

## CHAPTER 15 - THE THREE PRINCES PLOT TO UNDO THE EMPEROR

"Let me help your Imperial Serenity!"

"Bring a cane!"

"Carefully, now!"

The three royal Princes, with every show of affection, were supporting the Scarecrow to the silver bench in the garden where he usually sat during luncheon.

"Are you quite comfortable?" asked the elder. "Here, Happy, you rogue, fetch a scarf for his Imperial Highness. You must be careful, dear Papa Scarecrow. At your age, drafts are dangerous." The rascally Prince wound the scarf about the Scarecrow's neck.

"What do you suppose they are up to?" asked the Scarecrow, staring after the three suspiciously. "Why this sudden devotion? It upsets my Imperial Serenity alot."

"Trying to make you feel old," grumbled Happy. Several hours had passed since they had overheard the conversation in the garden. The Scarecrow had decided to watch his sons closely and fall in with any plan they suggested so they would suspect nothing. Then, when the time came, he would act. Just what he would do he did not know, but his excellent brains would not, he felt sure, desert him. Happy Toko sat as close to the Scarecrow as he could and scowled terribly whenever the Princes approached, which was every minute or so during the afternoon.

"How is the Scarecrow's celestial old head?"

"Does he suffer from honorable gout?"

"Should they fetch the Imperial Doctor?"

The Scarecrow, who had never thought of age in his whole straw life, became extremely nervous.

Was he really old? Did his head ache? When no one was looking, he felt himself carefully all over. Then something of his old time Oz spirit returned. Seizing the cushion that his eldest son was placing at his back, he hurled it over his head. Leaping from his throne, he began turning handsprings in a careless and sprightly manner.

"Don't you worry about your honorable old papa," chuckled the Scarecrow, winking at Happy Toko. "He's good for a couple of centuries!"

The three Princes stared sourly at this exhibition of youth.

"But your heart," objected the eldest Prince.

"Have none," laughed the Scarecrow. Snatching off the silver cord from around his waist, he began skipping rope up and down the hall. The Princes, tapping their foreheads significantly, retired, and the Scarecrow, throwing his arm around Happy Toko, began whispering in his ear. He had a plan himself. They would see!

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Meanwhile, off in his dark cave in one of the silver mountains, the Grand Gheewizard of the Silver Island was stirring a huge kettle of magic. Every few moments he paused to read out of a great yellow book that he had propped up on the mantle. The fire in the huge grate leaped fiercely under the big, black pot, and the sputtering candles on each side of the book sent creepy shadows into the dark cave. Dark chests, books, bundles of herbs, and heaps of gold and silver were everywhere. Whenever the Gheewizard turned his back, a rheumatic silver-scaled old dragon would crawl toward the fire and swallow a mouthful of coals, until the old Gheewizard caught him in the act and chained him to a ring in the corner of the cave.

"Be patient, little joy of my heart! Our fortune is about to be made," hissed the wizened little man, waving a long iron spoon at the dragon. "You shall have a bucket of red-hot coals every hour and I a silver cap with a tassel. Have not the Royal Princes promised it?" The dragon shuffled about and finally went to sleep, smoking sulkily.

"Is it finished, son of a yellow dog?" Through the narrow opening of the cave, the youngest Prince stuck his head.

"I am working as fast as I can, Honorable Prince, but the elixir must boil yet one more night. Tomorrow, when the sun shines on the first bar of your celestial window, come, and all will be ready."

"Are you sure you have found it?" asked the Prince, withdrawing his head, for the smoking dragon and steam from the kettle made him cough.

"Quite sure," wheezed the Grand Gheewizard, and fell to stirring the kettle with all his might.

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The Scarecrow, although busy with trials in the great courtroom of the palace, felt that something unusual was in the air. The Princes kept nodding to one another, and the Grand Chew Chew and General Mugwump had their heads together at every opportunity.

"Something's going to happen, Tappy. I feel it in my straw," whispered the Scarecrow as he finished trying the last case. At that very minute, the Grand Chew Chew arose and held up his hand for silence. Everybody paused in their way to the exits and looked with surprise at the old Silverman.

