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## C H A R T E R

## S I X T E E N

<<1952>>

King Scowleyow was getting a bit doddery but was still enough of a practising curmudgeon to withhold permission for his daughter's expedition. What that upstart so-called son-in-law of his did he could not care less. The king had never really gone along with the miserable swineherd's marriage to his daughter.

Hence, the two had to depart in secret. They'd thought of going with an immense retinue, to impress everybody wherever they went, you see. But now they found themselves sneaking out of town on asses in the dead of night, just the two of them. They got as far as a roadside inn a few miles out and, finding they were not pursued, stopped there to wait for a more practical hour for serious travel.

Fairly early the next morning the young man and the princess got on the way again and had soon passed the frontier. Now they began to feel fairly safe from pursuit. Scowleyow always had been a bit unpredictable when people ran off with his daughter.

In the dark of the previous night the couple had missed the sign that said, "He who travels this road will never return again,"

if it was even still there any more. By now people were returning all the time along that road, so leaving the sign up would have been a bit pointless. How it happened that they were able to travel back and forth there you'll see in a moment.

If this were a fairy tale the old woman would still be sitting on the rock three years later—but it isn't so she wasn't. Who was still to be encountered on the old road into Mo was the witch who, ineptly and very un-witch-like, had been in the habit of burning her hands while baking. She'd now acquired oven mitts and cleared up that problem.

This time the witch was not found in the act of baking when the young man passed by. She was minding the store. Yes, now that the rivalry of king and sorceress had subsided and the road between them was no longer sown with booby traps, the amount of traffic along the road had grown phenomenally. The travelers needed commodities and it had not taken witch Jrumm long to catch on and open a shop. She called it 'Mother Jrumm's Goodies'. Fresh-baked bread was of course one of the specialities.

"Well, what do you know!" said the sorceress when the bell above the door tinkled and the royal couple walked in. The three, though old acquaintances, had never been together as a trio before. For obvious reasons the witch had not been invited to the wedding. If she had, she might have spotted one or two anomalies about the ceremony. She had picked up a lot of miscellaneous learning in the years since she'd left home and set up as a sorceress.

Relations between the young man and the witch were quite cordial, those between princess and witch less so. It was no credit to Jrumm that the enchanted mockingbird had been happy in captivity. While Y.M. and Jrumm were having a big hello, the princess stood looking on rather sceptically. She was so good, however, that she didn't say anything.

The young man had a purpose in making this call. Without it, he judged, their journey right well be lost motion. After the first round of greetings was over Y.M. said to the witch, "You got a minute?"

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“Yes indeed,” said the shopwoman amiably. “Come on up to the house. Pernille, you take over, will you?” The couple recognized one of the serving maids from the old days at the castle of the Purple Dragon. Y.M. in particular felt a pang. What if it had been his erstwhile sweetheart? Pernille’s presence here warned him that all was no longer likely to be exactly as he remembered it at the western stronghold.

Cordial as they were all pretending to be, or perhaps in one or two cases actually were, something alerted the young couple not to reveal the true purpose of their quest. They gave out that they were just having a second honeymoon, escaping the tiring glamor of court life by traveling incogniti on asses. Just for sentimental reasons they were going back to visit the old castle where they had first met. They wanted information on the perils, if any, that lurked along their road. “What about the stable guarded by dragons?” Y.M. demanded over a good cup of coffee—and cinnamon toast, made of the witch’s own bread.

“Oh, that’s all changed,” declared Jrumm with a laugh. “Since your dad and I,”—here she turned to the princess—“signed our non-aggression pact everything’s been put back in place. My son has been restored to me. Actually I restored him myself, but that’s another story. And the dragons were released and allowed to go back to their old home. In fact, the stable’s been abandoned and, I believe, is merely being allowed to fall down.”

“So there are dragons at Dragon Castle?” said the young man, startled. “And what about the guardsmen who used to be on duty there and—er, other personnel?” He could scarcely breathe for anxiety, and inevitably the true purpose of their journey began to leak out.

“Still there, I guess,” said the witch nonchalantly. “I never asked. The King’s terms for my making up with him and ceasing hostilities were so generous that I didn’t care to put any awkward questions—” She noticed the cold looks of both her visitors and tried to backwater. “It was rather naughty of me, wasn’t it? Some of those servants had been acquired at considerable expense or trouble. I hope they didn’t end up as dragon

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fodder.”

Her guests started up in dudgeon, hardly able to utter. Only the princess gasped, “Do dragons eat birds too?!”

Jrumm was amazed. Here were people who actually cared about somebody besides themselves, and mere servants at that! The motivation was one very alien to herself. However, there was no cause to tease her callers unduly. “I’m not sure,” she stated soberly. “But the point is moot. I sold all the jeweled cages after your own escape.”

“And their bird contents?” demanded the princess.

“Them too. The ones I couldn’t shift I just let go, back into the woods and fields of Tweet. They are there to this day, I dare say.”

The princess was sniffing openly. “Oh, Richard,” she mourned. “You were free to leave and yet you never came to see me.”

Her husband was critical. “With you returned to human form and happily married? The bird may have had more discretion than you give him credit for.”

In fact the rebuke cheered the forlorn wife. “That’s right! I hadn’t thought of that. So my Dicky Bird could be anywhere. There’s hardly any point any more in my going to the castle. Oh, where should I look for him? I wouldn’t know how to begin.”

“Tell you what I’ll do,” said the sorceress, for whom light was dawning more and more. Her curiosity was piqued. Besides, there might be a chance for wreaking amusing mischief. Certainly there was nothing to keep her at home. She didn’t find petty commerce, and the baking routine, all that compelling! “If you like, I’ll go with you. I could probably be of some help in trying to trace your friends.”

The essentially naive couple had no reason to wish to remain strictly alone on their quest. They accepted with very little demur. “Oh, but wait,” said the young man. “We haven’t got any extra asses. How will you travel? Have you a mount?”

“Why, yes indeed. You haven’t forgotten Hræ stevrod — your old helper?”

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“The rangy mangy old horse?”

“He wasn’t so awfully old! Only forty-two when you knew him.”

“Forty-two! That’s ancient for a horse.”

“He *wasn’t* a horse: At least not to start with. He was my son. He’s still my son, for the matter of that. And he’s still a horse.”

The witch’s speech, if you analyzed it, didn’t sound logical, but it accurately described the situation.

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

<<1914>>

Button Bright and Wantowin Battles stumbled up the road. It was now full night and that was odd because the sun never sets in Mo, a curious state of affairs and one not adequately explained by the original discoverer of the country, who certainly describes a “night” spent in the magical kingdom.

They’d spent a long time talking and getting acquainted under the hedge, and Button Bright in eating up the soldier’s modest supply of provisions (yet he was still hungry). They felt they ought to be getting on, inasmuch as the hornbeam hedge offered no ample accommodation for over-nighting.

It was too dark to study Princess Ozma’s map any further. They could barely make out the path. Button Bright was insistent that the soldier would get no nearer the Monarch of Mo by going along the way he himself had come. Perhaps too the boy was motivated by a wish always to see new country, not retrace his own steps. He mentioned again the ambiguous crossroads Battles had passed and won the day in urging him to return and try the other fork. It seemed tacitly understood they would travel on together.

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See *The Scarecrow of Oz* 1915 edition, page 100. Editor’s note.

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The trail now wound rather steeply upward. They did a good deal more stumbling but kept it up for an hour. Finally Wantowin said, "It's no good. In this dark we may miss the turning. In fact maybe we already have. I've got a feeling we're getting near the top of this mountain, and I didn't do that myself earlier in the day."

"What'll we do?" wondered the yawning and weary boy.

"Sit down and wait for morning," proposed the weary and yawning man.

That's what they did. At first they sat together and Button Bright even attempted a little conversation. "Tell me about your name," he requested. "How come you're 'Wantowin Battles' sometimes and 'Omby Amby' others?"

"A freak of childish mispronunciation," the soldier explained succinctly. "At first as an infant I thought my name was 'Me' but the grown-ups soon showed me the error of my way. 'No, no,' they said, 'you're Wantowin G. Battles.'"

"Think of the perplexity of a tiny child at trying to say that name. All I could manage was 'Womm wim' and I got no further into 'Battles' than 'B'. I called myself 'Womwimbee'. In the course of time that turned into 'Omby Amby', but it was never more than a nickname. I don't know how it got such currency that some people thought it was my real name."

But by now the young boy was fast asleep. The head of the soldier himself was drooping sadly. He lurched quietly to his feet and for propriety's sake moved off some yards down the path where he laid himself properly to sleep, with the old yellow umbrella opened out and propped above him as a makeshift tent.

Although high up the mountain, the travelers did not feel cold, and this was odd, additionally, because it was the middle of the night. Indeed, toward morning it grew delightfully balmy—as it began to snow!

Button Bright was the first to discover this. Once he got going, the Soldier with the Green Whiskers was a much heavier sleeper, but the boy, being unprotected by an umbrella roof, was

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awakened by the peppering upon his person of many little light but solid things. He stirred in his sleep, and felt and heard a crunch. That woke him.

