



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Professor of Practical Jokes

Evelyn Sharp

Years and years and years ago, in a country that has been long forgotten, there lived a king called Grumbelo. In spite of his extremely ugly name, which was certainly no fault of his, he was young, handsome, and talented; and this made it all the more remarkable that he had never thought of seeking a wife. He ruled his country so well that not a single poor or ill-treated person was to be found in the whole of it; and yet, it was the dullest country that has ever existed. The reason for this was plain; the King was all very well in his way, and to be well-governed no doubt has its advantages, but the people were unreasonable and they wanted more than this. They wanted court balls, and court banquets, and royal processions through the streets, with bands playing and flags flying; they wanted more play, and more holidays, and more fun; and all these things, as every one knows well, are only to be had when there is a Queen at court. The King, however, was so well satisfied with himself that it never occurred to him how dreadfully dull his kingdom was growing; and he was exceedingly surprised when a number of the courtiers, headed by the Royal Comptroller of Whole Holidays and the learned Professor of Practical Jokes,—who had been positively out of work ever since his serious young Majesty came to the throne,—waited upon him one morning, with the humble request that he should begin to think about finding a Queen.

"What more can you want?" asked the young King in astonishment. "Surely a King, or at least a King such as I am, is enough for my subjects! I am quite satisfied with myself: is it possible that the country is not equally satisfied?"

"The country is more than satisfied with your excellent Majesty," explained the Comptroller of Whole Holidays. "The country has never been so admirably governed before. It feels, however, that certain other things are almost as important, your Majesty, as wise laws and honest toil; such as—such as whole holidays, for instance."

"And practical jokes," murmured the learned Professor at his side.

His Majesty was silent. It seemed incredible that the country should want anything more than the excellent government of King Grumbelo; but he was fond of his people at heart,—in spite of the dulness to which he had brought them, and so he consented in the end to give them a Queen.

"Go and find me the most beautiful, the most silent, and the most foolish Princess in the world," he said to them. "She must be the most beautiful because I shall have to look at her, and the most silent because I am able to talk for both of us, and the most foolish because I can be wise for her as well as for myself. If you find me a Princess like this I will make her my Queen."

Not long after, the King held a reception for all the beautiful Princesses who could be collected at such a very short notice. There were a hundred and fifty altogether; but although they were without doubt both beautiful and foolish, they never stopped talking for an instant, and not one of them would King Grumbelo have for his Queen. So the Royal Comptroller of Whole Holidays and the learned Professor of Practical Jokes put their heads together once more, and in a few days' time they came again to the King.

"We have heard at last of the Princess who would suit you," they said to him. "She is so beautiful that the trees stop gossiping and the flowers stop breathing when she passes by; and she is so silent that if it were not for the wonderful expression in her eyes it would be impossible to hold any conversation with her at all."

"Ah," said King Grumbelo, nodding his royal head approvingly; "and is she very foolish as well?"

"That she must be, your Majesty," said the Comptroller of Whole Holidays, looking nervously towards the Professor of Practical Jokes, "because, your Majesty,—well, because—"

"Because she has refused to have anything to do with your Majesty," boldly interrupted the Professor.

"What?" cried the King, astounded. "She does not *wish* to be my Queen?"

"Not exactly that, your Majesty," stammered the Comptroller of Whole Holidays; "but she declares she could never marry any one who—who—"

"Who has so ridiculous a name as your Majesty!" said the Professor of Practical Jokes without a moment's hesitation.

King Grumbelo stepped down from his throne and merely smiled.

"That is of no consequence," he observed. "Evidently she knows nothing about me except my unfortunate name, and that I certainly did not give myself. Tell me at once where this wonderful Princess is to be found."

"That is exactly what we do not know, your Majesty," they confessed, reluctantly. "As soon as the Princess heard that your Majesty wished to make her a Queen she fled from the country, and we have not been able to discover where she has hidden herself!"

"No matter," said King Grumbelo, actually omitting to scold them for their stupidity; "it is never difficult to find the most beautiful Princess in the world! Bring me my horse at once; you can make ready for the royal wedding as soon as you please."

