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The Princess Who Lost Her Rings

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Long ago there lived a lovely princess who owned the most beautiful rings in the whole world. She had rings set with diamonds and rings set with pearls. She had rings set with rubies and rings set with sapphires. She had rings set with emeralds and turquoises and amethysts and every other kind of precious stone. She had rings which had no precious stones in them, but which were wonderfully decorated with fine and delicate carving, wrought with great skill.

This princess lived in a magnificent palace surrounded by a high wall. Her own apartments opened upon a pleasant balcony. From the balcony she could see the blue waters of the ocean and the tall trees of the forest. Here she liked to pass her days.

In a corner of the balcony there was a basin and pitcher of silver always kept filled with water in order that the princess might wash her hands on the balcony instead of having to go inside the house. Whenever she washed her hands she always removed the ring she was wearing that day. Some days it was one ring and other days it was another, but, whatever ring it happened to be, the princess always took it off carefully when she washed her hands.

One day a pretty white rabbit came up to the balcony to play with the princess. That day the princess was wearing her best diamond ring. She removed it very carefully when she washed her hands. Then it disappeared. She knew that the rabbit must have stolen it.

The next day the rabbit came again and that day the princess lost her best emerald ring. She was very sure that the rabbit must have stolen that, too. However, she liked to play with the rabbit, so she said nothing to her father, the king, about the lost rings.

Every day the rabbit came and every day there was a ring missing. The princess had a large box full of rings, in the beginning, but one morning she opened the box and saw that it was entirely empty. She remembered then that she had put on her last ring, one set with a sapphire, the morning before.

The princess became so sad that she would not go out to the balcony to play with the white rabbit. Every day she grew sadder and sadder. At last her father, the king, noticed it.

"What is the matter with our daughter, the princess?" he asked the queen. "She is sad now, and once she was the very jolliest, happiest princess in the whole world."

"I cannot imagine what the trouble is," replied the queen. "Perhaps she is lonely. Let us send for the storytellers of the kingdom to come and tell their stories to entertain her."

Accordingly, the king sent for all the storytellers in the whole kingdom. All the storytellers had to come to the palace even if they were old and lame.

Now it so happened that in the kingdom there were two old women who were very lame. They knew the most interesting stories of anybody, but it took them so long to reach the palace that they forgot all their best stories on the way.

"What story are you going to tell the princess?" one of the lame old women asked the other.

"I can't remember a single one of my stories," said the other old woman. "It has taken my lame old legs so long to travel the road to the palace that now that we are almost there I can't think of a single story."

The two old women tried to remember some of their stories, but they could not think of any. They were almost at the royal palace, too.

"What shall we do if we can't remember our stories?" asked the first old woman.

"We'll have to learn some new stories," replied the other.

Just then they spied a queer sight. There was a little donkey without any feet traveling along the road. On his back was a load of wood.

"What a queer donkey!" cried the first old woman.

"Let us follow along after him. Perhaps we shall be able to tell a story about him," replied the other.

The two old women followed the donkey into the forest. There was a little thatched-roofed house in the forest and before the house there was a fire burning. A kettle of something which smelled good was boiling merrily over the fire.

The donkey which had no feet stopped beside the fire and left his load of wood. The two old women stopped beside the fire, too.

"What do you suppose is cooking in this kettle?" asked one of the old women.

"It smells so good I'm going to taste and see," said the other.

She started to taste, but as she was about to stick in her finger she heard a

strange deep voice which seemed to come out of the little thatched house.

"Do not touch. It is not yours," is what the voice said.

The two old women went up to the door of the house and one of them peeped through the keyhole.

Inside the house she saw a pretty white rabbit playing with a box full of rings. Suddenly the white rabbit pulled off his skin and changed into a handsome prince.

"What wouldn't I give to see the owner of these rings!" cried the prince.

The two lame old women hurried away from the little house in the forest. They were frightened at the queer doings there.

"I know a story to tell the princess!" cried one of the old women when she had recovered from her fright. "I'll tell her how I peeped through the keyhole and saw the rabbit change his skin."

"I know what I'll tell the princess," said the other old woman. "I'll tell her how I followed the donkey without any feet and what that strange voice said to me when I tried to taste the good-smelling broth in the kettle."

"We must keep saying over our stories so we won't forget them," said the first old woman.

"We must hurry on our way to the royal palace and get there while we remember them," said the other.

The two old women hurried on their way to the palace as fast as their lame old legs could carry them. They rehearsed their stories over and over along the way so they would not forget them.

Many storytellers had told their tales to the princess. They were jolly tales, too, but the princess was not in the least cheered by them. She remembered her lost rings even when she was listening to the stories.

"If the storytellers cannot make the princess happy, who can?" asked the king in despair.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the queen. "She always used to like stories."

Finally the two old women reached the royal palace and went to tell their tales to the princess.

The first old woman told the story of the donkey without any feet and the broth in the kettle. The princess did not appear to be particularly interested even when the old woman told about the strange deep voice which said, "Do not touch. It is not yours." Cold chills, however, ran up and down the spines of the king and

queen and all the courtiers when she came to that part of the tale.

Next the other old woman told how she peeped through the keyhole of the little thatched house in the forest and saw the white rabbit change his skin.

The pretty dark eyes of the princess sparkled when the old woman mentioned the rabbit and she leaned forward in her chair eagerly.

"Our dear little princess looks like her own happy self again for the first time in ages," whispered the king to the queen.

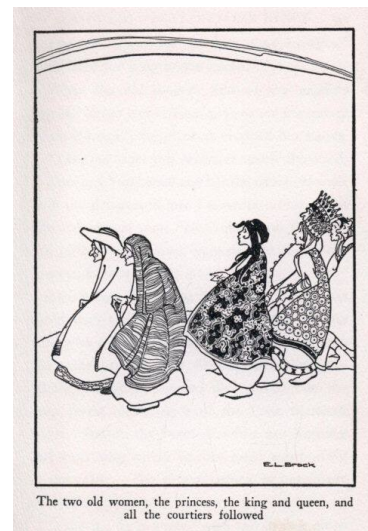
When the old woman told of the rabbit's words, "What would I not give to see the owner of these rings!" the princess clapped her hands.

"Take me to see this rabbit at once!" she cried.

The king and queen and all the courtiers went with the princess to find the white rabbit. The two old women went first to point out the way, and as these old women were so lame the whole procession moved very slowly.

At last they drew near the forest. There was the donkey without any feet moving along the road with a load of wood on his back. The two old women, the princess, the king and queen and all the courtiers followed the donkey into the deep forest to the door of the little thatched house. Before the house the fire was burning and something which smelled good was boiling in the kettle. The princess stuck in her finger to try it.

"Take it. It is yours," said the strange deep voice from the little house.



The two old women, the princess, the king and queen, and all the courtiers followed

The princess was so surprised that she forgot to taste the good-smelling broth. She ran to the door of the house and peeped through the keyhole. There was the white rabbit playing with a box full of rings set with diamonds and pearls, rings set with rubies and sapphires, rings set with emeralds and amethysts and turquoises, and rings set with no precious stones at all, but carved delicately, with great skill.

"What wouldn't I give to see the owner of these rings!" said the rabbit as he pulled off his skin and changed into a handsome prince.

"Here's the owner of the rings!" cried the princess. "She is here at your very door!"

The door of the little thatched house in the deep forest swiftly opened and the prince received the princess in his arms.

"Your words have broken my enchantment!" he cried. "Now that at last the voice of the owner of these rings is heard at my door, I'll never have to put on my rabbit skin again."

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