



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Lost Paradise

Andrew Lang

In the middle of a great forest there lived a long time ago a charcoal-burner and his wife. They were both young and handsome and strong, and when they got married, they thought work would never fail them. But bad times came, and they grew poorer and poorer, and the nights in which they went hungry to bed became more and more frequent.

Now one evening the king of that country was hunting near the charcoal-burner's hut. As he passed the door, he heard a sound of sobbing, and being a good-natured man he stopped to listen, thinking that perhaps he might be able to give some help.

'Were there ever two people so unhappy!' said a woman's voice. 'Here we are, ready to work like slaves the whole day long, and no work can we get. And it is all because of the curiosity of old mother Eve! If she had only been like me, who never want to know anything, we should all have been as happy as kings to-day, with plenty to eat, and warm clothes to wear. Why——' but at this point a loud knock interrupted her lamentations.

'Who is there?' asked she.

'I!' replied somebody.

'And who is "I"?''

'The king. Let me in.'

Full of surprise the woman jumped up and pulled the bar away from the door. As the king entered, he noticed that there was no furniture in the room at all, not even a chair, so he pretended to be in too great a hurry to see anything around him, and only said, 'You must not let me disturb you, I have no time to stay, but you seemed to be in trouble. Tell me; are you very unhappy?'

'Oh, my lord, we can find no work and have eaten nothing for two days!' answered she. 'Nothing remains for us but to die of hunger.'

'No, no, you won't do that,' cried the king, 'or if you do, it will be your own fault. You shall come with me into my palace, and you will feel as if you were in Paradise, I promise you. In return, I only ask one thing of you, that you shall obey my orders exactly.'

The charcoal-burner and his wife both stared at him for a moment, as if they could hardly believe their ears; and, indeed, it was not to be wondered at! Then they found their tongues, and exclaimed together:

'Oh, yes, yes, my lord! we will do everything you tell us. How could we be so ungrateful as to disobey you, when you are so kind?'

The king smiled, and his eyes twinkled.

'Well, let us start at once,' said he. 'Lock your door, and put the key in your pocket.'

The woman looked as if she thought this was needless, seeing it was quite, quite certain they would never come back. But she dared not say so, and did as the king told her.

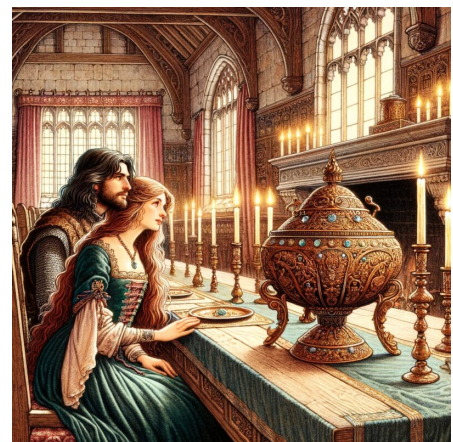
After walking through the forest for a couple of miles, they all three reached the palace, and by the king's orders servants led the charcoal-burner and his wife into rooms filled with beautiful things such as they had never even dreamed of. First they bathed in green marble baths where the water looked like the sea, and then they put on silken clothes that felt soft and pleasant. When they were ready, one of the king's special servants entered, and took them into a small hall, where dinner was laid, and this pleased them better than anything else.

They were just about to sit down to the table when the king walked in.

'I hope you have been attended to properly,' said he, 'and that you will enjoy your dinner. My steward will take care you have all you want, and I wish you to do exactly as you please. Oh, by the bye, there is one thing! You notice that soup-tureen in the middle of the table? Well, be careful on no account to lift the lid. If once you take off the cover, there is an end of your good fortune.' Then bowing to his guests, he left the room.

'Did you hear what he said?' inquired the charcoal-burner in an awe-stricken voice. 'We are to have what we want, and do what we please. Only we must not touch the soup-tureen.'

'No, of course we won't,' answered the wife. 'Why should we wish to? But all the same it is rather odd, and one can't help wondering what is inside.'



For many days life went on like a beautiful dream to the charcoal-burner and his wife. Their beds were so comfortable, they could hardly make up their minds to get up, their clothes were so lovely they could scarcely bring themselves to take

them off; their dinners were so good that they found it very difficult to leave off eating. Then outside the palace were gardens filled with rare flowers and fruits and singing birds, or if they desired to go further, a golden coach, painted with wreaths of forget-me-nots and lined with blue satin, awaited their orders. Sometimes it happened that the king came to see them, and he smiled as he glanced at the man, who was getting rosier and plumper each day. But when his eyes rested on the woman, they took on a look which seemed to say 'I knew it,' though this neither the charcoal-burner nor his wife ever noticed.

'Why are you so silent?' asked the man one morning when dinner had passed before his wife had uttered one word. 'A little while ago you used to be chattering all the day long, and now I have almost forgotten the sound of your voice.'

'Oh, nothing; I did not feel inclined to talk, that was all!' She stopped, and added carelessly after a pause, 'Don't you ever wonder what is in that soup-tureen?'

'No, never,' replied the man. 'It is no affair of ours,' and the conversation dropped once more, but as time went on, the woman spoke less and less, and seemed so wretched that her husband grew quite frightened about her. As to her food, she refused one thing after another.

'My dear wife,' said the man at last, 'you really must eat something. What in the world is the matter with you? If you go on like this you will die.'

'I would rather die than not know what is in that tureen,' she burst forth so violently that the husband was quite startled.

'Is that it?' cried he; 'are you making yourself miserable because of that? Why, you know we should be turned out of the palace, and sent away to starve.'

'Oh no, we shouldn't. The king is too good-natured. Of course he didn't mean a little thing like this! Besides, there is no need to lift the lid off altogether. Just raise one corner so that I may peep. We are quite alone: nobody will ever know.'

The man hesitated: it did seem a 'little thing,' and if it was to make his wife contented and happy it was well worth the risk. So he took hold of the handle of the cover and raised it very slowly and carefully, while the woman stooped down to peep. Suddenly she started back with a scream, for a small mouse had sprung from the inside of the tureen, and had nearly hit her in the eye. Round and round the room it ran, round and round they both ran after it, knocking down chairs and vases in their efforts to catch the mouse and put it back in the tureen. In the middle of all the noise the door opened, and the mouse ran out between the feet of the king. In one instant both the man and his wife were hiding under the table, and to all appearance the room was empty.

'You may as well come out,' said the king, 'and hear what I have to say.'

'I know what it is,' answered the charcoal-burner, hanging his head. 'The mouse has escaped.'

'A guard of soldiers will take you back to your hut,' said the king. 'Your wife has the key.'

'Weren't they silly?' cried the grandchildren of the charcoal-burners when they heard the story. 'How we wish that we had had the chance! We should never have wanted to know what was in the soup-tureen!'

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