

The Little Match Girl¹

Den lille pige med svovlstikkerne

Dansk Folkekalender for 1846

1. *The Little Match Girl*. The attribute “little” before the name of a girl in a story for children often spells the character’s doom. The little match girl, like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s little Eva, Charles Dickens’s little Nell, and Andersen’s little mermaid, is destined never to become big. Children living in the streets in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and in the United States often sold matches or newspapers instead of begging outright, which was illegal. Child labor—and fourteen-hour days—were common in nineteenth-century Europe: a “multitude of children, some of them barely seven years of age, gaunt, emaciated, dressed in rags, going barefoot to the factory through rain and mud, pale, debilitated, and with misery, suffering and defeat etched on their faces” (Villermé, 46). Child labor was denounced by many novelists, among them Dickens, Hugo, and Zola. In the Communist Manifesto of 1848, Marx famously denounced modern industry’s erosion of family ties and its transformation of children into “simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor.”



The Little Match Girl (written during a month-long stay with the Duke of Augustenborg) was inspired by illustrations Andersen received from the editor of an almanac, with the request that he write a story about one of them. One image, painted by the Danish artist Johan Thomas Lundbye, showed a girl selling matches. It had been popularized through its appearance in an 1843 calendar with the caption, “Do good when you give.” “While I was at Glorup,” Andersen later recalled in his travel diaries, “in this time of luxury and plenty, a publisher sent three woodcuts asking me to pick out one and write a little story around it. I chose a scene that depicted poverty and deprivation, a ragged little girl with a handful of matches—‘The Little Match-girl’—the contrast between our life at Augustenborg and her world” (Travels, 242).

Few children’s stories celebrate suffering with the kind of passion brought to the tale of the match-seller, and generations of children have admired her and wept over her death. The frail waif who freezes to death on New Year’s Eve has become something of a cultural icon. She is the victim of a brutal father (far more cruel than the ogres of

fairy tales) and of a heartless social world: even nature turns its back on her, offering neither shelter nor sustenance. The fairy-tale magic is absent, and rescue comes only in the form of divine intervention.

The narrator of the match girl's story takes us into the heroine's mental world, allowing us to feel her pain as the temperature drops and the wind howls. We also share her visions, first of warmth, then of nourishment, beauty, and finally human affection and compassion. If the final image of the story gives us a frozen corpse, the little match girl's death is still a "beautiful death," the site of radiant spirituality and transcendent meaning. Whether we read her sufferings as "tortures, disguised as pieties" (as did P. L. Travers) or consider her wretchedness as the precondition for translation into a higher sphere, the story remains one of the most memorable stories of childhood and haunts our cultural imagination.

Many will agree that the one requirement for a good children's book is the triumph of the protagonist. The death scene in "The Little Match Girl" has been adapted and rewritten many times over the last century, most notably in an American edition of 1944 that proclaimed on its dust jacket: "Children will read with delight this new version of the famous Hans Christian Andersen tale. For in it, the little match girl on that long ago Christmas Eve does not perish from the bitter cold, but finds warmth and cheer and a lovely home where she lives happily ever after." Andersen wrote this story during a decade of social unrest and political upheaval, and would no doubt have been distressed by the socially redemptive turn in a story that was intended as a powerful critique of economic inequities.

A recent self-help book reports the experience of a woman whose favorite childhood story was "The Little Match Girl": "When we asked her about it, she explained that, when the little match girl lit a match, the tiny flame became for her a roaring Christmas fire with gifts, friends and food around. This was also (her) deepest desire" (Breslin, 32).

2. *It was bitterly cold.* The story opens on a bleak note, with elaborate descriptions of intemperate weather and growing darkness, culminating in the empathetic exclamation “poor mite!” In his autobiography, Andersen described reading out loud to a clergyman’s widow from a work that began with the words “It was a tempestuous night; the rain beat against the window-panes.” When the woman declared her confidence that the work would turn out to be “extraordinary,” the young Andersen reports, without irony, that he “regarded her insight with a kind of reverence” (*The Fairy Tale of My Life*, 17).

