officers, the name of the great Jinjin set them moaning and weeping at a great rate and every one fell upon his knees before the throne, begging for mercy. Betsy was worried at seeing her companions so disturbed, but did not know what it was all about. Only Tik-Tok was unmoved at the discovery.

"Then," said he, "if you are Ti-ti-ti-Hoo-choo, and think Rug-ge-do is to blame, I am sure that some-thing queer will hap-pen to the King of the Nomes."

"I wonder what 'twill be," said Betsy.

The Private Citizen--otherwise known as Tititi-Hoochoo, the Great Jinjin--looked at the little girl steadily.

"I will presently decide what is to happen to Ruggedo," said he in a hard, stern voice. Then, turning to the throng of Kings and Queens, he continued: "Tik-Tok has spoken truly, for his machinery will not allow him to lie, nor will it allow his thoughts to think falsely. Therefore these people are not our enemies and must be treated with consideration and justice. Take them to your palaces and entertain them as guests until to-morrow, when I command that they be brought again to my Residence. By then I shall have formed my plans."

No sooner had Tititi-Hoochoo spoken than he disappeared from sight. Immediately after, most of the Kings and Queens likewise disappeared. But several of them remained visible and approached the strangers with great respect. One of the lovely Queens said to Betsy:

"I trust you will honor me by being my guest. I am Erma, Queen of Light."

"May Hank come with me?" asked the girl.

"The King of Animals will care for your mule," was the reply. "But do not fear for him, for he will be treated royally. All of your party

will be reunited on the morrow."

"I--I'd like to have some one with me," said Betsy, pleadingly.

Queen Erma looked around and smiled upon Polychrome.

"Will the Rainbow's Daughter be an agreeable companion?" she asked.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the girl.

So Polychrome and Betsy became guests of the Queen of Light, while other beautiful Kings and Queens took charge of the others of the party.

The two girls followed Erma out of the hall and through the gardens of the Residence to a village of pretty dwellings. None of these was so large or imposing as the castle of the Private Citizen, but all were handsome enough to be called palaces--as, in fact, they really were.