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THE BROWN OWL

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The Brown Owl

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The Brown Owl / A Fairy Story

ONCE upon a time, a long while ago – in fact long before Egypt had risen to power and before Rome or Greece had ever been heard of – and that was some time before you were born, you know – there was a king who reigned over a very large and powerful kingdom.

Now this king was rather old, he had founded his kingdom himself, and he had reigned over it nine hundred and ninety-nine and a half years already. As I have said before, it was a very large kingdom, for it contained, among other things, the whole of the western half of the world. The rest of the world was divided into smaller kingdoms, and each kingdom was ruled over by separate princes, who, however, were none of them so old as Intafernes, as he was called.

Now King Intafernes was an exceedingly powerful magician – that was why he had remained so long on the throne; for you must know that in this country the people were divided into two classes – those who were magicians, and those who weren't. The magicians called themselves Aristocrats, and the others called themselves what they liked; also in this country, as in all other countries, the rich magicians had the upper hand over the rest, but still the others did not grumble, for they were not badly treated on the whole. Now of all the magicians in the country the King was the greatest, and no one approached him in magic power but the Chancellor, who was called Merrymineral, and he even was no match for the King.

Among other things King Intafernes had a daughter, who was exceedingly beautiful – as indeed all princesses are or ought to be. She had a very fair face, and a wealth of golden hair that fell over her shoulders, like a shining waterfall falling in ripples to her waist.

Now in the thousandth year of her father's reign the Princess was eighteen, and in that country she was already of age. Three days before her nineteenth birthday, however, her father fell sick and gradually weakened, until at last he had only strength left to lie in his royal bed. Still, however, he retained his faculties, and on the Princess's birthday he made all the magicians file before his bed and swear to be faithful for ever to the Princess. Last of all came the Chancellor, the pious Merrymineral, and as he took the oath the King looked at him with a loving glance and said:

'Ah! my dear Merrymineral, in truth there was no need for thee to have taken the oath, for it is thy nature to be faithful; and it being thy nature, thou couldst not but be faithful.'

To which the pious Merrymineral answered:

'To such a master and to such a mistress how could I but be faithful?' and to this noble sentiment the three hundred and forty-seven magicians could not help according unanimous applause.

When they were quiet again the King said:

'So be it, good Merrymineral, do thou always act up to thy words. But now leave, good men all, for I am near my end, and would fain spend my last moments with my daughter here.'

Sorrowfully, one by one, the courtiers left, wishing him their last adieux. He had been a good king to all, all through his long reign, and they were sorry that he had to leave them at last.

Soon they were all gone except the good Merrymineral, and at last he too went, his whole frame shaking with suppressed sobs; his body seemed powerless with grief, and his limbs seemed to refuse their functions. The King looked after him, carefully noticing whether the door was shut. Then he spoke:

'My dear daughter,' he said, 'when I am gone be kind to every one, and, above all, cherish the Owl – do cherish the Owl – promise me to cherish the Owl.'

'But how can I cherish the Owl?' cried the poor Princess; 'how can I, unless I know who he is?'

But the King only answered:

'Dear Ismara, do promise to cherish the Owl!'

And he said nothing else for a long time, until at last the Princess saw that the only way to let him rest in peace was to promise, and she said:

‘I promise, dear father, but still I do wish I knew who or what the Owl is that I am to cherish.’

‘You will see that in good time,’ answered the King. ‘Now, my dear Ismara, I shall die happy, and you will be safe. If you had not promised – however, we will let that rest unsaid. Now wheel the bed to where I can see out of the window.’

The Princess did as she was told. Now from this you must not imagine that she was a very strong princess – for she was no stronger than most princesses of her age; but the old King, who was a very powerful magician, as I have told you already, made the bed easy for her to move. He might have made it move of its own accord, but he knew that it would please his daughter to be of service to him, and so he let her move it.

