

There is a Difference

Hans Christian Andersen

It was in the month of May. The wind was still cold, but spring had come, said the trees and the bushes, the fields and the meadows. Everywhere flowers were budding into blossom; even the hedges were alive with them. Here spring spoke about herself; it spoke from a little apple tree, from which hung a single branch so fresh and blooming, and fairly weighed down by a glorious mass of rosy buds just ready to open.

Now this branch knew how lovely it was, for that knowledge lies in the leaf as well as in the flesh, so it wasn't a bit surprised when one day a grand carriage stopped in the road beside it, and the young Countess in the carriage said that this apple branch was the most beautiful she had ever seen-it was spring itself in its loveliest form. So she broke off the apple branch and carried it in her own dainty hand, shading it from the sun with her silk parasol, as they drove on to her castle, in which there were lofty halls and beautifully decorated rooms. Fleecy-white curtains fluttered at its open windows, and there were many shining, transparent vases full of beautiful flowers. In one of these vases, which looked as if it were carved of new-fallen snow, she placed the apple branch, among fresh green beech leaves-a lovely sight indeed.

And so it happened that the apple branch grew proud, and that's quite human.

All sorts of people passed through the rooms, and according to their rank expressed their admiration in different ways; some said too much, some said too little, and some said nothing at all. And the apple branch began to realize that there were differences in people as well as in plants.

"Some are used for nourishment, some are for ornament, and some you could very well do without," thought the apple branch.

From its position at the open window the apple branch could look down over the gardens and meadows below, and consider the differences among the flowers and plants beneath. Some were rich, some were poor, and some were very poor.

"Miserable, rejected plants," said the apple branch. "There is a difference indeed! It's quite proper and just that distinctions should be made. Yet how unhappy they must feel, if indeed a creature like that is capable of feeling anything, as I and my equals do; but it must be that way, otherwise everybody would be treated as though they were just alike."

And the apple branch looked down with especial pity on one kind of flower that grew everywhere in meadows and ditches. They were much too common ever to be gathered into bouquets; they could be found between the paving stones; they shot up like the rankest and most worthless of weeds. They were dandelions, but people have given them the ugly name, "the devil's milk pails."

"Poor wretched outcasts," said the apple branch. "I suppose you can't help being as common as you are, and having such a vulgar name! It's the same with plants as with men-there must be a difference."

"A difference?" repeated the sunbeam, as it kissed the apple branch; but it kissed the golden "devil's milk pails," too. And all the other sunbeams did the same, kissing all the flowers equally, poor as well as rich.

The apple branch had never thought about our Lord's infinite love for everything that lives and moves in Him, had never thought how much that it is good and beautiful can lie hidden but still not be forgotten; and that, too, was human.

But the sunbeam, the ray of light, knew better. "You don't see very clearly; you are not

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very farsighted. Who are these outcast flowers that you pity so much?"

"Those devil's milk pails down there," replied the apple branch. "Nobody ever ties them up in bouquets; they're trodden under foot, because there are too many of them. And when they go to seed they fly about along the road like little bits of wool and hang on people's clothes. They're just weeds! I suppose there must be weeds too, but I'm certainly happy and grateful that I'm not like one of them!"

Now a whole flock of children ran out into the meadow to play. The youngest of them was so tiny that he had to be carried by the others. When they set him down in the grass among the golden blossoms, he laughed and gurgled with joy, kicked his little legs, rolled over and over, and plucked only the yellow dandelions. These he kissed in innocent delight.

The bigger children broke off the flowers of the dandelions and joined the hollow stalks link by link into chains. First they would make one for a necklace, then a longer one to hang across the shoulders and around the waist, and finally one to go around their heads; it was a beautiful wreath of splendid green links and chains.

But the biggest of the children carefully gathered the stalks that had gone to seed, those loose, aerial, woolly blossoms, those wonderfully perfect balls of dainty white plumes, and held them to their lips, trying to blow away all the white feathers with one breath. Granny had told them that whoever could do that would receive new clothes before the year was out. The poor, despised dandelion was considered quite a prophet on such occasions.

"Now do you see?" asked the sunbeam. "Do you see its beauty and power?"

"Oh, it's all right-for children," replied the apple branch.

Now an old woman came into the meadow. She stooped and dug up the roots of the dandelion with a blunt knife that had lost its handle. Some of the roots she would roast instead of coffee berries, others she would sell to the apothecary to be used as drugs.

"Beauty is something higher than this," said the apple branch. "Only the chosen few can really be allowed into the kingdom of the beautiful; there's as much difference between plants as between men."

Then the sunbeam spoke of the infinite love of the Creator for all His creatures, for everything that has life, and of the equal distribution of all things in time and eternity.

"That's just your opinion," replied the apple branch.

Now some people came into the room, and among them was the young Countess who had placed the apple branch in the transparent vase. She was carrying a flower-or whatever it was-that was protected by three or four large leaves around it like a cap, so that no breath of air or gust of wind could injure it. She carried it more carefully and tenderly than she had the apple branch when she had brought it to the castle. Very gently she removed the leaves, and then the apple branch could see what she carried. It was a delicate, feathery crown of starry seeds borne by the despised dandelion!

This was what she had plucked so carefully and carried so tenderly, so that no single one of the loose, dainty, feathered arrows that rounded out its downy form should be blown away. There it was, whole and perfect. With delight she admired the beautiful form, the airy lightness, the marvelous mechanism of a thing that was destined so soon to be scattered by the wind.

"Look how wonderfully beautiful our Lord made this!" she cried. "I'll paint it, together with the apple branch. Everybody thinks it is so extremely beautiful, but this poor flower is lovely, too; it has received as much from our Lord in another way. They are very different, yet both are children in the kingdom of the beautiful!"

The sunbeam kissed the poor dandelion, and then kissed the blooming apple branch,
whose petals seemed to blush a deeper red.

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