

What the Whole Family Said

Hans Christian Andersen

What did the whole family say? Well listen first to what little Marie said.

It was little Marie's birthday, the most wonderful of all days, she imagined. All her little boy friends and girl friends came to play with her, and she wore her prettiest dress, the one Grandmother, who was now with God, had sewn for her before she went up into the bright, beautiful heaven. The table in little Marie's room was loaded with presents; there was the prettiest little kitchen, with everything that belongs to a kitchen, and a doll that could close its eyes and say "Ouch!" when you pinched its stomach; yes, and there was also a picture book, with the most wonderful stories, to be read when one could read! But to have many birthdays was more wonderful than all the stories in the book.

"Yes, it's wonderful to be alive," said little Marie. And her godfather added that it was the most beautiful of all fairy tales.

In the next room were both her brothers; they were big boys, one of them nine years old, the other eleven. They thought it was wonderful to be alive, too; that is, to live in their own way, not to be a baby like Marie, but to be real smart schoolboys, to get A's on their report cards, to have friendly fights with their comrades, to go skating in the winter and bicycling in the summer, to read about the days of knighthood, with its castles, its drawbridges, and its dungeons, and to hear about new discoveries in Central Africa. On the latter subject, however, one of the boys felt very sad in that he feared everything might be discovered before he grew up, and then there would be no adventure left for him. But Godfather said, "Life itself is the most wonderful adventure, and you have a part in it yourself."

These children lived on the first floor of the house; in the flat above them lived another branch of the family, also with children, but these all had long since been shaken from their mother's apron strings, so big were they; one son was seventeen, and another twenty, but the third one was very old, said little Marie; he was twenty-five, and engaged to be married. They were all very well off, had nice parents, good clothes, and were well educated, and they knew what they wanted. "Look forward," they said. "Away with all the old fences! Let's have an open view into the wide world! That's the greatest thing we know of! Godfather is right - life is the most wonderful fairy tale!"

Father and Mother, both older people - naturally, they would have to be older than the children - said, with smiling lips and smiling eyes and hearts, "How young these young people are! Things usually don't happen in this world just as they expect them to, yet life goes on. Life is a strange and wonderful adventure."

On the next floor - a little closer to heaven, as we say when people live in an attic - lived Godfather. He was old, and yet so young in mind, always in a good humor, and he certainly could tell stories, many and long ones. He had traveled the world over, and his room was filled with pretty tokens from every country. Pictures were hung from ceiling to floor, and some of the windowpanes were of red or yellow glass; if one looked through them, the whole world lay in sunshine, however gray the weather might be outside. Green plants grew in a large glass case, and in an enclosure therein swam goldfish; they looked at one as if they knew many things they didn't care to talk about. There was always a sweet fragrance of flowers, even in the wintertime. And then a great fire blazed in the fireplace; it was such a pleasure to sit and look into it and hear how it crackled and spat.

"It refreshes old memories to me, " said Godfather. And to little Marie there seemed to appear many pictures in the fire.

But in the big bookcase close by stood real books; one of these Godfather often read, and

this he called the Book of Books; it was the Bible. In it was pictured the history of the world and the history of all mankind, of the creation, the flood, the kings, and the King of Kings.

"All that has happened and all that will happen is written in this book," said Godfather; "so infinitely much in one single book! Just think of it! Yes, everything that a human being has to pray for is entered there, and said in a few words in the prayer 'Our Father'! It is the drop of mercy! It is the pearl of comfort from God. It is laid as a gift on the baby's cradle, laid on the child's heart. Little child, keep it safely; don't ever lose it, however big you may grow, and you will never be left alone on life's changeful way; it will shine within you and you will never be lost!"

Godfather's eyes radiated joy. Once, in his youth, they had wept, "and this was also good," he said. "That was a time of trial, when everything looked dark and gray. Now I have sunshine within me and around me. The older one grows, the clearer one sees, in both prosperity and misfortune, that our Lord always is with us and that life is the most beautiful of all fairy tales, and this He alone can give us - and so it will be into eternity."

"Yes, it is wonderful to be alive!" said little Marie.

So said also the small and the big boys, as well as Father and Mother and the whole family - but first of all, Godfather, who had had so much experience and was the oldest of them all. He knew all stories, all the fairy tales. And it was right from the bottom of his heart that he said, "Life is the most wonderful fairy tale of all!"