

The Lilac Fairy Book

by

Andrew Lang

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Preface

'What cases are you engaged in at present?' 'Are you stopping many teeth just now?' 'What people have you converted lately?' Do ladies put these questions to the men--lawyers, dentists, clergymen, and so forth--who happen to sit next them at dinner parties?

I do not know whether ladies thus indicate their interest in the occupations of their casual neighbours at the hospitable board. But if they do not know me, or do not know me well, they generally ask 'Are you writing anything now?' (as if they should ask a painter 'Are you painting anything now?' or a lawyer 'Have you any cases at present?'). Sometimes they are more definite and inquire 'What are you writing now?' as if I must be writing something--which, indeed, is the case, though I dislike being reminded of it. It is an awkward question, because the fair being does not care a bawbee what I am writing; nor would she be much enlightened if I replied 'Madam, I am engaged on a treatise intended to prove that Normal is prior to Conceptional Totemism'- -though that answer would be as true in fact as obscure in significance. The best plan seems to be to answer that I have entirely abandoned mere literature, and am contemplating a book on 'The Causes of Early Blight in the Potato,' a melancholy circumstance which threatens to deprive us of our chief esculent root. The inquirer would never be undeceived. One nymph who, like the rest, could not keep off the horrid topic of my occupation, said 'You never write anything but fairy books, do you?' A French gentleman, too, an educationist and expert in portraits of Queen Mary, once sent me a newspaper article in which he had written that I was exclusively devoted to the composition of fairy books, and nothing else. He then came to England, visited me, and found that I knew rather more about portraits of Queen Mary than he did.

In truth I never did write any fairy books in my life, except 'Prince Prigio,' 'Prince Ricardo,' and 'Tales from a Fairy Court'--that of the aforesaid Prigio. I take this opportunity of recommending these fairy books--poor things, but my own--to parents and guardians who may never have heard of them. They are rich in romantic adventure, and the Princes always marry the right Princesses and live happy ever afterwards; while the wicked witches, stepmothers, tutors and governesses are never cruelly punished, but retire to the country on ample pensions. I hate cruelty: I never put a wicked stepmother in a barrel and send her tobogganing down a hill. It is true that Prince Ricardo did kill the Yellow Dwarf; but that was in fair fight, sword in hand, and the dwarf, peace to his ashes! died in harness.

The object of these confessions is not only that of advertising my own fairy books (which are not 'out of print'; if your bookseller says so, the truth is not in him), but of giving credit where credit is due. The fairy books have been almost wholly the work of Mrs. Lang, who has translated and adapted them from the French, German, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, and other languages.

My part has been that of Adam, according to Mark Twain, in the Garden of Eden. Eve worked, Adam superintended. I also superintend. I find out where the stories are, and advise, and, in short, superintend. I do not write the stories out of my own head. The reputation of having written all the fairy books (an European reputation in nurseries and

the United States of America) is 'the burden of an honour unto which I was not born.' It weighs upon and is killing me, as the general fash of being the wife of the Lord of Burleigh, Burleigh House by Stamford Town, was too much for the village maiden espoused by that peer.

Nobody really wrote most of the stories. People told them in all parts of the world long before Egyptian hieroglyphics or Cretan signs or Cyprian syllabaries, or alphabets were invented. They are older than reading and writing, and arose like wild flowers before men had any education to quarrel over. The grannies told them to the grandchildren, and when the grandchildren became grannies they repeated the same old tales to the new generation. Homer knew the stories and made up the 'Odyssey' out of half a dozen of them. All the history of Greece till about 800 B.C. is a string of the fairy tales, all about Theseus and Heracles and Oedipus and Minos and Perseus is a Cabinet des Fées, a collection of fairy tales. Shakespeare took them and put bits of them into 'King Lear' and other plays; he could not have made them up himself, great as he was. Let ladies and gentlemen think of this when they sit down to write fairy tales, and have them nicely typed, and send them to Messrs. Longman & Co. to be published. They think that to write a new fairy tale is easy work. They are mistaken: the thing is impossible. Nobody can write a new fairy tale; you can only mix up and dress up the old, old stories, and put the characters into new dresses, as Miss Thackeray did so well in 'Five Old Friends.' If any big girl of fourteen reads this preface, let her insist on being presented with 'Five Old Friends.'

