

John Payne (1842-1916)

2 *The Ballad of May Margaret*

Oh, sweet is the Spring in coppice and wold
And the bonny fresh flowers are springing!
May Margaret walks in the merry greenwood,
To hear the blithe birds singing.

May Margaret walks in the heart of the treen, 5
Under the green boughs straying;
And she hath met the king of the elves,
Under the lindens playing.

‘Oh, wed thou with me, May Margaret,
All in the merry green Maytime, 10
And thou shalt dance all the moonlit night
And sleep on flowers in the daytime!’

‘O king of the elves, it may not be,
For the sake of the folk that love me;
I may not be queen of the elfland green, 15
For the fear of the heaven above me.’

‘Oh, an thou wilt be the elfland’s queen,
Thy robe shall be blue and golden
And thou shalt drink of the rose-red wine,
In blue-bell chalices holden.’ 20

‘O king of the elves, it may not be.
My father at home would miss me;
An if I were queen of the elfland green,
My mother would never kiss me.’

‘Oh, an thou wilt be the elfland’s queen, 25
Thy shoon shall be seagreen sendal;
Thy thread shall be silk as white as milk
And snow-white silver thy spindle.’

He hath led her by the lilywhite hand
 Into the hillside palace: 30
And he hath given her wine to drink
 Out of the blue-bell chalice.

Now seven long years are over and gone,
 Since the thorn began to blossom;
And she hath brought the elf-king a son 35
 And beareth it on her bosom.

‘A boon, a boon, my husband the king,
 For the sake of my babe I cry thee!’
‘Now ask what thou wilt, May Margaret;
 There’s nothing I may deny thee.’ 40

‘Oh, let me go home for a night and a day,
 To show my mother her daughter
And fetch a priest to my bonny wee babe,
 To sprinkle the holy water!

‘Oh, let me go home for a day and a night 45
 To the little town by the river!
And we will turn to the merry greenwood
 And dwell with the elves for ever.’

Oh, out of the elfland are they gone,
 Mother and babe together, 50
And they are come, in the blithe Springtime,
 To the land of the blowing heather.

‘Oh, where is my mother I used to kiss
 And my father that erst caressed me?
They both lie cold in the churchyard mould 55
 And I have no whither to rest me.

‘Oh, where is the dove that I used to love
 And the lover that used to love me?
The one is dead, the other is fled;
 But the heaven is left above me. 60

‘I pray thee, sir priest, to christen my babe

With bell and candle and psalter;
And I will give up this bonny gold cup,
To stand on the holy altar.'

'O queen of the elves, it may not be! 65
The elf must suffer damnation,
But if thou wilt bring thy costliest thing,
As guerdon for its salvation.'

'Oh, surely my life is my costliest thing!
I give it and never rue it. 70
An if thou wilt save my innocent babe,
The blood of my heart ensue it!'

The priest hath made the sign of the cross,
The white-robed choristers sing;
But the babe is dead ere blessing be said, 75
May Margaret's costliest thing.

Oh, drearily and loud she shrieked, as if
The soul from her breast should sever!
And she hath gone to the merry greenwood,
To dwell with the elves for ever. 80

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