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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Four Gifts

In the old land of Brittany, once called Cornwall, there lived a woman named Barbaïk Bourhis, who spent all her days in looking after her farm with the help of her niece Téphany. Early and late the two might be seen in the fields or in the dairy, milking cows, making butter, feeding fowls; working hard themselves and taking care that others worked too. Perhaps it might have been better for Barbaïk if she had left herself a little time to rest and to think about other things, for soon she grew to love money for its own sake, and only gave herself and Téphany the food and clothes they absolutely needed. And as for poor people, she positively hated them, and declared that such lazy creatures had no business in the world.

Well, this being the sort of person Barbaïk was, it is easy to guess at her anger when one day she found Téphany talking outside the cow-house to young Denis, who was nothing more than a day labourer from the village of Plover. Seizing her niece by the arm, she pulled her sharply away, exclaiming:

'Are you not ashamed, girl, to waste your time over a man who is as poor as a rat, when there are a dozen more who would be only too happy to buy you rings of silver, if you would let them?'

'Denis is a good workman, as you know very well,' answered Téphany, red with anger, 'and he puts by money too, and soon he will be able to take a farm for himself.'

'Nonsense,' cried Barbaïk, 'he will never save enough for a farm till he is a hundred. I would sooner see you in your grave than the wife of a man who carries his whole fortune on his back.'

'What does fortune matter when one is young and strong?' asked Téphany, but her aunt, amazed at such words, would hardly let her finish.

'What does fortune matter?' repeated Barbaïk, in a shocked voice. 'Is it possible that you are really so foolish as to despise money? If this is what you learn from Denis, I forbid you to speak to him, and I will have him turned out of the farm if he dares to show his face here again. Now go and wash the clothes and spread them out to dry.'

Téphany did not dare to disobey, but with a heavy heart went down the path to the river.

'She is harder than these rocks,' said the girl to herself, 'yes, a thousand times harder. For the rain at least can at last wear away the stone, but you might cry for ever, and she would never care. Talking to Denis is the only pleasure I have, and if I am not to see him I may as well enter a convent.'

Thinking these thoughts she reached the bank, and began to unfold the large packet of linen that had to be washed. The tap of a stick made her look up, and

standing before her she saw a little old woman, whose face was strange to her.

'You would like to sit down and rest, granny?' asked Téphany, pushing aside her bundle.

'When the sky is all the roof you have, you rest where you will,' replied the old woman in trembling tones.

'Are you so lonely, then?' inquired Téphany, full of pity.

'Have you no friends who would welcome you into their houses?'

The old woman shook her head.

'They all died long, long ago,' she answered, 'and the only friends I have are strangers with kind hearts.'

The girl did not speak for a moment, then held out the small loaf and some bacon intended for her dinner.

'Take this,' she said; 'to-day at any rate you shall dine well,' and the old woman took it, gazing at Téphany the while.

'Those who help others deserve to be helped,' she answered; 'your eyes are still red because that miser Barbaïk has forbidden you to speak to the young man from Plover. But cheer up, you are a good girl, and I will give you something that will enable you to see him once every day.'

'You?' cried Téphany, stupefied at discovering that the beggar knew all about her affairs, but the old woman did not hear her.

'Take this long copper pin,' she went on, 'and every time you stick it in your dress Mother Bourhis will be obliged to leave the house in order to go and count her cabbages. As long as the pin is in your dress you will be

free, and your aunt will not come back until you have put it in its case again.' Then, rising, she nodded to Téphany and vanished.

The girl stood where she was, as still as a stone. If it had not been for the pin in her hands she would have thought she was dreaming. But by that token she knew it was no common old woman who had given it to her, but a fairy, wise in telling what would happen in the days to come. Then suddenly Téphany's eyes fell on the clothes, and to make up for lost time she began to wash them with great vigour.

Next evening, at the moment when Denis was accustomed to wait for her in the shadow of the cow-house, Téphany stuck the pin in her dress, and at the very same instant Barbaïk took up her sabots or wooden shoes and went through the orchard and past to the fields, to the plot where the cabbages grew. With a heart as light as her footsteps, the girl ran from the house, and spent her evening happily with Denis. And so it was for many days after that. Then, at last, Téphany began to notice something, and the something made her very sad.

At first Denis seemed to find the hours that they were together fly as quickly as she did, but when he had taught her all the songs he knew, and told her all the plans he had made for growing rich and a great man, he had nothing more to say to her, for he, like a great many other people, was fond of talking himself, but not of listening to any one else. Sometimes, indeed, he never came at all, and the next evening he would tell

Téphany that he had been forced to go into the town on business, but though she never reproached him she was not deceived and saw plainly that he no longer cared for her as he used to do.

Day by day her heart grew heavier and her cheeks paler, and one evening, when she had waited for him in vain, she put her water-pot on her shoulder and went slowly down to the spring. On the path in front of her stood the fairy who had given her the pin, and as she glanced at Téphany she gave a little mischievous laugh and said:

'Why, my pretty maiden hardly looks happier than she did before, in spite of meeting her lover whenever she pleases.'

