

C H A P T E R S E V E N

<<1949>>

Once upon a time there lived a King who had a daughter of such beauty and goodness she had become renowned throughout the land. Everyone spoke of her in awed whispers, for there was a mystery surrounding her. Although her beauty was acknowledged by all, no one remembered ever seeing her, for the King was said to keep her well guarded. Not even the servants and courtiers at the palace were afforded a glimpse of her.

In this kingdom there also lived a Young Man who often dreamed about the Princess of great goodness and beauty. This dream took hold in his heart and became a consuming fire, with the result that he became determined to have the Princess as his wife. He knew the King would not allow anyone near the Princess, but his love for her gave him courage to go to the palace and ask to see the King. When the King was informed about the Young Man he was impressed by his boldness and ordered him brought in. The Young Man told the King how he had dreamed about the Princess and how this dream had become a consuming fire so he thought of nothing else but his love for her.

The King gazed at him for a long time and then said, "If your love is so tremendous, there must be nothing you wouldn't be willing to do to gain her."

"I would go to the ends of the earth in order to get but a glimpse of her," said the Young Man.

"Well," said the King, "then you would not mind getting for me the Fifty-Tongued Bird.

If you succeed, the Princess will be yours, to have and hold."

The Young Man gasped when he heard this for he knew that many had tried to get possession of the Fifty-Tongued Bird but none had succeeded. The road that led to where the Bird was reputed to be was fraught with dangers and mysteries and none who went seeking it ever returned. But the Young Man was brave and his desire for the Princess so great that he told the King he would find the Bird, and he started on his way.

He had not gone far when he saw a sign by the road that said "*He who travels this road will never return again.*" Now the Young Man stopped for a moment for he knew that the sign spoke truth. None of those who had gone by this road had ever been heard of again. But he also knew that this was the path leading to the place of the Fifty-Tongued Bird and that unless he brought the Bird to the King he would never have the Princess. So he mustered all his courage and continued along the road.

He had not traveled much further when he saw an Old Woman sitting on a rock. When he approached, the Woman said, "My son, did you not read the sign by the road which said that whoever takes this path will never return again?"

"I did," said the Young Man. "But I am determined to marry the Princess and the King has said I cannot have her unless I bring back the Fifty-Tongued Bird."

The Old Woman studied the Young Man for a moment and then she said, "I see that you are really determined and I admire your fortitude. I will, therefore, give you some advice. Farther along this road there lives a Witch. You will find her baking bread in a large outdoor oven and burning her hands as she puts the

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loaves into the oven. If you will help her she may help you, for she alone knows the secret of the Fifty-Tongued Bird."

The Young Man thanked the Old Woman and resumed his journey. Farther on, as the Old Woman had foretold, he saw a Witch baking bread in a bakehouse open to the road. Every time she put loaves into the oven she burnt her hands. The Young Man would not have thought her a Witch for she had quite a pleasant expression in spite of the fact that she must have been in pain from her burns. The Young Man went up to her and greeted her and asked if she would not let him bake the bread for her.

The Witch accepted his offer gratefully and all the rest of her loaves were baked without further suffering on her part. After the bread was done she asked him what he was doing, traveling on such a dangerous road. The Young Man told her of his love for the Princess and how nothing could dissuade him from trying to get the Fifty-Tongued Bird for the King so that he could have the Princess.

"You are a fine Young Man," said the Witch when he had finished relating his story, "and I can be of some help to you in accomplishing your goal. In the forest beyond there is a large stable filled with horses. They are the most beautiful horses you will ever have seen: shiny black horses, brown horses, brown and white ones, horses as white as snow. In the beck of the stable there is a scrawny, sickly-looking yellow horse. That is the horse you must take in order to get to the Fifty-Tongued Bird. He is my son, who has been changed into a horse by an enchantment, and he alone knows the way.

"You will go up to him and whisper, 'Your mother has sent me,' and then you must do exactly what he tells you. I will give you a salve to put on your body as its scent will put to sleep the dragons which guard the stable, so that you can get away safely."

The Young Man thanked the Witch. He rubbed the salve on his body as she had instructed. Then he proceeded into the forest to look for the stable. As it was very large he had no trouble in finding it. As the witch had predicted, the dragons which

guarded it went to sleep as he approached them and he was able to get inside the stable without awakening them. Once inside he saw indeed the most magnificent horses he had ever seen. Among the throng the Young Man did not know where to look first. Each horse, of whatever color, seemed more splendid than the last.

But sure enough, in one dusty corner of the stable stood an ancient-looking, scrawny, sickly, mud-colored horse. 'Surely,' thought the Young Man, that horse would never be able to make such a hazardous journey. The Witch must be mistaken and this may be a trick. However, he remembered that all of those who had gone before him had failed, so he thought he had better follow the Witch's advice. He went up to the sickly horse and whispered in his ear, "Your mother has sent me."

As if by magic, the sickly horse took on life and vigor and said, "Mount me quickly:" The Young Man, startled to see the change in the Horse, obeyed, and the Horse galloped out of the stable and beyond the reach of the dragons as if it had acquired wings. Once they were safely away the Horse asked the Young Man if he was seeking the Fifty-Tongued Bird. The Young Man, amazed that he would know this, replied that he was. "Now," said the Horse, "you must do exactly as I tell you or else you will surely die. We will soon come upon an orchard where grows the most delicious-looking fruit you have ever seen. This fruit will entice you to eat it. You must resist, for if you do not then you will indeed surely die."

Soon after the Horse had said this they came to a wonderful orchard full of the most luscious fruit. There were cherries of deep burgundy as large as walnuts, peaches of fragrant aroma, ripe and tempting, golden apples, succulent pears, large purple grapes, oranges and tangerines and many other fruits which the Young Man had never seen before but which he would have loved to taste. Each fruit was at its peak of ripeness, juicy and fragrant, and each spoke to the Young Man in an enticing voice "Pluck me; eat me; I am delicious."

The Young Man was intoxicated by the perfume of the

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orchard and he thought that he would have to eat one of the fruits or die. He felt himself weakening and reasoned that one luscious cherry could surely do no harm. Fruit as beautiful as this could not be deadly. But just as he was about to succumb to the temptation he remembered his love for the Princess and his goal and he resisted. Then they came to the end of the orchard and the Young Man gave a sigh of relief.

“Now,” said the Horse, “we will go over a mountain. This mountain will be covered with snow and ice and will try to freeze you. As long as you hold on to me you will not freeze, because it cannot freeze me. But should you let go, I won’t be able to help you.”

No sooner had they left the orchard than they started climbing up the mountain. The horse had no trouble going up its icy slopes but the Young Man felt his teeth chattering and his breath congealing. He pressed his body as close to the Horse’s as he could, trying to get some warmth, but the closer he got the more the cold seemed to penetrate his bones. He felt his feet grow numb and his fingers lose all sensation. ‘I can hold on no longer,’ he thought. ‘This cold will surely do for me.’ But still he clung to the Horse as best he could and just as he knew he could endure no more they passed beyond the mountain.

