

"Look, ladies," said the Scarecrow. "There's a key in the lock."

"Yes, and awfully rusty-looking," commented young Dorothy.

"Yet after all it may work," opined the Queen of Oz, "and let us through to what lies beyond."

The Sawhorse said nothing, but his very silence attracted to him the attention of the others. Sawks stood looking expectantly. Then Ozma looked pensive.

"My faithful friend," she said. "You have been most patient. These last few miles along the narrow trail through dense undergrowth cannot have been easier for you than for us. I believe that now is the time for you to turn back. Please return to the court of Glinda the Good and render her an account of all we have seen and done. We will meet again under happier auspices."

All the companions took formal leave of their stout steed. Then the wooden animal turned about in the little space before the forbidding door, rustled briefly through the brush, and was seen no more.

Turning again to the door in sombre mood the Scarecrow pondered. "Could it be a trap? Do unwary travelers pass through, never to be heard from more?"

"Come," said Ozma more sanguinely. "This door might, too, lead on to the spiral stairway we seek. Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Here the doughty little queen put her hand to the great key and sought to turn it. Nothing budged.

The Scarecrow now directed his mighty brain at the problem confronting them. "If only we had the Tin Woodman's oil can," he wished, "we might get that key to move. I wonder: could nut oil serve?"

"Of course!" cried Ozma. "What a wonderful thought. I saw hazel thickets and walnut trees amongst the forest growth. Let us make haste to gather nuts."

Hazel nuts were hard to crack without a pounding utensil, which no one had thought to pack, but pecans and walnuts,

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easily found, yielded as easily to insistent fingers. The Scarecrow's hay-filled fingers (fine kid, since the Munchkin villagers' ministrations) were useless either for nut-picking-up or nutcracking, so while the girls worked he wandered away to see if perchance some path led over the mountain that might obviate penetration of the door at all.

His search produced nothing but a small avalanche. Even a light scarecrow's leather feet could dislodge a few pebbles and send him tumbling and even his slight weight could make a boulder roll and a boulder could collect earth, snowball-fashion, as it tumbled further, and the soil and rocks could start to slide and carry scarecrow and hillside down to overwhelm the mysterious door and bury the two females who sat working before it.

"Well," said Dorothy, sticking her head above avalanche level and shaking it once more free of sand (dryish this time, not wet as at the Munchkin River), "here's another nice mess you've gotten us into," remembering all the times they'd had to stop and deal with the Scarecrow's stuffing. But she was being unfair.

Princess Ozma shushed her properly too, as soon as she had dug herself out of the dirt and taken stock. "Don't scold. Our poor old friend may have solved our dilemma for us. Look:" The torrent of falling soil and rocks seemed to have knocked the door frame askew. When the girls, after ten minutes of feverish scabbling with their bare hands, had freed the doorway, the weathered and rotten old door fell forward virtually into their laps.

The now well sewn-together hay man had survived his unexpected descent in one piece but finding that piece was the next job on the ladies' agenda. Muffled cries assisted them to locate him under no more than a few bushels of soil, but alack! his like-newness as of the sojourn in the Munchkin village was sadly spoiled. Ozma brushed him down as best she might with her hair-brush but the effect was not the same.

Miraculously one of the provisions baskets turned up: the

one with the food (and the all-important lacquer-lettered agenda) in it, but the other, as well as the girls' hard-garnered haul of nuts, was never seen again.

The landslide-chastened trio now addressed themselves to the daunting project of penetrating the uninviting doorway. In a sickly effort to be jocose Dorothy quavered, "It doesn't look like anybody's at home," and she yoo-hooed as if treating the portal as an ordinary house entrance.

"I only hope you're right, Dot," spoke the Scarecrow. He was frankly frightened but trying not to show it.

"Let us join hands and plunge in," proposed the Oz queen bravely.

The hand-holding did generate a modicum of comfort and the travelers advanced. The entrance to Doorknob Mountain's interior was dimly lighted! At first the adventurers thought it was merely the early afternoon sunlight filtering in through the encircling trees that pierced the dark shadows, but gazing inward they began to make out distant crystal chandeliers that gave off a faint refracted glow. They dared to step inside.

The floor of the cavern or tunnel was reasonably smooth and as the party advanced their eyes gradually adapted to the near-darkness. After a little, when they looked back, the warm daylight at the entrance could no longer be seen.

They walked and walked. The corridor seemed endless but otherwise had not so far proved threatening. Now their eyes could make out the first of a series of doorways cut in the living rock. The metal doors were quite large and arched. They had wrought-iron hinge plates of antique type and tiny knobs.

Dorothy essayed a witticism, whistling-in-the-dark-fashion. "You don't suppose this mountain is called after *those* knobs, do you? They're so puny."

"They're silly too," opined Ozma. "Did you ever try to open a knob-type door with your elbow?" This view of things had caused her to have all doorknobs throughout the Palace of Magic replaced with bold firm jutting door *handles* soon after her accession to the throne of Oz.

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The trio stopped to squint and read the inscription carved in a wooden plaque above the first door:

"WHO ENTERS THIS HALL OF DOORS MUST CHOOSE THE RIGHT ONE".

"I suppose that makes sense," said Dorothy. "Only: how to tell?"

They stood around discussing this point until something odd occurred. 'Til now the air in the passage had been still, damp, rather musty-smelling. Now a wind from the entrance-way began to blow hard: hard enough to rattle even the metal doors in their frames. Shivers — from cold or alarm? — ran up and down the expeditionists' backs.

That was all. We hear no more of the wind, which must have been but a momentary vagary of nature. But under cover of the noise and alarm it brought something or someone had made an exit through one of the series of doors. No one saw it happen but they could all feel the presence. "Who's there?!" cried Dorothy with sudden prescience.

Out of the gloom down the passage a being appeared. Her companions gaped but Princess Ozma, ever alert to the forms of courtesy and protocol, whispered, "Try not to stare, darlings, at—well, whatever it is." Then, louder, she addressed the—er, whatever it was: "May we request to know who or what you are?"

There was silence. Dorothy thought this a rudeness to her noble, and polite, companion and she blurted, "Do you talk, whatever you are?"

"Yes, I do / no, I don't," answered the two voices of the unusual being. Then paying no further attention to its questioners it engaged itself in a long argument with itself. Back and forth the questions, opinions, and recriminations flew for what seemed a very long time.

Finally a resolution seemed to be reached. One half of the split (or double?) personality delivered a parting shot: "Well, if you're going to talk to these strangers I'm certainly not," and therewith quitted the field.

The other ‘half’ now introduced itself. “My name is Veys Vursah. I was once an explorer of this grim retreat as I suppose you yourselves are. I picked the wrong door to open. I’ve been locked up in a stone cell for a very long time. I had no calendar, of course, or any way to tell night from day, but I feel that I have not seen the outside world for many years.”

Dorothy was about to blurt a question about why the prisoner hadn’t starved to death but caught herself in time, remembering that starved Ozites never die, they just fade away.

Mr. (Miss? Mrs.? Ms.?) Vursah had the appearance of parts of two more or less normal Munchkins joined together, yet he/she/it was not Siamese twins. It was joined at the back and had a normal ration of arms and legs and just one head but this had faces on both sides. Perhaps Vursah’s best—or at any rate most—feature was the eyes. There were two of these in the usual location on each face plus an extra one in the middle of the chin.

