



The Crystal Casket

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Italian

Intermediate
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There was once a widower who had a daughter. This daughter was between ten and twelve years old. Her father sent her to school, and as she was all alone in the world commended her always to her teacher. Now, the teacher, seeing that the child had no mother, fell in love with the father, and kept saying to the girl: "Ask your father if he would like me for a wife." This she said to her every day, and at last the girl said: "Papa, the school-mistress is always asking me if you will marry her." The father said: "Eh! my daughter, if I take another wife, you will have great troubles." But the girl persisted, and finally the father was persuaded to go one evening to the school-mistress' house. When she saw him she was well pleased, and they settled the marriage in a few days. Poor child! how bitterly she had to repent having found a stepmother so ungrateful and cruel to her! She sent her every day out on a terrace to water a pot of basil, and it was so dangerous that if she fell she would go into a large river.

One day there came by a large eagle, and said to her: "What are you doing here?" She was weeping because she saw how great the danger was of falling into the stream. The eagle said to her: "Get on my back, and I will carry you away, and you will be happier than with your new mamma." After a long journey they reached a great plain, where they found a beautiful palace all of crystal; the eagle knocked at the door and said: "Open, my ladies, open! for I have brought you a pretty girl." When the people in the palace opened the door, and saw that lovely girl, they were amazed, and kissed and caressed her. Meanwhile the door was closed, and they remained

peaceful and contented.

Let us return to the eagle, who thought she was doing a spite to the stepmother. One day the eagle flew away to the terrace where the stepmother was watering the basil. "Where is your daughter?" asked the eagle. "Eh!" she replied, "perhaps she fell from this terrace and went into the river; I have not heard from her in ten days." The eagle answered: "What a fool you are! I carried her away; seeing that you treated her so harshly I carried her away to my fairies, and she is very well." Then the eagle flew away.

The stepmother, filled with rage and jealousy, called a witch from the city, and said to her: "You see my daughter is alive, and is in the house of some fairies of an eagle which often comes upon my terrace; now you must do me the favor to find some way to kill this stepdaughter of mine, for I am afraid that some day or other she will return, and my husband, discovering this matter, will certainly kill me." The witch answered: "Oh, you need not be afraid of that: leave it to me."

What did the witch do? She had made a little basketful of sweetmeats, in which she put a charm; then she wrote a letter, pretending that it was her father, who, having learned where she was, wished to make her this present, and the letter pretended that her father was so glad to hear that she was with the fairies.

Let us leave the witch who is arranging all this deception, and return to Ermellina (for so the young girl was named). The fairies had said to her: "See, Ermellina, we are going away, and shall be absent four days; now in this time take good care not to open the door to any one, for some treachery is being prepared for you by your stepmother." She promised to open the door to no one: "Do not be anxious, I am well off, and my stepmother has nothing to do with me." But it was not so. The fairies went away, and the next day when Ermellina was alone, she heard a knocking at the door, and said to herself: "Knockaway! I don't open to any one."

But meanwhile the blows redoubled, and curiosity forced her to look out of the window. What did she see? She saw one of the servant girls of her own home (for the witch had disguised herself as one of her father's servants). "O my dear Ermellina," she said, "your father is shedding tears of sorrow for you, because he really believed you were dead, but the eagle which carried you off came and told him the good news that you were here with the fairies. Meanwhile your father, not knowing what civility to show you, for he understands very well that you are in need of nothing, has thought to send you this little basket of sweetmeats."

Ermellina had not yet opened the door; the servant begged her to come down and take the basket and the letter, but she said: "No, I wish nothing!" but finally, since women, and especially young girls, are fond of sweetmeats, she descended and opened the door. When the witch had given her the basket, she said: "Eat this," and broke off for her a piece of the sweetmeats which she had poisoned. When Ermellina took the first mouthful the old woman disappeared. Ermellina had scarcely time to close the door, when she fell down on the stairs.

When the fairies returned they knocked at the door, but no one opened it for them; then they perceived that there had been some treachery, and began to weep. Then the chief of the fairies said: "We must break open the door," and so they did, and saw Ermellina dead on the stairs. Her other friends who loved her so dearly begged the chief of the fairies to bring her to life, but she would not, "for," said she, "she has disobeyed me;" but one and the other asked her until she consented; she opened Ermellina's mouth, took out a piece of the sweetmeat which she had not yet swallowed, raised her up, and Ermellina came to life again.

We can imagine what a pleasure it was for her friends; but the chief of the fairies reproved her for her disobedience, and she promised not to do so again.

Once more the fairies were obliged to depart. Their chief said: "Remember, Ermellina: the first time I cured you, but the second I will have nothing to do with you." Ermellina said they need not worry, that she would not open to any one. But it was not so; for the eagle, thinking to increase her stepmother's anger, told her again that Ermellina was alive. The stepmother denied it all to the eagle, but she summoned anew the witch, and told her that her stepdaughter was still alive, saying: "Either you will really kill her, or I will be avenged on you." The old woman, finding herself caught, told her to buy a very handsome dress, one of the handsomest she could find, and transformed herself into a tailoress belonging to the family, took the dress, departed, went to poor Ermellina, knocked at the door and said: "Open, open, for I am your tailoress." Ermellina looked out of the window and saw her tailoress; and was, in truth, a little confused (indeed, anyone would have been so). The tailoress said, "Come down, I must fit a dress on you." She replied, "No, no; for I have been deceived once." "But I am not the old woman," replied the tailoress, "you know me, for I have always made your dresses." Poor Ermellina was persuaded, and descended the stairs; the tailoress took to flight while Ermellina was yet buttoning up the dress, and disappeared. Ermellina closed the door, and was mounting the stairs; but it was

not permitted her to go up, for she fell down dead.

