

Arthur Rackham's illustration for
C. S. Evans' Cinderella, 1919.



The Gourd's Tale

Brian Szumsky

The coach driver shouted, 'We're off.' Then a whipcrack and a pull from the front, and we were all jolted backward as my wheels creaked and we picked up speed.

Let's be clear. Garden-dwellers love their lives, which means staying rooted to the mother-loving earth. So the bumping and clunking of my wheels and chassis along that rutted country road left me bewildered and a little nauseous, if truth be told. I shook, I rattled, and it took all I had to calm my nerves, to break from that sedentary nature, that vine which had, only moments before, been all I knew. Yet my heart was young and open, and after a few sweeping turns, I embraced this new sensation, a gleeful abandon that had me soaring. On metaphorical wings of course, but ever remembered, as you shall see.

That day had started out as an average summer morning. As pumpkins do, I spent my time lounging in the garden, working on my tan, letting photosynthesis do its thing. I was a young one then, big for my age and with much to learn. I never imagined a life beyond the vine: crystal slippers, fairy godmothers, glittering palaces. Those were the stuff of fairy tales.

Life was comfortable, uneventful. I remember fondly the warm twilights, with music wafting out from inside the manor. The young ladies playing the popular music of the day, lovely suites and sonatas that took me away. But there were also the harsh words from inside the house, the commands, the insults which broke the presiding calm. The three against one that always struck me as unfair.

I swore if I could do something someday to rectify that injustice, I would. But as the months turned from summer to autumn, nothing changed. That is, until the fairy godmother and her wand showed up.

She materialised out of nowhere, wearing a rune-embroidered frock and painfully pointed shoes. She came with a mission and immediately set to work, flitting purposefully over the garden, reviewing the fruits and vegetables with the discerning look of a livestock trader. And once she spotted me, it only took a moment.

She aimed her spell and there I was, stretching like the reflection in a funhouse mirror. In the windows of the grand house, I caught a dusky image of myself standing in the middle of the road, a golden royal coach. My gilded body was cut with tassels, arabesques, ripped golden lions, and fitted with four immense wheels. A team of muscular Orlov Trotters stood before me, the off one looking suspiciously like the white mouse that had tried to take a bite out of me earlier that afternoon.

I cannot say I was not dazzled by the change: me, a simple pumpkin. *Never in my dreams*, I thought. But my mother did not raise a fool. 'Speak up,' she warned, 'or people will take

advantage.' So, I did, rather strongly. 'If this isn't for me, this carriage thing, let's agree now that you'll change me back.'

And do you know what this fairy godmother said? The gall. She said, 'It's not your wish.'

I was stunned, and not a little afraid of her strange powers, but I persisted.

'My thought exactly. And while I'd like to help, I have a life here. I don't appreciate being co-opted into someone else's escapist fantasy. No moral of the story justifies that. Don't you agree?'

Regrettably, I did not get a straight answer: Only a haughty, 'I'll think about it.' And before I could respond, she vanished. Now that miffed me, but I had to set my feelings aside. Events began moving quickly once the young woman appeared.

Now I admit, I did a double take. We all did. She cleaned up well. Gone were the tattered housecoat, the face smudged with soot from cleaning out the flues. That night she stood before us dressed to the nines in a pearl lace gown, satin gloves, sparkling clutch, a diamond-clustered tiara perched atop that lovely mane of coifed hair. As she approached, she fairly glided across the ground on those crystal slippers.

But the finery did not fool me. This was the same young woman who chopped and carried in the firewood, cleaned out the privies, tripped along the brickwork in those battered clogs – one who had something about her, a spirit, that no matter what remained buoyant and undaunted.

She greeted us all with a lively '*Bonsoir*,' climbed gamely inside and settled in. Now surely there are the vine borers and the run-of-the-mill snails and slugs that were the bane of my existence, creepers, notorious for burrowing into all manner of rind. However, this body, this human body which entered me, was a new experience. Beyond the extra weight, a little unsettling at first, there was the light feel of her crystal heels poking into my yellow flesh like slender fingers massaging, and the tinkling of her voice as she conversed with the footman was a feather caressing my insides. And I marvelled at this new sensation, marking it down as unique and not entirely unpleasant.

