

Bottleneck

In a narrow, crooked alley, among a row of other wretched little houses, stood a narrow, tall house, half stone and half wood, ready to fall apart at every seam. Poor people lived there; especially poor and meager was the setup in the tiny room huddled right under the roof. Outside the window of that room hung an old cage, in which there was not even a proper little water cup: its place was taken by a bottle neck, stopped with a cork and turned upside down with the corked end pointing downward. At the open window stood an old maiden, treating a hemp seed bird to fresh chickweed, while the little bird cheerfully hopped from perch to perch, trilling its song.

"It's easy for you to sing!" said the bottle neck, of course not as we speak—for a bottle neck cannot speak—it only thought it, said it to itself, just as people sometimes talk mentally to themselves. "Yes, it's easy for you to sing! I suppose all your bones are intact! But just try losing your whole body like I did, remaining with only a neck and a mouth, and that mouth stopped up with a cork—I bet you wouldn't sing then! Still, it's good that someone can be cheerful! I have no reason to be cheerful or to sing, and besides, I cannot sing today! But in former times, when I was still a whole bottle, I too would start singing if someone rubbed me with a wet cork. They even once called me a lark, a great lark! I have been to the forest! Indeed, they took me along on the day of the furrier's daughter's betrothal. Yes, I remember everything so vividly, as if it happened yesterday! Much have I endured, if I think about it; I passed through fire and water, have been underground and up in the heavens, unlike others! And now again I soar in the air and warm myself in the sunshine! My story is worth hearing! But I do not tell it aloud, nor can I."

And the neck told it to itself, or rather, thought it through to itself. The story was indeed quite remarkable, while the hemp seed bird meanwhile kept on singing in its cage. Down below, people walked and rode along the street, each thinking his own thoughts or thinking of nothing at all—but the bottle neck was thinking!

It recalled the fiery furnace at the glassworks, where life had been blown into the bottle; it remembered how hot the young bottle had been, how it gazed into the bubbling melting furnace—the place of its birth—feeling a flaming desire to throw itself back in there. But gradually it cooled down and fully reconciled itself to its new condition. It stood in a row with other brothers and sisters. There was a whole regiment of them! All had come out of the same furnace, but some were destined for champagne, others for beer, and that makes a difference! Later on, of course, it

sometimes happens that a beer bottle gets filled with precious *lacrimae Christi*, and a champagne bottle with shoe polish, yet still the original purpose of each immediately reveals itself by its shape—a noble one will remain noble even with shoe polish inside!

All the bottles were packed; our bottle too; at that time it did not yet suspect that it would end up as a bottle neck serving as a little cup for a bird—a position, however, in essence, quite respectable: better to be something than nothing! The bottle saw the white light only in a Rhine wine cellar; there it and its fellow bottles were unpacked and rinsed—what a strange sensation that was! The bottle lay empty, without a cork, feeling a certain emptiness in its stomach, as if something were missing, though what exactly it did not know itself. But then it was filled with wonderful wine, corked, sealed with wax, and a label pasted on its side: "First Quality." The bottle seemed to have received the highest mark on an examination; and indeed the wine was good, and the bottle too. In youth we are all poets, and so something played and sang within our bottle about things of which it itself had no notion: about green, sunlit hills with vineyards on their slopes, about merry girls and youths who gather grapes with songs, kiss and laugh... Yes, life is so beautiful! That is what stirred and sang inside the bottle, just as in the souls of young poets—they too often do not know themselves what they sing about.

One morning the bottle was bought—a boy from the furrier came to the cellar and demanded a bottle of the very first quality wine. The bottle found itself in a basket alongside a ham, cheese, and sausage, the most wonderful butter, and rolls. The furrier's daughter herself packed everything into the basket. The girl was young and pretty; her black eyes sparkled with laughter, and a smile played upon her lips, as expressive as her eyes. Her hands were slender, soft, and whiter than white, but her bosom and neck were even whiter. One could see at once that she was one of the most beautiful girls in the city and—imagine it—not yet betrothed!

The whole family was setting off for the forest; the girl carried the basket of provisions on her lap; the bottle neck protruded from beneath the white tablecloth covering the basket. The bottle's red wax head looked straight at the girl and at the young navigator, son of their neighbor the painter, childhood playmate of the beauty, who sat beside her. He had just brilliantly passed his examination, and the very next day he was to sail away on a ship to foreign lands. Much was talked about this during the preparations for the forest outing, and in those moments no particular joy was noticeable in the gaze and expression of the pretty furrier's daughter's face.

