

Chapter Twenty

Quox Quietly Quits

When the chief nomes assembled before their new King they joyfully saluted him and promised to obey his commands. But, when Kaliko questioned them, none knew the way to the Metal Forest, although all had assisted in its making. So the King instructed them to search carefully for one of the passages and to bring him the news as soon as they had found it.

Meantime Quox had managed to back out of the rocky corridor and so regain the open air and his old station on the mountain-side, and there he lay upon the rocks, sound asleep, until the next day. The others of the party were all given as good rooms as the caverns of the nomes afforded, for King Kaliko felt that he was indebted to them for his promotion and was anxious to be as hospitable as he could.

Much wonderment had been caused by the absolute disappearance of the sixteen officers of Oogaboo and their Queen. Not a nome had seen them, nor were they discovered during the search for the passages leading to the Metal Forest. Perhaps no one was unhappy over their loss, but all were curious to know what had become of them.

On the next day, when our friends went to visit the dragon, Quox said

to them: "I must now bid you good-bye, for my mission here is finished and I must depart for the other side of the world, where I belong."

"Will you go through the Tube again?" asked Betsy.

"To be sure. But it will be a lonely trip this time, with no one to talk to, and I cannot invite any of you to go with me. Therefore, as soon as I slide into the hole I shall go to sleep, and when I pop out at the other end I will wake up at home."

They thanked the dragon for befriending them and wished him a pleasant journey. Also they sent their thanks to the great Jinjin, whose just condemnation of Ruggedo had served their interests so well. Then Quox yawned and stretched himself and ambled over to the Tube, into which he slid headforemost and disappeared.

They really felt as if they had lost a friend, for the dragon had been both kind and sociable during their brief acquaintance with him; but they knew it was his duty to return to his own country. So they went back to the caverns to renew the search for the hidden passages that led to the forest, but for three days all efforts to find them proved in vain.

It was Polychrome's custom to go every day to the mountain and watch for her father, the Rainbow, for she was growing tired with wandering upon the earth and longed to rejoin her sisters in their sky palaces.

And on the third day, while she sat motionless upon a point of rock, whom should she see slyly creeping up the mountain but Ruggedo!

The former King looked very forlorn. His clothes were soiled and torn and he had no sandals upon his feet or hat upon his head. Having left his crown and sceptre behind when he fled, the old nome no longer seemed kingly, but more like a beggerman.

Several times had Ruggedo crept up to the mouth of the caverns, only to find the six eggs still on guard. He knew quite well that he must accept his fate and become a homeless wanderer, but his chief regret now was that he had neglected to fill his pockets with gold and jewels. He was aware that a wanderer with wealth at his command would fare much better than one who was a pauper, so he still loitered around the caverns wherein he knew so much treasure was stored, hoping for a chance to fill his pockets.

That was how he came to recollect the Metal Forest.

"Aha!" said he to himself, "I alone know the way to that Forest, and once there I can fill my pockets with the finest jewels in all the world."

He glanced at his pockets and was grieved to find them so small. Perhaps they might be enlarged, so that they would hold more. He knew of a poor woman who lived in a cottage at the foot of the mountain, so

he went to her and begged her to sew pockets all over his robe, paying her with the gift of a diamond ring which he had worn upon his finger. The woman was delighted to possess so valuable a ring and she sewed as many pockets on Ruggedo's robe as she possibly could.

Then he returned up the mountain and, after gazing cautiously around to make sure he was not observed, he touched a spring in a rock and it swung slowly backward, disclosing a broad passageway. This he entered, swinging the rock in place behind him.

However, Ruggedo had failed to look as carefully as he might have done, for Polychrome was seated only a little distance off and her clear eyes marked exactly the manner in which Ruggedo had released the hidden spring. So she rose and hurried into the cavern, where she told Kaliko and her friends of her discovery.

"I've no doubt that that is a way to the Metal Forest," exclaimed Shaggy. "Come, let us follow Ruggedo at once and rescue my poor brother!"

They agreed to this and King Kaliko called together a band of nomes to assist them by carrying torches to light their way.

"The Metal Forest has a brilliant light of its own," said he, "but the passage across the valley is likely to be dark."

Polychrome easily found the rock and touched the spring, so in less than an hour after Ruggedo had entered they were all in the passage and following swiftly after the former King.

"He means to rob the Forest, I'm sure," said Kaliko; "but he will find he is no longer of any account in this Kingdom and I will have my nomes throw him out."

"Then please throw him as hard as you can," said Betsy, "for he deserves it. I don't mind an honest, out-an'-out enemy, who fights square; but changing girls into fiddles and ordering 'em put into Slimy Caves is mean and tricky, and Ruggedo doesn't deserve any sympathy. But you'll have to let him take as much treasure as he can get in his pockets, Kaliko."

"Yes, the Jinjin said so; but we won't miss it much. There is more treasure in the Metal Forest than a million nomes could carry in their pockets."

It was not difficult to walk through this passage, especially when the torches lighted the way, so they made good progress. But it proved to be a long distance and Betsy had tired herself with walking and was seated upon the back of the mule when the passage made a sharp turn and a wonderful and glorious light burst upon them. The next moment they were all standing upon the edge of the marvelous Metal Forest.

It lay under another mountain and occupied a great domed cavern, the roof of which was higher than a church steeple. In this space the industrious nomes had built, during many years of labor, the most beautiful forest in the world. The trees--trunks, branches and leaves--were all of solid gold, while the bushes and underbrush were formed of filigree silver, virgin pure. The trees towered as high as natural live oaks do and were of exquisite workmanship.

On the ground were thickly strewn precious gems of every hue and size, while here and there among the trees were paths pebbled with cut diamonds of the clearest water. Taken all together, more treasure was gathered in this Metal Forest than is contained in all the rest of the world--if we except the land of Oz, where perhaps its value is equalled in the famous Emerald City.

Our friends were so amazed at the sight that for a while they stood gazing in silent wonder. Then Shaggy exclaimed.

"My brother! My dear lost brother! Is he indeed a prisoner in this place?"

"Yes," replied Kaliko. "The Ugly One has been here for two or three years, to my positive knowledge."

"But what could he find to eat?" inquired Betsy. "It's an awfully swell place to live in, but one can't breakfast on rubies and di'monds, or

even gold."

"One doesn't need to, my dear," Kaliko assured her. "The Metal Forest does not fill all of this great cavern, by any means. Beyond these gold and silver trees are other trees of the real sort, which bear foods very nice to eat. Let us walk in that direction, for I am quite sure we will find Shaggy's brother in that part of the cavern, rather than in this."

So they began to tramp over the diamond-pebbled paths, and at every step they were more and more bewildered by the wondrous beauty of the golden trees with their glittering foliage.

Suddenly they heard a scream. Jewels scattered in every direction as some one hidden among the bushes scampered away before them. Then a loud voice cried: "Halt!" and there was the sound of a struggle.