

Cheerful disposition

My father left me the finest inheritance—his cheerful disposition. And who was my father? Well, that is beside the point! It suffices to say that he was a lively jolly fellow, round and stout—in short, both his soul and body were at odds with his office. But what office did he hold, what position in society? Ah, therein lies the matter; had I written or printed this at the very beginning, many would perhaps have laid the book aside, saying: "This is not our line!" And yet my father was neither an executioner nor a headsman; on the contrary, by virtue of his office he often occupied a place at the head of the city's most honorable persons! This place was his by right, and thus he had to be ahead of everyone—even ahead of the bishop and the very princes of the blood: he sat upon the box of the funeral carriage!

Well, now everything has been said! I can only add that, looking at my father seated upon the chariot of death, wrapped in a long wide black cloak, wearing a tricorn hat trimmed with black braid, looking at his merry round face, smiling like the sun, no one ever entertained sorrowful thoughts about death and funerals. My father's face seemed to say: "Nonsense, everything will turn out better than people think!"

So it was from him that I inherited my cheerful disposition and the habit of visiting the cemetery—a very pleasant stroll, provided one undertakes it in good spirits. Moreover, I too subscribe to the "Advertiser," just as my late father did.

I am no longer very young; I have neither wife nor children nor a library, but, as stated, I subscribe to the "Advertiser"—and that is enough for me! In my opinion, it is the finest newspaper; my late father said the same. The "Advertiser" serves its purpose: it provides all the information a person needs; from it one learns who preaches from church pulpits and who from the pages of new books, where one can find lodging, servants, and where to acquire clothing and food, where sales are opening and where funerals will take place; here one also becomes acquainted with the state of charity and with innocent little verses, learns who wishes to enter into lawful matrimony, who appoints or rejects rendezvous! Here everything is so simple and natural! And, in my opinion, one could happily live one's entire life until death, content with nothing but the "Advertiser," and by that time one would have amassed so much paper that one could make oneself a soft bedding in the coffin, if one does not like lying on wood shavings!

Yes, the "Advertiser" and the cemetery—these are my two favorite places for spiritual and physical excursions, the two most beneficial means of maintaining a cheerful disposition.

Anyone may go to the editorial office of the "Advertiser" alone, without an escort, but to the cemetery let one go with me! Let us go there on a clear sunny day, when the trees are already covered with greenery, and let us stroll among the graves! Each grave is a kind of closed book; it lies with its spine upward, so that anyone can read its title, which speaks of its contents and at the same time says nothing! I, however, possess more detailed information, partly passed down to me from my father, partly gathered by myself personally. You should know that I keep a special graveyard book, and it gives me as much pleasure as utility. All these graves are recorded in it, and some others besides!

Well, here we are at the cemetery.

Here, behind a fence painted white, where once grew a rose bush (now it is gone, and only ivy from a neighboring grave creeps in, wishing to brighten even a stranger's grave a little), rests a deeply unhappy man, though in life, they say, he enjoyed complete prosperity, possessed everything necessary, and even somewhat more. His whole misfortune lay in the fact that he took the entire world too much to heart, chiefly art. He would sit, say, in the theater in the evening; then he ought to have enjoyed himself with all his soul, but no, not at all! Why had the stagehand produced moonlight that was too strong? Why did the canvas sky hang in front of the wings instead of behind them? Why, finally, had palm trees grown on Amager (An island—a suburb of Copenhagen.—Translator's note), cacti in Tyrol, and beeches in the mountains of Norway?! As if it made any difference! And who needs to think about such things? After all, it is a performance, so be content with what is given! Or else it would suddenly seem to him that the audience applauded either too enthusiastically or, conversely, too sparingly. "Such damp wood," he would immediately remark, "simply will not catch fire today!" And he would turn to see what sort of audience had gathered that day; seeing that people were laughing quite inappropriately, he would grow even angrier. Thus he was forever angry, forever suffering, and was the unhappiest man in the world. Now he rests peacefully in his grave.

And here lies a lucky fellow, that is, a very distinguished gentleman of high birth—that was his entire happiness; otherwise nothing would ever have come of him! Yes, it is simply pleasant to reflect how wisely everything is arranged in this white world! He wore a garment embroidered with gold both front and back, used only for parade occasions, like a costly pearl-embroidered strip concealing a sturdy bell-pull; behind him too hid a sturdy cord—his assistant, who actually performed

the duties, and continues to perform them now for another embroidered strip. How wisely everything is arranged in this white world! How then could one fall into melancholy!

Here is buried... yes, this is a sad story! Here is buried a man who for sixty-seven years kept inventing witty remarks, lived only for that; and when at last he truly succeeded in devising such a remark, he did not survive his happiness, but died of joy! Thus his witty remark was wasted in vain; no one ever heard it! I can imagine how it torments him even in the grave! Indeed! Just think: suppose the remark was of such a nature that it ought to have been delivered precisely at breakfast, whereas the deceased, like all dead men, according to common belief, has the right to leave his grave only at midnight! What is he to do with his witty remark? If he utters it at the wrong time, it will produce no impression whatsoever, not even making anyone laugh! So the poor fellow must remain buried together with his witty remark in the grave. Yes, a sad story!

Here lies an extremely, extremely stingy lady. During her life she would rise at night and mew, so that neighbors would think she kept a cat—so stingy was she!

Here rests a young lady from a good family; she constantly gave society pleasure with her singing and usually sang: "Mimanca la voce." She never spoke anything truer in her entire life!

And here is buried a maiden of another sort. It is known that when the canary dwelling in the heart begins whistling with all its might, reason stops up its ears, and thus the soul-maiden found herself in a situation proper only to married women! A sad story, but a very common one. Let her, however, rest in peace; let us not disturb the dead!

Here lies a widow; on her lips warbled robins, while in her heart hooted an owl. Daily she went out hunting, tracking down the faults of acquaintances, just as in olden times the "Friend of the Police" (A newspaper once published in Copenhagen.—Translator's note) used to track down negligent homeowners before whose houses there were no prescribed footbridges across drainage ditches.

And here is a family grave. Among the members of this family reigned such touching unanimity that even if the whole world and the newspapers said one thing, and the little son came home from school and said, "But I heard it differently," then he alone was right, for he was a member of the family. And even if their yard rooster crowed his morning "cock-a-doodle-doo" at midnight—it meant it was morning, whatever all the night watchmen and all the city clocks together might say!

The great Goethe concludes the story of his Faust with the words: "Continuation may follow"; the same I can say about our stroll through the cemetery. I often come here. And should it happen that any of my friends or enemies annoys me excessively, I come here, choose a spot beneath the green turf, and assign it to him or her—that is, to the one whom I wish to bury—and then indeed I bury them. Thus they lie here dead and powerless until they rise again renewed and better people. I record their entire lives and deeds—as I see and understand them—in my "graveyard book." This is how one ought to act, and

to everyone: do not get angry when someone does you harm, but immediately bury the offenders, yet never change your cheerful disposition; and to the "Advertisement Sheet": in it, the public itself writes, even if at times other hands guide its pen!

And so, when the time comes that the tale of my life too is bound into a grave, let there be written upon it:

Here it is, the tale of my life!