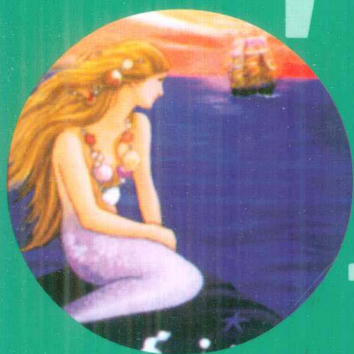


Andersen's Fairy Tales

By Hans Christian Andersen



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By Hans Christian Andersen

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Introduction

Such an original species of writing as that in which Andersen excelled does not burst full-blown upon the world. It is the result of many experiments, many accidents, even, perhaps, of some blunderings. Andersen did not set out deliberately to be a teller of fairy stories, much less did he expect or desire to be mainly known as the composer of these *smaating*, as he called them, of these trifles or bagatelles. He set out in life intending to be a serious poet, a writer of five-act dramas, a novelist of passion and society. Almost to the very last he persisted in believing that the critics and the public had made a mistake, and that his ambitious works, in the conventional branches of the profession, were what he would really live by. "Don't you think," he said to me in a sort of coaxing whisper, towards the very close of his life, "don't you think that people will really come back to 'The Two Baronesses' when these *smaating* have had their day?" "The Two Baronesses" is an old novel of Andersen's, which I had not read, so I could only bend my eyes politely. But that was in 1874, and people have neither come back to "The Two Baronesses" nor forgotten "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Snow Queen."

Unwilling as he was to admit it, however, Andersen could not fail to be aware that the Fairy Tales were his real possession and treasure-trove. In 1862 he deigned to recollect how these stories came into existence, and his notes—which I do not happen to have seen translated or even referred to—although tantalizingly scanty, are very valuable. He put back the germ of his fairy story telling to the year 1829, when he published, along with a little collection of his poems, a tale in prose called "The Dead Man." This was a treatment of one of the disquieting, half-humorous, half-melancholy legends which Andersen had heard when he haunted the Odense workhouse and its old women in his

childhood. He deliberately tried to tell it in the tone of Musäus, a German author of the eighteenth century, who began by being an imitator of Richardson, and who ended as the first man to collect and retell, after a somewhat over-genteel fashion, the folktales of Germany. Musäus possessed no great talent, but it is interesting to see him, who set the Brothers Grimm and all the multitude of modern folklorists in motion on the one hand, giving the start-word in a very different direction to Andersen. For "The Dead Man"—which was quite a failure—was the story which, entirely rewritten, appeared in 1836 as "The Travelling Companion."

In Andersen's account of his journey in the Harz Mountains, published in 1831, there is to be found a story of an old king, who believed that he had never heard a lie, and therefore promised that the man who should first successfully tell him a falsehood should receive the princess, his daughter, and half his royal kingdom. Here the fairy tale tone is clearly perceptible, but it has not yet discovered its form or its final character. But in 1835 there appeared a little pamphlet, the originality and importance of which it would be difficult to appraise too highly, "Fairy Tales Told for Children." This precious pamphlet of 61 pages contained four tales, "The Tinder Box," "Little Claus and Big Claus," "The Princess and the Pea," and "Little Ida's Flowers." These four stories are included in the present collection, and the reader may find it interesting to detach these, with a view to observing what we may call Andersen's primitive manner in the evolution of a fairy tale.

There was one peculiarity in these stories which startled a Danish ear, and led at first to almost universal reproof by the critics, and neglect by cultivated readers. Like the other literatures of Europe, and more than some—more than our own, for instance—the poetry and prose of Denmark were held at that time in the bondage of the proprieties. An author still had to consider not merely what he should, but also what he should not say. There was little attempt to reproduce, even in comedy, the actual daily speech of citizens, but something more polished, more rhetorical, more literary, in fact, was put into the lips of even vulgar persons before they could be permitted to speak in public. It would not be easy to make an Englishman or a Frenchman

understand how startlingly lax and puerile the conversations in these little stories of Andersen's appeared; perhaps a German would realise it better. It was the first time that children and uneducated people of the lower middle-class had been allowed to speak in Danish literature, and their naivetés and their innocent picturesqueness were at first an absolute scandal. Conceive what Johnson and Burke would have thought of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," and you have a parallel to the effect of "Little Claus and Big Claus" upon academic Denmark.

