

The Day Boy and the Night Girl

A play by Matt Buchanan

Based upon stories by George MacDonald

Speaking Characters

Mr. Raymond, a gentleman poet

Photogen, the day boy

Nycteris, the night girl

Jim, a sick child

Nancy, a sick child

Fargu, a huntsman, Photogen's guardian

A Nurse

Children, in the hospital

Waltho, a witch

Creatures of the forest and the plain

An orphans' hospital. It is night-time, and bedsteads and wheelchairs and hospital apparati cast coldly animate shadow-creatures over the huddled forms of sleeping Children. Suddenly one, Jim, is awake and screaming.

JIM

No! Where am I!?

Instantly, a little girl, Nancy, is out of bed and comforting Jim, who clings to her for life.

NANCY

It's all right. The dark can't hurt you.

JIM

I had the dream again, Nancy! Don't let the darkness get me!

NANCY

Go to sleep, Jim.

JIM

You won't leave me, will you?

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Draft 2.2

NANCY

I'll stay right here, I promise. Go to sleep.

Nancy cradles Jim's head in her lap. He is soon quiet and sleeping. Nancy remains with him, finally drifting to sleep herself, and the two are still, entwined. The lighting changes to indicate the advent of day. A few faces emerge from their cocoons. In some health has begun to appear in a twinge upon the cheeks and a doubtful brightness in the eyes, just as out of the winter the spring comes in buds and crocuses. Others remind us of snow and keen winds, more than of sunshine and butterflies. Jim awakens to find himself secure in Nancy's arms. He squirms from her embrace, waking her in the process.

JIM

Nancy! Get out of my bed!

NANCY

(Groggily) You had a nightmare. You were afraid.

JIM

Well, I'm all right now. Go away, you silly girl!

He shoves her out of his bed, and she scrambles into her own, burrowing under the covers to catch a few more moments of sleep. Just then a teeming whirlwind of a Nurse blows into the room, checking up--smiling at some, feeling the foreheads of others, and waking those who are slow to greet the morning. On her way out, she nearly blows over Mr. Raymond, who has just arrived.

NURSE

Oh! Excuse me, Mr. Raymond! How lovely to see you again. The children do love it when you visit. *(A blush.)* And so do I.

The Nurse sweeps out of the room, and Mr. Raymond watches her go. He is tall and dark, and every inch a gentleman. Kindness sparkles in his eyes, which almost always seem on the point of a wink. Every Child in the room knows him, and he has a personal smile for each of them.

Good morning, children! I trust everyone slept well?

A CHILD

Nancy slept in Jim's bed again.

Some giggles, perhaps an "oohh!"

JIM

She got afraid. She gets afraid sometimes.

MR. RAYMOND

(Smiling knowingly at Nancy, who has offered no protest.) Nothing to be ashamed of in that, surely. Anyone can be afraid of the dark.

NANCY

(With a private smile for Jim.) Especially in this place.

JIM

I am sorry Nancy gets so frightened. But she is a girl, after all.

MR. RAYMOND

That's important, is it?

JIM

(Nods.) It's okay for Nancy to be afraid. But not me. A man should be brave.

MR. RAYMOND

I know some girls who are very brave indeed.

NANCY

There's nothing bad about being afraid, Jim.

JIM

You shut up.

A CHILD

(*To Mr. Raymond.*) Tell us a story!

ALL THE CHILDREN

Oh, yes! Please do! (*etc.*)

MR. RAYMOND

(*Sitting on one of the beds.*) What sort of a story?

NANCY

A true story.

JIM

A fairy tale.

MR. RAYMOND

Well, let's see. (*He thinks for a moment.*) I can't think of a true story at the moment, so I'll tell you a sort of a fairy tale.

ALL THE CHILDREN

Hooray! Awe nuts! (*etc.*)

The more ambulatory Children pile onto the bed and surround Mr. Raymond like hungry chicks clamoring for a worm.

