

# *Little Maia*

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

English

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*Intermediate*  
*22 min read*

Once upon a time there lived a woman who had a pretty cottage and garden right in the middle of a forest. All through the summer she was quite happy tending her flowers and listening to the birds singing in the trees, but in the winter, when snow lay on the ground and wolves came howling about the door, she felt very lonely and frightened. 'If I only had a child to speak to, however small, what a comfort it would be !' she said to herself. And the heavier the snow fell the oftener she repeated the words. And at last a day arrived when she could bear the silence and solitude no longer, and set off to walk to the nearest village to beg someone to sell her or lend her a child.

The snow was very deep, and reached above her ankles, and it took her almost an hour to go a few hundred yards.

'It will be dark at this rate before I get to the first house,' thought she, and stopped to look about her. Suddenly a little woman in a high-crowned hat stepped from behind a tree in front of her.

'This is a bad day for walking ! Are you going far ?' inquired the little woman.

'Well, I want to go to the village'; but I don't see how I am ever to get there,' answered the other.

'And may I ask what important business takes you there ?' asked the little woman, who was really a witch.

'My house is so dreary, with no one to speak to; I cannot stay in it alone, and I am seeking for a child — I don't

mind how small she is — who will keep me company.’

‘Oh, if that is all, you need go no further,’ replied the witch, putting her hand in her pocket. ‘Look, here is a barley corn, as a favour you shall have it for twelve shillings, and if you plant it in a flower-pot, and give it plenty of water, in a few days you will see something wonderful.’

This promise raised the woman’s spirits. She gladly paid down the price, and as soon as she returned home she dug a hole in a flower-pot and put in the seed.

For three days she waited, hardly taking her eyes from the flower-pot in its warm corner, and on the third morning she saw that, while she was asleep, a tall red tulip had shot up, sheathed in green leaves.

‘What a beautiful blossom,’ cried the woman, stooping to kiss it, when, as she did so, the red petals burst asunder, and in the midst of them was a lovely little girl only an inch high. This tiny little creature was seated on a mattress of violets, and covered with a quilt of rose leaves, and she opened her eyes and smiled at the woman as if she had known her all her life.

‘Oh ! you darling; I shall never be lonely any more !’ she exclaimed in rapture; and the baby nodded her head as much as to say:

‘No, of course you won’t !’

The woman lost no time in seeking for a roomy walnut-shell, which she lined thickly with white satin, and on it she placed the mattress, with the child, whom she called Maia, upon it. This was her bed, and stood on a chair close to where her foster-mother was sleeping; but in the morning she was lifted out, and placed on a leaf in the middle of a large bowl of water, and given two white horse-hairs to row herself about with. She was the happiest baby that ever was seen, and passed the whole day singing to herself, in a language of her own, that nobody else could understand.

For some weeks the two lived together and never grew tired of each other’s society, and then a terrible misfortune happened. One night, when the foster-mother lay sound asleep after a hard day’s work, a big, ugly, wet frog hopped in through the open window and stood staring at Maia under her quilt of rose leaves.

‘Dear me ! that is quite a pretty little girl,’ thought the frog to herself; ‘she would make a nice wife for my son.’

And picking up the walnut cradle in her mouth, she hopped with it to the edge of a stream which ran through the garden.

‘Come and see what I have brought you,’ called the old frog, when she reached her home in the mud.

‘Croak ! croak ! croak !’ uttered the son, gazing with pleasure at the sleeping child.

‘Hush; don’t make such a noise or you will wake her !’ whispered the mother. ‘I mean her to be a wife for you, and while we are preparing for the wedding we will set hers on that water-lily leaf in the middle of the brook, so that she may not be able to run away from us.’

It was on this green floating prison that Maia awoke, frightened and puzzled, with the first rays of the sun. She stood up straight on the leaf, looking about her for a way of escape, and, finding none, she sat down again and began to weep bitterly. At length her sobs were heard by the old frog, who was busy in her house at the bottom of the marsh, twisting rushes into a soft carpet for Maia’s feet, and twining reeds and grapes over the doorway, to make it look pretty for the bride.

‘Ah ! the poor child feels lost and unhappy,’ she thought pitifully, for her heart was kind. ‘Well, I have just done, and then my son and I will go to fetch her. When she sees how handsome he is she will be all smiles again.’ And in a few minutes they both appeared beside the leaf.

