



A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

BY R. E. VERNÈDE.

**I**T is related in the Fairy Chronicles that once upon a time Moralia was the topsyturviest country in the world. Pigs flew about there and fishes were to be seen walking on land, and if you decided that the tree in your garden was a pear tree it was pretty certain to grow strawberries in the winter and apples in the spring. That kind of thing, of course, had happened before in other kingdoms, but in Moralia it went to extremes. Take pigs, for instance. The trouble was not to drive them to market, but to get them to settle down when they had arrived there. Often, when a farmer thought he had his pigs fixed safely in the pig-market and was bargaining with a trader for a fair price, whir-r-r—there would be a flutter of wings, and off the pigs would sail to the highest palm tree, leaving him agape!

“What can you expect in Moralia?” the intending purchaser would say, and would betake himself to some more certain market.

Again, travellers would often find the highways blocked by a shoal of herrings that had strolled ashore, and everyone would have to turn to and salt them where they stood, and in the meantime people could only get about by way of the canals, unless those were also blocked by cats and horses swimming for their pleasure.

It was annoying, too, to order a pound of greengages and find when you opened the bag that they had turned into mangoes or some sort of fruit that you didn't like nearly so much; or to purchase periwinkles and discover that they were really only pins. You cannot eat pins, at least, very few people can, and you cannot fasten dresses with periwinkles; and, naturally enough, trade soon fell away from Moralia. For nobody ever knew what was going to be what. At school the children used to write things with their india-rubber and erase them with their pencils. The schoolmaster used to say that he wouldn't have *his* pupils writing copper-plate. And certainly their copybooks did not resemble it.

Altogether, matters in Moralia were in a very bad way. People in other countries shook their heads over it and said that it couldn't go on like that. They said that if that was Moralia's boasted civilization they didn't think much of it. All the same, it did go on until what I have to tell had happened. And the cause of the topsy-turviness, as very few people knew, was that the King of Moralia had offended a Wizard.

It happened in this way. The King, who was the most prim and proper gentleman in the world, a little too proper and prim, perhaps, was invited to attend a banquet the Wizard was giving. He didn't like to refuse, because that sort of invitation is equivalent to a command. But at the same time he disapproved of the whole thing. He disliked the Wizard and he hated anything magical—which is a foolish thing to do. As a result, he wore a very glum face throughout. When he opened his mouth at all it was to criticise the dresses and the behaviour of the fairies present or to speak sharply to the invisible hands that waited on him. Also, at the end of the feast, when the gnomes and trolls began to exchange cigars, and the Wizard himself, a little excited with nectar, perhaps, began to talk what seemed nonsense, the King could contain himself no longer.

"I can't agree with you," he exclaimed, at last.

"What about?" the Wizard inquired, frowning. He had noticed the King's behaviour already, and was by no means pleased.

"That two and two make five," said the King.

"Ah, but you don't make allowances," began the Wizard, "for what we—"

"They only make four," said the King, abruptly.

Now, if there is one thing that Wizards dislike more than being contradicted, it is being interrupted, and this one, though courteous for a Wizard, glowered.

"It seems to me," he said, very slowly and distinctly, "that you don't make allowances for what we call magic."

"No, I don't," snapped the King.

"Why not?"

"Because I think it's grossly exaggerated," said the King.

"Indeed!"

There was a dead pause as the Wizard spoke, and the King became aware that the eyes of all present were fixed upon him. There were green eyes, and red eyes, and white eyes, some fiery and some dull, but

they all stared at him until he felt dizzy. He almost expected to be turned into a stone or a stock-pot or a stork. But as a matter of fact nothing, as it seemed, happened at all. Only, when the King arrived back in Moralia, having slept all night on the road, the magic had taken effect and Moralia was topsy-turvy.

The King's feelings may be imagined. He had been so orderly, and now everything was so contrary. He tried to wring his hands, but found himself walking on them instead, and he had to be content with wringing his legs. Anyone who has tried the process knows that it makes things appear even more curious than they are. For a moment the King fancied that it was only he that was bewitched, but he was mistaken. The Lord Chamberlain came in, and he was holding one arm to his side like a handle and the other curved outward like a spout.

