



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Elderbush

From "Andersen's Fairy Tales" by Hans Christian Andersen



nce upon a time there was a little boy who had taken cold. He had gone out and got his feet wet; though nobody could imagine how it had happened, for it was quite dry weather. So his mother undressed him, put him to bed, and had the tea-pot brought in, to make him a good cup of Elderflower tea. Just at that moment the merry old man came in who lived up a-top of the house all alone; for he had neither wife nor children—but he liked children very much, and knew so many fairy tales, that it was quite delightful.

“Now drink your tea,” said the boy’s mother; “then, perhaps, you may hear a fairy tale.”

“If I had but something new to tell,” said the old man. “But how did the child get his feet wet?”

“That is the very thing that nobody can make out,” said his mother.

“Am I to hear a fairy tale?” asked the little boy.

“Yes, if you can tell me exactly—for I must know that first—how deep the gutter is in the little street opposite, that you pass through in going to school.”

“Just up to the middle of my boot,” said the child; “but then I must go into the deep hole.”

“Ah, ah! That’s where the wet feet came from,” said the old man. “I ought now to tell you a story; but I don’t know any more.”

“You can make one in a moment,” said the little boy. “My mother says that all you look at can be turned into a fairy tale: and that you can find a story in everything.”

“Yes, but such tales and stories are good for nothing. The right sort come of themselves; they tap at my forehead and say, ‘Here we are.’”

“Won’t there be a tap soon?” asked the little boy. And his mother laughed, put some Elderflowers in the tea-pot, and poured boiling water upon them.

“Do tell me something! Pray do!”

“Yes, if a fairy tale would come of its own accord; but they are proud and haughty, and come only when they choose. Stop!” said he, all on a sudden. “I have it! Pay attention! There is one in the tea-pot!”

And the little boy looked at the tea-pot. The cover rose more and more; and the Elderflowers came forth so fresh and white, and shot up long branches. Out of the spout even did they spread themselves on all sides, and grew larger and larger; it was a splendid Elderbush, a

whole tree; and it reached into the very bed, and pushed the curtains aside. How it bloomed! And what an odour! In the middle of the bush sat a friendly-looking old woman in a most strange dress. It was quite green, like the leaves of the elder, and was trimmed with large white Elder-flowers; so that at first one could not tell whether it was a stuff, or a natural green and real flowers.

“What’s that woman’s name?” asked the little boy.

“The Greeks and Romans,” said the old man, “called her a Dryad; but that we do not understand. The people who live in the New Booths have a much better name for her; they call her ‘old Granny’—and she it is to whom you are to pay attention. Now listen, and look at the beautiful Elderbush.

“Just such another large blooming Elder Tree stands near the New Booths. It grew there in the corner of a little miserable court-yard; and under it sat, of an afternoon, in the most splendid sunshine, two old people; an old, old seaman, and his old, old wife. They had great-grand-children, and were soon to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their marriage; but they could not exactly recollect the date: and old Granny sat in the tree, and looked as pleased as now. ‘I know the date,’ said she; but those below did not hear her, for they were talking about old times.

“‘Yes, can’t you remember when we were very little,’ said the old seaman, ‘and ran and played about? It was the very same court-yard where we now are, and we stuck slips in the ground, and made a garden.’

“‘I remember it well,’ said the old woman; ‘I remember it quite well. We watered the slips, and one of them was an Elderbush. It took root, put forth green shoots, and grew up to be the large tree under which we old folks are now sitting.’

“‘To be sure,’ said he. ‘And there in the corner stood a waterpail, where I used to swim my boats.’

“‘True; but first we went to school to learn somewhat,’ said she; ‘and then we were confirmed. We both cried; but in the afternoon we went up the Round Tower, and looked down on Copenhagen, and far, far away over the water; then we went to Friedericksberg, where the King and the Queen were sailing about in their splendid barges.’

“‘But I had a different sort of sailing to that, later; and that, too, for many a year; a long way off, on great voyages.’

“‘Yes, many a time have I wept for your sake,’ said she. ‘I thought you were dead and gone, and lying down in the deep waters. Many a night have I got up to see if the wind had not changed: and changed it had, sure enough; but you never came. I remember so well one day, when the rain was pouring down in torrents, the scavengers were before the house where I was in service, and I had come up with the dust, and remained standing at the door—it was dreadful weather—when just as I was there, the postman came and gave me a letter. It was from you! What a tour that letter had made! I opened it instantly and read: I laughed and

wept. I was so happy. In it I read that you were in warm lands where the coffee-tree grows. What a blessed land that must be! You related so much, and I saw it all the while the rain was pouring down, and I standing there with the dust-box. At the same moment came someone who embraced me.'

