



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Enchanted Elm

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



Once upon a time, while riding, a brave, young prince dashed merrily ahead of his friends, and after galloping across a ploughed field, turned his horse's head down a grassy road leading to a wood. For some time he cantered easily along, expecting any moment to hear the shouts and halloos of his friends following after; but they by mistake took quite another road, and no sound except the pounding of his courser's hoofs reached the Prince's ear. Suddenly an ugly snarl and a short bark broke the stillness of the pleasant forest, and looking down, the Prince saw a gray wolf snapping at his horse's heels.

Though the horse, wild with fear, threatened to run away any instant, the Prince leaned over and struck the wolf with his whip.

Hardly had he done so, when an angry voice cried, "How dare you strike my pet?"

A little distance ahead, a wicked old witch stood at one side of the road. With its tail between its legs, the wolf cowered close to her skirts, and showed its long yellow fangs.

"Pet, indeed!" cried the Prince. "Keep him away from my horse or I will strike him again."

"At your peril, Prince," answered the witch. And then, as the Prince turned his horse's head and galloped back, she called out, "You shall rue this day! You shall rue this day!"

Now by the time the Prince had arrived at the ploughed field and the great road again, his friends had galloped on so far that they were lost to sight. Thinking that he might overtake them by following a shorter road, he turned down a byway skirting the wood in which he had encountered the enchantress. Presently he began to feel very thirsty. Chancing to see an old peasant woman in the fields, the Prince called to her and asked where he could find a roadside spring.

Now this old peasant woman was the wicked witch under another form. Overjoyed at having the Prince fall so easily into her power, she curtsied; and replied that within the wood was to be found the finest spring in the country. Anxious not to lose time, the Prince begged her to lead him to the water. Little did he know that the witch was leading him back into the wood, and that she had just bewitched the water!

When they arrived at the pool, the Prince dismounted, and kneeling by the brim, made a cup of his hands and drank till his thirst was satisfied. He was just about to seize his horse again by the bridle and put his foot into the stirrup, when a terrible pang shot through his body, darkness swam before his eyes, his arms lengthened and became branches, his fingers, twigs; his feet shot into the ground, and he found himself turned into a giant elm.

A giant elm he was; a giant elm he remained. Unable to find him after a long search, his friends gave him up for lost, and a new Prince ruled over the land. Though the elm tried many times to tell passers-by of his plight, none ever seemed to understand his words. Again and again, when simple wood-cutters ventured into the great dark wood, he would tell them his story and cry out, "I am the Prince! I am the Prince!" But the wood-cutters heard only the wind stirring in the branches. Ah, how cold it was in winter when the skies were steely

black and the giant stars sparkled icily! And how pleasant it was when spring returned, and the gossipy birds came back again!

The first year a pair of wood-pigeons took to housekeeping in his topmost branches. The Prince was glad to welcome them, for though denied human speech, he understood the language of trees and birds. On Midsummer Eve, the pigeons said to him, "To-night the King of the Trees comes through the wood. Do you not hear the stir in the forest? All the real trees are preparing for the King's coming; they are shedding dead leaves and shaking out their branches."

"Tell me of the King," said the Prince.

"He is tall and dark and strong," said the doves. "He dwells in a great pine in the North. On Midsummer Eve, he goes through the world to see if all is well with the tree people."

"Do you think he can help me?" asked the Prince.

"You might ask him," replied the doves.

The long, long twilight of Midsummer Eve came to a close; night folded the world beneath its starry curtains. At twelve o'clock, though not a breath of air was stirring, the trees were shaken as if by a mighty wind, the rustling of the leaves blending into strange and lovely music, and presently the King of the Trees entered the haunted wood. Even as the wood-doves had said, he was tall and dark and stately.

"Is all well with you, O my people?" said the King, in a voice as sweet and solemn as the wind in the branches on a summer's day.

"Yes, all is well," answered the trees softly. Though some replied, "I have lost a branch"; and a little tree called out unhappily, "My neighbors are shutting out all my sunlight."

"Then fare ye well, my people, till next Midsummer Eve," said the stately King. And he was about to stride onward through the dark wood when the enchanted Prince called aloud to him!

"Stay, O King of the Trees," cried the poor Prince. "Hear me even though I am not of your people. I am a mortal, a prince, and a wicked witch has turned me into a tree. Can you not help me?"

"Alas, poor friend, I can do nothing," replied the King. "However, do not despair. In my travels through the world, I shall surely find someone who can help you. Look for me on next Midsummer Eve."

So the great elm swayed his branches sadly, and the King went on his way.

The winter came again, silent and dark and cold. At the return of spring, a maiden who dwelt with a family of wood-cutters came often to rest in the shade of the great tree. Her

father had once been a rich merchant, but evil times had overtaken him, and at his death the only relatives who could be found to take care of the little girl were a family of rough wood-cutters in the royal service. These grudging folk kept the poor maiden always hard at work and gave her the most difficult household tasks. The Prince, who knew the whole story, pitied her very much, and ended by falling quite in love with her. As for the unhappy maiden, it seemed to her that beneath the sheltering shade of the great elm she enjoyed a peace and happiness to be found nowhere else.

