

## *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

By William Shakespeare

Adapted and retold by Charles and Mary Lamb

Edited, reformatted, and with glosses by Kim Stegall

THERE WAS A LAW in the city of Athens that gave citizens the power of *compelling* [forcing] their daughters to marry whomsoever they pleased; for upon a daughter's refusing to marry the man her father had chosen, the father was empowered by this same law to cause her to be put to death; but as fathers do not often desire the death of their own daughters, even though they do happen to prove a little *refractory* [stubborn, headstrong], this law was seldom or never *put in execution* [enforced], though perhaps the young ladies of that city were not infrequently threatened by their parents with the terrors of it.

There was one instance, however, of an old man, whose name was Egeus, who actually did come before Theseus (at that time the reigning Duke of Athens), to complain that his daughter Hermia, whom he had commanded to marry Demetrius, a young man of a noble Athenian family, refused to obey him, because she loved another young Athenian, named Lysander. Egeus demanded justice of Theseus and desired that this cruel law might be put in force against his daughter.

Hermia pleaded that Demetrius had formerly professed love for her dear friend Helena, and that Helena loved Demetrius to distraction; but this honorable reason, which Hermia gave for not obeying her father's command, moved not the stern Egeus.

Theseus, though a great and merciful prince, had no power to alter the laws of his country; therefore, he could only give Hermia four days to consider what she would do: at the end of that time, if she still refused to marry Demetrius, she was to be put to death.

When Hermia was dismissed from duke, she went to Lysander and told him the peril she was in—that she must either give him up and marry Demetrius or lose her life.

Lysander was in great affliction at hearing these evil tidings; but remembering that he had an aunt who lived a little ways from Athens and that at the place where she lived the cruel law could not be enforced, he *proposed* [suggested] that they should *steal* [sneak] out of her father's house that night and flee to his aunt's house, where they would be married. "I will meet you," said Lysander, "in the wood a few miles *without* [outside] the city, in that delightful wood where we have so often walked with Helena in the pleasant month of May."

Hermia joyfully agreed and told no one of their plans but Helena. Helena (as maidens will do foolish things for love) resolved to tell Demetrius, even though all she could gain from betraying her friend's secret would be the poor pleasure of following her faithless lover to the wood. For she well knew that Demetrius would go *thither* [there] to pursue Hermia.

The wood in which Lysander and Hermia proposed to meet was the favorite haunt of those little beings known by the name of *Fairies*.

Oberon the king and Titania the queen of the Fairies with all their tiny train of followers held their midnight revels in this wood.

Between this little king and queen of sprites there happened, at this time, a sad disagreement; they never met by moonlight in the shady walks of this pleasant wood, *but*

[except] they were quarrelling, till all their fairy elves would creep into acorn-cups and hide themselves for fear.

The cause of this unhappy disagreement was Titania's refusing to give Oberon a little changeling boy, whose mother had been Titania's friend. After her death the fairy queen stole the child from its nurse and brought him up in the woods.

The night on which Hermia and Lysander were to meet in the wood, Titania was walking with some of her maids of honour. She met Oberon attended by his train of fairy courtiers. "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania," said the fairy king.

The queen replied, "What, jealous Oberon, is it you? Fairies, skip hence; I have forsworn his company."

"Tarry, rash fairy," said Oberon; "Am not I thy lord? Why does Titania cross her Oberon? Give me your little changeling boy to be my page."

"Set your heart at rest," answered the queen; "Your whole fairy kingdom buys not the boy *of* [from] me." She then left her lord in great anger.

"Well, go your way," said Oberon: "Before the morning dawns I will torment you for this injury." Oberon then sent for Puck, his chief favorite and privy counselor.

Puck, (or as he was sometimes called, Robin Goodfellow) was a shrewd and *knavish* [dishonest or unscrupulous] sprite, who used to play comical pranks in the neighboring villages; sometimes getting into the dairies and skimming the milk, sometimes plunging his light and airy form into the butter-churn, and while he was dancing his fantastic shape in the churn, in vain the dairy-maid would labor to change her cream into butter.

