

The Gardener and the Noble Family

Hans Christian Anderson

About four miles from the city stood an old manor house with thick walls, towers, and pointed gables. Here lived, but only in the summer season, a rich and noble family. Of all the different estates they owned, this was the best and the most beautiful; on the outside it looked as if it had just been cast in a foundry, and the inside was made for comfort and ease. The family coat of arms was carved in stone over the gate; beautiful roses climbed about the arms and the balconies; the courtyard was covered with grass; there were red thorn and white thorn, and many rare flowers even outside the greenhouse.

The owners of the manor house also had a very skillful gardener. It was a pleasure to see the flower garden, the orchard, and the vegetable garden. A part of the manor's original old garden was still there, consisting of a few box-tree hedges cut so that they formed crowns and pyramids. Behind these stood two old, mighty trees, almost always without leaves, and one might easily think that a storm or a waterspout had scattered great lumps of dirt on their branches, but each lump was a bird's nest. Here, from time immemorial, a screaming swarm of crows and rooks had built their nests; it was a regular bird town, and the birds were the owners, the manor's oldest family - the real lordship! The people below meant nothing to them; they tolerated these crawling creatures, even if every now and then they shot with their guns, making the birds' backbones shiver, so that every bird flew up in fear and cried, "Rak! Rak!"

The gardener often spoke to the noble family about cutting down the old trees; they did not look well, and by taking them away they might also get rid of the shrieking birds, which then would probably look for another place. But the family did not want to give up either the trees or the swarm of birds; that was something the manor could not lose, something from the olden times, which should never be forgotten.

"Why, those trees are the birds' heritage by this time, so let them keep them, my good Larsen!" Larsen was the gardener's name, but that is of very little consequence to this story.

"Haven't you space enough to work in, little Larsen? Have you not the flower garden, the greenhouse, the orchard, and the vegetable garden?"

Yes, those he had, and he cared for them; he kept them in order and cultivated them with affection and ability, and that the noble family knew; but they did not conceal from him that they often saw flowers and tasted fruits in other people's homes that surpassed what they had in their garden, and that made the gardener sad, for he always wished to do his best and really did his best. He was goodhearted and a good and faithful worker.

One day the noble family sent for him and told him, very kindly, that the day before, at some distinguished friend's home, they had eaten apples and pears that were so juicy and so well flavored that they and all the other guests had expressed their admiration. It was doubtful if the fruits were native, but they ought to be imported and grown here, provided the climate would permit it. It was known that they had been bought from the finest fruit dealer in the city, and it was decided that the gardener was to go there and find out where these apples and pears came from and then order some slips for grafting. The gardener knew the fruit dealer well, because he was the very person to whom he sold the superfluous fruit that grew in the manor garden.

And the gardener went to town and asked the dealer where he got those highly praised apples and pears. "Why, they are from your own garden," said the fruit dealer, and showed him both the apples and pears, which he recognized immediately.

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How happy the gardener felt! He hurried back to the family and told them that both the apples and the pears were from their own garden. That they couldn't believe! "That's not possible, Larsen! Can you get a written guarantee to that effect from the fruit dealer?"

Yes, that he could, and a written guarantee he brought.

"That certainly is remarkable!" said the noble family.

Now every day great dishes filled with wonderful apples and pears from their own garden were set on the table. Bushels and barrels of these fruits were sent to friends in the city and outside the city; yes, even to foreign lands. This afforded great pleasure; yet the family added that the last two summers had, of course, been remarkably good for tree fruits and these had done very well all over the country.

Some time passed. The family were dinner guests at court. The next day they sent for the gardener. At the royal table they had eaten melons, very juicy and wonderfully flavored, from their majesties' greenhouse.

"You must go to the court gardener, my good Larsen, and let him give you some seeds of those precious melons."

"But the court gardener got his melon seeds from us!" said the gardener, very pleased.

"Then that man knows how to bring the fruit to a higher perfection!" answered the family. "Each melon was splendid."

"Well, then, I really can feel proud!" said the gardener. "I must tell your lordship that the court gardener had had bad luck with his melons this year, and when he saw how beautiful ours looked, and then tasted them, he ordered three of them for the castle."

"Larsen, don't try to tell us that those were melons from our garden."

"I really believe so," said the gardener.

And he went to the court gardener, from whom he got a written guarantee to the effect that the melons on the royal table were from the manor. This was really a big surprise to the family, and they did not keep the story to themselves; the written guarantee was displayed, and melon seeds were sent far and wide, as grafting slips had been earlier.

These slips, the family learned, had taken and begun to bear fruit of an excellent kind. This was named after the family manor, and the name became known in English, German, and French. This, no one had expected. "Let's hope the gardener won't get big ideas about himself," said the family.

But he took it in a different way; he would strive now to be known as one of the best gardeners in the country and to produce something superior out of all sorts of garden stuff every year. And that he did. But often he was told that the very first fruits he brought out, the apples and the pears, were, after all, the best, that all later variations were very inferior to these. The melons were very good, to be sure, though, of course, they belonged to another species; his strawberries might be called delicious, but no better than those grown by other gardeners, and when one year his radishes did not turn out very well, they spoke only of the unsuccessful radishes and not about all the other fine products he had developed.

It almost seemed as if the family felt a relief in saying, "It didn't go well this year, little Larsen!" Yes, they seemed quite happy when they said, "It didn't go well this year!"

