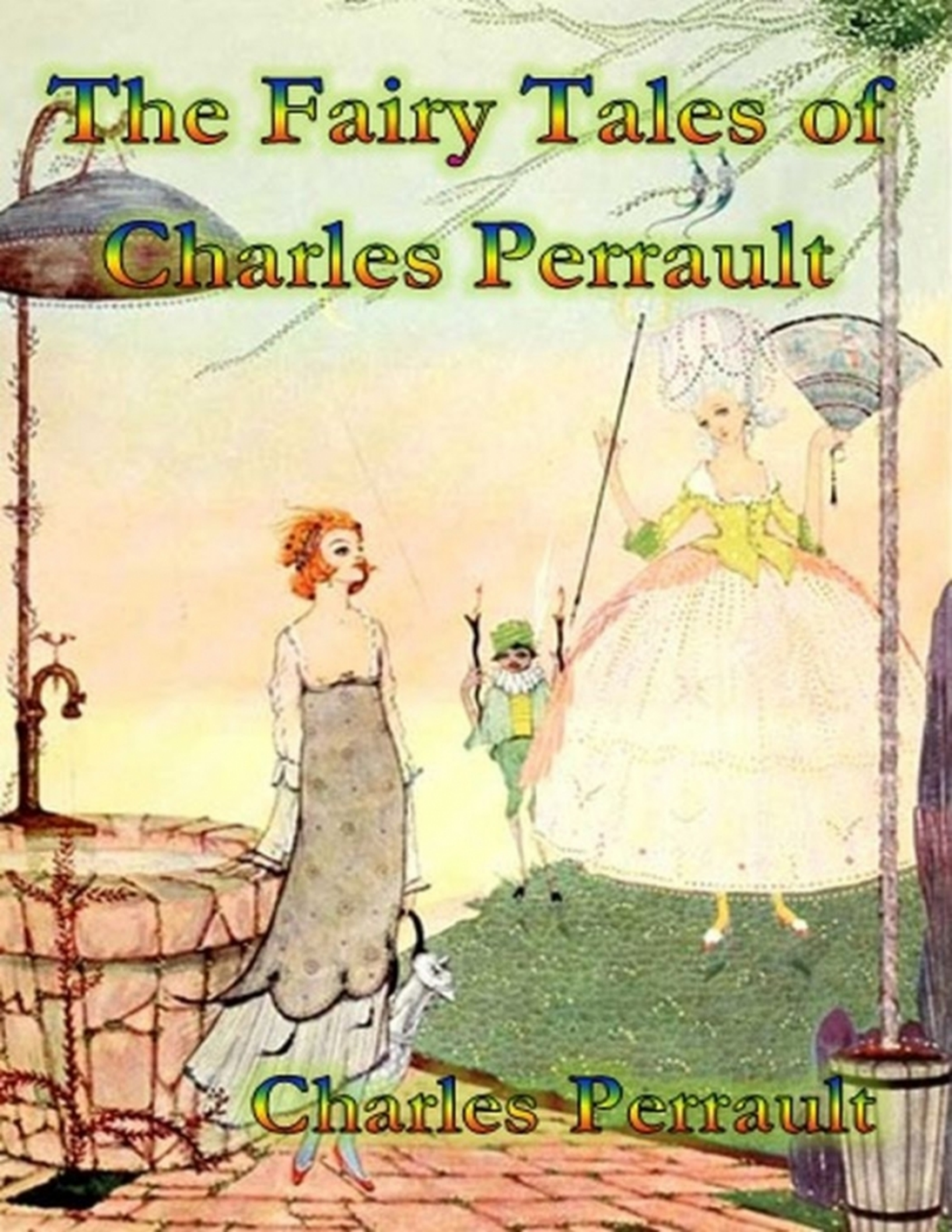
The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault



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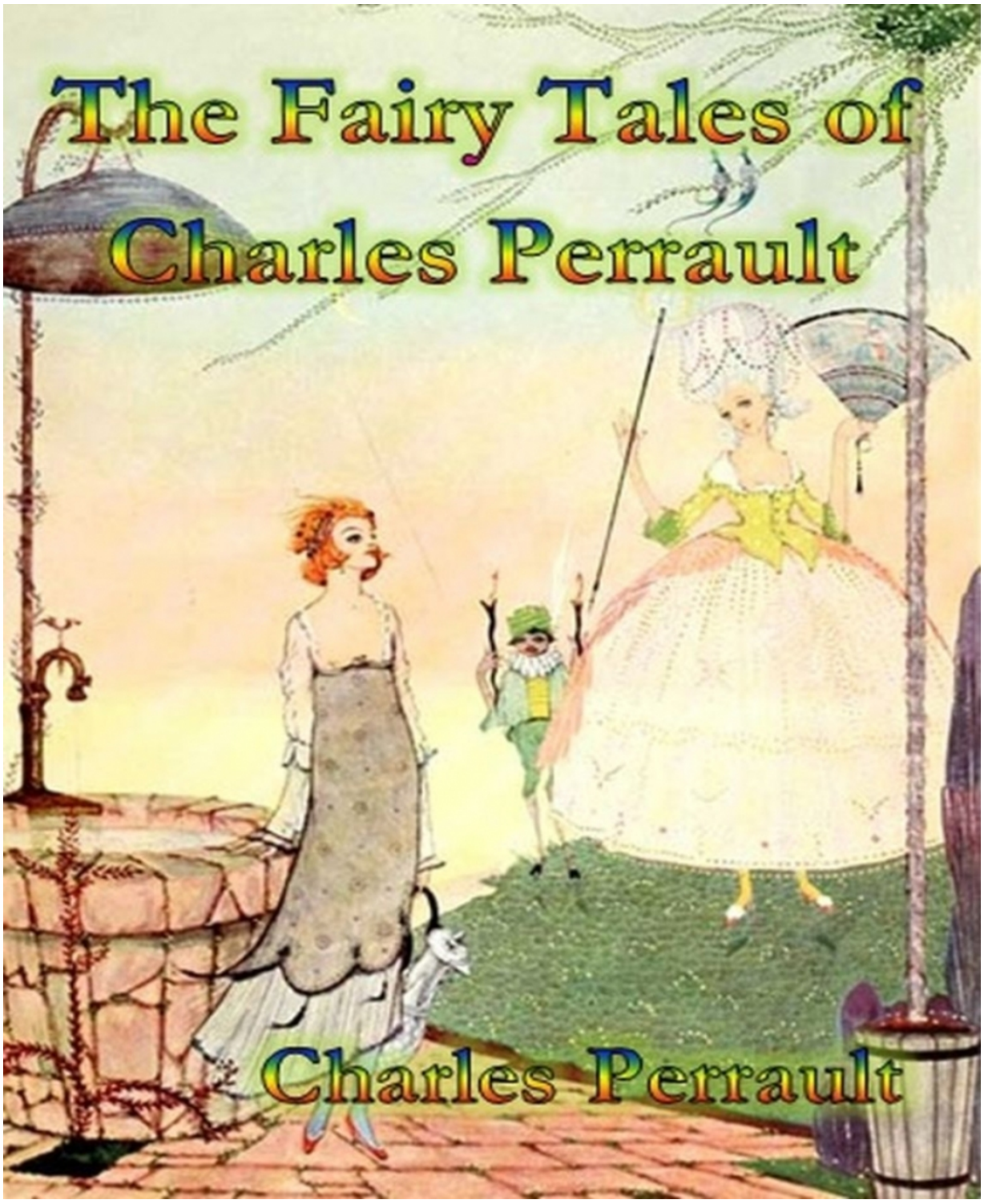
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By
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INTRODUCTION

"Avec ardeur il aima les beaux arts."

Griselidis

Charles Perrault must have been as charming a fellow as a man could meet. He was one of the best-liked personages of his own great age, and he has remained ever since a prime favourite of mankind. We are fortunate in knowing a great deal about his varied life, deriving our knowledge mainly from D'Alembert's history of the French Academy and from his own memoirs, which were written for his grandchildren, but not published till sixty-six years after his

death. We should, I think, be more fortunate still if the memoirs had not ceased in mid-career, or if their author had permitted himself to write of his family affairs without reserve or restraint, in the approved manner of modern autobiography. We should like, for example, to know much more than we do about the wife and the two sons to whom he was so devoted.

