

The Jack o'Lanterns are in Town, the Bog Crone Said

There was a man who once had known so many new fairy tales, but now they had dried up, he said; the fairy tale that paid a visit of its own accord no longer came and knocked on his door; and why didn't it come? Yes, that's probably true enough, the man hadn't thought of it for days or years, not expected it to come knocking, and it had certainly not been there either, for outside there was war and inside sorrow and distress, which is what war brings with it.

The stork and swallow came back after their long journey; they did not think of any danger, and when they returned, their nests had been burnt, the people's houses were burning, the fences smashed, even totally gone; the enemy's horses were trampling on the graves of the forebears. They were harsh, dark times: but they too come to an end.

And that end had now come, people said, but still the fairy tale did not knock, or give any sign of its presence.

'It is probably dead and gone with all the others!' *the man* said. But the fairy tale will never die! More than a whole year passed, and he longed so exceedingly.

'Surely the fairy tale will come again and knock on my door!' And he recalled it so vividly in all the many forms it had assumed when it had come to him; sometimes young and lovely, spring itself, a lovely young girl with a garland of woodruff in her hair and carrying a switch of beech; her eyes gleaming like deep woodland lakes in bright sunshine; at other times it had also come as a peddler, who had opened his pack and let silk ribbons flutter out with verses and inscriptions from old memories; but most delightful of all was when it came as a little old woman with silvery hair and eyes so large and so wise, since she knew properly how to tell stories about ancient times, even long before princesses spun with golden spindles, while dragons and wyverns lay outside and guarded them. Then she would tell her tales so vividly that black spots would appear before the eyes of everyone listening, the floor turned black with human blood; horrible to see and hear, and yet quite diverting, because it all happened so long ago.

'I wonder if she will knock again!' *the man* said and stared at the door, so that black spots appeared before his eyes, black spots on the floor; he didn't know if it was blood or black mourning crape from the harsh, dark days.

And while he was sitting there, the thought occurred to him that perhaps the fairy tale had hidden itself, just like the princess in the real, old fairy tales, and now wanted to be searched for; if it were found, it would then gleam in renewed splendour, yet more delightful than ever before.

'Who knows! perhaps it is lying hidden in the discarded stalk of straw that is rocking on the edge of the well. Take care now! take care! perhaps it is hidden in a withered flower placed in one of the big books on the shelf!'

And the man went over, opened one of the very newest books to find this out; but there was no flower lying there, it told of *Ogier the Dane*; and the man read that the entire story had been fabricated and put together by a monk in France, and that it was a romance that had been "translated and printed in the Danish language", that *Ogier the Dane* had simply never

existed and therefore would not return at all, as we had sung about and so much wanted to believe. *Ogier the Dane*, like *Wilhelm Tell*, was only idle talk, not to be relied on, and this stood in the book, which had been compiled with great scholarship.

'Well, I believe what I happen to believe!' *the man* said, 'no plantains grow where no foot has trod!'

And he closed the book, put it back on the shelf and then went over to the fresh flowers on the window sill; *there* perhaps the fairy tale had hidden in the red tulip with the golden-yellow rims, or in the fresh rose, or in the brightly coloured camellia. Sunshine lay among the petals, but not the fairy tale.

The flowers that stood in this time of sorrow were all far more beautiful; but they had been cut, each and every one, bound in funeral wreaths, laid in coffins, over which a flag was draped. Perhaps the fairy tale has been interred along with the flowers! But the flowers must have known about it, and the coffin sensed it, and the earth sensed it, every small blade of grass that came up would have told of this. The fairy tale will never die!

Perhaps it has also been here and knocked on the door, but who was then capable of hearing it, or just being aware of it! One looked darkly, gloomily, almost angrily at the spring sunshine, its chirruping birds, and all the pleasant greenery; indeed, one's tongue was unable to endure the old, popular songs, they were shelved with so much else that our hearts held dear. The fairy tale can well have knocked, but not been heard, not been welcomed, and then gone away.

I will go off in search of it.

Out into the country! out into the forest down by the open shore!

Out there lies an old manor house with red walls, a crenelated gable and a fluttering flag on its tower. The nightingale sings among the finely fringed beech leaves while it gazes at the garden's blossoming apple trees and thinks they are flowering with roses. Here in the summer sun the bees are busy and, humming their song, they swarm round their queen. The autumn storm can tell of the wild hunt, of the generations of humans and the leaves of the forest that are borne away. At Christmastide the wild swans sing from the open water, while inside the old manor, close to the tiled stove, people are in the mood to listen to songs and legends.

