

# *The Wise Judgment*

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*Intermediate*

*17 min read*

King Hradibor was a wise and a clever man. He was wise because he would travel about the country, that he might see everything for himself; he was clever because he did so under an assumed name, in order that people might not prepare themselves for his visits. In this way he saw many remarkable things—things of which he had not the remotest idea before; and no wonder, for he would not only go into open towns and villages, but even into the poorest hut if it came in his way. In a miserable hovel he once saw what he had never seen before—a poor woman with twelve daughters.

“Are all these your daughters?” asked the king of the old woman, who was greatly surprised that a gentleman should deign to enter her poor hut.

“They are all mine,” answered the old woman, sighing; “and I don’t know what to do with them.”

“As you are so poor,” said the king, “I will take one of your daughters with me on my return.”

Then the king gave the old woman a piece of gold money, and, wishing her heaven’s blessing, departed.

The woman became a little easier in her mind on the receipt of this present; but not so her daughters. They were all well-conducted and obedient children; but when a fine gentleman comes and asks to take one of them away—for his wife, of course!—it is no trifling matter. They began to discuss the question together, and each

claimed the strange gentleman for herself. At length, as after a long dispute they could not agree who was the most eligible, the eldest sister said,—

“I am the eldest, and according to custom I ought to be married first.”

“That’s of no consequence,” cried the second sister; “the gentleman may pay little respect for custom, and choose any one of us he likes best.”

“Certainly,” concurred the third sister, “such gentlemen don’t care much for custom. What do you say, sisters?”

“No, no; of course not!” they all cried, with the exception of the eldest—and the youngest, who was but five years old, and the most beautiful of them all.

Then the mother came among her daughters, and sent them to their work. The girls set to work, but somehow the work did not go on so well this time as usual; they were all deeply buried in thought; they would stop to arrange their dresses and smooth their hair, and they looked at each other with suspicion. Had not the king soon returned they would all have worried themselves to death, although he had promised to take only one of them. Fortunately the king soon made his appearance, and not wishing to keep the girls in suspense any longer, he took the youngest of them, called Libena, by the hand, saying to the old woman,—

“I will take this one away with me.”

“Why, what will you do with her?” cried the mother and sisters with one voice.

“What shall I do with her? I will adopt her as my own daughter, since I have none at home. Do you not agree to that?”

“With pleasure,” answered the mother; the daughters were dumb with surprise. Then the king stepped into his carriage, placed Libena by his side, and having given the mother a purse full of gold pieces, drove away. The daughters surrounded the mother, and when she had shown them the money they recovered somewhat from their astonishment and were satisfied.

Meanwhile the king drove to his palace, where he had three sons, the youngest of whom was only ten years old.

“I have brought you a sister,” said the king to his sons, when he reached home. The princes came running

round their new sister and smothered her with kisses. From that moment Libena was regarded by every one in the palace as a princess. It was only the servant who had travelled with the king about the country who knew it was not so.

Libena grew more beautiful every day, and the princes came to love her more and more; even the queen herself loved her as much as if she had been her own daughter. Among the servants, however, Libena came in the course of time to be looked upon with contempt, because the first one who knew of her place of birth told it to his friend, he to another, and so on, until the whole story was well known to every servant in the palace. The princes alone knew nothing of Libena's origin, although they had grown up to be young men. They, indeed, had no thought on the matter. They were greatly attached to their supposed sister, were always in her company, did whatever she asked of them, and would willingly have died for her sake. One day the youngest prince ordered the coachman to get the carriage ready, as the princess wished to take a short drive. The servant turned towards the stable to do what he was told, and thinking the prince was already out of hearing, grumbled to himself,—

“What a fuss they do make with that bought girl!—just as if she were a princess!”

“What did you say?” cried the prince, seizing the coachman by the arm. “Is Libena not our sister?”

The coachman was frightened; after a moment's hesitation he mumbled that he did not say anything.

“You did,” said the prince. “If you do not tell me what it was, I will complain to my father.”

“I only said,” apologised the coachman, “what the other servants have told me—that his majesty bought the Princess Libena at some village.”

Upon hearing this the prince went immediately to seek his brothers.

“Brothers!” he exclaimed with great joy, “I have just heard that Libena is not our sister.”

“Then I shall take her for my wife,” cried the eldest brother.

“No! I shall take her. I shall take her!” cried the other brothers.

“I am the eldest, and have the greatest right to her,” continued the eldest prince. “I will go at once and ask

father to give her to me for my wife.”

