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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Green Cat

Old Witch Betto stood in the door of her cave on top of a high mountain; her lean, long arms, with hands like claws, were stretched before her, and the wind blew wisps of her gray hair, making them look like so many horns around her wicked face.

Old Witch Betto was very angry. The people of the village were giving a fête to which she had not been invited.

But who would have thought of inviting old Betto to anything? Her appearance in the village was always an ill omen. Someone lost a cow or the water in the wells turned green and unfit to drink, or, worse still, the children upon whom she cast her evil eye became deformed.

But old Witch Betto did not think of all this, and in her cave on the top of the mountain, she was calling down the rain and spoiling their fête. Such rain had never been seen before. The valley was like a river, and all the pretty decorations which had been put up for the fête were spoiled, and the young people were bemoaning their lost pleasures.

Hans and Gretchen were to be married during the fête, and Gretchen's pretty eyes were red with weeping, for the new cap and embroidered petticoat would be spoiled if she wore them, and to be married in one's old clothes was something people would never forget.

And so Hans was unhappy because his pretty Gretchen would not smile. "Dry your eyes, liebchen," he said, as he kissed her good night; "I'll make the sun shine tomorrow if I have to climb to the top of the mountain and pull his old head out of the clouds."

Hans had not the least notion of doing it, but he could not leave his pretty sweetheart without some word of comfort.

He had not walked far before he heard something splashing along beside him.

"Some poor dog," thought Hans, "is trying to find his way home." And he swung his lantern around, but instead of a dog, he saw a huge frog.

"You are having wet weather," said the frog.

Hans was too surprised to reply, and the frog spoke again.

"Would you like to know how to stop this rain?" he asked. By this time, Hans had recovered from his surprise.

"Yes," he replied. "How can it be done?"

"If you have the courage to climb to the top of the mountain," said the frog, "and find old Witch Betto, you can do it. She is angry because you did not invite her to your fête, and is sending the rain into the valley."

"I am afraid she will not listen to me," said Hans.

"No," replied the frog, "but you can force her to stop the rain by finding the green cat."

"I never saw a green cat, or heard of one, either," said Hans. "Where can such a cat be found?"



"That is the most difficult part," said the frog, "for you will have first to find the dwarf who is guarding it. The green cat is the only thing in the world of which the old witch is afraid."

"Where does the dwarf live?" asked Hans, "and why does he guard the green cat?"

"I will tell you," said the frog. "The dwarf is old Betto's son, who lives in a forest on the other side of the mountain, and in his cave, he has the green cat, and it is guarded night and day by thousands of insects which fly at and sting anyone who comes near the cave."

Hans thought of Gretchen's tears, and he said, "I will try, and if I fail no one will be harmed but me, but if I succeed everybody in the valley will be happy." So he thanked the frog and turned toward the side of the mountain where the dwarf lived.

"Put me in your pocket," said the frog. "I may be of help to you." Hans picked him up and put him in his pocket. It was a long way up the mountain to the cave of the dwarf, and Hans sat down on a rock to rest when he came to the edge of the forest, for he expected to have a hard time getting to the green cat which the frog told him was inside the cave. It was wet and dark, and he had to carry a torch all the way, but now the frog told him he must extinguish it, or the dwarf and the insects would see him.

"The cave is only a short distance away," said the frog, "and there is always a fire burning near it at night. When you are in front of the cave, put me on the ground."

Hans walked along very cautiously, and presently he saw the fire, and in the doorway of the cave sat the dwarf.

Hans carefully put the frog on the ground and went nearer. The dwarf did not see him until he was in front of him.

He jumped up, gave a peculiar whistle, and instantly there arose what Hans thought at first was thick smoke, but he soon found that it was all kinds of insects. There were so many that they did look like smoke.

The frog, by this time, had leaped in front of the dwarf, who drew back as if he had been struck a blow.

"It is too late," said the frog; "call back the insects."

When the frog told the dwarf to call the insects, he gave the same peculiar whistle he had given when he first saw Hans, and the insects disappeared as quickly as they had come.

"The green cat is in the cave," said the frog.

Hans went in and soon came out with the cat under his arm.

Her fur was green, and so were her eyes; in fact, she looked as if she might have been dipped into a paint-pot.

The dwarf begged them not to take the green cat. "I will do anything you ask," he said, "if you will not take the cat away."

"You are lucky to escape without being punished," said the frog. "Go into your cave, or I may change my mind." The dwarf hurried into his cave when he heard this, and the frog told Hans to put him in his pocket again and hurry to old Betto's cave on the other side of the mountain.

Hans carried the cat under his arm and hurried toward the other side of the mountain as the frog told him.

When they reached there, the rain had ceased, and old Betto sat in front of her cave asleep.

Hans put the cat on the ground. When she saw old Betto, she ran to her and made a strange-sounding meow.

Old Witch Betto opened her eyes, and a look of fear came over her wicked old face. She got up and tried to get away, but the green cat ran in front of her. "We are face to face at break of day," said the cat, "and I change to my natural form." As she finished speaking, a young girl stood in the place of the green cat. "And now you shall give my lover his natural form also," said the girl. Old Betto was trembling so that she could hardly hold the cane which she held over the frog, mumbling as she did so.

In the place where the frog had been a minute before, a young gentleman appeared. He took the hand of the girl and held it to his lips.

Hans had been so busy watching the lovers that he did not notice that old Betto was sinking into the rock against which she was leaning, and when he looked around she had entirely disappeared, and only a big stone remained.

The sun was just coming up over the mountain when Hans and his new friends started for the valley.

The young gentleman told Hans his story as he walked down the mountain.

"I am a prince," he said, "and this lady is a princess whom I was to marry, but on the night of the wedding, old Betto enticed her to her cave by telling her she would give her a charm that would ensure happiness for the rest of her life.

"When the princess reached the cave, old Betto tried to get her to marry her son, the dwarf, who had seen the princess at some time and fallen in love with her. When the princess refused to marry the dwarf, old witch Betto changed her into a green cat and gave her to the dwarf to guard, saying, 'You will never resume your natural form until we are face to face at break of day.' And she was so sure that the dwarf would not let the green cat escape that she added, 'and when that happens, I will become a rock.'

"I found out that the princess had gone to old Betto's cave, and when I went to ask what had become of the princess, she was frightened and changed me into a frog so I could not return to my home for help.

'If you want your bride,' she said, 'climb to the other side of the mountain,' and she dropped me into the valley. Of course, I could not climb a mountain in the form of a frog, but when I met you on the road, I felt sure you would help me."

"In helping you," said Hans, "I have brought happiness to many others, for the rain has stopped falling and the

fête can go on, and Gretchen and I will be married today. I cannot thank you enough."

The prince told Hans that he was the one to be thankful, for without him, he could not have reached the princess.

The princess and the prince went their way, and Hans said "Goodbye" and hurried to Gretchen's cottage, where he found her all smiles and dressed in her new cap and embroidered petticoat for the wedding. "Did you really pull his head out of the clouds?" she asked, pointing to the sun.

Hans laughed and said, "I told you he should shine for you, and if I had climbed to the top of the mountain, your smile would have been ample reward."

He did not tell Gretchen about old Betto or the green cat, but years afterward, when there were little boys and girls playing about their door, Hans used to tell them a story of a green cat that was guarded by a dwarf who lived on the other side of the mountain that was in front of their home.