

The Chimney Sweep's Wife

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This is a cruel and sad story. I heard it told more than once in my childhood and it made me wonder and shudder.

On a side street stands an old building with a smooth and gray facade. Through a large, arched portal without any decorations—well, a date is there and perhaps a few fruit garlands—one enters into a narrow courtyard, lined with cobblestones, a black stone well like so many others, where the sun never shines. An old linden with sawed-off branches, blackened bark, and foliage thinning with age stands there in a corner. It is as old as the house, well, even older, and is still a favorite hangout for the courtyard's children and cats.

Once it belonged to Wetzmann, the chimney sweep.

Wetzmann, the chimney sweep, is said to have been a rather meek man. He had succeeded in life and collected quite a large fortune. He was nice to the poor, tough with his apprentices—because that was the custom, and maybe it was necessary—and drank toddy in the pub every evening, because he had troubles at home.

His wife was also tough with the apprentices, but she was not nice to the poor and not to anyone else either. She had served as a maid in Wetzmann's house before she became his second wife. Back then, Envy and Lust were the two of the seven deadly sins which best described her character; these days it was Wrath and Arrogance.

She was large and powerfully built and was said to have been pretty in her younger days.

Wetzmann's son, Fredrik, was frail and pale. He was born to the first marriage, and they said that he took after his mother. He had a good head and a mild personality, and had studied to be a minister. He had just finished gymnasium when he fell into a long and serious illness, which kept him in bed a whole winter.

In one wing of the building, a serving woman lived with her daughter Magda. Hmm, was she named Magda? I don't know, but I always called her that to myself, when as a child, I heard the old people tell about her at dusk some winter's night. And I thought I saw then a little pale and shy child's face, wreathed in thick, blond hair and with a very red mouth. She was fifteen years old and had recently been confirmed. Perhaps it was this "recently been confirmed" that made me imagine her as serious and quiet, like the young girls I used to see in church on Sunday, and dressed in a long and smooth black dress.

When the student had made it through the winter and started to be better, the serving woman's daughter, at his request, got to sit by his bedside a while in the afternoons and read aloud.

Mrs. Wetzmann did not like it. She was afraid that they might grow fond of each other. As far as she was concerned, her stepson could fall in love with whomever he liked and even become engaged—that didn't matter to her—but at least it was not going to be with a serving woman's daughter! She kept a suspicious eye on Magda, but had to let her continue. The convalescent had to be entertained in some way, and the doctor had forbidden him to lie in bed and read because he had weak eyes and should not strain himself.

So she sat by his bedside and read out loud from both religious and worldly books, and the student lay there pale and exhausted and listened to her voice and looked at her and found her pleasing.

She had such a red mouth.

They were almost the same age—he was not more than seventeen or eighteen—and they

had played together many times as children. Soon they were on intimate terms.

As often as possible, Mrs. Wetzmann found some excuse to enter the sick room in order to check on what was happening. The two children should have noticed and been careful, but one doesn't always behave as one should. One day, when she silently and carefully opened the door, she found the following: Magda had left her chair, which had been placed at some distance from the bed, and stood bent over the pillows with her arms around the young man's neck. He had halfway raised himself by propping his elbow against the pillow and caressed her hair with a thin white hand and they kissed each other energetically. Every now and then they also whispered scattered words without meaning.

The chimney sweep's wife became dark red. Just the same she could not keep from smiling inwardly: Hadn't things turned out just as she knew they would! But now there would be an end to it. Wrath and Arrogance rose up within her, welled forth and illuminated her skin and eyes, which glittered. And who knows—while she stood there unseen and silently watching the two young ones who did not have eyes or ears for anything but themselves—who knows whether Envy and Lust did not also secretly creep forth from their hiding places and play upon their hidden strings in her soul. She did not pause for long, but stepped quickly towards the bed, grabbed the girl by her fragile wrist with an iron-hard fist, called her an insulting name, and threw her out of the door beneath a flood of the foulest epithets. Thereafter she swore in the presence of curious servants and apprentices a solemn oath that if that child dared to cross her threshold one more time, she would get such a beating that she would not be able to move for fourteen days.

There was no one who doubted that she meant to keep her word.

The convalescent did not reprimand his stepmother. Every time she walked through the room, he turned his face to the wall. He did not want to see her or speak to her after what she had done to Magda. But one day he confided to his father in private that he could not live if he could not marry Magda. The old chimney sweep was astonished and annoyed, but did not immediately dare to put forth any serious resistance: His son was the only person he liked and who showed him some tenderness in return, and he could not bear the thought of losing him.

He put off the matter and related his concerns to his wife.

How shall I be able to depict what happened then? It sounds like an evil dream or like a tale made to scare children when they are bad, but it is true all the same. It is said to have happened a Saturday afternoon in May.

