

FREDERIK VAN EEDEN

LITTLE JOHANNES

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Little Johannes

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Frederik van Eeden

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INTRODUCTION

LITERARY FAIRY TALES

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

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

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 *Bizarres 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,

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.

– 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.

I

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-dunes – 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.

II

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.

A little old boat lay tied up to the bare roots of the beech-tree. Johannes was strictly forbidden ever to get into it. Oh! how strong was the temptation this evening! The clouds were parting into a grand gateway, through which the sun would sink to rest. Shining ranks of small clouds gathered on each side like life-guards in golden armour. The pool glowed back at them, and red rays flashed like arrows between the water-reeds.

Johannes very slowly untied the rope that moored the boat to the beech-root. Oh, to float out there in the midst of that glory! Presto had already jumped into the boat; and before his master knew what he was doing, the reeds had pushed it out, and they were drifting away together towards the setting sun.

Johannes lay in the bows staring into the heart of the cavern of light. 'Wings!' thought he. 'Oh, for wings now, and I should be there!'

The sun was gone. The clouds were of fire. The sky in the east was deep blue. A row of willows grew on the bank. Their tiny silvery leaves stood motionless in the still air, looking like pale green lace against the dark background.

Hark! What was that? A breath flew over the surface of the pool – like a faint gust of wind making a little groove in the water. It came from the sand-hills, from the cloud-cavern. When Johannes looked round he saw a large blue dragon-fly sitting on the edge of the boat. He had never seen one so large. It settled there, but its wings quivered in a large circle; it seemed to Johannes that the tips of them made a ring of light.

'It must be a glow-worm dragon-fly,' thought he, 'and they are very seldom seen.'

But the circle grew wider and wider, and the wings fluttered so fast that Johannes saw them only as a mist. And by degrees he saw out of the mist two dark eyes gleaming, and a slender, shining figure in a pale blue dress sat in the place where the dragon-fly had been. Its fair hair was crowned with a garland of white convolvulus, and on its shoulders were gauzy insect-wings glittering like a soap-bubble, with a thousand colours.

A shiver of delight tingled through Johannes. Here was a miracle!

'Will you be my friend?' he whispered.

It was an odd way of addressing a stranger, but this was not a common case. And he had a feeling as though he had always known this strange sky-blue creature.

'Yes, Johannes!' he heard, and the voice sounded like the rustling of the sedges in the evening breeze, or the whisper of rain on the leaves in the wood.

'What is your name?' asked Johannes.

'I was born in the bell of a bindweed flower. Call me Windekind.'⁶ And Windekind laughed and looked so kindly into Johannes' eyes that he felt strangely happy.

⁶ The child of the bindweed.

'To-day is my birthday,' Windekind went on, 'I was born close to this spot. The last rays of the sun and the first beams of the moon are my father and mother. People in Holland call the sun *she*, but that is not right. The sun is my father.'

Johannes made up his mind to call the sun *he* in school to-morrow.

'And look! There comes my mother's round shining face. Good-day, mother! Oh, oh! But she looks very sad!'

He pointed to the eastern horizon. The moon was rising, broad and bright in the grey heavens, behind the lace-work of willow-twigs which stood out black against the silver disc. It really had a melancholy face.

'Come, come, mother. There is nothing wrong. I can trust him.'

The fair being fluttered his gauzy wings gleefully, and tapped Johannes on the cheek with an iris flower he had in his hand.

'She does not like my having come to talk to you. You are the first, you see; but I trust you, Johannes. You must never, never mention my name to any human being, nor speak of me at all. Will you promise me this?'

