

# Aunty Toothache

Hans Christian Andersen

Where did we get this story? would you like to know?

We got it from the basket that the wastepaper is thrown into.

Many a good and rare book has been taken to the delicatessen store and the grocer's, not to be read, but to be used as wrapping paper for starch and coffee, beans, for salted herring, butter, and cheese. Used writing paper has also been found suitable.

Frequently one throws into the wastepaper basket what ought not to go there.

I know a grocer's assistant, the son of a delicatessen store owner. He has worked his way up from serving in the cellar to serving in the front shop; he is a well-read person, his reading consisting of the printed and written matter to be found on the paper used for wrapping. He has an interesting collection, consisting of several important official documents from the wastepaper baskets of busy and absent-minded officials, a few confidential letters from one lady friend to another - reports of scandal which were not to go further, not to be mentioned by a soul. He is a living salvage institution for more than a little of our literature, and his collection covers a wide field, he has the run of his parents' shop and that of his present master and has there saved many a book, or leaves of a book, well worth reading twice.

He has shown me his collection of printed and written matter from the wastepaper basket, the most valued items of which have come from the delicatessen store. A couple of leaves from a large composition book lay among the collection; the unusually clear and neat handwriting attracted my attention at once.

"This was written by the student," he said, "the student who lived opposite here and died about a month ago. He suffered terribly from toothache, as one can see. It is quite amusing to read. This is only a small part of what he wrote; there was a whole book and more besides. My parents gave the student's landlady half a pound of green soap for it. This is what I have been able to save of it."

I borrowed it, I read it, and now I tell it.

The title was:

AUNTY TOOTHACHE

I

Aunty gave me sweets when I was little. My teeth could stand it then; it didn't hurt them. Now I am older, am a student, and still she goes on spoiling me with sweets. She says I am a poet.

I have something of the poet in me, but not enough. Often when I go walking along the city streets, it seems to me as if I am walking in a big library; the houses are the bookshelves; and every floor is a shelf with books. There stands a story of everyday life; next to it is a good old comedy, and there are works of all scientific branches, bad literature and good reading. I can dream and philosophize among all this literature.

There is something of the poet in me, but not enough. No doubt many people have just as much of it in them as I, though they do not carry a sign or a necktie with the word "Poet" on it. They and I have been given a divine gift, a blessing great enough to satisfy oneself, but altogether too little to be portioned out again to others. It comes like a ray of sunlight and fills one's soul and thoughts; it comes like the fragrance of a flower, like a melody that one knows and yet cannot remember from where.

The other evening I sat in my room and felt an urge to read, but I had no book, no paper.

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Just then a leaf, fresh and green, fell from the lime tree, and the breeze carried it in through the window to me. I examined the many veins in it; a little insect was crawling across them, as if it were making a thorough study of the leaf. This made me think of man's wisdom: we also crawl about on a leaf; our knowledge is limited to that only, and yet we unhesitatingly deliver a lecture on the whole big tree - the root, the trunk, and the crown - the great tree comprised of God, the world, and immortality - and of all this we know only a little leaf!

As I was sitting there, I received a visit from Aunty Mille. I showed her the leaf with the insect and told her of my thoughts in connection with these. And her eyes lit up.

"You are a poet!" she said. "Perhaps the greatest we have. If I should live to see this, I would go to my grave gladly. Ever since the brewer Rasmussen's funeral you have amazed me with your powerful imagination."

So said Aunty Mille, and she then kissed me.

Who was Aunty Mille, and who was Rasmussen the brewer?

II

We children always called our mother's aunt "Aunty"; we had no other name for her.

She gave us jam and sweets, although they were very injurious to our teeth; but the dear children were her weakness, she said. It was cruel to deny them a few sweets, when they were so fond of them. And that's why we loved Aunty so much.

She was an old maid; as far back as I can remember, she was always old. Her age never seemed to change.

In earlier years she had suffered a great deal from toothache, and she always spoke about it; and so it happened that her friend, the brewer Rasmussen, who was a great wit, called her Aunty Toothache.

He had retired from the brewing business some years before and was then living on the interest of his money. He frequently visited Aunty; he was older than she. He had no teeth at all - only a few black stumps. When a child, he had eaten too much sugar, he told us children, and that's how he came to look as he did.

Aunty could surely never have eaten sugar in her childhood, for she had the most beautiful white teeth. She took great care of them, and she did not sleep with them at night! - said Rasmussen the brewer. We children knew that this was said in malice, but Aunty said he did not mean anything by it.

