

Merry Go Round In Oz – Oz 40

L. Frank Baum

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Chapter 1

IT WAS a fine April evening, and the little carnival that had pitched its tents on the outskirts of Cherryburg, Oregon, was doing a rushing business and making as much noise as possible about it. The calliope blared, the banners snapped in the breeze, the rifles banged in the shooting gallery, the grease sizzled in the hamburger stand, the children shrieked with excitement, the cash registers chimed vigorously, and the manager rubbed his hands together with a sound like sandpaper scraping a board.

An ancient pickup truck added to the din as it bumped and jolted and clattered its way into the carnival grounds and across the parking area, subsiding with a final backfire under a huge oak tree. Instantly its doors and tailgate flew open and disgorged nine tow-headed McGudgey brothers, and one small rusty-haired foster brother named Robin Brown.

"Okay, everybody, eyes front!" yelled Big Tim, the tenth tow-headed McGudgey brother, who had been in the army. He climbed out of the driver's seat, collected his young charges into a squirming, chattering group, and demanded to know where each one was going.

"Ferris wheel!" shrieked three McGudgeys.

"Fortune teller!" yelled another.

"Hamburger stand! Rocket cars! Dodgems!" whooped several more.

"Merry-go-round," said Robin Brown-in a calm voice, as

usual. Nobody heard him, also as usual.

"Okay, 'tention!" shouted Tim. "Got your money? Everybody show me! Tommy, come back here! Allen, 'bout face!

Let's see your money. Okay, company report back here at nine-thirty sharp, understand? Where's Robin?"

"Where's Robin? Where's Robin?" cried the others impatiently, milling around.

"Here I am," said Robin, but nobody heard him.

"Never mind him, let's go!" yelled various McGudgeys.

"Now just wait a minute, company halt! Where's Robin got to? Let go my sleeve, whoever that is-oh, it's Robin! Where've you been, anyhow? You got your money? Okay, break ranks everybody, back at nine-thirty, remember!"

The last warning was uttered in a drill-sergeant's bellow, as the nine McGudgeys scattered in all directions, whooping with anticipation. Big Tim himself set off at a trot for the shooting gallery, leaving Robin standing alone under the oak tree, able at last to hear the music of the merry-go-round.

Clutching his one precious coin, he hurried in the direction of the calliope, wondering if the merry-go-round could possibly be as glorious as he remembered it from last year, and warning himself not to be disappointed if it weren't. Robin often issued these severe little warnings to himself, though he scarcely needed them. In the ten years of his orphan's life-spent chiefly in shuttling from one foster home to another-very few things had turned

out to be as interesting as he had hoped.

He did not find the McGudgeys interesting at all, but they were no worse than any other of the foster families he had lived with-though noisier than most. He was quite accustomed to being solitary, belonging to no one and having no one that truly belonged to him. Mr. and Mrs. McGudgey were kind enough, in an absentminded way. They bellowed good-naturedly at him whenever they happened to notice him, sent him along with their own sons to enjoy an occasional treat such as this carnival, and took him to the dentist twice a year. Once every two weeks he was required to line up with the other boys for the regular nose counting, temperature-taking, and gumdrop distributing, a procedure which was conducted along army lines by Tim. The rest of the time the McGudgeys went noisily about their business, and left Robin to go quietly about his own, thinking his own thoughts and warning himself about disappointments.

Tonight there was no disappointment in store. The merry-go-round was a glorious sight, and it made a glorious, if deafening, noise-exactly as he remembered. He stood gazing raptly at the gilt-and-scarlet canopy glittering under its colored lights, and the prancing horses circling below it. Even the music sounded gilt-and-scarlet, and the saddles and bridles were fully as gorgeous as the ones in his King Arthur book. If there was anything Robin liked as well as merry-go-rounds, it was his King Arthur book. And if there was anything he liked better than either one, it was horses-any kind of horses. He preferred real ones, but had yet

to meet one personally. Until he did, wooden ones would do.

He began to walk all around the spinning merry-go-round, studying the horses through narrowed eyes. He had money for only one ride, and he meant to choose the very handsomest horse to take that one ride on. But how to choose? They were all the handsomest! Dapple-gray with a blue and silver saddle, black with fiery eyes, snow-white, yellow, spotted .

Robin was still biting his lip anxiously, looking from one horse to another, when the merry-go-round began to slow down.

"My ticket!" he exclaimed. "For heaven's sakes, I forgot to buy my ticket!"

As he whirled, glancing around to find the ticket booth, there was a cackle of laughter behind him, and a voice said, "Here's your ticket, Sonny, I've got your ticket! This way, this way!"

The voice faded slowly with the turning of the merry-go-round, but Robin caught a glimpse of a bent little man clinging to one of the gilded poles, and ran quickly after him. He had to follow another half turn before the merry-go-round glided slowly to a halt, and the man stepped down in front of him.

He was a very strange little man, fat as a butterball, no taller than Robin himself, and dressed in the oddest possible collection of rags and tatters. He seemed amiable enough, however, for he was grinning and chuckling as he peered intently into Robin's face.

"Here's your ticket, Sonny! Where's your money? Where's

your money? You pay-this way-I say-you pay-"

He must be a little touched, Robin thought, hastily holding out his coin and receiving a ticket in return. He had a fleeting impression that the ticket was as odd as the ticket-seller, but he had no time to examine it, for the little man was tugging him onto the merry-go-round, talking all the time.

"There you are, Sonny, one ticket one ride, grab the ring and have a fling, grab the ring, grab the ring-free ride, whee ride, spree ride, glee ride, grab the ring, free ride .

"Wait a minute!" puffed Robin, trying to wriggle away from the little man, who was pulling him along between the horses as fast as he could go. "Please-wait a minute, Sir. I want to choose my horse!"

"No need, no need, there's your steed, there's your steed, light feed, such speed-"

The calliope gave a shrill blast, the little man a shrill laugh that sounded almost like it, and Robin found himself staring in delight at the very handsomest horse on the merry-go-round. It was a dainty, high-stepping little mare, painted scarlet, with a tossing carved mane and flowing long tail of snowy white. Her saddle and bridle were shining gilt, as was the twisted pole rising up out of her withers to the canopy above. Her hooves were black and polished, and her glass eyes dark and soft.

"Why, how did I miss you before?" Robin said happily, patting her wooden neck and climbing quickly onto her back. He was sure he hadn't seen her before, though he couldn't think why,

since she was in the outside ring of horses and plainly visible.

"Never mind, I've found you now, thanks to that funny little man-where did he go, I wonder?"

The little man had certainly vanished-probably, thought Robin, he was on the other side of the merry-go-round selling tickets to someone else. For the first time, he examined his own ticket, and found that it 'was a curious one, as he had thought. It was as large as a postcard, and scarlet, like the mare. Across one side of it in shining gilt letters was printed:

GRAB THE BRASS RING FOR A FREE RIDE

"Well, I'll certainly try," Robin told his mare. "I'd like two rides on you better than anything I can think of! . . . Oh-oh, here we go!"

Hastily gathering the gilded reins, Robin thrust his feet into the stirrups and sat up very straight and stern, deciding he would be Sir Gareth on this ride, and-if he managed to grab the brass ring-Sir Lancelot on the next. The merry-go-round slowly began its gliding circle, and the scarlet mare rose slowly in her bounding canter, sank again, rose more swiftly, sank, rose, dropped, leaped, dropped, leaped . . .

"It's just like flying!" Robin thought, laughing with excitement as he watched the lights and tents of the carnival flick 'round and 'round. "Here I come, ye knights and ladies, I, Sir Gareth, will slay the Black Knight and rescue the damsel and-"

"The ring, grab the ring, have a fling, free ride, glee ride..."

It was the funny little man's voice, all right, though Robin couldn't see him anywhere. Never mind, there was the brass ring just ahead, a tiny object clipped to the end of a long metal arm that extended toward the merry-go-round. It was just out of reach.

"Missed it!" Robin said disgustedly. "Oh, well, it'll come around again in a minute . . . Shucks! Missed it again!"

After the fourth or fifth failure, Robin began to grow stubborn, as he always did when he failed at something. Then he grew ingenious, as he always did when he became stubborn. While his little red mare was leaping and bounding around the rest of the circle, he prepared hastily for the moment at which he would pass that tantalizing metal arm again. With some difficulty, since the merry-go-round was now whirling at top speed and his mare was very spirited, he stood up in his stirrups, wound his left arm tightly around the mare's pole to brace himself, and leaned perilously far out, with his right arm stretched full length.

Now! Here came the arm again-why, there was the little man, standing right under it, stamping one foot and shouting as he stamped. Reach, Sonny! Reach! Reach! Reach! Reach!"

"I'm t-trying-" Robin panted, reaching with all his might . . .Click!

"I got it, I got it!" Robin shouted, holding the ring high. He had one swift glimpse of the little man throwing his hat triumphantly in the air, then-CRACK!!!!

"Wh-what's happening?" Robin gasped, flinging both arms around the pole and hanging on for dear life. The merry-go-

round seemed to have gone crazy-or else something had made him fearfully dizzy-or else all the lights in the carnival were really whirling and swaying and jouncing and bouncing, as if the world were turning over and over. As he shut his eyes giddily, he heard a shrill neigh, and the little man's voice shrieked, "Free ride, glee ride, ski ride, 'wheee ride .

WHOOOOOOOSMMHHHHHH!

"My g-goodness, it's just like flying," Robin gulped, feeling the wind whistle through his hair. Fearfully he opened one eye and peeped-backward and downward. One peep was enough. He was flying, he and the little red horse. "Free" ride indeed! This ride had shot him free of the merry-go-round itself, free of the lights, the tents, the whole carnival! There they all were, clustered below him in the darkness, already so far away they looked like toys, and getting smaller every second. Even as he watched, they dwindled to a bright pinpoint and then vanished entirely.

"Jeepers W. Creepers!" Robin groaned, squeezing his eyes shut again and gripping the pole convulsively. "What happens when we land?"

For a long while, it seemed they were never going to land at all. Once or twice Robin opened his eyes a crack, but there was absolutely nothing but darkness to see-not even any stars-and the cold gale that blew against his eyelids made them sting, so he soon gave up, closed them tight and devoted himself to hanging on.

Finally, after what seemed an age and a half of freezing wind and rocket-like speed, there was a curious sound, like tissue-paper tearing. Instantly he felt his speed decrease, and warm sunshine touch his face. The next moment the pole was jerked from his hands and he was falling-gently, slowly, somersaulting over and over-down, down, down, to land with a splintering, crackling sort of crash in something twiggy and uncomfortable.

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Chapter 2

FOR a few minutes, Robin did nothing at all but pant. Then very cautiously, he opened one eye. Seeing nothing more alarming than a patch of blue sky and a couple of clouds, he opened the other eye and tried to sit up. This proved difficult, both because he was dizzy and because whatever it was he had fallen into didn't seem to want to be sat upon. Peering down at it, he perceived that it was a mass of leaves and twigs and thorns; as his head cleared, he realized he was sprawled in the middle of a hawthorn hedge.

His dizziness replaced by lively curiosity, Robin climbed out of the hedge and looked around him. The night had gone, somehow or other; there was a fresh feel of morning in the air. Early sunshine sparkled over a pleasant, rolling countryside, which was marked by hedgerows and stone walls and ditches, and dotted with patches of woodland. It didn't look much like Oregon; there were no fir trees, no orchards, no mountains in the distance,

What it did look like-what it reminded Robin of strongly-
was the pictures of England he had seen in books.

Wondering in astonishment if he could possibly have flown as
as far as England, he pushed through a gap in the hedge to see
what the place looked like on the other side. There he stopped
short. Before him was a green meadow; and in the meadow was the
little scarlet merry-go-round horse-cantering, all by itself, in
tidy circles.

For a moment Robin simply gaped. Then he scrambled clear
of the hedge and ran forward, telling himself sternly that it
must be some other horse, and that he mustn't be disappointed. But it was
not some other horse. What other horse would be made of wood,
and painted scarlet, and wear a gilded saddle, and-above all-have
a broken merry-go-round pole growing from the base of its neck?

"So that's what happened!" Robin exclaimed, peering at the
jagged, broken end of the pole.

"What's what happened?" inquired the mare, gliding to a halt
in front of him.

"Why, the pole broke! That was the crack I heard, and we
must have been thrown into the air by centripful- centrickital-
centrifugal force, and just gone on flying somehow, though I
still
can't understand how we- Robin broke off, his jaw dropping.
"Can you talk?" he exclaimed.

"I guess I can," the mare replied in a surprised tone. "How

queer! I don't remember ever doing it before. Am I doing it all right?" she added anxiously.

"V-very well," Robin stammered. "Only I don't believe it, of course. I expect I'm dreaming." He sighed, and warning himself not to be disappointed, closed his eyes and gave himself a hard pinch on the arm. Nothing happened, except that it hurt. When he opened his eyes the mare was still there, watching him intently.

"Are you dreaming?" she asked him.

"No." Robin drew a long solemn breath. "You're really talking And you're moving on your own legs, just like a real horse!"

The little mare blinked. "Aren't I a real horse?"

"Well, no. That is, you're real, of course, but you're not a real horse," Robin explained. "Real horses are made of flesh and blood, like me. You're made of wood."

"Oh," she said in a disappointed tone. Turning her pretty scarlet neck this way and that, she examined her hooves, her painted flanks, her flowing wooden tail. "I guess I am," she sighed. "Oh, dear, I wish I were a Real Horse! Do you think I could learn to be?"

"Well-maybe," Robin said doubtfully. "But I think you're nice the way you are. I'll just-just have to get used to you moving around and talking, that's all."

"Will it be very hard?." the mare said earnestly. "I wouldn't like to make things hard for you. I like you. I'd like to be your horse."

Robin's eyes grew round with pleasure. "Oh, would you? I've

always wanted a horse! I like you, too!" Suddenly he didn't feel solemn at all. He began to smile, then he grinned, then he burst out laughing.

The little mare eyed him, and her lip began to tremble. "Are you laughing at me? Because I'm not a Real Horse?"

"Of course not!" Robin cried, flinging his arms around her neck: "I'm only laughing because this is all so-so funny, and queer, and different from being with the McGudgeys, and-well, just because we're here, and I don't even know where 'here' is! It looks like England," Robin added, glancing around him uncertainly. "Hut I'm pretty sure merry-go-round horses don't talk in England, any more than they do in Oregon. Not even real horses talk, that I ever heard of. How did you manage to learn?"

"I didn't learn," the little mare said. "I just knew how, all of a sudden. Who are the McGudgeys?"

"They're my foster family."

"What's a foster family?"

"They're people who let you live with them when you're an orphan."

"What's an orphan?"

"My goodness!" Robin said in astonishment. "You don't know much, do you?"

"No," the little mare said humbly. "I suppose it's because I'm not a Real Horse. I don't even know your name."

"Well, I haven't told you!" Robin said reasonably. "It's Robin

Brown. Robin S. Brown."

"What's the 'S' for?"

"Oh . . Satchiverus," Robin admitted reluctantly. "It's awful silly, isn't it? I guess practically everybody has a silly middle name.

Please just call me Robin. What's your name?"

"I don't have one. I guess I never needed one before. Nobody ever wanted to talk to me before."

"Well, I want to talk to you, and I'm going to give you a name," Robin declared. "Let's see. I'll call you . . . Merry!"

"Merry," the little horse repeated in an awed, pleased voice.

"Oh! How pretty! . . . Only-"

"Only what?" Robin asked, seeing that she looked a little disappointed.

"Well-it's kind of short and unimportant. You've got three names. I want a silly middle name too."

Robin laughed and patted her scarlet neck. "All right. You can be Merry Go Round. If 'Go' isn't a silly middle name, I never heard one!"

"Go!" Merry snickered in delight, then added anxiously, "I suppose three names aren't too fancy for just an ordinary merry-go-round horse? I wouldn't want to seem stuck-up."

"But you're not an ordinary merry-go-round horse. You're alive!"

Merry gave a funny little neighing giggle and cantered around in a circle, coming to a halt directly in front of Robin again.

"How long will I be alive?" she asked.

"I don't know," Robin confessed thoughtfully. He scratched his head and sat down on the grass. "There's a lot of things I don't know any more than you do, come to think of it. I don't know why you are alive, or where we are, or how we re going to get back to Oregon, or why we flew away. All I did was catch the brass ring . . . say, I wonder if I've still got it."

He fished in one pocket after another, finding a handkerchief, two marbles, a rather squashed gumdrop, a harmonica, a stubby pencil, a key chain without any keys, one wheel from a model airplane, a yellowish pebble he was fond of, and-in the very last pocket-the brass ring. It was nice and shiny, but it was too big for any of his fingers and it certainly didn't answer any of his questions, so he put it back in his pocket and began to eat the gumdrop. "It's all mighty queer," he finished.

"I think it's nice," Merry said happily. "Let's not go back to Oregon at all."

"But we can't stay right here," Robin objected, swallowing the gumdrop and getting to his feet.

"Why not?" Merry, who had started cantering in a circle again, stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. "'Will the McGudgeys worry about you?"

"No," Robin admitted. "They probably won't even miss me until Tim counts noses next."

"Will you miss them?" asked Merry.

"I'll miss my King Arthur book, and that's about all," Robin told her truthfully. "But we can't stay in this meadow. There's nothing to eat here, and I'm hungry."

"I miss the calliope," Merry confessed. "Maybe we could find another carnival somewhere."

"We'll find a farm, first," Robin said practically. "And ask the farmer where we are. After that we can decide what we want to do. Let's climb that hill and look around. Come on."

"All right," Merry said amiably, and cantered around her circle.

Robin, who had started walking toward the hill, paused and glanced back at her. "Come on," he repeated.

"I'm trying," Merry said, cantering faster-but still in a circle. "Only I don't seem to know how to 'come on."

"Why, just-just come. Come this way. Can't you go in a straight line?"

Merry stopped and eyed him doubtfully. "I never have," she said. "I've never gone any way but 'round and 'round."

"Oh, my goodness!" Robin said in dismay. "I guess you haven't. Well, I'll have to teach you-if I can."

Walking back to the mare, he took her gilded reins in his hand and attempted to lead her toward the hill. He found her leading him, instead, firmly in a circle. They halted and eyed each other uneasily.

"Let's try again," Robin said. "This time I'll pull harder." They tried again. By dint of very hard pulling, Robin succeeded

in making the mare take three or four steps straight ahead, before she swerved and stopped abruptly, complaining that it made her dizzy.

"It makes you dizzy to go in a straight line?" Robin puffed in astonishment. (He was quite out of breath from tugging.)

Merry nodded her scarlet head guiltily. "Is that wrong?"

"Well, it's kind of mixed-up," Robin told her, scratching his head. "It makes me dizzy to go in a circle-till I sort of get used to it. You'll just have to get used to going straight, Merry, 'cause we'll never get anywhere just going 'round and 'round."

"Ride on my back and guide me," the little horse suggested. "Then I could canter. I don't feel right, walking. Why, I've never walked since I was carved! Maybe that's the trouble!"

Robin climbed willingly into the gilded saddle and flapped the gilded reins, which flashed so brightly in the sunlight that they attracted the attention of a passing redbird, who fluttered down to the hawthorn hedge and perched on a twig to watch. "Okay, Gid-dap!" said Robin.

Merry rolled an innocently inquiring eye, but didn't move. "'What's 'Gid-dap'?" she asked in an interested voice.

"That means start! Begin! Go ahead! I suppose it's the wrong word for a merry-go-round horse," Robin sighed. "'What signal are you used to?"

"Music," Merry said promptly. "That's what's wrong, there's no calliope! Could you manage to sound like a calliope, Robin?"

"Well, I'll try," Robin told her, though he couldn't help reflecting that there was a good deal more to riding a merry-go-round horse than to riding any real horse he'd ever heard of. Clearing his throat, he began, "Oom-pah-pah, oom-pah-pah, teedle-ee-dle-ee-dle-ee-dle-"

"Louder," Merry urged, starting very slowly to canter.

"Oom-pah-pah, teedle-ee-dle-ee-dle-" sang Robin. Three more redbirds dropped down to the hawthorn bush and watched with the greatest interest, as Merry picked up a little speed.

"Louder!" she repeated. "It doesn't feel right yet."

Robin took a deep breath and made as much noise as he possibly could. "OOM PAM, PAM, OOM PAM PAH, TEEDLE EEDLE EEDLE..

Merry was now bounding along gaily, leaping and dropping just as she had done on the merry-go-round; but she was still going in circles, and Robin was expending so much energy roaring "OOM PARS" and "TEEDLE EEDLES" that he had almost none left over for trying to guide her. He managed only to change the circles to spirals before he ran out of breath completely, and pulled back on the reins.

"Whooooo!" he gasped, collapsing against her pole as she came slowly to a halt. "That's never going to work, Merry-we'll have to think of-something else."

"And it was such fun, too!" the little mare said with regret.

"Maybe you could whistle?"

"Not that loud. If I had a tin whistle-or a flute-"

"We can whistle that loud," a little voice said shrilly.

Both Robin and Merry looked around in surprise, but there was no one in the meadow except themselves and the row of redbirds on the hawthorn hedge. Several more had joined the first ones; there was quite an audience by now.

"Did you say something, Merry?" Robin asked cautiously, one eye on the redbirds.

"No, I did, silly. I said we could whistle as loud as you were singing. Louder, in fact."

There was no further doubt about it; it was the largest redbird speaking.

"Well, my goodness," Robin said limply. "Nothing's ever going to surprise me again in my life, after today. Can birds talk too?"

"Just as well as you can," the bird replied in an impatient tone. "I don't see anything very surprising about that. In Oz, everybody can talk."

"Oz?" chorused Robin and Merry

"Don't you even know what country you're in?" the bird said, staring. "This is the Land of Oz. Capital, Emerald City. Ruler: Our Gracious Fairy, Princess Ozma. Geography: all Oz is divided into four parts-Munchkins live in the east, Gillikins in the north, Winkies in the west, Quadlings in the south. This is the Quadling Country; national color, red. How did you get here if you didn't

even know where you were going?"

"We don't quite know that, either," Robin confessed. "And I certainly don't know how we're going to get home-or even out of this meadow-unless I can teach Merry not to go in circles."

"Ah, now we're back to the point," the redbird said. "Do you want us to whistle while you train her?"

"I don't think he'll ever train her," another redbird put in scornfully. "Not good stock to start with. Tail's too long."

"She's a beautiful color, though," observed a third, rather ostentatiously preening its own scarlet wing.

"Ought to be good at taking her fences, too," put in the first one. "Got the right gait for it. More bounce in her hocks than in that whole gallumphing great creature of Squire Wirewither's."

"Tail's much too long," insisted the scornful one. "Like to see her clear a bramble-hedge without getting tangled! Poor stock, I say. Can't think what her breeding lines could be."

Robin had listened in astonishment to this lively argument, wondering how in the world birds happened to know so much about horses; but now, seeing that Merry's lip was trembling again, and her big, soft glass eyes filling with tears, he spoke up stoutly.

"Merry hasn't got any old breeding lines, she's a merry-go-round horse," he told the scornful bird. Then, to the others, he added politely, "I'd be very grateful if you'd whistle. She's used to a calliope, you see.

"Glad to oblige," said the first bird. "All right, fellows, baritones

and basses take the oom-pahs, and tenors the teedle-eedles.

Ah-one-and-two!"

On "two" the entire chorus of birds broke into piercing song- all except the scornful one, who shook his scarlet feathers disdainfully and flew away. Merry brightened, tossed her pretty wooden mane and slowly started to move. This time Robin was free to turn all his attention to guiding her, and in a few minutes had coaxed her from circles to spirals, then from spirals to great arcs that took her bounding and leaping over most of the meadow. Finally, to Robin's delight, the arcs straightened out until there was not much curve left in them at all.

"You're doing it! You're doing it!" he shouted.

"Am I? Oh, goody, how exciting! I'm learning to be a Real Horse, oh, goody, goody . ." Instantly Merry started going in circles again, and had to be brought to a halt, crestfallen.

"I guess excitement's bad for you," Robin told her, patting her scarlet neck while the birds were clearing their throats. "When you get excited, you forget. Okay, let's try again."

"Ah-one-and-two . . ." shrilled the largest redbird.

At the end of half an hour Merry was beginning to catch on nicely, and Robin was beginning to understand her merry-go-roundish ways. She always started slowly and halted gradually, and she needed regular stops-not for rest, since her wooden legs never grew tired, but because she was used to the merry-go-round's stopping at intervals to let children off and on. Robin found that if

he merely climbed out of the saddle and back on again now and then, Merry was quite content, and said it "felt right." Most important of all, except for a lingering tendency to go in circles when she was excited, the little horse was bounding along in perfectly straight lines.

"Now it's safe enough to leave the meadow," Robin thought.

"But what about the calliope music? We can't take all those birds along; besides, I'll bet they wouldn't go."

He had just happily remembered the harmonica in his pocket when Merry gave a jump of surprise, and the redbirds rose screeching into the air and scattered in every direction. Something had burst out of a thicket halfway up the hillside and was streaking toward them, running so swiftly it was no more than a red-brown blur.

"Why it's a fox!" exclaimed Robin.

At his words the blur came to a sliding stop a few feet away from them, and sure enough, there was a handsome red fox, staring at Merry with every appearance of astonishment.

"Of course I'm a fox," it barked. "But by my brush and mask and whiskers, what is that?"

By this time Robin had ceased to be surprised at talking animals, so he answered quite calmly, "That's my horse."

"Your horse?" The fox's eyes widened in disbelief, then narrowed to slits as it sat back on its haunches and simply yelped with laughter. "Oh, my mask and whiskers, wait'll they see this! Your horse! O, wait till I tell the kits! Oh, gadzooks!"

"What do you mean, laughing at Merry!" Robin cried indignantly, patting the little mare's drooping head.

"Sorry, can't stay to explain, I'm on duty. But you'll find out, you'll find out . . ." Still yapping hilariously, the fox streaked off again, plunged through the hawthorn hedge and disappeared.

"What manners!" Robin said angrily. "Never mind him, Merry, he's just ignorant. Come on, let's go look for that farm, I'm tired of this old meadow."

"B-but the birds are gone," Merry said. Her lip was quivering with discouragement. "And everybody laughs at me, and I'll never learn to be a Real Horse, and-"

"You're better than a real horse!" Robin told her, fishing hastily in his pocket. "And we don't need the birds, because I have a harmonica! Listen!"

He blew a stirring chord or two on the instrument. Merry's ears pricked up at once, but she had scarcely started to move when the loud, clear notes of a hunting horn sounded in the distance, and closer, the baying of a pack of hounds.

"What's that, Robin?" Merry quavered, beginning to prance a little.

"It's dogs," Robin said nervously. "They're coming fast, too. I think we'd better get out of here. Oh, my goodness-!"

He broke off as the first hounds appeared over the brow of the hill and headed straight down toward them. The noise of their baying filled the air.

Robin blew valiantly on his harmonica, kicking Merry's painted sides at the same time. But Merry had never seen a pack of hounds. With a frightened whinny she bounded sideways, then backwards, then began running in frantic circles heedless of Robin's shouts or tuggings on the reins. The hounds streamed past them, then as if belatedly realizing what they had seen, swirled like a river meeting a hidden obstacle and eddied back around the circling mare. At that moment the Hunt itself came over the hill.

"What's that?" shrieked the terrified Merry, tightening her circles until Robin had to cling fast to her pole to keep from being hurled off.

"Real Horses!" he managed to gasp out, swiveling his head to stare at the swiftly approaching throng. "And men in pink coats! It's a fox-hunt, Merry! Oh, jeepers, I do think we'd better leave-"

It was too late. "Real Horses!" neighed Merry, and stood perfectly still. Next instant, with bugles sounding, hounds yapping, and hearty voices shouting "Tally-ho!" the Fox-Hunters were upon them and they were surrounded.

Chapter 3

ROBIN'S first and strongest reaction to the Fox-Hunters was a desire to put his fingers in his ears. He thought he had never heard quite so much noise. Hunters, horses, hounds, all talked at once; saddles squeaked, bridles jingled, and nobody

stayed still for half a second. What with the black-and-white dogs swirling underfoot, the pink coats surging above, and horses prancing, tossing their heads and switching their shining tails, the whole meadow was full of milling confusion.

Patting Merry, who was staring with wide eyes at the Real Horses, Robin tried to sort out the babble of voices into something more sensible than "Tally-ho!" "Jolly rum, what?" "Take em to Yoicks!" and "Odd breedin'!" Suddenly there was a piercing blast on the hunting horn, and the hubbub quieted somewhat, though not much.

"Tally-ho, well-met, and all that," boomed a hearty voice in Robin's left ear, and someone clapped him on the back with such excessive friendliness that he was almost knocked from the saddle. Clutching at Merry's pole, he turned to see the nearest Huntsman beaming at him affably, and leaning from his horse to extend a large hand.

Robin submitted his own to a bone-crushing but fortunately brief grip, and said "Tally-ho," which seemed to be the accepted greeting among these people.

"Resident of the County? What's your Pack? Don't think I've had the pleasure," the other went on rapidly. His gaze had shifted to Merry, at whom everybody else in sight, animal or human, was staring fascinatedly.

"Well, I-" Robin began, wondering what sort of Pack was meant, and which question to answer first.

"Speak up, can't quite hear you," boomed the Huntsman. "I'm the Whipper-In-name's Wirewither. Questions quite in order. Take 'em one at a time, speak up. Name, please?"

"Robin Brown," said Robin, making an effort to speak up.

"Resident of the County?"

"Well-what county is this, sir? I live in Clackamas County, Oregon, U.S.A.," Robin added, so that everything would be perfectly clear.

At once the undertone of noise and conversation rose to a babble again, with the hounds joining in freely, Robin noticed. "Furriners."

"Thought as much." "Accounts for the rum breedin'."

"Take 'em to Yoicks." "Poachin'! Only thing to do."

The Whipper-In raised his riding crop, and the noise abated somewhat.

"There's only one County," he told Robin disapprovingly.

"Never heard of that other place. They have Packs there?"

"Well," Robin said, swallowing. "I once belonged to Cub Scout Pack 23. Is that what you-"

"Tell you what it is, chaps," interrupted the Whipper-In, who was still examining Merry. "Back's too short, that's what. Too small all over, actually. Still, a nice little mare. Got a bit of fence rail caught in her saddle, hasn't she? Odd thing to happen. Accident while jumping?" He pointed to Merry's pole, then suddenly seemed to realize what Robin had said, and turned a shocked gaze on him. "Cub scouts, you say? Not at all the thing! No, no! Can't allow that here. Hunt the full-grown fox, that's all."

"I don't hunt anything," Robin said exasperatedly. "And

that's not a fence rail, that's a merry-go-round pole. And-"

"Ah, kennel-boy, eh? Thought you didn't quite look bred for huntin'. No offense!" Another hearty clap on the back nearly unseated Robin. "Probably jolly good kennel-boy. Don't doubt it for a minute. Nice little mare, I must say. How's her mouth? Here, make room there, let's see her action."

"I'm not a kennel-boy," protested Robin, but nobody heard him. The entire Hunt had lost what little interest it had ever had in him, and was concentrating on Merry. The hounds were whistled to one side, the horses and Huntsmen pressed back into a ring, and everybody began rapping out orders for Robin to show his mare's gaits, to put her at that hedge yonder, to back her, to wheel her.

"All I'll be able to do is wheel her," Robin sighed, though nobody heard him. Merry 'vas prancing nervously, trembling with self-consciousness, and Robin knew perfectly well that even if she managed to hear the harmonica over the Hunt's uproar, she would do nothing but run in circles. Nevertheless, he blew a chord or two as loudly as he could, and rode her around and around while the huntsmen commented in loud, astonished voices on her bounding canter, and shouted a hundred different questions about her training.

"She isn't trained at all," Robin yelled finally, pulling the excited little mare to a halt. "She's a merry-go-round horse, and she was only just learning to go in a straight line when you came, and

now she's forgotten, and I wish you'd all go away!"

The Huntsmen caught just enough of this speech to comprehend the problem, which aroused their joyful enthusiasm.

"Goes in circles, he says!" "Fancy!" "Rum show-circles!"

"Challenge, what?" "Take 'em to Yoicks!" "Double-lead ropes, what?" "Oh, I say, just the thing! Let's have a spare leather, there.

Wirewither! Got a spare leather?"

Robin gave up trying to make himself heard, as he had already given up his hopes of avoiding the boisterous Fox-Hunters and going his own way. At least they were not unfriendly, he reflected, though he soon began to wonder if their overwhelming heartiness were not almost as bad as downright hostility. They surged about him and Merry, busily attached spare reins to her gilded bridle and barked suggestions at each other, terrifying the little mare and causing her to shy this way and that, and they kept clapping Robin encouragingly on the back, nearly knocking the breath out of him each time. Eventually the straps and buckles and lead-ropes were arranged to their satisfaction, and the hunting horn sounded.

"Off we go!" bellowed the Whipper-In jovially, giving a last resounding whack to Robin's shoulder. "Just stick your saddle, have you at view-Halloo in no time. Ho, Tally-HO!"

On "HO" the entire Hunt surged into motion, the hounds streaming ahead up the hill. Robin blew a hasty chord on the harmonica, more to reassure Merry than to coax her into action,

for she could not have stayed behind had she wanted to. The Huntsmen, Robin had to admit, understood how to solve horsey problems. They had buckled a spare length of rein to each end of Merry's golden bit, and two pink-coated riders had taken their places on either side of her, each holding one of these lead-straps taut. Thus, when they spurred up the hill, Merry and Robin went along-and in a perfectly straight line-whether they wanted to or not.

"Robin!" quavered the little mare in a frightened whinny.

'I'm being captured. Is that all right?'"

"It's got to be, I guess," Robin told her. "Don't be scared, Merry, I'm sure they don't mean to hurt us. And they are teaching you to go in a nice straight line!"

"I'd rather you taught me," Merry said dismally. "I don't think hike their way. Oh, Robin, there's a stone 'wall-right in front of us!"

"You'll have to jump," Robin gulped, grabbing for the pole.

Next minute Merry and both her escorts had sailed neatly over the wall and landed running on the other side. Glancing over his shoulder, Robin saw the rest of the Huntsmen sail over too, in pairs and threes, without breaking stride.

"I say, very bad form to cling to that fence-rail," shouted the Huntsman on his left disapprovingly. "Lean forward, give your mare her head. Needs a bit of instruction-bad technique!" he explained loudly to the right-hand huntsman.

"Not his fault, of course," bellowed the right-hand Huntsman

kindly. "Only a kennel-boy. Besides, confusing to have a fence-rail in the saddle. Odd thing to happen, what?"

"It's not a fence-rail," Robin said hopelessly, but nobody heard him, and there was a tall hedge looming up ahead, so he concentrated on giving Merry her head and trying not to grab her pole as over they went.

It seemed to Robin they jumped a hundred hedges, ditches and stone walls, and galloped over miles of rolling country, before the Hunt swept over the brow of a last hill and at the sound of the hunting horn came to a halt before a gate in a whitewashed; five-barred fence. Over the gate hung a large red sign with gold letters that spelled out "View-Halloo." Beyond, a great saucer-shaped valley spread out in the midday sunshine. It was dotted with thatched cottages interspersed with larger pink-stone houses, numerous grassy pastures, and clumps of trees, and entirely surrounded by the high five-bar fence. In the exact center of the valley, an imposing mansion of scarlet brick stood in the midst of stables, kennels, outbuildings, gardens and spacious lawns.

"Why, it's a town." Robin exclaimed.

"View-Halloo," explained the left-hand Huntsman, waving his crop toward the valley. "County Seat. Taking you to the Master. Proper form, y'know."

"Who's the Master? What Master?" Robin asked anxiously, as the gate was opened by someone inside the fence.

"Master of Foxhounds," the right-hand Huntsman told him.

"Yoicks III, MFH. Queen Tantivy. Gracious rulers and all that. Up to them what to do with you."

"Oh!" Robin said uneasily. "A king and queen? What will they do with us?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. Up to them, y'know. Mustn't be afraid," the Huntsman added encouragingly. "Very good sort, Yoicks and Queen Tantivy. Sporting. Sure to insist on fair play all around."

There was no time to argue or even ask more questions, for they were moving again, through the gate and down a wide bridle-path into View-Hallo. A few moments later the Hunt was dismounting in the huge stableyard behind the scarlet mansion, and Robin and Merry were conducted through a long flagged passage to an enormous hall, and into the presence of Yoicks III, Master of Foxhounds, and Queen Tantivy.

"Well, well! By Jove! My word!" roared Yoicks jovially, leaning forward in his high-backed chair and leveling a monocle at Merry. "What have we here? Look at that, M'lady! Fence-rail sticking right up from the saddle! Odd sort of arrangement, what? Odd sort of fence-rail, come to think of it. Gilded. Twisted."

"Very odd," said Tantivy sharply. Like Yoicks, she was tall, rangy, and leather-faced, but dressed in a battered riding skirt. Both wore pink satin coats. "Can't say I like it. Dashed inconvenient for the rider. Gaudy, too. Never liked gilt. Dashed poor form."

Robin opened his mouth to explain for what seemed the fiftieth time that Merry's pole was not a fence rail lodged by accident in the pommel of her saddle, but he never found a chance to say a word. When Yoicks was not booming something, Tantivy was;

and when both of them were momentarily silent, the Whipper-In was explaining how and where the Hunt had discovered the strangers, or giving a garbled account of Robin's membership in some shocking Pack that hunted cubs, or the left-hand Huntsman was displaying the double-lead straps that had brilliantly defeated Merry's curious urge to run in circles, or the hounds, who had followed the Huntsmen into the hall, were criticizing Robin's jumping technique, or the right-hand Huntsman was shouting kindly that it wasn't the boy's fault of course, Couldn't expect good technique, only a kennel-boy.

"I'm NOT a kennel-boy!" Robin yelled at last, losing his temper completely. For an instant there was a perfectly astonished Silence. Seizing his chance, Robin added quickly, "My name is Robin Brown and this is my merry-go-round horse and we came here by mistake and all we want to do is go away again, if you could please show us the way out of your country-I mean County. If you please." He took a long breath, patted Merry's trembling neck, and smiled.

"Not a kennel-boy, he says," Yoicks said faintly, turning the monocle on Robin and peering at him.

"Must be," snapped Tantivy. "Not old enough for a groom. Make a good kennel-boy, anyway. Spots'll teach him. Send the boy to Spots, Whipper.

"Ah, Spots!" Yoicks looked at her approvingly. "Capital plan. Spots'll teach him. Mare ought to be trained, I think."

"Oh, my word, yes!" agreed his lady. "First-rate jumper,

Whipper says. Train the mare, Whipper. Mare to the stables, boy to Spots. Dismissed. I say, tell 'em to bring our tea!"

"But-" Robin began frantically.

