



The Rover of the Plain

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

African

Intermediate

19 min read

A long way off, near the sea coast of the east of Africa, there dwelt, once upon a time, a man and his wife. They had two children, a son and a daughter, whom they loved very much, and, like parents in other countries, they often talked of the fine marriages the young people would make some day. Out there both boys and girls marry early, and very soon, it seemed to the mother, a message was sent by a rich man on the other side of the great hills offering a fat herd of oxen in exchange for the girl. Everyone in the house and in the village rejoiced, and the maiden was despatched to her new home. When all was quiet again the father said to his son:

‘Now that we own such a splendid troop of oxen you had better hasten and get yourself a wife, lest some illness should overtake them. Already we have seen in the villages round about one or two damsels whose parents would gladly part with them for less than half the herd. Therefore tell us which you like best, and we will buy her for you.’

But the son answered:

‘Not so; the maidens I have seen do not please me. If, indeed, I must marry, let me travel and find a wife for myself.’

‘It shall be as you wish,’ said the parents; ‘but if by-and-by trouble should come of it, it will be your fault and not ours.’

The youth, however, would not listen; and bidding his father and mother farewell, set out on his search. Far, far away he wandered, over mountains and across rivers, till he reached a village where the people were quite different from those of his own race. He glanced about him and noticed that the girls were fair to look upon, as they pounded maize or stewed something that smelt very nice in earthen pots—especially if you were hot and tired; and when one of the maidens turned round and offered the stranger some dinner, he made up his mind that he would wed her and nobody else.

So he sent a message to her parents asking their leave to take her for his wife, and they came next day to bring their answer.

‘We will give you our daughter,’ said they, ‘if you can pay a good price for her. Never was there so hardworking a girl; and how we shall do without her we cannot tell! Still—no doubt your father and mother will come themselves and bring the price?’

‘No; I have the price with me,’ replied the young man; laying down a handful of gold pieces. ‘Here it is—take it.’

The old couple’s eyes glittered greedily; but custom forbade them to touch the price before all was arranged.

‘At least,’ said they, after a moment’s pause, ‘we may expect them to fetch your wife to her new home?’

‘No; they are not used to travelling,’ answered the bridegroom. ‘Let the ceremony be performed without delay, and we will set forth at once. It is a long journey.’

Then the parents called in the girl, who was lying in the sun outside the hut, and, in the presence of all the village, a goat was killed, the sacred dance took place, and a blessing was said over the heads of the young people. After that the bride was led aside by her father, whose duty it was to bestow on her some parting advice as to her conduct in her married life.

‘Be good to your husband’s parents,’ added he, ‘and always do the will of your husband.’ And the girl nodded her head obediently. Next it was the mother’s turn; and, as was the custom of the tribe, she spoke to her daughter:

‘Will you choose which of your sisters shall go with you to cut your wood and carry your water?’

'I do not want any of them,' answered she; 'they are no use. They will drop the wood and spill the water.'

'Then will you have any of the other children? There are enough to spare,' asked the mother again. But the bride said quickly:

'I will have none of them! You must give me our buffalo, the Rover of the Plain; he alone shall serve me.'

'What folly you talk!' cried the parents. 'Give you our buffalo, the Rover of the Plain? Why, you know that our life depends on him. Here he is well fed and lies on soft grass; but how can you tell what will befall him in another country? The food may be bad, he will die of hunger; and, if he dies we die also.'

'No, no,' said the bride; 'I can look after him as well as you. Get him ready, for the sun is sinking and it is time we set forth.'

So she went away and put together a small pot filled with healing herbs, a horn that she used in tending sick people, a little knife, and a calabash containing deer fat; and, hiding these about her, she took leave of her father and mother and started across the mountains by the side of her husband.

But the young man did not see the buffalo that followed them, which had left his home to be the servant of his wife.

No one ever knew how the news spread to the kraal that the young man was coming back, bringing a wife with him; but, somehow or other, when the two entered the village, every man and woman was standing in the road uttering shouts of welcome.

'Ah, you are not dead after all,' cried they; 'and have found a wife to your liking, though you would have none of our girls. Well, well, you have chosen your own path; and if ill comes of it beware lest you grumble.'

Next day the husband took his wife to the fields and showed her which were his, and which belonged to his mother. The girl listened carefully to all he told her, and walked with him back to the hut; but close to the door she stopped, and said:

'I have dropped my necklace of beads in the field, and I must go and look for it.' But in truth she had done nothing of the sort, and it was only an excuse to go and seek the buffalo.

