

THE HARE AND THE ORPHAN

By Lynne Reid Banks

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THERE was once a beautiful girl who had been left an orphan when she was very young. Her home was in a little house in a deep, dark forest. Since her parents died, she had never left the little clearing around her house, because she was so afraid of the darkness under the trees, the trees themselves, and whatever might lie beyond.

She got her food by eating the vegetables she grew in her garden and wild fruit that grew in the clearing, and for meat, she set snares and ate the animals that got caught in them.

One day she found a fine big hare caught in one of her snares.

“Aha! You will make me an excellent supper!” she said.

To her amazement, the hare in her hands spoke to her.

“I shall be honored to be eaten by such a beautiful woman,” he said, in a very pleasing and polite voice.

She was taken aback. But she only said, “Very well, I shall give you that honor.”

And she carried the fine hare back to her kitchen.

He didn’t struggle, but lay quietly in her arms, looking up at her in a trustful sort of way that made her feel rather uncomfortable, considering that she had quite made up her mind to eat him.

In the kitchen, she laid him on the table and turned away to get the stove burning. She put a pot of water on the stove, then she picked up a sharp knife and turned to him.

She half expected that he would have run away—in fact, a bit of her hoped that he had—but he was sitting up on the table with his little front paws tucked to his breast.

“Have you got the onions?” he asked.

“Onions?” she said. “No. Why?”

“Goodness gracious grips! No hare should be cooked without onions,” he said reproachfully.

“Oh, all right, then,” she said, and went out into her garden and pulled up some onions. She left the back door open on purpose, but when she returned, the hare was still sitting on the kitchen table.

She prepared the onions and put them in the pot. Then she picked up the knife again.

“And the carrots?” the hare asked.

“You want carrots, too?” asked the girl.

“Of course! Whoever heard of eating hare without carrots?”

So she went outside again and pulled up some carrots. This time she left the door open very wide. But when she came back, the hare was waiting.

She scraped the carrots and put them in the pot. Then she picked up the knife with a strangely heavy heart, and turned to the hare.

“Where’s the bay leaf?” he asked.

“Bay leaf?”

“Don’t you know about bay leaves? They give a wonderful flavor, especially to hare.”

“You insist upon bay leaf?”

“No, I don’t insist. But everyone knows that hare doesn’t taste its best without a little bay leaf”

She lowered the knife. “I would get some if I could,” she said, “just to please you. But I can’t.”

“Why not? There’s a big bay tree just at the far edge of the forest.”

The girl shivered.

“I can’t go there. I’m too frightened.” The hare looked into her eyes.

“If you’re frightened, don’t go,” he said. “I’ll be cooked without bay leaf.”

“But you won’t taste your best,” she said. “You deserve the very best cooking.”

He shrugged. “I don’t want you to be frightened. Cook me and eat me now, and enjoy me as much as you can.”

And he laid his head on the table.

She put the knife down.

“I’ll go and get the bay leaf,” she said.

“You’re a brave girl. I’ll show you the way,” said the hare.

They went into the forest together, the hare running ahead, the girl following. It was very dark under the trees. At first she was almost too terrified to walk. But the hare danced along the path in front of her, and after a little while she found herself dancing, too.

At the far end of the forest, she saw the bay tree. She saw the wide road. She saw the town in the valley, and the beautiful mountains beyond, and the sky beyond that. She saw the world she had never seen.

She stopped by the bay tree and cried, “Look! How lovely it is! And I got here! And I’m not afraid!”

“Pick leaf, and let’s go back for supper,” said the hare. She looked at him.

“We’ll have carrot and onion soup,” she said.

The hare jumped high into the air and landed in her wide-stretched arms. For a second she held him. Then he vanished. And from that time on, she was never afraid of the wood or the world. And she never ate another bite of meat.