

Rashiecoat

As told by Bea Ferguson

There was once a king who had a daughter he loved dearly.

She was very beautiful, but rather headstrong. Her father told her that it was about time she got married, but she wasn't impressed by any of his suggestions for a husband. Being a princess meant that she couldn't marry for love, but had to marry a prince whose kingdom would be bound to her father's own kingdom with bonds of kinship, and even better if he was very rich. Eventually, the King said he had enough of her hivering and she was to marry the man he had chosen. But when she heard who it was, she said:

"Father he is old and ugly, and I've heard he is mean and cruel. I will not marry *him*."

But the king said that he was also very rich and that she had no more say in the matter. All her weeping and tantrums were of no avail.

The next morning, she slipped out of the castle and went to a small cottage to see the hen-wife, who it was said knew magic and was very wise. She told her about her proposed marriage to the old man.

"What shall I do?" she said, "I can't stand him."

The hen-wife thought for a while and then said:

"Tell your father that you'll only marry him if you are given a coat that is made of beaten gold. It will take him ages to find that much gold."

"Right enough," said the princess. So she went back to the king and told him that she would only marry the man if she was given a coat that was made of beaten gold.

"Gold?" said the king. "You wouldn't settle for....."

"Gold," said the princess. So the king reluctantly agreed.

But much sooner than she had expected, with the help of the rich old man's money, the gold was found and the coat was ready. It was wonderful. It shone like the sun, but was so finely made that it moved like it was made of silk. The princess looked beautiful in it.

"That'll sell for good money after we're wed," said the old man.

The princess threw off the coat and ran back to the hen-wife.

"What am I to do now?" she said. "I've got the coat of beaten gold, so now I have to set a date for the wedding."

The old hen-wife thought for a while and said:

"That was obviously too easy. Tell your father that you'll only marry him if you are given a coat that is made from the feathers of all the birds of the air. That will take much longer to make." So the princess went back to the king and told him that she would only marry the man if she was given a coat that was made from the feathers of all the birds of the air.

"But you've got a beautiful coat of gold," he said.

"But I want something that nobody else has got. I am a princess after all." So the king reluctantly agreed.

He sent out messengers all over the land with sacks of corn which were to be scattered onto the ground. Then they were to cry out:

"Each bird take a grain and put down a feather."

Sure enough, all the birds came and each gave one of their feathers and took up a grain of corn and flew away, and soon the messengers returned with huge bags of feathers. Then the work really began and tailors and dressmakers set to work day and night.

At the end of a year and a day, the princess was presented with the most stunning coat of feathers. It glowed with sparkling colours and floated when she moved as though the princess was flying like a bird herself. The king had never seen his daughter look so beautiful, but the old man said:

"Ay it'll do fine for a dressing gown after we're married."

The princess flung off the coat and once more ran down to the hen-wife.

“Now what?” she asked. “I’ve got the coat of feathers and now I have no option but to set a date.”

“Let me think,” said the hen-wife. “There must be something we can do. I’ve got it. Tell your father that you will only marry the man if you are given a coat made of rushes.”

“What rushes from the river bank?” asked the princess.

“Yes, ask for a pair of slippers too. The old man will no doubt think you’ve gone a little soft in the head and decide he doesn’t want to marry you after all.”

So, once again the princess went to the king and told him that she would only marry if she was given a coat and slippers made from woven rushes. This time, the king thought that the princess was a little touched but he agreed and sent servants to pull rushes, clean them, polish them and weave them into a fine coat and a pair of dainty little slippers. There was talk about the palace though and the princess was given the name Rashiecoat.

In less than a week, the coat was finished. It was soft and green and had the smell of the woods and fields. When Rashiecoat twirled round in it, it shone like sunlight. The king was amazed, but the old man was fast losing patience.

“Ay, that’ll do,” he said, “But no more hivering. We will be married in the morning.”

Rashiecoat was having none of it. That night she bundled up her three coats and the slippers into a sack, put on an old dress and scarf, tiptoed down the back stairs and ran away.

She walked and walked, mile after mile, far away from her father’s castle and from his kingdom. On and on she went, for a very long time. Eventually she came to another castle in another kingdom and she went up to it and knocked on the door.

“What do you want?” snapped a voice from inside.

“I am just a poor girl looking for work,” said Rashiecoat.

“Well,” said the voice, a bit kinder now, “I think they need a helper in the kitchen. Come in.” Rashiecoat was taken to the kitchen and set to work, peeling

vegetables and sweeping the floor. She worked really hard all day and at night slept on her bundle of coats in the chimney corner.

Now it happened that on a Sunday morning, everyone in the castle – the king, queen, prince and all the servants – went to church, leaving Rashiecoat behind to cook the dinner ready for their return. As she sat sadly by the fire there was a flash of light and a fairy appeared before her.

“Why are you not at the kirk?” asked the fairy. “Put on your coat of beaten gold and away to the kirk.”

