

## A Theologian's Dealings with the Fairies

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**F**airy stories have always, more or less, contained a moral. They show, if not always the superiority of virtue over vice, at least the superiority of courage or enterprise or kindness over cowardice or envy or sloth or greed. The fairy tale has even been called an initiation story, with Man as hero, destined to endure suffering and perform impossible tasks, yet, through his own determination and the help of friends, achieving final happiness. Their great defect, in the opinion of 18th century English writers for children, was that they were not literally true. "We do not allude to fairy-tales," said the Edgeworths in their *Practical Education*; reason and morality (sometimes of the most expedient kind) should suffice.

After the evangelical revival, theology entered children's literature. The depravity of the human heart, the inevitability of sin and the impossibility of avoiding eternal punishment except by belief in the Atonement were what children's books must teach. They taught by showing Vice terribly punished and Virtue rewarded, often by death. These were the books described in Mrs. Hodgson Burnett's *Haworth's*: "aw about Sunday Skoo' scholars as has consumption an' th' loike an' reads th' boible to foalk an' dees. This here un now . . . she'd sing aw th' toime when she could breathe fur th' asthma, an' tell foak as if they didna go an' do likewise they'd go to burnin' hell wheer th' fire is na quenched an' th' worms dyeth not."

It was Hans Andersen, some of whose stories were first translated into English in 1846, who taught English writers that the fairy tale could transmit ideas hitherto thought to be too sacred for any fiction but the avowedly evangelical. The splendour of creation, the love of God showing itself in what may look like evil, redemption by sacrifice, the mysteries of Time, Love and Death, were all themes that appear frequently in Andersen's stories, and were to appear as often in those of his admirer and imitator George MacDonald. Other writers too found a new way to present religious and metaphysical truths to children: fairy tales, said Mrs. Ewing, "deal with first principles under the simplest forms . . . They treat, not of the corner of the nursery or a playground, but of the world at large, and **[end of page 5]** life in perspective; of forces visible and invisible; of Life, Death and

Immortality.”

The fairies, however, are a tricky folk, and it behoves the theologian, like any other mortal, to be wary in his dealings with them. Andersen has a huge simplicity and innocence which carry him over many dangers and difficulties, unaware of their existence; his Ice Maidens and Marsh Kings and Snow Queens, whatever evil they may seem to do, are always firmly under the rule of the One whose love forms Eternity even from the ice of lovelessness. But other writers of lesser stature may find themselves in hazard; Mrs Gatty, for instance, in *The Fairy Godmothers*, finds herself almost at once on marshy ground. Her fairies, presumably, are part of God's creation, but the intelligent child reader might well feel anxious about the extent of their power. They appear to have the ability to alter human lives radically, for better or worse. Two of them give their mortal god-daughters gifts of Beauty and Riches, only to find that the gifts have made them miserable. The third gives Love of Employment, which brings happiness. Says Mrs Gatty,<sup>1</sup> “Fairies have no power to counteract what God has ordained, and He has ordained that we enjoy but little what we get at without labour or trouble.” But all three girls came by their gifts “without labour or trouble,” and, what is more, without choice or fault of their own. Our author would have done better to show how all three girls received the same gift, and what they made of it, as the three princes in traditional fairy tales are always set the same problem to overcome. Failure to keep to traditional laws always leaves the fairies laughing up their sleeves, as they do in this case. Mrs Gatty cannot have intended to show, as she appears to do In *The Fairy Godmothers*, that Beauty and Riches are bad things in themselves.

MacDonald avoids such obvious traps, but there are still some ambiguities about his early fairy tales. The moral law in Fairyland

1. Mrs Gatty (1809-73), was the mother of the celebrated children's writer, Mrs Ewing, and the founder of *Aunt Judy's Magazine* in 1866. She was the author of *Parables from Nature* and other books for children. [6]

is the same as the moral law everywhere else. Whatever their powers, the fairies are under an obligation to be kind and to keep their promises, and when, like the fairies in *The Carasoyne*, they try to evade this by “all kinds of trickery and false logic,” their punishment is certain, and they bring it on themselves by their very evasions. Still there are some traditions which, in his early stories, he does seem to ignore. In *The Light Princess*, the

witch actually contrives to throw something into the holy water in the font at a christening, and the wicked spell partly takes effect because of her success. “I think,” says the clergyman in *Adela Cathcart*, “. . . ‘there is a real objection to that scene. It is that no such charm could have had any effect where holy water was employed as the medium. In fact I doubt if the wickedness could have been wrought in a chapel at all.’” “I submit,” says the narrator. “You are right. I hold up the four paws of my mind, and crave indulgence.” But, he continues, this is “the first thing of the sort” he has ever attempted. In later stories he has learned from his mistakes. The wicked fairy in *Little Daylight* still does her worst at a christening, but, the narrator adds, it is traditional for the wicked as well as the good to operate always at christenings, “but it is difficult to understand how they should be able to do [wicked things] for you would fancy all wicked creatures would be powerless on such an occasion.” He explains this by saying that while the good fairies have their power “by nature” the bad ones get theirs “by wickedness.” If this implies some kind of Faustian bargain with the Devil, we hear no more of him in the fairy tales.