One morning, at the breakfast table, she told us of a terrible dream she had had during the night, in which one of her teeth had fallen out.

"That means," she said, "that I shall lose a true friend!"

"Was it a false tooth?" asked the brewer with a chuckle. "If so, it can only mean that you will lose a false friend!"

"You are an insolent old man!" said Aunty, angrier than I had seen her before or ever have since.

She later told us that her old friend had only been teasing her; he was the finest man on earth, and when he died he would become one of God's little angels in heaven.

I thought a good deal of this transformation, and wondered if I would be able to recognize him in this new character.

When Aunty and he had been young, he had proposed to her. She had settled down to think it over, had thought too long, and had become an old maid, but always remained his true friend.

And then Brewer Rasmussen died. He was taken to his grave in the most expensive hearse and was followed by a great number of folks, including people with orders and in uniform.

Aunty stood dressed in mourning by the window, together with all of us children, except our little brother, whom the stork had brought a week before. When the hearse and the procession had passed and the street was empty, Aunty wanted to go away from the window, but I did not want to; I was waiting for the angel, Rasmussen the brewer; surely he had by now become one of God's bewinged little children and would appear.

"Aunty," I said, "don't you think that he will come now? Or that when the stork again brings us a little brother, he'll then bring us the angel Rasmussen?"

Aunty was quite overwhelmed by my imagination, and said, "That child will become a great poet!" And this she kept repeating all the time I went to school, and even after my confirmation and, yes, still does now that I am a student.

She was, and is, to me the most sympathetic of friends, both in my poetical troubles and dental troubles, for I have attacks of both.

"Just write down all your thoughts," she said, "and put them in the table drawer! That's what Jean Paul did; he became a great poet, though I don't admire him; he does not excite one. You must be exciting! Yes, you will be exciting!"

The night after she said this, I lay awake, full of longings and anguish, with anxiety and fond hopes to become the great poet that Aunty saw and perceived in me; I went through all the pains of a poet! But there is an even greater pain - toothache - and it was grinding and crushing me; I became a writhing worm, with a bag of herbs and a mustard plaster.

"I know all about it," said Aunty. There was a sorrowful smile on her lips, and her white teeth glistened.

But I must begin a new chapter in my own and my aunt's story.

III

I had moved to a new flat and had been living there a month. I was telling Aunty about it.

"I live with a quiet family; they pay no attention to me, even if I ring three times. Besides, it is a noisy house, full of sounds and disturbances caused by the weather, the wind, and the people. I live just above the street gate; every carriage that drives out or in makes the pictures on the walls move about. The gate bangs and shakes the house as if there were an earthquake. If I am in bed, the shocks go right through all my limbs, but that is said to be strengthening to the nerves. If the wind blows, and it is always blowing in this country, the long window hooks outside swing to and fro, and strike against the wall. The bell on the gate to the neighbor's yard rings with every gust of wind.

"The people who live in the house come home at all hours, from late in the evening until far into the night; the lodger just above me, who in the daytime gives lessons on the trombone, comes home the latest and does not go to bed before he has taken a little midnight promenade with heavy steps and in iron heeled shoes.

"There are no double windows. There is a broken pane in my room, over which the landlady has pasted some paper, but the wind blows through the crack despite that and produces a sound similar to that of a buzzing wasp. It is like the sort of music that makes one go to sleep. If at last I fall asleep, I am soon awakened by the crowing of the cocks. From the cellarman's hencoop the cocks and hens announce that it will soon be morning. The small ponies, which have no stable, but are tied up in the storeroom under the staircase, kick against the door and the paneling as they move about.

"The day dawns. The porter, who lives with his family in the attic, comes thundering down

the stairs; his wooden shoes clatter; the gate bangs and the house shakes. And when all this is over, the lodger above begins to occupy himself with gymnastic exercises; he lifts a heavy iron ball in each hand, but he is not able to hold onto them, and they are continually falling on the floor, while at the same time the young folks in the house, who are going to school, come screaming with all their might. I go to the window and open it to get some fresh air, and it is most refreshing - when I can get it, and when the young woman in the back building is not washing gloves in soapsuds, by which she earns her livelihood. Otherwise it is a pleasant house, and I live with a quiet family!"

