

Hans Christian Andersen

A Christmas Greeting: A Series of Stories



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Содержание

TO CHARLES DICKENS, Esq	5
THE OLD HOUSE	6
THE DROP OF WATER	11
THE HAPPY FAMILY	12
THE STORY OF A MOTHER	14
THE FALSE COLLAR	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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TO CHARLES DICKENS, Esq

I am again in my quiet Danish home, but my thoughts are daily in dear England, where, a few months ago, my many friends transformed for me reality into a charming story.

Whilst occupied with a greater work, there sprung forth – as the flowers spring forth in the forest – seven short stories.¹ I feel a desire, a longing, to transplant in England the first produce of my poetic garden, as a Christmas greeting: and I send it to you, my dear, noble, Charles Dickens, who by your works had been previously dear to me, and since our meeting have taken root for ever in my heart.

Your hand was the last that pressed mine on England's coast: it was you who from her shores wafted me the last farewell. It is therefore natural that I should send to you, from Denmark, my first greeting again, as sincerely as an affectionate heart can convey it.

Hans Christian Andersen.

Copenhagen. 6th December, 1847.

¹ The first seven in this volume.

THE OLD HOUSE

In the street, up there, was an old, a very old house, – it was almost three hundred years old, for that might be known by reading the great beam on which the date of the year was carved: together with tulips and hop-binds there were whole verses spelled as in former times, and over every window was a distorted face cut out in the beam. The one story stood forward a great way over the other; and directly under the eaves was a leaden spout with a dragon's head; the rain-water should have run out of the mouth, but it ran out of the belly, for there was a hole in the spout.

All the other houses in the street were so new and so neat, with large window-panes and smooth walls, one could easily see that they would have nothing to do with the old house: they certainly thought, "How long is that old decayed thing to stand here as a spectacle in the street? And then the protecting windows stand so far out, that no one can see from our windows what happens in that direction! The steps are as broad as those of a palace, and as high as to a church tower. The iron railings look just like the door to an old family vault, and then they have brass tops, – that's so stupid!"

On the other side of the street were also new and neat houses, and they thought just as the others did; but at the window opposite the old house there sat a little boy with fresh rosy cheeks and bright beaming eyes: he certainly liked the old house best, and that both in sunshine and moonshine. And when he looked across at the wall where the mortar had fallen out, he could sit and find out there the strangest figures imaginable; exactly as the street had appeared before, with steps, projecting windows, and pointed gables; he could see soldiers with halberds, and spouts where the water ran, like dragons and serpents. *That* was a house to look at; and there lived an old man, who wore plush breeches; and he had a coat with large brass buttons, and a wig that one could see was a real wig. Every morning there came an old fellow to him who put his rooms in order, and went on errands; otherwise, the old man in the plush breeches was quite alone in the old house. Now and then he came to the window and looked out, and the little boy nodded to him, and the old man nodded again, and so they became acquaintances, and then they were friends, although they had never spoken to each other, – but that made no difference. The little boy heard his parents say, "The old man opposite is very well off, but he is so very, very lonely!"

The Sunday following, the little boy took something, and wrapped it up in a piece of paper, went down stairs, and stood in the doorway; and when the man who went on errands came past, he said to him —

"I say, master! will you give this to the old man over the way from me? I have two pewter soldiers – this is one of them, and he shall have it, for I know he is so very, very lonely."

And the old errand man looked quite pleased, nodded, and took the pewter soldier over to the old house. Afterwards there came a message; it was to ask if the little boy himself had not a wish to come over and pay a visit; and so he got permission of his parents, and then went over to the old house.

And the brass balls on the iron railings shone much brighter than ever; one would have thought they were polished on account of the visit; and it was as if the carved-out trumpeters – for there were trumpeters, who stood in tulips, carved out on the door – blew with all their might, their cheeks appeared so much rounder than before. Yes, they blew – "Trateratra! the little boy comes trateratra!" – and then the door opened.

The whole passage was hung with portraits of knights in armor, and ladies in silken gowns; and the armor rattled, and the silken gowns rustled! And then there was a flight of stairs which went a good way upwards, and a little way downwards, and then one came on a balcony which was in a very dilapidated state, sure enough, with large holes and long crevices, but grass grew there and leaves out of them altogether, for the whole balcony outside, the yard, and the walls, were

overgrown with so much green stuff, that it looked like a garden; but it was only a balcony. Here stood old flower-pots with faces and asses' ears, and the flowers grew just as they liked. One of the pots was quite overrun on all sides with pinks, that is to say, with the green part; shoot stood by shoot, and it said quite distinctly, "The air has cherished me, the sun has kissed me, and promised me a little flower on Sunday! – a little flower on Sunday!"