The country was very badly governed while the King was away; but it was certainly not dull. Every person in the kingdom was occupied in making preparations for the royal wedding, and it was going to be such a particularly grand royal wedding that the people were kept thoroughly amused by looking forward to it alone. When, however, the last touch had been put to the preparations, and there was positively nothing left for any one to do, the people began to grumble. It was clear that there could not be a marriage if nobody was there to be married, and no tidings had been received of King Grumbelo since he rode away to fetch his bride. There is no doubt that the discontent of the people would have ended in a revolution if the Professor of Practical Jokes had not hit upon a happy idea. "It is true that we cannot have a royal wedding," said the Professor of Practical Jokes; "but we can pretend to have one."

The Comptroller of Whole Holidays was only too delighted to fall in with the idea, and at once issued a proclamation to the effect that the country should take a whole holiday until further notice. After that, the people could not think of grumbling; they gave themselves up to general rejoicing, and pretended, day after day, that the King was being married, until they almost forgot that there was not even a king in the country.

Meanwhile, King Grumbelo was riding by night and by day in search of his beautiful, silent Princess. He rode for many months without discovering a trace of her; but instead of growing tired of his search he only became the more anxious to find her. One day, as he was riding through a wood, he came upon a sweet-smelling hedge, all made of honeysuckle and sweet-briar, so high that he could not climb it, and so thick that he could not see through it.

"Dear me!" thought King Grumbelo, "something charming must be hidden behind so pretty a hedge as this!" He rode along it with his mind full of curiosity until he came to two slender, pink-and-white gates, made entirely of apple-blossom; and through these he could see a fresh-looking garden with green lawns and gravel paths and bright flower-beds, and in the middle of it all a dainty little house made of nothing but rose leaves. The King was so impatient to know who was the owner of such a delightful little dwelling that he knocked at once on the gates for admission; and a dragon with a singularly mild and harmless expression appeared inside, and asked him gently what he wanted. The King looked at him in surprise; for, although he was decidedly small for a dragon, he was certainly much too large and too clumsy to live in a house made entirely of rose leaves.

"Can you tell me who lives here?" asked King Grumbelo, politely; for, as every one knows, it is always wise to be polite to a dragon however small he may be.

"Oh, yes," answered the dragon, with a wave of his tail towards the house and the garden; "I live here."

"Nonsense!" said the King, forgetting in his surprise to be polite. "You could not possibly live in so small a house as that!"

"If you want to know who lives inside the house you should say so," answered the dragon, in an injured tone. "It is n't likely that a well-bred dragon would live inside anything. You should be more careful in the way you express yourself."

"Well, well," said the King, impatiently, "perhaps you can tell me to whom the house belongs?"

"No, I can't," answered the dragon, with a smile; "because it does n't belong to anybody, you see. It is here because it is wanted, and when it isn't wanted any longer it will cease to be here."

"What a curious house!" exclaimed the King.

"Curious? Not at all!" said the dragon, looking injured again. "It would be much more curious if it were to remain here when it wasn't wanted. You shouldn't make needless remarks."

If King Grumbelo had not been so anxious to find out who did live inside the house he would certainly have ridden away, there and then; but the more he looked at the beautiful garden and the charming little dwelling of rose leaves, the more he longed for an answer to his question. So he kept his temper with difficulty, and turned once more to the aggravating dragon.

"Does anybody live inside the house?" he asked.

"Of course," answered the dragon. "Do they build houses in your country to be looked at? I suppose you can't help it, but I have never been asked so many senseless questions before."

"Answer me one more and I will go away," said King Grumbelo. "Does a beautiful Princess, the most beautiful you have ever seen, live inside the house over there?"

"There is no Princess in the place, be assured of that," answered the dragon, emphatically. "I should not be here if there were; it is a thankless task to keep guard over a Princess; it means nothing but spells and fighting and unpleasantness, and in the end the Princess complains that you have kept the right people away. Oh, no, nothing would induce me to take another place with a Princess. We 've nothing of *that* kind here."

"Then I'll bid you good-day," said King Grumbelo, for he did not mean to waste any more time. Just as he was going to ride away, however, the door of the little house opened, and out of it stepped the sweetest-looking little lady the world has ever contained. She was so beautiful that as she walked down the path the flowers stopped breathing and the trees stopped gossiping; and she had such wonderful eyes that to look at them was to know everything she was thinking about. She glanced once at the King as he stood outside the gates of apple-blossom, and then she turned aside without speaking a word and passed out of sight among the flower-beds. Then the King knew that his search was over; she was beautiful and silent enough to please him, whether she were foolish or not; and he made up his mind on the spot not to search any more for the disdainful Princess who had run away from him.

