

THE BOTTLE-NECK

Down in the narrow, winding street, between several poor houses, there stood a house that was so squashed and so tall, it was made of half-timbering that was coming apart in every direction; poor people lived there, and it was poorest of all up in the attic, where outside the small window a dented old bird-cage hung in the sunlight, one that did not even have any proper birdbath – only an upturned bottle-neck with a cork at the bottom and filled with water. An old woman stood at the open window, she had just decked out the cage with chickweed, where a small finch hopped from perch to perch, singing with all its might. ‘Yes, it’s all very well for you to sing!’ the bottle-neck said – well, it didn’t put it like that, in the way we could, for a bottle-neck can’t speak, but it thought it to itself, the way we do when we speak to ourselves. ‘Yes, it’s all very well for you to sing. You with all your limbs intact. You should try like me to have lost your lower half, only to have a neck and a mouth with a cork in it – you wouldn’t be so keen on singing then. But it’s a good thing someone’s happy and content! I’ve no reason to sing, and I can’t either! I used to be able to, when I was a whole bottle and was rubbed with a cork; I was called the real lark then, the great lark! – and when I was with the furrier in the forest, and his daughter got engaged – oh yes, I remember it as if it was yesterday! I’ve experienced a great deal, when I come to think about it! I’ve been in fire and water, down in the black earth and higher up than most, and now I float outside the birdcage in air and sunshine! It could be well worth the trouble to listen to my story, but I don’t speak out loud about it, for I cannot!’

And then it told the story to itself, or thought it inside itself, which was remarkable enough, and the little bird merrily sang away and down in the street people came and went, each thinking his or her own thoughts, or not thinking at all – though the bottle-neck did plenty of thinking.

It remembered the flaming melting furnace at the factory when it had been blown into life; it still remembered that it had been very hot, had looked into the thundering furnace, its birthplace, and had felt such a desire to immediately leap back into it again, but that little by little as it cooled down, it felt quite pleased about where it was, standing in a long row with a regiment of brothers and sisters, all from the same furnace, although some had been blown as champagne bottles, others beer bottles – and that makes a difference! Later on, out in the world, a beer bottle can admittedly contain the most expensive *Lachrymae Christi* and a champagne bottle be full of black ink, but what one is born as can be seen from one’s form even so – nobility remains nobility, even when it contains nothing but ink.

All the bottles were soon packed; our bottle as well. At that stage it didn’t ever think about ending up as a bottle-neck serving as a birdbath, which is always an honest existence for one is at least something! It did not see daylight again until it and all its comrades were unpacked in the wine merchant’s cellar, and the first time it was rinsed was a ridiculous feeling. Now it was filled with good, glorious wine, was given a cork and seal, and a label was stuck on it that said ‘Prime Quality’ – it was like getting top marks in an exam, but the wine was certainly good, and the bottle was good; when one is young, one waxes lyrical! it sang away about things it did not know of at all: the green, sunlit mountains where the wine grows, where the cheerful girls and merry youths sing and kiss – oh, life was wonderful! It sang away inside the bottle as it does in young poets – who often don’t know anything of what they write about either.

One morning, it was bought. The furrier’s boy needed a bottle of top-quality wine; and it was placed in a food basket along with ham, cheese and sausages; there was the loveliest butter, the finest bread; the furrier’s daughter packed it herself; she was so young, so beautiful; her brown eyes laughed, there was a smile playing around her lips that said just as much as her eyes did; she had fine, soft hands that

were very white, although her neck and breast were even whiter – one could see at once that she was one of the town's most beautiful girls, and yet she was not engaged.

