

The Old House

Hans Christian Andersen

Somewhere in the street stood an old old house; it was almost three hundred years old, as you could tell from the date cut into the great beam. Tulips and hobbines and also whole verses of poetry were carved into the wood as people used to do in those days, and over every window a mocking face was cut into the beam. The second story hung way out over the ground floor, and right under the eaves was a leaden spout with a dragon's head. Rain water was supposed to run out of the dragon's mouth, but it came from his belly instead, for there was a hole in it.

All of the other houses in the street were so neat and modern, with large windowpanes and smooth walls, that you could easily tell they would have nothing to do with the old house. They evidently thought, "How long do you suppose that decrepit old thing is going to stand there, making an eyesore of our street? And that bay window stands so far out we can't see from our windows what's happening in that direction. Those front steps are as broad as those of a palace, and as high as those which go up to a church tower! The iron railings-they look like the door to an old family vault! And those dreadful brass rails on them! It makes one feel ashamed!"

Across the street were other neat and modern houses, and they thought the same way. But at the window in the house directly opposite sat a little boy with bright shining eyes and fresh rosy cheeks. And he liked the old house best of all those on the street, whether by sunshine or by moonlight.

When he looked across at the wall where the mortar had fallen out, he could imagine the strangest pictures. He could see the street as it was in the old days; he could see soldiers with halberds, and the houses with their steps and projecting windows and pointed gables, and rainspouts in the shapes of dragons and serpents. Yes, to him that was indeed a house worth looking at!

An old man lived over there-an old man who wore old-fashioned plush breeches and a coat with big brass buttons, and a wig that you could plainly tell was a real one. Every morning an old male servant came, to put the rooms in order and do the marketing, but aside from that, the old man in the plush breeches lived all alone in his old house. Sometimes he came to the window and looked out, and the little boy waved to him, and the old man waved back, and so they became acquaintances and then friends. Of course, they had never spoken to each other, but that really made no difference.

One day the little boy heard his parents say, "The old man over there is very well to do, but he's terribly lonely!"

Next Sunday the little boy wrapped a small object in a piece of paper, went downstairs to his doorway, and, when the old servant who did the marketing came by, said to him, "Look, sir, will you please give this to the old gentleman across the way? I have two tin soldiers; this is one of them, and I want him to have it 'cause I know he's terribly lonely."

The old servant looked very pleased as he nodded, and took the tin soldier across to the house. And later he brought back a message inviting the little boy to come over and pay a visit. Happily the little boy asked his parents' permission, then went across to the old house.

The brass knobs on the railings shone brighter than ever - one would think they had been especially polished in honor of his visit. And the little trumpeters carved in tulips on the doorway seemed to puff out their cheeks and blow with all their might, "Tratteratra! The boy approaches! Tratteratra!" Then the door opened.

The whole hallway was hung with old portraits of knights in armor and ladies in silken gowns, and the armor seemed to rattle and the silken gowns rustle! Then there was a flight of stairs that went a long way up and a little way down, and then the little boy came out on a balcony. It was very dilapidated, with grass and leaves growing out of holes and long crevices, for the whole balcony outside, the yard, and the walls were so overgrown that it looked like a garden. But still it was just a balcony. There were old flowerpots with faces and donkey's ears, and flowers growing out of them just as they pleased. One of the pots was almost brimming over with carnations-that is, with the green part; shoot grew by shoot, and each seemed to say quite distinctly, "The air has blessed me, and the sun has kissed me and promised me a little flower on Sunday! A little flower on Sunday!"

Now the little boy entered a room where the walls were covered with pigskin and printed with golden flowers.

*Gilding fades fast;
But pigskin will last,*

said the walls.

There were heavily carved easy chairs there, with high backs and arms on both sides. "Sit down! Sit down!" they cried. "Oh, how I creak! I know I'll get the gout, like the old cupboard! Oh!"

And at last the little boy came into the room where the bay window was, and there sat the old man.

"I thank you for the tin soldier, my young friend," he said. "And I thank you again because you came over to see me."

"Thanks! Thanks!" or perhaps "Creak! Creak!" sounded from all the furniture. And there was so much of it in the room that the pieces seemed to crowd in each other's way, trying to get a look at the little boy.

