

Everything in its Proper Place

Hans Christian Andersen

It was over a hundred years ago.

By the great lake behind the wood there stood an old mansion. Round about it circled a deep ditch, with bulrushes, reeds, and grasses growing in it. Close by the bridge, near the entrance gate, an old willow tree bent over the reeds.

From the narrow lane came the sound of horns and the trampling of horses, and therefore the little girl who tended the geese hastened to drive her charges away from the bridge before the hunting party came galloping up. They approached with such speed that she was obliged to climb up onto one of the high cornerstones of the bridge, to avoid being run down. She was still little more than a child, pretty and slender, with a gentle expression in her face and lovely bright eyes. But the baron took no note of this; as he galloped past her, he reversed the whip in his hand, and in rough play gave her such a blow in the chest with the butt end that she fell backward into the ditch.

"Everything in its proper place!" he cried. "Into the mud with you!" And he laughed loudly, for this was intended to be funny, and the rest of the company joined in his mirth. They shouted and clamored, while the hunting dogs barked even more loudly than before. It was indeed: "Rich birds come rushing."

But goodness knows how rich he was. The poor goose girl, in falling, managed to seize one of the drooping branches of the willow tree and hang from it over the muddy water. As soon as the company and the dogs had disappeared through the castle gate, she tried to climb up again, but the branch broke off at the top, and she would have fallen into the reeds if, at that moment, a strong hand had not caught her from above. It was a peddler who from a little distance away had seen what had happened and had hurried up to give aid.

"Everything in its proper place," he said, mocking the baron, and pulled her up to the dry ground. He put the tree branch back to the place from which it had broken, but "everything in its place" cannot always be managed, and so he thrust it into the soft ground. "Grow if you can, until you can furnish a good flute for them up yonder," he said. It would have given him great pleasure to see the baron and his companions well thrashed.

And then the peddler made his way to the mansion, but did not go into the main hall; he was much too humble for that! He went instead to the servants' quarters, and the men and maids looked over his stock of goods and bargained with him. From above, where the guests were at table, was heard a sound of roaring and screaming that was intended for song; that was the best they could do! There was loud laughter, mingled with the barking and yapping of dogs, for there was riotous feasting up there. Wine and strong old ale foamed in jugs and glasses, and the dogs ate with their masters, and some of them, after having their snouts wiped with their ears, were kissed by them.

The peddler was told to come upstairs with his wares, but it was only to make fun of him. The wine had mounted into their heads and the sense had flown out. They insisted that the peddler drink with them, but, so that he would have to drink quickly, they poured his beer into a stocking. This was considered a great joke and caused more gales of laughter. And then entire farms, complete with oxen and peasants, were staked on a single card, and lost and won.

"Everything in its proper place," said the peddler thankfully when he had finally escaped from what he called "the Sodom and Gomorrah up there." "The open road is my proper place," he said. "I didn't feel at all happy up there."

And the little goose girl nodded kindly to him as he walked by the pasture gate.

Days passed and weeks passed; and the willow branch that the peddler had thrust into the ground beside the water ditch remained fresh and green and even put forth new shoots. The little goose girl saw that it must have taken root, and she was very happy about it; this was her tree, she thought.

Yes, the tree flourished, but everything else at the mansion went to seed, what with feasting and gambling. For these two are like wheels, upon which no man can stand securely.

Scarcely six years had passed before the baron left the mansion, a beggar, with bag and stick in hand; and the mansion itself was bought by a rich merchant. And the purchaser was the very peddler who had once been mocked at in the great hall and forced to drink beer from a stocking! Honesty and industry are good winds to speed a vessel, and now the peddler was the master of the mansion. But from that moment card-playing was not permitted there any more.

"That is bad reading," he said. "When the Devil saw a Bible for the first time, he wanted something to counteract it, and so he invented card playing."

The new owner took himself a wife, and who do you suppose she was but the pretty little goose girl, who had always been so faithful and good! In her new clothes she looked as beautiful and fine as if she had been of high birth. How did all this happen? Well, that is too long a story to tell you in these busy times, but it really did happen, and the most important part of the story is still to come.

It was pleasant and cheerful to live in the old mansion. The mother managed the household affairs, and the father superintended the estate, and blessings seemed to rain down on the home. For where there is rectitude prosperity is sure to follow. The old house was cleaned and repainted; ditches were cleared, and new fruit trees were planted. The floors were as polished as a draughtboard, and everything wore a bright cheerful look.

