

The Prince Has the Mumps

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Young Prince Ernest was ill. He had, in fact, the mumps. “Beastly nuisance,” he remarked to his valet. He wanted very much indeed to say “damned inconvenience”; and, considering the circumstances, even this would not have been putting the case too strongly; but he did not say “damned inconvenience,” because a prince must not set a bad example; and, mumps or no mumps, Ernest Cosmo Adelbert Oscar James never forgot that he was a prince.

“Every inch a prince,” said the newspapers of his native land in referring to him, which they did in every edition from the first, or bulldog, to the last, or five-star extra-special sporting final.

That made sixty-six inches of prince, for Ernest was a rather pretty boy of medium stature, with a pink, almost waxen complexion, blond hair impeccably parted, and a brow as unruffled as a pan of skimmed milk. At the moment the symmetry of his features was somewhat marred by the presence of two mature mumps; and, noting this in the gold-rimmed mirror near his bed, Prince Ernest gently groaned.

Physiognomists might have argued from the serenity of his brow that the prince was not a thinker; but they would have been in error, for in his twenty-three years he had, not infrequently, thought. Happily his thoughts had not been disturbing ones. It had taken no soul-struggle to make him entirely content with his princely lot. Having been born a prince, nursed as a prince, breeched as a prince, taught as a prince, at twenty-three and a few days it seemed completely natural to Ernest to be a prince. It was quite impossible for him to imagine himself anything else.

Sometimes he thought: “Of course, I don’t say I have a divine right to be a prince; nowadays that isn’t considered in good taste. But, since I’m being perfectly frank with myself, I must admit that there is something—well, if not exactly sacred, at least sacerdotal about royalty. Being a prince isn’t at all like filling a place in the cabinet or the civil service or the army, where almost any sort of fellow can get ahead if he has enough push. A prince has no use for push; he’s a prince, and that’s all there is to it.”

And at other times he thought: “It’s the fashion in these times to pretend that a prince is just like any other man in the country, and not a bit better. That’s rot, of course, and no one knows it better than the people. If I am like all the rest of them, why do they stand in the rain for hours to see me whisk by in a limousine? Why do they crowd into some stuffy hall to hear me tell them I am glad to be there, gazing into their open, manly countenances?”

Or, on other occasions, he thought: “To hear some of these radical chaps talk one would think

any fellow could be a prince. Really, you know, that's nothing more than twaddle. If they tried it they'd soon find that it takes generations of royal blood behind one to give one that—well, that authority, that—so to speak—presence. I'd just like to see one of those long-haired johnnies try to lay a corner stone—with the proper dignity, I mean. Why, the people would laugh at him! They never laugh at me.”

By nature a modest and candid young man, Prince Ernest had but one vanity. He was proud of the appearance he made at public functions. He loved to lay corner stones, to unveil monuments, to visit hospitals, to address meetings. On these occasions he invariably made a neat speech, and he had never, he was glad to say, in any of his speeches given offense to anybody. He accepted, with becoming graciousness, the tributes paid him by the crowds. It pleased him exceedingly to hear his subjects punctuate his speeches with their uncouth but sincere evidences of approbation. Often he read about it afterward in the press, and secretly glowed.

“Prince Ernest”—the front page of the Morning Stiletto is speaking—“was greeted with vociferous enthusiasm when he laid the corner stone of the new polo field being built by the Coal Mine Workers' Union for the use of its members. The prince shook hands with a number of the men and made one of his felicitous and witty speeches. In part His Highness said:

“□ ‘I am always glad to speak to miners. [Cheers.] I was once a minor myself. [Laughter.] Now, all joking aside, and speaking seriously, I am glad to be here and to look into so many open, manly countenances. [Violent cheering and cries of ‘Every inch a prince!’ and ‘Long live Bonny Prince Ernie!’] Yours is a very important industry. [Cries of ‘Hear, hear!’] I can't think what I should do in winter if it weren't for coal. [Cheers, and cries of ‘God bless Your Highness,’ and ‘Spoken like a prince!'] I repeat, therefore, I am glad to be with you——’□ ”

Yes, there was no question about it, his subjects loved him.

