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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Hungry Tiger of Oz: The Vegetable Man of Oz (4/20)

We shall have to leave the poor Hungry Tiger in the jail yard of Rash and take a peep at what is going on in the Emerald City of Oz. It will be something exciting, I am sure. One never can guess what will happen next in the Fairyland of Oz.

"Red ripe tomatoes! Red ripe tomatoes!

Fresh straw-burees! Fresh straw-burees!

Ripe red tomatoes, fine new potatoes

Salad! Cress and peas!

Fresh straw-burees!"



"Strawberries!" exclaimed Betsy Bobbin in delight, and running to the palace window, looked up and down the garden to see where the voice was coming from. It was so like old times in the States it made Betsy homesick. "Why, I never heard a huckster calling around here before," thought Betsy. "I believe I'll buy some for breakfast and surprise Ozma." Fastening the last button on her blue frock, she skipped out of the room, down the stairs and into the garden, following the sound of the husky voice. Sometimes it seemed to be quite near,

at other times to come drifting back to her from a great distance and before long Betsy was perfectly breathless from darting to and fro. But at last a sharp turn in the path brought her right upon the owner of the voice. It was a Vegetable Man, sure enough, his small hand cart piled high with fresh greens and rosy strawberries.

"I'll take a box of berries, please," panted Betsy, and standing on her tiptoes, she pointed to a very large and tempting one.

"Certainly Miss," said the Vegetable Man, and handing her the box stood smiling and bowing in the roadway. But instead of taking it Betsy gasped and put both hands behind her.

"Now don't be skeered," said the Vegetable Man softly. "I know I'm an odd one, but you'll get used to me. Try to get used to me," he begged coaxingly. Betsy thought it would take a long time, but he seemed so earnest that she took a long breath and looked at him again. His face was red and smooth as a beet. Queer, rootlike whiskers sprouted raggedly from the bottom, curious celery leaf hair waved excitedly from the top, while a turnip nose and two tall corn ears gave him a most roguish and inquisitive expression. His body was more like an enormous potato than anything else and his arms and legs were long, wiry roots of some coarse vegetable fibre.

"Well?" asked the Vegetable Man anxiously, as Betsy finished her inspection. "Can you stand me at all?"

"I—I think you're pretty interesting," confessed Betsy, who was an exceedingly polite and kind-hearted little girl.

"Am I?" beamed the stranger, rubbing his twig-like hands together, "Well! Well! I'm glad to hear you say that, for it's just what I've been thinking myself. But I was not always like this, my dear." The Vegetable Man's blue eyes were the only natural feature about him and they twinkled so merrily above his turnip nose that Betsy began to feel quite drawn to him. "I was a Winkie," he confided mysteriously, "and sold fresh vegetables to all the royal families in Oz. But each night when I returned to my farm, there were vegetables left in my cart, so young, so fresh, so fair, I could not let them die, so I ate them," he continued dreamily. "And bit by bit I turned to the figure you see before you. But I'm quite used to myself now and can still carry on my business. In fact—Oh, spinach!" The Vegetable Man interrupted himself crossly. "Spinach and rhubarb!"

"Why what's the matter?" asked Betsy in surprise, for he had put down the strawberries and was tugging with all his might at his left foot, which presently came up so violently, he sat down hard in the road.

"Would you mind walking on as we converse?" puffed the Vegetable Man, picking up the box of berries and springing nimbly to his feet. "I take root if I stand still," he said apologetically. "It would be awfully inconvenient to become rooted to this spot, and there's no telling what I'd grow into."

"Why don't you wear shoes?" asked Betsy, trotting along beside the cart and almost forgetting about the strawberries in her extreme interest.

"I never thought of that," mused the Vegetable Man, looking down ruefully at his huge twisted feet. "Do you s'pose I could ever find any shoes to fit, Miss—Miss? What is your name, now? Mine's Green, Carter Green, but most folks call me Carter."

"Mine's Betsy Bobbin, but I think I'd better go back now or I'll be late for breakfast." Stopping reluctantly, Betsy reached for her box of berries, and as she had brought no money she slipped a small emerald ring into the Vegetable Man's hand. At first he refused to take it, but as the little girl insisted and assured him she had dozens more like it, Carter slipped the ring into the leather pouch he wore round his neck.