‘This is your future husband. Did you ever see anyone like him ?’ asked the proud mother, pushing him forward. But, after one glance, Maia only cried the more; and the little fishes who lived in the stream came swimming round to see what was the matter.

‘It is absurd that such a pretty creature should be forced to take a husband whom she does not want,’ said they to each other. ‘And such an ugly one too ! However, we can easily prevent it.’ And by turns they gnawed the stem of the my-leaf close to the root, till at length it was free, and taking it in their mouths they bore Maia far away, till the little stream grew into a great river.

Oh, how Maia enjoyed that voyage, when once she became quite certain that the frogs could no longer reach her. Past many towns she went, and the people on the banks all turned to look at her, and exclaimed:

‘What a lovely little girl ! Where can she have come from ?’

‘What a lovely little girl !’ twittered the birds in the bushes. And a blue butterfly fell in love with her, and would not leave her; so she took off her sash, which just matched him, and tied it round his body, so that with this new kind of horse she travelled much faster than before.

Unluckily, a great cockchafer, who was buzzing over the river, happened to catch sight of her, and caught her up in his claws. The poor butterfly was terribly frightened at the sight of him, and he struggled hard to free himself, so that the sash bow gave way, and he flew off into the sunshine. But Maia wasn’t so fortunate, and though the cockchafer collected honey from the flowers for her dinner, and told her several times how pretty she was, she could not feel at ease with him. The cockchafer noticed this, and summoned his sisters to play with her; but they only stared rudely, and said:

‘Where did you pick up that strange object ? She is very ugly to be sure, but one ought to pity her for she has only two legs.’

‘Yes, and no feelers,’ added another; ‘and she is so thin ! Well, our brother has certainly very odd taste !’

‘Indeed he has !’ echoed the others. And they repeated it so loud and so often that, in the end, he believed it too, and snatching her up from the tree where he had placed her, set her down upon a daisy which grew near the ground.

Here Maia stayed for the whole summer, and really was not at all unhappy. She ventured to walk about by herself, and wove herself a bed of some blades of grass, and placed it under a clover leaf for shelter. The red cups that grew in the moss held as much dew as she wanted, and the cockchafer had taught her how to get honey. But summer does not last for ever, and by — and – by the flowers withered, and instead of dew there was snow and ice. Maia did not know what to do, for her clothes were worn to rags, and though she tried to roll herself up in a dry leaf it broke under her fingers. It soon was plain to her that if she did not get some other shelter she would die of hunger and cold.

So, gathering up all her courage, she left the forest and crossed the road into what had been, in the summer, a beautiful field of waving corn, but was now only a mass of hard stalks. She wandered on, seeing nothing but

the sky above her head, till she suddenly found herself close to an opening which seemed to lead underground.

‘It will be warm, at any rate,’ thought Maia, ‘and perhaps the person who lives there will give me something to eat. At any rate, I can’t be worse off than I am now.’ And she walked boldly down the passage. By — and — by she came to a door which stood ajar, and, peeping in, discovered a whole room full of corn. This gave her heart, and she went on more swiftly, till she reached a kitchen where an old field-mouse was baking a cake.

‘You poor little animal,’ cried the mouse, who had never seen anything like her before, ‘you look starved to death. Come and sit here and get warm, and share my dinner with me.’

Maia almost wept with joy at the old mouse’s kind words. She needed no second bidding, but ate more than she had ever done in her life, though it was not a breakfast for a humming-bird ! When she had quite finished she put out her hand and smiled, and the old mouse said to her:

‘Can you tell stories ? If so you may stay with me till the sun gets hot again, and you shall help me with my house. But it is dull here in the winter unless you have somebody clever enough to amuse you.’

Yes, Maia had learned a great many stories from her foster-mother, and, besides, there were all her own adventures, and her escapes from death. She knew also how a room should be swept, and never failed to get up early in the morning and have everything clean and tidy for the old mouse.

So the winter passed away pleasantly, and Maia began to talk of the spring, and of the time when she would have to go out into the world again and seek her fortune.

