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The Flying Trunk

by

Hans Christian Andersen

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

There was once upon a time a merchant so rich that he could have paved the whole street, and almost all of a little alley besides, with silver money. But he didn't do that, for he knew of another use for his money: if he paid a penny out, he got a dollar back: that's the sort of merchant he was, and then he died.

His son got all this money, and he lived a merry life: he went to the fancy ball every night, he made paper kites out of banknotes, and played ducks and drakes in the lake with sovereigns instead of stones. That was the way to make the money go, and go it did. At last he had nothing left but fourpence, and no clothes but a pair of slippers and an old dressing-gown. His friends didn't care about him any more, for they couldn't walk about the streets with him; but one of them, who was good-natured, sent him an old trunk and said, "Pack up". Well, that was all very well, but he hadn't got anything to pack up; so he got into the trunk himself.

It was a funny trunk, that. The moment you pressed on the lock of it, it could fly. And so it did: whizz! It flew up with him through the chimney, and high up above the clouds, far and far away. The bottom of it gave a crack every now and then, and he was very much afraid it would go to pieces, for then he would have made a pretty jump, preserve us all! And at last he got to Turkey. He hid the trunk in a wood under dead leaves and went into the town, which he could perfectly well do, for all the Turks went about in dressing-gowns and slippers like him. He met a nurse with a baby. "Look here, you Turkey nurse," said he, "what's that great big palace close by the town with the windows set so high up?"

"That's the King's daughter's," she said. "It's been foretold of her that she will be unlucky in a lover, and therefore nobody is allowed to visit her without the King and Queen are there." "Thanks," said the merchant's son: and he went into the wood, got into his trunk, and flew up on to the roof and crept in at the window to the Princess.

She was lying on the sofa asleep, and she was so pretty that the merchant's son couldn't help kissing her. She woke up and was terribly startled; but he explained that he was the Turkish God who had come down to her through the sky; and that pleased her very much. So they sat side by side, and he told her stories about her eyes. They were the most lovely dark lakes, and her thoughts floated in them like mermaids: and he told her about her forehead: it was a snow mountain with the most splendid halls and images in it; and he told about the Stork, how it brings the dear little babies. Ah, those were beautiful stories! And thereupon he proposed to the Princess, and she said yes at once.

"But you must come here on Saturday," she said, "the King and Queen are coming to tea with me then. They will be very proud that I am marrying the Turkish God: but be sure you have a really beautiful story ready, for my parents are particularly fond of stories. My mother likes them to be moral and genteel, and my father likes them amusing, so that he can laugh."

"Yes, I shall bring no wedding gift but a story," said he, and they parted; but the Princess gave him a sword set with gold coins, and for these he had plenty of use.

He flew off and bought a new dressing-gown and then stayed out in the wood and made up a story. It had to be ready by Saturday, which is not so easy, I can tell you. At last he was ready, and it was Saturday.

The King, the Queen, and all the court were waiting at tea at the Princess's. He was most kindly received.

"Now will you tell us a story?" said the Queen. "One that has a deep meaning and is instructive?"

"But let there be something one can laugh at," said the King.

"Very well," said he and began; and now we must listen carefully.

"Once upon a time there was a bundle of matches which were extremely proud of being of high degree. Their family tree,

that is, the great pine tree of which each of them was a chip, had been a large old tree in the forest. The matches now lay on the dresser between a fire-box and an old iron pot, and to them they told the story of their youth. 'Yes,' they said, 'when we were on the green bough we did indeed flourish like the green bay tree. Every morning and evening we had diamond tea (that was the dew), all day we had the sunshine (if the sun shone) and all the little birds were obliged to tell us stories. We could easily see, too, that we were rich, for the trees with leaves were clad only in summer, while our family could afford green clothes both in summer and winter. But then came the woodcutters; in other words, the great Revolution—and our family was split in pieces. The head of the house obtained a situation as mainmast on a magnificent vessel which could sail the whole world round if it pleased, the other branches went elsewhere, and we are now commissioned to kindle light for the common people: that's why we distinguished folk are come here to the kitchen.'

"'Yes, it has been otherwise with me,' said the iron pot beside which the matches lay. 'From the moment I came out into the world I have been scoured and set to boil many a time. I minister to solid needs, and properly speaking am the first person in the house. My one pleasure is, as it might be after dinner, to lie cleansed and neat on the dresser, and carry on a reasonable conversation with my colleagues: but with the exception of the water bucket, which every now and then goes down to the yard, we live entirely indoors; our only news bringer is the market basket, but it talks very unrestfully about the government and the people; lately indeed, there was an elderly pot which in its alarm at this fell down and broke itself to pieces. That basket is of a turbulent disposition, I must say.'

