

The Second Surprise - THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF THE KING'S HEAD

A good many years ago, the Magical Monarch of Mo became annoyed by the Purple Dragon, which came down from the mountains and ate up a patch of his best chocolate caramels just as they were getting ripe.

So the King went out to the sword-tree and picked a long, sharp sword, and tied it to his belt and went away to the mountains to fight the Purple Dragon.

The people all applauded him, saying one to another:

"Our King is a good King. He will destroy this naughty Purple Dragon and we shall be able to eat the caramels ourselves."

But the Dragon was not alone naughty; it was big, and fierce, and strong, and did not want to be destroyed at all.

Therefore the King had a terrible fight with the Purple Dragon and cut it with his sword in several places, so that the raspberry juice which ran in its veins squirted all over the ground.

It is always difficult to kill Dragons. They are by nature thick-skinned and tough, as doubtless every one has heard. Besides, you must not forget that this was a Purple Dragon, and all scientists who have studied deeply the character of Dragons say those of a purple color at the most disagreeable to fight with. So all the King's cutting and slashing had no effect upon the monster other than to make him angry. Forgetful of the respect due to a crowned King, the wicked Dragon presently opening wide its jaws and bit his Majesty's head clean off his body. Then he swallowed it.

Of course the King realized it was useless to continue to fight after that, for he could not see where the Dragon was. So he turned and tried to find his way back to his people. But at every other step he would bump into a tree, which made the naughty Dragon laugh at him. Furthermore, he could not tell in which direction he was going, which is an unpleasant feeling under any circumstances.

At last some of the people came to see if the King had succeeded in destroying the Dragon, and found their monarch running around in a

circle, bumping into trees and rocks, but not getting a step nearer home. SO they took his hand and led him back to the palace, where every one was filled with sorrow at the sad sight of the headless King. Indeed, his devoted subjects, for the first time in their lives, came as near to weeping as an inhabitant of the Valley of Mo can.

"Never mind," said the King, cheerfully; "I can get along very well without a head; and, as a matter of fact, the loss has its advantages. I shall not be obliged to brush my hair, or clean my teeth, or wash my ears. So do not grieve, I beg of you, but be happy and joyful as you were before." Which showed the King had a good heart; and, after all, a good heart is better than a head, any say.

The people, hearing him speak out of his neck (for he had no mouth), immediately began to laugh, which in a short time led to their being as happy as ever.

But the Queen was not contented.

"My love," she said to him, "I can not kiss you any more, and that will break my heart."

Thereupon the King sent word throughout the Valley that any one who could procure for him a new head should wed one of the princesses.

The princesses were all exceedingly pretty girls, and so it was not long before one man made a very nice head out of candy and brought it to the King. It did not look exactly like the old head, but the efface was very sweet, nevertheless; so the King put it on and the Queen kissed it at once with much satisfaction.

The young man had put a pair of glass eyes in the head, with which the King could see very well after he got used to them.

According to the royal promise, the young man was now called into the palace and asked to take his pick of the princesses. There were all so sweet and lady-like that he had some trouble in making a choice; but at last he took the biggest, thinking that he would thus secure the greatest reward, and they were married amid great rejoicing.

But, a few days afterward, the King was caught out in a rainstorm, and before he could get home his new head had melted in the great shower of

lemonade that fell. Only the glass eyes were left, and these he put in his pocket and went sorrowfully to tell the Queen of his new misfortune.

Then another young man who wanted to marry a princess made the King a head out of dough, sticking in it the glass eyes; and the King tried it on and found that it fitted very well. So the young man was given the next biggest princess.

But the following day the sun chance to shine extremely hot, and when the King walked out it baked his dough head into bread, at which the monarch felt very light-headed. And when the birds saw the bread they flew down from the trees, perched upon the King's shoulder and quickly ate up his new head. All but the glass eyes.

Again the good King was forced to go home to the Queen without a head, and the lady firmly declared that this time her husband must have a head warranted to last at least as long as the honeymoon of the young man who made it; which was not at all unreasonable under the circumstances.

So a request was sent to all loyal subjects throughout the Valley asking them to find a head for their King that was neat and substantial.

In the meantime the King had a rather hard time of it. When he wished to go any place he was obliged to hold out in front of him, between his thumbs and fingers, the glass eyes, that they might guide his footsteps. This, as you may imagine, made his Majesty look rather undignified, and dignity is very important to every royal personage.

At last a wood-chopper in the mountains made a head out of wood and sent it to the King. It was neatly carved, besides being solid and durable; moreover, it fitted the monarch's neck to the T. So the King rummaged in his pocket and found the glass eyes, and when these were put in the new head the King announced his satisfaction.

There was only one drawback--he couldn't smile, as the wooden face was too stiff; and it was funny to hear his Majesty laughing heartily while his face maintained a solemn expression. But the glass eyes twinkled merrily and every one knew that he was the same kind-hearted monarch of old, although he had become, of necessity, rather hard-headed.

Then the King sent word to the wood-chopper to come to the palace and take his pick of the princesses, and preparations were at once begun for the wedding.

