



It is curious in an age as realistic and mechanized as ours that the magic of the folk tales still casts its spell on modern children. Witches and dragons, talking beasts and rebellious pancakes, flying carpets and cloaks of darkness, fairies and wise women, spells and enchantments are accepted as casually by children as airplanes and television.

It is true that the modern child becomes interested in fairy tales later than people used to think, and perhaps he wears them out a little sooner. Except for a few of the simplest nursery tales of "The Little Red Hen" and "The Story of the Three Little Pigs" variety, the peak of

OLD MAGIC: THE FOLK TALES

children's interest in tales of magic seems to fall somewhere around eight- or nine-years-old and not earlier. After nine there is a continued but steadily diminishing interest in such stories through the ages of ten, eleven, and twelve years. There are many reasons why the modern child still enjoys these tales, as we shall see, and why it is well to delay his exposure to any great number of them until sometime after the six-year-old period.

In the first place, most of these old stories were created by adults for the entertainment of other

adults. Only a small fraction of them were composed for and told to children. A majority of the tales mirrors the mature lives, customs, beliefs, and emotions of peoples all over the world, and their adult themes make large numbers of them totally unsuited to children. There still remain, however, enough stories with lively plots, plenty of action, and conclusions which satisfy children's liking for justice and successful achievement, to account for their continued popularity with young people.

Origins of the folk tales¹

The problem of why and how the folk tales originated has given rise to many conflicting theories. Some of these are now completely discredited, others are considered partially applicable, and new explanations have developed from the studies which psychologists and anthropologists have made of peoples all over the world, their motives and drives, customs and beliefs.

One of the earliest theories of folk tale origin stemmed from the belief that a language-group known as Aryan was a pure racial strain and that all of the folk tales sprang from this one source. This theory of *single origin* or *monogenesis* is now discredited because we know that there is no such thing as a pure racial strain, and that the Aryan group consisted of many strains.

The theory of *many origins* or *polygenesis* grew out of the belief that human beings are basically alike in their reactions, and would therefore make up the same kind of stories. This would seem to account for the 345 variants of "Cinderella" which have been discovered. But anthropological studies of different peoples show that human beings differ too widely in their customs and emotional reactions to explain such story similarities. Although stepmothers may be a problem in one group, they may not be in another.

The "Aryan myth" gave rise to another theory, namely, that the folk tales preserved *remnants of the nature myths* of that single racial strain. Perhaps Red Riding Hood may have symbolized the setting sun swallowed up by the darkness of the night, the wolf. But certainly no large num-

¹For an expanded discussion of origins see May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, pp. 231-234.

ber of the stories could be accounted for in this way. Nor could masses of them be explained on the grounds that they preserved *remnants of religious beliefs and rituals*. It is true that some evidence of early religions, charms, and incantations is to be found in a number of the tales, but the bulk of them contain no such traces.

Some of the recent psychological explanations of folk tale origins are interesting speculations. The idea that the tales were all *symbols of emotional fantasy*, unconscious sexual love for the parent, for example, has been refuted by anthropology's discovery that peoples differ in their emotional reactions and would also differ in their symbols. More plausible is the suggestion that the tales grew out of the *dreams and nightmares* of the storytellers. When the night turns cold, or the blanket slips off, we sometimes dream of being abroad with few or no clothes on. So, perhaps, tales developed of poor lassies out in the snow, clad only in paper dresses. And, perhaps, the descriptions of fine foods and rich feasts, so common in the fairy tales, may have grown from the hunger of the dreamer.

This theory suggests still another psychological interpretation of folk tale origin, namely that the old storytellers created in these tales a *satisfaction for their own unconscious frustrations and drives*. This is a fertile suggestion. The poor, the obscure, or the oppressed dream of riches, achievement, and power; so, they make up tales about the goose-girl who marries a prince and a cat that turns his master into the Lord Mayor of London—splendid dreams which symbolize *wish fulfillment* for each succeeding generation.

The most conclusive explanation of folk tale origin has grown out of the findings of social anthropology. In the light of their studies of modern folk societies, many anthropologists conclude that folk tales were the *cement of society*, the carriers of the moral code. The folk tales taught kindness, industry, and courage by dramatic stories revealing the rewards of these virtues. They showed meanness, laziness, and deceit exposed at last, and well punished. By creating these dramatic examples of good and bad behavior, properly rewarded or punished, they helped to cement society together with a common body of social and moral standards.

Modern children learn from these old tales

something about their own behavior in relation to other people. They learn that it's well to use your head. Henny Penny was punished for her gullibility, but the third little pig prospered because he had courage and used his wits. Children learn that you must look beyond appearances which do not always reveal character. The prince discovered this to his sorrow when he accepted the false maid as his princess, in "The Goose-Girl." Beauty found her true love because she looked beyond the ugliness of the poor beast to his kindness. And Boots accomplished the impossible because he had the courage to wonder, to investigate, and to tackle things for himself. To the sophisticated, such philosophy may not seem to be borne out by the hard facts of modern life. But actually, gangsters and dictators are still coming to bad ends. Children are going to inherit plenty of dragons, ogres, and giants to be exterminated. They need some of the cement of society to be found in the folk tales, a belief in the moral code of decency, courage, and goodness.

