LUDWIG TIECK

THE ELVES

WHERE is Maria, our child?" asked the father.

"She is playing on the green," replied the mother, "with our neighbour's son."

"Do not let them run away," said the father anxiously; "they are so thoughtless."

The mother attended to the wants of the little ones, and gave them their supper.

"The weather is hot, mother," said the boy; and the little maiden longed exceedingly to have some red cherries.

"Be careful, child," said the mother; "do not run too far from the house, or into the wood; your father and I are going into the field."

"Oh, do not be anxious on that account," was the prompt reply of young Andrew, "for we are all afraid of the wood; we will remain here sitting at home, where we are near to the men."

The mother went in, and soon returned with the father. They closed their cottage, and turned towards the fields to look after the peasants, and to see the hay-harvest in the meadows.

Their dwelling was situated on a little green eminence, fenced round by an ornamental hedge, which enclosed a fruit and flower garden; the town lay a little lower down; and still further there rose in the distance the towers of the baronial castle. Martin rented a large farm of the lord, the proprietor, and lived in a happy state of contentment with his wife and only child, as he was enabled, year by year, to lay by something in reserve for the future, with the prospect of becoming one day himself a man of property; for through his toil and industry the land was fruitful, and the Count did not oppress him with undue exactions.

As he was walking towards the fields with his wife, he gazed joyously around, and said, "How is it, Bridget, that the country about here is so different from that in which we formerly lived? Here it is so green and verdant; the whole town is beautified with thickly planted fruit-trees; the soil teems with rich vegetation and shrubs; all the houses are gay and cleanly—the inhabitants prosperous; indeed, it would appear to me that the woods here are more majestic, and the sky more blue; and as far as the eye can scan, we have pleasure in beholding the bountiful earth."

"But," said Brigitta, "to pass over to the other side of the river is to migrate into quite another region, every thing there wears so gloomy and withered an aspect; but as for our own hamlet, every traveller confesses it to be the prettiest in the whole district."

"Come, then, to the fir-plantation," answered her husband; "look back and see how dark and dreary that spot seems in the distance, in the midst of such a gay and animated landscape; the dusky huts behind the dark firs; those detached buildings fallen into ruinous heaps; and even the very stream flowing onwards so sadly and sluggishly."

"That is true," said she, as they both stood still to gaze upon the scene. "As often as one approaches the spot, one becomes sad and sorrowful, one knows not why."

"Who can the people really be? and why should they keep themselves at such a distance from all the neighbourhood, avoiding any intercourse with us, as though they were inwardly conscious of deeds of darkness?"

"They are poor folk," said the young farmer; "seemingly of a gipsy-tribe, who rob and pilfer at a distance off, and make this spot perhaps their head-quarters: I wonder only that the baron allows them to remain."

"Possibly," said the woman kindly and compassionately, "they are poor people, ashamed of their poverty; for, to speak the truth, we cannot lay any crime, or even any trivial injury, to their charge; still it is remarkable that they never go to church; and how they contrive to subsist is strange enough, for their little garden, in itself a perfect wilderness, cannot support them, and they have no pasture-land."

"God only knows," continued Martin, as they proceeded on their way—"God only knows what they do; this at least is certain, that they hold no intercourse; no stranger ever comes from, or goes to them; for the spot where they dwell is bewitched and under ban, so that the boldest young townsmen would hardly venture into it."

This conversation continued through their walk to the fields.

That dark district of which they spoke lay beyond the town in a hollow that was surrounded on all sides by firs; there appeared to be a hut, and several domestic buildings fast falling to decay. Smoke was seldom seen to curl from it, still less frequently were any human beings visible; at times some persons, led on by curiosity to venture somewhat nearer, had seen on the rising ground in front of the hut frightful old women, clad in uncouth rags, dandling equally frightful and dirty children on their laps; black dogs prowled about continually before the stream; and in the evening a monster of a man, whom no one knew, passed over the bridge, and disappeared into the hut; then several figures, like dim shadows, flitted along in the darkness, and

danced round about a fire which was heaped up on the earth: this gloomy sport, the dark firs, and the ruinous huts, formed a most singular contrast to the gay green landscape, the clear white houses of the town, and the splendid new castle.

The two children had eaten up all their fruit, and then began to run races; and the little buoyant Maria outran, on each occasion, the tardy Andrew.

"That's no proof of your skill," he cried; "come, let us try a longer distance, and then we'll see who shall be the conqueror."

"As you please," said the little Maria; "only we must not run towards the stream."

"No," said Andrew; "but at the summit of that hill stands a large pear-tree, about a quarter of a mile off. I will run to the left past the fir-plantation, and you can go to the right through the fields; and we shall not know, till we meet, which of us is the fastest runner."

"Good," said Maria, immediately starting off; "we shall not hinder each other by going the same way, and our father says it is just the same distance to the top of the hill, whether we go on this side, or by the gipsy-huts."

Andrew had already started off, and Maria, who ran towards the right, saw him no more.

