

The Grateful Beasts



Lavinia Roberts

Inspired by the story "Stone Soup"

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*To Kathy Prior
for whose kind assistance
myself and many University of Kansas alumni
are very grateful!*

The Grateful Beasts

COMEDY. Inspired by the story “Stone Soup.” In this play within a play, a crafty traveler with a flair for storytelling arrives at a village and has to persuade some stubborn farmers to contribute a few of their prized vegetables to his soup pot. The traveler tells the farmers the story of Lionel, a charitable farm lad who saves the lives of five unfortunate animals. Determined to seek his fortune in the big city, Lionel ventures forth with five silver coins his mother gave him for his journey. Along the way, Lionel buys a loyal hunting dog, a faithful horse, a cat with an attitude, a blues-singing nightingale, and a bear who hates puns, saving them from a certain death. When Lionel reaches the city, he discovers that an evil ogre has transformed King Percival into a rat, taken over the kingdom, and has his sights set on marrying Princess Bianca. It is up to Lionel and his animal friends to recover a magic wishing ring and save the kingdom from the clutches of the selfish ogre.

Performance Time: Approximately 45-60 minutes.

About the Story

Stone Soup is a folk tale that is told throughout the world. In French and Hungarian versions of the tale, the travelers are represented by starving soldiers who are journeying back to their homeland. In Portugal, the traveler is usually a monk. In Northern European countries and in Scandinavia, the traveler is usually a tramp who uses a nail instead of a stone. And in Eastern Europe, an axe is often used to make the soup.

Characters

(4 M, 4 F, 17 flexible, opt. extras)

(With doubling: 3 M, 2 F, 17 flexible)

TINKER: Crafty traveler with a flair for storytelling and making stone soup; flexible.

CARROT FARMER: Refuses to sell his carrots; flexible.

POTATO FARMER: Refuses to sell his potatoes; flexible.

ONION FARMER: Refuses to sell his onions; flexible.

HERB FARMER: Refuses to sell his herbs; flexible.

CABBAGE FARMER: Villager who is sick of eating cabbage all the time; flexible.

LIONEL: Good-hearted, hard-working farm lad who wants to seek his fortune in the big city; male.

MOTHER: Lionel's mother.

COUNT OLDRICH: Selfish ogre who has a little troll in him on his mother's side; eats ice-cream sundaes for every meal; male.

HORSE: Talking horse who used to belong to King Percival; flexible.

STABLE HAND: Ordered by Count Oldrich to transport the Horse to work in the mines; flexible.

DOG: Royal hunting hound; flexible.

GAMEKEEPER: Ordered by Count Oldrich to take the Dog into the woods and shoot him; flexible.

BEAR: Dancing bear in Count Oldrich's court who refused to dance and who hates puns; wears a bear costume and is dressed like a clown; flexible.

COURT JESTER: Palace fool who loves puns and has an irritating laugh; ordered by Count Oldrich to take the Bear to the tanners and turn him into a bearskin rug; flexible.

NIGHTINGALE: Bird who mopes around the palace singing the blues and is known to do a good Elvis impersonation; flexible.

ROYAL ADVISOR: Ordered by Count Oldrich to sell the Nightingale at the market for his valuable liver; flexible.

CAT: Fluffums, the palace cat, who was caught sleeping on important royal documents; flexible.

CHAMBERMAID 1: Ordered by Count Oldrich to sell Fluffums at the market for his pelt; female.

CHAMBERMAID 2: Accompanies Chambermaid 1 to the market to sell Fluffums the cat; female.

KING PERCIVAL: Kindly king who Count Oldrich turned into a rat with the help of a magic ring; male.

RAT: May be played by same actor who plays King Percival or can be played by a second actor; wears a rat costume; male.

PRINCESS BIANCA: King Percival's daughter who refuses to marry Count Oldrich; female.

GUARD 1: Palace guard who likes to quote his mom and yearns to become a cook; flexible.

GUARD 2: Cynical palace guard; flexible.

EXTRAS (opt.): As Villagers and Market People.