"Is—is anything the matter with you, sire?" he asked, observing his Royal master in so unusual and undignified an attitude as is involved in trying to wring one's legs.

"No," said the King, sharply, "why should there be?"

"I don't know," said the Chamberlain, hurriedly. "But I fancied that you were ups—"

"What's the matter with you, though?" cried the King.

"Nothing," said the Chamberlain, who still held his left hand in the shape of a spout. "Nothing—nothing at all—but—er—'s a curious thing—very. I feel as if I were a tea-pot."

"A tea-pot?" repeated the King. He was about to say that, in that case, the Chamberlain had better resign his office, but, instead of doing so, he found himself crying out:—

"Hurrah! I'm a tea-pot too. Let's all be tea-pots!"

Tea-pots the King and all his Court were for the rest of the day, in so far as curving their arms and wearing a strainer on their left hands could make them so. Next day the King suggested in a shamefaced way that they should all fly kites. And so they did, or rather the kites flew them. For the kites ran along the ground, while the King and all his Ministers performed the most curious gyrations in the air at the end of pieces of string, with long tails fastened on to them. Next day they fancied they were Polar bears, and insisted on climbing up poles and having buns thrown to them.

And so matters went from bad to worse.

The strange thing was that nobody laughed at them, for everyone in Moralia was afflicted with some absurd fancy or other, and though all felt ashamed and ill at ease there was no one who could see precisely what was ludicrous and extravagant.

For the King had brought up his people to be very stiff and to disbelieve in magic, and though they were now bewitched they were all as solemn as ever. And at the end of sixteen years, when the King's daughter, the Princess Marianna, came of an age to be married, she was the most eccentric and most solemn person in the kingdom. It was natural enough that this should be so. The Queen-Mother had died when the Princess was but an infant, and Marianna had done as she pleased in the enchanted country all her days. Now she was the most beautiful Princess that has probably ever existed. Her hair was all gold and came below her knees, and her eyes were like violets, and she was lithe as a panther. The fame of her great beauty had induced many Kings and Princes to journey even to Moralia, which, for several reasons, had become one of the most perilous as well as one of the most trying places in the world to travel through. One reason was that the inhabitants would sit on the tree-tops and throw cocoa-nuts down on anyone passing; another, that the sign-posts were all put wrong, so that one wandered round and round as if in a maze, and as often as not got into some morass or fell into some hole that had been dug for an afternoon's amusement. But the chief reason was that the King had put at the head of affairs the most monstrous creature—a Sea Prince—who had come up out of the sea to make mischief in Moralia. The poor King thought he must be a genius because he was so ugly. He resembled a cod-fish with whiskers, and he walked sometimes on his fins and sometimes on his tail. And as he had determined to wed the Princess Marianna himself, despite his gruesome ugliness, he naturally encouraged her in all her eccentricities and cast every possible obstacle in the way of the Kings and Princes who came to woo her. Many of these had perished already, and it seemed likely on the day of Marianna's coming of age that no more would venture after her. Nor could her wedding be much longer delayed, since the King was getting old and must have some successor.

The cod-fish sat in the Cabinet that day and chuckled and rubbed his fins.

"I shall wed Marianna to-morrow," he gurgled to himself. And he opened and

shut his great slit of a mouth in a way that one might suppose would have made even the most daft Princess shudder, if she could have seen it. But, as a matter of fact, Marianna was up and away in the woods, swinging in the high boughs of an acacia. She had not permitted any of her maidens to do anything for her. She would not have her hat on nor her shoes, and only at the last moment, in a spirit of fancifulness, she had caught up her opal slippers and taken them with her. The inhabitants of Moralia had given up the pastime of throwing cocoa-nuts from the trees at wayfarers, for, truth to tell, no wayfarers came along now. But Marianna had taken the radiant slippers because they were hard and easy to throw, and if anyone happened to pass by she should have something to hurl. Now, she was swinging in the acacia tree. Blossoms of the white, sweet flower dropped in showers about her, as the boughs swayed to and fro, and the sunlight caught in her hair. And she never gave a thought to anything or anybody, least of all to the Prince who at that moment was coming on horseback through the forest towards the acacia tree.

