

Nix Naught Nothing

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Once upon a time there lived a King and a Queen who didn't differ much from all the other kings and queens who have lived since Time began. But they had no children, and this made them very sad indeed. Now it so happened that the King had to go and fight battles in a far country, and he was away for many long months. And, lo and behold! while he was away the Queen at long last bore him a little son. As you may imagine, she was fair delighted, and thought how pleased the King would be when he came home and found that his dearest wish had been fulfilled. And all the courtiers were fine and pleased too, and set about at once to arrange a grand festival for the naming of the little Prince. But the Queen said, "No! The child shall have no name till his father gives it to him. Till then we will call him 'Nix! Naught! Nothing!' because his father knows nothing about him!"

So little Prince Nix Naught Nothing grew into a strong, hearty little lad; for his father did not come back for a long time, and did not even know that he had a son.

But at long last he turned his face homewards. Now, on the way, he came to a big rushing river which neither he nor his army could cross, for it was flood-time and the water was full of dangerous whirlpools, where nixies and water-wraiths lived, always ready to drown men.

So they were stopped, until a huge giant appeared, who could take the river, whirlpool and all, in his stride; and he said kindly, "I'll carry you all over, if you like." Now, though the giant smiled and was very polite, the King knew enough of the ways of giants to think it wiser to have a hard and fast bargain. So he said, quite curt, "What's your pay?"

"Pay?" echoed the giant, with a grin, "what do you take me for? Give me Nix Naught Nothing, and I'll do the job with a glad heart."

Now the King felt just a trifle ashamed at the giant's generosity; so he said, "Certainly, certainly. I'll give you nix naught nothing and my thanks into the bargain."

So the giant carried them safely over the stream and past the whirlpools, and the King hastened homewards. If he was glad to see his dear wife, the Queen, you may imagine how he felt when she showed him his young son, tall and strong for his age.

"And what's your name, young sir?" he asked of the child fast clasped in his arms.

"Nix Naught Nothing," answered the boy; "that's what they call me till my father gives me a name."

Well! the King nearly dropped the child, he was so horrified. "What have I done?" he cried. "I promised to give nix naught nothing to the giant who carried us over the whirlpools where the nixies and water-wraiths live."

At this the Queen wept and wailed; but being a clever woman she thought out a plan whereby to save her son. So she said to her husband the King, "If the giant comes to claim his promise, we will give him the hen-wife's youngest boy. She has so many she will not mind if we give her a crown piece, and the giant will never know the difference."

Now sure enough the very next morning the giant appeared to claim Nix Naught Nothing, and they dressed up the hen-wife's boy in the Prince's clothes and wept and wailed when the giant, fine and satisfied, carried his prize off on his back. But after a while he came to a big stone and sat down to ease his shoulders. And he fell a-dozing. Now, when he woke, he started up in a fluster, and called out:

"Hodge, Hodge, on my shoulders! Say

What d'ye make the time o' day?"

And the hen-wife's little boy replied:

"Time that my mother the hen-wife takes

The eggs for the wise Queen's breakfast cakes!"

Then the giant saw at once the trick that had been played on him, and he threw the hen-wife's boy on the ground, so that his head hit on the stone and he was killed.

Then the giant strode back to the palace in a tower of a temper, and demanded "Nix Naught Nothing." So this time they dressed up the gardener's boy, and wept and wailed when the giant, fine and satisfied, carried his prize off on his back. Then the same thing happened. The giant grew weary of his burden, and sate down on the big stone to rest. So he fell a-dozing, woke with a start, and called out:

"Hodge, Hodge, on my shoulders! Say

What d'ye make the time o' day?"

And the gardener's boy replied:

"Time that my father the gardener took

Greens for the wise Queen's dinner to cook!"

So the giant saw at once that a second trick had been played on him and became quite mad with rage. He flung the boy from him so that he was killed, and then strode back to the palace, where he cried with fury: "Give me what you promised to give, Nix Naught Nothing, or I will destroy you all, root and branch."