"How very stupid he is!" said she to herself; "for if I could only summon up courage enough to run over the bridge by the hut, and then again out across the yard, I should certainly get there much sooner than he will." She was already standing facing the stream and the fir-hill. "Shall I?—No, it's too terrible." A little white dog stood on the other side, keeping up a loud and continued bark at her. In her fright the little animal appeared a perfect monster, and she sprang back trembling. "Oh dear," said she, "Andrew has by this time got such a long distance before me, while I'm stopping here to consider." The little dog still barked on; and as she looked at it more attentively, it no longer struck her as being so terrible, but, on the contrary, she was quite charmed with it. It had a red collar, to which was affixed a tiny glittering bell; and as often as it raised its head and shook it, while barking, the tinkling noise it produced was to her ears most musical. "Oh, I'll venture," cried little Maria; "I'll run as fast as I can, and I shall soon be on the other side; they surely can't eat me entirely." With this the young courageous child sprang on the bridge, and quickly passed the little dog, who immediately ceased his barking to fawn upon her. And now she was standing on the dread spot; and the black firs, that were thickly grouped together, shut out from her view the home of her fathers, and the rest of the pretty landscape. But how amazed was she at the spectacle before her!

Around her was a most brilliant expanse of flower-garden, in which roses, lilies, and

tulips, intertwining with one another, shone in all those gorgeous colours in which Nature loves to garb her bright creations; blue and golden butterflies fluttered about from blossom to blossom, glittering as the sunbeams danced upon their fairy livery; birds, whose plumage borrowed the tints of the rainbow, and whose tiny throats quivered again as each note swelled forth more delicious than the last, hung on cages and on glittering perches; children in short white garments, with golden hair hanging in luxuriant curls, and clear blue eyes, sported about, some leading little pet-lambs, others feeding the birds; some culled the fragrant flowers, and wove garlands for one another; others were tasting the delicious fruits—pears, large clusters of grapes, and red apricots: no hut was visible, but a large handsome mansion, with gates of brass and wood of exquisite workmanship, towered on high in the middle of this paradise. Maria was rivetted to the spot; indeed, the beauty of the garden and the magnificence of the mansion had taken so firm a hold on her fancy, that some moments elapsed ere she recovered her surprise even partially. But, as it had ever been the study of her parents to enable her to appear composed, whatever novelty might offer itself to her, she approached fearlessly the nearest child, and with extended hand wished it good day.

"So you have come to see us then at last," said the little girl; "I have often seen you dancing and sporting without there, but you were afraid of our little dog."

"Then you are not gipsies and strollers, as Andrew says you are. Ah, truly, he's very stupid, and talks a great deal too much."

"Only stop with us here," said her new friend; "you shall be so happy."

"But we are running for a wager, and—"

"Oh, you'll get back to him very soon; take some of our fruit." Maria tasted it, and it proved so delicious to her palate, that she declared she had never before eaten any like it; and from this moment Andrew, the race, and the prohibition of her parents, were altogether forgotten. Then a more elderly female, whose dress was still more beautiful than any thing Maria had hitherto seen, stepped forward, and made inquiry about the stranger-child.

"Most beautiful lady," said Maria, "I ran in here by accident, and now they wish to keep me here."

"You know, Zerina," said the beautiful lady, "that there is a short time only allowed her; besides, you should first of all have asked my permission."

"I thought," said the child, "as she had been allowed to cross the bridge, that I might keep her; we have often seen her running about in the fields, and you have yourself been pleased with her gay and spirited air; and she will be obliged to leave us soon

enough."

"No, I will stay here," said Maria, "it is so charming here; and I find the best things to play with here are strawberries and pears; it is not half so fine outside."

The golden-dressed lady now retired, smiling; and many of the children playfully sported about Maria—laughing, and inviting her to join their dance. Some brought her a pet-lamb or wonderful toys, others brought novel instruments and played and sang to her; but she preferred the little playfellow, her first friend, for she was the most gentle and good-natured of all. The little Maria constantly cried out, "I will always stop here, and you shall be my sisters;" at which all the children smiled and embraced her.

"Now then," said Zerina, "we shall have a fine game;" and running hastily into the palace, she returned with a little golden basket, in which were very fine glittering seeds. She took some in her delicate little fingers, and strewed the grains upon the green turf; and immediately they saw the grass heave and float about, as it were in waves; and after a few moments, beautiful rose-trees sprang from the ground, grew rapidly up, and suddenly burst themselves into their full beauty, exhaling the sweetest odours that floated round them in the air. Maria herself took some of the seed, and scattered it; and immediately there sprang up at her feet white lilies and cloves of every hue. At a motion of Zerina's, these flowers all disappeared, and others still more beautiful sprang up in their place.