Nor, indeed, did Prince Rideo, for that was the young man's name, give very much thought to the Princess Marianna. He had heard vaguely of her beauty and of the topsyturvy country where she lived. Being young and adventurous, and rashly fond of comedy, he had set out to see Moralia. That it was so perilous only added to the charm of journeying in it; and as for the Princess—if she were so lovely as was reported, why, he would see her at least. He might fall in love with her, perhaps, but he doubted it.

So he rode on, laughing to himself. He had encountered many strange things already, the finger-posts that led all wrong, and some winged pigs that started away like a covey of partridges, and lizards that lay in the shade to bask, and flies catching spiders in their webs, and sheep driving a flock of shepherds to their folds. Prince Rideo was greatly amused, though he had escaped with difficulty out of a morass and had been compelled to cut to pieces with his sword a herd of geese that attacked him. But he was more greatly astonished when he rode under the acacia tree and an opal slipper, very hard and pointed, hit him on the chest. He caught it before it fell to the ground, and then looked up into the tree.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

Marianna peeped out from among the blossoms, and he thought he had never seen

anyone so beautiful. She was sitting on a bough, very fearless, and-cried out :—

“Give me back my slipper !”

“Did you drop it ?” asked the Prince, smiling.

Marianna opened her eyes wide to see a man smile. She had never seen anyone in Moralia smile before, for their lack of humour was what made the enchantment work so successfully.

“No ; I threw it,” she said.

“Then I sha’n’t give it to you again,” said the Prince, putting it in his pocket.

“Why not ?” asked Marianna.

“You might throw it again.”

“I do as I please,” said Marianna, haughtily. “Give it me back at once or I shall throw the other slipper.”

As the Prince only laughed she threw the other.

“Now I have both,” he said.

“And if you are the Princess

“But I am to be wedded to-morrow,” she said, seriously, “so that I must have my slippers.”

“To whom ?” asked Rideo, eagerly.

“To the Fish Prince,” she said. “He is



“AS THE PRINCE ONLY LAUGHED SHE THREW THE OTHER SLIPPER.”



my father’s councillor, and to-day my father is building the church, so that it may be ready for to-morrow.”

Prince Rideo was so taken aback by this news that he hardly knew what to do. For he had fallen in love with her on the spot, and to think that Marianna should wed a Fish Prince disgusted him.

“Do you love him ?” he asked her.

“Love ?” Marianna repeated the word. “I don’t know,” she said. “I never thought of it.”

“Then you shall not wed him,” said the Prince, decidedly.

He was laughing again now, for he was light-hearted and saw no difficulties in the way.

“I shall ride straight to the King, your father,” he said, “and tell him that I love you.”

“Oh,” said Marianna, thoughtfully.

That was all she said, for she did not understand what he meant. Everything was so topsy-turvy in Moralia that love was as unconsidered as laughter. But she did not

Marianna, I will only give them back to you on your wedding-day.”

He was so strange and unusual a person to see in that topsy-turvy country that the Princess, in spite of her anger, could not resist talking to him a little. She swung to a lower bough, and her hair was all about her like a cloth of gold.



ask for the opal slippers again, and the Prince rode on with them in his pocket to the Court of the King. He rode so fast that he came to the end of the woods in no time, and, in the open land beyond, a curious sight met his eyes. Not only the capital city of Moralia stood there, and the great gates of entrance, and the palace, a stately mass of domes and minarets, but also the beginning of a building, such as Prince Rideo thought he had never seen before. It resembled more than anything the steeple of a church stuck the wrong way up in the ground, and all about it was a great concourse of people, working at it in a fashion quite their own. Some men stood with their tools balanced on their noses, one trying in this attitude to plane a log of wood, a second to hammer at a nail that a third was delicately balancing; others stood on their heads, mixing hods of mortar or holding buckets full of red-hot coals, such as workmen use, to the sides of bellows, as if the buckets could make a draught and the bellows a fire. Nobody paid any attention to Prince Rideo, until he asked:—

"Which is the King?"

