

The Fifth Surprise - THE MONARCH CELEBRATES HIS BIRTHDAY

There were great festivities in the Valley of Mo when the King had a birthday. The jolly monarch was born so many years ago that so every one had forgotten the date. One of the Wise Men said the King was born in February; another declared it was in May, and a third figured the great event happened in October. So the King issued a royal decree that he should have three birthdays every year, in order to be on the safe side; and whenever he happened to think of it he put in an odd birthday or two for luck. The King's birthdays came to be regarded as very joyful events, for on these occasions festivities of unusual magnificence were held, and everybody in the kingdom was invited to participate.

On one occasion the King, suddenly recollecting he had not celebrated his birthday for several weeks, announced a royal festival on a most elaborate scale. The cream-puff crop was an unusually large one, and the bushes were hanging full of the delicious ripe puffs, which were highly prized by the people of Mo.

So all the maidens got out their best dresses and brightest ribbons, and the young men carefully brushed their hair and polished their boots, and soon the streets leading to the palace were thronged with gay merry-makers.

When the guests were all assembled a grand feast was served, in which the newly-picked cream puffs were an important item.

Then the King stood up at the head of the table and ordered his ruby casket to be brought him, and when the people heard this they at once became quiet and attentive, for the Ruby Casket was one of the most curious things in the Valley. It was given the King many years before by the sorceress, Maetta, and whenever it was opened something was found in it that no living person had seen before.

So the people, and even the King himself, always watched the opening of the Ruby Casket with much curiosity, for they never knew what would be disclosed.

The King placed the casket on a small table before him, and then, after a solemn look at the expectant faces, he said, slowly:

"Giggle-gaggle-goo!" which was the magic word that opened the box.

At once the lid flew back, and the King peered within and exclaimed:
"Ha!"

This made the guests more excited than before, for they did not know what he was saying "ha!" about; and they held their breaths when the King put his thumb and finger into the box and drew out a little wooden man about as big as my finger. He wore a blue jacket and a red cap and held a little brass horn in his hand.

The King stood the wooden man upon the table and then reached within the box and brought out another wooden man, dressed just the same as the other, and also holding a horn in his hand. This the King stood beside the first wooden man, and then took out another, and another, until ten little wooden men were standing in a row on the table, holding drums, and cymbals, and horns in their small, stiff hands.

"I declare," said the King, when he had stood them all up, "it's a little German band. But what a shame it is they can not play."

No sooner had the King uttered the word "play" than every little wooden man put his horn to his mouth, or beat his drum, or clashed his cymbal; and immediately they began to play such delicious music that all the people were delighted, and even the King clapped his hands in applause.

Just then from out the casket leaped a tiny Baby Elephant, about as large as a mouse, and began capering about on its toes. It was dressed in short, fluffy skirts, like those worn by a ballet-dancer, and it danced so funnily that all who saw it roared with laughter.

When the elephant stopped to rest, two pretty Green Frogs sprang from the casket and began to play leapfrog before the astonished guests, who had never before seen such a thing as a frog. The little green strangers jumped over each other quick as a flash, and finally one of them jumped down the other's throat. Then, as the Baby Elephant opened his mouth to yawn, the remaining frog jumped down the elephant's throat.

The audience was so much amused at this feat that the Baby Elephant thought he would see what he could do to please them; so he stood on his head and gave a great jump, and disappeared down his own throat, leaving the musicians to play by themselves.

Then all the young men caught the girls about their waists and began spinning around in a pretty dance of their own, and the fun continued until they were tired out.

The King thanked the tiny wooden musicians and put them back in the Ruby Casket. He did not offer to take up a collection for them, there being no money of any kind in the Valley of Mo. The casket was then carried back to the royal treasury, where it was guarded with much care when not in use.

Just then a young man approached the King, asking permission for the people to skate on the Crystal Lake, and his Majesty graciously consented.

As it was never cold in the Kingdom of Mo there was, of course, no ice for skating. But the Crystal Lake was composed of sugar-syrup, and the sun had candied the surface of the lake, so it had become solid enough to skate on, and was, moreover, as smooth as glass.

It was not often the King allowed skating there, for he feared some one might break through the crust; but as it was his birthday he could refuse the people nothing. So presently hundreds of the boys and girls were skating swiftly on the Crystal Lake and having rare sport; for it was just as good as ice, without being cold or damp.

In the center there was one place where the crust was quite thin, and just as the merriment was at its height, crack! went the ice--or candy, rather--and down into the sugar-syrup sank the Princess Truella, and the Prince Jollikin, and the King's royal chamberlain, Nuphsed.

Down and down they went until they reached the bottom of the lake; and there they stood, stuck fast in the syrup and unable to move a bit, while all the people gathered on the shore to look at them, the lake being as clear as the clearest water.