Nobody heard him. He and Merry were hustled unceremoniously out of the hall, down the flagged passage, and into the hubbub of the stableyard, where the rest of the Huntsmen and horses still milled about, all talking jovially at once.

"They're as bad as the McGudgeys," Robin shouted hopelessly to Merry. "Worse! I don't 'want to stay here and be a kennel boy!"

"And I don't want to be trained," wailed Merry. "Let's run away, Robin! I'd rather be back on the merry-go-round than here!"

"Remember the five-bar fence," Robin sighed. Then, seeing that Merry's lip was trembling again, he patted her scarlet neck and added firmly, "Never mind, I'll think of something. Just put up with them for a while, and do what they say, and I'll get us out of here sooner or later, I promise! Oh dear-here conies the Whipper-In to take me to Spots, whoever that is. Goodbye, Merry-don't worry, I'll find a way

A moment later he was being hurried off in one direction, while Merry was dragged, balking and prancing, in another.

Chapter 4

FAR to the northeast of View-Hallo and the Quadling Land of the Fox-Hunters-in fact, in the exact center of the Munchkin Country of Oz-lies a shield-shaped valley. It is surrounded on two of its three sides by a high, crenelated wall, and bordered on the north by the wild Munchkin Mountains. This is the beautiful Valley of the Argent, and it is divided by the broad and quietly-flowing River Argent into two quaint little feudal kingdoms: Halidom and Troth.

Now, on the very same morning that Robin and Merry tumbled unceremoniously into the Fox-Hunters' hawthorn hedge, two strange and alarming events took place in the city of Pax-on-Argent, capital of Halidom.

First, every native-born inhabitant of the country awoke that morning to find himself stricken with a mysterious malady.

Second, a pageboy named Fess-who was not a native of Halidom but came from Troth, across the river-went into the palace Treasury as usual to feed the Wyver, stubbed his toe, and thereby made the horrendous discovery of what was the matter with everybody.

Halidom was, unfortunately, no stranger to horrendous discoveries. The little country had already suffered two National Disasters in as many generations. Before the Disasters, in what the Halidomians were apt to refer to, wistfully, as "the good old days,"

Halidom and Troth had been much alike, with their fields of azure,

their mulberry orchards, their castles set in gardens of
fleur-de-lys, roses, trefoils, citrophilous and cinquefoils, their stately
forests of pageant trees and family trees, and their abundance of animals. In
the shady glens of the forests lived harts, fawns, bucks, swine
and flittermice. Cocks and drakes strutted in every courtyard and falcons circled majestically overhead,
while mischievous blue-and-
white-striped popinjays fluttered about the villages, stealing the
good wives' thimbles and spoons and hairpins, or any other bright
objects they could carry in their thieving beaks. On the Sandbar
Sinister, a barren and dismal island in the middle of the River
Argent to which both kingdoms exiled their lawbreakers. gyrons
and wyvers scuttled among the teasle bushes. In the mountains to
the north lived more dangerous animals-leopards, lioncels and
dragons-which the noble youths of both states rode out to slay, in
order to win knighthood. The departure of such a Questing Party
made a stirring sight, with the sun glinting on blued-steel armor,
pennants flying, steeds and chargers prancing, and many dogs
barking-for no beast-questing could be done without the grey-
hounds, the talbots, the big, crop-eared alaunds and the little,
keen-nosed kanets.

The chief industry of Troth was the making of Blue Armor,
with shields to match, and the forging of Questing Swords and
Jousting Lances. The demand for the latter was particularly brisk,
since jousting was the favorite sport of both the states, and on a
good sunny day the breakage of lances was tremendous. Troth was,
in fact, not a monarchy but a thriving armory, energetically ruled

by King Armo 59th and his gracious queen, Paty, and its Academy of the Art of Jousting drew scholars from far and wide.

Halidom, on the other hand, was a heraldry, ruled-under dreadful handicaps in these times-by King Herald 64th and Queen Farthingale, with occasional discouraged assistance from their son, Prince Gules. Once, in those good old days the people sighed for, Halidom had been as thriving as Troth, boasting an excellent University of Genealogy and a flourishing trade in elegant coats-of-arms, which the Halidom artisans designed to order and then drew on parchment or wove into cloth. In those days, the skill of Halidom artisans was so famous that there was scarcely a royal family in all Oz that could feel truly royal until it had a genuine Halidom-designed coat-of-arms hanging on the palace wall, or its family crest woven by Halidom weavers into the throne-room draperies. And since there are hundreds of tiny kingdoms in Oz, all with royal families anxious to feel truly royal, the orders had poured in, and Halidom had prospered.

All that was now long past, because of National Disasters I and II, which had struck at the very source of the kingdom's prosperity: its powerful Crown Magic.

Now, Halidom's Crown Magic, which had been bestowed on the little kingdom in ancient times by the Fairy Lurline, consisted of three Golden Circlets. Circlet One, which was large enough to be worn around the base of the king's crown, conferred upon all the Halidomians excellent brains and even wisdom. Circlet Two,

worn on the king's upper arm, gave physical strength to all his subjects. The third and smallest circlet, worn on the king's thumb,

made them skillful in all handicrafts, particularly drawing, calligraphy, weaving and embroidery. For centuries these Circlets had

remained safe in the possession of the royal family, and the people had been wise, strong, and skillful.

Then, in the reign of the present King's grandfather, Herald 62nd, the first National Disaster struck. Circlet One was lost. One day when the King happened to be using it to play quoits with on the palace grounds, it rolled away into a rabbit-hole, and in spite of much digging and searching was never seen again. Of course, this served Herald 62nd right for being so careless with it; however, it served his innocent subjects very wrongly, for upon the loss of the Circlet the whole country became slow of wit and not even very bright. The University was soon forced to close its doors because no one was smart enough any longer to teach Genealogy.

National Disaster II occurred in the time of Herald 63rd. This Herald, father of the present King, was washing dishes on the cook's night out (it was the Queen's turn to dry) and he had taken the smallest Circlet off his thumb and put it on the windowsill. No sooner had he picked up his dishrag than a popinjay swooped down, snatched the bright Circlet in its beak, and carried it off—and it was never seen again. Immediately the Halidomians lost all their skill with the pen and brush, the loom and needle, and could design crests and coats-of-arms no better than anybody else.

Naturally, trade dwindled to nothing, and hard times settled down upon the little kingdom. By the time of the present King, Herald 64th, every castle roof was patched and leaky, every velvet cloak was threadbare. For years now the country had been scraping along by selling pageant tree seedlings, bouquets of trefoils and citrophilous, and a few fleer-de-lys bulbs.

Circlet Two, the only one remaining, had been placed under close guard and was still safe, so the Halidomians still had their strength, and jousted as much as ever-with mended lances, since nobody could afford to buy new ones. But jousting was all they had now to occupy their patched and shabby lives, and as Herald 64th often remarked to his queen in his wistful and rather dim-witted way, it somehow didn't seem enough.

Still, the Halidomians managed to be vaguely happy, though slow-witted and poor, until the morning Fess the pageboy stubbed his toe.

It had been raining for a week, but that particular Thursday dawned as fair and bright as anybody could have wanted it to, and Fess, who very much wanted it to, gave a whoop of joy as he tumbled out of bed and rushed to the window.

"Barry, Barry!" he shouted to the other page who shared his tower bedchamber. "The rain's over!. It's going to be a perfect day for the Tourney'."

"Whunf?" mumbled Barry, who always slept with his head under the covers.

Fess dashed across the room and yanked back the blanket. "It's a fine day!, Get up, lazybones!"

"I'm not lazy, I'm tired," sighed Barry, slowly dragging the covers back over him.

"I'm tired! A fine time to be tired! Don't you remember? It's the joust between Sir Greves and Sir Gauntlet today. At last!" Fess added, scarcely able to believe it.

The two knights were traditional enemies, though there was nothing personal about their famous feud. They had merely inherited it from their fathers, who had inherited it from their fathers, and so on into the dim past. Nobody knew or cared what the original quarrel had been about, but everybody knew it was the lifework of every Sir Treves to fight every Sir Gauntlet as hard and often as possible. For generations the two families had honorably discharged this duty, without the slightest thought of losing their tempers over the matter. But in the present generation things had not worked out properly at all. The current Sir Treves, a mild-faced, apologetic little knight, was forever postponing the match, sending word at the last moment that he'd caught a chill, or had to get his hair cut, or really ought to prune the roses. The current Sir Gauntlet, who became more frustrated, quick-tempered and sensitive every time his challenge was turned down, was by now so touchy that the whole kingdom had breathed a sigh of relief when the joust was finally announced.

"I really thought they'd never get around to it," Fess said as he began flinging on his clothes. "Why, they've been putting it off for years!"

"Probably do it again today," murmured Barry faintly.

"Oh, no they won't! Sir Treves sent the challenge himself this time! Prince Gules said yesterday . . ." Fess stopped in the act of fastening his belt and frowned at his roommate. "Say, you do act sick or something! "What's the matter?"

"Just tired. Too tired to do my chores. Too tired to get up." Barry yawned cavernously. "Too tired to stay awake, even. G'night." He drifted back to sleep.

"Well, by my bends and buckler!" exclaimed Fess, who possessed neither of these items, not being a knight yet. For a moment he stared in concern at his exhausted companion, who was usually bouncing with vigor. Then, reflecting that he never would become a knight if he didn't get on with his duties he hurriedly clasped his belt and reached for his curly-toed shoes.

Barry was the youngest child of the palace chef and had no great expectations in life beyond being a kitchen-page, but Fess was the son of a nobleman of Troth, and like many of the high-born Trothian youths, had been sent "abroad" across the Argent, to receive his training in some grand household of Halidom. In Fess's case, this grand household was the palace itself. For a year now he had been a page; when the King thought him worthy, he would become a squire; after proving his worth as a squire he

would return to Troth, go on a Quest, and become a knight. He longed for this great day to come; but he was quite aware that it never would if he were not a good page.

Jamming on his favorite cap with the popinjay feather, he turned again, frowning, to his sleeping friend.

"Barry! You'd better wake up and get down to the kitchen'." he said. A gentle snore was his only answer. "Oh, well, all right. But you'll catch it if your father has to carry the breakfast trays!" Leaving this warning to do its work, he ran out of the room and down the Tower stairs, whistling.

As he hurried through the palace corridors, he wondered at how quiet everything was. He heard none of the usual early-morning bustle among the servants and saw not a soul except one chambermaid languidly waving a feather-duster over the Queen's throne. Deciding it must be even earlier than he had thought, he strode briskly down the back hall and out into the sunny courtyard. A few drakes squatted about the stone well, but the palace cock, he noted with surprise, did not seem to be awake yet, for there was no sign of him.

Fess's first duty each day was to feed the palace animals. In the case of the dozen or so horses and the thirty Questing dogs, this was merely a matter of overseeing their feeding by the grooms and kennel-boys; but there were a few special animals to whom he always attended personally. Before starting for the stables, therefore, he went into a little broom-shed in one corner

of the courtyard, and peered through the half-gloom toward the shelf where his pet flittermouse liked to sleep, curled underneath one of Fess's old caps. The cap was there, undisturbed. Fess lifted it carefully, and smiled. The Flittermouse was still sound asleep, his gauzy, bat-like wings folded over his tiny, glossy, gray-blue body. It seemed a shame to wake him.

Fess replaced the cap and tiptoed out of the shed, taking a pan of corn from another shelf as he passed. This he scattered about the courtyard for the drakes, then went on to the stables. We was surprised to find that more than half the horses were lying down in their stalls; surprise turned to indignation when he caught sight of the two grooms, Bodkin and Seuteheon, sitting limply on a pile of hay in the corner.

"What are you doing, lazing about there!" he demanded, glaring down at them with his fists on his hips. "Why, you haven't even cleaned the stalls or mixed the bran mash! Up with you! Get busy!"

"Yes, Master Fess. Right away, Master Fess," said the grooms feebly, struggling to their feet.

"What's the matter, are you sick?" Fess demanded in a less belligerent tone.

"Just tired, Master Fess," sighed Bodkin, shuffling toward the bran bin.

"Never been so tired in my life," groaned Scutcheon as he picked up a pitchfork.

"You, too? That's funny," Fess said, remembering Barry.

"Say, why are so many of the horses lying down?"

"They're tired, same as us," Bodkin told him. "I heard the Queen's Palfrey tell the King's Charger so. Ask 'em yourself, if you don't believe me.

Frowning, Less hurried to the stalls, where the horses were slowly clambering to their feet with every appearance of utter weariness. The Queen's Palfrey assured him that she had never felt such lassitude, and indeed, was afraid she might be having a fit of the vapors, and begged him to fetch her smelling-salts or possibly a little hartshorn and water. The King's Charger said gruffly that he was right as rain, of course, though he did feel a bit liverish, and thought he might have caught a chill. Prince Gules's Steed, Fred, said haughtily that it was true he didn't feel quite the thing, very likely because of the riding party yesterday.

"The riding party? But we only went over to Lady Mace's for tea, and it was scarcely raining at all, and you wore your best blanket," Fess protested.

"I was not referring to the possibility of a chill," Fred informed him remotely. "Possibly you were not aware of it, but while you and His Highness my master were drinking tea, I was forced to associate with some very low company. Hacks, and Palfreys, and I know not what inferior creatures. Lady Mace's stables seem to be full of them."

"Now, now," Fess said coaxingly. "Of course Lady Mace and her granddaughter keep riding-horses, and not jousting-horses!

I ask you, how would it look for pretty young Lady Annelet to ride out on a Steed or a Charger?"

Fred permitted himself a small neigh of laughter, and admitted that it would not be at all the thing. "I do wish, however," he added, "that the next time we call on the ladies, you would require a private box stall for me. After all, I am not a mere riding horse, but the Prince's Steed, and I expect very soon to be promoted to Charger. It is not fitting that I should have to associate with lesser animals. As you know perfectly well, Master Less, I come of a very aristocratic family. Why, my first cousin is a Destrier!"

"Yes, I know! The finest in all Halidom I'm sure, Fred! Don't worry, I'll-"

"And I beg you not to call me by that plebian name!" Fred interrupted fretfully.

"I'm sorry, Federigo," Fess sighed, patting the Steed's shining black neck. Fred's airs grew rather tiresome at times, but Fess was fond of him, and almost never forgot to call him by the elegant name he had thought up for himself. The Prince, to Fred's distress, almost never remembered.

Fess stayed in the stables only long enough to make sure Hodkin and Scutcheon were going about their duties, however languidly, then hurried to the kennels. There he found the old kennel-man shuffling about in slow motion, filling dishes for the dogs, who were as tired as he was. Even the big, husky alaunds and the bouncing little kanets seemed to have lost all their energy.

Thoroughly uneasy by now, Fess hurried toward the flower-

garden to get breakfast for the Unicorn. As he emerged into the courtyard he halted at sight of one of the gardeners standing motionless beside the well, a sprinkling can in one hand and a scrap of paper in the other.

"What's wrong with you?" Fess demanded.

The man blinked sleepily at him and held out the paper. "Page-boy came just now. Message for the Master of Tournaments. No joust today."

"Oh, dragonflies!" Fess exclaimed crossly as he took the note.

"Has Sir Treves canceled it again?"

"Not Sir Treves. Sir Gauntlet."

"What?" Fess cried incredulously. "Sir Gauntlet's canceled it?"

"S'truth. It was Sir Gauntlet's page that came. Says his master's tired. Too weak to lift his lance. Says Sir Treves magicked him." The gardener interrupted himself with an enormous yawn.

"Magic!" Fess echoed in alarm. "But that's illegal! That's awful! That's-I'll bet that's what's the matter with everybody!"

He flung the note at the startled gardener and dashed up the back steps of the palace. Bursting into the kitchen, he saw the chef and scullery maids slumped about in chairs, with breakfast not even started. Barry, who had finally put in an appearance, had curled up in the sink and fallen asleep again.

"Fix the King's oatmeal, at least!" Less begged the cook. "I'll take it to him myself, as soon as I feed the Wyver."

Snatching a plate of last night's martlet pudding from the cupboard, he almost ran through the still silent and empty corridors to the Treasury, a small room once heaped with the riches of a prosperous kingdom. There were no riches nowadays, of course, but in the center of the room stood a large, hollowed-out block of marble called the Treasure Stone, within which rested the last remaining Golden Circlet of Halidom. On top of the Stone, covering the hollow like a lid, rested the basket of the Wyver.

Now, Wyvers, who are plump, winged creatures resembling miniature dragons, are not dangerous or ill-tempered animals, but they never sleep, and when alarmed they utter a piercing cry that can be heard for miles. Therefore they make excellent guards, and this one had years before been brought especially from the Sandbar Sinkter to guard the Circlet night and day. All through the reign of the present Herald he had kept faithful watch. Fess, who fed him twice daily, had never yet seen the scaly, golden eyelids so much as drooping.

But this morning, when he hurried into the Treasury, he found the Wyver's eyes tight closed. The creature was curled in its basket, wings folded, tail quiet-and it was snoring loudly.

For an instant Less was too shocked to do anything but stare at it. Then he rushed forward, stubbed his toe on a corner of the rug, and fell headlong. One of his out flung hands struck the corner of the basket, tipping it over and spilling the Wyver out upon the floor. The creature lay where it had fallen,

and continued to sleep, but Less was no longer paying any attention to it. His horrified eyes were fixed on the exposed hollow in the Treasure Stone.

The hollow was empty. The last Golden Circlet of Halidom was gone.

Chapter 5

ONCE recovered from his first shock, Fess scrambled to his feet, ran to the peacefully sleeping Wyver and shook it urgently, shouting to it to wake up. Nothing he did had the slightest effect. It continued to snore.

"Drugged!" gasped Fess. He dashed out of the Treasury and through the shabby throne-room to the stairs. Forgetting all about the King's oatmeal, he bounded up the steps three at a time, ran full tilt down the second-floor hall and slid to a halt before the King's bedchamber, where he began pounding

"Flnnph?" said a sleepy voice within.

"Wake up, Your Majesty!" shouted Fess. "Let me I

"Pnlffnf," replied the voice in indistinct but offended tones

"I know you're tired, but you must wake up anyhow, and let me in!" Fess begged at the top of his voice, renewing his pounding. "Please, Your Majesty! Somebody's drugged the Waver and stolen Circlet Two! Your Majesty! Your Ma-je sty! Did you hear me? I said--"

The door opened, revealing Herald 64th in his blue nightshirt,
with his crown on backwards over his uncombed hair.
He was blinking reproachfully.

"Why are you so noisy this morning?" he said. "You aren't-
supposed to wake me, anyhow. Where's Barry? He's supposed
to wake me, eh? Where's my oatmeal? I don't want to get up
until I've had my oatmeal."

"I forgot it, Your Majesty, and I'll fetch it, but please listen
to me! The Circlet has been stolen! I went in to feed the
Waver, and-

"The Circlet?" said Herald, his faded blue eyes wide and
hurt. "My Circlet? It's-gone, you say?"

"Yes!" Fess said, thankful to have made him understand
"Now everybody in the palace is tired, like you Probably
everybody in the kingdom"

"You aren't," the King said doubtfully.

"But I'm from Troth, Your Majesty! The Circlet's magic
doesn't affect me. Oh, please let me in, and I'll explain every-
thing!"

It took some time, because the King, who had always believed
in setting an example, was possibly the slowest-witted
of all his slow-witted country men; and just as Fess had managed
to make the crisis clear to him, Queen Farthingale, disturbed by
the voices, trailed in sleepily from the adjoining room
and inquired in her vague and gentle way if anything were the

matter.

Patiently, Fess started to explain all over again, greatly hindered by the King's attempts to help. Then, just as the Queen had grasped the news, Prince Rules walked in, leaned wearily against a potted plant, which instantly crashed to the floor, and demanded an explanation in his turn.

"Oh, dear," Fess sighed, and began again. He had to talk more loudly than ever now, because the Queen kept interrupting with piercing little wails of dismay, and the King was pattering animatedly (though still sleepily) about the room, tugging on bellcords and wringing his hands and insisting that somebody bring his oatmeal, eh?

Moreover, other people in the palace had by this time discovered the open Treasury door, the sleeping Waver and the theft, and a perfect procession of servants, pages, pet dogs, chamberlains and guards began panting wearily up the stairways to the King's chamber, to announce the catastrophe.

In desperation, Fess finally seized one of the guards and posted him at the door to fend off other news-bearers, ordered a passing scullery boy to wake the Privy Councilor, sent a couple of footmen to summon the Courtiers' Council, and pushed the rest of the people and dogs out of the King's bedroom. Then, begging the royal family to get dressed, he pelted down the stairs in search of the King's oatmeal.

This delivered, he had time to catch his breath. Instantly

he remembered the Flittermouse, who had not yet had its milk. The broom-shed was still dim and quiet, and his cap was still in place upon the shelf; but this time he lifted it off and roused his little pet.

"Wake up, Flitter!" he urged. "Wake up, something terrible has happened!"

The gauzy wings stirred, and a small, gray-blue mouse-face with delicate long whiskers and eyes like black sequins peered up at him. "Oh, aren't we going to the Tourney?" inquired the Flittermouse in a squeaky, disappointed voice. "Well, never mind, Fess dear. I'm too sleepy anyhow."

"I don't think there'll be any Tourney," Fess said, gently picking the little creature up in his hand. Wings and all, it just fitted comfortably into his palm. He explained, for the dozenth time that morning, what had happened.

"Oh, my," Flitter squeaked in alarm. "That's perfectly frightening, isn't it, Fess? Or is it?" he added, eyeing Fess doubtfully. "Should I be frightened?"

"No, I'll take care of you," Fess promised, lifting his pet to its accustomed perch on his shoulder. "And I'm all right, but I don't know what these poor Halidomians are going to do, if they can't even joust any more! Imagine Sir Gauntlet being too weak to lift his lance!"

"A person could make up a little song about that," the Flittermouse said earnestly. "I can't think of one right now, though."

"Never mind," soothed Fess, who was not surprised. Flitter, being as slow-witted as the rest of the country, never managed to think of his little songs until the event which had inspired them was long gone by. "You'll think of one later, I'm sure. Right now you can come along with me while I help get things ready for the Courtiers' Council."

Within half an hour King Herald, Queen Farthingale, and Prince Rules had managed to shuffle downstairs to their thrones, and soon the courtiers began to creep in, weary and weak, to gather around them. Fess, who was trying to be everywhere at once to help the tottering chamberlains, carried in a chair for Lady Mace, because she was the oldest courtier, and for her pretty granddaughter Lady Annelet, because she was the youngest and was betrothed to Prince Rules, but gave up trying to find any more. The rest of the courtiers were obliged to stand, leaning against the columns or supporting each other by the elbows. Occasionally someone would fall asleep in spite of himself, sit down suddenly on the floor with a clang of armor, and thankfully stay there.

Fess had just caught one knight in mid-fall and propped him against a wall when Barry slipped up behind him and tugged his sleeve so urgently that the Flittermouse lost his balance.

"Fess, come quick! Out to the Great Hall."

"What's wrong now?" Fess groaned as he hastily followed his friend.

"Sir Treves and Sir Gauntlet-they're angry as two lioncels, and shouting at each other, and the chamberlains are all too tired to make them listen-and so am I." With a sigh, Barry stopped short, leaned against a doorway, and went to sleep again.

Distractedly, Fess hurried on toward the sound of angry voices. He rushed through the last archway to find a ring of staring servants surrounding the two knights, who were standing forehead to forehead in the center of the Great Hall, shouting each other down. Before Fess could intervene, they actually did shout each other down, for they were both weaving and swaying so from weariness that they lost their balance at the same moment and toppled to the floor. The tremendous crash of their armor against the flagstones silenced even them for an instant, and most of the servants collapsed like rag dolls at the sound. Before the knights had recovered enough to go on arguing from a sitting position-which they showed signs of doing -Fess ran forward, and with great presence of mind slammed down both their vizors.

"Excuse me, please," he said hurriedly. "But you absolutely must speak one at a time, or nobody can settle your quarrel! Don't you know His Majesty is waiting for you? inside their vizors, which muffled their voices and made them sound as if they were at the bottom of a well. Fess hastily raised Sir Gauntlet's vizor.

" . . . trying to get to the throne room!" Sir Gauntlet was saying indignantly. "Matter of gravest importance! Fellow

here's been working magic on me! Bad manners! Crime, in fact!

Fess shut his vizor and opened Sir Treves's. "Sir, he says you've been working magic on him."

"Why, my dear boy, I've been trying to convince the fellow I've never worked any magic in all my life, and don't even know how! It's not my fault he's feeling poorly, I don't feel very well myself today, and I'm very disappointed about the Tourney because I was just sure I could win this time ... that is ...well, never mind that, but-well I don't feel good either!"

"Of course not!" Fess sighed, slamming Sir Greve's vizor and opening Sir Gauntlet's. "Sir, you're mistaken. You haven't heard the news, Everybody-"

"Not mistaken at all! Never been tired in my' life until today! Beastly business! Magic! Only -explanation! Dreadful-"

Fess shut the rest off by dropping his vizor. "Please, listen to me, both of you! Everybody in the kingdom is tired. It's because the last Circlet has been stolen!"

The waving arms stopped in mid-gesture; both knights sat motionless. Cautiously, Fess raised both vizors. Sir Gauntlet's proud, dark face was turned toward him in astonishment and consternation; Sir Treves's round, cherubic one had gone deathly pale, and his innocent blue eyes seemed twice their normal size.

"S-stolen, did you say?" he quavered.

Fess explained, watching Sir Treves's face in some alarm.

It seemed impossible that he could get any paler, but he was doing so.

"Waver drugged-Circlet gone . . ." the fat little knight whispered in horrified tones, and began to tremble so violently that all the sections of his armor jingled together musically.

"Fellow's going to faint!" exclaimed Sir Gauntlet, staring at him sympathetically. "Fetch water! Burn feathers under his nose! Courage, old boy, no need to take on so! National Disaster and all that, but not permanent! Assure you! Catch the thief myself! Bring him to justice and all that! Water, somebody! Here, here, old fellow, I apologize for what I said! Complete misunderstanding! Hadn't heard the news!"

By this time Fess had dashed to the ornamental fountain by the Grand Doorway and dashed back again with a vase of water, which he poured recklessly over Sir Greve's pallid face. A moment later the little knight was being helped unsteadily to his feet by Sir Gauntlet, who pounded him clangingly on the back with a mailed hand and supported him, trailing drops of water, down the corridor toward the throne room.

"Oh, Fess dear, I've thought of the song about Sir Gauntlet," the Flittermouse squeaked.

"Overnight,
Can't fight.

"Don't you think that's rather good?"

Since it was quite as good as most of the Flittermouse's songs, Fess agreed unhesitatingly, and his little pet swelled into a small gray-blue puffball of pleasure on his shoulder as Fess got the

servants on their feet and about their duties, and hurried after the two old enemies. He was still rather worried about Sir Treves, who seemed to be taking the Disaster harder than anybody.

When he got back to the Throne Room, the Council of Courtiers had begun. King Herald was pounding feebly on the arm of the throne with his sceptre, Queen Farthingale was holding in her ears as she always did, because she didn't like the noise, and Pellets, the Privy Councilor, was shouting, "Come to order, Come to order, Come to order!"

When all was quiet, the King put down his sceptre, folded his plump hands across his plumper middle, and said sadly, "There has been a-er-National Disaster-I'm afraid. Pellets, dear old thing, will you read the minutes of the last Council? Do we have any minutes of the last Council?" he added uncertainly.

"We have minutes, Your Majesty," Pellets sighed, "but they would stretch into hours if I were to read them all."

There were a few giggles at this, and King Herald, after a puzzled moment, laughed very hard indeed, saying, "Hours! Oh, very funny eh?" while looking anxiously from face to face to make sure he was laughing at the right thing.

"Therefore," Pellets continued when the commotion had died down, "I would suggest we dispense with the reading of the minutes and proceed directly to the announcements."

"Yes," the King said quickly. "Oh, yes, I daresay you're right. Announcements, eh? National Disaster, you mean."

"Oh, I do wish they would get on with it," Fess whispered to the Flittermouse.

While King Herald was bumbling his way through an explanation of the catastrophe-an explanation greatly lengthened by interruptions from the Queen and Prince, and greatly complicated by many references to oatmeal-Fess craned his neck to see if Sir Treves was feeling any better. To his surprise, he could not see Sir Treves at all. A quick glance around the room revealed the missing knight stealthily creeping out the door. Puzzled, Fess started to follow him, then changed his mind because the King at that moment completed his explanations and the throne room began to buzz with talk and ring with cries.

"Arrest the thief!" exclaimed somebody fiercely.

"Send him to the Sandbar Sinister!" cried somebody else.

"No, no, I have it! Find him. Then arrest him!" put in a third voice in a burst of inspiration.

"Blow the trumpets first," protested Lady Mace. "Nothing can be done until the trumpets are blown."

"But Grandma, what good will the trumpets do?" Lady Annelet objected.

"It is the proper First Step," retorted her grandmother severely.

"Let's organize an army," one of the knights said enthusiastically.

"That's against the law," Peliets told him. "No armies, no wars allowed. Only jousting tourneys."

Sir Gauntlet, with some difficulty, raised his sword and waved it feebly. "I will challenge this evildoer to a joust!" he

shouted.

"Oh, that's a splendid idea!" cried several people.

"Very satisfactory," agreed Lady Mace. "Trumpets are always blown before a joust."

"But Grandma," began Lady Annelet.

"I say, could someone take a message to the thief, telling him of Sir Gauntlet's challenge?" the King inquired hopefully.

"That would be just the thing, you know. Eh?"

"Oh, yes!" the Queen said. "I love a joust!"

"But Cousin Farthingale," began Lady Annelet.

"Hush, Annelet," said her grandmother. "Say Queen Farthingale in Court."

"But Grandma, what good will a joust-"

"Hush, Annelet!"

Just when Fess was beginning to despair of anything sensible being said or done, Prince Rules arose from his throne, held up his hand for silence, and announced, "I have decided what to do in the National Emergency."

Fess eyed him dubiously. In appearance, Prince Rules was everything a prince should be. He was handsome, with his blue-black hair, his aloof blue eyes, his slim figure and proud carriage. And though he was a bit condescending in manner, and much deferred to, he was never unpleasant and not really spoiled. He was a fine prince-but of course, he was not very bright. And, as of this morning, he was not very strong, either.

"What have you decided, dear?" said the queen.

"I have decided that I, myself, will go and find the Circlet,"
the Prince replied. "In fact, I'll find the other two Circlets too.
I am ready to wander all over Oz-all over the world-to find
them. I am the Prince, and I will save my kingdom. I shall leave
tomorrow.

There was stunned silence for a moment.

"Oh, but I say, dear boy," quavered the King. "All over Oz?
I mean to say, out of the kingdom?"

"The Circlets are not in the kingdom," Gules said simply.
"Or we would have found them long ago. My mind is quite
made up. I shall ride my Steed, and Fess the page shall go with
me. I must avenge Halidom! Besides," Rules added suddenly,
in quite a different tone, "I want to do something great, Papa!
It's so boring here at the palace. I want to be a famous knight,
and if I find the Circlets, I'll be the most famous knight there
ever was!"

"Oh, Gules, good for you?" breathed Lady Annelet: "Can
I go too?"

"OF COURSE YOU MAY NOT, ANNELET!" said
Lady Mace in a terrible voice. "MOST improper. You will
stay safely at home, and knit comforters and things, while your
Brave Prince fares forth into the Unknown World. Hooray for
Prince Rules!"

"Hooray! HOORAY!" shouted everybody.

"Hooray," Fess said, feeling more dubious than ever.

"Fess, dear, are we really going with him?" squeaked the Flittermouse, bouncing excitedly up and down. "Oh, are we, really?"

"Of course," Fess sighed.

He admired the Prince's bravery very much indeed, but he had the gravest doubts about the Prince's ability to find the ring or do anything else. Somebody would have to go with him-to look after him, and find food for him, and prevent him bungling everything-and probably to find the Circlets for him as well.

"Oh, yes, we'll go," Fess said.

"A person could make up a little song about that!" the Flittermouse said earnestly.

Chapter 6

AS SOON as it was known throughout the palace that Fess was going on a journey, all the palace animals wanted to go along. This was impossible, of course, but Fess had great difficulty in convincing them of it. Processions of grey-hounds and talbots and little kanets followed him around, crying piteously at the thought of being separated from him for so much as a day; gloom settled over the stables, and the Queen's Paifrey had to be given hartshorn and water; only the Waver could say nothing about the matter, since he was still asleep.

"But I can't take you all." Fess told them. "You'll be much better off here, anyway, and Barry is going to feed you while I'm gone. Go along now, I have lots to do. As for you," he added severely to Fred, who was unmercifully lording it over the other horses, "Behave yourself and go get your hooves polished. You can't go either unless you quit making everybody else feel bad."

Subdued by this threat, Fred went away with Bodkin, and Fess finally managed to escape from the other animals and hurry to the flower garden. In the excitement he had never brought the Unicorn her breakfast. She ate only flowers, and preferred, for her first meal, a dainty basket of trefoils and cinquefoils, with the dew still on them. It was late in the day for dew now, but he gathered the trefoils and cinquefoils, sprinkled a little cold water over them, and went quickly through the ornamental gate into the special little garden where the Unicorn lived. She was awaiting him patiently, arching her snow-white neck to rub her long, mother-of-pearl horn against a pear tree, and although she was as shy and aloof as ever, she did not seem tired.

"Thank goodness!" Fess exclaimed when she assured him in her soft voice that she felt quite as usual.

"Nothing is ever wrong with me, you know," she added, reaching gracefully for a trefoil.

"That's true," Fess said thoughtfully. The Unicorn was no ordinary animal, but the National Emblem, whose image figured on the Great Seal of Halidom. She was the only known

creature of her kind, * and Fess suspected she was a fairy animal, since she had been given to the first Herald of Halidom by the fairy Lurline in ancient days. Probably nothing ever could be wrong with such a creature. "I guess the Circlet has no power over you," he said when he had told her about the Disaster. "I'm all right too, because I'm from Troth."

"I'm glad," the Unicorn said gently. "As you know, I don't care much for the others anyway-except the ladies, of course. Males are usually so rough and boisterous! Except you. I'm devoted to you."

Fess thanked her, and asked solicitously if her citrophilous were crisp enough, but his mind was on preparations for the journey, and he soon excused himself, explaining that he had much to do.

"Oh, take me with you!" the Unicorn begged, pawing wistfully with her golden hoof. "I'm so bored these days, with never a pageant to appear in, and never an artist asking me to pose for a royal crest! Really, nothing is as it used to be in Halidom! I feel I've lost caste. What distinction is there in being the Emblem of such a run-down kingdom? Selling bulbs and tree-shoots for a living! Why, it's In Trade! I don't even have any Attendant Maidens nowadays, and nobody's woven a daisy chain for my neck in I don't know when!"

Fess promised he would weave her one as soon as he came back to Halidom, but explained that he couldn't take her with him.

* At least, the only one known in Halidom and Troth. There are other unicorns in Oz, as all scholars of Ozology know. But I'm not a bit sure they were fairy unicorns, are you?

Tears welled up in her long-lashed golden eyes. "But I can't endure not to be with you," she said in a trembling voice. "I don't want Barry to bring my breakfast! I don't like boys-ex-CET you. I don't like this garden any more. I don't like Halidom, either! I'll be lonesome."

"Now, please don't cry. I'll come back as soon as I possibly can," Fess assured her, and hurried away, leaving her sniffing gently and toying with her trefoils.

"You forgot to close the gate," squeaked the Flittermouse, who had been chasing butterflies in the outer garden and now swooped back to Fess's shoulder.

"Never mind, one of the gardeners will do it," Fess said breathlessly. "Flutter, go to the Blue smith's shop behind the stables, quickly-and don't let the dogs see you, or the horses either.

You'll find Bodkin there, seeing to Fred's hooves. Tell him I said to take Fred to the woods west of the palace and tie him there, saddled and bridled, as soon as the sun goes down. Do you understand? And don't let anyone else hear what you say!"

The Flittermouse swooped away on soundless wings, and

Fess went in search of Prince Rules, whom he found in his dress-in-chamber, trying to decide whether to wear his blue cape with the white crest, or his white cape with the blue crest.

"The blue cape won't show the dirt so quickly," Fess told him.

"Oh, do you think we'll get dirty?" Gules said interestedly. He had never been dirty in his life, and thought it sounded quite dashing.

"I'm almost sure of it," Fess sighed. "Prince Rules, I think we'd better sneak away tonight, in secret, instead of waiting until tomorrow. We're going to have all the dogs and horses following us if we don't.

"Very well," said Rules, more interested than ever. "But how can we arrange-

"I'll arrange it all. I'm going now to have the cook make sandwiches for us. If you'll be ready by sundown, I'll do the rest.

The Prince agreed graciously to this, and shortly after sundown, when the blue Munchkin evening settled down over Pax-on-Argent, Fess, Rules and the Flittermouse stole quietly out of the palace by a side door, slipped along the shadowed High Road to the woods, and found Fred waiting impatiently for them in a little clearing.

"High time!" he whinnied impatiently. "I really cannot understand, Your Highness, why we must sneak about like this, when-

"Hush! We're leaving secretly!" the Prince whispered.

"Secretly? But what about our Sendoff? What about the Procession? This is a Quest, isn't it? Then what about-"

"Hush!" the Prince repeated, stamping his foot. "Behave or I won't let you go. Now, hold still, Fred."

"Federigo," the Steed corrected him sulkily, but he stood still while Fess strapped the lunchbasket to his back. A moment later Rules swung into the saddle and the little party started off through the woods.

"Where are we heading, Fess dear?" squeaked the Flittermouse cheerfully.

"West," Fess said. "To the gate in the Crenelated Wall. It's the easiest way out of Halidom."

"And after we're out of Halidom, then what?"

"Then we'll see," Fess said uneasily. He had no more idea than the Flittermouse where to look for the Circlets, and it was obvious the question had not yet entered the Prince's mind.

When it did, he would be puzzled and interested for a moment, then he would graciously leave the matter up to Fess. Everything was going to be up to Fess-he knew it very well. "I'll just have to do the best I can," he thought as he trudged through the dark forest in Fred's wake.

It was easier going once they were through the woods, and even easier when the moon came up. The countryside lay blue and silver in the pale light, with the towers of a castle rising

here and there in the distance, and the mulberry orchards dark on the hillsides. Halidom did not look shabby and down-at-the-heel at night, it looked perfectly beautiful-and comfortingly familiar. Fess wondered, with an odd little lump in his throat, when he would see it again, and tried not to think about the unknown lands beyond the Crenelated Wall.

