

Danish Popular Legends

Hans Christian Andersen

Denmark is rich in old legends of heroes, of churches and manor houses, of hills and fields, and of the bottomless moorland. These stories date from the days of the great plague, from times of war, and from times of peace. They live on in books or on the tongues of people. They fly far about like a flock of birds, but they are as different, one from another, as the thrush is from the owl, and the wood pigeon from the gull. Listen to me, and I will tell you some of these legends.

I

In the olden days, when invaders were ravaging the Danish countryside, it happened that a pitched battle was fought, and the Danes won. That evening, many dead and many wounded men lay on the stricken field. One of these was an enemy, who had lost both his legs by a shot. Near-by a Danish soldier had just taken a flask filled with beer from his pocket and was about to put it to his mouth, when the desperately wounded man begged him for a drink. As the soldier bent down to give the bottle to his enemy, the wounded man discharged his pistol at him, but he missed his aim. The soldier took his bottle back, and drank half of it. As he handed the rest to his enemy, his only comment was, "You rascal, now you will get only half of it."

When the king was told of this, in memory of the deed he granted to the soldier and to his descendants a noble coat of arms on which was blazoned a bottle, half full.

II

There is a beautiful tradition worth telling of the church bell at Farum. Here the parsonage and the church stand side by side. It was a dark night, late in the fall. The minister was sitting at work upon his Sunday sermon when he heard the large church bell sound, very lightly and very strangely. No wind was blowing, and he could not account for the noise.

The minister took his keys and went to the church. As he entered it, the bell tone ceased, but he heard a faint sigh from the belfry.

"Who is there?" he asked in a loud voice. "Who is disturbing the peace of this church?" Footsteps pattered down the bell tower steps, and he saw a little boy coming toward him.

"Don't be angry," the boy said. "I slipped in here when the bell was rung for vespers. My mother is very ill - " Tears choked him, and he could not speak. The minister patted him on the cheek and encouraged the boy to tell his story frankly.

"They say that my mother - my sweet and good mother - is going to die. But I've heard tell that, when people are sick unto death, they may live to be well again if someone dares enter the church and at midnight scrape a little rust from the great church bell. That will keep death away, so I came here and hid myself till I heard the clock strike twelve. I was afraid. I thought of the dead people rising from their graves, and of their coming into the church, and I dared not look out in the churchyard. But I said the Lord's Prayer, and scraped the rust off of the bell."

"Come, my brave child," said the minister. "The good Lord will not forsake you or your mother." They went together to the poor cottage where the sick woman lay. She was in a sound and peaceful sleep.

God granted that she should live, and His blessings shone on her and her child.

III

This is a legend they tell about a poor young fellow, Paul Vendelbo, who came to be a

great man, highly honored. He was born in Jutland. After he had struggled hard and studied so well that he got through his examination as a scholar, he felt a still greater ambition to be a soldier and to stroll about in far-away lands.

One day he was walking along the ramparts of Copenhagen, with two young prosperous comrades. As he was telling them of his ambition, all of a sudden he stopped, and looked up at the window of a house where the young daughter of a professor was sitting. They all found her astonishingly pretty. When Paul's comrades saw how he blushed, they said as a joke:

"Paul, if you can get her to give you a kiss, in front of the window where we can see it, we will give the money you need to travel. Then you can see if fortune favors you better abroad than at home."

Paul Vendelbo went into the house and knocked at the parlor door. "My father is not at home," the young girl told him.

"Don't be angry," he begged her, as the blood rushed up into his cheeks, "but it's not your father I want." Then he told her frankly of his whole-hearted ambition to adventure out into the world and make an honorable name for himself. He told her of his two friends who were standing outside and how they had promised him his traveling expenses if, of her own free will, she would kiss him at the open window. He looked at her so bashfully, so honorably, and so frankly, that her anger died away.

"It is wrong for you to propose such a thing to a modest young girl," she told him. "But you look so honest that I won't stand in the way of your good fortune." She led him to the window, and gave him a kiss.

His comrades kept their bargain, and gave him the money. He went into the service of the Tsar of Russia, made a name for himself in the battle of Pultawa, and honors were heaped upon him. Afterward, when Denmark stood in need of him, he came home to become a man of might in the army and in the council of the King. *Lövenörn*, they called him, which means Lion-Eagle.

