

Soup

There was once a woman named Belda, who owned a small inn. She did all the work herself, helped only by one boy or another from the village who would come in the early evenings to feed and curry the horses. Belda had to work hard, but she enjoyed seeing the travelers come to her door, tired and hungry after a long day on the road, and bringing them into her bright and cosy parlor. There would be a fire in the winter, and something hot to drink, and in the summer she would have lemonade. All day long Belda cleaned and scrubbed, and her rooms were tidy and welcoming. There was always a good supper ready, and in the morning she served hot biscuits and fresh milk. Guests left Belda's feeling better about the world, and they usually felt it was worth a hard day on the road to pass so pleasant a night.

Belda was mostly what they call a good plain cook, but on Sundays for dinner she made a soup such as could not be found anywhere in the world. On Saturday she would go to the woods to find the secret herbs she needed. She had to start the actual cooking on Saturday night, for the many special ingredients needed to be chopped or grated. Then there was mixing and stirring, and some extra vegetables that were cooked separately in a frying pan and added at the last minute. That soup was a whole day's work, but for Sunday it was worth it. People came out from the village on Sundays for dinner at Belda's, and the farmers and landowners from the district came too, and the tiny inn would be so full not another soul could fit in the door.

One Sunday, when dinnertime was almost over, Belda was bringing some dishes from the dining room into the kitchen when there was a knock at the back door. When she answered, an old woman in ragged clothes was standing there, holding out a hand in which there was one small silver coin.

"This is all I have," she said. "I am hungry and tired after walking since the dawn. What can you give me for my dinner, for this one coin?"

Now Belda was not a cruel woman, not at all. She invited the old woman in and sat her down at the kitchen table, and she brought her good bread and some cheese, some salad and milk, and even a little cold meat, and she insisted that she did not need the money. But when the old woman looked longingly at the big pot on the stove, and asked if she might have just a drop of the soup that smelled so delicious, she was not pleased. Bread and cheese, even meat and salad, she would give away for charity. But Belda's soup was her pride, and nobody else in the kingdom could make such soup. She would not give it to a beggar.

"Please, ma'am," said the old woman, "I can see that your guests will soon be gone, and you have soup left. It smells as if only a spoonful would bring the life back into my old bones. You have been so generous with everything else. Surely you won't begrudge me a smidgeon of soup?"

But Belda shook her head and said "No." And when the old woman stood up, she had an instant of fear that this would turn out to be a fairy in disguise, who would place some curse on her for refusing the soup, even though she had given freely of everything else. But the old woman did not curse her. "Thank you," she said as she left, "and I wish you all success with your soup."

Belda thought that was an odd thing to say, but soon she was too busy cleaning to think about it, and a few days later, as travelers came and went, she had forgotten it completely. Only the next Sunday a wealthy merchant happened to be caught in the rain just at dinnertime, and of course somebody told him to taste the soup. When he was at home in the city he told some of his friends about the magnificent soup he had tried at a humble little country inn. His friends made an excursion of it, and they too were impressed. They told their friends at court, and only a few weeks later the King himself came in disguise to try the soup.

Belda was thrilled when the royal messenger came in the royal coach to tell her how much the King praised her soup, but she was less thrilled when the messenger ordered her

to climb into the royal coach with him and come to work as the royal soup-cook in the palace. Still, it was a great honor, and she had no choice. So she rode to the palace in the coach and made soup for the King everyday. She hated the job. She had fine rooms, and the King paid her a generous salary. But all day long, everyday, she made huge vats of soup. Instead of polishing the brass clock so that it shone and dusting cobwebs out of the corners, instead of greeting travelers and listening to their stories, instead of bringing them pots of tea and making sure their beds were warm, she made soup for the King's guests, and it was served by the King's footmen to diners she never saw. If she could have, she would have left, but the King would not allow her to go. She even offered to teach the other palace cooks exactly how to make her soup, although in the old days she would not have imagined telling anyone the secrets, but the King would not trust anyone but herself. For a long, long year she did nothing but cook soup, and at last she decided that she must run away.

The escape needed to be prepared. She knew that the King would be angry and would send soldiers after her; she could not just walk out the palace door and stroll down the road. First she said that the asparagus in the royal gardens was too bitter, and that she had to buy some in the market. The gardeners and the other cooks were offended by this snobbishness, for they thought the King's produce was the best in the world, but they had orders to give her whatever she needed. They tried to make her send a footman to buy it, but she insisted that she had to choose it herself, so she was allowed to go out to the market. While she was in the town, she bought a fast horse, and arranged to have him stabled near the palace. Then, one night during an especially grand state dinner, when everyone was occupied in the kitchen, she slipped away just as the main course was beginning. She ran out of the palace gates and mounted her horse, and rode all night. Just as dawn was breaking, she came to the great river. Here she abandoned the horse, confident that someone would find him and care for him. She had to pay the ferryman extra to make a special trip for her, and then she had to bribe him not to tell the king's soldiers where she had gone. In a village across the river, she bought new clothes, and hid the old ones deep in

the woods. Here, too, she gave the shopkeeper money in return for his promise not to tell the soldiers that she had been there. And so, by foot and by horseback and in the backs of wagons, she traveled for days and weeks, always afraid that the king's soldiers were right behind her, until at last she reached the borders of the kingdom. Here she paid yet more money to buy a false passport that said she was a gypsy musician, and she was in the next kingdom, finally safe from the King and his soldiers.

But by now she had hardly any money left. She was exhausted and hungry, and her clothes were worn away, when after a long day of walking down the road she came to a small inn at the edge of a village. She could see that there were guests in the sitting room in the front, and she could hear music and laughter, and she could smell good food cooking. Looking into her pockets, she could find only one small silver coin, and looking at her clothes, she knew she would not be welcome. With a terrible sadness in her heart she went to the back door of the little inn, and when an old woman answered it, she held out the coin on her dirty hand and asked what she might buy for it.

"Come in," said the old woman, plucking the money from her, and she went in and let the old woman give her water to wash and seat her at the kitchen table. Then the old woman went over to the pantry, and put bread and cheese and a small pot of tea on a tray before turning her bright eyes on Belda. She did not remove her eyes as she carried the tray to the table. "You see," she said, "I am a good plain cook. But I don't make good soup, and I have always thought that a good country inn needs a good soup. Anyway," she went on as she set the tray down and turned to the wall where an old grey shawl hung from a peg, "I'm tired of this business." She wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and walked towards the door. Belda was struck dumb. "The old woman opened the door and turned as she went out, saying "For the money, the place is yours." Belda jumped up and ran to the door, but the old woman had completely disappeared. So she ate the bread and cheese, and drank the tea, and after she was done she put on a clean apron and went to the sitting room to see

to the guests. She cleared away and cleaned, and in the morning she made biscuits. She was contented, and lived happily the rest of her life.