



# *The Stone of the Wiseman*

Hans Christian Andersen

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*Intermediate*

*32 min read*

Far away in the land of India, far away towards the East, at the end of the world, stood the Tree of the Sun, a noble tree, such as we have never seen, and shall probably never see. The crown stretched out several miles around: it was really an entire wood; each of its smallest branches formed, in its turn, a whole tree. Palms, beech trees, pines, plane trees, and various other kinds grew here, which are found scattered in all other parts of the world: they shot out like small branches from the great boughs, and these large boughs with their windings and knots formed, as it were, valleys and hills, clothed with velvety green, and covered with flowers. Everything was like a wide, blooming meadow, or like the most charming garden.

Here the birds from all quarters of the world assembled together—birds from the primeval forests of America, the rose gardens of Damascus, from the deserts of Africa, in which the elephant and the lion boast of being the only rulers. The Polar birds came flying hither, and of course the stork and the swallow were not absent; but the birds were not the only living beings: the stag, the squirrel, the antelope, and a hundred other beautiful and light-footed animals were here at home. The crown of the tree was a widespread fragrant garden, and in the midst of it, where the great boughs raised themselves into a green hill, there stood a castle of crystal, with a view towards every quarter of heaven. Each tower was reared in the form of a lily. Through the stem one could ascend, for within it was a winding-stair; one could step out upon the leaves as upon balconies; and up in the calyx of the flower itself was the most beautiful, sparkling round hall, above which no other roof rose but the

blue firmament with sun and stars.

Just as much splendour, though in another way, appeared below, in the wide halls of the castle. Here, on the walls, the whole world around was reflected. One saw everything that was done, so that there was no necessity of reading any papers, and indeed papers were not obtainable there. Everything was to be seen in living pictures, if one only wished to see it; for too much is still too much even for the wisest man; and this man dwelt here. His name is very difficult—you will not be able to pronounce it; therefore it may remain unmentioned. He knew everything that a man on earth can know, or can get to know; every invention which had already been or which was yet to be made was known to him; but nothing more, for everything in the world has its limits.

The wise King Solomon was only half as wise as he, and yet he was very wise, and governed the powers of nature, and held sway over potent spirits: yes, Death itself was obliged to give him every morning a list of those who were to die during the day. But King Solomon himself was obliged to die too; and this thought it was which often in the deepest manner employed the inquirer, the mighty lord in the castle on the Tree of the Sun. He also, however high he might tower above men in wisdom, must die one day.

He knew that, and his children also must fade away like the leaves of the forest, and become dust. He saw the human race fade away like the leaves on the tree; saw new men come to fill their places; but the leaves that fell off never sprouted forth again—they fell to dust, or were transformed into other parts of plants. “What happens to man?” the wise man asked himself, “when the angel of death touches him? What may death be? The body is dissolved—and the soul. Yes, what is the soul? whither doth it go? To eternal life, says the comforting voice of religion; but what is the transition? where does one live, and how? Above, in heaven, says the pious man, thither we go. Thither?” repeated the wise man, and fixed his eyes upon the moon and the stars; “up yonder?” But he saw, from the earthly ball, that above and below were alike changing their position, according as one stood here or there on the rolling globe; and even if he mounted as high as the loftiest mountains of earth rear their heads, to the air which we below call clear and transparent—the pure heaven—a black darkness spread abroad like a cloth, and the sun had a coppery glow, and sent forth no rays, and our earth lay wrapped in an orange-coloured mist. How narrow were the limits of the corporeal eye, and how little the eye of the soul could see!—how little did even the wisest know of that which is the most important to us all!

In the most secret chamber of the castle lay the greatest treasure of the earth: the Book of Truth. Leaf for leaf,

the wise man read it through: every man may read in this book, but only by fragments. To many an eye the characters seem to tremble, so that the words cannot be put together; on certain pages the writing often seems so pale, so blurred, that only a blank leaf appears. The wiser a man becomes, the more he will read; and the wisest read most. He knew how to unite the sunlight and the moonlight with the light of reason and of hidden powers; and through this stronger light many things came clearly before him from the page. But in the division of the book whose title is "Life after Death" not even one point was to be distinctly seen. That pained him. Should he not be able here upon earth to obtain a light by which everything should become clear to him that stood written in the Book of Truth?

