



# *The Castle of Life*

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Italian

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*Intermediate*

*45 min read*

Once upon a time there lived at Salerno a poor old woman who earned her bread by fishing, and whose only comfort and stay in life was her grandson, a boy twelve years of age, whose father had been drowned in a storm and whose mother had died of grief. Graceful, for this was the child's name, loved nobody in the world but his grandmother; he followed her to the shore every morning before daybreak to pick up the shell-fish or draw the net to the beach, longing for the time when he should be strong enough to go to sea himself and brave the waves that had swallowed up all his kindred. He was so handsome, so well made, and so promising, that no sooner had he entered the town with his basket of fish on his head than every one ran after him, and he sold the whole before he reached the market.

Unfortunately, the grandmother was very old; she had but one front tooth left, her head shook with age, and her eyes were dim. Every morning she found it harder to rise than the day before. Feeling that she had but a few days longer to live, at night, before Graceful wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down on the ground to sleep, she always gave him good counsels for him to follow when she was gone; she told him what fishermen to avoid, and how, by being good and industrious, prudent and resolute, he would make his way in the world and finally have a boat and nets of his own. The poor boy paid little heed to all this wisdom. As soon as his grandmother began to put on a grave air he threw his arms around her neck and cried: "Grandmamma, grandmamma, don't leave me. I have hands, I am strong, I shall soon be able to work for us both; but if you

were not here at night when I came home from fishing, what would become of me?”

“My child,” said the old woman one day to him, “I shall not leave you so much alone as you think; when I am gone you will have two powerful protectors whom more than one prince might envy you. A long time ago I did a favor to two great ladies, who will not forget you when the time comes to call them, which will be very soon.”

“Who are these two ladies?” asked Graceful, who had never seen any women but fishermen’s wives in the hut.

“They are two fairies,” replied his grandmother—“two powerful fairies—the Fairy of the Woods and the Fairy of the Waters. Listen to me, my child; I am going to intrust you with a secret—a secret which you must keep as carefully as I have done, and which will give you wealth and happiness. Ten years ago, the same year that your father died and your mother also left us, I went out one morning before daybreak to surprise the crabs asleep in the sand. As I was stooping down, hidden by a rock, I saw a kingfisher slowly floating toward the beach. The kingfisher is a sacred bird which should always be respected; knowing this, I let it alight and did not stir, for fear of frightening it. At the same moment I saw a beautiful green adder come from a cleft of the mountain and crawl along the sand toward the bird. When they were near each other, without either seeming surprised at the meeting, the adder coiled itself around the neck of the kingfisher, as if tenderly embracing it; they remained thus entwined for a few moments, after which they suddenly separated, the adder to return to the rock, and the kingfisher to plunge into the waves which bore it away.



“At night the grandmother always gave him good counsels for him to follow for when she was gone.” Illustration by Edward McCandlish, published in Laboulaye’s Fairy Book (1920), Harper.

“Greatly astonished at what I had seen, I returned the next morning at the same hour, and at the same hour the kingfisher also alighted on the sands and the adder came from its retreat. There was no doubt that they were fairies, perhaps enchanted fairies, to whom I could render a service. But what was I to do? To show myself would have been to displease them and run into danger; it was better to wait for a favorable opportunity which chance would doubtless offer. For a whole month I lay in ambush, witnessing the same spectacle every morning, when one day I saw a huge black cat arrive first at the place of meeting and hide itself behind a rock, almost under my hand. A black cat could be nothing else than an enchanter, according to what I had learned in my childhood, and I resolved to watch him. Scarcely had the kingfisher and the adder embraced each other when, behold! the cat gathered itself up and sprang upon these innocents. It was my turn to throw myself upon the wretch, who already held his victims in his murderous claws; I seized him, despite his struggles, although he tore my hands in pieces, and without pity, knowing with whom I had to deal, I took the knife which I used to open shell-fish, and cut off the monster’s head, claws, and tail, confidently awaiting the success of my devotion.

“I did not wait long; no sooner had I thrown the body of the animal into the sea than I saw before me two beautiful ladies, one crowned with white plumes, the other with a serpent’s skin thrown like a scarf across her shoulder. They were, as I have already told you, the Fairy of the Waters and the Fairy of the Woods, who, enchanted by a wretched genie who had learned their secret, had been forced to remain a kingfisher and an adder until freed by some generous hand, and who owed me their power and freedom.

“‘Ask of us what you will,’ said they, ‘and your request shall be instantly granted.’

