

The Guest

Gad's Hill, Summer 1857

A Novel about Hans Christian Andersen

PART I: THE INVITATION

Chapter 1: The Letter - Copenhagen, Spring 1857

The paper was too thick to be unfolded without resistance. It crunched dryly under his long, crooked fingers, a sound of English manufacture, of something solid and wealthy, which did not belong at all on the small table in Nyhavn.

Hans Christian Andersen did not just read it. He opened his mouth and let the words roll over his tongue like heavy, sweet berries:

"Come visit me at Gad's Hill, my dear Andersen..."

He read it aloud. The first time to himself, in a hoarse, staccato voice. The second time to the empty room, as he stood up and stood in front of the mirror to see his own face as the words were spoken. The third time for the cellarer in the hallway, who only wanted to deliver firewood, but who stood there with his mouth open while the famous poet grabbed him by the shoulders and shouted the English words down into his uncomprehending face. Twelve times in total before noon.

"He calls me his dear Andersen," whispered Hans Christian, pressing the sheet to his vest. His heart beat with the same feverish rhythm as when he stood at Vesterport as a fourteen-year-old with wooden shoes on his feet. "Do you hear that? He calls me his dear "Guest".

It wasn't just anyone. It was Charles Dickens. The man from London, who, like himself, had risen from the darkness of poverty, from the damp streets where children had to work themselves to death, and up into the bright light of glory. Dickens was his reflection. His

spiritual twin. His brother. Edvard Collin had never wanted to say "you" to him. Edvard had built his wall of bourgeois distance and cold looks. But Charles! Charles reached out his hand across the North Sea. In England, no one remembered that Hans Christian was a shoemaker's son from Odense; there he was simply the Genius, the Duck who had become a Swan.

The preparations didn't look like a journey; they looked like a wedding.

His suitcase lay open on the floor for two weeks like a gaping, expectant throat. He packed his own sheets and his own heavy, stiff pillowcases. He couldn't sleep in someone else's bed linen - the thought of someone else's body heat in the fabric gave him nausea and nightmares of mock death. He packed his medicine bottles, his fear of fire (carefully folded together with the thick rope he always carried in his luggage to be able to climb out of a burning window), and a carefully written list of topics the two big men were to discuss in the twilight.

They were to talk about the innocence of a child. They were to talk about the pain of poverty. They were to cry together over the weight of worldly knowledge.

At the bottom of the suitcase, wrapped in soft tissue paper, he placed his greatest treasure: a massive, German-made paper-clipping scissors with long, pointed blades. A gift for Dickens' children. He could already imagine how the ten little English angels would gather around his knees while he transformed the raw paper into dancers, trolls and castles. They would love him. The house on Gad's Hill would be the home he had never had.

He stood for a long time at the window in Nyhavn, looking out at the masts of the ships that rocked in the gray spring light.

"Fifteen days," he whispered to the window, his breath misting the glass. "Fourteen days with my brother."

He did not understand that a letter written out of English politeness is merely a door held ajar for a moment. He thought it was a portal to his new life.

Chapter 2: The Arrival - Gad's Hill, June 8, 1857

The stagecoach rumbled up the gravel drive to Gad's Hill Place and stopped with a dry, squealing thud.

Hans Christian stepped out into the cool Kent air. He was stiff from the journey, a striking silhouette of black cloth, too tall, too thin, and with his hat pulled down over his large, protruding ears. But his heart swelled. He looked at the red brick building with the white window frames and the neatly trimmed hedges like a man finally seeing his fatherland after ten years. exile.

The door swung open, and out stepped Charles Dickens.

He looked like an actor who had just stepped onto his own stage: dressed in a patterned waistcoat, with his dark

hair flowing around his ears and a face that was constantly moving in expressive folds.

"My dear Andersen!" Dickens shouted in his rapid, ringing English, and grabbed the tall Dane's hand with a squeeze that almost made Hans Christian's thin fingers creak.

"Welcome to Gad's Hill!"

