

# *Good Humour*

Hans Christian Andersen

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*Easy*  
*9 min read*

My father left me the best inheritance; to wit—good humour. And who was my father? Why, that has nothing to do with the humour. He was lively and stout, round and fat; and his outer and inner man were in direct contradiction to his calling. And pray what was he by profession and calling in civil society? Yes, if this were to be written down and printed in the very beginning of a book, it is probable that many when they read it would lay the book aside, and say, “It looks so uncomfortable; I don’t like anything of that sort.”

And yet my father was neither a horse slaughterer nor an executioner; on the contrary, his office placed him at the head of the most respectable gentry of the town; and he held his place by right, for it was his right place. He had to go first before the bishop even, and before the princes of the blood. He always went first—for he was the driver of the hearse!

There, now it’s out! And I will confess that when people saw my father sitting perched up on the omnibus of death, dressed in his long, wide, black cloak, with his black-bordered three-cornered hat on his head—and then his face, exactly as the sun is drawn, round and jocund—it was difficult for them to think of the grave and of sorrow.

The face said, “It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter; it will be better than one thinks.”

You see, I have inherited my good humour from him, and also the habit of going often to the churchyard, which is a good thing to do if it be done in the right spirit; and then I take in the *Intelligencer*, just as he used to do.

I am not quite young. I have neither wife, nor children, nor a library; but, as aforesaid, I take in the *Intelligencer*, and that's my favourite newspaper, as it was also my father's. It is very useful, and contains everything that a man needs to know—such as who preaches in the church and in the new books. And then what a lot of charity, and what a number of innocent, harmless verses are found in it! Advertisements for husbands and wives, and requests for interviews—all quite simple and natural. Certainly, one may live merrily and be contentedly buried if one takes in the *Intelligencer*. And, as a concluding advantage, by the end of his life a man will have such a capital store of paper, that he may use it as a soft bed, unless he prefers to rest upon wood-shavings.

The newspaper and my walk to the churchyard were always my most exciting occupations—they were like bathing-places for my good humour.

The newspaper every one can read for himself. But please come with me to the churchyard; let us wander there where the sun shines and the trees grow green. Each of the narrow houses is like a closed book, with the back placed uppermost, so that one can only read the title and judge what the book contains, but can tell nothing about it; but I know something of them. I heard it from my father, or found it out myself. I have it all down in my record that I wrote out for my own use and pleasure: all that lie here, and a few more too, are chronicled in it.

Now we are in the churchyard.

Here, behind this white railing, where once a rose tree grew—it is gone now, but a little evergreen from the next grave stretches out its green fingers to make a show—there rests a very unhappy man; and yet, when he lived, he was in what they call a good position. He had enough to live upon, and something over; but worldly cares, or to speak more correctly, his artistic taste, weighed heavily upon him. If in the evening he sat in the theatre to enjoy himself thoroughly, he would be quite put out if the machinist had put too strong a light into

one side of the moon, or if the sky-pieces hung down over the scenes when they ought to have hung behind them, or when a palm tree was

introduced into a scene representing the Berlin Zoological Gardens, or a cactus in a view of the Tyrol, or a beech tree in the far north of Norway

As if that was of any consequence. Is it not quite immaterial? Who would fidget about such a trifle? It's only make-believe, after all, and every one is expected to be amused. Then sometimes the public applauded too much to suit his taste, and sometimes too little.

"They're like wet wood this evening," he would say; "they won't kindle at all!" And then he would look round to see what kind of people they were; and sometimes he would find them laughing at the wrong time, when they ought not to have laughed, and that vexed him; and he fretted, and was an unhappy man, and at last fretted himself into his grave.

Here rests a very happy man. That is to say, a very grand man. He was of high birth, and that was lucky for him, for otherwise he would never have been anything worth speaking of; and nature orders all that very wisely, so that it's quite charming when we think of it. He used to go about in a coat embroidered back and front, and appeared in the saloons of society just like one of those costly, pearl-embroidered bell-pulls, which have always a good, thick, serviceable cord behind them to do the work. He likewise had a good stout cord behind him, in the shape of a substitute, who did his duty, and who still continues to do it behind another embroidered bell-pull. Everything is so nicely managed, it's enough to put one into a good humour.

Here rests—well, it's a very mournful reflection—here rests a man who spent sixty-seven years considering how he should get a good idea. The object of his life was to say a good thing, and at last he felt convinced in his own mind that he had got one, and was so glad of it that he died of pure joy at having caught an idea at last. Nobody derived any benefit from it, and no one even heard what the good thing was. Now, I can fancy that this same good thing won't let him live quiet in his grave; for let us suppose that it is a good thing which can only be brought out at breakfast if it is to make an effect, and that he, according to the received opinion concerning ghosts, can only

rise and walk at midnight. Why, then the good thing would not suit the time, and the man must carry his good idea down with him again. What an unhappy man he must be!

Here rests a remarkably stingy woman. During her lifetime she used to get up at night and mew, so that the neighbours might think she kept a cat—she was so remarkably stingy.

Here is a maiden of another kind. When the canary bird of the heart begins to chirp, reason puts her fingers in her ears. The maiden was going to be married, but—well, it's an every-day story, and we will let the dead rest.

Here sleeps a widow who carried melody in her mouth and gall in her heart. She used to go out for prey in the families round about; and the prey she hunted was her neighbours' faults, and she was an indefatigable hunter.

Here's a family sepulchre. Every member of this family held so firmly to the opinions of the rest, that if all the world, and the newspapers into the bargain, said of a certain thing it is so and so, and the little boy came home from school and said, "I've learned it thus and thus," they declared his opinion to be the only true one, because he belonged to the family. And it is an acknowledged fact, that if the rooster of the family crowed at midnight, they would declare it was morning, though the watchmen and all the clocks in the city were crying out that it was twelve o'clock at night.

The great poet Goëthe concludes his "Faust" with the words "may be continued;" and our wanderings in the churchyard may be continued too. If any of my friends, or my non-friends, go on too fast for me, I go out to my favourite spot and select a mound, and bury him or her there—bury that person who is yet alive; and there those I bury must stay till they come back as new and improved characters. I inscribe their life and their deeds,

looked at in my fashion, in my record; and that's what all people ought to do. They ought not to be vexed when any one goes on ridiculously, but bury him directly, and maintain their good humour, and keep to the *Intelligencer*, which is often a book written by the people with its hand guided.

When the time comes for me to be bound with my history in the boards of the grave, I hope they will put up as my epitaph, "A good-humoured one." And that's my story.

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