

The Bottle Neck

Hans Christian Andersen

In the narrow, crooked street, among several shabby dwellings, stood a very tall and very narrow house, the framework of which had given so that it was out of joint in every direction. Only poor people lived here, and poorest of all were those who lived in the attic. Outside the small attic window an old, bent bird cage hung in the sunshine; it didn't even have a real bird glass, but had only a bottle neck, upside down, with a cork in its mouth, and filled with water. At the open window stood an old maid who had just been decking the cage with chickweed; the little canary in it hopped from perch to perch and sang with all his might.

"Yes, you may well sing!" said the Bottle Neck. Of course, it didn't say it audibly, as we're able to, for a bottle neck cannot speak, but it thought it, just as when we humans speak inwardly. "Yes, you may well sing - you, with your limbs whole! But what if you had lost your lower half as I have, and had only a neck and a mouth left, and then had a cork stuffed into you! You certainly wouldn't sing then! But it's good that somebody is pleased. I have no reason to sing, and I can't anyway; I could once, when I was a whole bottle, and someone rubbed me with a cork; they used to call me a real lark then, 'the grand lark.' Didn't I sing that day in the woods when the furrier's daughter became engaged? I can remember it as though it were yesterday. When I come to think of it, I've lived through many things; I've been through fire and water - down in the black earth, and higher up than most people. And now I hang here on the outside of the cage in the air and sunshine. It might be worth while to hear my story, but I'm not going to tell it aloud, because I can't!"

And so it inwardly told, or thought, its story, which was a strange one, and in the meantime the little bird sang merrily, and people rode or walked through the streets down below. Each thought of his own story or didn't think at all; but, at any rate, the Bottle Neck was engrossed in thought.

It remembered the flaming furnace in the manufacturing plant, where it had been blown into existence. It still remembered how warm it was at first, how it looked into that roaring furnace, its birthplace, and longed to leap back into it. But then as it gradually cooled, it found itself well off where it was, standing in a long row with a whole regiment of brothers and sisters. All had been born from the same furnace, but some had been blown into champagne bottles, some into beer bottles, and that makes a difference. To be sure, as things happen in the world, a beer bottle may hold the costliest Lachryma Christi wine, while a champagne bottle may be filled with black ink; but what each one was born for may still be clearly seen in its form; nobility remains nobility, even with black ink inside.

All the bottles were soon packed up, our Bottle among them. Little did it think then that it would end as a bottle neck, serving as a bird glass, and yet that is an honorable existence - it's at least something. It did not see daylight again until it was unpacked, together with its comrades, in the cellar of a wine merchant; and then for the first time it was rinsed out - that was an odd sensation. It then lay empty and corkless, and felt strangely dull, as if it lacked something, though it didn't know what. But then it was filled with good, glorious wine received a cork, and was sealed up; a label was pasted on it, "Best Quality," and it felt as if it had been awarded the highest rating as the result of its examination - though it had to be admitted that the wine was good, as well as the Bottle.

When one is young, one is a lyric poet! The Bottle was singing inwardly of things it knew nothing about - green, sunlit mountains, where the vineyards grow, and where merry maidens and happy youths sing and kiss. Yes, it is wonderful to be alive! Indeed, the Bottle inwardly sang of all this, as do young poets, who frequently also know nothing about the things of which they sing.

One morning it was bought. The furrier's boy had been sent to fetch a bottle of the best

wine; and then it was packed into a large basket, together with ham, cheese, sausages, the best butter, and the finest bread. The furrier's daughter herself packed the basket. She was so young, so pretty; her brown eyes laughed, and there was a smile on her lips, which seemed as expressive as her eyes. Her hands were small, soft, and white, but not so white as her forehead and throat. You could see at once that she was one of the prettiest girls in the village, and still she was not yet betrothed.

When the party drove out into the woods, the basket lay in her lap. The neck of the Bottle peeped out from the folds of the white tablecloth; the red sealing wax on the cork looked right in the face of the young girl and looked also at the young sailor who sat beside her. He had been her friend since childhood, and was a portrait painter's son. He had recently passed his examination for the navel service with high honors, and on the next day he was to sail away, far away, to foreign lands. This had been spoken of during the packing of the basket, and it hadn't been quite so pleasant to look at the eyes and lips of the furrier's pretty daughter while there'd been talk of that.

