



King Orpheo and the Fairies

Overview



After a story had been told hundreds of years and had passed through the lips of scores of minstrels, it usually became very different from what it had been in the beginning. This story of King Orpheo shows the old Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice changed into an English fairy tale by

the telling of English bards.

The Tale of King Orpheo and the Fairies

In the great city of Cressens once lived Orpheo, a rich king and a great lord. He was a brave and good man and ruled wisely over his people. Now King Orpheo loved his harp above any other thing, and could play better than any man in all the world. Indeed, when men heard him play they thought they were in Paradise, so sweet was the music his fingers drew forth.

King Orpheo had a noble queen, Erodys, the fairest woman in the kingdom. She was as sweet and good as she was beautiful. One morning in Maytime, when the fields were full of flowers and the blossoms were springing on the boughs, Queen Erodys went to her orchard with two of her maidens to see the flowers and hear the singing--of the birds. They all sat down on the grass under a grafted tree, and before long the Queen fell asleep. The maidens did not dare to awake her, but played and made merry beside her and let her sleep until afternoon.

As soon as she awoke, she began to scream and tear her rich robes and scratch herself with her nails. The maidens were afraid to stay. They ran to the palace and told knights and squires that their Queen had gone mad. Then a large band of knights and ladies, too, went out to the orchard to see what they could do for her.

Some knights took her in their arms and carried her to her bed. There they held her fast, but still she shrieked and cried as though she were out of her mind.

When King Orpheo heard of the sad plight of his Queen, he was very sorrowful. He went to her chamber and said to her, "Love, how is it that you who were once so still now scream and tear yourself with your nails, that your rosy cheeks have become dull as lead, and your eyes wild? Pray tell me what has happened? Can nothing help you?"

Then the Queen began to weep and replied, "Sir, ever have you loved me and I have loved you with all my heart. Now we must part. Comfort yourself as best you can, for I must go."

"Alas!" said the King, "tell me where you must go. Wherever you go, I will go with you.

"That can never be," she said. "I will tell you how it is. This morning as I lay sleeping in the orchard, two knights in rich armor came to me and bade me go without delay to speak with their king. I answered boldly that I would not go.

"Then they went away. Soon there came a gay king with a thousand knights and fifty ladies, all clothed in white and mounted on white horses.

"Never since I was born had I seen so fair a company. The king had on his head a crown, not

of gold or silver, but carved all of one precious stone. It shone as bright as the sun. The king came up to me and, whether I wished it or not, made me ride on a white palfrey by his side. He brought me to his palace. Then he showed me castles, towers, meadows, rivers, fields, forests, and flowers, and they were all his, every one.

“After I had seen all, he brought me back to our own orchard and said to me, ‘See that you are here to meet me tomorrow at this time under this grafted tree. If you make delay, you will be taken, wherever you are. Even though you should be torn to pieces, it would not help you any. You would be carried away just the same.’”

“Alas!” cried King Orpheo when he had heard this tale, “I should rather lose my life than lose my own dear Queen.”

He was in despair. He called together a council of the wisest men in the kingdom to advise him what to do, but no one could give him any help. The next day when the time came, King Orpheo armed himself, took two hundred stout knights in the strongest of armor, and went with Queen Erodys to the orchard. There the knights watched on every side, ready to bring death to anyone who should try to take the Queen from them.

Then, as she was sitting in their midst, suddenly she vanished. One minute she was there, and the next she was not. No one could tell where she had gone.

Then there was great weeping and wailing in Cressens. King Orpheo went to his room, fell down on the floor, and wept and wept. No one could comfort him. As soon as he could control his grief, he sent for all the earls and barons of his kingdom.

When they had all gathered together, he said, “Lords, since I have lost my Queen, the fairest and best woman in all the world, I never want to see another woman. So I am going to the wilderness to live forevermore. I appoint the steward of my hall to care for my kingdom during my life. When you know that I am dead, call an assembly and choose a new king. Now farewell. Do your best in all things.”

There was great sorrow in the hall. All the mighty earls and barons knelt and begged him to stay with them, but he would not listen to their pleading and left his kingdom. He took nothing

with him but his harp and went barefoot from the city gate. He let no man go with him.

Yes, he who had been king and worn the crown went out of the city as poor as any beggar and wandered in the wilderness through forest and heath.

Some nights he lay on hard wood and some on herbs and grass. He who had once had all manner of dainty things to eat, now had to scratch and dig for his living. In the summer he could eat buds and berries, but in the winter he could find only dry roots and hoar frost. Ten years and more he suffered in the wilderness. He became thin and gaunt, and his black hair and beard grew so long that they hung below his girdle.

Always during these ten years he could find comfort in the music of his harp. Sometimes, on a clear and starry night, he would lie under a tree and play all night long. The sweet tones ringing out through the forest glades would draw all the woodland creatures. The animals would crawl out of their dens and gather around him.

Even the fiercest would be stilled by the magic of his music. The birds of the forest would light on the trees above his head. Then, when the harping ceased, they would all go away one by one. Often in the hot summer time he would see the King of the Fairies and his band out hunting.

There was always much sounding of horns and baying of hounds, but King Orpheo never saw them really take any game. Always they would disappear as suddenly as they had appeared, and Orpheo could never find out where they went.

