

THE LITTLE LAME PRINCE



Prince Cherry



Long ago there lived a monarch, who was such a very, honest man that his subjects entitled him the Good King. One day, when he was out hunting, a little white rabbit, which had been half-killed by his hounds, leaped right into his majesty's arms. Said he, caressing it: "This poor creature has put itself under my protection, and I will allow no one to injure it." So he carried it to his palace, had prepared for it a neat little rabbit-hutch, with abundance of the daintiest food, such as rabbits love, and there he left it.

The same night, when he was alone in his chamber, there appeared to him a beautiful lady. She was dressed neither

in gold, nor silver, nor brocade; but her flowing robes were white as snow, and she wore a garland of white roses on her head. The Good King was greatly astonished at the sight; for his door was locked, and he wondered how so dazzling a lady could possibly enter; but she soon removed his doubts.

"I am the fairy Candide," said she, with a smiling and gracious air. "Passing through the wood where you were hunting, I took a desire to know if you were as good as men say you are I therefore changed myself into a white rabbit and took refuge in your arms. You saved me and now I know that those who are merciful to dumb beasts will be ten times more so to human beings. You merit the name your subjects give you: you are the Good King. I thank you for your protection, and shall be always one of your best friends. You have but to say what you most desire, and I promise you your wish shall be granted."

"Madam," replied the king, "if you are a fairy, you must know, without my telling you, the wish of my heart. I have one well-beloved son, Prince Cherry: whatever kindly feeling you have toward me, extend it to him."

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“Willingly,” said Candide. “I will make him the handsomest, richest, or most powerful prince in the world: choose whichever you desire for him.”

“None of the three,” returned the father. “I only wish him to be good—the best prince in the whole world. Of what use would riches, power, or beauty be to him if he were a bad man?”

“You are right,” said the fairy; “but I can not make him good: he must do that himself. I can only change his external fortunes; for his personal character, the utmost I can promise is to give him good counsel, reprove him for his faults, and even punish him, if he will not punish himself. You mortals can do the same with your children.”

“Ah, yes!” said the king, sighing. Still, he felt that the kindness of a fairy was something gained for his son, and died not long after, content and at peace.

Prince Cherry mourned deeply, for he dearly loved his father, and would have gladly given all his kingdoms and treasures to keep him in life a little longer. Two days after the Good King was no more, Prince Cherry was sleeping in his chamber, when he saw the same dazzling vision of the fairy Candide.

“I promised your father,” said she, “to be your best friend, and in pledge of this take what I now give you;” and she placed a small gold ring upon his finger. “Poor as it looks, it is more precious than diamonds; for whenever you do ill it will prick your finger. If, after that warning, you still continue in evil, you will lose my friendship, and I shall become your direst enemy.”

So saying, she disappeared, leaving Cherry in such amazement that he would have believed it all a dream, save for the ring on his finger.

He was for a long time so good that the ring never pricked him at all; and this made him so cheerful and pleasant in his humor that everybody called him “Happy Prince Cherry.” But one unlucky day he was out hunting and found no sport, which vexed him so much that he showed his ill temper by his looks and ways. He fancied his ring felt very tight and uncomfortable, but as it did not prick him he took no heed of this: until, re-entering his palace, his little pet dog, Bibi, jumped up upon him and was sharply told to get away. The creature, accustomed to nothing but caresses, tried to attract his attention by pulling at his garments, when Prince Cherry turned and gave it a severe kick. At this moment he felt in his finger a prick like a pin.

“What nonsense!” said he to himself. “The fairy must be making game of me. Why, what

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great evil have I done! I, the master of a great empire, cannot I kick my own dog?”

A voice replied, or else Prince Cherry imagined it, “No, sire; the master of a great empire has a right to do good, but not evil. I—a fairy—am as much above you as you are above your dog. I might punish you, kill you, if I chose; but I prefer leaving you to amend your ways. You have been guilty of three faults today—bad temper, passion, cruelty: do better tomorrow.”

The prince promised, and kept his word a while; but he had been brought up by a foolish nurse, who indulged him in every way and was always telling him that he would be a king one day, when he might do as he liked in all things. He found out now that even a king cannot always do that; it vexed him and made him angry. His ring began to prick him so often that his little finger was continually bleeding. He disliked this, as was natural, and soon began to consider whether it would not be easier to throw the ring away altogether than to be constantly annoyed by it. It was such a strange thing for a king to have a spot of blood on his finger! At last, unable to put up with it any more, he took his ring off and hid it where he would never see it; and believed himself the happiest of men, for he could now do exactly what he liked. He did it, and became every day more and more miserable.

One day he saw a young girl, so beautiful that, being always accustomed to have his own way, he immediately determined to espouse her. He never doubted that she would be only too glad to be made a queen, for she was very poor. But Zelia—that was her name—answered, to his great astonishment, that she would rather not marry him.

“Do I displease you?” asked the prince, into whose mind it had never entered that he could displease anybody.

