



# *The Old King*

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German

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*Intermediate*

*22 min read*

Walter had been playing with his kite in the garden. Somehow or other it would never mount properly, unless his father was there to help him. It was apt to fly up a little way, and then to fall into a bush or fence, and there to perch like a big bird, until Walter and his friends rescued it with difficulty. But on a windy day when his father took him into the open fields, away the kite would sail, until Walter grew anxious lest it should disappear altogether in cloudland.

It was a fine afternoon, about three o'clock, a lazy, sleepy time of day. A queer jumble of all the fairy stories that the boy knew, passed through his head as he sat on the lawn, day-dreaming, while his kite flapped its wings on the ground beside him.

Now you must know that it happened to be Midsummer Eve, the summer fête day of the fairies. Walter stared at the mountains whose great purple heads he could see in the far distance across the green plain. How they changed from moment to moment, as the clouds cast their shadows on them, till the sun shone out bright again and chased away the shadows. As Walter looked intently at his favourite peak, a mountain called the Old King, he saw a shining cloud on the summit against the sky, that he had never noticed there before. As he gazed and gazed, the cloud seemed to form itself into a wonderful castle. Each turret and tower was of an exquisite hue like the clouds at sunset. Grey mists wreathed round it, and made a soft, mysterious background:

the castle became more vivid and shone like gold.

How should Walter reach this fairy palace? For reach it he felt that he must! His kite had an answer ready. It jumped up from the ground, and looked at him with a queerly human expression, and seemed to say: "Sail me!"

Walter gave but one touch to unwind the string, and up, up it mounted like the Parzival airship, bearing the little boy with it, who held tight to the end of the cord. He felt rather giddy and frightened at first, but soon found out that by holding the cord in his hands to give him confidence, and making movements in the air, similar to those of swimming, he could fly quite easily.

Most of us have experienced this delightful sensation in our dreams, and I have heard children declare that when they were small, they used to fly downstairs without even touching the banisters. Perhaps flying may be a forgotten art: or perhaps we have not yet learned to discover, and to use our wings.

To Walter it came quite naturally; on, on they flew over the trees, and over the houses, over the windings of the Nidda. Walter could hear the tinkle tinkle of sheep bells below, or was it possible that he could already hear the bells of fairyland ringing? Over the church spire of a little village they soared, and all the children shouted: "Zeppelin! Zeppelin!" because you see all this happened in modern times, when even the children no longer believe in the supernatural.

As the kite flew nearer to the mountains Walter could see the well-known tower of the Feldberg, and the inns kept by the landlords Storm and Monster; he could see the castle of Cronberg, and the interesting village of Falkenstein.

But where was the beautiful palace on the Altkönig? Here was nothing to be seen but trees, trees, trees. He would have thought it all a dream, were it not for his wonderful flight through the air. The kite now dropped gradually, and set Walter on the ground. Then it began to flap about undecidedly, and behave queerly, like a dog seeking for a trail. At last it set off again up a narrow path leading straight into the green woods.

Walter followed, still holding tight by its tail, no longer soaring but skimming the ground. Once or twice the poor kite was entangled in the branches, Walter freed it, and off it set again at a fine pace up the mountain-side.

Walter began to feel hungry; for there is nothing like flying to give you an appetite, as Mr Euler would surely tell you, but the kite allowed him no time even to gather a few raspberries on the way. At last they came to a place where several paths crossed. Here the woods took another character: dark firs grew in the place of beeches and oaks. These firs were covered with a silver lichen that looked like hoar frost.

A little hut made of rough logs of woods stood at this crossing. At the door stood a little old woman. She had neither red eyes nor a hooked nose; so Walter thought to himself: "She cannot be a wicked old witch like the one who caught Hänsel and Gretel." She had a friendly, grandmotherly face, and invited Walter to come into her hut.

"You must be so hungry, you poor little man," she said. "Come in, come in, the coffee is all hot and waiting for you!" Then she turned to the kite which was turning head over heels, and making grimaces on the ground. "Be off with you," she said, "we shall not need you any more!"

"Good-bye, good-bye, dear kite," said Walter, "thank you very much for bringing me here."

The kite grinned and made a funny bow; then he mounted up of his own accord, and sailed away home over the tree-tops.

On a rough wooden table was spread a delicious repast. Rolls and butter, coffee and milk, Streuselkuchen and Butterkuchen such as German children love, and also cakes called Bubenschenkel—or little boy's legs. Walter did not quite like the name of these cakes; it made him think of witches again; but they tasted quite harmless.

Whilst he was eating his cake, there was a knock at the door of the hut, and in came a smart fox, wearing a red cap with green feather, and a jaunty coat and waistcoat.