The person (the new arrivals were willing to grant it that much) was too great a curiosity to pass by in a hurry. The three friends sat down with their backs to the cavern wall and prepared to listen as Veys Vursah told its tale. After years in solitary confinement it was clearly eager to talk.

V.V. strode back and forth as it spoke. Room to stretch its legs seemed welcome after so long a time in cramped quarters. “I come from a land of blue flowers and blue mountains. I was the product of a most unusual birth, ‘set before my time into this breathing world, scarce half made up’: Mr. Shakespeare has described my case precisely. Far from appearing as Siamese twins, with a multiplicity of parts, my brother and I arrived—separately—with just enough limbs to go round for a single individual.

“My parents called in a most accomplished surgeon, who sewed the ‘halves’ together. Even now, after all the bitterness, I realize that without my other half I would be helpless. However, I think I got the worst of the deal. My other half is so disagreeable most of the time!”

This remark piqued the second half into speaking, despite

its declared intention. "Don't listen to that half!" it yelled. "He's" (that cleared up that point anyway) "the one that is a nuisance. If it wasn't for him we wouldn't have ended up in that closet. Left to me, we'd have chosen a completely different door to open. That way we wouldn't be standing here now explaining our business to a bunch of nosey strangers."

"That's enough of your surliness!" barked the first half. "I have more to tell these kind interested folks. Are you going to shut up and let me talk?"

"Why should I?" demanded the 'mean' side.

"It's that or another hair-pulling," threatened the 'nice' side.

"Oh, help! No, no! not that!"

"Then hold your tongue. I have more to relate to my listeners," decreed side one.

"Nobody ever cares about my wishes," was the second side's parting shot as it/he retired into a sulk.

"Where was I?" said Veys, taking no further notice of Vursah.

"You had told us about your birth and early experiences," Ozma described it diplomatically.

"Ah, yes. Well, having two fronts and no back proved to be a frightful bother." Veys' audience at once reflected upon internal arrangements but everyone was too genteel to say anything. Dorothy thought with a fiercely repressed giggle about a weird film she'd seen called *Edward Scissorhands* (whose problem in that department must have been even more drastic).

"The trouble is," Veys went on, "that we each have a voice, and eyes to deliver us impressions of the world around us, and we share a pair of ears. But we don't seem to receive the same impulses and we argue all the time about what we should do next. Most of the time I have to threaten Other with bodily harm to get him to let me have my way.

"On the other hand, there's nothing like having eyes at your back, especially when an enemy (and we have plenty) may be meaning to sneak up on you. If one half has a bad toothache the other half can still eat, to keep the communal body going. And

there are little comforts like each foot having ten toes—five to an end—allowing us to count to twenty without having to start over. I only wish we didn't quarrel all the time."

"We couldn't help noticing how—er, contrary Other seemed to be," admitted Ozma with hesitation, wanting to seem sympathetic but nervous at appearing to take sides.

"Oh, you did, did you?" interrupted Vursah. "Who asked you for put-downs?!"

Veyss instantly seized the hair on Vursah's end of the head. But the latter seemed to control the action of the second arm and with it tore the offending hand from 'their' head.

"Hmpff," snorted Veyss. "This is getting impossible—and very embarrassing. I had better say goodbye to you young people—"

"Oh, wait!" pleaded the little girl ruler. "There is so much you could tell us if you would." Ozma talked fast. "We're trying to reach a certain Vanishing Spiral Stairway—"

Veyss Vursah stopped in their tracks and said, "Vanishing Spiral...? what is that, my dear lady?"

"We have directions saying that is the only way we can get to—a place we have to get to." Ozma did not want to lose precious time trying to explain about a Vanishing Emerald City. "Can you possibly direct us?"

Veyss smiled, saying, "I would indeed try to help you if I could but I have never heard of any such stairway and would be at a total loss trying to advise you how to proceed. I will only say this: as you go along this passageway you must make very sure to select the right door. One door you *must* choose if ever you are to get out."

"But," inserted the Scarecrow, "how can we possibly guess which is the right one? What clue could we have?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't the faintest idea. You see how we failed the very same test. Still... I wonder if Other has any ideas."

Other chimed in with a disgruntled "You told me to keep my mouth shut, so why should I tell them anything?"

"You just *might* want to prove you have a heart after all,"

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suggested Veyss.

Vursah relented with scant grace. "I'll tell you a riddle," he said to the strangers. "But don't expect me to tell you what the riddle means."

"Oh, goodie," cired Dorothy. "I love riddles." And the Scarecrow too enjoyed their challenge to his intellectual powers.

"So here goes," announced Vursah:

"Search your best.

You may be blessed.

Attend the floor

And choose one door.

You might try feeling

On the ceiling.

A source of light

May aid your flight.

But if you're wrong

You may belong

Behind a door

Forevermore.

So Search! I say,

Without delay,

Both front and back.

The color's black!"

The tragic double man without a further word or glance made off along the passage toward the distant known exit from the mountain. One wrong guess, after this amount of time, was enough for 'them'!

Our friends looked after the figure growing dim in the gloom. "You know," said Dorothy thoughtfully, "I wonder what made Veyss Vursah's cell door open after all this time..."

"Part of the spell, don't you suppose?" posited the Scarecrow. "Maybe when new potential flies stray into the web the 'spider' in charge lets earlier ones go."

"That would seem a pointless exercise," commented Princess Ozma. But then, she'd known instances of arbitrary pointlessness in Oz before.

"It doesn't make much sense, does it?" muttered Princess Dorothy: "that riddle."

"That's the nature of riddles, Dot my friend," pontificated the Scarecrow. "They're supposed to reveal by deviousness."

"But it's self-contradictory," replied the girl. "We know we're to try one of the doors but it says to 'attend' the floor. There aren't any doors in the floor!"

"Just suppose there were," proposed the Scarecrow. In fact, Dorothy's querulousness had given him the clue he needed. He gestured to the others and set off forward without bush-beating to peer closely at the rocky passage floor as he moved forward.

The girls followed for a bit but where the famous straw/hay man was tireless they were not. Besides it was long past lunch-time. They fell behind—and then quite out. Ozma and Dorothy sat down against the cave wall and opened the provisions basket.

The Munchkins had packed the food basket with a tempting supply of blue—and 'keepable'—dainties. The girls toasted each other in little flagons of "Blue Nun" and sank their teeth with gusto into baguettes liberally smeared with bleu cheese. A wonderful impromptu meal. But just when they were speculating as to the extent to which they should each eat a second baguette, they-heard a distant cry.

A little guiltily, but enjoyably so, they hastily stuffed the broken bits back in the basket, rose, and ran down the rocky corridor.

"Eureka!" yelled the Scarecrow when he saw them coming. Dot was pleased; she had used the expression too long before on a celebrated occasion. But no time for reminiscing now. "There it is! I've found the door," chortled Scarekera.

The ladies looked along the cavern wall. There were doors to be sure, but which one? "Not there," protested the Scarecrow. "In the floor. Just like Vursah predicted in his riddle." There was another riddle: if Vursah had known how to find the proper

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door why had he not made use of his own percipience to open it, rather than another and wrong one? But maybe this wisdom had come to him belatedly, after many years of bleak confinement, with time for contemplation.