He tried to sit up—and couldn't. Now he realized that he had been hearing and feeling the tiny bombardment for quite some time. Latterly it had become a regular avalanche, and yet not stiflingly heavy. What could it be? If this was snow it was of a most unusual sort. Normally too snow doesn't smell; certainly not delightfully of corn and butter.

It was dawning, but Button Bright couldn't know that, lying face down and half covered in a drift of popped popcorn.

It was natural that a growing boy would open a mouth and taste what was close about him, especially when it smelled so nice. The moment Button Bright did that he was in seventh heaven and had no call to move any muscle beyond those of his jaw, tongue, and throat. The traveler's solitary unrequited wish for food! had been granted whilst he slept. Suppose he were still sleeping!? and this was all a glorious dream? He'd better not make any abrupt movements and wake himself up!

Button Bright did well to eat popcorn while he could. In fact, it is the most beneficial food known to man: rich in protein, calcium, phosphorus, iron, zinc, thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin, containing but, one calory per kernel, and a sovereign form of roughage. I don't know why they never mention popcorn when extolling the wonders of molasses, oats, bananas, yoghurt, citrus, cod liver oil, or soya bean sprouts as ideal forms of nourishment. Perhaps they think it's a frivolous food, being traditionally consumed in circumstances of more or less merrymaking: at circuses, cinema shows, and children's parties. Popcorn is not solemn and pretentious enough to count!

Well, Button Bright lived a dream from which he would just as soon never have awakened. Unfortunately he did, for, startlingly, he heard voices. On the instant he lay as quiet as could be. Maybe the voices were just a badness in his dream and would go away. But alas, the boy's feet betrayed him by sticking out of the corndrift.



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In a moment a loud man's voice was heard exclaiming that someone must have got lost in a storm and expressing the pious hope that the victim might still be alive. "Let's pull him out and see," the man ended.

He took hold of one foot and the Bumpy Man took hold of the other. Then they both pulled and out from the heap of popcorn came a little boy. When drawn from the heap the boy was chewing a mouthful of popcorn and both his hands were full of it. So at first he couldn't speak to his rescuers but lay quite still and eyed them calmly until he had swallowed his mouthful.

Then he said: "Get my cap," and stuffed more popcorn into his mouth.

While the Bumpy Man began shoveling into the cornbank to find the boy's cap, Trot was laughing joyfully and Cap'n Bill had a broad grin on his face. The Ork looked from one to another and asked, "Who is this stranger?"

"Why, it's Button Bright, of course," answered Trot. "If anyone ever finds a lost boy, he can make up his mind it's Button Bright. But how he ever came to be lost in this faraway country is more'n

I can make out."

"Where does he belong?" inquired the Ork.

"His home used to be in Philadelphia, I think; but I'm quite sure Button-Bright doesn't belong anywhere."

"That's right," said the boy, nodding his head as he swallowed the second mouthful.

"Everyone belongs somewhere," remarked the Ork.

"Not me," insisted Button Bright. "I'm half way round the world from Philadelphia, and I've lost my Magic Umbrella, that used to carry me anywhere. Stands to reason that, if I can't get back I haven't any home. But I don't care much. This is a pretty good country, Trot. I've had lots of fun here<sup>s</sup>."

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§ For Button-Bright's further adventures see *The Scarecrow of Oz*, *The Magic Mirror of Oz*, and *The Frogman of Oz*. Editor's note.

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

<<1914>>

Private-General Battles dreamed on.

Perhaps it was naughty of Button Bright not to have mentioned the soldier's near proximity when he himself was untimely rescued out of the cornbank. But the youth was possibly wiser than we have always been taught to think. What use would a one-legged sailor, a "bumpy man", or a little girl from California be to the green-whiskered soldier on his quest?

Mayre Griffith had been a little pot-like when she called Button Bright "lost." The boy was exactly as much or little lost as the girl and her companion Cap'n Bill themselves, for all of them had left the United States with an equally sketchy idea of where they were going and were now on matching footing as to knowledge of present whereabouts or future destination.

Omby Amby (to give him his everyday appellation) had, in contrast, specific knowledge of his own location and reason for being there. Besides, he carried fairy Ozma's own hand drawn map of the region. Meeting further newcomers would only have slowed him down.

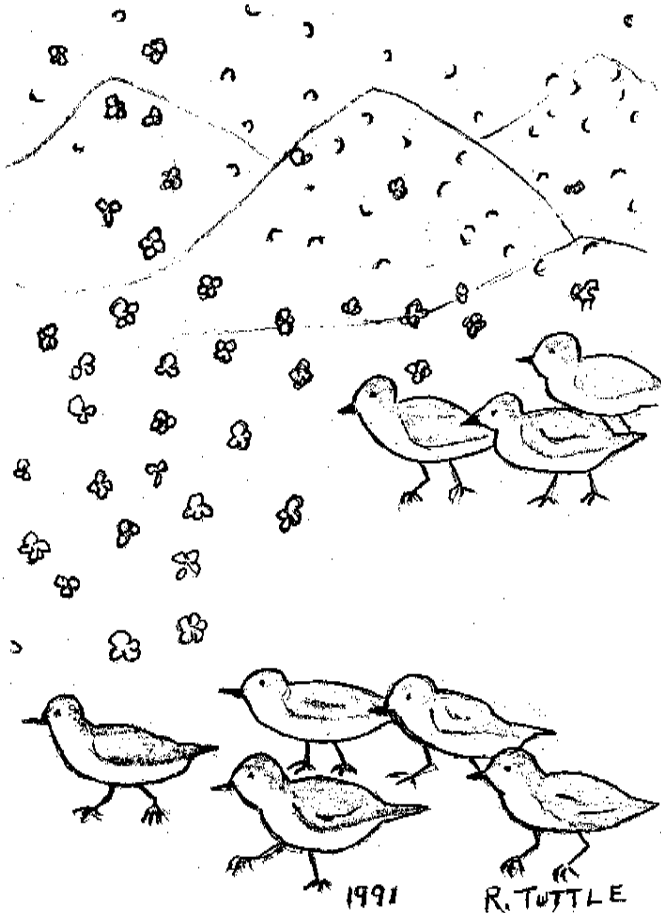
His umbrella tent screened him from the fall of corn. He slept on until the onslaught of the mountain's maizofagous birds un-

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covered his shelter and exposed him to the light of a by now advanced day.

“Say, will you look at that?” exclaimed a flamingo-like bird and gave an exploratory peck at the ferrule of the yellow umbrella. Perhaps its color confused him and he thought it was a well-buttered and unusually vast corn-pop.

His mates pecked on industriously and quickly the dimensions of the obstruction were laid bare. All the hopping, twittering, and pecking soon roused the soldier and he stuck his green-whiskered face out, from under the rim of the bumbershoot. “Birds and popcorn!” he exclaimed. “What’s happened?”



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The birds said nothing. Maize consumption absorbed them to the exclusion of all other concerns except being taken prisoners, as had been the fate of several of their number recently! Only when the whole surface of the mountain had been pecked clear of corn by the ravenous flocks did a few of the more curious return and engage in conversation the onward-hiking Ozite, who, for a time, had been the birds' competitor in stuffing into himself great quantities of the delightful delicacy. Ever afterward the charming food remained a favorite of the soldier's<sup>s</sup>.

A little bird landed on Battles' modified helmet (with diplomatic embellishments) and said, "What'cha doin'?"

Omby Amby was used to talking birds back home in Oz so he was nothing startled and replied, "Oh, just walking along this path."

"I SEE that," said the bird somewhat testily. "But in aid of what? That is, if you don't mind my asking."

"No, that's all right. It makes a change. Well, I'm traveling to the court of the Magical Monarch of Mo to ask for a divorce."

The little blue-green tit-like avian thought for a second (not long enough) and said, "But what if he still loves you?"

Omby Amby smiled. "Oh, I'm not married to the monarch myself. If that were so I'd be a queen and could grant my own divorces."

"*Would* you be queen?" mused the bird. "I wonder. There was quite a little scandal some time ago, in the country next door to this, about a king's wife who didn't make queen. Still, it might be worth a try," opined the bird. "Oh, but no, I'm forgetting: that might be bigamy. Since you're wanting a divorce I assume you're married to someone already."

"Yes, to a third party altogether. It's from her I want the Monarch to divorce me."

"Why?" It was a pert bird that thought nothing of asking, intimate questions.

"She's a shrike. She used to impale me on her barbed words," the soldier waxed poetical.

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§ See *Speedy in Oz* 1934 edition, page 273. Editor's note.

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“Oh, goodness, you’re married to a bird!”

“Not necessarily. I just mean, I was badly henpecked.”

“Wait a minute, I thought it was a shrike.”

“What would you call someone who screeches and rails from morning to night?”

“‘Rails’? More than one? So you *are* a bigamist!?”

“You’re not listening. I’m trying to say my wife browbeat me so much, and for no reason, that I sometimes thought she was cuckoo.”

“Gosh, it was a whole aviary. But I think you just *had* all those birds; you weren’t actually married to them?”

“Whatever. The problem now is to get rid of them—her! Do you know this region?”

“Like the back of my claw. I’m probably the best-traveled bird in the country.”