"Heigho! How fine you are, Mr Fox," said the old woman, "I suppose you are going to the ball to-night?"

"O yes, of course, I am going to be there early. Miss Bushy Tail has promised to be my partner for the Polonaise," he said. "I hope you have a cup of coffee ready for me." He then sat down, and peered at Walter with his bright, inquisitive eyes. Now everyone knows that the foxes dance on the Feldberg on May Day. On one of the biggest fir-trees there hangs a picture of two foxes dancing, and these cross-roads have thence derived their name Fuchstanz. But they do not only dance on May Day, but on many other occasions such as

the present. Walter had often wished that he could see them at their sports.

Presently there was a scratching at the window, and in came a squirrel in a great hurry with a bag of nuts slung over his shoulder. He disturbed the great black cat who was asleep on the window-sill, and she bristled with rage, and swore at him; but he took no notice, and was off again in a jiffy, after having drunk a tiny little glass of milk which stood all ready for him on the table. The squirrels were very busy; for a great many nuts were required for the feast, and they had been turning out their store cupboards.

A little hare peeped shyly in at the door. "Hullo!" he said. "Fine doings at the castle to-night. I am carrying up a basket or so of Easter Eggs. They are sure to please the Old King," and off he went.

"Is he really the Easter Hare?" asked Walter; but no one answered his question.

The old woman smiled mysteriously. When Walter had finished his coffee, she said: "Now my little dear, you must be off as well, or you will be late at the castle. It is a great privilege for you to be invited; it is long since the Old King has sent for a mortal child."

"But did he send for me?" said Walter, astonished.

"Why of course, or how could you have got here alone," said the fairy. "But be very polite and answer nicely when spoken to, or the Old King might be angry, and when he is angry the whole mountain shakes, and I crouch and tremble in my little hut. But now let us see if I have not got something fine for you," so speaking she pulled out a sack of toys that stood in a dark corner and gave Walter a cart and horse. At first it was quite small; but when she set it on the floor, it grew and grew until it was large enough for a seven year's old boy to ride in. And O marvel, the wooden horse began to prance as if it were alive!

Walter sprang into the cart; the door of the hut stood wide open, and out he drove.

"Good-bye, good-bye," said the fairy of Fuchstanz. She gave him a bag of gingerbread nuts, beautifully ornamented, as the peasants in the Odenwald know how to make them. One had on it:

"For a good boy."

It was an invitation from the Old King and was worded as follows:

Audience with His Majesty, 10-11.

Amusements Varied.

Supper and Dancing, 12.

Crying forbidden.

Old King.

“Good-bye, I will come to see you again very soon,” said Walter, and he drove up the mountain in fine style.

It was now getting quite dark; for he had stayed longer than he was aware of in the little hut; the firs stood black and deep on either hand; he would have been frightened perhaps, but he was tired; he closed his eyes and played at being asleep in his little bed at home. When he opened his eyes again, he saw bright lights flitting through the gloomy fir-trees like so many luminous butterflies. One flew towards him, and settled on the side of his cart, and he saw that it was a lovely elf with a crown of gold on his head. “King Oberon himself,” thought Walter, and the elf answered, as all fairies do, to his thought:

“Yes I am Oberon, King of the fairies,” he said in a voice in a high key like the hum of insects. “I have come to look at you, it is so long since I have spoken to a mortal child. Mortals care no longer for us; they like true stories—that is stories about their own stupid little lives; ‘fairies do not exist,’ they say, Ha, ha, ha! we pinch their silly little toes, and send them bad dreams, and hide their toys, and blot their copy-books, and then we do not exist, Ha, ha, ha!”

“But I care very much,” said Walter eagerly. “O won’t you come home with me and live with me always and sleep in my bed, you beautiful little Elf-man.” And he put out his hand to catch the fairy as a child might grasp at a butterfly. But—puff!—he was off like a seed of the thistledown, and a peal of fairy laughter sounded in his ears. Then all was still and dark again.

Suddenly a sound of bells broke the stillness ling, lang, ding dong. These were the foxgloves, and the balsams popped like tiny pistols, and from the tall mosses came sudden explosions and the scattering of illuminated spores. All this in honour of the night.

Suddenly Walter became aware of a huge rock in front of him. Towering up black and high on its summit was

the wonderful castle that he had seen from the distant plain. White and grey were its cloudy walls, rose and lemon and emerald its towers and turrets; its roof was the sky studded with a thousand diamond-rayed stars.

