

THE NEW PARIS

A child's tale

by J. W. Goethe

[The following fanciful tale occurs in the autobiography of Goethe, to which he has given the name of "Dichtung und Wahrheit." He is supposed to tell it, in his childhood, to a party of juvenile friends, and he introduces it thus:

"I could afford great amusement to my friend, Pylades, and other kindly-disposed acquaintance, by telling them stories. They liked them, especially when I told them in my own person, being much delighted to hear that such odd things could befall their play-fellow. As for the question when I could find time and place for such adventures--that was no matter, indeed they pretty well knew all my ingoings and outgoings, and how I employed myself. To such events, localities, taken from another spot, if not from another world, were absolutely necessary, but nevertheless I made every thing happen on the very day I told it, or the day before. My hearers, therefore, were less deluded by me, than deceived by themselves. Had I not, in conformity to my natural disposition learned to mould these aërial nothings into something like an artistical form, such vain-glorious beginnings, would certainly have turned out badly for me in the end.

"If we duly consider this impulse, we may discover in it that assumption, with which the poet ventures to utter the greatest improbabilities in a tone of authority, and requires that every one shall acknowledge that to be real, which to him, the inventor, may appear to be true in any manner whatever.

"However, what is said above, in general terms, and in the form of reflection, may be rendered more agreeable, and at the same time more perceptible by an example. I therefore add such a tale--one,

which as I used to repeat it often to my playmates, still distinctly floats before my imagination and in my memory."]

Lately, on the night before Whit Sunday, I dreamed that I was standing before a mirror, occupying myself with my new summer suit, which my parents had had made against the approaching festival. The dress consisted, as you well know, of shoes of nice leather, with great silver buckles, fine cotton stockings, breeches of black serge, and a coat of green barracan, with gold buttons. The waistcoat, of gold-stuff, had been cut out of the one worn by my father on his wedding-day. My hair was dressed and powdered, my curls stood upon my head like little wings,--but I could not finish dressing myself; for I continually changed the articles of wearing apparel, and the first always dropped off when I was about to put on the second. While I was thus embarrassed, a handsome young man came up to me, and greeted me in the kindest manner. "Welcome," said I, "it gives me great pleasure to see you here."--"Do you know me then?" asked he, smiling. "Why not?" I replied, smiling in my turn. "You are Mercury, and I have often enough seen pictures of you."--"I am, indeed," said he, "and I have been sent to you by the gods on an important mission. Do you see these three apples?" stretching out his hand, he showed me three apples, which from their size he could scarcely hold, and which were as wonderfully beautiful as they were large. One was green, another yellow, and the third red, and they looked like precious stones, to which the shape of fruit had been given. I wished to take them, but he drew me back, saying, "You must first know, that they are not for you. You are to give them to the three handsomest young persons in the town, who will, every one according to his lot, find wives to their heart's content. There, take them and manage the matter well," he added, as he quitted me, and placed the apples in my open hand. They seemed to me to have become even larger than they were before. I held them against the light, and found they were quite transparent, but soon they grew taller, and at last became three pretty--very pretty little ladies, of the height of a moderate-sized doll, with dresses of the colours of the apples. In this form they glided softly up my fingers,

and when I was about to make a catch at them, that I might secure one at least, they soared up far away, so that I could do nothing but look after them. There I stood quite astounded and petrified, with my hands high in the air, and still staring at my fingers, as if their was something to be seen upon them. All of a sudden I perceived upon the very tips a charming little girl, very pretty and lively, though smaller than the others. As she did not fly away, like them, but remained with me, and danced about, now on this finger, now on that, I looked at her for some time, in a state of astonishment. She pleased me so much, that I fancied I might catch her, and was just on the point of making a grasp--as I thought very cleverly--when I felt a blow on the head, that caused me to fall completely stunned, and did not awaken from the stupor it occasioned till it was time to dress and go to church.