Down in the old part of the garden, where the large avenue of wild chestnut trees entices with its half-light, the man in search of the fairy tale was walking; here the wind had once murmured to him about *Valdemar Daae and his Daughters*. The dryad in the tree, who was the mother of fairy tales in person, had here told him about *The Dream of the Old Oak Tree*. In his grandmother's time, trimmed hedges had stood here, now only ferns and nettles grew; they spread out over the sprawling remains of old stone figures; moss grew in their eyes, but they could still see as well as before, but the man searching for fairy tales could not, he was unable to see the fairy tale. Where was it?

Above him and the old trees, crows in their hundreds flew past, cawing: 'scram! scram!'

And he went from the garden across the manor moat into the alder grove; there a small hexagonal house stood with a hen-yard and a duck-yard. In the middle of the room sat an old woman who kept track of everything and knew exactly about each egg that was laid, each chick that hatched from the egg; but she was not the fairy tale the man was looking

for; she could prove this by her baptism certificate and vaccination certificate, both of which lay in the chest of drawers.

Outside, not far from the house, is a small hill with red hawthorn and laburnum; here lies an old tombstone that came here many years earlier from the market town churchyard, a monument to one of the town's honest aldermen; his wife and his five daughters, all with folded hands and ruffs, stand round him, carved in the stone. It was possible to contemplate this stone for so long that it seemed to make an impact on one's thoughts and this in turn on the stone, so that it told stories about old times; this was at any rate the case for the man in search of the fairy tale. As he now came to this spot, he saw a live butterfly sitting on the forehead of the carved image of the alderman; it fluttered its wings, flew a short distance and then settled once more close to the gravestone, as if to show him what was growing there. It was a four-leafed clover, there were no fewer than seven of them growing next to each other. If luck comes, it comes in full measure! he picked them and put them in his pocket. Luck is just as good as ready money, but a new, delightful fairy tale was even better all the same, the man thought, but he did not find it there.

The sun started to set, large and red; a ground mist rose over the meadow, the bog crone was brewing.

It was late evening; he was standing alone in his room, gazing out over the garden, over the meadow, bog and shore; the moon was shining brightly, a vapour hung over the meadow, as if it was a large lake, and this it had once been too, there was a legend about it, and in the moonlight visible proof revealed itself. Then the man thought about what he had read in the town, that *Wilhelm Tell* and *Ogier the Dane* had not actually existed but, like the lake out there, become a reality in popular belief. Oh yes, *Ogier the Dane* will come again!

While he stood there thinking such thoughts, something tapped quite sharply on the window. Was it a bird? A bat or an owl? Well, one does not let them in if they knock. The window flew open of its own accord, and an old crone looked in at the man.

'What's this!' he said to himself. 'Who can she be? She's looking in on the first floor. Is she standing on a ladder?'

'You have a four-leafed clover in your pocket,' she said, in fact you have seven of them, one of which is a six-leafed clover!'

'Who is she?' *the man* asked.

'The bog crone!' she said. 'the bog crone who brews; that was what I was busy doing; the bung was in the cask, but one of the young bog lads tore it off in his playfulness, hurled it towards the manor house up here where it struck the window; now the beer is running out of the cask, and that's no use to anyone.'

'But tell me!' *the man* said.

'All right, wait a moment!' *the bog crone* said, 'I've got other things to take care of at present!' and she was gone.

The man was about to close the window when the crone was there again.

'Now that's done!' she said, 'but half of the beer I'll have to brew again tomorrow, if the weather is right for it. Well, what was it you wanted to ask? I came back, for I always keep my word, and in your pocket you have seven four-leafed clovers, one of which is a six-leafed clover, that commands respect, that is a badge of honour that grows by the side of the road

but is not found by all and sundry. What do you want to ask me about, then? Don't stand there like some weird old mask, I've got to get back to my bung and cask!

And *the man* asked her about the fairy tale, asked if the bog crone had seen it on her travels. 'Oh, masterbrew!' *the crone* said, 'haven't you had enough of fairy tales by now? I think most people probably have. There are other matters to attend to, other matters to take care of. Even children have got over them. Give the young lads a cigar and the young girls a new crinoline, that's more to their liking! Listen to fairy tales! No, here there are indeed other things to attend to, more important things to get done!'

