

## A Brace of Fairy Tales

### I. MUSHROOMS

Once upon a time there was a woman who dreamt that she found a mushroom in a wood. It had a violet cap and stem and pale yellow gills, and she took it home and sautéed it in a little pan and just as she was going to eat it she woke up. And after that she kept making excuses to walk in the wood.

She found red mushrooms with white stems, and white mushrooms with gray spores, and violet mushrooms with violet stems and white gills and sulphur-colored mushrooms with pale yellow gills. She borrowed a mushroom book but there was no such mushroom in it. She asked an old man who lived by himself and walked the woods, too, looking for mushrooms, which he put carefully in his basket, and he said he had never seen such a mushroom but that if he did he would save it for her.

She drew a picture of the mushroom in her dream and colored it, so she wouldn't forget what it looked like, and sometimes when she went to bed she composed herself and tried to dream of it, but instead she dreamed of examinations she was not prepared for, and trains that had left at a different time than it said on the time-table, and flying, and children, when she was not even married.

If she found the mushroom, she said to herself, she would be a different person and her life would be easier and happier, so she kept on walking the path through the wood, looking from side to side, and at all stumps and fallen trees carefully, and especially after it had rained. Sometimes she brought a basket with her, like the old man, and gathered the mushrooms that the book said were edible, and brought them home and then did nothing about them. For they were not the mushroom she had found in her dream and brought home and sautéed in a little pan and been about to eat when she woke up. The old man brought her a purple mushroom with a purple stem and pale yellow gills, but she said no, it was not purple it was violet. And later on, thinking she had got it wrong, he brought her a pale yellow mushroom with a pale yellow stem and violet gills, but of course she hadn't got it wrong, and this mushroom was deadly poisonous.

In the end she said sadly to herself that she wasn't ever meant to find the mushroom she dreamed about, and stopped looking, and shortly after that she met a man walking alone in the wood, and he wasn't like anybody she had ever seen. He was dressed in velvet, and had a big brimmed hat with a feather in it, and the under side of his hat was pale yellow and his stockings and shoes and knee-britches and doublet and cap

and the upper side of his hat were all violet, and her heart beat violently at the sight of him and she said, "I have been searching everywhere for a—"

"Look there by your feet," the man said, and there it was. And three feet away, under an oak tree there was another, and farther along the road there were three more—all this in a place that she passed every day, and it hadn't even rained. But when she raised her face to ask how he knew what she was searching for, there was no one there.

She picked the mushrooms carefully and put them in her basket and took them home and cut them into fine slices and sautéed them in the pan she dreamed about and when she sat down to eat them she saw she was not alone. The man in the velvet costume was sitting at the kitchen table looking at her seriously, as if there was a riddle that she must solve, and without thinking what the riddle was or how to answer it she put the plate of mushrooms in front of him and he began to eat them slowly, still looking at her, and just as she was thinking *Perhaps he won't want all of them*, he said, "Look down at your place," and there was another plate of mushrooms just like the one she had put before him.

The clock went on ticking until some time the following day, and the spider in a corner of the ceiling went on waiting for an unwary fly, but there were no people any more. Or ever again. Though her acquaintances called the police, and they and everybody searched as hard for her as she had for the violet mushroom, they never found her. The house stayed empty for years and years, and a window blew open in a storm, and the birds and bats flew in and nested there, and the roof rotted and fell in, and finally it was a ruin leaning against the chimney. When even that disappeared, it became part of the wood, as it was originally, and in time nobody knew that there had been a house there, because the doorsill was covered with creeping vines and the chimney had fallen, and it was known as the best place for miles around to gather mushrooms.

## 2. THE DANCING

Once upon a time there was a woman who was kept awake at night by the memory of what it was like to go dancing. She was well along in years but not yet old, like her husband, and on Saturday night she used to stand by the window watching the couples go by on their way to the village hall, where there was a fiddler who could make almost anybody's feet start twitching. At the remembrance of the reels and the jigs and schottisches and hornpipes of her youth she would smile and turn away from the window without realizing that she had sighed for what was gone and would not return ever again.

