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# The Little Bookroom

Written by

## Eleanor Farjeon

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# THE LITTLE BOOKROOM

*Eleanor Farjeon's*
*Short Stories for Children*
*chosen by herself*

# THE LITTLE BOOKROOM



*ELEANOR FARJEON'S*
*SHORT STORIES FOR CHILDREN*
*CHOSEN BY HERSELF*

*Illustrated by*
*Edward Ardizzone*

OXFORD
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these stories are dedicated with love to

DENYS BLAKELOCK

*who began to share my childhood*

*in the Little Bookroom*

*sixty years after*

## To Ted from Eleanor, September 1956

*When all the fairy tales are told*
*And young and old go bedward,*
*Oh, what a debt both young and old*
*For ever owe you, Edward.*

*In darkness lit by dreams come true*
*The years revive their embers*
*And what the child's eye saw, through you*
*The ageing eye remembers.*

*The phoenixes of infant joy*
*And woe and all-desiring*
*Which time endeavours to destroy,*
*Arise from their first firing,*

*Reborn in images once born*
*Ere the dull brain retarded,*
*Picturing still our earliest morn*
*When words were unregarded.*

*So with my Picture book I lie*
*Among the old ones bedward*
*Knowing the unpaid debt which I*
*For ever owe you, Edward.*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE



In the home of my childhood there was a room we called 'The Little Bookroom'. True, every room in the house could have been called a bookroom. Our nurseries upstairs were full of books. Downstairs my father's study was full of them. They lined the dining-room walls, and overflowed into my mother's sitting-room, and up into the bedrooms. It would have been more natural to live without clothes than without books. As unnatural not to read as not to eat.

Of all the rooms in the house, the Little Bookroom was yielded up to books as an untended garden is left to its flowers and weeds. There was no selection or sense of order here. In dining-room, study, and nursery there was choice and arrangement; but the Little Bookroom gathered to itself a motley crew of strays

and vagabonds, outcasts from the ordered shelves below, the overflow of parcels bought wholesale by my father in the sales-rooms. Much trash, and more treasure. Riff-raff and gentlefolk and noblemen. A lottery, a lucky dip for a child who had never been forbidden to handle anything between covers. That dusty bookroom, whose windows were never opened, through whose panes the summer sun struck a dingy shaft where gold specks danced and shimmered, opened magic casements for me through which I looked out on other worlds and times than those I lived in: worlds filled with poetry and prose and fact and fantasy. There were old plays and histories, and old romances; superstitions, legends, and what are called the Curiosities of Literature. There was a book called *Florentine Nights* that fascinated me; and another called *The Tales of Hoffmann* that frightened me; and one called *The Amber Witch* that was not in the least like the witches I was used to in the fairy-tales I loved.

Crammed with all sorts of reading, the narrow shelves rose halfway up the walls; their tops piled with untidy layers that almost touched the ceiling. The heaps on the floor had to be climbed over, columns of books flanked the window, toppling at a touch. You tugged at a promising binding, and left a new surge of literature underfoot; and you dropped the book that had attracted you for something that came to the surface in the upheaval. Here, in the Little Bookroom, I learned, like Charles Lamb, to read anything that can be called a book. The dust got up my nose and made my eyes smart, as I crouched on the floor or stood propped against a bookcase, physically uncomfortable, and mentally lost. I was only conscious of my

awkward posture and the stifling atmosphere when I had ceased to wander in realms where fancy seemed to me more true than facts, and set sail on voyages of discovery to regions in which fact was often far more curious than fancy. If some of my frequent sore throats were due to the dust in the Little Bookroom, I cannot regret them.

