

Elder Mother

Once a little boy caught a cold. Where he had wet his feet, no one could figure out—the weather had been quite dry. His mother undressed him, put him to bed, and ordered a kettle to be brought so she could brew elderflower tea—an excellent sudorific! At that very moment, a kind, cheerful old man who lived on the upper floor of the same house entered the room. He was all alone; he had neither wife nor children, yet he loved children so much and knew how to tell them such wonderful fairy tales and stories that it was simply miraculous.

"Well, drink some tea, and then perhaps you'll hear a tale!" said the mother.

"Ah, if only I knew some new one!" replied the old man, nodding kindly. "But where exactly did our little lad wet his feet?"

"That's just it—where?" said the mother. "No one can make sense of it."

"Will there be a story?" asked the boy.

"First I need to know whether the drainage ditch in the alley near your school is deep. Can you tell me that?"

"Just up to the middle of my boot shaft!" answered the boy. "And that's in the deepest spot."

"So that's where we wet our feet!" said the old man. "Now I ought to tell you a tale, but I don't know a single new one!"

"But you can make one up right now!" said the boy. "Mama says that whatever you look at, whatever you touch, turns into a fairy tale or a story for you."

"True, but such tales and stories are good for nothing. Real ones come by themselves. They come and knock on my forehead: 'Here I am!'"

"Will one come soon?" asked the boy.

The mother laughed, poured elderflowers into the kettle, and brewed the tea.

"Oh, do tell! Do tell!"

"If only one would come by itself! But they're important folks; they come only when they themselves feel like it!... Wait!" suddenly exclaimed the old man. "Here it is! Look, inside the kettle!"

The boy looked. The lid of the kettle began rising higher and higher, until fresh white elderflowers peeked out from beneath it, and then long green branches grew forth. They spread out in every direction, even from the spout of the kettle, and soon before the boy stood an entire bush; its branches stretched toward the very bed, pushing aside the curtains. How wonderfully the elder bloomed and fraganced! And from its greenery peeked the kind face of an old woman dressed in some astonishing gown, green as elder leaves and entirely covered with tiny white blossoms. At first glance, one couldn't even tell whether it was a dress or simply foliage and living elderflowers.

"Who is this old woman?" asked the boy.

"The ancient Romans and Greeks called her a Dryad!" said the old man. "Well, for us that name is too complicated, and in New Suburb they gave her a better nickname: Elder Mother. So watch her closely and listen to what I shall tell..."

...Just such a large bush, covered with flowers, grew in the corner of a courtyard in New Suburb. Beneath the bush, during the afternoon hour, sat warming themselves in the sun two old folks—a very, very old former sailor and his very, very old wife. They had grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and soon they were to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary, only they couldn't quite remember the exact day and date. From the greenery, Elder Mother gazed at them, just as kind and welcoming as this one here, and said, "I certainly know the day of your golden wedding!" But the old folks were busy talking—recalling days gone by—and didn't hear her.

"Do you remember," said the former sailor, "how we used to run and play together as children? Right here, in this very yard, we planted a little garden. Remember how we stuck twigs and branches into the ground?"

"Of course!" chimed in the old woman. "I remember, I remember! We weren't lazy about watering those twigs; one of them was an elder twig, it took root, sprouted, and look how it has grown! Now, as old folks, we can sit in its shade!"

"True!" continued the husband. "And over in that corner stood a water tub. There we launched my little ship, which I carved myself out of wood. How it sailed! And soon I had to set off on a real voyage!..."

"Yes, but before that we still attended school and learned a few things!" interrupted the old woman. "Then we grew up, and remember, one day we went to see the Round Tower, climbed all the way to the top, and admired the city and the sea from there? Afterwards we went to Frederiksberg and watched the king and queen cruising along the canals in a magnificent boat."

"Only I had to sail differently, for many years far away from my homeland!"

"How many tears I shed for you! I truly thought you had perished and lay at the bottom of the sea! How many times at night I got up to check whether the weather vane was turning. The weather vane turned, but you never appeared! I remember clearly, once, during a heavy downpour, a garbage collector arrived in our yard. I was working there as a servant and came out with the garbage bin, stopping in the doorway. The weather was terrible! And then the postman came and handed me a letter from you. That letter must have traveled all around the world! I snatched it and immediately began reading! I laughed and cried at the same time... I was so happy! The letter said you were now in warm lands where coffee grows! What a blessed country that must be! You told me much more besides, and I saw it all as if it were happening before my eyes. The rain poured down, yet I kept standing in the doorway with the garbage bin. Suddenly someone embraced me around the waist..."