It was now night and still chilly and the Young Man had not been able to warm his cold body before the Horse said, “We come now to the last of your trials. We will pass through a river. This river will try to drown you. No matter how high I rise it will rise with me. It cannot drown me, but if you let go you will drown.”

Seemingly out of nowhere the river came up to meet them. The higher the Horse rose, the higher rose the river, seemingly determined to drown the rider. The Young Man’s hands grew slippery as the river rose up along the Horse’s body. The Horse rose higher; so did the river, up to the Horse’s head, and still it rose. The Young Man doubted his ability to hold on against the river’s swelling flow but still as long as there was breath in him, he was determined to struggle on. The river rose up to his neck.

The Young Man closed his eyes and opened his mouth, gasping for air. This is the end, he thought. But when he opened his eyes again, he saw that they had passed the river. "We have now arrived at the land where the Fifty-Tongued Bird is guarded," said the Horse. "From here on, you are on your own. I will wait for you by the edge of the river for I cannot go with you to the castle where the Bird is kept. You must gain access to it by yourself. Once inside, you will go to the topmost room and in that room you will see many doors. You must open the door in the center. Inside you will find dozens of cages of gold, silver, and precious stones. They will contain the most beautiful birds imaginable. You will ignore them all and take a rusty dusty old cage with a little grey bird inside. That is the Fifty-Tongued Bird."

The Young Man thanked the Horse for his help and started along the road leading to the castle. As he approached it, he saw that the castle was guarded on all sides and no one was allowed to go within.

The Maids who worked in the castle, however, often came out to take the air. Soon the Young Man made friends with one of them. She fell in love with him and found it difficult to refuse him any request. One day he asked her if he might look inside the castle.

At first she refused vehemently, reminding him that it was most stringently forbidden for any stranger to pass the gate. But as he persisted she gave in at last and led him into the castle by a secret passageway.

Once inside the castle the Young Man asked to see the topmost room.

"Oh, no;" the Maid protested. "No one is allowed up there."

"But if you loved me as you say you do, you would not hesitate to let me in."

The Maid was torn between her loyalty to the keepers of the castle and her love for the Young Man. Her love proved the stronger motivation and so she led him through the many rooms of the castle until they reached the one on top. There he

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saw many doors, just as the Horse had described them. He asked the Maid to open the door in the center.

She, fearful, yet knowing that she could not refuse him anything he really wanted, gave in to his wishes and opened the middle door.

The Young Man's eyes were dazzled by the sight of the beautiful bird-cages that filled the room. There were gold cages with emerald inlays, silver cages with rubies, platinum cages with diamonds. Inside the cages were gorgeous birds of every iridescent color. In a far corner of the room, hardly noticeable, stood a dusty rusty cage with a small grey bird crouched on its floor, seeming more dead than alive.

The Young Man doubted that this could after all be the prized Bird the King wanted in exchange for his daughter. But he remembered that all the Horse had told him up to now had proven to be true, so without another moment's hesitation he took the dusty cage and ran out of the castle without looking back.

The Maid was distraught at what she had done, for now the Guards were alerted and began to chase the Young Man. But having had a head start he was able to reach the Horse before the Guards caught up with him. Clutching the cage securely, the Young Man mounted the Horse.

The Guards, coming in close pursuit, shouted, "Drown him, River; Drown him, River!" But the River was calm and would not rise up to drown the Young Man for he had once passed it successfully.

The Guards, ever more frustrated, shouted, "Freeze him, Mountain! Freeze him, Mountain!" But the mountain disdained to freeze him.

The Guards, raging furiously and ever pursuing, shrieked, "Eat the fruit! Eat the fruit." But the fruit of the orchard had become wilted and wormy and unappealing. Realizing that their efforts were useless, the Guards returned defeated to the castle. The Young Man on the Horse returned safely to the forest stable where now the Witch was awaiting him. She took the cage and said something over it which its rescuer could not grasp. Then

she returned the cage to the Young Man, saying, "Beware of the King:" He did not understand her warning but he was anxious to be away; he thanked the Witch and the Horse for all their help and bade them farewell.

When the Young Man arrived at the palace with the caged bird the King was much surprised for he had not expected ever to see him again. "Seize him," he said to the guardsmen, "and throw him down the well." The Young Man had hardly time to express dismay before he found himself being dragged out of the palace and forcibly cast into a well. As he was being hurled down he seized hold of a stone that jutted out from the inside of the well and held on for dear life. A few days later a Farmer came to the well to draw water and saw the Young Man inside. He threw him a rope and helped him to climb out.

"How did you get down there?" the Farmer asked.

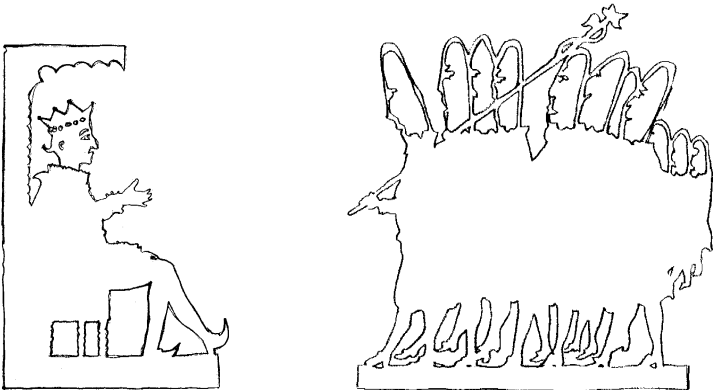
"Don't ask," said the Young Man. "It's a long sad story."

The Farmer let the Young Man stay in a shed beside his house and had him help with the farm work.

By now the Young Man, glad to be still alive, no longer thought about great adventures or of marrying the Princess. He was content to live a simple life and carry out his daily chores.

But one night the Young Man was awakened by the most beautiful singing he had ever heard. It was as if angels were caroling; as if fifty songbirds were singing together. He opened his eyes and saw the loveliest young woman he had ever seen.

"Who are you?" stammered the Young Man.



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"I am the Princess," replied the lady. "I am the Fifty-Tongued Bird. Many years ago, when I was only a child, a powerful Witch had a quarrel with my father. It was she who bewitched me and turned me into a bird. Only a love strong enough to meet and overcome all perils would free me from her spell. You alone had the intelligence and courage, you alone were able to release me from captivity and so break the enchantment."

"Yes," said the Young Man thoughtfully. "But your father is a cruel man and acted dishonorably to me."

"Do not fear," said the Princess. "I will speak to my father. He must be moved when I tell him all that you endured for my sake." So it was that after many trials and having lost all hope of gaining his great prize the Young Man was married to his Princess.