"'Now you're talking too much,' said the fire-box, and the steel knocked on the flint till the sparks came: 'Ought we not to have a gay evening?' 'Yes, let us speak of who is most distinguished,' said the matches. 'No, I don't care for talking about myself,' said the cooking pot, 'let us have an evening conversazione. I will begin. I will tell of things that everyone has experienced; there is opportunity for all to imagine it, and that is pleasant.'

"'Near the eastern sea, among the beech woods of Denmark.'—'That is a delightful commencement,' said all the plates; 'it will, I am sure, be a story I shall enjoy.' 'Yes, there it was that I passed my early years in a quiet family. The furniture was polished, the floor was washed, clean curtains were put up once a fortnight.' 'Now, how interesting you make your story,' said the broom. 'One can tell at once that it is a lady speaking: something so maidenly runs through it all.'

"'Indeed, yes, one does feel that,' said the water bucket, and out of pure pleasure it gave a little hop, and "plop" sounded on the floor.

"The pot went on with its story, and the end was every bit as good as the beginning. All the plates rattled with pleasure, and the broom got some green parsley out of the dust-hole and crowned the pot with it, for it knew this would annoy the rest, and, it reflected, 'if I crown her to-day, she will crown me to-morrow'.

"'I shall now dance,' said the tongs, and dance it did. Yes, heaven be good to us, how it did kick up in the air with its leg! The old chair cushion away in the corner split with looking at it. 'Can I be crowned?' said the tongs, and crowned it was.

"'Mere rabble, after all, these people,' thought the matches.

"The tea urn was now asked to sing; but it had a cold, it said; it could only sing when on the boil. But this was merely standoffishness; it wouldn't sing unless it was set on the table and the family were there.

"Over in the window lay an old quill pen which the maid used to write with; there was nothing remarkable about it except that it had been dipped too deep in the inkstand, but of this it was quite proud. 'If the tea urn won't sing,' it said, 'it can let it alone. Outside, there's a nightingale hung up in a cage; it can sing. It hasn't to be sure been trained at all, but we won't say anything unkind about that to-night.'

"'I think it extremely improper,' said the tea kettle, which was the kitchen singer-in-chief and half-sister to the tea urn, 'that a foreign bird like that should be listened to. Is it patriotic? I leave it to the market basket.'

"'I,' said the market basket, 'am merely annoyed. I am more intensely annoyed than can be imagined. Is this a fitting manner of spending the evening? Would it not be far better to set the house to rights? Everyone would then fall into his right place, and I should lead the whole dance. We should then have a very different state of things.' 'Yes, let's make a real row,' they all cried out together. At that moment the door opened. It was the maid. They all stopped; no one made a sound; but there wasn't a single pot that wasn't conscious of what it could do and how distinguished it was. 'If only I had chosen,' they thought, 'it would have been a gay evening indeed.'

"The maid picked up the matches and struck them. Gracious! How they did sputter and burst into flame! 'Now,' thought they, 'everybody can see we are the quality: what a flash we make! What a light!' And with that they burnt out."

"That was a beautiful story," said the Queen. "I seemed to be really in the kitchen with the matches. Yes, now thou shalt have our daughter."

"Certainly," said the King, "thou shalt marry our daughter on Monday." (They said "thou" to him now, since he was to be one of the family.)

So the wedding was fixed, and on the evening before the whole town was illuminated. Buns and tarts were thrown to be scrambled for. The street-boys stood on tiptoe and shouted "Hurrah!" and whistled on their fingers. It was a most brilliant affair.

"Well, I must see about doing something too," thought the merchant's son: so he bought rockets and throw-downs and every imaginable kind of firework, and put it all in his trunk and flew up in the air with it.

Whizz, how they all went off and how they popped! It made all the Turks jump in the air till their slippers flew about their ears; never before had they seen such sights in the heavens. They could see now that it really was the Turkish God who was to marry the Princess.

As soon as the merchant's son was back in the wood with his trunk he thought: "I'll go into the town and try to hear how the thing went," and very natural too that he should want to hear.

Well, well, what stories the people did tell! Every single one he asked had seen it his own way, but all of them had found it charming.

"I saw the Turkish God himself," said one. "He had eyes like bright stars and a beard like foaming water." "He was flying in a mantle of fire," said another, "and lovely little angels were peeping out from the folds of it." Indeed, he heard a number of charming things said, and the next day he was to be married.

He went back to the wood to get into his trunk—but where was it? The trunk was burnt. A spark from the fireworks had remained in it, had set it alight, and the trunk was in ashes. Never again could he fly, never again visit his bride. She stayed on the roof the whole day, waiting. She's waiting still. He is wandering the world over, telling stories. But they aren't so gay now as the one he told about the matches.

Transcriber's Notes:

1. page 141: added single quote mark at beginning of paragraph commencing "Near the eastern sea, among the..."
2. page 143: corrected typo, substituting double quote for single quote, at beginning of paragraph commencing 'The maid picked up the...

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