

# AN EPILOGUE

By Guy Holt

OF course, she did not really marry the prince. That was a report sent out by the prime minister, who wished, he said, to protect the reputation of the last member of a family which had ever been distinguished rather for nobility of spirit than for discretion or common sense. And, for that matter, the young prince had never shown evidence of — well, of more intelligence than, say, even the least of vertebrates might require. Amiable? Charming? To be sure. But so to forget himself and his position over a common kitchen wench, merely because she possessed a tiny foot: and to spend literally millions in a search for her! It was most distressing. . . . Thus, in effect, the prime minister, in later years.

But I anticipate. . . .

As for Cinderella: She returned, then, at midnight, as I believe has been reported. She was all aglow with wonder and delight, and for a space the kitchen wench's dreams possessed something of the glamour that in later days youthful hearted people have cast about her memory. But the ashes had, by some unhappy process, seeped into her spirit. In the morning she awoke to become much the same person she had ever been: a trifle sullen, a trifle sodden, and, alas, not at all beautiful. And if within her there was still a slight fluttering of the wings that had so proudly borne her the

night gone, it was not hope which agitated them but discontent.

In due course she married a young charcoal burner in a rising way of business. She was a good wife to him, men say: a bit tart of speech and slatternly in dress, but no less competent. She bore him five sons in as many years. She grew broader in girth and sharper of tongue. And, for a certainty, she thought no more about the prince, save now and then to recall importantly that one triumphant night.

And the prince? Why, poor fellow, I have already hinted that he came from a line in no wise noted for sensible conduct. Perhaps it was because the lights were dim upon that night of the ball; perhaps it was the potency of a certain fairy's magic which had terribly augmented her ward's beauty. However that be, the prince could in no wise forget the loveliness of his unbidden guest: and to him that remembered beauty seemed ever greater than any he saw thereafter in the flesh. After months of vain waiting he set out in search of her. . . . The manner of that search has been described elsewhere.

But success did not come to him although he sought the unknown beauty throughout seven lands and for as many years. All women, of whatever degree, had attempted to wear that crystal slipper he always carried with him; but it would fit none of them.

Upon a certain day he rode near the borders of his kingdom and observed of a sudden a house which he had never before seen. It was, in fact, a hovel, but one a little less abject than its near neighbors. The lands were broader which surrounded it; hogs well fed rooted before it; and five sturdy, ragged boys shouted and played nearby. Upon the lintel sat a woman.

The prince drew rein before the

hovel. Might it be, he wondered, that here lived the maiden he sought? Of all homes within many days' journey, this place alone remained untried. He hesitated, as he viewed the unkempt dooryard and its mistress; almost he hoped for another failure. But one does not lightly become the servant of illusion or carelessly evade its commands. He dismounted and approached the woman.

But as he drew near to her an interruption occurred. One of his men, impatient perhaps at his master's continued madness — although it may have been an accident — pricked his horse ever so slightly with his spur. The animal started madly forward, out of hand in a moment. Into the dooryard he thundered, and before his rider could master him had almost trampled one of the ragged youngsters who played there. The child picked himself up, frightened, and ran to his mother who had risen furiously.

So it was the woman who spoke first. I pass over what she said, for her words were neither few nor seemly; they served, however, to express her opinion of men who, upon whatever errand, rode unasked into poor folks' homes.

"And you", she cried to the prince, who had stood silent but apologetic throughout. "You, who stand there like a loon, for all your fine clothes — be off with you, whoever you are. I want none of you." This was not all she said, but it is the gist of it.

The prince turned away. There was, indeed, nothing else to do, for the woman had found her breath again and was repeating in different words the insults she had flung at them before. As they rode away, the prince and his men could hear her railing at them from a distance. To the men, it seemed that their master sat his saddle with even less of sprightliness in his manner

than before. He seemed, after these years, at last to have bid farewell to hope. . . .

It was later in the day that one of the charcoal burner's sons brought to his mother a glittering trifle he had picked up in the road. It was a crystal slipper which, evidently, one of the morning's visitors had dropped in his flight. The woman sniffed in disgust as she looked at it. And: "Vanity", she said. "Like enough one o' them town huzzies gave it away, for a token. She was no better than she should be, who wore it, I'll wager." She bade the boy cast it away.

"But it's pretty, mother", the lad insisted.

"Pretty!" sneered his mother. "A trifle like that! Much good it would be to work in. Cast it away, you brat, and look for something useful next time."

"And yet", she thought later, "time was when I could have worn a geegaw like that and would, right gladly. Eh, I was a senseless lass in those days, before my man and I were married."

And she remembered — but faintly — the evening so many years ago when she had danced with the prince. But for the life of her she could not recall many things that had occurred that night: and of how the prince looked or spoke she could remember nothing at all.