The horse could go no farther; his mission was accomplished. The boy bade his dear steed farewell with many fond regrets, and set out with a brave heart to scale the rock alone. It was a difficult and dangerous climb in the dark night; but, however, he managed with the help of bushes and shrubs to reach nearly to the top. But alas the last step was too steep for the little boy; it was a sheer, perpendicular wall. Our hero looked round in despair; big drops gathered in his eyes; but he would not let them fall. He stood quite still, clinging to the rock and unable to move either forward or backward. It seemed like the climax of a bad dream. Suddenly he saw a bright cloud approaching him, and the air was full of a multitude of tiny elves. They seized hold of him by his coat and knickers and boots and even by his curly hair, and bore him upwards singing:

“Fairies seek and fairies save  
Children who are bold and brave.”

So they supported him up the last step and they floated off as they had come, looking in the distance like a cloud of bright fireflies.

Walter now found himself in a dark, mysterious garden. The bushes and trees took strange forms and seemed alive. One shrub that looked like a big black bear gave a low growl, as he passed by. He was really frightened and his little heart beat fast, in spite of all the fairies had said in praise of his bravery. But he soon reached a lovely lighted avenue leading straight up to the entrance of the castle. The doors were open wide. Two large white owls stood on either side as sentinels. A stream of light poured out of the hall and dazzled Walter's eyes, so that he could not see distinctly at first. Graceful wood nymphs stood chatting in groups. A statue of Siegfried slaying the dragon was in the centre of the hall. Small fountains played round it. It seemed as if he were expected at the castle as his arrival created no surprise. Two fairies advanced and took him by the hand. Walter thought they were the loveliest ladies he had ever seen. One was fair and dressed in cloudy gauze which changed in colour from blue to green and mauve like opalescent waters; the other was dark and wore a dress of rose colour that changed into orange and red like leaping flames of fire. These were the geniuses of water and fire. Walter did not know this at the time; at least he only guessed it; he was too young to speculate as to the nature of the strange sights he saw. He found himself suddenly in a Court suit of white woollen material, beautifully embroidered and lined with silver.

“Now you are a cloud with a silver lining,” his fairy friends said to him smiling. “You are sure to please the Old King.”

Wonderful fairy creatures, nixies and gnomes and goblins arrived every minute as guests for the castle. The hare came in quite breathless with a basket which he delivered up to an attendant, saying: “Eggs for His Majesty.”

The fox from Fuchstanz seemed to feel himself very important; he swaggered about, knocking people with his bushy tail. He stuck out a paw condescendingly for Walter to shake as he went by, and stared at him more inquisitively than ever.

An elderly woman who would have been very neat and tidy, save that her hair was white with snowflakes (no, it could not be snow, it was little feathers as soft as down) came in smiling with a pot of bilberry jam under her arm. She had come from the Rossert Mountain, and the jam had been cooked as was her custom on the Holle Stone, that mysterious stone on the slopes of the Rossert, so neatly marked on the Taunus map, but so impossible for the curious mortal to find.

Gradually all these strange guests began to form into a long procession, and to march round the hall to the sound of fairy music.

One side of the wall was draped with a green curtain; this began to sway and draw itself aside. A fresh, invigorating mountain air blew in their faces; they marched on to a larger and loftier room. The ceiling was the sky; the light was the light of thousands of stars, the same stars that we know, but shining with greater brilliancy for the fairies on Midsummer Eve. The floor was carpeted with the softest moss. Walter's feet sank into it. They marched through green arches made by skilfully interlaced trees. Pines and larches were arranged as pillars, and were adorned by festoons of wild roses, forming garlands from one to the other.

At the far end of the room stood two tall poplar trees, and between them seated on a cloudy throne was a majestic being with flowing white beard, and a crown of gold on his head. As Walter approached the throne, the poplar leaves shook and shivered as before a thunderstorm. Then a great wind arose, a mist rose up, the fairy procession bowed down before the Old King—the Ruler of the Mountain. Then there was a sound like the rumbling of thunder, and the Old King spoke. Walter had some difficulty at first in catching the words, but by nudges, pinches, and pokes, the company gave him to understand that they were addressed to him.

“What is your name? mortal child,” said the Old King.

“Walter, please Your Majesty,” said Walter with a deep bow, feeling his courage going into his boots.

“Walter—a good old German name,” said the Old King. “Doubtless you are a poet?”

“Oh!” said our hero valiantly, “when I am a man I mean to write story poems like Schiller and Uhland.”

“That is right,” said the Old King. “Real poets are rare in these days. Even if I appear to them in all my splendour the stupid people merely remark ‘a curious cloud formation,’ and think they know all about it. You

are young”—he went on—“you will forget all that you have seen here; but the feeling will remain that the heavens are near you. Who knows but what you may be a real poet in the future, a poet who shall open men’s eyes once more to the invisible world which lies so near them. Remember your beautiful costume and show always the cloud with the silver lining in your poems.”

