

Chapter Eighteen

A Clever Conquest

The great dragon still had his eyes closed and was even snoring in a manner that resembled distant thunder; but Polychrome was now desperate, because any further delay meant the destruction of her friends. She seized the pearl necklace, to which was attached the great locket, and jerked it with all her strength.

The result was encouraging. Quox stopped snoring and his eyelids flickered. So Polychrome jerked again--and again--till slowly the great lids raised and the dragon looked at her steadily. Said he, in a sleepy tone:

"What's the matter, little Rainbow?"

"Come quick!" exclaimed Polychrome. "Ruggedo has captured all our friends and is about to destroy them."

"Well, well," said Quox, "I suspected that would happen. Step a little out of my path, my dear, and I'll make a rush for the Nome King's cavern."

She fell back a few steps and Quox raised himself on his stout legs,

whisked his long tail and in an instant had slid down the rocks and made a dive through the entrance.

Along the passage he swept, nearly filling it with his immense body, and now he poked his head into the jeweled cavern of Ruggedo.

But the King had long since made arrangements to capture the dragon, whenever he might appear. No sooner did Quox stick his head into the room than a thick chain fell from above and encircled his neck. Then the ends of the chain were drawn tight--for in an adjoining cavern a thousand nomes were pulling on them--and so the dragon could advance no further toward the King. He could not use his teeth or his claws and as his body was still in the passage he had not even room to strike his foes with his terrible tail.

Ruggedo was delighted with the success of his stratagem. He had just transformed the Rose Princess into a fiddle and was about to transform Files into a fiddle bow, when the dragon appeared to interrupt him. So he called out:

"Welcome, my dear Quox, to my royal entertainment. Since you are here, you shall witness some very neat magic, and after I have finished with Files and Tik-Tok I mean to transform you into a tiny lizard--one of the chameleon sort--and you shall live in my cavern and amuse me."

"Pardon me for contradicting Your Majesty," returned Quox in a quiet

voice, "but I don't believe you'll perform any more magic."

"Eh? Why not?" asked the King in surprise.

"There's a reason," said Quox. "Do you see this ribbon around my neck?"

"Yes; and I'm astonished that a dignified dragon should wear such a silly thing."

"Do you see it plainly?" persisted the dragon, with a little chuckle of amusement.

"I do," declared Ruggedo.

"Then you no longer possess any magical powers, and are as helpless as a clam," asserted Quox. "My great master, Tititi-Hoochoo, the Jinjin, enchanted this ribbon in such a way that whenever Your Majesty looked upon it all knowledge of magic would desert you instantly, nor will any magical formula you can remember ever perform your bidding."

"Pooh! I don't believe a word of it!" cried Ruggedo, half frightened, nevertheless. Then he turned toward Files and tried to transform him into a fiddle bow. But he could not remember the right words or the right pass of the hands and after several trials he finally gave up the attempt.

By this time the Nome King was so alarmed that he was secretly shaking in his shoes.

"I told you not to anger Tititi-Hoochoo," grumbled Kaliko, "and now you see the result of your disobedience."

Ruggedo promptly threw his sceptre at his Royal Chamberlain, who dodged it with his usual cleverness, and then he said with an attempt to swagger:

"Never mind; I don't need magic to enable me to destroy these invaders; fire and the sword will do the business and I am still King of the Nomes and lord and master of my Underground Kingdom!"

"Again I beg to differ with Your Majesty," said Quox. "The Great Jinjin commands you to depart instantly from this Kingdom and seek the earth's surface, where you will wander for all time to come, without a home or country, without a friend or follower, and without any more riches than you can carry with you in your pockets. The Great Jinjin is so generous that he will allow you to fill your pockets with jewels or gold, but you must take nothing more."

Ruggedo now stared at the dragon in amazement.

"Does Tititi-Hoochoo condemn me to such a fate?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"He does," said Quox.

"And just for throwing a few strangers down the Forbidden Tube?"

"Just for that," repeated Quox in a stern, gruff voice.

"Well, I won't do it. And your crazy old Jinjin can't make me do it, either!" declared Ruggedo. "I intend to remain here, King of the Nomes, until the end of the world, and I defy your Tititi-Hoochoo and all his fairies--as well as his clumsy messenger, whom I have been obliged to chain up!"

