



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Listening King

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Once upon a time there lived a king who liked to walk in disguise about the streets of the city, listening at people's doors. It was, in fact, his favorite amusement. Other kings of that land had been fond of war or hunting or fishing or games, but there had never before been one who liked to listen at doors. For this reason he was called "the listening king."

"It is the greatest fun I have," he often said to his counsellors. "Being a king would be a stupid life if one didn't have some diversion."

"Be careful that it does not get you into trouble," said the wise men. "We have often heard that listening to other people's secrets is a dangerous practice."

"I've had nothing but pleasure from it, anyway," the king would reply. Then he would add, "So far, at least."

Sometimes he would take a friend or two with him, and sometimes he would go alone. The habit of listening at doors became more and more a favorite one to him as the months and years passed.

Now in that city there lived a man of humble station who had three pretty daughters. One evening the king passed his house and stopped at the door to listen.

"Whom would you like to marry?" one of the girls was asking. It happened to be the youngest one.

"I'd like to marry the royal baker," the eldest sister replied.

"Why?" asked the youngest one.

"So that I might always eat fresh bread," was the reply.

"Whom would you like to marry?" the youngest sister asked the middle one.

"I'd like to marry the royal meat cook so that I might always eat meat roasted just to a turn," was her answer.

"Whom would you like to marry?" asked the eldest and the middle sister together.

"I'd like to marry the listening king himself," was the reply which their youngest

sister made.

"Silly! Silly!" cried her two sisters. "We have perhaps a chance of getting our wishes, but what chance have you?"

"If one wishes for nothing splendid one never gets anything splendid," replied the youngest sister with a blush which made her look very charming to the king as he peeped through the keyhole.

The king went away with a shrewd smile upon his face. The next day he sent for the three sisters to come to the palace. They were very much frightened.

"Well," said the king to the eldest girl, "do you want to marry the royal baker?"

"Yes, your majesty," she replied. "I have no objections."

The king turned to her sister.

"How is it with you?" he asked. "What do you say to marrying the royal meatcook?"

"I'll be most happy to marry him, your majesty," she answered.

The youngest girl was blushing like a rose and her heart was thumping so that she could scarcely breathe. The king smiled as he noticed her fair head bowed upon her breast.

"Would you like to marry the listening king?" he asked her gently.

"Yes, your majesty," she responded, so low that the king could hardly hear her.

"Very well," said the king. "I'll have all these weddings celebrated at once."

Thus it happened that the two eldest sisters got their wishes and married the royal baker and the royal meatcook, while the youngest one wedded the listening king himself. The others were very angry at her luck and their hearts were filled with envy.

"Why didn't we wish to be queens or at least princesses?" one asked the other. "It would have been just as easy to have had our wishes granted!"

"Why didn't we! Why didn't we! How stupid we were!" cried the other.

They passed the time in plotting against their youngest sister, the queen.

A year flew by and twin sons were born to the royal pair. They had gold stars on their foreheads. The whole kingdom was filled with rejoicing. As for the listening king, he was so happy that he forgot to listen at people's doors.

The only persons in the whole country who were not happy were the two jealous sisters. They stole the tiny babies out of the palace and threw them into the

river.

"Trouble has at last come to our listening king," said the wise men, when the loss was discovered.

The basket in which the twins had been placed floated away down the stream. It was found by a miller.

"What have we here?" he asked his wife as together they removed the cover from the basket.

"I guess it is something good to eat," said his wife. "What do you think it is?"

"I guess it is a poor little puppy which some one wanted to drown," replied the miller.

Then they took the cover off the basket. The two babies opened their eyes and smiled just then. The miller and his wife were the most surprised people in the whole country and also the happiest ones.

"What beautiful children!" cried the miller.

"Let's keep them!" cried his wife.

"Of course we'll keep them," replied the miller.

"The good God himself must have sent them to us in answer to our prayers."

Just then the miller's wife noticed the golden stars upon their foreheads.

