

CHAPTER 21 - MAGIC AGAINST MAGIC

The Wizard's advice was good, so again they started in the direction of the low mountain on the crest of which the wicker castle had been built. They had been gradually advancing uphill, so now the elevation seemed to them more like a round knoll than a mountaintop. However, the sides of the knoll were sloping and covered with green grass, so there was a stiff climb before them yet.

Undaunted, they plodded on and had almost reached the knoll when they suddenly observed that it was surrounded by a circle of flame. At first, the flames barely rose above the ground, but presently they grew higher and higher until a circle of flaming tongues of fire taller than any of their heads quite surrounded the hill on which the wicker castle stood. When they approached the flames, the heat was so intense that it drove them back again.

"This will never do for me!" exclaimed the Patchwork Girl. "I catch fire very easily."

"It won't do for me either," grumbled the Sawhorse, prancing to the rear.

"I also strongly object to fire," said the Bear King, following the Sawhorse to a safe distance and hugging the little Pink Bear with his paws.

"I suppose the foolish Shoemaker imagines these blazes will stop us," remarked the Wizard with a smile of scorn for Ugu. "But I am able to inform you that this is merely a simple magic trick which the robber stole from Glinda the Good, and by good fortune I know how to destroy these flames as well as how to produce them. Will some one of you kindly give me a match?"

You may be sure the girls carried no matches, nor did the Frogman or any of the animals. But Button-Bright, after searching carefully through his pockets, which contained all sorts of useful and useless things, finally produced a match and handed it to the Wizard, who tied it to the end of a branch which he tore from a small tree growing near them. Then the little Wizard carefully lighted the match, and running forward thrust it into the nearest flame. Instantly, the circle of fire began to die away, and soon vanished completely leaving the way clear for them to proceed.

"That was funny!" laughed Button-Bright.

"Yes," agreed the Wizard, "it seems odd that a little match could destroy such a great circle of fire, but when Glinda invented this trick, she believed no one would ever think of a match being a remedy for fire. I suppose even Ugu doesn't know how we managed to quench the flames of his barrier, for only Glinda and I know the secret. Glinda's Book of Magic which Ugu stole told how to make the flames, but not how to put them out."

They now formed in marching order and proceeded to advance up the slope of the hill, but had not gone far when before them rose a wall of steel, the surface of which was thickly covered with sharp, gleaming points resembling daggers. The wall completely surrounded the wicker castle, and its sharp points prevented anyone from climbing it. Even the Patchwork Girl might be ripped to pieces if she dared attempt it. "Ah!" exclaimed the Wizard cheerfully, "Ugu is now using one of my own tricks against me. But this is more serious than the Barrier of Fire, because the only way to destroy the wall is to get on the other side of it."

"How can that be done?" asked Dorothy.

The Wizard looked thoughtfully around his little party, and his face grew troubled. "It's a pretty high wall," he sadly remarked. "I'm pretty sure the Cowardly Lion could not leap over it."

"I'm sure of that, too!" said the Lion with a shudder of fear. "If I foolishly tried such a leap, I would be caught on those dreadful spikes."

"I think I could do it, sir," said the Frogman with a bow to the Wizard. "It is an uphill jump as well as being a high jump, but I'm considered something of a jumper by my friends in the Yip Country, and I believe a good, strong leap will carry me to the other side."

"I'm sure it would," agreed the Cookie Cook.

"Leaping, you know, is a froglike accomplishment," continued the Frogman modestly, "but please tell me what I am to do when I reach the other side of the wall."

"You're a brave creature," said the Wizard admiringly. "Has anyone a pin?"

Betsy had one, which she gave him. "All you need do," said the Wizard to the Frogman, giving him the pin, "is to stick this into the other side of the wall."

"But the wall is of steel!" exclaimed the big frog.

"I know. At least, it SEEMS to be steel, but do as I tell you. Stick the pin into the wall, and it will disappear."

The Frogman took off his handsome coat and carefully folded it and laid it on the grass. Then he removed his hat and laid it together with his gold-headed cane beside the coat. He then went back a way and made three powerful leaps in rapid succession. The first two leaps took him to the wall, and the third leap carried him well over it, to the amazement of all. For a short time, he disappeared from their view, but when he had obeyed the Wizard's injunction and had thrust the pin into the wall, the huge barrier vanished and showed them the form of the Frogman, who now went to where his coat lay and put it on again.

"We thank you very much," said the delighted Wizard.

"That was the most wonderful leap I ever saw, and it has saved us from defeat by our enemy. Let us now hurry on to the castle before Ugu the Shoemaker thinks up some other means to stop us."

"We must have surprised him so far," declared Dorothy.

"Yes indeed. The fellow knows a lot of magic--all of our tricks and some of his own," replied the Wizard. "So if he is half as clever as he ought to be, we shall have trouble with him yet."

He had scarcely spoken these words when out from the gates of the wicker castle marched a regiment of soldiers, clad in gay uniforms and all bearing long, pointed spears and sharp battle axes. These soldiers were girls, and the uniforms were short skirts of yellow and black satin, golden shoes, bands of gold across their foreheads and necklaces of glittering jewels. Their jackets were scarlet, braided with silver cords. There were hundreds of these girl-soldiers, and they were more terrible than beautiful, being strong and fierce in appearance. They formed a circle all around the castle and faced outward, their spears pointed toward the invaders, and their battle axes held over their shoulders, ready to strike. Of course, our friends halted at once, for they had not expected this dreadful array of soldiery. The Wizard seemed puzzled, and his companions exchanged discouraged looks.

"I'd no idea Ugu had such an army as that," said Dorothy. "The castle doesn't look big enough to hold them all."

"It isn't," declared the Wizard.

"But they all marched out of it."

"They seemed to, but I don't believe it is a real army at all. If Ugu the Shoemaker had so many people living with him, I'm sure the Czarover of Herku would have mentioned the fact to us."

"They're only girls!" laughed Scraps.

"Girls are the fiercest soldiers of all," declared the Frogman. "They are more brave than men, and they have better nerves. That is probably why the magician uses them for soldiers and has sent them to oppose us."

No one argued this statement, for all were staring hard at the line of soldiers, which now, having taken a defiant position, remained motionless.

"Here is a trick of magic new to me," admitted the Wizard after a time. "I do not believe the army is real, but the spears may be sharp enough to prick us, nevertheless, so we must be cautious. Let us take time to consider how to meet this difficulty."

While they were thinking it over, Scraps danced closer to the line of girl soldiers. Her button eyes sometimes saw more than did the natural eyes of her comrades, and so after staring hard at the magician's army, she boldly advanced and danced right through the threatening line! On the other side, she waved her stuffed arms and called out, "Come on, folks. The spears can't hurt you." said the Wizard gaily. "An optical illusion, as I thought. Let us all follow the Patchwork Girl." The three little girls were somewhat nervous in attempting to brave the spears and battle axes, but after the others had safely passed the line, they ventured to follow. And when all had passed through the ranks of the girl army, the army itself magically disappeared from view.

All this time our friends had been getting farther up the hill and nearer to the wicker castle. Now, continuing their advance, they expected something else to oppose their way, but to their astonishment nothing happened, and presently they arrived at the wicker gates, which stood wide open, and boldly entered the domain of Ugu the Shoemaker.