

The Stone of the Wise Man

Hans Christian Andersen

You know the story of Holger Danske, so we won't repeat it, but will ask you if you remember how "Holger Danske conquered the great land of India, eastward at the end of the world, to the tree called 'the Tree of the Sun,' " as Christen Pedersen says. Do you know Christen Pedersen? It makes no difference if you don't.

Holger Danske gave Prester John his power and rule over India. Have you heard about Prester John? Yes? Well, it makes no difference if you haven't, because he doesn't come into our story. You are going to hear about the Tree of the Sun "in India, eastward at the end of the world," as people believed it to be then, for they hadn't studied their geography the way we have - but that makes no difference, either!

The Tree of the Sun was a magnificent tree, such as we have never seen and most likely never will see. Its crown stretched out for miles around; it was really an entire wood, for each of its smallest branches formed, in turn, a whole tree. Palms, beech pines, plane trees, yes, and many other kinds of trees grew here, trees that are to be found all over the world; they sprang forth, as small branches, from the great branches, and these, with their knots and windings, were like hills and valleys, carpeted with soft, velvety green, and covered with thousands of flowers. Each branch was like a great blooming meadow or the most beautiful garden. The blessed Sun shone down upon it, for, remember, it was the Tree of the Sun.

Here the birds from all over the world gathered together, birds from the primeval forests of America, the rose gardens of Damascus, or the wild woods of Africa, where the elephant and the lion imagine that they alone reign. Polar birds came here, and the stork and swallow naturally did, too. But the birds were not the only living creatures here; the stag, the squirrel, the antelope, and hundreds of other beautiful and light-footed animals were at home in this place. The crown of the tree was a spreading, fragrant garden, and in the very center of it, where the great branches rose up into a green hill, there stood a castle of crystal, with a view toward every country in the world. Each tower rose up in the form of a lily, and one could ascend through the stem, for inside there were winding stairs. One could step out onto the leaves - these were the balconies; and up in the cup of the flower was a beautiful, brilliant round hall, with no roof above it, only the blue sky, with either the sun or the stars.

Down below, in the wide halls of the castle, there was just as much splendor, though of a different sort. Here the whole world was reflected on the walls. One could see everything that happened, so there was no need to read newspapers; there were no newspapers here, anyway. Everything could be seen in living pictures, if one wanted to or was able to see it all; for too much is too much, even for the wisest man. And the wisest of all men lived here.

His name is too difficult for you to pronounce, and it makes no difference, anyway. He knew everything that a man on earth can know or hope to know; he knew every invention that had been made or was yet to be made; but he knew nothing more than that, for everything in the world has its limits. Wise old King Solomon was only half as wise as this man, and yet he was very wise indeed, and governed the forces of nature and ruled over mighty spirits; even Death itself was forced to report every morning with a list of those who were to die during the day. But King Solomon himself had to die, too, and this was the thought that often occupied the mind of the learned, mighty ruler of the castle on the Tree of the Sun. However high he might rise above men in wisdom, he also must die someday. He knew that he and his children, too, must fade like the leaves of the forest and become

dust. He could see the human race fade away like leaves on the trees and new men come forth to take their places. But the leaves that fell never lived again; they became dust about other plants.

What happened to man when the Angel of Death came to him? What could Death be? The body became decayed. And the soul? Yes, what was the soul? What became of it? Where did it go? "To the life eternal," the comforting voice of religion said. But what was the transition? Where did one dwell, and how? "In heaven above," said the pious people; "it is there we go." "Above?" repeated the Wise Man, and gazed up at the moon and stars. "Up there?"

From the earthly globe he saw that "above" and "below" could be one and the same, depending upon where one stood on the revolving earth. And if he ascended as high as the earth's loftiest mountains rear their peaks, there in the air that we below call clear and transparent - "the pure heaven" - would be a black darkness, spread over all like a cloth, and the sun would have a coppery glow without giving forth rays, and our earth would lie wrapped in an orange mist. How narrow were the limits of the mortal eye, and how little could be seen by the eye of the soul! Even the wisest knew little of that which is the most important of all to us.