“I reflected that I was old, and had suffered too much in life to wish to begin it anew, while the day would come, my child, when nothing would be too great for your desires; when you wish to be rich, noble—a general, a marquis, a prince, perhaps! When that day comes, thought I, I can give him everything, and a single moment of such happiness will repay me for eighty years of pain and misery. I thanked the fairies, therefore, and entreated them to keep their good will till the day when I should have need of it. The Fairy of the Waters took a

small feather from her crown, and the Fairy of the Woods detached a scale from her scarf.

“My good woman,’ said they, ‘when you wish for us, place this feather and this scale in a vessel of pure water and call on us, making a wish. Should we be at the end of the world, we will be at your side in an instant, ready to pay the debt we owe you.’

“I bowed my head in token of gratitude. When I raised it all had vanished; even the wounds and blood had disappeared from my hands, and I should have thought that I had been dreaming, had not the scale of the serpent and the feather of the kingfisher remained in my hand.”

“And where are these treasures, grandmamma?” asked Graceful.

“My child, I have carefully concealed them,” answered the old woman, “not wishing to show them to you till you were a man and able to make use of them; but since death is about to separate us, the moment has come to give you these precious talismans. You will find at the back of the cupboard a wooden chest hidden under some rags; in the chest is a little pasteboard box, wound about with tow; open this box and you will find the scale and the feather carefully wrapped in cotton. Take care not to break them; handle them respectfully, and I will tell you what next to do.”

Graceful brought the box to the poor woman, who was no longer able to quit her pallet, and she herself took from it the two articles.

“Now,” said she, giving them to her grandson, “put a bowlful of water in the middle of the room; place the scale and the feather in the water, and make a wish—wish for fortune, nobility, wit, power, whatever you please; only, as I feel that I am dying, kiss me once more, my child, before speaking the words that will separate us forever, and receive my last blessing; it will be another talisman to bring you happiness.”

But, to the old woman’s surprise, Graceful did not come near her, either to kiss her or to receive her blessing. He quickly placed the bowl in the middle of the room, threw the feather and scale into the water, and shouted at the top of his voice, “Appear, Fairy of the Waters! I wish that my grandmother may live forever. Appear, Fairy of the Woods! I wish that my grandmother may live forever.”

And behold! the water bubbled, bubbled, bubbled; the bowl grew to a great basin, which the walls of the hut

could scarcely hold, and from the bottom of the basin Graceful saw two beautiful young women rise, whom he knew directly from their wands to be fairies. One wore a crown of holly leaves mixed with red berries, and diamond ear-rings resembling acorns in their cups; she was dressed in a robe of olive green, over which a speckled skin was knotted like a scarf across the right shoulder—this was the Fairy of the Woods. As to the Fairy of the Waters, she wore a garland of reeds on her head, with a white robe trimmed with the feathers of aquatic birds, and a blue scarf, which now and then rose above her head and fluttered like the sail of a ship. Great ladies as they were, they looked smilingly at Graceful, who had taken refuge in his grandmother's arms, and trembled with fear and admiration.

“Here we are, my child,” said the Fairy of the Waters, who spoke first, as the eldest. “We have heard what you said, and your wish does you honor; but, though we can help you in the plan which you have conceived, you alone can execute it. We can, indeed, prolong your grandmother's life for some time, but, for her to live forever, you must go the Castle of Life, four long days' journey from here, on the coast of Sicily. There you will find the[53] Fountain of Immortality. If you can accomplish each of these four days' journey without turning aside from the road, and, on reaching the castle, can answer three questions that will be put to you by an invisible voice, you will obtain what you desire. But, my child, reflect well before undertaking this adventure, for you will meet more than one danger on the way; and if you fail a single time to reach the end of your day's journey you will not only miss the object of your pursuit, but you will never quit the country, from which none has ever returned.”

“I will go, madam,” returned Graceful.

“But you are very young, my child,” said the Fairy of the Woods, “and you do not even know the way.”

“No matter,” replied Graceful. “I am sure, beautiful ladies, that you will not forsake me, and to save my grandmother I would go to the end of the world.”

“Wait,” said the Fairy of the Woods. Then separating the lead from a broken window-pane, she placed it in the hollow of her hand.

And behold! the lead began to melt and bubble without seeming to burn the fairy, who threw the metal on the hearth, where it cooled in a thousand different forms.

“What do you see in all that?” said the fairy to Graceful.

“It seems to me, madam,” said he, after looking attentively, “that I see a spaniel with a long tail and large ears.”

“Call him,” said the fairy.

A barking was instantly heard, and forth from the metal sprang a black and flame-colored spaniel, which began to gambol and leap around Graceful.

“This will be your companion,” said the fairy. “His name is Fido. He will show you the way; but I warn you that it is for you to direct him, and not for him to lead you. If you make him obey, he will serve you; if you obey him, he will destroy you.”