Since the others of the party were not much given to thinking, they were perfectly cheerful. Prince Rules rocked to and

fro in the saddle, half asleep. Fred plodded along drowsily but willingly, snatching a bite of grass now and then. The Flitter-mouse, who could see perfectly at night, left Fess's shoulder frequently to chase moths or swoop among the silvery weeds at the roadside, humming his latest little song. It was the one about Prince Rules riding forth into the world to save Halidom, and it went

"Donned his helm,
Left the realm."

Or sometimes it changed to:

"Carried his mace
To another place."

Fess praised both versions absently, but his mind was elsewhere. In spite of Fred's tiredness and weakness, which made

him move much more slowly than usual, it was hard for a boy on foot to keep up with a horse. Fess's feet and legs were beginning to ache, and he could not help wishing that Prince Rules had thought it proper for his page to be mounted. Nobody had suggested such a thing-the Prince because it hadn't occurred to him, and Fess because he hadn't quite liked to. He regretted his delicacy now; still, he was a sturdy boy, and he plodded on, uncomplaining.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the Crenelated Wall, passed through the great blue gateway, and entered the Unknown Land beyond. Fess did not permit himself to look back; but his first quick look ahead showed him that the road they had been following dwindled immediately into a footpath, which wound up a rocky, bramble-grown hillside and vanished among the boulders. It would be far better, Fess thought, to find out where it led tomorrow, in broad daylight. He caught up with Fred and suggested tactfully that the Prince might like to eat a sandwich and sleep a while before they went further.

"Oh, yes, let's do," Rules said with a yawn. "But where can we sleep, Fess? I see no castle anywhere."

"You may not see one again until we're back in Halidom.," Fess said bluntly. It was time the Prince began to learn a few home truths about going on a journey. "We'll probably have to sleep on the ground-tonight and every other night. And there won't be any pillows."

"Oh," the Prince said, blinking. "Very well," he said graciously

a moment later.

Fess smiled in the darkness, reflecting that however little the Prince might understand what lay ahead of him, at least he was a very good sport indeed. After a glance around the unfamiliar landscape, Fess said, "Come on, then-let's try that little grove of trees."

They found a grassy place under the trees, and a tiny stream, at which all four travelers drank gratefully. Prince Rules then sat down against a tree trunk and waited, as befitted a Prince, for dinner to appear. Fess sighed, but brought him a sandwich and a mulberry tart from the basket. Then he unsaddled Fred, who complained a little about the absence of oats and bran mash, but reluctantly agreed to graze on the thick grass instead.

"Flitter, can you find enough food for yourself?" Fess asked.

"Oh, yes, Fess dear, I've been eating gnats and things all along the way. But we've left my bed at home."

"That's easily remedied," Fess said, taking off his cap and placing it on the ground beside Fred's saddle. The Flittermouse crept under it at once, and Fess sat down nearby to eat his own sandwich, stretching his tired legs thankfully and hoping there were no bears or lioncels in the grove. Long before Fred had finished his dinner, the Prince had wrapped himself in his cloak and gone to sleep; but for some time Fess lay wakeful, listening for lioncels, but hearing only the Flittermouse's small, drowsy songs coming out from under the cap, and the Steed's teeth tearing

at the grass. Finally even these sounds ceased, and he, too, slept.

The first thing he saw next morning was the Unicorn, standing a shaft of sunlight and rubbing her mother-of-pearl horn gently against a tree.

"My bends and buckler!" exclaimed Fess, sitting up with a jerk. "Where did you come from?"

"Pax-on-Argent, of course," the Unicorn said gently. "Tell me, have you noticed any trefoils growing hereabouts?"

"I told you left the gate open!" squeaked the Flitter-mouse, scrambling out from under Fess's cap and hurtling to his shoulder in great excitement.

"You did-and I should have paid more attention," Fess said ruefully. "Now what's to be done? I suppose I'll have to take her back!"

"I won't go back," the Unicorn informed him. "Not even for you, and I'm very fond of you. I'm not needed at all in Halidom at the present, and I don't care for other people bringing my breakfast, and I want to go traveling." She eyed Fess shyly a moment, then added, "I thought you might like to ride me. I'd be glad to make myself useful, at least in that way.

"Oh, what a good idea!" said Prince Rules, who had wakened and listened with interest to the conversation. "I'm sure we should get on faster, don't you think so, Fess? And, now I think of it, it's quite fitting that I should have the National Emblem traveling with me-to bring good luck. Besides, we'll look

ever so much more elegant." Rules smiled at the Unicorn and added, "Good morning Unicorn. You may accompany me.

The Unicorn, who was very reserved and shy with everybody but Fess, merely pawed delicately at the moss with a golden hoof, but Fess shook his head doubtfully.

"There may not be any trefoils growing in this land at all," he warned her. "And I'm pretty heavy for you to carry.

"Oh, no. I may not be as large as a horse, but I'm quite as strong as one. Stronger, in fact, because I'm not an ordinary sort of animal. I'm unique. The fairy Lurline told me so. And I'll gladly eat ordinary daisies or buttercups, if I can be with you."

"Well, all right, then," Fess said, privately very glad he would not have to walk all over Oz. Turning to the Steed, who had been watching rather anxiously, he added politely, "Federigo, have you ever met the Unicorn?"

"I believe so, in a Procession once. I was only a palfrey then," he added hastily to the Unicorn. "I doubt if you remember. But I'm a Steed now, I'm His Highness's own personal Steed, and I hope soon to become a Charger. I have a cousin who's a Destrier."

"Never mind, go get your breakfast," Fess said, adding in an undertone, "You mustn't brag so, Federigo, it's not in good taste.

"Well, she outranks me," Fred muttered nervously. "At least, I suppose she does, being an Emblem, and Unique, and all

that. How can one tell what rank she is, when she's not even a horse.- It's irritating. Besides, she's very stuck-up. She looks down her nose at me, and I'm just as good as anybody. I come from a very aristocratic-

"I know, I know," Fess soothed him. "But you must be polite anyway, and she's not really stuck-up, she's only shy. Now go eat your grass so we can start."

Half an hour later, smothering his doubts as to how the two animals were going to get along, Fess saddled Fred for the Prince, scrambled onto the Unicorn's snowy back, and they were on their way, the Flittermouse fluttering ahead.

Having no idea what else to do, Fess had decided to follow the path over the hillside he had seen the night before. By daylight the scrubby bushes and tumbled boulders did not look menacing, but they made traveling difficult, and when the travelers reached the crest of the hill they were all glad to see a wooded valley spread out below. So far they had passed no villages, no houses, not even a squirrel or a woodcutter. A few brilliant blue birds flew southwards, far up in the cloudless sky, but there seemed to be no other inhabitants in this lonely country.

"If only there were somebody we could ask questions of" Fess said, as they gained the valley and were once again in woods. "We don't even know where we're heading. We can't just wander."

"Why not?" asked Prince Rules.

"Well, for one thing, we're nearly out of sandwiches And for another, we'll never find the Circlets unless we make some sort of plan about how to look for them."

"But how can we do that if we don't know where they are?"

"I don't know," Fess admitted gloomily. "But if there were any villages-or even any people-we could kind of ask around, at least. After all, there's not going to be a sign beside the path, saying 'This Way To Lost Circlets!'

"There's a sign, though," the Flittermouse said suddenly.

"Right over there by that bush. See?"

It was a square blue sign on a short stake, with large white letters that read uncompromisingly, "KEEP OUT." Since they were merely walking along a grassy path through scrubby and untended woods, this seemed an odd instruction.

"Keep out of what.?" Fred said indignantly. "I don't see anything to keep out of."

"Neither do I. Let's go on," Fess said.

A few yards farther on, however, they saw another sign. This one said "NO TRESPASSING." just beyond it was a third that read, "POST NO BILLS."

"This is very queer," Fess muttered. "We haven't passed a fence all morning, yet we must be on somebody's land."

"Maybe we'll come to the castle pretty soon," Prince Rules said hopefully.

"Then you can ask questions!" chirped the Flittermouse,

bouncing happily on Fess's shoulder and leaning far forward to peer into his face.

"I suppose so," Fess said, though privately he wondered whether he'd get any answers if he did ask. So far, the signs appeared anything but friendly. At that moment, Fred, who was in the lead, emerged into a little clearing and whinnied,

"Here's another sign!"

"Two more," Prince Rules corrected him.

The Unicorn pressed up beside them, and Fess read out, "SILENCE!" and "QUIET, PLEASE."

"Of all the nerve!" Fred exclaimed, loudly and huffily.

"Who do they think they're ordering around, anyhow? Your Highness, I believe you should make yourself known to these peasants, whoever they are, and-

He broke off with a startled snort, and the others gasped. Before their eyes, the letters of the second sign had changed from "QUIET PLEASE," to "SHUT UP!" As the whole party stared at it in disbelief, it changed again, to "SPEAK SIGN LANGUAGE ONLY."

"But how do we do that, Fess dear?." the Flittermouse whispered, very softly, in Fess's ear.

At the same moment, the Unicorn took a nervous step backwards, then pointed with her horn toward the patch of sky visible above the clearing. Against the cloudless blue, huge vapor letters were forming in the air, as if an unseen, giant hand were writing them. Slowly they spelled out, "PRIVATE PROPERTY."

FOLLOW DOTTED LINE."

"What dotted line.?" the Prince whispered, glancing in bewilderment at Fess.

Fess shook his head, then peering beyond Fred, suddenly pointed. On the other side of the clearing, the path became a line of round white stones that led off through the bushes and into a thicket of scrubby trees. The travelers glanced at each other, then, somewhat apprehensively, crossed the clearing and began to follow the dotted line.

Chapter 7

BY EVENING of his second day with the Fox-Hunters, Robin wanted nothing so much as to escape. He had learned a good deal about life in View-Halloo by now, and he found it not only exhausting but shatteringly monotonous.

Every day, apparently, was exactly like every other. The Huntsmen were up and into the saddle at daybreak, shouting heartily to each other almost before their eyes were open, and they never quit shouting heartily - and exercising vigorously - until they went to bed at night. They dismounted only for meals, all three of which were Hunt Breakfasts, with an unvarying menu of creamed kidneys, scrambled eggs, and a bitter hot drink called Stirrup-Cup. As soon as the first of these meals was over, half the hounds and Huntsmen sallied forth, amid loud blasts on the horn,

to streak madly over the fields and hedgerows after a fox, while the other half stayed in View-Halloo enthusiastically training horses or practicing jumps. At noon the First Hunt noisily returned, and after another breakfast they plunged in their turn into training and jumping-practice, while the Second Hunt rode out.

The hounds lived in a long, pink building, which was called The Kennels, but seemed to Robin more like a clubhouse. The foxes had their own quarters, or Earths, as they jocularly called them, on the other side of Yoick's red brick mansion. The foxes were every bit as fond of fox-hunting as the Huntsmen, hounds and horses, and carefully trained their cubs-or kits-in the profession, teaching them old family tricks of evasion and escape.

After a day in the field they came back to View-Halloo and sat around the Kennels discussing with the hounds the finer technical points of the day's sport, in the most companionable way possible, while the horses talked shop in the stables, and the Huntsmen in the Hunt Club Rooms of the red brick mansion.

As far as Robin could find out, Merry had not yet been ridden in a hunt, or even allowed outside of View-Halloo. Her training had been begun promptly, however. From the chance glimpses he caught of her as she was hurried from stables to paddock and back again, he could guess that she was learning far more than she really wanted to know about jumping, chasing, turning short, obeying commands, and half a dozen other things.

He himself was kept just as busy learning to be a kennel-Boy. His teacher, Spots, had turned out to be a large, elderly, and

very experienced black and white hound, who knew everything there was to know, he assured Robin, about training boys and puppies.

"Just keep your ears up, mind the cope, and don't throw your tongue unless you're barked at, and you'll learn the work soon enough," he told Robin casually, looking him over with a lazy eye.

This Robin translated, after some thought, into "pay attention, do what you're told, and don't speak until you're spoken to," which sounded familiar enough.

"Yes sir," Robin sighed. "What will the work be? Carrying food for the dogs?"

"For the Hounds. Yes, and drawing water. Your paws are better adapted than ours for that kind of menial task. However, you'll have assistants-babblers, skitters, rioters and so on, who haven't made the pack. Your main work will be-"

"Excuse me, Robin said. He was able to guess that "making the pack" was something like "making the team, but he was baffled and faintly alarmed by the sound of the other terms. did you say would be my assistants?"

"Babblers, skitters, and rioters," repeated Spots. When Robin continued to look puzzled, the old hound heaved a martyred sigh and closed his eyes for a moment. "I see we shall have to start at the very beginning. Tell me what you know-if anything-about fox-hunting."

Well," Robin began, thinking hard. "A hunt is ... well, a

whole lot of men and horses go out in the country with a bunch of dogs-"

"A field of huntsmen. and hunters ride out with a pack of hounds," Spots corrected him.

"Oh. well then, a field of huntsmen and hunters ride out with a pack of hounds, and the hounds sniff around looking for a fox, and pretty soon they smell his scent-"

"The hounds feather as they draw", and pretty soon they make a hit. Try to get things right!"

"Yes, sir. well, then they run along where the fox has been, barking and making a big racket as long as they can still smell him-"

"The hounds are off, in full cry, throwing their tongues as long as they own the scent," Spots yapped rapidly, closing his eyes again.

Robin sighed. "And then finally one of the men-huntsmen- sees the fox and yells to the others-."

"Gives the Halloo."

"Gives the Halloo," said Robin as fast as he could. "And everybody chases and chases and finally they run him into a corner somewhere, or into a hole, and the dogs-I mean hounds-stop and bark -I mean throw their tongues and finally the men-huntsmen- come up and kill him, and that's the end."

He finished with a sigh of relief, only to find that his teacher's eyes had flown upon and were fixed upon him with an expression of outrage.

"Kill him?" Spots barked. "What in the name of Yoicks makes you think any hound or huntsman in the whole County would so much as dream of killing a fox?"

Robin blinked. "Well," he faltered. "They do at home. I mean, in places where they have fox-hunts. I'm sure they do."

For a long moment Spots merely looked at him, levelly, coldly, and in complete disgust. "I perceive," he said at last, "that you are not only ignorant, but a barbarian."

"I'm not!" Robin retorted hotly. "I never said I'd kill one! Why, I wouldn't kill anything, except maybe a fly or a mosquito. And what's more-"

"Very well, very well, I won't rate you this time," Spots said, flapping a paw at him wearily. In the County, he told Robin, no fox was ever harmed in any way-they were merely tagged, or touched, when they were caught.

"Oh, I see! Like touch-football!" Robin said.

"Possibly. I am not acquainted with touch-football," Spots said austere. He gazed at Robin and shook his head. "You have a great deal to learn before your first Examinations. Why, you're not even ready for Lesson One yet! Come on into my office, we'd better have vocabulary drill the rest of the day."

Robin followed him, still smarting from what he considered an unjust scolding ("I suppose I'll have to call it rating!" he thought) and trying to catch a glimpse of Merry as he went. He found it utterly exasperating that, having landed dramatically in a strange

and magic country, and having just barely begun to own his very first horse, he should have stumbled into a sort of boring language class that was even worse than ordinary school.

"I'll find Merry tonight," he thought, "and we'll run away."

But he was not even allowed out of Spot's quarters that night. The evening Hunt Breakfast was brought to them on a tray, and afterwards Spots sent him to bed on a pile of hay in the next room, and locked the door behind him.

The next morning, after more creamed kidneys and Stirrup Cup, the old hound fixed his pupil with a stern amber eye, and said, "Lesson One: the foxes are our constant companions, our worthy opponents, and our friends. Repeat that after me."

Somewhat sulkily, Robin repeated it after him.

"Lesson Two: the first and best quality in a hound is courage. The second is a Superior Nose. 'A hound cannot go faster than his nose.' Memorize that. Lesson Three the first concern of a kennel boy is the care of the hound's feet. Be ready to recite all that to me by tomorrow. Now huic-huic to me-that means come along. You'd better meet some of the Pack."

Glad to get out of the stuffy office, Robin followed him toward the kennel yard. Several hounds were strolling aimlessly in the same direction, pausing now and then to stretch in the sunshine

"Off-duty just now," Spots explained. "Assigned to the Second Hunt. That's young Freckles over there-one of my brightest pupils." He gestured at one of the strollers with a front paw. "Not a handsome fellow, of course-all his family tend to be

swine-chopped-but as for Superior Noses-"

"Excuse me," Robin interrupted. "Did you say swine chopped?"

"Means his lower jaw sticks out beyond his upper jaw," Spots explained impatiently. "Look and you'll see for yourself. Now, I'm just the opposite-overshot." He exhibited his profile, displaying a receding chin. "See the difference? Now, Firetail, there by the gate, is handsome enough, but he's a skirter. Cuts corners and runs wide of the Pack. Bad business." Spots shook his head gravely, and growled a little under his breath. "Terrible disappointment to his father. Well-let's go in. You'll be meeting some foxes, too, unless they're all at the fence-wriggling contest. Remember Lesson One, and see that you don't mention killing to any of them," he added severely.

Robin assured him indignantly that he would do no such tactless thing, and followed his teacher into the kennel yard. He had always liked dogs, and couldn't help looking forward to getting acquainted with the hounds.

After spending most of that day with them, however, he decided that these hounds were the dullest dogs he had ever met. They seemed to have no interest in life outside of fox-hunting. When they were not actually hunting, they were talking about it. The ones off-duty lolled about interminably outside the kennel doors or in the shade of some tree, always in groups-which usually included a visiting fox or two-and they were always talking shop.

"It was after that second check we lost you," one hound was

saying to a fox as Robin and Spots paused nearby late that afternoon. "All I could smell was hare, once we crossed that big ditch."

"You should have followed the hare, old boy," the fox said with a yelp of laughter.

"Followed the hare? My dear fellow, what are you talking about?" the hound demanded indignantly. "I hope I know better than to run riot, at my age! Why, a foiled field simply sickens me".

"I know!" said the fox, laughing harder than ever.

"I think you went to earth in that big drain," put in a second hound. "Trouble was, we didn't close our cast, and missed your drag."

"No, no," another said impatiently. "We lost him by that rasper just this side of the bullfinch. Then after we'd feathered, it was a stale line."

"What on earth do they mean?" Robin muttered crossly. In spite of his vocabulary drill, they might as well have been speaking Serbo-Croatian. But Spots was chuckling and nodding as if the discussion couldn't have been more fascinating.

"Smart fox, old Bushy," he remarked to Robin. "I'll bet he paired up with that hare, and took it easy the rest of the morning. He's experienced, he is. Like to meet him?"

At that moment, the fox glanced around, and Robin recognized him as the one he and Merry had encountered in the meadow the day before.

"No thank you," he told Spots stiffly. "I have met him, and he

laughed at my horse."

"Oh, I say, no offense, my boy," said Bushy, trotting over to them. "Just knew the Huntsmen would find her rather unusual, y'know."

"I wish they hadn't found her at all," Robin muttered.

"They've taken her away from me."

"Oh, she's got to be trained," Bushy remarked. His slanty eyes gleamed suddenly, and he pulled Robin to one side, voice to a hoarse whisper. "Want to hear how I fooled the Pack this morning?"

"Well-" said Robin, who didn't. His lack of enthusiasm failed to dampen Bushy's abundance of it. He nudged Robin a little farther away from Spots and began whispering animatedly, shoving his sharp nose so close that his whiskers tickled Robin's ear, and casting excited, mischievous glances over his shoulder at the hounds.

"I used a trick my great-uncle Whitetail taught me. I cut north for a hundred yards down that first lane, see, then ran my foil for fifty or sixty, then turned sharp by the bullfinch, jumped the big ditch and met a friend of mine-a hare! The two of us ran around a little to foil the field, then just sat in a thicket and watched the fun. Laugh? Thought I'd burst. You never saw such confused hounds. Except one other time, about a year ago-that day I headed due south, then jumped a rasper and-"

This went on for some time, while Robin yawned, shifted from

one foot to the other, dodged the tickling whiskers, and wished Spots would come and rescue him. The old hound finally finished examining a pup's hurt paw, and ambled over to them just as Bushy came to the end of his fourth story and was starting, with undiminished enjoyment, on a fifth.

"Tally-ho, Spots! Time to get on with the lessons, eh?" the fox said good-naturedly. "Well, good luck, young man. Don't worry about your little mare. How's she getting on with her jumping, d'you know?"

"No, I don't!" Robin said. "I haven't even seen her."

"Never mind, I expect you will in a month or so, when she's passed her exams," Bushy said. "I'd better be loping along, I guess.

Leu in!"

"Leu in!" responded Spots affably.

The fox waved a nonchalant paw and sauntered away, leaving Robin staring after him. "A month or so!" he gasped. "Why, they can't keep Merry away from me a whole month! I won't let them!" He turned furiously on Spots. "She's sensitive, and they don't understand her-they'll hurt her feelings! Besides, she's my horse! We don't want to stay here in this old County! We never even-

"Cope, cope!" Spots growled. "A little less tongue-throwing, if you please, or I'll have to bite you. Huic-huic to me now, it's time to mix the evening food."

Robin didn't care to be bitten, so he clamped his mouth shut and followed Spots to the long pink kennel house and the discouraging

array of feeding bowls. But his mind was made up. Before tomorrow, he and Merry were going to be far away from View-Halloo.

That night, as soon as he heard Spots begin snoring in the next room, he crept out of his bed of hay, cautiously pried up a window, and crawled out into the dark. He felt his way along a graveled path he knew led to Yoick's mansion, then followed his nose toward the stables beyond. He was just edging cautiously around the corner of a well-house when he bumped straight into something that nickered with fright and bounced away.

"Merry!" whispered Robin, who had recognized the nicker. "Robin! Is that you?" came a tremulous voice from the darkness, and the next instant Robin was being muzzled joyfully by a tear-wet nose. "Oh, I've been trying to find you! I hate it here! Please, let's go away!"

"Shhhh! Somebody'll hear. I was looking for you, too. Don't worry, we're going-and right this minute!"

"Oh, quick, before those nosy Real Horses find out I'm not in my stall. Climb on my back, Robin, I can see in the dark better than you can.

Robin was up in a moment, and Merry started slowly across the royal lawns, gradually gaining speed.

"I don't need the calliope music now," she whispered over her shoulder to Robin. "Although I'd like it, of course. And I can nearly always canter in a straight line, and I can jump quite

well."

"Can you jump that five-barred fence?" Robin asked her anxiously.

"I don't know, but I've been practicing hard. There's a place near our training-ring where it isn't quite so tall. That's where I'm going to try.

"All right," Robin said, looking nervously behind him. The moon had come out from behind a cloud bank, and he could see much better now-but so, he reflected, could any pursuers. "Is it much farther?" he whispered.

"No, there it is ahead-see?"

At that moment Robin saw movement near the white bars glimmering ahead, and the flash of a white-tipped tail. "A fox!" he groaned. "Practicing his fence-wriggling, I'll bet!"

"At this time of night?" Merry gasped.

"They always do. It's so the hounds won't see them, and learn their secrets. Oh, maybe he won't notice us!"

But the fox had noticed them already. It let out a yelp of surprise and streaked for The Kennels, howling for Spots at the top of its lungs. Spots's answering deep bark sounded almost immediately, baying the message to the Whipper-In, and in another instant every hound in View-Halloo was giving tongue. Lights flared in the mansion, in the courtyard; against the glow Robin could see the first Huntsmen running toward the stables and shouting for their horses to be saddled.

"Run, Merry!" he cried. "Don't look back, just run!"

"Oh, Robin, are they after us?" she whinnied in fright, and began to run in terrified circles.

"No, no, go straight, Merry! You can't do this now! Control yourself!" Robin shouted, dragging frantically at the reins.

Behind he could hear the sound of hoofs in the courtyard, mixed with the jingle of bridles and the yells of Huntsmen. "Merry they'll be after us any second. . ." Then Robin thought of the harmonica in his pocket, and made a dive for it. An instant later he was blowing teedle-ee-dle-ees and oompahs as loud as he could blow. Merry's head came up, her ears pricked, and suddenly she was no longer going around and around, but bounding straight across the sawdust of the training-ring and the strip of soft grass beyond.

"Now!" yelled Robin, and blew a long, loud chord. Merry gave one last tremendous bound, sailed over the five-bar fence without so much as nicking the paint with a rear hoof, and landing running on the other side.

"We're safe, we're safe!", Robin cried, flinging both arms around her pole because he couldn't reach her neck without falling off. "You can slow down now, Merry-we've left them all behind!"

"Let's leave them farther behind!" Merry gasped. "Hang on, Robin, I'm going to keep on running."

Keep on she did, across meadows and over hedges and ditches, until the moon was high in the sky and the landscape around them had changed from the pleasant fields of the Fox-Hunters' County to rugged hills and forests and abrupt, narrow valleys. Here the

little mare was forced to slow down and pick her way more carefully, though she still cast nervous glances over her shoulder and would not consent to stop for the night until they found themselves in a deep and winding gorge through which a swift little river ran. Ahead, Robin could hear the muffled roar of a waterfall.

"We're perfectly safe now, Merry!" Robin told her. "And I'm tired. Let's stop, and go on in the morning."

"Can we go on?" Merry said dubiously as he slid down from her back. "Isn't that a waterfall we hear?"

"We'll worry about that tomorrow," Robin said with a yawn. He knelt for a long, refreshing drink of the icy water of the river, then curled up in a shallow cave in the rocks nearby, and was instantly asleep.

Chapter 8

ROBIN awoke early next morning, much refreshed to find Merry peering in the entrance of his little cave. She nickered softly, and when he said "Good morning!" she gave a little bounce of joy.

"Oh goody, you're awake. I've been awfully bored, waiting for you."

"Haven't you even been to sleep?" Robin asked, stepping out into the sunshine.

"No, I don't know how. I guess I'm not made for sleeping."

"Or for getting tired, either," Robin added, patting her ad-

miringly. "That was a wonderful run you made last night!"

"Well, I don't know," Merry sighed. "I think I ran too far. There doesn't seem to be any way out of this gorge, unless we go right back toward Fox-Hunting country, and please, let's not do that, Robin!"

"Have you been exploring?" Robin asked, beginning to do some exploring himself, in search of breakfast. He quickly discovered some wild raspberries, and moved from bush to bush picking them into his handkerchief, with Merry tagging at his heels.

"No," she answered, "I was afraid I might get lost from you. But a bird told me that noise is a waterfall up ahead, and we can't climb a waterfall, can we?"

"Maybe there's a way around," Robin told her. He had a handkerchief full of berries by now, and sat down on the bank of the little river to eat them. "You know, Merry," he added, "I've been thinking about what that redbird told us about this country we're in.

"It's called Oz," Merry said helpfully.

"Yes, and we're in the southern section of it, and there's a capital called the Emerald City, and a fairy princess is the ruler. A fairy princess wouldn't be mean to us, or capture us, or anything, would she? I think we ought to try to find this Emerald City and ask her if she'll help us. She might know the way to Oregon."

"She might," Merry said uncertainly.

Robin felt a little uncertain himself. So far, nobody in Oz

seemed even to have heard of Oregon, any more than he had ever heard of Oz.

"Fairies probably know everything," he said stoutly. "Anyway, we've got to go somewhere, and I'd like to see an emerald city, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes!" Merry agreed. "But Robin-what if it's too far to walk from there to Oregon?"

"Then we'll take a train. In a city, I could get a job to earn our fare. I was a caddy once, at the Cherryburg Golf Club, and another time I had a paper route. The only thing I won't be is a kennel-boy!" he added with a grin. He finished his raspberries, except for a handful which he put thoughtfully in his pocket for lunch, and jumped up, eager to be off. Reassuring Merry had made him feel much more confident himself. "Everything's going to be fine, you'll see," he told her as they started along the gorge.

But the farther they went, the narrower the gorge became, and the steeper and higher its red, craggy walls grew, while the waterfall boomed ever louder ahead. Within a few minutes they had scarcely room to pick their way along the rocky river-bank, and Robin wondered if they would soon be forced to wade. Then they rounded a sharp bend and halted in astonishment and admiration at the scene before them. The gorge had opened out abruptly into a steep-sided basin, with the river, suddenly broadened into a little lake, lying like a clear jewel at the bottom. Straight ahead, the waterfall leaped in a broad and sparkling torrent over the edge of the basin far above, to plunge with a roar and a cloud of spray into

the lake.

"How beautiful!" Robin exclaimed. His voice was lost in the thunder of the waterfall, and he ended by shouting his remark directly into Merry's ear. She nodded, but seemed frightened as she gazed with wide eyes this way and that.

"Where's the way around?" she whinnied. "You said there'd be a way round."

"I might've been wrong," Robin admitted.

He, too, began to examine his surroundings with an eye to escaping from them, and walking farther into the basin, peered rather anxiously across the river. At once he spotted a curious little hut on the opposite shore. It looked as if it were built entirely of twigs, woven together in some fashion, and smoke was spiraling from its crooked chimney. Most encouraging of all, there was a crude raft moored near the hut.

"Somebody must live there," Robin shouted, pointing. "Make as much noise as you can, Merry!"

Merry whinnied shrilly, and Robin cupped his hands about his mouth and yelled with all his might. It was useless. The waterfall's thunder swallowed their voices. After a few moments of effort, however, Robin stopped to catch his breath and noticed a small sign tacked to a tree growing near the water's edge, only a few steps away from him.

"PULL SIGNAL CORD FOR FERRYMAN," it read.

"Now, why didn't I see that in the first place!" Robin panted,

running forward in relief. A cord was dangling from the tree on which the sign was tacked. Wondering what sort of noise it would make, Robin pulled it. He heard nothing at all, but on closer examination he discovered that the cord was threaded through a complicated system of pulleys, screw-eyes and guide-hooks right under the river to a large drum-like stump on the opposite shore near the hut. Every time he pulled the cord, a wooden mallet banged hard upon the stump-and presently a very bent old man, with a long, pointed pink beard, emerged from the hut and peered across the river at them. Robin waved both hands and Merry her tail, and they received an answering wave from the Ferryman, who hobbled rapidly into his hut, came out again wearing a battered, official-looking scarlet cap, and hurried down to the raft.

"He's coming!" Robin shouted joyfully. "It won't be long now, Merry, and we'll be on our way.

As a matter of fact, though the river was not very wide, the old Ferryman took an unconscionable length of time to cross it. He boarded his raft promptly enough, but only after an enormous amount of energy expended and motions made did he succeed in casting off. To the puzzled travelers, who stood watching for some time and finally sat down on the red sands to wait, the ferry appeared to be a mere raft of logs with two railings which ran along a rope stretched across the river, but judging by the Ferryman's furious activity its operation seemed to be extremely complicated. Ropes of all sizes had to be untied every few minutes, and tied again in different places; a great many wooden levers had to be adjusted

and readjusted; soundings had to be taken every ten seconds. What with all these things to attend to, the Ferryman was a perfect whirlwind of motion all the way across the river-yet the ferry traveled so slowly it was almost impossible to see it move. Robin and Merry had ample time to inspect the strange craft minutely as it crept near, and to read the words printed across the front of the Ferryman's battered cap and handwritten, in red chalk, on both the railings:

"MUNICIPAL INTERSTATE RAPID TRANSIT WATERWAYS SYSTEM COMMISSION OF THE QUADLING

COUNTRY OF OZ. INC."

"Well, the Ferryman's rapid, even if the ferry isn't," Robin shouted to Merry.

Eventually, in a final burst of activity from its pilot, the raft scraped gently against the shore. Merry and Robin started down the sloping bank to board it, but the Ferryman waved his arms in alarm and motioned them back. They waited while he dashed about energetically, mooring the ferry securely in several places, the rigging a minute, red-striped awning over the little gang-plank. Then, and only then, were they allowed to step onto the raft.

"Good morning, sir," Robin shouted politely. "We'd like to cross the river."

"Howzat agin?" cried the old man, cupping one ear with a gnarled hand.

"I say we'd like to cross the river," Robin shrieked, wishing he could turn off the waterfall for a minute. "How much is the-"

"Eh?" yelled the Ferryman, leaning closer. "Howzat agin?"

"WHAT'S THE FARE?" Robin bellowed.

"Lots of air? A-course there is. Kind of a silly thing to call me clear across the river for, young feller."

"Oh, dear," Robin sighed.

"Well, you'd be deaf too, if you lived so close to that water-fall," Merry said sympathetically. "Let me try."

Stepping close to the old man, she began whinnying shrilly into his left ear, while Robin bellowed into his right one. At first he merely looked baffled and yelled "Howzat agin?" to everything they said, but finally his face cleared, and he gave them a jovial, toothless grin.

"Oh, you want to go across the river! Well, why didn't you say so? No charge, glad to oblige-" He stopped, then added eagerly, "-unless you'd happen to have a mite of food about you somewhere? Don't matter what. Berries, roots, any old thing."

Robin remembered the raspberries he had saved, and hastily presented them to old Howzatagin, who appeared overjoyed, and ate them on the spot.

"Now I needn't catch a fish for breakfast, you know," he confided as he returned Robin's raspberry-stained handkerchief.

"Well, all aboard! All ashore that's going ashore! Up the gang-plank! Stow the awning! Lash the railings! Cast off the moorings! Coil the sheets! Man the rudder! Hoist the tops'!! Mind the binnacle! Take the helm! Nor' by Southeast! Steady as you go!"

Robin had opened his mouth to ask why Howzatagin didn't like to catch fish, but presently he gave up and closed it again. Between the waterfall's din and the racket the old man was making as he barked out orders to himself and dashed here and there obeying them, things were far too noisy and confusing for conversation. Robin and Merry concentrated on keeping out of the way, and uttered not a word throughout the snail-like trip across the river and the long rigamarole of landing on the other shore.

At last they stepped off the ferry, and Robin, feeling he had spent the better part of his life on the journey, muttered to Merry that it might have been better to swim.

"What's more, I'm hungry again," he added with a sigh.

"Maybe you could catch a fish, even if the Ferryman doesn't like to," suggested Merry.

"Oh, don't do that, young feller!" begged Howzatagin, who seemed to hear much better now that they were away from the waterfall. "Poor little tykes, think how they must hate it!"

"Who?" Robin asked in bewilderment.

"The fish! How would you like to have a nasty old hook in your mouth?" Howzatagin demanded. "I have to catch 'em sometimes, because there's not much else to eat hereabouts. But it always makes me cry." He pulled out an enormous scarlet handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "I think of them as my friends, I do. There's some as I even know by their first names. Got a trout in the house right now as I'm curing of a sprained fin. Name's Richard. Come on in and meet 'im. I'll give you a cookie."

Fascinated at the prospect of meeting a trout named Richard, Robin and Merry followed the old Ferryman into his twiggy hut. There they found not only the trout, who was swimming wanly around a punch-bowl, but a dozen or so other little convalescents, both birds and animals, perched on the rafters or curled up on the old man's bed. They were recovering from a variety of ailments- broken legs, dislocated tails, ear-aches, or, as in the case of one rather pale-looking young beaver named Henry, merely upset stomachs-and many were neatly bandaged.

"You must be very fond of animals," Merry said shyly as the Ferryman led Robin to a table and set out seed-cookies, wild cranberry juice, and a mug of steaming herb tea.

"Well, they're company," the old man explained. "Only trouble with the Red Gorge, it's kinda lonesome. Not many folks ever pass this way. Besides the food bein' skeerce."

"Why don't you move?" asked Robin.

"Move?" Howzatagin looked scandalized. "Why, I couldn't leave my post, young feller! I'm the Ferryman! Only one in the Quadling Country! Sole employee of the Municipal Interstate Rapid Transit Waterways System Commission of the Quadling Country of Oz, Inc."

"What does 'Inc.' mean?" Merry asked.

"Inconsequential," sighed Howzatagin. "But I wouldn't move. Oh, no, I couldn't do a thing like that! Where are you folks headin' for?"

"Well-the Emerald City, if we can find a way," Robin said.

Briefly he told the old man of their adventures of the past two days, adding that he hoped someone in the capital could tell them how to get home to Oregon. "Do you think that fairy ruler would help Us?" he inquired.

"Easiest thing in the world!" Howzatagin declared. "Why, Princess Ozma'll just put on her Magic Belt and wish you home again."

"Wish us home?" Merry echoed.

"Magic Belt?" Robin said at the same moment.

"Oh, ho, you are strangers, aren't you?" the Ferryman chuckled. "Never heard of the Magic Belt! I s'pose you never heard of the Wizard, either, or the Cowardly Lion, or the Tin Woodman, or Princess Dorothy, or Betsy Bobbin, or the Saw-horse, or-"

"No, never!" chorused Robin and Merry. Merry added uneasily, "What's a Sawhorse?"

For the next half hour they listened, fascinated, while Howzatagin, who had lived in the Emerald City many years before becoming the sole employee of the M.I.R.T.W.S.C.O.T.Q. C.O.O.Inc., told them all about the beautiful capital of Oz and the many celebrities who lived there. To Robin it sounded as if nobody but celebrities lived there- and such astonishing ones they were that if he himself had not been traveling with a living, talking merry-go-round horse he would not have believed a word the old man said. There was a Scarecrow, stuffed with straw, who was not

only alive but had the best brains in the land-a kind-hearted Woodman made entirely of tin-a Tiger whose appetite continually demanded fat babies, but whose tender conscience had never allowed him to eat a single one-a Lion who trembled piteously with fright even while dashing into battle-a Wizard who could perform any conceivable feat of magic and had once been Ruler of Oz-a yellow hen named Billina who had been Dorothy's companion in a shipwreck and later rescued Ozma and her whole party from the Gnome King-a madcap rag girl named Scraps who was made of an old patchwork quilt but brimmed with more life and far more mischief than most ordinary folk-a Sawhorse whose common wooden legs were shod with pure gold, who had been the faithful steed of Princess Ozma when she was a boy.

"Princess Ozma was a boy once?" Robin burst out, delighted.

It made her seem much more approachable, somehow.

"A boy named Tip," said Howzatagin, nodding wisely. "Bewitched, you know."

"What about those other girls-Princess Dorothy and Betsy Bobbin? Were they boys too?"

"Oh, no! Why, they came from Americky, same as you. Carried here by earthquakes and shipwrecks and cyclones and I dunno what all. Princess Ozma kept wishin' 'em back home with her Magic Belt, but they kept comm' back, and finally they just decided to stay."

"Oh, Robin, couldn't we stay too?" Merry begged.

"For always?" Robin said. "Merry, don't you want to go back to Oregon at all?"

"Well-if I could be a Real Horse, and stay with you I might," Merry said. "But in Oregon I'd just be fastened to a merry-go-round, and I couldn't even talk!"

"I'll bet the Wizard would change you to a real horse, " Howzatagin told her.

"Oh, would he?" Merry whinnied, bouncing with excitement.

"Oh, Robin, did you hear that? Oh, hurry, let's go ask him!"

Robin agreed-reluctantly-that it was time to go. He could have listened to stories of the Emerald City folk forever. "But it'll be even better to meet them myself," he reflected, so after thanking the old Ferryman for his kindness, they left the hut.

