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## The Wine Merchant of Aarhus

### **Abstract**

The professor, who had gone to Denmark from Australia nearly thirty years ago when she was a young woman, lived in an old railway crossing-keeper's house about five miles out of the town centre. The house stood alone by the railway line in the middle of ploughed fields. It was two storeys with a steeply pitched roof in which, in the Danish style, there were also rooms. Several old apple trees survived in the neglected garden. As soon as I arrived at the house I felt there was something sad and forgotten about its situation.

ALEX MILLER

## The Wine Merchant of Aarhus

The professor, who had gone to Denmark from Australia nearly thirty years ago when she was a young woman, lived in an old railway crossing-keeper's house about five miles out of the town centre. The house stood alone by the railway line in the middle of ploughed fields. It was two storeys with a steeply pitched roof in which, in the Danish style, there were also rooms. Several old apple trees survived in the neglected garden. As soon as I arrived at the house I felt there was something sad and forgotten about its situation. As if I saw at once that it did not really belong there any more and that, in the service of efficiency, at which the Danes seemed to be very good, the railway company should have demolished the old house when the railway crossing was bridged and accommodation was no longer needed for a crossing keeper and his family. The local farmers might then have ploughed over the site where the house and its neglected garden stood and have resumed the land for their crops. Who, after all, I asked myself, would wish to live in such a place as this, isolated from neighbours, silent and alone in the middle of empty ploughed fields? Despite its picturesqueness I could see nothing to recommend the professor's house as a place to live. I imagined evenings there after long days spent alone in the study, when nothing would be more pressing than the need to get out and be among people in order to refresh one's spirits, to walk in the streets or to meet acquaintances in a cafe and drink a glass of wine. To step outside the professor's house was to enter the forlorn garden with its views of muddy fields. I was certain, moreover, that no inhabitant of this lonely gatekeeper's house could have any contact with the farmers, whose redbrick homes and cattle byres stood off on the skyline, their backs to the world, as unencouraging as military forts might be to the casual advances of a stranger in need of a little company.

We paused to admire the house before going in. It's true, it was during the silvery twilight of a long northern winter evening that I arrived at the professor's house, and I suppose the darkness and the cold and the leafless apple trees made the situation seem even more discouraging to me than would have been the case if I'd arrived during the summer. But even so, what about the summer evenings? Wouldn't you feel especially enticed out of the house then, to mingle with people and to eat ice creams and drink beer and to laugh, and perhaps even to

fall in love? Mightn't the situation of the crossing keeper's house, I thought, be even more disheartening during the summer than during the winter? If it can still be as true for us today as it was once for Huysmans, that *the beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy*, then in the rustic simplicity of its isolated setting I was prepared to believe that the professor's house was beautiful, but I was glad, nevertheless, that I was to be staying for only a few days and not, as she had, for thirty years. As we stood together in the garden, I said, 'What an incredible place! It's great! Really fantastic! Beautiful!' And when she turned to go inside I saw the smile in the professor's eyes, and that she did not believe in my enthusiasm.

As well as being an eminent scholar in the field of the new literatures in English, the professor was also the editor of an arts magazine. She had decided to publish an issue of the magazine in which my book and my visit to her university would be celebrated. Mette Jørgensen and Lars Jensen, two of the professor's old Ph.D. students, who had become her colleagues and were collaborating with her in the production of the arts magazine, came back to the house with us the next day from the university to have dinner with us and to discuss what should be put into the celebratory issue of the magazine. Earlier in the day I'd gone into the town with Lars to do some sightseeing and to help with the shopping for our dinner. It was then that I met Grubert, the owner of the wine shop on Guldsmegade – and the subject, supposedly, of this story.

It was a small family wine business. A warm brightly lit shop in the busy main street of the town. Grubert took such an obvious pleasure in helping us select the wine from his shelves that it was impossible not to feel that we were part of a privileged occasion. When the wine had been chosen he carried it to his counter and wrapped each bottle separately in tissue paper before handing it to us and receiving his payment. The practised way Grubert rolled the bottles, with a certain modest flourish, into the crinkly sheets of tissue paper, while Lars and I stood by the counter and watched him, seemed to me to be a survival from a past time. It was a gentle, unhurried, and really quite complex gesture. It was a gesture that belonged in the time when the professor's house had been a railway crossing-keeper's house and travellers had had to wait while the crossing-keeper came out and opened the gates for them. There was the possibility in Grubert's actions that Lars and I might have been entrusted with a message for him.

As we walked away along the street I glanced back at Grubert in his wine shop and caught an image of him, framed against the dark evening: the white sleeves of his shirt and the green of his apron in the bright shop as he rolls a bottle of wine into crisp sheets of tissue paper for an expectant customer.

Why do you call him Grubert, and not Hr. Grubert, or John Grubert?

I asked. Lars explained to me that during the past few years in Denmark the use of *Hr.* had come to sound too formal and old-fashioned. 'Perhaps the rich women whose husbands own the houses overlooking the bay still call him *Hr. Grubert*,' Lars said, 'when they telephone to order their wine. But everyone else would consider *Hr.* an affectation these days.' 'And things haven't relaxed so far that you'd call him by his first name?' I asked. 'Grubert,' Lars said, listening to himself. 'It sounds right.'

