The gate key

Every key has a history, and there are many kinds of keys - a chamberlain's key, a watch key, Saint Peter's key. We could tell you about all the keys; but now we will only tell about the councilor's gate key.

It had come into being at a locksmith's, but it might well have believed it had been made by a blacksmith, the way the man had worked on it with hammer and file. It was too large for one's trouser pocket, so it had to be put into the overcoat pocket. There it often lay in utter darkness; yet it had its own special hanging place on the wall, beside a childhood silhouette of the Councilor, in which he looked like a dumpling dressed in a frilled shirt.

It is said that every human being acquires in his character and conduct something from the astrological sign under which he has been born, such as the Bull, the Virgin, or Scorpion, as they are called in the almanacs. The Councilor's wife never mentioned the names of any of these; she said that her husband was born under the sign of the "Wheelbarrow," for he always had to be pushed on. His father had pushed him into an office; his mother had pushed him into matrimony; and his wife had pushed him on to become a councilor; the latter fact, however, she did not mention, being a good, sensible sort of woman who kept quiet in the right place and spoke and pushed in the right place.

He was now along in years - "well proportioned," as he said himself - a well-read man, good-natured, and "key wise" as well, which is something we shall better understand later. He was always in a good humor, loved all mankind, and liked to talk to everybody. If he went into the city, it was difficult to get him home again when his wife was not with him to push him along. He simply had to talk to every acquaintance he met; he had a lot of acquaintances, and this often made him late for dinner. Mrs. Councilor would sit at the window and watch for him. "Here he comes," she would say to the maid; "put the pot on the fire. Now he has stopped to speak to somebody, so take the pot off, or the food will be cooked too much. Now he is finally coming, so put the pot on again!"

But then he wouldn't come, after all. He would stand right under the windows of the house and nod up to her, and if an acquaintance happened to come by then, he could not keep from saying a few words to him; if while he was talking to this one, another one came by, he would take hold of the first by the buttonhole, clasp the other's hand, and shout to a third who wanted to pass by.

This was a heavy trial for the patience of the Councilor's wife. "Councilor! Councilor!" she would shout. "Yes, indeed, that man was born under the sign of the 'Wheelbarrow'; he won't move unless he is being pushed."

He was very fond of visiting bookshops and looking at books and periodicals. He would give his bookseller a small amount of money for the privilege of reading the new books at home, which meant he had permission to cut the leaves of the books along the side but not across the top, for then they could not be sold as new. He was a living newspaper, but a harmless one, and knew everything about engagements, weddings, and funerals, book talk and town talk. Yes, and he even gave out mysterious hints regarding matters no one else knew anything about. This mysterious information came from the gate key.

The Councilor and his wife had lived in their own house since young and newly married, and they'd had that very same gate key since then; but in those days they hadn't yet come to know of its unusual powers, and not until much later had they learned of these.

It was at the time of King Frederick VI. Copenhagen had no gas then; it had only train-oil lamps; it had no Tivoli Gardens, no Casino Theater, no streetcars, and no railways. It had very few public amusements, compared with what it now has. On Sundays one would go for a walk, out beyond the city gates, to the Assistants' Churchyard, read the inscriptions on the graves, sit down in the grass, eat from one's food basket, and drink a glass of schnapps; or one would go to Frederiksberg, where in front of the palace military music was played; and many people would go to see the royal family rowing about in the small, narrow canals of the park, with old King himself steering the boat, and he and the Queen greeting everyone, without distinction of rank. Well-to-do families from the city would come to this place and drink their afternoon tea. They could get hot water at a small farmhouse in the field outside the park, but they had to bring their own

tea service along.

One sunny Sunday afternoon the Councilor and his wife went out to the park, the servant girl walking in front with the tea service, a basket of food, and a "sip of Spendrup's Liqueur."

