

The Bird of Folklore

Hans Christian Andersen

It is wintertime, and the earth is covered with a layer of snow, as smooth as if it were marble cut from a mountain. The sky is high and clear, and the wind as sharp as an elfin-forged sword; the trees stand like white coral, or resemble blooming almond branches, and the air is as fresh as it is in the high Alps. The night is beautiful with streaming northern lights and countless twinkling stars.

Storms are coming; the clouds rise and scatter swan feathers; the snowflakes drift down, covering the hollow lane, the houses, the open fields, and the quiet streets. But we are sitting in a cozy room, before a glowing fire, and tales of olden days are being told. We hear a legend.

"By the open sea there lay a viking's grave, and on it at midnight sat the ghost of that buried hero. He had been a king, the golden crown encircling his brow. His hair fluttered in the wind, and he was clad in iron and steel. He bowed his head sorrowfully and sighed in deep grief, like an unblessed spirit.

"Then a ship came near. The men cast anchor and went on land. Among them was a scald, and he stepped forth toward the kingly form and asked, 'Why do you grieve and suffer?'

"Thereupon the dead man answered, 'No man has sung of my deeds; they are dead and gone. Song has never carried them over the lands and into the hearts of men; therefore I have no rest, no peace.'

"And he told of his work and his mighty deeds; the men of his time had known them, but not sung of them, for then there were no scalds.

"Then the old scald plucked the strings of his harp and sang of the hero - of his daring as a youth, his strength in manhood, and his great and noble deeds. At that the dead one's face brightened, like the edge of a cloud touched with moonlight; happy and blessed, the form arose in beams of glory and vanished like a trail of the northern lights. Only the green mound of turf with the stone devoid of runes remained to be seen; but over it, at the last sound of the chords, and as if it had come from the harp itself, there flew a tiny bird. It was a most beautiful songbird, with the tuneful melodies of the thrush, the throbbing melodies of the human heart, songs of home, as the bird of passage hears them. The bird flew over hill, over valley, and over forest and meadow. It was the Bird of Folklore, which never dies."

We hear the song; we hear it now here in our room, in the winter evening, while the white bees swarm outside and the tempest tightens its strong grip. The Bird sings not only heroic songs; it sings soft, sweet love songs, rich and many; it sings of faithfulness in the North; it gives us fairy tales in melodies and words; it has proverbs and a language in song, and thereby, as if runes were laid on a dead man's tongue, it can speak to us of ancient times, and thus we know the homeland of the Bird of Folklore.

In ancient heathen days, in the times of the vikings, its nest was in the harp of the bard. In the days of knighthood, when iron fists held the scales of justice, and only might was right, when the peasant and the dog were of equal value, where then did the Bird find shelter? Brutality and narrow-mindedness alike had no thought for it. But over the balcony of the castle, where the lady sat before her parchment and wrote down the old records in song and story; in the humble green-turf hut, where the wandering peddler sat on the bench beside the good woman, telling her tales - there, above them, fluttered and flew, twittered and sang, the Bird that never dies so long as earth is green under the foot of man - the

Bird of Folklore.

Now it sings for us in here. Outside are the snowstorm and the night. The Bird lays runes on our tongue; we know again our homeland, as God speaks to us in our mother tongue in the melodies of the Bird of Folklore, and the old memories rise within us; faded colors are bright again; song and tale give the joy of a blessed drink, lifting mind and soul until the evening seems like a Christmas festivity. The snow is drifting, and the ice is crackling; the storm reigns; it has great power; it is the lord, but not *our* Lord!

It is wintertime, the wind still as sharp as an elfin-forged sword; the snow is drifting - it has been drifting, it seems to us, for days and weeks - and it lies like a monstrous snow mountain over the big town; it is like a weighty dream in the winter night. All beneath it is hidden and seemingly nonexistent; only the golden cross on the church, the symbol of faith, rises above the snow grave and glitters against the blue sky in the clear sunshine.

And away over the snow-covered town fly the birds of heaven, the large and the small; they chirp and they sing, each in its own tongue.

First is the flock of sparrows; they chirp about all the little things in street and lane, in nest and house; they know tales of the kitchen and the parlor. "We know that buried town," they say. "Every living soul there has cheep, cheep, cheep!"

Then the black ravens and crows fly over the white snow. "Dig! Dig!" they scream. "There's still something to get down there, something for the belly - that's the most important thing. That's the opinion of most people down below there, and that opinion is caw, caw, caw!"

The wild swans come with whizzing wings and sing of the greatness and glory that still live in the thoughts and hearts of the men in the snow-covered slumber of the town. It is not the sleep of death, for evidence of life comes forth; we hear it in tones of music; they swell and sound as if they are coming from the church organ, they are gripping as a strain from an elfin mound, as Ossianic songs, as the winged rush of the Valkyries. What harmony! It speaks to our inmost heart, uplifts our thoughts; we hear the Bird of Folklore! And now the warm breath of God breathes down from above; the snow mountain breaks open, and the sun shines in through it. The spring is coming, and the birds are coming, a new generation, with the same familiar tones. Hearken to the drama of the year - the mighty snowstorm - the weighty dream of a winter night! All fetters shall be broken here, and everything shall rise again at the beautiful song of the Bird of Folklore - the Bird that never dies.