



The Kingdom of Elfin

Blake once saw (he said) a Fairy's funeral! Perhaps, looking over the Wizard's right shoulder, you have seen one yourself. But beware of spells and elf-bolts! This adventure in the realms of Fantasy by an author whose strong suit is Imagination, reveals something of the lore which surrounds the Little People

By Sylvia Townsend Warner

(Author of "Lolly Willows" and "Mr. Fortune's Maggot")

NO census has numbered them; no income-tax collector knocks on their green hills, or drops yellow forms into their hollow and holy trees; their children, except for a few changelings, do not attend the Board Schools, their criminals slip through the fingers of policemen, and their dead are buried without certificates. As regards this last point, indeed, there are some who hold that fairies do not die; yet one of our most reliable and accurate poets has confuted them. "Did you ever see a fairy's funeral, madame?" Blake once said to a lady who happened to sit by him in company one night at dinner. "Never, sir," was the answer. "I have," said Blake, "but not before last night. I was walking alone in my garden; there was great stillness among the branches and flowers, and more than common sweetness in the air; I heard a low and pleasant sound—I knew not whence it came. At last I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures of the size and colour of grey-green grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf which they buried with songs and then disappeared. It was a fairy's funeral!"

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clearly, still less to assist at their ceremonies; a peaked face looking down for a moment from the dusk of an ash-tree, a sudden small fierce nip on one's arm, a vapoury streak across the snap-shot of a picnic-party . . . that is as much as the commonalty have any reason to expect. It is sometimes said that we have but our own obtuseness to blame for not seeing fairies more often than we do; but this is to attach too much importance to our idiosyncrasies, even to such a well-established, long-standing idiosyncrasy as obtuseness; for if we fail to see the fairies it is not because we are too stupid to see them, but because they are too clever to allow themselves to be seen by us.

It is a sad fact, but undeniable; the Kingdom of Elfin has a very poor opinion of humankind. I suppose we must seem to them shocking bores, unsmooth, noisy, ill-bred and disgustingly oversized. It is only the fairies with a taste for low company, like Puck and the Brownies—who are considered in Elfland to have exchanged their birthright for a mess of pottage—that make a practice of familiarity. And it is to be observed that they, for choice, frequent the simple and rustic part of mankind, and avoid professors and students of folk-lore as witches avoid the herbs vervain and dill. For example, we

may instance Robert Wace, who about the year 1155 made a journey to the forest of Broceliande, at that time a sort of elfin Le Touquet. Not a wing, not a wand, not the least gleam of a fairy did he see; all that he got for his pains was a country holiday, healthy, no doubt, but severely shorn of the amenities that a well-educated poetical gentleman considers his due; and in his pique he summed up an account of his fool's errand in the following lines:—

La allai je merveilles querre;
Vis la forêt et vis la terre,
Merveilles quis, mais ne trovai;
Fol m'en revins, fol y allai;
Fol y allai, fol m'en revins;
Folie quis, por fol me tins.

Which may be Englished something like this:—

Thither went I wonders to seek;
The forest I saw and the pastures eke.
Wonders I looked for but found none,
And a Fool came home whence a Fool
has gone.
Whence a Fool had gone a Fool
came home;
What a Fool was I after Folly to
room!

Figure 1.1 The first page of 'The Kingdom of Elfin' from *Eve*, with editorial matter and illustration

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The Kingdom of Elfin¹

Sylvia Townsend Warner

(*Eve: The Lady's Pictorial*, 5 October 1927, pp. 14–15)

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Yet perhaps Robert Wace may be thought to have got off pretty lightly to have come home with nothing worse than a few scratches, some midge-bites, and a revised estimate of his wisdom; for many of those who have thrust themselves in upon the fairies have had good cause to rue their presumption.

'The usefull Method for a curious Person to get a transient sight of this otherwise invisible Crew of Subterraneans,' says Mr. Robert Kirk, Minister of Aberfoil, a worthy cleric who found the fairies a great deal more congenial than his parishioners, 'is to put his left Foot under the

Wizard's right Foot and the Seer's Hand is put on the Inquirer's Head, who is to look over the Wizard's right Shoulder ... then will he see a Multitude of Wights, like furious hardie Men, flocking to him haistily from all Quarters, as thick as Atoms in the Air. These through Fear strike him breathless and speechless.⁷⁴

