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# *The Old House*

by

# Hans Christian Andersen

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

Somewhere in the street there stood an old, old house. Almost three hundred years old it was, as you could read for yourself on the beam, where the date was carved out with tulips and hop vines round it. There stood a whole verse spelt out in the old fashion, and over every window a face was carved on the lintel, pulling a grimace. Each story stuck out a long way over the one below, and immediately under the roof there was a lead gutter with a dragon's head. The rain-water ought to have run out of its mouth, but it ran out of its stomach instead, for there was a hole in the gutter.

All the other houses in the street were very new and neat, with large window-panes and smooth walls. You could see, well enough, that they didn't want to have anything to do with the old house. You could see they were thinking: "How long is this old rubbish-heap going to stand there, making an exhibition of itself, in our street? The bay-window sticks out so that nobody can see, out of our windows, what's going on at the corner. The front doorsteps are as broad as if they led up to a palace, and as steep as if they were in a church-tower. The iron railings look like the gate on an old family vault, and they've got copper knobs, too. Vulgar, I call it."

Facing it, in the street, were more new neat houses, and they thought just the same as the rest. But at the window of one sat a little boy with fresh rosy cheeks and bright shining eyes, and he liked the old house far best, whether in sunshine or moonlight. When he stared at the place on the wall where the plaster had fallen off, he could sit and keep on finding out the most wonderful pictures. He could see exactly how the street used to look in old times, with steps and oriels and pointed gables; he could see soldiers with halberds, and gutters twisting about like dragons and serpents. It was a splendid house to look at. And over there lived an old man who went about in corduroy breeches, and had a coat with big copper buttons, and a wig that you could see really was a wig. Every morning an old servant used to come to him, who cleaned up and did errands, but except for that the old man in the corduroy breeches was quite alone in the old house. Sometimes he would come to the window and look out, and then the little boy would nod to him, and the old man would nod back; and so they became, first acquaintances and then friends, though they had never spoken to each other—but that didn't matter.

The little boy heard his father and mother say: "The old man, over there, is very comfortably off, but he is so dreadfully lonely."

Next Sunday the little boy took something and wrapped it up in a bit of paper, and went down to the front door, and when the man who went on errands came past he said to him: "I say! Will you take the old man opposite this from me; I've got two tin soldiers and this is one of them. I want him to have it, because I know he's so dreadfully lonely."

And the old servant looked quite pleased, and nodded and took the tin soldier across to the old house. After that there came a message—would the little boy like to come over himself, and pay a visit? And he got leave from his parents and went across to the old house.

And the copper knobs on the stair railing shone much brighter than usual—you'd think they had been polished up specially for this visit, and it seemed as if the carved trumpeters (for there were trumpeters carved on the door, standing in tulips) were blowing with all their might, for their cheeks looked much fatter than before. Of course, they were blowing "Tratteratra! The little boy's come! Tratteratra!" And the door opened. The whole of the front hall was hung with old portraits—knights in armour and ladies in silk gowns, and the armour rattled and the silk dresses rustled. Then there was a staircase which led a long way up and a little way down, and then you were in a balcony, which certainly was very rickety, with big holes and long cracks in it; but grass and plants grew out of them all, for the balcony, not to mention the court and the walls, was overgrown with such a lot of greenstuff that it looked like a garden. Still, it was only a balcony. Here stood old flower-pots that had faces with donkeys' ears; the flowers in them grew just as they liked. In one of them a mass of pinks hung over all the edges—that is to say, the green part did—in a multitude of shoots, and it was saying, quite plainly: "The air has stroked me, the sun has kissed me, and promised me a little flower for Sunday! A

little flower for Sunday!"

Then they came into a room where the walls were covered with stamped pigskin and gold flowers printed on it.

"Gilding's soon past; Pigskin will last," said the walls. And there stood arm-chairs, ever so high-backed, and carved, and with arms on both sides. "Sit down! Sit down!" they said. "Ugh! How I do creak! I shall get the gout, I know, like that old cupboard! Gout in the back, ugh!"

And then the little boy came into the room where the bay-window was, and where the old man was sitting.

"Thank you for the tin soldier, my little friend," said the old man, "and thank you for coming over to see me."