Hans Christian smiled, but his smile was too serious, too slow. He bowed deeply, almost submissively, and let his eyes rest on Dickens's face with a hungry, searching intensity.

"Brother," Hans Christian whispered softly, but the word was lost in the noise of the large crowd of children who came pouring out behind the master of the house.

The house was a hive of life. Ten children of all ages, barking dogs, servants carrying suitcases, and a constant stream of loud, English conversation. Where Hans Christian had expected a subdued, sacred atmosphere –

a sanctuary for two great spirits – he instead ran into a wall of noise, irony and constant movement.

Catherine Dickens, the lady of the house, stepped forward.

Her head was slightly bowed, her gaze filled with a permanent, dull weariness. She welcomed him kindly in a low voice, but Hans Christian barely noticed her presence. His gaze involuntarily sought Charles.

The grown-up children and teenagers exchanged quick, stolen glances behind the guest's back. The eldest son, Charley, spotted the strange, bony Dane who stood in the middle of the hall, pressing his own pillow to his chest like a small child refusing to let go of his toy.

At dinner that evening, the gap became clear.

The light from candles flickered in the heavy dining room. Dickens entertained the company with loud anecdotes, played comedy with his hands, imitated members of

parliament and made the whole table burst into mocking, indulgent laughter. Hans Christian sat in the middle of it all, stiff as a wooden figure. He did not understand English banter, the fine razor of irony, where one said the opposite of what one meant. When the others laughed, he smiled uncertainly a second too late.

He wanted to talk about the soul. He wanted to talk about death, about the poet's heavy calling, about the deep wounds of childhood.

When dinner was over and the company moved into the living room, Hans Christian seized his moment. Without being asked, he pulled a manuscript from his inside pocket.

"I read," he said in his thick, grating accent and wiped his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. "I read stories for you."

He began to read aloud from his latest fairy tales in an English so imbued with Danish vowels and crooked

accents that it sounded like a whole new language. He read with deep drama, raised his long index finger towards the ceiling, lowered his voice to a hiss and raised it again to a shout.

The minutes turned into an hour. One hour turned into two.

Dickens sat in an armchair by the fireplace, his fingers folded over his stomach. His professional actor's face retained a stiff, polite smile, but his gaze was extinguished. Charley leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. Little Plorn had long since fallen asleep on the sofa, his mouth open, while Catherine stared blankly down at her embroidery, her needle moving slower and slower until it stopped completely.

Hans Christian noticed nothing. He was caught up in his own stream of words, in his own conviction that he was giving them his soul. When he finally closed the manuscript and looked up, he expected tears and embraces.

There was only silence, broken by the crackling embers of the fireplace.

"Charming, my dear Andersen," Dickens said quickly, stood up, and clapped his hands once to break the spell. "Quite... charming. But now we must let our honored guest have his night's rest."

Downstairs in the guest room, Hans Christian made the bed with his own linens. He lay down to rest, filled with a warm, intoxicating feeling of having arrived at port.

Upstairs in the living room, Charles Dickens turned off the lights one by one, muttering softly to his wife: "He reads like a village priest during a famine, Catherine. May the next two weeks go by quickly."

PART II: THE FIVE WEEKS

Week 1: The Admirer (Days 1-7)

Day 1 – Tuesday, June 9

I woke to the smell of cold English rain and toast. What a blessing to open my eyes under this roof! My soul feels lighter, as if it had been lifted from the Copenhagen mud ditch. Charles was standing in the garden when I stepped out. He wore a red dressing gown and looked like an emperor in his kingdom. When he saw me, he shouted: “Good morning, Andersen!” I rushed to him and grabbed his hands. I told him that last night I had dreamed that we were two birds building a nest in the same tree. He smiled, although his eyes wandered a little towards the house, and said that it was a very delicate picture.

He had to go quickly into his study, though. He said that the rule in this house is unyielding: between nine and two

o'clock no one is to disturb him. No one. I understand that. The muse of art demands solitude.

Day 2 – Wednesday, June 10

The wait from nine to two is long and arduous. I walked up and down the hallway outside his door. I could hear his pen scratching against the paper. What diligence! What genius! At a quarter to two I could no longer bear my longing for spiritual exchange. I knocked very lightly on the door. Three small presses of the button.