They lived happily ever after.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

<<1914>>

Jrumm flew into a passion. At least, she pretended to. She had to keep up her reputation for testiness.

Something appeared to have riled her. It was the absence of dragons.

Button Bright *had* thought it was a little quiet as they trudged up through the woods, stumbled over wet stones in a beer brook, and came upon a path that was almost paved. No roaring. Those dragons (if that's what they were) earlier in the day hadn't waited to be seen to be heard, but here, where dragons ought to be seen, they weren't seen or heard either.

By the time the copper-colored portcullis in the castle's great portway was sighted Jrumm was uttering imprecations that boded no good. As she reached the crisscrossed bars and vainly tried to shake them she was yelling.

Button Bright was startled at his companion's loss of composure. Still, she had said she had an awful temper when provoked. "What's the matter?" he asked mildly.

Jrumm had no grievance against the boy. He had one against her but he didn't know it. She controlled herself a bit and said, "Here ought to be dragons! There aren't! They've gone away

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and, what's more, locked the portcullis after them. Oh, I have only myself to blame. I thought I was being so smart, making haste slowly. I imagined they'd never think to look for me *on foot*, so I dawdled fatally. It's perfectly obvious: that villain has sent swift steeds and got here ahead of me.

"Those dragons! They *were* dragons. You were right: I should never have passed by so blithely those sounds we heard in the forest. I'll bet that—"

The sorceress muttered and imprecated and Button Bright hadn't a clue what she was going on about. Meanwhile she was not losing time in gaining ingress to the castle. From under the crystalline robe she drew a silver cord in a big ball, loosened an end of it, and sent the rest flying and un-twining to a window embrasure high up. There the rope end slung itself about an iron stanchion, knotted itself, and spied down on its mistress with a smirk—if ropes can smirk.

"Right," pronounced the wonder-worker. "Up you go."

"Me?" whispered the boy.

"Sure. You're a fine young man, aren't you? Nimble, and that? If I can climb the rope you can."

Button Bright didn't like to imply he wasn't at least a normal boy so he took hold of the cord in grubby hands and began to try to haul himself up. It went easier than he dared hope. The rope, which was of a convenient stiffish texture like reed or bamboo, had a pleasing way of dangling in what were virtually footholds. With the slightest adaptability—which Button Bright had—one soon learnt to grasp with both hands and feet, and the trick was accomplished.

The sorceress made one or two adjustments under her mysterious cloak and then she swarmed after. By the time the two crawled over the wet sill of the unglazed single-barred window opening she seemed to be in quite a good humor again. "Maybe there's a silver lining," she muttered. "Having raided this place once, he won't think to look here again, anyway not right away..."

Button Bright paid little attention. He was a fairly incurious youth and what curiosity he did have was richly preoccupied

by the appearance of his present surroundings.

For a start, there were no people to be seen. That gave an air of mystery and solemnity to the place. The halls were spacious, the walls paneled, the doorways boasting stone jambs and massive wooden doors. Everywhere haunting scents hung in the air, faintly intermingled with the smell of brimstone, and perhaps of something else not even that pleasant. It seemed the dragons were not long gone.

The sorceress had no time to linger over the appointments. Quickly she led the way up shallow-stepped circular stairways to the topmost room in the keep. Here she flung wide the door and revealed to the American a stately but empty room.

"This is to be the aviary," stated Jrumm, "though so far untenanted. That will soon be remedied. In time you may want to help in catching birds.

"As for you—" Here she drew from under her cloak the trumpery cage with its little occupant. She gave the cage an oddly affectionate-looking pat. "This corner should do for the likes of you." So saying, the sorceress set the cage down any old where.

She turned back to Button Bright. "Can I trust you?" she demanded.

The boy thought a moment. "As much as I can trust you," he said, really wisely.

"Hmh" said the woman. That wasn't much. But this was an emergency. "I didn't think there'd be any rush once we got here. Now there is! I can't spare a moment. I have to be off to reconnoiter those dragons we think we heard. You'll be in charge here. Can you cope? Never mind if you can't. All you've got to do is water and feed the birdling. There's seed in the kitchen. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Button Bright took all that with aplomb, which is not to say he necessarily gave it his imprimatur. He trailed after as Jrumm bustled down and back to the portcullis. From a spike on the inner wall she took a key that unlocked a little door in the grille, passed through, relocked the door, and pocketed the key. "Trusting each other as much as we do—" she explained. "Have fun.

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Take a look around. As I say, 'til soon," she ended.

"Well," said Button Bright, hands on hips. He watched through the bars the crystal-cloaked woman stride down the slope and disappear into the forest.

C H A P T E R N I N E

<<1952>>

They walked east on Forty-second.

"I'm glad we met," said Speedy Rapidan "Too bad it couldn't be for longer. I'm meeting some pals of mine for a reunion dinner..."

"Oh?" said the girl. She'd said her name was "Pat". She seemed to have all the time in the world. If she was a hustler (or was that word reserved to male street-walkers?), at least she wasn't hustling him. "What, kind of reunion?"

That was a facer. Now were you going to explain to a common or garden lady of the evening—or, in this case, mid-afternoon—that you had seven friends with whom you had one single, but that a compelling, thing in common?: that you had all spent time in a make-believe—but perfectly real—country where animals talked and everybody lived forever. There might come a time when, through circumstances, pros would come to believe in, and even visit, Oz^s, but that time was not yet.

"In our youth," fabulated Speedy, "we all had a lot of fun at different times in places like that island I told you about. Places most people never get to see. Met some funny people there too."

§ See *The Ten Woodmen of Oz*. Editor's note.

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And when we can't get back there all the time we like to meet and talk about it once a year anyway. Kinda helps keep it alive."

"Why can't you go back?" enquired the tart reasonably. "You look pretty well-heeled to me."

"Question of time, mostly—not expense," Rapidan lied glibly. "The place's very remote. Like: you couldn't get to the interior of Tibet just over a weekend, could you?"

"Tibet, ey?" He hoped that seemed inaccessible—and unfamiliar -enough. "Did you see yaks there?" No, it wasn't: But still, she had taken the bait.

"Not yaks, but orks." There: he'd been able to insert a little truth at last, even if the truth was the unlikeliest bit of all the data he'd mentioned yet.

"Orks?"

"Yeah, a rare kind of bird." He didn't tell *how* rare, or totally impossible-seeming. Quickly Speedy ransacked his memory for personages of Oz he could describe without immediately and completely making Pat think he was kidding her or was crazy. The Tin Woodman, the living Scarecrow, Jack Pumpkinhead, Tik-Tok the mechanical man, the Patchwork Girl, a human-sized Frogman, a djinn who lived in a jar... Good night, wasn't there anybody in Oz that sounded normal enough to talk about? A raft of little preteen girls, of course, but he didn't want, to bring in any more of those.

