

Children of the Moon

By Richard Middleton

The boy stood at the place where the park trees stopped and the smooth lawns slid away gently to the great house. He was dressed only in a pair of ragged knickerbockers and a gaping buttonless shirt, so that his legs and neck and chest shone silver bare in the moonlight. By day he had a mass of rough golden hair, but now it seemed to brood above his head like a black cloud that made his face deathly white by comparison. On his arms there lay a great heap of gleaming dew-wet roses and lilies, spoil of the park flower-beds. Their cool petals touched his cheek, and filled his nostrils with aching scent. He felt his arms smarting here and there, where the thorns of the roses had torn them in the dark, but these delicate caresses of pain only served to deepen to him the wonder of the night that wrapped him about like a cloak. Behind him there dreamed the black woods, and over his head multitudinous stars quivered and balanced in space; but these things were nothing to him, for far across the lawn that was spread knee-deep with a web of mist there gleamed for his eager eyes the splendour of a fairy palace. Red and orange and gold, the lights of the fairy revels shone from a hundred windows and filled him with wonder that he should see with wakeful eyes the jewels that he had desired so long in sleep. He could only gaze and gaze until his straining eyes filled with tears, and set the enchanted lights dancing in the dark. On his ears, that heard no more the crying of the night-birds and the quick stir of the rabbits in the brake, there fell the strains of far music. The flowers in his arms seemed to sway to it, and his heart beat to the deep pulse of the night.

So enraptured were his senses that he did not notice the coming of the girl, and she was able to examine him closely before she called to him softly through the moonlight.

“Boy! Boy!”

At the sound of her voice he swung round and looked at her with startled eyes.

He saw her excited little face and her white dress.

“Are you a fairy?” he asked hoarsely, for the night-mist was in his voice.

“No,” she said, “I’m a little girl. You’re a wood-boy, I suppose?”

He stayed silent, regarding her with a puzzled face. Who was this little white creature with the tender voice that had slipped so suddenly out of the night?

“As a matter of fact,” the girl continued, “I’ve come out to have a look at the fairies. There’s a ring down in the wood. You can come with me if you like, wood-boy.”

He nodded his head silently, for he was afraid to speak to her, and set off through the wood by her side, still clasping the flowers to his breast.

“What were you looking at when I found you?” she asked.

“The palace—the fairy palace,” the boy muttered.

“The palace?” the girl repeated. “Why, that’s not a palace; that’s where I live.”

The boy looked at her with new awe; if she were a fairy— But the girl had noticed that his feet made no sound beside her shoes.

“Don’t the thorns prick your feet, wood-boy?” she asked; but the boy said nothing, and they were both silent for a while, the girl looking about her keenly as she walked, and the boy watching her face. Presently they came to a wide pool where a little tinkling fountain threw bubbles to the hidden fish.

“Can you swim?” she said to the boy.

He shook his head.

“It’s a pity,” said the girl; “we might have had a bathe. It would be rather fun in the dark, but it’s pretty deep there. We’d better get on to the fairy ring.”

The moon had flung queer shadows across the glade in which the ring lay, and when they stood on the edge listening intently the wood seemed to speak to them with a hundred voices.

“You can take hold of my hand, if you like,” said the girl, in a whisper.

The boy dropped his flowers about his white feet and felt for the girl’s hand in the dark. Soon it lay in his own, a warm live thing, that stirred a little with excitement.

“I’m not afraid,” the girl said; and so they waited.

The man came upon them suddenly from among the silver birches. He had a knapsack on his back and his hair was as long as a tramp’s. At sight of him the girl almost screamed, and her hand trembled in the boy’s; some instinct made him hold it tighter.

“What do you want?” he muttered, in his hoarse voice.

The man was no less astonished than the children.

“What on earth are you doing here?” he cried. His voice was mild and reassuring, and the girl answered him promptly.

“I came out to look for fairies.”

“Oh, that’s right enough,” commented the man, “and you,” he said, turning to the boy, “are you after fairies, too? Oh, I see; picking flowers. Do you mean to sell them?”

The boy shook his head.

“For my sister,” he said, and stopped abruptly.

“Is your sister fond of flowers?”

“Yes; she’s dead.”

The man looked at him gravely. “That’s a phrase,” he said, “and phrases are the devil. Who told you that dead people like flowers?”

“They always have them,” said the boy, blushing for shame of his pretty thought.

“And what are *you* looking for?” the girl interrupted.

The man made a mocking grimace, and glanced around the glade as if he were afraid of being overheard.

“Dreams,” he said bluntly.

The girl pondered this for a moment. “And your knapsack?” she began. “Yes,” said the man, “it’s full of them. The children looked at the knapsack with interest, the girl’s fingers tingling to undo the straps of it.

“What are they like?” she asked.

The man gave a short laugh.

“Very like yours and his, I expect; when you grow older, young woman, you’ll find there’s really only one dream possible for a sensible person. But you don’t want to hear about my troubles. This is more in your line.” He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a flageolet, which he put to his lips. “Listen!” he said.

