

THE CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN

Long ago, there was a young man who was the son of a forester. He lived deep in the forest, and had long learned all there was to know about woodcraft from his father. One day, while hunting, he caught sight of a magnificent roebuck. But, before he could take aim, it had moved off, stopping behind a group of trees. He followed. Again, before he could take aim, it moved away, just out of sight. He stalked further. Every time, he approached, it moved away.

The deer led him to a long and broad lake, which he had never seen before. Its surface shone brilliantly and sparkled in the sunlight, as a multitude of fish jumped out of and back into its clear water. Not far from where he stood, a group of three people, in their underclothes, were bathing in the shadow of a tree. He could just make out, from their long hair floating on the water, that all three were not men. He also saw that their overclothes were laying carelessly on the shore, behind a small bush. Then, he picked up the three dresses, and carried them with him back into the forest.

As soon as they saw this, the three young ladies ran after him, to, first demand, then ask, and finally plead for their return. The young forester then took the first dress and gave it back to the eldest girl. As soon as she put it on, she turned and vanished as quickly as if the wind had carried her away. He then gave the second dress to the next eldest, who disappeared in the same way. But he didn't return the third dress to the youngest, and prettiest, girl.

He carried the dress all the way home, ignoring the pleading of the girl, who was following him a few paces behind. She followed him into his father's house, where he opened the bottom drawer, and took out one of his late mother's dresses. He gave this to her in exchange, and locked the other away.

The young forester was already twenty years old, and had been thinking of taking a wife, but there were no young ladies of marriageable age in the surrounding area. This beautiful girl was a stranger, and nobody, near or far, new anything about her, except that she admitted to being eighteen years old. So, without hesitation, he asked her to marry him. To his surprise, and great pleasure, she agreed.

Within a few weeks the pair were married and, for a while, they lived happily together with the old forester. The young man travelled into the town, and bought his new wife the finest dresses he could find. She wore these happily, but she always asked for the old dress which he took from the lake shore. But, he always made an excuse, and his mother's old bottom drawer remained locked.

It remained locked, until one day he forgot to take the key with him. He had gone hunting in the forest with his father, and left her alone in the house. She was both very happy and sad, when she saw the key laying on the chest. Before

taking the key, she sat at the table, pen in hand, and composed a letter to her husband. She opened the drawer, took out her dress, and left the letter in its place. Then, as soon as she put on her dress, she was gone!

In the evening, when the father and son returned, they called out for her, but received no answer. They searched everywhere, inside and out, but she was nowhere to be found. Fearing the worst, the young man returned sadly to his room. There, he saw that the key, which he normally kept in his pocket, was in its lock. Suspecting what had happened, he pulled open the drawer, and found the letter. In his wife's delicate script, he read the following words: "If my husband truly loves me, he will find me atop the Crystal Mountain."

The young man didn't hesitate. He immediately went to his cash box in the corner of the room, and took out enough gold to last on a long journey. Then, he told his father what had happened, and that he must find the Crystal Mountain, climb it, and then find his wife. His father was dumbfounded, and before he had recovered his thoughts, the young man had taken his leave and vanished into the forest.

He travelled late into the night, stopping to sleep only when it was too dark to carry on, rose in the early morning twilight, and was well on his way by the time the first birds were singing. It was the same, day in and day out, up hill and down dale, through dark forests, across bright meadows, and even over snowy mountain peaks. Wherever and whenever he met anyone on the way, his first question, after greeting them politely, was if they knew of the Crystal Mountain, and how he might find it. Nobody had heard of such a mountain, let alone where it was. Many even thought that he was either trying to make a fool of them, or, worse still, was a fool himself.

And so his hopeless journey went on and on, until late one evening, after he had travelled a long, long time through a dark forest he came upon a house. As he approached the door he was met by a man who enquired brusquely why he was there and what he wanted. The young man explained that he had travelled far looking for the way to the Crystal Mountain, and that he would continue on his way once he had rested. On hearing this, the man's demeanour changed and he kindly invited the young forester inside, where he led him to a very pleasant bedroom. After eating a good supper, the young forester laid himself in the soft feather bed, and slept without waking, until it became light the next morning.

As soon as he was awake, he made himself ready to continue his journey. But, before he set off, he went to thank his host and asked him if he knew where the Crystal Mountain was. His host, who was a magician, answered "Indeed I do, and it is a very long way off. But, I have something which will help you get there quickly."

With these words, he went into another room, and returned shortly carrying a strange pair of boots. Handing them to the young man, he said "If you put these boots on, and let them take you where *they* will, you will reach the Crystal

Mountain by this evening. As soon as you arrive, you must remove the boots, and let them return. Then, it will be up to you see what happens next.”

The young man thanked the magician with all his heart, and immediately pulled the boots onto his feet. The boots wasted no time. As soon as the second boot was on his foot, before he had caught his balance, they had carried him out through the door. They carried him up hill and down dale, through dark forests, across bright meadows, and even over snowy mountain peaks. They sped so fast that he could hardly stay upright or catch his breath, but all day long there was no sign of the fabulous Crystal Mountain. Then, as the sun was moving lower in the sky, he saw something bright and sparkling ahead of him, and getting closer. He knew then, that he was nearing the end of this journey, and the start of the next.

The magic boots came to a halt at the foot of the mountain, which shone so brightly in the evening sun that the young man was forced to close his eyes. He opened them slowly, and then turned his attention to his feet which were dancing impatiently. He quickly removed the boots, and set them aside. But, no sooner had he done so, than they were gone.

