

## THE CANDLEMAKER

By Victoria Forrester

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ONCE upon a time, in the Great Forest, there lived a man who made candles. His father before him and his father's father before that had made candles for the village. His family had been the candlemakers for as long as anyone could remember.

Always they started early in the morning, melted the tallow to make the wax, and dipped and dipped until the long white strings were covered with smooth white wax and left in the shade to cool.

To the cottage where the candlemaker worked, the villagers came with all manner of good things. They came with eggs and wheat and apples and oranges. They came with shoes and chickens and sticks of sweet licorice. And when they left, their baskets were always filled with an ample supply of long white candles. It was a pleasant life, and one with which the candlemaker was well content.

Early one morning, the candlemaker stood looking at the work to be done that day. And as he looked, he thought to himself, "Today, before I start my work, I'll take just a sip from the jug I've been saving for special occasions; it will sweeten the taste of the day."

Its contents were sure to delight him, or so he'd been told when, not long before, on a dark and moonless night, he'd been given the jug as a gift.

On that night, on his way through the woods, he'd met an old woman who walked all alone all the night. "It's so dark," the stranger said, "had you but a candle to spare, it would light the path of one who is old and poor. "He'd had but the one in his hand, and he was still many steps from his home. But his heart was touched, and he bowed to the woman and gave her his one white candle. "Your kindness will be long remembered," she told him and placed in his hands a glass jug. Its contents were blue, the color of moonlight on iris. "Take this," she said. "It will sweeten the taste of your

days.” And with a smile as soft as the whisper of pines in the moonlight, she’d turned and was seen no more.

On the high window ledge where the jug had been placed for safekeeping, a change could be daily observed, a change in the coloring, strange to behold. In the morning the jug was pure red, like the dawn, like a plump juicy currant; by noon it was gold; and by night a deep blue. It was a change both strange and wonderful, and the candlemaker began to wonder if perhaps it might not be magic.

Carefully, he took down the jug from the ledge, brought out his cup, and as he poured began to compose a wish by which to test for magic. But he’d scarcely begun to think, and only just started to pour, when a loud knock on the door startled him, causing his hand to slip. The liquid spilled over the table and onto the floor and into the tub of melting white wax. His apron was splashed, and he sputtered and muttered all the way to the door. He was still sputtering and muttering when the woodsman who’d come with fresh kindling was given his candles and bid a good day.

He muttered and mopped up the table and sputtered and mopped up the floor. But he stopped when he came to the wax. Every sound, every motion grew still as he stood in amazement. The wax was a beautiful berry-bright red. Like a jewel, like a rose, it was bright as a cherry and rich as a red velvet pillow. “What a blessing,” he thought to himself. “What a gift! Why it’s like the sweet Christmas,” he said.

He looked at the wax long and long, and as he looked, he saw the kind of things that appear in firelight or are seen in a cloudy sky. He saw dancing bears and red birds in flight. He saw circles that turned into squares and flowers that turned into fir trees. He saw squares that grew smaller and taller, and castles that turned into people and melted away. Always as one thing came into view, another disappeared. And so it was that the candlemaker began to dream a dream of somehow capturing and keeping all the shapes and forms that danced before his eyes.

He dreamed long and long; and as he dreamed, he devised a way of working. In his kitchen were pans, in his garden a bag of white sand. So, taking the pans to the garden, he filled them. A bit of spring water to make the sand hold - and all was soon right to begin. He made holes in the sand, finger deep at the start. But he worked till the walls of each hole took the press of his hand; each hole grew till it changed from a hole to a space - tiny hollows of space - close in size and in shape to things that he’d

seen in the wax. And into these hollows the smooth red wax was poured. With anticipation, he awaited the time he could tap on the trays and lift out the beautiful things that were cooling inside the sand.

When the last tray was made, and the last drop of red wax poured out, there was a twinge of sadness in the candlemaker's heart. Tomorrow there would be only the smooth white wax to fill his tub. The beautiful red color was gone.

So, he swept the floor and scrubbed the table and put his things away. One by one he put them in their places: the candle wicks, the ladle, and the stirring stick. Then with a tug of sadness he reached for the jug to cast it away. He reached under the table and felt for the handle, but to his surprise he needed two hands! It was heavy to lift, and when he brought it up into the light, he could scarcely believe what he saw. It was full again, filled with a substance the color of amber and afternoon sunlight. Now he knew it was magic indeed. "What a blessing," he thought to himself. "What a gift! Why it's like the sweet Christmas," he said.

He knew now that as often as ever he liked, he could color the wax and make marvelous things come about. If he wished, he could turn the wax golden, the color of dragon wings, lemons, and leopards; and after that blue, the color of foxes in moonlight. He could even save some of the color aside to make spots with or stripes or to mix with still others and maybe make up his own color someday, like a purplish green, the color of ogres and leftover pumpkins.

All his days until now had been each like the last. In even succession, they'd come and they'd gone like smooth white candles; but this day had been one of pure magic.

