

Ib and Christine

Hans Christian Andersen
DanishNordicScandinavian

Easy
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Not far from the clear stream Gudenau, in North Jutland, in the forest which extends by its banks and far into the country, a great ridge of land rises and stretches along like a wall through the wood. By this ridge, westward, stands a farmhouse, surrounded by poor land; the sandy soil is seen through the spare rye and wheat-ears that grow upon it. Some years have elapsed since the time of which we speak. The people who lived here cultivated the fields, and moreover kept three sheep, a pig, and two oxen; in fact, they supported themselves quite comfortably, for they had enough to live on if they took things as they came. Indeed, they could have managed to save enough to keep two horses; but, like the other peasants of the neighbourhood, they said, "The horse eats itself up"—that is to say, it eats as much as it earns. Jeppe-Jäns cultivated his field in summer. In the winter he made wooden shoes, and then he had an assistant, a journeyman, who understood as well as he himself did how to make the wooden shoes strong, and light, and graceful. They carved shoes and spoons, and that brought in money. It would have been wronging the Jeppe-Jänses to call them poor people.

Little Ib, a boy seven years old, the only child of the family, would sit by, looking at the workmen, cutting at a stick, and occasionally cutting his finger. But one day Ib succeeded so well with two pieces of wood, that they really looked like little wooden shoes; and these he wanted to give to little Christine. And who was little Christine? She was the boatman's daughter, and was graceful and delicate as a gentleman's child; had she been differently dressed, no one would have imagined that she came out of the hut on the neighbouring heath. There lived her father, who was a widower, and supported himself by carrying firewood in his great boat out of the forest to the estate of Silkeborg, with its great eel-pond and eel-weir, and sometimes even to the distant little town of Randers. He had no one who could take care

of little Christine, and therefore the child was almost always with him in his boat, or in the forest among the heath plants and barberry bushes. Sometimes, when he had to go as far as the town, he would bring little Christine, who was a year younger than Ib, to stay at the Jeppe-Jänses.

Ib and Christine agreed very well in every particular: they divided their bread and berries when they were hungry, they dug in the ground together for treasures, and they ran, and crept, and played about everywhere. And one day they ventured together up the high ridge, and a long way into the forest; once they found a few snipes' eggs there, and that was a great event for them.

Ib had never been on the heath where Christine's father lived, nor had he ever been on the river. But even this was to happen; for Christine's father once invited him to go with them; and on the evening before the excursion, he followed the boatman over the heath to the house of the latter.

Next morning early, the two children were sitting high up on the pile of firewood in the boat, eating bread and whistleberries. Christine's father and his assistant propelled the boat with staves. They had the current with them, and swiftly they glided down the stream, through the lakes it forms in its course, and which sometimes seemed shut in by reeds and water plants, though there was always room for them to pass, and though the old trees bent quite forward over the water, and the old oaks bent down their bare branches, as if they had turned up their sleeves and wanted to show their knotty naked arms. Old alder trees, which the stream had washed away from the bank, clung with their fibrous roots to the bottom of the stream, and looked like little wooded islands. The water-lilies rocked themselves on the river. It was a splendid excursion; and at last they came to the great

eel-weir, where the water rushed through the flood-gates; and Ib and Christine thought this was beautiful to behold.

In those days there was no manufactory there, nor was there any town; only the old great farmyard, with its scanty fields, with few servants and a few head of cattle, could be seen there; and the rushing of the water through the weir and the cry of the wild ducks were the only signs of life in Silkeborg. After the firewood had been unloaded, the father of Christine bought a whole bundle of eels and a slaughtered sucking-pig, and all was put into a basket and placed in the stern of the boat. Then they went back again up the stream; but the wind was favourable, and when the sails were hoisted, it was as good as if two horses had been harnessed to the boat.

When they had arrived at a point in the stream where the assistant-boatman dwelt, a little way from the bank, the boat was moored, and the two men landed, after exhorting the children to sit still. But the children did not do that; or at least they obeyed only for a very short time. They must be peeping into the basket in which the eels and the sucking-pig had been placed, and they must needs pull the sucking-pig out, and take it in their hands, and feel and touch it all over; and as both wanted to hold it at the same time, it came to pass that they let it fall into the water, and the sucking-pig drifted away with the stream—and here was a terrible event!