Options for Doubling

KING PERCIVAL/RAT (Male)

MOTHER/CHAMBERMAID 2 (Female)

STABLEHAND/CHAMBERMAID 1 (Female)

Setting

The outskirts of a small village.

Sets

Sets can be as simple or elaborate as your budget allows. A path in the woods, a city marketplace, the palace throne room, and a dungeon cell can be represented onstage with a minimum of set pieces.

Props

Fake fire pit
Basket of carrots
Basket of onions
Basket of potatoes
Basket of herbs
Basket of cabbage
Knapsack, for Tinker
Large soup kettle
Stone
Soup ladle
5 Silver coins
Small knapsack, for Lionel
Reins, for Horse
Leash, for Dog
Large ring, for Ogre
Soup bowls
Spoons

Sound Effects

Loud crash

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*"To think...
all that came
from a stone."*

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(AT RISE: The outskirts of a small village. There is a fake fire SR. The Villagers are sitting around the fire eyeing each other contemptuously. Each Villager has a basket, bucket, or bag holding their produce: Carrot Farmer has carrots, Potato Farmer has potatoes, Onion Farmer has onions, Cabbage Farmer has cabbage, and Herb Farmer has a bundle of assorted dried herbs. Tinker enters, carrying a knapsack and a large kettle.)

CARROT FARMER: *(To Potato Farmer.)* I'm feeling generous today. How about I give you two carrots for ten of your potatoes?

POTATO FARMER: Ten potatoes...for only two of your puny, half-rotten carrots?! If you want a potato, you'll have to give me a guinea a piece!

ONION FARMER: A guinea?! That potato isn't worth a farthing! I've dug up more edible rocks!

HERB FARMER: You would know. Your onions have about as much flavor as a rock.

ONION FARMER: You are under no obligation to purchase any of my extraordinary onions!

HERB FARMER: That only thing extraordinary about your onions is the price!

ONION FARMER: Your cow is a very fair trade for one of my exceptional onions.

HERB FARMER: Exceptional onions? Yeah, right! Exceptionally expensive and exceptionally flavorless!

CABBAGE FARMER: I do wish we could trade occasionally. I get rather sick of eating cabbage all the time.

POTATO FARMER: I am quite willing to barter, if someone were willing to give me a fair price for my splendid spuds.

CABBAGE FARMER: Cabbage soup...cabbage porridge...fried cabbage...baked cabbage...steamed cabbage...

CARROT FARMER: I'm not mortgaging my hovel in order to buy one of your putrid potatoes.

TINKER: *(To Villagers.)* Excuse me...

CABBAGE FARMER: Cabbage cookies...cabbage crepes...cabbage a la flambé...eggless cabbage quiche...

HERB FARMER: How do you have an eggless quiche?

CABBAGE FARMER: It's just cabbage baked in a pan, really.

TINKER: *(To Villagers, louder.)* Pardon me...

HERB FARMER: *(To Cabbage Farmer.)* Then why even bother calling it quiche?

CABBAGE FARMER: Makes it seem more exotic and varied than eating plain cabbage...again, for the billionth time.

TINKER: *(To Villagers, louder.)* Please don't mind my intrusion...

HERB FARMER: *(To Onion Farmer.)* Why, those onions couldn't even squeeze a tear out of an infant they are so bland.

ONION FARMER: You would know all about tasteless...with those weeds you try to pass off as herbs!

HERB FARMER: *(Insulted.)* Excuse me?

CARROT FARMER: Frankly, I would eat carrots for the rest of my days rather than trade a single one for one of your lousy potatoes! All of you can die of vitamin-C deficiency and scurvy for all I care!

POTATO FARMER: *(Angry.)* I hope I do! At least my last meal on earth will be creamy mashed potatoes and potato pancakes started off with a creamy potato soup, not some half-rotten, puny carrots!

TINKER: *(To Villagers, louder.)* Please, if I could have just a moment of your time!

