

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Dragon Defies Danger

Although the journey through the Tube was longer, this time, than before, it was so much more comfortable that none of our friends minded it at all. They talked together most of the time and as they found the dragon good-natured and fond of the sound of his own voice they soon became well acquainted with him and accepted him as a companion.

"You see," said Shaggy, in his frank way, "Quox is on our side, and therefore the dragon is a good fellow. If he happened to be an enemy, instead of a friend, I am sure I should dislike him very much, for his breath smells of brimstone, he is very conceited and he is so strong and fierce that he would prove a dangerous foe."

"Yes, indeed," returned Quox, who had listened to this speech with pleasure; "I suppose I am about as terrible as any living thing. I am glad you find me conceited, for that proves I know my good qualities. As for my breath smelling of brimstone, I really can't help it, and I once met a man whose breath smelled of onions, which I consider far worse."

"I don't," said Betsy; "I love onions."

"And I love brimstone," declared the dragon, "so don't let us quarrel over one another's peculiarities."

Saying this, he breathed a long breath and shot a flame fifty feet from his mouth. The brimstone made Betsy cough, but she remembered about the onions and said nothing.

They had no idea how far they had gone through the center of the earth, nor when to expect the trip to end. At one time the little girl remarked:

"I wonder when we'll reach the bottom of this hole. And isn't it funny, Shaggy Man, that what is the bottom to us now, was the top when we fell the other way?"

"What puzzles me," said Files, "is that we are able to fall both ways."

"That," announced Tik-Tok, "is be-cause the world is round."

"Exactly," responded Shaggy. "The machinery in your head is in fine working order, Tik-Tok. You know, Betsy, that there is such a thing as the Attraction of Gravitation, which draws everything toward the center of the earth. That is why we fall out of bed, and why everything clings to the surface of the earth."

"Then why doesn't everyone go on down to the center of the earth?"

inquired the little girl.

"I was afraid you were going to ask me that," replied Shaggy in a sad tone. "The reason, my dear, is that the earth is so solid that other solid things can't get through it. But when there's a hole, as there is in this case, we drop right down to the center of the world."

"Why don't we stop there?" asked Betsy.

"Because we go so fast that we acquire speed enough to carry us right up to the other end."

"I don't understand that, and it makes my head ache to try to figure it out," she said after some thought. "One thing draws us to the center and another thing pushes us away from it. But--"

"Don't ask me why, please," interrupted the Shaggy Man. "If you can't understand it, let it go at that."

"Do you understand it?" she inquired.

"All the magic isn't in fairyland," he said gravely. "There's lots of magic in all Nature, and you may see it as well in the United States, where you and I once lived, as you can here."

"I never did," she replied.

"Because you were so used to it all that you didn't realize it was magic. Is anything more wonderful than to see a flower grow and blossom, or to get light out of the electricity in the air? The cows that manufacture milk for us must have machinery fully as remarkable as that in Tik-Tok's copper body, and perhaps you've noticed that--"

And then, before Shaggy could finish his speech, the strong light of day suddenly broke upon them, grew brighter, and completely enveloped them. The dragon's claws no longer scraped against the metal Tube, for he shot into the open air a hundred feet or more and sailed so far away from the slanting hole that when he landed it was on the peak of a mountain and just over the entrance to the many underground caverns of the Nome King.

Some of the officers tumbled off their seats when Quox struck the ground, but most of the dragon's passengers only felt a slight jar. All were glad to be on solid earth again and they at once dismounted and began to look about them. Queerly enough, as soon as they had left the dragon, the seats that were strapped to the monster's back disappeared, and this probably happened because there was no further use for them and because Quox looked far more dignified in just his silver scales. Of course he still wore the forty yards of ribbon around his neck, as well as the great locket, but these only made him look "dressed up," as Betsy remarked.

Now the army of nomes had gathered thickly around the mouth of the Tube, in order to be ready to capture the band of invaders as soon as they popped out. There were, indeed, hundreds of nomes assembled, and they were led by Guph, their most famous General. But they did not expect the dragon to fly so high, and he shot out of the Tube so suddenly that it took them by surprise. When the nomes had rubbed the astonishment out of their eyes and regained their wits, they discovered the dragon quietly seated on the mountainside far above their heads, while the other strangers were standing in a group and calmly looking down upon them.

General Guph was very angry at the escape, which was no one's fault but his own.

"Come down here and be captured!" he shouted, waving his sword at them.

"Come up here and capture us--if you dare!" replied Queen Ann, who was winding up the clockwork of her Private Soldier, so he could fight more briskly.

Guph's first answer was a roar of rage at the defiance; then he turned and issued a command to his nomes. These were all armed with sharp spears and with one accord they raised these spears and threw them straight at their foes, so that they rushed through the air in a perfect cloud of flying weapons.

Some damage might have been done had not the dragon quickly crawled before the others, his body being so big that it shielded every one of them, including Hank. The spears rattled against the silver scales of Quox and then fell harmlessly to the ground. They were magic spears, of course, and all straightway bounded back into the hands of those who had thrown them, but even Guph could see that it was useless to repeat the attack.

It was now Queen Ann's turn to attack, so the Generals yelled "For--ward march!" and the Colonels and Majors and Captains repeated the command and the valiant Army of Oogaboo, which seemed to be composed mainly of Tik-Tok, marched forward in single column toward the nomes, while Betsy and Polychrome cheered and Hank gave a loud "Hee-haw!" and Shaggy shouted "Hooray!" and Queen Ann screamed: "At 'em, Tik-Tok--at 'em!"

The nomes did not await the Clockwork Man's attack but in a twinkling disappeared into the underground caverns. They made a great mistake in being so hasty, for Tik-Tok had not taken a dozen steps before he stubbed his copper toe on a rock and fell flat to the ground, where he cried: "Pick me up! Pick me up! Pick me up!" until Shaggy and Files ran forward and raised him to his feet again.

The dragon chuckled softly to himself as he scratched his left ear with his hind claw, but no one was paying much attention to Quox just then.

It was evident to Ann and her officers that there could be no fighting unless the enemy was present, and in order to find the enemy they must boldly enter the underground Kingdom of the nomes. So bold a step demanded a council of war.

"Don't you think I'd better drop in on Ruggedo and obey the orders of the Jinjin?" asked Quox.

"By no means!" returned Queen Ann. "We have already put the army of nomes to flight and all that yet remains is to force our way into those caverns, and conquer the Nome King and all his people."

"That seems to me something of a job," said the dragon, closing his eyes sleepily. "But go ahead, if you like, and I'll wait here for you. Don't be in any hurry on my account. To one who lives thousands of years the delay of a few days means nothing at all, and I shall probably sleep until the time comes for me to act."

Ann was provoked at this speech.

"You may as well go back to Tititi-Hoochoo now," she said, "for the Nome King is as good as conquered already."

But Quox shook his head. "No," said he; "I'll wait."