The dragon smiled again, but it was not the sort of smile that made Ruggedo feel very happy. Instead, there was something so cold and merciless in the dragon's expression that the condemned Nome King trembled and was sick at heart.

There was little comfort for Ruggedo in the fact that the dragon was now chained, although he had boasted of it. He glared at the immense head of Quox as if fascinated and there was fear in the old King's eyes as he watched his enemy's movements.

For the dragon was now moving; not abruptly, but as if he had something to do and was about to do it. Very deliberately he raised one claw, touched the catch of the great jeweled locket that was suspended around

his neck, and at once it opened wide.

Nothing much happened at first; half a dozen hen's eggs rolled out upon the floor and then the locket closed with a sharp click. But the effect upon the nomes of this simple thing was astounding. General Guph, Kaliko, Pang and his band of executioners were all standing close to the door that led to the vast series of underground caverns which constituted the dominions of the nomes, and as soon as they saw the eggs they raised a chorus of frantic screams and rushed through the door, slamming it in Ruggedo's face and placing a heavy bronze bar across it.

Ruggedo, dancing with terror and uttering loud cries, now leaped upon the seat of his throne to escape the eggs, which had rolled steadily toward him. Perhaps these eggs, sent by the wise and crafty Tititi-Hoochoo, were in some way enchanted, for they all rolled directly after Ruggedo and when they reached the throne where he had taken refuge they began rolling up the legs to the seat.

This was too much for the King to bear. His horror of eggs was real and absolute and he made a leap from the throne to the center of the room and then ran to a far corner.

The eggs followed, rolling slowly but steadily in his direction.

Ruggedo threw his sceptre at them, and then his ruby crown, and then he drew off his heavy golden sandals and hurled these at the advancing

eggs. But the eggs dodged every missile and continued to draw nearer. The King stood trembling, his eyes staring in terror, until they were but half a yard distant; then with an agile leap he jumped clear over them and made a rush for the passage that led to the outer entrance.

Of course the dragon was in his way, being chained in the passage with his head in the cavern, but when he saw the King making toward him he crouched as low as he could and dropped his chin to the floor, leaving a small space between his body and the roof of the passage.

Ruggedo did not hesitate an instant. Impelled by fear, he leaped to the dragon's nose and then scrambled to his back, where he succeeded in squeezing himself through the opening. After the head was passed there was more room and he slid along the dragon's scales to his tail and then ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the entrance. Not pausing here, so great was his fright, the King dashed on down the mountain path, but before he had gone very far he stumbled and fell.

When he picked himself up he observed that no one was following him, and while he recovered his breath he happened to think of the decree of the Jinjin--that he should be driven from his Kingdom and made a wanderer on the face of the earth. Well, here he was, driven from his cavern in truth; driven by those dreadful eggs; but he would go back and defy them; he would not submit to losing his precious Kingdom and his tyrannical powers, all because Tititi-Hoochoo had said he must.

So, although still afraid, Ruggedo nerved himself to creep back along the path to the entrance, and when he arrived there he saw the six eggs lying in a row just before the arched opening.

At first he paused a safe distance away to consider the case, for the eggs were now motionless. While he was wondering what could be done, he remembered there was a magical charm which would destroy eggs and render them harmless to nomes. There were nine passes to be made and six verses of incantation to be recited; but Ruggedo knew them all. Now that he had ample time to be exact, he carefully went through the entire ceremony.

But nothing happened. The eggs did not disappear, as he had expected; so he repeated the charm a second time. When that also failed, he remembered, with a moan of despair, that his magic power had been taken away from him and in the future he could do no more than any common mortal.

And there were the eggs, forever barring him from the Kingdom which he had ruled so long with absolute sway! He threw rocks at them, but could not hit a single egg. He raved and scolded and tore his hair and beard, and danced in helpless passion, but that did nothing to avert the just judgment of the Jinjin, which Ruggedo's own evil deeds had brought upon him.

From this time on he was an outcast--a wanderer upon the face of the

earth--and he had even forgotten to fill his pockets with gold and jewels before he fled from his former Kingdom!