Like the wise King Solomon, he understood the language of the animals, and could interpret their talk and their songs. But that made him none the wiser. He found out the forces of plants and metals—the forces to be used for the cure of diseases, for delaying death—but none that could destroy death. In all created things that were within his reach he sought the light that should shine upon the certainty of an eternal life; but he found it not. The Book of Truth lay before him with leaves that appeared blank. Christianity showed itself to him in the Bible with words of promise of an eternal life; but he wanted to read it in his book; but here he saw nothing written on the subject.

He had five children—four sons, educated as well as the children of the wisest father could be, and a daughter, fair, mild, and clever, but blind; yet this appeared no deprivation to her—her father and brothers were outward eyes to her, and the vividness of her feelings saw for her.

Never had the sons gone farther from the castle than the branches of the tree extended, nor had the sister strayed from home. They were happy children in the land of childhood—in the beautiful fragrant Tree of the Sun. Like all children, they were very glad when any history was related to them; and the father told them many things that other children would not have understood; but these were just as clever as most grown-up people are among us. He explained to them what they saw in the pictures of life on the castle walls—the doings of men and the march of events in all the lands of the earth; and often the sons expressed the wish that they could be present at all the great deeds and take part in them; and their father then told them that out in the world it was difficult and toilsome—that the world was not quite what it appeared to them as they looked forth upon it from their beautiful home. He spoke to them of the true, the beautiful, and the good, and told them that these three held together in the world, and that under the pressure they had to endure they became hardened into a

precious stone, clearer than the water of the diamond—a jewel whose splendour had value with God, whose brightness outshone everything, and which was the so-called “Stone of the Wise.”

He told them how men could attain by investigation to the knowledge of the existence of God, and that through men themselves one could attain to the certainty that such a jewel as the “Stone of the Wise” existed. This narration would have exceeded the perception of other children, but these children understood it, and at length other children, too, will learn to comprehend its meaning.

They questioned their father concerning the true, the beautiful, and the good; and he explained it to them, told them many things, and told them also that God, when He made man out of the dust of the earth, gave five kisses to His work—fiery kisses, heart kisses—which we now call the five senses. Through these the true, the beautiful, and the good is seen, perceived, and understood; through these it is valued, protected, and furthered. Five senses have been given corporeally and mentally, inwardly and outwardly, to body and soul.

The children reflected deeply upon these things; they meditated upon them by day and by night. Then the eldest of the brothers dreamt a splendid dream. Strangely enough, the second brother had the same dream, and the third, and the fourth brother likewise; all of them dreamt exactly the same thing—namely, that each went out into the world and found the “Stone of the Wise,” which gleamed like a beaming light on his forehead when, in the morning dawn, he rode back on his swift horse over the velvety green meadows of his home into the castle of his father; and the jewel threw such a heavenly light and radiance upon the leaves of the book, that everything was illuminated that stood written concerning the life beyond the grave. But the sister dreamt nothing about going out into the wide world. It never entered her mind. Her world was her father’s house.

“I shall ride forth into the wide world,” said the eldest brother. “I must try what life is like there, and go to and fro among men. I will practise only the good and the true; with these I will protect the beautiful. Much shall change for the better when I am there.” Now his thoughts were bold and great, as our thoughts generally are at home, before we have gone forth into the world and have encountered wind and rain, and thorns and thistles.

In him and in all his brothers the five senses were highly developed, inwardly and outwardly; but each of them had one sense which in keenness and development surpassed the other four. In the case of the eldest this pre-eminent sense was Sight. This was to do him especial service. He said he had eyes for all time, eyes for all nations, eyes that could look into the depths of the earth, where the treasures lie hidden, and deep into the

hearts of men, as though nothing but a pane of glass were placed before them: he could read more than we can see on the cheek that blushes or grows pale, in the eye that droops or smiles. Stags and antelopes escorted him to the boundary of his home towards the west, and there the wild swans received him and flew north-west. He followed them. And now he had gone far out into the world—far from the land of his father, that extended eastward to the end of the earth.