"Come hither, Puck," said Oberon to this little merry wanderer of the night; "Fetch me the flower which maids call Love in Idleness; the juice of that little purple flower laid on the eyelids of those who sleep, will make them, when they awake, dote on the first thing they see. Some of the juice of that flower I will drop on the eyelids of my Titania when she is asleep; and the first thing she looks upon when she opens her eyes she will fall in love with, even though it be a lion or a bear, a meddling monkey, or a busy ape; and before I will take this charm from off her sight, which I can do with another charm I know of, I will make her give me that boy to be my page."

Puck, who loved mischief to his heart, was highly *diverted* [entertained] with this intended frolic of his master, and ran to seek the flower; and while Oberon was waiting the return of Puck, he observed Demetrius and Helena enter the wood. He overheard Demetrius reproaching Helena for following him, and after many unkind words on his part and gentle *expostulations* [arguments used to try to talk somebody out of something] from Helena reminding him of his former love and professions of faith to her, he left her, and she ran after him as swiftly as she could.

The fairy king, who was always friendly to true lovers, felt great compassion for Helena. So when Puck returned with the flower, Oberon said, "Take a part of this flower; there has been a sweet Athenian lady here, who is in love with a disdainful youth; if you find him sleeping, drop some of the love-juice in his eyes, but contrive to do it when she is near him, that the first thing he sees when he awakes may be this despised lady. You will know the man by the Athenian garments that he wears." Puck promised to manage this matter very *dexterously* [nimble]. Then Oberon went, unperceived by Titania, to her bower, where she was preparing to go to rest.

He found Titania giving orders to her fairies, how they were to *employ* [occupy] themselves while she slept.

When the fairies had sung their queen asleep, they left her to perform the important services she had *enjoined* [instructed] them. Oberon then softly drew near Titania, and dropped some of the love-juice on her eyelids, saying, "What thou seest when thou dost wake,/Do it for thy true-love take."

But to return to Hermia, who made her escape out of her father's house that night, to avoid the death she was doomed to for refusing to marry Demetrius. When she entered the wood, she found her dear Lysander waiting to conduct her to his aunt's house; but before they had passed half through the wood, Hermia was so much fatigued, that Lysander persuaded her to rest till morning on a bank of soft moss. He then lay down some distance away, and they soon fell fast asleep.

Here they were found by Puck, who, seeing a handsome young man asleep, and perceiving that his clothes were made in the Athenian fashion, and that a pretty lady was sleeping near him, concluded that this must be the Athenian maid and her disdainful lover whom Oberon had sent him to seek. He naturally enough *conjectured* [guessed, assumed] that, since they were alone, she would be the first thing he would see when he awoke. So without more ado he proceeded to pour some of the juice of the little purple flower into his eyes. But it so fell out, that Helena came that way, and, instead of Hermia, was the first object Lysander beheld when he opened his eyes. And so powerful was the love-charm that all his love for Hermia vanished away, and Lysander fell in love with Helena.

Helena *endeavored* [tried] to keep pace with Demetrius when he ran away so rudely from her; but she could not continue for long. She soon lost sight of Demetrius; and as she was wandering about, dejected and forlorn, she arrived at the place where Lysander was sleeping. "Ah!" said she, "this is Lysander lying on the ground: is he dead or asleep?" Then, gently touching him, she said, "Good sir, if you are alive, awake."

Upon this Lysander opened his eyes, and (the love-charm beginning to work) immediately addressed her in terms of extravagant love and admiration; telling her she as much excelled Hermia in beauty as a dove does a raven, and that he would run through fire for her sweet sake; and many more such lover-like speeches.

Helena, knowing Lysander was her friend Hermia's lover, and that he was solemnly engaged to marry her, was in the utmost rage when she heard herself addressed in this manner; for she thought that Lysander was making *a jest* [fun] of her. "Oh!" said she, "Why was I born to be mocked and scorned by every one? Is it not enough that I can never get a sweet look or a kind word from Demetrius; but you, sir, must pretend in this disdainful manner to court me? I thought, Lysander, you were a lord of more true gentleness."