MR. RAYMOND

It popped into my head just now, as a matter of fact, and if it turns out pretty well, I'll write it down, and get somebody to print it for me, and then you can read it whenever you like.

NANCY

Then nobody has ever heard it before?

MR. RAYMOND

Nobody.

ALL THE CHILDREN

Oh! A brand new story! (*etc.*)

MR. RAYMOND

Everything will be almost as new to me as it is to you. I'm not even sure of some of it myself.

Before beginning, Mr. Raymond looks about at the eager faces. As the tale unfolds, lighting changes begin to reveal the world of the story.

Once upon a time, so long ago that I have forgotten the date, there was a very wicked woman.

JIM

Was she a witch?

MR. RAYMOND

Well, yes, I suppose you might call her one. You see, Waltho had a wolf in her mind. If you looked her straight in her eye, you could see the wolf. You felt your heart turn to ashes and your blood to water.

NANCY

What were they like, her eyes?

MR. RAYMOND

When she was angry, they flashed blue. When she hated anybody, they shone yellow and green. What they looked like when she loved anybody, I don't know--I never heard of her loving anybody but herself. (*Winks at a Child.*) And I don't think she could have managed that if she hadn't got used to herself. Well. Waltho wanted to know all about everything. She cared for nothing in itself--only for knowing it. (*Growing mysterious.*) So she conceived an experiment.

JIM

An experiment?

MR. RAYMOND

First, she stole two newborn babies and carried them off to her castle.

JIM

She stole them?

NANCY

They were orphans like us!

JIM

What did she want them for?

MR. RAYMOND

Half a moment, and you'll know. The first child was Photogen. Just as the sun rose, he opened his eyes. Waltho decreed that Photogen should never know darkness. He never slept during the day, and never woke during the night. Waltho watched against shadows as if they were living things that could hurt him.

The lighting gradually changes to focus on the entire stage. It grows very bright, as in the midday sun. Upstage, for a brief moment, we see Waltho raising an infant high above her head, as if presenting it to the sun as an offering.

All day Photogen basked in the splendor of the sun. He ripened like a peach.

Photogen is seen running across the stage, laughing and soaking in the sunshine. He comes to a stop center-stage, and leans his head back to take the sun full in the face. Jim stands up on the bed, watching fascinated.

Now, surrounding Waltho's castle were the finest hunting grounds in the world. Great herds of buffalo roved about the plains. The woods swarmed with wild creatures. Photogen's guardian, Fargu, taught him to shoot, and soon he was the fiercest hunter on the plain.

Fargu runs on and touches Photogen's arm. The two circle the stage to come up behind some unsuspecting--and unseen--beast. The imaginary hunt continues through the following.

Waltho had laid but one command on Fargu. The boy should never, never be allowed out after sundown.

The light begins to change to dusk, and Photogen and Fargu, with a furtive glance at the sky, hurry offstage. Jim watches Photogen go, disappointed. He continues to stare after him during the following.

But one might as soon hold a tawny-maned lion as Photogen. Fargu feared that it would not be long before Photogen was tempted to follow the more mysterious animals who lived in the woods and came out in the night.

NANCY

But what about the other baby? Was it a girl?

MR. RAYMOND

You're absolutely right. But Waltho had very different plans for Nycteris. With the help of her trusted nurse, Falca, Waltho brought her up in darkness.

*We hear a baby's plaintive cry.
Dimly lit, we see Waltho hurrying across
the stage carrying a wailing baby in her
arms, covered from head to foot with
dull cloths.*

She decreed that the girl should never see any light but what came from her dim alabaster lamp. She slept during the day, and woke only in the night.

*Upstage, a yellowish pool of weak
light reveals Nycteris in her chamber.
She is playing quietly with bits of cloth.*

JIM

(Wide-eyed.) Was she afraid?

MR. RAYMOND

She didn't know to be. But she was a prisoner, even if she didn't know it. She was kept in a cavern in the darkest part of the castle, and no one but Waltho and Falca knew she was there.