HERB FARMER: *(To Villagers.)* I don't know why I even bother attempting to sell my herbs to you culinary ignoramuses! Clearly, you are not perceptive enough or skilled enough in the fine science of cookery to recognize top-quality, organic herbs when you see them!

ONION FARMER: I may not be able to recognize top-quality, organic herbs, but I can certainly recognize those lousy weeds you try and sell us!

HERB FARMER: *(Insulted.)* Weeds! How dare you?!

TINKER: *(To Villagers, shouts.)* Excuse me!

(Finally, Villagers turn and look at Tinker.)

CARROT FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* What do you want?

POTATO FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* Want to buy some potatoes?

ONION FARMER: *(To Tinker, sarcastic.)* Will only cost you your arm and your leg.

POTATO FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* Certainly not. I'm feeling charitable today, so three guineas a scrumptious spud. How about it?

TINKER: I am just a traveling tinker. I don't have money of any kind.

CABBAGE FARMER: Traveler, you say? Picked up any good recipes for cabbage during your wanderings?

HERB FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* Well, you best move along. We are only interested in paying customers.

ONION FARMER: On this and this alone are we in agreement. Move along, Tinker. There will be no begging for you here.

(Murmur of agreement from Villagers.)

TINKER: Actually, I was wondering if you would care to join me for lunch.

CARROT FARMER: Excuse me?

POTATO FARMER: Did he just say what I thought I heard?

TINKER: I asked all of you to join me for lunch. So how about it?

CABBAGE FARMER: What's the catch?

HERB FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* Yeah, are you going to charge me my cow or something?

TINKER: Certainly not. I'm not charging you anything.

ONION FARMER: But why ask us to lunch if you are not going to make an extraordinary profit?

POTATO FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* Yeah, it doesn't make any sense.

(Murmur of agreement from Villagers.)

TINKER: Why, for your companionship. I've been traveling by myself for a while. I could use a little company.

ONION FARMER: Well, I like free food.

CABBAGE FARMER: You know, I don't think I've ever had free food... *(Indicating other Villagers.)* ...not living around you lot.

TINKER: Very well, I'll get started brewing the soup. Might I use your fire?

CARROT FARMER: That will be a farthing a minute.

CABBAGE FARMER: Hey! That isn't your fire! It's a community fire.

CARROT FARMER: Oh, well. I thought I would try for it, at any rate.

TINKER: Now, here is my cooking pot. *(Sets large cooking pot on the "fire.")* I filled it with water at the river for just this purpose. Now for the secret ingredient...the most vital component...our main course.

(Curious, Villagers gather around Tinker. Tinker pulls a stone from his pocket.)

ONION FARMER: A stone?

TINKER: A *magic* stone.

POTATO FARMER: What's it for?

TINKER: Why, this stone is the main ingredient of my tasty stone soup.

POTATO FARMER: Stone soup? Seriously?

CABBAGE FARMER: Can't be much worse than cabbage soup.

TINKER: Just wait until you are having a scrumptious bowl of steaming-hot stone soup. Now, into the pot you go! (*Carefully puts the stone into the pot, pulls out a ladle from his knapsack, and begins stirring the soup.*) This could take awhile.

You don't want to rush stone soup...very exacting science simmering a stone. Now, how about a story while we wait?

CARROT FARMER: Well, all right. I'll tell you a story for five guineas, everyone.

POTATO FARMER: I have a story for you. Once upon a time, there was a very irritating villager who grew terrible, half-rotten carrots that nobody wanted to buy and nobody certainly wanted to hear any stories from. The end.

CARROT FARMER: But I thought that annoying villager who nobody liked grew potatoes?

POTATO FARMER: (*Sarcastically.*) Oh, ha, ha, ha.

TINKER: I thought I might tell a story. (*Murmur of agreement from Villagers.*) Now, once upon a time, there was a good-hearted and hard-working farm lad named Lionel.

(*Mother and Lionel enter SL. Lionel is carrying a small knapsack.*)

MOTHER: (*To Lionel.*) So you packed at least a week's worth of socks, dearest?

LIONEL: Yes, Mother.

