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Danish Popular Legends.

[400]

By Hans Christian Andersen.

Denmark is rich in old legends of historical persons, churches, and manors, of hills, of fields, and bottomless moors; sayings from the days of the great plague, from the times of war and 5 peace. The sayings live in books, and on the tongues of the people; they fly far about like a flock of birds, but still are as different from one another as the thrush is from the owl, as the wood-pigeon from the gull. Listen to me, and I will tell you some of them. 10

It happened one evening in days of yore, when the enemy were pillaging the Danish country, that a battle had been fought and won by the Danes, and many killed and wounded lay on the field of battle. One of these, an enemy, had lost both his legs by a shot. A Danish soldier, standing near by, had 15 just taken out a bottle filled with beer, and was about to put it to his mouth, when the badly wounded man asked him for a drink. As he stooped to hand him the bottle, the enemy discharged his pistol at him, but the shot missed. The soldier drew his bottle back again, drank half of it, and gave the remaining 20 half to his enemy, only saying, »You rascal, now you will only get half of it.«

The king afterward hearing of this, granted the soldier and his descendants an armorial bearing of nobility, on which was painted a half-filled bottle, in memory of his deed. 25

There is a beautiful tradition worth telling about the church-bell of Farum. The parsonage stood close by the church. It was a dark night late in the fall, and the minister was sitting up at

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a late hour preparing his sabbath sermon, when he heard a slight, strange sound from the large church-bell. No wind was blowing, and the sound was inexplicable to him; he got up, took the keys, and went into the church. As he entered the church the sound stopped suddenly, but he heard a faint sigh from above. »Who is there, disturbing the peace of the church?» he asked, in a loud voice. Footsteps were heard from the tower, and he saw in the passage-way a little boy advancing toward him.

»Be not angry!» said the child. »I slipped in here when the Vesper Service was rung; my mother is very sick!» and now the little boy could not say more for the tears that choked him. The minister patted him on the cheek, and encouraged him to be frank, and to tell him all about it.

»They say that my mother – my sweet, good mother – is going to die; but I knew that when one is sick unto death he may recover again and live, if in the middle of the night one dares enter the church, and scrape off a little rust from the large church-bell; that is a safeguard against death. Therefore I came here and hid myself until I heard the clock strike twelve. I was so afraid! I thought of all the dead ones, and of their coming into the church. I dared not look out; I read my Lord's Prayer, and scraped the rust off the bell.»

»Come, my good child,« said the minister; »our Lord will forsake neither thy mother nor thee.« So they went together to the poor cottage, where the sick woman was lying. She slept quietly and soundly. Our Lord granted her life, and his blessings shone over her and her son.

There is a legend about a poor young fellow, Paul Vendelbe, who became a great and honored man. He was born in Jutland, and had striven and studied so well that he got through the examination as student, but felt a still greater desire to become a soldier and stroll about in foreign countries. One day he walked with two young comrades, who were well off, along the ramparts of Copenhagen, and talked to them of his desire. He stopped suddenly, and looked up at the window of the Professor's house, where a young girl was seated, whose beauty had astonished him and the two others. Perceiving how he blushed, they said in joke, »Go in to her, Paul; and if you can get a voluntary kiss from her at the window, so that we can see it, we will give you money for travelling, that you may go abroad and see if fortune is more favorable for you there than at home.«

Paul Vendelbo entered into the house, and knocked at the parlor door.

»My father is not at home,« said the young girl.

»Do not be angry with me!« he answered, and the blood rushed up into his cheeks, »it is not your father I want!« And now he told her frankly and heartily his wish to try the world and acquire an honorable name; he told her of his two friends who were standing in the street, and had promised him money for travelling on the condition that she should voluntarily give him a kiss at the open window; and he looked at her with such an open, honest, and frank face, that her anger disappeared.

»It is not right for you to speak such words to a chaste maid,« said she; »but you look so honest, I will not hinder your fortune!« As she led him to the window, and gave him a kiss. His friends kept their promise, and furnished him with money. He went into the service of the Czar, fought in the battle of Pultowa, and acquired name and honor. Afterward, when Denmark needed him, he returned home, and became a mighty man of the army and of the king's council. One day he entered the Professor's plain room, and it was not just the Professor he wished to see this time either; it was again his daughter, Ingeborg Vinding, who gave him the kiss, — the inauguration of his fortune. A fortnight after, Paul Vendelbo Loevenørn (Lion-eagle) celebrated his wedding.

