

The wind tells about Valdemar Daae and his daughters

When the wind sweeps over the grass, the blades of grass ripple like the water of a lake; and when it sweeps over the cornfield, the ears of corn curl into waves like those on a lake; this is the dance of the Wind. But listen to him tell the story; he sings it out; and how different his song among the trees of the forest is from his shriek through the cracks, crannies, and crevices of old walls. Watch him chase the white, fleecy clouds across the sky like a flock of sheep; notice how he howls through the open gate, as if he were the watchman blowing his horn. Strangely he whistles through the chimney until the fire on the hearth beneath blazes up, and it is pleasant and comfortable to sit in the chamber warmed by its glow and listen to stories. Let only the Wind himself be the storyteller! He knows more wonderful tales than all the rest of us put together. Hear now how he tells the story: "Whew, whew, whew! On, on, on!" That is the theme of his song.

"Near the Great Belt there stands an old mansion with thick red walls," says the Wind. "I know every stone of those walls; I knew them in the olden days when they were part of Marsk Stig's castle on the promontory. They were torn down from there, but then they were built up again to form a new wall and a new mansion; this was Borreby Mansion, which stands to this day. I have seen and known all the noble men and women of many different families who have lived there. Now I shall tell you of Valdemar Daae and his daughters.

"He was a very proud man, for he was of royal blood. He knew more than how to hunt the stag or empty the jug. 'Everything will come out right,' he used to say.

"His highborn wife walked daintily in her golden-cloth garment over floors of polished mosaic. Magnificent tapestries and costly, beautifully carved furniture surrounded her; she had brought both silver and gold into the house; there was German beer in the cellar; proud black horses neighed in the stables; ah, Borreby Mansion was then the home of wealth. And there were children; three fair daughters - I can still remember their names - Ide, Johanne, and Anna Dorothea. These were rich folk, noble folk, born and reared in luxury. Whew, whew, whew! On, on, on!" sang the Wind, and then continued his tale.

"Here I never saw, as in other old houses, the noble

mistress turning the spinning wheel among her maidens in the great hall. She played upon the lute and sang, though not always the old Danish songs but songs in foreign languages. There were life and gaiety here; guests of distinction came from far and near; the sounds of music and the clinking of glasses were so loud that even I could not drown them. There was pride here, with boasting and bragging, and talk of domination, but not the blessings of our Lord!

"Then there was one May-day even," said the Wind, "when I came upon it from the west. I had seen ships wrecked on the coast of West Jutland, had hunted over the heath and the green-wooded shore to Fünen, and now I came over the Great Belt, blowing and roaring. I lay down for a rest on the coast of Zeeland, quite near Borreby Mansion, where the beautiful forest of oaks still grew. The young lads of the neighborhood came out to the forest to collect the biggest and driest branches and twigs they could find; they carried them into the town, laid them in piles, set fire to them, then the young men and girls sang as they danced around them.

"I lay still," said the Wind, "but then gently I just touched one of the branches that had been brought by the handsomest lad of them all, and immediately his pile of wood blazed up the highest. That meant he became the leader among them, with the privilege of choosing first one of the young girls to be his own May lamb. There was a joy, a merriment, such as I had never found in the rich Borreby Mansion.

"Then there came driving toward the mansion, in a gilded carriage drawn by six horses, the noble lady herself with her three daughters - so young and so fair - three sweet blossoms, a rose, a lily, and a pale hyacinth. Their mother was like a proud, splendid tulip; no word of greeting did she have for the peasants, who stopped their game and bowed and scraped to her; stiff as a tulip she held herself. Yes, rose, lily, and pale hyacinth, I saw all three; whose May lambs would they become one day, I wondered. Surely their young men would be proud knights, perhaps even princes! Whew, whew, whew! On, on, on!

"So the carriage rattled past, and the peasants returned to their dance. Summer was being celebrated from one

town to another, in Borreby, Tjaereby, and all the towns around.

"But when I rose up that same night, the highborn lady had laid herself down, never to rise again. That had come to her which comes to all men; that is nothing new. Grave and thoughtful stood Valdemar Daae; he seemed to be saying, 'The proudest tree may be bowed, but not broken.' The daughters wept, and all eyes in the mansion had to be dried. Lady Daae had passed on - and I then passed on! Whew, whew, whew!

"I came again, as I often came across Fünen and the waters of the Belt, and rested near Borreby in the shelter of the beautiful oak forest. Here ospreys, wood pigeons, blue ravens, and even the black storks build their nests; it was the spring of the year, and some had eggs while others had even young ones. How they flew! How they cried! The sound of the ax could be heard, stroke after stroke; the trees were to be felled. Valdemar Daae had decided to build a ship, a great warship with three decks, which the king would surely buy, and for this the trees must fall and the birds lose their homes. The hawk flew away in terror as his nest was destroyed, the osprey and all the other birds flew around in terrified anger, screaming of their wrath and agony; I could understand them well enough. The crows and jackdaws shrieked in scorn, 'Caw, caw! From the nests!'