"Just foller that path through the woods there," Howzatagin told them. "And when you come out on t'other side, keep agoin' till you come to a road made of yaller bricks. Then just stay on that Yaller Brick Road. It'll take you right into the Emerald City! Goodby! Come back and visit me again someday!"

"We will!" Robin promised, climbing onto Merry's back.

"Tell Richard we're glad we met him. Goodby!"

Chapter 9

PRINCE Gules, Fred, Fess, the Unicorn and Flitter, cautiously following the dotted-line path of white stones,

discovered that it led them right through the thicket, and out on the other side. As they emerged, they found themselves at the top of a little slope, and paused to look curiously at the tidy, rolling land which spread out before them.

It seemed to be one vast farm. Everywhere were orderly plots of fruit trees and berry bushes, and rows of little plants. All were laden and ready for harvest. There was not a person, an animal, or a bird to be seen anywhere, and not one sound to be heard, but at first this seemed to be the only queer thing about the place.

Then Fess, hoping to pick some pears and apples to replenish the lunchbasket, led the way down the slope and over to the nearest tree. There he stopped in astonishment, and simply gaped.

"Signs!" he exclaimed-and even his hushed voice sounded too loud in the silence. "Look here, Your Highness! This tree is growing signs, instead of fruit!"

"So is that one," whispered the Unicorn.

"They all are!" said the Prince.

It was true. Even the bushes and plants were loaded with signs, which grew on stake-like stems amid leaves that on closer inspection proved to be handbills and small posters. Some of the signs were small and obviously still green, with their lettering cramped and indistinct; some were ripe, and plain to read; still others were withering, with their lettering half worn off and their edges cracked and splitting.

They spelled out every sort of message. As the travelers fol-

lowed the dotted line they could read KEEP OUT, DO NOT DISTURB, NO SMOKING, SCHOOL ZONE, STANDING ROOM ONLY, and a hundred others. One whole group of trees bore nothing but STOP signs; another RAILROAD X-ING signs; still another merchants' signs, such as FIRE SALE, EVERYTHING MUST GO, SPECIAL CLEARANCE, and \$AVE! \$AVE! \$AVE! This last one seemed to fascinate the Flittermouse, who stared at it wide-eyed at they passed, then kept trying in a nervous whisper to pronounce it to himself.

"All the signs in the world must come from here!" Fess murmured to the Unicorn as they passed a price-tag bush. "Isn't it interesting?"

"Well, it's a nice place to visit, I suppose," she conceded remotely. "But I wouldn't care to live here."

"I wouldn't have the country if you gave it to me in a silver manger!" Fred grumbled, making very little attempt to keep his voice down. "Nobody riding out to welcome us, everything ordering us around-look at that bush there! 'No Hunting.' 'No Smoking.' 'No Trespassing!' Who'd want to trespass in this place if they could bypass it? Furthermore-"

"There's a helpful one," Prince Gules interrupted, pointing to a sign growing by itself at a place 'where the dotted line branched and wandered off in several directions through the trees. "THIS WAY IN" the sign directed, and below the words was an arrow pointing out one of the many paths.

"Nice of them to tell us, I'm sure!" Fred commented. "Any

decent country would send an escort. After all, a party of our consequence-

He broke off, shying slightly, as the sign suddenly changed to "SHHHHHHHH!" Then he tossed his head disdainfully and started along the path indicated- though without finishing his sentence, Fess noticed. He also rolled a wary eye at the sign as he went by, but it changed blandly to "No Smoking" and made no further comment.

There were a good many of these "talking" signs growing beside the path at intervals. "Like sentries," Fess reflected Uncomfortably. "Or even spies." Certainly something was keeping a sharp watch on the travelers. A KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign changed to "PLEASE!" when Fred inadvertently placed one hoof beyond the dotted line. A moment later, as the Unicorn reached eagerly toward a clump of daisies, the sky-writing itself broke off the lazy squiggles it was making, and scrawled angrily, "DO NOT PICK THE FLOWERS!" The Unicorn had already spat the daisies out in distaste; Fess, retrieving one from the corner of her mouth, discovered that they were made of cardboard, and each petal was neatly lettered, "He Loves Me" or "He Loves Me Not."

"Everything Loves Us Not in this place," Flitter whispered forlornly as he read the petals over Fess's shoulder. The little creature seemed depressed by this silent country, and was huddled inside Fess's collar with only his head sticking out.

"Never mind," Fess murmured, stroking the drooping, blue-gray fur with one finger. "We'll find some people soon."

It seemed to him the dotted-line path was leading them toward the source of the sky-writing-and perhaps the ruler of the country. There must be someone in charge of this strange place, he reasoned, who could tell them how to get out of it. Prince Gules, who had been riding along in silence, looking around with the mildly entertained expression of a sight-seeing tourist, was apparently of the same opinion, for he turned to smile at Fess, and whispered, "Bound to come to the castle soon."

However. it was not a castle they came upon presently, when the dotted line made a sharp turn between two groves of trees. It was merely a graveled clearing, with a small tool-shed in the center. Nailed to the door of the shed was a sign reading, "Bill Bored, Prop." Below the sign, a sleepy-faced gardener in a worn straw hat was sitting in an old chair, smoking a pipe. It was the smoke from this pipe that floated up into the air to form the sky-writing-which at the moment was spelling out, in trailing, bored-looking letters, "Good Morning-I Guess. Welcome To Sign-Here-I Suppose."

The Unicorn gave an affronted gasp, while Fred-perhaps fortunately-was rendered quite speechless by this unflattering greeting. Prince Gules, too, raised a critical eyebrow, but his manners were as excellent as the gardener's were bad.

"Thank you," he replied graciously.

At once the sign on the door changed to: QUIET! SPEAK

SIGN LANGUAGE ONLY!

The Prince favored it with a chilly look, remarking, "I'm afraid I don't know how."

Under his regal stare the sign faded a bit, then grudgingly-and with a slight air of embarrassment, Fess thought-reverted to its former announcement.

"The signs in your country repeatedly say 'No smoking'," Prince Gules reminded the gardener severely.

For answer, the gardener put the pipe in his mouth and puffed out, in sky-writing, "I'm Different. I'm The Boss. Who Are You? And Who Are Those Creatures With You? Signatures, Please."

Fred stamped indignantly at "creatures"; and the Unicorn elevated her snow-white nose and looked down it at the gardener, but the Prince merely became more courtly.

"I am Gules, Prince of Halidom," he said. "Traveling with me is the Unicorn, Emblem of Halidom and Unique Animal of the World. My attendants are my Steed, Fr . . . Federigo; my page, Fess of Troth; and his pet the Flittermouse."

Fred was much soothed by the quiet grandeur of this little speech-and especially by the Prince's having remembered to call him "Federigo"-but the gardener seemed unimpressed.

"Well, I'm Bill Bored, Proprietor Of Sign-Here," scrawled the sky-writing, carelessly. "And As Far As I'm Concerned, You're All Trespassers, And Against The Law. What's Your Business Here?"

"We have no business here," Prince Gules began, only to be interrupted by the sign on the door, which waspishly changed to "Right!" As this piece of impertinence drew down upon it another of the Prince's quelling stares, however, it seemed to lose its nerve, changed uneasily to "Write", and finally faded out sulkily altogether.

Meanwhile, the Prince was explaining to Bill Bored that while they had entered Sign-Here by accident and wished only to leave it, they would be glad to know if he had seen anything of a Golden Circlet.

"What's A Cold Circle?" scrawled the sky-writing, ending in an untidy puff of smoke as Bill Bored yawned.

"I said Golden Circlet. The Second Treasure of Halidom!" the Prince said in ringing tones.

Fess, who had so far admired the Prince's conduct of the interview-especially his squelching of the impertinent sign-now decided that a little less grandeur and a little more information was in order, and quickly told Bill Bored about the robbery, and the importance of finding the Circlet as soon as possible.

"But so far, we don't even know where to look," he finished. "Well, It's No Good Asking Me," Bill Bored sky-wrote indifferently. "I Haven't Seen It." After a pause in which he yawned again, he added three smoky words. "Ask The Oracle."

The travelers turned to him eagerly.

"Where is the Oracle, Sir?" asked Fess.

"In The Coracle," was the laconic answer.

"But where is the Coracle?" Fess persisted, while Fred danced impatiently, the Unicorn sighed with exasperation, and even Flitter thrust his head out of Fess's collar to scowl.

However, the smoky words answered only, "In The Middle Of The Link."

"And where is the Link?" cried the Prince. "Indeed, 'what is it?'"

But by now Bill had become so bored that he was almost asleep. He waved irritably toward a path leading out of the clearing, then turned his back and sat with his knees stolidly crossed, puffing on his pipe. Not another word could they get from him; the sky-writing resolved itself into mere lazy puffs and squiggles.

"Oh, who needs him?" Fred said in disgust. "Come on, we'll find this Link ourselves, whatever it is! We'll probably know it when we see it.

He set out at a spirited trot along the path Bill Bored had indicated; the others followed willingly. However, they were soon forced to slow down. Almost as soon as they were out of the clearing the path began to climb, the air to grow chilly, and the landscape to change. Within a few moments the neat plots of sign-trees had merged into untended groves and thickets, while the white stones of the dotted line gave way to jumbled rocks. Fred and the Unicorn slid and stumbled on the steep, uneven footing, while their riders, hunched against the cold wind, peered anxiously this way and that through the forest-though neither of them, Fess re-

flected, had the slightest notion what a Link might look like. Now, when signs might have helped, there were none visible except occasional weedy-looking ones that read "Road Closed" or "No Mountain-Climbing Allowed."

"Then what are we supposed to do, fly?" Fred panted, glaring at this last one. "If that isn't just like this country!"

At the same moment, the Unicorn remarked, "It's snowing."

"And I'm getting awfully hungry," squeaked the Flittermouse mournfully. "Can't we go somewhere else now, Fess dear? I don't like this place at all, and my nose is cold, and-"

Suddenly the Prince broke in. "What is that ahead? Oh, merely a lake. But what a queer one! By my halbred, it's almost black."

It certainly was a queer one, they saw when they emerged at last from the trees and stood looking at it through the falling snowflakes. It lay in a forest-ringed hollow which was apparently the very top of the mountain, and it was perfectly circular, with water of so dark a blue that it had actually stained the white sand around the edge.

"Looks more like ink than water, Prince Gules remarked as he and Fess dismounted to examine it.

The Unicorn, who had stretched her white nose down to sniff, drew back hastily, announcing, "I believe it is ink."

"A lake of ink?" Fess began incredulously, then exclaimed, "Why, of course-a link. We've found the Link, Your Highness!"

"And there's the Coracle!" cried the Flittermouse, bouncing

up and down.

Sure enough, in the exact middle of the Link a small, circular boat floated peacefully. It appeared quite empty, except for a load of snowflakes slowly gathering around its rim.

"If that's the Coracle, where's the Oracle?" Fred demanded.

"There's something," said the Unicorn, pointing her horn at an object standing on the sands a little distance away. As they approached they saw it was a table, on which was chained a large open register-book. Beside the book stood a pen in a silver stand, and-inevitably-a little sign.

"Sign Here For Oracle," it directed.

Without hesitation, Prince Gules seized the pen, dipped it in the Link, and boldly scrawled "Gules, Prince of Halidom" across the open page of the register.

No sooner had he dotted the last "i" than a bell chimed somewhere, and out in the middle of the Link the Coracle gave a little lurch and started toward them of its own accord. Fred shied, and Flitter scurried back inside Fess's collar. where he whispered shakily, "Fess dear, what kind of person is an Oracle?" The others merely watched in astonishment, stamping their cold feet and blowing on their hands, as the Coracle crossed the Link and halted, bobbing gently, in the shallow ink near the shore. They could see now that there was a velvet cushion in the boat's rounded bottom; on the cushion was a shimmering, transparent sphere mounted in a silver base.

"A crystal ball! So that's the Oracle!" Fess exclaimed. "I wonder how we work it?"

The Oracle itself answered this question; as the travelers clustered around it, a tiny sign popped up from a slot in its base.

"Deposit Three Gold Pieces," Prince Gules read aloud. He turned and held out a casual hand to Fess. "Do you have three gold pieces, please?"

"I don't think so," Fess said nervously, beginning to search his pockets.

"You forgot to bring gold pieces for our journey?" the Prince exclaimed in shocked and disapproving tones.

Reminding himself that the Prince couldn't help being a bit stupid at times, Fess patiently explained that all he had brought was a lunch basket, that a page seldom, if ever, even saw any gold pieces, and that in any case Halidom's treasury was usually empty.

"True," Gules admitted. "Well, perhaps I have some. I think I did have, about a month ago."

He, too, began going through his pockets, and after much searching produced two small and rather battered coins. After a few more anxious moments, while Fred stamped and complained that he was freezing, Fess located a third-an old one from Troth-which had slipped through a hole into the lining of his cloak. Much relieved, he handed it to the Prince, who dropped all three gold pieces into the slot.

Immediately another sign popped up. "Ask Three Questions. Shake Well After Each," it instructed.

"Where is the Golden Circlet?" Gules asked it promptly.

Fess, wishing the Prince would be less impulsive, hurriedly added, "The one stolen night before last from Halidom."

They all crowded forward, expecting another sign, but instead they heard the mysterious little bell chime again. Nothing else happened.

"You forgot to shake it," Fred mumbled.

The Prince reached into the Coracle, took the crystal ball between his hands and shook it hard. Instantly it became cloudy and opaque, as if gray fog were trapped inside; then the fog changed to violently swirling white particles. This gave the whole thing such a familiar appearance that Fess exclaimed in surprise. It looked precisely like a little glass paperweight he had at home, which produced just such a miniature snowstorm when he shook it. So striking was the resemblance that he found himself watching dubiously as the ball cleared, half-convinced it would reveal nothing more than a little snowman.

What it did reveal was even more disappointing. There, shimmering amid the last settling snowflakes in the crystal ball was merely the image of another crystal ball.

For an instant they all stared at it blankly.

"Maybe it means the Circlet is around here somewhere," Fess ventured, peering into the empty boat.

"Nonsense!" the Prince said in annoyance. Before Fess could stop him, he gave the ball an angry shake, and pointing to the

image, demanded, "What is that supposed to represent?"

At once the little bell chimed, and the miniature snowstorm raged, then cleared to show exactly the same image. This time it was larger and more distinct; it even quivered a little, as if the Oracle were trying hard.

"Oh, wait, please, Your Highness!" Fess cried, seeing that Prince Gules had his mouth open to ask another irritated question. "Be careful! That's two of our questions gone, and we haven't any more gold pieces! Do think before you ask it anything else!"

"Oh, you ask it something! I'm tired of its silly ways," said Gules, handing the Oracle to Fess.

Fess thought anxiously a moment, then asked, "How can we find the three Golden Circlets of Halidom?"

He shook the ball. As the swirling snow cleared for the third time, they could see that the former image was gone, and smoky words were beginning to take shape instead. Everyone pressed closer to Fess, the Flittermouse leaning perilously far out of his collar and Fred breathing hoarsely into his ear.

"It's a rhyme!" Fess said, and read it out.
"Circlet One, in strange disguise,
Will lie unseen before your eyes.
Flight and chance will set it free;
Despoil the gift to royalty."

As the travelers stared uncomprehendingly, the words shimmered and began to fade.

"Oh, hooray," snorted Fred with a withering glance at the

Oracle. "Why, that solves everything, doesn't it? Now if we can just locate those fellows Flight and Chance . .

"Why must it be so mysterious?" the Prince said in disgust.

"I seem to remember that Oracles are famous for that," Fess sighed. "It's disappointing, but-"

"Wait! There's more coming!" the Unicorn interrupted.

Sure enough, new words were forming as the first ones vanished. This time they read:

"Circlet Two, of purest gold,
Was carried off by a villain bold.
Problems will your path encumber;
Trust in the humblest of your number."

"My rhymes make more sense than that, don't they, Fess dear?" the Flittermouse said jealously. "Even if they're not quite as-"

"Here's more, here's more!" Fess exclaimed, as a third verse formed.

"Circlet Three, a tiny thing,
Is in the hands of a future king.
Go by night, return by day,
The Circlet find in a roundabout way."

The words remained a moment within the Oracle, then slowly faded, and though they waited hopefully, no more appeared.

"End of instructions," Fred said flatly. "Clear as mud. Easy as sneezing. Naturally, we won't have the slightest trouble finding a future king. Anybody who is anybody knows dozens, I'm sure. He stamped a hoof so hard it made a six-inch hole in the snowy sand. "I never heard of such a waste of gold pieces!"

"Yes, put the useless thing back in its boat, and let's be off before we freeze solid!" the Prince said with scorn.

"It's rude and crude," agreed Flitter. "And I'm cold as gold," he added pitifully.

The Prince mounted without further ado as Fess replaced the Oracle on its stand. Before the Oracle had borne its strange cargo back to the middle of the Link, Fred was half way around the edge of the shore. But Fess stayed behind long enough to scribble the verses on a scrap of paper torn from the register book.

"If I don't we're sure to forget what they said, and we might understand them later, if we keep trying," he explained to the Unicorn as he climbed hastily onto her back.

"I think that's very wise," she told him gently. "You know, I believe I already understand one line. 'The humblest of your number' must mean the Flittermouse, mustn't it? Because it wouldn't be His Highness or me or you, though it might be that Steed."

"Depends on what it means by 'humblest'," Fess said with amusement. "Federigo certainly doesn't act humble."

"That's precisely why I doubt if his blood-lines are as aristo-

cratic as he pretends. Persons of Real Quality don't boast so much."

"But how could it mean me?" the Flittermouse said in a rather panic-stricken voice. "I couldn't find a Circlet all by myself!"

"It only says for us to trust you," the Unicorn remarked. "And that," she added graciously, "I'm quite prepared to do."

Flitter was so flattered at this kind speech that he crawled out Fess's collar and sat proudly on the Unicorn's head, muttering lists of words that rhyme with "unicorn" so that he might compose a song in her honor.

He had just given up in despair on "unicorn" and begun on "emblem" when they reached the opposite side of the Link, where Fred had stopped in front of the oddest sign they had yet seen. It

merely "Exit", but the letters were painted on red glass, with dim light behind the glass and a doorway framed by red velvet curtains below. It all looked exceedingly strange and out of place this snowy landscape.

"Where do you suppose the door leads to?" said Prince Gules, who was trying unsuccessfully to see through the high, thick shrubbery on either side.

"Out, that's where," Fred told him. "Come on, any place is better than here!"

Recklessly, he shouldered the door open and went through, the Unicorn at his heels. Next instant both were trying in vain to scramble back through the closed door, as all the travelers gazed

downward in horror. They had emerged onto a narrow, shaky platform of iron bars, below which they could see nothing but empty space, with a series of equally frail-looking landings descending dizzily to the ground far below.

"It's a fire-escape!" Fess gasped.

"And we haven't even had the fire," Fred groaned. Teeth chattering, he made another plunging assault on the stubbornly closed door, nearly knocking the Unicorn off the platform in the attempt and causing the Flittermouse to skid off her head.

"You're crowding us! You're crowding us!" the little creature squeaked, wildly fluttering his wings.

"look out!" cried Prince Gules.

There was a loud clang, and instead of looking anywhere, all five travelers shut their eyes tight, for the platform had suddenly tilted, turned itself into a perilous sort of ramp down which they tobogganed helter-skelter, and shaken them furiously onto the next platform below, which immediately clanged and tilted too. For the next few minutes they did nothing but scramble, slide, and half-fall downward, as the fire-escape shuttled them roughly from one level to the next. At last it dumped them off unceremoniously at the bottom, folded itself up again with a series of malevolent clangs, and disappeared entirely.

Breathless, dizzy, and shaking, they were just beginning to pick themselves up when Fess discovered the Flittermouse was missing. Realizing the little creature must have fluttered away somewhere in the uproar, he scrambled to his feet and was looking frantically

around when Fred gave a loud, terrified neigh and yelled,

"Help! A lioncel.' A lioncel! Help! Help!"

At the same moment, there was a shrill scream, followed by a perfectly tremendous roar, and an unfamiliar voice shrieked,

"Help! Help! A bat! Go 'way! Go 'way!"

Chapter 10

"You know what, Ozma?" said Princess

Dorothy, stopping short to stare at a lily bush in the palace gardens.

"We ought to have an Easter party!"

"Well! Did you see that written on a lily-petal?" the Wizard asked her.

Dorothy returned the broad smile lighting the face of her old friend, and said, "Not exactly, but the lilies made me think of Easter, and that made me remember that Easter's only a week away, and that reminded me that we haven't made any plans, and THAT made me think-"

"-that we ought to make some," the Wizard finished.

"It's a good idea!" Ozma declared. "We haven't had a party in ages. Who shall we invite?"

"Children, of course," answered a brisk voice, and Dorothy's yellow hen, Billina, fluttered out from underneath a rosebush.

"Billina! Have you been hiding your nest again?" exclaimed Dorothy with a suspicious glance beneath the bush.

"Never you mind! Ozma lets me, don't you, Ozma?" demanded the hen, and ruffled her feathers with satisfaction at Ozma's amused nod. "Anyway, hiding eggs is the usual procedure at an Easter party, isn't it? I'm just getting in practice," she added with a shrill cackle of laughter.

"Finding 'em is what you do at the party," Dorothy said. "Though somebody has to hide them beforehand. I b'lieve I'll just appoint you Chief Egg-Hider, Billina-since you've had so much experience!"

"Well, I must say!" began the Yellow Hen indignantly. But at the Wizard's burst of laughter and Ozma's mischievous smile, she gave in and chuckled too. "Oh, all right. I'll hide 'em. Will the party be outdoors?"

"Of course. We have a perfect place for it," Ozma said, glancing around the rolling lawns and gardens of the palace grounds. "Let's have a nice big party, what do you say? I don't see why we shouldn't ask every single child in the Emerald City. Now let me think. ... They'll all need baskets-"

"That sounds like my department," the Wizard observed. "Shall I make small baskets grow on all the bushes for half an hour or so, at the beginning of the party? Then each child could pick one. Or, if you would prefer something a little more striking-"

"Have the baskets fall out of the trees onto their heads. That would be more striking," chuckled a deep voice behind them, and the Cowardly Lion ambled out of a little summerhouse, where he

had been taking an after-lunch nap.

Billina gave another of her shrill cackles of laughter, and the others joined in. At the sounds of merriment, Scraps the Patchwork Girl came careening perilously around a bend in the path riding the palace cook's bicycle, collided head-over-heels with a big snowball bush, and landed at Ozma's feet, demanding to know what was up.

"A patty's up," Dorothy giggled. "But you seem to be down."

"It's up, I'm down. What's more-alack!

I've got a snowball down my back!"

said Scraps, twisting her rag arm into an impossible position to pat the wet spot where the snowball had melted. "A party, you say? When? Where? Who? Why? Whee!" Turning an enthusiastic somersault, she announced herself ready to help. So Ozma and Dorothy sat down on a marble bench, Billina perched on the edge of a nearby fountain, and all four became engrossed in plans for the party, while the Lion lay purring sleepily and the Wizard leaned against a lantern tree and listened, smiling.

"Now. That's everything, I think," Ozma said at last, and began counting off items on her fingers. "Refreshments, invitations, favors, games, prizes, baskets."

"Excuse me, my dear," the Wizard chuckled. "I believe you forgotten a pretty important item."

"What's that, old boy?" the Cowardly Lion rumbled, lazily' turning his massive head.

"The eggs," said the Wizard.

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Ozma. "A fine Egg Hunt it would have been without any eggs!"

Scraps, who could never stay still for long, flung herself recklessly out of a tree she had been climbing, caught hold of a branch at the last moment, and dangled there by one hand, chanting:

"A legless table without the legs
Is just what you'd egg-spect,
But an Easter Egg Hunt without the eggs
Is not egg-zactly c'rect!"

With a whoop of laughter she released her hold, falling with a soft, raggy plump on the head of the Cowardly Lion, who sighed, but good-naturedly let it go.

"Why, there'll have to be hundreds of eggs!" Dorothy said in some awe. "How could we forget them? And where are we going to get hold of so many before next Sunday?"

"Well, don't look at me!" the Yellow Hen retorted.

The Cowardly Lion's eyes immediately slid in her direction.

"You're the only one around here who lays eggs."

"Very true, but I cannot possibly lay hundreds of eggs in a week-much less boil them and dye them before the party!"

"Oh, Billina, he's only teasing you," Ozma said with a laugh.

"Nobody expects you to furnish all those eggs!"

"Anyway," Dorothy said, "I don't think they should be just common eggs.

"Well! I'm sure I don't know what you mean by 'common'!"

Billina began huffily, but Dorothy interrupted her.

"You do too, so don't pretend to be offended! I mean they should be real Easter Eggs. Don't you think so, Ozma?"

"I do," said the little fairy firmly.

"Then," the Cowardly Lion said with a yawn, "why not order them from the Easter Bunny?"

He had made the suggestion in fun, but to his surprise it turned out to be perfectly practical. Ozma gave a little jump, clapped her hands, and said, "Why, yes! That's exactly what we'll do!"

"You mean we've got an Easter Bunny right here in Oz?" said the Lion, sitting up and blinking his yellow eyes.

"The Easter Bunny!" Ozma corrected him. "Where else would he live? He's one of my most interesting subjects!" Since this was news to everybody, she went on to explain that the Easter Bunny ruled over a tidy and busy kingdom of bunnies somewhere in the Munchkin country-or rather, beneath it, since his domain was mostly underground. "So I understand," she added. "I've never seen it-though I've often thought I'd like to."

"So would I!" Dorothy exclaimed. "I'll tell you what, Ozma, if you don't mind, I will go see it, and order our eggs while I'm there. I don't have a thing to do this afternoon-I can start right

now.

"Hold on-hold on!" the Cowardly Lion growled. "Where is this place? How far is it? Don't be so sudden! I don't care for the idea of your dashing all over the countryside by yourself!"

"Then come with me!" Dorothy laughed, and ran over to throw her arms around his great, maned neck. "Can we look in your Magic Picture, Ozma, and see which road to take?"

"I've a better idea," said the little fairy. "Scraps dear, would you mind fetching my Magic Belt from my bedroom?"

"Magic Belt!" gulped the Lion.

As the irrepressible Scraps cartwheeled wildly off across the lawn, yelling "Magic Belt! Bagic Melt! Agic-may Elt-bay!"

Dorothy exclaimed, "Oh, that's a fine idea, Ozma! The Magic Belt will get us there in a jiffy."

"I don't like jiffies! Couldn't we just walk?" the Lion begged.

"Better not," Ozma said. "Several hundred eggs is a lot of eggs -we'll be wise to order them right away. On your way home you can take your time, though-it'll be a nice little vacation for you. Just be sure to get back by Easter! Now-what colors do you think our eggs should be?"

This brought forth suggestions from everyone but the Lion, who was too busy worrying about his coming journey by Magic Belt to pay much attention to the conversation. He had had considerable experience-most of it in spite of himself-with such odd modes of travel as wishing pills, Flyabout Bus, and whirling mountains, and had a low opinion of them all. So while the others

thrashed out the last details of the Easter Egg order, he sat yawning with nervousness, growling fiercely under his breath, and trying without any success at all to control his cowardice. By the time Scraps burst out of a nearby tily bush, yelling "Boo!" and waving the Magic Belt, he was so upset he roared.

"What's the matter, can't you take a joke?" demanded Scraps as she handed the belt to Ozma and danced over to tweak his ear.

"This is no joking matter," the Lion said miserably.

"Really, it doesn't hurt a hit," Dorothy assured him. She kissed Ozma goodbye, then climbed quickly onto his back, took a firm hold on his mane, and announced that they were ready.

"Speak for yourself," muttered the Lion, but he braced himself and shut his eyes tight.

Ozma buckled on the Magic Belt, clasped both hands to it-and the next instant, Dorothy and the Lion were no longer in the garden.

* * * *

"OUCH!" roared the Cowardly Lion.

He opened his eyes, blinked through a rapidly clearing haze of opalescent smoke, and found himself sprawled in the middle of a bramble patch, his chin squashed flat against a mat of briars and his gaze fixed on a large rabbit-hole directly in front of him. His paws hurt, his elbows hurt, thorns were sticking into his nose, and something wriggly was weighing down his head.

"Dorothy? Where are you?" he quavered.

"Here I am," said the wriggly thing. "I'm sorry-I got sort of jounced around, I guess, and I'm trying to get off you, but there's so many stickers in this place! There, thank goodness. Is that better?"

Relieved of the weight, the Cowardly Lion struggled to a sitting position, sighed, and tried to lick a large thorn out of his left front paw. "Doesn't hurt a bit, she says," he muttered under his breath.

"Well, the wishing part didn't hurt," Dorothy pointed out as she scrambled around him-with a good deal of difficulty-and carefully removed the thorn for him. "I'll admit the landing is sometimes kind of inconvenient, but if this is the entrance to the Easter Bunny's kingdom, you can't blame the Magic Belt for putting us here. I suppose that rabbit-hole is the entrance?"

"I suppose so" said the Lion, looking at it without enthusiasm. "At least it isn't brambly. Come on, you'd better follow me-provided I can squeeze through."

Once he had wriggled past the tube-like entrance-removing a few bits of hide from his anatomy in the process-there was a bit more room; however, they were now in total darkness. Cautiously they groped their way forward, along what seemed to be a rough winding passage sloping steeply downward.

"I hope there aren't any old abandoned wells around here," the Lion muttered, adding "Oof!" as he bumped into the wall at one of the many curves. "Just what we need right now-to fall

into an old abandoned well and never be heard of again."

He sounded so gloomy that Dorothy giggled. "Silly. The bunnies must use this passage all the time. I believe it's getting roomier," she said a minute later. "And isn't it a little bit less black?"

The darkness was, indeed, becoming mere dimness; this lightened, as the passage twisted ever deeper and deeper into the earth, until a soft, pervasive, pleasant glow illuminated the rocky walls and roof. For a while the glow was blue, then gradually it changed to green, to ruby-red, to amber, amethyst, and pink. As these different colors shifted and played about them, the passage broadened into a spacious, level tunnel.

"Why, it's perfectly beautiful!" Dorothy said softly, and the Lion, too, blinked with pleasure as he padded along. Scurrying bunnies began to appear now, popping in and out of the branching passages, bent under the great loads of artificial grass or festooned with strings of painted baskets. All of them wore bright-colored oval badges lettered "Dye-Mixer," "Dipper," "Runner," "Grass Dept." and the like, and all seemed to be in a frantic hurry. As the light brightened, the traffic increased, and presently the travelers emerged from the tunnel into a vast, high-vaulted cave.

"My goodness!" Dorothy exclaimed, as they halted to look around them with lively interest.

The cave was brilliant with the jewel-like play of light, and seething with activity. Bunnies were everywhere-watering plots

of artificial grass, weaving and painting baskets, or carving blocks of chocolate into figures of rabbits or baby chicks. Some, in dye-splashed aprons, were stirring great cauldrons which steamed over little fires in rocky alcoves along one wall; the steam was varicolored, like the light. Others were loading handcarts with fresh-dyed eggs and trundling them away.

In the center of all, on a high basketwork throne, sat a personage who could be no other than the Easter Bunny himself. He was nearly as tall as Dorothy, not counting his long, alertly twitching ears. He wore a lavender waistcoat, a monocle on a purple ribbon, and a golden crown, and was altogether a splendid figure as he looked about him with watchful pink eyes and twinkling whiskers, directing his busy kingdom.

He spotted his visitors at once, and flung his monocle to his eye to watch their approach. "Well, well, well!" he cried genially as they reached the foot of his throne. "How d'ye do, I'm sure! Who are you, my dear? Er-I trust your lion is quite tame?"

"Oh, yes, your majesty," Dorothy assured him. "In fact, he's civilized. He's the Cowardly Lion, and I'm Dorothy, and we've come-"

"Not the Cowardly Lion? Not Princess Dorothy, of the Emerald City?" exclaimed the Easter Bunny, nearly falling off his throne in his haste to clamber down. "Why, a thousand welcomes! I can't tell you how honored I am. Well! Of all people!- and lions! What brings you here?"

"Magic Belt," said the Cowardly Lion, shuddering at the

memory.

"Ozma sent us," Dorothy said, and explained their errand. "I hope your bunnies aren't too busy?" she finished anxiously.

"Never!" declared the Easter Bunny. He laid a paw on his lavender waistcoat and eyed her earnestly. "On the contrary, it gives me great joy to be able to render some slight service to the radiant Princess Ozma, whose loyal subject I am proud to be! Here, Jumper, come take this little lady's order, quickly!"

With one bound, a bunny carrying a notebook and wearing a badge that said "Sales Dept." was at Dorothy's side, pencil poised and whiskers twitching.

"Now, I call that efficient," the Lion rumbled as Dorothy placed their order.

"Oh, we're all very efficient around here. We have to be," the Easter Bunny told him. "Our production volume is almost as big as Santa Claus's, you know. By the way, I do hope you have time for a cup of carrot tea and some jellybeans before you leave? Here, Knocker-hustle a tea-tray along to my office, will you?"

The Cowardly Lion felt a great lack of enthusiasm for these particular refreshments, but could think of no way to avoid them, so when Knocker and Jumper had both bounded efficiently away, he followed Dorothy and the Easter Bunny across the cave to a large alcove. It was glassed in with panes of clear sugar, and furnished with basketwork chairs and a large executive desk beautifully carved of chocolate.

"There-sit down, sit down, make yourselves at home. Ah, here's the tea-tray!" said the Easter Bunny.

Resigning himself to his fate, the Lion worried down a couple of jellybeans and sipped nauseatedly at the carrot brew while the Easter Bunny plied Dorothy with respectful questions about Princess Ozma, and confided that it was his greatest ambition to visit the Emerald City someday to offer his fealty in person.

"Meanwhile," he added earnestly, "perhaps you wouldn't mind carrying back a gift for the Princess, as a small token of my esteem." He sat back, twirling his monocle on its ribbon. "Now, let me see-what could I send her?"

"Some of this excellent carrot tea, perhaps," said the Cowardly Lion jovially. He had managed to empty his into a potted plant, and was feeling quite secure.

"Oh, do let me fill your cup!" exclaimed the Bunny, hospitably refilling all the cups to the brim. "No, I want my gift to be far more interesting than mere tea. Ah! I know the very thing!"

Bounding to the door of his office, he summoned a runner. "Fetch me the Great Egg from the Treasury," he ordered, adding in an undertone, "Better dust it before you bring it along." Turning back to his guests with an embarrassed smile, he explained, "The Great Egg is quite a valuable antique by now, and like all antiques, tends to need a bit of upkeep, which in a busy place like my kingdom it doesn't always get. It was designed and created by the Chief Artist of Bunnyland many years ago, during my grandfather's reign, and won a kingdom-wide contest for the

most unusual egg. Indeed, I believe you'll find you've never seen anything like it."

"I've never even seen anything like this tea," the Cowardly Lion said through his teeth.

A few minutes later the runner appeared outside the sugar-glass walls of the office, trundling a handcart in which the Great Egg was balanced carefully on a pillow of woven grass. Though still slightly dusty in spots, it really was quite magnificent. as they discovered when they went out to inspect it (the Lion casually dumping his tea into a vase on the way). It was about as big as Dorothy's head, was made of sparkling crystallized sugar, and was not only lavishly decorated but encircled by a band of beaten gold. At one end was a peephole, covered by a round pane of the clear sugar-glass and surrounded by stiff candy flowers. Anyone looking through the peephole saw the Great Cave of Bunnyland in lifelike miniature-and what was more astonishing, in action. Dorothy and the Lion could even see themselves peeping into the Egg, with the Easter Bunny standing beside them, the workers busy at their tasks around them, and the colored lights playing over all.

"Ozma will love this!" Dorothy exclaimed, though privately she was wondering how they would ever get such a fragile object home safely. But the Easter Bunny had thought of everything. Clapping his monocle to his eye, he hopped away, returning with a basket that just fitted the Great Egg, and followed by a little

boy bunny who was to guide them out of the kingdom.

After thanking him warmly and promising to bring Ozma to visit him sometime, Dorothy and the Lion crossed the Cave once more and started back along the tunnel. Their little guide went with them to the point at which the colored lights began to dim, then shyly pointed toward a smaller passage and hurried back to his tasks.

"Is this the way we came?" said the Lion as they started uncertainly along the passage.

"It must be," Dorothy told him. "Though it doesn't exactly look familiar. Oh, ouch! I bumped my head!"

"Roof's getting lower. Watch out, we're coming to another zig. Or maybe it's a zag."

The passage was, in fact, a constant succession of zigs and zags, and it grew darker, narrower and lower all the time. Dorothy had great difficulty managing the basket, as she crept along bent almost double, trying to avoid the frequent rocks that protruded from the rough walls. Before long, she and the Lion were both bruised and scraped in a dozen places, as well as breathless.

"Let's rest a minute!" Dorothy gasped finally, groping for her big friend and leaning against him in the dark. "I can't believe this is the same passage we used before. It's much longer and rougher. Do you suppose that little boy bunny didn't know the way?"

"Either that, or we've zigged somewhere when we should have zagged," the Lion panted.

However, they crept on a few steps, edged their way around another of the innumerable bends, and suddenly felt the ground underfoot sloping steeply upward. At the same time, the passage narrowed into a mere burrow, and they could see a circle of dim green light ahead.

"At last! That must be the rabbit-hole!" Dorothy said in relief. "Now, if I can just get the basket through this last bit without smashing the Egg. .

A moment later they had squeezed through the hole and emerged once more into the outside world-but not into the bramblesh they remembered. Instead, they found themselves standing in a patch of very tall, waving grasses at the foot of a gray stone wall, which was so high it seemed to have no top, and curved away in front of them without a gate or door of any kind.

"So it wasn't the same passage!" Dorothy said, looking curiously at the wall. "Now, where do you suppose we are? And what's on the other side of that, I wonder?"

"Let's not find out," growled the Lion, lashing his tail uneasily. The wall looked too grim and bleak for his taste. "Come on, if we just keep walking we're bound to come to a road soon."

Sore, disheveled, smudged, and glad to be finished with tunnels, they started along the foot of the wall, following its curve. They had not gone a dozen steps before they were startled by a tremendous clatter and clanging and banging which suddenly broke out somewhere ahead and above them. It grew louder and

louder, rose to a deafening climax, and was followed by a very complicated crash, a few final clangs, then total silence. Exchanging an astonished glance, they ran hastily farther around the wall's curve.

Next instant, a piercing neigh and a confusion of loud, insulting yelling made the Lion flatten his ears against his head. Quivering with fright and indignation, he gave a tremendous roar. At the same time, Dorothy screamed, dropped the basket, Egg and all, and began wildly beating at the air, ducking and dodging as she shrieked, "Help! Help! A bat! Go 'way! Go 'way!"