I often recalled the images to my mind during divine service, and at my grandfather's table where I dined. In the afternoon I went to visit some friends, both because such visits were due, and because I wished to show myself in my new clothes, with my hat under my arm and my sword by my side. Finding no one at home, and hearing that they were all gone to the gardens, I resolved to follow them, intending to pass a pleasant evening. My way led me along the town wall, and I soon came to the spot which is called the "evil wall," and rightly enough, for there is reason to believe it is always haunted. Walking slowly along, I thought of my three goddesses, and still more of the little nymph, and often held my fingers up in the air in the hope that she would be kind enough to balance herself upon them once more. As I proceeded, occupied with these thoughts, I discerned in the wall, on my left hand, a little wicket which I did not remember to have perceived before. It appeared low, but the pointed arch was such as to afford room for the tallest man to enter. The arch and the wall on either side had been most richly carved by the mason and the sculptor, but my attention was most attracted by the door itself. The old brown wood of which it was made had been but little ornamented, but broad bands of brass were attached to it, worked both in relief and in intaglio. The foliage which was represented on this brass, and on

which the most natural birds were sitting, I could not sufficiently admire. I was, however, most surprised at seeing no keyhole, no latch, no knocker, and from the absence of these I surmised that the door only opened from within. I was not mistaken, for when I went close to it, to feel the carved work, it opened inwards, and a man, whose dress was somewhat long, wide, and altogether singular, appeared before me. A venerable beard flowed about his chin, and I was, therefore, inclined to take him for a Jew. As if he had divined my thoughts he made the sign of the holy cross, thereby giving me to understand that he was a good Catholic Christian. "Young gentleman, how did you come here, and what are you doing?" said he, with friendly voice and gesture. "I am admiring the work of this door," I replied, "for I have never seen any thing like it, except, perhaps, in small pieces, in the collection of amateurs." "I am delighted," said he, "that you take pleasure in such work. The door is still more beautiful on the inner side, pray walk in if you choose." This affair made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. I felt embarrassed by the strange dress of the porter, by the retired situation of the place, and a certain indescribable something in the air. I paused, therefore, under the pretext of looking longer at the outside, and at the same time cast furtive glances at the garden--for a garden it was which had just been opened to me. Immediately behind the gate I saw a space completely shaded by the closely entwined branches of some old linden trees, which had been planted at regular intervals, so that the most numerous assembly might have rested there during the most intense heat of the day. I had already set my foot on the threshold, and the old man was well able to lure me on a step further. Indeed I made no resistance, for I had always heard that a prince or sultan, in such cases, must never ask whether there is any danger. Had I not my sword by my side, and could I not soon get the better of the old man if he took a hostile position? I therefore walked in with confidence, and the porter shut the gate so softly that I could hardly hear the sound. He then showed the work on the inside, which was certainly much superior to that without, and explained it, giving indications of the greatest kindness towards me. My mind being completely set at rest I allowed myself to be led further along

the shady space by the wall which circled the garden, and found much to admire. Niches, artificially adorned with shells, coral, and pieces of ore, poured from Tritons' mouths copious streams of water into marble basins. Between them were aviaries and other pieces of lattice-work, in which there were squirrels hopping about, guinea-pigs running backwards and forwards, and, in short, all the pretty little creatures that one could desire. The birds cried and sung to us as we went along; the starlings, in particular, prated after us the most absurd stuff, one always calling out "Paris, Paris," and the other "Narcissus, Narcissus," as plain as any schoolboy. The old man seemed to look at me more seriously whenever the birds uttered this, but I pretended not to mind it, and indeed had no time to attend to him, for I could clearly perceive that we were walking round and that this shady place was in fact a large circle, which inclosed another of far more importance. We had again come to the little door, and it seemed to me as if the old man wished to dismiss me; but my eyes remained fixed on a golden railing which seemed to inclose the middle of this wonderful garden, and which in my walk I had found an opportunity of observing sufficiently, although the old man always contrived to keep me close to the wall, and, therefore, pretty far from the centre. As he was going up to the gate I said to him, with a bow: "You have been so exceedingly civil to me that I can venture to make another request before I leave you. May I not look closer at that golden railing, which seems to encircle the inner part of the garden?" "Certainly," said he, "but then you must submit to certain conditions." "In what do they consist?" I asked, quickly. "You must leave your hat and sword here, and must not quit my hand as I accompany you." "To that I consent readily enough," said I, and I laid my hat and sword on the first stone bench that came in my way. Upon this he at once seized my left hand in his right, held it fast, and, with some degree of force, led me straight on. When we came to the railing, my surprise was increased to overwhelming astonishment; any thing like it I had never seen. On a high socle of marble countless spears and partisans stood in a row, and were joined together by their upper ends, which were singularly ornamented. Peeping through the interstices I saw behind this railing a

