



The Cripple

Hans Christian Andersen

Danishnordicscandinavian

Intermediate

18 min read

There was an old country-house which belonged to young, wealthy people. They had riches and blessings, they liked to enjoy themselves, but they did good as well, they wished to make everybody as happy as they were themselves. On Christmas Eve a beautifully decorated Christmas tree stood in the old hall, where the fire burned in the chimney, and fir branches were hung round the old pictures. Here were assembled the family and their guests, and there was dancing and singing.

Earlier in the evening there had been Christmas gaiety in the servants' hall. Here also was a great fir-tree with red and white candles, small Danish flags, swans and fishing-nets, cut out of coloured paper, and filled with goodies. The poor children from the neighbourhood were invited, every one had his mother with him. The mothers did not look much at the Christmas-tree, but at the Christmas table, where there lay linen and woollen cloth—stuff for gowns and stuff for trousers. They and the bigger children looked there, only the very little ones stretched out their hands to the candles, and the tinsel and flags.

The whole party came early in the afternoon and got Christmas porridge and roast goose with red cabbage. Then when the Christmas-tree was seen and the gifts distributed, each got a little glass of punch with apple fritters. Then they went back to their own poor homes and talked of the good living, that is to say good things to eat; and the gifts were once more inspected. There were now Garden Kirsten and Garden Ole. They were

married, and had their house and daily bread for weeding and digging in the garden of the big house. Every Christmas festival they got a good share of the gifts; they had five children, and all of them were clothed by the family.

“They are generous people, our master and mistress,” said they, “but they have the means to be so, and they have pleasure in doing it.”

“Here are good clothes for the four children to wear,” said Ole; “but why is there nothing for the cripple? They used to think about him too, although he was not at the festival.”

It was the eldest of the children they called “The Cripple”, he was called Hans otherwise.

As a little boy, he was the smartest and liveliest child, but he became all at once “loose in the legs”, as they call it, he could neither walk nor stand, and now he had been lying in bed for five years.

“Yes, I got something for him too,” said the mother, “but it is nothing much, it is only a book to read.”

“He won’t get fat on that,” said the father.

But Hans was glad of it. He was a very clever boy who liked to read, but used his time also for working, so far as one who must always lie in bed could be useful. He was very handy, and knitted woollen stockings, and even bedcovers. The lady at the big house had praised and bought them. It was a story-book Hans had got; in it there was much to read and much to think about.

“It is not of any kind of use here in the house,” said his parents, “but let him read, it passes the time, he cannot always be knitting stockings!”

The spring came; flowers and green leaves began to sprout-the weeds also, as one may call the nettles, although the psalm speaks so nicely of them:

Though kings in all their power and might
Came forth in splendid row
They could not make the smallest leaf
Upon a nettle grow.

There was much to do in the garden, not only for the gardener and his apprentice, but also for Kirsten and Ole.

“It is perfect drudgery,” said they. “We have no sooner raked the paths and made them nice, than they are just trodden down again. There is such a run of visitors up at the house. How much it must cost! But the family are rich people!”

“Things are badly divided,” said Ole; “the priest says we are all our Father’s children, why the difference then?”

“It comes from the Fall!” said Kirsten.

They talked about it again in the evening, where cripple Hans lay with his story-book.

Straitened circumstances, work, and drudgery, had made the parents not only hard in the hands, but also in their opinions and judgements; they could not grasp it, could not explain it, and made themselves more peevish and angry as they talked.

“Some people get prosperity and happiness, others only poverty! Why should our first parents’ disobedience and curiosity be visited upon us? We would not have behaved ourselves as they did!”

“Yes, we would!” said cripple Hans, all at once. “It is all here in the book.”

“What is in the book?” asked the parents.

And Hans read for them the old story of the wood-cutter and his wife. They also scolded about Adam’s and Eve’s curiosity, which was the cause of their misfortune. The king of the country came past just then.

“Come home with me,” said he, “then you shall have it as good as I; seven courses for dinner and a course for show. That is in a closed tureen, and you must not touch it; for if you do, it is all over with your grandeur.”

“What can there be in the tureen?” said the wife.

“That does not concern us,” said the man.

“Yes, I am not inquisitive,” said the wife, “but I would only like to know why we dare not lift the lid; it is certainly something delicate!”

“If only it is not something mechanical,” said the man such as a pistol, which goes off and wakens the whole house.”

“O my!” said the wife, and did not touch the tureen. But during the night she dreamt that the lid lifted itself, and from the tureen came a smell of the loveliest punch, such as one gets at weddings and funerals.

