

RBSC Report: Five Fairy Tales

Jack Zipes suggests that “The creation of fairy-tale worlds by British writers moved in two basic directions from 1860 until the turn of the century: conventionalism and utopianism” (xviii). This selection attempts to underscore the subversive possibilities of the fairy tale form, privileging texts that in Zipes’ words, offer no reconciliation with the status quo, and instead “reveal a profound belief in the power of the imagination as a potent force that can be used to question the value of existing social relations” (xviii).

In his illustrations for Charles Dickens’ *The Magic Fishbone*, Francis Bedford privileges the anti-establishment impulse that underlies Dickens’ Condition-of-England novels (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1

Bedford’s illustration is heavily ironic; here, the crownless and dishevelled King is tormented by paperwork and seemingly overwhelmed “Under Government,” pointing to the futility of his position. Instead, the trappings that denote monarchical authority are displaced onto the ominous,

titanic figure that looms over him, perhaps an anthropomorphization of the demands of administration (Fig. 1).



(Fig. 2)

Here, the self-possessed, angelic Princess Alicia and the light that surrounds her are juxtaposed against the King's evident discontent; Bedford powerfully evokes what U.C Knoepfelmacher terms the "regressive tendencies" of fairy tale writers, who may strive towards a "total annihilation of the adult's self-awareness" (499). Indeed, the narrative elevates the agency of the female child; the Princess Alicia transforms into a heroic maternal figure who sustains the family through her industry and later saves it from financial ruin by means of her ability to delay gratification. In what appears to be a humorous inversion of the didactic bent in some children's literature, the Fairy Grandmarina avails herself of the Princess Alicia as a moral example by which she chastises and infantilizes the sheepish King.

In Andrew Lang's satirical *The Adventures of Prince Prigio*, the eponymous protagonist is cursed with an incurable priggishness (as his name suggests) by way of the trope of the missed invitation at a christening.

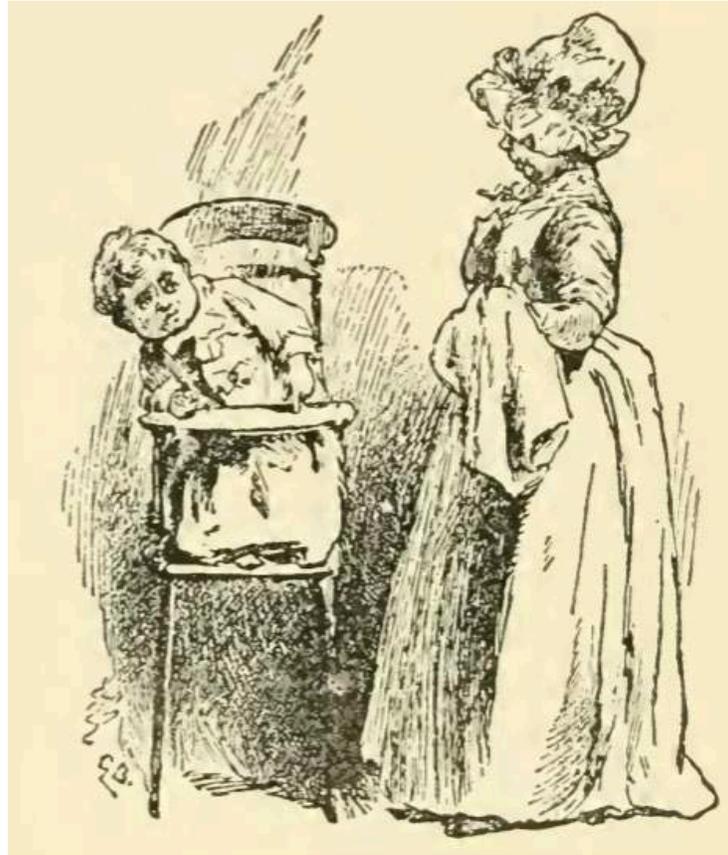


Fig. 3

The infant Prince “argue[s] with his nurse as soon as he could speak” and indicts social inequities by interrogating his father about why he should “have poached eggs and plum cakes at afternoon tea, while many other persons went without dinner” (Lang 8). Here, the expression of strong suspicion on a cherubic face is oddly comical. The know-it-all Prince infallibly stirs distaste in all who encounter him, including his own father, yet Lang refuses to socialize this objectionable tendency; instead, the tale concludes with the Prince wishing to “seem no cleverer than other people” (111). The appearance of conformity that in fact serves only to reaffirm self-superiority (he is “really as clever as ever”) subverts pedagogical readings; not only is the Prince

not truly reformed, the King is forced to acknowledge the Prince's superiority when he proves crucial to the kingdom's deliverance (111).

