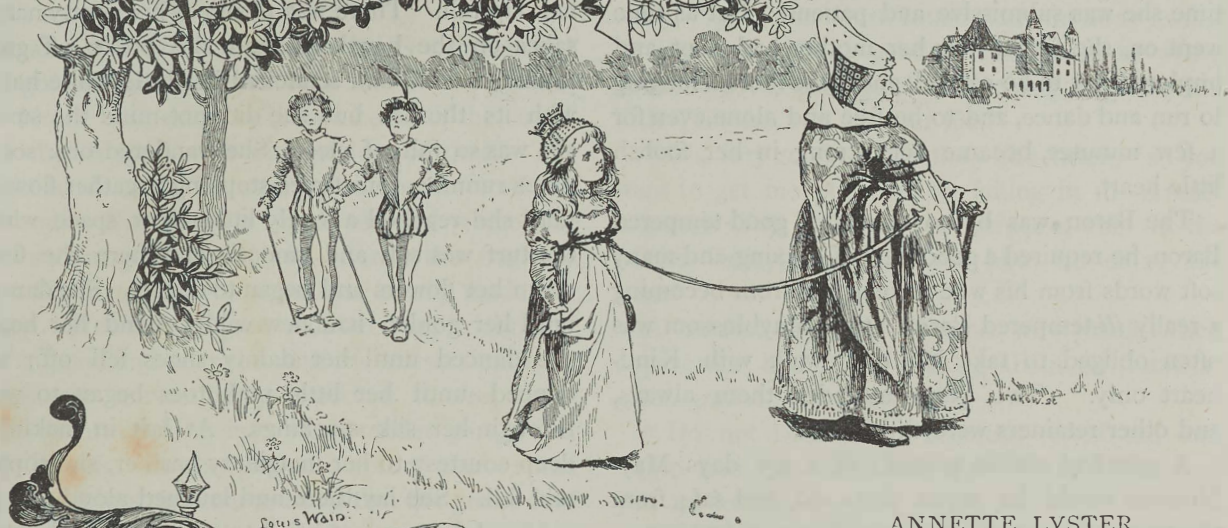


# Princess Mayblossom.



ANNETTE LYSTER.



Princess upon a time, there lived, in the Realms of fancy, a very, very great Baron, the Baron Hauteur, and his wife, the Baroness Gentesweet. They were very great people—all their sons and daughters bore the title of Prince or Princess, and the Baron reigned supreme over his property in the Realms of fancy, just as if he had called himself a king. He possessed a splendid castle, obedient vassals, a lovely wife, and one little girl, the Princess Mayblossom. In the wide corridor of this stately castle, one morning in the merry month of May, the little Princess and her nurse, good old Kindheart, were engaged in a somewhat noisy quarrel. Kindheart had produced a broad, strong ribbon with which she proposed to fasten the little princess to her apron-string, and Mayblossom declared that she was too old now for leading strings! She was flying up and down the corridor laughing at nurse's vain pursuit and maintaining loudly that for the future she would not submit to being tied to any one, when a door opened, and her mother came softly towards her. Mayblossom flew into her arms.

"Mother, dear mother! tell nursie that I am too old to be tied to her apron strings any longer! I am six years old to-day."

Baroness Gentesweet lifted the little one from the ground, and carried her off to her own pretty boudoir—where she sat down and talked gravely to her for a long time. Princess Mayblossom listened eagerly—as well she might! for her mother told her of the fate that hung over her noble house, and of the mysterious disappearance of many Princes and Princesses, her own two brothers having been the last victims.

"In another year thou wilt be safe, my treasure—the fatal Cat has no power over one who has completed seven years of life! For my sake, Mayblossom, be patient for one year longer."

"I will, dear mother—indeed I will, do not cry, and I will do anything you wish. But Kindheart does move so slow and I long to dance and run. Might I not be free even in the castle?"

"Your brothers were stolen from the Castle hall, dear child. Kindheart was my own nurse—when you were born I sent for her—and there is no one else in whom I can so securely trust. Once the dreadful cat had nearly stolen you, but Kindheart held you so firmly—she could not carry her off too; so she was baffled for once."

"I have never seen a cat—but from the picture

you once showed me of one, I should think, mother, she could hardly carry *me*, now : much less good fat nursie."

However Mayblossom allowed the pink ribbon to be tied round her waist once more, and for some time she was submissive and patient. But as time went on, she forgot how her mother had wept and implored her to be careful, and once more a longing to run and dance, and to be free and alone, even for a few minutes, became very strong in her foolish little heart.