Then several pointed to an elderly man, with a reddish-grey beard and thin legs, who was running aimlessly about balancing a ladder on his head. A crown, fastened to his waist by a cord, dangled at his heels. He stopped as Prince Rideo went up to him.

"What do you want?" he cried.

"The hand of your daughter," said the Prince.

"Ah!" said the King, and he looked worried. "I'm sorry you can't stop now."

"But I can," the Prince objected.

"Ah—well—I can't," said the King. "You see, I'm trying to get this ladder up."

"What for?"

The King, who had started off, paused a moment at this question and put his hand to his head.

"Why, of course," he said, at last; "it's the church, you see. I'm building a church for my daughter to be married in to-morrow."



"AN ELDERLY MAN, WITH A REDDISH-GREY BEARD AND THIN LEGS, WAS RUNNING AIMLESSLY ABOUT BALANCING A LADDER ON HIS HEAD."

Most churches are built on a wrong principle with their steeples at the top. This one's going to have it at the

bottom. It's quick work—quick work."

And he began trotting round the steeple again, balancing the ladder and dragging the crown in the same absurd manner. When he completed the circuit, and saw the Prince still standing there, he cried out again:—

"What do you want?"

"The hand of your daughter."

"But she's engaged," said the King.

"She's going to be married to the Fish Prince, who is my Prime Minister, to-morrow. It's a very suitable match. I'm sorry you can't stay for the wedding. But the fact is there isn't a room in the palace to offer you. They're full up—full up."

"Full of what?" asked Prince Rideo, who knew that no strangers had come to Moralia for a long time.

"Full of water," the King explained. "It's a scheme I've got for breeding canaries under water. Quite new—quite new."

"Indeed!" said the Prince, politely. But the King was running round the steeple again, for the ladder would not remain balanced if he stopped for any length of time. So Prince Rideo rode on, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Coming to the palace, he inquired of the janitor for the Fish Prince.

"He is in the cabinet," said the janitor.

So the Prince rode on without dismounting till he came to the cabinet, and he beat on the door of it with the handle of his sword. The Fish Prince rose in great fear and came sidling to the door on his tail, for usually no one dared to disturb him. When he saw the Prince he blinked his lidless eyes and snapped his mouth up and down. "What do you want?" he asked, though he knew quite well what the Prince wanted.

"The hand of the Princess Marianna."

"That is impossible," gurgled the Fish Prince. "I am going to wed her to-morrow."

"You!" Prince Rideo looked at him with such scorn that the Fish Prince shook with shame, like a jelly-fish.

"The King has promised her to me," he choked out.

"Well," said Prince Rideo, "I will promise you something also. And that is, if you are not gone to the lowest ooze of the sea by to-morrow when I return, I will kill you with my own sword."

Then he turned his horse's head and rode away into the country. How was he to keep his promise? Moralia was in so topsy-turvy a state that the Fish Prince could do as he pleased in it and no one detected his hideousness. Prince Rideo ground his teeth to think of it, and his horse took the first road that happened and carried him into a woodless country of rock and sand. Quite suddenly the vision of the foolish King, balancing the ladder on his head, came to Prince Rideo's mind and, despite his disappointment, he laughed aloud.

"Did you laugh?" An old, old man came out from behind a rock and put the question.

Prince Rideo replied courteously that he did.

"Who could help it?" he added.

"And yet," said the old man, "you are the first who has laughed in Moralia for many years. Lack-a-day!"

He looked so miserable that the Prince almost laughed again, and perhaps it was as well that he did not quite laugh. For the old man was, in reality, the Wizard who had cast the spell in Moralia; and the Fish Prince, who had taken such advantage of it, was his deadliest foe. But even wizards cannot always undo their mischief when they will. And it had been ordained by the fairies that only when a man who could laugh came to Moralia and brought to it a phial of the water from the fountain that is in the middle of the sea could the land regain its former state. So the Wizard was naturally very pleased to hear the Prince laugh, and explained why.