There was silence in there. The scratching of the pen ceased.

“Charles?” I whispered through the keyhole in my best English. “Are you finished now? My soul needs to speak.”

The door was not opened immediately. When it finally opened, Charles stood there. His face was strangely red, and his eyebrows were drawn together tightly. He said he was in the middle of a chapter of his new novel. I

immediately offered to sit quietly in the corner of a chair and watch him write – I didn't even promise to breathe loudly. He refused curtly and said that a change of air in the garden would do me good. He closed the door again. How caring he is for my health.

Day 3 – Thursday, June 11

Today I finally managed to have a private moment with him. We went for a walk on the hills behind Gad's Hill. The wind was fresh, and my throat felt a little sore – I have to be very careful not to catch pneumonia here in the humid climate.

I opened my heart to him. I told him about my deep, painful love for Jenny Lind, about how she called me her brother and broke my heart. I told him about Edvard Collin, who refused me the private you, and who let the door of his heart slam in my face. Tears welled up in my eyes as I described what it was like to walk through the world like a perpetual Peppermint, who can only look at other people's happiness through the window pane.

Charles walked beside me with his hands clasped behind his back. He nibbled at the dandelions with his walking stick.

"My dear Andersen," he said after a long silence. "In England, when a man is disappointed in love, he simply marries someone else and gets on with his business."

He laughed a short, dry laugh. He didn't understand me. He thought it was a joke. How strange that a man who can write so movingly about the fates of orphans can be so blind to the bleeding pain in my chest.

Day 5 – Saturday, June 13

The children in this house lack proper spiritual nourishment. They run around like wild animals in the garden, shouting in English. Today I sat down on the bench under the big oak tree to teach them about beauty. I took out my big scissors and started cutting a piece of white paper.

Little Plorn and a few of the others gathered around me. I cut out a beautiful, dancing swan for them.

"Look," I said proudly and held it out. "Like in my story The Ugly Duckling!"

Plorn took the swan, looked at it for a moment and asked if it was a vegetable head. Then he broke off its wings and used them as a sail on a small stick in a puddle.

I felt a stab in my heart. I tried to explain to them the story of the man who goes to the market to trade his horse and ends up with a bag of rotten apples – What Daddy does is always the Right Thing. The children just looked at me incomprehensibly. The eldest daughter, Mamie, said that the man in the story was an idiot, and that her father would never be so foolishly deceived. They ran away. Englishmen do not understand true Poetry.

Day 7 – Monday, June 15

The first week is over. My original plan was that this should be the halfway point of my visit. But tonight, as we sat at the tea table, I felt a deep, heartfelt certainty: I cannot leave yet. Charles needs me. The bond of our souls is only just being forged.

Mrs. Catherine looked at me across the table. She always looks so tired.

"I suppose your trunk is nearly packed for your departure on Thursday, Mr. Andersen?" she asked in her low, flat voice.

I smiled brightly at her and shook my head.

"Oh no, dear lady!" I cried, clapping my hands. "I stay! I stay more weeks for my brother Charles!"

Charles stopped bringing the teaspoon to his mouth. The action froze in midair. He looked at his wife, and she

looked at him. A strange, rigid look was exchanged between them – a look of sheer paralysis at the joy I brought into their home.

Charles cleared his throat for a long time.

"How... delightful, Andersen," he whispered at last.

I went to bed with a full heart. They love me here. They almost force me to stay.

Week 2: The Child (Days 8–14)

Day 8 – Tuesday, June 16

It is an envious, wicked world we live in. Today I received a letter from Copenhagen with clippings from the latest newspapers. Oh, this cruel, Jutlandic cold! A reviewer is mocking my latest collection of poems and calling my verses “formless” and “tasteless”. It felt like a stab in the middle of my bleeding chest.

I couldn't stand it in my living room. I rushed out into the garden, threw myself on the grass under the big oak tree and burst into tearless, violent tears. I lay there for a long time, pressing my face against the wet ground.

