

The Strange Boy

From the book, "The Fairy Doll and Other Plays" By Netta Syrett
(1922)

Characters:

-Betty

-Pat

-Kathleen

-Dolly

-Kenneth

-Di

-Jane (The Housemaid)

-The Strange Boy

(Betty and Pat are children who are brought up together. Kathleen, Dolly, Kenneth and Di are their little friends)

Scene: The schoolroom. A large map on the wall. A bookcase with school books, and a blackboard in one corner. The room is, however, pretty and bright. Flowers in pots on the window-sill. Pictures on the wall. Door center. Another door stage right. Window stage left. A table (not too big to be lifted by children) is laid for a birthday tea. Cake in the middle of the table. Flowers round it. A tea service of very small cups and saucers.

Door right opens, and Betty comes running in. She is dressed in white, as for a party. She goes up to the tea-table, and delightedly looks at the decorations, rearranges the tea-cups, etc. Voices outside. Betty runs to door, and admits two little girls about her own age.)

DOLLY AND KATHLEEN: *(Together.)* Many happy returns of the day.

KATHLEEN: *(Giving a little parcel.)* Here's our present.

BETTY: *(Unwrapping it.)* Oh! How sweet! It's just what I wanted for the Doll's House. *(She kisses both of them.)* Thank you, ever so much.

DOLLY: *(Looking around.)* Is this your schoolroom? It's much nicer than ours. Ours is horrid.

KATHLEEN: Do you have a governess?

BETTY: Yes. A Mademoiselle.

DOLLY: *(Apprehensively.)* Is she coming in to tea?

BETTY: No. Isn't it lovely? We're going to be quite alone all the afternoon. Mother said we might. She's gone out, and so has Mademoiselle, and we're going to have tea all by ourselves, and I'm going to pour out. Look! We've got the dear little tea-set. *(She draws the children to look at the table.)*

KATHLEEN: Oh, see! What a pretty cake! White with green letters on it. (*Reading.*) “Betty and Pat:” Who’s Pat?

BETTY: (*Staring, and then laughing.*) Why—Pat. I forgot. You don’t know Pat? He’s a sort of cousin. (*Ruefully.*) He’s been away, at his uncle’s house in the country, ever since the day I got to know you.

DOLLY: Well, that isn’t very long. Only a week.

BETTY: It seems millions and millions of years since he went away. It’s always perfectly horrid without Pat. (*Joyfully.*) But he’s coming back this afternoon on purpose for the birthday tea.

KATHLEEN: Why does he have his name on your birthday cake?

BETTY: Because it’s *his* birthday too. Only he’s a year older than me. We always keep them together. Look what he sent me this morning. (*Shows a book.*) It’s a *lovely* Fairy book. And I gave him a dormouse. We have lessons together with Mademoiselle, all except Latin. And he’s awfully naughty sometimes, only you mustn’t tell papa. Directly Mademoiselle sees him, she looks up to the ceiling like this, and says, “Mon Dieu!” and then he draws French cats with bows round their necks, on the blackboard, and then—

DOLLY: He sounds awfully nice.

BETTY: So he is, except when he teases me, and then he’s horrid. But he can make up lovely exciting games and stories about fairies and pixies and things. Only never when there are other people. Then he slashes about with a stick, you know, just like boys do, and pretends to be very grand, and likes hunting cats and shooting with catapults, and hating girls—just to show he’s a boy. But really he isn’t a bit nasty like that. And when we get grown up we’re going to have a little house in the very middle of the forest, and tame squirrels, and have them to breakfast with us. And when it’s moonlight we shall go out and watch the fairies dancing, and—

KATHLEEN: (*Scornfully.*) There aren’t any fairies.

BETTY: Not in England. There are in Ireland—heaps. And Pat and I are Irish. And we both had our sleeves tied up with green ribbon when we were christened. *My* nurse says I did, and Pat’s nurse says *he* did. And we were both born on *May Eve*. And children like that can always see the fairies. Nurse says so.

DOLLY: (*Doubtfully.*) Do you believe it?

KATHLEEN: Don’t be so silly! Who else is coming besides Pat?

BETTY: Oh! Kenneth and Di Cuthbertson—and a new little boy I've never seen. Mamma met his mother in Ireland, and now they've come to live quite close to us. And his mother says he's a very strange child, and he's often ill, and I wish he wasn't coming. *(Stops to listen to her name called outside, "Betty! Hulloo, Betty!") (Joyfully.)* Here's Pat!

