

# Copenhagen Tales

*Stories translated by*  
**Lotte Shankland**

Edited by Helen Constantine



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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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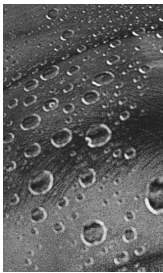
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# General Introduction

The Danes have been telling stories for a very long time. In the magnificent National Museum in Copenhagen you find yourself surrounded by the stuff of myth and magic and history. Take one story, poetic as well as eerily logical, which comes down to us from around 1500 BC. Archaeologists have pieced it together with evidence from abundant carvings and images of the Sun Ship.

It is the story of the journey of the Sun around the Earth. At sunrise, fish pull the Sun up over the horizon out of the night ship into the morning ship; they swim along with it for a while before being consumed by birds of prey; then the Sun horse takes over the task of pulling the Sun on to the afternoon ship; later the snake takes his turn and hides the Sun in his coils before submerging him once again in the night of the ocean.

Another story you will encounter in the National Museum is not myth but history. One summer day in around 1370 BC the corpse of a slender girl of about seventeen, now known as the Egtved Girl, with short blond hair

and wearing a short blouse and a cord skirt, was buried in a coffin. She wore a belt with bronze decorations, and had a thin ring at her ear; in a bark bucket was a mixture of beer and wine made from wheat and cranberries. Also found with her were the half-cremated bones of a five-year-old child. Before the lid was closed, someone placed on the edge of her coffin a small yarrow flower.

Who was she? Why and how did she die? What is the significance of the yarrow? Who was the child and why was it buried with her in the same grave? This is Danish *noir*, Bronze Age-style.

Besides the National Museum, visitors to Copenhagen will probably make for the most recognizable emblem of the city—the Little Mermaid, whose story, which will not be found in this collection, is recounted in the tale by Hans Christian Andersen. The mermaid fell in love, so the story goes, with a seafaring prince and, by means of sorcery, exchanged her tail for a pair of legs. This much-photographed statue sits in the harbour on rocks close to the shore by the fortress of Kastellet, where, if she were to turn her head, she would see factories and warehouses across the water, rather than the marvellous fronds and forests of the deep as in Andersen's story. Hans Andersen is represented in this volume by two short fairy-tales, 'The Water Drop' and 'The Naughty Boy', which will probably be much less familiar to English readers.

That the Danes are still great storytellers is evident to all from the phenomenal international success of some recent Danish TV thriller series. *The Killing* and the Danish-Swedish co-production *The Bridge*, or the hard-hitting political drama *Borgen*, all set in Copenhagen, have kept millions enthralled, taking us deep into a city and a milieu with which few were familiar. Now, with this generous selection of Copenhagen tales dating from the early nineteenth century to the present day, readers can discover for themselves from what a rich literary tradition this native storytelling genius springs. For sheer mesmerising writing read Karen Blixen's 'Conversation One Night in Copenhagen' or Benny Andersen's 'The Trousers'; for perfect control of their touching material try Tove Ditlevsen's 'Eggnog' or Dan Turèll's 'Willadsen'; for the evocation of a memorable character read Meïr Goldschmidt's 'Nightingale' or Bjarne Reuter's 'A Tricky Moment' or Jakob Ejersbo's 'The Bra'. Those who thirst for the excitement of Scandi *noir* will not be disappointed either: Naja Marie Aidt's 'As the Angels Fly' does not spare the reader the city's seamy side. Modern life in the capital, whether tragic or exhilarating, funny or passionate, is amply represented.

Despite Denmark being one of our closest neighbours, and despite its markedly Anglophile population, most of whom speak excellent English, 'wonderful' Copenhagen remains relatively unexplored by British visitors. Fortunately,

and most especially for an outsider, there is no better route to understanding the deepest nature of a city than through the literature and art it has generated. This selection of short fiction, put together and translated by a Copenhagener born and bred, goes a long way toward that.

Readers will find, as always in this series, evocative photographs accompanying each story, notes on the authors and their texts, and a map at the back marking many of the locations brought to life in the tales.

*God læsning!* Happy reading!