"And in the middle of the forest, with the workmen, stood Valdemar Daae and his three daughters, and they all laughed at the wild protests of the birds - all but the youngest, Anna Dorothea. She was a tenderhearted child, and when an old half-dead tree, on whose bare branches a black stork had built his nest, was to be cut down, it saddened her so to see the helpless young ones thrusting their heads out in the terror that she begged with tears in her eyes that this one tree be spared. So the tree with the black stork's nest was left standing.

"There was much hammering and sawing as the three-deck ship was being built. The master shipbuilder was a fine-looking young fellow, though of lowly birth, his eyes sparkling with life and his brow thoughtful. Valdemar Daae liked to hear him talk, and so did little Ide, his eldest daughter, who was now fifteen years old. And while he built the ship for her father, he built many a castle in the air besides, and saw himself and little Ide sitting there as man and wife. That might actually have come to pass if the castle had been of walled stone, with ramparts and

moat, forest and gardens. But with all his skill, the builder was only a common bird, and what business did a sparrow have among a flock of cranes? Whew, whew, whew! I flew away and he flew away, and little Ide forgot it, as forget she must.

"In the stable the beautiful black horses neighed. They were worth looking at, and they were looked at. The admiral was sent by the king himself to inspect the new warship and to discuss buying it. He was loud in admiration for the splendid horses. I heard him well," said the Wind. "I followed the gentlemen through the open stable door and scattered about their feet wisps of straw, yellow as gold. Gold! That was what Valdemar Daae wanted, and the admiral wanted the black horses he admired so greatly, but all their discussion came to nothing. The horses weren't bought, and neither was the ship! It was left on the shore with planks over it, a Noah's ark that was never to float on water. Whew, whew, whew! It was a pity!

"In the winter, when the fields were covered with snow and ice floes choked the Belt," said the Wind, "flocks of black ravens and crows came and perched on the lifeless, solitary ship as it stood on the shore. The frantic old birds and the homeless young ones screamed hoarse tales about the oak forest that had been ravished and the many wonderful nests that had been destroyed, all for the sake of this great piece of useless lumber, the proud vessel that was never to sail the seas. And I tossed and whirled the snow about until it lay thickly over the ship; I made it listen to my voice and taught it all that a storm has to say; I certainly did my part in teaching it all a ship should know of life. Whew, whew, whew! On, on, on!

"And winter passed away, winter and summer passed, as they always pass, as I pass, as the snow melts, as the leaf drifts downward, as the apple blossom fades, away, away, away! And as people pass away!

"But the daughters were still young. Little Ide was still as blooming a rose as when the shipbuilder had seen her. Often I caught hold of her long brown hair when she stood thoughtfully beside the apple tree in the garden, and she didn't notice that I shook petals down on her hair, loosening it, as she gazed at the crimson sunset and the streak of golden sky through the dark bushes and trees. Her sister Johanne was still like a lily, bright and slender, straight and tall, as stiff upon her stalk as her mother had been. She loved to linger in the great hall where the portraits of their ancestors hung; the ladies were painted wearing velvets and silk,

with tiny, pearl-embroidered hats set on their braids; they were beautiful ladies, indeed; the men were shown in steel armor, or in stiff white ruffs and rich mantles lined with squirrel fur, their swords belted to their sides, not around their waists. Johanne often wondered how her own portrait would look on those same walls, and what her husband would look like. Yes, she thought about that, and talked about it to herself. I heard it as I whipped through the long gallery into the hall and whirled around again.

"Anna Dorothea, the pale hyacinth, was still a very quiet child of fourteen, with large, thoughtful blue eyes, and the smile of childhood still lingering on her lips. Even if I could have I would never have blown that smile away. I met her in the garden, in the narrow lane, or in the fields, gathering herbs and flowers for her father to use in the wondrous potions and mixtures he used to prepare.

"Valdemar Daae, though haughty and conceited, was also a man of skill and great knowledge. People knew that and spoke about it. Fire burned in summer as well as winter in the fireplace in his study; his chamber door was always locked; night and day he worked, yet he seldom spoke of his labors. He knew that the secrets of nature must be wooed secretly, and he was seeking the best secret of all - how to produce pure red gold!

"The smoke therefore rose out of the chimney continuously, and the fire crackled as it burned. I was there!" sang the Wind. "I whistled up the chimney. 'Stop it! Stop it!' I sang through the chimney. 'It will all end in smoke, dust, embers, and ashes! You will burn yourself up! Whew, whew! Stop it!' But Valdemar Daae did not stop.