There lay a big silver shilling with the inscription, “Drink of this punch, and you will become the two richest people in the world, and everybody else will become beggars!”—and the wife wakened at once and told her husband her dream.

“You think too much about the thing!” said he.

“We could lift it gently,” said the wife.

“Gently,” said the man, and the wife then lifted the lid very gently. Then two little active mice sprang out, and ran at once into a mouse-hole.

“Good night,” said the king. “Now you can go home and lie in your own bed. Don’t scold Adam and Eve any more, you yourselves have been as inquisitive and ungrateful!”

“From where has that story come in the book?” said Ole. “It looks as if it concerned us. It is something to think about!”

Next day they went to work again; they were roasted by the sun, and soaked to the skin with rain; in them were fretful thoughts, and they ruminated on them.

It was still quite light at home after they had eaten their milk porridge.

“Read the story of the wood-cutter to us again,” said Ole.

“There are so many nice ones in the book,” said Hans, “so many, you don’t know.”

“Yes, but I don’t care about them,” said Ole, “I want to hear the one I know.”

And he and his wife listened to it again.

More than one evening they returned to the story.

“It cannot quite make everything clear to me,” said Ole.

“It is with people as with sweet milk, which sours; some become fine cheese, and others the thin, watery whey; some people have luck in everything, sit at the high-table every day, and know neither sorrow nor want.”

Cripple Hans heard that. He was weak in the legs, but clever in the head. He read to them from his story-book, read about “The man without sorrow or want”. Where was he to be found, for found he must be!

The king lay sick and could not be cured, except by being dressed in the shirt which had been worn on the body of a man who could truthfully say that he had never known sorrow or want.

Messages were sent to all the countries in the world, to all castles and estates, to all prosperous and happy men, but when it was properly investigated, every one of them had experienced sorrow and want.

“That I have not!” said the swineherd who sat in the ditch and laughed and sang, “I am the happiest man!”

“Then give us your shirt,” said the king’s messengers. “You shall be paid for it with the half of the kingdom.”

But he had no shirt, and yet he called himself the happiest man.

“That was a fine fellow,” shouted Ole, and he and his wife laughed as they had not laughed for a year and a day. Then the schoolmaster came past.

“How you are enjoying yourselves!” said he, “that is something new in this house. Have you won a prize in the lottery?”

“No, we are not of that kind,” said Ole. “It is Hans who has been reading his story-book to us, about ‘The man

without sorrow or want', and the fellow had no shirt. One's eyes get moist when one hears such things, and that from a printed book. Every one has his load to draw, one is not alone in that. That is always a comfort."

"Where did you get that book?" asked the schoolmaster.

"Our Hans got it more than a year ago at Christmastime. The master and mistress gave it to him. They know that he likes reading so much, and he is a cripple. We would rather have seen him get two linen shirts at the time. But the book is wonderful, it can almost answer one's thoughts."

The schoolmaster took the book and opened it.

"Let us have the same story again!" said Ole, "I have not quite taken it in yet. Then he must also read the other about the wood-cutter!"

These two stories were enough for Ole. They were like two sunbeams coming into the poor room, into the stunted thought which made him so cross and ill-natured. Hans had read the whole book, read it many times. The stories carried him out into the world, there, where he could not go, because his legs would not carry him.

The schoolmaster sat by his bed: they talked together, and it was a pleasure for both of them. From that day the schoolmaster came often to Hans, when the parents were at work. It was a treat for the boy, every time he came. How he listened to what the old man told him, about the size of the world and its many countries, and that the sun was almost half a million times bigger than the earth, and so far away that a cannon-ball in its course would take a whole twenty-five years to come from the sun to the earth, whilst the beams of light could come in eight minutes.

Every industrious schoolboy -knew all that, but for Hans it was all new, and still more wonderful than what was in the story-book.

The schoolmaster dined with the squire's family two or three times a year, and he told how much importance the story-book had in the poor house, where two stories in it alone had been the means of spiritual awakening and blessing. The weakly, clever little boy had with his reading brought reflection and joy into the house.

When the schoolmaster went away, the lady pressed two or three silver dollars into his hand for the little Hans.

“Father and mother must have them!” said Hans, when the schoolmaster brought the money.

And Ole and Kirsten said, “Cripple Hans after all is a profit and a blessing.”

Two or three days after, when the parents were at work at the big house, the squire’s carriage stopped outside. It was the kind-hearted lady who came, glad that her Christmas present had been such a comfort and pleasure for the boy and his parents. She brought with her fine bread, fruit, and a bottle of fruit syrup, but what was still more delightful she brought him, in a gilt cage, a little blackbird, which could whistle quite charmingly.