Ib jumped ashore, and ran a little distance along the bank, and Christine sprang after him.

“Take me with you!” she cried.

And in a few minutes they were deep in the thicket, and could no longer see either the boat or the bank. They ran on a little farther, and then Christine fell down on the ground and began to cry; but Ib

picked her up.

“Follow me!” he cried. “Yonder lies the house.”

But the house was not yonder. They wandered on and on, over the dry, rustling, last year's leaves, and over fallen branches that crackled beneath their feet. Soon they heard a loud piercing scream. They stood still and listened, and presently the scream of an eagle sounded through the wood. It was an ugly scream, and they were frightened at it; but before them, in the thick wood, the most beautiful blueberries grew in wonderful profusion. They were so inviting, that the children could not do otherwise than stop; and they lingered for some time, eating the blueberries till they had quite blue mouths and blue cheeks. Now again they heard the cry they had heard before.

“We shall get into trouble about the pig,” said Christine.

“Come, let us go to our house,” said Ib; “it is here in the wood.”

And they went forward. They presently came to a wood, but it did not lead them home; and darkness came on, and they were afraid. The wonderful stillness that reigned around was interrupted now and then by the shrill cries of the great horrid owl and of the birds that were strange to them. At last they both lost themselves in a thicket. Christine cried, and Ib cried too; and after they had bemoaned themselves for a time, they threw themselves down on the dry leaves, and went fast asleep.

The sun was high in the heavens when the two children awoke. They were cold; but in the neighbourhood of this resting-place, on the hill, the sun shone through the trees, and there they thought they would warm themselves; and from there Ib fancied they would be able to see his parents' house. But they were far away from the house in question, in quite another part of the forest. They clambered to the top of the

rising ground, and found themselves on the summit of a slope running down to the margin of a transparent lake. They could see fish in great numbers in the pure water illumined by the sun's rays. This spectacle was quite a sudden surprise for them; but close beside them grew a nut bush covered with the finest nuts; and now they picked the nuts, and cracked them, and ate the delicate young kernels, which had only just become perfect. But there was another surprise and another fright in store for them. Out of the thicket stepped a tall old woman; her face was quite brown, and her hair was deep black and shining. The whites of her eyes gleamed like a negro's; on her back she carried a bundle, and in her hand she bore a knotted stick. She was a gipsy. The children did not at once understand what she said. She brought three nuts out of her pocket, and told them that in these nuts the most beautiful, the loveliest things were hidden; for they were wishing-nuts.

Ib looked at her, and she seemed so friendly, that he plucked up courage and asked her if she would give him the nuts; and the woman gave them to him, and gathered some more for herself, a whole pocketful, from the nut bush.

And Ib and Christine looked at the wishing-nuts with great eyes.

"Is there a carriage with a pair of horses in this nut?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a golden carriage with two horses," answered the woman.

"Then give me the nut," said little Christine.

And Ib gave it to her, and the strange woman tied it in her pocket-handkerchief for her.

“Is there in this nut a pretty little neckerchief, like the one Christine wears round her neck?” inquired Ib.

“There are ten neckerchiefs in it,” answered the woman. “There are beautiful dresses in it, and stockings, and a hat with a veil.”

“Then I will have that one too,” cried little Christine.

And Ib gave her the second nut also. The third was a little black thing.

“That one you can keep,” said Christine; “and it is a pretty one too.”

“What is in it?” inquired Ib.

“The best of all things for you,” replied the gipsy-woman.

And Ib held the nut very tight. The woman promised to lead the children into the right path, so that they might find their way home; and now they went forward, certainly in quite a different direction from the path they should have followed. But that is no reason why we should suspect the gipsy-woman of wanting to steal the children. In the wild wood-path they met the forest bailiff, who knew Ib; and by his help, Ib and Christine both arrived at home, where their friends had been very anxious about them. They were pardoned and forgiven, although they had indeed both deserved “to get into trouble;” firstly, because they had let the sucking-pig fall into the water, and secondly, because they had run away.

