

CHAPTER 8 - THE BLUE CITY

The Blue City was quite extensive, and consisted of many broad streets paved with blue marble and lined with splendid buildings of the same beautiful material. There were houses and castles and shops for the merchants, and all were prettily designed and had many slender spires and imposing turrets that rose far into the blue air. Everything was blue here, just as was everything in the Royal Palace and gardens, and a blue haze overhung all the city.

"Doesn't the sun ever shine?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"Not in the blue part of Sky Island," replied Ghip-Ghisizzle. "The moon shines here every night, but we never see the sun. I am told, however, that on the other half of the Island--which I have never seen--the sun shines brightly but there is no moon at all."

"Oh," said Button-Bright. "Is there another half to Sky Island?"

"Yes, a dreadful place called the Pink Country. I'm told everything there is pink instead of blue. A fearful place it must be, indeed!" said the Blueskin with a shudder.

"I dunno 'bout that," remarked Cap'n Bill. "That Pink Country sounds kind o' cheerful to me. Is your Blue Country very big?"

"It is immense," was the proud reply. "This enormous city extends a half mile in all directions from the center, and the country outside the City is fully a half-mile further in extent. That's very big, isn't it?"

"Not very," replied Cap'n Bill with a smile. "We've cities on the Earth ten times bigger, an' then some big besides. We'd call this a small town in our country."

"Our Country is thousands of miles wide and thousands of miles long--it's the great United States of America!" added the boy earnestly.

Ghip-Ghisizzle seemed astonished. He was silent a moment, and then he said, "Here in Sky Island we prize truthfulness very highly. Our Boolooroo is not very truthful, I admit, for he is trying to misrepresent the length of his reign, but our people as a rule speak only the truth."

"So do we," asserted Cap'n Bill. "What Button-Bright said is the honest truth, every word of it."

"But we have been led to believe that Sky Island is the greatest country in the universe--meaning, of course, our half of it, the Blue Country."

"It may be for you, perhaps," the sailor stated politely. "An' I don't imagine any island floatin' in the sky is any bigger. But the Universe is a big place, an' you can't be sure of what's in it till you've traveled like we have."

"Perhaps you are right," mused the Blueskin, but he still seemed to doubt them.

"Is the Pink side of Sky Island bigger than the Blue side?" asked Button-Bright.

"No, it is supposed to be the same size," was the reply.

"Then why haven't you ever been there? Seems to me you could walk across the whole island in an hour," said the boy.

"The two parts are separated by an impassable barrier," answered Ghip-Ghisizzle. "Between them lies the Great Fog Bank."

"A fog bank? Why, that's no barrier!" exclaimed Cap'n Bill.

"It is indeed," returned the Blueskin. "The Fog Bank is so thick and heavy that it blinds one, and if once you got into the Bank, you might wander forever and not find your way out again. Also, it is full of dampness that wets your clothes and your hair until you become miserable. It is furthermore said that those who enter the Fog Bank forfeit the six hundred years allowed them to live and are liable to die at any time. Here we do not die, you know; we merely pass away."

"How's that?" asked the sailor. "Isn't 'pass'n' away' jus' the same as dyin'?"

"No indeed. When our six hundred years are ended, we march into the Great Blue Grotto, through the Arch of Phinis, and are never seen again."

"That's queer," said Button-Bright. "What would happen if you didn't march through the Arch?"

"I do not know, for no one has ever refused to do so. It is the Law, and we all obey it."

"It saves funeral expenses, anyhow," remarked Cap'n Bill. "Where is this Arch?"

"Just outside the gates of the City. There is a mountain in the center of the Blue land, and the entrance to the Great Blue Grotto is at the foot of the mountain. According to our figures, the Boolooroo ought to march into this Grotto a hundred years from next Thursday, but he is trying to steal a hundred years and so perhaps he won't enter the Arch of Phinis. Therefore, if you will please be patient for about a hundred years, you will discover what happens to one who breaks the Law."

"Thank'e," remarked Cap'n Bill. "I don't expect to be very curious a hundred years from now."

"Nor I," added Button-Bright, laughing at the whimsical speech. "But I don't see how the Boolooroo is able to fool you all. Can't any of you remember two or three hundred years back when he first began to rule?"

"No," said Ghip-Ghisizzle, "that's a long time to remember, and we Blueskins try to forget all we can, especially whatever is unpleasant. Those who remember are usually the unhappy ones; only those able to forget find the most joy in life."