The view from the window was very fine. A dark wood grew in the foreground, and far away over the tree-tops were the blue hills, behind which the sun was just preparing to retire. And it seemed angry, the sun, for its face was dark and clouded, and its beams smote fiercely on everything, and gilded the tops of the autumn trees with a purer gold than their natural tint. But overhead the clouds spread darkly, and they reached in a black pall to the verge of the horizon, forming a black frame to the red-gold sunset; for only the extreme west was bright with the waning light.

The Princess sat on the bed beside the King, and the dying sun lit them both and fell with a ruddy glare on the King’s hard countenance, as if it knew that his work on earth for the day, and for ever, was done.

‘Is it not grand?’ cried the old King, as if the glorious sight warmed his blood again and made him once more young. ‘And is it not grand to think of the power that thou hast, my daughter? If thou but raise thy little finger armies will move from world’s end to world’s end. Fleets come daily from every land for thee alone; all that thou seest is thine, and utterly within thy power. Think of the power, the grand power, of swaying the world.’

But long before he had got thus far, the Princess was weeping bitterly – partly at the overwhelming prospect, and partly from her great grief. She seized her father’s hand and kissed it passionately.

‘My father, my father,’ she cried, ‘say not so; they are all thine, not mine, for thou livest still, and all is yet well.’

But the old King cut her short:

‘Dost thou see the sun? Look, its lower rim is already cut by the mountains. When its disc is hidden I too shall have joined the majority, and my soul will have left my body, and the power will be thine. But above all cherish the Owl. Never go out of its sight, for if thou do, some harm will happen.’

As he stopped speaking a flash of lightning lit up the sky, and the sullen roar of distant thunder followed.

From every church in the land the passing bell tolled forth and the solemn sounds came swelling on the breeze. Again came the flash of lightning, and again the thunder, and now the splash of falling rain accompanied and almost drowned the thunder. The sun’s rim was now almost down.

For the last time the old King kissed his daughter, as she hung weeping on his neck. Again the lightning came, but this time the thunder was drowned in a more fearful sound. Never before had the sound been heard, except at the death of the Princess’s mother. It was the passing bell of the cathedral of the town. And as its sound went forth throughout the whole land men shook their heads in sorrow, for they knew that the soul of the good King had left his body. Through the whole land the news was known – to every one except to the Princess.

For she lay on the bed passionately kissing the dead face – not yet cold in death – and calling on his name in vain; for the ears of the dead are closed ‘to the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely.’

Gradually the voice of the Princess died away into low sobs and her breathing came more regularly, and in spite of the tolling of the death-bell she slept, worn out by her grief. No one came near her, for at the Court no one was allowed to enter the royal presence without a command, whatever happened. So for a time the Princess slept on, clasping the still face to her warm cheek. But at last the death-cold of the face wakened her once more to the death-cold of the world. For a time her wakening dreams refused to let her believe the worst, but the stern reality forced itself on her. She raised herself on her two arms and gazed through the darkness at the white face that made her shudder when her longing eyes at last traced out its lines as a flash of lightning lit it up. She sprang off the bed with a wild impulse of calling for help.

But no sooner had she got to the door and had given the call than she once more fainted and seemed for a time lifeless.

When she came to herself again she was in bed in her own room. It was still night, and at the side of her bed a night-light was burning in a glass shade. She could not understand what it all meant; but her head did ache so, and she could not tell why they were making such a noise at the far end of the room. For you see she was lying on her back low down in the pillows, and so she could not see beyond the foot of the bed. However, she raised herself on her elbow and looked. For a short time she could see nothing, for the room was somewhat dark, as the night-light gave but little light. But at the other end of the room a large fire was burning, and by its light the Princess saw a strange scene.

For in the middle of the floor she could make out a group of three ladies-in-waiting, who were struggling with a large black object – what it was the Princess could not see, but it seemed to be attempting to attack the Court doctor, who was huddled up in a corner with his umbrella spread out before him, and he was gradually sinking down behind it, giving vent to the most horrible groans and shrieks for mercy, and calling to the ladies to keep it off. However, in spite of their efforts, the ‘thing’ was gradually drawing them nearer and nearer to the poor doctor.

