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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Those Wymps Again

There was great consternation in Fairyland, for it was suddenly discovered that the sun had been shining crookedly all the morning. It was consequently two hours later than anybody thought it was; and this, as it happened, was a very serious matter, for all the fairies had been invited to the christening of the little Prince Charming, and it would never do for them to arrive late. Of course, the wymps were at the bottom of it and the sun had no idea that he was not shining quite in his usual way; but no one in Fairyland had time to trouble about that, and, without waiting even for the butterflies to be harnessed, away flew all the fairies in a regular scurry. Now, even fairies are apt to do stupid things sometimes, especially when they are flustered and the wymps have been at work; so there may be some excuse for what they did on that particular morning. The fact is, they were so anxious to arrive in time to give their christening presents to the royal baby, that when they met a christening party coming along the road they never stopped to see whether it was the right christening party or not, but just flew down and presented their gifts to the baby, one after another, as fast as they could speak.

"I give you beauty," said one. "And I, thoughtfulness," said another. "And I, wisdom," said a third. "And I, patience," said a fourth. "And I, contentment," said a

fifth; and so on, until all the gifts of Fairyland had been given to the baby in the nurse's arms. Then, when they had quite finished speaking, the poor, flurried little fairies discovered that the baby was the daughter of a poor peasant and his wife, while Prince Charming lived in quite another country, a very long way off. It was a great calamity, no doubt, but nothing could be done, for the fairies had no more gifts left; so they returned very sadly to Fairyland, and hoped that the wymps would not find it out. Of course, the wymps did find it out, for they had arranged the whole thing from the very beginning. Still, the wymps are not nearly so bad as they pretend to be; and when they had finished laughing over their joke they did their best to make things right again by going in large numbers to Prince Charming's christening. They behaved very noisily when they got there; and they ate every bit of the christening cake and ended in giving the baby Prince the only nice gift the wymps have the power to give; and that is the nicest gift in the world, for it is called Laughter. To be sure, there had never been such a topsy-turvey christening party before; but all the guests enjoyed it thoroughly, and that cannot be said of all the parties to which the fairies are invited. The Fairy Queen could not help smiling when she heard what happened. "Never mind!" she said. "Some day, Prince Charming shall have all the gifts of Fairyland, too. Meanwhile, he has something far better than we should have given him."

The peasant's daughter grew up as beautiful and as wise as all the gifts of Fairyland could make her.

Everything she did was as well done as the cleverest people in the world, all put together, could have done it; and everything she said was as wise as the contents of all the books in the King's library. When she cooked the Sunday dinner, she made it taste like a banquet of twenty courses; she had only to look at the flowers in the garden, and they bloomed as luxuriantly as though they had been brought straight from Fairyland. She helped all the village people when they were in a difficulty, for her advice was the very best that could be had; and they soon forgot that she was only a child, and they called her "Little Wisdom" instead of the ordinary name by which she had been christened. She loved to sit by herself in the cherry orchard, and she wondered how the other children could laugh and play when there was so much thinking to be done. She never laughed nor played herself, for the fairies had been so anxious to make her wise and beautiful, that they had not thought of giving her anything so ordinary as happiness. Every one envied her parents for having such a wonderful daughter; but for all that the peasant and his wife were not satisfied.

"It is a great pity," grumbled her father, "that all the gifts of Fairyland should have been wasted on a girl. If the child had been a boy, now, she would have made some stir in the world."

"For my part," sighed her mother, "I would gladly see her lose all the gifts of Fairyland if she would only laugh and cry like other children."

In the meantime the little Prince Charming was growing up without the help of a single gift from Fairyland.

Never had the palace contained such an idle, careless little Prince; he laughed at everything that happened, morning, noon, and night; he played tricks on all his Professors instead of learning his lessons, and he could not keep grave long enough even to say the alphabet. He was so determined to look on the bright side of everything, that when people were angry with him he thought it was only their way of being amusing; and when they tried to punish him, he found it such a good joke that they very soon gave up the attempt. The people, one and all, loved the merry little Prince who laughed at life from his royal nursery and refused to grow any older; but the King viewed the matter in quite another light.

"What will become of the country," said his Majesty, "if the boy does not learn to be serious?"

"He is so happy," said the Queen, apologetically. "Is not that enough?"