The first leg of the evening went according to plan. She arrived at the palace fashionably late, floated up the marble staircase and melted through the translucent ivory doors – the very image of elegance, self-assurance and poise.

The rest of us were shown to the VIP parking lot. The footmen and coach driver were treated to a light supper and the horses provided with a plate of carrots. While the driver chain-smoked, a pair of porters washed the dirt of the highway from my body and wheels and buffed me to a waxy glow. All the while, the faint notes of music floated out to us.

'Ah, the life of the cultured, the landed gentry,' I sighed. And with these thoughts and the music, I drifted off into a private reverie.

The orchestra was taking a break when the evening's calm was shattered by the sight and sounds of the girl tearing out of the palace, leaping two, three steps at a time. The driver, timepiece in hand, called out, 'Nearly midnight,' with a marked edge in his voice.

And as she flew toward the carriage and vaulted in, one of her shoes went flying out into the darkness. But we had no time to linger: The prince and a contingent of palace guards had spotted us and were rushing toward us on horseback, broadswords at their sides.

The driver set the horses at a full gallop and off we went, hurtling through the night, the royal posse not far behind. And there we were, dodging ancient trees, enormous stones, making astonishing leaps and hairpin turns, eventually outmaneuvering our pursuers and pulling up to the manor with only seconds to spare. No sooner had the girl crept into the darkened manor house than, *poof*, there go the horses, returned to mice, *poof*, the footmen to lizards, and then me, *poof*, to my pumpkin state.

The mice and the lizards scattered, and all went quiet save for the constant buzz of the autumn crickets. And I remember thinking, *where is this blasted fairy godmother? Doesn't she want to know how things turned out?* The girl returned to tatters, a shoe lost, and I left on the roadside waiting for a deer to come along and eviscerate me.

Mercifully, I made it through the night intact, and in the morning the young woman, back in her clogs and housecoat, retrieved me and carried me back to my place in the garden. She even planted a little kiss on my shell which, if I had not been orange, would have turned quite red from blushing.

Following that evening, life picked up where it had left off. The sweet music at night, the rough voices, the mice scrounging through the garden. And I thought *well, that is over* – and regretted it. I liked movement. I liked the girl. And I thought if there was another opportunity to help her; I would be first in line.

It was a month or so later when word came that the prince had found the lost shoe which, even though it was glass and had been thrown half the length of a chateau garden, had not shattered. He was currently barnstorming the countryside looking for its owner's foot. Eventually he and his entourage pulled up in front of the manor and, following much pomp and circumstance – bowing and curtsying, fanning and minuetting – the prince tried the shoe on each young lady in the house until it was finally our young woman's turn. Of course, the shoe fit, and he proposed to her on the spot. The couple became local stars of the moment, and they were married within weeks.

I will pause here to add the impulsiveness of youth is never to be underestimated. But I say that now. At the time I was aflush with the magic of the moment like everyone else.

So, off these two went to live an enchanted life in the palace, and my days became settled once again. I was happy for the girl, thinking all had turned out well for her. But as time ran on, I felt a longing. '*I wish I could, I wish I could*,' went through my thoughts, but nothing happened. And I supposed mere pumpkins did not have fairy godmothers.

And then, by magic naturally, one afternoon, the fairy reappeared. I was glad to see her but ruffled by her long absence. I asked her a bit crossly what she had been up to.

'Away in Potsdam on business,' she declared shortly but, sensing my dissatisfaction, added that she had packed her crystal ball and had been monitoring the situation all along. I was

relieved, but only momentarily, as she proceeded to take me aside and in whispers revealed a dire turn of events involving our young woman.

As it turned out, the man was a prince in title only. At first blush, of course, he was charming in speech and manner, and deferred to our young heroine's every wish. However, that regal posture was just that. The courtesies, the compassion, those royal refinements he was so practised in for public consumption, all but disappeared in his private dealings. And in short order, the real man emerged. This so-called *Monseigneur le Dauphin* was often drunk and unruly, staggering about the palace, manhandling the princess, gambling away the royal gold, and carrying on with a bevy of other courtesses and milkmaids in various secreted wings and far-flung counties. Broom closets notwithstanding.