(Enter Pat, who looks a little older than Betty. She rushes to him and embraces him.)

PAT AND BETTY: *(Simultaneously.)* Many happy returns of the day!

(He does not at first notice the other children, and begins to whirl Betty round in a dance.)

PAT: I say! The dormouse is heavenly. Let's call him Pixy, and then we can pretend—*(Suddenly pulls himself up, while his manner changes.)* Hulloo!

BETTY: This is Kathleen, and this is Dolly. I've just got to know them. And they've got a Mademoiselle too, and—

PAT: *(Rather shamefacedly and gruffly.)* How are you? *(Shakes hands awkwardly, and then turns to Betty.)* I say, is that silly young chap you told me about, coming?

BETTY: Yes, his mother said if he was well enough he might. How do you know he's a silly young chap?

PAT: Of course he is. We don't know him. Besides, the little ass is *delicate*. *(With scorn.)* Fancy being *delicate*!

BETTY: Well, he can't help it. He may be a very nice little boy.

PAT: *(Derisively.)* Very nice little boy! Very nice little ass!

BETTY: *(Reprovingly.)* You know you're not allowed to say "ass" —only donkey.

(Door opens, and Kenneth and Di come in. Betty runs and kisses them.)

BETTY: How do you do?

PAT: Hulloo! *(Pulls Di's hair.)* Hulloo! *(With nod to Kenneth.)*

BETTY: This is Kathleen, and this is Dolly.

(Children shake hands shyly.)

PAT: Come on, Betty. Let's have tea. The other fellow isn't coming. I suppose the poor little angel has a cold.

(Door opens, and housemaid comes in with teapot.)

PAT: Hurrah! Here's Jane, now we can begin.

JANE: *(Putting teapot down.)* I shouldn't think the other little boy's coming, Miss Betty. It's past five. Are you going to pour out? *(She places chairs at table.)* Are you sure you can manage, Miss Betty, dear?

BETTY: *(With dignity.)* Yes, beautifully, of course.

JANE: *(Smiling.)* That's all right then. *(Exit.)*

(The children gather round the table.)

BETTY: *(Pouring out.)* Pass the jam, Pat!

(Pat obeys. The children begin their tea.)

PAT: It's jolly decent jam!

BETTY: *(Triumphantly.)* There! I haven't spilt a drop. *(Suddenly.)* I say, is it rude to begin without the strange boy, do you think? He *might* come.

PAT: "The strange boy!" What silly names you call people! *(As though inspired with an idea.)* Well! We'll give him one chance. *(Runs to window and opens it.)* Now we'll call him three times, and if he doesn't come, we'll jolly well go on without him. *(Calls.)* Strange boy! Are you outside? *(Turning to children.)* Now call that altogether!

(Children, laughing and entering into the spirit of the game, call altogether.)

CHILDREN: *Strange boy, are you outside?*

PAT: Strange boy, we're waiting!

CHILDREN: *Strange boy, we're waiting!*

PAT: Strange boy, come now or never!

CHILDREN: *Strange boy, come now or never!*

PAT: *(Shutting window.)* He's done for himself! Now let's cut the cake.

BETTY: Shall I put in the sugar, or shall I—

(A knock. All the children are suddenly silent.)

BETTY: *(Below her breath.)* It's the strange boy! Come in!

(The door opens, and a pretty boy stands on the threshold. He is dressed in a short tunic of emerald green. He has a quaint little cap with a sprig of flower in it. The children look at one another in amazement.)

DOLLY: *(Pulling Betty's sleeve and speaking in a loud aside.)* He thought it was a fancy dress party! *(She, Kathleen, and the other little girls giggle.)*

THE BOY: *(Suddenly.)* Someone called me.

BETTY: *(Getting off her chair and going to him.)* You are the little strange boy, aren't you? We thought you weren't coming, and so before we began tea, Pat thought we'd better just—

THE BOY: Call me? Yes. I was passing and I heard.

BETTY: *(As she brings him to the table.)* Did you really and truly hear us outside? I say, Pat, we must have called loud.

KENNETH: *(Staring.)* Why have you got those things on?

DOLLY: Did you think it was fancy dress?

THE BOY: I am often dressed like this.

(The children again look at one another in amazement. Pat, with his elbows on the table, never takes his eyes from the newcomer. He pays no attention to anything else.)

DI: *(Incredulously.)* But you don't play in the square like that?

THE BOY: No. I play on the mountains, and in the green fields, and in the forest.

KATHLEEN: Then you don't live in London?