‘Oh, you need not begin to think of that for a while yet,’ answered the field-mouse. ‘Up on the earth they have a proverb:

When the day lengthens

Then the cold strengthens;

it has been quite warm up to now, and the snow may fall any time. Never a winter goes by without it, and then you will be very thankful you are here, and not outside ! But I dare say it is quiet for a young thing like you,’ she added, ‘and I have invited my neighbour the mole to come and pay us a visit. He has been asleep all these months, but I hear he is waking up again. You would be a lucky girl if he took into his head to marry you, only,

unfortunately, he is blind, and cannot see how pretty you are.' And for this blindness Maia felt truly glad, as she did not want a mole for a husband.

However, by-and-by he paid his promised visit, and Maia did not like him at all. He might be as rich and learned as possible, but he hated the sun, and the trees, and the flowers, and all that Maia loved best. To be sure, being blind, he had never seen them, and, like many other people, he thought that anything he did not know was not worth knowing. But Maia's tales amused him, though he would not for the world have let her see it, and he admired her voice when she sang:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?

or

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree top;  
though he told her that it was all nonsense, and that trees and gardens were mere foolishness. When she was his wife he would teach her things better worth learning.

'Meanwhile,' he said, with a grand air, 'I have burrowed a passage from this house to my own, in which you can walk; but I warn you not to be frightened at a great dead creature that has fallen through a hole in the roof, and is lying on one side.'

'What sort of creature is it?' asked Maia eagerly.

'Oh, I really can't tell you,' answered the mole, indifferently; 'it is covered with something soft, and it has two thin legs, and a long sharp thing sticking out of its head.'

'It is a bird,' cried Maia joyfully, 'and I love birds. It must have died of cold,' she added, dropping her voice. 'Oh! good Mr. Mole, do take me to see it!'

'Come then, as I am going home,' replied the mole. And calling to the old field-mouse to accompany them, they all set out.

'Here it is,' said the mole at last; 'dear me, how thankful I am Fate did not make me a, bird. They can't say

anything but “twit, twit,” and die with the first breath of cold.’

‘Ah, yes, poor useless creature,’ answered the fieldmouse. But while they were talking, Maia crept round to the other side and stroked the feathers of the little swallow, and kissed his eyes.

All that night she lay awake, thinking of the swallow lying dead in the passage. At length she could bear it no longer, and stole away to the place where the hay was kept, and wove a thick carpet. Next she went to the field-mouse’s store of cotton, which she picked in the summer from some of the marsh flowers, and carrying them both down the passage, she tucked the cotton underneath the bird and spread the hay quilt over him.

‘Perhaps you were one of the swallows who sang to me in the summer,’ said she. ‘I wish I could have brought you to life again; but now, good-bye!’ And she laid her face, wet with tears, on the breast of the bird. Surely she felt a faint movement against her cheek? Yes, there it was again! Suppose the bird was not dead after all, but only senseless with cold and hunger! And at this thought Maia hastened back to the house, and brought some grains of corn, and a drop of water in a leaf. This she held close to the swallow’s beak, which he opened unconsciously, and when he had sipped the water she gave him the grains one by one.

‘Make no noise, so that no one may guess you are not dead,’ said she. ‘To-night I will bring you some more food, and I will tell the mole that he must stuff up the hole again, as it makes the passage too cold for me to walk in. And now farewell.’ And off she went, back to the field-mouse, who was sound asleep.

After some days of Maia’s careful nursing, the swallow felt strong enough to talk, and he told Maia how he came to be in the place where she found him. Before he was big enough to fly very high he had torn his wing in a rose-bush, so that he could not keep up with his family and friends when they took their departure to warmer lands. In their swift course they never noticed that their little brother was not with them, and at last he dropped on the ground from sheer fatigue, and must have rolled down the hole into the passage.

It was very lucky for the swallow that both the mole and the field-mouse thought he was dead, and did not trouble about him, so that when the spring really came, and the sun was hot, and blue hyacinths grew in the woods and primroses in the hedges, he was as tall and strong as any of his companions.

‘You have saved my life, dear little Maia,’ said he; ‘but now the time has come for me to leave you — unless,’ he added, ‘you will let me carry you on my back far away from this gloomy prison.’

Maia’s eyes sparkled at the thought, but she shook her head bravely.

