

The Child in the Grave

Hans Christian Andersen

There was sorrow in the house; there was sorrow in every heart, for the youngest child, a four-year-old boy, the joy and future hope of his parents, was dead. They had two older daughters, the eldest of whom was to be confirmed that year; sweet, good girls, they both were; but the child one has lost is always the most precious, and this was not only the youngest but the only son. It was indeed a heavy affliction. The sisters grieved as the young grieve, awed by the sorrow of their parents; the father's head bowed in grief; but most of all the mother suffered.

Night and day she had cared for the sick child, nursed it, carried it with her, guarded it constantly until it was a part of herself. She could not conceive that he was dead, that he should be laid in a coffin and rest in a dark grave. God would never take her child from her, she thought; when it happened, however, and was a certainty, she cried aloud in her agony, "God had known nothing of this! He has heartless servants here upon earth; they do as they like and pay no heed to the prayers of a mother!"

In her grief she turned from God, and then came dark thoughts, thoughts of death, everlasting death- that human beings became earth in the earth and that all was over.

Her words were bitter, for her heart was black with despair. There were hours when she could not even find solace of tears; she had no thought for her young daughters; she never looked up at her husband when his tears fell on her hot forehead; her thoughts were all with her dead child; her mind could recall only cherished memories of him-his winning ways, his innocent, childish prattle.

The day of the funeral came. For several nights she had not closed her eyes; but early in the morning of this day, overcome at last by weariness, she fell asleep. And during her sleep the coffin was carried into a distant room and there the lid was nailed down, so that she would not hear the sound of the hammering.

When she awoke she demanded to see her child, but her husband replied through his tears, "We have closed the coffin; it had to be done."

"When God deals cruelly with me," she cried, "why should people treat me better!" And then she was overcome with bitter tears.

The coffin was carried to the grave; the inconsolable mother sat with her young daughters, but she looked at them without seeing them, for her thoughts had nothing more to do with her home. She resigned herself to sorrow, and it tossed her to and fro as the sea tosses the rudderless ship. Thus passed the day of the funeral, and several days followed, all dark with the same heavy monotony of sorrow. Her family watched her with moist eyes and sorrowful glances; she did not heed their words of comfort. What comfort could they offer when they themselves were grieving?

It seemed to her as though she would never sleep again, yet sleep could be her best friend; it could strengthen her body and bring rest to her embittered soul. They persuaded her to lie down, and she would lie in her bed as quietly as though she were actually sleeping.

One night her husband listened to her steady breathing and really thought that at last she had found repose. With folded hands he thanked God, and soon fell into a sound, deep sleep. So he was not aware that his wife rose, dressed herself, and went quietly out of the house, to seek the spot where her thoughts were night and day, the grave that hid her child. She walked through the garden and into the field beyond, where a footpath led to the churchyard. Nobody saw her, and she saw no one.

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It was a beautiful, starry night in early September; the air was mild. She entered the churchyard, and when she reached the little grave it was like one huge bouquet of fragrant flowers. She sat there and bowed her head over the grave, as if she could see through the thick covering of earth the dear child whose smile she so well remembered, that adoring look in the sweet eyes as she bent over his sickbed and lifted the tiny hand he had no strength to raise. And as then she sat beside his bed, now she sat beside his grave, but here her tears flowed freely and fell upon the grave.

"You wish to go down to your child!" said a voice close to her, a voice so clear, so profound, it resounded in her heart. She looked up, and there standing beside her was a figure shrouded in a heavy black mourning cloak. Over the head spread a hood, yet she could see the face beneath it, and that stern face inspired trust; those grave eyes sparkled with the light of youth.

"Down to my child!" she repeated in a sad, pleading tone, like a despairing prayer.

"Do you dare to follow me?" asked the figure. "I am Death!"

And she bowed her head in silent assent. Suddenly each of the millions of stars above shone with the brightness of the full moon; she beheld the richly colored splendor of the flowers on the grave, while the earth covering it yielded gently and softly like a waving cloth. She sank, and the black mantle of Death was spread over her, and all was darkness; she sank deeper than the spade of the gravedigger can reach, until the churchyard lay like a roof above her head.

The black folds of the mantle fell aside, and she was standing in a mighty hall that was as friendly as it was big; there was a twilight all around. Before her appeared her child, and in the same moment she held him close to her heart. He smiled at her and looked more beautiful than ever before; she uttered a cry, which, however, was inaudible, for just then the hall was filled with music, now swelling high and triumphant, now dying away into tones faint but clear. Such blessed sounds had never before reached her ears; they seemed to come from beyond the heavy black curtain that divided the hall from the great land of eternity.

"My sweet mother! My own mother!" she heard her child say. It was the familiar, beloved voice; and kiss followed kiss in boundless happiness. Then the child pointed to the black curtain. "Look, Mother! There is nothing as beautiful as this on earth! Do you see, Mother? Do you see them all? This is happiness!"

But the mother could see nothing where the child pointed, nothing but the blackness of night; she gazed with earthly eyes and could not see as could the child whom God had called to Himself. So it was with the music; she could hear the sounds, the tones, but not the words, the words in which she was to believe.

"I can fly now, Mother!" said the child. "Fly, with all the other happy children, straight into God's paradise! Oh, I love that, but when you cry as you are crying now it calls me back, and I can no longer fly, and I want so much to. Will you not let me? You will join me here in only a little time, dearest Mother!"

"Oh, stay, stay!" she begged. "Only for a moment longer! Let me look at you once more, kiss you again, hold you fast in my arms!"

And she kissed him, holding him tightly. Suddenly she heard her name called from far overhead, called in a sad, imploring tone! What could it mean?

"Don't you hear?" said the child. "It is Father calling you!"

And a few seconds later she heard deep sighs, which sounded as if they came from weeping children. "They are my sisters!" said the child. "Oh, Mother, surely you have not forgotten them!"

And now she remembered the beloved ones she had left in her home, and a great fear swept over her. She looked around her and saw the different forms that were continually gliding past, to disappear behind the black curtain. She imagined she recognized some of them; could her husband or her little girls be among them? No, their cries, their sighs, had come from far above her; she had nearly forgotten them for the dead.

"Mother," said the child, "the bells of paradise are ringing! The sun is rising!"

Then an overpowering light streamed out on her-and the child was gone, and she herself was carried upward. Then all was cold around her, and when she lifted her head she found herself lying on her child's grave in the churchyard. But in her dream the Lord had become a rest for her foot, a light for her understanding. She sank to her knees and prayed, "O my Lord forgive me that I wished to keep an immortal spirit from its flight into eternity and could forget my duties toward the living ones you have given me here!"

And with that prayer it seemed as if her heart at last found relief.

The sun came out, a little bird sang above her, and the church bells began to ring for the morning service. Light was all about her; light was once more in her heart; she felt the goodness of God and remembered her duties as, longing, she hurried to her home. There she bent over her husband, and her warm, tender kiss awakened him, and they could speak together of their loss. Now she was strong and calm, as a wife should be, and from her lips came words of trust and confidence. "God's will is always best."

"Where did you so suddenly gain this strength," her husband asked her, "this comfort?"

Then she kissed him and kissed her daughters. "It came to me from God, by the grave of my child!"

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