

The Christening of the 15 Princesses

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Once upon a time there was a village called Lew, and it was perched on the top of a hill 999 feet, 11 inches high. That is the way fairy-tales have to begin; they insist upon going back into the remote past; but unfortunately the village of Lew has come down to our own days, and so has the big hill on which it stands. If we start over again with, „Once upon a time there was a man of Lew who had fifteen daughters,“ we are confronted by exactly the same difficulty; for the man is still alive, and the fifteen daughters look as if they never would, nor could, belong to the period when little pixy maids were to be seen any night running round and round the furze-bushes. The only way out of the difficulty is to be courageous, to tell the truth, and say: At the top of a hill 999 feet, 11 inches high—some say it is 1,000 feet, but that is not true—stands the village of Lew, where dwells a man named Heathman, who has fifteen daughters and not a single son; and the daughters are all princesses, although it is not easy to say why; but as they are pretty, and this is a fairy-tale, they must be.

The little village lies within a kind of ring-fence of ash and sycamores, which shelter the cob houses from the furious gales which boom and bluster over the Dartmoor tors. The wind is always sighing and moaning. It is cool upon the

hottest day in August, and probably that is why Lew imports weak-chested people in some quantity. A regular business is done with big, smoky Bristol. Lew says to Bristol in its own language, „Us ha' butiful air up over in Demshur, and us ha' a proper plenty o' cream and butter and suchlike, but us ain't got much golden money. If yew sends us sickly volk, they can buy our cream and butter, and us will send 'em back strong.” Bristol sees the force of this argument, and packs up and sends off its weak-chested folk, who reason, quite sensibly, „What's the use of being ill when we can go to the top of Lew hill and get well?” There is a tariff, of course, for Lew does not believe in free imports. The weak-chested folk must buy cream and butter and suchlike in vast quantities, or they would be promptly deported under the local Aliens Act. As a matter of fact, they buy Lew produce without any grumbling; they do even more than they are wanted to, and are actually spoiling Lew—where tips are unknown and a man will do an extraordinary lot of work for two shillings—by raising the prices. They get absurdly grateful, these visitors, who enter Lew weak and thin, and are exported brown and fat and sleek, like porpoises.

It is the importation of so much foreign raw material that has built up the fortunes of the fairy family called Heathman. His Majesty, the father—hereinafter called King Heathman—was village cobbler before he came to the throne. After his accession he procured a horse and cart, and conveyed people to and from the distant station. He also annexed several acres of grass territory, by a process of peaceful penetration, and went in for cows and dairy produce. These two businesses developed so wonderfully that he dropped the cobbling, at which it must be owned he was always rather a poor hand. The weak-chested imports have to be brought up from the station ill, and taken back well; and while they are on the top of Lew hill they pass the time consuming cream, butter, milk, and eggs, which are provided by King Heathman, and delivered morning and evening by the golden-haired princesses. Their Majesties of the Palace—two cottages of red cob knocked into one—are busy people, and have no time for boasting; nor do they appear to think they have done anything out of the way in bringing up fifteen model princesses, not one of whom has ever given her parents an hour's anxiety. Sickness, some one will suggest; but that is a ridiculous idea, for the residents of Lew are never ill, and they live just as long as they like. Mrs. Heathman—hereinafter called Queen Heathman—looks the picture of health and strength, and only last Revel Week was footing it merrily after a long day's work, and dancing one or two anæmic young maids from foreign lands like Plymouth to a standstill. Old Grandfather Heathman, His Majesty's father, who is so much addicted to Lew that he won't die, had the impertinence to be dancing too. He must be nearly a hundred, though he neither knows nor cares about his age, and will merely state in the course of conversation that he intends to live out the present century, because he is so fond of the place. Old Grandfather Heathman is probably the only man now living in England who has witnessed a fatal duel, which was fought some time in the dark ages between the son of the then rector of Lew and a young doctor, a lady being of course the cause. The unfortunate young doctor, who very likely had never handled a sword before, was quickly killed by his opponent, who was an army officer. A stone still marks the spot, but it has become so overgrown with brambles that only Grandfather Heathman knows where to look for it.

The crown princess is just twenty-three. The girls are nicely dressed, well educated, and speak and behave like little angels. If Romney were alive, he would want to paint them all. They are so pretty, these fifteen princesses of

Lew. Each has a slender figure, wild-rose complexion, shy eyes, and fair hair. But it must not be imagined they are dancing princesses. One plays the American organ (which was alluded to with less respect as the harmonium twenty years ago) in the church; another is pupil-teacher; another manages the Sunday-school. They milk the cows and attend to the dairy work. All of them love animals; each has her dog, or cat, or bird, generally with her in work or in play. When you meet a pretty, well-dressed girl in Lew, you will not—unless you are the latest importation—ask her name. You will say, „And what is your number?“ She will blush delightfully, lower her shy eyes, put her hands behind her back, and tell you.

