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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Gnome King of Oz: Peter Flies With An Odd Bird (4/20)

"Nothing at all ever happens here," exclaimed Peter, digging his hands deep into his pockets and staring discontentedly out of the window.

"There's a balloon man on the corner," chuckled his grandfather, who was standing just behind Peter. "Go buy yourself a balloon." With another chuckle he dropped a quarter into Peter's hand and went back to his evening paper.



"I'm too old for balloons," said Peter with great disgust.

"I should think you'd know that, grandfather."

"Then buy me one," laughed the old gentleman, winking provokingly. There was no use arguing with a person like that, so Peter, fully intending to buy some marbles and a double nut sundae, ran out of the house.

Peter's home was in Philadelphia, facing on a large public square and the balloon man, his boisterous wares nearly tugging him off his feet, stood on the corner nearest Peter. There was something mysterious about the man. His face was dark and merry and his long pointed beard and slouch hat gave him the appearance

of a merchant from some far country, so that in spite of himself Peter stopped.

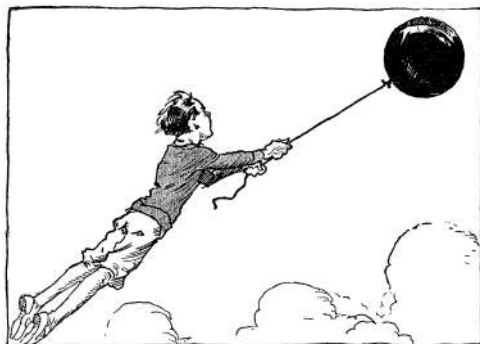
"A balloon, young gentleman?" inquired the dealer, bowing politely to the little boy. "What do you say to this one?" Separating a bright green one from the bunch, he held it out invitingly.

"How much?" asked Peter doubtfully. He liked being called a young gentleman, and the more he looked at the green balloon, the more it fascinated him. The balloon man had already seen the quarter in Peter's hand and quickly stating that twenty-five cents was the price, he thrust the balloon upon Peter and pocketed his quarter, all so quickly the little boy fairly gasped. Why, he had not even made up his mind to buy, and yet here he was with the green balloon and there was the man with his quarter. Uncertainly, Peter stood staring at the balloon man.

"It's a bird!" whispered the merchant, leaning forward to touch the balloon lovingly with the tips of his fingers. "Ah-h-h!" As the balloon man said "Ah!" a crowd of Peter's friends turned the corner and not wishing them to catch him with anything so babyish as a balloon, Peter started to run across the square. And never had Peter run so easily. Each step took him four or five paces ahead, and when he found himself bounding entirely over the fountain in the center of the square, he wisely decided to stop running. So he did, but it made no difference. His legs stopped moving, to be sure, but Peter himself shot upward, soaring lightly as a feather over tree tops, house tops, huge buildings

and church steeples. Not until the tall figure of William Penn, on the Town Hall, faded into the merest dot, did Peter remember the balloon man's words.

"Why, it is a bird," murmured the startled boy, blinking at the comical creature above him. The stem of the balloon to which he clung had turned to a strong stiff leg, while the balloon itself had expanded into a plump, green balloon bird. It careened through the air without any motion of wings or body and for a while, Peter, hanging to its leg, was too frightened to open his mouth. The city had disappeared long ago and, as they pushed up toward the clouds, Peter, regaining a little of



his courage, gave the bird's leg a sharp pull. "Stop!" shouted Peter in as commanding a voice as he could muster.

"Stop yourself," retorted the balloon bird sharply, and the words came in tiny explosions like the pop pop of an air gun. "Do you think I enjoy having my leg pulled?" it chirped indignantly.

"But where are we going?" cried Peter anxiously.

"Balloon Island!" popped the bird, bending its head to get a better view of the little boy. "Hold tight, for if you let go, you'll probably puncture yourself on a steeple."

Peter had been thinking this very thing himself. "You are a present to Queen Luna from Sandaroo," continued the bird calmly. "She needed an airrend boy, so Sandaroo sent you."

"The balloon man?" gasped Peter, scarcely believing his ears.

"He's not a balloon man," replied the bird disdainfully.

"He's Lord High Bouncer of Balloona. You were picked for errand boy," he continued placidly, "because you look strong and stout and because the balloon boys on the island are always puncturing themselves or exploding. Did you ever explode?" asked the bird severely.

"People don't explode," answered the little boy scornfully, "and I'm not going to be an errand boy for a lot of balloonatics either," he shouted angrily. "You'd better let me go or I'll tell my grandfather on you."

"Let go if you want to," said the bird carelessly. "You're holding on to me aren't you?" This was only too true, and after one dizzy look downward, Peter tightened his clutch on the balloon bird's leg and wondered desperately what to do. "You must tread lightly when we land on the island," warned the balloon bird, after a short silence, during which they covered miles of air, "but I daresay it will be all right after you are blown up."

