

THE VANISHED FAIRIES AND YRJÖ KOKKO

(Hans-Jørgen Wallin Weihe)

The Finnish author Yrjö Kokko (1903 – 1977) is famous for his much applauded book, *Pessi ja Illusia*” a short fairy tale written during the Second World War while he served as an officer. The book was originally written as a Christmas letter or story for his children. The story came to Kokko during one of his tours of inspections in one intensely cold winter’s day. After finishing his assignment he started on the return trip by car. He and his driver drove along a snowy road. On both sides, the land stretched abandoned and destroyed by war, forests beaten down by grenades, villages in ruins and churches in splinters. The darkness was beginning to descend and from the front they could hear the pounding of cannons. The flames issuing from their mouths flashed in the black sky like August lightning.

In the severe cold the breaths of Yrjö and his driver froze on the windshield. Yrjö tried to rub off the frost with a linen rag dipped in glycerine, but it helped only for a moment. The car was extremely cold. Yrjö’s mind was starting to sink into despondency, for Christmas was coming and he had no chance to go and spend it with his family. It would be the second Christmas he had to spend on the front.

In order to prepare something personal for his children Yrjö had been writing a Christmas newsletter during the evenings in the dugout. The newsletter was ready, except that it was missing a fairytale. He hadn’t been able to think of any topic for a story that would have satisfied him and now it was time to put the paper in the field post so it would get home for Christmas. Even at this late moment Yrjö was racking his brain for a suitable topic, but to no avail.

Once more he rubbed the windshield with the rag. Suddenly his hand stopped. He saw on the glass a little creature, the size of a finger, whose features became clearer and clearer. Why, it was a rosy-cheeked little girl, wearing a snow-white fur coat. The girl smiled at him and pointed her finger at another creature, which was the same size, and which I hadn’t even noticed. There in flesh, smiling at me, was a woodland troll, the kind whose pictures he had seen in storybooks.

“His name is Pessi and I’m Illusia” the girl whispered to him with a friendly smile.

“Pessi and Illusia” He hadn’t heard of them before.

The girl started to tell me about herself and about Pessi, how they had lived and about their joys and sufferings. He heard the song of birds, the smell of flowers and the rearing of the storm.

He thought the tale Illusia told him was wonderful. The story was made up of a collection of tiny crystals, which were at first translucent and then became more pronounced and glowed with different colours. The crystals joined together to form an entity, like ice, which slowly closed the hole he had rubbed there with the glycerine rag. Yrjö couldn’t see the road anymore, so its bends didn’t reveal to him the actions of war. He only heard what Illusia told him, and no longer felt cold.

As soon as Yrjö reached his bunker, he began to write. He tried to write down what the little girl at the windshiled had told him. Yrjö wrote the whole night. His officer companions slept, but he din't hear their snores, nor did he feel the overcrowded congestion of the bunker, nor its lack of air. Once in the while he added wood to the camp stove and went ou to check on the guards, since he had offered to be on call for the night. Outside he admired the spruce trees that stood silent and snow covered, the high dome of the star-studded sky, and the sparks that flew out of the bunker chimneysand looked as though they came from snow-covered underground volcanoes. Once more he hurried off to write. When the dawn was breaking, the story – a fairytale – was finished. In Yrjös opinion it was not nearly as beautiful as the one told by the girl, but he had done his best. At the end he took some ink and on the edges of the pages he drew pictures of the animals mentioned in the story.

In the morning the other officers asked him “What in the world have you been writing all night ?”

“I got a story for the Christmas Newsletter after all” Yrjö told them.

His friends wanted him to read the story. When he had finished they all wanted to copy it so that they could send it to their own children. So they all copied the story and so did numerous other soldiers. Most likely Yrjös book is most likely the only book ever turned into a best seller in a hand written copies. As the war continued Yrjö enlarged the book into a longer work, whic is the childrens book he is remebered for today. In his time he was the most-read author in Finland. The book *Pessi and Illusia* recieved the Finnish Governments Literary Award in the year of 1946.

Yrjö wrote a number of books after the war, all of them about nature and the importance of nature conservancy. One of them was crucial in order to protect the whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) one of the national symbols of Finland. The swan has an important status in Finnish mythology as expressed in the national epos of Kalevala. The swan was earlier regarded as aholy bird in the eastern Karelia. However in the hard years between the First and Second World War the breeding population decreased down to about some ten pairs due to hunting and dsiturbng. The last surviving swans lived in the northernmost part of Finland in what is called Lappland.

