

THE  
NURSERY  
RHYME  
BOOK

ANDREW LANG

# **The Nursery Rhyme Book**

**Andrew Lang**

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## **ANDREW LANG (1844-1912)**

Biographical Sketch from "Portraits And Sketches" by  
Edmund Gosse

INVITED to note down some of my recollections of Andrew Lang, I find myself suspended between the sudden blow of his death and the slow development of memory, now extending in unbroken friendship over thirty-five years. The magnitude and multitude of Lang's performances, public and private, during that considerable length of time almost paralyse expression; it is difficult to know where to begin or where to stop. Just as his written works are so extremely numerous as to make a pathway through them a formidable task in bibliography, no one book standing out predominant, so his character, intellectual and moral, was full -of so many apparent inconsistencies, so many pitfalls for rash assertion, so many queer caprices of impulse, that in a whole volume of analysis, which would be tedious, one could scarcely do justice to them all. I will venture to put down, almost at haphazard, what I remember that seems to me to have been overlooked, or inexactly stated, by those who wrote, often very sympathetically, at the moment of his

death, always premising that I speak rather of a Lang of from 1877 to 1890, when I saw him very frequently, than of a Lang whom younger people met chiefly in Scotland.

When he died, all the newspapers were loud in proclaiming his "versatility." But I am not sure that he was not the very opposite of versatile. I take "versatile" to mean changeable, fickle, constantly ready to alter direction with the weather-cock. The great instance of versatility in literature is Ruskin, who adopted diametrically different views of the same subject at different times of his life, and defended them with equal ardour. To be versatile seems to be unsteady, variable. But Lang was through his long career singularly unaltered; he never changed his point of view; what he liked and admired as a youth he liked and admired as an elderly man. It is true that his interests and knowledge were vividly drawn along a surprisingly large number of channels, but while there was abundance there does not seem to me to have been versatility. If a huge body of water boils up from a crater, it may pour down a dozen paths, but these will always be the same; unless there is an earthquake, new cascades will not form nor old rivulets run dry. In some authors earthquakes do take place as in Tolstoy, for instance, and in S. T. Coleridge but nothing of this kind was ever manifest in Lang, who was extraordinarily multiform, yet in his varieties strictly consistent from Oxford to the grave. As this is not generally perceived, I will take the liberty of expanding my view of his intellectual development.

To a superficial observer in late life the genius of Andrew Lang had the characteristics which we are in the habit of identifying with precocity. Yet he had not been, as a writer, precocious in his youth. One slender volume of verses represents all that he published in book-form before his thirty-fifth year. No doubt we shall learn in good time what

he was doing before he flashed upon the world of journalism in all his panoply of graces, in 1876, at the close of his Merton fellowship. He was then, at all events, the finest finished product of his age, with the bright armour of Oxford burnished on his body to such a brilliance that humdrum eyes could hardly bear the radiance of it. Of the terms behind, of the fifteen years then dividing him from St. Andrews, we know as yet but little; they were years of insatiable acquirement, incessant reading, and talking, and observing gay preparation for a life to be devoted, as no other life in our time has been, to the stimulation of other people's observation and talk and reading. There was no cloistered virtue about the bright and petulant Merton don. He was already flouting and jesting, laughing with Ariosto in the sunshine, performing with a snap of his fingers tasks which might break the back of a pedant, and concealing under an affectation of carelessness a literary ambition which knew no definite bounds.

