

***FREDERIK VAN
EEDEN***

***LITTLE
JOHANNES***

Frederik van Eeden

Little Johannes

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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by ANDREW LANG

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INTRODUCTION

LITERARY FAIRY TALES

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The *Märchen* or child's story, is a form of literature primevally old, but with infinite capacity of renewing its youth. Old wives' fables, tales about a lad and a lass, and a cruel step-mother, about three adventurous brothers, about friendly or enchanted beasts, about magical weapons and rings, about giants and cannibals, are the most ancient form of romantic fiction. The civilised peoples have elaborated these childlike legends into the chief romantic myths, as of the Ship Argo, and the sagas of Heracles and Odysseus. Uncivilised races, Ojibbeways, Eskimo, Samoans, retain the old wives' fables in a form far less cultivated,—probably far nearer the originals. European peasants keep them in shapes more akin to the savage than to the Greek forms, and, finally, men of letters have adopted the *genre* from popular narrative, as they have also adopted the Fable.

Little Johannes, here translated from the Dutch of Dr. Frederik van Eeden, is the latest of these essays, in which

the man's fancy consciously plays with the data and the forms of the child's imagination. It is not my purpose here to criticise *Little Johannes, an Allegory of a Poet's Soul*, nor to try to forestall the reader's own conclusions. One prefers rather to glance at the history of the Fairy Tale in modern literature.

It might, of course, be said with truth that the Odyssey, and parts of most of the world's Epics are literary expansions of the *Märchen*. But these, we may be confident, were not made of set literary purpose. Neither Homer, nor any poet of the French *Chansons de Geste*, cried, 'Here is a good plot in a child's legend, let me amplify and ennoble it.' The real process was probably this: adventures that from time immemorial had been attributed to the vague heroes of *Märchen* gradually clustered round some half divine or heroic name, as of Heracles or Odysseus, won a way into national traditions, and were finally sung of by some heroic poet. This slow evolution of romance is all unlike what occurs when a poet chooses some wild-flower of popular lore, and cultivates it in his garden, when La Fontaine, for example, selects the Fable; when the anecdote is developed into the *fabliau* or the *conte*, when Apuleius makes prize of *Cupid and Psyche* (a *Märchen* of world-wide renown), when Fénelon moralises the fairy tale, or Madame d'Aulnoy touches it with courtly wit and happy humour, or when Thackeray burlesques it, with a kindly mockery, or when Dr. Frederik van Eeden, or Dr. Macdonald, allegorises the nursery narratives. To moralise the tale in a very ancient fashion: Indian literature was busy to this end in the Buddhist Jatakas or Birth-stories, and in the *Ocean of the*

Stream of Stories. Mediæval preachers employed old tales as texts and as illustrations of religious and moral precepts. But the ancient popular fairy tale, the salt of primitive fancy, the drop of the water of the Fountain of Youth in modern fiction, began its great invasion of literature in France, and in the reign of Louis XIV. When the survivors of the *Précieuses*, when the literary court ladies were some deal weary of madrigals, maxims, *bouts-rimés*, 'portraits,' and their other graceful bookish toys, they took to telling each other fairy tales.^[1]

On August 6, 1676, Madame de Sévigné tells her daughter that at Versailles the ladies *mitonnent*, or narrate fairy tales, concerning the Green Isle, and its Princess and her lover, the Prince of Pleasure, and a flying hall of glass in which the hero and heroine make their voyages. It is not certain whether these exercises of fancy were based on memories of the *Pentamerone*, and other semi-literary Italian collections of Folk-Tales, or whether the witty ladies embroidered on the data of their own nurses. As early as 1691, Charles Perrault, inventing a new *genre* of minor literature, did some Folk-Tales into verse, and, in 1696, he began to publish his famous *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Puss in Boots*, in Moetjens's miscellany, printed at the Hague. In 1696 Mlle. L'Héritière put forth a long and highly embroidered fairy tale, *Les Enchantements de l'Eloquence*, in her *Bizarrures Ingénieuses* (Guignard), while Perrault's own collected *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* were given to the world in 1697 (Barbin, Paris).