But how he opened his eyes in astonishment! Many things were here to be seen; and many things appear very different when a man beholds them with his own eyes, or when he merely sees them in a picture, as the son had done in his father's house, however faithful the picture may be. At the outset he nearly lost his eyes in astonishment at all the rubbish and all the masquerading stuff put forward to represent the beautiful; but he did not lose them, and soon found full employment for them. He wished to go thoroughly and honestly to work in the understanding of the beautiful, the true, and the good. But how were these represented in the world? He saw that often the garland that belonged to the beautiful was given to the hideous; that the good was often passed by without notice, while mediocrity was applauded when it should have been hissed off. People looked to the dress, and not to the wearer; asked for a name, and not for desert; and went more by reputation than by service. It was the same thing everywhere.

"I see I must attack these things vigorously," he said; and attacked them with vigour accordingly. But while he was looking for the truth, came the Evil One, the father of lies. Gladly would the fiend have plucked out the eyes of this Seer; but that would have been too direct; the devil works in a more cunning way. He let him see and seek the true and the good; but while the young man was contemplating them, the evil spirit blew one mote after another into each of his eyes; and such a proceeding would be hurtful even to the best sight. Then the fiend blew upon the motes, so that they became beams; and the eyes were destroyed, and the Seer stood like a blind man in the wide world, and had no faith in it: he lost his good opinion of it and himself; and when a man gives up the world and himself, all is over with him.

"Over!" said the wild swan, who flew across the sea towards the east. "Over!" twittered the swallows, who likewise flew eastward, towards the Tree of the Sun. That was no good news that they carried to the young man's home.

"I fancy the Seer must have fared badly," said the second brother; "but the Hearer may have better fortune." For

this one possessed the sense of hearing in an eminent degree: he could hear the grass grow, so quick was he to hear.

He took a hearty leave of all at home, and rode away, provided with good abilities and good intentions. The swallows escorted him, and he followed the swans; and he stood far from his home in the wide world.

But he experienced the fact that one may have too much of a good thing. His hearing was too fine. He not only heard the grass grow, but could hear every man's heart beat, in sorrow and in joy. The whole world was to him like a great clockmaker's workshop, wherein all the clocks were going "tick, tick!" and all the turret clocks striking "ding dong!" It was unbearable. For a long time his ears held out, but at last all the noise and screaming became too much, for one man. There came blackguard boys of sixty years old—for years alone don't make men—and raised a tumult at which the hearer might certainly have laughed, but for the applause which followed, and which echoed through every house and street, and was audible even in the country high road.

Falsehood thrust itself forward, and played the master; the bells on the fool's cap jangled, and declared they were church bells; and the noise became too bad for the Hearer, and he thrust his fingers into his ears; but still he could hear false singing and bad sounds, gossip and idle words, scandal and slander, groaning and moaning without and within. Heaven help us! He thrust his fingers deeper and deeper into his ears, but at last the drums burst. Now he could hear nothing at all of the good, the true, and the beautiful, for his hearing was to have been the bridge by which he crossed. He became silent and suspicious, trusted no one at last, not even himself, and, no longer hoping to find and bring home the costly jewel, he gave it up, and gave himself up; and that was the worst of all. The birds who winged their flight towards the east brought tidings of this, till the news reached the castle in the Tree of the Sun.

"I will try now!" said the third brother. "I have a sharp nose!"

Now that was not said in very good taste; but it was his way, and one must take him as he was. He had a happy temper, and was a poet, a real poet: he could sing many things that he could not say, and many things struck him far earlier than they occurred to others. "I can smell fire!" he said; and he attributed to the sense of smelling, which he possessed in a high degree, a great power in the region of the beautiful. "Every fragrant spot in the realm of the beautiful has its frequenters," he said. "One man feels at home in the atmosphere of the

tavern, among the flaring tallow candles, where the smell of spirits mingles with the fumes of bad tobacco. Another prefers sitting among the overpowering scent of jessamine, or scenting himself with strong clove oil. This man seeks out the fresh sea breeze, while that one climbs to the highest mountain top and looks down upon the busy little life beneath.” Thus he spake. It seemed to him as if he had already been out in the world, as if he had already associated with men and known them. But this experience arose from within himself: it was the poet within him, the gift of Heaven, and bestowed on him in his cradle.

