

## AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

*Based on The Little Fairy Sister by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite & Grenbry Outhwaite, A & C Black, Ltd, London (first printed, 1923, reprinted 1929).*

Nadine had been dreading the day when she would have to face the prospect of clearing out her parents' house. Now that day had arrived. She walked slowly up the weed-infested path and opened the front door. Inside all was still, expectant, as if the house had been waiting for her. Her footsteps echo-ed on the polished floorboards in the hallway as she made her way to the lounge-room. Familiar yet not familiar after an absence of so many years, the sight of the sagging armchairs, the faded chintz curtains and her mother's treasured Persian rug engulfed her in memories of her long-dead twin sister, Kitty, and shadowy traces of a troubling incident that had darkened Nadine's childhood. She had buried the unhappiness in the deepest corners of her psyche, almost forgotten through teenage, then adult, years that were filled with achievements and adventures. Lovers had come and gone but Nadine never could commit her heart to any of them; there was always a part of her that was missing.

For the first time in years, Nadine wanted to see Kitty's face. She took the family photograph album from the bookshelf, sat down and opened it. The earliest photographs were of her parents' wedding and their new house. Next were photos of Nadine and Kitty. As babies they had been very alike – the same round faces and turned-up noses, the same curly chestnut hair. The only way to tell them apart was that Nadine had green eyes and Kitty's were hazel.

After their third birthday differences began to appear. Nadine was strong and sturdy while Kitty grew paler and thinner, content to sit and watch her more energetic twin. By the time they were four it was clear that Kitty was ailing. Their parents took her to doctor after doctor but none of them could find what was wrong. Nadine could hear their mother's sad voice, saying, as if it were yesterday, 'Perhaps she is pining for the Country of the Fairies'. In the last photo of Kitty, she was little more than a wraith in their mother's arms.

'She went away, and we never saw her again', the only explanation their parents gave.

Nadine missed her sister badly. 'I wish I'd gone too,' she often said.

'And leave me and Father?' her mother had whispered.

'I would only go for a little while to see Kitty in the Country of the Fairies, just like we visit Aunt Louise at Christmas time. But I don't know where the fairies live.'

Her father chimed in. 'Animals are supposed to talk to the fairies. They might know.'

Nadine thought for a moment, then nodded. 'I'll stay, for now. One day when I'm older I'll go and find Kitty.'

'Let's go to the park,' her mother had said, a catch in her throat.

At the delightful prospect of swings and slippery-dip Nadine took her parents' hands and skipped away from the sadness of losing her sister...

The park... Nadine used to know the names of all its trees. She hadn't been there for years and wondered how many she would remember. She closed the photo album, grabbed a coat against the late-June chill and headed to the gardens that in childhood had been a place for her imagination to roam free. Nadine smiled as she walked through lawns sprinkled with the last of autumn's fallen leaves, their flecks of gold merging with the dappled sunshine filtering through the foliage of eucalypts, date palms and a solitary bottle tree. She approached the sandstone ledges that rose in tiers towards the escarpment on the park's western boundary and sat on a wide slab of rock. She ran her hands over its sand-papery surface, turning her face to the sunlight filtering through the spiky foliage of a massive Hoop Pine. A golden butterfly fluttered past on its way to a clump of native clematis near a smooth-barked Angophora. A rainbow lorikeet called imperiously to its mate. Nadine closed her eyes. Kitty...

‘Hello Nadine, it’s me, Kitty,’ a child’s voice called. ‘I am so happy to see you again. Do you want to visit my home in Fairy Country?’ At Nadine’s enthusiastic nod, Kitty continued. ‘Because we are so alike, I can transform you into a pretend fairy, but you must promise never to try and approach me. If you do the fairies will know you are not me, only a human being, and terrible things will happen. That’s the first rule I learnt when I came here: If a human is admitted into Fairy Country there will be a great disaster.’

Nadine was curious about the Fairy Country, but most of all she wanted to see her sister again; she would agree to Kitty’s terms, for the moment. ‘How do I find this magical country?’

