

THE LIGHT PRINCESS

5 - What Is to Be Done?

But above-stairs it was different. One day, for instance, after breakfast, the king went into his counting house, and counted out his money.

The operation gave him no pleasure.

“To think,” said he to himself, “that every one of these gold sovereigns weighs a quarter of an ounce, and my real, live, flesh-and-blood princess weighs nothing at all!”

And he hated his gold sovereigns, as they lay with a broad smile of self-satisfaction all over their yellow faces.

The queen was in the parlour, eating bread and honey. But at the second mouthful she burst out crying, and could not swallow it. The king heard her sobbing. Glad of anybody, but especially of his queen, to quarrel with, he clashed his gold sovereigns into his moneybox, clapped his crown on his head, and rushed into the parlour.

“What is all this about?” exclaimed he. “What are you crying for, queen?”

“I can’t eat it,” said the queen, looking ruefully at the honey-pot.

“No wonder!” retorted the king. “You’ve just eaten your breakfast—two turkey eggs, and three anchovies.”

“Oh, that’s not it!” sobbed her Majesty. “It’s my child, my child!”

“Well, what’s the matter with your child? She’s neither up the chimney nor down the draw-well. Just hear her laughing.”

Yet the king could not help a sigh, which he tried to turn into a cough, saying:

“It is a good thing to be light-hearted, I am sure, whether she be ours or not.”

“It is a bad thing to be light-headed,” answered the queen, looking with prophetic soul far into the future.

“’T is a good thing to be light-handed,” said the king.

“’T is a bad thing to be light-fingered,” answered the queen.

“’T is a good thing to be light-footed,” said the king.

“’T is a bad thing—” began the queen; but the king interrupted her.

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“In fact,” said he, with the tone of one who concludes an argument in which he has had only imaginary opponents, and in which, therefore, he has come off triumphant—”in fact, it is a good thing altogether to be light-bodied.”

“But it is a bad thing altogether to be light-minded,” retorted the queen, who was beginning to lose her temper.

This last answer quite discomfited his Majesty, who turned on his heel, and betook himself to his counting house again. But he was not halfway towards it, when the voice of his queen overtook him.

“And it’s a bad thing to be light-haired,” screamed she, determined to have more last words, now that her spirit was roused.

The queen’s hair was black as night; and the king’s had been, and his daughter’s was, golden as morning. But it was not this reflection on his hair that arrested him; it was the double use of the word light . For the king hated all witticisms, and punning especially. And besides, he could not tell whether the queen meant light-haired or light-haired ; for why might she not aspirate her vowels when she was exasperated herself?

He turned upon his other heel, and rejoined her. She looked angry still, because she knew that she was guilty, or, what was much the same, knew that he thought so.

“My dear queen,” said he, “duplicity of any sort is exceedingly objectionable between married people of any rank, not to say kings and queens; and the most objectionable form duplicity can assume is that of punning.”

“There!” said the queen, “I never made a jest, but I broke it in the making. I am the most unfortunate woman in the world!”

She looked so rueful that the king took her in his arms; and they sat down to consult.

“Can you bear this?” said the king.

“No, I can’t,” said the queen.

“Well, what’s to be done?” said the king.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said the queen. “But might you not try an apology?”

“To my old sister, I suppose you mean?” said the king.

“Yes,” said the queen.

“Well, I don’t mind,” said the king.

So he went the next morning to the house of the princess, and, making a very humble apology, begged her to undo the spell. But the princess declared, with a grave face, that she knew nothing at all about it. Her eyes, however, shone pink, which was a sign that she was happy. She advised the king and queen to have patience, and to mend their ways. The king returned disconsolate. The queen tried to comfort him.

“We will wait till she is older. She may then be able to suggest something herself. She will know at least how she feels, and explain things to us.”

“But what if she should marry?” exclaimed the king, in sudden consternation at the idea.

“Well, what of that?” rejoined the queen.

“Just think! If she were to have children! In the course of a hundred years the air might be as full of floating children as of gossamers in autumn.”

“That is no business of ours,” replied the queen. “Besides, by that time they will have learned to take care of themselves.”

A sigh was the king’s only answer.

He would have consulted the court physicians; but he was afraid they would try experiments upon her.