After an hour, Charles' eldest son, Charley, came by. "Mr. Andersen?" he asked in horror. "Are you injured? Has something happened?"

I raised my tear-stained face and shouted at him: "They're killing me in Denmark! They don't understand me! Why do they always have to step on my soul?"

The poor young man turned completely pale. He didn't know what to do with my pain. He tried to pat me clumsily on the shoulder and hand me his handkerchief.

"There, there, Mr. Andersen... it's just a review," he stammered.

How could a young Englishman understand the suffering of a true poet? He had to help me up from the grass and

support me all the way into the house. I was so exhausted from crying that I had to lie on the sofa in the living room for the rest of the day, while Mrs. Catherine brought me hot tea and pale looks.

Day 10 – Thursday, June 18

Today I felt strong enough to take on an educational responsibility in this house. It is my duty as an older, experienced spirit.

At the lunch table I noticed how the children's behavior screamed to heaven. They talked in the middle of everything, they laughed at their father, and little Walter read in a dime instead of listening to the polite conversation.

I cleared my throat loudly and looked sternly at Charles.

"Charles," I said, pointing my fork at the boy. "In Denmark, children do not read such trash at the table.

They read Andersen. They read things that build the soul. You let them grow up like wild horses!"

There was deathly silence around the table. Charles stopped with his meat on the knife. His gaze became as dark and sharp as a razor blade.

"Mr. Andersen," he said in a voice so low and icy that it made my blood freeze. "My children read what I allow them to read. And in this house, we do not lecture the host on parenting."

I felt a chilling fear spread in my stomach. Was he serious? No, it must have been the English stiffness talking. He hides his feelings under a coat of armor. I smiled quickly to smooth it over and offered to read them the story of The Flying Suitcase after dinner. No one answered.

Day 12 – Saturday, June 20

I woke up last night with a terrible fear of being buried alive. My throat was tight, and my heart was pounding like a madman in a straitjacket. I got up in just a shirt and went out into the hallway to seek comfort.

The light was still burning under the door of Charles's study. I entered without knocking – a brother has no boundaries with his brother.

Charles was sitting at his desk under a bright lamp. He looked up, his face contorted with fatigue.

"For God's sake, Andersen!" he shouted and jumped up from his chair. "What are you doing in your nightshirt at two in the morning?"

"Charles," I whispered, holding out my crooked hands. "My soul is so dark tonight. Tell me... do you believe in the resurrection? Do you think we'll meet in heaven and write poetry together forever?"

Charles rubbed his eyes hard. He let out a deep, heavy sigh that sounded like it came from the bottom of his boots.

"Right now, Andersen," he said, grabbing my arm to lead me back to the door, "I am only praying for a good night's sleep. Go back to bed."

He closed the door tightly on me. But I know he was simply overwhelmed by the depth of the situation. Men of our caste have a hard time showing their true feelings in the dead of night.

Day 14 – Monday, June 22

Two whole weeks! Time flies in this paradise. I didn't mention in a single word that my two-week invitation had basically expired today. Why tear up a wound? No one in the family brought it up either. They are too polite to say how much they value my presence.

Late in the afternoon, however, I overheard a strange conversation from the basement stairs. It was Mrs. Catherine talking to the maid.

"Is he still here?" the maid asked in a strange tone.

"Yes," the lady answered, and her voice sounded as heavy as a tombstone. "He says he is staying. God give us strength."

They were probably talking about the vicar or some other troublesome guest who was on his way. How fortunate it is that Charles and his family have helped me to spread light and poetry in these difficult times. I went into the living room and sat down to shear another swan.

Week 3: The Ghost (Days 15–21)

Day 15 – Tuesday, June 23

A strange, inexplicable silence has fallen over the house. It's as if I've become invisible. When I step into the living room, the lively English chatter instantly falls silent. They look at me with large, expressionless eyes, as if I were a ghost floating through the door.

This morning at breakfast I tried to catch Charles's eye, but he was staring intently down at his newspaper.

