

Urbanus

Hans Christian Andersen

In a cloister there lived a young man named Urbanus, who was pious and studious. He was entrusted with the keys to the cloister's book collection and faithfully guarded this treasure. He wrote many beautiful books and frequently studied the Holy Scriptures and other works.

Then one day Urbanus, who had been reading the writings of the Apostle Paul, found in the Bible: "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." This impressed the young man as being quite impossible; he could not believe it, and he was tormented by doubt and ponderous thoughts.

It so happened that one morning the monk walked down from the gloomy library and out into the beautiful, sunlit cloister garden, and found a little, gaily colored wood bird sitting on the ground looking for a few grains of corn. Presently it flew up onto a branch, where it sang most strangely and wonderfully.

The little bird was not at all shy, and it permitted the monk to come very close. He would have liked to catch it, but the bird flew off, from tree to tree. The monk followed it, and it sang continuously with a clear and lovely voice. But the young monk could not catch it, although he pursued it for a considerable distance, from the cloister garden into the wood.

He finally gave up and returned to the cloister, but what he saw looked strangely changed to him. Everything had become extended, larger and more beautiful, both the buildings and the garden, and instead of the low, little old cloister church stood a mighty cathedral with three towers. The monk thought this strange and almost magic. And when he reached the cloister gate and hesitantly pulled the bell cord, he was met by a gatekeeper who was a complete stranger to him and who astoundedly drew away from him.

As the monk walked through the cloister cemetery, he noticed many, many tombstones that he did not remember having seen before.

And when he approached the cloister brethren they all drew away from him horrified.

Only the abbot, but not the abbot he had known - another, younger one, completely unknown to him - stood still, and pointing the crucifix toward him, he said, "In the name of the Crucified, who are you, unsaintly soul, who have risen from the grave, and what are you searching for among us the living?"

At that the monk shuddered, and with downcast eyes, he staggered like a senile old man. And, look, he had a long, silver-white beard that reached down below his belt, where the bunch of keys to the locked

bookcases still hung.

With shy reverence the monks led the curious-looking stranger to the abbot's seat.

There the abbot gave the library key to a young monk, who opened the library door and brought forth a handwritten chronicle in which one could read that a monk named Urbanus had completely vanished some three hundred years previously. No one knew if he had escaped or had met with an accident.

"Oh, wood bird! Was it your song!" said the stranger with a sigh. "I followed you and listened to your song for less than three minutes, and in the meantime three centuries went by. You have sung for me the song about eternity, the eternity I could not understand. But now I understand, and worship you, O Lord, in the dust. I am but a grain of dust," he said, bowing his head, and his body vanished into dust.

