

The King's Bride

E.T.A. Hoffmann

Translated by Paul Turner



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Contents

Introduction	v
Chronology	xi
<i>The King's Bride</i>	1
Notes	106

ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
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Introduction

THE FIRST THING one notices about E.T.A. Hoffmann is his versatility. In the course of a relatively short life (1776–1822) he successfully practised four different professions: those of lawyer, artist, musician and writer; and it may be as well to trace his career in each of these fields separately.

Following the example of his Uncle Otto, who brought him up from the age of three, he studied law at university, and practised as a lawyer from 1795 until 1806, when Warsaw, where he was then employed on the Prussian administrative staff, was occupied by the French and all Prussian officials lost their jobs. In 1814 he resumed his legal career in Berlin, and in 1816 received the important appointment of Chairman of the Supreme Court of Justice, which he held until his death. Although he often grudged the time that his legal work took away from more creative activities, he was evidently very good at it.

His career as an artist began in 1795, when he sent two historical paintings to a friend's wealthy uncle, in the

hope that he would buy them. The uncle thought they were intended as a gift, and gratefully added them to his collection. At Posen, in 1802, Hoffmann got into trouble with the authorities for circulating subversive caricatures of the local military commandant, and as a punishment was transferred to the remote town of Plock, where he spent his spare time copying pictures of ancient vases and painting portraits. At Warsaw he painted murals in the Academy of Music, and at Bamberg, in 1808, he designed sets for several theatrical productions. Finally, in 1814 he celebrated the Battle of Leipzig by publishing a series of cartoons on the downfall of the Napoleonic regime.

One indication of his devotion to music is the fact that he changed his third Christian name from Wilhelm to Amadeus, as a tribute to Mozart. When he left university, he started giving music lessons – with the result that he fell in love with one of his pupils – and composing songs and incidental music for plays. In 1799 he wrote his first opera, *Die Maske*, and between then and 1816, when his last opera, *Undine*, was successfully performed in Berlin, he composed two symphonies and a great variety of vocal and instrumental music. In 1808 he was appointed Director of Music at the theatre

at Bamberg, and in 1813 joined the Seconda Opera Company at Dresden in the same capacity. He was also a distinguished music critic, and from 1809 onwards was a regular contributor to the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*.

His writings, however, are his chief claim to fame. His first published work was an essay (1803) on the use of the classical chorus in drama. Then he wrote one or two plays, and a few dramatic fragments, but he found his true *métier* when he started writing fiction. *Fantasiestücke*, a collection of essays and stories published 1814–15, included the well-known *Der goldene Topf*, translated into English by Carlyle in 1827. In 1816 he brought out *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, a horrific novel of the supernatural partly inspired by *The Monk* of M.G. Lewis. It was followed by *Nachtstücke* (1817), a collection of stories in a similar vein, and finally by *Die Serapionsbrüder* (1819–21). The stories in this collection are inserted into a framework of conversation between various members of a club, some of whom represent aspects of Hoffmann's own character, and others actual friends of his. Vinzenz, for instance, who tells the story of *Die Königsbraut*, is a certain Dr Koreff, Professor of Medicine at Berlin University, whose special interest was

“animal magnetism” or hypnotism – hence the allusion on page 34.

Hoffmann was extremely sociable by nature, and his taste for alcoholic conviviality has been blamed for his early death. His love life may be said to have begun during his school days, when he and a friend tried to dig a tunnel underneath the wall of a neighbouring girls’ school, under the pretext of planting an exotic shrub. At the age of twenty he was forced to leave Königsberg for Glogau, as a result of the scandal caused by his association with a married woman. At twenty-six he married Michalina Rohrer, a pretty, good-natured but not very intellectual young lady, whose dim reflection may perhaps be seen in the portrait of Fräulein Ann in *Die Königsbraut*. The marriage was on the whole a happy one, but Hoffmann never became very domesticated, and at thirty-five he fell desperately in love with another pupil of his, a fifteen-year-old singer called Julia Marc, who was shortly afterwards persuaded by her family to marry a rich merchant from Hamburg.

In person, Hoffmann was extremely short, with a rather ugly face and a prominent nose. He always had a sense of physical inferiority, and there may perhaps be an element of personal resentment in the remarks on

page 72 about the average female’s attitude to males. Indeed, the whole description of Corduanspitz, the little Gnome who “bore no resemblance whatever to the Belvedere Apollo”, may possibly be regarded as an ironic self-portrait. At any rate, this half-comic, half-sinister figure is a very apt embodiment of Hoffmann’s literary personality, his characteristic blend of fantasy and realism, pathos and impish satire, buffoonery and magic.

