

Chapter Eighteen - The Cleverness of Ervic

We must now return to Ervic the Skeezer, who, when he had set down the copper kettle containing the three fishes at the gate of the lonely cottage, had asked, "What next?"

The goldfish stuck its head above the water in the kettle and said in its small but distinct voice:

"You are to lift the latch, open the door, and walk boldly into the cottage. Do not be afraid of anything you see, for however you seem to be threatened with dangers, nothing can harm you. The cottage is the home of a powerful Yookoohoo, named Reera the Red, who assumes all sorts of forms, sometimes changing her form several times in a day, according to her fancy. What her real form may be we do not know. This strange creature cannot be bribed with treasure, or coaxed through friendship, or won by pity. She has never assisted anyone, or done wrong to anyone, that we know of. All her wonderful powers are used for her own selfish amusement. She will order you out of the house but you must refuse to go. Remain and watch Reera closely and try to see what she uses to accomplish her transformations. If you can discover the secret whisper it to us and we will then tell you what to do next."

"That sounds easy," returned Ervic, who had listened carefully. "But are you sure she will not hurt me, or try to transform me?"

"She may change your form," replied the goldfish, "but do not worry if that happens, for we can break that enchantment easily. You may be sure that nothing will harm you, so you must not be frightened at anything you see or hear."

Now Ervic was as brave as any ordinary young man, and he knew the fishes who spoke to him were truthful and to be relied upon, nevertheless he experienced a strange sinking of the heart as he picked up the kettle and approached the door of the cottage. His hand trembled as he raised the latch, but he was resolved to obey his instructions. He pushed the door open, took three strides into the middle of the one room the cottage contained, and then stood still and looked around him.

The sights that met his gaze were enough to frighten anyone who had not been properly warned. On the floor just before Ervic lay a great crocodile, its red eyes gleaming wickedly and its wide open mouth displaying rows of sharp teeth. Horned toads hopped about; each of the four upper corners of the room was festooned with a thick cobweb, in the center of which sat a

spider as big around as a washbasin, and armed with pincher-like claws; a red-and-green lizard was stretched at full length on the window-sill and black rats darted in and out of the holes they had gnawed in the floor of the cottage.

But the most startling thing was a huge gray ape which sat upon a bench and knitted. It wore a lace cap, such as old ladies wear, and a little apron of lace, but no other clothing. Its eyes were bright and looked as if coals were burning in them. The ape moved as naturally as an ordinary person might, and on Ervic's entrance stopped knitting and raised its head to look at him.

"Get out!" cried a sharp voice, seeming to come from the ape's mouth.

Ervic saw another bench, empty, just beyond him, so he stepped over the crocodile, sat down upon the bench and carefully placed the kettle beside him.

"Get out!" again cried the voice.

Ervic shook his head.

"No," said he, "I'm going to stay."

The spiders left their four corners, dropped to the floor and made a rush toward the young Skeezer, circling around his legs with their pinchers extended. Ervic paid no attention to them. An enormous black rat ran up Ervic's body, passed around his shoulders and uttered piercing squeals in his ears, but he did not wince. The green-and-red lizard, coming from the window-sill, approached Ervic and began spitting a flaming fluid at him, but Ervic merely stared at the creature and its flame did not touch him.

The crocodile raised its tail and, swinging around, swept Ervic off the bench with a powerful blow. But the Skeezer managed to save the kettle from upsetting and he got up, shook off the horned toads that were crawling over him and resumed his seat on the bench.

All the creatures, after this first attack, remained motionless, as if awaiting orders. The old gray ape knitted on, not looking toward Ervic now, and the young Skeezer stolidly kept his seat. He expected something else to happen, but nothing did. A full hour passed and Ervic was growing nervous.

"What do you want?" the ape asked at last.

"Nothing," said Ervic.

"You may have that!" retorted the ape, and at this all the strange creatures in the room broke into a chorus of cackling laughter.

Another longwait.

"Do you know who I am?" questioned the ape.

"You must be Reera the Red--the Yookoohoo," Ervic answered.

"Knowing so much, you must also know that I do not like strangers. Your presence here in my home annoys me. Do you not fear my anger?"

"No," said the young man.

"Do you intend to obey me, and leave this house?" "No," replied Ervic, just as quietly as the Yookoohoo had spoken.

The ape knitted for a long time before resuming the conversation.

"Curiosity," it said, "has led to many a man's undoing. I suppose in some way you have learned that I do tricks of magic, and so through curiosity you have come here. You may have been told that I do not injure anyone, so you are bold enough to disobey my commands to go away. You imagine that you may witness some of the rites of witchcraft, and that they may amuse you. Have I spoken truly?"

"Well," remarked Ervic, who had been pondering on the strange circumstances of his coming here, "you are right in some ways, but not in others. I am told that you work magic only for your own amusement. That seems to me very selfish. Few people understand magic. I'm told that you are the only real Yookoohoo in all Oz. Why don't you amuse others as well as yourself?"

"What right have you to question my actions?"

"None at all."

"And you say you are not here to demand any favors of me?"

"For myself I want nothing from you."

"You are wise in that. I never grant favors."

"That doesn't worry me," declared Ervic.

"But you are curious? You hope to witness some of my magic transformations?"

"If you wish to perform any magic, go ahead," said Ervic. "It may interest me and it may not. If you'd rather go on with your knitting, it's all the same to me. I am in no hurry at all."

