

The Nightcap of the "Pebersvend"

Hans Christian Andersen

There is a street in Copenhagen that bears the odd name of Hysken Street. Why is it called that? And what does "Hysken mean? It is supposed to be German, but that is an injustice to the German word *Häuschen*, which means "small houses." Many years ago, when it was named, the houses in this street were not much more than wooden booths, almost like those we nowadays see set up in the markets - yes, a little larger, and with windows, but the panes were made only of horn or stretched bladder, for in those days glass windows were too expensive to be used in all houses. But then the time we are referring to was so long ago that when my great-grandfather's grandfather spoke of it he called it "the olden days." It was several hundred years ago.

The rich merchants of Bremen and Lübeck traded in Copenhagen in those days; they did not go there personally, but sent their clerks, who lived in the wooden booths in the "Street of Small Houses," and sold their beers and spices there. The German beers were indeed excellent, and there were many different kinds, including Bremen, Prying, and Emser beer - yes, and Brunswick ale, too - all sorts of spices, such as saffron, anise, ginger, and especially pepper. Yes, pepper was the most important of these, and consequently the German traders in Denmark came to be called *pebersvende* (pepper sellers). It was part of the contract they made before leaving home that they should not marry in Denmark. Many of them remained there until they were very old, and they had to look out for themselves, live alone, and light and put out their own fires, if they had any. Some of them became odd old fellows, with eccentric ideas and habits. From them the name of *pebersvende* has come to be given to all bachelors who have reached a certain age. All this one must know in order to understand the story. People make light of the *pebersvend*, the bachelor; they tell him to put on his nightcap, pull it down over his eyes, and go to bed.

*Saw, saw the wood!
His bed feels so good!
The pebersvend wears a nightcap on his head,
And must himself light the candle by his bed.*

Yes, they sing this about the *pebersvend* and thus make fun of him and his nightcap - only because they know so little about either. Ah, but such a nightcap one must never wish for! And why not? Just listen!

In the olden times there was no pavement in the Street of Small Houses; people stumbled into one hole after another, for it was like a dug-up street. And it was so narrow, and the booths were so near each other, that in the summertime a canvas was often stretched across the street from one booth to another, and then the aroma of pepper, saffron, and ginger was very strong there.

Behind the counters stood not many young men; no, most of the clerks were old fellows, and not dressed as we might think, with wigs or nightcaps, knee breeches, or with vests and coats buttoned up to their chins; no, it was our great-grandfather's grandfather who went about dressed like that and who appears in such attire in his portrait. The *pebersvende* couldn't afford to have their portraits painted, and that is a pity, for it would be well worth while now to have a picture of any one of them, just as he stood behind his counter, or walked to church on Sundays. The hat used was broad brimmed and high crowned, and often one of the younger clerks would stick a feather in his; the woolen shirt worn was partly covered by a turndown linen collar; the jacket was tightly buttoned, with a cape hanging loosely over it, and the breeches extended down to square-toed shoes; stockings were not worn. In the belt were fastened a spoon and a knife for eating and also

a larger knife for self-defense, which was often necessary in those days.

This was the dress, on festival days, of old Anton, one of the oldest *pebersvende* of the Street of Small Houses, except that instead of the high-crowned hat, he wore a low bonnet and, under it, a knitted cap, a regular nightcap. He was so used to it that he was never without it; in fact, he had two exactly alike. He would have been just the right model for a painter, for he was as thin as a lath, wrinkled about the lips and eyes, and had gray, bushy eyebrows and long, bony fingers. Over his left eye hung a big tuft of hair, which certainly wasn't good-looking, but it made him a man easily recognized. He was known to have come from Bremen, though that was not his native town; his master lived there, but he himself had come from the town of Eisenach, in Thuringia, just below Wartburg Castle. Old Anton did not say much about these places, but he thought a good deal of them.

The old fellows of the street seldom gathered together; each remained in his own booth, which was shut up early every evening and then looked dark indeed, with only a faint ray of light showing through the little horn windowpane on the roof. Inside, the old clerk would be sitting on his bed, chanting the evening psalm from his German hymnbook, or he would be mulling over his household matters until far into the night; it was not a very pleasant life, by any means. The lot of a stranger in a strange land is a hard one; nobody pays any attention to one, unless he happens to get in the way.