Chapter 11

SO-IN a muddle of misunderstanding-the parties from Halidom and from the Emerald City came face to face. For of course Dorothy's "bat" was none other than the Flittermouse, who had become separated from his companions a few moments before, during the tumble off the fire-escape. And the lioncel that had so terrified Fred was merely the Cowardly Lion, who now roared again, indignantly, at what he was sure must be a deadly insult.

"A lion sell! he growled to Dorothy, glaring at the Steed. "That big black bag of bones there called me a lion sell!"

This was enough to make Fred pull himself together and return the glare. "Bag of bones!" he whinnied furiously. "Who's a bag of bones, you great mop-head!"

"What do you mean, mop-head?" snarled the Lion. "Take that back, you big ink-blot, or I'll-"

"Ink-blot indeed! Why, I'll have you know-"

"Oh, please be quiet, Federigo'." begged Fess, who, being more sensible than Fred, still felt extremely wary of the Cowardly Lion, whether he was a lioncel or not.

"I won't be quiet! My honor is at stake! I unconditionally refuse to

At this point the Flittermouse landed on Fess's shoulder and began to cry bitterly.

"A bat! Fess, dear, she called me a bat!"

"But aren't you a bat?" quavered Dorothy, who still had both hands clamped to her head to prevent the bat's getting tangled in her hair.

"No, he's not, he's a Flittermouse," Fess explained, trying to shout above the din. "Fred, do be quiet!"

"Everyone be quiet!" Prince Gules's voice suddenly rang out with such authority that even the Lion was surprised into obeying. In the silence the Prince stepped up to Dorothy, bowed in his graceful, courtly manner, and added, "I apologize for the had manners of my Steed. May I introduce myself?"

"Oh. I wish you would," Dorothy said gratefully. By this time she had noticed the Unicorn, and the Prince's crown, and had taken a closer look at the Flittermouse, and her curiosity was growing every second. "Is that a Unicorn?" she burst out.

"The Unicorn," said that unusual creature, stepping daintily over to her. "And you're a maiden, aren't you? It's lovely to see a maiden again, after all these males. Would you care to weave a daisy chain for my neck sometime-at your convenience, of course? It would make me awfully happy."

"Why, I'd love to, Dorothy told her. Smiling at the Prince, she said, "I'm sure we were bad-mannered too. It was only because we were startled-and the Cowardly Lion thought he was being insulted by your horse."

"Steed," Fred corrected her sulkily. Under his breath he mumbled, "Admits he's a coward, does he?"

"Certainly he does-and it makes him a terrific fighter," Dorothy retorted. "It seems to me," she added severely, "that it's much better to admit you're a coward-and then act brave-than to pretend you're brave, and then just yell 'Help! Help! the way you and I did."

This left Fred with eyes and mouth both open and not a word to say. Fess could not help grinning at his stupefied expression. But then the Unicorn murmured confidingly to Dorothy, "No one expects maidens to be brave. After all, we femies are much more sensitive than these crude males." And even the Flitter-mouse, who was still sobbing disconsolately at being called a bat, raised his head long enough to peer at Fred and quaver,

"Males who rage and roar are rude.

Males who crowd are crude."

At this point, Less decided his old friend was getting a bit too much the worst of it. "I think Fred was just startled, too," he explained. "We were all pretty shaken up right that minute-we'd just fallen off a fire-escape."

"And we'd just climbed out of a rabbit-hole," the Cowardly Lion admitted gruffly. "Still, that's no reason to go calling a fellow a lion sell, is it? I wish somebody'd tell me what it means."

A good many explanations were in order, and several more apologies-including a remorseful one from Dorothy to the Flittermouse, who was still feeling quite crushed. He had to be coaxed for some time before he would consent to crawl out of Fess's collar and sit for a moment on Dorothy's hand, still hiccupping a bit but smiling tentatively at her through his tears. At last, after everybody was placated and the Cowardly Lion was made to understand that "lioncel" was merely the Halidom term for his species, the two parties got around to formal introductions. These aroused much interest and astonishment on both sides.

"Why, I've heard of Halidom," Dorothy exclaimed. "And Troth too. I've a friend-Sir Hokus of Pokes-who always orders his armor from there."

"And I've read about you two in the Oztory books!" Fess said diffidently. He felt very much impressed to be talking to such famous celebrities, and was delighted to find them so mod-

est. "Why, they're just like anybody'." he thought.

As for Fred, he was so overcome by the magnitude of his faux pas in quarreling with such personages that he could only stare miserably into space and conclude that his career was wrecked.

The Prince remained imperturbable, courtly, and as impractical as ever. "I am delighted to meet you both," he announced with a winning smile. "I regret only that I cannot at this moment offer you the hospitality of my father's palace, and arrange a tourney in your honor. However, I hope you will do me the honor of being my guests at luncheon."

"But Your Highness, we haven't any luncheon!" Fess whispered in a panic.

"When we locate some, that is," Prince Gules added graciously.

"We'll help you locate it," Dorothy said at once. "I'm hungry too."

"I'm starved," said the Cowardly Lion. "But no carrot tea, if you please! I want some lion food for a change."

Flitter, hoping very much that "lion food" didn't include Flittermice and things, made himself inconspicuous behind the popinjay feather on Fess's cap, but Dorothy merely remarked that they'd be lucky to find people-food, and that what she wanted was a place to sit down comfortably and talk. " 'Cause I'm just plain curious about why you left Halidom, and where you're going, and how you happened to be on that fire-escape-

and you're probably wondering what we were doing in a rabbit-hole-

"And why a Royal Princess of Oz is wearing such a dirty dress," the Cowardly Lion chuckled, trying with a few self-conscious swipes at his mane to improve his own appearance.

Fred, who had been musing bitterly on this very point, seized the chance to climb back into grace. "That was rather confusing, you know," he said rapidly. "If we'd had the least idea we were talking to Important Personages . . . I come of quite an aristocratic family, myself. I have a cousin who's a Destrier. As a matter of fact-" Catching Fess's disapproving frown, he broke off, merely adding in an awed tone, "Are you really a close friend of Princess Ozma?"

"Yes, but I'll bet she'd hardly know me," Dorothy sighed as she examined her once-white dress. Suddenly she cried, "Ozma! The Egg! Oh, my goodness, I've dropped the Egg somewhere!"

"An egg?" Prince Gules said hopefully. "Something for lunch, perhaps?"

"No, it's not that kind of an egg, it's a present for Ozma. Oh, there it is!" Dorothy ran quickly to where the Egg lay beside the overturned basket. Fortunately it had fallen in the soft grass and was undamaged. "You must all see it- it's so interesting."

"Later," the Cowardly Lion rumbled. "Stuff it in the basket

now, and bring it along. I intend to find some lunch before I do another thing."

This suited everybody. Within a few minutes they had pushed their way through the high grass surrounding the wall, and found beyond it a sunny meadow which supplied all their needs. Dorothy, Fess and the Prince sat down under a big bread-and-butter tree to lunch off its fruit, and the Cowardly Lion, after a few dissatisfied remarks about proper lion food, joined them. Fred began at once on the velvety grass, while the Flitter-mouse skimmed over it, catching insects and nibbling the centers out of honey-flowers. The Unicorn browsed in a daisy patch as close as she could get to Dorothy, for whom she seemed to have formed a strong attachment. As they ate, they talked, and before long had exchanged the complete stories of their various adventures.

Dorothy was greatly concerned about the theft of the Golden Circlet of Halidom and the sad state of the kingdom. "Why, that's dreadful!" she exclaimed. "Ozma must be told right away. After all, she's the ruler of all Oz, and Halidom's a part of Oz. I think you'd all better come straight to the Emerald City with the Cowardly Lion and me. Then Prince Gules can tell her about everything, and she and the Wizard can figure out what to do."

"But I don't want her to do anything," the Prince objected. "I want to find the Circlets myself, and win fame and glory."

"It's going to be pretty hard, if you don't even know where to look," Dorothy pointed out.

"No matter. I insist on saving my own kingdom, and I want no help."

"But that's just-" Dorothy had been going to say "plain stupid," but broke off, remembering that through no fault of his own the Prince was stupid. "That's-very understandable," she finished rather lamely.

A few moments later, Fess drew her away from the others, on the pretext of picking honey-flowers for dessert.

"Prince Gules just doesn't realize what we're up against," he said apologetically. "I think you're right about asking Princess Ozma to help us. Why, we could wander around for months without finding even one Circlet!"

"Yes, and no telling what might become of Halidom in the meantime," Dorothy said. "It's too bad-but if the Prince won't listen he won't, that's all. Are you sure those Oracle verses are no good?"

"Well, we couldn't make any sense out of them, but maybe you can. Here, take a look."

Less dug the page from the register-book out of his pocket and Dorothy studied the verses eagerly, but finally had to confess that she was baffled too.

"Of course, there are some clues here," she mused, frowning at the paper. " 'In the hands of a future king'-Prince Gules is a future king, isn't he?"

"Yes, but Circlet Three isn't in his hands. If it were, the

people in Halidom could draw and weave as well as ever. And the Unicorn thinks Flitter is 'the humblest of our number', but how can Flitter find a Circlet? He's not even very bright."

Dorothy sighed and handed the paper back to him. "Seems to me we'll just have to get the Wizard to help. Do you s'pose we could sort of steer the Prince toward the Emerald City without his knowing it?"

Fess had been thinking this very thing. Arguing away an uncomfortable feeling of disloyalty by telling himself that it was for the Prince's own good, he nodded. "It'd be easy, and we'd better do it. Which way is the Emerald City from here?"

"To tell the truth, I don't exactly know," Dorothy confessed with a puzzled glance around the meadow. "I got awf'ly turned around in all those twisty underground passages."

Fess couldn't help laughing, and he felt a little better. "We're in the same boat, then. You don't know where to find the Emerald City, and we don't know where to find the Circlets. Why don't we just travel together, and see which turns up first?"

The others readily agreed to the idea of the two parties joining forces-and Dorothy and Fess diplomatically avoided any further mention of the Wizard. The Cowardly Lion, whose good nature was entirely restored by several hundred slices of bread and butter, merely reminded Dorothy that they had promised to be home in time for the party.

"But if you want to do a little sight-seeing first, it's quite all right with me. This is our vacation, you know. I like traveling-

when I don't have to do it by Magic Belt. Climb on, let's go."

Fess and the Prince mounted too, and they started across the meadow. Dorothy carefully balanced the basket holding the Egg; Fess's lunchbasket-now comfortably stuffed with bread-and-butter sandwiches-dangled from Fred's saddle. The meadow merged gradually into an attractive wood, in which they passed several more bread-and-butter trees, and a few bread-and-jam trees as well. Fess could not resist sliding off the Unicorn to add a few jam sandwiches to their provisions; soon Dorothy joined him, and they both filled their pockets and the crannies of the Egg basket with peanut-butter-and-crackers from a tree farther on. Before long they were passing doughnut trees twined with marshmallow vines, and lollipop shrubs edging little brooks of lemonade; and they had learned to make cautious detours around the numerous cocoa bushes, which had a disconcerting way of spilling hot chocolate down one's neck whenever one brushed against them.

"I wish I hadn't eaten so much plain bread and butter!" Dorothy exclaimed. "What sort of place is this, anyhow? Look, there's a peppermint-drop fern. And a cookie tree!"

"And there's the end of the path, unless I'm badly mistaken," the Cowardly Lion observed.

Sure enough, directly ahead of them was a tall wrought-iron fence, with a gate firmly closed across their path. On the gate was a neat brass plate. Prince Gules now dismounted too, and

led the way over to it.

It read, simply, "HOME."

Chapter 12

WELL," said Robin, "that's the end of the woods. And there's plenty of roads down yonder, but I don't see anything of that yellow brick one Howzatagin told us about, do you?"

Merry shook her head as they both examined the scene before them. "No. Those roads are all kind of blue."

"Everything's kind of blue," Robin agreed in a puzzled tone.

They were standing on a hillside overlooking a curiously empty stretch of land which rose everywhere into barren, rolling hills dotted with clumps of prickly pears. They could not see over the hills, but they could see, winding in and out among them, numerous tracks and paths, which looked well-traveled though they were empty at the moment. The whole landscape did, indeed, have a distinctly blueish cast.

"Even the dirt's sort of blue," said Merry.

"And those prickly-pear bushes-and the pines at the edge of the woods. Look, Merry, isn't that queer?" Robin said as they both glanced back toward the last scrubby fringe of trees.

"I thought those pine woods had a sort of red look when we started through them, back by Howzatagin's cabin. And remember how red the rocks in the Red Gorge were? And all

that red clay in Fox-Hunter land? Now everything's changed color."

"You've changed countries, that's all," said a squeaky voice, and a squirrel with bushy blue-gray fur scampered along a pine branch to peer down at them.

"Changed countries? You mean we're not in Oz any more?" exclaimed Robin.

"Of course you're in Oz. But you've left the Quadling Country-it's the red one. You're in the Munchkin country now. The border runs through these woods."

"Oh. Then where's the Yellow Brick Road?" Robin asked. "I don't know. Squirrels aren't concerned with roads. Excuse me, please, I have an important engagement with a hazelnut bush. Ta-ta!" With a flirt of his tail, the squirrel vanished into the trees.

"Well," Robin said, "Maybe one of those blue roads will lead us to the yellow one. Come on, let's try it."

The blue road was little more than a well-trodden footpath, but for some time they followed it around the base of one hill after another, seeing nothing but prickly-pear bushes, blue rocks, and more barren hills ahead. Then they rounded the curve of one last hill and were confronted by a very strange sight.

Before them, in a bowl-shaped hollow among the dusty hills, was a huge sphere made of some glistening, transparent stuff that looked like pale blue glass. Inside it were many smaller spheres

the size of small houses, with an occasional larger dome thrusting up above them, and Robin and Merry could see people moving here and there along what appeared to be curving streets. Strangest of all, around the outside of the Great Sphere ran a broad road paved with little round glass stones; and this road was really running-circling frantically around and around the Sphere at great speed, flashing blindingly in the sun.

One bridge spanned the road, stretching from the foot of the hill on which Robin and Merry stood blinking to a large round opening in the Sphere. This entrance had elaborately worked gates of wrought-iron-standing wide open at the moment-and a round gatehouse at one side. A ramp led down to the level of the bridge, across which short chubby people trudged occasionally on their way to or from the Sphere.

"It's a city," Robin said finally in a dazed voice. "It must be. But it's absolutely the queerest one I ever saw!"

"Maybe it's the Emerald City," Merry said hopefully.

"Well-I don't see any emeralds. Of course, maybe they keep 'em in a safe or something. Did you ever see anything like that glass road, Merry! Let's go down and look around."

Merry was just as curious as he was, and in a very few minutes they had cantered to the bottom of the hill and wandered, gaping around them, onto the bridge, which happened to be empty when they reached it. Halfway across, Merry stopped to peer over the railing at the dazzling, circling road below.

"Come away, Merry!" Robin exclaimed, shuddering and

tugging at the gilded reins. "It looks dangerous!"

"Dangerous?" Merry gave her little whicker of laughter and danced even closer to the rail. "But it's just like the merry-go-round, Robin! Oh, dear, it almost makes me homesick. Round -and round-and round- Make some calliope noises, Robin!"

In a transport of nostalgia, Merry began to bound gracefully in circles in the middle of the bridge. Robin clung to her pole and cast nervous glances at the glass road wheeling beneath him, humming a few "teedle-ee-dle-ee-dles" just to please her. Neither of them noticed the group of chubby people who emerged from the gates just then. The people halted, apparently transfixed, at sight of the circling little mare. Then, after exchanging astonished glances, they hurried to the middle of the bridge. Merry, finding herself surrounded, halted abruptly.

"Hello," said Robin cautiously, looking around the circle of strange faces, all of which displayed the liveliest interest. There were five men and three women, all short and roly-poly, with countenances as round as full moons, set with round blue eyes.

"Hello," they answered in chorus. As they spoke, raised their right hands with tip of thumb and forefinger together to form a little circle. It seemed to be a gesture of so Robin politely imitated it, and waited for someone to. When no one did, he ventured to ask what city this was.

"This is Roundabout, your honor," answered a man in polka dot jacket.

Before Robin had recovered from being called "your honor,
a second man, wearing a tunic embroidered with spirals, said
"And we are Roundheads. Your honor is very welcome!
we ask who your honor is"? And what is that thing with you?"

Before Robin could answer, the man in the polka dots gasp
"Thing? Thing!" and turned, wide-eyed and excited, to
companions. They immediately grew as excited as he, clutching
each other and repeating, "Thing! It's a thing!"

"I'm not a Thing!" Merry said indignantly. "Am I, Robin?"

"No, of course not," Robin soothed her, adding to
Roundheads, "This is Merry. Merry Go Round. And I'm Robin
Brown, and we-"

"Merry Go Round?" echoed the Roundheads joyously,
Polkadots added, "Oh, please, your honor Robin, what brought
you here?"

Wondering why the little man's voice trembled with w~
seemed unbearable suspense, Robin replied, "To tell the truth
I don't know. All I did was catch the brass ring-and here I am!
At this the Roundheads simply went wild with excitement
"The ring! The ring brought him!" they babbled to each other
"And he brought the Thing! The ring! The Thing! The king!
thething! Thering!"

"What do they mean, Robin?" Merry asked crossly. She
felt very confused, and it made her nervous.

"Nothing, as far as I can tell," Robin told her. "They're just
talking in circles."

"Yes, yes, in circles!" Polkadots agreed eagerly.

"And you were running in circles when we found you!"

added Spirals. "Everything's round, even their names!" he announced triumphantly to the others, upon which the babble broke out again. "Yes, everything's round! Everything's round!" "And the treasure's found-Roundelay found it day before yesterday!"

"Oh, welcome, welcome, your honors!" Polkadots said earnestly. "We've been expecting you a long time!"

"Expecting us?" Robin said in surprise.

"Oh, yes! You and the Thing," said the Roundheads.

"You're a king, aren't you?"

"A king?" Robin gasped. "My goodness, no! How did you ever-I'm just a-I'm just Robin."

The joyous babble died away at this, and the smiles turned to anxious frowns. The Roundheads looked at each other and began a lowtoned, puzzled discussion, which seemed to feature the words "ring" and "Thing", and several suggestions to "ask Roundelay."

"I'll bet I know what it is," Robin whispered to Merry.

"They're probably expecting the king of some neighboring country on a State Visit or something. And here it's nobody but us. Kind of embarrassing all around." Raising his voice a little, he said diffidently, "I guess we came at just the wrong time. I'm sorry. We'll leave right away, if somebody would just tell us

where the-

"Oh, don't leave!" the Roundheads chorused in dismay.

"Oh, no!" Polkadots exclaimed. "You must meet Roundelay, your honors. He's our Sphere-Seer. Please, come in. Let us show you around our city. And then stay for lunch! We have an awfully pretty city," he added so coaxingly that Robin turned pink, and felt more flattered than ever in his life.

"Probably," he told himself honestly, "they've given up on that king, and just want to entertain somebody, so as not to waste the refreshments." But he was dying to see inside the Sphere, so after only a moment's hesitation, he shyly accepted the invitation, hoping he and Merry wouldn't be too much in the way in case the real king showed up after all.

The Roundheads did not seem the least bit worried about that; with a delighted cheer they hurried their guests through the wrought-iron gates into the city. The appearance of strangers in the glass streets of Roundabout caused an instant commotion. Every Roundhead in sight came running to stare at them and ask excited questions of the others, who were already trying to tell all about it. Since everybody was talking at once, Robin and Merry caught only a few words-the familiar "king", "Thing", and "ring", along with several references to "Roundelay" and something called a "Round House"-but they were too busy gaping at this strange and interesting city to listen anyway. At last several delegations detached themselves importantly from the crowd and scurried away in various directions, and Spirals

and Polkadots led the visitors toward the nearest winding avenue, with the rest of the joyous, chattering citizens trooping along behind.

"Now this, Your Honors," announced Polkadots proudly, "is Corckscrewe Street, named for a Founding Father of our city, who designed the Great Sphere, and built the Round House."

"What is this Round House?" Merry whispered to Robin.
"All the houses look round to me!"

Indeed, they were-and since they were all fashioned of the shimmering pale blue glass, it was easy to see that even the furniture inside was round. The larger domes, Polkadots explained, were all factories; and Robin, peering with interest through their transparent walls as the procession moved through the winding streets, soon realized that everything the people manufactured was round, as well. One factory made balls of every description, from tiny ball-bearings to huge beach balls; another made hoops and rings; another, plates and saucers; another, wheels and coils. There was still another that puzzled Robin. He could see shining machinery and round work tables, but he could see no merchandise at all.

"What is made there?" he asked Polkadots, who was walking beside his right stirrup.

"Holes, Your Honor," the little Roundhead answered. "To fit in wells, and doughnuts, and zeros, you know."

"And in croquet wickets?" suggested Robin, fascinated.

"Oh, no! They're not round. We make round things here
We also make our rounds," Polkadots added a bit wearily.
see, we're a nation of peddlers, your honor. We tramp about
the Munchkin country selling the things we make. But we'
getting terribly tired of it," he added in a pleading voice.
"We're really a home-loving people," said Spirals, peering
up earnestly into Robin's eyes.

"Besides, business has fallen off badly lately," put in a wistful
voice from the crowd.

"Oh, very badly! It's awful!" cried several other voices.

Robin said sympathetically, "It's hard to sell things." He had
once tried to sell can-openers for the Cub Scout Fund, and found
it tough going.

"Well, it's never before been hard to sell our things," Polka-
dots declared. "Because they never wear out. That's the whole
trouble! We've already sold our customers all the ball-bearings
and holes and wheels and saucers they can use-and now nobody
will buy any more, because the old ones are still perfectly good!
It's certainly balled up our economy, I can tell you!" He pointed
to a factory they were passing. "Just look at all those surplus
cymbals! The more they pile up, the less we sell, and the less we
sell, the more they pile up! Why, it's a vicious circle!"

"Isn't it, Your Honor?" Spirals added with a coaxing smile.

"Seems to me you'll have to find some new customers,"
Robin told him.

"Oh, no! We couldn't call on new customers, because we

always call on old ones," Spirals explained.

Merry blinked, exchanged a puzzled glance with Robin, and suggested, "Well, then, make things that wear out!"

"Oh, no!" Polkadots said in a shocked voice. "We couldn't make imperfect things! Ours are always perfect!"

This time Robin blinked too; somehow the conversation didn't seem to be getting anywhere. "Mighty few things are ever perfect," he remarked. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes!" a dozen voices assured him, and Polkadots added, "All the experts say so!"

"But who are the experts?" Robin persisted.

"Why-people who realize our products are perfect," Spirals explained. "Perfection is our motto, you see. And our National Emblem is a circle-the Perfect Circle."

"I thought you said it was a Vicious Circle?" whinnied Merry, who was by now totally confused.

"That's right-perfectly vicious!" Polkadots agreed enthusiastically, and all the others chorused, "Perfectly vicious!" then fixed Robin with wistful eyes. Spirals smiled winningly and added, "And perfectly circular."

It occurred to Robin that there was something perfectly circular about the National Reasoning, too, but before he could figure out just what it was, one of the Roundhead women spoke up in an eager, pleading voice.

"Please, Your Honor, we don't care if business improves or

not. The truth is, we're tired of being peddlers and factory-workers. We want to stay home in our pretty city and be ladies and gentlemen, and have crown jewels and National Magic Possessions and things, like other cities, and be glamorous and interesting!"

"Oh, yes! That's what we want!" several other Roundheads cried.

"And when we have a king, we can do those things, you see, your honor?" the woman went on persuasively. "Don't you think that will be nicer than the way things are now?"

"Oh, yes, much nicer," Robin agreed, wondering what his opinion had to do with it. "Are you going to have a king, then?" he added politely.

"Yes, Your Honor," Polkadots said in a solemn tone. "That is perfectly certain. We will have a king. The Prophecy says so. And our king will solve all our problems, and take care of us forever."

"Well! That's mighty nice," said Robin, privately thinking it was quite a bit to ask even of a king.

"Mighty nice! Oh, mighty nice! Yes, mighty, mighty, mighty nice!" cried the Roundheads joyfully. They began to dance in circles on the glassy street, singing their National Anthem, "Round and Round the Ballbearing Bush."

They had by this time arrived at the largest dome of all, which Robin guessed must be the Round House. Unlike the other buildings, it was a deep sapphire blue, and was flanked by

a tall Round Tower, which had small circular windows all around its top but no door giving on the street. The Round House itself had a thick glass door that reminded Robin of the bottom cut from some vast blue bottle; this was thrown open, and Robin and Merry were ushered into a huge round room.

Merry shied violently at a large white object on a dais in the middle of the room. "Is it a ghost?" she whispered in a trembling voice.

"No, just something wrapped in dust-sheets," Robin reassured her, sliding from the saddle and looking about him curiously. The room was odd but attractive, furnished with blue rugs and round blue velvet hassocks, with numerous small doors around the walls. As the Roundheads came dancing in, still bellowing their anthem, one of these little doors popped open, and a strange little man popped out, followed by one of the Roundhead delegations that had separated from the crowd earlier. He wore a long, flapping robe embroidered all over with pinwheels, and a high, peaked hat with a ball at its tip. Unlike the other Roundheads, he was almost skinny, and he had sly, gleaming eyes that made Robin instantly uneasy. However, he was beaming hospitably, and hurried toward the visitors with every appearance of delight, the delegation trotting after.

"Welcome! Welcome!" he exclaimed, bowing and bobbing and nodding and making repeated little circles with his fingers. As the last rafter-shaking notes of the anthem subsided at last,

he swept a grandiose bow and said in a loud and solemn voice,
"I am honored. The Round House is honored. All Roundabout
is honored! A hundred welcomes to Your Majesty!"

"Oh, dear," Robin groaned. "He's got things muddled too!"

It was the awkwardest thing, having to keep telling people you
weren't a king. "Excuse me, sir, but-are you the mayor or some-
thing?"

"Ah, no, no, Your Majesty," the little man chuckled, shaking
his head until the ball on his peaked cap waggled and bounced.
"I am merely Roundelay, Sphere-Seer of Roundabout, tempor-
ary guardian of this beautiful city and humble advisor to the
Roundheads."

"Well, anyway, you're in charge, aren't you?" Robin went
on hurriedly. He was anxious to get the embarrassing part over
with as soon as possible. "You see, there's been a sort of mix-up.
I'm afraid the-the delegation there must have told you I was the
king you were expecting for lunch, but they're mistaken, 'cause
I'm not, really. I'm only-"

"Ah, but they are not mistaken!" cried Roundelay. "You
are the king we've been expecting."

"Yes, yes, you are!" shouted the Roundheads. "You are,
you are, you-

The noise went on for some time. After exchanging a baffled
glance with Merry, Robin peered carefully at Roundelay, then
around at the rejoicing citizens, wondering if he could have
strayed into a city of harmless lunatics. Still, the Roundheads

seemed fairly sane-except on this one subject. Holding up both hands for silence, he tried again.

"Look, Mr. Roundelay," he said firmly. "I'm sorry to disappoint everybody-honest, I am. But this is all a mistake! It-"

"Indeed? Indeed?" murmured Roundelay, whose gleaming eyes were moving rapidly from Robin to Merry and back again.

"But is it not true that your name is Robin-as in 'round-robin'-and that this attractive Thing's name is Merry Go Round?"

"Yes, that's true, but-"

"And," Roundelay interrupted, beginning to rub his hands together, "were you not discovered on our bridge, cavorting in circles?"

"Well, I don't know about cavorting. Merry was wheeling around, but-"

"Wheeling around!" Roundelay echoed gleefully, rubbing his hands even faster. "Round, round, everything's round! And -just mention once more what brought you to our country?"

"Well, in the beginning, the brass ring brought us. you'd listen-"

"No need! It's proved! You've proved it yourself!" shrieked Roundelay. As the Roundheads burst into a deafening cheer, he shouted above it, "Hail to Round Robin, King of Roundabout! Hail to Merry Go Round, Royal Symbol! Hail-"

"King of Roundabout?" gasped Robin. "W-wait a minute-"

"Royal Cymbal!" Merry whinnied shrilly. "Are they going to beat me?"

"No, they don't mean that kind of a cymbal, Merry, but- oh, jeepers, if they'd only . . . Be quiet!" Robin yelled suddenly at the top of his voice.

To his surprise, everybody obeyed instantly, but before he could draw another breath Roundelay was already talking again, bowing, rubbing his hands and smiling ingratiatingly.

"Pardon, Your Majesty! We are too boisterous in our rejoicing. Your Majesty must forgive us! It is just that we have so looked forward to the day when we would have a king!"

"But I'm not your king! Whatever makes you think I am?"

"Why, the prophecy!" chortled Roundelay. Waving his bony hands to the rhythm, he chanted,

"The ring will bring the king
The king will bring the Thing-
Everything round
The treasure's found,
The ring will bring the king."

"That's the prophecy?" Robin said, dumbfounded.

"It is. And you are our long-awaited rulers! There's no doubt whatever! Between you, you fulfill every line!"

"Not unless you call me a Thing, and I won't let you!" cried Merry, her eyes filling with tears.

"Yes, and what about the treasure? We haven't got any treasure!" Robin protested.

"Ah-ha, but we have!" Roundelay chuckled, wagging a long finger at him and dancing about ecstatically. "We have recently acquired a treasure, a National Magic Possession, all our own-the Shining Circle of Roundabout! Now we have a Sovereign, too, and Roundabout can at last begin to be glamorous and interesting! Hooray! Make ready for the Royal Coronation! Give orders for the Royal Banquet! Roundabout's turn has come around at last!"

"Hooray! Hooray!" yelled all the Roundheads, and surged into a perfect fury of activity.

While Robin and Merry stood dazed, the dust-sheets were whipped off the object on the dais, revealing a glittering barrel-shaped throne, made of sapphire-blue glass and upholstered in pale blue velvet. Several Roundheads dashed through a door at the rear of the room, shouting for the cooks; others produced from somewhere a huge velvet cushion on which rested a sparkling blue glass crown and sceptre; still others, after considerable agitated rummaging in a closet, brought forth a length of the blue velvet trimmed with spun glass fringe. A moment later a whole troupe of chubby little Roundhead children dressed in blue-embroidered choir robes filed in through the big door, shrilly singing the National Anthem as a round. Breathless but all present, the entire citizenry gathered around, and Roundelay

stepped forward.

Before Robin and Merry had even begun to recover from their bewilderment at the rapid sequence of events, the fringed blue velvet cape was thrown over Merry's back, the crown placed on Robin's head, and the sceptre thrust into his hand. They were led to the dais amid noisy national rejoicing, and without further ceremony hailed as King Round Robin the First, Ruler of the Roundheads and Sovereign of the Sphere, and Merry Go Round, Royal Symbol of Roundabout.

"From kennel-boy to king, in one easy step, Robin mumbled as the populace began a group of round-dances in their honor. "Anyway, Merry, you can't say I haven't come up in the world."

"But my goodness, Robin, what'll we do?" Merry whinnied. "I don't even know how to be a Royal Symbol!"

"I don't know how to be a king, either--especially the kind they want, that's going to take care of them all their lives, and solve all their problems! Why, Merry, not even real kings do that! We'll just have to convince them, somehow, that they're wrong about us-but there's no sense trying now. They're making too much noise to hear a single word we say."

"Anyway, we've already tried, and they won't believe us!"

"Oh, they're bound to when the excitement dies down little. I'm sure they mean well, Merry. They're awfully nice."

"All except that Seer," Merry muttered, rolling an eye toward Roundelay, who was watching the dancing from the foot

of the dais, and still rubbing his hands.

Robin glanced at him too, and nodded. In his opinion Roundelay smiled too much, and there was something curiously sly about his manner-especially when he had mentioned that Shining Circle, whatever it was. But the other Roundheads seemed honest, hard-working people, and they wanted so badly to have a king and be glamorous and interesting that Robin felt a little sorry for them.

"Tell you what, Merry," he suggested as the dancing drew to a close. "We might stay for a day or two, just to please them. After that, we can go on to the Emerald City and see Princess Ozma and the Wizard."

"All right," Merry agreed. "I can wait that much longer to be a Real Horse. And I do kind of like this velvet cape," she confided.

"Then as soon as everybody goes home, I'll tackle that Roundelay, and tell him what we're going to do," Robin said firmly.

He had to wait some time before he could carry out this plan, because the moment the floor was cleared of dancers, the kitchen doors burst open and huge trays of steaming food were borne in by blue-liveried servants. To Robin, who had eaten nothing all morning but raspberries and a seed cookie, the banquet was the best part yet of being king. There was round steak, ground-round formed into meat balls with a delicious sauce, and the even

more delicious National Dish of Roundabout, called Pi. This was a light pastry tart stuffed with prickly pears, and had a flavor unlike anything Robin had ever tasted. He prudently ate two helpings of everything-and three of Pi-since he didn't know when he would get anything else.

"Because once we explain that the prophecy didn't really mean us," he whispered to Merry, "they might not even want us to stay for dinner."

He was wrong. When the citizens departed to their homes and he at last had a chance to tell Roundelay that he couldn't be king, though he wouldn't mind staying for a day or two, he was informed that he had no choice in the matter.

"The prophecy says the ring will bring the king, and the king will bring the Thing, and that you'll both make Roundabout prosperous forever," Roundelay declared.

"Forever?" Robin cried. "But listen here! We're on our way to the Emerald City to see Princess Ozma! I've got to get back to Oregon!"

"And I've got to get changed to a Real Horse!" Merry wailed.

"Besides, your old prophecy doesn't even mean us! And where does it say anything about making Roundabout prosperous forever?" Robin added suspiciously.

"There's another verse," Roundelay said, evading his eye.

"I'll bet there's not! Recite it to us!"

"Never mind. You're king of Roundabout and this horse is

the Royal Thing-I mean Symbol. You came exactly according to the prophecy. And now you're here, you'll stay!" Roundelay said stubbornly.

"Oh, no we won't! And you can't make us!" Robin shouted.

"Can't I?" inquired Roundelay, beginning to chuckle and back toward the door, his shifty eyes gleaming. "Can't I, indeed? Just take a look out there, if you don't believe me!"

He waved toward the window, and Robin and Merry rushed over to peer out. What they saw was the dangerous glass road, flashing 'round and 'round as far as they could see. The bridge which was the only means of exit from the city had been shut like a dresser drawer into some cavity beneath the Sphere, and the wrought iron gates were shut and padlocked.

"We've no need for a bridge, now that we can stay home and be ladies and gentlemen," came Roundelay's sly voice "From this moment on, Roundabout's welfare is up to you. I'll be back in half an hour to show you around the Round House and to hear your plans for our future prosperity. Good-day, Your Majesty!" He burst into gleeful chuckles, and the great glass door slammed shut.

Whirling around, Robin and Merry found themselves alone. And, after futilely shaking and pounding on every door in the room, they found that they were royal prisoners, as well.

Chapter 13

DOROTHY, Fess, Prince Gules, Fred, the Cowardly Lion, the Unicorn, and the Flittermouse were still standing in a puzzled row, staring up at the brass plate that read "HOME", when they heard childish laughter, and a burst of singing in treble voices. Peering through the iron gates, they saw hundreds of small children, all dressed in crisp, clean, starched pinafore or short white linen pants, playing merrily on vast green lawns. A few taller figures, in full blue skirts and tiny caps with fluttering white ribbons, strolled here and there among them; in the background, a long, white-columned building stood among shade trees. It was such a pretty sight that Dorothy exclaimed aloud in pleasure, the Cowardly Lion began to purr, and even Fred nickered softly and cocked his head in a sentimental manner.

"What charming little tots!" Prince Gules said cordially.

"What clean ones!" Fess added incredulously.

"Fess, dear," squeaked the Flittermouse, poking his head through the popinjay feather, "what rhymes with beautiful? Can anybody think what rhymes with beautiful?"

"Dutiful," the Unicorn said amiably. "I wonder if those little maidens would make me a daisy chain? I believe I'll ask them to let me in."

There was no need to ask. Their voices had attracted the attention of the nearest group of children, who instantly broke off their game and ran with delighted cries to open the gates.

"Come in! Come in and play!" cried half a dozen shrill little voices.

"Oh, look, a horsey!" shrieked one little girl.

"Horsey?" snorted Fred, switching from sentimentality to indignation. "See here, Miss-er-Tot, I am a Steed, not a-

"And a itty-bitty white donkey!" cried several others.

"Could they mean me?" the Unicorn gasped.

"And a big, big pussy-cat!" shouted a little boy.

The Cowardly Lion, who had been chuckling under his breath at Fred's outraged expression, abruptly assumed one of his own.

"Pussy-cat!" he growled. "Take that back, Moppet, or I'll pussy-cat you!"

Oh, hush-they're only little children!" Dorothy begged.

"We're Good Children," a little golden-haired girl informed her.

"I'm sure you are," the Prince said graciously. "Ah-will you be so kind as to show us the way through your charming-ah park?"

"If you'll play a game with us," piped the child Fred had called "Miss Tot."

"I suppose we could play just one game with them, couldn't we?" Dorothy said to her companions. Smiling at the children, she added, "What shall we play? Blindman's Buff? Tag? Ring Around the Rosy?"

"Oh, no!" the children chorused, turning shocked, wide eyes

upon her. "Those are naughty, rough games!"

"Ring Around the Rosy is naughty and rough?" the Cowardly Lion said incredulously.

"Oh, yes! We might get our hands dirty!" exclaimed the boy he had called "Moppet".

"Or muss our hair!" several little girls cried in dismay.

"Or wrinkle our pretty, clean clothes!" added the Moppet, carefully smoothing his spotless and absolutely wrinkle-free jacket.

"My!" said Dorothy, rather dashed. "You certainly are good children, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. This is Good Children's Land," Miss Tot said primly. She pointed to the white building among the trees. "That's the Nursery. We live there."

"With the Nannies," added a boy.

"That's a Nannie," offered another, pointing to one of the strolling figures in the white-ribboned caps.

"And we're little Ladies and Gent'mun, and always mind our Nannies, and do as we're bid, and drink up all our milk. And we have lovely porridge for breakfus, and bread-and-jam for lunch," the Moppet announced.

"Well! Now we know all about you, don't we?" Fess said, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, no!" Miss Tot informed him. "You don't know what we're going to have for dinner!"

Immediately all the children's faces lighted up, and they began giving little hops and handclaps of delight, shouting, "Parsnips!"

"Spinach!" "Mashed carrots!" "Bread-pudding!" "Oh, goody, goody!"

"Ugh," Fess said frankly, exchanging a revolted look with Dorothy.

The Flittermouse whispered, "At least they didn't invite us to stay, Fess dear! In fact, let's go!"

The Cowardly Lion, who had sat down and closed his eyes in a nauseated way at the sound of the dinner menu, hastily opened them again and got up. "Yes, we must go. I've just remembered some urgent business. I-"

Paying no attention, the children continued their hopping and goodying and hand-clapping. "And then do you know what we get to do?" the Moppet shrieked joyfully.

