

Under the Willow Tree

The area down near *Køge* is extremely bare; the town admittedly lies down by the shore, and that is always attractive, but it could be more attractive than it is: flat fields all around, and a long way to any woodland; but when one feels really at home in a place, one can always find something attractive, something that one can yearn for even when in the loveliest place on earth! And we also have to concede that on the outskirts of *Køge*, where a couple of small poor gardens stretch down to a small river that runs out to the shore, it could be quite charming in summer, and this was what *Knud* and *Johanne* felt, two small neighbouring children who used to play here and creep across to each other under the gooseberry bushes. In the one garden there stood an elder, in the other an old willow tree, and under it the children very much liked to play, and had also been given permission to, although the tree stood very close to the river, where they could easily fall into the water, but the Good Lord keeps an eye on his children, otherwise things would be in a bad way; they were also extremely careful, indeed, the boy was such a coward when it came to water that it was impossible in summer to get him out on the beach, where the other children loved to walk and paddle; he was reproached for this, and that was something he had to put up with; but then little *Johanne*, his neighbour, dreamt that she was sailing in a boat in *Køge* Bay and that *Knud* walked straight out to her, the water first came up to his neck and then went right above his head; and from the moment *Knud* heard the dream, he no longer put up with being called a coward when it came to water, but just referred to *Johanne*'s dream; he took pride in it – but he didn't go out into the water.

The poor parents often met with each other, and *Knud* and *Johanne* used to play in the gardens and out on the highway that alongside the ditches had a long row of willow trees, and they were unattractive, their crowns had been hacked off, but they were not there for decoration, but to be of use; the old willow in the garden was prettier, and beneath they sat 'many a time and often', as people say.

In the town of *Køge* there is a large square, and at market times there were whole streets of tents with silk ribbons, boots and all sorts of things; there were crowds of people and it usually rained, and then one noticed the whiff of peasant's coats, but also the quite delicious smell of gingerbread, there was a stall brimming over with them, and the most wonderful thing of all: the man who sold them always took lodgings during the market times at the house of *Knud*'s parents, and then of course there was always the odd gingerbread or two, which *Johanne* also got a piece of, but what was almost even better, the man who sold the gingerbread was good at telling stories and about practically everything, even his gingerbread; and one evening he told them a story about them that made such a profound impression on the children that they never ever forgot it, so the best thing is probably for us to hear it as well, especially since it is short.

'Two gingerbread figures lay on the counter,' he said, 'one was in the shape of a man with a hat, the other a young woman without a hat but with a blob of gold leaf on her head; they had faces on the side that pointed upwards, and it was that side they were to be seen from not the reverse, one should never look at people that way. The man had a bitter almond on his left-hand side – that was his heart – but the young woman was just an ordinary gingerbread.'

They lay on the counter as samples, they lay there for a long time and were in love with each other, but the one said nothing of this to the other, but one has to do that if something is to come of it.

"He's a man, he must say the first word," she thought, but would in fact be content with knowing that he reciprocated her feelings.

He was more ferocious in his way of thinking, which men always are; he dreamt he was a real live street urchin and possessed four pence, and that he bought the young woman and ate her.

And they lay for days and weeks on the counter and became dry, and her thoughts became finer and more feminine: "it's enough for me that I have lain on the counter with him!" she thought, and then snapped at the waist.

"If she had known of my love, she would have lasted a bit longer!" he thought.

And that is the story and here they are the both of them!' the gingerbread-seller said. 'They are unusual as regards the course of their lives and their unspoken love that never led to anything. Look, here they are!' and he gave the man, who was whole, to *Johanne*, and *Knud* was given the young woman who had snapped in two; but they were both so enchanted by the story that they could not bring themselves to eat the loving couple.

The next day they took the two gingerbread biscuits with them to *Køge* Cemetery, where the church wall is overgrown with the loveliest green ivy that summer and winter hangs like a rich carpet over the wall; and they placed the biscuits up in the greenery in the sunshine and told a group of other children the story of the unspoken love that never came to anything – the love that is – for the story was exquisite, all of them felt that, and when they looked across at the gingerbread couple, well, there was a large boy who – out of sheer wickedness – had eaten up the young woman who had snapped in half. The children cried because of this, and then, probably because the poor man should not be alone in the world, – they ate him too, but they never forgot the story.