The King evidently thought it was not nearly enough, for he despatched a page at once to fetch Prince Charming from the nursery. The Prince came whistling into the room, with his hands in his pockets, which was not a princely way of behaving, to begin with.

"You are eleven years old," began the King, solemnly.

"Everybody tells me that," said the Prince, smiling gaily. He supposed grown-up people could not help saying the same thing so often; at all events he did not mean to let it trouble him.

"It is time you learned to be serious," continued the King, still more solemnly.

"To be serious? What is that? Is it a new game?" asked Prince Charming, eagerly.

"Hush!" whispered the Queen, anxiously. "It is what every one has to be,—the Prime Minister, and the Head Cook, and everybody."

"Surely," laughed the little Prince, "if so many people are occupied in being serious there is no need for me to bother about it!"

"You cannot even read," said the King, frowning.

"No; but my Professor can," said Prince Charming. "He can read the longest words in the dictionary without taking breath. When any one in the kingdom can read so beautifully as that, it would surely be impolite to try to imitate him!"

"The poorest children in the kingdom know far more than you do," said the King, who was rapidly losing patience.

"Then there are plenty of people to tell me everything I want to know," smiled the Prince. "What is the use of knowing just as much as everybody else? There would be nothing left to talk about."

The King looked at the Queen in despair.

"It is not the boy's fault," said the Queen soothingly; "you see, the fairies did not come to his christening."

"And the wymps did," sighed the King. "I suppose that is why we have a stupid son without an idea in his head."

Prince Charming took off his crown and felt his head very carefully.

"What is an idea?" he asked. "And why have I no idea in my head? Have you got one in your head, father?"

The King was so angry at being asked whether he had an idea in his head, that he sent Prince Charming straight back to the nursery. However, as that was where the Prince liked best to be, he laughed more than ever and was not in the least bit ashamed of himself.

Now, Prince Charming was known to be so light-hearted and so careless, that all the flowers and all the animals told him their secrets; for it is always safe to tell a secret to some one who is not taken seriously by other people. And the Prince, for his part, delighted in talking to the flowers and the animals, because they never reminded him that he was eleven years old, nor told him to stop laughing as all the other people did, the people who were too clever to worry their heads about flowers and animals at all. So the Prince soon jumped out of the nursery window into his own little garden, where his name was written several times in mustard and cress, and where the tiger lilies fought with the scarlet poppies because they had been planted one on the top of the other, and where the guinea-pigs and the rabbits and the white mice ran wild and did what they liked. He took a very large watering-can and watered himself and a very small rose tree for the third time since sunrise, and then sat down and looked at the mould on his fingers.

"How funny everything is," said Prince Charming, laughing heartily. "I have done nothing but water my rose tree, and yet all my fingers are covered with mould! Now, the Prime Minister might water fifty rose trees and he would never get a speck of mould even on

his shoe buckles. I suppose it is because the Prime Minister has learnt to be serious. Oh dear! I do wish I had an idea in my head!"

"What are you saying?" asked the rose tree, shaking off the effects of the Prince's overwhelming attentions.

"Why do you wish to have an idea in your head?"

"Just to see what it would feel like," answered the Prince. "I don't even know what an idea is. Do you?"

"An idea," replied the rose tree in a superior tone, "is what somebody remembers to have heard somebody else say."



"I shall never have an idea, then," said Prince Charming; "for I never remember what anybody says. Is there no other way of getting an idea?"

"To be sure there is," answered the rose tree; "but very few people know of it. You can go to the Red Rock Goblin, if you like, and get a whole new idea for yourself. He has quantities of ideas, piled up in heaps; but very few people succeed in getting one."

"I shall never succeed, then," said the Prince; "for I am the stupidest boy in the world."

"That doesn't matter," said the rose tree. "The Red Rock Goblin does not care much about clever people, I fancy. Go and try."

"I think I will," said the Prince. "It is sure to be amusing, at all events. What must I do to get there?"

"It is of no use to do anything," answered the rose tree. "If you are the right sort of boy you will find yourself there, that's all."

Evidently, Prince Charming was the right sort of boy; for as he looked at the rose tree, it grew larger and larger, and redder and redder, until it was no longer a rose tree at all, but just a large, square, red rock. The little Prince was so amused at the transformation that he burst out laughing; and when he looked round and found that the garden and the palace had disappeared too, and that he was standing in the middle of nothing at all, he laughed even more than before at the absurdity of it all.