THE BOY: No. But I come sometimes.

BETTY: Will you have some birthday cake? *(Hesitates.)* I don't know what your name is.

THE BOY: *(Looking at the cake and reading)* : "Betty and Pat." You *(Point to her)* are Betty and you are Pat.

KATHLEEN: How do you know? You've never seen them before.

THE BOY: Yes, I have seen them both before.

PAT: *(In a confused way.)* Before? Where?

THE BOY: In a little house in the middle of the forest. *(Pat and Betty exchange glances.)* I have brought some birthday presents. Look! One for Pat, and one for Betty. *(He takes out of his tunic two little silver flutes.)*

THE CHILDREN *(except Betty and Pat, who take the flutes silently):* Oh! How pretty!

KENNETH: But they don't know how to play on them!

THE BOY: Presently I'll show them.

DOLLY: *(Looking at him in a puzzled way.)* How funny you are! Show them now.

KENNETH: Let's push the table back so that we can see him better.

(The children, with the exception of Betty and Pat, who are too absorbed, do this, and then all stand or sit near the table watching curiously. The boy holds out his hand for Pat's flute, which the latter silently gives him. He puts it to his lips, and wild music rises. As he plays, Betty and Pat get up slowly as though spellbound, and stand hand in hand close to the boy, staring. The other children remain in their places listening, their eyes fixed on the player. Music suddenly stops.)

PAT: *(Excitedly.)* Listen! There were birds singing just now, and a rushing noise, like a waterfall.

BETTY: *(Also excitedly.)* Why, of course! It's our waterfall, near our cottage in the forest. We always *said* there was to be one quite close. Oh, Pat, how *lovely!*

PAT: *(Eagerly.)* Tell us who you are?

THE BOY: *(Laughing mischievously.)* Why, I'm Michael O'Neil. Didn't you expect me to your birthday tea?

PAT: *(Slowly.)* You are not really Michael O'Neil? I believe you are—*(Pauses.)*

BETTY: We think you are—*(Pauses and glances at the other children, who are still gazing at the boy as though bewitched.)*

THE BOY: Go on. They're half asleep. That's what the music does to some people. They won't remember anything we say. Who do you think I am?

BETTY: *(Going close to him, delightedly, yet a little afraid.)* We think you are—a fairy!

DOLLY: *(Sleepily, while she yawns and rubs her eyes.)* How silly you are, Betty! *(Yawns again.)*

DI: *(Also sleepily.)* Always talking about—

KATHLEEN: Always talking about—*(Stops to yawn.)*

KENNETH: *(Rubbing his eyes.)* Silly fairies and things.

PAT: *(To the boy.)* Tell us!

BETTY: Tell us! Are you a fairy?

THE BOY: *(Laughing.)* It's a secret.

PAT: But anyhow you know them? You've seen them?

THE BOY: Listen. I'll tell you a story. *(He beckons, and very slowly the other children draw near, and sit on the floor, while the boy stands in the midst of them. He speaks mysteriously.):*

Michael O'Neil lies quiet in bed,
A soft warm pillow under his head.
There he lies through the livelong day,
"Staring at nothing" the good folks say.
(Laughs.) Little they know that Michael's "away."
Out and away with the fairy men,
Over the mountains, into the glen,
Into the glen of the silent lake
Beside whose waters the rushes shake.
There he sees when the night is still
Thousands of stars, peep over the hill,
Thousands of stars in the water deep
Lie 'mid the rushes—fast asleep.
There he hears when the night is fair
Sweet wild music upon the air;
Music so strange, so keen, so clear,
The daisies open their leaves to hear.
And all the birds that are dreaming of spring
Wake in their nests, and begin to sing.
There he sees, through the warm still night,
The feet of the fairies gleaming white,
In a dance so wild, in a dance so gay,
That Michael laughs, and the good folks say,
"What has come to the child today?"

Little they know that Michael's "away"!
(Laughs again.)

PAT: *(Slowly.)* Is *that* how it is?

BETTY: *(Nodding.)* Yes, I think I understand.

THE BOY: *(Laughing.)* Do you? I thought you would.

KENNETH: *(Getting up and yawning.)* Let's play something else now. I'm tired of Blind Man's Bluff.

KATHLEEN: *(Dreamily.)* Let's have Hunt the Slipper.

DOLLY: Yes. Hunt the Slipper.

(Kenneth takes off his shoe. The children move to another part of the room, and sit in a ring, every now and then passing the slipper slowly from one to another as though they are playing in their sleep.)

