

The Old Street Lamp

Have you heard the story about the old street lamp? It's not exactly vastly amusing, but one can always put up with hearing it just once. It was an unassuming old street lamp that had done service for many, many years but was now going to be scrapped. It was the last evening it was sitting up on its lamp post lighting up the street, and it felt like an old ballet figurante who is dancing on her final evening and knows that the following day she will be consigned to the attic. The lamp feared the day about to come so strongly for it knew that it was to go to the council hall for the first time and be inspected by 'the thirty-six men' of the town to see if it was fit or unfit for use. It would then be decided if it was to be sent to one of the bridges and light up there, or to a factory in the country, perhaps to an iron foundry and be melted down, and then it could become anything whatsoever, but it was distressed at not knowing if it would then retain the memory of having been a street lamp. – Whichever way it went, it would be separated from the watchman and his wife, whom it in fact regarded as its family. It became a street lamp when he became a watchman. His wife was a trifle condescending back then, she only deigned to look at the lamp when she passed in in the evening, never during the daytime. Now, on the other hand, in recent years, all three of them – the watchman, his wife and the lamp – had grown old, the wife had also taken care of lamp, polished it and poured trane oil into it. The married couple were honest folk, they had not cheated the lamp of a single drop. It was its last day in the street and the following day it was to go to the council hall – these were two dark thoughts for the lamp, so one can well imagine how it was burning. But other thoughts also passed through it, there was so much it had seen, so much it felt like doing, perhaps just as much as 'the thirty-six men', but it did not say so, for it was an unassuming old lamp, it did not wish to offend anybody, least of all those in authority over it. It remembered so much, and at times its flame flared inside it, it was as if it had the feeling: 'yes, I too will be remembered! there was that handsome young man – yes, many years ago now! he came with a letter, it was on pink paper, so fine, so fine, and with a gilt edge, it was so beautifully written, it was a lady's hand; he read it at least twice and he kissed it and he looked up at me with two eyes that said: 'I am the happiest person on earth!' Yes, only he and I knew what was in the first letter from his sweetheart. – I also remember another pair of eyes, it is strange how one thoughts can flit back and forth! here in the street there was a fine funeral, the beautiful young lady lay in the coffin on the velvet-draped hearse, there were so many flowers and wreaths, so many gleaming torches that I was quite inconspicuous; the whole pavement was full of people, all of them following the funeral procession, but when the torches were out of sight and I looked around me, there was still someone standing crying by my lamp post, I will never forget the two eyes of grief that looked up at me!' – Many thoughts such as these passed through the mind of the street lamp, burning this evening for the last time. The sentry who is replaced does at least know his successor, and can exchange a few words with him, but the lamp did not know its successor, though it could have given him a tip or two, about rain and rough weather, how far the moonlight shone on the pavement and from which direction the wind blew.

On the gutter plank there stood three hopefuls who had presented themselves to the lamp, for they thought it was the one that passed on its office: one of these was a herring head,

for it gleams in the dark, and it felt that it could represent a veritable saving of trane oil if it was placed on the lamp post. The second was a piece of touchwood, which also gleams, and always more than dried cod does, it said so itself, apart from which it was the last piece of a tree that had once added splendour to the forest. The third was a glow-worm; where it had come from the lamp failed to understand, but the worm was there and emitted light also, though the touchwood and herring-head swore that this was only from time to time, so it could never be taken into consideration.

The old lamp said that none of them gave off enough light to be a street lamp, but not one of them believed that, and when they heard that the lamp did not itself pass on its office, they said that this was a very good thing, for it was much too decrepit to be able to make a choice. Just then a gust of wind swept round the street corner, it whistled through the cowl of the old lamp, and said to it: 'What's this I hear that you're leaving us tomorrow? Is this the last evening I am to meet you here? In that case, you are to have a present! I will now clear the air inside your cranium so you will be able not only to remember completely clearly everything you have heard and seen, but also be so clear-headed whenever something is told or read in your presence that you can also see it!'

'Well, that really is most generous!' the old street-lamp said, 'thank you so much! I only hope I won't be melted down!'

'That won't happen yet!' the wind said, 'and now I will inflate your memory; if you can get some more presents like this one, you ought to have a quite enjoyable old age!'

'If only I'm not melted down!' the lamp said, 'or can you then still guarantee me my memory?' – 'Be reasonable, old lamp!' the wind said, and then it blew. – Immediately the moon appeared. 'What will you give?' the wind asked.

'I will give nothing!' it said, 'I am on the wane, and the lamps have never shone for me, but I have shone for the lamps.' And the moon went behind the clouds once more, for it didn't want to be pestered. Then right onto the cowl there fell a drop of water, it was like a drip from the eaves, but the drop said it came from the grey clouds and was also a present, and perhaps the best of them all. I will percolate into you, so you will acquire the ability for the space of one night, whenever you wish it, to transformed yourself into rust, completely disintegrate and turn into dust. But the lamp thought that this was a bad present and so did the wind; 'Is there nothing better, is there nothing better?' it blew as loudly as it could; then a gleaming shooting star fell in a long, shining trail.