Perrault was born in Paris in 1628, the fifth son of Pierre Perrault, a prosperous parliamentary lawyer; and, at the age of nine, was sent to a day-school—the Collège de Beauvais. His father helped him with his lessons at home, as he himself, later on, was accustomed to help his own children. He can never have been a model schoolboy, though he was always first in his class, and he ended his school career prematurely by quarrelling with his master and bidding him a formal farewell.

The cause of this quarrel throws a bright light on Perraults subsequent career. He refused to accept his teacher's philosophical tenets on the mere ground of their traditional authority. He claimed that novelty was in itself a merit, and on this they parted. He did not go alone. One of his friends, a boy called Beaurain, espoused his cause, and for the next three or four years the two read together, haphazard, in the Luxembourg Gardens. This plan of study had almost certainly a bad effect on Beaurain, for we hear no more of him. It certainly prevented Perrault from being a thorough scholar, though it made him a man of taste, a sincere independent, and an undaunted amateur.

In 1651 he took his degree at the University of Orléans, where degrees were given with scandalous readiness, payment of fees being the only essential preliminary. In the mean-time he had walked the hospitals with some vague notion of following his brother Claude into the profession of medicine, and had played a small part as a theological controversialist in the quarrel then raging, about the nature of grace, between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. Having

abandoned medicine and theology he got called to the Bar, practised for a while with distinct success, and coquetted with a notion of codifying the laws of the realm. The Bar proved too arid a profession to engage for long his attention; so he next sought and found a place in the office of another brother, Pierre, who was Chief Commissioner of Taxes in Paris. Here Perrault had little to do save to read at large in the excellent library which his brother had formed.

For want of further occupation he returned to the writing of verse, one of the chief pleasures of his boyhood. His first sustained literary effort had been a parody of the sixth book of the "Æneid"; which, perhaps fortunately for his reputation, was never published and has not survived. Beaurain and his brother Nicholas, a doctor of the Sorbonne, assisted him in this perpetration, and Claude made the pen-and-ink sketches with which it was illustrated. In the few years that had elapsed since the writing of this burlesque Perrault had acquired more sense and taste, and his new poems—in particular the "Portrait d'Iris" and the "Dialogue entre l'Amour et l'Amitié"—were found charming by his contemporaries. They were issued anonymously, and Quinault, himself a poet of established reputation, used some of them to forward his suit with a young lady, allowing her to think that they were his own. Perrault, when told of Quinault's pretensions, deemed it necessary to disclose his authorship; but, on hearing of the use to which his work had been put, he gallantly remained in the background, forgave the fraud, and made a friend of the culprit.

Architecture next engaged his attention, and in 1657 he designed a house at Viry for his brother and supervised its construction. Colbert approved so much of this performance that he employed him in the superintendence of the royal buildings and put him in special charge of Versailles, which was then in process of erection. Perrault flung himself with ardour into this work, though not to the exclusion of his other activities. He wrote odes in honour of the King; he

planned designs for Gobelin tapestries and decorative paintings; he became a member of the select little Academy of Medals and Inscriptions which Colbert brought into being to devise suitable legends for the royal palaces and monuments; he encouraged musicians and fought the cause of Lulli; he joined with Claude in a successful effort to found the Academy of Science.

Claude Perrault had something of his brother's versatility and shared his love for architecture, and the two now became deeply interested in the various schemes which were mooted for the completion of the Louvre. Bernini was summoned by the King from Rome, and entrusted with the task; but the brothers Perrault intervened. Charles conceived the idea of the great east front and communicated it to Claude, who drew the plans and was commissioned to carry them out. The work was finished in 1671, and is still popularly known as Perrault's Colonnade.

In the same year Charles was elected to the Academy without any personal canvas on his part for the honour. His inaugural address was heard with such approval that he ventured to suggest that the inauguration of future members should be a public function. The suggestion was adopted, and these addresses became the most famous feature of the Academy's proceedings and are so to the present day. This was not his only service to the Academy, for he carried a motion to the effect that future elections should be by ballot; and invented and provided, at his own expense, a ballot-box which, though he does not describe it, was probably the model of those in use in all modern clubs and societies.