But the three hundred and sixty-five authors who try to write new fairy tales are very tiresome. They always begin with a little boy or girl who goes out and meets the fairies of polyanthus and gardenias and apple blossoms: 'Flowers and fruits, and other winged things.' These fairies try to be funny, and fail; or they try to preach, and succeed. Real fairies never preach or talk slang. At the end, the little boy or girl wakes up and finds that he has been dreaming.

Such are the new fairy stories. May we be preserved from all the sort of them!

Our stories are almost all old, some from Ireland, before that island was as celebrated for her wrongs as for her verdure; some from Asia, made, I dare say, before the Aryan invasion; some from Moydart, Knoydart, Morar and Ardnamurchan, where the sea streams run like great clear rivers and the saw-edged hills are blue, and men remember Prince Charlie. Some are from Portugal, where the golden fruits grow in the Garden of the Hesperides; and some are from wild Wales, and were told at Arthur's Court; and others come from the firesides of the kinsmen of the Welsh, the Bretons. There are also modern tales by a learned Scandinavian named Topelius.

All the stories were translated or adapted by Mrs. Lang, except 'The Jogi's Punishment' and 'Moti,' done by Major Campbell out of the Pushtoo language; 'How Brave Walter hunted Wolves,' which, with 'Little Lasse' and 'The Raspberry Worm,' was done from Topelius by Miss Harding; and 'The Sea King's Gift,' by Miss Christie, from the same author.

It has been suggested to the Editor that children and parents and guardians would like 'The Grey True Ghost-Story Book.' He knows that the children would like it well, and he

would gladly give it to them; but about the taste of fond anxious mothers and kind aunts he is not quite so certain. Before he was twelve the Editor knew true ghost stories enough to fill a volume. They were a pure joy till bedtime, but then, and later, were not wholly a source of unmixed pleasure. At that time the Editor was not afraid of the dark, for he thought, ' If a ghost is here, we can't see him.' But when older and better informed persons said that ghosts brought their own light with them (which is too true), then one's emotions were such as parents do not desire the young to endure. For this reason 'The Grey True Ghost-Story Book' is never likely to be illustrated by Mr. Ford.

The Shifty Lad

In the land of Erin there dwelt long ago a widow who had an only son. He was a clever boy, so she saved up enough money to send him to school, and, as soon as he was old enough, to apprentice him to any trade that he would choose. But when the time came, he said he would not be bound to any trade, and that he meant to be a thief.

Now his mother was very sorrowful when she heard of this, but she knew quite well that if she tried to stop his having his own way he would only grow more determined to get it. So all the answer she made was that the end of thieves was hanging at the bridge of Dublin, and then she left him alone, hoping that when he was older he might become more sensible.

One day she was going to church to hear a sermon from a great preacher, and she begged the Shifty Lad, as the neighbours called him from the tricks he played, to come with her. But he only laughed and declared that he did not like sermons, adding:

'However, I will promise you this, that the first trade you hear named after you come out from church shall be my trade for the rest of my life.'

These words gave a little comfort to the poor woman, and her heart was lighter than before as she bade him farewell.

When the Shifty Lad thought that the hour had nearly come for the sermon to be over, he hid himself in some bushes in a little path that led straight to his mother's house, and, as she passed along, thinking of all the good things she had heard, a voice shouted close to her ear 'Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!' The suddenness of it made her jump. The naughty boy had managed to change his voice, so that she did not know it for his, and he had concealed himself so well that, though she peered about all round her, she could see no one. As soon as she had turned the corner the Shifty Lad came out, and by running very fast through the wood he contrived to reach home before his mother, who found him stretched out comfortably before the fire.