The engineer's darting memory came up with one conventional figure who was unwaveringly present at the court in the Emerald City. "One of our buddies there is in the army." No use stating that he *was* the army. "Great of guy. Well, I guess he's not all that old. Forty-five maybe. Has a funny nickname: Omby Amby. As a matter of fact he's making the trip this time: first time ever—in this direction. It'll be a kick showing him New York."

"What's so special about the soldier?" she wanted to know.

"Special?" Now how did she guess that?

"Yes. You don't need to go overseas to meet a soldier."

"Well, mm, he's very proud of his long beard—"

“Yuck.”

“Yeah, well, maybe. But the thing is: it’s green.”

Now came that stare he’d been hoping to avoid. Nuts. In an effort to keep the boat steady Speedy went on: “Yeah, he dyes it green.”

“Well, isn’t that the sweetest thing,” she mocked.

That was even worse. Better incredible than effeminate. “Yes,” said Speedy. “Ordinarily it’s blue.”

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<<1914>>

Not bad; lord of a castle after less than twenty-four (conscious) hours in a country. Button Bright strolled around as enjoined, with hands in pockets.

Actually, other than the massive fittings there wasn't that much to see, but what there was was freely accessible. No doors seemed barred. The visitor wondered rather what it was all in aid of: dragons and dropped portcullises guarding what? The empty room on top? Surely not; even that room wasn't locked.

After stepping over the fourth pile of dragon spoor the boy came to the conclusion that this was or had been, simply a harbor home for unparticular dragons. They hadn't been guarding anything; they just lived there. Maybe the portcullis was for keeping them *in*, rather than anybody out. He became quite sure when he reached the vast kitchens. There were no haunches of venison, or even corn flakes. Ranged all down one wall were seven-deep stacks of cases of oil-cake and fireseed. In cauldrons over the fire still smoked molten sulphur. Not much joy there.

Suddenly Button Bright realized he was ravenous. Rations had been spare on the road: really little more than the fruit of sugarplum trees at odd intervals after they left the fabulous fruit

grove. Fe tasted a pinch of fireseed and spat it out directly, then dashed to the pump over the slop-stone. Thank goodness, at least there was real water: even rather good pure-flavored water from some deep well. That reminded him of the poor little bird in the mildewed cage. He had been told to keep it supplied with water. And “bird seed”! Surely by that was not meant fireseed. He nosed about a bit more and did come across a big bin full of what looked like coriander kernels.

He tasted one. It didn’t taste like much but at least it wasn’t fireseed. For a moment he applied himself to the problem of his commission and soon came to a logical conclusion. Instead of carrying seed and water up seven flights, and who knew for how many days?, he would bring Mahomet to the fountain.

Back once more in the kitchen with the caged bird he set the coop in the seed bin and opened its door. The chick just sat there. Then it said “Peepity peep”, as buntings do.

“Sure,” said Button Bright. “I agree.” The birdlet tentatively shifted position on its rung.

“Oh, water,” remembered the youth. He pumped the slop-stone full. “When you get thirsty enough I guess you’ll fly over here.”

He took a long healthy swig of the tingling water himself. It was really good. But it made his hunger more overpowering than ever.

Alone, abandoned, with nothing to eat! Was that the sorceress’s way of insuring his co-operation? He couldn’t stay there and starve.

He quitted the fruitless—and also meatless and vegetableless—kitchen and sought elsewhere. Full dark had long fallen by now and though the odd flamboy burned here and there the castle remained spooky and unsettling. Button Bright poked his way into all the rooms along one corridor but found nothing resembling a dormitory. He soon remembered: this wasn’t a people castle but a dragon one. Dragons presumably needed no couches to sleep upon. Presently he did like a dragon and slept on the floor.

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In the morning the usually phlegmatic boy was roused to do something. Even if this was a magic land he might very well die of neglect in the un-accommodating castle. He went to the kitchens, where the little mockingbird greeted him with “peepity-peep”, then rendered the whole of the mating aria of the *male* capercaillie. Button Bright was touched but could perform nothing in return. He shared the bird’s breakfast though: he chewed *and* swallowed a whole handful of the coriander seeds or equivalent.

“Bwaa,” he said when he had finished. It wasn’t good enough. He had to escape. There was no help for it. He carried the chick on his finger to the rim of the slop-stone just so it would get the idea. It complacently dipped its bill and swallowed.

“Goodbye, bird,” said Button Bright and left the castle kitchen forever. He revisited the portcullis but found no satisfaction there.

Then he remembered the casement they had climbed in by. He didn’t recall seeing the sorceress wind up the ball of silver cord after use. There was just a chance.

Hooray! The best of sorceresses can commit an oversight and Jrumm had been in a tearing hurry. By straining Button Bright could just reach the sill. He hauled himself up and grasped the rope which still enwound the stanchion.

C H A P T E R E L E V E N

<<1952>>

At least it seemed like ever after.

In fact, it was only one or two years that the Young Man and the Princess lived together before discovering that they really knew nothing about each other. The little they did know they didn't much like. For starters, the young man was tone deaf, while the princess, naturally, was constantly caroling across a golden street in the city as the sun sank low. They had their own little palace in old Scowleyow's capital and when the arpeggios would get too insistent the young man would send his wife out to sing in the park opposite.

The wedding had been done with great pomp and ceremony and that part they both enjoyed. The princess was able to wear all her finest new gowns and jewellery and display the fact that she was as beautiful as people had all been saying for decades. The young man concentrated on the consuming fire he had formerly been subject to. He fought stoutly against the realization that spiritual fires are much easier to be consumed by when they are theoretical than when one is faced with the living presence of the supposed adored one across the breakfast table.

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For instance, the princess *would* insist on eating bird seed. "Don't be silly," she said when her husband protested. "I was raised on it. Am I supposed to give up the habits of a lifetime and start eating roast guinea hen—like a cannibal? I wouldn't hear of it."

But the young man concentrated on the consuming fire and didn't let the discussion degenerate into a quarrel.

Yet he was not without fault either in the princess' eyes. The main thing was that he was so plebeian. He never said anything about his family background but it was evident to the princess from the start that he didn't know much about how to behave in a royal court. She remembered but too clearly how at home and comfortable the young man had appeared in the shed beside the farmhouse where she'd found him. She suspected rural outhouses had been no unfamiliar phenomenon to him in his childhood.

Still, she was so good, and she had been told that a part of goodness is not to be snobbish about people's antecedents. She filled her basket with the broken meats from the breakfast table and prepared to go her rounds of bringing succor to the poor.

"Do you mind?" said the young man, for one of the meats was the slice of breakfast ham he had been in process of eating. He forked it out of her basket and back onto his plate.

But the princess too was resolved to live happily ever after and not quarrel. She sat down again and bit her lip and was silent.

The young man went on reading the paper and was silent too. They both knew it was impossible to have an argument if neither party spoke.

Presently a sigh escaped her. The young man put down his paper and fixed his wife with an accusing eye. "What's the matter now?"