When the first child was born the neighbours offered their congratulations, and said, „Of course you will call her Annie.“ In this part of the country it is absolutely necessary to have a girl in the family of that name, and it is most unorthodox to call the first girl anything else. But King Heathman rebelled against custom. He did not care for the name Annie. He liked something daintier, something more unusual and fanciful. No doubt there is a vein of poetry somewhere in His Majesty's system. King Heathman stated plainly he would not have his daughter named Annie. He would go to the rector and ask him to supply a name. The good people of Lew were horrified at such heresy. They pointed out what a great risk he was running. It was quite possible he would not have another daughter, and thus his family would be branded with the disgrace of having no Annie. But King Heathman hardened his heart yet more, and tramped off to the rectory.

The rector of Lew is a scholar of the old type, an unconscious pedant who can hardly open his lips without quoting Latin or Greek, a type which before another twenty years have gone will be as extinct as the pixies. The rector of Lew is almost as much a curiosity of the past as Grandfather Heathman, only when people plant themselves on the top of the big hill 999 feet, 11 inches high, it never seems to occur to them that they are mortal. The rector solved the royal difficulty at once, and in the most natural way possible. „She is the first child. Let us call her either Prima or Una,“ he said. „Una is a pretty name.“

„That 'tis, sir—that 'tis.“ For reasons of his own King Heathman always prefers to use the dialect of his country.

„You will find the name in the *Faerie Queene* written by Spenser,“ the rector continued.

„Old John Spencer over to Treedown?“ suggested His Majesty, who had not dabbled much in classics.

„No; Edmund Spenser, who lived in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.“

„Aw, yes, sir, I knows 'en,“ said King Heathman.

Of course he didn't, but perhaps he was referring to the queen. Every one in Lew knows Queen Elizabeth intimately, because there is a little old house in the village where she was fond of putting up for the night occasionally. This house is still furnished very much as it was in the sixteenth century, but whether the Maiden Lady ever saw or heard of Lew is another matter. It is certain, however, that Queen Elizabeth occupied most of her long reign travelling about the country in order that she might sleep in out-of-the-way manor-houses. Whenever you visit any old house in this neighbourhood it is only polite to say, „Queen Elizabeth slept here, of course?“ And then you will be shown the room and the bed, and if you go on being polite you may very possibly see the sheets and blankets and pillow-slips also, with the pillow itself still marked with the impression of Queen Elizabeth's head.

Princess Heathman was duly christened Una, to the delight of her father, and the horror of the inhabitants. Every one breathed a sigh of relief when a second princess favoured Lew with her appearance. After all, the Heathmans would not be disgraced. There would be an Annie in the family, though they hardly deserved it after letting the first chance slip. King Heathman remained as silent as the Sphinx, and about as mysterious. When the time came for the royal christening, the church was filled. The rector received a particularly plump bundle from Queen Heathman, and placed it snugly into the hollow of his arm. He dipped his hand into the font, and the whisper of „Annie” went about the church. The next moment they heard, „Secunda, I baptise thee...”

The next year Princess Tertia was christened, and then Princess Quarta. Even the rector admitted Quarta was rather an unusual name, but His Majesty revelled in it, and would hear of nothing else. Every one said Q was such an awkward initial; and they had to make the same remark next year when Princess Quinta was brought to the font. „Sounds like squint,” said one of the grumblers; but not one would venture to suggest such a thing now. By this time the gossips of Lew had pretty well accommodated themselves to the idea that King Heathman was irreclaimable. Annie, Bessie, and Lucy were the orthodox village names for young ladies; and it was perfectly clear he would have none of them.

In quick succession princesses were hurried to the font, and the unromantic ears of the congregation were astonished by a list of beautiful names—Sexta, Septima, Octava, Nona of the wonderful eyes, and Decima of the sunny hair. But when the eleventh princess was brought to church a serious difficulty arose. A perfect understanding existed between His Majesty and the court chaplain. The father had no idea what the name of his new daughter was to be when she was handed into the scholar’s arms. The rector did not use the formula, „Name this child,” but substituted the question, „What is her number?” or words to that effect. On this occasion, when the question was put, and King Heathman had answered, „Eleven, sir,” the rector paused. Then he whispered, „Would you like Undecima?”

„Aw, sir, proper. Let’s ha’ ’en,” was the eager answer.

The rector hesitated. Across his classical mind flashed the Latin numbers ahead. The twelfth princess would have to be christened Duodecima, and after that such names became impossible. So he whispered, „Undecima is too much like Decima. We must think of something else.”

„As yew like, sir,” said his accommodating Majesty, although in distinctly disappointed tones.

„Now there will be an Annie,” murmured those villagers who were nearest the font and had overheard the discussion.