Wide diffusion of the folk tales

Folk tales are a legacy from anonymous artists of the past, the old wives and grannies as well as the professional storytellers. They were first created orally and passed on by word of mouth for generations before the printing press caught up with them. Soldiers, sailors, slaves, traders, monks, and scholars carried these stories from one country to another and, of course, the stories were changed in the process. A story passed on orally, from memory, is bound to vary with each new telling. This collecting of stories from the oral tradition of old storytellers is still going on today. Missionaries, marines, teachers, and scholars are still finding and preserving the old tales.

Written versions of some of the folk tales began to circulate in Europe in the twelfth century. Merchants and crusaders brought the talking beast tales from India, in Arabic or Persian translations, and these were soon turned into Latin. The great Celtic manuscripts introduced stories of witchcraft and enchantment that are said to go back to 400 B.C. The world of fairy which these remarkable vellum manuscripts recorded brought to the folk tales many of those elements

which make the children call them "fairy tales." In the sixteenth century, Caxton's fine translations of Aesop's fables, the King Arthur legends, and the Homeric epics appeared. Although these are not folk tales, they are, like the ballads, a part of the rich stream of literature we know as folklore. In France, in the seventeenth century, Charles Perrault lent his name to a collection of eight famous folk tales which delighted the French court in Perrault's time.

Perrault's eight tales marked the beginning of a great interest in folklore collecting which has gone on ever since. The eighteenth century saw the appearance of some of the major collections. The Grimm brothers made scrupulous records of German tales from the lips of old storytellers, not for children's entertainment but as a serious study of the German language. Children soon appropriated them, however. In Norway, Peter Christian Asbjørnsen, a zoologist, and Jørgen E. Moe, a theologian and poet, collected the Norwegian folk tales. Since Sir George Webbe Dasent translated these into English, under the title *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon*, they have become almost as familiar to American children as Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel." The English tales were edited by Joseph Jacobs, who was himself an authority on folklore. However, Jacobs had children definitely in mind in his collection and said frankly that he omitted episodes which were unduly coarse or brutal and made some changes in the language. However, when you study his changes they are not too heinous even to folklore scholars, and the full flavor of ancient storytelling is still there. Since Jacobs' time, printed collections of folk tales have multiplied until now there are collections from all the major countries of the world.²

Of special interest to the children of the United States is a newly inspired enthusiasm for American folk tales. Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* tales of the American Negro have long delighted children and grownups. The so-called "tall tales" are favorites. Stories from the various tribes of the American Indian have been known but have never been popular, because they are not, on the whole, well constructed. But the new

² For further discussion of national collections see May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, pp. 235-254.

enthusiasm is for the American variants of the old European folk tales which are now appearing in large numbers and which show a fresh turn of phrase and a humor that is characteristically American. Richard Chase is an enthusiastic collector of these tales, and his storytelling is doing much to popularize them all over the country.

Predominant types of folk tales

The stories in this collection are a sampling from important national and racial collections and from most of the types of stories which occur in folklore in general. Not all children will like every story, but most children will like a goodly number of them.

Accumulative or repetitional stories appeal to children four- to six-years-old or even seven. In these stories, plot is at a minimum and action takes its place. The episodes follow each other in logical order and are related in a repetitional cadence that is almost like a patter-song. It swings the listener along until the spiral action ends abruptly or runs backwards to its beginning. "The Old Woman and Her Pig" is an example of running up the spiral and back, but "Henny Penny" and "The Pancake" come to a sudden and surprising end at the top of the spiral. These stories grow imperceptibly, from mere chants to such plot stories as "The Four Musicians."

Talking beast stories are usually prime favorites. Sometimes the animals talk with human beings, as in "Puss in Boots" or "The Fox and His Travels," and sometimes they just converse with other animals. Their talk betrays their folly or wisdom even as human talk betrays it. Children feel superior when they sense the absurdity of Henny Penny's ruminations, and they identify themselves with the wise and witty remarks of Padre Porko. Occasionally there is a talking beast who is no beast at all but an unhappy prince or princess under a wicked spell. That is, of course, quite a different matter. But the talk of the three Billy Goats Gruff, Brer Rabbit, the clever jackal, and all the pigs, bears, and foxes of the folk tales is quite as understandable and perhaps a shade more reasonable to the child than much of the talking-to he receives from grownups.

The drolls or humorous stories were obviously told for sheer entertainment. Stories of the sillies

and the numskulls are ancestors of *The Peterkin Papers* and the modern moron tales. Fortunately, the humor of the folk tales is not confined to such foolish ones as "Clever Elsie" but progresses to the gaieties of "King O'Toole and His Goose," and "Tom Tit Tot," and the subtle humor of "Clever Manka" and "The Most Obedient Wife." The last two stories should always be used as a pair, with the elevens and twelves. Read them "The Most Obedient Wife" and hear the boys chuckle and the girls fume over the ignominious taming of the Wife. Then, the next day perhaps, read them "Clever Manka" and turn the tables, to the delight of the girls.

