

THE RAT-CATCHER'S DAUGHTER

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Once upon a time there lived an old rat-catcher who had a daughter, the most beautiful girl that had ever been born. Their home was a dirty little cabin; but they were not so poor as they seemed, for every night the rat-catcher took the rats he had cleared out of one house and let them go at the door of another, so that on the morrow he might be sure of a fresh job.

His rats got quite to know him and would run to him when he called; people thought him the most wonderful rat-catcher and could not make out how it was that a rat remained within reach of his operations.

Now anyone can see that a man who practiced so cunning a roguery was greedy beyond the intentions of Providence. Every day, as he watched his daughter's beauty increase, his thoughts were: "When will she be able to pay me back for all the expense she has been to me?" He would have grudged her the very food she ate, if it had not been necessary to keep her in the good looks, which were some day to bring him his fortune. For he was greedier than any gnome after gold.

Now all good gnomes have this about them: they love whatever is beautiful and hate to see harm happen to it. A gnome who lived far away underground below where stood the rat-catcher's house, said to his fellows: "Up yonder is a man who has a daughter; so greedy is he, he would sell her to the first comer who gave him gold enough! I am going up to look after her."

So one night, when the rat-catcher set a trap, the gnome went and got himself caught in it. There in the morning, when the rat-catcher came, he found a funny little fellow, all bright and golden, wriggling and beating to be free.

"I can't get out!" cried the little gnome. "Let me go!"

The rat-catcher screwed up his mouth to look virtuous. "If I let you out, what will you give me?"

"A sack full of gold," answered the gnome, "just as heavy as myself—not a pennyweight less!"

"Not enough!" said the rat-catcher. "Guess again!" "As heavy as you are!" cried the gnome, beginning to plead in a thin, whining tone.

“I’m a poor man,” said the rat-catcher; “a poor man mayn’t afford to be generous!”

“What is it you want of me?” cried the gnome.

“If I let you go,” said the rat-catcher, “you must make me the richest man in the world!” Then he thought of his daughter: “Also you must make the king’s son marry my daughter; then I will let you go.”

The gnome laughed to himself to see how the trapper was being trapped in his own avarice as, with the most melancholy air, he answered: “I can make you the richest man in the world; but I know of no way of making the king’s son marry your daughter, except one.”

“What way?” asked the rat-catcher.

“Why,” answered the gnome, “for three years your daughter must come and live with me underground, and by the end of the third year her skin will be changed into pure gold like ours. And do you know any king’s son who would refuse to marry a beautiful maiden who was pure gold from the sole of her foot to the crown of her head?”

The rat-catcher had so greedy an inside that he could not believe in any king’s son refusing to marry a maiden of pure gold. So he clapped hands on the bargain and let the gnome go.

The gnome went down into the ground and fetched up sacks and sacks of gold, until he had made the rat-catcher the richest man in the world. Then the father called his daughter, whose name was Jasome, and bade her follow the gnome down into the heart of the earth.

It was all in vain that Jasome begged and implored; the rat-catcher was bent on having her married to the king’s son. So he pushed, and the gnome pulled, and down she went; and the earth closed after her.

The gnome brought her down to his home under the hill upon which stood the town. Everywhere round her were gold and precious stones; the very air was full of gold dust, so that when she remained still it settled on her hands and her hair, and a soft golden down began to show itself over her skin. So there in the house of the gnome sat Jasorne and cried; and, far away overhead, she heard the days come and go by the sound of people walking and the rolling of wheels.

The gnome was very kind to her; nothing did he spare of underground commodities that might afford her pleasure. He taught her the legends of all the heroes that have gone down into earth and been forgotten, and the lost songs of the old poets, and the buried languages that once gave wisdom to the world: down there all these things are remembered.

She became the most curiously accomplished and wise maiden that ever was hidden from the light of day. "I have to train you," said the gnome, "to be fit for a king's bride!" But Jasome, though she thanked him, only cried to be let out.

In front of the rat-catcher's house rose a little spring of salt water with gold dust in it, that gilded the basin where it sprang. When he saw it, he began rubbing his hands with delight, for he guessed well enough that his daughter's tears had made it; and the dust in it told him how surely now she was being turned into gold.

And now the rat-catcher was the richest man in the world: all his traps were made of gold, and when he went rat-hunting he rode in a gilded coach drawn by twelve hundred of the finest and largest rats. This was for an advertisement of the business. He now caught rats for the fun of it and the show of it, but also to get money by it; for, though he was so rich, ratting and money-grubbing had become a second nature to him; unless he were at one or the other, he could not be happy.

Far below, in the house of the gnome, Jasome sat and cried. When the sound of the great bells ringing for Easter came down to her, the gnome said: "Today I cannot bind you; it is the great rising day for all Christians. If you wish, you may go up and ask your father now to release you."

So Jasome kissed the gnome and went up the track of her own tears that brought her to her father's door. When she came to the light of day, she felt quite blind; a soft yellow tint was all over her, and already her hair was quite golden.

The rat-catcher was furious when he saw her coming back before her time. "Oh, father," she cried, "let me come back for a little while to play in the sun!" But her father, fearing lest the gilding of her complexion should be spoiled, drove her back into the earth and trampled it down over her head.