'What do you mean by that?' *the man* said. 'And what do you know about the world? All you ever see are frogs and jack o'lanterns!'

'Well, you just beware of jack o'lanterns!' *the crone* said, 'they're out and about! they're on the loose! we have to talk about them! Just you come to me in the bog, where my presence is necessary; there I will tell you everything, but get a bit of a move on, while your seven four-leafed clovers and the one six-leafed one are still fresh and the moon still up!'

And the bog crone was gone.

The tower clock struck twelve, and before it had struck the quarter hour, the man was out in the courtyard, out of the garden and was standing in the meadow. The ground mist had settled, the bog crone stopped brewing.

'You took a long time getting here!' *the bog crone* said, 'trolls and the likes of them get to places faster than humans, and I'm glad I was born a troll!'

'What have you got to tell me?' *the man* asked. 'Is it something about the fairy tale?'

'Can't you ever get any further than asking about that?' *the crone* said.

'Would you perhaps prefer to talk about the poetry of the future, then?' *the man* asked.

'Just don't get too hoity-toity!' *the crone* said, 'and I'll answer you all right! All you think about is flights of fancy, you ask about the fairy tale as if she was the old mistress in charge of the whole lot! well, she's only the oldest one, though she's always taken for the youngest. I know her all right! I was young once too, and it's not some childhood illness. I was once a quite pretty elf girl and used to dance with the others in the moonlight, listen to the nightingale, walk in the woods and meet the fairy tale miss who was always gadding about. At one moment she was making her bed in a half-open tulip or a meadow flower; at the next she would be nipping into the church and draping herself in the mourning crape that was hanging from the altar candles!'

'You seem to know all about it!' *the man* said.

'I should certain know just as much about it as you do!' *the bog crone* said. 'Fairy tales and poetry, well, they're two of a kind: they could go and lie down wherever they liked. All their works and words can be brewed up afterwards, better and cheaper. You can get them from me for nothing. I have a whole cupboard full of bottled poetry. It's the essence of it; the herb itself, both the sweet and the sour. I have bottled all that humankind needs in the way of poetry, so that they can get a few drops on their handkerchiefs to sniff on holidays!'

'You are saying some quite extraordinary things,' *the man* said. 'Do you have poetry in bottles?'

'More than you can put up with!' *the crone* said. 'I suppose you know the story of "*The Girl who Trod on the Loaf of Bread*"? It's been both written and printed.'

'I've told that one myself,' *the man* said.

'Right, so you know that one,' *the crone* said, 'and know that the girl sank down into the earth to the bog crone just when the devil's grand-grandmother was paying a visit to take a look at the brewery. She saw the girl who had sunk down, and requested her as a statue, a souvenir of her visit, and was given her, and I was given a present which I have no use for, a medicine chest, a whole cupboard full of bottled poetry. The great-grandmother said where the cupboard was to stand, and there it still stands. Just look! After all, you've your seven four-leafed clovers in your pocket, one of which is a six-leafed clover, so you will probably be able to see it.'

And really and truly, in the middle of the bog, like the stump of a large alder, lay great-grandmother's cupboard. It was possible to open for the bog crone and everyone in every country and in every age, she said, as long as they knew where the cupboard stood. It could be opened from both front and back, on all sides and edges, a real piece of craftsmanship, and yet it only looked like an old alder stump. Poets of every country, especially our own, were imitated here; their spirit was pondered, reviewed, renewed, concentrated and bottled. With unerring instinct, as it is called when one doesn't want to use the word genius, the great-grandmother had found in nature that which tasted of this or that particular poet, added a touch of devilry, and then she had his poetry in a bottle for all time to come.

'Do let me see!' *the man* said.

'All right, but there are more important things for you to hear!' *the bog crone* said.

'But now we've arrived at the cupboard!' *the man* said and looked inside. 'Here there are bottles of every size. What is there in this one? And in that one?'

'Here's one that's called *May scent!*' *the crone* said 'I haven't tried it out, but I know that if one pours just a tiny drop of it on the floor, a lovely woodland lake will immediately stand there, with water lilies, flowering rush and wild curled mint. If one pours just two drops of it on an old exercise book, even from the first class at school, the book will turn into a whole scent drama that one can quite well perform and fall asleep over, so powerful is its scent. It is probably a mark of courtesy towards me that "The Old Crone's Brew" has been written on the bottle.'

