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The Darning Needle

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

There was once a Darning Needle who was such a fine lady that she imagined she was a sewing needle. "Mind you take care what you're holding," said the Darning Needle to the Fingers, when they picked her up. "Don't drop me! If I fall on the floor, I should very likely never be found again, I'm so fine." "Moderately so," said the Fingers, taking her firmly round the waist.

"Look, here I come with my train," said the Darning Needle, as she drew a long thread after her; but it had no knot on it.

The Fingers pointed the needle straight at the kitchenmaid's slipper, where there was a tear in the upper leather that had to be sewn up.

"This is menial work," said the Darning Needle. "I shall never get through it! I shall break! I shall break!" And break she did. "Didn't I say so?" she said; "I'm so fine."

"Now, she's good for nothing," said the Fingers. However, they had to keep hold of her, for the kitchenmaid dropped some sealing-wax on her, and stuck her in the front of her neckerchief. "Look, now I'm a breast-pin," said the Darning Needle. "I knew I should come to the front. Be something and you'll become something." And she laughed, to herself, for you can't see on the face of it when a darning needle is laughing. Now she sat there as proud as if she was driving in her own carriage, and looked all about her.

"May I have the honour of inquiring whether you are made of gold?" she asked a pin who was beside her. "You make a handsome appearance, and have a head of your own, though a small one. You should take pains to make it grow, for we can't all have sealing-wax on the end of us." With these words the Darning Needle drew herself up so proudly that she fell out of the neckerchief into the waste-tub, just as the kitchenmaid emptied it out. "So I'm going on my travels," said the Darning Needle; "I only hope I don't get lost." But she was lost. "I'm too fine for this world," said she, as she lay in the drain. "Well, I have a good conscience, and that's always some little comfort"; and she held herself stiff and didn't lose her temper.

Every sort of thing went sailing along over her; sticks and straws and bits of newspaper. "Look at them sailing along," said the Darning Needle; "they don't know what's sticking fast just beneath them. It's I! Here I sit. Look! There goes a stick, thinking of nothing in the world but 'stick', that's himself. There goes a straw! Just look how it zig-zags about and turns round and round. Don't think quite so much about yourself! You may run up against the culvert! There's a newspaper; everything that's on it is forgotten, but it's spreading itself out all the same. I sit here patient and calm; I know what I am, and what I am I remain."

One day there came something close by that shone very finely, and the Darning Needle thought it must be a diamond, but it was really a bit of bottle. And as it shone the Darning Needle addressed it, introducing herself as a Breast Pin. "You are no doubt a diamond?" "Yes, I am something of the kind." So each believed that the other was something really valuable, and they talked about how conceited the world was.

"Ah, yes! I used to live in a casket owned by a young lady," said the Darning Needle; "and the young lady was a kitchenmaid. She had five fingers on each hand, but anything so self-centred as those five fingers I never knew, and yet they were only there to hold me and take me out of the casket and put me back again."

"Had they any brilliance about them?" asked the bit of glass. "Brilliance!" said the Darning Needle. "No, it was all conceit. They were five brothers, all born fingers; they held themselves close up to each other, though they were of different lengths. The outermost, Tom Thumb, was short and stout, and was outside the rank. He had only one joint in his back, and could only bow in one place, but he said that if he was cut off a man, that man was entirely unfitted for war service. Lick Pot was dipped in sweet and sour, and would point at the sun and moon, and he it was who held tight when

they wrote. Longman looked over the heads of the rest. Gold Band wore a gold ring round his stomach, and little Peter Playman had nothing to do and was proud of it. The whole thing was brag, and brag it remained. So I went into the tub."

"And now here we sit and glitter," said the bit of glass. Just then some more water was poured into the drain and overflowed all the edges, and washed away the bit of glass with it.

"Ah! Now he is gone abroad," said the Darning Needle, "and I stay here! I'm too fine! Still, that's my pride, and it's an honourable one." So there she sat stiffly, and thought many thoughts.

"I could almost believe I was born of a sunbeam, I'm so fine; doesn't it seem, too, as if the sun were always looking for me under the water? Ah me! I'm so fine that my mother can't find me. If I had my old eye that broke I really think I should cry, and yet no, I wouldn't—crying isn't refined."

One day there were some street boys lying and poking about in the gutter, where they found old nails, coppers and such things; it was messy work, but they enjoyed it.

"Ow!" said one of them, who had pricked himself with the Darning Needle. "Here's another chap!"

"I'm not a chap, I'm a young lady!" said the Darning Needle, but nobody heard her. The sealing-wax had come off her, and she had turned black, but being black makes you look thinner, so she thought she was even finer than before.

"There comes an eggshell sailing along," said the boys. Whereupon they stuck the Darning Needle into the shell.

"White walls, and myself black," said the Darning Needle; "that suits well! People can see me, anyhow. I only hope I shan't be sea-sick; if I am I shall break." But she wasn't sea-sick and didn't break: it's good for sea-sickness to have a steel stomach, and always to remember that one is somewhat more than ordinary. "My illness is over now. Yes, the finer one is the more one can bear."

Crack! went the eggshell; a loaded wagon had gone over it. "Ugh, what a squeeze!" said the Darning Needle. "I shall be sea-sick! I shall break! I shall break!" But she didn't, though the loaded wagon did go over her. She lay there at full length—and there let her lie!

[End of *The Darning Needle* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]