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# **Queer Stories for Boys and Girls**

Edward Eggleston

# Imprint

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## PREFACE.

The stories here reprinted include nearly all of those which I have written for children in a vein that entitles them to rank as "Queer Stories," that is, stories not entirely realistic in their setting but appealing to the fancy, which is so marked a trait of the minds of boys and girls. "Bobby and the Key-hole" appeared eight or nine years ago in *St. Nicholas*, and has never before been printed in book form. The others were written earlier for juvenile periodicals of wide repute in their time—periodicals that have now gone the way of almost all young people's magazines, to the land of forgetfulness. Although I recall with pleasure the fact that these little tales enjoyed a considerable popularity when they first appeared, I might just as well as not have called them "The Unlucky Stories." In two or three forms some of the stories that form this collection have appeared in book covers in years past, but always to meet with disaster that was no fault of theirs. Two little books that contained a part of the stories herein reprinted were burned up—plates, cuts and all—in the Chicago fire of 1871. Another book, with some of these stories in it, was issued by a publisher in Boston, who almost immediately failed, leaving the plates in pawn. These fell into the hands of a man who issued a surreptitious edition, and then into the possession of another, to whom at length I was forced to pay a round sum for the plates, in order to extricate my unfortunate tales from the hands of freebooters. This is therefore the first fair and square issue in book form that these stories have had. For this they have been revised by the author, and printed from plates wholly new by the liberality of the present publisher.

E. E.

Owls' Nest, Lake George, 1884.



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## Queer Stories.



## BOBBY AND THE KEY-HOLE.

### *A Hoosier Fairy Tale.*

You think that folks in fine clothes are the only folks that ever see fairies, and that poor folks can't afford them. But in the days of the real old-fashioned "Green Jacket and White Owl's Feather" fairies, it was the poor boy carrying fagots to the cabin of his widowed mother who saw wonders of all sorts wrought by the little people; and it was the poor girl who had a fairy godmother. It must be confessed that the mystery-working, dewdrop-dancing, wand-waving, pumpkin-metamorphosing little rascals have been spoiled of late years by being admitted into fine houses. Having their pictures painted by artists, their praises sung by poets, their adventures told in gilt-edge books, and, above all, getting into the delicious leaves of St. Nicholas, has made them "stuck up," so that it is not the poor girl in the cinders, nor the boy with a bundle of fagots now, but girls who wear button boots and tie-back skirts, and boys with fancy waists and striped stockings that are befriended by fairies, whom they do not need.

But away off from the cities there still lives a race of unflattered fairies who are not snobbish, and who love little girls and boys in pinafores and ragged jackets. These spirits are not very handsome, and so the artists do not draw their pictures, and they do not get into gilt-edge Christmas books. Dear, ugly, good fairies! I hope they will not be spoiled by my telling you something about them.

Little Bobby Towpate saw some of them; and it's about Bobby, and the fairies he saw, that I want to speak. Bobby was the thirteenth child in a rather large family — there were three younger than he. He lived in a log cabin on the banks of a stream, the right name of which is "Indian Kentucky Creek." I suppose it was named "Indian Kentucky" because it is not in Kentucky, but in Indiana; and as for Indians, they have been gone many a day. The people always call it "The Injun Kaintuck." They tuck up the name to make it shorter.

Bobby was only four years and three-quarters old, but he had been in pantaloons for three years and a half, for the people in the Indian Kaintuck put their little boys into breeches as soon as they

can walk—perhaps a little before. And such breeches! The little white-headed fellows look like dwarf grandfathers, thirteen hundred years of age. They go toddling about like old men who have grown little again, and forgotten everything they ever knew.