"Yes; but you gave him a good box on his ear that made it tingle!"

"But I did not know it was you. You arrived as soon as your letter, and you were so handsome—that you still are—and had a long yellow silk handkerchief round your neck, and a bran new hat on; oh, you were so dashing! Good heavens! What weather it was, and what a state the street was in!"

"And then we married," said he. 'Don't you remember? And then we had our first little boy, and then Mary, and Nicholas, and Peter, and Christian.'

"Yes, and how they all grew up to be honest people, and were beloved by everybody."

"And their children also have children," said the old sailor; 'yes, those are our grand-children, full of strength and vigor. It was, methinks about this season that we had our wedding.'

"Yes, this very day is the fiftieth anniversary of the marriage," said old Granny, sticking her head between the two old people; who thought it was their neighbor who nodded to them. They looked at each other and held one another by the hand. Soon after came their children, and their grand-children; for they knew well enough that it was the day of the fiftieth anniversary, and had come with their gratulations that very morning; but the old people had forgotten it, although they were able to remember all that had happened many years ago. And the Elderbush sent forth a strong odour in the sun, that was just about to set, and shone right in the old people's faces. They both looked so rosy-cheeked; and the youngest of the grandchildren danced around them, and called out quite delighted, that there was to be something very splendid that evening—they were all to have hot potatoes. And old Nanny nodded in the bush, and shouted 'hurrah!' with the rest."

"But that is no fairy tale," said the little boy, who was listening to the story.

"The thing is, you must understand it," said the narrator; "let us ask old Nanny."

"That was no fairy tale, 'tis true," said old Nanny; "but now it's coming. The most wonderful fairy tales grow out of that which is reality; were that not the case, you know, my magnificent Elderbush could not have grown out of the tea-pot." And then she took the little boy out of bed, laid him on her bosom, and the branches of the Elder Tree, full of flowers, closed around her. They sat in an aerial dwelling, and it flew with them through the air. Oh, it was wondrous beautiful! Old Nanny had grown all of a sudden a young and pretty maiden; but her robe was still the same green stuff with white flowers, which she had worn before. On her bosom she had a real Elderflower, and in her yellow waving hair a wreath of the flowers; her eyes were so large and blue that it was a pleasure to look at them; she kissed the boy, and now they were of the same age and felt alike.

Hand in hand they went out of the bower, and they were standing in the beautiful garden of their home. Near the green lawn papa's walking-stick was tied, and for the little ones it seemed to be endowed with life; for as soon as they got astride it, the round polished knob was turned into a magnificent neighing head, a long black mane fluttered in the breeze, and four slender yet strong legs shot out. The animal was strong and handsome, and away they went at full gallop round the lawn.

"Huzza! Now we are riding miles off," said the boy. "We are riding away to the castle where we were last year!"

And on they rode round the grass-plot; and the little maiden, who, we know, was no one else but old Nanny, kept on crying out, "Now we are in the country! Don't you see the farmhouse yonder? And there is an Elder Tree standing beside it; and the cock is scraping away the earth for the hens, look, how he struts! And now we are close to the church. It lies high upon the hill, between the large oak-trees, one of which is half decayed. And now we are by the smithy, where the fire is blazing, and where the half-naked men are banging with their hammers till the sparks fly about. Away! away! To the beautiful country-seat!"

And all that the little maiden, who sat behind on the stick, spoke of, flew by in reality. The boy saw it all, and yet they were only going round the grass-plot. Then they played in a side avenue, and marked out a little garden on the earth; and they took Elder-blossoms from their hair, planted them, and they grew just like those the old people planted when they were children, as related before. They went hand in hand, as the old people had done when they were children; but not to the Round Tower, or to Friedericksberg; no, the little damsel wound her arms round the boy, and then they flew far away through all Denmark. And spring came, and summer; and then it was autumn, and then winter; and a thousand pictures were reflected in the eye and in the heart of the boy; and the little girl always sang to him, "This you will never forget." And during their whole flight the Elder Tree smelt so sweet and odorous; he remarked the roses and the fresh beeches, but the Elder Tree had a more wondrous fragrance, for its flowers hung on the breast of the little maiden; and there, too, did he often lay his head during the flight.

