



Elder-tree Mother

Hans Christian Andersen

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Intermediate

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There was once a little boy who had taken cold by going out and getting his feet wet. No one could think how he had managed to do so, for the weather was quite dry. His mother undressed him and put him to bed, and then she brought in the teapot to make him a good cup of elder tea, which is so warming.

At the same time the friendly old man who lived all alone at the top of the house came in at the door. He had neither wife nor child, but he was very fond of children and knew so many fairy tales and stories that it was a pleasure to hear him talk. “Now, if you drink your tea,” said the mother, “very likely you will have a story in the meantime.”

“Yes, if I could think of a new one to tell,” said the old man. “But how did the little fellow get his feet wet?” asked he.

“Ah,” said the mother, “that is what we cannot make 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 through which you go to school.”

“Just halfway up to my knee,” said the boy, promptly; “that is, if I stand in the deepest part.”

“It is easy to see how we got our feet wet,” said the old man. “Well, now I suppose I ought to tell a story, but really I don’t know any more.”

“You can make up one, I know,” said the boy. “Mother says that you can turn everything you look at into a story, and everything, even, that you touch.”

“Ah, but those tales and stories are worth nothing. The real ones come of themselves; they knock at my forehead and say, ‘Here we are!’”

“Won’t there be a knock soon?” asked the boy. And his mother laughed as she put elder flowers in the teapot and poured boiling water over them. “Oh, do tell me a story.”

“Yes, if a story comes of itself, but tales and stories are very grand; they only come when it pleases them. Stop,” he cried all at once, “here we have it; look! there is a story in the teapot now.”

The little boy looked at the teapot and saw the lid raise itself gradually and long branches stretch out, even from the spout, in all directions till they became larger and larger, and there appeared a great elder tree covered with flowers white and fresh. It spread itself even to the bed and pushed the curtains aside, and oh, how fragrant the blossoms were!

In the midst of the tree sat a pleasant-looking old woman in a very strange dress. The dress was green, like the leaves of the elder tree, and was decorated with large white elder blossoms. It was not easy to tell whether the border was made of some kind of stuff or of real flowers.

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

“The Romans and Greeks called her a dryad,” said the old man, “but we do not understand that name; we have a better one for her in the quarter of the town where the sailors live. They call her Elder-flower Mother, and you must pay attention to her now, and listen while you look at the beautiful tree.

“Just such a large, blooming tree as this stands outside in the corner of a poor little yard, and under this tree, one bright sunny afternoon, sat two old people, a sailor and his wife. They had great-grandchildren, and would

soon celebrate the golden wedding, which is the fiftieth anniversary of the wedding day in many countries, and the Elder Mother sat in the tree and looked as pleased as she does now.

“I know when the golden wedding is to be,’ said she, but they did not hear her; they were talking of olden times. ‘Do you remember,’ said the old sailor, ‘when we were quite little and used to run about and play in the very same yard where we are now sitting, and how we planted little twigs in one corner and made a garden?’

“Yes,’ said the old woman, ‘I remember it quite well; and how we watered the twigs, and one of them was a sprig of elder that took root and put forth green shoots, until in time it became the great tree under which we old people are now seated.’

“To be sure,’ he replied, ‘and in that corner yonder stands the water butt in which I used to swim my boat that I had cut out all myself; and it sailed well too. But since then I have learned a very different kind of sailing.’

“Yes, but before that we went to school,’ said she, ‘and then we were prepared for confirmation. How we both cried on that day! But in the afternoon we went hand in hand up to the round tower and saw the view over Copenhagen and across the water; then we went to Fredericksburg, where the king and queen were sailing in their beautiful boat on the canals.’

“But I had to sail on a very different voyage elsewhere and be away from home for years on long voyages,’ said the old sailor.

“Ah yes, and I used to cry about you,’ said she, ‘for I thought you must be lying drowned at the bottom of the sea, with the waves sweeping over you. And many a time have I got up in the night to see if the weathercock had turned; it turned often enough, but you came not. How well I remember one day the rain was pouring down from the skies, and the man came to the house where I was in service to take away the dust. I went down to him with the dust box and stood for a moment at the door,—what shocking weather it was!—and while I stood there the postman came up and brought me a letter from you.

“How that letter had traveled about! I tore it open and read it. I laughed and wept at the same time, I was so happy. It said that you were in warm countries where the coffee berries grew, and what a beautiful country it was, and described many other wonderful things. And so I stood reading by the dustbin, with the rain pouring down, when all at once somebody came and clasped me round the waist.’