This was the report I gave Aunty about my flat, though it was livelier at the time, for the spoken word has a fresher sound than the written.

"You are a poet!" cried Aunty. "Just write down all you have said, and you will be as good as Dickens! Indeed, to me, you are much more interesting. You paint when you speak. You describe your house so that one can see it. It makes one shudder. Go on with your poetry. Put some living beings into it - people, charming people, especially unhappy ones."

I wrote down my description of the house as it stands, with all its sounds, its noises, but included only myself. There was no plot in it. That came later.

#### IV

It was during wintertime, late at night, after theater hours; it was terrible weather; a snowstorm raged so that one could hardly move along.

Aunty had gone to the theater, and I went there to take her home; it was difficult for one to get anywhere, to say nothing of helping another. All the hiring carriages were engaged. Aunty lived in a distant section of the town, while my dwelling was close to the theater. Had this not been the case, we would have had to take refuge in a sentry box for a while.

We trudged along in the deep snow while the snowflakes whirled around us. I had to lift her, hold onto her, and push her along. Only twice did we fall, but we fell on the soft snow.

We reached my gate, where we shook some of the snow from ourselves. On the stairs, too, we shook some off, and yet there was still enough almost to cover the floor of the anteroom.

We took off our overcoats and boots and what other clothes might be removed. The landlady lent Aunty dry stockings and a nightcap; this she would need, said the landlady, and added that it would be impossible for my aunt to get home that night, which was true. Then she asked Aunty to make use of her parlor, where she would prepare a bed for her on the sofa, in front of the door that led into my room and that was always kept locked. And so she stayed.

The fire burned in my stove, the tea urn was placed on the table, and the little room became cozy, if not as cozy as Aunty's own room, where in the wintertime there are heavy curtains before the door, heavy curtains before the windows, and double carpets on the floor, with three layers of thick paper underneath. One sits there as if in a well-corked bottle, full of warm air; still, as I have said, it was also cozy at my place, while outside the wind was whistling.

Aunty talked and reminisced; she recalled the days of her youth; the brewer came back; many old memories were revived.

She could remember the time I got my first tooth, and the family's delight over it. My first tooth! The tooth of innocence, shining like a little drop of milk - the milk tooth!

When one had come, several more came, a whole rank of them, side by side, appearing both above and below - the finest of children's teeth, though these were only the "vanguard," not the real teeth, which have to last one's whole lifetime.

Then those also appeared, and the wisdom teeth as well, the flank men of each rank, born in pain and great tribulation.

They disappear, too, sometimes every one of them; they disappear before their time of service is up, and when the very last one goes, that is far from a happy day; it is a day for mourning. And so then one considers himself old, even if he feels young.

Such thoughts and talk are not pleasant. Yet we came to talk about all this; we went back to the days of my childhood and talked and talked. It was twelve o'clock before Aunty went to rest in the room near by.

"Good night, my sweet child," she called. "I shall now sleep as if I were in my own bed."

And she slept peacefully; but otherwise there was no peace either in the house or outside. The storm rattled the windows, struck the long, dangling iron hooks against the house, and rang the neighbor's back-yard bell. The lodger upstairs had come home. He was still taking his little nightly tour up and down the room; he then kicked off his boots and went to bed and to sleep; but he snores so that anyone with good ears can hear him through the ceiling.

I found no rest, no peace. The weather did not rest, either; it was lively. The wind howled and sang in its own way; my teeth also began to be lively, and they hummed and sang in their way. An awful toothache was coming on.

There was a draft from the window. The moon shone in upon the floor; the light came and went as the clouds came and went in the stormy weather. There was a restless change of light and shadow, but at last the shadow on the floor began to take shape. I stared at the moving form and felt an icy-cold wind against my face.

On the floor sat a figure, thin and long, like something a child would draw with a pencil on a slate, something supposed to look like a person, a single thin line forming the body, another two lines the arms, each leg being but a single line, and the head having a polygonal shape.

The figure soon became more distinct; it had a very thin, very fine sort of cloth draped around it, clearly showing that the figure was that of a female.

I heard a buzzing sound. Was it she or the wind which was buzzing like a hornet through the crack in the pane?

No, it was she, Madam Toothache herself! Her terrible highness, Satania Infernalis! God deliver and preserve us from her!

