

The Crystal Coffin

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

German

Advanced
12 min read

Now let no one say that a poor tailor can't get on in the world, and, indeed, even attain to very high honour. Nothing is required but to set the right way to work, but of course the really important thing is to succeed.

A very bright active young tailor once set off on his travels, which led him into a wood, and as he did not know the way he soon lost himself. Night came on, and there seemed to be nothing for it but to seek out the best resting-place he could find. He could have made himself quite comfortable with a bed of soft moss, but the fear of wild beasts disturbed his mind, and at last he determined to spend the night in a tree.

He sought out a tall oak tree, climbed up to the top, and felt devoutly thankful that his big smoothing-iron was in his pocket, for the wind in the tree-tops was so high that he might easily have been blown away altogether.

After passing some hours of the night, not without considerable fear and trembling, he noticed a light shining at a little distance, and hoping it might proceed from some house where he could find a better shelter than in the top of the tree, he cautiously descended and went towards the light. It led him to a little hut all woven together of reeds and rushes. He knocked bravely at the door, which opened, and by the light which shone from within he saw an old gray-haired man dressed in a coat made of bright-coloured patches. 'Who are you, and what do you want?' asked the old man roughly.

'I am a poor tailor,' replied the youth. 'I have been benighted in the forest, and I entreat you to let me take shelter in your hut till morning.'

'Go your way,' said the old man in a sulky tone, 'I'll have nothing to do with tramps. You must just go elsewhere.'

With these words he tried to slip back into his house, but the tailor laid hold of his coat-tails, and begged so hard to be allowed to stay that the old fellow, who was by no means as cross as he appeared, was at length touched by his entreaties, let him come in, and after giving him some food, showed him quite a nice bed in one corner of the room. The weary tailor required no rocking to rest, but slept sound till early morning, when he was roused from his slumbers by a tremendous noise. Loud screams and shouts pierced the thin walls of the little hut. The tailor, with new-born courage, sprang up, threw on his clothes with all speed and hurried out. There he saw a huge black bull engaged in a terrible fight with a fine large stag. They rushed at each other with such fury that the ground seemed to tremble under them and the whole air to be filled with their cries. For some time it appeared quite uncertain which would be the victor, but at length the stag drove his antlers with such force into his opponent's body that the bull fell to the ground with a terrific roar, and a few more strokes finished him.

The tailor, who had been watching the fight with amazement, was still standing motionless when the stag bounded up to him, and before he had time to escape forked him up with its great antlers, and set off at full gallop over hedges and ditches, hill and dale, through wood and water. The tailor could do nothing but hold on tight with both hands to the stag's horns and resign himself to his fate. He felt as if he were flying along. At length the stag paused before a steep rock and gently let the tailor down to the ground.

Feeling more dead than alive, he paused for a while to collect his scattered senses, but when he seemed somewhat restored the stag struck such a blow on a door in the rock that it flew open. Flames of fire rushed forth, and such clouds of steam followed that the stag had to avert its eyes. The tailor could not think what to do or which way to turn to get away from this awful wilderness, and to find his way back amongst human beings once more.

As he stood hesitating, a voice from the rock cried to him: 'Step in without fear, no harm shall befall you.'

He still lingered, but some mysterious power seemed to impel him, and passing through the door he found

himself in a spacious hall, whose ceiling, walls, and floor were covered with polished tiles carved all over with unknown figures. He gazed about, full of wonder, and was just preparing to walk out again when the same voice bade him: 'Tread on the stone in the middle of the hall, and good luck will attend you.'

By this time he had grown so courageous that he did not hesitate to obey the order, and hardly had he stepped on the stone than it began to sink gently with him into the depths below. On reaching firm ground he found himself in a hall of much the same size as the upper one, but with much more in it to wonder at and admire. Round the walls were several niches, in each of which stood glass vessels filled with some bright-coloured spirit or bluish smoke. On the floor stood two large crystal boxes opposite each other, and these attracted his curiosity at once.

Stepping up to one of them, he saw within it what looked like a model in miniature of a fine castle surrounded by farms, barns, stables, and a number of other buildings. Everything was quite tiny, but so beautifully and carefully finished that it might have been the work of an accomplished artist. He would have continued gazing much longer at this remarkable curiosity had not the voice desired him to turn round and look at the crystal coffin which stood opposite.

What was his amazement at seeing a girl of surpassing loveliness lying in it! She lay as though sleeping, and her long, fair hair seemed to wrap her round like some costly mantle. Her eyes were closed, but the bright colour in her face, and the movement of a ribbon, which rose and fell with her breath, left no doubt as to her being alive.

