

L'Enfant et Les Sortileges

As told by David Hockney



L'Enfant is about a little boy who has no name, the setting is a farmhouse in Normandy. Colette wrote the story around 1917 – that is the period in which the opera occurs. She describes the farmhouse as having a very low ceiling with beams and a large fireplace.

As the music begins, you imagine the fire making dancing shadows in the room, and these are mysterious to the child. Anyway the mother comes into the room. You don't actually see her, you see her huge shadow on the wall.

She tells the child that until he has done all his homework and been a good boy he may have only dry bread and tea without sugar. She leaves a tray with a black Wedgwood teapot and china cup on it and says, "Now baby" – she calls him a baby – "be a good boy!" When she leaves, the little boy says he is fed up with being good – "I want to be free and wicked, wicked, wicked!"

He rushes over and smashes the teapot, he breaks the cup, he jabs the squirrel with his pen, he pulls the tail of the cat sitting by the fire, he pokes the fire, he tears the wallpaper off the wall, a strip with shepherds on it comes down. He pulls the pendulum off the grandfather clock, and he rips up the fairy-tale book he's been reading.

Then he sits in the armchair that begins to move about and sing, you wretched boy, you

shouldn't behave like this. We'll be glad to see the back of you. The fauteuil sings and does a dance with the little Louis XV chair, complaining about how wretched the boy is.

When they have finished, the grandfather clock runs around the room singing, "You wretched boy. Even I don't know the time now, so how can I tell it to anybody else? You are wicked and you shouldn't behave like this"

Then the fire leaps out of the fireplace and says, "You know, fires can warm people but they can burn very wicked boys! Burn! Burn! You are wretched and you shouldn't behave like this." The fire chases him around the room until, in the end, the ashes put out the fire.

Little shepherds and shepherdesses come dancing off the wallpaper singing a very tender, sad song about how they were torn apart from each other when the little boy tore the wallpaper. They do a beautiful dance, the shepherds go off one way and the shepherdesses another, with their pink sheep and blue trees, and the little boy is sad.

Then suddenly, out of the book rises the golden haired princess who says, "You wretched boy! You have torn my book and now nobody knows whether I will live happily ever after, I feel sorry for you. She sings a beautiful aria and all her anger and tenderness are in the music. Then she disappears into the book. And the little boy says he is fed up with books as well.

Out of a lesson book jumps a noisy, crooked little schoolmaster character, Mr. Arithmetic, who starts rapidly reciting arithmetical problems, and also out of the book jump a lot of numbers. To the little boys delight, the numbers run around shouting 5 times 4 is 36, 6 times 2 is 94 and so on. The little boy is so thrilled with this, naturally, he runs around shouting all the wrong sums as well.

Eventually all the little sums disappear and the boy is alone in the room with the black cat, which is now gigantic. Through the window it sees a huge white cat in the garden. The white cat starts singing to the black cat- a love duet.

Then the black cat leads the boy into the garden and this marvelous music goes mad. The claustrophobic room disappears to reveal a beautiful, moonlit garden. "Oh how marvelous it is to be back in the garden," the boy says. All the awful things that happened to him in the room have disappeared. He walks toward the huge tree in the center of the

garden, but the tree says, "Oh you wretched boy! You stuck a penknife in my side yesterday, you shouldn't have done that, you're absolutely wicked.."

Then a dragonfly comes up to him and says, "Oh, what a wretched boy. What you did to my sister! You took the beautiful wings of my sister and pinned them on the door – an awful thing to do." And then the squirrels and frogs come up and complain about how wretched the boy is, how naughty he is, how wicked he is. They complain so much and are so angry at the frightened little boy that they're all running around and one treads on the squirrel.

When the boy sees the injured squirrel, a little compassion overcomes him. He takes off his neckerchief and ties up the squirrels' paw. All the animals watch and say, well, perhaps he's not too bad after all. They decide he is redeemable and, singing, "He is good, he is wise," they lead him to the great tree where, as the curtain comes down, he calls for his mother.