Helen Constantine

# Introduction

‘Copenhagen contains within it everything which in other countries is distributed amongst several other cities. It is the capital and the seat of the sovereign and his government, the country’s most important commercial centre and the main fortress of the land; here is the one university serving two kingdoms; here is the fleet and naval arsenal; all significant manufacturers and factories are concentrated here; here is the Academy of Fine Art and the theatre; in other words, everything that is curious and interesting in Denmark can be found in Copenhagen.’\*

These are the opening words of the first comprehensive guide to Copenhagen, written just over 200 years ago by Rasmus Nyerup, a great bibliophile and irrepressible enthusiast of the city. Of course all Danes who are not Copenhageners will rightly dispute his concluding claim, yet it remains the case that Copenhagen is still the only big city in Denmark (and surely the liveliest and most beautiful in

\* *Kjøbenhavnns Beskrivelser*, Copenhagen 1800.

all Scandinavia) and still very much the heart and soul of the country's commercial, political, and cultural life. To reflect this continuity, these tales by some of our finest writers of the past two hundred years are loosely grouped according to Nyerup's broad categories, opening with stories of political and social import (1–4), followed by three exploring questions of work and class, while those touching on the city's cultural life and its role as 'seat of the sovereign' and 'main fortress of the land' compose the last four. 'Curious and interesting' might apply to all these stories, but I attach it in particular to the longer sequence of six tales (9–14) presided over by Cupid, or Eros, Hans Christian Andersen's 'Naughty Boy'.

Nyerup's encomium to the city was written at the very start of what has come to be called Denmark's 'Golden Age' (see 'Amelie's Eyes'), an era of exceptional brilliance in the arts and sciences roughly coinciding with the first half of the nineteenth century, the same century that under the pressure of intensive urbanization would see the city grow from small capital of a small state into a modern metropolis.

Until 1851 the rapidly expanding population was still confined within the ancient ramparts (*volden*), and this is the 'big city' packed with cannibalistic 'creepy crawlies' which the disgusted trolls examine through their magnifying glass in 'The Water Drop', a typically ironic tale by

Hans Christian Andersen which opens the collection. Through their own lenses most authors in this anthology find plenty to corroborate the two old trolls' impression in later generations. Copenhagen, like almost any other modern city, turns out to have a population and culture divided by inequalities of income and expectation, trivialized by the conformities of consumerism and the media, menaced by the desolations of drug and alcohol abuse and pornography—and on top of that cursed with a political class remote from its electorate. The sole tale by an outsider, Eugen Kluev's 'To Catch a Dane', makes bitter fun of the prejudice which immigrants often meet with in today's Denmark.

But, redirected at other corners of the city, and into other hearts, the various authorial magnifying glasses discover enough decent individuals or innocents struggling to live their lives against the worst trends of their times, or within themselves. In short, not all in the creepy-crawly city are creeps like Kierkegaard's seducer closing in on his next victim on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Frederiksberg Gardens, let alone the horrific 'Creepy' in Naja Marie Aidt's tale. Besides, as the reader will discover from the very first, a rich vein of humour runs through nearly all these stories. Perhaps, for the inhabitants of a small country surrounded by mighty neighbours who with depressing regularity have defeated it in wars and football and much

else, a sense of humour is a matter of necessity. As well as great writers, Denmark has produced some very great caricaturists.

A further positive is that Copenhageners live in a very beautiful city, at least in its old centre. Even in his very dark tale of political betrayal in the aftermath of an attempt on the life of the deeply unpopular conservative Prime Minister Estrup in 1885, Henrik Pontoppidan is unable to resist giving an awed description of the sea approach to the city of memorable spires. With less lyricism but comparable accuracy, other stories take us deep into the working class districts of Vesterbro, formerly the main slum area ('Eggnog'), and Nørrebro with its lively new immigrant quarter so different to opulent but dull suburbia ('To Catch a Dane'), leafy middle-class Frederiksberg ('The Bra'), the vast dock area ('The Trousers'), the trendy bars and cafés of the centre ('Is There Life after Love?') and chic Bredgade, the city's most elegant eighteenth-century street, with its art galleries and auction houses ('Amelie's Eyes').\*

