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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Hungry Tiger of Oz: The Airman of Oz (14/20)

Betsy had been perfectly right in supposing Princess Ozma would soon discover her absence from the castle. Dorothy had gone home with the Tin Woodman, so, of course, knew nothing about it, but when Betsy did not appear for breakfast Ozma immediately sent Jellia Jamb, her small maid-in-waiting, upstairs to search for her. Ozma, herself, hurried out into the garden, thinking Betsy might be gathering a breakfast bouquet. Shading her eyes, Ozma looked in every direction, but there was no sign of Betsy anywhere. She was about to return to the castle when a loud bump sounded just behind her. Spinning about, Ozma saw the strangest sort of figure, sprawled over her favorite rose bush. It was four times the size of a regular man, the body something like a tremendous sausage, with a round, balloon-shaped head and pudgy arms and legs. While Ozma was trying to determine what kind of being it was, the huge creature rose with a bounce and came clumping toward her.



"I told Zeph there were people at the bottom of the air!" puffed the stranger gleefully. "Here is one now. I'll take it straight back to the sky for proof."

Ozma had just time to notice that he wore heavy iron boots, when he bent over and, tucking her under his arm as if she had been a package of sugar plums, kicked off one boot and then the other and soared, like a balloon released from its string, straight up toward the sky. It was all so unexpected and breath-taking for several minutes Ozma was perfectly paralyzed. Then, glancing down and seeing her lovely castle fading to a mere speck below, she began to squirm and struggle and pound with both hands upon the arm of her captor. "Take me back! Put me down!" commanded Ozma, imperiously. "How dare you carry me off like this?" But her tiny fists made no impression on the great fellow. He seemed to be constructed of some tough silken substance, and from the way he dented in when she poked him, Ozma concluded he was filled with air. "Like a balloon," thought the Princess. "Oh, please! Please stop!" she called despairingly.

The voice of the little fairy came wafting faintly up to the airman and, with an interested sniff, he took Ozma from beneath his arm and held her on a level with his



nose. The quick change made her exceedingly dizzy, and while she recovered herself he examined her most attentively. He was swimming in the air all the time, with his feet in a strange

climbing motion, and their flight upward never slackened during the conversation that followed.

"What a pretty little creature it is," mused the airman half aloud. His voice was so kind and his face so round and jolly that Ozma took heart and began begging him to return her to the earth.

"I am a Princess," she explained earnestly, "and anything may happen to my Kingdom while I am away. Something has happened already." Breathlessly she began to tell of the disappearance of Betsy Bobbin and of the perils that might overtake her in a magic country like Oz. But the airman seemed more interested in Ozma's voice and appearance than in her story.

"Why it's talking airish," he chuckled with a pleased grin. "And what splendid proof a Princess will be when I deliver my lecture next month before the Cloud Country Gentlemen. Fellow Airmen! I shall say, It has long been a matter of dispute as to whether any life exists in the lower levels of the air, but now the question is settled for all time. The earth is undoubtedly populated by small fragile Princesses like this." Here he paused and held Ozma up as if displaying her to an imaginary audience.

"Oh! Oh! Please stop and listen to me!" entreated Ozma. Then she gave a great gasp, for without warning the sky darkened and in their swift flight they barely escaped the gleaming point of a star.

"Don't be alarmed," murmured the airman, feeling the little fairy tremble in his grasp. "Night has fallen. The

higher we go, the faster time flies. It will be daylight in a few moments. That's one of the advantages of high living," he continued comfortably. "One grows up so quickly and time flies so fast we never are bored. See, it is to-morrow already!"

"To-morrow!" wailed Ozma, blinking in the sudden sunlight that came flooding through the clouds. "How dreadful! Oh dear, Mr. Balloon Man, do take me back to my castle."

"Atmos is my name," announced the airman a bit stiffly, "Atmos Fere. I am a skyman, and I could not take you back even I wanted to, for I have left my diving boots on the earth. You'll grow used to it up here," he assured her, and turning on his back began to float lazily toward a long purple cloud, still holding Ozma aloft so he could more easily observe her.

"A most interesting specimen," he muttered over and over, squinting at the little fairy approvingly.

"I'm not a specimen, I'm a Princess!" declared Ozma indignantly. "I do not wish to live in the sky. Oh, dear! Oh, my! What will become of Oz while I am away?"

"Now you're unreasonable," sighed Atmos reproachfully.

"What will become of my lecture if I let you go? Do you think for one instant any air body would believe me when I told them there were living creatures at the bottom of the air? I must have proof and you are my proof, little Princess. You should feel honored to have been discovered by a well-known explorer. You shall have an air castle all to yourself and the lecture will

only take a few years of your time. Hello, it's night again!"

And sure enough it was. Shivering in the darkness, Ozma began to fully realize the awful perils of her position. It might be years before she saw her old friends and the lovely Emerald City again.

Being a fairy, Ozma knew that she herself would not grow older, but what might not happen in Oz during her long absence? Claspng her hands desperately, the little Princess tried to think of some way to help herself, and as the sun came flashing through the clouds again a dreadful plan popped into her head.

