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Opening extract from

In a Glass Grimmly

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Published by

Andersen Press

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This edition first published in 2013 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in 2012 in the United States of America
by Dutton Children's Books, a division of the Penguin Group USA Inc.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 84939 620 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon CR0 4TD

Once upon a time, fairy tales were horrible.

Not *boring* horrible. Not *so-cute-you-want-to-jump-out-the-window* horrible.

Horrible like they define it in the dictionary:

Horrible (adj.) – causing feelings of horror, dread, unbearable sadness and nausea; also tending to produce nightmares, whimpering for one's parents, and bed-wetting.

I know, I know. You're thinking: 'Fairy tales? Horrible? *Please*.' I understand.

If you've been brought up on the drivel that passes for fairy tales these days, you're not going to believe a word that I'm saying.

First of all, you're probably used to hearing the same boring fairy tales over and over and over again. 'Today, children, we're going to read a Cinderella story from China! Today, children, we're going to read a Cinderella story from Madagascar! Today, children, we're going to read a Cinderella story from the Moon! Today, children . . . '

Second of all, those fairy tales that you hear over and over and over again aren't even the *real* fairy tales. Has your teacher ever said to you, 'Today, children, we're going to read a Cinderella story where the stepsisters cut off their toes and their heels with a butcher's knife! And then they get their eyes pecked out by birds! Ready? Is everyone sitting crisscross-apple sauce?'

No? She's never said that?

I didn't think so.

But that's what the real fairy tales are like: strange, bloody and horrible.

Two hundred years ago, in Germany, the Brothers Grimm first wrote down that version of Cinderella in which the stepsisters slice off pieces of their feet and have their eyes pecked out. In England, a man named Joseph Jacobs collected tales like Jack the Giant Killer, which is about a boy named Jack who goes around murdering giants in the most gruesome and grotesque ways imaginable. And there was this guy called Hans Christian Andersen, who lived in Denmark and wrote fairy tales filled with sadness and humiliation and loneliness. Even Mother Goose's rhymes could get pretty dark – after all, Jack and Jill go up a hill, and then Jack falls down and *breaks his head open*.

Yes, fairy tales were horrible. In the original sense of the word.

But even these horrible fairy tales and nursery rhymes aren't *true*. They're just stories. Aren't they?

Not exactly.

You see, buried in these rhymes and tales are true stories, of real children, who fought through the darkest times, and came out the other end – stronger, braver and, usually, completely covered in blood.

This book is the tale of two such children: a boy named Jack, and a girl named Jill. Yes, they do fall down a hill at one point. And yes, Jack does break his head wide open.

But there is more than that. There is a beanstalk. There are giants. There might even be a mermaid or two.

Their story is terrifying. It is revolting. It is horrible.

It is the most horrible fairy tale I have ever heard.

Also, it is beautiful. Not sweet. Not cute. Beautiful – like the grey and golden ashes in a fireplace. Or like the deep russet of a drying stain of blood.

And, best of all, it is true.

Now, let me just say that if you happen to be the kind of person who actually likes cute and sweet fairy tales, or the kind of person who thinks children should not read about decapitation and dismemberment, or, finally, if you're the kind of person who, upon hearing about two children wading through a pool of blood and vomit, runs out of the room screaming, you don't need to worry. This book is for you. There is no decapitation, dismemberment, people without clothing, or pools of blood and vomit anywhere in this book.

At least, not anywhere in the first few pages.

‘Wait!’ you’re probably asking. ‘What was that about people without clothing?’

Nothing! Moving right along!

Chapter One
The Wishing Well

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom called Märchen, which sat just next to the modern countries of England, Denmark and Germany.

I need to interrupt. Already. I apologise. No one in the history of the world has ever pronounced the word 'Märchen' correctly. Some people say *Marchin*', and sound like my cousins from Texas when they see a parade ('Look, Ma! Look at 'em marchin'!').

That's not right.

Some people say *MARE-chen*. That's closer, but still wrong.

Others say *MARE-shen*. That's about as close as I've ever got to pronouncing it correctly, so it's probably good enough for you, too.

But if you really want to say the name of the kingdom that this story takes place in correctly (and I

don't know why you would, I'm just offering, because I'm nice like that), you've got to say MARE, then you've got to make a sound in your throat like you're hocking some phlegm, and then you have to say *shen*. Like this: *MARE-cccch-shen*.

You know what? You might just want to say Marchin'.

