CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Mombi was overdoing it a bit. Since she had discovered how popular it made her being good she went overboard and in the pouring rain was evincing such softheartedness that practically everybody was feeling sick. "How attractive the children were!" she lied. "How worn-out, misshapen, and dirty they are as shoes," she grieved.

"By the way," said Floraline, "where are the tots?"

"They were such darlings," remembered the witch. In this case her memory could be equated with her imagination since she had been cognizant of Jimmy and Sarah's existence fully a minute before she turned them into boots.

"I think in the excitement they got left beside the willow brook," vouchsafed Garth.

"Dern tootin' they did," said Mombi in an aside. "What use did I have of them after you carved me these nifty wooden shoes?" Then she went back to her self-flagellation: "I reproach myself for not having been patient," she, sighed. "After all, if they are really mature adults must be patient with children. How could I have allowed my maturity to be broken, even pierced, by Jimmy's (was that his name?) behavior? Nay, worse: how could I have been so arrogant, so insensitive?"

It was when she directed the latter question to herself that

Mombi broke down. Meanwhile the group were making their blundersome way through the woods in the midst of a renewed downpour. It didn't seem to be a Witch's Storm this time. Mombi was too busy producing oily tears out of her eye-holes to be able to take charge of any larger-scale precipitations.

They had left the shelter of Garth's kitchen and house after the oil sorceress in a bout of contrition suddenly called to mind the children she had done so ill by. "Yipe," she barked. "Where are those boot tots?!" and had started up, determined to make right her wrong. Out they all burst in the darkening afternoon and plunged into the thickest of the forest outside Garth's door.

"We must rescue them from their suffering!" she declared —and that was pretty much what the two fairies and Tik-Tok had in mind as well. Only, where to look? aside from the obvious place, the brook bank. So they headed in that direction.

Each of the members of the party in turn felt constrained to come to Mombi to try to console the remorseful one. "Mombi dearest," said Garth, as he had come to call the wind witch—and without having to be beaten with wire coat-hangers—"you mustn't blame yourself."

Her only reply was further sighs. Then she decided to make up for the wrong she had done Sarah and Jimmy. She would do something to make them happy, something that would make them forgive her.

"You know, I'm be-gin-ning to think she means it," said Tik-Tok. "Most odd."

"Only, what will it be?" pondered the witch.

"You'll realize when the time comes," assured Mombi's dear close friend when she revealed her intention. "First, though, we have to find them. Then when you've turned them back into their rightful forms they will be able to tell you themselves what would make them happy."

"Yes, Mombi," put in Floraline. "Try to control yourself, my friend. Every minute that we have to spend comforting you is a minute more that the poor little ones have to pass alone and fearful in the forest. We must get to them as soon as possible."

Dementia said nothing but "Oh, look at that bolt of lightning! Isn't it brilliant!" But otherwise the beauty of the darkling wood in the threatening storm was hardly being perceived by the plunging party. Only the two fairies would now and then whisper a bit about the wondrous greenness of their surroundings which they were penetrating for the first time ever. "It's quite like Burzee, isn't it?" opined Floraline and both the fays felt a twinge of homesickness.

Their remarks only brought looks of reproach from Mombi. "How can you admire the beauty of the woods when we're all just sick with worry over the fate of the two dear strays?" she wanted to know. "How can you think of landscapes when the poor children are cold and dirty and crawling with insects?" By now Mombi's imagination had gone into free fall.

Floraline bridled and retorted, "We care about the children too, don't you doubt that! We too are worried about them and want to find them. But our consciences are clean. That may be a reason why we can still take an interest in our surroundings and enjoy being alive. Their ordeal is not our fault."

"Hmm," muttered the witch and began to find out about the dull part of being conscience-ridden and concerned about one's misdeeds. She had thought she was going to enjoy being good for a change but all this remorse was getting boring.

Now Tik-Tok got back into the act. He said, "Let us try to keep calm, la-dies. We will not help the chil-dren or our-selves by quar-rel-ing."

So hearing, the searchers hastened onward through the rain and now in the early-gathering dusk the wind witch and the metal man could see that they were once more close to the spot where the discarded boots had been, all unthinking, left behind in the commotion occasioned by the approach of the requital-seeking travelers from Oz. "This is the place," alerted Garth of a sudden.

Well, almost the place. Actually the slant-growing willow was now an island in a roaring flood. The oil storm of the morning, followed by the present near-cloudburst, had swollen all water

channels to spate. Where two out-trodden boots had lain was now four feet under water. The rescue party could only stand on the bank and gape.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Scraps was being irrepressible. This was the second day of our grueling return march toward the Emerald City and the Patchwork Girl wouldn't be repressed. We wished she would, rather. Why couldn't she leave us to be merely dismayed and alarmed for the future of Oz? and of the world, for that matter.

She sang: "Away to Ozma, there to give
the wondrous news we bring:
all problems solved and nothing left
for us to do but sing."

"Shi'ite said Dorothy, borrowing a leaf from the Sanduskyites' book, and gave a number to a close-crowding fellow traveler upon the road who attempted to take a liberty with her. It was not sixes or sevens she gave either but a rabbit punch to render numb the non-Ozite who, spotting the nubile Kansas teen-ager, thought he fancied a bit of the crispy. "You can't even walk along the yellow brick road without getting insulted," said the girl, using a quaint old-world expression for 'practically raped'. "It's not the Oz I knew a century ago."

The Patchwork Girl drooped. "You're right," she confessed. "Even I got accosted there back a ways. Wonder how he thought he was gonna cut the mustard." It was a question in logistics that stimulated Scraps' lively mind. "Just the same I didn't like

it. And to think everything is just going to get more so in the world of the future. You know, world population now stands at six billion. In thirty-four years it'll be twelve billion. And Oz is bound to get the overspill."

"'Tis very grievous to be thought upon," quoted Dorothy. "It will be up to Ozma to take steps about it." That was a plus about not having been elected ruler of Oz herself. "It was very wise and noble of the dear Princess to miniaturize all living things in the fairy-land. That made plenty of room for more creatures to crowd into Oz. And, boy, have they crowded. But it's not good. We seem to have attracted an undesirable element. All this demonstrating and going on strike and the like. It's most un-Ozian—"

"Worse than that, it's boring," pronounced the Patchwork Girl."

"And also, alas, dear Princess," put in the Wizard, "it is inexact. Such disagreeable behavior is simply the result of overcrowding. Put the most adorable rats in the world in a cage with too many and they'll commence biting each other. All this antisocial behavior is just the way creatures *do* when there are too many of them."

"Well, then," decided the Kansas girl, "Ozma will just have to get rid of them."

"Hmm," wondered the Wizard. "After having gone on record as favoring the miniaturization solution our dear ruler may have to think four or five times before she admits it was all a mistake."

"But, Wizard," said Dorothy sagely, "do you think it is intelligent to let every nice place in the world get overrun and totally spoiled before *then* deciding there are too many people and doing something about it? What about saving *one* spot: Oz, while there is still some grace and amenity left to it?"

