

The Pepper-Man's Night-Cap

There's a street in *Copenhagen* that has the strange name '*Hyskenstræde*', and why is it called that and what does it signify? It's said to be German, but that does Germans an injustice: '*Häuschen*' is what one ought to say, and that means: small houses; the ones in *Hyskenstræde*, back then and for many years after that, were practically nothing more than wooden shacks, rather like the stalls one now sees erected at markets; well, probably a little bigger and with windows, though the panes were of horn or bladder skin, for back then it was too expensive to have glass window-panes in all the houses, but that is also a long time ago, so that great-grandfather's great-grandfather, when he talked about it, also used to refer to it as 'in olden times'; it is several centuries ago.

The rich merchants in *Bremen* and *Lübeck* used to do business in *Copenhagen*; they did not come up here in person, they sent their journeymen, who used to live in the wooden shacks in 'Small House Street' and took care of selling beer and spices. German beer was so delicious, and there were many different types: Bremer beer, Prying, Emser – oh yes, and Braunschweiger-Mumme, and then there were all those spices, such as saffron, aniseed, ginger and especially pepper; yes, that was the most important here, and for that reason every German journeyman in Denmark was called a '*pebersvend*' – a 'pepper-man'. Back home they had to promise not to get married while up here; many of them would then grow old; they had to earn their own livelihood, take care of themselves, put out their own fires if they had any; some of them became lonely old fellows, with their own thoughts and habits; and that is why every unmarried male person who has reached a certain age is now called a pepper-man. All this you have to know to be able to understand the story.

People make fun of the 'pepper-man', say he must have a night-cap on, pull it down over his eyes and go to bed with it:

'Saw firewood, with no end in sight,
The pepper-man must share this plight, –
And go to bed with night-cap on,
His candle he himself must light!' –

Yes, that's what people sing about him! they poke fun at the pepper-man and his night-cap – simply because they know so little about him and his cap – ah, such a night-cap one must never wish for oneself! and why not? Well, just listen!

Down in Small House Street, in olden days, there were no cobbles, people stepped in one hole after the other, as in a much-used sunken road, and it was narrow there: the shacks were so close to both next-door and opposite neighbour that canvas was often stretched across the street from one shack to another, and there was such a spicy smell of pepper, saffron and ginger. Behind the counter not many a young journeyman stood, no, most of them were old fellows, and they did not, as we think of them, wear a wig or a night-cap, with coarse woollen trousers, waistcoat and dress coat buttoned all the way up, no, that was how great-grandfather's grandfather used to dress and how he is portrayed in paintings; the pepper-men couldn't afford to have their portrait painted, and it would have been worth it now to own a painting of one of them, dressed as they did when they stood behind the counter or walked to church on special days. Their hat was broad-brimmed and high-crowned, and often one

of the youngest journeymen would stick a feather in his; the woollen shirt was hidden by a turned-down linen collar, the jacket tightly buttoned, the cloak worn loosely on top and the trousers stuffed down into broad-toed shoes, for they wore no stockings. At their belt they wore a kitchen knife and a spoon, there was also a larger knife they could use to defend themselves with, as was often necessary back then. Dressed like this on festive days was old *Anthon*, one of the oldest pepper-men of the street, except that he did not wear a high-crowned hat, but a fur cap and under that a knitted cap, a real night-cap, he had got used to wearing it and did so always, and he possessed no less than two of them; he was exactly right for a portrait, he was so scrawny, so wrinkled round the mouth and eyes, had long, bony fingers and bushy grey eyebrows, and a large tuft of hair hung down over his left eye, not a pretty sight, but it made him instantly recognisable; it was known that he came from *Bremen*, although he wasn't really from there, that was where his master lived; he himself was from *Thüringen*, from the town of *Eisenach*, just north of *Wartburg*; old *Anthon* didn't speak much about it, though he thought about it all the more!

The old journeymen in the street did not meet much socially, each of them stayed in his own shack which closed early in the evening and then it looked quite black, only a dull gleam of light could be seen through the small horn window-pane up in the roof, where, inside, and usually on his bed, the old fellow would sit with his German song book and recite his evening hymn, or he pottered around, even late at night, with this or that; it was certainly not entertaining, a stranger in a foreign land is a harsh fate – one is not noticed by anybody, unless one happens to be standing in the way.