When in the darkness of night, rain and sleet engulfed the street, this was a very gloomy and deserted place. There were no lamps here then, except a very small one that hung under the picture of the Blessed Virgin that was painted on the wall at one end of the street. Water could be heard rolling and splashing against the wharf by the castle, which the other end of the street faced. Such evenings are long and lonely and would be even more so if people had nothing to do. To unpack and pack, to polish one's scales, or to make paper bags, is not necessary every day, and so one tries to find something else to do.

And that old Anton did; he sewed his own clothes and repaired his shoes. And when finally he went to bed, yes, he always kept his nightcap on, and drew it a little further down over his face, but then usually he soon pulled it up to enable him to see if his light was properly extinguished. He felt about it and pressed down the wick, then turned on the other side and lay down again. But often when he had done so he had the thought, "I wonder if every coal in the little fire pan was really burned out; one little spark may be left; it could make the fire burn anew and cause trouble." And then he invariably got out of bed, crept down the stepladder - it could not be called a staircase - and yet when he got to the fire pan there was never a single spark to be seen, and so he could go back to bed, feeling relieved. But he frequently got only half way back and then began to wonder if he had drawn the iron bolt of the door and if the shutters were fastened; yes, then his skinny legs had to carry him down the steps again. He shivered and his teeth chattered when he crawled back into bed, for one often feels the cold more on going from it into a warm place. He always drew the blanket tighter and the nightcap closer over his eyes and then turned his thoughts away from the trade and troubles of the day, but this was not always pleasant. For then old memories came and drew their curtains around him, and memories sometimes have sharp needles in them that pierce us until we cry "Oh!" - they pierce the flesh and burn and bring tears to our eyes!

And so it was with old Anton; often hot tears, like the brightest pearls, came to his eyes and rolled down across the blanket or onto the floor; it was as if one of his heartstrings had broken; they seemed to smolder and then blaze forth in flames, illuminating pictures of his life that never faded from his heart. He always dried his eyes with his nightcap, wiping away the tears and pictures, though the source of these was still within him, deep in his heart. Whenever these pictures appeared before him, they didn't follow one another in the order of the actual happenings; the most painful ones came the oftenest, but the

happier ones came quite frequently too, though these cast the deepest shadows.

"How beautiful the beech woods of Denmark are!" people often said. But far more beautiful to old Anton were the beech woods near Wartburg; mightier and more venerable than any Danish trees were the old oaks up by the proud, stately castle, where the ivy crept over the hard blocks of stone; the scent of the apple blossoms there was sweeter than any fragrance in the land of Denmark. He could remember it all very vividly.

A tear, big and bright, rolled down Anton's cheek. In this tear he clearly saw two children playing, a little boy and a little girl. The boy had red cheeks, curly yellow hair, and honest blue eyes; he was little Anton, the son of the rich trader - himself, in fact. The little girl had brown eyes and black hair, and looked bright and clever; she was the burgomaster's daughter, Molly. The two children were playing with an apple, shaking it, and listening to the seeds rattle inside. Then they cut it in two and, between them, ate all but one seed, which the little girl suggested they plant in the ground.

"Then you'll see what will come of it! Something you would never expect; a whole apple tree will come out, but not right away!"

So they planted it in a flowerpot, both very excited over their work, the boy digging a hole in the earth with his fingers, the little girl dropping the seed into it, then both smoothing the earth over it.

"You mustn't dig it up again tomorrow to see if it has taken root," she said. "You must never do that! I did that with my flowers, but only twice. I just wanted to see if they were growing; I didn't know any better then, and the flowers died."

The flowerpot was left with Anton, and he looked at it every morning all winter long, but still saw nothing but the black earth. Then when spring came, and the sun shone warmly, two tiny green leaves peeped through.

"That's me and Molly! said Anton to himself. "That's beautiful! That's perfect!"

But soon there appeared a third leaf - now whom did that represent? Then another followed, and another; every day, every week, the plant grew bigger and bigger, until it became a tree.

And all this seemed to be reflected in that one big, bright tear that followed and then vanished so soon; but more such tears were quite likely to come forth from the fountain that was old Anton's heart.

