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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz: The King of the Kudgers (13/20)

The Wizard's plan worked very well, at first. He and the Soldier astride one stick, Dorothy and Jellia, holding the poor, sodden Scarecrow between them on the other, shot high into the air, across the lake and over the amazed ranks of Bowmen drawn up on the bank. Before the Red Beards had recovered from their surprise, the travellers were winging strongly toward the turretted red castle that crowned the mountain top. The Cowardly Lion, to escape the flying arrows, had swum under water. Now, scrambling up the bank, he neatly skirted the enemy and ran swiftly beneath the two, flying staffs.



"As soon as we're safely past this castle, we'll descend, rest, dry our clothes and then proceed to the Emerald City," called the Wizard, turning to wave encouragingly at the two girls.

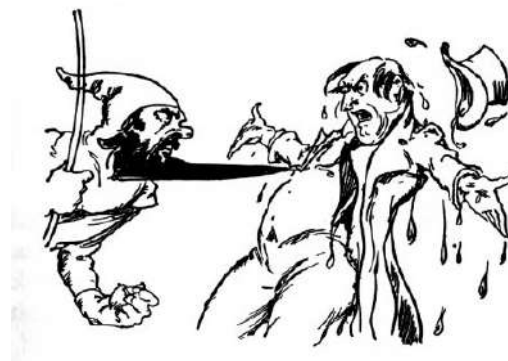


But at that moment a dreadful thing happened. Sprawled on a huge camp chair on the sloping terrace before the castle, its huge, red-bearded owner suddenly sighted the flying sticks and their riders. Seizing the long bow that lay beside him on the grass, he sent two arrows speeding upward, one right after the other. Each arrow found its mark and splintered a flying stick. With spine-shattering suddenness the travellers crashed to earth. Dorothy, describing it to Ozma later, explained that although she never had been in a battle, she knew exactly how a warrior felt when his horse was shot from under him. Except, of course, that a horseman would not have had so far to fall. The Scarecrow, tumbling off first, softened the bump for both girls. The Wizard and Soldier plunged headlong into a red-pepper bush. While not seriously injured, they were grievously scratched and shaken. But the worst was not the blow to their pride and persons, the worst was to see the upper and winged halves of their precious sticks flying away without them.

"Oh! Oh!" groaned the Wizard, leaping out of the pepper bush and running for an anguished yard or two after the vanishing staffs. "This is awful, AWFUL! Come back! Come down!" he implored, realizing even as he shouted that the sticks could neither hear nor obey.

"Noo then, whew are yew?" The startled Red Beard hoisted himself out of his camp chair. "W—itches riding on br—hoom sticks? Noo then, call off yewer dog!" The Cowardly Lion, noting the mischief already done by the Red King's bow, had seized it in his teeth and backed

rapidly into the bushes. The Wizard, reluctantly withdrawing his gaze from the sky, now stamped over to the astonished owner of the castle.



"Just see what you've done," he cried angrily. "Destroyed the only winged staffs in Oz. We flew them all the way from the Strat and now, how are we to reach the Emerald City in time to stop the airlanders? Don't you realize—but how could you?" In sudden discouragement the Wizard broke off and stared despondently around the rugged mountain top. "I must tell you," he began again in a hoarse and desperate voice, "that Ozma and the Emerald City are in great danger. Strut of the Strat and a host of his flying Stratovanians are descending to conquer Oz and carry off Ozma's treasure. If we fail to warn her the city is lost—doomed—I tell you! Since you have shattered our flying sticks you must quickly supply us with some other means of travel. We must reach the capital before morning!" "MUST!" roared the Bearded Bowman. "Are yew shouting 'must' at ME?"

"Be careful!" cried Dorothy. For the Wizard, in his earnestness, had stepped closer and closer to the red King. But her cry was too late. Without any warning, the King's pointed beard, rising with his wrath, pointed straight out and struck the valiant Wizard to the earth. For a whole minute he lay perfectly still, staring up at

this curious phenomenon. Though he had seen many a beard in his day, he had never been knocked down by one before.

