

The Neighboring Families

Hans Christian Andersen

One would certainly think that something quite unusual had happened in the duckpond to cause such a commotion, but nothing really had happened.

All the ducks that had been floating gracefully on the water, some standing on their heads, for they knew how to do that, now abruptly rushed straight onto land. Leaving their footprints in the wet clay, they shrieked so that one could hear them far away. The water was agitated. It had been smooth as a mirror, reflecting calmly and clearly everything around it; every tree and bush, the old peasant's cottage with holes in its gable, the swallow's nest, and especially the large rose tree whose branches and flowers covered the wall and hung almost into the water all these had been painted on the clear surface like a picture, only upside down. But now that the water was troubled, everything ran together, and the whole picture was ruined. Two feathers that had fallen from the ducks were tossed to and fro, and suddenly took flight as though carried away by the wind, yet there was no wind. And soon the feathers lay still, and the water became smooth as a mirror again, reflecting as before the peasant's cottage, the swallow's nest, and the rose tree. Each rose could see itself in the pond; all were beautiful, but they didn't know it - no one had told them so. The sun shone through their delicate petals, which were so full of fragrance, and each rose felt the way we do when we are happy in our thoughts.

"How delightful it is to live!" said each rose. "The only thing I'd wish for is to kiss the sun, because it's so warm and bright. Yes, and those lovely roses down in the water! I'd like to kiss them too; they're just like us. And I'd like to kiss those dear baby birds in the nest down there; yes, there are also some above us. They pop out their heads and twitter so softly, and they haven't any feathers like their father and mother! We certainly have pleasant neighbors, above and below. Oh, how wonderful it is to be alive!" Now the young birds up above - yes, those down below were just their reflection in the water - were sparrows. Father and Mother Sparrow had taken possession of the empty swallow's nest the year before, and it was now their home.

"Are those the ducklings swimming down there?" asked the young sparrows when they saw the two feathers drifting on the water.

"Ask sensible questions if you ask any," said the mother.

"Don't you see that they are feathers - live clothes, such as I wear, and you will have some day? Only ours are finer! But I wish we had those feathers up here; they'd make our nest warm and comfortable, I'd like to know what frightened the ducks just now! Must have been something in the water. I'm sure it wasn't I, even if I did say 'twit!' rather loudly. Those thick-headed roses ought to know, but they don't know anything; they only look at themselves and scent the air. I'm completely sick of these neighbors of ours!"

"Listen to the sweet little birds up there!" said the roses. "They're really trying to sing; of course they can't yet, but they will in time. What a great pleasure that must be! It's such fun to have such happy neighbors!"

Just then there came galloping up to the pond two big horses, to be watered. A peasant boy was on one of them, and he had taken off all his clothes except his black hat, which was large and broad-brimmed. The boy whistled as if he himself were a little bird, as he rode through the deepest part of the pond. When he came to the rose tree, he broke off one of the roses and stuck it in his hat; then, considering himself properly decorated, he rode off with it. The other roses looked after their lost sister, and asked each other, "Where has she gone to?" But none of them knew.

"I think I would like to go out in the world, " said one of the roses to another, "but still it's nice here at home in our own green branches. The sun is so warm all day long, and at night the sky shines still more beautifully; then we can see through the many little holes that are in the sky."

It was the stars that they thought were holes, for the roses didn't know any better.

"We make it lively around the house!" said the mother sparrow. "People say that a swallow's nest brings luck, so they're glad to have us. But our neighbors here - a great rosebush like that against the wall only makes the place damp. I think they'll dig it up soon, and then perhaps corn will grow there. Roses are only to look at and smell, or at the most to stick in hats. Every year, I know from my mother, they fall to pieces; the peasant's wife collects them and sprinkles salt on them; they're given some French name that I can't pronounce, and don't care to, and then they're thrown into the fire to make a nice smell. You see, that's their life; they live only to please the ears and nose. Now you know!"

