

OSCAR WILDE

The Happy Prince

AND
OTHER STORIES

With an Introduction by Micheál Mac Liammóir

Illustrated by Lars Bo



PUFFIN BOOKS

PUFFIN CLASSICS
THE HAPPY PRINCE
AND OTHER STORIES

Oscar Wilde originally made up these nine beautiful, sad and haunting fairy tales for his two sons, Vyvyan and Cyril. He was telling them more than just stories about princes, giants, nightingales and roses, he was teaching them about life and the way to live it. You will find in these stories so much sweetness and tenderness that you will never forget them.

There is no age for this book. Children and grown-ups will be enchanted by the stories – the Selfish Giant who discovered love, the rise and fall of a Remarkable Rocket, the tragic tale of the Dwarf who danced for the Infanta's birthday – the book is a brilliant and haunting treasure-trove for everybody.

The drawings by the famous Danish artist, Lars Bo, were specially made for this Puffin edition of *The Happy Prince and other stories*.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin and educated at Porotra Royal School, Enniskillen, Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford. These nine fairy tales, originally written as two collections (*The Happy Prince*, 1888 and *A House of Pomegranates*, 1891) were some of his first writings (his *Poems* had appeared in 1881). Later, of course, Wilde went on to produce his most famous works – among them *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He died in Paris in 1900, at the age of forty-six.



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An Introduction to the Author

by Micheál Mac Liammóir

The most familiar image of Oscar Wilde in the popular imagination does not seem to be that of a man on intimate terms with Fairyland. That urbane, opulent figure, that faultless frock-coat, that hot-house flower in its well-fitting button-hole, those gloves, those amused, incredulous eyes, what had they to do with the dim magical world where the dew is forever on the grass, where the light falls from 'the Sun in his chariot of gold and the Moon in her chariot of pearl', and where enchanted woods, whose boughs are heavy with both blossom and fruit, are the guardians of those secrets that may be discovered only between sleeping and waking?

But if we look more closely at the pictures of this man who was at once artist and fop, jester and sage, philosopher and foolhardy adventurer, we begin, it may be, to understand.

'Oscar is not really well-dressed,' some English contemporary once remarked. 'He always looks dressed-up.'

He was. He was in disguise.

What he would have looked like, how he would have dressed had he not so characteristically and conscientiously lived up to his own jest that 'the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible', it is difficult to say. Perhaps he would have borne some resemblance to those druids and bards of his own country to whose mysterious brotherhood the depths of him undoubtedly belonged. Perhaps he would have looked like those later figures of the Middle Ages with pointed shoes and a cap of feathers and a bag fashioned from the scales of a fish crammed with the secret images of fortune and disaster.

For Oscar Wilde was, in truth, a magician, a dreamer, and a poet. Above all he was a born teller of tales. All

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the magic and mystery of the ancient world lay hidden under that deliberate and ceremonious dandyism, and to this inheritance he has added, in this book, the magic and the mystery of a later and no less marvellous tradition: the cities and statues of renaissant Italy, the pageantry of French culture, the roses and the nightingales of Provence, the royal portraits of Spain. From the imagined background of the dream-like world that he reveals in *THE YOUNG KING*, to the dry, odd, eighteenth-century chatter of a group of worldly-minded fireworks awaiting their triumphant appearance at some royal display in *THE REMARKABLE ROCKET*, he has conjured these amazing tales. From the arts of all the world, but primarily from the treasure house of his own ancestral memory – his mother, Lady Wilde, was an authority on Irish Faery lore – he seems idly to pick up these jewels, to look gravely at them, and then to tell us fantastic things about them all in words as glowing and as magical as themselves.

His son Vyvyan Holland, in a delightful book called *SON OF OSCAR WILDE*, tells us how, when his father was tired of playing with him and his brother Cyril, he would keep them quiet by telling them fairy stories. 'There was one,' Mr Holland says, 'about the fairies who lived in the great bottles of coloured water that the chemists used to put in their windows, with lights behind them that made them take on all kinds of different shapes. The fairies came down from their bottles at night and played and danced and made pills in the empty shop. Cyril once asked him why he had tears in his eyes when he told us the story of the Selfish Giant, and he replied that "really beautiful things always made him cry".'

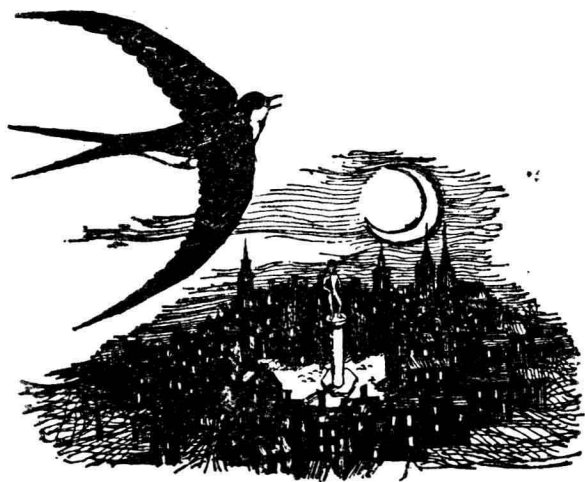
And that is the important thing about these tales: they evoke the marvels of a world that is all but lost to the mind of present-day man, who has placed Reason above Beauty, and the Counting House above the House of the Father; who has banished Imagination under the accusation of mere Invention, and who more and more has

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exiled himself from that ancient garden that lies behind the gates of ivory and horn. The poet, being one who has never succeeded in a final closing of those gates, turns now and then to look back over his shoulder at the forsaken majesty, and then, remembering a little the moods of childhood, he needs must weep.

