

Ole, the Tower Keeper

Hans Christian Andersen

"In this world things go up and down and down and up!" said Ole, the tower keeper. "Now I can't get any higher! Up and down and down and up; that's the fate of most of us; in fact, we all become tower keepers at last; we look at life and things from above."

Thus spoke my friend Ole, in his tower - a chatty, jolly fellow who seemed to say whatever came into his head yet had so many serious thoughts concealed deep in his heart. He came from a good family; there were some who said that he was a conference councilor's son, or might have been. He had a good education, had been the assistant to a schoolmaster, the deputy of a parish clerk, but what help could that have been! When he lived with the parish clerk it was agreed that he should have free use of everything in the house. He was then young and a bit of a dandy as we call it, and he wanted shoe polish to brush and shine his boots with; but the parish clerk would only allow him grease, and so they had a quarrel. One spoke of stinginess, the other of vanity; the shoe polish became the black cause of their strife, and so they separated.

But what he wanted from the parish clerk he wanted of the world generally - the very best polish, and he always got its substitute, grease, so he turned his back on everybody and finally became a hermit. But in a big city, hermitage with a livelihood is to be found only in the church tower, so up it he went, and there he would smoke his pipe and pace up and down on his lonely walks, looking upward and downward, and talking in his own way about what he saw or didn't see, what he read in books or in himself.

I often lent him books to read, good books, for by the company one keeps shall he be known. He didn't care for the English-governess type of novel, he said, nor for the French ones, either, which he called a brew of empty wind and rose stalks; no, he liked biographies and books about the wonders of nature. I visited him at least once a year, generally soon after the new year; he always had something to tell which the change of year suggested to his thoughts.

I shall tell about two visits, and use his own words as far as I can.

FIRST VISIT

Among the books I had recently lent Ole was one about pebbles, which had greatly pleased him.

"They are truly veterans from olden times, those pebbles," he said, "yet people pass them by without thinking, and trample them down in fields or on beaches, those fragments of antiquity. I have done so myself. From now on I shall hold every paving stone in high respect! Thank you for the book; it has driven cobwebby old thoughts and ideas out of my head and made me eager to read more of the same type.

"The romance of the earth is truly the most fascinating of all romances. It's a shame we can't read the first parts of it; but they're written in a language we haven't learned yet; we have to dig away among strata and rocks, puzzling out bits here and there from the early acts of earth's drama. The acting persons of the drama, old Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve, don't make their entrance before the sixth act; that's far too late for many impatient readers, who want them to come on stage right away, but it's all the same to me. It is indeed a most marvelous romance, and here we are all in it. We creep and crawl about, but always stay where we are, while all the while the globe keeps turning around, but never splashing its ocean spray over us. The crust on which we move remains solid so that we never fall through, and so it is a story of millions of years, with steady progress.

"Many thanks for your book on pebbles; those old fellows could tell us so much if only they

could talk. Isn't it funny to be a nobody once in a while, like me, and then remember that we all, whether we have the best shoe blacking or not, are just like tiny ants on the anthill of the world, even though some of us ants have stars and decorations, honors and offices? And it makes you feel so ridiculously young, compared with the millions of years of these venerable stones! I read your book on New Year's Eve, and became so lost in it that I entirely forgot my usual New Year's Eve entertainment - watching the wild hunt to Amager; but you don't know what that is.

"The witches' flight to the Blocksberg on Midsummer Eve is, of course, well known, but we also have a wild mob, in this land and in our time, which speeds to Amager on New Year's Eve. All the bad poets, poetesses, newspaper hack writers, musicians, and artistic lions who are not worth anything else ride through the air to Amager on New Year's Eve. They sit astride their pencils or quill pens - for steel pens are too stiff for riding. I watch them every New Year's Eve - I could name most of them, but it isn't worth while - they don't imagine that anybody knows of their trip through the air on the quill pens. There is a sort of a niece of mine who is a fisherwoman, and writes scandal and slander for three respectable papers; she says she has been out there as an invited guest, and they carried her, for since she cannot herself use a pen she couldn't ride on one. She has described the whole affair. Half of what she told me is probably a lie, but the other half is enough.

"When she was well under way they all broke into song; each of the guests had written his own song, and each sang his own composition, because, of course, he thought it was the best. They were all very much alike; and all sung to the same melody. Then, in little groups, up marched those who occupy themselves only as chatterboxes. They were now singing bells that sang alternately. Then came the small drummers, who drummed in family groups. Those who write anonymously were introduced - those, let me say here, whose grease is used for shoe polishing. There was the executioner, and his helper, and the helper was the worst, for otherwise no one would have paid any attention to him. There was the street sweeper with his cart, who turns over his dustbin and calls it "good, very good, remarkably good." During all this merriment, such as it was, there would shoot forth from holes scattered about now a gaunt stalk, now a leafless tree, a huge flower, or a large mushroom, and finally a roof that bore upon itself everything this honorable assembly had given to the world during the preceding year. Bright sparks could be seen glittering among them - there were the borrowed thoughts they had used, which now cut themselves loose and flew up like fireworks.

