

Something

Hans Christian Andersen

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Intermediate

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“I want to be something!” said the eldest of five brothers. “I want to do something in the world. I don’t care how humble my position may be in society, if I only effect some good, for that will really be something. I’ll make bricks, for they are quite indispensable things, and then I shall truly have done something.”

“But that something will not be enough!” quoth the second brother. “What you intend doing is just as much as nothing at all. It is journeyman’s work, and can be done by a machine. No, I would rather be a bricklayer at once, for that is something real; and that’s what I will be. That brings rank; as a bricklayer one belongs to a guild, and is a citizen, and has one’s own flag and one’s own house of call. Yes, and if all goes well, I will keep journeymen. I shall become a master bricklayer, and my wife will be a master’s wife—that is what I call something.”

“That’s nothing at all!” said the third. “That is beyond the pale of the guild, and there are many of those in a town that stand far above the mere master artizan. You may be an honest man; but as a ‘master’ you will after all only belong to those who are ranked among common men. I know something better than that. I will be an architect, and will thus enter into the territory of art and speculation. I shall be reckoned among those who stand high in point of intellect. I shall certainly have to serve up from the pickaxe, so to speak; so I must begin as a carpenter’s apprentice, and must go about as an assistant, in a cap, though I am accustomed to wear a silk

hat. I shall have to fetch beer and spirits for the common journeymen, and they will call me 'thou,' and that is insulting! But I shall imagine to myself that the whole thing is only acting, and a kind of masquerade. Tomorrow—that is to say, when I have served my time—I shall go my own way, and the others will be nothing to me. I shall go to the academy, and get instructions in drawing, and shall be called an architect. That's something! I may get to be called 'sir,' and even 'worshipful sir,' or even get a handle at the front or at the back of my name, and shall go on building and building, just as those before me have built. That will always be a thing to remember, and that's what I call something!"

"But I don't care at all for that something," said the fourth. "I won't sail in the wake of others, and be a copyist. I will be a genius; and will stand up greater than all the rest of you together. I shall be the creator of a new style, and will give the plan of a building suitable to the climate and the material of the country, for the nationality of the people, for the development of the age—and an additional storey for my own genius."

"But supposing the climate and the material are bad," said the fifth, "that would be a disastrous circumstance, for these two exert a great influence! Nationality, moreover, may expand itself until it becomes affectation, and the development of the century may run wild with your work, as youth often runs wild. I quite realise the fact that none of you will be anything real, however much you may believe in yourselves. But, do what you like, I will not resemble you: I shall keep on the outside of things, and criticise whatever you produce. To every work there is attached something that is not right—something that has gone wrong; and I will ferret that out and find fault with it; and that will be doing something!"

And he kept his word; and everybody said concerning this fifth brother, "There is certainly something in him; he has a good head; but he does nothing." And by that very means they thought something of him!

Now, you see, this is only a little story; but it will never end so long as the world lasts.

But what became of the five brothers? Why, this is nothing, and not something.

Listen, it is a capital story.

The eldest brother, he who manufactured bricks, soon became aware of the fact that every brick, however small it might be, produced for him a little coin, though this coin was only copper; and many copper pennies laid one upon the other can be changed into a shining dollar; and wherever one knocks with such a dollar in

one's hand, whether at the baker's, or the butcher's, or the tailor's—wherever it may be, the door flies open, and the visitor is welcomed, and gets what he wants. You see that is what comes of bricks. Some of those belonging to the eldest brother certainly crumbled away, or broke in two, but there was a use even for these.

On the high rampart, the wall that kept out the sea, Margaret, the poor woman, wished to build herself a little house. All the faulty bricks were given to her, and a few perfect ones into the bargain, for the eldest brother was a good-natured man, though he certainly did not achieve anything beyond the manufacture of bricks. The poor woman put together the house for herself. It was little and narrow, and the single window was quite crooked. The door was too low, and the thatched roof might have shown better workmanship. But after all it was a shelter; and from the little house you could look far across the sea, whose waves broke vainly against the protecting rampart on which it was built. The salt billows spurted their spray over the whole house, which was still standing when he who had given the bricks for its erection had long been dead and buried.

The second brother knew better how to build a wall, for he had served an apprenticeship to it. When he had served his time and passed his examination he packed his knapsack and sang the journeyman's song:

“While I am young I'll wander, from place to place I'll roam,
And everywhere build houses, until I come back home;
And youth will give me courage, and my true love won't forget:
Hurrah then for a workman's life! I'll be a master yet!”

And he carried his idea into effect. When he had come home and become a master, he built one house after another in the town. He built a whole street; and when the street was finished and became an ornament to the place, the houses built a house for him in return, that was to be his own. But how can houses build a house? If you ask them they will not answer you, but people will understand what is meant by the expression, and say, ‘certainly, it was the street that built his house for him.’ It was little, and the floor was covered with clay; but when he danced with his bride upon this clay floor, it seemed to become polished oak; and from every stone in the wall sprang forth a flower, and the room was gay, as if with the costliest paper-hanger's work. It was a pretty house, and in it lived a happy pair. The flag of the guild fluttered before the house, and the journeymen and apprentices shouted hurrah! Yes, he certainly was something! And at last he died; and that was something too.

Now came the architect, the third brother, who had been at first a carpenter's apprentice, had worn a cap, and served as an errand boy, but had afterwards gone to the academy, and risen to become an architect, and to be called "honoured sir." Yes, if the houses of the street had built a house for the brother who had become a bricklayer, the street now received its name from the architect, and the handsomest house in it became his property. That was something, and he was something; and he had a long title before and after his name. His children were called genteel children, and when he died his widow was "a widow of rank," and that is something!—and his name always remained at the corner of the street, and lived on in the mouth of every one as the street's name—and that was something!