"Charles," I said cheerfully. "I've been thinking of a new fairy tale about a paper swan that will never be understood by the world."

He simply flipped through his newspaper with a loud, dry swish and muttered, "Fascinating, Andersen," without raising his eyes an inch.

They're talking about me in the corners. I can feel it. When they think I'm out in the garden, I hear their hushed whispers in the corridors. "Is he in his room?" "When is he leaving?" They are worried about my health, that must be why. They look after me like a fragile treasure.

Day 17 – Thursday, June 25

Oh, this irresistible urge to put their mark on their home! Since no one has time to have deep conversations with me, I have spent my days decorating the house. I go everywhere with my big scissors and piles of white paper.

When Charles is locked in his office, I sneak around. I leave little cut-out dancers on the mantelpieces, put paper angels on the bookshelves, and even sneak into the children's rooms to put paper swans on their pillows. The house is now filled with my inner life!

Mrs. Catherine, however, does not seem to appreciate this artistic gift. This afternoon I found her in the hallway, where with a tired, almost hideous gesture she picked up

my paper clippings from the floor and threw them directly into the cold ashes of the fireplace.

"Mrs. Catherine!" I exclaimed in horror.

She turned around. Her face was pale, and her eyes were red. She is pregnant again, overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the house.

"Mr. Andersen," she said with trembling lips. "I cannot have this paper clutter everywhere. It is driving us all to distraction. Please... go for a long walk."

She does not understand fleeting beauty. It is the English, practical mind that stifles poetry.

Day 19 – Saturday, June 27

A terrible event! A stab in my most sensitive nerve!

Late in the afternoon I was standing in the little corner of the library, hidden behind the heavy velvet curtain, when

Charles and Mrs. Catherine entered the room next door. The door was ajar.

"Charles, you must speak to him!" exclaimed the lady, her voice almost breaking with tears. "He has been here for three weeks! He wanders around the house like a ghost, he reads his dreadful stories, he cries in the garden! He is an absolute bore!"

A bore! A boring person! The words hit my brain like a shrieking iron bolt.

There was a pause. I stopped breathing. My heart was completely still. Then I heard Charles answer. His voice was deep and tired.

"I know, Catherine. I know. But what can I do? He is a guest in my house, and he is a famous poet. We must endure it a little longer."

I backed out of the nook without a sound. My knees were shaking so violently that I could hardly walk up the stairs.

Inside my room I threw myself on the bed and pressed the pillow against my face to keep from screaming.

A bore! Is my brother calling me that?

But as darkness fell and I thought about it with my cool, educated mind, the truth dawned on me. Charles only said it to calm his tired, pregnant wife! He had to take her side for the sake of peace. He didn't mean it. In his heart of hearts he loves my spirit. He said himself that they must endure it – because I am a great poet! He is only sparing me the pettiness of the family. He means it lovingly.

Day 21 – Monday, June 29

Three weeks have passed. Three weeks in this enchanted world.

Tonight I entered Charles's study. He was sitting at his desk, surrounded by stacks of letters. He looked up at me with a look so empty and blank that it cut my heart.

"Charles," I said gently, and walked right up to him. "You don't have to pretend. I know how hard you struggle to hold this house together. But you have me. Our friendship is as solid as a rock."

He stared at me for several seconds without saying a single word. Then he let out a long, rolling sigh, rubbed his temples, and said softly,

"Andersen... do you ever think about going back to Denmark?"

I smiled and patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Not yet, my dear brother," I whispered. "Not yet. My task here is not complete."

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the back of his chair. He was mute with gratitude.

Week 4: The Shadow (Days 22–28)

Day 22 – Tuesday, June 30

A new, distinctive cheerfulness has come over the house, but it has a bitter aftertaste that I can't quite fathom.

When we sit at the dinner table, Charles behaves differently than before. He picks up his knife and fork with strangely stiff, perpendicular movements, lifts his shoulders up to his ears, and speaks

r in a strange, raspy voice, all the vowels long and flat.

"Yæś, my dearr frriend," he said to his son Charley today, tilting his head to one side with a stiff, mechanical smile.

