

RIQUET WITH THE TUFT.



ONCE upon a time a queen had a little son, who was so ugly and ill-made, that for a long time the poor little baby was thought hardly human.

However, a good fairy, who presided at his birth, assured his mother that, though ugly, he would have so much sense and wit that he would never be disagreeable: moreover, she bestowed on him the power of communicating these gifts to the person he should love best in the world. At this the queen was a little comforted, and became still more so, when, as soon as he could speak, the infant began to say such pretty and clever things that everybody was charmed with him. (I forgot to mention that his name was Riquet with the Tuft, because he was born with a curious tuft of hair on the top of his head.)

Seven or eight years after this, the queen of a neighbouring country had two little daughters, twins, at whose birth the same fairy presided. The elder twin was more beautiful than the day – the younger so extremely ugly that the mother's extravagant joy in the first was all turned to grief about the second. So,

in order to calm her feelings, the fairy told her that the one daughter should be as stupid as she was pretty, while the other would grow up so clever and charming that nobody would miss her want of beauty.

“Heaven grant it!” sighed the queen; “but are there no means of giving a little sense to the one who is so beautiful?”

“I can do nothing for her, madam,” returned the fairy – “nothing as regards her own fortunes; but I grant her the power of making the person who best pleases her as handsome as herself.”

Accordingly, as the young princesses grew up, their perfections grew with them; and nothing was spoken of but the beauty of the elder and the wit of the younger. True, their faults increased equally: the one became uglier, and the other more stupid, day by day. Unlucky fair one! she never had a word to say for herself, or else it was the silliest word imaginable; and she was so awkward that she could not place four teacups in a row without breaking at least one of them, nor drink a glass of water without spilling half of it over her clothes. Beauty is a great charm; yet, whenever the sisters went out together, those who were attracted by the elder’s lovely face, in less than half an hour were sure to be seen at the side of the

younger, laughing at her witty and pleasant sayings, and altogether deserting the poor beauty, who had just sense enough to find it out, and to feel that she would have given all her good looks for one-half of her sister's talents.

One day, when she had hid herself in a wood, and was crying over her hard fate, she saw coming towards her a little man, very ugly, but magnificently dressed. Who should this be but Prince Riquet with the Tuft? He had seen her portrait, had fallen desperately in love with her, and secretly quitted his father's kingdom that he might have the pleasure of meeting her. Delighted to find her alone, he came forward with all the respect and politeness imaginable. But he could not help noticing how very melancholy she was, and that all the elegant compliments he made her did not seem to affect her in the least.

“I cannot comprehend, madam,” said he, “how so charming and lovely a lady can be so very sad. Never did I see anyone who could at all compare with you.”

“That's all you know,” said the princess, and stopped.

“Beauty,” continued the prince, sighing, “is so great an advantage that, if one possessed it, one would

never trouble oneself about anything else.”

“I wish I were as ugly as you, and had some sense, rather than be as handsome as I am, and such a fool.”

“Madam,” said Riquet politely, though her speech was not exactly civil, “nothing shows intellect so much as the modesty of believing one does not possess it.”

“I don’t know that; but I know I am a great fool, and it vexes me so, that I wish I was dead,” cried the princess bitterly.

“If that is all, madam, I can easily put an end to your grief, for I have the power of making the person I love best as clever as I please. I will do it, provided you consent to marry me.”

The princess stood dumb with astonishment. She – to marry that little frightful creature – scarcely a man at all!

“I see,” said Riquet, “that my proposal offends and grieves you. Well, I will give you a year to consider it.”

Now the young lady was so stupid that she thought a year's end was a long way off – so long that it seemed as if it might not come at all, or something might happen between whiles. And she had such a longing to be clever and admired that she thought at all risks she would accept the chance of becoming so. Accordingly, she promised Riquet to marry him that day twelvemonth.

No sooner had she said it than she felt herself quite another being. She found she could at once say anything she chose, and say it in the most graceful and brilliant way. She began a lively conversation with Prince Riquet, and chattered so fast and so wittily, that he began to be afraid he had given her so much cleverness as to leave himself none.

When she returned to the palace, all the court were astonished at the change. She, who had annoyed everybody by the impertinent, tasteless, or downright foolish things she uttered, now charmed everybody by her wit, her pleasantness, her exceeding good sense. The king himself began to come to her apartment, and ask her advice in state affairs. Her mother, and indeed the whole kingdom, were delighted; the only person to be pitied was the poor younger sister, of whom nobody now took the least notice.

Meantime, princes came in throngs to ask in marriage this wonderful princess, who was as clever as she was beautiful; but she found none to suit her, probably because the more sense a lady has, the more difficult she is to please. As for her promise to Riquet with the Tuft, being given in the days when she was so dull and stupid, it now never once came into her head; until one day, being quite perplexed by her numerous suitors, she went to take a solitary walk and think the matter over, when by chance she came into the same wood where she had met the prince.

There, all of a sudden, she thought she heard a queer running about and chattering underground. "Fetch me that spit," cried one; "Put some more wood on that fire," said another; and by and by the earth opened, showing a great kitchen filled with cooks, cooking a splendid banquet. They were all working merrily at their several duties, and singing together in the most lively chorus.

"What is all this about?" asked the amazed princess.

"If you please, madam," replied the head-cook, politely, "we are cooking the wedding-dinner of Prince Riquet with the Tuft, who is to be married tomorrow."

“To-morrow!” cried the princess, all at once recollecting her promise; at which she was so frightened that she thought she should have fallen to the earth. Greater still was her alarm when, at only a few steps’ distance, she beheld Riquet, dressed splendidly, like a prince and a bridegroom.

“You see me princess, exact to my word; and I doubt not you are the same, come to make me the happiest of mankind.”

“Prince,” said the lady, frankly, “I must confess that such was not my intention, and I fear I shall never be able to do as you desire.”

“You surprise me, madam.”

“I can well believe it; and if I had to do with a brute, instead of a gentleman of sense and feeling, I should be very uneasy,” returned she; “but since I speak with the cleverest man in the world, I am sure he will hear reason, and will not bind me, now a sensible woman, to a promise I made when I was only a fool.”

“If I were a fool myself, madam, I might well complain of your broken promise; and being, as you

say, a man of sense, should I not complain of what takes away all the happiness of my life? Tell me candidly, is there anything in me, except my ugliness, which displeases you? Do you object to my birth, my temper, my manners?"

"No, truly," replied the princess; "I like everything in you, except" – and she hesitated courteously – "except your appearance."

"Then, madam, I need not lose my happiness; for if I have the gift of making clever whosoever I love best, you also are able to make the person you prefer as handsome as ever you please. Could you love me enough to do that?"

"I think I could," said the princess; and her heart being greatly softened towards him, she wished that he might become the handsomest prince in all the world. No sooner had she done so than Riquet with the Tuft appeared in her eyes the most elegant young man she had ever seen.

Ill-natured people have said that this was no fairy-gift, but that love created the change. They declare that the princess, when she thought over her lover's perseverance, patience, good-humour, and discretion, and counted his numerous fine qualities of mind and

disposition, saw no longer the deformity of his body or the plainness of his features; that his hump was merely an exaggerated stoop, and his awkward movements; became only an interesting eccentricity. Nay, even his eyes, which squinted terribly, seemed always looking on all sides for her, in token of his violent love, and his great red nose gave him an air very martial and heroic.

However this may be, it is certain that the princess married him; that either she retained her good sense, or he never felt the want of it; and he never again became ugly – or, at least, not in his wife’s eyes: so they both lived very happy until they died.