“Well! that *is* something to crow about.”

“Why? You want guiding?”

“Now about coming along to show me the way to the Monarch’s capital?”

“We-l-l ... okay. It might be fun.”

“Yea, indeed. It’ll be a lark!”

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

<<1952>>

"Who was that?"

"Oh, girl.? Pretty nice girl actually. Her name Pat.. I don't know. "

"She looked familiar. Friend of yours?"

"Oh, I guess so—but not what you might expect. We just talked. I might even run into her again some time."

"Well, neat... Where's Peter?"

"Search me. We're the first ones. I thought he might be coming with you."

"No, he's got Omby Amby in tow. Pete invited him to Philly."

"Oh, that's good." Speedy had his own opinion of Philadelphia. Slums were all very well in their way but not when they took over whole historic cities so you didn't intentionally walk alone there after dark. "What's that I hear about you and him and a mix-up over umbrellas?"

The two had sat down to wait and now Smith brought out again from under the table the unlikely big bumbershoot he wasn't going to need on this fine Indian summer evening. "You recognize it?"

"Would I? Have I ever seen it before?"

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“Maybe you did. Or maybe again you wouldn’t have. Ozma didn’t keep it out in view, gathering dust. It stayed in a closet somewhere—actually, several somewheres, it seems—”

“Sounds nicely mysterious. You’re gonna tell me all about it when the time comes, aren’t you?” But a barman had come over and they had to order something. It’d be Speedy’s second Martini and he determined to sip it slowly. No point, in getting groggy before the fun even properly began.

“It’s the umbrella I went to Mo with, a long time ago.” Smith dropped the bombshell quietly.

“No! Cripes, that. really *is* news! I thought you lost your Magic Umbrella over a popcorn field and it was never seen again!..?”

“That’s the story that got around. Actually I never said I lost it in the popcorn drift. The loss had happened several days before that.

“I used to wonder a lot about where it finally fetched up but I never tried seriously to find out ‘til this past summer—”

<<1951>>

But now there was a hubbub and the whole Oz contingent materialized in a body. Speedy and Sples Smith were used to such phenomena but it must be admitted that other patrons of Xavier’s did a double take and thought they’d already had one too many when eight men were suddenly visible where none had been a moment earlier. They rubbed their eyes while Prince Randy of Regalia as more or less spokesman for the newcomers hailed the two men at the table.

“Wherever you are, Hello!” he quoted from Speedy’s own book, not exactly aptly.

“We’re right here!” cried William Rapidan, jumping up. And then there was a confused scene of general hello-saying. The whole mob trooped at once to the exit. The bartenders too had failed to see the group come in. Less complicated if they immediately saw them go out.

But Peter and his/everybody’s guest weren’t there yet, so the bunch hung around on the sidewalk. They’d only be a minute.

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Over the years the Old Boys of Oz had promulgated the rule that you were punctual in meeting, or not at all. Whoever had not turned up within half an hour of the agreed meeting time was no longer expected.

And in good time here came the sweating pair hurrying up Third Avenue, and it was still only twenty past seven.

Handshakes all around and particular cordiality shown to Wantowin Battles, for whom it was all so new. He had a box of popcorn he and Peter had stopped to pick up at a sidewalk machine down at Sixth and Forty-Second; that's what made them an extra five minutes later. The corn was presented to Sples Smith amid pleased hilarity and some questioning eyebrows. "I don't get it," stated Woot the Wanderer. "We're on our way to dinner. Who needs popcorn?"

"Yeah, dinner," put in Speedy. "I take it that's where we're going to hear all about it.." But where's that gonna be?"

They never dined two years running at the same place. Last year it had been the Russian Tea Room and now for a change of pace they chose Keen's Chop House down in the west Thirties. It took three taxis to get them all there.



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## C H A P T E R            T W E N T Y

<<1914>>

The Magical Monarch was nothing loth. He liked to see people smile. Sometimes they laughed outright when they got their decrees.

“But,” he ordained, “there is one condition...” Wantowin Battles listened attentively. The little bird on his shoulder pricked up his—well, not exactly ears.

“Of course you must inform your former spouse. It would not be fair to leave her in ignorance. She too might wish to wed again.”

‘Fat chance,’ thought Battles; ‘not if the guy saw her coming first.’ Aloud he said, “Oh, that is most considerate of your highness. But how shall the news be brought to her?”

“By personal messenger, I ween. Here is her copy of the Divorce Certificate. But I fear it must be you yourself who brings the good news. You know where she resides? Somewhere in my own dominions, I think you said?”

“I have a strong clue, our grace, as to her whereabouts,” confessed the private-general. ‘Durn!’ he thought privately. ‘If only I didn’t.’

Thus it was that they set out again, Wantowin G. Battles and



Bert the Bird. The Magical Monarch could not, with a spell, wish them to where they were going, for he did not deal in magic<sup>s</sup>. Besides, how much story would you have left, then? if every little problem were to be solved with an enchantment rather than by real people doing real things.

They traveled for many days—but not by the Lunch Isle or rocky defiles, unless one could think of lunching on fruitcake, because they did proceed via Fruitcake Island. They were in no hurry and dawdled along. Frankly, Omby Amby dreaded the upcoming interview. He was

determined to make it as brief as possible and meanwhile to delay it all he could.

As for Bert the Bird (soon shortened, for occasional use, to “Berbir”), he had no pressing business anywhere and could as well be in one place as another.

A further motivation in slowing down the pair was the soldier’s insistence on telling his (uneventful) life story to his bird companion. He tried, with moderate success, to do it in an interesting way. He started with a startling statement: “Death has been outlawed in the lovely Land of Oz and yet, each dawn I dye.”

This had the desired effect of making Berbir sit up and take notice. With his claws hooked in Battles’ epaulette he had had his head under his wing and was frankly dozing, but a case of dying, (unusual also in Mo) was worth hearing about and he

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§ See *The Magical Monarch of Mo*, 1903 edition, page 4. Editor’s note.

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attended. "It doesn't seem to hurt you," he commented. "I take it you've achieved a method of merely temporary dying..?"

"Well, no, it's permanent as far as it goes—" the soldier lifted his beard abstractedly "—but my whiskers grow so fast I'm quite blue about the jaws by evening."

Berbir boggled at the non sequitur but only said, "Blue?"

"Yes. You see, I was born a Munchkin<sup>s</sup> and my hair would naturally be blue. But that was obviously no good when I came to take up my post in the Emerald City. There the dear old wizard, O.Z. Diggs, was staging a little reign of error and insisted on everything appearing green whether it was or not. I at once adopted the habit of tinting afresh my fast-growing whiskers every morning—"

"Ah," the bird broke in, enlightened: "that kind of dyeing."

"—and I've kept it up ever since. Only during this journey I haven't been able to. The dyeing kit seemed too bulky to be worth the bother of carrying along."

Berbir stared. "That's right," he said. "I thought something was getting to look different about you. There's quite an eighth of an inch of blue at the roots of your face hair."

"Not different enough to fool my wife though," said Battles with regret. "She'll recognize me immediately."

"But to continue with my history: my family with its military heritage saw to it that I attended military school. I hated it, but it didn't stop there. My father, ex-General Neverlost N.E. Battles, arranged that I win the desirable post of guardsman at the Oz ruler's palace. I'm afraid that I, having as little vocation as I did, would never have got the job if there had been any competition. But Oz is after all a country of virtually no warlike traditions. An 'officer class' hardly exists.

"That appointment was the great hurdle of my life. Once secure in my position as palace sentinel I filled up my days by growing, varieties of hair: ringing all the possible changes in the field of head hirsuteness."

Berbir was intrigued despite the blandness and triviality of

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§ See *Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz*. Editor's note.

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the topic. “‘Varieties of hirsuteness’. Please explain what you mean.”

“I was still only in my teens when I came to the Emerald City. I was fascinated by my own brand new and scarcely anticipated ability to grow hair on my face. It was the fashion in those days for men to wear the beard and I started right off following the trend. But I soon found it was no challenge merely to let nature takes its course. I learned to use a curling iron and got busy. My tender wispy adolescent whiskers were soon frizzed into every arrangement of face hair conceivable. Then I took scissors into use to achieve variations. And I even made so bold as to essay the razor—though not on my virgin face. Rather, I practised on my top hair, which, under my casquette, was more or less expendable anyway. Ever since those early days I have shaved my head on occasion, but never my face... completely.”

“But partly?”

“Oh, yes, sometimes my beard would go while the whiskers remained. Or vice versa.”

“Is there a vice versa? Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Are you kidding?” said the hair expert. “A beard hangs down from the jaw while whiskers, by definition, grow out of the sides of the face—though it is clear from his writing that the first royal historian of Oz didn’t know the difference either. He publicized me as the ‘soldier with the green whiskers’ whereas in point of fact it is the length and greenness of my *beard* which is my one truly notable feature.”

The bird auditor cocked his head and seemed to grow lost in thought. about the green-going-on-blue hair beside him.