At the centre of the kingdom of Märchen was a castle. Behind this castle was a hidden grove. In the grove was a well. And at the bottom of the well there lived a frog.

He was a sad frog. He did not like his well. It was wet and mossy and dirty, and very very very very very very very very smelly.

All day long the frog sat at the bottom of his well as salamanders splashed around him. Now, maybe you know, and maybe you don't, but salamanders are not the most *popular* creatures in the animal kingdom.

But why? Salamanders seem all right to you. They're lots of pretty colours, like shimmery purple and glowy red. They have tiny black eyes that stare at you oh-so-very-cutely. And they have these little mouths that are permanently curled into tiny, maybe-smiles.

All of this is true. But, in addition to the pretty colours and the tiny eyes and the maybe-smiles, they have these shrill little voices which they use to ask the most idiotic, mind-numbing questions that you have ever heard.

For example:

'Why is blue?'

Or, 'Who is a stone?'

Or, 'What tastes better, a fly or a fly?'

Or, 'Who is uglier, me or Fred? Is it me? It's me, right? Me? Is it me?'

The sad frog's only solace, amid the damp, and the filth, and the smell, and the salamanders, was the sky. All day and all night, the frog stared up at a little patch of sky that peered down into his clearing. Sometimes it was grey like slate, other times it was inky black, other times it was washed with a burning red. But most of the time the sky above his well was a clear, deep blue, with white shapes like fluffy rocks that floated across its face. All day and all night he stared up, unblinking, at that sky.

And then, one day, while the frog was staring up at his sky, he heard a peculiar *stomp-stomp-stomping* on the forest floor. It was followed by a sudden *whoomp*, and then a cry. Curious, he climbed the slippery stone wall to the top of his well and peered out.

Sitting on the forest floor, with matted hair and muddied clothes, was a little girl. Her face was red with anger and exertion. Her lips were all scrunched up and furious. But her eyes . . . The frog studied them. Her eyes . . . Well, her eyes looked just like the patch of sky above his well when it was its clearest, deepest blue.

'They *can't* play with my ball!' the little girl bellowed at no one in particular. 'They can't. It's

mine!' She began to throw the ball up and down, glancing over her shoulder from time to time to see if she had been followed into the wood, and returning, disappointed, to her ball each time she discovered she had not been.

The frog watched, mesmerised. And where you or I might have begun to suspect that this little girl might be a selfish brat, the frog, not knowing many (any) humans, saw only a maiden who had somehow captured the sky and kept it jailed behind her eyelids. And he suddenly felt that if only he could spend the rest of his days in the presence of this beautiful creature he would be perfectly and completely happy.

So the frog began to croak at the top of his lungs. *Maybe she'll notice me!* he thought. And then he thought, *Maybe she'll take me home with her!* And then he thought, *Wait, she doesn't live with salamanders!* And so he put every ounce of hope that flowed through his froggy little veins into each expert amphibian warble.

But, of course, the girl did not notice him. She only threw her ball up and down, up and down. The frog sat there croaking for a full hour, but never once did she look at him. Finally, she stood up and took her ball out of the wood. The frog, in despair, threw himself from the edge of his well, down to the depths, hoping that the long fall would kill him. It didn't. Instead, the salamanders began to nudge him with their blunt noses.

'Hey! Hey! Hey!'

‘Are you dead?’

‘Are you? Frog? Frog?’

‘What is it like to be dead?’

‘Am I dead?’

‘Am I smelly?’

‘Who’s smellier, me or Fred? Me? It’s me, right?’

The frog shoved moss into his ear holes.

But, to the frog’s great joy, the girl returned to the wood to play with her ball the next day, and the day after, and the day after that. And every day, the frog wooed her with the most magnificent croaks he could muster. But she never noticed him. Still, he took pleasure in watching her, examining her utterly perfect beauty, and imagining all the happy times they might one day spend together.

Alas, dear reader, you know as well as I do the mistake that our poor friend, the frog, is making. We all know that beauty is well and fine, but that it is unimportant when compared to questions of goodness, kindness, intelligence, and honesty. And, watching the girl throwing her ball in the air, the frog could determine nothing of these things. In fact, he knew next to nothing about her.

He did not know that this wasn’t just any little girl he had fallen in love with. She was the princess, the king’s only daughter. He also did not know that, as pretty as she was, she was a horror. Sweet and pretty on the outside, cruel and selfish on the inside.