"No, but I can see you're going to tell us," sighed the Lion, sitting down again.

"We get to Clean Our Teeth!" "Yes, and Scrub Our Hannies!" ("Hannies!" the Lion groaned, lashing his tail.) "And have our Ears Washed!" "And then it'll be Bedtime!"

"Never," Prince Gules remarked thoughtfully to Fred, as the happy anticipatory little cries of "Bedtime! Oooo, goody! Bedtime!" shrilled around him, "Never have I encountered such insufferable little namby-pambys. Let us continue our journey."

"Yes, let's!" Dorothy said with feeling.

Since all the travelers were heartily bored with the Good Children, there was an immediate chorus of agreement, and the Flitter-

mouse-who had so far remained unnoticed behind the popinjay feather-fluttered down to his traveling position on Fess's shoulder. Instantly several children spotted the little creature, and clustered around Fess, making little snatches and shouting, "Oh, look! A mouse! A teeny blue mouse!"

"A mouse? First a bat, and then a mouse!" Flitter squeaked as he tried to avoid the chubby fingers. "Help! Don't do that! Oh, dear!" Wildly flapping his wings, he beat off a clutching little hand and hurled himself in the air, where he skittered about a moment in confusion, squeaking, "Oh, dear me," and finally landed on the highest thing he could find, which happened to be the tip of the Unicorn's horn. "Do you mind if I sit here, Unicorn dear?" he quavered breathlessly. "If I can hang on, that is?"

"Not at all," the Unicorn assured him. "I have every sympathy for you, and I'll hold my head very still."

"Oh, I like you. You're nice," Flitter told her tearfully. "Not at all like those beautiful, dutiful, namby-pamby . . . Oh, my, that's a little rhyme, isn't it? They clutch too much," he then exclaimed, "Oh, My!" and fell silent, almost overcome by own brilliance.

"Beautiful is as beautiful does," the Unicorn sniffed as she began to pick her way through the crowd of children.

This was extremely difficult, as they were still hopping, bing, chattering in their piercing trebles, and getting so successfully underfoot that the travelers could scarcely move. Fess the Prince tried to clear a way through the mass for Fred, who

hardly dared put a hoof down for fear of treading on a child Dorothy, attempting to do the same for the Cowardly Lion, lifted the Egg-basket high, thus unintentionally-and most unfortunately-revealing the stains and smudges her white dress had acquired in the rabbit-hole. This produced a concerted shriek of horror from the children.

"Her clothes are dirty!" they gasped to each other, pointing trembling fingers at Dorothy's skirt. "Oh, look, look! The Big Girl's clothes are dirty!" For an instant they shrank back in dismay-for only for an instant.

"Poor Big Girl! We'll save her!" the Moppet shouted.

"Oh, yes! Take her to a Nannie!" the others chorused.

The next thing the stunned travelers knew, the entire mob of tots had rushed at Dorothy, knocked the Egg-basket from her hands in a shower of peanut-butter-and-crackers, and were hurrying her off across the lawns toward the nearest Nannie, still uttering loud, shocked noises of concern and sympathy.

"G-reat golliwogs!" the Cowardly Lion stuttered. "Come on!"

Fess snatched up the Egg-basket, and the entire party pelted across the grass in pursuit, but the Nannie, after one horrified glance at Dorothy, seized her wrist and rushed her into the great colonnaded Nursery building, slamming the door in the faces of her breathless and consternated companions.

Prince Gules tried the door at once, and found it locked fast.

"They can't do this!" Fred neighed hysterically. "Don't they

know who we are? Don't they realize-"

"Oh, hush, Federigo," Fess begged. "Don't stand there whinnying about your dignity, try to kick that door down!"

"I?" Fred stared, dumbfounded. "I, a Steed of Halidom, so forget my education and my manners as to kick?"

"Then stand aside, or I'll forget mine and have horsemeat for dinner," snarled the Cowardly Lion, preparing to hurl himself at the door.

"Wait-perhaps I can break the lock with my horn," the Unicorn put in.

At that moment they heard the rattle of a window sash, and a faint hail from somewhere above and to their left. Dashing around the corner of the building, they saw Dorothy's distressed face framed in a second story window.

"Here I am," she called, "and don't be worried, because I'm perfectly all right, only I'm locked in this play room, and I can't get out!"

"For heavens sakes, jump! I'll catch you!" the Cowardly Lion promised recklessly.

"I can't-they've taken my dress away to wash! What's more, that Nannie is coming in a minute to give me a shampoo and a bath whether I want it or not! It's perfec'ly infuriating!"

"Isn't there any way we can get your dress?" Fess asked anxiously.

"Not that I know of, and I think you'd all better run before any more of those bossy Nannies show up. You're none too clean

yourselves, you know, after falling off that fire-escape and getting hot chocolate spilled down your neck in the woods, and-Oh, hurry! Here they come!"

Looking hastily in the direction she was pointing, they saw a whole new crowd of children running and skipping toward the Nursery, herded along by a dozen Nannies.

"Hurry, nothing! We're not going to run away and leave you here to face those parsnips and mashed carrots!" Fess said indignantly.

"Perish the thought!" the Lion said with a shudder. "Come on, jump! Never mind your dress!"

"Mightn't you climb down those vines?" Prince Gules suggested vaguely, squinting at a very small creeper clinging to the side of the building.

"Or just fly?" the Flittermouse coaxed. "Just this once? It's easy, truly it is, Dorothy dear! See me?" He fluttered about acrobatically to show how easy it was, but Dorothy only wrung her hands and begged them all to run.

"I'll get away somehow, and find you outside the fence, I promise, but-Oh, please hurry, they're almost here!"

"Here, hold this, Your Highness!" Fess thrust the Egg-basket into the Prince's hands and dashed toward the vine. Whether he would have succeeded in climbing up it or not he never knew, for at that moment the Nannies and children arrived, and the whole party was not only surrounded, but nearly deafened.

"Naptime! Naptime! Naptime!" the shrill little voices chanted.

"Come along, now, come along now, time to take your nice naps," the Nannies cried briskly.

Struggle as they might, the travelers found themselves swept irresistibly back toward the front door of the building. It did no good at all to protest that they must go on, that they were engaged in an important Quest, that Dorothy must be released immediately, if not sooner. Both Nannies and children were merely shocked, and announced disapprovingly that they could not possibly go now! It was Naptime!

At this the Cowardly Lion lost his temper completely. Snarling, "It's not my naptime!" he stopped in his tracks, opened his mouth, and roared deafeningly.

The effect was devastating. Nannies and children screeched, flung up their hands and scattered in every direction; the Unicorn backed full tilt into a tree: the Flittermouse dived headfirst into the Egg-basket; and Fred sat down. Indeed, the travelers were almost as startled as the Nannies and children-even the Cowardly Lion had to lean against a column for a moment with his ears flattened and his legs trembling panting as the echoes died away.

Surprisingly, it was Prince Gules who first recovered his wits. Even more surprisingly, he took instant action. Still clutching the Egg-basket, out of which the Flittermouse's head was now warily protruding, he ran back to Dorothy's window, shouting, "Quickly! Quickly! Our chance has come!"

"Ch-chance?" Dorothy stammered, taking her fingers out of

her ears.

"Yes, and you must hurry! They'll soon be returning. Are there clothes-closets in that playroom?"

"Well, there's a toy-closet-yes, there's a clothes-closet, too.

But what-"

"Just obey me! Go quickly and find something big enough to fit you. Put it on and come back to the window."

"But-" Dorothy began.

"Go!" the Prince commanded imperiously. As Dorothy vanished, he whirled and seized Fess's wrist. "Come! I saw a picnic table under those trees. We must drag it under the window."

"But Your Highness, a table won't be high enough to rescue her!" Fess panted, trying to pull back.

"The Unicorn will rescue her, not the table!" snapped the Prince, jerking him on.

"The Unicorn's going to rescue her!" squeaked the Flitter-mouse, spurting out of the Egg-basket and skittering about in high excitement. Oh, drag the table as fast as you're able, follow the plan as quick as you can, mind the rules, obey Prince Gules, don't be bold, just do as you're told, drag it hither, don't stop to dither, that's the way, but look at it sway, oh will it fall and ruin us all, now don't forget . . . Heavens to Bet-sy, hear how I'm rhyming-all of this time-" Flitter landed with a small, surprised thud on Fred's saddle, gulped "-mg," conscientiously and began to wonder what had come over him.

The others were too busy to wonder anything. The table stood against the building now, directly under the window, and Prince Gules was insisting that the Unicorn leap on top of it.

"But it's so wobbly!" she protested. "I'll do anything to help dear Dorothy, but if we both fall. . . !"

"You won't fall, I'll brace the table," Fred put in unexpectedly.

He trotted quickly over and leaned against one side of the table, while the Cowardly Lion, who was beginning to understand the Prince's plan, braced his massive shoulder against the other. With a light spring the Unicorn bounded to the table-top, under the Prince's direction, reared and placed both her front hooves against the wall of the building.

"Now-bend your head until your horn is against that windowsill," Gules ordered.

At that moment, Dorothy appeared at the window, wearing a very stiffly starched white pinafore so much too small for that its sash came just below her armpits. She appeared both irritated and breathless, but when she saw Prince Gules's arrangements she clapped her hands delightedly.

"How awf'ly clever of you! Now if I can just get through this window . .

She immediately began to try, while the others watched her anxiously and Flitter bounced up and down with excitement, keeping a sharp black-sequin eye out for Nannies meanwhile.

"Can you manage?" said the Prince.

"I think so. Oh! This pesky pinafore!" Dorothy puffed. "It's

like wearing a board!"

"Who's wiggling the table! Stop it!" exclaimed the Unicorn.

"I can't stop it, I'm terrified," moaned the Cowardly Lion, who was trembling in every limb as he watched Dorothy's precarious attempt to swing out the window.

"Shut your eyes," the Prince commanded him.

"Oh, hurry! I see a Nannie," Fess cried suddenly. "Three Nannies! And children . . . They're all coming back!"

"Never mind, I'm-there!" Dorothy gasped. As she spoke, she completed her perilous scramble from the windowsill. In an instant she had slid down the Unicorn's neck, to a firm seat on its back.

"Now!" the Prince sang out triumphantly. "Everybody run! Head for that far gate yonder!"

With another of her floating leaps, the Unicorn sprang from the table to the ground and fled for the gate the Prince had indicated, with Dorothy safe on her back. Fess flung himself on the Cowardly Lion, who charged after them, and the Prince, though hampered by the Egg-basket, to which he was still stubbornly clinging, managed to scramble into the saddle somehow. But as Fred wheeled to follow the others, a crowd of Nannies and children streamed out of the Nursery almost under his nose. Fred reared, wheeled again, and headed around the building the other way, with Flitter darting behind.

"More children, by my halberd! Quick through that patch

of shrubbery!" the Prince panted.

Nannies and children, having recovered from their fright, were appearing from everywhere now, more determined than ever to enforce the Law of Naptime. Within seconds all the travelers found themselves deflected from their straight dash for the gate, instead being forced to dodge, evade, detour around playhouses and wading pools and clusters of swings and teeter-totters, and-in the Cowardly Lion's case-occasionally leap clean over the heads of groups of children who burst out of the shrubbery right in front of him. Separated and unable to keep track of what was happening to the others, each still kept moving somehow toward the gate, and finally Dorothy and the Unicorn dodged one last group of Nannies and dashed through it.

"At last!" Dorothy gasped. "Thank goodness the woods are thick. Let's hide."

Panting and exhausted, they concealed themselves behind a lemon-drop bush, and very shortly saw the Cowardly Lion, with his tongue out, his ears flat, and Fess half-buried in his mane, skim through the gates in one prodigious bound.

"Here we are! Come hide yourselves, quick!" Dorothy called softly. "Where are the others?" she went on in an agitated whisper as the Lion flung himself down beside her and closed his eyes, muttering, "Nice vacation we're having."

"Don't know," Fess puffed, collapsing thankfully on the ground. He stared with respect at the Cowardly Lion. "Whew! What a ride! Do you always spend most of your time in the air

when you're running?"

"I do when I'm scared," the Lion panted. "And I'm usually scared." He opened his eyes and looked at Dorothy in alarm.

"Where are the others? You mean the Prince is still missing?"

"And Fred-I mean Federigo-and the Flittermouse! Oh, what can be keeping them?"

"I'll go find them," the Cowardly Lion said instantly, struggling to his feet.

"But my dear Lion, you're much too tired!" the Unicorn protested.

"Besides," Dorothy added, giving her cowardly old friend a hug for being so brave, "They're just bound to come in a minute. I'm sure Fred can run awfully fast."

"But did he even get started?" Fess said. He, too, stood up, frowning as he tried in vain to remember catching even a glimpse of Fred dashing, like the rest of them, about the lawns. "Oh, why did I leave them! How could I desert them like that? Not one of them is smart enough to get out of a fix-"

"I thought the Prince acted mighty smart when he got me out of that window," Dorothy said.

"That was a lucky accident, I'm afraid. He'd never be able to think so fast again. And Fred-and poor little Flitter! Oh, I've got to go back and find them! Was Flitter even 'with them?"

"I'm sure he was," said the Unicorn. "He climbed out of the Egg-basket when you went to fetch the table, and then-"

"The Egg! Ozma's Egg!" cried Dorothy, starting up. "Oh, I must go back too!"

"Hush! Listen!" hissed the Lion.

As soon as they stopped talking, they could hear rapid hoof-beats, and a moment later they saw the Steed pounding full tilt through the woods, his gleaming black legs working like pistons. The Prince was crouched like a jockey on his back, still clutching the Egg-basket as well as something fluttery and white, and the Flittermouse was clinging wildly to Fred's headstrap, with his gauzy wings streaming straight out behind.

"Stop them before they run right past us!" Dorothy cried.

Fess was already plunging through the bushes and out into the path. At sight of him Fred arched his neck, set all four hooves, and stopped. The jolt was so severe that the Prince came close to sailing straight over his head; as he grabbed for balance, the basket spun out of his arms, and landed, bouncing. The Egg spilled out, chips from its candy flowers flew, and the gold band came loose and wobbled away in one direction while the Egg rolled in another.

"Oh, I'm extremely sorry!" the Prince gasped. Tumbling out of the saddle, he ran to pick up the band, while Fess rescued both Egg and basket. By this time the others had crawled out of the bushes, and the party was once more reunited. Feeling themselves still too close to the Nursery for comfort, they pushed on deeper and deeper into the woods, until they were sure they had put a safe distance between themselves and the most adventurous Nan-

nie.

Then, at last, they stopped in a little clearing to catch their breath and collect themselves. The first thing Prince Gules did was apologize to Dorothy for dropping the Egg, and promise that he would try to fit the band back on. The second was to present her with the fluttering white thing he had been carrying, which turned out to be her dress. The Flittermouse, he explained, had spotted it hanging on a clothesline, had flown hurriedly to tell him, and they had made a detour back through the pursuing Nannies and Children to retrieve it. It was still slightly damp, but Dorothy was overjoyed to see it, and at once hung it over a branch to finish drying.

"I'm ever so much obliged to you!" she told the Prince earnestly. "If you'd ever worn a starched pinafore three sizes too small for you, you'd know how obliged I am! Don't you worry about Ozma's Egg, I don't think it's damaged much at all-and besides you've more than made up for it, finding my dress for me, and figuring out how to rescue me from that playroom! That was sort of a s'prise," she added thoughtfully. "That it was you who figured it out, I mean.

"Those Nannies were a surprise, too," the Cowardly Lion rumbled, lashing his tail a little at the memory.

"So was our fall off that fire-escape," Fess sighed.

"And having to dash through that park," added the Steed, who was still leaning wearily against a tree.

The Cowardly Lion yawned and lay down heavily. "Yes, on the whole I can't say I care much for surprises. And," he added with a glance at the lengthening shadows all about them, "I think we've all had plenty of them for today. I vote we camp right here and try for a nice uneventful night's sleep."

But there was one more surprise in store for them. A few minutes later, when Fred and the Unicorn had wandered off to graze on the flower-starred moss, Flitter was swooping after gnats, and Dorothy and Fess were exploring the badly squashed contents of the lunch basket, Prince Gules settled down under a tree to see if he could fit the band back on Ozma's Egg. And a moment or two after that, he gave a sudden, strange, sharp outcry that made everybody look around in alarm, and caused the Cowardly Lion to choke violently on a crumb.

"What's wrong?" Fess cried.

The Prince was sitting bolt upright, staring with open mouth at the slightly dented gold band off the Egg. He seemed struck dumb, but raised one hand and beckoned wordlessly. As the entire party converged on him like pins rushing to a magnet, he held up the band so that every one could see its inside surface. There, delicately engraved on the shining metal, were the words "Herald of Halidom," followed by a small but distinct figure "1".

"It's a Circlet!" Prince Gules brought out at last, in a voice grown hoarse with excitement. "I've found one of the Golden Circlets of Halidom-on an Easter Egg!"

Chapter 14

The great discovery had come so unexpectedly that it was some time before the astonished travelers could comprehend that one of the lost Circlets of Halidom was actually in their possession, and one portion of the Prince's quest accomplished.

"Which Circlet is it?" Dorothy asked.

"The largest, Circlet One," the Prince told her. "You can see the number engraved inside it. The kings of Halidom always wore it around their crowns-until my great-grandfather lost it playing quoits."

"Lost it down a rabbit-hole!" Fess said suddenly.

"So that's how the bunnies got hold of it!" Dorothy exclaimed. "One of them found it, I s'pose, and took it to the cavern as a sort of-of curio, and-"

"And then that Chief Artist, or whoever he was, used it to decorate a sugar egg!" said the Cowardly Lion. "Won a contest with it, too!" he added with a roar of laughter.

"I fail to see anything funny," Fred said with a glare, "about the First Golden Circlet of Halidom being used to decorate a sugar candy trinket."

"Oh, well, it hasn't hurt it," Fess said pacifically. "Though I think it's changed it some. Of course, I've never even seen this one, it was lost such a long time ago, but Circlet Two, the

one that was stolen from the Wyver, was thicker, and smooth all over."

"So was this one, in the olden days," the Unicorn put in, in her gentle voice. "I've seen it, many times-on your dear great-grandfather's head, Your Highness. It's shocking! They've beaten it quite flat to fit around that Egg."

"Flat or not, you will soon see it on my head," announced the Prince, who had been working to bend the egg-shaped band back into its original circle. "Furthermore, you will never see it off my head until I ride back into Pax-on-Arget and give it to my father. I say-I've thought of something! Everyone is smart again now, back home in Halidom!"

"Ooooooh!" squeaked the Flittermouse, dropping from a branch to perch on the Cowardly Lion's nose in great excitement. "Is this the one that makes us smart?"

"That's right!" Fess exclaimed. "Why, Your Highness, you began being clever the minute I handed you that basket! Remember? I shoved it at you when I ran to climb that vine on the Nursery wall-"

"And the next thing we knew, you'd thought up that excellent plan for rescuing the maiden," said the Unicorn. Her golden eyes rested fondly on Dorothy. "So fortunate," she murmured.

"And the Flittermouse started thinking up rhymes-whole lots of them!" Dorothy said.

"And even I had the common horse-sense to brace the table,"

Fred whinnied triumphantly.

"And I found Dorothy's dress," added the Flittermouse in a rather tentative voice. "That was pretty smart, too-wasn't it?" he asked the Cowardly Lion, turning to peer into his eyes, which were only about five inches away.

"Yes indeed! It showed the greatest perspicacity!" the Lion declared, looking cross-eyed in an effort to focus on him, and trying not to sneeze.

Flitter stared at him, enthralled. "Per-scacity. Verscacity. Verse-picacity," he whispered, his black-sequin eyes round with awe. Suddenly squeaking "I'm smart! I'm smart!" he hurled himself joyously into the air and performed a whole aerial ballet of silent skitterings, swoopings, side-slips, roll-overs, nose-dives, and soaring spirals, until he looked like one more flitting blue shadow among those now fast stealing through the trees. Dorothy, watching him, thought she had never seen anything so enchanting.

Fess had already observed that night was almost upon them, and as the others went on discussing the new quick-wittedness of the Halidomians, he roamed about gathering twigs, dry leaves, and fallen branches, and piling them into a heap in the center of the clearing. As he produced his tinder-box and began to strike sparks into the mass, he reflected with some amusement that though he had only the same old ordinary wits he was born with, he was still the only one of the party who ever thought of practical things, such as building a fire before it was too dark to find

the wood.

Once the flames sprang up, the others roused themselves. Fred and the Unicorn returned to their mossy dinner, and the rest gathered cozily around the fire to finish the mashed jelly sandwiches. The Prince had by this time managed to squeeze the Circlet back into shape, and pressed it down firmly on his blue-black hair, where it glinted impressively in the firelight.

"I'm just disgusted," Dorothy remarked as she studied it, "To think how we lugged that Egg around all day hunting for the Circlet-and if we'd only looked, it was right before our eyes!"

"Right before our eyes," Fess repeated in a puzzled tone.

"Now why does that sound familiar? Right before our-"

"The Oracle!" the Flittermouse squeaked, landing suddenly on his shoulder. "That's what the Oracle verses said, Fess dear. Something about 'right before your eyes.'"

"So it did!" Dorothy said. "Let's take another look at those verses!"

Fess was already diving into various pockets, and in a moment produced the crumpled but still legible sheet from the Register-book. Holding it so that the firelight fell on it, he read it out:

"Circlet One, in strange disguise,
Will lie unseen before your eyes.
Flight and chance will set in free;
Despoil the gift to royalty.

"Well! It certainly makes plenty of sense now, doesn't it?"

he finished.

"But we didn't really spoil Ozma's present, did we Dorothy dear?" the Flittermouse asked in a worried voice.

"Oh, no," Dorothy assured the little creature. "It works as well as ever, and the Wizard can put on another band. 'Despoil' means something different, Flitter."

"I rather feel I should apologize to that Oracle," the Prince admitted. "Never again will I think a Crystal Ball is silly! Do you know, if that verse makes sense, the others must, too. Read them, Fess. Perhaps now that I'm a bit more intelligent, I can understand them."

"Me, too," Flitter said proudly.

"Well, they don't seem much clearer to me," Fess said, but he read them aloud.

"Circlet Two, of purest gold,
Was carried off by a villain bold.
Problems will your path encumber;
Trust in the humblest of your number.

Circlet Three, a tiny thing,
Is in the hands of a future king.
Go by night, return by day,
The Circlet find in a roundabout way."

There was baffled silence for a moment. Presently Dorothy sighed and shook her head. "Far as I'm concerned, those two verses are still nonsense," she confessed.

"Complete nonsense! In fact, that middle verse merely tells us what we already know!" the Prince added irritably, forgetting he was going to be charitable toward Crystal Balls.

"Except where it says about trusting me," the Flittermouse said in a small, nervous voice, and began to mumble plaintively to himself,

"Says I'm humble-

Mustn't grumble.

Says I'm trusty,

So I must be.

Says I'm willin'

To catch the villain.

What is less clear

Is how, Fess-dear?"

"I wouldn't worry about it tonight," Fess told his little pet with a smile. "Maybe it'll all be clear tomorrow."

By this time their scanty meal was finished, and everybody was beginning to yawn. Dorothy's dress was quite dry now, and she thankfully put it on, wrapping the discarded pinafore around the Egg as padding and packing the whole bundle into the basket.

"Now when morning comes, I'll be all ready to leave here she explained.

"Wonder where here is, by the way?" the Cowardly Lion said uneasily, squinting into the blackness between the trees.

"Just a thick forest, that's all I know. A mighty thick one," Dorothy, too, gazed thoughtfully into the unknown darkness.

"Say, do you s'pose it could be the Great Blue Forest? That's in the Munchkin Country, all right, and it's enormous on the maps. If that's where we are, I hope we're right on the edge of it, 'cause if we aren't, we could get awful lost."

"Perhaps we're lost now," Prince Gules said with a yawn. "I must say I don't care. I intend to sleep for hours and hours and hours without so much as stirring. Tomorrow, I'll consider the matter of where we are.

"And I'll write a little song about it," Flitter crooned sleepily. "Fess dear, where's your cap?"

Fess hastily placed his cap over a soft patch of moss, and the Flittermouse disappeared underneath it. One by one the others arranged themselves comfortably around the fire or under nearby trees, and before long most of them were fast asleep and dreaming.

Prince Gules had a wonderful dream. He dreamed he was riding, victorious, back into Pax-on-Arget. He was wearing all three Golden Circlets, and Lady Annelet, whom he had somehow rescued from a dragon, rode beside him on her palfrey, beaming at him and chanting, "Oh, good for you, Gulie! Oh, good for you, Gulie! Oh, good for you, Gulie!"

The Unicorn dreamed she was walking in a procession beside

Prince Gules's great-grandfather, simply smothered in daisy chains and attended by twenty maidens, all of whom were Dorothy.

The Flittermouse dreamed-in rhyme-that the University of Halidom was conferring upon him an honorary degree for Smartness and Verse-picacity, and that Fess was applauding proudly from the front row.

Dorothy dreamed somebody was trying to convince her there was, too, such a thing as a Flittermouse, and that she didn't believe it.

Three of the party were not dreaming. The Cowardly Lion, who had planted his massive self on the farthest edge of the clearing, was taking only lion-naps, keeping one yellow eye warily open in case of danger. Fess (who thought the Lion was fast asleep) had privately resolved to do the same thing. For a long time he lay staring into the flames, his chin on his fists and his mind wandering among the strange scenes of the past two days. Then, because he was just a little bit homesick, his thoughts Sneaked away, back to the Crenelated Wall and the last glimpse he had had of the moonlit castles and mulberry orchards and azure fields of Halidom. Just as he was anxiously hoping that he had remembered to tell Barry to break an egg over the kanets' chopped meat every morning, a twig snapped nearby, startling him until he recognized the big black shadow that had drifted up beside him.

"Oh-it's you, Federigo! Why aren't you asleep?"

"I have been asleep-doing, anyway. And thinking," the

Steed added carelessly.

"Thinking?"

Fred nodded, tossed back his mane, and contrived to look elaborately unconcerned about almost anything one could mention. "Nice night, isn't it?" he said brightly.

"What have you been thinking about, Federigo?" Fess asked with a smile.

"Oh, nothing in particular, really. Just about this-well, this fancy name notion I had for a while. This Federigo. Sounds a little silly. Not at all the thing. I'd rather you'd just call me Fred, if it's no particular trouble."

"It's no trouble at all." Fess got up, threw another branch on the fire, and walked over to stroke the Steed's gleaming black neck. "Fred's a very nice name, really. I've always thought so."

"Well, at any rate, it's good enough for me," Fred mumbled. "Common-undistinguished-suits me, I expect," he added with a short whinny of laughter. "I never told you, but one of my grandfathers was a plow-horse."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"No. He was a good plow-horse. Well, g'night."

"Goodnight," Fess said. Affectionately he watched the Steed move away into the trees, both glad and just a little bit sorry that Fred had actually become smart enough not to put on airs, and hoping it wouldn't change him much. Stretching out again beside the fire, he decided to worry about the forest, and getting

lost, in order to keep himself awake. He was still thinking hard about this problem three minutes later, when he fell asleep.

Fred was asleep too, head drooping and one hip cocked. He was dreaming intently. In his dream, Princess Ozma was bestowing on him an emerald-studded gold medal-for sheer merit, valor and character-even though knowing all about his grandfather and not a thing about his cousin who was a Destrier.

Chapter 15

THE MORNING mists were still floating like veils among the trees when the Cowardly Lion rose with a yawn, shook his heavy mane, and looked about him. The Unicorn was already browsing on the dew-covered moss a little distance away, and after telling her that he was off to find himself some breakfast, the Lion padded away silently through the forest. As a matter of fact, he had decided to do some exploring. Dorothy's remark last night had worried him, and he knew that if this really were the huge Blue Forest of the Munchkin Country, there was a good chance they might wander about in it for weeks before discovering a way out.

The sun was high before he returned to the clearing, now more worried than before. He had ranged far in every direction, without seeing anything but trees, an occasional stream, much undergrowth, and still more trees.

"I can't find any squirrels or birds to ask questions of, either," he told the others gloomily. "We're lost, all right, and I don't like it. At this point, I'd even go back to Good Children's Land -if I knew which way to go. All we can do is follow one of those streams, and hope it'll lead us out of the forest somehow."

Dorothy, Fess and the Prince had already breakfasted on wild plums and blueberries, so without further delay the little party started off, Prince Gules remarking that the Circlet would probably make him smart enough to find their way, and Dorothy added staunchly that though she'd been lost often, she'd never stayed lost long.

"You know, I've been wondering, Prince," she said as they threaded their way through the forest. "Do you s'pose those other Circlets could be right under our noses, too, and we just haven't seen

"Not unless you or the Lion have them," Prince Gules answered.

"Well I don't have a single other metal thing except shoe-buckles," Dorothy sighed. "And the Cowardly Lion doesn't even have those. But-I guess it's useless to suspect any of those silver things on Fred's bridle? Some of 'em are circles."

Fred politely smothered a horselaugh, and the Prince shook his head, smiling. "Those silver ornaments were made in Troth, long after that popinjay carried off Circlet Three. And of Course, the bridle is my property and in my possession so even if the

robber had contrived to fasten Circlet Two onto it somewhere Fred and I would still be strong, as would all my father's subjects."

"You don't seem very weak to me," Dorothy observed.

"Nor do I feel as weak as I did the first day after Circlet Two was stolen, but I believe I've just grown used to it. I tried to pick up Fred's saddle this morning, and I could barely lift it. By my buckler, I'd hate to try a joust!"

"Me, too," Fred agreed with feeling. "That dashing about yesterday nearly did me in."

"Well, all right, I just thought I'd ask," Dorothy said reluctantly. "I s'pose that popinjay couldn't have just flown over to Troth? And just happened to drop Circlet Three in that bridle-factory or whatever it is, and-"

This time it was the Cowardly Lion who had to smother his laughter-not quite successfully.

Fess explained that there had been a strong east wind that evening, according to old timers' accounts, so probably the popinjay had been blown right over the Crenelated Wall, and for all anybody knew, to the other end of Oz. "So we'll just have to keep on hunting, I'm afraid," he finished. "That is' if this stream ever leads us out of the forest so we can keep on!"

By noon, however, the stream they had chosen to follow had done nothing but lead them farther and farther into increasingly thick forest, and finally, to their disgust, it poured itself into a very deep pool and simply ended.

"How aggr'vating!" Dorothy said, putting her hands on her hips and scowling at the pool. "It must go right underground here. I thought rivers and streams were all supposed to empty into the Nonestic Ocean!"

"Not that we want to go to the Nonestic Ocean," the Cowardly Lion said moodily.

"No, but we'd be sure to get out of this forest on the way there. Why, my goodness, if we spend much more time in this place, we'll miss the Easter party!"

"And I'll never find the other Circlets!" said the Prince.

"A pox on this following of streams! I propose we strike out boldly for ourselves. We can't possibly be any more lost than we are already."

So, after lingering by the pool long enough for the Cowardly Lion to catch a few fish with his big, swift paw, and Fess and Dorothy to grill them for lunch over a twig fire, they chose a direction at random and started off, determined to keep going in a straight line. This proved terribly difficult; they kept having to detour around boulders or thickets or ponds, and by mid-afternoon no longer had any idea whether they were going in a straight line or in circles. It was just at the point when their spirits were lowest, when Flitter had begun to cry a little and Dorothy was trying not to, that Fred, who was plodding in lead, stopped suddenly and exclaimed, "Look! Here's a road!"

The others crowded up beside him eagerly.

"Well, anyway, a path," Fess amended.

"No matter, it's quite visible enough to follow! And it must lead somewhere," the Prince declared.

He and Fred started briskly along the little trail. The Cowardly Lion, privately hoping it wouldn't lead merely to some deserted clearing, trotted after him, with the Unicorn, Fess and Flitter following behind. It was certainly easier going than pushing through the underbrush as they had been doing the whole day, but the path wound and curved and doubled back on itself so much that even the Prince soon began to have misgivings.

"In my opinion, we're still just going in circles," he muttered as he tried to see around the next bend. "'Round and 'round and 'round."

"And up and down, too!" the Cowardly Lion observed, beginning to pant a little.

"But aren't the trees beginning to thin out just a little?" Dorothy said hopefully. "And look! There's a bird, at last!"

Sure enough, a blue-jay was sitting on a branch near the path, grooming his wing-feathers and watching them with an indifferent sapphire eye.

"Good afternoon," Prince Gules said politely. "Could you tell us where this road goes, please?"

The bird studied him a moment, then said, "Oh, round about," in a casual tone, and went on with its left wing.

"That's obvious," the Lion growled. "What we want to

know is does it ever get anywhere?"

The jay glared at him. "I have already answered that question!" it said. With an insulted flick of its tail, it flew away.

'Already answered!' " Fred repeated in disgust. "All he said was 'round about.' Roundabout?" he neighed suddenly.

At the same moment, several of the others chorused, "The verse! The Oracle!"

"The Circlet find in a roundabout way!" " the Prince quoted. "This is certainly a roundabout way," he added bitterly, as they started again up the winding, meandering, hilly path. "But I fail to see how that will help us find the Circlet, unless it's lying somewhere on this road."

"Oh, dear!" the Unicorn said in dismay. "Surely no one would leave your dear ancestors' Golden Circlet lying about on a road! Besides, that's the one that's 'in the hands of a future king,' isn't it?"

"That's right," Dorothy sighed. "That pesky Crystal Ball! I hope it knows what it's talking about!"

"It did before," the Prince reminded her, tapping Circlet One.

"So did we-after we'd found the Circlet," Fred puffed scornfully. He stopped a moment to catch his breath. They were nearing the top of the slope, and it was growing steeper all the time. "For my part, I wish the thing had known how to talk plain Ozzish," he grumbled as he bent his head and started the tiresome climb again. "I don't hold with this poetry stuff. Or

pictures, either! Remember? The first question we asked it, it tried to fob us off with a picture of itself, instead of an answer. Just a picture of a crystal ball! Now why did it do that?"

"It must have had some good reason," said the Prince.

Nobody commented; the others felt too doubtful to agree and too breathless to discuss it. The Flittermouse alone seemed to take the Prince's words to heart, repeating "Some good reason," solemnly to itself several times, then murmuring rather moodily,

"Some good reason,

Not just teasin'.

Told us right,

Just last night.

Kind of taunting,

Pretty daunting.

Won't talk plainly,

Babbles, mainly.

Still insists

That we persist

Why, there's a Cryst-al Ball!" it finished in as they reached the top of the hill at last.

"So there is!" Dorothy gasped.

They all stood staring in astonishment. Abruptly, at the crest of the ridge, the forest had ended. Before them lay a barren circular valley criss-crossed by roads and ringed with hills.

And in the middle of the valley stood something that looked precisely like a huge blue crystal ball.

"Could it be a picture of that, the Oracle was showing us?"

Fess breathed.

"Don't know," the Lion gulped uneasily. "What is it?"

"A city?" Dorothy guessed.

"A kind of castle!" Prince Gules exclaimed. He gazed at it in growing excitement. "I say, it must be what the Oracle meant! Just look at it!"

"And just look at that road running 'round and 'round it!" roared the Cowardly Lion with a shudder.

"No matter, there must be a bridge!" the Prince said impatiently. "I'll wager it's hidden in that space underneath the dome. And I'll also wager my best buckler that this place has a king, and that the king has Circlet Three, the rogue!"

"But the Oracle said 'a future king'," Fess objected.

"Then perhaps he's a prince! Whatever he is, if he has my Circlet, I mean to find it! Charge, Fred! Forward for Halidom!"

"Oh, wait!" Dorothy cried in dismay. "Let's make a plan! Let's-oh, dear, I 'wish he wouldn't be so impulsive!"

But the Prince, flourishing his sword, had already plunged recklessly down the rocky hillside, and Fess, after exchanging one startled glance with the Lion, gulped "For Halidom!" and plunged loyally in pursuit. The Cowardly Lion swallowed and began to tremble. Then, laying his ears flat and roaring "For

the Prince and Fess!" in his most horrendous tones, he bounded after the Unicorn's flying hooves.

In another two minutes they were all ranged at the brink of the glass road, shouting fiercely for the bridge in the name of King Herald of Halidom, Princess Ozma of Oz, and anybody else they could think of.

A few moments later, Robin Brown, who was slouched in utter boredom on his blue glass throne plaiting and unplaiting Merry's gilded reins, was startled by the sound of pounding footsteps. Next instant the thick glass door was flung shatteringly open, and a puffing Roundhead-it was Polkadots-dashed in.

"Visitors, Your Majesty!" he bawled, and had barely time to leap aside before what seemed a whole menagerie swept in after him.

To Robin and Merry in the throne room, their appearance was electrifying. Robin half-started from his throne, staring wild-eyed at the biggest lion he had ever seen; Merry's incredulous gaze riveted on the Unicorn.

"His-His Highness, Gules of H-Halidom," Polkadots announced, then dashed through one of the doors in search of Roundelay.

"And his Steed, and his Royal Emblem," the Prince added austere.

"And his page, Fess of Troth," shouted Fess, as impressive as he could.

"And his protector, the Fierce Lion of Oz," growled the

Cowardly Lion, who had decided he might be more impressive incognito.

"And me, Dorothy," Dorothy said firmly.

"And me, and me, and me!" the Flittermouse shrieked in tremendous excitement.

"In the name of my father, King Herald the 64th," cried the Prince, "I demand the instant return of the Third Golden Circlet of Halidom!"

Robin swallowed convulsively. "The wh-whatlet of wh-whatidom?" he faltered.

"Do not feign ignorance!" the Prince thundered, half-drawing his sword. "You hold in unlawful possession a Treasure of my kingdom, and I command you to hand it over! If you do not instantly obey-"

"Oh, wait a minute," begged Dorothy, who had been looking more closely at Robin, and with astonishment, at Merry, who was peeking wide-eyed from behind the throne. "I don't think he even knows what you're talking about! Besides, you mustn't bully him, he's not as big as you are!"

"He is just a little lad, isn't he?" said the Prince, reverting with relief to his usual mild tones, and studying Robin with interest. "And what an extraordinary Steed he has! See here," he said to Robin, letting his sword slip back into his sheath. "Are you really king of this funny place?"

"Not really," Robin said. He drew a long, wavering breath

and began to relax a little, though he kept a vigilant eye on the Fierce Lion of Oz. "I'm just sort of-of temporary. I'd better call Roundelay. He-"

At that moment one of the small doors opened, and Polka-dots reappeared, followed by Roundelay himself. The Seer had hurried halfway to the throne when he caught sight of the Prince. He stopped dead, then tried hastily to sneak back out. But the Prince had seen him, and was staring in astonishment.

