

Kannitverstan by Johann Peter Hebel

Man indeed has the opportunity every day, in Emmendingen or Gundelfingen as well as in Amsterdam, to speculate, if he wants to, on the inconsistency of all earthly things and to become satisfied with his fate, even though there aren't many roast pigeons flying about in the air for him. But, through an error, a German artisan in Amsterdam arrived at the truth and its recognition by the strangest roundabout way. For when he had come to this great and rich commercial city full of splendid houses, swaying ships and busy people, his eye was at once caught by a large and handsome house, such as he had never yet experienced on all his wanderings from Tuttlingen to Amsterdam.

For a long time he contemplated this luxurious building in astonishment, the six chimneys on its roof, its beautiful cornices and its tall windows, larger than the door of his father's house at home. Finally he could not refrain from addressing a passer-by. "My good friend," he said to him, "couldn't you tell me the name of the gentleman who owns this wonderfully beautiful house with its windows full of tulips, daisies and stocks?" But the man, who presumably had something more important to do and unfortunately understood just as much of the German language as the questioner of Dutch, that is to say nothing, said shortly and brusquely, "Kannitverstan" and buzzed past.

Now this was a Dutch word, or three if you want to be exact, and means in German as much as "Ich kann Euch nicht verstehn." ("I can't understand you.") But the good stranger believed that this was the name of the man he had asked about. He must have been an awfully rich man, this Herr Kannitverstan, he thought and went on. Out one street, in another, he finally came to the bay they call there Het Ey, or in German, the Y. There stood ship beside ship and mast beside mast, and at first he didn't know how he would manage to see and contemplate his fill of all these marvels with his two eyes alone, until finally his attention was caught by a large ship which had recently arrived from East India and was now being unloaded.

Whole rows of boxes and bales were already standing on and beside one another on land. But more kept being rolled out, and barrels full of sugar and coffee, full of rice and pepper and, pardon the expression, mouse droppings too. But when he had looked for a long time, he finally asked a fellow who was

just carrying a chest on his shoulder for the name of the lucky man for whom the sea was bringing all these goods to shore. "Kannitverstan" was the reply. At this he thought, Aha, is that it?" No wonder, a man for whom the sea floats such treasures ashore can well afford to put such houses into the world and such breeds of tulips in front of his windows in gilded flowerpots.

Now he went back again and began a really sad speculation in his mind, what a poor man he was among so many rich people in the world. But just as he was thinking, if I had it as good as this Herr Kannitverstan, only once – he turned a corner and saw a long funeral procession. Four horses, draped in black, were drawing a hearse, which was likewise draped in black, slowly and mournfully, as if they knew that they were taking a dead man to his rest. A long train of friends and acquaintances of the deceased followed, pair by pair, enveloped in black coats and silent. In the distance a lonely bell was tolling.

Now our stranger was seized by a melancholy feeling, which never passes a good man by when he sees a corpse, and he stood there devoutly with his hat in his hands until they had all passed by. However he went up to the last man in the procession, who was just then calculating silently how much he would profit from his cotton if it went up ten guildens a hundredweight, gently took hold of his cloak and innocently begged his pardon. "That must have been a good friend of yours," he said, "for whom the bell is tolling, that you are following the procession so sadly and pensively." "Kannitverstan!" was the reply. At this a few big tears fell from the eyes of our man from Tuttlingen, and he suddenly felt heavy and then again light about his heart. "Poor Kannitverstan," he exclaimed, "what profit do you get from all your wealth now" What I will get from my poverty some day too: a shroud and a sheet, and from all your beautiful flowers – perhaps a sprig of rosemary on your cold chest or a rue."

With these thoughts he accompanied the corpse to the grave as if he belonged to the party, saw the supposed Herr Kannitverstan lowered to his rest and was more moved by the Dutch funeral oration, of which he did not understand a word, than by many a German one to which he paid no attention. Finally he went away with the others with a light heart and ate a piece of Limburger cheese with a good appetite at an inn where they understood German, and whenever he was again threatened by the sad thought that so many people in

the world were so rich and he so poor, he merely thought of Herr Kannitverstan in Amsterdam, of his great house, his rich ship and his narrow grave