

This story is brought to you by Ririro.com for free. Our mission is to give all children in the world free access to a variety of stories. The stories can be read, downloaded and printed online and cover a wide range of topics, including animals, fantasy, science, history, diverse cultures and much more.

Support our mission by sharing our website. We wish you a lot of fun reading!



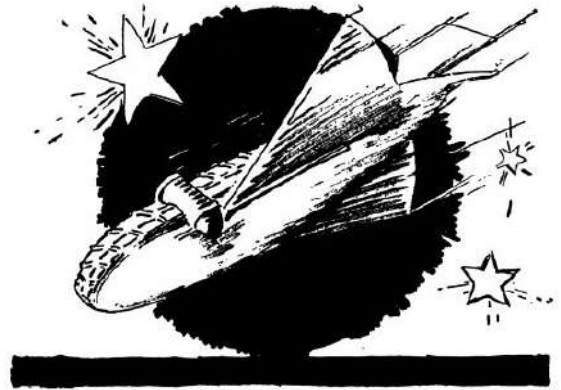
Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

Ririro

Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz: Strut of the Strat Arrives in Oz! (18/20)

For several hours after leaving Stratovania, Nick followed the Wizard's map implicitly. With Strut leaning over the back of his seat, eyes glued to both map and board, there was nothing else he could do. If he deviated from the course so much as a hair's breadth, the Airlander would tap him on his tin head with his staff. The Tin Woodman had not expected Strut to be so clever about navigating and as time passed, he grew



less and less hopeful of outwitting the wily Airman.



If he increased the speed of the Oztober in an effort to outdistance Strut's flying warriors, they also increased their speed. Try as he would

it seemed quite impossible to lose them. But Nick Chopper did not despair. He was counting on the night

to help him. Never tiring or needing sleep, he would have the advantage of Strut, then. As soon as the Airlander relaxed in his seat, the Tin Woodman meant to fall upon him, hurl him from a window, put all the plane's lights out and speed off in the dark so swiftly the Stratovanians would be unable to follow. That failing, he depended on the difference in altitude to subdue the enemy. Perhaps when they reached the lower areas, Strut and his Airmen would faint, wilt, and become harmless.

So, bolstering his spirits with these heartening hopes, Nick bore as patiently as he could the long afternoon and the unpleasant taunts and company of his captor. Repassing the ice crescent without meeting any Spikers, the Tin Woodman zoomed along, not even bothering to answer Strut's many questions about Oz and its inhabitants.

Night, when it did come, was especially dark and murky. No moon and only a few stars dotted the arching Skyway. The darker the better, rejoiced the Tin Woodman, taking quick little glances over his shoulder to see whether Strut was falling asleep or showing any signs of drowsiness. If it were just dark enough, he'd rid himself of these flying pests in a hurry. But all his plans proved futile. As the Oztober rushed on and on, and the hours dragged slowly by, Strut grew even more alert and watchful. His star-shaped eyes twinkled and glowed with sulphurous lights and he showed no more signs of weariness than the Tin Woodman himself. The endurance of the Airlander and his warriors was

positively uncanny, and Nick, maneuvering the buttons and wheel of the plane, grew increasingly discouraged and gloomy. Flying at this rate they would arrive in the Emerald City early in the morning, and to think that he was leading this band of savages upon the defenseless City almost broke Nick Chopper's heart. As it was a red plush heart, it could not really break, but it fluttered up and down in his tin bosom like a bird beating against the bars of a cage. To Nick's suggestion that he rest, Strut gave a contemptuous snort.

"I'll rest in Ohsma's palace," he sneered maliciously.

"D'ye think I trust you enough to sleep? Ho no! Just attend to your flying, Mr. Funnel Top, and I'll take care of the rest of this little adventure." After this, Nick made no further remarks, and morning found the Oztober sailing high above the Hammerhead Mountains in the Quadling Country of Oz. All too soon the Tin Woodman made out the glittering green turrets and spires of the Emerald City itself.

"Quite a pretty little town," observed Strut condescendingly, as Nick, his thoughts in a perfect tumult, tried to think of some excuse for not landing.



"Why are you not flying over the castle?" demanded Strut sharply. "It's the castle I am most anxious to reach. There—you can come down right

inside the walls. My, My! So this is the wonderful Land of OHS. Well, it owes me its crown jewels and treasure to pay for your insolent invasion of the Strat. Collecting them should prove pleasant! Very pleasant indeed!"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," snapped Nick, turning his head stiffly. "I suppose you realize you are in great danger? If Ozma sees you before you have time to storm the castle, you and your silly flock of flyers are likely to be turned to crows or sparrows! The chances are, she HAS seen you," concluded Nick, slanting the Oztober sharply downward. At Nick's warning, the few clouds flitting across the Airman's forehead became positively thunderous.

"Pouf!" he sniffed, snapping his fingers scornfully. "Do you suppose a mere girl like this Ohsma of Ohs can frighten me? My Blowmen will soon attend to her and anyone else who stands in our way!"

"That," shouted Nick, raising his voice above the roar of the engine,— "remains to be seen!" As a matter of fact, the Oztober and the swarm of flying Warriors had been sighted almost as soon as they appeared above the green lands edging the capitol. Long before they reached the Emerald City itself, terrified messengers had brought word of the approaching airmen. Ozma being absent, Bettsy and Trot, the two little mortal girls who lived with Dorothy and the Supreme Ruler in the Emerald Palace, were in charge.