While the rector was deliberating his eyes fell among flowers, the church happening to be decorated for a festival, and bunches of the white cluster-rose known as the Seven Sisters being twined about the font; and he suggested that, if King Heathman was agreeable, a bevy of flower-named princesses would be a pleasing relief after the dull monotony of numbers.

„Twill do fine, sir,” said King Heathman.

And that is how the Princess Rosa came to be christened.

But princesses went on filling the palace, and names were soon running short again. Rosa had been followed by Lilia, Viola, and Veronica. King Heathman was becoming fastidious. He had imbibed so much raw material of knowledge from the court chaplain that he was beginning to regard himself as a

scholar of some importance. Then his royalty was increasing in Lew; and he always wore a hard hat, which, in this part of the country, is a sign, not exactly of majesty, but of stability and respectability. He still hankered after the numbers, and was looking forward to the birth of a twentieth princess who could be called Vicesima. The fifteenth princess had just made her appearance, and the father continued to disregard the petition of the neighbours praying him to call her Annie before it was too late. It happened one day that he cast his eyes upon two flowering shrubs which grew in pots, one at each side of the palace gates. King Heathman could not remember the name of these shrubs, though he had been told often enough, so he called Tertia, and asked her to enlighten him.

„The name is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't get it out," said Tertia. „I'll call Una."

Una is court encyclopædia. She appeared with her beautiful hair ruffled, for she had been deep in arithmetic when Tertia called her, trying to paper an imaginary room, having most impossible angles, with imaginary wall-paper at the ridiculous price of one penny three-farthings a yard.

„What be the name o' that plant?" asked His Majesty.

„That is a hydrangea," said Una, in a delightfully prim and pedantic fashion; and then she slipped back to her wall-papering at a penny three-farthings a yard.

„What b'est going to call the new maiden?" shouted the blacksmith a few moments later over the palace gates.

„Hydrangea," answered King Heathman grimly. Then he went into the state apartments to break the news to his wife, leaving the blacksmith to have a fit upon the road, or to go on to his smithy and have it there.

For the first time Queen Heathman rebelled. She said it was ridiculous to give the child a name like that: she was surprised that the rector should have thought of it, and she—

But at that point her husband interrupted with the famous remark of the White Knight to Alice „Tis my own invention."

This gave Queen Heathman free licence to exercise her tongue. She talked botany for some time, and concluded with such words as: „You'll call the poor maids vegetables next. If us ha' another maiden you'll call her Broad Bean, I reckon, and the next Scarlet Runner."

„One Scarlet Runner be plenty, my dear," said her husband, with regal pleasantries.

„What do ye mean?"

„Bain't your tongue one, my dear?"

This was a libel, for Queen Heathman is remarkably silent—for a woman. She had to laugh at her husband's little Joke. They have always been a devoted couple, and this little tiff was in perfect good-humour. Finally, King Heathman went off to the rectory, where he discovered the court chaplain and the Home Secretary chatting upon the lawn. Without any preamble he disclosed his difficulty, and proposed that the fifteenth princess should be named Hydrangea. There was no seconder. The motion was declared lost, and the subject was thrown open for discussion.

The Home Secretary suggested that the princess just born and her eleven successors should be given the names of the months; and when he rolled forth such stately titles as Januaria, Februaria, Martia, His Majesty trembled. However, it occurred to him there might not be sufficient princesses to exhaust

the months, and he stated with much dignity of language that he should not like to have an incomplete set. Then the Christian virtues were suggested, Faith, Patience, Charity, Mercy, Hope; but King Heathman would have none of them, not because he despised the virtues, but because he considered that his daughters had them all.

Then the rector interposed in his quiet manner:

„The child shall be called Serena.“

„What do 'en mean, sir?“ asked King Heathman eagerly.

„It means free from care.“

„That's it, sir—that's it,“ said His Majesty, expressing satisfaction in his usual way.

„It is an appropriate name,“ the rector went on. „It implies a perfectly happy condition. There may be dangers, but the girl shall not know of them. There may be difficulties, but they shall not trouble her—at least, we will hope so,“ he added with a smile.

„Thank ye, sir,“ said King Heathman. „And what will be the next name?“ he asked hopefully.

„The next?“ said the rector, still in his classical musings. „Why, the next child shall be called Placida.“

But for some reason or other the Princess Placida has never come to claim her name. Serena appears to be the last. She is still a toddler. Almost any day of the week you may see her, fat and jolly, and extremely free from care, staggering between Septima and Octava as they go a-milking. She is generally embracing a yellow and very ugly cat, in lieu of a doll. If you ask her name, she is just able to lisp, „I'se Swena.“

The gossips of Lew have revenged themselves upon King Heathman. They refuse to call the baby Serena. They call her Annie.

And they are all living happily ever afterwards.

