

THE HUSBAND OF THE RAT'S DAUGHTER

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Once upon a time there lived in Japan a rat and his wife who came of an old and noble race, and had one daughter, the loveliest girl in all the rat world. Her parents were very proud of her, and spared no pains to teach her all she ought to know. There was not another young lady in the whole town who was as clever as she was in gnawing through the hardest wood, or who could drop from such a height on to a bed, or run away so fast if anyone was heard coming. Great attention, too, was paid to her personal appearance, and her skin shone like satin, while her teeth were as white as pearls, and beautifully pointed.

Of course, with all these advantages, her parents expected her to make a brilliant marriage, and, as she grew up, they began to look round for a suitable husband.

But here a difficulty arose. The father was a rat from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail, outside as well as in, and desired that his daughter should wed among her own people. She had no lack of lovers, but her father's secret hopes rested on a fine young rat, with moustaches which almost swept the ground, whose family was still nobler and more ancient than his own. Unluckily, the mother had other views for her precious child. She was one of those people who always despise their own family and surroundings, and take pleasure in thinking that they themselves are made of finer material than the rest of the world. ‘_Her_ daughter should never marry a mere rat,’ she declared, holding her head high. ‘With her beauty and talents she had a right to look for someone a little better than *that*.’

So she talked, as mothers will, to anyone that would listen to her. What the girl thought about the matter nobody knew or cared—it was not the fashion in the rat world.

Many were the quarrels which the old rat and his wife had upon the subject, and sometimes they bore on their faces certain marks which looked as if they had not kept to words only.

‘Reach up to the stars is *my* motto,’ cried the lady one day, when she was in a greater passion than usual. ‘My daughter’s beauty places her higher than anything upon earth,’ she cried; ‘and I am certainly not going to accept a son-in-law who is beneath her.’

‘Better offer her in marriage to the sun,’ answered her husband impatiently. ‘As far as I know there is nothing greater than he.’

‘Well, I *was* thinking of it,’ replied the wife, ‘and as you are of the same mind, we will pay him a visit to-morrow.’

So the next morning, the two rats, having spent hours in making themselves smart, set out to see the sun, leading their daughter between them.

The journey took some time, but at length they came to the golden palace where the sun lived.

‘Noble king,’ began the mother, ‘behold our daughter! She is so beautiful that she is above everything in the whole world. Naturally, we wish for a son-in-law who, on his side, is greater than all. Therefore we have come to you.’

‘I feel very much flattered,’ replied the sun, who was so busy that he had not the least wish to marry anybody. ‘You do me great honour by your proposal. Only, in one point you are mistaken, and it would be wrong of me to take advantage of your ignorance. There *is* something greater than I am, and that is the cloud. Look!’ And as he spoke a cloud spread itself over the sun’s face, blotting out his rays.

‘Oh, well, we will speak to the cloud,’ said the mother. And turning to the cloud she repeated her proposal.

‘Indeed I am unworthy of anything so charming,’ answered the cloud; ‘but you make a mistake again in what you say. There is one thing that is even more powerful than I, and that is the wind. Ah, here he comes, you can see for yourself.’

And she *did* see, for catching up the cloud as he passed, he threw it on the other side of the sky. Then, tumbling father, mother and daughter down to the earth again, he paused for a moment beside them, his foot on an old wall.

When she had recovered her breath, the mother began her little speech once more.

‘The wall is the proper husband for your daughter,’ answered the wind, whose home consisted of a cave, which he only visited when he was not rushing about elsewhere; ‘you can see for yourself that he is greater than I, for he has power to stop me in my flight.’ And the mother, who did not trouble to conceal her wishes, turned at once to the wall.

Then something happened which was quite unexpected by everyone.

‘I won’t marry that ugly old wall, which is as old as my grandfather,’ sobbed the girl, who had not uttered one word all this time. ‘I would have married the sun, or the cloud, or the wind, because it was my duty, although I love the handsome young rat, and him only. But that horrid old wall—I would sooner die!’

And the wall, rather hurt in his feelings, declared that he had no claim to be the husband of so beautiful a girl.

‘It is quite true,’ he said, ‘that I can stop the wind who can part the clouds who can cover the sun; but there is someone who can do more than all these, and that is the rat. It is the rat who passes through me, and can reduce me to powder, simply with his teeth. If, therefore, you want a son-in-law who is greater than the whole world, seek him among the rats.’

‘Ah, what did I tell you?’ cried the father. And his wife, though for the moment angry at being beaten, soon thought that a rat son-in-law was what she had always desired.

So all three returned happily home, and the wedding was celebrated three days after.

[0] Contes Populaires. ↑

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