'Yes, Windekind,' said Johannes. It was still very strange to him. He felt happy beyond words, but feared lest his happiness should vanish. Was he dreaming? By his side, on the seat, lay Presto, sleeping quietly. His dog's warm breath reassured him. The gnats crept over the surface of the water and danced in the sultry air, just as usual. Everything about him was quite clear and real. It must be true. And he felt all the time that Windekind's trustful look was on him. Then again he heard the sweet low voice: —

'I have often seen you here, Johannes. Do you know where I was? Sometimes I sat on the sand at the bottom of the pool among the thicket of water-plants, and looked up at you when you bent over to drink, or to catch the water-beetles or the efts. But you did not see me. Then again I would hide near you among the reeds. There I was very comfortable; I sleep there most times when it is warm, in an empty reed-warbler's nest. And that is deliciously soft!'

Windekind rocked himself contentedly on the edge of the boat, hitting at the gnats with his flower.

'Now I have come to keep you company. Your life is too dull. We shall be good friends, and I will tell you a great many things – much better things than the schoolmaster teaches you. He knows nothing about them. And if you do not believe me I will let you see and hear for yourself. I will take you with me.'

'Oh, Windekind! Dear Windekind! Can you take me with you out there?' cried Johannes, pointing to the spot where the purple rays of the vanished sun had streamed out of the golden gate of clouds. The glorious structure was already fading into grey mist, but the rosy light still could be seen in the farthest depths.

Windekind looked at the glow, which tinged his delicate face and fair hair, and he gently shook his head.

'Not now, not now. You must not ask too much at once, Johannes. I myself have never been to my father's home.'

'I am always at my father's,' said Johannes. 'No; he is not your father. We are brothers. My father is your father too. But the earth is your mother and so we are very different. And you were born in a house among men, and I in a bindweed flower; and that is much better. But we shall get on very well together nevertheless.'

Then Windekind sprang lightly into the boat, which did not rock under his weight, and kissed Johannes on the forehead.

What a strange change then came over Johannes! Everything about him seemed different. He saw everything better and more clearly, as he fancied. He saw the moon look down with a kinder glance, and he saw that the water-lilies had faces, and gazed at him in pensive amazement. He now

suddenly understood why the gnats danced so merrily up and down, and round and round each other, touching the water with the tips of their long legs. He had often wondered and thought about it, but now he understood it at once.

He heard too what the reeds whispered to the trees on the bank, softly complaining that the sun had gone down.

'Oh! Windekind, thank you, this is glorious. Yes; we shall be very happy together!'

'Give me your hand,' said Windekind, spreading his many-coloured wings. Then he drew Johannes in the boat over the pool through the splashing leaves which glistened in the moonlight. Here and there a frog was sitting on a leaf; but he did not now leap into the water when Johannes came by. He only made a little bow and said, 'Quaak.' Johannes politely bowed in return; above all, he would not seem ill-bred.

Then they came to the reeds; they grew so far out into the water that the whole boat was swallowed up in them without touching the shore. But Johannes held fast to his leader and they scrambled to land between the tall stems. It seemed to Johannes that he had grown quite small and light, but perhaps that was fancy. Still, he could not remember that he had ever before been able to climb up a sedge.

'Now, keep your eyes open,' said Windekind, 'and you shall see something pretty.'

They walked on among the tall grass and under dark brushwood which here and there let through a bright narrow streak of moonlight.

'Did you ever hear the crickets of an evening out on the sand-hills, Johannes? It is as if they were giving a concert, isn't it? And you can never find out exactly where the sound comes from. Now they do not sing for pleasure: the voices come from the crickets' school, where hundreds of little crickets are learning their lessons. Be quite still, for we are near them now.'

Shurr! Shurr!

The bushes were thinner here, and when Windekind pushed the grass stems aside with his flower, Johannes saw a beautiful open glade where, among the fine spiky grass of the down, the crickets were busy reading their lessons. A great stout cricket was master and teacher. One after another the pupils skipped up to him with one leap forward and one leap back again. The cricket who missed his leap had to stand on a toadstool.

'Now listen, Johannes,' said Windekind; 'you too may perhaps learn something.'

Johannes could understand what the little crickets said. But it was not at all the same as the master at his school taught him. First came geography: they knew nothing of the quarters of the world. They only knew twenty-six sand-hills at most, and two ponds. No one could know of anything beyond, said the master, and what was told of it was mere idle fancy.

