

The Gate Key

Every key has its own history and there are many kinds of keys: chamberlain keys, watch keys, St Peter's keys; we could tell stories about all sorts, but here we will only tell the story of the *councillor's* gate key.

It came into being at a locksmith's, but it could well believe it was at a blacksmith's, judging by the way the man hammered and filed away at it. It was too large for a trouser pocket, so it had to be put in a coat pocket. Here it often lay in the dark, although it also had its particular place on the wall, next to the silhouette of the *councillor* from his childhood years, where he looked like a dumpling in a frilled shirt.

People say that each person has in his or her character and manner of behaviour something of the astrological sign under which that person was born, Taurus, Virgo, Scorpio, as they are called in the almanac. The *councillor's wife* did not name any of these, she said her husband was born 'under the sign of the wheelbarrow', he always needed a push to go forwards.

His father pushed him into an office job, his mother pushed him into matrimony, and his wife pushed him up to the rank of *councillor*, but she didn't ever mention this, she was a level-headed, honest woman who kept silent in the right place and pushed in the right place.

He was now getting on in years, 'well-proportioned' as he himself put it, a man who was well-read, good-natured and, in addition, knowledgeable about keys, something we will understand better later. He was always in a good mood, he was fond of everybody and willing to talk to everybody. If he went into town, it was hard to get him to return home again, unless the missus was with him to give him a push. He had to talk to each and every acquaintance he met. He had so many acquaintances, and this could be at the expense of the evening meal. The *councillor's wife* kept a look-out from the window. 'Now he's on his way!' she said to the maid, 'put the pot on the stove! – Now he's stopped to talk to someone, take the pot off again, otherwise the meal will be overcooked! – Now he's on his way again! yes, put the pot back on!'

But that didn't mean he actually arrived.

He could stand right under the window of the house and nod upwards, but if an acquaintance happened to pass by, he couldn't resist saying a few words; if, while he was talking to this person, another acquaintance came along, he would button-hole the first one and take the second by the hand, while he called out to a third, who was on his way past.

It was a trial of his wife's patience. '*Councillor! councillor!*' she would call out, 'yes, that man has been born under the sign of the wheelbarrow, he cannot shift from the spot unless he is given a push!'

He was very fond of going into bookshops, to look at books and magazines. He paid his book dealer a small fee for being allowed to read the new books at home, in other words, to be allowed to cut open the books lengthwise, but not crosswise, for then they could not be sold as new. He was a walking newspaper in all his good-naturedness, was completely up to date on betrothals, weddings and funerals, talk of books and the latest town news, indeed, he even dropped secretive hints about knowing what no one else knew. He had this from the gate key.

From the early years of their marriage, the *councillor* and his wife had lived in their own town house, and from that time they still had the same gate key, but back then they were unaware of its remarkable powers, these they only learnt about later.

It was during the reign of *Frederik VI*. At that period *Copenhagen* had no gas, it had train-oil lamps, it had no Tivoli or Casino, no trams and no railways. There were few amusements compared with nowadays. On Sundays one went for a walk out of the gate to the cemetery called *Assistens Cemetery*, read the inscriptions on the graves, sat down in the grass, ate from one's picnic basket and took a small glass of snaps with it, or one went to *Frederiksberg*, where regimental music was played in front of the palace and many people came to see the royal family row around in the small, narrow canals, while the old king steered the boat, and he and his queen greeted everybody irrespective of their rank. Wealthy families used to travel there from the city and drink their evening tea. Hot water was available from a small cottage on the field outside the gardens, but they had to bring their own tea machine with them.

The *councillor* and his wife went out there one sunny Sunday afternoon; their maid went ahead with the machine and a basket of food and a bottle of *Spendrup's* snaps.

'Take the gate key with you!' the *councillor's* wife said, 'so that we can slip in back home when we return, you know that they shut everything when it gets dark and the bell pull is out of order since this morning! – We will not be returning home until late! After we've been to *Frederiksberg* we shall go to *Casorti's* theatre in Vesterbro and see the pantomime: '*Harlequin, Chief of the Thrashers*'; in it they descend in a cloud; it costs two marks per person!'

And off they went to *Frederiksberg*, listened to the music, saw the royal boats with fluttering flags, saw the old king and the white swans. After having drunk a good cup of tea they hurried off, but did not arrive at the theatre on time.

The tightrope walking was over, the dancing on stilts was over, and the pantomime had begun; they came late as always, and this was the *councillor's* fault; at every moment on their way he stopped to talk with acquaintances; inside the theatre he also found good friends, and when the performance was over, he and his wife simply had to follow the others into town to a family who lived in Vesterbro to partake of a glass of punch, it would only be a stop-off for ten minutes, but this eventually turned into a whole hour. They talked and talked. Particularly entertaining was a Swedish baron, or was it a German, the *councillor* couldn't quite make out which, but the trick with the key he taught him was something he was always able to recall afterwards. It was extremely interesting! he could get the key to answer everything one asked it, even the most secret things.