3. *a boy had run off with the other.* Andersen alludes often to the cruelty of children and how he himself was taunted and teased by schoolmates.

4. *bare feet.* As the son of a shoemaker, Andersen was inclined to pay special attention to what characters wear on their feet. The bare feet of the little match girl make her a particularly abject figure. But those who place a premium on their shoes run into serious moral trouble (see Andersen’s “Girl Who Trod on the Loaf,” with a protagonist who refuses to dirty her shoes,

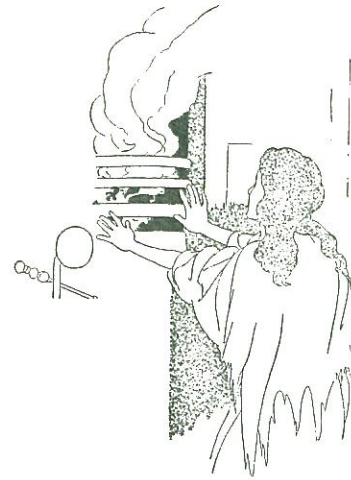


It was bitterly cold.² Snow was falling, and before long it would be dark. It was the last day of the year: New Year’s Eve. In the cold darkness, a poor little girl, with nothing on her head and with bare feet, was walking down the street. Yes, it’s true, she had been wearing slippers when she left home. But what good could they do? They were great big slippers that had belonged to her mother—that’s how big they were! The little girl had lost them while scurrying across the road to avoid two carriages rushing by at a terrifying speed. One slipper was nowhere to be found, and a boy had run off with the other,³ declaring that he would use it as a cradle when he had children of his own someday.

The little girl walked along on her tiny, bare feet,⁴ which were red and blue from the cold. She was carrying matches in an old apron, and she had a bundle in her hand as well. No one had bought anything from her all day long, and she had not received so much as a penny. Poor mite,⁵ she was the picture of misery as she trudged along, hungry and shivering with cold. Snowflakes fell on her long, fair hair, which settled into beautiful curls at the nape of her neck. But you can be sure that she wasn’t worrying about how she looked. Lights were shining in every window,⁶ and the tempting aroma of roast goose drifted out into the streets. You see, it was New Year’s Eve, and the little girl was thinking about that.

Over in a little nook between two houses, one of which jutted out into the street more than the other, she sat down and curled up, with her legs tucked beneath her. But even there she just grew colder and colder. She didn’t dare return home,⁷ for she had not sold any of her matches and had not earned a single penny. She knew that her father would beat her, and besides, it was almost as cold at home as it was here. They had only the roof to protect them, and the wind howled right through it, even though the worst cracks had been stopped up with straw and rags.

The girl's little hands were almost numb from the cold. Ah! Maybe a lighted match would do some good. If only she dared pull one from the bunch and strike it against the wall, just to warm her fingers. She pulled one out—scratch!—how it sputtered, how it flamed! Such a bright warm light—it felt just like a little lamp⁸ when she cupped her hand around. Yes, what a strange light it was! The little girl imagined that she was sitting in front of a big iron stove, with shiny brass knobs and brass feet. The fire was burning so cheerfully, and it warmed her up! But—oh no! The little girl was just stretching out her toes to warm them up too, when—out went the flame. The stove vanished, and there she sat with the end of a burned match in her hand.



and "The Red Shoes," with a girl who takes pride in wearing flashy footwear unsuited for a church service).



HONOR APPLETON

Barefoot, the little match girl sits on a snow-covered step, welcomed into the arms of her loving grandmother after lighting a match for warmth.

5. *Poor mite.* Andersen often presents tableaux of suffering. The loving embellishment of the girl's wretched condition suggests a tendency to aestheticize scenes of pain, to create a verbally baroque effect while describing misery and distress.

