



Anne Lisbeth

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DanishNordicScandinavian

Intermediate
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Anne Lisbeth had a colour like milk and blood; young, fresh, and merry, she looked beautiful, with gleaming white teeth and clear eyes; her footstep was light in the dance, and her mind was lighter still. And what came of it all? Her son was an ugly brat! Yes, he was not pretty; so he was put out to be nursed by the labourer's wife. Anne Lisbeth was taken into the count's castle, and sat there in the splendid room arrayed in silks and velvets; not a breath of wind might blow upon her, and no one was allowed to speak a harsh word to her. No, that might not be; for she was nurse to the count's child, which was delicate and fair as a prince, and beautiful as an angel; and how she loved this child! Her own boy was provided for at the labourer's, where the mouth boiled over more frequently than the pot, and where, in general, no one was at home to take care of the child. Then he would cry; but what nobody knows, that nobody cares for, and he would cry till he was tired, and then he fell asleep; and in sleep one feels neither hunger nor thirst. A capital invention is sleep.

With years, just as weeds shoot up, Anne Lisbeth's child grew, but yet they said his growth was stunted; but he had quite become a member of the family in which he dwelt; they had received money to keep him. Anne Lisbeth was rid of him for good. She had become a town lady, and had a comfortable home of her own; and out of doors she wore a bonnet, when she went out for a walk; but she never walked out to see the labourer—that was too far from the town; and indeed she had nothing to go for; the boy belonged to the labouring people, and she said he could eat his food, and he should do something to earn his food, and consequently he kept Matz's red cow. He could already tend cattle and make himself useful.

The big dog, by the yard gate of the nobleman's mansion, sits proudly in the sunshine on the top of the kennel, and barks at every one who goes by: if it rains he creeps into his house, and there he is warm and dry. Anne Lisbeth's boy sat in the sunshine on the fence of the field, and cut out a pole-pin. In the spring he knew of three strawberry plants that were in blossom, and would certainly bear fruit, and that was his most hopeful thought; but they came to nothing. He sat out in the rain in foul weather, and was wet to the skin, and afterwards the cold wind dried the clothes on his back. When he came to the lordly farmyard he was hustled and cuffed, for the men and maids declared he was horribly ugly; but he was used to that—loved by nobody!

That was how it went with Anne Lisbeth's boy; and how could it go otherwise? It was, once for all, his fate to be beloved by nobody.

Till now a "land crab," the land at last threw him overboard. He went to sea in a wretched vessel, and sat by the helm, while the skipper sat over the grog-can. He was dirty and ugly, half frozen and half starved: one would have thought he had never had enough; and that really was the case.

It was late in autumn, rough, wet, windy weather; the wind cut cold through the thickest clothing, especially at sea; and out to sea went a wretched boat, with only two men on board, or, properly speaking, with only a man and a half, the skipper and his boy. It had only been a kind of twilight all day, and now it became dark; and it was bitter cold. The skipper drank a dram, which was to warm him from within. The bottle was old, and the glass too; it was whole at the top, but the foot was broken off, and therefore it stood upon a little carved block of wood painted blue. "A dram comforts one, and two are better still," thought the skipper. The boy sat at the helm, which he held fast in his hard seamed hands: he was ugly, and his hair was matted, and he looked crippled and stunted; he was the field labourer's boy, though in the church register he was entered as Anne Lisbeth's son.

The wind cut its way through the rigging, and the boat cut through the sea. The sail blew out, filled by the wind, and they drove on in wild career. It was rough and wet around and above, and it might come worse still. Hold! what was that? what struck there? what burst yonder? what seized the boat? It heeled, and lay on its beam ends! Was it a waterspout? Was it a heavy sea coming suddenly down? The boy at the helm cried out aloud, "Heaven help us!" The boat had struck on a great rock standing up from the depths of the sea, and it sank like an old shoe in a puddle; it sank "with man and mouse," as the saying is; and there were mice on board, but only one man and a half, the skipper and the labourer's boy. No one saw it but the swimming seagulls, and the fishes down yonder, and even they did not see it rightly, for they started back in terror when the water rushed into the ship, and it sank. There it lay scarce a fathom below the surface, and those two were provided for, buried and forgotten! Only the glass with the foot of blue wood did not sink; for the wood kept it up; the glass drifted away, to be broken and cast upon the shore—where and when? But, indeed, that is of no consequence. It had served its time, and it had been loved, which Anne Lisbeth's boy had not been. But in heaven no soul will be able to say, "Never loved!"