The young people went wandering through the forest. What did they talk about? Ah, the bottle did not hear that: it remained in the basket and even managed to

grow bored standing there. But finally it was taken out, and at once it saw that matters had meanwhile taken a most cheerful turn: everyone's eyes were sparkling with laughter, the furrier's daughter was smiling, though she spoke somewhat less than before, while her cheeks bloomed like roses.

The father took the bottle of wine and the corkscrew... And what a strange sensation one feels when being uncorked for the first time! The bottle could never forget that solemn minute when the cork was practically knocked out of it and a deep sigh of relief escaped, while the wine bubbled into the glasses: glug-glug-glug!

"To the health of the bridegroom and the bride!" said the father, and everyone emptied their glasses to the bottom, while the young navigator kissed the beautiful bride.

"God grant you happiness!" added the elders. The young sailor filled the glasses once more and exclaimed:

"To my return home and our wedding exactly one year from now!" And when the glasses were drained, he seized the bottle and tossed it high, high into the air: "You have been witness to the finest moments of my life, so serve no one else anymore!"

At that time it never entered the furrier's daughter's head that she would ever see that same bottle again, high, high in the air, yet so it happened.

The bottle fell into the thick reeds growing along the banks of a small forest lake. The bottle neck still vividly remembered how it lay there and reflected: "I treated them to wine, and now they treat me to swamp water, but certainly from a kind heart!" The bottle could no longer see either the bridegroom or the bride, nor the happy old folks, but for a long time it still heard their joyful revelry and singing. Then two peasant boys appeared, peered into the reeds, spotted the bottle, and took it—now it was settled somewhere.

The boys lived in a little house in the forest. Yesterday their elder brother, a sailor, had come to bid them farewell—he was departing on a long voyage; and so their mother was now busy packing into his chest this and that, things needed for his journey. In the evening the father himself intended to carry the chest to town, to say goodbye to his son once more and convey the mother's blessing. A little bottle of liqueur had been packed into the chest. Suddenly the boys arrived with a large bottle, far better and sturdier than the small one. Much more liqueur could fit into it, and the liqueur itself was very good and even medicinal—beneficial for the stomach. Thus, the bottle was filled not with red wine but with bitter liqueur, yet

that too was good—for the stomach. Instead of the small bottle, the large one was packed into the chest, which accordingly set sail together with Peter Jensen, who served on the same ship as the young navigator. But the young navigator did not see the bottle, and even if he had seen it, he would not have recognized it; it would never have occurred to him that this was the very same one from which they had drunk in the forest at his betrothal and to his happy return home.

True, there was no longer wine in the bottle, but something no worse, and Peter Jensen frequently took out his "pharmacy," as his comrades called the bottle, and poured them medicine, which worked so well on the stomach. And the medicine retained its healing property down to the very last drop. Those were merry times! The bottle even sang when the cork was rubbed across it, and for this it was nicknamed "the big lark" or "Peter Jensen's lark."

Much time passed; the bottle had long stood empty in a corner when suddenly disaster struck. Whether the misfortune happened on the way to foreign lands or already on the return journey—the bottle did not know, for it had never once set foot on shore. A storm broke out; huge black waves tossed the ship like a ball, the mast snapped, a hole formed and water rushed in, the pumps ceased working. Impenetrable darkness reigned; the ship heeled over and began to sink. In those final minutes, the young navigator managed to scribble a few words on a scrap of paper: "Lord have mercy! We are perishing!" Then he wrote his fiancée's name, his own name, and the ship's name, rolled the paper into a tube, shoved it into the first empty bottle that came to hand, corked it tightly, and threw it into the raging waves. He did not know that this was the very same bottle from which he had poured good wine into glasses on the happy day of his engagement. Now it floated, rocking upon the waves, carrying his farewell, his deathbed greeting.

The ship went to the bottom, the entire crew with it, but the bottle sped across the sea like a bird: for it carried the lover's heartfelt greeting to his beloved! The sun rose and set, reminding the bottle of the glowing furnace in which it had been born and into which it had so wished to throw itself back then. It experienced both calm and new storms, yet it did not smash against rocks nor fall into a shark's jaws. For more than a year it drifted hither and thither upon the waves; true, during this time it was its own master, but even that can grow tedious.

