

The Culprit Fay

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The wood-tick's drum convokes the elves at the noon of night on Cro' Nest top, and, clambering out of their flower-cup beds and hammocks of cobweb, they fly to the meeting, not to freak about the grass or banquet at the mushroom table, but to hear sentence passed on the fay who, forgetting his vestal vow, has loved an earthly maid. From his throne under a canopy of tulip petals, borne on pillars of shell, the king commands silence, and with severe eye but softened voice he tells the culprit that while he has scorned the royal decree he has saved himself from the extreme penalty, of imprisonment in walnut shells and cobweb dungeons, by loving a maid who is gentle and pure. So it shall be enough if he will go down to the Hudson and seize a drop from the bow of mist that a sturgeon leaves when he makes his leap; and after, to kindle his darkened flame-wood lamp at a meteor spark. The fairy bows, and without a word slowly descends the rocky steep, for his wing is soiled and has lost its power; but once at the river, he tugs amain at a mussel shell till he has it afloat; then, leaping in, he paddles out with a strong grass blade till he comes to the spot where the sturgeon swims, though the watersprites plague him and toss his boat, and the fish and the leeches bunt and drag; but, suddenly, the sturgeon shoots from the water, and ere the arch of mist that he tracks through the air has vanished, the sprite has caught a drop of the spray in a tiny blossom, and in this he washes clean his wings.

The water-goblins torment him no longer. They push his boat to the shore, where, alighting, he kisses his hand, then, even as a bubble, he flies back to the mountain top, dons his acorn helmet, his corselet of bee-hide, his shield of lady-bug shell, and grasping his lance, tipped with wasp sting, he bestrides his fire-fly steed and

off he goes like a flash. The world spreads out and then grows small, but he flies straight on. The ice-ghosts leer from the topmost clouds, and the mists surge round, but he shakes his lance and pipes his call, and at last he comes to the Milky Way, where the sky-sylphs lead him to their queen, who lies couched in a palace ceiled with stars, its dome held up by northern lights and the curtains made of the morning's flush. Her mantle is twilight purple, tied with threads of gold from the eastern dawn, and her face is as fair as the silver moon.

She begs the fay to stay with her and taste forever the joys of heaven, but the knightly elf keeps down the beating of his heart, for he remembers a face on earth that is fairer than hers, and he begs to go. With a sigh she fits him a car of cloud, with the fire-fly steed chained on behind, and he hurries away to the northern sky whence the meteor comes, with roar and whirl, and as it passes it bursts to flame. He lights his lamp at a glowing spark, then wheels away to the fairy-land. His king and his brothers hail him stoutly, with song and shout, and feast and dance, and the revel is kept till the eastern sky has a ruddy streak. Then the cock crows shrill and the fays are gone.

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