"Who is she?" he asked the dragon, eagerly.

"The Lady Whimsical, to be sure," answered the dragon. "What a lot of questions you ask!"

"Then go and tell the Lady Whimsical that if she pleases I would like to speak with her," said King Grumbelo.

The dragon did not move.

"The Lady Whimsical never speaks," he observed. "It would really be much wiser if you were to go away."

"I am not going away," shouted the King, growing angry. "Go and ask her at once if she will receive me, or I will put you out of the way for good and all!"

"Very well," said the dragon, sighing; "I suppose I must. What name?"

"King Grumbelo," answered the King, proudly.

He fully expected that the dragon would fall flat on the ground at the mention of such an important name as his; but the dragon did nothing of the kind.

"It is not a bit of use expecting to come in here with a name like that," he complained. "The Lady Whimsical cannot bear anything ugly, and she has a particular horror of ugly names. I have strict orders never to mention an ugly name in her presence. You had really better go away."

"I am not going away," shouted the King once more. "Go and tell the Lady Whimsical that a great King, who has heard how charming and how gracious she is, would like to make himself known to her."

The dragon consented unwillingly to take this message, and ambled clumsily away among the flower-beds. When he came back, he found the King pacing restlessly up and down.

"Can't you keep still?" growled the dragon. "Your ridiculous name is enough to make any one giddy without—"

"What did the Lady Whimsical say?" interrupted King Grumbelo, impatiently.

"The Lady Whimsical never says," answered the dragon drowsily, as he curled himself up in the sun and closed his eyes; "but she will allow you to look at her for five minutes every morning, at two hours after sunrise."

Two hours after sunrise on the following morning, King Grumbelo was accordingly admitted into the garden beyond the pink-and-white gates of apple-blossom. There sat the Lady Whimsical on the doorstep of her rose-leaf dwelling, and in front of her stood the King.

"You are the most charming person I have ever seen," declared the King.

The Lady Whimsical smiled.

"I never thought I should find any one so charming as you are," said the King.

The Lady Whimsical smiled again.

"Nor so silent," continued the King.

The Lady Whimsical smiled for the third time.

"Nor so—" began the King, and then he paused, for he thought she might possibly object to being called foolish, though foolish she undoubtedly was if she did not wish him to stay longer than five minutes. As he hesitated, the Lady Whimsical burst out laughing and ran inside her little house of rose leaves, and banged the door in his face.

"Time's up," said the dragon, and King Grumbelo went away puzzled. He came back again, however, at the same time on the following morning; and there sat Lady Whimsical on the doorstep of her rose-leaf dwelling, just as though she were expecting him.

"I have thought only of you since yesterday morning," sighed King Grumbelo.

The Lady Whimsical smiled as before.

"I shall think only of you for the rest of my days," declared the King.

The Lady Whimsical smiled even more than before.

"Do you know why I have come all this way to find you?" demanded the King, growing bolder.

The Lady Whimsical shook her head at him, burst out laughing, and ran inside her rose-leaf house as she had done the day before.



Two hours after sunrise on the following morning, the Lady Whimsical was once more seated on her doorstep, and King Grumbelo was once more standing in front of her.

"You are so beautiful that I shall never tire of looking at you," said the King.

Again, the Lady Whimsical only smiled.

"You are so silent that you will always allow me to talk enough for both of us," continued the King.

The Lady Whimsical smiled once more.

"And since you are so foolish as to send me away every morning," said the King, "you must surely be foolish enough to be the Queen of so wise a King as myself."

The Lady Whimsical had never laughed so heartily at anything as she did at these words of King Grumbelo; and even after she had banged the door in his face, he could still hear her laughter as it floated out from the windows of the dainty little house of rose leaves. Now, all this was very amusing for the Lady Whimsical, who was quite happy as long as she had something to make her smile; but King Grumbelo was not so well satisfied.

It was not amusing to carry on a conversation entirely alone, and he even began to wish secretly that the Lady Whimsical would not answer all his questions by laughing at them. However, the Lady Whimsical showed no signs of answering them in any other way, and at last the King determined that he would make her speak to him just once, and after that she might be as silent as she pleased. So, one morning, when the dragon opened the apple-blossom gates to him as usual, he strode up to Lady Whimsical with a resolute air.