The Baron was by no means a good-tempered Baron, he required a good deal of coaxing and many soft words from his wife to keep him from becoming a really *ill*-tempered Baron : thus Mayblossom was often obliged to take her daily walk with Kindheart only. Two pages attended them always, and other retainers were within call.

A year had almost passed : in a few days Mayblossom would be seven years old, and safe from the fate which threatened the children of her house. It was May again, and the weather was charming. The birds sang, the deer ran over the park, the air was full of sounds and scents, and Mayblossom's heart was full of a great longing to be free. She was taking a walk with Kindheart, and the slow pace, and the company of the old nurse and the two pages, had become even more irksome than usual. Presently Kindheart said—

"Let us rest here, my Princess, the day is hot and my old bones are weary."

"Are you sure you have any bones?" said Mayblossom pertly. "Sit down, nursie—I dare say we shall both take a nap.

Nursie looked all round. They were not far from the castle, and in the window of the Baron's library sat both Baron and Baroness, he smoking a cigar, and she reading to him. Even while wondering whether she might safely indulge in a doze, poor Kindheart was fast asleep.

Close by there was a little wood, into which Mayblossom had never been allowed to go. She looked longingly at it—and alas! the temptation proved too strong. She sent the pages running up to the castle, one for a cup of tea, the other for a parasol : as soon as they were gone, she took out of her pocket a pretty little "lady's companion," pulled out the scissors it contained and cut the pink ribbon through and through. Then she gently got up from beside nursie, and scampered off to the

wood ; in the shade of the tender young leaves she was soon hidden from view.

The sun was shining brightly, and the soft green darkness of the wood was delicious. There were primroses in the grass, and Mayblossom gathered her lap full. There was plenty of her pretty namesakes on the hawthorn, and she broke off great branches of it, and scratched her little white hands with its thorns : but she did not mind the smart, she was so full of glee. She wandered on : sometimes running, sometimes stopping to gather flowers, until she reached a lovely little clear space where the turf was soft and smooth, and here she flung down her flowers and began to dance. She danced until her golden hair flew wildly round her head ; she danced until her dainty shoes fell off ; she danced until her little pink toes began to peep through her silk stockings. At last in making a deep courtesy to her imaginary partner, she slipped and fell. She lay there and laughed aloud : to get a fall, and no one at hand to make a fuss about it ! this really was freedom. In the midst of her laughter she heard a sound ; a tiny cry. She sat up and looked round. Under a bush close by lay a little snow-white kitten, crying pitifully.

Mayblossom had been warned again and again to avoid cats—but in her wild glee she never stopped to think, and this was such a pretty, tiny creature : and it seemed in pain. She sprang up and ran towards it : the kitten rolled over on to its feet and tried to crawl away. Then the Princess saw that some cruel person had wound a green silk cord tightly round the creature's legs and paws, so that it was almost powerless to move. It lay and looked up at her, crying softly.

"You poor little thing !" cried the child, "do let me take you up and untie that horrid cord, which will certainly cut off your nice legs if you don't. Don't be afraid of me, though I *am* a Princess."

Here the kitten gave her a look—so very strange a look that Mayblossom stopped short, and said—

"What do you mean by that, please?"

The kitten uttered a terrified "mew" and made a great struggle to get up ; Mayblossom pounced upon it, and in a moment had it safe in her arms. Oh, so soft, and warm, and cosy, and dear, and wee, and—kiss, kiss, kiss,—to see the way Mayblossom went on about that kitten would have made any one laugh.



Presently she sat down and began to try to untie the cord. But in vain, the knots and twists defied her.

"No one on earth could have patience to untie this," said she; "but never mind, my darling, I will soon set you free."

Again she took out her "lady's companion," and got the scissors.

"Now," said she, "we'll soon be rid of the cord," and she snipped at it without loss of time. The bright blades met, but strange to say, the cord was not cut. Not even a mark showed where the scissors had gone through it. Surely this ought to have frightened Mayblossom, but it only made her angry. Her cheeks grew red, her eyes bright, and she snipped and snapped with the scissors until the kitten not unreasonably expected to feel those sharp points sticking into some tender part of her little person. So she uttered a yell of terror: and then Mayblossom became aware that the green cord was being pulled. The end of it had been lying on the grass, it now rose about three feet from the ground, and became what the sailors call "taut"; very soon the strain upon it was considerable. Mayblossom flung down her scissors and held on to the kitten; the cord got tighter—tighter again—it *must* soon break. But it did not break, nor did Mayblossom let the kitten go, nor did the kitten cease to yell.