But Bobby Towpate was not ugly. Under his white hair, which "looked every way for Sunday," were blue eyes and ruddy cheeks, and a mouth as pretty as it was solemn. The comical little fellow wore an unbleached cotton shirt, and tattered pantaloons, with home-made suspenders or "gallowses." The pantaloons had always been old, I think, for they were made out of a pair of his father's—his "daddy's," as he would have told you—and nobody ever knew his father to have a new pair, so they must have been old from the beginning. For in the Indian Kaintuck country nothing ever seems to be new. Bobby Towpate himself was born looking about a thousand years old, and had aged some centuries already. As for hat, he wore one of his daddy's old hats when he wore any, and it would have answered well for an umbrella if it had not been ragged.

Bobby's play-ground was anywhere along the creek in the woods. There were so many children that there was nobody to look after him; so he just kept a careful eye on himself, and that made it all right. As he was not a very energetic child, there was no danger of his running into mischief. Indeed, he never ran at all. He was given to sitting down on the ground and listening to the crazy singing of the loons—birds whose favorite amusement consists in trying to see which can make the most hideous noise. Then, too, he would watch the stake-drivers flying along the creek, with their long, ugly necks sticking out in front of them, and their long, ugly legs sticking out behind them, and their long, ugly wings sticking out on each side of them. They never seemed to have any bodies at all. People call them stake-drivers because their musical voices sound like the driving of a stake: "Ke-whack! ke-whack!" They also call them "Fly-up-the-creeks," and plenty of ugly names besides.

It was one sleepy summer afternoon that Bobby sat on the root of a beech-tree, watching a stake-driver who stood in the water as if looking for his dinner of tadpoles, when what should the homely bird do but walk right out on the land and up to Bobby. Bobby then saw that it was not a stake-driver, but a long-legged, long-necked,

short-bodied gentleman, in a black bob-tail coat. And yet his long, straight nose did look like a stake-driver's beak, to be sure. He was one of the stake-driver fairies, who live in the dark and lonesome places along the creeks in the Hoosier country. They make the noise that you hear, "Ke-whack! ke-whack!" It may be the driving of stakes for the protection of the nests of their friends the cat-fish.

"Good-morning, Bobby, ke-whack!" said the long, slim gentleman, nodding his head. He said ke-whack after his words because that is the polite thing to do among the stake-driver fairies.

"My name haint Bobby Ke-whack, nur nothin'," answered Bobby. The people on Indian Kaintuck say "nor nothin'," without meaning anything by it. "My name haint on'y jeth Bob, an' nothin' elth."

But the slender Mr. Fly-up-the-creek only nodded and said ke-whack two or three times, by way of clearing his throat.

"Maybe you'd like to see the folks underground, ke-whack," he added presently. "If you would, I can show you the door and how to unlock it. It's right under the next cliff, ke-whack! If you get the door open, you may go in and find the Sleepy-headed People, the Invisible People, and all the rest, ke-whack!"

"Ke-whack!" said Bob, mimicking, and grinning till he showed his row of white milk-teeth. But the gentleman stake-driver must have been offended, for he walked away into the water and disappeared among the willows, saying, "Ke-whack! ke-whack!" in an indignant way at every step.

When once the stake-driver fairy had gone, Bob was troubled. He was lonesome. He had always been lonesome, because the family was so large. There is never any company for a body where there are so many. Now Bob wished that "Ole Ke-whack," as he called him, had not walked off into the willows in such a huff. He would like to see who lived under the ground, you know. After a while, he thought he would go and look for the door under the cliff. Bobby called it "clift," after the manner of the people on the Indian Kaintuck.

Once under the cliff, he was a long time searching around for a door. At last he found a something that looked like a door in the rock. He looked to see if there was a latch-string, for the houses in

the Indian Kaintuck are opened with latch-strings. But he could not find one. Then he said to himself (for Bobby, being a lonesome boy, talked to himself a great deal) words like these:

"Ole Ke-whack thed he knowed wharabout the key mout be. The time I went down to Madison, to market with mammy, I theed a feller dretht up to kill come along and open hith door with a iron thing. That mout be a key. Wonder ef I can't find it mythelf! There, I come acrost the hole what it goeth into."