6. *Lights were shining in every window.* The contrast between the cold and dark outdoors and the warmth and light indoors is made even more powerful by the aroma of roast goose, the traditional Scandinavian Christmas bird, drifting from the cheerful domestic interior to the cold and desolate outside.

7. *She didn't dare return home.* Andersen reported that the story was inspired in part by his own mother's experience of being sent out to beg and being told not to return until she had received some money. In his autobiography, he writes: "As a young girl, her parents chased her out to beg, and when she had no luck, she spent a whole day crying under a bridge by the river in Odense. As a child, I could imagine all of this so clearly and I wept about it" (*Fairy Tale of My Life*, 2). Later in



ARTHUR RACKHAM

The match girl lights a second flame that brings the vision of a grand tree, lit up with candles, providing the pleasures of a feast that the girl could enjoy only as distant witness.

She struck another match. It flared up, and when the light shone on the wall,⁹ it began to turn transparent, like a piece of gauze. She could see right into a dining room, where a table was covered with a snowy white cloth and fine china. The air was filled with the delicious scent of roast goose stuffed with apples and prunes. And what was even more amazing, the goose jumped right off the dish and waddled across the floor, with a carving knife and a fork still in its back. It marched right up to the poor little girl. But then the match went out, and there was nothing left to see but the cold, solid wall.

She lit another match. Now she was sitting beneath the most beautiful Christmas tree.¹⁰ It was even taller and more splendidly decorated than the one she had seen last Christmas through the glass doors of a house belonging to a wealthy merchant. Thousands of candles were burning on the green branches, and colorful pictures, just like the ones she had seen in shop windows, looked down at her. The little girl stretched both hands up in the air—and the match went out. The Christmas candles all rose higher and higher into the air, and she saw them turn into bright stars. One of them turned into a shooting star,¹¹ leaving behind it a streak of sparkling fire.

“Someone is dying,” the little girl thought, for her grandmother, the only person who had ever been kind to her¹² and who was no longer alive, had once said that a falling star means that a soul is rising up to God.

She struck another match against the wall. Light shone all around her,¹³ and right there in the midst of it was her old grandmother, looking so bright and sparkling, so kind and blessed.

“Oh, Grandma,” the little girl cried out. “Please take me with you! I know you will be gone when the match burns out—just like the warm stove, the lovely roast goose, and the big beautiful Christmas tree.” And she quickly lit the entire bundle of matches, because she wanted to hold on tight to her grandmother. The matches burned with such intensity that it

life, he reported the incident from his mother's point of view: “I have never been able to ask anyone for anything. When I sat there under that bridge I was really hungry. I dipped my finger into the water and put a few drops on my tongue because I felt it would help. Finally, I fell asleep until evening came. Then I returned home and, when my mother discovered that I hadn't brought anything home, she roundly scolded me and told me I was a lazy girl.” Andersen's sympathies were always with the downtrodden, and the little match girl gives us a figure who is pure victim.

8. *it felt just like a little lamp.* The matches have the power to kindle the imagination, producing visions of warmth (the brass stove), whimsy (a roast goose that waddles on the floor with a fork and knife in its back), and beauty (the Christmas tree). The comparison to a “little lamp” is likely an allusion to the magic lamp in the story of Aladdin, a character with whom Andersen identified. As a boy, he had read *The Arabian Nights* with his father. Andersen was also deeply familiar with Adam Oehlenschläger's *Aladdin or the Magical Lamp* (1805), a play that had captured the Danish popular imagination and had been set to music by Carl Nielsen.

9. *when the light shone on the wall.* The light from the match illuminates the wall to produce a screen on which desires are projected. For Andersen, brightness and illumination are signals for spirited imaginative activity.

10. *the most beautiful Christmas tree.* Andersen writes in his diaries about his own vivid sense of abandonment (as an adult) during the holidays: “Christmas Eve! Like a child I had looked forward to the Christmas tree, to celebrating with my friends—who told me later each was sure

someone else had taken care of me and that I had only to choose where I would prefer to be—but in fact I sat by myself in my room at the hotel, dreaming of home.” And he adds that he opened a window “to look at the stars, they were my Christmas tree” (*Travels*, 246).