"Will you fill the phial from the fountain?" he asked.

The Prince turned his horse's head.

"I will go at once," he said.

"Ah," said the Wizard, smiling, "you are bold, Sir Prince. But remember one thing. The Fish Prince is your foe and has endless power over the sea. He will cast every obstacle in your way—"

"Give me the phial!" said the Prince, smiling.

"Here it is," said the Wizard. "And with your permission I will shoe your horse's feet, that they may not slip in the waves."

"Make haste, then," said Prince Rideo. "For by to-morrow I must be back to give Marianna her opal slippers."

The Wizard shod the horse swiftly with enchanted shoes, and it was well that he did so, for when Prince Rideo came to the seashore it seemed that he could go no farther, for the deep lay all around to the horizon, and there was no boat at hand or any wood with which to build a raft. But the horse galloped, and the Prince perceived that he was on a narrow causeway of rocks that ran out seaward just under the water's surface. It was more slippery than ice, but the horse sped on, until land became dim and indistinct behind him and then faded away.

"This is easier than I imagined," said Prince Rideo.

Hardly had he spoken when the sea became black with thousands of monstrous crabs, as big as men. They had claws like pincers and their beady eyes glared venomously. The Prince struck at them with his sword

bravely enough as they scuttled up the causeway; but the steel rang vainly on their backs, and the Prince would have been wrenched down and devoured had not the horse galloped like lightning along the rocks so that the crabs could not keep pace with him.

"The Fish Prince can do nothing," said Prince Rideo, exhilarated with the speed.

As he uttered this there arose a most rich

swept hundreds of feet over the causeway, and the foam seemed to lash the very sky. But the horse galloped on, and Prince Rideo clung to the saddle manfully, though he was almost suffocated with surge. Sea-snakes



"THE SEA BECAME BLACK WITH THOUSANDS OF MONSTROUS CRABS, AS BIG AS MEN."

swam alongside in that tempest, spitting, and squids, like branching trees, reached at him with their suckers, and giant rocks moved to and fro trying to clap him between them. But Prince Rideo spurred forward. And

and entrancing music to the left and to the right of him, and the Prince looking out in the sunset saw far off in the sea the most beautiful maidens singing to the melody of golden harps. They and their songs were so beautiful that the Prince pulled at the reins and would have ridden off the causeway to greet them; but the horse galloped on, on, on. And though the Prince was angry at first he saw later that there was good reason for it. For these were the sirens who wait for men in the sea to drag them down; and, as the sun sank on them, he saw that the maidens had sharks' tails and were a part of the Sea Prince's conspiracy.

"I had best be careful," he said.

And at the words the sun went down in the sea and a great storm rose. Billows

then quite suddenly the storm ceased, and the darkness was drawn apart like a curtain and the full moon came out. And there, just ahead of him, a fountain spirted out of the middle of the sea.

You may be sure that Prince Rideo filled his phial with no loss of time and set out on the return speedily. No peril threatened him now, but he had come farther than he supposed, and dawn broke before he had got to land and arrived in sight of the palace once more.

A great procession was moving towards the steeple, which still remained unfinished. The crowd of people was in every conceivable attitude except that of ordinary mortals walking on their two feet, and every-one was doing something intensely absurd

in the solemnest manner. At the head of the procession the King was walking on one leg with his crown round one knee, with the Archbishop beside him trying to roll his mitre like a hoop. Behind them walked the Princess Marianna, bare-foot, leaning on the fin of the Fish Prince. She looked so lovely that Prince Rideo's wrath knew no bounds, and he thundered up with his drawn sword and broke the phial violently in the fish's face.

The effect was instantaneous. Everyone came to their feet, stared, and burst out into laughter. The Archbishop ceased rolling his mitre, and the King slipped his crown on to his head. As for the Princess, she shrank back and looked with disgust on the Fish Prince.

