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Title: Grimm's Fairy Tales: The Elfin Grove

Date of first publication: 1930

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Date first posted: October 3 2012

Date last updated: October 3 2012

Faded Page eBook #20121006

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The Elfin Grove

"I hope," said a woodman one day to his wife, "that the children will not run into that fir-grove by the side of the river; who they are that have come to live there I cannot tell, but I am sure it looks more dark and gloomy than ever, and some queer-looking beings are to be seen lurking about it every night, as I am told." The woodman could not say that they brought any ill luck as yet, whatever they were; for all the village had thriven more than ever since they came; the fields looked gayer and greener, and even the sky was a deeper blue. Not knowing what to say of them, the farmer very wisely let his new friends alone, and in truth troubled his head very little about them.

That very evening little Mary and her playfellow Martin were playing at hide and seek in the valley. "Where can he be hid?" said she; "he must have gone into the fir-grove," and down she ran to look. Just then she spied a little dog that jumped round her and wagged his tail, and led her on towards the wood. Then he ran into it, and she soon jumped up the bank to look after him, but was overjoyed to see, instead of a gloomy grove of firs, a delightful garden, where flowers and shrubs of every kind grew upon turf of the softest green; gay butterflies flew about her, the birds sang sweetly, and, what was strangest, the prettiest little children sported about on all sides, some twining the flowers, and others dancing in rings upon the shady spots beneath the trees. In the midst, instead of the hovels of which Mary had heard, there was a palace that dazzled her eyes with its brightness. For a while she gazed on the fairy scene around her, till at last one of the little dancers ran up to her, and said, "And you are come at last to see us? we have often seen you play about, and wished to have you with us." Then she plucked some of the fruit that grew near; and Mary at the first taste forgot her home, and wished only to see and know more of her fairy friends.

Then they led her about with them and showed her all their sports. One while they danced by moonlight on the primrose banks; at another time they skipped from bough to bough among the trees that hung over the cooling streams; for they moved as lightly and easily through the air as on the ground: and Mary went with them everywhere, for they bore her in their arms wherever they wished to go. Sometimes they would throw seeds on the turf, and directly little trees sprang up; and then they would set their feet upon the branches, while the trees grew under them, till they danced upon the boughs in the air, wherever the breezes carried them; and again the trees would sink down into the earth and land them safely at their bidding. At other times they would go and visit the palace of their queen; and there the richest food was spread before them, and the softest music was heard; and there all around grew flowers which were always changing their hues, from scarlet to purple and yellow and emerald. Sometimes they went to look at the heaps of treasure which were piled up in the royal stores; for little dwarfs were always employed in searching the earth for gold. Small as this fairyland looked from without, it seemed within to have no end; a mist hung around it to shield it from the eyes of men; and some of the little elves sat perched upon the outermost trees, to keep watch lest the step of man should break in and spoil the charm.

"And who are you?" said Mary one day. "We are what are called elves in your world," said one whose name was Gossamer, and who had become her dearest friend: "we are told you talk a great deal about us; some of our tribes like to work you mischief, but we who live here seek only to be happy: we meddle little with mankind; but when we do come among them, it is to do them good." "And where is your queen?" said little Mary. "Hush! hush! you cannot see or know her: you must leave us before she comes back, which will be now very soon, for mortal step cannot come where she is. But you will know that she is here when you see the meadows gayer, the rivers more sparkling, and the sun brighter."

Soon afterwards Gossamer told Mary the time was come to bid her farewell, and gave her a ring in token of their friendship, and led her to the edge of the grove. "Think of me," said she; "but beware how you tell what you have seen, or try to visit any of us again, for if you do, we shall quit this grove and come back no more." Turning back, Mary saw nothing but the gloomy fir-grove she had known before. "How frightened my father and mother will be!" thought she as she looked at the sun, which had risen some time. "They will wonder where I have been all night, and yet I must not tell them what I have seen." She hastened homewards, wondering however, as she went, to see that the leaves, which were yesterday so fresh and green, were now falling dry and yellow around her. The cottage too seemed changed, and, when she went in, there sat her father looking some years older than when she saw him last; and her mother, whom she hardly knew, was by his side. Close by was a young man; "Father," said Mary, "who is this?" "Who are you that call me father?" said he; "are you—no you cannot be—our long-lost Mary?" But they soon saw that it was their Mary; and the

young man, who was her old friend and playfellow Martin, said, "No wonder you had forgotten me in seven years; do not you remember how we parted seven years ago while playing in the field? We thought you were quite lost; but we are glad to see that some one has taken care of you and brought you home at last." Mary said nothing, for she could not tell all; but she wondered at the strange tale, and felt gloomy at the change from fairyland to her father's cottage.

