

The Elder-Tree Mother

Hans Christian Andersen

Once there was a little boy who went out and got his feet wet and caught cold. Nobody could understand how it had happened, because the weather was very dry.

His mother undressed him, put him to bed, and had the tea urn brought in to make him a good cup of elder tea, for that keeps one warm.

At the same time there came in the door the funny old man who lived all alone on the top floor of the house. He had no wife or children of his own, but he was very fond of all children, and knew so many wonderful stories and tales that it was fun to listen to him.

"Now drink your tea," said the little boy's mother, "and then perhaps there'll be a story for you."

"Yes," nodded the old man kindly, "if I could only think of a new one! But tell me, how did the young man get his feet wet?" he asked.

"Yes, where did he?" said the mother. "Nobody can imagine how."

"Will you tell me a fairy tale?" the little boy asked.

"Yes, but I must know something first. Can you tell me as nearly as possible how deep the gutter is in the little street where you go to school?"

"Just halfway up to my top boots," answered the little boy. "That is," he added, "if I stand in the deep hole."

"That's how we got our feet wet," said the old man. "Now, I certainly ought to tell you a story, but I don't know any more."

"You can make one up right away," the little boy said. "Mother says that everything you look at can be turned into a story, and that you can make a tale of everything you touch."

"Yes, but those stories and tales aren't worth anything. No, the real ones come all by themselves. They come knocking at my forehead and say, 'Here I am!'"

"Will there be a knock soon?" the little boy asked. His mother laughed as she put the elder tea in the pot and poured hot water over it.

"Tell me a story! Tell me a story!"

"I would if a story would come of itself. But that kind of thing is very particular. It only comes when it feels like it. Wait!" he said suddenly. "There is one! Look! There's one in the teapot now!"

And the little boy looked toward the teapot. He saw the lid slowly raise itself and fresh white elder flowers come forth from it. They shot long branches even out of the spout and spread them abroad in all directions, and they grew bigger and bigger until there was the most glorious elderbush - really a big tree! The branches even stretched to the little boy's bed and thrust the curtains aside - how fragrant its blossoms were! And right in the middle of the tree there sat a sweet-looking old woman in a very strange dress. It was green, as green as the leaves of the elder tree, and it was trimmed with big white elder blossoms; at first one couldn't tell if this dress was cloth or the living green and flowers of the tree.

"What is this woman's name?" asked the little boy.

"Well, the Romans and the Greeks," said the old man, "used to call her a 'Dryad,' but we don't understand that word. Out in New Town, where the sailors live, they have a better name for her. There she is called 'Elder Tree Mother,' and you must pay attention to her;

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listen to her, and look at that glorious elder tree!"

"A great blooming tree just exactly like that stands in New Town. It grows in the corner of a poor little yard; and under that tree two old people sat one afternoon in the bright sunshine. It was an old sailor and his very old wife; they had great-grandchildren and were soon going to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary, but they weren't quite sure of the date. The Elder Tree Mother sat in the tree and looked pleased, just as she does here. 'I know perfectly well when the golden wedding day is,' she said, but they didn't hear it - they were talking of olden times.

" 'Yes, do you remember,' said the old sailor, 'when we were very little, how we ran about and played together? It was in this very same yard where we are now, and we put little twigs in the earth and made a garden.'

" 'Yes,' replied the old woman. 'That I remember well; one of those twigs was an elder, and when we watered them it took root and shot out other green twigs, and now it has become this great tree under which we old people are sitting.'

" 'That's right,' said he. 'And there used to be a tub of water over in the corner, where I sailed the little boat I had made myself. How it could sail! But pretty soon I had to sail in a different way myself.'

" 'Yes, but first we went to school and learned something,' said she, 'and then we were confirmed. Remember how we both cried? But in the afternoon we went together to the Round Tower, and looked out at the wide world over Copenhagen and across the water. And then we went to Frederiksborg, where the King and Queen were sailing on the canal in their beautiful boat!'

" 'But I had to sail in a different way myself,' said the old man. 'And for many years, far away on long voyages.'

" 'I often cried over you,' she said. 'I thought you were dead and gone, and lying down in the deep ocean, with the waves rocking you. Many a night I got up to see if the weathercock was turning. Yes, it turned all right, but still you didn't come.'

