

Two Brothers

Hans Christian Andersen

On one of the Danish islands, where old thingsteads, the judgment seats of our forefathers, loom up in the cornfields, and mighty trees raise their heads above the beech forests, there lies a little town of low houses with red roofs. In one of these houses strange things were being prepared on the open stove, over the coals and embers. There was boiling in test tubes, mixing and distilling, and pounding of drugs in mortars. An elderly man was in charge of everything.

"One must be careful and do the right thing," he said. "Yes, the right, the correct thing; the truth in each created thing, we must recognize and keep hold of."

In the living room sat the mother with her two sons - still young, with mature thoughts. Their mother had always taught them about right and reason, and to hold fast to truth, which she said is the face of God in this world.

The elder of the boys looked bright and alert; he liked to read about the forces of nature, of suns and stars - no fairy tale could give him greater joy. Oh, how wonderful to be able to go on voyages of discovery, or to discover how to imitate birds' wings and fly! Yes, these were the great things to find! Father was right and Mother was right; truth holds the world together.

The younger brother was more quiet and lived entirely in his books. If he read of Jacob, and how he clad himself in sheepskins to resemble Esau and thus cheat him of his birthright, the boy would clench his tiny fists in anger against the deceiver. If he read of tyrants and of all the injustice and wickedness that reigned in the world, tears would come into his eyes. Thoughts of the right, the truth that should and someday would triumph, moved him profoundly.

One evening, the little boy was already in bed, but the curtains were not drawn about him and the light shone in on him. He lay there with his book, eager to finish reading the history of Solon.

Then his thoughts lifted him and carried him strangely on, as if his bed had changed into a vessel under sail - was he dreaming? Or what else could it mean? He was gliding over rolling waves, across the great ocean of time; and he heard the voice of Solon, proclaiming in his foreign tongue, which the boy could still understand, the motto of Denmark - "By law the land is built!"

Then the Genius of the human race stood in that humble room, bent down over the bed, and kissed the boy on his forehead. "Be strong in fame and strong in the battle of life! With truth in your heart fly toward the land of truth!"

The older brother was not yet in bed; he stood at the window, gazing out at mists arising from the meadow. They were not elf maidens dancing out there, as an honest old servant had told him; he knew much more about it. They were vapors, warmer than the air, and that is why they rose. A shooting star lit up the sky, and the boy's thoughts went instantly from the vapors of the earth way up into the regions of the shining meteor.

The stars of heaven twinkled; it was as if long threads of gold were floating from them down on our earth.

"Fly with me!" it sang and rang in the boy's heart. The mighty Genius of mankind carried him up, swifter far than bird or arrow or any flying thing of earth, out into space, where ray after ray from star to star bound all the globes together; the earth was spinning in the thin air and cities seemed to lie close to each other. Through the spheres it sounded: "What is

near and what is far, while the mighty genius of thought lifts you on high?"

And again the boy was at the window, gazing out, while the younger brother lay abed; and their mother called them by their names, "Anders and Hans Christian!"

Denmark knows both those two brothers - the world knows them - Oersted!