

Chapter Eleven, 'Hiss!'

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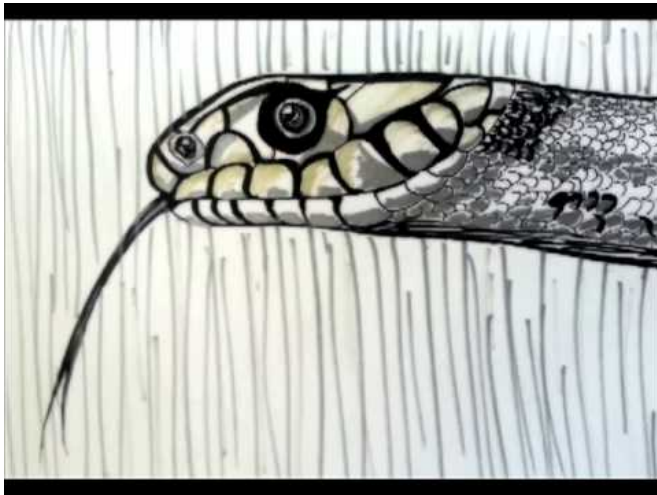
subvertinglaughter

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Once again [George MacDonald](#) shows his playful skill with the multiple meaning of words. "Hiss!" refers to the sounds of the White Snake of Darkness, the menacing creature that Princess Makenmnoit unleashes to drain [the Light Princess's](#) lake. But "Hiss!" is also the response of the audience when the stereotyped villain appeared on stage in Victorian pantomime or melodrama. As John Patrick Pazdziora observes in his commentary on chapter two, Princess Makemnoit, "ranks among the most extravagant fairy tale villains." Like the pantomime, the popular Victorian theatrical performance that was frequently based on fairy tales, MacDonald's literary fairies were intended for the dual audience of children and adults. The MacDonald family often performed family theatricals. [Louisa MacDonald](#), MacDonald's wife, published *Chamber Dramas for Children* (1870) which included scripts for "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Snowdrop [Snow White]" that the family developed and presented. MacDonald produced three distinctive versions of "The Light Princess" which supports his declaration that his literary fairy tales were not solely intended for the children, but, as he famously announced, in his "The Fantastic Imagination": "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." (7).

"The Light Princess" was first published as one of the twelve interpolated tales that appeared in MacDonald's adult novel *Adela Cathcart* (1864). These tales are intended to produce a therapeutic effect on the listless young woman, Adela Cathcart. In the novel, MacDonald provided "The Light Princess" with a second title, "A Fairy-Tale without Fairies," (54), although he would drop this title when the tale reappeared as the lead story in *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867) a collection of five literary fairy tales illustrated by Arthur Hughes.

Given that *Dealings with the Fairies* was published two years after the success of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), this volume was aimed at the growing market of middle class children's literature. MacDonald and Carroll were particularly close during the 1860s when both authors were writing literary fairy tales. During the same period, Carroll produced a number of memorable photographs of MacDonald and members of his family. One of the few photographs that features Carroll with children is a group self-portrait with Louisa MacDonald and the four MacDonald children. Louisa MacDonald read Carroll's *Alice's Adventures Underground*, the handwritten early draft of Carroll's *Wonderland*, to the MacDonald children to their great delight. The family encouraged Carroll to expand the story and to publish it. In many ways Mrs. MacDonald's oral reading of *Alice's Adventures Underground* to her children, echo John Smith's oral presentation of "The Light Princess" in *Adela Cathcart*. Just as the reading of "The Light Princess" produced to a positive change in Adela Cathcart, the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had a therapeutic effect on children's literature. If "The Light Princess" is a fairy tale without fairies, *Wonderland* is a fairy tale without a moral that helped to liberate children's literature from its overt didacticism. The final version of "The Light Princess" that MacDonald created was a scroll version that he used as a script and a prop for family and public readings of the tale.

Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is another Victorian literary fairy tale without fairies. *Wonderland* was also strongly influenced by Victorian pantomime and Carroll frequently accompanied his child friends to pantomimes in London. As a literary fairy tale, "The Light Princess" is both an adaptation and transformation of the traditional fairy tale, especially the opening of Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty," as previously noted by Christine Chettle in her examination of chapter one. While Princess Makemnoit is a variation of the evil fairy that casts a spell on Sleeping Beauty at her christening, MacDonald's tale lacks the good fairies who try to counteract her powerful magic. But Makemnoit is much more than an evil fairy; MacDonald explains that she is a "witch-princess" (41). She is not just an evil character, but also a clever one. Makemnoit is described as a fairy that "beat all the wicked fairies in wickedness, and all the clever ones in cleverness" (16). Makemnoit is a genius when it comes to revenge. Hers isn't just revenge against the beautiful and spoiled Light Princess, but her parents, and the rest of the kingdom of Lagobel. As Makemnoit warns, "The king and the people shall die of thirst; their brains shall boil and frizzle in their skulls before I will lose my revenge" (40). While the Light Princess laments over the rapid sinking of her beloved lake, her sphere of her pleasure, Makemnoit's revenge is apocalyptic in scope. MacDonald warns, "It was fearful to think of mud that would soon lie there baking and festering, full of lovely creatures dying, and ugly creatures coming to life, like the unmaking of a world" (39). Beneath its light surface, MacDonald's fairy tale is a deeply pessimistic and foreshadows of the grim conclusion of his *The Princess and the Curdie* (1877).

The White Snake of Darkness is clearly one of those ugly creatures that come to life with the unmaking of a world. Makemnoit brings the dreadful creature to life from "what looked like a piece of dried seaweed" (40) by stirring it in a tub of water as it increases in size and strength. The White Snake of Darkness is a version of the folklore legend of the Lambton Worm of Northern England. In that legend, John Lambton goes fishing one Sunday morning instead of attending church. While Lambton doesn't catch any fish, he does catch a small eel or lamprey-like creature, that quickly expands into a giant worm that terrorizes the village as it gobbles up livestock and small children. Bram Stoker, best known as the author of *Dracula* (1897), would use the legend of the Lambton Worm for his horror novel *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), which was made into a wonderfully campy film adaptation *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988) directed by Ken Russell.

Once the White Snake of Darkness has expanded to its full size, Makemnoit attaches the creature to the roof of the cavern below the lake and it begins the process of draining the lake. While the Light Princess is

fixated on her receding surface of the lake, Makemnoit has put a spell on all the water sources in the country so that all “the fountains of mother Earth ceased to flow” (42). Without water, it has become a life and death situation, not just for the Light Princess, but also for the entire kingdom. The lack of water is same the form of destruction that John Ruskin inflicts as punishment on the Treasure Valley in his literary fairy tale *The King of the Golden River* (1851). In order to exact her revenge, Makemnoit must go underground, just like Carroll’s Alice. Carroll eventually changed the name of his fairy tale from *Underground* to *Wonderland* since he feared that that the original title sounded too much like a lesson book about mining. Makemnoit’s complex subterranean machinations below the lake do suggest that some of her cleverness involves the knowledge with mining.



‘[O]ut [. . .] came the head and half the body of a huge gray snake. But the witch did not look round. It grew out of the tub, waving itself backwards and forwards with a slow horizontal motion, till it reached the princess, when it laid its head upon her shoulder, and gave a low hiss in her ear.’

There are a number of parallels between the work of Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. John Docherty’s *The Literary Products of Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship* is a brilliant, but obsessive study of the relationship of these two writers whom Docherty argues engaged in a “literary game with each other” for nearly forty years (xii). But “The Light Princess” bears the influence of another author, who, like MacDonald, insisted that his literary fairy tales were not intended simply for children: Hans Christian Andersen.

In curious ways, MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” is an inversion of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” Like MacDonald’s protagonist, the Little Mermaid doesn’t fit in her world. It is only when she escapes her environment by floating to the top of the ocean that the Little Mermaid discovers happiness and her prince in the world of the air. The Light Princess can only find her gravity and her prince in the world of water. Makemnoit is a version of the Sea Witch who has sea snakes as companions. Makemnoit takes delight in making the Light Princess suffer, just as the Sea Witch enacts painful cruelties on the Little Mermaid. Andersen has the Little Princess sacrifice her life for the prince she loves, a thoughtless fellow who is unaware her many sacrifices made for him. MacDonald’s prince turned shoeblack willingly sacrifices himself for the woman he loves, a character who is indifferent to his suffering for most of the tale. Makemnoit and her elaborate evil plan of revenge dominate this chapter. She is very much in the tradition of the villain of the Victorian pantomime. All three versions of MacDonald’s “The Light Princess,” suggest he always had the public performance of his literary fairy tale in mind. C.S. Lewis has attributed his religious transformation to his reading of MacDonald. It is possible that Lewis had Makemnoit and her White Snake of Darkness in mind when he created the White Witch, his own memorable villain of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series.

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