"True, and you surely gave such a slap that the sound rang out!"

"How was I to know it was you! You had caught up with your own letter. And how handsome you were... You're still like that. From your pocket peeked a yellow silk handkerchief, on your head an oilcloth hat. Such a dandy!... But what weather it was, what our street looked like!"

"And so we got married," continued the former sailor. "Remember? Then children came to us: first a little boy, then Marie, then Niels, then Peter, then Hans Christian!"

"Yes, and they all grew up and became fine people; everyone loves them."

"And now their children have children too!" said the old man. "These are our great-grandchildren, and what sturdy lads they are! It seems to me our wedding took place just around this time."

"Exactly today!" said Elder Mother, poking her head between the old folks, but they thought it was merely their neighbor nodding to them.

They sat hand in hand, lovingly gazing at each other. A little while later, children and grandchildren came to them. They knew perfectly well that today was the old couple's golden wedding anniversary and had already congratulated them in the morning, only the old folks had managed to forget about it, although they remembered vividly everything that had happened many, many years ago. The elder bloomed fragrantly, and the setting sun shone farewell directly into the old folks' faces, reddening their cheeks. The youngest grandson danced around grandfather and grandmother, joyfully shouting that tonight they would have a real

feast: hot potatoes would be served for supper! Elder Mother nodded her head and shouted "Hooray!" along with everyone else.

"But this isn't a fairy tale at all!" objected the little boy, who had been listening attentively to the old man.

"That's what you say," replied the old man, "but ask Elder Mother herself!"

"It is not a fairy tale!" answered Elder Mother. "But now a fairy tale will begin. The most wonderful fairy tales grow out of reality itself. Otherwise, my beautiful bush wouldn't have grown out of the kettle."

With these words, she took the boy into her arms; the elder branches, covered with blossoms, suddenly closed around them, and the boy and the old woman found themselves as though in a leafy arbor that floated with them through the air. It was wonderfully beautiful! Elder Mother transformed into a lovely little girl, yet her dress remained the same—green, dotted with tiny white flowers. On the girl's breast bloomed a living elderflower, and atop her light-blond curls rested an entire wreath made of similar flowers. Her eyes were large and blue. Oh, how pretty she was, simply delightful! The boy and the girl kissed, and both became the same age, sharing the same thoughts and feelings.

Hand in hand, they stepped out of the arbor and found themselves in a flower garden before a house. On the green lawn stood a walking stick belonging to the father, tied to a peg. For the children, even the stick was alive. As soon as one sat astride it, its shiny knob turned into a magnificent horse's head with a long flowing mane. Then four slender, strong legs grew forth, and the spirited horse galloped with the children around the lawn.

"Now we'll ride far, far away!" said the boy. "To the manor estate where we were last year!"

The children rode around the lawn, and the girl—we know, after all, that this

"There was the Elder-tree Mother," she kept saying:

"Well, here we are outside the town! Do you see the peasant's house? A huge bread oven, like a giant egg, bulges out from the wall right onto the road. Above the house, an elder bush has spread its branches. Look, a rooster wanders about the yard, scratching in the earth, seeking food for the hens. See how importantly he strides! And now we are on the high hill by the church; it stands among tall oaks, one of them half withered... And now we are at the forge! Look how brightly the fire blazes, how the half-naked people work with their hammers! The sparks fly in all directions! But we must go further, further, to the manor house!"

And everything the girl named, sitting astride the cane behind the boy, flashed past. The boy saw it all, yet they were only circling around the lawn. Then they played on a side path, making themselves a little garden. The girl took an elder flower from her wreath and planted it in the ground. It took root and sprouted, and soon grew into a large elder bush, exactly like the one belonging to the old folks in New Suburb when they were still children. The boy and the girl took each other by the hand and also went for a walk, but they did not go to the Round Tower nor to Frederiksberg Garden. No, the girl embraced the boy tightly, rose with him into the air, and they flew over Denmark. Spring gave way to summer, summer to autumn, autumn to winter. Thousands of pictures reflected in the boy's eyes and were imprinted upon his heart, while the girl kept saying:

"You will never forget this!"

And the elder bloomed so sweetly, so wonderfully! The boy inhaled both the scent of roses and the fragrance of fresh beeches, but the elder smelled strongest of all: for its flowers adorned the girl's breast, and to her he so often bowed his head.

