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Anne Lisbeth

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories [1930], translated by M. R. James)

Anne Lisbeth was like milk and blood, young and merry, and fair to see; her teeth gleamed white, her eyes were bright, her foot was light in the dance; and her mind was lighter yet, and what came of it? Why, the ugly whelp!—*he* was no beauty. He was put out with the ditcher's wife, and Anne Lisbeth went to the Count's mansion, and there she sat in a lovely room, clad in silks and velvets. Not a breeze durst blow on her, no one durst say her a hard word; it might be bad for her, and she dared not run the risk, for she was nursing the Count's boy, fine as a prince, fair as an angel. How she loved that child! As for her own, why, it had a roof over it, the ditcher's roof. No pot boiled over there, but the mouth might, and mostly there was no one at home: the boy might cry, but what the eye don't see the heart don't grieve. He cried himself to sleep, and when you are asleep you don't feel hunger or thirst. Sleep is an excellent invention.

Years went on—time goes and weeds grow, as the saying is—and Anne Lisbeth's boy shot up, though they said he was stunted in his growth. But he had quite grown into the household there, they had been paid for it; Anne Lisbeth was wholly rid of him. She was a town lady now; she had a cosy home of it there, and a hat on her head when she went out; but she never went to the ditcher's house, it was such a way off from the town: and, besides, she had nothing to do there. The boy was theirs, and they said he could eat his food. But he must do something for it, and so he looked after Mads Jensen's red cow; he could herd it and help himself a bit.

The watchdog at the hall drying ground sits in the sunshine on the top of his kennel very proud, and barks at everyone that goes by; when it rains he creeps inside and lies there dry and snug. Anne Lisbeth's boy sat on the dyke in the sunshine and whittled a tether-peg; spring came, and he knew of three strawberry plants in blossom; they would have berries right enough, that was the happiest thought he had, but no berries came. He sat there in the rain and mist and got wet to the skin, and then the keen wind dried his jacket on him. When he went to the farm he was hit and pushed about; he was nasty and ugly, the girls and lads said, but he was used to that—never loved.

How did Anne Lisbeth's boy get on? How should he get on? That was his lot; never loved.

From the land he was sent to sea on a rotten craft and sat at the helm while the skipper drank. Dirty and ugly, nipped with cold and miserable, you would say he had never once had enough to eat, and no more he had.

It was late in the year, raw, wet, blowing weather. The wind cut cold through the thickest of clothes, and worse at sea, and there under one sail went a rotten craft with only two men on board—or only one and a half, you might say—the skipper and his boy. Dark it had been all day, and now it grew blacker; it was a biting cold. The skipper took a dram to warm his inside. The bottle was got out and the glass too; the top was whole, but the foot broken off, and instead of it it had a bit of wood cut to fit and painted blue, to stand on. One dram did good, two would do more, thought the skipper. The boy sat at the tiller and held on to it with his hard tarry hands. Ugly he was, with tousled hair, stubby and shrivelled he was; the ditcher's boy; but in the church register he stood as Anne Lisbeth's.

The wind cut on in his own way, the boat in hers. The sail filled, the wind took hold, they flew along. All around was raw and wet; but something more was to come. Stop! What was that that struck, that broke, that caught on the boat? It whirled round! Was there a cloud-burst? Was it a heavy sea? The boy at the tiller screamed aloud: "Name of Jesus!" The boat had struck on a great rock in the sea-bottom, and sank like an old shoe in a street gutter. Sank with man and mouse, as they say; and mouse, no doubt, there was, but only a man and a half, the skipper and the ditcher's boy. Nobody saw it but the gulls and the fish down below, and even they didn't see it properly, for they shot away in a fright when the water burst into the boat and it sank. Hardly a fathom under water it lay. Out of sight were the two of them; out of sight, out of mind. Only the glass with the blue block for a foot didn't sink, the bit of wood held it up. The glass floated off, to be broken and washed up on the beach—where and when? Yes, there was nothing more for it to do, it had served its time and been loved: not so had Anne Lisbeth's boy. But in the kingdom of heaven no soul will ever again have to say: "Never loved."

Anne Lisbeth had lived in the market town for many a year now. She was called Ma'am—and how high she carried herself when she talked of old memories of the days in the Count's family, when she drove in a carriage and could chat with countesses and baronesses! That sweet child of hers, the Count's boy, was the prettiest angel, the loveliest soul. He had been so fond of her and she of him. They used to kiss each other and pat each other on the cheek: he was her joy, he was half her life. He had grown up now, fourteen years old he was, clever and handsome; she hadn't seen him since she carried him about in her arms; not for many years had she been to the great house; it was quite a journey to get there.