“And I,” said the Fairy of the Waters, “have I nothing to give you, my poor Graceful?”

Then, looking around her, the lady saw on the ground a bit of paper, which she tossed into the fire with her tiny foot. The paper caught fire, and as soon as the blaze had died away thousands of little sparks were seen chasing one another about. The fairy watched these sparks with a curious eye; then, as the last one was about to go out, she blew upon the cinders, when, lo! the chirp of a bird was heard, and a swallow rose, which fluttered, terrified, about the room and finally alighted on Graceful’s shoulder.

“This will be your companion,” said the Fairy of the Waters. “Her name is Pensive. She will show you the way; but I warn you it is for you to direct her, and not for her to lead you. If you make her obey, she will serve you; if you obey her, she will destroy you.”

“Stir the black ashes,” added the good Fairy of the Waters, “and perhaps you will find something there.”

Graceful obeyed. Under the ashes of the paper he found a vial of rock crystal, sparkling like a diamond. This, the fairy said, was to hold the water of immortality, which would break any vessel made by the hand of man. By the side of the vial Graceful found a dagger with a triangular blade—a very different thing from the stiletto of his father the fisherman, which he had been forbidden to touch. With this weapon he could brave the proudest

enemy.

“My sister, you shall not be more generous than I,” said the other fairy; then, taking a rush from the only chair in the room, she blew upon it, when, lo! the rush instantly swelled, and in less time than it takes to tell it became a beautiful musket, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. A second rush produced a cartridge-box, which Graceful slung around his body and which became him marvelously. One would have thought him a prince setting out for the chase; he was so handsome that his grandmother wept for joy and emotion.

The two fairies vanished; Graceful kissed the good old woman, urging her to await his return, and knelt before her to receive her blessing. She entreated him to be patient, just, and charitable, and, above all, not to wander from the right path. “Not for my sake,” added the old woman, “for I would gladly welcome death, and I regret the wish that you have made, but for your own, my child, that you may return to me and that I may not die without your being here to close my eyes.”[56]

It was late. Graceful threw himself on the ground, too agitated, it seemed, to sleep. But slumber soon overtook him, and he slept soundly all night, while his poor grandmother watched the face of her dear child lighted by the flickering lamp, and did not weary of mournfully admiring him.

It was late. Graceful threw himself on the ground, too agitated, it seemed, to sleep. But slumber soon overtook him, and he slept soundly all night, while his poor grandmother watched the face of her dear child lighted by the flickering lamp, and did not weary of mournfully admiring him.

Early in the morning, when dawn was scarcely breaking, the swallow began to twitter, and Fido to pull the blankets. “Let us go, master—let us go,” said the two companions, in their language, which Graceful understood by the gift of the fairies; “the tide is already rising on the beach, the birds are singing, the flies are humming, and the flowers are opening in the sun. Let us go; it is time.”

Graceful kissed his grandmother for the last time, and took the road to Pæstum, Pensive fluttering to the right and the left in pursuit of the flies, and Fido fawning on his young master or running before him.

They had gone two leagues from the town when Graceful saw Fido talking with the ants, who were marching in

regular troops, carrying all their provisions with them.

“Where are you going?” asked he.

“To the Castle of Life,” they answered.

A little farther on Pensive encountered the grasshoppers, who had also set out on a journey, together with the bees and the butterflies; all were going to the Castle of Life,<sup>[57]</sup> to drink of the Fountain of Immortality. They traveled in company, like people following the same road. Pensive introduced Graceful to a young butterfly that chatted agreeably. Friendship springs up quickly in youth; in an hour the two comrades were inseparable.

To go straight forward does not suit the taste of butterflies, and Graceful’s friend was constantly losing himself among the grass. Graceful, who had never been free in his life, nor had seen so many flowers and so much sunshine, followed all the windings of his companion, and troubled himself no more about the day than if it were never to end; but, after a few leagues’ journey his new friend began to be weary.

“Don’t go any farther,” said he to Graceful. “See how beautiful is this landscape, how fragrant these flowers, and how balmy these fields. Let us stay here; this is life.”

“Let us go on,” said Fido; “the day is long, and we are only at the beginning.”

“Let us go on,” said Pensive; “the sky is clear and the horizon unbounded. Let us go on.”

Graceful, restored to his senses, reasoned sagely with the butterfly, who fluttered constantly to the right and the left, but all in vain. “What matters it to me?” said the insect. “Yesterday I was a caterpillar, to-night I shall be nothing. I will enjoy to-day.” And he settled on a full-blown Pæstum rose. The perfume was so strong that the poor<sup>[58]</sup> butterfly was suffocated. Graceful vainly endeavored to recall him to life; then, bemoaning his fate, he fastened him with a pin to his hat like a cockade.

