

The Fairy Ring

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Greek

Intermediate

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PETROS GOURAS! The name rang through all the Peloponnesus, and every tongue that spoke it spoke in praise and every ear that heard it listened in admiration. Petros came of a noble family of warriors, rich and powerful, with lands, herds, gold, and rare beauty of form and feature, as his heritage.

Three days after the birth of Petros, his fairy grandmother, Selena, came to offer blessings and gifts. She brought her grandson a bag of incense and hung it about his neck to protect him from evil. Three kisses she gave him for the Holy Trinity and then from her leather bag she drew a ring. It was a ring such as no one in all that country had ever seen.

The gold band was delicately fashioned and engraved with strange figures, and the jewel caught the light in its crimson heart and flashed it out again with dazzling radiance.

“This is my gift to my grandson,” said Selena as she kissed the ring three times. “He shall not put it on his finger until the day he is twenty-one years old, for only then will he be strong enough and wise enough to wear it.” She made the sign of the cross upon the head of the child, upon the head of the mother and upon the ring, and touching the heart of mother and child, she went away, murmuring words that no one could understand.

The ring was a magic ring which the queen of the fairies had bestowed upon Selena when she was a fairy maiden. It would have made her queen, and it was her most beloved treasure until one day on the Eagle’s Hill she saw Panàgos Gouras. Then Selena remembered that fairy queens never marry. Mortal youths are only their

slaves. Suddenly the idea of being a queen lost its fascination.

Selena kept the image of Panàgos ever before her. Sometimes she would go to the spot on the Eagle's Hill where she had seen him, and weep, wishing she need never go back to the fairy palace. One day, after three years, Panàgos Gouras came upon her thus as he was on his way to the Laconian Gulf to meet a ship from the Aegean. At his first glimpse of Selena he vowed never to part from her. He did not meet his ship; he did not reach the Laconian Gulf; he took the beautiful fairy maiden back with him to his home among the hills. Selena thus renounced the right to queenship for the love of a mortal, and became the grandmother of the far-famed Petros Gouras.

The fairy grandmother was as beautiful as the moon, the loveliest woman in the land. Panàgos, her husband, was no less beautiful, and he was one among the many warriors in his family who defended the hills of Taegetos against the Turks and allowed no Turkish foot to step thereon. Because of Selena the family was called Neraidogenemanoi, and its descendants ever after were the fairest, richest and most noble in that part of Lacedemonia.

When Petros grew to the stature of a man and could fight the Turks side by side with his father, he was given the fairy ring and told by his mother all that she knew of it. Petros kept it in his sash, and often while alone on the hills he would look at it, wonder where it had come from, and dream of fairies, their flower gardens and their palaces, as though he saw them in the strange figures on the ring.

Petros reached his twentieth year. He was alone one day upon the Aetorahe, Eagle's Hill, from where he could gaze far away to the east where the Eurotas River rolls. It was springtime; the hills of Taegetos were abloom; cedars, firs and pines gave to the breeze their rich odors; birds sang; and shepherdesses danced on the hills to the music of flutes which their sweethearts played. Petros' heart was filled with vague longings. He took out the ring and gazed into the bright depths of the jewel.

"I am nearly twenty-one," he thought. "I am old enough to fight the Turks. Surely I am strong enough and wise enough to wear the ring. What harm could there be in it? Besides, who would know?"

He looked about. His dogs were sleeping near him. Quiet filled the land, for it was mid-day and the field workers were at rest in the shadows of trees. Swiftly, as though not to be seen, he slipped the ring on his finger.

All was as it had been for a moment. Then far away on the Laconian Gulf three cloud-like chariots with leaping

white horses, and an army of strange, fairy forms appeared, moving toward him. With incredible speed they came on and in an instant the Aetorahe was enveloped in them, while music and voices and the beating of drums echoed through all the hills. Petros was lifted onto a white horse. The earth seemed to slip away from him and drop down, down. There was no sensation of motion, only a great wind in his face, and hills, trees and streams whirling beneath him.

Then he could not distinguish any objects below. All about him was cloud. The sunlight was dim and even the faces of the fairy host were blurred and indistinct. At last after what seemed days and days of riding without motion on the horse's back, Petros saw ahead a mysterious shore. A city of mist rested upon it and was faintly reflected in the cloudy sea on which they floated. A palace of pearl could be seen from afar, like a pile of foam glimmering in the faded light. The great silver gate of the city at the very edge of the sea, admitted them through the banked cloud walls to the pearl-studded path to the palace.

Petros was assisted to the ground. Throngs of fairy maidens in white, with chains of pearls entwined with flowers, greeted him in song and led him to the palace. The path lay between gardens of white roses, roses of thirty petals, of a hundred petals, of a thousand petals, whose perfume hung heavy above them. The maidens parted, bowing on either hand while Petros passed up the sixty-six silver steps that led into the hall.

Fairies in blue, in white and in gray, colors of the sky, surrounded him. Strange notes, sweet as the murmur of the Eurotas, fell upon his ears. The inner walls of the palace were festooned with cloud-like draperies caught with pearls. In the center of the main hall was a crystal fountain and beyond it, as behind a shimmering veil, the fairy queen sat upon her throne.