‘The animals will guide you,’ Kitty replied, her voice growing fainter until it faded altogether.

When Nadine judged it safe to look, she discovered that the park stretched further than the eye could see. The trees were truly enormous. The flowers on a nearby banksia were like the bristling yellow cylinders at a carwash. The rock on which she sat had become a vast platform; the ground was now far below. She was no bigger than a willy wagtail.

Instead of jeans and sweater she was wearing a pink organza dress – identical to one she had worn as a young girl. Her brown leather shoes had been transformed into strange silver ones with wing-like protrusions at the back. She put a hand to her hair. Instead of her smooth chignon, she felt the unruly curls of childhood. Was she dreaming? She didn’t think so. The stone on which she sat was rough against her skin, the sun warm on her face. A thrill of fear ran through Nadine at this extraordinary situation.

She heard a rustling under some nearby ferns and turned in that direction to see a grey-brown bandicoot emerge. ‘Who are you?’ the animal asked in a high squeaky voice.

‘I could ask the same of you,’ Nadine replied, surprised at her equally high voice, so unlike her adult one. ‘My name is Nadine and I want to visit the Country of the Fairies, to see where Kitty lives. Can you help me?’

The bandicoot eyed Nadine with bright black eyes. ‘Why it’s here, all around you, if you know how to look. First you will have to get off that cliff. Try jumping.’

‘It’s a long way down, Nadine said, wriggling to the edge of the rock and peering over, her heart beating fast.

‘You’ll just have to trust yourself,’ the bandicoot replied and scurried off.

Nadine took a deep breath and pushed herself forward. To her surprise she didn’t flop to the ground but floated, light as dandelion down, into a thick layer of leaves, some as big as dinner plates. Somewhere the other Nadine watched the scene with delight. Like Alice, she had been transported into an enchanted world.

As Nadine stood up, a throaty voice called out: ‘You did that all right.’ The owner of this voice was a huge lizard with blue flashes on its head and tail.

‘Aha,’ the girl said when the lizard flicked out its tongue at a passing fly. ‘You’re a blue-tongue!’

‘How did you guess?’

‘Where am I?’ Nadine ignored his ironic tone.

‘The Land of Minnows,’ the lizard chortled. ‘Most people here are tiny, like you; not me. I’m full size. All the better to catch my dinner.’ His tongue flew out trapping two hapless flies.’ He wiped his mouth with a scaly claw. ‘Delicious!’

Nadine was glad she didn’t have wings. No flying creature would be safe from that flicking tongue. ‘I’m looking for the Country of the Fairies,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you could show me the way.’

The lizard’s head swayed from side to side. ‘Could do,’ he said in his scratchy voice. ‘You’ll have to cross the river first.’

In the ‘real’ world’ the stream that meandered through the park was usually little more than a trickle, easily crossed. It had been raining and in her current Lilliputian state, Nadine acknowledged that traversing it might pose a problem.

'Thank you lizard. Can you show me the way?'

'Call me Bluey. Come on.'

She followed him across rocks and around bushes and was clambering through a clump of bright green cycads when she heard a sound like small bells tinkling. Looking up she saw dozens of fairy-like creatures dressed in rainbow colours, rising into the sky on shimmering wings. Her heart leapt. Was Kitty among them? The fairy flock was so high she could not see their faces. She tried to follow but the fairies were travelling very fast. Even with her winged feet, she made slow progress and could only watch as they vanished. With a last flick of its tongue the lizard also disappeared.

Nadine sank into a tuft of spongy moss under the graceful branches of a weeping lilly-pilly. She felt like weeping herself. Was there no one to help her find Kitty? She saw water sparkling in the distance but the way to it appeared difficult, across huge tree roots that fanned out in all directions. With a sigh she struggled on. When she reached the swiftly flowing stream, it was much wider than she remembered. At the sound of a melodious tune, Nadine glanced up to a low-hanging branch to see a young butcherbird. Although the bird had a sharply hooked beak it seemed friendly.