Anne Lisbeth had lived in the city for many years. She was called Madame, and felt her dignity, when she remembered the old “noble” days in which she had driven in the carriage, and had associated with countesses and baronesses. Her beautiful noble-child was the dearest angel, the kindest heart; he had loved her so much, and she had loved him in return; they had kissed and loved each other, and the boy had been her joy, her second life. Now he was so tall, and was fourteen years old, handsome and clever: she had not seen him since she carried him in her arms; for many years she had not been in the count’s palace, for indeed it was quite a journey thither.

“I must once make an effort and go,” said Anne Lisbeth. “I must go to my darling, to my sweet count’s child. Yes, he certainly must long to see me too, the young count; he thinks of me and loves me as in those days when he flung his angel arms round my neck and cried ‘Anne Liz.!’ It sounded like music. Yes, I must make an effort and see him again.”

She drove across the country in a grazier’s cart, and then got out and continued her journey on foot, and thus reached the count’s castle. It was great and magnificent as it had always been, and the garden looked the same as ever; but all the people there were strangers to her; not one of them knew Anne Lisbeth, and they did not know of what consequence she had once been there, but she felt sure the countess would let them know it, and her darling boy too. How she longed to see him!

Now, Anne Lisbeth was at her journey’s end. She was kept waiting a considerable time, and for those who wait time passes slowly. But before the great people went to table she was called in and accosted very graciously. She was to see her sweet boy after dinner, and then she was to be called in again.[257]

How tall and slender and thin he had grown! But he had still his beautiful eyes, and the angel-sweet mouth! He looked at her, but he said not a word: certainly he did not know her. He turned round, and was about to go away, but she seized his hand and pressed it to her mouth. “Good, good!” said he; and with that he went out of the room—he who filled her every thought—he whom she had loved best, and who was her whole earthly pride. Anne Lisbeth went out of the castle into the open highway, and she felt very mournful; he had been so cold and strange to her, had not a word nor a thought for her, he whom she had once carried day and night, and whom she still carried in her dreams.

A great black raven shot down in front of her on to the high road, and croaked and croaked again. "Ha!" she said, "what bird of ill omen art thou?"

She came past the hut of the labourer; the wife stood at the door, and the two women spoke to one another.

"You look well," said the woman. "You are plump and fat; you're well off."

"Oh, yes," answered Anne Lisbeth.

"The boat went down with them," continued the woman. "Hans skipper and the boy were both drowned. There's an end of them. I always thought the boy would be able to help me out with a few dollars. He'll never cost you anything more, Anne Lisbeth."

"So they were drowned?" Anne Lisbeth repeated; and then nothing more was said on the subject.

Anne Lisbeth was very low-spirited because her count-child had shown no disposition to talk with her who loved him so well, and who had journeyed all that way to get a sight of him; and the journey had cost money too, though the pleasure she had derived from it was not great. Still she said not a word about this. She would not relieve her heart by telling the labourer's wife about it, lest the latter should think she did not enjoy her former position at the castle. Then the raven screamed again, and flew past over her once more.

"The black wretch!" said Anne Lisbeth; "he'll end by frightening me to-day."

She had brought coffee and chicory with her, for she thought it would be a charity towards the poor woman to give them to her to boil a cup of coffee, and then she herself would take a cup too. The woman prepared the coffee, and in the meantime Anne Lisbeth sat down upon a chair and fell asleep. There she dreamed of something she had never dreamed before; singularly enough, she dreamed of her own child that had wept and hungered there in the labourer's hut, had been hustled about in heat and in cold, and was now lying in the depths of the sea, Heaven knows where. She dreamed she was sitting in the hut, where the woman was busy preparing the coffee—she could smell the roasting coffee beans.

But suddenly it seemed to her that there stood on the threshold a beautiful young form, as beautiful as the count's child; and this apparition said to her, "The world is passing away! Hold fast to me, for you are my mother after all. You have an angel in heaven. Hold me fast!" And the child-angel stretched out its hand to her; and there was a terrible crash, for the world was going to pieces, and the angel was raising himself above the

earth, and holding her by the sleeve so tightly, it seemed to her, that she was lifted up from the ground; but, on the other hand, something heavy hung at her feet and dragged her down, and it seemed to her that hundreds of women clung to her, and cried, "If thou art to be saved, we must be saved too! Hold fast, hold fast!" And then they all hung on to her; but there were too many of them, and—ritsch, ratsch!—the sleeve tore, and Anne Lisbeth fell down in horror—and awoke. And indeed she was on the point of falling over, with the chair on which she sat; she was so startled and alarmed that she could not recollect what it was she had dreamed, but she remembered that it had been something dreadful.

The coffee was taken, and they had a chat together; and then Anne Lisbeth went away towards the little town where she was to meet the carrier, and to drive back with him to her own home. But when she came to speak to him, he said he should not be ready to start before the evening of the next day. She began to think about the expense and the length of the way, and when she considered that the route by the sea shore was shorter by two miles than the other, and that the weather was clear and the moon shone, she determined to make her way on foot, and to start at once, that she might be at home by next day.