As the tailor stood gazing at her with a beating heart, the maiden suddenly opened her eyes, and started with delighted surprise.

'Great heavens!' she cried, 'my deliverance approaches! Quick, quick, help me out of my prison; only push back the bolt of this coffin and I am free.'

The tailor promptly obeyed, when she quickly pushed back the crystal lid, stepped out of the coffin and hurried to a corner of the hall, when she proceeded to wrap herself in a large cloak. Then she sat down on a stone, desired the young man to come near, and, giving him an affectionate kiss, she said, 'My long-hoped-for deliverer, kind heaven has led you to me, and has at length put an end to all my sufferings. You are my destined husband, and, beloved by me, and endowed with every kind of riches and power, you shall spend the remainder of your life in peace and happiness. Now sit down and hear my story. I am the daughter of a wealthy

nobleman. My parents died when I was very young, and they left me to the care of my eldest brother, by whom I was carefully educated. We loved each other so tenderly, and our tastes and interests were so much alike that we determined never to marry, but to spend our entire lives together. There was no lack of society at our home. Friends and neighbours paid us frequent visits, and we kept open house for all. Thus it happened that one evening a stranger rode up to the castle and asked for hospitality, as he could not reach the nearest town that night. We granted his request with ready courtesy, and during supper he entertained us with most agreeable conversation, mingled with amusing anecdotes. My brother took such a fancy to him that he pressed him to spend a couple of days with us, which, after a little hesitation, the stranger consented to do. We rose late from table, and whilst my brother was showing our guest to his room I hurried to mine, for I was very tired and longed to get to bed. I had hardly dropped off to sleep when I was roused by the sound of some soft and charming music. Wondering whence it could come, I was about to call to my maid who slept in the room next mine, when, to my surprise, I felt as if some heavy weight on my chest had taken all power from me, and I lay there unable to utter the slightest sound. Meantime, by the light of the night lamp, I saw the stranger enter my room, though the double doors had been securely locked. He drew near and told me that through the power of his magic arts he had caused the soft music to waken me, and had made his way through bolts and bars to offer me his hand and heart. My repugnance to his magic was so great that I would not condescend to give any answer. He waited motionless for some time, hoping no doubt for a favourable reply, but as I continued silent he angrily declared that he would find means to punish my pride, and therewith he left the room in a rage.

‘I spent the night in the greatest agitation, and only fell into a doze towards morning. As soon as I awoke I jumped up, and hurried to tell my brother all that had happened, but he had left his room, and his servant told me that he had gone out at daybreak to hunt with the stranger.

‘My mind misgave me. I dressed in all haste, had my palfrey saddled, and rode off at full gallop towards the forest, attended by one servant only. I pushed on without pausing, and ere long I saw the stranger coming towards me, and leading a fine stag. I asked him where he had left my brother, and how he had got the stag, whose great eyes were overflowing with tears. Instead of answering he began to laugh, and I flew into such a rage that I drew a pistol and fired at him; but the bullet rebounded from his breast and struck my horse in the forehead. I fell to the ground, and the stranger muttered some words, which robbed me of my senses.

‘When I came to myself I was lying in a crystal coffin in this subterranean vault. The Magician appeared again, and told me that he had transformed my brother into a stag, had reduced our castle and all its defences to

miniature and locked them up in a glass box, and after turning all our household into different vapours had banished them into glass phials. If I would only yield to his wishes he could easily open these vessels, and all would then resume their former shapes.

‘I would not say a word more than I had done previously, and he vanished, leaving me in my prison, where a deep sleep soon fell on me. Amongst the many dreams which floated through my brain was a cheering one of a young man who was to come and release me, and to-day, when I opened my eyes, I recognised you and saw that my dream was fulfilled. Now help me to carry out the rest of my vision. The first thing is to place the glass box which contains my castle on this large stone.’

As soon as this was done the stone gently rose through the air and transported them into the upper hall, whence they easily carried the box into the outer air. The lady then removed the lid, and it was marvellous to watch the castle, houses, and farmyards begin to grow and spread themselves till they had regained their proper size. Then the young couple returned by means of the movable stone, and brought up all the glass vessels filled with smoke. No sooner were they uncorked than the blue vapours poured out and became transformed to living people, in whom the lady joyfully recognised her many servants and attendants.

Her delight was complete when her brother (who had killed the Magician under the form of a bull) was seen coming from the forest in his proper shape, and that very day, according to her promise, she gave her hand in marriage to the happy young tailor.

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