"Whew are yew?" demanded the burly mountain monarch again. "How dare yew fly over my castle and swim in my lake without permission?" Stroking his beard which gradually resumed a vertical position on his chest, he stared from one to the other of the adventurers.

"No use to run," he sneered as Wantowin Battles began to back toward the bushes. "My bowmen will be here any moment now! But WHEW are YEW?"

"Wheww!" groaned Jellia, propping the bedraggled Scarecrow against a rock. "A body'd hardly know, after such a welcome. Whew are yew, yewerself, yew old Redbeard!"

"I?" roared the Bowman, taken completely by surprise.

"Why, don't yew know? I am Bustabo, King of the Kudgers and Red Top Mountain."



"I don't believe it," said the Wizard, leaping agilely to his feet and shaking his fist under Bustabo's long

nose. "A real King would not treat travellers as you have done, shoot away valuable flying sticks and keep two lovely girls standing out here in the wind."

"How dew yew know what a King would dew?" demanded Bustabo, puckering his forehead in an uneasy frown.

"Because," stated the Wizard, folding his arms disdainfully, "I personally know all the most important rulers in Oz, and none of them would behave as you have done. If you are a King, act like a King!"

"Whew are yew?" repeated the Ruler of Red Top, walking around the little group with hands clasped behind his back.

"Oh, for Oz sake—tell him!" snarled the Cowardly Lion, poking his head out of the bushes. "If he asks that question again I might eat him up, pointed beard and all!"

"Well, this is the Wizard of Oz," explained Dorothy, as the Lion stalked grimly out of the bushes, "Chief Magician for Ozma of Oz. This—" Dorothy, with a wave of her hand, indicated the trembling soldier, "This is Wantowin Battles, the Grand Army of Oz. Beside him is our famous, live Scarecrow. I am Princess Dorothy of Oz and this is Jellia Jam, First Lady in Waiting to Ozma. Coming toward you is the Cowardly Lion of Oz."

"He doesn't look very cowardly to me," muttered Bustabo, putting the camp chair between himself and the approaching beast.

"Oh, but I am cowardly," growled the lion growlishly, "and when I'm frightened I never know what I'll do. I might even chew up the King of this Mountain! Whoever heard of a King pointing his beard at harmless travellers! Whoever heard of a King with a beard as hard and red as yours, anyway! It's hard as iron from the looks of it."

"Harder!" agreed the King, evidently considering the lion's remark a compliment. "All we Kudgers have red beards—not of soft hair like his—" The Red King gazed contemplatively at the Soldier with Green Whiskers, "but of hard hair like mine. I don't suppose yew've ever seen a beard like this before. The point's sharp as a dagger, too," he warned, as the lion sprang a pace closer.

"Oh, I'm sure it is," said Dorothy nervously. "And it's dreadfully handsome, too. But could your Majesty please let us dry out in your castle and then could you show us the quickest route to the Emerald City? If you don't," finished Dorothy, clasping her hands anxiously, "the ruler of this whole country of Oz may be captured and carried to the Strat."

"What do I care about the Ruler of Oz?" sniffed Bustabo, scratching his head in a most unkingly manner. "Ozma never does anything for me! Even if she were conquered I'd still have my Mountain. Why should I help yew or her or them?" His scornful wave included the whole little group. "What can yew dew for me?" he asked sullenly. "Can yew sing?" His dull eye brightened momentarily as it rested inquiringly on Dorothy.



"Well, a little," confessed Dorothy, smoothing down her damp dress. Clearing her

throat and fixing her eye on the top of a red pine, she started in rather a choked voice:

"Oh, Bright and gay is the Land of Oz
We love its lakes and hills becoz—"

"There, there! That will dew!" Bustabo snapped his fingers impatiently, and taking out a little book scribbled hastily: "Can't sing."

"Can yew dance?" he demanded, addressing himself to Jellia. "We are short of good dancers on this mountain." Jellia by this time was in such a state of cold and temper, she stamped her foot and turned her back on the unmannerly monarch. "Can't dance," wrote Bustabo under the first entry.