But the wood-chopper, on his way to the court, unfortunately passed by the dwelling of the Purple Dragon and stopped to speak to the monster.

Now it seems that when the Dragon had swallowed the King's head, the unusual meal made the beast ill. It was more accustomed to berries and caramels for dinner than to heads, and the sharp points of the King's crown (which was firmly fastened to the head) pricked the Dragon's stomach and made the creature miserable. After a few days of suffering the Dragon disgorged the head, and, not knowing what else to do with it, locked it up in a cupboard and put the key in its pocket.

When the Dragon met the wood-chopper and learned he had made a new head for the King, and as a reward was to wed one of the princesses, the monster became very angry. It resolved to do a wicked thing; which will not surprise you when you remember the beast's purple color.

"Step into my parlor and rest yourself," said the Dragon, politely. Wicked people are most polite when they mean mischief.

"Thank you, I'll stop for a few minutes," replied the wood-chopper; "but I can not stay long, as I am expected at court."

When he had entered the parlor the Dragon suddenly opened its mouth and snapped off the poor wood-chopper's head. Being warned by experience, however, it did not swallow the head, but placed it in the cupboard. Then the Dragon took from a shelf the King's head and glued it on the wood-chopper's neck.

"Now," said the beast, with a cruel laugh, "you are the King! Go home and claim your wife and your kingdom."

The poor wood-chopper was much amazed; for at first he did not really know which he was, the King or the wood-chopper.

He looked in the mirror and, seeing the King, made a low bow. Then the King's head thought: "Who am I bowing to? There is no one greater than the King!" And so at once there began a conflict between the wood-chopper's heart and the King's head.

The Dragon was mightily pleased at the result of its wicked stratagem, and having pushed the bewildered wood-chopper out of the castle, immediately sent him on his way to the court.

When the poor man neared the town the people ran out and said: "Why, this is the King come back again. All hail, your Majesty!"

"All nonsense!" returned the wood-chopper. "I am only a poor man with the King's head on my shoulders. You can easily see it isn't mine, for it's crooked; the Dragon didn't glue it on straight."

"Where, then, is your own head?" they asked.

"Locked up in the Dragon's cupboard," replied the poor fellow, beginning to weep.

"Here," cried the King's head; "stop this. You mustn't cry out of my eyes! The King never weeps."

"I beg pardon, your Majesty," said the wood-chopper, meekly, "I'll not do it again."

"Well, see that you don't," returned the head more cheerfully.

The people were greatly amazed at this, and took the wood-chopper to the palace, where all was soon explained.

When the Queen saw the King's head she immediately kissed it; but the King rebuked her, saying she must kiss only him.

"But it is your head," said the poor Queen.

"Probably it is," replied the King; "but it is on another man. You must confine yourself to kissing my wooden head."

"I'm sorry," sighed the Queen, "for I like to kiss the real head best."

"And so you shall," said the King's head; "I don't approve your kissing that wooden head at all."

The poor lady looked from one to the other in perplexity. Finally a happy thought occurred to her.

"Why don't you trade heads?" she asked.

"Just the thing!" cried the King; and, the wood-chopper consenting, the exchange was made, and the Monarch of Mo found himself in possession of his own head again, whereat he was so greatly pleased that he laughed long and merrily.

The wood-chopper, however, did not even smile. He couldn't because of the wooden face. The head he had made for the King he now was compelled to wear himself.

"Bring hither the princesses," commanded the King. "This good man shall choose his bride at once, for he has restored to me my own head."

But when the princesses arrived and saw that the wood-chopper had a wooden head, they each and all refused to marry him, and begged so hard to escape that the King was in a quandary.

"I promised him one of my daughters," he argued, "and a King never breaks his word."

"But he hadn't a wooden head then," explained one of the girls.

The King realized the truth of this. Indeed, when he came to look carefully at the wooden head, he did not blame his daughters for not wishing to marry it. Should he force one of them to consent, it was not unlikely she would call her husband a blockhead--a term almost certain to cause trouble in any family.

After giving the matter deep thought, the King resolved to go to the Purple Dragon and oblige it to give up the wood-chopper's head.

So all the fighting men in the kingdom were got together, and, having picked ripe swords off the sword-trees, they marched in a great body to the Dragon's castle.

Now the Purple Dragon realized that if it attempted to fight all this army, it would perhaps be cut to pieces; so it retired within its castle and refused to come out.

The wood-chopper was a brave man.

"I'll go in and fight the Dragon alone," he said; and in he went. By this time the Dragon was both frightened and angry, and the moment it saw the man it rushed forward and made a snap at his head.

The wooden head came off at once, and the Dragon's long, sharp teeth got stuck in the wood and would not come out again; so the monster was unable to do anything but flop its tail and groan.

The wood-chopper now ran to the cupboard, took out his head and placed it upon his shoulders where it belonged. Then he proudly walked out of the castle and was greeted with loud shouts by the army, which carried him back in triumph to the King's palace.

And, now that he wore his own head again, one of the prettiest of the young princesses willingly agreed to marry him; so the wedding ceremony was performed amidst great rejoicing.