"Bring the gate key," Mrs. Councilor had said, "so we can get in by ourselves when we return; you know, they lock the gate here at nightfall, and the bell cord was broken this morning! It will be late before we get home! After we've been in Frederiksberg Park, we are going to the Casorti's theater at Vesterbro to see the pantomime, Harlequin, Chief of the Thrashers. You see them come down in a cloud; it costs two kroner a person."

And so they went to Frederiksberg, heard the music, saw the royal barges with their waving banners, saw the old King and the white swans. After drinking some very good tea, they hurried away; yet they did not arrive at the theater on time.

The rope-dance act was finished, the dance on stilts was finished, and the pantomime had started; as always, they were too late, and that was the Councilor's fault; every moment on the road, he had stopped to speak to an acquaintance. Within the theater he also found several good friends, and when the performance was over, he and his wife were obliged to accompany a family home at Vesterbro, to enjoy a glass of punch; they would stop for only ten minutes. But this was extended to a whole hour. They talked and talked. Especially entertaining was a Swedish baron, or, perhaps, he was German, for the Councilor hadn't quite caught which - but, on the other hand, the trick with the key that the baron taught him he caught and always remembered. This trick was extraordinarily interesting! He could get the key to answer everything that one asked it, even questions pertaining to the most secret matters. The Councilor's gate key was particularly suitable for performing this trick; its bit was heavy, and this part had to hang downward. The baron let the handle of the key rest on the forefinger of his right hand. There it hung loosely and lightly, and every pulsebeat in his finger could put it into motion and make it swing; and if this failed to happen, the baron understood how unnoticeably to make it turn as he wished. Every turn denoted a letter of the alphabet, and as many letters as desired, from A on through the alphabet, could be indicated by the key. When the first letter of a word was revealed, the key would turn to the opposite side; then the next letter would be sought, and in that manner one got whole words, sentences, and answers to questions. It was all a fake, but at any rate provided amusement; this was the Councilor's first thought, but he did not retain it; he became very engrossed in the key.

"Husband! Husband!" cried Mrs. Councilor. "The Westgate closes at twelve o'clock! We won't get through; we have only a quarter of an hour in which to hurry there."

They had to hurry indeed; several persons who were going into the city soon got ahead of them. They finally approached the outside guardhouse as the clock was striking twelve and the gates were being slammed shut. A number of people were locked out, and among these were the Councilor and his wife, with their servant girl, tea service, and empty food basket. Some stood there greatly frightened, while others were very annoyed, each reacting in his own manner. What could be done? Fortunately, an ordinance had been passed of late that one of the city gates, the Northgate, should not be locked at night, and there pedestrians were allowed to slip through the guardhouse into the city.

The road to the Northgate was by no means short, but the weather was fine, the sky bright with starlight and shooting stars; the frogs were croaking in the ditches and ponds. The party began singing and sang one song after another, but the Councilor did not sing; nor did he look up at the stars or even look at his own feet. He then fell down at the edge of the ditch, the full length of his body alongside it. One might have thought that he had had too much to drink; but it was not the punch, it was the key, that had gone to his head, and kept on turning there. They finally reached the Northgate guardhouse, slipped across the bridge and into the city.

"Now I am happy again, " said the Councilor's wife. "Here's our gate."

"But where is the gate key," said the Councilor. It was neither in the back pocket nor in the side pocket.

"Good gracious!" cried the Councilor's wife. "Haven't you got the key? You must have lost it after letting the Baron use it for the key trick. How will we get in now? You know the bell cord was broken this morning, and the watchman doesn't have a key to our home. We are in a hopeless situation!"

The servant girl began to cry. The Councilor was the only one who showed presence of mind.

"We must break in a windowpane at the grocer's downstairs!" he said, "get him up, and then we can get into the building."