The children were always together by the elder bush and under the willow tree, and the little girl sang the loveliest songs with a voice that was as pure as a silver bell; *Knud* had no music whatsoever in him, but he knew the words, and that is always something. – People in *Køge*, even the ironmonger's wife, used to stand still and listen to *Johanne*. 'What a sweet voice that young child has!' she said.

They were wonderful days, but such days do not always last. The neighbours became separated; the little girl's mother was dead, her father was to be married in Copenhagen and there it was possible for him to earn a livelihood: he was to be a messenger somewhere, which was a highly remunerative job. And the neighbours separated tearfully, the children in particular wept; but the parents promised to write to each other at least once a year. And *Knud* became a shoemaker's apprentice, they couldn't let the tall youth just laze around any longer. And then he also got confirmed!

Oh, how he would have loved on that solemn day to have gone to Copenhagen and seen little *Johanne*, but he did not, nor had he ever been there, despite the fact it only lies about 40 kilometres from *Køge*; although he had seen its towers across the bay in clear weather, and on the day of his confirmation he could distinctly see the golden cross gleaming on the *Church of Our Lady*.

Oh, how he thought of *Johanne*! did she remember him? Yes, she did! – At Christmas a letter came from her father to *Knud*'s parents, things were going very well in Copenhagen, and good fortune had come *Johanne*'s way because of her beautiful voice, she had a job at the theatre and sang there; and she had already earned some money for this, out of which she sent a whole Thaler to her dear former neighbours in *Køge* so they could celebrate Christmas; they were to drink her health, and she had also added a P.S. that said 'Kind Regards to Knud!'

They all cried, and yet it was all so delightful, but they cried tears of joy. Every day *Johanne* had been in his thoughts, and now he could see that *she* also thought of him, and as the time approached for him to become a journeyman, the more clearly did he realise that he was so fond of *Johanne* that he wished her to become his wife, and then a smile would come to his lips and he would file with even swifter strokes while his leg was held tight against the knee strap; he pushed the awl into one of his fingers, but that didn't matter a bit. He did not intend to remain silent like the two gingerbread figures – that story had taught him a great deal. And then he became a journeyman and his knapsack was filled and fastened. He was at last to make the journey to Copenhagen for the first time in his life and had already found a master there. Well, how surprised and glad *Johanne* would be. She was now seventeen years old and he was nineteen.

He wanted to buy a gold ring while still in *Køge*, but then it crossed his mind that there must be far lovelier ones in *Copenhagen*; and then he said goodbye to his parents, and set out briskly on foot through the rough and rainy autumn weather; the leaves were falling from the trees; drenched to the skin he came to *Copenhagen* and to where his new master lived.

The first following Sunday he wanted to pay a visit to *Johanne*'s father. He put on his new journeyman clothes, and his new hat from *Køge*, it suited *Knud* so well, until then he had always only worn a cap. – And he found the house he was looking for, and climbed the many stairs; it was enough to make one giddy, how people were stacked on top of each other in this jungle of a city.

It looked quite prosperous inside the living room, and *Johanne*'s father received him kindly; to his new wife he was of course a complete stranger, but she gave him her hand and a cup of coffee.

'*Johanne* will be pleased to see you!' her father said, 'you have become such a spruce young man! – yes, now you shall see her! she is a girl who is a source of joy to me and will continue to be so, God willing! she has her own room and pays us for it too!' and her father knocked very politely on her door, just as if he were a stranger, and then they entered – oh, how charming it was! there was certainly not a room like it in all of *Køge* – the queen could not have had anything more exquisite! There was a carpet, there were full-length curtains, a genuine velvet-upholstered chair and all around there were flowers and paintings and a mirror one almost ran straight into, it was just as large as a door. *Knud* took in all of this at one look, though his eyes were fixed solely on *Johanne*, she was a fully grown woman, quite different from how *Knud* had imagined her, but much more beautiful! There was no young woman like her in *Køge*, and how fine she was! But how strangely she looked at *Knud*, although only for a moment, then she flew towards him, as if she was going to kiss him; she did not, however, but was almost about to. Oh yes, she was really delighted to see her childhood friend! there were tears in her eyes, and she had so much to ask and talk about, everything

