Moving day

You surely remember Ole, the tower watchman. I have told you about two visits I paid him, and now I'll tell you of a third, although it won't be the last one.

I have gone up to see him generally on New Year's Day, but this time it was Moving Day, when everything down in the city streets is very unpleasant, for they are littered with heaps of rubbish and crockery and all kinds of sweepings, not to mention musty old straw that you have to trample about in. Well, there I was, and in the middle of this rubbish from attic and dustbin I saw a couple of children playing going to bed; they thought it looked so inviting there for that game. Yes, they snuggled down in the straw and drew a ragged old scrap of a curtain over them for a quilt. "That was wonderful!" they said. It was too much for me, so I hurried off to see Ole.

"It's Moving Day," he said. "Streets and alleys are dustbins, dustbins in the grand style; but one cartload is enough for me. I can always find something to pick out of it, and I did that, soon after Christmas. I was walking down the street, a damp, raw, and dirty street, and just the right kind of weather for catching cold. The rubbish man had drawn up his cart there; it was loaded and looked like a sample of Copenhagen streets on Moving Day. In the back of the cart was a fir tree still quite green and with tinsel still hanging on its twigs. It had been the centerpiece of a Christmas display, but now it was thrown out into the street and the rubbish man had stuck it up behind on his pile; a sight to laugh at or weep at - yes, you might even go so far as that - it all depends on your turn of mind. And I thought about it, and so did some of the odds and ends in the cart. At least they may have thought, which is just about the same. Here was a worn lady's glove; what was it thinking about? Shall I tell you? It lay there pointing its little finger straight at the fir tree. 'That fir tree touches me,' it thought. 'I have been to a party, too, among the lighted chandeliers. My life was just a night at a ball. A squeeze of the hand, and I burst; that's all I remember, so now I have nothing more to live for.' That's the way the glove thought, or it may have thought like that. 'That's a tasteless thing for that fir tree to do!' said the potsherds. But you see, broken crockery finds everything tasteless. 'When you come to the rubbish cart,' they said, 'it's time to give up your fine airs and your tinsel. As for ourselves, we've been of some use in the world - far more use than an old green stick like that!' You see, that was another point of view on the same subject, and many people have it. But still the fir tree looked pretty well, and it was a bit of poetry on the rubbish heap; there are many like that to be found in the streets on Moving Day. But the streets down there were crowded and tiresome, and I longed to get back up to my tower and stay there; so here I sit and look down on them from above, and that's very amusing.

"Down below the good people are changing houses; they work hard packing up and then go off with their movables, and the house goblin sits on the tail of the cart and moves with them. Household quarrels, family arguments, sorrows, and cares move from the old to the new houses, and so what do they and we get out of it all? Yes, that was told us already long ago, in the good old verse in the newspaper columns:

Remember Death's great Moving Day!

"It is a serious thought, but I hope it is not disagreeable to you to hear about it. Death is the most faithful administrator after all, in spite of his many petty duties. Have you ever thought about them?

"Death is a bus conductor; he is a passport writer; he signs his name to our references; and he is the director of life's great savings bank. Do you understand that? All our earthly deeds, great and small, are deposited in that savings bank. Then, when Death comes with his Moving Day bus, and we have to get in to be driven to eternity, he gives us our references on the frontier as a passport. For our expense money on the journey he draws from the savings bank one of our deeds, whichever of them most distinctly characterizes our conduct; this may be very pleasant to us, or it may be very horrible!

"Nobody has ever escaped that omnibus journey. They tell stories, indeed, of one man who was not allowed to enter - they call him the Wandering Jew; he still has to run along behind it. If he had managed to get in, he would have escaped the treatment he received from the poets.

"Let's take an imaginary look into that big Moving Day omnibus. What a mixed group! Side by side sit kings and beggars, the genius and the idiot. On they

must go, without goods or wealth, with only their references and their expense money from life's savings bank. But of each man's deeds, which one has been found and given to him? Perhaps only a very small one, no bigger than a pea, yet a great blooming vine may grow from it.

"The poor beggar, who sat on a low stool in the corner, and received blows and hard words, perhaps is given the battered stool to take, as a token and as expense money. That stool will become the cart to bear him into eternity, and there it will grow into a throne, gleaming with gold and blooming like an arbor.

"He who was always drinking from the bubbling cup of pleasure, and thus forgetting the wrong things he had done here, receives a wooden keg as his lot. On the journey he has to drink from it; and that pure and cleansing drink will clear his thoughts and awaken his better and nobler nature, so that he sees and feels what before he could not or would not see. Thus he bears within himself his own punishment, the gnawing worm that never dies. If on his wineglass was inscribed Forgetfulness, the inscription on the keg is Memory.

"Whenever I read a good historical book, I cannot help picturing to myself the person of whom I am reading at the final moment of all, when he begins to enter Death's omnibus. I cannot help wondering which of his deeds Death has given him from the savings bank, and what sort of expense money he will take with him to eternity.

"Once upon a time there was a French king - his name I have forgotten, for the names of good people can sometimes be forgotten by you and me, but it will surely come to light again, because in the time of famine this king became the savior of his people. In his honor they raised a monument of snow, with the inscription, 'More quickly than this melts did you help us!' I think, remembering that monument, that Death must have given him one single snowflake that would never melt but flew like a white butterfly above his royal head, on into the land of eternity.

"Then there was Louis XI - yes, I remember his name; one always remembers what is wicked - a sample of his doings often comes to mind; I wish I could say the story is untrue.

"He had his lord high chancelor beheaded, and that he had a right to do, justly or unjustly; but on the same scaffold he set up the chancelor's innocent children, the one eight and the other seven, so that they would be spattered with their father's warm blood. Then they were taken to the Bastille and set in an iron cage, without even a blanket to cover them. Every eighth day the King sent the executioner to them, to pull a tooth from each of them, so that they might suffer even more. The elder said, 'My mother would die of sorrow if she knew how my little brother suffered. Pray, pull out two of my teeth, and spare him! There were tears in the hangman's eyes when he heard this, but the king's will was stronger than the tears. Every eighth day a silver dish, with two children's teeth on it, was brought to the king; as he had demanded them, so he had them. And I think it was two teeth that Death drew out of life's savings bank for Louis XI to take with him on his journey to the great land of eternity. They flew before him like two fireflies; they glowed and burned and stung him, the teeth of those innocent children.

"Yes, a serious drive it is, that bus drive on the great Moving Day. And when does our turn come?"

"That's why it's so very serious; any day, any hour, any minute the bus may come for us. Which of our deeds will Death draw from the savings bank and give us for the journey? Yes, think that over! That Moving Day will not be found on the calendar!"

* * *