"I'm of your view completely," said O.Z. Diggs. Meanwhile a mob of Malcontents surging toward them along the road was blocking the way. As it happened, this mob had just at this time grown to crisis point, where the disorganized cries of "Down

with this and that" gave way to a concerted intention to "do something about it". The first thing they did was recognize the famous Wizard of Oz and the equally familiar-looking Patchwork Girl and take them as hostages. "Wow," said one who was a ringleader; "with hostages we can do a whole lot more! Let's not mess around. Let's march on the Emerald City and demand our rights. If they won't grant them we'll set fire to the Patchwork Girl and roast the old wizard on a spit."

"Oh, grand," cried all the rest and turned about and carried the lot of us, protesting and resisting, onward toward the capital, though not quite in the fashion we had envisioned at our start. For a long day we tramped and in very awkward wise: with our arms bound behind our backs.

That night they obliged the Wizard to create a tent city to house them all on a bit of waste ground not far from the Winkie River. Oh, the torments. We were not even allowed to brush our teeth before going to bed.

Next day on again along the dusty road. Further hostages were picked up wherever opportunity afforded. Some poor victims were even tortured—and torture in Oz is worse than anywhere else because no one can die and so the agony lasts forever.

But late that afternoon an amelioration occurred. At a major crossroads the insurgent mob ran up against another army of malcontents. This proved to be native Ozites who were fed to the teeth at the marauding of the masses of aliens who had come to Oz apparently only to make trouble. With pitchforks and knitting needles they were marching on the Emerald City to register a protest with Ozma at the numbers of wayward girls and boys who were making life in Oz a misery for your Ozite in the street.

A pitched battle took place. Heads rolled but unfortunately did not spell the death of those involved. Later, heads were picked up and jammed back on bodies that went right on living but it was most disconcerting to some eyes to look down on swelling breasts where formerly they had surveyed a flat brawny

chest. But never mind. It was all Oz and just wonderful. Even so, the result of the battle was a nasty mess, and by now it was night.

As I was led away to a prisoner-of-war compound I fell in beside a six-foot blond bruiser I took to be one of the malcontents who had been holding us prisoners. He was obviously an outlander. No bite-size Munchkin or Winkie this. I was inclined to sulk. I started rather when he suddenly said, "You look like a brother of mine—if he's turned into a ninety-pound weakling."

"Thanks a lot." In the half light I cast a glance. "Come to think of it, you look like a brother of *mine* the way he looked in 1970. But that's nonsense of course. He died in 1993 and was by then sadly far removed from his appearance as in his days of glory: paralyzed on the left and weighing over three hundred pounds." I gave a gulp, recalling days happier and lost.

The man stuck out his hand. "Eldest oyster?" he said, and looked a searching question.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The next day they tried again. The flood waters had considerably receded when and where Mombi cried, "There's the willow that grows aslant the brook—and what remains of the branch you cut to carve my shoes, dear." She sent a loving look Garth's way.

But alas, not a boot could be seen. Well, that was to be expected. It would have been a stubborn shoe that resisted the spating flow of yesterday. Just the same the search party looked carefully among the half-drowned and bedraggled flowers and weeds, the daffodils, wild roses, geraniums, orchids, and carnations that still clung to life amid the froth and wrack beside the brook.

When those yielded no clues Tik-Tok made the suggestion that Mombi whirl up (in her dust-deviless mode) into the topmost branch of the willow find do a dekko from there. She did, and spied far and wide. No dice. Then it was that the witch had an additional small weeping fit.

The others all stood along the nearest shore and gaped. "What now, dear one?" wondered Garth and waded into the water in an impulsive gesture to approach and comfort his love.

"Get back!" cried the wind witch. "No use having to list you as a casualty too: going rusty in the water. Remember how many

hours we worked last night drying and oiling you after your exposure to that rain. And that was just drops."

Shamefast, the metal man retreated to dry ground. But just the same he said, "We entreat you: tell us why you are carrying on like that. You can't see the boots from up there?"

"Nary a boot!" boothooted Mombi. "What's more, I think they could be miles downstream and buried full fathoms five." She moaned.

Garth made another emotion-swayed move to approach her. Then, so as to put a stop to his nonsense, the witch descended from the tree and breezed lightly to the shore. Garth took her in his arms. "Ow," said Mombi at the pressure of a steel elbow. Then she dropped everything to blow her nose.

Garth took advantage of the tiny lull to say, "If indeed those kid boots have sunk to some lower watery depths, you have the power to lay all bare. Do your stuff magically, my girl."

Mombi, for whom Garth's word had become law, replied, "That's right! How twitty I am to have forgotten that I can help other ways than just by weeping and wailing."

While all her friends looked on admiringly the sorceress made passes, intoned witching words, and behold: the swollen brook became an upside-down waterfall, turning abruptly in its flow to gush straight up into the now faultless (and for a bit well rain-washed) blue sky. Quickly the watchers on the bank darted past the fall and ran along the shore downstream, searching the now bare-laid creek-bed where only stones and sand remained, together with certain limp subacquaceous riverine plants.

They scampered on for perhaps a quarter of a mile but found nothing bootlike for their pains. Then Floraline had a thought. "Mombi," she said reflectively, "would you let the water column drop back into the bed little by little so we can check that the footwear hasn't been dragged along skyward by the uprushing waters?"

"Well thought upon," said Mombi and did as she was asked.

Watching a by-now mile's worth of brook rain down again,

liberally splashing them all, was tedious work but the devoted rescuers persevered. Their efforts availed them nothing.

"I'm convinced," quoth little Dementia, who wasn't all that scatty really, "the tots aren't in the river. I wonder... *if* they had washed ashore somewhere—and if somebody happened to have found them—they could be anywhere!'

"Oh, that's a big help," said Garth. He could not, however, fault the pixy's logic. Somehow those two were thrown together rather more than heretofore as the entire party spent the remainder of the long day in fanning out from both sides of the creek and for miles downstream, searching every rabbit hole and concealed cranny for a spot where at any rate one boot might have lodged. They asked every forest creature they came across too but nobody had seen hide or thread of any unfamiliar person-shoes. They had all been too busy hunting higher ground when the flood came to spare time for noting floating debris.

Next day same thing. And the next. But then luck turned. As they were searching yet a new forest glade ten miles from their starting point Dementia's attention was attracted to a squirrel who flirted across a corner of the clearing. The fairy saw that the little animal wore a tiny bright blue flower behind an ear.

"I want to talk to that squirrel," she said to Garth, who again happened to be near her. "Will you take me to it?" The fairies had gradually come to know of the tin man's intimacy with woodland creatures, particularly squirrels. "Please?" continued Dementia. "That pretty shade of blue reminds me of something. It's so unusual."

"A blue squirrel? I think I saw the animal you mean and I can assure you, little lady, it was brownish grey, not blue."

"Oh, silly," retorted the pixy with spirit. "I know we're not in Munchkinland. Of course that squirreling wasn't blue. I referred to the tiny flower or rosette it was wearing behind its ear. Did you see that?"

"No. Maybe I'm too metallic to be able to discern shapes that small. And yet *you* can see them and even make out different color shades. Oh, the power of pixy eyes," he marveled

praisingly.

"Mr. Garth, please, let's follow that squirrel. I just love that hue of blue. Maybe it will let me have the flower—if it was a flower."

Floraline happened to be eavesdropping and inserted, "Aren't you being a bit insensitive, Dementia, to think of favored colors and the desire for flower souvenirs when the lost children are still lost?" As she spoke the lead fairy made much of continuing, herself, to push aside plant tendrils and stalks in search of shoe traces.

