

*THE STORY OF THE QUEEN OF THE
FLOWERY ISLES*

THERE once lived a queen who ruled over the Flowery Isles, whose husband, to her extreme grief, died a few years after their marriage. On being left a widow she devoted herself almost entirely to the education of the two charming princesses, her only children. The elder of them was so lovely that as she grew up her mother greatly feared she would excite the jealousy of the Queen of all the Isles, who prided herself on being the most beautiful woman in the world, and insisted on all rivals bowing before her charms.

In order the better to gratify her vanity she had urged the king, her husband, to make war on all the surrounding islands, and as his greatest wish was to please her, the only conditions he imposed on any newly-conquered country was that each princess of every royal house should attend his court as soon as she was fifteen years old, and do homage to the transcendent beauty of his queen.

The queen of the Flowery Isles, well aware of this law, was fully determined to present her daughter to the proud queen as soon as her fifteenth birthday was past.

The queen herself had heard a rumour of the young princess's great beauty, and awaited her visit with some anxiety, which soon developed into jealousy, for when the interview took place it was impossible not to be dazzled by such radiant charms, and she was obliged to

admit that she had never beheld anyone so exquisitely lovely.

Of course she thought in her own mind 'excepting myself!' for nothing could have made her believe it possible that anyone could eclipse her.

But the outspoken admiration of the entire court soon undeceived her, and made her so angry that she pretended illness and retired to her own rooms, so as to avoid witnessing the princess's triumph. She also sent word to the Queen of the Flowery Isles that she was sorry not to be well enough to see her again, and advised her to return to her own states with the princess, her daughter.

This message was entrusted to one of the great ladies of the court, who was an old friend of the Queen of the Flowery Isles, and who advised her not to wait to take a formal leave but to go home as fast as she could.

The queen was not slow to take the hint, and lost no time in obeying it. Being well aware of the magic powers of the incensed queen, she warned her daughter that she was threatened by some great danger if she left the palace for any reason whatever during the next six months.

The princess promised obedience, and no pains were spared to make the time pass pleasantly for her.

The six months were nearly at an end, and on the very last day a splendid fête was to take place in a lovely meadow quite near the palace. The princess, who had been able to watch all the preparations from her window, implored her mother to let her go as far as the meadow; and the queen, thinking all risk must be over, consented, and promised to take her there herself.

The whole court was delighted to see their much-loved princess at liberty, and everyone set off in high glee to join in the fête.

The princess, overjoyed at being once more in the open air, was walking a little in advance of her party



The Princess is swallowed up by the Earth.

when suddenly the earth opened under her feet and closed again after swallowing her up!

The queen fainted away with terror, and the younger princess burst into floods of tears and could hardly be dragged away from the fatal spot, whilst the court was overwhelmed with horror at so great a calamity.

Orders were given to bore the earth to a great depth, but in vain; not a trace of the vanished princess was to be found.

She sank right through the earth and found herself in a desert place with nothing but rocks and trees and no sign of any human being. The only living creature she saw was a very pretty little dog, who ran up to her and at once began to caress her. She took him in her arms, and after playing with him for a little put him down again, when he started off in front of her, looking round from time to time as though begging her to follow.

She let him lead her on, and presently reached a little hill, from which she saw a valley full of lovely fruit trees, bearing flowers and fruit together. The ground was also covered with fruit and flowers, and in the middle of the valley rose a fountain surrounded by a velvety lawn.

The princess hastened to this charming spot, and sitting down on the grass began to think over the misfortune which had befallen her, and burst into tears as she reflected on her sad condition.

The fruit and clear fresh water would, she knew, prevent her from dying of hunger or thirst, but how could she escape if any wild beast appeared and tried to devour her?

At length, having thought over every possible evil which could happen, the princess tried to distract her mind by playing with the little dog. She spent the whole day near the fountain, but as night drew on she wondered what she should do, when she noticed that the little dog was pulling at her dress.

She paid no heed to him at first, but as he continued

to pull her dress and then run a few steps in one particular direction, she at last decided to follow him; he stopped before a rock with a large opening in the centre, which he evidently wished her to enter.

The princess did so and discovered a large and beautiful cave lit up by the brilliancy of the stones with which it was lined, with a little couch covered with soft moss in one corner. She lay down on it and the dog at once nestled at her feet. Tired out with all she had gone through she soon fell asleep.

Next morning she was awakened very early by the songs of many birds. The little dog woke up too, and sprang round her in his most caressing manner. She got up and went outside, the dog as before running on in front and turning back constantly to take her dress and draw her on.

She let him have his way and he soon led her back to the beautiful garden where she had spent part of the day before. Here she ate some fruit, drank some water of the fountain, and felt as if she had made an excellent meal. She walked about amongst the flowers, played with her little dog, and at night returned to sleep in the cave.

In this way the princess passed several months, and as her first terrors died away she gradually became more resigned to her fate. The little dog, too, was a great comfort, and her constant companion.

One day she noticed that he seemed very sad and did not even caress her as usual. Fearing he might be ill she carried him to a spot where she had seen him eat some particular herbs, hoping they might do him good, but he would not touch them. He spent all the night, too, sighing and groaning as if in great pain.