And then they entered a chamber where the walls were covered, with hog's leather, and printed with gold flowers.

"The gilding decays, But hog's leather stays!"

said the walls.

And there stood easy chairs, with such high backs, and so carved out, and with arms on both sides. "Sit down! sit down!" said they. "Ugh! how I creak; now I shall certainly get the gout, like the old clothes-press, ugh!"

And then the little boy came into the room where the projecting windows were, and where the old man sat.

"I thank you for the pewter soldier, my little friend!" said the old man, "and I thank you because you come over to me."

"Thankee! thankee!" or "cranky! cranky!" sounded from all the furniture; there was so much of it, that each article stood in the other's way, to get a look at the little boy.

In the middle of the wall hung a picture representing a beautiful lady, so young, so glad, but dressed quite as in former times, with clothes that stood quite stiff, and with powder in her hair; she neither said "thankee, thankee!" nor "cranky, cranky!" but looked with her mild eyes at the little boy, who directly asked the old man, "Where did you get her?"

"Yonder, at the broker's," said the old man, "where there are so many pictures hanging. No one knows or cares about them, for they are all of them buried; but I knew her in by-gone days, and now she has been dead and gone these fifty years!"

Under the picture, in a glazed frame, there hung a *bouquet* of withered flowers; they were almost fifty years old; they looked so very old!

The pendulum of the great clock went to and fro, and the hands turned, and every thing in the room became still older; but they did not observe it.

"They say at home," said the little boy, "that you are so very, very lonely!"

"Oh!" said he, "the old thoughts, with what they may bring with them, come and visit me, and now you also come! I am very well off!"

Then he took a book with pictures in it down from the shelf; there were whole long processions and pageants, with the strangest characters, which one never sees now-a-days; soldiers like the knave of clubs, and citizens with waving flags: the tailors had theirs, with a pair of shears held by two lions, – and the shoemakers theirs, without boots, but with an eagle that had two heads, for the shoemakers must have everything so that they can say, it is a pair! – Yes, that was a picture book!

The old man now went into the other room to fetch preserves, apples, and nuts; – yes, it was delightful over there in the old house.

"I cannot bear it any longer!" said the pewter soldier, who sat on the drawers; "it is so lonely and melancholy here! but when one has been in a family circle one cannot accustom oneself to this life! I cannot bear it any longer! the whole day is so long, and the evenings are still longer! here it is not at all as it is over the way at your home, where your father and mother spoke so pleasantly, and where you and all your sweet children made such a delightful noise. Nay, how lonely the old man is! – do you think that he gets kisses? do you think he gets mild eyes, or a Christmas tree? – He will get nothing but a grave. – I can bear it no longer!"

"You must not let it grieve you so much," said the little boy; "I find it so very delightful here, and then all the old thoughts, with what they may bring with them, they come and visit here."

"Yes, it's all very well, but I see nothing of them, and I don't know them!" said the pewter soldier, "I cannot bear it!"

"But you must!" said the little boy.

Then in came the old man with the most pleased and happy face, the most delicious preserves, apples, and nuts, and so the little boy thought no more about the pewter soldier.

The little boy returned home happy and pleased, and weeks and days passed away, and nods were made to the old house, and from the old house, and then the little boy went over there again.

The carved trumpeters blew, "trateratra! there is the little boy! trateratra!" and the swords and armor on the knights' portraits rattled, and the silk gowns rustled; the hog's-leather spoke, and the old chairs had the gout in their legs and rheumatism in their backs: Ugh! – it was exactly like the first time, for over there one day and hour was just like another.

"I cannot bear it!" said the pewter soldier, "I have shed pewter tears! it is too melancholy! rather let me go to the wars and lose arms and legs! it would at least be a change. I cannot bear it longer! – Now, I know what it is to have a visit from one's old thoughts, with what they may bring with them! I have had a visit from mine, and you may be sure it is no pleasant thing in the end; I was at last about to jump down from the drawers.