Then came the botany lesson. They were all very sharp at this, and many prizes were given, consisting of the youngest and sweetest blades of grass of various length. But the zoology was what most puzzled Johannes. The animals were classified as leaping, flying, and creeping. The crickets could leap and fly, and thus stood at the head of all; next to them the frogs. Birds were mentioned with every sign of horror, as most malignant and dangerous creatures. Finally man was spoken of. He was a huge useless and mischievous being, very low in the scale, as he could neither leap nor fly; but happily he was very rarely met with. A very tiny cricket, who had never yet seen a man, had three blows with a reed for including man among the harmless beasts.

Johannes had never heard anything like this before. Then the master called out: 'Silence! Leaping exercise!' And the little crickets immediately ceased conning their lessons, and began to play leap-frog, in the cleverest and nimblest way, the big teacher at their head. It was such a merry sight that Johannes clapped his hands with glee; but at that sound, the whole school vanished in an instant into the sand-hills, and the grass plot was as still as death.

'There, that is your doing, Johannes! You must not behave so roughly. It is easy enough to see that you were born among men.'

'I am so sorry! Twill do my best. But it was so funny!'

'It will be still funnier,' said Windekind.

They crossed the grass plot and went up the down on the other side. Oof! it was hard walking in the heavy sand; but as soon as Johannes held on to the pale-blue robe he flew upwards, lightly and swiftly. Half-way up there was a rabbit-burrow. The rabbit who lived there was lying with his head and forepaws over the edge. The wild roses were still in bloom, and their sweet, delicate fragrance mingled with that of the thyme which grew on the sand-hill.

Johannes had often seen rabbits pop into their holes, and had wondered what the burrows looked like inside, and how they sat there together, and would they not be stifled?

So he was very glad when he heard his companion ask the rabbit whether they might step in.

'So far as I am concerned, and welcome,' said the rabbit. 'But it most unfortunately happens that I have this very evening lent my burrow for a charitable entertainment, and so am not properly master in my own house.'

'Dear, dear! Has some disaster occurred?'

'Oh, yes!' said the rabbit sadly – 'a terrible misfortune! It will take us years to get over it. About a dozen jumps from here, a man's house has been built, so big, so big! And its men are come to live there with dogs. Seven members of my family have already perished, and three times as many holes have been robbed. The mouse family and the mole tribe have fared no better. Even the toads have suffered. So now we are giving an entertainment for the benefit of the survivors. Every one does what he can; I have lent my burrow. One must find something to spare for one's fellow-creatures.'

The polite rabbit sighed and passed his long ear over his face with his right forepaw, as though to wipe a tear from his eye. It was his pocket-handkerchief. There was a rustling sound in the grass and a fat, heavy body came shuffling up to the hole.

'Look,' said Windekind, 'here comes daddy toad too, all humped up. Well, how are you getting on, old fellow?'

The toad made no reply. He carefully laid an ear of corn neatly wrapped in a dry leaf close to the entrance, and nimbly climbed over the rabbit's back into the hole.

'May we go in?' said Johannes, who was excessively inquisitive. 'I will give something.'

He remembered that he still had a biscuit in his pocket – a little round biscuit, from Huntley and Palmer's. When he took it out he at once observed how much smaller he had grown. He could scarcely grasp it with both hands, and could not understand how his breeches pocket had still held it.

'That is most rare and precious!' cried the rabbit. 'That is a princely donation!'

And he respectfully made way for them to pass. It was dark in the burrow, and Johannes let Windekind lead the way. Soon they saw a pale-green light approaching them. It was a glow-worm, who obligingly offered to light them.

'It promises to be a delightful evening,' said the glow-worm as they went forward. 'There are a great number of guests. You are elves as it seems to me – are you not?' And the glow-worm glanced doubtfully at Johannes as he spoke.

