

The Last Pearl

Hans Christian Andersen

There was a rich and happy house. All those in it—the owners, and servants, and friends, too—were happy and cheerful, for on this day a son and heir had been born, and mother and child were doing well.

The lamp in the cozy bedroom had been partly covered, and heavy curtains of costly silken material had been drawn tightly together before the windows. The carpet was as thick and soft as moss. Everything here invited rest and sleep; it was a delightful place for repose. And the nurse found it so, too; she slept, and indeed she might, for all was well and blessed here.

The Guardian Spirit of the house stood by the head of the bed; and over the child, at the mother's breast, it spread itself like a net of shining stars, stars of great richness; each was a pearl of good fortune. Life's good fairies had brought their gifts to the newborn child; here sparkled health, wealth, happiness, love—everything that man can desire on earth.

"Everything has been brought and bestowed here," said the Guardian Spirit.

"No," said a voice near by; it was the voice of the child's good Angel. "One fairy has not yet brought her gift, but she will bring it; she'll bring it in time, even if years should pass first. The *last pearl* is yet lacking."

"Lacking! Nothing must be lacking here! If that actually is the case, let us go and seek the powerful fairy; let us go to her!"

"She will come! She will come someday! Her pearl must be given to bind the wreath together!"

"Where does she live? Where is her home? Tell me that, and I'll go and fetch the pearl!"

"You do want to then," said the child's good Angel. "I will guide you to her, or to where she is to be sought. She has no permanent place; she visits the palace of the emperor and the cottage of the poorest peasant. She passes no one by without leaving a trace of herself; to all she brings her gift, be it a world or a toy. And this child, also, she will come to. You think that while the time to come will be equally long one way or the other, it will not be equally profitable if you await her; well, then, we will go and fetch the pearl, the last pearl in this wealth of gifts."

And so, hand in hand, they flew to the place which at the moment was the fairy's home.

It was a large house, with dark halls and empty rooms, all strangely still. A row of windows stood open, so the fresh air could flow in, and the long white curtains rustled in the breeze.

In the middle of the floor stood an open coffin, and within it lay the corpse of a woman still in the prime of life. The loveliest fresh roses lay upon her, leaving visible only the folded, delicate hands and the noble face, beautiful in death, with the exalted solemnity of one initiated into God's service.

By the coffin stood her husband and children, a whole flock of them, the smallest of whom was held in his father's arm. They had come to bid a last farewell, and the husband kissed her hand, that which, now like a withered leaf, had once clasped theirs with strength and love. Bitter tears of sorrow fell in heavy drops upon the floor, but not a word was spoken. Silence expressed a world of grief. And silent and sobbing, they left the room.

A lighted candle stood there, the flame struggling against the wind as it shot up its long red tongue. Strangers entered the room, closed the lid of the coffin, and hammered in the nails. The hammer strokes clanged sharply through the halls and rooms of the house,

resounding in the hearts that bled there.

"Where do you take me?" inquired the Guardian Spirit. "Here could live no fairy whose pearl belong among life's best gifts."

"She dwells in this very place, now at this holy hour," said the Angel, pointing to a corner.

And there, where the mother had sat in life amid flowers and pictures, and been like the good fairy of the house, where she had affectionately greeted husband, children, and friends, and, like rays of sunshine, had spread happiness, love, and harmony, and been the very heart of everything, there now sat a strange woman clad in long, heavy robes. It was Sorrow, and she now ruled here in the mother's place. A hot tear rolled down her cheek, into her lap, where it became a pearl, sparkling with all the hues of the rainbow, and as the Angel caught it up it shone with the sevenfold luster of a star.

"The Pearl of Sorrow, the last pearl, which must never be lacking! Through it the light and splendor of all other gifts are enhanced. Behold in it a reflection of the rainbow, which unites earth with heaven itself! In the place of each of our beloved ones taken from us by death, we gain one friend more to look forward to being with in heaven. In the night we look up beyond the stars, toward the end of all things. Reflect, then, upon the Pearl of Sorrow, for within it lie the wings of Psyche, which carry us away from here."