

The Candles

Hans Christian Andersen

There was once a big wax candle who had the highest opinion of his merits.

"I," he said, "am made of the purest wax, cast in the best mold. I burn more brilliantly than any other candle, and I outlast them all. I belong in the high chandelier or the silver candlestick."

"What a delightful life you must lead," the tallow candle admitted. "I am only tallow. Just a tallow dip. But it's a comfort to think how much better off I am than the taper. He's only dipped twice, while I am dipped eight times to make a thick and respectable candle of me. I'm satisfied. To be sure it would be better to be born of wax than of tallow, and a lucky thing to be shaped in a mold, but one isn't asked how he wants to be born. Your place is in the big rooms with glass chandeliers. Mine is in the kitchen. But kitchen is a good place too. All the food in the house comes from there."

"There are more important things in the world than food," the wax candle boasted. "There's the glitter of good society in which I shine. Why, I and all my family are invited to a ball that's being given here this very evening."

No sooner had he said this than all the wax candles were sent for. But the tallow candle was not left behind. The mistress of the house took it in her own hand and carried it to the kitchen, where a poor boy waited with his basket full of potatoes and a few apples that she had given him.

"And here's a candle for you too, my little friend," she told him. "Your mother can use it to work by when she sits up late at night."

The lady's small daughter stood close beside her mother, and when she heard the magic words "late at night," she forgot to be shy. "I'm going to stay up late tonight too!" she exclaimed. "We are to have a ball this evening, and I'm to wear my big red ribbon." No candle ever could shine like the eyes of a child.

"Happiness is a blessed thing to see," the tallow candle thought to himself. "I mustn't forget how it looks, for I certainly shan't see it again." They put him in the basket and closed the lid. Away the boy went with it.

"Where can he be taking me?" the candle wondered. "I may have to live with poor people who don't even own a brass candlestick, while the wax candle sits in silver and beams at all the best people. How fine it must be to shine in good company. But this is what I get for being tallow, not wax."

And the candle did come to live with poor people. They were a widow and her three children, who had a low-ceilinged room across the way from the well-to-do house.

"God bless our neighbor for all that she gave us," the widow said. "This good candle will burn far into the night."

She struck a match to it.

"Fut, fie," he sputtered. "What a vile smelling match she lights me with. Would anyone offer such a kitchen match to the wax candle, in the well-to-do house across the way?"

There the candles were lighted too. They made the street bright as carriages came rumbling with guests dressed in their best for the ball. The music struck up.

"Now the ball's beginning." The tallow candle burned brighter as he remembered the happy little girl whose face was more shining than the light of all those wax candles. "I'll

never see anything like that again."

The smallest of the poor children reached up, for she was very small, and put her arms around the necks of her brother and sister. What she had to tell them was so important that it had to be whispered. "Tonight we're going to have - just think of it - warm potatoes, this very night."

Her face beamed with happiness and the candle beamed right back at her. He saw happiness again, and a gladness as great as when the little girl in the well-to-do house said, "We're having a ball this evening, and I'm to wear my red ribbon."

"Is it such a treat to get warm potatoes?" the candle wondered. "Little children must manage to be happy here too." He wept tallow tears of joy, and more than that a candle cannot do.

The table was spread and the potatoes were eaten. How good they tasted! It was a real feast. There was an apple for everyone, and the smallest child said grace:

*"Now thanks, dear Lord, I give to Thee
That Thou again hast filled me. Amen."*

"And didn't I say it nicely?" the little girl asked.

"Don't say such things," her mother told her. "Just thank the good Lord for filling you up."

The children went to bed, were kissed good night, and fell fast asleep. Their mother sat up late and sewed to make a living for them and for herself. From the well-to-do house came light and music. But the stars overhead shone on all the houses, rich or poor, with the same light, clear and kind.

"This has been a wonderful evening," the tallow candle told himself. "Can the wax candle have had any better time of it in his silver candlestick? I'd like to know that before I'm burned out."

He remembered the two happy children, one face lighted up by the wax candle, the other shining in the tallow candle's light. One was happy as the other. Yes, that is the whole story!