Introduction to “Fairy Tales Every Child Should Know”

The fairy tale is a poetic recording of the facts of life, an interpretation by the imagination of its hard conditions, an effort to reconcile the spirit that loves freedom and goodness and beauty with its harsh, bare, and disappointing conditions. It is, in its earliest form, a spontaneous and instinctive endeavor to shape the facts of the world to meet the needs of the imagination, the cravings of the heart. It involves a free, poetic dealing with realities in accordance with the law of mental growth; it is the naïve activity of the young imagination of the race, untrammeled by the necessity of rigid adherence to fact.

Myths record the earliest attempt at an explanation of the world; fairy tales record the free and joyful play of the imagination, opening doors through hard conditions to the spirit, which craves power, freedom, happiness; righting wrongs and redressing injuries; defeating base designs; rewarding patience and virtue; crowning true love with happiness, placing the powers of darkness under the control of man and making their ministers his servants. In the fairy story, men are not set entirely free from their limitations, but by the aid of fairies, genies, giants, and demons, they are put in command of unusual powers and make themselves masters of the forces of nature.

The oldest fairy stories constitute a fascinating introduction to the book of modern science, curiously predicting its discoveries, its uncovering of the resources of the earth and air, and its growing control of the tremendous forces that work in earth and air. And it is significant that the recent progress of science is steadily toward what our ancestors would have considered fairy land; for in all the imaginings of the childhood of the race, there was nothing more marvelous, or more audaciously improbable, than the transmission of the accents and modulations of familiar voices through long distances and the power of communications across leagues of sea without mechanical connections of any kind.

The faculty that created the fairy tale is the same faculty that, supplemented by a broader observation and based on more accurate knowledge, has broadened the range and activities of modern man, made the world accessible to him, enabled him to live in one place but to speak and act in places thousands of miles distant, given him command of colossal forces, and is fast making him rich on a scale that would have seemed incredible to men of a half-century ago. There is nothing in any fairy tale more marvelous and inherently of scientific observation and invention, and we are only at the beginning of the wonders that lie within the reach of the human spirit!

No one can understand the modern world without the aid of the imagination, and as the frontiers of knowledge are pushed still further away from the obvious and familiar, there will be an increasing tax on the imagination.