

THE STORY
OF THE
WHITE VIOLETS

(From Brownies & Rose Leaves)

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The Story of the White Violets

WHAT ? No fairies nowadays, do you say, children ?
Dear me, what shocking ignorance ! Who in the world do you think looks after the ferns and flowers in God's big garden ? Who teaches the thrushes the new tunes, and attends to the winter wardrobe of the robin-redbreasts ? Who watches over the hedge-sparrow's eggs, and takes care of the nestlings when Mrs. Dickey hops off to get her afternoon tea ? Mr. Dickey brings her dinner to her, you know, but he doesn't approve of afternoon tea for ladies, so she always has to get that for herself. Why, the world would go all wrong were it not for the fairies ! In fact, I do believe that even the sun would forget to get up !

And talking of getting up reminds me of the story of the White Violets. Would you like to hear it ? The elves told it to me themselves one drowsy summer afternoon, so it must be true. And, if you are really going to believe it, I will tell it to you. But if you think it is all nonsense, why then you can go back to your English grammar and your sums, and believe *them*, because they can all be proved, and the story of the White Violets can't.

Once upon a time there were no white violets in the world. They were all blue : some pale blue, almost like a little bit of the sky when it is touched with purple by the sunset; some a faint sweet lavender ; and some deep and rich, like the inside of a storm-cloud. And they peeped out from their green leaves, and smelled as sweet as possible. And they lived underneath the hedges, and warmed themselves in the sun, and drank the clear cold dew, and were as happy and good as they could be.

The elves took care of them, just as they took care of all the flowers. They put them to bed every night, and woke them up and dressed them every morning. And they filled their little cups with honey, smelling so sweet and fresh that the great brown bees came buzzing over the hedge to find it, and carried it away to make stiff and sweet and golden for

the little children who danced to school down the green lane. And the violets did not care, not a bit! For, strangely enough, the more honey they gave away the sweeter and bigger and bluer they grew, until the very robins and blackbirds composed sonnets about them. In fact, there was a rumour that one very spruce young robin had actually proposed to the biggest and bluest among them, but the elves had thought the match unsuitable, so they had broken off the engagement.

Well, it was a great pity that the violets were not always good, for then they would always have been happy. But, as it was, they were sadly naughty one day, and had to pay very, very dearly for it. It was all the fault of Mrs. Caterpillar's party – at least, so they said afterwards; but the elves shook their heads and didn't seem to think so. The elves said that if the violets had been obedient, no harm would have come of the party at all.

The truth was, Mrs Caterpillar had issued cards of invitation to all the neighbouring grubs and beetles. She was having an "at home" in the beech tree that grew just over the violets' heads. And she had made the dew negus just a little too strong for the young cockchafers, and one or two of them fell right into the middle of the violets. The elves

came at once, and picked them up and carried them home to their mothers ; but the violets, although they had been put to bed long ago, were wide awake with the excitement, and refused to go to sleep again. In vain did the elves come and sing them lullabies, and shade their eyes from the moonlight with curtains of grass and leaves. The violets interrupted the lullabies with giggles, and pushed aside the curtains to peep at the gay scene above their heads. For was not a fat caterpillar waltzing solemnly with a brown earwig, and a white maggot, rather overcome by the negus, making love to a dainty young green fly ? Altogether, it was too exciting, and the violets refused to go to sleep at all. And at last the elves were obliged to leave them, for they heard the stream quarrelling with a big grey stone that had sat down right in the middle of it, and they were sadly needed to make peace.

So the naughty little violets peeped and giggled until the party was over, and the caterpillars and the maggots and the earwigs had waddled home arm-in-arm, discussing the supper and the dresses. And by that time the violets were so tired and sleepy that they could hardly wish one another good-night, but tucked their heads under their green blankets, and went off into a sound slumber.

Well, at sunrise the elves came to wake them. The roses were up and dressed long ago, and the daisies were blinking their golden eyes at the sun. But the violets were *very* sleepy. They opened one eye each, and murmured, "All right," and then went to sleep again. For, you see, they had been awake so very late the night before. And in vain the elves shook them, and called to them, and told them that very soon all the dew would have gone away into the clouds, and there would be nothing left in which to give them their baths. They only said that they "didn't want baths, they were quite clean," and went to sleep again. One of the elves even went to the stream, and brought back a leaf full of cold water, and dashed it over their faces. But they only peeped at him from under the blankets, and nodded their heads, and were back in dreamland before you could say "Jack Robinson."

