

The Bell-Ringer Ole

In life, everything goes uphill, then downhill, then downhill again, then uphill! I can climb no higher!—so the bell-ringer Ole used to say. Uphill—downhill, downhill—uphill, everyone must experience this! In the end, we all essentially become bell-ringers—we look down upon life and things from above.

Thus spoke my friend Ole, the bell-ringer, a cheerful, talkative old man. It seemed whatever was on his mind was also on his tongue, yet he kept much hidden in his heart. He came of good stock; people said he was the son of an important official, or might have become one himself; he received an education, served as a teacher's assistant, then as a sexton's assistant, but nothing came of it! Ole lived at the sexton's expense, fully provided for, and in those days he was still young and loved, as they say, to show off; thus he demanded patent polish for his boots, while the sexton supplied him only with ordinary grease, and so they fell out. One spoke of stinginess, the other of vanity; the boot polish became the black cause of their quarrel, and they parted ways. But Ole's demands remained the same: he demanded patent polish from the whole world, yet always received only ordinary grease; so he withdrew from people and became a hermit. But a hermit's cell, along with a piece of bread, can be found in a large city only in a bell tower. There Ole settled and paced the gallery all alone, smoking his little pipe. He looked downward, he looked upward, and told of what he saw and what he did not see, what he had read in books and what lay within his soul. I often supplied him with books, only good ones: tell me whom you keep company with, and I will tell you who you are! Ole disliked edifying English novels, nor did he care for French ones concocted from wind and raisin stems. He asked me for descriptions of human lives and wonders of nature. I visited Ole at least once a year, usually shortly after New Year's: at that time my friend always had something to talk about, always had something in reserve connected with the change of the year.

I shall recount here two visits, striving, as far as possible, to keep to Ole's own words.

First Visit

Among the books I gave Ole last time was one about boulders; this one pleased him especially.

"Here is whose jubilee ought to be celebrated—the jubilee of boulders!" Ole said to me. "Yet people pass them by without even noticing them. I myself did so, walking

across fields and along shores where hundreds of them lie. On cobblestones, these remnants of hoary antiquity are trodden underfoot with indifference! And I did the same! But now I look upon every cobblestone with deep respect! Thank you for this book! It captured my attention, freed me from old prejudices and habits, and awakened in me a desire to read more such books. The novel of the earth is nevertheless more interesting than all novels! It is a pity only that one cannot read its first chapters: they are written in a language we were never taught; one must read by layers, by siliceous strata of various earthly periods, while the protagonists, Adam and Eve, appear only in the sixth chapter. To some readers such an appearance seems somewhat belated: they demand living persons right at the beginning of the earth's novel, but for me—it makes no difference. Yes, here is a novel with fairy-tale content, and we are all depicted in it! We struggle, we scurry, we crawl—and still get nowhere, while the sphere keeps turning and turning, without pouring the ocean over us. The crust upon which we walk is solid, so we do not fall through, and thus the novel stretches on for millions of years, with the continuation still ahead. Thank you for the book about boulders! What fine fellows they are! If only they could speak, they would tell quite a tale! Indeed, it is amusing, sitting up here on the gallery, to become a mere zero, remembering that all of us, with all our patent polish, medals, and forward progress—are but momentary ants upon an earthly mound! Yes, one feels such a greenhorn compared to these million-year-old boulders that it becomes simply awkward. I was reading the book precisely on New Year's Eve and became so absorbed in it that I forgot to give myself my usual pleasure—to watch how 'the wild horde races to Amager.' Yes, perhaps you know nothing about that!

Everyone knows about the flight of witches to the Sabbath; that happens on St. John's Night, and they fly to the Brocken mountain. But we have our own, native and modern, Sabbath on Amager on New Year's Eve. All bad poets and poetesses, musicians, journalists, and other worthless artistic figures race through the air on New Year's Eve to Amager; they ride atop paintbrushes or goose quills—steel ones won't do: they are too hard, they do not bend. As I said, I watch the journey of the wild horde every year and could name many of the travelers to you—but it is not worth getting involved! They desperately do not wish people to know about their annual nocturnal journey, riding on quills, to Amager, but I have a distant relative, a fishmonger and supplier of abusive words to three respectable newspapers, as she says—and she once attended such a Sabbath as a guest. She was carried there, since she herself holds no pen and does not know how to ride. So she told me everything. Half of her tales are lies, but the remaining half is enough. The celebration began with songs; each guest wrote his own and sang his own—for hers was the best of all! But does it not all amount to the same? Everyone sang to