'Here it says *The Scandal Bottle*. It looks as if there is only dirty water in it, and it is dirty water, but with fizzy powder of town gossip added; three portions of lies and two grains of truth, stirred with a birch switch, not from a root laid in brine and carved out of the sinner's bloody body, or a piece of a schoolmaster's cane, no, freshly taken from the broom that swept the gutter.

'Here is the bottle with devout poetry, made up of hymn notes. Each drop has a sound, like the slam of hell's gates, and has been made out of the blood and sweat of chastisement; some people say that it is only dove gall, but doves are the most devout of creatures, they do not have any gall, people say who are ignorant of natural history.'

Here stood the bottle of all bottles; it filled half the cupboard: the bottle with *Everyday Stories*; it was bound in both hogskin and bladder-skin, for it was unable to withstand a loss of its power. Every nation could get its own soup here, it came according to how one twisted and turned the bottle. Here there was old German blood soup with brigand meat balls, as well as thin crofter's soup with real court councillors that lay like roots, with round blobs of philosophical grease floating on top. There was English governess soup and the French *Potage à la Kock*, made out of cockerel bones and sparrow's eggs, called *Cancan Soup* in

Danish, but the best of the soups was the one from Copenhagen. That was what the family said.

Here stood *Tragedy* in a champagne bottle; it could go off with a bang, as it should. *The Comedy* looked like fine sand to throw in people's eyes, the finer form of comedy that is; the lower kind had also been bottled, but it only consisted of future playbills, on which the name of the play was the strongest thing about it. There were excellent names for comedies such as: '*Do you Dare Spit on the Work*', '*A Sock on the Jaw*', '*The Sweet Brute*' and '*She is Dead Drunk*'.

The man was lost in thought at all this, but the bog crone was thinking further ahead, she wanted to have an end to all this.

'Now you must surely have seen enough of the peddler's box!' she said, 'now you know what is there; but what is more important you don't yet know. The jack o'lanterns are in town! That means more than poetry and fairy tales. I really ought to keep quiet about it, but there is something compelling me, a fate, something that comes over me, it has got me by the throat, it has to be said. The jack o'lanterns are in town! they are on the loose! Beware, all you humans!'

'I don't understand a word of all this!' *the man* said.

'Please sit on the cupboard!' she said, 'but don't fall into it and break the bottles; you know what's in them. I will tell you the big piece of news; it came only yesterday; it has happened before. This one will last three hundred and sixty-five days from now on. You do know how many days there are in a year?'

And the bog crone related the following:

'There was something big taking place here yesterday, out in the bog! There was a children's party! Here a little jack o'lantern was born, here a brood of twelve were born of the variety it is said could, if they wanted to, appear as human beings and act and command among them, just as if they had been born as humans. That is a big event in the swamp, so all the jack o'lanterns and their wives – females exist too, but they do not concern us here – danced like small lights over bog and meadow. I was sitting on the cupboard there, and on my lap I had all the twelve new-born jack o'lanterns; they gleamed like glow-worms; they were already starting to jump, and every minute they increased in size, so that before a quarter of an hour had passed, each of them looked just as large as a father or uncle. Now there is an old hereditary law and favour that when the moon is precisely as it was yesterday, and the wind blows as it blew yesterday, all the jack o'lanterns that are born at that hour and at that minute are granted the ability to become humans, and each of them, for a whole year, can exercise their power wherever they are. The jack o'lantern can roam all over the country and the world too, as long as he is not afraid of falling into the sea or being blown away by a severe storm. He can pass straight into a human being, speak for him and carry out all the movements he wants. The jack o'lantern can assume any form, male or female, act in their spirit, but completely according to his own fancy, so that what comes out of it is what he wants; but in the course of a year he must know and understand how to lead three hundred and sixty-five people astray and do this in grand style, lead them away from what is right and true, then he will gain the highest thing a jack o'lantern can attain, become a runner in front of the devil's fine coach, be given a saffron dress coat and have a flame come right from his throat. That is something that can make a simple jack o'lantern smack his lips in

anticipation. But there is also danger and a great deal of trouble involved for an ambitious jack o'lantern who intends to play such a role. If humans become aware of who he is and can blow him away, then he is done for and must return to the swamp; and if, before the year has passed, the jack o'lantern is stirred by the longing to come back to his family, to abandon his role, then he is also done for, can no longer burn brightly, will soon go out and cannot be relit; and if the year has ended and he has still not enticed three hundred and sixty-five men away from the truth and that which is good and delightful, then he is doomed to lie in rotten wood and gleam without being able to move, and that is the most terrible punishment for a lively jack o'lantern. I knew all this and I told all this to the twelve small jack o'lanterns I had sitting on my lap!, and they were completely beside themselves with joy. I told them that the safest and easiest thing was to give up the honour and not do anything at all; but the young firebrands were unwilling to do this, they could already see themselves in glowing saffron with a flame coming straight from the throat. 'Stay with us!' some of the old ones said. 'Play tricks on the humans!' the others said. Humans dry out our meadows, they drain them! What is to become of our descendants!