He had no trouble in "coming acrost" the key itself, for he found it lying on the ground. He took it up, looked at it curiously, and said: "Thith thing muth be a key." So he tried to put it into the key-hole, but an unexpected difficulty met him. Every time he tried to put in the key, the key-hole, which before was in easy reach, ran up so far that he could not get to it. He picked up some loose stones and piled them up against the door, and stood on them on his tiptoes, but still the key-hole shot up out of his reach. At last he got down exhausted, and sat down on the pile of stones he had made, with his back to the door. On looking round, he saw that the key-hole was back in its old place, and within a few inches of his head. He turned round suddenly and made a dive at it, with the key held in both hands, but the key-hole shot up like a rocket, until it was just out of his reach.

After trying to trap this key-hole in every way he could, he sat down on a stone and looked at it a minute, and then said very slowly: "Well, I never! That beats me all holler! What a funny thing a key-hole muth be."

At last he noticed another key-hole in the rock, not far away, and concluded to try the key in that. The key went in without trouble, and Bob turned it round several times, until the iron key had turned to brass in his hands.

"The blamed thing ith turnin' yaller!" cried little Towpate. You must excuse Bob's language. You might have talked in the same way if you had been so lucky as to be born on the Indian Kaintuck.

Seeing that he could not open anything by turning the key round in this key-hole, since there was no door here, he thought he would now try what luck he might have with the "yaller" key in opening

the door. The key-hole might admit a brass key. But what was his amazement to find on trying, that the key-hole which had run upward from an iron key, now ran down toward the bottom of the door. He pulled away the stones and stooped down till his head was near the ground, but the key-hole disappeared off the bottom of the door. When he gave up the chase it returned as before. Bobby worked himself into a great heat trying to catch it, but it was of no use.

Then he sat down again and stared at the door, and again he said slowly: "Well, I never, in all my born'd days! That beats me all holler! What a thing a keyhole ith! But that feller in town didn't have no trouble."

After thinking a while he looked at the key, and came to the conclusion that, as the key-hole went up from an iron key, and down from a brass one, that if he had one half-way between, he should have no trouble. "Thith key ith too *awful* yaller," he said. "I'll put it back and turn it half-way back, and then we'll thee."

So he stuck it into the key-hole and tried to turn it in the opposite direction to the way he had turned it before. But it would not turn to the left at all. So he let go and stood off looking at it a while, when, to his surprise, the key began turning to the right of its own accord. And as it turned it grew whiter, until it was a key of pure silver.

"Purty good for you, ole hoss," said Bob, as he pulled out the bright silver key. "We'll thee if you're any better'n the black one and the yaller one."

But neither would the silver one open the door; for the key-hole was as much afraid of it as of the brass one and the iron one. Only now it neither went up nor down, but first toward one side of the door and then toward the other, according to the way in which the key approached it. Bobby, after a while, went at it straight from the front, whereupon the key-hole divided into two parts—the one half running off the door to the right, the other to the left.

"Well, that'th ahead of my time," said Bob. But he was by this time so much amused by the changes in the key and the antics of the nimble key-hole, that he did not care much whether the door

opened or not. He waited until he had seen the truant key-hole take its place again, and then he took the silver key back to the other key-hole. As soon as he approached it the key leaped out of his hand, took its place in the key-hole, and began to turn swiftly round. When it stopped the silver had become gold.

"Yaller again, by hokey," said Bob. And he took the gold key and went back, wondering what the key-hole would do now. But there was now no key-hole. It had disappeared entirely.

Bob stood off and looked at the place where it had been, let his jaw drop a little in surprise and disappointment, and came out slowly with this: "Well, I never, in all my born'd days!"

He thought best now to take the key back and have it changed once more. But the other key-hole was gone too. Not knowing what to do, he returned to the door and put the key up where the nimble key-hole had been, whereupon it reappeared, the gold key inserted itself, and the door opened of its own accord.