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## C H A P T E R   T W E N T Y - O N E

<<1952>>

Maybe Jrumm the sorceress, a complicated personality, was somewhat naive as well, in her own way. It always surprised her when people didn't meekly accept the roles she assigned them and suffer on without complaint forever. Probably she was spoiled by her long marriage to Wantowin "Omby Amby" Battles. He had meekly put up with her high-handedness for years. Indeed, he played the part she allotted him to perfection, so much so that at last it got boring and she left him for someone rather more exciting.

The quick end of that second relationship surprised her but didn't teach her much. She still assigned roles and expected them to be played. Just today she had had a shock. She had formerly expected the fifty-tongued bird to be pretty bored in captivity: as a second-hand punishment to Jrumm's enemy, the bird-princess' father? Now she learned that the little creature had contrived to be quite content as a prisoner. It was surprising. And there were other such disillusionments in store.

Meanwhile the reunion of the young man with his faithful steed of yore had been quite jolly. The party from Jrumm's house strolled up the half-wooded hill behind it which was the

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son-horse's grazing range. Y.M. hardly recognized in the sleek palomino the gaunt starved horse he had braved so many dangers with, years before.

<<three years before>>

The horse recognized the young man, however, although by now he wasn't quite that young any more. But the earnest look was unchanged, and the doublet and hose he wore on this new quest not so different, from those the treacherous king had outfitted him with for his earlier venture.

Hræ stevrod gave a spirited whinny of gratification as he lifted his muzzle from the grass and sighted the party. The newcomers walked up to him and there was an odd little ceremony of presentations. Many mothers would feel awkward at introducing their sons as horses but Jrumm didn't turn a hair. Her guests, though, were perplexed as to whether to offer hands. Y.M. solved his problem by clapping his old comrade heartily on the neck.

Small time was lost in setting out. His mother told Hræ stevrod what was intended and the horse complied. It would be a change for him too. Then, "I know," cried the witch: "Young Man, you ride Vrod! We ladies can take the asses. That will be more seemly, I think" — though it was perhaps late in the day for Jrumm to begin to be concerned about seemliness.

Now Y.M. began actively to enjoy the expedition. Zounds! it was good to be in the saddle again. He rode at home but that was only on mild walking-horses, about the nearby park. This was real riding! He displayed a tendency to tear off across the fields, leaving the two women on their poky steeds temporarily in the lurch, and *they* didn't have much to say to each other.

The princess was, as we have heard, good, and a part of real goodness is non-grudge-holding. However, you couldn't expect her to be really hearty with the woman who had wantonly confined her for so many years, wasting her youth in sterile perch-sitting. Thank goodness for Richard Bird (not the polar explorer). But for him she would have grown up mindless, aside from bird calls, of course.

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Jrumm tried to make conversation but it was stiff work. The princess only said, "Yes, madam" or "No, ma'am." The witch offered jawbreakers from the stock of the general store but the princess glanced at them with disdain. The umbrella parasol was offered shared against the August sun but found no taker.

When Y.M. and Hrae stevrod came racing back from a side jaunt to the once ominous forest stable a little diversion was provided. The young man had time now to be curious. "Who built a stable in the middle of a forest? and what for?" he queried, in highish spirits.

"Shh," warned Jrumm playfully. "Don't enquire too closely into the genesis of phenomena in a fairy tale. They usually don't bear logical examination."

"Well anyway answer this," desired the young man: "What happened to all the magnificent horses?"

"I suppose your dad-in-law disposed of them. They were only there to confuse the issue so people poking in wouldn't notice my son in horse's clothing. Actually I used the ploy myself when I wanted to distract attention from your present lady wife the time she was a bird."

"Thanks a lot," murmured the former fifty-tongued bird with more than a soupçon of sarcasm.

What was not discussed in this conversation was what Y.M. and Hrae stevrod had, in talk, plumbed to the depths the first moment they were alone together. That was the inexplicable behavior throughout of witch Jrumm in relation to her horse-son.

Over the years: first down the well, then in the farmhouse shed, and finally in the Palace on the Park, the young man had pondered profoundly on the elements of his great adventure. It had come to him to wonder why the witch, if she knew all about what and where her son was, had not gone to the stable in the wood in the first place and set him free, restoring his proper form in double-quick time. She appeared to be a sorceress of supreme power. She could conjure up magnificent jeweled cages to decorate a prison cell. Why then did she bake bread old-

## THE UMBRELLAS OF OZ

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fashionedly in a rural setting and that so inexpertly that she constantly burned herself? The whole thing didn't add up. The sixty-four-dollar question was why, with all other spells off and peace declared, she didn't, release the said son from his enchantment. Or, if her capabilities were spotty, why did she not get old King Scowleyow to do it? or whoever *he'd* had cast the spell?

Hræ stevrod thought it was all very unkind and nursed the grievance. Y.M. was just puzzled.

"What does she say when yon ask her about it?" he wanted to know.

"Not a word. She just literally doesn't say anything. She fails to speak. Queer, isn't it? It's not as if I'm more useful to her as a horse. She never makes me plough the south forty, or uses me for riding. This is the first time I've been saddled since *our* run together. And as you see, she doesn't ride me herself."

The two males talked about it all the time when they were alone together but they didn't get any forwarder in their rationalizing as to what made the enchantress tick.



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## C H A N T E R   T W E N T Y - T W O

<<1914>>

The soldier's account of his changes in hair style richly entertained both himself and (possibly more moderately) his bird audience until they came to the little bridge leading to Fruitcake Island. Like Button-Bright earlier they had encountered virtually no one on their journey but now across the brown beers of the Root Beer River they could discern a few stodgy people moving about sluggishly on the also brown surface of the island. The soldier waved jauntily but the people seemed to take no notice of him.

In contrast to the apparent solidity of the island the bridge leading to it was built of spun sugar and as soon as Omby Amby stepped upon it it collapsed, pitching him into the root beer. Now *unlike* Button-Bright earlier, the soldier quite delighted in the taste of the radical fluid. He had already sampled it in the course of his transit eastward to the Mo monarch's court. Again unlike the American he knew what it was in advance, from wise Ozma's indoctrination, and had quite looked forward to tasting the unusual 'water'. This was, again, 1914, when most country streams could still be drunk of, unprocessed, without imminent expectation of poisoning or disease.

## THE UMBRELLAS OF OZ

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From enjoying a sip of root beer en passant it was, however, a long way to getting a kick out of being immersed in it totally. Omby Amby regained the surface and yelled, while flailing out in many directions. While the startled Bert flew about distractedly, the soldier's hand struck his umbrella, which rode serene, rolled up, upon the waves. Once again the historical bumbershoot had failed to be expanded in time to avert a drenching.

But not for long. Princess Ozma had instructed her emissary in the uses of the rain-gear. He knew that if you could once get the umbrella open it was sovereign against all threat by water. This property was so far perfected in the implement that the umbrella, up-ended, could even serve as a boat. Its struts were of reinforced ozynium and its sheathing, of unpierceable rubberized silk. If you didn't tramp around in it *too* much, the umbrella could contain in dryness anyone less weighty than an elephant.

It was, however, expecting, too much for the soldier to climb into the umbrella out of the water. Holding onto its rim he pushed it before him and paddled to shore. There his first concern was to grope for his new parchment decrees and spread them out in the noonday sun. Berbir returned and said, "Whatcha doin'?"

"My divorce papers, you know. Thank goodness the Monarch's scribe used India ink. My ex- would have been vexed if the ink had run."

"You worry a lot about your wife's reactions, don't you?" said the bird, "—even now."

"Unh-hunh," admitted the solemn soldier. "I wish I didn't have to face her. On the other hand, I've got to have this divorce document effective in every way. I wouldn't feel secure if she didn't know about it and thought I was still her property."

"Hm," said his friend and was, again, thoughtful. "But now to cases," said Wantowin. "How do we get across this stream? I do think we ought to see this island now we're so close."

"That's easy," said Berbir. "You said your broolly could double as a boat."

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"Indeed," agreed the soldier. "But I haven't. any oars, and we can't count on being able to drift to the island shore before we're carried downstream past it."

"You got a thinnish piece of rope?"

"Well, let's see." Battles began to turn out his wet pockets.

"Or if there isn't any, bring a thickish piece of string."

As it happened, the provident soldier did have a whole half ball of twine in his knapsack. He held it out questioningly.

"Don't look at me," commanded Bert. "Fold one end in your hand and pay out the other to me. With you sitting, in the brolly-boat it shouldn't be too great a strain to draw you at least strongly enough to be able to move you across the current, if we act fast. Let's go upstream a quarter of a mile."

They did that. Behold, in half an hour soldier and bird steeped ashore on the soggy bank of the island of fruitcake.

The logy dwellers on the isle had, almost, with curiosity, observed across the stream the travelers' preparations for embarking and now quite a little group was gathered where they put ashore. "What do you want?" asked one or two heavily.

"Oh, we're tourists," explained Omby Amby. "Fruitcake Island is world-famous where I come from. I'd like to see it, now I've journeyed so far."

"Take a look," said the welcoming committee ungraciously. "I suppose you'll want a tour guide?"

"Well, that would be agreeable—if it could be arranged."

"You, Sukat!" barked the apparent spokesman, "that'll be your job."

