

The cripple

There was an old manor house where a young, splendid family lived. They had riches and many blessings; they liked to enjoy themselves, and yet they did a lot of good. They wanted to make everybody happy, as happy as they themselves were.

On Christmas Eve a beautifully decorated Christmas tree stood in the large old hall, where fire burned in the fireplaces and fir branches were hung around the old paintings. Here gathered the family and their guests; here they sang and danced.

The Christmas festivities had already been well under way earlier in the evening in the servants' quarters. Here also stood a large fire tree, with lighted red and white candles, small Danish flags, swans and fishing nets cut out of colored paper and filled with candies and other sweets. The poor children from the parish had been invited, and each had its mother along. The mothers didn't pay much attention to the Christmas tree, but looked rather at the Christmas table, where there lay woolen and linen cloths, for dresses and trousers. Yes, the mothers and the older children looked at this; only the smallest children stretched out their hands toward the candles, the tinsel, and the flags. This whole gathering had come early in the afternoon; they had been served Christmas porridge and roasted goose with red cabbage. Then when the Christmas tree had been looked over and the gifts distributed, each got a small glass of punch and apple-filled æbleskiver.

When they returned to their own humble rooms, they talked about the "good living," by which they meant the good food they had had, and the presents were again thoroughly inspected.

Now, among these folks were Garden-Kirsten and Garden-Ole. They were married, and earned their lodging and their daily bread by weeding and digging in the manor house garden. At every Christmas party they received a goodly share of the gifts, but then they had five children, and all five of them were clothed by the wealthy family.

"Our masters are generous people," they said. "But then they can afford it, and they get pleasure out of it."

"The four children received some good clothing to wear," said Garden-Ole, "but why is there nothing here for the Cripple? They always used to think of him, too,

even if he wasn't at the party."

It was the eldest of the children they called the Cripple, although his name was Hans. When little, he had been the most able and the liveliest child, but all of a sudden he had become "loose in the legs," as they called it. He could neither walk nor stand, and now he had been lying in bed for nearly five years.

"Yes, I got something for him, too," said the mother.

"But it's nothing much; it is only a book for him to read!"

"That won't make him fat!" said the father.

But Hans was happy for it. He was a very bright boy who enjoyed reading, but who also used his time for working, doing as much as he, who always had to lie bedridden, could, to be of some benefit. He was useful with his hands, knitted woolen stockings, and, yes, even whole bedcovers. The lady at the manor house had praised him and bought them. It was a book of fairy tales Hans had received; in it there was much to read and much to think about.

"It is of no use here in this house," said the parents, "but let him read, for it passes the time, and he can't always be knitting stockings."

Spring came; green leaves and flowers began to sprout, and the weeds, too, as one may call the nettles, even if the psalm speaks so nicely about them:

If every king, with power and might,
Marched forth in stately row,
They could not make the smallest leaf
Upon a nettle grow.

There was much to do in the manor house garden, not only for the gardener and his apprentices, but also for Garden-Kirsten and Garden-Ole.

"It's a lot of hard work," they said. "No sooner have we raked the walks, and made them look nice, than they are stepped on again. There is such a run of visitors at the manor house. How much it must cost! But the owners are rich people!"

"Things are strangely divided," said Ole. "We are our Lord's children, says the pastor. Why such a difference, then?"

"That comes from the fall of man!" said Kirsten.

In the evening they talked about it again, while Cripple-Hans was reading his book of fairy tales. Hard times, work, and toil had made the parents not only

hard in the hands but also hard in their judgment and opinion.

They couldn't understand, and consequently couldn't explain, the matter clearly, and as they talked they became more peevish and angry.

"Some people are prosperous and happy; others live in poverty. Why should we suffer because of our first parents' curiosity and disobedience! We would not have behaved as those two did!"

"Yes, we would!" said Cripple-Hans all of a sudden. "It is all here in this book!"

"What's in the book?" asked the parents.

And Hans read for them the old fairy tale about the woodcutter and his wife. They, too, argued about Adam's and Eve's curiosity, which was the cause of their misfortune also. The king of the country then came by. "Follow me home," he said, "and you shall be as well off as I, with a seven-course dinner and a course for display. That course is in a closed tureen, and you must not touch it, for if you do, your days of leisure are over!" - "What can there be in the tureen?" said the wife. "That's none of our business," said the husband. "Well, I'm not inquisitive," said the woman, "but I would like to know why we don't dare lift the lid; it must be something delicious!" - "I only hope there is nothing mechanical about it," said the man, "such as a pistol shot, which goes off and awakens the whole house!" - "Oh, my!" said the woman, and she didn't touch the tureen. But during the night she dreamed that the lid lifted itself, and from the tureen came an odor of the most wonderful punch, such as is served at weddings and funerals. In it lay a large silver coin bearing the following inscription, "If you drink of this punch, you will become the two richest people in the world, and all other people will become beggars!" Just then the woman awoke and told her husband about her dream. "You think too much about that thing," he said. "We could lift it gently," said the woman. "Gently," said the man. And the woman lifted the lid very, very gently. Then two small, sprightly mice sprang out and disappeared into a mousehole. "Good night," said the king. "Now you can go home and lie in your own bed. Don't blame Adam and Eve any more; you two have been just as inquisitive and ungrateful!"

