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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Twelve Feet of Nose

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There was once a king who had a daughter of extraordinary beauty, and the young men of the kingdom vied fiercely for her hand. The king, who enjoyed complications, set a condition: the princess would marry any man who could make her laugh — but any man who tried and failed would leave the palace with a longer nose than the one he arrived with.

Suitors came from everywhere. Counts and merchants and soldiers all tried their best jokes, their cleverest stories, their most elaborate pratfalls. Every one of them failed. Every one walked out with a nose a little longer than before, until some of the more persistent ones could barely fit through the palace gates.

Now, in a certain part of the kingdom there lived a peasant boy who had heard about all of this and decided he wanted to try. His mother thought this was a terrible idea and said so at length. His father agreed with his mother, which was unusual. The boy went anyway.

On the road to the palace he met an old woman sitting by a fig tree, resting her feet. He greeted her kindly, sat down beside her, and shared his lunch with her without being asked. She thanked him and, as he stood to leave, said: "Pick three of those figs before you go. They'll be useful."

He thanked her, picked the figs, put them in his pocket, and didn't think much more about it.

At the palace he was announced and brought before the princess in the great hall, where the court had gathered to watch another young man fail. The princess sat on her throne looking beautiful and utterly bored.

The boy bowed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the figs. He bit into it — and a nose began to grow from his face. It grew and it grew and it grew. It curled over the arm of the nearest chair. It stretched across the floor. It reached the princess's feet. The court stared. The princess stared. The boy's nose grew to twelve feet.

Then he took out the second fig and ate it. The nose shrank back to its normal size.



The princess burst out laughing. She laughed until her eyes watered. She laughed the way people laugh when they've been holding it in for a very long time.

The king declared the contest won. The court applauded. The boy was given a bath, some decent clothes, and a formal introduction.

But there were other suitors who had heard about what happened, and they were not pleased. A few had been waiting in the wings — men of rank who had not yet tried their luck — and they conferred together and decided that the simplest solution was to steal the figs.

That night, one of them crept into the boy's room while he was sleeping, found the third fig in his coat pocket, and took it. In the morning, before anyone was about, the thief ate the fig in his private chambers.

He grew a nose twelve feet long, and it did not stop there.

When the surgeons were eventually called, they could do nothing. When the old doctor came, she shook her head. When the renowned physician arrived from the capital, he said it was entirely outside his experience.

The boy, who had noticed his fig was missing, dressed himself in the robes of a foreign doctor, put on a pair of spectacles, and presented himself at the palace as a specialist in unusual nasal conditions. He examined the groaning suitor with great seriousness. He prescribed a course of treatment. He charged an enormous fee. He set the nose back to its ordinary length, pocketed the money, changed back into his own clothes, and appeared for breakfast as usual.

He married the princess that spring. His mother came to the wedding and admitted he had not been entirely wrong.

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