In those days, and when he appeared for the first time in London, the poet was paramount in him. Jowett is said to have predicted that he would be greatly famous in this line, but I know not what evidence Jowett had before him. Unless I am much mistaken, it was not until Lang left Balliol that his peculiar bent became obvious. Up to that time he had been a promiscuous browser upon books, much occupied, moreover, in the struggle with ancient Greek, and immersed in Aristotle and Homer. But in the early days of his settlement at Merton he began to concentrate his powers, and I think there were certain influences which were instant and far-reaching. Among them one was pre-eminent. When Andrew Lang came up from St. Andrews he had found Matthew Arnold occupying the ancient chair of poetry at Oxford. He was a listener at some at least of the famous lectures which, in 1865, were collected as "Essays in Criticism"; while one of his latest experiences as a Balliol

undergraduate was hearing Matthew Arnold lecture on the study of Celtic literature. His conscience was profoundly stirred by "Culture and Anarchy" (1869); his sense of prose-form largely determined by "Friendship's Garland" (1871). I have no hesitation in saying that the teaching and example of Matthew Arnold prevailed over all other Oxford influences upon the intellectual nature of Lang, while, although I think that his personal acquaintance with Arnold was very slight, yet in his social manner there was, in early days, not a little imitation of Arnold's aloofness and superfine delicacy of address. It was unconscious, of course, and nothing would have enraged Lang more than to have been accused of "imitating Uncle Matt."

The structure which his own individuality now began to build on the basis supplied by the learning of Oxford, and in particular by the study of the Greeks, and "dressed" by courses of Matthew Arnold, was from the first eclectic. Lang eschewed as completely what was not sympathetic to him as he assimilated what was attractive to him. Those who speak of his "versatility" should recollect what large tracts of the literature of the world, and even of England, existed outside the dimmest apprehension of Andrew Lang. It is, however, more useful to consider what he did apprehend; and there were two English books, published in his Oxford days, which permanently impressed him: one of these was "The Earthly Paradise," the other D. G. Rossetti's "Poems." In after years he tried to divest himself of the traces of these volumes, but he had fed upon their honey-dew and it had permeated his veins.

Not less important an element in the garnishing of a mind already prepared for it by academic and aesthetic studies was the absorption of the romantic part of French literature. Andrew Lang in this, as in everything else, was selective. He dipped into the wonderful lucky-bag of France

wherever he saw the glitter of romance. Hence his approach, in the early seventies, was threefold: towards the mediaeval *lais* and *chansons*, towards the sixteenth-century Pleiade, and towards the school of which Victor Hugo was the leader in the nineteenth century. For a long time Ronsard was Lang's poet of intensest predilection; and I think that his definite ambition was to be the Ronsard of modern England, introducing a new poetical dexterity founded on a revival of pure humanism. He had in those days what he lost, or at least dispersed, in the weariness and growing melancholia of later years a splendid belief in poetry as a part of the renown of England, as a heritage to be received in reverence from our fathers, and to be passed on, if possible, in a brighter flame. This honest and beautiful ambition to shine as one of the permanent benefactors to national verse, in the attitude so nobly sustained four hundred years ago by Du Bellay and Ronsard, was unquestionably felt by Andrew Lang through his bright intellectual April, and supported him from Oxford times until 1882, when he published "Helen of Troy." The cool reception of that epic by the principal judges of poetry caused him acute disappointment, and from that time forth he became less eager and less serious as a poet, more and more petulantly expending his wonderful technical gift on fugitive subjects. And here again, when one comes to think of it, the whole history repeated itself, since in "Helen of Troy" Lang simply suffered as Ronsard had done in the "Franciade." But the fact that 1882 was his year of crisis, and the tomb of his brightest ambition, must be recognised by every one who closely followed his fortunes at that time. Lang's habit of picking out of literature and of life the plums of romance, and these alone, comes to be, to the dazzled observer of his extraordinarily vivid intellectual career, the principal guiding line. This determination to dwell, to the exclusion of all other sides of any question, on its romantic side is alone enough to rebut the charge of

versatility. Lang was in a sense encyclopaedic; but the vast dictionary of his knowledge had blank pages, or pages pasted down, on which he would not, or could not, read what experience had printed. Absurd as it sounds, there was always something maidenly about his mind, and he glossed over ugly matters, sordid and dull conditions, so that they made no impression whatever upon him. He had a trick, which often exasperated his acquaintances, of declaring that he had " never heard " of things that everybody else was very well aware of. He had " never heard the name " of people he disliked, of books that he thought tiresome, of events that bored him; but, more than this, he used the formula for things and persons whom he did not wish to discuss. I remember meeting in the street a famous professor, who advanced with uplifted hands, and greeted me with " What do you think Lang says now? That he has never heard of Pascal! " This merely signified that Lang, not interested (at all events for the moment) in Pascal nor in the professor, thus closed at once all possibility of discussion.