No servant ever came with duster and broom to polish the dim panes through which the sunlight danced, or sweep from the floor the dust of long-ago. The room would not have been the same without its dust: star-dust, gold-dust, fern-dust, the dust that returns to dust under the earth, and comes up from her lap in the shape of a hyacinth. 'This quiet dust,' says Emily Dickinson, an American poet—

*This quiet dust was Gentlemen and Ladies,*
*And Lads and Girls:*
*Was laughter and ability and sighing,*
*And frocks and curls.*

And an English poet, Viola Meynell, clearing her ledges of the dust that 'came secretly by day' to dull her shining things, pauses to reflect—

*But O this dust that I shall drive away*
*Is flowers and kings,*
*Is Solomon's temple, poets, Nineveh . . .*

When I crept out of the Little Bookroom with smarting eyes, no wonder that its mottled gold-dust still danced in my brain, its silver cobwebs still clung to the corners of my mind. No wonder that many years later, when I came to write books myself, they were a muddle of fiction and fact and fantasy and truth. I

have never quite succeeded in distinguishing one from the other, as the tales in this book that were born of that dust will show. Seven maids with seven brooms, sweeping for half-a-hundred years, have never managed to clear my mind of its dust of vanished temples and flowers and kings, the curls of ladies, the sighing of poets, the laughter of lads and girls: those golden ones who, like chimney-sweepers, must all come to dust in some little bookroom or other—and sometimes, by luck, come again for a moment to light.

E. F.

*Hampstead*
*May 1955*

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THERE was in the village a simpleton who was not the ordinary type of village idiot, by any means. He was the Schoolmaster's son, and had been one of those precocious children of whom everything or nothing may be hoped. His father hoped everything, and forced him to live in his books; and, when the child had reached the age of ten, saw the end of his hopes. It was not that the boy's bright wits turned dull, he lost them altogether. Well, but did he? He sat in the fields, smiling a great deal and talking seldom, until some chance loosed his tongue; then he talked without pause, till he came to his stop, like an old musical box that everybody thinks is out of order, and, unexpectedly kicked, plays out its tune. One never knew what chance kick would set Simple Willie going. In books he took no more interest at all. Sometimes his father put under his eyes one that had been his delight, but he glanced indifferently at the old tales and records, wandered away, and picked up the daily paper. He generally dropped it very soon; but occasionally his eye seemed chained by a paragraph, usually of a trifling character, and he would stare at it for an hour.

His father hated the name his boy had been given by the villagers, but it was spoken with affection, and Simple Willie was even pointed out to visitors with pride. He was singularly beautiful; tawny-haired, fair-skinned, gold-dusted with freckles, with blue eyes sly and innocent like a child's, and fine-cut lips which smiled with unusual charm. He was sixteen or seventeen when he was first pointed out to me. I was spending the month of August in the village. For a fortnight he only replied to my greeting with a smile; but one day, as I lay at the edge of a corn-field, three parts cut, and drowsily watched the centre patch diminish, Simple Willie strolled up and lay beside me. Without looking at me he reached out his hand, and fingered the scarab I wear on my watch-chain. Suddenly he began to speak.

When I was a boy in Egypt I sowed my father's corn. When it was sown I used to watch the field until the green blades began to grow, and then, as the days went by, I saw them turn from grass to grain, and the field from a green field to a gold one. And every year, when the field was gold with corn, I thought my father had the richest treasure in all Egypt.

There was at that time a King in Egypt who had many names. The shortest of his names was Ra, so that is what I will call him. King Ra lived in the city in great splendour. My father's field was outside the city, and I had never seen the King, but men told tales of his palace, and his rich clothes, his crown and his jewels, and his coffers full of money. He ate off silver plates, and drank from cups of gold, and slept under

curtains of purple silk fringed with pearls. I liked to listen when men talked of Ra, because he sounded like a fairy king; but I could not believe he was a real man like my father, or that his gold mantle was as real as our cornfield.

One day, when the sun was very hot, and my father's field was tall, I lay in the shadow of the corn picking the grains from an ear, and eating them one by one. As I did so, I heard a man's laugh over my head, and I looked up and saw the tallest man I had ever beheld, looking down on me. He had a great black beard in curls upon his breast, and his eyes were as fierce as an eagle's; his head-dress and his garments glittered in the sun, and I knew he was the King. A little way off I saw his guards on their horses, and one held the bridle of the King's own horse, which he had left when he came to look at me. For a little while we only gazed at each other, he down, and I up. Then he laughed again, and said, 'You look contented, child.'