The beast was crouching under a tree when she came up, and snorted with pleasure at the sight of her.

'You can roam about this field, and this, and this,' she said, 'for they belong to my husband; and that is his wood, where you may hide yourself. But the other fields are his mother's, so beware lest you touch them.'

'I will beware,' answered the buffalo; and, patting his head, the girl left him.

Oh, how much better a servant he was than any of the little girls the bride had refused to bring with her! If she wanted water, she had only to cross the patch of maize behind the hut and seek out the place where the buffalo lay hidden, and put down her pail beside him. Then she would sit at her ease while he went to the lake and brought the bucket back brimming over. If she wanted wood, he would break the branches off the trees and lay them at her feet. And the villagers watched her return laden, and said to each other:

'Surely the girls of her country are stronger than our girls, for none of them could cut so quickly or carry so much!' But then, nobody knew that she had a buffalo for a servant.

Only, all this time she never gave the poor buffalo anything to eat, because she had just one dish, out of which she and her husband ate; while in her old home there was a dish put aside expressly for the Rover of the Plain. The buffalo bore it as long as he could; but, one day, when his mistress bade him go to the lake and fetch water, his knees almost gave way from hunger. He kept silence, however, till the evening, when he said to his mistress:

'I am nearly starved; I have not touched food since I came here. I can work no more.'

'Alas!' answered she, 'what can I do? I have only one dish in the house. You will have to steal some beans from the fields. Take a few here and a few there; but be sure not to take too many from one place, or the owner may notice it.'

Now the buffalo had always lived an honest life, but if his mistress did not feed him, he must get food for himself. So that night, when all the village was asleep, he came out from the wood and ate a few beans here and a few there, as his mistress had bidden him. And when at last his hunger was satisfied, he crept back to his lair. But a buffalo is not a fairy, and the next morning, when the women arrived to work in the fields, they stood still with astonishment, and said to each other:

'Just look at this; a savage beast has been destroying our crops, and we can see the traces of his feet!' And they hurried to their homes to tell their tale.

In the evening the girl crept out to the buffalo's hiding-place, and said to him:

'They perceived what happened, of course; so to-night you had better seek your supper further off.' And the buffalo nodded his head and followed her counsel; but in the morning, when these women also went out to work, the races of hoofs were plainly to be seen, and they hastened to tell their husbands, and begged them to bring their guns, and to watch for the robber.

It happened that the stranger girl's husband was the best marksman in all the village, and he hid himself behind the trunk of a tree and waited.

The buffalo, thinking that they would probably make a search for him in the fields he had laid waste the evening before, returned to the bean patch belonging to his mistress.

The young man saw him coming with amazement.

'Why, it is a buffalo!' cried he; 'I never have beheld one in this country before!' And raising his gun, he aimed just behind the ear.

The buffalo gave a leap into the air, and then fell dead.

'It was a good shot,' said the young man. And he ran to the village to tell them that the thief was punished.

When he entered his hut he found his wife, who had somehow heard the news, twisting herself to and fro and shedding tears.

'Are you ill?' asked he. And she answered: 'Yes; I have pains all over my body.' But she was not ill at all, only very unhappy at the death of the buffalo which had served her so well. Her husband felt anxious, and sent for the medicine man; but though she pretended to listen to him, she threw all his medicine out of the door directly he had gone away.

With the first rays of light the whole village was awake, and the women set forth armed with baskets and the men with knives in order to cut up the buffalo. Only the girl remained in her hut; and after a while she too went to join them, groaning and weeping as she walked along.

'What are you doing here?' asked her husband when he saw her. 'If you are ill you are better at home.'

'Oh! I could not stay alone in the village,' said she. And her mother-in-law left off her work to come and scold her, and to tell her that she would kill herself if she did such foolish things. But the girl would not listen and sat down and looked on.

When they had divided the buffalo's flesh, and each woman had the family portion in her basket, the stranger wife got up and said:

'Let me have the head.'

'You could never carry anything so heavy,' answered the men, 'and now you are ill besides.'

'You do not know how strong I am,' answered she. And at last they gave it her.

She did not walk to the village with the others, but lingered behind, and, instead of entering her hut, she slipped into the little shed where the pots for cooking and storing maize were kept. Then she laid down the buffalo's head and sat beside it. Her husband came to seek her, and begged her to leave the shed and go to bed, as she must be tired out; but the girl would not stir, neither would she attend to the words of her mother-in-law.

