

A String of Pearls

Hans Christian Andersen

The railroad in Denmark still extends only from Copenhagen to Korsör; it is a string of pearls. Europe has a wealth of these pearls; its most costly are named Paris, London, Vienna, Naples. And yet many a man will point out as his favorite pearl not one of these great cities but rather some little country town that is still the home of homes to him, the home of those dearest to him. Yes, often it is not a town at all, but a single homestead, a little house, hidden among green hedges, a place hardly visible as the train speeds by.

How many pearls are there on the line from Copenhagen to Korsör? We will consider just six, which most people must notice; old memories and poetry itself give a luster to these pearls, so that they shine in our thoughts.

Near the hill where stands the palace of Frederick VI, the home of Oehlenschläger's childhood, one of these pearls glistens, sheltered by Söndermarken's woody ground. It used to be called "The Cottage of Philemon and Baucis." Here lived Rahbek and his wife, Camma; here, under their hospitable roof, assembled many of the generation's finest intellects from busy Copenhagen; it was the festival home of the intellectual. Now, don't say, "Ah, what a change!" No, it is still the home of the intellect, a conservatory for sick plants, for buds which do not have the strength to unfold their true beauty of color and form or show the blossoming and fruit-bearing which is hidden within them. The insane asylum, surrounded by human love, is truly a spot of holiness, a hospital for the sick plants that shall someday be transplanted to bloom in the paradise of God. The weakest minds are assembled now here, where once the strongest and keenest met to exchange thoughts and ideas, but still the flame of generosity mounts heavenward from "The Cottage of Philemon and Baucis."

Ancient Roskilde, the burial town of Kings, by Hroar's Spring, now lies before us. The slender towers of the church lift up above the low town and mirror themselves in Issefiord. Only one grave shall we seek here; it is not that of the mighty Queen Margrethe; no within the white-walled churchyard which we speed close by is the grave, and over it lays a small, plain stone. The master of the organ, the reviver of the old Danish romances, rests here. We recall, "The clear waves rolled" and "There dwelt a king in Leire." Roskilde, burial place of kings-in your pearl we see the insignificant gravestone whereon is cut a lyre and the name Weyse.

Now we reach Sigersted, near the town of Ringsted. The bed of the river is low here; yellow corn waves over the spot where Hagbarth's boat lay at anchor, not far from Signe's maiden bower. Who does not know the legend of Hagbarth, who was hanged on the oak tree while the bower of Signe burst into flames? Who can forget that legend of immortal love?

"Beautiful Sorö, encircled by woods!" Your quiet old cloistered town peeps out through its mossy trees; the keen eyes of youth from the academy can look across the lake toward the world's highway and hear the roar of the locomotive's dragon as it speeds through the woods. Sorö, pearl of poetry, you are guarding the dust of Holberg! Your palace of learning stands beside the deep woodland lake like a great white swan, and near by, like the bright starflower of the woods, there gleams a tiny cottage, whence pious hymns echo throughout the land; words are spoken within, and the peasant listens and learns of Denmark's bygone days. As the song of the bird is to the greenwood, so is Ingemann to Sorö.

On to the town of Slagelse! What is mirrored here in this pearl's luster? Gone forever is the cloister of Antoorskov (NB: Antvorskov); vanished are the rich halls of the castle, even

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the last remaining wing; yet one relic of olden times still lingers here, the wooden cross on the hill. It has been repaired again and again, for it marks the spot where, legend tells us, Saint Anders, holy priest of Slagelse, awoke, after having been brought there from Jerusalem in a single night.

Korsör, birthplace of Baggesen, master of words and wit! The ruined old ramparts of the fallen fortress are now the last visible witness of your childhood home; their lengthening sunset shadows point to the spot where stood the house in which you were born. From these hills you looked toward Sprogö and sang in undying verse.

*Nowhere have roses so red a hue
And nowhere are feathers so light and so blue,
Nowhere the thorns so daintily grown,
As those to childhood innocence known.*

Humorous, charming singer! We shall weave for thee a garland of woodbine and fling it into the lake, so that the current may bear it to the coast of Kielerfiord, where your ashes rest. The tide shall bring you a greeting from the new generation, a greeting from your birthplace Korsör - where I drop my string of pearls.

"That's quite right! A string of pearls does stretch from Copenhagen to Korsör," said Grandmother when she had heard this read aloud. "It's a string of pearls for me now, as it was more than forty years ago. We had no railroad then; we spent days on a trip that can now be made in as many hours. That was in 1815, and I was twenty-one; that is a charming age! Although to be up in the sixties, that is also a wonderful age! In my young days it was a much rarer event than it is now to come to Copenhagen, which we considered the town of all towns! My parents hadn't visited it for twenty years, but at last they were going, and I was going with them. We had talked about that journey for years before, and now it was actually coming true; it seemed as though a new life were beginning for me, and really in a way a new life did begin for me.

