

A Story

Hans Christian Andersen

All the apple trees in the garden were blooming. They had hastened to cover themselves with blossoms before their green leaves were fully unfolded. All the ducklings were in the farmyard, and so was the cat; it basked in the sun and tried to lick the sunshine from its own paws.

And to look across the fields was a pleasing sight; there stood the corn, so beautifully green, while all the small birds chirped and twittered as happily as if they were having a great holiday.

And, indeed, people could rightly think of this as a holiday, for it was Sunday. The bells were chiming while people in their best clothes were walking to church and looking so cheerful. It was such a bright, warm day that one might well say: "How good God is to grant us so many blessings!"

But inside the church the preacher in the pulpit spoke in a loud and angry tone; he said that all humans were wicked and that God would certainly punish them by sending them to the eternal torments of hell when they died. He said that they would never find peace or rest in hell, for their consciences would never die nor would the fires ever be extinguished.

This was terrible to hear, but still he went on as if the subject he was explaining were really true. He described hell to them as a stagnant cave, where all the impure and sinful of the world would be; there would be no air, only the hot sulphur flames, and no bottom there, and the wicked would sink deeper and deeper into eternal silence forever!

It was horrible to hear this, but the preacher spoke from his heart, and all the people in the church were terrified.

But the birds outside the church sang joyously, and the sun was shining warmly; it was as if each little bird were saying, "Nothing is so great as the loving-kindness of the Almighty!"

Yes, outside the church, it was not at all like the preacher's sermon.

Before the preacher went to bed that evening he noticed that his wife sat silent and thoughtful. "What's the matter with you?" he said to her.

"Why," she replied, "the matter with me is that I can't quite bring myself to agree with what you said today in your sermon. It doesn't seem right to say that so many sinners will be condemned to everlasting fire forever. Forever! Ah, how long! I'm only a poor sinful creature myself, but I can't believe in my heart that even the vilest sinner will be condemned to burn in torment forever! We know the mercy of the Almighty is as great as His power; He knows how people are tempted from without and within by their own evil natures. No, I do not believe it, even if you said so."

It was autumn, the trees scattering their leaves on the ground, and the severe but earnest preacher sat beside the bed of a dying person. A faithful soul closed her eyes forever; it was the preacher's wife.

"If anyone can find peace and rest in the grave, through God's mercy, it is you!" sighed the preacher, as he folded her hands and read a psalm over the dead woman.

She was laid in her grave. Two large tears rolled down the cheeks of the sincere man, and in the parsonage everything seemed so empty and still. The sunshine of his home had vanished, for *she* had gone.

It was night, and a cold wind blew over the head of the preacher. He opened his eyes and it seemed to him that the moon was shining into the room, but there was no moonlight. A

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figure stood beside his bed, and the spirit of his deceased wife shone upon him. Earnestly and sadly she looked at him, as if she had something on her mind that she wanted to say to him.

He half raised himself in bed, stretched out his arms to her, and cried, "Then even *you* aren't permitted to rest in peace forever? Must you suffer, too? You, the best, the most pious!"

The dead bowed her head as if to say "yes," and laid her hand on her heart.

"And can I give you peace in the grave?" he asked.

"Yes," was the distinct reply.

"And how?"

"Bring me a hair, just one single hair, from the head of just one sinner whom God will condemn to eternal torture in hell."

"Yes, you should be freed that easily, you pure, you pious woman!" he said.

"Then follow me," said the dead. It has been granted us that you can fly through the air by my side, wherever your thoughts are directed. To mortals we shall be invisible, and able to pass unseen through the closed and bolted doors of inner rooms. But you must be *certain* that the man you point out to me as eternally damned is really one whom God will condemn to the torments of hell-fire forever, and he must be found before the cock crows."

And quickly, as if carried by the wings of thoughts, they arrived at the great city. On the walls of the houses letters of living flame gave the names of the deadly sins: Arrogance, Greed, Drunkenness, Wantonness—in fact, the whole seven-colored bow of sin.

"Yes, in these houses, as I thought, as I knew," said the preacher, "live those who will be punished forever."