"Why, it's the peddler!" he cried.

Chapter 16

THE PRINCE'S exclamation caused Roundelay to stop in his tracks, while the rest of the party gazed surprise first at this newcomer, then at Prince Gules.

"Do you know this-this-whomever it is?" Dorothy asked bewilderedly.

"It's Roundelay," said Robin.

"Roundelay, Sphere-Seer of Roundabout, at your service, my dear young lady," said that personage, smiling ingratiatingly, bowing, and rubbing his hands.

"Don't believe the rogue," Prince Gules retorted, watching this performance with distaste. "Naturally, he is no acquaintance of mine-but I've seen him, time and again, in Pax-on-Argent. Why, I saw him not a week ago, coming out of Sir Greve's house. I know he's the peddler."

"You highness is right, quite right," Roundelay said. "Until recently, all Roundheads were peddlers-even I. But that is changed now. No more must our homeloving people tramp the highways and byways of Munchkinland. No more must we shoulder our heavy packs, bow our weary backs, and trudge-"

"Get on with it!" growled the Cowardly Lion, who did not care for oratory.

"-on our rounds," the Seer said quickly. "We may now remain at home in our beloved and beautiful sphere and be ladies and gentlemen, for now we have a king! And a Royal Symbol! We have become-"

"And a National Magic Possession, too!" Polkadots put in eagerly. "Don't forget the Shining Circle!"

"Be quiet!" Roundelay snarled. "You may leave! Get out!"

Polkadots hurried to obey, but the damage was done. Fess and Dorothy chorused, "What Shining Circle?" and the Prince cried, "Circlet Three! I knew it!"

"You mean the Shining Circle is your Circlet?" Robin exclaimed.

"I'm positive of it!" the Prince declared. "And I must have it back at once! It-"

"Quick - somebody catch that seer" Fess snapped.

Without even interrupting a yawn, the Cowardly Lion, happened to be nearest, shot out his right front foot and hooked a claw into Roundelay's tunic, bringing to an abrupt halt the

Seer's second attempt to sneak away.

"It is of supreme importance that I restore the Circlet to my father," the Prince was saying to Robin. "Tell me, who is the king here, if you are not?"

"Well, I'm not! But I don't know-"

"You are! He is!" Roundelay broke in. "He and no other! He is Round Robin the First, Ruler of Roundabout and Sov-"

"Hush," said the Cowardly Lion, squashing the Seer's peaked cap over his face.

"I'm not anything of the sort!" Robin said indignantly. "I'm plain Robin Brown from Cherryburg, Oregon, and I'm a prisoner here, and

"A prisoner!" Fess exclaimed.

Simultaneously, Dorothy cried, "Did you say Oregon? Why I'm from Kansas!"

"Kansas! Are you that Dorothy?" Robin gasped.

At that point everybody began asking so many questions everybody else that it became quite impossible for a few minutes to sort out what anybody was saying. Seizing the chance to ask a burning question of her own, Merry emerged from behind the throne and hurried over to where Fred and the Unicorn were standing.

"Is that your pole?" Merry whispered shyly, fixing wide, excited eyes on the Unicorn's horn. "Did you used to be a merry-go-round horse like me, before the Wizard transformed you?" Fred could not restrain a snort of laughter, and for a dumb-

founded moment the Unicorn's golden eyes opened as wide as Merry's. But then all three began to explain-Fred, kindly, that he wasn't really laughing at Merry, and Merry, humbly, that she didn't really mean to be rude, but she'd never seen a Unicorn before, and the Unicorn, gently (because this was a fellow female) that Merry's ignorance was quite understandable, because there weren't any other Unicorns to see. Meanwhile, Dorothy, Robin, Fess and the Prince were untangling their various stories and meeting each other properly, and Robin was being formally introduced to Flitter and the Cowardly Lion, while the Lion himself sat thumping his tail, absent-mindedly squashing the struggling Seer, and watching the whole scene with benign interest.

Presently things were sufficiently straightened out for them all to turn their attention back to the matter of the Shining Circle.

"Maybe it is your Circlet," Robin told the Prince. "I'd tell you in a minute if I knew, but I've never seen either one of them. Why don't you ask Roundelay? I'll bet he knows all about it, the old villain!"

"Villain?" gulped Flitter, bouncing into the air and skittering around Fess's head. "Is that the Villain, Fess dear? I'm willin' to fight the Villain-bite the Villain-"

"No, no-better not bite him, Flitter," Fess said quickly. "Your part's in a different verse, remember? The one about Circlet Two. This is about Circlet Three, and the future king, and roundabout way and all that."

"Oh, yes," Flitter said, settling down again with relief.

"Well, I'll fight him, if necessary, or even bite him!" Prince Gules said as he strode over to the Seer. "Let him up, please, Sir Lion."

As the Cowardly Lion obligingly removed his paw, Roundelay struggled to his feet and backed dizzily away, jerking at his hat. After numerous furious attempts he succeeded in yanking it off his eyes, and glared, red-faced and defiant, at the Prince.

"He does know all about it, I can tell by looking at him!" Gules exclaimed. "You insolent, bald old Jackanapes, where is my father's Golden Circlet?"

"It isn't your father's Golden Circlet! Not any more it isn't!" shouted the infuriated Seer. "It's Roundabout's Shining Circle. What's more, we Roundheads have a perfect right to it, because it's round!"

"You have no right to it whatsoever! Where is it?" the Prince demanded.

"It's in the Round Tower," Robin muttered.

"Yes, in the Round Tower!" Roundelay's scowl changed to a spiteful grin as he began to back away. "And perfectly safe, as His Majesty Round Robin will be glad to tell you. Just try and get it!"

"I intend to try, and I intend to succeed!" the Prince informed him. "I'd give a sack of gold pieces to know how you got it, in the first place!"

"Oh, would you?" Roundelay hugged himself with both skinny arms and burst into mocking laughter. "Then ask Sir

Greves!"

"Sir Greves?" repeated the Prince, momentarily too taken aback to do more than stare.

"Yes, Sir Greves! Go home and ask him! Leave now, why don't you?"

"I'll never leave without that Circlet!"

"Then you'll never leave," Roundelay retorted. With another burst of laughter, he leaped nimbly through the round doorway and slammed the great glass portal after him.

"Oh, dear, he's locking it!" Dorothy cried.

"Let him," the Prince said scornfully. "Once I have that Circlet on my thumb, my hands will be skillful enough to pick the lock! Where's the door to this Tower, Robin? We'll break it down!."

"It isn't locked," Robin sighed, pointing toward a small door set in an alcove. "There's no need to lock it.. Roundelay's right, I'm afraid. You'll never get the Shining Circle unless he says so."

"Why not?"

"Because it's guarded. By the Machine. I'll show you."

Robin led the way across the room to the alcove and flung open the small door. The others crowded through after him and found that they had walked directly into the Round Tower. It was a very curious room they stood in; Fess decided it was like being in the bottom of a well. The floor was bare and circular, and the shining dark walls rose sheer and straight on every side. There was nothing

whatever in the place except a thin spiral staircase, which wound up the center through empty space to a platform high at the top of the Tower.

"Is the Circlet up there?" Dorothy asked Robin as they stared upward.

"That's what Roundelay said when he showed me this place," Robin told her. "Of course, he called it the Shining Circle. But whatever it is, it's up there on that platform."

"Then why can't we just climb up the stairs and get it?" Prince Gules demanded. As he spoke, he strode toward the stairs, and before Robin could stop him, placed one foot on the bottom step.

Instantly a tremendous clamor of alarm bells broke out from what seemed every direction at once. As the noise shrilled and screamed and banged and clanged, the cringing travelers saw the Machine appear like an awakened watchdog on the edge of the high platform.

The Machine, which was made of shining steel, was a large, complicated affair, indeterminate in shape but intimidating in appearance, and absolutely crammed with pulleys and cogs and wheels. In fact, it seemed mainly composed of wheels within wheels, and Fess thought it had a decidedly malevolent sneer. It lost no time proving it could do more than sneer. Before the Prince -or anyone else-could possibly have reached the top of the long spiral of stairs, it had shot out a steel arm holding six interlocking and furiously spinning wheels and placed them across the platform like a shield, separating platform and stairs as effectively as a squad

of armed soldiers could have done it.

Shivering, Dorothy pulled the Prince back. The instant his foot was off the bottom step, the din of bells died away, the arm with its spinning wheels drew back, and the Machine disappeared from view, leaving only the sound of Roundelay's jeering laughter coming from somewhere outside the Tower.

"That's why," Robin said simply.

"And a very good reason, too", said the Cowardly Lion with a shudder. Every hair on his mane was standing on end, and he shook it angrily as he padded to the dark glass wall and flattened his nose against it in an attempt to see where the laughter was coming from "I wish I'd squashed that beetly little Seer when I had my paws on him!" he growled.

"But then we'd never get the Circlet!" Fess pointed out.

"We're never going to get it anyway, far as I can see," Dorothy sighed. "Unless..." She looked nervously at the stair. "I weigh the least of anybody, I s'pect. Maybe if I tried it-on my very tippy toes.

"Nonsense! I won't hear of it!" roared the Cowardly Lion, his mane bushing up uncontrollably again.

"It wouldn't work, anyhow," Robin told her. "The alarm's too sensitive. Why, an ordinary blue-bottle fly lighted on that bottom step this morning, and set off the whole alarm."

"How about the second step? Or the third or fourth?" the Prince demanded. He was still glaring up at the platform as if it had

insulted him personally.

"They're all the same. The least vibration on the stairs, and the Machine comes out to see what's going on."

"What if I climbed up the banister?" Fess suggested.

Robin shook his head, but shrugged and said, "Try it if you like."

"Oh, no, don't!" Dorothy begged. "I couldn't stand that racket again! Come on, let's get out of this awful place, and try to think of some way to make Roundelay get the Circlet for us."

Merry and the Unicorn had bolted into the Round Room at the first sound of the alarms, and were uneasily waiting there when the others returned. Fred had bolted with them, to his subsequent intense shame, and was now pretending stern and single-minded interest in the large door-the thick round glass one.

"Don't worry about being locked in, Your Highness," he told the Prince in his most responsible voice "One good kick, and there'll be nothing of this thing left to lock."

"You think you can bring yourself to kick this time?" rumbled the Cowardly Lion, who had not forgotten the Nursery.

"Don't worry about that either," Fred muttered. "That was in my stupid days, you know. I realize now that sometimes the best thing to do with manners and training is to forget them."

"Well, I've been trained to eat, and I'm having a little trouble forgetting that at the moment," the Lion confessed. "In fact, I'm about to forget my manners, too, and ask our little King Robin here if he happens to be ruler of any cooks."

"You bet I am!" Robin told him. "Merry, just go down to the kitchen and tell them to send up a banquet, will you? With plenty of barley for Fred, and-excuse me, but what does the Unicorn like to eat?"

"I don't suppose you'd have any quatrefoils, would you?" said that creature wistfully. "Or even a few plain fleur-de-lys?"

"Not unless they're circular," Robin sighed. "Merry, just say 'flowers' and we'll see what they bring. And tell them to turn on that moon-it's almost dark."

Without their noticing, afternoon had, indeed, slipped into dusk, and the light was fading fast. Very shortly, however, a large moon-like lamp began to glow from the glass dome above their heads, and was soon filling the room with its soft radiance.

"Is everything round here.-" Dorothy inquired, blinking curiously at this odd but attractive lighting system.

"Absolutely everything," Robin said. "Food, houses, furniture! And the people sing rounds and talk in circles-and write round-robin letters with ball-point pens! I've only been here a day, and already I'd give most anything just for the sight of a straight line or a square!"

"It's a pretty place, though," Fess remarked from the window, through which he was admiring the view of the shining glass city, and the moon-lamps blinking on in dome after dome.

"I know it," Robin admitted. "And the Roundheads are nice friendly people, too-all except Roundelay. But I'm not a Round-

head, and I don't know how to be a king, and all I want is to get away!"

"Of course you do," Dorothy agreed. "That old Roundelay had no business keeping you here in the first place. You and Merry just stick with us, and when we escape, you can come too!"

"The question is," Fess said, "Can any of us escape.?"

Chapter 17

IT was quite a question Fess had asked. Trying to answer it kept the travelers busy all the time they were eating the excellent banquet Robin had provided (the Unicorn got tuberoses and bachelor buttons, which she found delicious) and long after the dishes had been cleared away. Fred had relieved their minds about the locked glass door; but what about the bridge? The Roundheads had drawn it in as soon as the travelers had crossed over it that afternoon, and it hadn't been extended since. Robin considered this, then said,

"I don't think that'll be a problem. It all depends on our timing." He explained that in their peddling days the Roundheads had kept the bridge stretched out across the whirling road most of the time, because they were constantly going and coming on their rounds. But from now on they planned to extend it for just one hour in the early morning, between six and seven o'clock-barely long enough for the people to go out to the hills and gather enough prickly pears for their daily ration of Pi. "You remember Pi-that

dessert we had for dinner," Robin added.

Fess, who had had three pieces, remembered it very well, and quickly said so. "Do they have it every day?" he asked enviously.

"Yes-it's their national dish. Well, I thought we might get up before six o'clock, and get all ready, and then the minute they push the bridge Out, Fred can kick down the door and we'll all run like sixty, and storm the gates, and be the very first ones on the bridge. I'll bet we could bet across before anybody could stop us!

"I don't want to get across until I have the Circlet." Prince Gules said firmly.

"Oh," said Robin, rather dashed. "I sort of forgot about the Circlet. I suppose you couldn't just buy another Circlet exactly like it?" he suggested without much hope.

"There are no others like it" the Prince exclaimed. Then, realizing that Robin had not yet been told of the magical powers of the Circlets, he explained that the manual skill, and therefore the prosperity, of everyone in Halidom depended on this particular Circlet and no other. Of course, once Robin understood this, he saw perfectly why the Prince wouldn't leave without it.

"But I still don't see how we're to get it," he sighed. "And from what I know of Roundelay, he'll never give it up unless somebody makes him do it."

"Ozma could make him do it," Dorothy declared. "If we could all get out of here, and go straight to the Em'rald City, and get Ozma to help-"

"I don't want Ozma to help," the Prince said stubbornly. "I want to do it all myself!"

No amount of arguing would move him from this stand, and finally Dorothy and Fess exchanged a helpless glance and gave it up, listening with gloomy misgivings to the Prince's plan-which was to capture Roundelay and make the Roundheads ransom him with the Circlet-and Fred's plan, which was to toss Roundelay onto the whirling road and then simply kick the Machine to pieces. The others grew quite interested in working out the details of these dashing schemes, but neither Dorothy nor Fess had much faith in them, and soon moved a little distance away to put their heads together.

"The Roundheads couldn't get the Circlet any more than we can-even if they wanted to ransom that crafty old Roundelay, which I'll bet they wouldn't," Dorothy muttered.

"Yes-and how's Fred going to climb up that skinny little staircase to get at the Machine to kick it?" Fess added. "The only thing to do, Dorothy, is for you and the Lion to escape and go to the Emerald City for help, while the rest of us wait here. I'll try to keep the Prince from doing anything reckless, but you'd better hurry."

"Hurry? I don't even know the way!" Dorothy said in despair. "Oh, Fess, let's take one more look at that awful staircase and see if we can think of something else."

The two of them, and the Flittermouse, who happened to be napping on Fess's shoulder at the time, went back to the Round

Tower and once more examined the empty room, the twisting spiral staircase, and the platform high above their heads. In the light of the real moon, which filtered through the dark blue glass of the Tower walls, it all looked twice as sinister-and three times as discouraging-as before.

"I s'pose that is the Circlet up there?" Dorothy said. "For all we really know, that Shining Circle is something else altogether."

Fess shook his head positively. "It's the Circlet, all right. Roundelay as good as admitted it. I wonder how he ever got hold of it?"

"Maybe the popinjay was blown here, in that windstorm, Dorothy ventured.

"But Fess dear," Flitter put in sleepily, "it was something to do with Sir Greves. Remember? He said 'ask Sir Greves.'

"Yes, he did," Fess said thoughtfully. "How queer! I can't imagine what he meant."

"Maybe we should go home and ask Sir Greves?" Flitter suggested in a hopeful voice. "I'm kind of tired of this place, Fess dear, I don't think I want to stay here very much longer."

"Well, I don't either," Fess sighed, stroking his little pet with one finger as they turned to leave. "But I don't see any way out of it right now. Maybe one of us will have a bright idea by morning."

There was nothing to do but hope for this, and very soon the whole party had disposed itself comfortably on the velvet hassocks or the soft circular rugs in the Round Room. Fred, who preferred

to sleep standing up, posted himself by the great glass door, ready to kick if necessary, and Merry, who did not sleep at all, wandered off to the kitchens where she could prowl around and think about things without disturbing the others.

Flitter could not get to sleep, possibly because he had napped too long on Fess's shoulder after dinner. After trying for some time, he heaved a small sigh, crept out from under Fess's cap and began swooping rather aimlessly about the room in hope of finding a gnat or two. The moon-lamp had gone out long ago, but he could see perfectly well in the dark, and soon noticed that the door of the Tower was ajar. This made him blink his black-sequin eyes and skitter away to the throne, on the arm of which he perched for a few moments, peering at the door and hoping earnestly that he would not see Something creeping in. No Something appeared, however, and he soon realized that Fess had merely neglected to close the door properly when he and Dorothy returned from their Second inspection of the Tower.

This made him quite brave again-so brave that he swooped right over to the door, edged through the narrow opening by banking acrobatically, and perched on the inside doorknob, feeling intrepid and verse-picacious and Smart. He felt so Smart, in fact, that he began wishing there were some problem he could solve for Fess-dear, or Dorothy, or the Unicorn, or the Prince. Not the problem of How To Get The Circlet, of course-that was a Large problem; a People-Sized problem, one might say. What he needed was just a Small, Unimportant, Oh-By-The-Way, Footnote sort

of problem, suitable for small, unimportant, footnote-ish creatures like Flittermice.

"Like watching for Nannies," Flitter explained to himself.

"And noticing Dorothy's dress on the clothesline. And remembering that the Oracle said 'right before your eyes.' That sort of thing. I remembered about 'ask Sir Greves,' too."

He considered this last contribution doubtfully; it was Flittermouse-sized, all right, but it didn't seem to be anything anybody wanted.

"And even a Small, Unimportant Problem ought to be a problem somebody wants solved," Flitter told himself severely. He thought very hard for a moment, and then remembered that Dorothy, at least, might like to know for sure whether the Shining Circle was really and truly a Golden Circlet.

"I could find that out, I think," Flitter confided to himself, eyeing the lofty platform. "I'll just fly up there and take a peek. I'll be careful," he promised. "I won't even touch the stair."

Swooping silently off the doorknob, he began flying around and around the spirals of the staircase, keeping a good margin of space between it and his wing-tips. He could not help feeling just a little timid about passing above the edge of the platform, but after hovering a moment just below it, and swallowing several times, he made one swift dart and found himself skittering quite safely about very top of the Tower, with the alarm-bells still silent. Descending a trifle, he peered curiously down at the platform. Just

of the edge, the Machine crouched, glinting a little in the moonlight and looking fearfully malevolent, but not doing anything dangerous. Behind the Machine the platform was quite empty except for a round velvet cushion and quite a bit of dust. In the center of the cushion lay a golden bracelet.

Flitter stared at this some moments, waving his wings just enough to keep aloft, and experiencing a growing sensation that all was not as it should be. Then it burst upon him what was wrong. "A bracelet?" he squeaked in a frantic whisper, bouncing several inches upwards and beginning to flutter distractedly here and there. "But it shouldn't be a bracelet! It should be a little bitty thing. 'The verse says so! 'Circlet Three, a tiny thing'. Dorothy's right! This isn't the Circlet, it's only some old Shining Circle. It's -I'll just go peek inside it. I'll be very careful. ."

Swooping cautiously down toward the platform, he hung with quivering wings just over the velvet cushion, ducking his head until he was almost upside down, in an effort to scan the inside surface of the bracelet. It was smooth and blank, on the portion of the curve that he could see. He pivoted slowly in mid-air, examining the rest of the curve-and suddenly there were words engraved in the gold. "Herald of Halidom. 2," they said. "Two?" Flitter squeaked. He was now utterly bewildered. "But it's supposed to be Circlet Three. Why does it say Two?"

The answer came quickly, even to Flitter: "Because it's Circlet Two."

"Well!" Flitter gasped. "Well, fancy that!"

He blinked down in amazement at the shining thing so close beneath him. It was very close beneath him-so close that his dangling feet were almost touching it. Quite suddenly, without thinking the matter over at all, he plummeted the remaining half-inch, snatched the Circlet off the cushion, and swooped away, carrying it in his claws.

"My goodness!" he squeaked. "Oh, my goodness, MY GOODNESS! I've got the Circlet! I've got the Circlet! I've got the-Fess, dear! Oh, FE-YUS, DEAR . . ."

By this time the Flittermouse was simply shrieking, and soon remembered to fly toward the door, instead of merely here and there inside the Tower. In another instant he had flung himself through the door's narrow opening and was swooping wildly around and around the Round Room, banging the Circlet against the travelers' heads, and shrilly commanding them to wake up and see his Surprise.

Chapter 18

NEEDLESS to say, one glimpse of the Surprise had everyone wide awake, and for a while the Round House simply vibrated with rejoicing. Flitter had never been so marveled at, and exclaimed over, and praised, and petted, and congratulated, and thanked, in all his life-nor had he ever dreamed he would be. He was soon breathless from telling his

story, as well as speechless from being the center of attention, and finally so worn out from the sheer excitement of everything that when Prince Gules solemnly promised him a silver collar engraved "For Distinguished Service To King and Country," the little creature was quite overcome, and burst into tears. Fess understandingly bore him off to take a nap under his cap, then rejoined the others to discuss the find.

Everyone was as astonished as Flitter that it was Circlet Two Roundelay had hidden in the Tower, since they all had been convinced it was Circlet Three. But as Prince Gules said, when you stopped to think, it really made more sense this way. "Roundelay somehow stole it from the Wyver," the Prince declared as he slipped the Circlet over his sleeve-a rather soiled and shabby sleeve by now-and settled it firmly on his upper arm. "I never did understand how he could have got hold of Circlet Three, anyway.

"But the verse-" Dorothy began in a puzzled tone.

"Yes, it was the verse about Circlet Three that mentioned Roundabout," the Prince admitted. "That's odd. The Oracle must have been confused."

"Oh, not the Oracle!" Fred exclaimed with awful sarcasm.

"No, because the verse about Circlet Two fits fine," Fess said. Half-closing his eyes, he recited it from memory:

"Circlet Two, of purest gold,
Was carried off by a villain bold;

Problems will your path encumber,
Trust in the humblest of your number-
Meaning Flitter! Just as the Unicorn guessed," he added, patting

the Royal Emblem's snowy neck. "Nothing confused about that."

"Just hoping to confuse U5, more likely," muttered Fred, who still had no use for Oracles.

"Well, we'll prob'ly understand later what it meant by mentioning 'roundabout way in that third verse," Dorothy said philosophically. "We always do understand what the verses mean after we've found a Circlet."

"-and therefore have no need to understand," Fred added
The Cowardly Lion, who loved Fred's heavy-hoofed irony tactfully turned a grin into a yawn. "Never mind-who wants to understand 'em? Seems to me we're doing fine on our own. We've got two of the Circlets now-only one more to go. You fellows feeling any more muscular, by the way?"

"I could knock that door down with one hoof!" Fred assured him.

"And I'll challenge the whole Roundhead army-swords or lances!" Prince Gules said recklessly.

Robin gazed at him with admiration, but said, "I don't think there is an army."

"They don't need one. They've got that road," the Cowardly Lion said with a shudder. "We're not out of this place yet, by a

long way, and I've got a funny idea plenty more of those problems are going to our path encumber before we are out. I for one am going to get some more sleep."

This idea appealed to the others, too, so after agreeing that they would make a dash for the bridge at six o'clock next morning, they settled themselves to sleep for the rest of the night.

At dawn, Merry softly nudged Robin awake, bringing the news that she had found the doughnut bin in her prowlings about the kitchen.

"I don't care for myself," she whispered, "but I know you Real Creatures get hungry. I found some old maps, too."

"Maps? In the kitchen?" Robin said, blinking himself awake.

"No, in another room-a little office place right behind the kitchen. I think it might be Roundelay's, because there's an old cap there that looks just like his. Come on, I'll show you."

Rubbing his nose, which always itched when he first woke up, Robin tiptoed after the little mare, out of the Round Room and down a curving flight of steps to the deserted kitchens. Behind them, as Merry had told him, was a small circular chamber containing a desk littered with papers, a shabby hassock, and a peaked hat hanging from a hook on the wall. The rest of the wall space was covered with well-worn maps.

"I suppose they're maps of Roundelay's rounds, when he was a peddler," Robin said with a yawn. "There isn't one that shows how to go to the Emerald City, is there?"

"No, I looked. I suppose Roundelay never went there. But

there's one that shows how to go from here to Halidom. See?

That blue one over there."

"So that's Halidom," Robin murmured, walking over to study the map in fascination. "Why, it looks like half a shield, Merry-a coat-of-arms kind of shield. And Troth's the other half! 'River Argent'... oh, don't you 'wish' we could go there, and see a real tourney, and real knights jousting, and all the banners, and armor and everything? And did you ever dream we'd know a real Prince? Don't you think he's just the most princely prince you could imagine? My, I wish I were just like him."

"I'd rather you were just like you," Merry said solemnly

Robin smiled and patted her scarlet neck, then started prying up the thumbtacks that held the map. "Maybe Prince Gules could use this sometime. I'll take it, just in case. Roundelay owes him something for stealing his Circlet." Folding the map hastily, he stuffed it into his pocket. "Come on, let's find that doughnut bin. It'll soon be six o'clock.

When they returned to the Round Room with a basket full of doughnuts, they found the rest of the party awake and eager to escape. As soon as the doughnuts had disappeared-which was very soon indeed-Fess saddled Fred for the Prince, Dorothy made sure the Egg was firmly wedged in its basket, and the four humans of the party climbed on their accustomed mounts. Fred took up a good kicking position by the great glass door. The others ranged themselves behind him, ready to dash. Flitter darted

to the window as lookout and hovered there, his shiny black eyes fixed on the curve of the spinning road where the bridge would soon appear.

A full minute passed, in tense and utter silence.

"Oh, goodness!" Dorothy burst out. "I wish they'd hurry and extend that bridge, so we could get this over with!"

"What are we going to do about the people, Fess dear?" Flitter said anxiously.

"People?"

"Yes, Roundheads. The street's full of them. They're all walking toward the gates with their baskets. Do we just trample them, or ought we to jump over them?"

"I can jump over them, I'm good at jumping," Merry confided to the Unicorn.

"Well, I jumped over a lot of those Good Children, so I guess I can clear Roundheads too," the Cowardly Lion growled.

"Not that I was planning on it. Did you realize there'd be a lot of people cluttering up the street?" he asked Robin uneasily.

"I didn't exactly think about it," Robin confessed, swallowing. "Why don't they hurry with the bridge? We've got to get out of here before Roundelay shows up, or he-"

"There!" shrieked the Flittermouse. "There's the bridge; there's the bridge, there's the bridge! Kick, Fred-"

His squeaks were obliterated by a perfectly paralyzing crash which sounded as if somebody had dropped ten dozen milk bottles and a whole tray of dishes down a flight of concrete steps. Fred

had kicked-with spectacular success. Momentarily stunned, the door-travelers blinked at the circle of sunlight which had replaced the blue glass door. Then, as the last slivers of glass tinkled to rest, they all recovered from the shock at once and hurled themselves at the opening. The result was that the Lion and Fred, who were the most impetuous, wedged themselves in the doorway like a double cork. The others, unprepared for this sudden halt, trod on their heels and fell over each other in a tangle. There was a moment of chaos, but after some struggling, the Lion squeezed through. He bounded into the street, Fred clattered after him, and in an instant the others were streaming behind.

Their progress immediately became that of broken-field runners in a football game. The Roundheads, startled out of their wits-first by the crash of the breaking door and then by the eruption through it of all their State Visitors, their Royal Symbol and their King-simply stood as if rooted in the street, and became so many obstacles for the fleeing travelers to dodge around. In spite of this, the Cowardly Lion was beginning to believe they might make it safely to the bridge, when one of the Roundheads suddenly came to life.

"Hold on there!" he cried. "Stop, stop! They're escaping!" he screamed at his fellows.

"Oh-oh,!" groaned the Lion, flattening his ears. "Hold on, Dorothy. I may have to fly!"

The others put on a desperate burst of speed too, and Merry,

for one, was already gaily jumping over Roundheads. But the Roundheads were now swarming everywhere, shouting, snatching at bridles, trying to turn the party away from the bridge.

"Stand back, or you'll get hurt!" yelled Prince Gules, drawing his sword and brandishing it in a whistling arc over a hastily ducked head. "Start kicking, Fred! Everybody fight!"

"Try roaring," Dorothy gasped to the Lion.

"Can't do it unless I'm standing still!" he panted. He managed a few fierce snarls, however, and snapped savagely at several coat-tails. The Unicorn lowered her head and ran with her horn leveled at Roundheads who stepped into her path; Fred kicked at them, Merry leaped over them, and Flitter did his best by flying into their faces and beating at them with his wings.

But there were too many. Despite all their efforts, and though they were now tantalizingly close to the bridge, the travelers found themselves obstructed, herded together, and slowed almost to a standstill. At that moment they saw a figure streak out of a nearby building and race for the gatehouse. It was Roundelay, who had evidently been waked from a sound sleep by the clamor, for he wore a flapping nightshirt.

"Oh, hurry, hurry," Robin cried. "He'll draw in the bridge."

The Cowardly Lion, instead of hurrying, stopped dead and roared as loudly as he could. He was awfully short on breath but the effect was still impressive, and though the Roundheads did not run shrieking as the Children and Nannies had done, they did fall back a little. That little was enough. Fred spotted

a passage through the crowd and dashed for it, with the others at his heels. In another moment they had covered the remaining few yards to the open wrought-iron gates. They arrived just in time to see the bridge begin slowly to rumble backwards into its sheath beneath the Sphere, and to hear a burst of mocking laughter from the gatehouse.

"Too late!" gulped the Lion, planting his feet and coming to a shivering halt on the ramp leading down to the bridge.

"Could we jump for it?" Fred panted.

"No! We'd have to have wings!" exclaimed the Unicorn, staring at the far end of the bridge. There was already a wide gap between it and the hill opposite, and it was now backing gradually across the spinning road.

"That rogue of a Roundelay!" Prince Gules stormed. "Come down here, you miserable coward, you thieving scoundrel, you-"

Suddenly Merry spoke up. "Who cares about the bridge?" she whinnied cheerfully. "Come on-we'll ride the road! It's no worse than a merry-go-round, just a little faster, is all."

The Lion gave a terrified roar, and there was a chorus of protests from the others, but Merry was already pushing past them and starting down the ramp, with Robin, rather white-faced, tugging helplessly at her reins.

"You won't get dizzy," Merry insisted to the other animals. "Arch your neck and bound-that's the trick of riding a merry-go-round. Come on, I'll show you!"

With that she trotted right onto the retracting bridge, and when she reached its end, leaped without hesitation onto the road below.

Chapter 19

GREAT j-jumping gyrons!" Fess gulped.

For one horrified instant, the others stared, transfixed, at the end of the bridge where Merry had disappeared. Then, as she came into view below it, bounding gaily, and apparently safely, along the whirling road, Fred seized his bit in his teeth. "If she can to it, I can," he muttered, and charged out onto the bridge.

There was not much left of the bridge by now; in another moment it would disappear entirely beneath the Sphere, and the great iron gates would clang shut. Moreover, the Roundheads, who had dropped their pursuit the instant the bridge began to move, were now realizing their prisoners were not trapped after all, and surged forward again just as Fred, too, leaped down onto the road.

"Oh, well," the Cowardly Lion groaned resignedly to the Unicorn, "who wants to stay in one piece all his life? Come on, Uni old girl, let's go!"

One bound took him to the end of the bridge; another onto the road. Dorothy, with her eyes shut, her teeth set, her arms clamped around the Egg-basket and her fists full of mane, felt for a few wild moments as if she were being tossed in a blanket.

Then the motion steadied to a rhythmic leaping marred only by the Lion's convulsive trembling. Cautiously she opened her eyes, peered around in dawning amusement, and suddenly began to giggle.

"Is something funny?" the Lion snarled through his teeth. He sounded so outraged that Dorothy refrained from answering, but privately she thought it was very funny to see the whole party circling 'round and 'round the Sphere-city like an animated merry-go-round, with even the Lion desperately arching his neck and bounding in proper merry-go-round style. The little wooden mare, of course, looked quite gay and natural, but it was obvious that Fred's sense of dignity was suffering as much as the Lion's, and the Unicorn wore the affronted expression of a duchess being forced to dance a jig. However, they were all bounding very well, and Dorothy, who was frankly beginning to enjoy herself, had to stifle another fit of giggles as she decided that any of them could get a job on a merry-go-round tomorrow.

She was almost sorry when, after several spirited circuits of the city, Merry spotted a good level strip of ground at the base of the hillside and leaped nimbly off the road. It was high time; Roundelay had started the bridge extending again, and the frustrated Roundheads were jumping up and down in their impatience to cross it and cut off their quarry's escape. Fred, the Lion and the Unicorn hastily followed Merry's example, and, thankfully resuming their own gaits, took off the hills without a backward

glance.

They did not stop until they were safe beyond the barren lands surrounding Roundabout. Then, having no desire to be trapped again in the Blue Forest, Prince Gules ordered a halt beside a sparkling little stream.

"Whew!" Fess puffed, sliding thankfully off the Unicorn and collapsing onto the grass. Is that what merry-go-rounds are like? If so, I don't think I'd ever get really fond of riding them-not if I had anything else to do."

"Well, they're not quite that fast, usually," Merry explained.

"Not anywhere near that fast!" Robin declared. "Don't you have any merry-go-rounds in Halidom?"

"There aren't any in Oz at all, as far as I know," Dorothy told him.

"Then let's not get any," Flitter suggested earnestly as he struggled out of Fess's collar. The little creature was looking rather damp and crumpled, and had to fan his wings up and down a while in the sunshine before they would work properly.

"Well, anyway, we're out of Roundabout, and we've got another Circlet, even if we did have to ride a merry-go-round to do it," Fred said with satisfaction. "The question is, what next?"

He glanced automatically at Prince Gules as he asked the question, and so did the others. The Prince himself had climbed to a little knoll to look thoughtfully in all directions; he now walked back toward them.

"I'm not certain. I want to think about it. Loosen his cinch,

Fess, we'll rest for a little while."

Fess hastened to make Fred comfortable, easing the cinch and unsnapping his bit as well. Then he plucked a handful of leaves and rubbed the dust of the barren hills off both him and the Unicorn. Since neither of them had cared much for their doughnut breakfast, they soon strolled off to graze, and Flitter darted away in search of gnats. The others, after drinking gratefully of the cold, clear water of the little brook, were content to lounge on the grass in the early morning sunlight, compare notes on their wild merry-go-round ride, and leave it to the Prince to decide on their next move.

Prince Gules was by this time accepted by everyone as the leader of the expedition. With two of the Circlets in his possession, he had become both strong and wise-a real Prince, Dorothy reflected approvingly, worthy of his kingdom.

Now, as a real Prince should, he had begun to worry about that kingdom. He could not forget Roundelay's curious reference to Sir Greves yesterday, and the more he thought about it the more uneasy he became. He was sure Roundelay was the thief who had stolen Circlet Two from the Wyver. The old peddler had been in Pax-on-Argent at just the right time; the Prince himself had seen him on the day before the theft was discovered-seen him coming out of Sir Greves's house! Then Sir Greves must have had something to do with the crime-but what?

Try as he would, Prince Gules could not picture the mild-mannered, chubby little knight doing anything more criminal than fibbing his way out of a tourney with Sir Gauntlet. But the fact remained that Roundelay had said, "Ask Sir Greves."

Puzzling about this, Prince Gules became more and more preoccupied, until Robin, who was bursting to ask him questions about jousting and knighthood and castles, hit on a way to draw him back into the conversation. Producing from his pocket the map he had taken off Roundelay's office wall early that morning, he offered it rather shyly to the Prince.

"A map! Where did you find it?" the Prince said in surprise

Robin explained, adding apologetically, "It only shows the route between Roundabout and Halidom, so I suppose it's no good for finding that other Circlet. But I thought it might come in handy sometime."

"It might come in handy this moment!" Gules exclaimed. He studied the map eagerly, then announced, "This settles it." With a courteous glance at Dorothy and the Lion, Robin and Merry, he added, "It settles nothing for you, of course. But my companions and I will start for Halidom at once."

"For Halidom?" the others chorused, and Dorothy added, "You mean you're going to give up trying to find the other Circlet?"

"Of course not!" Prince Gules said proudly. "But I must postpone it until I find out what's happening at home." He explained his suspicions about Sir Greves, adding, "For all I know, he might

have seized my father's throne, or done some other treacherous thing while I've been away.

Fess said, "He did act funny that morning. Why, when I told him the Circlet was gone, he fainted! And he sneaked out of the Throne Room later, as if-But it's awfully hard to imagine that nice little man doing anything wicked!"

"I know it," the Prince admitted. "But wicked people don't always look wicked. And if he helped Roundelay steal that Circlet, he's a traitor! I must deal with him first, then I can set out again to find the other Circlet."

"Well," the Cowardly Lion said uncertainly, "We're supposed to be heading for the Emerald City, so I guess..."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Unicorn in a pained voice, trotting anxiously up to them. "Isn't Dorothy going with us?"

"Is it very far?" Dorothy asked the Prince. By this time she was terribly curious to see Halidom, and could hardly bear the thought of not hearing how the mystery of Sir Greves came out.

"If we leave now, we could be in Pax-on-Arget by tea-time," Prince Gules said temptingly. He showed them Roundelay's map, which traced a plain and direct route from Roundabout to Halidom, avoiding the Blue Forest and coming nowhere near Good Children's Land, Sign-Here, or any other territory they had passed through on their circuitous wanderings. "You see? By this route it isn't far at all."

"Then let's go too!" Dorothy begged the Cowardly Lion

"We don't know the way to the Emerald City anyhow, so we might as well go to Halidom instead!"

The Cowardly Lion blinked a little at this reasoning, but he had grown as fond of the Halidomians as Dorothy, and he affably agreed. "If the Prince's father won't mind his bringing a ferocious lioncel into the country," he added with a chuckle.

"A lioncel and a little gel," Flitter chanted happily from Fess's shoulder. "Why, he'll just love having you, won't he, Your Highness? And can Robin and Merry come too, please?"

"Of course! They're on their way to the Emerald City with us," Dorothy said firmly.

