

# The Fairies

“Die Elfen”

*From “Phantastus” Part 1 (1812)*

**By Ludwig Tieck**

**Translated & Arranged by Bruce & Marion Donehower**

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# The Fairies

“Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte  
und finden nur Dinge.”

Novalis

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## The Fairies

“Where is Marie, our child?” asked the father.

“She’s outside playing on the grass with our neighbor’s son,” the mother replied.

“I hope they don’t run off,” worried the father. “They’re both so reckless.”

The mother looked for the children and brought them their evening bread.

“It’s hot!” said the young boy, and little girl cast longing glances toward the red cherries.

“Be careful, children,” said the mother. “Don’t wander too far from the house or into the woods. Father and I are going out to the field.”

The young boy Andres answered: “Don’t worry! We’re afraid of the woods. We’ll stay right here at the house or near other people.”

The mother went off and soon came back again with the father. They closed up the house and set off for the fields to see about the workers harvesting the hay. Their house stood on a small, green prospect, enclosed by a graceful picket fence that protected the fruit trees and flower garden. The village began a bit farther down below, and on the other side of the village stood the lord's castle. Martin, Marie's father, had leased this substantial holding from its aristocratic owner, and he lived there contentedly with his wife and only child. Each year he was able to set some money aside, and he entertained the expectation of becoming self-sufficient as a result of his industrious activity. The soil was rich, and the lord was not overbearing in his demands.

As he traversed his fields with his wife, the father looked about joyously and said: "Brigitte, how very different this region appears compared to where we live. It is so green here. The whole village is adorned with heavy-laden fruit trees; the soil is thick with lovely plants and flowers; all the houses are tidy and clean; and the inhabitants are well off. It even strikes me that the forests are more beautiful and the skies a deeper blue. As far as the eye can see, one beholds only the joy and pleasure of bountiful nature."

"But as soon as you merely cross to the other side of the stream," said Brigitte, "you find yourself in a completely different landscape. Everything is sad and scrawny. Every

traveler agrees that our village is far and away the most beautiful in the region.”

“Yes, right up to the edge of the pine trees,” replied her husband. “Take a look back there—how sad and foreboding that secluded plot appears in contrast to the surrounding region. And see behind those dark pines—the sooty huts, the broken-down corrals, the melancholy, overflowing stream.”

“That’s true,” said the wife, as both came to a halt. “A sad, anxious feeling overcomes you near that spot. One hardly knows why. Who can say what sort of people live there—or why they choose to keep so much to themselves, as though they were troubled by bad conscience?”

“Poor immigrants, no doubt!” agreed the husband. “They strike me as immigrants, the types who lurk about to rob and cheat honest folk. That’s where they have their hideout. I’m amazed that our gracious lord tolerates them.”

The wife softened a bit. “Maybe they are poor folk who’ve fallen on hard times and are ashamed of their poverty? Perhaps we shouldn’t judge too harshly, although it’s certainly queer that they don’t show up in church. No one knows how they make ends meet. That tiny, pitiful-looking garden can’t nourish them very well. They have no crops to speak of!”

“God only knows how they survive,” continued the husband, as they again began to walk. “Not a single living soul visits them, because that spot where they choose to squat is



cursed and unchristian—even the worst of the homeless keep their distance.”

Thus, the conversation continued between the two as they trod across the fields. The sinister region that held their attention lay on the far side of the village. At a dip in the landscape surrounded by pines, a few huts and various dilapidated farm buildings stood visible. Smoke seldom rose from those chimneys. Just as invisible, or more so, were the people. Once in a blue moon some curious local citizen, who dared sneak close, caught sight of some detestable female in a tattered smock. Equally detestable and squalid-looking brats clung to the dirty woman. Black dogs led the sad procession. In times of darkness, a brutish field hand, whom no one recognized, shuffled over a board that spanned the stream and disappeared into the huts. Then through the gloom one could observe vague, shadowy shapes that wove strange patterns, silhouetted by flames. Viewed against the tidy houses of the village and the rich magnificence of the castle, this plot of pines and ruined cottages marred the pleasant countenance of the landscape like a scar.

