

Mother Elde Slept Late

A fairy story from Tales from the Wood by Adrian Farrel

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The long summer ran into a golden autumn. In the mountain pastures, the wild flowers still bloomed and butterflies patterned the grasses with extra colour.

In her house high on the mountain ridge above the trees and above the meadows, Mother Elde slept late. From the porch in front of the door you could look down at the valley below and across it to the mountains and the world beyond. Inside the house, which was in fact a single room, there was a big stove with wood stacked ready, a rocking-chair, turned today to face the window, and a huge bed that filled more than half the space.

In the bed, dappled and warmed by the sunlight that streamed through the open door, dozed Mother Elde, her head on a smooth white pillow and her small body nestled under a great white duvet filled with the finest goose down.

Everyone was enjoying the extra days of warmth as the season stretched on. All the hay was cut and dried and stored. A bumper crop of apples set everyone to baking and preserving. And weekends were spent picnicking in the meadows, walking in the hills, or getting lost in the cool shade of the forests.

By the middle of November people were talking about the remarkable warmth. Could anyone remember when it had been so mild so late in the year? Grandpa Mendel said he could, but he said he could recall all sorts of strange things, so no one paid him any attention and they went back into their gardens to soak up the rays and rest themselves.

At the start of Advent the children were excited to open the first window on the calendar, but they studied the snowy scene inside with care, and wondered.

And when the sun still shone as Christmas week approached, then people started to worry. What did it mean, this everlasting summer? No one asked, "Will it be a white Christmas?" Instead, they puzzled about the changes in the world and fretted about needing rain for the streams.

Alfons loved his grandfather and knew he could answer every question as he always had. And so on the morning of Christmas Eve, he went and asked, "Granddad, will we ever see snow again?" "Ah," sighed Grandpa Mendel, "so it has come to this again, has it? Fetch my stick and my hat. We are going for a walk."

Outside the house Grandpa Mendel paused to strap a toboggan to his back, and when Alfons asked what it was for he just smiled and said, "You'll see."

They walked all day. Always upwards. They climbed through the fields, up beside the streams, on forest paths and through the high pastures. They had lunch sitting on the toboggan, looking out at the view spread before them like a huge picture. "Is this why Granddad brought it with him?" wondered Alfons. "Surely not."

As the afternoon drew on they were still climbing. Grandpa Mendel had to stop more often now, panting and leaning on his stick. And they were in a bare place: a ridge with rocks and only a few alpine plants.



As Alfons was wondering whether to start worrying, he saw a small wooden house perched on the very crest of the mountain, and understood that that was where they were headed.

The house, when they reached it, was old and weather-beaten, the wood bleached silver by the sun and the wind. The detailed carvings on the beams and window frames were worn and softened by age. The door stood open and a soft rumbling like the purring of a giant cat met their ears.



Grandpa Mendel strode forward and banged on the door frame with his stick. “Mother Elde,” he called out, “are you home?” But there was no answer, only the continued purring of the cat.

“We had better go in,” said his grandfather, and led Alfons into the house. There in the dusky light Alfons could make out the stove and the rocking-chair as his eyes adjusted. But the cat sounded very close now.

“Lay the fire and light it, boy,” said Grandpa Mendel, as he went into the shadows, and Alfons bent to his task at the stove.

Over his shoulder he could hear his grandfather speaking. “Come on now, Mother Elde, it’s time to wake up. Now wake up, I say. Hey! You have slept too long.”

And at the same time the cat’s purrs seemed to be joined by the grunting of a large pig.

As the fire sprang into life, Alfons turned to see his grandfather bent over the huge bed that took up half of the room. “It’s no good, Alfons,” he said. “You must bring me the cooking pot.”

So Alfons dragged the great iron pot, half as big as himself, across the floor to where his grandfather stood. Picking it up with one hand, Grandpa Mendel struck it again and again with the brass end of his stick. Clang, clang, clang, the noise was unbelievable. Then silence. The cat had stopped its purring. The pig gave one last snort. And then a voice: “Well, it’s Peter Mendel, isn’t it? So nice to see you after so many years. And what are you doing with my cook pot?”

“Mother Elde,” replied Grandpa Mendel, “you’ve been sleeping. It’s Christmas Eve. There are things to be done.”

“Oh, is it already?” Mother Elde said. “I do like a snooze in the summer. Well, time to get busy. But first,” and she turned to Alfons, “what is your name, young boy, and why are you here?”