The Scarecrow was on Cloud Nine. "Maybe I can go on and solve the whole riddle now," he wished.

"Oh, sure you can," encouraged the ladies. They had never entertained doubts on that score.

The hay man now led his friends to where dim lines in the dust outlined a trapdoor.

"Oh, goodness," cried Dorothy, assailed by more memories. "It's just like the cyclone cellar door I last saw Aunt and Uncle disappear down before I came to Oz."

There was just one thing missing: any means to open the horizontal door. They could see a keyhole but no key and no handle or knob ("Doorknob Mountain slipped up there," joked Dorothy) by which an even unlocked door could be pulled up. What to do now?

The girls broke their fingernails trying to get a purchase on the edge of the trap. It was both too heavy and too locked to budge.

"We'll have to have recourse to the riddle," advised the Scarecrow. All three of the travelers had committed the rhyme to memory; after all, success or failure seemed to depend on it. "Feeling on the ceiling" had been one mysterious bit of counseling, and something about a "source of light".

"The chandeliers!" they cried.

Now in fact not all the cobwebby chandeliers that ranged, every twenty yards, down the center of the passageway ceiling, were lit. What if what they sought: a key — no doubt — was to be found near an unlit chandelier? "It's so black up there," commented Ozma. "Indeed, we never could find anything there except by feeling about."

"Black'!" shouted the Scarecrow. "Exactly! The riddle warned us to be alert about something black."

Somebody had been providential: Ozma, Dorothy, Tourma-

line, or the Munckins? Nobody paused to claim credit. They scabbled in the food basket and came up with a candle stump and matches.

The Scarecrow had already keen-sightedly peered about in the vicinity of a couple of the nearer lighted chandeliers. Now he urged that they go consequently down the line and investigate every light-crown, lit or unlit. For this human pyramids were in order. Ozma who had once been a boy preserved a trace of boyish robustness, so she stood bottom-most. Lithe Dot clambered up on her shoulders and thence hauled up by one arm the flimsy Scarecrow, who yet was sturdy enough to hold aloft the burning candle-end. He was not at *all* keen on that shenanigan, but he did it.

At the eighth chandelier they struck oil—but they did not bother to light it. Instead the Scarecrow just held up the guttering candle and with nervous fingers detached the black (!) key that hung from a leather thong from an arm of the candelabra.

They could all fall to the ground now and breathe great sighs of relief. *This* was the key—or if it wasn't they weren't going to lose more time in this cul-de-sac but make for the cave entrance and freedom. They'd think of some other way of getting over Doorknob Mountain.

"I'm almost afraid to try the key," said the Oz queen in a hoarse whisper.

"Needs must," whispered Dorothy back archaically.

Ozma drew a deep beath, inserted the clumsy iron key, and twisted. She sighed out, and something like a sigh echoed down the cavern. The key worked perfectly.

They were glad of the key's sturdiness. This was the only handle they had to pull up the creaking but not stuck trapdoor. A wave of mustiness welled upward.

Not surprisingly a staircase was revealed to view. It was not spiral, however, and showed no signs of vanishing. There must be another staircase in their future.

No sentimental last looks were in order. Peering straight down, Ozma led the way into the bowels of the earth, holding

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up a fresh candle-end from the provisions basket. Dorothy followed with that basket itself. The Scarecrow took an instant to toss the long-sought but only momentarily needed key upon the cavern floor. Spare the next seeker a lot of needless bother!

The Cloud King reposed on his silver throne in his silver-towered palace up above the world so high. The cushions that aided his comfort were of cloth-of-silver with a simple design picked out in tiny diamonds and of course the fringes were silver threads. Indeed, the entire article of furniture was a variation on the theme of silver: the arm-rests were silver bars, the head-rest was a silver mirror ringed about with stylized heads of cloud fairies and above this again was an argent arch with small portraits of his niece Polychrome and some of her sisters etched in silver nitrate.

King Welkin appeared lost in thought but suddenly he called out to his chamberlain who stood respectfully at a distance: "Come hither, sirrah!" He gave instructions and the chamberlain pulled upon a silver cord that hung near the wall.

A stout little silverling came running into the hall. "What does your majesty require?"

Welkin stared hard at the little fellow. "Silvertip," he spoke, "I have called you here to expedite three commands. You will take excessive care in putting them into execution."

"But of course, your greatness. Yours is but to speak your will."

The Cloud King rose and stepped from the dais. He laid a fatherly hand on Silvertip's shoulder and looked closely into the youth's silver eyes. He spoke almost in a whisper. "It is of utmost importance that the work on the Emerald City be carried out in the most exquisite detail. You understand that each and every mounted emerald must be taken from its setting. Gem and mounting must be code-numbered and the master list of matchings preserved under triple lock and key."

"That will take days, even weeks!" cried Silvertip, alarmed.

"Days!" commanded the king, "and but few of those... Secondly, see to the delivery of the crated emeralds to the Black Cloud Forest—"

"Why is your highness doing all this?" the equerry inter-

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rupted again.

“Darest thou to question me, varlet?!” roared the incensed king.

Silvertip trembled agonizingly and fell to his knees. “I was merely curious,” he excused himself in a seizure of contrition.

“Don’t let it happen again. Now get up and pay attention to my final orders. After every single emerald has been scoured and purified and delivered to the Forest you are to see that instructions are given for their ultimate transport to my Silver Cloud mines. When all this has been set in train send Silverplate to me. Now be off with you!”

Silvertip sped out of the Hall of the Throne, down some steps, along a corridor, toward a pair of enormous silver doors. The doors stood fifty feet high and were covered with great gawdy diamond knobs.

Opening them was not a task that could be accomplished by one small cloud elf with the bare hands. He had to throw his whole inconsiderable weight into pressing on a great silver-spangled lever that jutted from the floor. A burst of raw sunlight flooded the hall and prismatic colors shot from the knob diamonds, blinding the elf.

Squinting against the glare Silvertip ran between the doors calling, “Silvertop! Silvertop! Where are you, Silvertop?”

A little silverling voice spoke matter-of-factly: “I’m over here. What’s up?”

“Quick, quick! Speed is of the essence. I’ll explain as we run to the Emerald City. We—and everybody—have got to work like furies round the clock! It’s that or be melted down for filigree, so old Welkin says.”

The job facing Tip and Top was immense. Everybody in the palace and complex was going to have to pitch in. Not only that but they sent the royal herald Silvertap to broadcast throughout the cloud kingdom that every able-bodied elf who could be spared was to report to the royal jewelworks.

Soon the workshops were bursting with eager little Silverlings wanting to do their bit. These cloud creatures are

charming little figures, none taller than traditional-type Munchkins. Bit weird-looking though: they have diamond-shaped heads which are completely hairless and their faces have the peculiar quality of reflecting brilliantly whatever sunlight falls on them, making it hard for mere mortals to gaze on them for more than a moment. Even their hands are unusual, bearing only as many fingers as those of Mickey Mouse. (Ever consider that it is odd a mouse should have fingers? How anthropomorphic can ya get?) As for the Silverlings' clothing, they dressed uniformly in silver gowns painted with star-dust.