'I wish you would leave me alone!' she answered crossly. 'It is impossible to sleep if somebody is always coming in.' And she turned her back on them, and would not even eat the food they had brought. So they went away, and the young man soon stretched himself out on his mat; but his wife's odd conduct made him anxious, and he lay wake all night, listening.

When all was still the girl made a fire and boiled some water in a pot. As soon as it was quite hot she shook in the medicine that she had brought from home, and then, taking the buffalo's head, she made incisions with her little knife behind the ear, and close to the temple where the shot had struck him. Next she applied the horn to the spot and blew with all her force till, at length, the blood began to move. After that she spread some of the deer fat out of the calabash over the wound, which she held in the steam of the hot water. Last of all, she sang

in a low voice a dirge over the Rover of the Plain.

As she chanted the final words the head moved, and the limbs came back. The buffalo began to feel alive again and shook his horns, and stood up and stretched himself. Unluckily it was just at this moment that the husband said to himself:

'I wonder if she is crying still, and what is the matter with her! Perhaps I had better go and see.' And he got up and, calling her by name, went out to the shed.

'Go away! I don't want you!' she cried angrily. But it was too late. The buffalo had fallen to the ground, dead, and with the wound in his head as before.

The young man who, unlike most of his tribe, was afraid of his wife, returned to his bed without having seen anything, but wondering very much what she could be doing all this time. After waiting a few minutes, she began her task over again, and at the end the buffalo stood on his feet as before. But just as the girl was rejoicing that her work was completed, in came the husband once more to see what his wife was doing; and this time he sat himself down in the hut, and said that he wished to watch whatever was going on. Then the girl took up the pitcher and all her other things and left the shed, trying for the third time to bring the buffalo back to life.

She was too late; the dawn was already breaking, and the head fell to the ground, dead and corrupt as it was before.

The girl entered the hut, where her husband and his mother were getting ready to go out.

'I want to go down to the lake, and bathe,' said she.

'But you could never walk so far,' answered they. 'You are so tired, as it is, that you can hardly stand!'

However, in spite of their warnings, the girl left the hut in the direction of the lake. Very soon she came back weeping, and sobbed out:

'I met some one in the village who lives in my country, and he told me that my mother is very, very ill, and if I do not go to her at once she will be dead before I arrive. I will return as soon as I can, and now farewell.' And she set forth in the direction of the mountains. But this story was not true; she knew nothing about her mother, only she wanted an excuse to go home and tell her family that their prophecies had come true, and

that the buffalo was dead.

Balancing her basket on her head, she walked along, and directly she had left the village behind her she broke out into the song of the Rover of the Plain, and at last, at the end of the day, she came to the group of huts where her parents lived. Her friends all ran to meet her, and, weeping, she told them that the buffalo was dead.

This sad news spread like lightning through the country, and the people flocked from far and near to bewail the loss of the beast who had been their pride.

'If you had only listened to us,' they cried, 'he would be alive now. But you refused all the little girls we offered you, and would have nothing but the buffalo. And remember what the medicine-man said: "If the buffalo dies you die also!"'

So they bewailed their fate, one to the other, and for a while they did not perceive that the girl's husband was sitting in their midst, leaning his gun against a tree. Then one man, turning, beheld him, and bowed mockingly.

'Hail, murderer! hail! you have slain us all!'

The young man stared, not knowing what he meant, and answered, wonderingly:

'I shot a buffalo; is that why you call me a murderer?'

'A buffalo—yes; but the servant of your wife! It was he who carried the wood and drew the water. Did you not know it?'

'No; I did not know it,' replied the husband in surprise. 'Why did no one tell me? Of course I should not have shot him!'

'Well, he is dead,' answered they, 'and we must die too.'

At this the girl took a cup in which some poisonous herbs had been crushed, and holding it in her hands, she wailed: 'O my father, Rover of the Plain!' Then drinking a deep draught from it, fell back dead. One by one her parents, her brothers and her sisters, drank also and died, singing a dirge to the memory of the buffalo.

The girl's husband looked on with horror; and returned sadly home across the mountains, and, entering his hut, threw himself on the ground. At first he was too tired to speak; but at length he raised his head and told all

the story to his father and mother, who sat watching him. When he had finished they shook their heads and said:

‘Now you see that we spoke no idle words when we told you that ill would come of your marriage! We offered you a good and hard- working wife, and you would have none of her. And it is not only your wife you have lost, but your fortune also. For who will give you back your money if they are all dead?’

‘It is true, O my father,’ answered the young man. But in his heart he thought more of the loss of his wife than of the money he had given for her.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com