

A View from Vartou's Window

Hans Christian Andersen

Near the green ramparts that run around Copenhagen is a large red house with many windows. These are garnished with balsams and green leaves, but the rooms within are bare and rude, for poor old folk live there. This place is called Vartou.

Look there! An old maid is leaning out of a window, plucking the withered leaves from her balsam, and looking over the green rampart where happy children are playing. What is she thinking about? A whole life drama unfolds before her mind's eye.

The poor children, how gaily they play! What bright eyes and what red cheeks! But they have neither shoes nor stockings. And they are dancing and playing on the green rampart, on that very spot where, as the old story goes, the ground always sank in until an innocent child was lured with flowers and toys into its open grave, which was walled up even while the child played. Then the ramparts were firm and were soon covered with a garment of beautiful green turf. But the children have never heard that old legend, or else they would hear the poor little one still weeping beneath the mound, and the dew on the grass would seem to them the pearls of her tears.

Nor have they heard the story of that ancient king of Denmark who, when the enemy lay encamped around the city, rode past this very spot, and swore he would die at his post; or how the women and men together poured boiling water down on the white-clad foemen as they crawled up through the snow on the outer side of the ramparts.

Play on, little ones!

Yes, play, little girl, for years pass quickly! Yes, the blessed years! Soon enough will come that solemn confirmation time, when the candidates walk together hand in hand, and you among them, in a white dress which your mother, with much time and labor, has fashioned from her own confirmation dress of long years ago. You will get a red shawl too; it is far too big for you, but at least everyone can see how large it is, much too large. You think about your attire and about the kind Father above. And it is wonderful indeed to walk on the green ramparts after the services.

Then the years roll on; dark days come, but youth is ever hopeful. You have a new friend, you know not how you met. You walk together on the rampart in the early spring, when all the church bells toll out on the solemn prayer day. No violets are yet in blossom, but just outside Rosenborg Castle you pause beside a tree decked with the first green buds of spring. There you both pause. Each year that tree puts forth fresh green shoots; but the human heart does not, and the clouds that pass over the mind of man are heavier and darker than ever the northern skies have known.

Poor child! Your bridegroom's bridal chamber shall be a coffin, and you shall live on, an old maid; from Vartou you shall peer through the balsam blossoms, watch the children at play, and see your own history repeated.

This is indeed the life drama that unfolds before the eyes of the old maid who looks out on the ramparts, where the sun shines, and the merry red-cheeked children sing and play in their bare feet, carefree as the birds of the air themselves.