

The Rose Elf

Hans Christian Andersen

In the midst of a garden there grew a rose bush, quite covered with roses, and in the most beautiful of them all there lived an elf-an elf so tiny that no mortal eye could see him. But he was as well made and as perfect as any child could be, and he had wings reaching from his shoulders to his feet. Behind each petal of the rose he had a tiny bedroom. Oh, how fragrant his rooms were, and how bright and transparent the walls, for they were the beautiful pale pink petals of the rose! All day long the little elf rejoiced in the warm sunshine as he flew from flower to flower or danced on the wings of the fluttering butterflies and measured how many steps he would have to take to pass along all the roads and paths on a single linden leaf. You see, what we call the veins on a leaf were highroads and byways to him. It was a long journey, and he had begun it rather late, so before he finished, the sun had gone down!

It turned very cold, dew fell, and the wind blew, so now it was high time he went home. He hurried as fast as he could, but to his dismay he found that the rose had closed its petals for the night! Not a single rose stood open! He couldn't get in! Now, the poor little rose elf was terribly frightened, for he had never been out at night before; he had always slumbered sweetly and safely behind the warm rose petals. This would surely be the death of him!

Suddenly he remembered that at the other end of the garden there was an arbor of lovely honeysuckle, those flowers which looked like big painted horns. In one of them, perhaps, he could go down and sleep safely till morning.

Swiftly he flew to the far end of the garden. But suddenly he stopped! Quiet! There were already two people in the arbor. The loveliest maiden and a handsome young man. They sat closely together and wished they might never, never part. They loved each other, even more than the best child can love its father and mother.

"Yet we must part," the young man was saying. "Your brother doesn't like me, so he is sending me on a long journey, far over distant mountains and oceans. Farewell, my sweetest bride, for that you will always be to me!"

Then they kissed, and the young maiden wept and gave him a rose. But first she pressed on it a kiss so warm and tender that the rose petals opened, and then the little elf slipped quickly inside. As he leaned his tiny head against the delicate, fragrant walls, he could hear, "Farewell! Farewell!" and he felt that the rose was being placed on the young man's heart. Ah, how that heart beat! The little elf couldn't go to sleep for its beating!

But not long did the rose rest undisturbed on that throbbing heart. As the young man walked lonely through the dark wood he took the rose out and kissed it so often and so warmly that the little elf was almost crushed. Through the petals he could feel the young man's burning lips, while the rose itself opened as if under the strongest midday sun.

Suddenly another man appeared. It was the pretty maiden's gloomy and wicked brother! He drew out a long sharp knife, and while the young man was kissing the rose, this wicked one stabbed him to death! Then he cut off the head and buried head and body in the soft earth beneath the linden tree.

"Now he's dead and forgotten!" the evil brother thought. "He'll never come back again. He was supposed to have left on a long journey where a man might easily lose his life-and so he has lost his. No, he won't come back, and my sister won't ever dare ask me about him." Then he kicked dry leaves over the loose earth and went home in the darkness of the night.

But he was not alone, as he thought. The little elf was with him. For, as he dug the grave, a dried, rolled-up linden leaf had fallen in his hair, and the rose elf was in that leaf. Now the man's hat was placed over the leaf, and it was very dark in there where the little elf trembled in fear and anger at the wicked deed.

In the early morning, the evil man reached home. He took off his hat and went into his sister's bedroom. There lay the pretty maiden, dreaming of her beloved, whom she thought far away traveling over mountains and through the forests. The wicked brother leaned over her and laughed—the hideous laugh of a devil—and the withered leaf dropped from his hair onto her bed cover. But he didn't notice, and pretty soon he left her room to get a little sleep himself.

Now the little elf crept quietly out of the withered leaf, slipped into the ear of the sleeping girl, and told her, as in a dream, the dreadful story of the murder. He described the spot in the woods where her brother had killed her sweetheart, and the place under the linden tree where the body was buried, and then whispered, "And so that you may not think this all a dream, you will find a withered leaf of the tree on your bedspread!" And when she awoke she found the leaf.

Oh, what bitter, bitter tears she shed! Yet to no one did she dare betray her grief. All that day her window stood open, and the little elf could easily have escaped to the roses and all the other flowers of the garden, but he could not bear to leave the sorrowing girl.

