

# \*THE LIGHT PRINCESS\*

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After a long avoidance of the painful subject, the king and queen resolved to hold a council of three upon it; and so they sent for the princess. In she came, sliding and flitting and gliding from one piece of furniture to another, and put herself at last in an armchair, in a sitting posture. Whether she could be said to sit, seeing she received no support from the seat of the chair, I do not pretend to determine.

“My dear child,” said the king, “you must be aware by this time that you are not exactly like other people.”

“Oh, you dear funny papa! I have got a nose, and two eyes, and all the rest. So have you. So has mamma.”

“Now be serious, my dear, for once,” said the queen.

“No, thank you, mamma; I had rather not.”

“Would you not like to be able to walk like other people?” said the king.

“No indeed, I should think not. You only crawl. You are such slow coaches!”

“How do you feel, my child?” he resumed, after a pause of discomfiture.

“Quite well, thank you.”

“I mean, what do you feel like?”

“Like nothing at all, that I know of.”

“You must feel like something.”

“I feel like a princess with such a funny papa, and such a dear pet of a queen-mamma!”

“Now really!” began the queen; but the princess interrupted her.

“Oh, yes,” she added, “I remember. I have a curious feeling sometimes, as if I were the only person that had any sense in the whole world.”

She had been trying to behave herself with dignity; but now she burst into a violent fit of laughter, threw herself backwards over the chair, and went rolling about the floor in an ecstasy of enjoyment. The king picked her up easier than one does a down quilt, and replaced her in her former relation to the chair. The exact preposition expressing this relation I do not happen to know.

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“Is there nothing you wish for?” resumed the king, who had learned by this time that it was useless to be angry with her.

“Oh, you dear papa!—yes,” answered she.

“What is it, my darling?”

“I have been longing for it—oh, such a time!—ever since last night.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“Will you promise to let me have it?”

The king was on the point of saying yes, but the wiser queen checked him with a single motion of her head.

“Tell me what it is first,” said he.

“No, no. Promise first.”

“I dare not. What is it?”

“Mind, I hold you to your promise. It is—to be tied to the end of a string—a very long string indeed, and be flown like a kite. Oh, such fun! I would rain rose-water, and hail sugar-plums, and snow whipped-cream, and—and—and—”

A fit of laughing checked her; and she would have been off again over the floor, had not the king started up and caught her just in time. Seeing that nothing but talk could be got out of her, he rang the bell, and sent her away with two of her ladies-in-waiting.

“Now, queen,” he said, turning to her Majesty, “what is to be done?”

“There is but one thing left,” answered she. “Let us consult the college of Metaphysicians.”

“Bravo!” cried the king; “we will.”

Now at the head of this college were two very wise Chinese philosophers—by name Hum-Drum, and Kopy-Keck. For them the king sent; and straightway they came. In a long speech he communicated to them what they knew very well already—as who did not?—namely, the peculiar condition of his daughter in relation to the globe on which she dwelt; and requested them to consult together as to what might be the cause and probable cure of her infirmity. The king laid stress upon the word, but failed to discover his own pun. The queen laughed; but Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck heard with humility and retired in silence.

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Their consultation consisted chiefly in propounding and supporting, for the thousandth time, each his favourite theories. For the condition of the princess afforded delightful scope for the discussion of every question arising from the division of thought—in fact, of all the Metaphysics of the Chinese Empire. But it is only justice to say that they did not altogether neglect the discussion of the practical question, what was to be done .

Hum-Drum was a Materialist, and Kopy-Keck was a Spiritualist. The former was slow and sententious; the latter was quick and flighty; the latter had generally the first word; the former the last.

“I reassert my former assertion,” began Kopy-Keck, with a plunge. “There is not a fault in the princess, body or soul; only they are wrong put together. Listen to me now, Hum-Drum, and I will tell you in brief what I think. Don’t speak. Don’t answer me. I won’t hear you till I have done. At that decisive moment, when souls seek their appointed habitations, two eager souls met, struck, rebounded, lost their way, and arrived each at the wrong place. The soul of the princess was one of those, and she went far astray. She does not belong by rights to this world at all, but to some other planet, probably Mercury. Her proclivity to her true sphere destroys all the natural influence which this orb would otherwise possess over her corporeal frame. She cares for nothing here. There is no relation between her and this world.

“She must therefore be taught, by the sternest compulsion, to take an interest in the earth as the earth. She must study every department of its history—its animal history, its vegetable history, its mineral history, its social history, its moral history, its political history, its scientific history, its literary history, its musical history, its artistical history, above all, its metaphysical history. She must begin with the Chinese dynasty and end with Japan. But first of all she must study geology, and especially the history of the extinct races of animals—their natures, their habits, their loves, their hates, their revenges. She must—”

“Hold, h-o-o-old!” roared Hum-Drum. “It is certainly my turn now. My rooted and insubvertible conviction is, that the causes of the anomalies evident in the princess’s condition are strictly and solely physical. But that is only tantamount to acknowledging that they exist. Hear my opinion. From some cause or other, of no importance to our inquiry, the motion

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of her heart has been reversed. That remarkable combination of the suction and the force-pump works the wrong way—I mean in the case of the unfortunate princess, it draws in where it should force out, and forces out where it should draw in. The offices of the auricles and the ventricles are subverted. The blood is sent forth by the veins, and returns by the arteries. Consequently it is running the wrong way through all her corporeal organism—lungs and all. Is it then at all mysterious, seeing that such is the case, that on the other particular of gravitation as well, she should differ from normal humanity? My proposal for the cure is this:

“Phlebotomise until she is reduced to the last point of safety. Let it be effected, if necessary, in a warm bath. When she is reduced to a state of perfect asphyxy, apply a ligature to the left ankle, drawing it as tight as the bone will bear. Apply, at the same moment, another of equal tension around the right wrist. By means of plates constructed for the purpose, place the other foot and hand under the receivers of two air-pumps. Exhaust the receivers. Exhibit a pint of French brandy, and await the result.”

“Which would presently arrive in the form of grim Death,” said Kopy-Keck.

“If it should, she would yet die in doing our duty,” retorted Hum-Drum.

But their Majesties had too much tenderness for their volatile offspring to subject her to either of the schemes of the equally unscrupulous philosophers. Indeed, the most complete knowledge of the laws of nature would have been unserviceable in her case; for it was impossible to classify her. She was a fifth imponderable body, sharing all the other properties of the ponderable.