The *councillor's* gate key was particularly suitable for this purpose, the bit was heavy, and had to hang downwards. The shaft of the key the baron allowed to rest on the index finger of his right hand. It hung there loosely and lightly, every pulsation of the fingertip could set it in motion, so that it turned, and if this did not occur, the baron knew how to make it turn imperceptibly as he wished. Every turn was a letter from A down to as far in the alphabet one wished. When the first letter had been found, the key turned the other way; one then sought the next letter, and in that way one acquired whole words, whole sentences, an answer to one's question. The whole thing was a pack of lies, but always amusing, that was also the first thought the *councillor* had, but he did not retain that view, he became utterly engrossed in the key.

'Husband! Husband!' the *councillor's wife* called out. 'The West Gate shuts at twelve o'clock! We won't be able to get in, we've only a quarter of an hour to hurry there.'

They had to hurry; a number of people who wanted to get back into the city soon passed them. Finally they reached the outermost guardhouse, then the clock struck twelve and the gate slammed shut; quite a few people stood there locked out and among them were the *councillor*, his wife and their maid, the tea machine and an empty picnic basket. Some stood there greatly dismayed, others highly vexed; they took it in their different ways. What was to be done!

Fortunately, the decision had recently been taken that one of the city gates, the North Gate, was not to be locked, there people on foot could slip in via the guardhouse into the city.

It was quite a way away, but the weather was beautiful, the clear sky full of stars and shooting stars, frogs croaked in the ditches and in ponds. The small company started to sing, one song after the other, but the *councillor* did not sing, nor did he look at the stars, not even at his own legs, he fell flat on his face beside the ditch, one would have thought he had been drinking too much, but it was not the punch, it was the key that had gone to his head and was turning and churning away.

At last they reached the North Gate guardhouse, were let in across the bridge and entered the city.

'Now I feel happy again,' his wife said. 'Here is our gate!'

'But where is the gate key?' the *councillor* said. It wasn't in his back pocket, nor in his side pocket.

'Merciful heavens!' his wife called out. 'Haven't you got the key? You must have lost it practising those tricks with the baron. How are we to get in now? You know the bell pull is out of order since this morning, the watchman hasn't got a key to the house. We're in a desperate situation!'

The maid started to wail, the *councillor* was the only one who kept his composure.

'We must break one of the grocer's downstairs window panes!' he said, 'get him out of bed and let us in.'

He broke one pane, he broke two, 'Petersen!' he called out and stuck the shaft of his umbrella in through the window panes; then the man in the basement's daughter screamed inside. The man opened the shop door with the cry 'Night Watchman!' and before he had made out the *councillor* family, recognised it and let it in, the watchman gave a signal and another one answered from the next street. People all came to their windows. 'Where's the fire? Where's the disturbance?' they asked, and were still asking when the *councillor* was already in his living room, took off his coat and – in it lay the gate key – not in the pocket but in the lining, it had fallen into it through a hole that shouldn't have been in the pocket.

From that evening on, the gate key acquired a specially great importance, not only when one went out in the evening but when one sat at home and the *councillor* displayed his ingenuity and let the key answer questions.

He thought up the most reasonable answer and then let the key give it, finally he believed it himself; but that was not what the pharmacist did, a young man closely related to the *councillor's wife*.

The pharmacist had a good mind, a critical mind, he had even as a schoolboy handed in critiques of books and plays, but without mentioning his name, that causes too much trouble.

He was what people call a *bel esprit*, although he did not believe in spirits, least of all key-spirits.

'Oh yes, I believe, I believe,' he said, 'dear Mr. *Councillor*, I believe in the gate key and all key-spirits as firmly as I do in the new science that is beginning to become known: dancing tables and spirits within old and new furniture. Have you heard about that? I have! I have doubted, you know I am a doubter, but have been converted by reading a terrible story in a highly credible foreign magazine. *Councillor!* you will hardly believe this, well, let me tell the story as I have it. Two clever children had seen their parents wake the spirit within a large dining table. The two young ones were alone and now wanted to try in the same way to rub life into an old chest of drawers. Life came into it, the spirit woke up, but it refused to obey child commands; it rose up, it creaked, it pushed out drawers and with its legs it laid the children in separate drawers, then ran with them out of the open door, down the stairs and out into the street, down to the canal, where it plunged into it, drowning both the children. The small bodies ended up in consecrated ground, but the chest of drawers was taken to the council hall, sentenced for infanticide and burnt alive on the square. I have read this!' the pharmacist said, 'read it in a foreign magazine, it is not something I have thought up myself. It's true, may the Key take me if it isn't! That is indeed a solemn oath'

The *councillor* found this too coarse a joke, the two of them could never again talk about the key. The pharmacist was a key ignoramus.