"I must go across once," said Anne Lisbeth. "I must go to my treasure, my sweet boy. I'm sure he longs for me, thinks of me, and loves me just as when he used to cling with his angel arms about my neck and say, 'An-lis'. It was like the music of a violin. Yes, I must get over there and see him again."

So, driving in the cattle cart and walking, she got to the Count's mansion. It was stately and brilliant as it had always been, with the garden in front just as before, but the people of the house were all strangers, and not one of them knew anything about Anne Lisbeth, or how important she had been there once. Ah, but the Countess would tell them all about that, and her boy too. How she yearned to see him!

And now there she was: she had some time to wait, and waiting-time is long. Before the gentle-folk went into dinner she was called in to the Countess and very kindly spoken to. She was to see her sweet boy after dinner, and then she was called in again.

How big he had grown, how tall and slim! But the lovely eyes, he had them still, and the angel mouth. He looked at her, but he said never a word. For certain he did not know her: he turned and was going away again, but she caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. "All right! That'll do!" he said, and with that he went out of the room—he, the centre of her affections, he whom she had loved and still loved best of all, he who was all her pride in this world.

Anne Lisbeth went out of the great house, along the open high road, and how depressed she was! He had been so distant with her and had no thought nor word for her: he whom she had carried night and day once on a time—whom she always carried in her heart.

A big black raven flew down on to the road in front of her and croaked and croaked again. "Get away," said she, "horrid unlucky bird that you are."

She had to pass by the ditcher's house: and there was the man's wife standing in the door, and so they had a talk together.

"You're well in yourself," said the ditcher's wife, "you're big and stout. Not much wrong with you."

"To be sure!" said Anne Lisbeth.

"The boat and them's lost," said the ditcher's wife. "Skipper Lars and the boy are drowned, both of them. That's the end of it for them: all the same, I had hoped the boy might have helped me to turn a penny some time. He won't cost you no more now, Anne Lisbeth."

"Drowned! Are they really?" said Anne Lisbeth: and no more was said about that. Anne Lisbeth was very much depressed because her boy-count had not cared to talk to her, to her who loved him and had taken that long journey to get here—it had cost money, too. The satisfaction she had got was little enough, but she wouldn't say a word of that here, she wouldn't ease her mind by talking of it to the ditcher's wife; she might think that Anne wasn't thought so much of now at the Count's. Just then the raven croaked again, flying over her.

"That black horror!" said Anne Lisbeth. "He'll give me a fright before to-day's over, I'm sure."

She had brought some coffee berries and chicory with her; it would be a kindness to the ditcher's wife to give her them to make a cup of coffee with, and she herself would take a cup too. The ditcher's wife went out to boil the coffee, and Anne Lisbeth sat down on a chair, and there she fell asleep.

She dreamt about someone she had never dreamt of before. It was odd enough; she dreamt about her own child, who had starved and squalled in this very house and been left to shift for himself, and now lay in the deep sea, God knew where. She dreamt she was sitting where she now sat, and that the ditcher's wife was outside making coffee—she could smell the berries roasting—and in the doorway there stood one who was beautiful—as beautiful every bit as the Count's boy; and the little one said: "The world is passing away! Hold fast to me, for you *are* my mother. You have an angel in the

kingdom of heaven. Hold fast to me."

So he caught her, but there came such a crash—it was the world falling to pieces—and the angel rose upwards, and held her fast by the sleeve, so tight, thought she, that she was lifted up from the earth. But something hung heavy on her legs and pulled at her back; it seemed as if a hundred women were clinging to her, and they cried: "If you're to be saved, we will too. Hang on, hang on!" And they did hang on, all of them. It was too much. Ritsch, ratsch! The sleeve tore, and Anne Lisbeth had a frightful fall—so that she woke with it, just on the point of tumbling off the chair she sat on. Her head was so confused that she couldn't remember in the least what she had been dreaming—only that it was something unpleasant.

The coffee was drunk, and they had a talk, and then Anne Lisbeth set out for the nearest town, where she was to meet the carrier and drive with him all that evening and night to her home. But when she found the carrier, he said that they could not start before the afternoon of next day; so she reckoned up what it would cost her to stay, thought over the distance, and decided that if she went along the shore and not by the high road it would be almost eight miles less. It was fine weather and full moon too. So she would walk; she would be at home next day.

