

9. *The Hussar, the King, and the Stag Wagon*

Once upon a time there was an Hussar who had served out his time in the army; but he was still young and strong and had no wish to be idle. So, with the pay he had saved up, he bought a small farm; and one day as he was ploughing he turned up a stone that glittered most brightly in the sun.

‘Ah ha,’ thought he, ‘this surely must be something valuable!’ And he picked it up, and off with him to show it to a jeweller.

The jeweller was an honest old man. He looked at the stone and said, ‘My good sir, this stone is a diamond of priceless value. I cannot pay you what it is worth, nor, I’m sure, can any other man. If I were you I should present it to the King. He will certainly reward you in some suitable manner.’

So the Hussar went with the diamond to the King and said, ‘High and mighty majesty, will you be pleased to accept a gift from your obedient servant?’

The King was delighted. He immediately presented the Hussar with a dukedom. But he said, ‘My good fellow, because I make you a duke I cannot have you giving yourself unnecessary airs. You must know that it is my custom to drive out in a carriage drawn by six horses with reins of finest highly polished leather. Now I forbid you, as I have forbidden all my subjects, to rival me in this. A two-horse carriage is all I can permit you to use.’

‘I would not dream of disobeying you, your majesty,’ said the Hussar, bowing low.

Now here was our Hussar a mighty duke, feeling proud as any peacock. But that he couldn’t drive out in a carriage and six – well, that vexed him. So what did he do? He bought a little four-wheeled wagon, and twelve magnificent stags. He had the wagon decorated with gold and silver stars, and he gilded the stags’ horns. He harnessed

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the twelve stags to the wagon and drove about the country, wearing a coat of red velvet with diamond buttons – a coat finer than any garment the King possessed.

Was the King angry? He was furious! But the Hussar, all cock-a-hoop with his dukedom and his riches, took no notice of the King's anger. And since he had not disobeyed the King's orders, there seemed no way of punishing him. So the King complained to the Emperor.

The Emperor was a merry fellow. He thought 'I'll have some fun over this!' And he summoned the King and the Hussar to appear before him.



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'Now,' said he, 'I am going to suggest that we hold a contest between you two. We will call it a lying contest. You shall each tell a story – a story with as many lies in it as you can invent. And the one of you who can first make the other say "*That's a lie!*" shall win the contest. If the King wins, the Hussar must cease from flaunting about in his stag wagon. If the Hussar wins, he shall be free to drive out in whatever manner he pleases. . . . And your majesty,' said he turning to the King, 'you, being of the higher rank, shall have first innings. Now let us hear what you have to tell us.'

So the King began his story. 'Once,' he said, 'I had to march my army against an enemy much stronger than myself. We met in a furious battle –'

'That I can well believe,' said the Hussar.

'Guns were discharging,' went on the King, 'cannon were roaring, heads were flying –'

'That I can well believe,' said the Hussar. 'I've experienced the same myself, many's the time.'

'Ah,' said the King, 'but you have never experienced a happening that I am now about to relate. By and by there came a time when every one of my soldiers lay dead upon the field –'

'That I can well believe,' said the Hussar.

'Hold your tongue!' said the King, getting vexed.

The Hussar was laughing. He put out his tongue and held the tip of it between his thumb and forefinger. The King scowled, and went on with his story. 'Now I come to the marvellous part of the whole affair. As each of my men fell dead, two strange soldiers sprang up to take his place. . . . And so of course we won the battle.'

'Ha ha ha! That I can well believe,' laughed the Hussar, 'because something of the sort once happened to me. It was when I was fighting in your army, my lord King. I was shot down, and as I lay dead a stranger rose up and took my place. . . . And now I don't rightly know which I am – myself or the other fellow. . . . Sometimes I find this extremely awkward,' he said, shaking his head sorrowfully.

'Is that the end of your story, my lord King?' asked the Emperor.

The King couldn't think of anything more. So he scowled at the Hussar, and said, 'Yes, that is the end of the story.'

'Then now,' said the Emperor to the Hussar, 'let us hear what you have to tell us.'

'Well,' said the Hussar, 'once upon a time there was an old woman

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who found a grain of wheat and a grain of oats and a grain of barley. She planted all three grains in her garden. The grain of wheat died, the oat grain was eaten by a mouse, but the grain of barley sprang up and grew, and grew, and *grew*. It grew till it reached the sky, and the old woman climbed up it and found herself in Heaven.'

'That I can well believe,' said the King. 'I've heard that tale before – or something very like it.'

'So then,' said the Hussar, 'the old woman went rambling about Heaven, listening to the angels playing their harps, and the happy souls singing their hymns of praise. But after a time she became bored –'

'That I can very well believe,' sneered the King.

'So the old woman climbed down the barley stalk again,' said the Hussar, 'and when she reached the earth once more she felt curious to know how deep the barley roots went, and she rummaged in the earth and found the roots. And, believe it or not, they went right down to Hell Gate.'

'Yes, yes, of course we can believe that,' said the King.

'Well now,' said the Hussar, 'the old woman pushed open Hell Gate and stepped inside; and the many people she met that she'd never have thought to find there, you wouldn't believe –'

'Oh, I can believe it well enough,' said the King.

'Don't interrupt,' said the Hussar. 'Where was I? Oh yes, the old woman was looking about her, wondering what she'd see next, when she heard a shout, "Make way, make way for Satan and his bride!" And the Devil himself came walking towards her, pushing a wheelbarrow. Somebody was sitting in the wheelbarrow – and guess who it was? No, you'd never guess, so I'll have to tell you – it was the King's grandmother.'

'You scoundrel,' shouted the King, 'that's a downright lie!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed the Hussar. And 'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed the Emperor 'Our friend the Hussar has won the contest. And henceforth he is free to drive out in any manner that pleases him.'