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HANS ANDERSEN'S

FAIRY TALES

A SELECTION

Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* are known and loved by adults and children alike. The first volume containing four stories appeared in 1835, and by the end of his life he had published a total of 156 tales. Despite the author's declaration that he would have preferred to be known for his poems and novels, it is for these imaginative tales that he is remembered.

Andersen was born in Odense in 1805, the son of a poor shoemaker and a simple peasant woman. His father died when he was 11 and at the age of 14 he set out to seek fame and fortune as an actor in Copenhagen. For three years he was helped by various patrons from scholars to the King himself, and at 17 he was sent to school as a State protégé. Once he had passed his examinations he chose to write, becoming eventually, and after many hardships and humiliations, Denmark's most illustrious son, fêted all over the world. His autobiography, which he began as early as 1832, was entitled *The Fairytale of My Life*. Hans Andersen died in 1875.

NAOMI LEWIS is a critic and writer, and expert on Hans Andersen's works. She has edited several volumes of children's stories including collections of fairy tales by Andersen and the brothers Grimm. Her books include *A Peculiar Music* (about the poems of Emily Brontë), *Fantasy* (for The National

Book League), *A Footprint on the Air*, *The Silent Playmate* (an anthology of doll literature), and the Puffin *Hans Christian Andersen*, a new translation of twelve stories with introduction and notes. She received the Eleanor Farjeon Award for distinguished services to children's literature.

L. W. Kingsland is a retired headmaster and translator of Scandinavian literature.

INTRODUCTION

THE story goes that when Andersen, in his honoured last years, was shown the plan for his projected national statue—a design which included a crowding cluster of children—he angrily protested. 'I pointed out', he wrote in his diary, 'that ... I could not bear anyone behind me, nor had I children on my back, on my lap, or between my legs when I read; that my fairy tales were as much for older people as for children ... The naïve was only a part of my fairy tales; humour was the real salt in them.' The children, as anyone may see who visits the King's Garden at Copenhagen, were removed. The point of Andersen's complaint, as anyone may see who goes to the stories, remains. But it is a truth that needs rediscovering.

For indeed, during his lifetime, Andersen's tremendous reputation both in Europe and America came not only from children but from the numbers of men and women who had read and savoured the tales. That at first he would have preferred to be known for his 'adult' novels and plays is neither here nor there; authors commonly have these foibles. It is true that the earliest collections—little paperback books of two, three, or four stories, thrown off between Andersen's more considered works—were published as *Fairy Tales Told to the Young* (*Eventyr fortalte for Børn*). But after a few years (and 23 stories) the qualifying description was dropped. He had put it in, he declared, as a safeguard against the critics: a defence too, no doubt, against something that he

unwillingly recognized in himself. The actor in Andersen—the poor boy who was finding success at last—desired to play the part of an adult in an adult world. But to write at the level of genius for the young, it is necessary *not* to be a lover of children but to have a rigid streak of childhood in oneself. This, Andersen had. It was to be throughout his life his talisman and his bane.

The first of the little story-books appeared in 1835. It contained four tales: *The Tinder-Box*, *Little Claus and Big Claus*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *Little Ida's Flowers*. The familiar first two of these were folk themes, though recast with new detail, and told in an unmistakable new voice. The third, like the others, he had heard as a child, from spinning or hop-picking women. But the fourth heralds the genuine new storymaker, in the student who entertains little Ida with paper figures and quaint stories, in the offended doll, turned out of its bed for the exhausted flowers, in the chimney-sweep toy who danced alone ('and that's no bad thing either'), and the spirited flower funeral conducted by Ida's two boy cousins, in the chattering bits and pieces. To present modern life through kitchen articles and nursery toys and yet with adult irony and wit was something new in fiction. That student, too, so apt with stories and paper toys, is our first glimpse of Andersen himself. In one guise or another, sometimes for only a fleeting moment, he may be found in almost all his tales. They are his own living story.

The second volume followed soon, in 1836, with *Thumbelina*, *The Naughty Boy*, and *The Travelling-*

Companion; the third, in 1837, with *The Little Mermaid* and *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It was the *Mermaid*, again an original tale, that really brought wide public attention to these extraordinary little volumes. Encouragement was all that Andersen wanted, and his invention flowed. Soon he had no need to go to old plots: every flower, every household article had its story to offer him. By his own reckoning—a conservative one—there were 156 tales by the end of his life.

