

THE LITTLE LAME PRINCE



Chapter Four

And what of the traveling-cloak? What sort of cloak was it, and what good did it do the Prince?

Stay, and I'll tell you all about it. Outside it was the commonest-looking bundle imaginable—shabby and small; and the instant Prince Dolor touched it, it grew smaller still, dwindling down till he could put it in his trousers pocket, like a handkerchief rolled up into a ball. He did this at once, for fear his nurse should see it, and kept it there all day—all night, too. Till after his next morning's lessons he had no opportunity of examining his treasure.

When he did, it seemed no treasure at all; but a mere piece of cloth—circular in form, dark green in color—that is, if it had any color at all, being so worn and shabby, though not dirty. It had a split cut to the center, forming a round hole for the neck—and that was all its shape; the shape, in fact, of those cloaks which in South America are called ponchos—very simple, but most graceful and convenient.

Prince Dolor had never seen anything like it. In spite of his disappointment, he examined it curiously; spread it out on the door, then arranged it on his shoulders. It felt very warm and comfortable; but it was so exceedingly shabby—the only shabby thing that the Prince had ever seen in his life.

“And what use will it be to me?” said he sadly. “I have no need of outdoor clothes, as I never go out. Why was this given me, I wonder? and what in the world am I to do with it? She must be a rather funny person, this dear godmother of mine.”

Nevertheless, because she was his godmother, and had given him the cloak, he folded it carefully and put it away, poor and shabby as it was, hiding it in a safe corner of his top cupboard, which his nurse never meddled with. He did not want her to find it, or to laugh at it or at his godmother—as he felt sure she would, if she knew all.

There it lay, and by and by he forgot all about it; nay, I am sorry to say that, being but a child, and not seeing her again, he almost forgot his sweet old godmother, or thought of her only as he did of the angels or fairies that he read of in his books, and of her visit as if it had been a mere dream of the night.

There were times, certainly, when he recalled her: of early mornings, like that morning

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when she appeared beside him, and late evenings, when the gray twilight reminded him of the color of her hair and her pretty soft garments; above all, when, waking in the middle of the night, with the stars peering in at his window, or the moonlight shining across his little bed, he would not have been surprised to see her standing beside it, looking at him with those beautiful tender eyes, which seemed to have a pleasantness and comfort in them different from anything he had ever known.

But she never came, and gradually she slipped out of his memory—only a boy's memory, after all; until something happened which made him remember her, and want her as he had never wanted anything before.

Prince Dolor fell ill. He caught—his nurse could not tell how—a complaint common to the people of Nomansland, called the doldrums, as unpleasant as measles or any other of our complaints; and it made him restless, cross, and disagreeable. Even when a little better, he was too weak to enjoy anything, but lay all day long on his sofa, fidgeting his nurse extremely—while, in her intense terror lest he might die, she fidgeted him still more. At last, seeing he really was getting well, she left him to himself—which he was most glad of, in spite of his dullness and dreariness. There he lay, alone, quite alone.

Now and then an irritable fit came over him, in which he longed to get up and do something, or to go somewhere—would have liked to imitate his white kitten—jump down from the tower and run away, taking the chance of whatever might happen.

Only one thing, alas! was likely to happen; for the kitten, he remembered, had four active legs, while he——

“I wonder what my godmother meant when she looked at my legs and sighed so bitterly? I wonder why I can't walk straight and steady like my nurse only I wouldn't like to have her great, noisy, clumping shoes. Still it would be very nice to move about quickly—perhaps to fly, like a bird, like that string of birds I saw the other day skimming across the sky, one after the other.”

These were the passage-birds—the only living creatures that ever crossed the lonely plain; and he had been much interested in them, wonder-ing whence they came and whither they were going.

“How nice it must be to be a bird! If legs are no good, why cannot one have wings? People have wings when they die—perhaps; I wish I were dead, that I do. I am so tired, so tired; and nobody cares for me. Nobody ever did care for me, except perhaps my god-mother. Godmother, dear, have you quite forsaken me?”