But now he had the mumps. He was as puffy as if he had attempted to swallow a pair of inflated water wings, and when he drank a glass of water it was like swallowing a string of biggish beads. Moreover, he had a fever, and his royal knees felt decidedly gelatinous, and the doctor had said he must stay in bed. To get mumps at a time like this, he mused, was almost unprincely. His country needed him, and there he lay, ineffectual and mumpish. Indeed, mumps at a time like this was nothing short of a calamity, for on the morrow His Very Serene Highness the Emperor of Zabonia was to pay an official visit to the prince's country. Fifty million people held their breath and tremulously awaited the result. Would there be war? Everybody knew that the answer depended on the emperor's visit.

Relations between the prince's country and Zabonia were strained—dangerously strained. Why had that bellicose old fire eater, the Duke of Blennergasset, made that intemperate

speech in which he referred to the Emperor of Zabonia as a “pompous elderly porpoise with the morals of a tumblebug?” Why had Count Malpizzi, the Zabonian Secretary for War, in heated rejoinder seen fit to declare that as for Prince Ernest’s father, the king, he was no lily of the valley himself, and furthermore, Prince Ernest’s countrymen were three degrees lower in the scale of existence than the guinea pig? A painful and acute situation had been created between the two countries; one puff of the air of animosity on those smoldering embers and the blood-red flame of war would break forth. This eventuality would be highly inopportune for Prince Ernest’s country, for Zabonia had just perfected a cannon whose shell carried a hundred miles and then bounced back to be recharged. War must be averted. The Emperor of Zabonia must be received with every show of cordiality, must be accorded every honor, must be given not the slightest shadow of a pretext for taking umbrage. The emperor must carry away the impression that Prince Ernest’s country loved Zabonia with a surpassing love; the emperor must be made to believe that the Duke of Blennergasset’s reference to him as a pompous elderly porpoise was one of pure affection and esteem, and that a comparison of the morals of His Very Serene Highness to those of a tumblebug was an idiomatic expression, and highly complimentary, inasmuch as tumblebugs are popularly believed to lead lives of singular probity and chastity.

Prince Ernest’s father, the king, had given orders that his entire royal family, down to the most remote ducal cousin, must be on hand to greet the Emperor of Zabonia; and, of course, so the king stated, it was of the highest importance that the heir apparent, Prince Ernest, should be there. But how could he be, for he had the mumps? It was an exceedingly regrettable situation. These Zabonians were a truculent and suspicious lot, and if the crown prince were not present to greet their emperor they’d read some subtle insult into it, you could depend upon it. It was the custom for visiting monarchs to appear on the balcony overlooking the plaza in front of the royal palace to be cheered by the crowd which always collected there on such occasions, and it was also the custom, as the whole world knows, for the king to stand on the right side of the royal visitor and the crown prince to stand on the left. This was the etiquette. From it there could be no deviation. If the crown prince did not stand at the emperor’s left hand tomorrow it would be instantly apparent to the crowd that a slight was intended, and then no power could hold back the hungry hounds of war; and war, just now, with Zabonia would be extremely inconvenient.

The prince frowned at the obese pink cupids that adorned the ceiling of the royal bedchamber. He was too weak to do much else.

The doctor had just issued an ultimatum. The prince must not be moved; to do so, the doctor assured him, would be suicide. The king protested, even pleaded. But the doctor, who, like most savants, was stubborn, shook his white beard.

“But he must appear before the crowd,” said the king, wringing his own whiskers, which were plentiful and auburn.

“It would kill him,” said the doctor with finality.

“If I weren’t an only son I’d risk it,” said the prince weakly, from his bed.

“You can bet you would,” said the king.

His Majesty paced the chamber.

“Mumps!” he ejaculated. “And at such a time! The crowd will never understand it!” He was patently worried.

Then it was that the Count of Duffus, who was Gentleman in Waiting in the Royal Bedchamber, had a tremendous idea. He reduced his brain wave to an excited whisper and poured it into the king’s ear. The king beamed and nodded, at intervals saying, “Good!” “Yes, yes, yes!” “Excellent!” “Splendid!” “Ripping!” “By all means!” “Stout fellow!” “Good old Duffus!” “The very thing.” “Quite so, quite so!” “Admirable!” “Of course!” “Perfect!” and other expressions of approbation. The Count of Duffus, damp with the gentle dew of success, made off; and the king turned to the prince, a twinkle in his eye.

