

MIDNIGHT
by Tanith Lee

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Above the glittering ballroom, the gilded clock hung like a baleful planet. The hands on the face of it showed ten minutes to midnight.

Only ten minutes more. Then, she must be gone. But the girl — how could she bear to leave? She looked away from the clock, back at the face of the young prince who was dancing with her, over the marble floor.

They fitted together like hand and glove. Both so young, so beautiful, and so wonderfully dressed. For not only the prince was clad as one would expect, in garments of silk and velvet, so was the girl. She too looked like royalty.

How strange it had been. The old woman the girl had sometimes helped, giving her scraps from the kitchen, nice things when possible, though the girl herself got little enough. Then suddenly, this very night, when the evil, tyrannical women of the house had flounced away to the ball, the old woman entered - not by the door, but out of the *fireplace* — shedding her rags, her old age, becoming a shining creature. “Bathe yourself,” the being had said to the astonished girl, “wash the soot from your hair. Then you will find there are garments for you, and everything else, to show your beauty as it truly is.”

Bemused, indeed under a *spell*, the girl obeyed. Stepping from the tub, she found herself at once both dry and scented, and she was next instant dressed, in the whitest silks, whiter than new-polished stars — her hair plaited with diamonds. And on her feet two shoes of such lovely peculiar-ity, she stood gazing at them.

Then the being was beside her again. “They are not made of glass — you will be well-able to dance in them.”

The girl saw then the shoes were only stitched over, each of them, with a hundred or so tiny sparkling crystals. And taking a step, found she was already gliding — dancing — as if in a dream.

“Outside,” said her benefactor, “a carriage awaits you. I made it —” a little, perhaps boastful laugh — “from a pumpkin — but now it is formed of gold. The six white horses are mice, but no one will know — not even they. Go to the palace, and win the heart of the handsome prince. You will find it quite easy, as now you are.”

The girl — who in her recent awful years of ill-treated slavery, had been called in mockery, *Ashy* — murmured, “But these are faery gifts. They will vanish away at morning.”

“True. The very first moment of morning, which comes when night turns back to day — at mid-night. Thus, before the fatal hour strikes, you must depart or be seen in rags and ruin.”

“But then,” whispered Ashy, turning ashen under all her beauty, “what use is any of this?”

“He will love you. You must trust in that. Love is *never* blind. He will find you, even after mid-night has struck. Do you understand?”

“No, Lady,” said Ashy. But her own real name came back to her at that second. It was Elvira. She bowed to the one who had been an old beggar woman, and who could walk out of a fire. “But I thank you. Even if this night ends for me in trag-edy, to taste the joy of it will be worth any later pain.”

Then Elvira went out and found the incredible golden carriage and the white horses, and step-ping inside the vehicle, was carried faster almost than light — which she now resembled — to the palace of the prince.

Through all the crowds, he saw her at once. As she saw him.

Like two magnets, one of stellar silver, one of flame-lit steel, they flew together.

“I thought the moon had fallen on the terrace,” he said, as he led her out across the gleaming floor. “But it was you.”

What had they said to each other, after that? Beginning with courtly phrases, presently the passionate desire, the deep tenderness each had at once conceived for the other, spangled in their brains, more vital than champagne, and sprang from their lips like arrows. There among the host of other dancers, they spoke of love — shameless, precipitous, sincere.

But, for all their bond of truth, Elvira told him nothing of who she was, of what had happened to her, the jealous wickedness of false family. Noth-ing of her station now in life, that of a girl smudged with filth and living among grey cinders.

She could not bring herself to do it. She was afraid. Love is *never* blind? Yet he saw her now in a gown of moonlight, with diamonds in her hair and shoes that seemed magically made of glass. He thought her the daughter of a king, just as he was the son of a king.

And so she had arrived with him at ten minutes to midnight.

Yet now — oh now — the hands of the gilded clock had leapt forward

impossibly. Eight minutes were *gone*. Only two minutes were left. She must fly — she must run away for her very life.

Let me stay one minute more. Only one —

For after this — no, he would never find her. How could he? She would be hidden again in dark-ness. And then he would forget her completely. Or else his heart would break as her heart already broke, thinking of the empty desert of despair beyond this night.

A single minute now, all that was left. How slowly the hands of the clock crept — how swiftly.

If only Elvira might freeze time. One *half* minute — all that remained — to make that half minute last another night — another hour — at least ... at least another ten minutes —

“My love,” Elvira said to the prince. There on the gleaming floor, among the crowds, they ceased to dance. Seeing this, the other dancers also stopped dancing. The orchestra fell silent in a sudden phantasmal flowing away of sound.

“My love — I must —”

The clock *struck*. The first stroke of the terrible twelve — an axe-blade that cracked asunder the pane of night.

Elvira stared up into the face of her lover. She saw how his laughing delight was altering to bewilderment — dismay.

She drew her hand from his. She drew away from him.

The clock *struck*. The second stroke. Already smashed, the night scattered in bits like black and golden snow. ‘ .

“I—” she said.

“Never leave me,” he said.

The clock *struck*. The third stroke. The palace and the city reeled.

Elvira’s feet in the shoes of glass were lead. She must gather up her glimmer of skirts and run — *run* — before the glory of the spell of illusion deserted her.

Four, struck the clock, five, six, *seven* —

Like a statue, Elvira. Turned to stone.

Already it was too late.

The crashing axe-blows had become a thin honed sword, which sliced away the imagery of enchantment. Eviscerated, the white gown, foam-ing up like feathers, *melted* — the diamonds, shed like rain, dried— even the peerless shoes — for how could they remain, when all else that was sorcerous vanished? The shoes were two puddles of mirror. Then a mirror’s double shadow. Then— nothing at all.

Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

Twelve, roared the clock, the voice of judge-ment: *Twelve-twelve-twelve*. The echo continued forever. But after forever, silence returned.

Elvira had not run away. She stood there in the midst of strangers, three of whom — though she could not see them — she knew to be the enemies from her own house. These people had not lost their finery. They bloomed in it, and bloomed also with eyes stretched wide with shock, disgust or fear.

And there before her, he — her lover, her prince, also changed at last to expressionless pale stone.

The girl wore only her dirty shift. Her hair hung down her back, thick with kitchen grease and cinders. She smelled no more of flowers and essences, but of sweat and toil, ash and agony.

Love is not blind. No, love sees too much. Love sees and becomes a whip with thorns in it. Oh, she had already learned as much, when her step-mother and stepsisters first turned upon her like starving rats.

Elvira waited, her head still raised, too shamed to be ashamed, her tears now the only jewels she wore.

And he, the prince, stretched out one hand, as if to push her away.

Instead, his hand clasped hers. He looked into her face, and suddenly the sun rose behind his eyes. He smiled at her gravely. “Now I under-stand,” he said.

“But,” she faltered, “do you still know me — even now?”

“Just as I knew you at first sight,” he said. “It is still you. And how courageous you are, to have stayed. How you must love me, Elvira — perhaps even as much as I love you.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the prince, turn-

ing to his astounded court, Elvira's dirt-blackened hand clasped firmly in his own, "Here is my future wife."

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