"Where has that story in the book come from?" said Garden-Ole. "It sounds as if it were meant for us. It is something to think about."

The next day they went to work again, and they were

roasted by the sun and soaked to the skin by the rain. Within them were grumbling thoughts as they pondered over the story.

The evening was still light at home after they had eaten their milk porridge.

"Read the story about the woodcutter to us again," said Garden-Ole.

"But there are so many other beautiful stories in this book," said Hans, "so many you don't know."

"Yes, but those I don't care about!" said Garden-Ole. "I want to hear the one I know!"

And he and his wife heard it again.

More than one evening they returned to that story.

"It doesn't quite make everything clear to me," said Garden-Ole. "It's the same with people as it is with sweet milk when it sours; some becomes fine cheese, and the other, only the thin, watery whey; so it is with people; some are lucky in everything they do, live high all their lives, and know no sorrow or want."

This Cripple-Hans heard. His legs were weak, but his mind was bright. He read for them from his book of fairy tales, read about "The Man Without Sorrow and Want." Yes, where could he be found, for found he must be! The king lay on his sickbed and could not be cured unless he wore the shirt that had belonged to, and been worn on the body of, a man who could truthfully say that he had never known sorrow or want. A command was sent to every country in the world, to all castles and manors, to all prosperous and happy people. But upon thorough questioning, every one of them was found to have known sorrow and want. "I haven't!" said the swineherd, who sat laughing and singing on the edge of the ditch. "I'm the happiest person!" - "Then give us your shirt," said the messengers. "You will be paid for it with half of a kingdom." But he had no shirt at all, and yet he called himself the happiest person!

"He was a fine fellow!" shouted Garden-Ole, and he and his wife laughed as they hadn't laughed for years.

Then the schoolmaster came by.

"How pleased you are!" he said. "That is unusual in this house. Have you won a prize in the lottery?"

"No, it isn't that sort of pleasure," said Garden-Ole. "It is because Hans has been reading to us from his book of fairy tales; he read about 'The Man Without Sorrow and Want,' and that fellow had no shirt. Your eyes get moist when you hear such things, and from a printed book, at that! Everyone has a load to carry; one is not alone in that. That, at least, is a comfort!"

"Where did you get that book?" asked the schoolmaster.

"Our Hans got it at Christmastime over a year ago. The manor house family gave it to him. They know he likes reading and, of course, that he is a cripple. At the time, we would rather have seen him get two linen shirts. But that book is unusual; it can almost answer one's thoughts."

The schoolmaster took the book and opened it.

"Let's have the same story again," said Garden-Ole. "I don't quite get it yet. And then he must also read the one about the woodcutter."

These two stories were enough for Ole. They were like two sunbeams pouring into that humble room, into the oppressed thoughts that had made them cross and grumbly. Hans had read the whole book, read it many times. The fairy tales carried him out into the world, where he, of course, could not go because his legs would not carry him. The schoolmaster sat beside his bed; they talked together, and both of them enjoyed it. From that day on, the schoolmaster visited Hans often when his parents were at work, and every time he came it was a great treat for the boy. How attentively he listened to what the old man told him - about the size of the world and about its many countries, and that the sun was nearly half a million times larger than the earth and so far away that a cannon ball in its course would take twenty-five years to travel from the sun to the earth, while the light beams could reach the earth in eight minutes. Of course, every studious schoolboy knew all that, but to Hans this was all new, and even more wonderful than what he had read in the book of fairy tales.

Two or three times a year the schoolmaster dined with the manor house family, and on one of these occasions he told of how important the book of fairy tales was in the poor house, how alone two stories in it had been the means of spiritual awakening and blessing, that the sickly, clever little boy had, through his reading, brought meditation and joy into the house. When the schoolmaster departed from the manor house, the lady pressed two shiny silver dollars in his hand for little Hans.

"Father and Mother must have them," said the boy, when the schoolmaster brought him the money.

And Garden-Ole and Garden-Kirsten both said, "Cripple-Hans, after all, is also a profit and a blessing to us!"

A couple of days later, when the parents were away at

work at the manor house, the owners' carriage stopped outside; it was the kindhearted lady who came, happy that her Christmas gift had afforded so much comfort and pleasure to the boy and his parents. She brought fine bread, fruit, and a bottle of sweet sirup, but what was still more wonderful, she brought him, in a gilded cage, a little blackbird which whistled quite charmingly. The bird cage was placed on the old cabinet close by the boy's bed; there he could see and hear the bird; yes, and people way out on the highway could hear it sing.