The sun had set, and the evening bells, tolled in the towers of the village churches, still sounded through the air; but no, it was not the bells, but the cry of the frogs in the marshes. Now they were silent, and all around was still; not a bird was heard, for they were all gone to rest; and even the owl seemed to be at home; deep silence reigned on the margin of the forest and by the sea shore: as Anne Lisbeth walked on she could hear her own footsteps on the sand; there was no sound of waves in the sea; everything out in the deep waters had sunk to silence. All was quiet there, the living and the dead creatures of the sea.

Anne Lisbeth walked on "thinking of nothing at all," as the saying is, or rather, her thoughts wandered; but thoughts had not wandered away from her, for they are never absent from us, they only slumber. But those that have not yet stirred come forth at their time, and begin to stir sometimes in the heart and sometimes in the head, and seem to come upon us as if from above.

It is written that a good deed bears its fruit of blessing, and it is also written that sin is death. Much has been written and much has been said which one does not know or think of in general; and thus it was with Anne Lisbeth. But it may happen that a light arises within one, and that the forgotten things may approach.

All virtues and all vices lie in our hearts. They are in mine and in thine; they lie there like little grains of seed; and then from without comes a ray of sunshine or the touch of an evil hand, or maybe you turn the corner and

go to the right or to the left, and that may be decisive; for the little seed-corn perhaps is stirred, and it swells and shoots up, and it bursts, and pours its sap into all your blood, and then your career has commenced. There are tormenting thoughts, which one does not feel when one walks on with slumbering senses, but they are there, fermenting in the heart. Anne Lisbeth walked on thus with her senses half in slumber, but the thoughts were fermenting within her. From one Shrove Tuesday to the next there comes much that weighs upon the heart—the reckoning of a whole year: much is forgotten, sins against Heaven in word and in thought, against our neighbour, and against our own conscience. We don't think of these things, and Anne Lisbeth did not think of them.

She had committed no crime against the law of the land, she was very respectable, an honoured and well-placed person, that she knew. And as she walked along by the margin of the sea, what was it she saw lying there? An old hat, a man's hat. Now, where might that have been washed overboard? She came nearer, and stopped to look at the hat. Ha! what was lying yonder? She shuddered; but it was nothing save a heap of sea grass and tangle flung across a long stone; but it looked just like a corpse: it was only sea grass and tangle, and yet she was frightened at it, and as she turned away to walk on much came into her mind that she had heard in her childhood; old superstitions of spectres by the sea shore, of the ghosts of drowned but unburied people whose corpses have been washed up on to the desert shore.

The body, she had heard, could do harm to none, but the spirit could pursue the lonely wanderer, and attach itself to him, and demand to be carried to the churchyard that it might rest in consecrated ground. "Hold fast! hold fast!" the spectre would then cry; and while Anne Lisbeth murmured the words to herself, her whole dream suddenly stood before her just as she had dreamed it, when the mothers clung to her and had repeated this word, amid the crash of the world, when her sleeve was torn and she slipped out of the grasp of her child, who wanted to hold her up in that terrible hour. Her child, her own child, which she had never loved, lay now buried in the sea, and might rise up like a spectre from the waters, and cry "Hold fast! carry me to consecrated earth."

And as these thoughts passed through her mind, fear gave speed to her feet, so that she walked on faster and faster; fear came upon her like the touch of a cold wet hand that was laid upon her heart, so that she almost fainted; and as she looked out across the sea, all there grew darker and darker; a heavy mist came rolling onward, and clung round bush and tree, twisting them into fantastic shapes.

She turned round, and glanced up at the moon, which had risen behind her. It looked like a pale, rayless

surface; and a deadly weight appeared to cling to her limbs. "Hold fast!" thought she; and when she turned round a second time and looked at the moon, its white face seemed quite close to her, and the mist hung like a pale garment from her shoulders. "Hold fast! carry me to consecrated earth!" sounded in her ears in strange hollow tones. The sound did not come from frogs or ravens; she saw no sign of any such creatures. "A grave, dig me a grave!" was repeated quite loud.

Yes, it was the spectre of her child, the child that lay in the ocean, and whose spirit could have no rest until it was carried to the churchyard, and until a grave had been dug for it in consecrated ground. Thither she would go, and there she would dig; and she went on in the direction of the church, and the weight on her heart seemed to grow lighter, and even to vanish altogether; but when she turned to go home by the shortest way, it returned. "Hold fast! hold fast!" and the words came quite clear, though they were like the croak of a frog or the wail of a bird, "A grave! dig me a grave!"

The mist was cold and damp; her hands and face were cold and damp with horror; a heavy weight again seized her and clung to her, and in her mind a great space opened for thoughts that had never before been there.