At last Mayblossom found herself on her feet—whether she had risen or was pulled up she did not know; the strain on the slender green cord continued, and she let it lead her on. On she went—slowly at first, then faster, faster, faster, until the child was running as surely she had never run before. Out of the wood, across a green plain, at the other side of which she saw wild rocks which seemed to form an impassable barrier. But as she came swiftly nearer and nearer she saw a narrow opening, across which was drawn a thick crimson rope. Mayblossom could not stop herself: she came bang up against the rope and fell flat on her back for the second time that day. When she recovered her breath and got up, she saw the white kitten sitting at the other side of the rope, quite free: the green cord had disappeared. Perched on the rope was a most respectable-looking elderly owl, who blinked at her solemnly through a pair of blue spectacles.

"Child," said the owl, "who are you?"

"Please do not speak to me unless I speak to you," replied the child, "for I am the Princess Mayblossom, Baron Hauteur's only child. Get out of my way, for I want to pass under the rope."

"Oh, you poor, pretty innocent!" cried the owl, sadly, "go home! turn round and run away as fast as you can. Look yonder! see the home where your mother is perhaps already crying for you; run, little Princess, run for your life."

"Oh, very good!" said the white kitten, "so you want to get me punished for failing in my errand, Mistress Owl. Come on, Princess, this is the Magic Valley, and just see how we enjoy life here."

A perfect troop of kittens now made their appearance, and began frisking about on the short green grass.

"Do not heed them, Princess," cried the owl, "turn and flee while you can. Once inside, and you are lost."

But Mayblossom scarcely heard her, so delighted was she with the kittens. She laughed to see them spring and frisk, and at last she stooped under the rope and darted in. And behold! another white kitten was frisking on the grass, and the little Princess—the sole hope of her noble house—had vanished!

"Joy, joy! I have done my task, I am safe!" cried the white kitten, and all the others shouted "Hurrah!" And the whole troop set off, and scampered up the valley, Mayblossom running off among them. The owl sat on the rope alone, and uttered several dismal hoots.

Up, up the valley ran the kittens; it was really very pleasant. Once through the barrier formed by the rocks, the valley was very beautiful. Every moment increased the speed of the race and Mayblossom's enjoyment. This *was* freedom! She bounded on, and felt as if she could continue the race for ever. When suddenly—whisk!—the leader, a fine tabby, turned sharply aside and sprang into a hole in the solid rock. A hole just big enough to allow a full grown cat to enter it, and which was cut, clean and round and smooth, in the solid rock. One by one the rest followed, but Mayblossom hung back. Seeing this, the white kitten who had been in the wood with her, stopped and waited until they were alone together.

"Come in, Mayblossom," she said; "you may as well do it willingly, for come you must."

"Must!" cried Mayblossom, "please remember who I am. I shall not go in. It has been very pleasant, but it is time for me to go home."

"Listen to me, Mayblossom. I am your aunt, you must know, your father's sister, taken from the

hesitate now, and you will very soon be quite merry and happy here."

She led the way into the round hole as she spoke, and Mayblossom followed her slowly. The hole was really the entrance to a long dark passage.



Castle long ago. And I advise you for your own good, as aunts *always* do. Step this way—take care! you are such a hasty little puss! look down there and tell me what you see."

"I see a dreadful deep hole, with black, black water far down in it," said Mayblossom.

"Well now, my dear niece, if you obey the Princess of the Magic Valley, better known to you as the Fatal Cat; you may live here for ever, a nice pretty white kitten, full of fun, well-fed, with plenty of merry playfellows, and the whole valley for a playground. If you displease her, she will stick pins into you and most likely throw you into that dreadful black water. It is too late for you to

"I don't like dark places!" said Mayblossom, "and I think I am going to be frightened."

"There is not much further to go," said the other, "already you see there is a gleam of light."

They ran on—and presently sprang out of the round passage into a large, lofty, beautiful cave. The walls were rough indeed, but then the colours were so splendid. Ruby red, deep violet, pure blue, vivid yellow, dazzling white, with here and there green of the most delicate shades. These colours gave light to the cave; it seemed as if they *were* light, for they glowed with a changeful, transparent brightness, although you could not see



through them. The floor was covered with thick soft moss, and here and there grew strange, beautiful trees. The air was deliciously warm and sweet, and here Mayblossom saw all the kittens again. But in the centre of the cave, lying on a cushion of ruby velvet, was a large white cat, with four black paws and a black tip to her tail.