'You may announce us as elves,' replied Windekind.

'Do you know that your king is of the party?' the glow-worm went on.

'Is Oberon here? Well, I am pleased indeed,' cried Windekind. 'He is a personal friend of mine.'

'Oh!' said the glow-worm. 'I did not know that I had the honour – ' and his light almost went out with alarm. 'Yes, his Majesty prefers the outer air as a rule, but he is always to be seen at a beneficent meeting. It will be really a most brilliant affair.'

And so indeed it was. The chief apartment in the rabbit-burrow was beautifully decorated; the floor was patted flat and strewn with scented thyme, and over the entrance a bat hung head downwards. He called out the names of the guests, and at the same time his wings served as curtains – a most economical arrangement. The walls were tastefully lined with dry leaves, cobwebs, and tiny hanging bats. Glowworms innumerable crept between them and over the ceiling, forming a very

pretty and twinkling illumination. At the end of this hall stood a throne made of fragments of decayed wood which gave a light of themselves. That was a very pretty sight.

There were a great many guests. Johannes felt very shy in this crowd of strangers, and clung closely to Windekind. He saw wonderful things there. A mole was talking to a field-mouse of the charming effect of the lighting and decorations. Two fat toads sat together in a corner, shaking their heads and lamenting over the persistent drought. A frog tried to walk round the room arm in arm with a lizard; but this was a failure, for he was embarrassed and excited, and now and then made too long a leap, whereby he somewhat damaged the wall decorations.

On the throne sat Oberon, the Elfin King, surrounded by his little train of elves who looked down on the rest of the company with some contempt. The King himself was full of royal condescension, and conversed in the most friendly way with several of the company. He had just arrived from a journey in the East, and wore a strange garment of brightly coloured flower-petals. 'Such flowers do not grow here,' thought Johannes. On his head he had a dark blue flower-cup which still shed a fresh perfume as though it had but just been plucked. In his hand he carried the stamen of a lotus-flower as a sceptre. All the company were struck with silent admiration of his condescension. He had praised the moonlight over the downs, and had said that the glow-worms here were as beautiful as the fire-flies in the East. He had also glanced with approval at the decorations, and a mole had observed that he had nodded his head very graciously.

'Come along,' said Windekind to Johannes. 'I will present you.' And they made their way to the King's throne.

Oberon opened his arms with joy when he saw Windekind, and embraced him. There was a murmur among the guests, and unfriendly glances from the Elfin court. The two fat toads in the corner muttered something about 'flattery' and 'servility' and 'it would not last' – and nodded significantly to each other.

Windekind talked to Oberon for a long time in an unknown language, and then beckoned to Johannes to come forward. 'Shake hands, Johannes,' said the King. 'Windekind's friends are my friends. So far as I can, I will gladly serve you. I will give you a token of our alliance.'

Oberon took a tiny gold key from the chain he wore about his neck and gave it to Johannes, who received it with great respect and clasped it tightly in his hand.

'That key may bring you luck,' the King went on. 'It opens a golden casket which contains a priceless treasure. But where that is I cannot tell you; you must search for it diligently. If you remain good friends with me, and with Windekind, and are steadfast and true, you may very likely succeed.' The Elfin King nodded his handsome head with hearty kindness, and Johannes thanked him, greatly delighted.

Hereupon three frogs, who sat perched on a little cushion of moist moss, began to sing the prelude to a slow waltz, and the couples stood up. Those who did not dance were requested by a green lizard – who acted as master of the ceremonies and who rushed hither and thither very busily – to move into the corners; to the great indignation of the two toads, who complained that they could not see; and then the dancing began. It was very droll at first. Each one danced after his own fashion and naturally imagined that he did it better than any one else. The mice and frogs leaped as high as they could on their hind legs; an old rat spun round so roughly that all the rest had to keep out of his way; and even a fat slug ventured to take a turn with a mole, but soon gave it up, excusing herself by saying that she had a stitch in her side – the real reason was that she could not do it well.