from *Knud's* parents to the elder tree and the willow tree, and she called them *Elder-Mother* and *Willow-Father*, as if they were human beings, well, they could just as well qualify as the gingerbread biscuits could; she also spoke of them, and of their unspoken love, how they lay on the counter and fell to pieces, and then she laughed so heartily – but *Knud* could feel his cheeks burning and his heart beating more strongly than it otherwise did! – no, she hadn't become the slightest bit haughty! – She was also responsible, he felt sure, for her parents inviting him to stay the whole evening, and she poured out the tea and offered him a cup herself and then she took a book and read aloud for them, and it seemed to *Knud* as if precisely what she read aloud had to do with his love, it fitted completely with all his own thoughts; and then she sang a simple song, but she turned it into a complete story, it was as if her own heart brimmed over with it. Oh yes, she was definitely very fond of *Knud*. The tears ran down his cheeks, he could do nothing to stop them, and he was unable to say a single word; he felt so stupid and yet she squeezed his hand and said: 'You have a good heart, *Knud*! Stay as you are, always!'

It was a wonderful evening, impossible to sleep after, and *Knud* did not sleep either. On parting, *Johanne's* father had said: 'Yes, now don't you completely forget us! Make sure you don't let the entire winter pass before you come to see us again!' – and he could certainly come on a Sunday if he liked! And that he dearly wished. But every evening, when work was over, and they worked until candles had to be lit, *Knud* would go out into the city; he would walk through the street where *Johanne* lived, would look up at her window, it was nearly always lit in her room, and one evening he saw quite clearly the shadow of her face at the curtain – that was a lovely evening! The master's wife didn't approve of his gallivanting around town in the evening, as she called it, and she shook her head, but the master laughed: 'he's just a young chap!' he said.

'On Sunday we will see each other, and I will tell her about my thoughts for her, and that she must become my wife! I may be a poor shoemaker's journeyman, but I can become a master, one outside the guild at any rate. I will work hard and put every effort into it -! yes, I will tell her that, nothing comes out of unspoken love, I've learnt that from the gingerbread figures!' And Sunday came and *Knud* came, but – how unfortunate! – all of them were on the way out, they had to tell him that. *Johanne* squeezed his hand and asked him: 'have you ever been to the theatre? You must try it sometime! I'm singing on Wednesday, and if you have time, I will send you a ticket; my father knows where your master lives!'

How kind it was of her! and on Wednesday afternoon a sealed paper arrived without a message, but a ticket lay inside, and that evening *Knud* went to the theatre for the first time, and what did he see there – yes, he saw *Johanne*, so beautiful, so charming; she admittedly got married to a stranger, but that was in the play, something they acted, *Knud* knew that, otherwise she would never had considered sending him a ticket to watch it; and everyone clapped and called out, and *Knud* cried out Hurrah!

Even the king smiled down at *Johanne*, as if he too was pleased with her. Dear Lord, how small and insignificant *Knud* felt himself, but he loved her so fervently and she was also fond of him, and the man must be the one to say the first word, that was what the gingerbread woman had thought; there was a great deal in that story.

As soon as Sunday came, *Knud* went to their house; his mind was attuned, as when he took Holy Communion. *Johanne* was alone at home and she received him, he couldn't have been more fortunate.

'It's a good thing you've come!' she said, 'I almost sent father to you, but I sensed you might come this evening; for I have to tell you that on Friday I am travelling to France, I have to do this if I am to get to the top of my profession!' –

Knud felt as if the room started to spin, as if his heart would break, but not a tear came to his eyes, although it was perfectly obvious how sad he became at the news; *Johanne* saw this and she was on the point of crying, 'You honest, trusty soul!' she said – and that loosened *Knud's* tongue, and he told her how intensely fond of her he was and that she must become his wife; and as he said it, he saw that *Johanne* turned deathly pale, she let go of his hand and said, seriously and sadly: 'Do not make yourself and me unhappy, *Knud*! I will always be a good sister to you, someone you can rely on -! but nothing more!' and she stroked his heated brow with her soft hand. 'God gives us strength to withstand a great deal, as long as one wishes it oneself!'

And at that moment her stepmother entered the room.

'*Knud* is beside himself because I am to leave for France!' she said; 'take it like a man!' and she patted him on the shoulder, as if she had only been speaking to him about her journey and nothing else. 'Child!' she said. 'And now you must be good and sensible, as under the willow tree, when both of us were children!'