"Now," said Zerina to the astonished child, "prepare yourself for something still greater." She then placed two pine-cones in the ground, and stamped on them violently with her feet: instantly two green shrubs stood before them. "Grasp me firmly," said she; and Maria threw her arms around her delicate waist, and felt herself rising up into the air; for the trees grew beneath them with surprising quickness. The tall pines swayed to and fro at the will of the breeze, and the two children, locked in each other's arms, kissed each other, while floating backwards in the red clouds of evening. The other little ones clambered up and down the stems of the trees with elastic step, and if by chance one impeded the progress of another, the whole number raised a loud shout of laughter. Maria at length grew terrified; and at some mystic words uttered by the little one, the trees sank again gently into the earth, setting them down in the spot from which they had raised them up. They then went through the brazen gate of the palace; here many women, some younger, some older, all of that degree of beauty that no pencil could portray, were seated round a circular hall, feasting on the most delicious fruits, and listening to a concert of most delightful and invisible harmony.

Round the ceiling of the hall, which was studded with gold and gems, representing the starry sphere, were palm-trees, plants, and shrubs, between which children clambered and sported in most graceful groups. The figures varied and glowed in more burning colours, according to the tones of the music. At one time, green and blue, sparkling

like clear rays of light, prevailed. Then the colours paled away, and purple and gold burst forth: then the naked children, amid the fanciful clusters that the different flowers wove, seemed to be full of life, and to inhale and exhale breath with their ruby-red lips, so that their beautiful white teeth were visible, and the bright glances of their clear blue eyes were seen from beneath their dark fringe. From the hall, some steps of marble and jasper led into a large subterraneous chamber. The floor of this room was covered with vast heaps of gold and silver; diamonds, pearls, and gems of all colours dazzled the eyes; large deep vessels stood around the walls, all filled with precious stones, and gold wrought into curious devices, and mystic characters, with such ingenuity as no artisan, however skilful, could form. Many little dwarfs were occupied in sorting the precious heaps, and in filling vessels with the riches; others, with crooked legs and long red noses, dragged in heavy sacks, as millers carry their corn, and bending forward, poured out the grains on the earth: then they jumped to the right and left, and seized the treasures as they rolled away; and it often happened, that through their zeal and eagerness to recover them, they rolled one against the other and fell heavily on the ground. They made frightful faces whenever Maria laughed at their grotesque manner and hideous deformity. Behind sat a little old man, wrinkled by age, whom Maria saluted very respectfully, but he merely bent his head in answer to her deferential salutation: he had a sceptre in his right hand, and a crown encircled his brow; all the other dwarfs seemed to look up to him as their chief and superior; his fiat was instantly obeyed, though his commands were given by signs and motions.

"What is the matter now?" said he in a surly tone, as the children approached nearer to him. The timid Maria kept silence, but her little playfellow answered, that they had only come to see the chamber.

"What," said the old man peevishly, "will there always be these childish freaks? is there never to be an end to this idling?" He then turned his attention again to his work, and ordered the pieces of gold to be weighed and collected together. Some of the dwarfs he despatched in different directions; many, too, he scolded right heartily.

At length Maria's curiosity got the better of her fear, and in an eager manner she said to her little friend, "Who is that old man?"

"Our metal-prince," said the little one, as they left the chamber.

They soon found themselves in the open air, by the side of a large lake; still no sun had appeared hitherto, nor could they see any sky above them. Here a little boat received them, and Zerina took the helm and steered their course very skilfully. They floated rapidly down the lake, and when they had arrived at about the middle, Maria saw that a thousand canals, streams, and rivulets, branched off in every direction from this miniature sea.

"These waters," said the bright-beaming child, "flow exactly under your garden, irrigating the soil around; and hence it is that your flowers bloom more beautifully and more fragrantly than others, and that your fruits are so superior in flavour; from this stream we launch into the great canal." On a sudden there rose to the surface from every branch of these blue waters a countless number of beautiful children, swimming and plunging up and down among the mimic waves; many wore graceful coronets of flags and water-lilies, glittering as though with gems from the drops of spray; others waved branches of red and white coral; others again carried curious horns, tastefully decorated with blue ribbons; then several beautiful women rose to the surface, swimming about among the group of younger naiads, and at times the children might be seen hanging on the necks of the women, covering them with kisses. They all saluted the stranger party; and through the midst of this grouped assemblage the little barque floated on from the main stream into a smaller rivulet, which became gradually narrower and narrower, and at the same time the depth of water diminished till the little boat grounded on the shore. Here the group of naiads, who had accompanied their tiny vessel, took leave of them; and Zerina knocked against the rock, which immediately opened like a magnificent doorway to admit them, and a female figure, of a glowing red colour, assisted them to disembark.

"Is all going on merrily?" inquired Zerina.

"Ay, merrily indeed," replied the other; "you are ever on the wing; no cloud of sorrow ever darkens your brow, but the sunshine of happiness always lights up those features of yours, curling that lip with a smile of joy."

They mounted a winding staircase, and Maria suddenly found herself in a most glittering hall, so that on entering, her eyes were dazzled with the brilliant lights that burst in their full splendour upon her. Deep-red tapestry covered the walls with a brilliant glow; and as soon as her eye was familiar with the unusual halo that invested the whole chamber, she perceived figures moving gracefully up and down in the tapestry, of such exquisite beauty and delicate symmetry of form, that her imagination could not paint any thing more lovely. Their bodies appeared to be formed of crystal of a reddish tint, and so transparent, that one might see the life-blood circulating in their veins. They smiled at the stranger-child, and bowed courteously: but when the little Maria wished to approach nearer, Zerina held her back forcibly, exclaiming, "You will burn yourself, little Maria; what you are gazing upon is all fire."