In fact, MacDonald appears to believe, like St Augustine, that evil has no real existence; “what we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed to be the best good.” So even when the witch does her best to blight the princess’s life, MacDonald can say, “But I never knew of any interference on the part of a wicked fairy that did not turn out a good thing in the end.” Yet though the acts of the bad fairies are only another operation of good, those acts are still sin, and deathly to the perpetrator: the Light Princess’s wicked aunt is buried under her own house, the cruel Watho is shot in the form she [7] [8] [Note: image not available] has assumed, that of a wolf. Of the possible repentance and redemption of the seemingly irredeemable sinner, MacDonald has nothing to say in his stories for children; and I should think that he was right, and that this is not a theme for children, were it not for Andersen’s spectacularly successful treatment of it in *The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf*, which seems to me a fable such as a child can clearly understand of sin, repentance, reparation and sacrificial love. Only in the last chapters of *Lilith* does MacDonald approach this theme, and there his treatment of it is too complex for a child (and indeed for most adults) to understand. It is true that the Ugliers represent people who have sinned and are gradually being given the chance through good deeds to return to humanity; when Curdie has felt the child’s hand in the dog-like paw of the hideous Lina, the princess tells

him, “That paw in your hand now might almost teach you the whole science of natural history—the heavenly sort, I mean.”” But I doubt whether most children would understand the metaphysics of this idea.

That sin may actually be a prelude to repentance, MacDonald does show, when Curdie’s shooting of the princess’s pigeon leads him to try to amend his life, because he is brought by this act to realise that his downward path, his “becoming more and more a miner, and less and less a man of the upper world,” is leading to a great difference in him. “He had stopped saving, and begun killing! What had he been sent into the world for? Surely not to be a death to its joy and loveliness. He had done the thing that was contrary to gladness; he was a destroyer! He was not the Curdie he had been meant to be!”

Knowledge of sin and intent to amend lead Curdie to the purgatorial fire of roses into which he must plunge his hands, and which, once endured, will give new strength and new powers; his hands will henceforth be able to feel the real nature of all those he may encounter, as long as he never uses his gift for his own ends. The old king, burning all night in the rose-fire, wakes in the morning free of all his weakness and in perfect health and strength. Tangle having crept down the burning stair and endured the unendurable heat, understands all that had happened to her—“all was plain; she [9] understood it all, and saw that everything meant the same thing . . .” They are all, as it were, crowned and mitred over themselves, as Dante was after winning his way through the flames to the Earthly Paradise.

Besides the symbol of fire as cleansing and renewing, MacDonald uses the symbol of water as life-giving love.

As a world where never rain  
Glittered on the sunny plain:—  
Such, my heart, my world would be  
If no love did flow in thee.

The soul without love is “like a dry and thirsty ground.” The Light Princess has at least the illusion of gravity when she is swimming in the lake, and both she and her country are saved when she is able to weep; this breaks the witch’s spell, so that the rain can fall. The transforming power of love is shown in the changed landscape. “The sun shone all the time, and the great drops, which fell straight to the earth, shone likewise. The palace was in the heart of a rainbow. It was a rain of rubies, and sapphires, and emeralds, and topazes.”

The water-symbol runs all through *The Carasoy*. Because Colin

has diverted the burn to run through his own house, he is given a chance to save the child the fairies have stolen, who is ultimately to become his wife. He saves his own child years later by siphoning away the sea-water on which the fairies have become unnaturally dependent. "They had fallen in love with the water itself, for its own sake, or rather for the pleasure it gave to them, irrespective of the good it was to the flowers which lived upon it. So they neglected their business . . . . Hence the rapidity of their decline and fall." Their business of course is to do good; but they are concerned with mere life, which without love, leaves them in a barren and drying pool.

The river at the back of the North Wind is the river of life that flows from the eternal city, that is always singing of love. Love can do the impossible, and so the river that takes Richard to Faryland in *Cross Purposes* can flow uphill. "It needed no channel, and turned aside for no opposition . . . . If a wall came in its course [10] it flowed against it, heaping itself up on itself till it reached the top, whence it plunged to the foot on the other side, and flowed on. Soon he found that it was running gently up a grassy hill. The waves kept curling back as if the wind blew them, or as if they could hardly keep from running down again. But still the steam mounted and flowed, and the waves with it. It found it difficult, but it could do it." And the "great water" that Tangle hears running inside the rock leads down to the Old Man of the Fire Himself, the marvellous Child who is the source of all love. "He had no smile, but . . . with the repose there lay on his face a shimmer as of moonlight, which seemed as if any moment it might break into such a ravishing smile as would cause the beholder to weep himself to death. But the smile never came, and the moonlight lay there unbroken. For the heart of the child was too deep for any smile to reach from it to his face."