However, the dance went on very gravely and ceremoniously. Every one regarded it as a matter of conscience, and glanced anxiously at the King to see some token of approval on his countenance. But the King was afraid of causing jealousies, and looked quite unmoved. His suite thought it beneath them to dance with the rest.

Johannes had stood among them quite quietly for a long time; but he saw a little toad waltzing with a tall lizard who sometimes lifted the hapless toad so-high above the ground that she described

a semicircle in the air, and his amusement burst out in a hearty laugh. What an excitement it caused! The music ceased. The King looked angrily about him. The master of the ceremonies flew in all haste to implore Johannes to behave less frivolously.

'Dancing is a very serious thing,' said he, 'and certainly no subject for laughter. This is a very distinguished party, where people do not dance for amusement. Every one is doing his best and no one expects to be laughed at. It is extremely rude. Besides, this is a mourning feast, on a very melancholy occasion. You must behave suitably, and not as if you were among men and women.'

Johannes was quite alarmed. On every side he met disapproving looks; his intimacy with the King had already made him some enemies. Windekind led him aside.

'We shall do better to go, Johannes,' he whispered. 'You have spoilt it all. Yes, yes; that comes of having been brought up among men.'

They hastily slipped out under the wings of the porter bat, into the dark passage. The glow-worm in waiting attended them to the door.

'Have you been amused?' he asked. 'Did King Oberon speak to you?'

'Oh, yes; it was a beautiful party,' replied Johannes. 'Must you stay here in the dark passage all the time?'

'It is my own free choice,' said the glow-worm in a tone of bitter melancholy. 'I have given up all such vanities.'

'Come,' said Windekind; 'you do not mean that.'

'Indeed I do. Formerly – formerly – there was a time when I too went to banquets, and danced and cared for such frivolities. But now I am crushed by suffering – now-'

And he was so much overcome that his light went out. Fortunately they were close to the opening, and the rabbit, who heard them coming, stood a little on one side so that the moonlight shone in.

As soon as they were outside with the rabbit, Johannes said —

'Tell us your history, Glow-worm.'

'Alas!' sighed the glow-worm, 'it is simple and sad. It will not amuse you.'

'Tell it, tell it all the same,' they all cried.

'Well – you all know of course, that we glow-worms are very remarkable creatures. Yes, I believe that no one will venture to dispute that we are the most gifted creatures in existence.'

'Pray why? I do not see that!' said the rabbit.

'Can you give light?' asked the glow-worm contemptuously.

'No, certainly not,' the rabbit was forced to admit.

'Well, *we* give light! all of us. And we can let it shine or extinguish it at will. Light is the best of nature's gifts, and to give light is the highest function to which a living creature can attain. Can any one now doubt our pre-eminence? Besides, we, the males, have wings and can fly for miles.'

'That I cannot do,' the rabbit humbly owned.

'For the divine gift of light which we possess, all other creatures look up to us; no bird may attack us. One animal alone, the lowest of them all, seeks us out and carries us off. That is man – the vilest monster in creation!'

At this Johannes looked round at Windekind as though he did not understand the meaning of it. But Windekind smiled and nodded to him to say nothing.

'Once I flew gaily about the world like a bright will-o'-the-wisp among the dark bushes. And in a lonely damp meadow, on the bank of a stream, dwelt she whose existence was inseparably bound up with my happiness. She glittered in exquisite emerald green light as she crept among the grass stems, and she entirely possessed my youthful heart. I fluttered round her and did my utmost to attract her attention by changing my light. I gladly perceived that she noticed my salutation and eclipsed her own light. Tremulous with devotion, I was about to fold my wings and drop in ecstasy at the side of my radiant and adored one, when a tremendous noise filled the air. Dark figures were approaching: they

were men. I fled in terror. They rushed after me and struck at me with great black tilings, but my wings were swifter than their clumsy legs. – When I returned – '

Here the narrator's voice failed him. It was only after a pause of silent meditation, while his three hearers reverently kept silence, that he went on: 'You have guessed the rest. My gentle bride, the brightest and most sparkling of her kind, had disappeared, carried away by cruel men. The peaceful, moist grass plot was trodden down, and her favourite place by the stream was dark and desolate. I was alone in the world.'

