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Soup from a Sausage-Peg

by

Hans Christian Andersen

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

"That was a first-class dinner we had yesterday," said an old lady Mouse to another, who had not been at the party. "I sat twenty-first from the old Mouse King, and that's not so bad either. Let me tell you the bill of fare, now; it was extremely well arranged. Mouldy bread, bacon-rind, tallow candle and sausage, and then the same all over again; just as good as having two dinners. The whole tone was comfortable, and the talk as lively as at a family party. Nothing whatever was left over but the sausage-pegs. So we talked about them, and the old saying came up about 'making soup out of a sausage-peg'. Everyone, of course, had heard of it, but nobody had ever tasted the soup, let alone knowing how to make it. A very neat toast was proposed—the health of the inventor—he deserved to be made President of the Board of Guardians. Wasn't that clever? And then the old Mouse King got up and promised that the young Mouse who should make the soup most savoury should be his Queen, and a year and a day was allowed for thinking it out."

"That wasn't bad either," said the second Mouse. "But how do you make this soup?"

"Ah, how *do* you make it?" They were all asking that, all the lady mice, young and old alike. Everyone would like well enough to become Queen, but they didn't fancy the trouble of going out into the wide world and learning the process; and, of course, that was necessary: and then again it isn't given to everybody to leave their family and the old chimney corner. You don't run across cheese-rind or smell bacon-rind every day abroad; no, no, one may end by being starved, or even perhaps eaten up alive by a cat."

It was considerations of that sort which deterred most of them from setting out in search of knowledge, and only four mice presented themselves for this expedition; they were young and lively, but poor. They meant to go each of them to one of the four quarters of the world, and it would depend on which of them fortune favoured. Each took a sausage-peg with her to remind her of the object of the journey; it would serve them for a pilgrim's staff. They set out early in May, and early in May the next year they returned, but only three of them. The fourth neither sent any message nor was any news of her heard, and now was the day of decision.

"Somewhat of sorrow is ever mingled with one's brightest joys," said the Mouse King. Nevertheless, he issued orders to invite all the mice for many miles around to meet in the kitchen. The three travelled mice stood in a row by themselves; for the fourth, who was missing, a sausage-peg hung with black crape was set up. No one dared to give their opinion before the three had spoken, and the Mouse King had said whatever more was necessary.

Now we shall hear all about it.

II

What the first little Mouse had seen and learned on her travels

"When I set out into the wide world", said the first little Mouse, "I thought, as many do at my time of life, that I had absorbed all the wisdom of the world, but one has not done that. A year and a day must pass before that happens. I went to sea at once: I went aboard a ship that was to sail for the North. I had heard that at sea the cook must understand how to get along, but it's easy enough to get along when you have unlimited sides of bacon, tubs of salt meat and musty flour. You live in luxury, but you learn nothing that will help to get soup out of a sausage-peg. Many days and nights we sailed; we had pitching and tossing, and we had wet. When we got to our destination I left the vessel. It was far up in the North."

"It's a strange experience to leave one's own chimney corner at home and go on board a ship where there is also some sort of a chimney corner, and suddenly find yourself more than a hundred miles away in a strange country. There were lonely forests of fir and birch; how strong the scent of them was! I don't like it. The wild plants, too, smelt so spicy that I sneezed and thought of sausage. There were great woodland lakes, whose water was clear when you were near it, but seen from a distance was as black as ink. On them floated white swans. I took them for foam, they lay so still, but later I saw them fly and I saw them walk, and then I knew them; they belong to the goose tribe, you can see it by their gait; nobody can get away from his descent. I kept to my own sort, and joined the wood and field mice, who by the way know terribly little, especially about cookery, which, of course, was what I was travelling abroad to look into. It was such an extraordinary idea to them that anyone could imagine making soup from a sausage-peg that it went at once through the whole forest; but that this problem could be solved they reckoned an impossibility, and least of all did I think that there on that very night I should be initiated into the matter. It was midsummer, and that, they said, was why the forest was so fragrant, the herbs so spicy, the lakes so clear and yet so dark, with the white swans upon them. On the outskirts of the forest, among three or four houses, a pole had been raised, tall as a mainmast, and at the top of it hung a wreath and a ribbon; it was the Maypole: girls and lads danced round it and sang, vying with the fiddler's music. It went merrily on till near sunset, and in the moonlight, but I didn't join them: what has a little Mouse to do at a forest dance? No, I sat in the soft moss, holding my sausage-peg. The moon was shining brightest on one spot where there was a tree covered with moss so delicate—why, I could almost venture to say as delicate as the fur of our Mouse King, but its colour was green, such that it did one's eyes good to look at it. Thither all at once there came marching up a number of the smartest little beings, no bigger than the height of my knee. They looked like human beings, but they were better proportioned. They called themselves Elves, and their clothes were of flower petals set with the wings of flies and midges—really very pretty. At first it seemed as if they were looking for something—I didn't know what—and then a few of them came up to me, and the leader of them pointed to my sausage-peg and said: 'That's just the sort of thing we want. It's cut out for it, it's admirable!' and he became more and more lost in admiration as he looked at my pilgrim staff. 'Lend, yes, but not keep,' I said. 'No, not keep,' they all said. They took hold of the peg, which I let go, and danced off with it to the plot of delicate moss, where they planted the peg right in the middle of the green. They too wanted a Maypole, and the one they had now got suited as well as if it had been cut out for the purpose. Next it was dressed out. Ah, it was a sight, I can tell you!