When we'd finished the shopping Lars took me to his favourite cafe and ordered two bottles of Tuborg. We drank the beer and talked. The cafe was busy with young people drinking and smoking and talking. The beer was light and to my palate nearly tasteless. Outside it had begun to rain again. Our coats were wet from an earlier shower which we'd made no attempt to shelter from. 'We'll soon get dry again,' Lars had said, the rain shining on his face and his hair. It was pleasant in the cafe. I was curious to find out as much as I could about Denmark during my short stay. Lars had visited Australia several times and we talked about differences between Denmark and Australia. The weather mostly. I ordered the next round of Tuborg, and attempted the Danish, which was unnecessary as the waiter spoke excellent English. But there is a peculiar pleasure to be had from trying out the strange sounds that make up another's language. To articulate the odd, meaningless sound and get a sensible response has the magic of incantation in it. The waiter laughed with us, sharing our pleasure, and Lars complimented me on my pronunciation. Everyone seemed to be friendly and happy. Denmark, I thought, is a friendly country. I was reminded, by this thought, however, that I was enjoying the period of amnesty from care that can be experienced whenever we are in a new country for the first time; a brief, and to the writer a precious, period during which the stranger is permitted to enjoy a kind of innocent wonder. As if it has been agreed that for a little while the stranger, like the child, will not be held accountable for reality. I had experienced such a period in China some years earlier and it had proved profitable to my writing. I knew that detachment was possible during this moment in-between, as it were, a moment of disconnectedness during which I would be permitted to read the social dimensions of this country as my own fiction. A moment for receiving impressions, before the imagination is closed by exact knowledge. Of course I said nothing of this to Lars, because I knew that to speak of such a thing is to destroy its power.

At the professor's house that evening after dinner, during the discussion about what to put into the celebratory issue of the arts journal, Lars suggested that a short story from me would be a good idea. 'But I've never written short stories,' I said. 'That doesn't mean you can't, though, does it?' 'Suggest something, then,' I said. 'Tell me what to write and I'll write it.' I waited while they looked at each other,

puzzling over what to suggest to me. It was Mette who was first to lose patience with this procedure. 'We're not the writers,' she said. 'You should think of something yourself. That's part of being a writer, isn't it, thinking up your own stories?' 'Maybe,' I said, 'But it's nice to have things suggested sometimes.'

While we considered the problem the professor poured the last of the wine for us. One of us once again remarked on how good the wine was and the others readily agreed. The professor, however, was silent. She was thinking. 'As good as Australian wine,' Lars said, looking into his glass. The professor was gazing out the window toward the bare cold hill of dark ploughed land with the small lights of the distant farmhouses on the skyline. She seemed to have forgotten us. As if, accustomed to sit here alone during the long evenings in the spell of the old house, she had fallen into an habitual reverie, sipping Grubert's good red wine and gazing out the window while the silvery light lingered and lingered on the ploughed fields, waiting interminably for the landscape to grow quite dark, and then forgetting to wait. After a while she lifted the glass to her lips and drank deeply, and she made a sound like a groan that someone might make in their sleep. Then she turned to me, her gaze direct, challenging me, and she said, 'Grubert,' as if she were forming the word out of the groan. 'Lars said you liked our Grubert. So why don't you write us a story about the wine merchant of Aarhus?'

They watched me and waited. A fast train went by, making the house tremble. In the stillness after the passage of the train I recalled my image of Grubert in his shop, surrounded by his tall racks of handsome wine bottles, just like me in my study at home in Australia as I am at this very moment writing this story that is not really a story, surrounded by my tall shelves of books. 'I suppose he's the third generation of Grubert wine merchants,' I said, 'and just like his father and grandfather before him has been going to that same shop regularly at the same hour every day for thirty or forty years without a break and that the locals safely set their watches by him.' 'Good! That's our Grubert,' the professor said. 'What else?' 'Well,' I said. 'One day he takes off his green apron in the middle of the afternoon, long before the usual time, and he puts on his jacket and closes his shop and hurries down Guldsmegade without looking either left or right and without greeting any of his numerous acquaintances as he passes.'

While I drank from my glass of Grubert's good red wine my three friends waited. And when I had drunk and remained silent Mette leaned towards me, resting her elbows on the blond wood of the table she examined me with her large blue eyes, a frown, which seemed to question my integrity as a storyteller, creasing the centre of her broad intelligent forehead. 'What then?' she asked. 'Where was Grubert going?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Did he have a lover?'

'It's a sort of jest,' I said. 'Like a haiku, or a Chinese micro story. Everyone in the town knows the wine merchant has never varied his habits for forty years, then without any explanation one day he does something different, and at once there is this mystery. And all because a man has walked down a street that is as familiar to him as the thoughts in his own mind.'

Mette and Lars looked at the professor. Were they waiting for her verdict before giving their own? I wondered. 'We need something a bit longer than that,' the professor said.

'Perhaps other things will occur to me when I write it,' I said.

'I want to know why Grubert leaves his shop,' Mette insisted.

'But it's not a story about why Grubert leaves his shop,' I said. 'It's a story about your town. It's a story about Aarhus and how steady a town it is.'

'Even so,' the professor said. 'It still needs to be longer.' She pushed her empty wineglass to the middle of the table and got up and went and stood by the window with her back to us. 'You'll have to *pretend* to know why Grubert leaves his shop in that unexpected way,' she said, just an edge of something impatient in her voice, her interest no longer really connected to the possibilities of the story, wishing, perhaps, to think of other things. 'Make something up,' she said, standing at the window gazing out into the cold winter night across the dark ploughed fields that were no longer visible toward the twinkling lights of the farmhouse on the horizon. 'A lover,' she said eventually, when I no longer expected her to speak again of the story. 'A lover is a good idea.'