

The Elder-Tree Mother



taken from

Fairy Tales and Stories

by Hans Christian Andersen

translated by Hans Lien Brækstad

THERE was once a little boy who had caught a cold through getting his feet wet.



No one could make out how he had managed to get them wet, for the weather was quite fine. His mother undressed him and put him to bed, and had the tea-urn brought in to make a nice cup of elder-tea for him, for that warms the body so well! Just then the amusing old gentleman, who lived at the top of the house, came in through the door; he lived by himself, for he had neither wife nor children, but he was so very fond of children and could tell so many fairy tales and stories that it was a pleasure to listen to him.

"You must drink your tea, now," said the mother to the little boy, "and then perhaps you shall hear a fairy tale!"

"If one could only think of something new!" said the old man with a friendly nod. "But how did the little fellow get his feet wet?" he asked.

"Yes, where did he get them wet?" said the mother. "No one can make it out."

"Will you tell me a story?" asked the boy.

"Yes, if you can tell me exactly how deep the gutter is in the little street where your school is. I must know that first."

"Just half way up to my knee," said the boy, "but then I have to stand in the deepest part!"

"Ah, that's where we have got our wet feet!" said the old man; "I ought now to tell you a fairy tale, but I don't know any more!"

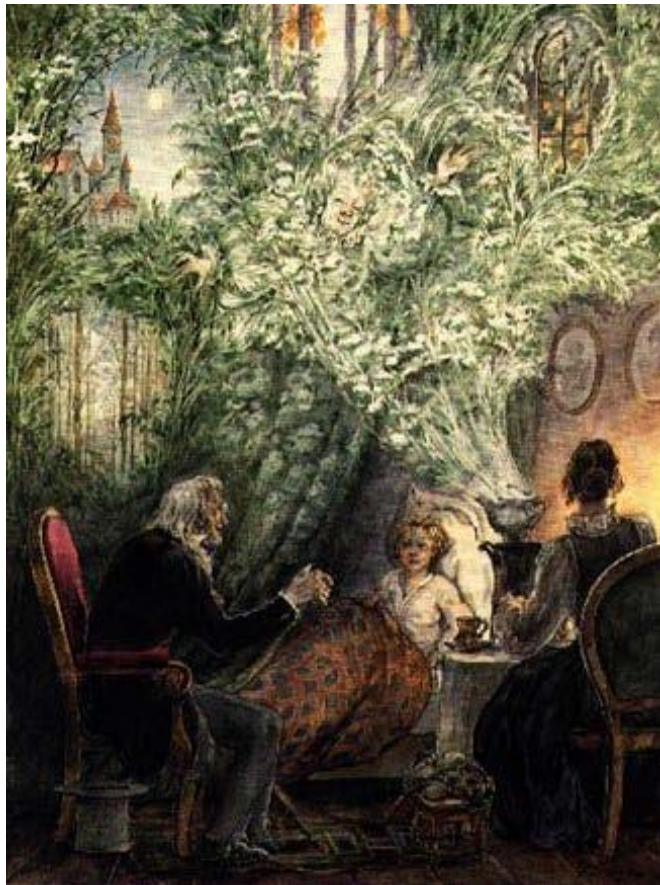
"But you can make up one," said the little boy. "Mother says that you can make a story out of everything you look at or touch!"

"Yes, but those tales and stories are no good; no, the real ones come of themselves—they knock at my forehead and say, 'Here I am!'"

"Will one knock there soon?" asked the little boy, and his mother laughed, put the elder-tea into the urn and poured boiling water over it.

"Do tell me a fairy tale, do!"

"Yes, if only it would come of itself, but the real fairy tale only comes when it is in the right humor and likes to come— But stop!" he suddenly exclaimed. "There's one! Mind! There's one now in the tea-urn!"



