

Anne Lisbeth

Anne Lisbeth's complexion was like peaches and cream; her eyes were bright, her teeth shiny white; she was young, gay, and beautiful to look upon; her steps were light and her mind was even lighter. What would come of all this? "That awful brat," people said about her baby; and indeed he wasn't pretty, so he was left with the ditchdigger's wife.

Anne Lisbeth went into service in the Count's castle. There she sat in a magnificent room, dressed in silk and velvet; not a breath of wind was allowed to blow on her nor anyone to speak a harsh word to her. She was nurse to the Count's child, who was as beloved as a prince, beautiful as an angel. How she loved him!

Her own child was provided for in the ditchdigger's house, where his wife's temper boiled over more often than her pot. Sometimes the child was left alone all day long, and cried; but what nobody hears doesn't bother anyone! He cried himself to sleep, and in sleep there is neither hunger nor thirst; sleep is such a good invention!

"Ill weeds grow fast," says the proverb, and Anne Lisbeth's boy did indeed shoot up rapidly. It was as if he had taken root in the ditchdigger's household; his mother had paid for his upbringing and considered herself well rid of him. She was a city lady now, was well provided for, and whenever she went out she was beautifully dressed; but she never went to see her son at the ditchdigger's; that was too far from the city, and there was no reason for her to go there, anyway; the boy was theirs, and now, they decided, it was time for him to earn his keep; so he found work tending Mads Jensen's red cow.

The watchdog at Blegdam Manor sits proudly on top of its house in the sunshine, barking at passers-by, but in rainy weather it lies, warm and dry, inside its kennel. Anne Lisbeth's boy sat at the edge of a ditch in the sunshine, whittling sticks or watching three blossoming strawberry plants; he hoped they would soon turn into berries - that was his happiest thought - but the berries never ripened. Through sunshine or showers he sat there; he was often soaked to the skin, but the cold wind soon dried his clothes on his body. Whenever he went to the farmyard he received only kicks and cuffs and was called "stupid and ugly"; he was used to that - nobody loved him.

How did Anne Lisbeth's boy get along? How could he under such circumstances? It was his fate never to be loved.

At last he was literally pushed off the earth and sent to sea in a wretched little sailing vessel. Here he took the helm while the skipper drank - a frostbitten, shabby-looking little boy, and always hungry! One would think he never had enough to eat, and that really was the case.

It was late in the autumn, wet, raw, stormy weather, with a wind that cut through the warmest clothing, especially out at sea. A miserable little vessel with one sail drove on before the wind; it had a crew of two men, or rather a man and a half - the skipper and his boy. All day the light had been no brighter than twilight; now it grew still darker and it was bitterly cold. The skipper brought forth a bottle and a glass and took a swallow to warm himself up; the top of the glass was whole, but its foot had been broken off, so instead it had a little piece of wood, painted blue, to stand on. A drink is a great comfort, and two are even better. The boy was at the helm, holding it with rough, tarred hands, a wretched, shrinking form with unkempt hair; it was the ditchdigger's boy, registered in the parish records as the son of Anne Lisbeth.

The wind drove the ship hard before it; the sail bellied out before the power of the wind; it was rough and wet everywhere, and it might soon be even worse. Stop! What was that? What crashed? What sprang up? What grasped the little vessel? The boat whirled around. Was it a waterspout or a tidal wave? The boy at the helm screamed, "Lord Jesus, save us!" The vessel had struck on a great rock, and it sank like a waterlogged old shoe in a duckpond; sank with "man and mouse," as the saying goes; there were mice on board, but only a man and a half - the skipper and the ditchdigger's boy. No one saw it, save the screaming gulls above and the darting fishes beneath, and these hardly saw it clearly, for they fled in terror when the water poured into the doomed vessel. There it lay, scarcely a fathom below the water, and the two were drowned and forgotten. Only the glass was left, for the blue wooden block kept it afloat, and it drifted onto the shore. Where and when? That is of no consequence. That old broken glass had been useful, and had been loved, too,

in a way; which Anne Lisbeth's son had never been. However, in the kingdom of heaven no soul shall ever have cause to sigh, "Never loved!"

Anne Lisbeth meanwhile had been living for several years in a large town; she was addressed as "madam" and always held herself very proudly when she spoke of olden times, of the times when she rode in a carriage and talked with countesses and baronesses. And she talked of her foster child, that sweetest of little angels, and how he had loved her and she had loved him, how they had kissed and caressed each other, for he was her pride and joy. Now he was tall, fourteen years old, a bright, beautiful boy. She hadn't seen him since the time she carried him in her arms; for many years she had not been at the Count's castle, which was a long journey away.

