



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

Graciosa And Percinet

From "The Fairy Book" by Miss Mulock



nce upon a time there lived a king and queen, who had an only daughter. Her incomparable beauty, sweetness, and intelligence caused her to be named Graciosa. She was all her mother's joy. Every day she had given her a different dress, of gold brocade, velvet, or satin; yet she was neither conceited nor boastful. She used to pass her mornings in study, and in the afternoon she sat sewing by the queen's side. She had, however, plenty of play-time, and sweetmeats without end, so that she was altogether the happiest princess alive.

At the same court was an elderly young lady named Duchess Grognon, who was the very opposite of Graciosa. Her hair was fiery red, her face fat and spotty, and she had but one eye. Her mouth was so big that you might have thought she could eat you up, only she had no teeth to do it with; she was also humpbacked and lame. Of course she could not help her ugliness, and nobody would have disliked her for that, if she had not been of such an unpleasant temper that she hated everything sweet and beautiful, and especially Graciosa. She had also a very good opinion of herself, and when any one praised the princess, would say angrily, "That is a lie! My little finger is worth her whole body."

In course of time the queen fell sick and died, and her daughter was almost broken-hearted. So was her husband for a year, and then he began to comfort himself by hunting. One day, after a long chase, he came to a strange castle, which happened to be that of the Duchess Grognon. She, informed of his approach, went out to meet him, and received him most respectfully. As he was very hot with hunting, she took him into the coolest place in the palace, which was a vaulted cave, most elegantly furnished, where there were two hundred barrels arranged in long rows.

"Madam, are these all yours?" inquired the king.

"Yes, sire, but I shall be most happy if you will condescend to taste their contents. Which wine do you prefer—canary, hermitage, champagne?" and she ran over a long list, out of which his majesty made his choice.

Grognon took a little hammer, and struck "toc, toc," on the cask, from which there rolled out a handful of silver money. "Nay, what is this?" said she, smiling, and passed on to the next, from which, when she tapped it, out poured a stream of gold coins. "I never saw the like—what nonsense!" and she tried the third, out of which came a heap of pearls and diamonds, so that the floor of the cave was strewn with them. "Sire," she exclaimed, "some one has robbed me of my good wine, and put this rubbish in its place."

"Rubbish, madam! Why, such rubbish would buy my whole kingdom."

"It is yours, sire," replied the duchess, "if you will make me your queen."

The king, who was a great lover of money, replied eagerly, "Certainly, madam, I'll marry you to-morrow if you will."

Grognon, highly delighted, made but one other condition—that she should have the Princess Graciosa entirely in her own rule and power, just as if she had been her real mother;

to which the foolish king consented, for he thought much more of riches than he did of his child. So he and Grognon departed hand in hand out of the cave, very well pleased.

When the king returned home, Graciosa ran out with joy to welcome her father, and asked him if he had had good sport in his hunting.

“Yes, my child,” said he, “for I have taken a dove alive.”

“Oh, give it me, and I will nourish and cherish it,” cried the princess.

“That is impossible; for it is the Duchess Grognon, whom I have promised to marry.”

“She a dove!—she is rather a hawk,” sighed the princess in despair; but her father bade her hold her tongue, and promise to love her stepmother, who would have over her all the authority of a mother, and to whom he wished to present her that very day.

The obedient princess went to her apartment, where her nurse soon found out the sorrow in her face, and its cause.

“My child,” said the good old woman, “princesses ought to show a good example to humbler women. Promise me to do your best to please your father, and to make yourself agreeable to the stepmother he has chosen for you. She may not be so bad after, all.”

And the nurse gave so much good advice, that Graciosa began to smile, and dressed herself in her best attire, a green robe embroidered with gold; while her fair, loose-falling hair was adorned, according to the fashion of the day, with a coronet of jasmine, of which the leaves were made of large emeralds.

Grognon, on her part, made the best of herself that was possible. She put on a high-heeled shoe to appear less lame, she padded her shoulders, dyed her red hair black, and put in a false eye; then dressed herself in a hooped petticoat of violet satin trimmed with blue, and an upper gown of yellow with green ribands. In this costume, she wished to enter the city on horseback, as she understood the queens were in the habit of doing.

Meantime, Graciosa waited in fear the moment of her arrival, and, to pass the time away, she went all alone into a little wood, where she sobbed and wept in secret, until suddenly there appeared before her a young page, whom she had never seen before.

“Who are you?” she inquired; “and when did his majesty take you into his service?”