Christine was taken back to her father on the heath, and Ib remained in the farmhouse on the margin of the wood by the great ridge. The first thing he did in the evening was to bring forth out of his pocket the little black nut, in which “the best thing of all” was said to be enclosed. He placed it carefully in the crack of the door, and then

shut the door so as to break the nut; but there was not much kernel in it. The nut looked as if it were filled with tobacco or black rich earth; it was what we call hollow, or worm-eaten.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I thought,” said Ib. “How could the very best thing be contained in this little nut? And Christine will get just as little out of her two nuts, and will have neither fine clothes nor the golden carriage.”

And winter came on, and the new year began; indeed, several years went by.

Ib was at last to be confirmed; and for this reason he went during a whole winter to the clergyman, far away in the nearest village, to prepare. About this time the boatman one day visited Ib’s parents, and told them that Christine was now going into service, and that she had been really fortunate in getting a remarkably good place, and falling into worthy hands.

“Only think,” he said; “she is going to the rich innkeeper’s, in the inn at Herning, far towards the west, many miles from here. She is to assist the hostess in keeping the house; and afterwards, if she takes to it well, and stays to be confirmed there, the people are going to adopt her as their own daughter.”

And Ib and Christine took leave of one another. People called them “the betrothed;” and at parting, the girl showed Ib that she had still the two nuts which he had given her long ago, during their wanderings in the forest; and she told him, moreover, that in a drawer she had carefully kept the little wooden shoes which he had carved as a present for her in their childish days. And thereupon they parted.

Ib was confirmed. But he remained in his mother’s house, for he had become a clever maker of wooden shoes, and in summer he looked after

the field. He did it all alone, for his mother kept no farm-servant, and his father had died long ago.

Only seldom he got news of Christine from some passing postillion or eel-fisher. But she was well off at the rich innkeeper's; and after she had been confirmed, she wrote a letter to her father, and sent a kind message to Ib and his mother; and in the letter there was mention made of certain linen garments and a fine new gown, which Christine had received as a present from her employers. This was certainly good news.

Next spring, there was a knock one day at the door of our Ibis old mother, and behold, the boatman and Christine stepped into the room. She had come on a visit to spend a day: a carriage had to come from the Herning Inn to the next village, and she had taken the opportunity to see her friends once again. She looked as handsome as a real lady, and she had a pretty gown on, which had been well sewn, and made expressly for her. There she stood, in grand array, and Ib was in his working clothes. He could not utter a word: he certainly seized her hand, and held it fast in his own, and was heartily glad; but he could not get his tongue to obey him. Christine was not embarrassed, however, for she went on talking and talking, and, moreover, kissed Ib on his mouth in the heartiest manner.

"Did you know me again directly, Ib?" she asked; but even afterwards, when they were left quite by themselves, and he stood there still holding her hand in his, he could only say:

"You look quite like a real lady, and I am so uncouth. How often I have thought of you, Christine, and of the old times!"

And arm in arm they sauntered up the great ridge, and looked across the stream towards the heath, towards the great hills overgrown with

bloom. It was perfectly silent; but by the time they parted it had grown quite clear to him that Christine must be his wife. Had they not, even in their childhood, been called the betrothed pair? To him they seemed to be really engaged to each other, though neither of them had spoken a word on the subject. Only for a few more hours could they remain together, for Christine was obliged to go back into the next village, from whence the carriage was to start early next morning for Herning. Her father and Ib escorted her as far as the village. It was a fair moonlight evening, and when they reached their destination, and Ib still held Christine's hand in his own, he could not make up his mind to let her go. His eyes brightened, but still the words came halting over his lips. Yet they came from the depths of his heart, when he said:

"If you have not become too grand, Christine, and if you can make up your mind to live with me in my mother's house as my wife, we must become a wedded pair some day; but we can wait awhile yet."

"Yes, let us wait for a time, Ib," she replied; and he kissed her lips. "I confide in you, Ib," said Christine; "and I think that I love you—but I will sleep upon it."