But in this first typical specimen there were differences to be observed. "The Tinder-Box" and "The Princess with the Pea" are not of the same class as "Little Ida's Flowers." Nothing of its kind could be more exquisite than the last, and Andersen never excelled its lightness and brightness of fancy, its intimate recognition of the movement of a child's imagination. Only a great poet could have written it—only the great poet who subsequently wrote so many other pure "fairy tales" of the same enchanting innocence and ebullience. But that poet needed not to have had Andersen's peculiar training. As a matter of fact, "Little Ida's Flowers" was composed in consequence of hearing the small daughter of Thiele make remarks about the plants in the Botanic Gardens of Copenhagen; remarks, the delicious artlessness of which so delighted Andersen, that he noted them down and reproduced them in the setting which we all know so well. This is an example of the side of Andersen's genius on which he most closely approaches Lewis Carroll.

If from this lovely fantasia we turn to the other three stories, we see something different, something more entirely original, and suggestive of a more surprising departure. These also were suggested to Andersen by matters lurking in his recollection; he never, perhaps, absolutely invented the material of his tales. But these were legends the crude germ or kernel of each of which he had heard long ago, in his unparalleled childhood, fragments of the prejudice and ignorance and mother-wit of the untaught peasant mind. These were atoms of folklore left sticking to his memory from the days when he went weeding in the garden of the lunatic asylum, or strolled along among the hop-pickers at Bogense. These worn fragments of a primitive age, shapeless and unsuggestive to any less penetrating imagination than his, Andersen

redeemed from their low uses, and clothed again with his fancy and his humanity.

The next little collection, that of 1836, contained three, and that of 1837 only two stories. It appeared in these that Andersen had become a little shy of his old, direct folklore. He had put forth his discovery, and the world had proved averse to it. Here was "The Travelling Companion," in its remodelled form, which indeed was actual folklore; but the others belonged to the modern, the invented, or, as we English may roughly call it, the Alice section of the stories. "The Naughty Boy" came out of Anacreon; "The Emperor's New Clothes," remarkable as showing the first complete development of Andersen's satiric irony, from Spanish sources. In "Thumbeline" and "The Little Mermaid" we have pure fairy tales, works of literary fancy, unattached to any genuine folklore. The last-mentioned, however, was the earliest of all Andersen's Tales to become widely popular. It was in "The Wild Swans," of 1838, that he first dared to come back to actual Danish legend; by this time he had begun to conquer his public, and he now went on writing as it happened to please him best. Oddly enough, he himself was never perfectly converted; to the last, and in the presence of his immortal little masterpieces, he continued to be slightly scandalized at the liberties he had persuaded himself to take with classical Danish.

Perhaps there never existed a more remarkable instance of the adaptation of extraordinary circumstances to the purposes of a unique genius than was seen in the case of the early training of Andersen. His childish days had been spent in strange places, in still stranger company. He must have been about five when he went with his parents to dine with the jailer of the common prison in Odense. Two prisoners waited at table, but Hans Christian could eat nothing; his brain was full of all the stories of robbers and dungeons and enchanted castles that he had ever heard of, and he had to be put to bed. But when he was left alone, he characteristically tells us, he forgot to be frightened, for he turned the whole incident into a wonderful fairy tale. How he played about in the corridors of the mad-house, and how a beautiful lunatic nearly frightened him to death, is well known; but this is an incident

which could have happened, one is inclined to say, to no poet but Andersen. He has given us a most curious account of the long hours he used to spend in the old women's ward of the poor-house at Odense, and how he offered to sketch the internal economy of anyone of the ancient ladies, with chalk, on the door of the room. With these and other ingenuities he so diverted them that they declared with one voice that so clever a child was not long for this world. But, in their turn, to this ignorant, freakish, wild little boy the old women told stories, legends of troll and water-sprite, ghost and goblin and wizard, such as in those days the uninstructed imagination of the Scandinavian peasant teemed with.