The two children Marie and Andres, having gobbled up their food, decided to have a race. The pert and agile Marie always gave the advantage of an early start to the slower Andres.

“That’s no contest!” he finally complained. “Let’s try it again, and this time farther. We’ll see who wins!”

“Sure,” said the girl. “But not across the stream—we’re not allowed.”

“No,” said Andres. “But there’s a big pear tree over on that hill—about fifteen minutes from here. I’ll run left around the pines—you go right across the field. Once we reach the top, we’ll see who’s fastest!”

“Fine,” said Marie, “that way we won’t bump into each other racing. Father said it’s all the same to the top, whether you go this side or that side past the immigrants.”

And she immediately dashed off.

Andres was gone like a shot, and Marie, who turned to the right, didn’t see him again.

“He’s really stupid,” she said to herself. “I only need to screw up my courage, dash across those planks past those huts and through the courtyard, and I’ll be the first one to the finish.”

She came to a halt at the stream in front of the pines.

“Shall I?” she considered. “Oh no! It’s just too scary!”

A small, white mutt stood on the far side of the stream and barked as though fit to be tied. Her fear made the beast seem like a monster, and she sprang back.

“Oh, bother!” she exclaimed. “That bratty Andres has the lead while I stand here deciding what to do.”

The dog barked incessantly, but as she stared, it no longer seemed so frightening. On the contrary, it now appeared cute.

It had a red collar adorned with bells. Its head shook as it yipped, and the little bells tinkled merrily.

“Gosh, where’s my courage?” swore Marie. “I’ll run as fast as I can—and quick before you know it, I’ll be across and gone. That dumb pooch is not going to scare me!”

With such bold thoughts, the brave, perky child sprang on to the planks and quickly cleared the distance to the dog, which fell silent and wagged its tail. Now, all of a sudden, she stood in the midst of that other place, surrounded by dark pine trees that prevented even a glimpse of her parents’ home or the surrounding landscape.

How it all amazed her! She found herself surrounded by the most colorful, festive flower garden she could imagine—it was filled with vibrant tulips, roses, and lilies. Blue and golden-red butterflies fluttered from blossom to blossom. Exotic, colorful birds warbled and sang inside cages hung from glistening wires on a trellis, and golden-haired, bright-eyed children in short, white smocks gamboled about. Some of these played with lambs; others fed the birds or collected flowery bouquets that they gave to each other; still others ate cherries, grapes, and ripened apricots. No huts were to be seen. There stood instead in the middle of that environment a large, beautiful house with an iron door, artfully wrought and decorated. Marie was beside herself with astonishment and could scarcely find her wits. Never one to stand about,

however, she straight-away approached the nearest child and took its hand in greeting.

“Have you really come to visit us?” said the lovely child. “I’ve seen you running and leaping about on the other side. Our dog gave you a fright.”

“So, you’re not really vagrants or criminals as everyone says,” said Marie. “Those gossips are really stupid.”

“Please stay with us,” said the marvelous child. “You will like it.”

“But I was challenged to a race.”

“You’ll get back soon enough. Here! Have something to eat.”

Marie took a taste, and she found the fruit quite sweet—sweeter than any she had ever tasted. Andres, the race, and the warnings of her parents were in a moment completely forgotten.

A large woman in a splendid dress came toward them and questioned Marie.

“Dearest Lady,” said Marie, “I ran in here from the outside. With your permission, I’d like to stay.”

“Zerina,” said the beautiful woman, “you know quite well that she’s only allotted a short time here, else you really should have asked for my permission.”

“Since she already crossed the bridge, I thought it was all right for her to be here,” said the lovely child, “especially since

we've often seen her playing in the fields, and you yourself have often smiled at her liveliness. She'll leave us soon enough."

"No, I want to stay here!" said Marie. "Here everything is beautiful—and not only that, you have the best toys, and even strawberries and cherries. The outside world is nowhere near as good."