“I’m Alfons,” he said, “and this is my Granddad. He brought me here.”

“Well, Alfons, wait outside with your Granddad, and you can help me with my housework.”

Whatever that meant, it was clear that he and his Granddad were banished to the porch, where they stood in silence looking at the view.

Presently they were joined by an old but sprightly lady dressed in a deep green gown. She had twinkling dark eyes like berries, and her grey hair was so light it was like blossom. She was carrying a wooden bucket which she held out to Alfons: “Fill this from the water butt at the corner of the house and bring it inside to the stove.”

Back in the house, Mother Elde tipped water from the bucket into the cook pot that was standing on the stove. Immediately, huge billows of steam rose from the pot, gathering in the roof of the house and rolling out of the door.

“Now,” said Mother Elde to Alfons, “go and empty the rest of the bucket over the edge of the porch. Be sure to throw the water out as far as you can.”

Outside, Alfons was amazed. Huge grey clouds filled the sky, getting thicker and darker as they plumed out of the window and door of the house. But he remembered his task and, swinging the bucket with all his strength, he tossed the water out into space. And then it was raining. Big, fat drops, splashing down on the roof, on the mountains, and into the valleys.

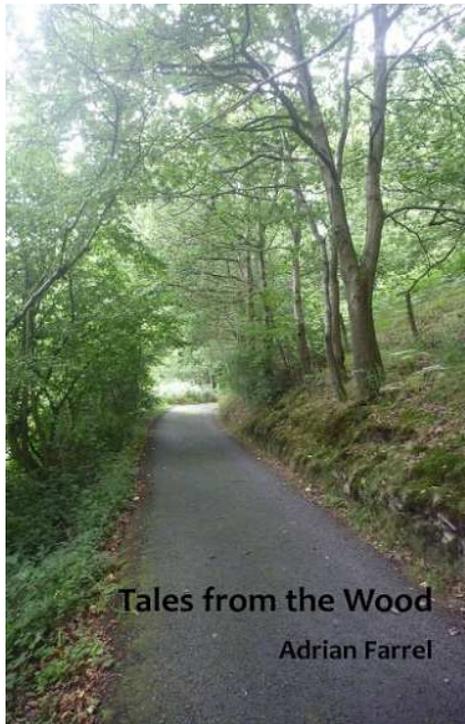
“Now, it seems to me that this old duvet needs a good airing,” said Mother Elde, struggling through the doorway, her arms full of her bedding. She hung it on the rail of the porch and turned to Grandpa Mendel: “Perhaps you would do the honours with that fine stick of yours, Peter,” she asked.

So Alfons’s grandfather started to beat the duvet with his stick. At first, a little dust came off, just a fine powder. “You’ll have to hit it a bit harder than that,” said Mother Elde, laughing. And thwack, thwack, thwack went the stick.

Now white dust swirled around them. “Harder, harder,” laughed Mother Elde, and thwack, thwack went the stick, and Alfons’s granddad was laughing now. And now feathers were flying out of the duvet. One settled on Alfons’s nose and Alfons started to laugh. It was snowing.

When Alfons and his grandfather tobogganed back into the village in the early evening, the fields were white under a thick carpet of snow, the other children were making a snowman, and the Christmas lights twinkled from the trees.

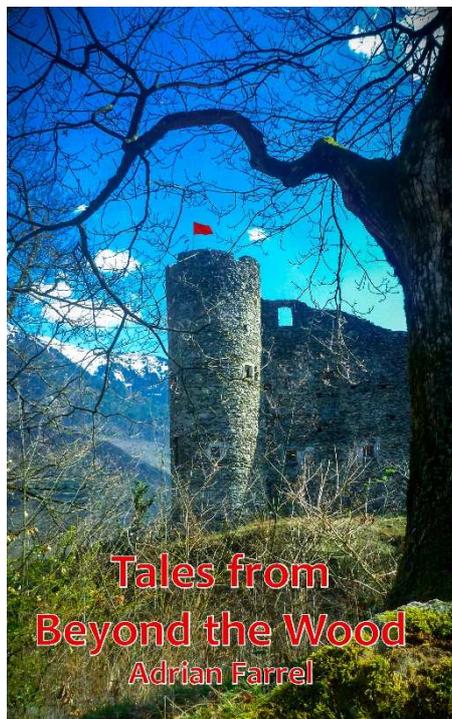




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