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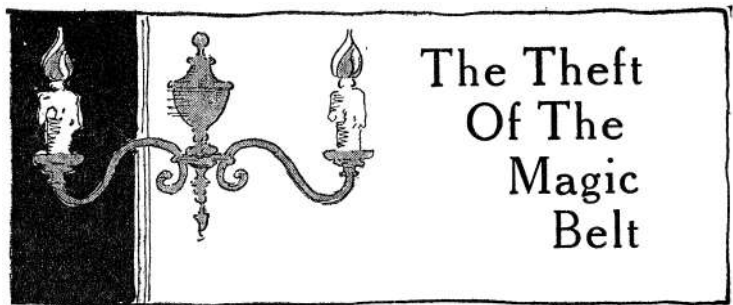
# Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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# The Gnome King of Oz: The Theft Of The Magic Belt (18/20)

Ozma, surprised enough at the party, was so startled and dismayed by the oztrich's roars that she caught at a little gold stand to keep from falling. As she steadied herself, two arms clasped themselves round her waist. "Oh! Oh! Someone is trying to steal my magic belt!" wailed the little fairy, swaying dizzily from side to side.



"Take this! Take this!"

Bounding to his feet, Peter picked up the oztrich egg and fairly forced it into Ozma's arms. As he did so there came a blood-curdling screech, and then, perfect silence.



"It's Ruggedo!" puffed the Patchwork Girl, who had picked herself up by this time.

"Look for a blue patch! Look for a blue patch!" panted Grumpy, standing on his hind legs and sniffing the air anxiously. But there was no

sign of a blue patch anywhere, for Ruggedo at the first glimpse of the egg had commanded the magic cloak to carry him to the royal stable. Here, trembling and shaken, he cowered in the Hungry Tiger's stall. Furious to have been frustrated by Peter at the very instant when success seemed sure, he raved and sputtered and tried to think up some way to get his belt in spite of the hateful egg. Meanwhile, in the palace, the utmost confusion prevailed, and when the hand of Kuma again flashed into the banquet hall and flew like an arrow to Ozma and dropped the note of warning into her lap, the courtiers fled in every direction, while the celebrities crowded close about the little Queen to protect her from these confusing and invisible enemies.

"Stop! Stop!" panted Peter, as Sir Hokus, waving his sword, made determined swings at the flying arm. "It's a helping hand! It belongs to a friend of mine, Sir!"

Tugging at the iron coat tails of the Knight, he sought to dissuade him from his grim purpose, but not until Ozma clapped sharply did the good Knight desist.

Leaning back wearily in the chair to which the Scarecrow had guided her, and still holding the great oztrich egg in her lap, Ozma turned to Scraps.

"What does this mean? Who are these strangers, and where is the Gnome King?" asked Ozma in a faint voice.

As she spoke, Kuma's hand patted Peter approvingly on the head, doubled into a fist under the Knight's nose and, sailing upward, settled quietly on the green chandelier.

"I've been a Queen, I've riz and fell  
And have a thrilling tale to tell!"

puffed Scraps, tossing back her yarn dramatically.

"Never mind the thrills, come to the point! Come to the point!" growled the Cowardly Lion, looking uneasily at the oztrich, who was strutting pompously up and down the banquet hall, and at Grumpy, who was casting longing eyes at the banquet table.

Now the whole company turned expectantly to the Patchwork Girl and, enjoying the importance of her position and news to the very fullest extent, Scraps told her story and Peter's, while the little boy kept a sharp lookout for the invisible gnome. Scraps' own adventures were surprising enough, but when she came to Peter's experiences with the former Gnome King, the sea quakes, their escape in the pirate ship and the magic casket of Soob, the Sorcerer, the excitement of her hearers knew no bounds. Clapping on two pair of specs, the Wizard of Oz rushed from the room to fetch his encyclopedia of magic and his black bag, for he felt that his utmost skill would be needed to prevent the gnome from carrying out his wicked plans.

"It must have been Ruggedo who pinched you and pulled the Cowardly Lion's tail," whispered Dorothy, who was standing between Sir Hokus and the Scarecrow.

When the good Knight heard how Kuma had dispatched his hand to aid Peter and Scraps in their [Pg 265] escape from Patch, he waved apologetically at the arm resting on the chandelier. It at once descended and

began shaking hands all around and Peter, staring at that gay and brilliant assemblage, thought he had never seen so interesting and strange a sight. The Hungry Tiger, now that the story was told, was all for going on with the party, but the Wizard, realizing the extreme danger they were in, said no.

"Put all the magic treasures together and place the oztrich egg on top of them," commanded the wizard, "for Ruggedo dare not touch them so long as the egg is near."