Bob eagerly tried to enter, but there stood somebody in the door, blocking the passage.

"Hello!" said Bob. "You here, Ole Ke-whack? How did you get in? By the back door, I 'low."

"Put my yellow waistcoat back where you got it, ke-whack!" said the stake-driver, shivering. "It's cold in here, and how shall I go to the party without it, ke-whack!"

"Your yaller wescut?" said Bob. "I haint got no wescut, ke-whack or no ke-whack."

"You must put that away!" said the fly-up-the-creek, pecking his long nose at the gold key. "Ke-whack! ke-whack!"

"Oh!" said Towpate, "why didn't you say so?" Then he tossed the gold key down on the ground, where he had found the iron one, but the key stood straight up, waving itself to and fro, while Bobby came out with his drawling: "Well, I never!"

"Pick it up! Pick it up! Ke-whack! You've pitched my yellow waistcoat into the dirt, ke-whack, ke-whack!"

"Oh! You call that a wescut, do you. Well, I never!" And Bobby picked up the key, and since he could think of no place else to put it, he put it into the key-hole, upon which it unwound itself to the left till it was silver. Bobby, seeing that the key had ceased to move, pulled it out and turned toward the open door to see the stake-driver wearing a yellow vest, which he was examining with care, saying, "Ke-whack, ke-whack," as he did so. "I knew you'd get spots on it, ke-whack, throwing it on the ground that way."

Poor Bobby was too much mystified by this confusion between the gold key and the yellow vest, or "wescut," as they call it on the Indian Kaintuck, to say anything.

"Now, my white coat, put that back, ke-whack," said the fly-up-the-creek fairy. "I can't go to the party in my shirt sleeves, ke-whack."

"I haint got your coat, Ole Daddy Longlegs," said Bobby, "less you mean this key."

On this suspicion he put the key back, upon which it again unwound itself to the left and became brass. As soon as Bobby had pulled out the brass key and turned round, he saw that the fairy was clad in a white coat, which, with his stunning yellow vest, made him cut quite a figure.

"Now, my yellow cap," said the stake-driver, adding a cheerful ke-whack or two, and Bobby guessed that he was to put the brass key in the key-hole, whereupon it was immediately turned round by some unseen power until it became iron, and then thrown out on the ground where Bobby Towpate had found it at first. Sure enough, the fairy now wore a yellow cap, and, quick as thought, he stepped out to where the key was lying, and struck it twice with his nose, whereupon it changed to a pair of three-toed boots, which he quickly drew on. Then he turned and bowed to Bobby, and said:

"Ke-whack! You've ironed my coat and vest, and brushed my cap and blacked my boots. Good-day, ke-whack, I'm going to the party. You can go in if you want to."

Bobby stood for some time, looking after him as he flew away along the creek, crying "ke-whack, ke-whack, ke-whack!" And Bobby said once again: "Well, I never, in all my born'd days," and then

added, "Haint Daddy Longlegs peart? Thinks he's *some* in his yaller wescut, I 'low."

When once the fly-up-the-creek had gone out of sight and out of hearing, Bobby started on his search for the Sleepy-headed People. He travelled along a sort of underground gallery or cave, until he came to a round basin-like place. Here he found people who looked like fat little boys and girls, rather than men and women. They were lolling round in a ring, while one of the number read drowsily from a big book which was lying on a bowlder in the middle of this Sleepy-hollow. All seemed to be looking and listening intently. But as soon as those who sat facing Bobby caught sight of him, they gave a long yawn and fell into a deep sleep. One after another they looked at him, and one after another the little round, lazy fellows gaped, until it seemed their heads would split open, then fell over and slept soundly, snoring like little pigs. Bobby stood still with astonishment. He did not even find breath to say, "Well, I never!" For presently every one of the listeners had gone off to sleep. The reader, whose back was toward the new-comer, did not see him. He was the only one left awake, and Bobby looked to see him drop over at any moment. But the little fat man read right along in a dawdling, sleepy mumble, something about the Athenians until Bob cried out: "Hello, Ole Puddin'-bag, everybody'th gone to thleep; you'd jeth as well hole up yer readin' a while."