Hello', Nadine said.

The fledgling began singing a song about 'Poor little Kitty'. Nadine felt a moment of anxiety. If her companion assumed *she* was Kitty then every other creature she met might make the same mistake.

'I'm on my way to sing for the Fairy Queen – that's why I'm practising. I'm surprised you are not already there Kitty,' the bird trilled, eye-ing Nadine with suspicion. 'Perhaps you are afraid to cross the dreaded Spi-Woman's river. I'm not good at flying yet, so mother won't let me go over the river by myself in case the Spi-Woman pulls me down into her cavern.'

As a make-believe fairy Nadine could skim just above the ground but she couldn't fly high like birds and fairies so she too would be in danger. 'Is there is a way round?'

'No, the river goes all the way to the sea. No one knows where it begins.'

The bird stretched both wings as its mother arrived and the two flew off.

Nadine continued alone and soon found herself standing on the edge of a deep waterway. She dipped a toe in the water. There was a ripple close by as a strange object began to break the surface to reveal the weirdest looking creature Nadine had ever seen: a woman covered in green-grey scales from the top of her head to her fish-like tail. Her hair was coarse and crinkly like seaweed and her fingers had claws instead of nails.

'You want to get across my river dearie?' she gurgled. 'Come along, I'll take you.'

'Do you live here?' Nadine asked to buy time, hoping the butcherbird had exaggerated the danger.

'I have a lovely house down under the water. It's made of precious crystal. Would you like to see it?'

'Why do you need a house?'

'I must live in the water but be surrounded by air; to breathe you see.'

Nadine didn't really 'see' but nodded all the same.

'Spirit People like me keep the ponds cleaned out and rivers and streams free from rubbish so that their waters flow freely to the sea. Otherwise the waterways would choke up, the levels rise, spread over the whole country and drown all those who live there.'

The Spi-Woman waved her claws. 'The way humans are behaving, the flood will happen. The seas and oceans are rising, in spite of our best efforts.' Her voice came in angry staccato bursts. Nadine resolved to try harder when she was back in her own world to keep the beaches clean. She brushed aside a small voice that said, 'if you get back'.

She was about to let the Spi-Woman ferry her across when a wren flew by, twittering, 'Don't go'. Before Nadine could ask why, the bird was gone in a flash of blue.

'It won't take long, will it?' she asked the Spi-Woman.

'Not at all,' replied the Spi-Woman, a leering grin on her face, a wicked gleam in her eyes. Nadine was about to say 'yes', when the wren darted past again and chirped, louder this time, 'Don't go!'

As Nadine backed away from the edge of the river, the Spi-Woman began to sink slowly under the water. At that moment a dragonfly swooped near Nadine, its wings beating fast. In an instant she leapt onto the shining armour behind its head. However the dragonfly did not ferry Nadine straight across the water. He swooped high and low in great curves with a whole cloud of dragonflies chasing them in a game of follow-the-leader. Finally, when the dragonfly flew close enough to the opposite side of the river, Nadine jumped onto the shore.

She leant over the side hoping to catch a glimpse of the Spi-Woman's crystal house to find the creature looking straight up at her, waving her long scaly arms round in circles. The water in the river began to swirl in eddies, faster and faster. Its level rose until it lapped over the banks. Just as the Spi-Woman's snaky arms reached out towards her, Nadine somersaulted backwards away from the danger to land on the velvety petals of a flannel flower. She sat up and looked around. If this was Fairy Country, where was Queen, and all the fairies?

She heard tinkling voices ahead of her chanting in unison: 'Where is Kitty? We must keep looking for her.' Nadine followed the voices, leaping over ferns and creepers until she reached the spreading roots of a Port Jackson Fig Tree. In her haste she tripped and sprawled head first in the damp soil. 'Bother,' she cried, alerting the fairies to her presence. They ran towards her, calling, 'Here's Kitty, dear Kitty. Where have you been?'