'Well, have you got any news to tell me?' asked he.

'No, nothing; for I left the church at once, and did not stop to speak to anyone.'

'Oh, then no one has mentioned a trade to you?' he said in tones of disappointment.

'Ye--es,' she replied slowly. 'At least, as I walked down the path a voice cried out "Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!" but that was all.'

'And quite enough too,' answered the boy. 'What did I tell you? That is going to be my trade.'

'Then your end will be hanging at the bridge of Dublin,' said she. But there was no sleep for her that night, for she lay in the dark thinking about her son.

'If he is to be a thief at all, he had better be a good one. And who is there that can teach him?' the mother asked herself. But an idea came to her, and she arose early, before the sun was up, and set off for the home of the Black Rogue, or Gallows Bird, who was such a wonderful thief that, though all had been robbed by him, no one could catch him.

'Good-morning to you,' said the woman as she reached the place where the Black Gallows Bird lived when he was not away on his business. 'My son has a fancy to learn your trade. Will you be kind enough to teach him?'

'If he is clever, I don't mind trying,' answered the Black Gallows Bird; 'and, of course, if ANY one can turn him into a first-rate thief, it is I. But if he is stupid, it is of no use at all; I can't bear stupid people.'

'No, he isn't stupid,' said the woman with a sigh. 'So to-night, after dark, I will send him to you.'

The Shifty Lad jumped for joy when his mother told him where she had been.

'I will become the best thief in all Erin!' he cried, and paid no heed when his mother shook her head and murmured something about 'the bridge of Dublin.'

Every evening after dark the Shifty Lad went to the home of the Black Gallows Bird, and many were the new tricks he learned. By- and-by he was allowed to go out with the Bird and watch him at work, and at last there came a day when his master thought that he had grown clever enough to help in a big robbery.

'There is a rich farmer up there on the hill, who has just sold all his fat cattle for much money and has bought some lean ones which will cost him little. Now it happens that, while he has received the money for the fat cattle, he has not yet paid the price of the thin ones, which he has in the cowhouse. To-morrow he will go to the market with the money in his hand, so to-night we must get at the chest. When all is quiet we will hide in the loft.'

There was no moon, and it was the night of Hallowe'en, and everyone was burning nuts and catching apples in a tub of water with their hands tied, and playing all sorts of other games, till the Shifty Lad grew quite tired of waiting for them to get to bed. The Black Gallows Bird, who was more accustomed to the business, tucked himself up on the hay and went to sleep, telling the boy to wake him when the merry-makers had departed. But the Shifty Lad, who could keep still no longer, crept down to the cowshed and loosened the heads of the cattle which were tied, and they began to kick each other and bellow, and made such a noise that the company in the farmhouse ran out to tie them up again. Then the Shifty Lad entered the room and picked up a big handful of nuts, and returned to the loft, where the Black Rogue was still sleeping. At first the Shifty Lad shut his eyes too, but very soon he sat up, and taking a big needle and thread from his pocket, he sewed the hem of the Black Gallows Bird's coat to a heavy piece of bullock's hide that was hanging at his back.

By this time the cattle were all tied up again, but as the people could not find their nuts they sat round the fire and began to tell stories.

'I will crack a nut,' said the Shifty Lad.

'You shall not,' cried the Black Gallows Bird; 'they will hear you.'

'I don't care,' answered the Shifty Lad. 'I never spend Hallowe'en yet without cracking a nut'; and he cracked one.

'Some one is cracking nuts up there,' said one of the merry-makers in the farmhouse. 'Come quickly, and we will see who it is.'

He spoke loudly, and the Black Gallows Bird heard, and ran out of the loft, dragging the big leather hide after him which the Shifty Lad had sewed to his coat.

'He is stealing my hide!' shouted the farmer, and they all darted after him; but he was too swift for them, and at last he managed to tear the hide from his coat, and then he flew like a hare till he reached his old hiding-place. But all this took a long time, and meanwhile the Shifty Lad got down from the loft, and searched the house till he found the chest with the gold and silver in it, concealed behind a load of straw and covered with loaves of bread and a great cheese. The Shifty Lad slung the money bags round his shoulders and took the bread and the cheese under his arm, then set out quietly for the Black Rogue's house.

