

The Old Street Lamp

Hans Christian Andersen

Have you ever heard the story of the old Street Lamp? It's really not very amusing, but you might listen to it for once.

It was such an honest lamp, which had done its duty for many, many years and which was now going to be discarded. It was the last evening it hung on its post and gave light to the street beneath it. The Lamp felt like an old ballet dancer who is performing for the last time and who knows that tomorrow she will be in a cold garret. The Lamp dreaded the morrow, for then it was to appear in the town hall and be inspected by the thirty-six council members, to see whether or not it was fit for further service.

It would be decided whether in the future the Lamp was to give light for the inhabitants of some suburb, or perhaps for some manufacturing plant in the country. But it might go at once to be melted down in an iron foundry! In that case it might become anything, but the Lamp was terribly troubled wondering whether, in some new state, it would remember it had once been a Street Lamp. In any case, the Lamp would be separated from the watchman and his wife, whom it had come to consider part of its family. It became a Lamp at the same time that he became a watchman.

In those days the watchman's wife was a little haughty. She would glance at the Lamp only when she passed under it in the evening-never in the daytime. However, in later years, when those three, the watchman, his wife, and the Lamp, had grown old together, the wife helped tend the Lamp, clean it, and poured oil into it. The old couple were thoroughly honest; never had they cheated the Lamp of a single drop of oil.

Now it was the Lamp's last night in the street, and tomorrow it would go to the town hall. Those were two dark thoughts indeed, and it's no wonder the old Lamp didn't burn very brightly. But other thoughts too passed through its mind. How many events it had lighted, how much it had seen of life! Perhaps as much as the thirty-six councilmen put together. But it didn't really say anything, for it was a good, honest old Lamp, and wouldn't willingly insult anyone-least of all those in authority. It remembered so much, and now and then its flame flashed up as if the Lamp had the feeling: "Yes, I will also be remembered."

"There was that handsome young man-my, it was a long time ago! He came with a letter, written on pink paper, so fine and gilt-edged, so prettily written by a lady's hand. Twice he read it, and kissed it, and as he looked up to me his eyes said, 'I'm the happiest person in the world!' Yes, only he and I knew what was written in that first letter from his beloved.

"I also remember another pair of eyes - it's strange how my thoughts are rambling! Here in this street was a magnificent funeral procession, a beautiful young maiden lying in a coffin on the velvet-covered hearse. There were many wreaths and flowers, and the many torches quite overpowered my light. The sidewalk was filled with people who all followed the procession. But after the torches had passed me, and I looked around, I could see one single person, leaning against my post and weeping. I shall never forget the eyes that looked up at me then!"

Many thoughts flitted through the mind of the old Street Lamp, for tonight it shone for the last time.

The sentry who is relieved of his post at least knows his successor, and may say a few words to him; but the Lamp did not know who would succeed it. It could have given one or two useful hints about rain and mist, how far the rays of the moon lit up the pavement, and from what direction the wind blew.

On the gutter plank stood three individuals who had introduced themselves to the Lamp,

because they thought it was the Lamp that could choose its successor. One of them was a herring's head, and because it could gleam in the darkness, it was sure there would be a real saving in oil if they would put him up on the lamppost. The second was a piece of touchwood, which also glowed, and certainly better than a herring's head, at least so it said. Furthermore, it was the last descendant of an old stem, once the pride of the forest. And the third was a glow-worm. Where that had come from the Lamp couldn't imagine; but there it was, and it could give light too. But the herring's head and the touchwood swore it could do so only at certain times, and therefore could not be taken into account.

The old Lamp said that not one of them gave enough light to fulfill the duties of a street lamp; but they wouldn't believe it. And when they heard that the Lamp had nothing to do with appointing its successor, they were much relieved and said the Lamp was much too decrepit to make a choice.

Just then the Wind came tearing around the street corner, and whistled through the air holes of the Lamp, and said to it: "What's this I hear? Are you going away tomorrow? Is this the last evening I'll see you here? Then I'm certainly going to give you a farewell present. I'll blow into your brain box so that in the future you'll be able not only to remember everything you've seen and heard, but you'll also have such a light within you that you can see all that is read or spoken in your presence."

"Oh, that's way too much!" said the old Lamp. "Thank you very much! I only hope I'm not going to be melted down!"

"That won't happen right away," said the Wind. "Now I'll blow a memory into you; if you receive several presents like this, you'll have a happy old age."

"If only I'm not melted down!" said the Lamp. "Or can you guarantee my memory even in that case?"

"Don't be silly, old Lamp!" said the Wind, and then it blew. At that moment the Moon came out.

"What are you going to give?" asked the Wind.

"Nothing at all," replied the Moon. "I'm on the wane, and besides the lamps have never lighted me. On the contrary, I've often given light for the lamps." Whereupon it slid behind the clouds again, for it didn't want to be pestered.

Now a drop fell on the Lamp. It seemed to come from the roof, but it explained that the gray clouds sent it as a present-perhaps the best possible present. "I'll penetrate you so completely that you'll be able, if you wish, to turn into rust in one night, and then crumble into dust."

But the Lamp thought this was a poor present, and so did the Wind.

"Isn't someone going to give something better?" it blew as loudly as it could.

Just then a bright shooting star fell, blazing down in a long bright stripe.

"What was that?" cried the herring's head. "Wasn't that a falling star? Why, I think it went right into the Lamp! Well, if such a highborn personage as that is trying for his position we'd better quit and go home!" And so it did, and the others too. But the old Lamp shone more marvelously than ever.