A sparkling narrative confidence marks the stories but behind them is a strange and troubling figure. Andersen's *Autobiography* offers clues to much that he wrote—yet it seems to separate him all the more from his own achievement. 'My life', it begins with characteristic verve, 'is a beautiful fairy tale.' A fairy tale it certainly was, but one with an oddly malicious twist. Our wishes, it seems to demonstrate, are fulfilled more often than we expect, but not always in the way we desire. There is always a price to be paid. Here, to be sure, is the humble shoemaker's solitary child, dreaming, declaiming, playing with his homemade toy theatre, presenting to the village world the kind of preposterous innocence that turns away blows; here again the awkward, crazy-looking, stage-struck boy setting out at fourteen to seek his improbable fortune in the city of Copenhagen; singing, pleading, and clowning his way into the theatre and out of it, always avoiding being pinned down to his station by a trade; catching the half-hypnotized aid of patron after patron—scholars, State Councillors, ballet dancers, the King himself;

sent to school at seventeen (the severest trial of all) as a State protégé, and after every kind of hardship and humiliation becoming (though not, alas, through his singing, dancing, or plays) Denmark's most illustrious son, an honoured guest in every country of Europe.

But the dark side of the story can be traced back, no less than the other, as far as the one-roomed Odense home where Andersen was born in 1805. His father, perforce a shoemaker, married in his early twenties and dead hardly a dozen years later, was a man of incipient gifts, a self-taught student, political rebel and freethinker, full of ideas, but deeply frustrated by poverty and imprisoning circumstance. It was he who built Hans Christian his toy theatre, took him on Sundays into the woods (where, under his guidance, the boy observed the creatures and grasses with a meticulous regard, each with a life of its own), and bid him in effect, rather as if telling himself, not to submit to any ordered rôle that was against his natural bent. Restlessness and poverty drove the shoemaker to volunteer as a solider in 1812; he returned a sick man, half out of his mind, and died in 1816 when his son was eleven. The mother, on the other hand, many years older than her husband, was a simple rough peasant woman, religious and superstitious. (The story *She Was Good for Nothing* is a tribute to her memory.) An earlier daughter of hers, an illegitimate half-sister to Hans, received none of the devoted and sheltering affection which was the little boy's lot. Boarded out as a child and for a time a prostitute in later life, she was to haunt the easily stirred imagination of her brother,

and embarrass him considerably when she did appear. The Andersen grandparents also had their part in the boy's early life. There was a dear grandmother, a kind and neat old lady who worked as gardener at the local asylum for the insane poor. But the grandfather was wandering in his wits; and when Hans Christain saw him being hooted at and pursued by boys in the Odense streets, he was filled with terror. 'I knew', he wrote, 'that I was of his flesh and blood.'

In Andersen's genius, though, these two conflicting strains were necessary. If his inventive genius and imagination came from his father, so too did his melancholy, his restlessness, and his emotional instability. If his mother passed on her superstitions, she also gave him his dogged peasant endurance, his obstinate ability to survive: certainly, too, his respect for those in high places. Well—he hadn't much use for bishops and other church dignitaries, but he dearly loved a king. In any case, without the faith and the force he could not have survived at all.

The school examinations were finally passed, and Andersen's guardians allowed him to choose his road. He chose to write. Indeed, his poems and novels gave him a fair reputation from the start. But the harsh years were to have their effect, and once the battle for recognition was over, neuroses crowded in. He suffered increasingly from fears and anxieties about money, about madness, about his half-sister, about losing his passport (remember the rat in *The Steadfast Tin-Soldier*), about missing the times of coaches or, presently, railway trains. He developed

a compulsive taste for travel; 'to travel', he wrote, 'is to live'. Staying in hotels or furnished rooms, or the great houses of wealthy friends, he was over sixty before he owned a bed. He was fêted and welcomed all over the world; but until his honoured final years, he never really impressed the people at home, the Danes, who knew his start.

The flaw in Andersen's personal fairy tale was the human one. The simple lad in the folk tale prospers through a kind of inspired idiocy; he does not grieve or toil, and Andersen did both. The clown's resilience of temper, the absence of offended dignity—though it did not save Andersen from bad dreams of the past when life was easier—was to protect him in the hard days of his youth. It was something that Chatterton, in similar circumstances but with a more rigid temperament, entirely lacked; unable to be the clown he had to play the tragic part. Andersen paid a different price. As a child in a world of adults, he could thrive. But this very childlike quality that opened the doors of patrons was a bar to adult relationships. Women were his kindest counsellors and friends, yet, since he failed to approach them as adult to adult, he remained through life alone. Perhaps it is best that we do not know too much when we are young about the tellers our tales; that the scholarly brothers Grimm should remain as two troll-like figures, and Andersen not as a person but as a book.