The gnome seemed quite sorry for her when she returned; but already, he said, a year was gone—and what were three years when a king's son would be the reward?

At the next Easter he let her go again; and now she looked quite golden, except for her eyes and her white teeth and the nails on her pretty little fingers and toes. But again her father drove her back into the ground and put a heavy stone slab over the spot to make sure of her.

At last the third Easter came, and she was all gold.

She kissed the gnome many times and was almost sorry to leave him, for he had been very kind to her. And now he told her about her father catching him in the trap, and robbing him of his gold by a hard bargain, and of his being forced to take her down to live with him till she was turned into gold, so that she might marry the king's son. "For now," said he, "you are so compounded of gold that only the gnomes could rub it off you."

So this time, when Jasome came up once more to the light of day, she did not go back again to her cruel father but went and sat by the roadside and played with the sunbeams and wondered when the king's son would come and marry her.

And as she sat there all the country people who passed by stopped and mocked her; and boys came and threw mud at her because she was all gold from head to foot—an object, to be sure, for all simple folk to laugh at. So presently, instead of hoping, she fell to despair and sat weeping with her face hidden in her hands.

Before long the king's son came that road and saw something shining like sunlight on a pond; but when he came near, he found a lovely maiden of pure gold lying in a pool of her own tears with her face hidden in her hair.

Now the king's son, unlike the country folk, knew the value of gold; but he was grieved at heart for a maiden so stained all over with it, and more, when he beheld how she wept. So he went to lift her up; and there, surely, he saw the most beautiful face he could ever have dreamed of. But, alas! so discolored—even her eyes, and her lips, and the very tears she shed were the color of gold! When he could bring her to speak, she told him how, because she was all gold, all the people mocked at her and boys threw mud at her; and she had nowhere to go, unless it were back to the kind gnome who lived underground, out of sight of the sweet sun.

So the prince said, "Come with me, and I will take you to my father's palace, and there nobody shall mock you, but you shall sit all your days in the sunshine and be happy."

And as they went, more and more he wondered at her great beauty—so spoiled that he could not look at her without grief—and was taken with increasing wonder at the beautiful wisdom stored in her golden mind; for she told him the tales of the heroes, which she had learned from the gnome, and of buried cities; also the songs of old poets that have been forgotten; and her voice, like the rest of her, was golden.

The prince said to himself, "I shut my eyes and am ready to die loving her; yet, when I open them, she is but a talking statue!"

One day he said to her, "Under all this disguise you must be the most beautiful thing upon earth! Already to me you are the dearest!" and he sighed, for he knew that a king's son might not marry a figure of gold.

Now one day after this, as Jasome sat alone in the sunshine and cried, the little old gnome stood before her and said, "Well, Jasome, have you married the king's son?"

"Alas!" cried Jasome, "you have so changed me: I am no longer human! Yet he loves me, and, but for that, he would marry me."

"Dear me!" said the gnome. "If that is all, I can take the gold off of you again: why, I said so!"

Jasome entreated him, by all his former kindness, to do so for her now.

“Yes,” said the gnome, “but a bargain is a bargain. Now is the time for me to get back my bags of gold. Do you go to your father and let him know that the king’s son is willing to marry you if he restores to me my treasure that he took from me; for that is what it comes to.”

Up jumped Jasome and ran to the rat-catcher’s house. “Oh, father,” she cried, “now you can undo all your cruelty to me; for now, if you will give back the gnome his gold, he will give my own face back to me, and I shall marry the king’s son!”

But the rat-catcher was filled with admiration at the sight of her and would not believe a word she said. “I have given you your dowry,” he answered; “three years I had to do without you to get it. Take it away, and get married, and leave me the peace and plenty I have so hardly earned!”

Jasome went back and told the gnome. “Really,” said he, “I must show this rat-catcher that there are other sorts of traps and that it isn’t only rats and gnomes that get caught in them! I have given him his taste of wealth; now it shall act as pickle to his poverty!”

So the next time the rat-catcher put his foot out of doors, the ground gave way under it and—snap!—the gnome had him by the leg.

“Let me go!” cried the rat-catcher; “I can’t get out!”

“Can’t you?” said the gnome. “If I let you out, what will you give me?”

“My daughter!” cried the rat-catcher; “my beautiful golden daughter!”

“Oh, no!” laughed the gnome. “Guess again!”

“My own weight in gold!” cried the rat-catcher, in a frenzy; but the gnome would not close the bargain till he had wrung from the rat-catcher the promise of his last penny.

So the gnome carried away all the sacks of gold before the rat-catcher’s eyes; and when he had them safe underground, then at last he let the old man go. Then he called Jasome to follow him, and she went down willingly into the black earth.

For a whole year the gnome rubbed and scrubbed and tubbed her to get the gold out of her composition; and when it was done, she was the most shiningly beautiful thing you ever set eyes on.

When she got back to the palace, she found her dear prince pining for love of her, and wondering when she would return. So they were married the very next day; and the rat-catcher came to look on at the wedding.

He grumbled because he was in rags and because he was poor; he wept that he had been robbed of his money and his daughter. But gnomes and daughters, he said, were in one and the same box; such ingratitude as theirs no one could beat.