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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Hungry Tiger of Oz: The Second Rash Ruby (11/20)

"I told you there was a strange power in that ruby when you bought it from the fisherman," hissed Guph. "No ruby has an R carved in the side without some reason. It is undoubtedly one of the magic rubies of Rash—the one protecting the holder from danger by water."

Several days before Betsy's arrival, an old Ev fisherman had brought a sparkling square ruby to the Gnome King. He had found it in a fish he had drawn up in his nets and, knowing Kaliko's fondness for jewels, had taken it straight to the King. Kaliko at once purchased the stone and had it set in a small ring—the same ring Carter had seen him slip into the rock throne. "If you had the courage of a flea," grumbled Guph, "you'd steal the ruby this vegetable person discovered and become a real power in the land."



"But it wouldn't be right," objected Kaliko, mopping his brow with his gray kerchief. "Besides, Ozma would hear of it and come with her army to conquer us."

"How could she if you had the two Rash rubies?" argued Guph. "How would she ever know? We'll just destroy all these rubbishy travellers and that will be the end of it. Where's the ring now?" he inquired anxiously.

"Safe enough," answered Kaliko, glancing over his shoulder. "I took it off as soon as Betsy mentioned the rubies. I was afraid she would notice it."

"Come on then," urged Guph coaxingly. "Can't you be a little bad for once. Tisn't natural for a gnome to be good all the time and where does all this goodness get you? Show you're a real gnome for once and forget all this mortal stuff you learned from Betsy Bobbin."

As Guph continued his wicked pleading, Carter stood frozen to the spot, his corn ears waving to and fro with wrath and indignation. He longed to snatch the precious ruby from its hiding place and dash back to warn the others. But the gnomes were so close, he dared not move. But all at once Kaliko came to a decision and began to hurry toward a small door.

"I will consult the wizard," muttered the Gnome King in a weak whisper. "Come, let us see what the wizard thinks about this." Taking Guph's arm, Kaliko went pattering down the rocky hallway. In one leap, the Vegetable Man reached the great throne, found the ruby ring and dropped it into his leather pouch. He was about to return to his companions when the King's exspectacles, lying on the arm of the throne, attracted his attention. Clapping them hurriedly upon his nose, he

rushed toward the cavern occupied by the little Prince of Rash. But half-way there he gave a great leap.

"Great cauliflowers!" gasped Carter. As plainly as you see the pictures in this book, he saw Guph thumping the little boy on the head with a pick-axe.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed the Vegetable Man, dashing into the cavern like a whirlwind. Off flew the King's exspectacles and splintered into bits on the floor, and his entrance was so noisy, Evered jumped up in a fright from the couch where he had been sleeping.



"What's the matter?" he demanded, feeling around sleepily for his sword.

"Matter!" coughed Carter, "Wasn't that rogue Guph in here?" The Prince shook his head and, looking into the next cavern, Carter saw Betsy curled up peacefully on a green sofa and from the cave beyond came the resounding snores of the Hungry Tiger. "Nothing's happened at all," yawned Reddy.

"It was the exspectacles," puffed Carter, catching a glimpse of the pink splinters of glass at his feet.

"Do you know what is going to happen, my Rash young friend? That scalawag of a gnome intends to bang you over the ears with a pick-axe. I saw him with my own eyes and Kaliko's specs!"

"Bang me with a pick-axe!" shuddered Evered, jumping up in alarm, as Carter ran to waken Betsy and the

Hungry Tiger. As fast as he could, the Vegetable Man told them all he had overheard, and showed them the ruby ring Kaliko had slyly hidden away from them. Their pleasure at recovering the second ruby was entirely spoiled by the treachery of the Gnome King and, scarcely looking at it, Reddy thrust the ring into his pocket.

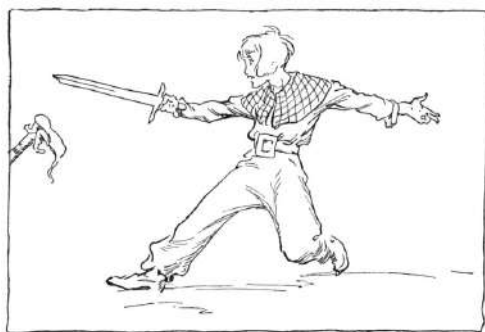
"I can run the fastest," panted the Hungry Tiger. "Jump on my back, all of you and I'll make a sprint for safety." Almost as one, the three leaped on the Hungry Tiger's back, Carter leaving his wheel-barrow with a sigh, and arming himself with the spade he had picked from the Indus Tree.

But as the Hungry Tiger dashed through the door into the throne room, Guph and his entire army came swarming through another entrance. Kaliko, himself, was nowhere in sight. He had delegated Guph to secure the Rash ruby and dispose of the travellers. Then, thought the Gnome King, if any trouble arose afterward, Guph would be held responsible.

But Guph did not intend to have any trouble afterward. He meant to destroy the travellers so utterly that not even Ozma, with her magic, would be able to discover what had become of them. Therefore, when the wicked little elf saw his four victims preparing to escape, he gave a loud screech, hurled himself at the Hungry Tiger, and brought his pick-axe down with all his might upon the head of the little Prince. It might have been a feather for all the impression it made upon Reddy. And while Betsy and Carter ducked back in dismay, the

gnomes rushed at them in a body and simply rained blows upon their heads and shoulders. But the blows fell as harmlessly as an April shower and when Carter realized this, he began laying about with his spade so briskly that the enemy went down in heaps.

