

THE LITTLE LAME PRINCE



Chapter Eight

What, I wonder, would be people's idea of a king? What was Prince Dolor's?

Perhaps a very splendid personage, with a crown on his head and a scepter in his hand, sitting on a throne and judging the people. Always doing right, and never wrong—"The king can do no wrong" was a law laid down in olden times. Never cross, or tired, or sick, or suffering; perfectly handsome and well dressed, calm and good-tempered, ready to see and hear everybody, and discourteous to nobody; all things always going well with him, and nothing unpleasant ever happening.

This, probably, was what Prince Dolor expected to see. And what did he see? But I must tell you how he saw it.

"Ah," said the magpie, "no levee to-day. The King is ill, though his Majesty does not wish it to be generally known—it would be so very inconvenient. He can't see you, but perhaps you might like to go and take a look at him in a way I often do? It is so very amusing."

Amusing, indeed!

The prince was just now too much excited to talk much. Was he not going to see the king his uncle, who had succeeded his father and dethroned himself; had stepped into all the pleasant things that he, Prince Dolor, ought to have had, and shut him up in a desolate tower? What was he like, this great, bad, clever man? Had he got all the things he wanted, which another ought to have had? And did he enjoy them?

"Nobody knows," answered the magpie, just as if she had been sitting inside the prince's heart, instead of on the top of his shoulder. "He is a king, and that's enough. For the rest nobody knows."

As she spoke, Mag flew down on to the palace roof, where the cloak had rested, settling down between the great stacks of chimneys as comfortably as if on the ground. She pecked at the tiles with her beak—truly she was a wonderful bird—and immediately a little hole opened, a sort of door, through which could be seen distinctly the chamber below.

"Now look in, my Prince. Make haste, for I must soon shut it up again."

But the boy hesitated. "Isn't it rude?—won't they think us intruding?"

— 1 —

The Little Lane Prince: Chapter Eight

“Oh, dear no! there’s a hole like this in every palace; dozens of holes, indeed. Everybody knows it, but nobody speaks of it. Intrusion! Why, though the royal family are supposed to live shut up behind stone walls ever so thick, all the world knows that they live in a glass house where everybody can see them and throw a stone at them. Now pop down on your knees, and take a peep at his Majesty.”

His Majesty!

The Prince gazed eagerly down into a large room, the largest room he had ever beheld, with furniture and hangings grander than anything he could have ever imagined. A stray sunbeam, coming through a crevice of the darkened windows, struck across the carpet, and it was the loveliest carpet ever woven—just like a bed of flowers to walk over; only nobody walked over it, the room being perfectly empty and silent.

“Where is the King?” asked the puzzled boy.

“There,” said Mag, pointing with one wrinkled claw to a magnificent bed, large enough to contain six people. In the center of it, just visible under the silken counterpane,—quite straight and still,—with its head on the lace pillow, lay a small figure, something like wax-work, fast asleep—very fast asleep! There was a number of sparkling rings on the tiny yellow hands, that were curled a little, helplessly, like a baby’s, outside the coverlet; the eyes were shut, the nose looked sharp and thin, and the long gray beard hid the mouth and lay over the breast. A sight not ugly nor frightening, only solemn and quiet. And so very silent—two little flies buzzing about the curtains of the bed being the only audible sound.

“Is that the King?” whispered Prince Dolor.

“Yes,” replied the bird.

He had been angry—furiously angry—ever since he knew how his uncle had taken the crown, and sent him, a poor little helpless child, to be shut up for life, just as if he had been dead. Many times the boy had felt as if, king as he was, he should like to strike him, this great, strong, wicked man.

Why, you might as well have struck a baby! How helpless he lay, with his eyes shut, and his idle hands folded: they had no more work to do, bad or good.

“What is the matter with him?” asked the Prince.

“He is dead,” said the Magpie, with a croak.

The Little Lane Prince: Chapter Eight

No, there was not the least use in being angry with him now. On the contrary, the Prince felt almost sorry for him, except that he looked so peaceful with all his cares at rest. And this was being dead? So even kings died?

“Well, well, he hadn’t an easy life, folk say, for all his grandeur. Perhaps he is glad it is over. Good-by, your Majesty.”

With another cheerful tap of her beak, Mistress Mag shut down the little door in the tiles, and Prince Dolor’s first and last sight of his uncle was ended.

He sat in the center of his traveling-cloak, silent and thoughtful.

“What shall we do now?” said the magpie. “There’s nothing much more to be done with his majesty, except a fine funeral, which I shall certainly go and see. All the world will. He interested the world exceedingly when he was alive, and he ought to do it now he’s dead—just once more. And since he can’t hear me, I may as well say that, on the whole, his majesty is much better dead than alive—if we can only get somebody in his place. There’ll be such a row in the city presently. Suppose we float up again and see it all—at a safe distance, though. It will be such fun!”

“What will be fun?”

“A revolution.”

Whether anybody except a magpie would have called it “fun” I don’t know, but it certainly was a remarkable scene.

As soon as the cathedral bell began to toll and the minute-guns to fire, announcing to the kingdom that it was without a king, the people gathered in crowds, stopping at street corners to talk together. The murmur now and then rose into a shout, and the shout into a roar. When Prince Dolor, quietly floating in upper air, caught the sound of their different and opposite cries, it seemed to him as if the whole city had gone mad together.

“Long live the king!”

“The king is dead—down with the king!”

“Down with the crown, and the king too!”

“Hurrah for the republic!” “Hurrah for no government at all!”

The Little Lane Prince: Chapter Eight

Such were the shouts which traveled up to the traveling-cloak. And then began—oh, what a scene!

When you children are grown men and women—or before—you will hear and read in books about what are called revolutions—earnestly I trust that neither I nor you may ever see one. But they have happened, and may happen again, in other countries besides Nomansland, when wicked kings have helped to make their people wicked too, or out of an unrighteous nation have sprung rulers equally bad; or, without either of these causes, when a restless country has fancied any change better than no change at all.

For me, I don't like changes, unless pretty sure that they are for good. And how good can come out of absolute evil—the horrible evil that went on this night under Prince Dolor's very eyes—soldiers shooting down people by hundreds in the streets, scaffolds erected, and heads dropping off—houses burned, and women and children murdered—this is more than I can understand.

But all these things you will find in history, my children, and must by and by judge for yourselves the right and wrong of them, as far as anybody ever can judge.

Prince Dolor saw it all. Things happened so fast one after another that they quite confused his faculties.

“Oh, let me go home,” he cried at last, stopping his ears and shutting his eyes; “only let me go home!” for even his lonely tower seemed home, and its dreariness and silence absolute paradise after all this.

“Good-bye, then,” said the magpie, flapping her wings. She had been chatting incessantly all day and all night, for it was actually thus long that Prince Dolor had been hovering over the city, neither eating nor sleeping, with all these terrible things happening under his very eyes. “You've had enough, I suppose, of seeing the world?”

“Oh, I have—I have!” cried the prince, with a shudder.

“That is, till next time. All right, your royal highness. You don't know me, but I know you. We may meet again some time.”

She looked at him with her clear, piercing eyes, sharp enough to see through everything, and it seemed as if they changed from bird's eyes to human eyes—the very eyes of his godmother, whom he had not seen forever so long. But the minute afterward she became only a bird, and with a screech and a chatter, spread her wings and flew away.

The Little Lamé Prince: Chapter Eight

Prince Dolor fell into a kind of swoon of utter misery, bewilderment, and exhaustion, and when he awoke he found himself in his own room—alone and quiet—with the dawn just breaking, and the long rim of yellow light in the horizon glimmering through the window-panes.