So then they saw they must give up the dear little Prince, and this time they really wept and wailed as the giant carried off the boy on his back. And this time, after the giant had had his rest at the big stone, and had woke up and called:

"Hodge, Hodge, on my shoulders! Say

What d'ye make the time o' day?"

the little Prince replied:

"Time for the King my father to call,

'Let supper be served in the banqueting hall.' "

Then the giant laughed with glee and rubbed his hands saying, "I've got the right one at last." So he took Nix Naught Nothing to his own house under the whirlpools; for the giant was really a great Magician who could take any form he chose. And the reason he wanted a little prince so badly was that he had lost his wife, and had only one little daughter who needed a playmate sorely. So Nix Naught Nothing and the Magician's daughter grew up together, and every year made them fonder and fonder of each other, until she promised to marry him.

Now the Magician had no notion that his daughter should marry just an ordinary human prince, the like of whom he had eaten a thousand times, so he sought some way in which he could quietly get rid of Nix Naught Nothing. So he said one day, "I have work for you, Nix Naught Nothing! There is a stable hard by which is seven miles long, and seven miles broad, and it has not been cleaned for seven years. By to-morrow evening you must have cleaned it, or I will have you for my supper."

Well, before dawn, Nix Naught Nothing set to work at his task; but, as fast as he cleared the muck, it just fell back again. So by breakfast-time he was in a terrible sweat; yet not one whit nearer the end of his job was he. Now the Magician's daughter, coming to bring him his breakfast, found him so distraught and distracted that he could scarce speak to her.

“We’ll soon set that to rights,” she said. So she just clapped her hands and called:

“Beasts and birds o’ each degree,

Clean me this stable for love o’ me.”

And, lo and behold! in a minute the beasts of the fields came trooping, and the sky was just dark with the wings of birds, and they carried away the muck, and the stable was clean as a new pin before the evening.

Now when the Magician saw this, he grew hot and angry, and he guessed it was his daughter’s magic that had wrought the miracle. So he said: “Shame on the wit that helped you; but I have a harder job for you to-morrow. Yonder is a lake seven miles long, seven miles broad, and seven miles deep. Drain it by nightfall, so that not one drop remains, or, of a certainty, I eat you for supper.”

So once again Nix Naught Nothing rose before dawn, and began his task; but though he baled out the water without ceasing, it ever ran back, so that though he sweated and laboured, by breakfast-time he was no nearer the end of his job.

But when the Magician’s daughter came with his breakfast she only laughed and said, “I’ll soon mend that!” Then she clapped her hands and called:

“Oh! all ye fish of river and sea,

Drink me this water for love of me!”

And, lo and behold! the lake was thick with fishes. And they drank and drank, till not one drop remained.

Now when the Magician returned in the morning and saw this he was as angry as angry. And he knew it was his daughter’s magic, so he said: “Double shame on the wit that helped you! Yet it betters you not, for I will give you a yet harder task than the last. If you do that, you may have my daughter. See you, yonder is a tree, seven miles high, and no branch to it till the top, and there on the fork is a nest with some eggs in it. Bring those eggs down without breaking one or, sure as fate, I’ll eat you for my supper.”

Then the Magician’s daughter was very sad; for with all her magic she could think of no way of helping her lover to fetch the eggs and bring them down unbroken. So she sate with Nix Naught Nothing underneath the tree, and thought, and thought, and thought; until an idea

came to her, and she clapped her hands and cried:

“Fingers of mine, for love of me,

Help my true lover to climb the tree.”

Then her fingers dropped off her hands one by one and ranged themselves like the steps of a ladder up the tree; but they were not quite enough of them to reach the top, so she cried again:

“Oh! toes of mine, for love o’ me,

Help my true lover to climb the tree.”

Then her toes began to drop off one by one and range themselves like the rungs of a ladder; but when the toes of one foot had gone to their places the ladder was tall enough. So Nix Naught Nothing climbed up it, reached the nest, and got the seven eggs. Now, as he was coming down with the last, he was so overjoyed at having finished his task, that he turned to see if the Magician’s daughter was overjoyed too: and lo! the seventh egg slipped from his hand and fell

Crash!