The golden-robed woman stepped back and smiled. Several of the children now sprang forward with smiles and laughter, and they surrounded the happy Marie. They teased her and emboldened her to dance. Some brought her lambs or wonderful toys, while others played music and sang. But Marie felt drawn most strongly to the young playmate that first had greeted her, for this child had the sweetest and friendliest nature of them all.

All at once little Marie said to the girl: "I'll always stay with you— and you will be my sister!"

Upon hearing this, all the children laughed and joined hands.

"Now let's play a splendid game!" said Zerina.

She quickly ran into the palace and returned with a golden box that contained beautiful clumps of pollen. She took a pinch with her finger and scattered the pollen on the grass. At once the grass began to sway as though stirred by wind, and after a few moments lovely rose bushes sprang up. They quickly grew large and just as quickly unfolded their blossoms, which filled the air with the sweetest scents. Marie took a pinch

of pollen, too. As soon as she had scattered it, white lilies and gay daffodils sprang up. Zerina made a quick gesture, and the flowers disappeared, only to be replaced by others a moment later.

“Now,” said Zerina, “get ready for something grand!”

She stuck two pinecones in the earth and stamped them down heartily. Two green branches appeared.

“Hold on,” said Zerina, and Marie looped her arm around the girl’s delicate body.

She felt herself lifted upwards as the trees grew with amazing swiftness. The tall pines increased in size, and the two children clung to each other and kissed as the branches swayed in the red clouds of the sunset. The other children clambered up the trees with agile leaps, and they teased and tickled each other amid loud peals of laughter. If by chance one of the children tumbled off a limb, the child flew through the air and settled slowly down to earth unharmed. By and by Marie became alarmed. At this point, the others sang a few loud notes and the trees began to grow smaller, returning the children to the ground after their visit to the clouds.

“Come!” said Zerina.

They went through the iron door of the palace. Inside were several beautiful women, old and young, who sat in a circular hall. They nibbled the most exquisite fruits, while strains of lovely melodies, played by invisible musicians,

delighted their ears. In the vaulting of the chamber's ceiling, palms, flowers, and greenery had been painted; between this foliage, posed charmingly in playful motion, were the colorful figures of various children. As the music played, this painted scene changed and metamorphosed, all the while glowing with the most intense hues—now green, now blue, now flaming purple—that kindled to a golden splendor. The naked cherubs in the foliage seemed alive, breathing in and out with ruby-red lips, allowing one to catch a glimpse of pearl-white teeth and sparkling, heavenly blue eyes.

Iron steps led downward to a vast, underground room filled with gold, silver, and jewels of varied colors that sparkled brightly between the metal. Wonderful vessels—each apparently filled to the brim with rarities—stood against the walls. The gold had been wrought in the most artful fashion into a variety of forms, and it shimmered gaily. Many small dwarves busied themselves sorting through the treasure and storing it up in the vessels; others—stooped and knock-kneed, with long red noses—lugged about heavy sacks on their sagging shoulders like millers hauling grain. They wheezed and gasped as they broadcast the golden kernels hither and yon. Then they lurched awkwardly right and left and seized at the rolling balls that threatened to bounce off course. Not infrequently, one or the other was knocked head over heels into the midst of this hurly burly and smacked the ground like a sack of wheat. They

screwed up their faces unpleasantly when Marie laughed at their grotesque shapes and antics.

Behind them sat a little old man with sunken features. Marie greeted him politely, and he thanked her with an earnest nod. He held a scepter and wore a crown. All the other dwarves appeared to acknowledge his authority.

“What’s happening here?” he demanded crossly as the children came a bit closer.

Marie kept silent from anxiety, but her companion answered that they’d only entered the room to have a look around.

“Always the same old pranks,” said the old one. “Will such idle foolery never end?”

At that he turned his attention to business and resumed his assessment of the gold. He dismissed some of the dwarves and shouted angrily at others.

“Who is that?” asked Marie.