Again, he would see a great host of armed knights ride by him, or knights and ladies come slowly along with minstrels by their sides. Always they wore white.

One day he met a company of fair ladies with no man among them. Each was clad in white and bore a snow-white falcon¹ on her hand. They rode down to the river where the pheasant, heron, and cormorant dwelt and let loose their falcons.

The falcons swooped upon the other birds. King Orpheo drew near to watch the hunt. As he did so, he recognized Erodys, his own Queen, among the ladies. She saw him and recognized him, too,

in spite of his ragged clothing and long black hair and beard. She spoke to him. He could see her lips move, but could not hear a sound. Then he tried to call to her, but he could not make her hear him, for she was under the spell of the fairies.

They both wept bitterly because, in their first meeting for ten years, they could not hear each other speak a word.

Soon the ladies started to ride away, and Erodys had to go with them. Orpheo took his harp and ran after them as fast as he could. He made up his mind to find out where they went. He was not afraid of anything that might happen, for life was worth little to him without his Queen. The ladies went slowly along until they came to a huge rock. Instantly the rock opened up so that they could go in. Orpheo hurried forward and just got through before the rock closed again.

He found himself in a country as bright as day. Here there were no rocky hills and wild dales as in the wilderness, but fair meadows, close-clipped lawns, beautiful gardens, and a city of proud palaces. In the midst of the land was a castle with walls shining like crystal and towers set with large pearls. There were pillars of precious stones and passages of gold and silver. No man could begin to tell of the riches that were there. The ladies alighted at the castle and went in. King Orpheo followed after as fast as he could and knocked at the heavy gate. The porter came and asked him what he wanted.

“I am a travelling minstrel,” answered Orpheo, “and I come to make you merry with my music.”

Then the porter undid the gate and let him in. Orpheo looked all about him. At the foot of the wall, he saw some ladies sitting, and among them was Erodys under a grafted tree. He could not stop there long, for the porter led him on into the hall. There the King of the Fairies was sitting with a fair queen by his side. Orpheo knelt down before him and asked if he would like to hear some minstrelsy.

“Who are you who have dared to come here?” said the King of the Fairies. “I know that I did not send for you. Never since this kingdom was founded has there been a man brave enough to come here when I did not send for him.”

“Sir,” answered Orpheo, “it is a minstrel’s business to stop at every house along the way and offer his services whether he is bidden or not.”

Then he sat down before the King and began to play many merry notes. The King of the Fairies sat still as a stone, for he had never heard such music.

When Orpheo stopped playing, the King of the Fairies said, “Minstrel, your music pleases me well and I shall pay for it most generously. Ask of me whatever you wish and I will give it to you.

“Sir, I beg you to give me that fair lady who is sitting yonder under the grafted tree,” said Orpheo.

“No, it is not fitting,” said the King of the Fairies looking at Orpheo’s long tangled hair and beard, “for you would make a sorry couple. You are wild and black, and she is spotless and fair. It would be a shame to make her go in your company.

“Sir, it would be a greater shame for you to break your promise,” answered Orpheo boldly.

“You told me that you would give me anything I asked. A king’s promise should be kept most faithfully of all.”

“You are right,” said the King of the Fairies. “You speak like an honest man. Take her by the hand and go forth. I know that you will be happy with her.” Orpheo thanked the King of the Fairies many, many times, took Erodys by the hand, and went forth from the land of the fairies. As soon as they were out of Fairyland, the spell was broken and they could hear each other speak as well as ever. They went back to their own city, Cressens, but they had been gone so long that no one knew them. At last a poor beggar took them in for the night. Orpheo asked him the news of the city.

“Ten years ago our Queen was carried off by the fairies,” said the beggar. “Then our King was overcome with grief and went off into the wilderness. We have not seen him or heard from him since. The steward now holds the kingdom. As soon as it is surely known that King Orpheo is dead, a new king will be chosen. Some say that the steward will be our next king.”

Then Orpheo wished to know whether the steward was still true to him or whether he wished his King dead so that he could keep the kingdom for himself. The next day at noon he left Erodys in the beggar's hut and went into the streets of the city with his harp. Soon he met the steward coming down the street and knelt before him.

"Lord, help me in my distress," he cried. "I am a poor wandering minstrel and am faint with hunger."

"Come home with me," said the steward, "and I will feed and shelter you. All minstrels are welcome to me for the sake of King Orpheo who loved minstrelsy."

They went together into the hall of the castle. There was much laughter and mirth, for a great feast was being held. The steward seated Orpheo at the foot of the table and went to his place of honor at the head. When the noise of the merriment stopped for a moment, Orpheo took his harp and began to play. The steward looked around quickly, for he recognized the sound of the harp.

"Minstrel," he said, "pray tell me where you got that harp."

"Ten years ago," Orpheo replied, "I found it lying by a dead man in the wilderness."

"Alas!" said the steward weeping, "now I know that King Orpheo must be dead."

Then Orpheo saw that the steward was faithful to him and said, "Friend, mourn no more. I am King Orpheo. I have found my Queen and brought her with me. Even now she is in the beggar's hut at the entrance to the city."

All the lords and earls and barons started up with joy and surprise. They made King Orpheo go to his room to rest, while they formed a gay procession and brought the Queen to the palace. Then for many, many days there was great rejoicing throughout the land.

¹ A falcon is a kind of hawk used to sight the game in hunting.