At last the princess fell asleep, and when she awoke her first thought was for her little pet, but not finding him at her feet as usual, she ran out of the cave to look for him. As she stepped out of the cave she caught



sight of an old man, who hurried away so fast that she had barely time to see him before he disappeared.

This was a fresh surprise and almost as great a shock as the loss of her little dog, who had been so faithful to her ever since the first day she had seen him. She wondered if he had strayed away or if the old man had stolen him.

Tormented by all kinds of thoughts and fears she wandered on, when suddenly she felt herself wrapped in a thick cloud and carried through the air. She made no resistance and before very long found herself, to her great surprise, in an avenue leading to the palace in which she had been born. No sign of the cloud anywhere.

As the princess approached the palace she perceived that everyone was dressed in black, and she was filled with fear as to the cause of this mourning. She hastened on and was soon recognised and welcomed with shouts of joy. Her sister hearing the cheers ran out and embraced the wanderer, with tears of happiness, telling her that the shock of her disappearance had been so terrible that their mother had only survived it a few days. Since then the younger princess had worn the crown, which she now resigned to her sister to whom it by right belonged.

But the elder wished to refuse it, and would only accept the crown on condition that her sister should share in all the power.

The first acts of the new queen were to do honour to the memory of her dear mother and to shower every mark of generous affection on her sister. Then, being still very grieved at the loss of her little dog, she had a careful search made for him in every country, and when nothing could be heard of him she was so grieved that she offered half her kingdom to whoever should restore him to her.

Many gentlemen of the court, tempted by the thought of such a reward, set off in all directions in search of the dog; but all returned empty-handed to the queen, who,

in despair announced that since life was unbearable without her little dog, she would give her hand in marriage to the man who brought him back.

The prospect of such a prize quickly turned the court into a desert, nearly every courtier starting on the quest. Whilst they were away the queen was informed one day that a very ill-looking man wished to speak with her. She desired him to be shown into a room where she was sitting with her sister.

On entering her presence he said that he was prepared to give the queen her little dog if she on her side was ready to keep her word.

The princess was the first to speak. She said that the queen had no right to marry without the consent of the nation, and that on so important an occasion the general council must be summoned. The queen could not say anything against this statement; but she ordered an apartment in the palace to be given to the man, and desired the council to meet on the following day.

Next day, accordingly, the council assembled in great state, and by the princess's advice it was decided to offer the man a large sum of money for the dog, and should he refuse it, to banish him from the kingdom without seeing the queen again. The man refused the price offered and left the hall.

The princess informed the queen of what had passed, and the queen approved of all, but added that as she was her own mistress she had made up her mind to abdicate her throne, and to wander through the world till she had found her little dog.

The princess was much alarmed by such a resolution, and implored the queen to change her mind. Whilst they were discussing the subject, one of the chamberlains appeared to inform the queen that the bay was covered with ships. The two sisters ran to the balcony, and saw a large fleet in full sail for the port.

In a little time they came to the conclusion that the

ships must come from a friendly nation, as every vessel was decked with gay flags, streamers, and pennons, and the way was led by a small ship flying a great white flag of peace.

The queen sent a special messenger to the harbour, and was soon informed that the fleet belonged to the Prince of the Emerald Isles, who begged leave to land in her kingdom, and to present his humble respects to her. The queen at once sent some of the court dignitaries to receive the prince and bid him welcome.

She awaited him seated on her throne, but rose on his appearance, and went a few steps to meet him ; then begged him to be seated, and for about an hour kept him in close conversation.

The prince was then conducted to a splendid suite of apartments, and the next day he asked for a private audience. He was admitted to the queen's own sitting-room, where she was sitting alone with her sister.

After the first greetings the prince informed the queen that he had some very strange things to tell her, which she only would know to be true.

'Madam,' said he, 'I am a neighbour of the Queen of all the Isles ; and a small isthmus connects part of my states with hers. One day, when hunting a stag, I had the misfortune to meet her, and not recognising her, I did not stop to salute her with all proper ceremony. You, Madam, know better than anyone how revengeful she is, and that she is also a mistress of magic. I learnt both facts to my cost. The ground opened under my feet, and I soon found myself in a far distant region transformed into a little dog, under which shape I had the honour to meet your Majesty. After six months, the queen's vengeance not being yet satisfied, she further changed me into a hideous old man, and in this form I was so afraid of being unpleasant in your eyes, Madam, that I hid myself in the depths of the woods, where I spent three months more. At the end of that time I was

so fortunate as to meet a benevolent fairy who delivered me from the proud queen's power, and told me all your adventures and where to find you. I now come to offer you a heart which has been entirely yours, Madam, since first we met in the desert.'

A few days later a herald was sent through the kingdom to proclaim the joyful news of the marriage of the Queen of the Flowery Isles with the young prince. They lived happily for many years, and ruled their people well.

As for the bad queen, whose vanity and jealousy had caused so much mischief, the Fairies took all her power away for a punishment.

['Cabinet des Fées.']