'I am, King Ra,' said I.

'You eat your corn as though it were a feast.'

'It is, King Ra,' said I.

'Who are you, child?'

'My father's son,' I said.

'And who is your father?'

'The richest man in Egypt.'

'How do you make that out, child?'

'He owns this field,' I said.

The King cast his bright eye over our field, and said, 'I own Egypt.'

I said, 'It is too much.'

'How!' said the King. 'Too much! It cannot be too much, and I am a richer man than your father.'

At this I shook my head.

'I say I am! What does your father wear?'

'A shirt like mine.' I touched my cotton shirt.

'See what I wear!' The King swept his gold mantle round him, so that it stung my cheek. 'Now do you say your father is richer than I am?'

'He has more gold than that,' I said. 'He has this field.'

The King looked dark and angry. 'How if I burn this field? What will he have then?'

'The corn again, next year.'

'The King of Egypt is greater than Egypt's corn!' cried King Ra. 'The King is more golden than the corn! The King will outlast the corn!'

This did not sound true to me, and I shook my head again. Then a storm seemed to break in King Ra's eyes. He turned to his guards, and cried harshly, 'Burn this field!'

And they set fire to the four corners of the field, and as it burned the King said, 'Behold your father's gold, child. It has never been so bright before, and will never be bright again.'

Not till the gold field was black did King Ra go away; and as he went he cried, 'Which is more golden now, the corn or the King? Ra will live longer than your father's corn.'

He mounted his horse, and I saw him go, his golden mantle blazing in the sun. My father crept out of his hut, and whispered, 'We are ruined people. Why did King Ra burn our field?'

I could not tell him, for I did not know. I went to the little garden behind the hut, and wept. When I opened my hand to wipe the tears away, I saw the

half-empty ear of ripe grain stuck to my palm. It was the very last of our treasure, half an ear of corn, all that remained of thousands of golden ears; and lest the King should want to take it too, I stuck my finger in the earth, making holes, and into the bottom of each hole I dropped a grain. Next year, when the corn of Egypt ripened, ten lovely ears stood in my garden among the flowers and gourds.

That summer the King died, and was to be buried with great pomp. It was the custom for Kings of Egypt to lie in a sealed chamber, filled with jewels, rich robes, and golden furniture of all sorts. Among other things, he must have corn, lest he should be hungry before he arrived in heaven. A man came out of the city to fetch the corn, and he passed our hut, going and coming. The day was hot, and on the way back he came in to us to rest awhile, and told us that the sheaf of corn he carried would be buried with the King. Soon he fell asleep, from heat and fatigue, and while he slept his words rang in my head. I seemed to see King Ra again, standing above me, saying, 'The King of Egypt is more golden than the corn! The King of Egypt will outlast the corn!' And I ran out quickly to my garden, and cut down my ten ears, and thrust the golden blades among the corn the sleeping man had gathered for the King. When he awoke, he took up the sheaf and went on his way to the city. And when King Ra was buried in his glory, they buried my corn with him.

Simple Willie stroked my scarab softly.

'Is that all, Willie?' I asked.

'Not all,' said Willie. 'Hundreds and hundreds of years afterwards, last year indeed it was, some Englishmen in Egypt found King Ra's tomb, and when they opened it, there, among the treasures, lay my corn. The golden stuffs crumbled in the light of day, but not my corn. These Englishmen brought some of it to England, and passed my father's house and stopped to rest awhile, as the Egyptian had done, so long ago. They told my father what they had with them, and showed it to him. I handled it for myself, my very corn.' Willie smiled at me, his radiant smile. 'One grain stuck to my palm. I sowed it in the middle of this field.'

'Then, if it grew,' I said, 'it must be in that little uncut patch.'

I looked at the cutter, making its last revolution. Willie rose, beckoning me to follow. We looked carefully over the small remaining patch, and in a moment he pointed to an ear of corn which seemed taller and brighter than the rest.

'Is this the one?' I asked.

He smiled at me, like a sly child.

'It's certainly more golden than its fellows,' I said.

'Yes,' said Simple Willie. 'How gold's the King of Egypt?'