But the strangest thing of all was that the doctor’s face was lit up by two distinct rounds of light. It was just as if some one had turned the light of a bull’s-eye lantern on him, and this the Princess could not understand at all. However, she lay still and watched.

The doctor got farther and farther behind the umbrella until only his head appeared over the top of it. At last he shrieked:

‘Send for a regiment of Lifeguards – let them shoot the Owl – it is necessary for the health of the Princess. Owls are very bad things to have in bedrooms – they bring scarlatina, and they always carry the influenza epidemic. Lifeguards, I tell you, send for them.’ But still the ‘thing’ came nearer, and with an agonised shriek of ‘The Owl!’ he sank altogether under the rim.

This loud cry of ‘The Owl’ roused the Princess, and she remembered her promise to cherish the Owl. So she called to the ladies-in-waiting, and they, astonished, let go the thing, and the Owl immediately flew at the umbrella, underneath which the doctor was coiled up, and perched on the top. The Princess, however, thought it was rather rash to have promised to cherish the Owl if it was going to eat up her physicians in that reckless manner. However, the Owl did not seem aggressive, and only seemed as if it were waiting for further orders. The Princess determined to see if it would come when it was called, like a dog. So she called in a sweet, persuasive voice:

‘Come here, good Owl.’

Immediately the dark shape of the Owl flitted noiselessly to her side as she sat on the bed. The wind of its flight blew out the flickering night-light in spite of the glass shade. But the glittering eyes of the Owl lit up the whole room, so that there was no need of light. As it alighted on the bed it turned its eyes on the Princess as much as to say, ‘What shall I do now?’

But the fierce light of the eyes was softened as it turned to her, as if the Owl feared to hurt her with the blinding rays.

‘Cherished Owl,’ said the Princess, ‘why didst thou hurt the physician?’

The Owl shook his head; but the Princess could not understand whether he meant that he did not know why he had hurt him, or if he meant he had not hurt him. So the Princess told one of the ladies-in-waiting to remove the umbrella from over the doctor. But this was not so easy as it sounded, for the doctor held firmly on to the handle, and in spite of the united efforts of the three ladies-in-waiting he managed to hold on. At last the Princess lost patience.

‘Go and help them, good Owl,’ she said; and the Owl, overjoyed, flew to the doctor, and seizing the top of the umbrella flew with it up to the ceiling, and as the doctor still held on, he flew round and round, until the doctor, hitting the top of a cupboard, let go, and fell in a heap in the middle of the floor, where he lay half unconscious, repeating as he sat:

‘Orange juice for influenza; try a seidlitz powder and a blue pill, and keep the owls out of the room and take a warm bath, and – send for the Lifeguards.’

But the Princess did not seem inclined to send for them; and in truth it would have been rather awkward for the horses to get in, as the room was on the second floor.

So the Princess told the ladies-in-waiting to drag him out of the room, and they obeyed; but as he went he said: ‘Sleeping in unaired sheets causes rheumatism, sciatica, pleurisy, pneumonia and – owls;’ and as the door closed they heard him say, ‘Gregory powder and Epsom salts.’

The poor Princess, however, began to weep again, and the Owl sat perched on the bed-post at her feet, watching her with his bright eyes.

However, after she had cried thus for a long time, she thought it would be better to stop her tears, for they were all in vain, as she knew but too well.

So she rose from her bed; for you must know she had only been laid on her bed when she had fainted, and so she still had all her clothes on.

Through the window-blinds the light of dawn was already beginning to show itself. So the Princess went to the window and drew back the curtains, and let the bright sunlight shine into the room. A beautiful day was dawning after the last night’s rain, and the sun was rising brightly over the edge of the blue sea. For a moment, as she looked out, everything was quiet except the shrill chirp of a solitary sparrow that seemed to have awakened too early. From the chimneys of the red-roofed town below her no smoke was rising, for all in the town were asleep still.

