

Ernest

PREFACE

MOST OF THESE STORIES were originally told to my children in the pleasant half-hours before the arrival of their bedtime and the sound of the dressing-bell interrupted our evening talk.

In travelling upon a path so often trodden before, it is difficult to avoid the occasional appearance, if not the reality, of plagiarism. I believe, however, that the only tale to which such a suspicion might attach is that of "Ernest," which in some points has a family resemblance to "Alice in Wonderland." My excuse must be that both the general idea of the tale, and the parodies of certain familiar rhymes, were conceived and written by me long before the appearance of that admirable child's book.

The Tales are written as they were told; and if they afford to any other children, in reading, some portion of the pleasure which my own have had in hearing them, I shall not regret having been induced to let them go forth to the Fairy-loving Public.

—E.H. KNATCHBULL-HUGESSEN

ERNEST

A little boy named Ernest was once playing at ball by himself in the garden, when his ball suddenly bounded into the well, and fell down with a loud splash. Many boys would have bitten their thumbs with vexation, and given the matter up as a bad job; some might even have cried; and hardly a boy but what would have been more or less put out at losing a new ball in so stupid a manner.

Ernest, however, not being a common boy, and having a particular liking for this ball, immediately splashed in head foremost after it. He knocked himself a little against the sides of the well, but he didn't care for that a bit; and though the water felt rather cold, it only freshened him up, and made him all the more determined to find his ball. Down he went for some distance, and at last got to what he supposed to be the bottom of the well. He wasn't far wrong, either; but the well was much larger at the bottom than the top, and all the water in it seemed to come up like a wall from the ground, leaving a large dry space all round it, into which Ernest crept out of the water, and began to look about him. It wasn't so *very* dry, either, but rather moist, and he could see no ball anywhere; but all round the sides of the kind of cave



in which he was there was a bright substance like crystal, which lighted up the place, and on the floor sat an enormous Toad, smoking a very bad cigar, and evidently thinking himself everybody. He turned upon Ernest directly, and cried out to him in an angry tone—

"You presumptuous fool, how dare you come down here?"

Now Ernest, having been carefully brought up, was well aware that no one loses anything by politeness. Far from being angry, therefore, he replied, with the lowest bow which circumstances enabled him to make—

"Presumptuous, sir, I may possibly be, but it can hardly be the act of a

fool which has brought me into the presence of so noble and handsome a Toad as yourself."

"Not so bad," replied the Toad; "I see you have been taught manners. But what do you want?"

"My ball, sir," said Ernest; when instantly a low silvery laugh echoed through the cave, and the Toad, after swelling till Ernest thought he must certainly burst, went into a fit of laughter which rather puzzled the boy.

"Your ball!" at length shouted the Toad. "If you mean that india-rubber affair that came crashing down here some time ago, I should hope it was long since cut up into gaiters for the tame Mice; for it was fit for nothing else, and they were beginning to want new leggings. But as for balls, you shall see such a ball as you've never seen up above Toad-land, if you only wait for a moment."

With that the Toad spat in the air, which was his way of ringing the bell, and immediately a door was thrown open behind him, and several hundred Toadstools came rushing in and stood on their heads all round him.

The Toad then marched solemnly through the door, and the Toadstools after him, two and two, till Ernest had counted about four hundred. Then he got tired of counting, and thought he might as well follow and see what they were all going to do. So he kicked aside several Toadstools that came in his way, and passed on through the door after the procession.

Presently they came to quite a large room, entirely lighted by Glow-worms; and here were assembled a great number of Mice, some of whom had gaiters on, which appeared to Ernest to be made of some stuff suspiciously like india-rubber. He had no time, however, to think about it, for as they entered the room the band was striking up a merry tune, and the Mice were asking each other to dance, and forming sets of Lancers just as people do in the world above.

