

THE LITTLE LAME PRINCE



Chapter One

Yes, he was the most beautiful Prince that ever was born.

Of course, being a prince, people said this; but it was true besides. When he looked at the candle, his eyes had an expression of earnest inquiry quite startling in a newborn baby. His nose—there was not much of it certainly, but what there was seemed an aquiline shape; his complexion was a charming, healthy purple; he was round and fat, straight-limbed and long—in fact, a splendid baby, and everybody was exceedingly proud of him, especially his father and mother, the King and Queen of Nomansland, who had waited for him during their happy reign of ten years—now made happier than ever, to themselves and their subjects, by the appearance of a son and heir.

The only person who was not quite happy was the King's brother, the heir presumptive, who would have been king one day had the baby not been born. But as his majesty was very kind to him, and even rather sorry for him—insomuch that at the Queen's request he gave him a dukedom almost as big as a county—the Crown-Prince, as he was called, tried to seem pleased also; and let us hope he succeeded.

The Prince's christening was to be a grand affair. According to the custom of the country, there were chosen for him four-and-twenty godfathers and godmothers, who each had to give him a name, and promise to do their utmost for him. When he came of age, he himself had to choose the name—and the godfather or godmother—that he liked the best, for the rest of his days.

Meantime all was rejoicing. Subscriptions were made among the rich to give pleasure to the poor; dinners in town halls for the workingmen; tea parties in the streets for their wives; and milk-and-bun feasts for the children in the schoolrooms. For Nomansland, though I cannot point it out in any map, or read of it in any history, was, I believe, much like our own or many another country.

As for the palace—which was no different from other palaces—it was clean “turned out of the windows,” as people say, with the preparations going on. The only quiet place in it was the room which, though the Prince was six weeks old, his mother the Queen had never quitted.



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Nobody said she was ill, however—it would have been so inconvenient; and as she said nothing about it herself, but lay pale and placid, giving no trouble to anybody, nobody thought much about her. All the world was absorbed in admiring the baby.

The christening-day came at last, and it was as lovely as the Prince himself. All the people in the palace were lovely too—or thought themselves so—in the elegant new clothes which the Queen, who thought of everybody, had taken care to give them, from the ladies-in-waiting down to the poor little kitchen-maid, who looked at herself in her pink cotton gown, and thought, doubtless, that there never was such a pretty girl as she.

By six in the morning all the royal household had dressed itself in its very best; and then the little Prince was dressed in his best—his magnificent christening robe; which proceeding his Royal Highness did not like at all, but kicked and screamed like any common baby. When he had a little calmed down, they carried him to be looked at by the Queen his mother, who, though her royal robes had been brought and laid upon the bed, was, as everybody well knew, quite unable to rise and put them on.

She admired her baby very much; kissed and blessed him, and lay looking at him, as she did for hours sometimes, when he was placed beside her fast asleep; then she gave him up with a gentle smile, and, saying she hoped he would be very good, that it would be a very nice christening, and all the guests would enjoy themselves, turned peacefully over on her bed, saying nothing more to anybody. She was a very uncomplaining person, the Queen—and her name was Dolorez.

Everything went on exactly as if she had been present. All, even the king himself, had grown used to her absence; for she was not strong, and for years had not joined in any gayeties. She always did her royal duties, but as to pleasures, they could go on quite well without her, or it seemed so. The company arrived: great and notable persons in this and neighboring countries; also the four-and-twenty godfathers and godmothers, who had been chosen with care, as the people who would be most useful to his royal highness should he ever want friends, which did not seem likely. What such want could possibly happen to the heir of the powerful monarch of Nomansland?

They came, walking two and two, with their coronets on their heads—being dukes and duchesses, princes and princesses, or the like; they all kissed the child and pronounced the name each had given him. Then the four-and-twenty names were shouted out with great energy by six heralds, one after the other, and afterward written down, to be preserved in the state records, in readiness for the next time they were wanted, which would be either on his Royal Highness' coronation or his funeral.

Soon the ceremony was over, and everybody satisfied; except, perhaps, the little Prince

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himself, who moaned faintly under his christening robes, which nearly smothered him.

In truth, though very few knew, the Prince in coming to the chapel had met with a slight disaster. His nurse,—not his ordinary one, but the state nurse-maid,—an elegant and fashionable young lady of rank, whose duty it was to carry him to and from the chapel, had been so occupied in arranging her train with one hand, while she held the baby with the other, that she stumbled and let him fall, just at the foot of the marble staircase.

To be sure, she contrived to pick him up again the next minute; and the accident was so slight it seemed hardly worth speaking of. Consequently nobody did speak of it. The baby had turned deadly pale, but did not cry, so no person a step or two behind could discover anything wrong; afterward, even if he had moaned, the silver trumpets were loud enough to drown his voice. It would have been a pity to let anything trouble such a day of felicity.

So, after a minute's pause, the procession had moved on. Such a procession with Heralds in blue and silver; pages in crimson and gold; and a troop of little girls in dazzling white, carrying baskets of flowers, which they strewed all the way before the nurse and child—finally the four-and-twenty godfathers and godmothers, as proud as possible, and so splendid to look at that they would have quite extinguished their small godson—merely a heap of lace and muslin with a baby face inside—had it not been for a canopy of white satin and ostrich feathers which was held over him wherever he was carried.

