

## The King of the Waterfalls

by Andrew Lang  
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

When the young king of Easaidh Ruadh came into his kingdom, the first thing he thought of was how he could amuse himself best. The sports that all his life had pleased him best suddenly seemed to have grown dull, and he wanted to do something he had never done before. At last his face brightened.

‘I know!’ he said. ‘I will go and play a game with the Gruagach.’ Now the Gruagach was a kind of wicked fairy, with long curly brown hair, and his house was not very far from the king’s house.

But though the king was young and eager, he was also prudent, and his father had told him on his deathbed to be very careful in his dealings with the ‘good people,’ as the fairies were called. Therefore before going to the Gruagach the king sought out a wise man of the countryside.

‘I am wanting to play a game with the curly-haired Gruagach,’ said he.

‘Are you, indeed?’ replied the wizard. ‘If you will take my counsel, you will play with someone else.’

‘No; I will play with the Gruagach,’ persisted the king.

‘Well, if you must, you must, I suppose,’ answered the wizard; ‘but if you win that game, ask as a prize the ugly crop-headed girl that stands behind the door.’

‘I will,’ said the king.

So before the sun rose he got up and went to the house of the Gruagach, who was sitting outside.

‘O king, what has brought you here to-day?’ asked the Gruagach. ‘But right welcome you are, and more welcome will you be still if you will play a game with me.’

‘That is just what I want,’ said the king, and they played; and sometimes it seemed as if one would win, and sometimes the other, but in the end it was the king who was the winner.

‘And what is the prize that you will choose?’ inquired the Gruagach.

‘The ugly crop-headed girl that stands behind the door,’ replied the king.

‘Why, there are twenty others in the house, and each fairer than she!’ exclaimed the Gruagach.

‘Fairer they may be, but it is she whom I wish for my wife, and none other,’ and the Gruagach saw that the king’s mind was set upon her, so he entered his house, and bade all the maidens in it come out one by one, and pass before the king.

One by one they came; tall and short, dark and fair, plump and thin, and each said ‘I am she whom you want. You will be foolish indeed if you do not take me.’

But he took none of them, neither short nor tall, dark nor fair, plump nor thin, till at the last the crop-headed girl came out.

‘This is mine,’ said the king, though she was so ugly that most men would have turned from her. ‘We will be married at once, and I will carry you home.’ And married they were, and they set forth across a meadow to the king’s house. As they went, the bride stooped and picked a sprig of shamrock, which grew amongst the grass, and when she stood upright again her ugliness had all gone, and the most beautiful woman that ever was seen stood by the king’s side.

The next day, before the sun rose, the king sprang from his bed, and told his wife he must have another game with the Gruagach.

‘If my father loses that game, and you win it,’ said she, ‘accept nothing for your prize but the shaggy young horse with the stick saddle.’

‘I will do that,’ answered the king, and he went.

‘Does your bride please you?’ asked the Gruagach, who was standing at his own door.

‘Ah! does she not!’ answered the king quickly. ‘Otherwise I should be hard indeed to please. But will you play a game to-day?’

‘I will,’ replied the Gruagach, and they played, and sometimes it seemed as if one would win, and sometimes the other, but in the end the king was the winner.

‘What is the prize that you will choose?’ asked the Gruagach.

‘The shaggy young horse with the stick saddle,’ answered the king, but he noticed that the Gruagach held his peace, and his brow was dark as he led out the horse from the stable. Rough was its mane and dull was its skin, but the king cared nothing for that, and throwing his leg over the stick saddle, rode away like the wind.

On the third morning the king got up as usual before dawn, and as soon as he had eaten food he prepared to go out, when his wife stopped him. ‘I would rather,’ she said, ‘that you did not go to play with the Gruagach, for though twice you have won yet some day he will win, and then he will put trouble upon you.’

‘Oh! I must have one more game,’ cried the king; ‘just this one.’ And he went off to the house of the Gruagach.

Joy filled the heart of the Gruagach when he saw him coming, and without waiting to talk they played their game. Somehow or other, the king’s strength and skill had departed from him, and soon the Gruagach was the victor.

‘Choose your prize,’ said the king, when the game was ended, ‘but do not be too hard on me, or ask what I cannot give.’

‘The prize I choose,’ answered the Gruagach, ‘is that the crop-headed creature should take thy head and thy neck, if thou dost not get for me the Sword of Light that hangs in the house of the king of the oak windows.’

‘I will get it,’ replied the young man bravely; but as soon as he was out of sight of the Gruagach he pretended no more, and his face grew dark and his steps lagging.

