

# Anne Lisbeth

*Anne Lisbeth* was as red and white as milk and blood, was young and contented, a joy to behold, her teeth gleaming white, her eyes so bright; light on her feet when dancing and her nature yet lighter! And what was the result? – ‘The ugly brat!’ – well yes, he certainly was not a pretty sight! he was placed with the ditch-digger’s wife. *Anne Lisbeth* herself came to the count’s castle, sat in the finest room and wore silk and velvet; no breeze dared blow on her, no one say a harsh word to her, for that would do her harm and she dared not be exposed to such. She was wet nurse to the count’s child, who was as fine as a prince, lovely as an angel, oh how she loved that child; her own, well it was put out at the *ditch-digger’s* house, where the pot didn’t boil over, but their mouths did, and most of the time there was nobody at home, the boy cried, but what the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t grieve over, he cried himself to sleep, and when you’re asleep you don’t feel either hunger or thirst, sleep is such a good invention; over the years – yes, as time goes by – up come the weeds, as people say, *Anne Lisbeth’s* boy did that all right, though he was in fact stunted in his growth, they said; but he had completely become one of the family here, they had been paid money for it, *Anne Lisbeth* was well rid of him, she was a city lady, she had feathered her nest and wore a hat whenever she went out, though she never went to the *ditch-digger’s* place, that was so far from the city and she had no business there either, the boy was theirs and he had a voracious appetite, they said, and was to earn his keep, so he took care of *Mads Jensen’s* cow for he was able to tend and get things done. –

The watch dog at the manor’s bleaching ground sits proudly in the sunshine on top of its kennel and barks at every passer-by; in rainy weather it creeps inside and stays dry and warm. *Anne Lisbeth’s* boy sat by the ditch in the sunshine, whittling away at a tethering stake, in the spring he knew of three strawberry plants in blossom that would probably yield fruit, that was his happiest thought, but no strawberries came. He sat in rainy, rough weather, got drenched to the skin, the keen wind then dried the clothes on his body; if he came to the manor house he got shoved and pushed, he was nasty and ugly, the maids and farm hands said, he was used to that – ‘*never loved!*’

How did things go for *Anne Lisbeth’s* boy? How could they possibly go? it was his lot in this life: ‘*never loved.*’

He was ‘cast overboard’ from dry land, went to sea in an unseaworthy old tub, sat at the helm while the skipper drank; he was filthy and nasty, numb with cold and ravenous, anyone would think he’d never had a full belly, nor had he either.

It was late in the year, rough, wet, windy weather, the chill wind cut through the thickest clothes, especially at sea, and with but one sail there a wretched old craft sailed with only two men on board, well, one and a half you could also say, the skipper and his boy. It had been half-dark all day long, now it got blacker, the air was piercing cold. The skipper took himself a dram to keep himself warm inside! The bottle was old and the glass too, the top half was whole but the foot snapped off and instead it had a carved, blue-painted wooden block to stand on. A wee dram did you good and two did you better, in the skipper’s opinion. The boy sat at the helm, holding onto it with his rough, tarry hands, he was ugly, his hair

wiry, he was cowed and stunted, it was the *ditch-digger's* boy, in the church register he was listed as *Anne Lisbeth's*.

The wind sliced in its own way, the boat in another! The sail swelled, the wind had caught hold, they shot forward like greased lightning – the going was rough and tough, but still more could come – Stop! – what was that! what thrust, what sprang up, what clutched the craft? it turned around! did a cloudburst occur, did a breaker rise? – the boy at the helm screamed: 'In the Name of Jesus!' The ship had struck a great rock on the seabed and sank like an old shoe in the village pond; sank with mice and men as one says, and there were mice all right but only one and a half men: the skipper and the ditch-digger's boy. No one saw it happen except the screeching gulls and the fish down there, and even they didn't see it properly, for they scurried out of the way in fright when the water roared into the sinking craft; almost a fathom under water it now stood; hidden were the two of them, hidden, forgotten! only the glass with the blue-painted wooden block as its foot didn't sink, the block held it afloat; the glass drifted and snapped in two and was washed ashore – where and when? Well, it was no use any more now! it had served its term and been loved; the same couldn't be said for *Anne Lisbeth's* boy! but in the Kingdom of Heaven no soul will still be able to say 'never loved'!

*Anne Lisbeth* lived in the city and had done so for many years, was called *Madam* and held her head especially high when she spoke of old memories, her time with the count, when she rode in a carriage and could speak with countesses and baronesses. Her sweet count's child was the loveliest of God's angels, the most lovable soul, he had been so fond of her and she of him. They had kissed each other and stroked each other, he was her joy, half of her life. Now he was in his youth, was fourteen years old, possessed learning and charm; she had not seen him since she bore him in her arms; had not been at the count's castle for many a year, it was quite a journey to go there.