He broke one pane; he broke two. "Petersen!" he shouted, as the put the handle of his umbrella in through the windowpanes. Whereupon the grocer's daughter began to scream loudly. The grocer threw open the door of his shop and shouted, "Watchman!" And before he had a chance to see and recognize the Councilor's family and let them in, the watchman blew his whistle, and in the next street another watchman answered and whistled. People appeared in the windows. "Where is the fire? Where is the cause of all the excitement?" they asked, and were still asking such questions even after the Councilor was in his room. There he removed his overcoat - and in it lay the gate key, not in the pocket, but inside the lining; it had slipped through a hole that should not have been in the pocket.

From that night on, the gate key held a unique and great importance, not only when it was taken out in the evening, but also when remaining at home, for in either case the Councilor would show how clever he was by making the key answer questions. He would think of the most likely answer and then pretend to let the key give it. Finally, he himself came to believe in the power of the key.

That was not so of the Pharmacist, however, a young man closely related to the Councilor's wife. The Pharmacist had a good head, a critical mind; he had, as mere schoolboy, sent in critical articles on books and the theater, but without his signature, which is always important. He was what one calls a bel esprit, but he by no means believed in spirits, and, least of all, key spirits.

"Yes, I believe, I believe," he said, "blessed Mr. Councilor, I believe in gate keys and all key spirits as firmly as I believe in that new science which is beginning to become known the table dance and the spirits in old and new furniture. Have you heard about that? I have! I have doubted - you know I am a skeptic - but I have been converted by reading, in a quite reliable foreign paper, a dreadful story. Councilor, can you imagine! I will give you the story as I read it. Two clever children had seen their parents raise the spirits in a large dining-room table. The little ones were alone, and decided they would try, in the same manner, to rub life into an old chest of drawers. Life came, for a spirit was awakened; but it did not tolerate the commands of mere children; it arose, and the chest of drawers creaked; it then shot out the drawers, and with its wooden legs put each of the children in a separate drawer. The chest of drawers then ran off with them, out the open door, down the stairs, into the street, and over to the canal, where it jumped out into the water and drowned both the children. Their little bodies were given Christian burial, but the chest of drawers was taken to the town hall, tried for murder, and burned alive in the market place! I have read this," said the Pharmacist, "in a foreign paper; it is not something I have invented myself. This is the truth, and may the key take me if it isn't! I swear to it - on my oath!"

The Councilor found that such talk was all too much like a coarse joke. The two could never speak agreeably about the key. The Pharmacist was key ignorant.

The Councilor made progress in his key knowledge; the key was his diversion and channel of wisdom.

One evening, as the Councilor was getting ready to go to bed, and was half undressed, there was a knock on the front door. It was the shopkeeper from downstairs who was calling at this late hour; he, too, was half undressed, but he had suddenly had a thought, he said, which he was afraid he would not be able to retain through the night.

"It is my daughter Lotte-Lene I must talk about. She is a beautiful girl, and has been confirmed, and now I would like to see her well provided for."

"But I am not as yet a widower!" said the Councilor, and chuckled, "and I have no son to offer her."

"You must understand me, Councilor," said the man from downstairs. "She can play the piano, and she can sing; you must be able to hear her upstairs. You have no idea of all the things that little girl is able to do; she can talk and entertain people. She is made for the stage, and that is a good course for pretty girls of good families to take; they may even have an opportunity to marry a count, though neither I nor Lotte-Lene are thinking of that. She can indeed sing and play the piano, so the other day I took her up to the singing school. She sang; but she doesn't have a beer bass, as I call it in women, nor does she shriek those very high canary-bird notes which they now demand in singers, and so they advised her strongly against pursuing that career. Well, I thought, if she can't become a singer, she can always become an actress; that only requires the ability to speak. Today I talked about it to the Instructor as they call him. 'Is she well read?' he asked. 'No, ' I said, 'not at all.' 'But it is necessary for an actress to be well read!' said he. She still has time for that, was my opinion; and then I went home. She can

go to a rental library and read what is to be had there, I thought.