"Maybe," admitted the green-blue pixy. Then she confessed her noble motivation. "But the thing is: you know I'm color conscious. Just in the moments we glimpsed her before she tragically turned into a boot I noted that young Sarah's dress was of a particular and striking electric blue: exactly the shade of the little squirrel's ear decor. Maybe, just maybe ...maybe I'm an imaginative fool!" she ended and began to pout seriously.

"No, you're not!" backtracked her fellow fay. "And maybe, just maybe, I ought to mind my own business once in a while. Friend Garth—"; she turned; "will you go with Dementia to interview that fugitive squirrel?"

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

"This is parlous news indeed."

"Whu' dat, boss man?"

"You remember! That's a 'quotable quote'—or a 'thing we say'. That's how I greeted you the first time I saw you, at Bay Pines after your stroke, back in seventy-one. You seemed to savor the word 'parlous' ."

"It's okay. But—va' är det för nyhet? It's been seven years."

"Since you came here? Yes, but I only just arrived. We haven't met in the interim."

"So you're dead too?"

"I guess. It's the only way I know of for certifiably existing people to come to Oz. It's queer though. I don't exactly feel dead—and I was living to be 118."

"You look it already. I wonder..."

"Oh, well, thanks. Just as long as I *look* 118, who cares if I am it? Never mind; I looked eighty when I was fifty. It goes with the job of being me."

"I wonder."

"You said that. What do you wonder?"

"Well, see me. You more or less look the age you are. But I..."

"Yes, you've gone back to your glanstid."

"?"

"You know: Swedish. Or maybe it's more Danish. Or both. 'Time of gleaming'. The period when one was at one's best: heyday, golden age."

"Thanks."

"Oh, no credit to me. It's just a statement of fact. You look about forty-five, and trim to boot. You were getting on for 'beached whale' there at the last."

"Thanks."

"Statement of fact... Yeah: you've... 'mellowed'. In other ways too. Back then you'd blow your top any time anybody said anything that didn't fit your self-image."

"I guess a guy faces facts at the last."

"Oh, this is great! You—I mean 'one'—can really talk to you again at last. You don't know how I missed it."

"Don't slop over."

"We ought to have slopped over more. Why is it men—or Americans—or both—have all the time got to *not* say what they're feeling?—unless it's something disagreeable."

"The macho image."

"Oh, futt that! What the heck difference does macho make? It's being a warm sentient considerate human being that matters."

"Don't slop over."

"There *was* plenty of it when you... left. You should have seen the sobs and tears. People that hadn't cried in years took their tears out of mothballs."

"I know."

"What? Do you mean...? Fascinating! Somebody being gathered to his ancestors gets a look at what he's leaving behind?"

"You ought to know."

"That's the funny part: I don't. One minute I was just lying in bed and the next: Ozma and Dot were arriving to take me on this junket. I wonder..."

"That's my line."

"What did you see? I mean, after the crucial moment?"

"I saw the corpus delicti—and then people coming and

going—"

"Not anything... awful? Say it isn't so!"

"No trips to the undertaker if that's what you mean. I get the impression kicking off excises the grim bits. Now you just witness what matters: people caring, the odd good memory recalled, some shining hours—unmarred..."

"'Beyond all pain, beyond all sorrow'?"

"Yeah. That's well expressed. Who said it?"

"You did. In *Earthblood*, remember? 'The fair one is gone away, Roan. Now she dances before the most high—beyond... I had a good sob the first time I read that."

"Good for you. There was some enjoyable sobbing at the ceremony, I noticed."

"The memorial gathering?! at your place that evening?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm glad! Everybody there hoped that—without much really expecting it. So you heard Bum? and that wonderful weepy quotation: how does it go?: 'All those shadowy peoples of the past who loved and lost as we have loved. Surely there is some place beyond, where all the love we lost in life is given back—and given back forever.' Ineffable—even if it is just from some 'Victorian novel' ."

"Your quote from *Spoon River* wasn't any slouch either."

"Oh: 'The echoes about the vales bring dreams of life.. Where are those laughing comrades?...' I was frightfully touched when somebody said you'd known that verse by heart too. I've always loved it so much. What a shame I never knew..."

"We leave the most important things unsaid in life."

"Mm-hmh. That's par for the course. I remember once Mom said—"

"How is the old lady?"

"Fine. Still going strong—at ninety-eight. Her memory's in tatters, but otherwise... By the way, speaking of sobs and tears: did you see her at the time?"

"I forget."

"You couldn't. *There* were hysterics, if you like. The worst

came one night at bedtime when I was saying good-night and she had a screaming jag: 'Oh, my baby... my Donnie!! I can't *stand* it!' she yelled."

"Stop it!"

"It was terrible. You couldn't have forgotten it if you were there. But you know, in a queer way I lapped it up. I thought at the time: if there's ever a moment that someone is truly alive it is when he's in a paroxysm of honest generous loving grief for someone lost. It's what ever being alive at all is all about. Everything shallow and selfish scorched away and just pure love remaining. It was awesome to be witness to—and I was grateful."

"Lucky you."

"You're not scoffing. And then there was another time. I told her I was going to be talking to you—meaning this book, eventually—and was there anything she wanted to say to you? She said, 'Oh, I'd tell him so many things...' Pure sweet fondness. But she never went on to say what they were."

"'This book'?"

"Yes. And that's another thing. Isn't it ironic? Do you remember?: I once read you the first two chapters of this and you broke me off, said, 'It's vile. Tear it up'!"

"It was vile."

"You don't mean that. What you mean is: it's too close to the bone. It says something real. And in your fugue from reality, into the extravagances of science fiction, you had to keep from saying anything about real life."

"Oh, is that what I mean?"

"Yes. In reality, you were the greatest romantic of them all. But you professed to spurn romance. It wasn't sufficiently macho."

"Shit."

"It's true though. And yet, romance will save the world—as I announced in my trilogy of that name. If people can forget about money and machismo and go back to following the grail in search of that which is noble and remote and desirable and nostalgic and lost the world will be saved."

"Oh, super."

"You know it's so. The plot of every one of your novels, though you cursed me when I said it, is 'Hard-bitten loner saves the world single-handed.' It's the most romantic plot in the world... And now here you are, leading this quixotic quest of the Winkies to cast out the foul—and out-numbering—usurpers and to restore the dreamland to its old beauty and graciousness. You—one—doesn't get more romantic than that."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The tin man took the little pixy girl by the hand and they set off. In fact they hadn't far to go before Dementia could exclaim, "There's the animal I saw! There, up on that branch. No, more to the left! See? Oh, dear, now she's ducked out of sight. Dear Garth, please try to control the squeaking of your knees. I think that's what scared her."

All Garth could do was slow his pace and walk stiff-legged so as to reduce knee noise. He also began to repeat "Hello" in a friendly voice. That had always in the past been enough to lure squirrel pals to him by the score. *They* knew the weird "cry of tin" coming from the metal man's joints foreboded no malice.

