

Children's Prattle

Hans Christian Andersen

There was a large party for children at the house of the merchant; rich people's children and important people's children were all there. Their host, the merchant, was a learned man; his father had insisted that he have a college education. You see, his father had been only a cattle dealer, but he had always been honest and thrifty. This business had brought him a fortune, and his son, the merchant, had later managed to increase this fortune. Clever as he was, he also had a kind heart, but there was less talk about his heart than about his money. His house was always full of guests; some who had "blue blood," as it is called, and some who had mind; some who had both, and some who had neither. But this time it was a children's party, with children's prattle; and children say what they mean. Among the guests was a pretty little girl, most absurdly proud that her father was a groom of the bedchamber. The servants had taught her this arrogance, not her parents; they were much too sensible.

"I'm a child of the chamber," she said. She might as well have been a child of the cellar, for no one can help his birth. Then she explained to the other children that she had "birth," and insisted that anyone who didn't have "birth" from the beginning couldn't in any way get it; it did no good to study or be ever so industrious if you didn't have "birth." And as for people whose names ended with "sen," she declared, "They'll never amount to anything. You must put your arms out at the side and keep them, these 'sen' people, at a distance, like this!" And with this she stretched her delicate little arms with the elbows turned out to show what she meant-and the little arms were very pretty. Sweet child!

But the little daughter of the merchant was very angry, for her father's name was Madsen, and of course she knew that ended with "sen," so she answered, as proudly as she could: "My father can buy a hundred dollars' worth of sugar candy and just throw it away; can your father afford to do that?"

"Yes, but my father," said the little daughter of a writer, "can put your father and her father and everybody else's father into a newspaper! My mother says everybody is afraid of him because he owns the paper!" And then she strutted as though she were a real little princess who knows how to strut!

Meanwhile a poor boy stood right outside the half-open door, peeping through the crack. This youngster was so humble that he wasn't even allowed into the room; he had been helping the cook by turning the spit, and now he had permission to peep through the door at the beautifully dressed children who were enjoying themselves inside, and that meant a lot to him.

"Wish I were one of them," he thought, and then he heard what they said, and that was enough to make him very sad. His parents had not saved a penny; they couldn't afford to buy a newspaper, much less write for one. Worst of all, his father's name, and hence his own, ended with "sen." He could never amount to anything in this world! That was sad, indeed. But still it seemed to him he had been "born." Yes, just like everybody else-it couldn't possibly be otherwise.

So much for that evening.

Many years had passed, and in that time children grow up. Now there stood in the city a handsome house, full of beautiful treasures, and everybody wanted to see it, even people who lived outside the city came to see it. And which of the children we have told you about owned this house? Yes, that's very easy for you to guess. No, it's not so very easy after all! That house belonged to the poor little boy! He had amounted to something, in spite of the "sen" at the end of his name-Thorvaldsen!

And the three other children-the children of blue blood, money, and intellectual pride? Well, one had nothing to reproach the other with. They were all equal as children, and they turned into charming and pleasant people, for they were really good at heart; what they had thought and said that evening had just been children's prattle.