'I really must do something about it!' *Anne Lisbeth* said, 'I must make the trip to my pride and joy, to my sweet count's child! ah yes, I'm sure he longs for me too, thinks of me, is fond of me, as when he put his angelic arms round my neck and said: "*Ann-Lis*", it was like a violin! yes, I really must do something about it and see him again!'

She travelled by calf-wagon, she went on foot, she came to the count's castle, it was large and gleaming as it always had been, the garden looked as before, but the people in the house were all strangers, not a single one of them knew about *Anne Lisbeth*, they didn't know what she had once meant to this place, that though the countess would tell them, also her own boy! how she longed for him.

Now *Anne Lisbeth* was here; she had to wait for a long time and time spent waiting is long! Before the count's family went to dine, she was called in to the countess, and addressed most kindly. Her sweet boy she would get to see after the meal, then she would be called in again! How he had grown, was tall and slim, but he still had his lovely eyes and his angelic mouth! he looked at her, but didn't say a word. He seemed not to recognise her. He turned round, wanted to leave once more, but then she took his hand and pressed it to her lips! 'That's enough!' he said and then he left the room, he whom she only thought of with love, he whom she had loved and loved more than anyone, he, her earthly pride.

*Anne Lisbeth* walked outside the castle along the open highway, she was so downcast; he had been so distant towards her, had not spared her a thought, not a word, he who she had once carried in her arms both day and night, and still carried in her thoughts.

A large, black raven landed on the road in front of her, screeched, and screeched again, 'Aah!' she said, 'what sort of a bird of ill omen are you!'

She passed the *ditch-digger's* house, there his wife stood in the doorway and they spoke together.

'You're stout as they come!' the *ditch-digger's* wife said, 'you're plump and dumpy! You're doing all right!'

'Not so bad!' *Anne Lisbeth* replied.

'The boat went down with them!' the *ditch-digger's* wife said. '*Skipper Lars* and the boy both drowned. So that was the end of them. I had thought though that the boy in time could have helped me out with a penny or two, he did not cost you any more, *Anne Lisbeth!*'

'They drowned, did they?' *Anne Lisbeth* said, and nothing more was said on the subject. *Anne Lisbeth* was so disheartened, because her count's child didn't feel like talking to her, she who had loved him and had travelled all that way to go there, it had also cost money, the pleasure she had gained from it had not been great, but she didn't say a word about that here, she didn't want to get it off her mind by talking about it to the *ditch-digger's* wife, she might come to think that she no longer had any standing with the count's family. Then the raven screeched above her head once more.

'That infernal black racket,' *Anne Lisbeth* said, 'it's giving me quite a scare today!'

She had brought some coffee beans and chicory with her, it would be a kind deed to give this to the *ditch-digger's* wife so she could make a bowl of coffee, *Anne Lisbeth* could have a cup too, and the *ditch-digger's* wife went off to make it, and *Anne Lisbeth* sat down on a chair where she fell asleep; then she dreamt of the one person she had never dreamt of, that was rather strange: she dreamt of her own child who had hungered and bawled here in this house, been neglected and left to his own devices, and who now lay in the depths of the ocean, *Our Lord* knew where. She dreamt that she was sitting where he sat, and that the *ditch-digger's* wife was out making coffee, she could smell the coffee beans, and in the doorway there stood such a lovely creature, just as handsome as the count's child, and the little one said:

'Now the world is about to end! Hold on to me, for after all you are my mother! You have an angel in the kingdom of heaven! hold on to me!'

And he reached out for her, but there was such a terrible crashing noise, it sounded as if the world was falling apart, and the angel rose up and held her by the sleeves of her shift, so tightly, it seemed to her, that she was lifted clear of the ground, but something heavy was holding onto her legs, it lay across her back, it was as if a hundred women were clinging onto her, and they said: 'If you are to be saved, so are we too! hang on tight! hang on tight!' and all of them hung on. It was too much, 'rrii-iiip!' it said, the sleeve tore and *Anne Lisbeth* plunged downwards so horribly that it made her wake up – and she was on the point of crashing down with the chair she was sitting on, she was so confused in her mind that she couldn't recall what she had dreamt, but it had been something bad.

They then drank coffee, and talked together, and then *Anne Lisbeth* went to the nearest town, where she was to meet the carrier and that same evening and night ride home with him; but when she came to the carrier, he said that they couldn't leave before the evening of the next day, she then wondered what it would cost her to stay, considered the length of the journey and thought of taking the coast road and not the highway as it was nearly ten miles

shorter; after all the weather was fine and there was probably a full moon, so *Anne Lisbeth* decided to walk, she could be home the following day.

