

GRACIEUSE AND PERCINET

There was once a king and queen who had only one daughter. Her beauty, her mildness and her intelligence, which were incomparable, caused her to be named Gracieuse. She was her mother's entire joy. There was no morning when she was not brought a beautiful dress, sometimes gold brocade, velvet or satin. She was adorned marvelously without being proud or more vainglorious. She spent the morning with knowledgeable individuals, who taught her all sorts of sciences, and in the afternoon she worked in the company of the queen. When it was time for a snack she was served bowls full of sugared almonds and more than twenty pots of jam, so it was said everywhere that she was the most fortunate princess in the world.

In the same court there was a very rich old woman called Duchess Grognon, who was frightful in every way; her hair was flame-red; she had a terribly fat face covered in pimples; of the two eyes she had once had, only one remained, which was gummy; her mouth was so wide one might have thought that she wanted to eat the whole world, but as she had no teeth there was no fear of that; she had humps in front and behind and was lame on both sides. Monsters of that sort are envious of all beautiful persons; she hated Gracieuse mortally, and withdrew from the court in order not to hear her praised any longer. She had a castle of her own not far away. When anyone came to see her and recounted marvels about the princess she cried, angrily: "You're lying! You're lying! She isn't lovable. I have more charm in my little finger than she has in her entire body."

However, the queen fell ill and died. Princess Gracieuse nearly died too, of the grief of having lost such a good mother. The king regretted such a good wife greatly, and remained shut away in his palace for nearly a year. Finally, the physicians, fearing that he would fall ill, ordered him to go for walks and to divert himself. He went hunting, and as the weather was very hot, when he went past a large castle that he found on his route he went in.

As soon as she was informed of the king's arrival, Duchess Grognon—for it was her castle—came to greet him, and told him that the coolest place in the house was a large, well-vaulted cellar, very tidy, to which she invited him to descend. The king went there with her, and, seeing two hundred barrels lined up on top of one another he asked her whether it was for herself alone that she made such a large provision.

"Yes, Sire," she said, "It's just for me; I'd be very glad to let you sample some; there's Canary, Saint-Laurent, Champagne, Hermitage, Rivesalte, Rossolis, Persicot and Fenouillet; which would you like?"

"Frankly," said the king, "I hold that Champagne wine is better than all the others."

Immediately, Grognon took a little hammer and struck: *tap, tap*. A thousand pistoles emerged from the barrel.

"What does that signify?" she said, smiling. And she struck another barrel: *tap, tap*. A bushel of double louis d'or emerged.

"I don't understand this at all," she said, again, smiling more broadly. She went on to a third barrel and struck: *tap, tap*. So many pearls and diamonds came out that the floor was covered by them.

"Oh!" she cried. "I don't understand at all, Sire. Someone must have stolen my good wine and left these bagatelles in its place."

"Bagatelles!" said the king, who was quite astonished. "Damn it, Madame Grognon, do you call that bagatelles? There's enough there to buy ten kingdoms the size of Paris."

"Well," she said, "know that all these barrels are full of gold and precious stones; I'll make you the master of them on condition that you marry me."

"Ah!" replied the king, who loved money uniquely, "I'd like nothing better; tomorrow, if you wish."

"But there's one more condition," she said, "which is that I want to be mistress of your daughter, as her mother was, that she depends entirely on me and that you leave her at my disposal."

"You'll be her mistress," said the king. "Put it there."

Grognon shook his hand; they went out of the rich cellar together, of which she gave him the key.

He returned to his palace immediately. On hearing her father, Gracieuse ran to meet him; she kissed him and asked him if he had had a successful hunt.

"I caught a living dove," he said.

"Oh, Sire!" said the princess. "Give it to me, I'll nourish it."

"That can't be," he said, "for, to explain myself more intelligibly, it's necessary to tell you that I encountered Duchess Grognon and I've taken her for my wife."

"O Heaven!" cried Gracieuse, in her first impulse. "Can she be called a dove? She's more like a screech-owl."

"Shut up," said the king. "I intend that you love her and respect her as much as if she were your mother. Go and adorn yourself promptly, for I want to return to her today."

The princess was very obedient; she went to her room in order to get dressed. Her nurse read her sadness in her eyes. "What's the matter with you, my dear child?" she said to her. "You're weeping."

"Alas, my dear nurse," replied Gracieuse, "who wouldn't weep? The king is going to give me a stepmother, and to complete the disgrace, it's my cruelest enemy. In a word, it's the frightful Grognon. How can I see her in these beautiful beds that my good mother the queen embroidered so delicately with her own hands? How can I caress a she-ape who would like to have me killed?"

"My dear child," replied the nurse, "your intelligence ought to elevate you as much as your birth. Princesses like you ought to set fine examples for others. And what more beautiful example is there than to obey your father and do violence to yourself in order to please him? Promise me, then, that you won't give Grognon any evidence of the pain you feel."

The princess could not resolve to do that, but the sage nurse gave her so many reasons that she finally agreed to put on a good countenance and use it well with her stepmother.

She immediately put on a green and gold dress; she let her blonde hair fall over her shoulders, floating at the whim of the wind, as was the fashion in those days, and she put on her head a light crown of roses and jasmines, all the leaves of which were emeralds. In that state, Venus, the mother of the Amours, would have been less beautiful, but the sadness she could not overcome appeared in her face.