'We flamingly want to flame!' the new-born jack o'lanterns said, and so the matter was decided.

A minute ball immediately took place, it couldn't be any shorter! The elf girls swung round three times with all the others, so as not to seem haughty; otherwise, they prefer to dance with themselves. The presents for the new born were dished out: 'ducks and drakes', as it is called. The presents flew, like smooth pebbles, over the bog-water. Each of the *elf-girls* gave a corner of their veil: 'Take it!' they said, 'then you'll immediately be able to do the higher form of dancing, the most difficult swings and turns at a pinch; you will have the right posture and can show yourselves in the highest ranks of society. The *night raven* taught each of the young jack o'lanterns to say: 'Bra-bra-bravo!' to say it at precisely the right moment, and that is a great gift, it brings its own reward. *The owl* and *the stork* also gave something, but it wasn't worth talking about, they said, and so we won't talk about it. *King Valdemar's wild hunt* was just passing over the bog, and when the distinguished family heard about the event, they sent as a present a couple of fine dogs that hunt at the speed of the wind and could probably carry two or three jack o'lanterns. Two old night mares that make a living from haunting, were at the celebration; they immediately began teaching the art of slipping in through a keyhole, it is as if all doors were open to one. They offered to take the young jack o'lanterns into town, where they knew the ropes. They normally ride through the air on their own long back hair, which they have tied into a knot, so as to sit hard, but now each of them sat astride the dogs of the wild hunt, took the young jack o'lanterns on their lap that were to lure and lead the humans astray, – whoosh! they were gone. All of this took place last night. Now the jack o'lanterns are in town, now they have got started, but precisely how, well, tell me that! I have a big toe that twinges and always tells me things!

'That is some fairy tale!' *the man* said.

'Yes, and it's only the start of one!' *the crone* said. 'Now *you* can tell me how the jack o'lanterns are cavorting and carrying on, what forms they have assumed to lead humans astray!'

'I think,' *the man* said, 'that a whole novel could be written about the jack o'lanterns, in twelve parts, one for each jack o'lantern, or, possibly even better, a whole popular comedy!'

'You ought to write it!' *the crone* said, 'or preferably refrain from doing so!'

'Yes, that is much easier and more pleasant!' *the man* said, 'for then one avoids being tethered to a newspaper, and that is often just as constricting as for a jack o'lantern to lie in a rotten tree, gleam and not be able to speak a syllable!'

'I couldn't care less!' *the crone* said, 'but you'd do better to let the others write, those that can and those that can't. I'll give them an old bung from my cask, it opens up the cupboard with bottled poetry, from there they can get as much as they please! but you, my good man, would seem to me to have got enough ink on your fingers and must have reached the age and sobriety not to go running off every year in search of fairy tales, now there are far more important things to do! You have, I trust, understood what is going on?'

'The jack o'lanterns are in town!' *the man* said, 'I have heard it, I have understood it! but what do you want me to do? I'm sure to be heaped with abuse if I see and say to people: just look, there goes a jack o'lantern wearing an honest dress coat -!'

'They also go around wearing frocks!' *the crone* said. 'The jack o'lantern can assume any form at all and turn up anywhere. He goes to church, not for Our Lord's sake, perhaps he has invaded the vicar! He talks on election day, not for the sake of kingdom and country, but for his own sake; he is an artist, both in colours and the theatre, but if he takes over all power, that is the end of the show! I am chattering away, I must tell you what has got me by the throat, to the detriment of my own family; but now I am to be the woman who saves humanity! That is decidedly not with my own good will or for the sake of a medal. I am doing the maddest thing I can, I am telling all this to a poet, and that means the whole town will know about it in no time!'

'The town will not take it to heart!' *the man* said. 'It won't affect a single one of them, they will all think that I am telling a fairy tale, when in all seriousness I say to them: "The jack o'lanterns are in town, the bog crone said, be on your guard!"'