

Soup on a Sausage Peg

Hans Christian Andersen

I. SOUP FROM A SAUSAGE PEG

"That was a perfectly delightful dinner yesterday," one old female mouse told another, who had not attended the feast. "I sat number twenty-one from the old mouse king, which wasn't at all bad. Would you like to hear the menu? The courses were exceedingly well arranged-mouldy bread, bacon rind, tallow candle, and sausage, and then the same dishes all over again, from start to finish, so it was as good as two banquets. There was such a pleasant atmosphere, and such good humor, that it was like a family gathering. Not a scrap was left except the pegs at the ends of the sausages.

"The conversation turned to these wooden pegs, and the expression 'soup from a sausage peg,' came up. Everybody had heard it, but nobody had ever tasted such a soup, much less knew how to make it. We drank a fine toast to the health of whoever invented the soup, and we said he deserved to be appointed manager of the poorhouse. Wasn't that witty? And the old mouse king rose and promised that the young maiden mouse who could make this soup should be his queen. He gave them a year and a day to learn how."

"That wasn't so bad, after all," said the other mouse. "But how do you make this soup?"

"Yes, how do you make it? That's exactly what all the female mice are asking-the young ones and the old maids too. Every last one of them wants to be the queen, but they don't want to bestir themselves and go out in the wide world to learn how to make soup, as they certainly would have to do. Not everyone has the courage to leave her family and her own snug corner. Out in the world one doesn't come upon cheese parings or smell bacon every day. No indeed. One must endure hunger, yes, and perhaps be eaten alive by the cat."

Very likely this was what frightened most of them from venturing out in the wide world to find the secret of the soup. Only four mice declared themselves ready to go. They were young and willing, but poor. Each would go to one of the four corners of the world, and then let fortune decide among them. All four took sausage pegs with them as a reminder of their purpose. These were to be their pilgrim staffs.

It was the beginning of May when they set out, and they did not return until May of the following year. But only three of them returned. The fourth did not report, and there was no news about her, though the day for the contest had come.

"Yes, something always goes wrong on even the most pleasant occasions," the mouse king observed. But he commanded that all the mice for many miles around should be invited.

They gathered in the kitchen, and the three travelers lined up in a row by themselves. For the fourth, who was missing, they placed a sausage peg-shrouded in crape. No one dared to express an opinion until the three travelers had made their reports, and the mouse king had rendered his decision. Now we shall hear.

II. WHAT THE FIRST LITTLE MOUSE HAD SEEN AND HEARD ON HER TRAVELS

"When I went out into the wide world," the little mouse said, "I thought, as many others do when they are my age, that I knew everything. But such was not the case. It takes days and years to know everything. I immediately set out to sea. I went on a north-bound ship, for I had heard that ships' cooks must know how to manage. But it isn't so hard to manage at sea when you have an abundance of bacon, and whole barrels of salt meat and mouldy

flour. You live like a lord, but you don't learn to make soup from a sausage peg. We sailed many days and we sailed many nights. The boat rolled dreadfully, and we got many a drenching. When we reached port at last, I left the ship. That was far up in the north country.

"It's a strange thing to leave one's chimney corner, sail away in a ship which is a sort of corner too, and then suddenly find oneself in a foreign land, hundreds of miles away. There were vast and trackless forests of birch and pine. They smelled so strong that I didn't like it! The fragrance of the wild herbs was so spiced it made me sneeze and think of sausages.

"There, too, were broad lakes of water which was perfectly clear when you came close to it, though from a distance it looked as black as ink. White swans rested on the lakes, and they were so still that at first I thought they were flecks of foam. But when I saw them fly, and I saw them walk, I knew at once that they were members of the duck family-I could tell by the way they waddled. One can't disown his relatives! I kept to my own kind. I went with the field and forest mice, although they knew little enough of anything, and nothing at all of cookery, which was the very thing, I had traveled so far to find out about. That it was possible to think soup could be made from a sausage peg startled them so that the information was immediately bandied throughout the vast forest. But that there could be any solution to such a problem they thought was utterly impossible, and little did I expect that there, before the night was over, I should be initiated into the making of it.