Now, all this was very perplexing to the dear little brownies. They were not used to sleepy flowers. As a rule, the sweet hedge blossoms opened their dewy eyes the moment that they were told to do so, and stretched out their petals to the morning breeze. The elves, therefore, were very much puzzled indeed, and had to hold a council about it, sitting down under the mushrooms.

Some thought that the violets must need a little medicine,

and suggested a wild-rose draught or a ragged-robin pill. One or two were afraid that the nightshade had come into flower much too early in the year, and had made its home over the violets' heads. And when this was suggested, there was quite a stampede to the hedgerow to see if such a terrible thing could really have happened. But no, there was nothing growing in the hedge except the pearly white May, and no deadly nightshade was drooping its purple flowers over the path. But the violets were sleeping still.

And then the elves, standing sorrowfully by them, came to a very sad conclusion. They began to believe that it was only naughtiness and laziness on the part of the violets after all. No flowers had any business to sleep after the sun rose, any more than they had any business to lie awake after he had gone to bed. And the elves reluctantly confessed that the violets were "naughty."

Then, when they had confessed that to one another, they were in a worse dilemma than ever. What was to be done ? They had never had anything to do with naughty flowers before. They had nursed sick flowers, and they had lovingly tended the poor little withered ones thrown carelessly down on to the path, and they had laid the dead ones tenderly away in the earth without sorrow, for would they not bloom

again ? But *naughty* flowers were things that they had never had anything to do with. And they talked about it very anxiously and solemnly indeed.

“What is to be done ?” said one, perching himself astride a grass-stalk. “This is very shocking.”

“There must be a cure for it somewhere,” said another, puckering up all his face in thought.

“You, Briarlet,” cried a third, “you, who go near men’s houses, cannot you suggest something ? What would they do in such a case ?”

Briarlet wrinkled his forehead and pondered. Presently a light came into his eyes, and he looked up.

“I remember,” he said, “a case a few mornings since. I was peeping in at the window of a little child’s room. I had just been driving the green flies away from the roses, and it was hot, and I was resting for a time. While I sat there, watching the face of the child, the nurse came in to take it out of bed, but — ” And Briarlet’s sweet little voice grew mournful.

“Yes, but?” cried all the brownies in chorus.

“But,” said Briarlet, quite distressed, “it refused. It-it screamed. It-even-even-*kicked*!”

Briarlet quite blushed as he told the story, and looked so

miserable that the elves could not press him to go on, but sat in a silent ring around him. Presently, however, one bolder than the rest took courage.

“Yes,” he whispered, “and how did they cure it?”

For the elves could not get rid of the idea that being naughty was something like being ill.

Briarlet’s face brightened.

“They *did* cure it,” he said softly, “but only by making the child stay in bed – all day.”

“And that is the very thing !” again cried all the elves in chorus. “That is how we must cure the violets. They too shall stay in bed all day !”

The little brownies were quite pleased and happy again. Here was a cure – a way out of all their perplexities. Suddenly, however, their faces fell.

“How,” they asked solemnly, each of his neighbour – “how are we to prevent the violets from getting up ?”

Here was a new difficulty, and again they turned to Briarlet to help them. Once more he wrinkled his brows and thought.

“I know !” he exclaimed at last. “They took away the child’s clothes !”

“Of course ! What an excellent plan !” came the delighted

chorus of voices. And then all the elves shook hands with each other, and congratulated one another solemnly on Briarlet's wonderful acuteness.

Then they went, in a body, back to the violets, for all the world like a troop of town councillors. And the violets were sleeping still. And in a stately and dignified fashion, as if they were performing some important ceremony, did those little brownies carry away the violets' purple frocks, and deposit them in a wardrobe in Fairy-land.

Well, by-and-by, when the sun was high up in the blue dome above them, the violet's woke up. They had "slept themselves out," as the old nurses say, and they were quite tired of bed and dreamland, and wanted to get up and flirt with the thrushes. So they began clamouring for the elves to come and dress them, and make them tidy for the day.

But the elves all stood in a row and shook their heads, and looked very important indeed. And one of them, who was spokesman, made the violets a little speech.

"We are afraid," he said solemnly, "that you have been naughty, and so we are obliged to punish you. We have resolved that you shall stay in bed all day. So we have taken away your clothes."

"But," objected the violets, "we shall catch cold."