" 'I remember so clearly how the rain poured down one day. The garbage man came to the place where I worked. I took the dustbin down to him and stood in the doorway. What dreadful weather it was! And while I was standing there, the postman came up and gave me a letter - a letter from you! My, how that letter had traveled about! I tore it open quickly and read it, and I was so happy that I laughed and cried at the same time. You had written me that you were in the warm countries where the coffee beans grow. What a wonderful country that must be! You wrote me all about it, and I read it there by the dustbin with the rain streaming down. Then somebody came and clasped me around the waist!'

" 'And you gave him a good smack on the ear,' he said. 'One that could be heard!'

" 'Yes, but I didn't know it was you! You had come just as quickly as your letter. And you were so handsome - but you still are, of course! I remember you had a long yellow silk handkerchief in your pocket, and a shiny hat on your head. You looked so well! But what awful weather it was and how the street looked!'

" 'Then we were married, remember?' said he. 'And then out first little boy came, and then Marie, and Niels, and Peter, and Hans Christian?'

" 'Yes, indeed,' she nodded. 'And how they've grown up to be useful people. Everyone likes them.'

" 'And their children have had little ones in their turn,' said the old sailor. 'Yes, they are our great-grandchildren; they're fine children. If I'm not mistaken, it was at this very time of the year that we were married.'

" 'Yes. This is the very day of your golden wedding anniversary!' said the Elder Tree Mother, stretching her head down between the two old people. They thought it was the neighbor woman nodding to them, and they looked at each other and took hold of each other's hands.

"Then the children and the grandchildren came; they knew very well that this was the old people's golden wedding day - they had already brought their congratulations that morning. But the old people had forgotten that, although they remembered everything that had happened years and years ago.

"And the elder tree smelled so fragrant, and the setting sun shone right in the faces of the old people so that their cheeks looked quite red and young; and the littlest of the grandchildren danced around them, and cried out happily that there was to be a grand feast that evening with hot potatoes! And the Elder Mother nodded in the tree and called out 'Hurrah!' with all the others."

"But that wasn't a fairy tale," said the little boy, who had been listening to the story.

"Yes, it was, if you could understand it," said the old man. "But let's ask the Elder Mother about it."

"No," the Elder Mother said, "that wasn't a story. But now the story is coming. For the strangest fairy tales come from real life; otherwise my beautiful elderbush couldn't have sprouted out of the teapot."

Then she took the little boy out of his bed and laid him against her breast, and the blossoming elder branches wound close around them so that it was as if they were sitting in a thick arbor, and this arbor flew with them through the air! How very wonderful it was! Elder Mother all at once changed into a pretty young girl, but the dress was still green with the white blossoms trimming it, such as the Elder Tree Mother had worn. In her bosom she had a real elder blossom, and a wreath of the flowers was about her yellow, curly hair. Her eyes were so large and so blue, and, oh, she was so beautiful to look at! She and the little boy were of the same age now, and they kissed each other and were happy together.

Hand in hand they went out of the arbor, and now they were standing in the beautiful flower garden at home. Near the green lawn the walking stick of the little boy's father was tied to a post, and for the little children there was magical life in that stick. When they seated themselves upon it, the polished head turned into the head of a noble neighing horse with a long, black flowing mane. Four slender, strong legs shot out; the animal was strong and spirited; and they galloped around the grass plot!

"Now we'll ride for miles!" said the boy. "We'll ride to that nobleman's estate, where we went last year!"

So they rode round and round the grass plot, and the little girl, who you must remember was the Elder Mother, kept crying, "Now we're in the country! See the farmhouse, with the big baking oven standing out of the wall like an enormous egg beside the road! The elder tree is spreading its branches over the house, and the cock is walking around, scratching for his hens. Look at him strut! Now we're near the church; it's high up on the hill, among the great oak trees. See how one of them is half dead! Now we're at the forge; the fire is burning, and the half-clad men are beating with the hammers. Look at the sparks flying all around! We're off! We're off to the nobleman's beautiful estate!"

They were only riding around and around the grass plot, yet the little boy seemed to see everything that the little maiden mentioned as she sat behind him on the magic stick. Then they played on the sidewalk, and marked out a little garden in the earth; and she took the elder flower out of her hair and planted it, and it grew just like the ones that the old people had planted in New Town, when they were little, as I have already told you. They walked hand in hand, the same way the old people did in their childhood, but they didn't go to the

Round Tower or the Frederiksborg Garden. No, the little girl took the little boy around the waist, and they flew through the country of Denmark.

And it was spring and it became summer, and it was autumn and it became winter, and there were thousands of pictures in the boy's mind and heart, as the little girl sang to him, "You will never forget this."