"But I must find a way to get there someday," said Anne Lisbeth. "I must see my sweet young count again. He must be missing me, and loving me as he did when his angelic little arms clung around my neck and he said, 'Ann-Lis,' as sweet as a violin. Ah, yes, I must make short work of it and see him again!"

So she made the long trip, partly on foot and partly by wagon. The castle was as magnificent and the gardens as lovely as ever, but the servants were all new to her, and not one of them knew Anne Lisbeth or what she had once meant there. But the Countess would tell them, she thought, and her own boy; how she longed for him!

Now Anne Lisbeth was finally here, but they kept her waiting a long time. At last, just before the household went to dinner, she was called in. The Countess spoke to her very courteously and promised that after dinner she should see her beloved boy. So she had to wait for another summons.

How tall, thin, and lanky he had grown, but he still had his beautiful eyes and angelic mouth; and he looked straight at her without a word. Certainly he had no recollection of her. He turned to go, but she caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. "All right," he said, "that's enough," and then he left the room.

The ungrateful young nobleman, whom she had loved above all on earth and had made the pride of her life!

So Anne Lisbeth left the castle and made her way homeward along the highway. She was very sorrowful; he had been so cold and strange to her, without a word or thought for her, he whom she had once carried in her arms night and day and always had carried in her heart.

Then a huge black raven flew down and alighted on the road just in front of her and croaked again and again. "Oh, what bird of ill omen are you?" she said.

As she passed the ditchdigger's house, his wife was standing in the doorway, and they spoke to one another.

"How robust you look!" said the ditchdigger's wife. "You are plump and stout! Everything must be going well with you."

"Pretty well," replied Anne Lisbeth.

"The boat went down with them," said the ditchdigger's wife. "Skipper Lars and your boy were both drowned. So that ends that. But I hoped that the boy would have lived to help me out from time to time with a little money; he hasn't cost you anything for a long while, you know, Anne Lisbeth."

"Drowned, are they?" repeated Anne Lisbeth, and then said nothing more on that subject.

Anne Lisbeth was heartsick because the young count wouldn't speak to her, she who loved him so and had taken that long trip to see him; the journey had also been expensive. The pleasure it had brought her was little indeed. But she didn't say a word about it; she wouldn't lighten her mind by talking about it to the ditchdigger's wife, who might think she was no longer welcome at the Count's castle. While they were talking, the raven again flew screaming over her head. "That ugly black thing!" said Anne Lisbeth. "That's the second time it's frightened me today!"

She had brought some coffee beans and chicory with her; it would be a kindness to the ditchdigger's wife to give these to her and share a cup with her. While the old woman went to make the coffee Anne Lisbeth sat down and soon fell asleep.

Strangely enough, she dreamed of one whom she had never seen in her dreams before - her own child, who in that very house had hungered and wept, who had been kicked about in heat and cold, and who now lay deep below the sea, the good Lord only knew where. She dreamed that even as she sat there waiting for the coffee and smelling the fragrance drifting in to her from the kitchen, a shining little angel, beautiful as the young count, stood in the doorway and spoke to her.

"The end of the world is come," said the little angel. "Hold fast to me, for you are still my mother! You have an angel in paradise. Hold fast to me!" Then he took hold of her, and at that very moment there came a tremendous crash, as though the whole world were bursting into pieces, and as the angel rose in the air,

holding her tightly by her sleeves, she felt herself lifted from the ground. But then something heavy clung to her feet and dragged her down; it was as if a hundred other women were holding tightly to her, screaming, "If you are to be saved, we must be saved, too! Hold fast! Hold fast!" And then they all clung to her. The weight was too heavy; ritsch, ratsch! - her sleeves were split, and she fell down in terror - and awoke.

Her head was so dizzy she nearly fell off the chair where she was sitting. She could not understand her dream clearly, but she felt it foretold evil for her.

They had their coffee and talked for a while. Then Anne Lisbeth walked on to the nearest village, where she was to meet the carrier and drive home with him that evening. But when she got there, the carrier told her he couldn't start until the following evening. She thought it over - what it would cost her to stay there, the length of the distance home, and realized that if she went along the seashore instead of by road, it would be nearly two miles shorter; it was clear weather and the moon was at the full. And so Anne Lisbeth decided to go at once; she could be home the next day.