“Not at all, my prince,” said the honest peasant maiden. “You are very handsome, very charming; but you are not like your father the Good King. I will not be your queen, for you would make me miserable.”

At these words the prince’s love seemed all to turn to hatred: he gave orders to his guards to convey Zelia to a prison near the palace, and then took counsel with his foster brother, the one of all his ill companions who most incited him to do wrong.

“Sir,” said this man, “if I were in your majesty’s place, I would never vex myself about a poor silly girl. Feed her on bread and water till she comes to her senses; and if she still refuses you, let her die in torment, as a warning to your other subjects should they venture to dispute your will. You will be disgraced should you suffer yourself to be conquered by a simple girl.”

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“But,” said Prince Cherry, “shall I not be disgraced if I harm a creature so perfectly innocent?”

“No one is innocent who disputes your majesty’s authority,” said the courtier, bowing; “and it is better to commit an injustice than allow it to be supposed you can ever be contradicted with impunity.”

This touched Cherry on his weak point—his good impulses faded; he resolved once more to ask Zelia if she would marry him, and if she again refused, to sell her as a slave. Arrived at the cell in which she was confined, what was his astonishment to find her gone! He knew not whom to accuse, for he had kept the key in his pocket the whole time. At last, the foster-brother suggested that the escape of Zelia might have been contrived by an old man, Suliman by name, the prince’s former tutor, who was the only one who now ventured to blame him for anything that he did. Cherry sent immediately, and ordered his old friend to be brought to him, loaded heavily with irons. Then, full of fury, he went and shut himself up in his own chamber, where he went raging to and fro, till startled by a noise like a clap of thunder. The fairy Candide stood before him.

“Prince,” said she, in a severe voice, “I promised your father to give you good counsels and to punish you if you refused to follow them. My counsels were forgotten, my punishment despised. Under the figure of a man, you have been no better than the beasts you chase: like a lion in fury, a wolf in gluttony, a serpent in revenge, and a bull in brutality. Take, therefore, in your new form the likeness of all these animals.”

Scarcely had Prince Cherry heard these words than to his horror he found himself transformed into what the Fairy had named. He was a creature with the head of a lion, the horns of a bull, the feet of a wolf, and the tail of a serpent. At the same time he felt himself transported to a distant forest, where, standing on the bank of a stream, he saw reflected in the water his own frightful shape, and heard a voice saying:

“Look at thyself, and know thy soul has become a thousand times uglier even than thy body.”

Cherry recognized the voice of Candide, and in his rage would have sprung upon her and devoured her; but he saw nothing and the same voice said behind him:

“Cease thy feeble fury, and learn to conquer thy pride by being in submission to thine own subjects.”

Hearing no more, he soon quitted the stream, hoping at least to get rid of the sight of

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himself; but he had scarcely gone twenty paces when he tumbled into a pitfall that was laid to catch bears; the bear-hunters, descending from some trees hard by, caught him, chained him, and only too delighted to get hold of such a curious-looking animal, led him along with them to the capital of his own kingdom.

There great rejoicings were taking place, and the bear-hunters, asking what it was all about, were told that it was because Prince Cherry, the torment of his subjects, had just been struck dead by a thunderbolt—just punishment of all his crimes. Four courtiers, his wicked companions, had wished to divide his throne between them; but the people had risen up against them and offered the crown to Suliman, the old tutor whom Cherry had ordered to be arrested.

All this the poor monster heard. He even saw Suliman sitting upon his own throne and trying to calm the populace by representing to them that it was not certain Prince Cherry was dead; that he might return one day to reassume with honor the crown which Suliman only consented to wear as a sort of viceroy.

“I know his heart,” said the honest and faithful old man; “it is tainted, but not corrupt. If alive, he may reform yet, and be all his father over again to you, his people, whom he has caused to suffer so much.”

These words touched the poor beast so deeply that he ceased to beat himself against the iron bars of the cage in which the hunters carried him about, became gentle as a lamb, and suffered himself to be taken quietly to a menagerie, where were kept all sorts of strange and ferocious animals a place which he had himself often visited as a boy, but never thought he should be shut up there himself.

However, he owned he had deserved it all, and began to make amends by showing himself very obedient to his keeper. This man was almost as great a brute as the animals he had charge of, and when he was in ill humor he used to beat them without rhyme or reason. One day, while he was sleeping, a tiger broke loose and leaped upon him, eager to devour him. Cherry at first felt a thrill of pleasure at the thought of being revenged; then, seeing how helpless the man was, he wished himself free, that he might defend him. Immediately the doors of his cage opened. The keeper, waking up, saw the strange beast leap out, and imagined, of course, that he was going to be slain at once. Instead, he saw the tiger lying dead, and the strange beast creeping up and laying itself at his feet to be caressed. But as he lifted up his hand to stroke it, a voice was heard saying, “Good actions never go unrewarded;” and instead of the frightful monster, there crouched on the ground nothing but a pretty little dog.