In the most secret chamber of that castle lay earth's greatest treasure - the Book of Truth. Page after page, the Wise Man had read it through. Every man may read in this book, but only parts of it; to many an eye the letters seem to fade, so that the words cannot even be spelled; on some pages the writing is so pale that they seem like blank leaves. But the wiser a man becomes, the more he can read; and the wisest men read the most. The Wise Man knew how to unite the sunlight and the starlight with the light of reason and the hidden powers of his soul, and under this dazzling light many things stood out clearly on the pages before him. But in the chapter of the book entitled "Life After Death" there was not so much as one single letter to see. That grieved him. Could he not somewhere on earth obtain a light by which everything written in the Book of Truth would become clear to him?

Like wise King Solomon, he understood the language of the animals and could interpret their talk and their songs. But that made him none the wiser. He had learned the powers of plants and metals, powers that could be used for the cure of diseases or for delaying death, but none that could destroy death. In all created things that he could reach he sought the light that would shine upon the certainty of eternal life, but he did not find it. Blank leaves still appeared in the Book of Truth before him. Christianity gave him words of promise of an eternal life in the Bible, but he wanted to read it in *his* book; and there he could see nothing about it.

The Wise Man had five children, four sons, educated as well as the sons of the wisest of fathers should be, and a daughter, lovely, gentle, and clever, but blind. Yet this affliction was no deprivation to her, for her father and brothers were mortal eyes to her, and her own keen perception gave her clear mental vision.

The sons had never ventured farther from the castle than the extent of the branches of the tree, nor had the sister ever left the home. They were happy children in the home of their childhood - the beautiful, fragrant Tree of the Sun. Like all children, they were happy to have stories told them, and their father told them many things that other children would never have understood, but these children were as clever as most of our old people are. He explained to them the pictures of life that they saw on the castle walls - the labors of men and the march of events in all the lands of the earth. Often the sons wished that they could go into the world and take part in the great deeds of other men, and then their father explained to them that it was hard and wearisome out in the world, that the world was not as they saw it from their beautiful home.

He told them of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and explained that these three clung

together in the world, and that under the pressure they endured they hardened into a precious stone, purer than the water of a diamond - a splendid jewel of value to God Himself, whose brightness outshone all things; this was called the "Stone of the Wise Man." He told them that, just as man could gain knowledge of the existence of God by seeking it, so was it within the power of man to gain proof that such a jewel as the "Stone of the Wise Man" existed. This explanation would have been beyond the understanding of other children, but these children could grasp it, and in time other children, too, will learn to understand its meaning.

They asked their father about the true, the beautiful, and the good, and he told them many things - how when God made man from the dust of the earth, He gave to His work five kisses, fiery kisses, heart kisses, which we now call the five senses. Through these, that which is the true, the beautiful, and the good is seen, felt, and understood; through them, it is valued, protected, and augmented. Five senses have been given, physically and mentally, inwardly and outwardly, to body and soul.

By day and by night the children thought deeply about all these things. Then the eldest of the brothers had a wonderful dream; and, strangely enough, the second brother had the same dream, and the third did, too, and the fourth - all of them dreamed exactly the same thing. They dreamed that each went out into the world and found the "Stone of the Wise Man," which gleamed like a radiant light on his forehead when, in the morning dawn, he rode his swift horse back over the velvety green meadows of home to the castle of his father. Then the jewel threw such a divine light and brilliance upon the pages of the book that everything written there on the life beyond the grave was illuminated. But the sister dreamed nothing about venturing out into the world, for it had never entered her mind. Her world was her father's castle.

"I shall ride out into the wide world," said the eldest brother. "I must find what life is like there, and mix with people. I shall do only what is good and true, and with these I shall protect the beautiful. Many things shall change for the better when I am there."

Yes, his thoughts were bold and big, as our thoughts always are at home, before we have gone out into the world and have met with wind and rain, thorns and thistles.

Now in all of these brothers the five senses were highly developed, both inwardly and outwardly; but in each of them *one* sense had reached a keenness surpassing the other four. In the case of the eldest, this outstanding sense was Sight. This was to be of special benefit to him. He had eyes for all times, he said, and eyes for all nations, eyes that could look into the very depths of the earth, where treasures lie hidden, or into the depths of people's hearts, as though only a clear pane of glass were before them; in other words, he saw more than we could in the cheek that blushes or turns pale, in the eye that cries or laughs.