"That was a wonderful present!" it said. "The bright stars that I've always admired and that shine far more brightly than I ever have been able to, despite my ambition and efforts, have actually noticed me, a poor old lamp, and have sent me a present! They have granted that everything I remember and see as clearly as if it stood before me shall also be seen by those I love! And in that lies true happiness; for if we cannot share happiness with others, it can only be half enjoyed."

"Those are very honorable thoughts," said the Wind. "But for that you need wax lights. Without a wax candle lit up in you, your rare faculties will be of no use to others. The stars didn't think of that! They think everything that shines has at least one wax light in it always. But now I am tired! I am going to lie down." And then the Wind lay down.

The next day-well, we'd better pass over the next day. But the next evening, the Lamp was resting in a big easy chair. And where? In the old watchman's house!

The old man had begged as a favor of the thirty-six councilmen that he be allowed to keep the Lamp as a reward for his long and faithful service to the city. They laughed at him when he asked for it, but finally gave it to him.

Now the Lamp lay in the big armchair close to the warm stove, and it seemed to be much larger. It almost filled the whole chair. As the old couple sat at supper they looked fondly at the old Lamp and would gladly have given it a place at their table.

It is true that their home was only a cellar two yards below the sidewalk, and that one had to walk through a stone-paved front room to get into their room, but inside it was very comfortable. There were strips of list on the door, and everything looked clean and neat, with curtains around the bed and over the little windows. On the window sill stood two strange flowerpots. Sailor Christian had brought them home from the East or West Indies. They were made of clay and represented two elephants, with their backs cut off. From the earth in one of the elephants there grew the most excellent chives, and that was the old people's vegetable garden; in the other was a great blooming geranium, and that was the flower garden. On the wall hung a large colored print of the Congress of Vienna; there you could see all the Kings and Emperors at once. There was a Bornholm clock with heavy lead weights that went "tick! tock!" It was always a little fast, but that was much better than having it a little slow, said the old people.

They were eating their supper, and the Street Lamp lay, as you know, in the big armchair close to the warm stove. It seemed to the Lamp as if the whole world were turned upside down. But when the old watchman looked at it, and talked of all they had gone through together in rain and in mist, in the short bright summer nights, and when the snow beat down and he longed for his home in the cellar, then the old Lamp felt all right again. It could see everything as clearly as if it were happening then; yes, the Wind had certainly given it a splendid light.

The old people were always active and industrious; not a single hour was wasted in idleness. Sunday afternoons the old man would bring out some book or other-generally a volume of travels. And he would read aloud about Africa, about great jungles, with elephants running about wild, and the old woman would listen closely and peer at the clay-elephant flowerpots. "I can almost visualize it myself," she would say.

Then the lamp would wish most particularly that a wax candle had been lighted inside it, for then the old woman would have been able to see everything in detail, just as the Lamp saw it- the tall trees with their great branches all entwined, the naked, black men riding horseback, and big herds of elephants, crushing the reeds and bushes with their huge feet.

"What good are all my faculties if I can't get a wax light?" sighed the Lamp. "They have only oil and tallow candle here, and they won't do."

One day the old man brought a number of wax-candle ends down into the cellar. The larger pieces were burned, and the smaller ones were used by the old woman for waxing her thread when she was sewing. There were plenty of wax candles then, but no one thought of putting a little piece into the Lamp.

"Here I am, with all my rare faculties!" said the Lamp. "I have everything within me, but I can't share it with those I love. They don't know that I can cover these white walls with the

most gorgeous tapestry, or change them into noble forests, or show them anything they could wish to see! They don't know that!"

The Lamp stood neat and scoured in a corner, where it always caught the eyes of visitor, and although people considered it a piece of rubbish, the old couple didn't care; they loved the Lamp.

One day-it was the old watchman's birthday-the old woman went to the Lamp, smiling a little to herself. "I'll light it today, in his honor," she said.

Then the Lamp rattled its metal cover, for it thought, "At last they have a fine idea!" But it was only oil, and no wax candle. The Lamp burned throughout that whole evening, but now it understood at last that the gift the stars had given it, the best of all gifts, would be a lost treasure for all its life.

That night the Lamp had a dream, for with such faculties it is easy enough to dream. It seemed as if the old people were dead and the Lamp itself sent to the iron foundry to be melted down. It was as frightened as on that dreadful day when it appeared in the council hall to be inspected by the thirty-six council members.

But though it had the power to crumble into rust and dust at will, it did not use that faculty. It was put into a furnace, and cast into as beautiful an iron candlestick as you could wish-and it was a candlestick for wax lights! It was in the form of an angel holding a bouquet; and the wax candle was to be placed right in the middle of the bouquet.

The candlestick had a place of its own on a green writing table. And the room was very cozy, its walls lined with many books and hung with beautiful pictures-the room of a poet. Everything that the poet wrote about appeared near him. The room became thick dark forests, beautiful meadows where storks strutted, and then the deck of a ship sailing high on the foaming ocean.

"What power are hidden in me!" said the old Lamp, as it awoke from its dream. "I could almost wish to be melted down! But no, that must not happen so long as the old people live. They love me for myself. I am their child, and they have cleaned me and given me oil. I'm as happy now as the whole Congress of Vienna, and that is something really elegant."

And from that day on, it enjoyed more inner peace, and that the modest old Lamp well deserved.