As it became evening and the gnats danced in the warm air, where the clouds glowed so red, the nightingale came and sang to the roses. He sang that beauty was like the sunshine of the world, and that the beautiful lives forever. But the roses imagined that the nightingale was singing about himself, and indeed that may have been true. They never would have thought that the song might have been addressed to them, but it pleased them, and they wondered if the young sparrows might also become nightingales.

"I understood quite well what that bird was singing about," said the young sparrow. "There was only one word I didn't understand. What is 'the beautiful'?"

"That's nothing," said their mother. "It's just an appearance. Up at the manor house the doves have a house of their own, and peas and grains of corn are spread out for them every day in the yard. I've dined with them, and you shall too sometime. 'Tell me who you go with, and I'll tell you who you are.' Well, up there at the manor house they have two birds with green necks and crests on their heads; the tail of each can spread out as though it were a large wheel, and has so many colors that it hurts your eyes to look at it. Peacocks, they are called, and they are 'the beautiful.' They should be stripped of their feathers; then they wouldn't look any differently than we others. I'd have plucked them myself, if they hadn't been so large."

"I'll pluck them!" said the smallest sparrow, who had no feathers of his own yet.

In the farmhouse lived two young married people, who were very devoted to each other; they were industrious and healthy, and everything was very neat in their house. Sunday morning the young wife went out and gathered a handful of the loveliest roses, put them in a glass of water, and set it on the cupboard.

"Now I see it is Sunday," said the husband. He kissed his pretty little wife, and they sat down and read a psalm, holding hands, while the morning sun shone brightly through the window on the fresh roses and the young couple.

"I'm so tired of looking at this!" said the mother of the sparrows as she looked down into the room; and then she flew away.

She did the same thing the following Sunday, for every Sunday fresh roses were placed in the glass, but the rose tree still blossomed just as much. The young sparrows, who now had feathers of their own, wanted to fly with their mother. But she said, "You stay!" And so they stayed.

She flew off; but, whatever the reason, she suddenly was caught in a horsehair net that some boys had fastened to a bough! The horsehair bound about her leg so tightly she thought it was cut in half. How it pained and terrified her! The boys sprang forward and seized the bird with a cruelly hard grasp.

"It's nothing but a sparrow!" they said, but they wouldn't let her go. They took her home, and every time she cried they hit her on the beak.

In the farmhouse there was an old man who knew how to make soap for shaving and washing hands, soap in balls and pieces. He was a wandering, merry old fellow. When he saw the sparrow that the boys brought, and which they said they didn't care about, he said to them, "Shall we make it beautiful?"

The sparrow mother shivered with fear as he said this. Out of his box of the brightest colors he took a lot of shining gold leaf; then he sent the boys for an egg, smeared its white all over the sparrow, and laid the gold upon it. Thus the sparrow mother was gilt, but she didn't think about this pomp; her limbs shook with terror. Then the old soapmaker tore a piece of red cloth from his jacket, cut it into the shape of a cock's comb, and glued it on the bird's head.

"Now you shall see the golden bird fly!" he said, and let the sparrow loose. In deadly horror, she flew away in the bright sunshine. My, how she glittered! All the sparrows, even a large crow, who was no youngster, were quite frightened at the sight. But they flew after her, for they wanted to know what this unusual bird was.

"Where from! Where from!" screamed the crow.

"Wait a bit! Wait a bit!" said the sparrows. But she would not wait; in terror and pain she flew on toward home. She was ready to sink to the earth, and the crowd of birds, small and large, increased every moment, and some even flew in to peck at her. "Such a one! Such a one!" they all cried.

"Such a one! Such a one!" squeaked the young sparrows as she approached the nest. "That is surely a young peacock, for there are the colors that hurt your eyes, as Mother said. Twit! That is 'the beautiful.'" And then they attacked her with their little beaks, so that it wasn't possible for her to enter the nest; and she was so overcome with fright that she could no longer even say "twit," much less say, "I am your mother." The other birds all joined in pecking at her until every one of her feathers was gone; and, bleeding, the sparrow mother sank down into the rosebush.

"The poor animal!" said the roses. "Come, we will hide you. Rest your little head upon us!"

Once more the sparrow mother spread her wings, but then folded them close to her body again, and died among her neighbors, the fresh, beautiful roses.