Such sighs are always heard by the people who live under the Hill, and one night as she was lying in bed beside her old man, who was sleeping like a baby, she thought she saw something moving at the window, and was alarmed, and sat up in bed, and saw a child's face looking in at her. "What is it?" she asked, thinking that somebody must be sick and the child had been sent to get her. And then she saw the pointed ears and realized that it wasn't a child but one of *them*.

"You're not about to put a sickness on my old man's cow, are you?" she said, and when there was no reply she threw the covers off and went to the window but there was no one there. And if she hadn't been standing on her two feet she would have thought she had dreamed it.

The next night there were two of them, and she lay still and pretended not to know they were there, and after a while she heard a tiny voice say "We've come to take you dancing . . ."

"Oh, I'm too old for that," she said, and the fairies said "How old are you, exactly?" "Fifty-nine last June twenty-seventh."

"I'm five hundred and ninety-seven, I *think*," one of the fairies said. And the other said, "I'm a thousand and something, I forget just exactly what. And you don't have to get dressed up the way the village girls do when they go to the fiddler, come just as you are."

So she did.

They were dancing in a ring in the sheep meadow and the ring opened and made a place for her and then the music continued, so light and eerie that at first she had to listen hard to hear it. And she realized why they all had such long ears. "Do you feel your age?" the fairy who had come to get her asked, when they were catching their breath after a particularly fast set of Sir Roger de Coverley.

"No," she said.

"Neither do we," the fairy said. And she was about to ask why this was when she saw that it was broad daylight and she was in her bed and her old man was already up and a-doing. And instead of feeling tired after being up all night dancing, she was strangely rested. I mustn't do that any more, she said to herself. The dominie wouldn't approve. But when night came and she lay there stretched out in the darkness and no little head appeared at the window, she felt let down and disappointed. And after a time a voice said in her ear "So it's the dominie you care about and not dancing."

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "I don't know why I thought that. I certainly don't mean it."

"Then why are you lying there in bed when you could be dancing with us in the dell?"

Off she went, in her nightgown, with her hair done up in rag-curlers. And never thought once about how she might look to the fairies, any more than they thought how they might look to her.

Night after night after night this happened, and finally the old man's sleep was disturbed by a dream that he was separated from her and walking in a wood calling her name. When he woke he said to himself, I had a bad dream, and put his hand out in the dark and found that she was not lying in the bed beside him. He called out and there was no answer.

When she wasn't in the other room, he looked around for a note, but there was nothing. And no wife. Such a thing had never happened in all the years they had been married. And he was standing there in a fright, wondering what to do next, when a voice from inside the milk pitcher said, "If you're looking for your missus, she's with us." He looked in the milk pitcher and it was full of pale sparks.

"Take me where she is," the old man said, and the voice from the milk pitcher said, "If I take you there, you'll have to dance."

"I'm much too old for that," the old man said. "My knees aren't what they used to be."

"You can just shuffle, then," the voice said. "Only don't keep me waiting. The dancing has already begun."

When the woman saw her old man in his long white nightgown and nightcap, she let go of the hand of the fairy she was dancing with and made a place for him. And it was wonderful how lively he was. He kept up with dancers that were ten times his age.

The next morning while she was getting his breakfast he said, "I had a dream last night."

"Oh?" she said. "What was it?"

"I dreamt you and I were dancing with the fairies in Dead Man's Hollow."

"Were you enjoying it?"

"Very much. But my rheumatism is much worse than usual this morning." And she saw by the way he hobbled around that it was true.

That night, lying in bed in the dark, she thought how much she loved the dancing in Dead Man's Hollow the night before, and then she thought of her poor old man lying sound asleep beside her, and she thought I mustn't do that to him, he's too old, and I'm all he has and he's all I have.

"Once you say no, we can't come for you any more," a voice said, an inch or two from her ear.

"I know," she whispered. "But he might catch pneumonia. And in any case, I don't want him to wake in the night and not find me lying beside him. I hope you understand."

"How could I?" the voice said. "Fairies don't have any heart. Are you coming or aren't you?"

She wasn't sorry afterward. But people did say that she had aged considerably in the last few months. Which was the fairies' revenge, for she was a lovely dancer and they wanted her all to themselves.