

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kindly Kisses

"Won't you be dreadful sorry to leave this lovely place?" Betsy asked the Ugly One.

"No, indeed," said he. "Jewels and gold are cold and heartless things, and I am sure I would presently have died of loneliness had I not found the natural forest at the edge of the artificial one. Anyhow, without these real trees I should soon have starved to death."

Betsy looked around at the quaint trees.

"I don't just understand that," she admitted. "What could you find to eat here."

"The best food in the world," Ugly answered. "Do you see that grove at your left?" he added, pointing it out; "well, such trees as those do not grow in your country, or in any other place but this cavern. I have named them 'Hotel Trees,' because they bear a certain kind of table d'hote fruit called 'Three-Course Nuts.'"

"That's funny!" said Betsy. "What are the 'Three-Course Nuts' like?"

"Something like cocoanuts, to look at," explained the Ugly One. "All you have to do is to pick one of them and then sit down and eat your dinner. You first unscrew the top part and find a cupfull of good soup. After you've eaten that, you unscrew the middle part and find a hollow filled with meat and potatoes, vegetables and a fine salad. Eat that, and unscrew the next section, and you come to the dessert in the bottom of the nut. That is, pie and cake, cheese and crackers, and nuts and raisins. The Three-Course Nuts are not all exactly alike in flavor or in contents, but they are all good and in each one may be found a complete three-course dinner."

"But how about breakfasts?" inquired Betsy.

"Why, there are Breakfast Trees for that, which grow over there at the right. They bear nuts, like the others, only the nuts contain coffee or chocolate, instead of soup; oatmeal instead of meat-and-potatoes, and fruits instead of dessert. Sad as has been my life in this wonderful prison, I must admit that no one could live more luxuriously in the best hotel in the world than I have lived here; but I will be glad to get into the open air again and see the good old sun and the silvery moon and the soft green grass and the flowers that are kissed by the morning dew. Ah, how much more lovely are those blessed things than the glitter of gems or the cold gleam of gold!"

"Of course," said Betsy. "I once knew a little boy who wanted to catch the measles, because all the little boys in his neighborhood but him

had 'em, and he was really unhappy 'cause he couldn't catch 'em, try as he would. So I'm pretty certain that the things we want, and can't have, are not good for us. Isn't that true, Shaggy?"

"Not always, my dear," he gravely replied. "If we didn't want anything, we would never get anything, good or bad. I think our longings are natural, and if we act as nature prompts us we can't go far wrong."

"For my part," said Queen Ann, "I think the world would be a dreary place without the gold and jewels."

"All things are good in their way," said Shaggy; "but we may have too much of any good thing. And I have noticed that the value of anything depends upon how scarce it is, and how difficult it is to obtain."

"Pardon me for interrupting you," said King Kaliko, coming to their side, "but now that we have rescued Shaggy's brother I would like to return to my royal cavern. Being the King of the Nomes, it is my duty to look after my restless subjects and see that they behave themselves."

So they all turned and began walking through the Metal Forest to the other side of the great domed cave, where they had first entered it.

Shaggy and his brother walked side by side and both seemed rejoiced that they were together after their long separation. Betsy didn't dare look at the polka dot handkerchief, for fear she would laugh aloud; so she walked behind the two brothers and led Hank by holding fast to his

left ear.

When at last they reached the place where the passage led to the outer world, Queen Ann said, in a hesitating way that was unusual with her:

"I have not conquered this Nome Country, nor do I expect to do so; but I would like to gather a few of these pretty jewels before I leave this place."

"Help yourself, ma'am," said King Kaliko, and at once the officers of the Army took advantage of his royal permission and began filling their pockets, while Ann tied a lot of diamonds in a big handkerchief.

This accomplished, they all entered the passage, the nomes going first to light the way with their torches. They had not proceeded far when Betsy exclaimed:

"Why, there are jewels here, too!"

All eyes were turned upon the ground and they found a regular trail of jewels strewn along the rock floor.

"This is queer!" said Kaliko, much surprised. "I must send some of my nomes to gather up these gems and replace them in the Metal Forest, where they belong. I wonder how they came to be here?"

All the way along the passage they found this trail of jewels, but when they neared the end the mystery was explained. For there, squatted upon the floor with his back to the rock wall, sat old Ruggedo, puffing and blowing as if he was all tired out. Then they realized it was he who had scattered the jewels, from his many pockets, which one by one had burst with the weight of their contents as he had stumbled along the passage.

"But I don't mind," said Ruggedo, with a deep sigh. "I now realize that I could not have carried such a weighty load very far, even had I managed to escape from this passage with it. The woman who sewed the pockets on my robe used poor thread, for which I shall thank her."

"Have you any jewels left?" inquired Betsy.

He glanced into some of the remaining pockets.

"A few," said he, "but they will be sufficient to supply my wants, and I no longer have any desire to be rich. If some of you will kindly help me to rise, I'll get out of here and leave you, for I know you all despise me and prefer my room to my company."

Shaggy and Kaliko raised the old King to his feet, when he was confronted by Shaggy's brother, whom he now noticed for the first time. The queer and unexpected appearance of the Ugly One so startled Ruggedo that he gave a wild cry and began to tremble, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Wh--wh--who is this?" he faltered.

"I am that helpless prisoner whom your cruel magic transformed from a handsome man into an ugly one!" answered Shaggy's brother, in a voice of stern reproach.

"Really, Ruggedo," said Betsy, "you ought to be ashamed of that mean trick."

"I am, my dear," admitted Ruggedo, who was now as meek and humble as formerly he had been cruel and vindictive.

"Then," returned the girl, "you'd better do some more magic and give the poor man his own face again."