And forgetting to eat and forgetting his sleep, he continued to work all that day and very far into the night. When at last he did sleep, it was soundly and well.

In the morning, the weaver came by for his usual supply of white candles. He knocked at the door, and he knocked again. But the candlemaker stayed fast asleep. On the third knock, he opened his eyes and shook his poor head to make sure he was clearly awake. It had not been a dream. They were there: the beautiful candles were there to be touched. He got up and touched each to be sure: the laughing prince, the castle, the little dancing bear... He looked at them all and held each one in turn, loving them with his hands and with his eyes.

He could see through a crack in the door that the weaver had come with a very large basket to fill. But to send these away? To trade them for cloth? The thought filled his heart with alarm. "None today," he called out. "No white candles for trade."

He knew the weaver well and felt a sadness in the sound that followed his steps away. But the thought of his beautiful things being lighted and turning to smoke made him stop and not open the door.

All who came were turned back with the same short reply, "None today. No white candles for trade." And so it was that for many long days thereafter the candlemaker did not open his door. No soft knock, no loud knock, no knock whatsoever could change what was said and was so.

Days passed by, and behind the closed doors of his cottage the candlemaker worked on alone. He worked well, and imagined such things as are dreamed of by children and kings. One day, he created a rainbow so small it could rest in the palm of his hand. And he held it there, thinking how fine was the feeling of being himself at the ends of the rainbow, his own hand the fabled treasure. He looked up at the jug placed inside the high window and thought of how rich in good things he'd become, of how great a gift he'd been given.

But so great was his gift that he made in a season more things than his cottage could hold. He built more shelves and more, till they reached from the floor to the ceiling and met at the four corners of the room. In the cupboards and drawers candles nested in boxes and peeked out of boots. There was no room for more in the closet.

"Profusion, confusion!" he muttered, and still he made more. He muttered and filled up the table and sputtered and filled up the floor. Still he worked on and on till the chairs were encircled with colorful clutter, the bed top a patchwork of plump, lumpy things.

When at last the night came that all possible space was used up, he lay down to rest on the old wooden bench that had become his bed. With heavy eyes he looked up at the ledge where the jug had been placed for refilling. But to his surprise, the window was filled with mist. He looked at the strange gray light, and slowly, cautiously, he took the jug into his hands. It was light to lift up. It was gray like a teardrop and empty inside like the feeling he felt in his heart.

No substance, no color returned, though he waited and watched for it long into darkness.

The night deepened around him. It deepened and gently wrapped around him a chrysalis spun of light sleep and dreams. Then, unfolding new wings, petal soft, there appeared in his dream a young dragon. Its little waxen wings trembled when he reached out to take it in his hands. But he tickled it under the chin, and it began to talk to him in dragon language, a secret kind of language that is seldom understood except by children. It talked to him of dancing bears and rainbows, of woodsmen and weavers, and of an old woman who walked all alone in the night. On the brink of the night, its wide, beautiful wings slowly opened and closed, closed and opened. Its wings were the color of sunrise. When the morning arrived, and he wakened, he felt strangely changed. He felt light as a leap and ready to go to the task that he knew must be done on that day. And so it was that the morning was spent making notes to be sent to the village. He wrote on the best bits of paper he had and made spots on the edges with scraps of bright wax. "Celebration at Sundown": the word was sent out to each person he knew, and he knew everyone in the village.

When the hour drew near, he could hear the sweet sound of their coming. From far and away he could hear fiddles playing, and voices. And sweet, he suspected, would be the surprise they'd find waiting.

As each in turn came to his door, he put a bright candle into the outstretched hand. The look in the eyes of each who received one was more lovely than anything ever he'd seen. The surprise, the delight that came into each face made a place in his heart start to kindle and burn with a warmth that no color could match.

As the people turned to go home in the darkness, his gifts lit the way. And he saw and he heard there such things as had never before filled the forest. He heard stories of dragon wings, lemons and leopards; he heard songs about foxes in moonlight. A rainbow of color, a ribbon of light, he knew now why the gift had been given: it had lighted a people and lighted the night and left a dark forest enchanted with laughter and dreams. "What a blessing," he thought to himself. "What a gift! Why it's like the sweet Christmas this night."

From its station inside the high window, the jug softly glistened and started to fill; its contents were once again blue, filled with a substance the color of moonlight on rivers. Tomorrow new candles, some white and some blue...

Yet some things happen just once and no more. So, the maker of candles stood long by his door and kept watch till the last little light left the forest. Now his shelves were all empty, the last candles gone, like leaves from the branches of winter. And softly and sadly a small cloud passed over the moon.

But so it was then, as it is to this day, as one thing disappeared, another one came into view. In his heart he imagined himself busy working, the beautiful wax softly swirling like clouds in a marvelous motion. It moved to the sound of the meaning he'd heard, and it sang in his mind like the ocean.