One day he again entered the professor's modest room. Again it was not the professor he wanted, but the professor's daughter, Ingeborg Vinding - the girl who gave him the kiss with which his good fortune began. Fourteen days later Paul Vendelbo Lövenörn celebrated his wedding.

IV

The enemy once made a great attack on the Danish island of Fyen. Only one village was left standing, and this was soon to be sacked and burned.

Two poor people lived in a low-roofed house at the edge of the town. It was a dark winter's night, and the enemy were expected at any minute. The two poor, anxious people opened their psalm book to see if they could find anything in it to help or to comfort them. They opened their book and turned to the psalm, "A mighty fortress is our God."

Full of confidence, they sang the psalm, and their faith was renewed. They went to bed and slept well in the care of the Lord. In the morning, when they awoke, they found the room entirely dark. There was no glimmer of daylight, and the door would not open when they tried it. Then they climbed to the loft, and opened a trapdoor in the roof, from which they saw that it was broad daylight. But a heavy snow had fallen in the night. It had drifted over their whole house, and hidden it from the enemies who had pillaged and burned the town during the night. The two people clasped their hands in thankfulness, and again they sang, "A mighty fortress is our God," for He had shielded them and raised a rampart of snow around their home.

V

In North Seeland they tell of a dark mystery that challenges one's imagination. The church of Roervig lies far out among the sand dunes by the stormy Kattegat. One evening a great ship came to anchor off the shore. It seemed to be a Russian man-of-war. That night there was a knock at the parsonage door, and several people, armed and masked, demanded that the minister put on his robes and come with them, out to the church. They promised to pay him well, and they threatened him if he should refuse to go. He went.

He found the church lighted. Unknown people were gathered there, and all was in deep silence. A bride and groom waited in front of the altar. The magnificent clothes they wore suggested the highest rank, but the bride was deathly pale. When the marriage ceremony ended, a shot rang out, and the bride fell dead at the altar. The people took her corpse and went away with it. Next morning, the ship was gone, and to this day no one has been able to give any explanation of these happenings.

The minister who took part in it wrote the whole story down in his Bible, which his family has kept to this day. The old church still stands between the sand dunes, near the tossing waters of the Kattegat, and the story still lives in memory and in writing.

VI

I must tell you one more church legend. On the island of Falster, which is part of Denmark, there lived a lady of rank and wealth. She had no children, and her family was about to die out. So she took a part of her wealth and built a magnificent church. When it was finished and the candles were lighted, she knelt at the altar and prayed that, for her pious gift, God would grant her life upon this earth as long as her church should stand.

The years went by. Her relatives died. Her old friends, her acquaintances, and all her old servants were laid in their graves. But she, who had made such an evil wish, did not die. Generation after generation grew up and were strangers to her. She did not go to see anyone, and no one came to see her. She wasted away in a long dotage, abandoned and alone. Her senses grew dull, and she was like someone asleep, but not like a dead person. Every Christmas Eve life flashed up in her for a moment, and she got back the use of her voice. Then she would order her new servants to put her in an oak coffin, and carry it to the graveyard by the church. The minister was asked to come and receive her commands. They laid her in the coffin, and brought it to the church. As she wished, every Christmas night the minister came through the choir up to the coffin, and raised the coffin lid for the weary old lady who lay there without finding rest.

"Is my church still standing?" she would ask in a tremulous voice, and when the minister answered, "It still stands," she would give a deep sigh and sadly fall back in her coffin. The minister closed down the lid, and came again on next Christmas Eve, and the next, and again and again.

Now there is no stone of the church left standing, no trace of the buried dead. A large whitethorn grows in the field there, and it blooms every spring as a sign of the resurrection of life. It is said that it grows on the spot where they placed the coffin of the high-born lady, and where her dust at last became dust of this earth.

VII

There is an old saying that, when our Lord drove the rebellious angels out of heaven, He let some of them fall among the hills, where they still live and are called hobgoblins, or trolls. They always flee in terror when they hear thunder, which they believe is the wrath of heaven. Others fell down in the alder marshes. These are called elves, and among them the women are very handsome to look at, but they are not to be trusted. Their backs are as hollow as a baker's dough trough. Others fell down in old farms and houses. These became dwarfs and goblins. Sometimes they have dealings with men, and many strange stories are told about them.

