

Chapter Thirteen

The Jinjin's Just Judgment

All the adventurers were reunited next morning when they were brought from various palaces to the Residence of Tititi-Hoochoo and ushered into the great Hall of State.

As before, no one was visible except our friends and their escorts until the first bell sounded. Then in a flash the room was seen to be filled with the beautiful Kings and Queens of the land. The second bell marked the appearance in the throne of the mighty Jinjin, whose handsome countenance was as composed and expressionless as ever.

All bowed low to the Ruler. Their voices softly murmured: "We greet the Private Citizen, mightiest of Rulers, whose word is Law and whose Law is just."

Tititi-Hoochoo bowed in acknowledgment. Then, looking around the brilliant assemblage, and at the little group of adventurers before him, he said:

"An unusual thing has happened. Inhabitants of other lands than ours, who are different from ourselves in many ways, have been thrust upon us through the Forbidden Tube, which one of our people foolishly made

years ago and was properly punished for his folly. But these strangers had no desire to come here and were wickedly thrust into the Tube by a cruel King on the other side of the world, named Ruggedo. This King is an immortal, but he is not good. His magic powers hurt mankind more than they benefit them. Because he had unjustly kept the Shaggy Man's brother a prisoner, this little band of honest people, consisting of both mortals and immortals, determined to conquer Ruggedo and to punish him. Fearing they might succeed in this, the Nome King misled them so that they fell into the Tube.

"Now, this same Ruggedo has been warned by me, many times, that if ever he used this Forbidden Tube in any way he would be severely punished. I find, by referring to the Fairy Records, that this King's servant, a nome named Kaliko, begged his master not to do such a wrong act as to drop these people into the Tube and send them tumbling into our country. But Ruggedo defied me and my orders.

"Therefore these strangers are innocent of any wrong. It is only Ruggedo who deserves punishment, and I will punish him." He paused a moment and then continued in the same cold, merciless voice:

"These strangers must return through the Tube to their own side of the world; but I will make their fall more easy and pleasant than it was before. Also I shall send with them an Instrument of Vengeance, who in my name will drive Ruggedo from his underground caverns, take away his magic powers and make him a homeless wanderer on the face of the

earth--a place he detests."

There was a little murmur of horror from the Kings and Queens at the severity of this punishment, but no one uttered a protest, for all realized that the sentence was just.

"In selecting my Instrument of Vengeance," went on Tititi-Hoochoo, "I have realized that this will be an unpleasant mission. Therefore no one of us who is blameless should be forced to undertake it. In this wonderful land it is seldom one is guilty of wrong, even in the slightest degree, and on examining the Records I found no King or Queen had erred. Nor had any among their followers or servants done any wrong. But finally I came to the Dragon Family, which we highly respect, and then it was that I discovered the error of Quox.

"Quox, as you well know, is a young dragon who has not yet acquired the wisdom of his race. Because of this lack, he has been disrespectful toward his most ancient ancestor, the Original Dragon, telling him once to mind his own business and again saying that the Ancient One had grown foolish with age. We are aware that dragons are not the same as fairies and cannot be altogether guided by our laws, yet such disrespect as Quox has shown should not be unnoticed by us. Therefore I have selected Quox as my royal Instrument of Vengeance and he shall go through the Tube with these people and inflict upon Ruggedo the punishment I have decreed."

All had listened quietly to this speech and now the Kings and Queens bowed gravely to signify their approval of the Jinjin's judgment.

Tititi-Hoochoo turned to Tubekins.

"I command you," said he, "to escort these strangers to the Tube and see that they all enter it."

The King of the Tube, who had first discovered our friends and brought them to the Private Citizen, stepped forward and bowed. As he did so, the Jinjin and all the Kings and Queens suddenly disappeared and only Tubekins remained visible.

"All right," said Betsy, with a sigh; "I don't mind going back so very much, 'cause the Jinjin promised to make it easy for us."

Indeed, Queen Ann and her officers were the only ones who looked solemn and seemed to fear the return journey. One thing that bothered Ann was her failure to conquer this land of Tititi-Hoochoo. As they followed their guide through the gardens to the mouth of the Tube she said to Shaggy:

"How can I conquer the world, if I go away and leave this rich country unconquered?"

"You can't," he replied. "Don't ask me why, please, for if you don't

know I can't inform you."

"Why not?" said Ann; but Shaggy paid no attention to the question.