Realistic stories, wherein everything that happens might conceivably be so, are few and far between in the folk tales. The old storytellers seemed to have little use for the here-and-now stuff of everyday living. Even when they told a story that was possible, it was likely to be fabulous. "Clever Elsie" is the extreme of silliness. Dick Whittington, on the other hand, is a very possible hero of flesh-and-blood proportions and Manka and the obedient wife are possible, too. Perhaps the prettiest of the realistic stories is "Gudbrand on the Hill-Side," which is a tender version of "Mr. Vinegar," with a loving wife instead of a shrew. But, on the whole, folk tales pay scant attention to the laws of probability and are far happier and more numerous in the field of the impossible.

Some *religious tales* of long ago have been appropriated by the children. In the Middle Ages the stories which grew out of the morality plays often included the devil, the saints, or occasionally the Virgin or the Christ Child. The devil stories were invariably humorous with the devil getting the worst of it at the hands of resourceful human beings, especially scolding wives. The stories of the saints were generally grave, although this collection includes one that is broadly comic, "King O'Toole and His Goose."

Tales of magic are the heart of the folk tales. Fairies and fairy godmothers, giants, water nixies, lads who ride up glass hills, impossible tasks which are nonchalantly performed, three wishes, three trials, enchanted men or maidens, these are just a suggestion of fairy tale motifs and atmosphere. These give the tales an unearthly quality, often so beautiful that it comes close to poetry.

Fairies and magic

Actually, fairy folk are a remarkably varied lot as you will discover even in this selection of tales. Wise women, witches, and wizards may be either helpful or ruthless. Sometimes they serve as fairy godmothers and sometimes they lure children with gingerbread houses, for wicked reasons of their own. There are trooping fairies, with a queen, who live in underground halls of great magnificence. They sometimes steal children or bewitch handsome young men, but generally they are gay and kindly.

The Norse hill folk and the German dwarfs live underground also, but they are the humble workers of the fairy world. There are pixies who ride across moors on fairy steeds, water sprites and nixies who haunt wells and rivers, elves or brownies who sometimes abide in a house and make themselves useful, and an occasional imp, like Tom Tit Tot, who bobs up unexpectedly and invariably yearns for a human child to cheer his old age. Giants and ogres may be good or bad. Some are bloodthirsty and cruel and feast on their enemies. But others swallow oceans or stride over mountains in their seven-league boots on behalf of some cinderlad who shared his crust of bread with them.

Fairy animals not only aid discouraged heroes but, like Puss in Boots or the Horse of Power, are actually the brains of the enterprise. What a picturesque and unforgettable lot are these fairy beasts—Dapplegrim, sly old Lishka, the Flounder, the Three Bears, and the Three Pigs. And picturesque, too, are the magic objects in the tales—Aladdin's lamp, Boots' ram that coins money, and Freddy's merry fiddle.

Enchanted people are often a piteous group—the poor frog-king so rudely treated by the princess, Beauty's Beast, Little Burnt-Face, and the great White Bear, all waiting for someone to break their unhappy spells. And it can't be just anyone, either, because fairies and fairy spells work by definite laws. No magic ever ultimately succeeds for the mean or cowardly or cruel. But for kind souls, who are also courageous, help comes in time of need, and magic is always waiting for him who knows how to use it. Dark spells can only be broken by love and self-sacrifice and it takes a brave lassie to save her prince from the

hags and witches who have ensnared him. The youngest son must first brave lions before magic reveals to him the water of life. Through all this fairy world the child hears over and over again that grace and strength are bestowed upon those who strive mightily and keep an honest, kindly heart.

Using the tales with children

On the whole the selections in this book are the simpler, merrier tales from the great collections. Each of the large groups begins with easier stories, most of them with nursery tales for the youngest children. They progress through tales of magic for the sevens, eights, and nines to the more mature stories which will command the respect of the elevens and twelves. Grownups will discover likenesses in some of the stories from the different national and racial groups, and these likenesses sometimes interest children. See "Tom Tit Tot" and "Rumpelstiltskin," "Mr. Vinegar" and "Gudbrand," "Cinderella," "Tattercoats," and "Little Burnt-Face," "Beauty and the Beast" and "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," "Sadko" and "Urashimo Taro and the Princess of the Sea." Remember that the folk tales were created and kept alive by the oral tradition of gifted storytellers. Read them aloud if you must, but tell them if you can, for in the spontaneity of good storytelling, these tales come most vividly to life for you and your children.

Finally, tales of magic should never be used exclusively or in too great numbers, but in balanced proportion to realistic fiction and informational reading. Use the folk tales in connection with the study of a people—the Chinese, English, or East Indian, for example. Use them to stimulate the children's creative urge to paint or dramatize or write. The tall tales have often set children to creating their own "whoppers." Above all, use these stories for sheer delight. They have humor, nonsense, romance, and poetic beauty. They will help to break up the tight literalness that overtakes some children. They also reiterate moral truths that are important for children to know. "Be of good cheer," these stories seem to say. "Use your head, keep a kindly heart, a civil tongue, and a fearless spirit and you will surely find the water of life and your heart's desire."