"How wonderful it is here in spring!" said the girl, and they found themselves in a young beech forest. At their feet bloomed fragrant woodruff, and marvelous pale-pink anemones peeked out from the grass. "Oh, if only spring would reign forever in the fragrant Danish beech forest!"

"How lovely it is here in summer!" she said as they swept past an old manor house with an ancient knight's castle. Red walls and crenellated gables were reflected in the water-filled moats where swans swam, peering into the old, cool avenues. The fields waved like a sea, the ditches were speckled with red and yellow wildflowers, and wild hops and flowering bindweed twined along the hedges. In the evening, a large, round moon rose, and from the meadows drifted the sweet aroma of new-mown hay. "This will never be forgotten!"

"How marvelous it is here in autumn!" said the girl, and the vault of heaven suddenly became twice as high and blue. The forest was painted in the most wonderful colors—red, yellow, green.

Hunting dogs broke loose. Whole flocks of game flew screaming over the burial mounds where old stones lie, overgrown with blackberry bushes. On the dark-blue sea, white sails appeared. Old women, girls, and children picked hops and threw them into large vats. The young people sang old songs, while the old women told tales of trolls and house spirits.

"Nowhere could it be better! And how good it is here in winter!" said the girl, and all the trees were clad in hoarfrost, their branches turned into white coral. The

snow crunched underfoot as if everyone had put on new boots, and from the sky, shooting stars fell one after another.

In the houses, Christmas trees lit up, hung with gifts; people rejoiced and made merry. In the village, in the peasants' homes, violins never ceased playing, apple fritters flew through the air. Even the poorest children said:

"How wonderful winter truly is!"

Yes, it was wonderful! The girl showed everything to the boy, and everywhere the elder bloomed fragrantly, everywhere fluttered the red flag with the white cross, the flag under which the former sailor from New Suburb had sailed. And so the boy became a youth, and he too had to set out on a long voyage to warm lands where coffee grows. Upon parting, the girl gave him a flower from her breast, and he hid it in a book. Often, in a foreign land, he remembered his homeland and opened the book—always to the place where the flower lay! And the more the youth looked at the flower, the fresher it became, the more strongly it fraganced, and it seemed to the youth that he could smell the aroma of Danish forests. In the petals of the flower, he saw the face of the blue-eyed girl; he seemed to hear her whisper: "How good it is here in spring, and summer, and autumn, and winter!" And hundreds of pictures flashed through his memory.

Thus many years passed. He grew old and sat with his old wife beneath a blossoming tree. They held hands and spoke of days gone by, of their golden wedding, exactly as their great-grandfather and great-grandmother from New Suburb had done. The blue-eyed girl with elder flowers in her hair and on her breast sat in the branches of the tree, nodded her head to them, and said: "Today is your golden wedding!" Then she took two flowers from her wreath, kissed them, and they gleamed, first like silver, then like gold. And when the girl placed them upon the heads of the old folks, the flowers turned into golden crowns, and the husband and wife sat just like a king and queen, beneath the fragrant tree, so much like an elder bush. And the old man told his wife the story of the Elder-tree Mother, just as he had heard it in childhood, and to both it seemed that in that story there was much resembling the story of their own lives. And precisely what was similar pleased them most of all.

"That is how it is!" said the girl sitting in the foliage. "Some call me the Elder-tree Mother, some a Dryad, but my true name is Remembrance. I sit in the tree which grows and grows. I remember everything, I can tell of everything! Let me see, is my flower still intact with you?"

And the old man opened the book: the elder flower lay there as fresh as if it had just been placed between the pages. Remembrance nodded kindly to the old folks,

and they sat in their golden crowns, illuminated by the purple setting sun. Their eyes closed, and... and... And here the tale ends!

The boy lay in bed and did not know himself whether he had seen all this in a dream or only heard it. The teapot stood on the table, but no elder grew from it, and the old man prepared to leave and departed.

"How wonderful!" said the boy. "Mama, I have been to the warm lands!"

"Indeed! Indeed!" said the mother. "After two such cups of elder tea, it is no wonder one visits the warm lands." And she wrapped him up well so he would not catch cold. "You slept quite soundly while we argued whether it was a fairy tale or reality!"

"But where is the Elder-tree Mother?" asked the boy.

"In the teapot!" answered the mother. "That is where she belongs."