



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Maria-of-the-forest

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Once upon a time there was a young king who went into the deep forest on a hunting expedition. He and his favorite page became separated from the rest of the party and soon they realized that they were lost. As night approached they found the rude hut of a charcoal burner and begged for permission to pass the night there. They were received most hospitably.

Just at the hour of midnight the king was awakened from his sleep by a voice. This is what it said:

"Here in this hut is born to-night
The maiden of your fate:
You can't escape your lot, young king;
Your fate for you will wait.
'Tis fate—'tis fate—'tis fate."

The king turned over on his pillow and tried to sleep, but the strange voice kept ringing in his ears. He rose early.

As soon as he saw the charcoal burner the man said: "A baby daughter was born to me last night."

"At what time?" asked the king.

"It was just midnight," replied the charcoal burner.

The king awakened his page and told him what had happened.

"I refuse to wed any maid born in this poor hut," he said. "You must help me to escape this fate."

"What can I do about it?" asked the page, yawning.

"You must steal this babe this very day and put it to death," said the king sternly.

The page did not dare refuse, and easily obtained possession of the baby when no one was looking. He carried her away into the deep forest, but he did not have the heart to put an innocent babe to death. He left her in a hollow tree, wrapped up in the bright red sash he wore.

When he had returned to the king he confessed that he had been too tender-

hearted to slay the baby. The king was angry.

"Take me to the baby," he said. "I'll do the deed myself."

Though they searched long and faithfully they were unable to find the hollow tree where the baby had been left. They, of course, did not wish to return to the hut of the charcoal burner, and at length they found their way out of the deep forest.

"No one will ever discover that baby if I could not find it myself! She will soon die without food," said the page.

The king agreed that it was quite impossible for the babe to escape death, but he could not forget the strange voice which had said:

"Here in this hut is born to-night
The maiden of your fate:
You can't escape your lot, young king;
Your fate for you will wait.
'Tis fate—'tis fate—'tis fate."

Now it happened that very day that a woodcutter was working in the forest. Suddenly he heard what sounded like the cry of a baby.

"There can't be a child here in the deep forest," he said to himself and went on with his work.

The cry continued, however, and it sounded very near, almost under the woodcutter's feet. He looked into the hollow log and there he found a dimpled baby girl wrapped in a bright red sash.

"Poor little thing! Her own mother has abandoned her. My good wife will be a mother to her," he said.



The woodcutter's wife had no children of her own and received the baby gladly. She named her Maria-of-the-forest. As the days flew by and the babe thrived under her care, she could not have loved her more had she been her own child.

The weeks and months passed and soon the little Maria-of-the-forest had grown into a lovely little girl five years old. Her kind foster mother made a bonnet for her out of the bright red sash which she had found wrapped about her the first time she saw her. It made Maria's dark eyes look even brighter than before.

Now it happened that the king and his page were again hunting in the forest and passed by the house of the wood cutter. The page noticed the pretty little girl and the red bonnet she wore. He called her to him and examined it carefully.

"There can be no doubt that material is from my own red sash," he confessed to the king. "This woodcutter's daughter could have such a bonnet as this in no other way."

The king bade him make inquiries about the child and soon the page found out that the little maid was in truth the baby he had left in the hollow tree. The king ordered him again to steal her. This time the king plotted her death by drowning. He had a box made for her, put her in it, and threw her into the sea with his own hand.

"I refuse to wed any girl brought up in a woodcutter's hut," he raged. "I'll escape that fate."

Nevertheless he could not escape the memory of the strange voice which had said:

"Here in this hut is born to-night
The maiden of your fate:
You can't escape your lot, young king;
Your fate for you will wait.
'Tis fate—'tis fate—'tis fate."

It was most annoying to remember it.

It happened soon after that a ship encountered the box floating upon the sea. The sailors rescued it and opened it with interest. Inside they were surprised to find a pretty little dark-eyed girl with a bright red bonnet on her head. She could not tell them where she had come from but she said her name was Maria-of-the-forest.

When the sailors arrived in their own country they told the story of finding the child and the king asked to see her. He and the queen were so pleased with her lovely face and gentle manners that they received her into the royal palace. She was brought up as a lady-of-waiting to their own little daughter of about the same age.

When, after a dozen years, the princess was wedded, all the kings of near-by countries were invited to the marriage feast. The king who had been lost in the forest came with the others. At the feast there was no one more beautiful than Maria-of-the-forest. The king danced with her.

"Who is the girl?" was his eager question.

"She has been reared in the royal palace as if she were in truth the sister of the bride," was the reply.

The king fell in love with the beautiful maid and gave her a ring. The page, however, was suspicious when he heard her name. He lost no time in making

inquiries about her. What he found out made him very sure that she was in truth the daughter of the charcoal burner. He reported his suspicions to the king.

"Never mind," said the king. "I'll wed the maid anyway. One can't escape from one's fate."

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