To get back to Grognon, that ugly creature was fully occupied in adorning herself. She had one shoe made half a cubit higher than the other, in order to appear a little less lame; she had a bodice stuffed over one shoulder in order to hide her hump; she put in the best enamel eye she could find; she put on make-up to whiten her face; she tinted her red hair black; then she put on an amaranth satin dress lined with blue, with a yellow skirt and violet ribbons. She wanted to make her entrance on horseback, because she had heard it said that the queens of Spain made theirs in that fashion.

While the king was giving his orders and Gracieuse was awaiting the moment to depart to go to meet Grognon, she went down into the garden on her own, and went into a very dark little wood, where she sat down on the grass.

"Finally," she said, "I'm at liberty; I can weep as much as I want without anyone opposing it."

Immediately, she started sighing and weeping, so much that her eyes seemed to be two fresh-water springs. In that state, she was no longer thinking of returning to the palace when she saw a page coming, clad in green satin, with white feathers and the most beautiful head in the world. He put one knee on the ground and said to her: "Princess, the king is waiting for you."

She remained surprised by all the charms she remarked in the young page, and as she did not know him she thought that he must be in Grognon's retinue.

"Since when," she said to him, "has the king received you in the number of his pages?"

"I'm not the king's, Madame," he said, "I'm yours, and I only want to be yours."

"You're mine?" she replied, quite astonished. "But I don't know you!"

"Oh, Princess," he said, "I haven't yet dared to make myself known, but the misfortunes by which you are threatened by virtue of the king's marriage oblige me to speak to you sooner than I would have done. I had resolved to leave to time and my services the care of declaring my passion to you, but..."

"What!" cried the princess. "A page has the audacity to tell me that he loves me! That's the culmination of my disgrace."

“Don’t be afraid, beautiful Gracieuse,” he said to her, in a tender and respectful manner. “I am Percinet, a prince well enough known for my wealth and my knowledge for you not to find any inequality between us. It’s only your merit and your beauty that can introduce any. I’ve loved you for a long time; I’m often in the places where you are without you seeing me. The gift of enchantment that I received at birth has been a great help to me in procuring me the pleasure of seeing you. I’ll accompany you everywhere today in this costume, and I hope not to be entirely useless to you.”

As he spoke the princess looked at him with an astonishment that she could not get over.

“It’s you, handsome Percinet,” she said to him, “that I’ve had so much desire to see, and about whom such surprising things are said. How glad I am that you want to be my friend! I no longer fear the malevolent Grognon, since you’re entering into my interests.”

They said a few more things to one another, and then Gracieuse returned to the palace, where she found a horse fully harnessed and caparisoned, which Percinet had brought into the stable, and which everyone believed to be for her. She mounted up. As it was a great jumper, the page took it by the bridle and led it, turning continually to the princess in order to have the pleasure of looking at her.

When the horse that was being led for Grognon appeared next to Gracieuse’s, the latter looked like a mere nag, and the blanket of the handsome horse was so brilliant with gems that the other could not enter into comparison with it. The king, who was occupied by a thousand things, did not notice it, but all the noblemen only had eyes for the princess whose beauty they admired, and for her green-clad page, who was prettier than all those of the court.

They met Grognon on the road in an uncovered caleche, uglier and more ill-formed than a peasant woman. The king and the princess embraced her. Her horse was presented to her for her to mount, but seeing Gracieuse’s, she said: “What! That creature will have a finer horse than me! I’d rather not be queen and return to my rich castle than be treated in such a manner.”

The king immediately commanded the princess to dismount, and begged Grognon to do him the honor of mounting her horses. The princess obeyed without protest. Grognon did not look at her or thank her; she had herself hoisted up on to the beautiful horse; she resembled a bundle of dirty linen. There were eight gentlemen holding her, for fear that she might fall.

She was not yet content; she muttered threats between her teeth. She was asked what was wrong. “Being the mistress,” she said, “I want the green page to hold the bridle of my horse, as he did when Gracieuse as mounted on it.”

The king ordered the green-clad page to lead the queen’s horse.

Percinet cast his eyes upon the princess, and she on him, without saying a single word. He obeyed, and the entire court set forth; drums and trumpets made a desperate sound. Grognon was delighted; with her flat nose and her skewed mouth, she would not have changed places with Gracieuse.

At the time when it was least expected, however, the beautiful horse began to leap, to kick and to run so fast that no one could stop it. It carried Grognon away. She held on to the saddle and the mane; she screamed with all her might. Finally, she fell, her foot caught in the stirrup. It dragged her for a long way over stones, over thorns and through the mud, where she remained almost buried. Everyone followed, and had soon caught up with her. She was scratched all over, her head was fractured in three or four places, and one arm was broken. There had never been a bride in a worse condition.

The king appeared to be in despair. She was picked up like a shattered glass; her bonnet was on one side, her shoes on the other. She was carried into the city, she was laid down, and the surgeons were summoned. Ill as she was, she vituperated nevertheless.

“This is a trick on the part of Gracieuse,” she said. “I’m certain that she only took that beautiful but malevolent horse in order to make me desire it, and so that it would kill me. If the king doesn’t give me satisfaction, I’ll return to my rich castle and never see him again as long as I live.”

The king was informed about Grognon’s anger. As his dominant passion was self-interest, the mere idea of losing the thousand barrels of gold and diamonds made him shiver, and would have brought him to any extremity. He ran to the bedside of the filthy patient; he put himself at her feet and swore to her that she only had to prescribe a punishment proportionate to Gracieuse’s fault and he would abandon her to her resentment. She told him that that was sufficient, and that she would send for her.

In fact, someone came to tell the princess that Grognon was asking for her. She became pale and tremulous, suspecting that it was not to caress her. She looked in all directions to see if Percinet was apparent; she did not see him and walked very sadly to Grognon's apartment.