"It was midsummer. The mice said that this was why the woods and the herbs were redolent, and the waters so clear and yet so dark blue in contrast with the whiteness of the swans. At the edge of the forest, between three or four houses they had raised a pole as high as a ship's mainmast. Garlands and ribbons fluttered from the peak of it. It was a Maypole. Young men and maidens danced around it and sang at the top of their voices, while the fiddler played them a tune. They were merry in the sunset and merry in the moonlight, but I had no part in it, for what would a little mouse be doing at a forest dance? So I sat in the soft moss, and held tight to my sausage peg. The moonlight fell particularly bright on one spot, where there was a tree. This spot was carpeted with moss so soft that I dare say it was as fine as the mouse king's fur, but its color was green and it was a blessing to the eyes.

"All of a sudden there appeared a few of the most enchanting little folk, no taller than my knee. They resembled human beings, except that they were better proportioned. Elves was what they called themselves. They went dressed very fine, in clothes made of flower petals trimmed with the wings of flies and gnats. It wasn't at all bad-looking. They seemed in search of something, but I didn't know what it could be until a couple of them came up to me. Then their leader pointed to my sausage peg and said:

" 'That's just what we need. It's pointed. It's perfect!' The more he looked at my sausage peg, the happier it made him.

" 'You can borrow it,' I told him, 'but not keep it.'

" 'Not keep it,' all of them promised, as they took the sausage peg that I gave them and danced away with it to the place where the soft moss grew. They wanted to have a Maypole of their own, and mine seemed made to order for them. Then they decorated it. Yes, what a sight it was!

"Small spiders spun gold thread around it. They draped it with streamers and banners so fine and bleached so snowy white in the moonlight that they dazzled my eyes. They took the color from a butterfly's wing and splashed it about on my sausage peg until it seemed blooming with flowers and sparkling with diamonds. I scarcely knew it, for in all the world there is no match to the Maypole they had made of it.

"Now the real party of elves appeared, in great numbers. Not a stitch did they wear, yet it

couldn't have been more refined. I was invited to look on, but from a distance, because I was too big for them.

"Then the music struck up, and such music! It seemed as if a thousand bells of glass were ringing. It was so rich and full that I thought it was the swans who were singing. Yes, I even thought I heard the cuckoos, and blackbirds, until it was as if the whole forest had joined in the chorus. Children's voices, bell tones, and birds' songs, all seemed to keep tune in the loveliest melody, yet it all came from the elves' Maypole. It was a whole chime of bells-yet it was my sausage peg. I would never have imagined so much could have been done with it, but that depends altogether upon who gets hold of it. I was deeply touched. From sheer pleasure, I wept as much as a little mouse can weep.

"The night was all too short, but the nights in the far north are not any longer at that time of the year. As dawn broke, and the morning breeze rippled the mirrored surface of the lake, the fine-spun streamers and banners were blown away. The billowing garlands of spider web, the suspension bridges from leaf to leaf, the balustrades and whatever else they are called, blew away like nothing at all. Six elves brought back my sausage peg, and asked if I wished for anything they could give me. So I begged them to tell me how to make soup from a sausage peg.

"The chief elf smiled, and said, 'How do we do it? Why you have just seen it. I'm sure you scarcely knew your sausage peg.'

" 'To you, it's only a trick of speech,' I said. I told him honestly what I traveled in search of, and what importance was attached to it here at home. 'What good,' said I, 'does it do our mouse king or our great kingdom for me to witness all this merrymaking? I can't just wave my sausage peg and say, "See the peg. Here comes the soup." This sort of dish is good only after all the guests at the table have had their fill.'

"Then the chief elf dipped his little finger in the blue cup of a violet, and told me:

" 'Watch this. I shall anoint your pilgrim's staff. When you come home again to the mouse king's palace, you need only touch his warm heart with it, and the staff will immediately be covered with violets, even in the coldest wintertime. So I should say I have given you something to take home with you, and a little more for good measure.' "

Before the little mouse said what this "little more" was, she held out her stick to the king's heart. Really and truly, it became covered with the most beautiful bouquet of flowers, and their fragrance was so strong that the mouse king ordered the mice who stood nearest the fire to singe their tails. He wanted a smell of something burning to overcome the scent of violets, which was not the kind of perfume that he liked.

"What was that 'little more for good measure'?" he asked.

"Oh yes," said the little mouse. "I think it is what they call an effect." She turned the stick around and, behold! there was not a flower to be seen on the bare sausage peg in her hand. She flourished it like a music baton. " 'Violets are to see, and smell, and touch.' the elf told me. So something must be done for us to hear and taste."