When the child was eleven his father, the gentle, consumptive young cobbler, fell deadly sick. Already Andersen had gained a reputation as a clever, uncanny boy ("he is cracked, like his grandfather," people said in Odense); accordingly when his father was very ill, his mother sent him out at night to walk by the river, "for," she said, "if your father is to die this time, you will meet his ghost." The poor frightened child came home, having seen nothing, and his mother's superstition was assuaged; but the third day after that her husband did die. Little Andersen and his mother watched with the corpse, and all night long a cricket chirped; till at last the mother sat up and cried to it, "You need not call to him; he is dead!" In this amazing old-world atmosphere of terror and spiritual bewilderment was the delicate and nervous brain of this great modern poet nurtured, and we must not forget it if we would understand in what manner he was prepared for the composition of the *Fairy Tales*.

It may be said that in his address to his imaginary audience, Andersen never advanced beyond what he recalled of his own childhood in those loose, undisciplined and fruitful years when it was doubtful whether he would become a tailor's apprentice or a super at a provincial theatre. It is to what he recollected of his own dimly-luminous mind before he set out for Copenhagen in 1819 that he addressed in later life the ingenuous language of his tales. Hence he uses the simplest words, the most concrete images, is occupied with the rudest tastes and the humblest ambitions. If he wishes to conjure up

power, it is always in the person of a real old king, generally a peasant in intelligence and experience, but known to be a king by his wearing a golden crown and an ermine robe, and by his carrying a sceptre. So, if he wishes to suggest wealth, he uses none of its symbols or evidences, but quantities of bullion—bars of gold or bags of minted money. The child's want of clear distinction between the seen and the unseen, the experienced and the impossible; its naive acceptance of animals and flowers, and even of the winds and the stars and the inanimate domestic objects around it, as creatures allied to itself, with which it may be in mutual comprehension, the dullest of which (in fact) is more in sympathy with it than an ordinary "grown-up person," —all this was realised by Andersen with a clairvoyance which becomes almost supernatural when we recollect that no previous writer had ever seriously dreamed of it, and that this was a little chamber of literature into which even Shakespeare had never forced his way.

It has taken the world sixty years to become perfectly assured that Andersen, in his own best line, is an author of the very highest originality, that—given the particular *genre*—he is as great in it as Milton or—shall we say? —Molière in his. Nothing less than this can be claimed for Andersen, —absolute supremacy in his own special field. Only one man perceived this fact, however, at first; this was the Dane, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, the acutest critic of Northern Europe in those years, who—though hitherto not well affected to Andersen's writings—told him bluntly, as soon as he had read "The Princess and the Pea," that here he had struck at last into the road that leads to immortality. But the excellent Fredrika Bremer could only wish that "The Little Mermaid" had been brought down to the level of a young child's apprehension, and most of what were considered the "best judges" of that age were shocked at the humour which gives the very salt of life to the fairy tale which without it is apt to be a little mawkish. Andersen's autobiography is full, perhaps over-full, of instances of want of appreciation of his writings by those from whose praise he anticipated most pleasure. But the children soon took up the matter themselves, and paid him an abundant and enthusiastic devotion which dragged