"It is verrry poetic, yæś?"

The children burst into violent, almost unpleasant cries of laughter. Little Walter was scratching his pudding. They all

looked at me, and when I smiled to show that I also appreciated this gaiety, they laughed even louder.

Charles is evidently trying to learn the sound of the Danish language to honor his guest! What a wonderful expression of his friendship. He plays on my tone to bring a little lightness into the heavy English company. I patted him off at the table. He stopped abruptly, however, and his face became dark as a thundercloud before he drank his glass of wine in one gulp.

Day 24 – Thursday, July 2

Today I discovered a strange drawing in the children's schoolroom.

It was a piece of paper that Charley quickly tried to hide when I entered. I kindly took it from his hand. The drawing depicted an enormous, long-legged stork with an oversized hat and a giant pair of paperclips in its beak. The stork had tears rolling down its beak and looked like

a creature of pure misery while a group of little English boys threw stones at it.

"Who is this bird?" I asked, pointing to the drawing.

Charley turned red behind the ears and mumbled something about it being just an illustration for an old legend.

I patted him gently on the cheek. "It's me," I whispered, moved. "You have captured the deep tragedy of my soul. You see me as the Stork – the wandering bird, forced to fly from country to country without ever finding a permanent place."

I took the drawing and hid it in my chest. They understand my suffering better than they will ever know.

Day 26 – Saturday, July 4

An evening of pure triumph and spiritual fusion!

A dinner had been given for several of Charles's prominent friends from London. When the cakes and wine had been brought out, I felt a sudden, strong impulse. I rose to the head of the table, raised my glass, and asked to speak.

The light from the candelabra flickered in the room. I spoke for twenty minutes. I told the company how Charles and I are two halves of the same great, immortal poetic soul. I described how fate had brought us together across the sea, and how Gad's Hill was no longer just his home, but our shared spiritual sanctuary.

"We are soulmates!" I shouted and stretched out my arms towards him. "Two men who have stepped on sharp knives to give the world our poetry!"

When I sat down, there was a paralyzing silence in the room. No one applauded. Charles sat with his head bowed and stared intently into his plate, as if he were examining the pattern in the porcelain with the greatest

care. His knuckles were completely white, so tightly did he grip his knife.

He never looked up. He did not say a word. He was so overwhelmed by the power of my words that his emotions had completely deprived him of speech.

Day 28 – Monday, July 6

Something strange happened last night.

I was lulled into a sweet dream of my childhood in Odense when I woke up to a muffled sound from the hallway. I got up and opened the door a crack.

Charles was standing out there in the darkness, dressed in his nightshirt. He held a lighted candle in his hand. He stood quite still outside my door, staring at the woodwork. The light from the flame cast deep, dark shadows across his face—he looked like a man struggling with a terrible demon.

He stood there for several minutes without moving. I dared not open the door fully and disturb his nocturnal meditation. He had come to watch over his friend. He stood like a protector on my threshold.

Late that night I wrote in my diary with a trembling hand:

"I have never been so happy in my life. I have found my true home. I have found my brother."

Week 5: The Farewell (Days 29–35)

Day 29 – Tuesday, July 7

A strange, almost inevitable unease has gripped the house. It was as if the very air were pressing against my temples as I stepped into the dining room. Charles was not there. Mrs. Catherine sat alone at the table, pale as a sheet and marked by her condition.

As she handed me the teacup, her hand shook so violently that the china clinked.

"Mr. Andersen," she said, and her voice was as thin as cobwebs. "Charles has taken the liberty of arranging your carriage for Thursday morning. The tickets for the mail-coach to London have been purchased."

The words hit me like a splash of cold water. Departure? So abrupt? My first impulse was to protest, to explain to her that my spirit had not yet finished absorbing the blessings of this place. But then I looked at her. Poor English minds are so easily overwhelmed by great poetry. They cannot bear happiness for long at a time.

"Thursday," I whispered, bowing my head in profound reverence. "If that is my brother's wish, I will comply."