During this conversation they had been walking along the streets of the Blue City, where many of the Blueskin inhabitants stopped to gaze wonderingly at the sailor and the boy, whose strange appearance surprised them. They were a nervous, restless people, and their egg-shaped heads, set on the ends of long, thin necks, seemed so grotesque to the strangers that they could scarcely forbear laughing at them. The bodies of these people were short and round and their legs exceptionally long, so when a Blueskin walked, he covered twice as much ground at one step as Cap'n Bill or Button-Bright did. The women seemed just as repellent as the men, and Button-Bright began to understand that the Six Snubnosed Princesses were, after all, rather better looking than most of the females of the Blue Country and so had a certain right to be proud and haughty.

There were no horses nor cows in this land, but there were plenty of blue goats, from which the people got their milk. Children tended the goats--wee Blueskin boys and girls whose appearance was so comical that Button-Bright laughed whenever he saw one of them.

Although the natives had never seen before this any human beings made as Button-Bright and Cap'n Bill were, they took a strong dislike to the strangers and several times threatened to attack them. Perhaps if Ghip-Ghisizzle, who was their favorite, had not been present, they would have mobbed our friends with vicious ill-will and might have seriously injured them. But Ghip-Ghisizzle's friendly protection made them hold aloof.

By and by they passed through a City gate, and their guide showed them the outer walls, which protected the City from the country beyond. There were several of these gates, and from their recesses stone steps led to the top of the wall. They mounted a flight of these steps and from their elevation plainly saw the low mountain where the Arch of Phinis was located, and beyond that the thick, blue-gray Fog Bank, which constantly rolled like billows of the ocean and really seemed, from a distance, quite forbidding.

"But it wouldn't take long to get there," decided Button-Bright, "and if you were close up, it might not be worse than any other fog. Is the Pink Country on the other side of it?"

"So we are told in the Book of Records," replied Ghip-Ghisizzle. "None of us now living know anything about it, but the Book of Records calls it the 'Sunset Country' and says that at evening the pink shades are drowned by terrible colors of orange and crimson and golden-yellow and red. Wouldn't it be horrible to be obliged to look upon such a sight? It must give the poor people who live there dreadful headaches."

"I'd like to see that Book of Records," mused Cap'n Bill, who didn't think the description of the Sunset Country at all dreadful.

"I'd like to see it myself," returned Ghip-Ghisizzle with a sigh, "but no one can lay hands on it because the Boolooroo keeps it safely locked up in his Treasure Chamber."

"Where's the key to the Treasure Chamber?" asked Button-Bright.

"The Boolooroo keeps it in his pocket night and day," was the reply. "He is afraid to let anyone see the Book because it would prove he has already reigned three hundred years next Thursday, and then he would have to resign the throne to me and leave the Palace and live in a common house."

"My Magic Umbrella is in that Treasure Chamber," said Button-Bright, "and I'm going to try to get it."

"Are you?" inquired Ghip-Ghisizzle eagerly. "Well, if you manage to enter the Treasure Chamber, be sure to bring me the Book of Records. If you can do that, I will be the best and most grateful friend you ever had!"

"I'll see," said the boy. "It ought not to be hard work to break into the Treasure chamber. Is it guarded?"

"Yes. The outside guard is Jimfred Jinksjones, the double patch of the Fredjim whom you have met, and the inside guard is a ravenous creature known as the Blue Wolf, which has teeth a foot long and as sharp as needles."

"Oh," said Button-Bright. "But never mind the Blue Wolf; I must manage to get my umbrella somehow or other."

They now walked back to the palace, still objects of much curiosity to the natives, who sneered at them and mocked them but dared not interfere with their progress. At the palace they found that dinner was about to be served in the big dining hall of the servants and dependents and household officers of the royal Boolooroo. Ghip-Ghisizzle was the Majordomo and Master of Ceremonies, so he took his seat at the end of the long table and placed Cap'n Bill on one side of him and Button-Bright on the other, to the great annoyance of the other Blueskins present, who favored the strangers with nothing pleasanter than envious scowls.

The Boolooroo and his Queen and daughters--the Six Snubnosed Princesses--dined in formal state in the Banquet Hall, where they were waited upon by favorite soldiers of the Royal Bodyguard. Here in the servants' hall there was one vacant seat next to Button-Bright which was reserved for Trot; but the little girl had not yet appeared, and the sailorman and the boy were beginning to be uneasy about her.