The enemy made once a great attack on the Danish island of Funen. One village only was spared; but this was also soon to be sacked and burnt. Two poor people lived in a low-studded house, in the outskirts of the town. It was a dark winter evening; the enemy was expected; and in their anxiety they took the Book of Psalms, and opened it to see if the psalm which they first met with could render them any aid or comfort. They opened the book, and turned to the psalm, »A mighty fortress is our God.« Full of confidence, they sang it; and, strengthened in faith, they went to bed and slept well, — kept by the Lord's guardianship. When they awoke in the morning it was quite dark in the room, and the daylight could not penetrate; they went to the door, but could not open it. Then they mounted the loft, got the trap-door open, and saw that it was broad daylight; but a heavy drift of snow had in the night fallen upon the whole house and hidden it from the

23 Loevenørn] Loevendørn fejl A.

enemies, who in the night-time had pillaged and burnt the town. Then they clasped their hands in thankfulness, and repeated the psalm, »A mighty fortress is our God!« The Lord had guarded them, and raised an intrenchment of snow around
5 them.

From North Seeland there comes a gloomy incident that stirs the thoughts. The church of Roervig is situated far out toward the sand hills by the stormy Kattegat. One evening a large ship dropped anchor out there, and was presumed to be
10 a Russian man-of-war. In the night a knocking was heard at the gate of the parsonage, and several armed and masked persons ordered the minister to put on his ecclesiastical gown and accompany them out to the church. They promised him good pay, but used menaces if he declined to go. He went with them.
15 The church was lighted, unknown people were gathered, and all was in deep silence. Before the altar the bride and bridegroom were waiting, dressed in magnificent clothes, as if they were of high rank, but the bride was pale as a corpse. When the marriage ceremony was finished, a shot was heard, and
20 the bride lay dead before the altar. They took the corpse, and all went away with it. The next morning the ship had weighed anchor. To this day nobody has been able to give any explanation of the event.

The minister who took part in it wrote down the whole event
25 in his Bible, which is handed down in his family. The old church is still standing between the sand hills at the tossing Kattegat, and the story lives in writing and in memory.

I must tell you one more church legend. There lived in Denmark, on the island of Falster, a rich lady of rank, who had
30 no children, and her family was about to die out. So she took a part of her riches, and built a magnificent church. When it was finished, and the altar-candles lighted, she stepped up to the altar-table and prayed on her knees to our Lord, that He would grant her, for her pious gift, a life upon the earth as
35 long as her church was standing. Years went by. Her relations died, her old friends and acquaintances, and all the former servants of the manor were laid in their graves; but she, who made such an evil wish, did not die. Generation upon generation became strange to her, she did not approach anybody,
40 and nobody approached her. She wasted away in a long dotage, and sat abandoned and alone; her senses were blunted, she was

like a sleeping, but not like a dead person. Every Christmas Eve the life in her flashed up for a moment, and she got her voice again. Then she would order her people to put her in an oak coffin, and place it in the open burying-place of the church. The minister then would come on the Christmas night to her, in order to receive her commands. She was laid in the coffin, and it was brought to the church. The minister came, as ordered, every Christmas night, through the choir up to the coffin, raised the cover for the old, wearied lady, who was lying there without rest. 10

»Is my church still standing?« she asked, with shivering voice; and upon the minister's answer, »It stands still!« she sighed profoundly and sorrowfully, and fell back again. The minister let the cover down, and came again the next Christmas night, and the next again, and still again the following. 15 Now there is no stone of the church left upon another, no traces of the buried dead ones. A large whitethorn grows here on the field, with beautiful flowers every spring, as if it were the sign of the resurrection of life. It is said that it grows on the very spot where the coffin with the noble lady stood, where 20 her dust became dust of earth.

There is an old popular saying that our Lord, when he expelled the fallen angels, let some of them drop down upon the hills, where they live still, and are called »Bjergfolke« (mountain goblins), or »Trolde« (imps). They are always afraid, and flee 25 away when it thunders, which is for them a voice from heaven. [473] Others fell down in the alder moors; they are called »Elverfolke« (alder folks), and among them the women are very handsome to look at, but not to trust; their backs are also hollow, like a dough-trough. Others fell down in old farms and houses; they 30 became dwarfs and »Nisser« (elves). Sometimes they are wont to have intercourse with men, and a great many stories about them are related which are very strange.