“I can’t do that,” said Rashiecoat, “I have to cook the dinner.”

“I’ll look after the dinner for you,” said the fairy, “now hurry, but mind to be back before the others.” So Rashiecoat ran to her sack and brought out the coat that was made from beaten gold. Then she ran over to the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and said:

*‘One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashiecoat go to the kirk today.’*

Then she put on her coat of beaten gold and went to the kirk.

When she walked through the door of the kirk dressed in her fine golden coat everyone turned their heads and stared at her. The prince stared harder than anyone else, because Rashiecoat was so beautiful. Before the end of the sermon he had decided that he would marry this girl and no other. But she slipped away quietly before the service ended, and no one knew where she had gone.

When she got home the fairy had been as good as her word and the dinner was ready. All the talk in the kitchen that evening was about the beautiful girl who had been seen in the kirk that day. Rashiecoat smiled to herself, but said nothing. No one knew that she had ever left the castle.

The next Sunday saw great excitement in the castle; would the beautiful girl be back at the kirk today? Everyone left, leaving Rashiecoat behind to cook the dinner for their return. The fairy appeared, just the same as the previous week, telling Rashiecoat to put on her coat made of feathers from all the birds of the air and go to the kirk. Rashiecoat ran to her sack and put on the coat of feathers. She stood over the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and said:

*'One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashiecoat go to the kirk today.'*

When Rashiecoat entered the kirk wearing her coat that was made from the feathers of every bird of the air, the crowd gave a gasp of wonder. The prince gasped louder than any of them, and his love for this strange girl grew deeper and deeper. He seldom took his eyes off her throughout the whole sermon, and he was determined to speak to her before she left. But the prince was too slow, for before the sermon ended Rashiecoat got to her feet and ran out of the door. He followed, but by the time the prince reached the door she was gone.

The next Sunday saw even more excitement than ever, and the prince was in such a hurry to go to the kirk that he paced the floor until the king and queen were ready to leave. The same thing happened as the previous two Sundays; the fairy came to Rashiecoat and told her to dress in her coat made of woven rushes and to put the small, dainty slippers on her feet. Rashiecoat stood over the bubbling pot that hung over the fire and said:

*'One peat make another peat burn,
One spit make another spit turn,
One pot make another pot play,
Let Rashiecoat go to the kirk today.'*

When Rashiecoat entered the kirk wearing the coat and slippers of rushes there was a cry of astonishment from all the crowd who were gathered inside. The prince cried out louder than the rest, as she seemed even more beautiful every time that he saw her. The green rushes made her look like summertime was walking among them, and some thought that she must be the queen of the fairies herself. The prince sat near to the door and watched his chance, and as soon as Rashiecoat stood up to leave he ran after her. Rashiecoat ran too, but as she ran one of the tiny, dainty slippers slipped off her foot and was left behind. The prince couldn't catch her, but he saw the slipper lying there and he picked it up and examined it carefully. He had never seen such a small slipper, so beautifully made, for such a tiny and beautiful foot.

Back at the castle there was such a buzz of excitement in the air as the prince held up the slipper and decreed:

'Whoever this slipper fits I will marry!'

All the noble ladies tried it on, but it was far too small for them. Then the ladies-in-waiting tried, but without any luck. The proclamation was read throughout the kingdom, that the prince would marry the girl whose foot fitted the slipper. Rich merchants sent their daughters; farmers, craftsmen, servants and labourers all sent their daughters, but all of them had to return home disappointed.

Now this kingdom had a hen-wife too, who tended the king's hens and practiced a bit of witchcraft on the side. She had a daughter, who was very ugly, and had big horrible looking feet. This girl nipped off her heel and clipped off her toes so that her foot was small enough to fit the slipper. The prince had ridden throughout the kingdom with the slipper, letting every girl try it on, but without any luck. He now arrived at the hen-wife's house and he stood and watched in horror as the hen-wife's daughter quickly tried on the slipper and it fitted. In the darkness of their small tumbled-down cottage he didn't see the awful sight of that foot. But, he had made a promise to marry the girl whose foot fitted the slipper and so he took the hen-wife's daughter up behind him on his horse and he rode home with her.

As they were passing a wood the prince could hear a bird singing, and to his surprise he could understand its speech. It was singing this rhyme:

*'Nipped foot and clipped foot
Behind the King's son rides;
But bonny foot and true foot
Behind the cauldron hides.'*

The king's son stopped and looked at the hen-wife's daughter's foot, and when he saw the mess that it was in he threw her off his horse and rode back to the castle as fast as he could. He ran down the stairs and burst into the kitchen and headed over to the big cauldron, and there he saw Rashiecoat. He held the slipper out to her and she smiled and slipped it onto her tiny, beautiful foot. Then she took the matching slipper from her bag and put that one on too. The prince took her in his arms and asked her to marry him, and this time Rashiecoat had no problems about saying yes. They were married soon after and lived long and happily together and if they aren't dead, they're living still.



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