

The Shirt Collar

Hans Christian Andersen

There was once a perfect gentleman whose whole household goods consisted of one bootjack and a comb. But he also had one of the most remarkable shirt collars in the world. I'll tell you a story about it.

When the shirt collar had passed his prime he turned his thoughts to marriage. In the fullness of time he went to the wash, and there he met with a garter.

"My!" said the collar, "anyone so slender, so tender, so neat and nice as you are, I never did see. May I know your name?"

"No," said the garter. "I won't tell you."

"Then at least tell me where you live?" asked the collar.

But the garter was so modest that she couldn't bring herself to answer such an embarrassing question.

"I believe you are a girdle," said the collar. "A sort of underneath girdle. And I dare say you're as useful as you are beautiful, my pretty little dear."

"I forbid you to speak to me," said the garter. "I'm sure I haven't given you the slightest encouragement."

"Your beauty is every encouragement," said the collar.

"Kindly keep away from me," said the garter. "You look too masculine."

"Oh, I'm a perfect gentleman," said the collar. "I've a bootjack and a comb to prove it."

This wasn't true at all, for they belonged to his master, but he liked to boast.

"Please don't come so close," said the garter. "I'm not used to such behaviour."

"Prude!" the collar called her as they took him from the washtub. They starched him, hung him over a chair back in the sun, and then stretched him out on an ironing board. There he met with a sadiron.

"My dear lady," said the collar, "you adorable widow woman, the closer you come the warmer I feel. I'm a changed collar since I met you, without a wrinkle left in me. You burn clear through me. Oh, won't you be mine?"

"Rag!" said the sadiron, as she flattened him out, for she went her way like a railway engine pulling cars down a track. "Rag!" was what she said.

The collar was the worse for wear at the edges, so the scissors were called for to trim him.

"Oh," said the collar, "you must be a ballet dancer. How straight you stretch your legs out. Such a graceful performance! No one can do that like you."

"I'm well aware of it," said the scissors.

"You deserve to be no less than a countess," said the collar. "All I have to offer is my perfect gentleman, bootjack and comb. Oh, if only I had an earldom."

"I do believe he's daring to propose," said the scissors. She cut him so furiously that he never recovered.

"Now I shall have to ask the comb," said the collar. "My dear, how remarkably well you've kept your teeth. Have you ever thought of getting engaged?"

"Why, of course," said the comb. "I am engaged-to the bootjack."

"Engaged!" the collar exclaimed. Now that there was no one left for him to court, the collar pretended that he had never meant to marry.

Time passed and the collar went his way to the bin in a paper mill, where the rags kept company according to rank, the fine rags in one bin, the coarse in another, just as it is in the world. They all gossiped aplenty but the collar chattered the most, for he was an awful braggart.

"I've had sweethearts by the dozen," he told them. "Ladies never would leave me alone, and you can't blame them; for I was such a perfect gentleman, stiff with starch, and with a bootjack and comb to spare. You should have seen me then. You should have seen me unbend.

"I'll never forget my first love-such a charming little girdle, so slender and tender. She threw herself into a tub of water, all for the love of me. Then there was the widow, glowing to get me, but I jilted her and let her cool off. And there was the ballet dancer, whose mark I bear to this day. What a fiery creature she was! And even my comb fell so hard in love with me that she lost all her teeth when I left her. Yes, indeed, I have plenty on my conscience. But the garter-I mean the girdle - who drowned herself in the wash tub, is the one I feel most badly about. Oh, I have a black record, and it's high time I turned into spotless white paper."

And that's exactly what happened. All the rags were made into paper, and the collar became the page you see, the very paper on which this story is printed. That was because he boasted so outrageously about things that never had happened. So let's be careful to behave we better than he did, for you never can tell. Some day we may end up in the rag bag, and be made into white paper on which the whole story of our life is printed in full detail. Then we'd have to turn tattletale on ourselves, just as the shirt collar has done.