Often, when it was a pitch-black night outside with rough, rainy weather, it could be so forbidding and deserted here; there were no lamps except for a single small one that hung right at one end of the street, in front of a picture of the Virgin Mary that had been painted on the wall. One could hear the water plashing and splashing against the timberwork close by, off *Slotsholm*, which the other end of the street faced. Such evenings felt long and lonely unless one busied oneself with something: unpacking and packing, making cornets and polishing scales isn't a necessary chore each and every day, but then one finds something else to do, and old *Anthon* did so, he mended his own clothes, patched his shoes; and when he finally got to bed, he kept – out of habit – his night-cap on, pulled it a little further down, but then pulled it up slightly again to check if the candle had been properly gutted, he felt it, squeezed the wick and then lay down again and turned over onto his other side, and pulled down his night-cap once more; but often a thought immediately came into his head: were, he wondered, all the coals in the small fire-pot downstairs really out, properly doused, a tiny spark might still be there and that could set light and cause damage; and so he got up out of bed, crept down the ladder – it could hardly be called a staircase – and when he got to the bed-warmer, there was not a spark to be seen, and he could go back again; but often he only got halfway, for then he wasn't quite sure if the iron rod had been put up to bar the door, if the cramp-iron secured the shutters; well, down again he had to go on his spindly legs; he was very cold, his teeth chattered when he crept back into bed, for the cold only gets really bad when it knows it is about to be banished. He pulled his coverlet higher up over himself, his night-cap further down over his eyes and turned his thoughts away from the dealings and difficulties of the day, but that did not make him feel comfortable, for now old memories came along and hung up their curtains, and sometimes they have pins in them

that one can prick oneself on: ow! one says; and if they stick into one's flesh and sting, it can bring tears to one's eyes, and this was often the case with *Anthon*, there came hot tears, the brightest pearls; they fell onto the coverlet or onto the floor, and they rang out as if a string of pain broke, so heart-rending it was; they evaporated of course, they flared up in flames, but they then lit up a life-image for him that never disappeared from his heart; if he dried his eyes with his night-cap, the tear and the image were crushed, but the source of it remained, it lay in his heart. The images did not come in the order they usually did in real life, usually the most painful came, and then the happy yet melancholy ones gleamed too, but the latter were precisely the ones that cast the strongest shadows.

'The beech wood is a delight in Denmark!' people said, but more delightful to *Anthon* was the beech wood in the area around *Wartburg*; more majestic and more venerable did the old oak trees around the proud baronial castle seem to him, where the twining plants hung over the boulders of the cliff; the apple blossom smelt sweeter there than in the land of Denmark; he could still feel and sense it vividly; a tear rolled down, rang out and gleamed: in it he clearly saw two young children, a boy and a girl, playing together; the boy had red cheeks, curly blond hair, honest blue eyes, it was the son of the rich merchant, little *Anthon* himself; the little girl had brown eyes and black hair, she looked both spirited and intelligent, it was the mayor's daughter, *Molly*. The two of them were playing with an apple, they shook it and could hear the pips rattling inside it; they divided the apple and had a piece each; they shared the pips between them and ate them, except for one, that ought to be placed in the earth, the little girl felt.

'Then you'll see what comes out of it, something will come that you can't imagine, a whole apple tree, but not right away!'

And they planted the pip in a flowerpot, both of them eagerly took part; the boy poked a hole in the soil with his finger, the little girl placed the pip in it and then both of them covered it over with earth.

'Now you mustn't take it up tomorrow to see if it has taken root,' she said, 'one mustn't do that! I did that with my flowers, only twice, I wanted to see if they were growing, I didn't know any better, and the flowers died!'

The flowerpot stayed at *Anthon's*, and every morning, throughout all winter, he tended it, but all he could see was black earth; now spring came, the sun shone so warmly, and then two small green leaves started to sprout in the flower pot.

'That's me and *Molly*!' *Anthon* said, 'that's lovely, that's wonderful!'

Soon a third leaf made its appearance; who could that be? Yes, and then one more and yet another one! every day and week the plant grew bigger and bigger, it became a whole tree. And this, all of it, was reflected in a single tear that was crushed and vanished; but it could come again from the source in old *Anthon's* heart.