Before Nadine could answer, the fairies gathered her up and hurried to a hillock on which more fairies danced and sang about their tasks for the Fairy Queen: one was to guide the tendrils on the plants; another to gather dead blooms and bury them in the soil; a third was to waken seeds from their winter sleep. As her turn approached, Nadine worried she wouldn't know what to say, yet if she didn't say anything they might all notice that her eyes were green, instead of Kitty's hazel.

'Kitty, Kitty,' they chorused. 'Kitty hasn't sung yet. We all know what she does!' Into Nadine's head came a rhyme from childhood, about waiting on the Fairy Queen 'in her lovely robe of spangled green'. She couldn't sing it because she was not Kitty and certainly could not wait on the Queen. Nadine stood there becoming redder and redder, as they all stared at her.

'Why Kitty,' asked one fairy, 'where is the Queen and why aren't you with her?' A tall fairy asked why Nadine didn't sing. Another stared at her closely and said she looked different. A fourth asked, 'What have you done to your eyes?' Just then the music changed to a loud clangour of bells, which distracted the fairies long enough for Nadine to escape.

Free from their awkward questions, Nadine skimmed around tree trunks and over the undergrowth before reaching a slope covered with emerald grass and rimmed by bangalay gums and carabeen trees. About half way down the sward a vine of pink boronia grew so thickly over a fallen tree it formed a kind of grotto. As Nadine drew closer she saw, sticking out from under the mass of blooms, a bare foot.

Nadine brushed aside Kitty's warning that something awful would happen if they met face to face. She wanted so much to see her sister, she would risk that possibility. She peeped into the bower to find a heap of pale-green fabric. As she bent down to lift the flowers aside peals of mischievous laughter erupted. The fairies had followed her!

The green-clad figure in the bower stirred, sat up and reached for a stem of boronia bush which she then held upright, like a wand. It was the Fairy Queen. Nadine was so astonished that she forgot everything she ought to have remembered and shouted, 'You're not Kitty!'

There was a crackling of twigs as she spoke and through the boronia screen she saw a figure who had been lying on the other side of the Fairy Queen, spring up and dash away. She did not see the face but even through the leaves she recognised the pink dress and knew it was Kitty.

As the Queen inspected Nadine, a lightning flash shot into her eyes. Suddenly there arose a mighty gust of wind; the sky turned black and darkness fell around them. A terrible storm blew up, the wind and rain howling like demons. Nadine crouched down and covered her face with her hands.

A few minutes later the wind stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Nadine raised her head to find she was alone: fairies, Fairy Queen and floral bower had vanished. Yet it was the same grassy slope with the same trees growing around it and next to her was a stem of boronia, crushed and torn. This must be the 'great disaster' Kitty had told her about, and it was Nadine's curiosity and disobedience that had caused it. If she could have her time over again, she would be content with the privilege of simply visiting the country where Kitty lived. Somewhere, the adult Nadine knew this was her 'time over again' and she had ruined it.

A rumbling sound made Nadine look up to see a bizarre figure on the edge of the slope. She hurried towards it to find, not the Fairy Queen, but a very tall old man wrapped in a long brown cloak, his head so bowed he was nearly bent double. Before she got close enough to ask what had happened to the Fairy Queen, the old man was swept into the last of the storm and disappeared up and over the escarpment at the back of the park, as if nothing had happened.

Desperate to find out what had occurred, Nadine set off through the park in search of someone to ask. Near the trunk of an immense eucalypt, she came upon two koalas sitting side by side on a pile of leaves. They stared at her solemnly.

'Did you notice a storm just now?' Nadine asked.

The bigger koala wagged his furry head, which she understood to mean 'Yes'.

'Do you often have storms like that?' she continued.

'Only once in a while,' said the smaller koala.

'What do you mean by "once in a while"?' 'Have you ever you had one in the past?'

'Not in the past... in a while I said.'

'Do you think something has happened to the Fairy Queen?'