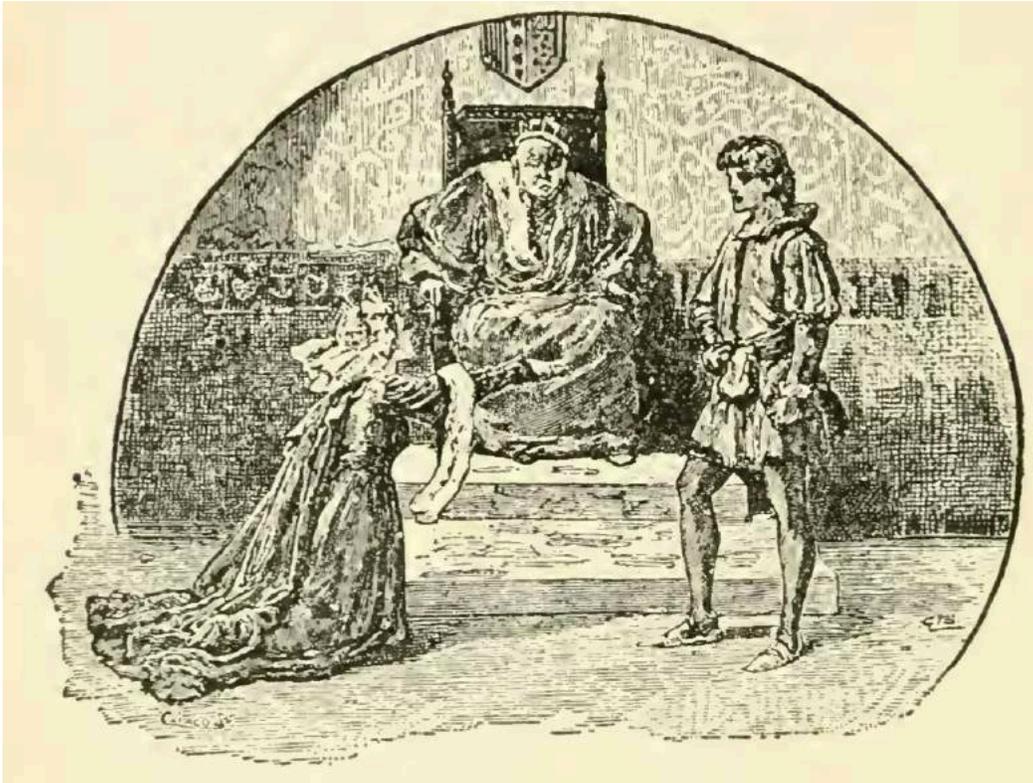


Fig. 4

Instead, the uniquely idealized representation of the Prince in most of Bedford's illustrations (Fig. 4) suggests his status as sole dispenser of unpleasant truths, besieged and thoroughly "hated by all" of the corrupt figures of authority that surround him (8).

Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* exemplifies what Zipes describes as "an intense quest for the female self" in the fairy tale tradition (xxvi). In this tale, the male protagonist with whom the reader is first led to identify is slowly but insistently rendered marginal to Mopsa, whose progress toward queenship evokes Alice's journey in *Through the Looking Glass*.



Fig. 5

Here, Jack teaches the growing Mopsa to read amidst a woodland idyll in which the colourful “one-foot-one” fairies assist with the lesson by supplying flowers (Fig. 5). Maria Kirk provides each fairy with its own delightfully distinctive attire.