The Cowardly Lion gave another rumble of laughter, but Robin and Merry were overjoyed. From what Robin had heard about life in Halidom, it sounded exactly like life in King Arthur's court, only much more fun, and he had 3,487 questions he wanted to ask about it. As for Fess and Flitter, they were overjoyed just to be going home, and even the Unicorn's golden eyes brightened at the thought of her own comfortable private garden, and the prospect of crisp quatrefoils for dinner. As for the Prince, he was so anxious about his parents and his kingdom that he barely waited for Fess to tighten Fred's girth before he was in the saddle and on his way.

Thanks to the map, it was a pleasant and uneventful journey. Fred set a good pace, for he was strong and tireless now. Behind him, the Cowardly Lion swung into the long, easy stride he could keep up by the hour when he wanted to cover distance. Merry,

capering along beside the Unicorn, brought up the rear of the procession, and Robin began at once on his list of questions. Fess and Flitter and the Unicorn did their best to answer every one.

At lunchtime, they stopped briefly to quench their thirst at a little spring and gather a few wild peachplums to nibble on the way. An hour or two later, Dorothy and Robin changed mounts just for fun, since Dorothy had not ridden a merry-go-round horse since she left Kansas, and Robin had never ridden a lion at all. They changed back again about an hour after that, when they stopped at a crossroads for a few minutes' rest while the Prince studied the map.

"We should be near now," he said anxiously, frowning at the sun, which was dropping low in the western sky. "Oh, I do want to get there before nightfall! Let's go on, it can't be far."

He vaulted back into the saddle and led the way down the left fork of the road, which looked far less traveled than the other and made Dorothy hope Roundelay's map was reliable. However, only three hills and a patch of woodland later, Fess and all the other homesick Halidomians broke into a cheer as they emerged from the trees and sighted the Crenelated Wall ahead.

As Prince Gules had predicted, it was just at tea-time-the loveliest of all hours in Halidom, when the first blue shadows were lengthening over the fields of azure, gathering among the sloping mulberry orchards, and reaching out to stain a turret here and a crumbling tower there-that the little procession rode down

the cobbled High Road into Pax-on-Argent.

It was a triumphal entry. The Halidomians were well aware that their Prince had found two Circlets, for they had recovered their wits and strength as soon as he had, and their first glimpse of him brought them flocking into the streets to cheer with all their might. Wildly excited children took turns pelting the company with flowers and dashing about the gardens in search of more; agile boys scrambled up trees to gape at Merry and the Lioncel. Girls and women hung out of every window, waving handkerchiefs and calling a joyful welcome.

The Prince had immediately pulled Fred to a stately walk, and his eyes shone with pride as he nodded this way and that, acknowledging the people's greetings, but he moved steadily onward to the castle. As he led the way at last through the courtyard gates, Barry erupted joyously from the kitchen door and rushed toward them, yelling over his shoulder for Bodkin and Scutcheon, and trying to bow to the Prince and clap Fess on the back all at the same time. Soon the courtyard was alive with people and swarming with barking, ecstatic Questing dogs, all thirty of whom insisted on licking Fess personally. Fred was led away by the two grooms to be rubbed down and pampered and deferred to in the stables, and the Unicorn headed at once for her favorite bed of quatrefoils. The others finally managed to make their way into the castle, where they were greeted with tea, crumpets, martlet pudding, and cries of joy-as well as a few happy tears-by King Herald and Queen Farthingale.

What with the many introductions to be performed, well-comes to be extended, and adventures to be described at least briefly, it was not until the tea-things had been cleared away that Gules was able to explain to his father the fears that had brought him home before the last Circlet was found, and tell him his grave suspicions about Sir Greves.

"Sir Greves, eh? Fancy that! Well, he hasn't seized the crown yet, that I know of," said King Herald, reaching up to make sure it was still safely on his head. "Nor the throne either. Couldn't you know. I've been sitting on it. Fact is, I don't think I've seen the fellow since you left."

"Neither have I, not once," declared the Queen.

"Well, if he hasn't run away, you'll see him shortly, because I sent Pellets for him," the Prince informed them grimly. "I'm going to confront him with this second Circlet, and see what has to say."

However, when the chubby little knight was hauled into the throne room five minutes later, he had nothing at all to say. He took one look at the Prince, standing stern and straight on the steps of the throne with Circlet Two gleaming on his arm, and burst into floods of tears.

"So you do know something about this matter," Prince Gules said.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I do. I d-do," wept the little knight.

"That's a disgrace," Gules told him. "An absolute disgrace!"

Seating himself on his own throne, he glanced at his father, who nodded. The Prince leaned back, folded his hands across his slim middle, and said coldly, "You'll have to tell me everything, you know. You may begin at once.

It was some moments, however, before Sir Greves could manage to control his sobs, mop his mild blue eyes, and declare in a voice of heartfelt relief that he was quite ready to confess.

"You don't know how miserable I've been!" he said tremulously. "Just simply miserable. I'll be glad to get it off my chest."

"Very well, begin," the Prince said inflexibly.

Fess ventured to fetch a stool for the little knight-though after a glance at the Prince's frowning face, he made sure it was a hard one-and the others eagerly drew up their chairs and prepared to listen.

Chapter 20

WELL," said Sir Greves sadly, "it all begins with my character. I was born of a great and noble family, as Your Highness knows, and was intended from babyhood to be a knight like my forebears, but my true nature-" he heaved a guilty sigh "is that of a homebody. I confess it freely. I love to sit on my front porch and rock. I love to eat apples and read. I love to work in my beds of fleur-de-lys and trefoils and roses. Most of all I love to cook! Yes, it's true, I will conceal nothing from Your Highness. Cookery is my true talent, and my secret

passion." Sir Greves rolled his round blue eyes mournfully. "Naturally, I had to keep it secret. Why, most knights wouldn't be caught dead in a kitchen. And if I'd been caught alive in one- and actually enjoying it-well, I'd have been disgraced forever, and so would all my brothers and cousins and uncles and ancestors. So I had to sneak around-cook in the middle of the night. I ended by firing most of the servants, so they wouldn't find out. Oh, I didn't fire them all at once-somebody would have started wondering why, you know! I just fired them one by one. I was very clever about it. Oh, I've been learning stealthy ways for years!"

Sir Greves sighed, blew his nose, and went on brokenly, "Take my recipes. I've been collecting recipes for years, in the most underhanded ways. By now, I venture to say my collection rivals any woman's in the kingdom, if it doesn't surpass them all. I have every one of the 539 best recipes in Halidom, as well as seventy-four from Troth-and that includes the Blue-Armor-Plate Special that Queen Paty always makes for King Armo on his birthday. I've even invented fifty-two of my own. One is a new way to make martlet pudding using cinnamon instead of salt. It's lovely." The little knight sniffed, and his eyes refilled. "I know how to use marshmallows to sweeten rose-applesauce, too- and how to take rings off tables with quatrefoil bulbs soaked in vinegar.

"Why, that's my method!" cried Queen Farthingale, sitting

up with a start. "My own private and exclusive method! I've told nobody in all the world except my butler and Lady Mace!"

"But Lady Mace told her butler, too," Sir Greves explained apologetically. "And he told the upstairs maid, and the maid told her nephew, who happens to be my page-and the page told me. I sent my formula for armor-polish in return-via the same grapevine. The formula using mulberry seeds and sand."

"Oh," said the Queen, blinking. "Well, it's very good," she added honestly.

"I got it from the Duchess of Bezanty," Sir Greves confessed. "I've swapped household hints with all the good housewives of the kingdom-and the ladies never knew I was doing it. My spies are everywhere-in all the best kitchens and<pantries of Halidom. Why, I've even smuggled in recipes from other countries of Oz-countries far outside the Crenelated Wall!"

"Now how on earth did you do that?" King Herald said in astonishment.

"Organization," Sir Greves said simply. "Plus a dreadful talent I have discovered in myself for accomplishing things by devious and roundabout methods."

The Prince, whose stern expression had begun to relax somewhat as he listened, scowled again at the word "roundabout," and Sir Greves blushed dismally and hurried on.

"Well-anyway, you can see why I have always evaded my duty in the matter of jousting with Sir Gauntlet. I simply hate to fight! I'm scared to fight! Fighting is not in my nature, any

more than it is in any housewife's. I know I should uphold the honor of my family's traditions, but I just can't do it!"

"Get on to the Circlet part," Prince Gules said curtly. He was beginning to feel sorry for Sir Greves, and he didn't want to.

"I am on to it," the fat little knight sighed. "It's all mixed up with these other things-cooking, and spies, and being scared to joust, and the family honor, and my conscience. Especially my conscience. All these things led up to it, but my final downfall came about through the peddler, Roundelay. I presume you've met Roundelay by now?" Sir Greves faltered, glancing at the Prince. "Er-yes. I thought you might have. Well, I have long been acquainted with this-this man. I began by buying biscuit cutters from him, and soon discovered he was quite willing to smuggle recipes in and out of Halidom for me. He was ideal for my purpose, because he was always traveling, and could pass through the Crenelated Wall whenever he pleased. I didn't realize that I was ideal for his purpose too. I didn't even know he had a purpose," Sir Greves said gloomily.

"Well, one day-months ago, it was-when Roundelay brought me my regular supply of doughnut-holes and a couple of smuggled recipes, he brought me something else, too. It was a piece of Pi." Sir Greves paused, clasped his chubby hands, and closed his eyes in a manner more eloquent than words. "Oh, Your Highness! If you had ever tasted Pi-

"I have," said the Prince.

The knight's eyes flew open. "Oh. Yes, of course, in Round-
about, I presume. Well?" he threw out both arms dramatically.

"I appeal to you-to your palate-to your every taste-bud! Isn't
it simply scrumptious?"

"Yes," the Prince admitted.

"Never had I tasted such delectability! I was completely
bowled over by it. I lost my heart to it! In fact, I lost my head
over it. From that moment, my life was ruled by one obsession-
to obtain the recipe for Pi. Naturally, since Pi is the Ro
national dish, the recipe is secret. And no matter how I begged
Roundelay would not reveal it. However, he often sold me a
Pi or two, and in the privacy of my kitchen I have frequently
worked far, far into the night, trying to figure out the ingredients
and their proportions, by experimenting and tasting. As Your
Highness can see, I have grown quite fat from my long and de-
voted research on this problem-my armor doesn't even fit me
very well any more. But it was all to no avail. I could not discover
the secret of the recipe.

"Meanwhile, Roundelay and I had become old cronies. He
had never told on me, not once, about my cooking, and I trusted
him completely. Besides, he was the only living soul I could talk
to about the subjects nearest to my heart. Recipes. Seasonings.
Pi. I didn't know he was a scoundrel!" Sir Greves sniffed broken-
heartedly, then bravely controlled himself and went on.

"And so, last Tuesday, I confided my other problem to him
I told him I was a failure-as a knight and an upholder of family

tradition. I confessed that I was afraid to fight Sir Gauntlet-as well as a good deal too fat, now. I told him the whole awful story. It made me feel a whole lot better. And it must have been the chance the scoundrel was waiting for! He told me he had in his pack that minute a potion that would make any man brave and unconquerable-and that he would give it to me, in exchange for a small favor. The favor was . . . well, It was to help him get into the King's castle some night, for just five minutes."

"And you agreed?" Prince Gules cried, leaping to his feet.

"Oh, no, no, no, no, Your Highness mustn't think that of me!" babbled Sir Greves. "I refused! Oh, I refused staunchly and indignantly! I informed him that courage, invincibility, even the restored honor of my family was too low a price to offer for my integrity!"

"Oh. So what happened then?" said the Prince sitting down again.

"He raised the price," the knight said piteously. "He told me he'd throw in the recipe for Pi. And I-I capitulated."

There was a grieving silence in the Throne Room for a moment. Finally the little knight fetched an enormous sigh, and gloomily took up the story again.

"I simply could not resist. Besides, I told myself-quite truthfully, you must admit-that there was nothing valuable left in the castle anyhow, except the last Golden Circlet, and that was

guarded day and night by the Wyver. I didn't see how Roundelay could do any harm in just five minutes. I didn't even suppose he wanted to. I thought being only a peddler, you know, he'd probably never been inside a castle in his life, and just wanted to take a quick look around. It even touched me, rather. I have a very kind heart. Well-I let him in. I had my key to the Knights' Chess-and-Checker Room, of course. And what did he use his five minutes for? To drug the Wyver and s-steal the C-Circlet!"

Sir Greves choked up, and for a few moments was busy wiping his eyes and blowing his reddened nose.

Fess said thoughtfully, "No wonder you fainted next morning, when I told you the news.

"Oh, it was dreadful! Dreadful! To wake up on a nice shiny morning, with the Tourney all arranged at last, and the family honor about to be vindicated, and my blue rosebush just coming into bloom-and find out I was a traitor!" Sir Greves burst into a fresh flood of tears. "And I'll tell you the bitterest blow of all!" he sobbed. "That potion never. did me a bit of good! I drank it, all right, but with the Circlet gone, there couldn't be any Tourney anyhow. Neither Sir Gauntlet nor I could so much as lift a lance!"

"Oh, I say, old fellow, don't cry so hard," King Herald said uncomfortably. Even the floor around Sir Greve's stool had become quite damp, and his collar was simply soaked. "Now that the Circlet's found, maybe you can fight your Tourney bravely after all. Or has the potion worn off?"

"I don't know, and I'm too miserable to care," replied the knight. Stumbling to his feet, he flung out both arms toward the Prince. "I've been miserable ever since the Circlet was taken, and I'll go right on being miserable until I'm punished! I insist that I be exiled immediately to the Sandbar Sinister-without so much as a f-frying pan to comfort me-and left there for the rest of my natural life!"

"You have certainly behaved very badly," the Prince agreed in as forbidding a voice as he could summon. "As for your punishment, I will have to think the matter over. Pellets, take him into some other room to wait."

After the door had closed behind Sir Greves, the entire company sat in gloomy silence for some moments. The fact was, they were all terribly sorry for Sir Greves, in spite of the trouble he had caused-and finally Dorothy ventured to say so.

"After all, it's not his fault he likes to cook," she pointed out. "If people had just let him do it openly, without making him think it was something disgraceful, he'd never had begun all that sneaking around and smuggling. Maybe he'd never even have got acquainted with Roundelay!"

"It's not his fault he's a coward, either," said the Cowardly Lion moodily. He cast an embarrassed glance at the Prince. "I suppose he shouldn't have sidestepped that joust, but I can't help sympathizing-family tradition or no family tradition."

"Well, that family tradition is just silly!" Dorothy said.

"Oh, my dear, I think so too!" exclaimed Queen Farthingale, leaning toward her confidentially. "Of course I never liked to say so-but really! For a couple of good friends like him and Sir Gauntlet to go rushing at each other with lances when they aren't even annoyed-!"

"By Jove! It does seem a bit nit-witted, eh? When you put it like that," exclaimed King Herald, much struck.

"Yes-but he should have put a stop to the tradition," said the Prince. "Instead, he kept avoiding the jousts and then feeling guilty about it-and look what a mess that got him into! What's more, he's committed treason against his king and country, whether k was exactly his fault or not. And treason's a bad crime, and it must be punished, and our laws say it must be punished with exile. I can't see any way out of doing just what he asked, and sending him to the Sandbar Sinister."

"Oh, poor Sir Greves!" Flitter burst out.

"He now perceives
The webs he weaves
When he deceives!
Oh, poor Sir Greves!
He's now bereft
With nothing left
But guilt for theft!
Oh, poor Sir... Greft!"

He finished distractedly. "Oh, what a mess! Isn't it, Fess?"

"Yes," sighed Fess, causing the Cowardly Lion to look at them both in some alarm, and hope the rhyming habit wasn't catching.

"It's an awful mess!" the Prince said crossly. "Because I feel sorry for him too, and I don't want to exile him. And that makes me feel sorry for myself!"

"I even feel sorry for the Roundheads," Robin said.

He had spoken in his usual quiet voice, and had more or less assumed he was talking to himself, since people seldom heard him unless he shouted. Therefore he turned a little pink when everybody stared at him.

"You feel sorry for the Roundheads?" Prince Gules repeated.

"But they were the true thieves!"

"No, they weren't-Roundelay was!" Robin said stubbornly.

"Roundelay's the only sly one in the whole bunch. The others are ever so nice and jolly, and not a bit wicked, are they Merry? And they were so happy, and now everything's ruined for them, and they'll have to go back to being peddlers again. All they ever wanted was to stay home like other folks, and have something grand to be proud of. That's what they need most of all, I think. A nice, grand king to be proud of."

"And a new National Magic Possession?" Dorothy added doubtfully.

"Roundelay was the only one who cared a pin about that!"

Robin declared. "They need a new National Occupation a lot worse. They can't sell their wheels and balls and things any more, you see, because everybody's old ones are still good. Seems to me they've got to find something else to sell."

"That makes a lot of sense," Dorothy said thoughtfully.

"It does, doesn't it?" exclaimed King Herald. "Boy's got a head on his shoulders, eh, Gulie?"

"Yes, well. . ." Prince Gules sighed and waved a hand. "Very well, I feel sorry for the Roundheads too. But I can't solve everybody's problems, Papa. I still have plenty of my own. Sir Greves must be sent to the Sandbar Sinister, because I don't know what else to do with him. He can't be a knight after this, and he wouldn't be happy in Pax-on-Argent now anyhow. As for the last Circlet, I shall start on another Quest for it tomorrow morning, and I shall search until I find it. If I don't, the people will never recover their skills, and Halidom will be no more prosperous than Roundabout."

There was a short silence while everybody glumly contemplated the prospect of another Quest.

"Well, you don't need to start until tomorrow night, Prince dear," Flitter squeaked comfortingly. "You know-'go by night and return by day.'"

"That pesky Oracle again!" Fess groaned.

Prince Gules smiled crookedly and propped his chin on his hand. "I'd just managed to forget it. I suppose I should try once more to figure out the verse that's left. Somebody read it to me."

Flitter, Dorothy, Fess and the Cowardly Lion all recited it wearily:

"Circlet Three, a tiny thing,
Is in the hands of a future king.
Go by night, return by day,
The Circlet find in a roundabout way."

"Oh, is that one of the Oracle's verses?" inquired King Herald in an interested tone. "But what does it mean, Gulie?"

"If we only knew!" retorted the Prince.

"Well, my dear boy!" exclaimed Queen Farthingale. "Flitter's quite right! That one line obviously means that you should start the journey at night and come home by day!"

"Or else it just means we've already done that," the Prince pointed out. "When we first left here, you know, we went secretly, at night. And we came back by daylight, today."

"It's always telling us to do something we've already done," the Cowardly Lion grumbled.

"And everything it tells us might mean something else!" Dorothy added in exasperation. "'Roundabout way'! We were sure that meant the roundabout road through the forest. Then we were sure it meant the city of Roundabout! Now we know it didn't mean either one, because it was Circlet Two we found in the Tower, not Circlet Three."

"I~ getting awfully confused," murmured the Queen faintly.

"You'll get more and more so, the better you know this Oracle," Fess assured her. "Take that 'future king', for instance. How is anybody going to identify a king when he's not a king yet?"

"Oh, I say! I say!" King Herald burst out. "Gulie is a future king!"

"But Papa, the Circlet isn't in my hands!" the Prince said patiently. "It can't mean me."

Robin giggled suddenly. "Maybe it means me. I'm a past king now, but I was a future king for a while there, I suppose. It would have taken an Oracle to know it, too, because I certainly didn't look like one!"

The others smiled, and Dorothy opened her mouth to say something, then instead turned slowly and studied Robin. "When did they crown you king of Roundabout?" she asked in a thoughtful voice.

"Well-just yesterday morning, wasn't it, Merry?" Robin answered in surprise. So much had happened since then that it seemed at least a month ago.

"Yesterday morning," the Prince repeated. He, too, straightened to peer speculatively at Robin. "And we found the Oracle the day before that. So you were still a future king then .

"But-but I don't have the Circlet!" Robin stammered. They were all peering at him so intently that his ears began to feel quite hot. "Where would I carry anything like that?" he pro-

tested, pointing to the Circlets on the Prince's head and arm.

"Circlet Three isn't like that," said the Prince. "The verse is right, it's tiny-just big enough to fit around my thumb."

"It's a finger ring.." Fess explained.

Robin's eyes gradually widened. He thrust his hand into his pocket, felt around a moment, then said uncertainly, "I do have a little ring. But it's not gold, it's only brass."

He extracted his hand from his pocket and held out the brass ring from the merry-go-round. The Prince leaped to his feet, seized it, looked inside, then threw up both arms and gave a shout of joy.

At the same instant, there was a blinding flash, and a puff of opalescent smoke filled the throne room. As it drifted away, the startled company saw the loveliest little fairy princess in all Oz standing before them, smiling.

"So-you have found the last Circlet, Prince Gules," she said.

"May I congratulate you?"

Chapter 21

Ozma!" chorused Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion. Both dashed forward to greet her, Dorothy with a hug and the Lion with a flurry of tail-lashing and lion-sized purrs.

"Wherever did you come from?" Dorothy added in astonishment.

"From the Emerald City, of course," Ozma said with a mis-

chievous laugh. "You didn't think I could bear to miss all the excitement, did you? Oh, please, introduce me to your new friends."

King Herald and Queen Farthingale were already hurrying forward to welcome their distinguished guest, and for a few minutes even the Circlets were forgotten, while the Ruler of all Oz met everybody in the throne room, including Flitter.

"And Fred! Where is Fred, and that delightful Unicorn?" Ozma demanded. "I haven't seen her in ever so long!"

"Do you know the Unicorn?" Dorothy exclaimed.

"Well, I knew her a long time ago," Ozma said calmly. "We were both with the Fairy Lurline then. I wonder if she'd remember me?"

"I'll go fetch her," gasped Fess, closing his mouth, which had fallen open in astonishment at the idea that anyone as fresh and beautiful as Ozma could be even a day older than he was himself.

Robin and Merry, standing unobtrusively in a corner, too shy and awed to move, could scarcely believe Ozma was real. Neither of them had ever seen a fairy before, much less a fairy princess wearing a crown carved of one great clear emerald, a gown that looked as if it were made of spun emeralds (which it was), and a curious broad belt flashing with jewels-a fairy princess with two scarlet poppies twined in her flowing, shining black hair to frame her vivid little face-with sparkling, great dark eyes, and a bewitching smile. She was simply overwhelming.

"I don't suppose she is real, really," Robin whispered in a daze.

And Merry, thinking of Real Horses and Real Other Creatures, and of what Robin had said about her being real too, but not a real horse-and then looking again at Ozma, who was perhaps real but not really real-shook her wooden mane and gave it up. "I just don't understand about 'real'," she said simply.

"I don't understand how she knew where we were," Robin said, "but I suppose fairies know everything."

Dorothy, who overheard him, turned with a laugh. "No, they don't-but Ozma has some pretty good magic to help her. I'm pretty sure I know how she knew where we were-she looked in the Magic Picture."

"She did? What's that?" Robin asked.

"Well, it's just an ordinary-looking little picture that hangs in her bedroom at the palace, but whenever you stand in front of it and make a wish to see somebody, or some special place, the Picture changes and shows it to you. It's come in mighty handy lots of times."

"I should think it would have," said Robin dazedly. "But then-that puff of smoke-did the Picture bring her here, too?"

"No, the Magic Belt, probably-that belt she's wearing. Don't worry, we'll get her to explain everything, after Fess comes back."

Fess brought Fred and the Unicorn right into the throne

room. The Steed was so impressed and excited at being presented to the Ruler of all Oz that he scarcely knew what he was doing, and managed to knock over two footstools, and then stand for some moments with his tail in a bowl of flowers and one hoof solidly on Queen Farthingale's train, until Fess moved him and released her. As for the Unicorn, she was as dainty and calm as ever, but her golden eyes shone with pleasure at seeing Ozma again.

"I remember you perfectly, of course!" she said in her gentle voice. "You made the best daisy-chains of any fairy in Lurline's band-and made them for me oftener, too. So kind! You don't look a day older, my dear."

"Neither do you," Ozma assured her.

And then, because it was growing late and there was still much to be explained and settled, the little fairy seated herself in the worn but still splendid chair of the First King Herald of Halidom, which the present King Herald had hastily ordered dusted and brought down out of the castle attic for her. The others settled themselves around her, eager to hear why she had come and what she had to say.

"Well," said Ozma, smiling at Dorothy. "Late this afternoon I began to think that it was high time you and the Cowardly Lion were getting home for the party. Do you realize Easter is tomorrow?"

"My goodness! Dorothy exclaimed. "Well, the truth is, we've been so busy hunting for the Circlets-

"Besides, we got lost," the Cowardly Lion rumbled defensively.

"I rather thought you might have." Ozma gave him a mischievous glance. "I also suspected you might be having numerous adventures and quite a good time, so I just took a peep into my Magic Picture to see. And there you were, marching into Pax-on-Argent with my old friend the Unicorn and all sorts of other interesting-looking companions, with crowds cheering you and children throwing flowers! Well-I'd intended to transport you home when I found you, but I really couldn't bear to spoil all that, so I just kept watching you instead-and I got the Wizard to bring his magic radio so that I could hear you, too."

Ever since, she went on to explain, she had been following events in Pax-on-Argent; she had seen the travelers' joyful welcome at the castle, had heard the story of their adventures as they talked to King Herald and Queen Farthingale, and had listened not only to Sir Greves's confession but also to the discussion about him later.

"And then, when you found the last Circlet-in Robin's pocket, of all places! -I simply couldn't stay away any longer," Ozma declared. "Besides," she added with a warm smile at Prince Gules, "I decided it was time I took a hand. You've done enough -and done it bravely and well, without needing or wanting my help." The Prince colored a bit at this, and started to say something, but Ozma shook her head. "No, I don't blame you a bit.

You had every right to go on your own Quest, and recover your own country's treasure. But now you can relax."

"But the Roundheads-

"Leave them to me. I am Ruler of Oz, and they are my responsibility."

"All right," Prince Gules said with relief. He added wryly, "I wish Sir Greves were your responsibility. I don't know what to do with him. I'll be glad to make you a present of him!"

"I accept!" Ozma said promptly. She laughed at his expression, then confessed she was hoping he would say just that. "Because I know exactly what to do with him. I'll send him to be king of Roundabout."

"What?" chorused everybody.

With another laugh, Ozma explained. Listening through the magic radio to Sir Greves's confession, she, like the others, had felt sorry for him, and realized he would be of even less use on the Sandbar Sinister than he had been in Halidom, as well as more unhappy.

"So I began wondering where and how he could be useful. Then Robin said what he did about the Roundheads, and suddenly I knew. You were quite right about the Roundheads," Ozma told Robin with a decisive little nod. "They need something new to sell. Well, I think they should sell Pi!"

"Of course!" Robin shouted, forgetting his shyness in his enthusiasm. "Why, it's just the thing! They can turn all those factories into bakeries, and they'll never run out of customers

for Pi, or have a hard time selling it!"

"And Sir Greves, who is a true chef at heart, and good at organizing, will be perfectly content and useful in Roundabout," Ozma finished.

The others were as delighted as Robin with the plan, which seemed to them all a perfect solution to both problems.

"Why didn't we think of it ourselves?" Prince Gules exclaimed.

"You almost did," Ozma admitted. "Just a few more minutes, and you would have, I'm quite sure of it. That's why I hurried!" she added solemnly, causing the Cowardly Lion to chuckle.

"So you could get your fingers in the Pi?" he rumbled.

After the groans and giggles had subsided, Ozma said that she meant to transport Roundelay to the Emerald City the day after Easter, and scold him severely for the mischief he had caused, after which she thought he could be trusted to be a good Sphere-Seer and a real help to the new King Greves in organizing the baking industry. As for the National Magic Possession he wanted so badly, she would advise him to place the recipe for Pi in the Tower for the Machine to guard.

"After all, a possession that can switch a whole nation from peddling to prosperity overnight is magic enough for anybody!" she declared.

"That's true," Prince Gules observed thoughtfully. "Hali-dom's Golden Circlets can't do more than that."

"And what d'you know, Merry!" Robin said with a laugh.

"That silly prophecy has been fulfilled!" The others had not heard Roundabout's prophecy, so he repeated it for them. "The ring will bring the king'-that's Sir Greves, you see, not me at all; and the 'ring' isn't my brass ring, but the stolen Circlet. 'The king will bring the Thing'-that's the new baking industry, not Merry! 'Everything round, the treasure's found . . .'" Robin paused and blinked. "Why, they were even saying that wrong -no wonder they didn't understand it! It never did mean that everything was round! It means 'everything will be found around the treasure'-and the treasure is that recipe! Don't you bet that's it?"

It certainly did seem that every sign pointed toward Sir Greves as Roundabout's rightful king. Prince Gules sent for the little knight at once, and told him the surprising fate in store for him. Sir Greves was overjoyed, immediately burst into fresh tears-of gratitude, this time-and sobbed earnestly that he would do anything, everything, anybody wished him to.

"Then go at once to Sir Gauntlet and make peace forever between your two families," Ozma said with some severity. "Feuds are stupid and silly, and this one should have ended long ago. In a few days, I will transport you to Roundabout-with all your skillets and spices-to take up your new life."

Weeping his joyful thanks, Sir Greves hurried away; at the same moment, Barry hurried in to inform Queen Farthingale that supper was almost ready. Beaming with satisfaction at the

fine way everything was turning out, the Queen begged her visitors to stay and sample roast Halidom goose and flaunch-pasties, mulberry tartlet and Argent cream.

Everyone accepted with pleasure, and while they waited for Barry to scurry back to the banquet hall and lay the extra places, King Herald cleared his throat, rose to his feet, and announced that he wished to perform two acts of great importance, and now was as good a time as any.

"The first is to release young Fess here from his-er-page hood," said the King. "He has proved himself over and over during this Quest, and taken mighty good care of Gulie, too. I'm supposed to promote you to be a squire next, Fess my boy, but the fact is, you've been Gulie's squire all through this journey. whether anybody called you that or not. So I'm just going to free you from my service altogether, eh? Time you went home to your own country and became a Knight of Troth. Yes. Hrrrmph! And before you go-here, just step a little closer, eh?"

As Fess, coloring to the ears with pleasure and surprise, did so, King Herald drew his sword and dubbed him Sir Fess, Knight of Halidom, on the spot. Then, hospitably inviting him to come back often to Pax-on-Argent for a weekend or a joust, now that he knew the way, he kissed the new knight on both cheeks, slapped him on the back, and sat down, beaming. After the others had crowded around Fess to offer their own congratulations, the

King arose and cleared his throat again.

"The second thing I want to do," he announced, "is abdicate, in favor of my son. You've proved yourself, too, Gulie. You're ready to be king." He thought deeply a moment, then added, "Matter of fact, you already are king, I think. I've scarcely done a lick of ruling all afternoon. Felt good, too. Relaxing, eh? Never was quite smart enough to be a king, anyway. Circlet gone, you know. Not too brainy even now that it's back, come to think of it. Anyhow, I'm quite ready to hand my shoes over to you and let you step into my crown. Er-that is-yes. Well. So there you are, Gulie. Marry your pretty little Lady Annelet and get on with being Herald the 65th, eh? We'll have the wedding and coronation tomorrow, but you can start being king right now, if you don't mind."

"Whatever you say, Papa," Prince Gules said, squaring his shoulders and trying-unsuccessfully restrain a flush of pride.

"Speech! Speech!" roared the Cowardly Lion.

"I have no speech to make, except to thank everybody who helped me in my Quest," the Prince said, smiling. "You all deserve medals. But I think Flitter would rather have his silver collar-and the Unicorn a daisy chain. I'll make one for her myself tomorrow. Fess has already been rewarded. As for Fred, he should be promoted, and my first act as king will be to see to that, right now. Let me borrow your sword a minute, Papa."

Striding over to the startled Steed, Prince Gules touched him three times on the shoulder with the flat of the sword. "I hereby

dub you Charger," he announced. Then he paused, gazed for a moment with silent affection and real gratitude into his old friend's excited eyes, and said, "No, wait a minute-I've changed my mind." Down came the sword again on the shiny black shoulder. "I bestow upon you the rank of Destrier!" cried the Prince in a ringing voice. 'And the official name of Frederick the Great!"

There was a gasp of delight from everyone in the room, followed by a rousing cheer, and Fess, almost overcome with the joy of Fred's new grandeur on top of his own, flung his arms around the Destrier's neck.

Frederick the Great alone was speechless. For a moment Fess wondered if he were unconscious-possibly from the shock. He simply stood, staring with glazed eyes at the Prince, apparently not noticing that Fess was hanging on his neck.

"Sheer merit, valor and character," he whispered after a moment. "Sheer merit-valor-and character. A Destrier. Frederick the Great. Oh, if my grandfather could see me now!"

"You deserve it, Fred, but you'd better say thank you, hadn't you?" Fess murmured.

"Thank you," Fred said, swallowing. He seemed to come to himself, and slowly arched his neck. "Thank you," he said in a voice that sounded hollow and impressive, like an echo. "Thank you, Your Highness-Your Majesty. I will endeavor to be worthy of my-your trust."

Head high, ears strained to needle points, tail flowing in an almost impossibly strenuous curve, he floated out of the room and back to the stables to his waiting oats, with his eyes fixed on glory and not one hoof touching the common ground.

Then the Unicorn-who, being Unique, could be elevated no higher-bade Ozma and Dorothy a fond farewell, and retired to her garden, and the others went in to supper.

It was not only the first real banquet Robin had ever attended in a real castle, it was also the jolliest party he had ever attended anywhere. It was, in fact, only the second party he had ever been invited to in all his life-the first having been a Christmas party long ago at the Cherryburg Community Center, where he had sat solemnly on a wooden chair listening to a lady in an extraordinary hat sing Christmas carols, then stood solemnly in a long line to receive one orange and one candy cane, and afterwards gone solemnly back to the orphanage in a bus. It wasn't at all like this.

"Oh, my!" he whispered to Merry, who stood close beside his chair watching the fun, "don't you wish we could always be with Dorothy and the Prince and the Cowardly Lion and Flitter and Fess and everybody? I hate to think it's almost over."

"Is it almost over?" Merry asked wistfully.

"Oh, yes. Ozma and Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion have to go home to the Emerald City, you know, and Fess has to go home to Troth, and the Halidom people are home, so we'll have to leave, too.

"But where'll we go?" Merry said.

"Well, I don't know, but we can't just stay around being extra. It's not polite. Maybe Dorothy'll remember to ask Princess Ozma to send us back to Oregon. That's our home-I guess."

"I don't have a home. All I ever had was a merry-go round."

Robin sighed, reflecting that he'd never had a home either, unless you counted the orphanage and places like the McGudgeys' house, which he felt sure wasn't the same thing at all. "Well, everybody can't have one, Merry," he explained. "Anyhow, Oregon's where we live, so . . . Oh, let's think about it later! Look! They're bringing another kind of cake!"

It was Queen Farthingale's famous rose-applesauce cake, and it was so good that everybody-except Merry-had two slices, with another glass of pear-and-teazle punch. But finally not even the Lion could hold another bite of anything, and since the moon was already halfway up the sky, Ozma rose at last and announced regretfully that she and Dorothy and the Lion must say goodbye, if they were to be in the Emerald City in time for the Easter Egg Hunt next day. At the mention of Easter, Dorothy remembered him. the Bunny's present, and ran to fetch the Great Egg. Ozma was delighted with it, and assured the Prince that the Wizard could easily repair the damage to the sugar flowers, and replace the Circlet with an ordinary gold band.

"Just leave it in the basket, it'll be easy to carry that way," she advised Dorothy. "And now say your goodbyes, for we must go.

"How are we going?" rumbled the Cowardly Lion with sudden suspicion, then groaned when Ozma grinned at him and touched her Magic Belt.

"Well, we just don't have time to walk," Dorothy told him. "Anyway, we won't land in a bramble patch this time, will we, Ozma?"

"No, I'll transport us right to the palace grounds," Ozma promised.

"Well-I hate to leave," Dorothy sighed, smiling around at all her friends. Suddenly her eye fell on Robin and Merry, who were standing together in the background, looking rather left out and shy. "Why, we must do something about them!" Dorothy cried. "Can we take them with us, Ozma?"

"Do they want to be taken?" Ozma asked with a smile.

The others quickly explained to her that Robin and Merry had been on their way to the Emerald City all along, to ask her help.

"You see," Robin added reluctantly, "I was going to ask you to send me back to Oregon-and to transform Merry into a Real Horse and send her with me."

"Why, I'll be happy to do both those things," Ozma assured him.

"Oh," Robin said hollowly. He had been hoping, in secret, that the whole thing would prove to be impossible even for Ozma, and they would have to stay in Oz. He swallowed, and he and the little mare glanced at each other with long faces. "Well, thank you very much," he sighed.

Ozma studied them a moment, then went up to Robin and took both his hands. "Tell me truthfully," she said. "Don't you want to go?"

"No," said Robin, very truthfully indeed.

"Neither do I," Merry said. Her lower lip was beginning to tremble and her great brown eyes filled with tears. "I never did want to go! And now I don't even want to be a Real Horse, either. They have to eat, and rest, and keep warm, and all sorts of inconvenient things, and I think it's more fun to just be me."

"It's much more interesting, too," Dorothy agreed.

"But what about your family, Robin?" Ozma said. "Wouldn't they miss you?"

"I don't have one, and the McGudgeys'd never miss me. scarcely ever remembered I was there, anyway," Robin said frankly. "I don't think I was the sort of boy they liked."

"Well, you're exactly the sort of boy I like!" Ozma declared.

"And you may both come and live in my palace forever if you want to."

"In your palace?" Robin breathed.

"If we want to?" Merry gulped.

"Oh, wheee!" Dorothy cried, clapping her hands and jumping up and down because she simply couldn't help it. "Oh, you'll just love the Scarecrow, and Betsy, and the Hungry Tiger, and-"

"And me," put in the Lion jealously. "Remember, I knew you first."

"I take it you accept the invitation?" Ozma added.

"Oh, yes," gasped Robin. And Merry said, "Oh, yes! Oh, yes!

Oh, yes!"

"Then stand close to Dorothy and the Lion, and off we go!"

"Goodbye, Prince Gules!" cried Dorothy. "Goodbye, Sir Fess! Goodbye, Flitter! Goodbye, everybody-give my Jove to Frederick the Great-"

"Please come to visit me in Troth, Robin and Merry!" Fess begged.

"And me in Halidom!" added the Prince. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, everybody-dear!" squeaked Flitter, waving both his wings. "Oh-dear!"

Smiling, Princess Ozma had clasped both hands to her Magic Belt.

An instant later, Robin was standing on a moonlit lawn, with a sky full of stars above him, and straight ahead of him the twinkling lights of the most beautiful palace he had ever even imagined-and at his side, the Cowardly Lion was growling,

"Welcome home!"

The End