The koalas waved their paws. 'That's it – the Fairy Queen. She's gone!'

'Where has she gone?'

'Only the Tree-Man knows.'

'Where shall I find the Tree-Man?'

The koalas cuddled closer.

'I must find him and ask him to release the Queen,' said Nadine. 'It's all my fault.' The koalas looked dismal; Nadine's heart sank.

'I must find him,' she insisted. 'It's because of me it all happened. Please tell me where I can find the Tree-Man.'

'In the middle of the Park.' The larger koala pointed to a sombre gully.

'Will you show me the way?'

When the Koalas didn't reply, Nadine continued. 'Will the Tree-Man hurt you?'

'No, but we are animals.'

'Why are you afraid then?'

'You are a fairy person.'

'You think he'll harm me?'

The koalas nodded but agreed to show her the way. The trio had not gone far into a dark glade filled with tree ferns and grass trees before they met a pelican waddling along a path. Nadine waved to the bird.

'Can you tell us what has happened?'

'A Great Disaster, Kitty,' the pelican replied.

'Is it the Fairy Queen?'

'She has been carried away.' The pelican clacked its beak.

'How can I discover where the Fairy Queen has gone?'

‘Only the Tree-Man can tell you that.’

Then the pelican muttered: ‘That’s strange; that’s very strange.’ With a great flapping of wings, he launched himself into the air.

At each new creature Nadine encountered, the answer to her questions met with the same responses: ‘A Great Disaster’; or, ‘That’s strange, that’s very strange.’ Always, only the Tree-Man could help her. Two platypuses, a dwarf tree frog, a bush rat, a kookaburra and several magpies all said the same thing: ‘It was strange – very strange’.

As she approached the darkest part of the park, Nadine sensed that an important moment was near. She must not show all the animals following her that she was afraid yet when they came to a clearing, she gripped the koalas’ paws tighter. At first she saw only the enormous stump of a Port Jackson Fig flanked by the ringed trunks of tall palm-trees. When she looked more closely she saw it was the Tree-Man himself. He had two withered branch-like arms and a gnarled face half way up a leathery trunk. Though frightening because of its size, the face was not unkind – very like the face of the old gardener at her parents’ home.

The Tree-Man spoke first: ‘So you’ve come. I knew you would.’

‘No one made me come, I came because I wanted to,’ Nadine replied. She could tell by the look in his eye that *he* knew that she was not Kitty, only a human girl pretending to be a fairy.

‘Well, what did you come for?’

The animals were listening eagerly so she must appear brave no matter she was quaking inside. ‘I came to find out what has happened to the Fairy Queen,’ she said, hoping the Tree-Man wouldn’t notice her shaky voice.

‘You were there, you know what happened,’ he replied sternly.

‘I saw a great storm, and an old, old man...’

The Tree-Man laughed so hard his branches shook. ‘I am very old, even for a tree,’ he said. ‘Hundreds of years old. So when I choose to be a man for a little while, I am of a very great age. That is beside the point. What I mean is that you know why what happened – happened.’

She could have said ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ but she did know what he meant and could not answer; she jiggled from one foot to the other.

‘You want me to tell you then?’ the Tree-Man asked. ‘In the good old days, I was King of the Park. Then the fairies came and we trees fought and fought. They were stronger than us, with their nasty magic. We had magic too, although it wasn’t as good as theirs. Still we could make it unpleasant for them. In the end we made a treaty. Do you know what a treaty is?’

Before Nadine could say, ‘Yes like the Treaty of Versailles, after World War I’, the Tree-Man continued.

‘It means the weaker side gives up almost everything to be allowed to keep something. In this case the treaty was that we should remain trees all the time, and not go running about where we liked and turning into humans when we chose, as we had been in the habit of doing. We were to be trees, rooted to the soil, except – this was our side of it – except if the fairies ever allowed a human being to enter the country.’