“Invaluable chap, Duffus,” said His Majesty. “Good idea of his. Should have thought of it myself, tho. The old dummy dodge!”

“The dummy dodge, father?” The young prince raised un-understanding eyebrows.

“You’ll see,” promised the king, “when Duffus gets back.”

It wasn’t often that the king talked with the prince so familiarly. Usually there was an atmosphere of formality about their relations; it was more as if they were a friendly but not intimate king and prince than a father and son. Sometimes, the prince had noticed, the king was unusually aloof; there had been days when the king had not spoken to the prince at all; on other days His Majesty was more expansive; today the king was positively clubby.

Presently the Count of Duffus did come back, and with him a package so large that it took two able-bodied footmen to carry it. With an air of having accomplished something noteworthy, the Count of Duffus stood the package upright by the prince’s bed and began most carefully to peel off the wrapping paper. He tore off the last piece of paper with a flourish, and the prince’s eyes opened so wide that his mumps hurt.

It was the waxen figure of a fair-haired, smiling young man in polo costume.

“Why, it’s I!” exclaimed the prince, who, mumps or no mumps, surprised or not, always

expressed himself correctly.

“They do make those dummies more perfectly all the time,” remarked the king, who was admiringly examining the figure. “That nose is exactly like Ernie’s, now isn’t it?”

The prince lay staring at his effigy.

“I don’t see——” he began as distinctly as the mumps would let him.

“Oh, you will,” said the king. “Duffus, did Madame Hassler make much of a fuss?”

“Oh, naturally,” replied the count. “She thought I was balmy in the crumpet, probably. She said it was the prize figure in the waxworks. Big drawing card and all that. I had to pay her a hundred and seventy goobecs before she’d part with it.”

“That’s a lot of money,” said the king, a careful soul; “but it will be worth it tomorrow. I’ll make you a duke for this, Duffus.”

“Thanks awfully. Oh, look here, Your Majesty! You can move its arms!”

“Better and better!” exclaimed the king. “We can make it salute.” The king turned to his son, who was still more than a little bewildered. “Ernie,” said the king, “where do you keep your uniform as honorary colonel of the Royal Purple Bombardiers?”

“Whatever for, father?”

“For your understudy here, of course.”

The king’s expression just then indicated that he did not consider that his son was a lightning calculator.

“Don’t you get the idea, Ernie?”

“I think I begin to,” said the prince; “and, father, I don’t like it.”

The king shrugged well-nourished shoulders.

“It’s the only way,” he said. “We can’t risk even the appearance of slighting that touchy old hippopotamus.”

“Hippopotamus, father? I was not aware——”

“Oh, I mean that venerable muffin, the Emperor of Zabonia,” cut in the king with a trace of impatience.

“But, father,” said the prince, and his eyes showed that he was shocked, “he is a king!”

The king was contrite.

“Sorry, son,” he said. “I shouldn’t speak like that of royalty, I know. But I have so much on my mind these days, with this tiresome visit and your mumps and the shadow of war and heaven knows what.”

“But, father,” said the prince, following up his advantage, “please don’t ask me to permit this monstrous thing. It’s not honorable. It’s not princely.”

The king patted his son’s silk pajamaed shoulder.

“Pish-tush, Ernie!” he said playfully. “I wish you wouldn’t always be so devilishly idealistic. You’re so high-minded one needs to get on a stepladder to talk to you. Wake up, Ernie. You’re old enough now not to believe in Santa Claus any longer.”

The king’s tone grew more serious.

“I’ve dreaded this day, Ernie,” he said, “on your account. You’re such a naïve chap, you know. Still, the day was bound to come. It’s like a fellow’s first cigar—sickens him at first, but it’s the only way to learn to smoke.”

“Father,” said the prince, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I know is that it’s not right to try to impersonate a prince in this way. That grinning dummy there isn’t I. It can’t be I. Nobody will be fooled. And furthermore, I don’t want to fool my people.”