A dull-looking woman wearing a hat of tangerine peel stepped forward clumsily, without protest. The other islanders turned away with no further regard for amenities vis-a-vis the visitors.

Omby Amby, with Berbir on his shoulder, followed the unspeaking Sukat as she led the way into a village a short way inland. This proved to be the only settlement on the mile-long island. The path there crossed level fields of a rich brown where nothing grew. It was the work on an unengaged moment for the

## THE UMBRELLAS OF OZ

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soldier to reach down and break off a piece of a clod under foot. He sniffed of it, then tasted.

"That's right," he constated: "fruitcake." That hadn't been hard to guess. Neither was it hard to understand that nothing grew on fruitcake, unless it might be a little mold, and the climate here seemed too uniformly breezy but dry for that.

If unfruitful (and yet one couldn't say *that*) the soil of fruitcake Island was not useless for other purposes. All the houses in Fruitcake Centre were built of slabs of case-hardened cake. It also appeared to be the only form of food of the inhabitants, as evidenced by displays in a few shop windows they passed. The substance was presented in a variety of shapes but when it came down to essentials it was all flour with a heavy admixture of sweet fruits and nuts.

"No wonder the people seem so heavy and stodgy," Omby Amby whispered toward his shoulder, "if this is all they get to eat."

The massive brown buildings with their roofs of thick white icing were left behind and Sukat showed the way to the apparent sole "sight" on the island. "The quarry from which we get our building materials," she identified and agitated a hand heavily to indicate a big hole in the ground some hundreds of yards across.

In the cavity many feet below men were busy with axes and saws and other pushed wheelbarrows about, all to a slow dragging tempo. Presently some of the workers took notice of the sightseers on the rim of the excavation. Two or three put their heads together and then they actually waved in greeting!

Wantowin Battles was surprised at; this sign of animation and, more, of friendliness. He felt quite touched and saluted and waved in return.

Now the men signaled to others of their comrades and nearly all the laborers stooped what they were doing and turned to hail the visitors. The latter were flabbergasted to find themselves being actually beckoned!

"What?!" stammered the soldier, "do they want us to go

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down?" He turned to their guile but Sukat was already twenty yards away, her job having been phlegmatically accomplished and she going back where she came from without a word of goodbye. "Hmpf," said the nettled Battles.

The incident made by contrast the hailings of the quarry workers all the more appealing. "I wonder," muttered the sight-seer. "Maybe they need help—or something.. But there's no way

"Yes, there is," assured Berbir, who, a bird, had a sharper orientation sense than a mere human and had at once spotted a stairway carved in the fruitcakeside just below their feet. He flitted ahead and showed the place where it started.

After that it was no time before the soldier had scrambled down and gone to meet his pals at the 'cutting edge' within the cake quarry. Down at the bottom the cake was even firmer than by the top of the excavation, though here and there lay shallow pools of root beer seepage. These Omby Amby carefully skirted as he came up to the others.

"Want to give us a hand?" said one who seemed to be in charge of the work gang.

"At quarrying cake? Sure," said the soldier good-naturedly, though also, as it turned out, gormlessly.

With a heavy-set fellow with a cast in one eye he teamed up to operate a two-hand saw—and then the fruitcake fairly flew! Slab after slab of the building material was cut .from the cake face and Wantowin began to glow from the exertion (which soon finished drying his clothes from within) but also with the sense of impressing his new-found mates with his industry and dexterity. Most of the other cakesmen gathered about and stood, frankly admiring the prowess at quarrying of the soldier and his partner.

Evening was beginning to draw in. Presently the boss called quitting time. Not at all too soon, really. Omby Amby had passed from the stage of enjoying the plaudits of his new friends to one of dawning boredom with the task and a wondering as to how best to retire from the arena of his feat with all admiration intact. Now when the others proposed that he join them about a

## THE UMBRELLAS OF OZ

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campfire and share the evening meal of fruitcake toasted on skewers over the flames and hot root beer he was happy to take part.

By then the soldier was beginning to think about the question of overnighing. The question was resolved for him without discussion. The crowd had relaxed for an hour with (non-habit-forming) dope sticks (fruitcake-flavored, of course) about the dwindling fires. Dried cake, it appeared, burned readily, like turves of peat, giving off a rich winy scent. Then, "Come along," beckoned Battles' cast-eyed teammate.

Omby Amby followed along down an alley cut in the cake earth that he had not noticed before. On either side stretched a row of small dark cells cut in the solid pastry; the workers' sleeping quarters. The soldier was assigned an empty cubicle, farthest in along the corridor. A surprisingly comfortable bench of cake had been left un-cut-away within each cell. There were bedclothes, even a cake chair, and a night candle on a ledge.

Berbir perched on the candle shelf and chirped his companion a thoughtful good-night. The vicissitudes of the day past gave Battles a good appetite and he woke only to a bugle's clear call at dawn.

He looked out. Blue sky above the narrow canyon of the sleeping-quarters passage. It would be good to get on the road again, restored by a fair night's sleep and after more exposure to fruitcake than the soldier hoped ever to have again.

But alas, it was not to be as simple as that. His mates insisted on his attendance at a breakfast of cake. Then he was astonished to have his saw-mate thrust into his hands again half the handles of the big sharp-toothed quarrying implement.

Enough was too much. Battles fairly flung down his end of the saw and made as if to march to the staircase at the far fruitcake wall.

But Bert the bird was ahead of him, was in fact returning from a quick orientation tour. He alighted on Omby Amby's shoulder and squeaked in his ear: "That stairway is gone! They must have cut it clown in the night. There's no way out for you. We're prisoners here!"

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## C H A P T E R   T W E N T Y - T H R E E

<<1914>>

Berbir was just being loyal and solidaritable. He, bewinged, was no prisoner. But he was not going off and leaving his less functionally endowed comrade. Wantowin was touched but, more urgently, he was angry and frightened. Courage had never been his strong point and now he pondered furiously how to behave.

If he bolted from servitude whither would he bolt? A chase around the quarry bottom would leave the cakesmen, lethargic as they were, masters of the situation and himself with every shred of dignity destroyed. Quickly he determined to put the best face possible upon it. He turned back and took the saw handle. If there was to be any escape it would have to be by cunning, not by physical revolt.

Wantowin Battles worked all day. Admittedly not with the verve of his first tour of duty, but steadily and, withal, maintaining his poise. He tended to remain silent, speaking, dignifiedly, only of necessity. The islanders were to understand that he was not best pleased but. he would not give them the satisfaction of crowing at his discomfiture. And he worked well, producing with his teammate significantly more slabs of build-

## THE UMBRELLAS OF OZ

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ing cake than any other pair. This ability, was of course the reason for his entrapment. With him at the cake-face all the other quarrymen could take it easier, practise sluggish indolence, which was what they liked best, and still meet their daily quota of work delivered.

At night in the cell Battles and his bird would discuss their plight. The soldier was barren of ideas for arranging an escape. "Eventually Princess Ozma will look at the Magic Picture and send a rescue party," he prognosticated a bit bleakly. "It's just for us to hold out with patience 'til then, I guess."

For the alert Berbir that wasn't good enough. "I'm not a prisoner," he boasted. "I'm free as a bird. But how can I use that state of affairs to help you? Going and complaining to some headman in Fruitcake Centre won't serve. And farther afield? What if I fly back to the Monarch at Motown and let him know?"

"Good idea," opined Battles. Then, on second thought, "But he hasn't, got any army or police force, as he was at pains to let us know when we visited him. How could he send to rescue us?"

"He's 'magical' after all. That. must mean some-thing."

"Mmm, it's magical that such an old duffer could maintain control in this far-ish-flung country just by sitting on a throne and looking wise."

"But he can do things like wearing heads made of candy, dough, or wood, as he was at pains to boast of, or more magically yet, his own head after it had been half digested by a dragon."

"Those are merely the sort. of kookie-marvelous things that can happen in this magical country, but they don't indicate the monarch can do anything magical himself that would help us. No, on reflection I think the one you ought to fly to is Ozma herself. If you could be bothered," the soldier added modestly.

"Oh, I could be bothered," assured Berbir. "It. is just that my physical strength wouldn't last

to cross the great desert. Admittedly I might not be overcome by fumes rising from the sands. The deserts between just



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here and Oz aren't strictly poisonous. But there'd be nothing to eat and I fear I'd sink down on the sands exhausted long before I reached the fairyland.

"Speaking of food, fruitcake isn't the proper diet of dickey-birds. I'm feeling a BIT unnourished already. What about you?"

"More than 'a bit'," admitted the Ozite. "I really think that's the single worst aspect of this vile durance. I don't know if I'll be able to hold out, eating nothing but Fruitcake."

In the end he couldn't. After a week Battles put in a formal complaint to the foreman. Would he not get permission from whoever was highest up on Fruitcake Island for the strangers to be allowed *something* else to eat? Unlike the natives they could not perform at their best and turn out their quota only on pastry.

The works boss, favorably impressed by the slave laborer's unresisting good behavior, promised to see what could be done. In fact he did get word to the Chief Confectioner at Fruitcake Centre.

