# There is a difference!

It was May; the air was still quite cold, yet everything in nature—the bushes, the trees, the fields, and the meadows—spoke of spring's arrival. The meadows were speckled with flowers: blossoms were opening on the hedges as well; and right nearby stood the very embodiment of spring itself—a little apple tree covered entirely in bloom. One branch upon it was especially lovely: young, fresh, and utterly showered with delicate, half-opened pink buds. It knew well how beautiful it was; the consciousness of its beauty lay within its sap. Therefore, the branch was not at all surprised when a carriage traveling along the road stopped directly before the apple tree, and the young countess declared that it would be hard to find anything more exquisite than this little branch, that it was the living incarnation of spring's youthful beauty. The branch was broken off; the countess took it in her tender fingers and carefully carried it home, shielding it from the sun with a silk parasol. Upon arriving at the castle, the branch was borne through lofty, luxuriously furnished chambers. White curtains fluttered at the open windows, and bouquets of wonderful flowers stood in shining, transparent vases. Into one such vase, seemingly molded from freshly fallen snow, they placed the apple branch, surrounding it with fresh, light-green beech boughs. How delightful, how beautiful it was!

The branch grew proud, and why not? After all, this was only as it should be!

Many different people passed through the room; each visitor dared express an opinion only to the extent that significance was acknowledged in himself. And so some said nothing at all, while others spoke far too much; the branch realized that among people, just as among plants, there are differences.

"Some exist for beauty, others only for utility, and without a third sort one can do altogether," thought the branch.

It was placed directly opposite an open window, from which it could see the garden and the fields, so that it might gaze its fill upon various flowers and plants and ponder the difference between them; there were many kinds there—both luxurious and simple, even excessively simple.

"Poor outcast plants!" said the branch. "There is indeed a great difference between us! How unhappy they must feel, if indeed they are capable of feeling at all, as I and those like me are! Yes, a great difference exists between us! But so it must be, otherwise all would be equal!"

And the branch looked upon the field flowers with a certain compassion; one particular sort of flower seemed especially pitiful to it, flowers that swarmed over all the fields and even the ditches. No one gathered them into bouquets—they were too simple, too ordinary; they could be found even between the stones of the pavement, pushing up from everywhere like the vilest weed. And their name was most disgusting: devil's milk-pails (the Danish name for dandelions.—Trans.). "Poor despised plant!" said the branch. "You are not to blame for belonging to such a kind and for having such an ugly name! But among plants, just as among people, there must be a difference!"

"A difference?" replied the sunbeam, kissing the flowering branch, yet kissing also the yellow devil's milk-pails growing in the field; its other brothers—the sunbeams—likewise kissed the poor little flowers equally with the most splendid ones.

The apple branch had never reflected upon God's infinite love for all living things on earth, never thought about how much beauty and goodness might lie hidden in every creature of God, hidden yet not forgotten. Nothing of the sort had ever entered its mind, and why should it? Strictly speaking, this too was only as it should be! The sunbeam, the ray of light, understood the matter better.

"How shortsighted, how blind you are!" it said to the little branch. "What outcast plant is it that you pity so?"

"Devil's milk-pails!" said the branch. "No one ever makes bouquets from them; they are trampled underfoot—there are simply too many of them! Their seeds fly over the roads like shorn wool and cling to the dresses of passersby. Mere weeds, and nothing more! Yet someone must be the weed! Ah, how grateful I am to fate that I am not among their number!"

A whole crowd of children poured out onto the field. The youngest was carried in someone's arms and set down on the grass amidst the yellow flowers. The little one laughed merrily, frolicked, beat the grass with its feet, tumbled about, plucked the yellow flowers, and even kissed them in the simplicity of an innocent child's soul. The older children stripped the flowers away, bent the hollow stems, and inserted one end into another; then from these separate rings they made long chains and garlands, adorning necks, shoulders, waists, chests, and heads with them. What splendor that was! The eldest of the children carefully picked the plants already gone to seed, crowned with feathery tufts, brought these airy woolly flowers—a sort of miracle of nature—to their mouths, and tried to blow away all the down at once. Whoever succeeded would receive new clothes before New Year's, so grandmother had said.

In this case, the despised flower proved to be a true prophet.

"Do you see?" asked the sunbeam. "Do you see its beauty, its great significance?"

"Yes, for children!" replied the branch.

An old grandmother woman came creeping onto the field and began digging up the roots of the yellow flowers with a blunt fragment of a knife. Some of the roots she intended to use for coffee, others to sell to the apothecary for medicine.

"Beauty, nevertheless, stands far higher!" said the branch. "Only the chosen shall enter the kingdom of the beautiful! There is indeed a difference among plants, just as among people!"

The sunbeam spoke of God's infinite love for every earthly creation: all that is endowed with life has its share in everything—in time and in eternity!

"Well, that is only how you think!" said the branch.

People entered the room; among them was the young countess who had placed the branch in the transparent, beautiful vase through which the sunlight shone. The countess carried in her hands a flower—what else?—wrapped in large green leaves; the flower lay within them as in a case, protected from the slightest breath of wind. And the countess carried it so tenderly as she had not even carried the delicate apple branch. Carefully she folded back the green leaves, and from behind them peeked the airy crown of the despised yellow flower. This was what the countess had so carefully plucked and so tenderly carried, lest the wind blow away even one of the finest feathers of its fluffy sphere. She brought it home whole and unharmed and could not admire enough the beauty, the transparency, the entire peculiar structure of this wonder-flower, whose whole charm lasts only until the first breath of wind.

"Look, what a miracle the Lord God has created!" said the countess. "I shall draw it together with the apple branch. Everyone admires the latter, but by the Creator's grace this poor little flower is endowed with no less beauty. However different they may be, both are nevertheless children of one kingdom of beauty!"

And the sunbeam kissed the poor little flower, and then kissed the flowering branch, and its petals seemed to blush slightly.