Suddenly, with a rush, the morning breeze came from over the land behind her, and with the rustle of the wind everything seemed to wake and come to life once more. The solitary chirp of the sparrow was drowned in the flood of song that poured forth from the trees in the palace garden, and with the birds the rest of the living animals awoke, and from far inland the lowing of the cows was borne on the breeze, and now and again came the joyful bark of the shepherd’s dog as it recognised its master’s whistle as he called it to work again among the sheep, whose plaintive bleating came softly, as if from a distance, to the Princess’s ear.

Everything seemed joyful at the sight of the beautiful morning except the Princess, and she felt oh so lonely, for it seemed as if her only friend had gone from her for ever. And at the thought her tears began to flow afresh, for she felt very lonely, while everything else seemed to rejoice. But as she leant thus against the window-sill, with a great lump in her throat and the hot tears in her eyes, she suddenly felt a weight on her shoulder and a rushing wind waved her hair, and as she turned her head to see what it was, her face was covered in the soft brown feathers of the Owl, who had perched on her shoulder.

The touch of the Owl seemed to have driven away her grief, and she felt quite light and joyful in the beautiful sunshine. For it seemed as if the Owl had become a companion to her that would take the place of her father; so she leaned her head against the Owl, and her golden hair mixed with the dusky brown feathers, till each streak of golden hair shone again in the bright sunlight. And the Owl too seemed very happy. So for a time the Princess stood looking over the deep-blue sea.

Suddenly, however, a footstep sounded in the courtyard below, and the Princess drew back from the window, for a thought suddenly came into her head:

‘Oh dear,’ she said, ‘I have been crying such a lot that my eyes must be quite red, and my hair is all ruffled. This will never do.’ And as she looked in the glass she said, ‘Ah, just as I thought. Come, my cherished Owl, sit there on the crown on the top of the looking-glass frame and wait while I wash my hands and face and make myself tidy.’

The Owl did as he was told, and the Princess began to wash in cold water – a thing she had never done before – but she did not like to call to her ladies-in-waiting, lest they should see how red her eyes were. So she had to put up with the cold water, and very pleasant she found it, for it cleared the tear-mist out of her eyes and made her feel quite happy and cheerful again: ‘And I have heard,’ she thought to herself, ‘that washing in cold water is matchless for the complexion.’

When she had finished washing she went and combed her hair before the glass. For she was a very artistic Princess, and liked looking at beautiful things, and so she liked sometimes to look at herself in the glass. Not that she was in the least conceited.

So she combed her hair with a gold comb, and when she had finished combing it, she put on her gold circlet as a sign of her rank, and then she said to the Owl, who had been sitting patiently on the looking-glass blinking at her as if he quite enjoyed himself:

‘Now, cherished Owl, you may sit on my shoulder again.’

When the Owl was again in his place he blinked in the glass at his own reflection as if the light were too strong for him, and he shut his eyes and drew in his neck and lifted up one foot into his feathers, as if he felt quite happy and comfortable, and the Princess smiled at his happy look, for she seemed quite to have forgotten her sorrow in the company of the Owl.

So she, with the Owl on her shoulder, went to the window. Here in the courtyard already a large crowd had collected to catch a glimpse of the Princess if possible, so that it fell about that when they saw her they raised a mighty shout of joy and pity:

‘The King is dead,’ they cried. ‘Long live the Queen!’ And throughout the city far and wide echoed and re-echoed the cry:

‘Long live the Queen’; and it seemed as if the waves of the sea murmured the sound.

The Princess, however, held out her little hand to still the tumult, and as if by magic the cries stopped.

‘Good people all,’ she said in clear ringing tones, ‘I thank you for your good wishes, and I will try always to be worthy of them as my father was. For to-day, however, rejoice not; remember that the great King Intafernes, the founder of the kingdom to which we all belong, has but just left the earth – sorrow for him but a short time; joy will come soon enough for all.’

So the crowd, silent and pensive for a time, dispersed in groups. More than one of them asked what had been perched on the Princess’s shoulder, and those who had been near enough, said that it was an owl – though what it meant they knew not.

‘To me it seemed as if the head of the old King were looking over his daughter’s shoulder,’ said one of the listeners who stood on the outskirts of the crowd.