"It is good to be here!" she buzzed. "These are nice quarters - mossy ground, fenny ground! Gnats have been buzzing around here, with poison in their stings; and now I am here with such a sting. It must be sharpened on human teeth. Those belonging to the fellow in bed here shine so brightly. They have defied sweet and sour things, heat and cold, nutshells and plum stones; but I shall shake them, make them quake, feed their roots with drafty winds, and give them cold feet!"

That was a frightening speech! She was a terrible visitor!

"So you are a poet!" she said. "Well, I'll make you well versed in all the poetry of toothache! I'll thrust iron and steel into your body! I'll seize all the fibers of your nerves!"

I then felt as if a red-hot awl were being driven into my jawbone; I writhed and twisted.

"A splendid set of teeth," she said, "just like an organ to play upon! We shall have a grand concert, with jew's-harps, kettledrums, and trumpets, piccolo-flute, and a trombone in the wisdom tooth! Grand poet, grand music!"

And then she started to play; she looked terrible, even if one did not see more of her than her hand, the shadowy, gray, icecold hand, with the long, thin, pointed fingers; each of

them was an instrument of torture; the thumb and the forefinger were the pincers and wrench; the middle finger ended in a pointed awl; the ring finger was a drill, and the little finger squirted gnat's poison.

"I am going to teach you meter!" she said. "A great poet must have a great toothache, a little poet a little toothache!"

"Oh, let me be a little poet!" I begged. "Let me be nothing at all! And I am not a poet; I have only fits of poetry, like fits of toothache. Go away, go away!"

"Will you acknowledge, then, that I am mightier than poetry, philosophy, mathematics, and all the music?" she said. "Mightier than all those notions that are painted on canvas or carved in marble? I am older than every one of them. I was born close to the garden of paradise, just outside, where the wind blew and the wet toadstools grew. It was I who made Eve wear clothes in the cold weather, and Adam also. Believe me, there was power in the first toothache!"

"I believe it all," I said. "But go away, go away!"

"Yes, if you will give up being a poet, never put verse on paper, slate, or any sort of writing material, then I will let you off; but I'll come again if you write poetry!"

"I swear!" I said; "only let me never see or feel you any more!"

"See me you shall, but in a more substantial shape, in a shape more dear to you than I am now. You shall see me as Aunty Mille, and I shall say, 'Write poetry, my sweet boy! You are a great poet, perhaps the greatest we have!' But if you believe me, and begin to write poetry, then I will set music to your verses, and play them on your mouth harp. You sweet child! Remember me when you see Aunty Mille!"

Then she disappeared.

At our parting I received a thrust through my jawbone like that of a red-hot awl; but it soon subsided, and then I felt as if I were gliding along the smooth water; I saw the white water lilies, with their large green leaves, bending and sinking down under me; they withered and dissolved, and I sank, too, and dissolved into peace and rest.

"To die, and melt away like snow!" resounded in the water; "to evaporate into air, to drift away like the clouds!"

Great, glowing names and inscriptions on waving banners of victory, the letters patent of immortality, written on the wing of an ephemera, shone down to me through the water.

The sleep was deep, a sleep now without dreams. I did not hear the whistling wind, the banging gate, the ringing of the neighbor's gate bell, or the lodger's strenuous gymnastics.

What happiness!

Then came a gust of wind so strong that the locked door to Aunty's room burst open. Aunty jumped up, put on her shoes, got dressed, and came into my room. I was sleeping like one of God's angels, she said, and she had not the heart to awaken me.

I later awoke by myself and opened my eyes. I had completely forgotten that Aunty was in the house, but I soon remembered it and then remembered my toothache vision. Dream and reality were blended.

"I suppose you did not write anything last night after we said good night?" she said. "I wish you had; you are my poet and shall always be!"

It seemed to me that she smiled rather slyly. I did not know if it was the kindly Aunty Mille, who loved me, or the terrible one to whom I had made the promise the night before.

"Have you written any poetry, sweet child?"

"No, no!" I shouted. "You are Aunty Mille, aren't you?"

"Who else?" she said. And it *was* Aunty Mille.

She kissed me, got into a carriage, and drove home.

I wrote down what is written here. It is not in verse, and it will never be printed.

Yes, here ended the manuscript.

My young friend, the grocer's assistant, could not find the missing sheets; they had gone out into the world like the papers around the salted herring, the butter, and the green soap; they had fulfilled their destiny!

The brewer is dead; Aunty is dead; the student is dead, he whose sparks of genius went into the basket. This is the end of the story - the story of Aunty Toothache



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