Maria perceived the heat, and said to Zerina, "Why don't these charming creatures come out and play with us?"

"It is impossible," answered Zerina; "as you live in air, so they live in fire; if you were to be taken out of your peculiar element, you would languish and droop; in the same manner, if you were to transport them into your element, they would perish."

"Only look," said Maria, "how happy and joyous they seem; listen how they shout and sing."

"Below," said her little friend, "the fire-streams spread in every direction throughout the whole earth, imparting heat to the vegetation, and ripening the seed, till it shoots upward into a fruitful plant: hence you have your flowers and fruits. These fire-streams go side by side with the water-streams; and to their mutual agency you owe all the herbage of your pasture-land, all the beauties of your flower-garden, all the luscious produce of your orchards: they are your great benefactors: without them your present fruitful land would be a desolate wilderness; your flower-gardens overrun with noxious weeds, and your orchard-trees blighted and dying away. In consequence of such benefits resulting from them, they are ever active, ever happy. But this heat is too great for a child of air; come, let us return to the garden."

There had been a great change in the atmosphere; the moonshine lay on all the flowers, the birds were hushed, and the children were slumbering on the greensward.

"Happy, holy calmness," thought Maria; "Peace has certainly chosen her retreat in these lovely regions; Contentment is linked with her; and wherever they roam hand in hand, all is joy, all is tranquillity."

But did Maria slumber? No; she and her little friend felt no weariness; they roamed through the live-long summer night amid the groves and sylvan avenues, prattling in youthful eloquence on the wondrous spectacles that were before them. At day-break they refreshed themselves with fruits and milk; and Maria said to her little companion, "Let us go out to the fir-trees yonder; it will be a change for us."

"With all my heart," said Zerina; "then you can see our sentries at the same time, and they will be sure to please you. They take their stand upon the rampart between the trees."

They walked on through the flower-garden, through beautiful thickets peopled with nightingales; then they mounted the vine-hills, and following the course of a clear crystal stream in its winding channel, they arrived at the firs, and the high ground that formed the boundary of the district.

"How is it," said Maria, "that we have had such a long walk to reach the firs here within, when the circuit on the outside is so small?"

"I cannot say how it is," said the other; "but so it is."

They ascended the hill to the dark firs, and the cold breeze blew upon them from without. A dark cloud, extending far across the horizon, seemed to hang over the whole district; and above them stood wondrous forms with whitened faces, not unlike

the hideous heads of the white owl, and clad in folding mantles of coarse and shaggy wool, fanning themselves from time to time with bats' wings.

"How I long to laugh!" said Maria; "but yet I'm afraid."

"Those," said Zerina, "are our careful watchmen; they stand here in order to strike awe and consternation into any that may venture to approach, and to deter any curious folks from getting an insight into our regions. You see they are wrapped up closely, and protected from the weather; that is because it is raining and freezing without; but neither snow, nor wind, nor hail, can penetrate here within: here is eternal spring—here the bright garb of summer never fades. Our sentinels are very devoted to us; so that, although they are seldom relieved, yet they willingly keep watch at their posts."

"But who are you?" at length asked Maria; "have you any names by which we may call you?"

"We are called Elves," said her little friend; "they speak well of us too in the world, as I understand."

On retracing their way into the flower-garden they heard a great shout in the meadows, which grew louder as they approached nearer to the spot.

"A large beautiful bird has arrived," shouted the children, as they followed the flight of the majestic creature, as it sailed through the air: all pushed on hastily in its track, and Maria and her young friend could see young and old all pressing forward to the spot with hasty steps: songs of rejoicing were heard on every side, and a sweet strain of triumphal music from within came floating through the air to them. They entered the hall, and saw the whole circuit filled with the elfin-tribe, all gazing up at a vast bird of beautiful plumage, which was describing slowly many revolutions around the dome of the building. The music burst forth more gaily than ever, and the colours and lights in the ceiling revolved more rapidly, and shot forth again in brighter colours and more fantastic groups. At length the music died away softly, and the majestic bird fluttered down upon a splendid throne, suspended mid-way from the ceiling, beneath the window which lighted the apartment from above. His plumage was a mixture of purple and green, through which the most brilliant golden streaks were to be seen; on his head was a clear, shining coronet of feathers, glittering as though it were studded with precious stones; his beak was of a deep red tint, and his legs of bright blue. When he rose again into the air, all the colours blended together so uniquely that the eye was perfectly enraptured with the gorgeous galaxy of magnificence which it presented. But soon he opened his brilliant beak, and warbled sweet melody more delicious than that of the nightingale: his song swelled forth and grew more powerful, gushing out like lovely rays of light, till the whole assembly shed tears of delight.

When he had ceased his song, all present bowed low before him; again he flew around the cupola in circles, and sailing swiftly through the entrance, soared again up to the blue sky, where he was soon lost to the eye, appearing for a time a mere bright speck upon the horizon.