“He is our King of Metals,” said the little one, Marie’s companion, as they set forth again.

Once more, it seemed they were outside, because they stood next to a large pond, although no sun was shining, and they did not see any sky. They entered a small rowboat, and Zerina began to row very energetically. The journey went quickly. As they reached the middle of the pond, Marie saw



that a thousand water pipes, canals, and streams flowed from the pond in all directions.

“This water to the right,” said the splendid child, “flows down under your garden, which accounts for why everything blooms so freshly. From here you arrive at a great underground river.”

Suddenly from the canals and pond, a multitude of children emerged swimming through the water. Many wore wreaths of cattails and water lilies; others held red spikes of coral, and others blew upon conch shells. A wild cacophony resounded gaily from the darkened shores. In and out between the water babes swam the most beautiful women, and often the young ones jumped from one to the other and clung to their necks with kisses. They all greeted the strangers.

In the midst of this celebration, the children traveled from the pond into a small river, which became ever more constrained. At last the tiny boat came to a halt. The others took their leave, and Zerina banged upon the cliff face. The stones opened like a door, and a large, red womanly being helped them disembark.

“Are things going well?” asked Zerina.

“They are always busy,” came the answer, “and so joyful, as you can see. But the temperature is also quite pleasing.”

They climbed up a winding staircase, and suddenly Marie found herself in a brilliant salon, so brightly lit that her eyes at first were blinded. Fire-red carpets covered the walls with a

purple glow, and as their eyes became more accustomed, they saw to their astonishment that human figures appeared to be dancing joyfully in the patterns of the carpet. These figures were so beautifully proportioned and finely made that one could not imagine anything more charming. Their bodies were of red crystal, so that it seemed that their blood circulated and pulsed visibly. They greeted the new child with laughter and a variety of gestures, but when Marie wanted to go closer Zerina suddenly seized her forcefully and held her back.

“Marie! Be careful! It’s all aflame! It will burn you to cinders!”

Marie felt the heat.

“Why don’t those darling creatures come out and play?”

“Just as you live in air, they must live in fire. They’d perish outside it. See how it suits them! How they laugh and take delight! Those there on the bottom disperse the streams of fire toward every corner of the underworld, and from those streams grow the flowers, fruits, and wine. The red currents flow alongside streams; those beings of flame are always active and joyful. But come, let’s return to the outer garden. It’s too hot for you here.”

Outside, the scene had changed. Moonlight lay upon all the flowers; the birds were silent, and the children slept in varied groups amid the arbor. Marie and her friend, however, did not feel tired. On the contrary, they wandered in happy

conversation throughout the warm summer night until it was morning.

As day broke, they breakfasted on fruits and milk. Marie said: "Let's go out to the pine trees, just for the fun of it, to see how they look."

"Good," said Zerina. "And while we're there you can visit our sentinels, who will certainly please you. They're standing on the ramparts between the trees."

They went through the flower garden, through graceful groves filled with the melodies of nightingales, climbed over vine-laden hills, and after following the windings of a clear-running stream, they came at last to the pine trees on the rise that marked the border of that domain.

"How is it that we've covered so great a distance when from the outside this place appears so small?" asked Marie.

"I don't know," answered her friend. "It is simply the way of things."

They climbed to the dark pine trees, and a cold wind blew upon them from the outer world. A foggy mist lay upon the surrounding landscape. Above perched marvelous shapes and figures with white-dusted faces; they were not unlike the disagreeable white heads of owls. The figures wore folded cloaks of ragged wool, and they held open umbrellas over their remarkable heads. They swayed and bobbed unceasingly with bats that winged adventurously from the rock.

“I’d like to laugh, yet I am afraid,” said Marie.

“Those are our good and vigilant sentinels,” said Marie’s small companion. “They stand here and create wind, so that anyone who dares to approach will see them and experience paralyzing fear and sublime terror. Right now, they are under wraps, because outside it is cold and rainy. They hate that kind of weather. Snow and wind never touch us here below—not even a cold breeze. Here it is eternal summer and spring. If those above didn’t frequently change their shifts, they would die.