The work of Mlle. L'Héritière was thoroughly artificial, while the immortal stories of Perrault have but a few

touches of conscious courtly wit, and closely adhere to the old nursery versions. Perrault, in fact, is rather the ancestor of the Grimms and the other scholarly collectors, than of the literary letters of fairy tales. The Fairy Godmothers of modern *contes* play quite a small part in Perrault's works (though a larger part than in purely popular narrative) compared with their *rôle* in Madame d'Aulnoy, and all her successors. Much more truly than la Comtesse de M—— (Murat), author of *Contes des Fées* (1698), Madame d'Aulnoy is the true mother of the modern fairy tale, and the true Queen of the *Cabinet des Fées*.^[2] To this witty lady of all work, author of *Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne*, and of many novels, a mere hint from tradition was enough. From such hints she developed her stories, such as *Le Mouton*, *Le Nain jaune*, *Finette Cendron*, *Le Bon petit Souris*, and very many others. She invented the modern Court of Fairyland, with its manners, its fairies—who, once a year, take the forms of animals, its Queens, its amorous, its cruel, its good, its evil, its odious and its friendly *fées*; illustrious beings, the counsellors of kings, who are now treated with religious respect, and now are propitiated with ribbons, scissors, and sweetmeats.

The Fairies are as old as the Hathors of Egypt, the Moerae who came to the birth of Meleager, the Norns of Scandinavian myth. But Madame d'Aulnoy first developed them into our familiar *fées* of fairy tale. Her *contes* are brilliant little novels, gay, satirical, full of hits at courts and kings. Yet they have won a way into true popularity: translated and condensed, they circulate as penny scrap-books, and furnish themes for pantomime.^[3] It is from

Madame d'Aulnoy that the *Rose and the Ring* of Thackeray derives its illustrious lineage. The banter is only an exaggeration of her charming manner. It is a pity that Sainte-Beuve, in his long gallery of portraits, found no space for Madame d'Aulnoy. The grave Fénelon follows her in his *Rosimond et Braminte*, by no means the worst effort of the author of *Télémaque*.^[4] From Madame d'Aulnoy, then, descend the many artificial stories of the *Cabinet des Fées*, and among these the very prolix novel out of which *Beauty and the Beast* has been condensed takes a high place. The tales of the Comte de Caylus have also humour, wit, and a pleasant invention.^[5]

The artificial fairy tale was in the eighteenth century a regular literary *genre*, a vehicle, now for satire, now for moralities. The old courtly method has died out, naturally, but the modern *Märchen* has taken a hundred shapes, like its own enchanters. We have Kingsley's *Water Babies*, a fairy tale much too full of science, and of satire not very intelligible to children, and not always entertaining to older people, but rich in tenderness, poetry, and love of nature. We have the delightful *Rose and the Ring*, full of characters as real to us, almost, as Captain Costigan, or Becky Sharpe. Angelica is a child's Blanche Amory; Betsinda is a child's Laura Bell, Bulbo is the Foker of the nursery, and King Valoroso a potentate never to be thought of without respectful gratitude. How noble is his blank verse.

—'He laid his hands on an anointed king,
—Hedzoff! and floored me with a warming pan!'

Then we have the *Phantastes* of Dr. Macdonald, which the abundant mysticism does not spoil, a book of poetic

adventure perhaps too unfamiliar to children. To speak of Andersen is superfluous, of Andersen so akin in imagination to the primeval popular fancy; so near the secret of the heart of childhood. The *Tin Soldier*, the *Ugly Duckling* and the rest, are true *Märchen*, and Andersen is the Perrault of the North, more grave, more tender, if less witty, than the kind Academician who kept open for children the gardens of the Louvre. Of other modern *Märchen*, the delightful, inimitable, irresponsible nonsense of *Alice in Wonderland* marks it the foremost. There has been, of course, a vast array of imitative failures: tales where boisterousness does duty for wit, and cheap sentiment for tenderness, and preaching for that half-conscious moral motive, which, as Perrault correctly said, does inform very many of the true primeval *Märchen*. As an inveterate reader of good fairy tales, I find the annual Christmas harvest of them, in general, dull, imitative,—*Alice* is always being imitated,—and, in brief, impossible. Mere vagaries of absurdity, mere floods of floral eloquence, do not make a fairy tale. We can never quite recover the old simplicity, energy, and romance, the qualities which, as Charles Nodier said, make Hop o' my Thumb, Puss in Boots, and Blue Beard 'the Ulysses, the Figaro and the Othello of children.' There may possibly be critics or rather there are certain to be critics, who will deny that the modern and literary fairy tale is a legitimate *genre*, or a proper theme of discussion. The Folklorist is not unnaturally jealous of what, in some degree, looks like Folk-Lore. He apprehends that purely literary stories may 'win their way,' pruned of their excrescences, 'to the fabulous,' and may confuse the speculations of later mycologists.