The little mouse began to beat time, and music was heard. It was not the elfin music of the forest. No, it was such as can be heard in the kitchen. There was the bubbling sound of boiling and stewing. It came all at once, as though the wind rushed through every chimney funnel, and every pot and kettle boiled over. The fire shovel clanged upon the copper kettle, and then all at once the sound died down. One heard the whisper of the tea kettle's song, so sweet to hear and so low they could scarcely tell when it began or left off. The little pot simmered and the big pot boiled, and neither kept time with the other. It was as if there were no reason left in the pots. And the little mouse flourished her baton even more fiercely. The pots seethed, bubbled, and boiled over. The wind whistled and roared down the chimney. *Puff!* it rose so tremendously that the little mouse at length lost hold of her

stick.

"That was thick soup," said the mouse king. "Is it ready to be served?"

"That's all there is to it." The little mouse curtsied.

"All?" said the mouse king. "Then we had better hear what the next has to tell us."

III. WHAT THE SECOND LITTLE MOUSE HAD TO TELL

"I was born in the palace library," said the second mouse. "I and other members of my family have never known the luxury of visiting a dining room, much less a pantry. Only on my journey and here today have I seen a kitchen. In the library we often went hungry indeed, but we got a great deal of knowledge. The news of the royal reward offered for making soup from a sausage peg finally reached us. It was my grandmother who promptly ferreted out a manuscript, which of course she could not read, but from which she has heard the following passage read: 'If one is a poet, one can make soup out of a sausage peg.'

"She asked me if I were a poet. I told her I was entirely innocent in such matters, but she insisted that I must go forth and manage to be one. I asked how to do it, for that was as hard for me to learn as it was to find out how to make the soup. But my grandmother had heard a good many books read, and she told me that three things were essential: 'Understanding, imagination, and feeling-if you can manage to get these into you, you'll be a poet, and this business of the sausage peg will come to you by nature.'

"So off I went, marching westward, out into the wide world to become a poet.

"I knew that understanding comes first in everything, because the other two virtues aren't half as well thought of, so I set off in search of understanding at once. Yes, but where does it live? 'Go to the ant and be wise,' said the great King of the Jews. I learned that in the library. So I did not rest until I came to a big ant hill. There I posted myself on watch, to learn wisdom.

"The ants are a very respectable race. They understand things thoroughly. With them everything is like a well worked problem in arithmetic that comes out right. Work and lay eggs, they say, for you must both live your life and provide for the future. So that is just what they do. They are divided into clean ants and those who do the dirty work. Each one is numbered according to his rank, and the ant queen is number *one*. What she thinks is the only right way to think, for she contains all wisdom, and it was most important for me to learn this from her. But she talked so cleverly that it seemed like nonsense to me.

"She asserted that her ant hill was the highest thing in all the world, though quite close to it grew a tree which was obviously higher. It was so very much higher that there was no denying it, and consequently it was never mentioned. One evening an ant got lost in the tree. She climbed up the trunk, not to the very top but higher than any ant had climbed before. When she came home and told of finding something even more lofty than the ant hill, the other ants considered that she had insulted the whole community. She was muzzled, and condemned to solitary confinement for life. Shortly afterward another ant climbed the tree, making the same journey and the same discovery. But this ant reported it with suitable caution and diffidence as they say. Besides, she was one of the upper-class ants-one of the clean ones. So they believed her, and when she died they gave her an eggshell monument, to show their love of science."

The little mouse went on to say, "I saw the ants continually running to and fro with eggs on their backs. One of them dropped hers, and tried to pick it up again, but she couldn't manage it. Two others came to help her with all their power. But when they came near dropping their own eggs in the attempt they at once stopped helping, for each must first think of himself. The queen ant said that they had displayed both heart and understanding.

" 'These two virtues,' she said, 'raise ants above all other creatures of reason. Understanding must and shall always come first, and I have more of it than anyone else.' With this, she reared up on her hind legs so that all could be sure who she was. I was sure who she was, and I ate her. 'Go to the ant and be wise'-and I had swallowed the queen.

"I now went over to the tree I mentioned. It was an oak, with a mighty trunk and far-flung branches, for it was very old. I knew that a living spirit must live in it, a dryad as she is called, who is born when the tree is born, and dies when it dies. I had heard of this in the library, and now I saw such a tree with such an oak maiden. She shrieked frightfully when she saw me so near her, for like other women she is terribly afraid of mice. But she had more reason to fear me than the others have, because I might have gnawed through the bark of the tree on which her life depended. I spoke to her in a cordial, friendly fashion, and told her she had nothing to fear.