And to *Knud* it was as if a piece of the world had broken off, his thoughts were like a loose thread, at the mercy of the wind. He stayed, he was unaware if they had asked him to or not, but they were friendly and kind, and *Johanne* gave him tea, and she sang, it was not the same sound as before, but so exceedingly beautiful even so, it was enough to break one's heart in pieces, and then they said farewell to each other, *Knud* did not hold out his hand, but she took his and said: 'You must give your sister your hand when parting, my old playmate!' and she smiled through the tears that coursed down her cheeks, and repeated the word: 'Brother.' Yes, that was supposed to be a great consolation! – Such was their parting.

She sailed to France, *Knud* walked the muddy streets of Copenhagen. – The other journeymen from the workshop asked him what he was ruminating about; he ought to go out on the town with them, he was a young fellow just as they were.

And they went off together to a public dance hall; and there were many pretty girls, but no one like *Johanne*, and precisely where he thought he could forget her, she would be most vivid in his thoughts: 'God gives one strength to withstand a great deal, as long as one wishes it oneself!' she had said; and his mind became more solemn, he folded his hands – and the violins played and the young women danced around him; he was quite frightened, he felt he was where he could not take *Johanne*, and yet she was with him in his heart – and so he went outside, he ran through the streets, walked past the house where she had lived, where it was dark, everywhere it was dark, empty and lonely; the world went on its way, and so did *Knud*. Winter came and the water froze over everywhere, it was as if everything was getting ready for a funeral.

But when spring came and the first steamers set out, he felt such a longing to get away from everything, travel far out into the great wide world, though not too close to France.

And so he packed his knapsack and roamed deep into Germany, restlessly travelling from one town to another; it was not until he came to the magnificent old city of *Nürnberg* that it seemed to him as if his wanderlust has deserted him and he was able to stay.

It is a strange old city, as if cut out of an illustrated history book. The streets lie higgledy-piggledy as it suits them, the houses dislike standing in rows; the oriels with small turrets, scrolls and statues project out over the pavement, and high up from the strangely angled roofs gutters stick out over the street, shaped like dragons and long-bodied dogs.

On the marketplace stood *Knud* with his knapsack on his back; he was standing beside one of the old fountains where the marvellous bronze figures, biblical and historical, stand among the jets of water. – A lovely serving maid was just fetching water, she gave *Knud* a refreshing drink; since she had a whole handful of roses, she gave him one of them too, and he thought that was a good omen. –

From the nearby church pealed the sound of the organ, it sounded so familiar to him as if it came from *Køge* Church and he entered the large cathedral; the sun was streaming in through the stained-glass windows in amongst the tall slender columns; his thoughts became meditative, his mind became calm.

And he sought out a good master in *Nürnberg*, stayed with him and learnt the language.

The old entrenchments around the city have been transformed into small vegetable gardens, but the high walls are still standing, with solid towers; the ropemaker plies his trade on the log-built gallery along the wall towards the city, and everywhere from cracks and holes grow elder trees that drape their branches out over the small, low houses below, and in one of these the master lived who *Knud* worked for; across the small skylight where he slept the elder inclined its branches.

He lived there for a summer and a winter, but when spring came, it became unbearable, the elder was in flower, and the scent was so familiar to him, it was as if he was in the garden back in *Køge*, – and so *Knud* moved from his master's house to another one further to the city centre, where there were no elder trees.

It was close to one of the old brick bridges, right opposite a low, roaring water mill where he found a job in a workshop; outside there was only a swift-flowing river that was hemmed in between the houses, all of which were draped with old, rickety balconies that looked as if they would be shaken down into the water. – No elders grew here, there was not even a flowerpot with a little greenery in it, but immediately opposite there was a large old willow tree that seemed to cling to the house there so as not to be swept off by the current; it stretched its branches out over the river, just like the willow in the garden down by *Køge* river.

Yes, he had actually moved from elder trees to willow trees; the tree here, especially on moonlit evenings, had something about it that made him feel:

‘ – a Dane outright
in moon's clear light!’

although it was not the moonlight which made him feel like this, no, it was the old willow tree. He couldn't bear it, and why not? Ask the willow, ask the blossoming elder! – and so he bade his master and *Nürnberg* farewell and travelled on even further.