"Those superb horses in the stable - what became of them? And the fine old gold and silver in cupboards and chests, the cattle in the meadows, the mansion and all its riches? Yes, they were all melted down in the gold-making crucible, and yet no gold came of it. Barn and granary, cellar and pantry, all were empty now; the house sheltered fewer folk and more mice. One windowpane was broken, another cracked," said the Wind, "and now I had no need to go around to the door to get in. The chimney still smoked, to be sure, not for cooking dinner, but for cooking the red gold.

"I blew through the courtyard gates, like the watchman blowing his horn, but there was no watchman here," said the Wind. "I whirled the weathercock round and round, and it creaked like the snoring of the watchman,

but there was no watchman; only rats and mice were there; poverty loaded the table and stuffed wardrobe and larder; the doors sagged from their hinges; there were chinks and cracks in plenty, so that I could go in and out at will.

"In the smoke and ashes, beset by sorrow and sleepless nights, Valdemar's hair and beard turned gray, his skin grew coarse and yellowish; his eyes still looked greedily for gold - the long hoped-for gold!

"I blew ashes and smoke into his face and beard. I whistled through the broken panes and open cracks and blew into the daughters' chest of drawers, where they kept their clothes, which now were faded and threadbare from constant use, but which had to last them. The poor dears never had such a song as this sung at their cradles; but none, save I, sang any song at all in the great hall now. The life of abundance had turned into one of poverty," said the Wind. "I snowed them in, and it is said that snow puts one in a good humor. They had no firewood, for the forest was destroyed. There came a sharp frost, and while I sprang through holes and passages and over walls and roofs to keep myself warm, the highborn daughters huddled in bed against the cold, and their father crept beneath a covering of rude skins. Nothing to eat, nothing to burn!

"It was a hard lesson they had to learn!

"Whew, whew, whew! But Valdemar Daae couldn't learn. 'After winter comes the spring,' he said, 'and after troubles come the good times; we have only to wait, wait! Now the mansion is mortgaged! Now it is high time indeed - and so we shall have gold! By Easter!' And then I saw him watching a spider at work, and heard him mutter, 'Good, industrious little weaver, you teach me to persevere! Your web may be broken, but you only begin it again; again it may be torn asunder, but all undismayed you return again and again to your work, and you are rewarded at last!'

"Then Easter morning came, and the bells rang and the sun shone in the heavens. He had awakened in a feverish heat; he had boiled and seethed and distilled and compounded. I heard him sigh like a lost soul and I heard him pray; I felt that he was holding his breath. The lamp had gone out, but he did not notice it. I blew on the coals until a flame shone on his chalk-white face and lighted up those staring eyes. But then those eyes became larger and larger - until they seemed about to burst.

"Behold the alchemistic glass! I glittered, glowing,

pure and heavy; he lifted it with faltering hand; he cried with stumbling tongue, 'Gold! Gold!' He staggered, dizzy, and I could have blown him down as he stood," said the Wind, "but I only blew on the live coals, then followed him through the door to where his daughters sat, shivering. Ashes sprinkled his beard, clung to his dress, and lay in his matted hair. He stood erect and lifted high his treasure in its fragile glass. 'I've found it! I've won!' he cried. 'Gold!' The glass flashed in the sunbeams as he held it high - and then, lo! his hand trembled so that the alchemistic glass fell to the floor and shattered into a thousand fragments! His last bubble had burst! Whew, whew, whew! On, on, on! And I went on, away from the alchemist's home.

"Toward the end of that year, during the short days when the mist flings wet drops on the red berries and leafless branches, I came back in happy spirits, swept the heavens clean, and broke off the dead branches; that is not very hard work, to be sure, but it has to be done. And at the same time there was a different sort of sweeping and cleaning out at Borreby Mansion. Valdemar Daae's old enemy, Ove Ramel, of Basnaes, was there with the mortgage on the mansion and all its contents. I drummed on the broken panes, beat against the ruined doors, and whistled through the cracks and chinks; Master Ove shouldn't find it pleasant to stay there. Ide and Anna Dorothea wept quietly; Johanne stood pale and stately and bit her thumb till it bled; but all that did no good.

"Ove Ramel generously offered to allow Mr. Daae to remain at the mansion during his lifetime, but he got no thanks for the gesture. I listened, and noticed how the homeless old nobleman held his head more proudly than ever. I rushed against the mansion and the old lime trees, so that the thickest branch broke off - and it wasn't a rotten one, either. There it lay at the gate, like a broom for sweeping out - and there was sweeping out there, you may be sure! But I had expected it.

"Oh, that was a day of bitterness - a sorrowful day! But with a stiff neck and a stout back the proud man bore his burden bravely.