The novelty of his views did not always commend them to his brother 'Immortals.' Those expressed in his poem "Le Siècle de Louis XIV," which he read as an Academician of sixteen years' standing, initiated one of the most famous and lasting literary quarrels of the era. Perrault, in praising the writers of his own age, ventured to disparage some of

the great authors of the ancient classics. Boileau lashed himself into a fury of opposition and hurled strident insults against the heretic. Racine, more adroit, pretended to think that the poem was a piece of ingenious irony. Most men of letters hastened to participate in the battle. No doubt Perrault's position was untenable, but he conducted his defence with perfect temper and much wit; and Boileau made himself not a little absurd by his violence and his obvious longing to display the extent of his learning. Perrault's case is finally stated in his four volumes, "Le Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes," which were published in 1688-1696. He evidently took vastly more pride in this dull and now almost forgotten work than in the matchless stories which have made him famous for ever.

After twenty years in the service of Colbert, the sun of Perrault's fortunes passed its zenith. His brother, the Commissioner of Taxes, had a dispute with the Minister and was disgraced. Then Perrault got married to a young lady of whom we know nothing except that her marriage was the subject of some opposition from his powerful employer. In a matter of the sort Perrault, though a courtier, could be relied on to consider no wishes save those of his future wife and himself. Colbert's own influence with the King became shaky, and this affected his temper. So Perrault, then just fifty-five, slid quietly from his service in the year 1683.

Before he went, he succeeded in frustrating a project for closing the Tuileries Gardens against the people of Paris and their children. Colbert proposed to reserve them to the royal use, but Perrault persuaded him to come there one day for a walk, showed him the citizens taking the air and playing with their children; got the gardeners to testify that these privileges were never abused, and carried his point by declaring, finally, that "the King's pleasaunce was so spacious that there was room for all his children to walk there."

Sainte-Beuve, seventy years ago, pleaded that this service to the children of Paris should be commemorated by a statue of Perrault in the centre of the Tuileries. The statue has never been erected; and, to the present day, Paris, so plentifully provided with statues and pictures of the great men of France, has neither the one nor the other to show that she appreciates the genius of Perrault. Indeed, there is no statue of him in existence; and the only painting of him with which I am acquainted is a doubtful one hung far away in an obscure corner of the palace of Versailles.

The close of Perrault's official career marked the beginning of his period of greatest literary activity. In 1686 he published his long narrative poem "Saint Paulin Evesque de Nole" with "a Christian Epistle upon Penitence" and "an Ode to the Newly-converted," which he dedicated to Bossuet. Between the years 1688 and 1696 appeared the "Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes" to which I have already referred. In 1693 he brought out his "Cabinet des Beaux Arts," beautifully illustrated by engravings, and containing a poem on painting which even Boileau condescended to admire. In 1694 he published his "Apologie des Femmes." He wrote two comedies—"L'Oublieux" in 1691, and "Les Fontanges." These were not printed till 1868. They added nothing to his reputation. Between 1691 and 1697 were composed the immortal "Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé" and the "Contes en Vers." Toward the end of his life he busied himself with the "Éloges des Hommes Illustres du Siècle de Louis XIV." The first of these two stately volumes came out in 1696 and the second in 1700. They were illustrated by a hundred and two excellent engravings, including one, by Edelinck, of Perrault himself and another of his brother Claude. These biographies are written with kindly justice, and form a valuable contribution to the history of the reign of the Roi Soleil. I have not exhausted the list of Perrault's writings, but, to speak frankly, the rest are not worth mentioning.

He died, aged seventy-five, in 1703, deservedly admired and regretted by all who knew him. This was not strange. For he was clever, honest, courteous, and witty. He did his duty to his family, his employer, his friends, and to the public at large. In an age of great men, but also of great prejudices, he fought his own way to fame and fortune. He served all the arts, and practised most of them. Painters, writers, sculptors, musicians, and men of science all gladly made him free of their company. As a good Civil Servant he was no politician, and he showed no leaning whatever toward what was regarded in his time as the greatest of all professions—that of arms. These two deficiencies, if deficiencies they be, only endear him the more to us. Every one likes a man who deserves to enjoy life and does, in fact, enjoy it. Perrault was such a man. He was more. He was the cause of enjoyment to countless of his fellows, and his stories still promise enjoyment to countless others to come.

