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The Quest For The Nightingale

Maud Lindsay

In the deepest dell of the Enchanted Wood, where the moss grew the greenest and the violets bloomed the sweetest, the fairies lived. It was they who kept the brooks and the springs free from dirt or clog, and tended the wild flowers and watched over the young trees. And they were friends with all the harmless birds and beasts from wood's end to wood's end.

But for those creatures that work harm to others, and for the goblins who delight in mischief they had no love, and every day and every night a watch was set to drive them from the fairy dell.

Each fay in turn kept guard and all went well till one evening when Pease-Blossom, the best-loved fairy in the dell, fell asleep at his post and the goblins stole away the nightingale that sang each night at the queen's court.

Great was the sorrow in fairyland when this was known.

"I will fly to catch them before they have had time to hide her away," cried a fay whose name was Quick-As-Lightning.

"I will go, too," said little Twinkle-Toes.

"And I, three," said Spice-of-Life; "and my good thorn sword with me, which will make four against them."

But the fairy queen would not consent to this.

"Pease-Blossom in his trust did fail;
And he must seek the nightingale," she said; and no sooner had she spoken than the little fay bade his companions good-bye and hastened out upon his quest alone.

The goblins had left no trace behind them and Pease-Blossom wandered hither and thither over dewy fells and fields asking of every piping cricket and brown winged bat he met: "Passed the goblins this way?"

No one could aid him, and he was ready to drop from weariness and sorrow when the moon came over the hill and called:

"Whither away, Pease-Blossom? Whither away?"

"In quest of the nightingale that the goblins have stolen; but where they have

taken her I cannot find," answered the little fay sadly.

Then said the moon: "Many a nightingale there is in the wide world, both free and caged, and how may I know yours from any other? But this I can tell you: through a window in the castle of the Great Giant, which stands upon a high hill beside the Silver Sea, I spy a nightingale in a golden cage which was not there when I shone through that same window yester eve; and moreover, at the World's End, which is beyond the Giant's castle, I see a band of goblins counting money."

"A thousand thanks to you, oh moon," cried Pease-Blossom joyfully when he heard this; for he could put two and two together as well as any fay in fairyland, and he did not doubt that the goblins had sold the nightingale to the Great Giant.

"I shall be at the castle before you shine in the dell," he called to the moon as he flew swift as a humming bird through the air.

But when he reached the hedge of thorns that guarded the palace of a lovely princess who was next neighbor to the Giant, he tripped against a candle-fly that was hurrying to an illumination in the palace, and tumbled headlong into the thorns.

"Help! help!" he cried as he struggled to get free, and a night-hawk that was out in a search of a supper flew down to see what the matter was.

"Oh, ho!" said he when he saw who it was. "Fairy folk like to have all things their way, but 'tis my turn now to have a little fun."

And he plucked Pease-Blossom from out the thorns and flew away with him in his bill.

Up and down, so high that the trees below looked no taller than corn stalks, and so low that their branches brushed his wings, he flew, till Pease-Blossom was faint from dizziness.

"See what a great moth the hawk has in his bill," cried an owl that they passed.

"'Tis no moth but a bug," said a whip-poor-will.

"Such an enormous gnat should make a meal for two," whispered a brother hawk, flying close.

"Simpleton! Do you not know a fairy when you see one?" said the night-hawk who could keep quiet no longer.

But no sooner had he opened his bill to speak his very first word than out tumbled Pease-Blossom.

The other hawk made haste to catch the fay but before he could reach him a fine

breeze came blowing by.

"Is this not my little playmate, Pease-Blossom, who likes so well to ride on the grasses and rock in the flowers?" asked the breeze; and it whisked the little fairy away and bore him along so fast that no bird could keep up with him.

They were at the Silver Sea in the twinkling of a star, and Pease-Blossom was just beginning to think that his troubles were ended, when the breeze died away as quickly as it had come, and the little fay found himself in the sea before he knew what was happening.

Fortunately for him a great tarpon fish came swimming by just then.

"Catch fast hold of my tail, and I will take you safely to shore," said he; and Pease-Blossom lost no time in doing as he was bid.

Ugh! How salty the water was and how the billows roared as the fish plunged through them, sending the white spray far above his head!

Poor Pease-Blossom was more dead than alive when they reached the shore, but as soon as he had gotten his breath again he said to his new friend:

"If you will come with me to fairyland you may swim in a stream as clear as glass. There is no salt in it, and no rough waves and every fairy in the dell will guard you from harm."

"Water without salt! I cannot imagine it," said the great tarpon. "And no waves! Why, I should die of homesickness there."

So when Pease-Blossom saw that there was nothing he could do for him, he thanked him kindly, and turned his steps to the Giant's castle which stood on a high hill close beside the sea just as the moon had said.

But Pease-Blossom's wings were so wet and so weary that though he tried once, twice, and thrice he could not fly to the lowest window ledge of the castle; and what he would have done nobody knows had not a chimney-swift who was out late from home flown by just then.

She lived in the castle chimney and when she heard what the little fay wanted she offered to carry him to her nest.