The sun had set, the vesper bells were still ringing - no, it was not the bells, but Peter Oxe's frogs croaking in their pond. Soon they, too, were silent, and then all was still; no bird raised its voice, for all were at rest; and it seemed the owl was not at home. The hush of death settled over forest and shore. She could hear her own footsteps in the sand. No wave disturbed the sea, the deep waters were at peace; everywhere was silence, silence among the living and the dead.

Anne Lisbeth walked on, not thinking of anything in particular, as we say. Yet, though she was not conscious of it, her thoughts were busy within her, as they always are within all of us. They lie asleep inside us, thoughts that have already shaped themselves into action and thoughts that have never yet stirred - there they lie still, and someday they will come forth. It is written: "The labor of righteousness is peace"; and again it is written: "The wages of sin are death!" Much has been said and written that one does not know - or, as it was with Anne Lisbeth, does not remember - but such things can appear before one's subconscious self, can come to mind, though one is unaware of it.

The germs of vices and virtues are alive deep in our hearts - in yours and mine; they lurk like tiny invisible seeds. There comes a ray of sunshine or the touch of an evil hand; you turn to the right or to the left, and the little seed quivers into life, puts forth shoots, and pours

its life throughout all the veins. Walking in a daydream, one may be unconscious of many painful thoughts, but they have their being within us all the same; thus Anne Lisbeth walked as if in a daydream, but her thoughts lived within her.

From Candlemas to Candlemas the heart has much written upon it, even the record of the whole year. Many sins are forgotten, sins in word or thought, sins against God or our neighbor or our own conscience; we think not of them, nor did Anne Lisbeth. She had broken no laws of the land; she knew that she was popular, esteemed, even respected.

Now, as she walked along the shore, suddenly something made her start and stand still! What was it? Only an old man's hat. Where could that have been washed overboard? She drew closer and looked down at it.

Oh! What was that lying over there? She became very frightened, and yet it was nothing but a heap of tangled seaweed, but to her fancy it had seemed for a moment the body of a man. As she continued on her way she remembered many stories she had heard as a child about the old superstitious belief in the "sea ghost" - the ghost of a drowned body that lay still unburied, washed by the tides on the wild seashore. The lifeless body itself could harm no one, but the "sea ghost" would follow a solitary wanderer, clinging fast to him and demanding to be carried to the churchyard and buried in consecrated ground. "Hold on! Hold on!" it would cry; and as Anne Lisbeth thought of these words, all at once there came back to her most vividly her dream - how the mothers had clung to her, screaming, "Hold fast! Hold on!" how the world had split beneath her, how her sleeves had been torn apart and she had fallen from the grasp of her child, who had tried to hold her up in the hour of doom. Her child, her own flesh and blood, whom she had never loved and scarcely ever thought of, was now lying at the bottom of the sea; any day his body might be washed ashore, and his ghost might follow her, wailing, "Hold on! Hold on! Bury me in Christian earth!"

Panic-stricken by this horrible thought, she ran faster and faster. Terror touched her heart with a cold, clammy finger; she was ready to faint. And as she looked upon the sea, the air grew thicker and thicker, a heavy mist fell over the scene, veiling tree and bush in strange disguises. She turned to seek for the moon behind her - and it was only a pale disk without rays. Then something heavy seemed to drag at her limbs;

"Hold on! Hold on!" she thought. And when she again turned toward the moon its white face seemed close beside her, and the mist hung like a shroud over her shoulders. "Hold on! Bury me in Christian earth!" - she could almost hear those words. And then she did hear a sound, so hollow, so hoarse - not the voices of the frogs in the pond nor the tones of the raven, for neither was near by, but clearly she heard the dreadful words, "Bury me! Bury me!" Yes! It was, it must be, the ghost of her own child, who could find no rest for his soul until his body was carried to the churchyard and laid in a Christian grave.

To the churchyard she would hurry; that very hour she would dig the grave; and as she turned toward the church her burden seemed to grow lighter, until it disappeared altogether. As soon as she felt that, she started back to follow the short cut to her home, but once more her limbs sank beneath her, and again the terrible words rang in her ears, "Hold on!

Hold on!" It sounded like the croaking of a frog and like a wailing bird.

"Bury me! Bury me!"

Cold and clammy was the mist, but still colder and clammiest were her hands and face under the touch of fear! A heavy weight again clung to her and seemed to drag her down; her heart quaked with thoughts and feelings that had never stirred within her before this moment.

In our Northern countries a single spring night is often enough to dress the beech wood, and in the morning sunlight it appears in its young, bright foliage.