"Might the new-impressed worker and his mate, the bird, be allowed an extenuation of diet? Just to keep up their strength for the labor?"

Put the answer that was presently returned was fairly predictable: "Let them eat cake."

## C H A P T E R   T W E N T Y - F O U R

<<1914>>

In the event they were saved by the weather.

In Mo, as in Ev, Oz, Ix, and other beside-the-desert countries, rain, though occasional and in most cases adequate, was not a usual characteristic of the meteorology. References to it in the literature are rare and, as we have seen, in some regions it was as likely to snow popcorn as to rain water. Moreover, when in Mo rains did come they dropped as gentle lemonade from heaven.

Battles had been about a month in slavery in the fruitcake quarry. He had changed. The unaccustomed physical labor from dawn to dark had put muscle on him that a former career of just standing around looking military had never occasioned. The hard work also gave him an appetite and, gag as he might, he stuffed the cake in, and put on weight. Nay, he was even beginning to look rather filled out: a drastic change from the gaunt figure known of yore. But, the severest change was in the soldier's face.

Cast-eyed Caspar, his team-mate at the saw, had taken no more than a week to grow exasperated at Battles' constant flinging back of his long beard over his shoulder before taking a

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grip on the cakesaw. One evening the fellow crept into Omby Amby's cell, sprang on the sleeper, and before he knew what was what had hacked off the offending (and, let's face it, idiotic) adornment with garden shears, close under the chin.

At a stroke the "soldier with the green whiskers" had gone out of existence. What remained was only a going-on-burly quarryman with a fringe of very dark blue hair around his jaws. A few stray green side whiskers that Caspar had missed were negligible. When Bert the Bird got a look at his pal by daylight he had to laugh. "What a change! I'd never know you. But you know what? I like you better this way. You look like a rugged man now, not just a weirdo—oh, sorry! But you will admit that it was never your appearance that was any source of your charm, but rather your winsome manner and jolly spirits, your discipline in war, wisdom in peace, your bounty, virtue, fair humility..."

Berbir fantasized freely for a space. Omby Amby the while, as people often do when praised for qualities they have not intended to display, swore inwardly to resume his former condition at the first opportunity: beard, greenness, and all.

But in point of fact the new relative beardlessness *was* more practical. The soldier discovered what the Vikings had found out in ages past: in hand-to-hand combat you didn't want a dopey long beard hanging down that your opponent could grab for a pivot while lopping your head off. Many hands were to grasp at Omby Amby before escape became a reality.

It began mildly enough on the twentieth of August. The sun misted over before noon. By two o'clock actual clouds were making the day dark.

The clouds were yellow, of course, but had shifted before long to a dark ochre color. Then lightning split the air, and sent the superstitious quarrymen flying to any corner or cranny for shelter. Battles fled with them, back to his cell.

The thunder burst and the clouds followed suit. Oh, how it lemonaded! It also "eliminated" any possibility of further work that day. The men could only stand under ledges and look up

at. the punishing sky.

It was amazing how quickly flooding began. In half an hour any so imprudent as to venture out were up to their ankles in lemonade freely mingled with root beer, as the river (and the water table) rose under the swamping rainfall upstream.

An hour later the cakesmen were bitterly regretting having cut away the quarryside staircase. Not that lemonade-softened cake steps would have borne the weight of the escaping workmen anyway. They began to panic right and left, running to the quarry walls and screaming up for help. But the citizens of Fruitcake Centre were busy shoring up their own collapsing housing and had no thought for strugglers out of sight.

Those that could not swim drowned early (as much as one could drown in magical Mo). The rest paddled around disconsolately with nothing to hang onto that would float. There had been next to no equipment made of wood within the quarry. That was a commodity at a premium on the island; all wooden objects had to be imported from beyond the river.

“Nothing that would float”: oh, there was one thing: Omby Amby’s umbrella. It took the street-wise dickey-bird to warn the soldier not to expose his umbrella to the gaze of the desperate miners. Man and bird huddled in the soldier’s cell until the beer-ade was up to his neck, then refugeed suddenly in the spread umbrella.

The dormitory corridor with its softening and dissolving cake walls was the first worst hazard. It was here that panicking men floundered through the flood and made grabs at the broly and its passenger. It seems miraculous that none succeeded in stopping the cruise of the bumbershoot. At least they could have wrecked it so that nobody could escape! for that it could safely have carried more than three at most was excluded.

Somehow, and without a paddle, Omby Amby made it out of the passage with his vessel intact. From there on, the vast lake that the quarry pit had become was safer. There were no surviving swimmers out in the open lemonade. It was now but a question of enduring until, and if, the liquid rose to the level.

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of the top of the excavation.

It did, but it was after dark when that happened. Quite suddenly soldier and bird felt their broolly-boat begin to move, rapidly, downstream, as the beers of the rampaging river engaged with the lemonade that had crested the rim of the quarry. Not long after that the two could feel in the dark that the rain was stopping.

The long-term cloudburst had done its job. But I don't like to think that, fairy Ozma sent it! to rescue her emissary at the cost of so many lives—and so much fruitcake.

## C H A P T E R     T W E N T Y - F I V E

<<1914>>

The rest of the long-interrupted journey to the castle of the purple dragon was accomplished without noteworthy incidents. We note them as follows.

“The umbrella-borne pair rode out the night and the flood, their makeshift boat now richly demonstrating its river (if not sea) worthiness. Never a drop of the flood beers broke over the rim of the broolly’s sheet-metal-like integument. There was no bailing to be done. Incidentally, for the enlightenment of those who may wonder that the up-ended, open umbrella did not fill up with lemonade during the downpour, it should be stated that the device was totally and completely proof against liquids from whatever direction arriving. It did, however, require to be expanded before its magic would operate. Rolled, it was just a broolly.

As a lemonadey dawn came the soldier with the blue stubble lifted himself from a slumped position to spy over the umbrella rim a pretty house up to its eaves in root beer. He recognized it from Ozma’s illuminated sketch map, as the stately home, though not outright castle, of the Duchess Bredenbutta, regent of West Credia. West Credia, unlike most of Mo, supported a popula-

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tion large enough to motivate the rule of a duke (or duchess) over it. For the time, this dignitary was Her Grace, Bredenbutta, enlightened lady and duchess.

And behold: there was Her Grace, sitting on top of her chimney-cluster with her wet ladies about her, frantically flapping a sodden handkerchief. But, alas, what could gallant Omby Amby, oar-less, do to assist? Of course he waved widely his military-diplomatic casquette and did all the obeisance that was possible across an eighty-yard expanse of lemon beer. Yet the urgent torrent bore him on, out of sight of the helpless ones. He could only solace himself with the thought that the Duchess had solid brick beneath her, not fruitcake. It would no doubt bear her up in safety until such time as the beer should subside.

That was the next thing that happened. By two in the afternoon the floaters could see treetops still in position, projecting above the flood. Twenty minutes later the umbrella drifted into one such web of bedraggled branches and leaves and there it stuck.

The inundation was rapidly in retreat. By three o'clock Omby Amby could (and must, or else be tipped out by the listing umbrella) descend into the tree itself, a great ash. Then level by level he followed the beer down, until he stood on wet ground.

The desolation was vast. The going was not easy as Battles and bird headed northward over sodden riparian plains. What with the chocolate mud and scattered debris they had made but a few miles by dark. They spent a miserable night huddled in a trash-filled box thicket. The boxes had all been swept away in the ravening flood, so what they might have contained of useful seed-sorts the soldier never knew. At least it, did not rain afresh and by dawn the voyager was even almost dry of garments, if sticky.

The sun made a welcome reappearance out of clouds. As Berbir flew lookout Battles tramped on, retracing, not though they knew, the route young Button-Bright had followed so many weeks before. By nightfall they were at Brig-a-Beer and before noon next day at the foot of the gloomy grey castle the Mo

monarch had pinpointed for the soldier on Ozma's map.

There Wantowin Battles paused to shudder. All day his dread of facing his erstwhile wife had grown on him and Bert the bird had had to talk to him like a Dutch uncle. "You're free of the woman now!" insisted the dickey. "What have you got to fear? But the bill of divorcement in her mailbox and be on your way."

"Oh, I have to see it in her hands, to be certain," objected the far from gay divorcé. "Besides, we only know that she was at the dragon's castle at one period, not that she actually lives there."

"Have it your way," gave up Bert. "But try to show a little grit! You've proven on this excursion you've got qualities of a man: strength, endurance, even a kind of reverse courage itself; anyway you didn't weep when the going was diceyest. So why let this woman make a woman of you?"

"Oh," cried the frightened soldier, "what if she hits me with her broom?! It wouldn't be the first time."

"Grab it and break it over her neck," advised the impatient avian.

"Oh, dear," moaned Wantowin, and was still at it as he pulled the bell rope at the portcullis.

It was not a wife with a broom who presently appeared but a maid with a mop. She curtseyed politely and looked at Omby Amby with what seemed admiration

"Er," said the hero "Is your mistress in?"

"Dame Jrumm?" (The very name! Oh, grief!) "Why, no, she's away, teaching her bird to sing. But I expect her back directly. Won't you come in?"