Toward noon the grasshoppers stopped in turn. “Let us rest,” said they; “the heat will overpower us if we struggle against the noonday sun. It is so pleasant to live in sweet repose! Come, Graceful, we will divert you and you shall sing with us.”

“Listen to them,” said Pensive; “they sing so sweetly!” But Fido would not stop; his blood seemed on fire, and he

barked so furiously that Graceful forgot the grasshoppers to follow his importunate companion.

At evening Graceful met the honey-bee loaded with booty. "Where are you going?" said he.

"I am returning home," said the bee; "I shall not quit my hive."

"What!" rejoined Graceful; "industrious as you are, will you do like the grasshoppers and renounce your share in immortality?"

"Your castle is too far off," returned the bee. "I have not your ambition. My daily labor suffices for me; I care nothing for your travels; to me work is life."

Graceful was a little moved at losing so many of his fellow-travelers on the first day; but when he thought with what ease he had accomplished the first day's journey his heart was filled with joy. He caressed Fido, caught the flies which Pensive took from his hand, and slept full of hope, dreaming of his grandmother and the two fairies.

The next morning, at daybreak, Pensive called her young master.

"Let us go," said she; "the tide is already rising on the shore, the birds are singing, the bees are humming, and the flowers are opening in the sun. Let us go; it is time."

"Wait a moment," said Fido. "The day's journey is not long; before noon we shall be in sight of the temples of Pæstum, where we are to stop for the night."

"The ants are already on the way," returned Pensive; "the road is harder than yesterday, and the weather more uncertain. Let us go."

Graceful had seen his grandmother smiling on him in his dreams, and he set out on his way with even greater ardor than the day before. The morning was glorious; on the right the blue waves broke with a gentle murmur on the strand; on the left, in the distance, the mountains were tinged with a roseate hue; the plain was covered with tall grass sprinkled with flowers; the road was lined with aloes, jujubes, and acanthuses, and before them lay a cloudless horizon. Graceful, ravished with hope and pleasure, fancied himself already at the end of his journey. Fido bounded over the fields and chased the frightened partridges; Pensive soared in the air and

sported with the light. All at once Graceful saw a beautiful doe in the midst of the reeds, looking at him with languishing eyes as if she were calling him. He went toward her; she bounded forward, but only a little way. Three times she repeated the same trick, as if to allure him on.

“Let us follow her,” said Fido. “I will cut off the way and we will soon catch her.”

“Where is Pensive?” said Graceful.

“What does it matter?” replied Fido; “it is the work of an instant. Trust to me—I was born for the chase—and the doe is ours.”

Graceful did not let himself be bid twice. While Fido made a circuit he ran after the doe, which paused among the trees as if to suffer herself to be caught, then bounded forward as soon as the hand of the pursuer touched her. “Courage, master!” cried Fido, as he came upon her. But with a toss of the head, the doe flung the dog in the air, and fled swifter than the wind.

Graceful sprang forward in pursuit. Fido, with burning eyes and distended jaws, ran and yelped as if he were mad. They crossed ditches, brakes, and hedges, unchecked by nothing. The wearied doe lost ground. Graceful redoubled his ardor, and was already stretching out his hand to seize his prey when all at once the ground gave way beneath his feet and he fell, with his imprudent companion,<sup>[61]</sup> into a pit covered over with leaves. He had not recovered from his fall when the doe, approaching the brink, cried, “You are betrayed; I am the wife of the King of the Wolves, who is coming to eat you both.” Saying this, she disappeared.

“Alas! master,” said Fido, “the fairy was right in advising you not to follow me. We have acted foolishly and I have destroyed you.”

“At all events,” said Graceful, “we will defend our lives”; and, taking his musket, he double-loaded it, in readiness for the King of the Wolves; then, somewhat calmed, he examined the deep ditch into which he had fallen. It was too high for him to escape from it; in this hole he must await his death. Fido understood the look of his friend.

“Master,” said he, “if you take me in your arms and throw me with all your might, perhaps I can reach the top; and, once there, I can help you.”

Graceful had not much hope. Three times he endeavored to throw Fido, and three times the poor animal fell back; finally, at the fourth effort, he caught hold of some roots, and aided himself so well with his teeth and paws that he escaped from the tomb. He instantly threw into the ditch the boughs which he found about the edge.

“Master,” said he, “plant these branches in the earth and make yourself a ladder. Quick! quick!” he added. “I hear the howls of the King of the Wolves.”

Graceful was adroit and agile. Anger redoubled his strength; in a moment he was outside. Then he secured his dagger in his belt, changed the powder in the pan of his musket, and, placing himself behind a tree, awaited the enemy with firmness.