After one glance at the flying army, they had called all the celebrities, servants and courtiers together and bade them flee for their lives. Then Bettsy, Trot, and the

Patchwork Girl, climbed into the Red Wagon. With the Saw Horse to pull them, they set off at a gallop to hide in the Blue Forests of the Munchkin Country till the invasion was over. Tik Tok, the Machine Man, carrying all of Ozma's loose jewels and valuables, marched rapidly after them. The Medicine Man rode the Hungry Tiger and the rest of the palace inmates ran helter-skelter



down the yellow brick highway from the Capitol.

The inhabitants of the Emerald City itself, never having seen the Wizard's Ozoplanes and having no way of knowing that Nick

Chopper was inside this one, were almost as afraid of the Oztober as of the Stratovarians. Pelting into their houses and shops, they bolted windows and doors and waited in terror-stricken silence for whatever was to come. Only the Guardian of the Gate stayed bravely at his post, waving his bunch of keys defiantly as the Ozoplane and the Airlanders swooped over the castle wall.

"Ho! No you don't!" cried Strut, as Nick, having brought the plane to a landing, started to run for the door.

"You'll stay with me, as a hostage!" he rasped, gripping the Tin Woodman's arm. Furious but helpless in the iron grasp of the Stratovarian, Nick was forced to lead him into Ozma's beautiful castle.

Strut's warriors, after fluttering like curious birds from tree to tree and alighting in chattering groups on the

wall, finally furled the wings of their staffs, formed ranks and marched, singing and shouting, up the steps after their jubilant leader.

In vain Nick watched for any signs of weakening among them. The Airmen seemed as comfortable and carefree in this lower altitude as they had been on their own airosphere. The Tin Woodman's only consolation was that he had brought back the Wizard's Ozoplane in as good condition as when it had started away so unexpectedly. It was also a great relief to him to find the castle deserted. Not a courtier, servant or celebrity was in sight—not even the Glass Cat or Dorothy's little kitten Eureka. Strut and his rude army stamped through the first floor from end to end without encountering a single soul.

"Very good," sniffed the Ruler of all the Stratovanians, shooting his eyes sharply to left and right, "so this powerful fairy Ohsma of Ohs has run off and left us her castle, and we win the war without blowing a blow! Ho, Ho! I shall spend my summers in this enchanting palace," he added, with a malicious wink at the Tin Woodman. "But now," his grasp on Nick's arm tightened. "Where are these famous, magic treasures and jewels you were boasting of—this belt and fan and all the other foolishments and fripperies?"

"In a safe in Ozma's own apartment," Nick told him, reluctantly. Now that Strut was in complete possession of the castle, little was to be gained by concealing the location of the treasures.

"Take me there at once," he commanded Nick, and—because the thousand Airlanders were a bit too numerous for comfort—Strut ordered them out to the garden, bidding them man the walls, guard the gates and all entrances, and give the alarm should any of the Ozlanders approach. Then, with lowered head and dragging feet, the Tin Woodman led the way to Ozma's private sitting room. The safe, sparkling with emeralds imbedded in metal more valuable than platinum, stood in an alcove behind a pair of silk curtains. Giving little heed to the elegant appointments of the apartment itself, Strut knelt before the safe, fairly panting with impatience and curiosity.

"How does it open?" he asked, spinning the little knob on the door, round and round without any results whatsoever.

"I am sure I cannot say." Resting one elbow on the golden mantel, the Tin Woodman looked indifferently at the kneeling Airman. "Only Ozma and our Wizard ever open that safe."

"Oh, is that so!" Strut straightened up angrily, "We shall see about that. All I have to do is call one of my Blowmen and BLOW it open."

"Suit yourself," said Nick, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Only if you do, the safe probably will blow away—and all the treasures with it!"



"Then how in the Dix shall I open it?" screamed Strut, giving it a spiteful kick with his silver-shod toe. Worn out by his long vigil of the night and the excitement of taking possession of the castle, he lost his temper completely, and stamped and raged up and down before Ozma's jewelled strong box. But thump and bang at the door as he would, it still remained shut. "Ha!" he puffed at last, "I'll call my Swordsmith! He can hammer it open!" Racing over to the window he yelled loudly for the Swordsmith to come up.

But Strut's Swordsmith had no more success than his Master. Kindling a fire in the grate, he heated a poker red hot and tried to burn a hole in the door, but the poker did not leave even a scratch on the glittering surface. "Stop! Stop! You Witless Woff. I'll do it myself," raged Strut. "I'll blow it open with star powder!"



"Surely you wouldn't do that," protested Nick, who up to this time had been watching the effort of the two airmen with quiet amusement. "If you blow up the safe you might set fire to the castle and destroy all the treasures you have won."

"Oh, hold your tongue!" advised Strut. Dragging two smouldering logs from the grate, he shoved them under the safe. Then, unscrewing the end of his flying

stick, he sprinkled a fine, black powder that smelled and looked like gun powder, over the logs. Lighting a twisted paper, he stuck it beneath the logs and jumped back, waiting impatiently for the safe to fly apart.

Nick Chopper waited not a moment longer. Darting into the dressing room he hastily filled a pitcher with water. But before he could return, an ear-splitting explosion rocked the castle and flung him and the pitcher through the doorway of the sitting room.

Without stopping to recover his breath, the Tin Woodman jumped up and hurried across the room. The two airmen, with blackened clothes and faces, stared dazedly at the spot where the safe had been. Where it had been—because it was no longer there! Not a sign, emerald or single splinter of it! There was no hole in the ceiling, so it could not have blown up; there was no hole in the floor, so it could not have blown down. The windows were unbroken, the walls, intact. Only the two logs, smoking sullenly on Ozma's priceless rug, remained of the Airlander's bonfire—unless we count the expression on Strut's face, which simply blazed with wrath, bafflement and unadulterated fury.