The sea in MacDonald's stories may be Time and Death, which are only different names for Love. When Tangle meets the Old Man of the Sea, he tells her, "Others have another name for me, and are terribly frightened when they meet me taking a walk by the shore . . . . They are so afraid, that they never see what I really am." Mossy sees him as he really is, because he has bathed in the Old Man's "great basin" of sea-water. "'You have tasted of Death now,' said the Old Man. 'Is it good?' 'It is good,' said Mossy. 'It is better than life.' 'No,' said the Old Man, 'it is only more life.'"

Anodos plunging into the "hopeless waves" and "tumbling chaos" of Time and Sorrow, is borne up by the waves themselves. He floats over his whole submerged past, until at last he sleeps "in dreams of unspeakable joy—of restored friendships; of revived embraces; of love which said it had never

died; of faces that had vanished long ago, yet said with smiling lips that they knew nothing of the grave; of pardons implored, and granted with bursting floods of love, that I was almost glad that I had sinned.” It is only when he goes through the forbidden door of the Timeless, while still living, that the waters rise and cover the home of Faith.

Water as the baptismal and cleansing bath is also a most potent theme in the fairy tales. Tangle is bathed in the beautiful lady’s [11] tank, and is held up by fishes. Afterwards she is clothed in sweet-smelling garments, and feels that “having once been in her grandmother’s pond, she must be clean and tidy ever after.” Irene too must be laid in her great-grandmother’s bath, to which she can see no bottom. Both she and Tangle must trust that they will be safe and not drown.

But the most important, perhaps, of all the religious symbols in the work of George MacDonald is the figure of the Old Woman with the young eyes. Whether because he unconsciously remembered his own lost mother, or because he reacted strongly, like many Victorians, to the feminine principle, the Anima, or because Fides and Ecclesia are feminine nouns, the Old Woman stands for something not easily explained, but easily recognised. In *Little Daylight* she is only a good fairy, but a fairy who could believe “anything that ever was or ever could be.” In *The Golden Key* she becomes the Lady of the fishes, who is thousands of years old and is the keeper of the baptismal tank. In *The Carasoy*n she has begun to spin; her hands, “young and long-fingered and fair,” spin rainbows and stories and shrouds for good people. The one who wore her shroud “never died, but was laid in a beautiful white bed, and the door was closed upon him, and no noise came near him, and he lay there, dreaming lovely cool dreams, till the world had turned round, and was ready for him to get up again and do something.” Although she is blind, she can see so well “that it is not worth while to burn eyesight.” She can move mountains too—or at least she can add a cubit to their stature—and she does it by faith and works. Perhaps she, and the Lady of the fishes, who also works all day long, and whose children may never stay with her long, represent simple natural Goodness. They are not yet anything to do with Christianity, for the Lady must wait, like Tangle and her own fishes, for ultimate happiness, and she cannot remember the name of the Valley of the shadow of Death.

It is in the *Curdie* stories that the Old Woman reaches her true stature. If she is here Ecclesia, then she is the Church itself, terrible as an army with banners, not one of the sects whom MacDonald recognised as mere chapels

of the one Foundation. But I [12] suspect that she may be Christianity itself, since she is not yet two thousand years old. She spins the thread of Faith, which, rightly followed, even into terrible places, or by what seems “a very roundabout way indeed”, will lead one home. Her moon is the light of Revelation, which is seen only “five times in a hundred years,” and then only by gift. She holds the sacraments of baptism and absolution, and those who love her must be obedient, even when what she requires seems too bad to be true. Curdie has to step forward at once, even when he feels himself to be on the edge of a great abyss and can see only darkness and the great sky. He must plunge his hands into the fire, as Tangle must throw herself headlong into the bottomless hole. The Lady’s servants must learn to know her, not by any particular sign or ritual, but as she really is in herself. One might almost call her Duty, or the voice of God.

North Wind too does the will of God, even when it looks like cruelty to those who do not know what she is really doing. Her work, she thinks, may be “all managed by a baby”; and we know that it is the marvellous Child who can go to the country whence the shadows fall, though no human is old enough to go by the way that he goes.

So much, perhaps, a child might understand, or perceive glimpses of, in MacDonald’s fairy tales. But there is much that an adult sees to be of metaphysical significance that cannot be wholly understood. What is the Carasoy, the wine that makes good people happy and bad people miserable? Is it St Augustine’s *Fac quod vis*, or is there a reference to the Wine that is “dangerous to them that will presume to use it unworthily”? Who are the multitude of not-quite-identical cobblers who seem coarse and cruel yet whose Grandmother is the Old Woman? Why can the boy-angels in Diamond’s dream never see the girl-angels? What are the shadows that the Shadows themselves fear?

Any reader of MacDonald can propound a hundred such questions, but they remain his secrets. “For him the secret of the Cosmos was a secret,” says Chesterton, “because it was too good to tell.” But MacDonald himself answers, “This world is not merely a thing [13] which God hath made, . . . but is an expression of the thought, the feeling, the heart of God himself.” No wonder then that we can understand interpretations of it only imperfectly. In *Adela Cathcart* there is a story of a boy who is given a vision of his own future. “It was long years ere the boy understood *all* the meanings of the vision. I doubt if he understands them all yet. But he will one day.” We too

shall understand, one day. **[14]**