The priests of the ancient Celts saw in evergreens—which stayed alive and green when other plants appeared dead—a symbol of everlasting life. Scandinavian pagan customs included bringing evergreens indoors for festivities.

The Christmas tree tradition has been traced to sixteenth-century Germany, when Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. It is said that Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, first added candles to the Christmas tree. Returning home one winter evening, he was struck by the beauty of the stars twinkling among evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he adorned the branches of a tree with lighted candles. The Christmas tree makes one of its first literary appearances in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* in a scene that takes place shortly before Werther's suicide. The tree, “decorated with fruit and sweetmeats, and lighted up with wax candles,” is said to be the delight of young children. In *The Battle for Christmas*, Stephen Nissenbaum points out that Christmas trees became in the nineteenth century a “timeless tradition.” Their display turned into “a fashionable new ritual that was perceived . . . as an ancient and authentic folk tradition” (Nissenbaum, 197).

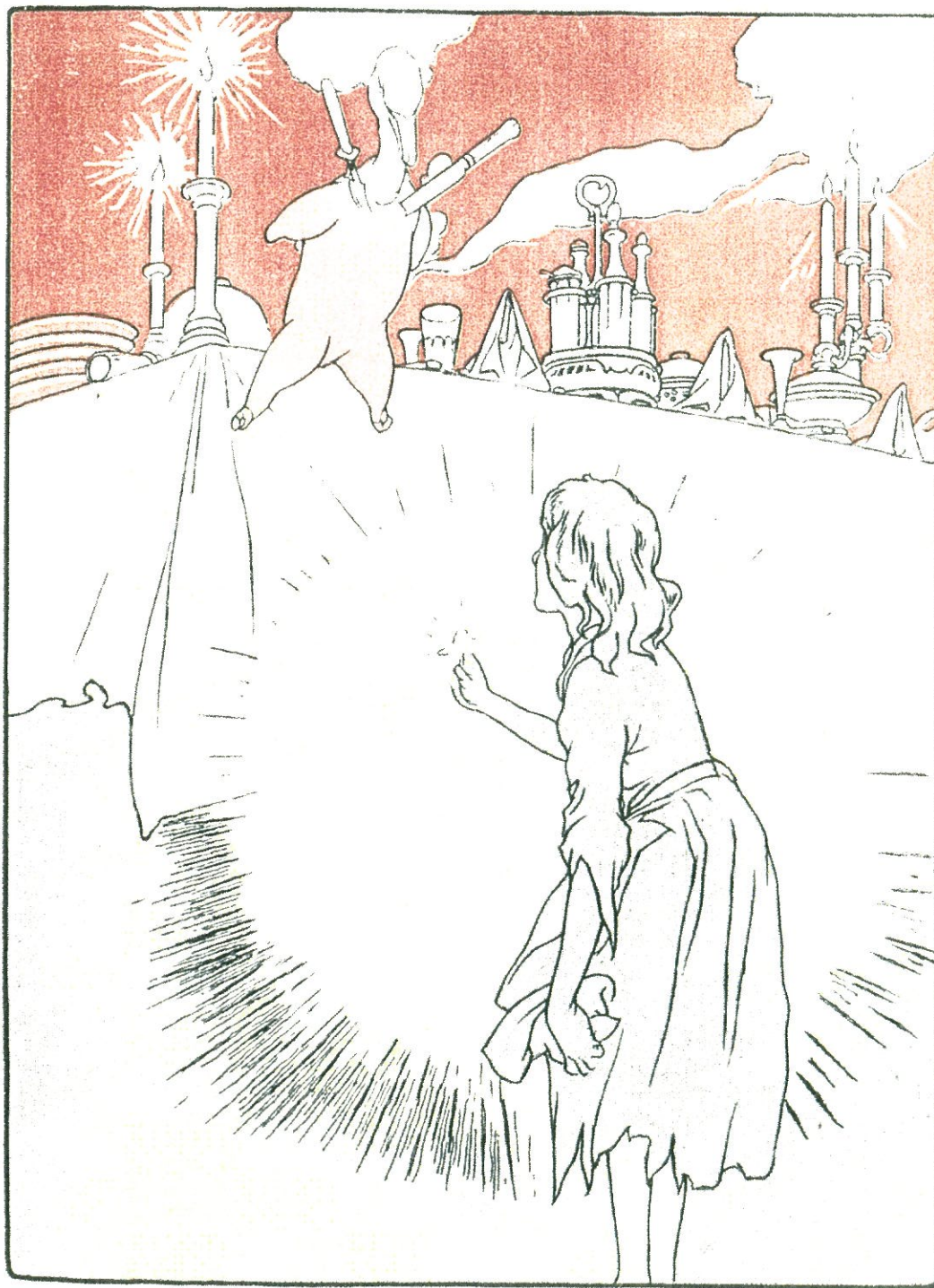
11. *One of them turned into a shooting star.* On the eve of Christ's birth, a star in the heavens pointed the way to his manger. It has also been said that a nova appeared on the night of his birth.