Near Eisenach there is a chain of rocky mountains, and one of them is curiously rounded and completely bare of trees, shrubbery, or grass. This is called Mount Venus, for within it dwells the Lady Venus, a goddess of old pagan times. Every child in Eisenach knows that Lady Venus - or Lady Holle, as she is sometimes called - lives here, and that once long ago she lured into her home that noble knight, Tannhäuser, a minnesinger from the Wartburg circle of singers.

Anton and little Molly often walked near this mountain, and once she said to him, "Anton, do you dare knock at the mountain and say, 'Lady Venus, Lady Venus, open! Tannhäuser is here!'" Anton did not dare do it, but Molly did. She spoke out loudly and clearly, but only the first words, "Lady Venus, Lady Venus!" The rest seemed to die away on her lips. Anton was sure she hadn't really said anything out loud. She kept her bold look, just as she did when sometimes she and the other little girls would meet him in the garden and try to kiss him simply because they knew he didn't like to be kissed and would push them away. She alone dared to. "I can kiss him!" she would say vainly, and put her arms around him. Anton never objected to anything she wanted to do. How pretty she was, and how clever!

Lady Venus in the mountain was said to be beautiful, too, but that was an evil spirit's

alluring beauty; it was a very different beauty from that of the holy Elisabeth, patron saint of the country, the pious princess of Thuringia, whose good deeds were immortalized through stories and legends. Her picture hung in the chapel, lighted by lamps of silver; but she was not at all like Molly.

Year after year, the apple tree that the children had planted grew larger, until it had to be transplanted into the garden out in the fresh air; there the dew watered it and the sun shone warmly upon it and gave it strength to endure the long winter. And when the severity of winter was past, it seemed to put forth its blossoms purely from joy that the cold weather was gone. And that autumn it bore two apples, one for Molly and one for Anton; it could not very well do less.

Molly grew up quickly, like the apple tree itself, and she was as fresh as an apple blossom, but Anton could not much longer enjoy the sight of this flower. All things change! Molly's father left his old home, and Molly went with him, far away. In our day, the journey from Eisenach to the town that is still called Weimar takes only a few hours by railway, but then it took more than a whole day and a night. And Molly wept and Anton wept, but their tears united when they parted, and Molly told him that she loved him better than all the splendors of Weimar.

A year passed - two, three years passed - and during those three years only two letters came from her. One was brought by the regular carrier, and the second by a traveler; the route was long and hard, with many twistings, and through many different towns and villages.

Often Anton and Molly had listened to the sad old story of Tristan and Isolde, and whenever he had heard it Anton had always imagined himself and Molly in their circumstances. But the name of Tristan, "one born in sorrow," did not fit him, he thought, nor would he ever be like Tristan in imagining that she whom he loved had forgotten him. That was so unjust! For Isolde never did really forget Tristan, and when both were dead, and buried on opposite sides of the church, the lime trees that grew from their graves met over the roof of the church and there their blossoms intermingled. Anton thought that story so lovely and yet so sad - but his and Molly's story should never be sad; and then he would gaily whistle a song by Walther von der Vogelweide, the minnesinger. "Under the lime tree on the heath," it began, and its chorus was so pretty:

*Out in the wood, in the quiet dale,
Tandarai!
Sang so sweetly the nightingale!*

This song was continually on his lips. He sang and whistled it all through one bright moonlit night as he rode along the deep defile, on the road to Weimar, to visit Molly. He wanted to arrive unexpectedly, and so he did.

He was welcomed warmly, with goblets full of wine, friendly company, a comfortable room, and a good bed, and yet it wasn't as he had imagined it. He did not understand himself or the others, but we can easily understand it. One can so often stay in a home with a family without taking root in any way; one talks as people talk in a carriage; one knows the people as people know each other in a carriage; mutual annoyances become irritations, until one wishes either oneself or one's neighbor were far away. It was something like this that Anton felt.

"I am an honest girl," Molly finally said to him, "and I want to tell you the truth. Much has changed since we were together as children; things are different, both inside and outside us. Habit and will have no control over our hearts. Anton, I don't want you to hate me, but soon I shall be far away from here. Believe me, I shall always think kindly of you, but love you - the way I know now I can love someone else - that I can't do. I never have loved you

that way. You must reconcile yourself to this. Farewell, Anton!"