piece of water which flowed gently along, with marble on each side of it, and in the clear depths of which a great number of gold and silver fish might be discovered, which now slowly, now swiftly, now singly, now in shoals, were swimming to and fro. I wished much to see the other side of the canal that I might learn how the interior part of the garden was fashioned; but, to my great annoyance, on the other side of the water stood a similar railing, which was so skilfully arranged that, opposite to every space on the side where I stood was placed a spear or a partisan on the other, and thus, with the additional impediment of the other ornaments, it was impossible for one to look through, whatever position one took. Besides, the old man, who kept a fast hold of me, hindered me from moving freely. My curiosity--after all that I had seen--increased more and more, and I plucked up courage to ask the old man whether it was not possible to cross over. "Why not?" said he, "only you must conform to new conditions." When I asked him what these were, he told me that I must change my dress. I readily consented; he led me back towards the outer wall and into a neat little room, against the walls of which hung dresses of several kinds which seemed to approach the oriental style of costume. I changed my dress quickly, and he put my powdered locks into a many-coloured net, after finally dusting out the powder, to my great horror. Standing before a large mirror I thought I looked prettily enough in my disguise, and liked myself better than in my stiff Sunday clothes. I made gestures and leaps, in imitation of the dancers I had seen on the stage erected at the fair, and while I was doing this I perceived, by chance, the reflection in the glass of a niche that stood behind me. Against its white ground hung three green cords, each twined in a manner which was not very clear to me in the distance. I therefore turned round somewhat hastily and asked the old man about the niche and these cords also. Civilly enough he took one down and showed it to me. It was a cord of green silk of moderate thickness, the ends of which, fastened together by a piece of green leather, cut through in two places, gave it the appearance of being an instrument for no very agreeable purpose. The affair seemed to me somewhat equivocal, and I asked the old man for an explanation. He answered, very quietly and

mildly, that the cord was intended for those who abused the confidence which was here readily placed in them. He hung the cord in its place again, and asked me to follow him at once. This time he did not take hold of me, but I walked freely by his side.

My greatest curiosity now was to know where the door could be to pass through the railing, and where the bridge could be to cross the canal, for I had been able to discern nothing of the sort hitherto. I therefore looked at the golden rails very closely, as we hastened close up to them,--when all of a sudden my sight failed me; for the spears, pikes, halberds, and partisans, began quite unexpectedly to rattle and to shake, and this curious movement ended with the points of all being inclined towards each other, just as if two ancient armies, armed with pikes, were preparing for the attack. The confusion before my eyes, the clatter in my ears, was almost insupportable; but the sight became infinitely astonishing, when the spears, laying themselves quite down, covered the whole circle of the canal, and formed the noblest bridge that one can imagine, while the most variegated garden was revealed to my view. It was divided into beds, which wound about one another, and, seen at once, formed a labyrinth of an ornament. All of these were encompassed by a green border, formed of a short woolly-looking plant, which I had never seen; all were adorned with flowers, every division being of a different colour, and as these likewise grew short, the ground plan was easily traced. This beautiful sight, which I enjoyed in the full sunshine, completely riveted my eyes; but I scarcely knew where I could set my foot, for the winding paths were neatly covered with a blue sand, which seemed to form upon earth a darker sky, or a sky in the water. Therefore, with my eyes fixed upon the ground, I went on for some time by the side of my conductor, until I at length perceived, that in the midst of the circle of beds and flowers, stood another large circle of cypresses, or trees of the poplar kind, through which it was impossible to see, as the lowest boughs seemed to be shooting up from the earth. My conductor, without forcing me straight into the nearest way, nevertheless led me immediately towards that centre; and how was I surprised, when