There is very little real danger of this result. I speak, however, not without sympathy; there was a time when I regarded all *contes* except *contes populaires* as frivolous and vexatious. This, however, is the fanaticism of pedantry. The French *conteurs* of the last century, following in the track of Hop o' my Thumb, made and narrated many pleasing discoveries, if they also wrote much that was feeble and is faded. To admit this is but common fairness; literary fairy tales may legitimately amuse both old and young, though 'it needs heaven-sent moments for this skill.' The *conteurs*, like every one who does not always stretch the bow of Apollo till it breaks, had, of course, their severe censors. To listen to some persons, one might think that gaiety was a crime. You scribble light verses, and you are solemnly told that this is not high poetry, told it by worthy creatures whose rhymes could be uncommonly elevated, if mere owl-like solemnity could make poetry and secure elevation. You make a fairy tale, and you are told that the incidents border on the impossible, that analysis of character, and the discussion of grave social and theological problems are conspicuously absent. The old *conteurs* were met by those ponderous objections. Madame d'Aulnoy, in *Ponce de Léon*, makes one of her characters defend the literary *Märchen* in its place. 'I am persuaded that, in spite of serious critics, there is an art in the simplicity of the stories, and I have known persons of taste who sometimes found in them an hour's amusement.... He would be ridiculous who wanted to hear and read nothing but such legends, and he who should write them in a pompous and inflated style, would rob them of their proper character, but

I am persuaded that, after some serious occupation, *l'on peut badiner avec.* 'I hold,' said Melanie, 'that such stories should be neither trivial nor bombastic, that they should hold a middle course, rather gay than serious, not without a shade of moral, above all, they should be offered as trifles, which the listener alone has a right to put his price upon.'

This is very just criticism of literary fairy tales, made in an age when we read of a professional *faiseur des contes des fées vieux et modernes*.

Little Johannes is very modern, and, as Juana says in *Ponce de Léon*:

'Vous y mettrez le prix qu'il vous plaira, mais je ne peux m'empêcher de dire que celui qui le compose est capable de choses plus importantes, quand il veut s'en donner la peine.'

ANDREW LANG.

[1] Part of what follows I have already stated in a reprint of *Perrault's Popular Tales*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1888.

[2] In forty-one volumes, Paris, 1785-89.

[3] There are complete English translations of the eighteenth century. Many of the stories have been retold by Miss M. Wright, in the *Red and Blue Fairy Books*.

[4] I am unacquainted with the date of composition of this story about a Ring more potent than that of Gyges. (It is printed in the second volume of *Dialogues des Morts* Paris, 1718).

[5] From one of these tales by Caylus the author, who but recently made their acquaintance, finds that he has unconsciously plagiarised an adventure of Prince Prigio's.

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I will tell you something about little Johannes. My tale has much in it of a fairy story; but it nevertheless all really happened. As soon as you do not believe it you need read no farther, as it was not written for you. Also you must never mention the matter to little Johannes if you should chance to meet him, for that would vex him, and I should get into trouble for having told you all about it.

Johannes lived in an old house with a large garden. It was difficult to find one's way about there, for in the house there were many dark doorways and staircases, and cupboards, and lumber-lofts, and all about the garden there were sheds and hen-houses. It was a whole world to Johannes. He could make long journeys there, and he gave names to all he discovered. He had named the rooms in the house from the animal world; the caterpillar-loft, because he kept caterpillars there; the hen-room, because he had once found a hen there. It had not come in of itself; but Johannes' mother had set it there to hatch eggs. In the garden he chose names from plants, preferring those of such products as he thought most interesting. Thus he had Raspberry Hill, Cherry-tree Wood, and Strawberry Hollow. Quite at the end of the garden was a place he had called Paradise, and that, of course, was lovely. There was a large pool, a lake where white water-lilies floated and the reeds held long whispered conversations with the wind. On the farther side of it there were the dunes or sand-hills. Paradise itself was a little grassy meadow on the bank, shut in by bushes, among which the hemlock grew tall. Here Johannes would sometimes lie in the thick grass, looking between the

swaying reeds at the tops of the sand-hills across the water. On warm summer evenings he was always to be found there, and would lie for hours, gazing up, without ever wearying of it. He would think of the depths of the still, clear water in front of him—how pleasant it must be there among the water-plants, in that strange twilight; and then again of the distant, gorgeously coloured clouds which swept across the sand-downs—what could be behind them? How splendid it would be to be able to fly over to them! Just as the sun disappeared, the clouds gathered round an opening so that it looked like the entrance to a grotto, and in the depths of the cavern gleamed a soft, red glow. That was what Johannes longed to reach. 'If I could but fly there!' thought he to himself. 'What can there be beyond? If I could only once, just for once, get there!'