"Oh, I was just thinking," said the princess in a small voice. "Y.M."—she called him "Y.M.", you see. Somehow he had never got around to telling her his name. No wonder. It was "Ignatz". "Y.M., it's no good, is it?"

“What’s no good?”

“Our marriage. We were a couple of mad things, ever to wed. Weren’t we?”

“Were we?”

“Yes. I did it out of the gratitude I was popularly supposed to feel for your having rescued me, and you because of all the effort you’d made TO rescue me and I think it must have seemed like lost motion to you not to carry through with it. But we were... ‘already taken’, weren’t we?”

The young man was silent some more. Odd. For the first time, in the midst of their confession of failure of love, he felt a little stab of fondness for his wife. She was wiser, more full of insight, than he had guessed.

He laid down his paper. “How long have you known?”

“Oh, from the start I could sense that what you felt about me was awe, not really passionate love. That, and triumph at your success in having accomplished the great task you’d set out on... And—dare I name it? You won’t be angry?—a wee bit, at least, of gratification at social climbing. There, now you’re going to be cross—” The princess lifted her eyes to him hopefully-fearfully.

“By no means. Actually, you’ve hit the nail on the head,” the young man confessed magnanimously. “But you said ‘already taken’. What did you mean by that?”

“I knew it on the wedding night. Awe and triumph and social success didn’t add up to what you were meant to be feeling—and showing. I knew there was somebody else.”

Now a sigh escaped *him*, but a deep manly one. In fact, it was more like a dry sob.

“Come, my dear.” The princess ventured to lay a hand on her husband’s. “Tell me, do.”

Such sympathy was heart-tearing. If only they’d confessed their lack of love, or the existence of *other* love, years ago, what a comfort they could have been to each other. Now there were actual tears as Y.M. said, “It was when I was rescuing you. I met a young girl. The first I’d ever known, really. I’d never been acquainted with a *pretty* girl. There were none where I grew up.

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All I knew about lovely ladies was from reading the papers. Completely theoretical, you see. And that's how I acquired a consuming fire for you. For the *idea* of you. Because the newspapers, which was all I had to read, praised you always as the most beautiful—if not the *only* beautiful—girl in the world. I *was* consumed—until I met reality.”

“But who was she?” cried the princess, all agog. “My sweetheart? A young girl. She worked as a slavey in that grim castle where I found you. Who she was? I don't know anything about her. I don't know much about a shining star. I only know I'm lost without her. That's all I know. I loved her as I always will. Princess, I love her^{s!}”

It was like an aria from opera. If this story is ever put on the stage, be sure and let Y.M. sing that to the tune of the Flower Song from Carmen. The libretto can be altered so that the character is not tone-deaf.

The princess was exactly the one to hear the music in her husband's confession. She replied in full coloratura: “Sweet-heart! ‘sweetheart’? sweetheart, will you love her ever? Will you remember in May how you were happy and gay^{ss?} —You were happy and gay, weren't you?”

“I think my little friend *was* happy for a brief time while she abetted me in setting free the fifty-tongued bird. But in my single-minded devotion to the quest I was scarcely gay. Now I wish we *had* had a few more lightsome moments together. There was a picnic in the woods the time I talked her into letting me into the keep. But it was over so soon...”

The princess was now veering a little in sympathy. “But how could you let her go?” she demanded, almost indignantly.

“Oh,” the young man philosophized, “people with cheap mentalities” (he knew himself: stout fella) “will always chose money, glamor, and position over true mutual affection. I did too. It's only after you've got them that you realize money, glamor, and position are hollow possessions—if they are all

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there is.”

“I found that out too. We supposed to be living happily ever after but in blunt fact I have not been happy since I left the castle of the purple Dragon. Only today, talking so confidentially with you, my dear, do I feel a faint sweet breath of something like contentment—”

“You were happy in captivity? Locked in a cell within a cell in a prison castle!? How can it be?” cried the young man reproachfully. Good heavens, it looked like the famous rescue was turning out to have been a blunder from both sides.

“Well, yes,” hesitated the princess. “I have to confess it. I had delightful companionship in captivity and of course that’s worth more than jewels.”

“But who was it? When I took the bird of the fifty tongues it was all alone in the strongroom. Just surrounded by jeweled cages—which were there merely to confuse pursuers, as I understand it.”

“Oh, those jeweled cages. I can tell you how *they* got started. But didn’t you notice what was in the cages?”

“Just some birds. Why? Rather gorgeous ones, I’ll admit. But there was no one in the room for you to make a ‘companion’ of!”

“Anthropomorphising as usual,” sighed the princess, feeling her little flare-up of love for her husband fade. It was this lack of sensitivity, of knowing how one properly *should* be thinking and feeling and acting, that most irritated her about him.

“‘Just birds’, you say. It doesn’t occur to you that I was a bird? and naturally I thrive in the society of my own kind. We had a ball! up in that topmost chamber: chattering away all day and night, singing in competition—those of us who could sing— and of course I was delightfully bucked, always to win. And boasting about and admiring our own and others’ splendid plumage and cage jewellery—though I came off last in *that* contest.

“But most of all I had the adoration of my dear Dicky Bird.

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(His name was 'Bert' but. I never called him that. So plebeian.) He seemed awfully struck with me from the start and his devotion never wavered, all down the years. I missed him terribly when you 'rescued' me—and I still do. T wonder if he still lives..."

"Why don't you go and see?" said the young man gruffly. Being a man, he couldn't show the kind of tender concern his lady wife could. Yet he wasn't *all* hard cheap feelinglessness where others were concerned. (Like many unempathetic people he was sensitively aware of his *own* emotions.) He really wished the princess well and was even almost ready to help her achieve such well-being.

"Please don't think I haven't thought of it," replied the wife. "But we've been having to live happily ever after. I couldn't shatter the illusion by revealing that I hadn't been happy once."

"But now?" suggested Y.M.

Suddenly man and wife stood up as in one gesture. "What are we waiting for?!" they cried together and ran each to his own chamber to get ready for the trip.

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

<<1914>>

Free, white, and half twenty-one: that was Button Bright's condition now. He skipped out of the forest, refugeeing south. Sometimes he almost forgot he was hungry it was such a nice day and he so insouciant, apart from humming the Miss-Meals Blues. Then when his stomach gave a pang he would recall. Simultaneously he would forget he wasn't in Oz and there weren't cherry-pie trees around every corner or hot-dog bushes in the undergrowth. There *were* candy canes and bonbon brambles but they were no good. He lost a lot of time looking for food in the wild.

The first hours of his escape were made musical by the birds which well and truly, as described, infested the forest. Not though Button Bright knew he heard the calls of the corncrake, the crane, the crow, the cuckoo, and the curlew (there were lakes in the hills, round which such could wade). Now he was out on the open plain again, the sun shone, and he missed again his bumbershoot, which might have served as a parasol. He wondered what had become of it.