“Which do you like best, work or play?” continued His Majesty in a voice like distant rolls of thunder.

“Play, please Your Majesty,” said Walter, tremulously.

“Quite right, quite right, play play all the day—good folk say—good folk say! Do you cry much? My children are all such cry babies, and though I scold them and lecture them every day, they will not learn to behave better.”

Walter had no time to answer; for clouds came rolling up and almost hid him from view.

“These are my troublesome children,” said the Old King.

Some of the clouds were dear little cuddly babies, others looked like great white poodles, others like huge black bears or crocodiles. With outstretched arms and wingèd helmets strange forms rode by on swift horses with floating manes resembling the Walküre of old; the lightning played across the sky as they passed. Truly they were a strange family with much originality.

“Now, children, be off with you, and whatever you do, don’t cry,” said the Old King. But even as he spoke, one little cloud dissolved in raindrops and wetted the fine clothes of the company.

Presently a push and a bustle began. Long, narrow tables were brought into the hall, and in a short space of time they were covered with the most wonderful dainties in the way of sweets and cakes, jellies, puddings and fruit.

Walter sat down hastily: a fine plate of Easter eggs and nuts was before him. He helped himself plentifully, and even filled his pockets, which was not quite good manners you know, but seemed to excite no notice.

A venerable water-sprite rose presently and proposed the health of the Old King. Wine-glasses were filled to the brim with golden or crimson wine; as the glasses clinked together, the vibrations sounded sweet yet sad like some high violin note, as it dies on the string. Then a wind arose, summer lightning played round the

room, illuminating vividly the faces of that strange company; a roar of thunder shook the castle. Brunhilde's fire sprang up suddenly round the outer walls, so that the scene was brighter than daylight. The tables were cleared away, and the wildest revels began. The Old King faded into the distance like a mountain-peak. A goblin seized hold of Walter and tore him round in the maddest fashion.

The foxes had a corner to themselves; their dancing was evidently much admired. Especially our friend and his sweetheart Miss Bushy Tail distinguished themselves by the elegance of their steps.

Mother Holle seemed to keep a certain amount of order, but the revels became wilder and wilder and Walter grew strangely sleepy and tired; he felt himself a part of some mad dream. As he dreamed, great clouds came rolling up, and all was lost in mist. When the mist cleared, Walter stood once more before the throne of the Old King.

"Come my little fleecy," the Old King was saying to a little girl cloud who came tumbling down before him. "Be the best of daughters and take this little boy home; you know the way. But mind, no tears!"

"Adieu," he said to Walter. Walter murmured adieu, and, in another moment, he was flying with his arm round the neck of the baby cloud, flying, flying, flying.

He knew no more till he found himself in his garden at home, feeling rather queer and sleepy. He got up, and stretched himself, and found that he was quite wet; for the little cloud had dissolved in tears at parting from him. On the ground lay his kite looking quite innocent.

He went indoors, and found it was tea-time, and everything was just as usual.

"Why, child, you are quite wet! Why did you not come in during the shower?" he heard his mother's voice saying to him.

He found a huge walnut in his pocket and when he cracked it out crawled a wonderful beetle with green body streaked with gold. As Walter put out his hand to secure his treasure, it flew away from him looking very much like King Oberon himself. Walter thought that he heard a peal of fairy laughter, but it might have been only his fancy.

The next day was his birthday, and what do you think he had as a present? Why the very same cart and horse

that had carried him to the castle, big enough to ride in. But he never told anyone—even his mother—the whole story of his adventures. Perhaps he did not remember them clearly himself; for the fairies protect their secrets well, and draw in sleep the veil of forgetfulness over much that we have seen in our dreams.

And did Walter become a great poet? He is a friend of mine, so I can tell you. The world has not heard of him as yet. He tells me that he often hears a little voice near him, singing, singing; sometimes he can distinguish the words and the melodies. They make him feel sad at times, he says, with longing for a world that is more beautiful than ours, but oftener they make him feel exhilarated and happy.

He thinks that he knows many secret things that would make the world happier if he could only get people to believe them. But these secrets are not about high explosives or torpedoes or aeroplanes, or motor-cars that can do the distance between Paris and Berlin at the very shortest record. They are secrets that can only be breathed in music and poetry.

Be on the look-out for him, children; for the songs he sings will be full of wonder, like Kubla Khan, and the melodies will be those of fairyland. Did he not hear them himself on the Old King's Mountain, when he attended the Midsummer fête of the fairies?

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