“Roll over and go to sleep, Ernie,” said the king. “There are times when you give me a sharp pain in the region of the waistcoat.”

From his bed the prince could see it all, the whole damnable imposition. First he could see emerge the full outlines of His Serene Highness of Zabonia. The prince could see plainly the celebrated red nose of that monarch; rather like an electric-light bulb in the center of a round cheese, thought the prince, who had a gift for simile. He wondered why the Zabonian emperor insisted on wearing that ridiculous skin-tight pink hussar uniform. Then the prince saw his father step on the balcony, to cheers. His Majesty was in the cream-and-gold uniform of a field marshal of the King’s Very Own Royal Indefatigables, and he took his

place at the emperor's side, bowing. Then came the stunning blow to the mumps-stricken prince. Another figure had appeared on the balcony, a very erect, dignified figure in the dashing uniform of the Royal Purple Bombardiers. The prince in the bed perceived that the thing on the balcony was himself!

As, horrified, he watched, Prince Ernest saw the thing's hand go up in a precise military salute. The great throng of people went wild. Their cheers made the palace tremble.

"Viva our prince!" he heard distinctly. "Long live Prince Ernest!"

A lean man with a hungry face had eluded the police and eeled his way to the top of a lamp-post in the plaza.

"There he is!" called the man shrilly. "Every inch a prince! Who's every inch a prince?"

Their answer filled the air with sound—"Prince Ernest! Prince Ernest! Prince Ernest!"

Lying there, Prince Ernest saw the dummy back majestically from the balcony.

"Long life to the prince!" screamed the man on the lamp-post. "He never turns his back on his people!"

The crowds took up the cry.

"Long life to Prince Ernest! He never turns his back on his people!"

"And jolly good reason," said the prince, "for they'd see the strings Duffus is pulling to make the thing salute."

The brow of the prince was no longer bland, no longer was it free from lines of disillusionment. He was thinking of what he had seen.

His voice was tragic, as he said, "So this is what it means to be a prince! A dummy serves just as well! A dummy; the sort of thing they have in cheap ready-made clothing stores—Very Nobby! Newest and Niftiest Cut! Take Me Home for Fourteen Goobecs. What a blind ass I've been! But it's not too late. I'm not going to go on with this miserable sham. I'm not going to be a stuffed uniform any longer. If a dummy can be a prince I don't want to be. Let them have a dummy in my place. I'm going to be a man."

He addressed these words to the emptiness of the royal chamber, and his tone was steeped in the vinegar of bitter realization. Prince Ernest was working himself up to quite a pinch of resolution, when the chamber door opened and in came the king. Behind him wobbled the

vast bulk and incandescent nose of the Emperor of Zabonia.

“His Zabonian Serenity,” explained the king, “insisted on coming to see you. His Serenity understands, of course, why political expediency made it necessary for you to be represented before the people by a—er—substitute. Don’t you, Your Zabonian Serenity?”

“Zshur,” rumbled the royal visitor; his voice was thick as if his words came through a blanket. “I didn’t know,” he added, “it wasn’t the prince until the king told me.”

Emotions were bubbling and sputtering inside the bosom of Prince Ernest.

“I’m ashamed,” said the prince, “to deceive my people like that.”

His Zabonian Serenity, who had taken a chair, arranged two or three of his chins and part of his expanse of jowl into a grin.

“Ernie,” cautioned the king, “no nonsense now!”

The bottled-up feeling rushed from the prince in a torrent of passionate words.

“Father, I’m going to speak out! I’m through with this whole business.”

“What business?” The king looked puzzled.

“This prince business,” said Prince Ernest. “I saw it all while I was lying here. What am I? Nothing! Nothing, that is, but a—pardon the colloquialism—stuffed uniform. A prince? Bah, a dummy! That’s all I am! I step out and bow and smirk and salute while some other chap pulls the strings. The people don’t care a gingersnap about me. It’s my uniform they cheer. Stuff it with wax or sawdust or me, it’s all the same to them. Why, they’d cheer it if it were stuffed with mush! So I’m through, father! I can’t go on with this hypocrisy. Give the dummy my place. I’m sorry to shock you, father. You and the emperor probably have never thought about things in this way. But don’t you see, a prince is really only a dummy? Forgive me—but it’s true.”