The brownie shook his head, and one little violet began to cry.

“I want to get up,” she sobbed, “and I-I-don’t like sitting in my night-gown.”

“We are very sorry,” said the brownie; and indeed he did look troubled and tearful. “But we think that it is for your good.”

And then, because they were very tender-hearted, and could not bear to see anyone in trouble, the brownies all went sorrowfully away, telling one another that it was for the violets’ good, and persuading one another not to go right off to Fairy-land and fetch the purple frocks away from the Queen’s wardrobe.

And so all the violets sat in their little white night-gowns under the hedge. They felt, oh, so ashamed of themselves! The robins gazed at them in such amazement, and the bullfinches positively blushed pink up to the ears. Even the May-blossoms took a rosy tinge, and one little briar-bud, peeping out upon his beautiful new world, went quite red with the shock to his feelings. But the violets themselves were beyond blushing, and only drooped their heads lower and lower, and wished that the earth would open and swallow them up.

And so they drooped and wept all day, and when evening came, and the brownies hastened to them, the tender-hearted little elves could do nothing but kiss the sweet white, nodding heads, and promised them that they should have their frocks again in the morning. And the violets went to sleep, comforted and forgiven.

But when morning came, and the brownies hurried off in the early dawn to Fairy-land, some terrible news awaited them. You know the violets' purple frocks had been put into the Queen's wardrobe. Well, the court tailor had found them there, and, thinking that they were some wonderful new fairy stuff, he had carefully picked them to pieces and made a lovely robe for his royal mistress. And she was so pleased with it that she had sent out invitations at once for a grand dinner-party, and all the household was busy preparing for it.

Now, was not that a terrible thing to happen ? You may imagine what a state of consternation the brownies were in. They tried to get audience of the Queen, but she was interviewing the court cook, and could not see them for ever such a time. And when at last they were admitted to her presence they could hardly tell their tale, she looked so radiant and beautiful in her purple gown.

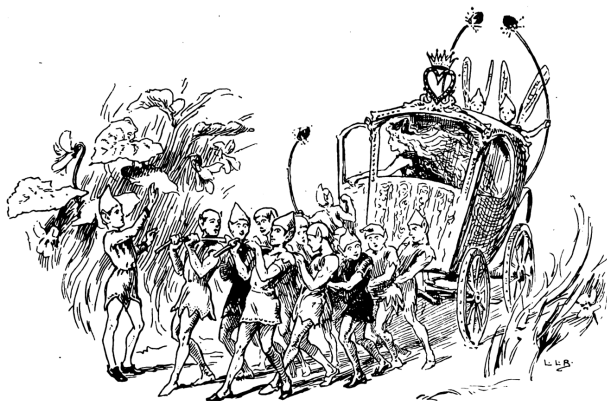
However, they told her the story, and she seemed very sad and disappointed.

“My poor gown !” she said pitifully. “And I have told all my friends about it! Still, if the violets are *very* unhappy—” She paused and looked thoughtfully at the elves. “Could you not get them some others ?” she asked.

They shook their heads. “We can’t make them,” they said. “Only the angels can do that.”

The Queen looked very thoughtful and uncertain what to do. Then suddenly she cried, “Take me to the violets themselves. I am sure they will give me the gowns.”

So the brownies took her, themselves drawing her wee golden coach, far away from Fairy-land, down to the green lane where the violets waited under the hedge.



And when she saw them she sprang out of the coach, and exclaimed in wonder -

“Was that their punishment ?” she cried - “that, to become more beautiful than their fellows ! Why, look at them !”

And the brownies looked, and saw that what she had said was true. The violets in their sweet white gowns were fair with a new humility, and drooped their tender heads like children who had sinned and been forgiven.

“We see,” said the brownies softly. “You shall have their gowns.”

And the violets, peeping up, and seeing the Queen in her wonderful purple, bowed their heads and whispered, “You shall have our gowns.”

“Hush !” whispered the Queen to the brownies. “Do not tell them how beautiful they are.” And then, turning to the violets, she said, “Children, answer me; which shall it be ? Will you have back your purple, or will you always wear your white, in memory of your fault and its forgiveness ?”

And the violets whispered, “We shall wear our white,” and bowed their heads even lower than before.

“It is well”, said the Queen, softly. “For out of your own fall have you lifted your own purity.”

And then she went away again to Fairy-Land, but the violets sat in their little white night-gowns forever.