Now suddenly a different squirrel, larger than the blue-decked female, made an appearance and greeted the pursuers with some garrulity. "Hello, hello! What have we here?! A metal man and a charming young pixy! And it looks mighty like you're chasing my Nutella. My, my, *that*'s a new experience for her! She's never been chased by a metal man before. In fact she's never seen a metal man before—"

"No," Garth finally broke in. "I've never seen you two before either, though I have plenty of squirrel friends in the forest. I live eight or ten miles away, in the metal men's village. Don't you ever get over there?"

"Oh, no," said the squirrel. "We're homebodies. Just stay close to home and tend our business, which is raising our brood of young ones. You should see them. There's a lively and attractive pair for you if you like!"

"I'm sure we'd like to. And in return we can show you another metal man: different shape and color but metal pure through. He's around here somewhere. But first, if we could meet your friend..."

"That's not my friend," corrected the male squirrel. "That's my wife!"

"That's right!" squeaked the voice of a girl squirrel and now the sought-after female head with that patch of blue appeared from around the bole of a water oak, high up. Then two more tiny furry heads were also seen. One of these as well sported a minute fragment of decorative blue. "Are you safe to know?! Oh, I'm so glad. I overheard what you were saying and thought it would indeed be fun to get acquainted. Only, it's a pity you're so big," the squirrel wife lamented. "Otherwise we would be delighted to invite you into our home."

Gaining every moment in audacity from the tin man's obvious peaceableness and the lure of the charms of the pretty pixy, the little squirrel family ventured fully forth and down the tree stem. The whole family seemed struck by the beauty of the little (but to them enormous) immortal. They all moved yet nearer, nay, even reached out to touch.

"Don't worry about bigness," advised Dementia forth-rightly. "My shape's not fixed. I can change it at will." So saying she shrank alarmingly in a trice to be just shoulder high to the pater familias.

"Ooh!" gasped all the squirrels. And, "Oh, mama," cried the two young ones, "please!, 'in, please! bring her to our house!"

"Indeed," said the fay, "I should be strangely moved to be afforded a glimpse inside your home."

"Oh, mama, papa," the twins (for such they were) clamored on, "it would be marvelous to have her at our home and to play with her!"

The mother squirrel looked at her mate and he did not delay in expressing in well chosen words his willingness, even eagerness, to receive the visit of the blue-green pixy. "Bring your friend to our house!" he urged the tin man. "Follow us!" And lined up like ducks the four furries scampered away through the woods.

All in good time the party reached another, more gnarled and ancient oak of enormous trunk, that grew farther on, down on the shore of the brook.

"You won't be able to come in... the mother squirrel, Nutella, explained apologetically to Garth. "It's a bit too far up to our home hole and you're too big. But the dear fairy girl may come," and here she fluttered her eyelids invitingly to the (now really) little Dementia, who was not slow in batting her pixy wings and wavering to the high oak crotch in pursuit of the up-scampering rodents.

From then on Garth had to experience all at second hand as Dementia called down discoveries. "The boot on the left we use for Flicker, our little girl," the mother was explaining, "and that on the right is Quicker's."

Dementia, half in, half out of, the largish entrance hole in the oak, exclaimed: "Aren't you clever! Think of using battered old boots as separate cribs for your babies. So practical! How did you ever come to do so? Loose shoes aren't that common a phenomenon in a forest."

"Too true," agreed Nutella. "We were astonished ourselves at the fortunate find. We've only had them for three days. We found them hanging tangled in the reeds near the very foot of our tree one morning right after that awful storm and high water."

Down below the squirrel father was enlarging to Garth. "At first we didn't know how we'd get them up into our nest, though we saw at once they'd be perfect beds for our two. We were lucky again in that a couple of raven friends happened to be in our neck of the woods just then. They soon joined up to seize a bootlace each and in two brisk trips they had the boots up and tipped in through our front door."

And Nutella: "The children helped. It was they who lined the new cribs with moss and padded them with leaves, to make really comfy beds."

"Weren't they awfully wet? The boots, I mean," put in the thoughtful pixy.

"Not that bad," demurred the mother. "It looked as if they had caught in the reeds exactly by being upside-down and subsiding, with the water, over the broken-off stumps of two luckily placed plants. We figure they'd already had a day to drip dry before we found them." Nutella rhapsodized on: "They're made of the smoothest softest leather—though admittedly a bit the worse for wear. Pretty linings too. Quicker's is amber taffeta, as you see, but even more gorgeous is this wonderful blue material. Have you noticed? I just couldn't resist gnawing off two bits of it for rosettes for Flicker and me to wear at our ears—"

"I knew it!" cried Dementia, breaking in. "I knew it. That's the same shade and pattern as the material of the dress Sarah was wearing all during her adventures. I remember thinking at the time that of course she'd be wearing blue just like Judy Garland when she came to Oz. These boots are our friends!"

"Oh, I'm so glad," sighed Nutella, gratified. "We love them too. Already we've got so we couldn't think of parting with them."

"Oh, gracious, I'm afraid you must," protested the pixy. "We don't love them, you see, in the same way you do." ('In fact, I don't know that we love them at all,' she afterwards remembered thinking. 'It's much bigger than that.') "These boots actually are our friends. They were turned into footwear by a wicked spell; they are really a young American boy and girl." Nutella nearly fell out of the oak she was that surprised, even shocked.

"'Part with them'?!" cried Bushy, the father, getting a garbled report of things down below. "No way! The children never had such comfortable beds in their lives. Nothing you can say could make us give up the boots. We found them by the stream and they are ours. Finders keepers! And after we slaved over them,

cleaning them of mud and rubbing them with beeswax and buffing them with our tails—all four of us! No, sir, they are staying right here with us in our home. And by the way, we don't find you welcome here any more. Please go away and leave us in peace!"

Up at the tree hole Dementia was faring little better. The Squirrel twins, feeling threatened, were sheltering behind their mother's haunches. Nutella put paws on hips and echoed forthrightly: "You would deprive my children of their most cherished possessions? and when they've only just got them and the new isn't off? No, never! Go away, the two of you!"

Dementia surprised herself by bursting into tears. After such kindness this had been a dismal thing to do! Send them away in enmity?! She was wounded to her depths. As she retreated out of the squirrel nest raining tears down on sensitive Garth at the oak foot, *he* started crying.

The squirrel family were admittedly touched. They *had* liked the oddly assorted pair of newcomers up until the moment of their unwarranted ultimatum. They softened even more when Garth sobbed: "My first failure! I've never known squirrels before that I didn't get on with. I'm quite famous in my village as 'the friend of the animals'. Why, I have a special jar on my kitchen shelf with nuts for treating my squirrel buddies."

The squirrel foursome got more impressed as Garth grieved on. "I was just now counting the moments till I could meet close up your two kiddies. Young are so rare around Alloya. I've never seen squirrel babies before! and I've always longed to..."

Even Dementia interrupted her tears at this report. She wavered in air and called down: "Garth? You are obliged to be kidding. Never seen a baby squirrel?—you, the great animal lover!?.."

Garth stopped weeping to inform: "I guess I'd got into the way of thinking squirrels were like metal-men: no offspring. But anyway it's true. Even now I've not had a proper look at these little ones—who are so rare..."

"I guess they are pretty rare," said Bushy and buffed his claws

on his chest. "But we *wanted* children—badly—, you see. That's why we deliberately held off eating of the irony berries—"

Garth and Dementia looked, each from his/her direction, big question marks. "Irony berries? What are those?"

