

The White Maiden

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Advanced
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It is now centuries since a young noble of the neighbourhood was hunting in the valleys which lie behind the hills that skirt the Rhine opposite the ancient town of St. Goar. In the heat of the pursuit he followed the game to the foot of the acclivity on which are seated the ruins of Thurnberg, and there it disappeared all at once from his view. It was the noon of a midsummer day, and the sun shone down on him with all its strength.

Despairing of being able to find the object of his pursuit, he determined to clamber up the steep hillside, and seek shelter and repose in the shadow of the old castle, or, mayhap, in one of its many crumbling chambers. With much labour he succeeded in reaching the summit, and there, fatigued with his toil, and parched with a burning thirst, he flung himself on the ground beneath one of the huge towers, some of whose remains still rear their heads on high, and stretched out his tired limbs in the full enjoyment of rest.

“Now,” said he, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow,—“now could I be happy indeed, if some kind being would bring me a beaker of the cool wine, which, they say, is ages old, down there in the cellars of this castle.”

He had scarce spoken the words when a most beautiful maiden stepped forth from a cleft in the ivy-covered ruin, bearing in one hand a huge silver beaker of an antique form, full to the very brim of foaming wine. In her other hand she held a large bunch of keys of all sizes. She was clad in white from head to foot, her hair was flaxen, her skin was like a lily, and she had such loving eyes that they at once won the heart of the young noble.

“Here,” said she, handing him the beaker, “thy wish is granted. Drink and be satisfied.”

His heart leaped within him with joy at her condescension, and he emptied the contents of the goblet at a single draught. All the while she looked at him in such a manner as to intoxicate his very soul, so kindly and confidential were her glances. The wine coursed through his veins like liquid fire, his heart soon burned with love for the maiden, and the fever of his blood was by no means appeased by the furtive looks which ever and anon she cast upon him. She apparently read his state of mind, and when his passion was at its highest pitch, and all restraint seemed put an end to by the potent effects of love and wine, she disappeared in a moment by the way she came. The noble rushed after her in the hope of detaining the fugitive, or, at least, of catching a parting glimpse of her retreating form, but the ivy-encircled cleft, through which she seemed to have flitted, looked as though it had not been disturbed for centuries, and as he tried to force his way to the gloomy cavern below, a crowd of bats and owls and other foul birds of evil omen, aroused from their repose, rose upwards, and, amidst dismal hootings and fearful cries, almost flung him backward with the violence of their flight. He spent the remainder of the afternoon in search of the lost one, but without success. At the coming of night he wended his way homeward, weary, heart-sick, and overwhelmed with an indefinable sensation of sadness.

From that day forth he was an altered man—altered in appearance as well as in mind and in manners. Pleasure was a stranger to his soul, and he knew no longer what it was to enjoy peace. Wherever he went, whatever pursuit he was engaged in, whether in the chase, in the hall, in lady’s bower, or in chapel, his eye only saw one object—the White Maiden. At the board she stood in imagination always before him, offering to his fevered lips the cool, brimming beaker; and in the long-drawn aisles of the chapel she was ever present, beckoning him from his devotions to partake of the generous beverage which she still bore in her right hand. Every matron or maiden he met seemed by some wondrous process to take her shape, and even the very trees of the forest all looked to his thought like her.

Thenceforward he commenced to haunt the ruins in which she had appeared to him, still hoping to see, once again, her for whom he felt he was dying, and living alone in that hope. The sun scorched him, but it was nothing to the fever that burned within him. The rain drenched him, but he cared not for it. Time and change and circumstance seemed all forgotten by him, everything passed by him unheeded. His whole existence was completely swallowed up in one thought—the White Maiden of the ruined castle, and that, alas! was only vexation of spirit. A deadly fever seized him. It was a mortal disease. Still he raved, in his delirium, but of her. One morn a woodman, who occasionally provided him with food, found him a corpse at the entrance of the

crevice in the wall whence the maiden had seemed to come, and where she had disappeared. It was long rumoured that he had struggled bravely with death—or rather that he could not die, because the curse was upon him—until the maiden, garbed in white as usual, appeared to him once more. That then he stretched forth his hands—she stooped over him. He raised his head—she kissed his lips—and he died.

The White Maiden, tradition says, has not since been seen in the ruins of Thurnberg.

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