

Chapter Fourteen

The Long-Eared Hearer Learns by Listening

During this time Ruggedo, the Metal Monarch and King of the Nomes, was trying to amuse himself in his splendid jeweled cavern. It was hard work for Ruggedo to find amusement to-day, for all the nomes were behaving well and there was no one to scold or to punish. The King had thrown his sceptre at Kaliko six times, without hitting him once. Not that Kaliko had done anything wrong. On the contrary, he had obeyed the King in every way but one: he would not stand still, when commanded to do so, and let the heavy sceptre strike him.

We can hardly blame Kaliko for this, and even the cruel Ruggedo forgave him; for he knew very well that if he mashed his Royal Chamberlain he could never find another so intelligent and obedient. Kaliko could make the nomes work when their King could not, for the nomes hated Ruggedo and there were so many thousands of the quaint little underground people that they could easily have rebelled and defied the King had they dared to do so. Sometimes, when Ruggedo abused them worse than usual, they grew sullen and threw down their hammers and picks. Then, however hard the King scolded or whipped them, they would not work until Kaliko came and begged them to. For Kaliko was one of themselves and was as much abused by the King as any nome in the vast series of caverns.

But to-day all the little people were working industriously at their tasks and Ruggedo, having nothing to do, was greatly bored. He sent for the Long-Eared Hearer and asked him to listen carefully and report what was going on in the big world.

"It seems," said the Hearer, after listening for awhile, "that the women in America have clubs."

"Are there spikes in them?" asked Ruggedo, yawning.

"I cannot hear any spikes, Your Majesty," was the reply.

"Then their clubs are not as good as my sceptre. What else do you hear?"

"There's a war.

"Bah! there's always a war. What else?"

For a time the Hearer was silent, bending forward and spreading out his big ears to catch the slightest sound. Then suddenly he said:

"Here is an interesting thing, Your Majesty. These people are arguing as to who shall conquer the Metal Monarch, seize his treasure and drive him from his dominions."

"What people?" demanded Ruggedo, sitting up straight in his throne.

"The ones you threw down the Hollow Tube."

"Where are they now?"

"In the same Tube, and coming back this way," said the Hearer.

Ruggedo got out of his throne and began to pace up and down the cavern.

"I wonder what can be done to stop them," he mused.

"Well," said the Hearer, "if you could turn the Tube upside down, they would be falling the other way, Your Majesty."

Ruggedo glared at him wickedly, for it was impossible to turn the Tube upside down and he believed the Hearer was slyly poking fun at him. Presently he asked:

"How far away are those people now?"

"About nine thousand three hundred and six miles, seventeen furlongs, eight feet and four inches--as nearly as I can judge from the sound of their voices," replied the Hearer.

"Aha! Then it will be some time before they arrive," said Ruggedo, "and

when they get here I shall be ready to receive them."

He rushed to his gong and pounded upon it so fiercely that Kaliko came bounding into the cavern with one shoe off and one shoe on, for he was just dressing himself after a swim in the hot bubbling lake of the Underground Kingdom.

"Kaliko, those invaders whom we threw down the Tube are coming back again!" he exclaimed.

"I thought they would," said the Royal Chamberlain, pulling on the other shoe. "Tititi-Hoochoo would not allow them to remain in his kingdom, of course, and so I've been expecting them back for some time. That was a very foolish action of yours, Rug."

"What, to throw them down the Tube?"

"Yes. Tititi-Hoochoo has forbidden us to throw even rubbish into the Tube."

"Pooh! what do I care for the Jinjin?" asked Ruggedo scornfully. "He never leaves his own kingdom, which is on the other side of the world."

"True; but he might send some one through the Tube to punish you," suggested Kaliko.

"I'd like to see him do it! Who could conquer my thousands of nomes?"

"Why, they've been conquered before, if I remember aright," answered Kaliko with a grin. "Once I saw you running from a little girl named Dorothy, and her friends, as if you were really afraid."

"Well, I was afraid, that time," admitted the Nome King, with a deep sigh, "for Dorothy had a Yellow Hen that laid eggs!"

The King shuddered as he said "eggs," and Kaliko also shuddered, and so did the Long-Eared Hearer; for eggs are the only things that the nomes greatly dread. The reason for this is that eggs belong on the earth's surface, where birds and fowl of all sorts live, and there is something about a hen's egg, especially, that fills a nome with horror. If by chance the inside of an egg touches one of these underground people, he withers up and blows away and that is the end of him--unless he manages quickly to speak a magical word which only a few of the nomes know. Therefore Ruggedo and his followers had very good cause to shudder at the mere mention of eggs.