Besides a wide variety of subject matter, epoch, and voice, there is variety in the short story form itself, ranging from Katrine Marie Guldager's subtle minimalism to the

\* Danish *vej*, *gade*, *stræde* = road, street, alley; *plads* = square; *torv* = marketplace; *borg* = castle, palace (cf. 'Borgen' for the parliament building Christiansborg, in Tale 3); *have* = gardens, park; *bro* = bridge.

more expansive art of great practitioners like Benny Andersen, Anders Bodelsen, and Bjarne Reuter, and the striking experiments of their younger contemporaries Jan Sonnergaard, Naja Marie Aidt, and the late, very talented Jakob Ejersbo. As opportunities for total immersion, I have included two longer tales by two of the city's very greatest storytellers: Meïr Goldschmidt, the Danish-Jewish novelist who in his student days notoriously crossed pens with the formidable Kierkegaard, and Karen Blixen (pen-name Isak Dinesen) of *Out of Africa* and *Babette's Feast* fame.

Goldschmidt's 'Nightingale' is set in and around the city's greatest cultural institution, det Kongelig Teater, the Royal Theatre, and in the still extant little streets and alleys nearby. This perfectly told tale, in which Copenhagen is still a compact middle-size city where seemingly everyone knows just about everyone, also gives an insider's glimpse of the rise of the city's small Jewish community from its humble Ashkenazi immigrant origins (still traceable in its speech) to comfortably off bourgeoisie. From this same background was to emerge the great radical literary critic Georg Brandes, one of the most influential thinkers of late-nineteenth-century Europe.

Karen Blixen's wonderfully atmospheric evocation of mid-eighteenth-century Copenhagen is set in the second year of the reign of the unstable Christian VII (the 'mad

king' of the recent very successful film *A Royal Affair*). Lost in the city one wet and eventful night the novice monarch stumbles upon the slightly older but far more worldly wise poet Johannes Ewald in the company of his favourite whore. In the pair's schnapps-heightened 'conversation' about sex and myth-making, might and mortality, Blixen revels in the triumphs and absurdities of their macho world as if it were her own. Indeed 'Isak' Dinesen identified very strongly with Ewald, Denmark's first great lyric poet, who wrote his finest work while resident in the old inn at Rungsted, the Dinesen family home in which she was born.

The last 'tale' is not fiction at all, but a fine journalist's retelling of a fairy-tale moment in the history of her city. 'The Night of Great Shared Happiness' captures the joy and spontaneous need for togetherness—rare in the life of any great city—suddenly unleashed by BBC London's surprise announcement, on the evening of 4 May 1945, that the five years of Nazi occupation were at an end. Events unfold against the backdrop of some of the most familiar streets and squares and public buildings of the inner city: the historic power centres of Christiansborg and the royal palace of Amalienborg, the great public spaces of Kongens Nytorv and Rådhuspladsen (the Town Hall Square), and two important cultural icons at opposite ends of the city centre: the Royal Theatre on Kongens

Nytorv, and the head office of the daily paper *Politiken* on Rådhuspladsen.

In translating these stories, most of them for the first time, I have hoped to demonstrate the versatility, range, and also beauty (four writers here are first and foremost poets) of a great national literature very little known beyond Scandinavia, and here encapsulated in seventeen tales set in my ordinary and extraordinary city.

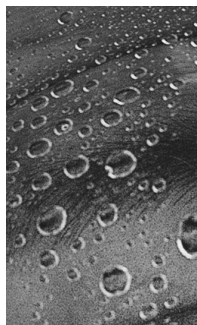
Many people have been instrumental in bringing this collection of stories together: my sister Trine, the indefatigable reader; great friends and Denmark lovers, Fleur Griffiths and John Lowe; the special little enclave of friends in Skamlebæk. Particular thanks go to my brother Jesper for his scholarly and excellent help and advice, also to my nephew Kristian whose beautiful flat in the centre of the old city he generously lent us, and to Rune Backs, who took many of the wonderful photos for the book. Thanks also to the helpful librarians in Odsherred Library, Asnæs. And finally, above all, thanks to Hugh, my husband and fellow traveller through life as well as the canon of Danish short stories, without whose help this book would not have seen the light of day.