And Anton bade her farewell; he shed no tears, even though he felt he was no longer Molly's friend. The red-hot bar of iron and the frozen bar of iron will both tear the skin from our lips if we kiss them; Anton was as wild with hatred now as he had been with love before.

It didn't take Anton nearly the usual twenty-four hours to ride home to Eisenach, but his poor horse was ruined by his speed. "What does it matter?" he said. "I'm ruined, and I'll ruin everything that reminds me of her - Lady Venus, the false heathen! I shall cut down and smash the apple tree and tear up its roots; never shall it bloom or bear fruit again!"

But the apple tree was not felled; he himself was felled by a fever and brought to his bed. What could help him to rise again? A medicine was brought to him, the bitterest to be found, but with power to strengthen the sick body and the diseased mind.

Anton's father was no longer a rich merchant; dark days of trial were waiting at the door; misfortune, like a flood, poured in and streamed over the once rich house. The father had become a poor man, shattered by sadness and anxiety, and Anton had other things to occupy his mind besides his love grief and anger against Molly. He had to be both father and mother in that house; he had to keep things in order, to help in every way, really to pitch in and work; he even had to go out into the world and earn his bread.

He traveled to Bremen. There he experienced many a day of poverty and hardship, and these either strengthen or weaken the heart. How very different the world of real men and women was from the imaginary world of his childhood! What were the songs of the minnesingers to him now? Just so many empty words! Sometimes he felt that way, but then sometimes the old songs would sound in his soul again, and he would become pious in his attitude.

"God's will is best," he would then say. "It was good that our Lord did not let the heart of Molly cling to me, for how would it have ended, now that fortune has turned against me? She gave me up before she knew of this misfortune. Our Lord has been merciful toward me; all has been for the best, all things are ordered wisely. And she could not help herself; it was wrong of me to feel so bitter and angry!"

And years passed: Anton's father was dead, and now strangers lived in the old house. Yet Anton was to see his old home once more, for his wealthy master sent him on a journey that took him through his native town, Eisenach. Old Wartburg stood unchanged on the mountain, with its "Monk and Nun" carved in stone; the mighty oak trees lent the same majestic splendor to it all as they had in the time of his childhood; the Mountain of Venus still gleamed gray in its barrenness. He would gladly have said, "Lady Venus, Lady Venus! Open your mountain and take me in! Then, at least, I shall remain in my own country!" But that was a sinful thought, and so he crossed himself. A little bird was singing at a near-by bush, and this turned Anton's thoughts to the old minnesong.

*Out in the wood, in the quiet dale,
Tandarai!
How sweetly sang the nightingale!*

He recalled so many things as he stood here and saw once again the home of his childhood; he was looking at it through a veil of tears. The house stood exactly as before, but the garden had been laid out anew; a road now crossed a corner of it, and the apple tree, which he had never destroyed, now was on the other side of the road. The sun shone on it and the dew fell on it as before; the weight of its rich fruit bowed its branches almost to the earth. "It thrives," he said, "and that is good." However, one of the large branches of the tree had been broken off, the victim of cruel hands - but then, of course, the tree now stood close to the road.

"People tear off its blossoms without a word of thanks. They steal the fruit and break off the branches; one could say, speaking of a tree, as we do of a human, that at the tree's cradle no song was sung about what would be its fate. Its story began so delightfully, and what has happened to it? It's forsaken and forgotten, an orchard tree standing by a ditch along a highway! There it stands without protection - plucked at and broken! It won't die of that, but every year there will be fewer blossoms, and soon there will be no fruit at all - and, yes, then its story will be ended." Thus thought Anton under the old apple tree.

And these later were his thoughts on many a night in the lonely little room in the Street of Small Houses in Copenhagen. His wealthy master, a merchant of Bremen, had sent him there with the understanding that he would not marry. "Marry, indeed! Ha! Ha! and Anton had laughed a strange and bitter laugh.