He then went to the king, and his brothers followed him. The king and the queen were much surprised when their sons told them, with great delight, how they had heard that Libena was not their sister.

“Do you dislike her, then?” asked the king.

“Not in the least,” answered the youngest prince. “My brothers want her for a wife.”

“And you, too, I suppose,” said the king smiling.

“I shall die if she does not become mine,” answered the prince.

“Then you all three want her for a wife?”

“Yes, yes!” cried the princes together.

The king reflected for a moment, then he said,—

“Hear me, my sons, you cannot all three marry Libena. Go, therefore, all of you, into the world, and he among you who brings home the most wonderful thing, shall become the husband of Libena. Does that please you?”

“Yes, yes!” answered the princes.

They soon set out together on their travels. They journeyed for three days, but they could find nothing remarkable.

“This will not do,” said the eldest brother, at the inn where they stopped for the night. “We must part; then perhaps we shall meet with better fortune.”

The two younger brothers agreed to this suggestion, and soon afterwards they started, each on a different route, after promising to come again, and to wait for each other, at the same inn, before returning home.

The eldest prince pursued the road leading to the right. One day he came to a town, and from a distance saw a great crowd of people. He came nearer, pressed into the middle of the crowd, and there saw a very old man with a little carriage.

“What is this?” asked the prince of one of the bystanders.

“Why, this old man wants to sell his little carriage,” answered the man; “but he asks such an enormous sum for it—a thousand gold pieces.”

“And some of you would perhaps buy it!” said the prince aloud. “Oh, foolish people! Would you give a thousand gold pieces for this miserable carriage? Are you not afraid that the whole world would laugh at you? You are as ridiculous as this old man.”

When the prince said this, those who were present grew ashamed of themselves, and one by one went away. At last the prince remained alone with the old man.

“I pray you,” said the prince to the old man in a whisper, “tell me, what is there remarkable in this little carriage?”

“Indeed, sir, it is a very wonderful carriage,” answered the old man mysteriously. “Whoever sits in it will find himself immediately carried into that place to which he may wish to go.”

“A miraculous carriage!” exclaimed the prince. “Here are your thousand gold pieces for it.”

He sat down in the little vehicle, and wished himself in the inn, where he had parted from his brothers. In an instant he was there. Delighted at having obtained so wonderful a prize, he sat down thinking of Libena more deeply than ever.

The second prince went away to the left. He travelled several days and met with nothing out of the ordinary course of things; but at last fortune smiled also upon him. On the public road, just at the entrance to a town, he saw a little old man showing a handsome looking-glass he had for sale.

People passing by would stop and look at it, and ask the price, but when they heard it they would only shake their heads, and continue their journey. The prince also looked at the glass, but could see nothing remarkable

in it.

“Buy it, sir,” cried the old man to the young prince. “It is not dear; I will sell it to you for two thousand gold pieces.”

“You foolish old man! Who would give you so large a sum for a common looking-glass?”

“But stay, sir; whoever looks into this glass will see whatever he desires.”

“Here are the two thousand gold pieces,” cried the prince, and he handed his well-filled purse to the old man. The latter took the money and gave him the looking-glass. The prince looked into the glass, and silently wished to see the inn where he was to meet his brothers. At once he saw his elder brother sitting in the inn, and, judging from his countenance, in a happy mood. The prince concluded from this that his brother had gained possession of some extraordinary thing, and mounting a fast horse he galloped quickly back to the place of meeting.

Meanwhile, the youngest prince, who had chosen the road leading straight on before him, wandered on like a man bewildered; the one clear thought which filled both heart and mind was the thought of Libena.

One day, as he walked into the market-place of a town, he came upon a crowd of people who had collected round an old woman.

“Whoever heard of such a thing?” “To ask ten gold pieces for an apple!” “This is a foolish woman!” “She is mad!”

These were the exclamations which the prince heard, uttered in laughter or in indignation, from the crowd round the old woman.

“Buy, gentlemen, buy!” cried she continually. “I have only three apples for sale, and each of them costs ten gold pieces.”

The prince at once concluded that these apples must be something extraordinary, and without further consideration he gave the old woman the thirty gold pieces. As she gave him the apples, she whispered in his ear,—

“You have bought a prize, my son. If one is about to die, and will eat but one of these apples, he will live and be

well again.”

The prince was delighted. He put the apples in his pouch, and returned joyfully to the inn where his two brothers impatiently awaited his arrival.