The inscribed scrap of paper, the lover's final farewell to his beloved, would have brought only sorrow had it fallen into the hands of the one to whom it was addressed. But where were those little white hands that spread the white tablecloth on the fresh grass in the green forest on the happy engagement day? Where was the tanner's daughter? And where was the bottle's own homeland?

Toward what country was it now drawing near? Of all this it knew nothing. It drifted and drifted upon the waves until finally it grew bored. Drifting upon the waves was *bovce* not its proper business, and yet it drifted, until at last it washed ashore in a foreign land. It understood not a word of what was spoken around it: they spoke some strange, unfamiliar language, not the one to which it had grown accustomed in its homeland; and not to understand the language spoken around one—is a great loss!

The bottle was caught, examined, the note was seen and taken out; they turned it this way and that, but could not decipher it, though they understood that the bottle had been thrown from a sinking ship and that all this was mentioned in the note. But what exactly? Ah, therein lay the whole point! The note was shoved back into the bottle, and the bottle was placed in a large cupboard standing in a large room of a large house.

Whenever a new guest appeared in the house, the note was taken out, shown, turned about and examined, so that the letters written in pencil gradually wore away and finally disappeared entirely—no one would now say that anything had ever been written on that scrap. The bottle itself stood in the cupboard for another year or so, then ended up in the attic, where it became completely covered with dust and cobwebs. Standing there, it remembered its best days, when red wine was poured from it in the green forest, when it rocked upon the sea waves carrying within itself a secret, a letter, a final farewell!...

In the attic it stood for a full twenty years; it would have stood longer, but they decided to rebuild the house. The roof was removed, they saw the bottle and said something, but it still understood not a word—one does not learn a language by standing in an attic, even if one stands there for twenty years! "If only I had remained downstairs, in the room," the bottle reasoned justly, "I would surely have learned it!"

The bottle was washed and rinsed—it greatly needed this. And so it became clear again, brightened, as if rejuvenated; but the note which it had carried inside was flushed out along with the water.

The bottle was filled with some seeds unfamiliar to it; it was corked and packed so carefully that it could see not even God's light, let alone the sun or the moon. "Yet one must see something when traveling," thought the bottle, but it saw nothing at all. The main thing, however, was done: it had set out on its journey and arrived where it was supposed to. There it was unpacked.

"My, how they labored over it there, abroad! Look how they packed it, and yet it has probably cracked!" the bottle heard, but it turned out that it had not cracked.

The bottle understood every word; they spoke the same language it had heard when emerging from the melting furnace, heard at the wine merchant's, and in the forest, and on the ship—in short, the one true, understandable, good native language! It found itself at home again, in its homeland! From joy it nearly jumped out of their hands and barely noticed that it was uncorked, emptied, and then placed in the cellar, where it was forgotten. But even in the cellar, home is good. It never occurred to it to count how long it stood there, though it stood for more than a year! But then people came again and took all the bottles that were in the cellar, including ours.

The garden was magnificently decorated; garlands of multicolored lights hung over the paths, paper lanterns glowed like transparent tulips. The evening was wonderful, the weather clear and calm. Little stars shone in the sky and the young moon; indeed, not only its golden crescent edge was visible, but the entire gray-blue circle—visible, of course, only to those with good eyes. Illumination had also been arranged in the side alleys, though not as brilliant as in the main ones, yet quite sufficient so that people would not stumble in the dark. Here, among the bushes, bottles were placed with lit candles stuck into them; here too was our bottle, destined in the end to serve as a little cup for a bird. The bottle was delighted; it found itself among greenery again, merriment surrounded it once more, singing and music resounded, laughter and chatter of the crowd, especially thick where garlands of colored lamps swayed and paper lanterns gleamed with bright colors. True, the bottle itself stood in a side alley, but precisely there one could dream; it held a candle—serving both for beauty and for use, and therein lies the whole essence. In such moments one forgets even twenty years spent in the attic—what could be better!

A couple passed arm in arm past the bottle, exactly like that couple in the forest—the navigator and the tanner's daughter; the bottle suddenly seemed transported into the past. Invited guests strolled in the garden, and strangers too, who were permitted to admire the guests and the beautiful spectacle; among them was an old maid, she had no relatives, but she had friends. She thought of the same things as the bottle; she too remembered the green forest and the young couple who were so dear to her heart—for she herself had taken part in that merry outing, she herself had been that happy bride! She had spent then in the forest the happiest hours of her life, and those are not forgotten, even when one becomes an old maid! But she did not recognize the bottle, nor did the bottle recognize her. Such things happen in the world often enough: old acquaintances meet and part without recognizing each other, until a new meeting.

