

CHAPTER 7 - GHIP-GHISIZZLE PROVES FRIENDLY

The Royal Palace was certainly a magnificent building, with large and lofty rooms and superb furnishings, all being in shades of blue. The soldier and the boy passed through several broad corridors and then came to a big hall where many servants were congregated. These were staring in bewilderment at Cap'n Bill, who had been introduced to them by Captain Ultramarine. Now they turned in no less surprise to examine the boy, and their looks expressed not only astonishment but dislike.

The servants were all richly attired in blue silk liveries, and they seemed disposed to resent the fact that these strangers had been added to their ranks. They scowled and muttered and behaved in a very unfriendly way, even after Captain Ultramarine had explained that the newcomers were merely base slaves, and not to be classed with the free royal servants of the palace.

One of those present, however, showed no especial enmity to Button-Bright and Cap'n Bill, and this Blueskin attracted the boy's notice because his appearance was so strange. He looked as if he were made of two separate men, each cut through the middle and then joined together, half of one to half of the other. One side of his blue hair was curly and the other half straight; one ear was big and stuck out from the side of his head, while the other ear was small and flat; one eye was half shut and twinkling, while the other was big and staring; his nose was thin on one side and flat on the other, while one side of his mouth curled up and the other down. Button-Bright also noticed that he limped as he walked because one leg was a trifle longer than the other, and that one hand was delicate and slender and the other thick and hardened by use.

"Don't stare at him," a voice whispered in the boy's ear. "The poor fellow has been patched, that's all."

Button-Bright turned to see who had spoken and found by his side a tall young Blueskin with a blue-gold chain around his neck. He was quite the best looking person the boy had seen in Sky Island, and he spoke in a pleasant way and seemed quite friendly. But the two-sided man had overheard the remark, and he now stepped forward and said in a careless tone:

"Never mind. It's no disgrace to be patched in a country ruled by such a cruel Boolooroo as we have. Let the boy look at me if he wants to. I'm not pretty, but that's not my fault. Blame the Boolooroo."

"I--I'm glad to meet you, sir," stammered Button-Bright. "What is your name, please?"

"I'm now named Jimfred Jonesjinks, and my partner is called Fredjim Jinksjones. He's busy at present guarding the Treasure Chamber, but I'll introduce you to him when he comes back. We've had the misfortune to be patched, you know."

"What is being patched?" asked the boy.

"They cut two of us in halves and mismatch the halves--half of one to half of the other, you know--and then the other two halves are patched together. It destroys our individuality and makes us complex creatures, so it's the worst punishment than can be inflicted in Sky Island."

"Oh," said Button-Bright, alarmed at such dreadful butchery. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt," replied Jimfred. "But it makes one frightfully nervous. They stand you under a big knife, which drops and slices you neatly in two, exactly in the middle. Then they match half of you to another person who has likewise been sliced, and there you are, patched to someone you don't care about and haven't much interest in. If your half wants to do something, the other half is likely to want to do something different, and the funny part of it is you don't quite know which is your half and which is the other half. It's a terrible punishment, and in a country where one can't die or be killed until he has lived his six hundred years, to be patched is a great misfortune."

"I'm sure it is," said Button-Bright earnestly. "But can't you ever get--get--UNpatched again?"

"If the Boolooroo would consent, I think it could be done," Jimfred replied, "but he never will consent. This is about the meanest Boolooroo who ever ruled this land, and he was the first to invent patching people as a punishment. I think we will all be glad when his three hundred years of rule are ended."

"When will that be?" inquired the boy.

"Hush-sh-sh!" cried everyone in a chorus, and they all looked over their shoulders as if frightened by the question. The officer with the blue-gold chain pulled Button-Bright's sleeve and whispered, "Follow me, please." And then he beckoned to Cap'n Bill and led the two slaves to another room where they were alone.

"I must instruct you in your duties," said he when they were all comfortably seated in cozy chairs with blue cushions. "You must learn how to obey the Boolooroo's commands, so he won't become angry and have you patched."

"How could he patch US?" asked the sailorman curiously.

"Oh, he'd just slice you all in halves and then patch half of the boy to half of the girl, and the other half to half of you, and the other half of you to the other half of the girl. See?"

"Can't say I do," said Cap'n Bill, much bewildered. "It's a reg'lar mix-up."

"That's what it's meant to be," explained the young officer.