The young prince was almost hysterical. The king did not appear to be in the least perturbed; he gave the prince a fatherly pat on his shoulder and winked at the Emperor of Zabonia.

“He’s only twenty-three and a few days,” explained the king, “so naturally he takes it a bit hard. I did myself—thought of entering a monastery—yes, really.”

His Zabonian Serenity chuckled deep in his cavern of chest.

“Ernie,” said the king, turning to his son, and speaking in his most kindly manner, “you’ve discovered what all kings discover sooner or later. You’ve found yourself out. Now your job will be to keep the people from finding you out. Isn’t that so, Your Serenity?”

“Zshur,” rumbled the visitor, sucking at a long amber-scented cigaret.

“But I don’t want to keep them from finding me out!” cried the prince. “I don’t want to go on living this ghastly farce. I am going to work.”

The king laughed jovially.

“Work?” he inquired. “At what, in heaven’s name?”

“Something honest,” replied Prince Ernest.

The king laughed and nudged the emperor in his imperial ribs.

“Ah, youth!” said the king. “Ah, youth! By the way, Ernie, how much did you spend last year?”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly,” replied the prince, mystified. “The Royal Bursar of the Most Privy Purse could no doubt tell you. Probably between three hundred and four hundred thousand goobecs, I fancy.”

“And how many motor cars did you have?” questioned the king.

“Eleven, if you don’t count roadsters.”

“Fair enough,” said the king. “We won’t count roadsters. Now, Ernie, suppose you were a young lawyer——”

“I wish I were,” said the prince.

“At this precise moment,” pursued the king, “you’d be in your office hoping some friend would fall down a manhole so you could sue the city for damages. You could consider yourself jolly lucky if you made eight hundred goobecs a year. If you were a young doctor you’d be sitting around with your hands in your empty pockets praying for an epidemic. If you were a young business man you’d be in a terrible stew about your overhead or underfoot or whatever it is business men get into a stew about. Instead of having eleven motor cars, not counting roadsters, you’d be fortunate to have your bus fare. Now I’m a doting father, Ernie, but even I can see that you are no intellectual colossus. And yet you

acceptably fill a job that brings you in three or four hundred thousand goobecs a year, and eleven motor cars, not counting roadsters. Despite all that, you talk of going on strike. Really, Ernie, that's preposterous. Isn't it, Your Zabonian Serenity?"

The emperor nodded and puffed at his scented cigaret.

"Pre," he rumbled, "posterous!"

"You've a downy nest, my boy," went on the king benignly. "You'd be a chump to quit it. Come now. Look at this thing through a microscope instead of a pair of smoked glasses. Be a prince of the world, not one of the Red Fairy Book. If the people are dolts enough to let you keep the job, why put unpleasant ideas into their heads?"

"Oh, father"—the young prince was very pale—"forgive me for saying it, but I do believe you are a cynic!"

"Of course I am," answered the king cheerfully. "That's better than being the only other thing a king can be."

"What's that?"

"A blithering fool," answered the king. "How can a king with any sense respect his people? He sees them bawling their beery cheers first about some rather ordinary human being like yourself, for example, Ernie, and then he sees them cheering one of your silly uniforms stuffed with wax. The only way a king who pretends to be civilized can regard his subjects is as dupes."

The young prince lay scowling at the cupids. He was thinking deeply. He said at last:

"I know. You are saying this to try me. You are testing my faith in the inherent strength of royalty. It was weak of me to doubt. That dummy business today did hit me hard; but, after all, it was only a desperate ruse that by chance succeeded. You pretended it is quite the usual thing; but, of course, it isn't. I implore you to tell me that it isn't, father."

The king lit a cheroot and replied in an anecdotal tone:

"When I was your age, Ernie, I had a beautiful set of whiskers and a still more beautiful set of ideals about the sanctity of my position and all that. I still have the whiskers. My dear old father suggested that I grow the whiskers. 'You haven't much of a chin,' he said to me. 'I think you'd better keep your loyal subjects in the dark about that. A king can be human, but not too damn human. Also, there's another reason—whiskery men all look pretty much alike.' I did not understand then what he was talking about; but many years later, after his

death, I did. I was scheduled to go to some dismal provincial town and knight some pestilential bounder of a mayor. I'd been performing a lot of royal chores, including the coronation mumbo-jumbo, and I was a bit fed up. The more I thought of going to that town the more bored I grew. But of course I had to go. Was I not a king? I took myself and my duties terribly seriously, even as you do, Ernie."

