

# HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN<sup>1</sup>

BY ERNST LISSAUER

LITTLE Red Riding Hood, the Snow Fairies, the Thorn Roses, are the companions and playmates of our earliest childhood, when we sit on our mother's lap and have to be led along by the hand. Then, when we are old enough to go to school and gradually learn how to read for ourselves, other figures join the company of these, such as the Snow Queen and the Little Mermaid. It is one of the miracles of the history of poetry how a single poet succeeded in forcing an entrance into that realm of world literature that is ordinarily occupied only by the great nameless poets of the folk tales.

How many obstacles, how many barriers, these fairy tales had to overcome! In the first place, of course, the barriers that are set for all poetry so far as it proceeds from an individual to the many and has not, like folk poetry, been current among them from the beginning. These tales had, moreover, to transcend the barriers of the Danish language, which is understood by only a couple of million people. But they succeeded in this, and just as the flying chests rose into the air and flew away over all countries of the earth, so these fairy tales, as if by magic, could be read and understood in all languages.

The third obstacle: the door of the nursery opened before them; they stood about on the chests and bureaus in the form of the Shepherdess and the Swineherd; were the toys of the nursery in the form of the Steadfast Tin Soldier

and that Loving Couple, Kreisel and Bällchen; sat by our bedsides in the figures of old grandfathers or aunts when we were sick, and steamed fragrantly from the pot of elderberry tea.

The poet Hans Christian Andersen succeeded, not only with one tale or with a couple, but with a great many, in winning to himself the hearts of children almost everywhere. All of them familiar to us: the Storks and the Happy Family, the Fir Tree and the Swineherd and the Emperor's New Clothes, the Ugly Duckling, the Traveling Companion and the Tinder Box, and all the others. Who else has achieved this? Not Mörücke and not Stern, our German fairy-tale poets. Chamisso, to be sure, succeeded with the one story of Peter Schlemihl; and, besides him, only Hauff. He too became familiar to children through most of his fairy tales: Caliph Stork, and Poet's Destiny, the Inn in Spessart — they all belong to our childhood, but it must be admitted that in foreign languages, in world literature, they have scarcely made any headway. Hauff and Andersen were kindred natures, lovable, gay, thoughtful, tender; but it cannot be denied that Andersen was the more profound. Andersen's fairy tales belong to the durable things of childhood, along with the primer in which horses and dogs are depicted; they are as well suited for children's stories and home stories as Grimm's.

And this light from the early days does not go out. When we turn to these stories in later years as adults, it be-

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comes a deeper light and begins to cast shadows; we recognize here and there a hidden meaning, and all at once we become aware that these tales have not been spun out of thin air, but that they reflect the experiences of a soul. Fata morgana are they; but they are not mirrored, at least not all of them, from the Land of Nowhere, but from the inner life of the poet. Andersen himself thought that in respect to their tone his tales were designed for children; in respect to their content, for adults.

'*The Fairy Tale of My Life*,' Andersen called his own biography, and a fairy tale it is indeed. 'My life is a beautiful story, so full of richness and happiness,' it begins.

Hans Christian — named Hans like the fairy-tale heroes and Christian like the Danish kings — was born at Odense, a Danish county-seat, in a small and miserable room. His father was a shoemaker, but he did not prosper much in his calling. He was the son of a farmer who had formerly been well-to-do, and the longing was strong in him to get back to the heights of prosperity. His power to do so, however, failed him. Hans Christian was the first to be a success. The father was a visionary, and made all kinds of plans from which nothing came, but he did like to read, and he used to read aloud for the children from Holberg's comedies and from the *Arabian Nights*. The father's great-grandmother had been of the nobility and had eloped with an actor, and this is what came of it. The father's father had lost his reason as a result of many losses by fire and by the death of live stock.