So Ozma unclasped her belt and, placing the oztrich egg in the center, put her magic box and wishing pills beside it.

"I cannot believe Ruggedo would be so wicked," sighed Ozma, turning sadly to the Scarecrow. "Now that he sees it is impossible to steal the belt perhaps he will go away."

"Not he!" answered the Scarecrow positively. "He's around here somewhere, depend on that, and until we find him, watch out!"

"Why not eat, while we watch?" purred the Hungry Tiger. "These travellers look tired and hungry and deserve refreshment after their long journey."

Grumpy rolled his eyes approvingly at the Hungry Tiger and Ozma, in spite of herself, had to smile. As she nodded her royal head, the Scarecrow burst into his speech of welcome all over again, the footmen began pulling out the chairs and everyone settled down as if nothing at all had happened. Grumpy had a place between the Hungry Tiger and Cowardly Lion, and they,

well pleased with the behavior of the little bear, did their best to make him feel at home. The oztrich stood up behind Grumpy, swallowing rapidly everything that came within reach. Scraps had the seat of honor beside Ozma, and Peter, between Dorothy and Sir Hokus, was plied with every delicacy. The hand of Kuma, trained to serve, flew backward and forward, filling tumblers, carrying trays and generally making itself useful.

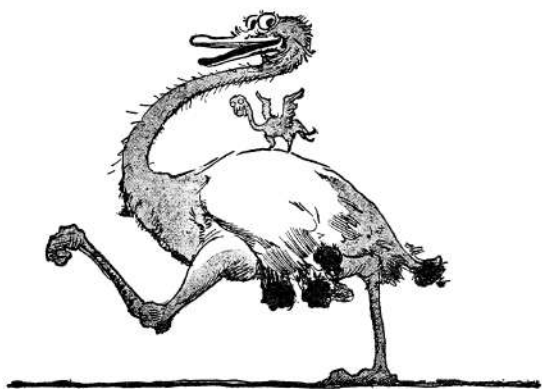
"Dost like our Emerald City, lad?" queried Sir Hokus, bending kindly toward the little boy.

"Well," acknowledged Peter quite truthfully, "I haven't seen much of it, the oztrich ran so fast, you know."

"A rare and exceptional bird!" murmured Sir Hokus mildly, "but not my idea of a giddy steed."

"Nor mine!" whispered Peter, winking sociably at the Knight. "He goes twenty feet at one jump and travels like a hurricane." Between bites, Peter told the Knight how they had run over the bookman and a little more about the pirate ship and the Sultan of Suds, while

Scraps, at the head of the table, gave a spirited account of her experiences as Queen of the Quilties.



So light hearted and gay are these dear people of Oz that soon they were laughing and chatting as merrily as if no

danger threatened their little ruler or themselves. Only the Wizard seemed to be bothering about the Gnome

King. He had placed his encyclopedia beside him on the table and, nibbling absently at a chicken leg, continued to pore over its finely printed pages in an effort to trace the magic articles Peter had found in the sorcerer's chest. It must be confessed that Peter glanced from time to time at the chair where the magic belt lay, marveling at its wonderful powers and hoping that when everything was over it would safely transport him back to Philadelphia.

"After the party we'll have the Cowardly Lion take us all over the Emerald City," promised Dorothy, as Peter dipped his spoon into a heaping saucer of Ozcream. Blissfully, Peter nodded, then glancing again at the magic belt, dropped his spoon with a crash and pushed back his chair.

"The egg!" gasped Peter wildly. "It's hatched!" And it most certainly had! As the startled company sprang to their feet, the baby oztrich stepped awkwardly out of its shell, wobbled to the edge of the chair and fell off. And that was not all! For as the oztrich, with great strides, rushed to the side of its child, the magic belt, the box of wishing pills and the magic box disappeared and a blue patch began to flutter and dance before the horrified eyes of the now thoroughly alarmed guests of Ozma.

"The Gnome King!" groaned the Wizard, slamming his book with a bang.

"The belt!" screamed Peter, dashing toward the blue patch. Feeling that something might happen that would enable him to carry out his plans, Ruggedo had

returned to the banquet hall and, watching from a safe distance, saw to his utter relief and astonishment that the egg had hatched. Instantly its power over him ceased and, dashing forward, he had pounced upon the belt and clasped it about his waist.

"Revenge!" roared the voice of the invisible gnome.

"Revenge! Next moment I shall send you all to the bottom of the Nonestic Ocean!"

"Not that! Not that!" faltered the Patchwork Girl, clutching Ozma in a panic. "I never could stand water!"