The cage with the bird was set up on the old clothes-chest, a little bit away from the boy’s bed; he could see the bird and hear it; even the people out in the road could hear its song.

Ole and Kirsten came home after the lady had driven away; they noticed how glad Hans was, but thought there would only be trouble with the present he had got.

“Rich people don’t have much foresight!” said they. “Shall we now have that to look after also? Cripple Hans cannot do it. The end will be that the cat will take it!”

Eight days passed, and still another eight days: the cat had in that time been often in the room without frightening the bird, to say nothing of hurting it. Then a great event happened. It was afternoon.

The parents and the other children were at work, Hans was quite alone; he had the story-book in his hand, and read about the fisherwoman who got everything she wished for; she wished to be a king, and that she became; she wished to be an emperor, and that she became; but when she wished to become the good God, then she sat once more in the muddy ditch she had come from.

The story had nothing to do with the bird or the cat, but it was just the story he was reading when the incident happened: he always remembered that afterwards.

The cage stood on the chest, the cat stood on the floor and stared at the bird with his greeny-gold eyes. There was something in the cat’s face which seemed to say, “How lovely you are! How I should like to eat you!”

Hans could understand that; he read it in the cat’s face.

“Be off, cat!” he shouted, “will you go out of the room?” It seemed as if it were just about to spring. Hans could not get at him, and he had nothing else to throw at him but his dearest treasure, the story-book.

He threw that, but the binding was loose, and it flew to one side, and the book itself with all its leaves flew to the other. The cat went with slow steps a little back into the room, and looked at Hans as much as to say, “Don’t mix yourself up in this affair, little Hans! I can walk, and I can spring, and you can do neither.”

Hans kept his eye on the cat and was greatly distressed; the bird was also anxious. There was no one there to call; it seemed as if the cat knew it: it prepared itself again to spring. Hans shook the bed-cover at him; his hands he could use; but the cat paid no attention to the bed-cover; and when it was also thrown at him without avail, he sprang upon the chair and into the window-sill, where he was nearer to the bird.

Hans could feel his own warm blood in himself, but he did not think of that, he thought only about the cat and the bird; the boy could not help himself out of bed, could not stand on his legs, still less walk. It seemed as if his heart turned inside him when he saw the cat spring from the window, right on to the chest and push the cage so that it was upset. The bird fluttered wildly about inside.

Hans gave a scream; something gave a tug inside him, and without thinking about it, he jumped out of bed, flew across to the chest, tore the cat down, and got hold of the cage, where the bird was in a great fright. He held the cage in his hand and ran with it out of the door and out on to the road.

Then the tears streamed out of his eyes; he shouted with joy, “I can walk! I can walk!”

He had recovered his activity again; such things can happen, and it had happened to him.

The schoolmaster lived close by; Hans ran in to him with his bare feet, with only his shirt and jacket on, and with the bird in the cage.

“I can walk!” he shouted. “My God” and he sobbed and wept with joy.

And there was joy in the house of Ole and Kirsten. “A more joyful day we could not see,” said both of them.

Hans was called up to the big house; he had not gone that way for many years; it seemed as if the trees and the nut-bushes, which he knew so well, nodded to him and said, “Good day, Hans, welcome here!”

The sun shone on his face as well as in his heart. The master and mistress let him sit with them, and looked as glad as if he had belonged to their own family.

Gladdest of all was the lady, who had given him the story-book, given him the singing-bird, which was now as a matter of fact dead, dead of fright, but it had been the means of restoring him to health, and the book had brought the awakening of the parents: he had the book still, and he would keep it and read it if he were ever so old.

Now he could be a benefit to those at home. He would learn a trade, by preference a bookbinder, "because," said he, "I can get all the new books to read!"

In the afternoon the lady called both parents up to her. She and her husband had talked together about Hans; he was a wise and clever boy: had pleasure in reading, and ability.

That evening the parents came home joyfully from the farm, Kirsten in particular, but the week after she wept, for then little Hans went away: he was dressed in good clothes; he was a good boy; but now he must go away across the salt water, far away to school, and many years would pass before they would see him again.

He did not get the story-book with him, the parents kept that for remembrance. And the father often read in it, but nothing except the two stories, for he knew them.

And they got letters from Hans, each one gladder than the last. He was with fine people, in good circumstances, and it was most delightful to go to school; there was so much to learn and to know; he only wanted to remain there a hundred years and then be a schoolmaster.

"If we should live to see it!" said the parents, and pressed each other's hands, as if at communion.

"To think of what has happened to Hans!" said Ole.

Our Father thinks also of the poor man's child! And that it should happen just with the cripple! Is it not as if Hans were to read it for us out of the story-book?

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