"Will you dance in a sixteen set?" said the Toad to Ernest; but he was so confused that he hardly knew what to say: at last he stammered out—

"If you please, sir, shan't I stamp on somebody? I'm very much afraid I shall never be able to help it."

"That's *their* look-out," replied the Toad. "Now don't be a fool, but get a partner at once."

Ernest was dreadfully puzzled, for he didn't know whether he ought to ask a Mouse, a Toadstool, or the Toad itself to dance; but while he was doubting what to do, a delicate White Mouse came softly up to him, and murmured in a soft but somewhat shrill voice—

"If you would please to dance with me, sir, in a quiet set of eight, I shall be so delighted!"

So Ernest bowed civilly, and, as he could not give his arm to the Mouse, he offered her his hand, upon which she sat till the set was formed and they began to dance. Ernest took great care, and all went well until the last figure, when the music went quick, and he was so terribly afraid of hurting somebody that he came to a dead stop, and sat down, as ill-luck would have it, right on the top of a Toadstool, who squashed instantly.

His companions began to abuse Ernest violently, telling him that he was an awkward Fungus, and, in fact, no better than a mere Mushroom. But the White Mouse took his part, and explained that it was all a mistake; and as the squashed Toadstool was not by any means a popular person, he was soon forgotten.

Ernest now asked his partner if he should fetch her some lemonade or a glass of sherry, to which she mildly responded that she felt inclined for a crumb or two of toasted cheese, if he knew where it was to be found. He looked right and left, and seeing a number of the Mice crowding up into one corner, justly guessed that the supper was there: so pushing his way along, with his partner in his hand, he soon discovered a table, on which toasted cheese formed a large part of the eatables. Having placed his partner on this table, he soon saw that she was so fully occupied that he might just as well amuse himself by looking about him. Accordingly, he walked back to the middle of the room, and perceived the Toad seated upon a Toadstool, and making facetious remarks upon everybody about him.

As soon as he saw Ernest, "Halloo, you upper-world boy," he cried; "how do you like the ball?"

"Very much, sir," replied Ernest, respectfully; upon which the Toad rejoined—

"But you must have had enough of it now—at least I know *I* have; so come and feed the gold and silver Fish"; and beckoning Ernest to follow him, he hopped off to a passage in one side of the room, down which he went for some little way, when there appeared more and more light; and Ernest presently found himself in a pleasant garden, in which was a large round pond, full of gold and silver Fish. The Toad knew all these by their names, and they came at his call like dogs to their master. He then began to feed them, his method of doing which was rather peculiar: the Toadstools put crumbs on his back, and then he leaped into the water, and the Fish came swimming round, and took the crumbs off as he told them.

"Come," said he to Ernest, "do as I do, young Worldling."

But Ernest said he was afraid of catching cold, and had rather stay where he was.

"Why *didn't* you stay where you were, then—up above?" said the Toad;

"if you come to Toad-land, you ought to do as Toads do: and as to catching cold, you can't do that here; *our* colds run so fast that nobody ever catches them, and if they do, they are not such fools as to keep them, as you human beings sometimes do, for weeks together."

Ernest bowed silently, for he feared to continue the argument, lest he might be obliged to feed the Fish in the very unpleasant manner adopted by the Toad. The latter, however, soon got tired of his amusement, and, leaping from the pond, told Ernest to come along with him, and hear the Toadstools sing. To this Ernest willingly consented; and the first Toadstool who was in attendance upon the Royal Toad immediately began, in a voice hoarse with emotion—

"Abroad in the morning to see the bold Toads
Squat silently down by the side of the roads,
With speckles so yellow and bright,
With their servants behind them, the marsh-loving Frogs,
Who hurry to follow, from ponds and from bogs,
And croak till the coming of night."

"There!" said the Toad, triumphantly, "you won't hear such a singer as *that* every day. What would you do with him, if you had him up above?"

"I think," quietly observed Ernest, "that as he seems so hoarse, I should give him a lozenge."