Suddenly a frightful cry was heard, and an animal, with tusks like those of the wild boar, rushed on him with prodigious bounds. Graceful took aim and fired. The bullet hit the mark and the animal fell back howling, but instantly sprang forward anew. “Load your musket again! Make haste!” cried Fido, springing courageously in the face of the monster and seizing his throat with his teeth.

The wolf had only to shake his head to fling the poor dog to the ground. He would have swallowed him at one mouthful had not Fido glided from his jaws, leaving one of his ears behind. It was Graceful’s turn to save his companion; he boldly advanced and fired his second shot, taking aim at the shoulder. The wolf fell; but, rising, with a last effort he threw himself on the hunter, who fell under him. On receiving this terrible shock, Graceful thought himself lost; but without losing courage, and calling the good fairies to his aid, he seized his dagger and thrust it into the heart of the animal, which, ready to devour his enemy, straightened his limbs and died.

Graceful rose, covered with blood and froth, and seated himself, trembling, upon a fallen tree. Fido crept painfully to his feet, without daring to caress him, for he felt how much he was to blame.

“Master,” said he, “what will become of us? Night is approaching and we are so far from Pæstum!”

“We must go,” said the child, and he rose; but he was so weak that he was obliged to sit down again. A burning

thirst devoured him; he was feverish and everything whirled before his eyes. He thought of his grandmother, and began to weep. What was poor Graceful's remorse for having so soon forgotten such fair promises, and condemned himself to die in a country from which there was no return, and all this for the bright eyes of a doe! How sadly ended the day so well begun!

Sinister howls were soon heard; the brothers of the King of the Wolves were calling him and coming to his aid. Graceful embraced Fido, his only friend, and forgave him the imprudence for which they were both about to pay with their lives; then loaded his musket, offered up a prayer to the good fairies, commended his grandmother to them, and prepared to die.

"Graceful! Graceful! where are you?" cried a little voice that could be none other than Pensive's, and the swallow alighted on the head of her master.

"Courage!" said she; "the wolves are still far off. There is a spring close by where you can quench your thirst and stanch your bleeding wounds, and I have found a hidden path which will lead us to Pæstum."

Graceful and Fido dragged themselves along to the brook, trembling with hope and fear; then entered the obscure path, a little reanimated by the soft twittering of Pensive. The sun had set; they walked in the twilight for some hours, and, when the moon rose, they were out of danger. They had still to journey over a painful and dangerous road for those who no longer had the ardor of the morning. There were marshes to cross, ditches to leap, and thickets to break through, which tore Graceful's face and hands; but at the thought that he could still repair his fault and save his grandmother his heart was so light that his strength redoubled at every step with his hope. At last, after a thousand obstacles, they reached Pæstum just as the stars marked midnight.

Graceful threw himself on the pavement of the temple of Neptune, and, after thanking Pensive, fell asleep, with Fido at his feet, wounded, bleeding, and silent.

The sleep was not long. Graceful was up before daybreak, which seemed long in coming. On descending the steps of the temple he saw the ants, who had raised a heap of sand and were bringing grain from the new harvest. The whole republic was in motion. The ants were all going or coming, talking to their neighbors, and receiving or giving orders; some were dragging wisps of straw, others were carrying bits of wood, others conveying away dead flies, and others heaping up provisions; it was a complete winter establishment.

“What!” said Graceful to the ants, “are you not going to the Castle of Life? Do you renounce immortality?”

“We have worked long enough,” answered one of the laborers; “the time for harvest has come. The road is long and the future uncertain, and we are rich. Let fools count on to-morrow; the wise man uses to-day. When a person has hoarded riches honestly it is true philosophy to enjoy them.”

Fido thought that the ant was right; but, as he no longer dared advise, he contented himself with shaking his head as they set out. Pensive, on the contrary, said that the ant was a selfish fellow, and that, if life were made only for enjoyment, the butterfly was wiser than he. At the same time, and with a lighter wing than ever, the swallow soared upward to lead the way.

Graceful walked on in silence. Ashamed of the follies of the day before, although he still regretted the doe, he resolved that on the third day nothing should turn him aside from the road. Fido, with his mutilated ear, limped after his master and seemed not less dreamy than he. At noon they sought for a shady place in which to rest for a few moments. The sun was less scorching than the day before. It seemed as if both country and season had changed. The road lay through meadows lately mown for the second time, or beautiful vineyards full of grapes, and was lined with great fig-trees laden with fruit, in which thousands of insects were humming; golden clouds were floating in the horizon, the air was soft and gentle, and everything tempted to repose.