"A game called 'the stick burns' was played; and the younger poets played 'heartburns.' The jesters told their jokes, and the jokes rang out like empty pots being thrown against doors. My niece said it was most amusing; she told me a good deal more, too malicious to mention, but very funny. So you see, since I know so much about this midnight festival, it's only natural I should be interested in watching for it every New Year's Eve.

"But this year I forgot all about it. I was rolling through millions of years with my rocks, watching them break loose up in the North, drift along on icebergs ages before the building of Noah's ark, sink to the bottom of the sea, then mount again on a reef, and at last peer up through the water and say, 'This shall be Zealand!' I saw them become the homes of many different birds whose species we don't know, and the homes of savage chieftains we don't know either, until the ax hewed out in Runic letters the names of a few that can thus take a place in our histories. I had gone beyond all lapse of time and had become a nonentity.

"Then three or four beautiful shooting stars fell; they shone brightly, and started my thoughts off in an entirely different direction. Does anybody know what a shooting star really is? The learned do not know! But I have my own idea about them, and this is it:

"How often is it that not a single word of thanks or blessing is given for a generous action or beautiful work that rejoices all who witness it! Yes, often that gratitude is voiceless, but

still it doesn't fall wasted to the ground. I can fancy it is caught up by the sunshine, and eventually the sunbeams carry it away and shower it over the head of the benefactor. Sometimes the thanks of a whole nation are thus due; they may come late, but at last they do come like a bouquet, when a shooting star falls over the grave of some hero or statesman. Thus it's a great thrill to me when I see a shooting star, especially on New Year's Eve, and try to guess for whom that bouquet of gratitude can be meant. A short time ago a radiant shooting star fell in the southwest - now for whom could that have been intended? I am sure it fell right over the bank by the Flensborg Fiord, where the white-crossed flag of Denmark floats over the graves of Schleppegrell, Laessoe, and their comrades. Another one fell in the heart of Zealand, fell upon Sorö; I'm sure that was a bouquet for Holberg's grave, a thanksgiving from the multitude who during years past have laughed over his delightful plays.

"It is a great thought, a happy thought, to know that a shooting star like that will fall upon our own graves! Well, none will ever fall on mine; no sunbeam will bring me thanks, for I haven't done anything to be thanked for. I don't even merit polish for my boots," said Ole. "My lot in life has been only to get grease."

SECOND VISIT

On another New Year's Day I went to the tower, and this time Ole talked about the "*Skaal*" toasts that had been drunk with the change of the old year to the new. Then he gave his story of the glasses, and there was sense in what he said.

"On New Year's Eve when the clock strikes twelve, people rise from the table with freshly filled glasses and drink a toast to the new year. So people begin the new year with a glass in their hands, and that's fine for people who like to drink; others start the year by going to bed, and that's first rate for lazybones! But then, sleep is sure to play a leading part in the coming year, and so is the glass.

"Do you know what lives in the glasses?" he asked. "Why, health, happiness, and joy live there! Misfortune and bitter misery dwell there! When I count up the glasses I can tell the gradations of the different people.

"You see, the first glass is the glass of health. In it grows the health herb. Stick that into your beam, and by the end of the year you may sit in the arbor of health.

"Now take the second glass. Ah, yes, out of it there flies a little bird, singing with such innocent happiness that men listen to it and perhaps sing with it, 'Life is beautiful! We will not hang our heads! Put cheer and courage forth!'

"From the third glass a tiny winged imp darts out. You can't call him a little angel, for he has the blood and soul of a goblin, all for jest and mischief. He lurks behind our ear and whispers some queer drollery; he creeps into our heart and warms it until one becomes frolicsome, becomes the great wit in a party of wits.

"In the fourth glass there is neither herb, nor bird, nor fairy. That glass is the boundary line of sense, beyond which you should never, never pass.

"Do you take the fifth glass? Then will you weep over yourself, or laugh with a fierce shout. For out of this glass will spring riotous Prince Carnival, flippant and wild as an elf. He will overcome you, until you forget your dignity, if you ever had any, and forget things you ought not to forget. All is dance and song and revelry; the masks carry you away with them, and the daughters of evil, in silk and flowers, come with flowing hair and alluring charms. Tear yourself loose if you can!

"And the sixth glass! Yes, in that sits Satan himself, a little, well-dressed charming man who never contradicts you, tells you that you are always right. He comes with a lantern to guide you home! What sort of home, and what sorts of spirits live there? There's an old legend about a saint who was ordered to choose one of the seven deadly sins, and chose

what he thought was the least - drunkenness. But in it he committed all the other six. Man and the devil mixed with blood - that is the sixth glass; and all the evil seeds within us thrive on it, and each of them sprouts with a force like the grain of mustard, in the Bible, and grows into a mighty tree, spreading out over the whole world.

"Most have nothing before them but to be put into the smelting oven and be cast in a new mold.

"This is the story of the glasses," said Ole, the tower keeper, "and it can be told both with shoe polish and grease! I give it to you with both."

That was my second visit to Ole. If you want to hear more, we will have to pay him another visit.