BETTY: *(First looking at them, and then at the boy, calls wonderingly):* Kathleen! Kenneth!

THE BOY: Let them alone. They think we're all playing. The music made them think so, that's all.

PAT: But why didn't it make *us* think so?

THE BOY: I don't know. It says different things to different people.

BETTY: *(Eagerly.)* Tell us everything about Fairyland. Do the fairies talk?

THE BOY: They whisper.

PAT: What do they whisper?

THE BOY: You don't understand—until you've been away with them.

BETTY: Do you dance with them?

THE BOY: Yes.

PAT AND BETTY: Show us!

THE BOY: *(Looking around the room.)* Here? I want the soft grass, and the big white moon, and all the stars.

PAT: Try! Do try!

THE BOY: Well! But it won't be right. Wait till I call the music. *(Puts the flute to his lips. Music rises. He throws down the flute, and while music still sounds, dances.)*

BETTY: *(After dance.)* Oh! Teach us! Teach Pat and me!

THE BOY: I can't. You must first learn your magic flutes.

PAT: Shall we ever play them?

THE BOY: Perhaps. If you take enough *trouble*. *(While he speaks he moves towards the door center.)*

BETTY: *(Apprehensively.)* Where are you going?

THE BOY: *(Laughing and speaking in mysterious whisper.)* Back to Michael. He's been staring at nothing, long enough. It's time he was lively once more.

PAT: *(Running after him.)* But we shall see you again?

THE BOY: Yes. You will see Michael O'Neil. *(Laughs.)* He will be dressed in a suit like yours!

BETTY: *(Incoherently.)* But we don't want that. We want your lovely green dress, and the grass, and the big white moon, and the—

THE BOY: Then you must learn to play the flutes. But *(impressively)* hide them! That's right, hide them! Goodbye! Goodbye! *(He waves his hand to each of them in turn, opens the door, and is gone, smiling as he goes. Faint music sounds a moment, and dies. Betty and Pat stand looking at one another. The moment music ceases, the other children resume their natural manner, and come running up, talking altogether.)*

KATHLEEN: Shall we play Dumb Crambo now?

DOLLY: Oh no.

DI: Yes. Yes. Dumb Crambo.

KENNETH: *(To Pat.)* You and Betty choose sides.

(While the clamor goes on, Jane, the housemaid, comes in.)

JANE: You're called for, Miss Di, and Master Kenneth. *(To Kathleen and Dolly.)* And your maid is here too, dears.

DI: Oh no! Not yet.

KATHLEEN: Oh! Can't we stay a little longer?

JANE: They're both in a hurry, and they say you mustn't wait. *(To Betty.)* Oh, Miss Betty, the poor little boy wasn't well enough to come. He's been in bed all day. Someone's just been round with a message.

BETTY AND PAT: Why? *—(Check themselves suddenly, and look at other children.)*

DOLLY: Why, he *did* come. *(Stops, puzzled.)*

KATHLEEN: What *do* you mean? Fancy not knowing if he came! How stupid you are, Dolly.

(Dolly still looks puzzled.)

DI: Well, we called him. *(Laughing.)*

KENNETH: Yes. We gave him a chance.

JANE: *(Carelessly.)* Called him? What do you mean? But come along and get your things on. I'll take them, Miss Betty, and then they shall come back to say goodbye. *(Suspiciously.)* You're very quiet, you two. I hope you've been good and kind to your little friends?

DI: Oh yes. We've had such fun, Jane.

KATHLEEN: We've had Blind Man's Bluff.

DI: And Hunt the Slipper, and—

(The children go out with Jane talking. When the door closes upon them, Betty and Pat look at one another, then simultaneously take out the flutes. They both put them to their lips, and blow in vain.)

BETTY: *(Despairingly.)* It's no good.

PAT: *(Doggedly.)* We've got to learn them, you know. And we shall, if we take enough trouble.

BETTY: And when we get grown up, we'll play them in our cottage in the forest. And then we shall see the fairies dance.

PAT: And now the squirrels' language!

BETTY: And hear the flowers talk.

PAT: And understand everything—and have a splendid time!

BETTY: *(Excitedly clinging to Pat's arm.)* And we'll never forget the strange boy, will we? And we'll ask him to tea in our cottage, and have eggs and honey and cream. It will be perfectly lovely. *(With sudden ruefulness.)* But, oh, Pat! I expect it will take a long time to learn the flutes.

(Both children stand now together, looking down at the flutes which they hold in their hands.)

CURTAIN