It must not be forgotten that we have lived to see him, always wonderful indeed, and always passionately devoted to perfection and purity, but worn, tired, harassed by the unceasing struggle, the lifelong slinging of sentences from that inexhaustible ink-pot. In one of the most perfect of his poems, " Natural Theology," Lang speaks of Cagn, the great hunter, who once was kind and good, but who was spoiled by fighting many things. Lang was never " spoiled," but he was injured; the surface of the radiant coin was rubbed by the vast and interminable handling of journalism. He was jaded by the toil of writing many things. Hence it is not possible but that those who knew him intimately in his later youth and early middle-age should prefer to look back at those years when he was the freshest, the most exhilarating figure in living literature, when a star seemed

to dance upon the crest of his already silvering hair. Baudelaire exclaimed of Theophile Gautier: " Homme heureux! homme digne d'envie! il n'a jamais aimé que le Beau!" and of Andrew Lang in those brilliant days the same might have been said. As long as he had confidence in beauty he was safe and strong; and much that, with all affection and all respect, we must admit was rasping and disappointing in his attitude to literature in his later years, seems to have been due to a decreasing sense of confidence in the intellectual sources of beauty. It is dangerous, in the end it must be fatal, to sustain the entire structure of life and thought on the illusions of romance. But that was what Lang did he built his house upon the rainbow.

The charm of Andrew Lang's person and company was founded upon a certain lightness, an essential gentleness and elegance which were relieved by a sharp touch; just as a very dainty fruit may be preserved from mawkishness by something delicately acid in the rind of it. His nature was slightly inhuman; it was unwise to count upon its sympathy beyond a point which was very easily reached in social intercourse. If any simple soul showed an inclination, in eighteenth-century phrase, to " repose on the bosom " of Lang, that support was immediately withdrawn, and the confiding one fell among thorns. Lang was like an Angora cat, whose gentleness and soft fur, and general aspect of pure amenity, invite to caresses, which are suddenly met by the outspread paw with claws awake. This uncertain and freakish humour was the embarrassment of his friends, who, however, were preserved from despair by the fact that no malice was meant, and that the weapons were instantly sheathed again in velvet. Only, the instinct to give a sudden slap, half in play, half in fretful caprice, was incorrigible. No one among Lang's intimate friends but had suffered from this feline impulse, which did not spare even the

serenity of Robert Louis Stevenson. But, tiresome as it sometimes was, this irritable humour seldom cost Lang a friend who was worth preserving. Those who really knew him recognised that he was always shy and usually tired.

His own swift spirit never brooded upon an offence, and could not conceive that any one else should mind what he himself minded so little and forgot so soon. Impressions swept over him very rapidly, and injuries passed completely out of his memory. Indeed, all his emotions were too fleeting, and in this there was something fairy-like; quick and keen and blithe as he was, he did not seem altogether like an ordinary mortal, nor could the appeal to gross human experience be made to him with much chance of success. This, doubtless, is why almost all imaginative literature which is founded upon the darker parts of life, all squalid and painful tragedy, all stories that "don't end well" all religious experiences, all that is not superficial and romantic, was irksome to him. He tried sometimes to reconcile his mind to the consideration of real life; he concentrated his matchless powers on it; but he always disliked it. He could persuade himself to be partly just to Ibsen or Hardy or Dostoieffsky, but what he really enjoyed was Dumas père, because that fertile romance-writer rose serene above the phenomena of actual human experience. We have seen more of this type in English literature than the Continental nations have in theirs, but even we have seen no instance of its strength and weakness so eminent as Andrew Lang. He was the fairy in our midst, the wonder-working, incorporeal, and tricky fay of letters, who paid for all his wonderful gifts and charms by being not quite a man of like passions with the rest of us. In some verses which he scribbled to R.L.S. and threw away, twenty years ago, he acknowledged this unearthly character, and, speaking of the depredations of his kin, he said:

Faith, they might steal me, w? ma will,  
And, ken'd I ony fairy hill  
I#d lay me down there, snod and still,  
Their land to win;  
For, man, I maistly had my fill  
O' this world's din

His wit had something disconcerting in its impishness. Its rapidity and sparkle were dazzling, but it was not quite human; that is to say, it conceded too little to the exigencies of flesh and blood. If we can conceive a seraph being fanny, it would be in the manner of Andrew Lang. Moreover, his wit usually danced over the surface of things, and rarely penetrated them. In verbal parry, in ironic misunderstanding, in breathless agility of topsy-turvy movement, Lang was like one of Milton's "yellow-skirted fays," sporting with the helpless, moon-bewildered traveller. His wit often had a depressing, a humiliating effect, against which one's mind presently revolted. I recollect an instance which may be thought to be apposite: I was passing through a phase of enthusiasm for Emerson, whom Lang very characteristically detested, and I was so ill-advised as to show him the famous epigram called "Brahma." Lang read it with a snort of derision (it appeared to be new to him), and immediately he improvised this parody:

If the wild bowler thinks he bowls,  
Or if the batsman thinks he's bowled,  
They know not, poor misguided souls,  
They, too, shall perish unconsolated.  
I am the batsman and the bat,  
I am the bowler and the ball,  
The umpire, the pavilion cat,  
The roller, pitch and stumps, and all

This would make a pavilion cat laugh, and I felt that Emerson was done for. But when Lang had left me, and I was once more master of my mind, I reflected that the parody was but a parody, wonderful for its neatness and quickness, and for its seizure of what was awkward in the roll of Emerson's diction, but essentially superficial. However, what would it be if it were profound? I must leave it there, feeling that I have not explained why Lang's extraordinary drollery in conversation so often left on the memory a certain sensation of distress.

But this was not the characteristic of his humour at its best, as it was displayed throughout the happiest period of his work. If, as seems possible, it is as an essayist that he will ultimately take his place in English literature, this element will continue to delight fresh generations of enchanted readers. I cannot imagine that the preface to his translation of "Theocritus," "Letters to Dead Authors," "In the Wrong Paradise," "Old Friends," and "Essays in Little" will ever lose their charm; but future admirers will have to pick their way to them through a tangle of history and anthropology and mythology, where there may be left no perfume and no sweetness. I am impatient to see this vast mass of writing reduced to the limits of its author's delicate, true, but somewhat evasive and ephemeral genius. However, as far as the circumstances of his temperament permitted, Andrew Lang has left with us the memory of one of our most surprising contemporaries, a man of letters who laboured without cessation from boyhood to the grave, who pursued his ideal with indomitable activity and perseverance, and who was never betrayed except by the loftiness of his own endeavour. Lang's only misfortune was not to be completely in contact with life, and his work will survive exactly where he was most faithful to his innermost illusions.

## The Nursery Rhyme Book



TO read the old Nursery Rhymes brings back queer lost memories of a man's own childhood. One seems to see the loose floppy picture-books of long ago, with their boldly coloured pictures. The books were tattered and worn, and my first library consisted of a wooden box full of these volumes. And I can remember being imprisoned for some crime in the closet where the box was, and how my gaolers found me, happy and impenitent, sitting on the box, with its contents all round me, reading.

