

The Old Tombstone

Hans Christian Andersen

In a small provincial town lived a man who owned his own house. There one evening he and his whole family were gathered together. It was the time of year when people say, "The evenings are growing longer," and it was still pleasant and warm; the lamp was lit, long curtains hung down before the windows-by which stood several flowerpots-and bright moonlight flooded the world outside.

But they were not talking about the moonlight; they were discussing a huge old stone that lay out in the yard, near the kitchen door, where the servants often placed their copper utensils, when they had been washed, to dry in the sun, and where the children usually played. As a matter of fact, it was an old tombstone.

"I believe," explained the master of the house, "that it came from the old ruined chapel of the convent. Pulpit and tombstones, with their epitaphs, were sold, and my departed father bought several of them. We broke up the others into paving stones, but we didn't use that one and left it lying in the yard."

"You can easily tell that it was a tombstone," said the eldest of the children. "You can still see an hourglass on it, and a piece of an angel, but the inscription is just about gone. You can make out the name 'Preben' and a capital 'S' just after it, and 'Martha' a little further down, but it is impossible to read any more. And you can see that only after it has been raining or we have washed the stone."

Now a very old man, who from his age might have been the grandfather of everybody in the room, spoke up. "Why, that must be the tombstone of Preben Svane and his wife," he said. "Yes, of course, that grand old couple were almost the last to be buried in the churchyard of the old convent. In my childhood days I knew them as an honorable old couple. Everybody knew them and loved them; they were like a king and queen in this town. People said they had more than a barrelful of money, and yet they always dressed simply, in very coarse cloth-but their linen was always snowy white. Yes, they were a lovable old pair, Preben and Martha. When they sat on the bench at the top of the stone staircase, over which the old linden tree spread its branches, nodding friendly and gently to passers-by, it made you glad to see them.

"They were so wonderfully kind to the poor people! They gave them food and clothing, but there was good sense, and a true Christian spirit, in all their charity.

"She died first. I can remember that day very well, though I was only a little boy. My father took me to see old Preben right after she passed away; the old man was so heartbroken he cried like a child. The corpse of his wife lay in her bedroom, near where we were sitting. The old man told my father and a couple of his neighbors how lonely he would be now, how wonderful she had been and how many years they had spent together, and how they had first met and come to love each other.

"As I told you, I was only a child and stood by listening, but it touched me deeply to hear the old man and see how he grew more animated as he talked; a faint color came into his cheeks as he told us of the days of their courtship, how pretty she had been, and how many little tricks he had played to get to meet her. And when he told us about his wedding day his eyes really sparkled; he seemed to be living his happy hours again. Yet all the while she was lying dead near us in the bedroom, an old lady, and he was an old man who spoke of the days of hope! Yes, that's the way it goes! I was only a child then, and now I'm very, very old, as old as Preben Svane was.

"Yes, time and change come to all things. I can remember so clearly the day of the

funeral, and Preben Svane following her coffin. A couple of years before, they had had their tombstone carved with names and inscriptions, just leaving the dates of their deaths blank; and that same evening the stone was set in its place on the grave. And only a year later the grave had to be reopened, for old Preben joined his wife again. It turned out that they were not so rich as people had thought, and the little they did leave went to distant relatives far away, to people who had never been heard of before. The old wooden house, with the bench under the linden tree at the top of the high stone staircase, was pulled down by order of the town council, for it was much too ruined to stand any longer. And later, the same fate befell the chapel, and the cemetery was leveled. Preben's and Martha's old tombstone was sold, like the rest, to anybody who wanted to buy it. And so it happened that it wasn't broken in pieces, but that it is now lying out there in the yard for the children to play on, or to be used as a shelf for the servant maid's kitchen utensils. And the paved street now covers the resting place of old Preben and his wife; and nobody ever thinks about them any more."

Then the old man who had told them the story shook his head sadly. "Yes, forgotten! All things are forgotten!"

The rest began to speak of other things, but the youngest child, a little boy with large, grave eyes, climbed up on a chair and peered through the curtains into the yard. The moon shone down brightly on the huge stone, which previously had seemed to the little boy very flat and dull, but which now had become like a page from a wonderful storybook. For the stone seemed to contain within it all that the little boy had heard about Preben and his wife. He looked down at the stone, then up at the brilliant moon, which seemed like a divine face peering down on the earth through the pure still air.

"Forgotten! All things are forgotten!" The words were again repeated in the room; and at that moment an invisible angel kissed him on the forehead and whispered softly, "Keep the seed carefully; cherish it until the time for ripening shall come. Through you, my child, shall the half-vanished inscription on the crumbling tombstone stand out in clear characters for generations yet to come. Through you shall the old couple once more walk arm in arm through the old streets and sit with smiling, rosy-cheeked faces on their bench under the linden tree, greeting rich and poor alike. From this moment on through the years, the seed shall ripen into a blooming poem. For the good and the beautiful perish never; they live eternally in story and song!"