The *councillor* made advances in his key-knowledge – the key was his amusement and source of wisdom.

One evening the *councillor* was going to bed, he stood there half-undressed, when there was a knock on the passage door. It was the man from downstairs who came so late; he too was half-undressed, but he had suddenly, he said, had a thought which he was afraid he could not keep to himself the whole night.

'It's my daughter *Lotte-Lene* I must talk to you about. She is a pretty girl, is confirmed, and now I would like to see her well married!'

'But I'm not a widower yet!' the *councillor* said with a smile, 'and I haven't a son I can offer her!'

'You must understand me, *councillor!*' the man from the basement said. 'She can play the piano, she can sing; you must be able to hear that up here in the house. You can't imagine what ideas that young girl can think up, she can talk and walk like all sorts of people. She is a born actor, and that is a good profession for girls from a good family, they can even marry a count, although that is not what I am thinking of, nor is *Lotte-Lene*. She can sing, she can play the piano! So the other day I went with her up to the singing school. She sang; but she does not have what I would call a beery bass voice in women, nor shriek like a canary in the high notes as one insists on from female singers nowadays, and then she was advised to give up going in that direction altogether. Well, I thought, if she cannot become a singer, she can always become an actress, for that only calls for speaking. Today I talked about this to the theatre producer, as he is called. 'Is she well-read?' he asked; 'no,' I said, 'not at all!' – 'An artist has to be well-read!' he said; it's not too late for that, I thought, and went home. She can go to a rental library and read what's there, I thought. But this evening, as I was getting undressed, it struck me: why loan books, when one can simply borrow them. The *councillor* has lots of books, let her read them; there's plenty of reading here, and it's free of charge!'

'Lotte-Lene is a sweet girl!' the *councillor* said, 'a pretty girl! She is welcome to borrow books to read. But does her mind have what I would call plenty of pep, something brilliant, a touch of genius? And does she have, and this is just as important, good luck on her side?'

'She's won the lottery twice,' the man from the basement said, 'on one occasion she won a wardrobe, on the other six pairs of sheets, I'd call that luck and she has it!'

'I'll ask the key!' the *councillor* said.

And he placed the key on his right index finger and on that of the man from the basement, allowed the key to turn and indicate one letter after the other.

The key said: 'Success and good luck!' and that decided *Lotte-Lene's* future.

The *councillor* immediately gave her two books to read: '*Dyveke*' and *Knigge's* 'Social Etiquette'.

From that evening on a kind of closer acquaintance was established between *Lotte-Lene* and the *councillor* and his wife. She came up to them, and the *councillor* found her a sensible girl, she believed in him and the key. His wife saw in the frankness with which she at every moment displayed her great lack of knowledge something childlike, innocent. In their separate ways they became fond of her, as she did of them.

'It smells so nice up there!' *Lotte-Lene* said.

There was a smell, a fragrance, a scent of apples in the passage, where the *councillor's* wife had stored a whole barrel of 'Graasten' apples. There was also an incense-like smell of roses and lavender in all the rooms.

'It adds something nice!' *Lotte-Lene* said. Her eyes also lit up at the sight of all the beautiful flowers the *councillor's* wife always had here; for even in the midst of winter sprigs of lilac and cherry tree flowered here. The cut-off, leafless sprigs were placed in water, and in the warm living room they soon came into leaf and flower.

'One would have thought that all life had left the bare sprigs, but just look at how they rise from the dead.'

'I've never thought of that before!' *Lotte-Lene* said. 'Nature really is wonderful!'

And the *councillor* let her see his 'key book', in which strange things had been recorded that the key had said; even about half an apple-cake that had disappeared from the cupboard precisely the evening that the maid had her sweetheart visiting her.

And the *councillor* asked his key: 'Who has eaten the apple-cake, the cat or the sweetheart?' and the gate key answered: 'The sweetheart!' The *councillor* believed that before he even asked, and the maid confessed: that confounded key knew everything.

'Yes, isn't it strange!' the *councillor* said. 'That key, that key! and about *Lotte-Lene* it has said "Success and good luck!" – And so it will be! – I guarantee it.'

'It is wonderful!' *Lotte-Lene* said.

The *councillor's* wife was not so full of confidence, but she did not express her doubts within her husband's hearing, although she later confided to *Lotte-Lene* that the *councillor*, when he was a young man, had been completely addicted to the theatre. If someone had given him a push back then he would certainly have become an actor, but his family pushed the other way. He wanted to get onto the stage, and to get there he wrote a play.

'It's a big secret I'm confiding in you, little *Lotte-Lene*. The play wasn't bad, it was accepted by the Royal Theatre but whistled off the stage, so one has never heard of it since, and I'm

glad of that. I am his wife and I know him. And now you want to follow the same path; – I wish you well, but I don't think it will happen, I don't believe in the gate key!