MOTHER: And you have your lunch, Lionel?

LIONEL: I do, Mother.

MOTHER: And your ear mufflers? I know it's summer, but you never know with this weather. It's been unseasonably cold.

LIONEL: Mother, I'll be fine, really.

MOTHER: Oh, Lionel, my only child, must you go seek your fortune in the wide world?!

LIONEL: Please, Mother...

MOTHER: Oh, I know we've discussed this a few times —

LIONEL: A few *thousand* times.

MOTHER: But can't you stay here in the village? I hear they are looking for a new pig boy at the manor house. Or you could become a cabbage farmer, Lionel...

CABBAGE FARMER: (*Shouts.*) Don't stay in the village, Lionel! Seek your fortune! Don't become a cabbage farmer! Or the next thing you'll know, you'll be up to your ears in eggless cabbage quiche! Don't do it, Lionel! Don't take the easy way out!

ONION FARMER: Quiet down! You are interrupting the story!

TINKER: (*To Villagers.*) May I continue?

(*Murmur of agreement from Villagers.*)

LIONEL: I'm sorry, Mother. I've always dreamed of seeking my fortune in the city, and that is where I am determined to go.

MOTHER: Then, here, my son... (*Holds out five silver coins.*) ...take these.

LIONEL: Mother! I couldn't possibly take your money.

MOTHER: Your father left this to you, my son. These five pieces of silver are your only inheritance. Please take them, with my love.

LIONEL: Mother, you keep them, please...

MOTHER: No, no, take them. I will manage. I always have. I've been saving these for this day. Take them, my dearest son, and may they help bring you the good fortune you seek.

(*Lionel accepts the coins and embraces his Mother.*)

TINKER: (*To Villagers.*) Lionel reluctantly accepted the coins from his mother. And after a tearful goodbye, he headed down the road toward the city to seek his fortune.

(Lionel exits SR. Mother exits SL.)

POTATO FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* I'm hungry.

CARROT FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* How is the soup coming?

TINKER: Fine, fine. Although...

ONION FARMER: Although what?

TINKER: Well, the soup could really use an onion. But, you see, only the finest, most flavorful onions should be used in stone soup. Anything less than the most eye-watering and tasty onions would be completely diminished by the strong yet subtle flavor of the stone. I can't imagine anyone having any onions like that here.

ONION FARMER: Why, I have onions.

TINKER: As I said, only the *best* onions can be used in stone soup.

ONION FARMER: Are you saying my onions aren't good enough for your silly stone soup?

TINKER: No, no. Not at all.

ONION FARMER: Why, these are the best onions! Here...
(Hands Tinker two onions.) ...take a couple! Put them in your stone soup! See if I'm wrong!

TINKER: If you insist...

ONION FARMER: Why, I'll even put them in the stone soup myself! Not good enough, you say?! Ha! Just wait till you taste my flavorful onions! All of you! *(Puts some onions into the soup pot.)*

POTATO FARMER: *(To Tinker.)* So what happened to Lionel?

TINKER: Well, Lionel headed down the path toward the city...

(Led by a Stable Hand, Horse enters SR, limping. Holding the horse reins, the Stable Hand lays down to take a nap. Stable Hand begins snoring. Horse stands there neighing plaintively. Whistling to himself, Lionel enters SL.)

LIONEL: *(To Horse.)* Good afternoon.

HORSE: Good afternoon for you maybe. You aren't about to be carted off to the mines.

LIONEL: (*Surprised.*) Excuse me, but did you just talk to me?

HORSE: Maybe.

LIONEL: But you're a horse. Horses can't talk.

HORSE: (*Sarcastic.*) Well, you're an expert on these things, naturally.

LIONEL: There! You did it again!

HORSE: Really, this is why horses don't often bother talking!

You humans are impossible to have a decent conversation with...always blabbing on about politics, war, that kind of nonsense instead of interesting conversations like where the most tender grass in the field is and the best blacksmiths.

LIONEL: A talking horse! Blimey!

[END OF FREEVIEW]