

Little Ida's Flowers

Hans Christian Andersen

"My poor flowers are quite dead," said little Ida. "They were so pretty last evening, but now every leaf has withered and drooped. Why do they do that?" she asked the student who sat on the sofa.

She was very fond of him because he told such good stories and could cut such amusing figures out of paper-hearts with dancing ladies inside them, flowers of all sorts, and castles with doors that you could open and close. He was a rollicking fellow.

"Why do my flowers look so ill today?" she asked him again, and showed him her withered bouquet.

"Don't you know what's the matter with them?" the student said. "They were at the ball last night, that's why they can scarcely hold up their heads."

"Flowers can't dance," said little Ida.

"Oh, indeed they can," said the student. "As soon as it gets dark and we go to sleep, they frolic about in a fine fashion. Almost every night they give a ball."

"Can't children go to the ball?"

"Little daisies can go. So can lilies of the valley."

"Where do the prettiest flowers dance?" Ida asked.

"Haven't you often visited the beautiful flower garden just outside of town, around the castle where the King lives in the summertime? You remember the place where swans swim close when you offer them bread crumbs. Believe me! that's where the prettiest flowers dance."

"Yesterday I was there with my mother," said Ida, "but there wasn't a leaf on the trees, or a flower left. Where are they? Last summer I saw ever so many."

"They are inside the castle, of course," said the student. "Confidentially, just as soon as the King comes back to town with all of his court, the flowers run from the garden into the castle and enjoy themselves. You should see them. The two loveliest roses climb up on the throne, where they are the king and the queen. All the red coxcombs line up on either side, to stand and bow like grooms of the bedchamber. Then all the best dressed flowers come, and the grand ball starts. The blue violets are the naval cadets. Their partners, whom they call 'Miss,' are hyacinths and crocuses. The tulips and tiger lilies are the old chaperones, who see to it that the dancing is done well and that everyone behaves properly."

"But", said little Ida, "doesn't anybody punish the flowers for dancing in the King's own castle?"

"Nobody knows a thing about it," said the student. "To be sure, there's the old castle keeper, who is there to watch over things. Sometimes he comes in the night with his enormous bunch of keys. But as soon as the flowers hear the keys jangle they keep quiet, and hide, with only their heads peeking out from behind the curtains. Then the old castle keeper says, 'I smell flowers in here.' But he can't see any."

"What fun!" little Ida clapped her hands. "But couldn't I see the flowers either?"

"Oh easily," said the student. "The very next time you go there, remember to peep in the windows. There you will see them, as I did today. A tall yellow lily lay stretched on the sofa, pretending to be a lady-in-waiting."

Can the flowers who live in the botanical gardens visit the castle? Can they go that far?"

"Why certainly. They can fly all the way if it suits them. Haven't you seen lovely butterflies-white, yellow, and red ones? They almost look like flowers, and that's really what they used to be. They are flowers, who have jumped up off their stems, high into the air. They beat the air with their petals, as though these were little wings, and so they manage to fly. If they behave themselves nicely, they get permission to fly all day long, instead of having to go home and sit on their stems. In time their petals turn into real wings. You've seen them yourself. However, it's quite possible that the botanical garden flowers have never been to the King's castle and don't know anything about the fun that goes on there almost every night. Therefore I'll tell you how to arrange a surprise for the botanical professor. You know the one I mean-he lives quite near here. Well, the next time you go to the garden, tell one of his flowers that they are having a great ball in the castle. One flower will tell the others, and off they'll fly. When the professor comes out in the garden not one flower will he find, and where they've all gone he will never be able to guess."

"How can a flower tell the others?" You know flowers can't speak."

"They can't speak," the student agreed, "but they can signal. Haven't you noticed that whenever the breeze blows the flowers nod to one another, and make signs with their leaves. Why, it's as plain as talk."

"Can the professor understand their signs?"

"Certainly he can. One morning he came into his garden and saw a big stinging nettle leaf signaling to a glorious red carnation, 'You are so beautiful, and I love you so much.' But the professor didn't like that kind of thing, so he slapped the nettle's leaves, for they are its fingers. He was stung so badly that he hasn't laid hands on a stinging nettle since."

"Oh, how jolly!" little Ida laughed.

