

GEORG EBERS

THE

GREYLOCK: A

FAIRY TALE

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The Greylock: A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time there was a country, more beautiful than all other lands and the castle of the Duke, its ruler, lay beside a lake that was bluer than the deepest indigo. A long time ago the Knight Wendelin and his squire George chanced upon this lake, but they found nothing save waste fields and bleak rocks around it, yet the shores must formerly have borne a different aspect, for there were shattered columns and broken-nosed statues lying on the ground. Against the hillside there were remains of ancient walls that once, undoubtedly, had supported terraces of vines, but the rains had long washed the soil from the rocks, and among the caves and crannies of the fallen stonework, and ruined cellars, foxes, bats, and other animals had found a home.

The knight was no antiquary, but as he looked about him his curiosity was excited: "What can have happened here?" he said, and his squire wondered also, and followed his master. The latter led his horse to the edge of the water to let him drink, for though he had seen many watercourses in the land, he had found nothing in them save stones, and boulders, and sand.

"What if this lake should be salt, like the Dead Sea in the Holy Land?" the knight asked, and the squire answered:

"Ugh, that would be a thousand pities!" As the former raised his hand to his mouth to taste the water, wishing indeed that it were wine, he suddenly heard a strange noise. It was mournful and complaining, but very soft and sweet. It seemed to be the voice of an unhappy woman, and this pleased the knight, for he had ridden forth in search of adventures. He had already been successful in several encounters, and from George's saddle hung the tail-tips of seven dragons which his master had killed. But a woman with a musical, appealing voice, in great danger, offered a rare opportunity to a knight. Wendelin had not yet had any such experience. The squire saw his master's eyes sparkle with pleasure, and scratched his head thinking: "Distress brings tears to most peoples' eyes, but there is no knowing what will delight a knight like him!"

The waters of the lake proved to be not salt, but wonderfully sweet.

When Wendelin reached the grotto from which the complaining notes came, he found a beautiful young woman, more lovely than any one the grey-haired George had ever seen. She was pale, but her lips shone moist and red like the pulp of strawberries, her eyes were as clear and blue as the sky over the Holy Land, and her hair glistened as if it had been spun of the sunbeams. The knight's heart beat fast at the sight of her loveliness; he could not speak, but he noticed that her hands and feet were bound with chains, and that her beautiful hair was entwined about a circle of emeralds that hung by a chain from the ceiling. She marked neither the knight nor the squire, who stood shading his eyes with his hand in order to see her the better.

Hot rage took possession of the heart of Wendelin when he saw the tears rain down from the lady's large eyes onto her gown, which was already as wet as if she had just been drawn from the lake.

When the knight noticed this, an overwhelming pity chased the anger from his heart, and George, who was a soft-hearted man, sobbed aloud at her pitiful appearance. The voice of the knight, too, was unsteady as he called to the fair prisoner that he was a German, Wendelin by name, and that he had set out on a knightly quest to kill dragons, and to draw his sword for all who were oppressed. He had already conquered in many combats, and nothing would please him better than to fight for her.

At this she ceased to weep, but she shook her head gently—her hair being chained impeded her motion,—and answered sadly. "My enemy is too powerful. You are young and beautiful, and the darling, perhaps, of a loving mother at home, I cannot bear that you should suffer the same fate as the others. Behold that nut-tree over there! What seem to be white gourds hanging on its naked branches are their skulls! Go your way quickly, for the evil spirit that keeps me prisoner, and will not release me until I have sworn an oath to become his wife, will soon return. His name is Misdral,

he is very fierce and mighty, and lives among the waste rocks over there on the north shore of the lake. You have my thanks for your good intention, and now proceed on your journey." The knight, however, did not follow her advice, but approached the beautiful woman without more words, and caught hold of her hair to unbind it from the ring. No sooner had he touched the emeralds than two brown snakes came hissing towards him.

"Oho!" exclaimed Sir Wendelin. With one hand he caught their two necks together in his powerful grip, with the other he grasped their tails, tore them in two, and threw them out onto the cliffs above the lake.

When the imprisoned lady saw this, she heaved a deep sigh of relief and spoke: "Now I believe that you will be able to liberate me. Draw this ring from my finger!"

The knight obeyed and as he touched the lady's fingers, which were slender and pointed, he felt his heart warm within him, and he would gladly have kissed her. But he only withdrew the ring. As he forced it onto the end of his own little finger the lady said to him: "Whenever you turn it round you will be changed to a falcon; for you must know... But woe to us! There, where the water is lashed into foam, is the monster swimming towards us!"