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He stretched himself wearily, gathered himself up, and dropped his head upon his hands; as he did so, he felt somebody kiss him at the back of his neck, and, turning, found that he was resting, not on the sofa pillows, but on a warm shoulder—that of the little old woman clothed in gray.

How glad he was to see her! How he looked into her kind eyes and felt her hands, to see if she were all real and alive! then put both his arms round her neck, and kissed her as if he would never have done kissing.

“Stop, stop!” cried she, pretending to be smothered. “I see you have not forgotten my teachings. Kissing is a good thing—in moderation. Only just let me have breath to speak one word.”

“A dozen!” he said.

“Well, then, tell me all that has happened to you since I saw you—or, rather, since you saw me, which is quite a different thing.”

“Nothing has happened—nothing ever does happen to me,” answered the Prince dolefully.

“And are you very dull, my boy?”

“So dull that I was just thinking whether I could not jump down to the bottom of the tower, like my white kitten.”

“Don’t do that, not being a white kitten.”

“I wish I were—I wish I were anything but what I am.”

“And you can’t make yourself any different, nor can I do it either. You must be content to stay just what you are.”

The little old woman said this—very firmly, but gently, too—with her arms round his neck and her lips on his forehead. It was the first time the boy had ever heard any one talk like this, and he looked up in surprise—but not in pain, for her sweet manner softened the hardness of her words.

“Now, my Prince,—for you are a prince, and must behave as such,—let us see what we can do; how much I can do for you, or show you how to do for yourself. Where is your traveling-cloak?”

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Prince Dolor blushed extremely. "I—I put it away in the cupboard; I suppose it is there still."

"You have never used it; you dislike it?"

He hesitated, no; wishing to be impolite. "Don't you think it's—just a little old and shabby for a prince?"

The old woman laughed—long and loud, though very sweetly.

"Prince, indeed! Why, if all the princes in the world craved for it, they couldn't get it, unless I gave it them. Old and shabby! It's the most valuable thing imaginable! Very few ever have it; but I thought I would give it to you, because—because you are different from other people."

"Am I?" said the Prince, and looked first with curiosity, then with a sort of anxiety, into his godmother's face, which was sad and grave, with slow tears beginning to steal down.

She touched his poor little legs. "These are not like those of other little boys."

"Indeed!—my nurse never told me that."

"Very likely not. But it is time you were told; and I tell you, because I love you."

"Tell me what, dear godmother?"

"That you will never be able to walk or run or jump or play—that your life will be quite different from most people's lives; but it may be a very happy life for all that. Do not be afraid."

"I am not afraid," said the boy; but he turned very pale, and his lips began to quiver, though he did not actually cry—he was too old for that, and, perhaps, too proud.

Though not wholly comprehending, he began dimly to guess what his godmother meant. He had never seen any real live boys, but he had seen pictures of them running and jumping; which he had admired and tried hard to imitate but always failed. Now he began to understand why he failed, and that he always should fail—that, in fact, he was not like other little boys; and it was of no use his wishing to do as they did, and play as they played, even if he had had them to play with. His was a separate life, in which he must find out new work and new pleasures for himself.

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The sense of THE INEVITABLE, as grown-up people call it—that we cannot have things as we want them to be, but as they are, and that we must learn to bear them and make the best of them—this lesson, which everybody has to learn soon or late—came, alas! sadly soon, to the poor boy. He fought against it for a while, and then, quite overcome, turned and sobbed bitterly in his godmother's arms.

She comforted him—I do not know how, except that love always comforts; and then she whispered to him, in her sweet, strong, cheerful voice: “Never mind!”

“No, I don't think I do mind—that is, I WON'T mind,” replied he, catching the courage of her tone and speaking like a man, though he was still such a mere boy.

“That is right, my Prince!—that is being like a prince. Now we know exactly where we are; let us put our shoulders to the wheel and——”

“We are in Hopeless Tower” (this was its name, if it had a name), “and there is no wheel to put our shoulders to,” said the child sadly.

“You little matter-of-fact goose! Well for you that you have a godmother called——”

“What?” he eagerly asked.

“Stuff-and-nonsense.”

“Stuff-and-nonsense! What a funny name!”