He bade farewell to his paternal roof in the Tree of the Sun, and departed on foot through the pleasant scenery of home. Arrived at its confines, he mounted on the back of an ostrich, which runs faster than a horse; and afterwards, when he fell in with the wild swans, he swung himself on the strongest of them, for he loved change; and away he flew over the sea to distant lands with great forests, deep lakes, mighty mountains, and proud cities; and wherever he came it seemed as if sunshine travelled with him across the fields, for every flower, every bush, every tree exhaled a new fragrance, in the consciousness that a friend and protector was in the neighbourhood, who understood them and knew their value. The crippled rose bush reared up its twigs, unfolded its leaves, and bore the most beautiful roses; every one could see it, and even the black damp wood-snail noticed its beauty.

“I will give my seal to the flower,” said the Snail; “I have spit at it, and I can do no more for it.”

“Thus it always fares with the beautiful in this world!” said the poet; and he sang a song concerning it, sang it in his own way; but nobody listened. Then he gave the drummer twopence and a peacock’s feather, and set the song for the drum, and had it drummed in all the streets of the town; and the people heard it, and said, “That’s a well-constructed song.” Then the poet sang several songs of the beautiful, the true, and the good. His songs were listened to in the tavern, where the tallow candles smoked, in the fresh meadow, in the forest, and on the high seas. It appeared as if this brother was to have better fortune than the two others. But the evil spirit was angry at this, and accordingly he set to work with incense powder and incense smoke, which he can prepare so artfully as to confuse an angel, and how much more therefore a poor poet! The Evil One knows how to take that kind of people! He surrounded the poet so completely with incense, that the man lost his head, and forgot his mission and his home, and at last himself—and ended in smoke.

But when the little birds heard of this they mourned, and for three days they sang not one song. The black

wood-snail became blacker still, not for grief, but for envy. "They should have strewed incense for me," she said, "for it was I who gave him his idea of the most famous of his songs, the drum song of 'The Way of the World;' it was I who spat at the rose! I can bring witness to the fact."

But no tidings of all this penetrated to the poet's home in India, for all the birds were silent for three days; and when the time of mourning was over, their grief had been so deep that they had forgotten for whom they wept. That's the usual way!

"Now I shall have to go out into the world, to disappear like the rest," said the fourth brother. He had just as good a wit as the third, but he was no poet, though he could be witty. Those two had filled the castle with cheerfulness, and now the last cheerfulness was going away. Sight and hearing has always been looked upon as the two chief senses of men, and as the two that it is most desirable to sharpen; the other senses are looked upon as of less consequence. But that was not the opinion of this son, as he had especially cultivated his taste in every respect, and taste is very powerful. It holds sway over what goes into the mouth, and also over what penetrates into the mind; and consequently this brother tasted everything that was stored up in bottles and pots, saying that this was the rough work of his office. Every man was to him a vessel in which something was seething, every country an enormous kitchen, a kitchen of the mind.

"That was no delicacy," he said, and he wanted to go out and try what was delicate. "Perhaps fortune may be more favourable to me than it was to my brothers," he said. "I shall start on my travels. But what conveyance shall I choose? Are air balloons invented yet?" he asked his father, who knew of all inventions that had been made, or that were to be made. But air balloons had not yet been invented, nor steam ships, nor railways. "Good: then I shall choose an air balloon," he said; "my father knows how they are made and guided. Nobody has invented them yet, and consequently the people will believe that it is an aërial phantom. When I have used the balloon I will burn it, and for this purpose you must give me a few pieces of the invention that will be made next—I mean chemical matches."