Mayblossom knew now what had happened to her. Her mother had showed her a picture of the Fatal Cat—and there she lay! Mayblossom opened her mouth and yelled with terror.

“Hold your tongue!” said the cat. But Mayblossom screamed louder still.

“Oh mother, mother!” she cried. But oh! little Mayblossom, it seems that even in the Realms of fancy, one may cry out too late.

The cat rose, walked over to the little princess (she walked on her hind legs, like a highly-trained spaniel) and seizing Mayblossom by her little furry ears, she carried her over to a lovely fountain which played and sparkled in the many-coloured light, and quietly dropped her into the water which filled the marble basin. Mayblossom after

some terrified struggling, managed to crawl out.

“Dry yourself,” said the Fatal Cat. “That will give you some-

thing to do, my little dear. Every time you squall, I shall put you in that basin.”

She returned to her cushion, leaving May-



blossom speechless with anger and fright.

“Come here, Fairesperance,” said the cat. “What made you linger outside with yon little fool?”

“She was afraid to jump into the hole,” said the white kitten. “You would not wish me to leave her outside, I suppose?”

“Ho! Ha!” cried the cat. “I allow no saucy answers here.”

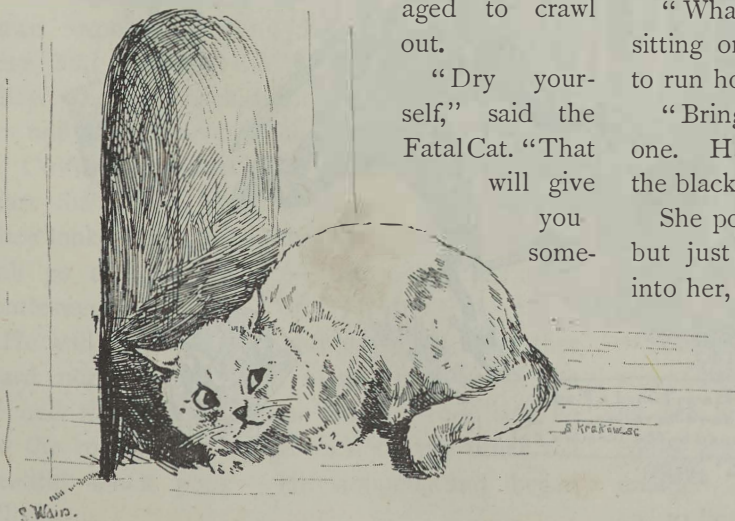
Fairesperance looked frightened, and hastened to say.

“What do you think of Mistress Owl, Madam, sitting on the red rope and advising Mayblossom to run home!”

“Bring me a pin,” shouted the cat. “A long one. Ha! Ho! Mistress Owl will find herself in the black pool yet.”

She pounced upon poor Mistress Owl who had but just come in, and having stuck the pin well into her, shut her up in a dark cupboard. Then she lay down on her cushion and summoned Mayblossom, who crept over to her, half dry and more than half dead with fear.

“You have seen how I reward rebellion!” said the Fatal Cat. “Be



obedient, and you may join your kindred there ; play, jump, eat, drink, and be merry. It amuses me. But you may as well give up all thoughts of escape. You are mine now. Long ago, little idiot, I too was a Princess of your family. My sisters married, but I had a soul above such a fate. I studied magic, I became powerful. I would have used my power for the good of my House ; but they would not submit to my sway. One day the Baron, he was my grand-nephew and your great-great-great-grand-father, saw me box his wife's ears ; she deserved it thoroughly. He ordered me to leave the Castle. I did so. I vowed to ruin the ungrateful race ; and now I have done so. It has taken a long time. See here is your eldest brother, Bienaimé. And here is your other brother, Desiré. I have laid a spell upon them all, and I lay it upon you ; none of you shall ever pass the age of seven years, until you are restored to your own forms. Which will not happen, my children, I promise you. Do not venture to displease me, Mayblossom. I brought a train of servants with me when I took possession of the Valley, and Mistress Owl is the last of them. They displeased me ; and I threw them into the black pool. Now be quiet, for I wish to sleep."

Mayblossom crept away, but the kittens came round her, and tried to cheer her up.