Petros was dazzled, but the queen smiled reassuringly and spoke in the gentlest of voices.

"Petros Gouras, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Oh queen," murmured the young man, almost overwhelmed by her beauty and by the strangeness of all that was happening, "oh queen, ask anything you wish of me."

"My dearest desire in the world," she explained, "is to possess the ring that you wear on your finger. This jewel may mean only a little to you, but to me it is more precious than all things else."

Instinctively Petros held out his hand and looked at the ring. He had not thought of it since the appearance of the fairy hosts. He would have given much to please the queen, but the ring was the gift of his fairy

grandmother.

“Ask anything but this, oh queen, I beg of you, for this only I cannot give.”

The queen’s frown seemed to darken the room. She arose and with an imperious gesture summoned fifty of her servants.

“Take the ring from him,” she ordered, “and bring it to me.”

In spite of Petros’ resistance, she was instantly obeyed. Joyfully she seized the ring, but in a flash her expression changed to angry disappointment, almost fear.

“Oh!” she cried. “A cross upon it! A mortal’s work! Give it back to him. Give it back. Evil upon my palace. Take him away! Take him away!”

Again the queen’s command was immediately carried out. The ring was placed on his finger and Petros was rushed down the steps, along the path, through the gate and on horseback across the mysterious sea of foam to the top of the Aetorahe. When he had time to catch his breath and look about, the fairies had disappeared and he was sitting in the same spot as before with his dogs asleep near by.

Petros wished then that he had obeyed his grandmother’s warning and waited until he was twenty-one. Still, he had escaped. The cross Selena had made upon the ring saved it for him. Probably now, he reasoned, the fairies would never try again to take it. He might just as well go on wearing it.

Months passed. The father and mother of Petros were both dead. A strange disease fell upon his herds and their vast numbers were reduced by more than half. Thieves one night broke into Petros’ house, murdered the old servant who had guarded it for years, and escaped with all the gold and jewels they could carry. Crops failed. Part of the land had to be sold. Petros, who had not known illness, moved about thin and wan. His pride, that had been fed by envy and adulation, had to endure pity from all who saw him. He neglected the supervision of his fields and flocks, to wander over the hills in search of wild plants for potions. Every remedy suggested by wise old women, eager with advice, he tried. He made offerings, and of the riches that remained gave lavishly to the poor. But evil was upon his house and nothing availed against it.

Ten months before he would reach the age of twenty-one, Petros heard of a sorceress, Nessena, who in passing through the country, had taken up a temporary abode among the highest rocks of the Taetetos. When he

learned that even the Archontes, chiefs, of Lacedemonia went to consult her on mystical matters, he decided to ask her help in his trouble. Through a friend he was given an audience and was told to meet Nessena at the top of the Eagle's Hill at twelve o'clock on the night of the next full moon.

Painfully Petros climbed the Aetorahe and waited. At the appointed hour, old Nessena, wrinkled and bent, hobbled out from among her rocks. The instant she saw Petros, she drew herself up, raised her stick above her head and cried out:

"A curse! A curse is upon you!" Her flashing eyes were fixed upon him while she told him all his history, as though she were reading it in his face. "You have about you," she continued, "yes, I see you are wearing it upon your left hand, a fairy ring. You were not to put on that ring until you should be twenty-one years of age, and I see that ten months must yet roll by before that time arrives. Imprudent young man!"

"Imprudent and wretched," Petros accused himself.

"Do not speak, do not stop me!" cried the sorceress. "The ring has magical power, giving the wearer control over fairies, if he knows how to use it. You do not know, my boy, and you have exposed yourself to all manner of danger. Until you are twenty-one, the fairies can and will continue to persecute you through yourself and all that is dear to you."

"But, oh wise one, is there no remedy, no cure?"

"Do you not wish to wait the ten months for knowledge of the ring's power to be given you?"

"I would not wait one single hour, if there is any means to be cured immediately!"

"I see that you are in earnest," said Nessena. "Listen then. I shall tell you what to do:

"If forever you would be free,

Kiss the ring thrice. Away, away,

Cast it into Eurotas' sea,

Go, go, obey, obey!

"Three nights from now in the night's noon

(The cross cannot save you. Away, away.)

Let no one see you beneath the moon.

Go, go, obey, obey!”

On the third night at the time set, Petros stood on the banks of the Eurotas. The night was beautiful with its bright moon and countless stars. The waters were calm, softly murmuring secrets to the sky. The land was deserted; not a soul was awake; not a breath stirred. Mounting to the peak of a high, lone rock, Petros kissed the ring three times and cast it far out into the water. Instantly three fairies with angel faces and garments of gleaming white floated down and danced on the water about the spot where the ring fell. Joy was in their faces and joy in the swift movements of their dance. They watched the ripples spread wider and wider until the outer circle touched the shore, when like a bubble they separated and vanished into space.

Peace came to the house of Gouras. Petros regained his health; his flocks prospered and increased; the earth sent forth an abundance; the old property boundaries were restored and gold again filled the bags of the treasure room. To the end of his days Petros enjoyed nothing more than to recount the story of his fairy grandmother’s gift.

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