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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Hungry Tiger of Oz: Rusty Ore to the Rescue (15/20)

While Ozma, perched on Rusty's rude bench, nibbled hungrily at the big sandwich he had brought her, Atmos looked around him with interest and frank curiosity. The little shop was filled with iron deer, fire irons, iron dogs and weather cocks, too. Rusty had placed the punctured airman on top of a scrap heap, while he went to search for his bellows, that he might blow him up.

"Is this an earth castle?" asked Atmos, as Rusty disappeared through the doorway. "Are there many creatures like this at the bottom of the air?"



"Rusty is a man. There are plenty of men, women, children, Kings, Queens and animals down here," answered Ozma, hardly knowing how to begin to tell an airman about the real and unreal countries of the earth. "Everyone here does not live in a castle," she went on seriously. "Most people live in houses or on farms."

"What's a farm?" asked Atmos, with a puzzled frown.

"Do you know, little Princess, I think I had better explore this country a bit further before I'm blown up.

Think what a lecture I can give on the wonders at the bottom of the sky!"

"Why don't you?" asked Ozma, swallowing the last bite of the sandwich.

"What?" inquired Rusty, returning just then with the bellows.

"I was just remarking to the Princess that I'd like to see more of your earth before I return to the sky," confided Atmos, blinking his round eyes at the iron worker. "But as soon as I'm blown up and patched I'll fly straight upward."

"How did you manage before?" questioned Rusty, sitting down on the bench beside Ozma.

"Well," said Atmos, "a friend of mine who lives on the Mountains of the Moon, made me a pair of iron boots. These enabled me to sink through the air and walk about the bottom of the sky which you call the earth. I wanted to find out if the earth was inhabited. Putting on the boots, I dove from the tip of the Moon and landed in a strange and lovely garden, where the first object that met my eyes was the lovely little lady before us. Delighted with my find, I picked this Princess from the garden, kicked off my boots and flew back to the sky, carrying her along as proof."

"Proof?" blustered Rusty, jumping up indignantly. "How dare you steal a Princess for proof, you old rascal! What shall I do to him?" he puffed, turning angrily to Ozma.

"Oh, nothing, please do nothing!" begged the little fairy in alarm. "He did not really mean any harm and I'm

down on earth again. Besides—" (Ozma's voice sank to a low whisper), "besides, I punctured him with a pin."

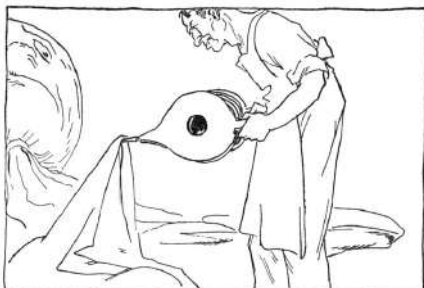
"You did!" exclaimed Rusty admiringly. "Well, good for you!"

"Yes!" sighed Atmos sorrowfully. "It was good for her, but exceedingly bad for me. Still, I can see now that it was wrong for me to carry her away, and if you'll find some way to blow me up and keep me down, I'll take her safely back to her castle."

"Now you're talking like a real man instead of a wind bag," said Rusty approvingly. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make you a pair of iron shoes myself, blow you up, patch you up and start you in the right direction. How would that be?"

Ozma was so delighted with the iron worker's plan that she gave him a hearty hug, and as Rusty started to work on the boots at once, it was not long before they were finished and standing in the doorway to cool.

Blowing Atmos up was a ticklish and dangerous operation. Carrying the airman outside, Rusty placed



him on the ground. Then, placing the bellows in his side, he began to work it slowly and carefully, while Ozma watched to see that each arm and leg had the same amount of air. Before they started, Rusty

had weighted Atmos down with an iron bucket and an iron stag, but as the body of the airman filled out, he grew so light and buoyant they had to add the anchor and a couple of chains.

"Not too much, now," warned Ozma, anxiously untying the ribbon from the airman's throat. "Not too much, or he'll burst!"

But Atmos did not burst, and when Rusty saw he had exactly filled out his strange silken skin, he pulled out the bellows, clapped a neat patch over the puncture and stood back to admire this curious citizen of the air. Atmos, himself, began to bounce, swing his arms and sing aloud for pure joy.

"Excuse my singing," chuckled the airman, "but I'm full of fresh air and you have no idea how fine it feels."

"Well, don't put on airs with us," muttered Rusty, who was really alarmed at the airman's size. "Do you think he's safe?" he whispered nervously to Ozma. Ozma nodded enthusiastically and, somewhat reassured, Rusty went off to pack her a lunch for the journey back home.

By this time, the boots had cooled and, with great difficulty, Rusty fitted them to the airman's puffy feet, released him from the iron weights and chains and helped him to rise.

Ozma watched with great interest, for she was not at all sure the boots would keep Atmos on the earth. But after a few skips and flutters the airman began to walk soberly up and down, and with a pleased smile declared himself ready to start.