"Fool!" answered the Toad, angrily, "what would be the use of *that*, when he has got no mouth?"

"No more he has," said Ernest; "I quite forgot that."

"Think before you speak, then," said the Toad. And Ernest began wondering how a creature without a mouth could sing at all, and whether a Toadstool could properly be called a creature; and then he began to say, half aloud, some verses which he remembered to have heard his nurse sing to him:—

"'Tis the voice of the Toadstool, I heard him complain,
I came up in the night from a smart shower of rain;
As a worthless old Fungus, so he in his bed,
Is left, while the people pick Mushrooms instead."

But these unlucky words were hardly out of his mouth, when a chorus of Toadstool voices began abusing him in the most furious language, and the Toad himself flew into a violent passion.

"Frogs' legs and heads!" exclaimed he; "was ever person so insulted? A common Mushroom, that folks eat upon toast with ketchup, preferred to an

elephant and ornamental Toadstool! Out upon you!—Workling!—you tasteless monster!"

Ernest was rather confused at this, and could think of nothing better to say than that he had meant no harm, and that it was from love and admiration for Toadstools that people in the upper world forbore to eat them. This statement somewhat calmed the offended followers of the Toad; but a sulkingness seemed to pervade the party, until the Toad, who had cooled down quite suddenly, and appeared as friendly as ever, asked Ernest what he would like to do next. Wishing to make himself as pleasant as possible, the boy suggested a game of "leap-frog."

"Leap-toad, I suppose you mean," grumbled the Toad; "but you seem determined to call everything by its wrong name to-day:—but you shall have what you want." And ringing the bell again in his usual manner, he directed the Toadstools to fetch in the leapers; upon which several of them vanished, and soon returned, ushering in a large number of small Toads, who began dancing and leaping about in every direction.

"But that isn't what I meant," said Ernest; "don't you know how to play the real game of leap-frog—I mean leap-toad—down here? One of you stands still and bends forward, and another jumps over him—like this." And Ernest imitated the manner in which one boy makes a back and another jumps over it at leap-frog.

"Don't come down here to teach your betters," shouted the Toad; "that may be upper-world leap-toad, but this is Toad-land leap-toad. We ought to know best, being regular toads; and if you don't like it, you may lump it"; and so saying, he sat down again and didn't speak another word for several minutes, during which time Ernest watched the Toads skipping about as fast as they could, till, at a signal from the old Toad, they suddenly ranged themselves in a line against the side of the room, and remained perfectly silent and motionless.

"Now," said the Toad, "you shall see an illumination"; and at the word of command each of the leaping Toads drew from his pocket a lucifer-match, lighted it by striking it against the wall, and stuck it into his mouth. This produced a curious effect, and the Toad appeared highly delighted at it, keeping the leapers there until the matches had burnt so low that their eyes began to wink, and they trembled visibly; then, at a wave of his cigar, they all got rid of their matches as quickly as they could, and at a second signal disappeared down the passage out of which they had come.

Ernest now began to recollect that, with all these amusements, he was no nearer getting his ball, and therefore he politely remarked to the Toad that he should be much obliged if he would tell him where it was to be found.

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"Drat your ball!" angrily answered the Toad; "it's dead—it's burst—it's changed into a mouse—anything you please, only don't bother, but be contented."

"But I would go to the end of the world to get my ball," said Ernest, mournfully.

"Yes, you stupid world-child," remarked the Toad, "and tumble off when you'd got there, as a friend of mine once did, and fell down, and down, till he turned into a star, poor fool, and has stuck there, shining like an idiot of a Glowworm ever since. I should have thought you had had enough of tumbling by this time; but if you really want your ball, you must tumble again."