"There was such a bustle of sewing and packing; and when at last we were ready to start, such a crowd of friends came to bid us farewell! It was a long journey we had ahead of us. Shortly before noon we drove out of Odense in my parents' Holstein carriage, and our friends waved to us from the windows all the way down the street, till we passed through St. Jörgen's Gate. The weather was beautiful; the birds sang, and everything was joyful; we forgot what a long and tiresome road it was to Nyborg. We reached it toward evening; but the little sailing vessel had to wait for the mail, which didn't arrive until night. Then we got on board, and as far as we could see the wide, smooth waters lay before us. We lay down and went to sleep in our clothes. When I awoke and came on deck next morning, I could see nothing at all; a heavy fog covered everything. When I heard the cocks crowing, I knew it must be sunrise; bells were ringing, but I didn't know where; then the mist lifted, and we found we were still lying very close to Nyborg. Later in the day a wind came up, but it was against us; we tacked back and forth, and at last were lucky enough to reach Korsör by a little past eleven that night, having spent twenty-two hours to go sixteen miles!

It was good to get ashore, but it was dark; the lamps were weak, and it all seemed very strange to me, who had never been in any other town but Odense.

" 'Look!' said my father. 'Baggesen was born there! And Birckner lived in that house!' When I heard that, somehow the dark old town with its narrow little streets seemed to grow larger and brighter. And we were so glad to feel solid earth under our feet! There was no sleep for me that night, for I was so excited over all that I had seen and heard since I had left home the day before.

"Next morning we had to leave early; there was a terrible road ahead of us, with great bumps and holes as far as Slagelse, and not much better from there on, and we wanted to

get to the Crab Inn early, so that on the same day we could reach Sorö and visit the Möllers' Emil, as we called him then; yes, he was your grandfather, my late husband, the dean. He was a student at Sorö then, and had just passed his second examination.

"That afternoon we reached the Crab Inn, which was a gallant place at that time, the very best inn on the whole trip, with the prettiest country around it. Yes, but you must all admit that it still is. Madame Plambek was an industrious hostess, and everything in her house was as smoothly scoured as a larding board. On the wall they had, framed under glass, Baggesen's letter to her; it was indeed worth seeing, and I greatly enjoyed looking at it. Then he went to Sorö and found Emil there. You can imagine how glad we were to see him, and he to see us. He was so thoughtful and charming; he took us to see the church, and the graves of Absalon and Holberg; he inspected the old monkish inscriptions with us, and sailed with us across the lake to Parnasset. It was the most wonderful evening I remember! I was thinking that to become a poet one had only to come to Sorö and meditate among those lovely, peaceful scenes. By moonlight we followed the 'Philosopher's Walk,' as it's called, the wonderful and lonely little path beside the lake that joins the highway near the Crab Inn. Emil stayed for supper with us, and my father and my mother declared he had grown so sensible and looked so well. It was almost Whitsuntide, and he promised that in a few days he would be in Copenhagen to join us and his family. Ah, those few hours in Sorö and at the Crab Inn I count among the choicest pearls of my life!

"Next morning we again started very early, for we had a long trip to Roskilde, where we wanted to see the church and Father wanted to visit an old school friend that evening. We spent that night in Roskilde and reached Copenhagen by noon the next day. So we had spent about three days on a journey that can now be made in three hours-Korsör to Copenhagen. The pearls on that way have not grown more costly-that could never be-but the string is new and wonderful.

"I stayed with my parents in Copenhagen for three weeks. Emil was with us for eighteen whole days, and when we returned to Fünen he went with us as far as Korsör. There, before we parted, we were betrothed. So it is no wonder I should call the road from Copenhagen to Korsör a string of pearls.

"Afterwards, when Emil received his post at Assens, we were married. We often talked about that journey to Copenhagen, and intended doing it again, but then your mother came along, and after her came her brothers and sisters, and with all of them there was so much to do and take care of! Then your grandfather was promoted and made a dean; yes, everything was happiness and joy, but we never got to Copenhagen again. No, I have never been there since, though we often thought and talked about it. Now I'm much too old to travel by rail, but still I'm right glad there is a railway; it's a real blessing, because it brings you young ones to me more quickly!

"Nowadays Odense is hardly farther from Copenhagen than in my youth it was from Nyborg; you can speed to Italy in the time it took us to reach Copenhagen! Yes, that is certainly something! It doesn't matter that I just sit here always; let the others travel, so long as they sometimes travel to me.

"And you needn't laugh at me, you young people, for sitting so still here, day after day! I have really a wonderful journey ahead of me; I shall soon have to travel at a speed far greater than the railway's. For when our Lord calls me I shall go to join your grandfather; and when you have completed your work on this dear earth, you too will join us; and then, if we talk over the days of our mortal life, believe me, dear children, I shall say then as I do now, 'From Copenhagen to Korsör is a perfect string of pearls!' "

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