"Sister," said Bienaimé, "do not cry. Our life is far merrier than if we had to learn lessons and grow up. No one grows up here ; everything is to be the same until the end comes. A race up the valley—one mad, merry race, will make you forget. What say you, Mayblossom?"

"That it would be very nice, only for mother. She will cry so much. I've seen her cry so bitterly for you both, and now she must cry for me. I feel her tears hurting me."

"Nonsense !" cried

Bienaimé. "She cannot cry for me. I don't remember her." But he looked uncomfortable—and all the kittens felt something—they did not know what. They were all crying soon, but the cat moved in her sleep, and they dried their eyes hastily, and began to run about the cave.

Meantime, who can describe the scene at the castle when Mayblossom was missed? The Baron raved : he even threatened to hang poor faithful Kindheart. The Baroness fainted, and lay insensible all the time that search was being made for her child. The Baron led the searchers. They found the "lady's companion" ; they found the scissors ; they found the dainty little shoes ; but they did not find the Princess Mayblossom. They tracked her flying footsteps to the entrance of the Magic Valley : there the Baron leaned for a moment on the crimson rope, and then went sadly home.

The Baroness had recovered from her swoon, and came to meet her lord in the hall,

"How are you here so soon, my lord?" she said.

The Baron told her what he had done, and what he had seen.

"What !" she cried, "have you returned without searching the Magic Valley? Oh, my lord, go





now—save our little darling—to-morrow it may be too late. Let it not be said that the Baron Hauteur was afraid to enter the Magic Valley.”

The Baron, not very willingly, promised to go. He summoned all his men-at-arms and put on his best armour. He marched to the entrance of the valley, and there issued the order.

“Cut me that rope!”

Two sturdy retainers came forward, and with axes and hunting knives tried to cut the crimson rope—all in vain. They could make no impression on it.

“We must stoop to conquer,” said the Baron, and with wonderful condescension he bowed his head low and passed under the rope. A large party of his retainers at once turned about and ran away; but some bolder spirits followed him into the Valley.

“Go on,” said the Baron, eyeing them sternly. “Lead the way.”

“It is not for *us* to go before our Baron,” they cried with one voice.

“That means, that you are afraid!” he cried angrily. “Follow me then! Ho! Ha! Hum!”

This was the ancient war-cry of his house. There is little doubt that the “Fee, fo, fum” of the giants Blunderbore and Cormoran was a vulgar way of saying this majestic sentence. Either the giants themselves had degenerated, which seems quite likely, or those who heard them made a slight, and, under the circumstances, very pardonable mistake. For there can be little doubt that these giants were natives of the Realms of fancy, and they may have been younger brothers of some Baron ancestor of Baron Hauteur.

The Baron, crying his war-cry, and waving his drawn sword, rushed up the defile through the rocks and reached the lovely, peaceful-looking valley. Looking back, he found that he was alone. Not one of his train had followed him.

“Cowards! traitors!” he exclaimed, “ye shall smart for this. Shall I—follow them? The valley looks very quiet—very like other valleys. I shall go a little further—just to content poor Gentlesweet.”

He walked on—it was quite easy, and he neither heard nor saw aught to alarm him, until he reached the rocky platform where on one side he saw the round hole in the rock, on the other the dreadful black pool. He stopped, and began calling—

“Mayblossom! you troublesome little monkey, come here. I have come for you. I shall forgive you if you come at once—you very naughty little girl. Don’t keep me waiting, undutiful child. Unless you come at once, I shall whip you soundly.”

Suddenly—without warning—he found himself confronted by the Fatal Cat.

“Go home, you blustering booby,” said the Princess of the Valley, quietly. “You see that deep black pool? A moment more and I shall have you thrown in. And in those magic waters you will simply cease to be. It is my fate to perish thus, but not until I am confronted by something stronger than the hate I bear the house that cast me off. And you, weak fool, go at once, before I lose my temper. Your daughter has heard your call, but she did not seem at all disposed to join you. Go—go—go.” And with a yell she sprang at him. The Baron turned and fled—fled down the valley, pursued by the terrible cat; he reached the crimson rope, tumbled over it anyhow, and turned to look. The cat was no longer visible.

The Baron was borne home in a fainting state, and it was four days before he came perfectly to his senses. Gentlesweet nursed him tenderly; and made him tell her exactly what had occurred to him in the Magic Valley. Her mind was made up. She would save Mayblossom, or share her fate.