Nor do the fairies always content themselves with giving these Peeping Toms the fright of their lives. Often they go further, causing them to fall into languishing sicknesses, harrying them with ignominious accidents, and even pursuing them to death. They commonly employ one or two methods: blasting, or shooting with an elf-bolt, a weapon preserved in great quantities in County Museums under the name of flint arrow-heads. Jonet Morisoune, accused in 1692 of witchcraft and consorting with evil spirits, being asked the difference between shooting and blasting, declared that: 'quhen they are shott ther is no recoverie for it and if the shott be in the heart they died presently (*i.e.*, immediately), bot if it be not at the heart they will die in a while with it yet will at last die with it and that blasting is a whirlwinde that the fayries raises about that persone quhich they intend to wrong quhich may be healed two wayes ether by herbs or by charming.'⁷⁵

To those who seek some scatheless method of scraping acquaintance with these proud and capricious 'little Puppet Spirits which they call Elves or Fairies' I would recommend one of the following expedients: –

1. To be a country-woman with a new-born baby;
2. To be a young child;
3. To be a handsome man;

Fairy mothers are passionately attached to their children, but, as one might expect, they are not of a very domesticated temper, and the royal and noble fairies in particular have so many social engagements that it is essential for them to employ a nurse. As some human mothers believe that the most devoted nurses are to be found among the less sophisticated races – an ayah, an amah, or a Coal-black Mammy – so do the fairies think that the plodding and bovine nature of human-kind is peculiarly well-adapted to provide reliable old-fashioned nurses for fairy babes. So earnest are the fairies to get them that there is no sleight or boldness that they will stop at, sometimes wiling them from their homes with the show of a gold ring or cup bobbing upon the current of a stream, at other times actually entering the house of a lying-in woman and spiriting her away in a gust of wind or a sudden darkness.

It is not so clear why fairies should steal human children, putting a changeling in their place. One school of thought holds that the fairies are obliged to sacrifice one of their number every seven years to the Devil, and that they have hit upon the scheme of substituting a human tribute, one of them, perhaps, having peeped over the shoulder of a clergyman who was reading his Bible abroad in the fields and seen therein how Abraham substituted a ram for his own flesh and blood. Be this as it may, the accounts of changelings are numerous and well-authenticated. And to give the fairies their due it must be said that their parental solicitude appears very strongly in their behaviour to their foundlings. In Waldron's *Works* is a description of a changeling child whose human mother was a charwoman. Though this child 'were left ever so dirty, the woman, at her return, saw him with a clean face, and his hair combed with the utmost exactness and nicety.'⁶

But undoubtedly the best way of getting to know a fairy is to marry one. This has frequently been done, though – humbling reflection for my sex! – it is only female fairies who enter into these marriages, for though there have been cases of fairy seducers no earthly woman's charms have been powerful enough to bind a fairy to her in honourable matrimony. The first authentic notice of the fairies is that of Pomponius Mela, the Roman Geographer; but on one count Pomponius would seem to have been misinformed; for he describes the nine fairy women who lived on the island of Sein, off the coast of Brittany, as being vowed to perpetual virginity; and from all that we know of fairies this must seem extremely improbable. Their amorousness is proverbial, and no doubt the fairies who married human mortal husbands were induced to this rash step by the violence of their passions, coupled with a romantic and high-flown notion that there is something very fine about defying convention. Once married, however, they make admirable wives. Scandal has never dared to breathe a word against the fair fame of the Lady Tiphaine, wife of Bertrand du Guesclin: 'Laquelle avoit environ vingt-quatre ans, ne oncques n'avoit esté mariée, et estoit bonne et sage, et moult experte aux arts d'astronomie.' Nor was the celebrated Melusine, wife of Guy de Lusignan, Count of Poitou, any less wise and virtuous. She built her husband a castle by her enchantments, and bore him numerous children; and though in the end she was obliged to leave him it has always been admitted that the fault was on his side, and that any other self-respecting woman, under similar circumstances, must have done as she did.

Notes

- 1 The original printing in *Eve* includes these notes on the article and the author under the title (see Fig. 1.1):

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- 2 The story is told by Allan Cunningham in 'The Life of Blake' from *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1830).
- 3 Robert Wace, *Roman de Rou et des ducs de Normandie*.
- 4 Sentences taken from Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth or an Essay on the Nature and Actions of the Subterranean (and for the most part) Invisible People heretofore going under the names of Fauns and Fairies, or the like, among the Low Country Scots as described by those who have second sight, 1691* (published 1815).
- 5 Cited in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, by Margaret Alice Murray (1921), 'Appendix I. Fairies and Witches'. The correct date is 1662.
- 6 George Waldron, *A Description of the Isle of Man* (1731).