Such courtesy was delicious and Wantowin, who had expected nothing like it, was charmed. He followed, almost incredulous, as the pretty slavey led the way through marble halls.

"Maybe you'd like to freshen up, while you wait?" said the maid. She opened the door to another marble-walled, though much smaller, room.

"A bath!" said Omby Amby and marveled. No such contrivance for comfort had fallen under his eye since he had received



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his orders in Queen Ozma's office and happened to glance through into the boudoir.

"I'll leave you to get on with it," said the girl and curtsayed again, withdrawing.

The servant's cordiality had done wonders for Wantowin's ego. As he wallowed in the pump tub he actually dared to let his voice rise in song, though not so loudly as to penetrate the bathroom door and perhaps bring on his ex-wife untimely. Then he put on the spare shirt from his knapsack: wrinkled and lemonade-damp but quite clean.

The most important event in the bathroom was the adjustment of his facial hair. Battles stared into the looking glass appalled. All was a wild tangle. The scalp hair had grown apace and the jaw hair, unburdened by the weight of the knee-length beard, actually tended to curl up and out. Omby Amby grabbed the scissors that bung on a cord beside the wash basin (indoor plumbing! in a remote corner of the land of Mo; it was scarcely credible). He made short work of the few remaining wisps of greenness in his sideburns. Then when he'd used the hairbrush that depended from a ribbon on the other side of the mirror he turned to Berbir. "How do I look?"

"A regular bluebeard!" crowed the bird, delighted. "Now all you've got to do is hint at the other six wives in the locked closet and this one will be too scared even to look at a broom. Shove the decree at her and leave, no nonsense permitted!"

"I'll do my best," swore—well, no, he wouldn't so that; say 'promised' the soldier with the blue beard and stiffened his backbone.

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“Woodcock, woodpecker, wren, yellowhammer,” said Jrumm, checking off her list. “That’s the lot. You’re on your own now, my pretty.” And she gave the young bird a little tap on the head.

“Chee-weep,” replied the bird. Though now able to sing in fifty different voices and speak Human, the little grey mockingbird never said anything intelligible to the witch. Maybe that was because, though so young, she understood how great an injury the woman had done her and no amount of later amiability was going to make up for it.

The sorceress clicked-to the door of the cheap cage she used when carrying the bird into the woods for her singing lessons. She hitched up her skirt and strode across the drawbridge.

“What ho, within!” she hollered, and strong halbardiers quaked. They hurried to raise arms and erect an arch of crossed weapons for her to enter under. Flurried maids hastened forward and the pretty one said,

“You have a visitor, madam.”

“Nonsense,” snorted the witch. “In this benighted dragonless castle? Who would bother to come here? Who is it?”

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“A puissant knight—I think,” stammered the wench. “He didn’t give his name but he wears a uniform and looked most awful: that is to say, inspiring awe. He required at once to go to the bathroom and there he is now.”

“But will issue forth, I take it? I’ll see him in my office

Now Omby Amby behind the marble door of the bath heard this exchange and quaked like the halbardiers. But Berbir raved him a tweak to his ear and said, “Excelsior! March out boldly! Let’s to it pell mell. If not to heaven, then hand in claw to hell.”

This adjuration was just what Battles needed to make him yank back the heavy door and stride into the hall with fierce mien and blue beard bristling ferociously.

Jrumm saw him and had to agree with Pernille the maid: it WAS a bold bruiser and one to be admired. She simpered immediately and said, “Where may we serve your lordship withal?”

Wantowin Battles stopped short; and scowled terrifyingly and terrified. “Lordship”? Did the woman not recognize him then? But he had propulsions enough in reserve: the exhortations of his bird pal, the opinion of the young tweeny who favored him, and the clear indications of success he was having by not acting like a shrinking violet! He resumed motion, strode further forward, planted himself twosquare, with feet wide-spread and fists on hips, like any bold pirate, and said to the wondering witch: “Know, dame, we come as emissary of one Ozma, Queen of all she surveys and particularly of the Land of Oz! We have those messages we would impart and certain writs for your receipt which cannot be denied! Take this! and this!”

Here he thrust out his crumpled commission as Ambassador Extraordinary to His Majesty of Mo and the rolled and ribboned decree of divorce.

But witch Jrumm was having none of that, at least not suddenly, without protocol! “Good master!” she cried. “Such screeds as these appear to be can only be received in state, not standing in this drafty passage! And you! must be royally entertained, as coming from such a Queen!” (‘Uppity little snit,’ thought Jrumm, who remembered Ozma from the old days when the virgin

princess knew completely nothing about wielding a sceptre.)

“Lead on then, Mistress Jrumm!” commanded the soldier, now aware of his oats and noticing for the first time ever how delightful it feels to act with confidence in your role.

“First I must pop in here,” said Jrumm as they repassed the bathchamber door. “I would freshen up after a day by field and stream. Pernille, bring my sprigged muslin,” she ordered in an aside. “And you, honored emissary,” she returned to Battles, “may wish a brush-up yourself.”

In fact the ambassador’s uniform could well have enjoyed a total dry-cleaning after the strabassings of the past month, not to mention last night spent in the muddy underbrush. There was neither time nor facility for that. The most that could be afforded was a hasty sponging, and pressing by Pernille while the soldier, momentarily resigning boldness, shivered in a closet off the kitchen.

At least, while there, an occasion was had for brief conference with Berbir. “I don’t get it,” worried Omby Amby. “The hag has changed, but not that much! I knew her at once. But impossible as it seems she doesn’t know me. What can be the explanation?”

Bert the Bird answered in a curiously distraught fashion. “Hm..? I didn’t notice. My eyes were elsewhere. Did you observe that bird in a mildewed cage? A pitiful sight to see.”

“Bird? Cage? Oh, yes, she was carrying a cage, but, I didn’t notice what was in it. But advise me, trusted friend: what do I do now? CAN it be true I’m not recognized?”

Berbir made an effort to concentrate: “What is it: eight years since your wife disappeared? Of course a guy could change! Where are your green whiskers that you say were all anybody ever noticed about you? This bristling blue beard is nothing like. The rainbow-striped diplomat’s uniform looks far different from the way you’ve described your green guardsman’s outfit. You’re broader, fatter, more virile in appearance than even when we met, a month ago. Most of all, just for a moment there, you acted like a stout corsair! Keep on that way and I think you’ll carry it

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off—if we don't hang around *too* long."

Those words, all of which Omby Amby had heard before, were like wine to his soul. To think! that with a little forthrightness he might escape entirely the painfulness of the interview he had so dreaded. He'd buck up and do his durnedest, play the role of he-man to the hilt. He could always wilt afterwards and resume his milktoast character if the ploy didn't pay off. He scrub-rubbed his hands in anticipation.

When Pernille knocked with the touched-up suit he put it on with panache, with bravura brushed his hair and beard the wrong way, and issued forth to hand her something with benign command and flashing merry eye: "Put this, my dear, in that umbrella stand I noted in the foyer. It hardly fits the image I would fain present!"

The girl received the soldier's broly with a knowing lilt of the head and did as she was bid. Then she returned to lead Ambassador Battles—oh, no, just for now he was calling himself "Envoy Extraordinary Barbleue"—to the room where the sorceress chatelaine kept a chair of state.

There she was, herself now also unrecognizable in friendly flounces of sprigged finery and plainly trying to appear captivating.

The witch had had sense enough, if she was going to woo this attractive stranger, the first eligible man she'd seen since she stole the child princess from her dastardly father, to have her throne-chair pushed to a shaded corner and what light bulbs there were exchanged for pink ones. Now he wouldn't see her wrinkles! and she might get somewhere.

Omby Amby signed with satisfaction when he saw that arrangement. He fluffed up his chin whiskers and pulled his forelock further into his eyes, then advanced with his dispatch case at the ready.

Jrumm enticingly indicated the tea table and said, "To our affairs then. I believe you have intelligence for me...? I shall accept the documents now."

The ambassador had been doing some unusually useful

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thinking, for him, and now replied: "Just so, your excellency. But there is a condition to the presentation. My mistress commands me say that this communication—" Here he fingered the divorce certificate meaningfully. "—being most secret, is only to be opened by yourself in utter privacy, and after I myself, have taken my leave."

Here he passed across the scroll and Jrumm stared at it with curiosity. The soldier also displayed his warrant. While in the kitchen closet he had had foresight, to call for ink and a knife and had altered, not too crudely, "Battles to "Parbleue."

These formal matters disposed of, with Jrumm poured out. You can imagine the emissary's fright when he saw fruitcake on the dainty hoard! Gratefully there were watercress sandwiches as well and the deprived man ate of them with gusto.

The interview was conducted with amiability but Battles did not linger. He pleaded fatigue after his long journey. Jrumm, thinking, that tomorrow there would be time enough for pleasant dalliance, fell in with his demur and sent for Pernille to show him to a hastily prepared guest chamber. The parting of sorceress and ambassador was formal and most civil.

As soldier and servant paced the passage Omby Amby whispered urgently, "Please send my bird to me! good girl. I left him at the kitchen."

"Oh, yes... your bird. I'm not sure... I'll have a look, to be sure," promised Pernille.