And he obtained what he wanted, and flew away. The birds accompanied him farther than they had flown with the other brothers. They were curious to know what would be the result of the flight, and more of them came sweeping up: they thought he was some new bird; and he soon had a goodly following. The air became black with birds, they came on like a cloud—like the cloud of locusts over the land of Egypt.

Now he was out in the wide world.

The balloon descended over one of the greatest cities, and the aëronaut took up his station on the highest point, on the church steeple. The balloon rose again, which it ought not to have done: where it went to is not known, but that was not a matter of consequence, for it was not yet invented. Then he sat on the church steeple. The birds no longer hovered around him, they had got tired of him, and he was tired of them.

All the chimneys in the town were smoking merrily. “Those are altars erected to thy honour!” said the Wind, who wished to say something agreeable to him. He sat boldly up there, and looked down upon the people in the street. There was one stepping along, proud of his purse, another of the key he carried at his girdle, though he had nothing to unlock; one proud of his moth-eaten coat, another of his wasted body. “Vanity! I must hasten downward, dip my finger in the pot, and taste!” he said. “But for awhile I will still sit here, for the wind blows so pleasantly against my back. I’ll sit here so long as the wind blows. I’ll enjoy a slight rest. ‘It is good to sleep long in the morning, when one has much to do,’ says the lazy man. I’ll stop here so long as this wind blows, for it pleases me.”

And there he sat, but he was sitting upon the weathercock of the steeple, which kept turning round and round with him, so that he was under the false impression that the same wind still blew; so he might stay up there a goodly while.

But in India, in the castle in the Tree of the Sun, it was solitary and still, since the brothers had gone away one after the other.

“It goes not well with them,” said the father; “they will never bring the gleaming jewel home; it is not made for me; they are gone, they are dead!” And he bent down over the Book of Truth, and gazed at the page on which he should read of life after death; but for him nothing was to be seen or learned upon it.

The blind daughter was his consolation and joy: she attached herself with sincere affection to him; for the sake of his peace and joy she wished the costly jewel might be found and brought home. With kindly longing she thought of her brothers. Where were they? Where did they live? She wished sincerely that she might dream of them, but it was strange, not even in dreams could she approach them. But at length, one night, she dreamt that the voices of her brothers sounded across to her, calling to her from the wide world, and she could not refrain, but went far far out, and yet it seemed in her dream that she was still in her father's house.

She did not meet her brothers, but she felt, as it were, a fire burning in her hand, but it did not hurt her, for it was the jewel she was bringing to her father. When she awoke, she thought for a moment that she still held the stone, but it was the knob of her distaff that she was grasping. During the long nights she had spun incessantly, and round the distaff was turned a thread, finer than the finest web of the spider; human eyes were unable to distinguish the separate threads. She had wetted them with her tears, and the twist was strong as a cable. She rose, and her resolution was taken: the dream must be made a reality.

It was night, and her father slept. She pressed a kiss on his hand, and then took her distaff, and fastened the end of the thread to her father's house. But for this, blind as she was, she would never have found her way home; to the thread she must hold fast, and trust not to herself or to others. From the Tree of the Sun she broke four leaves; these she would confide to wind and weather, that they might fly to her brothers as a letter and a greeting, in case she did not meet them in the wide world. How would she fare out yonder, she, the poor blind child? But she had the invisible thread to which she could hold fast. She possessed a gift which all the others lacked. This was thoroughness; and in virtue of this it seemed as if she could see to the tips of her fingers, and hear down into her very heart.

And quietly she went forth into the noisy, whirling, wonderful world, and wherever she went the sky grew bright—she felt the warm ray—the rainbow spread itself out from the dark world through the blue air. She heard the song of the birds, and smelt the scent of orange groves and apple orchards so strongly that she seemed to taste it. Soft tones and charming songs reached her ear, but also howling and roaring, and thoughts and opinions, sounded in strange contradiction to each other. Into the innermost depths of her heart penetrated the echoes of human thoughts and feelings. One chorus sounded darkly—

“The life of earth is a shadow vain

A night created for sorrow!"

but then came another strain—

"The life of earth is the scent of the rose,

With its sunshine and its pleasure."