This scene of pastoral innocence renders the image that immediately follows it in the text (Fig. 6) quite startling; within the textual space between the two images, the toddler undergoes a swift transformation, emerging as a seemingly otherworldly being.

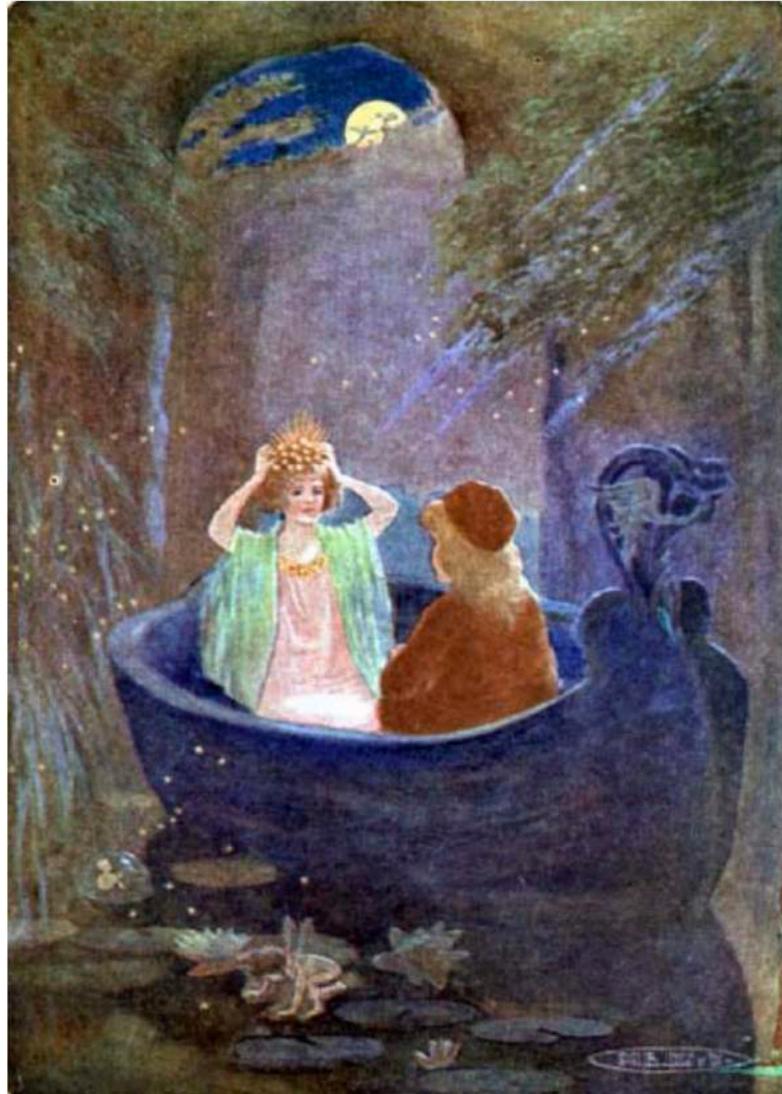
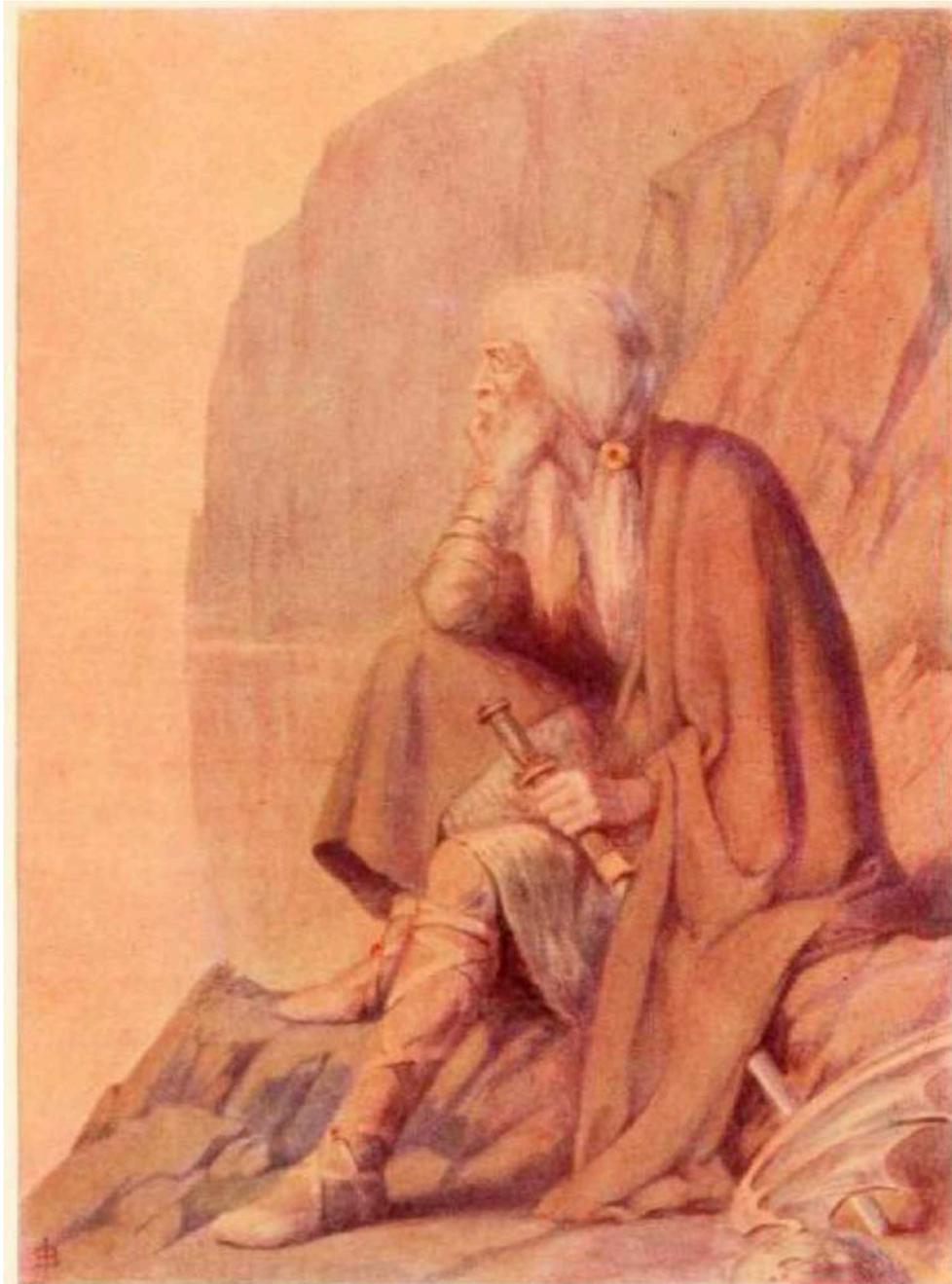


