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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Nicko and the Ogre

Once upon a time there lived on the banks of a deep, wide river an ogre who ate all the fish in the river, never letting the people who lived in the town come near the river to fish.

And this was not all the ogre did. He would make such a noise when he slept that all the children were frightened so they could not sleep at night, and the people decided at last that something must be done. One day a youth named Nicko said he would go to an old witch who lived in the forest and ask her what could be done.

So to this witch the youth went. "There is only one way to get rid of the ogre," she told Nicko, "and that secret is known only to a mermaid, who comes up from the river every night and sings to the ogre."

Of course the ogre would see Nicko if he went to the mermaid when she was singing, so he decided to have a suit made of green and silver that would make him look like a huge fish and dive into the river, hoping in that way to find the home of the mermaid and learn the secret she knew.

One night after the mermaid had finished her song to the ogre, Nicko slipped from behind a rock where he was hidden, dressed in his green-and-silver suit, and swam to the place he had seen the mermaid go under the water.

Down, down he went, and just before he reached the bottom of the river the mermaid turned around and saw him.

She had never seen such a beautiful big fish before and the silver glistened and shone so in the moonlight that the mermaid was filled with envy.

"Oh, beautiful fish, tell me where you got your shining coat! I must have a dress like it at once," she said, swimming along beside Nicko.

"I will tell you, beautiful mermaid, willingly, and I will bring you a dress of wonderful brightness," said Nicko, "if you will tell me how the people who live in the river town can get rid of the ogre you sing to every night."



The mermaid no longer smiled when she heard this; her face looked sad and unhappy.

"That can never be done; for the way to be rid of the ogre is beyond my power, although I know the secret," answered the mermaid; "but you cannot help me."

"Well, if I cannot help you, at least tell me how it could be brought about that the river folk could be rid of their trouble."

"A mortal must come to this river and live here," said the mermaid. "And he must marry me. Now you see how impossible it is for any one to learn the rest of the secret, for who would marry a mermaid and live at the bottom of the river?"

Nicko had fallen in love with the pretty mermaid at first sight, and when he heard this he said: "Show me your home, pretty maid. Perhaps I can help you, even if I am only a fish."

To the very bottom of the river the mermaid took Nicko, and when they stood on the white sand before her home of crystal Nicko said:

"Mermaid, I love you! Behold your mortal lover. Will you be my wife?"

As he spoke he threw off the green-and-silver costume he wore, and there stood the mortal who had come to woo her.

The pretty little mermaid blushed and hung her head. "I did not know; I could never have guessed you were a mortal," she stammered.

"Of course you couldn't," said Nicko, almost forgetting why he was there, he was so very much in love with the pretty creature. "Now where shall I find your father?" he asked.

The little mermaid clapped her tiny hands, and from under the rock came many little silver-colored fish, swimming all around her.

"Run quickly and tell the dolphin to find Father Neptune," said the mermaid.

Soon the water began to roll and tumble about, and Nicko saw swimming toward them two sea-horses drawing a chariot in which stood a man carrying in one hand a curious and big three-pronged fork.

"He is Father Neptune," said the mermaid. "Ask him for me if you wish."

"Well, young mortal, what do you wish here at the bottom of my river?" asked Father Neptune.

At first Nicko did not know what to say, for Father Neptune was very big and stern-looking; but when he saw the little mermaid swim up to him and lean her head against his shoulder he took courage and spoke.

"I wish to marry your daughter," he said, "and live at the bottom of the river."

Father Neptune began to smile. "The spell is broken for you, my dear," he said to the little mermaid, "and I am glad. I would have helped you before this if I could, but it was not in my power.

"She is yours, mortal youth," said Neptune. "I pronounce you man and wife. And now we will see what can be done to get rid of that awful ogre on the bank of the river. He has bothered me so much, I shall be glad to have him gone."

"Now we are married," said the mermaid to Nicko, "I can tell you I am not a mermaid at all, but a king's daughter who was changed into a mermaid to sing for the ogre because my father did not invite the dreadful ogre to a feast at his palace one night.

"The ogre cast a spell over me which could be broken only when a mortal should come to the bottom of the river and ask me to marry him, which the ogre thought never could happen.

"Now it is my turn to have the ogre changed into another form, and if Father Neptune will consent I will ask the old forest witch to change him into a big rock in the middle of the river."

"Very well, my dear," said Father Neptune, "a big rock will be an addition to my river, and when I run in here to rest my sea-horses will have a place to play and my dolphins a place to sit."

"Goodbye, Father Neptune," said the mermaid. "I shall no longer wear this form after to-night, for when I touch the land I shall be a mortal again."

"I will take you to the shore," said Father Neptune; "jump in, both of you." It took only a minute for the sea-horses to dash to the top of the river, and another for them to bring the chariot to the bank of the river near the forest.

Nicko jumped out and lifted the little mermaid to the ground, which she no sooner touched than before him stood a beautiful young girl on two dainty feet.

When he looked around Father Neptune was gone and the Princess (for we must call her so now) said: "We must hurry to the witch and tell her before sunrise, or the ogre will have another day in which to bother the river-town people."

When the old witch saw the Princess she began to laugh. "Ha-ha!" she said. "Now the ogre will be in my

power. Leave him to me, my dear. I will change him into any shape you wish."

The Princess told her she wished him changed into a huge rock to be placed in the middle of the river.

"Come along, my pretties; you shall see it done," said the old witch, clapping her hands as she spoke.

Up from behind the cave jumped a big broomstick, and on it hopped the witch and the Princess and Nicko, and off they flew to the place where the ogre sat fishing by the river.

When they were near enough for the old witch to touch him with her crooked cane she leaned over and tapped him on the head and said:

"In the middle of the river,

To dwell there forever,

A rock you shall be

So all folks may see."

A peal of thunder that shook the woods around was heard, and then a loud splash.

When the mist of the splashing water cleared Nicko and the Princess saw a huge black rock in the middle of the river, and the next thing they knew they were flying through the air with the old witch again.

"Here is your home, Princess," said the witch at last.

"They will be waiting for you and your husband, for I sent word you had been rescued, and a feast is being made in honor of your marriage."

Before Nicko or his bride could thank the witch she was far above their heads and flying away.

The King and the Queen were overjoyed to have their daughter again and gave Nicko such a welcome that he quite forgot his home by the river and never returned. But this did not matter, as he was an orphan, but no one thought of him as being the cause of the ogre's disappearance. The people in the river town knew the ogre had gone, and they cared not who brought it about.

Nicko and the Princess lived happily ever after, and one day became the King and Queen in the country where they lived.