

The Old Gravestone

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Advanced
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In a little provincial town, in the time of the year when people say “the evenings are drawing in,” there was one evening quite a social gathering in the home of a father of a family. The weather was still mild and warm. The lamp gleamed on the table; the long curtains hung down in folds before the open windows, by which stood many flower-pots; and outside, beneath the dark blue sky, was the most beautiful moonshine. But they were not talking about this. They were talking about the old great stone which lay below in the courtyard, close by the kitchen door, and on which the maids often laid the cleaned copper kitchen utensils that they might dry in the sun, and where the children were fond of playing. It was, in fact, an old gravestone.

“Yes,” said the master of the house, “I believe the stone comes from the old convent churchyard; for from the church yonder, the pulpit, the memorial boards, and the gravestones were sold. My father bought the latter, and they were cut in two to be used as paving-stones; but that old stone was kept back, and has been lying in the courtyard ever since.”

“One can very well see that it is a gravestone,” observed the eldest of the children; “we can still decipher on it an hour-glass and a piece of an angel; but the inscription which stood below it is quite effaced, except that you may read the name of Preben, and a great S close behind it, and a little farther down the name of Martha. But nothing more can be distinguished, and even that is only plain when it has been raining, or when we have washed the stone.

“On my word, that must be the gravestone of Preben Schwane and his wife!”

These words were spoken by an old man; so old, that he might well have been the grandfather of all who were present in the room.

“Yes, they were one of the last pairs that were buried in the old churchyard of the convent. They were an honest old couple. I can remember them from the days of my boyhood. Every one knew them, and every one esteemed them. They were the oldest pair here in the town. The people declared that they had more than a tubful of gold; and yet they went about very plainly dressed, in the coarsest stuffs, but always with splendidly clean linen. They were a fine old pair, Preben and Martha! When both of them sat on the bench at the top of the steep stone stairs in front of the house, with the old linden tree spreading its branches above them, and nodded at one in their kind gentle way, it seemed quite to do one good. They were very kind to the poor; they fed them and clothed them; and there was judgment in their benevolence and true Christianity. The old woman died first: that day is still quite clear before my mind. I was a little boy, and had accompanied my father over there, and we were just there when she fell asleep. The old man was very much moved, and wept like a child. The corpse lay in the room next to the one where we sat; and he spoke to my father and to a few neighbours who were there, and said how lonely it would be now in his house, and how good and faithful she (his dead wife) had been, how many years they had wandered together through life, and how it had come about that they came to know each other and to fall in love. I was, as I have told you, a boy, and only stood by and listened to what the others said; but it filled me with quite a strange emotion to listen to the old man, and to watch how his cheeks gradually flushed red when he spoke of the days of their courtship, and told how beautiful she was, and how many little innocent pretexts he had invented to meet her. And then he talked of the wedding-day, and his eyes gleamed; he seemed to talk himself back into that time of joy. And yet she was lying in the next room—dead—an old woman; and he was an old man, speaking of the past days of hope! Yes, yes, thus it is! Then I was but a child, and now I am old—as old as Preben Schwane was then. Time passes away, and all things change. I can very well remember the day when she was buried, and how Preben Schwane walked close behind the coffin. A few years before, the couple had caused their gravestone to be prepared, and their names to be engraved on it, with the inscription, all but the date. In the evening the stone was taken to the churchyard, and laid over the grave; and the year afterwards it was taken up, that old Preben Schwane might be laid to rest beside his wife. They did not leave behind them anything like the wealth people had attributed to them: what there was went to families distantly related to them—to people of whom until then one had known

nothing. The old wooden house, with the seat at the top of the steps, beneath the lime tree, was taken down by the corporation; it was too old and rotten to be left standing. Afterwards, when the same fate befell the convent church, and the graveyard was levelled, Preben's and Martha's tombstone was sold, like everything else, to any one who would buy it; and that is how it has happened that this stone was not hewn in two, as many another has been, but that it still lies below in the yard as a scouring-bench for the maids and a plaything for the children. The high-road now goes over the resting-place of old Preben and his wife. No one thinks of them any more."

And the old man who had told all this shook his head scornfully.

"Forgotten! Everything will be forgotten!" he said.

And then they spoke in the room of other things; but the youngest child, a boy with great serious eyes, mounted up on a chair behind the window-curtains, and looked out into the yard, where the moon was pouring its radiance over the old stone—the old stone that had always appeared to him so tame and flat, but which lay there now like a great leaf out of a book of chronicles. All that the boy had heard about old Preben and his wife seemed concentrated in the stone; and he gazed at it, and looked at the pure bright moon and up into the clear air, and it seemed as though the countenance of the Creator was beaming over His world.

"Forgotten! Everything will be forgotten!" was repeated in the room.

But in that moment an invisible angel kissed the boy's forehead, and whispered to him:

"Preserve the seed-corn that has been entrusted to thee, that it may bear fruit. Guard it well! Through thee, my child, the obliterated inscription on the old tombstone shall be chronicled in golden letters to future generations! The old pair shall wander again arm-in-arm through the streets, and smile, and sit with their fresh healthy faces under the lime tree on the bench by the steep stairs, and nod at rich and poor. The seed-corn of this hour shall ripen in the course of time to a blooming poem. The beautiful and the good shall not be forgotten; it shall live on in legend and in song."

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