

Red Feather Rides To The Sea

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Illustrated by Elsie Deane

THE west wind shook the grass-blade on which Red Feather was sitting. There sounded a murmur as of far-off waters tumbling on a shore of dreams, and the West Wind spoke.

"Oh! drowsy little Red Feather, why do you waste your time rocking here, low down in the meadow grass, when all the wide world is calling. Don't you want to glide with the birds, and run with the field-mice, and climb with the brown squirrels? What is the use of setting a bright red feather in your cap when never a soul can see it? Listen to me, little Red Feather, while I sing you the song of the sea!"

And the West Wind sang the Atlantic song. He sang it right through, and there are a hundred and fourteen verses—no less! He sang of the wild water and the smooth, of the wheeling, crying gulls, of the seaweed and the pebbles and the shells, and the ships and their pathways—the silver road running out to the moon, and the golden track leading to sunset; and Red Feather listened spell-bound, tapping time upon the grass-blade with his fairy foot, for like all the little people, he was passionately fond of music, and the West Wind was singing him a new song.

Slowly the music faded and died and the West Wind tucked his harp under his arm and said:

"They are waiting for me in the East, and I have a love-tryst with the morning star. Good-night, little Red Feather!"

And the fairy slipped down from his grass-blade, and curled himself up under a clover-leaf and slept on the edge of the moonlight, and the tumbling tides made music in his dream.

He woke early and washed his face in the morning dew. The blue-bells were ringing all round him, but he shook his head rather sadly, for the finer sea-music was still in his ears.

"Good-morning, Little Red Feather!" It was the West Wind going back. Of course, wise people would have called him the East Wind now, but wise people are very often quite wrong, and, of course, he was still the West Wind, though he was going home.

"Why don't you bid a good-bye to the heather?
Why don't you climb from the lap of the lea?
Why don't you saddle your pony, Red Feather,
And why don't you ride to the sea?"

The grey gull's abroad with a wing to the weather,
The spindrift flies jolly and free,
Oh! Why don't you saddle your pony, Red Feather,
And why don't you ride to the sea?"

RED FEATHER listened intently as the wind's song died in the West.

"Why don't you saddle your pony, Red Feather?"

He climbed slowly down from his perch and strolled under a convenient mushroom, for a light rain had begun to fall and the fairies always prefer to keep dry if possible. He sat down and gazed meditatively, chin on hand, at the raindrops as they quivered in the grass.

"The grey gull's abroad with a wing to the weather."

"I think I would like to see a grey gull," thought the fairy, "and what's a 'spindrift,' I wonder! I must ask the West Wind when he comes back, but he is always in such a hurry. I never knew him to stay so long as he did last night. What a beautiful song that was! Yes! I must certainly see the sea!"

"Why don't you saddle your pony, Red Feather?"

He looked across to the open space where Gliding Petal tugged at his picket-rope, silken and spun by the spiders, and he said: "I will ride to-night, this very night as soon as the moonbeams come out of the purple; to-night, I will ride to the sea!"

And though the West Wind was far out of hearing, he sang a song that came into his head, and he shouted it so loudly, that the mushroom rafters rang and the bluebell chimed were dumb.

Tired am I of rocking in the heath-bells and the grasses,
Tired am I of dancing in the starlit woodland rings!
Had I only half the freedom of the West Wind as he passes
And only half the speed and half the splendor of his wings,
I would flutter down the moonbeams to the sea of which he sings!

Tired am I of envy when the building birds fly over,
Tired am I of longing when the busy bees go by,

Tired am I of dreaming and of drowsing in
the clover,
Of the grasses round about me and the patch
of summer sky;
Has the West Wind guessed, I wonder,
how so very tired am I?

Red Feather stopped singing, and in every blue belfry, the bells rocked again and clanged at the bidding of unseen hands. And when the night came, he put his gossamer saddle on Gliding Petal, and rode swiftly up

the nearest moonbeam. He had ridden quite a long way before he met anybody, then he nearly rode into the Late Bat, who was hurrying home.

"Is this the road to the sea?" he asked politely.

"Not much!" said the Late Bat, rather rudely, "if you follow it far enough, you will hit the moon; you've taken a wrong turning somewhere, you ought to be much lower down!"

So Red Feather turned Gliding Petal round and hurried back, rather disappointed. But it was all downhill, fortunately, and before very long, he could hear the wind singing to the tree-tops; he woke up a spider who was sleeping on a larch stem, and asked: "Which road shall I take to the sea?" and the spider, who was angry at being awakened, said, very roughly: "Go away, go away, you are mad, you red-feathered clown. The sea is long miles from here, and what would you do if you found it?" But already Gliding Petal's hoofs were tap-tapping through the dead beech-leaves of last year, as he travelled westward through the wood. In the doorway of his house a little red squirrel lay dozing. Every squirrel is a fairy's friend, so Red Feather touched him on the shoulder, "Will you tell me, Sir Squirrel, if this is the way to the sea?"

"First turning to the right and go on till you're tired; but it's a very long way," said the squirrel, "at least, the West Wind told me so."

RED FEATHER felt a little jealous that the West Wind had been telling other people, but he also felt proud because he was going to the sea and the squirrel wasn't. So he drew himself up a little haughtily and said: "I shall be there in the morning! Good-night!"

Then he rode on for many hours till even the tireless Gliding Petal began to droop his head and stumble in the leaves. There was a grey light in the East when he met the Water Rat, who is the wisest of all the meadow creatures, who live by their wits. The Water Rat listened to his story with head on one side, then he dropped the stalk he was nibbling, and said:

"It is a very long way to the sea; you will be very frightened when you get there; you will have no friends, and the foam fairies are very fierce and dislike strangers. You had better turn back!"

Red Feather said: "I will not go back, but my pony is tired, and I don't know what to do."

"Take the saddle and bridle off your horse," said the Water Rat, "and let him go, and then come with me and I will show you how to get to the sea!"

So Red Feather unbuckled the gossamer girths, and let Gliding Petal go free, and he trotted home to the beechwood. And the Water Rat led his fairy friend through grassy tunnels and through tall buttercup forests, until the sound of water tinkling over stones broke upon their ears.

Then the Water Rat said, "This is the river, and every day it passes my door as it goes to the sea. I will find you a boat and you shall sail to the sea without any trouble, and much quicker than Gliding Petal could carry you; but I think you are very foolish to go, and you will meet danger when you meet the Foam Fairies!"

But Red Feather said he would go; so the Water Rat nibbled an inch of bark from the birch tree and put his friend upon it and shoved it out into the stream, and Red Feather whirled away westward in his tiny boat.

And this is the song that the river sang as it rocked the fairy shallop on its breast:—

Where the foam-white crests are falling
On the golden sands in glee,
Where the wildfowl gather, calling,
There's a home for you and me;
Far beyond all bond and tether;
Where the four winds meet together
And the West Wind rules the three,
There's a home for you, Red Feather,
In the wide arms of the sea!

When the skies are dark and leaden,
When the rain drives home the bee,
In your woods the leaves shall redden,
From your fields the bloom shall flee;
In the wild October weather
Broken boughs are grief to gather
At the foot of every tree,
But the foam is white, Red Feather,
In the gardens of the sea!

AND so singing, the river bore its burden swiftly to the West, and the dying sun threw a blood-red bar across the water, and the heart of Red Feather was full of gladness because he knew that at last, he should see the sea. And always the river grew wider, till the last flower waved him farewell.

Three times the sun rose upon the water, and three times it dipped and died, and on the fourth day, Red Feather heard the thunder of the surf and the harsh crying (Continued on page 5)