

Frances Hodgson Burnett

The Racketty-Packetty House

Now this is the story about the doll family I liked and the doll family I didn't. When you read it you are to remember something I am going to tell you. This is it: If you think dolls never do anything you don't see them do, you are very much mistaken. When people are not looking at them they can do anything they choose. They can dance and sing and play on the piano and have all sorts of fun. But they can only move about and talk when people turn their backs and are not looking. If any one looks, they just stop. Fairies know this and of course Fairies visit in all the dolls' houses where the dolls are agreeable. They will not associate, though, with dolls who are not nice. They never call or leave their cards at a dolls' house where the dolls are proud or bad tempered. They are very particular. If you are conceited or ill-tempered yourself, you will never know a fairy as long as you live.

Queen Crosspatch.

Racketty-Packetty House was in a corner of Cynthia's nursery. And it was not in the best corner either. It was in the corner behind the door, and that was not at all a fashionable neighborhood. Racketty-Packetty House had been pushed there to be

out of the way when Tidy Castle was brought in, on Cynthia's birthday. As soon as she saw Tidy Castle Cynthia did not care for Racketty-Packetty House and indeed was quite ashamed of it. She thought the corner behind the door quite good enough for such a shabby old dolls' house, when there was the beautiful big new one built like a castle and furnished with the most elegant chairs and tables and carpets and curtains and ornaments and pictures and beds and baths and lamps and book-cases, and with a knocker on the front door, and a stable with a pony cart in it at the back. The minute she saw it she called out:

“Oh! what a beautiful doll castle! What shall we do with that untidy old Racketty-Packetty House now? It is too shabby and old-fashioned to stand near it.”

In fact, that was the way in which the old dolls' house got its name. It had always been called, “The Dolls' House,” before, but after that it was pushed into the unfashionable neighborhood behind the door and ever afterwards — when it was spoken of at all — it was just called Racketty-Packetty House, and nothing else.

Of course Tidy Castle was grand, and Tidy Castle was new and had all the modern improvements in it, and Racketty-Packetty House was as old-fashioned as it could be. It had belonged to Cynthia's Grandmamma and had been made in the days when Queen Victoria was a little girl, and when there were no electric lights

even in Princesses' dolls' houses. Cynthia's Grandmamma had kept it very neat because she had been a good housekeeper even when she was seven years old. But Cynthia was not a good housekeeper and she did not re-cover the furniture when it got dingy, or re-paper the walls, or mend the carpets and bedclothes, and she never thought of such a thing as making new clothes for the doll family, so that of course their early Victorian frocks and capes and bonnets grew in time to be too shabby for words. You see, when Queen Victoria was a little girl, dolls wore queer frocks and long pantalets and boy dolls wore funny frilled trousers and coats which it would almost make you laugh to look at.

But the Racketty-Packetty House family had known better days. I and my Fairies had known them when they were quite new and had been a birthday present just as Tidy Castle was when Cynthia turned eight years old, and there was as much fuss about them when their house arrived as Cynthia made when she saw Tidy Castle.

Cynthia's Grandmamma had danced about and clapped her hands with delight, and she had scrambled down upon her knees and taken the dolls out one by one and thought their clothes beautiful. And she had given each one of them a grand name.

"This one shall be Amelia," she said. "And this one is Charlotte, and this is Victoria Leopoldina, and

this one Aurelia Matilda, and this one Leontine, and this one Clotilda, and these boys shall be Augustus and Rowland and Vincent and Charles Edward Stuart.”

For a long time they led a very gay and fashionable life. They had parties and balls and were presented at Court and went to Royal Christenings and Weddings and were married themselves and had families and scarlet fever and whooping cough and funerals and every luxury. But that was long, long ago, and now all was changed. Their house had grown shabbier and shabbier, and their clothes had grown simply awful; and Aurelia Matilda and Victoria Leopoldina had been broken to bits and thrown into the dust-bin, and Leontine — who had really been the beauty of the family — had been dragged out on the hearth rug one night and had had nearly all her paint licked off and a leg chewed up by a Newfoundland puppy, so that she was a sight to behold. As for the boys; Rowland and Vincent had quite disappeared, and Charlotte and Amelia always believed they had run away to seek their fortunes, because things were in such a state at home. So the only ones who were left were Clotilda and Amelia and Charlotte and poor Leontine and Augustus and Charles Edward Stuart. Even they had their names changed.