“Princess,” said the page, bowing, “I am in no one’s service but your own. I am Percinet, a prince in my own country, so that there is no inequality of rank between us. I have loved you long, and seen you often, for I have the fairy gift of making myself invisible. I might longer have concealed myself from you, but for your present sorrow, in which, however, I hope to be of both comfort and assistance—a page and yet a prince, and your faithful lover.”

At these words, at once tender and respectful, the princess, who had long heard of the fairy-prince Percinet, felt so happy that she feared Grognon no more. They talked a little while together, and then returned to the palace, where the page assisted her to mount her horse; on which she looked so beautiful, that all the new queen's splendours faded into nothing in comparison, and not one of the courtiers had eyes for any except Graciosa.

As soon as Grognon saw it, "What!" cried she, "has this creature the impudence to be better mounted than myself! Descend, Miss, and let me try your horse;—and your page, whom everybody thinks so much of, bid him come and hold my bridle."

Prince Percinet, who was the page, cast one look at his fair Graciosa and obeyed; but no sooner had the duchess mounted, than the horse ran away with her and dragged her over briers, stones, and mud, and finally threw her into a deep ditch. Her head was cut in several places, and her arm fractured. They picked her up in little pieces, like a broken wineglass; never was there a poor bride in worse plight. But in spite of her sufferings her malice remained. She sent for the king:

"This is all Graciosa's fault; she wished to kill me. I desire that your majesty will punish her, or leave me to do it—else I will certainly be revenged upon you both."

The king, afraid of losing his casks full of gold pieces, consented, and Graciosa was commanded to appear. She came trembling and looking round vainly for Prince Percinet. The cruel Grognon ordered four women, ugly as witches, to take her and strip off her fine clothes, and whip her with rods till her white shoulders were red with blood. But lo! as soon as the rods touched her, they turned into bundles of feathers, and the women tired themselves to death with whipping, without hurting Graciosa the least in the world!

"Ah! kind Percinet, what do I not owe you? What should I do without you!" sighed the princess, when she was taken back to her own chamber and her nurse. And then she saw the prince standing before her, in his green dress and his white plume, the most charming of pages.

Percinet advised her to pretend illness on account of the cruel treatment she was supposed to have received; which so delighted Grognon, that she got well all the sooner, and the marriage was celebrated with great splendour.

Soon after, the king, who knew that his wife's weak point was her vanity, gave a tournament, at which he ordered the six bravest knights of the court to proclaim that Queen Grognon was the fairest lady alive. No knight ventured to dispute this fact, until there appeared one who carried a little box adorned with diamonds, and proclaimed aloud that Grognon was the ugliest woman in the universe, and that the most beautiful was she whose portrait was in the box. He opened it, and behold the image of the Princess Graciosa!

The princess, who sat behind her stepmother, felt sure that the unknown knight was Percinet; but she dared say nothing. The contest was fixed for next day; but in the meantime, Grognon, wild with anger, commanded Graciosa to be taken in the middle of the night to a forest a hundred leagues distant, full of wolves, lions, tigers, and bears. In vain the poor

maiden implored that the attendants would kill her at once, rather than leave her in that dreadful place: the queen's orders must be obeyed; no answer was made to her, but the servants remounted and rode away. Graciosa, in solitude and darkness, groped through the forest, sometimes falling against the trunks of trees, sometimes tearing herself with bushes and briers; at last, overcome with fear and grief, she sank on the ground, sobbing out, "Percinet, Percinet, have you forsaken me?"

While she spoke, a bright light dazzled her eyes, the midnight forest was changed into glittering alleys, at the end of which appeared a palace of crystal, shining like the sun. She knew it was the doing of the fairy-prince who loved her, and felt a joy mingled with fear. She turned to fly, but saw him standing before her, more handsome and charming than ever.

"Princess," said he, "why are you afraid of me? This is the palace of the fairy-queen my mother, and the princesses my sisters, who will take care of you, and love you tenderly. Enter this chariot, and I will convey you there."

Graciosa entered, and passing through many a lovely forest glade, where it was clear daylight, and shepherds and shepherdesses were dancing to merry music, they reached the palace, where the queen and her two daughters received the forlorn princess with great kindness, and led her through many rooms of rock-crystal, glittering with jewels, where, to her amazement, Graciosa saw the history of her own life, even down to this adventure in the forest, painted on the walls.

"How is this?" she said. "Prince, you know everything about me."

"Yes; and I wish to preserve everything concerning you," said he tenderly; whereupon Graciosa cast down her eyes. She was only too happy, and afraid that she should learn to love the fairy-prince too much.

