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Opening extract from

Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Anderson

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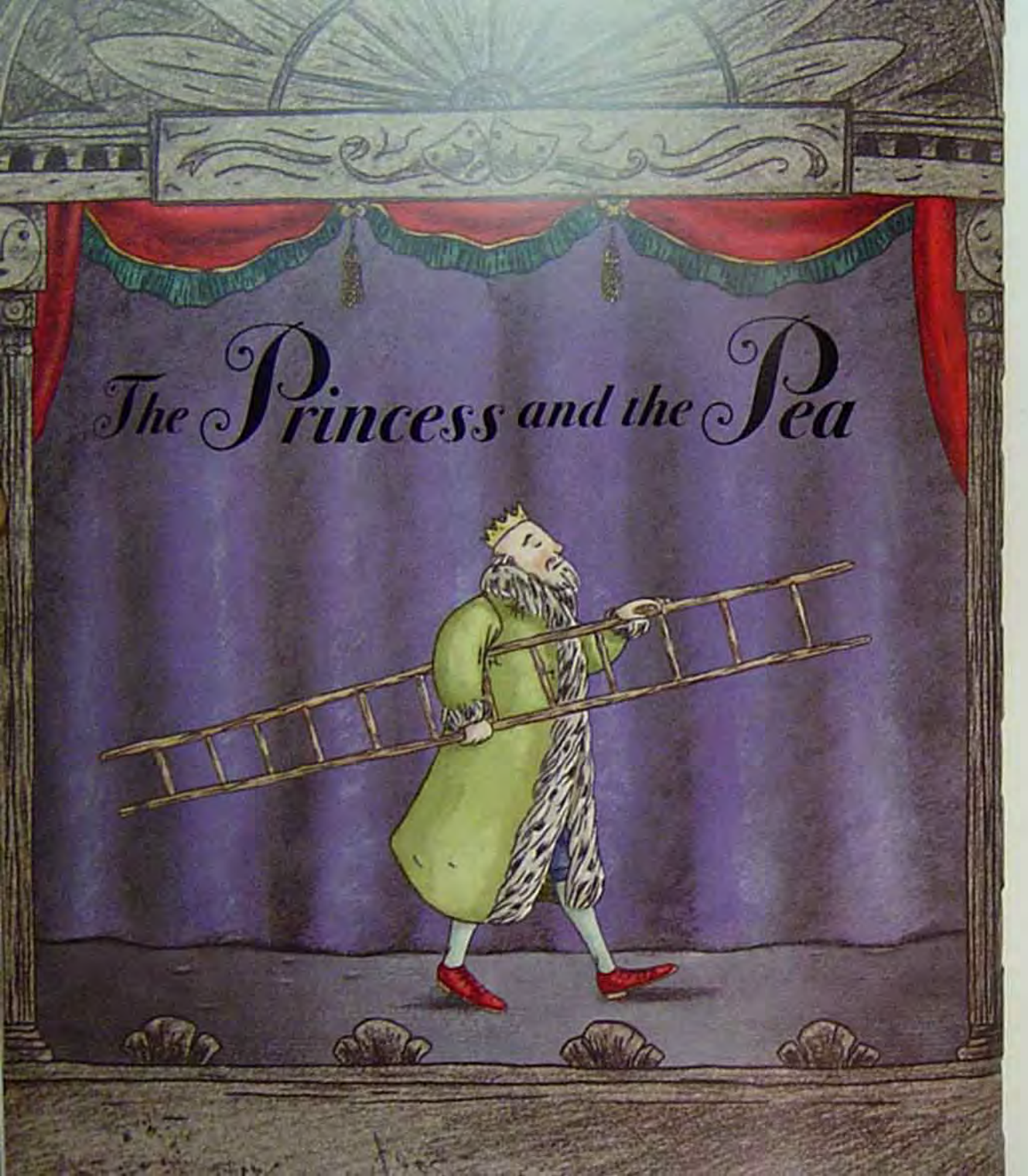
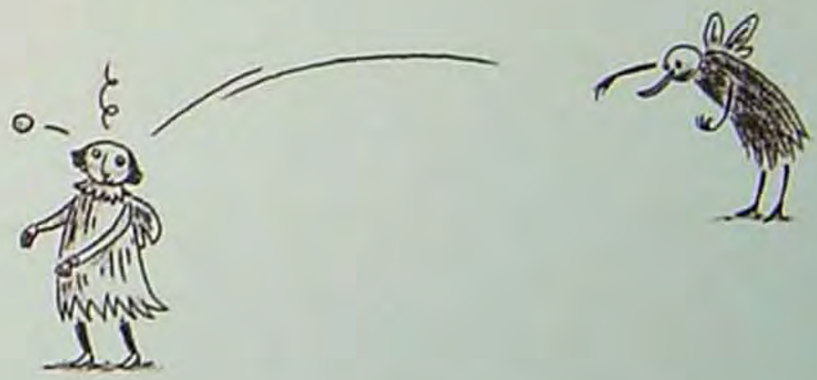