Here in the North the beech wood often buds in a single night, and in the morning sunlight it appears in its full glory of youthful green; and thus in a single instant can the consciousness unfold itself of the sin that has been contained in the thoughts, words, and works of our past life. It springs up and unfolds itself in a single second when once the conscience is awakened; and God wakens it when we least expect it. Then we find no excuse for ourselves—the deed is there, and bears witness against us; the thoughts seem to become words, and to sound far out into the world. We are horrified at the thought of what we have carried within us, and have not stifled over what we have sown in our thoughtlessness and pride. The heart hides within itself all the virtues and likewise all the vices, and they grow even in the shallowest ground.

Anne Lisbeth now experienced all the thoughts we have clothed in words. She was overpowered by them, and sank down, and crept along for some distance on the ground. "A grave! dig me a grave!" it sounded again in her ears; and she would gladly have buried herself if in the grave there had been forgetfulness of every deed. It was the first hour of her awakening; full of anguish and horror. Superstition alternately made her shudder with cold and made her blood burn with the heat of fever. Many things of which she had never liked to speak came into her mind. Silent as the cloud shadows in the bright moonshine, a spectral apparition flitted by her: she had heard of it before. Close by her galloped four snorting steeds, with fire spurting from their eyes and nostrils; they dragged a red-hot coach, and within it sat the wicked proprietor who had ruled here a hundred

years ago. The legend said that every night at twelve o'clock he drove into his castle yard and out again. There! there! He was not pale as dead men are said to be, but black as a coal. He nodded at Anne Lisbeth and beckoned to her. "Hold fast! hold fast! then you may ride again in a nobleman's carriage, and forget your child!"

She gathered herself up, and hastened to the churchyard; but the black crosses and the black ravens danced before her eyes, and she could not distinguish one from the other. The ravens croaked, as the raven had done that she saw in the daytime, but now she understood what they said. "I am the raven-mother! I am the raven-mother!" each raven croaked, and Anne Lisbeth now understood that the name also[263] applied to her; and she fancied she should be transformed into a black bird, and be obliged to cry what they cried if she did not dig the grave.

And she threw herself on the earth, and with her hands dug a grave in the hard ground, so that the blood ran from her fingers.

"A grave! dig me a grave!" it still sounded; she was fearful that the cock might crow, and the first red streak appear in the east, before she had finished her work, and then she would be lost.

And the cock crowed, and day dawned in the east, and the grave was only half dug. An icy hand passed over her head and face, and down towards her heart. "Only half a grave!" a voice wailed, and fled away. Yes, it fled away over the sea—it was the ocean spectre; and exhausted and overpowered, Anne Lisbeth sunk to the ground, and her senses forsook her.

It was bright day when she came to herself, and two men were raising her up; but she was not lying in the churchyard, but on the sea shore, where she had dug a deep hole in the sand, and cut her hand against a broken glass, whose sharp stem was stuck in a little painted block of wood. Anne Lisbeth was in a fever. Conscience had shuffled the cards of superstition, and had laid out these cards, and she fancied she had only half a soul, and that her child had taken the other half down into the sea. Never would she be able to swing herself aloft to the mercy of Heaven, till she had recovered this other half, which was now held fast in the deep water. Anne Lisbeth got back to her former home, but was no longer the woman she had been: her thoughts were confused like a tangled skein; only one thread, only one thought she had disentangled, namely, that she must carry the spectre of the sea shore to the churchyard, and dig a grave for him, that thus she might win back her soul.

Many a night she was missed from her home; and she was always found on the sea shore, waiting for the spectre. In this way a whole year passed by; and then one night she vanished again, and was not to be found;

the whole of the next day was wasted in fruitless search.

Towards evening, when the clerk came into the church to toll the vesper bell, he saw by the altar Anne Lisbeth, who had spent the whole day there. Her physical forces were almost exhausted, but her eyes gleamed brightly, and her cheeks had a rosy flush. The last rays of the sun shone upon her, and gleamed over the altar on the bright buckles of the Bible which lay there, opened at the words of the prophet Joel: "Bend your hearts, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord!" That was just a chance, the people said; as many things happen by chance.

In the face of Anne Lisbeth, illumined by the sun, peace and rest were to be seen. She said she was happy, for now she had conquered. Last night the spectre of the shore, her own child, had come to her, and had said to her, "Thou hast dug me only half a grave, but thou hast now, for a year and a day, buried me altogether in thy heart, and it is there that a mother can best hide her child!" And then he gave her her lost soul back again, and brought her here into the church.

"Now I am in the house of God," she said, "and in that house we are happy."

And when the sun had set, Anne Lisbeth's soul had risen to that region where there is no more anguish, and Anne Lisbeth's troubles were over.

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