Bushy held forth again. "Why, everybody knows the strange and potent irony berries. Leastways, around here. Haven't you noticed those iron-colored shrubs with their rusty berries? They're everywhere; at least, anywhere where the air is bad and the water brackish and polluted. This low-lying part of Ev near the desert has lots of them. Could it be from the dry dusty miasmic breezes blowing in? Because it's true that deep forest regions don't seem to promote their growth. Guess tree foliage purifies the air just that crucial bit. Anyway, off-putting as they look, the tiny fruits have a most seductive taste. No creature can resist them..."

"I can hardly believe I've never heard of such a plant," puzzled Garth, who after all came from not far away. But then he reasoned: "I don't eat! That must account for it. Beings who don't eat don't spend much time talking about food." Had he been more worldy wise the tin man might have gone on to draw the parallels of non-drinkers who don't know much about particular vintages or non-smokers and the relative merits of Virginia and Latakia.

Dementia was more mundane-practical. "What have tasty berries got to do with having young?"

"Nobody knows," inserted Nutella at the oak-hole mouth, "except that if you eat them you don't. And of course if you have ever tasted one you can never again not eat them whenever you can."

"Gee," mused the pixy. "That sounds almost as good as moonbeam soufflé... Have you got any of those berries?" She was starting to drool in ever so ladylike a fashion and knew now she would have to satisfy her curiosity.

"Why, no," admitted the squirrel mother. "But they are so plentiful even squirrels would never think of hoarding any. Here, wait..." Her ultimatum to the two newcomers to make them-

selves scarce apparently forgotten, she popped out of the nest entrance and down the oak, closely followed by her children. “Now, Bushy love, lead our visitors to the nearest stand of the ironies.”

That was about four yards from where they stood and so it was about as many seconds before the blue-green pixy had put a single little chewy-hard berry the size of a blueberry or lingon in her dainty mouth and was savoring away.

“Oh, wow,” she announced. “It’s like maple malted-milk with almond croquante and a faint overtone of orange chocolate... I see what you mean!” In a moment she was gobbling away. Just as well she didn’t plan on having children any time soon.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Things got confused in there. I'm still pretty confused about the sequence of events, but let's see if I can sort them out.

There was the party from Patch making its slow painful (feet, backs, and general tuckered-out-ness) way along the now hundred-times-as-long-seeming road from the cotton kingdom toward the District of Oz. They (we) were moving east-south-easterly and after two days, I think it was, we met up with that awful band of Malcontents who immediately took our puny party prisoners (notwithstanding the power of O.Z. Diggs, the Wizard). Malcontents, Inc., had been advancing south-south-westward out of Gillikinland. The little coup of annexing our bunch only deflected them to the degree that they now marched bee-line on the capital.

Next our horde crossed staffs with the valiant little party of insurgents coming up from the southwest and led by my brother. These people were the first in Oz to throw aside hypocrisy and boldly ask:

'Why the (censored) should they allow the paradise to be sullied by a crowd of evil-natured crapheads intent on merely mucking up what they had not the wit to enjoy?' I concurred wholeheartedly with their enterprise when I heard what it was. I had simply been too pusillanimous, as having-to-be-impartial

author, to say so beforehand—as I freely confessed to Keith. Yes, there he was, a loner, saving Oz single-handed.

He didn't save it much though. He had only a pair of fists and they didn't avail very long. He had no magic power to aid him; well, of words, on the printed page, but what good were they here? His cohort fell, after a spirited battle in which one and another crown got broken.

Now here we all were: oh, I guess a couple of thousand strong, camped outside the gates of the Emerald City and the Guardian of the Gates not about to issue us all green spectacles. The city was under siege.

Inside the palace Queen Ozma consulted with Sorceress Glinda whom she had summoned urgently by two-way wrist radio as soon as the extent of the threat was known. (Funny how I as author knew everything she was doing, but I as character couldn't send her word to let her know what the score was inside the army of the besiegers nor advise her as to any likely policies to follow.)

When the (some of them) warlike Winkies got word by bird messenger of the risk to their beloved ruler they hastily threw together a makeshift army and marched on the besiegers' rear. I guess they regretted the lack of their counterparts from Alternate Oz: those brave souls who in an earlier day had not drawn back from making self-exploding cannons to assist in a rout of Emerald City threateners[§].

This was the situation when Ozma and Glinda in concert threw up a protective shield around the green city and prepared to sit out the siege. There were plenty of kitchen gardens within the area of the old verdant capital city to feed the populace without stint for as long as the siege might last. The protecto-shell was total proof against any other sort of shell the invaders might lob. But what was to be the outcome? The Emerald City had no troops to stage a sortie and attempt to force back the besiegers. All they had was magic, though the fairy and sorceress had plenty of that. Only, they were hamstrung by the

§ See *The Wooden Soldiers of Oz*. Editor's note.

stubborn Princess, who was bound and determined not to give an inch on the once-for-all miniaturization and free-entry-for-all she had once granted anyone who would come to the magic land. She was so noble and pure-minded, poor girl. She just wasn't attuned to how evil the human race was (of course, this doesn't include you, dear reader). Humans would never give up their cherished greed, selfishness, and mercilessness for the benefit of living things in general. ('What?!! *We* stop throwing away half the beef on our plates for the benefit of starving Bosnians or Somalians? You gotta be kidding!')

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The squirrel family followed along meekly as Garth and Dementia (returned to 'life'-size and gingerly holding the much-talked-about boots) made their way back along the water meadows to where Tik-Tok, Floraline, and, high in another tree, Mombi had continued to spend time spying out the locality in search of strayed footwear.

"Mombi?" mother Nutella had said. "Yes, I *think* I've heard of her. Ah, but that was long ago—and in another country. She's not still playing a part in present-day affairs, surely?"

"I'm afraid she did in this one," admitted Garth. "She's turned over a new leaf. Now she's the greatest lady in the world. Of course, I'm prejudiced. But before she—er, went straight she left one or two little bits of unfinished business—and the boots were one of them. One boot—that is, boy—had the bad luck to vex her and quick as a wink she gave him a more immediately useful shape. I think, from all I hear, we can say that he has played a more efficient role since he became a shoe than he ever did in human form. So the fairy ladies here inform me. They had the pleasure of the children's company for many days."

"Check," said Dementia but did not add further to bad reputations.

The three who had been left behind came into view, now

sitting on the river bank and dabbling their feet in the tepid stream: even Tik-Tok, just out of being hail-fellow. Immersion of copper in H_2O was unlikely to have any directly beneficial effect. It appeared they were having a breather from the ardors of boot-seeking.

The party by the stream heard the noise of the metal man's knees at the run some time before he appeared. All had been expecting him anxiously and they broke into applause when they saw him approaching with his companions, he now holding a boot in each hand.

Witch Mombi rushed to her lover, crying "Hallelujah!", and without an instant's ado asked that the lost and found footwear be placed on the ground. A few magic words, some hocus-pocus passes, and in less than a minute Sarah and Jimmy appeared in their old familiar (if possible, even shabbier) forms. As flatly as that.