With half-closed eyes, the young man wandered around in wonder at the foot of the mountain. The mountain in front of him was really, completely from top to bottom, composed of the clearest, brightest crystal. It was not just the rocks and stones, but the trees, plants, and even the grass, were all transparent, delicate crystal. The leaves on the trees sparkled much more brightly, and with more colours, than on any shimmering birch tree he had seen on the brightest summer day. The grass stalks reflected a rainbow of colours as they wafted in the breeze under the light of the evening sun, and the mountain itself mirrored the sun almost as brightly as it shone in the sky.

The young man found it all very beautiful, but he did wish that his eyes could better withstand the dazzling display of light, and, more importantly, that he could find a way to scale the mountain. Remembering the last words of the magician, he decided to be patient and continued exploring around the foot of the mountain. Soon, he heard angry voices and set off to investigate. As he approached he saw that there were two young boys, arguing over a saddle over which they had found. “Ah!” he thought “maybe the saddle is another magic object like the boots.” He then took a gold coin out of his pocket, and threw it to one side near the boys, who immediately forgot about the saddle and dived for the gold. Taking the opportunity, he sat astride the saddle, which immediately rose into the air.

In no time, he was at the top of the Crystal Mountain, where he dismounted to find a bright level plane on which was built a magnificent castle, all built of clear, bright crystal. He walked on through the open crystal gates into the castle and up the crystal stairway towards its magnificent crystal doors. On the stairs, he was met by his wife who welcomed him formally. But then, she added, quietly, “You have difficult tasks to face, before you are out of danger. My mother, who owns this castle and the mountain, sets trials for everyone who

visits. Those who fail, or refuse — she puts to death. But, you do not need to be afraid, I will help you.” She then continued to tell him “The other two maidens, who you saw at the lake with me, are my sisters who also live in this castle. But, you will not meet them, because, as the youngest, it is my duty to host and care for all visitors with my mother.”

As she said this, her old grey-haired mother came up behind her, and greeted the visitor. She was very friendly, and invited him to stay in the castle. He politely accepted the invitation, and after being provided with an evening meal, he was shown to a bedroom.

Early the next morning, almost as soon as he had risen, the old woman came into his room. In a deep and terrible voice, she said “You have accepted my hospitality, and now you must earn it. You must fell every tree on this mountain top, and bring them to castle gates. You can use this!” She threw a hatchet, with a crystal head and crystal haft, at his feet, and continued “If you don’t complete the task by nightfall, it will be all the worse for you. And, don’t think of leaving. Nobody leaves this mountaintop unless I allow it.” With that, she turned and left the room.

The young forester was more than a little afraid, but was comforted by his wife’s promise to help him. But, when he went out in the daylight, he realised that it wouldn’t be an easy task. The top of whole mountain appeared to be a forest of delicate shimmering crystal trees. Then, chiding himself, he thought “You fool, these are fine crystal and very fragile. It should be easy to break them.” But, it wasn’t. Even with all his strength, he couldn’t snap the finest twig, and, when he tried his crystal hatchet against the trunk, it only rang out like a bell. Nothing shattered, nothing snapped. The only thing which could have broken, would have been his hope, if not for the thought of his beloved wife.

She, herself, came to him at noon with his midday meal — and to keep her promise. Taking the axe from him, she set about doing his work. In her hands, the axed felled every tree in a single blow. The young man was both astonished at and proud of her skill, but he, himself didn’t stop. They worked together. As each tree fell, he dragged it to the castle gate, and within half an hour they had finished.

In the evening, the old woman came out to see how the work was progressing. She appeared to be very pleased when she saw all the fallen trees piled up by the gate. But, the following morning she again came into his room, and commanded “Today, you must remove the branches from all the trees, and chop up all of the branches and trunks small for firewood.”

The young man took up his crystal hatchet and went out of the castle to the pile of crystal trees. While it had been easy for his wife, no matter how hard he swung his axe, it wouldn’t break the thinnest branch. By midday, when his wife came with his meal, he had worked all morning, without chopping a single tree. She, again, took the crystal hatchet from him and began chopping while he

piled the wood. In her hands, with each strike of the crystal axe, branches flew of the trunks, trunks and branches became logs, and logs became sticks. When they had finished, she turned to her husband, and pressed a little flask into his hand, saying "Tonight, she will fill your room with a noxious smoke which will surely smother and kill you. But, if you drink this potion it will protect you and keep you from harm."

In the evening, the old woman again came out of the castle, to see how the work was progressing. She was surprised, but appeared to be pleased to see that he had finished, and went back into the castle.

It was already dark that night, when the young man returned to his room, and even later when he lay down to sleep. As he lay there, smoke drifted into the room. The smoke became thicker and thicker, and would easily have suffocated the young man if he hadn't reached for the flask by his bed, and drunk from it. After he had done so, the room was still filled with smoke, but it no longer bothered him. He then turned over and slept soundly until morning, when the old woman came into his room.

She was fully expecting to find him lying dead in his bed, but when he rose as she entered, she happily greeted him and was genuinely pleased that he had passed all three of her tests. But she wanted to know how, and asked him to tell her about himself and how he came to her castle on the Crystal Mountain.

This he did, and so when he came to the story of the three girls in the lake, she realised that he was the husband of her youngest daughter, and that he truly loved her. Now, she really was happy that, albeit with his wife's help, he had passed her three tests.

The young pair celebrated for three days, with the the mother and the two sisters, in the castle atop the Crystal Mountain. Then, they departed to return to the old forester, who experienced such a great joy on their return that it cannot be described by these poor words.