the same tune! Then the 'laborers of the tongue' marched in small groups. There were bell-ringers who ring doorbells in houses, and little drummers who drum within families. Then those who needed to make acquaintance with scribblers who publish their articles unsigned—so that ordinary grease might pass for patent polish! Among them was an executioner and his assistant; the assistant proved the sharpest of tongue—otherwise no one would have noticed him! There was also a garbage collector who emptied his bin, saying: 'Good, very good, remarkably good!' At the height of the 'merriment,' from the dung heap grew a stalk, a tree, a monstrous flower, a huge mushroom, an entire roof; this was the 'Christmas tree' of the honorable assembly; upon it hung everything they had given the world during the past year. Sparks showered from it, as if will-o'-the-wisps were flying; these were borrowed thoughts and rented ideas which the participants of the merriment had used; now they were liberated and flew into the air like fireworks. A game of 'the brand burns' began; the poetasters played 'the heart burns,' the chatterboxes sprinkled witticisms—they cannot do otherwise—and the witticisms clattered exactly like empty pots or pots full of ashes smashing against doors. It was terribly merry—according to my relative! Strictly speaking, she poured out yet another three basketfuls of wicked but witty remarks, but I shall not repeat them: one must be kind people, not critics. Now you will understand that, knowing of such a festival, I do not miss the chance annually, on New Year's Eve, to watch how the wild horde races. Some years I happen to notice certain travelers from the previous year missing, yet usually several new ones are added. This year, however, I missed the spectacle, rolling along with the boulders through millions of years. I saw how they broke away from northern cliffs, rolled downward, floated upon ice floes long before Noah's ark was built, fell into the water, sank to the bottom, and rose again to the surface together with the sandbank which declared: 'Here shall be Zealand!' I saw how these stones served as perches for bird species unknown to us, as thrones for leaders of savage bands whose names we likewise do not know; finally, I saw how runic signs were carved with an axe upon some of the stones. Thus, a place in the reckoning of time has been assigned to these stones, whereas I myself completely lost all notion of time, turned into a zero... At that moment, three or four lovely little stars fell from the sky, and my thoughts took another turn. You know what falling stars are? Scholars do not know! I regard them in my own way.

How often do people send a secret, silent thank-you to someone who has done something beautiful, good; this thank-you is soundless, yet it does not vanish in vain. In my opinion, this silent, secret thank-you is caught up by a sunbeam, which then places it upon the benefactor's head. If it should happen that an entire nation sends such a thank-you

To a benefactor long dead, a bright bouquet—a little star—falls from the sky onto his grave. And it gives me true pleasure to guess, especially on New Year's Eve, to whom this bouquet of gratitude is destined. Last time, a star fell upon the southwestern shore; that was thanks from many, many people! But to whom exactly? In my opinion, the star surely fell upon the steep bank of the Flensburg Fjord, where the Dannebrog flutters above the graves of Schleppegrell, Læssøe (Danish officers who fell a heroic death in the first Schleswig War (1848-1850)—Translator's Note) and their comrades. Then once I saw a star roll down into the very center of the country—to Sorø, onto Holberg's grave. That was thanks from many readers of his wonderful comedies!

And what a great, joyful thought it is—to realize that such a little star will roll down onto your own grave!... Not one will fall upon mine; not a single sunbeam will bring me thanks—for there is nothing to thank me for! I have failed to attain patent leather polish; my fate is to content myself with simple grease.

Second Visit

On the first day of the New Year, I climbed the bell tower, and Ole began speaking about the toasts drained on the occasion of the transition from the old "rigmarole"—as he called the year—to the new. Here I heard from him the story of the goblets, and it contained no bad idea.

"As soon as the clock strikes twelve on New Year's Eve," said Ole, "people rise from their seats with full goblets in hand and drink to the health of the New Year. They begin the year with goblets in hand—a fine beginning for drunkards! They begin the year by going to sleep—a good beginning for lazybones! And sleep and goblets indeed play no small role throughout the year! But do you know what is in the goblets?" he asked me. "In them are health, joy, and merriment! But in them also lie misfortune and the greatest calamities! When I speak of counting goblets, I naturally mean degrees of intoxication.

"Here is the first goblet, the goblet of health! In it grows the flower of health; plant it in your home, and by the end of the year you will be sitting in the arbor of health!

"You take the second goblet—from it flies out a little bird; it chirps innocently and joyfully; man listens and involuntarily sings along with it: 'Life is beautiful! Do not hang your head! Boldly forward!'

"From the third goblet flies out a small winged creature; one cannot call it an angel—it belongs to the tribe of house-spirits, but it does not mock, it only jokes. It clings to a man's ear and begins whispering amusing fictions, settles upon his

heart and warms it so that man feels like playing pranks and making witticisms, and he truly becomes a wit, in the opinion of other such wits.

"In the fourth goblet there is neither flower, nor bird, nor winged prankster; in it is a line drawn by reason, which one must never cross.

"But if you take the fifth goblet, you will weep over yourself, become sentimental or, on the contrary, raise a clamor: out of the goblet will leap with a crash Prince Carnival, unrestrained of tongue, madcap!... He will carry you away; you will forget your dignity—if you have any! You will forget much, more than you can or dare. Dancing, singing, the clinking of goblets!... Masks sweep you into a frenzied whirl... Before you stand the daughters of Satan in gauze and silk, with flowing hair, slender, beautiful... Tear yourself away from them, if you can!

"The sixth goblet!... In it sits Satan himself, finely dressed, eloquent, attractive, a most pleasant fellow! He understands you perfectly, finds that you are always right in everything; he is your second 'I'; he comes with a lantern to escort you home. Yes, an old legend tells of a saint who had to choose one of the seven deadly sins and chose, as it seemed to him, the least—drunkenness, but through it fell into all the rest. In the sixth goblet is Satan's blood mixed with human blood. Only drink it, and all the evil seeds hidden in your soul will sprout, and each will grow, like the gospel mustard seed, into a whole tree that can cover the entire world with its shadow. For most people, after this, there remains only to go to the smelter!

"There you have the story of the goblets!" concluded Ole. "It can be served with a sauce made either of patent leather polish or of simple grease. I serve it with both."

That was my second visit to Ole; if you wish to hear more, further visits will be necessary (Seven years later (1868) the author wrote such a continuation under the title "Moving Day"; this fairy tale will be placed in the "Collected Works" in its proper location.—Translator's Note).