Now it was the custom of the wood-men to cut down, during the summer, such trees as would be needed for the coming winter, and one day the wood-cutter in whose family the maiden dwelt announced his intention of cutting down the great elm.

“Not the great elm which towers above all the forest?” cried the maiden.

“Yes, that very tree,” answered the woodcutter gruffly. “To-morrow morning we shall fell it to the ground, and to-morrow night we shall build the midsummer fire with its smaller branches. What are you crying about, you silly girl?”

“Oh, please don’t cut the great elm!” begged the good maiden.

“Nonsense!” said the wood-cutter. “I wager you have been wasting your time under its branches. I shall certainly cut the tree down in the morning.”

All night long, you may be sure, the maiden pondered on the best way to save the great tree; and since she was as clever as she was good, she at length hit upon a plan. Rising early on Midsummer Morn, she ran to the forest, climbed the great elm, and concealed herself in its topmost branches. She saw the rest of the wood beneath her, and the distant peaks of the Adamant Mountains; and she rejoiced in the dawn songs of the birds.

An hour after the sun had risen, she heard the voices of the wood-cutter and his men as they came through the wood. Soon the band arrived at the foot of the tree. Imagine the feelings of the poor Prince when he saw the sharp axes at hand to cut him down!

“I shall strike the first blow,” said the chief wood-cutter, and he lifted his axe in the air.

Suddenly from the tree-top a warning voice sang,—

“Throw the axe down, harm not me.

I am an enchanted tree.

He who strikes shall breathe his last,

Before Midsummer Eve hath passed.”

“There is a spirit in the tree,” cried the woodcutters, thoroughly frightened. “Let us hurry away from here before it does us a mischief.” And in spite of all the chief wood-cutter’s remonstrances, they ran away as fast as their legs could carry them.

The chief wood-cutter, however, was bolder-hearted, and lifted the axe again. As the blade shone uplifted in the sun, the maiden sang once more,—

“Throw the axe down, harm not me.

I am an enchanted tree.

He who strikes shall breathe his last

Before Midsummer Eve hath passed.”

Hearing the voice again, the chief began to feel just the littlest bit alarmed; nevertheless, he stood his ground and lifted the axe a third time. Once more the girl sang,—

“Throw the axe down, harm not me.

I am an enchanted tree.

He who strikes shall breathe his last

Before Midsummer Eve hath passed.”

At the same moment, the elm managed to throw down a great branch which struck the rogue a sound thump on the shoulders. Now thoroughly terrified, the chief wood-cutter himself fled from the spot.

All day long, for fear lest he return, the maiden remained hidden in the tree. At twilight, overcome by weariness, she fell into a deep sleep. Just before midnight, alas, she was awakened from her slumber by hearing an angry voice cry,—

“Come down from the tree, wicked, deceitful girl, or I shall cut it down at once!”

Very much alarmed, the poor maiden looked down through the branches, and discovered the wood-cutter standing at the foot of the elm. A lantern swung from his left hand, and his sharpest axe rested on his right shoulder. He had returned home, and not finding the maiden there, had suspected that it was her voice which had frightened his men away.

“Come down,” roared the rascal. “I’ll teach you, you minx, to play tricks with me. One—two—three.” And lifting the axe in the air, he was about to send it crashing into the trunk of the elm, when the mysterious murmur which heralded the coming of the King of the Trees sounded through the wood. Perplexed and frightened again, the chief wood-cutter let fall his axe. Presently he perceived two beings coming toward him through the solemn forest. Uttering a howl of fear, the rogue would have fled, but, lifting his wand, the elder of the

newcomers transfixed him to the spot. The two personages were the King of the Trees and his friend, the mighty enchanter, Gorbodoc.

“Descend and fear not, maiden,” said the King of the Trees. “You have done bravely and well. Your misfortunes are over, and a happier day is at hand.”

So the brave girl hurried down the tree, and stood before the enchanter and the King. Very pretty she was, too, in her rustic dress and ribbons.

Lifting his wand with great solemnity, Gorbodoc touched the trunk of the elm. There was a blinding flash of rosy fire; the great tree appeared to shrink and dissolve, and presently the Prince stood before them.

“Welcome, Prince,” said the enchanter.

“Your enemy, the witch, will trouble you no more. I have turned her into an owl and given her to the Queen of Lantern Land. As for you,” and here the enchanter turned fiercely upon the wood-cutter, “you shall be a green monkey, until you have planted and brought to full growth as many trees as you have cut down.”

An instant later, a green monkey swung off into the tree-tops.

Then the grateful Prince thanked the King of the Trees, the mighty Gorbodoc, and the brave maiden, with all his heart. I am glad to say that he got his castle back again and married the maiden who had saved his life, and they lived happily ever after.

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