"Who is this monster?" she cried, and shut her eyes. In that moment, while the creature still leared and snapped, Prince Rideo ran him through with his sword, as he had promised. All the crowd cheered and laughed.

But Prince Rideo held up his hand for silence.

"Moralia has been bewitched," he said, "for many years, but to-day the water of the Fountain of Laughter has broken the spell, as you all see. And now Moralia has become itself again."

Then he turned to Marianna.

"Will you wed me now?" he asked.

She smiled and blushed and looked more beautiful than ever.

"I have no shoes to go to church in," she said.

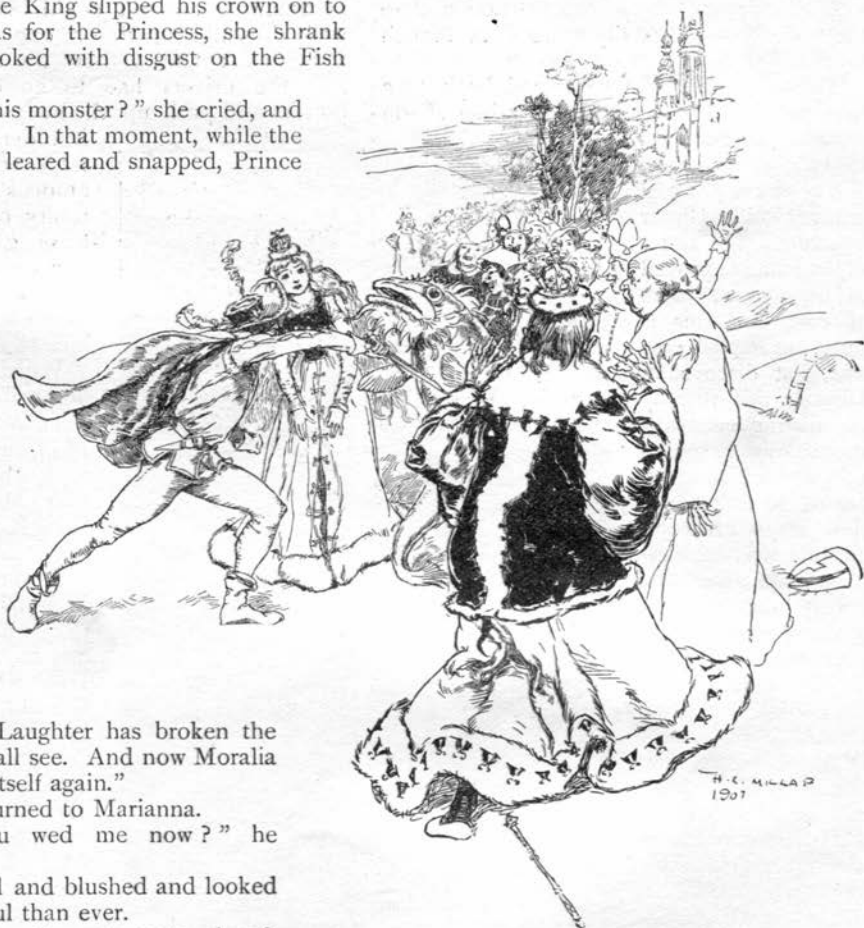
Prince Rideo drew out the opal slippers from his pocket.

"These will fit," he said, and she put out her foot for him to try them on.

"But—they are my own!" she exclaimed; and then it came back to her how the Prince had ridden under the acacia tree and all that had happened after, and she smiled and blushed again.

"Now you must marry me," said Prince Rideo.

"I will," said Marianna, and she did. For they went straight to one of the proper churches, with its steeple the right side up, and the Archbishop superintended the ceremony. Then the people asked the Prince to be King, and the old King asked him too.



"PRINCE RIDEO RAN HIM THROUGH WITH HIS SWORD."

So he was given the crown and ruled wisely and well. And no country in all the world was less topsy-turvy than Moralia, and probably no country ever will be.