Here the tender-hearted rabbit again used his ear to wipe a tear from his eyes.

'From that night I am an altered creature. I have a horror of all vain amusements. I think only of her whom I have lost, and of the time when I may see her again.'

'What, have you still a hope?' asked the rabbit in surprise.

'I have more than hope; I have assurance. Up there I shall see my beloved once more.'

'But – ' the rabbit put in.

'Rab,' said the glow-worm solemnly, 'I can understand the doubts of those who must feel their way in the dark. But to those who can see with their own eyes! – then all doubt is to me incomprehensible. There!' cried the glow-worm, looking reverently up at the twinkling, starry sky, 'I see them there! All my ancestors, all my friends, – and she among them – they shine up there in still greater radiance than here on earth. Ah! when shall I be released from this lower life and fly to her who twinkles at me so tenderly. When, ah! when?'

The glow-worm turned away with a sigh, and crept back into the dark again.

'Poor fellow!' said the rabbit, 'I hope he may be right.'

'I hope so too,' added Johannes.

'I have my fears,' said Windekind. 'But it was very interesting.'

'Dear Windekind,' Johannes began, 'I am very tired and sleepy.'

'Come close to me, then, and I will cover you with my cloak.'

Windekind took off his blue mantle and spread it over Johannes and himself. So they lay down together in the sweet moss on the down, their arms round each other's necks.

'Your heads lie rather low,' cried the rabbit. 'Will you rest them against me?' And so they did.

'Good-night, mother!' said Windekind to the Moon.

And Johannes shut his hand tight on the little golden key, laid his head on the downy fur of the good-natured rabbit, and slept soundly.

III

'Well, where is he, Presto? Where is your little master then?' How alarming to wake in the boat among the reeds – quite alone – the master vanished entirely! this is something indeed to be frightened at.

And now run about, hunting on all sides with timid little whinings, poor Presto! How could you sleep so soundly as not to notice when your master left the boat? Generally you are wont to wake if only he moves a little. Here – you can see here where your master landed; but now you are on land the track is very much confused. All your busy snuffing is in vain! What a misfortune! The little master gone, quite lost! Seek, Presto, seek him then!

'Look! There, against that low mound just before you – Is there not a little dark figure lying? Look at it closely!'

For a moment the dog stood motionless, looking eagerly into the distance. Then he suddenly stretched out his head and flew as fast as his four slender legs could carry him to the dark object on the mound. And when he found that it really was the little master he had so sorely missed, all his powers were too feeble to express his joy and thankfulness. He wagged his tail, his whole body wriggled with glee, he leaped, barked, yelped, and laid his cold nose against his re-found friend, licking and sniffing all over his face.

'Down, Presto! Go to your basket!' cried Johannes, but half awake. How stupid of master! There was no basket to be seen, look where he might.

Slowly, slowly, light began to dawn on the little sleeper's mind. Presto's sniffing! – he was used to that, every morning. Faint images still floated before his soul, dream-pictures of elves and moonlight, like morning mists over a landscape of sand-hills. He feared that the cold breath of day would waft them away. 'Keep your eyes shut,' said he to himself, 'or you will see the clock against the wall where it always hangs!'

But there was something strange about his bed. He felt that he had no bed-clothes over him. Gently and warily he opened his eyes, just a little way.

Bright daylight. Blue sky. Clouds.

Then Johannes opened his eyes very wide and said: 'Then it was true?'

Yes. He was lying among the sand-hills. The cheerful sunshine warmed him; he breathed the fresh morning air; a filmy mist hung over the woods beyond. He saw the tall beech-tree by the pool, and the roof of his own home rising above the shrubbery. Bees and beetles were buzzing around him, overhead a lark was singing; in the distance he could hear dogs barking and the hum of the neighbouring town. It was all real, beyond a doubt.