“Quick! Quick!” cried the Magician’s daughter, who, as you will observe, always had her wits about her. “There is nothing for it now but to fly at once. But first I must have my magic flask, or I shall be unable to help. It is in my room and the door is locked. Put your fingers, since I have none, in my pocket, take the key, unlock the door, get the flask, and follow me fast. I shall go slower than you, for I have no toes on one foot!”

So Nix Naught Nothing did as he was bid, and soon caught up the Magician’s daughter. But alas! they could not run very fast, so ere long the Magician, who had once again taken a giant’s form in order to have a long stride, could be seen behind them. Nearer and nearer he came until he was just going to seize Nix Naught Nothing, when the Magician’s daughter cried: “Put your fingers, since I have none, into my hair, take my comb and throw it down.” So Nix Naught Nothing did as he was bid, and, lo and behold! out of every one of the comb-prongs there sprang up a prickly briar, which grew so fast that the Magician found himself in the middle of a thorn hedge! You may guess how angry and scratched he was before he tore his way out. So Nix Naught Nothing and his sweetheart had time for a good start; but the Magician’s daughter could not run fast because she had lost her toes on one foot! Therefore the Magician in giant form soon caught them up, and he was just about to grip Nix Naught Nothing when the Magician’s daughter cried: “Put your fingers, since I have none, to my breast. Take out my veil-dagger and throw it down.”

So he did as he was bid, and in a moment the dagger had grown to thousands and thousands of sharp razors, criss-cross on the ground, and the Magician giant was howling with pain as he trod among them. You may guess how he danced and stumbled and how long it took for him to pick his way through as if he were walking on eggs!

So Nix Naught Nothing and his sweetheart were nearly out of sight ere the giant could start again; yet it wasn't long before he was like to catch them up; for the Magician's daughter, you see, could not run fast because she had lost her toes on one foot! She did what she could, but it was no use. So just as the giant was reaching out a hand to lay hold of Nix Naught Nothing she cried breathlessly:

"There's nothing left but the magic flask. Take it out and sprinkle some of what it holds on the ground."

And Nix Naught Nothing did as he was bid; but in his hurry he nearly emptied the flask altogether; and so the big, big wave of water which instantly welled up, swept him off his feet, and would have carried him away, had not the Magician's daughter's loosened veil caught him and held him fast. But the wave grew, and grew, and grew behind them, until it reached the giant's waist; then it grew and grew until it reached his shoulders; and it grew and grew until it swept over his head: a great big sea-wave full of little fishes and crabs and sea-snails and all sorts of strange creatures.

So that was the last of the Magician giant. But the poor little Magician's daughter was so weary that, after a time she couldn't move a step further, and she said to her lover, "Yonder are lights burning. Go and see if you can find a night's lodging: I will climb this tree by the pool where I shall be safe, and by the time you return I shall be rested."

Now, by chance, it happened that the lights they saw were the lights of the castle where Nix Naught Nothing's father and mother, the King and Queen, lived (though of course, he did not know this); so, as he walked towards the castle, he came upon the hen-wife's cottage and asked for a night's lodging.

"Who are you?" asked the hen-wife suspiciously.

"I am Nix Naught Nothing," replied the young man.

Now the hen-wife still grieved over her boy who had been killed, so she instantly resolved to be revenged.

"I cannot give you a night's lodging," she said, "but you shall have a drink of milk, for you look weary. Then you can go on to the castle and beg for a bed there."

So she gave him a cup of milk; but, being a witch-woman, she put a potion to it so that the very moment he saw his father and mother he should fall fast asleep, and none should be able to waken him so he would be no use to anybody, and would not recognize his father and mother.

Now the King and Queen had never ceased grieving for their lost son. They were always very kind to wandering young men, and when they heard that one was begging a night's lodging, they went down to the hall to see him. And lo, the moment Nix Naught Nothing caught sight of his father and mother, there he was on the floor fast asleep, and none could waken him! He did not recognize his father and mother nor they did not recognize him.