"Thanks! Thanks!" or "Crack! Crack!" sounded from all the furniture. There was such a lot of it the pieces got in each other's way to see the little boy.

And in the middle of the wall there hung a portrait of a beautiful lady, young and gay, but dressed all in the old fashion, with powder in her hair and a dress that would stand up by itself. She didn't say either thanks or crack, but looked with her kind eyes on the little boy, who forthwith asked the old man: "Where did you get her from?"

"Round at the dealer's," said the old man. "There are a lot of pictures hanging up there; nobody knows them or cares about them, for the people are in their graves, every one of them. But in the old days I used to know her, and now she's dead and gone these fifty years."

Beneath the portrait was hung up, under glass, a withered bunch of flowers: they, too, must have been fifty years old, by the look of them; and the pendulum of the big clock went to and fro and the hands turned round, and everything in the room went on getting older—but they didn't notice.

"They say, at home," said the little boy, "that you are so dreadfully lonely." "Oh," said he; "but old memories and all they can bring with them come and pay me visits, and now you are come, too. I'm really very well off." And with that he took from a shelf a book with pictures, a whole long procession of the most marvellous coaches, such as you don't see nowadays; soldiers like the knave of clubs and guild-men with waving banners. The tailors had on theirs a pair of scissors, held by two horns, and the cordwainers had on theirs, not a boot, but an eagle that had two heads, because shoemakers must always have things so arranged that they can say: "There's a pair." Ah, that was a picture book!

Then the old man went into another room to fetch sweetmeats and apples and nuts. It really was delightful over in that old house.

"I can't bear it," said the tin soldier, who stood on the chest of drawers. "It's so lonely and so dismal; no, really, when one's lived in a family one can't accustom oneself to the life here. I can't bear it! The whole day is dreary and the evening drearier; it isn't like being over at your house, where your father and mother talked cheerfully, and you and all the rest of the nice children made such a jolly row. Dear, what a lonely time the old man has of it! Do you suppose he ever gets a kiss? Do you suppose he ever has a kind look from anybody, or a Christmas tree? Not he; he never will get anything but a funeral. I can't bear it."

"You mustn't take such a dismal view," said the little boy. "I think it's perfectly delightful here; and then, all the old memories, and all that they can bring with them, come and pay him visits."

"Yes, but I don't see them, and I know nothing about them," said the tin soldier; "I can *not* bear it."

"You've got to," said the little boy.

And now the old man came back, looking as cheerful as possible, and brought the most delicious sweetmeats and apples and nuts, and the little boy thought no more about the tin soldier.

Very happy and gay, the little boy went home, and days passed and weeks passed, and there was nodding to the old house and nodding from the old house, and then the little boy went across again; and the carved trumpeters blew: "Tratteratra! Here's the little boy! Tratteratra!" And the swords and harness on the knight's pictures rattled and the silken dresses rustled, the pigskin said its say, and the old chairs had gout in their backs. Ow! It was exactly like the first time, for over there one day and hour were just like the next.

"I can't bear it," said the tin soldier. "I have cried tears of tin! It is really too dismal here. I'd sooner go to the war, and lose my arms and legs. That would be a change, anyhow. I can *not* bear it! Now I know what it is to have visits from your old memories, and all that they can bring with them. I've had visits from mine, and you may take it from me there's no pleasure to be got out of them in the long run. By the end of it I was nearly jumping down off the drawers. I saw all you at the house over there as plain as if you were really here. It was that Sunday morning, you remember quite well, all you children were standing before the table singing your hymn as you do every morning. You were very serious, with your hands clasped, and your father and mother were just as solemn; and then the door opened and your little sister Mary, who isn't yet two years old and who always dances when she hears music or singing of any kind, was put in—she oughtn't to have been—and she began to dance, but she couldn't keep time, the notes were too long. So first she stood on one leg and bent her head this way, and then on the other leg and bent her head that way, but even so it wouldn't come right. You all kept grave, every one of you, though it was hard enough; but I laughed to myself, and so I fell off the table and got a bump which I still have, for it wasn't right of me to laugh. But all that, now, goes on in my head, and everything else that has happened to me, and that, I suppose, is the old memories and all they can bring with them. Tell me, do you still sing on Sunday? Tell me, do, something about little Mary, and how my comrade is, the other tin soldier? Ah, he's the lucky one! I cannot bear it!"

