


# The Dumb Book

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(1851)

 IN the high-road which led through a wood stood a solitary farm-house; the road, in fact, ran right through its yard. The sun was shining and all the windows were open; within the house people were very busy. In the yard, in an arbour formed by lilac bushes in full bloom, stood an open coffin; thither they had carried a dead man, who was to be buried that very afternoon. Nobody shed a tear over him; his face was covered over with a white cloth, under his head they had placed a large thick book, the leaves of which consisted of folded sheets of blotting-paper, and withered flowers lay between them; it was the herbarium which he had gathered in various places and was to be buried with him, according to his own wish. Every one of the flowers in it was connected with some chapter of his life.

“Who is the dead man?” we asked.

“The old student,” was the reply. “They say that he was once an energetic young man, that he studied the dead languages, and sang and even composed many songs; then something had happened to him, and in consequence of this he gave himself up to drink, body and mind. When at last he had ruined his health, they brought him into the country, where someone paid for his board and residence. He was gentle as a child as long as the sullen mood did not come over him; but when it came he was fierce, became as strong as a giant, and ran about in the wood like a chased deer. But when we succeeded in bringing him home, and prevailed upon him to open the book with the dried-up plants in it, he would sometimes sit for a whole day looking at this or that plant, while frequently the tears rolled over his cheeks. God knows what was in his mind; but he requested us to put the book into his coffin, and now he lies there. In a little while the lid will be placed upon the coffin, and he will have sweet rest in the grave!”

The cloth which covered his face was lifted up; the dead man’s face expressed peace—a sunbeam fell upon it. A swallow flew with the swiftness of an arrow into the arbour, turning in its flight, and twittered over the dead man’s head.

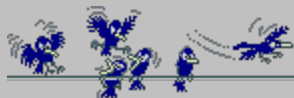
What a strange feeling it is—surely we all know it—to look through old letters of our young days; a different life rises up out of the past, as it were, with all its hopes and sorrows. How many of the people with whom in those days we used to be on intimate terms appear to us as if dead, and yet they are still alive—only we have not thought of them for such a long time, whom we imagined we should retain in our memories for ever, and share every joy and sorrow with them.

The withered oak leaf in the book here recalled the friend, the schoolfellow, who was to be his friend for life. He fixed the leaf to the student’s cap in the green wood, when they vowed eternal friendship. Where does he dwell now? The leaf is kept, but the friendship does no longer exist. Here is a foreign hothouse plant, too tender for the gardens of the North. It is almost as if its leaves still smelt sweet! She gave it to him out of her own garden—a nobleman’s daughter.

Here is a water-lily that he had plucked himself, and watered with salt tears—a lily of sweet water.

And here is a nettle: what may its leaves tell us? What might he have thought when he plucked and kept it? Here is a little snowdrop out of the solitary wood; here is an evergreen from the flower-pot at the tavern; and here is a simple blade of grass.

The lilac bends its fresh fragrant flowers over the dead man's head; the swallow passes again—"twit, twit;" now the men come with hammer and nails, the lid is placed over the dead man, while his head rests on the dumb book—so long cherished, now closed for ever!



HCA.Gilead.org.il

Copyright © Zvi Har'El

\$Date: 2007/12/13 20:45:27 \$