Stags and antelopes escorted him to the western boundaries of his home, and there the wild swans received him and led him on into the northwest. And now he was far out into the world, far from the land of his father, which extended eastward to the ends of the earth.

How widely his eyes opened in amazement! There were many things to be seen here; and things appear very different when a man look at them with his own eyes instead of merely in a picture, as he had done in his father's house, however good the picture may be, and those in his father's house were unusually good. At first he nearly lost his eyes in astonishment at all the rubbish, all the carnival-like decorations that were supposed to represent the beautiful; but he did not quite lose them, and soon found full use for them. He wished to work thoroughly and honestly to understand the beautiful, the true, and the good. But how were these represented in the world? He saw that often the praise which by right belonged to the beautiful, was given to the ugly; that the good was often overlooked, and mediocrity was applauded when it should have been hissed. People looked at the

dress and not at the wearer, asked for a name instead of a value, and were guided more by reputation than by worth. It was the same everywhere.

"I must attack these things," he thought, and he did so.

But while he was seeking the truth there came the Devil, who is the father of all lies. Gladly would he have plucked out the eyes of this seer, but that would have been too blunt, for the Devil works in a more cunning way. He let him continue to seek and see the true and the good; but while the young man was doing so, the Devil blew a mote into his eye, into both eyes, one mote after another; this, of course, would harm even the clearest sight. Then the fiend blew upon the motes until they became beams, and the eyes were destroyed. There the Seer stood like a blind man in the great world and had no faith in it, for he had lost his good opinion of it and of himself. And when a man loses confidence in the world and himself, it is all over with him.

"All over!" sang the wild swans, flying across the sea toward the east. "All over!" repeated the swallows, also flying eastward toward the Tree of the Sun. It was not good news that they were carrying to the young man's home.

"The Seer must have done badly," said the second brother, "but the *Hearer* may have better luck. " For in this son the sense of hearing was developed to a very high degree; so keen was it that he could hear the very grass grow.

He lovingly bade farewell and rode away from home, full of sound abilities and good intentions. The swallows followed him, and he followed the swans, until he was far from his home, far out in the wide world.

Then he discovered that one may have too much of a good things. For his hearing was *too fine*. Not only could he hear the grass grow, but he could hear every man's heart beat, whether in sorrow or in joy. To him the whole world was like the great workshop of a clockmaker, with all the clocks going "Tick, tock," and all the tower clocks striking "Ding, dong." The noise was unbearable. For a long time his ears held out, but at last all the noise, the shrieking, became too much for one man. Then "street boys," of some sixty years of age - for years alone don't make men - raised a tumult, at which the Hearer would have laughed, except for the slanderous talk that followed and echoed through every house and street; it was heard even in the country lanes. Falsehood pushed itself forward and pretended to be the master; bells on the fools' caps jangled and insisted they were church bells, until the noise became too much for the Hearer and he thrust his fingers into his ears. But still he could hear false singing and evil sounds, gossip and idle words, scandal and slander, groaning and moaning, on all sides - none of it worth listening to. Heaven help us! It was impossible to endure; it was all too mad! He thrust his fingers deeper and deeper into his ears, until at last his eardrums burst. Now he heard nothing at all; he could not hear the true, the beautiful, and the good; his hearing was to have been the bridge by which he would have crossed to it. He became morose and suspicious, at last trusting no one, not even himself, and that was most unfortunate. He would not be able to discover and bring home the divine jewel, and so he gave up; he even gave himself up, and that was the worst of all. The birds that flew eastward brought the tidings of this also to the father's castle in the Tree of the Sun; no letters arrived there, for there was no mail service.

"Now I'll try," said the third brother. "I have a sharp *nose*."

It wasn't a very good practice for him to boast like that, but that was his way, and we must take him as he was. He had a happy disposition and was a poet, a great poet; he could sing many things that he could not speak, and ideas came to him far more quickly than they did to others.

"I can smell a rat!" he said. And it was his highly developed sense of smell to which he attributed his great range of knowledge about the realm of the beautiful.

