

# Count Alaric's Lady

## By Barbara Leonie Picard

### Reader's Theater Edition #17

Adapted for reader's theater (or readers theatre) by Aaron Shepard, from the story published in [the book](#) *Selected Fairy Tales*, by Barbara Leonie Picard, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994

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**PREVIEW:** A young count marries a maiden he finds in a meadow, though she can't remember who she is or where she came from.

GENRE: Fairy tales

CULTURE: European (medieval)

THEME: Possessiveness

READERS: 7 or more

READER AGES: 14 and up

LENGTH: 14 minutes

**ROLES:** Narrators 1 & 2, Alaric, Lady, Magda, Fairy People (2 or more)

**NOTES:** This original story draws on traditional fairy tale motifs to convey a timeless message. For best effect, place NARRATOR 1 at far left, and NARRATOR 2 at far right, as seen from the audience.

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**NARRATOR 1:** Early in the morning of one Midsummer Day, young Count Alaric rode out of his castle alone. The count was joyful as he rode his horse over his fields, for the sun was shining and life was good.

**NARRATOR 2:** Halfway across a meadow, he saw a maiden in a gown of green, sitting on the grass. Her feet were bare, and on her hair of flaxen gold she wore a wreath of moon daisies. Alaric reined in his horse.

**ALARIC:** You are a stranger here, fair lady. Will you tell me your name?

**NARRATOR 1:** She smiled a little, but distantly, as though she were smiling at something remembered.

**LADY:** I do not know my name.

**ALARIC:** (*in surprise*) But where do you come from?

**LADY:** I do not know.

**ALARIC:** Can you tell me nothing about yourself?

LADY: Nothing, but that for an hour or two I have sat in this field, watching the sun rise higher and listening to the song of the lark.

NARRATOR 2: Count Alaric looked down at her pale, strange beauty, and she looked up at him and smiled, and he knew he wanted to help her more than anything in the world.

NARRATOR 1: Yet there was a look in her golden-green eyes that he had never seen before—a look as though, even while she smiled at him, she was thinking of something else.

ALARIC: My castle is yonder. Will you come there with me?

NARRATOR 2: She thought a moment, then rose and answered.

LADY: I will.

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NARRATOR 1: As the maiden had no name, he called her Catherine, because he knew of no name more beautiful. And since he loved her and she was willing, he married her.

NARRATOR 2: But though they were happy and talked and laughed together, whenever he looked into her eyes he saw she was thinking of something else.

NARRATOR 1: With others, she was shy and silent, and when dances were held at the castle, she would sit by the wall and watch and smile. But one day Alaric came upon her in a room alone, dancing in a shaft of sunlight that streamed through a window.

ALARIC: You dance so lightly and gracefully. Why will you never dance with me?

NARRATOR 2: She stopped and gave him a puzzled frown.

LADY: I never want to dance.

ALARIC: (*laughs*) You were dancing a moment ago, dearest. I saw you as I came in.

LADY: (*face lightens*) Ah yes. I heard the music and I *had* to dance.

ALARIC: But, dearest, there was no music.

LADY: But there was! Sometimes I hear it in the distance, but today it seemed quite near.

NARRATOR 1: She listened for a moment.

LADY: (*sadly*) It is all silent now.

NARRATOR 2: Count Alaric took her hand in his.

ALARIC: Tell me truly, Catherine, are you happy with me?

NARRATOR 1: She smiled and laughed and pressed his hand.

LADY: Of course I am happy with you.

NARRATOR 2: But his heart was heavy, for still he saw the look in her eyes, as though she thought of something else.

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NARRATOR 1: A year passed, and it happened that on Midsummer Eve, Count Alaric was returning home from a short journey. All through the night he rode, hoping to be with Catherine at the very same hour he had found her, twelve months before.

NARRATOR 2: Towards dawn, as he passed the meadow where he had first seen her, he heard strains of sweet music. He rode towards it over the grass, and in the fading moonlight he could see some twenty or thirty figures in gowns of green, dancing barefoot in the dew.

ALARIC: (*wonderingly, to himself*) It is the fairy people. They have come here to dance on Midsummer Eve.

NARRATOR 1: And then he noticed that one among them wore crimson instead of green.

ALARIC: That hair, and that little chin. And I have seen her wear that gown before.