In the most beautiful of the meadows, by the side of a brook which diffused its coolness afar, Graceful saw a herd of buffaloes chewing the cud under the shade of the ashes and plane-trees. They were lazily stretched on the ground, in a circle around a large bull that seemed their chief and king. Graceful approached them, and was received with politeness. They invited him by a nod to be seated, and pointed out to him great bowls full of milk and cheese. Our traveler admired the calmness and gravity of these peaceful and powerful animals, which

seemed like so many Roman senators in their curule chairs. The gold ring which they wore in their noses added still more to the majesty of their aspect. Graceful, who felt calmer and more sedate than the day before, thought, in spite of himself, how pleasant it would be to live in the midst of this peace and plenty; if happiness were anywhere, it must surely be found here.

Fido shared his master's opinion. It was the season of the southward migration of the quails; the ground was covered with tired birds, resting to regain strength before crossing the sea, and Fido had only to stoop down to find game worthy of a prince. Satiated with eating, he stretched himself at Graceful's feet and slept soundly.

When the buffaloes had finished chewing their cud, Graceful, who had hitherto feared to disturb them, entered into conversation with the bull, who showed a cultivated mind and wide experience.

"Are you the masters of this rich domain?" asked he.

"No," replied the old buffalo; "we belong, with all the rest, to the Fairy Crapaudine, the Queen of the Vermilion Towers, the richest of all the fairies."

"What does she require of you?" asked Graceful.

"Nothing, except to wear this gold ring in the nose and to pay her a tribute of milk," returned the bull, "or, at most, to give her one of our children from time to time to regale her guests. At this price we enjoy our plenty in perfect security, and we have no reason to envy any on earth, for none are so happy as we."

"Have you never heard of the Castle of Life and the Fountain of Immortality?" asked Graceful, who, without knowing why, blushed as he put the question.

"There were some old men among our ancestors who still talked of these visions," replied the bull; "but we are wiser than our fathers; we know that there is no other happiness than to chew the cud and sleep."

Graceful rose sadly to resume his journey, and asked what were those reddish square towers which he saw in the distance.

"They are the Vermilion Towers," returned the bull; "they bar the way; and you must pass through the castle of the Fairy Crapaudine in order to continue your road. You will see the fairy, my young friend, and she will offer

you hospitality and riches. Take my advice and do like those that have gone before you, all of whom accepted the favors of our mistress, and found that they had done well to abandon their dreams in order to live happy.”

“And what became of them?” asked Graceful.

“They became buffaloes like us,” rejoined the bull, who, not having finished his afternoon nap, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Graceful started and awakened Fido, who rose, grumbling. He called Pensive. Pensive did not answer; she was talking with a spider that had spun a great web between the branches of an ash-tree, which was glittering in the sun, full of flies. “Why take this long journey?” said the spider to the swallow. “What is the use of changing your climate and putting your life at the mercy of the sea, the weather, or a master? Look at me; I depend on nobody, and have everything for myself. I am my own mistress; I enjoy my art and genius; I bring the world to me; nothing can disturb either my calculations, or a serenity which I owe to myself alone.”

Graceful called Pensive three times without making her hear, so completely was she engrossed in admiration of her new friend. Every instant some giddy fly fell into the web, and each time the spider, like an attentive hostess, offered the prey to her astonished companion, when suddenly a breeze passed—a breeze so light that it did not ruffle a feather of the swallow’s wing. Pensive looked for the spider; the web had been swept away by the winds, and the poor insect was clinging by one foot to the last thread, when a bird seized it and bore it away.

Setting out again on their way, they proceeded in silence to the palace of Crapaudine. Graceful was introduced with great ceremony by two beautiful greyhounds, caparisoned with purple and wearing on their necks broad collars sparkling with rubies. After crossing a great number of halls, all full of pictures, statues, gold, and silver, and coffers overflowing with money and jewels, Graceful and his companions entered a circular temple, which was Crapaudine’s drawing-room. The walls were of lapis-lazuli, and the ceiling, of sky-blue enamel, was supported by twelve chiseled pillars of massive gold, with capitals of acanthus leaves of white enamel edged with gold. A huge frog, as large as a rabbit, was seated in a velvet easy-chair. It was the fairy of the place. The charming Crapaudine was draped in a scarlet mantle covered with glittering spangles, and wore on her head a ruby diadem whose luster lighted up her fat cheeks mottled with green and yellow. As soon as she perceived Graceful she extended to him her fingers, covered with rings, which the poor boy was obliged respectfully to

raise to his lips as he bowed.