But one thing he wondered at more than that: he never saw any people, not since the forest. There he had sighted a number

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but then it was early morning and fewness of persons to be expected. Now in full day, out on the plain, there were none.

Why was that? wondered even the traditionally incurious boy. This was a pretty good country, it could obviously grow things, so there would seem to be no reason why humans shouldn't thrive there. Yet they didn't. Plenty of all other sorts of creatures though. A coypu ambled across his path. Button Bright addressed it but it made no reply. Was that because it couldn't speak or from sheer indifference?

No, Mo seemed to suffer from the same ailment as dear old Oz: out in the country you never saw people unless they were destined to play some part in your own story. By now Button Bright was wishing quite much that somebody would come along and play a part. He'd had fun so far, after a fashion, and was doing so still, strolling along with his hands in his pockets, kicking at stones (which were often rock candy) in his path, but there was just the chance that he might grow bored if something didn't happen soon. Boredom, of course, was the worst possible fate for a growing boy.

Right on cue things got better.

The path had strengthened to an actual road and now it lifted to pass over a bridge. The boy dangled over the railing for ten minutes, looking down into the brown river fairly far below. What could he use that for? he wondered. It wasn't quite of the color you'd want to drink, though he didn't go so far as to wonder what made it brown. Then a little breeze lifted off the stream and brought to his nostrils a faintly sweet smell. Sweet, but not actually of a sweetness one cared for. Sassafras!

At first he didn't believe it. True, he'd already made acquaintance with a milk river in this peculiar country, but, it had been indicated to flow from "cow mountains." What could give rise to a sassafras stream?

He'd better make sure. He crossed on over the bridge, scrambled down the bank, and stuck his fist in the river. He licked it. Oh, pew, root beer. This was the famous Root Beer River, about which others had heard so much, but he nothing. He just

went on mildly wondering how it got there.

Then it occurred to him that root beer was a sort of food, though not a much better one than all the sweets that littered the landscape. He speculated as to whether he should drink some, just on humanitarian (to himself) grounds.

He decided against it and regained the road. Sassafras and licorice. He wondered why it was he couldn't stand them when all the other kids adored those tastes. He just barely liked peppermint. On the other hand he enjoyed *spearmint* a lot. Funny, but there you were.

If Button Bright had been the least bit of a contemplative type he might have gone on to wonder why it is that one person, without having been frightened by it in the womb, will all his life detest root beer, while an own sibling may love it. A profound question though seemingly so trivial. If he'd wondered that he could have claimed the Nobel Prize as one of the great thinkers of mankind.

Anyway he'd now had an adventurette and the hours could go on uneventfully again. Once more the roadway devolved to a path. The boy was driven to wonder why there was even a path if no one but, himself ever came this way.

There was one little further frisson the time he came to a crossroads. Only one arm remained to a signpost standing there. It said "To the Wise Donkey", which was of no interest. Poor Button Bright. If only he'd known, the easterly of the three unmarked ways led to the Fruitcake Island and on to the domains of the Duchess Bredenbutta (who no doubt could have spared him a little). He did not know — and proceeded on south.

Long about sundown the path Button Bright had cleaved to came to another stream. This time there was no bridge and the path had to turn rather sharply to follow the creek up into the highlands again. Since the boy had no idea or plan as to where he was going (as long as there might be food there) a highland was as good as a plain to him. He hitched up his pants and headed for the hills.

But now he hadn't gone far when at last he met another foot

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passenger. The fellow marched out of the gloaming from among trees and came to a sharp military halt when he saw Button Bright. "Who goes there?" he cried, as if he weren't any more used to seeing other wayfarers than was Button Bright himself.

The boy saw a tall lank individual in a uniform that was clearly a soldier's though with accessories of a diplomat's. The newcomer's most striking feature was a long dark flowing beard.

"Gosh," said Button Bright. "The soldier with the green whiskers."

<<1914>>

C H A P T E R T H I R T E E N

<<1952>>

They were in Xavier's bar in the east Fifties. That's where the bunch always rendezvoused. Anybody could enter a bar and hang around indefinitely. Not like in a hotel lobby, where you got bored if you did nothing but maybe questioned by the house dick if you read a book or newspaper for too long. Ever notice?: in a bar people waiting for people can talk to each other, but not in a hotel lobby.

William Rapidan had somebody to talk to, medbragt. The Danes had a word for it: "with-brought". You couldn't say it in one word in English. In other words he'd brought with him his own talk partner. Now the job was to get rid of her in half an hour because then it would be seven o'clock. Peter'd phoned the other day from Philadelphia to confirm for the usual hour, and incidentally to mention that Wantowin Battles would be coming along. He'd said the two of them—well, some others too—had a fun story to relate.

The two weren't in a booth this time. Speedy didn't want them to get to feeling too ensconced. He hoped she'd be gone by the time the guys turned up. He wasn't ashamed to introduce her. Far from it. Pat was an okay girl. He might like to see her

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again—if his attachments didn't lie elsewhere. But he was alert to social nuances and you just didn't bring a girl to a stag party, welcome as she might be to the same men at some other kind of party. He didn't want to have to ask her to go. He wanted her to know it on her own.

To that end he paradoxically involved her in talk so absorbing she *couldn't* break in and say "I'm leaving." He said, "The 'Old 'Boys' club is made up of just the male foreigners—and that basically means Americans—that have been to that country—"

Pat broke in: "Hasn't the country got a name?" He should have seen it coming and maybe he did, back a ways, because he *had* planned he'd say 'Oz'—just like that—and count on her being the ignorant moll she ought to have been. Now, and for quite a while, he didn't see her that way any more. But he'd let the question of name go. He stopped, but only for a second. He was quick enough to say, "Sure it has."

Then while she said, "Yeah? What is it?" he had a couple of seconds to thank fast in. "Shangri-La."

"Funny name." She mused. "But okay. I've heard of it. Go on."

That was a narrow escape. She just could have heard of the Oz film but *Lost Horizon* was that bit less celebrated, that smidgin older—and even so she knew the name existed.

"There's seven of us then," related Speedy. "The oldest is a farm fella from California..." He told about Zeb Hugson, who had gone to... Shangri-La in 1906.

"Nineteen-six. He'll be kinda long in the tooth by now."

"Yeah, that's right. Zeb's getting along there, but he's far from the oldest of the fellows that have been to—um, Shangri-La."

Just then and, curiously, for the first time Speedy realized something. Plenty of men had gone from the United States to Oz but not all of them belonged to the Old Boys. Now why was that? The very Wizard himself, O.Z. Diggs: highly honored; indeed, held in awe; yet nobody'd ever proposed him for membership in the O.B.O. And Dorothy Gale's Uncle Henry. Who

could be more of an authentic American transplanted to the fairy-land than he? Or the Shaggy Man (nameless there forevermore) and the Shaggy Man's brother (even nicknameless forevermore, with only a designation by category)? Or Cap'n Bill Weedles. Or Netta Bit More, the clown.