“Yes, and you gave him such a box on the ears that they tingled,’ said the old man.

“I did not know that it was you,’ she replied; ‘but you had arrived as quickly as your letter, and you looked so handsome, and, indeed, so you are still. You had a large yellow silk handkerchief in your pocket and a shiny hat on your head. You looked quite fine. And all the time what weather it was, and how dismal the street looked!’

“And then do you remember,’ said he, ‘when we were married, and our first boy came, and then Marie, and Niels, and Peter, and Hans Christian?’

“Indeed I do,’ she replied; ‘and they are all grown up respectable men and women, whom every one likes.’

“And now their children have little ones,’ said the old sailor. ‘There are great-grandchildren for us, strong and healthy too. Was it not about this time of year that we were married?’

“Yes, and to-day is the golden-wedding day,’ said Elder-tree Mother, popping her head out just between the two old people; and they thought it was a neighbor nodding to them. Then they looked at each other and clasped their hands together. Presently came their children and grand*-children, who knew very well that it was the golden-wedding day. They had already wished them joy on that very morning, but the old people had forgotten it, although they remembered so well all that had happened many years before. And the elder tree smelled sweet, and the setting sun shone upon the faces of the old people till they looked quite ruddy. And the youngest of their grandchildren danced round them joyfully, and said they were going to have a feast in the evening, and there were to be hot potatoes. Then the Elder Mother nodded in the tree and cried ‘Hurrah!’ with all the rest.”

“But that is not a story,” said the little boy who had been listening.

“Not till you understand it,” said the old man. “But let us ask the Elder Mother to explain it.”

“It was not exactly a story,” said the Elder Mother, “but the story is coming now, and it is a true one. For out of truth the most wonderful stories grow, just as my beautiful elder bush has sprung out of the teapot.” And then she took the little boy out of bed and laid him on her bosom, and the blooming branches of elder closed over them so that they sat, as it were, in a leafy bower, and the bower flew with them through the air in the most delightful manner.

Then the Elder Mother all at once changed to a beautiful young maiden, but her dress was still of the same green stuff, ornamented with a border of white elder blossoms such as the Elder Mother had worn. In her bosom she wore a real elder flower, and a wreath of the same was entwined in her golden ringlets. Her large blue eyes were very beautiful to look at. She was of the same age as the boy, and they kissed each other and felt very happy.

They left the arbor together, hand in hand, and found themselves in a beautiful flower garden which belonged to their home. On the green lawn their father’s stick was tied up. There was life in this stick for the little ones, for no sooner did they place themselves upon it than the white knob changed into a pretty neighing head with a black, flowing mane, and four long, slender legs sprung forth. The creature was strong and spirited, and galloped with them round the grassplot.

“Hurrah! now we will ride many miles away,” said the boy; “we’ll ride to the nobleman’s estate, where we went last year.”

Then they rode round the grassplot again, and the little maiden, who, we know, was Elder-tree Mother, kept crying out: “Now we are in the country. Do you see the farmhouse, with a great baking oven standing out from the wall by the road-side like a gigantic egg? There is an elder spreading its branches over it, and a cock is marching about and scratching for the chickens. See how he struts!

“Now we are near the church. There it stands on the hill, shaded by the great oak trees, one of which is half dead. See, here we are at the blacksmith’s forge. How the fire burns! And the half-clad men are striking the hot iron with the hammer, so that the sparks fly about. Now then, away to the nobleman’s beautiful estate!” And the boy saw all that the little girl spoke of as she sat behind him on the stick, for it passed before him although they were only galloping round the grassplot. Then they played together in a side walk and raked up the earth

to make a little garden. Then she took elder flowers out of her hair and planted them, and they grew just like those which he had heard the old people talking about, and which they had planted in their young days.

They walked about hand in hand too, just as the old people had done when they were children, but they did not go up the round tower nor to Fredericksburg garden. No; but the little girl seized the boy round the waist, and they rode all over the whole country (sometimes it was spring, then summer; then autumn and winter followed), while thousands of images were presented to the boy's eyes and heart, and the little girl constantly sang to him, "You must never forget all this." And through their whole flight the elder tree sent forth the sweetest fragrance.

They passed roses and fresh beech trees, but the perfume of the elder tree was stronger than all, for its flowers hung round the little maiden's heart, against which the boy so often leaned his head during their flight.