In the large hall the lady sat in the winter evenings, with all her maids spinning woolen and linen yarn, and every Sunday evening there was a reading from the Bible by the Councilor of Justice himself. In his old age the peddler had achieved this title. There were children, and as they grew up they received the best possible education, although all were not equally gifted - just as it is in all families.

But the willow branch outside had grown to be a big splendid tree, which stood free and undisturbed. "That is our family tree," the old people said. And they explained to all the children, even those who were not very bright, that the tree was to be honored and respected.

So a hundred years rolled by.

Now it was our own time. The lake had grown into a marsh, and the old mansion had almost disappeared. A long narrow pool of water near the remains of a stone wall was all that was left of the deep ditch; yet here still stood a magnificent old willow tree with drooping branches. It was the family tree, and it showed how beautiful a tree may be if left to itself. To be sure, the main trunk was split from root to crown, and storms had given it a little twist, but it still stood firmly. From every cleft and crack into which the winds had carried soil, grasses and flowers had sprung forth, especially near the top, where the great branches separated. There a sort of a small hanging garden had been formed of wild raspberries and chickweed, and even a little serviceberry tree had taken root and stood slender and graceful in the midst of the old tree, which reflected itself in the dark water when the wind had driven all the duckweed into a corner of the pool. A narrow path, which led across the fields, passed close by the old tree.

High on the hill near the forest, with a splendid view in every direction, stood the new

mansion, large and magnificent, the glass of its windows so clear and transparent that there seemed to be no panes there at all. The stately flight of steps that led up to the entrance looked like a bower covered with roses and broad-leaved plants. The lawn was as freshly and vividly green as if each separate blade of grass were washed mornings and evenings. In the great hall hung valuable pictures; there were silken chairs and sofas so airy and graceful that they seemed almost ready to walk on their own legs; there were tables with polished marble tops, and books bound in rich morocco and gold. Yes, they were really wealthy people who lived here; they were people of position; here lived the baron and his family.

Everything here fitted with everything else. The motto of the house was still "Everything in its proper place." So all the pictures that at one time had hung with honor and glory in the former mansion were now relegated to the passage that led to the servants' hall, for they were considered nothing but old junk; especially two old portraits, one of a man in a pink coat and a wig, the other of a lady with powdered, high-dressed hair and a rose held in her hand, and each surrounded by a large wreath of willow branches. These two old pictures were marred by many holes, for the baron's children were fond of using the two old people as targets for their cross bows. They were the portraits of the Councilor of Justice and his lady, from whom the whole family descended.

"But they didn't really belong to our family," said one of the young barons. "He was a peddler, and she was a goose girl! They weren't like Papa and Mamma!"

The pictures were judged to be worthless junk, and as the motto was "Everything in its proper place," Great-grandmother and Great-grandfather were hung in the passage that led to the servants' hall.

Now, the son of the village pastor was the tutor at the mansion. One day he was out walking with his pupils, the young barons and their older sister, who had just been confirmed. They followed the path toward the old willow, and as they strolled along, the young girl gathered some field flowers and bound them together - "Everything in its proper place" - and the flowers became a beautiful bouquet. At the same time she heard every word that was spoken, for she liked to listen to the clergyman's son talk of the power of nature and the great men and women of history. She had a good, sweet temper, with true nobility of soul and mind, and a heart that appreciated all that God had created.

They stopped at the old willow tree, where the youngster boy insisted on having a flute made for him, as had been cut for him from other willow branches before; and the pastor's son therefore broke off a branch.

"Oh, don't," cried the young baroness, but it was already too late. "That is our famous old tree," she explained, "and I love it dearly. They laugh at me at home for it, but I don't care. There's an old tale attached to this tree."

Then she told them all the story about the tree, about the old mansion, and the peddler and the goose girl who had met for the first time on this very spot and had afterward founded the noble family to which these young people belonged.

"They didn't want to be knighted, the grand old people!" she said. "They kept their motto, 'Everything in its proper place,' and so they thought it would be out of place for them to buy a title. It was their son - my grandfather - who was made a baron. They say he was very learned, a great favorite with princes and princesses, and was present at all their festivals. The others at home love him the best, but I don't know - there seems to be something about that first pair that draws my heart to them. How comfortable and patriarchal it must have been in the old mansion then, with the mistress sitting at her spinning wheel among all her maids, and the old master reading aloud from the Bible!"

"They must have been wonderful people, sensible people," said the pastor's son.

Then the conversation turned naturally toward noblemen and commoners. The young man hardly seemed to belong to the lower classes, so well did he understand and speak of the purpose and meaning of nobility.