"It is lovely here in spring!" said the young maiden. And they stood in a beech-wood that had just put on its first green, where the woodroof at their feet sent forth its fragrance, and the pale-red anemony looked so pretty among the verdure. "Oh, would it were always spring in the sweetly-smelling Danish beech-forests!"

"It is lovely here in summer!" said she. And she flew past old castles of by-gone days of chivalry, where the red walls and the embattled gables were mirrored in the canal, where the swans were swimming, and peered up into the old cool avenues. In the fields the corn was waving like the sea; in the ditches red and yellow flowers were growing; while wild-drone flowers, and blooming convolvuluses were creeping in the hedges; and towards evening the moon rose round and large, and the haystacks in the meadows smelt so sweetly. "This one never forgets!"

"It is lovely here in autumn!" said the little maiden. And suddenly the atmosphere grew as blue again as before; the forest grew red, and green, and yellow-colored. The dogs came

leaping along, and whole flocks of wild-fowl flew over the cairn, where blackberry-bushes were hanging round the old stones. The sea was dark blue, covered with ships full of white sails; and in the barn old women, maidens, and children were sitting picking hops into a large cask; the young sang songs, but the old told fairy tales of mountain-sprites and soothsayers. Nothing could be more charming.

“It is delightful here in winter!” said the little maiden. And all the trees were covered with hoar-frost; they looked like white corals; the snow crackled under foot, as if one had new boots on; and one falling star after the other was seen in the sky. The Christmas-tree was lighted in the room; presents were there, and good-humor reigned. In the country the violin sounded in the room of the peasant; the newly-baked cakes were attacked; even the poorest child said, “It is really delightful here in winter!”

Yes, it was delightful; and the little maiden showed the boy everything; and the Elder Tree still was fragrant, and the red flag, with the white cross, was still waving: the flag under which the old seaman in the New Booths had sailed. And the boy grew up to be a lad, and was to go forth in the wide world-far, far away to warm lands, where the coffee-tree grows; but at his departure the little maiden took an Elder-blossom from her bosom, and gave it him to keep; and it was placed between the leaves of his Prayer-Book; and when in foreign lands he opened the book, it was always at the place where the keepsake-flower lay; and the more he looked at it, the fresher it became; he felt as it were, the fragrance of the Danish groves; and from among the leaves of the flowers he could distinctly see the little maiden, peeping forth with her bright blue eyes—and then she whispered, “It is delightful here in Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter”; and a hundred visions glided before his mind.

Thus passed many years, and he was now an old man, and sat with his old wife under the blooming tree. They held each other by the hand, as the old grand-father and grand-mother yonder in the New Booths did, and they talked exactly like them of old times, and of the fiftieth anniversary of their wedding. The little maiden, with the blue eyes, and with Elder-blossoms in her hair, sat in the tree, nodded to both of them, and said, “To-day is the fiftieth anniversary!” And then she took two flowers out of her hair, and kissed them. First, they shone like silver, then like gold; and when they laid them on the heads of the old people, each flower became a golden crown. So there they both sat, like a king and a queen, under the fragrant tree, that looked exactly like an elder: the old man told his wife the story of “Old Nanny,” as it had been told him when a boy. And it seemed to both of them it contained much that resembled their own history; and those parts that were like it pleased them best.

“Thus it is,” said the little maiden in the tree, “some call me ‘Old Nanny,’ others a ‘Dryad,’ but, in reality, my name is ‘Remembrance’; ’tis I who sit in the tree that grows and grows! I can remember; I can tell things! Let me see if you have my flower still?”

And the old man opened his Prayer-Book. There lay the Elder-blossom, as fresh as if it had been placed there but a short time before; and Remembrance nodded, and the old people, decked with crowns of gold, sat in the flush of the evening sun. They closed their eyes, and—and—! Yes, that’s the end of the story!

The little boy lay in his bed; he did not know if he had dreamed or not, or if he had been listening while someone told him the story. The tea-pot was standing on the table, but no Elder Tree was growing out of it! And the old man, who had been talking, was just on the point of going out at the door, and he did go.

“How splendid that was!” said the little boy. “Mother, I have been to warm countries.”

“So I should think,” said his mother. “When one has drunk two good cupfuls of Elder-flower tea, 'tis likely enough one goes into warm climates”; and she tucked him up nicely, least he should take cold. “You have had a good sleep while I have been sitting here, and arguing with him whether it was a story or a fairy tale.”

“And where is old Nanny?” asked the little boy.

“In the tea-pot,” said his mother; “and there she may remain.”

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