"I wish I could," answered the old King; "but you must remember that Tititi-Hoochoo has deprived me of all my magic powers. However, I never took the trouble to learn just how to break the charm I cast over Shaggy's brother, for I intended he should always remain ugly."

"Every charm," remarked pretty Polychrome, "has its antidote; and, if you knew this charm of ugliness, Ruggedo, you must have known how to dispel it."

He shook his head.

"If I did, I--I've forgotten," he stammered regretfully.

"Try to think!" pleaded Shaggy, anxiously. "Please try to think!"

Ruggedo ruffled his hair with both hands, sighed, slapped his chest, rubbed his ear, and stared stupidly around the group.

"I've a faint recollection that there was one thing that would break the charm," said he; "but misfortune has so addled my brain that I can't remember what it was."

"See here, Ruggedo," said Betsy, sharply, "we've treated you pretty well, so far, but we won't stand for any nonsense, and if you know what's good for yourself you'll think of that charm!"

"Why?" he demanded, turning to look wonderingly at the little girl.

"Because it means so much to Shaggy's brother. He's dreadfully ashamed of himself, the way he is now, and you're to blame for it. Fact is, Ruggedo, you've done so much wickedness in your life that it won't hurt you to do a kind act now."

Ruggedo blinked at her, and sighed again, and then tried very hard to think.

"I seem to remember, dimly," said he, "that a certain kind of a kiss will break the charm of ugliness."

"What kind of a kiss?"

"What kind? Why, it was--it was--it was either the kiss of a Mortal Maid; or--or--the kiss of a Mortal Maid who had once been a Fairy; or--or the kiss of one who is still a Fairy. I can't remember which. But of course no maid, mortal or fairy, would ever consent to kiss a person so ugly--so dreadfully, fearfully, terribly ugly--as Shaggy's brother."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Betsy, with admirable courage; "I'm a Mortal Maid, and if it is my kiss that will break this awful charm, I--I'll do it!"

"Oh, you really couldn't," protested Ugly. "I would be obliged to remove my mask, and when you saw my face, nothing could induce you to kiss me, generous as you are."

"Well, as for that," said the little girl, "I needn't see your face at all. Here's my plan: You stay in this dark passage, and we'll send away the nomes with their torches. Then you'll take off the handkerchief, and I--I'll kissyou."

"This is awfully kind of you, Betsy!" said Shaggy, gratefully.

"Well, it surely won't kill me," she replied; "and, if it makes you and your brother happy, I'm willing to take some chances."

So Kaliko ordered the torch-bearers to leave the passage, which they did by going through the rock opening. Queen Ann and her army also went out; but the others were so interested in Betsy's experiment that they remained grouped at the mouth of the passageway. When the big rock swung into place, closing tight the opening, they were left in total darkness.

"Now, then," called Betsy in a cheerful voice, "have you got that handkerchief off your face, Ugly?"

"Yes," hereplied.

"Well, where are you, then?" she asked, reaching out her arms.

"Here," said he.

"You'll have to stoop down, you know."

He found her hands and clasping them in his own stooped until his face was near to that of the little girl. The others heard a clear, smacking kiss, and then Betsy exclaimed:

"There! I've done it, and it didn't hurt a bit!"

"Tell me, dear brother; is the charm broken?" asked Shaggy.

"I do not know," was the reply. "It may be, or it may not be. I cannot tell."

"Has anyone a match?" inquired Betsy.

"I have several," said Shaggy.

"Then let Ruggedo strike one of them and look at your brother's face, while we all turn our backs. Ruggedo made your brother ugly, so I guess he can stand the horror of looking at him, if the charm isn't broken."

Agreeing to this, Ruggedo took the match and lighted it. He gave one look and then blew out the match.

"Ugly as ever!" he said with a shudder. "So it wasn't the kiss of a Mortal Maid, after all."

"Let me try," proposed the Rose Princess, in her sweet voice. "I am a Mortal Maid who was once a Fairy. Perhaps my kiss will break the charm."

Files did not wholly approve of this, but he was too generous to interfere. So the Rose Princess felt her way through the darkness to

Shaggy's brother and kissed him.

Ruggedo struck another match, while they all turned away.

"No," announced the former King; "that didn't break the charm, either. It must be the kiss of a Fairy that is required--or else my memory has failed me altogether."

"Polly," said Betsy, pleadingly, "won't you try?"

"Of course I will!" answered Polychrome, with a merry laugh. "I've never kissed a mortal man in all the thousands of years I have existed, but I'll do it to please our faithful Shaggy Man, whose unselfish affection for his ugly brother deserves to be rewarded."

Even as Polychrome was speaking she tripped lightly to the side of the Ugly One and quickly touched his cheek with her lips.

"Oh, thank you--thank you!" he fervently cried. "I've changed, this time, I know. I can feel it! I'm different. Shaggy--dear Shaggy--I am myself again!"

Files, who was near the opening, touched the spring that released the big rock and it suddenly swung backward and let in a flood of daylight.

Everyone stood motionless, staring hard at Shaggy's brother, who, no

longer masked by the polka-dot handkerchief, met their gaze with a glad smile.

"Well," said Shaggy Man, breaking the silence at last and drawing a long, deep breath of satisfaction, "you are no longer the Ugly One, my dear brother; but, to be entirely frank with you, the face that belongs to you is no more handsome than it ought to be."

"I think he's rather good looking," remarked Betsy, gazing at the man critically.

"In comparison with what he was," said King Kaliko, "he is really beautiful. You, who never beheld his ugliness, may not understand that; but it was my misfortune to look at the Ugly One many times, and I say again that, in comparison with what he was, the man is now beautiful."

"All right," returned Betsy, briskly, "we'll take your word for it, Kaliko. And now let us get out of this tunnel and into the world again."