

Little Lasse

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

Finnish

Intermediate

15 min read

There was once a little boy whose name was Lars, and because he was so little he was called Little Lasse; he was a brave little man, for he sailed round the world in a pea-shell boat.

It was summer time, when the pea shells grew long and green in the garden. Little Lasse crept into the pea bed where the pea stalks rose high above his cap, and he picked seventeen large shells, the longest and straightest he could find.

Little Lasse thought, perhaps, that no one saw him; but that was foolish, for God sees everywhere.

Then the gardener came with his gun over his shoulder, and he heard something rustling in the pea bed.

'I think that must be a sparrow,' he said. 'Ras! Ras!' but no sparrows flew out, for Little Lasse had no wings, only two small legs. 'Wait! I will load my gun and shoot the sparrows,' said the gardener.

Then Little Lasse was frightened, and crept out on to the path.

'Forgive me, dear gardener!' he said. 'I wanted to get some fine boats.'

‘Well, I will this time,’ said the gardener. ‘But another time Little Lasse must ask leave to go and look for boats in the pea bed.’

‘I will,’ answered Lasse; and he went off to the shore. Then he opened the shells with a pin, split them carefully in two, and broke small little bits of sticks for the rowers’ seats. Then he took the peas which were in the shells and put them in the boats for cargo. Some of the shells got broken, some remained whole, and when all were ready Lasse had twelve boats. But they should not be boats, they should be large warships. He had three liners, three frigates, three brigs and three schooners. The largest liner was called Hercules, and the smallest schooner The Flea. Little Lasse put all the twelve into the water, and they floated as splendidly and as proudly as any great ships over the waves of the ocean.

And now the ships must sail round the world. The great island over there was Asia; that large stone Africa; the little island America; the small stones were Polynesia; and the shore from which the ships sailed out was Europe. The whole fleet set off and sailed far away to other parts of the world. The ships of the line steered a straight course to Asia, the frigates sailed to Africa, the brigs to America, and the schooners to Polynesia. But Little Lasse remained in Europe, and threw small stones out into the great sea.

Now, there was on the shore of Europe a real boat, father’s own, a beautiful white-painted boat, and Little Lasse got into it. Father and mother had forbidden this, but Little Lasse forgot. He thought he should very much like to travel to some other part of the world.

‘I shall row out a little way—only a very little way,’ he thought. The pea-shell boats had travelled so far that they only looked like little specks on the ocean. ‘I shall seize Hercules on the coast of Asia,’ said Lasse, ‘and then row home again to Europe.’

He shook the rope that held the boat, and, strange to say, the rope became loose. Ditsch, ratsch, a man is a man, and so Little Lasse manned the boat.

Now he would row—and he could row, for he had rowed so often on the step sat home, when the steps pretended to be a boat and father's big stick an oar. But when Little Lasse wanted to row there were no oars to be found in the boat. The oars were locked up in the boat-house, and Little Lasse had not noticed that the boat was empty. It is not so easy as one thinks to row to Asia without oars.

What could Little Lasse do now? The boat was already some distance out on the sea, and the wind, which blew from land, was driving it still further out. Lasse was frightened and began to cry. But there was no one on the shore to hear him. Only a big crow perched alone in the birch tree; and the gardener's black cat sat under the birch tree, waiting to catch the crow. Neither of them troubled themselves in the least about Little Lasse, who was drifting out to sea.

Ah! how sorry Little Lasse was now that he had been disobedient and got into the boat, when father and mother had so often forbidden him to do so! Now it was too late, he could not get back to land. Perhaps he would be lost out on the great sea. What should he do?

When he had shouted until he was tired and no one heard him, he put his two little hands together and said, 'Good God, do not be angry with Little Lasse.' And then he went to sleep. For although it was daylight, old Nukku Matti was sitting on the shores of the 'Land of Nod,' and was fishing for little children with his long fishing rod. He heard the low words which Little Lasse said to God, and he immediately drew the boat to himself and laid Little Lasse to sleep on a bed of rose leaves.

Then Nukku Matti said to one of the Dreams, 'Play with Little Lasse, so that he does not feel lonesome.'