Rusty was sorry to have the little Princess go, but when she explained the strange disappearance of Betsy Bobbin and how she must return at once to the Emerald

City and try to discover her whereabouts in the Magic Picture, he reluctantly bade her good-bye.

"You are on the edge of the Gnome King's dominions," said Rusty, "and if you travel straight ahead you will come to the Deadly Desert. With iron boots Atmos should have no trouble crossing the burning sands, and if he carries you on his shoulder no harm will come to you."

"I have never seen a desert," said Atmos eagerly, "for there are no deserts in the sky. Come, little Princess, let us go at once." Giving Rusty a farewell embrace and thanking him again for all his kindness, Ozma ran after the airman, who had already started toward the South. "Good-bye!" called Rusty, as they turned to wave to him from a little hill. "Be careful not to tread on her toes!"

The country through which they were passing was barren and wild and not at all interesting to Ozma, but the airman stopped and exclaimed over every tree and boulder, collecting so many leaves, flowers, sticks and small stones, that his air pockets were soon bulging.

"I'm really quite glad I was punctured," he remarked happily. "Otherwise I should have missed all this."

Ozma nodded, a bit impatiently, for she was thinking of all she had missed during her strange two days in the air, and wondering what had become of Betsy Bobbin.

"Maybe she's been home all the time," sighed the little Princess, "and won't she be astonished when I tell her where I have been. Oh, dear, I do wish he would hurry. If you put any more stones in your pocket you'll never

be able to fly," she cautioned gently, "and if we don't walk a little faster, we'll never reach the Emerald City at all."

"That's so," puffed the airman, and straightening up he reluctantly dropped a handful of pebbles. "But walking is so monotonous. In the air, we can drift, float, swim or fly and so we never grow tired."

"It must be very nice," agreed Ozma politely, "but don't you think you could walk a little faster? We're going to have a storm," she added, glancing up at the sky, which was full of dark clouds. "Oh, Atmos, let's run and maybe we'll reach a house before it breaks."

"Breaks?" panted the airman, clumping clumsily after the light-footed little fairy. "What will it break? Us?"

"Don't you ever have any storms in the sky?" called Ozma over her shoulder.

Atmos shook his head solemnly. "We're above all that sort of thing," grunted the airman, trying his best to keep up with Ozma. "Dear me, how dreadfully disagreeable." The sky had grown dark by this time and the rain was falling in torrents. Blinding flashes of lightning and loud crashes of thunder added to the confusion and when large hail stones came pelting down upon their heads, Atmos stopped in positive alarm.

"Princess! Princess!" choked the airman, groping toward Ozma in the dark, "Get me out of this or I'll be punctured!"

"If I only had my magic belt!" gasped Ozma, pushing back her wet hair, "I could wish us both to the Emerald

City. Oh, dear, I do wish there was a house somewhere!"

Scarcely had the words been spoken before a house sprang up at the little girl's feet—so suddenly, in fact, that it tumbled her over backwards. The morning before she left her castle, Ozma had slipped one of the Wizard's wishing powders into her pocket.

But, shoe strings and button hooks! The little girl had not been careful to say what kind of house she wanted and there, perched askew on the dripping rocks, stood a dog house. While Atmos stared at it in a daze, thinking it, too, had fallen from the sky, and Ozma picked herself up in astonishment, a cross doggie face appeared in the doorway.

"Gr—woof!" rumbled the dog threateningly. Where he had been wished from I cannot say, but the journey had been unexpected and rough, and seeing two total strangers standing outside, the dog immediately decided they were responsible for the accident. Paying no attention to the rain or hail, he

dashed furiously out and tried to bury his teeth in the airman's leg. Thanks to his iron boots, Atmos was not punctured, and as the dog made a spring at Ozma, the airman snatched the little fairy up in his



arms and began running in a way he had not believed possible. So swiftly did Atmos run that the barks of the dog soon died away in the distance and the storm was left far behind them.

"Stop! Stop!" begged Ozma, when she could finally make the airman hear her. "Stop, Atmos dear. Atmos Fere, you're running the wrong way. Oh! Oh! Do take care, there's something queer about this country."

With a final puff, Atmos brought himself to a stop, or at least he tried to. But the earth beneath his feet was behaving most unaccountably, moving along in big brown waves and carrying him tumbling along with it. They had unluckily run into the great rolling country of the east, mentioned by a few explorers, but seldom crossed by ordinary travellers. Standing first on one foot and then the other, Atmos tried wildly to keep his balance, but in a moment a heavy mud wave struck him behind the knees and rolled him over, so that he and the little Princess of Oz were soon being buffeted along like tiny ships on an unruly ocean. When the waves broke, which they frequently did, sticks, stones, pebbles and dust showered over their heads. In fact, a more miserable mode of travel cannot be imagined.

"Let us fly," choked the frightened airman, clutching Ozma's hand. "Say the word little Princess, and I'll kick off my boots and carry you up to safety."

"No! No! Not that!" coughed Ozma in a panic. "Wait Atmos, something will turn up!"