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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Hungry Tiger of Oz: The Big Wig's Secret (17/20)

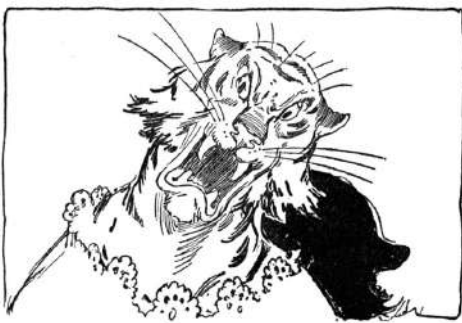
The Giantess seemed astonished to find the Hungry Tiger without his wraps, and picking him up began to scold gently. She was thrusting his front paws into a doll's night dress, when a loud voice from the next room made her pause.



"Bother!" exclaimed Princess Elma, putting the Hungry Tiger down beside the plate of chicken,

"I've got to take my bath. But I'll be right back."

"Don't hurry," growled the Hungry Tiger, gnashing his teeth ferociously as Elma ran toward the Big Wig nurse, standing in the doorway.



"Why don't you bite her," asked Reddy, venturing out from beneath the chair.

"My conscience tells me it would be wrong," groaned the poor tiger. "After all, she is only a child and really means no harm."

Princess Elma was gone so long that Reddy and the Hungry Tiger had time to dine most comfortably on the

plate of chicken and tell their strange experiences in the Giant Castle. The Hungry Tiger was amazed to learn how Reddy had been carried over the wall and listened eagerly to his plans for escape.

"We'll wait till midnight," whispered the little Prince.

"Then, with the Rash rubies to protect us, we'll fall all the way down the stairs and try to find our way out of the castle."

"I hope nothing has happened to Carter and Betsy," sighed the tiger mournfully. "Help me out of these horrible sleeves, boy!" But Reddy advised him to keep on the doll's gown so that Elma would suspect nothing, and reluctantly the tiger agreed. "I had no idea kittens lead such hard lives," he groaned dismally. "My ribs ache from hugging and I've been dragged around all day like a duster. Hide, Reddy, hide! Here she comes again."

Reddy lost no time in concealing himself beneath the chair, and from his hiding place he watched the Giantess kiss the Hungry Tiger good-night, and tuck him vigorously into the doll bed. Then, with a huge yawn, she walked over to her own bed—the tiny bed that had so astonished Reddy in the first place.

"How does the great creature expect to sleep in that?" thought the little boy scornfully. How, indeed? Raising her hand to her head, Elma calmly took off her huge wig, and as she did she shrank so swiftly downward that Reddy clutched the leg of the chair and clapped his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming aloud.

The Hungry Tiger, who had slept in the nursery the night before, was equally astonished at this sudden change in the Princess. Rearing up on all fours, he glared in disbelief at the little girl, who now no larger than Reddy, jumped unconcernedly into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. The big wig, itself, grown small enough to fit a mortal-sized person, lay on the floor beside her. So surprised that he forgot all necessity for caution, Reddy rushed out from beneath the chair, but the Hungry Tiger hastily waved him back and, curling down as if nothing unusual had happened, pretended to be asleep. Fortunately the little girl had not seen Reddy, and crawling cautiously back, he sank down beneath the chair and tried to work out the puzzle.



"These Giants are frauds," decided the little boy exultantly. "Why, they're Giants only when they wear their wigs."

He longed to talk it over with the Hungry Tiger, but realizing the wisdom of hiding till all the Giants were abed, set himself patiently to wait.

It grew quieter and quieter in the Giant's Castle, and as the nursery clock tolled out twelve, the Hungry Tiger slipped noiselessly from his bed and padded softly over to the little Prince.

"She's asleep," breathed the Hungry Tiger, "and so are the rest of these bogus Big Wigs. Let's make a dash for it, my boy."

"I've been thinking," mused Reddy, as he helped the Hungry Tiger off with the giant doll dress, "I've been thinking that it will take a long time to get out of the castle and across the city. It might take us till morning."

"All the more reason to start at once," urged the Hungry Tiger. "Come along, let's start now."

But Reddy stood staring thoughtfully at the white wig beside Princess Elma's bed. "I've been thinking," repeated the little boy, "that if I put on that wig, I might grow into a Giant myself, run a hundred times faster than I can now and fight anyone who tries to stop us."

"Better not," shuddered the Hungry Tiger nervously. "It might stick to you. Come along, hop on my back and we'll manage somehow."

But Reddy, remembering the steepness of the Giant stair and the hugeness of the Giant city, began to creep determinedly toward Elma's bed. As he did, Elma stirred uneasily in her sleep, and alarmed, lest she wake and seize the wig before he could, Reddy snatched it from the floor and clapped it on his head. Stars! Up like a bean stalk shot the little boy, till he feared his head would crack against the ceiling. As he grew, the chairs, tables and furniture that had seemed so immense assumed an astonishing smallness. The Hungry Tiger running in a frantic circle round his feet, looked as he must have looked to Princess Elma—a very tiny and cunning kitten. Taking a long breath, Reddy leaned down, picked the Tiger up and ran out of the room. The

Hungry Tiger was scolding bitterly under his breath, but Reddy had to hold him up to his ear to discover what he was saying.