And the bottle awaited a new meeting with an old acquaintance—for they were now in the same city!

From the garden the bottle went to the wine merchant, was filled with wine again and sold to an aeronaut, who was to ascend in a balloon the following Sunday. A multitude of people gathered, a brass band played; great preparations were underway. The bottle saw all this from the basket, where it lay beside a live rabbit. The poor rabbit was utterly bewildered—he knew he would be lowered from a height by parachute! The bottle, however, did not know whether they would fly upward or downward; it saw only that the balloon inflated more and more, then lifted off the ground and strained upward, but the ropes still held it fast. Finally they were cut, and the balloon soared into the air together with

with the aeronaut, the basket, the bottle, and the rabbit. The music thundered, and the crowd shouted "hurrah."

"How strange it is to fly through the air!" thought the bottle. "Here is a new way of sailing! At least here one won't bump into a stone!"

The multitude of thousands gazed at the balloon; an old maiden also watched from her open window; outside the window hung a cage with a linnet, which still made do with a teacup instead of a little drinking vessel. On the windowsill stood a myrtle tree; the old maiden pushed it aside so as not to knock it over, leaned out of the window, and clearly distinguished in the sky the balloon and the aeronaut, who lowered the rabbit by parachute, then drank from the bottle to the health of the inhabitants and tossed the bottle upward. It never occurred to the maiden that this was the very same bottle her fiancé had thrown high into the air in the green forest on the happiest day of her life!

As for the bottle, it had no time to think about anything—it found itself so unexpectedly at the zenith of its life's journey. Towers and rooftops lay somewhere down below; people seemed so tiny!..

And then it began to fall downward, much faster than the rabbit; it somersaulted and danced in the air, feeling so young, so full of life, the wine inside it bubbling with energy—but not for long, it spilled out. What a flight it was! Sunbeams reflected off its glass walls; all the people watched only it—the balloon had already vanished; soon the bottle too disappeared from the spectators' sight. It fell onto a roof and shattered. The shards, however, did not settle immediately—they jumped and bounced across the roof until they ended up in the courtyard and broke against the stones into even smaller pieces. Only the neck survived; it looked as though it had been sliced off with a diamond!

"What a splendid little cup for a bird!" said the cellar keeper, though he himself had neither bird nor cage, and acquiring them merely because he had found a bottle neck suitable for a cup would be going too far! But for the old maiden living in the attic, it could come in handy, and so the bottle neck came into her possession; it was stoppered with a cork, turned upside down—such changes often happen in the world—filled with fresh water, and hung beside the cage where the linnet sang so joyfully.

"Yes, you sing well!" said the bottle neck, and indeed it was remarkable—it had flown in a hot-air balloon! None knew anything else about its life. Now it served as a drinking cup for the bird, swaying in the air together with the cage; from the street reached the rumble of carriages and the murmur of the crowd, while from the small room came the voice of the old maiden. An old friend, her contemporary, had come to visit her, and their conversation was not about the bottle neck, but about the myrtle tree standing in the window.

"Really, there is no need for you to spend two rixdollars on a wedding wreath for your daughter!" said the old maiden. "Take my myrtle! See how wonderful it is, all covered in blossoms! It grew from a cutting of the myrtle you gave me the day after my engagement. I intended to weave a wreath from it for my own wedding day, but that day never came! Those eyes that were meant to shine upon me with joy and happiness throughout my life have closed forever! My dear fiancé sleeps at the bottom of the sea!.. The myrtle has grown old, and I even more so! When it began to wither, I took its last fresh twig and planted it in the earth. See how it has grown, and yet it will finally make it to a wedding: we shall weave a bridal wreath from its branches for your daughter!"

Tears welled up in the old maiden's eyes; she began to recall the friend of her youth, the engagement in the forest, the toast to their health, she thought of the first kiss... but did not mention it—for she was already an old maid! She remembered and thought of many things, only not that just outside her window, so close to her, lay another reminder of that time—the neck of that very bottle from which the cork had popped with such a noise when they drank to the health of the betrothed. And the neck itself did not recognize its old acquaintance, partly because it wasn't listening to what she was saying, but mainly because it thought only of itself.