Atmos was still talking. "After the lecture, there will be a dinner," droned the airman sleepily, "that will take about seven years, I should say, though I've known sky banquets to last as long as ten."

"Ten?" moaned Ozma, with a little shudder, and steeled by the thought of a ten-year banquet, she drew an emerald pin from her dress and thrust it quickly into the airman's side. Then covering her face with both hands, she began to cry softly, for this tender-hearted little fairy had never hurt anyone in her whole gentle life and could not bear to even think of what she had done. For several seconds the airman's calm conversation continued. Then all at once he gave a great gulp.

"Princess!" gasped the airman in a faint voice, "I seem to be losing my breath!"

Ozma felt a rush of cold air past her ears, and next instant they were tumbling earthward, over and over,

and over, down through clouds and mists and great blue stretches of empty air. How she managed, during that long, dizzy fall, to keep hold of the airman's limp arm, she never knew, herself. But hold on she did and after what seemed to be hours and hours, they landed together in a feathery field of wheat. The sudden plunge downward had kept all the air from escaping from the airman, but as Ozma rolled over and saw his pitiable condition, she began to weep anew. His legs and body were perfectly limp and the air was issuing from his right arm with a shrill whistling sound.



"Save me!" panted Atmos, rolling his eyes wildly from side to side. "Save me! Can't you see I'm expiring?"

"But what can I do?" sobbed Ozma, in a panic.

"Tie something round my neck," directed the airman desperately. "Keep the air in my head."

Snatching the ribbon from her curls, Ozma hastened to do as he suggested, shivering a little as she pulled the ribbon tight.

"I'd like to know how this happened," moaned Atmos, as the little fairy tied the ribbon in a neat bow under his poor, wrinkled chin.

"It was my fault," confessed Ozma, covering her face so she could not see him. "I stuck you with a pin. You wouldn't let me go and I couldn't leave Oz for all those

years. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I'm so sorry!" and remorseful tears began to trickle through her fingers and drop on the airman's nose.

"Punctured—by—a—Princess!" puffed Atmos, as if he could not get the idea through his head at all. "Well, who would have thought it? She looked so harmless, and sweet, too. I think I should be the one to cry," he observed presently, and as the little fairy's sobs grew



more and more violent, he lifted his head and regarded her with positive alarm.

"Don't cry like that," begged Atmos uncomfortably. "It didn't hurt, you know, and I have expired

in the cause of high skyence. That's a great honor, besides I should not have carried you off. Don't cry," he begged, trying frantically to rise. But the more he coaxed and blamed himself, the harder Ozma wept, so that neither of them heard the approaching steps of a stranger.

"Hello!" cried a bluff voice suddenly. "What's the matter here? Did you bust your balloon, little girl, or what?" Glancing up, Ozma saw a tall red-faced fellow in a leather apron just behind her. The head of the airman did look like a great balloon, and while Ozma quickly dried her tears, Atmos simply stared at the newcomer, almost forgetting his misfortune in his curiosity.

"What is this?" he whispered huskily. "I thought earth was inhabited by Princesses like yourself. Is this a Princess, too?"

"Hah, hah, hah!" roared the stranger, slapping his great thigh. "Do I look like a Princess?" Then, as the curiousness of a balloon's conversing struck him, his eyes grew rounder and rounder and his mouth hung open with astonishment.

"It's an airman," explained Ozma with dignity, "and I am the Princess of Oz."

"Airman!" muttered the big fellow under his breath.

"Oz? Well, I've heard of Oz, but you're a long way from home, little lady, and where on earth did you pick up this fellow?"

"He's from the sky," Ozma hastened to inform him.

"And I've had a serious accident," added Atmos, to save the little fairy from telling her part in the affair.

"You look like an accident," observed the stranger, kneeling down beside the collapsed form of the airman.

"Was it a puncture or an explosion?"

"A—a puncture," sighed Atmos, with a sidelong glance at Ozma, "but what manner of earth creature are you?"

"I'm an ornamental iron worker," announced the stranger proudly. "There's my shack over yonder. Rusty Ore is my name, and say!" He rose and looked triumphantly at the little fairy. "I believe I could blow this fellow up again. I've a bellows in the shop. Shall I try?"

"Oh, could you? Would you?" begged the little Princess, clasping her hands eagerly. The more Rusty looked at

lovely little Ozma, the surer he became that he could. Everyone who saw Ozma had an immediate desire to serve her, and the ornamental iron worker was no exception. Rolling the airman into a neat bundle, he slung him over his shoulder. Then, taking Ozma's hand, strode briskly across the fields.

"Have you anything to eat in your house?" asked the little Princess, skipping to keep up with Rusty's long strides. "I haven't had anything to eat for two days!"

"Two days!" bellowed the iron worker indignantly, and sweeping Ozma up into his arms, he broke into a run, so that almost before they knew it, they had reached his queer little shop.