"Twit!" said the young sparrows in the nest.

"What's become of Mother! I can't understand it. Could this be a trick of hers to teach us to look out for ourselves? She has left us the house for an inheritance, but which of us is to have it alone when we get families!"

"Yes, I can't have you others here when I have a wife and children!" said the smallest.

"I'll have more wives and children than you!" said another.

"But I'm the oldest!" said a third. Then they all got into a fight; they flapped their wings and pecked at each other, and - bumps! - one after another popped out of the nest! There they lay, full of anger; they held their heads to one side and blinked their upturned eyes; that was their way of sulking.

They could fly a little, and so they practiced some more. And finally they agreed that in order to recognize each other when they met in the world, they would say "twit!" and scrape three times with the left leg.

The youngest sparrow, who remained in the nest, puffed himself up as big as he could, for he was now the owner, but that did not last long. During the night, fire gleamed through the windows of the farmhouse; the flames burst forth from under the roof, and the dry

straw went up in a blaze. The whole house burned, and with it the little sparrow and his nest; however, the young couple luckily escaped.

When the sun was up next morning, and everything seemed so refreshed, as after a night's gentle sleep, there was nothing left of the farmhouse except some black, charred beams leaning against the chimney which was its own master now. The smoke still rose from the ground, but the whole rose tree stood fresh and blooming, with every bough mirrored in the calm water.

"My, how pretty those roses are there in front of the burnt-down house!" said a man, who came by. "It's the most charming little picture! I must have it!" And the man took from his pocket a little book with white leaves and a pencil, for he was an artist, and he sketched the smoking ground, the charred beams, and the chimney that leaned more and more to one side; but first of all, the big, blooming rose tree, which was certainly beautiful, and was, of course, the reason the picture was drawn.

Later that day two of the sparrows who had been born there came by. "Where is the house?" they said. "Where is the nest? Twit! It's all burnt, and our strong brother is burnt, too! That's what he got for keeping the nest. Those roses escaped well! They're still standing there with red

red cheeks. They don't mourn over their neighbors' misfortunes. I won't speak to them; and it's ugly here - that's my opinion!" So they flew away.

When autumn came, there was a beautiful sunshiny day; one would have thought it was in the middle of the summer. It was so dry and clean in the courtyard before the great steps at the manor house, and there walked the doves, both black and white, and violet, glistening in the sunshine. The old dove mothers waddled about and said to their children, "Stand in groups! Stand in groups!" For that made them look better.

"What are those little gray birds that run about among us?" asked an old dove who had red and green in her eyes. "Little gray ones! Little gray ones!" she repeated.

"Those are sparrows, modest creatures. We have always been known to be good-natured, so we let them pick up a little of our corn. They don't talk to us, and they scrape so politely with their legs."

Yes, they scraped, three times with the left leg, and then said "twit!" and thus they recognized each other; they were three of the sparrows from the burnt house. "It is very good to eat here," said the sparrows.

The doves walked about among themselves, carrying themselves proudly, and had private opinions to exchange. "See that crop pigeon?" said one about another. "Do you see her and how she devours the peas? She gets too many! She gets the best! Coo, coo! See how bald she's getting in her crest! See that ugly, wicked creature! Coo, coo!" And then the eyes of them all gleamed red with malice. "Stand in groups, stand in groups! Little gray birds! Little gray ones! Coo! Coo! Coo!" So it went on unceasingly, and so will it still be in a thousand years.

The sparrows ate well, and they heard well. Yes, and they even stood in groups with the others, but that didn't suit them. They were full, so they left the doves and exchanged opinions about them. Then they wriggled under the garden fence and, since the door to the garden room was open, one of them hopped upon the threshold. He was filled to satiety, and therefore courageous. "Twit!" he said. "I dare do this!"

"Twit!" said another. "I also dare do that, and more too!" And then he hopped into the room.

There were no people there; the third saw this, and then he flew even farther into the room, and said, "All the way in, or not at all! What a funny human nest this is! And what

have they put up there? Why, what is that!"