He spoke to no one about *Johanne*; he kept his sorrow hidden within himself, and he placed a special significance on the tale of the gingerbread figures; now he understood why the gingerbread man had a bitter almond in his left-hand side, he too knew its bitter taste, and

Johanne, who was always so gentle and smiling, was just a gingerbread woman. It was as if the strap of his knapsack was lacing him, making it hard for him to breathe, he loosened it, but that didn't help. The world was only half outside him, the other half he bore within him, that was how it was!

It was not until he saw the high mountains that the world seemed larger to him, his thoughts turned outwards, he felt tears in his eyes. The *Alps* seemed to him to be the folded wings of the Earth; what if it opened them out, spread out the great feathers with motley pictures of black forests, roaring waters, clouds and masses of snow! 'On the Day of Judgment, the Earth will raise its great wings, fly towards God and burst like a bubble in his bright rays! Oh, if only it were the Day of Judgment!' he sighed. –

In silence he walked through the countryside, which seemed to him to be a grass-grown orchard; from the wooden balconies of the houses the lace-making girls nodded to him, the mountain tops gleamed in the red evening sun, and when he saw the green lakes between the dark trees – he thought of the shore at *Køge Bay*; and there was sadness but no pain in his breast.

At the place where the *Rhine*, like some long wave, surges forward, crashes, is crushed and is transformed into snow-white, bright masses of cloud, as if it were the creation of the clouds – the rainbow flutters like a loose ribbon above it – he thought of the water mill in *Køge*, where the water roared and was crushed.

He would have liked to have stayed in the quiet Rhineland town, but here there was so much elder and so many willow trees, – and so he travelled on; over the high, mighty mountains, through openings blasted in the rock and along roads which, like swallows' nests, clung to the rock-face. Far below the water roared, the clouds lay beneath him; over glistening thistles, rhododendrons and snow he walked in the warm summer sun – and then he said farewell to the lands of the North and moved on, down under chestnut trees, among vineyards and fields of maize. The mountains were a wall between him and all his memories, and that was how it should be. –

Before him there lay a large, imposing city which they called *Milan*, and here he found a German master who gave him work; he had come to a workshop where an old, good-natured married couple lived. And they grew fond of the quiet journeyman, who spoke little, worked all the more and was devout and Christian. It was also as if God had lifted the heavy burden from his heart.

What he most like doing was occasionally to go up onto the roof of the imposing marble church, it seemed to him to be made of snow from back home, and shaped in images, pointed spires, flower-adorned open halls; from every corner, every pinnacle and arch the white statues smiled down at him. – Above him he had the blue sky, beneath him the city and the wide expanses of the green Lombardy plains, and to the north the high mountains with their eternal snow, – and then he thought of *Køge Church* with ivy twining round its red walls, but he did not long to be there; here beyond the mountains he wished to be buried.

One year he had lived here, three years had passed since he left home; then his master took him out into the city, not to the arena to see the circus riders, no, to the great opera house, where there was an auditorium that was well worth seeing. – Silk curtains hung there in seven tiers, and from the floor to the dizzying height of the ceiling the finest ladies sat with bouquets of flowers in their hands, just as if they were going to a ball, and the gentlemen

were dressed to the nines, many sporting silver and gold. It was as dazzling there as the brightest sunshine and the music roared so strongly and delightfully, it was more magnificent than the theatre in *Copenhagen*, but there *Johanne* was, whereas here – yes, it was like magic, the curtains were drawn aside and here too *Johanne* stood in gold and silk with a golden crown on her head; she sang as only God's angel can sing; she moved forward as far as she could, she smiled as only *Johanne* could: she looked straight at *Knud*.

Then poor *Knud* seized the master's hand and shouted out 'Johanne!' but it couldn't be heard, the musicians were playing so loudly; and the master was nodding at this: 'Yes, her name is indeed Johanne!' and he took a printed programme and showed him that her name stood on it, her entire name.

No, it was not a dream! and all the people there acclaimed her and threw flowers and garlands to her, and each time she left the stage she was called back in, she left, returned and returned yet again.