The volunteer workers had come each carrying own tools: hammers, axes, saws, scrub brushes, scouring powder, jeweler's pincettes and magnifying glasses. They did not neglect to pack lunches for a lengthy tour of duty. They rather favored sandwiches of silverside beef.

Foremen were quickly appointed. Silvertop suggested working the 'men' in shifts. (Actually, all Silverlings are of the same [unspecified] sex.) Silvertip agreed fully that that would hasten the work.

For greater handleability the Cloud King's first act on getting the stolen city home to the clouds was to miniaturize it slightly. It was already featherlight but a reduction in dimensions meant a valuable saving in time as the army of workers swarmed over its surface: it was not so far from work-point A to work-point B.

Soon the air was fairly green with plucked-out emeralds from the city walls and buildings flying down to land in lifted bolt-catchers. Fast scraping and polishing followed. "Gosh, some of these stones are the grimmest," remarked one Silverblup to his mate Silverflit.

"Yeah. Did you hear the ruler of Oz is considering enclosing the city under a protective dome?" said Flit, passing on the rumor he'd picked up. "Air pollution is getting pretty fierce these days."

"Especially," said Blup with a shrug, "out in the great world." The clean-up crew worked 'from the outside in', first scour-

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ing the Emerald City's outer protective walls, then moving on to citizens' private houses, and saving the Palace of Magic for last. It had a coating of emeralds equal in extent to almost the rest of the city combined.

The cleaned (and number-tagged) green stones were shoveled into cloud carts by the bushel. There was no grumbling among the overtime-working elves but there was plenty of talk and speculation. "Why do you suppose the king is doing all this?" Silverflit asked another mate, Silverdump.

"Never question the ways of royalty," advised Dump.

"Oh, come on," pleaded Flit. "I know you worked for a while as scullion in the palace kitchens. You must have heard something."

"I'll tell you what happened when I was a scullion:" declared the elf-with-a-grievance. "One day when there was nobody else around ol' Welkin gave me a message to be carried to the royal treasury. There I got fascinated by the sight of silver bars stacked up to the ceiling, and I was a mite late getting back to report to His Skyness. He never waited for a word of excuse before he shot a bolt of lightning through my body. I've never been quite the same since."

"But wasn't that an exception?" wondered Flit. "Ordinarily he's supposed to be a very fair monarch. At least, I remember once, a long time ago, my cloud-house was struck by a thunderbolt and completely destroyed. King Welkin heard about it and sent for me and my whole family to live in a palace side building until his cloudsmiths could build us a new house. I call that pretty royal."

"And was the new place okay?" asked Dump sceptically.

"Sure! It even has more rooms than the old house, besides a beautiful view down on Oz."

By the end of the day all available carts and wagons were filled to brimming with refurbished emeralds. The loads caught the last rays of the setting sun and gleamed out verdantly in a million rays and sparkles.

The despoiled City itself, however—was a different matter.

Never since the earliest days of its foundation by Oz the Great and Terrible had the capital looked so dull, dark, and depleted. The Emerald City had lost its personality and looked now about as inviting as East St. Louis. Would the once lovely metropolis ever again be the jewel in the crown of Oz?

At the hour when the very last decorative emerald had been pried from its scone at the pinnacle of the Wizard's tower at the Oz palace a crowd of Silverlings was observed to be laughing. Was it in relief at an arduous job accomplished? Or were they enjoying the completion of the spoliation of one of the fairest cities (if not *the* fairest) mankind had ever imagined?

Silvertip ran to report to King Welkin the completion of a bad job well done. The elfin equerry, even after so many years, never failed to draw an extra breath of wonderment and admiration on entering the Throne Room of the cloud palace. Everything was of silver, needless to say: tables, chairs, what-nots, picture frames, and all was kept burnished daily within an inch of its life.

Those picture frames were of particular interest, not as much for their beauty as for what they contained. Surprisingly, they surrounded portraits of personalities we have heard of before, all etched on silver. You could admire a scene of Dorothy of Kansas, with Toto in her arms, knocking on the gates of the Emerald City. Another picture showed the Tin Woodman, Scarecrow, and (then) Cowardly Lion looking awed in the middle of a dark wood. There was Glinda the Good surrounded by some of her court ladies. The Hungry Tiger was depicted standing under the limbs of a tree which, just too high up, supported a row of tender juicy babies.

But Silvertip today had no time to pause and admire. "Your Skyness, I bring most satisfactory news."

"Out with it!" snarled King Welkin. "Can't you see I'm at my supper?!" (People seem to be eating all the time in this story. How fat *is* the author?)

Chastened, Tip told the tale. "The Oz emeralds have all been removed," he stated sulkily.

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"Where are they now?" demanded the chewing king.

"On their way to the Black Cloud Forest, as you commanded."

"Hmpff. Very well," said his majesty ungraciously. "What took you so long?"

"'Long'!? A day and a half to dismantle an entire (if scaled-down) city? I like that!" Silvertip was shaken.

"Entirely too long. If that's the best you can do, tomorrow you'll repose on a shelf in the treasury: melted down to a *thin* brick of silver," said Welkin testily. "Now go before I decide to smelt you right now."

"Whew," said Tip when back in his apartment (which was as far away from the king's quarters as might be for the equerry still to be on call). His teeth chattered and his knees knocked. "What's come over the old boy?" the elf soliloquized. "He's usually a bit more easy-going than that. I'll bet he's got a bad conscience at stealing that city that was minding its own business—and he's taking it out on us. Silly old feese! Serves him right."

Back in the throne hall Welkin was laughing to recall how scared his servant had been. "That ought to make him get on with the job. I daren't tell them *why* the whole project has to be completed inside a week. Anyway, it was kinda fun seeing him jump," gloated the Cloud King naughtily. "Maybe I'll go zap a few other underlings with a touch of lightning."

With the emerald train well and safely dispatched to the cloud forest Silvertip himself set off next morning for the Silver Cloud mines. There he sought out Silverplate, chief engineer. "I'm to escort you back to court," he told the official. With that his current load of managerial duties was completed.

Maid Silverbell announced mine boss Silverplate and king and commoner were left alone. "This will only take a few minutes," Welkin told the engineer. "We have a few details to work out."

Not long afterwards Plate left the presence with the king's words echoing in his ears: "Good luck. You will need it."

The three underground travelers found the stone stairs to be twisty, turny, and topsy-turvy. Someone or two stumbled at every step. The risers were of unequal height, making it impossible to sense where to place one's step in the gloom, which, however, was not total. Fantastically enough, ancient kerosene lamps cast flickering shadows on the walls. One is hard put to imagine attendants coming to put fresh fuel in those lamps at least every day or so.

The party made conversation but whether it kept their spirits up is difficult to say. Ozma started by saying, "At least we are traveling in the right direction."

"How do you know that, dearest?" wondered Dorothy just behind her.

"Oh," said Ozma and thought for a moment. "I suppose because there seemed no other way to go. The cavern seemed to dead-end, choosing any one of those wall doors seemed an impossible task, and out the way we came in our Scarecrow proved there was not much hope of crossing the mountain any other way. Voila: right direction."

"Okay, I'll buy that," said Dot and gave up.

