

The Flax

Hans Christian Andersen

The flax was in full bloom. It had such pretty blue blossoms, as soft as the wings of a moth, and even more delicate. And the sun shone down on the flax, and the rain clouds watered it, and that was as good for it as it is for little children to be bathed and kissed by their mothers-it makes them look so much prettier, and so it did the flax.

"People say that I stand exceedingly well," said the flax, "and that I am growing so charmingly tall that I'll make a grand piece of linen. Oh, how happy I am! No one could possibly be happier! How well off I am! And I'm sure I'll be put to some good use, too. The sunshine makes me so cheerful, and the rain tastes so fresh! I'm exceedingly happy; yes, I'm sure I'm the happiest being in the world!"

"Oh, yes," jeered the hedge stakes. "But you don't know the world the way we do. There are knots in us." And then they creaked out dolefully:

*Snip, snap, snurre,
Basse lure!
The ballad is over!*

"No, it's not," said the flax. "The sun will shine tomorrow, and the rain is so good for me, I can hear myself grow; I can feel that I'm in blossom. Who could ever be as happy as I?"

But one day people came, grabbed the flax by the top, and pulled it up by the roots. Oh, how that hurt! Then it was thrown into the water as if to be drowned, and after that laid on the fire as if to be roasted. It was terrible!

"You can't always have what you want," said the flax. "It's good to suffer sometimes; it gives you experience."

But there was still worse to come. The flax was broken and cracked, hackled and scalded-it didn't even know what the operations were called- and finally put on the wheel - snurre, snurre! It was impossible to think clearly.

"I have been very happy in the past," it thought in all its pain. "You should always be thankful for the happiness you've enjoyed. Thankful, oh, yes!" And the flax clung to that thought as it was taken to the loom. And there it was woven into a large, beautiful piece of linen. All the flax from one field was made into one piece of cloth.

"But this is amazing!" cried the flax. "I never should have expected it! How lucky I am! What nonsense the hedge stakes used to talk with their,

*Snip, snap, snurre,
Basse lure!*

"Why, the ballad is by no means over! No, it is just beginning! This is wonderful! I've suffered, yes, but I've been made into something through suffering. I'm happier than anyone could be. How strong and yet soft I am, how white and long! This is much better than just being a plant; even if you bear flowers, nobody attends to you, and you only get watered when it rains. Now I get attention! The maid turns me over every morning, and gives me a shower bath in the washtub every evening. Why, the parson's wife herself came and looked at me, and said I was the finest piece of linen in the whole parish! Who could be any happier than I am now!"

Now the linen was taken into the house and cut up by the scissors. How they clipped and how they cut, and how it was pierced through with needles! Yes, that's what they did, and

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it was all very unpleasant. But at last it was made up into twelve garments-garments that are unmentionable, but that people cannot do without. Twelve of them.

"Well, look at that! Now I am really useful!" cried the linen. "So this is my destiny! What a blessing! Now I am useful. And nothing brings such happiness as to be useful in the world! Now we're twelve pieces, but we're still one and the same. We are one dozen. What a stroke of luck!"

The years passed, and at last the linen pieces wouldn't hold together any longer.

"Everything must come to an end," said each piece. "I should like to have lasted a little longer, but you shouldn't wish for things like that."

Now the pieces were torn into rags and fragments, and they were sure it was going to be the end of them. They were hacked and mashed and boiled-yes, they didn't know what else was done to them-but finally they became beautiful white paper!

"Well, if this isn't a surprise!" said the paper. "And a wonderful surprise! Why, I'm finer than ever! And people will write on me now. What wonderful stories they'll write! I certainly am lucky!"

And beautiful stories were written on the paper, and people read them and said they were very fine and would make mankind wiser and better. The words written on that paper would bring great blessings to the world.

"This is more than I could ever have dreamed of, when I was a tiny blue flower in the field. How could I have expected to spread wisdom and joy to mankind? I can't yet understand it, but that's what has happened. Our Lord knows that I've really never done anything myself, but just tried to live as well as I could, yet He carries me one honor to another. Every time I think, 'Now surely the ballad is over,' I am moved up to something better. Now I suppose people will send me around the world, so everybody can read me. That's most likely. For every blue flower I used to have, I will now carry a beautiful thought! How could anyone be happier!"

But the paper did not travel around the world-instead it went to the printer, and there everything that was written on it was printed in a book, yes, in hundreds of books. In that way a great many more people could get pleasure and benefit from the writings than if the one paper on which it was written had been sent out into the world and been worn out before it had gone very far.

"Yes, this is the most sensible way," thought the paper. "I didn't think of it. I'll stay at home, and be held in great honor, like an old grandfather. Because the book was written on me first; every word came down from the author's pen right onto me. But it is much better for the printed books to go out into the world and do good; I couldn't have wandered as far as they can go. My, how happy I am, and how lucky!"

Then the paper was bundled up and put away on a shelf. "It's good to rest a little after working," said the paper. "It gives you a chance to collect your thoughts and figure out what's inside of you. Now! I really know all that is written on me, and that means true progress. I wonder what's going to happen to me now! At any rate, I know I'll go forward again; I'm always going forward."

At last the paper was taken out to the stove-it was to be burnt, for everybody said it wouldn't be proper to sell that paper to the huckster for wrapping butter and powdered sugar. And all the children in the house flocked around, for they wanted to see the blaze and count the many tiny red sparks as they died out, one after another. They call these sparks "the children going out of school," and the last spark of all is the "schoolmaster." Sometimes they think he has gone, but then comes another-the schoolmaster always come a little behind the rest.

So the big bundle of paper was laid on the fire. "Oh!" it cried, as it suddenly burst into flame. It rose higher into the air than the flax had ever been able to send its little blue blossoms, and it shone more brilliantly than the linen had ever been able to shine. Instantly the letters written on it became fiery red, and the words and thoughts of the writer vanished in the flame.

"I'm going straight up to the sun!" said a voice in the flame. It was as if a thousand voices cried this together, as the flames burst through the chimney and out at the top. And brighter than the flames, but still invisible to mortal eyes, little tiny beings hovered, just as many as there had been blossoms on the flax long ago. They were lighter even than the flame which gave them birth, and when that flame had died away and nothing was left of the paper but black ashes, they danced over the embers again. Wherever their feet touched, their footprints, the tiny red sparks, could be seen. Thus the children came out of school, and the schoolmaster came last. It was a pleasure to watch, and the children of the house sang over the dead ashes:

*Snip, snap, snurre,
Basse lurre!
The ballad is over!*

But the tiny invisible beings cried, "The ballad is never over! That is the best of all! We know that, and therefore none are so happy as we!"

But the children couldn't hear or understand that. And perhaps that's just as well; children shouldn't know everything.

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