

Chapter Twenty-One - Polychrome's Magic

On this morning, which ought to be the last of this important journey, our friends started away as bright and cheery as could be, and Woot whistled a merry tune so that Polychrome could dance to the music.

On reaching the top of the hill, the plain spread out before them in all its beauty of blue grasses and wildflowers, and Mount Munch seemed much nearer than it had the previous evening. They trudged on at a brisk pace, and by noon the mountain was so close that they could admire its appearance. Its slopes were partly clothed with pretty evergreens, and its foot-hills were tufted with a slender waving bluegrass that had a tassel on the end of every blade. And, for the first time, they perceived, near the foot of the mountain, a charming house, not of great size but neatly painted and with many flowers surrounding it and vines climbing over the doors and windows.

It was toward this solitary house that our travelers now directed their steps, thinking to inquire of the people who lived there where Nimmie Amee might be found.

There were no paths, but the way was quite open and clear, and they were drawing near to the dwelling when Woot the Wanderer, who was then in the lead of the little party, halted with such an abrupt jerk that he stumbled over backward and lay flat on his back in the meadow. The Scarecrow stopped to look at the boy.

"Why did you do that?" he asked in surprise.

Woot sat up and gazed around him in amazement.

"I--I don't know!" he replied.

The two tin men, arm in arm, started to pass them when both halted and tumbled, with a great clatter, into a heap beside Woot. Polychrome, laughing at the absurd sight, came dancing up and she, also, came to a sudden stop, but managed to save herself from falling.

Everyone of them was much astonished, and the Scarecrow said with a puzzled look:

"I don't see anything."

"Nor I," said Woot; "but something hit me, just the same."

"Some invisible person struck me a heavy blow," declared the Tin Woodman, struggling to separate himself from the Tin Soldier, whose legs and arms were mixed with his own.

"I'm not sure it was a person," said Polychrome, looking more grave than usual. "It seems to me that I merely ran into some hard substance which barred my way. In order to make sure of this, let me try another place."

She ran back a way and then with much caution advanced in a different place, but when she reached a position on a line with the others she halted, her arms outstretched before her.

"I can feel something hard--something smooth as glass," she said, "but I'm sure it is not glass."

"Let me try," suggested Woot, getting up; but when he tried to go forward, he discovered the same barrier that Polychrome had encountered.

"No," he said, "it isn't glass. But what is it?"

"Air," replied a small voice beside him. "Solid air; that's all."

They all looked downward and found a sky-blue rabbit had stuck his head out of a burrow in the ground. The rabbit's eyes were a deeper blue than his fur, and the pretty creature seemed friendly and unafraid.

"Air!" exclaimed Woot, staring in astonishment into the rabbit's blue eyes; "whoever heard of air so solid that one cannot push it aside?"

"You can't push this air aside," declared the rabbit, "for it was made hard by powerful sorcery, and it forms a wall that is intended to keep people from getting to that house yonder."

"Oh; it's a wall, is it?" said the Tin Woodman.

"Yes, it is really a wall," answered the rabbit, "and it is fully six feet thick."

"How high is it?" inquired Captain Fyter, the Tin Soldier.

"Oh, ever so high; perhaps a mile," said the rabbit.

"Couldn't we go around it?" asked Woot.

"Of course, for the wall is a circle," explained the rabbit. "In the center of the circle stands the house, so you may walk around the Wall of Solid Air, but you can't get to the house."

"Who put the air wall around the house?" was the Scarecrow's question.

"Nimmie Amee did that."

"Nimmie Amee!" they all exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," answered the rabbit. "She used to live with an old Witch, who was suddenly destroyed, and when Nimmie Amee ran away from the Witch's house, she took with her just one magic formula--pure sorcery it was--which enabled her to build this air wall around her house--the house yonder. It was quite a clever idea, I think, for it doesn't mar the beauty of the landscape, solid air being invisible, and yet it keeps all strangers away from the house."

"Does Nimmie Amee live there now?" asked the Tin Woodman anxiously.

"Yes, indeed," said the rabbit.

"And does she weep and wail from morning till night?" continued the Emperor.

"No; she seems quite happy," asserted the rabbit.