"Why are you all so glad?" asked Maria, bending down to the beautiful child, who appeared to her smaller than the day before.

"The king is coming," answered the child; "many of us have never yet seen him; and wherever he goes, thither happiness and prosperity follow him. We have been eagerly longing for his presence for some time past, and looking forward to his coming as anxiously as you children of air look forward to spring and spring-flowers after a tedious winter. And now he has announced to us his approach through that beautiful and intelligent messenger, the Phœnix. He dwells afar off in Arabia, and there only appears one of the species at the same time in the world: when he grows old, he builds himself a nest of balm and incense, and, setting it on fire, burns to death, singing at the same time as beautifully as you have heard him to-day; then from the odoriferous ashes he rises again into a new existence, and soars aloft with fresh vigour and beauty. But now, dear little Maria, you must go; the period of your stay with us has expired: when the king comes, no stranger must dwell with us, nor even see him once."

"But he will soon leave you again," said Maria fondly, "and then I will return to you, and never quit you."

"It cannot be," answered her friend; "the king will stay here twenty years, or even longer; but he will make every thing change for you for the better: there will be no storms to harm your crops, no hail to destroy the early blossoms of your fruit-trees, no floods to overflow your pasture-land."

Here the golden-dressed lady stepped up to Maria.

"You must indeed go," she said; "though we must all be sorry that the time for your visit has elapsed. Take this ring, and wear it always in remembrance of your elfin friends; but remember, when you quit this spot, never to mention to any living soul the place where you have been staying—never to reveal aught of the wonders you have been permitted to see here. Should you ever be tempted to disclose this great secret, beware of the evil results that must ensue—they will fall heavily upon you, as well as upon us: we shall be obliged to quit the spot for ever, and your fruitful fields will be transformed to a desolate wilderness. Come, kiss your little playfellow once more, and then farewell. Remember my last caution."

Maria bade them a sad farewell, and retraced her steps to her own home. As she was crossing the bridge, the little white dog barked at her again, as he had done when she first approached, and shook his little bell. She crossed over, and began for the first

time to think of her parents, and the happy home she had deserted through her disobedience. She pictured to herself the anguish of a loving mother, the silent though deep sorrow of her father, the alarm of the whole hamlet, as soon as the news of her disappearance was noised abroad. She then thought of Andrew's glee when he reached the winning-post, and how his eager eye was turned in the direction that she had agreed to come by, expecting to see her downcast look. She then called to mind the caution she had received not to make the communication known, for fear of the evil results: "however," said she, "if I were to tell them, and insist upon the truth of my statement, I should find no one to credit my story." As she was indulging in her reveries, two men passed her and saluted her.

"What a pretty girl!" said they, "where can such a beautiful creature have come from?"

She quickened her pace; but on looking round her she was struck with amazement: the flowers that she had left yesterday so lovely and fragrant were dead, and their sweet odour was gone; the trees, yesterday so verdant, were now leafless and withered; new buildings had sprung up around her—indeed it would seem that some mystic agency had been at work on the spot—that the spirit of enchantment had passed over the district, and wrought a change indeed.

"Then it must all be a dream," said Maria, rubbing her eyes as though wakening up from a deep slumber; "it must all be a dream; and the strange and wonderful sights I have seen must be the effects of fancy.—No, it certainly is reality, and I am standing near the bridge where our house stood yesterday."

She proceeded on to her home, perfectly bewildered by the change that a day had wrought; and, with a feeling of embarrassment that can be more naturally conceived than portrayed, she opened the door, and saw her father sitting behind a table, at which were seated a lady and a youth, both of whom Maria fancied she had never seen before.

"Father, dear father," cried Maria, gazing round her with a look of deep amazement, "say, where is my mother?"

The lady immediately rose from her seat, and, rushing towards her, looked at her with an earnestness of feeling that itself would have told the grand secret, that it was no other than her mother, and exclaimed, "Yes, you are,—no;" and then she seemed for a minute to distrust her powers of recollection,—"yes, you are our dear, lost Maria;" and the mother and daughter were instantly clasped in each other's arms.

Still Maria scarcely seemed to credit her senses.—"How," said she to herself, "can one single day have produced this change?—not only are the buildings altered, and the general appearance of the country, but my mother also wears a more aged appearance: can this be the effect of one little day?"

"Who, then, is that young man?" she inquired of her mother, who was by this time fully satisfied of her daughter's identity.

"That," replied Martin, "is your old playfellow Andrew; you surely have not entirely forgotten him; though certainly a lapse of seven years must have made some little change in all of us. Seven years have now passed away since you disappeared so suddenly; and so many continued years of sorrow and anxiety rarely, I trust, fall to the lot of any mortals. Where have you been this long time? Why did we not hear of you?—for, although we all rejoice exceedingly to receive you again, still you must satisfy us with the cause of your disappearance, and with an account of what has befallen you in your separation from us."

"Seven years!" exclaimed Maria; "seven years do you say have passed?"

"Yes," said Andrew, "it is so indeed. I arrived first at the pear-tree, and that was seven years ago; and as you have only this moment returned, I think I can claim the prize as victor."