The two young people went for a walk in the green forest, talking - and what did they talk about? The Bottle couldn't hear that, for it was left in the basket. A long time passed before the basket was unpacked, but when it was, it was apparent that some pleasant thing had happened in the meantime, for all eyes were filled with happiness, particularly those of the furrier's daughter, though she said less than the others, and her cheeks blushed like two red roses.

The father unwrapped the Bottle and took up the corkscrew. Yes, it was a strange sensation that the Bottle felt when, for the first time, the cork was drawn! The Bottleneck could never forget that solemn moment; it said "pop!" as the cork was pulled out, and then the wine gurgled when it flowed into the glasses.

"A toast to the betrothed!" said the father, and every glass was emptied, and then the young man kissed his pretty fiancée. "Good luck and blessings," said the old couple. And the young man then refilled the glasses, exclaiming, "To my home-coming and our wedding, a year from today!" When the glasses had been emptied; he raised the Bottle in the air, saying, "You have been a part of the happiest day of my life. You shall never serve anyone else!"

Then he flung it high into the air. Little did the furrier's daughter think that she would ever see the Bottle again - and yet she would. The Bottle fell down among the thick reeds fringing the little woodland lake. The Bottle neck could remember clearly how it lay there, thinking, "I gave them wine, and they gave me swamp water - but they meant well." It could no longer see the happy betrothed and their pleased parents, but it could hear them talking and singing in the distance. Then after a while two peasant boys came along, found the Bottle among the reeds, and took it away. Now it had someone to take care of it.

At the woodland hut where the boys lived, they and their elder brother, who was a sailor, had parted the day before, when he had come home to say good-by prior to leaving on a long voyage. Now their mother was packing a few things that their father was going to take to him in the town that evening; this would give him an opportunity to see his son once more before his departure and to bring him greetings from his mother and himself. A little flask of spiced brandy was placed in the package. But then the boys came home with the bottle they had found; it was larger and stronger and would hold more than the little flask; it was just right for a good-sized schnapps for a stomach in need of such. So it was filled, not with red wine as before, but with brandy containing herbs that are good for the stomach. The newly found Bottle, rather than the little one, would go on the trip.

And so the Bottle continued on its travels. It went with Peter Jensen on board the very same ship as this young officer who had been betrothed. He hadn't yet seen the Bottle again, and if he had, he wouldn't have recognized it, or thought, "This is the bottle from which the toasts to our betrothal and my homecoming were drunk!"

Now, of course, it no longer contained red wine, but there was something just as good in it. Whenever Peter Jensen brought it out, his shipmates always called it "the Apothecary"; it provided good medicine for the stomach, they agreed, and indeed it helped them as long as there was a drop left in it. Those were happy times, and the Bottle sang when it was rubbed with the cork, and thus it came to be called "the grand lark," and "Peter Jensen's lark."

A long time had passed; the Bottle stood empty in a corner, and it did not know whether it was on the voyage out or bound for home, for it hadn't been ashore. Then a mighty storm arose. Huge, heavy, black waves rose up and hurled the vessel about. The mast crashed overboard; a mighty wave smashed in a plank, and the pumps were useless. The ship was sinking, but in the last minute the young officer wrote on a piece of paper, "Lord Jesus have mercy on us - we perish!" He wrote his fiancée's name, his own, and that of the ship, put the note into an empty bottle he found near by, pressed the cork in tightly, and then flung the bottle out into the stormy sea. Never did he realize that this was the Bottle that had provided wine for toasts to his and her happiness and the fulfillment of their hopes. It now tossed on the surging billows, carrying its tidings of death, its greeting to the living.

The ship sank, and the crew with it. The Bottle was like a bird in flight, the way it was tossed above the waves - and, what's more, it had a heart within it, in the form of a lover's message. The sun rose, and the sun set - and that reminded the Bottle of the time of its birth, in the red, glowing furnace; it longed to fly back into the heat.

It went through calm seas and more storms; it was neither dashed against rocks nor swallowed by a shark. For more than a year and a day it drifted, now north, now south, as it was carried by the currents. To be sure it was its own master, but one gets tired of that.

The note, that last farewell from the young officer to his betrothed, would bring only sorrow if it ever should fall into the proper hands. But where were those hands, the hands that had gleamed so white while spreading the tablecloth over the fresh grass on the betrothal day?