Of course, this calamity put an end to further skating, and the King rushed around asking every one how he could get his daughter and his son and his royal chamberlain out of the mass. But no one could tell him.

Finally the King consulted the Wise Donkey; and after he had thought the matter over and consulted his learning, the donkey advised his Majesty to fish for them.

"Fish!" exclaimed the King; "how can we do that?"

"Take a fish-line and put a sinker on it, to make it sink through the syrup. Then bait the end of the line with the thing that each one of them likes best. In that way you can catch hold of them and draw them out of the lake."

"Well," said the King, "I'll try it, for of course you know what you are talking about."

"Have you ever eaten a geography?" demanded the Wise Donkey.

"No," said the King.

"Well, I have," declared the donkey, haughtily; "and what I don't know about lakes and such things isn't in the geography."

So the King went back to the Crystal Lake and got a strong fish-line, which he tied to the end of a long pole. Then he put a sinker on the end of the line and was ready for the bait.

"What does the Princess Truella like best?" he asked the Queen.

"I'm sure I do not know," replied the royal lady; "but you might try her with a kiss."

So one of the nicest young men sent a kiss to the Princess, and the King tied it to the end of the line and put it in the lake. The sinker carried it down through the sugar-syrup until the kiss was just before the sweet, red lips of the pretty Princess. She took the kiss at once, as the Queen had guessed, and the King pulled up the line, with the Princess at the end of it, until he finally landed her on the shore.

Then all the people shouted for joy and the Queen took the Princess Truella home to change her clothes, for they were very sticky.

"What does the Prince Jollikin like best?" asked the King.

"A laugh!" replied a dozen at once, for every one knew the Prince's failing.

Then one of the girls laughed quite hard, and the King tied it to the end of the line and dropped it into the lake. The Prince caught the laugh at once, and was quickly drawn from the syrup and likewise sent home to change his clothes.

Then the King looked around on the people and asked:

"What does the Chamberlain Nuphsed like best?"

But they were all silent, for Nuphsed liked so many things it was difficult to say which he liked best. So again the King was obliged to go to the Wise Donkey, in order to find out how he should bait the line to catch the royal chamberlain.

The Wise Donkey happened to be busy that day over his own affairs and was annoyed at being consulted so frequently without receiving anything in return for his wisdom. But he pretended to consider the matter, as was his wont, and said:

"I believe the royal chamberlain is fond of apples. Try to catch him with a red apple."

At this the King and his people hunted all over the kingdom, and at last found a tree with one solitary red apple growing on a little branch nearly at the top. But unfortunately some one had sawed off the trunk of the tree, close up to the branches, and had carried it away and chopped it up for kindling wood. For this reason there was no way to climb the tree to secure the apple.

While the King and the people were considering how they might get into the tree, Prince Thinkabit came up to them and asked what they wanted.

"We want the apple," replied the King, "but some one has cut away the tree trunk, so that we can not climb up."

Prince Thinkabit rubbed the top of his head a minute, to get his brain into good working order. It was a habit he had acquired. Then he walked to the bank of the river, which was near, and whistled three times. Immediately a school of fishes swam up to him, and one of the biggest cried out:

"Good afternoon, Prince Thinkabit; what can we do for you?"

"I wish to borrow a flying fish for a few minutes," replied the Prince.

Scarcely had he spoken when a fish flew out of the river and perched upon his shoulder. Then he walked up to the tree and said to the fish: "Get me the apple."

The flying fish at once flew into the tree and bit off the stem of the apple, which fell down and hit the King on the nose, for, unfortunately, he was standing exactly under it. Then the Prince thanked the flying fish and sent it back to the river, and the King, having first put a plaster over his nose, took the apple and started for the Crystal Lake, followed by all his people.

But when the apple was fastened to the fish-line and let down through the syrup to the royal chamberlain, Nuphsed refused to touch it.

"He doesn't like it," said the King, with a sigh; and he went again to the Wise Donkey.

"Didn't he want the apple?" asked the donkey, as if surprised. But you must know he was not surprised at all, as he had planned to get the apple for himself.

"No, indeed," replied the King. "We had an awful job to find the apple, too."

"Where is it?" inquired the donkey.

"Here," said the King, taking it out of his pocket.

The donkey took the apple, looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, and then ate it up and smacked his lips, for he was especially fond of red apples.

"What shall we do now?" asked the King.

"I believe the thing Nuphsed likes best is a kind word. Bait the line with that, and you may catch him."

So the King went again to the lake, and having put a kind word on the fish-line quickly succeeded in bringing the royal chamberlain to the shore in safety. You can well imagine poor Nuphsed was glad enough to be on dry land after his long immersion in the sugar-syrup.

And now that all had been rescued from the Crystal Lake, the King put a rope around the broken crust and stuck up a sign that said "Danger!" so that no one else would fall in.

After that the festivities began again, and as there were no further accidents the King's birthday ended very happily.