‘You have brought nothing with you to-night,’ said the queen, who was standing on the steps awaiting him. She was so beautiful that the king was fain to smile when he looked at her, but then he remembered what had happened, and his heart grew heavy again.

‘What is it? What is the matter? Tell me thy sorrow that I may bear it with thee, or, it may be, help thee!’ Then the king told her everything that had befallen him, and she stroked his hair the while.

‘That is nothing to grieve about,’ she said when the tale was finished. ‘You have the best wife in Erin, and the best horse in Erin. Only do as I bid you, and all will go well.’ And the king suffered himself to be comforted.

He was still sleeping when the queen rose and dressed herself, to make everything ready for her husband’s journey; and the first place she went to was the stable, where she fed and watered the shaggy brown horse and put the saddle on it. Most people thought this saddle was of wood, and did not see the little sparkles of gold and silver that were hidden in it. She strapped it lightly on the horse’s back, and then led it down before the house, where the king waited.

‘Good luck to you, and victories in all your battles,’ she said, as she kissed him before he mounted. ‘I need not be telling you anything. Take the advice of the horse, and see you obey it.’

So he waved his hand and set out on his journey, and the wind was not swifter than the brown horse--no, not even the March wind which raced it and could not catch it. But the horse never stopped nor looked behind, till in the dark of the night he reached the castle of the king of the oak windows.

‘We are at the end of the journey,’ said the horse, ‘and you will find the Sword of Light in the king’s own chamber. If it comes to you without scrape or sound, the token is a good one. At this hour the king is eating his supper, and the room is empty, so none will see you. The sword has a knob at the end, and take heed that when you grasp it, you draw it softly out of its sheath. Now go! I will be under the window.’

Stealthily the young man crept along the passage, pausing now and then to make sure that no man was following him, and entered the king's chamber. A strange white line of light told him where the sword was, and crossing the room on tiptoe, he seized the knob, and drew it slowly out of the sheath. The king could hardly breathe with excitement lest it should make some noise, and bring all the people in the castle running to see what was the matter. But the sword slid swiftly and silently along the case till only the point was left touching it. Then a low sound was heard, as of the edge of a knife touching a silver plate, and the king was so startled that he nearly dropped the knob.

'Quick! quick!' cried the horse, and the king scrambled hastily through the small window, and leapt into the saddle.

'He has heard and he will follow,' said the horse; 'but we have a good start,' And on they sped, on and on, leaving the winds behind them.

At length the horse slackened its pace. 'Look and see who is behind you,' it said; and the young man looked.

'I see a swarm of brown horses racing madly after us,' he answered.

'We are swifter than those,' said the horse, and flew on again.

'Look again, O king! Is anyone coming now?'

'A swarm of black horses, and one has a white face, and on that horse a man is seated. He is the king of the oak windows.'

'That is my brother, and swifter still than I,' said the horse, 'and he will fly past me with a rush. Then you must have your sword ready, and take off the head of the man who sits on him, as he turns and looks at you. And there is no sword in the world that will cut off his head, save only that one.'

'I will do it,' replied the king; and he listened with all his might, till he judged that the white-faced horse was close to him. Then he sat up very straight and made ready.

The next moment there was a rushing noise as of a mighty tempest, and the young man caught a glimpse of a face turned towards him. Almost blindly he struck, not knowing whether he had killed or only wounded the rider. But the head rolled off, and was caught in the brown horse's mouth.

'Jump on my brother, the black horse, and go home as fast as you can, and I will follow as quickly as I may,' cried the brown horse; and leaping forward the king alighted on the back of the black horse, but so near the tail that he almost fell off again. But he stretched out his arm and clutched wildly at the mane and pulled himself into the saddle.

Before the sky was streaked with red he was at home again, and the queen was sitting waiting till he arrived, for sleep was far from her eyes. Glad was she to see him enter, but she said little, only took her harp and sang softly the songs which he loved, till he went to bed, soothed and happy.

It was broad day when he woke, and he sprang up saying:

'Now I must go to the Gruagach, to find out if the spells he laid on me are loose.'

'Have a care,' answered the queen, 'for it is not with a smile as on the other days that he will greet you. Furiously he will meet you, and will ask you in his wrath if you have got the sword, and you will reply that you have got it. Next he will want to know how you got it, and to this you must say that but for the knob you had not got it at all. Then he will raise his head to look at the knob, and you must stab him in the mole which is on the right side of his neck; but take heed, for if you miss the mole with the point of the sword, then my death and your death are certain. He is brother to the king of the oak windows, and sure will he be that the king must be head, or the sword would not be in your hands.' After that she kissed him, and bade him good speed.