Day 31 – Thursday, July 9

The day of farewell. My suitcase stood bundled up in the hall again, heavy with my sheets and my uncontrollable longing.

The whole family was gathered on the stairs. The children stood stiff as wooden soldiers. No one cried, which surprised me deeply – in Denmark such a departure would have brought on rivers of tears! But the English hide their bleeding hearts behind a wall of silence.

Charles grabbed my hand. His grip was so hard that my bones crunched, and his gaze wandered restlessly over my face.

"Farewell, Andersen," he said in a strange, almost breathless voice. "May you have a... very long journey home. Very long indeed."

He waved. He waved with his whole arm, quickly and without ceasing, while the coachman loaded my luggage.

He kept waving even as I got into the carriage. His eagerness to send me off with a strong memory was almost touching.

Day 32 – Friday, July 10

A small, painful detail from the platform

in Maidstone, which I can't get out of my head.

Before the carriage had completely pulled away, little Edward – as they call Plorn – stepped forward to the carriage window. I reached out and gave him my very largest paper clip: a delicate, delicate swan that I had sat cutting all night by candlelight.

The boy took it in his little fingers. He looked at me, then at the paper, and then... he dropped it.

The swan fell into the dust on the platform, right by the wheel. The boy stepped back without picking it up. The

carriage started, and through the cloud of dust I saw the swan lying there, trampled flat by a passenger.

I said nothing. I just leaned back in the leather seat and closed my eyes. He was just a child. Children don't know what they do when they step on the delicate wings of poetry.

Day 35 – Monday, July 13

On board the steamer that takes me back across the grey, foaming sea towards Denmark.

I stand at the rail and watch the shores of England disappear into the mist. The wind catches my cloak and chills my cheekbones, but in my chest burns an unquenchable fire.

I took out my diary and wrote with a firm, happy hand:

"Those were the happiest five weeks of my life. Charles and I are now bound together forever. I have found my true home in his heart."

I know he is sitting on Gad's Hill at this moment, thinking of his Danish brother. I know he misses my voice in his living rooms. What we shared in those five weeks was too great for words – it was an eternity frozen in time.

PART III: THE AFTERLIFE

Chapter 10: Two Versions - 1857-1870

Truth is a fluid substance when it passes through two different writers' souls. When the dust of the journey had settled and the sea again separated the two men, two very different stories emerged about the five weeks on Gad's Hill.

In Copenhagen, Hans Christian Andersen was not slow to let his triumph ring out in the salons. He published

revised sections of his memoirs and filled his private letters to the Danish elite with swelling accounts of his stay with the English master.

Copenhagen, autumn 1857

Excerpt from a letter from H.C. Andersen to Edvard Collin:

"Oh, my dear Edvard! You should have seen us at Gad's Hill! Charles and I were inseparable from morning till night. We wandered through the Kentish woods like two spiritual brothers who had nothing at all to hide from each other. His ten child angels surrounded me constantly to listen to my tales, and Mrs. Catherine showered me with the finest English care. Charles told me at parting that my visit had brought a whole new light into his house. Our friendship is frozen in time like a monument to the fusion of two poets' souls!"

But across the North Sea, in steamy and bustling London, Charles Dickens told a very different story. The love for the Danish guest was absent, and the mask of British

politeness fell abruptly as soon as H.C. Andersen's cab had rolled out of the driveway.

London, August 1857

Excerpt from a letter from Charles Dickens to his friend, William Jerrold:

"My dear Jerrold,

If you ever think of inviting the Danish fairy tale writer Hans Christian Andersen to stay with you, let me give you a well-meaning piece of advice: Don't! He arrived at my house a fortnight ago and stayed for five weeks. He speaks pitiful English, suffers from a mad fancy that the whole world is conspiring against him, and throws himself in the grass weeping over bad reviews from Copenhagen. He has cut out paper figures and filled my house with them like a ghost! The children were going mad, and Catherine was weeping with exhaustion. He was a most dreadful guest—a bone in our throats!"