Saying these words in great anger, she ran away; and Lysander followed her, quite forgetful of his own Hermia, who was still asleep.

When Hermia awoke, she was in a sad fright at finding herself alone. She wandered about the wood, not knowing what was become of Lysander or which way to go to seek for him. In the meantime, Demetrius not being able to find Hermia and his rival Lysander and fatigued with his fruitless search, was observed by Oberon fast asleep.

Now Oberon had learnt by some questions he had asked of Puck, that the sprite had applied the love-charm to the wrong person's eyes; and now having found the person first intended, Oberon touched the eyelids of the sleeping Demetrius with the love-juice.

Demetrius instantly awoke. The first thing he saw was Helena, so he, as Lysander before him, began to address love-speeches to her. Just at that moment Lysander, followed by Hermia, made his appearance. Then Lysander and Demetrius both spoke of love to Helena, they being each one under the influence of the same potent charm.

The astonished Helena thought that Demetrius, Lysander, and her once dear friend Hermia, were all in a plot together to make a jest of her. Hermia was as much surprised as Helena: She knew not why Lysander and Demetrius, who both before loved her, were now become the lovers of Helena. And to Hermia the matter seemed to be no jest.

The ladies, who before had always been the dearest of friends, now began arguing. "Unkind Hermia," said Helena, "it is you have set Lysander on to vex me with mock praises; and your other lover Demetrius, who used almost to spurn me with his foot, have you not bid him call me 'Goddess,' 'Nymph,' 'rare,' 'precious,' and 'celestial'? He would not speak thus to me, whom he hates, if you did not set him on to make a jest of me. Unkind Hermia, to join with men in scorning your poor friend."

"I am amazed at your passionate words," said Hermia: "I scorn you not; it seems you scorn me."

"Ay, do," returned Helena, "persevere, counterfeit serious looks, and make mouths at me when I turn my back; then wink at each other, and hold the sweet jest up. If you had any pity, grace, or manners, you would not use me thus."

While Helena and Hermia were speaking these angry words to each other, Demetrius and Lysander left them, to fight together in the wood for the love of Helena. When they found the gentlemen had left them, they departed, and once more wandered weary in the wood in search of their lovers.

As soon as they were gone, the fairy king, who with Puck had been listening to their quarrels, said, "This is your negligence, Puck; or did you do this willfully?"

"Believe me," answered Puck, "it was a mistake; did not you tell me I should know the man by his Athenian garments? However, I am not sorry this has happened, for I think their jangling makes excellent sport."

"You heard," said Oberon, "that Demetrius and Lysander are gone to seek a convenient place to fight in. I command you to overhang the night with a thick fog, and lead these *quarrelsome* [grouchy] lovers so astray in the dark, that they shall not be able to find each other. *Counterfeit* [imitate] each of their voices to the other, and with bitter taunts provoke them to follow you, while they think it is their rival's tongue they hear. See you do this, till they are so weary they can go no farther; and when you find they are asleep, drop the juice of this other flower into Lysander's eyes, and when he awakes he will forget his new love for Helena, and return to his old passion for Hermia; and then the two fair ladies may each one be happy with the man she loves, and they will think all that has passed a *vexatious* [annoying] dream. Go, Puck, and I will see what sweet love my Titania has found."

Titania was still sleeping, and Oberon seeing a clown near her, who had lost his way in the wood, and was likewise asleep: "This fellow," said he, "shall be my Titania's true love." And clapping an ass's head over the clown's, it seemed to fit him as well as if it had grown upon his own shoulders. Though Oberon fixed the ass's head on very gently, it awakened him, and rising up, unconscious of what Oberon had done to him, he went towards the bower where the fairy queen slept.

“Ah! what angel is that I see?” said Titania, opening her eyes, the juice of the little purple flower beginning to take effect: “Are you as wise as you are beautiful?”

“Why, mistress,” said the foolish clown, “if I have wit enough to find the way out of this wood, I have enough to serve my turn.”

“Out of the wood do not desire to go,” said the *enamored* [charmed] queen. “I am a spirit of no common rate. I love you. Go with me, and I will give you fairies to attend upon you.”