"Once there all will be easy," she said; "for there is no better way to get into the castle than through the chimney."

So Pease-Blossom seated himself between the swift's wings, and up they went to the top of the chimney and then down through the opening to the swift's home, which looked as if it were only half of a nest fastened against the wall.

"If you will come with me to fairyland," said Pease-Blossom when he saw this,

"you shall have the greenest tree in the wood for your home. And the fairies will help you to build a whole nest there."

But the swift only laughed at him. "There is no better place than a chimney to raise young birds. I should be uneasy about them every minute in a tree. And as for a whole nest, I don't know what you mean," said she.

And when Pease-Blossom saw that she was well content with her home, he thanked her and bade her good-bye, and began his climb down the chimney.

There was no light to show him the way except the little that the moon sent through the opening high above the swift's nest; and on all sides of the little fay were the straight narrow walls of the chimney, covered with black soot. He clung to them as closely as a lichen to a rock, putting his little toes into every crack and holding fast to the bits of cement that jutted out here and there from the bricks. If he rustled a wing he brought down a shower of soot upon himself, and when at last he stood in the Giant's room, he was as black as any goblin.

He had no time to think of himself though, for there asleep in the golden cage which the moon had seen was the queen's nightingale. There was no mistaking her, for there was a tiny feather missing from the tip of her right wing, and that missing feather was in Pease-Blossom's Sunday cap hanging in an alder bush in the fairy dell that very minute.

The Giant was asleep, too, but the golden cage was on a table close beside him, so close that poor Pease-Blossom, whose wings were not improved by the soot from the chimney, could not reach it without climbing upon the Giant's bed.

He was as careful as he could be, but no sooner had he stepped upon the bed than he touched one of the Giant's toes; and the Giant gave a great start.

"What is the matter?" called his wife.

"Oh, nothing," said he; "I only dreamed that a little mouse was tickling my toes;" and he fell asleep again.

Pease-Blossom did not dare to move till he heard him breathing heavily. Then, tiptoe across the counterpane he went, taking care at every step; but in spite of his care his wings brushed against one of the Giant's hands; and the Giant gave a great start.

"What is the matter?" called his wife.

"Oh, nothing," said he; "I only dreamed that a little leaf fell on my hand;" and he closed his eyes, and turned over on his side and was soon asleep.

Pease-Blossom was close under the cage by this time, but so tall was the table on which it was, and so small was he that, to reach the door, he was forced to

stand on the Giant's head.

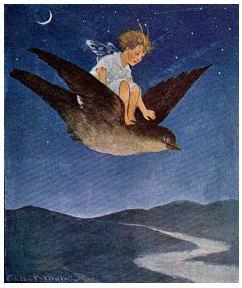
Light as thistle-down were his feet, but no sooner had the Giant felt their tread than he gave a great start, and lifting his hand struck himself a tremendous blow upon his forehead. Pease-Blossom would have been crushed to death had he not managed to spring, just at that instant, to the edge of the cage, where he stood trembling.

"What is the matter?" called the Giant's wife.

"Oh, nothing," said he; "I only dreamed that a fly lighted on my forehead," and he was soon breathing heavily again.

The nightingale, who was not used to sleeping at night, anyway, was wide awake by this time, but when she saw Pease-Blossom she did not know him, so black was he.

"Do you not remember the fairy dell and the little fay to whom you gave a feather for his cap?" said Pease-Blossom then; and when the nightingale heard that, she was so overjoyed that she could scarcely keep from bursting into song.



To open the cage door was only a minute's work and the nightingale was soon as free as air. Pease-Blossom seated himself upon her back and she was just ready to fly through an open window near by when the giant waked up in real earnest and saw the open cage.

"Thieves! Robbers!" he called in such a terrible voice that the chimney-swift shook in her nest, and the big fish in the Silver Sea jumped out of the water.

If the Giant had spied Pease-Blossom and the nightingale it would have gone hard with them; but luckily for them his wife, who was a kind-hearted woman, saw them before he did, and upset the golden cage right in his way.

"The whole place is bewitched," thundered he, stumbling over the cage; and in the stir which followed the nightingale slipped away unseen.

Over the Silver Sea where the fish swam, over the hedge of thorns which guarded the palace of the lovely princess, over the fields and the fells where the dew sparkled, straight to the Enchanted Wood they went.

"Who comes here?" called the fairy warder of the dell.

"Pease-Blossom and the nightingale," answered the fay; and great was the joy in fairyland at their return.

"How long you have been!" said Quick-As-Lightning.

"How fast you have come!" said little Twinkle-Toes.

But as for Spice-of-Life he could not speak at all for laughing at sooty Pease-Blossom.

Then Pease-Blossom made haste to bathe himself in the brook, and put on his finest court suit of pink satin rose-petals trimmed with lace from a spider's web; for the fairy queen had ordered a grand court ball in his honor, and there was no time to lose.

A cricket band played merrily, the nightingale sang from a thicket close at hand, and tripping and twirling the little folks went till the cock crowed and the sun came up; and it was fairy bedtime.

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