Gad's Hill Place, late summer 1857

A few days after Andersen's departure, Charles Dickens entered the small guest room on the first floor. The room was strangely empty and still smelled faintly of the Dane's medicine bottles and camphor.

Dickens went to the mirror hanging above the chest of drawers. With a small, dried-out wooden stick, he scratched a message directly into the stiff dust of the glass, so that no one in the family was in any doubt about what the master of the house felt. The writing stood out clear and sharp in the sunlight:

"Hans Christian Andersen slept in this room for five weeks—which seemed to the family AGES!"

For thirteen years, Dickens left the writing untouched as a warning sign.

He never answered Andersen's letters again. When thick envelopes with the familiar, crooked Danish-English

handwriting arrived from Copenhagen, Dickens put them unopened in the bottom drawer. The friendship had long since become a frozen memory of a guest who never learned to walk.

Chapter 11: The Last Fairy Tale – Copenhagen & Gad's Hill, 1870

The news hit Copenhagen like an icy gust of wind in the June heat.

Charles Dickens is dead. 58 years old.

Hans Christian Andersen sat at his desk in his apartment. The newspaper lay in front of him, but the printer's ink swam before his eyes. He moved his lips silently. Fifty-five years. Fifty-six. Fifty-seven. Fifty-eight. He was older himself. He had survived.

He stood up with difficulty. The heavy weight of gout pulled at his long, thin legs. He went to the little Chatol in

the corner, unlocked the drawer and reached his crooked-fingered hand all the way into the darkest corner.

His fingers found what they were looking for: a piece of yellow, faded paper.

It was the paper swan he had cut the last night at Gad's Hill. The swan that little Plorn had dropped on the Maidstone platform, and that Hans Christian had surreptitiously picked up from the dust when the coachman turned his back. He had hidden it for thirteen years. A worn, crumpled piece of Poetry that never reached its destination.

He rubbed the paper against his cheek.

"Charles," he whispered to the empty room. "Now you know. Now you understand everything."

He sat down at the desk, dipped his pen in the black ink, and began to write. He did not write a historical account

of his visit. He did not write about the cold, the unopened letters, or the silence of the children. Instead, he transformed the pain into his habitual comfort. He wrote the fairy tales *What the Family Said*, *Aunt Toothache* and *The Peppermint's Nightcap* – stories about the lonely man who sits by other people's fireplaces, about wanting to belong in a home that is not his own, and about the eternal guest who must transform his deprivation into paper and ink.

Late in the afternoon he went for a walk in the King's Garden.

The sun was low over the treetops and cast long, dark shadows across the grass. Hans Christian walked slowly with his tall hat pulled down tightly over his ears and his hands clasped behind his back.

A little further down the path he caught sight of an English family on a journey. The mother sat on a bench with her parasol, while a little boy in sailor's clothes ran

around a flower bed. The boy laughed, fiddled with a stick and refused to listen when his mother called him.

"Edward!" the mother shouted in her clear, English voice.
"Come now! We have to go home!"

The boy stopped, stamped his little boot on the gravel, and shouted back: "No! Just five more minutes! Please, mother—just five more minutes!"

Hans Christian stood perfectly still on the path.

He looked at the boy. He looked at the mother, who sighed and shook her head, but listened to the child's wish for a moment longer.

A strange, painful smile spread across the old, bony face. For the first time in his seventy-three-year life, he felt no anger. He felt no offended pride at the elite's mockery or Edvard's coldness. He felt only a deep, quiet clarity.

He understood it now.

He was that boy. He had been that boy all his life. An awkward, desperate young man from Odense, standing on the threshold of other people's warm living rooms, ticking away just five more minutes. Five minutes at the Royal Theatre. Five minutes in Collins's heart. Five weeks at Gad's Hill.

He was the guest who never learned to walk because the world outside was too cold.

Hans Christian raised his hat slightly to the English lady, turned around and walked slowly home towards Nyhavn. That same evening he sat down and wrote a last, loving letter to Plorn in England. A letter about paper swans and old memories.

It was never answered. But it no longer mattered. Because the adventure was over, and the guest had finally gone to rest.