But Prince Nix Naught Nothing had grown into a very handsome young man, so they pitied him very much, and when none, do what they would, could waken him, the King said, "A maiden will likely take more trouble to waken him than others, seeing how handsome he is. Send forth a proclamation that if any maiden in my realm can waken this young man, she shall have him in marriage, and a handsome dowry to boot."

So the proclamation was sent forth, and all the pretty maidens of the realm came to try their luck, but they had no success.

Now the gardener whose boy had been killed by the giant had a daughter who was very ugly indeed—so ugly that she thought it no use to try her luck, and went about her work as usual. So she took her pitcher to the pool to fill it. Now the Magician's daughter was still hiding in the tree waiting for her lover to return. Thus it came to pass that the gardener's ugly daughter, bending down to fill her pitcher in the pool, saw a beautiful shadow in the water, and thought it was her own!

"If I am as pretty as that," she cried, "I'll draw water no longer!"

So she threw down her pitcher, and went straight to the castle to see if she hadn't a chance of the handsome stranger and the handsome dowry. But of course she hadn't; though at the sight of Nix Naught Nothing she fell so much in love with him, that, knowing the hen-wife to be a witch, she went straight to her, and offered all her savings for a charm by which she could awaken the sleeper.

Now when the hen-wife witch heard her tale, she thought it would be a rare revenge to marry the King and Queen's long-lost son to a gardener's ugly daughter; so she straightway took the girl's savings and gave her a charm by which she could unspell the Prince or spell him again at her pleasure.

So away went the gardener's daughter to the castle, and sure enough, no sooner had she

sung her charm, than Nix Naught Nothing awoke.

“I am going to marry you, my charmer,” she said coaxingly; but Nix Naught Nothing said he would prefer sleep. So she thought it wiser to put him to sleep again till the marriage feast was ready and she had got her fine clothes. So she spelled him asleep again.

Now the gardener had, of course, to draw the water himself, since his daughter would not work. And he took the pitcher to the pool; and he also saw the Magician’s daughter’s shadow in the water; but he did not think the face was his own, for, see you, he had a beard!

Then he looked up and saw the lady in the tree.

She, poor thing, was half dead with sorrow, and hunger, and fatigue, so, being a kind man, he took her to his house and gave her food. And he told her that that very day his daughter was to marry a handsome young stranger at the castle, and to get a handsome dowry to boot from the King and Queen, in memory of their son, Nix Naught Nothing, who had been carried off by a giant when he was a little boy.

Then the Magician’s daughter felt sure that something had happened to her lover; so she went to the castle, and there she found him fast asleep in a chair.

But she could not waken him, for, see you, her magic had gone from her with the magic flask which Nix Naught Nothing had emptied.

So, though she put her fingerless hands on his and wept and sang:

“I cleaned the stable for love o’ thee,

I laved the lake and I clomb the tree,

Wilt thou not waken for love o’ me?”

he never stirred nor woke.

Now one of the old servants there, seeing how she wept, took pity on her and said, “She that is to marry the young man will be back ere long, and unspell him for the wedding. Hide yourself and listen to her charm.”

So the Magician’s daughter hid herself, and, by and by, in comes the gardener’s daughter in her fine wedding-dress, and begins to sing her charm. But the Magician’s daughter didn’t wait for her to finish it; for the moment Nix Naught Nothing opened his eyes, she rushed

out of her hiding-place, and put her fingerless hands in his.

Then Nix Naught Nothing remembered everything. He remembered the castle, he remembered his father and mother, he remembered the Magician's daughter and all that she had done for him.

Then he drew out the magic flask and said, "Surely, surely there must be enough magic in it to mend your hands." And there was. There were just fourteen drops left, ten for the fingers and four for the toes; but there was not one for the little toe, so it could not be brought back. Of course, after that there was great rejoicing, and Prince Nix Naught Nothing and the Magician's daughter were married and lived happy ever after, even though she only had four toes on one foot. As for the hen-wife witch, she was burnt, and so the gardener's daughter got back her earnings; but she was not happy, because her shadow in the water was ugly again.

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