"She took me up in her slender hand, and when I told her why I had come out into the wide world she promised that perhaps that very evening I should find one of the two virtues for which I still searched. She told me that Fantasy was her very good friend, that he was as beautiful as the god of love, and that he often rested under the leafy boughs of the tree, which would then rustle even more softly over these two. He called her his dryad, she said, and the tree his tree, for the magnificent gnarled oak just suited him. He liked its roots which went down so deep and steadfast in the earth, and the trunk which rose so high in the clear air that it felt the pelting snow, the driving wind, and the warm sun as they ought to be felt.

" 'Yes.' the dryad talked on, 'the birds up aloft there sing and tell of distant lands. On the single dead branch the stork has built a nest which is very picturesque, and he tells me about the land where the pyramids are. Fantasy loves to hear all this, but it is not enough for him. I too must tell him of my life in the forest, from the time when I was small and the tree so tiny that a nettle could shade it, until now when the tree is so tall and strong. Sit down under the sweet thyme, and watch closely. When Fantasy comes I shall manage to pinch his wings and pull out a little feather. Take it. A poet can get no better gift-and it will be all you need.'

"When Fantasy came, the feather was plucked and I took it," said the little mouse. "I soaked it in water until it was soft. Still it was hard to swallow, but I nibbled it down at last. It's no easy matter to become a poet, with all the things one must cram inside oneself.

"Now I had both understanding and imagination, and they taught me that the third virtue was to be found in the library. For a great man once said and wrote that there are romances whose only purpose is to relieve people of their superfluous tears, and that these romances are like sponges, sopping up the emotions. I remembered that a few of these old books had always looked especially tasty. They had been thumbed quite greasy. They must have absorbed an enormous lot of tears.

"I returned to the library and devoured a whole novel-that is to say, the soft and the essential part; but the crust-that is, the binding, I left. When I had digested this, and another one too, I felt fluttery inside. I ate still a third and there I was, a poet. That is what I told myself, and that is what I told everyone else. I had headache, stomach aches-I can't remember all the different aches.

"Now I began to recall all the stories that could be made to apply to a sausage peg. Many pegs came to mind-the ant queen must have had magnificent understanding. I remembered the story about a man who would take a white peg out of his mouth to make both himself and the peg invisible. I thought of old beer with a peg stuck in it, of peg legs, and 'round pegs in square holes,' and 'the peg to one's coffin.' All my thoughts ran on pegs. When one is a poet-as I am, for I have worked like mad to become one-one can turn all of these subjects into poems. So every day I shall be able to entertain your majesty with another peg, another story-yes that's my soup."

"Let's hear what the third one has to say," the king commanded.

"Squeak, squeak!" they heard at the kitchen door, and the fourth little mouse—the one they had given up for dead—whizzed in like an arrow and upset the crape-covered sausage peg. She had been running night and day, and when she saw her chance she had traveled by rail on the freight train. Even so she was almost too late. She pushed forward, looking the worse for wear. She had lost her sausage peg but not her tongue, for she immediately took over the conversation as if everybody had been waiting to hear her, and her alone, and as if nothing else mattered in the world. She spoke at once, and she spoke in full. She appeared so suddenly that no one had time to check her or her speech until she was through. So let's hear her.

IV. WHAT THE FOURTH MOUSE, WHO SPOKE BEFORE THE THIRD, HAD TO SAY

"I went at once to the largest town," she said. "I don't recall the name of it. I have such a bad memory for names. From the railway station I was carried with some confiscated goods to the courthouse, and from there I ran to see the jailor. He was talking about his prisoners, and especially about one who had spoken rashly. One word led to another. About these words other words had been spoken, read and recorded.

" 'The whole business is soup from a sausage peg,' said the jailor, 'but it is a soup that may cost him his head.'

"This gave me such an interest in the prisoner," the little mouse went on to say, "that I watched my chance, and darted into his cell. For there is always some mouse hole behind every locked door. The prisoner looked pale. He had a big beard and big, brilliant eyes. His lamp smoked up the cell, but the walls were so black that they couldn't get any blacker, and the prisoner whiled away the time by scratching drawings and verses in white on this black background. I didn't read them, but I believe he found it dull there, for I was a welcome guest. He tempted me out with crumbs, and whistling, and pet words. He was glad to see me, won my confidence, and we became fast friends. We shared his bread and water, and he treated me to cheese and sausage, so I lived well. However, I would say that it was chiefly for his good company that I stayed with him. He let me run up his hand and arm into his sleeve, and climb in his beard. He called me his little friend, and I really liked him, for friendship is a two-sided thing. I forgot my mission in the wide world and I forgot my sausage peg. It is lying there still in a crack in the floor. I wanted to stay with him, for if I had gone away the poor prisoner wouldn't have had a friend in the world. That would not be right, so I stayed. But he did not stay. He spoke to me sadly for the last time, gave me a double ration of bread and cheese, and blew me a parting kiss. Then he went away and he never came back. I don't know what became of him.