"You remember," said her father, "our leaving you with Andrew, while we went into the harvest-field: on our return you were missing. Andrew told us the story of the race, and that he saw no more of you after the start. We searched diligently for you, and everybody through the hamlet offered their assistance to endeavour to discover you. But our attempts were fruitless, and we returned to our home broken-hearted, having lost all we prized on earth, our only child. But tell us, how did you contrive to lose yourself?—we thought you were so well acquainted with the whole district as to render it a matter of impossibility. Where have you been? how have you been living?"

These questions embarrassed the poor Maria in no slight degree: for how could she tell of the wondrous elves—of her dear little playfellow Zerina—of the gold and precious stones, the lovely fruits, the variegated flower-beds, the streams of gentle water, the children sporting in the rivulets? How could she describe the crystal fire-beings—the beautifully-feathered phœnix, the palace of the elf-king, with its brazen-wrought gates, and its highly decorated ceilings? How could she trace to their imaginations the hideous form of the metal-prince, and the strange figures of the sentinels on the rampart? But even if she had been able to depict all the spectacles she had witnessed in their proper colours, would such a strange story have appeared credible, or even plausible? But she had not forgotten the last parting admonition of the golden lady—no, it was still ringing in her ears—"tell not aught of the things you have seen or heard; evil results will happen to you and us:" and then the smiling features of her little elfin friend were visible to her mind's eye,—and could she harm so dear a head? No, it was not in her disposition to injure any one, even should it not be likely to draw down danger upon herself.

"Where have you been?" again asked Martin.

"As soon as I started off in the race," said Maria, "I was snatched up, and carried off to a distance. I did not know the country," she continued, "and could not get any communication to you: I seized the first opportunity to make my escape, and have once more reached you."

However strange and incredible this may have appeared, as it certainly did, to her parents, still they were so happy to receive their lost child, and to heap blessings on her head for cherishing such feelings of love and affection towards them during her long absence, that they forgot the mystery that seemed to invest her statement, in the joy they experienced in having her again beneath the roof of her fathers. He who can appreciate the joy with which a parent clasps to her bosom a long-lost child, can readily pardon the seeming indifference as to the cause of her separation. Andrew remained the whole evening, and shared their frugal supper. But how great was the change to poor Maria! Where were the chambers glittering with gold and gems? where the costly tapestries? where the sweet odours floating about in the air? where the strains of divine harmony that were wafted to her ears but yesterday by every breeze? They were no longer—they lived but in her memory. And she gazed with a dissatisfied air at the meanness of her father's dwelling; and thought how gloomy it was after the brightness of the palace; and, indulging her fancy, she dreamt of Zerina and the little elves, and gladly availed herself of an opportunity to seek her chamber for the night, where she might dwell upon the strange events of one day apparently—of seven years in reality.

Andrew returned on the following morning, seemingly anxious to spend as much time as possible in the society of his first playfellow, Maria. The news of her return spread rapidly through the hamlet, and many were the hearty congratulations poured forth, mingled with blessings, on her youthful head. It at length reached the ears of the noble proprietor of the castle, who sent for her, and listened to her statement with no little surprise and wonder: they were struck with her vivacity of spirit, tempered with unassuming modesty, and with her plain unvarnished tale;—so well hitherto had she concealed in her own bosom any feeling that might have thrown a shade of suspicion on her story, and brought to light the awful secret of which she was possessed. It was now the month of February; but the whole country wore that rich appearance which a more matured season of the year induces: the trees were clad in their brilliant green livery; the nightingale's notes were already to be heard in the woods; and never had such an early or so lovely a spring gladdened the earth before in the recollection of the most aged villager. The hills seemed to increase in size; the vines planted on them shot forth more numerous tendrils, and the thick clusters, that promised an abundant vintage, were already peeping forth among the leaves; the fruit-trees were covered with blossoms, and there had been no hail to crush the produce in the bud, no blight to destroy the hopes of the farmer at a more advanced season. The following year wore the same happy appearance; the harvest was still more abundant than before, and at

the conclusion of their toil Maria assented to the wishes of her parents and crowned their joy by becoming Andrew's bride. Still she would often dwell upon the happy days that were passed behind the fir-trees, till she grew silent and serious, but more beautiful each succeeding day. It pained her too, as often as Andrew talked of the gipsies and vagabonds, and prayed that the Baron might some day purge his estate of such worthless characters, as he styled them. On such occasions the temptation of defending her benefactors was great indeed; but whenever Andrew mentioned the subject she was more silent than before, in consequence of her knowledge of the result of such a communication. Thus matters went on steadily for a year, at the end of which time they were blessed with a daughter, whom Maria named Elfrida—the name doubtless having reference to those kind beings whose home she had once shared, and who were at that time the secret agents in working the grand changes that had taken place.