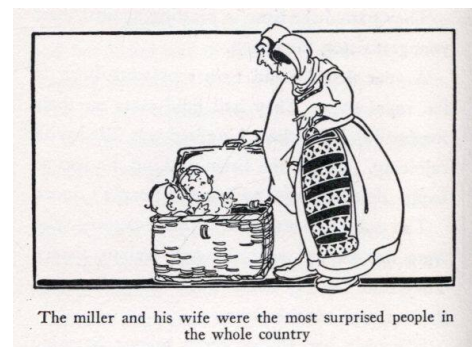
"What does this mean?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered her husband as he examined them carefully. "Perhaps it is just a sign that they are truly the gift of God."

The miller and his wife cared for the two children as if they had been their own. They lived such a long distance from the palace that they never heard the news that the royal babes were missing.

As the two boys grew older they became the handsomest, cleverest lads in the whole kingdom. The gold stars shone and twinkled upon their foreheads. At last the miller's wife made little caps for them to wear to hide the stars. They were altogether too conspicuous.

Then one sad summer a pestilence came upon the land and the good miller and his wife died. The two children were left alone in the world. The listening king had decreed all the orphaned children in the kingdom should be brought to the royal city that they might be fed and cared for. The miller's two orphans went



with the others, and the king's wicked sister-in-laws saw them. They recognized them at once because of the golden stars upon their foreheads.

"We must make a new plot to destroy the royal children," said one sister to the other. "And we must be quick about it or the king or queen will see them and recognize them, too, by the golden stars."

"Are you quite sure these are the two royal babes we threw into the river?" asked the other sister doubtfully. "It is a bit difficult for me to believe that our sister's children can be so handsome."

"I'm entirely certain of it," assured her sister. "There is no one except the royal babes who could have those golden stars."

While the wicked sisters plotted, the two children had approached the royal gardens. Inside the garden there was a beautiful parrot with feathers of green and gold.

"I'm going to catch that bird," said one of the brothers. "Wait here while I go inside the gates."

He could not catch the parrot and he called his brother to come and help him. Together they succeeded; and, with the beautiful green-and-gold parrot tightly clutched, they tried to slip outside the gate of the royal gardens.

Just as they were almost out, the great gates swiftly closed and caught their garments.

"We're caught! We're caught!" cried the two children. "How can we ever get the gates unfastened!"

At the sound of their cries, the royal gardeners, the courtiers and the listening king himself came to the rescue.

When the king saw the golden stars upon their foreheads he leaned against the nearest tree for support.

"What children are these?" he asked in a voice which shook.

"I never saw them before," replied the head gardener. "I think they are some of the orphan children which the great mercy and clemency of your royal majesty have caused to be rescued from the plague."

"Who are your parents, my children?" asked one of the courtiers.

"We are the children of the good miller and his wife," they replied. "Our kind foster parents are now dead with the plague."

"Where did this miller and his wife find you?" asked the king eagerly.

Then the two children told the story of how the miller had found them in a basket in the river. They knew it well, for it was their favorite story of all the ones which the miller's wife had told them.

The courtiers looked at each other in amazement. Every one had noticed the bright stars shining on the children's brows.

"I believe you are the two dear babes lost from this palace!" cried the king as he took them in his arms.

"Who put them in that basket?" asked the king's counsellors.

"If I knew you may be sure that fitting punishment would be visited upon them!" cried the king.

The beautiful green-and-gold parrot had escaped from the children's arms and had flown back to a tree near the gates of the royal gardens. Suddenly he was heard to speak.

"Go find the king's sisters-in-law," were the words he said.

The king's sisters-in-law were quickly brought into the garden. A look at their guilty faces convinced every one that they were the ones who had placed the royal babes in the basket and had thrown them into the river.

"You shall now receive the punishment which you have so richly deserved!" cried the king as he frowned upon them sternly.

"Where is the good queen?" some one asked.

The queen had been sleeping in her own apartments and had not heard the noise in the garden. When the courtiers brought her there and she saw the two handsome boys with the bright stars shining on their foreheads, she fainted with the joy of it.

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