Close to *Eisenach* a range of rocky mountains stretches out, one is rounded and has neither trees, bushes or grass; it is called *Venusberg*. Inside it lives *Dame Venus*, a Germanic goddess from pagan times, *Dame Holda* she is also called, every child in *Eisenach* knew and knows this; she had enticed the noble knight *Tannhäuser* into the mountain, the minnesinger from the *Wartburg* circle of singers.

Little *Molly* and *Anthon* often used to stand outside her home, and on one occasion she said: 'Do you dare knock and say: "Dame *Holda*! Dame *Holda*! open up, here stands *Tannhäuser*!"'

but *Anthon* did not dare; *Molly* dared, although she only said "Dame *Holda*! Dame *Holda*!" loudly and clearly, the rest she mumbled into the wind, so indistinctly that *Anthon* was sure she hadn't really said anything; she looked so spirited, as spirited as when she sometimes met him in the garden along with other young girls, and they then all wanted to kiss him, simply because he didn't want to be kissed, and resisted. She was the only one who dared. 'I dare kiss him!' she said proudly and put her arms round his neck; that was *her* conceitedness and *Anthon* put up with it, didn't think any further about it. How charming she was, how spirited. Dame *Holda* inside the mountain was also said to be lovely, but that loveliness, people had said, was the seductive beauty of wickedness; the greatest loveliness on the other hand was that found in holy *Elisabeth*, the guardian saint of the land, the devout Thüringen princess whose good deeds, through stories and legends, lent glory to many a place here; in the chapel her picture hung with silver lamps round it – though she didn't look like *Molly* at all.

The apple tree the two children had planted grew year by year, it became so big it had to be planted out in the garden in the fresh air, where the dew fell, the sun shined warmly, and it gained strength to withstand the winter, and after the heavy burden of the winter it was as if it came into blossom out of sheer joy in spring; in the autumn there were two apples on it, one for *Molly*, one for *Anthon*; there could hardly be less than that.

The tree had been quick to grow, *Molly* grew like the tree did, she was as fresh as apple blossom; but he was not destined to see that blossom for long. Everything alters, everything changes! *Molly's* father left his old home and *Molly* went with him, far away – well, in our present age of steam it is only a few hours' journey, but back then it took more than a night and a day to get from *Eisenach*, which was right on the outermost edge of Thüringen, to the city that is still called *Weimar*.

And *Molly* cried and *Anthon* cried – all those tears, well they merged into a single tear that had the lovely red colour of happiness. *Molly* had told him that she was fonder of him than all of *Weimar*.

A year passed, then two, three and during all that time two letters arrived, one brought by a carrier, the other by a traveller; the road was long, heavy and winding, past cities and towns. How often hadn't *Anthon* and *Molly* listened together to the story of *Tristan* and *Isolde* and he had then thought of himself and *Molly*, although the name *Tristan* was said to mean 'he was born to them in sorrow', and that didn't apply to *Anthon*, nor would he ever, like *Tristan*, come to think 'she has forgotten me!', but *Isolde* did not forget her dear friend either, and when, in the legend, they were both dead and buried on either side of the church, the linden trees from their graves grew higher than the church roof and met up above it when they blossomed; that was so beautiful, *Anthon* thought, but so sad – but it could never be sad in that way between him and *Molly* and then he whistled a song by the minnesinger *Walther von der Vogelweide*:
 'Under the linden on the heath'
 and he especially liked the lines:
 'near the wood and in a dale
 tantanteray!
 sweetly sang the nightingale!'

That song was constantly on his lips, he sang and whistled it in the moonlit night when he rode off on horseback along the deep sunken road to get to *Weimar* and visit *Molly*; he wanted to come unexpectedly, and that he did.

He was welcomed, goblets were filled with wine, there was convivial company, fine company, a cosy room and a good bed, and yet it wasn't at all as he had imagined and dreamt it! he did not understand himself, he did not understand the others; though we are able to understand it! One can be in a house, in a family, and yet not take root; one converses as one does in a stagecoach, knows each other as one does in a stagecoach, makes each other feel uncomfortable, wishes that one could take one's leave, or that one's good neighbour could do so. Yes, it was something similar that *Anthon* felt.