Now came the genius of the family, the fourth brother, who wanted to invent something new and original, and an additional storey on the top of it for himself. But the top storey tumbled down, and he came tumbling down with it, and broke his neck. Nevertheless he had a splendid funeral, with guild flags and music; poems in the papers, and flowers strewn on the paving-stones in the street; and three funeral orations were held over him, each one longer than the last, which would have rejoiced him greatly, for he always liked it when people talked about him; a monument also was erected over his grave. It was only one storey high, but still it was something.

Now he was dead like the three other brothers; but the last, the one who was a critic, outlived them all: and that was quite right, for by this means he got the last word, and it was of great importance to him to have the last word. The people always said he had a good head of his own. At last his hour came, and he died, and came to the gates of Paradise. There souls always enter two and two, and he came up with another soul that wanted to get into Paradise too; and who should this be but old dame Margaret from the house upon the sea wall.

"I suppose this is done for the sake of contrast, that I and this wretched soul should arrive here at exactly the same time!" said the critic. "Pray who are you, my good woman?" he asked. "Do you want to get in here too?"

And the old woman curtsied as well as she could: she thought it must be St. Peter himself talking to her.

"I'm a poor old woman of a very humble family," she replied. "I'm old Margaret that lived in the house on the sea wall."

"Well, and what have you done? what have you accomplished down there?"

“I have really accomplished nothing at all in the world: nothing that I can plead to have the doors here opened to me. It would be a real mercy to allow me to slip in through the gate.”

“In what manner did you leave the world?” asked he, just for the sake of saying something; for it was wearisome work standing there and saying nothing.

“Why, I really don’t know how I left it. I was sick and miserable during my last years, and could not well bear creeping out of bed, and going out suddenly into the frost and cold. It was a hard winter, but I have got out of it all now. For a few days the weather was quite calm, but very cold, as your honour must very well know. The sea was covered with ice as far as one could look. All the people from the town walked out upon the ice, and I think they said there was a dance there, and skating. There was beautiful music and a great feast there too; the sound came into my poor little room, where I lay ill. And it was towards the evening; the moon had risen beautifully, but was not yet in its full splendour; I looked from my bed out over the wide sea, and far off, just where the sea and sky join, a strange white cloud came up. I lay looking at the cloud, and I saw a little black spot in the middle of it, that grew larger and larger; and now I knew what it meant, for I am old and experienced, though this token is not often seen. I knew it, and a shuddering came upon me. Twice in my life I have seen the same thing; and I knew there would be an awful tempest, and a spring flood, which would overwhelm the poor people who were now drinking and dancing and rejoicing—young and old, the whole city had issued forth—who was to warn them, if no one saw what was coming yonder, or knew, as I did, what it meant? I was dreadfully alarmed, and felt more lively than I had done for a long time. I crept out of bed, and got to the window, but could not crawl farther, I was so exhausted. But I managed to open the window. I saw the people outside running and jumping about on the ice; I could see the beautiful flags that waved in the wind. I heard the boys shouting ‘hurrah!’ and the servant men and maids singing. There were all kinds of merriment going on. But the white cloud with the black spot! I cried out as loud as I could, but no one heard me; I was too far from the people. Soon the storm would burst, and the ice would break, and all who were upon it would be lost without remedy. They could not hear me, and I could not come out to them. Oh, if I could only bring them ashore! Then kind Heaven inspired me with the thought of setting fire to my bed, and rather to let the house burn down, than that all those people should perish so miserably. I succeeded in lighting up a beacon for them. The red flame blazed up on high, and I escaped out of the door, but fell down exhausted on the threshold, and could get no farther. The flames rushed out towards me, flickered through the window, and rose high above

the roof. All the people on the ice yonder beheld it, and ran as fast as they could, to give aid to a poor old woman who, they thought, was being burned to death. Not one remained behind. I heard them coming; but I also became aware of a rushing sound in the air; I heard a rumbling like the sound of heavy artillery; the spring-flood was lifting the covering of ice, which presently cracked and burst into a thousand fragments. But the people succeeded in reaching the sea-wall—I saved them all! But I fancy I could not bear the cold and the fright, and so I came up here to the gates of Paradise. I am told they are opened to poor creatures like me—and now I have no house left down upon the rampart: not that I think this will give me admission here.”

Then the gates of heaven were opened, and the angel led the old woman in. She left a straw behind her, a straw that had been in her bed when she set it on fire to save the lives of many; and this straw had been changed into the purest gold—into gold that grew and grew, and spread out into beauteous leaves and flowers.

“Look, this is what the poor woman brought,” said the angel to the critic. “What dost thou bring? I know that thou hast accomplished nothing—thou hast not made so much as a single brick. Ah, if thou couldst only return, and effect at least so much as that! Probably the brick, when thou hadst made it, would not be worth much; but if it were made with good-will, it would at least be something. But thou canst not go back, and I can do nothing for thee!”

Then the poor soul, the old dame who had lived on the dyke, put in a petition for him. She said,

“His brother gave me the bricks and the pieces out of which I built up my house, and that was a great deal for a poor woman like me. Could not all those bricks and pieces be counted as a single brick in his favour? It was an act of mercy. He wants it now; and is not this the very fountain of mercy?”

Then the angel said:

“Thy brother, him whom thou hast regarded as the least among you all, he whose honest industry seemed to thee as the most humble, hath given thee this heavenly gift. Thou shalt not be turned away. It shall be vouchsafed to thee to stand here without the gate, and to reflect, and repent of thy life down yonder; but thou shalt not be admitted until thou hast in real earnest accomplished something.”

“I could have said that in better words!” thought the critic, but he did not find fault aloud; and for him, after all, that was “something!”

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