And if one strophe sounded painfully—

"Each mortal thinks of himself alone,

This truth has been manifested"—

on the other side the answer pealed forth—

"A mighty stream of warmest love,

All through the world shall guide us."

She heard, indeed, the words—

"In the little petty whirl here below,

Each thing shows mean and paltry;"

but then came also the comfort—

"Many things great and good are achieved,

That the ear of man heareth never."

and if sometimes the mocking strain sounded around her—

"Join in the common cry: with a jest

Destroy the good gifts of the Giver."

in the blind girl's heart a stronger voice repeated—

"To trust in thyself and in God is best;

His good will be done for ever."

And whenever she entered the circle of human kind, and appeared among young or old, the knowledge of the true, the good, and the beautiful beamed into their hearts. Whether she entered the study of the artist, or the festive, decorated hall, or the crowded factory, with its whirring wheels, it seemed as though a sunbeam were

stealing in—as if the sweet string sounded, the flower exhaled its perfume, and a living dew-drop fell upon the exhausted blood.

But the evil spirit could not see this and be content. He has more cunning than ten thousand men, and he found out a way to compass his end. He betook himself to the marsh, collected little bubbles of the stagnant water, and passed over them a sevenfold echo of lying words to give them strength. Then he pounded up paid-for heroic poems and lying epitaphs, as many as he could get, boiled them in tears that envy had shed, put upon them rouge he had scraped from faded cheeks, and of these he composed a maiden, with the aspect and gait of the blessed blind girl, the angel of thoroughness; and then the Evil One's plot was in full progress. The world knew not which of the two was the true one; and, indeed, how should the world know?

“To trust in thyself and in God is best;  
His good will be done for ever,”  
sung the blind girl, in full faith.

She intrusted the four green leaves from the Tree of the Sun to the winds, as a letter and a greeting to her brothers, and had full confidence that they would reach their destination, and that the jewel would be found which outshines all the glories of the world. From the forehead of humanity it would gleam even to the castle of her father.

“Even to my father's house,” she repeated. “Yes, the place of the jewel is on earth, and I shall bring more than the promise of it with me. I feel its glow, it swells more and more in my closed hand. Every grain of truth, were it ever so fine, which the sharp wind carried up and whirled towards me, I took up and treasured; I let it be penetrated by the fragrance of the beautiful, of which there is so much in the world, even for the blind. I took the sound of the beating heart engaged in what is good, and added it to the first. All that I bring is but dust, but still it is the dust of the jewel we seek, and in plenty. I have my whole hand full of it.” And she stretched forth her hand towards her father. She was soon at home—she had travelled thither in the flight of thoughts, never having quitted her hold of the invisible thread from the paternal home.

The evil powers rushed with hurricane fury over the Tree of the Sun, pressed with a wind-blast against the open doors, and into the sanctuary where lay the Book of Truth.

“It will be blown away by the wind!” said the father, and he seized the hand she had opened.

“No,” she replied, with quiet confidence, “it cannot be blown away; I feel the beam warming my very soul.”

And the father became aware of a glancing flame, there where the shining dust poured out of her hand over the Book of Truth, that was to tell of the certainty of an everlasting life, and on it stood one shining word—one only word—“Believe.”

And with the father and daughter were again the four brothers. When the green leaf fell upon the bosom of each, a longing for home<sup>[367]</sup> had seized them, and led them back. They had arrived. The birds of passage, and the stag, the antelope, and all the creatures of the forest followed them, for all wished to have a part in their joy.

We have often seen, where a sunbeam bursts through a crack in the door into the dusty room, how a whirling column of dust seems circling round; but this was not poor and insignificant like common dust, for even the rainbow is dead in colour compared with the beauty which showed itself. Thus, from the leaf of the book with the beaming word “Believe,” arose every grain of truth, decked with the charms of the beautiful and the good, burning brighter than the mighty pillar of flame that led Moses and the children of Israel through the desert; and from the word “Believe” the bridge of Hope arose, spanning the distance, even to the immeasurable love in the realms of the Infinite.

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