"It is good fortune," he said, "to belong to a family that has distinguished itself. In your own blood there is then, so to speak, a spur that urges you on to make progress in everything that is good. It's gratifying to bear the name of a family that is a card of admission to the highest circles. Nobility means something great and noble; it is a gold coin that has been stamped to show its worth. It is a modern belief, and many poets, of course, agree with it, that all of nobility must be bad and stupid, and that the lower you go among poor people, the more wisdom and virtue do you find. But that isn't my opinion, for I think it's entirely foolish, entirely false. There are many beautiful and kindly traits found in the upper classes. I could give you many examples; here's one my mother told me once.

"She was visiting a noble family in town, where I think my grandmother had nursed the lady of the house. The old nobleman and my mother were together in his apartments when he noticed an old woman come limping into the courtyard on crutches. She used to come there every Sunday, to receive a little gift.

" 'Ah! There is the poor old lady!' said the nobleman. 'Walking is so hard for her!' And before my mother understood what he meant, the seventy-year-old excellency was out of the room and down the stairs, carrying his gift to the old woman, to spare her the difficult walk.

"Now that was only a little thing, but like the widow's mite it has a sound that echoes to the depths of the human heart. Those are the things that poets ought to sing about, especially in these times, for it does good; it soothes and reconciles mankind. But when a person, just because he is of noble birth and has a pedigree, stands on his hind legs and neighs in the street like an Arabian horse, and, when a commoner has been in the rooms, sneers, 'Something out of the street has been in here!' - that is nobility in decay and just a mask - a mask such as Thespis created. People are glad to see one like that satirized."

That was the way the pastor's son spoke. It was a rather long speech, but while talking he had finished carving the flute.

That night there was a great party at the mansion, with many guests from about the neighborhood and from the capital. The main hall was full of people; some of the ladies were dressed tastefully, while others showed no taste at all. The clergymen of the neighborhood remained gathered respectfully in a corner, looking as if they were conducting a burial service there. But it was a party of pleasure; only the pleasure hadn't begun yet.

There was to be a great concert, so the little baron brought in his new willow flute. But neither he nor his father could get a note from it, so they decided it was worthless. There were chamber music and song, both of the sort that pleases the performers most - yet quite charming.

Suddenly a certain cavalier - his father's son and nothing else - spoke to the tutor. "Are you a musician?" he demanded. "You play the flute and make it, too! That's genius! That should command, and receive, the place of honor! Heaven knows, I try to follow the times. You have to do that, you know. Come, you will enchant us all with the little instrument, won't you?"

Then he handed the tutor the flute made from the old willow down by the pool and announced loudly that the tutor was about to favor them with a solo on that instrument.

Now, it was easy to tell that they only wanted to make fun of him, so the tutor refused, though he could really play well. But they crowded around him and insisted so strongly that at last he put the flute to his lips.

That was a strange flute! A tone was heard, as sustained as the whistle of a steam engine, yes, and much stronger; it echoed over the courtyard, garden, and wood, and miles away into the country. And with that note there came a rushing wind that seemed to roar, "Everything in its proper place!"

And then Papa flew, as if carried by the wind, straight out of the great hall and into the shepherd's cottage, while the shepherd was blown - not into the main hall, for there he could not come - no, up into the servants' room, among the haughty lackeys strutting in their silk stockings. The proud servants were almost paralyzed at the very thought that such a common person would dare to sit at table with them!

But in the great hall the young baroness flew to the upper end of the table, where she was worthy to sit; the pastor's son found himself next to her, and there they both sat as if they were a newly married couple. A gentle old count of one of the most ancient families in the country remained unmoved in his honorable place, for the flute was just, as everyone ought to be. But the witty cavalier who was nothing more than the son of his father, and who had caused the flute playing, flew head over heels into the poultry house - and he was not alone.

For a whole mile around the countryside the sound of the flute could be heard, and remarkable things happened. The family of a rich merchant, driving along in their coach and four, was blown completely out of the carriage and could not even find a place on the back of it. Two wealthy peasants who in our times had grown too high for their own cornfields were tumbled back into the ditch.

Yes, that was indeed a dangerous flute. But luckily it burst after that first note, and that was a fortunate thing for everybody, for then it was put back into the owner's pocket. "Everything in its proper place."

The next day no one spoke of what had happened; and that is where we get the expression, "To pocket the flute." Everything was back in its former state, except for the two old portraits of the merchant and the goose girl. They had been blown up onto the wall of the drawing room; and when one of the well-known experts said they had been painted by an old master, they were left there, and carefully restored. Nobody knew before that they were worth anything, and how could they have known? Now they hung in the place of honor. "Everything in its proper place."

And it will come to that. Eternity is long - even longer than this story.