She had hardly finished before a hideous creature drew itself out of the lake. It looked as if it were covered with mouldering pumice-stone. Two toads peeped from the cavities of the eyes, brown eel-grass hung dripping and disordered over its neck and forehead, and in place of teeth there were long iron spikes in its jaws which protruded and crossed one another over its lips.

"A fine wooer, indeed!" thought the squire. "If the stone-clad fellow should not possess a vulnerable spot somewhere on his body I shall certainly lose my position!"

Similar thoughts passed through the knight's mind, and consequently he did not attack it with his sword, but lifting a huge piece of granite from the ground he hurled it at the monster's head. The creature only sneezed, and passed its hand over its eyes as if to brush away a fly. Then it looked round and, perceiving the knight, bellowed aloud, and changed itself into a dragon spouting fire. Herr Wendelin rejoiced at this, for his favourite pastime was to kill that sort of beast. He had no sooner, however, plunged his good sword into a soft part of the monster, and seen the blood flow from the wound, than his opponent changed itself into a griffin, and raising itself from the ground swooped upon him. His defence now became more difficult, as the evil spirit continued to attack him in ever changing forms, but Sir Wendelin was no coward, and knew well how to use his arm and sword. At length, however, the knight began to feel that his strength was deserting him; his sword seemed to grow heavier and heavier in his hand, and his legs felt as if an hundredweight had been attached to them. His squire, noting his fatigue, grew faint, and began to think the best thing for him would be to ride off, for the fight was likely to end badly for his master. The knight's knees were trembling under him, and as the monster, in the form of a unicorn, charged against his shield he fell to the ground.

The creature shrank suddenly together and in the guise of a black, agile rat shot towards him.

Sir Wendelin felt that he was losing consciousness, he heard faintly a voice from the grotto where the lady was imprisoned calling to him: "The ring, remember the ring!"

He was just able to turn with his thumb the ring on his little finger. Immediately he felt himself lighter and freer than he had ever felt before, and his heart seemed to harden to a steel spring, while a gay and reckless mood came over him. A wild desire to fly took possession of him at the same time, and it seemed as if he were only fourteen years old once more. Some strange force impelled him aloft into the air, to which he yielded, spreading the two large wings, that he suddenly found himself in possession of, as naturally as if he had used them all his life. He soon felt the feathers on his back stroked by the clouds, and yet he saw everything below him on the earth more distinctly than ever before. Even the smallest things appeared perfectly clear to his sharpened eyes, and yet he seemed to see them as if reflected in a brilliant mirror. He could distinguish even the hairs on the rat and suddenly another impulse came over him—the impulse to stoop down and catch the long-

tailed vermin in his beak and claws. Wendelin had been changed into a falcon, and the rat struggled in vain to escape his powerful attack.

The prisoner had followed the combat first with anxiety, then with joy. While the falcon held the rat in his claws and struck him with his beak again and again, she called the squire to her, and bade him free her from her chains. This was no distasteful task for George, indeed it gave him so much pleasure that he was in no hurry to finish.

When at last all her bonds were loosened, she stood very erect, and lifted her arms, and each moment seemed to make her more lovely and more beautiful. Then she grasped the circle of emeralds, about which the enchanter had wound her golden hair, and waving it high in the air, cried: "Falcon, return to the shape you were before. Misdral, hear thy sentence!"

Wendelin assumed immediately his knightly guise, which seemed very clumsy to him after having been a falcon. The rat lengthened itself and expanded until it was once more the giant covered with pumicestone; it walked no longer erect, however, but crawled along the ground at the feet of the beautiful woman, whimpering and howling like a whipped cur. She then said to it: "At last I possess the emerald circlet, in which resides your power over me. I can destroy you, but my name is Clementine and so I will grant you mercy. I will only banish you to your rocks. There you shall remain until the last hour of the last day. Papaluka, Papaluka,—Emerald, perform thy duty!"

The giant of pumice-stone immediately glowed like molten iron. Once he raised his clenched fist towards Wendelin, and then plunged into the lake where the hissing and foaming waters closed over him. The lady and the knight were left alone together. When she asked him what reward he desired, he could only answer that he wished to have her for his wife, and to take her to his home in Germany; but she blushed and answered sadly: "I may not leave this country, and it is not permitted to me to become the wife of any mortal man. But I know how heroes should be rewarded, and I offer you my lips to kiss."