The soldier waited in utmost nervousness behind his chamber door. There would take place no restoring slumber here: He knew Mistress Jrumm's insatiable curiosity. She would not wait for his departure from the castle to open the dispatch. Then all would fall into place with a crash. Ten minutes at most he had. He bit his nails and counted. His knapsack was on his back. At minute nine he opened the door noiselessly and fled along the darkened corridor.

Down by the entrance hall he fumbled briefly at the umbrella stand. Then he strode silently across to the one drowsing man on sentry duty. "The portcullis is up?" he hissed urgently.

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The fellow jumped. "W-why, no. But I can open the postern wicket. Your worship is going out?" The guard marveled, glancing out into the sombre night.

"Something has come up,?" muttered 'Barbleue' scarcely informatively. Just let that gate-door in the portcullis be opened! and the man could think what he would.

The ambassador sped out into the trackless night. He lost himself quickly in the forested hills. What matter that he didn't know where he was if his wife didn't either! By morning's light he could make shift to find his way back to that spot on the Mo frontier on which Princess Ozma kept the Magic Picture trained. He didn't know the extent of the wife-witch's power but he thought there was just a chance he might make it to the rendezvous without her tracing him in the trackless expanses of the Hills of Tweet.

An hour later he had time to hug himself with satisfaction that so far he did not seem pursued. He had now completely divorced the Xantippic Mistress Jrumm and could begin to dream of a happy life hereafter. He had only one regret but that a sharp one. He missed his little pal, Bert the Bird. With a furtive tear he sent a silent thought in his direction. 'Whatcha doin'?' he wondered.

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As it happened, just at that moment Berbir was not missing Omby Amby in return. He was far too engrossed in a new fascination.

When the blue-bearded soldier in his new-brushed uniform left the kitchen to meet his destiny in conference with witch and wife, Bert only scantily noticed him go. He had noticed something else far more compelling. On the old deal table in the middle of the kitchen stood the rusty cage of the little grey bird.

Perhaps the cage bird was the first avian Berbir had seen in several days, but why should just that poor shabby little thing in its far from prepossessing cage make such an impression on him? Why, it wasn't even his own species and there could be no hope of a real romance. Yet something in the grey bird's abjection called to him and he knew that whatever should be her fate must be his too.

Berbir took up an unobtrusive position on a curtain rod and waited in silence until the maids had all left the room on domestic duties. Then he fluttered down to the table, perched, cocked his head, and said, "Whatcha doin'?"

The mockingbirdlet lifted its drooping head. It fluttered



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one wing tentatively and turned a wondering eye on its interlocutor.

Then it was marvelous to see the bird seem to rise and grow and expand and come to life and throw back its head and warble in the voice of the nightingale the sextet from "Lucia": a stirring rendition that made the rafters ring.

Now all at once Bert the (other) bird knew (partly) why he so admired the occupant of the cage. It was not only the sympathy of pity. The creature had charms of a very positive kind. Soon, in fact suddenly, he would know more of them.

For when the singer had drawn to a climactic close she switched to the declarative tones of the thrush and chirped:

"Singing! You asked what I was doing. That's what. Now. A moment ago I was drooping. I was feeling sorry for myself. Me, a king's daughter! in this moldy cage. The indignity of it! I thought I would hang my head and die. Then you came along. Who are you? How did you get here? I feared I'd seen the last of my kind forever, now that I've learned my fifty songs. Yes, fifty. Count them. Why fifty? I don't know. The old woman never tells me anything. Not that I'd answer if she did. I've got nothing to say to *her*. After what she did? I was minding my own business, playing on the floor beside my dad's throne. Then that woman grabbed me up, did something or other—I never understood what—and there I was, turned into the form you see now: a miserable mockingbird. I only even know what species I am because when we got to 'M' the witch said, 'Never mind. You don't need to *learn* mockingbird; you're that already.' She brought me here, teaching me bird songs every step of the way. She didn't say why—or why fifty songs. Just a number she grabbed out of the air, I guess. Anyway I now possess the singing abilities, such as they are, of the albatross, the bittern, the bunting, the coot, the cormorant, the cuckoo, the dunnock, the luck, the flycatcher, the goose, the grebe, the grouse, the jackdaw, the kingfisher, the lark, the linnet, the martin, the nightjar, the oriole, the owl, the peewit, the phalarope, the pheasant, the plover, the quail, the robin, the sandpiper, the sheldrake, the

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sparrow, the swan, the swift, the teal, the tern, the tit, the wax-wing, the wigeon, and the wren, to name but a few. There are others, but that's enough to give you an idea. It's balmy, isn't it? What's it all in aid of? Being a mockingbird, I can imitate any other bird's call on one hearing, but what I'm supposed to do with all these voices—! The witch calls them 'tongues'. I'm the 'fifty-tongued bird'. But I just find the whole thing depressing. To have all this ability to sing, and no reason to do so. Not 'til I saw you anyway! You're quite a glamorous figure of a cock. I like those mixed green and blue bands on you. What species are you? I don't remember seeing any in the woods or fields like you. But oh! what am I to do? I shudder when I think of it. Poor old dad: he'll be at his wit's' end—I trust! I hope he is planning to punish the sorceress for stealing me. And all my pretty things from when I was a princess. What will have become of them?: my jewels and dresses. I was so lovely, everyone said so. Now here I sit, an ugly little bird in a rusty old cage. I'll be forgotten and pine away. Oh, boo-hoo-hoo..."

To say that Berbir was amazed is to understate. Neither was this spate of words a feature in itself designed to win his heart, though it was encouraging to realize that the die-away-looking cage bird was not in fact as peaked as it had seemed. But the information imparted! That she could sing in fifty voices was delightful to discover, especially for an avian who, though bright, and perky, couldn't actually *sing* above a chirp. Was it her brilliant talent that he had sensed in her and that made such an appeal? Or was it her royalty? for the caged bird was, or had been, a princess! or so she claimed. It would seem that Bert had a sense for class without even knowing it.. Finally: she was a damsel in distress. She was no common or garden cage bird, a phenomenon no doubt deplorable but one so usual that you grew accustomed, even resigned, to it. No, she was a caged kingsdaughter! and as such must needs be rescued, if one could manage it.

Now the maids were coming back. Without ceremony Bert flew to a high shelf and lurked there amongst, the parchment-

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paper and second-best candlesticks. The cage-bird hung, its head again and was silent.

“What about this poor thing?” said Pernille to her mates. It was not for them to make disposition of the witch-chatelaine’s belongings. They sprinkled some garden seed in the cage and put a saucer of water within reach. Beyond that time went by eventlessly for the birds in the kitchen.

Meanwhile witch Jrumm spent some time in daydreaming about her unexpected caller. Thus she was not so quick off the mark as Wantowin Battles had anticipated in unrolling the fateful scroll he had delivered to her.

Really, she ought to have known better. She had never had any luck with her men. After wrecking her first marriage she had run off with an importunate suitor who soon left her in the lurch. He was a lot quicker than Omby Amby had been to get fed up with her hasty temper, nor had he been any too pleased to discover such traits as her compulsive kleptomania and her prowess as a liar. When he went he did not punish her thievery by taking anything. Instead, he left her something: a pregnancy, that was destined to complicate the woman’s life wonderfully. But now she did not think of him but of another.

Presently, dreamily, Jrumm stretched out a hand and grasped the scroll. In a moment there were screams to wake the ravens in the castle eaves. The drowsing household staff were brought up standing. Where?!! the witch wanted to know, in no uncertain terms, was that scoundrel and villain, the soi-disant ambassador?!

The trembling man on portcullis duty confessed his crime in allowing the envoy to escape. “His bird familiar with him, I expect?” shrieked the witch.

Well, no, the sentry hadn’t noticed any bird in the company of the departing guest. A knapsack and an umbrella; that was the lot.

“Find me that bird!” roared Jrumm. She could vent some spleen there, meagre as was the scapebird.

It was no trick at all to discover Berbir on his high kitchen

perch. With brooms and mops (she was a whiz with those) Jrumm, with the frightened assistance of the maids, brought him down. The obvious thing was to thrust him in the cage beside the mockingbird. The witch paused only a moment before doing so. She had no way of sensing the stranger bird's sudden devotion to the other prisoner. She did consider briefly whether anything was at risk in such an arrangement, but at least until tomorrow it would do. Then she would order in a supplementary cage. Or cages! That was an idea. To populate the top-floor jailroom with multiple birds. If anyone came seeking to rescue anyone, he wouldn't know which bird to choose.

The ascent was made. Jrumm bore the bird cage and the maids the lamps and candles. The witch put down her burden in its usual dusty corner. The prisoners need not expect they were going to be waited on wing and claw just because they were now two. The maids would perform necessary chores here, the guards would ward off snooping strangers, and Jrumm could get back to her own domestic affairs at her own residence. It was well that the dragons had been transported elsewhere. Unaware of the use to which their stronghold was now being put they would have the less reason to complain.

At her own hearth witch Jrumm would have time and to spare to mull over the 'double' decampment of her earlier rejected but only now regretted husband, as she, too late, had recognized "Envoy Barbleue" to be.