P.D.L.T.
London, 1958

Chronology

- 1776 Born on 24th January at Königsberg.
- 1795 Leaves university and enters legal profession.
- 1796 Moves to Glogau.
- 1798 Moves to Berlin, and composes first opera, *Die Maske*.
- 1800 Moves to Posen.
- 1802 Transferred to Plock, and marries Michalina Rohrer.
- 1803 First published work.
- 1804 Takes up new appointment on Prussian staff at Warsaw.
- 1806 Warsaw occupied by the French. Loses his job, supports himself by giving music lessons, painting portraits, etc.
- 1807 Visits Berlin.
- 1808 Appointed Director of Music at Bamberg.
- 1811 Falls in love with Julia Marc.
- 1813 Moves to Dresden to join Seconda Opera Company. Writes *Der goldene Topf*.

- 1814 Publishes *Fantasiestücke*. Returns to legal profession in Berlin, where he meets leaders of Romantic movement.
- 1816 *Undine* performed. *Die Elixiere des Teufels* published. Appointed Chairman of Supreme Court of Justice.
- 1817 *Nachtstücke* published.
- 1819 First volume of *Die Serapionsbrüder* published.
- 1821 Last volume published, containing *Die Königsbraut*.
- 1822 Dies of locomotor ataxy on 25th June.

The King's Bride

A Fairy Tale based on Real Life

1

In which various characters are introduced and their circumstances described, and the stage is pleasantly set for all the extraordinary scenes that will be enacted in the following chapters.

IT WAS A WONDERFUL YEAR. Magnificent crops of wheat, barley and oats were ripening in the fields, the peasant boys were busy picking peas and the cows were equally busy nibbling clover. There were so many cherries on the trees that, much as the sparrows would have liked to peck them all off at one go, they were forced to leave half of them over for another meal. Nature kept open house, and every day her guests had all the food that they could possibly eat. But her real triumph was Herr Dapsul von Zabelthau's kitchen garden, where the beauty of the vegetables was so unprecedented that Fräulein Ann was quite understandably in ecstasies about it.

I suppose I had better explain right away who these two people were. Just imagine, dear Reader, that you

are travelling through the lovely country beside the river Main. Warm breezes are wafting fragrance over the meadows, which glisten in the golden light of the rising sun. You cannot bear to stay cooped up in your carriage, so you get out and start wandering through a wood, beyond which, as you come down into the valley, you catch sight of a small village.

Suddenly you see a tall, thin man approaching, whose extraordinary costume immediately rivets your attention. Perched on top of a jet-black wig he wears a small grey felt hat, and everything else about him – coat, waistcoat, trousers, socks and shoes – is grey to match. Even his preternaturally long walking stick is painted grey. He comes striding towards you, with his great deep-set eyes staring straight at you, but appears to be quite unaware of your existence.

“Good morning, sir!” you call out, just in time to prevent a collision. At this he gives a start, as if he had suddenly woken out of a deep dream, raises his hat and addresses you in hollow, tragic tones.

“Good morning?” he repeats. “My dear sir, how thankful we should be that it is a good morning! Those poor people at Santa Cruz – just had two earthquakes, and now it’s pouring with rain!”

You do not quite know how to reply to this odd remark, and while you are still thinking it over, he says, “Allow me, sir,” and gently touches your forehead, and then takes a look at your palm.

“God bless you, sir,” he continues, in the same hollow, tragic tone as before. “You have a good horoscope.”

And with that he goes striding off again.

Now this unusual man is none other than Herr Dapsul von Zabelthau, and the only bit of property that he possesses is the tiny village of Dapsulheim, which lies in the most delightful surroundings immediately ahead of you. In fact, you are just coming into it.

You want some breakfast, but things do not look too promising at the local inn, for they have just had a village fair and stocks are consequently very low. As you insist on having something more substantial than a glass of milk, they direct you to the manor house, where Fräulein Anna, they say, will be only too glad to give you whatever she has available.

So off you go to the manor house, of which all I need say for the moment is that, like the *château* of M. le Baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh* in Westphalia, it possesses windows and doors, and that over the front door are displayed the arms of the von Zabelthau

family, carved, Maori-fashion, in wood. But the odd thing about this house is that its north side abuts on the outer wall of an old ruined castle, so that the back door is actually the original castle gate and leads straight into the castle courtyard, in the middle of which a tall, round watchtower still remains intact.