"Blown up," coughed Peter, "why, what do you mean?"

"Well, you wouldn't do as you are," murmured the bird, rolling its eyes disapprovingly down at the little boy, "so the Queen has a splendid plan. She will cut a tiny hole in your back and then have you blown up till you can float as easily as we do. Oh, you'll enjoy floating," promised the balloon bird, diving through a moist cloud bank.

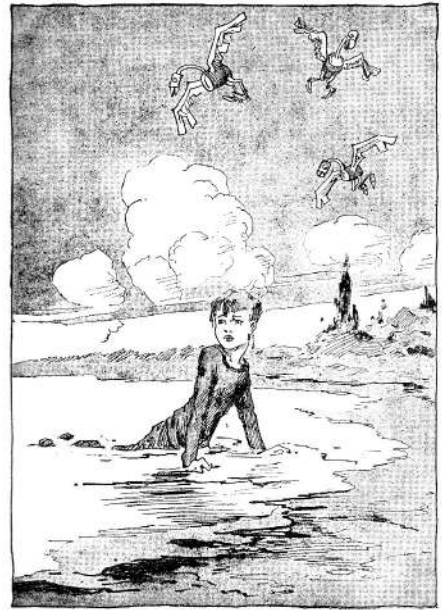
Peter doubted that he would enjoy floating, he doubted it very much, and the more he thought about being blown up and the hole that was to be cut in his back the more dreadfully uneasy he became. His arms ached from the long swing through the air and, as the balloon bird plunged through a particularly black cloud, Peter took a long breath and let go.

"Maybe ... I'll land ... on ... something ... soft!" panted Peter, as he turned over and over and then dropped straight downward.

"Anyway, it won't be any worse than being cut and blown up." He had fallen several miles by this time and it was so confusing,

tumbling through clouds and air-ways, and the wind made such a frightful whistling in his ears, he finally gave up thinking altogether and closed his eyes.

Splash! With a terrific slap, Peter struck the surface of a shining blue ocean, the force of his fall carrying him to the very bottom, where he bumped his head severely on a clam shell. Dazed and choking, Peter rose to the surface and almost mechanically began to swim. After several strokes, he shook the water from his eyes and looked around him. Then he gave a little exclamation of excitement and relief. Not more than twenty paces off lay a small, straggly looking island.



"Well, this is better than being blown up," gulped Peter, heading straight for the island. "Maybe some fishermen live here and maybe some boats pass. Gee whillikens, won't grandfather be surprised when he hears about this, though!"



Immensely cheered, Peter cut swiftly through the choppy blue waves, and the water was soon shallow enough for him to wade

ashore. The island was not much larger than the public square at home. A few sea gulls circled aimlessly overhead, but so far as Peter could see there were no people or houses. First he walked completely round the island, then, feeling rather depressed, started across.

The soil was poor and rocky and there were only about a dozen trees altogether. When he had come to the top of a small hill, Peter sank down on a heap of rocks and began to wring the water from his coat. How long he sat there wondering what he should eat,

how he should endure the loneliness or ever find his way back to Philadelphia, Peter never knew. But he suddenly became aware of a rattle and rumble below and out from the



opposite side of the rock heap sprang a perfectly furious little man. He was gray as the rocks himself,

and his long, wispy white hair and beard blew and snapped in the wind.

"Get off my chimney, idiot!" screamed the old gentleman, dancing wrathfully up and down. "Can't you see you're filling my cave with smoke?"

Stopping right in the middle of his dance, he glared long and searchingly at the little boy. Then, bursting into loud sobs, he began to hop 'round and 'round on one leg, wiping his tears on his whiskers and fairly sizzling with indignation.

"To think!" he shouted, raising his arms to the Heavens, "To think, that after five years of loneliness a miserable mortal should fall on this island! Why couldn't it have been a gnome or a witch or somebody real and interesting. I hate children," shrieked the angry little fellow, stamping his curly foot at Peter.

Peter had been so startled by the sudden appearance of the old gentleman and then so surprised at his curious actions that he had said nothing at all. But now he jumped angrily off the rock heap. "He's no bigger than I am," thought Peter courageously, "and he needn't think he can talk to me like that. Is this your island?" he asked stiffly.

"Of course it's my island!" spluttered the little man. "Go away, I hate children."

"Well, I can't help that," answered Peter. "Besides, I'm not a child. I'm nine years old and in the Fifth-B."

"I don't care what you're in," shrilled the little islander.

"You're in my way now, and if I had my magic belt I'd

turn you to a potato and mash you for supper. Don't you know I'm a King?" he squealed, thumping himself three times upon the chest.