Are these stories really intended for children? To me they seem to have been written for everybody who is or who has ever been a child in the complete sense of the word, and who is fortunate enough or wise enough to have preserved something of what, in childhood itself, is fortunate, wise, and eternal.

The Happy Prince



HIGH above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was encased all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt.

He was very much admired indeed. 'He is as beautiful as a weathercock,' remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; 'only not quite so useful,' he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not.

'Why can't you be like the Happy Prince?' asked a sensible mother of her little boy who was crying for the moon. 'The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything.'

'I am glad there is someone in the world who is quite happy,' muttered a disappointed man as he gazed at the wonderful statue.

'He looks just like an angel,' said the Charity Children as they came out of the cathedral in their bright scarlet cloaks and their clean white pinafores.

'How do you know?' said the Mathematical Master, 'you have never seen one.'

'Ah! but we have, in our dreams,' answered the children; and the Mathematical Master frowned and looked very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming.

One night there flew over the city a little Swallow. His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, but he had stayed behind, for he was in love with the most beautiful Reed. He had met her early in the spring as he was flying down the river after a big yellow moth, and

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had been so attracted by her slender waist that he had stopped to talk to her.

'Shall I love you?' said the Swallow, who liked to come to the point at once, and the Reed made him a low bow. So he flew round and round her, touching the water with his wings, and making silver ripples. This was his courtship, and it lasted all through the summer.

'It is a ridiculous attachment,' twittered the other Swallows; 'she has no money, and far too many relations'; and indeed the river was quite full of Reeds. Then, when the autumn came they all flew away.

After they had gone he felt lonely, and began to tire of his lady-love. 'She has no conversation,' he said, 'and I am afraid that she is a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind.' And certainly, whenever the wind blew, the Reed made the most graceful curtsies. 'I admit that she is domestic,' he continued, 'but I love travelling, and my wife, consequently, should love travelling also.'

'Will you come away with me?' he said finally to her, but the Reed shook her head, she was so attached to her home.

'You have been trifling with me,' he cried. 'I am off to the Pyramids. Good-bye!' and he flew away.

All day long he flew, and at night-time he arrived at the city. 'Where shall I put up?' he said; 'I hope the town has made preparations.'

Then he saw the statue on the tall column.

'I will put up there,' he cried; 'it is a fine position, with plenty of fresh air.' So he alighted just between the feet of the Happy Prince.

'I have a golden bedroom,' he said softly to himself as he looked round, and he prepared to go to sleep; but just as he was putting his head under his wing a large drop of water fell on him. 'What a curious thing!' he cried; 'there is not a single cloud in the sky, the stars are quite clear and bright, and yet it is raining. The climate in the

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north of Europe is really dreadful. The Reed used to like the rain, but that was merely her selfishness.'

Then another drop fell.

2) 24, 20

'What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?' he said; 'I must look for a good chimney-pot,' and he determined to fly away.

But before he had opened his wings, a third drop fell, and he looked up, and saw - Ah! what did he see?

The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity.

'Who are you?' he said.

'I am the Happy Prince.' *over/for*

'Why are you weeping then?' asked the Swallow; 'you have quite drenched me.' *2) 24, 20*

'When I was alive and had a human heart,' answered the statue, 'I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.'

'What! is he not solid gold?' said the Swallow to himself. He was too polite to make any personal remarks out loud.

'Far away,' continued the statue in a low musical voice, 'far away in a little street there is a poor house. One of the windows is open, and through it I can see a woman seated at a table. Her face is thin and worn, and

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she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress. She is embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour to wear at the next Court ball. In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill. He has a fever, and is asking for oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water, so he is crying. Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword-hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move.'

'I am waited for in Egypt,' said the Swallow. 'My friends are flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus-flowers. Soon they will go to sleep in the tomb of the great King. The King is there himself in his painted coffin. He is wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed with spices. Round his neck is a chain of pale green jade, and his hands are like withered leaves.'

'Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'will you not stay with me for one night, and be my messenger? The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad.'

'I don't think I like boys,' answered the Swallow. 'Last summer, when I was staying on the river, there were two rude boys, the miller's sons, who were always throwing stones at me. They never hit me, of course; we swallows fly far too well for that, and besides I come of a family famous for its agility; but still, it was a mark of disrespect.'

But the Happy Prince looked so sad that the little Swallow was sorry. 'It is very cold here,' he said; 'but I will stay with you for one night, and be your messenger.'

'Thank you, little Swallow,' said the Prince.

So the Swallow picked out the great ruby from the Prince's sword, and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town.

He passed by the cathedral tower, where the white marble angels were sculptured. He passed by the palace