“My friend,” said the fairy to him, in a hoarse voice, which she vainly tried to soften, “I was expecting you, and I will not be less generous to you than my sisters have been. On the way here you have seen but a small part of my riches. This palace, with its pictures, its statues, and its coffer full of gold, these vast domains, and these innumerable flocks, all may be yours if you wish; it depends only on yourself to become the richest and happiest of men.”

“What must I do for this?” asked Graceful, greatly excited.

“Less than nothing,” replied the fairy; “chop me up into little pieces and eat me. It is not a very disagreeable thing to do,” added Crapaudine, looking at Graceful with eyes redder than usual.

“Can I not season you, at least?” said Graceful, who had been unable to look without envy at the beautiful gardens of the fairy.

“No, you must eat me without seasoning; but walk about my palace, see and handle all my treasures, and reflect that, by giving me this proof of devotion, they will all be yours.”

“Master,” sighed Fido, in a supplicating voice, “a little courage! We are so comfortable here!”

Pensive said nothing, but her silence was consent. As to Graceful, who remembered the buffaloes and the gold ring, he distrusted the fairy. Crapaudine perceived it.

“Do not think, my dear Graceful, that I wish to deceive you,” she said. “In offering you all that I possess, I also demand of you a service which I will reward as it deserves. When you have done what I propose I shall become a young girl, as beautiful as Venus, except that my hands and feet will remain like those of a frog, which is very little when one is rich. Ten princes, twenty marquises, and thirty counts have already begged me to marry them as I am; when I become a woman, I will give you the preference, and we will enjoy my vast fortune together. Do not blush for your poverty; you have about you a treasure that is worth all mine, the vial which my sister gave you.” Saying this, she stretched out her slimy fingers to seize the talisman.

“Never!” cried Graceful, shrinking back, “never! I wish neither repose nor fortune; I wish to quit this place and to go to the Castle of Life.”

“You shall never go there!” exclaimed the fairy, in a rage. The castle instantly disappeared, a circle of fire surrounded Graceful, and an invisible clock began to strike midnight. At the first stroke the child started; at the second, without hesitating, he plunged headlong into the flames. To die for his grandmother seemed to him the only means of showing his love and repentance.

To Graceful’s surprise, the flames parted without touching him, and he suddenly found himself in a new country, with his two companions by his side. This country was no longer Italy, but Russia, the end of the earth. He was wandering on a mountain covered with snow. Around him he saw nothing but great trees, coated with hoar-frost and dripping water from all their branches; a damp and penetrating mist chilled him to the bones; the moist earth sank under his feet; and, to crown his wretchedness, it was necessary to descend a steep precipice, at the bottom of which a torrent was breaking noisily over the rocks. Graceful took his dagger and cut a branch from a tree to support his faltering steps. Fido, with his tail between his legs, barked feebly; and Pensive, her ruffled feathers covered with icicles, clung to her master’s shoulder. The poor bird was half dead, but she encouraged Graceful and did not complain.

When, after infinite pains, he reached the foot of the mountain, Graceful found a river filled with enormous icebergs, striking against one another and whirling in the<sup>[73]</sup> current, and this river he must cross, without bridge, without boat, and without aid.

“Master,” said Fido, “I can go no farther. Accursed be the fairy that drew me from nothingness to place me in your service.” Saying this, he lay down on the ground and would not stir. Graceful vainly tried to restore his courage, and called him his companion and friend. All that the poor dog could do was to answer his master’s caresses for the last time by wagging his tail and licking his hands; then his limbs stiffened and he expired.

Graceful took Fido on his back in order to carry him to the Castle of Life, and boldly climbed one of the icebergs, still followed by Pensive. With his staff he pushed this frail bark into the middle of the current, which bore it away with frightful rapidity.

“Master,” said Pensive, “do you hear the roaring of the waters? We are floating toward a whirlpool which will

swallow us up! Give me a last caress and farewell!”

“No,” said Graceful. “Why should the fairies have deceived us? The shore may be close by; perhaps the sun is shining behind the clouds. Mount, mount, my good Pensive; perchance above the fog you will find light and will see the Castle of Life!”

Pensive spread her half-frozen wings, and courageously soared amid the cold and mist. Graceful listened for a moment to the sound of her flight; then all was silent, while<sup>[74]</sup> the iceberg pursued its furious course through the darkness. Graceful waited a long time; at last, when he felt himself alone, hope abandoned him, and he lay down to await death on the tottering iceberg. Livid flashes of lightning shot through the clouds, horrible bursts of thunder were heard, and the end of the world and of time seemed approaching. All at once, in the midst of his despair, Graceful heard the cry of the swallow, and Pensive fell at his feet. “Master, master,” cried she, “you were right. I have seen the shore; the dawn is close at hand. Courage!” Saying this, she convulsively spread her tired wings and lay motionless and lifeless.

