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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Ambitious Snowflake

There is a very beautiful land hidden from mortal eyes, where thousands and thousands of snowflakes are born every year. If men and women had clearer sight, they would see that each little white atom contained a lovely wee sprite. These dainty fairies travel in large families, and, as is the case with human beings, many kinds of character make up the family party.

"I am going to do very great things," said Neigette, an unusually large and beautiful snowflake, "and you must all come and help me to do them," and she waved her tiny crystal wand imperiously.

"What are you going to do? Tell us, Neigette!" cried the large family of brothers and sisters.

"Well," said Neigette as they sailed along, "there is a country ruled by the greatest queen that ever lived, and little Ermine told me all about her. His family do not like her because she dresses in nothing but tails of his friends; so he says, but I don't quite believe that, but I am going to see for myself. I intend to fall right into her hands—



they say she holds the keys of the world—and I am going to end in the sight of all the millions of people over whom she rules."

But the admiring family circle only uttered "ohs!" of family admiration and wonder. They did nothing but talk about it among themselves as they blindly followed Neigette through the sharp, cold air. It will be seen that Neigette's ideas of things were not quite right. Neigette, too, was so occupied with her great thoughts about the stir she was to make in the big unknown world that she did not see where she was going and blundered right into a most curious trap, and all her family followed her. Of course, this was a very strange thing—it is not often a trap is set for snowflakes. But there was a cause, a very urgent cause for the setting of this one.

King Magnificus and his Queen Splendidosa had one son, who was most terribly spoiled. Prince Superbus had such a fiery disposition that his life was despaired of unless he could be kept cool. So, after many and long deliberations, the court physicians had most wisely decided to order snowflakes to be caught and kept all over the palace so that they might cool the air, and so correct the heat of the Prince's temper.

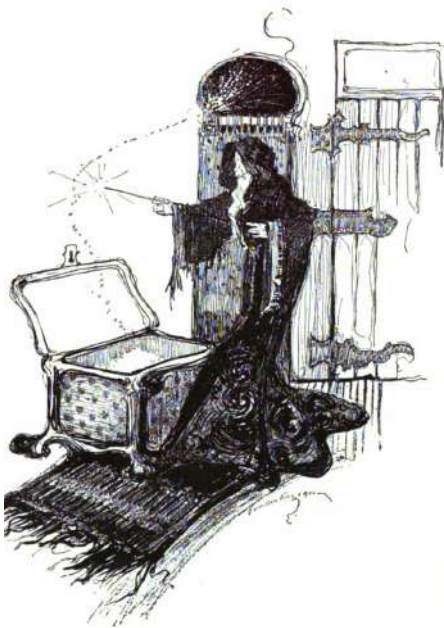
For this reason, unwary snowflakes were captured, frozen stiff by the court magicians, and placed in crystal boxes. This was very trying for the courtiers, who all caught tremendous colds, and the court physicians were kept busy all the year round trying to cure them. However, it became so unfashionable not to sneeze that everyone was soon resigned to his fate,

and as the ladies found fur surprisingly becoming, they were very soon reconciled to the inevitable.

Prince Superbus had been worse than ever on the day of Neigette's capture. So she and all her family were quickly shut up in his especial den, and the Prince left in solitude. Finally, he began kicking at the crystal boxes, and that greatly upset Neigette's dignity, so she called out as loudly as she could:

"Prince Superbus! What are you doing?"

The Prince stood as still as if he had been suddenly turned into stone. Then he peered about, but at first could find no one. At length, the idea struck him to look in the crystal boxes, and when he saw sprite after sprite sitting disconsolately in their prisons he laughed outright.



Neigette grew very angry indeed. "You may laugh," she cried indignantly, "but if you were a nice boy you would not behave in such a ridiculous fashion, interfering with other people's lives in this way. Pray, why should we be shut up in a box, just because you like to be so silly?"

Prince Superbus gasped in astonishment. This was quite a new way of looking at his conduct. He knew quite well that his mother and father were secretly delighted at his "wonderful high spirits," as they were pleased to call it. He was greatly offended.

"I'll keep you there forever!" he said angrily. "You ought to be glad you can be useful to a prince," and he stormed out of the room altogether.

Neigette wept, but she had sense enough to know now that she must make friends with the Prince if she were ever to carry out her grand scheme of life. The next time Superbus came near her she said she felt very dull, and meekly asked the Prince to come and talk to her. The first day he refused, but presently he began to grow interested in his pretty little prisoner, and spent quite a long time talking with her.

The court physicians congratulated themselves on the grand success of their treatment, and went about with their noses so high in the air that, one after another, they all had severe tumbles through not being able to see where they were walking. This put the Prince in a high good humor when the edifying procession came to see him in the morning, for every single physician was bandaged and plastered.

Neigette soon discovered that the fiery Prince was ambitious, too, and so artfully did she talk and talk that finally Superbus came to the conclusion that nothing would do but he must see this wonderful queen who wore ermine tails, and to whom millions of people bowed themselves down all day and all night.

"Tell me, Neigette," he said, "tell me how I can come with you."

"I do not think you can," said the artful sprite, knowing that was just the way to make Superbus all the more determined.

At last she said: "If you open wide the windows to let the cold air in, and let us out of the boxes, we will change you into a snowflake, too; then you can come with us."

Superbus actually believed every word she said, opened the windows, and broke to pieces the crystal boxes. Then, of course, all the snowflakes flew out into the frosty air, and Neigette cried: "Good-bye, Prince Superbus! I will tell the great queen you are coming."