This end of the Tube had a silver rim and around it was a gold railing to which was attached a sign that read.

"IF YOU ARE OUT, STAY THERE.

IF YOU ARE IN, DON'T COME OUT."

On a little silver plate just inside the Tube was engraved the words:

"Burrowed and built by

Hiergargo the Magician,

In the Year of the World

1 9 6 2 5 4 7 8

For his own exclusive uses."

"He was some builder, I must say," remarked Betsy, when she had read the inscription; "but if he had known about that star I guess he'd have spent his time playing solitaire."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" inquired Shaggy, who was impatient to

start.

"Quox," replied Tubekins. "But I think I hear him coming."

"Is the young dragon invisible?" asked Ann, who had never seen a live dragon and was a little fearful of meeting one.

"No, indeed," replied the King of the Tube. "You'll see him in a minute; but before you part company I'm sure you'll wish he was invisible."

"Is he dangerous, then?" questioned Files.

"Not at all. But Quox tires me dreadfully," said Tubekins, "and I prefer his room to his company."

At that instant a scraping sound was heard, drawing nearer and nearer until from between two big bushes appeared a huge dragon, who approached the party, nodded his head and said: "Good morning."

Had Quox been at all bashful I am sure he would have felt uncomfortable at the astonished stare of every eye in the group--except Tubekins, of course, who was not astonished because he had seen Quox so often.

Betsy had thought a "young" dragon must be a small dragon, yet here was one so enormous that the girl decided he must be full grown, if not

overgrown. His body was a lovely sky-blue in color and it was thickly set with glittering silver scales, each one as big as a serving-tray. Around his neck was a pink ribbon with a bow just under his left ear, and below the ribbon appeared a chain of pearls to which was attached a golden locket about as large around as the end of a bass drum. This locket was set with many large and beautiful jewels.

The head and face of Quox were not especially ugly, when you consider that he was a dragon; but his eyes were so large that it took him a long time to wink and his teeth seemed very sharp and terrible when they showed, which they did whenever the beast smiled. Also his nostrils were quite large and wide, and those who stood near him were liable to smell brimstone--especially when he breathed out fire, as it is the nature of dragons to do. To the end of his long tail was attached a big electric light.

Perhaps the most singular thing about the dragon's appearance at this time was the fact that he had a row of seats attached to his back, one seat for each member of the party. These seats were double, with curved backs, so that two could sit in them, and there were twelve of these double seats, all strapped firmly around the dragon's thick body and placed one behind the other, in a row that extended from his shoulders nearly to his tail.

"Aha!" exclaimed Tubekins; "I see that Tititi-Hoochoo has transformed Quox into a carryall."

"I'm glad of that," said Betsy. "I hope, Mr. Dragon, you won't mind our riding on your back."

"Not a bit," replied Quox. "I'm in disgrace just now, you know, and the only way to redeem my good name is to obey the orders of the Jinjin. If he makes me a beast of burden, it is only a part of my punishment, and I must bear it like a dragon. I don't blame you people at all, and I hope you'll enjoy the ride. Hop on, please. All aboard for the other side of the world!"

Silently they took their places. Hank sat in the front seat with Betsy, so that he could rest his front hoofs upon the dragon's head. Behind them were Shaggy and Polychrome, then Files and the Princess, and Queen Ann and Tik-Tok. The officers rode in the rear seats. When all had mounted to their places the dragon looked very like one of those sightseeing wagons so common in big cities--only he had legs instead of wheels.

"All ready?" asked Quox, and when they said they were he crawled to the mouth of the Tube and put his head in.

"Good-bye, and good luck to you!" called Tubekins; but no one thought to reply, because just then the dragon slid his great body into the Tube and the journey to the other side of the world had begun.

At first they went so fast that they could scarcely catch their breaths, but presently Quox slowed up and said with a sort of cackling laugh:

"My scales! but that is some tumble. I think I shall take it easy and fall slower, or I'm likely to get dizzy. Is it very far to the other side of the world?"

"Haven't you ever been through this Tube before?" inquired Shaggy.

"Never. Nor has anyone else in our country; at least, not since I was born."

"How long ago was that?" asked Betsy.

"That I was born? Oh, not very long ago. I'm only a mere child. If I had not been sent on this journey, I would have celebrated my three thousand and fifty-sixth birthday next Thursday. Mother was going to make me a birthday cake with three thousand and fifty-six candles on it; but now, of course, there will be no celebration, for I fear I shall not get home in time for it."