Everyone rushed to hug and kiss and caress the children, not gagging very much at all. The tots in their turn smiled broadly if a little chastenedly and muttered their thanks over and over again to the gorgeous blond lady who, they quickly comprehended, was she who had restored them somehow to the rightful selves. Mombi *was* looking spiffy, like ZsaZsa at thirty, and when she realized what a hit she was making she quietly subtracted another ten years from her apparent age. For a minute there Jimmy, who didn't have much of a memory for faces, thought she was Queen Lurline. Then Sarah pointed out his mistake.

Needless to say, the Ohio siblings had no idea who Mombi really was and you can be sure not she, nor anybody, was about to tell them. Actually it might have worked out better in the end if somehow, gently, the children had been led to know and accept the (after all improved) facts of the case. The former footgear were at this point feeling very much on their uppers. The two shoes were quite worn out by what they had been through. Spiritually their tongues were hanging out. They had been shaken to the depths of their soles. With the example of the confessed and

reformed witch before them they too might well have resolved to stop being a pair of heels.

But the moment was lost, and now the family of squirrels had set up a clamor. "WHAAHNH!" screamed Flicker and Quicker on seeing their treasured boot beds turn into a couple of (to them) enormous and grubby human children. In their new shape the latter two had lost all their polish and looked unprepossessing to a degree. As mere children the pair were kissed goodbye (figuratively) by the little squirrels without a pang. But they missed their well loved cribs!"

Their parents at once got back into the act and began to scold furiously. "We refuse to give them up! We said we wouldn't! We don't! Give us back our dear ones' beloved beds!"

Floraline as a flower deity offered to give them flower beds instead but the squirrel family rejected the proposal with contempt. Tik-Tok, still sitting at his ease with his feet in the water, pointed invitingly to the river bed but the animals did not even dignify his suggestion with a reply. Daffy Dementia in desperation proposed an oyster bed, though where she thought to obtain one, in the heart of the Oz continent, was never made clear.

But to Dementia, however, must be given credit for the bright thought that in the end set all matters to rights. She said, "Remember the irony berries?"

The squirrels, proprietorially, admitted they did. They didn't quite see the connection though.

"They're so yummy," recalled the pixy, "that we want to take back with us a lifetime supply. Will you show us where to hunt? We'll want to fill up some big baskets that our sorceress friend here I'm sure will make for us—to a pattern supplied in turn by our metal friend—out of willow withies. Then when the job is nicely done, our dear magical friend again—" (she was careful not to name Mombi in the Ohioans' hearing) "will surely make you beds of whatever shape and substance you desire."

The plan was carried out. Thus elegantly were all parties satisfied and the temporary exiles from Oz could blow away home at their leisure.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y

Transportation was now a matter of logistics. Mombi could easily whirl away to Oz and spread the news but she didn't like to do the trip without all her new friends with her. Wearing your acquaintances as shoes while actively transmogrified as a windstorm would just about pass but even the wind witch couldn't quite see how she was going to carry two metal men on her back while cycloning south. In the end they decided to request passage on Tik-Tok's hat brim again.

The two fairies were good at miniaturizing so it was their spell which made everybody small and then they all took places in the chairs from the Palace of Magic that Wizard Diggs had glued on the hat in what seemed a time ages past. There was Mombi looking radiant as Miss Gabor (in fact, calling herself 'Miss Gabor' to deceive the tots) and queening it on the foremost chair.

Tik-Tok hadn't lost the power once imbued by fairy Floraline to spinfoot it across the miles. The party left Ev without even a farewell glance-in at Garth's house. In dear secluded safe old Alloya things would be all right, he knew, until such time as he should return, be it in days or years. In just a day and a half the distance was put behind and the immense (to everybody else) copper man was tramping up on the outliers of the army that

besieged the Emerald City.

The returning party had by then been well briefed, to their consternation, by tiny people encountered on the road as to all that had befallen since their quitting Oz. True, the latter fate of Wizard Diggs, Princess Dorothy, and their other friends was all unknown beyond the fact of their having been made prisoners by Fear Nation, as the mob of rebels was by now calling itself. Of course our party of travelers most wanted to confront Ruler Ozma herself but even mighty Tik-Tok was restrained by the all-resisting protecto-wall that safeguarded the Emerald Citizens.

A council of war was held on the hat brim. A vote was taken that came out three-to-three. Garth and the fairies were for employing sweet reason and arguing with the insurgents to try to get them all to go back home and stop rocking the boat. Mombi/ZsaZsa and the two children found themselves allies in their more pugnacious stance. "What, Ozma and them held prisoners in the palace?" demanded Jimmy.

"It isn't very nice," said Sarah and pouted. "Move aside, please, and I'll blow them away," offered the wind witch, alluding to the besiegers.

"Oh, but, ZsaZsa darling," protested Garth,"you will blow away the sweet with the bitter. The good guys and the bad ones are all mixed up together in this beleaguering band."

"Hm, that's true," admitted the witch. "We may have to use guile."

The council of six deliberated on the hat brim but couldn't come up with anything very guileful. Mombi had been devious enough in the old days but that was when thinking up evil plans. When she wanted to plan constructively she proved not to be as imaginative. In the end six little heads peered over the brim into the (to them) upsidedown eyes of copper Tik-Tok.

"Got any guile wiles?" asked his metal mate whimsically. "We can't think of a way to separate the sheep from the goats here so we want to ask you. We would like to have all the loyal Ozites collected in one spot and then perhaps we can rescue them en bloc in some fashion. But we don't know just which

ones they all are."

"Now, then," stated Tik-Tok ponderously, "while I walked a-long, re-le-gat-ed to my own com-pa-ny, I had time to think. The same pre-dic-a-ment sug-gested it-self to me. What I fin-al-ly came up with is this:

"Let us pre-tend to be Mal-con-tents as well! We can make our way to the ring-lead-ers and an-nounce that we have come to re-lieve the be-sieg-ers, that we have a spec-ial treat for all lo-yal mem-bers of Fear Na-tion, some-thing they will prize most highly. Then of course, be-ing the sel-fish peo—ple they are, they won't let the true Oz-ites come to share in the treat. Voi-lá...!"

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

I saw the whole thing from the other side, of course. Keith and I had been inseparable since our mutual rediscovery. Miraculous state of things! The comradeship we'd lost in life was given back—if not forever, yet for a magic while.

As a matter of fact the parting of sheep from goats proved not as awkward as Tik-Tok and company had gone along supposing. This was thanks to my brother. He had accepted no guff from the renegades of Oz, had spoken out boldly in condemnation of the siege, and openly admitted total loyalty to the young girl ruler of the fairy realm. In fact, he had been quite obnoxious to those in command in the rebel army (nameless here forevermore). The result had been the erection in the last two days of a stockade by slave labor (us) and the thrusting within its barbed-wire walls of all who proved not to be wholehearted supporters of the siege. Here there joined us in fairly short order the Wizard of Oz, the Patchwork Girl, Princess Dorothy, and the three royal historians, together with a vast concourse of the loyal Winkies Keith had led on their crusade.

We first noticed something was afoot when a pleasing and ever increasing stillness spread over the concentration camp. The internees themselves had all along kept quite a quiet, low, let's face it: cowed, profile. Noise had been supplied by the rowdy

element among the beleaguerers who were faithfully keeping up the war of nerves on the Emerald Citizens we could see behind Queen Ozma's transparent but impervious wall peacefully going about their daily tasks. They looked to be quite enjoying the lack of riots such as had made life lively (but less fun) in latter days within the capital. Interestingly enough, the numbers of Emerald Citizens who left the cool green charm of the city to join the sweaty bawling Fear Nationals were few.