Lotte Shankland



# The Water Drop

Hans Christian Andersen



I dare say you are familiar with a magnifying glass, that kind of round spectacle lens which makes everything a hundred times bigger than it really is? If you hold it up to your eye and look at a drop of water from the pond you will see over a thousand queer creatures you never normally see in the water, although they are there and they are real. It almost looks like a whole plateful of shrimps jumping around, and they are so ravenous they tear the arms and legs and tops and tails off each other, and yet they are happy enough in their own way.

Now, once upon a time there was an old man whom everyone called Creepy-Crawly, for that was his name. He always wanted to make the best of everything, and when that didn't work he used magic.

One day he was sitting there, holding a magnifying glass to his eye and looking at a drop of water taken from a puddle of ditch water. Goodness, how everything was creeping and crawling in there! All the thousands of little beasties were jumping and skipping about, pulling at each other and eating each other up.

‘Oh dear me, that is quite disgusting’, said old Creepy-Crawly. ‘Can’t they be made to live in peace and harmony and all mind their own business?’—and he thought and he thought but nothing seemed to work, so then he had to use magic. ‘I must colour them so they’ll be easier to see’, he said, and so he added something that looked like a little drop of wine to the water drop, but it was magic blood, the very best for two shillings; and this turned all the queer creatures pink all over, and now it looked just like a whole city full of naked savages.

‘What have you got there?’ asked another old troll who didn’t have a name, and that was what was special about him.

‘Well, if you can guess what it is’, said Creepy-Crawly, ‘I will make you a present of it; but it isn’t easy to discover if you don’t already know.’

And the troll without a name looked through the magnifying glass. It really did look like a whole city full of people running about with no clothes on! It was horrible, but even more horrible was seeing how they pushed

and shoved, all picking and pecking, biting and tearing at each other. Whichever was underneath had to be on top, and whichever was top had to be bottom! 'Look, look! His leg is longer than mine! Slash!—off with it! There's someone with a little pimple behind his ear, a harmless little pimple but it's tormenting him, so let it torment him even more!' And they pecked at it, and they pushed him over, and they ate him for the sake of that one little pimple. There was another one sitting as still as a little girl, only wanting peace and quiet, but the little girl had to go, and they pulled at her and they tore at her and they ate her up!

'That's exceedingly droll', said the troll.

'Yes, but what do you think it is?' asked Creepy-Crawly. 'Can you work it out?'

'That's easy to see!' said the other. 'It must be Copenhagen, or another big city, they're all alike. A big city, for sure.'

'It's ditchwater!' said Creepy-Crawly.



# Twice Met

Henrik Pontoppidan



He went far up into the mountains of Norway—an odd-looking lanky fellow in threadbare clothes with a permanent grin on his lean face. No one could make out where he belonged—not whence he came, not whither he was bound. But when the ‘Long Dane’, as they came to call him, every spring and autumn without fail came striding through their valley with his thin oilcloth knapsack on his back and that stumpy pipe smouldering under his nose-end, not a few on whose doors he knocked to ask for a match or a beaker of water could resist the temptation to invite him in—to be entertained by his many far-fetched stories and his altogether curious figure.

On the other hand, one wouldn’t particularly have wanted to meet him on a lonely path in the hills or the

woods. It was generally agreed there was something unsettling about the way those tiny dark eyes of his flickered behind his glasses. His grin wasn't altogether above suspicion either, and his hair hung like a tangled mane all over his ears and neck. The girls up in the summer pastures squealed in terror when he stuck his long, slightly inebriated nose through a crack in the door.

No, truth to tell, it was not easy to figure out what the devil he was doing roaming about this foreign land, all down at heel, when somewhere or other he surely had hearth and home waiting to welcome him inside so much more warmly. Most people considered him a bit of a 'queer fish'. Others were of the opinion he had likely forsaken his place of origin on account of some misdeed or other—possibly even murder. He looked capable of anything, that fellow! But if you asked him straight out, he would just grin and say in his quaint speech that it was so 'much, much bonnier in Norway'.

