



Classics in Short The Water Babies

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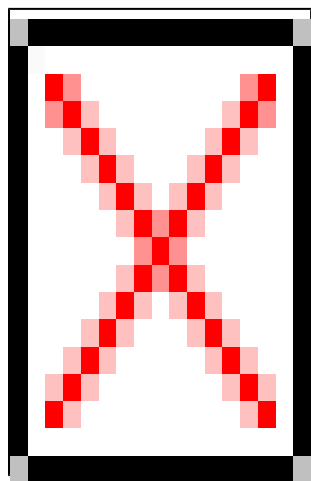
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Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson examines Charles Kingsley's fantasy **The Water Babies**

150 years have passed since young Tom slid down Gordale Scar, soon to find himself among **The Water Babies**. Brian Alderson examines Charles Kingsley's unique serio-comic fantasy.



Chimney-sweeps, eh?

Isn't it all about sending boys up chimneys to sweep the soot down? Didn't they change the law because of it?

Well...not exactly.

For sure Kingsley hated the practice, but his climbing-boy first came to mind when he was visiting the uplands of Airedale and saw all the dark lichen growing down Gordale Scar.(1) 'Why,' says he, 'it's just as if a chimney sweep had slid down there on his backside?'. So when, a bit later, Mrs Kingsley remarked that he had not yet written a story for his youngest child (his three older ones had had **The Heroes**) he remembered the slide down the Scar and straight off sent Tom and his master, Grimes, to sweep the chimneys of Harthover Place at four o'clock in the morning.

But that was not the start of a social tract.

Kingsley the Realist gives us a Tom who takes hunger and beatings as 'the way of the world?' and looks forward to 'the fine times coming?' when he too will be a master, sitting in a pub and knocking his own apprentices about. It is Kingsley the Parson who is troubled. For Tom had never been taught to say his prayers. And, when the boy takes a wrong turning among Harthover's maze of chimneys and ends up in the pretty white bedroom of Ellie, the daughter of the house, he cannot identify the sad picture there of a man nailed to a cross: 'some kinsman of hers perhaps who had been murdered by savages?'.

Knocking over the fire-irons

in his confusion Tom wakes the household and must needs make off through the bedroom window, down a tree, and away across Harthover Fell, under pursuit. As he speeds across the Pennine moors and, eventually, down Lewthwaite (ie. Gordale) Crag to the secluded valley of Vendale, so Story turns into what Kingsley designates Fairy-Tale. Realist and Parson join forces to produce what is a wild, self-indulgent, satirical, serio-comic fantasy unique in the annals of children's literature.

A narrative axis does exist.

Exhausted by his escape, Tom bathes in the Vendale stream, drowns, and is transformed into a water-baby. As such, he travels down-river to the sea where, with many fellows, he plays under the seemingly benign rule of the sisters Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. But Tom is a recidivist misbehaviorer and is eventually persuaded that he must purge himself of his ill-nature by travelling to the Other-End-of-Nowhere: going where he does not like, doing what he does not like, and helping someone whom he does not like. The tutoress who encourages him to this decision is none other than the little girl Ellie, who has herself died in a seaside fall while arguing the toss about the existence of water-babies with a professorial companion (probably a caricature of Thomas Henry Huxley.)

For her sake,

Tom makes his journey, she thus becoming a further aspect in the book of the presiding Eternal Feminine ? almost a pre-endorsement of Robert Graves's White Goddess. As Tom suspected, he is brought to confront and share in the release of his former master who has been imprisoned in a chimney-pot by the vengeful fairies. He is sent off to keep the crater sides of Etna properly swept and Tom is united with Ellie with the prospect of leaving waterbabydom and becoming a great man of science.

Such a plot-line looks factitious (or even barmy)

but exerts a consistent fascination through Kingsley's use of it to parade a gallimaufry of his loves and prejudices. Before Tom ever gets to Harthover we have divagations on limestone springs and the topsy-turvy architecture of ancient family seats. With his flight across the fells we have a paean on the beauty of the high hills and before we get to the backstairs that lead to the end of the story we enjoy the author's ragbag opinions (learned, satirical, comical) on anything from salmon rivers and Irish gillies to an assault on rote-learning that is still relevant today.

Without doubt

the book's eccentric structure owes much to Kingsley's liking for Rabelais with his digressions and piled-up lists (among the multiple evils that fly out of Pandora's Box are Popes, Unpaid Bills and Tight Stays). At the same time this natural history of water-babies is shot through with references to Darwinian disputes ? Kingsley's admiration for the **Origin** is noted in its second edition where his awe is credited to ?an eminent author and divine?. So much diversity and obscurity hardly make for a coherent read ? and certainly not for the five-year-old ?little man? who is its addressee. But it is all held together by the rolling periods of the author's rhetoric. What Queenie Leavis (no less) called the ?rich brew of words? of this secular sermon carry a winning conviction and Edward Lear, thanking Kingsley for the story, said as much when he assured him that he believed every one of them as true.

Brian Alderson edited the World's Classics edition of **The Water-Babies** in 1995. A new sesquicentenary edition (hardback) retains his notes but replaces his introduction with a new one by the Oxford scholar.Robert Douglas-Fairhurst.

(1)Opinion veers as to where Kingsley had in mind, with Arndale, off Wharfedale, a good contender. William Mayne, a lover of the book, set several of his *Earthfasts* series and other books in a Vendale that was mostly Swaledale.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for The Times.

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