"I've a stone something like this," he told her and, hopping up and down to keep from taking root, he fumbled in the pouch till he brought out a large square ruby. "Found it in a potato," continued Carter, as Betsy turned it over and over in her hand. "Not in any I raised myself, but in one of a lot I bought from a gypsy. Like it?" Betsy nodded emphatically, for not even in



Ozma's crown itself had she seen a more dazzling jewel. There was a small R cut in one of the flat sides of the gem and the ruby itself blazed and sparkled in the sunshine and fairly made Betsy blink.

"But I wonder what the R stands for?" she murmured softly.

"Raspberries, I guess," chuckled the Vegetable Man, putting the ruby back into his pouch. "Raspberries, rhubarb or radishes. Have a radish, my dear Miss Betsy?"

"Oh, no thank you, and I really must go now." Holding the strawberries carefully, Betsy smiled up into the pleasant face of Mr. Carter Green. He was so curious and exciting she hated to leave him, but Dorothy and Ozma would surely think her lost, so with a little skip she turned about. "Don't forget the shoes," she reminded him gaily. "Good-bye! Good—gracious!"

"Hold tight, Betsy! Hold tight! Celery and cinnamon! What's the matter here?" Seizing his cart with one hand and the little girl with the other, the Vegetable Man teetered backward and forward in the road. And no wonder! It had suddenly ripped itself loose and was rushing along at such a rate that trees and fences simply whizzed past. Betsy's hat blew off at the first curve and strawberries, beets and bananas flew out in every direction.

"I—was—afraid—of—this!" panted the Vegetable Man. "I—should—have—taken—the—regular—road!"

"Isn't this a reg-u-lar—road!" called Betsy, hanging on to Carter with both hands. "What's—it—doing?"

"Winding!" shrieked the Vegetable Man, trying to keep the rest of his vegetables from bouncing out of the

cart. "It's—a—winding—road—Betsy! Shut—your eyes, quick!"

Betsy was glad enough to obey, for the road was going round like a top, round and round like a merry go-round, in and out of trees, past lakes and forests, till the whole world tilted topsy-turvey. Then as suddenly as it had started to wind, it stopped, and when Betsy opened her eyes she was sitting on a small sand dune entirely surrounded by cabbages. A short distance away lay the Vegetable Man, still clutching his cart. While Betsy was still trying to catch her breath, Carter jumped up and shading his eyes looked in all directions. "Well, it's gone," he exclaimed ruefully and he was perfectly right. There was no sign of a road anywhere. It had cruelly gone off and left them in a wilderness of sand and scorched desert grass.

"Why, I never knew there was a winding road near the Emerald City?" Betsy jumped up indignantly. "Where did it come from?"

"Never can tell," sighed the Vegetable Man, beginning to collect his cabbages. "They just come and go, these winding roads of Oz; pass themselves off as regular roads till they catch a few travellers and you never can tell where they will take you."

"Well, I don't think much of this place," groaned Betsy, rubbing her elbow, which had been severely skinned during the journey over the winding road.

"Then let's go some other place," proposed the Vegetable Man cheerfully. All the strawberries and bananas had spilled out of the cart, but there were

plenty of cabbages and apples left and he was busily rearranging these all the time he was talking to Betsy. "Have a cabbage?" he invited pleasantly. "Nothing like cabbages for a ship-wreck."

"It was something like a ship-wreck," mused Betsy thoughtfully. "But I'd rather have an apple, if you don't mind. Do you think we'll ever find the way back to the Emerald City, Mr. Green?"

Carter nodded so vigorously his celery tops waved for moments afterward and, handing Betsy an apple, he pointed off toward the south.

"It's somewhere in that direction, and if you are ready we'd better start." Carter looked a little anxiously at his feet to see if he was taking root, but the ground was too dry and sandy. "I don't believe even I would grow in this kind of soil," he muttered uneasily. "It's hot enough to scorch a fellow. Wish I had a pair of shoes right now. Come, let's move on!"