The little boy looked at the tea-urn; the lid gradually lifted itself and large branches of the elder-tree with fresh white elder flowers shot forth from the urn, even through the spout, and spread themselves out on all sides, always growing larger and larger, till they formed the most beautiful elder-tree—in fact, a great tree, which extended right to the little boy's bed and pushed the curtains aside. How it blossomed, and how fragrant it was! In the middle of the tree sat a pleasant-looking old woman in a strange dress; it was quite green, just like the leaves of the elder-tree, and was trimmed with large white elder flowers; one could not see at once whether it was made of cloth or of living green plants and flowers.

"What is the name of the old lady?" asked the little boy.

"Well, the Romans and the Greeks called her a dryad," said the old man, "but we do not understand the meaning of that name. In Nyboder they have a better name for her; there she is called 'Elder-Tree Mother,' and it is to her you must now give all your attention. Listen, and look at the beautiful elder-tree!"

"Just such a large tree stands in full bloom out at Nyboder! It grew there in the corner of the yard of a poor little cottage; under this tree one afternoon, in the most delightful sunshine, sat two old people. They were an old, old sailor and his old, old wife; they were great-grandparents and were soon to celebrate their golden wedding, but they could not quite remember the date. Elder-tree mother sat in the tree and looked so pleased, just as she does now. 'I know when the golden wedding is!' she said, but they did not hear it; they were talking about the old days.



"'Yes, do you remember,' said the old sailor, 'when we were quite youngsters and used to run about and play together? It was in this very yard where we are now sitting! We put twigs into the ground and made a garden.'

"'Yes,' said the old woman, 'I remember it well! We watered the twigs, and one of them was from an elder-tree, and it took root, shot forth green shoots, and has now become the great tree under which we old people are sitting.'

"'Yes, of course!' said he, 'and over in the corner stood the water-butt, in which I used to sail my ship, which I had made myself. How it did sail! But I soon came to sail in quite a different style!'

"Yes, but first we went to school and learned something!' she said. 'And then we were confirmed; we both cried, I remember. But in the afternoon we went hand and hand up the Round Tower, and looked out upon the world over Copenhagen and the Sound; then we went to Frederiksberg, where the king and queen sailed about in the canals in their beautiful boats.'

"But I soon came to sail about in quite a different style, and for many years, far away on long voyages!

"Yes, I often wept for you!' she said; 'I thought you were dead and gone and lying rolling about at the bottom of the sea! Many a night have I got up to look at the weather-cock to see if the wind had shifted; it had shifted, of course, but you did not come. I remember so clearly how the rain was pouring down one day, when the dustman came outside the house where I was in service, and I came down with the dustbin, and was standing by the door. What terrible weather it was! Just as I was standing there, the postman came up and gave me a letter! It was from you. How it had traveled about! I snatched it and read it! I laughed and I cried! I was so happy! You wrote that you were in the hot countries, where the coffee grows! How delightful it must have been there! You told



me so much and I could see it all before me, while the rain was pouring down and I was standing there with the dustbin. Just then someone put his arm round my waist---

"Yes, and you gave him such a box on the ear, that it sent him flying!

"Well, I didn't know it was you! You had arrived as early as your letter; and you looked so handsome, — of course, you

are so still, — you had a long, yellow-silk handkerchief in your breast-pocket and a black, glazed hat! You were so grand! But, gracious me, what terrible weather it was, and what a state the streets were in!

"Then we got married!' he said; 'do you remember? And then our first little boy came, and then Marie, and Nils, and Peter, and Hans Christian!

"Yes, and all of them have now grown up and become respectable people, whom everybody likes!

"And then their children again; and they have little ones too!" said the old sailor. "Yes, they are great-grandchildren, and chips of the old block! But it seems to me it was about this time of the year we were married!"

