

# A Good Humor

Hans Christian Andersen

From my father I have inherited that most worthy of bequests—a cheerful temper. And who was my father? Well, that really has nothing to do with a good humor. He was thrifty and lively, fat and round; in fact, his exterior and interior were both at variance with his office.

And what was his office, his position in the community? Why, if the answer to that question were written and printed at the very beginning of a book, most people would lay the book down as soon as they opened it, saying, "There is something dismal about it. I don't want anything like this."

And yet my father was neither a hangman nor a headsman. On the contrary, his office often brought him into contact with the most honorable men of the state, and he was certainly entitled to be there; he had to be ahead of them, even ahead of bishops and princes of the royal blood, for, to tell the truth, he was the driver of a hearse!

Now you know it! But I must add that when one saw my father sitting high up on the carriage of death, dressed in his long black mantle and crape-bordered, three-cornered hat, his face as round and smiling as the sun, one could not think of sorrow and graves, for that face said, "Never mind, it's going to be much better than you think."

You see, then, that from him I have my good humor and also the habit of frequently visiting the churchyard; and that is rather amusing, if one goes there in a cheerful temper. Oh, yes, I also subscribe to the *Advertiser*, just as he used to do.

I am not exactly young, and I have neither wife, nor children, nor library to divert me. But, as I have told you, I read the *Advertiser* - that's all I need; it was my father's favorite newspaper, and it's mine, too. It is a most useful paper, and contains everything a person ought to know.

From it I learn who is preaching in the churches and who preaches in the new books; I know where I may obtain houses, servants, clothes, and food; I know who is selling out and who is buying up. Then, too, I learn of so many deeds of charity, and I read so many innocent verses, which are quite free of any offense, and of marriages desired. Yes, it is all so natural and simple. One can live very happily, and be happily buried, if one reads the *Advertiser*—and then when death comes about, one has such a lot of paper that one can rest softly on it, if one doesn't care to rest on wood shavings. The churchyard and the *Advertiser* were as always the things that most elevated my mind.

Everyone is free, of course, to read the *Advertiser*, but if anybody would like to share my walks in the churchyard, let him join my someday when the sun is shining and the trees are green.

Then let us ramble together among the old graves; each one is like a closed book with the cover toward you, so you can read the title that tells you what the book contains and yet says nothing at all. But from my father, and through my own experiences, I know all about it. I have written it all in a book for my own especial benefit and instruction; there is something written about most of them.

Now we are in the churchyard.

Behind this white-painted trellis, where once grew a rosebush—it is dead now, but a stray bit of evergreen from the next grave stretches a long green finger across the sod, as if to make up for the loss—there rests a man who was singularly unhappy. Yet you would not have called him unfortunate; he had sufficient income and never suffered any great calamity. His unhappiness was of his own making; as we say it, he took everything,

especially his "art," too much to heart. Thus, if he spent an evening at the theater, he nearly went out of his mind if the machinist had put too strong a light into each cheek of the moon, or if canvases representing the sky were hanging in front of the scene instead of behind, or if a palm tree appeared in a local landscape, cacti on the Tirolean plains, or beech trees in the high mountains of Norway. What does it matter; who cares! It is only a play intended for amusement. The audience was sure to be wrong, sometimes applauding too much and sometimes too little. "Look, that is wet wood tonight," he said. "It won't burn!" And when he turned around to see what kind of people were there, he found them laughing in the wrong places. All this annoyed and pained him. He was a miserable man, and now he is in his grave.

Here rests, on the other hand, a very fortunate man-I mean to say he was a man of extremely noble birth. In fact, that constituted his good fortune, for had he not been highborn he would never have amounted to anything. But, then, everything is so wisely arranged, and that is a pleasure to know. His coats were embroidered in front and in back, very much like a fine, embroidered bellpull in a room, for behind the handsome, gaudy bellpull is always a good, strong, plain cord that really does all the work. And this man had his good, stout cord behind him, which now does the work behind a new embroidered bellpull. That's the way it is; everything is so wisely arranged that it is very easy to keep one's good humor.

Over here there rests-now, this is really sad!-a man who for sixty-seven years worried and wracked his brains to hit upon a great idea. For the sake of this idea he lived alone all his days, and when at last he had convinced himself that he had succeeded, he was so overcome that he died of joy at having found it-before he even had time to announce it to the world - so nobody ever heard about his great idea. I can almost fancy that he has no rest in his grave, because of that great idea which no one but himself has enjoyed or ever can enjoy. For suppose this was an idea that could be explained successfully only at breakfast time; and everyone knows that ghosts can walk only at midnight. And if this ghost should appear among his friends at that appointed hour, his idea would be an utter failure. No one would laugh, for jesting comes unseasonably at midnight, and so the unhappy ghost would return to the grave with his great idea. It is really very sad.

Here lies a lady who was a miser. During her lifetime she often arose at night and mewed, so that the neighbors would imagine she kept a cat, which she was too stingy to do.

And here is a young lady of good family. She always insisted upon singing in society, and when she sang, "*Mi manca la voce!*" that was the only truth she ever spoke.

Here rests another young girl, of a very different nature. Alas! When the bird of the heart begins to sing, too often will Reason stop up her ears. Lovely maiden, she was to be married; but that's an everyday story - may she rest in peace!

Here lies a widow who had the sweetness of the swan on her lips and the gall of the owl in her heart. She went from one family to another, feeding upon the faults of her neighbors.

Now, this is a family vault; every member of that family lived in the sublime faith that whatever the world and the newspapers said must indeed be true. If the young son of that house came home from school and announced, "This is how I heard it--," his news, whatever it might be, was received without question, because he belonged to the family. And certain it is that if the cock of that family had decided to crow at midnight, the whole family would have insisted that morning had dawned, even if the watchman and all the clocks of the town announced it was midnight.

The great Goethe concluded his *Faust* with the words, "It may be continued"; and thus will I conclude our walk in the churchyard.

I go there often, for whenever one of my friends or unfriends, gives me to understand that he wishes to be as one dead to me, I go there, find a spot of green turf, and dedicate it to

him or her, whomever I wish to bury. In this way I have buried many of my acquaintances. There they lie, powerless to harm me, until the time when they may return to life, better and wiser than before. I write down in my book their life and history, as seen from my point of view. Everybody ought to do so!

You shouldn't be upset if your friends do something foolish; bury them at once, keep your good humor, and read the *Advertiser*, for this paper is written by the people, although their pens are sometimes wrongly guided.

When at last I myself and the story of my life are to be bound in the grave, then write upon it the epitaph:

A GOOD HUMOR!

This is my story.