"Every fragrant spot in the realm of the beautiful has its denizens," he said. "Some like the smell of apple blossoms; some like the smell of a stable. One man is at home in the atmosphere of the tavern, among the smoking tallow candles, where the smell of spirits mingles with the fumes of cheap tobacco. Another prefers to be near the heavy scent of jessamine, or to scent himself with strong oil of cloves. Some seek the fresh sea breezes, while others climb the highest mountain to look down on the bustling little life beneath."

Yes, thus he spoke. It seemed to him as if he had already been out in the wide world and known people from close association with them. But this conviction arose from within himself; it was the poet within him, the gift heaven had bestowed on him in his cradle.

He bade farewell to his ancestral home in the Tree of the Sun and went on foot through the pleasant countryside. When he arrived at the boundaries of his home, he mounted an ostrich, which runs faster than a horse, and when he later met the wild swans, he swung himself onto the strongest of them, for he loved variety. Away he flew across the sea to distant lands of great forests, deep lakes, towering mountains, and proud cities. And wherever he appeared it seemed as if sunlight traveled with him across the countryside, for every flower and bush gave forth a new fragrance, conscious that near by was a friend and protector who understood them and knew their value. Then the crippled rosebush stretched out its branches, opened its leaves, and gave bloom to the most beautiful roses; even the black, slimy wood snail saw its beauty.

"I will put my mark on the flower," said the snail. "Now I have spit on it, and there is nothing more I can do for it."

"Thus the beautiful always fares in this world!" said the Poet.

Then he sang a song about it in his own way, but nobody listened. So he gave a drummer two pennies and peacock's feather, and then arranged the song for the drum, and had it drummed throughout the town, in all the streets and lanes. When the people heard it they said that they understood it - it was very profound!

And so the Poet sang other songs about the beautiful, the good, and the true, and people listened to them among the smoking tavern candles, listened in the fresh meadows, in the forests, and on the high seas. It seemed as if this brother was going to have better luck than the other two.

But that angered the Devil, and so he promptly set to work with all the incense powder and smoke to be found, the very strongest, which can stifle anyone, and which he can prepare artfully enough to even confuse an angel - and surely, therefore, a poor poet! The Devil knows how to take hold of a man like that! He surrounded the Poet so completely with incense that the poor man lost his head, forgot his mission, his home, everything - even himself; he then vanished in smoke.

When the little birds heard about this they were sad, and for three days they didn't sing. The black wood snail became blacker still, not from grief but from envy.

"They should have burned incense for me," he said, "for it was I who gave him the idea for the most famous of his songs, the drum song about the way of the world. It was I who spat at the rose! I can bring witnesses to prove that!"

But no news of this reached the Poet's home in India, for all the little birds were mourning and silent for three days; and when their time of mourning was over, their grief had been so profound that they had forgotten for whom they wept. That's the way it goes.

"Now I'll have to go into the world, and stay away like the others," said the fourth brother.

He had as good a humor as the third, though he was no poet, which was a fine reason for him to have a good humor. Those two had filled the castle with gaiety, and now the last of that gaiety was leaving. Men have always considered sight and hearing the two most

important senses, those that it is most desirable to strengthen and sharpen; the other three senses are generally looked upon as subordinate. But that was not the belief of this son, for he had especially cultivated his *taste in* every way possible, and taste is very powerful indeed. It governs what goes into the mouth and into the mind; hence this brother tasted everything there was in pots and pans, in bottles and barrels, explaining that this was the uncouth side of his function. To him every man was a vessel with something cooking within, and every country was an enormous kitchen, a kitchen of the mind - this he considered fine indeed, and he wanted to go out into the world and taste of it.

"Perhaps I'll have better luck than my brothers. I shall be on my way - but how shall I travel? Are balloons invented yet?" he asked his father,

who knew about all inventions that had been made or would be in the future. But men had not yet invented balloons, or steamships, or railways. "Then I'll go by balloon," he said. "My father knows how they're made and steered, and that I can learn. They aren't invented yet, so people will think it's some spirit of the air. When I have finished with the balloon I'll burn it, and for that you must give me some pieces of another invention to come - matches."

When he had received what he wanted, he flew away. The birds flew much farther along with him than they had with his brothers. They were curious to know how the flight would come out, for they thought it was some new kind of bird. More and more came sweeping up until the air was black with birds; they came on like the cloud of locusts over the land of Egypt. And so now he, the last brother, was out in the wide world.