The little man rolled his eyes round upon Bob, and said: "Oh, my! I'm gone off again!" And then he stretched his fat cheeks in an awful yawn.

"Hey! You'll never get that mouth of your'n shet, ef you don't be mighty keerful," cried Bob; but the fellow was fast asleep before he could get the words out.

"Well now, that'th a purty lookin' crowd, haint it?" said Bob, looking round upon the sleepers.

Just at that moment they began to wake up, one after another, but as soon as they saw Bob, they sighed and said: "He's so curious," or, "He's so interesting," or something of the sort, and fell away into a deep slumber again. At last Bob undertook to wake some of them up by hallooming, but the more noise he made, the more soundly they slept. Then he gave over shaking them and shouting at them,

and sat down. As soon as he was quiet they began to wake up again.

"Hello!" cried Bob, when he saw two or three of them open their eyes.

"If you'd only keep still till I get awake," said one of them, and then they all went to sleep again.

By keeping quite still he got them pretty well waked up. Then they all fell to counting their toes, to keep from becoming too much interested in Bobby, for just so sure as they get interested or excited, the Sleepy-headed People fall asleep. Presently the reader awoke, and began to mumble a lot of stuff out of the big book, about Epaminondas, and Sesostris, and Cyaxeres, and Clearchus, and the rest, and they all grew a little more wakeful. When he came to an account of a battle, Bobby began to be interested a little in the story, but all the others yawned and cried out, "Read across, read across!" and the reader straightway read clear across the page, mixing the two columns into hopeless nonsense, so as to destroy the interest. Then they all waked up again.

"I know a better thtory than that air!" said Bobby, growing tired of the long mumbling reading of the dull book.

"Do you? Tell it," said the reader.

So Bobby began to tell them some of his adventures, upon which they all grew interested and fell asleep.

"Don't tell any more like that," said the little reader, when he awoke.

"What'th the matter weth it? Heap better thtory than that big book that you're a mumblin' over, Mr. Puddin'."

"We don't like interesting stories," said the sleepy reader. "They put us to sleep. This is the best book in the world. It's Rollin's Ancient History, and it hasn't got but a few interesting spots in the whole of it. Those we keep sewed up, so that we can't read them. The rest is all so nice and dull, that it keeps us awake all day."

Bobby stared, but said nothing.

"Can you sing?" said one of the plump little old women.

"Yeth, I can sing Dandy Jim."

"Let's have it. I do love singing; it soothes me and keeps me awake."

Thus entreated, little Bobby stood up and sang one verse of a negro song he had heard, which ran:

"When de preacher took his tex'  
He look so berry much perplex'  
Fur nothin' come acrost his mine  
But Dandy Jim from Caroline!"

Bobby shut his eyes tight, and threw his head back and sang through his nose, as he had seen big folks do. He put the whole of his little soul into these impressive words. When he had finished and opened his eyes to discover what effect his vocal exertions had produced, his audience was of course fast asleep.

"Well, I never!" said Bob.

"The tune's too awful lively," said the little old woman, when she woke up. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Now, hear me sing." And she began, in a slow, solemn movement, the most drawling tune you ever heard, and they all joined in the same fashion:

"Poor old Pidy,  
She died last Friday:  
Poor old creetur,  
The turkey-buzzards— —"

But before they could finish the line, while they were yet hanging to the tails of the turkey-buzzards, so to speak, Bobby burst out with:

"La! that'th the toon the old cow died on. I wouldn't thing that."

"You wouldn't, hey?" said the woman, getting angry.

"No, I wouldn't, little dumplin'."