"I saw you all over there at home so distinctly, as if you really were here; it was again that Sunday morning; all you children stood before the table and sung your Psalms, as you do every morning. You stood devoutly with folded hands; and father and mother were just as pious; and then the door was opened, and little sister Mary, who is not two years old yet, and who always dances when she hears music or singing, of whatever kind it may be, was put into the room – though she ought not to have been there – and then she began to dance, but could not keep time, because the tones were so long; and then she stood, first on the one leg, and bent her head forwards, and then on the other leg, and bent her head forwards – but all would not do. You stood very seriously all together, although it was difficult enough; but I laughed to myself, and then I fell off the table, and got a bump, which I have still – for it was not right of me to laugh. But the whole now passes before me again in thought, and everything that I have lived to see; and these are the old thoughts, with what they may bring with them.

"Tell me if you still sing on Sundays? Tell me something about little Mary! and how my comrade, the other pewter soldier, lives! Yes, he is happy enough, that's sure! I cannot bear it any longer!"

"You are given away as a present!" said the little boy; "you must remain. Can you not understand that?"

The old man now came with a drawer, in which there was much to be seen, both "tin boxes" and "balsam boxes," old cards, so large and so gilded, such as one never sees them now. And several drawers were opened, and the piano was opened; it had landscapes on the inside of the lid, and it was so hoarse when the old man played on it! and then he hummed a song.

"Yes, she could sing that!" said he, and nodded to the portrait, which he had bought at the broker's, and the old man's eyes shone so bright!

"I will go to the wars! I will go to the wars!" shouted the pewter soldier as loud as he could, and threw himself off the drawers right down on the floor.

What became of him? The old man sought, and the little boy sought; he was away, and he stayed away.

"I shall find him!" said the old man; but he never found him. The floor was too open – the pewter soldier had fallen through a crevice, and there he lay as in an open tomb.

That day passed, and the little boy went home, and that week passed, and several weeks too. The windows were quite frozen, the little boy was obliged to sit and breathe on them to get a

peep-hole over to the old house, and there the snow had been blown into all the carved work and inscriptions; it lay quite up over the steps, just as if there was no one at home; – nor was there any one at home – the old man was dead!

In the evening there was a hearse seen before the door, and he was borne into it in his coffin: he was now to go out into the country, to lie in his grave. He was driven out there, but no one followed; all his friends were dead, and the little boy kissed his hand to the coffin as it was driven away.

Some days afterwards there was an auction at the old house, and the little boy saw from his window how they carried the old knights and the old ladies away, the flower-pots with the long ears, the old chairs, and the old clothes-presses. Something came here, and something came there; the portrait of her who had been found at the broker's came to the broker's again; and there it hung, for no one knew her more – no one cared about the old picture.

In the spring they pulled the house down, for, as people said, it was a ruin. One could see from the street right into the room with the hog's-leather hanging, which was slashed and torn; and the green grass and leaves about the balcony hung quite wild about the falling beams. – And then it was put to rights.

"That was a relief," said the neighboring houses.

A fine house was built there, with large windows, and smooth white walls; but before it, where the old house had in fact stood, was a little garden laid out, and a wild grapevine ran up the wall of the neighboring house. Before the garden there was a large iron railing with an iron door, it looked quite splendid, and people stood still and peeped in, and the sparrows hung by scores in the vine, and chattered away at each other as well as they could, but it was not about the old house, for they could not remember it, so many years had passed, – so many that the little boy had grown up to a whole man, yes, a clever man, and a pleasure to his parents; and he had just been married, and, together with his little wife, had come to live in the house here, where the garden was; and he stood by her there whilst she planted a field-flower that she found so pretty; she planted it with her little hand, and pressed the earth around it with her fingers. Oh! what was that? She had stuck herself. There sat something pointed, straight out of the soft mould.

It was – yes, guess! – it was the pewter soldier, he that was lost up at the old man's, and had tumbled and turned about amongst the timber and the rubbish, and had at last laid for many years in the ground.

The young wife wiped the dirt off the soldier, first with a green leaf, and then with her fine handkerchief – it had such a delightful smell, that it was to the pewter soldier just as if he had awaked from a trance.

"Let me see him," said the young man. He laughed, and then shook his head. "Nay, it cannot be he; but he reminds me of a story about a pewter soldier which I had when I was a little boy!" And then he told his wife about the old house, and the old man, and about the pewter soldier that he sent over to him because he was so very, very lonely; and he told it as correctly as it had really been, so that the tears came into the eyes of his young wife, on account of the old house and the old man.

