

Holger Danske

Hans Christian Andersen

In Denmark there is an old castle named Kronborg. It lies on the coast of the Öresund, where hundreds of great ships pass through every day-English, Russian, German, and many others. And they salute the old castle with their cannons-"Boom!" And the castle returns their salute with cannons-"Boom!" For that's the way cannons say "Good day" and "Many thanks." In the wintertime no ships sail there, for then the sea is frozen over right to the Swedish coast, and it appears exactly like a regular highway. There wave the flags of Denmark and the flags of Sweden, and Danish and Swedish people meet on the ice and say "Good day" and "Many thanks," but not with cannons; no, with a firm shake of the hand, and each one comes to buy white bread and cakes from the other-for strange food always tastes best.

But the most beautiful sight of all is old Kronborg, and in a deep, dark cellar beneath it, where no one ever goes, sleeps Holger Danske. He is clad in iron and steel and rests his head on his strange arms; his long beard hangs down over the marble table and has grown through it. He sleeps and dreams, and in his dreams he sees all that happens here in Denmark. Every Christmas Eve one of God's angels comes to him and tells him that what he had dreamed is true; he may sleep again, for no real peril threatens Denmark. But should real danger come, old Holger Danske will rise in his fury, and the table itself will burst as he wrenches his beard from it, and the mighty blows he strikes for Denmark will be heard throughout the world.

An old grandfather was telling his little grandson all this about Holger Danske, and the little boy knew that what his grandfather said was true. And while the old man told his tale, he sat carving a large wooden figure, intended to represent Holger Danske and to be used as the figurehead of a ship. For the old grandfather was a wood carver. You see, a wood carver is a man who carves the figures that are to be fastened to the front of every ship, and from which the ship is named. Here he had fastened Holger Danske, standing erect and proud with his long beard; in one hand he held his broad battle sword, while the other rested on a shield with the arms of Denmark.

And the old man told many stories about the strange Danish men and women, until the little boy felt he must know as much about them as Holger Danske himself, who could only dream. And when the youngster went to bed, he thought so much about all he had heard that he pressed his chin hard against the quilt, until he fancied that he had a long beard which had grown through it.

The old man sat at his work until he had finished the last carving, the Danish coat of arms on the shield. Then, as he looked at his carving, he thought of all he had read and heard and of what he had told the little boy that night. He nodded and wiped his spectacles, put them on again, and said, "Well, I don't suppose Holger Danske will ever come in my day, but the little boy there in bed may see him and may help to defend Denmark when there is really need."

And the grandfather nodded again, and the more he looked at his figurehead, the better he knew that his work was good. It almost seemed to him that color came into it; the armor seemed to gleam like steel and iron; in the coat of arms the hearts became redder, and the lions with the golden crowns on their heads were leaping.

"It's the most beautiful coat of arms in the world!" he said proudly. "The lions mean strength, and the hearts mean gentleness and love."

He looked at the uppermost lion, and thought of the old King Canute, who had bound mighty England to the throne of Denmark; he looked at the second lion and thought of

Valdemar, who had conquered the Wendish lands and united Denmark; he looked at the third lion and thought of Margaret, who had joined together Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. But when he looked at the red hearts, they seemed to shine even more than before; they became leaping flames of fire, and in his own thoughts he followed each of them.

The first flame led him into a dark, narrow dungeon cell, and there he could see the prisoner, a beautiful woman-Eleonora Ulfeld, daughter of King Christian IV. The flame became a rose that blossomed on her breast, and became one with the heart of that noblest and best of all Danish women. "Yes, that is indeed a heart in Denmark's arms!" said the old grandfather.

And his thoughts followed the second flame far out to sea, where cannons thundered and the ships were shrouded in smoke, and the flame like a ribbon of honor fastened itself to the breast of Hvitfeldt, who blew up himself and his ship to save the fleet.

The third flame led him to the miserable huts of Greenland, where the preacher, Hans Egede, labored with loving words and deeds; that flame became a star on his breast, another heart in the arms of Denmark.

And the thoughts of the old grandfather hastened on before the leaping flame, for he knew where it wanted to go. In the humble little room of the peasant woman stood Frederick VI, and wrote his name with chalk on the beam. The flame trembled on his breast and in his heart, and in the peasant's room that kingly heart became a heart in the arms of Denmark. The old grandfather wiped a tear from his eyes, for he had known and lived for King Frederick of the silvery locks and the honest blue eyes, and he sat in silence with folded hands.

Just then his daughter-in-law came and said it was late, and that he ought to rest; besides, the supper table was spread.

"But what a beautiful figure you have made, grandfather!" she cried. "Holger Danske and our old coat of arms! But wait! It is almost as if I've seen that face before!"

"No, I'm sure you haven't," said the old grandfather. "But I've seen it, and I've tried to carve it in wood just as I remembered it. It was long ago, when the English fleet lay in front of Copenhagen, on that Danish second of April, when we proved we were all good old Danes. On board the *Denmark*, where I fought in Steen Bille's squadron, there was a man beside me - why, the bullets themselves seemed to be afraid of him! Joyfully he sang the grand old ballads as he fought and struggled, and it seemed as if he was something more than a man like me! I can remember his face still, but where he came from, or what became of him, I don't know. Nobody knows. I have often wondered if it could have been old Holger Danske himself who had swum out from the Kronborg to help us in that terrible hour. That was in my mind, and there stands his portrait!"

The great shadow of the figurehead spread up the wall, and even over the ceiling, and it looked as if the real Holger Danske was standing there. As they watched it the shadow seemed to move, but perhaps that was just because the candle flame was flickering.

Then the daughter-in-law kissed the old man and led him to the great armchair at the head of the table, and she and her husband, who was the old grandfather's son, and father to the little boy in bed, ate their supper with him. And the old grandfather told them of the Danish lions and Danish hearts, of strength and gentleness.

Then he very plainly explained to them that there is another strength beside the strength of the sword. He pointed to his bookshelf filled with old books. There stood the comedies of Holberg, which we so often read, for they are so very amusing that in them one seems to recognize those people of bygone days. "He knew how to strike, too. For in his plays he ridiculed the foolishness and prejudice around him as much as he dared."

The old grandfather nodded towards the mirror, where hung the calendar with a picture of the Round Tower. "Tycho Brahe was another who could use the sword, not to cut at men's flesh and bones, but to carve a plainer path among the stars of heaven. And then there was Bertel Thorvaldsen, whose father was a wood carver like me. We have seen him ourselves, with his silvery locks falling to his broad shoulders. His name is known throughout the world; he was a sculptor-I am only a carver. Yes, Holger Danske can appear in many shapes, so that every country in the world knows of Denmark's strength! Less drink now to the health of Bertel Thorvaldsen!"

But the little boy in bed saw plainly the ancient Kronborg by the Öresund and the real Holger Danske who was sitting deep below, with his beard growing through the marble table, dreaming of all that happens above. Holger Danske dreamed, too, of the humble little room where the wood carver sat at supper, and in his sleep he nodded and said, "Aye, remember me, you people of Denmark! Remember me! In your hour of darkest need I shall come!"

And outside Kronborg it was bright daylight, and the wind bore the notes of the huntsman's horn from the opposite shore of the neighboring country. The ships sailed past and saluted, "Boom! Boom!" and Kronborg spoke back, "Boom! Boom!" But Holger Danske did not awaken, however loudly the cannons roared, for they were only saying "Good day" and "Many thanks." There must be a very different kind of shooting to awaken him; but he will awake, for there is still strength and courage in Holger Danske.