"Hullo!" said a voice from inside the square red rock.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I am laughing at everything," said the little Prince. "I always laugh at everything; but that may be because I haven't an idea in my head."

"I am glad to hear that," said the voice. "Most of the people who come here have so many ideas of their own that I take good care not to let them steal one of mine. However, step inside, and you shall have one of my very best ideas."

The Prince could hardly be said to have accepted this invitation, for he had no time to move before he found himself transported to the interior of the rock; and there he stood in the middle of a large, square room, that hung dimly lighted by a red lantern from the roof. The Red Rock Goblin sat facing him, at a little round table. He had a bushy red beard that trailed on the

ground, and in his mouth was a long pipe from which rings of red smoke slowly curled up towards the roof. "Do you feel afraid?" asked the Goblin, blowing a particularly long thin line of red smoke into the air, which curled round and round the little Prince until he could hardly breathe. He could still laugh, however; and directly he did that, the red smoke cleared away again and raced up to the roof, as though it were frightened at the very sound of the Prince's laugh.

"I'm not at all afraid, thank you," said Prince Charming. "My Professor says that I am far too stupid to understand the meaning of fear. Besides, what is there to be afraid of?"

The Red Rock Goblin waved his long, red, bony hand towards the shelves that covered the four walls.

"Those shelves are packed with new ideas," he said.

"Most people are afraid of new ideas."

"How stupid of them!" said the Prince, beginning to whistle. "A new idea must be more amusing to play with than an old one, I should think!"

"Of course it is," answered the Goblin. "That is what new ideas are for. However, as you don't seem afraid, I will find you a new idea to play with."

He put his pipe on the table, and fetched a pair of steps, and climbed up to the highest shelf of all. When he came down again, he held a small bottle in his hand, which he uncorked; and from this he poured something into a red metal bowl on the table. Immediately a delightful smell of pine woods and strawberry jam and sea-air and hot cakes and chrysanthemums filled the

air; and the Prince drank it in and laughed with pleasure.

"Ah!" he cried suddenly, putting his hand to his head, as the contents of the bottle fizzed and bubbled in the red metal bowl and the smell of pine woods and all the other things grew stronger. "So it is all because the sun shone crookedly on my christening day!"

"Just so," answered the Red Rock Goblin, looking intently into the red metal bowl. "That is why all the gifts of Fairyland, which ought to have been yours, were given to Little Wisdom. Now, if you were to go straight off and find Little Wisdom—"

"That's not a bad idea!" shouted the Prince.

"Of course it isn't," snapped the Goblin, drawing himself up indignantly. "It is a very good idea; one of the best I have ever made. If you want a bad idea, you had better go somewhere else for it."

There was nothing for it but to apologise, and this the Prince did as politely as he could, saying that if he had been a little more accustomed to receiving ideas he would have known better how to behave to this one. He then asked the Goblin to tell him the way to Little Wisdom's home, but the Goblin answered him just as the rose tree had done.

"There isn't a way," he said. "If you are the right sort of boy you will find yourself there, that's all."

There was again no doubt whatever that Prince Charming was the right sort of boy, for the walls of the square red rock fell down as flat as the walls of a card house, and he found himself walking in a beautiful cherry orchard, with bright green grass under his feet

and showers of white blossoms falling softly from above, with a blue and grey sky overhead, and the sound of bees in the air. Under the largest cherry tree sat a solemn little girl in a stiff white frock, with a large red sunshade spread over her. The Prince looked at her doubtfully. If she had been an ordinary little girl in a pinafore, with a laugh in her voice, he would have asked her to play with him at once; but it was impossible to be as friendly as that with a little girl in a stiff white frock. What he finally did was what he always did when he was in a difficulty—he began to laugh. The little girl only stared at him more solemnly than before; and for the first time in his life Prince Charming felt that laughing was a little out of place. "Will you come and play with me, Little Wisdom?" he said, taking off his crown and making her his best court bow.

"I never play," answered the little girl, who possessed all the gifts of Fairyland.

"That is a pity," observed the Prince, "for it is the only thing worth doing. What do you do all day if you don't play?"