Winter had come early, and it was freezing cold. There was a snowstorm, so everyone not compelled to go out remained indoors. Thus it happened that Anton's neighbors didn't notice that his booth was not open for two whole days. Nor did he show himself, for who would go out in such weather if he didn't have to? These were gray, gloomy days. In the booth, where, of course, the windows were not made of glass, it appeared to be either twilight or dark night. During these two days old Anton never left his bed, for the bitter cold had sapped his strength and numbed his limbs. The old bachelor, the *pebersvend*, lay forsaken and unable to do more for himself than reach the water pitcher beside his bed, and now the last drop was gone. It was not a fever, not an illness; it was simply old age that had laid him low. There was almost continuous night about him where he lay. A tiny spider, which he couldn't see, contentedly and diligently spun its web above him, as if preparing some fine new crape for mourning, in case his old eyes should close in death.

Long and dull were the hours; he had no tears, and he felt no pain. Molly was far from his thoughts now; it seemed that he no longer was a part of the world and its tumult, that he lay somewhere beyond it, with no one to remember him. For a moment he felt hunger and thirst - yes, that was painful! - but no one came to help him, and no one was going to come.

His thoughts turned to others who had suffered; he remembered that the holy Elisabeth, the patron saint of his homeland, the magnanimous sovereign of Thuringia, had visited the humblest cottages and administered comfort and nourishment to the sick and needy. His thoughts brightened as he reflected upon her good deeds; he recalled the pious words of hope and trust in God which she had spoken to those poor sufferers, how she had bound up their wounds and brought food to the hungry, although her cruel husband had forbidden it. He remembered the legend about her - how, as she passed along with a basket packed with food and wine, her husband, who had been following her, suddenly rushed forward and asked her angrily what it was she carried in her basket. Terrified, she replied, "These are only roses I have picked in the garden." Whereupon he tore back the cloth from the basket - and, lo, a miracle had been performed for the pious woman - the bread, the wine, and all else in the basket had been changed into the loveliest roses!

Thus lived the gentle saint in the thoughts of old Anton, and thus she stood vividly before his failing eyes, beside his bed in the wretched wooden booth in the land of Denmark. He uncovered his head and looked up into her kindly eyes; brightness surrounded him, and sweet, fragrant roses sprang up all about him! Then a different fragrance, that of apple blossoms, reached him; he saw a flowering apple tree, and it was spreading its branches over him; it was the tree that had grown from the little seed he and Molly had planted.

And the tree sprinkled its fragrant petals upon him, and they cooled his hot forehead; they fell upon his parched lips and seemed to strengthen him like wine and bread; they fell upon his breast, and now he felt so relieved, so protected, and wanted to sleep.

"Now I'll sleep," he whispered softly. "Sleep will be good for me; tomorrow I shall be up again, well and strong. Beautiful, beautiful! The apple tree planted in love! I can see it now

in glory!" And then he slept.

The next day - the third after his booth had been closed - the snow ceased, and old Anton's neighbor from across the way came to see what had happened to him. There he lay, dead, holding between his clasped hands his old nightcap. He did not wear this one when he lay in his coffin; he had another, clean and white, on then.

Where were now the tears he had shed? What had become of the pearls of his memories? They were left in his nightcap, and in the cap they remained, for the genuine ones are never lost in the washing. The old thoughts, the old dreams, all were left in the nightcap of the *pebersvend*. Don't wish for that nightcap for yourself! It will make your forehead too hot, your pulse race too fast, and will bring dreams as vivid as reality.

This was experienced by the first man who wore the cap after Anton, though this was half a century later. He was the burgomaster himself, a very prosperous man, with a wife and eleven children; but he promptly dreamed of unhappy love, bankruptcy, and hard times.

"Oh, how hot this nightcap makes you!" he said, tearing it off, as one pearl after another trickled down and glittered before his eyes. "It must be the gout!" said the burgomaster. "Something glitters before my eyes!"

What he saw were tears shed half a hundred years before - shed by old Anton of Eisenach.

Everyone who later wore the nightcap had visions and dreams. The life of each became like Anton's. This grew to be quite a story - in fact, many stories - but we shall leave it to others to tell these. We have told the first of them, and we conclude with these words - don't ever wish for the nightcap of the *pebersvend*.