12. *her grandmother, the only person who had ever been kind to her.* In his autobiography,

Andersen recalled his maternal grandmother with great fondness: “Grandmother came every day to my parents' house, if only for a few minutes—above all to see her grandson, little Hans Christian. I was her joy and happiness. She was a quiet, much loved old woman; she had gentle blue eyes and a delicate appearance.”

13. *Light shone all around her.* As Kirsten Malmkjær points out, Andersen's grandmothers and other elderly women often “shift and shimmer between the human, the spectral and the divine” (23), a trait that the Scottish writer George McDonald used to portray grandmothers in *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883).





CHARLES ROBINSON

The little match girl's light produces a table covered with a cloth and china. The roast goose jumps right off its platter and walks toward her.

14. *they flew in brightness and joy higher and higher.* As in "The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf," upward flight leads to redemption. Andersen takes advantage of the childhood fantasy of flying to capture the power of the girl's spiritual transformation.

15. *the little girl was still huddled between the two houses.* Although the frozen body of the girl presents a grotesque reprimand to passersby, her "rosy cheeks" and "smile" suggest that her death marks a joyous transition to a superior life, and that she has transcended worldly things. Bruno Bettelheim found the ending to be "deeply moving," but he also worried that children might make the mistake of identifying with the little match girl: "The child in his misery may indeed identify with this heroine, but if so, this leads only to utter pessimism and defeatism. 'The Little Match Girl' is a moralistic tale about the cruelty of the world; it arouses compassion for the downtrodden. But what the child who feels downtrodden needs is not compassion for others who are in the same predicament, but rather the conviction that he can escape this fate" (Bettelheim, 105).

Rosellen Brown has a different perspective on the tale, finding it captivating and absorbing when recalling her childhood response to its ending: "That Andersen would let his heroine die was shocking and—to some of us stories are exciting because they roil up our emotions, disturb our equilibrium even if they make us miserable—I would say *satisfying*" (Brown, 51).

was suddenly brighter than broad daylight. Grandma had never looked so tall and beautiful. She gathered up the little girl in her arms and together they flew in brightness and joy higher and higher¹⁴ above the earth to where it is no longer cold, and there is neither hunger nor fear. They were now with God!

In the cold dawn, the little girl was still huddled between the two houses,¹⁵ with rosy cheeks and a smile on her lips. She had frozen to death on the last night of the old year. The New Year dawned on the frozen body of the little girl, who was still holding matches in her hand, one bundle used up. "She was trying to get warm," people said. No one could imagine what beautiful things she had seen and in what glory she had gone with her old grandmother into the joy of the New Year.