But she was only a little hunchback, and the rich citizens laughed at her, saying: ‘Tush, child – thy fancy is not sound! Or else before looking at the Princess thou didst look at the fierce sun, and the sun-spots in thy eyes caused thee to see it thus. It was but an owl.’ But the little hunchback held to her own opinion.

But while the Princess stood watching them depart, a tapping came at the door, and the Princess cried ‘Come in.’ A page entered and said that the Chancellor, Merrymineral, was below and requested audience of the Princess.

‘Let him be shown into the audience chamber to await me there.’

The page bowed and departed on his errand, and the Princess went to another door in the room and down the staircase that led from it to the audience chamber, and the Owl remained seated on her shoulder until they reached the room. When they got there the Chancellor had not yet entered, for the staircase from the Princess’s bedroom to the audience chamber was much shorter than that

from the entrance hall, and then you see the Princess was much more nimble than Merrymineral, who was an old man, and she ran quickly downstairs whilst he walked slowly up. However at last he entered. As he came in the Princess said:

‘Good morning, dear Merrymineral. How is it you are so late? I shall have to fine you if you keep me waiting like this again. And now what do you want with me?’

The good Chancellor received her laughing reproach with his head bowed down. He heaved a deep sigh, and drew his pocket-handkerchief from his pocket and applied it to his eyes. As he drew it away the tears could be seen flowing fast down his withered cheeks.

‘I came,’ he moaned, ‘to console you for your great loss. I too,’ he continued in a voice choked with sobs, ‘I too am an orphan.’

It seemed funny to the Princess to see him weeping thus, and she could hardly help laughing at him, but her grief soon came back.

‘Poor Merrymineral,’ she sighed, ‘to you also it must be a sad blow, for you were always faithful and attached. But it was fated to happen thus, and you must really try and be comforted, for crying will not mend matters.’

The Chancellor began again:

‘The beloved King your father’; but his sobs choked him, and he hid his face.

‘The beloved King your father,’ echoed a loud voice, exactly mimicking the tones of the Chancellor, but where the voice came from no one could tell. The Chancellor started.

‘Did you say that?’ said the Princess.

‘Not the second time,’ answered Merrymineral.

‘Who could it be?’ said the Princess; ‘for there is no one in the room except the cherished Owl; and you can’t speak, can you, Owl dear?’

The Owl shook his head dismally. But the change that came over Merrymineral was most astonishing as his eye suddenly lit upon the Owl – for since his entrance he had not raised his eyes from the floor. He jumped backwards over three rows of seats, for you see the seats in the audience chamber were arranged in rows, and he alighted in a sitting posture on the other side. As he sat on the floor he looked up at the Owl in a terrified manner, then threw up his arms and fainted. The poor Princess did not know what to do, so she rang a bell that stood on the table in front of the throne. Several pages at once came in.

‘Just bring that man to,’ said the Princess.

The pages bowed low, and went and shook the Chancellor violently. He showed no signs of recovering, so one of the pages turned to the Princess and said:

‘May it please your Majesty, but the Chancellor refuses to come to, and we can’t bring him.’

‘So he refuses to obey my orders,’ said the Princess. ‘He must be punished for this. However, now go and get a bucketful of water and pour it on him. Perhaps that will bring him to.’

Now when she said he was to be punished, she was only joking, but she said it very gravely, so that many people might have thought it was quite in earnest. Meanwhile the pages departed to fetch the water. They soon came back and brought a large pailful.

‘You had better not throw it all over him,’ said the Princess; ‘just let it trickle over his face gently.’

So one of the pages began to do as he was told, but somehow – either he had a sudden push, or, as he said afterwards, the Owl looked at him, and startled him – he let the pail go, and all the water and the pail too fell over the unlucky Chancellor. This really did bring him very much to – much too much to, in fact – for he sprang up in such a rage that the Princess really wished herself out of the room.

‘You jackanapes,’ he screamed at the unfortunate page; ‘you ape, you boar, you cow, you clumsy monkey, I’ll be revenged on you.’