What then had he dreamed, and what was true? Where was Windekind? And the rabbit? He saw nothing of either. Only Presto, who sat as close to him as possible and looked at him expectantly.

'Can I have been walking in my sleep?' Johannes murmured softly to himself.

By his side there was a rabbit's burrow; but there were so many in the down. He sat up to see more plainly. What was this in his tightly clasped fingers? A glow flashed through him from head to foot as he opened his hand. In it lay a bright little gold key.

For a few moments he sat silent.

'Presto,' said he then, and the tears almost came into his eyes, 'Presto. Then it *was* true!'

Presto sprang up, and tried by barking to make his master understand that he was hungry and wanted to go home.

Home? To be sure. Johannes had not thought of that, and he did not particularly care to go. However, he presently heard his name called by loud voices. Then he began to understand that his proceedings would certainly not be regarded as right and satisfactory, and that far from kindly words awaited him on his return.

For a moment he could hardly be sure whether his tears of joy had not, in vexation, turned to tears of fear and contrition; but then he remembered Windekind, who was now his friend, his friend and ally; and the Elfin King's gift; and the splendid, indisputable reality of all that had happened; – and so he made his way homeward calmly, and prepared for whatever might betide.

It fell out as he had anticipated. But he had not imagined that the distress and alarm of the house-hold could be so serious a matter. He must solemnly promise never again to be so naughty and heedless. This quite restored his presence of mind.

'That I cannot promise,' he said very resolutely.

They looked at him in amazement. He was questioned, coaxed, threatened. But he thought of Windekind and was firm. What did he care for punishment so long as he had Windekind for his friend – and what would he not endure for Windekind's sake? He clutched the little key tightly to his breast and shut his mouth firmly, answering every question with a shrug of his shoulders.

'I cannot promise,' was all he replied.

But his father said: 'Leave him in peace; he is quite in earnest about it. Something strange must have happened to him. He will tell us all about it some day.'

Johannes smiled, ate his breakfast in silence, and crept up to his little room. There he nipped off a bit of the blind-cord, slipped it through his precious little key and hung it round his neck next to his breast. Then he very contentedly went to school.

Things went ill with him at school that day. He knew none of his lessons and paid no attention at all. His thoughts were constantly wandering to the pool, and the wonderful things which had happened last evening. He could scarcely believe that a friend of the fairy king's could be expected and required to do sums and conjugate verbs. But it had all been true, and no one there knew anything about it, or would believe it or understand it; not even the master, however cross he might be, calling Johannes an idle little boy in a tone of great contempt. He took the bad marks he had earned with a light heart, and did the task set him as a punishment for his inattention.

'You, none of you understand anything about it. You may scold me as much as you please. I am Windekind's friend, and Windekind is worth more to me than all of you put together. Ay, with the master into the bargain!'

This was not respectful of Johannes. But his estimation of his fellow-creatures had not been raised by all the evil he had heard said of them the evening before.

But, as is often the case, he was not yet wise enough to use his wisdom wisely, or, better still, to keep it to himself.

When the master went on to say that man alone of all creatures was endowed by God with speech, and appointed lord over all other animals, Johannes began to laugh. This cost him a bad mark and serious reproof. And when his next neighbour read the following sentence out of an exercise-book: 'The age of my wilful aunt is great, but not so great as that of the Sun' – parsing 'the Sun' correctly as feminine, Johannes shouted out loudly, correcting him: 'Masculine, masculine!'

Every one laughed excepting the master, who was amazed at such utter stupidity as he thought it, and he desired Johannes to remain in school and write out a hundred times: 'The age of my wilful aunt is great, but not so great as that of the Sun (feminine), and greater still is my arrogant stupidity.'