"You've been given away," said the little boy. "You've got to stay here, can't you see that?"

The old man came in with a drawer in which there were a lot of things to look at; pen-cases and scent boxes, and old cards so big and so begilded as one never sees now. Then there was opening of large drawers, and the piano was opened; it had a landscape painted inside the lid; and how husky it was when the old man played on it! Then he hummed a song: "Ah, she could sing that," said he, and nodded at the portrait he had bought at the dealer's—and the old man's eyes shone very bright.

"I'll go to the wars! I will! I will!" shrieked the tin soldier as loud as he could, and dashed himself down on the floor. Why, what had become of him? The old man searched and the little boy searched, but gone he was, and gone he remained. "I shall find him all right," said the old man, but he never did; the floor was too full of gaps and holes. The tin soldier had fallen through a crevice, and there he lay, in an open grave.

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So that day passed, and the little boy went home; and the weeks went by, and several more weeks. The windows were quite frozen over. The little boy had to sit and breathe on them to make a peep-hole to look across at the old house, and there the snow was drifted into all the curly-wurlies and lettering, and lay all over the steps, as if there was nobody at home. The old man was dead.

Late in the evening a carriage drew up outside, and he was carried down to it, in his coffin, for he was to be driven out into the country to lie there in his family burial-place. So thither he drove off, but nobody followed; all his friends were dead. But the little boy kissed his hand to the coffin as it drove away.

Some days after there was a sale at the old house, and the little boy saw from his window how the old knights and the old ladies, the flower-pots with long ears, the old chairs and the old chests, were carried off, some one way, some another. The portrait of the lady that had been found at the dealer's went back to the dealer's again, for nobody knew her any more, and nobody cared about the old picture.

In the spring the house itself was pulled down, for it was an old rubbish-heap, people said. From the street you could look right into the room and see the pigskin hanging, which was stripped off and torn to bits; and the greenstuff from the balcony hung all in disorder about the fallen beams—and then it was all cleared away.

"That's a good job," said the houses next door.

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And a beautiful house was built, with large windows and smooth white walls. But in front of it, in the place where the old house had actually stood, a small garden was planted, and wild creepers grew up against the neighbour's walls. In

front of the garden a large iron fence, with an iron gate, was put up, and it looked so imposing that people stopped and peeped through. The sparrows perched by scores in the creepers and talked into each others' beaks as hard as they could: but it wasn't about the old house that they talked; they couldn't remember that. So many years had gone by that the little boy had grown into a real man, and a good man, too, who was a great comfort to his parents, and now he had just married and moved with his little wife into this house where the garden was. And there he was, standing by her, while she planted a wild meadow flower which she thought very pretty. She planted it with her own little hands, and was patting the earth with her fingers. "Ow!" What was that? She had pricked herself; something sharp was sticking up out of the earth.

It was—only think! It was the tin soldier; the very one that had been lost up in the old man's room and had been tumbled hither and thither among the beams and rubbish, and had ended by lying in the earth this many a year.

The young wife wiped the soldier clean, first with a green leaf and then with her pocket handkerchief, which had a delightful smell—and the tin soldier felt as if he had been waked out of a trance.

"Let me look at him," said the young man; and he laughed and shook his head. "Why, of course it can't be the same, but he does remind me of an affair of a tin soldier I had when I was a little boy." And he went on to tell his wife about the old house and the old man, and the tin soldier he sent across to him because he was so dreadfully lonely. And he told it all exactly as it had really happened, and the young wife's eyes filled with tears at the thought of the old house and the old man.

"It's quite possible it may be the same tin soldier," said she. "I'll keep him and remember all that you've told me—but you must show me the old man's grave."

"Ah, I don't know it," he said; "and nobody knows it. All his friends were dead; nobody looked after it, and I was only a little boy."

"How dreadfully lonely he must have been!" said she.

"Dreadfully lonely," said the tin soldier; "but it is delightful not to be forgotten."

"Delightful indeed!" something called out, near by; but no one except the tin soldier saw that it was a rag of the pigskin hanging. It had no gilding left and looked like damp earth, but it had an opinion of its own, and spoke it out.

"Gilding's soon past. Pigskin will last."

However, the tin soldier did not agree.

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