

THE LIGHT PRINCESS

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10 ~ Look at the Moon

Early the next morning the prince set out to look for something to eat, which he soon found at a forester's hut, where for many following days he was supplied with all that a brave prince could consider necessary. And having plenty to keep him alive for the present, he would not think of wants not yet in existence. Whenever Care intruded, this prince always bowed him out in the most princely manner.

When he returned from his breakfast to his watch-cave, he saw the princess already floating about in the lake, attended by the king and queen—whom he knew by their crowns—and a great company in lovely little boats, with canopies of all the colours of the rainbow, and flags and streamers of a great many more. It was a very bright day, and the prince, burned up with the heat, began to long for the cold water and the cool princess. But he had to endure till twilight; for the boats had provisions on board, and it was not till the sun went down that the festive party began to vanish. Boat after boat drew away to the shore, following that of the king and queen, till only one, apparently the princess's own boat, remained. But she did not want to go home even yet, and the prince thought he saw her order the boat to the shore without her. At all events it rowed away; and now, of all the radiant company, only one white speck remained. Then the prince began to sing.

And this is what he sung:

“Lady fair,
Swan-white,
Lift thine eyes,
Banish night
By the might
Of thine eyes.

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“Snowy arms,
Oars of snow,
Oar her hither,
Plashing low.
Soft and slow,
Oar her hither.

“Stream behind her
O’er the lake,
Radiant whiteness!
In her wake
Following, following, for her sake,
Radiant whiteness!

“Cling about her,
Waters blue;
Part not from her,
But renew
Cold and true
Kisses round her.

“Lap me round,
Waters sad
That have left her
Make me glad,
For ye had
Kissed her ere ye left her.”

Before he had finished his song, the princess was just under the place where he sat, and looking up to find him. Her ears had led her truly.

“Would you like a fall, princess?” said the prince, looking down.

“Ah, there you are! Yes, if you please, prince,” said the princess, looking up.

“How do you know I am a prince, princess?” said the prince.

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“Because you are a very nice young man, prince,” said the princess.

“Come up then, princess.”

“Fetch me, prince.”

The prince took off his scarf, then his swordbelt then his tunic, and tied them all together, and let them down. But the line was far too short. He unwound his turban, and added it to the rest, when it was all but long enough; and his purse completed it. The princess just managed to lay hold of the knot of money, and was beside him in a moment. This rock was much higher than the other, and the splash and the dive were tremendous. The princess was in ecstasies of delight, and their swim was delicious.

Night after night they met, and swam about in the dark clear lake, where such was the prince’s gladness, that (whether the princess’s way of looking at things infected him, or he was actually getting light-headed) he often fancied that he was swimming in the sky instead of the lake. But when he talked about being in heaven, the princess laughed at him dreadfully.

When the moon came, she brought them fresh pleasure. Everything looked strange and new in her light, with an old, withered, yet unfading newness. When the moon was nearly full, one of their great delights was to dive deep in the water, and then, turning round, look up through it at the great blot of light close above them, shimmering and trembling and wavering, spreading and contracting, seeming to melt away, and again grow solid. Then they would shoot up through the blot, and lo! there was the moon, far off, clear and steady and cold, and very lovely, at the bottom of a deeper and bluer lake than theirs, as the princess said.

The prince soon found out that while in the water the princess was very like other people. And besides this, she was not so forward in her questions or pert in her replies at sea as on shore. Neither did she laugh so much; and when she did laugh, it was more gently. She seemed altogether more modest and maidenly in the water than out of it. But when the prince, who had really fallen in love when he fell in the lake, began to talk to her about love, she always turned her head towards him and laughed. After a while she began to look puzzled, as if she were trying to understand what he meant, but could not—revealing a notion that he meant something. But as soon as ever she left the lake, she was so altered, that the prince said to himself, “If I marry her, I see no help for it: we must turn merman and mermaid, and go out to sea at once.”