“Where have you been so long?” asked the eldest brother.

“I have wandered about the world seeking wonderful things.”

“And what have you brought?” asked the second brother.

“Three apples.”

“There is nothing wonderful in three apples,” said the eldest brother again. “We have something better. I have a little carriage by which one may travel as fast as the wind; and our brother has a looking-glass in which you can see all that you desire.”

“Then let us look into it at once, and see what they are doing at home,” cried the youngest prince.

The brothers agreed. They took up the looking-glass, and wished to see their palace at home. They were terror-stricken by what they saw; the windows of the apartments where their parents and Libena lived were closed, and the blinds drawn darkly down. The servants ran about the courtyard as if distracted, throwing up their arms in despair.

“What does this mean?” exclaimed the eldest prince. “Some one is dangerously ill—perhaps dead!”

“We shall soon see,” said the second prince; and he desired to behold his parents and Libena. They looked in the glass; they saw the king, the queen, and their beloved one—alas! they were all upon the point of death!

“Let us fly to them!” exclaimed the youngest brother.

The princes sprang into the wonderful carriage, and in an instant they found themselves before the palace. The youngest of them immediately ran to his father, his mother, and to Libena; gave to each of them an apple, and begged them to eat it. They did as he desired, and, oh, wonder of wonders! before you could count one hundred they were so far recovered as to be able to rise. Every one praised the youngest prince to the utmost;

more especially the doctors, who had used all their skill in vain, and were driven to despair. The king embraced his youngest son, and cried, with tears of joy in his eyes,—

“Now is Libena yours! Without your help, we should all have died.”

“Not so, father,” said the second prince. “Had it not been for my looking-glass we should not have known of your illness. Libena therefore belongs to me.”

“No!” cried the eldest prince. “She is mine! Without my carriage you would have died before we could have reached home.”

Upon this a violent dispute arose as to which of the princes had won Libena. The king and his courtiers could not but acknowledge the evenly-balanced right of each of the princes to the prize; but that did not help the case, as only one of them could marry Libena. As they could not agree, the king called all the learned men of the kingdom together in his palace, that they might settle the question.

The learned men were soon assembled. They sat whole days together, and carried on the dispute even at meal times, but all to no purpose; they could not agree, and consequently arrived at no satisfactory conclusion. At last the king grew wearied of the delay, and thinking to hasten the settlement, announced his intention of being present at their next debate. The learned men prepared themselves for the occasion; and they came to dispute so vigorously in the king’s presence, that at last he clapped his hands to his ears and ran out of the room. And no wonder; for an ordinary man of common sense, had he stayed to hear them but a single day, must certainly have become crazed by their interminable talk.

“Your Majesty,” said the Lord Chamberlain, “we shall never come to an end with these gentlemen. They are so comfortable here, that they will stay and dispute to the day of their death.”

“You are right,” answered the king, “we shall never finish with such fellows. This is what you shall do: issue a proclamation to the effect that any of my subjects is at liberty to come forward and decide the question.”

Two days afterwards the hall where the learned men disputed was thrown open to everybody. The king, the queen, and Libena sat on the throne. Near it were the princes; the eldest with his little carriage, the second with the looking-glass, the youngest empty-handed. Around the hall sat the men of learning who disputed

with, if possible, even more violence than usual; not even the presence of the king restrained them. At intervals there appeared several people—some rich, in fine clothes, some poor, in humble apparel—and expressed their opinions of the case; but they had much better have stopped at home.

At last the king grew angry, and was about to leave the hall, when there appeared a little old man, with hair as white as milk, who, having bowed to the king, addressed the princes,—

“How vain is this long dispute! You all three are equally deserving; but how does the matter stand?—One of you has a miraculous little carriage; another a wonderful looking-glass; but the third has nothing, because his magic apples are eaten. Therefore it is only just that he, who has nothing else, should receive Libena.”

The king, full of joy, sprang to his feet. He embraced the old man, exclaiming,—

“You have made a wise decision; and it shall be as you say.”

The learned gentlemen were ready to faint with surprise and vexation; they never expected so much sense under so common-place a dress. They sat as dumb and still as wood until the king told them that the marriage would be celebrated on the following day, and that they were invited to the ceremony. This seemed to bring them to their senses. They began then to praise, and to express their wonder at the little old man.

The two elder princes were fain to be satisfied with the decision, and Libena was happy with the youngest prince for her husband<sup>17</sup>

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