How Superbus stormed and raged and shook his fist at the retreating snowflakes! Finally, he threw cushions at the King and Queen and all the physicians, and behaved so badly that, in self-defense, the court magicians had to be called in to freeze him into quietness. The Queen wept

bitterly, and the King sniffed secretly. But no one could find a better way out of the difficulty at present.

So now Neigette was free, and the poor little prince a prisoner. The fairy family continued its long journey, and some of the flakes began to feel worn out and to express desire to settle down softly on some object or other.



"I should like to stay here," murmured one flake, looking longingly at some tall pines bending under the weight of snow.

"And I here," sighed another flake as they passed a snug little cottage with gleaming windows and a roof already white with its winter burden.

But Neigette sternly kept them all together. "We are getting near our journey's end, I feel sure," she said reassuringly.

They were, in fact, nearing a great city. Instead of lonely fir-trees and nestling cottages, there were rows and rows of gleaming lights and houses; the snow did not keep white very long, and the little sprites quite shuddered at its ugly color. But numbers of people were hurrying about in a cheery fashion, heedless of the now fast-falling flakes; mostly their hands were so full of queer-shaped parcels that they had not a free hand to hold an umbrella or even to give in friendly greeting, but they nodded to each other and smiled, and said joyfully, "A merry Christmas! A merry Christmas!"

There were a great many happy little children looking very excited about something or other. Then some bells began to ring, and the people seemed to grow happier and happier. Even Neigette began to feel a wild desire to tumble down among the happy crowd. However, she steeled her heart against any such mad ideas, and decided to look about for the great queen she had come to seek.

The snow had ceased falling now, and the sky grew bright with stars, and Neigette heard people murmur, "Seasonable weather, this!" "Just the right weather for

Christmas time." Fires were replenished; pretty maidens wrapped themselves up in cozy furs, grandmothers told tales of cold winters they remembered, and grandfathers aided and abetted them. But at last all grew still, and the cold grew more and more intense. As all these sounds of joy and festivity died away into silence, Neigette heard a sound of sobbing, and saw a little child lying on the ground clasping a bunch of crimson berries.

"I wanted to give 'em to the kind lady," he was sobbing; "she liked 'em so last year, and I be so cold I can't walk no more," and down the head dropped on the little chap's arms till he sobbed himself to sleep.

"He'll die of cold!" cried Neigette, thinking of a poor wee bird she had seen one day with its bright eyes glazed and its poor feet stretched out stiff and straight. And straightway, forgetful of queen and glory, she sailed softly down and rested lightly on the little lonely figure to try to keep him warm; down fluttered all the flakes, and then more and more, till the child's figure was covered with the soft, white snow.

"Where is the queen?" asked one snowflake.

"I forgot all about her!" murmured Neigette as she quietly melted away.

"Why, what is this?" said a quiet voice, as the speaker tumbled over the little figure in the snow. Then it was not long before the sleeping burden was carried into



light and warmth, and the poor wee laddie restored to life again. His childish story was soon told.

"The lady," at whose gate he had fallen, had last year visited him when sick, and she had worn crimson holly berries in her fur muff. The child's quick eye noted how she caressed them, but he did not know that it was for the sake of the giver. He had tried to show his gratitude by bringing her some this year, and had nearly fallen a victim to the cold.

"Brave little man," cried the finder of the little wanderer when he heard how far he had come. "He shall share our happiness," he cried, turning to the "lady," who shyly smiled assent; and that was the first of Ned's happy Christmases. First, he was a prosaic little page, all buttons and importance; but though in after years he rose to positions of trust, he always kept a shriveled bunch of holly berries in memory of the Christmas night when his good fortune began.

When Neigette had sunk down, regardless of her fine plans, she, of course, had expected the fate of every snowflake, to melt away into nothingness. Imagine her surprise, then, when she awoke again, feeling bigger and looking more lovely than ever, and by her side stood another white fairy holding out hands in greeting. "Welcome, Neigette," said the fairy. "You are one of us now."

"But the others—they helped, too?"

"They only went because you did; they did not give up anything, for they care nothing about the great queen."

Neigette smiled—neither did she now; how funny it seemed to her that she ever did!

"Come," said her fairy guide, "you have one more task to perform," and the astonished Neigette found herself before the palace of King Magnificus.

"It cannot be a 'merry Christmas' with one's son frozen stiff," the Queen was sobbing, when the door opened and a bewitching little white maiden stood smiling on the threshold.

"I believe, ma'am," she said, "I could help to keep Prince Superbus very good-tempered indeed."

At once the Queen dragged her off to the court magicians, and they in their turn hurried the two off for the court physicians; and, in less time than it takes to tell, Prince Superbus was free once more. When he saw how very pretty Neigette looked, he quite forgot she was the naughty little snow fairy who had cheated him so, and promised to be good always, if only the little maiden could stay to play with him.

So that was a merry Christmas at court; in fact, there never was a merrier until years and years later, when the boy and girl had grown up to be handsome youth and sweetest maiden, and then there was a wedding that Christmas which put all weddings into the shade that have ever been held before or since.

Before a glowing fire a little boy was sitting enjoying the cheerful blaze, and a motherly looking person was holding a steaming basin of something good.

"The snow fairies saved me," the little fellow was saying. "The gentleman said so."

"Snow fairies!" sniffed the comfortable-looking party. "You drink this, and see if it isn't much better than snow fairies. Such rubbish!" Another sniff.

But the gentleman in the background laughed, and nodded at the boy. "I shouldn't wonder if the snow fairies know all about it," he said.

Just then the bells began ringing merrily, swiftly, as if they could not tell their message quickly enough.

"Peace and good will! Peace and good will!" they pealed.

And the "kind lady" bent to kiss the little wistful face, and cried: "A merry Christmas, Ned!"

He quite forgot she was the naughty little snow fairy.