This has the distinction of being one of the first four "fairy tales" tried out in May 1835. Would they bring fame, shame, or silence? Well, they brought very strange reviews, for Andersen was known only as an adult writer. Yet fame soon came – and stayed. Though he explained that the idea for this tale may have come from the women telling folk tales and fables to each other in the spinning room or the hop fields, the listening boy had now become the skilful artist. Indeed, as our story shows he was a master from the start. This pioneer tale is a small perfection. Andersen's artful simplicity keeps the tale alive: one pea; a huge load of bedcoverings; a royal household where the king answers the door and the queen arranges the bed, yet we have no doubt of their royalty; oh, and that single pea is later sent to a museum.

The first English translators could not understand Andersen's humour or his subtlety. One pea? That was absurd. Three might be more credible. The museum is ignored. Sadly, some of these early versions are still in use. Look out for those rogue peas.

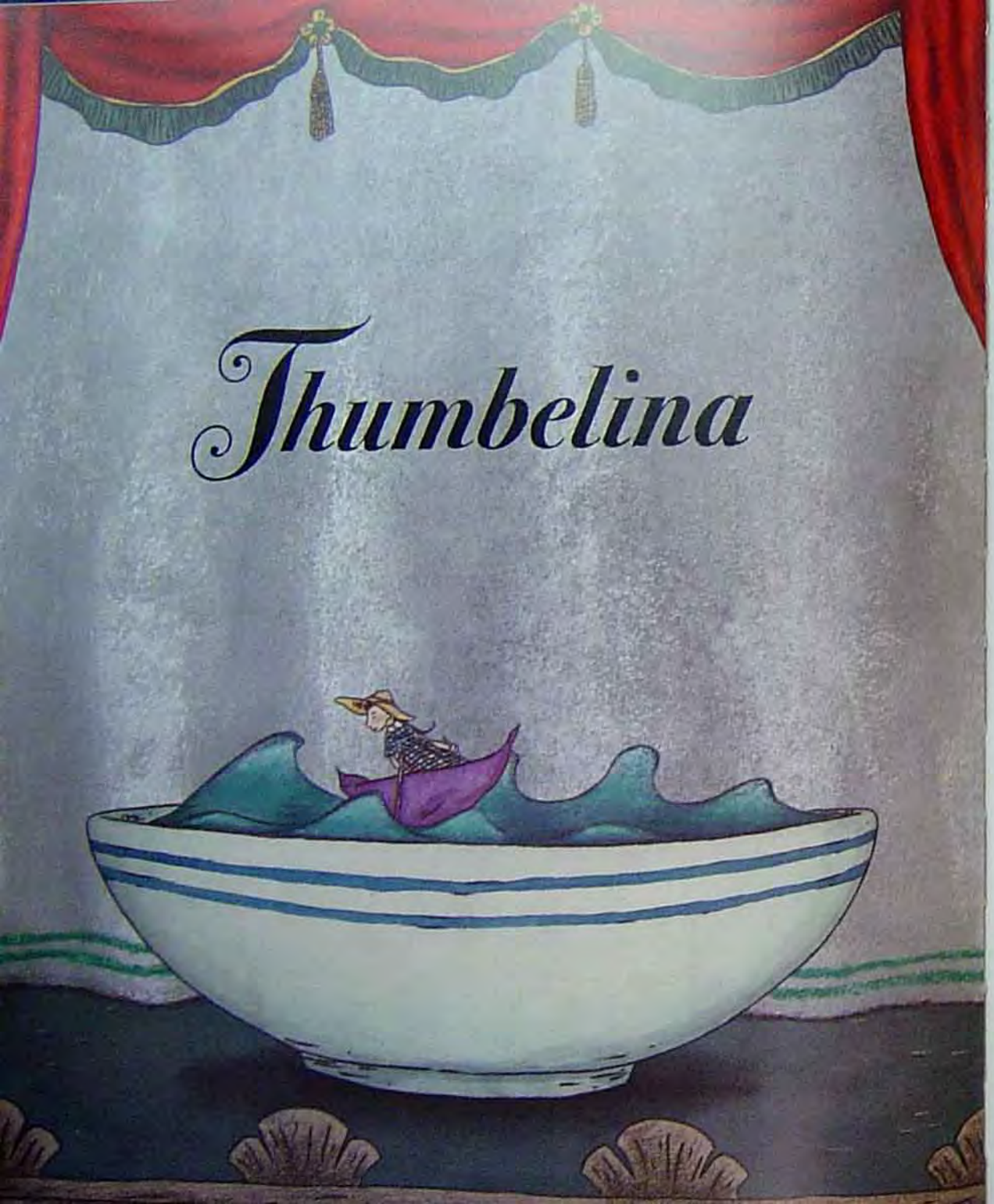


THERE WAS ONCE A PRINCE WHO WISHED to marry a princess – but a real princess she had to be. So he travelled all the world over to find one; yet in every case something was wrong. Princesses there were in plenty, yet he could never be sure that they were the genuine article; there was always something, this or that, that just didn't seem as it should be. At last he came back home, quite downhearted for he did so want to have a real princess.