The Tin Woodman seemed quite disappointed to hear this report of his old sweetheart, but the Scarecrow reassured his friend, saying:

"Never mind, your Majesty; however happy Nimmie Amee is now, I'm sure she will be much happier as Empress of the Winkies."

"Perhaps," said Captain Fyter, somewhat stiffly, "she will be still more happy to become the bride of a Tin Soldier."

"She shall choose between us, as we have agreed," the Tin Woodman promised; "but how shall we get to the poor girl?"

Polychrome, although dancing lightly back and forth, had listened to every word of the conversation. Now she came forward and sat herself down just in front of the Blue Rabbit, her many-hued draperies giving her the appearance of some beautiful flower. The rabbit didn't back away an inch. Instead, he gazed at the Rainbow's Daughter admiringly.

"Does your burrow go underneath this Wall of Air?" asked Polychrome.

"To be sure," answered the Blue Rabbit; "I dug it that way so I could roam in these broad fields, by going out one way, or eat the cabbages in Nimmie Amee's garden by leaving my burrow at the other end. I don't think Nimmie

Amee ought to mind the little I take from her garden, or the hole I've made under her magic wall. A rabbit may go and come as he pleases, but no one who is bigger than I am could get through my burrow."

"Will you allow us to pass through it, if we are able to?" inquired Polychrome.

"Yes, indeed," answered the Blue Rabbit. "I'm no especial friend of Nimmie Amee, for once she threw stones at me, just because I was nibbling some lettuce, and only yesterday she yelled 'Shoo!' at me, which made me nervous. You're welcome to use my burrow in any way you choose."

"But this is all nonsense!" declared Woot the Wanderer. "We are every one too big to crawl through a rabbit's burrow."

"We are too big now," agreed the Scarecrow, "but you must remember that Polychrome is a fairy, and fairies have many magic powers."

Woot's face brightened as he turned to the lovely Daughter of the Rainbow.

"Could you make us all as small as that rabbit?" he asked eagerly.

"I can try," answered Polychrome, with a smile. And presently she did it--so easily that Woot was not the only one astonished. As the now tiny people grouped themselves before the rabbit's burrow the hole appeared to them like the entrance to a tunnel, which indeed it was.

"I'll go first," said wee Polychrome, who had made herself grow as small as the others, and into the tunnel she danced without hesitation. A tiny Scarecrow went next and then the two funny little tin men.

"Walk in; it's your turn," said the Blue Rabbit to Woot the Wanderer. "I'm coming after, to see how you get along. This will be a regular surprise party to Nimmie Amee."

So Woot entered the hole and felt his way along its smooth sides in the dark until he finally saw the glimmer of daylight ahead and knew the journey was almost over. Had he remained his natural size, the distance could have been covered in a few steps, but to a thumb-high Woot it was quite a promenade. When he emerged from the burrow he found himself but a short distance from the house, in the center of the vegetable garden, where the leaves of rhubarb waving above his head seemed like trees. Outside the hole, and waiting for him, he found all his friends.

"So far, so good!" remarked the Scarecrow cheerfully.

"Yes; so far, but no farther," returned the Tin Woodman in a plaintive and disturbed tone of voice. "I am now close to Nimmie Amee, whom I have come ever so far to seek, but I cannot ask the girl to marry such a little man as I am now."

"I'm no bigger than a toy soldier!" said Captain Fyter, sorrowfully. "Unless Polychrome can make us big again, there is little use in our visiting Nimmie Amee at all, for I'm sure she wouldn't care for a husband she might carelessly step on and ruin."

Polychrome laughed merrily.

"If I make you big, you can't get out of here again," said she, "and if you remain little Nimmie Amee will laugh at you. So make your choice."

"I think we'd better go back," said Woot seriously

"No," said the Tin Woodman, stoutly, "I have decided that it's my duty to make Nimmie Amee happy, in case she wishes to marry me."

"So have I," announced Captain Fyter. "A good soldier never shrinks from doing his duty."

"As for that," said the Scarecrow, "tin doesn't shrink any to speak of, under any circumstances. But Woot and I intend to stick to our comrades, whatever they decide to do, so we will ask Polychrome to make us as big as we were before."

Polychrome agreed to this request and in half a minute all of them, including herself, had been enlarged again to their natural sizes. They then thanked the Blue Rabbit for his kind assistance, and at once approached the house of Nimme Amee.