Lotte-Lene believed in it, and in this she coincided with the *councillor*.

Their hearts understood each other – in all propriety, of course.

The young girl also had other skills that the *councillor's wife* appreciated. *Lotte-Lene* knew how to make starch from potatoes, sew silk gloves out of silk stockings, re-cover her silk dancing shoes, despite the fact she couldn't afford to buy all her clothes first-hand. She had what the grocer referred to as: cash in the table drawer and shares in the safe. She was really a wife for the pharmacist, the *councillor's wife* thought, but didn't say this, and didn't let the key say it either. The pharmacist was about to get established, have his own pharmacy and this was to be in one of the nearest, largest provincial towns.

Lotte-Lene still read '*Dyveke*' and *Knigge's* '*Social Etiquette*'. She kept the two books for two years, but by then she also knew one of them by heart, *Dyveke*, all the roles of the characters, but she only wanted to perform one of them, that of *Dyveke*, and not appear in the capital, where there was so much envy, and where they did not want to have her. She would start her career as an artist, as the *councillor* called it, in one of the country's major provincial towns. And what a coincidence it was that this happened to be precisely the same place where the young pharmacist had established himself as the town's youngest, though not only pharmacist.

The great, long-expected evening came when *Lotte-Lene* was to perform, gain success and good fortune, as the key had said. The *councillor* was not present, he was ill in bed, and his wife was taking care of him; he had to have hot poultices and camomile tea: poultices round his stomach and tea inside it.

The married couple were not present at the '*Dyveke* performance', but the pharmacist was there and wrote a letter about it to his relative, the *councillor's wife*.

'*Dyveke's* ruff was the best thing about it!' he wrote. 'If the *councillor's* gate key had been in my pocket, I would have taken it out and whistled her off stage with it, that she deserved as did the key for having lied so grossly about "Success and good luck".'

The *councillor* read the letter. It was sheer malice, he said, key-hatred at the expense of the poor innocent girl.

And as soon as he was up from his sick-bed and had regained his old self again, he sent a short but venomous letter to the pharmacist, who replied as if he hadn't regarded the whole epistle as anything else than a joke and good humour.

He thanked him for this as well as for every future, well-meaning contribution to notifying the key's incomparable value and importance; and subsequently he confided to the *councillor* that he, apart from his profession as a pharmacist, was writing a large key-novel, in which all the characters were keys, nothing else but keys; the '*Gate Key*' was of course the main character. It was based on the gate key of the *councillor*, blessed with the gift of prophecy and prediction, and all the other keys had to turn round it: the old chamberlain key, which knew the glitter and festivities of the court, the watch key, small, fine and distinguished, the key to the church pew, which considers itself part of the clergy and, by sitting for a whole night in the keyhole in the church, has seen spirits; the pantry, firewood room and wine cellar keys, all of them perform, bow down and turn around the gate key. The sun's rays make it gleam like silver, the wind, the spirit of the world, blows into it so it whistles. It is the key of

all keys, it was the *councillor's* gate key, now it is the key to heaven's gate, it is the papal key, it is *infallible!*

'Malice!' the councillor said. 'Pyramidal malice!'

He and the pharmacist never saw each other again. – Well, yes, at the funeral of the *councillor's wife*.

She died first.

In the house she was mourned and sorely missed. Even the cut-off sprigs of cherry tree, which had budded and blossomed, grieved and withered; they stood there forgotten, she was not there to care for them.

The *councillor* and the *pharmacist* walked behind her coffin, side by side, as the two closest relatives; this was neither the time nor place for wrangling.

Lotte-Lene bound crape round the *councillor's* hat. She was there in the house, had long since returned, without success or good fortune in an artistic profession. But it could still come, *Lotte-Lene* had a future. The key had said this, and the *councillor* had said this.

She came up to him. They talked about the deceased and they cried, *Lotte-Lene* was soft-hearted, they talked about art and *Lotte-Lene* was strong.

'Life in the theatre is wonderful!' she said, 'but there is so much nonsense and envy! I'd rather do things my own way. Put myself first, then art!'

Knigge had spoken the truth in his chapter about actors, she realised this, the key had not spoken the truth, but she did not mention this to the *councillor*, she was fond of him.

The gate key, by the way, was his consolation and encouragement throughout the year of mourning. He gave it questions, and it gave him answers. And when the year was past and he and *Lotte-Lene* one emotional evening were sitting together he asked the key:

'Will I marry, and whom will I marry?'

Nobody gave him a push, he gave the key a push, and it said '*Lotte-Lene!*'

The word was spoken, and *Lotte-Lene* became the wife of the councillor.

'*Success and good luck!*'

Those words had been said in advance – by *The Gate Key*.