He knelt down before her and she took his head between her slim hands and pressed her mouth against his.

George, the squire, saw this, sighed deeply, and wondered: "Why was my father only a miller? What favours are granted to a knight like that! But I hope the kiss won't be the end of it all; for, unless she is a miserly fairy, there ought to be much more substantial pay for his services in store for him."

But Clementine bestowed even a richer reward than he had expected upon her rescuer. When she discovered that a lock of the brown hair on Wendelin's left temple had turned grey during the conflict with the evil monster, she said to him: "All this land shall belong to you henceforth, and because you have grown grey in your courageous fight with evil, you shall be known from this time forward as Duke Greylock. Every prince, yea, even the Emperor himself, will recognize the title which I confer upon you as my saviour, and when the race, of which you are to be the progenitor, is blessed with offspring, I will stand godmother to every first-born. All the sons of your house from first to last, whether they be dark or fair, or brown, shall bear the grey lock. It will be a sign unto your posterity that much good fortune awaits them. My authority, however, is limited, and if at any time a higher power should hinder me from exerting my influence in behalf of one of your grandsons, then will the grey lock be missing from his head, and it will depend altogether on himself how his life unfolds itself. One thing more. Give me back my ring and take instead this mirror, which will always show to you and yours whatever you hold most dear, even when you are far away from it."

"Then it will ever be granted to me to bring your face before my eyes, oh! lovely lady!" the knight exclaimed.

The fairy laughed and answered: "No, Duke Greylock—the mirror can only reflect the forms of mortals. I know a wife awaiting you, whom you will rather see than any picture in the glass, even were it that of a fairy. Receive my thanks once more! you are duke, enter now into your dukedom!"

With these words she disappeared. A gentle rustling and tinkling was heard through the air, the waste ground covered itself with fresh green, the dry river beds filled with clear running water,

and on their banks appeared blooming meadows, shady groves and forests. The broken walls against the hillsides fitted themselves together, rose higher and supported once more the terraces covered with vine stocks and fruit-trees. Villages and cities grew into form and lay cradled in the landscape. Beautiful gardens bloomed forth, full of gay flowers, olive-trees, orange-trees, citron, and fig, and pomegranate-trees, each covered with its golden fruit of many-seeded apples. In the neighbourhood of the grotto in which the fairy had been imprisoned a park of incomparable beauty grew into view, where brooks whispered and fountains played, and shady pergolas appeared, formed of gold and silver trellises, over which a thousand luxuriant creepers clambered, holding by their little tendril hands.

The fallen columns stood up again, the mutilated marble statues found new noses and arms, and in the background of all this growing magnificence the young duke perceived-at first dimly, as if obscured by mists, then more distinctly-the outline of a palace with loggia, balconies, columned halls, and statues in bronze and marble around the cornice of its flat roof.

George, the squire, gazed in openmouthed wonder, and his mouth remained open until he entered the fore-court of the palace. Then he only closed it to give his jaws a little rest before their future labours began, for such a good smell from the kitchen greeted him that he ordered the willing cook to satisfy immediately the demands of his appetite, as his hunger was greater than his curiosity.

Sir Wendelin continued his way through the passages, chambers, halls, and courts. Everywhere servants, guards, and heyducks swarmed, and from the stables he heard the stamping of many horses, and the jingle of their halter chains as they rattled them against their well-filled mangers. Chorus of trumpeters played inspiring fanfares, and from the assembled people in the forecourt a thousand voices shouted again and again: "Hail to his Grace Duke Greylock, Wendelin the First! Long may he live!"

The knight bowed graciously to his good people, and when the Chancellor stepped forward, and after a deep reverence set forth in a carefully prepared speech the great services which the duke had rendered to the country, Wendelin listened with polite attention, though he himself was quite ignorant of what the old man was talking about.

Sir Wendelin had lived through so many adventures that it pleased him now to sit peacefully on his throne, and he did his best to be worthy of the honours which the fairy had conferred upon him. After he had learned the duties of a ruler from A to Z, he returned to Germany to woo his cousin Walpurga. He led her back to his palace, and for many years they governed the beautiful land together. All of the five sons which his wife bore to him, came into the world with the grey lock. They all grew to be brave men and loyal subjects of their father, whom they served faithfully in war, holding fraternally together and greatly enlarging the boundaries of his dukedom by their prowess.