The sun had set, and the evening bells were still ringing. No, it was not the bells, it was Peter Oxe's frogs croaking in the pools: and now they stopped, and everything was still: not a bird could be heard, they were all at rest, and the owl was not home yet. Soundless were wood and shore; as she walked on she heard her own footsteps on the sand: there was not a ripple in the sea, soundless was everything in the deep waters; dumb everything beneath them, alike the quick and the dead.

Anne Lisbeth walked on, thinking of nothing, as people say. She was far away from her thoughts, but the thoughts were not away from her; they are never away from us, they only lie in a slumber; both the thoughts that have been quickened and have laid themselves to sleep, and those that have not yet stirred. But sooner or later they come out, they can stir in our heart, stir in our head, or fall down over us.

"A good deed hath its fruit of blessing," so it is written, and "in sin is death", so is it also written. Much there is that stands written, much that is said; man knows it not, remembers it not; so was it with Anne Lisbeth. But it may rise up before you; it may come forth!

All vices, all virtues lie in our heart, in yours, in mine. They lie there like tiny invisible seeds. Then there comes from without a ray of sun, or the touch of an evil hand. You turn the corner, to right or left—aye, that may bring it about—and the little seed quivers and swells thereat, and bursts and pours its juices into all your blood, and behold you started! There are agonizing thoughts—not felt when one is in a slumber, yet stirring; Anne Lisbeth went onward in a slumber, the thoughts were stirring. From Candlemas to Candlemas the heart has a great deal written in its account-book, the whole year's reckoning. Much is forgotten—sin in word and thought against God, against our neighbour, against our own conscience: we do not think of it, and no more did Anne Lisbeth. She had done nothing against the law and justice of the land, she was highly thought of, well behaved, respectable, and she knew it. And now, as she walked along the shore, what was it that lay there? She stopped. What was it that had been washed up? An old hat lay there: where might that have gone overboard? She went nearer and stood and looked at it. Ah! What was lying there? She was quite frightened, but there was nothing to be frightened about; it was seaweed that lay in a tangle over a big oblong stone and looked like a man's body: only seaweed, but she had had a fright, and as she walked on, there came into her mind a great deal that she had heard when she was a child of the belief in the shore-crier, the ghost of the unburied one that lay washed up on the lonely shore. The "shorewasher", the dead corpse, did nothing, but its ghost, the shore-crier, followed the solitary wayfarer, clung fast to him, and demanded to be borne to the churchyard and buried in Christian earth. "Hang on, hang on!" it would cry; and as Anne Lisbeth repeated the words to herself, all at once the whole of her dream rose up before her in living light; how the mothers had clung to her with the cry: "Hang on, hang on!" How the world had sunk away, and her sleeve had torn and she had fallen from her child's grasp, who would have held her up in the hour of doom. Her child—own child of her body, he whom she never had loved, no, never once thought of—that child lay now on the sea's floor, and might come as the shore-crier and scream: "Hang on, hang on, or carry me to Christian earth." And as she thought of it, fear pricked at her heels so that she walked faster. The horror came like a cold clammy hand and laid itself on her heart's core, so that she was like to swoon. And as she looked out over the sea, all grew thicker and dimmer; a heavy fog came up and wrapped itself about the bushes and trees, and they took on strange forms beneath it. She turned to look at the moon which was behind her, and it was like a pale disk, rayless; and it seemed as if something had settled down heavily over all her limbs. "Hang on, hang on!" thought she: and as yet again she turned to look at the moon, it

seemed to her as if its white face were close behind her, and the mist hung like a cloak from her shoulders. "Hang on! Carry me to Christian earth"—she tried to listen, and heard a voice, so hollow, so strange—it came not from the frogs in the pool, and not from raven or crow, for of them she saw none. "Bury me! Bury me!" It sounded quite plain. It was the shore-crier of her own child, who lay at the bottom of the sea, and could have no peace till it was carried to the churchyard and its grave dug in Christian earth. Thither would she go, there would dig. She turned in the direction where the church lay, and then, she thought, the load became lighter. It disappeared, and she thought to turn again towards the shortest way home; but then it pressed on her again: "Hang on, hang on!" It sounded like the frog's croak, sounded like a whimpering bird, sounded as clear as could be: "Bury me! Bury me!"

The mist was clammy and cold, her hands and face were clammy and cold with fear; outside it wrapped her about, and within her there opened an infinite space, for thoughts she had never till now had an inkling of.