The little puzzle didn't last long. Of course: it, was because it was the Old *Boys* of Oz. The genius of the group, even if unenunciated, was that it was composed of individuals who had known Oz as boys: men who had become, partially or in some sense, Ozites themselves, as Uncle Henry or Cap'n Rill could never be. Indeed, the "boy" aspect of the matter had been more regarded than the ex-Oz origins of the members, for were not Ojo and Randy of Regalia and Zip and Woot honorary participants? The club was for people who had been boys in Oz, regardless of what stage of maturity they might afterwards have achieved. And that's why Princess Ozma herself was Royal Patron of the society. Sex-change operations didn't count! Ozma too had known Oz for at least a decade as a boy!

These reflections perhaps slowed down the tempo of Speedy's voiced reminiscences to Pat but not enough to make her lose the thread or even feel he'd grown distant and preoccupied. She found it entertaining to hear that Peter was quite a well known architect of West Philadelphia but in his youth a champion baseball pitcher who had once saved the day with a well-aimed "twirler." She heard that Ojo had .turned out to be of royal blood but that Robert Up still knew nothing of his ancestry nor was ever likely to. She learned that Zeb was content down on the farm though having seen Shangri-La, while lucky Buck Jones had on paired off with a local girl and settled in that distant country for good. His luck still held and he's missed the coconut Grove fire.

Then Speedy Rapidan looked up and saw .Sples Smith heading his way.

C H A P T E R F O U R T E E N

<<1914>>

"Yes," exclaimed the man, coming nearer. "The Soldier with the Green Whiskers. But how did you know?"

"That's easy," said Button Bright. "You're dressed like a soldier and you've got green whiskers.

"True," admitted the private-general.. "Mostly people act as if 'Soldier with Green whiskers' is my name and I suppose I've got in the way of thinking like that myself, so when you said those words I thought you recognized me."

"I do. You're the Soldier with the Green Whiskers."

"Oh, goodness, here we go again. Do you always talk in riddles?"

"Don't know," muttered the boy, reverting to his usual practice.

"Let's put it this way," said the Soldier with the Green Whiskers, for indeed it was he! "Am I to you A soldier with green whiskers or *the* Soldier with the Green Whiskers?"

"The," said Button Bright.

"Aha. So you know me?!"

"Sure. You stand around outside Ozma's palace and look important. If there's a war you run the other way. And when the

Guardian of the Gate is off duty you take his place.”

“Just so,” said the soldier, stopping to gaze at the boy thoughtfully. “So you do know me. Do I know you?”

“Now *you’re* kind of talking in riddles. Yes, you know me. I’m Button Bright.”

“Aha.” The soldier thought hard. “But last time you were wearing a sailor suit—and were only about half as tall.”

“I’ve changed,” stated the boy succinctly.

“Do you still get lost?” asked the soldier, remembering.

“Yes. I’m lost now.”

“Oh.” That wasn’t good news, because the soldier himself had been going to ask directions. He wasn’t lost but he had no more than a rough sketch map of the area with him and he was far from knowing where his next turning might be.

He asked anyway.

“The Palace of the Monarch of Mo?” echoed Button Bright. “Search me. But one thing I can tell you: it’s not the way you’re going. I’ve just come from there and not a palace did I see, or much of anything except just tame countryside.”

“Perhaps you’ve not come far?” posited the soldier.

“I mean: there might be a capital city on beyond, the other way, past where you started.”

“I don’t think so. I walked all day and where I started was way on the other side of the country. There was a castle there but there was nobody in it.”

“Oh, dear,” said the soldier and sat down under a hornbeam hedge. He fanned himself with his hat. “But I made sure this was the way—” He fumbled for the piece of parchment on which Queen Ozma had traced ways and landmarks.

“Maybe you missed a turning,” suggested the boy, and looked at the sketch—upside down.

“There was only one,” informed the soldier, “and the sign said ‘To the wise Donkey’. ‘That was of no interest.’”

“No.” Button Bright had come to the same conclusion. Now he looked at the map right side up. “But maybe after all that road led on, after the donkey, to other places.” He described

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his own confusion at the road sign whose other arms were missing.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

C H A P T E R

F I F T E E N

<<1914>>

"It was unbearable," recalled Omby Amhy, the soldier with the green whiskers, dealing his companion the last biscuit from his dispatch case.

"Your marriage, you mean?" said Button Bright, sounding for a moment oddly grown up.

"Right. My wife had—has—had an awful temper. I sometimes think now that she was disappointed in me. That's why she scolded me so much."

"Disappointed about what?" Maybe if Button Bright had been a little older he would have been embarrassed to venture such a question to a married man, but he was the age he was.

As it turned out, the question was safe enough and the soldier answered blandly: "She was ambitious. She thought that I, as the Royal Army of Oz, should have gone on to glory, with her riding on my coattails and shining by reflection. But nothing happened and I just went on from year to year standing around like any recruit on sentry duty."

"Too bad," sympathized the boy, who couldn't see much harm in the soldier's way of life. Not everybody could be ambitious. "There's no room in the world for everybody to be a star."

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"Yes, it's bad when you are ambitious," knew the soldier from experience, or his wife's, as reported. "Then nothing seems worth anything unless it promotes your dream. That's why people struggling for recognition are usually unhappy. Even with success you can't be hearing applause *all* the time and all the time you're not you feel dissatisfied, like you're wasting your time and life is getting away from you and you might as well be dead."

"Gee, is that what it's like?"

"So my wife said. Anyway she railed at me constantly. Everything I did was wrong."

"Why didn't she do anything on her own then if she was so keen to be famous or glamorous or whatever it was?"

"Oh, she did, finally. She left me. That's why I'm here."

Button Bright didn't get the connection but probably he wasn't meant to, not yet. He made himself more comfortable on the grass under the hornbeam and settled to hear the story out.

"I'm sort of a mild kind of person," admitted the soldier. "I didn't have any ambition. Never did—though others have had it for me. Why, in my very cradle my military family tried to build it into me. They named me 'Wantowin'."

"That's funny," said Button Bright. "I thought your name was 'Omby Amby'."

"That's just a nickname. Maybe I'll tell you about that later." The soldier twiddled with his umbrella in almost a significant way. "In fact my name is Wantowin G. Battles—"

"What's the 'G' for?"

"'Great'—but I never lived up to any of my names. My family put me in military school. I hated it. Then my father, who had been a well known general during the time of the old king, used his influence to get me appointed to guard duty at the Palace of Magic in the Emerald City. It should have warned them: the way I let myself be pushed around was a sign I probably wasn't going to win any battles. I got pushed into my marriage too. My wife believed in my names, you see, and not in what she saw before her eyes.

"What with one thing and another I was pretty miserable.