"The East Wind is a good friend and helper to me," he said.

"You mean the East Wind and the West Wind!" said the winds. "You couldn't have flown northwest if we both hadn't helped you."

But he didn't hear what the wind said, and that makes no difference. The birds tired of flying along with the balloon. Too much had been made of that thing, said a pair of them. It had become conceited! "It isn't worth flying with; it's nothing!" And then they withdrew; they all withdrew, for indeed too much had been made of nothing.

The balloon descended over one of the greatest cities, and the aeronaut landed on the highest point, the church steeple. The balloon rose into the air again, which it shouldn't have done; we don't know where it went, but that doesn't matter, for it was not yet invented. There the young man sat on the church steeple, the birds no longer hovering around him; he had grown as tired of them as they had of him.

All the chimneys of the town smoked fragrantly.

"Those are altars erected in your honor," said the Wind, which thought it ought to say something pleasant.

He sat up there boldly and gazed down at the people in the streets. One person was prancing along, proud of his purse; another was proud of the key that hung at his girdle, though he had nothing for it to unlock; one was proud of his moth-eaten coat, another of his worm-eaten body.

"Vanity!" he said. "I must go down, dip my fingers into that pot, and taste it. But I'll sit here a little longer, for the wind is blowing very pleasantly against my back; I'll take a little rest. 'It is good to sleep long in the mornings, when one has much to do,' the lazy man says. Laziness is the root of all evil, but there is no evil in our family. I'll stay here as long as the wind blows, for it feels good."

So he sat there; but since he was sitting on the weathercock of the steeple, which turned round and round with him, he had the false idea that the same wind was still blowing, so he remained seated there; he might as well stay a long while and have a good taste.

Back in India, in the castle of the Tree of the Sun, it had become empty and quiet after the brothers, one after another, had gone away.

"Things are going badly with them," said the father. "Never will they bring home the gleaming jewel; it is not for me. They are all dead and gone!" And then he bent over the Book of Truth and gazed at the page that should have told him of life after death, but there was nothing for him to see or learn from it.

Now his blind daughter was his sole joy and consolation; she clung to him with deep affection, and for the sake of his happiness and peace of mind she wished the precious jewel might be discovered and brought home. With sorrow and longing she thought of her brothers. Where were they? Where could they be living? With all her heart she wished she might dream of them, but, strangely enough, not even in her dreams could she reach them.

At last one night she dreamed that their voices sounded across to her, calling to her from out in the wide world, and she could not hold back, but traveled far, far away; and yet she seemed still to be in her father's house. She never met her brothers. but in her dream she felt a sort of fire burning in her hand that did not pain her - it was the shining jewel she was bringing to her father.

When she awoke she thought for a moment that she still held the stone in her hand, but it was the knob of her distaff that she was grasping. Through that long night she had spun incessantly, and on the distaff was a thread finer than the finest spider's web; human eyes could not distinguish the separate threads in it, so fine were they. She had moistened it with her tears, and it was as strong as a rope. She arose; her decision was made - the dream must become a reality.

It was still night, and her father was sleeping. She pressed a kiss on his hand, and then, taking her distaff, fastened the end of the thread to her father's castle. But for this, in her blindness she would never have been able to find her way home; she must hold fast to that thread and trust neither to herself nor to others. From the Tree of the Sun she broke off four leaves; these she would entrust to the winds to bring to her brothers as letters of greeting in case she should not meet them out there in the wide world.

How could she fare, that poor blind child? She could hold fast to her invisible thread. She possessed one gift that all the others lacked - sensibility - and by virtue of this she seemed to have eyes in the very tips of her fingers and ears in her heart.