The Oz queen, being in the lead, was not surprisingly the first to reach the bottom of the stairway and to exclaim, "Oh, lookeel!: a light ahead!"

The source of the light was never revealed but it seemed to be of quite an astonishing brightness. It pierced all eyes, which were turned away to squint and blink to try to adapt. When they were adjusted to the illumination they saw a doorway much resembling those they had left behind less than half an hour before on the upper level. This door was shorter: about three feet in height, and was cut in the rock in the shape of an hour-glass. It looked to be merely latched, not locked, and seemed to be very old. One felt that but to touch it would make it fall in frapoents to the ground, as had happened, if less spectacularly, with the original door into Doorknob Mountain. Actually, the

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door went that premonition one better: when Ozma touched the latch, the door crumbled almost like rotten sawdust.

Behold: the party stepped out into the Land of Oz (though technically they had not been out of it while inside the mountain). There was a distinct sense of anticlimax. "Boy, that was a pretty short mountain," protested Dorothy. "We can't possibly have walked or down-climbed more than a third of a mile since we came in."

Never mind. What they saw made up for their disappointment at not having suffered more while negotiating Doorknob Mountain. Princess Ozma's face grew wreathed in the loveliest smile and the dear Scarecrow began to bounce in sheer imitation of the scene disclosed.

Everything was astir in the town that lay before them. The buildings swayed in the breeze, producing corny sounds like 'boing', 'spwing', and 'pling', and all the people who could be glimpsed were bouncing energetically—and even enjoying it, to judge by the smiles. Babies especially came in for an inordinate amount of bouncing. Dogs even bounced as they got walked (and this despite the assurance of early authors that there are no native dogs in Oz). Men bounced while sitting on park benches reading newspapers.

"Don't tell me; let me guess!" said Dorothy. "This is Bounceburg." (In point of fact it turned out to be called 'Springer Town'.)

We must give the place its due. It appeared clean and tidy and the inhabitants were obviously happy or, if not, they were kidding themselves that they were.

On closer inspection it transpired that everything, creatures and objects alike, had springs attached. Street lights, window frames, fences, grass, shrubs, trees, all came spring-equipped. The newcomers admitted that plants might well spring up, and window frames might not unnaturally be fitted with springs. But what was the function of a spring on a fence? Now if it had been a garden gate...?

A bouncing boy lurched toward them. "Who are you?" he queried, "Where ya come from? And where are your springs?"

Ozma undertook to reply. "Now isn't that a shame?: we clean neglected to pack any springs when we came away. Really, we might have suspected we'd need them, for we are on our way to a spiral staircase, and springs and spirals are much alike in shape."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no spiral staircase," confessed the youth. "But howdy anyway. My name's Coily. That's 'cause o' my coily hair... But bounce along: I'll take you to meet Mayor Carom. He'll be the one to know about spiral stairs, if anybody."

Coily bounced on ahead, but too fast. In a couple of energetic leaps he was out of sight. The visitors shrugged and followed along after at a leisurely pace.

The little town was fascinating to look upon. The houses were all built of springboards. People moved fast and furiously, springing up where you least expected them. And when the visitors noticed fresh primroses, snowdrops, and daffodils they had only to surmise that it was always spring in Springer Town.

Young Coily had bounced back after being out of circulation for a bit. "Come on!" he cried. "The Mayor is bouncing up and down with eagerness to meet you."

The new arrivals ran like mad but after all Coily always kept one jump ahead of them. After fifteen minutes the girls flopped exhausted on a bench. Coily circled back. "Come on," he wheedled. "The mayor's house is only a hop, skip, and a jump from here."

Before long the party did actually arrive there. The house proved to be star-shaped and was clearly the town's star tourist attraction. It sported a rainbow-colored roof and high arched doorways. Inside the doors sprang open at a touch. Glancing through doorways the visitors spied spring-leg tables and bed with well-sprung mattresses.

The mayor, when at last he was discovered in his den, was wearing a gold hat. Graduate Dorothy stopped in her tracks, overcome with the aptness of it all. She remembered her summer course in the novels of Scott Fitzgerald. How did it go?: that forepiece to *Gatsby*:

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“Then wear the gold hat—if that will win her.
And, if you bounce high, bounce for her too.
‘Til she cry, ‘Loved
Gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover!
I must have *you*’.”

Dorothy extended her hand very cordially to the literary mayor. She was sorry when he jumped as if affrighted.

But, “Hello! and welcome,” he cried civilly enough. “You must forgive me, my dear,” he went on when he noted the Kansas girl’s puzzled and wounded look. “Everybody in this town is jumpy—but I more than most. Don’t know why. And you, my lady,” he went on, sensing queen Ozma’s pre-eminence. “I as most curious: why did your ladyship choose to pay Springer Town a visit?”

“Don’t be offended, good sir,” admitted Ozma, “but our presence here is quite fortuitous.” She proceeded to tell about the quest and the need of finding a certain Vanishing Spiral Staircase. “Can you possibly help us at all? No one we’ve met seems to know anything about the stairway.”

“Is that the fabled stair that makes an appearance just once in every hundred years?”

“Yes! yes!” cried all the newcomers eagerly.

“I *have* heard of it, but only just, nor have I ever seen it myself. But I’m only ninety nine years old almost. There’s time; there’s time.” Actually the mayor didn’t look a day over ninety eight—and in Oz oldsters of that age can appear as spry as George Burns.

The mayor invited them to an impromptu luncheon reception. Young Coily was let come too. The fivesome bounced along to the town hall where the repast would be spread. The menu consisted of chops of spring lamb, spring beans, and spring rolls, piping hot, all washed down with spring water.

When queen Ozma rose to give a speech of thanks she realized for the first time the miraculous prescience of whoever had chosen her travel wardrobe and so appropriately included the once despised jump suit.

Mayor Carom had prevailed on the travelers to stay over night. After the glooms of the Doorknob Mountain experience they were nothing loath to linger in the cheerful town. Only, their slumbers were rudely broken into next morning by a tiresome disturbance in the kitchen of the mayor's home.

It seemed that Coily, fascinated by the great-world aura of the visitors, had crept back into the mansion uninvited, just to be near them. He had spent the night on the pantry floor, sleeping under a comfortable blanquette de veau with his head cushioned on a six-pint saucepan. When the cook discovered him there his screams and reproaches so startled the boy that his head slipped *into* the pot. Now he couldn't get it off.

Fleeing from the attack of the oddly flat-faced cook Coily blundered about blindly, knocking pots, pans, and dishes galley-west. "Get out!" shrieked the cook.

"Help, help! and rescue!" yelled Coily.

Everyone came running and looked on in consternation as the cook belabored the fleeing youngster with a broom and Coily rebounded from wall to wall. By sheer accident he stumbled through the doorway where the rudely wakened sleepers gaped. Quickly one or two got between him and the irate cuisinier.

The mayor seized the saucepan handle and tried to free his young compatriot. The girls wrung their hands and the Scarecrow looked grave. Suddenly the cook stuck his puggy face out of the kitchen doorway and held out a handful of bacon grease. "Here! Try to get this in between the pot and the head. It just might work."

It did. Soon the unfortunate scene was but a dumb memory.