Out in the street people flocked round her carriage and pulled it, and *Knud* was at the very front and happiest of all of them, and when they came to her magnificently lit-up house, there *Knud* stood by the carriage door, which opened and she stepped out and the light shone straight into her exquisite face and she smiled and thanked people so gently and was so moved; and *Knud* looked straight into her face and she looked straight into *Knud's* face, but she did not recognise him. A gentleman with a star on his chest held out his arm – they were engaged, people said.

And then *Knud* returned home and packed his knapsack; he wanted, he had to, return home to the elder and the willow tree – ah, under the willow tree! in the space of one hour one can live an entire human life!

They asked him to say; no words could hold him back; they said to him that winter was coming, that the snow was already falling in the mountains; but in the track of the slowly moving carriage – a way had of course to be cleared for it – he would walk, with his knapsack on his back, supporting himself on his stick. –

And he walked towards the mountains, climbed them and descended on the other side; exhausted, he glimpsed neither town nor house. He simply moved northwards. The stars lit up above him, his feet faltered, his head reeled; deep down in the valley stars were also lit; it was as if the heavens were also stretched out beneath him. He felt ill. The stars down there became ever greater in number and ever brighter, they moved this way and that. It was a small town where the lights were winking, and he realised this, summoned his last vestiges of strength and managed to reach a humble inn.

He stayed there for the night and the whole of the next day, for his body needed rest and care. There was a thaw and slush in the valley. Early the following morning a hurdy-gurdy man came by, he played a melody from back home in Denmark, and then *Knud* was unable to stand it any longer – he walked for days, many days, at a speed as if it was a matter of getting home before all of them died there – but he spoke to no one about his longing, no one could guess that he had a great heartache, the most profound one can have, it is not of the world, it is not diverting, it is not even for telling friends – and he had no friends! A foreigner, he travelled through foreign lands, homewards, northwards. In the only letter from home that his parents had written to him years ago it said: 'You are not truly Danish like the

rest of us here at home! We are so to such a tremendous extent! You are only fond of foreign countries!' His parents could write this, for after all they knew him!

It was evening, he was walking along the open highway, it started to freeze; the land itself became flatter with fields and meadows; by the roadside there stood a large willow tree; everything looked like it did back home, so Danish! He sat down under the willow tree, he felt so tired, his head sagged, his eyes closed so as to rest, but he felt and sensed how the willow lowered its branches towards him, the tree seemed to be a colossal old man, it was *Willow-Father* himself who lifted him up in his arms and carried him, the tired son, back to the Danish land with the open, pale shore, to *Køge*, to his childhood garden. Yes, it was the willow-tree from *Køge* town itself that had set out into the world to search and find him, and now he had been found and brought back home to the little garden by the river, and here stood *Johanne* in all her splendour, wearing her golden crown, as he had last seen her and she cried out: 'Welcome!'

And just in front of them stood two strange figures, but they looked more human than back in childhood, they had also changed; it was the two gingerbread figures, the man and the woman; they were facing the right way and looked a handsome couple.

'Thank you!' both of them said to *Knud*, 'You have loosened our tongues! You have taught us that one must fearlessly dare express one's thoughts, otherwise nothing will come of it! and now something has come of it – we are engaged!'

And they walked hand in hand through the streets of *Køge*, and they looked very respectable from behind, there was not a finger one could lay on them! and they went straight towards *Køge* Church, with *Knud* and *Johanne* following after; they too walked hand in hand; and the church stood there as before with its red walls and lovely ivy, and the great door of the church opened to both sides and the organ pealed and the gingerbread man and gingerbread woman both walked up the aisle: 'Master and mistress first!' they said, 'the bridal pair of the gingerbread figures!' and then they stepped aside for *Knud* and *Johanne*, and they knelt up at the altar and she bowed her head over his face, and ice-cold tears rolled down from her eyes, it was the ice that was melting round her heart because of his strong love, and they fell on his burning cheeks, and – he woke up at this, and found himself sitting under the old willow tree in a foreign country, in the winter-cold evening; icy-cold hail was falling from the clouds that lashed his face.

'This was the loveliest hour of my life!' he said, 'and it was a dream. – Dear Lord, let me dream it once more!' and he closed his eyes, he slept, he dreamt.

In the early morning the snow fell, it drifted over his feet, he slept. The village folk went to church; there sat a journeyman, he was dead, frozen to death – under the willow tree.