Right in front of the sparrows bloomed the roses; they were mirrored in the pond, and the charred beams rested against the ready-to-fall

chimney! Well, what was this? How did all this get in the manor parlor? And all three sparrows tried to fly over the roses and the chimney, but it was a flat wall that they flew against; it was all a painting, a large, beautiful piece of work that the artist had made from his little sketch.

"Twit!" said the sparrows. "It's nothing! It's only a likeness! Twit! That is 'the beautiful.' Can you understand it? For I can't!" And then they flew out, because people came into the room.

Now days and years went by; many times had the doves cooed, and quarreled too, the wicked birds! The sparrows had nearly frozen in winter, and lived luxuriously in summer; they were all engaged or married, or whatever one wants to call it, and those with young ones naturally thought his own were the handsomest and cleverest. One flew here and another there, and whenever they met they recognized each other by a "twit!" and three scrapes of the left leg.

The eldest of them, who was now such an old one, had no nest or young ones. She wanted so much to visit a large city, so she flew to Copenhagen.

A big house of many colors stood by the palace and the canal, where there were vessels laden with apples and pottery. Its windows were wider at the bottom than at the top; the sparrow peered inside, and each room, she thought, looked like the inside of a tulip, with all sorts of colors and decorations. In the middle of the tulip stood white people; they were of marble and some of plaster, but to a sparrow they all looked the same.

On top of the house stood a metal car, with metal horses, and the Goddess of Victory, also of metal, driving them. This was Thorvaldsen's Museum!

"How it shines! How it shines!" said the sparrow. "This must be 'the beautiful!' Twit! But here it's larger than a peacock!" She still remembered from when she was little what the most beautiful thing was that her mother knew.

Then she flew down into the courtyard, and this was also lovely. There were palms and green foliage painted on the walls, and in the middle of the courtyard stood a big, blooming rose tree that spread its fresh green branches, with their many flowers, over a grave. She flew to it, for she saw several other sparrows there. "Twit!" she said, and scraped three times with her left leg. She had practiced that greeting many times in past days and years, but no one had understood it, for those who are once parted don't meet every day; the greeting had become hardly more than a habit. But today there were two old sparrows and one

young one who said, "twit!" in return and scraped with their left legs.

'Ah, good day, good day!" It was a couple of the sparrows from the old nest, and a little one of the family. "That we should meet here!" They said, "This is a very fine place, but there isn't much to eat. It's 'the beautiful.' Twit!"

And then many people came into the courtyard from one of the rooms where the beautiful marble figures stood, and they went to the grave that held the remains of the great master who had created those figures. All stood with their eyes on Thorvaldsen's grave, and some gathered scattered rose petals to save. There were people from faraway places; they had come from mighty England from Germany, and France; and the fairest lady took one of the roses and placed it near her heart.

The sparrows then thought that the roses reigned there, that the whole house had been built for them. This seemed to them to be really a little too much, but since the people all

showed such regard for the roses, they would do the same. "Twit!" they said, and swept the ground with their tails, with one eye on the roses. They did not look at them long before they were convinced that they were their old neighbors, and so they really were. The artist who had sketched the rosebush near the charred ruins of the house had later obtained permission to transplant it, and had then given it to the architect of the Museum, for lovelier roses could not be found; and the architect had planted it on Thorvaldsen's grave, where, as a living symbol of the beautiful, it blossomed and gave its red, fragrant petals to be carried as remembrances to foreign lands.

"Have you got an establishment in town now?" asked the sparrows. And the roses nodded; they recognized their gray neighbors, and were so glad to see them.

"How wonderful it is to live and blossom here, and to see old friends and kind faces every day! It is as if every day were a big holiday!"

"Twit!" said the sparrows. "Yes, they are our old neighbors. We remember them from the duckpond! Twit! How they have been honored! But then some people are while they're asleep. And what there is so wonderful in a red lump like that, I don't know! Ah, there's a withered leaf, for that I can see!"

So they pecked at the leaf until it fell off, but it only made the rose tree look fresher and greener. And the roses bloomed fragrantly in the sunshine on the grave of Thorvaldsen, with whose immortal name their beauty thus became linked.