"But then tonight, while I was undressing, it occurred to me - why rent books when one can borrow them? The Councilor has plenty of books; let her read them; there is enough reading here for her, and it could be hers gratis!"

"Lotte-Lene is a nice girl," said the Councilor, "a beautiful girl! She shall have books to read. But has she what one calls grit and spirit - aptitude - genius? And, what is equally important, has she luck with her?"

"She has twice won in the lottery," said the grocer from downstairs. "Once she won a clothes cabinet, and another time six pairs of bed sheets; that I call luck, and that she has!"

"I shall ask the key," said the Councilor. And he placed the key on his right forefinger, and on the grocer's right forefinger as well, and then the key swung and gave out letter after letter.

The key said, "Victory and luck!" And so Lotte-Lene's future was decided.

The Councilor at once gave her two books to read, Dyveke and Knigge's Social Intercourse.

That night marked the beginning of a closer acquaintance between Lotte-Lene and the Councilor and his wife. She would come upstairs to the couple, and the Councilor found her to be a sensible girl; she believed in him and the key. The Councilor's wife saw something childish and innocent in the frankness with which she would at every moment show her great ignorance. The couple was fond of her, he in his way and she in hers, and Lotte-Lene was fond of them.

"It smells so lovely upstairs," Lotte-Lene would say. There was an odor, a fragrance, an apple fragrance, in the hallway, where the Councilor's wife had put away a whole barrel of graystone apples. There was also an incense odor of roses and lavender throughout all the rooms. "There is something refined in that!" Lotte-Lene would say.

Then, too, her eyes were pleased by the many pretty flowers the Councilor's wife always had. Even in the middle of winter, lilacs and cherry-tree slips bloomed here. The leafless twigs were cut off and put into water and in the warm room soon bore leaves and flowers.

"One would have thought that all life was gone from these naked branches, but see how they rise from the dead. It has never occurred to me before," said Lotte-Lene, "how wonderful nature is!"

And the Councilor let her look at his "key book, " in which were written strange things the key had said - even about the half of an apple cake that had disappeared from the cupboard on the very evening that the servant girl had had her sweetheart there for a visit. The Councilor had asked his key. "Who has eaten the apple cake, the cat or the sweetheart?" and the key had replied, "The sweetheart." The Councilor had already thought so before asking the key; and the servant girl had confessed, "That cursed key knows everything!"

"Yes, isn't it strange!" said the Councilor. "That key, that key! And about Lotte-Lene it has said, 'Victory and luck.' That we shall see! I swear to it."

"That's wonderful" said Lotte-Lene.

The Councilor's wife was not so confident, but she did not express her doubts when her husband was within hearing distance. She later told Lotte-Lene in confidence that the Councilor, when a young man, had been quite taken with the theater. Had someone pushed him a little in that direction, he surely would have become an actor; his family, however, had pushed him in the opposite direction. But, he had still aspired to the stage, and to further that ambition he had written a play.

"This is a great secret that I am entrusting you with, little Lotte-Lene. The play was not bad; it was accepted at the Royal Theater, and then hissed out, and no one has since heard of it, for which I am glad. I am his wife and know him. Now you want such a career, too. I wish you all that is good, but I don't think that things will work out as predicted; I don't believe in the gate key."

Lotte-Lene believed in it, and in that belief she was united with the Councilor. Within their hearts they had a mutual understanding, in all honor and chastity.

The girl had many qualifications that the Councilor's wife valued. Lotte-Lene knew how to make starch from potatoes, make silk gloves from old silk stockings, and recover her silk dancing shoes, although she could afford to buy all her clothes new. She had, as the grocer said, pennies in the table drawer and credit notes in her money safe. She would make just the wife for the Pharmacist, thought the Councilor's wife, but she did not say so, and of course didn't permit the key to say anything about it. The Pharmacist was going to settle down soon and have his own pharmacy in one of the nearest and largest provincial towns.