To the girl it seemed as though the little tune had leapt from the pipe, and was dancing round the ring like a real fairy, while echo came tripping through the trees to join it. The boy gaped and said nothing.

At last, when the fairy was beginning to falter and echo was quite out of breath, the man took the flageolet from his lips.

“Well,” he said, with a smile.

“Thank you very much,” said the girl politely. “I think that was very nice indeed. Oh, boy!” she broke off, “you’re hurting my hand!”

The boy’s eyes were shining strangely, and he was waving his arms in dismay.

“All the wasted moonlight! he cried; the grass is quite wet with it.”

The girl turned to him in surprise.

“Why, boy, you’ve found your voice.

“After that,” said the man gravely, as he put his flageolet back in his pocket, “I think I will show you the inside of my knapsack.”

The girl bent down eagerly, while he loosened the straps, but gave a cry of disappointment when she saw the contents.

“Pictures!” she said.

“Pictures,” echoed the man drily,—“pictures of dreams. I don’t know how you’re going to see them. Perhaps the moon will do her best.”

The girl looked at them nicely, and passed them on one by one to the boy. Presently she made a discovery.

“Oh, boy!” she cried, “your tears are spoiling all the pictures.”

“I’m sorry,” said the boy huskily; “I can’t help it.”

“I know,” the man said quickly; “it doesn’t matter a bit. I expect you’ve seen these pictures before.”

“I know them all,” said the boy, “but I have never seen them.”

The man frowned.

“It’s the devil,” he said to himself, “when boys speak English.” He turned suddenly to the girl, who was puzzling over the boy’s tears. “It’s time you went back to bed,” he said; “there won’t be any fairies to-night. It’s too cold for them.”

The girl yawned.

“I shall get into a row when I get back if they’ve found it out. I don’t care.”

“The moon is fading,” said the boy suddenly; “there are no more shadows.”

“We will see you through the wood,” the man continued, “and say good-night.”

He put his pictures back in his knapsack and then walked silently through the murmuring wood. At the edge of the wood the girl stopped.

“You are a wood-boy,” she said to the boy, “and you mustn’t come any farther. You can give me a kiss if you like.”

The boy did not move, but stayed regarding her awkwardly.

“I think you are a very silly boy,” said the girl, with a toss of her head, and she stalked away proudly into the mist.

“Why didn’t you kiss her?” asked the man.

“Her lips would burn me,” said the boy.

The man and the boy walked slowly across the park.

“Now, boy,” said the man, “since civilisation has gone to bed the time has come for you to hear your destiny.”

“I am only a poor boy,” the boy replied simply. “I don’t think I have any destiny.”

“Paradox,” said the man, “is meant to conceal the insincerity of the aged, not to express the simplicity of youth. But I wander. You have made phrases to-night.”

“What are phrases?”

“What are dreams? What are roses? What, in fine, is the moon? Boy, I take you for a moon-child. You hold her pale flowers in your arms, her white beams have caressed your limbs, you

prefer the kisses of her cool lips to those of that earth-child; all this is very well. But, above all, you have the music of her great silence; above all, you have her tears. When I played to you on my pipe you recognised the voice of your mother. When I showed you my pictures you recalled the tales with which she hushed you to sleep. And so I knew that you were her son and my little brother.”

“The moon has always been my friend,” said the boy; “but I did not know that she was my mother.”

“Perhaps your sister knows it; the happy dead are glad to seek her for a mother; that is why they are so fond of white flowers.”

“We have a mother at home. She works very hard for us.”

“But it is your mother among the clouds who makes your life beautiful, and the beauty of your life is the measure of your days.”

While the boy reflected on these things they had reached the gates of the park, and they stole past the silent lodge on to the high road. A man was waiting there in the shadows, and when he saw the boy’s companion he rushed out and seized him by the arm.

“So I’ve got you,” he said; “I don’t think I’ll let you go again in a hurry.”

The son of the moon gave a queer little laugh.

“Why, it’s Taylor!” he said pleasantly; “but, Taylor, you know you’re making a great mistake.”

“Very possibly,” said the keeper, with a laugh.

“You see this boy here, Taylor; I assure you he is much madder than I am.”

Taylor looked at the boy kindly.

“Time you were in bed, Tommy,” he said.

“Taylor,” said the man earnestly, “this boy has made three phrases. “If you don’t lock him up he will certainly become a poet. He will set your precious world of sanity ablaze with the fire of his mother, the moon. Your palaces will totter, Taylor, and your kingdoms become as dust. I have warned you.”

“That’s right, sir; and now you must come with me.”

“Boy,” said the man generously, “keep your liberty. By grace of Providence, all men in authority are fools. We shall meet again under the light of the moon.”

With dreamy eyes the boy watched the departure of his companion. He had become almost invisible along the road when, miraculously as it seemed, the light of the moon broke through the trees by the wayside and lit up his figure. For a moment it fell upon his head like a halo, and touched the knapsack of dreams with glory. Then all was lost in the blackness of night.

As he turned homeward the boy felt a cold wind upon his cheek. It was the first breath of dawn.