Where was the furrier's daughter? Yes, and where was land? What land lay nearest? The Bottle had no idea. It drifted on and on and finally became very weary of drifting - for which it had never been intended, anyway - but still it drifted on, until at last it was cast ashore on a foreign land. It couldn't understand a word that was spoken here; this was not the language it had always heard before, and one misses a great deal when in a country where one cannot understand the language.

The Bottle was picked up and examined; the note inside it was noticed, taken out, turned around, and turned over, but the people could not understand what was written on it. They realized, of course, that the bottle had been thrown overboard and that there was something about that written on the paper, but what it said was a mystery. And so the note was put back into the Bottle, and the Bottle itself placed in a large cabinet in a large room in a large house. Whenever strangers came to the house the note was brought forth, turned around and over, and viewed from every angle, until the writing - which was only pencil, to begin with - became more and more illegible, and at last the letters could hardly be made out at all. For a year the Bottle remained in the cabinet; then it was sent up to the attic, where it was smothered with dust and spider webs. Up there it thought of its better days, when it had provided the red wine in the fresh woods, and when it had been rocked by the billows, and had had a secret, a letter, a sigh of farewell, entrusted to its care.

For twenty years it was left in the attic, and it might have remained there still longer if the house had not been rebuilt. The roof was torn down; the Bottle was found, and remarks were made about it, but it still couldn't understand the language; one doesn't learn a language by standing in an attic, even in twenty years. "If only I had stayed in the parlor downstairs," it thought, "I would have learned it!"

It now was washed and rinsed out, and it needed cleaning badly. It felt itself once more quite clear and transparent; it felt young in its old age. But the note it had carried had been destroyed in the washing. Now it was filled with seed corn - what sort, it didn't know - was well packed, and corked up tightly; it could see neither lamp nor candle, not to mention sun or moon. "One should be able to see something when one goes on a journey," thought the Bottle. But while it saw nothing, it did something - and that is of far greater importance. It traveled, and at last came to its destination, where it was unpacked.

"What a lot of trouble those foreigners have gone to with that!" it was said. "And yet it's probably cracked!" But the Bottle wasn't cracked. It understood all that was said here, for every word was spoken in the language it had heard on coming out of the furnace at the factory, and at the wine merchant's, and in the woods, and aboard the ship - the only language that was right, the good, old language that one could understand. The Bottle had come home to its own country; to hear the language was a welcome greeting in itself, and in its joy it nearly jumped from the hands that held it! It was barely aware that its cork was pulled out and that it was emptied of its contents and sent down to the cellar - there to be kept and forgotten; however, there is no place like home, even in the cellar! It never gave thought to how long a time it lay there, for it lay in comfort; it was there for many years. Then, finally, one day people came down and took the bottles away, ours among them.

The garden of the house was magnificently decorated; colorfully lighted lamps were hung in garlands, and paper lanterns glowed festively, resembling big, seemingly transparent tulips. It was a beautiful evening, too; the air was calm and mild; the stars twinkled brightly, and there was a new moon; people with sharp eyes could see the whole round moon, which looked like a blue-gray globe half encircled with gold.

There was some illumination along the outlying walks, too - at least enough to enable one to find his way along them. Rows of bottles, each with a candle in it, had been set up along the hedges. Among these stood the Bottle we know - that which was to end as a bottle neck, a bird glass - and it found everything here completely delightful; it was again out among the greenery; again it heard the sounds of gladness and festivity, song and music, the buzz and chatter of many people, especially from the section of the garden where the lamps were burning and the paper lanterns showed their bright colors. Though the Bottle stood along an out-of-the-way walk, even that gave it food for thought; in standing here and bearing its light, it was being both useful and enjoyable to others, and such was its rightful purpose. In an hour like that one can forget twenty years in an attic - and that is a good thing to forget.

A couple passed close by, arm in arm, like the betrothed pair out in the woods - the naval officer and the furrier's daughter; it seemed to the Bottle that it was living its life over again. Guests strolled to and fro in the garden; there were also passers-by who had ventured here for a glimpse of the guests and the festivities, and among them was an old maid who had no relatives or family but was not friendless. She was thinking of the same thing that the Bottle was; she thought of the green woods and the young betrothed couple of so long ago. That indeed concerned her, because she had been a part of it - she was one of the two lovers! That had been the happiest time of her life, a time never to be forgotten, however old an old maid may be. But she did not recognize the Bottle, nor did it recognize her; and thus it is that we pass one another by in this world - though sooner or later we are sure to meet again, as did these two, who were now residents of the same town.