There was "Who Killed Cock Robin?" which I knew by heart before I could read, and I learned to read (entirely "without tears") by picking out the letters in the familiar words. I remember the Lark dressed as a clerk, but what a clerk might be I did not ask. Other children, who are little now,

will read this book, and remember it well when they have forgotten a great deal of history and geography. We do not know what poets wrote the old Nursery Rhymes, but certainly some of them were written down, or even printed, three hundred years ago. Grandmothers have sung them to their grandchildren, and they again to theirs, for many centuries. In Scotland an old fellow will take a child on his knee for a ride, and sing—

"This is the way the ladies ride,  
Jimp and sma',—"

a smooth ride, then a rough trot,—

"This is the way the cadgers ride.  
Creels and a'!"

Such songs are sometimes not printed, but they are never forgotten.

About the people mentioned in this book:—We do not exactly know who Old King Cole was, but King Arthur must have reigned some time about 500 to 600 A.D. As a child grows up, he will, if he is fond of poetry, read thousands of lines about this Prince, and the Table Round where his Knights dined, and how four weeping Queens carried him from his last fight to Avalon, a country where the apple-trees are always in bloom. But the reader will never forget the bag-pudding, which "the Queen next morning fried." Her name was Guinevere, and the historian says that she "was a true lover, and therefore made she a good end." But she had a great deal of unhappiness in her life.

I cannot tell what King of France went up the hill with twenty thousand men, and did nothing when he got there. But I do know who Charley was that "loved good ale and

wine," and also "loved good brandy," and was fond of a pretty girl, "as sweet as sugar-candy." This was the banished Prince of Wales, who tried to win back his father's kingdom more than a hundred years ago, and gained battles, and took cities, and would have recovered the throne if his officers had followed him. But he was as unfortunate as he was brave, and when he had no longer a chance, perhaps he *did* love good ale and wine rather too dearly. As for the pretty girls, they all ran after him, and he could not run away like Georgey Porgey. There is plenty of poetry about Charley, as well as about King Arthur.

About King Charles the First, "upon a black horse," a child will soon hear at least as much as he can want, and perhaps his heart "will be ready to burst," as the rhyme says, with sorrow for the unhappy King. After he had his head cut off, "the Parliament soldiers went to the King," that is, to his son Charles, and crowned him in his turn, but he was thought a little too gay. Then we come to the King "who had a daughter fair, and gave the Prince of Orange her."

There is another rhyme about him:—

"O what's the rhyme to porringer?  
Ken ye the rhyme to porringer?  
King James the Seventh had ae dochter,  
And he gave her to an Oranger.

Ken ye how he requited him?  
Ken ye how he requited him?  
The lad has into England come,  
And ta'en the crown in spite o' him.

The dog, he shall na keep it lang,  
To flinch we'll make him fain again;

We'll hing him hie upon a tree,  
And James shall have his ain again."

The truth is, that the Prince of Orange and the King's daughter fair (really a very pretty lady, with a very ugly husband) were not at all kind to the King, but turned him out of England. He was the grandfather of Charley who loved good ale and wine, and who very nearly turned out King Georgey Porgey, a German who "kissed the girls and made them cry," as the poet likewise says. Georgey was not a handsome King, and nobody cared much for him; and if any poetry was made about him, it was very bad stuff, and all the world has forgotten it. He had a son called Fred, who was killed by a cricket-ball—an honourable death. A poem was made when Fred died:—

"Here lies Fred,  
Who was alive and is dead.  
If it had been his father,  
I would much rather;  
If it had been his brother,  
Still better than another;  
If it had been his sister,  
No one would have missed her;  
If it had been the whole generation,  
So much the better for the nation.  
But as it's only Fred,  
Who was alive and is dead,  
Why there's no more to be said."



This poet seems to have preferred Charley, who wore a white rose in his bonnet, and was much handsomer than Fred.

Another rhyme tells about Jim and George, and how Jim got George by the nose. This Jim was Charley's father, and the George whom he "got by the nose" was Georgey Porgey, the fat German. Jim was born on June 10; so another song says —

"Of all the days that's in the year,  
The Tenth of June to me's most dear,  
When our White Roses will appear  
To welcome Jamie the Rover."