Let us return to the fairies, who came home and knocked at the door; but what good did it do to knock! There was no longer any one there. They began to weep. The chief of the fairies said: "I told you that she would betray me again; but now I will have nothing more to do with her." So they broke open the door, and saw the poor girl with that beautiful dress on; but she was dead. They all wept, because they really loved her. But there was nothing to do; the chief struck her enchanted wand, and commanded a beautiful rich casket all covered with diamonds and other precious stones to appear; then the others made a beautiful garland of flowers and gold, put it on the young girl, and then laid her in the casket, which was so rich and beautiful that it was marvellous to behold. Then the old fairy struck her wand as usual and commanded a handsome horse, the like of which not even the king possessed. Then they took the casket, put it on the horse's back, and led him into the public square of the city, and the chief of the fairies said: "Go, and do not stop until you find some one who says to you: 'Stop, for pity's sake, for I have lost my horse for you.'"

Now let us leave the afflicted fairies, and turn our attention to the horse, which ran away at full speed. Who happened to pass at that moment? The son of a king (the name of this king is not known); and saw this horse with that wonder on its back. Then the king began to spur his horse, and rode him so hard that he killed him, and had to leave him dead in the road; but the king kept running after the other horse. The poor king could endure it no longer; he saw himself lost, and exclaimed: "Stop, for pity's sake, for I have lost my horse for you!" Then the horse stopped (for those were the words). When the king saw that beautiful girl dead in the casket, he thought no more about his own horse, but took the other to the city. The king's mother knew that her son had gone hunting; when she saw him returning with this loaded horse, she did not know what to think. The son had no father, wherefore he was all powerful. He reached the palace, had the horse unloaded, and the casket carried to his chamber; then he called his mother and said: "Mother, I went hunting, but I have found a wife." "But what is it? A doll? A dead woman?" "Mother," replied her son, "don't trouble yourself about what it is, it is my wife." His mother began to laugh, and withdrew to her own room (what could she do, poor mother?)

Now this poor king no longer went hunting, took no diversion, did not even go to the table, but ate in his own room. By a fatality it happened that war was declared against him, and he was obliged to depart. He called his mother, and said: "Mother, I wish two careful chambermaids, whose business it shall be to guard this casket; for if on my return I find that anything has happened to my casket, I shall have the chambermaids killed." His

mother, who loved him, said: "Go, my son, fear nothing, for I myself will watch over your casket." He wept several days at being obliged to abandon this treasure of his, but there was no help for it, he had to go.

After his departure he did nothing but commend his wife (so he called her) to his mother in his letters. Let us return to the mother, who no longer thought about the matter, not even to have the casket dusted; but all at once there came a letter which informed her that the king had been victorious, and should return to his palace in a few days. The mother called the chambermaids, and said to them: "Girls, we are ruined." They replied: "Why, Highness?" "Because my son will be back in a few days, and how have we taken care of the doll?" They said: "True, true; now let us go and wash the doll's face."

They went to the king's room and saw that the doll's face and hands were covered with dust and fly-specks, so they took a sponge and washed her face, but some drops of water fell on her dress and spotted it. The poor chambermaids began to weep, and went to the queen for advice. The queen said: "Do you know what to do! call a tailoress, and have a dress precisely like this bought, and take off this one before my son comes." They did so, and the chambermaids went to the room and began to unbutton the dress. The moment that they took off the first sleeve, Ermellina opened her eyes. The poor chambermaids sprang up in terror, but one of the most courageous said: "I am a woman, and so is this one; she will not eat me."

To cut the matter short, she took off the dress, and when it was removed Ermellina began to get out of the casket to walk about and see where she was. The chambermaids fell on their knees before her and begged her to tell them who she was. She, poor girl, told them the whole story. Then she said: "I wish to know where I am?" Then the chambermaids called the king's mother to explain it to her. The mother did not fail to tell her everything, and she, poor girl, did nothing but weep penitently, thinking of what the fairies had done for her.

The king was on the point of arriving, and his mother said to the doll: "Come here; put on one of my best dresses." In short, she arrayed her like a queen. Then came her son. They shut the doll up in a small room, so that she could not be seen. The king came with great joy, with trumpets blowing, and banners flying for the victory. But he took no interest in all this, and ran at once to his room to see the doll; the chambermaids fell on their knees before him saying that the doll smelled so badly that they could not stay in the palace, and were obliged to bury her. The king would not listen to this excuse, but at once called two of the palace servants to erect the gallows. His mother comforted him in vain: "My son, it was a dead woman." "No, no, I will not listen

to any reasons; dead or alive, you should have left it for me.”

Finally, when his mother saw that he was in earnest about the gallows, she rang a little bell, and there came forth no longer the doll, but a very beautiful girl, whose like was never seen. The king was amazed, and said: “What is this!” Then his mother, the chambermaids, and Ermellina, were obliged to tell him all that had happened. He said: “Mother, since I adored her when dead, and called her my wife, now I mean her to be my wife in truth.”

“Yes, my son,” replied his mother, “do so, for I am willing.” They arranged the wedding, and in a few days were man and wife.

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