

Fairy Gardens

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Greek

Intermediate
8 min read

UNCLE KOSTAS, as everyone called him, had once been a prisoner of the fairies. He would sit stiffly down upon a stone and lean upon the tall, shepherd's staff which he always carried, to recount his story.

"Look," he would begin. "Do you see those hills yonder? They are the Hills of the Dragons. Many, many years ago."

Kostas was resting at noon beside a spring under the shadow of a pine in one of the Dragonorahes, Dragon Hills, after eating his bread and cheese. He closed his eyes for a little while and when he opened them, there were fairies dancing all around him in the air. He knew that he was handsome, handsome enough to tempt them to carry him away, but since he had his gun with him he thought himself safe.

Some of the fairies were singing, others were playing their flutes, and all would pause now and then to ask Kostas to play his flute and dance with them. Pointing to his gun, he shook his head and even though they were angry they dared not harm him. Suddenly the music and the dancing ceased. The fairies whispered together a moment and then disappeared like a cob web that is brushed away.

Kostas was about to go back to his sheep, grazing lower down on the hillside, but he was unable to move, even to stretch out his hand. Then the fairies were back again and this time their queen was with them, riding on a great white horse. Around her were a thousand fairies on white horses and others kept coming and coming until the Dragonorahe was covered with them.

Kostas tried to stand up, he tried to reach his gun, but he could do nothing except gaze at the beautiful queen, with her shining, silken hair and her shimmering white garments, as she sat upon her proud horse. There was a great murmuring around him. After a while he understood that all the fairies were talking about him.

“Does he please you?” one asked the queen.

“Will you have him?” asked another.

“He is powerless now,” said a third. “Shall we take him?”

The queen looked down at him thoughtfully for a long time. Then she smiled, lifted her wand and cried, “I shall have him! He is beautiful! Let us bring him with us!”

Servant fairies caught up Kostas and darted away with him as fast as an eagle flies. The queen with the thousand fairies on horseback followed and after them came the thousands and thousands of others, all in white, all dancing around and around as they swept forward. They took him up to the highest peak of the mountain Kyllene, where there is snow nearly all the year. A yawning, black opening admitted to a long dark passage, ending in a golden gate. Beyond lay the gardens of the fairies, where the sweet, warm air of summer always dwelt.

“Here you must stay
For a year and a day,
And never, oh never,
Will you wish to go away.”

sang the queen to her new prisoner and all the fairies echoed softly,

“And never, oh never,
Will you wish to go away.”

Looking about him, Kostas saw that he was in a paradise. There were gardens everywhere, each with flowers of a different color. One garden was white, one yellow, one purple, then green, rose and blue, with many shades of each, so that they all blended together like the bars of a magnificent rainbow. In the center was a lake, mirror-like, upon which an island appeared to float. So clear was the water that one could see to the bottom which was studded with emeralds. Upon the surface, like great bubbles, diamonds, rubies and sapphires moved with the slow current.

On the island many youths, stolen by the fairies, were playing with flower-wreaths, chains of precious stones, and fine gold and silver-like sand. Kostas was taken to the island, given fairy clothes such as the other youths wore, and shown trees from which he could gather as much fruit as he wished.

There were as many kinds of fruit trees on the island as there were flower gardens around the lake. Figs, pears and olives, peaches and plums, as well as grapes heavy upon their vines, hung in tempting profusion. The fruit would fall to the ground when it was ripe and if no one ate it, it would harden into a jewel of the shape and color of the fruit.

Peacocks strutted about and birds of bright plumage flitted through the trees. In the lake one saw mermaids with fairy faces, graceful swans, and fish such as are not found in any other sea. All the time, for there never is any night there, fairies danced in the flower gardens, gazed at their reflections in the lake, sang or made music on their flutes, while youths played on their beautiful island, and the queen appeared happiest of all, watching the others being happy.

But Kostas, alone of all those thousands, was not happy. He enjoyed living in that paradise, but he could never forget his home and his sweetheart Christena, and he longed to go back. Then he would think of the queen. He thought she cared a great deal for him, more, perhaps, than for any of the other youths. He remembered her song:

“Here you must stay
For a year and a day,
And never, oh never,
Will you wish to go away.”

“I must wait,” he told himself again and again. “I must wait for a year and a day.”

Finally the time passed. Kostas went to the queen, bowed very humbly and said:

“Here did I stay
For a year and a day,
But always and always
I’ve wished to go away.”

Then he told her how, even though she was so beautiful and everything was so lovely, he desired above all to go home to his sweetheart Christena. The queen did not answer immediately, and he waited in anguish on his knees with his head bowed to the ground.

“Kostas,” she said at last, “will you do anything I ask you?”

“Anything!” he cried, starting up eagerly.

“Then listen. I have lost a gold vase set with turquoise and lined with golden hair. Find the vase for me by noon to-day. Be sure of the lining of golden hair, for that is important. Go!”

Hopefully Kostas began his search in the gardens, but though he looked carefully among all the vari-colored flower beds, he found nothing. Going to the island, he searched anxiously beneath all the fruit trees and even scanned their branches, but the vase was not there. It was now almost noon.

He walked to the shore and stood looking hopelessly into the water, thinking how far he was from his desire. A strange fish, all gold and blue, appeared swimming toward him. But no, it was not a fish. It was a vase, gold set with turquoise!

Kostas seized it and held it up joyfully. The lining! He was almost afraid to look. There it was, the fine gold hair, and there was something else, more precious to him than hair or jewels or gold. It was the shepherd’s clothes that he had worn when the fairies carried him away. He knew then that the queen meant to let him go. Quickly exchanging the fairy garments for the old loose cloak and short, full skirt of the shepherd, he returned to the queen and laid the vase before her, just as the sun reached the meridian.

The queen smiled and touched Kostas with her wand.

“You may go back to your home and your sweetheart,” she said, “and you may take with you a strand of the hair lining the vase. It is my hair, and if you should ever wish to return to the fairy gardens, you have only to show it to the fairies and they will bring you back.”

Kostas thanked her many times and arose. There was a beautiful white horse with a golden tail and mane and a human face, to carry him, and three fairy princesses with red caps, to show him the way. Through the golden gate, through the long, dark passage, through the snow-fringed opening in the mountain and over the hills they flew until they reached the spring on the Dragonorahe. There the fairies left him, just where he had been a year and a day before. But the strand of golden hair Kostas lost out of his selahe as they came swiftly over the hills. Afterward he searched for it tirelessly, climbing all of the Dragon Hills as high as he could go, but he never found it.

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