

You Can Never Go Home

by Phillip Berrie
(with apologies to L. Frank Baum)

The storm rages as if in violent disapproval of the peaks that would dare reach its elevated position. One particular peak, the highest, seems singularly resented as bolt after bolt of lightning strike it. Then the lightning stops and two figures can be seen atop the peak. One, a wizard by the ornate staff and esoteric symbols that trim his robes of black, the other a small winged monkey who sits upon its master's shoulder. It is this one that speaks first.

"Are we there yet?" it says in a squeaky voice.

"Yes ... I believe so."

"Well? Where are the soaring glass towers? Where are the horseless carriages? Where are the giant metal birds?" the creature asks, looking round.

"Patience, Baltor. You will see these marvels soon enough. But first, I must rest, the traversal was harder than expected." With a word his staff begins to glow and the sorcerer makes his way down into the lee of the peak out of the wind that has sprung up since the storm finished its pyrotechnics. The familiar flexes its wings as if to fly, but then does not, perhaps preferring safety in such wild surrounds.

The man of magic eases himself down on the most comfortable rock he can find and then delves deeply into a hidden pocket and withdraws a crystal ball large enough such that it seems no pocket or garment could support its weight. Much to his disapproval, his hand shakes with the strain and he put the orb down on a convenient ledge.

"Where is thy strength?" asks the familiar. "Why didn't you renew the spell before we left?"

"I did! Do you think me stupid?"

Baltor opens his mouth, but wisely, says nothing. Instead he spreads his wings and flutters across to land next to the crystal ball. "Go on, work the spell. I want to see these wonders properly," demands the overly-familiar creature.

"In good time, Baltor. When I recover my magic, we will see what we can see."

Scowling, Baltor scrambles up to a high point and looks about. He does not like what he sees and quickly turns on his master demanding, "So how long ago did you leave this place?"

"Sixty years, come next double-moon eclipse," replies his master rubbing the back of his left hand.

The familiar smirks. "I know why you left. What a boring place!"

"You should not judge an entire world by one place, Baltor. This is just where the barrier was weakest. A whole world as rich and varied as our own awaits us."

"Well, if it is such a great place, why did you leave?"

"It was not my decision. I wasn't a wizard then. A cosmic event—"

"Not a wizard? Your kind are born to the power."

"Perhaps that is true, but we have to learn our craft. I was already an old man when it was discovered I had the gift. I was the oldest student ever accepted into the Academy."

"That's funny!" The little joker slaps his knee with glee. "I can just imagine you lining up for class with the children. Did you have to wear short trousers?"

"I was the quickest ever to achieve the rank of wizard and also the only Outling ever to rule the council," says the man glaring at the familiar.

"Yes, but what have you done recently?"

The old man sighs and shakes his head wearily. "Sometimes I wonder why I ever invested so much time and effort in you. Now hush," he says and closes his eyes.

The familiar climbs atop the crystal ball and sit glaring at its master, waiting.

Minutes pass and only the storm seems to achieve anything as it performs a long drawn out escape on the prevailing wind. The man opens his eyes but seems shrunken somehow. The look in his eyes has a desperate quality.

"What took you so long?" complains the familiar. "I'm bored. Let's go somewhere more exciting."

The old man draws a sudden breath and raises an old and wrinkled hand to his brow. "What have I done?"

"Oh yes, and just what have we missed this time?" chides Baltor.

The man points. "Your wings."

"My wings? My wings!" The creature shrieks as it realises that they are only half their former size. Twisting further it slips from the slippery sphere and drops to the ground with a useless flutter.

"Baltor!" cries the old man. He moves to his familiar's aid, but he has not the strength, and instead falls himself. Bruised and bloody, master and servant look at each other across a hand span of space.

"You fool! What have you done?" shrieks the smaller.

"Made a dreadful mistake," the larger whispers. "I have killed us both."

"What? How?"

"There isn't any magic here and we cannot survive without it."

"No magic! But, but, I need magic to be what I am."

"Yes, Baltor, I know. And, it is your magic that sustains me, and now it – I – am draining you with the demands of my aged body. I am over one hundred and twenty years old and would have died long ago without our link."

"Take us home. I want to go home."

"We can't," whispers the man.

"Why not?"

"I don't have enough magic,"

"Use ... use mine," the familiar says after a pause.

"It would kill you. I couldn't do that," says the master.

"Better dead than a bloody monkey again," says the servant in defiance.

"No, I couldn't do that to you. We ..."

A long look passes between the two.

"You old fool!" says Baltor softly.

Silence descends. Death is near, come to claim its long overdue prize, but the man heeds it not. Tears well from his eyes as he remembers times and places unreachable. Cradled in his arms is the withered, wingless corpse of a small monkey.

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