From the garden the Bottle went back to the wine merchant's; there it was once more filled with wine and then sold to an aeronaut, whose next balloon ascension was to be on the following Sunday. A crowd of people came to see the event; there was military music, and many elaborate preparations had been made for the occasion. The Bottle saw it all from a basket, where it lay with a live rabbit, who was very disheartened because he knew he

was going up only to come down again by parachute. The Bottle knew nothing about going up or coming down, but it saw how the balloon swelled out larger and larger, and that when it could grow no larger it began to raise itself, higher and higher, and rolled uneasily; then the ropes that held it down were cut, and it floated up with the aeronaut, the basket, the rabbit, and the bottle. The band played, and all the people cried, "Hurrah!"

"It's funny to go up in the air like this!" thought the Bottle. "It must be a new kind of sailing; you can't run onto rocks up here!"

Many thousands of people looked up at the balloon, and the old maid watched it, too. She was standing at the open attic window, beside the cage with the little canary, who at that time didn't have a glass for his water but had to get along with an old cup. In the window was a flowering myrtle, which the old woman had moved aside so it wouldn't fall out when she leaned forward to see the proceedings. She could see the aeronaut in the balloon basket; he let the rabbit fall by parachute, then drank a toast to all the spectators and flung the Bottle high into the air. She naturally had no thought of having seen the same bottle fly through the air on that happy day in the green woods, in her youth.

The Bottle didn't have time to think at all, so suddenly did it reach the highest point of its life. Far below lay the towers and roofs of the town; people were so tiny that they were hardly visible at all.

Now it fell, but it was a quite different fall from the rabbit's. The Bottle turned somersaults in the air, and felt itself so young, so wild! It was half full of wine, but not for long. What a voyage! The sun glittered on the Bottle, and all eyes followed it; the balloon itself was already a considerable distance aloft, and soon the Bottle was out of view. It fell on a roof, and broke in two, but there was such spirit in the pieces that they couldn't remain still! They leaped and rolled, downward, downward until they reached the courtyard, where they broke into still smaller pieces. Only the neck of the Bottle was left whole; it looked as if it had been cut off cleanly with a diamond.

"It can be used as a bird glass," said the man who lived in the cellar. But he himself had neither bird nor cage, and it would hardly have been worth while to get them just because he had a bottle neck that might be used as a bird glass. He knew, however, that the old maid up in the attic could use it. So the Bottle Neck was taken upstairs, a cork was put in, and the part that had always been the top was now at the bottom - as often happens in life's changes; it was filled with fresh water, and was hung on the cage for the little bird who sang so merrily.

"Yes, you may well sing," said the Bottle Neck. And it was indeed a remarkable bottle neck, for it had been up in a balloon; this, however, was all that was known of its story. Now, in hanging here as a bird glass, it could hear the hum and buzz of people in the street below and the voice of the old maid in her chamber. She had a visitor just now, a friend of her own age, and they were talking - not about the bird glass, but about the myrtle at the window.

"You certainly shan't waste two dollars for a bridal bouquet for your daughter!" said the old maid. "You shall have a charming one from me, full of flowers! See how lovely my myrtle is! Yes, it's an offshoot from the myrtle you gave me, the day after my betrothal. I was going to have my own bridal bouquet made of it, when the year was up, but that day never came. Those eyes that were to have been my light and joy throughout life were closed; at the bottom of the sea he sleeps sweetly, the angel. The myrtle grew until it was like an old tree, but I aged even more; and when it withered I took the last fresh shoot and set it into the ground, and now that shoot is like a tree, and at last it shall serve at a wedding, as a bridal bouquet for your daughter!"

And there were tears in the old maid's eyes; she spoke again of the friend of her youth and of their betrothal in the woods; she thought of the toasts that had been drunk, thought of his first kiss - but she said nothing about that; she was an old maid now.

She thought of so many things, but little did she think that just outside her window was a remembrance of that time, the neck of that very Bottle which had said "pop!" when its cork had been pulled out for the drinking of the toasts. The old Bottle didn't know her either, for it hadn't listened to what she had said, partly - in fact, chiefly - because it thought only of itself.