One evening there was a fearful storm; thunder raged, lightning flashed, rain poured down in torrents – it was horrifying. In the midst of it all someone knocked at the palace door, and the old king went to open it.

Standing there was a princess. But, goodness! What a state she was in! The water ran down her hair and her clothes, through the tips of her shoes and out at the heels. Still, she *said* she was a real princess.

Well, we'll find out soon enough, the old queen thought. She didn't say a word, though, but went into the spare bedroom, took off all the bedclothes and laid a small pea on the mattress. Then she piled twenty more mattresses on top of it, and twenty eiderdowns over that. There the princess was to sleep that night.



This tale was written and published in 1835, the same year as Andersen's first trial booklet. Thumbelina *appeared in a second booklet in good time for Christmas. To write of a tiny fairytale human was no problem to Andersen, a master of doll-sized toy theatre all his life. As a writer, the small scale was always to serve him well. The Tom Thumb of the Grimms and the wild fantasies of E.T.A. Hoffmann (remembered now only for the ballet themes of* The Nutcracker *and* Coppelia*) would have been known to Andersen, but his version of the tiny odyssey was entirely his own. Not only the manner of telling, but the features within make* Thumbelina *a real Andersen original. The details at once divide him from the traditional pattern, not only by such items as the walnut-shell bed, the soup-plate pond and such, but also by, for example, the awesome moment when life returns to the bird. Again, as in so many later tales, how intrinsic to the event is the changing landscape through the changing seasons – the wintry stubble field, for instance, perceived as a forest. Memorable, too, are the characters – the fieldmouse and mole in particular. (Did Kenneth Grahame know this tale? He must have done. But he was a good deal kinder to Mole and Rat and the rest – even to Toad.)*

And, there is the author himself, an approving listener at the end. The "warm countries" mark his discovery of and lasting love for Italy and the south. A friendly adult critic might also praise how cunningly the points of sadness and grief are lightened by secret humour and open joy at the (well-earned) turns of luck and surprise in the journey.

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS a woman who wanted a little tiny child of her own, but she didn't know how to set about finding one. So off she went to an old witch and said to her, "I would so much like to have a little child! Couldn't you tell me where to get one?"

"Oh, that's not difficult," said the witch. "Here's a barleycorn for you – and it isn't the kind that grows in the farmer's field, nor the kind that the chickens eat, either. Just put it in a flowerpot, and you shall see what you shall see!"

"Oh, thank you!" said the woman, and she gave the witch a silver coin. Then she went home and planted the grain. She hadn't long to wait before a fine big flower sprang up; it looked like a tulip, but the petals were tightly closed, as if it were still a bud.

"What a lovely flower!" said the woman, and she kissed the closed red and yellow petals. The moment she did so, the flower burst open with a loud crack. It was a real tulip – you could see that now – but right in the middle of the flower, on the green centre, sat a tiny little girl, as graceful and delicate as a fairy. She was no more than a thumb-joint high, and so she was called Thumbelina.

She was given a walnut shell, beautifully polished, as her bed; she lay on a mattress of deep-blue violet petals, and a rose petal was her eiderdown. There she slept at night, but in the daytime she played upon the table, where the woman had put a soup-plate of water with a circle of flowers round its edge, the stalks facing the centre. Floating in the plate was a large tulip petal, on which Thumbelina could sit and row from one side to the other, using two white horsehairs as oars. It was the prettiest sight! She could sing, too, in the tiniest, sweetest voice ever heard.

One night, as she lay in her beautiful bed, a toad came hopping into the room, through a broken window pane. The toad looked very big and wet as she thumped down onto the table where Thumbelina lay fast asleep under her rose petal.

"Now *there* be a handsome wife for my son!" said the toad. And she took the walnut-shell bed in which the little girl was sleeping and hopped with it through the window and down into the garden. At the end of the garden flowed a wide stream, but at the edge it was marshy and thick with mud; this was where the toad lived with her son. He was not at all handsome; in fact, he looked just like his mother. "Croak, croak! Brek-kek-kex!" That was all he would say when he saw the pretty little girl in the walnut shell.

"Don't speak so loudly, or she'll wake," said the old toad. "She could still escape from us, for she's as light as a piece of swan's-down. I know – we'll put her out in the stream on one of the great water-lily