His school-fellows had departed, and Johannes sat alone writing, in the great empty school-room. The sun shone in brightly, making the dust-motes glitter in its beams, and painting the wall with patches of light which crept round as time went on. The master, too, was gone, slamming the door behind him. Johannes had just got to the fifty-second 'wilful aunt' when a tiny, brisk mouse, with black, beady little eyes and erect ears, came out of the farthest corner of the room and ran noiselessly along by the wall. Johannes kept as still as death, not to scare the pretty little thing; but it was not shy and came close to where he was sitting. It looked sharply about for a minute or two, with its small, bright eyes; then with one spring leaped on to the bench, and with a second on to the desk on which Johannes was writing.

'Well done!' said he half to himself, 'you are a very bold little mouse.'

'I ought to know whom I should be afraid of,' said a wee-wee voice, and the mouse showed his little white teeth as if he were laughing.

Johannes was by this time quite used to marvels; still, this made him open his eyes very wide. Here, in school, in the middle of the day – it was incredible.

'You need not be afraid of me,' said he, very gently for fear of frightening the mouse. 'Did Windekind send you?'

'I am sent to tell you that the master was quite right, and that you thoroughly deserved your extra task.'

'But it was Windekind who told me that the sun was masculine. He said he was his father.'

'Yes; but no one else need know it. What have men to do with that? You must never discuss such delicate matters with men; they are too gross to understand them. Man is an astonishingly perverse and stupid creature that only cares to catch or kill whatever comes within his reach. Of that we mice have ample experience.'

'But why then, little mouse, do you live among men? Why do you not run away to the woods?'

'Oh, that we cannot do now. We are too much accustomed to town living. And so long as we are prudent, and always take care to avoid their traps and their heavy feet, we get on very well among men. Fortunately we are very nimble. The worst of it is, that man ekes out his own slowness by an alliance with the cat; that is a great grievance. But in the woods there are owls and hawks, and we should all be starved. Now, Johannes, mind my advice – here comes the master.'

'Mouse, mouse; do not go away. Ask Windekind what I am to do with my little key. I have tied it round my neck, next my skin. But on Saturday I am tubbed, and I am so afraid that it will be found. Tell me, where can I hide it?'

'Underground, always underground, that is always safest. Shall I keep it for you?'

'No, not here in school.'

'Then bury it out in the sand-hills. I will tell my cousin the field-mouse that he must take care of it.'

'Thank you, little mouse.'

Tramp, tramp! In came the master. While Johannes was dipping his pen the mouse had vanished. The master, who wanted to go home, let Johannes off the other forty-eight lines.

For two days Johannes lived in constant dread. He was kept strictly within sight, and had no opportunity of slipping off to the sand-hills. It was already Friday, and still the precious key was about his neck. The following evening he would inevitably be stripped; the key would be discovered and taken from him – his blood turned cold at the thought. He dared not hide it in the house or garden – no place seemed to him safe enough.

Friday afternoon, and dusk was creeping down! Johannes sat at his bedroom window, gazing with longing at the distance, over the green shrubs in the garden to the downs beyond.

'Windekind, Windekind, help me!' he whispered anxiously.

He heard a soft rustling of wings close at hand, he smelt the scent of lilies of the valley, and suddenly heard the sweet, well-known voice. Windekind sat by him on the window-sill, waving the bells of a lily of the valley on their slender stems.

'Here you are at last!' cried Johannes; 'I have longed for you so much!'

'Come with me, Johannes, we will bury your little key.'

'I cannot,' said Johannes sadly.

But Windekind took him by the hand and he felt himself wafted through the still evening air, as light as the wind-blown down of a dandelion.

'Windekind,' said Johannes, as they floated on, 'I love you so dearly. I believe I would give all the people in the world for you, and Presto into the bargain.'

'And Simon?'

'Oh, Simon does not care whether I love him or not. I believe he thinks it too childish. Simon loves no one but the fish-woman, and that only when he is hungry. Do you think that Simon is a common cat, Windekind?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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