And the picnic basket rested in her lap when the family drove off into the forest; the bottle-neck stuck up between the corners of the white cloth; there was red wax on the cork, and it looked straight into the face of the young girl; it also looked at the young ship's mate next to her; he was a childhood friend, the son of the portrait painter; he had recently passed his naval examination with flying colours and the next day he was to leave with his ship for distant lands; a great deal was spoken about this while the packing took place, and while the talking was going on, there was not much pleasure to be spied in the eyes and lips of the furrier's beautiful daughter. The two young people walked in the green forest, they talked together – and what did they talk about? Well, the bottle couldn't hear, for it was in the food basket. It took a remarkably long time for it to be taken out, but when it was, something pleasant had clearly taken place, there was laughter in everyone's eyes, also those of the furrier's daughter, although she spoke less, and her cheeks were blushing like two red roses. Her father took up the filled bottle and the corkscrew. Oh, it was a strange sensation to be uncorked for the first time! The bottle-neck had never since been able to forget the solemn moment – there was a really loud pop when the cork came out, and then a gurgling sound when the wine flowed into the glasses.

'To the health of the engaged couple!' her father said, and every glass was drained and the young ship's mate kissed his beautiful bride-to-be.

'Blessings and all happiness to you!' both parents said. And the young man refilled the glasses: 'To my return and our wedding a year from now to the day!' he cried, and when the glasses had been emptied, he took the bottle and lifted it up: 'You have been with me on the most wonderful day in my life, you are not to serve anyone any longer!'

And he flung it high into the air. Least of all did the furrier's daughter think that she would see it fly again several more times, but she would; now it fell down among the dense reeds by the small forestland lake; the bottle-neck still recalled so vividly how it lay there and thought: 'I gave them wine and they give me bog water in return – but it's well meant!' It could no longer see the engaged couple and the contented old parents, but it could still hear them rejoicing and singing for a long time. Then two farmer's boys came along, looked among the reeds, saw the bottle and took it – now it was taken care of.

Back in the forestland home where they lived their eldest brother, who was a sailor, had come and taken his leave the day before, as he was to be off on a one of his long voyages; his mother was now packing a few things that his father was going to take to town with him that evening to see his son one more time before his departure and to give him his and his mother's greetings. A small bottle with spiced snaps had been put in the basket, now the boys came along with a larger, stronger bottle they had found; more could go into it than the small one, and it was such a fine snaps for stomach troubles – there was hypericum in it. It was not red wine the bottle had put in it like the last time. This time it was a bitter concoction, but one that was good too – for the stomach. The new bottle and not the small one was to be packed – and so the bottle started its travels again, it came on board with Peter Jensen, for it was precisely the same ship that the young mate was on, but he did not see the bottle, and would not have recognised it either and thought: that is the one from which we drank to our engagement and my return.

There was admittedly no longer any wine in it, but something just as good; and whenever Peter Jensen took it out, it was called 'The Apothecary' for it dispensed the good medicine that eased the stomach, and it helped for as long as there was a drop left in it. It was a happy time, and the bottle sang

when it was stroked with the cork, and it was then it was given the name of the great lark, 'Peter Jensen's lark'.

A long time had passed, it stood empty in a corner, when it happened – well, the bottle couldn't know for sure if it was on the outward or the return journey, for it hadn't been ashore – a storm blew up, great waves rose up black and heavy, lifted and tossed the ship; the mast snapped, a wave shattered a plank, the pumps were unable to cope any longer; it was pitch-black outside; the ship started to sink, but the young mate managed in the last minute to write down on a piece of paper: 'In Christ's name! We are going down!' he wrote his fiancée's name, his own and that of the ship, pushed the message into an empty bottle standing there, jammed the cork in and threw the bottle out into the stormy sea; he did not know that it was the same bottle from which he had poured a toast of joy and hope for himself and her – now it rocked on the waves with a greeting and message of death.

The ship sank, the crew sank, it flew like a bird, for it had a heart, a love-letter inside it. And the sun rose and the sun set, to the bottle it seems to be just like his own beginning in the red, gleaming furnace and it felt a longing to fly back into it. It registered dead calms and new storms, but was not crushed against any piece of rock, not swallowed by any shark; for more than a year and a day it drifted about, first to the north, then to the south – as the current took it. It was, by the way, now its own master, but that too one can grow tired of.

