

The Day's Work Before Sunrise



THERE WAS A SMITH and a smithy. But the Smith was not an ordinary one, for his day's work was done before sun-up. That is a very hard day's work. One becomes still and patient in performing it. It takes much strength for one lives alone and forges in the dawn.

Now it was night and the Smith was not in his workshop. The fire-spirit in the embers heaped up around the flue was fast asleep. Only his breath glowed beneath the ashes, sending forth a fiery sparklet here and there in the darkness. But the spark soon died out. Only a faint glimmer remained and hastened erringly and searchingly through the obscurity of the smithy.

The big stomach of the bellows had collapsed into a heap of sagging folds that looked like the wrinkles in a grumbler's face. It reminded one of a fat man who had suddenly become very thin. It looked comical enough to make one laugh, but there was no one in the smithy who knew how to laugh.

Slowly the anvil with his big head turned his pointy snout in every direction, sizing up the old iron that was to be forged today. It was not very much, only a few pieces. They lay piled up in one corner, soiled and rusty, covered with dust, like people who had a long and burdensome journey behind them.

The anvil was annoyed, saying: "What a low and mean rabble this, piling up here. It is a good thing it has first to go into the forge before it is laid on my shiny head. It would not be very wholesome. Thanks, people like us are clean" The anvil con-

temptuously turned up his nose and looked the other way. The anvil was stupid. It had never occurred to him that he was also made of iron, and that the old iron that had wandered so far would be as bright as he after the firespirit had had a hold of it, and the hammer belabored it. To his way of thinking there was only bright iron to begin with—and dusty and rusty on the other hand, and that settled it. He was just a blockhead, nor did he know how painstakingly his master had gathered this old iron in order to transform it at the dawn of day.

The pieces of old iron felt much relieved when the anvil had turned his back upon them so that they no longer felt his resentful glances. They had felt them quite distinctly although they were so dusty and soiled. Whereupon they began a conversation in whispering tones.

They were individual pieces that were quite different as to age. There were some very old ones that really belonged in a museum of antiquities. But there were also quite young ones who had been in this world only a few years. But in appearance they were all alike.

"My goodness, how rusty you are," said a chain sympathetically to an old sword, "that is a very serious illness. I am sure you are not feeling well at all!"

The sword sobbed creakingly between hilt and blade. "Yes, it is an old trouble, I have had it for hundreds of years. They are bloodstains. I have seen some dreadful things in my days. Scores have been my masters. One killed the other with me. One stole me from another, only to kill others again with me. All this blood and tears have eaten

into my tissues. I have had little rest. I have waded hilt deep in blood and he who had spilled the most blood tolled the church-bells with the selfsame hands and called it his victory.”

“I have lived only a few years here on earth,” said a young saber, “but have known the same horrors.”

“I have seen different kinds of victories,” said an old rusty bolt. “I have seen men who had vanquished themselves and the world with their thoughts. I secured the gates behind which they were incarcerated. In there they sat and perished, in a living tomb. But their thoughts I saw passing me, through prison-vault and walls, to go out into all the world.

“Look here,” said another bolt, “I am much younger than you but I have had to do the identical thing and experienced the same phenomenon.”

The fire-spirit in the forge breathed more deeply

ministers of the gospel from Europe, sneered at the old man because of his faith.”

“Now we have Europe with its culture,” said the saber, rattling furiously so that an old, silly tassel, suspended from a gold braid that had been wrapped around the hilt, dropped to the floor.

“We have to pass through many forms,” replied the knife. “I know that from the old man in India. Only, I do not know which one we are going to take on now.”

“We cannot remain in these shapes,” they all cried out together. “We are soiled and full of stains. We want to be re-forged We want to see the fire-spirit and ask him for a different body. But we do not want to wait until the sun rises. We do not want the sun to find us like this. Then he will shine upon our filth and dust. However, the Smith will not

***“and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruninghooks”—Isaiah 2:4***

and the first rays of early morning fell upon all the old iron in the corner. They became very depressed and perplexed for now the many stains and spots stood out more visibly than in the faint gleam of the fire-spirit who was breathing laboriously in the crammed forge. All the pieces looked upon their soiled bodies, talking confusedly and plaintively among themselves.

“I had to hold a murderer,” wailed the chain; “it was his last night. Beside him sat a man in a long, black robe, holding before him in his hands a book upon which was graven a golden cross.”

“I had to work in a shambles,” said a long knife. “I have looked thousands of creatures in their terror-stricken eyes before they closed. I have seen thousands of animal-souls floundering about in a house full of blood and horror. And to think! a piece of myself was once upon a time a bead in the rosary of an old feeble man in India; and the old, silent man used to brush the path before him so that he might not step on any living thing. He called the worm his brother and asked a blessing from God on it. He was in the habit of speaking of the ‘chain of things.’ He would draw the sign of the cross in the sand and resignedly fondled his rosary when the wind blurred its design. The foreign visitors,

come so soon. He is very likely to be still asleep.”

Suddenly, a spark from the forge sallied forth, landing right in the midst of the old iron. “The Smith is not asleep,” hissed the spark, “he will be here directly. He is no ordinary Smith. His day’s work is done before sunrise.” Then the spark died out. The door opened and the Smith entered. He was a stern and quiet man with sad eyes. That was because of his day’s work. He stepped on the treadle of the bellows so that it rounded out, unfolding all the creases in its big stomach. The fire-spirit busied himself coming out of his narrow confines to set the coals aglow that the Smith had heaped upon the embers. The Smith laid the old iron in the roaring forge, and after its baptism of fire put it upon the anvil.

“What is going to become of us?—what form?—what destiny?” asked the old iron, and the thoughts of the knife wandered to the poor old man in India.

The Smith hammered away. The sparks flew in every direction. He forged but one form, the last of all forms. Today he forged the soul of the iron. It was his day’s task. When it was done there stood a shining plowshare in the dew-decked meadow before the smithy. Then the sun rose. □

—Manfred Kyber