entering the circle of the tall trees, I saw before me the portico of a magnificent summer-house, which seemed to have similar openings and entrances on every side! A heavenly music, which issued from the building, charmed me even more than this perfect specimen of architecture. Now I thought I heard a lute, now a harp, now a guitar, and now a tinkling sound, which was not like that of any of the three instruments. The door which we approached opened at a light touch from the old man, and my amazement was great, when the female porter, who came out, appeared exactly like the little maiden who had danced upon my fingers in my dream. She greeted me as if we were old acquaintances, and asked me to walk in. The old man remained behind, and I went with her along a short passage, which was arched over and beautifully ornamented, till I came to the central hall; the majestic and cathedral-seeming height of which arrested my sight and surprised me, immediately on my entrance. However, my eye could not long remain fixed upwards, as it was soon lured down by a most charming spectacle. On the carpet, immediately beneath the centre of the cupola, sat three ladies, each one forming the corner of a triangle, and each dressed in a different colour. One was in red, another in yellow, the third in green. Their seats were gilded, and the carpet was a perfect bed of flowers. In their arms lay the three instruments, the sounds of which I had distinguished from without, for they had left off playing, being disturbed by my entrance. "Welcome!" said the middle one, who sat with her face towards the door, was dressed in red, and had the harp. "Sit down by Alerte, and listen, if you are fond of music." I now saw, for the first time, that a tolerably long bench, placed across, with a mandoline upon it, lay before me. The pretty little girl took up the mandoline, seated herself, and drew me to her side. Now I looked at the second lady, who was on my right. She wore the yellow dress, and had a guitar in her hand; and if the harp-player was imposing in her form, grand in her features, and majestic in her deportment, the guitar-player was distinguished by every grace and cheerfulness. She was a slender blonde, while the other was adorned with hair of a dark brown. The variety and accordance of their music did not prevent me from observing the third beauty in the green dress,

the tones of whose lute were to me somewhat touching, and at the same time remarkably striking. She it was who seemed to take the greatest notice of me, and to direct her playing towards me. At the same time, I could not tell what to make of her, for she was now tender, now odd, now frank, now capricious, as she altered her gestures and the style of her playing. Sometimes she seemed anxious to move me, and sometimes anxious to tease me. No matter, however, what she did, she gained no advantage over me, for I was quite taken up by my little neighbour, to whom I sat close; and when I perceived plainly enough that the three ladies were the sylphides of my dream, and recognised the colours of the apples, I well understood that I had no reason to secure them. The pretty little creature I would much sooner have seized, had not the box on the ear which she gave me in my dream remained still fresh in my memory. Hitherto she had kept quiet with her mandoline; but when her mistresses had ceased, they ordered her to treat us with a few lively airs. Scarcely had she struck off some dancing melodies in a very exciting style, than she jumped up, and I did the same. She played and danced; I was forced to follow her steps, and we went through a kind of little ballet, at which the ladies seemed to be well pleased, for no sooner had we finished it, than they ordered the little girl to refresh me with something nice before supper. In truth, I had forgotten that there was any thing else in the world beyond this Paradise. Alerte led me back into the passage by which I had entered. On one side, she had two well-furnished apartments, in one of which--the one in which she lived--she served before me oranges, figs, peaches, and grapes, and I tasted the fruits both of foreign lands and of early months, with great appetite. Confectionary was in abundance, and she filled a goblet of polished crystal with sparkling wine; but I had no need of drinking, as I sufficiently refreshed myself with the fruits. "Now we will play," said she, and took me into the other room. This had the appearance of a Christmas fair, except that such fine, precious things are never to be seen in a booth. There were all sorts of dolls, and dolls' clothes, and utensils; little kitchens, parlours, and shops; besides single toys in abundance. She led me all round to the glass cases, in which these