"Tiny spiders spun gold thread about it, and hung up fluttering scarves and flags of the finest weaving, and bleached to such snowy whiteness in the moonshine that it dazzled my eyes. Then the Elves took colours from butterfly wings and dropped them upon the white threads, and flowers and diamonds shone out, so that I could no longer recognize my sausage-peg. The like of such a Maypole as it made, I am sure, was nowhere to be found. Then there came, first the noblest company of the Elves, who were quite unclad. Nothing more delicate was ever seen. I was invited to look on at the show, but from a distance, since I was too big for them. Then the music struck up. It sounded as if a thousand glass bells were ringing, full and strong. I thought it must be the swans that were singing; I thought too that I could hear the cuckoo and the thrush, and at last it seemed that the whole forest was chiming in—voices of children, ringing of bells, song of birds, the sweetest melodies: and all this loveliness was ringing out from the Elves' Maypole. It was a whole peal of bells, and it came from my sausage-peg. Never could I have believed that this could come out of it, but that depends, of course, on whose hands it is in. Really, I was so moved that I wept such tears as a little Mouse can shed, out of pure delight.

"The night was all too short, but up there at that season it is but brief. With the dawn there came a breath of air; the mirror of the forest lake was ruffled, all the delicate waving scarves and banners flew off into the air, the swaying arbours of cobweb, the suspension bridges and balustrades, or whatever they were, that had been thrown across from leaf to leaf vanished into nothing. Six Elves came and brought me my sausage-peg, and asked if I had any wish that they

could grant me. So I begged them to tell me how one can make soup from a sausage-peg.

"How do we manage it?" said the leader, and he laughed. "Why, you've just seen! You hardly recognized your sausage-peg, did you?" "Oh, you mean in that way?" said I, and then told them straight out the object of my travels, and what was expected from them by those at home. "What pleasure", said I, "can the Mouse King and the whole realm derive from my having seen all this beauty? I can't shake it out of my sausage-peg and say: "Look, here's the peg, now the soup will come." That, to be sure, would be a sort of dessert when people had eaten their fill.' Then the Elf dipped his tiny finger into a blue violet, and said to me: 'Attend now! I will anoint your staff, and when you get home to the Mouse King's palace, do you touch with the staff your King's warm breast. At once violets will blossom out all over the staff, even in the depth of winter. There! You've got something to take home, and a little more into the bargain.'" But before the little Mouse told what this little more was, she pointed her staff towards the breast of the King, and there did actually burst out the most delicious bouquet of flowers, smelling so strong that the King ordered the mice who stood nearest the fireplace to stick their tails into the fire so that one could get a little scent of burning, for the smell of the violets was too strong to be borne, and indeed was not generally liked.

"But what was the 'little more' that you spoke of?" asked the Mouse King.

"Ah!" said the little Mouse. "That is what people call an effect." She turned the sausage-peg round, and no flowers were to be seen. She now held the bare peg, which she raised in the fashion of a conductor's baton. "The violets are for sight, smell and touch (the Elf told me). Something yet remains for hearing and for taste." She began beating time, and music was heard, not such as rang out in the forest at the Elves' festival; no, rather such as is heard in the kitchen. Upon my word, there was a Cooking! All at once it came, as if the wind were roaring down every chimney. Kettles and pots boiled over, the shovel thundered against the copper—and then in an instant all was still, you heard only the subdued song of the tea-kettle—a strange song, of which you could not tell in the least whether it was the end or the beginning that you heard. Then the little pot boiled and the big pot boiled—one taking no notice of the other—it really seemed as if the pots had no sense at all. The little Mouse brandished her baton more and more wildly: the pots foamed, bubbled, boiled over, the wind roared, the chimney screamed—whew! It was so alarming that the little Mouse herself dropped her stick.