Fig. 6

Kirk foregrounds the tale's subversion of gender norms: not only has Mopsa suddenly surpassed Jack in physical height, she fashions her own crown and bestows it upon herself in a sort of self-coronation. The moonbeams themselves stretch out towards her, directing the viewer's gaze toward the central, ethereal figure (Fig. 6). In contrast, Jack's features are elided, while the earth-tones of his clothing are dull against the radiance that seems to emanate from the transcendent Mopsa; Kirk here anticipates Jack's progressively diminished narrative role, which culminates in his substitution and ultimate eviction from Fairyland.

Tales from The Earthly Paradise, William Glover's prose rendering of a selection of the tales retold in William Morris's epic, *The Earthly Paradise*, claims children as its target audience. Yet the text opens with a sombre illustration of an aged man welcoming death (Fig. 7)



THE FAIRIES' GIFTS.

"What man is this who, weak and worn and old, can smile on his coming death." Page 103.

Fig. 7

This arresting image is soon followed by a prologue which details the disastrous Odyssean journey that follows a hopeless quest for utopia. Indeed, though Glover's narratives often espouse a clear moral - for example, "The Writing on the Image" cautions the reader against the dangers of materialism - Bonus's potent illustrations reveal a space of the imagination that threatens to overwhelm the viewer in its intensity (Fig. 8).