'He has grown tired of me,' answered Téphany in a trembling voice, 'and he makes excuses to stay away. Ah! granny dear, it is not enough to be able to see him, I must be able to

amuse him and to keep him with me. He is so clever, you know. Help me to be clever too.'

'Is that what you want?' cried the old woman. 'Well, take this feather and stick it in your hair, and you will be as wise as Solomon himself.'

Blushing with pleasure Téphany went home and stuck the feather into the blue ribbon which girls always



wear in that part of the country. In a moment she heard Denis whistling gaily, and as her aunt was safely counting her cabbages, she hurried out to meet him. The young man was struck dumb by her talk. There was nothing that she did not seem to know, and as for songs she not only could sing those from every part of Brittany, but could compose them herself. Was this really the quiet girl who had been so anxious to learn all he could teach her, or was it somebody else?

Perhaps she had gone suddenly mad, and there was an evil spirit inside her. But in any case, night after night he came back, only to find her growing wiser and wiser. Soon the neighbours whispered their surprise among themselves, for Téphany had not been able to resist the pleasure of putting the feather in her hair for some of the people who despised her for her poor clothes, and many were the jokes she made about them. Of course they heard of her jests, and shook their heads saying: 'She is an ill-natured little cat, and the man that marries her will find that it is she who will hold the reins and drive the horse.'

It was not long before Denis began to agree with them, and as he always liked to be master wherever he went, he became afraid of Téphany's sharp tongue, and instead of laughing as before when she made fun of other people he grew red and uncomfortable, thinking that his turn would come next.

So matters went on till one evening Denis told Téphany that he really could not stay a moment, as he had

promised to go to a dance that was to be held in the next village.

Téphany's face fell; she had worked hard all day, and had been counting on a quiet hour with Denis. She did her best to persuade him to remain with her, but he would not listen, and at last she grew angry.

'Oh, I know why you are so anxious not to miss the dance,' she said; 'it is because Azilicz of Penenru will be there.'

Now Azilicz was the loveliest girl for miles round, and she and Denis had known each other from childhood.

'Oh yes, Azilicz will be there,' answered Denis, who was quite pleased to see her jealous, 'and naturally one would go a long way to watch her dance.'

'Go then!' cried Téphany, and entering the house she slammed the door behind her.

Lonely and miserable she sat down by the fire and stared into the red embers. Then, flinging the feather from her hair, she put her head on her hands, and sobbed passionately.

'What is the use of being clever when it is beauty that men want? That is what I ought to have asked for. But it is too late, Denis will never come back.'

'Since you wish it so much you shall have beauty,' said a voice at her side, and looking round she beheld the old woman leaning on her stick.

'Fasten this necklace round your neck, and as long as you wear it you will be the most beautiful woman in the world,' continued the fairy. With a little shriek of joy Téphany took the necklace, and snapping the clasp

ran to the mirror which hung in the corner. Ah, this time she was not afraid of Azilicz or of any other girl, for surely none could be as fair and white as she. And with the sight of her face a thought came to her, and putting on hastily her best dress and her buckled shoes she hurried off to the dance.

On the way she met a beautiful carriage with a young man seated in it.

'What a lovely maiden!' he exclaimed, as Téphany approached. 'Why, there is not a girl in my own country that can be compared to her. She, and no other, shall be my bride.'

The carriage was large and barred the narrow road, so Téphany was forced, much against her will, to remain where she was. But she looked the young man full in the face as she answered:

'Go your way, noble lord, and let me go mine. I am only a poor peasant girl, accustomed to milk and make hay and spin.'

'Peasant you may be, but I will make you a great lady,' said he, taking her hand and trying to lead her to the carriage.

'I don't want to be a great lady, I only want to be the wife of Denis,' she replied, throwing off his hand and running to the ditch which divided the road from the cornfield, where she hoped to hide. Unluckily the young man guessed what she was doing, and signed to his attendants, who seized her and put her in the coach. The door was banged, and the horses whipped up into a gallop.

At the end of an hour they arrived at a splendid castle, and Téphany, who would not move, was lifted out and carried into the hall, while a priest was sent for to perform the marriage ceremony. The young man tried to win a smile from her by telling of all the beautiful things she should have as his wife, but Téphany did not listen to him, and looked about to see if there was any means by which she could escape. It did not seem easy. The three great doors were closely barred, and the one through which she had entered shut with a spring, but her feather was still in her hair, and by its aid she detected a crack in the wooden panelling, through which a streak of light could be dimly seen. Touching the copper pin which fastened her dress, the girl sent every one in the hall to count the cabbages, while she herself passed through the little door, not knowing whither she was going.