"Mind what you're doing," rumbled the Hungry Tiger, crossly. "I'm tired of being picked up like a bundle of rags and tossed about. Don't squeeze me either or I'll bite off your thumb. Grr—uff! I'm real mad at you!"

Chuckling a little to himself, Reddy promised to be careful, and tucking the Hungry Tiger gently beneath his arm ran down the richly carpeted hallway. He could not resist peeping into some of the rooms, and everywhere the same sight met his eyes. Tiny beds stood in the midst of gigantic bed chambers and the Giants themselves, no bigger than ordinary folk, sleeping comfortably without their wigs.

"It would be a great chance to capture the city," mused Reddy to himself and for a time wondered whether it might not be fun to try. But he was so anxious to see Betsy and Carter and continue his search for the lost ruby, that he decided to let the foolish Big Wigs rest in peace. Quickening his steps, he hurried downstairs, unbolted the doors and let himself out of the castle. Several Big Wig Guards looked at him curiously, as he hurried down the street, but they made no attempt to stop him.

"It's funny," said Reddy to the Hungry Tiger, as he panted along. "This city doesn't look large at all and it's not nearly so big nor fine as Rash."

"That's because you're a Giant now," roared the tiger, who was gradually recovering his good humor. "It looks pretty big to me. Where are we anyway?"

"Right at the gates," answered Reddy triumphantly.

"Here, you, get out of the way!" The Big Wig Guard, who was asleep with his back against the wall, blinked with surprise and resentment as Reddy spun him out of his path and slid back the bolts. Then, opening the gates, Reddy darted through, calling Betsy Bobbin at the top of his voice.

"Hush!" roared the Hungry Tiger. "Be still, can't you. Do you want to scare her to death?"

We know already how frightened Betsy and the Vegetable Man really were. Failing to recognize Reddy in the huge big wig, as he came bounding through the doorway, they took hands and ran for their lives.

"Come back! Come back!" pleaded the Prince of Rash, making frantic little snatches at the fleeing pair. "Stop, Carter! Stop, Betsy! Don't you know me?"

"The wig, idiot. Take off the wig," grumbled the Hungry Tiger, who was tired of being jostled up and down.

"Take off the wig."

So Reddy, who had been about to lift Betsy up and explain who he was, snatched off his wig instead. In a twinkling he had shrunk down to boy-size and, releasing his hold on the Hungry Tiger, chased merrily after Carter and Betsy.

"Betsy! Betsy!" gasped the little Prince breathlessly.

"Don't run away from me." When Betsy, scarcely believing her ears, looked over her shoulder and saw

Reddy and the Hungry Tiger instead of a Big Wig, she spun about in perfect astonishment.

"But the Giant!" exclaimed Betsy, while Carter Green hurried forward to embrace Reddy and hug the Hungry Tiger. "What became of the Giant?"

"Here it is," coughed the Hungry Tiger, dropping Princess Elma's wig, which he had picked up when Reddy dropped it, and brought along in his teeth.

While Carter and Betsy continued to stare at them in wonder, Reddy related the history of his experience in Immense City, and told how he had stolen the wig. Then, to demonstrate its strange power, he tried it on and turned before their eyes into a Big Wig himself.

"Well," sighed Betsy Bobbin, as he took it off and shrank down beside her, "I don't believe anybody in Oz is having as queer adventures as this. Do you, Carter?" The Vegetable Man shook his head positively.

"But they're turning out all right," he added cheerfully.

"Here we are, all together again, with two of the lost rubies and a magic wig besides. I think we should be very happy," finished Carter, smiling at the Hungry Tiger.

"That's because you were never a kitten," roared the tiger, beginning to lick his satiny coat into smoothness again. "What I've endured at the hands of that great girl no one will ever know! Ugh! Brrr-rr!"

"Won't she have to stay little without her wig?" asked Betsy, curiously.

"Hope she does. Hope she feels just as small as I did," grumbled the Hungry Tiger vindictively. "She's far safer as she is now."

"Maybe they'll make her a new one," suggested Reddy. "Why, Betsy, they're not Giants at all—just big frauds and I'm going to keep this wig always, just to remember them by."

"Don't wear it when I'm around," groaned the Hungry Tiger, rolling his yellow eyes fiercely. "I don't want to remember 'em, and every time I look at it I'll think of the awful day I spent as a kitten."



Though it was way past midnight, the four adventurers had so much to tell and so many plans to make for the

morrow, it was a long time before they finally settled themselves for sleep. But after Betsy had heard all over again about Princess Elma's marvelous toys and how Reddy had fallen into the giant water pitcher, the little boy and girl stretched out on the soft grass beside the road and pillowing their heads comfortably on the tender-hearted old tiger, slept soundly as tops. But Carter did not need to sleep, so perching upon a fence, he watched the moon sailing across the starry sky and kept a sharp look-out for Giants.