In a single night of spring here in the North the beech wood may bud forth and stand in its bright young beauty in the morning's sun. In a single instant the seed of guilt in thought, word and deed may lift and unfold itself—sown in our earlier life: it will rise and expand in a single instant when conscience wakes: and God will wake that when we least expect it. Then is there no excuse: the deed stands and bears witness, the thoughts take to themselves words, and the words ring out plain to be heard throughout the world. We are appalled at what we have borne within us and not killed, appalled at what in pride and thoughtlessness we have strewn about us. The heart has in hiding all virtues, but also all vices, and they can thrive even in the barrenest soil.

Anne Lisbeth dimly thought what we have put into words, and she was overwhelmed. She sank to the ground and crept along for a little way. "Bury me! Bury me!" said the voice, and gladly would she have buried herself if the grave were an eternal forgetfulness of all. It was with her the true time of awakening, in horror and anguish. Old beliefs ran hot and cold in her blood, much that she could not bear to speak of came into her mind. Noiselessly, like the shadow of a cloud in the clear moonlight, a phantom passed by her of which she had heard ere now. Close in front of her four snorting horses galloped past—fire gleaming from their eyes and nostrils—and they drew a red-hot coach in which sat the wicked lord who more than a hundred years before had lived hard by. Every night at midnight, it was said, he drove to his manor and turned straight back. He was not pale, as men say the dead are; no, he was black as coal, a coal that has burnt out. He nodded to Anne Lisbeth and beckoned to her. "Hang on, hang on! And then you can ride in the Count's coach again and forget your child."

She hurried on at a quicker pace, and drew near the churchyard; but the black crosses and black ravens were confused together before her eyes. The ravens croaked as the raven had croaked that day; but now she understood what it was they were saying. "I am a raven-mother, I am a raven-mother," every one of them said, and Anne Lisbeth knew that the name fitted her too, and perhaps she would be changed into a black bird like that, and have to go on crying as they cried unless she got the grave dug.

And now she flung herself on the ground and dug a grave in the hard earth with her hands, so that the blood ran from her fingers.

"Bury me! Bury me!" was still the cry, and she dreaded the cock-crow and the first streak of red in the east, for if that came before her task was ended she was lost. And the cock crowed, and there came light in the East—the grave was only half dug. An ice-cold hand passed over her head and face, down to her heart. "Only half a grave!" sighed the voice, and died away, down toward the bottom of the sea—yes, it was the shore-crier. Anne Lisbeth sank to the earth overwhelmed, stricken, without thought or sensation.

It was bright day when she came to herself, and two men were lifting her up. She was not lying in the churchyard, but down on the shore, and there she had dug in front of her a deep hole in the sand, and cut her fingers deep on a broken bit of glass, the sharp splinter of which was stuck in a wooden foot painted blue. Anne Lisbeth was very ill. Her conscience had shuffled the cards of old beliefs, and laid them out and expounded them, to the effect that now she had but half a soul. The other half her child had taken away with him to the bottom of the sea; and she could never fly upward to the mercy of heaven till she got back the other half, which was imprisoned in the deep water. Anne Lisbeth returned to her home, but she was no longer the woman she had been. Her ideas were tangled like a ravelled skein; she had but one thread clear, that she must carry the shore-crier to the churchyard and dig it a grave, and so get back the whole of her soul.

Many a night she was missed from her home, and always found down on the shore, where she waited for the shore-crier. A whole year passed away thus, and then she disappeared again one night and could not be found; all the next day was

spent in fruitless search.

Towards evening, when the sexton entered the church to ring the bell for sundown, he saw Anne Lisbeth lying before the altar. There she had been since early morning. Her strength was well nigh gone, but her eyes were shining and her face had a rosy glow. The last rays of the sun shone in upon her, and gleamed over the altar table and the bright clasps of the Bible which lay there, open at the words of the prophet Joel: "Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God." Merely an accident, people said; so many things are merely accidents.

On the face of Anne Lisbeth, lit up by the sun, peace and pardon were to be read. It was well with her, she said, she had won the fight. That night the shore-crier, 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 buried me wholly in your heart, and that is where a mother can best bury her child." And then he had given her back the lost half of her soul, and guided her here into the church.

"Now I am in God's house," she said, "and they that dwell there are happy."

When the sun had quite sunk down, Anne Lisbeth's soul was risen quite up, where there is no more any fear, if the fight has been fought out: and it had been fought out by Anne Lisbeth.

[End of *Anne Lisbeth* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]