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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Little Princess and the Poet

There was once a Poet whom nobody wanted. Wherever he went, he was always in the way; and the reason for this was his inability to do anything useful. All the people in all the countries through which he passed seemed to be occupied in making something,—either war, or noise, or money, or confusion; but the Poet could make nothing except love, and that, of course, was of no use at all. Even the women, who might otherwise have welcomed him, could not endure the ugliness of his features; and, indeed, it would have been difficult to find a face with less beauty in it, for he looked as if all the cares and the annoyances of the world had been imprinted on his countenance and left it seared with lines. So the poor, ugly Poet went from place to place, singing poems to which nobody listened, and offering sympathy to people who could not even understand his language.

One day he came to a city he had never visited before; and, as he always did, he went straight to the part where the poorer people lived, for it was all about them that he wrote the poetry to which nobody listened. But, as usual, the poor people were so full of their troubles that they could not even understand him. "What is the use of telling us we are unhappy?" they grumbled. "We know that already, and it does not interest us a bit. Can you not do something for us?"

The Poet only shook his head.

"If I did," he replied, "I should probably do it very badly. The world is full of people who are always doing things; the only mistake they make is in generally doing them wrong. But I am here to persuade them to do the right things for a change, so that you may have your chance of happiness as well as they."

"Oh, we shall never be happy," the people said. "If that is all you have to say, you had better leave us to our unhappiness and go up to the King's palace. For the little Princess has been blind from her birth, and her great delight is to listen to poetry, so the palace is full of poets. But none of them ever come down here, so we do not know what they are like."

The Poet was overjoyed at hearing that at last he was in a country where he was wanted; and he set off for the palace immediately.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded the royal sentinels, when he presented himself at the palace gates.

"I am a Poet," he replied. "And I have come to see the Princess, because she is fond of poets."

"We have never seen a poet like you," said the sentinels, doubtfully. "All the poets in the palace have smooth, smiling faces, and fine clothes, and white hands. Her Royal Highness is not accustomed to receiving any one so untidy as yourself."

The Poet looked down at his weather-beaten clothes and his toil-worn hands; and he stared at the reflection of his wrinkled, furrowed face in the moat that

surrounded the palace; and he sighed in a disappointed manner.

"I am a Poet," he repeated. "How can a man be a poet if his face is smooth and his hands are white? No man can be a poet if he has not toiled and suffered and wandered over the earth, for the sake of the people who are in it."

Just then he heard a woman's voice speaking from the other side of the gates; and looking through them, he saw a beautiful, pale Princess, standing there all by herself, with a look of interest on her face.

"It is the little blind Princess," thought the Poet, and he bowed straight to the ground though he knew quite well that she could not see him. The sentinels saluted, too, for they were so accustomed to saluting people who never saw them at all that the blindness of the little Princess made no difference to them.

"Tell me," said the Princess, eagerly, "the name of the man with the wonderful voice, who is saying all those beautiful, true things."

"Please your Highness," said the sentinels, "he says he is a Poet."

"Ah," cried the little Princess, joyfully, "at last you have come; I have been waiting for you all my life! At last I have found a real Poet, and the Queen-mother will see now that all those people in there, who say the same things over and over again in their small, thin voices, are not poets at all. Come in, Poet; why do you stay so long outside?"

So the drawbridge was let down, and the sentinels saw what a mistake they had made and did their best to

pretend that they had not made it at all; and for the first time in his life the Poet felt that he was not in anybody's way.

"Come with me, Poet," said the little Princess, holding out her small white hand to him. "If you will take my hand, I shall feel quite sure you are there."

So the little blind Princess and the Poet went into the palace, hand in hand.

"I have found a Poet," she announced to the whole court, just as it was sitting down to luncheon.

"What! Another?" groaned the King from the top of the table. "I should have thought five-and-forty were quite enough, considering the demand."

"This is a real Poet," continued the little Princess, still holding the Poet's hand. "I knew him by his wonderful voice. I am so glad he has come; and now, we can send away all the others, who are not poets at all."

Now, this was a little awkward, for the five-and-forty poets were all present; and being mostly the younger sons of kings, who had only taken up poetry as an accomplishment, they were also suitors for the Princess's hand, which made it more awkward still. So the Queen coughed uncomfortably, and all the ladies in waiting blushed uncomfortably, and the five-and-forty poets naturally looked uncomfortable into the bargain. But the little Princess, who could see nothing and never had been able to see anything, neither blushed nor felt uncomfortable.

"Will some one give place to the Poet?" she asked with a smile.