Cherry, delighted to find himself thus metamorphosed, caressed the keeper in every pos-

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sible way, till at last the man took him up into his arms and carried him to the king, to whom he related this wonderful story, from beginning to end. The queen wished to have the charming little dog; and Cherry would have been exceedingly happy could he have forgotten that he was originally a man and a king. He was lodged most elegantly, had the richest of collars to adorn his neck, and heard himself praised continually. But his beauty rather brought him into trouble, for the queen, afraid lest he might grow too large for a pet, took advice of dog-doctors, who ordered that he should be fed entirely upon bread, and that very sparingly; so poor Cherry was sometimes nearly starved.

One day, when they gave him his crust for breakfast, a fancy seized him to go and eat it in the palace garden; so he took the bread in his mouth and trotted away toward a stream which he knew, and where he sometimes stopped to drink. But instead of the stream he saw a splendid palace, glittering with gold and precious stones. Entering the doors was a crowd of men and women, magnificently dressed; and within there was singing and dancing and good cheer of all sorts. Yet, however grandly and happily the people went in, Cherry noticed that those who came out were pale, thin, ragged, half-naked, covered with wounds and sores. Some of them dropped dead at once; others dragged themselves on a little way and then lay down, dying of hunger, and vainly begged a morsel of bread from others who were entering in—who never took the least notice of them.

Cherry perceived one woman, who was trying feebly to gather and eat some green herbs. “Poor thing!” said he to himself; “I know what it is to be hungry, and I want my breakfast badly enough; but still it will kill me to wait till dinner time, and my crust may save the life of this poor woman.”

So the little dog ran up to her and dropped his bread at her feet; she picked it up and ate it with avidity. Soon she looked quite recovered, and Cherry, delighted, was trotting back again to his kennel, when he heard loud cries, and saw a young girl dragged by four men to the door of the palace, which they were trying to compel her to enter. Oh, how he wished himself a monster again, as when he slew the tiger!—for the young girl was no other than his beloved Zelia. Alas! what could a poor little dog do to defend her? But he ran forward and barked at the men, and bit their heels, until at last they chased him away with heavy blows. And then he lay down outside the palace door, determined to watch and see what had become of Zelia.

Conscience pricked him now. “What!” thought he, “I am furious against these wicked men, who are carrying her away; and did I not do the same myself? Did I not cast her into prison, and intend to sell her as a slave? Who knows how much more wickedness I might not have done to her and others, if Heaven’s justice had not stopped me in time?”

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While he lay thinking and repenting, he heard a window open and saw Zelia throw out of it a bit of dainty meat. Cherry, who felt hungry enough by this time, was just about to eat it, when the woman to whom he had given his crust snatched him up in her arms.

“Poor little beast!” cried she, patting him, “every bit of food in that palace is poisoned: you shall not touch a morsel.”

And at the same time the voice in the air repeated again, “Good actions never go unrewarded”; and Cherry found himself changed into a beautiful little white pigeon. He remembered with joy that white was the color of the fairy Candide, and began to hope that she was taking him into favor again.

So he stretched his wings, delighted that he might now have a chance of approaching his fair Zelia. He flew up to the palace windows, and, finding one of them open, entered and sought everywhere, but he could not find Zelia. Then, in despair, he flew out again, resolved to go over the world until he beheld her once more.

He took flight at once and traversed many countries, swiftly as a bird can, but found no trace of his beloved. At length in a desert, sitting beside an old hermit in his cave and partaking with him his frugal repast, Cherry saw a poor peasant girl and recognized Zelia. Transported with joy, he flew in, perched on her shoulder, and expressed his delight and affection by a thousand caresses.

She, charmed with the pretty little pigeon, caressed it in her turn, and promised it that if it would stay with her she would love it always.

“What have you done, Zelia?” said the hermit, smiling; and while he spoke the white pigeon vanished, and there stood Prince Cherry in his own natural form. “Your enchantment ended, prince, when Zelia promised to love you. Indeed, she has loved you always, but your many faults constrained her to hide her love. These are now amended, and you may both live happy if you will, because your union is founded upon mutual esteem.”

Cherry and Zelia threw themselves at the feet of the hermit, whose form also began to change. His soiled garments became of dazzling whiteness, and his long beard and withered face grew into the flowing hair and lovely countenance of the fairy Candide.

“Rise up, my children,” said she; “I must now transport you to your palace and restore to Prince Cherry his father’s crown, of which he is now worthy.”

She had scarcely ceased speaking when they found themselves in the chamber of Suliman,

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who, delighted to find again his beloved pupil and master, willingly resigned the throne, and became the most faithful of his subjects.

King Cherry and Queen Zelia reigned together for many years, and it is said that the former was so blameless and strict in all his duties that though he constantly wore the ring which Candide had restored to him, it never once pricked his finger enough to make it bleed.