In one second the seed of sin within us may be lifted to the light and unfolded into thoughts, words, and deeds; and thus it is when conscience is awakened. And our Lord awakens it when we least expect it; when there is no way to excuse ourselves, the deed stands open to view, bearing witness against us; thoughts spring into words, and words ring clearly throughout the world. Then we are horrified to find what we have carried within us, that we have not overcome the evil we have sown in thoughtlessness and pride. The heart hides within itself all vices and virtues, and they grow even in the shallowest ground.

Anne Lisbeth, overwhelmed with the realization of her sin, sank to the ground and crept along for some distance. "Bury me! Bury me!" still rang in her ears, and gladly would she have buried herself, if the grave could have brought eternal forgetfulness. It was her hour of awakening, and she was full of anguish and

horror; superstition made her blood run hot and cold. Many things of which she had feared to speak came into her mind. There passed before her, silently as a shadowy cloud in the clear moonlight, a vision she had heard of before. It was a glowing chariot of fire, drawn by four snorting horses, with fire blazing from their eyes and nostrils; and inside sat a wicked nobleman who more than a century ago had ruled here. Every midnight, he rode into his courtyard and right out again. He was not pale, like other ghosts; no, his face was as black as burnt coal. As he passed Anne Lisbeth he nodded and beckoned to her, "Hold on! Hold on! You may ride in a count's carriage once more and forget your child."

She pulled herself together and hastened to the churchyard, but the black crosses and the black ravens mingled before her eyes; the ravens screamed as they had done that morning, but now she could understand what they were saying. "I am Mother Raven! I am Mother Raven!" said each of them, and Anne Lisbeth knew the name fitted herself well; maybe she would be changed into a huge black bird like these, and have to cry as they cried, if she did not dig the grave.

Then she flung herself on the ground and began frantically digging with her hands in the hard earth; she dug till the blood ran from her fingers.

"Bury me! Bury me!" Still she heard those words, and every moment she dreaded to hear the cock crow and see the first streak of dawn in the east. For if her task were not completed before daylight she knew she would be lost.

And the cock did crow, and the light appeared in the east - and the grave was only half dug, and behold! an icy hand slid over her head and face, down to her heart. A voice seemed to sigh, "Only half the grave!" and a shadowy form drifted past her and down to the bottom of the ocean. Yes, it was indeed the "sea ghost," and Anne Lisbeth fell fainting to the earth, exhausted and overpowered, and her senses left her.

When she came to, it was bright daylight, and two men were lifting her up. She was lying, not in the churchyard, but down on the seashore, where she had been digging a deep hole in the sand, and had cut her fingers on a broken glass, the stem of which was stuck in a wooden block painted blue.

Anne Lisbeth was ill; her conscience had spoken loudly to her that night, and superstitious terror had mingled its voice with the voice of conscience. She had no power to distinguish between them; she was

now convinced that she had but half a soul, while the other half had been borne away by her child, away to the bottom of the ocean; and never could she hope for the mercy of God until she again possessed the half soul that was imprisoned in those deep waters.

Anne Lisbeth went home, but she was no longer the same. Her thoughts were like tangled yarn; there was only one thread that she could clearly grasp; just one idea possessed her, that she must carry the "sea ghost" to the churchyard and there dig a grave for it. Many a night they missed her from her home and always found her down by the shore, waiting for the "sea ghost." So a whole year passed, and then one night she disappeared and this time was sought in vain. All of the following day was spent in searching for her.

Toward evening, when the parish clerk entered the church to ring the bell for vespers, he found Anne Lisbeth lying before the altar. She had been here ever since dawn; her strength was nearly gone, but her eyes were bright and a faint rosy hue lighted her face; the last sunbeams shone down upon her, streamed over the altar, and glowed on the bright silver clasps of the Bible, open at this text from the Prophet Joel; "Rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God." This was just by chance, said people, as so many things happen by chance.

In Anne Lisbeth's face, as the setting sun shone upon it, were peace and grace. Now she was so happy, she said. Now she had won back her soul! During the past night the spirit of her own child had been with her, and had said, "You dug but half a grave for me, but now for a year and a day you have entombed me in your own heart, and that is the only proper resting place a mother can provide for her child!" And then he had returned to her lost half soul and guided her to the church!

"Now I am in God's house!" she said. "And only there can one be happy!"

When the sun had set, the soul of Anne Lisbeth had gone way up from this earth to where there are no fears nor the troubles that we have here, even such as those of Anne Lisbeth.

* * *