NARRATOR 2: But he could scarcely believe it, and he watched for many minutes before he knew beyond doubt that the dancer was Lady Catherine.

ALARIC: The fairy people have lured her from the castle! There is no time to lose. I must save her from their power.

NARRATOR 1: He urged his horse forward, but the horse took fright and bolted, fleeing like a mad creature back the way it had come. It carried him three miles before he could calm it and turn it around. But before he reached the meadow, the cock had crowed, and he found the field deserted.

NARRATOR 2: He rode on to the castle and went straight to his lady's room, fearing to find it empty. But when he flung back the velvet curtains around

the bed, he saw her sleeping there, her pale hair spread over the pillow. She awoke and smiled.

ALARIC: Dearest, is all well with you?

LADY: Of course. You are home early, and I am glad.

ALARIC: What did you do last night, Catherine?

LADY: I slept. What else should I do? (*smiles*) I am tired, and you ask so many questions. Wake me again when the sun is high.

NARRATOR 1: And she closed her eyes and slept once more.

ALARIC: (*softly to himself*) I must have been mistaken. It could not have been her in the meadow.

NARRATOR 2: He turned from the bed and walked softly away. But there hanging over a chair was her gown of crimson brocade, and he saw that the hem was dark and wet, as though it had been dragged in the dew.

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NARRATOR 1: Count Alaric thought much on what had passed that Midsummer Eve, and on the look he saw always in his lady's eyes. And at last he told himself,

ALARIC: I can bear this no longer. I will go out on the moors and visit wise old Magda. If anyone can advise me, it is she.

NARRATOR 2: So Count Alaric rode across the heath to the tumbledown hut of Magda. He knocked, and a voice of dignity answered.

MAGDA: Come in.

NARRATOR 1: He stooped to pass inside the door, and in the dim light he saw Magda, standing by the fire and stirring a pot of steeping herbs with her strong peasant hands. She turned to him and smiled.

MAGDA: Good day, Count Alaric. Sit you down. You are in trouble, or you would not have sought me out.

ALARIC: It is of my Lady Catherine that I would speak with you.

NARRATOR 2: And he told her all about the strange maiden he had married, and how he had seen her on Midsummer Eve dancing with the fairy people, and about the look always in her eyes, as though she were thinking of something else.

NARRATOR 1: When he had done, Magda was silent for a while, then looked at him with eyes full of pity and understanding.

MAGDA: Alaric, your lady is one of the fairy people.

ALARIC: It cannot be!

NARRATOR 2: But he knew in his heart she spoke true.

MAGDA: The time you found her, she must have been dancing on Midsummer Eve as the fairy people do, and happened to remain in the meadow at dawn when the others departed. Away from her people, she would forget much of her life with them, and so could tell you nothing of herself.

ALARIC: But if she is one of them, must I then lose her?

MAGDA: So long as she remembers anything of her fairy life, she will never be wholly yours. She will always hear the fairy music borne on the wind, and on Midsummer Eve she will have to dance with her people—and one day she may not return. And even if she should come back each time, you will always see in her eyes the look that troubles you.

ALARIC: (*in despair*) Is there no way to make her forget the fairy people? Can I never win her completely for my own?

MAGDA: There is only one way. You must give her a love that is perfect—a love that leaves no room for memory of any other life.

ALARIC: But my love *is* perfect. Magda, I would die for her!

MAGDA: (*shakes her head*) If your love were truly perfect, she would be wholly yours. But do not despair. Go home and see what time will do to help.

NARRATOR 1: From that day on, Count Alaric was even kinder to his lady than before, if that were possible.

NARRATOR 2: Yet daily he grew more sad, for still he saw she thought of something else.

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NARRATOR 1: Winter came, and after that the spring, then spring was gone and summer back again.

NARRATOR 2: On Midsummer Eve, Count Alaric watched and waited, and at dusk he saw his lady slip through the castle gate and run toward the fields. He buckled on his sword and mounted his horse.

NARRATOR 1: When he reached the meadow, he heard the music and saw once again the fairy people, dancing barefoot in their fluttering gowns of green. And among them in blue velvet was his lady, her feet bare and her pale hair flying, just the same as theirs.

NARRATOR 2: The count left his horse and came nearer, keeping to the shadows where he could. And as he watched his lady dance and laugh, he felt his heart would break.