'Here you are at last, you villain!' cried his master in great wrath. 'But I will be revenged on you.'

'It is all right,' replied the Shifty Lad calmly. 'I have brought what you wanted'; and he laid the things he was carrying down on the ground.

'Ah! you are the better thief,' said the Black Rogue's wife; and the Black Rogue added:

'Yes, it is you who are the clever boy'; and they divided the spoil and the Black Gallows Bird had one half and the Shifty Lad the other half.

A few weeks after that the Black Gallows Bird had news of a wedding that was to be held near the town; and the bridegroom had many friends and everybody sent him a present. Now a rich farmer who lived up near the moor thought that nothing was so useful to a young couple when they first began to keep house as a fine fat sheep, so he bade his shepherd go off to the mountain where the flock were feeding, and bring him back the best he could find. And the shepherd chose out the largest and fattest of the sheep and the one with the whitest fleece; then he tied its feet together and put it across his shoulder, for he had a long way to go.

That day, the Shifty Lad happened to be wandering over the moor, when he saw the man with the sheep on his shoulder walking along the road which led past the Black Rogue's house. The sheep was heavy and the man was in no hurry, so he came slowly and the boy knew that he himself could easily get back to his master before the shepherd was even in sight.

'I will wager,' he cried, as he pushed quickly through the bushes which hid the cabin--'I will wager that I will steal the sheep from the man that is coming before he passes here.'

'Will you indeed?' said the Gallows Bird. 'I will wager you a hundred silver pieces that you can do nothing of the sort.'

'Well, I will try it, anyway,' replied the boy, and disappeared in the bushes. He ran fast till he entered a wood through which the shepherd must go, and then he stopped, and taking off one of his shoes smeared it with mud and set it in the path. When this was done he slipped behind a rock and waited.

Very soon the man came up, and seeing the shoe lying there, he stooped and looked at it.

'It is a good shoe,' he said to himself, 'but very dirty. Still, if I had the fellow, I would be at the trouble of cleaning it'; so he threw the shoe down again and went on.

The Shifty Lad smiled as he heard him, and, picking up the shoe, he crept round by a short way and laid the other shoe on the path. A few minutes after the shepherd arrived, and beheld the second shoe lying on the path.

'Why, that is the fellow of the dirty shoe!' he exclaimed when he saw it. 'I will go back and pick up the other one, and then I shall have a pair of good shoes,' and he put the sheep on the grass and returned to fetch the shoe. Then the Shifty Lad put on his shoes, and, picking up the sheep, carried it home. And the Black Rogue paid him the hundred marks of his wager.

When the shepherd reached the farmhouse that night he told his tale to his master, who scolded him for being stupid and careless, and bade him go the next day to the mountain and fetch him a kid, and he would send that as a wedding gift. But the Shifty Lad was on the look-out, and hid himself in the wood, and the moment the man drew near with the kid on his shoulders began to bleat like a sheep, and no one, not even the sheep's own mother, could have told the difference.

'Why, it must have got its feet loose, and have strayed after all,' thought the man; and he put the kid on the grass and hurried off in the direction of the bleating. Then the boy ran back and picked up the kid, and took it to the Black Gallows Bird.

The shepherd could hardly believe his eyes when he returned from seeking the sheep and found that the kid had vanished. He was afraid to go home and tell the same tale that he had told yesterday; so he searched the wood through and through till night was nearly come. Then he felt that there was no help for it, and he must go home and confess to his master.

Of course, the farmer was very angry at this second misfortune; but this time he told him to drive one of the big bulls from the mountain, and warned him that if he lost THAT he would lose his place also. Again the Shifty Lad, who was on the watch, perceived him pass by, and when he saw the man returning with the great bull he cried to the Black Rogue:

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