On the morning of the fifth day the Baroness dressed herself in her plainest apparel, and left the castle unperceived. She took a cake in her pocket, Mayblossom might be hungry—also she took the little shoes, for the child must not walk barefoot. She reached the crimson rope, bent her fair head low, and passed under it. She never paused nor faltered, but walked steadily on with head erect. Ah, we little know how strong love can make the weakest among us. Gentlesweet thought of her lost child, and of nothing else: of herself, her safety, her dignity, her probable fate, she thought not at all. And so she walked fearlessly up the Magic Valley.

Something moved on the path before her, she stopped to look, and saw a large gray owl, lying on its side, apparently dying. Even now Gentlesweet could not pass on, leaving the creature to suffer unaided. She sat down on a large stone, lifted the owl to her lap and examined it carefully.

"It is half-starved," she said. "Oh, how thin it is, poor thing. And what is this? Oh! what wicked cruelty! A long pin stuck into the poor creature so deep. I must pull it out. There, now, you poor thing, maybe you will feel better."

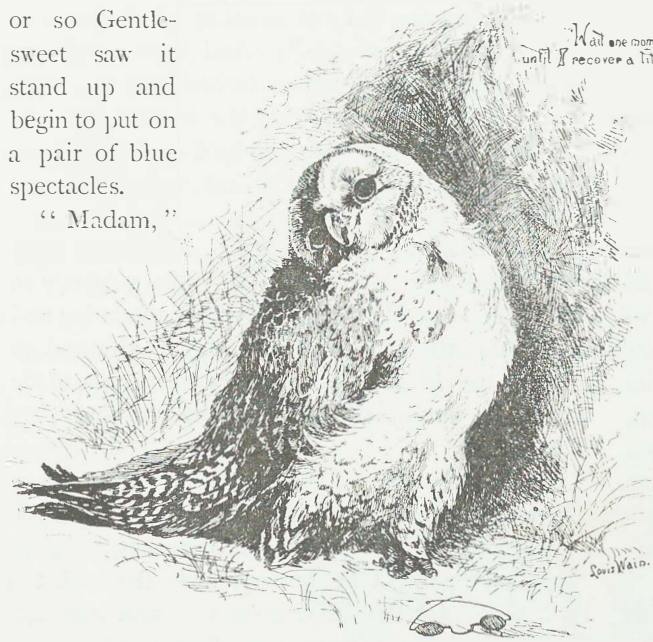
She fed the bird gently with some of the cake in her pocket, and seeing the glint of water close by, she lifted some in the hollow of her white hand, and gave it a drink.

"That is all I can do for you," she said "I must not delay any longer." And she laid the bird on the grass. To her surprise it looked up at her and said distinctly.

"Wait one moment, gentle lady, until I recover a little, I beseech you wait."

After a minute or so Gentlesweet saw it stand up and begin to put on a pair of blue spectacles.

"Madam,"



said the owl, "you have saved my life, and though I am often very weary of it, I feel grateful to you. In return, let me save you from such a fate as mine. Turn, lady, and fly from this hateful place. You are in the Magic Valley of the Fatal Cat, and if my mistress becomes aware of your presence, your fate is sealed."

"You are very kind," said Gentlesweet, "but I cannot fly, my little daughter has wandered into the valley, or been brought here somehow. I am seeking her."

"Then I think, Madam, that you are the Baroness Gentlesweet?"

"I am—and a most unhappy mother."

"Noble lady! fly while flight is still possible. The child you seek is a child no longer—like all the stolen children of your house she has been turned into a kitten. I owe my liberty to her, for only this morning she contrived to open the door of the cupboard in which my mistress had shut me up and left me to perish: forgetting all about me, I believe. You know that the Baron came here seeking the child. He got away safe but the Princess has lamented it ever since, and regrets that she did not turn him into a porcupine! and she will not let you escape her. And your child would not go with you. The Baron called her, and my mistress mockingly gave her leave to go, but she ran to her brothers and would not go."

"Her brothers!" cried Gentlesweet, "Oh, my babies, my babies! But tell me, kind owl, did the Baron call her tenderly, telling her how we were all so sad without her?"

"I cannot say that he did, Madam. He promised her a whipping and called her troublesome, and I know not what else. Had he been kinder she might have wished to go then, but now it is too late for that. She is changed—she is the maddest, merriest, happiest of them all. Last night she caught a mouse, and played with it, hunting it about the cave until it was almost dead with fear."