In the window stood a bush that bore roses every month, and he found a spot in one of those flowers from where he could watch the poor girl. Often her brother came into the room, merry with an evil mirth, and she dared not say a word of the grief in her heart.

When night came she stole out of the house and into the forest to the place where the linden tree stood. She brushed away the leaves, dug into the earth, and so at last came to the body of her beloved. How she wept then, and how she prayed to God that she too might die! She would gladly have taken the body home with her, but since that would be impossible, she took up the pale head, with its closed eyes, kissed the cold mouth, and with a trembling hand brushed the dirt from the beautiful hair.

"This, at least, I can keep," she wept. Then she buried the body again and scattered the leaves once more over it. But the head, together with a little sprig from a jasmine bush which bloomed in the wood where he had been killed, she took with her to her home.

As soon as she reached her room she brought the biggest flowerpot she could find, and in this she laid the dead man's head, covered it with earth, and planted the sprig of jasmine.

The little elf could no longer bear to see such grief. "Farewell, farewell," he whispered, and then he flew out to his rose in the garden. But it was withered and faded now, and only a few dry leaves clung to the bush. "Alas!" sighed the elf. "How soon everything good and beautiful passes away!" But at last he found another rose, and made his home in safety behind its delicate, fragrant petals.

But every morning he would fly to the poor maiden's window, and he always found her there, weeping over the flowerpot. Softly her bitter tears fell upon the jasmine spray, and every day as she became paler and paler the sprig grew fresher and greener. New shoots appeared, one after another, and little white buds burst forth, and these she kissed.

When her wicked brother saw her do that he scolded her and asked why she acted so silly. He didn't like it and didn't understand why she was always weeping over the flowerpot. He did not know what closed eyes were there, and what red lips had there returned to dust.

And the pretty maiden leaned her head against the flowerpot, and the little elf found her there, fallen into a gentle slumber. So he crept again into her ear and whispered to her of that evening in the arbor and of the scent of the roses and the loves of the elves. Then

she dreamed so sweetly, and while she dreamed her life passed gently away. She died a quiet death and was in Heaven with her beloved. And the jasmine flowers opened their big white bells and gave out their wonderful sweet fragrance. It was the only way they knew to weep for the dead.

When the wicked brother saw the beautiful blooming plant, he took it for himself as an inheritance from his sister, and put it in his bedroom close beside his bed, for it was glorious indeed to look at, and its fragrance was sweet and fresh. But the little rose elf went with it, and flew from blossom to blossom; in each lived a tiny soul, and to each he told the story of the murdered man whose head even now rested under the earth beneath them. He told them of the evil brother and the poor sister.

"We know it!" replied each little soul in the flowers. "Did we not spring from those murdered eyes and lips? We know it! We know it!" they repeated, and nodded their heads in an odd way. The rose elf could not understand how they could be so quiet about it, and he flew out to the bees gathering honey and told them the terrible story about the wicked brother. So they reported it to their Queen, and the Queen commanded all the bees to kill the murderer the very next morning.

But the night before, the first night after his sister's death, while the evil brother was asleep in his bed beside the fragrant jasmine, the flowers opened, and out of each blossom came a tiny spirit-invisible, but armed with a sharp little poisoned spear. First, they crept into his ears, and told him wicked dreams; then they flew across his lips, and pierced his tongue with their poisoned darts.

"Now we have avenged the dead man!" they cried, then flew back again into the white bells of the jasmine.

When the morning came, and the windows of the bedroom were opened, the rose elf and the whole swarm of bees with their Queen swept in to kill him.

But he was already dead, and people stood around his bed and said, "The scent of the jasmine has killed him!" Then the rose elf understood the vengeance of the flowers and told it to the Queen, and she and her whole swarm of bees ceaselessly hummed around the flowerpot and could not be driven away. When a man picked up the pot a bee stung him on the hand, so that he let it fall and it broke into pieces. Then the people saw the whitened skull and knew that the dead man on the bed was a murderer.

So the Queen bee hummed in the air and sang of the vengeance of the flowers and about the rose elf, and how behind the smallest leaf there dwells One who can disclose and repay every evil.