"I have to announce," said the Grand Chew Chew in a solemn voice, "that the Great and Imperial Chang Wang Woe will tomorrow be restored to his own rightful shape. The Grand Gheewizard of the realm has discovered a magic formula to break the enchantment and free him from this distressing Scarecrow body. Behold for the last the Scarecrow of Oz. Tomorrow he will be our old and glorious Emperor!"

"Old and glorious?" gasped the Scarecrow, nearly falling from his throne.

"Tappy! I forgot to lock up the wizards. Great Cornstarch! Tomorrow I will be eighty-five years old."

Such cheers greeted the Grand Chew Chew's announcement that no one even noticed the Scarecrow's distress.

"I, also, have an announcement!" cried the eldest Prince, standing up proudly. "To make the celebration of my royal Papa's restoration complete, we have chosen the lovely and charming Orange Blossom for his bride."

"Bride!" gulped the Scarecrow. "But I do not approve of second marriages. I refuse to--"

No one paid the slightest attention to the Scarecrow's remarks.

"Hold my hand, Tappy," sighed the Scarecrow weakly. "It may be your last chance." Then he sat up and stared in good earnest, for the Prince was leading forward a tall, richly clad lady.

"Orange Blossom!" muttered the Scarecrow under his breath. "He means Lemon Peel! Silver grandmother, Tappy!" Orange Blossom was a cross-looking Princess of seventy-five, at least.

"She is a sister of the King of the Golden Islands," whispered General Mugwump. "Of a richness surpassing your own. Let me felicitate your Highness."

"Fan me, Tappy! Fan me!" gasped the Scarecrow. Then he straightened himself suddenly. The time had come for action. He would say nothing to anyone, but that night he would escape and try to find his way back to Oz, family or no family! He bowed graciously to Princess Orange Blossom, to the Grand Chew Chew, and to his sons.

"Let everything be made ready for the ceremony, and may tomorrow indeed bring me to myself," he repeated solemnly. Nothing was talked of that evening but the Emperor's impending marriage and the Grand Gheewizard's discovery. The Scarecrow seemed the least excited person in the palace. Sitting on his throne, he pretended to read the Royal Silver Journal, but he was really waiting impatiently for the courtiers to retire. Finally, when the last one had bowed himself out and only Happy Toko remained in the throne room, the Scarecrow began making his plans.

"It's no use, Tappy," said he, tying up a few little trinkets for Dorothy in a silk handkerchief, "I'd rather be straw than meat. I'd rather be a plain Scarecrow in Oz than Emperor of the Earth! They may be my sons, but all they want is my death. I'm going back to my old friends. I'd rather--". He got no farther. A huge slave seized him suddenly from behind, while another caught Happy Toko around his fat little waist.

"Tie them fast," said the eldest Prince, smiling wickedly at the Scarecrow. "Here, tie him to the beanstalk. Merely a part of the Grand Gheewizard's formula," he exclaimed maliciously as the struggling Scarecrow was bound securely to his family tree. "Good night, dear papa Scarecrow. Tomorrow you will be your old self again, and in a few short years I will be Emperor of the Silver Islands!"

"This rather upsets our plans, eh Tappy?" wheezed the Scarecrow after a struggle with his bonds.

"Pigs! Weasels!" choked Tappy. "What are we to do?"

"Alas!" groaned the Scarecrow. "Tomorrow there will be no Scarecrow in Oz. What will Dorothy and Ozma think? And once I am changed into my old Imperial self, I can never make the journey to the Emerald City. Eighty-six is too old for traveling."

"Has your Majesty forgotten the wonderful brains given to you by the Wizard of Oz?"

"I had--for a moment," confessed the Scarecrow. "Be quiet, Tappy, while I think." Pressing his head against the magic beanpole, the Scarecrow thought and thought, harder than he had ever done in the course of his adventurous life, and in the great, silent hall Happy Toko struggled to set himself free.