Twice a week the gardener brought fresh flowers up to their drawing room, always arranged with such taste and artistry that the colors seemed to appear even brighter.

"You have good taste, Larsen," said the noble family, "but that is a gift from our Lord, not from yourself!"

One day the gardener brought a large crystal bowl; in it floated a water-lily leaf upon which was laid a beautiful blue flower as big as a sunflower.

"The lotus of Hindustan!" exclaimed the family.

They had never seen a lotus flower before. In the daytime it was placed in the sunlight and in the evening under artificial light. Everyone who saw it found it remarkably beautiful and unusual; yes, even the most highborn young lady in the country, the wise and kindhearted Princess, said so. The family considered it an honor to present her with the flower, and the Princess took it with her to the castle. Then they went down to their garden to pick another flower of the same kind, but none was to be found. So they sent for the gardener and asked him where he got the blue lotus flower.

"We have been looking for it in vain," they said. "We have been in the greenhouses and round about the flower garden!"

"Oh, no, it's not there," said the gardener. "It is only a common flower from the vegetable garden; but, look, isn't it beautiful! It looks like a blue cactus, and yet it is only the flower of the artichoke!"

"You should have told us that immediately!" said the noble family. "Naturally, we supposed it was a rare, foreign flower. You have ridiculed us to the young Princess! She saw the flower in our house and thought it was beautiful; she didn't know the flower, although she knows her botany well, but then, of course, that science has nothing to do with kitchen herbs. How could you do it, Larsen! To place such a flower in our drawing room is enough to make us ridiculous!"

And the gorgeous blue flower from the vegetable garden was taken out of the drawing room, where it didn't belong; yes, and the noble family apologized to the Princess and told her that the flower was only a kitchen herb that the Gardener had had the idea of exhibiting, and that he had been severely reprimanded for it.

"That was a shame, and very unfair," said the Princess. "He has really opened our eyes to a magnificent flower we otherwise would have paid no attention to; he has shown us beauty where we didn't expect to find it. As long as the artichoke is in bloom, our court gardener shall daily bring one of them up to my private room!"

And this was done.

The noble family told the gardener that he could again bring them a fresh artichoke flower.

"It is really beautiful!" they said. "Highly remarkable!" And the gardener was praised.

"Larsen likes that," said the noble family. "He is like a spoiled child."

In the autumn there was a terrific storm. During the night it increased so violently that many of the large trees in the outskirts of the wood were torn up by the roots, and to the great grief of the noble family - yes, they called it grief - but to the gardener's delight, the two big trees with all the birds' nests blew down. Through the storm one could hear the screaming of the crows and the rooks as they beat their wings against the manor windows.

"Now, of course, you are happy, Larsen!" said the noble family. "The storm has felled the trees, and the birds have gone off into the forest. There is nothing from olden times left to see here; every sign and reference has disappeared; it makes us very sad!"

The gardener said nothing, but he thought of what he had long had in his mind, how he could make use of that wonderful, sunny spot, now at his disposal; it could become the pride of the garden and the joy of the family.

The large trees, in falling, had crushed the very old box-tree hedges with all their fancy trimmings. Here he put in a multitude of plants, native plants from the fields and the

woods. What no other gardener had ever thought of planting in a manor garden, he planted, giving each its appropriate soil, and sunlight or shadow, according to what the individual plant required. He gave them loving care, and everything grew magnificently.

The juniper tree from the heaths of Jutland rose in shape and color like the Italian cypress; the shiny, thorny Christ's-thorn, ever green, in the cold of winter and the sun of summer, was beautiful to behold. In the foreground grew ferns of various species; some of them looked as if they were children of the palm tree, others as if they were parents of the pretty plant we call Venus's-hair. Here stood the neglected burdock, so pretty in its freshness that it can be outstanding in a bouquet. The burdock stood in a dry place, but further down, in the moist soil, grew the coltsfoot, also a neglected plant and yet very picturesque with its enormous leaf and its tall stem. Six-feet tall, with flower after flower, like an enormous, many-armed candelabra, rose the mullein, just a mere field plant. Here grew the woodruff, the primrose, and the lily of the valley, the wild calla and the fine three-leaved wood sorrel. It was all wonderful to see.

In the front, in rows, grew very tiny pear trees from French soil, fastened to steel wires; by getting plenty of sun and good care they soon bore fruit as large and juicy as in their own country. In place of the two old leafless trees was set a tall flagpole from which Dannebrog - the flag of Denmark - proudly flew; and close by stood another pole, around which the hop tendril twisted and wound its fragrant flower cones in the summer and at harvesttime, but on which in the winter, according to an old custom, oat sheaves were hung, so that the birds could have a good meal during the happy Christmastime.

"Our good Larsen is getting sentimental in his old age," said the family, "but he is true and faithful to us!"

At New Year's, one of the city illustrated papers published a picture of the old manor; it showed the flagpole and the oat sheaves for the birds at the happy Christmastime, and the paper commented that it was a beautiful thought to uphold and honor this old custom, so appropriate to the old manor.

"Anything that Larsen does," said the noble family, "they beat the drum for. He is a lucky man. We should almost be proud to have him!"

But they were not a bit proud of it; they knew they were the masters of the manor, and they could dismiss Larsen, but that they wouldn't do. They were good people, and there are many good people of their kind in the world - and that is fortunate for all the Larsens.

Yes, that is the story of the gardener and the noble family. Now you may think about it!

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