"An' seein' as we're Earth folks, an' not natives of Sky Island, I've an idea the slicing machine would about end us, without bein' patched," continued the sailor.

"Oh," said Button-Bright, "so it would."

"While you are in this country, you can't die till you've lived six hundred years," declared the officer.

"Oh," said Button-Bright. "That's different, of course. But who are you, please?"

"My name is Ghip-Ghi-siz-zle. Can you remember it?"

"I can 'member the 'sizzle,'" said the boy, "but I'm 'fraid the Gwip--Grip--Glip--"

"Ghip-Ghi-siz-zle" repeated the officer slowly. "I want you to remember my name, because if you are going to live here, you are sure to hear of me a great many times. Can you keep a secret?"

"I can try," said Button-Bright.

"I've kep' secrets--once in a while," asserted Cap'n Bill.

"Well, try to keep this one. I'm to be the next Boolooroo of Sky Island."

"Good for you!" cried the sailor. "I wish you was the Boolooroo now, sir. But it seems you've got to wait a hundred years or more afore you can take his place."

Ghip-Ghisizzle rose to his feet and paced up and down the room for a time, a frown upon his face. Then he halted and faced Cap'n Bill. "Sir," said he, "there lies all my trouble. I'm quite sure the present Boolooroo has reigned three hundred years next Thursday, but he claims it is only two hundred years, and as he holds the Royal Book of Records under lock and key in the Royal Treasury, there is no way for us to prove he is wrong."

"Oh," said Button-Bright. "How old is the Boolooroo?"

"He was two hundred years old when he was elected," replied Ghip-Ghisizzle. "If he has already reigned three hundred years as I suspect, then he is now five hundred years old. You see, he is trying to steal another hundred years of rule so as to remain a tyrant all his life."

"He don't seem as old as that," observed Cap'n Bill thoughtfully. "Why, I'm only sixty myself, an' I guess I look twice as old as your king does."

"We do not show our age in looks," the officer answered. "I am just about your age, sir--sixty-two my next birthday--but I'm sure I don't look as old as that."

"That's a fact," agreed Cap'n Bill. Then he turned to Button-Bright and added, "Don't that prove Sky Island is a fairy country as I said?"

"Oh, I've known that all along," said the boy. "The slicing and patching proves it, and so do lots of other things."

"Now then," said Ghip-Ghisizzle, "let us talk over your duties. It seems you must mix the royal nectar, Cap'n Bill. Do you know how to do that?"

"I'm free to say as I don't, friend Sizzle."

"The Boolooroo is very particular about his nectar. I think he has given you this job so he can find fault with you and have you punished. But we will fool him. You are strangers here, and I don't want you imposed upon. I'll send Tiggie to the royal pantry and keep him there to mix the nectar. Then when the Boolooroo or the Queen or any of the Snubnosed Princesses call for a drink, you can carry it to them and it will be sure to suit them."

"Thank'e sir," said Cap'n Bill. "That's real kind of you."

"Your job, Button-Bright, is easier," continued Ghip-Ghisizzle.

"I'm no bootblack," declared the boy. "The Boolooroo has no right to make me do his dirty work."

"You're a slave," the officer reminded him, "and a slave must obey."

"Why?" asked Button-Bright.

"Because he can't help himself. No slave ever wants to obey, but he just has to. And it isn't dirty work at all. You don't black the royal boots and shoes, you merely blue them with a finely perfumed blue paste. Then you shine them neatly and your task is done. You will not be humiliated by becoming a bootblack. You'll be a bootblue."

"Oh," said Button-Bright. "I don't see much difference, but perhaps it's a little more respectable."

"Yes, the Royal Bootblue is considered a high official in Sky Island. You do your work at evening or early morning, and the rest of the day you are at liberty to do as you please."

"It won't last long, Button-Bright," said Cap'n Bill consolingly. "Somethin's bound to happen pretty soon, you know."

"I think so myself," answered the boy.

"And now," remarked Ghip-Ghisizzle, "since you understand your new duties, perhaps you'd like to walk out with me and see the Blue City and the glorious Blue Country of Sky Island."

"We would that!" cried Cap'n Bill promptly.

So they accompanied their new friend through a maze of passages--for the palace was very big--and then through a high, arched portal into the streets of the City. So rapid had been their descent when the umbrella landed them in the royal garden that they had not even caught a glimpse of the Blue City, so now they gazed with wonder and interest at the splendid sights that met their eyes.