"A very odd soup!" said the Mouse King. "Will it not be served up now?"

"That is all," said the little Mouse, and made a curtsy.

"That all? Very well, then, let us hear what the next one has to say," said the Mouse King.

III

What the second little Mouse had to tell

"I was born in the palace library," said the second Mouse. "Neither I nor most of my family have ever known the privilege of getting into the dining-room, let alone the larder; it was only on my travels and here to-day that I have ever seen a kitchen. It is true that we often suffered from hunger in the library, but we acquired a great deal of information. The rumour reached us up there of the royal offer of a prize for making soup out of a sausage-peg, whereupon my old grandmother brought out a manuscript. She couldn't read it, but she had heard it read, and in it was written: 'If one is a poet, one can make soup out of a sausage-peg.' She asked me if I was a poet. I said I was not, and she said that in that case I ought to go and take steps to become one. I asked what the requirements were, for it was just as difficult for me to discover as to make the soup. But Granny had heard people read books, and she said that there were three principal things necessary: 'Intelligence, Imagination, and Sensibility.' 'You go and get these into you, and you will be a poet, and you will win through safe enough with the sausage-peg.' So I set forth westward into the wide world to become a poet.

"Intelligence, I knew, is, in every affair, the most important. The other two qualities are not in such estimation; so I made for intelligence in the first place; now where does it reside? 'Go to the ant and become wise,' so said a great king in Jewry—I knew that from the library, and I did not stop till I got to the nearest large ant-hill and lay in wait, to become wise.

"They are very respectable folk, the ants; they are pure intelligence, and with them everything is like a sum that is added up right. To work and to lay eggs, they say, is to live in the present and provide for the future, and that is what they do. They divide themselves into clean and dirty ants; rank is denoted by a number. The Ant Queen is number one, and her opinion is the only correct one, for she has absorbed all wisdom, an important thing for me to know. She said a great deal that was so clever that it appeared to me to have no sense. She said that their ant hill was the highest thing in the world; yet close by the hill stood a tree that was higher, much higher, the fact couldn't be denied, so nobody mentioned it. One evening an ant had lost its way in that direction and crawled up the trunk—not even right up to the top, but yet higher than any ant had been before, and when it turned back and got home, it spoke in the ant hill of something much higher, that was outside. This seemed to the other ants an insult to the whole community, so this ant was condemned to wear a muzzle and remain in perpetual solitary confinement. But a short time after another ant went to this tree and made the same exploration and discovery and told of it too, as was said, with caution and vaguely; and since it was also a respected ant and one of the clean, it was believed; and when it died an egg-shell was set up as a monument to it, for the ants honoured knowledge. I saw", said the little Mouse, "how the ants continually ran about with their eggs on their backs. One of them dropped hers, and had great difficulty in getting it up again, in fact could not. Two others came and helped with all their might, so that they were dropping their own eggs, whereupon they instantly left off helping—for charity begins at home: and the Ant Queen said of the incident, that it certainly showed feeling and intelligence. 'These two things serve to place us ants at the head of rational beings. Intelligence must and should outweigh all else, and the greatest intelligence is mine.' With that she stood upon her hind legs, and was so conspicuous I could not be mistaken; and I swallowed her. 'Go to the ant and become wise.' I had got the Queen.

