

The Silent Book

Hans Christian Andersen

On the highroad in the forest there stood a lonely farmhouse; the road passed right through its courtyard.

All the windows were open to the warm sun; within the house there was bustling life, but out in the yard, under an arbor of blooming lilacs, there rested an open coffin. The dead man had been carried to it, and this morning he was to be buried. There was no one to stand by the coffin and look down in sorrow at the dead, no one to shed a tear over him.

A white cloth covered his face, and under his head lay a great thick book, its leaves formed of whole sheets of gray paper. And between each leaf there lay withered flowers, kept close and hidden, so that the book was really a complete herbarium, gathered in many different places. His request had been that the book be buried with him, for each flower had formed a chapter of his life.

"Who is the dead man?" we asked; and the answer was:

"The old student of Upsala. They say he was once a brilliant man who knew foreign languages and could sing and write songs, too. But it was also said that something went wrong with him, and he wasted his thoughts and himself in drinking. Finally, when his health was gone he came out here to the country, where some kindly person paid his board and lodging. He was as gentle as a child, but when his dark moods came on him he became as strong as a giant and ran about the forest like a hunted beast. But if we could manage to get him home and persuade him to open the book with the withered flowers, he would sit quietly all day long, looking at one flower after another, and often the tears rolled down his cheeks. God only knows what thoughts those flowers brought back to him. But he begged that the book be laid in the coffin with him, so there it is. In a little while we'll nail the lid down, and then he will have his sweet rest in the grave."

We lifted up the cloth; there was a peaceful look on the face of the dead man; a ray of sunshine flickered across it. A swallow darted swiftly into the arbor and wheeled rapidly, twittering above the dead man's head.

Surely we all know that strange feeling when we take out old letters of our youth and read them. All the hopes and sorrows of our life seem to rise up before us again. How many of those whom we then knew and were on intimate terms with are dead to us now! Yet they are still alive, although for a long time they have not been in our thoughts - those whom we once thought we should cling to forever, and share their joys and sorrows.

The faded oak leaf in that silent book is the memento of a friend, the school friend who was to remain a friend for life. He himself had fastened that leaf in the student's cap in the green forest long ago, when that lifelong bond of friendship was made. Where is that friend now? The leaf is kept; the bond-broken.

Here is a foreign hothouse plant, far too tender for the gardens of the North; its fresh odor seems to cling to it still. The daughter of a noble house gave it to him out of her own garden.

Here is a water lily that he himself plucked, and watered with his bitter tears, a water lily of sweet waters. And what do the leaves of this nettle tell us? What were his thoughts when he plucked it and laid it away?

Here are lilies of the valley from the dark solitudes of the forest, honeysuckle from the taproom flowerpot, and here the sharp, bare grass blade.

Gently the blooming lilac bends its fresh and fragrant clusters over the dead man's head;

the swallow darts by again - "Quivit! Quivit!" Now the men come with nails and hammer;
the lid is laid over the dead, who rests his head silently on the silent book.

Hidden - forgotten!