

The Comet

Hans Christian Andersen

Now there came a comet with its shiny nucleus and its menacing tail. People from the great castles and people from the poor huts gazed at it. So did the crowd in the street, and so did the man who went his solitary way across the pathless heath. Everyone had his own thoughts. "Come and look at the omen from heaven. Come out and see this marvelous sight," they cried, and everyone hastened to look.

But a little boy and his mother still stayed inside their room. The tallow candle was burning and the mother thought she saw a bit of wood-shaving in the light. The tallow formed a jagged edge around the candle, and then it curled. The mother believed these were signs that her son would soon die. The wood-shaving was circling toward him. This was an old superstition, but she believed it. The little boy lived many more years on earth. Indeed he lived to see the comet return sixty years later.

The boy did not see the wood-shaving in the candle-light, and his thoughts were not about the comet which then, for the first time in his life, shone brightly in the sky. He sat quietly with an earthenware bowl before him. The bowl was filled with soapy water, into which he dipped the head of a clay pipe. Then he put the pipe stem in his mouth, and blew soap bubbles, large and small. They quivered and spun in beautiful colors. They changed from yellow to red, and from red to purple or blue and then they turned bright green, like leaves when the sun shines through them.

The boy's mother said, "May God grant you many more years on earth - as many years as the bubbles you are blowing."

"So many, so many!" he cried. "I can never blow all the soapy water into bubbles. There goes one year, there goes another one; see how they fly!" he exclaimed, as bubbles came loose from his pipe and floated away. A few of them blew into his eye, where they burned, and smarted, and made his tears flow. In every bubble he saw a picture of the future, glimmering and glistening.

"This is the time to look at the comet," cried their neighbors. "Come outdoors. Don't sit in your room."

The mother took her boy by the hand. He had to put aside his clay pipe, and stop playing with the soap bubbles, because there was a comet to see.

The boy saw the bright ball of fire, with its shining tail. Some said it was three yards long, while others insisted it was several million yards long - such a difference.

Most of the people who said these things were dead and buried when the comet came again. But the little boy, toward whom the wood-shaving had circled, and of whom his mother thought, "He will soon die," still lived on, though he had grown old and his hair was white. "White hairs are the flowers of age," the saying goes, and he had many such flowers. He was an old schoolmaster. The school children thought him very wise and learned, because he knew history, and geography, and all there is to be known about the heavens and the stars.

"Everything comes again," he said. "If you will pay attention to people and events, you will learn that they always come back. There may be a hundred years between, or many hundreds of years, but once again we shall see the same character, in another coat and in another country." And the schoolmaster then told them about William Tell, who was forced to shoot an apple from his son's head, but before he shot the arrow he hid another one in his shirt, to shoot into the heart of the wicked Gessler. This happened in Switzerland. But many years before, the same thing happened in Denmark to Palnatoke. He too was forced

to shoot an apple from his son's head, and he too hid an arrow in his shirt to avenge the cruelty. And more than a thousand years before that, the same story was written in Egypt. It happened before and will happen again, just as sure as the comet returns. "Off it flies into space, and is gone for years, but still it comes back." He spoke of the comet that was expected, the same comet he had seen as a boy.

The schoolmaster knew what went on in the skies, and he thought much about it too, but he did not neglect history and geography. His garden was laid out in the shape of a map of Denmark. In it grew herbs and flowers which flourished in different parts of the land.

"Fetch me peas," he said, and they went to the garden bed that represented Laaland. "Fetch me buckwheat," he said, and they fetched it from Langeland. Lovely blue gentian was planted in Skagen, and the shining Christthorn in Silkeborg. Towns and cities were marked with small statues. Here was the dragon and St. Knud, who stood for Odense. Absalon with the bishop's staff stood for Sorö. The little boat with oars marked the site of Aarhus. In the schoolmaster's garden you could learn the geography of Denmark, but first you had to be instructed by him and that was a pleasure.

Now that the comet was expected again, he told about it, and he told what people had said in the old days when it last was seen. They had said that a comet year was a good year for wine, and that water could be mixed with this wine without being detected. Therefore the wine merchants thought well of a comet year.

For fourteen days and fourteen nights the sky was clouded over. They could not see the comet, and yet it was there. The old schoolmaster sat in his little chamber next to the schoolroom. The old Bornholm clock of his grandfather's time stood in the corner, though its heavy lead weights moved neither up nor down, nor did its pendulum ever swing. The little cuckoo, that used to come out to call the passing hours, had long ago stopped doing his duty. The clock neither struck nor ticked. The clock was decidedly out of order.

But the old clavichord at which he sat had been made in his parents' time, and it still had a tune or two left in it. The strings could still play. Tremulous though they were, they could play for him the melodies of a whole lifetime. As the old man heard them, he remembered many things, both pleasant and sad, that had happened in the long years which had gone by since he was a little boy and saw the comet. Now that the comet had come again, he remembered what his mother had said about the wood-shaving circling toward him. He remembered the fine soap bubbles he had blown, one for every year of his life he had said as he looked at them glistening and gleaming in wonderful colors. He saw in them all his pleasures and sorrow - everything, both the good and the bad. He saw the child at his play, and the youth with his fancies. His whole life, iridescent and bright, floated before his eyes. And in that splendor he saw his future too, in bubbles of time to come.

First the old man heard from the strings of the clavichord the melodies of times past, and saw the bubbles of years gone by, colored with memories. He heard his grandmother's knitting song:

*"Surely no Amazon
The first stockings knit."*

And then the strings played the songs his old nurse used to sing for him:

*"There were so many dangers
In this world to pass through
For people who were young
And only little knew."*

Now the melodies of his first ball were playing, for the minuet and molinasky - soft melancholy tunes that brought tears to the old man's eyes. A roaring war-march, then a

psalm, then happy tunes. The years whirled past as if they were those bubbles he blew when he was a little boy.

His eyes were turned towards the window. A cloud billowed across the sky, and as it passed he saw the comet with its shining nucleus and its shining, misty veil. It seemed to him as though it were only yesterday evening when he had last seen that comet, yet a whole busy lifetime lay between that evening and this. Then he was a child, looking through bubbles into the future; now those bright bubbles were all behind him. Once more he had a child's outlook and a child's faith. His eyes sparkled, and his hands struck the keys. There was the sound of a breaking string.

"Come out and see," cried his neighbors. "The comet is here, and the sky is clear. Come out and look!"

The old schoolmaster did not answer. He had gone where he could see more clearly. His soul was on a journey far greater than the comet's, and the realm to which it went was far more spacious than that in which the comet moved.

Again the comet was seen from the high castle and from the lowly hut. The crowd in the street gazed up at it, and so did the man who went his solitary way across the pathless heath. But the schoolmaster's soul was seen by God, and by those dear ones who had gone before him, and whom he longed to see.