‘We didn’t want people here, with their axes and loppings and cuttings and once we were real trees we didn’t feel safe unless the fairies promised us that. So they agreed that if ever a human entered their country, we should be free once more to take human shape as we used to do and exercise our power over the weather.’

He nodded, stiffly. ‘Oh yes, trees have power over the weather. When word got out that a human being had entered this wood, I crashed out, free again. My brave companions are all dead and these trees,’ he waved his craggy arms, ‘are Johnny-come-latelies. I alone can be alive. I have shown these fairies what I can do.’

By the time he had finished this long speech the animals were craning their necks to stare at Nadine, their voices bouncing off one another.

‘I knew it wasn’t Kitty.’

'There's something strange about her.'

'Kitty's got hazel eyes. Didn't I say so?'

'Whoever heard of a fairy with green eyes?'

'Then it isn't Kitty.' 'Could Kitty change her eyes?'

Nadine put her hands over to ears to shut out this chatter. She turned to the Tree-Man. 'It was you who carried off the Fairy Queen and it all happened because of me. I am so sorry. Can't you let her go?'

'Ha-ha,' laughed the Tree-Man. 'What would become of Kitty then? Wouldn't the Fairy Queen be very angry with Kitty for letting you in and giving control back to the trees?'

'I think she would forgive her because, you see, I am Kitty's twin sister and she did it because I wanted her to see her very much. I'm sure the Fairy Queen will forgive Kitty, if you'll let her go. Oh please do! I'll do anything you ask, if you'll only let her go.'

'Anything, will you?' asked the Tree-Man grimly. 'Do you know I eat human beings, plump and tender like you? Will you come and be eaten up?'

Although this sounded terrifying, Nadine wasn't sure whether he was laughing at her or not. He looked so ridiculously like that old gardener that she couldn't believe he was an ogre. The only thing that bothered her was the memory of the bowed old man with the long beard. Suppose she crawled inside the Tree-Man and found him there? She didn't like this frightening idea. For a split second the adult Nadine felt a familiar flash of terror as she remembered her parents' garden shed and her young self struggling to break free of strong soil-stained hands.

'What must I do?'

You would have to crawl into that large crack down there between my roots,' he answered. 'Although I can't bend down to look at it, I know it's big enough to take you.'

'If I don't do it?'

'Then you'll leave the Fairy Queen to her fate, whatever that may be.' He cackled horribly. His branches creaked and groaned; he no longer resembled the old gardener as he had been, most of the time... except for that one distressing day.

'I'll come,' she cried, and dashed forward before she had time to be afraid. On her hands and knees she crawled into the yawning blackness at the foot of the tree stump. The animals gave loud cries of fear; the koalas groaned a deep 'woo-oof'. The instant she was inside the darkness, a loud explosion rent the air and the tree flew to pieces all round her. She seemed to be floating high up in the air. She saw the animals flying in all directions as bits of wood rained down on them. As she rose higher still, she saw a velvety green hillock. On its top stood the Fairy Queen with her hair falling like waves of sunshine over her shoulders. As Nadine watched, Kitty came running up. The Fairy Queen held out her arms and Kitty ran straight into them. Then Kitty and the Fairy Queen disappeared in the mist that had begun to swirl through the park...

There was a flash of lightening and a crack of thunder, and the sound of wood tearing, as the top of a Cook Pine came crashing down on Nadine, pinning her legs to the ground. She screamed for help, but no one came. She began to lose all sense of time: sometimes there was pain; sometimes numbness. She heard a voice shouting, 'wake up, wake up!' She opened her eyes to see a figure standing in front of her. Was it the Tree-Man, the old gardener or a paramedic?

As she drifted in and out of consciousness, soothing images of Kitty in the Country of the Fairies flowed past Nadine's eyes. She didn't want to wake up but stay with her sister, and never again be troubled by human wrongdoings.

Nadine heard Kitty whisper 'Nadine, Nadine' amidst the bell-like voices of the fairies.

'I'm coming Kitty,' she called ever so faintly.