So saying, the Toad fiercely stamped his foot upon the ground, at the same time taking his eyes out of his head, throwing them up to the ceiling, and catching them again as cleverly as an Indian juggler; after which he replaced them carefully, but took care to put the right eye where the left one was before, and the left in the place of the right. As soon as he had done this, he winked in the most frightful manner, and stamped upon the ground again. Immediately Ernest felt the floor giving way beneath him, and down he sunk, so quickly, that he could not even try to save himself, and all he heard was the voice of the Toad croaking, more and more faintly as he got further and further off—

"Go to the end of the world, then, and see how you like it!"

Somehow or other Ernest found this kind of sinking a remarkably easy way of travelling; he went so softly and smoothly that he did not feel the least uncomfortable or giddy; and though he seemed to be passing now through clay, now chalk, and now through something so black that he thought it must be coal, nothing seemed to come off on his jacket, and when he was brought up with a sudden jerk, he was as clean and comfortable, and just as self-composed, as if he had been all the time in his father's garden at home.

He shook himself thoroughly, to be sure that he was awake, and then looked around. Where in the world—or out of the world—was he? On the brink of an enormous precipice, to look over which made him giddy at once, and he felt sure, without being told, that he had really got to the end of the world.

Giddy as he was, he still determined that he must and would peep over to see what there was to be seen; and accordingly he lay down flat on his stomach and looked over. He saw lights at different distances from each other, which he took to be stars; some so large and glaring that they made him wink and shut his eyes when he tried to look at them, others paler and more dim, as if further off. And then he saw, floating all round him in every direction, a quantity of clouds, — at least they looked like clouds at first; but each one had

a face, and an uncomfortable sort of anxious expression seemed to rest on every countenance, as it blew first one way and then another, like leaves at the corner of the street which the wind whirls about and catches up and drives in different directions. Still, each Cloud-face seemed to be trying to go its own way, and never to be quite satisfied whichever way it was going.

"What on earth are these?" said Ernest to himself.

"(On earth, my child," said a voice near him, "they were undecided people, who spent their time in making and unmaking all their plans, small and great, and could never settle what was best to be done. So now, having left the earth, they are doomed to pursue the same course which they did in life, and are making up their minds—or trying to do it—as you see. The end of the world makes no difference to them, and it will probably be centuries before their minds are finally made up, until which event they blow about here as undecided as ever."

Ernest started at the sound of this voice, and, turning round his head as well as he could, saw to his surprise a venerable Oyster close to him, whose large beard betokened his extreme age. He was open, or else of course Ernest could not have seen his beard; and the sight of him would have reminded the boy at once of vinegar and thin slices of brown bread and butter, had not his voice so surprised him that he could think of nothing else. It was a soft, low voice, sweet to the ear, and not unlike the gentle pattering of the rain against the window when the wind blows it up from the south-west. And Ernest, in spite of his surprise at hearing the Oyster speak, felt a great respect for him at once, and addressed him with the reverence due from youth to age.

"Pray, sir," asked he in a humble tone, "is this the end of the world?"

"Shut me tight if I know," replied the Oyster; "but by all accounts I believe it is, and I wouldn't go too near the edge, if I was you."

"Thank you, sir," replied Ernest; and then, after a moment's hesitation, "How long have you been here, and how did you come?"

"I was born here," said the Oyster, "about a thousand years ago, more or less; but it is very impertinent to ask questions. I thought that nobody did *that*, except the commoner sort of Mussels, or the discarded shell of an old Crab. Pray don't get into such habits."

"But," remarked Ernest, "I am very anxious to find my ball, and I want to know all about the strange places I come to in looking for it."

"Then," solemnly replied the Oyster, "you had better ask somebody else."

"But there *is* nobody else," said Ernest.

"Ah!" sighed the Oyster, "no more there is. I had never thought of *that*; but, you know, one can't go on talking for ever." And without another word he suddenly shut, nor would he open again for anything that Ernest could say.