"Three thousand and fifty-six years!" cried Betsy. "Why, I had no idea anything could live that long!"

"My respected Ancestor, whom I would call a stupid old humbug if I had

not reformed, is so old that I am a mere baby compared with him," said Quox. "He dates from the beginning of the world, and insists on telling us stories of things that happened fifty thousand years ago, which are of no interest at all to youngsters like me. In fact, Grandpa isn't up to date. He lives altogether in the past, so I can't see any good reason for his being alive to-day.... Are you people able to see your way, or shall I turn on more light?"

"Oh, we can see very nicely, thank you; only there's nothing to see but ourselves," answered Betsy.

This was true. The dragon's big eyes were like headlights on an automobile and illuminated the Tube far ahead of them. Also he curled his tail upward so that the electric light on the end of it enabled them to see one another quite clearly. But the Tube itself was only dark metal, smooth as glass but exactly the same from one of its ends to the other. Therefore there was no scenery of interest to beguile the journey.

They were now falling so gently that the trip was proving entirely comfortable, as the Jinjin had promised it would be; but this meant a longer journey and the only way they could make time pass was to engage in conversation. The dragon seemed a willing and persistent talker and he was of so much interest to them that they encouraged him to chatter. His voice was a little gruff but not unpleasant when one became used to it.

"My only fear," said he presently, "is that this constant sliding over the surface of the Tube will dull my claws. You see, this hole isn't straight down, but on a steep slant, and so instead of tumbling freely through the air I must skate along the Tube. Fortunately, there is a file in my tool-kit, and if my claws get dull they can be sharpened again."

"Why do you want sharp claws?" asked Betsy.

"They are my natural weapons, and you must not forget that I have been sent to conquer Ruggedo."

"Oh, you needn't mind about that," remarked Queen Ann, in her most haughty manner; "for when we get to Ruggedo I and my invincible Army can conquer him without your assistance."

"Very good," returned the dragon, cheerfully. "That will save me a lot of bother--if you succeed. But I think I shall file my claws, just the same."

He gave a long sigh, as he said this, and a sheet of flame, several feet in length, shot from his mouth. Betsy shuddered and Hank said "Hee-haw!" while some of the officers screamed in terror. But the dragon did not notice that he had done anything unusual.

"Is there fire inside of you?" asked Shaggy.

"Of course," answered Quox. "What sort of a dragon would I be if my fire went out?"

"What keeps it going?" Betsy inquired.

"I've no idea. I only know it's there," said Quox. "The fire keeps me alive and enables me to move; also to think and speak."

"Ah! You are ver-y much like my-self," said Tik-Tok. "The on-ly dif-fer-ence is that I move by clock-work, while you move by fire."

"I don't see a particle of likeness between us, I must confess," retorted Quox, gruffly. "You are not a live thing; you're a dummy."

"But I can do things, you must ad-mit," said Tik-Tok.

"Yes, when you are wound up," sneered the dragon. "But if you run down, you are helpless."

"What would happen to you, Quox, if you ran out of gasoline?" inquired Shaggy, who did not like this attack upon his friend.

"I don't use gasoline."

"Well, suppose you ran out of fire."

"What's the use of supposing that?" asked Quox. "My great-great-great-grandfather has lived since the world began, and he has never once run out of fire to keep him going. But I will confide to you that as he gets older he shows more smoke and less fire. As for Tik-Tok, he's well enough in his way, but he's merely copper. And the Metal Monarch knows copper through and through. I wouldn't be surprised if Ruggedo melted Tik-Tok in one of his furnaces and made copper pennies of him."

"In that case, I would still keep going," remarked Tik-Tok, calmly.

"Pennies do," said Betsy regretfully.

"This is all nonsense," said the Queen, with irritation. "Tik-Tok is my great Army--all but the officers--and I believe he will be able to conquer Ruggedo with ease. What do you think, Polychrome?"

"You might let him try," answered the Rainbow's Daughter, with her sweet ringing laugh, that sounded like the tinkling of tiny bells. "And if Tik-Tok fails, you have still the big fire-breathing dragon to fall back on."

"Ah!" said the dragon, another sheet of flame gushing from his mouth and nostrils; "it's a wise little girl, this Polychrome. Anyone would

know she is a fairy."