Springers had begun to gather on the mayor's doorstep. It turned out that this was his birthday. "What fun," said Princess Ozma quietly. "Almost the same day as my own." The

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townsmen had come to serenade him at breakfast. They had brought with them fifes, hautboys, and theorbos.

Carolers sang songs of joy and musicians blew and strummed forth delightful twangs and chortlings while the inmates of the mayor's mansion looked on, edified, from a star-shaped window. A very large soprano favored with "Spring Is Here", "The Jersey Bounce", and "Alabammy Bound". The Springers cheered themselves hoarse. In the end there was nothing for it but that Mayor Carom must step out upon the balcony and say a few words of pleased recognition.

The breakfast that had begun so disastrously gathered momentum and ended as quite a celebration. The locals carried in mountains of food to add to the mayor's own offerings. You'll want to know the menu. It was melon balls, hot cakes, and bacon as pièces de resistance, but other dishes, both suitable and unsuitable, made their appearance and were tasted by some: chilled pizza, ice cream soup, divinity, matzo balls, chocolate-covered oysters, maple malted milk, breast of guinea hen under glass, and day-old hamburgers.

"Now then," said the mayor with satisfaction when the last of the revelers had departed and charwomen were clearing the grounds of folding chairs, streamers, and a drift of fallen confetti, "what would you like to do today?"

"Hit the road," blurted young Dorothy with conviction.

"Oh, but—I thought you might care to go shopping or for a buggy ride or skating on the pond (we keep it magically frozen the year round)—"

"*Would* that it were possible," put in the Queen of Oz with regret, "but please do not forget, your honor, that we are engaged in a quest. We're already running over time. We simply must find this all too verily vanished stairway."

"Well, then, the least I can do for my distinguished visitors is to bring them safely on their way." Here the mayor turned to greasy-headed Coily who still lurked under foot. "My boy, be so good as to run to the stable and alert the coachmen. This must be a leave-taking in state."

The expeditionists gathered up their few possessions and waited on the front steps of the mayoral residence. Very soon a coach, black with gold trim, glittered to a halt on the drive. The coachman tipped his hat and a footman jumped down to place a stepping stool and give his hand to assist the passengers to encoach.

Then it was an electrical snapping of the whip and cries of "Tallyho! Away!" The drivers seemed to know where to go without commands. The horses sprang away and raced to the town square scarcely ceremonially.

From there the pace was more sedate. The visitors had time to take note of offerings in shop windows. Ozma was intrigued by an evening gown with green sequins but instantly came to the conclusion that now was not at all an appropriate time to concern herself with such fripperies. Dorothy and the Scarecrow in their turn gazed with interest at the window of a luggage shop and pondered the advisability of acquiring some kind of carryall to replace the missing travel basket—but decided against it. After all, what did they really have to put in it?

Yet all the party gave way at the sight of an antique shop. After all, they were all antiques themselves, having lived well over a hundred years apiece. "Oh, Ozma," pleaded Dorothy, "couldn't we pop in just for a minute? Those things in the window look so fascinating!" The Scarecrow, who was interested in genealogy, having traced his own lineage way back (under ground^s), had spotted some ancient family trees that he would have liked to have a closer look at. And the girl ruler of Oz herself had caught a glimpse of a daguerrotype of her own father, King Pastoria of sainted memory, and was determined to acquire it if at all possible. The three pleaded prettily with Mayor Carom who was only too delighted to fall in with his guests' wishes.

The old Springer behind the counter cast a frightened look at the strange springless creatures who had entered his shop

§ See *The Royal Book of Oz*. Editor's note.

but the familiar presence of the Mayor reassured him. "Yes, indeed," he confirmed when asked: "nothing in the shop less than a hundred years old." This obviously went for himself as well—and as we know Mayor C. was an exact ninety nine.

Ozma soon had possession of her dad's picture and the Scarecrow had picked up for a song ("It Might as Well Be Spring") several hoary old trees, roots and all. Dorothy couldn't decide what to take. But now of course the party did have something to put in a valise, so her gaze strayed to venerable portmanteaux and frayed and stained carpetbags. In the end her choice rested between a cracked—but so quaint—hatbox and a small weatherbeaten steamer trunk.

"The hatbox, I think, dearest," opined her royal chum. "Considerations of space, you know."

"That's just it, Ozma," returned the other girl. "The hatbox is just a wee bit too small to contain the one basket we have left. I want something that will go in, so we still just have one piece to carry."

"I see what you mean," admitted the other. "But I don't really know how we can manage with a whole trunk."

Nevertheless Dorothy wanted to consider further. Something about the trunk appealed to her strangely. At least she could have it out and opened and see what it was like inside. But among the high-piled aisles of the narrow shop there was scarcely room to open the receptacle—and still have room around for people to stand and peer in.

Shopkeeper and mayor lifted the trunk out to the back court. Daylight was better there too. They all gathered round. A key dangled from one of the trunk's lock-catches. The antiquarian slipped it in the hole indicated. There was a strenuous effort at twisting. No luck.

It was the scene from the door to Doorknob Mountain all over again. But here there were no handy pecans or walnuts for squeezing. As it happened, little Coily, not to be done out of intercourse with his admired foreigners, had found out where the party had gone and tagged along. Here was a source

of grease! The shopman rubbed the key among the boy's coily locks.

And now, see there! The trunk lid fell back with a groan and a creak, and out of the interior shot a folding ladder, spiraled quickly upward, and vanished among the clouds before you could say 'Jumpin' Jimminy!'

"Oh, Ozma!" squealed Dorothy at the top of her voice, "it's a spiraling staircase!"

"Well, 'staircase'," put in Scarekew, the linguistic purist. "'Ladder' and 'stairs' are not quite the same thing. If they were we wouldn't need two words."

"Never mind, children," soothed Ozma. "We have two strikes out of three: it's certainly spiraling and 'vanishable' both past and present. Tell me, sir," the girl ruler went on, addressing the shopkeeper: "had you never occasion to open this trunk before?"

"No, ma'am. I only got it in last month. Just hadn't got around to it. But you can see it's more than a century old: it's precisely the type of steamer trunk the American President Polk had with him on his voyage from Washington to New Orleans when he left the White House in 1849..."

This led of course to an interesting discussion of one of the most able of American chief executives and his tragedy: dying of cholera at age fifty-three only three months after leaving the office in which he had served so capably, and missing 'greatness' because he refused to serve for more than one term. In America only presidents are considered great if they have done duty for at least part of two terms or more, which stricture allows Grant, Coolidge, and Nixon into the highest pantheon.

But meanwhile the spiral ladder wavered in the air and gave no sign of falling down. "Do you suppose this *could* be it?" wondered Ozma and tapped a foot.

"Oh, I'm sure of it," breathed Dorothy excitedly, and the Scarecrow said he'd give his vote for its being the correct 'staircase'.

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Ozma counted on her fingers. “Gosh, only one more day to reach the Cloud King. We’d better at least give this apparatus a try as being the one intended. It fulfills some of the stipulations at least.” Here she checked again with the lacquer-lettered agenda, which she had taken to carrying in the pocket of her jump suit. “‘Spiraling’: check. ‘Vanishing’ —” She lifted her eyes high up to some cirrus clouds where the ladder certainly disappeared. “‘Appearing once every hundred years’. At least it came out of a container where it *could* have been since a century ago. Very well: I’m game,” declared the little ruler courageously.