This was decidedly unpleasant; the more especially as the place on which Ernest was lying was a kind of ledge, with the precipice in front and a wall of chalk behind, and on this ledge he could see nothing but the Oyster. However, he was determined not to be annoyed by trifles: so he crept along the ledge a little way, and presently came to a turning which led away from the precipice right into the chalk. He went down this a few yards, when he suddenly heard a laugh, and looking up saw a little old Man sitting on a shelf above his head. He couldn't have been more than two feet high, and he had a hooked nose, rather like Punch, and a merry eye, and a clay pipe in his mouth, which he had taken out to laugh.

"I hope I don't intrude, sir," said Ernest.

"By no means," answered the little Man; "I am very glad to see you. I am the Man in the Moon, and of course I have come down before my time; and as to asking my way to Norwich, it is quite useless, for I find the people there are frightened at my very name just now; so I have sauntered down here to be out of the way for a time."

"And can you get back again when you please, sir?" said Ernest.

"To be sure I can," replied the little Man, "but I don't want to go just yet. I like to be on the shelf for a little while, now and then; it rests me. And there is a good look-out up here, too. Come up and try!" So saying, he held out his hand to Ernest, and helped him up to the shelf.

There, indeed, was the strangest sight you ever saw. A number of windows, cut in the chalk, enabled you to look out over the whole country around the end of the world, and out of each window you had quite a different view.

Ernest looked through the first one, and saw a number of people pushing and panting with exertion, trying to get through a door which was shut, and which no effort of theirs could force open. They seemed dreadfully disappointed, and their faces were yards long with vexation.

"Who are those?" asked Ernest.

"Oh!" said the Man in the Moon, "those are the people who always declared there was no other world than the one they lived in: so now that they have got to the end of it, they have been taken at their word. They have done with one world, and no other will have anything to say to them; so there they are, pushing and struggling on, unable to go backward or forward."

Ernest looked, and looked again; and then, as it was rather a sad sight, he moved a little way along the shelf and looked through another window. There he saw a number of things like very large leaves of trees, tossing up and down in inextricable confusion, sometimes blown up high as if by the wind, and sometimes sinking down again, each with a curious face to it, on which appeared a restless and unhappy expression.

"Whatever are these?" said Ernest.

"These are Senses," said his companion. "When people up above have lost their senses, they generally blow down here, where they perhaps do less harm than if they had remained with their former owners. They are always, however, trying to get back again; but there is so much nonsense in the world that they hardly ever do so, and not one person out of a hundred in the world gets his senses back when he once loses them, as his brain is instantly stuffed full of nonsense, so that there would be no room for them if they *did* get back."

Ernest turned away and looked through another window, and saw a quantity of birds, of every sort and description, flying about all over the place.

"Ah!" said his friend, "these are the rotten eggs. Don't suppose that a rotten egg in a nest means that there was no bird belonging to it. Only, instead of hatching like a common bird, the rotten-egg birds fly off here to the end of the world, and there, you see, is a regular comfortable place provided for them."

Ernest thought this a very fair arrangement; for why should one egg fare better than another?

He moved on, however, and, looking through another window, saw a number of men walking up and down on a platform, from which they could not move, whilst opposite them were placed a number of large boards, with various inscriptions in large blue and gold and red letters.

"What does this mean?" asked the boy.

"These," said the Man in the Moon, "are railway directors, who have bored people so terribly, when waiting for their trains, by having great staring advertisements put up at their railway stations, that now, whilst *they* are waiting at the end of the world, they are condemned to stay on a platform and have nothing to read but these same advertisements. Look at that stout old gentleman with 'Thorley's Food for Cattle' before him, and that one next him looking up at 'Horniman's Tea.' I warrant they'll never allow such things again if they should ever be directors of an underground railway, or an atmospheric company."

Ernest thought this was all very curious, and rather puzzling; so he didn't look through any more of the windows; but, turning to his pleasant friend, told him the reason why he had come to the end of the world, and asked him where he thought the ball was to be found.