"One of the rubies is protecting us," whispered Prince Evered, pulling out his sword. "Take that you gray robber!" And bringing the sword down on Guph's shoulders he stretched him flat upon the rocks. At the same moment, the Hungry Tiger, gathering himself for a spring, leaped entirely over the gnome army and, charging out the first door he came to, raced down a long dismal tunnel. They could hear the gnomes scampering after them and, redoubling his speed, the Hungry Tiger fairly flew down the dim corridor. When a sudden turn brought him up against a swinging door, he went through like a shot and out upon a huge rocky cliff.



"Whoa! Whoa!" quavered Carter, jerking the Hungry Tiger frantically by the tail.

"Stop! Stop!" implored Betsy and Reddy both together. No wonder! Bubbling up from the cliff and hurling itself down over the rocks below, was a shimmering sheet of flame, the highest fire-fall, to be perfectly exact, in the whole of Kaliko's Kingdom. But the Hungry Tiger could no more stop himself than a barrel rolling down hill.

With a roar that loosened three rocks and a boulder, he plunged over the cliff and down the fire-fall itself. "Ruby! Ruby!" moaned the Vegetable Man, clutching Betsy and the little Prince. "Do your work!" The roar of the flames drowned out every other sound and green and yellow tongues of fire licked out at the travellers as they were hurled downward. But so powerful was the Rash Ruby, they were harmless as spring zephyrs, while the stones and rocks against which they bumped and bounded seemed soft as pillows. The tiger was falling head first, and somehow the three riders managed to keep on his back and hang together. Just before they reached the bottom and swirled down into the pool of flames at the base of the fire-fall, Carter lost his hold on Reddy's belt. He soon regained it, but not quickly enough.

"My ears burn," complained the Vegetable Man, as the Hungry Tiger struggled through the flaming torrent toward the shore.

"What's that?" questioned Betsy, sniffing the air suddenly. At the same moment they were simply covered with a shower of crisp white flakes.

"My ears!" moaned the Vegetable Man, in grief-stricken tones. "They've popped!" This on top of all the other shocks was almost too much, and when the tiger had dragged himself out of the fiery stream and scrambled up the steep bank, they all dropped down upon the steaming rocks and simply panted with exhaustion.

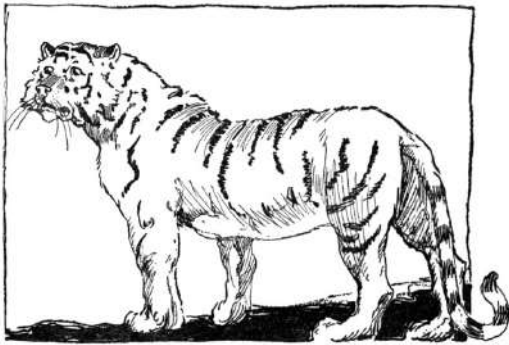
"First time I ever came down a fire-fall," puffed Reddy, gazing fearfully at the tumbling torrent of flames.

"Well, it's the last time I ever come down one," growled the Hungry Tiger. "If it hadn't been for that ruby of yours we'd all have been nicely toasted by now. As it is —" The Hungry Tiger looked sorrowfully at the Vegetable Man.

"The best ears I ever had," groaned Carter, feeling the husks that were left to him.

"Did it hurt?" asked Betsy sympathetically. But the Vegetable Man made no reply.

"He can't hear you," explained the Hungry Tiger gloomily. "If I had that Gnome King I'd eat him."



"He didn't turn out very well," admitted Betsy sadly. "But never mind. Reddy has another ruby and we're in the upstairs world again."

"That's so! Maybe we're nearer the Emerald City than we think," rumbled the Hungry Tiger. "Let's look around a bit and see." Motioning for Carter to follow, and still feeling depressed over Kaliko's treachery and the Vegetable Man's sad loss, they started across the stony country edging the Gnome King's dominions.

"It's funny Ozma doesn't help us," whispered Betsy to the little Prince of Rash, as Carter strode gloomily and silently beside them. "I've been away from the Emerald City two days now and she must be wondering where I am and they have certainly missed the Hungry Tiger by this time."

"But how would Ozma know where to look for you?" asked Reddy.

"The Magic Picture would show her," answered Betsy, and quickly explained the most magic of Ozma's possessions. This curious painting hangs in the royal palace, and when Ozma wishes to know where her friends are and what they are doing she has but to stand before it and request them to appear.

Immediately they flash into view, the picture showing just where they are and what they are doing at the time. More than once, Ozma had saved her subjects from serious disaster by consulting the Magic Picture, and it did seem strange that she had not looked for Betsy and the Hungry Tiger.

While Betsy and the little Prince were still puzzling over it, they stepped across the rocky borders of the Gnome King's dominion into a pleasant farming country and they were all so relieved to find themselves once again in more natural surroundings that they stopped worrying and began to enjoy themselves. The fields of potatoes and cabbages were especially cheering to Carter Green, and when they came upon a waving field of corn, he gave a joyful shout and sprang lightly over a fence.

"Wait!" he called gaily holding up both hands. "Wait till I pick a couple of ears!"