She then called four of her fairies: their names were, Pease-blossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustard-seed. “Attend,” said the queen, “upon this sweet gentleman; hop in his walks, and gambol in his sight; feed him with grapes and apricots, and steal for him the honey-bags from the bees. Come, sit with me,” said she to the clown, “and let me play with your hairy cheeks! And kiss your fair large ears, my gentle joy!”

“Where is Pease-blossom?” said the ass-headed clown, not much regarding the fairy queen's courtship, but very proud of his new attendants.

“Here, sir,” said little Pease-blossom.

“Scratch my head,” said the clown. “Where is Cobweb?”

“Here, sir,” said Cobweb.

“Where is Mustard-seed?”

“Here, sir,” said Mustard-seed: “What is your will?”

“Nothing,” said the clown, “good Mr. Mustard-seed, but to help Mr. Pease-blossom to scratch; I must go to a barber's, Mr. Mustard-seed, for methinks I am marvelous hairy about the face.”

“My sweet love,” said the queen, “what will you have to eat? I have a fairy shall fetch you some new nuts.”

“I had rather have a handful of dried peas,” said the clown, who with his ass's head had got an ass's appetite. “But, I pray, let none of your people disturb me, for I have a mind to sleep.”

“Sleep, then,” said the queen, “and I will wind you in my arms. O how I love you! how I dote upon you!”

When the fairy king saw the clown sleeping in the arms of his queen, he advanced within her sight, and reproached her with having lavished her favors upon an ass. This she could not deny, as the clown was then sleeping within her arms, with his ass's head crowned by her with flowers.

When Oberon had teased her for some time, he again demanded the changeling boy; which she, ashamed of being discovered with her new favorite, did not dare to refuse him.

Oberon, having thus obtained the little boy he had so long wished for to be his page, took pity on the disgraceful situation into which he had brought his Titania, and threw some of the juice of the other flower into her eyes; and the fairy queen immediately recovered her senses, saying how she now loathed the sight of the strange monster.

Oberon likewise took the ass's head from off the clown and left him to finish his nap with his own fool's head upon his shoulders.

Oberon and his Titania being now perfectly reconciled, he related to her the history of the lovers and their midnight quarrels; and she agreed to go with him and see the end of their adventures.

The fairy king and queen found the lovers and their fair ladies sleeping on a grass-plot. For Puck, to make amends for his former mistake, had managed to bring them all to the same spot, unknown to each other. He had then carefully removed the charm from the Lysander with the antidote the fairy king gave him.

Hermia first awoke, and finding her lost Lysander asleep so near her, was looking at him and wondering at his strange *inconstancy* [unfaithfulness]. Lysander presently opened his eyes, saw his dear Hermia, and recovered his reason and his love for Hermia. They began to talk over the adventures of the night, wondering whether these things had really happened or if they had both been dreaming the same bewildering dream.

Helena and Demetrius were by this time awake, and she listened with delight to the professions of love that Demetrius still made to her and which, to her surprise as well as pleasure, she began to perceive were sincere.

These fair night-wandering ladies, now no longer rivals, became once more true friends. All the unkind words were forgiven, and they calmly consulted together what was best to be done in their present situation.

It was soon agreed that, as Demetrius had given up his pretensions to Hermia, he should endeavor to prevail upon her father to revoke the cruel sentence of death which had been passed against her. Demetrius was preparing to return to Athens for this friendly purpose, when they were surprised with the sight of Egeus, Hermia's father, who came to the wood in pursuit of his runaway daughter.

When Egeus understood that Demetrius would not now marry his daughter, he no longer opposed her marriage with Lysander, and on that same day Helena joyfully agreed to marry her beloved and now faithful Demetrius.

The fairy king and queen, who were invisible spectators of this *reconciliation* [reunion] brought about by Oberon, resolved to celebrate the approaching nuptials with sports and revels throughout their fairy kingdom.

And now, if anyone is offended with this story of fairies and their pranks, just imagine that you have been asleep and dreaming, and that all these adventures were visions that you saw in your sleep. No need to be so unreasonable as to be offended with a pretty harmless Midsummer Night's Dream.