The Queen, who was generally full of resources, felt that it was time to interfere.

"Do not listen to Her Royal Highness," she said, soothingly, to the five-and-forty poets. "She is so terribly truthful that she does not know what she is saying. I have tried in vain to break her of it."

"Don't know where she gets it from," growled the old King, who had a great dislike to scenes at meal times. The five-and-forty poets recovered their composure, when they heard that the Princess was rather to be pitied than blamed; and the Queen was able to turn to the cause of the disturbance.

"Will you be kind enough to go?" she said to the Poet.

"My daughter did not know who you were because, unfortunately, she cannot see. She actually mistook you for a poet!"

"It is the first time," said the Poet, "that any one has made the mistake. However, you are quite right and I had better go. You will not like my poetry; I see five-and-forty gentlemen who can write the poetry that will give you pleasure; mine is written for the people, who have to work that you may be happy. Little lady," he added, turning to the Princess, "I pray you, think no more of me. As for me, I shall love you to the end of my days."

Then he tried to go, but the small, white fingers of the little blind Princess were round his own rough, tanned ones, and he could not move.

"I loved you before you came," she said, smiling. "I have been waiting for you all the time. Why are you in such a hurry to go, if you love me?"

The listeners grew more scandalised every moment. No one had seen such love-making before. To be sure, the five-and-forty poets had written love songs innumerable, but that was not at all the same thing. Every one felt that something ought to be done and nobody quite knew how to do it. Fortunately, the King was hungry.

"I think you had better say the rest in private, when we have had lunch," he said grimly, and the courtiers looked immensely relieved, and a place was found next to the Princess for the Poet; and the Queen and her ladies in waiting proceeded to make conversation, and lunch went on as usual.

"Now," said the King, with a sigh, for meals were of far greater importance to him than poetry, "you shall tell us one of your poems, so that we may know whether you are a poet or not."

Then the Poet stood up and told them one of his poems. It was about the people who lived on the dark side of the city, and it was very fierce, and bitter, and passionate; and when he had finished telling it, he expected to be thrust out of the palace and banished from the country, for that was what usually happened to him. There was a great silence when he sat down again, and the Poet did not know what to make of it. But the small, white fingers of the little Princess had again stolen round his, and that was at least consoling. The Queen was the first to break the silence.

"Charming," she said with an effort, "and so new."

"We have heard nothing like it before," said the ladies in waiting. "Are there really such people as that in the

world? It might be amusing to meet them, or, at least, to study them."

The King glanced at all the other poets and said nothing at all. And the five-and-forty kings' sons, who, if they were not poets, were at least gentlemen, rose from their seats with one accord.

"Her royal Highness was quite right," they said. "We are not poets at all."

Then they took leave of every one present and filed out of the room and rode away to their respective countries, where, of course, nobody ever suspected them of being poets; and they just remained Princes of the royal blood and nothing else to the end of their days.

"And you, little lady?" said the Poet, anxiously.

"It was wonderful," answered the little blind Princess.

"But there was no love in it."

By this time the Queen had ceased to be impressed and had begun to remember that she was a Queen.

"We are quite sure you are a poet," she said in her most queenly manner, "because you have told us something that we did not know before. But we think you are not a fit companion for her royal Highness, and it is therefore time for you to go."

"No, no!" cried the Princess. "You are not to go. You are my Poet, and I want you to stay here always."

Matters were becoming serious, and every one set to work to try to turn the little Princess from her purpose.

"He is shockingly untidy," whispered the ladies in waiting.

"And so ugly," murmured the Queen; "there is nothing distinguished about him at all."

"He will cost the nation something to keep," added the King, without lowering his voice at all.

But the little Princess turned a deaf ear to them all and held out her hand again to the Poet.

"I do not believe a word they say," she cried. "You cannot be ugly, you with a voice like that! If you are ugly, then ugliness is what I have wanted all my life. Ugliness is what I love, and you are to stay here with me."

In the end, it was the Poet himself who came to the rescue.

"I cannot stay with you, little lady," he said gently. "It is true what they say; I am too ugly to be tolerated, and it has been my good fortune that you could not see me. I will go away and put some love into my poetry, and then, perhaps, I shall find some one who will listen to me."

But the poor little Princess burst out sobbing.

"If I could only see," she wept, "I would prove to you that I do not think you ugly. Oh, if I could only see! I have never wanted to see before."

"Little lady," whispered the Poet, bending over her, "I am glad that you cannot see."