The building is quiet. The street is quiet. Perhaps someone hums a tune through a kitchen window, or maybe some children play in the alley. . . . The convalescent is alone in his room. He counts the minutes and the hours. It is spring outside now. Soon it will be summer. Will he never again rise from his bed, never again hear the forest moan and whisper, never again be able to measure the days in periods of activity and periods of rest? And Magda . . . if only he did not always see her face before him with the wild fear in her eyes, like she had when his stepmother grabbed her by the wrist. She did not need to fear. That evil woman surely would not seriously dare to do her harm when she knew that he had chosen her for his bride.

So he lies there and dreams, now awake, now half-awake, and lets his pupils soak up the light of the sunbeam on the white door. When he shuts his eyes, an archipelago of poisonous green islands surrounded by an ink-black sea swims forth. And while he shuts his eyes, the green changes to blue and the black shifts to blue-red with ragged dark edges, and then everything becomes black.

He feels a light hand caress his brow and he sits up in bed.

It is Magda. Magda stands before him, small and delicate with a smiling red mouth and she places a bouquet of spring flowers before him on the bedspread. Anemones and saxifrage and violets. Is it true? Is it really her?

“How have you dared?” he whispers.

“Your stepmother is away,” she says then. “I saw her go out just now, dressed for a visit. I heard that she was going to Söder, and that it will be a long time before she comes home. Then I crept up the stairs and into your room.”

And she stays with him for a long time and talks about the forest, where she has walked alone and listened to the birds and picked spring flowers for him, whom she loves. And they kiss each other as often as possible and caress each other like two children and both are happy while the hours rush by and the sunbeam on the white door becomes fiery orange and red and dims and disappears.

“Perhaps you should leave,” says Fredrik. “She may be home soon. What will I do if she wants to hit you, I who lie here sick and weak and get dizzy if I even get out of bed. Perhaps you should leave!”

“I am not afraid,” answers Magda.

Because she wants to prove that she is fond of him and gladly will suffer for the sake of her love.

And only when it is dusk does she kiss him for the last time and creep out of the house. In the courtyard, she pauses a moment and looks up to the window of the room where he lies alone on the white bed with her saxifrage and violets on the bedspread. When she turns to go into the little room in wing, she stands face to face with Mrs. Wetzmann and she lets go a small cry.

There is not a living soul in the courtyard besides those two. Round about them stand the walls and stare upon them in the darkness with empty, black windows, and the old linden shivers in its corner.

“You have been up there,” says the chimney sweep’s wife.

Always as a child, I believed that she smiled when she said that, and that her teeth shone just as white in the darkness as the teeth of her husband’s apprentices.

“Yes, I have been with him,” Magda has perhaps replied, defiant and stiff in her chalk-white fear.

What happened next? One does not really know, but probably there was a wild chase around the courtyard. At the foot of the old linden, the girl tripped and fell. She dared not call for help, so the convalescent should not hear it. And who else would have helped her? Her mother was away at work. The furious woman fell upon her. At some point, she had got hold of a weapon, a broomstick or something like that, and blow after blow fell. A few stifled screams from a throat paralyzed with the fear of death, and then nothing.

A few of the apprentices, who had just come home, stood there in the dark portal and watched. They did not move a finger to help the child. Perhaps they did not dare. Perhaps they were gripped by the faint hope of seeing their mistress carted away in a police wagon.

When Mrs. Wetzmann went back into the house after exercising her rights as mistress of the house—because she felt instinctively that she naturally had the right to discipline any and all whom she could or wished to—she bumped into something soft on the stairs. She called for a maid and a candle, because it was completely dark up there. It was Fredrik. He had heard the weak cries, jumped out of bed, rushed out, and had fallen down the stairs.

Magda lived for three days. After that she died and was buried.

Wetzmann, the chimney sweep, paid some money to the serving woman, her mother, and there was no trial over the matter. Just as well it affected the old man deeply. He no longer went to the pub to drink toddy, but instead most often sat at home in a leather chair and read in an old Bible. His health deteriorated and he became quiet and peculiar, and it was not a year before even he was dead and laid in the earth.

His son Fredrik got better eventually, but he never finished the seminary, because both

his intelligence and his mind had been weakened. One often saw him take flowers to Magda's grave. He walked hunched over and very fast, yes, he almost ran, as if he had many important errands to run, and often he had a few books tucked under his arm. In the end, he became a complete idiot. And the chimney sweep's wife? She seems to have been a strong character. There are people who are not actually without conscience, but who never come upon the idea that they have done something wrong. It can happen that a man with shiny buttons on his coat grabs them by the shoulder and asks them to come along: then their conscience awakes. But no one came to get Mrs. Wetzmann. She put her stepson in an institution when he was too much trouble to have at home, and she mourned her husband, as is customary, and afterward remarried. When she went to church on her wedding day, she wore a mauve satin coat with gold braid and was "dressed to the nines"—so said my grandmother, who sat in her window in the house across the street and saw the whole procession, while she turned a page in her postilla.