Once at some festivity where he had been invited in off the road they finally managed to worm out of him that he really did come from Denmark, was even a Copenhagener! When, however, they went on to enquire whether he felt homesick or ever had thoughts of returning to his native land, a peculiar dark flush suffused his jutting cheekbones; and after gazing silently at the ceiling a long while he answered, 'Yes, when I am needed.'

He was a riddle.

Come winter, when the snow and the cold drove him down from the mountains, he betook himself to Kristiania where he found work in his old profession: bookbinding. There, every night, he could be found sitting in a modest basement tavern, always in the same out-of-the-way corner, bent imperturbably over a newspaper which he studied from end to end, shrouded in ever thicker fumes from that half burned-out little pipe which so rarely left the corner of his mouth. But at the very first signs of spring the irresistible longing for adventure awoke in his breast once more. He strapped on his oilcloth knapsack and struck out for the mountains.

Well now, last summer he turned up again in the usual places, where little by little people had got so accustomed to his arrival that they almost felt he belonged to spring in the same way as the starling and the stork. Only this time he was the shadow of his old self. His tall spare frame was now almost skeletal, and the little dark eyes flitted hither and thither distractedly as though his thoughts were forever far away, in foreign parts. No less striking was how relentlessly he pressed people everywhere for tidings of Denmark and the frantic eagerness he showed whenever he caught sight of a newspaper and then begged permission to read it. On the other hand, if you broached the subject of politics, the parlous state of affairs back home in the land of his birth, the coup d'etat, the king and the

possibility of a revolution, he would straightway fall silent and go all black around the eyes.

And then it came, that October day with the appalling news from Copenhagen: Assassination attempt! Prime minister shot at! The story shook up even the Norwegian peasants. Now all hell will break loose, they opined. It's surely the last straw! And each morning, caught between suspense and concern, they picked up the paper and thought with commiseration of the old sister country.

But where, all of a sudden, was the 'Long Dane'? He had vanished into thin air, right from under the noses of the good people of Hallingdalen.

In fact, at the very first wind of the pistol shots, he had set out to cross the mountains by the shortest route to the sea. Without pause night or day he had tramped through valleys and towns, forest and heath, in an unfamiliar landscape, until toward evening after three days' hard march he came to a little coastal town in the west country. In one of the many sailors' taverns along the darkened quayside he discovered a German captain whose old tub had just taken on a cargo for Riga, and who, after a good many objections, in the end agreed to take him as a passenger to the waters off Copenhagen.

They weighed anchor at break of day the very next morning.

It was a misty November afternoon when the ship finally entered the Sound under a mild north-westerly. Reinald—for that was the Dane's name—stood beside the mainmast on the wet and slippery deck, blue with cold, with his numbed hands thrust into the sleeves of his tightly buttoned coat and his hat pulled down over his lank hair above those tiny feverish eyes which seemed to flare up each time he glimpsed a section of the familiar autumn-brown coast through the mist.

Most of the interminable crossing he had spent in more or less the identical position, and on the selfsame spot. Once in a while he had allowed himself a little exercise, pacing to and fro in the tight space between mast and rail; but when his impatience and agitation became too much for him he had sat down on a coil of anchor cable with his face buried in his hands. At night he slept below in the fo'c'sle between a sailor and a cabin boy who had enjoyed a good laugh at the expense of this baffling passenger who thrashed about in his hammock like a fish on the line and screamed aloud in his dreams.

In any case, there had been little chance to become acquainted. They ran into the foulest weather, with rain and gales over the North Sea, and fog over the Kattegat. For two days they lay off Hesseløe, compelled to keep sounding the ship's bell; and when the fog finally lifted enough to dare set sail again, they were forced to heave to

once more in the lee of Kullen to await a pilot. Not until late morning did they slip past Kronborg—and now the Sound lay all about them like a thick, lead-grey, rocking waste over which the ship slowly crept along.

It was almost evening before Copenhagen loomed out of the mist far up ahead.

Reinald's bony body gave a start when he saw the first spires rise like fine needles piercing the grey gauze of the horizon. Instinctively his hand went to the small of his back—to make sure the well-honed pointed knife still sat snug in its leather sheath under his coat tails. His entire body started trembling with impatience as little by little the city emerged from the mist: Vor Frelser's slender corkscrew spire, the brickwork cone of St. Paul's, the plump dome of the Marble Church. And later: the Stock Exchange, the Cross of Our Lady, the crane on the old battlement of the royal dockyard, and the snow-white roofs of the bacon factories.