"They had nothing left except the clothes they wore, and the new alchemistic glass, filled with the brittle treasure that had promised so much - the fool's gold scraped up from the floor; this Valdemar Daae hid in his breast. He took his cane in his hand, and with his three daughters the once rich nobleman walked out of Borreby Mansion. I blew cold upon his flaming cheeks

and stroked his gray beard and long white hair to and fro as I sang, as loudly as I could, "Whew, whew, whew! This was the end of his glory!

"Ide and Anna Dorothea walked on each side of him, but as Johanne crossed the threshold she turned back. Perhaps, as he gazed so wistfully at the red stones that had once made up Marsk Stig's castle, she remembered the old ballad about Marsk Stig's daughters:

The elder took the younger by the hand,
And forth they went to a distant land.

"Was she thinking of this song? Here were three daughters, and their father was with them. They turned off from the highway, where they had used to drive in their carriage, and made their way to Smidstrup Field, to a little shack of mud they had rented for ten marks a year. These bare walls and empty chambers were their new 'mansion.' Crows and jackdaws circled above their heads, screaming, as if in mockery, 'Turned out of the nest! Caw, Caw!' just as they had screamed in Borreby Wood when the oaks were being cut down. Mr Daae and his daughters must have understood the cries; they were not pleasant to listen to, so I did my best to drown them out by blowing about their ears.

"Thus they passed into the shack of mud on Smidstrup Field, and I passed away over field and moor, through bare hedges and leafless woods, away over open waters, to other lands - whew, whew! On, on! Year after year!"

What happened to Valdemar Daae; what happened to his daughters? The Wind will tell us:

"The last time I went to see them I found only Anna Dorothea, the pale hyacinth. She was then old and bent; it was half a hundred years later. She had lived the longest; she knew the whole story.

"Across the heath, near the town of Viborg, there stood the dean's beautiful new house, with red stones and pointed gables and chimneys always smoking busily. The gentle lady and her beautiful daughters sat on the balcony and looked out over the hanging buckthorn in the garden, out to the brown heath; what did they look at there? They looked at the stork's nest on that dilapidated cottage out there. Houseleek and moss made up most of the roof, if one could call it a roof; the stork's nest covered the greater part of it, and that alone was in good condition, for the stork kept it that way.

"It was a house to look at but not to touch," said the Wind. "I had to pass by it very gently. The hut was left there only for the sake of the stork's nest, for it was a

certainly no credit to the heath. The dean didn't want to drive the stork away, so the poor old woman who had lived in the hut had permission to stay there and shelter herself as well as he could. For that she owed thanks to the queer Egyptian bird; or was it because, so many years ago, she had pleaded for the nest of his wild black brother in Borreby Wood? Then she, the poor woman, was a happy child, a delicate, pale hyacinth in the garden of her ancestral home. She remembered it now; Anna Dorothea forgot nothing.

" 'Oh!' she sighed - yes, humans can sigh almost like the Wind himself does among the reeds and rushes. 'Oh! - there were no bells to ring at your funeral, Valdemar Daae! No groups of poor schoolboys sang psalms when Borreby's former master was laid to rest! Oh, but everything comes to an end - misery as well as happiness! It grieved my father worst of all that my sister Ide should become the wife of a peasant, a miserable peasant whom he could have punished by making him ride a hard plank. But he is at peace in the grave now, and you are with him, Ide! Oh, yes, ah, me - I am still here. I am old and poor. Deliver me, kind Christ!'"

Such was the prayer of Anna Dorothea in the miserable mud hut that was allowed to stand only for the sake of the stork.

"The boldest and most resolute of the three sisters I carried off myself," said the Wind. "She cut her clothes like a man's, disguised herself as a poor lad, and went into service as a sailor. She was sparing of speech, cross-looking, but quick at her work, although she couldn't climb the mast. So one night I blew her overboard, before anyone found out she was a woman; and I think that was the right thing to do.

"It was another Easter morning, bright as that morning when Valdemar Daae thought he had found the gold. Among those tumbledown walls beneath the stork's nest I could hear a faint voice chanting a psalm. It was Anna Dorothea's last hymn.

"There was no window with glass, only a hole in the wall; but the sun set itself there like a lump of gold, and as she gazed on its glory her heart broke and her eyes grew fixed. The stork had given her shelter to the day of her death. I sang at her funeral," said the Wind, "as I had sung at her father's; I know where his grave is, and her grave, but no one else knows.

"Now there are new times, changed times. The old highway is lost in the fields, old cemeteries have been made into new roads, and soon the steam engine, with

its row of cars, will come to rush over the forgotten graves of unknown ancestors. Whew, whew, whew! On, on!

"And that's the story of Valdemar Daae and his daughters; tell it better, you people, if you think you can," said the Wind, then veered around.

He was gone.

* * *