Little by little she came to herself, thought of her story as a mere dream, and soon became Martin's bride. Everything seemed to thrive around them; and Mary called her first little girl Elfie, in memory of her friends. The little thing was loved by every one. It was pretty and very good-tempered; Mary thought that it was very like a little elf; and all, without knowing why, called it the fairy child.

One day, while Mary was dressing her little Elfie, she found a piece of gold hanging round her neck by a silken thread, and knew it to be of the same sort as she had seen in the hands of the fairy dwarfs. Elfie seemed sorry at its being seen, and said that she had found it in the garden. But Mary watched her, and soon found that she went every afternoon to sit by herself in a shady place behind the house: so one day she hid herself to see what the child did there; and to her great wonder Gossamer was sitting by her side. "Dear Elfie," she was saying, "your mother and I used to sit thus when she was young and lived among us. Oh! if you could but come and do so too! but since our queen came to us it cannot be; yet I will come and see you and talk to you, whilst you are a child; when you grow up we must part for ever." Then she plucked one of the roses that grew around them and breathed gently upon it, and said, "Take this for my sake. It will keep its freshness a whole year."

Then Mary loved her little Elfie more than ever; and when she found that she spent some hours of almost every day with the elf, she used to hide herself and watch them without being seen, till one day when Gossamer was bearing her little friend through the air from tree to tree, her mother was so frightened lest her child should fall that she could not help screaming out, and Gossamer set her gently on the ground and seemed angry, and flew away. But still she used sometimes to come and play with her little friend, and would soon have done so perhaps the same as before, had not Mary one day told her husband the whole story, for she could not bear to hear him always wondering and laughing at their little child's odd ways, and saying he was sure there was something in the fir-grove that brought them no good. So to show him that all she said was true, she took him to see Elfie and the fairy; but no sooner did Gossamer know that he was there, (which she did in an instant), than she changed herself into a raven and flew off into the fir-grove.

Mary burst into tears, and so did Elfie, for she knew she should see her dear friend no more: but Martin was restless and bent upon following up his search after the fairies; so when night came he stole away towards the grove. When he came to it nothing was to be seen but the gloomy firs and the old hovels; and the thunder rolled, and the wind groaned and whistled through the trees. It seemed that all about him was angry so he turned homewards frightened at what he had done.

In the morning all the neighbours flocked around, asking one another what the noise and bustle of the last night could mean; and when they looked about them, their trees looked blighted, and the meadows parched, the streams were dried up, and everything seemed troubled and sorrowful; but they all thought that somehow or other the fir-grove had not near so forbidding a look as it used to have. Strange stories were told, how one had heard flutterings in the air, another had seen the fir-grove as it were alive with little beings that flew away from it. Each neighbour told his tale, and all wondered what could have happened; but Mary and her husband knew what was the matter, and bewailed their folly; for they foresaw that their kind neighbours, to whom they owed all their luck, were gone for ever. Among the bystanders none told a wilder story than the old ferryman who plied across the river at the foot of the grove; he told how at midnight his boat was carried away, and how hundreds of little beings seemed to load it with treasures; how a strange piece of gold was left for him in the boat, as his fare; how the air seemed full of fairy forms, fluttering around; and how at last a great train passed over that seemed to be guarding their leader to the meadows on the other side; and how he heard soft music floating around as they flew; and how sweet voices sang as they hovered over his head,

Fairy Queen!

Fairy Queen!

Mortal steps are on the green;

Come away!

Haste away!
Fairies, guard your Queen!
Hither, hither, fairy Queen!
Lest thy silvery wing be seen;
O'er the sky
Fly, fly, fly!
Fairies, guard your lady Queen!
O'er the sky
Fly, fly, fly!
Fairies, guard your Queen!
Fairy Queen!
Fairy Queen!
Thou hast pass'd the treach'rous scene;
Now we may
Down and play
O'er the daisied green.
Lightly, lightly, fairy Queen!
Trip it gently o'er the green:
Fairies gay,
Trip away
Round about your lady Queen!
Fairies gay,
Trip away
Round about your Queen!

Elfie mourned their loss the most, and would spend whole hours in looking upon the rose that her playfellow had given her, and singing over it the pretty airs she had taught her; till at length when the year's charm had passed away and it began to fade, she planted the stalk in her garden, and there it grew and grew till she could sit under the shade of it and think of her friend Gossamer.

[The end of *Grimm's Fairy Tales: The Elfin Grove* by the Brothers Grimm]