For in the stories, all these elements in Andersen's temper have a fit and proper place. The human uncertainty is the great distinction between the tales

of Andersen and the traditional tales of Grimm. In the folk narrative, everyone's path is prescribed; you cannot distinguish between witch and witch, prince and prince, goosegirl and yellow-haired goosegirl. In Andersen, not only the people have an individual human quality but the silly household objects themselves. Browning once wrote to a novelist friend: 'Even two potatoes are *unlike*—but two *men*, Isa!' No two potatoes are alike in Andersen's tales.

Once he had realized the range and power of his new invented genre, he did not have to look far for ideas. Inspiration was everywhere. 'The stories lay there like seeds', he wrote; 'all that was necessary for them to spring into bloom was a breath of air, a ray of sunshine, or a drop of wormwood.' And joys and pangs came readily enough to the mercurial creature. The stories were, of course, his own magical weapon, his personal answer to life—an answer that is usually irresistible. Pride will be humbled; the humble will have redress—this is a constant theme. *The Ugly Duckling* has long since become its classic allegory, and numerous kitchen and nursery pieces echo the moral. *The Travelling-Companion* assures us that a kindness done will bring its reward. *The Snow Queen* and *The Wild Swans* stress the power of innocence. All men, all creatures must serve the flower-like Gerda; the very toads turn into flowers at Elise's touch. Quality will out is another characteristic moral—the commonness of the princess, say, and the princeliness of the swineherd. Several tales, such as *The Steadfast Tin-Soldier*, are about endurance. But nearest of all to his own story is the theme that every wish has its price. *The Little*

Mermaid (a major story marred by an unfair theological bias which the author's father would have deplored) is its most piercing version, but you can find it at a lighter level in *The Galoshes of Fortune*. Fortune sends a lady-in-waiting to do her business, but Sorrow carries out her errands herself to see that they are done properly. And when Fortune's galoshes have proved their point, Sorrow appropriates them, for they seem to be hers after all. A nice conclusion.

But the art must carry the thought: and behind the careful simplicity the art in Andersen's tales is considerable. Even in translation you can recognize his ear for dialogue; his remarkable narrative manner based on the living rhythm of speech; the gratuitous detail (a trait he shares with Dickens); the sly, flat, straightfaced comment which was so inimitably his own. The betrothed dolls received presents, 'but they had declined to accept provisions of any kind, for they intended to live on love.' 'That was a charming story', says the Queen in *The Flying Trunk*. 'You shall certainly have our daughter.' 'Yes, indeed,' adds the King. 'You shall have her on Monday.' The broom takes some parsley from the dustbin to crown the story-telling pot 'for he knew that it would annoy the others'. Moreover, 'If I crown her today,' he thought, 'she will have to crown me tomorrow.' The Snow Queen promises Kay, if he does the task she has set, the whole world and a new pair of skates. The earth is there as well as the sky, the kitchen as well as the palace. Nothing, however marvelous, is quite beyond human touch.

It is in the tales about objects—the house or kitchen or garden pieces—that Andersen's peculiar genius is most evident: his charm, dry humour, economy, and crystal-clear, almost microscopic vision. Each kitchen, parlour, or nursery is a society in miniature; in the homely bric-à-brac, the clocks, tongs, toys, pins, and kitchen rubbish, every social and professional nuance is displayed. Consider the Darning-needle as it lies in the gutter. 'I am too fine for this world', it reflects. 'But I know my own worth, and there is always a satisfaction in that.'

One day something glittering lay close by its side, then the Needle thought it was a Diamond, thought it was nothing but a Piece of Glass; but because it glittered the Needle addressed it, and introduced itself as a Breast-pin. 'You are a Diamond, I suppose?' 'Yes, I am something of that sort!' So each believed the other to be something very valuable, and they complained of the vanity of the world.

Or take this account of the toys having an evening's entertainment. The Money-pig (or Piggy-bank) looks down upon them all. 'It knew very well that what it had in its stomach would have bought all the toys, and that's what we call having self-respect.'