By this time night had fallen, and Téphany was very tired. Thankfully she found herself at the gate of a convent, and asked if she might stay there till morning. But the portress answered roughly that it was no place for beggars, and bade her begone, so the poor girl dragged herself slowly along the road, till a light and the bark of a dog told her that she was near a farm. In front of the house was a group of people; two or three women and the sons of the farmer. When their mother heard Téphany's request to be given a bed the good wife's heart softened, and she was just going to invite her inside, when the young men, whose heads were turned by the girl's beauty, began to quarrel as

to which should do most for her. From words they came to blows, and the women, frightened at the disturbance, pelted Téphany with insulting names. She quickly ran down the nearest path, hoping to escape them in the darkness of the trees, but in an instant she heard their footsteps behind her. Wild with fear her legs trembled under her, when suddenly she bethought herself of her necklace. With a violent effort she burst the clasp and flung it round the neck of a pig which was grunting in a ditch, and as she did so she heard the footsteps cease from pursuing her and run after the pig, for her charm had vanished.

On she went, scarcely knowing where she was going, till she found herself, to her surprise and joy, close to her aunt's house. For several days she felt so tired and unhappy that she could hardly get through her work, and to make matters worse Denis scarcely ever came near her.

'He was too busy,' he said, 'and really it was only rich people who could afford to waste time in talking.'

As the days went on Téphany grew paler and paler, till everybody noticed it except her aunt. The water-pot was almost too heavy for her now, but morning and evening she carried it to the spring, though the effort to lift it to her shoulder was often too much for her.

'How could I have been so foolish,' she whispered to herself, when she went down as usual at sunset. 'It was not freedom to see Denis that I should have asked for, for he was soon weary of me, nor a quick tongue, for he was afraid of it, nor beauty, for that brought me

nothing but trouble, but riches which make life easy both for oneself and others. Ah! if I only dared to beg this gift from the fairy, I should be wiser than before and know how to choose better.'

'Be satisfied,' said the voice of the old woman, who seemed to be standing unseen at Téphany's elbow. 'If you look in your right-hand pocket when you go home you will find a small box. Rub your eyes with the ointment it contains, and you will see that you yourself contain a priceless treasure.'

Téphany did not in the least understand what she meant, but ran back to the farm as fast as she could, and began to fumble joyfully in her right-hand pocket. Sure enough, there was the little box with the precious ointment. She was in the act of rubbing her eyes with it when Barbaïk Bourhis entered the room. Ever since she had been obliged to leave her work and pass her time, she did not know why, in counting cabbages, everything had gone wrong, and she could not get a labourer to stay with her because of her bad temper. When, therefore, she saw her niece standing quietly before her mirror, Barbaïk broke out:

'So this is what you do when I am out in the fields! Ah! it is no wonder if the farm is ruined. Are you not ashamed, girl, to behave so?'

Téphany tried to stammer some excuse, but her aunt was half mad with rage, and a box on the ears was her only answer. At this Téphany, hurt, bewildered and excited, could control herself no longer, and turning away burst into tears. But what was her surprise when

she saw that each tear-drop was a round and shining pearl. Barbaïk, who also beheld this marvel, uttered a cry of astonishment, and threw herself on her knees to pick them up from the floor.

She was still gathering them when the door opened and in came Denis.

'Pearls! Are they really pearls?' he asked, falling on his knees also, and looking up at Téphany he perceived others still more beautiful rolling down the girl's cheeks.

'Take care not to let any of the neighbours hear of it, Denis,' said Barbaïk. 'Of course you shall have your share, but nobody else shall get a single one. Cry on, my dear, cry on,' she continued to Téphany. 'It is for your good as well as ours,' and she held out her apron to catch them, and Denis his hat.

But Téphany could hardly bear any more. She felt half choked at the sight of their greediness, and wanted to rush from the hall, and though Barbaïk caught her arm to prevent this, and said all sorts of tender words which she thought would make the girl weep the more, Téphany with a violent effort forced back her tears, and wiped her eyes.

'Is she finished already?' cried Barbaïk, in a tone of disappointment. 'Oh, try again, my dear. Do you think it would do any good to beat her a little?' she added to Denis, who shook his head.

'That is enough for the first time. I will go into the town and find out the value of each pearl.'

'Then I will go with you,' said Barbaïk, who never trusted any one and was afraid of being cheated. So the two went out, leaving Téphany behind them. She sat quite still on her chair, her hands clasped tightly together, as if she was forcing something back. At last she raised her eyes, which had been fixed on the ground, and beheld the fairy standing in a dark corner by the hearth, observing her with a mocking look. The girl trembled and jumped up, then, taking the feather, the pin, and the box, she held them out to the old woman.

'Here they are, all of them,' she cried; 'they belong to you. Let me never see them again, but I have learned the lesson that they taught me. Others may have riches, beauty and wit, but as for me I desire nothing but to be the poor peasant girl I always was, working hard for those she loves.'

'Yes, you have learned your lesson,' answered the fairy, 'and now you shall lead a peaceful life and marry the man you love. For after all it was not yourself you thought of but him.'

Never again did Téphany see the old woman, but she forgave Denis for selling her tears, and in time he grew to be a good husband, who did his own share of work.