But even while he was wishing it the cavern fell asunder in rolling dark clouds before he could get any nearer. And then it grew cold and damp by the pool, and he had to go back to his dark little bedroom in the old house.

He did not live all alone there; he had his father, who took good care of him, his dog Presto and the cat Simon. Of course he loved his father best: but he did not love Presto and Simon so very much less, as a grown-up man would have done. He told Presto many more secrets than he ever told his father, and he held Simon in the greatest respect. And no wonder! Simon was a very big cat with a shining black coat and a bushy tail. It was easy to see that he was perfectly convinced of his own importance and wisdom. He was always solemn and dignified, even when he condescended to play with a rolling cork or to gnaw a stale

herring's head behind a tree. As he watched Presto's flighty behaviour he would contemptuously blink his green eyes and think: 'Well, well, dogs know no better!'

Now you may understand what respect Johannes had for him. But he was on much more familiar terms with little brown Presto. He was not handsome nor dignified, but a particularly good-natured and clever little dog, who never went two yards from Johannes' side, and sat patiently listening to all his master told him. I need not tell you how dearly Johannes loved Presto. But he had room in his heart for other things as well. Do you think it strange that his dark bedroom with the tiny window-panes filled a large place there? He loved the curtains with the large-flowered pattern in which he could see faces, and which he had studied so long when he lay awake in the mornings or when he was sick; he loved the one picture which hung there, in which stiff figures were represented in a yet stiffer garden, walking by the side of a tranquil pond where fountains were spouting as high as the clouds, and white swans were swimming. But most of all he loved the hanging clock. He pulled up the weights every day with solemn care, and regarded it as an indispensable civility to look up at it whenever it struck. This of course could only be done as long as Johannes remained awake. If by some neglect the clock ran down Johannes felt quite guilty, and begged its pardon a dozen times over. You would have laughed, no doubt, if you had heard him talking to his room. But perhaps you sometimes talk to yourself; that does not seem to you altogether ridiculous; and Johannes was perfectly convinced that his hearers had quite understood him, and he required

no answer. Still he secretly thought that he might perhaps have a reply from the clock or the curtains.

Johannes had schoolmates, but they were not exactly friends. He played with them, and plotted tricks with them in school, and robber-games out of school; still he never felt quite at home but when he was alone with Presto. Then he never wanted any boys, and was perfectly at his ease and safe.

His father was a wise, grave man, who sometimes took Johannes with him for long walks through the woods and over the sand-hills; but then he spoke little, and Johannes ran a few steps behind, talking to the flowers he saw, and the old trees which had always to stay in the same place, stroking them gently with his little hand on the rough bark. And the friendly giants rustled their thanks.

Sometimes his father traced letters in the sand as they went along, one by one, and Johannes spelt the words they made: and sometimes his father would stop and tell Johannes the name of some plant or animal.

And now and then Johannes would ask about what he saw, and heard many strange things. Indeed, he often asked very silly questions: Why the world was just as it was, and why the plants and animals must die, and whether miracles could ever happen. But Johannes' father was a wise man, and did not tell him all he knew; and this was better for Johannes.

At night before he went to sleep Johannes always said a long prayer. His nurse had taught him this. He prayed for his father and for Presto. Simon did not need it, he thought. He had a long prayer for himself too, and almost always ended

with the wish that just for once a miracle might happen. And when he had said *Amen* he would look curiously round the half-dark room at the figures in the picture, which looked stranger than ever in the dim twilight, at the door-handle and the clock, wondering how the miracle would begin. But the clock always ticked in its own old fashion, and the door-knob did not stir, and it grew darker and darker, and Johannes fell asleep without any miracle having happened.

But it would happen some day; of that he was sure.



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It was a warm evening, and the pool lay perfectly still. The sun, red and tired with its day's work, seemed to pause for a moment on the edge of the world, before going down. Its glowing face was reflected, almost perfect, in the glassy water. The leaves of the beech-tree which overhung the lake took advantage of the stillness to gaze at themselves meditatively in the mirror. The solitary heron, standing on one leg among the broad leaves of the water-lilies, forgot that he had come out to catch frogs, and looked down his long nose, lost in thought.

Then Johannes came to the meadow to look into the cloud-cavern. Splash, dash! the frogs went plump off the bank. The mirror was rippled, the reflection of the sun was broken up into broad bands, and the beech-leaves rustled indignantly, for they were not yet tired of looking at themselves.