their elders along with it. ^①

There can be little doubt that one peculiarity of Andersen's imagination peculiarly endeared him to the minds of the children. A child is like a savage in its calm acceptance of incongruous elements, in the ease with which it passes over essential difficulties of tone and plane. Andersen's art consists largely of the adroitness with which he blends together ideas which in the real world cannot be conceived of in combination or even in relation. He is unique, for instance, in his mingling of images from the Christian religion with those from primitive forms of superstition. When "The Travelling Companion," for example, opens, Johannes is at the parish church, and the people are singing a hymn. But in the tower of the old church, a brownie or *nisse* is squatting, and it waves its red cap at him. He follows the bells through the forest, and with a good conscience enters another little church, listening to the word of God; this does not prevent him presently from enjoying the gambols of the elves in the woodland. He is a good little modern boy, living in a quiet parish, among God-fearing people, but the mountain opens before him and he enters without surprise the great hall where the King of the Trolls sits under a canopy of pink spiders' webs, and listens to the choir of great black grasshoppers playing on Jews' harps. But he is the same sober Christian lad as ever, and in due time overthrows all his enemies by his honesty and sagacity. Here the mixture of spiritual ideas is bewildering, if we only persuade ourselves to realise it, and involves an incongruity which no other teller of fairy stories allows himself to undertake. In one of Grimm's stories, for instance, or of Asbjørnsen's, we shall have trolls, and wicked princesses, and imps with enormous noses, but they will not be mixed up with the singing of hymns in church and preparing for a first communion. But in the mind of a child this or any incongruity is possible, and the mind of Andersen was exactly like that of a child. Hence, even when his topsy-turvy world is most startling, we are never scandalized. Probably no one was ever found to accuse Andersen of profanity.

A somewhat similar moral incongruity would not be quite so easy to

^① For the facts of Andersen's life, the reader may be referred to Mr. R. Nisbet Bain's excellent *Biography*, 1895, a work collected entirely from Danish sources.

condone, if we were inclined to take a very high ground. The soldier in "The Tinder-Box" cuts off the head of the old woman and steals her treasures with shocking ingratitude, yet with complete impunity; his ultimate good fortune even springs directly from his crime. The behaviour of the merchant's son to the Turkish princess in "The Flying Trunk" was deplorable, but Andersen does not seem to regret it. Little Claus can hardly be said to live up to any recognized standard of morals in his relation to Big Claus. But all this is very characteristic of the childish instinct; life to a child is a phantasmagoria, and thanklessness and rapine and murder are amusing shadows which the unsubstantial human figures throw as they dance in the flicker of the fire-light. It is precisely the absence of any priggishness in this respect, and the daring with which he sets himself against all the obvious schoolroom axioms of conduct, that help to make up the astounding fascination of Andersen. His very savagery endears him to the little innocent barbarians of the nursery.

It was a favourite exercise with Andersen to read aloud his fairy tales, soon after they were written, to some fortunate friend. The number of those who can say that they have enjoyed this privilege must now be growing small. In England it must be extremely small, for Andersen's latest visit to this country was paid in 1857. The present writer, therefore, is tempted to believe that there is some little rarity, at least, in an experience which he is able to relate, and the more so from a particular which will be presently mentioned. Only on a single occasion did Hans Christian Andersen read to me one of his unpublished fairy tales, and, indeed, I had not the honour of knowing him until he had given to the world the main bulk of his productions. But in the summer of 1872 I had the happiness of listening to "The Cripple." At that time Andersen had a suite of rooms in Copenhagen, but he was much more frequently to be found at the mansion of some friends just outside the fortifications, called Rolighed or "Quietude." This house had been the residence of several interesting people, among others of no less a person than Oersted. It was now owned by a wealthy and liberal merchant, Mr. Moritz Melchior, who had rebuilt it, and who had turned it into a miniature of Rosenborg Castle, with a tower,

and with high balconies overlooking the Sound. It is now, I understand, pulled down.

In this house Andersen was so constantly welcome, that a portion of it—three or four charming rooms—was set apart entirely for his service, and he came and went in them without constraint. “Rolighed” is the subject of Andersen’s latest poem, in which he says:—

“My home of homes, where behind the slope of elder-bushes,
My life regained its sunshine and my harp its tone,
To you I bring with gratitude this blithe song of mine!”

It was here, in his bright room open to the east, with the long caravan of ships going by in the Sound below, “like a flock of wild swans,” as he said, with the white towns of Malmö and Landskrona sparkling on the Swedish coast, and the sunlight falling on Tycho Brahé’s island, that Andersen proposed to recite to me a new fairy tale. He read in a low voice, which presently sank to almost a hoarse whisper; he read slowly, out of mercy to my imperfect apprehension, and as he read he sat beside me, with his amazingly long and bony hand—a great brown hand, almost like that of a man of the woods—grasping my shoulder. As he read, the colour of everything, the twinkling sails, the sea, the opposite Swedish coast, the burnished sky above, kindled with sunset. It seemed as if Nature itself was flushing with ecstasy at the sound of Andersen’s voice.