She finished her report with, 'Now the poor girl is confined to a single room most days. Locked up with only some manuscripts of La Fontaine to read "for her personal edification". Can you imagine?'

And in that moment, the two of us began to lay our plan to rescue the young woman. Our idea was simple, involving a familiar subterfuge. I and the others would reprise our roles, the fairy would breach the palace and spirit out the young woman, whom we would whisk away to a safehouse. We presented the plan to our co-conspirators, who agreed, and all that was left was to wait for the right conditions.

The day of our mission, we had one of the white mice deliver a note to our young captive, alerting her to our arrival later that evening. As we set out, the night was chilly, the moon a sliver, the landscape dark. Perfect for our ends. As we approached the palace we slowed to a creep. The driver parked just out of sight behind an ancient cypress whose crown towered over the prison walls that held our young charge. A stillness froze everything; not even a breeze disturbed. And we waited, the mood anticipatory, our eyes peeled.

Presently, off in the distance, we saw two tiny dots coming around the far side of the palace. A collective impromptu sigh arose from the footmen, which escalated to a hurrah as the two figures making their way toward us became our two heroines. They were followed moments later by a black mass of heavily armed guards. But the pursuers, having been bewitched by the fairy, were doubled over, fumbling and dropping their broad swords as though they had been at the laudanum. Our sure-footed escapee and her godmother reached the coach in moments, and we were off.

We took side roads out of town and drove as far as we could get before the horses needed rest and water. And there, just before dawn, we stopped at the outskirts of a small village. The fairy helped the young woman settle in, and there she stayed hidden for some months in a local convent, where she was to remain until the palace gave up the search. In time, the royal family declared a divorce by decree and our young woman was finally free. She changed her name and moved to a village in Alsace-Lorraine. She never remarried and became a successful local business owner and philanthropist, spending her time visiting the

sick, providing the locals well-paying jobs, donating what money she could to charities and medical societies to combat poverty and the frequent outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever that routinely devastated the surrounding communities. In her later years, she ran a soup kitchen and published her own leftist newspaper, *La Liberté*. And all the locals remember her as a true princess of the people, as they still call her.

As it goes these days, the prince was never held accountable. He lived out his life carousing and womanising as he had always done – older and ranker and ever the leering, half-strutting popinjay. But one tawdry anecdote may provide some sense of comeuppance. He had part of his left buttock blown off by a turnip farmer who did not recognise the man humped over his youngest daughter in the hayloft. And tragically our Prince was never able to sit upon his horse the same again. And yes, that is cold comfort, I know, but one day I hope behaviour like his will get someone kicked out of social circles, brought in front of a judge, and the ‘what happens in the palace stays in the palace’ will be relegated to society’s dustbin.

The fairy was over the moon, literally, that we had been able to rectify matters for the young woman and, in her exuberance, offered to grant me a wish. I had earned it, she effused.

Now ever since our first trip to that accursed palace, I had been harbouring my own wish: a dream to fly. And the words were not out a moment than she aimed her wand at me one more time and, *poof*, as it goes, I was transformed into a European robin. I paused to admire my salient orange breast, to test my blue-grey wings, and then without hesitation took to the sky and the long-awaited freedom of true flight.

Over the years, the fairy godmother and I have stayed in touch and occasionally she will pop in for a visit and a brisk tour aloft the old neighbourhood. As a bird with no ability to hold a pen steadily enough to write, she has helped me compose this memoir of things past as a way of setting down what really happened.

Unfortunately, some years ago now, a writer named Perrault got a hold of the story. And while he accurately captured some of the more superficial details, he decided the story’s moral was about grace and how young women need godmothers to teach them that regal quality. But I reject that. No one needs supernatural intervention or ballroom manners for character. Character is character. It is there from the start, or it is not. All the godmother did was provide the dressing and the opportunity for her to be seen by the royal cads of state who, as we learned, would not know the difference between a white mouse and coach horse when it comes to the tenor of one’s character.

Finally, that the shoe fits is no guarantee of true happiness. And maybe that is the moral of this story. I am not sure. But I will leave you with all of this in hope that it may inspire you to find your own truth.

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