But the Princess, who had gained courage while he was screaming, said:

‘You will not be revenged on him.’

‘But I shall,’ he said.

‘Indeed you will not,’ said the Princess, ‘for he did it by my orders.’

‘Oh! he did it by your orders,’ said the Chancellor; ‘then I’ll be revenged on you too,’ and he began to move uncomfortably near to the Princess. But the three pages threw themselves on him and tried to drag him back, but he turned suddenly on them.

‘What,’ he said scornfully, ‘you try to stop me – ye frogs! Ah! a good idea – by virtue of my magic power I command you to turn into water-rats; then perhaps the Owl there will eat you up.’

No sooner said than done, and the three pages instantly became water-rats, squatting in the water that was still in a pool on the floor.

Somehow the Princess did not seem to be at all frightened at this; she was only very angry.

‘I thought I told you not to hurt those pages.’

‘Who cares what you say?’

‘Dear me,’ thought the Princess, ‘he is getting excessively insolent – I shall have to be severe with him in a moment.’ So she said:

‘Turn those pages back again.’

‘I shall not.’

‘Then leave the room.’

‘I shall not.’

The Princess did not know what to do; he was really very rude, and he was walking towards her evidently intending to attack her. When he was within ten feet of her he stopped, and though he tried to get nearer he could not.

‘Ha! ha!’ he cried; ‘you think to keep me off by magic, but it is not so easy, I can tell you. By virtue of my magic power I command you to turn into a mouse.’

But the Princess, leaning her head against the soft feathers of the Owl, only smiled, and did not turn into a mouse at all.

The Chancellor seemed perplexed.

‘Is that not enough for you?’ he said; ‘I thought I told you to turn into a mouse.’

But the Princess smiled calmly and said:

‘Do you suppose I am going to do anything of the sort – you have forgotten your manners to speak to your Queen thus. I believe there is a fine of five shillings for any one who speaks to the King or Queen without saying “Your Majesty.” You had better pay it, Sir Chancellor, and turn those pages back again, or I shall have you turned out of the kingdom.’

But the Chancellor laughed. ‘You can’t send me out if you wanted to. Meanwhile I shall not turn those rats back, for if I am not much mistaken your Owl there will carry them off.’

It really seemed as if the Owl were going to obey him, for greatly to the Princess’s surprise it sprang off her shoulder and seized the three rats, one in each claw, and one in its beak – but it returned at once to her and laid them squeaking on the table in front of her – but no sooner did they touch the table than they turned into men again just as quickly as they had become rats. When Merrymineral saw this he became perfectly frantic, and tried in vain to get at the Princess – he even went back a little and tried to run at her – but it was no use, for no sooner did he reach a certain spot than he was suddenly stopped, just as if he had run against a wall. At last he became so frantic that the Princess could stand it no longer. So she said:

‘Will you be quiet, you naughty old man? – leave the room or I will send for the police.’

But Merrymineral answered:

‘Oh, send for the police and the soldiers and sailors and candlestick-makers.’

So the Princess rang the bell that stood on the table: a page at once appeared at the door.

‘Send for a policeman and ask him to step this way.’

The page looked astonished, but he saluted and left the room. Almost immediately a policeman came in – for you see there was one always on the palace steps. He entered the room with a low bow.

‘Take the Chancellor out of the room,’ said the Princess, ‘and put him in prison for three days.’
But the policeman shook his head.

‘Excuse me, mum – I mean your most gracious Majesty – but it is against the law to imprison a member of Parliament, much less a chancellor.’

The Chancellor laughed sarcastically.

‘Oh, is it?’ said the Princess; ‘never mind, take him into custody; I depose him – he is no longer Chancellor.’

Merrymineral looked astonished, but the policeman cleared his throat and said:

‘Come, I say, young fellow; will you go quietly, or shall I make you?’

‘Oh, make me, by all means,’ answered Merrymineral.

So the policeman advanced and held out his hand to take him by the collar, but had no sooner touched Merrymineral than he fell to the ground as if he had been thunderstruck.