The written piece of paper, the last farewell from bridegroom to bride, would only bring sorrow were it to come into the right hands, but where were the hands that had shone so white when they spread out the cloth in the fresh grass, in the green forest, on the day of their engagement? Where was the furrier's daughter? Indeed, where was that country, and what country was nearest? This the bottle did not know; it drifted around about finally was so tired of drifting – that was not its purpose in life, but it drifted nevertheless, until finally it reached land, a foreign country. It didn't understand a word of what was spoken there, it was not the tongue it had previously heard being spoken, and you lose a great deal when you do not understand the language. The bottle was picked up and looked at; the message inside it was seen, taken out, turned this way and that, but they did not understand what was written on it, that was a mystery – so it was put back into the bottle, and this time placed in a large cupboard, in a large room, in a large house.

Each time strangers came, the message was brought out, turned this way and that, so that the writing, which was only in pencil, became more and more illegible – and finally, no one could even make out that there were letters there. And the bottle stood a further year in the cupboard, was moved to the attic and finally became covered in dust and cobwebs; then it thought of happier days, when it poured red wine in the fresh green forest, and when it bobbed in the waves and carried a secret, a letter, a sigh of farewell.

And now it had been up in the attic for twenty years; it could have stayed there even longer if the house had not been going to be converted. The roof was ripped off, the bottle seen and talked about, but it didn't understand what was said – one can't learn a language from staying in an attic, not even for twenty years. 'If I had remained down in the living room,' it felt, however, 'I would probably have learnt it!'

It was now washed and rinsed, which was something it was in real need of; it now felt itself to be quite clear and transparent, felt young again in its old age, but the message it had borne had come to nothing.

The bottle was now filled with seeds, it didn't know what kind; it was corked and wrapped up well, it saw neither sun nor moon, and one has to see something when one is on one's travels, the bottle felt,

but it saw nothing, although it did do the most important thing – it travelled and came to where it should do and was unpacked.

‘What a great deal of trouble they have taken with it in foreign parts!’ people said, ‘and yet it’s probably broken even so!’ – but it wasn’t broken. The bottle understood every single word that was spoken, it was in the language it had heard at the melting furnace and the wine merchant’s and in the forest and on the ship, the one really good old language that one could understand; it had come home to its own land, it was given a welcoming greeting! it almost leapt out of their hands from joy, it hardly noticed that the cork was pulled out, and that it was shaken and put down in the cellar to become hidden and forgotten; east west, home’s best – even in the cellar! – it never occurred to it to think about how long it lay there, it lay well and did so for years. Then one day people came down and fetched the bottles, it included.

Outside in the garden, great festivities had been prepared: lit lamps were hanging in garlands, Chinese lanterns gleamed like large transparent tulips; it was also a lovely evening, the weather was calm and clear, the stars sparkled so brightly and the new moon was light – it could actually be seen as a blue-grey ball with a golden half-rim, and looked good to good eyes.

In the outlying walks there was also some illumination, enough at any rate to light one’s path; between the hedges bottles had been placed, each with a light in, and there the bottle we know about stood, the one that was eventually to end up as a bottle-neck, as a birdbath – at this moment it found everything so exceptionally wonderful, it was out in the open air once more, was where there was joy and festivity, fine singing and music, a buzz and murmur of many voices, especially from the part of the garden where the lamps were lit and the Chinese lanterns showed their colours. It stood itself on a remote path, but precisely that gave it food for thought: the bottle stood there and bore its light, stood here and was of use and gave pleasure, and that was the right thing for it to do – at such a time, one forgets twenty years in the attic – and that is a good thing to forget.

Close by, a single pair walked arm in arm, like the engaged couple out in the forest; the ship’s mate and the furrier’s daughter; the bottle felt as if it was reliving this! The guests walked round in the garden and there were people who dared look at them and all the finery, among which was an old girl, without relations but not without friends, she was thinking precisely the same as the bottle, she was thinking of the green forest and of a young engaged couple, it meant a great deal to her, she was part of it – the half of it – it was the happiest hour of her life and that one never forgets, no matter how old a spinster one becomes. But she did not recognise the bottle, and it did not recognise her, for so does one pass each other by in the world – until one meets again, and these two now did so for they lived once more in the same town.

