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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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# How the Speckled Hen Got Her Speckles

Once upon a time, ages and ages ago, there was a little white hen. One day she was busily engaged in scratching the soil to find worms and insects for her breakfast. As she worked she sang over and over again her little crooning song, "Quirrichi, quirrichi, quirrichi." Suddenly she noticed a tiny piece of paper lying on the ground. "Quirrichi, quirrichi, what luck!" she said to herself. "This must be a letter. One time when the king, the great ruler of our country, held his court in the meadow close by, many people brought him letters and laid them at his feet. Now I, too, even I, the little white hen, have a letter. I am going to carry my letter to the king."

The next morning the little white hen started bravely out on her long journey. She carried the letter very carefully in her little brown basket. It was a long distance to the royal palace where the king lived. The little white hen had never been so far from home in all her life.

After a while she met a friendly fox. Foxes and little white hens are not usually very good friends, you know, but this fox was a friend of the little white hen. Once upon a time she had helped the fox to escape from a

trap and the fox had never forgotten her kindness to him.

"O, little white hen, where are you going?" asked the fox.



"Quirrichi, quirrichi," replied the little white hen, "I am going to the royal palace to carry a letter to the king."

"Indeed, little white hen," said the fox, "I should like to go with you. Give me your permission to accompany you on your journey."

"I shall be glad to have you go with me," said the little white hen. "It is a very long journey to the royal palace where the king lives. Wouldn't you like me to carry you in my little brown basket?"

The fox climbed into the little brown basket. After the little white hen had gone on for some distance farther she met a river. Once upon a time the little white hen had done the river a kindness. He had, with great difficulty, thrown some ugly worms upon the bank and he was afraid they would crawl back in again. The little white hen had eaten them for him. Always after that the river had been her friend.

"O, little white hen, where are you going?" the river called out as soon as he saw her.

"Quirrichi, quirrichi, I am going to the royal palace to carry a letter to the king," replied the little white hen. "O, little white hen, may I go with you?" asked the river.

The little white hen told the river that he might go with her and asked him to ride in the little brown basket. So the river climbed into the little brown basket. After the little white hen had journeyed along for a time she came to a fire. Once upon a time, when the fire had been dying the little white hen had brought some dried grass. The grass had given the fire new life and always after that he had been the friend of the little white hen.

"O, little white hen, where are you going?" the fire asked.

"Quirrichi, quirrichi, I am going to the royal palace to carry a letter to the king," replied the little white hen. "O, little white hen, may I go with you?" asked the fire. "I have never been to the royal palace and I have never had even a peep at the king."

The little white hen told the fire that he might go with her and asked him to climb into the little brown basket. By this time the little brown basket was so full, that, try as they might, they couldn't make room for the fire. At last they thought of a plan. The fire changed himself into ashes and then there was room for him to get into the basket.

The little white hen journeyed on and on, and finally she arrived at the royal palace.

"Who are you and what are you carrying in your little brown basket?" asked the royal doorkeeper when he opened the door.

"I am the little white hen and I am carrying a letter to the king," replied the little white hen. She didn't say a word about the fox and the river and the fire which she had in her little brown basket. She was so frightened before the great royal doorkeeper of the palace that she could hardly find her voice at all.

The royal doorkeeper invited the little white hen to enter the palace and he led her to the royal throne where the king was sitting. The little white hen bowed very low before the king—so low, in fact, that it mussed up all her feathers.

"Who are you and what is your business?" asked the king in his big, deep, kingly voice.

"Quirrichi, quirrichi, I am the little white hen," replied the little white hen in her low, frightened, little voice. "I have come to bring my letter to your royal majesty." She handed the king the piece of paper which had remained all this time at the bottom of the little brown basket. There were marks of dirt upon it where the friendly fox's feet had rested. It was damp where the river had lain. It had tiny holes in it where the fire had sat after he had turned himself into hot ashes.

"What do you mean by bringing me this dirty piece of paper?" shouted the king in his biggest, deepest, gruffest voice. "I am highly offended. I always knew that hens were stupid little creatures but you are quite the stupidest little hen I ever saw in all my life."

"Here," and he turned to one of the attendants standing by the throne, "take this stupid, little white hen and throw her out into the royal poultry yard. I think we will have her for dinner tomorrow."

The little white hen was roughly seized by the tallest royal attendant and carried down the back stairs, through the back gate, out into the royal poultry yard. She still clung to the little brown basket which she had brought with her on her long journey to the royal palace and through all the sad experiences she had met there.

When the little white hen reached the royal poultry yard all the royal fowls flew at her. Some plucked at her ruffled white feathers. Others tried to pick out her eyes. One pulled off the cover of the little brown basket.

Out sprang the fox from the little brown basket and in the twinkling of an eye he fell upon the fowls of the royal poultry yard. Not a single fowl was left alive.

There was such a great commotion that the king, the queen, the royal attendants and all the royal servants of the palace came rushing out to see what was the matter. The fox had already taken to his heels and the little white hen lost no time in running away too. She did not, however, forget to take her little brown basket with her.

The royal household all ran after her in swift pursuit. They had almost caught her when the river suddenly sprang out of the little brown basket and flowed between the little white hen and her royal pursuers. They couldn't get across without canoes.

While they were getting the canoes and climbing into them the little white hen had time to run a long way. She had almost reached a thick forest where she could easily hide herself when the royal pursuers again drew near. Then the fire which had changed itself into hot ashes jumped out of the little brown basket. It immediately became dark, so dark that the royal household could not even see each other's faces and, of course, they could not see in which direction the little white hen was running. There was nothing for them to do but to return to the royal palace and live on beef and mutton.

The fire which had turned itself into ashes sprang out of the little brown basket so suddenly that it scattered ashes all over the little white hen. From that day she was always speckled where the ashes fell upon her. The chickens of the little white hen (who was now a little speckled hen) were all speckled too. So were their chickens and their chickens and their chickens' chickens, even down to this very day. Whenever you see a speckled hen you may know that she is descended from the little white hen who carried a letter to the king, and who, in her adventures, became the first speckled hen.