'I am an honest girl,' *Molly* said to him, 'I will tell you straight out! Much has changed since we were together as children, both outside and inside. Custom and will have no power over our hearts! *Anthon!* I do not want to lose you as a friend, now that I am soon to be far from here! – believe me, I have many a kind thought for you, but to be fond of you as I now know it is possible to be of another human being is something I have never been with regard to you! This you will have to accept! – Goodbye, *Anthon!*'

And *Anthon* also said goodbye; not a tear did he shed, but he sensed that he was no longer *Molly's* friend. The white-hot iron rod and the frozen iron rod rip the skin off our lips with an identical sensation when we kiss it, and he kissed love just as strongly as he did hatred.

It did not take even one whole day for *Anthon* to ride back to *Eisenach*, but the horse he rode on was also ruined.

'So what!' he said, 'I am ruined and I will ruin everything that can remind me of her: Dame *Holda*, Dame *Venus*, you pagan woman! – I will shake and break the apple tree, pull it up by the roots; it will never blossom again and bear fruit!'

But the tree was not laid waste, it was he himself who was laid waste and lay in his bed with a fever. What could help him rise from his sick bed? There was one medicine able to, the bitterest of all medicines, one that shakes up the sick body and the shrinking soul: *Anthon's* father was no longer a rich merchant. The burdensome days, the days of trial and tribulation, were imminent; misfortunes surged in over the formerly rich household and inundated it like great waves. His father became a pauper, sorrow and misfortune stunned him; then *Anthon* had something else to think about than a broken heart and being angry with *Molly*; now he had to be both master and mistress of the house, he had to organise, assist, really get down to work, get out into the wide world and earn a living.

He went to *Bremen*, experienced adversity and difficult days, and they make the mind either hard or soft, often much too soft. How different the world and people there were than he had imagined when he was a child. What were the songs of the minnesingers to him now? Tinkling cymbals, hot air! Yes, that is what he sometimes felt, but at other times the songs spoke directly to his soul and he grew devout.

'God's will is what is best!' he then said, 'it was a good thing that the Lord God did not let *Molly's* heart hang on to me, what would that have led to, now that this reversal of fortune has struck. She let go of me before she knew or considered the sudden loss of prosperity that was to take place. It was an act of divine mercy towards me, everything has turned out for the best! Everything has turned out wisely! she couldn't help it; and I have been so bitterly hostile towards her!'

And the years passed; *Anthon's* father was dead, strangers now lived in his family home; *Anthon* was to see it again, however, his rich master sent him on a business matter that took him through his native town of *Eisenach*. The old castle of *Wartburg* stood unchanged up there on the mountain, with 'The Monk and the Nun' slabs of carved stone; the majestic oak trees formed the same silhouette for the entire scene as in his childhood. The Venusberg gleamed, bare and greyish, down in the valley. He would have liked to have said: 'Dame *Holda!*, Dame *Holda!* Unlock the mountain! then at least I would remain there on home ground!'

It was a sinful thought, and he crossed himself; then a small bird started to sing from the bush, and the old minnelied came to mind:

'near the wood and in a dale –
tantantery!

sweetly sang the nightingale!'

He remembered so much, here close to the town of his childhood, which he saw once more through tears. The family home was as before, but the garden had been relaid, a field lane led across one corner of the plot, and the apple tree – the one he had not ruined – still stood there, but outside the garden, on the far side of the lane, although the sun shone on it as before and the dew fell on it as before, it bore much fruit that caused its branches to bow down towards the ground.

'It thrives!' he said, 'it's able to thrive!'

One of its large branches, however, had been snapped, wanton hands had done this, for the tree stood close to the beaten track.

'Some of its blossoms have been broken off with no thanks given, some of its fruit stolen and branches snapped; one could say, if it possible to speak of a tree in this way as one does of a human being: it was not sung at its cradle that this would come to pass. Its story began so beautifully, and what has come out of it? abandoned and forgotten, a garden tree by a ditch, close to field and lane! there it stands unsheltered, shaken and broken! it probably won't wither as a result, but as the years pass it will blossom less, bear no fruit and finally – well, that's the end of the story!'

That is what *Anthon* thought under the tree, what he thought many a night in the small, lonely room in the wooden shack in a foreign country in Small House Street in *Copenhagen*, where his rich master, the merchant in *Bremen*, had sent him and stipulated that he was not to marry.