And with that they parted. And on the way home Ib told the boatman that he and Christine were as good as betrothed; and the boatman declared he had always expected it would turn out so; and he went home with Ib, and remained that night in the young man's house; but nothing further was said of the betrothal.

A year passed by, in the course of which two letters were exchanged between Ib and Christine. The signature was prefaced by the words, "Faithful till death!" One day the boatman came into Ib, and brought him a greeting from Christine. What he had further to say was brought out in somewhat hesitating fashion, but it was to the effect that

Christine was almost more than prosperous, for she was a pretty girl, courted and loved. The son of the host had been home on a visit; he was employed in the office of some great institution in Copenhagen; and he was very much pleased with Christine, and she had taken a fancy to him: his parents were ready to give their consent, but Christine was very anxious to retain Ib's good opinion; "and so she had thought of refusing this great piece of good fortune," said the boatman.

At first Ib said not a word; but he became as white as the wall, and slightly shook his head. Then he said slowly:

"Christine must not refuse this advantageous offer."

"Then do you write a few words to her," said the boatman.

And Ib sat down to write; but he could not manage it well: the words would not come as he wished them; and first he altered, and then he tore up the page; but the next morning a letter lay ready to be sent to Christine, and it contained the following words:

"I have read the letter you have sent to your father, and gather from it that you are prospering in all things, and that there is a prospect of higher fortune for you. Ask your heart, Christine, and ponder well the fate that awaits you, if you take me for your husband; what I possess is but little. Do not think of me, or my position, but think of your own welfare. You are bound to me by no promise, and if in your heart you have given me one, I release you from it. May all treasures of happiness be poured out upon you, Christine. Heaven will console me in its own good time.

"Ever your sincere friend,

“IB”

And the letter was dispatched, and Christine duly received it.

In the course of that November her banns were published in the church on the heath, and in Copenhagen, where her bridegroom lived; and to Copenhagen she proceeded, under the protection of her future mother-in-law, because the bridegroom could not undertake the journey into Jutland on account of his various occupations. On the journey, Christine met her father in a certain village; and here the two took leave of one another. A few words were mentioned concerning this fact, but Ib made no remark upon it: his mother said he had grown very silent of late; indeed, he had become very pensive, and thus the three nuts came into his mind which the gipsy-woman had given him long ago, and of which he had given two to Christine. Yes, it seemed right—they were wishing-nuts, and in one of them lay a golden carriage with two horses, and in the other very elegant clothes; all those luxuries would now be Christine’s in the capital. Her part had thus come true. And to him, Ib, the nut had offered only black earth. The gipsy-woman had said, this was “the best of all for him.” Yes, it was right, that also was coming true. The black earth was the best for him. Now he understood clearly what had been the woman’s meaning. In the black earth, in the dark grave, would be the best happiness for him.

And once again years passed by, not very many, but they seemed long years to Ib. The old innkeeper and his wife died, one after the other; the whole of their property, many thousands of dollars, came to the son. Yes, now Christine could have the golden carriage, and plenty of fine clothes.

During the two long years that followed no letter came from Christine; and when her father at length received one from her, it was not

written in prosperity, by any means. Poor Christine! neither she nor her husband had understood how to keep the money together; and there seemed to be no blessing with it, because they had not sought it.

And again the weather bloomed and faded. The winter had swept for many years across the heath, and over the ridge beneath which Ib dwelt, sheltered from the rough winds. The spring sun shone bright, and Ib guided the plough across his field, when one day it glided over what appeared to be a fire stone. Something like a great black ship came out of the ground, and when Ib took it up it proved to be a piece of metal; and the place from which the plough had cut the stone gleamed brightly with ore. It was a great golden armlet of ancient workmanship that he had found. He had disturbed a "Hun's Grave," and discovered the costly treasure buried in it. Ib showed what he had found to the clergyman, who explained its value to him, and then he betook himself to the local judges, who reported the discovery to the keeper of the museum, and recommended Ib to deliver up the treasure in person.

"You have found in the earth the best thing you could find," said the judge.