The sun had set, the vesper bells were still ringing – no, it wasn't the bells, it was the fire-bellied toads croaking in the ponds. They now fell silent, everything was quiet, there was not a bird to be heard, they had all gone to rest, and the owl was not yet home; the woods and the shore where she walked were hushed and still, she could hear her own footsteps in the sand, no lapping of the waves could be heard, everything out there in the deep water was soundless; down there everybody was mute, both the living and the dead.

*Anne Lisbeth* walked along, her mind empty, she was absent-minded as one says, but her thoughts were not absent from her, they are never absent, they simply lie there dozing, both the living thoughts that have gone to rest, and those that have not stirred yet. But the thoughts are sure to arrive, they can move in our hearts, move in our heads or fall down on us!

'A good deed bears the fruit of its own blessing!' it is written; 'in sin is death' it is also written. A great deal is written, a great deal has been said, one does not know this, one does not remember it. This was the case for *Anne Lisbeth*; but it can dawn upon one, it can take place. All vices, all virtues lie in our hearts! in yours, in mine! they lie there like small invisible seeds; then a sun's ray comes from without, the touch of an evil hand, you turn a corner, to the right or the left, yes, that can decide things, and the small seed gets shaken, which causes it to swell, it bursts, and spills out its juices into your bloodstream and then you are on the move. These are anxious thoughts, one does not have when one is dozing, but they are in motion: *Anne Lisbeth* moved in a doze, her thoughts were in motion! From Candlemas to Candlemas the heart has chalked up a great deal on its slate, it has the year's accounts, much has been forgotten, sins in word and thought against God, our neighbour and our conscience; we don't think about this, nor did *Anne Lisbeth*, she had done nothing contrary to the laws of the land, she was well regarded, worthy and honest, she knew that. And as she walked down by the shore – what was it lying there? She stopped; what had been washed up? a man's old hat lay there. Where could it possibly have gone overboard. She went up closer, stood and looked at it, Aah! what was lying there! she was badly frightened; but it was nothing to get frightened about, it was only seaweed and rushes that lay tangled round a large oblong stone, it looked as if it was the entire body of a human being, it was only rushes and seaweed, but she was frightened and as she passed on, so many things came into her thoughts that she had heard as a child, all those superstitions about '*the shipwreck spectre*', the ghost of the unburied corpse that lay washed up on the deserted beach. The '*shore-washer*': the dead body that did no harm, but its ghost, the *shipwreck spectre*, would follow the lone wanderer, hold on to it and demand to be carried to the cemetery to be buried in consecrated ground. 'Hold on tight! hold on tight!' it said; and as *Anne Lisbeth* repeated these words to herself, she suddenly recalled her entire dream, as large as life, recalled how the mothers had clung to her with this cry: 'hang on tight! hang on tight!' how the world sank, the sleeves of her shift tore and she fell away from her child, who at the hour of judgment would have held her up. Her child, her own flesh and blood, the child she had never loved, indeed, not even thought about, this child now lay on the sea-bed, it could come like a shipwreck spectre and cry out: 'hang on tight! hang on tight! carry me to consecrated ground' and as she thought this, anxiety nipped at her heels and she walked faster; fear came like a cold, clammy hand and laid itself on her heart, so that she began almost to feel pain, and as she now looked out over the sea,

the air grew thicker and denser; a heavy mist rushed forward, laid itself around bushes and trees, lending them a strange appearance. She turned round to look for the moon that was behind her, it was like a pale disc that emitted no rays, it was as if something heavy was weighing down all her limbs: hang on tight! hang on tight! she thought, and when she once more turned round and looked at the moon, it seemed to her that its white face was right close to her, and the mist draped like a sheet of linen round her shoulders: 'hang on tight! take me to consecrated ground!' she wanted to hear, and also heard, a sound so hollow, so strange, it did not come from the toads in the pond, not from ravens or crows, for such she could not see, 'bury me! bury me!' it sounded so clearly! yes, it was the shipwreck spectre of her child that lay on the sea-bed, that would know no peace before it had been carried to the cemetery and its grave dug in consecrated ground. That was where she wanted to go, where she wanted to dig; she went in the direction of the church, and then she felt as if her burden grew lighter, it disappeared, and so she wanted to turn round again to reach the shortest way home, but then the leaden weight returned: hang on tight! hang on tight! – it sounded like the toads croaking, it sounded like a plaintive bird, it sounded exactly like 'bury me! bury me!' The mist was cold and clammy, her hands and face were cold and clammy with dread! around her there was this squeezing, inside her there was infinite room for thoughts she had never sensed before.