The climbers stopped when they had reached the thirtieth rung or thereabouts and took time to pull out their handkerchiefs and wave to Mayor Carom, the antiquities dealer, and ointment-headed Coily standing in the courtyard of the curiosity shop. It was an opportunity also for Dorothy to hook securely over her shoulder the remaining basket, into which the travelers had crammed Pastoria's portrait and the family trees. There was room, for their food supply was gravely diminished. "We'll just have to subsist on cloudberries for a while," Ozma had said.

At the hundredth rung their Springer friends, greatly diminished, were scarcely visible and by the five-hundredth rung not at all. But now there were fabulous vistas out over Springer Town and all the Oz country round. From this viewpoint they could see what a funny tall narrow peak Doorknob Mountain really was. Everything was blue-violet and the travelers realized that the mountain probably marked the boundary in that region between the Munchkin and the Gillikin countries.

Then on and upward again. The Scarecrow was bringing up the rear, when near the thousandth rung he happened to glance down. "Yikes!" he shrieked. "Look there!"

The girls got a firm purchase, then inclined their heads. "Dear, oh dear," gasped the little queen. "'Vanishing' is right. I didn't realize there were to be this many forms of vanishing." From about twenty rungs below where they clung the ladder 'steps' were invisible.

"Let's pretend they're really still there," suggested Dorothy; "we just can't see them. Obscured by the curvature of the earth, or something."

"That may indeed be best for our peace of mind," admitted Ozma and climbed on.

Of course the climbers had observed from the word Go that the ladder was woven of thick silver fibres. They were not prepared though for the wonderful changes that the silver ropes

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and bars would undergo the further up into the heavens they climbed. The silver strands seemed to become transparent and now when errant sunbeams struck the ladder it gleamed like crystal or sparkled in rainbow colors.

Fatigue began to make itself felt. Not with the tireless Scarecrow, of course, but the girls after a measured strength-conserving clamber of an hour knew that despite all husbanding of energy they could not go on much longer. Every moment they thought would be their last—because they would get where they were going and could rest! Not a bit of it. The climb went monotonously on and on, unvaryingly.

Dorothy screamed faintly and let go. She had reached that point where the living organism, clinging fervently, desperately, to life, has to relax its hold and fall to its doom. The ladder relented: the plucky Kansas girl saw that the very next rung above her was a plank: She dragged herself up onto it, and could sit!

The others joined her there and the three sat squashed together, the Scarecrow offering comfort rather than needing any relief himself, for half an hour. After that they could go on. And each time either girl came to the exact end of her tether a sitting-plank would appear in the succession of silver rungs, and they would seize sweet respite.

Nor was exhaustion the only hazard. A certain tempo for their climb seemed dictated. As long as they kept on at a 'prescribed' rate the vanishment of the rungs lower down stayed at a fixed twenty levels below them. And apparently the rest-period planks were a 'free zone': as long as they stayed there the visible lower twenty rungs did not shorten. But once the Scarecrow who brought up the rear looked down to see that the space of grace had decreased to eighteen rungs. Then every quarter of an hour they lost one more rung.

The climbers did not spend much time looking upward to see where they were going. They were always headed into mere cloud which always seemed to hang there, a hundred feet above, no matter how high they climbed.

Now there came a change. They caught up with the cloud layer and climbed through woolly whiteness. This was consoling in one way, as blotting out the dizzy depths below, but dangerous in another, as disorienting the strugglers more than ever.

Surcease came at last. Half an hour's cloud-climbing brought them to a regular platform, beyond which rose a flight of steps. So much for your Spiraling 'Stairway'! This was the only part of the ascent that was anything like a staircase. The comrades mustered the strength to scramble to the top.

The awfulness was over. Here was a monumental gateway in wrought silver and beside it hung a big silver summoning bell-pull. Queen Ozma tugged for all she was worth. Slowly the great double gatewings swung open. The travelers had reached the confines of the Cloud Kingdom. Or was it Cloud-Cuckooland?

The three made no pretense of doing anything but flopping down in the big white cotton-battingly cushion clouds and going to sleep—all those who could. But repose was not long. The Scarecrow, sitting guard, plucked the sleepers awake. "Look!" he whispered.

In the far distance had appeared three silver dots that appeared to be moving rapidly. A few minutes revealed the dots to be cloud horses, racing with the wind and ridden by small silver elf-like creatures. These, as the voyagers were soon to learn, were Silverlings, the only sort of 'people' the cloud kingdom afforded.

Now the tensely expectant Ozites could see that two of the silver beings carried lances and the third a large silver net. They were heading straight for the gate at breakneck speed, yet not so fast but what the waiting ones had time to wonder why the horses were not flying, as each was equipped with wings like Pegasus. The wondering stopped short when all three stallions rose in the air and circled over the newcomers with a roar of beating wings.

It was too much for the flimsy Scarecrow, who was whirled

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away into the distance and plummeted out of sight into a clouddrift. The weightier earth maidens could only shriek and cling together.

The net-bearer with a skillful cast slung his web over and about the cowering duo. The two with lances thrust them through the lines and hollered, "Catch hold!" The girls could see instantly there was no use in struggling. If each caught a lance under her elbows she might be borne away in relative dignity, rather than riding possibly upside down entwined in the meshes.

"Why are you doing this to us?" Ozma found breath to scream. "We come in perfect peace to beg a boon!"

The net-elf replied in what could indeed not be faulted as a coarse or impertinent tone: "His Royal Skyness, the King of the Clouds, has ordered your capture. You are to be brought before His Majesty in the Cloud Castle."

"But I," Ozma yelled on, "am as royal as he. I can not suffer myself to be treated like rude cargo. I can perfectly well *walk* into the Cloud King's presence. Release me, I say!"

"Sorry, ma'am. You could never walk over this cloud surface. Only silverlings can cope with that. You'd never make it, honestly as you might try. Believe me: this is the best way."

So saying, the horse-elves raised high the tangle of net on their lance ends and, in close formation, prodded their steeds aloft. But Ozma was far from content. "Wait! wait!" she shrieked on. "Our companion, the worthy Scarecrow! He must not be left behind!"

"We come with no instructions about hay-bags," retorted one of the lancers.

And away they went, riding up the sky.

Over the clouds they flew. It might have been quite exhilarating if one hadn't been so depressed. Ozma could hardly reply to her captors' mild efforts to be conciliating. They made conversation about the weather ("Fair and cloudy") to try to put their captives at ease. As the girls maintained a stubborn silence, the net-thrower finally said:

"For myself, I'd let you go if I could. It would be my mass though if I did that: melted totally to become a bar of silver in the royal treasury. Of course that's where we come from in the first place: spun out of solid silver at the royal silversmithy but nobody likes to retreat to the womb untimely."

The Oz queen in turn was melted a little by this speech. "Never mind. Ride on. We don't choose to be responsible for the deliquescing of inferiors. Such, however, is never the practice in *our* realm. What sort of monster can this Cloud King be?" The question was only rhetorical.

