

Tales of a Sunbeam

"Now I shall begin!" declared the wind.

"No, if you please!" said the rain. "Now it is my turn! You have stood long enough on the corner and howled with all your might! Is this your thanks for me, when for your sake I twisted and broke the umbrellas of those gentlemen who wanted nothing to do with you?"

"The word is mine!" said the sunbeam. "Attention!"

And this was spoken with such brilliance and majesty that the wind immediately stretched out to his full length. But the rain still would not be quiet; he teased the wind and said:

"Are we really going to tolerate this? That gentleman always pushes ahead! Let us not listen to him! As if we really need to!"

And the sunbeam began:

"A swan flew over a stormy sea; its feathers shone like gold; one feather fell and landed on a large merchant ship gliding across the sea under full sail. The feather became entangled in the curly hair of a young man, the cargo supervisor. The feather of the bird of happiness touched his brow, turned in his hand into a writing quill, and soon he became a wealthy merchant, for whom it was no trouble at all to buy golden spurs or to exchange a barrel of gold for a nobleman's coat of arms. I myself sparkled upon that shield!" added the sunbeam.

"The swan flew also over a green meadow; in the shade of an old, solitary tree lay a shepherd boy, a seven-year-old lad, watching his sheep. The swan kissed one of the leaves of the tree as it flew by; the leaf fell into the shepherd's hand, and from that single leaf came three, then ten, then a whole book! The boy read in it of the wonders of nature, of his native tongue, of faith and knowledge, and when going to sleep, he hid it under his head so as not to forget what he had read. And so that book led him first to the school bench, and then to the podium of science. I read his name among the names of scholars!" added the sunbeam.

"The swan flew into the thicket of a forest and descended to rest upon a quiet, dark forest lake overgrown with water lilies; reeds grew on the shore, wild apple trees stood nearby, and in their branches the cuckoo called and the wood pigeons cooed.

A poor woman was gathering firewood there; on her back she carried a whole bundle, and against her breast lay a small child. She saw the golden swan, the swan of happiness, which flew out from among the reeds. But what was it that sparkled there? A golden egg! The woman placed it inside her bodice, and the egg grew warm; a living creature stirred within it. It was already tapping with its beak against the shell, while the woman thought it was her own heart beating.

Coming home to her poor hut, she took out the golden egg. 'Tick-tock!' could be heard from it, as though the egg were a golden clock, but it was a real egg, and life beat within it. Then the shell cracked, and a little swan covered in golden down poked its head out. On its neck were four golden rings, and since the woman had three sons besides the one who had been with her in the forest, she immediately guessed that these rings were intended for her children. As soon as she removed the rings, the golden chick flew away.

The woman kissed the rings, let each child kiss his own ring, pressed them to each child's heart, and then slipped them onto the children's fingers.

'I saw all this!' added the sunbeam. 'I saw also what came of it.'

One of the boys dug in the clay, took a lump of clay, began to knead it between his fingers, and out came a statue of Jason, who fetched the golden fleece.

Another boy immediately ran to the meadow, overgrown with wonderful, variegated flowers, gathered a whole handful of them, squeezed them tightly in his little hand, and the flower juices squirted right into his eyes, wetting his golden ring... Something stirred in the boy's brain, and in his hands as well, and a few years later people in a great city spoke of a new, great painter.

The third boy squeezed his ring so tightly with his teeth that it emitted a sound, an echo of what lay hidden in the boy's heart, and from that time forth his feelings and thoughts began to flow out in sounds, rising to heaven like singing swans, plunging into the abysses of thought as swans plunge into deep lakes. The boy became a composer; every country may claim him as its own.

The fourth boy was a runt, and on his tongue, as they said, sat a canker; he had to be treated with butter and pepper, like sick chicks, and with good spankings too—well, they treated him accordingly!

'Yet I gave him my solar kiss!' said the sunbeam. 'Not just one, but ten! The boy was of a poetic nature, and they either bestowed kisses upon him or served him flicks, yet he still possessed the ring of happiness given him by the golden swan, and his thoughts soared to heaven like golden butterflies, and the butterfly—is a symbol of immortality!'

'A long story!' said the wind.

'And a boring one!' added the rain. 'Blow on me; I cannot come to my senses!'

And the wind began to blow, while the sunbeam continued:

'The swan of happiness flew also over a deep bay where fishermen cast their nets. The poorest of the fishermen was about to marry, and he did marry.

And the swan brought him a piece of amber. Amber attracts, and this piece attracted hearts to the fisherman's home. Amber is the most wonderful fragrant incense, and from the fisherman's house there issued a fragrance as from a temple; it was the fragrance of God's own nature! The poor couple enjoyed domestic happiness, were content with their modest household, and their whole life passed like a single sunny day!'

'Is it not time to interrupt him!' said the wind. 'He has chattered enough! I am bored!'

'And so am I!' said the rain. 'But what shall we say, having listened to these stories?'

We shall say:

'Well, here is the end of them!'

Now I will tell you a story about happiness. Everyone is acquainted with happiness, but to some it smiles year after year, to others only in certain years, and there are even such people whom it gifts with a smile only once in their lives, but there are none whom it would not smile upon at least once.