It was a little dream-boy, so little, so little, that he was less than Lasse himself; he had blue eyes and fair hair, a red cap with a silver band, and white coat with pearls on the collar. He came to Little Lasse and said, 'Would you like to sail round the world?'

'Yes,' said Lasse in his sleep, 'I should like to.'

'Come, then,' said the dream-boy, 'and let us sail in your pea-shell boats. You shall sail in Hercules and I shall sail in The Flea.'

So they sailed away from the 'Land of Nod,' and in a little while Hercules and The Flea were on the shores of

Asia away at the other end of the world, where the Ice Sea flows through Behring Straits into the Pacific Ocean. A long way off in the winter mist they could see the explorer Nordenskiöld with his ship Vega trying to find an opening between the ice. It was so cold, so cold; the great icebergs glittered strangely, and the huge whales now lived under the ice, for they could not make a hole through with their awkward heads. All around on the dreary shore there was snow and snow as far as the eye could see; little grey men in shaggy skins moved about, and drove in small sledges through the snow drifts, but the sledges were drawn by dogs.

‘Shall we land here?’ asked the dream-boy.

‘No,’ said Little Lasse. ‘I am so afraid that the whales would swallow us up, and the big dogs bite us. Let us sail instead to another part of the world.’

‘Very well,’ said the dream-boy with the red cap and the silver band; ‘it is not far to America’—and at the same moment they were there.

The sun was shining and it was very warm. Tall palm trees grew in long rows on the shore and bore coconuts in their top branches. Men red as copper galloped over the immense green prairies and shot their arrows at the buffaloes, who turned against them with their sharp horns. An enormous cobra which had crept up the stem of a tall palm tree threw itself on to a little llama that was grazing at the foot. Knaps! it was all over the little llama.

‘Shall we land here?’ asked the dream-boy.

‘No,’ said Little Lasse. ‘I am so afraid that the buffaloes will butt us, and the great serpent eat us up. Let us travel to another part of the world.’

‘Very well,’ said the dream-boy with the white coat, ‘it is only a little way to Polynesia’—and then they were there.

It was very warm there, as warm as in a hot bath in Finland. Costly spices grew on the shores: the pepper plant, the cinnamon tree, ginger, saffron; the coffee plant and the tea plant. Brown people with long ears and thick lips, and hideously painted faces, hunted a yellow-spotted tiger among the high bamboos on the shore, and the tiger turned on them and stuck its claws into one of the brown men. Then all the others took to flight.

‘Shall we land here?’ asked the dream-boy.

‘No,’ said Little Lasse. ‘Don’t you see the tiger away there by the pepper plant? Let us travel to another part of the world.’

‘We can do so,’ said the dream-boy with the blue eyes. ‘We are not far from Africa’—and as he said that they were there.

They anchored at the mouth of a great river where the shores were as green as the greenest velvet. A little distance from the river an immense desert stretched away. The air was yellow; the sun shone so hot, so hot as if it would burn the earth to ashes, and the people were as black as the blackest jet. They rode across the desert on tall camels; the lions roared with thirst, and the great crocodiles with their grey lizard heads and sharp white teeth gaped up out of the river.

‘Shall we land here?’ asked the dream-boy.

‘No,’ said Little Lasse. ‘The sun would burn us, and the lions and the crocodiles would eat us up. Let us travel to another part of the world.’

‘We can travel back to Europe,’ said the dream-boy with the fair hair. And with that they were there.

They came to a shore where it was all so cool and familiar and friendly. There stood the tall birch tree with its drooping leaves; at the top sat the old crow, and at its foot crept the gardener’s black cat. Not far away was a house which Little Lasse had seen before; near the house there was a garden, and in the garden a pea bed with long pea shells. An old gardener with a green coat walked about and wondered if the cucumbers were ripe. Fylax was barking on the steps, and when he saw Little Lasse he wagged his tail. Old Stina was milking the cows in the farmyard, and there was a very familiar lady in a check woollen shawl on her way to the bleaching green to see if the clothes were bleached. There was, too, a well-known gentleman in a yellow summer coat, with a long pipe in his mouth; he was going to see if the reapers had cut the rye. A boy and a girl were running on the shore and calling out, ‘Little Lasse! Come home for bread- and-butter!’