In the middle of the wall hung a painting of a beautiful lady, young and happy, but dressed as in olden times, with clothes that stood out stiffly, and with powdered hair. She neither said, "Thanks!" nor "Creak!" but just looked with mild eyes at the little boy. He promptly asked, "Where did she come from?"

"From the secondhand dealer down the street," said the old man, "where there are so many pictures. No one knows or cares anything about them, for all the people are buried. That lady has been dead and gone these fifty years, but I knew her in the old days."

In a glass frame beneath the portrait there hung a bouquet of withered flowers; they, too, must have been fifty years old-at least they looked it.

The pendulum of the great clock slowly swung to and fro, and the hands slowly turned, and everything in the room slowly became still older, but they didn't notice it.

"My mother and daddy say," said the little boy, "that you're terribly lonely."

"Oh," he answered, "the old thoughts, with what they may bring with them, come to see me, and now you come, too! I'm really very happy."

Then he took a picture book down from the shelf. There were long processions and strange coaches such as one never sees nowadays, soldiers who looked like the knave of clubs, and tradesmen with waving banners. The tailors had a banner that showed a pair of shears held by two lions; and the shoemakers had on theirs not a boot, but an eagle with two heads, for shoemakers must have everything in pairs. What a wonderful picture book that was!

And the old man went into the next room to fetch jam, apples, and nuts. Yes, the old

house was a wonderful place. "I can't bear this any longer," cried the tin soldier, who was sitting on a chest of drawers. "It's so lonely and sad here! Anyone who has been in a family circle as I have can't get used to this sort of life. I can't bear it any longer! The days are so long, and the evenings are still longer! Things here aren't the way they were over at your house, where your father and mother spoke so pleasantly, and you and the other nice children made such delightful, happy noises. How lonely this old man is! Do you think he ever gets a kiss? Do you think he ever gets a kindly look or a Christmas tree? He'll get nothing but a funeral-I simply can't stand it any longer!"

"You mustn't let it make you so sad," said the little boy. "I think it's fun here, and then all the old memories, with what they may bring with them, come to visit here."

"Yes," said the tin soldier, "but I can't see them, because I don't know them. I tell you I can't stand it!"

"But you must!" replied the little boy firmly.

Then the old man came back with his face all smiling, and with the most delicious jam and apples and nuts! So the little boy forgot about the tin soldier.

He went home, happy and pleased, and days and weeks passed, while nods and waves were exchanged to the old house and from the old house. Then he went over to call again.

Again the carved trumpeters seemed to blow, "Tratteratra! The little boy approaches! Tratteratra!" And the swords and armor on the knight paintings rattled, and the silken gowns rustled; the pigskin spoke, and the old chairs had rheumatism in their backs-"Ouch!" It was just like the first time, for in that house one day or hour was just like another.

"I can't bear it!" wailed the tin soldier. "I've been shedding tin tears - it's too sad here! I'd rather go to the wars, and lose arms and legs; at least that would be a change! I just can't stand it! Now I know what it's like to have a visit from one's old memories and what they may bring with them. One of mine came to see me, and let me tell you that isn't a very pleasant experience! I nearly jumped down from this chest!"

"Because I saw you all over there so clearly, as if you really were right here! It was again that Sunday morning which you surely remember; all you children stood before the table and sang your hymns, just as you do every Sunday. You looked so devout, with your hands folded together; and your father and mother were just as pious. Then the door was opened, and little Sister Mary was put in the room. She really shouldn't have been there because she's less than two years old, and always tries to dance when she hears any kind of music or singing. She began to dance then, but she couldn't keep time-the music was too slow. First she stood on one leg and bent her head forward, and then she stood on the other leg and bent her head again-but it wouldn't do. You all stood together, and looked very serious, although it was difficult to keep from laughing, but I did laugh to myself so hard I fell off the table and got a bump that I still have! It was very wrong of me to laugh. But it all comes back to me now in thought, and everything that I've seen all my life; these are the old memories and what they may bring with them!"

"Tell me, do you still sing on Sundays? Tell me about little Mary! And how is my comrade, the other tin soldier, doing? I imagine he's happy enough! Oh, I can't stand it any more!"

"You were given away as a present," said the little boy firmly. "And you must stay here! Can't you understand that?"