This may have puzzled Red Reera, but the face beneath the lace cap could show no expression, being covered with hair. Perhaps in all her career the Yookoohoo had never been visited by anyone who, like this young man, asked for nothing, expected nothing, and had no reason for coming except curiosity. This attitude practically disarmed the witch and she began to regard the Skeezer in a more friendly way. She knitted for some time, seemingly in deep thought, and then she arose and walked to a big cupboard that stood against the wall of the room. When the cupboard door was opened Ervic could see a lot of drawers inside, and into one of these drawers--the second from the bottom--Reera thrust a hairy hand.

Until now Ervic could see over the bent form of the ape, but suddenly the form, with its back to him, seemed to straighten up and blot out the cupboard of drawers. The ape had changed to the form of a woman, dressed in the pretty Gillikin costume, and when she turned around he saw that it was a young woman, whose face was quite attractive.

"Do you like me better this way?" Reera inquired with a smile.

"You look better," he said calmly, "but I'm not sure I like you any better."

She laughed, saying: "During the heat of the day I like to be an ape, for an ape doesn't wear any clothes to speak of. But if one has gentlemen callers it is proper to dress up."

Ervic noticed her right hand was closed, as if she held something in it. She shut the cupboard door, bent over the crocodile and in a moment the creature had changed to a red wolf. It was not pretty even now, and the wolf crouched beside its mistress as a dog might have done. Its teeth looked as dangerous as had those of the crocodile.

Next the Yookoohoo went about touching all the lizards and toads, and at her touch they became kittens. The rats she changed into chipmunks. Now the only horrid creatures remaining were the four great spiders, which hid themselves behind their thick webs.

"There!" Reera cried, "now my cottage presents a more comfortable appearance. I love the toads and lizards and rats, because most people hate them, but I would tire of them if they always remained the same. Sometimes I change their forms a dozen times a day."

"You are clever," said Ervic. "I did not hear you utter any incantations or magic words. All you did was to touch the creatures."

"Oh, do you think so?" she replied. "Well, touch them yourself, if you like, and see if you can change their forms."

"No," said the Skeezer, "I don't understand magic and if I did I would not try to imitate your skill. You are a wonderful Yookoohoo, while I am only a common Skeezer."

This confession seemed to please Reera, who liked to have her witchcraft appreciated.

"Will you go away now?" she asked. "I prefer to be alone."

"I prefer to stay here," said Ervic.

"In another person's home, where you are not wanted?"

"Yes."

"Is not your curiosity yet satisfied?" demanded Reera, with a smile.

"I don't know. Is there anything else you can do?"

"Many things. But why should I exhibit my powers to a stranger?"

"I can think of no reason at all," he replied.

She looked at him curiously.

"You want no power for yourself, you say, and you're too stupid to be able to steal my secrets. This isn't a pretty cottage, while outside are sunshine, broad prairies and beautiful wildflowers. Yet you insist on sitting on that bench and annoying me with your unwelcome presence. What have you in that kettle?"

"Three fishes," he answered readily.

"Where did you get them?"

"I caught them in the Lake of the Skeezers."

"What do you intend to do with the fishes?"

"I shall carry them to the home of a friend of mine who has three children. The children will love to have the fishes for pets."

She came over to the bench and looked into the kettle, where the three fishes were swimming quietly in the water.

"They're pretty," said Reera. "Let me transform them into something else."

"No," objected the Skeezer.

"I love to transform things; it's so interesting. And I've never transformed any fishes in all my life."

"Let them alone," said Ervic.

"What shapes would you prefer them to have? I can make them turtles, or cute little sea-horses; or I could make them piglets, or rabbits, or guinea-pigs; or, if you like I can make chickens of them, or eagles, or bluejays."

"Let them alone!" repeated Ervic.

"You're not a very pleasant visitor," laughed Red Reera. "People accuse me of being cross and crabbed and unsociable, and they are quite right. If you had come here pleading and begging for favors, and half afraid of my Yookoohoo magic, I'd have abused you until you ran away; but you're quite different from that. You're the unsociable and crabbed and disagreeable one, and so I like you, and bear with your grumpiness. It's time for my midday meal; are you hungry?"

"No," said Ervic, although he really desired food.

"Well, I am," Reera declared and clapped her hands together. Instantly a table appeared, spread with linen and bearing dishes of various foods, some smoking hot. There were two plates laid, one at each end of the table, and as soon as Reera seated herself all her creatures gathered around her, as if they were accustomed to be fed when she ate. The wolf squatted at her right hand and the kittens and chipmunks gathered at her left.

"Come, Stranger, sit down and eat," she called cheerfully, "and while we're eating let us decide into what forms we shall change your fishes."

"They're all right as they are," asserted Ervic, drawing up his bench to the table. "The fishes are beauties--one gold, one silver and one bronze. Nothing that has life is more lovely than a beautiful fish."

"What! Am I not more lovely?" Reera asked, smiling at his serious face.

"I don't object to you--for a Yookoohoo, you know," he said, helping himself to the food and eating with good appetite.

"And don't you consider a beautiful girl more lovely than a fish, however pretty the fish may be?"

"Well," replied Ervic, after a period of thought, "that might be. If you transformed my three fish into three girls--girls who would be Adepts at Magic, you know they might please me as well as the fish do. You won't do that of course, because you can't, with all your skill. And, should you be

able to do so, I fear my troubles would be more than I could bear. They would not consent to be my slaves--especially if they were Adepts at Magic--and so they would command me to obey them. No, Mistress Reera, let us not transform the fishes at all."

The Skeezer had put his case with remarkable cleverness. He realized that if he appeared anxious for such a transformation the Yookoohoo would not perform it, yet he had skillfully suggested that they be made Adepts at Magic.