“Who are you?” asked Marie, as she again descended into the scent of flowers. “Or are you nameless?”

“We are called Fairies,” said the friendly child. “I’ve heard that we’re much talked about in the world.”

They heard a great commotion in the meadow.

“The beautiful bird has arrived!” shouted the children. Everyone hurried into the hall. The two peered inside, as young and old shoved to get in. Everyone cheered, while from within sounded jubilant music.

As soon as they were inside, they saw that the circular space was filled with all manner of shapes and figures. They all gazed upward at a giant bird, whose brilliant plumage described circles above them in the dome as it flew back and forth. The music sounded more joyous than ever, and the colors and lights pulsed faster.

At last the music stilled and the bird fluttered with a sweeping whoosh down to a sparkling crown, which hovered under the high windows and was illuminated from the vaulting. Its feathers were purple and green, streaked with brilliant, golden stripes. On its head, blazing like jewels, swayed a feathery diadem. The bird's beak was red and its legs bright blue. As it settled down, all the colors of its feathers shimmered together, enchanting the eye.

The bird was the size of an eagle. But when it opened its beak, a sweet melody rose from its heaving breast in tones as charming as a nightingale's. It sang the song strongly into the chamber like beams of light, so that everyone down to the smallest child wept with enchantment and rapture. Once the song ended, everyone bowed. The bird then flew in circles throughout the dome, swooped through the door, and ascended into bright sky, where it soon shone no more vividly than a dying ember and at last was lost to sight.

"Why are you all so happy?" asked Marie, and she inclined herself toward a beautiful child, who seemed smaller than the day before.

"The King is coming," said the little one. "Many of us have not yet seen him. Wherever he goes, good luck and gaiety follow. For quite a while, we've longed for him, just as you long for spring after a long tedious winter. And now the bird, his lovely ambassador, has announced the King's arrival. That admirable and judicious bird that comes to us in the service of

the King is called Phoenix. He lives far away in Arabia atop a tree—the only one like it in the world—just as the Phoenix is the only bird of its kind in the world. When Phoenix feels old, he weaves a nest out of balsam and frankincense, sets it on fire, and burns up alive. He dies singing, and out of the drifting ashes a rejuvenated Phoenix is reborn. The Phoenix seldom takes flight; people see him only once in a century or so, but whenever they catch sight of him, they record the encounter in their chronicles and mark the event as a harbinger of miraculous times. But now, my dear friend, you must depart, for the countenance of the King is not inclined toward you.”

The lovely woman, clad in gold, strolled through the throng. She gestured Marie to follow, and she went with her to a lonely pathway in the arbor.

“Dear child, you must leave us,” she said. “The King will hold court here for twenty years, maybe longer. Blessings and fertility will spread throughout the land, but most of all in the regions bordering. All fountains and streams will flow more abundantly; fields and gardens will bear more richly; the wine will sweeten; the meadow flower, the wood grow fresh and green; mild breezes will blow, foul weather vanish, and no riverbank will overflow. Take this ring, think of us later. Yet, take care what you say to those with whom you share these memories, or else we will be forced to flee this country. All who live here, including you, share in the luck and blessings of our

presence. Now, for one last time, kiss your darling playmate farewell.”

She left, and Zerina wept. Marie bent down to embrace her, and they parted.

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**JOHANN LUDWIG TIECK** (May 31, 1773 - April 28, 1853; born in Berlin). Known as the “King of the Romantics, Tieck was a poet, translator, editor, novelist, playwright, critic—and a close friend of the poet Novalis. *The Fairies (Die Elfen)* appeared in a three-volume collection of stories and dramas entitled *Phantasmus* (1812-1817). Tieck was a member of the group of early romantic writers, poets, and philosophers active in Jena at the end of the 1700s. Tieck, along with Friedrich Schlegel, was instrumental in arranging the posthumous publication of the novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* by Novalis.