One by one our guards had silently disappeared. Some of us had even been emboldened to finger the locks and bolts on the main gate and to size up the height of the barbed fence that ringed our enclosure. We were alone! Not a Malcontent could longer be seen patroling the perimeter with slingshot or crowbar at the ready. But Keith alone had dared to say, "What've we got to make a battering ram out of?" before that ominous rumble and roar began on a low note away beyond the high ground in the east.

Miss Thompson had been keeping lookout in that direction. Now she reported: "I noticed our captors moving off by twos and threes that way. They've been at it for going on an hour. Isn't it eerie! Whatever can be in the wind?"

We didn't have long to ponder the question. The wind indeed. Every gaze was soon riveted by a sight right out of the Judy Garland film: a twirling stocking of dark cloud that rose in wild fury, grew every moment vaster and more twisty, and soon darkened the sky totally in that eastern quarter. Unlike in Miss Garland's experience the tornado did not approach in the direction of us spectators. Praise be. It blew the opposite way and, speedy as such things are, it hastily took its departure over beyond the rise, subsided below it, and soon was out of sight.

"Well—l!" we all exhaled. "Whatever was that?" No answer was forthcoming. Still we gazed on through the wire netting, expecting to see our captors return.

They never did. Instead it wasn't long before enormous Tik-Tok came stalking into sight down the slope. His aspect was most solemn but yet not ungratified. At first we thought he was

quite alone but then we spied two tiny fays riding on his hat brim and weeping infinitesimal tears as if hearts were breaking.

Our curiosity was at the point of hysteria but Tik-Tok would only say: “We must tell Ozma. We must tell the Queen...”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

It was with considerable relief that the vast assemblage of centenary—year visitors, Palace of Magic courtiers, and plain Emerald Citizens strolled the few yards to the Old Palace and dusted off seats in the Audience Chamber. A lot of us had to stand and at last the place was jammed, for there was no one who would willingly miss attendance at this most important council in Oz history.

How delightful it was to be expanded again to one's natural size! Only now did we realize how frightfully cramped it felt to be one hundredth of normal in every way. I think each of us wished inwardly but fervently that Ozma never again would feel impelled to practice any miniaturization. Already directives had gone out to the twenty-four gates of Oz not to allow any new individuals to enter the fairyland unless the fairy ruler be there in person to approve it. Enough was enough, sometimes!

"My good friends and loyal subjects," spoke Princess Ozma from the throne, "I know a world of questions remains unanswered. Now is the time to pose them. First we shall call upon fairy Floraline to explain much."

With charming grace the green immortal flew over the heads of spectators to alight at the Oz queen's side and genuflect delightfully.

"Your Majesty, assembled citizens, hail!" she spoke. Then through a moving half hour the much-traveled fairy retraced the tale of desert pursuit, a struggle of metal titans, a search of days along a river bank, a reconciliation of sometime antagonists in the form of fairy-tale creatures, forest squirrels, and human children.

"We followed the squirrel family back to their oaken home," she recounted further. "Mr. Bushy and mother Nutella had decided that nothing would be quite so homey and familiar as acorn cribs. They themselves selected two fine firm specimens from their own home tree. Madam Mombi, in her whirlwind mode (lowest potency), levitated to the home hole, tossed in the acorns with a careless gesture, and casually caused them to become the two cosiest squirrel beds in the world. Young Quicker and Flicker scrambled inside and soon we heard squeals of delight. Our last view of the family was of four squirrel heads and a couple of squirrel paws waving tiny handkerchiefs of a particular shade of blue in merry farewell.

"The new-restored children from Ohio enjoyed the long jaunt by hat brim across the desert. Not that they remembered—thanks be—anything of their ordeal as boots, but this was surely a more gratifying trajectory of the wasteland than they had experienced heretofore. We made our way in through the still-destroyed Door Twenty-Two to Oz. Sorceress Mombi may have had a pang when she saw again what she had done, but for our present purposes it was fortunate.

"Of course we were looking forward eagerly to relating to dear Princess Ozma and all here the happy endings to several stories. Imagine our chagrin at finding the royal court impossible of access! A great army of siege blocked the approaches.

Still, by the time we had proceeded so far we had been alerted as to the state of affairs and had a plan of action in readiness. We did not delay in putting it into effect.

"It was as follows: the besiegers were invited to come and taste of the irony berries..." Here the fairy made a break in her narrative to describe the strange fruits which were the best thing

anyone had ever tasted. The Malcontents had been *well* content to get to experience them, she related.

"Now attend well," instructed Floraline. "I want you to picture the scene. Sorceress Mombi (radiant as that beauty of earlier days, Miss ZsaZsa Gabor), her fond friend Garth, the man of tin, my pixy companion and I, and the two dirty but dauntless Ohio children, at the center of a rowdy but enthusiastic mob of little people in that stubble field. Great Tik-Tok loomed over us and at his feet were the laden berry baskets that he had carried all the way from Ev. There were berries for all and the Fear Nationals were not backward in claiming their share. We heard them telling how they were going to keep some back and plant them and grow their own crops of these most wonderful-tasting fruits. That of course was just what our sorceress colleague had in mind.

"The time was nearly ripe to carry out the scheme that Tik-Tok had devised. We who were in the know had begun to cast glances at each other. When would the mighty wind witch begin?

"And then came the fatal words:

"'Mombi dearest,' spoke her true love, the man of metal, 'is it time to work your spell..?'

"Well! Never had anyone dreamed of such a denouement. We saw how the children Jimmy and Sarah stopped in their tracks as they handed out berries to all comers.

"'Mombi!?' cried little Sarah, aghast—and burst into tears. She had admired the beautiful enchantress so—and now to learn thus abruptly who she really was!

"'Mombi!!' yelled forthright Jimmy, and for a second time without an instant's thought of consequences launched himself on the wind witch (this time at scarcely larger than his own size) with flailing fists. The knife he'd used before was, most fortunately, no longer to hand but he could do great damage to that lovely face with tearing fingernails.

"Mombi/ZsaZsa fell back horrified—but only for a step or two. Then her old witch nature must have reasserted itself. She

did what she had been on the point of doing anyway—but now in spades! Our plan had been for Mombi to become a mild but irresistible zephyr and waft all the unwelcome malcontents away to the far corners of Oz out of harm's way.

"Instead a hurricane boiled up out of that graceful figure of the former movie queen and all the world around was engulfed in the maelstrom. Great Tik-Tok, the ponderous copper man, was a bit too heavy to lift efficiently but even he was toppled as the whirlwind roared up and away. Dementia and I were carried off willy-nilly and were miles distant before we caught—if not our breaths—our senses and quickly worked spells of our own to bring us back to where we'd started from.

"What a strange scene of desolation! Where minutes before a great throng had populated the stubble field, now only a Mechanical Man lay on his back and rocked powerlessly from side to side. Dementia and I in concert worked a charm sufficient to get Tik-Tok to his knees and from there he was able to stand on his own.