The king unashed his cheroot in a gold tray and went on:

"Yes, I felt that only a king full of blue blood could possibly knight a fellow properly. However, on the night before the ceremony I drank a magnum of champagne, and then made the strategic error of adding a few glasses of 1812 brandy. Alcohol is no respecter of royalty. In the morning I perceived that if I tried to knight the fellow I'd probably decapitate him. Here was a pretty kettle of whitebait. I was at my wit's end when Lord Crockinghorse, my secretary, bobbed up with an idea. He'd had it on ice for some time, it appeared. He produced a whiskery blighter who opened oysters in a fried-fish shop; the fellow smelled most evilly of shellfish, but he looked exactly like me. In my condition at that time I could hardly tell him from myself. Crockinghorse coolly proposed that the whiskery oysterman should take my place. I was shocked inexpressibly. An oysterman substituting for a king! What a devastating and yet absurd thought! I felt just as you do now, Ernie."

The king blew a smoke ring and continued:

"Well, Crockinghorse won his point, and we dressed up the whiskery blighter in my most garish uniform, told him if he said a syllable more than 'yes' or 'no' we'd murder him, and taught him a speech which went:

"□ 'My loyal subjects [pause for cheers] I am overcome by this reception. [Pause.] I can only say thank you, thank you, thank you.' We packed him off in my pea-green uniform and next day the papers all said, 'His Majesty performed his part in the ceremony with exceptional grace and dignity.' □ "

The prince in his bed moaned; the king, with a shrug, continued:

"Oh, I was all cut up for days! Felt deucedly unnecessary. But at last light dawned and the more I thought of the whole affair the more it entertained me. I ended by hiring the whiskery blighter at twenty-five goobecs a week, gave him a room in the palace near the kitchen and a lot of oysters to amuse himself with and whenever I got tired of kinging I trotted to Paris or somewhere incog and left the corner stone laying to my oyster friend. He became rather better at it than I. Oh, I had to do it, Ernie! If I hadn't had a genuine vacation now and then I should have got squirrels in the cupola, absolutely."

The prince had aged perceptibly during this recital. His voice quavered as he asked, "And

where is the fellow now?"

"Oh, I still use him," answered the king. "Only last week I sent him down to Wizzelborough to lay the corner stone of the new cathedral. You were there, Ernie. Didn't you notice anything peculiar?"

The prince's reply was faint-voiced.

"I did notice that the cathedral smelled uncommonly oystery," he said. He drew in his breath; his manner was that of a drowning man making a last desperate effort to save himself.

"Father," he said, "I am crushed by what you tell me. I can't believe that what you say is true of all royal persons. Something in here"—the prince laid a manicured hand on the spot on the bosom of his lavender pajamas where he believed his heart to be—"tells me that there are still kings who respect the traditions of royalty, who are themselves and nothing else. I appeal to Your Zabonian Serenity to reassure me about this, to give me back my faith in myself and my position. They wouldn't do a thing like this in Zabonia! Oh, tell me they wouldn't!"

The Emperor of Zabonia tossed away his scented cigaret.

"You gentlemen," he said in his slow, thick voice, "have confided in me. I'm going to return the compliment. I am not the Emperor of Zabonia. I'm just an old actor from the Imperial Stock Company who happens to look like the emperor. He is usually too tight to go to public functions or pay royal visits, so he sends me."

In the morning the young prince pulled a velvet bell cord and his valet entered.

"Thursday," said the prince, "I'm supposed to ride through the city and be pelted with flowers. It's an old tradition or some such rot. Will you please take that dummy there in the corner, dress him in my uniform as Honorary Rear Admiral of the Royal Submarine Fleet, seat him in the royal carriage and drive him around in my place?"

The valet bowed. The prince picked up the morning newspaper and turned to the sporting page.

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