

THE HARE AND THE SPOILED QUEEN

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ONCE there was a spoiled Queen. She was bad-tempered and terribly unfair. She blamed her people for everything that went wrong.

For instance, at her coronation, just as the archbishop set the crown on her head, she bent over to scratch a sudden itch on her instep, and her crown fell off and rolled down the steps leading to the throne.

She ranted and raved that it was everyone's fault but hers, and spoiled the whole occasion so thoroughly that nobody took pictures of her. Then she got furious again because her picture wasn't in the papers or on television. She closed down all the TV stations and newspapers, so nobody knew what was happening.

To cheer her up, her people held a big festival for her. They planned it weeks in advance and worked very hard to make it a success. When the day came—it rained. The queen jumped up and down, shouting that it was all their fault for choosing a rainy day to hold the festival on.

All the people felt very miserable. The queen wasn't speaking to anyone. There was no telly. Nobody knew what to do.

One day the spoiled queen was out walking in the palace garden with two scared ladies-in-waiting. They kept just behind her and held hands because they were so frightened that she would find something to blame them for.

She pulled an apple crossly off a tree and bit into it. Then she spat out the piece, turned on the two ladies-in-waiting, and screamed, "This apple is *sour!* How dare you let me pick it when it's not ripe!"

And she threw it straight at them.

They didn't bother arguing that it wasn't their fault. They just turned and ran.

That left the queen on her own. She stamped and fumed in the long grass, shouting at the top of her voice, "I HATE EVERYONE!" But suddenly, just near her stamping feet, she saw a little furry head with long ears.

She stopped carrying on, and said, "Oh! A hare in my orchard!" She didn't know whether to be pleased or annoyed, but as usual she chose to be annoyed. "You're trespassing, hare! Go away at once."

"Oh, all right," said the hare. "If you prefer to be alone." And he hopped off.

"Wait!" cried the queen imperiously. The hare stopped and looked back. "I didn't know you could talk. That makes a difference. Come back and talk to me." She was used to ordering everyone about, but the hare didn't move.

"Come here, I said!" shouted the spoiled queen, stamping her foot.

"Please' would be nice," said the hare.

"Please!'" echoed the queen. "A queen doesn't have to say please!" The mere idea shocked her.

"Well, I don't know much about queens, but personally I don't like talking to *anyone* who doesn't say please. *And* thank you," said the hare very reasonably.

"You impertinent little animal!" cried the queen. "Do you presume to teach me manners?"

"Not at all," said the hare. "I don't care how you behave. All I said was that 'please' would be nice. Because I like things nice." And he made off in great bounds, ignoring the queen's shouts at him to come back immediately.

That night the queen summoned her gamekeeper. "There's a hare in the orchard," she said. "I want him for the pot. Shoot him."

The gamekeeper trembled in his boots.

"That hare can't be shot, Your Majesty," he muttered. "He's a magic hare. If you try to shoot him, he vanishes."

"A magic hare! I should have guessed," said the queen. "Then trap him for me—I want him alive."

"He can't be trapped either, ma'am."

"Then how am I to get my hands on him? I want him for my very own magic hare!"

The gamekeeper shook his head. "Nothing to be done," he said.

“This is all your fault, you stupid man!” railed the queen. “It’s your job to catch game for me! You’re dismissed!”

The gamekeeper, who had a wife and children, went away sadly. There was a lot of unemployment among gamekeepers. No sooner was he out of the door than the hare appeared in front of the throne. The queen was so surprised she jumped.

“How can you be so mean?” he asked indignantly.

“I do as I like! I’m the queen!” screamed the queen.

“More’s the pity, if you ask me,” muttered the hare.

“What’s that you said?”

“I said, more’s the pity. I should think your subjects would rather have almost any other queen than you.”

The queen’s mouth fell open. She was speechless. She had never in her whole life been spoken to like that, not even by her nanny when she was little.

The hare didn’t take advantage of her speechlessness to tell her off some more. Instead, he did a little dance.

This had an extraordinary effect on the queen. It calmed her down. She sat watching the hare leaping about, and her heartbeat slowed, her eyes lost their anger, and her fists unclenched.

Then something very strange happened. She found she had gotten to her feet and begun dancing, too, jumping and kicking her legs about just like the hare. Fortunately, there was no one watching, or they would have thought it very undignified.

The hare finished his dance. The queen stopped, too, breathless.

“I’m quite thirsty after that!” said the hare cheerfully. “Could you fancy a glass of water?”

“Water? I don’t drink—” began the queen faintly. But before she could go on to say she never drank anything less than champagne, she found a glass of water in her hand, and feeling suddenly very thirsty, she drank some.

It was perfectly delicious! The most satisfying, cooling, thirst-quenching drink she’d ever drunk.

“This is divine!” she cried, and drank the lot. “Lovely and fizzy! Can you make this drink whenever you like?”

“Yes. but so can you. It comes from the spring in your garden.”

“I’ll never drink anything else!” said the queen. “I feel so good! “What can I do to express what I feel?”

“You know,” said the hare, and vanished.

The queen sat down and gave the matter some thought.

Then she rang the bell and summoned her chancellor.

“Good morning, my dear Chancellor!” she said.

The poor man nearly fainted.

“I have some instructions for you, *please*, if you would be so very kind. First, call back my gamekeeper and ask him if he would stay in my employ—at double the wages, of course. Next, I am going to open my palace grounds for one day every month and give an enormous fête. Everyone’s invited.”

“Everyone, ma’am? You mean, *ordinary* people?”

“They’re not ordinary people, they’re my people. No expense to be spared. Especially for music. I want the best musicians, who specialize in music to dance to.”

“Your commands shall be obeyed, Your Majesty,” said the astounded chancellor, bowing low.

“Not commands,” said the queen. “Requests. Thank you, Chancellor, that will be all.”

The chancellor backed out of the room in the approved manner, but he was in such a state that he tripped and fell over backward.

The queen helped him up.

“I’m so very, humbly sorry, Your Majesty—” began the chancellor, all of a tremble.

“Entirely my fault,” said the queen.