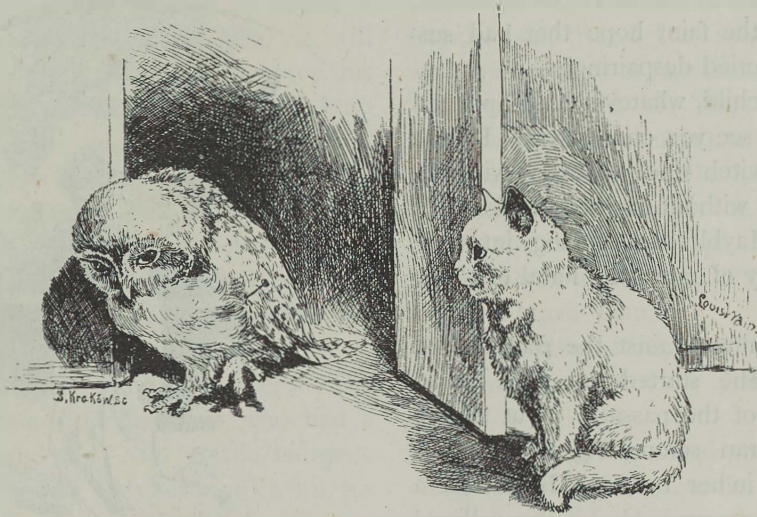
"My tender-hearted little girl did that!" cried the Baroness. "Ah, I must save her or share her fate."

"Are you so wilful, Madam? will nothing turn you back? If there is a creature that you hate and fear, into that creature you will be transformed. Look at me. I was the Princess's gentlewoman. I was afraid of owls and she knew it. Not a creature among her train but was turned into some bird or beast: and I am the only one left now."

"I cannot help it," said Gentlesweet, "if I must be a toad, why I must; but I shall at least see my children, and let them know how their mother loves them. I am resolved, good Mistress Owl."

"Then what I can do to help you I will do, noble lady, be my fate what it may. Attend to my words. When the Baron came to the top of





the glen, the Princess, in the form of the Fatal Cat, came out to meet him : and I have little doubt she will do the same when she knows that you are there. On the other side of the rock, nearly opposite the passage by which she will come, you will see the black pool. Its waters are fatal to all who touch them : they are destined to be fatal to my mistress herself, but only when she is confronted by something stronger than her hate for the House from which she sprang. Oh, lady, what strength have you ? ”

“None,” said Gentlesweet, “I am frightened ; but there is something here,” laying her hand upon her heart, “that is stronger than fear ; perhaps it may prove stronger than hate. At all events I will go on.”

“Alas that you will ! but remember what I have told you, lady, for it is your only chance—and a poor one, for she is wary and suspicious. I will be near, and if I can help you, I will do so.”

“Thank you, kind friend. I will remember. But my hope is to get Mayblossom into my arms, and run. I have no strength for a struggle.”

She passed on up the valley, meeting with no further adventure until she reached the great rock with the round passage through it, and the awful black pool on the other side of the platform. Leaning against the rock and bending down towards the hole, she called aloud—

“Mayblossom ! my darling, my one comfort ! my little girl ! come to your mother. Mayblossom, her heart is breaking for the loss of you. None shall blame you for running away, we know you

meant no harm. Only come back, come back, my little Mayblossom.”

Far off, in the cave, the Fatal Cat lay on her cushion, watching the kittens at play. It was the wildest, maddest play, and Mayblossom was the wildest there. The springs she made ! the jumps of her ! the way her tail whisked and her eyes flashed ! And in the midst of the fun, the Baroness sent her pitiful cry down the passage. The kittens ceased their antics suddenly ; the Fatal Cat frowned.

“This becomes very tiresome,” said she, “does the young woman want to be turned into a snail or something else that is nasty ? You, Mayblossom ! do you know that voice ? ”

“It is my mother’s voice,” said Mayblossom, “and she called me.”

“And you may go to her if you like,” replied the Princess, “I shall easily catch both her and you. Go if you will—but you must take the consequences.”

“Don’t go, don’t go,” whispered Fairesperance in a frightened voice. But now the Baroness spoke again.

“Mayblossom, my darling, my only beloved, will you not come to your poor mother who loves you so dearly ? ”

Slowly did Mayblossom draw near the entrance to the passage ; the Fatal Cat laughing maliciously all the time.