And throughout their whole journey the elder tree smelled sweet and fragrant. He noticed the roses and fresh beech trees, but the elder tree smelled the sweetest, for its flowers hung over the little girl's heart, and he often leaned his head against them as they flew onward.

"How beautiful it is here in the spring!" said the little girl.

Then they were standing in the new-leaved beech wood, where the fragrant green woodruff lay spread at their feet, and the pale pink anemones looked glorious against the vivid green.

"Oh, if it could only always be spring in the fragrant beech woods of Denmark!"

"How beautiful it is here in the summer!" she said.

Then they were passing by knightly castles of olden times, where the red walls and pointed gables were mirrored in the canals, and where swans swam about and peered down the shady old avenues. In the fields the corn waved, as if it were a sea; in the ditches were yellow and red flowers, and wild hops and blooming convolvulus were growing in the hedges. In the evening the moon rose round and full, and the haystacks in the meadows smelled fragrant.

"One can never forget it. How beautiful it is here in the autumn!" said the little girl.

And the sky seemed twice as high and twice as blue as ever before, and the forest was brilliant with gorgeous tints of red and yellow and green. The hunting dog raced across the meadows; long lines of wild ducks flew shrieking above the ancient grave mounds, on which the bramble twined over the old stones. The ocean was a dark blue, dotted with white-sailed ships. In the barns old women and girls and children picked hops into a large tub, while the young people sang ballads, and the older ones told fairy tales of elves and goblins. It could not be finer anywhere.

"How beautiful it is here in the winter!" said the little girl.

Then all the trees were covered with hoarfrost, until they looked like trees of white coral. The snow crackled crisply underfoot, as if you were always walking in new boots, and one shooting star after another fell from the sky. In the room the Christmas tree was lighted, and there were presents and happiness. In the farmer's cottage the violin sounded and games were played for apple dumplings, and even the poorest child cried, "It's beautiful in winter!"

Yes, it was beautiful, and the little girl showed the boy everything.

The blossoming elder tree always smelled fragrant, and the red flag with the white cross always waved, the same flag under which the old seaman in New Town had sailed away.

And the boy became a young man, and he too had to sail far away to warmer countries, where the coffee grows. But when they departed, the little girl took an elder blossom from her breast and gave it to him as a keepsake. He laid it away in his hymnal, and whenever he took out the book in foreign countries it always came open by itself at the spot where lay the flower of memory. And the more he looked at the flower the fresher and sweeter it became, so that he seemed to be breathing the air of the Danish forests, and he could plainly see the little girl looking up at him with her clear blue eyes from between the petals of the flower, and could hear her whispering, "How beautiful it is here in spring, summer,

autumn, and winter!" And hundreds of pictures drifted through his thoughts.

Many years passed by, and now he was an old man, sitting with his old wife under a blossoming tree; they were holding hands, just as Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother out in New Town had done before. And like them they talked of olden times and of their golden wedding anniversary.

Now the little maiden with the blue eyes and the elder blossoms in her hair sat up in the tree and nodded to them both and said, "Today is your golden wedding anniversary!" Then from her hair she took two flowers, and kissed them so that they gleamed, first like silver, and then like gold. And when she laid them on the heads of the old couple, each became a golden crown. There they both sat, a king and a queen, under the fragrant tree that looked just exactly like an elder bush, and he told his old wife the story of the Elder Tree Mother, just as it had been told to him when he was a little boy. They both thought that much of the story resembled their own, and that part they liked best.

"Yes, that's the way it is," said the little girl in the tree. "Some people call me Elder Tree Mother, and some call me the Dryad, but my real name is Memory. It is I who sit up in the tree that grows on and on, and I can remember and I can tell stories. Let me see if you still have your flower."

Then the old man opened his hymnal, and there lay the elder blossom, as fresh as if it had just been placed there. Then Memory nodded, and the two old people with the golden crowns sat in the red twilight, and they closed their eyes gently and - and - and that was the end of the story....

The little boy was lying in his bed and he didn't know whether he had been dreaming or had heard a story. The teapot was standing beside him on the table, but there was no elderbush growing out of it now, and the old man was just going out of the door, which he did.

"That was so beautiful!" said the little boy. "Mother, I have been in the warm countries!"

"Yes, I believe you have," said his mother. "If one drinks two full cups of hot elder tea, one usually gets into the warm countries!" Then she tucked the bedclothes carefully around him so that he wouldn't take cold. "You've had a nice nap while I was arguing with him as to whether that was a story or a fairy tale."

"And where is the Elder Tree Mother?" asked the boy.

"She's in the teapot," said the mother. "And there she can remain!"

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