A long time passed and generation after generation of the descendants of the worthy Sir Wendelin followed one another. The first-born son always bore the name of the progenitor of the family, and the fairy Clementine always appeared at the baptism. No one ever saw her; but a gentle tinkling through the palace betrayed her presence, and when that ceased, the grey lock on the infant's temple was always found to have twisted itself into a curl.

At the end of five hundred years, Wendelin XV. was carried to his grave. No Greylock had ever possessed a more luxuriant grey curl than his, and yet he had died young. The wise men of the land said that even to the most favoured only a fixed measure of happiness and good luck was granted, and that Wendelin XV. had enjoyed his full share in the space of thirty years.

Certain it is that from childhood everything had prospered with this duke. His people had expected great things of him when he was only crown prince, and he did not disappoint them when he came to the throne. Every one had loved him. Under his leadership the army had marched from one victory to another. While he held the sceptre one abundant harvest followed another, and he had married the most beautiful and most virtuous daughter of the mightiest prince in the kingdom.

In the midst of a hot conflict, and at the moment that his own army sent up a shout of victory, he met his death. Everything that the heart of man could desire had been accorded to him, except

the one joy of possessing a son and heir. But he had left the world in the hope that that wish, too, would be fulfilled.

Black banners floated from the battlements of the castle, the columns at its entrance were wreathed in crape, the gold state-coaches were painted black, and the manes and tails of the duke's horses bound with ribbons of the same sombre hue. The master of the hunt had the gaily-colored birds in the park dyed, the schoolmaster had the copy-books of the boys covered with black, the merry minstrels in the land sang only sad strains, and every subject wore mourning. When the ruby-red nose of the guardian of the Court cellar gradually changed to a bluish tint during this time, the Court marshal thought it only natural. Even the babies were swaddled in black bands. And besides all this outward show, the hearts too were sad, and saddest of all was that of the young widowed duchess. She also had laid aside all bright colours, and went about in deepest mourning, only her eyes, despite the Court orders in regard to sombre hues, were bright red from weeping.

She would have wished to die that she might not be separated from her husband, save for a sweet, all-powerful hope which held her to this world; and the prospect of holy duties, like faint rays of sunshine, threw their light over her future, which would otherwise have seemed as dark as the habits of the Court about her.

Thus five long months passed. On the first morning of the sixth month cannon thundered from the citadel of the capital. One salvo followed another, making the air tremble, but the firing did not waken the citizens, for not one of them had closed an eye the foregoing night, which, according to the oldest inhabitants, had been unprecedented. From the rocky district on the north shore of the lake, where Misdral lived, a fearful thunder-storm had arisen, and spread over the city and ducal palace. There was a rolling and rumbling of thunder and howling of wind, such as might have heralded the Day of judgment. The lightning had not, as usual, rent the darkness with long, jagged flashes, but had fallen to the ground as great fiery balls which, however, had set nothing aflame. The watchmen on the towers asserted that above the black clouds a silver- white mist had floated, like a stream of milk over dark wool, and that in the midst of the rumbling and crashing of the thunder they had heard the sweet tones of harps. Many of the burghers said that they too had heard it, and the ducal Maker of Musical Instruments declared that the notes sounded as if they had come from a fine harpsichord—though not from one of the best—which some one had played between heaven and earth.

As soon as the firing of cannon began, all the people ran into the streets, and the street-cleaners, who were sweeping up the tiles and broken bits of slate that the storm had torn from the roofs, leaned on their brooms and listened. The Constable was using a great deal of powder; the time seemed long to the men and women who were counting the number of reports, and there seemed no end to the noise. Sixty guns meant a princess, one hundred and one meant a prince. When the sixty- first was heard, there was great rejoicing, for then they knew that the duchess had borne a son; when, however, another shot followed the one hundred and first, a clever advocate suggested that perhaps there were two princesses. When one hundred and sixty-one guns had been fired, they said it might be a boy and a girl; when the one hundred and eightieth came, the schoolmaster, whose wife had presented him with seven daughters, exclaimed: "Perhaps there are triplets, 'feminini generis!'" But this supposition was confuted by the next shot. When the firing ceased after the two hundred and second gun, the people knew that their beloved duchess was the mother of twin boys.

The city went crazy with joy. Flags bearing the national colours were hoisted in place of the mourning banners. In the show-windows of the drapers' shops red, blue, and yellow stuffs were exhibited once more, and the courtiers smoothed the wrinkles out of their brows, and practised their smiles again.

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