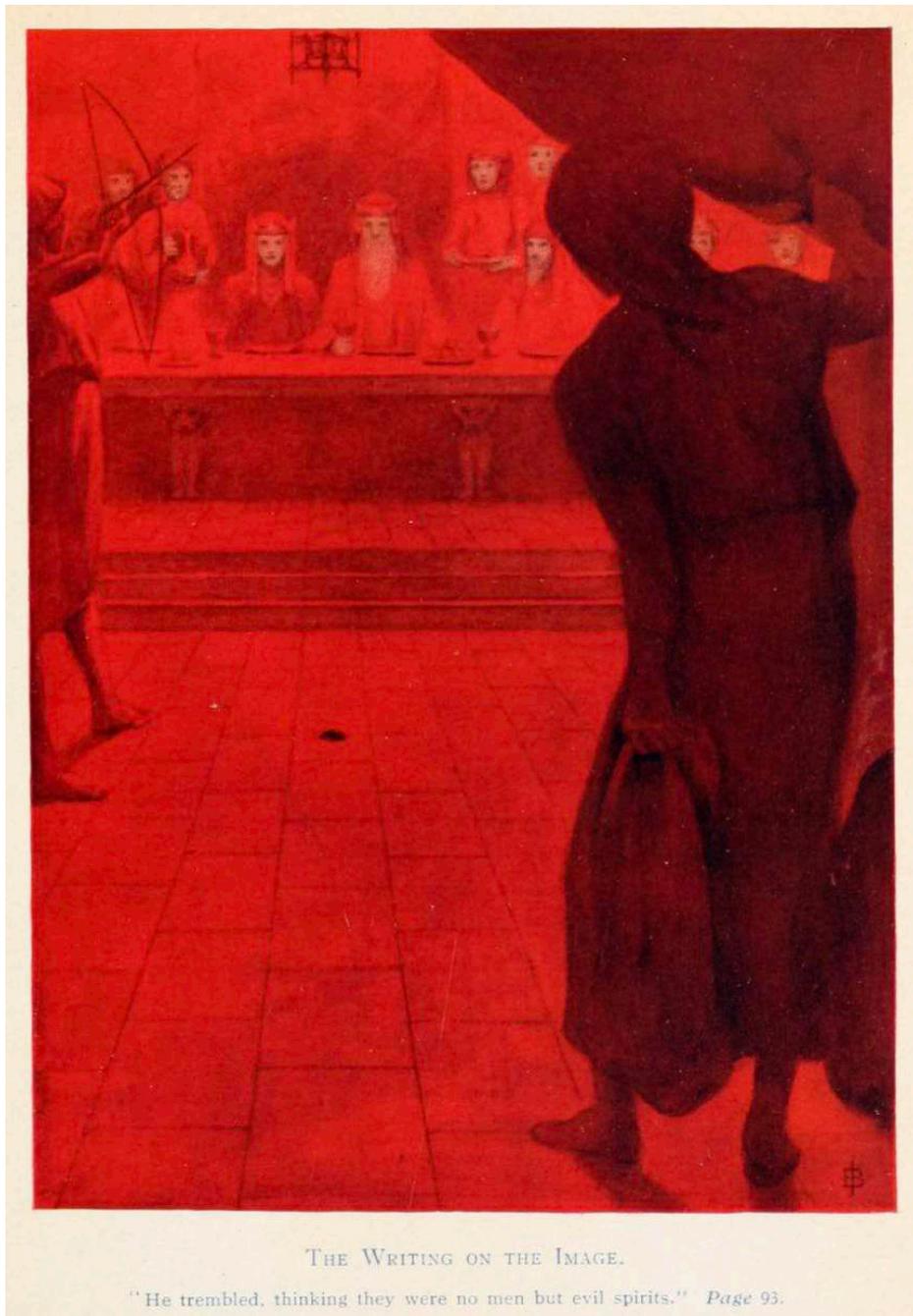


Fig. 8

Bonus' haunting illustration for "The Writing on the Image" amplifies and indeed confronts the reader with the latent horror within an otherwise didactic narrative (Fig. 8). Like the avaricious Scholar, we too appear to be eternally trapped inside the luridly red death chamber, surrounded by the living dead that preside over our demise (Fig. 8).