Now the old man brought in a drawer in which there were many treasures-balm boxes and coin boxes and large, gilded, old playing cards, such as one never sees any more. Several drawers were opened, and then the piano was opened; landscapes were painted on the inside of its lid, and it was so squeaky when the old man played it! Then he hummed a little song.

"She used to sing that," he said softly as he nodded up at the portrait he had bought from the secondhand dealer. And the old man's eyes shone brightly.

"I'm going to the wars! I tell you I'm going to the wars!" the tin soldier shouted as loudly as he could, then he threw himself off the chest right down to the floor.

What had become of him? The old man searched, and the little boy searched, but he was gone; they couldn't find him.

"I'll find him," said the old man, but he never did; the flooring was open and full of holes, and the tin soldier had fallen into one of the many cracks in the floor and lay there as if in an open grave.

And that day passed, and the little boy went home. A week passed, and several more weeks passed.

The windows of his home were frosted over, and the little boy had to breathe hard on one to make a peephole over to the old house. Then he saw that the snow had drifted into all the carving and inscriptions and up over the steps, just as if there were no one there. And there wasn't, really. For the old man was dead!

That evening a hearse drove up before the door, and the old man's coffin was borne into it; he was going out into the country now, to lie in his grave. And so he was driven away, but there was no one to follow him, for all the old man's friends were dead. There was only the little boy who blew a kiss to the coffin as it was driven away.

A few days later the old house was sold at auction, and from his window the little boy watched them carry away the old knights and their ladies, and the long-eared flowerpots, the old chairs, and the old cupboards; some pieces landed here and others landed there; the portrait that had come from the secondhand dealer went back to the secondhand dealer again, and there it hung, for no one knew the lady any more, and no one cared about the old picture.

In the spring the house was torn down, for everybody said it was nothing but a ruin. One could see from the street right into the room with the pigskin hangings, which were slashed and torn; and the green foliage about the balcony hung wild among the falling beams. The site was cleared.

"Good riddance," said the neighboring houses.

Then a fine house was built there, with large windows and smooth white walls; but in front of it, where the old house used to stand, a little garden was laid out, with a wild grapevine running up the wall of the neighboring house. Before the garden was a large railing with an iron gate; it looked quite splendid, and many people stopped to peer in. Scores of sparrows fluttered in the vines and chattered away to each other as fast as they could, but they didn't talk about the old house, for they couldn't remember it. So many years had passed.

Yes, many years had passed, and the little boy had grown up now to be a fine man; yes, an able man, and a great joy to his old parents. He had just been married and, with his pretty little wife, came to live in the new house where the garden was.

He was standing beside her in the garden while she planted a wild flower she was so fond of. She bedded it in the ground with her little hand and pressed the earth around it with her fingers. Ouch, what was that! She had pricked herself. There was something there, pointed straight up in the soft dirt.

Yes, it was - just imagine, the little tin soldier! The same one that had been lost in the old man's room. He had tumbled and tossed about among the gravel and the timber and at last had lain for years in the ground.

The young wife wiped the dirt off the soldier, first with a green leaf and then with her delicate handkerchief, which had such a delightful scent that it woke the soldier up from his trance.

"Let me see him," said the young man. Then he laughed and shook his head. "No, it couldn't be he, but he certainly reminds me of a tin soldier I had when I was a little boy." Then he told her all about the old house and the old man and the tin soldier that had been sent over to keep him company because he was so terribly lonely. He told it just as it had happened, and the tears came into the eyes of his young wife-tears of pity for the old house and the old man.

"It might just possibly be the same tin soldier," she said gently. "I'll keep it, and remember everything you've told me. But you must show me the old man's grave."

"But I don't know where it is," he replied. "Nobody knows. All his friends were dead, and there was no one to take care of it. I was then just a little boy."

"How terribly lonely he must have been!" she murmured.

"Terribly lonely!" repeated the tin soldier. "But it's wonderful not to be forgotten!"

"Wonderful!" cried something else close by, but only the tin soldier saw that it was a scrap of the pigskin hanging. It had lost all of its gilding and looked like a piece of wet clay, but it still had its opinion, and gave it:

*Gilding fades fast;
But pigskin will last!*

But the tin soldier didn't really believe it.