"I then approached the large tree I have mentioned: it was an oak, very old, with a tall stem and mighty crown. I knew that in it dwelt a living being, for a woman called a Dryad is born with the tree and dies with it. I had heard about this in the library; now I saw such a tree and such an oak-maid. She gave a dreadful shriek when she saw me so close, for she was, like all women, very much afraid of mice. Still, she had more reason to be so than others, for I could gnaw through her tree, and on it her life depended. I talked to her in a friendly and affectionate way, and she regained courage and took me on her delicate hand, and when she heard why I had come out into the wide world she promised that very likely that same evening I might get hold of one of the two treasures I was still looking for. She told me that Fantasus was a dear friend of hers, that he was as beautiful as the God of Love, and that he very often came to rest himself under the leafy branches of her tree, which then rustled above the two of them with more life than ever. He would call her his own Dryad, and her tree his own tree. Indeed, the beautiful stately gnarled oak was just after his own heart, with its roots set deep and fast in the earth, its trunk and crown rising high into the fresh air, and feeling the driving keen-aired snow and the hot sun as they should be felt. 'Yes,' she said, 'up there, the birds sing and tell of foreign lands, and on that single dead bough the stork has built a nest, which is an ornament to the tree, and one hears something about the land of the pyramids. All this Fantasus enjoys, but he isn't satisfied with that; I have to tell him myself about my life in the forest, ever since I was little and my tree was so tiny that a nettle could hide it, up till now, when it is so large and stately. Sit down now

under the woodruff and take good heed; when Fantusus comes I shall be sure to find an opportunity to twitch his wing and pull a little feather out. Take that: no poet ever had a better, and that will suffice you.'

"Fantusus came, the feather was pulled out, and I seized it," said the little Mouse. "I kept it in water till it grew soft—it was still extremely hard to digest, but I got through it. It's by no means easy to eat yourself into a poet, such a quantity of stuff one has to absorb. Well, now I had two things, Intelligence and Imagination, and by their help I knew that the third thing was to be found in the library; for a great man has said and has written that there are novels whose only object is to relieve people of their superfluous tears—they are in fact a sort of sponge, soaking up Sensibility. I recollected some of these books, which had always looked to me very appetizing: they had been so much read and were so greasy, they must have soaked up an infinite quantity of force. So I returned to the library and forthwith ate practically a whole novel, that is to say the soft part, the real novel, for the rind, the binding, I left alone. After digesting this and another, I could already perceive how they were working within me. I then ate a small portion of a third, and I was a poet. So at least I told myself and told others. I had headache, stomach-ache—I don't know what aches I didn't have. Then I pondered over the stories that might be brought into connection with a sausage-peg, and my whole mind became full of pegs (the Ant Queen was possessed of no common intelligence). I thought of the man who put a white peg in his mouth and became invisible, and so did the peg. I thought of old ale with a peg in the tankard, of the saying about standing on a peg, [1] putting a peg in, [2] driving a peg into one's coffin. All my thoughts ran on pegs: a poem could be written about them if one were a poet, and a poet I am—I have worn myself out to become one. I am ready every day in the week to serve Your Majesty with a peg—a story. Very well, that is my soup."

"We will now hear the third," said the Mouse King.

There was a cry of "Pi, Pi!" at the kitchen door, and a little Mouse—it was the fourth, the one they thought was dead—rushed in and knocked down the sausage-peg with the black crape on it. She had been running night and day, had travelled by rail in goods trains when she got a chance, and yet had almost come too late. She thrust herself forward, sadly out of breath; she had lost her sausage-peg, but not her voice, and began speaking at once as if everyone was only waiting for her and only wanted to hear her, and everything else in the world was of no concern to anyone. She began talking at once, and talked herself out. So unexpected was she that nobody had a moment to make any remark about her or her speech all the time she was talking. Now we must listen.

IV

What the fourth Mouse, who spoke before the third had spoken, had to tell

"I went directly to the capital city," said she; "I don't remember the name of it, I haven't a good memory for names. I went from the railway along with some confiscated goods, to the law courts, and there I took up with the jailer. He was talking about his prisoners, and particularly about one of them, who had made rash speeches, about which there had been endless talking and reading and writing. 'The whole thing is soup from a sausage-peg,' said he, 'but that same soup may easily cost him his knob.'

"This gave me an interest in the prisoner," said the little Mouse; "and I watched for an opportunity and slipped into his cell—there's always a hole for a mouse, even with locked doors. He looked very pale; he had a great beard and big shining eyes. His lamp smoked, but the walls were accustomed to it, it didn't make them any blacker. The prisoner had scratched pictures and verses on them—white on black—but I didn't read them. I think he found it very dull, and I was a welcome visitor. He enticed me to him with breadcrumbs and whistling, and gentle words, and was delighted with me. I trusted him, and we became friends. He shared his bread and water with me, and gave me cheese and sausage, so I lived in luxury; but it was more than anything the pleasant companionship, I may say, that attracted me. He let me run up his hand and arm right up his sleeve; let me creep into his beard; called me his little friend. I got really fond of him; an attachment like that is mutual. I forgot my mission in this wide world, and left my sausage-peg in a crack in the floor—it's there now. I decided to stay where I was, for if I went away, the poor prisoner would have nothing at all left, and that really is too little in the world. Well, I stayed, but he did not. On the last day he talked to me very sorrowfully, and gave me twice as much bread and cheese-rind as usual, and kissed his fingers to me. Then he went, and never came back. I don't know his story. 'Soup from a sausage-peg,' said the jailer, and to him I went, but I ought not to have trusted him. He took me on his hand, to be sure, but it was to put me in a cage, a treadmill. It's awful! You run and run and get no further, and they only laugh at you.