"It may possibly be, however, that it is the same pewter soldier!" said she, "I will take care of it, and remember all that you have told me; but you must show me the old man's grave!"

"But I do not know it," said he, "and no one knows it! all his friends were dead, no one took care of it, and I was then a little boy!"

"How very, very lonely he must have been!" said she.

"Very, very lonely!" said the pewter soldier; "but it is delightful not to be forgotten!"

"Delightful!" shouted something close by; but no one, except the pewter soldier, saw that it was a piece of the hog's-leather hangings; it had lost all its gilding, it looked like a piece of wet clay, but it had an opinion, and it gave it:

"The gilding decays, But hog's leather stays!"

This the pewter soldier did not believe.

THE DROP OF WATER

What a magnifying glass is, you surely know – such a round sort of spectacle-glass that makes everything full a hundred times larger than it really is. When one holds it before the eye, and looks at a drop of water out of the pond, then one sees above a thousand strange creatures. It looks almost like a whole plateful of shrimps springing about among each other, and they are so ravenous, they tear one another's arms and legs, tails and sides, and yet they are glad and pleased in their way.

Now, there was once an old man, who was called by every body Creep-and-Crawl; for that was his name. He would always make the best out of everything, and when he could not make anything out of it he resorted to witchcraft.

Now, one day he sat and held his magnifying glass before his eye, and looked at a drop of water that was taken out of a little pool in the ditch. What a creeping and crawling was there! all the thousands of small creatures hopped and jumped about, pulled one another, and pecked one another.

"But this is abominable!" said Creep-and-Crawl, "Can one not get them to live in peace and quiet, and each mind his own business?" And he thought and thought, but he could come to no conclusion, and so he was obliged to conjure. "I must give them a color, that they may be more discernible!" said he; and so he poured something like a little drop of red wine into the drop of water, but it was bewitched blood from the lobe of the ear – the very finest sort for a penny; and then all the strange creatures became rose-colored over the whole body. It looked like a whole town of naked savages.

"What have you got there?" said another old wizard, who had no name, and that was just the best of it.

"Why," said Creep-and-Crawl, "if you can guess what it is, I will make you a present of it; but it is not so easy to find out when one does not know it!"

The wizard who had no name looked through the magnifying glass. It actually appeared like a whole town, where all the inhabitants ran about without clothes! it was terrible, but still more terrible to see how the one knocked and pushed the other, bit each other, and drew one another about. What was undermost should be topmost, and what was topmost should be undermost! – See there, now! his leg is longer than mine! – whip it off, and away with it! There is one that has a little lump behind the ear, a little innocent lump, but it pains him, and so it shall pain him still more! And they pecked at it, and they dragged him about, and they ate him, and all on account of the little lump. There sat one as still as a little maid, who only wished for peace and quietness, but she must be brought out and they dragged her, and they pulled her, and they devoured her!

"It is quite amusing!" said the wizard.

"Yes; but what do you think it is?" asked Creep-and-Crawl. "Can you find it out!"

"It is very easy to see," said the other, "it is some great city, they all resemble each other. A great city it is, that's sure!"

"It is ditch-water!" said Creep-and-Crawl.

THE HAPPY FAMILY

Really, the largest green leaf in this country is a dock-leaf; if one holds it before one, it is like a whole apron, and if one holds it over one's head in rainy weather, it is almost as good as an umbrella, for it is so immensely large. The burdock never grows alone, but where there grows one there always grow several: it is a great delight, and all this delightfulness is snails' food. The great white snails which persons of quality in former times made fricassees of, ate, and said, "Hem, hem! how delicious!" for they thought it tasted so delicate – lived on dock leaves, and therefore burdock seeds were sown.

Now, there was an old manor-house, where they no longer ate snails, they were quite extinct; but the burdocks were not extinct, they grew and grew all over the walks and all the beds; they could not get the mastery over them – it was a whole forest of burdocks. Here and there stood an apple and a plumb-tree, or else one never would have thought that it was a garden; all was burdocks, and there lived the two last venerable old snails.

They themselves knew not how old they were, but they could remember very well that there had been many more; that they were of a family from foreign lands, and that for them and theirs the whole forest was planted. They had never been outside it, but they knew that there was still something more in the world, which was called the manor-house, and that there they were boiled, and then they became black, and were then placed on a silver dish; but what happened further they knew not; or, in fact, what it was to be boiled, and to lie on a silver dish, they could not possibly imagine; but it was said to be delightful, and particularly genteel. Neither the chafers, the toads, nor the earth-worms, whom they asked about it could give them any information, – none of them had been boiled or laid on a silver dish.