"Well, then—what dew yew dew?" he asked, turning in exasperation to the Wizard.

"I?" said the Wizard, twirling his water-soaked topper, "I, am a Wizard. Naturally I supposed a King like yourself would have everything he desired. But if that is not the case, tell me what you wish and perhaps I can help you. Only be quick!" he added earnestly, "for we have no time to lose."

"Sooo, yew really are a Wizard!" Bustabo's expression became almost agreeable. "Well, then," he drew himself up pompously. "The Princess whom I wish to wed has unaccountably disappeared. Find and return her to this

castle, and I will speed yew and yewer friends to the Emerald City by the safest and swiftest route!"

"But that would take too much time," objected the Wizard, rubbing his chin anxiously. "Who is this Princess? Why has she gone? What is her name and what does she look like?"

"If yew were a real Wizard yew would know all these things without my telling yew," answered Bustabo, looking suspiciously at Ozma's Chief Magician. "I'll tell you this much, though. The Princess whom I would marry is called Azarine, the Red. Not three days ago she was in this castle, but on the morning of our wedding day she ran off into the forest, and though all my Bowmen have been searching ever since, not a trace of her have they found!"

"Humph, the girl showed very good sense, if you ask me," sniffed the Cowardly Lion, shaking his mane, "What did you do? Point your beard at her? Come on, Wiz! Let's go. We're just wasting time here."

"Aha, but yew cannot leave! Look behind yew!" Bustabo, with an enormous laugh, pointed over his shoulder. Silently as Indians the Bearded Bowmen had crept up and entirely surrounded the little company on the green. Standing in a circle with bows raised and beards pointed, they fairly dared anyone to take a step. "Soo, then, it's all settled!" The Red King clapped the Wizard heartily on the back. "Don't think I have not heard of yewer skill, Mister Weezard. Even here on Red Top we've heard rumors of the wonderful Weezard of Oz. Now all yew have to dew is walk into that forest, find

the Princess and bring her back to me. Meanwhile, I shall treat these others as my guests. They shall rest and warm themselves and have all they wish to eat. If by morning yew have failed to return, I shall regretfully be forced to throw them off the mountain. If yew dew return, yew will find that Bustabo will keep his word and bargain."

The Wizard hardly knew what to say.

"If he knows so much, why does he not help himself?" demanded one of the Red Beards, stepping insolently out of the circle. "People who can fly through the air on icebergs and sticks do not need help from ordinary folk like us. Why doesn't he fly to the Emerald City if he's so smart? I'll tell you why—because he's not the Wizard of Oz! He's a fraud, that's what!"

"If he's a fraud then you're a rascal!" cried Jellia Jam, remembering suddenly that she recently had been a Starina. "Your Princess is as good as found, Mister King! Isn't that so, Wizard?" Meeting Jellia's firm gaze, the Wizard nodded quickly.

"This young Oz maid is right, your Majesty! Before the sun rises Azarine will return to this castle!"

"Yes—and now bid your vassals lead us into the castle!" ordered Jellia sharply.

"Bring us soup, meat, bread, vegetables, salad and plenty of fruit and cake!"



Bustabo, after a long look both at Jellia and the Wizard, motioned for the Bowmen to lead the visitors into the castle. The Cowardly Lion trailed suspiciously along in the rear, keeping a sharp watch to see that no beards were pointed at his friends. The Wizard accompanied them part way, conversing in earnest whispers with Jellia and Dorothy. Wantowin Battles supported the dripping and still helpless Scarecrow, and each tried not to show the anxiety he felt when the Wizard finally turned to leave them.

"Goodbye, all!" he said, lifting his dripping hat. "Goodbye, Jellia—here is your bag!" Tapping the kit-bag significantly, he pressed it into Jellia's cold hands. Then, without a word to Bustabo or his Henchmen, he strode resolutely toward the dark forest that covered the sides and more than half of the top of the mountain. Relenting a little, the Red King sent a Bowman running after him with a basket of provisions. Taking the basket with a brief nod of thanks, the Wizard waved again to his friends and marched straight into the gloomy and forbidding woods.