‘Shall we land here?’ asked the dream-boy, and he blinked his blue eyes roguishly.

'Come with me, and I shall ask mother to give you some bread-and- butter and a glass of milk,' said Little Lasse.

'Wait a little,' said the dream-boy. And now Little Lasse saw that the kitchen door was open, and from within there was heard a low, pleasant frizzling, like that which is heard when one whisks yellow batter with a wooden ladle into a hot frying-pan.

'Perhaps we should sail back to Polynesia now?' said the happy dream-boy.

'No; they are frying pancakes in Europe just now,' said Little Lasse; and he wanted to jump ashore, but he could not. The dream- boy had tied him with a chain of flowers, so that he could not move. And now all the little dreams came about him, thousands and thousands of little children, and they made a ring around him and sang a little song:

The world is very, very wide, Little Lasse, Lasse, And though you've sailed beyond the tide, You can never tell how wide It is on the other side, Lasse, Little Lasse. You have found it cold and hot, Little Lasse, Lasse; But in no land is God not, Lasse, Little Lasse. Many men live there as here, But they all to God are dear, Little Lasse, Lasse. When His angel is your guide, Little Lasse, Lasse, Then no harm can e'er betide, Even on the other side Where the wild beasts wander. But tell us now, Whene'er you roam, Do you not find the best is home Of all the lands you've looked upon, Lasse, Little Lasse?

When the dreams had sung their song they skipped away, and Nukku Matti carried Lasse back to the boat. He lay there for a long time quite still, and he still heard the frying-pan frizzling at home of the fire, the frizzling was very plain, Little Lasse heard it quite near him; and so he woke up and rubbed his eyes.

There he lay in the boat, where he had fallen asleep. The wind had turned, and the boat had drifted out with one wind and drifted in with another while Little Lasse slept, and what Lasse thought was frizzling in a frying-pan was the low murmur of the waves as they washed against the stones on the shore. But he was not altogether wrong, for the clear blue sea is like a great pan in which God's sun all day makes cakes for good children.

Little Lasse rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked around him. Everything was the same as before; the crow in the birch tree, the cat on the grass, and the pea-shell fleet on the shore. Some of the ships had

foundered, and some had drifted back to land. Hercules had come back with its cargo from Asia, The Flea had arrived from Polynesia, and the other parts of the world were just where they were before.

Little Lasse did not know what to think. He had so often been in that grotto in the 'Land of Nod' and did not know what tricks dreams can play. But Little Lasse did not trouble his head with such things; he gathered together his boats and walked up the shore back to the house.

His brother and sister ran to meet him, and called out from the distance, 'Where have you been so long, Lasse? Come home and get some bread-and-butter.' The kitchen door stood open, and inside was heard a strange frizzling.

The gardener was near the gate, watering the dill and parsley, the carrots and parsnips.

'Well,' he said, 'where has Little Lasse been so long?'

Little Lasse straightened himself up stiff, and answered: 'I have sailed round the world in a pea-shell boat.'

'Oh!' said the gardener.

He has forgotten Dreamland. But you have not forgotten it; you know that it exists. You know the beautiful grotto and the bright silver walls whose lustre never fades, the sparkling diamonds which never grow dim, the music which never ceases its low, soft murmur through the sweet evening twilight. The airy fairy fancies of happy Dreamland never grow old; they, like the glorious stars above us, are always young. Perhaps you have caught a glimpse of their ethereal wings as they flew around your pillow. Perhaps you have met the same dream-boy with the blue eyes and the fair hair, the one who wore the red cap with the silver band and the white coat with pearls on the collar. Perhaps he has taken you to see all the countries of the world and the peoples, the cold waste lands and the burning deserts, the many coloured men and the wild creatures in the sea and in the woods, so that you may earn many things, but come gladly home again. Yes, who knows? Perhaps you also have sailed round the wide world once in a pea-shell boat.

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