Hans Christian used to cut out strange little images, men with the heads of beasts and winged animals; and the grandson, too, used to cut out toy theatres and actor dolls. He was a little Hans the Dreamer, and soon he had only games and fantasies in his

head; collected colored rags and sewed them together himself for his doll. He lived entirely in another, unearthly world. As a result, he soon went about with fast-shut eyes so that everybody thought his sight was weak; but he saw perfectly well, and blinded himself only to the outer world, in order to see better in his own camera obscura. There he used to sit, under the currant bush in the yard, and spin and fabricate for himself all kinds of things, quite like the many children who later spun and fabricated in his fairy tales — like Hjalmar who put on the uniform of the Tin Soldier and was carried in his mother's thimble by a mouse to a wedding of mice; like the Little Maiden who sold matches and lighted one after another for herself in order to keep warm; and the little Tuk and the little Ida, and all the other names. There he sat, the descendant of adventurers, actors, madmen, but in him burned the dream and the play and the adventure, like a bright, inextinguishable gleam. The boy took it into his head to become something notable; and a proph- etess, like the witch in the fairy tales, came into the story and prophesied out of coffee grounds that Hans would come to fame and wealth and that Odense would bedeck itself in his honor. And just so it fell out. Odense did bedeck itself, and in the dictionaries, over against the word Odense, stands the information that Hans Christian Andersen was born there.

Finally, he got together thirteen Reichsthaler, given him at different times, and was able to go to the capital, Copenhagen.

Karl Busse, in his history of world literature, observes that the 'foolishly confident' Andersen did have, on the whole, an uncommon talent for making acquaintances. And is this not, after all, the method of the fairy-tale Hans to draw people to himself, by

his trusting folly, and with them good luck? All of them, the fairy-tale princes, the traveling artisans, the hunting people, and the soldiers in the fairy tales, have this talent for making acquaintances — which may, of course, get them into dangerous predicaments, but also brings them always to a good end, so that they become rich (wherever possible), marry princesses, and for the most part become kings. So it happened with Andersen. An angry coachman was once about to strike him with a frightful big whip, but Hans looked him into the face and shouted: 'How dare you strike me! God can see you!' Thereupon the man forgot his anger entirely, patted his cheek, and gave him some money. He became friends with a man who passed out playbills in the theatre and gave him a playbill every day; and out of the names of places and characters he constructed for himself a whole comedy.

Then he writes his first play, and reads it aloud to everybody in the streets, so that the ragamuffins run after him and shout, 'Comedy writer!' But he manages to get an audience with all kinds of distinguished people, and once, indeed, with Prince Christian, later the King. Quite as in the fairy tales, the poor shoemaker's son falls in, he knows not how, with the King's son.

And so he stayed on in Copenhagen. He made friends, he gave love and received love, and so through all kinds of dangers and difficulties he achieved success. He became a ballet pupil and a chorus singer at the theatre, and then obtained, with the King's intervention, a Latin school. Later he became a student, and, again with the help of the King, made a great trip into Italy, wrote plays, novels, and short stories, but, above all, fairy tales. Gradually he became famous throughout Europe, and at length was recognized in Denmark too. And if he did not become

king also, he was visited by the Danish king at his home in Kongens Nytorv.

This fairy tale of his life he really told over and over again, and one feels that he himself constantly marveled at the strange course of his life, marveled how everything had come to pass just as he had fabricated it for himself under the currant bush in Odense. So he told the story of the Ugly Duckling that was pecked at and shoved about and bullied and in the end became a swan. 'The last shall be first,' as it happened to Hans Christian Andersen; or as he himself said, 'there is no harm in being born in a duck's nest if only the egg has been laid in a swan's nest.' This is Andersen's tone when, as Hans Christian, he came into luck: 'He felt genuine happiness over all the need and hardships which he had suffered.' And this is fame: 'The large swans swam about him and stroked him with their bills; children came, and threw bread and cakes into the water, and they all said: "The new one is the prettiest. How young! And how splendid!"' Literary criticism, which had hitherto been unfavorable to him, at last recognized him, and the old swans bowed down before him. 'The swan himself was only too happy, but not haughty at all, for a good heart never becomes haughty.' Andersen's never did; for he is that old poet — 'a very good old poet' — at whom the naughty boy Amor has taken aim.

He is also the Little Mermaid who struggles up from her dark dwelling in the depth of the waters painfully and sorrowfully to the dwelling of men; just as he is the Little Maiden with the matches, except that he did not freeze to death. He is also the confirmation student with the wooden shoes and the sleeves that were too short, who wandered in search of the invisible bell which the king's son was also wandering in search of, so that they fell in with

each other. He is the Old Street Lamp that can see clearly everything that people read under it, or talk about in its vicinity, or that it can itself remember; and all whom it loves can do as much — ‘and herein lies, indeed, true joy, for pleasures which one cannot share with others are only half pleasures.’ To be sure, wax candles must be put into the lamp to make all this possible, and this did not always fall to the lot of the Old Street Lamp; at times it remained an empty old lamp, and it might thus have happened with the poet Andersen before he achieved fame.