And then they stood before a brilliantly lighted gate. The broad steps were covered with flowers and carpets, while from the festive rooms came the sounds of music and dancing.

A footman dressed in velvet and silk, with a large silverhandled stick in his hand, stood erect near the door.

"Our ball is as splendid as those at the palace of the king," said he, and turned toward the people outside. From tip to toe his thoughts were evident: "Poor beggars who stare in at the gate; compared to me, you people are only cattle!"

"Arrogance," said the dead wife. "Do you see him?"

"Him!" replied the preacher. "Yes, but this man is only a fool and a simpleton. He'll not be condemned to everlasting fire or eternal torment."

"Only a fool!" echoed through the whole house of Arrogance; they were all fools there.

Then they flew within the four bare walls of a miser's room—where, skinny, shivering with cold, hungry and thirsty, an old, old man clung desperately with all his thoughts to his gold. They saw how he, as in a fever, sprang from his miserable bed and took a loose stone out of the wall. There lay a stocking crammed full of gold pieces. The man kept fumbling in his ragged pockets, where he had sewn more gold, and his clammy fingers trembled.

"He is ill; it is insanity, a dreadful insanity. Haunted by terrors and evil dreams!"

Swiftly they left the miser's room, and stood before a dormitory of a jail, where the prisoners slept close together in long rows. Suddenly one of them started up in his sleep and uttered the terrible cry of a wild beast! With his pointed elbow, he gave his companion a ferocious blow, and the latter turned around sleepily: "Shut up, you beast, and go to

sleep! You go on like this every night!"

"Every night!" the man repeated. "Yes, every night *he* howls and torments me like this. I have committed many wrongs because of the passionate temper with which I was born. Twice my wicked temper has brought me here, but if I have done wrong, I am certainly being punished for it.

"There is only one thing I have not confessed. The last time I went out from here and passed by my master's farm, evil thoughts rose within me. I struck a match against the wall; it came a bit too close to the thatched roof. The heat seized onto the straw, as it often seizes onto me, and everything was burned. I helped to rescue the house property and the animals; no living creature perished, except a flock of pigeons which flew right into the fire, and also the yard dog, which was chained up. I had not thought of him. One could hear him howl, and that howl I can still hear when I want to sleep, and when I do fall asleep, the dog comes also. He is very large, with thick, shaggy fur, and he lies on me and howls and squeezes me until I am nearly choked. Now listen to what I tell you! You all can sleep and snore the whole night, but I can sleep for only a short quarter of an hour." And the blood rose to the head of the tormented; he threw himself upon his comrade and struck him in the face with his clenched fist.

"The madman is raging again!" everyone cried. Then the other criminals threw themselves on him, wrestled with him, bent his body down until his head was forced between his legs, and then bound him so tightly that the blood seemed about to burst from his eyes and his pores.

"You're killing him!" cried the preacher, and stretched his protecting hand over the sinner who had already suffered severely.

Then the scene changed. Unseen they glided through rich homes, as well as through the huts of the poor. Wantonness and envy, and all the deadly sins, passed before them.

An angel from the judgment seat appeared, to read to each of them their sins and their excuses. These excuses meant little to God, for He reads the hearts; He knows every hidden sin that dwells there; He knows the temptations that are before us in the outer world as well as in our own hearts, and knows when to show mercy and pitying love.

The preacher's hand trembled, and now he dared not stretch it out to pluck a single hair from the head of any sinner. Tears streamed from his eyes as he thought of the fountain of mercy and love, which can quench even the everlasting fire of hell.

And then the cock crowed!

"All-merciful God, I pray Thee grant her that peace in the grave which I have not been able to produce for her!"

"I have it now," said the dead wife. "It was your hard words and your gloomy belief in God and His creatures that drove me to you. Learn to know mankind. Even the soul of the wicked is a part of God Himself, a part that will conquer and extinguish even hell-fire forever."

The preacher felt a kiss upon his lips, and a light streamed about him. God's bright sunshine shone into the room, and his living wife stood beside him, tender and loving. She had awakened him from a dream sent him by God.

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