When he had finished, he talked to me a little about the story, and he confided to me that he intended this, “The Cripple,” to be his last. He was very much pleased with it; he thought it summed up all his methods, and that in a certain sense it presented symbolically his lesson, his imaginative message, to mankind. The reader may not recollect this story, since it is far from being the best known of Andersen’s tales; nor is it really one of the most characteristic, for there is nothing supernatural or fantastic about it. It presents a little complicated episode of humble manners. A gardener and his wife have five children, of whom the eldest, a fine boy, has the misfortune to be a bed-ridden cripple. The parents, worthy narrow people, live engrossed in their materialistic interests, and when someone from whom a present is expected gives the cripple a book, they ungraciously say to

one another, "He won't get fat on that." But it is a book of fairy tales, and the boy's whole spiritual life is awakened by the vistas these open for him in every direction. He finds two simple and direct parables which he reads over and over again to his parents, and their hearts, too, are humanized and melted. Finally, a little dark bird, like the Emperor of China's nightingale, is presented to him, and in a supreme nervous effort to save its life the cripple regains the use of his own limbs. In this story Andersen intended to sum up the defence of fairy tales and of their teller. It was to be a sort of *apologia* for his whole poetical career, and he told me that it would be the latest of his writings. In this matter his mind afterwards changed, for later in the same year, 1872, he composed "Auntie Toothache," inspired by his own sufferings, and it is with this story that the long series of his fairy tales ultimately closed in the original.

He gradually realised that his work was done; in a most pathetic letter to me on New Year's Day, 1875, he admitted that we must look for nothing more, that his bag of magic was emptied. After a long illness, however, his physical health seemed in large measure restored, and at the completion of his seventieth year, great festivities were arranged at Copenhagen and at Odense. The whole nation, from the Royal Family down to the peasants in the country villages, kept Andersen's birthday as a holiday, and this attention soothed and pleased him. But his vital energy was now fast ebbing; he began to suffer great torture from an obscure complaint which puzzled the doctors. It was interesting that when he was dying Andersen expressed a curiosity to study the ancient Indian fables which are identified with the mythical name of Bidpai, and the death-bed of the greatest modern fabulist was strewn with translations and commentaries of his earliest fellow-craftsman of Hindustan. At last, on the 4th of August, 1875, he fell asleep in the room at Rolighed, where we were sitting when he read me "The Cripple" three years before; and out of that peaceful slumber he never woke again. His laborious and beautiful life had been the most enchanting of his fairy tales; it closed at last in honour and serenity. It will probably be centuries before Europe sees again a man in whom the same peculiar qualities of imagination are blended; she can never

see one more blameless in his life, or inspired by an aim more delicate and guileless.

The illustrations to the present edition form a feature of special attractiveness. It may safely be said, without disrespect to the artists of several generations and of many nations who have previously attempted the task, that now for the first time Andersen finds an adequate illustrator. This is Mr. Hans Tegner, the most distinguished of that group of black-and-white draughtsmen which has come to the front in Copenhagen within the last two decades. The preparation of these drawings has occupied the artist fifteen years, and they are destined to find a home at last in the Danish National Museum. I am told that the originals, which I have not had the advantage of seeing, have been enthusiastically commended by M. Édouard Detaille and M. Dagnan-Bouveret, no light authorities in matters of this kind. The picturesqueness, the strength and the originality of these designs, and their exact fitness to the poet's narrative, must strike every observer, even though he makes no pretence to the science of an expert in such arts. And the fact that everything in them, —the landscape, the architecture, the costume, the faces of the human beings, —is exclusively and characteristically Danish, must add a very great charm to pictures which are in themselves already so entertaining and so fascinating.

Edmund Gosse

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The Wild Swans



The princes were turned into
eleven beautiful wild Swans.