Lifting Betsy on top of the cabbages, the Vegetable Man grasped the handles of his cart and started on a run across the sandy wasteland. It was not unpleasant, rattling along in the queer little cart and the morning was so brisk and fine Betsy soon began to enjoy herself. "Won't Dorothy and Ozma be surprised when I come rolling up to the castle in this," she chuckled merrily to herself "and won't they stare when I introduce the Vegetable Man! Why, he's almost as int'resting as Tik Tok and more fun. I wonder if everybody who eats too many vegetables grows celery tops and corn ears? Oh Mr. Green! Mr. Gr—een!" But the

cart wheels were going round with such a squeak, grind and rattle that he did not hear her and Betsy sensibly decided to save this important question for another time.

She had just finished her second apple when the Vegetable Man stopped with a jerk. A rude sign stuck up in the limb of a crooked tree had caught his attention. "Quick Sand," said the sign, "Go Slow!"

"Oh spinach!" exclaimed the Vegetable Man, wiping his face on a stray salad leaf. "Oh spinach!"

"Do you 'spose it's very quick sand?" asked Betsy, leaning far over the side of the cart.

"We'll soon find that out." Taking an apple, Carter flung it as far as he could. But horrors! No sooner had it touched the sand than it disappeared as suddenly as one drop of dew on a frying pan.

"It's a good thing you stopped," shuddered Betsy, "or we'd have been swallowed up."

"Down," corrected Carter gloomily. "Looks like pretty quick sand to me, Betsy. Guess we'll have to turn back."

Mournfully, Carter began bringing the cart about. The way they had come was so rough and uneven that he hated the thought of travelling over it again.

"But that won't take us to the Emerald City," objected Betsy, beginning to grow a little anxious.

"Maybe we could find a path if we looked carefully enough."



Jumping out of the cart, Betsy climbed a small dune. But as far as the eye could reach there was nothing but sand. Sand, sand, sand, shimmering dizzily in the sunlight, with not a tree, path or even a blade of grass to break the monotony. With a sigh, Betsy started down the dune. She had gone about half-way, when a big, newspaper-wrapped package made her pause. It was covered with a queer writing that she could not understand, but looked so interesting she hastily shook it open. Imagine her astonishment when a huge pair of sandals tumbled out. They were cut from white leather, had silver buckles and were almost large enough for a giant.

"Why, I believe they'd fit Carter," murmured Betsy in pleased surprise. "How lucky I found them." Gathering the sandals up in her arms, she ran down to the Vegetable Man. He was almost as pleased as she was, for the trip across the dry desert had already begun to curl up his toes and, while she climbed back into the cart, he sat down to try them on. They were a bit long, but just the right width and as he fastened the first one he noticed two words cut into the buckle.

"Quick Sandals," murmured Carter under his breath.

"Now what may that mean?" But he was in such a hurry to be off, he did not stop to puzzle it out and drawing on the other sandal, jumped excitedly to his feet. "Now I won't be taking root!" he cried joyfully.

"Now—" A strange look came into his mild blue eyes, and next instant he had sprung into the air like a jack

rabbit. "Help!" screamed the Vegetable Man. "Spinach! Tomatoes! Turnips and Cress!" And while Betsy stared at him in dismay and growing alarm, he sprang twice as high as he had in the first place, seized the handles of the cart and started on a gallop for the quick sand. "Oh stop! Oh stop!" wailed the little girl frantically. "Stop, Carter, stop!" But he paid not the smallest attention to her. Now they were on the quick sand itself and Betsy, with a scream, buried her face in the cabbages. But the rattle and bump of the cart continued and, concluding that she could not be swallowed up yet, she ventured to raise her head. What she saw this time was so much worse that she had not even courage to cry "Stop!" They had crossed the quick sand and were right on the edge of the Deadly Desert. Betsy well knew the look of this dread wilderness that surrounds the Fairyland of Oz and she knew also that contact with its burning sands meant instant destruction. She tried to signal to the Vegetable Man, but the cart was bumping and bouncing so terribly, it was all she could do to keep from falling out. Carter himself was running as if his life depended upon it, his celery tops waving wildly and his corn ears rustling in the wind. With a choked sob, poor little Betsy shut her eyes and dropped face down among the vegetables.