Thanks to Yrjö Kokko the Finnish people found again ntheir respect to the swan. Yrjö wrote a book called “Swan the bird of Ultima Thule” and thanks to his authorship he is thought of as the saviour of the whooper swan. Today Finland has a breeding population of 1200 – 1400 pairs of whooper swans.

The Second World War is in Finland divided in three parts first the so-called winter war of 1939, then the continuation war and finally the war with Germany as part of the peace settlemet with the Soviet Union. Between the Winter War and the Continuation War Yrjö Kokko spent some time at home with his children. I will end my story of Yrjö Kokko and his authorship with a quote from one of his books;

I was a beautiful summer day. I sat in the living room in an armchair, upholstered with flowered cretonne, and obsaerved how the sun shone through the large windows and the pane of glass on the door that led to the terrace. It glimmered on the edges of the crystal vase on the table and threw upon the floor the netlike shadows of the rattan chairs. In the garden where a huge bird cherry tree grew, I could hear the voice of Jeppe's voice.

Huhyhiihulihyy

Jeppe was a golden oriole, who always began to play his flute the minute it saw people in the garden. It seemed to be very sociable and if one answered its call by whistling in the same manner, it would fly up very close and show off its golden outfit. Normally orioles are shy and hide inconspicuously in the top branches of a tree.

Now Jeppe had noticed my daughter and her playmate, a girl called Rauha. They were cavorting on the lawn, enclosed by a semicircular lilac bush. The grass had been eaten by geese, so that it now resembled a short-piled Persian carpet.

I was just thinking how lovely nature and the sun could be, and how difficult it would be to describe this beauty in words, when my daughter ran in through the terrace door and cried,

“Daddyyy!”

“What now?” I asked and saw that she had something weighty on her mind.

“Listen, Daddy. Do fairies really exist?” my daughter asked, pronouncing her words with unusual fervency.

I looked at her. She was already at the age when Santa Claus lives at Korvantunturi, and children dance elf-dances. But why she suddenly posed this question, I couldn't guess at the moment.

“What do you mean?” I asked in order to win some time, so I could answer correctly. “Why are you asking this right now?”

“Well, Rauha said there's no such things as fairies and you've told me there is. You remember when we were walking on the snow in Ohhrasaari last spring and you told me...”

I well remembered that morning, the previous April, when the glow of spring shimmered violet on the surface of the hard-frozen snow, which easily carried even my weight. We had walked over the bay to an island and had come across a spiraling curly birch, at the base of which an open fountain sent its steam into the freezing air. I had told her how, in the spring when nature awakens back to life, the fairies emerge from the spring, where they have remained unfrozen through the winter.

“Are you thinking that I perhaps lied to you?” I asked.

“No, no. I don't think that at all,” my daughter answered and on her countenance I could see the expression that one sees on the face of a person who realizes that she is about to lose something that has been beautiful and precious to her. I didn't know what I could say and how I could explain it all to her. Her burning look was questioning.

“My daughter. The fact of the matter is,” I could hear myself begin a fumbling reply. “the fact of the matter is, that actually there are no fairies and actually there are. It's how you look at it and how you understand it. There are people who don't have fairies and so then they don't

exist. And, again, there are people who have fairies, and I believe then the really do exist. And I feel that the life of these people is somehow more beautiful and rich...

"You know, Daddy!" my daughter cried happily. "We have fairies,"

"That's true," I replied feeling satisfaction at having been able to find an answer to the difficult question. "We have fairies," I went on and took her in my arms.

"Always?"

"Always," I said quietly.

"Always, Daddy," she whispered, joy reflecting on her face. The tear that had squeezed out from the corner of her eye fell on my hand like a refreshing dewdrop from the tip of a willow leaf. She kissed me on the cheek, jumped down from my arms and hurried out. Soon I could hear the sound of the girl's chatter and Jeppe's whistling call. "

In the winter the enemy attacked and during that winter Yrjö Kokko wrote his beautiful tale of "Pessi ja illusia" The book well reflects the identity of the woodland folk and the hope for a new humanity after the war.

Literature

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