'Didst thou get the sword?' asked the Gruagach, when they met in the usual place.

'I got the sword.'

'And how didst thou get it?'

‘If it had not had a knob on the top, then I had not got it,’ answered the king.

‘Give me the sword to look at,’ said the Gruagach, peering forward; but like a flash the king had drawn it from under his nose and pierced the mole, so that the Gruagach rolled over on the ground.

‘Now I shall be at peace,’ thought the king. But he was wrong, for when he reached home he found his servants tied together back to back with cloths bound round their mouths, so that they could not speak. He hastened to set them free, and he asked who had treated them in so evil a manner.

‘No sooner had you gone than a great giant came, and dealt with us as you see, and carried off your wife and your two horses,’ said the men.

‘Then my eyes will not close nor will my head lay itself down till I fetch my wife and horses home again,’ answered he, and he stopped and noted the tracks of the horses on the grass, and followed after them till he arrived at the wood, when the darkness fell.

‘I will sleep here,’ he said to himself, ‘but first I will make a fire,’ And he gathered together some twigs that were lying about, and then took two dry sticks and rubbed them together till the fire came, and he sat by it.

The twigs cracked and the flame blazed up, and a slim yellow dog pushed through the bushes and laid his head on the king’s knee, and the king stroked his head.

‘Wuf, wuf,’ said the dog. ‘Sore was the plight of thy wife and thy horses when the giant drove them last night through the forest.’

‘That is why I have come,’ answered the king; and suddenly his heart seemed to fail him and he felt that he could not go on.

‘I cannot fight that giant,’ he cried, looking at the dog with a white face. ‘I am afraid, let me turn homewards.’

‘No, don’t do that,’ replied the dog. ‘Eat and sleep, and I will watch over you.’ So the king ate and lay down, and slept till the sun waked him.

‘It is time for you to start on your way,’ said the dog, ‘and if danger presses, call on me, and I will help you.’

‘Farewell, then,’ answered the king; ‘I will not forget that promise,’ and on he went, and on, and on, till he reached a tall cliff with many sticks lying about.

‘It is almost night,’ he thought; ‘I will make a fire and rest,’ and thus he did, and when the flames blazed up, the hoary hawk of the grey rock flew on to a bough above him.

‘Sore was the plight of thy wife and thy horses when they passed here with the giant,’ said the hawk.

‘Never shall I find them,’ answered the king, ‘and nothing shall I get for all my trouble.’

‘Oh, take heart,’ replied the hawk; ‘things are never so bad but what they might be worse. Eat and sleep and I will watch thee,’ and the king did as he was bidden by the hawk, and by the morning he felt brave again.

‘Farewell,’ said the bird, ‘and if danger presses call to me, and I will help you.’

On he walked, and on and on, till as dusk was falling he came to a great river, and on the bank there were sticks lying about.

‘I will make myself a fire,’ he thought, and thus he did, and by and bye a smooth brown head peered at him from the water, and a long body followed it.

‘Sore was the plight of thy wife and thy horses when they passed the river last night,’ said the otter.

‘I have sought them and not found them,’ answered the king, ‘and nought shall I get for my trouble.’



‘Be not so downcast,’ replied the otter; ‘before noon to-morrow thou shalt behold thy wife. But eat and sleep and I will watch over thee.’ So the king did as the otter bid him, and when the sun rose he woke and saw the otter lying on the bank.

‘Farewell,’ cried the otter as he jumped into the water, ‘and if danger presses, call to me and I will help you.’

For many hours the king walked, and at length he reached a high rock, which was rent into two by a great earthquake. Throwing himself on the ground he looked over the side, and right at the very bottom he saw his wife and his horses. His heart gave a great bound, and all his fears left him, but he was forced to be patient, for the sides of the rock were smooth, and not even a goat could find foothold. So he got up again, and made his way round through the wood, pushing by trees, scrambling over rocks, wading through streams, till at last he was on flat ground again, close to the mouth of the cavern.

His wife gave a shriek of joy when he came in, and then burst into tears, for she was tired and very frightened. But her husband did not understand why she wept, and he was tired and bruised from his climb, and a little cross too.

‘You give me but a sorry welcome,’ grumbled he, ‘when I have half-killed myself to get to you.’