"The best thing!" thought Ib. "The very best thing for me, and found in the earth! Well, if that is the best, the gipsy-woman was correct in what she prophesied to me."

So Ib travelled with the ferry-boat from Aarhus to Copenhagen. To him, who had but once or twice passed beyond the river that rolled by his home, this seemed like a voyage across the ocean. And he arrived in Copenhagen.

The value of the gold he had found was paid over to him; it was a large sum—six hundred dollars. And Ib of the heath wandered about in the great capital.

On the day on which he had settled to go back with the captain, Ib lost his way in the streets, and took quite a different direction from the one he intended to follow. He had wandered into the suburb of Christianhaven, into a poor little street. Not a human being was to be seen. At last a very little girl came out of one of the wretched houses. Ib inquired of the little one the way to the street which he wanted; but she looked shyly at him, and began to cry bitterly. He asked her what ailed her, but could not understand what she said in reply. But as they went along the street together, they passed beneath the light of a lamp; and when the light fell on the girl's face, he felt a strange and sharp emotion, for Christine stood bodily before him, just as he remembered her from the days of his childhood.

And he went with the little maiden into the wretched house, and ascended the narrow, crazy staircase, which led to a little attic chamber in the roof. The air in this chamber was heavy and almost suffocating: no light was burning; but there was heavy sighing and moaning in one corner. Ib struck a light with the help of a match. It was the mother of the child who lay sighing on the miserable bed.

“Can I be of any service to you?” asked Ib. “This little girl has brought me up here, but I am a stranger in this city. Are there no neighbours or friends whom I could call to you?” And he raised the sick woman's head, and smoothed her pillow.

It was Christine of the heath!

For years her name had not been mentioned yonder, for the mention of her would have disturbed Ib's peace of mind, and rumour had told

nothing good concerning her. The wealth which her husband had inherited from his parents had made him proud and arrogant. He had given up his certain appointment, had travelled for half a year in foreign lands, and on his return had incurred debts, and yet lived in an expensive fashion. His carriage had bent over more and more, so to speak, until at last it turned over completely. The many merry companions and table-friends he had entertained declared it served him right, for he had kept house like a madman; and one morning his corpse was found in the canal.

The icy hand of death was already on Christine. Her youngest child, only a few weeks old, expected in prosperity and born in misery, was already in its grave, and it had come to this with Christine herself, that she lay, sick to death and forsaken, in a miserable room, amid a poverty that she might well have borne in her childish days, but which now oppressed her painfully, since she had been accustomed to better things. It was her eldest child, also a little Christine, that here suffered hunger and poverty with her, and whom Ib had now brought home.

“I am unhappy at the thought of dying and leaving the poor child here alone,” she said. “Ah, what is to become of the poor thing?” And not a word more could she utter.

And Ib brought out another match, and lighted up a piece of candle he found in the room, and the flame illumined the wretched dwelling. And Ib looked at the little girl, and thought how Christine had looked when she was young; and he felt that for her sake he would be fond of this child, which was as yet a stranger to him. The dying woman gazed at him, and her eyes opened wider and wider—did she recognize him? He never knew, for no further word passed over her lips.

And it was in the forest by the river Gudenau, in the region of the

heath. The air was thick and dark, and there were no blossoms on the heath plant; but the autumn tempests whirled the yellow leaves from the wood into the stream, and out over the heath towards the hut of the boatman, in which strangers now dwelt; but beneath the ridge, safe beneath the protection of the high trees, stood the little farm, trimly whitewashed and painted, and within it the turf blazed up cheerily in the chimney; for within was sunlight, the beaming sunlight of a child's two eyes; and the tones of the spring birds sounded in the words that came from the child's rosy lips: she sat on Ib's knee, and Ib was to her both father and mother, for her own parents were dead, and had vanished from her as a dream vanishes alike from children and grown men. Ib sat in the pretty neat house, for he was a prosperous man, while the mother of the little girl rested in the churchyard at Copenhagen, where she had died in poverty.

Ib had money, and was said to have provided for the future. He had won gold out of the black earth, and he had a Christine for his own, after all.

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