The old white snails were the first persons of distinction in the world, that they knew; the forest was planted for their sake, and the manor-house was there that they might be boiled and laid on a silver dish.

Now they lived a very lonely and happy life; and as they had no children themselves, they had adopted a little common snail, which they brought up as their own; but the little one would not grow, for he was of a common family; but the old ones, especially Dame Mother Snail, thought they could observe how he increased in size, and she begged father, if he could not see it, that he would at least feel the little snail's shell; and then he felt it, and found the good dame was right.

One day there was a heavy storm of rain.

"Hear how it beats like a drum on the dock leaves!" said Father Snail.

"There are also rain-drops!" said Mother Snail; "and now the rain pours right down the stalk! You will see that it will be wet here! I am very happy to think that we have our good house, and the little one has his also! There is more done for us than for all other creatures, sure enough; but can you not see that we are folks of quality in the world? We are provided with a house from our birth, and the burdock forest is planted for our sakes! I should like to know how far it extends, and what there is outside!"

"There is nothing at all," said Father Snail. "No place can be better than ours, and I have nothing to wish for!"

"Yes," said the dame. "I would willingly go to the manor-house, be boiled, and laid on a silver dish; all our forefathers have been treated so; there is something extraordinary in it, you may be sure!"

"The manor-house has most likely fallen to ruin!" said Father Snail. "or the burdocks have grown up over it, so that they cannot come out. There need not, however, be any haste about that; but you are always in such a tremendous hurry, and the little one is beginning to be the same. Has he not been creeping up that stalk these three days? It gives me a headache when I look up to him!"

"You must not scold him," said Mother Snail; "he creeps so carefully; he will afford us much pleasure – and we have nothing but him to live for! But have you not thought of it? – where shall we get a wife for him? Do you not think that there are some of our species at a great distance in the interior of the burdock forest?"

"Black snails, I dare say, there are enough of," said the old one – "black snails without a house – but they are so common, and so conceited. But we might give the ants a commission to look out for us; they run to and fro as if they had something to do, and they certainly know of a wife for our little snail!"

"I know one, sure enough – the most charming one!" said one of the ants; "but I am afraid we shall hardly succeed, for she is a queen!"

"That is nothing!" said the old folks; "has she a house?"

"She has a palace!" said the ant – "the finest ant's palace, with seven hundred passages!"

"I thank you!" said Mother Snail; "our son shall not go into an ant-hill; if you know nothing better than that, we shall give the commission to the white gnats. They fly far and wide, in rain and sunshine; they know the whole forest here, both within and without."

"We have a wife for him," said the gnats; "at a hundred human paces from here there sits a little snail in her house, on a gooseberry bush; she is quite lonely, and old enough to be married. It is only a hundred human paces!"

"Well, then, let her come to him!" said the old ones; "he has a whole forest of burdocks, she has only a bush!"

And so they went and fetched little Miss Snail. It was a whole week before she arrived; but therein was just the very best of it, for one could thus see that she was of the same species.

And then the marriage was celebrated. Six earth-worms shone as well as they could. In other respects the whole went off very quietly, for the old folks could not bear noise and merriment; but old Dame Snail made a brilliant speech. Father Snail could not speak, he was too much affected; and so they gave them as a dowry and inheritance, the whole forest of burdocks, and said – what they had always said – that it was the best in the world; and if they lived honestly and decently, and increased and multiplied, they and their children would once in the course of time come to the manor-house, be boiled black, and laid on silver dishes. After this speech was made, the old ones crept into their shells, and never more came out. They slept; the young couple governed in the forest, and had a numerous progeny, but they were never boiled, and never came on the silver dishes; so from this they concluded that the manor-house had fallen to ruins, and that all the men in the world were extinct; and as no one contradicted them, so, of course it was so. And the rain beat on the dock-leaves to make drum-music for their sake, and the sun shone in order to give the burdock forest a color for their sakes; and they were very happy, and the whole family was happy; for they, indeed were so.

THE STORY OF A MOTHER

A mother sat there with her little child. She was so downcast, so afraid that it should die! It was so pale, the small eyes had closed themselves, and it drew its breath so softly, now and then, with a deep respiration, as if it sighed; and the mother looked still more sorrowfully on the little creature.