The moon shone through the window-frames and gave free light. Now the fun was about to begin and all of them, even the children's Go-Cart, which certainly belonged to the coarser playthings, were invited to take part in the sport.

'Each one has his own peculiar value,' said the Go-Cart. 'We cannot all be noblemen. There must be some who do the work, as the saying is.'

The Money-pig was the only one who received a written invitation, for he was of high standing, and they were afraid he would not accept a verbal message. Indeed, he did not answer... nor did he come: if he was to take a part, he must do so from his own home; they were to arrange accordingly, and so they did.

... There was to be a tea party and a discussion for mental improvement, and with this latter part they began immediately. The Rocking Horse spoke of training and Race, nd the Go-Cart of railways and steam power ... The Clock talked politics—ticks—tocks ... thought it was whispered that he did not go correctly; the Bamboo Cane stood there, stiff and proud, for he was conceited about his brass ferule and his silver top, for being thus bound above and below; and on the sofa lay two worked Cushions, pretty and stupid ... Each one thought of himself and of what the Money-pig might think ...

That last sentence, like the Piece of Glass's evasive reply, is quite masterly. Another such scene may be found in the interlude-story in *The Flying Trunk*. A further outstanding example is in *The Goblin at the Provision-Dealer's*, a wonderful short by any standards. The goblin, a simple creature, full of respect for the grocer, finds itself having to decide between the merits of poetry (the student's diet) and the grocer's delicious porridge. The reader must look to see exactly how Andersen presents these notions and the goblin's final choice.

But something else will presently strike the reader; it is that, in so many of the tales, the creative process seems to have been identical with that of poetry; like a poem, the Andersen story can be read again

and again. This quality, which applies to the miniature comedies no less than the splendid pieces like the *Garden of Paradise* with its ranging landscapes, or *The Snow Queen*, or *The Wind Tells of Valdemar Daae and His Daughters*, is something quite distinct from the poetic mood which runs through the prose of these longer tales. It is worth noting that the *Valdemar Daae* story was revised many times to catch in words the exact sound of the rushing wind that tells the tale.

> 'I blew through the great gateway like a watchman blowing on his horn, but there was no watchman there,' said the wind, 'I turned the weathercock on the spire and it creaked and groaned as if watchman were snoring in the turret, but there was no watchman there either: there were rats and mice: poverty laid the table, poverty sat in the wardrobe and the pantry, the door came off its hinges, cracks and crevices appeared; I went in and out,' said the wind, 'so I knew all that was going on ... I was the only one that sang loudly in that castle ... Whew-oo-oo! Away, away!'

The Snow Queen is surely the high point of Andersen's achievement. This is not only because of the poetic construction—the crystallizing, you might say, of each episode: the dreams rushing past on the stairs, the night in the robber castle; the self-absorbed flowers telling their stories, Kay's great ride with the Queen. Nor is it only for the truly magnificent descriptions, scene after scene: summer and autumn, hut and castle, the whole vast sweep of winter—scenes which nobody who has read the story can ever really forget. But it is also one of the most effective of the tales in human terms. Take, for

instance, the pretty, vain flowers, each absorbed only in its own story when Gerda seeks for help. Or the relationship of the Schoolboy Kay and the Queen.

'And now you get no more kisses!' she said. 'Or else I shall kiss you to death.'

Kay looked at her: she was very beautiful; a wiser, lovelier face he could not imagine; now she no longer seemed made of ice as she had done when she sat outside the window and beckoned to him—in his eyes she was perfect. He felt no fear at all: he told her he could do mental arithmetic, even with fractions, and work out how many square miles there were in the country and how many people lived there. She smiled all the time. Then he realized that he knew very little indeed ...

Andersen may often choose to write of toys—life, you might say, at one or two removes: but no 'adult' novelist could have improved on this.

The Snow Queen also belongs to the great line of quest-stories—a perilous journey through seasons and wonders to what seems the very end of the world. How many of us notice that it is the one great fairy tale where all the main characters (eight or more of them) are girls or women, while the victim who must be saved is a boy? Did Andersen realize this himself? By his own account, the whole long work was written at incredible speed—the pace of inspiration rather than worked-out thought. By contrast, other tales (*The Ugly Ducking*, say) took months to write.

Andersen lived at the junction of two worlds, old and new. Stage coach travel, witch-doctoring, and public executions were part of his youth; he was to