ALARIC: (*softly to himself*) She must be mine! I will take her at any cost.

NARRATOR 1: He stepped among the dancers and seized her by the wrist.

NARRATOR 2: The fairy people scattered and fluttered into a group a little way off, with their white faces turned to him in the moonlight. And his lady would have followed, but he held her fast.

ALARIC: Catherine, it is Alaric, your husband. I have come to fetch you home.

NARRATOR 1: But she only struggled and cried,

LADY: Let me go!

NARRATOR 1: . . . and the fairy people held out their arms like white moonbeams and moaned,

FAIRY PEOPLE: Come back, our sister, come back.

NARRATOR 2: Yet Alaric's hold was too strong, and after a while she ceased her struggling. Then she smiled cunningly at him, and touched his cheek and stroked his hair.

LADY: Dear husband, my people wait for me. Let me join in the dance, and when it is over, I promise I will come back to you.

ALARIC: (*shakes his head*) The promises of the fairy people are as breath in the wind. If I let you go, you may *never* come back to me.

NARRATOR 1: Then tears filled Catherine's eyes.

LADY: The fairy people have no tears, but you have taught me how to weep.

NARRATOR 2: And Alaric turned his gaze away so pity should not make him weak.

NARRATOR 1: The fairy people swayed closer.

NARRATOR 2: Around the count and his lady they made a circle, and she cried out to them,

LADY: Give me now your strength, my people!

FAIRY PEOPLE: Be strong, our sister, be strong.

NARRATOR 1: And Count Alaric's lady became a sapling, and his hand was on its trunk, and a strong wind bent it away to tear it from his hold.

NARRATOR 2: But he clung to the tree tightly, and the wind died down and was still.

FAIRY PEOPLE: Be wild, our sister, be wild.

NARRATOR 1: And Count Alaric's lady became a vixen, which twisted and turned and snapped at him.

NARRATOR 2: But he held it close until it lay panting in his arms.

FAIRY PEOPLE: Be flowing, our sister, be flowing.

NARRATOR 1: And Count Alaric's lady became water which would have trickled through his fingers.

NARRATOR 2: But he cupped his hands and caught every drop.

FAIRY PEOPLE: Be fiery, our sister, be fiery.

NARRATOR 1: And Count Alaric's lady became a magic flame that seemed to scorch away his flesh.

NARRATOR 2: But he cried in his pain,

ALARIC: If I hold you till dawn, you will still be partly mine.

NARRATOR 2: . . . and he did not let go of the flame.

NARRATOR 1: Then Count Alaric's lady in her own shape sank upon the grass.

LADY: (*softly*) You are too strong for me, and I cannot leave you.

NARRATOR 2: The voices of the fairy people rose in a wail, and the circle broke.

NARRATOR 1: The count looked up and saw with joy a streak of saffron in the east. But when he looked down to where his lady crouched and moaned, his heart was troubled.

ALARIC: (*gently*) Catherine, if you stay with me, will you remember your people and be sad?

LADY: I shall only faintly remember them. I shall not be sad, but I shall always feel there is something I have lost.

ALARIC: And if you went back to your people, would you remember me and our life together and regret that it was past?

LADY: I should remember none of it. So I should have no regrets and be only happy.

ALARIC: (*remains silent a moment*) I would not wish your happiness lessened for even a minute. Dearest, go back to your people.

NARRATOR 2: And he let go of her wrist.

NARRATOR 1: In the distance, the first cock crowed. Alaric turned and ran to his horse, and he never looked back, for he could not bear to see the meadow empty behind him.

NARRATOR 2: For an hour he rode blindly, not caring where his horse carried him. When again he noticed where he was, he found himself nearing the castle.

NARRATOR 1: And there on the dusty road before him trudged a solitary figure in blue velvet.

ALARIC: Catherine!

NARRATOR 2: He raced to her side and found her very close to tears.

LADY: Oh, Alaric! I woke up and found myself alone in a meadow, and I was so afraid. I must have walked there in my sleep. Did you ride out to look for me? Were you afraid too?

ALARIC: (*smiling*) I rode out to look for you. And I was afraid.

NARRATOR 1: Alaric dismounted and took her hand, and when he looked into her eyes, he saw she thought only of him and of her and of their life together.

NARRATOR 2: And he knew that now she was wholly his, for his love at last was perfect.