

The Last Pearl

That was a rich, happy house! Everyone in the house—masters, servants, and friends of the family—rejoiced and made merry: an heir had been born to the family—a son. Both mother and child were healthy.

The lamp hanging in the cozy bedroom was shaded on one side by a curtain; heavy, costly silk draperies tightly covered the windows; the floor was spread with a thick, soft carpet, like moss; everything invited sweet slumber, sleep, rest. No wonder the nurse had fallen asleep; and let her be—all was well. The Genius of the Hearth stood at the head of the bed; the head of the child, nestled against its mother's breast, was encircled as if by a wreath of bright stars; each was a pearl of happiness. All the good fairies had brought their gifts to the newborn; in the wreath gleamed pearls: of health, wealth, happiness, love—in short, of all earthly blessings a person could wish for.

"Everything has been given to him!" said the Genius.

"No!" came a voice close beside him. It was the child's Guardian Angel speaking. "One fairy has not yet brought her gift, but she will bring it in time, though perhaps not soon. The last pearl is missing from the wreath!"

"Missing! That must not be! If this is so, we must seek out the mighty fairy, go to her at once!"

"She will appear in her own time and bring her pearl, which must complete the wreath!"

"Where then does this fairy dwell? Where is her home? Tell me, and I shall go for the pearl!"

"Very well!" said the child's Guardian Angel. "I myself will lead you to her, no matter where we may have to seek her! She has no fixed dwelling! She appears both in royal palaces and in wretched peasant huts! She passes by no one; to each she brings her gift—be it a whole world or a trifle! And to this child too she will come in her own time! But since, in your opinion, waiting is not always beneficial—very well, let us hasten to fetch the pearl, the last pearl missing from this magnificent wreath!"

And hand in hand they flew to where the fairy dwelt at that hour.

They found themselves in a large house, but the corridors were dark, the rooms empty and strangely quiet; a long row of windows stood open to admit fresh air into the rooms; long white curtains hung down and swayed in the wind.

In the middle of the room stood an open coffin; within it lay a woman in the prime of life. The deceased was entirely covered with roses; only her slender hands, folded upon her breast, and her face were visible, retaining an expression both serene and solemn, grave.

Beside the coffin stood the deceased's husband and children. The father held the youngest in his arms; they had come to take farewell of the departed. The husband kissed her hand, yellowed and dry as a withered leaf, which so recently had been so strong, so firm, guiding household and home with such love. Bitter tears fell upon the floor, yet no one uttered a word. In this silence lay an entire world of sorrow. Silently, suppressing their sobs, all left the room.

A candle burned in the room; its flame flickered in the wind and flared up in long red tongues. Strangers entered, closed the coffin, and began nailing down the lid. The blows of the hammer echoed loudly in every corner of the house, striking hearts that were bleeding.

"Where have you brought me?" asked the Genius of the Hearth. "There are no fairies here whose gift, whose pearl, belongs among life's greatest blessings!"

"She is here!" said the Guardian Angel, pointing to a figure sitting in the corner. In that very spot where, during her lifetime, the mother of the family used to sit, surrounded by flowers and pictures, from where, like a benevolent fairy of the hearth, she smiled kindly upon husband, children, and friends, from where, like a clear sun, the soul of the entire house, she spread light and joy all around—there now sat a strange woman in a long garment. It was Sorrow; now she was mistress of the house; she had taken the place of the departed. A burning tear rolled down her cheek and turned into a pearl shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. The Guardian Angel caught it, and it blazed forth as a bright seven-colored star.

"Behold, the pearl of sorrow, the last pearl, without which the wreath of earthly blessings is incomplete! It makes the brilliance and beauty of the others shine even more brightly. Do you see within it the radiance of the rainbow—that bridge connecting earth with heaven? Losing a dear, beloved one here on earth, we gain a friend in heaven, for whom we shall long. And on quiet starry nights we involuntarily turn our gaze to the sky, to the stars, where another, perfect life awaits us. Look upon the pearl of sorrow: within it lie hidden the wings of Psyche, which carry us away from this world!"