So it was kind of a relief when my wife disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” asked Button Bright, almost feeling curiosity.

“Yes, we had a grand blow-up. I always thought it took two to quarrel but she taught me different. The next day she was nowhere to be seen.”

“What do you suppose happened to her?” said Button Bright to be polite. “You didn’t murder her or anything?” With that question he thought he was being very naughty but in fact he was just being unrealistic. No one can die in Oz.

Omby Amby looked aggrieved. “And I such a mild peaceful bland fellow who wouldn’t say Boo to a goose? I see you don’t know me after all.”

“Sorry,” said Button Bright, who didn’t really like offending people, “Please go on.”

“Well, the relief was so great that for a year or two I didn’t do anything. But then, you see, I met a nice woman. For the first time I wanted to get married. But how could I? not knowing but what I still was.”

“What did you do?”

“My would-be bride advised me. I would never have presumed to bother our dear Queen myself—”

“That’d he Ozma?”

“That’s the one. But Tollydiggle—that’s my adored one’s name—*would* urge me. She’s so nice, and she swore Ozma would be just as nice. So finally last week I went to the Girl Ruler, threw myself on her good graces, and asked what I should do.”

“And what was that?”

“The first thing Ozma said was that we ought to look at the Magic Picture and discover where my wife *was*. So we did.”

“Where was she?”

“In a castle. Talking to a purple dragon. ‘Good gracious,’ said Ozma, ‘that’s the Purple Dragon of Mo!’ The dear princess went on to tell me about this Purple Dragon. She recognized it, you see, by the silver star on its forehead. ‘I’ve nagged and nagged the animal,’ she said—though one can’t imagine Ozma nagging—

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‘to come and live in our Gillikin country. He’s so very purple, you know, and would give a cachet to our purple land.’

“‘But my wife,’ I put in mildly. It was she, of course, in whom I was most interested.

“‘Let’s watch a bit,’ suggested the Girl Ruler. ‘Perhaps we can find out more about their circumstances.’ So we did. The two were in an arras-lined room—”

Button Bright had to break in to ask what “arras” was or were. Not though the soldier knew, someone had blundered and named wall tapestries after a town in France, so ever after when a person said ‘Lift up the arras’ or ‘Makes a pass through the arras’ you couldn’t be quite sure if he was talking about fabrics or the things you shoot from bows. Battles knew nothing of that. He just said “wall coverings” and went on:

“They were playing chess. That quickly palled—for us—but the clever little queen made a discovery. ‘See the men:’ she said, and behold: the chess ‘men’ were animals, on the model of the King of England’s beasts: boars, harts, bulls, wyverns.” Before his auditor could ask what wyverns were the soldier hastened on: “So Ozma knew they were the dragon’s chess pieces and therefore this must be the dragon’s own arras-lined room, and not my wife’s. ‘That’s the castle of the Purple Dragon,’ she deduced, ‘and that’s in the land of Mo.’

“‘But my wife?’ I wondered.

“‘Now you know where she is you can go and bring her back,’ said the Princess delightedly. ‘I’ll designate you ambassador-at-large and then you can go to Mo, officially, as soon as you like.’

“‘But I don’t want her back—if it please your grace,’ I protested. ‘I only reported her absence to see if Your Highness could make it permanent. I wish to marry again.’

“Ozma looked grave. ‘You cannot mean I should compass Mrs. Battles’ death,’ she stated. ‘Thus, you must be speaking of divorce.’ She continued to look disapproving. ‘That’s just as bad.’” (Don’t forget that this was in 1914, when they didn’t yet have world wars, genocides, concentration camps, terrorism, or inner-cities, so as to know what really bad was like.)

“‘Anyway,’ went on our beloved Queen, ‘divorce isn’t permitted by the laws of Oz. Perhaps, in time, that may change^s, but for now I don’t know what to suggest.’ She was still looking solemn.

“I gulped and didn’t know which way to look. But I was lucky in remembering how miserable I was not to be able to wed dear Tollydiggle fair and square, and that gave me courage.

“‘Your Highness spoke of an embassy,’ I reminded. ‘Could that still be? You say my wife finds herself in Mo. Perhaps she’s now a resident of Mo. And perhaps in Mo...’ I didn’t quite have the courage to go on.

“Ozma saw through my ploy at once. ‘Perhaps in Mo,’ she echoed, ‘there is no prohibition of divorce. Well, I ought not to wink at circumvention of laws I am bound to enforce, but in fairness I cannot see the rightness in obliging to stay together people who are unhappy so.

“‘Very well. You may go. Not to your wife’s presence itself, I take it? but to the court of the Monarch of Mo. He’s merry as well as Magical and perhaps will take a relaxed view of your objective, possibly even grant, your suit. It’s worth a try, I dare say.’

“So it was decided and all things set in train that I might start out on my mission. Of course I must go in uniform, so as to look official, but not in that of the loyal Army of Oz, for that might look warlike. Princess Ozma had a new outfit tailored for me that, as you see, displays elements from my two professions: soldier and ambassador.”

“And the umbrella you carry?” asked Button Bright, who from the moment of meeting had shown a particular interest in that accoutrement.

“Oh, well, that,” said Battles, looking a bit, discomfited. “It’s not very presentable, is it? But you see, I had to carry something. I would feel naked without my rifle, my bayonet, or my sword, but all those would look out of place in the grip of one come to seek a boon, not launch an attack. The Queen and I

§ See *The Good Witch of Oz*. Editor’s note.

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pondered a whole day as to what implement would be suitable for me to bear.

"It almost never rains in the Emerald City, as perhaps you remember, and so for a long time nobody thought of an umbrella. But at last Ozma did so and declared that such would be ideal, as nothing could be more peaceable-appearing than a rolled broolly. Besides, she happened to know that it does rain in Mo, though only lemonade. And there was a third reason."

"Oh? What was that?"

"The Queen was mysterious about it. 'It's the only umbrella in the palace,' she said, 'so it will have to be the one. It's very old-fashioned to look at, though in perfect working order, I assure you.' She led the way to an obscure clothes cupboard and took out a yellow umbrella of indeed an antiquated type.

"'This umbrella has magical properties,' Ozma stated. 'I myself am not sure of the full extent of its capabilities but one thing is certain: it will protect the user absolutely from all peril by liquids. Thus was it constantly used by its original owner. Of course,' the Princess hastened to instruct, 'it must be opened in order to function properly. It was its owner's failure so to operate it that proved fatal—and led in the end to its coming into our possession.'

"But that was all she said, and I didn't like to press. I accepted it gratefully and presented shoulder-arms with the old rolled bumbershoot. I was about to open it out for testing when I recollected that it is counted unlucky to open an umbrella withindoors. The Girl Ruler, however, sensed my perplexity and said with a smile, 'Go ahead. Open it out! It was the previous owner's *failure* to open it. indoors that proved unlucky!'"