For twelve long years he had not set eyes on the city of his birth—not since those momentous days at the beginning of the seventies when, as a very young man, he had thrown himself into the socialist class war, never doubting that the time for the great reckoning had finally come, the dearly bought vengeance of the suffering, the oppressed, and the wronged. Right in there, between St. Peter's and Our Lady, high up in a wretched little garret he had lived

with his poor, deceived, and abandoned mother to whose one sole lapse from virtue he owed his existence. Up there, day after day her joyless grey eyes had dripped that bitter hatred into his soul which made his cheeks blaze and his brain glow. And it was from there that he had stormed out to the great rallies, where under the eyes of the leaders themselves he had delivered his own fiery speeches to the listening thousands.

And then he had left—broken, disillusioned, full of loathing, branded by all the newspapers' inky lies, pursued by the gloating grins of treacherous comrades and the vigilant eyes of the police. Not long after, his mother died, and with that his last tie with his hated hometown was broken.

And yet . . . and yet wherever in the world he happened to set foot, in Germany, in America, and latterly in the mountains of Norway, he had unfailingly kept one sleepless ear cocked in the direction of the old places, waiting for the day when the people's patience would finally snap. And now at last it had come! The summons had sounded! . . . Or could it even be that the wondrous and ineffable had already occurred? Had the sentence been passed, the punishment carried out? It seemed to him that an eerie and eloquent silence brooded over the city as it gradually opened up to his gaze, with the long rows of pale lights under the still factory chimneys stark against the sky.

Could it, *could* it have happened?

On the stroke of six they dropped anchor in the inner roads. Darkness had fallen. Hundreds of ships' lanterns bobbed to left and right of the Trekrøner beacon's penetrating beam. A tramp steamer came splashing out from the harbour with its fiery red and cat-green eyes riding above an incessant hissing and creaking. From within the glowing city sounded a far-off restless hum.

Staggering like a drunk, Reinald got down into the dinghy, which swiftly carried him ashore.

The first person he came across was a uniformed messenger standing under a lamp by the custom house steps, deep in a newspaper. But the blue, bloated face betrayed nothing, and Reinald did not have the courage to approach him. The customs officer, a sulky little fellow who inspected his knapsack wordlessly, likewise left him none the wiser. But as he hastened out into the deserted foggy street where once in a while a solitary figure brushed past him under the wan street lighting with coat collar round his ears, he was struck anew by the uncanny silence that hung over the city.

Next moment, through the fog he caught sight of a row of large posters on a nearby hoarding. People's revolution!— flashed through his mind as he hurried over. But then by the dim light of a far-off street lamp he made out:

*Madame Popper Menter! Last concert! Theatre! Burlesque! Chung-Chang the equilibrist! Breathtaking aerobatical performances! Musse is coming!!! Bedbugs eliminated! . . .*

A dry cough sounded a little way off. He looked round and glimpsed a policeman's helmet slowly approaching from the direction of Grønningen. Quickly he turned a corner and was almost immediately in Store Kongensgade. Here there was no lack of light or people. Hansom cabs and drays thronged the street. Shop bells jingled, boys whistled 'The Happy Coppersmith'. On one corner a fat policeman stood and yawned.

Reinald was astounded. He gazed at all those fine gentlemen sweeping past him in their new promenade furs, the imposing perfumed ladies with flashing eyes roaming behind cherry-red veils. He gazed at the placid urchins gathered wistfully in front of the bright shop windows, at the workers quietly making their way home, at the womenfolk and apprentice lads standing about in doorways and gateways chatting together and smoking. And he peered down into cellar tap-rooms where people sat crowded together, drinking and laughing.

He could make no sense of it. What was the meaning of this gaiety? Was it a cover under which the bullets were being forged?

Where should he seek information? Whom did he dare ask?