Back and forth, from side to side, swayed the ladies as if within a giant enclosed hammock, as they rode across the cloudscape. The journey went on for a long time. 'I had no idea the Cloud Kingdom was of such wide extent,' thought the earth queen, forgetting that the dominion of the upper air was not like her own land: of fixed boundaries, but waxed and waned with the weather.

Still, all bad things must come to an end and now before the eyes of the trussed travelers rose the battlements of the Cloud Capital in all their splendor and glory. 'Gosh,' thought Dorothy, 'this place is as grand in its way as the Emerald City. Fantastic! Not so substantial-seeming, perhaps, but really, you know, prettier! Let's face it: the Emerald City *is* rather monotonously green. But this town is every color of the rainbow. And what could be more logical?: a rainbow city amidst the clouds!' The central stronghold of the Cloud King's capital might be built of spun silver but here in the outskirts everything was cellophane and nothing more glamorous was ever seen than sunlight striking

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through thin sheets of transparent cellulose of every imaginable hue. The streets were paved in layers of blue cellophane. The buildings were of cellophane 'balloons' cunningly fitted together. Windows were of clear cellophane, roofs aped tiles in red cellophane, there was even 'grass' of thin shredded green cellophane, and what look for all the world like natural flowers in every cellophane shade.

Their captors had freed the earth girls from their constraints and allowed them to enter the city gates and proceed along the streets under their own power. Why they didn't break through the cellophane sidewalks the visitors never understood—but they did not.

The streets were busy with cloud 'people' going about their tasks. These appeared to be all of one general sex and, indeed, when everybody was 'born' of silver filigree in a furnace, what need of gender distinctions? Otherwise, the silverlings seemed to be and behave like humans generally. They gaped at the newcomers with normal curiosity, stopping in their daily tasks of sweeping stardust off their porches or looking over the rainbow trout at the fishmonger's or carrying moonbeams home in jars.

The armed guard remained on alert duty to each side of the captive visitors. They did not actually prod them with their lances but neither did they brook delay when the two earthlings, captivated despite themselves, seemed inclined to stop and watch, or even speak to, the natives.

At last the party arrived before the great castle/palace. This was altogether a more sombre structure than anything they had seen in the prismatical parts of town. Little was to be sensed of the silver splendor within. The great walls looked to be built of dense grey fog encased in the cellophane/balloon bricks peculiar to Cloudland architecture, and each turret was topped with a brooding black cloud similarly sealed up. The only note of color was, in the castle courtyard, three yellow cellophane banners that flapped in the breeze. Each flag bore a large scarlet letter: 'W', 'K', 'C'.

“Welkin King of Clouds’,” explained the net-bearer gruffly.

The entrance into the castle proper was almost as impressive to the newcomers as the first sight of the city itself. Once they were inside every prospect pleased. The furnishings were of the finest, rare tapestries graced the beaten-silver walls, and on stands, in display cases, and depending from the ceilings were rare works of art and sculpture. But think of Princess Ozma’s horror when, as focal point of the longer wall in one particularly sumptuous chamber, she gazed upon her own Magic Picture!

The queen shuddered and stopped in her tracks. “It’s all true then,” she gasped: “the very worst we feared.”

“Move along there,” barked a lancer and gestured meaningfully with his weapon.

Forgetting her royal dignity and even her manly past as a boy, the Princess broke down and sobbed all the rest of the way to King Welkin’s audience chamber.

Then there was an odd little passage—just as the captives walked forward along the broadest big passage they had seen yet. At its end rose a grandiose doorway. The girls were marching ahead, ever urged onward by the menacing lances behind them. Something: an unexpected hush? caused Dorothy to look round. They were alone!

“Oh, thank goodness,” cried the girl. “What a relief.”

“What is it?” murmured Ozma raising sob-soaked eyes. Dorothy gestured.

“Isn’t that strange!” they sighed together. And Dorothy: “Dearest, do you think we could make a break for it?”

“Not a chance, I shouldn’t think. They’d never have left us if there was any way to go but on. Come.” The girl queen seized her chum’s arm in a fond but nearly desperate clutch. “Let’s get it over with.”

The pair moved on again. And slowness would serve nothing. They almost sped along the hall. As they came up to the great double doors these silently fell open.

It was the magnificent Hall of the Throne. But King Welkin

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was not perched, in usual Oz fashion, on his throne. After all, this was not, strictly speaking, contiguous Oz; customs could vary. No, the Cloud King, in a silver brocade dressing gown, was lounging chastely on a chaise longue.

"Aha, my dears! there you are," he boomed out heartily. "Do come in, I pray you—and kneel just there at my feet."

"Feet, sheet!" blurted young Dorothy rudely. "We'll do nothing of the sort."

"Shush, sweetings," pleaded Ozma. "I'll handle this. Sirrah!" she cried—louder. "I come against my will into your presence, the never defeated Princess of an independent realm. It is not fit that I should bend the knee to anyone."

"Oh, well, just as you will." The king waved the show of spunk aside with a careless gesture. "But just in case you were thinking of ever getting a certain green city back again..." He let the thought dangle. "Come. I want to show you something." He rose languidly and passed beside the unwilling visitors to the doors of the chamber.

His victims followed willy-nilly. The way led back to that imposing salon where the girls had seen the Magic Picture hanging.

"Behold," bragged Welkin: "my marvelous picture that rumor has it once hung somewhere in your own dwelling."

Both earthlings were crying now. Was there never to be an end to the indignities? and them so utterly undeserved. It was most miserable to experience—and not all that much fun to read about either.

Shame prevented the pair from looking where King Welkin's hand directed at first—but curiosity forced them to lift their eyes at last. "Picture," muttered the king, "do not pause for pity. Show us now the Emerald City."

The bland anonymous landscape (not unskillfully painted, however) that always met the first glance of anyone examining the canvas now blurred and ran together in rippling greenish swirls. When the blur had cleared the Ozites saw the outlines of a once great capital, now sacked and ruined, despoiled of every

precious stone that had formerly made it magnificent and world-renowned. Indeed, the princesses could scarcely recognize the ghost city as a place where they had reigned and dwelt for so many happy years.

Princess Ozma fell on her knees, not in genuflection, but just out of disgust, despair, and general exhaustion. Princess Dorothy was not far from following her to the floor. The King of Clouds gloated.

"Ah, you do bend the knee after all," he beamed in gratification, deliberately misreading motives. "That will do nicely."

Dorothy flared up. "You dreadful—well, you're not a man, either in substance or worthiness—you dreadful creature. Princess Ozma will never, ever, forgive you."

The jovial monarch's face fell. Then he rallied: "Well, never mind—as long as you do my bidding."

Both girls looked up. Bidding? What further acts were required of them? now that they had reached the ultimate degradation.

"Why, yes," went on the king. "That is, if you still entertain any hopes of being given a certain Emerald City as a present."

What horrors had he still in store for them? They must hear the worst.

"It's like this," instructed King Welkin. "The Dorothy girl is to be my personal handmaiden and attendant for the next fifty years. The so-called Queen of Oz shall have lighter duties. She need but polish my boots every day for the same period of time."

Ozma surprised them both. "Very well. If you will promise—and by an oath that cannot be broken—to return, unchanged from their former glory, my Emerald City and my Palace of Magic to my people... I surrender."