And then, he turned and fled out of the palace and out of the city and away from the country that contained the little Princess who had loved him because she was blind. And he wandered from place to place as before; but he told no one that he was a poet, for he had felt ashamed of his poetry ever since the little Princess had

said there was no love in it. But there came a day when he could keep silent no longer, so he went among the people once more and told them one of his poems. This time, he had no difficulty in making them understand, for he told them the story of his love for the little blind Princess.

"Why," said the people, when he had finished, "the maid is easily cured, for it is well known among our folk that a kiss on the eyelids when asleep, from a true lover, will open the eyes of any one who has been blind from birth."

Now, when the Poet heard this, he was greatly perplexed. For to open the eyes of his little Princess was to kill her love for him; and yet, he could not forget how she had wept for the want of her sight, and here was the power to give it back to her, and it rested with him alone of all men in the world. So he



determined to make her happy at any cost, and he turned his face towards the King's palace once more and arrived there at midday, after travelling for seven days and seven nights without ceasing. But, of course, that was nothing to a poet who was in love.

"Dear me," said the King irritably, when the Poet appeared before him; "I thought you had gone for good. And a pretty time we 've been having of it with the Princess, in consequence! What have you come back for?"

"I have come back to open the Princess's eyes," answered the Poet, boldly.

"It strikes me," grumbled the King, "that you opened everybody's eyes pretty effectually, last time you were here. You certainly can't see the Princess now, for she has gone to sleep in the garden."

"That is exactly what I want," cried the Poet, joyfully.

"Let me but kiss her eyelids while she is sleeping, and by the time she awakes I shall have gone for ever."

"The Queen must deal with this," said the King, looking helpless in the face of such a preposterous suggestion. Her Majesty was accordingly sent for, and the Poet explained his mission all over again.

"It is certainly unusual," said the Queen, doubtfully, "not to say out of order. But still, in view of the

advantage to be gained, and by considering it in the light of medical treatment—and if you promise to go away directly after, just like a physician, or—or a

singing-master,—perhaps something might be arranged."

The end of it was that the Poet was taken into the garden, and there was the little blind Princess sound asleep in her hammock, with a maid of honour fanning her on each side.

"Hush," whispered the Queen. "She must not awake, on any account."

"No," echoed the poor, ugly Poet; "she must not awake—on my account."

Then he bent over her, for the second time in his life, and touched her eyelids with his lips. The Princess went

on dreaming happily, but the Poet turned and fled out of the city.

"At least," he said, "she shall never know how ugly I am."

That day, every Prince who was in the palace put on his best court suit, in order to charm the Princess. But the Princess refused to be charmed. She looked at them all, with large, frightened eyes, and sent them away, one by one, as they came to offer her their congratulations.

"Why do you congratulate me on being able to see you?" she asked them. "Are you so beautiful, then?"

"Oh, no," they said in a chorus. "Do not imagine such a thing for a moment."

"Then why should I be glad because I can see you?" persisted the Princess; and they went away much perplexed.

"Tell me what is beautiful," said the little Princess to her mother. "All my life I have longed to look on beauty, and now it is all so confusing that I cannot tell one thing from another. Is there anything beautiful here?"

"To be sure there is," replied the Queen. "This room is very beautiful to begin with, and the nation is still being taxed to pay for it."

"This room?" said the Princess in astonishment. "How can anything be beautiful that keeps out the sun and the air? Tell me something else that is beautiful."

"The dresses of the ladies in waiting are very beautiful," said the Queen. "And the ladies in waiting themselves might be called beautiful by some, though that of course is a matter of opinion."

"They all look alike to me," sighed the little Princess.

"Is there nothing else here that is beautiful?"

"Certainly," answered the Queen, pointing out the wealthiest and most eligible Prince in the room. "That is the handsomest man you could ever want to see."

"That?" said the Princess, disconsolately. "After all, one is best without eyes! Can you not show me some ugliness for a change? Perhaps it may be ugliness that I want to see so badly."

"There is nothing ugly in the palace," replied the Queen. "When you get used to everything you will be able to see how beautiful it all is."

But the Princess sighed and came down from her golden throne and wandered out into the garden. She walked uncertainly, for now that she was no longer blind she did not know where she was going. And there, under the trees where she had been sleeping a few hours back, stood a man with his face buried in his hands.

"Little lady," he stammered, "I tried to keep away, but —"

Then the little Princess gave a shout of joy and pulled away his hands and looked into his face for a full minute without speaking. She put her small, white fingers into every one of his wrinkles, and she touched every one of his ugly scars, and she drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Just fancy," laughed the little Princess to the Poet; "they have been trying to persuade me in there that all those Princes and people are—beautiful!"