Then she went forth quietly into the noisy, whirling, strange world, and wherever she went the sky became so bright with sunshine that she could feel the warm rays; and the rainbow spread itself through the blue air where there had been dark clouds. She heard the birds sing, and smelled the scent of orange groves and apple orchards so strongly that she seemed to taste the fruit. Soft tones and delightful sounds reached her ears, but with them came howlings and roarings; manifold thoughts and opinions strangely contradicted each other. The echoes of human thoughts and feelings penetrated into the depths of her heart. One chorus sounded mournfully,

*Our earthly life is filled with mist and rain;
And in the dark of night we cry with pain!*

But then she heard a brighter strain,

*Our earthly life is like a rosebush, so bright;
It is filled with sunshine and true delight!*

And if one chorus sounded bitterly,

Each person thinks of himself alone;

This truth to us is often shown.

from the other side came the answer,

*Throughout our life a Fairy of Love
Guides our steps from heaven above.*

She could hear the words,

*There's pettiness here, far and wide;
Everything has its wrong side.*

But then she heard,

*So much good is done here
That never reaches man's ear.*

And if sometimes the mocking words sounded to her,

*Make fun of everything, laugh in jest,
Laugh along with all the rest!*

a stronger voice came from the Blind Girl's heart,

*Trust in God and thyself; pray then
His will be done forever; amen.*

Whenever the Blind Girl entered the circle of humanity and appeared among people, young or old, knowledge of the true, the good, and the beautiful was radiant in their hearts. Wherever she went, whether she entered the studio of the artist, or the hall decorated for the feast, or the crowded factory with its whirring wheels, it seemed as though a sunbeam were entering, as though the string of a lute sounded, or a flower exhaled its perfume, or a refreshing dewdrop fell upon a withering leaf.

But the Devil could not put up with this. With more cunning than that of ten thousand men, he devised a way to bring about his purpose. From the marsh he collected little bubbles of stagnant water, and muttered over them a sevenfold echo of untrue words, to give them strength. Then he blended bought heroic poems and lying epitaphs, as many as he could find, boiled them in the tears of envy, colored them with grease paint he had scraped from the faded cheeks of an old lady, and from all this he fashioned a maiden, with the appearance and carriage of the Blind Girl, the blessed angel of sensibility. Then the Devil's plot was consummated, for the world knew not which of the two was the true one, and indeed how could the world know?

*Trust in God and thyself; pray then
His will be done, forever; amen.*

sang the Blind Girl in complete faith. Then she entrusted to the winds the four green leaves from the Tree of the Sun as letters of greeting to her brothers, and she was quite sure that they would reach their destinations and the jewel be found, the jewel that dims all the glories of the world. From the forehead of humanity it would gleam even to the house of her father.

"Even to the house of my father," she repeated. "Yes, the place of the jewel is on this earth, and I shall bring with me more than the promise of it. I can feel its glow; in my closed hand it swells larger and larger. Every grain of truth, however fine it was, which the wind whirled toward me, I caught up and treasured; I let penetrate into it the fragrance of the beautiful, of which there is so much in the world, even for the blind. To the first I added

the sound of the beating heart, doing good. I bring only dust with me, but still it is the dust of the jewel we sought, and it is in ample quantity. I have my whole hand full of it!"

Then she stretched forth her hand toward her father. She was home. She had traveled there with the swiftness of thoughts in flight, having never let go of the invisible thread leading to home.

With the fury of a hurricane, the evil powers swept over the Tree of the Sun, and their wind blasts rushed through the open doorway, into the sanctuary of the Book of Truth.

"It will be blown away by the wind!" cried the father, and he seized the hand she had opened.

"Never!" she replied with calm assurance. "It cannot be blown away; I can feel the rays warming my very soul."

And the father became aware of a dazzling flame, right where the shining dust poured from her hand onto the Book of Truth, that would grant the certainty of an everlasting life. Now on the white page there glowed one shining word - one word only -

BELIEVE

And once more the four brothers were with their father and sister. When the green leaf had fallen upon the bosom of each, a great longing for home had taken hold of them and led them back; the birds of passage had followed them, as had the stag, the antelope, and all the wild creatures of the forest, for all wished to share in their joys - and why shouldn't they when they could?

We have often seen how a column of dust whirls around where a sunbeam bursts through a crack in a door into a dusty room. But this was not common, insignificant dust; even the colors of the rainbow are lifeless compared with the beauty that showed itself here. From the page of the book, from the glowing word *Believe*, arose each grain of truth, decked with the loveliness of the beautiful and the good, flaming more

brightly than the mighty pillar of fire that led Moses and the children of Israel to the land of Canaan. And from the word *Believe* arose the bridge of *Hope*, extending to the eternal love in the realm of the Infinite.