"Once more and for the last time we rode his hat brim as the copper man marched up over the rise and down to the beleaguerers' prisoner compound. There he warned the loyal Ozites within to stand back out of harm's way. Then he trampled the barbed-wire fence into the ground and all were set free, to stream in a great flood toward the impervious protecto-wall that Queen Ozma had set up around the capital. You Emerald Citizens saw us coming and sent word to the court. A moment more and then—but the rest you know."

As Floraline fell silent a great chorus of questions and protests arose. "What now?!" "Where are the besiegers? What has become of them?!"

"Mombi—is she bad or good?!"

"What happened to those children from Ohio? Will the outside world ever forgive us?"

"And the noble metal man!? What is his fate?"

Ozma, with her scepter in one of her hands, raised both to appeal for quiet. "Much can be told," she said. "I have been

diligent before the Magic Picture—what time I was not shedding tears of frustration in the silken folds of its covering curtain.

"To start with your last query first: the—yes, noble—Man of Metal:

"When, many days ago, I asked to see our little friends, the fairies Floraline and Dementia, I made acquaintance at one remove with that curious community in Ev, the forest town of Alloya. At once I was struck by a fact which, I now learn, seems to have escaped those, perhaps less well read in the period, who had to deal with the metal men in person: the inhabitants of Alloya were animated suits of medieval-type armor! fitted in many cases with modern accessories, as for instance Garth's overalls.

"Such a suit of armor was a perfect habitation for any being capable of form-changing, or perhaps even for one who was not. What more thrilling experience for one in love than to be able to climb right inside the one you adore! Such, I imagine, will be the joy of the witch Mombi now at times, when she and her friend are one, far from human sight, and where the conditions are right for magic manifestation.

"So Garth who yearned to love and Mombi who longed to be loved found each other at last. Strange and unlikely couple—but love is where you find it. I think those two will be greatly content as now they blow about the world: a steel-girt Joan of Arc who frequently metamorphoses into a storm cloud of great potency.

The solution is not what I should have chosen: not one that I as humane governess of a dreamland *could* think of choosing. But it may be effective. Is not annihilation by violent windstorm to be preferred over that by starvation? For natural or man-made disaster is what faces the present vastly over-populated earth as absolute certainty.

"But let us not think of that, since we can ourselves do nothing to avert it. Let us rather pin our hopes to another process that Mombi and Garth, among others, have, perhaps

half unwittingly, initiated.

"I speak of the irony berries. Of course some few of us leaders here in Oz have long known of the existence of the fantastic plants. A tiny import trade in them has even been carried on. 'Ironia' is the active ingredient in the so-called 'dope sticks' that I and Sorceress Glinda and Historian Baum and some others have long enjoyed; they induce a mild non-habit-forming euphoria and act, besides, as contraceptives.

"The 'irony' consists in two features of the plants, one being namely that, though at once so delicious, so euphoric, and so generally conducive to good health, they at the same time produce something so apparently negative as sterility. But in the present day, alas, that is what the human race needs most of all. Reduce world population and *every* problem facing mankind will shrink to easily managed proportions. And secondly, though so propitious for *existing* life, the berries thrive explicitly in life-negative surroundings. Sow irony berries in barren ravaged pollution-plagued areas and they will flourish mightily! The filthier the earth becomes the more likely the ironies are to take root and burgeon—to the benefit of men. Animals don't need them; there is no non-human population over-represented on this planet. Luckily the irony plants do not do well in just those clean well-lighted, well-watered regions of the earth where animals live best.

"We can hope that the bushels of berries blown away by rampaging Mombi have already in places begun to germinate to take root and cover the soil—"

"Princess Ozma," I here ventured to intrude: "the picture you paint is encouraging. But what of the protecto-dome of Oz? All that auspiciousness you speak of must have been frustrated when the whirling wind of Mombi with its heavy freight of humans ran up against the enclosing walls...?"

"That was the first thing I thought of when you brought me word of the contretemps outside the city," reported the Girl Ruler. "I repaired where I had spent so many hours, even days, in later times: to the Magic Picture.

"There I witnessed how great heaps of creatures were striking the interior walls of our dome and sliding to the ground. Mombi, it seems, has had the compassion to let down lightly everyone she's blown away—so far! But I saw too how she had, with ease, burst all the doorways on the eastern side of Oz and commenced the mopping-up operation of sweeping the blowees out into the great world. If her one-woman clean-up campaign prospers, who knows?: perhaps I shall not need to keep closed and guarded, as planned, the doors to Oz.

"Mombi is good. How curious that I, who was first to suffer at her hands: I mean by years of captivity as a kidnapped hostage, should be the one now to affirm to the world that 'the wicked witch is dead', that a kindly and all-powerful witch of the wind has taken her place. I believe she will do much good. Perhaps one day we may even meet again. Then I may ask—and grant—forgiveness."

The little Princess of Oz was silent.

"And Jimmy and Sarah then, Your Grace?" fairy Floraline fain would know. And I saw that pixy Dementia and chambermaid Jellia and the little ghost girl Lana and others of the Ohio children's one-time associates hung on her words.

"The Magic Picture again," cited Ozma. "I looked for them first thing. I saw them tumble down in a dirty field in Ohio, then sit up and rub their eyes. I think I may safely predict that they will believe they fell asleep among the dusty dandelions and had the most fantastic dream. Maybe even, in retrospect, it may occur to them that they might have left behind a sweeter-smelling memory in the Oz of their dreams if they had sometimes tried consideration and courtesy. Still... let us not expect *too* much..."

"And then—and then..." piped up the effervescent Patchwork Girl, new-sudsed by her pal the palace washwoman after her term of trial as a hostage outside the gates. "Well,

"I guess all's said and done—and then

That's why you made us big again?"

"Yes," affirmed the little ruler of Oz with an enchanting smile. "That is my 'investment in the future': I want to believe that all

trends on earth are now to go into a more—nay, completely—propitious channel. In this spirit of hope, and with the expectation that Oz from this time forward will have ample space for all who live here, I have restored the old dimensions to all living moving things within the gates of the kingdom."

"And that makes easier a last detail, Your Grace," called a voice from the crowd. All eyes turned to look at artisan Lester standing with his little group of helpers. "We've been out of work for weeks now! May we request permission to hike to Patch and pick up the cleaned carpet for the—er, 'Mombi Room'...?"

"Such shall be its name, verily," concurred the queen. "If ever the great sorceress should see fit to come again where she was wrongly lost to life for so many years, that place could be her bedroom. And there she would receive all honors I could bestow..."

"Princess Ozma!" spoke up another voice—to me so intimately familiar for more than sixty years. "Give me leave" —he seemed rather to demand than ask—"to join that party. I have never seen Patch—except in imagination for the length of a lifetime. I would like to see it in reality."

"So would I!" cried jolly Jellia Jamb, who, in dusting out bedrooms in the Palace of Magic, had never had occasion to make the trip.

"And I! And I!" called out others, many who *had* visited Patch but who longed for the treat again.

In the end the Pilgrimage to Patch became one of the high points of the centenary celebrations. It was next day that the procession faced a golden dawn as we tripped down the steps of the Palace of Magic. Outside the palace gates we turned north and all through the magic day we strolled north and west, stopping for a picnic here, lingering to drink at a spring there, singing the old songs of Oz, gossiping of the late remarkable happenings in the fabled land, and, at the close of day, walking into the sunset.

Lund, 10 April 1991
Dade City, 9 March 1993