In our northern climes, a beech wood can come into leaf in the space of a spring night, stand there in young, light-green splendour in the day's sunlight, in one single second the seed of sin in thought, word and deed in the life we have led is sown; it swells and unfolds in a single second when our conscience is aroused; and the *Lord God* wakens it when we least expect it; then there are no excuses: our deeds bear witness, our thoughts find words and the words ring out clearly over the world. We are appalled at what we have borne within us and not smothered, appalled at what we have scattered around out of arrogance and thoughtlessness. The heart stores away all virtues but also all vices, and they thrive in even the most barren soil.

*Anne Lisbeth* contained in her thoughts what we have said here in words, she was overwhelmed by them, she sank to the ground, crawled along it for a short distance. 'Bury me! bury me!' it said, and she would most have liked to bury herself, since the grave granted eternal forgetfulness of all things. – It was the horrid and fearsome hour of the revival of deadly seriousness. Superstition caused her blood to go hot and cold, so much she never wished to speak of came into her mind. Soundlessly, like the shadow of a cloud in bright moonlight, a vision passed before her eyes that she had heard of earlier. Close to her, four whinnying horses rushed by, fire blazed from their eyes and nostrils, they were pulling a gleaming coach in which sat the wicked squire who more than a century earlier had caused havoc in the region. Every midnight, it was said, he drove into his courtyard and immediately came out again he was not white as one says a dead person is, no, he was as black as coal, a burnt-out coal. He nodded to *Anne Lisbeth* and waved: 'hang on tight! hang on tight! then you can ride once more in a count's carriage and forget your child!'

In greater haste still she hurried off and reached the cemetery; but the black crosses and the black ravens mingled in front of her eyes, the ravens screeched like the raven that day had screeched, though now she understood what it was it said: 'I am an unnatural mother! I am an unnatural mother!' each one of them said, and *Anne Lisbeth* knew that this also applied

to her, she might well be transformed into such a black bird and constantly have to screech what it was screeching if she did not get the grave dug.

And she threw herself down onto the ground, and with her hands dug a grave in the hard earth till the blood spurted from her fingers.

'Bury me! bury me!' came the constant cry, she was afraid of hearing the cock crow and of seeing the first red streak of light in the East, for if either came before her work was complete, she would be lost. And the cock crew and dawn broke in the East – – the grave was only half-dug, an icy hand glided over her head and face down towards where her heart was. 'Only half a grave!' it sighed and drifted away, down to the bottom of the sea, yes, it was *the shipwreck spectre*; *Anne Lisbeth* sank overwhelmed and exhausted to the ground, with no thought or sensation left in her.

It was broad daylight when she came to her senses, two young men lifted her up; she was not lying in the cemetery but on the seashore, and in front of her she had dug a deep hole in the sand and cut her fingers till they bled on edges of a broken glass the sharp stem of which had been pushed down into a blue-painted wooden foot. *Anne Lisbeth* was ill; conscience had shuffled the cards of superstition, dealt them and from reading them had found out that she now only had half a soul, the other half her child had taken with it down to the bottom of the sea; she would never be able to fly up to the mercy of heaven before recovering the other half, which was being kept down in the depths; *Anne Lisbeth* came back home, she was no longer the human being she had been previously; her thoughts were tangled like yarn that gets tangled, she had only teased out one thread; to carry *the shipwreck spectre* to the cemetery, dig a grave for it and thereby regain all of her soul.

Many a night she was missing from her home and then she was always found down on the beach, where she was waiting for the shipwreck spectre; a whole year passed in this fashion, then one night she went missing and could not be found; the following day was spent searching for her to no avail.

Towards evening, when the parish clerk entered the church to ring the vesper bells, he saw *Anne Lisbeth* lying in front of the altar; she had been here since early that morning, her strength was almost gone, but her eyes were bright, her face had a rosy gleam to it; the last rays of the sun were shining down on her, across the communion table onto the shining clasps of the bible that lay open at a page of the Book of the Prophet *Joel*: '*Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God!*' – 'that was merely a coincidence!' people said, just as so many other things are mere coincidence!

In *Anne Lisbeth's* face, lit up by the sun, one could read peace and mercy. She felt so well! she said. She had now recovered herself! that night the shipwreck spectre, her own child, had been with her, it had said: You only dug half a grave – for me, but now you have completely buried me for a year and a day in your heart, and that is where a mother keeps its child best! and then it had given her back the lost half of her soul and led her into the church here.

'Now I am in God's house!' she said, 'and in it one is blessed!'

When the sun had completely set, *Anne Lisbeth's* soul had completely risen to where there is no fear, when its battle here has been fought and won, and this *Anne Lisbeth* had done.