Then a knocking was heard at the door, and in came a poor old, man wrapped up as in a large horse-cloth, for it warms one, and he needed it, as it was the cold winter season! Every thing out of doors was covered with ice and snow, and the wind blew so that it cut the face.

As the old man trembled with cold, and the little child slept a moment, the mother went and poured some ale into a pot and set it on the stove, that it might be warm for him; the old man sat and rocked the cradle, and the mother sat down on a chair close by him, and looked at her little sick child that drew its breath so deep, and raised its little hand.

"Do you not think that I shall save him?" said she, "*Our Lord* will not take him from me!"

And the old man, – it was Death himself, – he nodded so strangely, it could just as well signify yes as no. And the mother looked down in her lap, and the tears ran down over her cheeks; her head became so heavy – she had not closed her eyes for three days and nights; and now she slept, but only for a minute, when she started up and trembled with cold: "What is that?" said she, and looked on all sides; but the old man was gone, and her little child was gone – he had taken it with him; and the old clock in the corner burred, and burred, the great leaden weight ran down to the floor, bump! and then the clock also stood still.

But the poor mother ran out of the house and cried aloud for her child.

Out there, in the midst of the snow, there sat a woman in long, black clothes; and she said, "Death has been in thy chamber, and I saw him hasten away with thy little child; he goes faster than the wind, and he never brings back what he takes!"

"Oh, only tell me which way he went!" said the mother: "Tell me the way, and I shall find him!"

"I know it!" said the woman in the black clothes, "but before I tell it, thou must first sing for me all the songs thou hast sung for thy child! – I am fond of them; I have heard them before; I am Night; I saw thy tears whilst thou sang'st them!"

"I will sing them all, all!" said the mother; "but do not stop me now; – I may overtake him – I may find my child!"

But Night stood still and mute. Then the mother wrung her hands, sang and wept, and there were many songs, but yet many more tears; and then Night said, "Go to the right, into the dark pine forest; thither I saw Death take his way with thy little child!"

The roads crossed each other in the depths of the forest, and she no longer knew whither she should go; then there stood a thorn-bush; there was neither leaf nor flower on it, it was also in the cold winter season, and ice-flakes hung on the branches.

"Hast thou not seen Death go past with my little child?" said the mother.

"Yes," said the thorn-bush; "but I will not tell thee which way he took, unless thou wilt first warm me up at thy heart. I am freezing to death; I shall become a lump of ice!"

And she pressed the thorn-bush to her breast, so firmly, that it might be thoroughly warmed, and the thorns went right into her flesh, and her blood flowed in large drops, but the thorn-bush shot forth fresh green leaves, and there came flowers on it in the cold winter night, the heart of the afflicted mother was so warm; and the thorn-bush told her the way she should go.

She then came to a large lake, where there was neither ship nor boat. The lake was not frozen sufficiently to bear her; neither was it open, nor low enough that she could wade through it; and across it she must go if she would find her child! Then she lay down to drink up the lake, and

that was an impossibility for a human being, but the afflicted mother thought that a miracle might happen nevertheless.

"Oh, what would I not give to come to my child!" said the weeping mother; and she wept still more, and her eyes sunk down in the depths of the waters, and became two precious pearls; but the water bore her up, as if she sat in a swing, and she flew in the rocking waves to the shore on the opposite side, where there stood a mile-broad, strange house, one knew not if it were a mountain with forests and caverns, or if it were built up; but the poor mother could not see it; she had wept her eyes out.

"Where shall I find Death, who took away my little child?" said she.

"He has not come here yet!" said the old grave woman, who was appointed to look after Death's great greenhouse! "How have you been able to find the way hither? and who has helped you?"

"*Our Lord* has helped me," said she. "He is merciful, and you will also be so! Where shall I find my little child?"

"Nay, I know not," said the woman, "and you cannot see! Many flowers and trees have withered this night; Death will soon come and plant them over again! You certainly know that every person has his or her life's tree or flower, just as every one happens to be settled; they look like other plants, but they have pulsations of the heart. Children's hearts can also beat; go after yours, perhaps you may know your child's; but what will you give me if I tell you what you shall do more?"

"I have nothing to give," said the afflicted mother, "but I will go to the world's end for you!"

"Nay, I have nothing to do there!" said the woman, "but you can give me your long black hair; you know yourself that it is fine, and that I like! You shall have my white hair instead! and that's always something!"

