

A Picture from the Ramparts

Hans Christian Andersen

It is autumn, and we are standing on the ramparts of the citadel, gazing at the ships on the sound and the distant coast of Sweden rising beyond, bright in the evening sunlight. Behind us the ramparts drop abruptly; growing below us are stately trees whose golden leaves are falling from their branches. Down below them are dark and gloomy buildings with wooden palisades, and inside, where the sentry paces back and forth, it is dreary and dark. But behind the grated windows it is still darker and drearier, for here are confined the most hardened criminals, the convict slaves.

A sunbeam from the setting sun creeps into the bare dungeon, for the sun shines on good and evil alike. A sullen, savage prisoner glares bitterly at the cold sunbeam. Then a tiny bird flutters against his grated window, for the bird too sings for the evil as well as for the good. For a moment it twitters softly, "Qvivit," then remains perched on the grating, fluttering its wings, plucking a feather from its breast, and ruffling up its plumage.

As the chained criminal gazes at it, a milder expression steals softly over his ugly face. A feeling that he scarcely realizes slowly enters his heart—a feeling that is somehow akin to the sunbeam that has strayed through the grating, and the scent of violets that in the spring bloom so abundantly outside his prison.

Now there sound the clear, strong, and lively notes of the huntsman's horn. Away from the grating flies the startled bird, the sunbeam fades; all is again dark in the cell and in the heart of the wicked man. But for one brief moment the sun has shone therein, and the little song of the bird has been heard.

Keep on, sweet tones of the huntsman's horn! For the evening is mild, and the sea as calm and smooth as a mirror.