precious articles were preserved. The first case she soon closed again, saying: "There is nothing for you, I am sure, there," added she, "we can find building materials, walls, and towers, houses, palaces, and churches to put together a large town. That, however, would be no amusement for me, so we will take something else, that may be equally amusing for both of us." She then brought out some boxes, in which I saw some little soldiers placed in layers one over the other, and with respect to which I was forced to confess that I had never seen any thing so pretty in my life. She did not leave me time to look closer into particulars, but took one of the boxes under her arm, while I caught up the other. "We will go to the golden bridge," said she, "for that's the best place to play at soldiers. The spears point out the direction in which the armies should be placed." We had now reached the shaking, golden bridge, and I could hear the water ripple, and the fish splash beneath me, as I knelt down to set up my rows of soldiers, which, as I now saw, were all on horseback. She gloried in being the queen of the Amazons, as the leader of her host; while I, on the other hand, found Achilles, and a very fine set of Greek cavalry. The armies stood face to face, and nothing prettier can be conceived. They were not flat leaden horsemen like ours, but man and horse were round and full-bodied, and very finely worked. It was difficult to see how they were able to balance themselves, for they kept up without having a stand.

We had both surveyed our armies with great complacency, when she announced the attack. Besides the soldiers, we had found artillery in our chests--namely, boxes filled with little balls of polished agate. With these we were to shoot at each other's forces from a certain distance, on the express condition, however, that we were not to throw with greater force than was required to upset the figures, as they were on no account to be injured. The cannonading began from each side, and, at first, to the great delight of both of us. But when my adversary remarked that I took a better aim than she, and that I might end by winning the game, which depended on having the greatest number of men upright, she stepped closer, and her girlish manner of throwing

proved successful. A number of my best troops were laid low, and the more I protested, with the greater zeal did she go on throwing. At last I became vexed, and told her that I would do the same. Accordingly, I not only came closer, but in my passion, I threw much harder, so that, in a short time, a couple of her little female centaurs were broken to pieces. Her zeal prevented her from noticing this at once, but I stood petrified with astonishment when the broken figures joined themselves together again, and the Amazon and her horse again became entire; nay, became perfectly alive at the same time, for they galloped from the bridge up to the linden-trees, and after running backwards and forwards, were lost--how I cannot tell--in the direction of the wall. My fair adversary had scarcely perceived this, than she sobbed aloud, and exclaimed that I had caused her an irreparable loss, which was far greater than words could express. I, who had grown enraged, was pleased at doing her an injury, and with blind fury, threw the few agate-balls I still had, among her forces. Unfortunately, I struck the queen, who had been excepted, as long as our game had proceeded in the regular way. She flew to pieces, and her nearest adjutants were shattered at the same time. Soon, however, they joined themselves together again, took their flight like the first, galloped merrily under the lindens, and were lost near the wall.

My adversary reproached and scolded me, but I, having once begun the work of destruction, stooped down to pick up some of the agate balls, which were rolling about the golden spears. My savage wish was to destroy her whole army; while she did not remain inactive, but darting at me gave me a box on the ear, that set my very head ringing. I, who had always heard that a hearty kiss is the proper return for a blow given by a girl, caught her by her ears and kissed her several times. At this she uttered such a piercing cry that I was absolutely terrified. I let her go, and it was fortunate that I did so, for at that moment I did not know what befel me. The ground beneath me began to shake and rattle, the rails, as I now observed, put themselves in motion, but I had no time for consideration, nor was I sufficient master of my feet to fly. Every moment I was afraid of being impaled,