Garden-Ole and Garden-Kirsten didn't return home until after the lady had driven away. Even though they saw how happy Hans was, they thought there would only be trouble with the present he had received.

"Rich people don't think very clearly," they said. "Now we have that to look after. Cripple-Hans can't do it. In the end, the cat will get it!"

Eight days went by, and still another eight days. During that time the cat was often in the room without frightening the bird, to say nothing of not harming it.

Then one day a great event occurred. It was in the afternoon, while the parents and the other children were at work, and Hans was quite alone. He had the book of fairy tales in his hand and was reading about the fisherman's wife who got her wishes fulfilled; she wished to be king, and that she became; she wished to be emperor, and that, too, she became; but then she wished to be the good Lord - and thereupon she again sat in the muddy ditch she had come from.

Now that story had nothing whatsoever to do with the bird or the cat, but it happened to be the story he was reading when this occurrence took place; he always remembered that afterward.

The cage stood on the cabinet, and the cat stood on the floor and stared, with its yellow-green eyes, at the bird. There was something in the cat's look that seemed to say, "How beautiful you are! I'd like to eat you!" That Hans understood; he could read it in the cat's face.

"Get away, cat!" he shouted. "You get out of this room!"

It looked as if the cat were getting ready to leap. Hans couldn't reach it and had nothing to throw at it but his greatest treasure, the book of fairy tales. This he threw, but the cover was loose and flew to one side, while the book itself, with all its leaves, flew to the other side. The cat slowly stepped backward in the room and looked at Hans as if to say, "Don't get yourself mixed up in this matter, little Hans! I can walk and I can

jump. You can do neither."

Hans was greatly worried and kept his eyes on the cat, while the bird also became uneasy. There wasn't a person he could call; it seemed as if the cat knew that, and it prepared itself to jump again. Hans shook his bedcover at it - he could, remember, use his hands - but the cat paid no attention to the bedcover. And after Hans had thrown it without avail, the cat leaped up onto the chair and onto the sill; there it was closer to the bird.

Hans could feel his own warm blood rushing through his body, but that he didn't think of; he thought only about the cat and the bird. The boy could not get out of bed without help; nor, of course, could he stand on his legs, much less walk. It was as if his heart turned inside him when he saw the cat leap straight from the window onto the cabinet and push the cage so that it overturned. The bird fluttered about bewilderedly in the cage.

Hans screamed; a great shock went through him. And without thinking about it, he sprang out of bed, moved toward the cabinet, chased the cat down, and got hold of the cage, where the bird was flying about in great fear. Holding the cage in his hand, he ran out of the door, onto the road. Then tears streamed from his eyes, and joyously he shouted, "I can walk! I can walk!" He had recovered the use of his limbs. Such a thing can happen, and it had indeed happened to Hans.

The schoolmaster lived near by, and to him he ran on his bare feet, clad only in his shirt and jacket, and with the bird in the cage.

"I can walk!" he shouted. "Oh, Lord, my God!" And he cried out of sheer joy.

And there was joy in the house of Garden-Ole and Garden-Kirsten, "We shall never live to see a happier day," said both of them.

Hans was called to the manor house. He had not walked that road for many years. The trees and the nut bushes, which he knew so well, seemed to nod to him and say, "Good day, Hans! Welcome back out here!" The sun shone on his face and right into his heart.

The owners of the manor house, that young, blessed couple, let him sit with them, and looked as happy as if he were one of their own family. But the happiest of the two was the lady, for she had given him the book of fairy tales and the little songbird. The bird was now dead, having died of fright, but it had been the means of getting his health back. And the book had brought the awakening to him and his parents; he still had it,

and he wanted to keep it and read it, no matter how old he became. Now he also could be of help to his family. He wanted to learn a trade; most of all he wanted to be a bookbinder, "because," he said, "then I can get all the new books to read!"

Later in the afternoon the lady called both his parents up to her. She and her husband had talked about Hans - he was a fine and clever boy, with a keen appreciation of reading and a capacity for learning. Our Lord always rewards the good.

That evening the parents were really happy when they returned home from the manor house, especially Kirsten.

But the following week she cried, for then little Hans went away. He was dressed in good, new clothes. He was a good boy, but now he must travel far away across the sea, go to school, and learn Latin. And many years would pass before they would see him again.

The book of fairy tales he did not take with him, because his parents wanted to keep that in remembrance. And the father often read from it, but only the two stories, for those he understood.

And they had letters from Hans, each one happier than the last. He lived with nice people, in good circumstances. But best of all, he liked to go to school; there was so much to learn and to know. He only wished to live to be a hundred years old, and eventually to become a schoolmaster.

"If we could only live to see it!" said the parents, and held each other's hands.

"Just think of what has happened to Hans!" said Ole. "Our Lord thinks also of the poor man's child! And to think that this should have happened to the Cripple! Isn't it as if Hans might have read it for us from the book of fairy tales!"

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