He is also the Collar that is made out of white paper on which our whole histories, even the most secret, are printed, so that as we go about everybody can read our history. He is this because he tells us his most secret adventures. He is quite certainly the homely gray nightingale who is despised by the clever nightingales, but who later achieved a triumph when he saved the emperor from death. He is the homely nightingale just as he is the ugly duckling.

When he tells stories, ordinary stories, they are really fairy tales, such as that story of the ‘Lucky Peter,’ which in the right light may be regarded as *The Fairy Tale of My Life* all over again, only that this upstart bears the other fairy-name of Peter and becomes famous as an opera singer, as Andersen had dreamed of doing when he had a pretty voice and was a pupil in the theatre school. Lucky Peter is the child of poor people who finds patrons, and so forth, and dies young at the proudest moment of his life, in the triumph of his first opera, as he is bowing before the applause of the public.

And this is a very strange thing: these are true ‘once-upon-a-time’ stories, and yet many of them take place not in a dim period of antiquity, but yesterday and to-day, on the street.

The Little Maiden sells her matches and dreams her fairy dreams in the midst of a European street of the nineteenth or twentieth century. Every day we may see her in Potsdam or Kärtner Strasse.

Eichendorff, gifted as a poet as tenderly and pleasantly as Andersen, also wrote short stories that were really fairy stories, of fortune-hunters and lucky ne'er-do-wells. He locates them in an undefined poetic period which is recognizable only by the well-trimmed gardens as a miraculous Rococo. Hauff's fairy tales take place in a timeless time that can be named, according to places rather than centuries, the Eastern or the Forest Time, or, as a last resort, the Poetic Time, in which Hebbel located his ‘Genoveva.’ Andersen's fairy tales often take place in a fairy-tale nineteenth century. In his fairy tales, Andersen enjoys utilizing all kinds of things. There we find those timeless objects that may have existed in all centuries, such as the ball with which Nausicaa plays in Homer's *Odyssey*; but there, too, are all kinds of things which were invented in later times — the tinder box and matches, a humming top and the street lantern, the teapot and the pot of elderberry tea; and among the overcoats and hats sit Good Luck and Bad Luck in the form of two chambermaids who have to maintain their womanly superiority; and that superiority does not depend upon sandals or shoes or a poetic wishing-cape, but on very modern and prosaic galoshes!

The story of the flax is told; canvas and paper are made into what we might call a factory fairy-tale, in which, however, the factory is not mentioned; the story of the collar that becomes paper is added. The Tin Soldier in the toy box and the Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep of porcelain on the old, battered wardrobe, the geography

textbook, the ABC book, the coat-of-arms at the inn, yes, even a bottle-neck turned upside down and corked underneath, which serves as a seedbox in a bird-cage in the dormer window — these, along with Ice Maidens and Snow Queens, along with angels and kobolds, are the heroes of Andersen's tales.

Andersen's is a cadence unspeakably innocent and wise — the cadence of a benevolent old voice, speaking perhaps in old age, but certainly in youthful spirits; a voice which is only a voice

and of which the form and the head we have never once seen, which was with us in the nursery and spoke to us in the days of our childhood, and now continues to speak in our adult life. It is a cadence through which shines a light, a very white light, like the light of dawn and of the hours of childhood. Yes, over Andersen's fairy tales lies that light of childish hours as if the brightness of the morning of the first Christmas Day lay over all the days of childhood.

## BEAUTY AND DEATH

BY HUMBERT WOLFE

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It is a common lie — who would believe it? —  
 That, as men lose their beauty, the slow earth  
 Does in her tranquil motherhood reweave it  
 Into a bird — into a flower-birth.  
 It is not true. The earth has no such power.  
 But spring to spring is hostile; summer saith  
 'Was there another summer?' Bird and flower  
 Have nothing half so lovely as their death.  
 And if men say no drop in rapture's cup  
 But is some beauty known, and had, and scattered  
 Now, as hereafter, for the millionth time,  
 Remember lost Atlantis silted up  
 And crawling seas between be beauties shattered  
 Of gods face downwards in the ocean slime.