Lotte-Lene was continually reading Dyveke and

Knigge's Social Intercourse. She kept the two books for two years, and by the end of that time she had learned one, Dyveke, by heart - all the parts, although she wished to play only one, that of Dyveke; she did not, however, want to appear at first in the capital, where there is so much envy, and where they would not have her, anyway. She wanted to start her artistic career, as the Councilor called it, in one of the country's large provincial towns. Now that, strangely enough, turned out to be the same place where the youthful Pharmacist had settled down as the youngest of the town's pharmacists.

The great, long-awaited night came on which Lotte-Lene was to make her debut and have "victory and luck," as the key had said. The Councilor was not there, for he lay in his bed, and his wife was nursing him; he had to have warm napkins and camomile tea; the napkins about his body and the tea in his body.

While the couple was absent from the Dyveke performance, the Pharmacist was there, and wrote a letter about it to his relative, the Councilor's wife.

"Dyveke's ruff was the best thing about it," he wrote. "If I had had the Councilor's gate key in my pocket, I would have pulled it out and used it as a whistle; she deserved it, and the key deserved it, because of its nasty lie about her 'victory and luck.'"

The Councilor read the letter. It was all spitefulness, he said, key hatred, aimed at that innocent girl. And as soon as he was out of bed and was himself again, he sent a short but poisonous note to the Pharmacist, who in turn replied as if he had seen only jest and good humor in the whole epistle. He thanked him for this and for any future contribution to the revelation of the incomparable worth and significance of keys; next he confided to the Councilor that, apart from his activities as an apothecary, he was writing a great key novel in which all the characters were keys and keys alone. A gate key naturally was the central character and - patterned after the Councilor's gate key - was gifted with prophetic vision and second sight; around this all the other keys had to revolve - the old chamberlain's key, experienced in the splendor and festivity of the court; the watch key, small, refined, and distinguished, but worth only a few pennies at the ironmonger's; the key to the church pew, which counted itself among the clergy, and which, from remaining one night in its keyhole in the church, could see ghosts; the larder key, the wine-cellar key, and the coal-cellar key all appeared, and bowed before, and turned around, the gate key. The sunbeams brightened it into silver, and the wind, that spirit of the earth, entered its body and made it whistle!

It was the key of all keys; it was the Councilor's gate key. It was now the key of the heavenly gate itself; it was the papal key; it was infallible!

"Wickedness!" said the Councilor. "Great wickedness!"

He and the Pharmacist never saw each other again - except once, and that was at the funeral of the Councilor's wife.

She was the first to die. There were sorrow an emptiness in the house. Even the slips of cherry which had thrown out fresh roots and flowers seemed to mourn and fade away; they stood forgotten, for she was not there to tend them.

The Councilor and the Pharmacist walked behind her coffin, side by side, as the two nearest relations of the departed. This was not the time, nor were they in the mood, for quarreling. Lotte-Lene tied the mourning crape around the Councilor's hat. She was living in the house again, having long since returned without victory and luck in her career. Yet that still might come; Lotte-Lene had a future before her; the key had said so, and the Councilor had said so.

She went up to him. They talked about the departed and they wept, for Lotte-Lene was tenderhearted; but when they talked about the art, Lotte-Lene felt strong. "Life in the theater is charming," she said, "but there is so much nonsense and envy! I would rather go my own way. Myself first, then art!"

Knigge had told the truth in his chapter about actors; that she was aware of; the key had not told the truth, but she never spoke of this to the Councilor; she was fond of him. Besides, the gate key was his comfort and relief during the whole year of mourning. He gave it questions, and it gave him answers.

And when the year had passed, and he and Lotte-Lene were sitting together one inspiring evening; he asked the key, "Will I marry, and whom will I marry?" No one pushed him, but he pushed the key, and it answered, "Lotte-Lene!"

So it was said, and Lotte-Lene became Mrs. Councilor. "Victory and luck!"

And these words had been said before -by the gate key.

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