"How can anyone stuff a child's head with such nonsense?" said the prosy councilor, who had come to call and sit on the sofa too. He didn't like the student a bit. He always grumbled when he saw the student cut out those strange, amusing pictures-sometimes a man hanging from the gallows and holding a heart in his hand to show that he had stolen people's hearts away; sometimes an old witch riding a broomstick and balancing her husband on her nose. The councilor highly disapproved of those, and he would say as he said now, "How can anyone stuff a child's head with such nonsense-such stupid fantasy?"

But to little Ida, what the student told her about flowers was marvelously amusing, and she kept right on thinking about it. Her flowers couldn't hold their heads up, because they were tired out from dancing all night. Why they must be ill. She took them to where she kept her toys on a nice little table, with a whole drawer full of pretty things. Her doll, Sophie, lay asleep in the doll's bed, but little Ida told her:

"Sophie, you'll really have to get up, and be satisfied to sleep in the drawer tonight, because my poor flowers are ill. Maybe, if I let them sleep in your bed tonight, they will get well again."

When she took the doll up, Sophie looked as cross as could be, and didn't say a word. She was sulky because she couldn't keep her own bed.

Ida put the flowers to bed, and tucked the little covers around them. She told them to be good and lie still, while she made them some tea, so that they would get well and be up and about tomorrow. She carefully drew the curtains around the little bed, so the morning sun would not shine in their faces.

All evening long she kept thinking of what the student had said, before she climbed into bed herself. She peeped through the window curtains at the fine potted plants that belonged to her mother-hyacinths and tulips, too. She whispered very softly, "I know you

are going to the ball tonight."

But the flowers pretended not to understand her. They didn't move a leaf. But little Ida knew all about them.

After she was in bed, she lay there for a long while thinking how pleasant it must be to see the flowers dance in the King's castle. "Were my flowers really there?" she wondered. Then she fell asleep. When she woke up again in the night, she had been dreaming of the flowers, and of the student, and of the prosy councilor who had scolded him and had said it was all silly nonsense. It was very still in the bedroom where Ida was. The night lamp glowed on the table, and Ida's mother and father were asleep.

"Are my flowers still asleep in Sophie's bed?" Ida wondered. "That's what I'd like to know."

She lifted herself a little higher on her pillow, and looked towards the door which stood half open. In there were her flowers and all her toys. She listened, and it seemed to her that someone was playing the piano, very softly and more beautifully than she had ever heard it played.

"I'm perfectly sure that those flowers are all dancing," she said to herself. "Oh, my goodness, wouldn't I love to see them." But she did not dare get up, because that might awaken her father and mother.

"I do wish the flowers would come in here!" she thought. But they didn't. The music kept playing, and it sounded so lovely that she couldn't stay in bed another minute. She tiptoed to the door, and peeped into the next room. Oh, how funny-what a sight she saw there!

No night lamp burned in the next room, but it was well lighted just the same. The moonlight streamed through the window, upon the middle of the floor, and it was almost as bright as day. The hyacinths and the tulips lined up in two long rows across the floor. Not one was left by the window. The flowerpots stood there empty, while the flowers danced gracefully around the room, making a complete chain and holding each other by their long green leaves as they swung around.

At the piano sat a tall yellow lily. Little Ida remembered it from last summer, because the student had said, "Doesn't that lily look just like Miss Line?" Everyone had laughed at the time, but now little Ida noticed that there was a most striking resemblance. When the lily played it had the very same mannerisms as the young lady, sometimes bending its long, yellow face to one side, sometimes to the other, and nodding in time with the lovely music.

No one suspected that little Ida was there. She saw a nimble blue crocus jump up on the table where her toys were, go straight to the doll's bed, and throw back the curtains. The sick flowers lay there, but they got up at once, and nodded down to the others that they also wanted to dance. The old chimney-sweep doll, whose lower lip was broken, rose and made a bow to the pretty flowers. They looked quite themselves again as they jumped down to join the others and have a good time.

It seemed as if something clattered off the table. Little Ida looked, and saw that the birch wand, that had been left over from Mardigras time, was jumping down as if he thought he were a flower too. The wand did cut quite a flowery figure, with his paper rosettes and, to top him off, a little wax figure who had a broad trimmed hat just like the one that the councilor wore.