Graceful started up, placed the poor bird that had sacrificed itself for him next his heart, and, with superhuman ardor, urged the iceberg on to safety or destruction. Suddenly he heard the roaring of the breakers. He fell on his knees and closed his eyes, awaiting death.

A wave like a mountain broke over his head and cast him fainting on the shore, which no living person had touched before him.

When Graceful recovered his senses, the ice, clouds, and darkness had disappeared. He was lying on the ground in the midst of a charming country, covered with trees bathed in a soft light. In front of him was a beautiful castle, from which bubbled a brook that flowed into a sea as blue, calm, and transparent as the sky. Graceful looked about him; he was alone—alone with the remains of his two companions, which the waves had washed on the shore. Exhausted with suffering and excitement, he dragged himself to the brook and bent over the water to refresh his parched lips, when he shrank back with affright. It was not his face that he saw in the water, but that of an old man with silvery locks who strongly resembled him. He turned round; there was no one behind him. He again drew near the fountain; he saw the old man, or rather, doubtless, the old man was himself. “Great fairies,” he cried. “I understand you. If it is my life that you wish in exchange for that of my grandmother, I joyfully accept the sacrifice.” And without troubling himself further about his old age and

wrinkles, he plunged his head into the water and drank eagerly.

On rising, he was astonished to see himself again as he was when he left home, only more beautiful, with blacker hair and brighter eyes than ever. He picked up his hat, which had fallen near the spring, and which a drop of water had touched by chance, when what was his surprise to see the butterfly that he had pinned to it fluttering its wings and seeking to fly. He gave it its liberty, and ran to the beach for Fido and Pensive, then plunged them both into the blessed fountain. Pensive flew upward with a joyful cry and disappeared amid the turrets of the castle. Fido, shaking the water from both ears, ran to the kennels of the palace, where he was met by magnificent watch-dogs, which, instead of barking and growling at the new-comer, welcomed him joyfully like an old friend. Graceful had at last found the Fountain of Immortality, or rather the brook that flowed from it—a brook already greatly weakened, and which only gave two or three hundred years of life to those that drank of it; but nothing prevented them from drinking anew.

Graceful filled his vial with this life-giving water and approached the palace. His heart beat, for a last trial remained. So near success, he feared the more to fail. He mounted the steps of the castle. All was closed and silent; no one was there to receive the traveler. When he had reached the last step and was about to knock at the door, a voice, rather gentle than harsh, stopped him.

“Have you loved?” said the invisible voice.

“Yes,” answered Graceful; “I have loved my grandmother better than any one in the world.”

The door opened a little way.

“Have you suffered for her whom you have loved?” resumed the voice.

“I have suffered,” replied Graceful; “much through my own fault, doubtless, but a little for her whom I wished to save.”

The door opened half-way and the child caught a glimpse of woods, waters, and a sky more beautiful than anything of which he had ever dreamed.

“Have you always done your duty?” said the voice, in a harsher tone.

“Alas! no,” replied Graceful, falling on his knees; “but when I have failed I have been punished by my remorse even more than by the hard trials through which I have passed. Forgive me, and punish me as I deserve, if I have not yet expiated all my faults; but save her whom I love—save my grandmother.”

The door instantly opened wide, though Graceful saw no one. Intoxicated with joy, he entered a courtyard surrounded with arbors embowered in foliage, with a fountain in the midst, spouting from a tuft of flowers larger, more beautiful, and more fragrant than any he had seen on earth. By the side of the spring stood a woman dressed in white, of noble bearing, and seemingly not more than forty years old. She advanced to meet Graceful, and smiled on him so sweetly that the child felt himself touched to the heart, and his eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t you know me?” said the woman.

“Oh, grandmother! is it you?” he exclaimed. “How came you in the Castle of Life?”

“My child,” said she, pressing him to her heart, “He who brought me here is an enchanter more powerful than the fairies of the woods and the waters. I shall never more return to Salerno. I shall receive my reward here for the little good I have done by tasting a happiness which time will not destroy.”

“And me, grandmother!” cried Graceful, “what shall become of me? After seeing you here, how can I return to suffer alone?”

“My dear child,” she replied, “no one can live on earth after he has caught a glimpse of the celestial delights of this abode. You have lived, my dear Graceful; life has nothing more to teach you. You have passed in four days through the desert where I languished eighty years, and henceforth nothing can separate us.”

The door closed, and from that time nothing was heard of Graceful or his grandmother. It was in vain that search was made for the palace and enchanted fountain; they were never more discovered on earth. But if we understood the language of the stars, if we felt what their gentle rays tell us every evening, we should long ago have learned from them where to look for the Castle of Life and the Fountain of Immortality.

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