She spent eight days in his palace—days full of every enjoyment; and Percinet tried all the arguments he could think of to induce her to marry him, and remain there for ever. But the good and gentle Graciosa remembered her father who was once so kind to her, and she preferred rather to suffer than to be wanting in duty. She entreated Percinet to use his fairy power to send her home again, and meantime to tell her what had become of her father.

"Come with me into the great tower there, and you shall see for yourself."

Thereupon he took her to the top of a tower, prodigiously high, put her little finger to his lips, and her foot upon his foot. Then he bade her look, and she saw as hi a picture, or as in a play upon the stage, the King and Grognon sitting together on their throne. The latter was telling how Graciosa had hanged herself in a cave.

"She will not be much loss, sire; and as, when dead, she was far too frightful for you to look at, I have given orders to bury her at once."

She might well say that, for she had had a large faggot put into a coffin, and sealed up; the king and all the nation mourned over it; and now, that she was no more, they declared there never was such a sweet creature as the lost princess.

The sight of her father's grief quite overcame Graciosa. "Oh, Percinet!" she cried, "my father believes me dead. If you love me, take me home."

The prince consented, though very sorrowfully, saying that she was as cruel to him as Grognon was to her, and mounted with her in his chariot, drawn by four white stags. As they quitted the courtyard, they heard a great noise, and Graciosa saw the palace all falling to pieces with a great crash.

"What is this?" she cried, terrified.

"Princess, my palace, which you forsake, is among the things which are dead and gone. You will enter it no more till after your burial."

"Prince, you are angry with me," said Graciosa sorrowfully; only she knew well that she suffered quite as much as he did in thus departing and quitting him.

Arrived in her father's presence, she had great difficulty in persuading him that she was not a ghost, until the coffin with the faggot inside it was taken up, and Grognon's malice discovered. But even then, the king was so weak a man, that the queen soon made him believe he had been cheated, that the princess was really dead, and that this was a false Graciosa. Without more ado, he abandoned his daughter to her stepmother's will.

Grognon, transported with joy, dragged her to a dark prison, took away her clothes, made her dress in rags, feed on bread and water, and sleep upon straw. Forlorn and hopeless, Graciosa dared not now call upon Percinet; she doubted if he still loved her enough to come to her aid.

Meantime, Grognon had sent for a fairy, who was scarcely less malicious than herself. "I have here," said she, "a little wretch of a girl for whom I wish to find all sorts of difficult tasks; pray assist me in giving her a new one every day."

The fairy promised to think of it, and soon brought a skein as thick as four persons, yet composed of thread so fine, that it broke if you only blew upon it, and so tangled that it had neither beginning nor end. Grognon, delighted, sent for her poor prisoner.

"There, miss, teach your clumsy fingers to unwind this skein, and if you break a single thread I will flay you alive. Begin when you like, but you must finish at sunset, or it will be the worse for you." Then she sent her to her miserable cell, and treble-locked the door.

Graciosa stood dismayed, turning the skein over and over, and breaking hundreds of threads each time. "Ah! Percinet," she cried in despair, "come and help me, or at least receive my last farewell."

Immediately Percinet stood beside her, having entered the cell as easily as if he carried the key in his pocket. "Behold me, princess, ready to serve you, even though you forsook me." He touched the skein with his wand, and it untangled itself, and wound itself up in perfect order. "Do you wish anything more, madam?" asked he coldly.

"Percinet, Percinet, do not reproach me; I am only too unhappy."

"It is your own fault. Come with me, and make us both happy." But she said nothing, and the fairy-prince disappeared.

At sunset, Grognon eagerly came to the prison-door with her three keys, and found Graciosa smiling and fair, her task all done. There was no complaint to make, yet Grognon exclaimed that the skein was dirty, and boxed the princess's ears till her rosy cheeks turned yellow and blue. Then she left her, and overwhelmed the fairy with reproaches.

"Find me, by to-morrow, something absolutely impossible for her to do."

The fairy brought a great basket full of feathers, plucked from every kind of bird—nightingales, canaries, linnets, larks, doves, thrushes, peacocks, ostriches, pheasants, partridges, magpies, eagles—in fact, if I told them all over, I should never come to an end; and all these feathers were so mixed up together, that they could not be distinguished.

"See," said the fairy, "even one of ourselves would find it difficult to separate these, and arrange them as belonging to each sort of bird. Command your prisoner to do it; she is sure to fail."

Grognon jumped for joy, sent for the princess, and ordered her to take her task, and finish it, as before, by set of sun.