"I think," answered Little Wisdom, gravely. "I think about everything in the world; and when I have come to the end I begin all over again."

"How queer!" said the Prince. "I have never thought about anything in my whole life. It is much better to laugh."

"Is it?" asked Little Wisdom, and she smoothed out the folds of her stiff white frock thoughtfully. After

thinking all day long for eleven years it seemed as though it might make a change to learn to laugh.

"Do you know," continued the Prince, "that you have all the gifts of Fairyland? That is why I am the stupidest boy in the world."

"I know," said Little Wisdom without seeming at all surprised, which was, of course, only natural, for when one knows everything in the world there is nothing left to be surprised at.

"If the sun had shone straight on my christening day," said Prince Charming, "I should have had all the gifts of Fairyland instead of you."

"I know," said Little Wisdom again. It seemed to her very unnecessary to talk so much about things that she had always known without being told.

"And if I had all the gifts of Fairyland instead of you, I should have learnt to be serious," continued Prince Charming.

"Perhaps you would," said Little Wisdom. She was beginning to wonder if all stupid boys were as nice as this little Prince, who seemed to take it for granted that she wanted to go on talking to him.

"Of course," continued Prince Charming, "I should not think of depriving you of any of the gifts from Fairyland; but if you will come back to the palace with me and teach me how to be serious I will give you the wymps' gift in exchange. It is not a very nice present, perhaps," he added humbly, "because it makes everybody complain of you so much; but it is the only gift I have to offer you."

"And what is the wymps' gift?" asked Little Wisdom. She was quite interested now, for here at last was something that she did not know. The Prince answered her with a peal of laughter; and Little Wisdom began to feel decidedly odd. First of all, she felt a curious tickling somewhere at the back of her head, and then a widening out of the thinking lines on her forehead, and then a twitching sensation round the corners of her mouth, and then—but it is not difficult to guess what happened next. It takes all the fairies in Fairyland to make a little girl wise when she is only eleven years old; but even a stupid little Prince without an idea in his head can teach her to laugh!

Now, when the peasant and his wife heard their daughter laughing in the cherry orchard, they came hurrying out to see what could be the cause of such a wonderful event. All the people in the village came running too—men and women, boys and girls, one on the top of the other; and they stood round in a ring and stared, while the merry little Prince and the wise little girl in the stiff white frock laughed at nothing at all.

"What is the meaning of it all?" asked the good people.

"Is it the fairies' doing?"

"Nothing of the sort," answered the Prince, again taking off his crown and making them all his best court bow.

"It is only because the sun shone crookedly on my christening day. That is why I have come to fetch Little Wisdom. I really hope you have no objection?"

He said this so very charmingly that everybody felt it would be most impolite to object; besides, Little Wisdom had taken the Prince's hand and seemed to have settled

the question already. As for her parents, they were overjoyed at the idea.

"After all," said her father, "the child will make some stir in the world." His wife laughed and cried at the same moment.

"We shall lose Little Wisdom," she said; "but, at least, she will learn to be like other children."

Prince Charming was as usual in a great hurry, for he could never endure to wait for anything except his lessons; so he turned to the nearest cherry tree and asked it to tell him the way home.

"If you don't know the way home without being told, you are not at all the right sort of boy," answered the cherry tree. Of course, as we know already, Prince Charming was the right sort of boy; and the very next minute he marched once more into the royal palace, and by his side tripped a sedate little girl in a stiff white frock.

"I have found Little Wisdom," he announced to his parents and the court in general, as they sat over their afternoon tea. "She is going to stay here and play with me for ever and ever. Isn't it fun?"

"The boy will never be serious," sighed the King, although he looked with approval at the solemn face of the little girl in the stiff white frock.

"I will teach him to be serious," said Little Wisdom, "because he has already taught me how to laugh."

But she never did teach him to be serious, for Prince Charming did nothing but laugh to the end of his days. This did not, however, matter quite so much as might be supposed, for when one plays all day long with some

one who knows everything there is to know, one need not be so very wise oneself. And when the time came for Prince Charming to rule the country, the Queen who sat beside him on the throne was a wise and beautiful maiden in a stiff white frock. So the Prince laughed as much as before, and the country was governed with all the wisdom of the fairies.