William Fraser's *Sa'-Zada Tales* details a zoo-keeper's mission to foster mutual understanding between his cantankerous animal comrades during a drought. Arthur Heming's naturalistic sketches breathe life into each animal conversationalist, drawing the reader into Fraser's wonderfully cacophonous world.

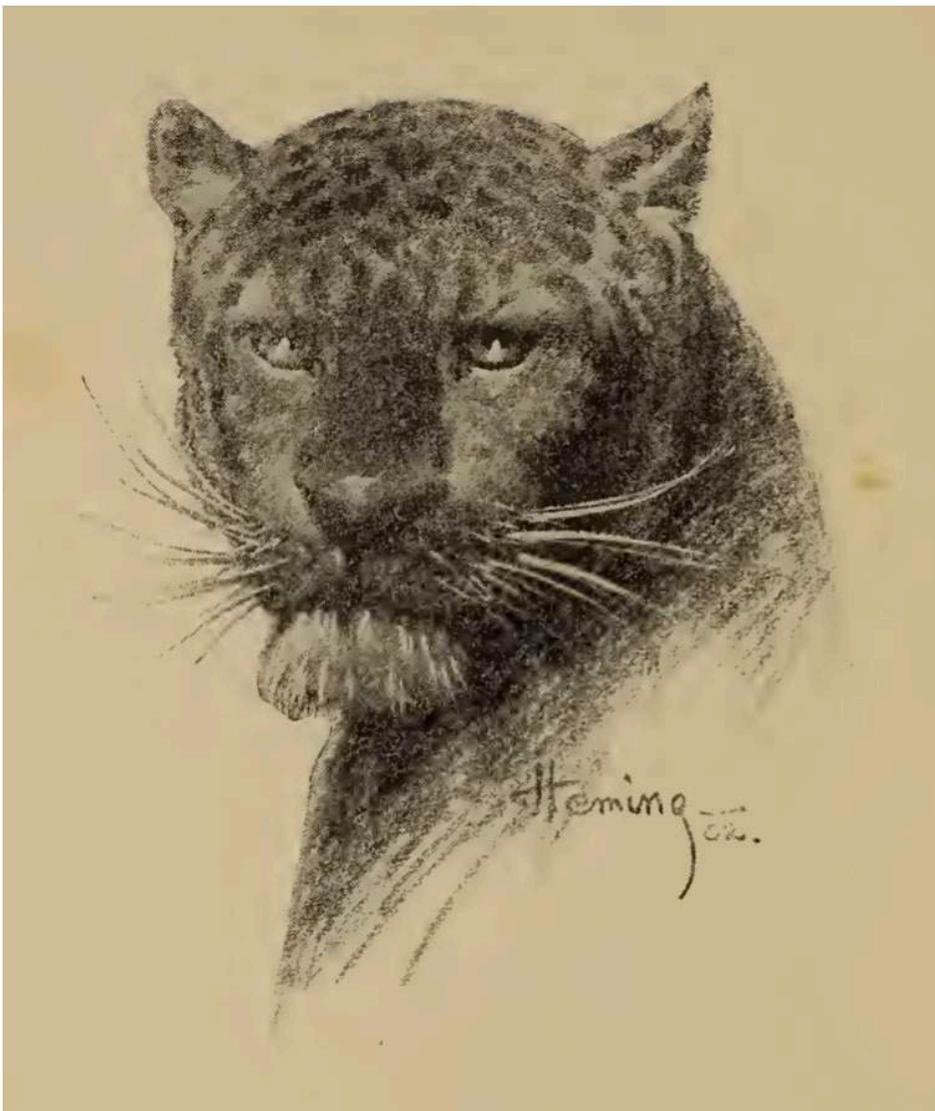
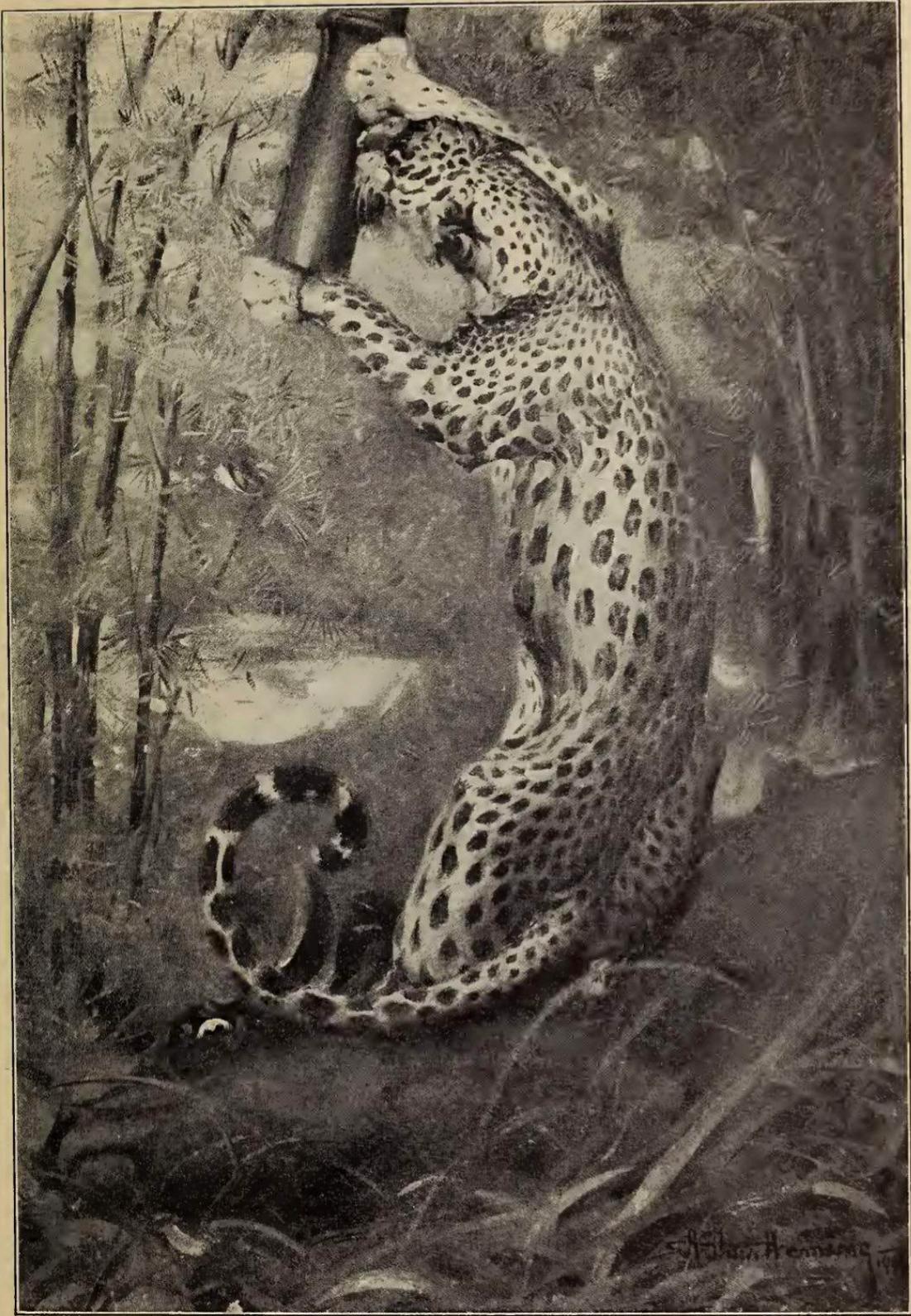


Fig. 9



"THE THING THAT HAD ME BY THE PAW WAS OF A FIENDISH KIND."

Fig. 10

Fraser's use of defamiliarization to indict a paradoxically animalistic humanity is complemented by Heming's emotive animal portraits (Fig. 10). Here, the illustration of the noble Yellow Leopard caught in a snare powerfully compels the reader to join both carnivorous "Blood-kind" and herbivorous "Peace-kind" in their shared hatred of "Men-kind," the diabolical evil (x).

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