*Nycteris rises and moves to take up a
book. She glances lovingly at its pages,
and hugs it close to her. Nancy moves
close to Nycteris, entering the scene with
her, but invisible to her. She watches
Nycteris, fascinated.*

NANCY

How lonely!

MR. RAYMOND

Nycteris managed to coax Falca into teaching her the letters, and bringing her a few books to read. There was one thing, however, which moved and taught her more than all the rest: the lamp that hung from her ceiling.

We see the lamp burning in the ceiling, and Mr. Raymond and the Children seem also to see it, and to stare longingly at it. It seems to grow, if not brighter, then bigger as they gaze at it. Mr. Raymond slowly moves to join Nancy, gazing at the light from within the scene.

It was always lit, and she loved its soft light. She would sit for hours gazing up at the lamp, and her heart would swell as she gazed. When she found her face wet, she would wonder how she could have been hurt without knowing it.

Mr. Raymond wipes a tear from Nancy's face. He smiles.

For Nycteris, her lamp was the most wonderful thing in the world.

There is a pause as everyone worships the light. The lamp grows gradually brighter, until it has become the sun. With a whooping cry, Photogen sweeps in with his bow, in pursuit of a terrified herd of buffalo which we hear but do not see. He is followed at a safe distance by Fargu, who carries a spare quiver. During this scene the lights fade out on Nycteris's area and Nancy and Mr. Raymond return to the bed.

PHOTOGEN

Ha, ha! Run, you cowardly beasts! You shall not escape me! Fargu!

Fargu hands him an invisible arrow, which he quickly fits and looses. He watches as the arrow finds its target.

There!

FARGU

(Out of breath.) Well shot, young Sir! Only I wish you wouldn't dash into the herd like that! You might have been killed.

PHOTOGEN

Bah! You worry too much. Am I not the fastest runner and the surest shot on the plain? Can any man best me?

FARGU

Perhaps no man can. But you may learn that there are creatures more deadly than Photogen.

PHOTOGEN

But none more brave!

FARGU

It is true you are never afraid. But there is more to bravery than that.

PHOTOGEN

Bah!

As Photogen casts about for something else to hunt, a shadowy Creature is seen slinking across the back of the stage. Instantly alert, Photogen takes Fargu's arm and freezes. He speaks in a tense whisper. The Creature freezes at the first sound.

Fargu! What animal is that?

FARGU

I cannot say, young Sir. Perhaps it is a leopard. Best to leave it alone.

PHOTOGEN

Bah!

Very slowly, Photogen removes his hunting knife from his belt. Then, lightning-quick, he springs forward. But he is not fast enough, and his quarry vanishes. Disappointment is replaced by awe as Photogen stands helplessly watching the Creature running from him.

Fargu! I am not the fastest creature on the plain! How he did run! A leopard, is it?

FARGU

Perhaps, young Sir. But I think now that it might be a lion. Or a lioness.

PHOTOGEN

What a coward he must be!

FARGU

Don't be too sure of that. He is one of the creatures the sun makes uncomfortable. As soon as the sun is down, he'll be brave enough.

PHOTOGEN

As soon as the sun goes down? What do you mean?

FARGU

Nothing, young Sir. Shall we find some wild cattle to hunt?

PHOTOGEN

Then that contemptible beast is one of the terrors of sundown, of which my foster mother told me!

FARGU

(Becoming stern.) I really think it would be best if you forgot the whole thing. You know Madame Waltho's command about being out after sundown. Come, Photogen, let us continue our hunt and speak no more of this!

Photogen and Fargu move offstage.

MR. RAYMOND

How poor Fargu wished he had never opened his mouth! But said was said. From that day forth Photogen's curiosity festered and grew. He watched for his opportunity to steal away and explore the forbidden night.

JIM

He should be careful!.

MR. RAYMOND

But don't you wonder what was happens while you're asleep?

JIM

I wish I didn't know. I don't like the night at all.

MR. RAYMOND

Well, as he was to discover, neither did Photogen.