In Jutland, a hobgoblin lived with many other trolls in a large hill. One of his daughters was married to the village blacksmith, who was a bad man. He beat his wife until at last she tired of it. Just as he was about to beat her one day, she took a horseshoe and broke it upon him. She had such tremendous strength that she could easily have broken him in pieces too. He thought about this, and did not beat her again, but gossip spread the story abroad, and the country people no longer respected her. Now that they knew her to be the troll's daughter, no one in the parish would have anything to do with her. And the hobgoblin heard of this. One Sunday, the blacksmith, his wife, and other parishioners were in the churchyard, waiting for the parson. The blacksmith's wife looked out over the bay, where fog was rising.

"Here comes father," she said, "and he is angry." He came, and angry he was.

"Will you throw them to me, or would you rather do the catching?" he asked, and looked with greedy eyes upon the church people.

"I'll do the catching," she said, for she knew very well that he would not handle them gently if they fell in his hands. The hobgoblin seized one after another, and flung them over the roof of the church, while his daughter stood on the far side and caught them as gently as she could. From that time on, she got along very nicely with the parishioners. They were afraid of the hobgoblin and his many fellow trolls, who were scattered about the country. The best people could do was to avoid quarreling with him, and try to turn his acquaintance to their profit. Everyone knew that trolls had big kettles full of gold, and it was well worth while to get a handful of this money. But to do so they had to be as clever and tricky as the farmer of whom I shall tell you. I shall tell you also of the farmer's boy, who tended pigs and was even cleverer than his master.

The farmer had a hill among his fields, which he did not want to leave idle. So he plowed it, but the hobgoblin who lived under the hill came out and asked him:

"How dare you plow my roof?"

"I didn't know it was your roof," the farmer said, "but it is neither to your advantage nor to mine for us to allow the land to lie idle. Let me plow and plant. The first year you may take what is growing above the ground, and I shall reap what grows in the earth. The next year we will change around." The bargain was made, and the first year the farmer planted carrots. The second year he sowed wheat. The hobgoblin got the tops of the carrots and the roots of the wheat. In this way they lived in harmony.

But it happened that there was to be a christening at the farmer's house. He was greatly embarrassed, because he could not very well avoid inviting a hobgoblin with whom he was on such good terms. But, if the troll should accept his invitation, the farmer would get a bad name with the minister and with all the other people in the parish. Clever though the farmer usually was this time he didn't know what to do. He mentioned his troubles to the boy who tended his pigs, and who was even more clever than he.

"I will help you," the boy said. He took a large bag and went out to the hill where the hobgoblin lived. He knocked and was let in. Then he said that he came to invite the hobgoblin to the christening. The hobgoblin accepted the invitation and promised to come.

"I suppose I'll have to give a christening present, won't I?"

"They usually do," said the boy, and opened his bag. The troll poured money into it.

"Is that enough?"

The boy lifted the bag, and said, "Most people give as much." When all the gold in the big money kettle had been poured into the bag, the boy said, "Nobody gives more - most less."

"Tell me now," said the hobgoblin, "what honored guests are you expecting?"

"Three parsons and a bishop," said the boy.

"That's fine. Such gentlemen care only for eating and drinking. They won't bother me. Who else will come?"

"Mother Mary is expected."

"Hm, hm! But I think there will still be a little place for me behind the stove. And who else will be there?"

"Well, there's the Lord."

"Hm! Hm! Hm! You don't say so! But such extremely distinguished guests usually come late and leave early. While they are there I'll just step out for a moment. What sort of music will you have?"

"Drum music," said the boy, "The Lord has ordered a heavy thunder of drum music, to which we shall dance. Drum music it will be."

"Oh, isn't that dreadful!" the hobgoblin cried. "Thank your master for his invitation, but I prefer to stay at home. Doesn't he know that thundering and drumming terrify me and all of my people? Once, when I went for a walk in my younger days, the thunder began drumming, and one of the drumsticks thumped my thigh so hard that the bone cracked. I'll have no more of that sort of music, so just give the farmer my thanks and my present."

The boy took the bag on his back, and brought his master a fortune along with the troll's best wishes.

We have many such legends, but those we have told here ought to be enough for today!