for the lances and partisans which began to stand upright, tore my clothes. Suffice it to say,--I do not know how it was,--that my sight and hearing failed me, and that I recovered from my terror and the stupor into which I had been thrown, at the foot of a linden tree, against which the railing, while raising itself, had thrown me. My malice returned with my senses, and increased still more, when from the other side I heard the jeers and laughter of my adversary, who had probably come to the ground somewhat more softly than myself. I therefore got up, and as I saw scattered around me, my own little army with its leaden Achilles, which the rising rails had thrown off together with myself, I began by catching hold of the hero, and dashing him against a tree. His resuscitation and flight gave me double pleasure, for the prettiest sight in the world was associated with all the delight of gratified malice, and I was on the point of sending the rest of the Greeks after him, when all of a sudden water came hissing from every side, from the stones and walls, from the ground and branches; and wherever I turned it pelted me furiously. My light dress was soon completely wet through, and as it had been already torn, I lost no time in flinging it off altogether. My slippers I threw aside, and then one covering after the other, finding it very pleasant in the sultry day to take such a shower-bath. Stark naked, I walked gravely along between the welcome waters, and I thought I might thus go on pleasantly for some time. My rage had cooled, and I now desired nothing more than a reconciliation with my little adversary. All of a sudden the water stopped, and I now stood completely wet on ground that was soaked through. The presence of the old man, who unexpectedly came before me, was any thing but welcome. I should have wished, if not to hide myself, at any rate to put on some covering. Shame, cold, and an endeavour to cover myself in some measure, made me cut a very miserable figure, and the old man lost no time in loading me with the bitterest reproaches. "What hinders me," he cried, "from taking one of the green cords, and fitting it to your back at any rate, if not to your neck!" This threat I took very ill. "Hark ye," said I, "you had better take care of such words, or even such thoughts, or you and your mistresses will be lost!" "Who are you?" said he, in a tone of defiance,

"that dare to talk in this way?" "A favourite of the gods," I replied, "on whom it depends whether those ladies will find good husbands and live happily, or pine and grow old in their magic cloister." The old man retreated some steps. "Who revealed that to you?" he asked with doubt and astonishment. "Three apples," said I, "three jewels." "And what reward do you desire?" he exclaimed. "Above all things," I replied, "the little creature who brought me into this cursed condition." The old man threw himself at my feet, without heeding the dampness and muddiness of the ground. He then arose, not in the least wetted, took me kindly by the hand, led me into the room, where I had been before, dressed me again quickly, and I soon found myself with my hair curled and my Sunday clothes on, as at first. The porter did not utter another word, but before he allowed me to cross the threshold, he detained me, and showed to me certain objects that were near the wall, and on the other side of the way, while at the same time he pointed to the door backwards. I understood him well. He wished me to impress the objects on my mind, that I might more readily find the door again, which unexpectedly closed behind me. I observed already what was opposite to me. The boughs of seven old nut-trees projected over a high wall, and partly covered the moulding with which it terminated. The branches reached to a stone tablet, the decorated border of which I could easily recognise, but the inscription on which I could not read. It rested on the jutting stone of a niche, in which a fountain artificially constructed, was throwing water from cup to cup into a large basin, which formed a kind of little pond, and was lost in the ground. Fountain, inscription, nut-trees, all stood, one directly over the other, and I could have painted it as I saw it.

It may be easily conceived how I passed the evening, and many a day afterwards, and how often I repeated these adventures, which I could hardly believe myself. As soon as I could, I went again to the "evil wall," that I might at least refresh my memory by the sight of the objects, and look at the beautiful door. To my great astonishment all was changed. Nut-trees were, indeed, hanging over the wall, but they were not close together. A tablet was inserted, but it stood at some

distance to the right of the trees, was without carving, and had a legible inscription. A niche with a fountain stood far to the left, and was not to be compared to the one I had before seen. Of the door not a trace was to be found, and I was, therefore, almost compelled to believe that my second adventure was a dream, as well as my first. My only consolation is, that the three objects always seem to change their situation, for, after repeated visits to the spot, I think I have observed, that the nut-trees are running towards each other, and that the tablet and fountain are approaching. Probably, when all has come together again, the door will once more be visible, and I will do all I can to fit on a sequel to the adventure. Whether I shall be able to tell what befalls me in future, or whether it will be expressly forbidden me, I cannot say.