'What was that?' the herring head cried out, 'didn't a star just fall down? I think it went straight into the lamp! – Well, if the office is also being sought by something of such high standing, we might as well go home and lie down!' which it did, as did the others; but the old lamp suddenly gleamed with a marvellously strong light: 'That was a delightful present!' it said. 'The bright stars, in which I have always taken so much pleasure, and that shine more delightfully than I have ever been able to, despite this being my entire endeavour and aspiration, have noticed me, poor old lamp that I am, and sent one down with a present to me that enables all that I personally remember and see really clearly will also be able to be seen by those of which I am fond! and only then can a pleasure be complete, for when one cannot share it with others it remains but a half joy!'

'A very noble idea indeed!' the wind said, 'but you clearly do not know that it calls for wax candles. Without a wax candle being lit inside you, none of the others will be able to see

anything in you. The stars have not taken that into account, they believe that everything that shines must at least have a wax candle inside it. But now I'm tired!' the wind said, 'now I want to lie down!' and so it lay down.

The next day – well, the next day we can skip – the next evening the lamp was lying in an armchair, and where was that? At the old watchman's. He had asked 'the thirty-six men', because of his many years of faithful service, to be allowed to keep the old lamp; they laughed at him when he asked for this and gave it to him, and now the lamp lay in an armchair, close to the warm tiled stove, and it was just as if this had made it bigger, for it almost filled the entire chair. And the old couple were already eating their evening meal and they looked benignly over at the old lamp, which they would have liked to have given it a seat at the table. Even though they lived down in a cellar, four feet underground – one had to pass through a cobbled entrance hall to enter their living room – it was nice and warm here for cloth-stands had been set up round the door; it looked nice and tidy here; curtains round the bedstead, and above the small windows, where up on the sill there stood two strange flower pots; sailor Christian had bought them home with him from the East or the West Indies, they were two elephants of earthenware, their backs were hollowed out and flowers came out of the soil that had been placed inside, in one of them grew the finest chives, it was the old couple's kitchen garden, and in the other a large, blooming geranium, that was their flower garden. On the wall hung a large, coloured picture with 'The Congress of Vienna', which showed all the kings and emperors! – A grandfather clock with heavy lead weights went 'tick! tock!' and was always too fast, that was better than going too slow, the old couple said. They ate their evening meal, and the old street lamp, as mentioned, lay in the armchair close to the warm tiled stove. To the street lamp it felt as if its entire world had been turned upside-down. – But when the old watchman looked at it and talked about what the two of them had experienced together, in rain and rough weather, in the bright, short summer nights and when the snow drifted so much it was good to get back down to the cellar shelter, then everything felt all right for the old lamp once more, it saw everything as if it were there still – yes, the wind really had lit it up well inside. –

They were so industrious and so assiduous, the old couple, no hour of the day spent dozing; every Sunday afternoon some book or other was taken out, preferably a travel account, and the old man read aloud about Africa, about the great forests and the elephants that roamed wild there, and the old woman listened attentively and then glanced over at the earthenware elephants that were flower pots! – 'I can almost imagine it!' she said. And the lamp wished so intensely that it had a wax candle that could be lit and placed inside it, for then she would be able to see exactly as the lamp saw things, the tall trees, the dense intertwining branches, the naked black men on horseback and whole herds of elephants that crushed reeds and bushes with their massive feet.

'What's the good of all my abilities when there is no wax candle!' the lamp sighed, 'they only have tallow candles, and that is not enough!'

One day a whole bundle of wax-candle stumps came into the cellar, the largest piece were burnt and the old woman used the smaller pieces to wax her thread with when she sewed; there were wax candles all right, but no one thought of placing a small piece in the lamp.

'Here I am with all my rare abilities!' the lamp said, I have everything inside me, but I cannot share it with them! They don't know that I can transform the white walls into the loveliest of tapestries, into real forests, into everything they could ever wish! – They don't know!

The lamp though stood neat and nicely polished in a corner where one's eyes always fell on it; people admittedly called it a piece of scrap metal, but the old couple weren't a bit put out by this, they were fond of the lamp.

One day, it was the old watchman's birthday, the old woman went over to the lamp, gave a little smile and said: 'I will light things up for him!' and the lamp creaked in its tin cowl, for it thought: 'now at last they've seen the light!' but they used trane oil and no wax candle, it burnt the whole evening, but now the lamp knew that the gift the stars had given it, the best gift of all, would remain a dead treasure during its lifetime. Then it dreamt – and when one has such abilities, one can really dream – that the old couple were dead, and that it had ended up at an iron foundry and was to be melted down, it was just as scared as when it was to go to the council hall and be inspected by 'the thirty-six men', but although it had the ability to disintegrate into rust and dust whenever it so wished, it did not do so, and it was put in the melting furnace and became the loveliest iron candlestick in which someone would wish to place a wax candle; it had the form of an angel that carried a bouquet, and at the centre of the bouquet the wax candle was put and the candlestick was placed on a green writing desk, and the room was so cosy, lined with many books, hung with lovely pictures, it was in a poet's home, and everything that he thought and wrote unfurled around him, the room became deep, dark forests, became sunlit meadows there the stork strutted, and became the ship's deck high on the ocean waves! –

'What abilities I have!' the old lamp said as it woke up. 'It almost makes me wish to be melted down! – but no, that must not happen as long as the old couple are still alive! They are fond of me for my own sake! I am like a child to them, and they have polished me and given me trane oil and I am just as well off as "The Congress", and that is something very distinguished!' And from then on, it felt calmer inside, and that was something the unassuming old street lamp very much deserved.