

CHAPTER 18 - THE CONFERENCE

"Now then," said the Wizard, "let us talk this matter over and decide what to do when we get to Ugu's wicker castle. There can be no doubt that the Shoemaker is a powerful Magician, and his powers have been increased a hundredfold since he secured the Great Book of Records, the Magic Picture, all of Glinda's recipes for sorcery, and my own black bag, which was full of tools of wizardry. The man who could rob us of those things and the man with all their powers at his command is one who may prove somewhat difficult to conquer, therefore we should plan our actions well before we venture too near to his castle."

"I didn't see Ozma in the Magic Picture," said Trot. "What do you suppose Ugu has done with her?"

"Couldn't the Little Pink Bear tell us what he did with Ozma?" asked Button-Bright.

"To be sure," replied the Lavender King. "I'll ask him." So he turned the crank in the Little Pink Bear's side and inquired, "Did Ugu the Shoemaker steal Ozma of Oz?"

"Yes," answered the Little Pink Bear.

"Then what did he do with her?" asked the King.

"Shut her up in a dark place," answered the Little Pink Bear.

"Oh, that must be a dungeon cell!" cried Dorothy, horrified. "How dreadful!"

"Well, we must get her out of it," said the Wizard. "That is what we came for, and of course we must rescue Ozma. But how?"

Each one looked at some other one for an answer, and all shook their heads in a grave and dismal manner. All but Scraps, who danced around them gleefully. "You're afraid," said the Patchwork Girl, "because so many things can hurt your meat bodies. Why don't you give it up and go home? How can you fight a great magician when you have nothing to fight with?"

Dorothy looked at her reflectively.

"Scraps," said she, "you know that Ugu couldn't hurt you a bit, whatever he did, nor could he hurt ME, 'cause I wear the Gnome King's Magic Belt. S'pose just we two go on together and leave the others here to wait for us."

"No, no!" said the Wizard positively. "That won't do at all. Ozma is more powerful than either of you, yet she could not defeat the wicked Ugu, who has shut her up in a dungeon. We must go to the Shoemaker in one mighty band, for only in union is there strength."

"That is excellent advice," said the Lavender Bear approvingly.

"But what can we do when we get to Ugu?" inquired the Cookie Cook anxiously.

"Do not expect a prompt answer to that important question," replied the Wizard, "for we must first plan our line of conduct. Ugu knows, of course, that we are after him, for he has seen our approach in the Magic Picture, and he has read of all we have done up to the present moment in the Great Book of Records. Therefore we cannot expect to take him by surprise."

"Don't you suppose Ugu would listen to reason?" asked Betsy. "If we explained to him how wicked he has been, don't you think he'd let poor Ozma go?"

"And give me back my dishpan?" added the Cookie Cook eagerly.

"Yes, yes, won't he say he's sorry and get on his knees and beg our pardon?" cried Scraps, turning a flip-flop to show her scorn of the suggestion. "When Ugu the Shoemaker does that, please knock at the front door and let me know."

The Wizard sighed and rubbed his bald head with a puzzled air. "I'm quite sure Ugu will not be polite to us," said he, "so we must conquer this cruel magician by force, much as we dislike to be rude to anyone. But none of you has yet suggested a way to do that. Couldn't the Little Pink Bear tell us how?" he asked, turning to the Bear King.

"No, for that is something that is GOING to happen," replied the Lavender Bear. "He can only tell us what already HAS happened."

Again, they were grave and thoughtful. But after a time, Betsy said in a hesitating voice, "Hank is a great fighter. Perhaps HE could conquer the magician."

The Mule turned his head to look reproachfully at his old friend, the young girl. "Who can fight against magic?" he asked.

"The Cowardly Lion could," said Dorothy.

The Lion, who was lying with his front legs spread out, his chin on his paws, raised his shaggy head. "I can fight when I'm not afraid," said he calmly, "but the mere mention of a fight sets me to trembling."

"Ugu's magic couldn't hurt the Sawhorse," suggested tiny Trot.

"And the Sawhorse couldn't hurt the Magician," declared that wooden animal.

"For my part," said Toto, "I am helpless, having lost my growl."

"Then," said Cayke the Cookie Cook, "we must depend upon the Frogman. His marvelous wisdom will surely inform him how to conquer the wicked Magician and restore to me my dishpan."

All eyes were now turned questioningly upon the Frogman. Finding himself the center of observation, he swung his gold-headed cane, adjusted his big spectacles, and after swelling out his chest, sighed and said in a modest tone of voice:

"Respect for truth obliges me to confess that Cayke is mistaken in regard to my superior wisdom. I am not very wise. Neither have I had any practical experience in conquering magicians. But let us consider this case. What is Ugu, and what is a magician? Ugu is a renegade shoemaker, and a magician is an ordinary man who, having learned how to do magical tricks, considers himself above his fellows. In this case, the Shoemaker has been naughty enough to steal a lot of magical tools and things that did not belong to him, and he is more wicked to steal than to be a magician. Yet with all the arts at his command, Ugu is still a man, and surely there are ways in which a man may be conquered. How, do you say, how? Allow me to state that I don't know. In my judgment, we cannot decide how best to act until we get to Ugu's castle. So let us go to it and take a look at it. After that, we may discover an idea that will guide us to victory."

"That may not be a wise speech, but it sounds good," said Dorothy approvingly. "Ugu the Shoemaker is not only a common man, but he's a wicked man and a cruel man and deserves to be conquered. We mustn't have any mercy on him till Ozma is set free. So let's go to his castle as the Frogman says and see what the place looks like."

No one offered any objection to this plan, and so it was adopted. They broke camp and were about to start on the journey to Ugu's castle when they discovered that Button-Bright was lost again. The girls and the Wizard shouted his name, and the Lion roared and the Donkey brayed and the Frogman croaked and the Big Lavender Bear growled (to the envy of Toto, who couldn't growl but barked his loudest), yet none of them could make Button-Bright hear. So after vainly searching for the boy a full hour, they formed a procession and proceeded in the direction of the wicker castle of Ugu the Shoemaker.

"Button-Bright's always getting lost," said Dorothy. "And if he wasn't always getting found again, I'd prob'ly worry. He may have gone ahead of us, and he may have gone back, but wherever he is, we'll find him sometime and somewhere, I'm almost sure."