

What one can invent

There was once a young man who was studying to be a poet. He wanted to become one by Easter, and to marry, and to live by poetry. To write poems, he knew, only consists in being able to invent something; but he could not invent anything. He had been born too late? everything had been taken up before he came into the world, and everything had been written and told about. "Happy people who were born a thousand years ago!" said he. "It was an easy matter for them to become immortal. Happy even was he who was born a hundred years ago, for then there was still something about which a poem could be written. Now the world is written out, and what can I write poetry about?"

Then he studied till he became ill and wretched, the wretched man! No doctor could help him, but perhaps the wise woman could. She lived in the little house by the wayside, where the gate is that she opened for those who rode and drove. But she could do more than unlock the gate. She was wiser than the doctor who drives in his own carriage and pays tax for his rank.

"I must go to her," said the young man.

The house in which she dwelt was small and neat, but dreary to behold, for there were no flowers near it? no trees. By the door stood a bee-hive, which was very useful. There was also a little potato-field, very useful, and an earth bank, with sloe bushes upon it, which had done blossoming, and now bore fruit, sloes, that draw one's mouth together if one tastes them before the frost has touched them.

"That's a true picture of our poetryless time, that I see before me now," thought the young man; and that was at least a thought, a grain of gold that he found by the door of the wise woman.

"Write that down!" said she. "Even crumbs are bread. I know why you come hither. You cannot invent anything, and yet you want to be a poet by Easter."

"Everything has been written down," said he. "Our time is not the old time."

"No," said the woman. "In the old time wise women were burnt, and poets went about with empty stomachs, and very much out at elbows. The present time is good, it is the best of times; but you have not the right way of looking at it. Your ear is not sharpened to hear, and I fancy you do not say the Lord's Prayer in the evening. There is plenty here to

write poems about, and to tell of, for any one who knows the way. You can read it in the fruits of the earth, you can draw it from the flowing and the standing water; but you must understand how? you must understand how to catch a sunbeam. Now just you try my spectacles on, and put my ear-trumpet to your ear, and then pray to God, and leave off thinking of yourself"

The last was a very difficult thing to do? more than a wise woman ought to ask.

He received the spectacles and the ear-trumpet, and was posted in the middle of the potato-field. She put a great potato into his hand. Sounds came from within it; there came a song with words, the history of the potato, an every-day story in ten parts, an interesting story. And ten lines were enough to tell it in.

And what did the potato sing?

She sang of herself and of her family, of the arrival of the potato in Europe, of the misrepresentation to which she had been exposed before she was acknowledged, as she is now, to be a greater treasure than a lump of gold.

"We were distributed, by the King's command, from the council-houses through the various towns, and proclamation was made of our great value; but no one believed in it, or even understood how to plant us. One man dug a hole in the earth and threw in his whole bushel of potatoes; another put one potato here and another there in the ground, and expected that each was to come up a perfect tree, from which he might shake down potatoes. And they certainly grew, and produced flowers and green watery fruit, but it all withered away. Nobody thought of what was in the ground? the blessing? the potato. Yes, we have endured and suffered, that is to say, our forefathers have; they and we, it is all one. "What a story it was!

"Well, and that will do," said the woman. "Now look at the sloe bush."

"We have also some near relations in the home of the potatoes, but higher towards the north than they grew," said the Sloes. "There were Northmen, from Norway, who steered westward through mist and storm to an unknown land, where, behind ice and snow, they found plants and green meadows, and bushes with blue-black grapes? sloe bushes. The grapes were

ripened by the frost just as we are. And they called the land 'Wine-land,' that is, 'Groenland,' or 'Sloeland.' "

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"That is quite a romantic story," said the young man.

"Yes, certainly. But now come with me," said the wise woman, and she led him to the bee-hive. He looked into it. What life and labor! There were bees standing in all the passages, waving their wings, so that a wholesome draught of air might blow through the great manufactory; that was their business. Then there came in bees from without, who had been born with little baskets on their feet; they brought flower-dust, which was poured out, sorted, and manufactured into honey and wax. They flew in and out. The queen-bee wanted to fly out, but then all the other bees must have gone with her. It was not yet the time for that, but still she wanted to fly out; so the others bit off her majesty's wings, and she had to stay where she was.

"Now get upon the earth bank," said the wise woman.

"Come and look out over the highway, where you can see the people."

"What a crowd it is!" said the young man. "One story after another. It whirls and whirls! It's quite a confusion before my eyes. I shall go out at the back."

"No, go straight forward," said the woman. "Go straight into the crowd of people; look at them in the right way. Have an ear to hear and the right heart to feel, and you will soon invent something. But, before you go away, you must give me my spectacles and my ear-trumpet again." And so saying, she took both from him.

"Now I do not see the smallest thing," said the young man, "and now I don't hear anything more."

"Why, then, you can't be a poet by Easter," said the wise woman.

"But, by what time can I be one?" asked he.

"Neither by Easter nor by Whitsuntide! You will not learn how to invent anything."

"What must I do to earn my bread by poetry?"

"You can do that before Shrove Tuesday. Hunt the poets! Kill their writings and thus you will kill them. Don't be put out of countenance. Strike at them boldly, and you'll have carnival cake, on which you can support yourself and your wife too."

"What one can invent!" cried the young man. And so he hit out boldly at every second poet, because he could not be a poet himself.

We have it from the wise woman. She knows What One Can Invent.