# Kannitverstan

(Johann Peter Hebel)

A person has daily opportunities, in Emmendingen and Gundelfingen as well as in Amsterdam, to reflect on the state of all earthly things, if they wish, and to be content with their fate, even if not many roasted pigeons fly around in the air for them.

But in the strangest way, a German journeyman once came to the truth and its recognition in Amsterdam through a mistake. For when he arrived in this large and wealthy trading city, full of magnificent houses, swaying ships, and busy people, a large and beautiful house immediately caught his eye, the likes of which he had not seen on his entire journey from Tuttlingen to Amsterdam. He long admired this precious building with wonder, the six chimneys on the roof, the beautiful cornices, and the tall windows, larger than the door at his father's house back home. Finally, he could not hold back from addressing a passerby. "Good friend," he addressed him, "can you tell me the name of the gentleman who owns this beautiful house with windows full of tulips, asters, and stocks?" But the man, who presumably had something more important to do and unfortunately understood as much German as the questioner did Dutch, namely nothing, said curtly and snappishly: "Kannitverstan" and walked on. This was now a Dutch word, or three if you look at it rightly, and means in German as much as: 'I cannot understand you'. But the good stranger believed it was the name of the man he had asked about. 'That must be a very wealthy man, Mr. Kannitverstan,' he thought, and walked on. Street out, street in, finally he came to the bay called Het Ey, or in German: the Ypsilon.

There stood ship by ship and mast by mast, and he initially did not know how he would manage with his two eyes to see and consider all these curiosities enough, until finally a large ship caught his attention, which had recently arrived from East India and was now being unloaded. Whole rows of crates and bales were already standing side by side on the land. More were still being rolled out, and barrels full of sugar and coffee, full of rice and pepper, and also some mouse droppings among them. But after watching for a long time, he finally asked someone who was just carrying a crate on his shoulder, what the lucky man's name was, to whom the sea brought all these beautiful goods ashore. "Kannitverstan" was the answer. Then he thought: 'Haha, look at that! No wonder, whoever the sea washes such riches ashore for can well afford to build such beautiful houses in the world as that one with the many tulips in the gilded vases in front of the windows.' Now he went back and made a rather sad reflection on himself, what a poor devil he was among so many rich people in the big wide world.

But just as he was thinking: 'If only I could get as far as this Mr. Kannitverstan,' he came around a corner and saw a large funeral procession. Four black-veiled horses slowly and sadly pulled a likewise black-covered hearse, as if they knew they were leading a dead person to their rest. A long procession of friends and acquaintances of the deceased followed, pair by pair, veiled, in black cloaks and silent. In the distance, a solitary bell tolled. Now a melancholy feeling seized our stranger, which does not pass by any good person when they see a corpse, and he stood devoutly with his hat in his hands until everything had passed. Yet he approached the last in the procession, who was just quietly calculating what he could gain on his cotton if he raised the price by ten guilders per hundredweight, gently took him by the coat, and sincerely asked for forgiveness. "That must have been a good friend of yours," he said, "for whom the bell tolls, that you walk along so sadly and thoughtfully." "Kannitverstan" was the answer. Then a couple of big tears fell from our good Tuttlinger's eyes, and his heart became heavy and then light again. "Poor Kannitverstan," he exclaimed, "what do you have now from all your wealth? You have only what I will one day receive from my poverty: a shroud and a linen cloth, and perhaps a rosemary on your cold chest, or a rue."

With these thoughts, he accompanied the funeral as if he belonged to it, to the grave, saw the supposed Mr. Kannitverstan lowered into his resting place, and was more moved by the Dutch funeral sermon, of which he understood not a word, than by many a German one, to which he had otherwise never paid attention. Finally, he went away with a relieved heart with the others, consumed a piece of Limburger cheese with a good appetite at his inn, where they understood German, and if it ever again weighed heavily on him that so many people in the world were so rich and he so poor, he only thought of Mr. Kannitverstan in Amsterdam, of his large house, of his rich ship, and of his narrow grave.

Source: Johann Peter Hebel: Works. Two volumes; ed. by Otto Behagel, Stuttgart 1883 - 1884 (= Kürschners Deutsche National-Literatur Vol. 142/1 and 142/2) Vol.2: Treasure Chest of the Rhenish House Friend, 1884