At the front door, the one with the coat of arms above it, you are met by a rosy-cheeked young lady, who with her fair hair and bright blue eyes would really be quite pretty, if only her figure were a shade less round and solid. Her manner is kindness itself. She asks you in and, as soon as she hears what you want, produces some delicious milk, a large slice of bread and butter, some ham which tastes good enough to have come from Bayonne, and a small glass of beetroot brandy. Meanwhile your hostess, who is none other than Fräulein Anna von Zabelthau, chats cheerfully away about all sorts of things connected with agriculture, a subject on which she is evidently well informed.

Suddenly a loud and dreadful cry rings out:

“Anna! Anna! Anna!”

It appears to be a voice from heaven, and you are naturally terrified, but Fräulein Anna kindly explains:

“Papa’s just got back from his walk and wants his breakfast. He’s calling from his study.”

“Calling from his study?” you repeat in astonishment.

“That’s right,” says Fräulein Anna, or Fräulein Ann, as most people call her. “You see, Papa’s study is up there in the tower, and he’s speaking through a megaphone.”

And then, dear Reader, you see her open a small door in the tower and run upstairs with the same sort of breakfast as you have just eaten yourself, that is to say, a large helping of ham and bread, and a glass of beetroot brandy. The next moment she is back again, taking you round her beautiful kitchen garden, and talking away so fast about Variegated Featherheads, Rapunticas, English Turnips, Little Greenheads, Montrues, Great Moguls, Yellow Kingheads and so on, that you begin to feel quite bewildered, especially if you are not aware that these are merely grand names for cabbages and lettuces.

Well, dear Reader, the brief visit that you have just paid to Dapsulheim should be enough, I think, to give you a general picture of the house which is the scene of the strange and almost incredible story that I am now about to relate.

In his youth Herr Dapsul von Zabelthau seldom set foot outside the house of his parents, who were fairly wealthy people. His tutor, who was an elderly eccentric,

not only instructed him in foreign languages, especially those of the East, but also encouraged his natural bent for mysticism, or rather for mystery mongering. The tutor died and left young Dapsul a whole library of books on the occult, in which he became deeply engrossed. His parents also died, and now young Dapsul set out on his travels, which in accordance with his tutor's recommendation included visits to Egypt and to India. When he finally came back, many years later, he found that a cousin had administered his estate in his absence with such zeal that there was nothing left but the tiny village of Dapsulheim.

Herr Dapsul von Zabelthau was far too interested in the sun-begotten gold of a higher sphere to care about losing the earthly variety. On the contrary, he thanked his cousin heartily for saving out of the wreck such a pleasant place as Dapsulheim, with its fine, high watchtower, which might have been expressly designed for taking astrological observations. And he promptly arranged for the top floor of it to be furnished as his study.

His thoughtful cousin now proved to him conclusively that it was his duty to get married. Dapsul admitted the necessity of this step, and immediately married the young lady that his cousin had selected for the purpose.

His wife had scarcely entered the house before she left it again, for she died in giving birth to a daughter. The cousin saw to all the arrangements for the wedding, the baptism and the funeral, so that Dapsul in his tower hardly noticed what was going on, especially as these events coincided with the appearance of a most remarkable comet, with which he believed his own destiny to be involved, for he was always on the look-out for possible omens of disaster.

His daughter was brought up by an aged great-aunt, who was delighted to find that the child soon showed signs of interest in estate-management. So Fräulein Ann was made to start at the bottom and work her way up, from goose girl to kitchen maid, to housemaid, to housekeeper, right up to the status of gentlewoman farmer. Thus theoretical knowledge was illustrated and confirmed by salutary practical experience. She developed an extraordinary passion for geese and ducks and hens and pigeons, for sheep and for cows; nor was she by any means indifferent to the joys of cherishing a plump young porker, although she never went quite so far as that girl in some country or other who tied a ribbon with a bell on it round the neck of a little white piglet, and treated it like a lapdog.

But what meant more to her than anything else in the world, even than her orchard, was her kitchen garden. As the gentle reader will have noticed in his conversation with her, Fräulein Ann had received from her great-aunt, who was a mine of information on all agricultural matters, a good grounding in the science of growing vegetables, and not only was she in sole charge of all such things as preparing the soil, sowing the seeds and planting the plants, but she also took an active part in these operations herself. Even her worst enemy was forced to admit that Fräulein Ann wielded a very pretty spade.