"Yes, this is the day of your golden wedding!" said elder-tree mother, as she put her head straight in between the two old people, and they thought it was the neighbor's wife who nodded to them; and they looked at one another and took each other by the hand. Soon after came their children and grandchildren, who all knew it was the golden-wedding day; they had already been there in the morning to offer their congratulations, but the old people had forgotten that, although they remembered so well everything that had happened many years ago. The elder-tree smelled so sweetly and the sun, which was setting, shone right into the faces of the old people, which were quite fresh and ruddy, and the youngest of the grandchildren danced around them and shouted gleefully that to-night there would be great doings — that they were going to have hot potatoes! And elder-tree mother in the tree nodded her head and shouted 'hurrah!' with all the others."

"But that is not a fairy tale!" said the little boy, who had been listening to it.

"Well, you ought to know!" said the old man, who had been telling the story; "but let us ask elder-tree mother!"



"That was not a fairy tale!" said elder-tree mother, "but now it is coming! Out of real life grow the most wonderful fairy tales; otherwise, my beautiful elder-tree could not have sprung from the tea-urn." And then she took the little boy out of bed and held him to her bosom, and the elder-tree branches, which were full of blossoms, closed

around them, till at last they seemed to sit in an arbor, thickly covered with leaves and flowers — and away it flew with them through the air. What a delightful trip! Elder-tree mother had suddenly become a beautiful young girl, but her frock was of the same green stuff and was trimmed with the same white flowers which elder-tree mother had worn; in her bosom she had a real elder flower and round her yellow, curly hair a whole

wreath of elder flowers; her eyes were large and blue—it was a pleasure to look at her! She and the boy kissed each other; they were of the same age and felt the same happiness. They went hand in hand out of the arbor, and were now standing in the beautiful flower garden of their home.

On the fresh lawn the father's stick was tethered to a peg; to the little ones there was life in that stick; as soon as they set themselves astride it, the bright knob turned into a horse's head with a long, black, flowing mane and four strong legs shot out from the stick. The animal was powerful and high-spirited, and they flew at full gallop round the lawn—hurrah!—"Now we'll ride many miles away," said the boy; "we'll ride to the old manor-house, where we were last year!" And they rode round and round the lawn, while the little girl, who, as we know, was no one else but elder-tree mother, kept crying out: "Now we are in the country! Do you see the farmer's house with the big baking-oven sticking out like a giant egg in the wall facing the road? The elder-tree spreads its branches over it, and the cock struts about and scratches the ground for the hens; look how proudly he holds himself! Now we are near the church. It lies high up on the hill behind the great oak-trees, one of which is half dead! Now we are near the smithy where the fire burns in the forge and half-naked men strike the red-hot iron with their hammer, so that the sparks fly all over the place. Away, away to the old manor-house!"

And everything which the little girl, who sat behind him on the stick, spoke of, flew rapidly past them, and the boy saw it all, although they were only galloping round the lawn. Then they played on a sidewalk and marked the outline of a little garden in the ground, and she took the elder flower out of her hair and planted it there; it grew up exactly like the one which the old couple had planted in Nyboder, when they were young, which has already been told. They went hand in hand just like the old people had done as children, but they did not go up the Round Tower or to Frederiksborg Garden; no, the little girl took the boy round the waist and flew with him all over Denmark. It was spring, and the summer came, and it was autumn, and the winter came, and thousands of pictures were reflected on the boy's eyes and heart, while the little girl sang to him: "This you will never forget! "And during their whole flight the elder-tree smelled sweet and delicious; he noticed, of course, the smell of the roses and the fresh beeches, but the fragrance from the elder-tree became still sweeter, for its flowers hung near the little girl's heart, and he often leaned his head on it during their flight.

"How beautiful it is here in the spring!", said the little girl, as they stood in the beechwood where all the shoots were fresh and green, and where the fragrant green woodruff lay at their feet, and the pale-pink anemones looked so beautiful among the green. "Oh, that there might always be spring in the fragrant Danish beechwoods!"