‘Do not heed him,’ said the horses to the weeping woman; ‘put him in front of us, where he will be safe, and give him food, for he is weary.’ And she did as the horses told her, and he ate and rested, till by and bye a long shadow fell over them, and their hearts beat with fear, for they knew that the giant was coming.

‘I smell a stranger,’ cried the giant, as he entered; but it was dark inside the chasm, and he did not see the king, who was crouching down between the feet of the horses.

‘A stranger, my lord! no stranger ever comes here, not even the sun!’ and the king’s wife laughed gaily as she went up to the giant and stroked the huge hand which hung down by his side.

‘Well, I perceive nothing, certainly,’ answered he, ‘but it is very odd. However, it is time that the horses were fed;’ and he lifted down an

armful of hay from a shelf of rock and held out a handful to each animal, who moved forward to meet him, leaving the king behind. As soon as the giant's hands were near their mouths they each made a snap, and began to bit them, so that his groans and shrieks might have been heard a mile off. Then they wheeled round and kicked him till they could kick no more. At length the giant crawled away, and lay quivering in a corner, and the queen went up to him.

'Poor thing! poor thing!' she said, 'they seem to have gone mad; it was awful to behold.'

'If I had had my soul in my body they would certainly have killed me,' groaned the giant.

'It was lucky indeed,' answered the queen; 'but tell me, where is thy soul, that I may take care of it?'

'Up there, in the Bonnach stone,' answered the giant, pointing to a stone which was balanced loosely on an edge of rock. 'But now leave me, that I may sleep, for I have far to go to-morrow.'

Soon snores were heard from the corner where the giant lay, and then the queen lay down too, and the horses, and the king was hidden between them, so that none could see him.

Before the dawn the giant rose and went out, and immediately the queen ran up to the Bonnach stone, and tugged and pushed at it till it was quite steady on its ledge, and could not fall over. And so it was in the evening when the giant came home; and when they saw his shadow, the king crept down in front of the horses.

'Why, what have you done to the Bonnach stone?' asked the giant.

'I feared lest it should fall over, and be broken, with your soul in it,' said the queen, 'so I put it further back on the ledge.'

'It is not there that my soul is,' answered he, 'it is on the threshold. But it is time the horses were fed;' and he fetched the hay, and gave it to them, and they bit and kicked him as before, till he lay half dead on the ground.

Next morning he rose and went out, and the queen ran to the threshold of the cave, and washed the stones, and pulled up some moss and little flowers that were hidden in the crannies, and by and by when dusk had fallen the giant came home.

‘You have been cleaning the threshold,’ said he.

‘And was I not right to do it, seeing that your soul is in it?’ asked the queen.

‘It is not there that my soul is,’ answered the giant. ‘Under the threshold is a stone, and under the stone is a sheep, and in the sheep’s body is a duck, and in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my soul. But it is late, and I must feed the horses;’ and he brought them the hay, but they only bit and kicked him as before, and if his soul had been within him, they would have killed him outright.

It was still dark when the giant got up and went his way, and then the king and the queen ran forward to take up the threshold, while the horses looked on. But sure enough! just as the giant had said, underneath the threshold was the flagstone, and they pulled and tugged till the stone gave way. Then something jumped out so suddenly, that it nearly knocked them down, and as it fled past, they saw it was a sheep.

‘If the slim yellow dog of the greenwood were only here, he would soon have that sheep,’ cried the king; and as he spoke, the slim yellow dog appeared from the forest, with the sheep in his mouth. With a blow from the king, the sheep fell dead, and they opened its body, only to be blinded by a rush of wings as the duck flew past.

‘If the hoary hawk of the rock were only here, he would soon have that duck,’ cried the king; and as he spoke the hoary hawk was seen hovering above them, with the duck in his mouth. They cut off the duck’s head with a swing of the king’s sword, and took the egg out of its body, but in his triumph the king held it carelessly, and it slipped from his hand, and rolled swiftly down the hill right into the river.

‘If the brown otter of the stream were only here, he would soon have that egg,’ cried the king; and the next minute there was the brown otter, dripping with water, holding the egg in his mouth. But beside

the brown otter, a huge shadow came stealing along--the shadow of the giant.

The king stood staring at it, as if he were turned into stone, but the queen snatched the egg from the otter and crushed it between her two hands. And after that the shadow suddenly shrank and was still, and they knew that the giant was dead, because they had found his soul.

Next day they mounted the two horses and rode home again, visiting their friends the brown otter and the hoary hawk and the slim yellow dog by the way.

From 'West Highland Tales.'