" ' Soup from a sausage peg,' the jailor had said, so I went to see him. But he was not to be trusted. He took me up in his hand, right enough, but he popped me into a cage, a treadmill, a terrible machine in which you run around and around without going anywhere. And, besides, people laugh at you.

" The jailor's grandchild was a charming little girl, with curls that shone like gold, such sparkling eyes, and such merry lips.

" 'Why, you poor little mouse,' she said, as she peeped into my ugly old cage. She drew back the iron bolt, and out I jumped to the window sill, and from there to the rain spout. I was free, free! That was all I thought of, and not of the purpose of my journey.

"It was almost dark. Night was coming on when I established myself in an old tower already inhabited by a watchman and an owl. I didn't trust either of them, and the owl least of all. It is like the cat, and has the unforgivable vice of eating mice. But one can be mistaken, as I was, for this old owl was most worthy and knowing. She knew more than the watchman, and as much as I did. The young owls were always making a fuss about everything. 'Don't try to make soup out of a sausage peg,' she told them, and she had

such tender affection for her own family that those were the hardest word she would say.

"Her behavior gave me such confidence in her, that from the crevice where I hid I called out, 'Squeak!' My trust in her pleased her so that she promised to take me under her protection. No animal would be allowed to molest me, and she would save me for the wintertime when food ran short.

"She was wise in every way. The watchman, she told me, can only hoot with the horn that hangs by his side. 'He is vastly puffed up about it,' she declared, 'and thinks he's an owl in a tower. It sounds so big, but it is very little-all soup from a sausage peg.'

"I begged her to give me the recipe for this soup, but she explained to me that, 'Soup from a sausage peg is only a human expression. It means different things, and everybody thinks his meaning is the right one, but the real meaning is nothing at all.'

" 'Nothing at all?' I squeaked. That was a blow! Truth isn't always pleasant, but 'Truth above all else.' The old owl said so too. Now that I thought about it, I clearly saw that if I brought back what was 'above all else,' I would be bringing something much better than soup from a sausage peg. So I hurried back, to be home in time and to bring back the best thing of all, something above everything else, which is the *truth*. We mice are an enlightened people, and the mouse king is the most enlightened of us all. He is capable of making me his queen for the sake of truth."

"Your truth is false!" said the mouse who had not yet had her say. "I can make the soup, and I intend to do so."

V. HOW THE SOUP WAS MADE

"I didn't go traveling," the third mouse informed them. "I stayed at home, and that's the right thing to do. There's no need to travel. One can get everything just as well here, so I stayed at home. I have not learned what I know from fabulous creatures, or swallowed it whole, or taken an owl's word for it. I found it out from my own meditation. Kindly put a kettle brimful of water on the fire! Now stir up the fire until the water boils up and boils over. Now throw the peg in! And now will the mouse king kindly dip his tail in the scalding water, to stir it. The longer he stirs it the stronger the soup will be. There's no expense-it needs no other ingredients. Just stir it around."

"Can't someone else stir it?" the mouse king asked.

"No," she told him. "The necessary touch can be given only by the mouse king's tail."

The water bubbled and boiled as the mouse king stood close to the kettle. It was almost dangerous. He held out his tail, as mice do in a dairy when they skim a pan of milk and lick the cream from their tails. But no sooner did the hot steam strike his tail than away he jumped.

"Naturally, you are my queen," he declared. "The soup can wait until our golden anniversary. That will give the poor people among my subjects something to which they can look forward, with pleasure-and a long pleasure."

And then the wedding was held. But as the mice returned home, some of them said that it could scarcely be called soup from a sausage peg. Soup from a mouse tail was more like it. This or that of what had been told was quite good, they admitted, but the whole thing could have been done very differently.

"Now I would have said this, and that, and the other thing." So said the critics, who are so wise after a thing is done. But the story was told around the world. Various opinions were held of it but they didn't do the story itself any harm. So it's well to remember that for all things great and small, as well as in regard to soup from a sausage peg, don't expect any thanks.