He turned down one of the side streets, and at once his eyes were drawn to light streaming onto the street from a big house some way ahead. Knots of people were gathered on both sides of the arched entrance, and carriage after carriage drove through it and drew up.

'What's happening?' Reinald asked a shoemaker's apprentice after watching a while in amazement the ladies in ball gowns and the men in white ties skipping from the carriages into the garlanded vestibule.

'It's the liberals.'

'The liberals? Who are they?'

'The liberals? Huh, get away with you!'

'They're dedicating the flag', piped up a little old dame in a bonnet and long cape, and she nodded portentously up at him.

Reinald gazed down at her wizened trembling mouth, as though unable to believe his own ears. Dedicating the flag! Then had some sort of victory been won?

He felt utterly at a loss. As if in a dream, he roamed a long while through a succession of dark streets, almost unaware of walking. At last he halted outside a deep basement tavern. And being thereby reminded he had eaten nothing all day, he pulled himself together and descended the steps.

It was a grubby little room with a spittle-dotted floor, at that moment void of customers. From the centre of the blackened ceiling dangled a drowsily fuming bare paraffin lamp, and seated in one corner in shirtsleeves was the stout tavern keeper, fast asleep. The sound of the doorbell woke him, though, and he eyed the stranger in befuddled surprise. Reinald sat down at a table close to the door, and ordered a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of beer. With much effort and audible grumbles, the fat man rose from his chair and shuffled across the floor to a hatch in the wall, where he remained standing until the order was thrust through the hole.

‘Bad times, eh?’ he gasped as he slumped into a chair opposite the newcomer, and, still half asleep, bit off a good three inches from a stick of chewing tobacco which he fished from a trouser pocket.

Reinald nodded assent, bent over his sandwiches.

‘Nothing seems to be moving. Just strikes and bankruptcies and mischief and misery wherever you look. And all just because of politics! Can you beat it?’

At the word ‘politics’ Reinald pricked up his ears.

But the fat man was suddenly wide awake too, and darted a hard look at his visitor out of the corner of an eye.

‘Well—so what’s *your* opinion about all this here politicking?’ he asked.

Reinald replied that he had only that very evening arrived in the city from abroad and was therefore in complete ignorance. But he would appreciate some information; he had heard so many rumours.

‘Did you also hear about the new emergency laws?’

‘No!’

‘About the gendarmes? And the police?’

‘No! Has...has something happened? I mean—something really serious?’ Reinald stammered out.

‘Eeh, God preserve us!’ cried the fat man in horror. ‘What more could possibly happen? Isn’t it dangerous enough already? Thank the Lord I don’t bother myself with politics and that. To my way of thinking the Right or the Left would be equally good, if they could only agree. That’s what they should be thinking about, that lot over there in Parliament, and start understanding it’s us tradesmen who suffer. You tell me what’s the use of all their fuss? Previously I could dispose of a half or even a whole barrel of beer in a single night, just to labourers and workmen. But now everyone’s keeping well clear of public places so as not to run into trouble over what they say. It’s easy to let slip a word or two when you’ve had a drop too much, and a spy can jump on it and use it to harm a man. So that’s why they’re all stopping at home, unless as like as not they’re setting up secret societies and hush-hush clubs... And as though that’s any better! Watch out, or before you

know it we'll be the same here as over there in Russia, what with them nillylists and dynamiters.'

'You really think so?' asked Reinald eagerly.

The publican again gave his customer a searching look. Then he winked a couple of times and said in conspiratorial tones:

'Who knows what might be going on in these strange times. Could be something new pops up sooner than anyone thinks.'

'What do you mean?'

'Hm! I'm not saying nothing', he said, and stared hard out into the room.

But a moment later he turned back to Reinald and laid a hand confidentially on his arm.

'Know how to keep a secret?'

'Me? . . . Yes, of course.'

'Then listen to this. Up here on the second floor lives one of the leaders . . . of the opposition, naturally—'

'Here, in this house?'

'On the second floor, aye. Take it from me, something's afoot up there. There's been no end of running up and down them stairs in recent days! And they go wishing and whispering and putting their heads together soon as they come out on the street. The other day—but don't quote me!—the other day there was a proper meeting on, with a good two dozen—and ladies and all, naturally! You