‘Yes, you must go; but I must stay behind,’ she answered. ‘The field-mouse has been good to me, and I cannot desert her like that. Do you think you can open the hole for yourself?’ she asked anxiously. ‘If so, you had better begin now, for this evening we are to have supper with the mole, and it would never do for my foster-mother to find you working at it.’

‘That is true,’ answered the swallow. And flying up to the roof — which, after all, was not very high above them — he set to work with his bill, and soon let a flood of sunshine into the dark place.

‘Won’t you come with me, Maia?’ said he. And though her heart longed for the trees and the flowers, she answered as before:

‘No, I cannot.’

That one glimpse of the sun was all Maia had for some time, for the corn sprung up so thickly over the hole and about the house, that there might almost as well have been no sun at all. However, though she missed her bird friend every moment, she had no leisure to be idle, for the field-mouse had told her that very soon she was to be married to the mole, and kept her spinning wool and cotton for her outfit. And as she had never in her life made a dress, four clever spiders were persuaded to spend the days underground, turning the wool and cotton into tiny garments. Maia liked the clothes, but hated the thought of the blind mole, only she did not know how to escape him. In the evenings, when the spiders were going to their homes for the night, she would walk with them to the door and wait till a puff of wind blew the corn ears apart, and she could see the sky.

‘If the swallow would only come now,’ she said to herself, ‘I would go with him to the end of the world.’ But he never came !

‘Your outfit is all finished,’ said the field-mouse one day when the berries were red and the leaves yellow, ‘and the mole and I have decided that your wedding shall be in four weeks’ time.’

'Oh, not so soon! not so soon !' cried Maia, bursting into tears; which made the field-mouse very angry, and declare that Maia had no more sense than other girls, and did not know what was good for her. Then the mole arrived, and carried her on his back to see the new house he had dug for her, which was so very far under ground that Maia's tiny legs could never bring her up even as high as the field-mouse's dwelling, from which she might see the sunlight. Her heart grew heavier and heavier as the days went by, and in the last evening of all she crept out into the field among the stubble, to watch the sun set before she bade it good-bye for ever.

'Farewell, farewell,' she said, 'and farewell to my little swallow. Ah ! if he only knew, he would come to help me.'

'Twit ! twit,' cried a voice just above her; and the swallow fluttered to the ground beside her. 'You look sad; are you really going to let that ugly mole marry you ?'

'I shall soon die, that is one comfort,' she answered weeping. But the swallow only said:

'Tut! tut! get on my back, as I told you before, and I will take you to a land where the sun always shines, and you will soon forget that such a creature as a mole ever existed.'

'Yes, I will come,' said Maia.

Then the swallow tore off one of the corn stalks with his strong beak, and bade her tie it safely to his wing. And they started off, flying, flying south for many a day.

Oh! how happy Maia was to see the beautiful earth again ! A hundred times she longed for the swallow to stop, but he always told her that the best was yet to be; and they flew on and on, only halting for short rests, till they reached a place covered with tall white marble pillars, some standing high, wreathed in vines, out of which endless swallows' heads were peeping; others lying stretched among the flowers, white, yellow, and blue.

'I live up there,' said the swallow, pointing to the tallest of the pillars. 'But such a house would never do for you, as you would only fall out of it and kill yourself. So choose one of those flowers below, and you shall have it for your own, and sleep all night curled up in its leaves.'

'I will have that one,' answered Maia, pointing to a white flower shaped like a star, with a tiny crinkled wreath of red and yellow in its centre, and a long stem that swayed in the wind; 'that one is the prettiest of all, and it

smells so sweet.' Then the swallow flew down towards it; but as they drew near they saw a tiny little manikin with a crown on his head, and wings on his shoulders, balancing himself on one of the leaves. 'Ah, that is the king of the flower-spirits,' whispered the swallow. And the king stretched out his hands to Maia, and helped her to jump from the swallow's back.

'I have waited for you for a long while,' said he, 'and now you have come at last to be my queen.'

And Maia smiled, and stood beside him as all the fairies that dwelt in the flowers ran to fetch presents for her; and the best of them all was a pair of lovely gauzy blue wings to help fly about like one of themselves.

So instead of marrying the mole, Little Maia was crowned a queen, and the fairies danced round her in a ring, while the swallow sang the wedding song.

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