'Get married! ho, ho!' and he laughed deeply and oddly.

Winter had arrived early, there was a keen frost; outside a snowstorm caused everyone who was able to stay indoors; and that was also why *Anthon's* opposite neighbour did not notice that the door of his shack had not been opened for two days, that he had not shown himself, who goes out in such weather unless it is necessary?

The days were grey and dark, and inside the shack, where the window panes were not of glass, it was either twilight or pitch darkness. For two days, *Anthon* had not left his bed, he did not have enough strength to do so; he had long since sensed the harsh weather outside in his own limbs. The old pepper-man lay there, abandoned by other, and unable to help himself, scarcely able to reach out for the jug of water he had placed beside the bed, and the last drop had already been drunk. It was not a fever, not an illness, it was old age that

immobilised him. It was almost like constant night around him, up there where he lay. A small spider, which he couldn't see, busily and contentedly wove its web over him, as if to ensure a little new, fresh mourning crape if the old man should close his eyes for good.

Time was so sluggish and meaninglessly empty; he had no tears, no pain either; he did not think at all of *Molly*; he had a feeling that the world and its bustle was no longer any affair of his, that he lay outside it, no one thought of him. For an instant it seemed to him he felt hungry, thirsty as well, – yes, he did! but no one came to satisfy those needs, no one would come. He thought of those who languished, recalled how holy *Elisabeth*, when she lived on this earth, she who was the saint of his home and childhood, the noble Duchess of *Thüringen*, the exalted Dame, used to enter even the poorest dwelling and bring hope and refreshment to anyone who was sick. Her pious deeds illuminated his thoughts, he recalled how she came with words of solace to those who suffered, bathed the wounds of the afflicted, brought food to the hungry, even though her strict husband was angry with her. He recalled the legend about her, how, when she came with her basket, full to the brim with food and wine, her husband, who watched her every step, came forward and asked her angrily what she was carrying, and when she out of fear answered, it is roses I have picked in the garden, he tore off the cloth, and the miracle took place for the pious woman – the wine and bread, everything in the basket, had been transformed into roses.

So did the saint live on in old *Anthon's* thoughts, so did she stand as large as life before his feeble eyes, before his bed in the shabby shack in the country of Denmark. He bared his head, looked directly into her gentle eyes and everything around him was radiance and roses, indeed, these even spread out so fragrantly, he then discerned a distinct, lovely smell of apples, he saw that it was an apple tree in blossom, it stretched out over him, it was the tree he and *Molly* had planted as a tiny seed.

And the tree let its scented leaves sift down onto his hot forehead and cool it; they fell onto his parched lips and were like fortifying wine and bread, they fell onto his chest and he felt so light, so secure that he dozed.

'Now I am sleeping!' he quietly whispered, 'sleep is good! tomorrow I will be in full vigour once more and up on my feet! wonderful! wonderful! The apple tree planted in love I see in all its glory!'

And he slept.

The following day, it was the third day the shack was closed, the snow now longer swirled in eddies, the neighbour opposite went over to *Anthon*, who did not show himself. He lay there stretched out on the bed. Dead. With his old night-cap clenched in his hands. He was not given it to wear in his coffin, he owned another one, pure and white.

Where now were the tears he had wept? Where were the pearls? They remained in the night-cap – genuine ones do not dissolve in the wash – with the cap they were kept and forgotten – the old thoughts, the old dreams, yes, they continued to remain in *The Pepper-Man's Night-Cap*. Don't wish for it! it will make your forehead much too hot, cause your pulse to race, cause you to have dreams you confuse with reality; this is what the first person who tried it on experienced and this was even so fifty years later, and it was the mayor in person, who sat with a wife and eleven children, safely within four walls; he immediately dreamt of unhappy love, bankruptcy and hard times.

'Ooh! how hot that night-cap makes you feel!' he said and pulled it off and one pearl after the other rolled out and sounded and gleamed. 'It's my rheumatics!' the mayor said, 'I can see stars!'

These were tears wept fifty years previously, wept by old *Anthon* from *Eisenach*.

Anyone who put on the night-cap since then was sure to have visions and dreams, his own story became that of *Anthon*, it became a real story, it became many, other people can relate those, now we have told the first one and with that our final word is: Never wish for *The Pepper-Man's Night-Cap*.