But, somehow, George really got Jim by the nose, in spite of what the poet says; for it does not do to believe all the history in song-books.

After these songs there is not much really useful information in the Nursery Rhymes. Simple Simon was not Simon Fraser of Lovat, who was sometimes on Jim's side, and sometimes on George's, till he got his head cut off by King George. That Simon was not simple.

The Babes in the Wood you may read about here and in longer poems; for instance, in a book called "The Ingoldsby Legends." It was their wicked uncle who lost them in the wood, because he wanted their money. Uncles were exceedingly bad long ago, and often smothered their nephews in the Tower, or put out their eyes with red-hot irons. But now uncles are the kindest people in the world, as every child knows.

About Brian O'Lin there is more than this book says:—

"Brian O'Lin had no breeches to wear;  
He bought him a sheepskin to make him a pair,  
The woolly side out, and the other side in:  
'It's pleasant and cool,' says Brian O'Lin."

He is also called Tom o' the Lin, and seems to have been connected with Young Tamlane, who was carried away by the Fairy Queen, and brought back to earth by his true love. Little Jack Horner lived at a place called Mells, in Somerset, in the time of Henry VIII. The plum he got was an estate which had belonged to the priests. I find nobody else here about whom history teaches us till we come to Dr. Faustus. He was *not* "a very good man"; that is a mistake, or the poem was written by a friend of the Doctor's. In reality he was a wizard, and raised up Helen of Troy from the other world, the most beautiful woman who ever was seen. Dr. Faustus made an agreement with Bogie, who, after the Doctor had been gay for a long time, came and carried him off in a flash of fire. You can read about it all in several books, when you are a good deal older. Dr. Faustus was a German, and the best play about him is by a German poet.

As to Tom the Piper's Son, he was probably the son of a Highlander, for they were mostly on Charley's side, who was "Over the hills and far away." Another song says—

"There was a wind, it came to me  
Over the south and over the sea,  
And it has blown my corn and hay  
Over the hills and far away.  
But though it left me bare indeed,  
And blew my bonnet off my head,  
There's something hid in Highland brae,  
It has not blown my sword away.  
Then o'er the hills and over the dales,  
Over all England, and thro' Wales,  
The broadsword yet shall bear the sway,  
Over the hills and far away!"

Tom piped this tune, and pleased both the girls and boys.

About the two birds that sat on a stone, on the "All-Alone Stone," you can read in a book called "The Water-Babies."

Concerning the Frog that lived in a well, and how he married a King's daughter and was changed into a beautiful Prince, there is a fairy tale which an industrious child ought to read. The frog in the rhyme is not nearly so lucky.

After these rhymes there come a number of riddles, of which the answers are given. Then there are charms, which people used to think would help in butter-making or would cure diseases. It is not generally thought now that they are of much use, but there can be no harm in trying. Nobody will be burned now for saying these charms, like the poor old witches long ago. The Queen Anne mentioned on page 172 was the sister of the other Princess who married the

Prince of Orange, and she was Charley's aunt. She had seventeen children, and only one lived to be as old as ten years. He was a nice boy, and had a regiment of boy-soldiers.

"Hickory Dickory Dock" is a rhyme for counting out a lot of children. The child on whom the last word falls has to run after the others in the game of "Tig" or "Chevy." There is another of the same kind:—

"Onery  
Twoery  
Tickery  
Tin  
Alamacrack  
Tenamalin  
Pin  
Pan  
Musky Dan  
Tweedleum  
Twiddleum  
Twenty-one  
Black fish  
White trout  
Eery, Ory  
You are out."

Most of the rhymes in this part of the book are sung in games and dances by children, and are very pretty to see and hear. They are very old, too, and in an old book of travels in England by a Danish gentleman, he gives one which he heard sung by children when Charles II. was king. They still sing it in the North of Scotland.

In this collection there are nonsense songs to sing to babies to make them fall asleep.