

What Happened to the Thistle

Hans Christian Andersen

Adjoining the rich estate was a lovely and beautifully kept garden of rare trees and flowers. Guests at the estate enjoyed this fine garden and praised it. People from the countryside all round about and townspeople as well would come every Sunday and holiday to ask if they might see the garden. Even whole schools made excursions to it.

Just outside the fence that separated the garden from a country lane, there grew a very large thistle. It was so unusually big with such vigorous, full-foliaged branches rising from the root that it well deserved to be called a thistle bush. No one paid any attention to her except one old donkey that pulled the dairymaid's cart. He would stretch his old neck toward the thistle and say, "You're a beauty. I'd like to eat you!" But his tether was not long enough to let him reach the thistle and eat her.

There was a big party at the manor house. Among the guests were fine aristocratic relations from the capital - charming young girls, and among them was a young lady who had come from a foreign land, all the way from Scotland. Her family was old, and noble, and rich in lands and gold. She was a bride well worth winning, thought more than one young man, and their mothers thought so too.

The young people amused themselves on the lawn, where they played croquet. As they strolled about in the garden, each young lady plucked a flower and put in a young man's buttonhole. The young lady from Scotland looked all around her for a flower. But none of them suited her until she happened to look over the fence and saw the big, flourishing thistle bush, full of deep purple, healthy-looking flowers. When she saw them she smiled, and asked the young heir of the household to pick one of them for her.

"That is Scotland's flower," she said. "It blooms on my country's coat of arms. That's the flower for me."

He plucked the best flower of the thistle, and pricked his finger in the process as much as if he had torn the blossom from the thorniest rose bush.

When she put it in his buttonhole, he considered it a great honor. Every other young man would gladly have given his lovely garden flower for any blossom from the slender fingers of the girl from Scotland. If the heir of the household felt himself highly honored, how much more so the thistle! She felt as full as if the sunshine and dew went through her.

"I must be more important than I thought," she said to herself. "I really belong inside, not outside the fence. One gets misplaced in the world, but I now have one of my offspring not only over the fence but actually in a buttonhole!"

To every one of her buds that bloomed, the thistle bush told what had happened. Not many days went by before she heard important news. She heard it not from passers-by, nor from the chirping of little birds, but from the air itself, which collects sounds and carries them far and wide - from the shadiest walks of the garden and from the furthest rooms of the manor, where doors stood ajar and windows were left open. She heard that the young man who got the thistle flower from the slender fingers of the girl from Scotland, now had won her heart and hand. They made a fine couple, and it was a good match.

"I brought that about," the thistle believed, thinking of how her flower had been chosen for the gentleman's buttonhole. Each new bud that opened was told of this wonderful happening.

"Undoubtedly I shall now be transplanted into the garden," thought the thistle. "Perhaps they will even pinch me into a flowerpot, which is the highest honor of all." She thought

about this so long that at length she said with full and firm conviction, "I am to be planted in a flowerpot."

Every little thistle bud which opened was promised that it too would be put in a pot, perhaps even in a buttonhole, which was the highest it could hope to go. But not one of them reached a flowerpot, much less a buttonhole. They lived upon light and air. By day they drank sunshine, by night they drank dew, and were visited by bees and wasps who came in search of a dowry - the honey of the flower. And they took away the honey, but left the flowers behind.

"Such a gang of robbers!" said the thistle bush. "I'd like to stick a thorn through them, but I can't."

Her flowers faded and fell away, but new ones came in their place. "You have come as if you were called for," the thistle bush told them. "I expect to cross the fence any minute now."

A couple of innocent daisies and some tall, narrow-leaved canary grass listened with deepest admiration, and believed everything that they heard. The old donkey, who had to pull the milk cart, looked longingly at the blooming thistle bush and reached out for it, but his tether was too short.

The thistle thought so hard and so long about the Scotch thistle, whom she considered akin to her, that she began to believe that she herself had come from Scotland and that it was her own ancestors who had grown on the Scottish arms. This was toplofty thinking, but then tall thistles are apt to think tall thought.

"Sometimes one is of more illustrious ancestry than he ventures to suppose," said a nettle which grew near-by. It had a notion that it could be transformed into fine muslin if properly handled.

Summer went by, and fall went by, and the leaves fell from the trees. The flowers were more colorful, but less fragrant. On the other side of the fence the gardener's boy sang:

*"Up the hill and down the hill,
That's the way the world goes still."*

And the young fir trees in the woods began to look forward to Christmas, though Christmas was a long time off.

"Here I still stay," said the thistle. "It is as if nobody thinks of me any more, yet it was I who made the match. They were engaged, and now they have been married. That was eight days ago. But I haven't progressed a single step - how can I?"

Several weeks went by. The thistle had one last, lonely flower. Large and full, it grew low, near the root. The cold wind blew over it, its color faded, its splendor departed. Only the thistle-shaped cup remained, as large as an artichoke blossom, and as silvery as a sunflower.

The young couple, who now were man and wife, came down the garden walk along the fence. The bride looked over the fence, and said, "Why, there still stands the big thistle, but it hasn't a flower left."

"Yes, there's the ghost of one - the very last one." Her husband pointed to the silvery shell of the flower - a flower itself.

"Isn't it lovely!" she said. "We must have one just like that carved around the frame of our picture."

Once again the young man had to climb the fence, and pluck the silvery shell of the thistle flower. It pricked his fingers well, because he had called it a ghost. Then it was brought

into the garden, to the mansion, and to the parlor. There hung a large painting - "The Newly Married Couple!" In the groom's buttonhole a thistle was painted. They spoke of that thistle flower, and they spoke of this thistle shell, this last silvered, shining flower of the thistle which they had brought in with them, and which was to be copied in the carving of the frame. The air carried their words about, far and wide.

"What strange things can happen to one," said the thistle. "My oldest child was put in a buttonhole, and my youngest in a picture frame. I wonder where I shall go."

The old donkey by the roadside looked long and lovingly at the thistle. "Come to me, my sweet," he said. "I cannot come to you because my tether is not long enough."

But the thistle did not answer. She grew more and more thoughtful, and she thought on right up to Christmas time, when this flower came of all her thinking:

"When one's children are safe inside, a mother may be content to stand outside the fence."

"That's a most honorable thought," said the sunbeam. "You too shall also have a good place."

"In a flowerpot or in a frame?" the thistle asked.

"In a fairy tale," said the sunbeam. And here it is.