"Lady Whimsical, I want you to come away with me and be my Queen," he said.

She shook her head and smiled.

"Why not?" demanded King Grumbelo.

She smiled again.

"Why not?" shouted King Grumbelo at the very top of his voice.

When the Lady Whimsical shrugged her shoulders and merely smiled again, the King lost his patience completely, which of course was an absurd thing to do, considering that he had come all this way on purpose to find some one who knew how to be silent.

"Will nothing induce you to speak just one word to me?" he exclaimed; and then he ran right away from her mocking laughter, and did not even wait to have the rose-leaf door banged in his face.

It was a very crestfallen King Grumbelo who knocked at the gates of apple-blossom on the following morning. But no one was sitting on the doorstep of the dainty little house of rose leaves; and King Grumbelo's heart gave a great jump.

"Where is she?" he demanded of the dragon, who had followed him along the path and was looking at him with his aggravating smile.

The dragon became reproachful.

"It is your fault," he complained. "I told you she never spoke; why didn't you listen to me? You have driven her away now by your endless questions; she has gone into her house of rose leaves, and the Wise Woman of the Wood alone knows what will bring her out again."

King Grumbelo looked up at the dainty little house of rose leaves, and thought he heard the sound of muffled laughter floating through the open windows. He turned once more to the dragon.

"Where does the Wise Woman of the Wood live?" he asked. But the dragon had curled himself up in the sun and was already half asleep.

"Don't ask so many questions," he mumbled sleepily; and King Grumbelo strode angrily out of the garden. He mounted his horse and allowed it to take him wherever it would, for he had no idea where the Wise Woman of the Wood lived, and one way was as good as another. Towards sundown, a blackbird hopped on to his horse's head and sang to him, and something in its song so reminded the King of Lady Whimsical's laughter that he put out his hand to caress it. No sooner did he touch it, however, than it turned into a squirrel, and scampered away from him so mischievously that he was again reminded of Lady Whimsical and of the way she, too, had run away from him. He put spurs to his horse and chased the squirrel until he overtook it, when it immediately turned into a field mouse and sprang into a large hole in the root of an old elm tree; and after it went King Grumbelo without a moment's hesitation. He left his horse outside, and threw his crown on the ground, and crept into the hole as humbly as though he had not been a King at all. The hole opened into a long, dark passage which grew smaller and smaller as it wound deeper into the earth, so that King Grumbelo could scarcely drag himself along on his hands and knees. It came to

an end at last, however, and he crawled into a cavern lighted dimly by glow-worms. The field mouse was just ahead of him, but before he could catch it he found that it was no longer there, and in its place stood a tall witch woman, with a voice like a blackbird's, and eyes like a squirrel's, and hair the colour of a field mouse.

"Tell me," said King Grumbelo, eagerly, "are you the Wise Woman of the Wood?"

"Of course I am," said the witch woman. "Do you think any one else would have been so much trouble to catch? And now that you have caught me, what can I do for you?"

"I want you to remove the spell from the Lady Whimsical, so that she may be able to speak to me," said King Grumbelo. The witch woman laughed outright.

"There is no spell over the Lady Whimsical," she said. "She can talk as much as she pleases."

"Then why has she never spoken to me?" asked the King in astonishment.

"You wished for the most silent woman in the world," said the Wise Woman of the Wood. "Now that you have found her, why do you complain?"

For the first time in his life King Grumbelo felt distinctly foolish.

"I made a mistake," he owned. "I don't want a silent Queen at all."

"Then go back and tell her so," said the witch woman, promptly.

"Do you think that will make her come out from her house of rose leaves?" asked King Grumbelo.

"I shouldn't wonder," said the Wise Woman of the Wood; "but go and see for yourself. There is no need to thank me, for any one who takes the trouble to follow the Wise Woman of the Wood to her home is welcome to what he may find when he gets there."

Indeed, before he had time to thank her he found himself once more outside the tree, with his crown lying at his feet and his horse standing at his side. He was in such a hurry to get back to the Lady Whimsical, however, that he did not stay to pick up his crown, but rode bareheaded all through the night and reached the hedge of sweet-briar and honeysuckle precisely at two hours after sunrise.

"Dear, dear," complained the dragon; "do you mean to say you 've come back again?"