The bottle came from the garden to the wine merchant’s, was filled once more with wine and sold to the balloonist who was to make an ascent the following Sunday. There was a crowd of people who came to watch, there was military music and many preparations, the bottle saw everything from a basket where it lay with a live rabbit that was highly timorous, for it knew it was to ascend so as to be let down on a parachute, the bottle knew neither up nor down, it saw that the balloon swelled up so big, so big, and when it couldn’t get any bigger, it began to rise higher and higher, it became so restless, the ropes holding it were cut, and it is floating upwards with the balloonist, the basket, the bottle and the rabbit; the music sounded, and everyone cried out ‘Hurrah!’

‘Ridiculous to go up into the air like this!’ the bottle thought, ‘it’s a new kind of travel – you can’t run into rocks up here!’

And many thousands of people watched the balloon’s ascent, and the old spinster did so too; she stood at her open attic window, where the cage hung with the small finch, which did not have a

birdbath then, but had to make do with a cup. In the window itself there stood a myrtle bush, it had been moved slightly to one side so as not to get pushed out when the old woman bent forwards to look; and in the balloon she could clearly make out the balloonist, who let the rabbit descend by parachute, after which he drank to everyone's health and threw the bottle high into the air; and she didn't think of the fact that she had seen it fly just as high for her and her beloved on that happy day in the green forest, in her youth.

The bottle didn't have any time to think, suddenly it found itself at the high point of its life. Towers and roofs lay deep beneath it, the people below were ever so tiny. Now it started to descend, and at a completely different speed to the rabbit; the bottle did somersaults in the air, it felt so young, so wild with joy, it was half-full of the wine – but not for long. What a journey! The sun glittered on the bottle, everyone looked up at it, the balloon was already far off, and soon the bottle was too, it fell onto one of the roofs and shattered, but there was such velocity in the pieces that they couldn't lie still, they leapt and rolled until they ended up down in the courtyard and lay there in tiny pieces – only the bottle-neck was in one piece, as if it had been sheared off with a diamond.

'That could do as a birdbath!' the cellerman said, but he himself had neither bird nor cage and it was too much trouble to acquire both of these because he happened to have the bottle-neck that could be used as a birdbath. But the old spinster in the attic could make use of it, and so the bottle-neck end up there, was given a cork, and what had been up was now down, as so often happens when things change, it was given fresh water and hung in front of the cage for the little bird that sang its heart out.

'Yes, it's all very well for you to sing!' was what the bottle-neck said; and it was strange – it had been in the balloon, but no one knew any more of its history. Now it hung there as a birdbath, could hear people going about their business down in the street, hear the old woman talking inside her room: she had a visitor, a female friend of her own age, they were talking together – not about the bottle-neck, but about the myrtle bush in the window.

'You really musn't squander two florins on a bridal bouquet for your daughter!' the old woman said, 'you can have a lovely one from me, full of flowers! Look at how lovely the bush is. Well, it is actually a cutting from the myrtle bush you gave me on the day after I got engaged, that which, when the year had passed, I was going to use for my bridal bouquet, but that day never came! The eyes that were to have shone for me and gladdened and blessed my life were closed for good. He sleeps sweetly on the sea bed, the angelic soul! – The bush grew old, but I grew even older, and when the tree started to languish, I took the last fresh branch, placed it in the earth, and now the branch has become such a large bush and will finally become part of wedding finery – become your daughter's bridal bouquet!'

And there were tears in the old woman's eyes; she spoke of the friend of her young days, of the engagement in the forest; she thought of the toast that was drunk, thought of the first kiss – but she didn't say any of that, for she was an old spinster; she thought of so many things, but not at all of the fact that right outside her window there was still a memento of that long-gone time: the neck of the bottle that said pop when the cork shot out for the toast. But the bottle-neck did not recognise her either, for it did not listen to what she was saying – partly and particularly because of the fact that it only thought of itself.