"It is beautiful here in the spring," said the maiden, as they stood in a grove of beech trees covered with fresh green leaves, while at their feet the sweet-scented thyme and blushing anemone lay spread amid the green grass in delicate bloom. "O that it were always spring in the fragrant beech groves!"

"Here it is delightful in summer," said the maiden, as they passed old knights' castles telling of days gone by and saw the high walls and pointed gables mirrored in the rivers beneath, where swans were sailing about and peeping into the cool green avenues. In the fields the corn waved to and fro like the sea. Red and yellow flowers grew amongst the ruins, and the hedges were covered with wild hops and blooming convolvulus. In the evening the moon rose round and full, and the haystacks in the meadows filled the air with their sweet scent. These were scenes never to be forgotten.

"It is lovely here also in autumn," said the little maiden, and then the scene changed again. The sky appeared higher and more beautifully blue, while the forest glowed with colors of red, green, and gold. The hounds were off to the chase, and large flocks of wild birds flew screaming over the Huns' graves, where the blackberry bushes twined round the old ruins. The dark blue sea was dotted with white sails, and in the barns sat old women, maidens, and children picking hops into a large tub. The young ones sang songs, and the old ones told fairy tales of wizards and witches. There could be nothing more pleasant than all this.

"Again," said the maiden, "it is beautiful here in winter." Then in a moment all the trees were covered with

hoarfrost, so that they looked like white coral. The snow crackled beneath the feet as if every one had on new boots, and one shooting star after another fell from the sky. In warm rooms there could be seen the Christmas trees, decked out with presents and lighted up amid festivities and joy. In the country farmhouses could be heard the sound of a violin, and there were games for apples, so that even the poorest child could say, "It is beautiful in winter."

And beautiful indeed were all the scenes which the maiden showed to the little boy, and always around them floated the fragrance of the elder blossom, and ever above them waved the red flag with the white cross, under which the old seaman had sailed. The boy—who had become a youth, and who had gone as a sailor out into the wide world and sailed to warm countries where the coffee grew, and to whom the little girl had given an elder blossom from her bosom for a keepsake, when she took leave of him—placed the flower in his hymn book; and when he opened it in foreign lands he always turned to the spot where this flower of remembrance lay, and the more he looked at it the fresher it appeared.

He could, as it were, breathe the homelike fragrance of the woods, and see the little girl looking at him from between the petals of the flower with her clear blue eyes, and hear her whispering, "It is beautiful here at home in spring and summer, in autumn and in winter," while hundreds of these home scenes passed through his memory.

Many years had passed, and he was now an old man, seated with his old wife under an elder tree in full blossom. They were holding each other's hands, just as the great-grandfather and grandmother had done, and spoke, as they did, of olden times and of the golden wedding. The little maiden with the blue eyes and with the elder blossoms in her hair sat in the tree and nodded to them and said, "To-day is the golden wedding."

And then she took two flowers out of her wreath and kissed them, and they shone first like silver and then like gold, and as she placed them on the heads of the old people, each flower became a golden crown. And there they sat like a king and queen under the sweet-scented tree, which still looked like an elder bush. Then he related to his old wife the story of the Elder-tree Mother, just as he had heard it told when he was a little boy, and they both fancied it very much like their own story, especially in parts which they liked the best.

"Well, and so it is," said the little maiden in the tree. "Some call me Elder Mother, others a dryad, but my real name is Memory. It is I who sit in the tree as it grows and grows, and I can think of the past and relate many

things. Let me see if you have still preserved the flower.”

Then the old man opened his hymn book, and there lay the elder flower, as fresh as if it had only just been placed there, and Memory nodded. And the two old people with the golden crowns on their heads sat in the red glow of the evening sunlight and closed their eyes, and—and—the story was ended.

The little boy lay in his bed and did not quite know whether he had been dreaming or listening to a story. The teapot stood on the table, but no elder bush grew out of it, and the old man who had really told the tale was on the threshold and just going out at the door.

“How beautiful it was,” said the little boy. “Mother, I have been to warm countries.”

“I can quite believe it,” said his mother. “When any one drinks two full cups of elder-flower tea, he may well get into warm countries”; and then she covered him up, that he should not take cold. “You have slept well while I have been disputing with the old man as to whether it was a real story or a fairy legend.”

“And where is the Elder-tree Mother?” asked the boy.

“She is in the teapot,” said the mother, “and there she may stay.”

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