After Leontine had had her paint licked off so that her head had white bald spots on it and she had scarcely any features, a boy cousin of Cynthia's had put a bright

red spot on each cheek and painted her a turned up nose and round saucer blue eyes and a comical mouth. He and Cynthia had called her, "Ridiklis" instead of Leontine, and she had been called that ever since. All the dolls were jointed Dutch dolls, so it was easy to paint any kind of features on them and stick out their arms and legs in any way you liked, and Leontine did look funny after Cynthia's cousin had finished. She certainly was not a beauty but her turned up nose and her round eyes and funny mouth always seemed to be laughing so she really was the most good-natured looking creature you ever saw.

Charlotte and Amelia, Cynthia had called Meg and Peg, and Clotilda she called Kilmanskeg, and Augustus she called Gustibus, and Charles Edward Stuart was nothing but Peter Piper. So that was the end of their grand names.

The truth was, they went through all sorts of things, and if they had not been such a jolly lot of dolls they might have had fits and appendicitis and died of grief. But not a bit of it. If you will believe it, they got fun out of everything. They used to just scream with laughter over the new names, and they laughed so much over them that they got quite fond of them. When Meg's pink silk flounces were torn she pinned them up and didn't mind in the least, and when Peg's lace mantilla was played with by a kitten and brought back to her in rags and tags, she just put a few stitches in it

and put it on again; and when Peter Piper lost almost the whole leg of one of his trousers he just laughed and said it made it easier for him to kick about and turn somersaults and he wished the other leg would tear off too.

You never saw a family have such fun. They could make up stories and pretend things and invent games out of nothing. And my Fairies were so fond of them that I couldn't keep them away from the dolls' house. They would go and have fun with Meg and Peg and Kilmanskeg and Gustibus and Peter Piper, even when I had work for them to do in Fairyland. But there, I was so fond of that shabby disrespectful family myself that I never would scold much about them, and I often went to see them. That is how I know so much about them. They were so fond of each other and so good-natured and always in such spirits that everybody who knew them was fond of them. And it was really only Cynthia who didn't know them and thought them only a lot of old disreputable looking Dutch dolls — and Dutch dolls were quite out of fashion. The truth was that Cynthia was not a particularly nice little girl, and did not care much for anything unless it was quite new. But the kitten who had torn the lace mantilla got to know the family and simply loved them all, and the Newfoundland puppy was so sorry about Leontine's paint and her left leg, that he could never do enough to make up. He wanted to marry Leontine as soon as he

grew old enough to wear a collar, but Leontine said she would never desert her family; because now that she wasn't the beauty any more she became the useful one, and did all the kitchen work, and sat up and made poultices and beef tea when any of the rest were ill. And the Newfoundland puppy saw she was right, for the whole family simply adored Ridiklis and could not possibly have done without her. Meg and Peg and Kilmanskeg could have married any minute if they had liked. There were two cock sparrows and a gentleman mouse, who proposed to them over and over again. They all three said they did not want fashionable wives but cheerful dispositions and a happy home. But Meg and Peg were like Ridiklis and could not bear to leave their families — besides not wanting to live in nests, and hatch eggs — and Kilmanskeg said she would die of a broken heart if she could not be with Ridiklis, and Ridiklis did not like cheese and crumbs and mousy things, so they could never live together in a mouse hole. But neither the gentleman mouse nor the sparrows were offended because the news was broken to them so sweetly and they went on visiting just as before. Everything was as shabby and disrespectable and as gay and happy as it could be until Tidy Castle was brought into the nursery and then the whole family had rather a fright.

It happened in this way:

When the dolls' house was lifted by the nurse and

carried into the corner behind the door, of course it was rather an exciting and shaky thing for Meg and Peg and Kilmanskeg and Gustibus and Peter Piper (Ridiklis was out shopping). The furniture tumbled about and everybody had to hold on to anything they could catch hold of. As it was, Kilmanskeg slid under a table and Peter Piper sat down in the coal-box; but notwithstanding all this, they did not lose their tempers and when the nurse sat their house down on the floor with a bump, they all got up and began to laugh. Then they ran and peeped out of the windows and then they ran back and laughed again.

“Well,” said Peter Piper, “we have been called Meg and Peg and Kilmanskeg and Gustibus and Peter Piper instead of our grand names, and now we live in a place called Racketty-Packetty House. Who cares! Let’s join hands and have a dance.”

And they joined hands and danced round and round and kicked up their heels, and their rags and tatters flew about and they laughed until they fell down; one on top of the other.

It was just at this minute that Ridiklis came back. The nurse had found her under a chair and stuck her in through a window. She sat on the drawing-room sofa which had holes in its covering and the stuffing coming out, and her one whole leg stuck out straight in front of her, and her bonnet and shawl were on one side and her basket was on her left arm full of things she had got