



What Six Girls with Balloons Told the Gray Man on Horseback

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North American

Intermediate
7 min read

Once there came riding across the Rootabaga Country a Gray Man on Horseback. He looked as if he had come a long ways. He looked like a brother to the same Gray Man on Horseback who said he had seen the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy.

He stopped in the Village of Cream Puffs. His gray face was sad and his eyes were gray deep and sad. He spoke short and seemed strong. Sometimes his eyes looked as if they were going to flash, but instead of fire they filled with shadows.¹⁶⁸

Yet—he did laugh once. It did happen once he lifted his head and face to the sky and let loose a long ripple of laughs.

On Main Street near the Roundhouse of the Big Spool, where they wind up the string that pulls the light little town back when the wind blows it away, there he was riding slow on his gray horse when he met six girls with six fine braids of yellow hair and six balloons apiece. That is, each and every one of the six girls had six fine

long braids of yellow hair and each braid of hair had a balloon tied on the end. A little blue wind was blowing and the many balloons tied to the braids of the six girls swung up and down and slow and fast whenever the blue wind went up and down and slow and fast.

For the first time since he had been in the Village, the eyes of the Gray Man filled with lights and his face began to look hopeful. He stopped his horse when he came even with the six girls and the balloons floating from the braids of yellow hair.

“Where you going?” he asked.

“Who—hoo-hoo? Who—who—who?” the six girls cheeped out.

“All six of you and your balloons, where you going?”

“Oh, hoo-hoo-hoo, back where we came from,” and they all turned their heads back and forth and sideways, which of course turned all the balloons back and forth and sideways because the balloons were fastened to the fine braids of hair which were fastened to their heads.

“And where do you go when you get back where you came from?” he asked just to be asking.

“Oh, hoo-hoo-hoo, then we start out and go straight ahead and see what we can see,” they all answered just to be answering and they dipped their heads and swung them up which of course dipped all the balloons and swung them up.

So they talked, he asking just to be asking and the six balloon girls answering just to be answering.

At last his sad mouth broke into a smile and his eyes were lit like a morning sun coming up over harvest fields. And he said to them, “Tell me why are balloons—that is what I want you to tell me—why are balloons?”

The first little girl put her thumb under her chin, looked up at her six balloons floating in the little blue wind over her head, and said: “Balloons are wishes. The wind made them. The west wind makes the red balloons. The south wind makes the blue. The yellow and green balloons come from the east wind and the north wind.”

The second little girl put her first finger next to her nose, looked up at her six balloons dipping up and down like hill flowers in a small wind, and said:

“A balloon used to be a flower. It got tired. Then it changed itself to a balloon. I listened one time to a yellow

balloon. It was talking to itself like people talk. It said, 'I used to be a yellow pumpkin flower stuck down close to the ground, now I am a yellow balloon high up in the air where nobody can walk on me and I can see everything.'

The third little girl held both of her ears like she was afraid they would wiggle while she slid with a skip, turned quick, and looking up at her balloons, spoke these words:

"A balloon is foam. It comes the same as soap bubbles come. A long time ago it used to be sliding along on water, river water, ocean water, waterfall water, falling and falling over a rocky waterfall, any water you want. The wind saw the bubble and picked it up and carried it away, telling it, 'Now you're a balloon—come along and see the world.'"

The fourth little girl jumped straight into the air so all six of her balloons made a jump like they were going to get loose and go to the sky—and when the little girl came down from her jump and was standing on her two feet with her head turned looking up at the six balloons, she spoke the shortest answer of all, saying:

"Balloons are to make us look up. They help our necks."

The fifth little girl stood first on one foot, then another, bent her head down to her knees and looked at her toes, then swinging straight up and looking at the flying spotted yellow and red and green balloons, she said:

"Balloons come from orchards. Look for trees where half is oranges and half is orange balloons. Look for apple trees where half is red pippins and half is red pippin balloons. Look for watermelons too. A long green balloon with white and yellow belly stripes is a ghost. It came from a watermelon said good-by."

The sixth girl, the last one, kicked the heel of her left foot with the toe of her right foot, put her thumbs under her ears and wiggled all her fingers, then stopped all her kicking and wiggling, and stood looking up at her balloons all quiet because the wind had gone down—and she murmured like she was thinking to herself:

"Balloons come from fire chasers. Every balloon has a fire chaser chasing it. All the fire chasers are made terrible quick and when they come they burn quick, so the balloon is made light so it can run away terrible quick. Balloons slip away from fire. If they don't they can't be balloons. Running away from fire keeps them light."

All the time he listened to the six girls the face of the Gray Man kept getting more hopeful. His eyes lit up.

Twice he smiled. And after he said good-by and rode up the street, he lifted his head and face to the sky and let loose a long ripple of laughs.

He kept looking back when he left the Village and the last thing he saw was the six girls each with six balloons fastened to the six braids of yellow hair hanging down their backs.

The sixth little girl kicked the heel of her left foot with the toe of her right foot and said, "He is a nice man. I think he must be our uncle. If he comes again we shall all ask him to tell us where he thinks balloons come from."

And the other five girls all answered, "Yes," or "Yes, yes," or "Yes, yes, yes," real fast like a balloon with a fire chaser after it.

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