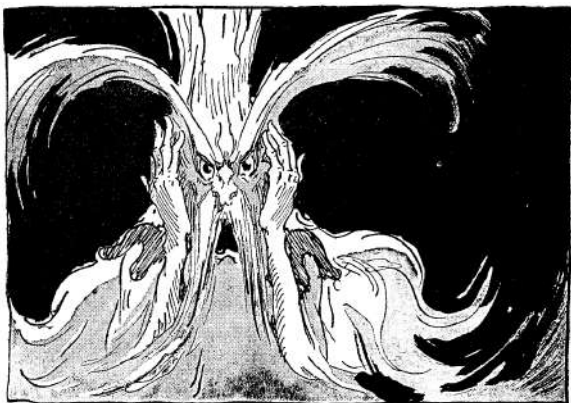
"Well, you don't act like one," answered Peter, in disgust. "If you are the King of this island I wish you'd give me some supper and a place to sleep."

"King of this island!" screamed the angry little man. "I'm Ruggedo, the Rough, the one and only Metal Monarch and ruler over five hundred thousand gnomes besides."

"Gnomes!" murmured Peter, pushing back his cap. He had read about these underground elves, who mine all the precious stones in and out of the world, but he had never really believed in them.

"Yes, gnomes!" boasted the little grey gentleman, marching proudly up and down.

"Where are they?" inquired Peter, a little anxiously. For, thought Peter to himself, if they are all as cross and temperry as this one, life on the island is going to be very unpleasant and dangerous.



"You stand there and ask me that," howled the Gnome King furiously. "Don't you know I've been banished from my Kingdom for years and made a prisoner on this ridiculous little island, just because I tried to get back my magic

belt from Ozma of Oz? Don't you know it was a miserable child who stole it in the first place. I hate children," repeated the Gnome King, clutching his hair

with both hands and snapping his wicked little eyes at Peter.

"If you've been here all that time by yourself I should think you'd be glad to have someone to talk to," ventured the little boy, seating himself carefully on a rock. "I read a book about Oz once," he went on in an interested voice, "but I didn't know it was really true. Is Ozma still Queen and does Dorothy still live in the Emerald City?"

"Dorothy's the girl who stole my belt," sputtered Ruggedo, for it was the Gnome King. "If you have read about Dorothy, you must know about me."

"You weren't in the book I read," explained Peter patiently, "but if you know Dorothy and Ozma, they must be real and if we are near Oz, maybe you can tell me how to get there?"

"If I knew do you suppose I'd be here?" yelled Ruggedo. Picking up a rock, he flung it at Peter's head and rushed violently into his cavern. Peter dodged the rock and, almost wishing he had stuck with the balloon bird, stared dejectedly out to sea. The sun was sinking in the west and the prospect of a long stay on the barren island with the dreadful little Gnome King was not at all cheering.

"I'll probably starve to death," sighed Peter, kicking gloomily at a stone. Then, remembering some string in his pocket, he pulled it out and, fastening a small piece of wire on the string, started toward the beach with the intention of catching a few fish for his dinner.

Halfway there, he came to a small sluggish stream and, casting his line into its muddy waters, sat down to wait for a bite. He had no matches but thought maybe if he caught a few fish and offered Ruggedo one he might allow him to cook over his fire.

Now Ruggedo had fully intended to stay in his cave and not speak another word to Peter, but finally his curiosity got the best of him. After you have been all alone for five years, even a creature you despise is better than no one at all, so presently he came stalking out again. Peter had in the meantime decided to be as polite as possible to the old gnome, for no one could help him. Therefore, as Ruggedo approached, puffing away at a short clay pipe, he waved to him quite cheerfully.

"Don't wave at me," wheezed Ruggedo, taking his pipe out of his mouth and frowning darkly. "I'm a King, I am!" "Oh, what difference does that make?" said Peter impatiently. "We're both stranded, aren't we? Let's stop quarreling and try to find a way off the island. Don't boats ever stop here and how far away is this land of Oz, anyway?"

"Boats!" scoffed the Gnome King, "I've been here five years and not one boat has passed. As for Oz, you are in the very middle of the Nonestic Ocean and about as far from Oz as you could possibly be."

"You mean to say you've been here five years?" gasped Peter incredulously, "and nothing has happened in all that time?"

"Nothing—but you," answered the Gnome King.

"Well, you needn't think I'm going to stay that long," blustered Peter, jerking at his fish line in great agitation. "I'll build a boat, or a raft or something."

Taking his pipe from his mouth, the old gnome looked at Peter almost respectfully. He had often thought of building a raft himself but, being a King and naturally quite unskillful and lazy, he had never really gotten down to it.



"If you help me off this island," he puffed after a short pause, "I'll make you the richest boy in the world." "Humph!" grunted Peter, not much impressed by the old gnome's promises. Just then, his line gave a tug and he was pulling it up quite joyfully when Ruggedo seized his arm.



"Look!" shuddered the gnome, pointing a trembling finger out to sea. Not far from the island, the waters of the Nonestic Ocean were boiling and churning in a terrifying manner. As Peter jumped to his



feet, the waves arose in a mighty green wall and, with a deafening roar, came crashing downward.