“Go by all means,” she said. “I shall be amused to see how your mother looks when she sees you. Do you expect her to care for a kitten ? a kitten too, that will never even be a cat ? ”

Mayblossom hesitated, Baroness Gentlesweet, who was fast losing the faint hope that had sustained her until now, cried despairingly—

“Come, home, my child, whatever has happened to you. Let me only see you once more? I don’t care what that cruel witch does to me, I will stay here, for I cannot live without my Mayblossom!”

At these words, Mayblossom sprang into the passage, and with a cry of rage the Fatal Cat flew after her.

The Baroness, leaning against the rock heard this terrible yell. She started up and stood gazing at the mouth of the passage. Out sprang a white kitten, who ran scrambling up into her arms and hid its head in her bosom. But before a word could be said, out sprang also, with a yell and a bound like those of a tigress, the Fatal Cat! With wonderful courage and presence of mind, the Baroness placed herself between her enemy and the mouth of the passage. At the same moment the cat turned and saw her. Rising upon her hind feet, she began to utter a spell: one moment more and the Baroness was lost! But surely this was Mayblossom, whose little heart was beating hard with terror as she pressed herself close to her mother’s breast. And with her child to fight for, Gentlesweet was strong indeed. With a cry which echoed far down the valley, she rushed at the Fatal Cat, seized her with both hands and flung her with all her might into the black pool.

Down, down, she went, her snowy form showing out distinctly against the dark sides of the pit; the Baroness, leaning over the edge in an agony of terror, listened for the splash which would prove that she had reached the water. But there was no splash, not a sound broke the stillness, not a drop of spray came flying up, nor a circle appeared on the surface of the mysterious water. But as the form of the Fatal Cat touched the face of the pool she disappeared, ceased to be, she was gone! The Baroness, panting and frightened, still gazed down, when a voice behind her made her turn round. There was Mistress Owl in a state of great excitement.

“Baroness Gentlesweet, brave and loving lady, brave because loving! You have saved us all. But I beseech you, lose no time; the spell is working now and those poor children will be prisoners in the Cave if they do not escape while



they are still kittens. Call them, Lady—see how the water rises.”

Yes, the black water was turning slowly round and round, rising as it turned. The Baroness, clasping the white kitten in her arms, ran to the hole in the rock and cried aloud—

“Run! escape for your lives! the water is rising!”

And in a moment, one after another, the whole band of kittens rushed out and stood gazing at her. Just as the last of them was safely out, the black waters reached the platform of rock on which they stood. Then they began to turn the other way, and to sink as rapidly as they had risen: and before they had entirely disappeared, every prince and princess had regained his or her rightful form, and the Baroness was surrounded by a group of lovely children.

But all she saw was, that her own little Mayblossom lay in her arms.

“Mother, dear mother, kiss me and forgive me, I will never run away again! Oh, we shall be so happy now! You will never sit alone and cry any more! Come here, brothers; Mother, see your lost babies! you have three children now.”

The poor Baroness might really have fainted, so overpowered was she, but that Faïresperance burst into tears, crying—

“No one wants us! We have no mother!”

“I will be mother to every one of you,” said the



Baroness; "my heart is big enough to hold you all. Kiss me, dear children, all of you. I will love you all, have no fear. Now, let us leave this place and get out of the Magic Valley, for I do not feel quite safe here, even yet. But how ungrateful I am! where is Mistress Owl?"

"I am here, Madam," said the somewhat sententious voice of the owl; and behold a very respectable looking old lady with a hooked nose, dressed in a fashion that none of the beholders had ever seen before, save in very old pictures.

Such a happy procession down the valley! The children crowded round the Baroness, who had a kind word for each and all. And at the entrance to the valley they found the Baron with all his retainers, and poor Kindheart weeping bitterly.

"Ha Ho Hum! Here they come!" cried the Baron.

"These are our three children, Baron," said Gentlesweet, "and the spell is broken at last; we have no more to fear from the Fatal Cat."

Then she told her story simply and quietly, and the whole audience burst forth into the cry—"Hurrah for the brave Baroness Gentlesweet, who has fought and overcome the Fatal Cat."

And there were tears in the Baron's eyes as he kissed his wife, saying, "Gentlesweet, you are indeed a brave woman."

"Not brave at all," she answered, "but Mayblossom is my own little girl, and I—love her so dearly."

The crimson rope had vanished, the valley lost all its terrors and became the favourite playground of the rescued children. They were all very happy "once upon a time."