Up in Jutland lived in a large hill such a mountain goblin, together with a great many other imps. One of his daughters 35 was married to the smith of the village. The smith was a bad man, and beat his wife. At last she got tired of it, and one day as he was going again to beat her, she took a horse-shoe and broke it over him. She possessed such an immense strength, that she easily could have broken him in pieces too. He thought 40 about it, and did not beat her any more. Yet it was rumored abroad, and her respect among the country-people was lost, and

she was known as a »Trolde barne (an imp child). No one in the parish would have any intercourse with her. The mountain goblin got a hint of this; and one Sunday, when the smith and his wife, together with other parishioners, were standing in the church-yard, waiting for the minister, she looked out over the bay, where a fog was rising.

»Now comes father,« she said, »and he is angry!« He came, and angry he was.

»Will you throw them to me, or will you rather do the catching?« he asked, and looked with greedy eyes upon the church-people.

»The catching!« she said; for she knew well that he would not be so gentle when they fell into his hands. And so the mountain goblin seized one after another, and flung them over the roof of the church, while the daughter, standing on the other side, caught them gently. From that time she got along very well with the parishioners; they were all afraid of the mountain goblin, and many of that kind were scattered about the country. The best they could do was to avoid quarreling with him, and rather turn his acquaintance to their profit. They knew well that the imps had big kettles filled with gold money, and it was certainly worth while to get a handful of it; but for that they had to be cunning and ingenious, like the peasant of whom I am going to tell you; as also of his boy, who was still more cunning.

The peasant had a hill on his field, which he would not leave uncultivated; he ploughed it, but the mountain goblin, who lived in the hill, came out and asked, -

»How dare you plough upon my roof?«

»I did not know that it was yours!« said the peasant; »but it is not advantageous for any of us to let such a piece of land lie uncultivated. Let me plough and sow! and then you reap the first year what is growing over the earth, and I what grows in the earth. Next year we will change.« They agreed; and the peasant sowed the first year carrots, and the second corn. The mountain goblin got the top part of the carrots, and the roots of the corn. In this way they lived in harmony together.

But now it happened that there was to be a christening in the house of the peasant. The peasant was much embarrassed, as he could not well omit inviting the mountain goblin, with whom he lived in good accord; but if the imp accepted his invitation,

1 barn] barn; fejl A.

the peasant would fall into bad repute with the minister and the other folk of the parish. Cunning as the peasant ordinarily was, this time he could not find out how to act. He spoke about it to his pig-boy, who was the more cunning of the two.

»I will help you!« said the boy; and taking a large bag, he 5 went out to the hill of the mountain goblin; he knocked, and was let in. Then he said that he came to invite him to the christening. The mountain goblin accepted the invitation, and promised to come.

»I must give a christening-present, I suppose; mustn't I!« 10

»They usually do,« said the boy, and opened the bag. The imp poured money into it.

»Is that sufficient?« The boy lifted the bag.

»Most people give as much!« Then all the money in the large money kettle was poured into the bag. 15

»Nobody gives more – most less.«

»Let me know, now,« said the mountain goblin, »the great guests you are expecting.«

»Three priests and one bishop,« said the boy.

»That is fine; but such gentlemen look only for eating and 20 drinking, – they don't care about me. Who else comes!« – »Mother Mary is expected!« – »Hm, hm! but I think there will always be a little place for me behind the stove! Well, and then?«

»Well, then comes »our Lord.« – »Hm, hm, hm! that was mighty! but such highly distinguished guests usually come late 25 and go away early. I shall therefore, while they are in, sink away a little. What sort of music shall you have?«

»Drum-music!« said the boy; »our Father has ordered a 30 heavy thundering, after which we shall dance! drum-music it shall be.«

»O, is it not dreadful!« cried the mountain goblin. »Thank your master for the invitation, but I would rather stay at home. Did he not know, then, that thundering and drum are to me, and my whole race, a horror! Once, in my younger days, going 35 out to take a walk, the thunder began to drum, and I got one of the drumsticks over my thigh-bone so that it cracked. I will not have more of that kind of music! Give my thanks and my greetings.«

And the boy took the bag on his back, and brought his master the great riches, and the imp's friendly greetings. 40

We have many legends of this sort, but those we have told ought to be enough for to-day!

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