Elfrida was a very intelligent child from her birth, and ran about alone and prattled ere a twelvemonth had passed over her head. As she grew older, her singular beauty was the remark of every one, and her quick perception astonished them: she did not associate with other children, but seemed to shun their sports, and avoid their company, retiring frequently into an arbour or some secret spot, and passing the hours in reading or working, and indulging her love of solitude. Old Martin rejoiced to see the bloom of health on the cheek of his grandchild, and to trace the rapid development of her intellect; but Brigitta was constantly saying, "That child will not see many years—she is too good, too beautiful for earth; she will smile on us here for a time, but she will soon be carried off to a happier home than we can give her." The child was never in need of any assistance—she rose with the lark, and was off immediately to her chosen retreat: but on one occasion, when they were going to the castle, Maria insisted on dressing her child, who resisted her with prayers and tears, begging and entreating that her mother would leave her. Maria persevered, and on stripping her discovered a singular piece of gold, corresponding exactly to the treasures which she had seen in the elves' chambers, fastened to her bosom by a silken thread. The child, terrified at the discovery, declared that she knew not how she had come by it, but at the same time prayed that her mother would not remove it, but allow her still to keep the treasure. At the child's earnest entreaty Maria replaced it by its thread, and took her to the castle; but it made a deep impression on her heart, and she was from that moment full of thought.

By the side of old Martin's house were some detached buildings, erected as storehouses for fruits and corn; behind them was a grass-plat, where stood an old arbour, which no one was in the habit of visiting, in consequence of its distance from the new dwelling-house. This was the favourite retreat of Elfrida, and no one disturbed her, even though she were to spend the greater part of the day there in solitude. One afternoon Maria went to the arbour to find an article she had mislaid, and observed a bright stream of light issuing through a chink in the wall: she hastily removed a few loose stones, and, peeping in, saw Elfrida seated on a little rustic bench, and by her

side Zerina, sporting with her. The elf embraced the child, and said, "Ah, my dear little thing, I played with your mother once as I do with you, when she visited us: you are growing so fast, and becoming so rational—'tis a sad pity."

"How I wish," said Elfrida, "how I wish I could remain a child all my life, to please you!"

"Ah," said Zerina, "it is with you as with the blossoms of the trees: how beautiful the bloom is! but ere you have had time to admire the bud, the warm sun shoots down on it, the blossom bursts and comes to its full maturity."

"How I wish I could see you in your home, if it were only once!" said the child.

"That is impossible," said Zerina; "since our king has come, no child of earth can visit us: but I can come often to you—no one knows it, either here or there; I fly to and fro like a bird; so that we can be happy with one another as long as we live."

"What can I do to please you, dear Zerina?" said the child.

"Let us make a crown again," answered Zerina, taking a golden box from her bosom. She shook two grains upon the earth, and there arose a greenish bush with two red roses, which bent towards each other, and seemed to kiss. They plucked the two roses, and the bush sank again into the earth.

"I wish my rose would not die so soon," said the child.

"Give it to me," said the elf; and breathing on it she kissed it three times, and gave it back to the child, and said, "now it will live till the winter."

"How sweet!" said Elfrida; "I'll set it up in my room like a picture, and kiss it morning and evening."

"Now, dear Elfrida, I must leave you," said Zerina; "the sun is going down, and my time has passed;" and she disappeared from the arbour, and soon regained her fairy home.

From this moment Maria looked with a certain degree of awe and reverence upon her child, and let her roam at her will even more than she had done before—soothing and quieting her husband whenever he wished to go in search of the little fugitive. Maria frequently crept to the hole, and always discovered the elf there playing or chattering with the child.

"Should you like to be able to fly?" asked the elf one day of her little friend.

"Willingly," replied Elfrida.

Zerina embraced her, and they floated up together from the earth to the top of the arbour. The mother, in her anxiety for her darling child, leant forward from her hiding-place to look for them, when Zerina perceived her, and, holding up her finger in a threatening manner, she smiled sweetly on her, and brought down the child to earth again, and disappeared.

Maria was in the habit of shaking her head kindly at her husband in their disputes concerning the occupants of the district behind the fir-plantations: on one occasion she said, "You are unjust in your ideas of them;" but when pressed by her husband for an explanation, she was silent. Scarce a day passed without a serious conversation between them on the same subject; and on another occasion Andrew was more than usually enraged against them, and said, "The Baron ought to expel them; they are injurious to the hamlet."

"Silence!" cried Maria, "they are benefactors, and no vagabonds!" and, binding him by a promise never to divulge aught of what she was about to mention, she related to him the story of her youth, with all the particulars of the elfin regions. As he continued incredulous, she led him to the arbour, where he saw the elf caressing his child. On his approach Zerina grew pale, and trembled exceedingly, and lifted her finger in a threatening manner at Maria, no longer smiling as before. "It is not your fault," said she to the child, "but I must leave you for ever;" and embracing Elfrida, she flew in the form of a raven, with most discordant shrieks, towards the fir-plantation.