The Chancellor smiled. ‘I told you so,’ he said.

The Princess was now thoroughly nonplussed. However, she rang the bell again. Again the page appeared.

‘Summon the Lords of the Council; let them come here at once.’

Almost immediately afterwards the lords appeared. As they came in each one bowed profoundly to the Princess. But in spite of their grave appearance they could not help looking astonished at the policeman, who was lying on the floor, and at the three pages who were still sitting on the table – for as they had not yet been told to go they could not depart.

But each one took his seat without questioning. Last of all came the Court doctor, who looked in an alarmed manner at the Owl – nevertheless he took his seat.

When all was quiet the Princess began to speak.

‘My lords,’ she said, ‘I have been obliged to assemble you on the first day of my reign; but the matter is a very grave one. I have found it necessary to dismiss the Chancellor, for these reasons: first, he attacked these three pages who were executing my bidding; next, he attacked me; and lastly, he attacked the law, in the person of the policeman there, whom he knocked down. Now I ask your advice as to how I am to get rid of him, for he refuses to leave the room at my command.’

So spoke the Princess, but before any one could answer Merrymineral spoke:

‘My lords,’ he said, ‘are we, we, the lords of the kingdom, to be governed by this schoolgirl, who is not even a magician as we are? What good has she ever done us? What power is to keep us from deposing her and electing as a ruler one of ourselves?’ – but before he could finish a perfect uproar of shouts of rage interrupted him.

The Princess put her fingers in her ears to keep out the sound, and when the lords saw that the noise was annoying her they stopped at once. When they were quiet the Princess spoke again:

‘What he has just said is right,’ she said; ‘I have no right to reign over you, for I am but a girl. Do ye therefore elect a ruler.’

For a moment all was silence in the Council, but all eyes were turned on a lord who stood next to Merrymineral in rank. He was a portly man, and a great magician too, though his power was not quite so great as Merrymineral’s. When therefore he saw that all eyes were turned on him, Lord Licec, for so he was called, rose.

‘Your most gracious Majesty,’ he began, ‘although you had no need to command us to elect a ruler, we are of course bound to obey your commands, whatever they are. I therefore speak, giving my vote, and I believe the vote of all the rest of the assembly, that you shall be our ruler according to the oath which we swear to your father.’

And then turning to the rest of the assembly he said:

‘Am I not right, my lords?’ and with one voice they answered:

‘We will die for our Queen Ismara.’

Only one voice objected, but as that was Merrymineral, no one noticed him.

So the Princess rose and thanked them for their confidence in her, though, to tell the truth, she had known all along what they would say. That done she said:

‘And now what are we to do about turning this man out? for he refuses to go of his own accord.’

No one could suggest anything better than to send for the Lifeguards and let them carry him off. But before this was done they decided to try to persuade him to go. But it was of no use, for he stood on the spot where he had stopped, with his arms folded and his hat on, looking down at the ground in a brown study, and he took no notice of anything they could do, even though they rang the bell close to his ear. Now he did no particular harm as he stood there, but you see no one could tell whom he might attack next. So they determined to send for the Lifeguards as a last resource.

So they were sent for, and in a short time they came, although they left their horses outside in the courtyard. Fifty of them were then marched into the hall and they were ordered to move the man out. So they divided into two parties of twenty-five each, and they put a rope round him, and each body of twenty-five took an end of the rope and pulled, but it was no good, for he took no more notice of the pulling than if he had been Samson or any other strong man. So the fifty gave up the attempt in despair; the only thing to do seemed to be to cut him to pieces. So they drew their swords and hacked at him, but it was no use: the swords bent or broke just as if they had been bulrushes or paper, and still Merrymineral took no notice in particular. So they gave up the attempt in despair when they had broken up all their swords. However, they did not give in, for they called in the best horseman in the regiment and told him to charge on horseback with his lance in rest. So the soldier rode in on his horse; this was not so difficult as it may seem, for the council chamber was on a level with the ground, and a lane was opened in between the chairs to where Merrymineral still stood with his arms folded.

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