"The jailer's grand-daughter was a pretty little thing with golden-yellow curly hair and merry eyes and a laughing mouth. 'Poor little mouse,' she said, peeping into my horrid cage. She pulled out the iron pin, and I jumped down on the window-sill and out into the gutter. Free! Free! That was all I thought of, not the object of my journey. It was getting on for night when I took refuge in an old tower. There lived a watchman and an owl; I trusted neither of them, but the owl least. They're like cats, and they commit the grave error of eating mice. Still, one can be mistaken, and I was mistaken: this was a very respectable, extremely well educated old owl, who knew more than the watchman and as much as myself. The young owls tried to make a great to-do about everything, and she would say: 'Don't make soup out of a sausage-peg.' It was the severest thing she could bring herself to say, such was her affection for her family. I felt such confidence in her that I called out 'Pip!' from the crack I was sitting in. This trustfulness pleased her, and she assured me that I should be under her protection, and no creature should be allowed to hurt me; she meant to see about that herself, in winter when food got scarce. She was clever in all ways; she informed me that the watchman could not hoot without a horn, which hung on him, separate. He is inordinately proud of it, and believes he is the owl in the tower. Great cry and little wool! Soup from a sausage-peg! I begged her to give me the recipe, and she explained it to me thus. 'Soup from a sausage-peg is merely a human saying, and is understood in different ways, and everyone thinks his own way is the most correct. But the whole thing is, as a matter of fact, nothing at all.'

"'Nothing at all,' said I, and it struck me. 'Truth is not always agreeable, but truth is above all else.' That also the owl said. I thought it over, and perceived that if I brought you that which is above all else, I should be bringing something far better than soup from a sausage-peg."

"So I hurried off to get home in time, and bring that which is highest and best, namely, the truth. The race of mice is an enlightened one, and the King is at the head of them all. He is capable of making me his queen, for the sake of the truth."

"Your truth is a lie," said the Mouse who, as yet, had had no chance of speaking. "I can make the soup, and I shall now do so."

V

How the soup was made

"I have not travelled," said the third Mouse. "I stayed in my own country, which is the right thing to do. Nobody need travel, everything can be got just as good here. I stayed. I have not taken lessons from supernatural beings, or eaten myself into knowledge, or conversed with owls. What I have comes from my own meditations. Kindly put the kettle on, full of water—to the brim—light the fire. Let it burn till the water boils. It must boil over. Now throw in the peg. Will the King be pleased to plunge his tail into the boiling water and stir it round? The longer he stirs, the stronger will the soup become. It costs nothing: there is no need for any flavouring—only stirring."

"Can no one else do this?" asked the Mouse King.

"No," said the Mouse; "the virtue resides in the King's tail alone." The water boiled up, and the Mouse King took his place close by—it was almost dangerous. He stuck out his tail, as mice do in a dairy when they skim the cream off a pan and lick their tails afterwards. But he only just stuck his tail into the hot steam and immediately jumped down.

"Of course, you are my Queen," he said. "We will reserve the soup till our golden wedding. My poorer subjects will then have something to enjoy in prospect—in a long prospect."

So the wedding took place. But many of the mice, when they got home, said: "It's all very well to call it soup from a sausage-peg, but really it was soup from a mouse's tail." A point here and there in the stories, they considered, was well made, but the whole might well have been different. "Now *I* should have told it in this way. . . ."

That was criticism, and criticism is always very clever—afterwards.

The story went all over the world, and people's opinions on it were divided, but the story itself remained. And this is the right result in affairs great and small, even in soup from a sausage-peg. Only you mustn't expect to be thanked for it.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]Dancing attendance.

[2]Putting a spoke in anyone's wheel.