Thus, with the sun shining on them through the painted windows, they stood; the king and his train on one side, the Prince and his attendants on the other, as pretty a sight as ever was seen out of fairyland.

“It’s just like fairyland,” whispered the eldest little girl to the next eldest, as she shook the last rose out of her basket; “and I think the only thing the Prince wants now is a fairy god-mother.”

“Does he?” said a shrill but soft and not unpleasant voice behind; and there was seen among the group of children somebody,—not a child, yet no bigger than a child,—somebody whom nobody had seen before, and who certainly had not been invited, for she had no christening clothes on.

She was a little old woman dressed all in gray: gray gown; gray hooded cloak, of a material excessively fine, and a tint that seemed perpetually changing, like the gray of an evening sky. Her hair was gray, and her eyes also—even her complexion had a soft gray shadow over it. But there was nothing unpleasantly old about her, and her smile was as sweet and childlike as the Prince’s own, which stole over his pale little face the instant she came near enough to touch him.

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“Take care! Don’t let the baby fall again.”

The grand young lady nurse started, flushing angrily.

“Who spoke to me? How did anybody know?—I mean, what business has anybody——” Then frightened, but still speaking in a much sharper tone than I hope young ladies of rank are in the habit of speaking—”Old woman, you will be kind enough not to say ‘the baby,’ but ‘the Prince.’ Keep away; his Royal Highness is just going to sleep.”

“Nevertheless I must kiss him. I am his god-mother.”

“You!” cried the elegant lady nurse.

“You!” repeated all the gentlemen and ladies-in-waiting.

“You!” echoed the heralds and pages—and they began to blow the silver trumpets in order to stop all further conversation.

The Prince’s procession formed itself for returning,—the King and his train having already moved off toward the palace,—but on the top-most step of the marble stairs stood, right in front of all, the little old woman clothed in gray.

She stretched herself on tiptoe by the help of her stick, and gave the little Prince three kisses.

“This is intolerable!” cried the young lady nurse, wiping the kisses off rapidly with her lace handkerchief. “Such an insult to his Royal Highness! Take yourself out of the way, old woman, or the King shall be informed immediately.”

“The King knows nothing of me, more’s the pity,” replied the old woman, with an indifferent air, as if she thought the loss was more on his Majesty’s side than hers. “My friend in the palace is the King’s wife.”

“King’s have not wives, but queens,” said the lady nurse, with a contemptuous air.

“You are right,” replied the old woman. “Nevertheless I know her Majesty well, and I love her and her child. And—since you dropped him on the marble stairs (this she said in a mysterious whisper, which made the young lady tremble in spite of her anger)—I choose to take him for my own, and be his godmother, ready to help him whenever he wants me.”

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“You help him!” cried all the group breaking into shouts of laughter, to which the little old woman paid not the slightest attention. Her soft gray eyes were fixed on the Prince, who seemed to answer to the look, smiling again and again in the causeless, aimless fashion that babies do smile.

“His Majesty must hear of this,” said a gentleman-in-waiting.

“His Majesty will hear quite enough news in a minute or two,” said the old woman sadly. And again stretching up to the little Prince, she kissed him on the forehead solemnly.

“Be called by a new name which nobody has ever thought of. Be Prince Dolor, in memory of your mother Dolorez.”

“In memory of!” Everybody started at the ominous phrase, and also at a most terrible breach of etiquette which the old woman had committed. In Nomansland, neither the king nor the queen was supposed to have any Christian name at all. They dropped it on their coronation day, and it never was mentioned again till it was engraved on their coffins when they died.

“Old woman, you are exceedingly ill-bred,” cried the eldest lady-in-waiting, much horrified. “How you could know the fact passes my comprehension. But even if you did know it, how dared you presume to hint that her most gracious Majesty is called Dolorez?”

“WAS called Dolorez,” said the old woman, with a tender solemnity.

The first gentleman, called the Gold-stick-in-waiting, raised it to strike her, and all the rest stretched out their hands to seize her; but the gray mantle melted from between their fingers like air; and, before anybody had time to do anything more, there came a heavy, muffled, startling sound.

The great bell of the palace the bell which was only heard on the death of some one of the royal family, and for as many times as he or she was years old—began to toll. They listened, mute and horror-stricken. Some one counted: one—two—three—four—up to nine-and-twenty—just the Queen’s age.

It was, indeed, the Queen. Her Majesty was dead! In the midst of the festivities she had slipped away out of her new happiness and her old sufferings, not few nor small. Sending away all her women to see the grand sight,—at least they said afterward, in excuse, that she had done so, and it was very like her to do it,—she had turned with her face to the window, whence one could just see the tops of the distant mountains—the Beautiful

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Mountains, as they were called—where she was born. So gazing, she had quietly died.

When the little Prince was carried back to his mother's room, there was no mother to kiss him. And, though he did not know it, there would be for him no mother's kiss any more. As for his godmother,—the little old woman in gray who called herself so,—whether she melted into air, like her gown when they touched it, or whether she flew out of the chapel window, or slipped through the doorway among the bewildered crowd, nobody knew—nobody ever thought about her.

Only the nurse, the ordinary homely one, coming out of the Prince's nursery in the middle of the night in search of a cordial to quiet his continual moans, saw, sitting in the doorway, something which she would have thought a mere shadow, had she not seen shining out of it two eyes, gray and soft and sweet. She put her hand before her own, screaming loudly. When she took them away the old woman was gone.