Graciosa tried patiently, but she could see no difference in the feathers; she threw them all back again into the basket, and began to weep bitterly. "Let me die," said she, "for death only will end my sorrows. Percinet loves me no longer; if he did, he would already have been here."

"Here I am, my princess," cried a voice from under the basket; and the fairy-prince appeared. He gave three taps with his wand—the feathers flew by millions out of the basket, and arranged themselves in little heaps, each belonging to a different bird.

"What do I not owe you?" cried Graciosa.

"Love me!" answered the prince, tenderly, and said no more.

When Grognon arrived, she found the task done. She was furious at the fairy, who was as much astonished as herself at the result of their malicious contrivances. But she promised to try once more; and for several days employed all her industry in inventing a box, which, she said, the prisoner must be forbidden on any account to open. "Then," added the cunning

fairy, “of course, being such a disobedient and wicked girl, as you say, she will open it, and the result will satisfy you to your heart’s content.”

Grognon took the box, and commanded Graciosa to carry it to her castle, and set it on a certain table, in an apartment she named, but not upon any account, to open it or examine its contents.

Graciosa departed. She was dressed like any poor peasant, in a cotton gown, a woollen hood and wooden shoes; yet, as she walked along, people took her for a queen in disguise, so lovely were her looks and ways. But being weak with imprisonment, she soon grew weary, and, sitting down upon the edge of a little wood, took the box upon her lap. Suddenly a wonderful desire seized her to open it.

“I will take nothing out, I will touch nothing,” said she to herself, “but I must see what is inside.”

Without reflecting on the consequences, she lifted up the lid, and instantly there jumped out a number of little men and little women, carrying little tables and chairs, little dishes, and little musical instruments. The whole company were so small, that the biggest giant among them was scarcely the height of a finger. They leaped into the green meadow, separated into various bands, and began dancing and singing, eating and drinking, to Graciosa’s wonder and delight. But when she recollected herself, and wished to get them into the box again, they all scampered away, played at hide-and-seek in the wood, and by no means could she catch a single one.

Again, in her distress, she called upon Percinet, and again he appeared; and, with a single touch of his wand, sent all the little people back into the box. Then, in his chariot, drawn by stags, he took her to the castle, where she did all that she had been commanded, and returned in safety, to her stepmother, who was more furious than ever. If a fairy could be strangled, Grognon certainly would have done it in her rage. At last, she resolved to ask help no more, but to work her own wicked will upon Graciosa.

She caused to be dug a large hole in the garden, and taking the princess there, showed her the stone which covered it.

“Underneath this stone lies a great treasure; lift it up, and you will see.”

Graciosa obeyed; and while she was standing at the edge of the pit, Grognon pushed her in, and let the stone fall down again upon her, burying her alive. After this, there seemed no more hope for the poor princess.

“O Percinet,” cried she, “you are avenged. Why did I not return your love, and marry you! Still, death will be less bitter, if only you regret me a little.”

While she spoke, she saw through the blank darkness a glimmer of light; it came through a little door. She remembered what Percinet had said: that she would never return to the fairy palace, until after she was buried. Perhaps this final cruelty of Grognon would be the end of

her sorrows. So she took courage, crept through the little door, and lo! she came out into a beautiful garden, with long alleys, fruit-trees, and flower-beds. Well she knew it, and well she knew the glitter of the rock-crystal walls. And there, at the palace-gate, stood Percinet, and the queen, his mother, and the princesses, his sisters. "Welcome, Graciosa!" cried they all; and Graciosa, after all her sufferings, wept for joy.

The marriage was celebrated with great splendour; and all the fairies, for a thousand leagues round, attended it. Some came in chariots drawn by dragons, or swans, or peacocks; some were mounted upon floating clouds, or globes of fire. Among the rest, appeared the very fairy who had assisted Grognon to torment Graciosa. When she discovered that Grognon's poor prisoner was now Prince Percinet's bride, she was overwhelmed with confusion, and entreated her to forget all that had passed, because she really was ignorant who she had been so cruelly afflicting.

"But I will make amends for all the evil that I have done," said the fairy; and, refusing to stay for the wedding-dinner, she remounted her chariot, drawn by two terrible serpents, and flew to the palace of Graciosa's father. There, before either king, or courtiers, or ladies-in-waiting could stop her—even had they wished to do it, which remains doubtful—she came behind the wicked Grognon, and twisted her neck, just as a cook does a barn-door fowl. So Grognon died and was buried, and nobody was particularly sorry for the same.

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