"Found!" said the Man in the Moon; "why, don't you know that india-rubber balls always rebound? Of course, as soon as your ball got to the bottom of the well and struck the ground, it bounded up again as fast as it could, and the wonder is that it didn't strike you in the face as you came down. Your

ball is probably waiting for you at the place where you were playing with it when you lost it."

"Dear me!" said Ernest, "I never thought of that. But how am I to get up again? I can't rebound, you know."

"Of course not," replied his friend; "but there is nothing easier in the world than to do what you wish. I am going back myself directly, and will show you all about it in a minute."

Accordingly, he took his pipe in his left hand, and with the stem of it touched a spring in the chalk rock, when a door immediately opened and disclosed a large cupboard, in which were several enormous tumblers.

"Now," said the Man in the Moon, "have you ever taken a saline draught?"

"Yes," replied Ernest; "you mean the thing that fizzes up when you put water on the powder?"

"Exactly so," rejoined his friend; "but I dare say you never *were* a saline draught, were you?"

Ernest stared, and said he certainly never had been yet; but having long ceased to be surprised at anything, he was quite ready to believe that he might become a draught, or a pill, or even a dose of rhubarb and magnesia, at any moment. The Man in the Moon told him that he must do exactly as he saw *him* do; and he then took two small powders, wrapped in blue paper, out of his waistcoat pocket, and shook one of them into each of two tumblers, which he took out and placed upon the shelf. He then deliberately got into one of the tumblers, and told Ernest to get into the other; after which he took a bottle from the cupboard, which was labelled Double X, meaning, no doubt, that it was a very extraordinary mixture. And so it was; for the Man in the Moon had no sooner poured half of it into Ernest's tumbler and half of it into his own, than they both began bubbling and fizzing like soda-water very much "up." Very much "up" they soon were; for the mixture, carrying them with it, fizzed right up out of the tumblers and through the earth. Everything seemed to give way before them, or else they had hit upon the same passage as that down which Ernest had come, or one very like it. Up, up they went, past coal, and clay, and chalk, as comfortably and as easily as possible; and the last thing Ernest remembered was seeing the Man in the Moon nodding, and smiling, and kissing his hand to him, as he mounted far above him. Then Ernest lifted up his head, opened his eyes wide, and looked around. Where was he? Why, under the mulberry trees that grew near the well in his own father's garden! The cool air was blowing on his face, and the pleasant sunlight was shining down upon him, and there was a gentle rustling of the mulberry leaves above his head, and he sat up and rubbed his eyes in astonishment. Close to him, on the ground, uncut and unhurt, dry and safe, was his india-rubber ball.

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"Then the Toad told a story," cried he, "and the tame Mice have *not* got new leggings!"

"New leggings, indeed!" said a voice near him. "What's all that nonsense about mice and leggings? I think we poor maids shall be wanting new legs soon if we have to run about after you children so long. Why, Master Ernest, I've been hunting for you this half-hour. There have your sisters gone in to tea, and Miss Jones has been asking after you, and here you are fast asleep under the mulberry trees!—I declare it's enough to worrit one to death; and all because of that apple-pie and custard you ate such a lot of at dinner, I'll be bound! *Do* come along, there's a good boy."

So Ernest got up and looked the maid straight in the face, and said—

"Jane, were you ever down a well?"

"Down a well, Master Ernest!—no, to be sure not; who ever heard of such a thing? But I shall be up a tree if I don't bring you in to Miss Jones pretty soon!"

Ernest said no more, but went quietly with the maid, who told his sisters and their governess that he had been asleep under the mulberry trees all the afternoon. You and I know better, but it does not always do to tell all one knows out aloud. But, as the Toad, and the Oyster, and the Man in the Moon all knew too, it is no wonder that the real truth came out in spite of Ernest's silence; and in fact, if one of them hadn't told me, I should never have known all the wonderful things that I have been telling you, for I don't believe the India-rubber Ball would ever had said a word about it!