

The Angel

Hans Christian Andersen

Every time a good child dies, an angel of God comes down to earth. He takes the child in his arms, spreads out his great white wings, and flies with it all over the places the child loved on earth. The angel plucks a large handful of flowers, and they carry it with them up to God, where the flowers bloom more brightly than they ever did on earth. And God presses all the flowers to His bosom, but the flower that He loves the best of all He kisses. And then that flower receives a voice, and can join in the glorious everlasting hymn of praise.

You see, all this one of God's angels said as he was carrying a dead child to Heaven, and the child heard it as if in a dream. As they passed over the places where the child used to play, they came through gardens with lovely flowers. "Which flowers shall we take with us to plant in Heaven?" asked the angel.

And there stood a slender beautiful rosebush. A wicked hand had broken the stem, and the branches with their large, half-opened blossoms hung down withering.

"That poor bush!" cried the child. "Let's take it so that it may bloom again up there in God's garden."

So the angel plucked it, then kissed the child for its tender thought, and the little child half opened his eyes. They took others of the rich flowers, and even some of the despised marigolds and wild pansies.

"Now we have enough flowers," said the child, and the angel nodded. But they did not yet fly upward to God.

It was night, and it was very quiet. They remained in the great city and hovered over one of the narrowest streets, which was cluttered with straw, ashes, and refuse of all kinds. It was just after moving day, and broken plates, rags, old hats, and bits of plaster, all things that didn't look so well, lay scattered in the street.

In the rubbish the angel pointed to the pieces of a broken flowerpot and to a lump of earth which had fallen out of it. It was held together by the roots of a large withered field flower. No one could have had any more use for it, hence it had been thrown out in the street.

"We shall take that with us," said the angel. "As we fly onward, I will tell you about it." And as they flew the angel told the story.

"Down in that narrow alley, in a dark cellar, there once lived a poor sick boy who had been bedridden since childhood. The most he could ever do, when he was feeling his best, was hobble once or twice across the little room on crutches. For only a few days in midsummer the sunbeams could steal into his cellar for about half an hour or so. Then the little boy could warm himself and see the red blood in his thin, almost transparent fingers as he held them before his face. Then people would say, the boy has been out in the sunshine today.

"All he knew of the forests in the fresh breath of spring was when the neighbor's son would bring him home the first beech branch. He would hold this up over his head, and pretend he was sitting in the beech woods where the sun was shining and the birds were singing.

"One spring day the neighbor's boy brought him also some field flowers, and by chance one of them had a root to it! So it was planted in a flowerpot and placed in the window beside the little boy's bed. And tended by a loving hand, it grew, put out new shoots, and bore lovely flowers each year. It was a beautiful garden to the little sick boy-his one treasure on earth. He watered it and tended it and saw that it received every sunbeam,

down to the very last that managed to struggle through the dingy cellar window.

"The flower wove itself into his dreams; for him it flowered; it spread its fragrance, and cheered his eyes, and toward it he turned his face for a last look when his Heavenly Father called him.

"He has been with God now for a year, and for a year the flower stood withered and forgotten in the window until on moving day it was thrown out on the rubbish heap in the street. That is the flower-the poor withered flower-we have added to our bouquet, for it has given more happiness than the richest flower in the Queen's garden."

The child looked up at the angel who was carrying him. "But how do you know all this?" he asked.

"I know it," said the angel, "because I myself was the sick little boy who hobbled on crutches. I know my own flower very well."

Then the child opened his eyes wide and looked up into the angel's beautiful happy face, and at that moment they found themselves in God's Heaven where there was everlasting joy and happiness. And God pressed the child to His bosom, and he received glorious white wings like the angel's, so they flew together, hand in hand. Then God pressed all the flowers to His heart, but the poor withered field flower He kissed, and it received a voice and joined the choir of the angels who floated about God's throne. Some were near, some farther out in great circles that swept to infinity, but all were supremely happy. And they all sang, the great and the small, the good blessed child and the withered field flower that had lain so long in the rubbish heap in the dark narrow alley.