Thus while Herr Dapsul von Zabelthau devoted himself entirely to astrological observations and other mystic rites, Fräulein Ann, on the death of her great-aunt, made an excellent job of running the estate. In other words, whereas Dapsul's head was always in the clouds, Ann's interests were extremely down to earth.

So no wonder Fräulein Ann was in ecstasies when she found that her kitchen garden was doing so extraordinarily well this year. But surpassing all the other vegetables in luxuriance of growth were the carrots, which promised a quite unprecedented yield.

“Oh, my pretty little darlings!” cried Fräulein Ann again and again, clapping her hands and jumping up and down, and generally behaving like a child that has been given a wonderful Christmas present. And apparently the young carrots were feeling equally cheerful, for the faint sound of laughter that was heard at that moment undoubtedly came from underneath the soil. Ann took no notice of it, but dashed off to meet a farmhand, who was waving a letter in the air and shouting:

“For you, Fräulein Ann! Gottlieb's just brought it from the town.”

Ann recognized the writing and knew at once that the letter came from young Herr Amandus von Nebelstern, a neighbouring landowner's son, who was up at the University. Now, while he was still living at home and running over to Dapsulheim every day, Amandus had convinced himself that he could never in his whole life love anyone but Fräulein Ann. In the same way Fräulein Ann knew for a certainty that it would be quite impossible for her to feel the slightest partiality for anyone but the brown-haired Amandus. They had therefore agreed that the sooner they got married and became the happiest couple in the whole wide world the better.

Amandus had been a cheerful, unaffected lad before he went up to the University, but there he came under the influence of someone or other who not only persuaded him that he was a tremendous poetical genius, but also induced him to cultivate an extremely bombastic style. His efforts in this direction were so successful that he had soon risen far above were called reason and common sense by mere prose-writers, who were so foolish as to suggest that these qualities are perfectly compatible with the greatest imaginative activity.

Such was the young man who had written this letter. Joyfully, Ann opened it, and read as follows:

*Heavenly maiden,
Can you picture – can you feel – can you sense what your Amandus is doing at this moment? Can you see him, in the very flower of his youth, with the orange-blossom scents of fragrant Evening eddying round him, lying on his back in the grass and gazing skywards with eyes full of yearning devotion and of holy love? Lavender and thyme, roses and carnations, shy violets and yellow-eyed narcissi, all these he is weaving into a flowery crown. And every flower is a love-thought, a thought of you, my Anna!*

But is it fit that lips inspired by love should speak in barren prose? Hearken, oh hearken! For I can only love in sonnet-form, and only in a sonnet tell my love!

*Bright as a thousand suns see Love arise!
See lips of passion press to passion's lips!
Down from the vault of heaven the starlight dips
To bathe itself within Love's tearful eyes!
But he that loves too deeply to be wise
Crushes Joy's grape and tastes the bitter pips.
Thus my tormented soul is in eclipse:
I hear Love calling from the violet skies.
The fiery waves of ocean rage and roar,
The daring swimmer takes a mighty bound
And plunges headlong 'mid the whirling spray.
The hyacinth is blooming on the shore,
The faithful heart is bleeding underground,
A fine red root beneath the human clay!*

Oh, Anna, would that as you read this sonnet your soul could be flooded by all the heavenly raptures into which my whole being dissolved when I wrote it down, and when, divinely inspired, I read it aloud afterwards to a group of kindred spirits who are capable of understanding

the noblest things in life! Think, oh, think, sweet maid, of your faithful and ecstatic adorer,

Amandus Von Nebelstern

PS – Forget not, noble maiden, to enclose with your answer a pound of the Virginian tobacco that you grow yourself. It burns very well, and tastes far better than the stuff from Porto Rico that the other chaps here smoke when they go on a binge.

“Oh, how nice! Oh, how beautiful!” exclaimed Fräulein Ann, pressing the letter to her lips. “And what a lovely poem, with rhymes and everything! Oh, if only I were clever enough to understand it all – but I suppose only an undergraduate could do that. Whatever can that bit about the fine red root mean, I wonder? Why, of course! He’s thinking of those long red English carrots – or rapunticas maybe. The darling!”

That very same day she packed up the tobacco, and got the village schoolmaster to sharpen a dozen first-rate goose quills for her, as she wanted to sit down right away and start composing an answer to that wonderful letter.

Incidentally, as she ran out of the kitchen garden, an unmistakable sound of laughter was again heard behind

her, and if she had been a tiny bit more observant, she could not have failed to hear a faint little voice crying: “Pull me out! Pull me out! I’m ripe! Ripe! Ripe!”

But as I said before, she took no notice of it.