"I have some good news for you," said King Grumbelo, jovially. "There is no spell over the Lady Whimsical after all!"

"Of course there isn't," said the dragon, as he slowly unfastened the gates of

apple-blossom. "Didn't I tell you she wasn't a Princess?"

King Grumbelo did not stay to argue the point with him, but walked quickly up the path and stopped in front of the dainty little house all made of rose leaves.

"Lady Whimsical," he said, very gently and humbly, "will it please you to smile on me once more? I have discovered that you are the wisest person in the world, and that I am by far the most foolish."

When the Lady Whimsical looked out of her window and saw the King standing there so humbly without his crown, the tears came right into her wonderful eyes and stayed there.

"Oh!" she cried, "I am so glad you have come back! I was afraid you were never coming back any more."

She held out her two little hands, and the King kissed them. Then she came running down the stairs as fast as she could; and they sat on the doorstep side by side, and talked.

"I feel as though I should never stop talking again! Do you mind?" asked Lady Whimsical.

"I should like nothing better," said King Grumbelo. "But first of all I must confess to you that I have an extremely ugly name. Do you think you can bear to hear it?"

"I know it already!" laughed the Lady Whimsical. "Do you suppose I have n't coaxed it out of my dragon long ago? But I, too, have something to confess to you. Do you think it will make you angry?"

"I am quite sure I shall never be angry again," declared the King.

"Then," said Lady Whimsical, looking extremely solemn, "to begin with, I am not a Princess at all."

"As if I didn't know that!" laughed the King. "The dragon told me, ever so long ago!"

"He didn't tell you the rest, so stop laughing and listen to me," said Lady Whimsical, with severity. "I knew all the while who you were and what you wanted, and I pretended to be under a spell just to tease you."

"I know that, too," said the King, triumphantly. "The Wise Woman of the Wood told me."

"Did she tell you that I came and hid myself here on purpose, because I heard you were looking for a Princess and I wanted you to find me?" asked the Lady Whimsical, softly.

"Nobody told me that," answered King Grumbelo; "I guessed it for myself."

"What will the Professor of Practical Jokes say, when you come home without the Princess you went out to find?" she asked mischievously.

The King had no time to answer, for at that moment the Professor of Practical Jokes—whose profession always required him to arrive unexpectedly in places where he was not wanted—appeared at the apple-blossom gates and answered Lady Whimsical's question himself.

"There is nothing to say," he observed. "There never was a Princess for your Majesty to find, so of course your Majesty has n't found her."

"There never was anybody for you to find except me," added Lady Whimsical, who was nodding at the Professor as though she had known him all her life. "The other Princess was a practical joke, don't you see. Do you mean to say my dragon did not tell you *that*, too?"

"Then, who are you?" asked King Grumbelo in bewilderment. The Lady Whimsical laughed, as she had laughed every day for a month when she banged the door in the King's face.

"Can't you guess?" she exclaimed. "Why, I am just the daughter of the Professor of Practical Jokes!"

And the King only wondered that he had not guessed it long ago.

As they went out through the apple-blossom gates, the dainty little house of rose leaves vanished away because it was no longer wanted, and so did the beautiful flower-garden, and the hedge of sweet-briar and honeysuckle, and the sleepy good-natured dragon. They had no trouble in getting home, for the Wise Woman of the Wood had a hand in the matter, and the road came racing towards them as fast as an express train; all they had to do was to stand quite still and wait until King Grumbelo's country came hurrying along, which was the most convenient way of travelling any one could possibly invent. When the city reached them they found they were just in time to be married, for the people were on the point of celebrating their wedding for the hundred and first time; so the King and Queen were married almost before they knew it themselves, and certainly before the people discovered that somebody was really being married at last. This, however, was not at all surprising, for the real wedding was very much the same as all the make-believe ones, except that it took a little longer because the King and Queen were not so used to being married as the people were to marrying them.

After that, every one was as happy as it was possible to be. The country had grown so accustomed to being frivolous that it never became serious again; and the King never made another law, because the people were so fond of Lady

Whimsical that they did everything she told them, and therefore no laws were needed. The result of all this happiness was that nobody in the kingdom ever grew old; and the Lady Whimsical who sits and laughs on her throne at this very moment is the same Lady Whimsical who sat and laughed on the doorstep of her rose-leaf house, years and years and years ago.

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