"How beautiful it is here in the summer!" she said, as they flew past the old manor house of the middle ages, the red walls and pointed gables of which were reflected in the moats where swans were swimming about and looking up the old shady avenue. In the fields the corn stood waving like a sea, the ditches were full of red and yellow flowers, and the hedges with wild hops and budding convolvuluses, and in the evening the moon rose, large and round, while the scent from the hayricks in the meadows filled the air with sweetness. "It can never be forgotten!"

"How beautiful it is here in the autumn!" said the little girl, as the heavens became loftier and of a darker blue; the forests glowed with the most beautiful colors in red, yellow, and green; the hounds rushed past while whole flocks of wild birds flew screeching over the burial mounds, where the blackberry bushes hung over the old stones. The sea was blue-black, dotted with white sails, and in the barn sat old women, girls, and children picking hops into a big tub; the young folks sang ditties and the old ones told fairy tales about brownies and trolls. "It could not be better!"

"How beautiful it is here in the winter!" said the little girl as all the trees stood covered with hoar frost, looking like white corals. The snow creaked under foot as if all the people were wearing new boots, and from the sky fell one shooting star after another. In the parlor the Christmas tree was lighted; there were presents, and all were in good spirits. In the country the violin was heard in the peasant's parlor; and there were scrambles for slices of apples. Even the poorest child said: "It is beautiful in winter-time!"

Yes, it was delightful! The little girl showed the boy everything, while the elder-tree filled the air with scent, and the red flag with the white cross was waving, the flag under which the old sailor in Nvboder had sailed! And the boy grew up and was going out into the wide world, far away to the hot countries where the coffee grows; but when they parted the little girl took an elder flower from her breast and gave it to him to keep. It was placed in his hymn-book, and whenever he opened the book in foreign lands, it always opened at the place where the flower lay, and the more he looked at it the fresher it grew; he seemed to breathe the air of the Danish woods, and between the leaves of the flowers he could plainly see the little girl peeping out with her clear blue eyes, and then she whispered: "How beautiful it is here in spring, in summer, in autumn, and in winter," while a hundred pictures passed before him.



Thus many years had passed and he was now an old man and sat with his wife under the blossoming tree; they held each other by the hand, just as great-grandfather and great-grandmother had done out at Nyboder, and like them, talked about the old days and of the golden wedding; the little girl with the blue eyes and the elder flowers in her hair was sitting up in the tree, nodding to them both, and saying: "To-day it is the golden wedding-day!" And then she took two flowers from his wreath and kissed them; they shone first like silver, and then like gold, and when she placed them on the heads of the old couple, each flower became a golden crown. There they both sat, like a king and queen, under the fragrant tree, which looked exactly like an elder-tree; and he told his old

wife the story about elder-tree

mother, just as it had been told him, when he was a little boy, and they both thought there was so much in it, which resembled their own and these parts they liked best.

"Yes, that's how it is!" said the little girl in the tree. "Some call me elder-tree mother, others call me a dryad, but my proper name is 'Memory'; it is I who sit in the tree which goes on growing and growing. I can remember; I can relate. Let me see if you still have your flower!"

And the old man opened his hymn-book and there lay the elder flower as fresh as if it had just been put there, and Memory nodded, and the two old people with their golden crowns sat in the red glow of the setting sun; they closed their eyes, and—and then the story came to an end!

The little boy lay in his bed; he did not know whether he had been dreaming, or whether he had been listening to the story. The tea-urn stood on the table, but no elder-tree was growing out of it, and the old man, who had been telling the story, was just on the point of going out at the door, which he did.

"How beautiful it was!" said the little boy. "Mother, I have been to the hot countries!"

"Yes, I can quite believe that!" said the mother; "when one has drunk two brimful cups of elder-tea, one may well think one has been to the hot countries!" And she covered him up well, so that he should not take cold. "You must have slept while I sat disputing with him whether it was a story or a fairy tale!"

"And where is elder-tree mother?" asked the boy.

"She is in the tea-urn," said the mother, "and there she had better stay!"