"Do you demand nothing else?" said she, – "that I will gladly give you!" And she gave her her fine black hair, and got the old woman's snow-white hair instead.

So they went into Death's great greenhouse, where flowers and trees grew strangely into one another. There stood fine hyacinths under glass bells, and there stood strong-stemmed peonies; there grew water plants, some so fresh, others half sick, the water-snakes lay down on them, and black crabs pinched their stalks. There stood beautiful palm-trees, oaks, and plantains; there stood parsley and flowering thyme: every tree and every flower had its name; each of them was a human life, the human frame still lived – one in China, and another in Greenland – round about in the world. There were large trees in small pots, so that they stood so stunted in growth, and ready to burst the pots; in other places, there was a little dull flower in rich mould, with moss round about it, and it was so petted and nursed. But the distressed mother bent down over all the smallest plants, and heard within them how the human heart beat; and amongst millions she knew her child's.

"There it is!" cried she, and stretched her hands out over a little blue crocus, that hung quite sickly on one side.

"Don't touch the flower!" said the old woman, "but place yourself here, and when Death comes, – I expect him every moment, – do not let him pluck the flower up, but threaten him that you will do the same with the others. Then he will be afraid! he is responsible for them to *Our Lord*, and no one dares to pluck them up before *He* gives leave."

All at once an icy cold rushed through the great hall, and the blind mother could feel that it was Death that came.

"How hast thou been able to find thy way hither?" he asked. "How couldst thou come quicker than I?"

"I am a mother," said she.

And Death stretched out his long hand towards the fine little flower, but she held her hands fast around his, so tight, and yet afraid that she should touch one of the leaves. Then Death blew on her hands, and she felt that it was colder than the cold wind, and her hands fell down powerless.

"Thou canst not do anything against me!" said Death.

"But that *Our Lord* can!" said she.

"I only do His bidding!" said Death. "I am His gardener, I take all His flowers and trees, and plant them out in the great garden of Paradise, in the unknown land; but how they grow there, and how it is there I dare not tell thee."

"Give me back my child!" said the mother, and she wept and prayed. At once she seized hold of two beautiful flowers close by, with each hand, and cried out to Death, "I will tear all thy flowers off, for I am in despair."

"Touch them not!" said Death. "Thou say'st that thou art so unhappy, and now thou wilt make another mother equally unhappy."

"Another mother!" said the poor woman, and directly let go her hold of both the flowers.

"There, thou hast thine eyes," said Death; "I fished them up from the lake, they shone so bright; I knew not they were thine. Take them again, they are now brighter than before; now look down into the deep well close by; I shall tell thee the names of the two flowers thou wouldst have torn up, and thou wilt see their whole future life – their whole human existence: and see what thou wast about to disturb and destroy."

And she looked down into the well; and it was a happiness to see how the one became a blessing to the world, to see how much happiness and joy were felt everywhere. And she saw the other's life, and it was sorrow and distress, horror, and wretchedness.

"Both of them are God's will!" said Death.

"Which of them is Misfortune's flower? and which is that of Happiness?" asked she.

"That I will not tell thee," said Death; "but this thou shalt know from me, that the one flower was thy own child! it was thy child's fate thou saw'st, – thy own child's future life!"

Then the mother screamed with terror, "Which of them was my child? Tell it me! save the innocent! save my child from all that misery! rather take it away! take it into God's kingdom! Forget my tears, forget my prayers, and all that I have done!"

"I do not understand thee!" said Death. "Wilt thou have thy child again, or shall I go with it there, where thou dost not know!"

Then the mother wrung her hands, fell on her knees, and prayed to our Lord: "Oh, hear me not when I pray against Thy will, which is the best! hear me not! hear me not!"

And she bowed her head down in her lap, and Death took her child and went with it into the unknown land.

THE FALSE COLLAR

There was once a fine gentleman, all of whose moveables were a bootjack and a hair-comb: but he had the finest false collars in the world; and it is about one of these collars that we are now to hear a story.

It was so old, that it began to think of marriage; and it happened that it came to be washed in company with a garter.

"Nay!" said the collar, "I never did see anything so slender and so fine, so soft and so neat. May I not ask your name?"

"That I shall not tell you!" said the garter.

"Where do you live?" asked the collar.

But the garter was so bashful, so modest, and thought it was a strange question to answer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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