The little child silently kissed her rose, and wept incessantly; Andrew spoke little. At length night came on: the trees moaned as the blast swept by, the owls whooped mournfully, the thunder boomed along the sky, and the earth rocked violently. Maria and Andrew lay trembling with fear, and endeavouring to shut out all the fury of the storm, and the roar of the thunder from their thoughts. How eagerly did they long for the morning! At length day dawned, and the sun shone forth again. Andrew dressed himself hastily, and, opening his door, looked forth on the scene around him. What a change was there!—the prospect could not even be recognised; the verdant freshness of the wood was gone, the hill had sunk into the ground, the stream wound slowly on, with scarce a sufficient depth of water to cover its channel; the sky wore a grey gloomy hue, and the fir-trees, that had ever been so unusually dark, wore the same appearance as the rest of the vegetation. Maria looked at her ring, the gift of the elf, and saw that the stone was of a strange palish colour, having lost all its fire and brilliancy.

The villagers, in different groups, were discussing the events of the singular night; some had passed over the heath by the gipsy-huts early in the morning, and found no trace of living creature. The huts were certainly still standing, but they were tenantless; and the whole spot was so entirely changed that there was no feature in it

to distinguish it from the hamlet in which they themselves dwelt. In the course of the day Elfrida sought a conference with her mother, and said, "I was so restless last night, dear mother, I could not close my eyes; and, being terrified by the storm, I prayed fervently for safety during the many dark hours that still remained before morning dawned; and in the midst of my prayers the door opened suddenly, and my little playfellow entered to take leave of me. She was equipped as though for a long journey, and had a pilgrim's staff. She was angry, dear mother, very angry with you; for she has undergone severe and painful punishments on your account, and that too when she was so fond of you: and even amid all this trouble, resulting from your want of prudence, she says she is sorry to leave the district on your account." Maria begged her to conceal the whole matter from her father, and to mention it to none of the villagers.

Meantime the ferry-man, who plied on the stream near which their gardens were situated, came, with terror depicted on his face, to tell the strange things he had seen and heard. "At twilight," said he, "a man of gigantic stature called to hire the ferry till sunrise this morning, on one condition, that I would promise to keep myself within doors, and not venture to peep forth to see what was being done. I was afraid that some trick was to be played off; and although I retired to rest, I could not sleep for thinking on the strange bargain. I crept silently to the window, and looked forth; the dark dusky clouds chased one another restlessly through the expanse of sky; the distant woods moaned heavily, strange noises floated in the air, and the cottage shook from its very foundations. Suddenly I saw a white stream of light, brightening ever and anon, like many thousand twinkling stars; it floated on from the direction of the firs, waving to and fro over the fields, and spreading towards the stream. I heard a tramping of footsteps, and a buzzing, rustling noise, which grew by degrees more and more distinct: then I saw many thousand glittering figures—men, women, and children—pass on to the ferry-boat and embark, and the gigantic man ferried them across; many beautiful creatures swam over by the boat, and lively clouds of white and blue floated over their heads; melancholy music was wafted by the breeze around me, and the sounds of lamentation, as though of colonies parting for a distant country from their father-land: the stroke of the oar fell heavily on my ear, and then all again was silence for a while. Then the boat returned, and was laden anew: many hideous dwarfs rolled along heavy vessels; but whether they were demons of earth or not, I cannot say. Then there came a brilliant and stately procession, in the midst of which appeared an aged man, on a small white horse, the head of which was adorned by precious stones of every colour. The old man's head was surrounded by a coronet, which shone so vividly, that, as he passed, methought the sun was rising, and that the beams of early day were piercing through the mists of midnight. This procession lasted during the whole night, till at length, worn out with fatigue, I fell into a deep slumber. In the morning all seemed quiet; but when I rose to look after my ferry-boat, I observed that the stream was almost dry, and the water so low, that I must altogether remove my ferry."

This was the strange recital on the part of the ferry-man, who had been an eye-witness of the wondrous spectacle. In the same year a dreadful famine prevailed through the whole district; the corn was blighted; the fruit-trees withered away; the foliage of the woods became of a sickly yellow colour; the springs dried up; and soon that pretty hamlet, which had been for years the delight of the traveller, was nothing more than a barren desert, naked and sterile; a vast expanse of sand, with here and there a tuft of grass, and even that discoloured and dying. The vines, that were formerly the pride of the district, afforded no more rich clusters; and the whole spot wore so melancholy and gloomy an aspect, that in the following year the Count and his family removed from the once magnificent castle, which soon afterwards fell to ruins.

Elfrida gazed fondly at the rose day and night, and kissed it, dreaming of her dear little playfellow; and as the flower drooped and faded, so did her little head droop; and ere the balmy breezes of spring returned with their freshness, she was gone. Maria would often stand before the door of the cottage, weeping for her lost child, and dreaming of that happiness once her own, never again to return. On her fell all the misery that was predicted by the golden lady, if she should ever divulge aught of the elves or their fairy regions: she bowed her head to the stroke, and like her child faded slowly away, and followed her to the grave. The broken-hearted parents could no longer dwell in the spot, embittered as it was by the recollection of former days of happiness, and the prospect of heaviness and gloom for the future; and since the link that bound them to all that was dear had been rudely snapt asunder, old Martin, Brigitta, and Andrew, quitted the spot, and retired to a district where the old man had passed his first happy days.