It is amazing to remember that Perrault was rather ashamed of his "Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé"—perhaps better known as "Les Contes de ma Mère l'Oye," or "Mother Goose's Tales," from the rough print which was inserted as a frontispiece to the first collected edition in 1697. He would not even publish them in his own name. They were declared to be by P. Darmancour, Perrault's young son. In order that the secret might be well kept, Perrault abandoned his usual publisher, Coignard, and went to Barbin. The stories had previously appeared from time to time, anonymously, in Moetjens' little magazine the "Recueil," which was published from The Hague. "La Belle au Bois Dormant" ("Sleeping Beauty") was the first: and in rapid succession followed "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" ("Red Riding-Hood"), "Le Maistre Chat, ou le Chat Botté" ("Puss in Boots"), "Les Fées" ("The Fairy"), "Cendrillon, ou la Petite Pantoufle de Verre" ("Cinderella"), "Riquet à la Houppe" ("Riquet of the Tuft"), and "Le Petit Poucet" ("Tom Thumb").

Perrault was not so shy in admitting the authorship of his three verse stories—"Griselidis," "Les Souhaits Ridicules," and "Peau d'Asne." The first appeared, anonymously it is true, in 1961; but, when it came to be reprinted with "Les Souhaits Ridicules" and "Peau d'Asne" in 1695, they were entrusted to the firm of Coignard and described as being by "Mr Perrault, de l'Academie Françoise." La Fontaine had made a fashion of this sort of exercise.

It would not be fair to assume that P. Darmancour had no connection whatever with the composition of the stories which bore his name. The best of Perrault's critics, Paul de St Victor and Andrew Lang among others, see in the book a marvellous collaboration of crabbed age and youth. The boy, probably, gathered the stories from his nurse and brought them to his father, who touched them up, and toned them down, and wrote them out. Paul Lacroix, in his fine edition of 1886, goes as far as to attribute the entire authorship of the prose tales to Perrault's son. He deferred, however, to universal usage when he entitled his volume "Les Contes en prose de Charles Perrault."

"Les Contes du Temps Passé" had an immediate success. Imitators sprung up at once by the dozen, and still persist; but none of them has ever rivalled, much less surpassed, the inimitable originals. Every few years a new and sumptuous edition appears in France. The best are probably those by Paul Lacroix and André le Fèvre.

The stories soon crossed the Channel; and a translation "by Mr Samber, printed for J. Pote" was advertised in the "Monthly Chronicle" of 1729. "Mr Samber" was presumably one Robert Samber of New Inn, who translated other tales from the French, for Edmond Curl the bookseller, about this time. No copy of the first edition of his Perrault is known to exist. Yet it won a wide popularity, as is shown by the fact that there was a seventh edition published in 1795, for J. Rivington, a bookseller, of Pearl Street, New York.

No English translation of Perrault's fairy tales has attained unquestioned literary pre-eminence. So the publishers of the present book have thought it best to use Samber's translation, which has a special interest of its own in being almost contemporary with the original. The text has been thoroughly revised and corrected by Mr J. E. Mansion, who has purged it of many errors without detracting from its old-fashioned quality. To Mr Mansion also is due the credit for the translation of the "Les Souhaits Ridicules" and for the adaptation of "Peau d'Asne." "Griselidis" is excluded from this book for two good reasons; firstly, because it is an admitted borrowing by Perrault from Boccaccio; secondly, because it is not a 'fairy' tale in the true sense of the word.

It is, perhaps, unnecessary for me to add anything about Mr Clarke's illustrations. Many of the readers of this book will be already familiar with his work. Besides, I always feel that it is an impertinence to describe pictures in their presence. Mr Clarke's speak for themselves. They speak for Perrault too. It is seldom, indeed, that an illustrator enters so thoroughly into the spirit of his text. The grace, delicacy, urbanity, tenderness, and humour which went to the making of Perrault's stories must, it seems, have also gone in somewhat similar proportions to the making of these delightful drawings. I am sure that they would have given pleasure to Perrault himself.

THOMAS BODKIN