“Some people give it me, but they are not my most intimate friends. These call me—never mind what,” added the old woman, with a soft twinkle in her eyes. “So as you know me, and know me well, you may give me any name you please; it doesn't matter. But I am your godmother, child. I have few godchildren; those I have love me dearly, and find me the greatest blessing in all the world.”

“I can well believe it,” cried the little lame Prince, and forgot his troubles in looking at her—as her figure dilated, her eyes grew lustrous as stars, her very raiment brightened, and the whole room seemed filled with her beautiful and beneficent presence like light.

He could have looked at her forever—half in love, half in awe; but she suddenly dwindled down into the little old woman all in gray, and, with a malicious twinkle in her eyes, asked for the traveling-cloak.

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“Bring it out of the rubbish cupboard, and shake the dust off it, quick!” said she to Prince Dolor, who hung his head, rather ashamed. “Spread it out on the floor, and wait till the split closes and the edges turn up like a rim all round. Then go and open the skylight,—mind, I say OPEN THE SKYLIGHT,—set yourself down in the middle of it, like a frog on a water-lily leaf; say ‘Abracadabra, dum dum dum,’ and—see what will happen!”

The Prince burst into a fit of laughing. It all seemed so exceedingly silly; he wondered that a wise old woman like his godmother should talk such nonsense.

“Stuff-and-nonsense, you mean,” said she, answering, to his great alarm, his unspoken thoughts. “Did I not tell you some people called me by that name? Never mind; it doesn’t harm me.”

And she laughed—her merry laugh—as child-like as if she were the Prince’s age instead of her own, whatever that might be. She certainly was a most extraordinary old woman.

“Believe me or not, it doesn’t matter,” said she. “Here is the cloak: when you want to go traveling on it, say ‘Abracadabra, dum, dum, dum’; when you want to come back again, say ‘Abracadabra, tum tum ti.’ That’s all; good-by.”

A puff of most pleasant air passing by him, and making him feel for the moment quite strong and well, was all the Prince was conscious of. His most extraordinary godmother was gone.

“Really now, how rosy your Royal Highness’ cheeks have grown! You seem to have got well already,” said the nurse, entering the room.

“I think I have,” replied the Prince very gently—he felt gently and kindly even to his grim nurse. “And now let me have my dinner, and go you to your sewing as usual.”

The instant she was gone, however, taking with her the plates and dishes, which for the first time since his illness he had satisfactorily cleared, Prince Dolor sprang down from his sofa, and with one or two of his frog-like jumps reached the cupboard where he kept his toys, and looked everywhere for his traveling-cloak.

Alas! it was not there.

While he was ill of the doldrums, his nurse, thinking it a good opportunity for putting things to rights, had made a grand clearance of all his “rubbish”—as she considered it: his beloved headless horses, broken carts, sheep without feet, and birds without wings—all

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the treasures of his baby days, which he could not bear to part with. Though he seldom played with them now, he liked just to feel they were there.

They were all gone and with them the traveling-cloak. He sat down on the floor, looking at the empty shelves, so beautifully clean and tidy, then burst out sobbing as if his heart would break.

But quietly—always quietly. He never let his nurse hear him cry. She only laughed at him, as he felt she would laugh now.

“And it is all my own fault!” he cried. “I ought to have taken better care of my godmother’s gift. Oh, godmother, forgive me! I’ll never be so careless again. I don’t know what the cloak is exactly, but I am sure it is something precious. Help me to find it again. Oh, don’t let it be stolen from me—don’t, please!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed a silvery voice. “Why, that traveling-cloak is the one thing in the world which nobody can steal. It is of no use to anybody except the owner. Open your eyes, my Prince, and see what you shall see.”

His dear old godmother, he thought, and turned eagerly round. But no; he only beheld, lying in a corner of the room, all dust and cobwebs, his precious traveling-cloak.

Prince Dolor darted toward it, tumbling several times on the way, as he often did tumble, poor boy! and pick himself up again, never complaining. Snatching it to his breast, he hugged and kissed it, cobwebs and all, as if it had been something alive. Then he began unrolling it, wondering each minute what would happen. What did happen was so curious that I must leave it for another chapter.