The wand skipped about on his three red wooden legs, and stamped them as hard as he could, for he was dancing the mazurka. The flowers could not dance it, because they were too light to stamp as he did.

All of a sudden, the wax figure grew tall and important. He whirled around to the paper flowers beside him, and said, "How can anyone stuff a child's head with such nonsense-such stupid fantasy?" At that moment he was a perfect image of the big-hatted councilor,

just as sallow and quite as cross. But the paper flowers hit back. They struck his thin shanks until he crumpled up into a very small wax manikin. The change was so ridiculous that little Ida could not keep from laughing.

Wherever the sceptered wand danced the councilor had to dance too, whether he made himself tall and important or remained a little wax figure in a big black hat. The real flowers put in a kind word for him, especially those who had lain ill in the doll's bed, and the birch wand let him rest.

Just then they heard a loud knocking in the drawer where Ida's doll, Sophie, lay with the other toys. The chimney-sweep rushed to the edge of the table, lay flat on his stomach and managed to pull the drawer out a little way. Sophie sat up and looked around her, most surprised.

"Why, they are having a ball!" she said "Why hasn't somebody told me about it?"

"Won't you dance with me?" the chimney-sweep asked her.

"A fine partner you'd be!" she said, and turned her back on him.

She sat on the edge of the drawer, hoping one of the flowers would ask her to dance, but not one of them did. She coughed, "Hm, hm, hm!" and still not one of them asked her. To make matters worse, the chimney-sweep had gone off dancing by himself, which he did pretty well.

As none of the flowers paid the least attention to Sophie, she let herself tumble from the drawer to the floor with a bang. Now the flowers all came running to ask, "Did you hurt yourself?" They were very polite to her, especially those who had slept in her bed. But she wasn't hurt a bit. Ida's flowers thanked her for the use of her nice bed, and treated her well. They took her out in the middle of the floor, where the moon shone, and danced with her while all the other flowers made a circle around them. Sophie wasn't at all cross now. She said they might keep her bed. She didn't in the least mind sleeping in the drawer.

But the flowers said, "Thank you, no. We can't live long enough to keep your bed. Tomorrow we shall be dead. Tell little Ida to bury us in the garden, next to her canary bird's grave. Then we shall come up again next summer, more beautiful than ever."

"Oh, you mustn't die," Sophie said, and kissed all the flowers.

Then the drawing room door opened, and many more splendid flowers tripped in. Ida couldn't imagine where they had come from, unless - why, they must have come straight from the King's castle. First came two magnificent roses, wearing little gold crowns. These were the king and the queen. Then came charming gillyflowers and carnations, who greeted everybody. They brought the musicians along. Large poppies and peonies blew upon pea pods until they were red in the face. Blue hyacinths and little snowdrops tinkled their bells. It was such funny music. Many other flowers followed them, and they all danced together, blue violets with pink primroses, and daisies with the lilies of the valley.

All the flowers kissed one another, and that was very pretty to look at. When the time came to say good night, little Ida sneaked back to bed too, where she dreamed of all she had seen.

As soon as it was morning, she hurried to her little table to see if her flowers were still there. She threw back the curtain around the bed. Yes, they were there, but they were even more faded than yesterday. Sophie was lying in the drawer where Ida had put her. She looked quite sleepy.

"Do you remember what you were to tell me?" little Ida asked.

But Sophie just looked stupid, and didn't say one word.

"You are no good at all," Ida told her. "And to think how nice they were to you, and how all

of them danced with you."

She opened a little pasteboard box, nicely decorated with pictures of birds, and laid the dead flowers in it.

"This will be your pretty coffin," she told them. "When my cousins from Norway come to visit us, they will help me bury you in the garden, so that you may come up again next summer and be more beautiful than ever."

Her Norwegian cousins were two pleasant boys named Jonas and Adolph. Their father had given them two new crossbows, which they brought with them for Ida to see. She told them how her poor flowers had died, and they got permission to hold a funeral. The boys marched first, with their crossbows on their shoulders. Little Ida followed, with her dead flowers in their nice box. In the garden they dug a little grave. Ida first kissed the flowers, and then she closed the box and laid it in the earth. Adolph and Jonas shot their crossbows over the grave, for they had no guns or cannons.