"But Dorothy," said the King, "is not with this band of invaders; nor is the Yellow Hen. As for Tititi-Hoochoo, he has no means of knowing that we are afraid of eggs."

"You mustn't be too sure of that," Kaliko warned him. "Tititi-Hoochoo knows a great many things, being a fairy, and his powers are far

superior to any we can boast."

Ruggedo shrugged impatiently and turned to the Hearer.

"Listen," said he, "and tell me if you hear any eggs coming through the Tube."

The Long-Eared one listened and then shook his head. But Kaliko laughed at the King.

"No one can hear an egg, Your Majesty," said he. "The only way to discover the truth is to look through the Magic Spyglass."

"That's it!" cried the King. "Why didn't I think of it before? Look at once, Kaliko!"

So Kaliko went to the Spyglass and by uttering a mumbled charm he caused the other end of it to twist around, so that it pointed down the opening of the Tube. Then he put his eye to the glass and was able to gaze along all the turns and windings of the Magic Spyglass and then deep into the Tube, to where our friends were at that time falling.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "Here comes a dragon."

"A big one?" asked Ruggedo.

"A monster. He has an electric light on the end of his tail, so I can see him very plainly. And the other people are all riding upon his back."

"How about the eggs?" inquired the King.

Kaliko looked again.

"I can see no eggs at all," said he; "but I imagine that the dragon is as dangerous as eggs. Probably Tititi-Hoochoo has sent him here to punish you for dropping those strangers into the Forbidden Tube. I warned you not to do it, Your Majesty."

This news made the Nome King anxious. For a few minutes he paced up and down, stroking his long beard and thinking with all his might. After this he turned to Kaliko and said:

"All the harm a dragon can do is to scratch with his claws and bite with his teeth."

"That is not all, but it's quite enough," returned Kaliko earnestly.

"On the other hand, no one can hurt a dragon, because he's the toughest creature alive. One flop of his huge tail could smash a hundred nomes to pancakes, and with teeth and claws he could tear even you or me into small bits, so that it would be almost impossible to put us together again. Once, a few hundred years ago, while wandering through some

deserted caverns, I came upon a small piece of a nome lying on the rocky floor. I asked the piece of nome what had happened to it. Fortunately the mouth was a part of this piece--the mouth and the left eye--so it was able to tell me that a fierce dragon was the cause. It had attacked the poor nome and scattered him in every direction, and as there was no friend near to collect his pieces and put him together, they had been separated for a great many years. So you see, Your Majesty, it is not in good taste to sneer at a dragon."

The King had listened attentively to Kaliko. Said he:

"It will only be necessary to chain this dragon which Tititi-Hoochoo has sent here, in order to prevent his reaching us with his claws and teeth."

"He also breathes flames," Kaliko reminded him.

"My nomes are not afraid of fire, nor am I," said Ruggedo.

"Well, how about the Army of Oogaboo?"

"Sixteen cowardly officers and Tik-Tok! Why, I could defeat them single-handed; but I won't try to. I'll summon my army of nomes to drive the invaders out of my territory, and if we catch any of them I intend to stick needles into them until they hop with pain."

"I hope you won't hurt any of the girls," said Kaliko.

"I'll hurt 'em all!" roared the angry Metal Monarch. "And that braying Mule I'll make into hoof-soup, and feed it to my nomes, that it may add to their strength."

"Why not be good to the strangers and release your prisoner, the Shaggy Man's brother?" suggested Kaliko.

"Never!"

"It may save you a lot of annoyance. And you don't want the Ugly One."

"I don't want him; that's true. But I won't allow anybody to order me around. I'm King of the Nomes and I'm the Metal Monarch, and I shall do as I please and what I please and when I please!"

With this speech Ruggedo threw his sceptre at Kaliko's head, aiming it so well that the Royal Chamberlain had to fall flat upon the floor in order to escape it. But the Hearer did not see the sceptre coming and it swept past his head so closely that it broke off the tip of one of his long ears. He gave a dreadful yell that quite startled Ruggedo, and the King was sorry for the accident because those long ears of the Hearer were really valuable to him.

So the Nome King forgot to be angry with Kaliko and ordered his

Chamberlain to summon General Guph and the army of nomes and have them properly armed. They were then to march to the mouth of the Tube, where they could seize the travelers as soon as they appeared.