

The Lucky Peer - Parts III and

IV

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DanishNordicScandinavian

Intermediate
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A good many thoughts went through little Peer's head, and one Sunday, when he had his best clothes on, he started out without saying a word about it to his mother or grandmother, not even to Miss Frandsen, who always gave him good advice, straight to the chapel-master; he thought this man was the most important one there was outside the ballet. He stepped boldly in and said:—

“I am at the dancing-school, but there is so much *chicane*, and I would much rather be a player or a singer, if you please.”

“Have you a voice?” asked the chapel-master, and looked quite pleasantly at him. “Seems to me I know you. Where have I seen you before? Was it not you who was ripped down the back?” and now he laughed. But Peer grew red; he was surely no longer Lucky Peer, as his grandmother had called him. He looked down at his feet and wished himself away.

“Sing me a song!” said the chapel-master. “Nay, cheer up, my lad” and he tapped him under the chin, and Peer looked up into his kind eyes and sang a song which he had heard at the theatre in the opera “Robert le Diable”—“*Grace à moi.*”

“That is a difficult song, but you make it go,” said the chapel-master. “You have an excellent voice—when it is not ripped in the back!” and he laughed and called his wife. She also must hear Peer sing, and she nodded her head and said something in a foreign tongue. Just at that moment the singing-master of the theatre came in; it was he to whom Peer should have gone if he wanted to get among the singers; now he came of himself, (quite accidentally, as it were; he heard him also sing “*Grace à moi*,” but he did not laugh, and he did not look so kindly on him as the chapel-master and his wife; still it was decided that Peer should have singing-lessons.

“Now he has got on the right track,” said Miss Frandsen. “One gets along a great deal farther with a voice than with legs. If I had had a voice, I should have been a great songstress, and perhaps a baroness now.”

“Or a bookbinder’s lady,” said mother. “Had you become rich, you would have had the bookbinder any way.”

We do not understand that hint; but Miss Frandsen did.

Peer must sing for her, and sing for the merchant’s family, when they heard of his new career. He was called in one evening when they had company down-stairs, and he sang several songs—for one. “*Grace à moi*.” All the company clapped their hands, and Felix with them; he had heard him sing before; in the stable Peer had sung the entire ballet of Samson, and that was the most delightful of all.

“One cannot sing a ballet,” said the lady.

“Yes, Peer could,” said Felix, and so he was bidden do it. He sang and he talked, he drummed and hummed: it was child’s play, but there came snatches of well-known melodies, which did not give an ill idea of what the ballet meant. All the company found it very entertaining; they laughed and praised it, one louder than another. The merchant’s lady gave Peer a great piece of cake and a silver dollar.

How lucky the boy felt, till his eyes rested on a gentleman who stood somewhat back, and looked sternly at him. There was something harsh and severe in the man’s black eyes; he did not laugh; he did not speak a single friendly word, and this gentleman was the theatre’s singing-master.



PEER AND THE CHAPEL-MASTER.

Next morning, Peer was to go to him, and he stood there quite as severe-looking as before.

“What possessed you yesterday!” said he. “Could you not understand that they were making a fool of you? Never do that again, and don’t you go running about and singing at doors, outside or in. Now you can go. I’ll not have any singing with you today.”

Peer was dreadfully cast down; he had fallen out of the master’s good grace. Nevertheless the master was really better satisfied with him than ever before. In all the absurdity which he had scraped together, there was some meaning, something not at all common. The lad had an ear for music, and a voice clear as a bell and of great compass; if it continued like that, then the little man’s fortune was made.

Now began the singing-lessons; Peer was industrious and quick. How much there was to learn! how much to know! The mother toiled and slaved that her son might go well dressed and neat, and not look too mean among the people to whose houses he now went. He was always singing and troling; they had no need at all of a canary-bird, the mother said. Every Sunday must he sing a psalm with his grandmother, It was charming to hear his fresh voice lift itself up with hers. “It is much more beautiful than to hear him sing wildly;” that was what she called his singing, when, like a little bird, he trolled with his voice, and gave forth tones which seemed to come of themselves, and make such music as they pleased. What tunes there were in his little throat, what sounding music in his little breast! Indeed he could imitate a whole orchestra. There were both flute and bassoon in his voice, violin and bugle. He sang as the birds sing; but man’s voice is most charming, even a little man’s, when he can sing like Peer.

But in the winter, just as he was to go to the priest to be prepared for confirmation, he caught cold; the little bird in his breast said pip the voice was ripped like the vampire’s back-piece.

“It is no great misfortune,” thought mother and grandmother; “now he doesn’t go singing tra la, and thus he can think more seriously about his Christianity.”

His voice was changing, the singing-master said. Peer must now not sing at all. How long would it be? A year, perhaps two; perhaps the voice would never come again. That was a great grief.

“Think now only of the confirmation,” said mother and grandmother. “Apply yourself to music,” said the singing-master, “but hold your mouth!”

He thought of his “Christianity,” and he studied music. There was singing and playing going on inside him; he wrote entire melodies down in notes, songs without words. Finally he wrote the words, too.

“Really, thou art a poet, little Peer,” said the merchant’s wife, to whom he carried his text and music. The merchant received a piece of music dedicated to him—a piece without words. Felix also got one, and so did Miss Frandsen, and that went into her album, in which were verses and music by two who were once young lieutenants, but now were old majors on half-pay. The book was given by “a friend,” who had himself bound it.

And Peer “stood” at Easter, as they say. Felix presented him with a silver watch. It was the first watch Peer had owned; it seemed to him that he was a man already when he did not need to ask others what o’clock it was. Felix came up to the garret, congratulated him, and handed him the watch; he himself was not to “stand” until the autumn. They took each other by the hand, these two children of the house, both just the same age, born the same day and in the same house; and Felix ate of the cake which had been baked in the garret on occasion of the confirmation.

“It is a glad day with solemn thoughts,” said grandmother.

“Yes, very solemn!” said mother. “Had father only lived to see Peer stand!”

The next Sunday they all three sat at Our Lord’s table. As they came from church there came a message from the singing-master, asking Peer to come to him, and Peer went. Some good news awaited him, and yet pretty serious, too. He was to give up singing for a year altogether; his voice was to lie fallow like a field, as a peasant might say; but during that time he was to go to school, not in the capital, where every evening he would be running to the theatre, from which he could not keep away; he was to go thirty miles away from home, to board with a schoolmaster, who kept a lad or two *en pension*. There he was to learn language and science, which would one day be of service to him. The charge for a year’s course was three hundred rix-dollars, and that was paid by a “benevolent man who did not wish his name given.”

“It is the merchant,” said mother and grandmother.

The day of departure came. A good many tears were shed and kisses and blessings given; and then Peer rode

thirty miles¹ on the railway out into the wide world. it was Whitsuntide. The sun shone, the woods were flesh and green; the train went rushing through them. Fields and villages flitted past; gentlemen's country-seats peeped out; the cattle stood on the after-crop pastures. Soon there came a station, then another, market town after market town. At each stopping-place there was a hubbub of people, welcoming or saying good-bye; there was noisy talking outside and in the carriages. Where Peer sat there was a deal of entertainment and chattering by a widow dressed in black. She talked about his grave, his coffin, and his corpse—meaning her child's. It had been such a poor little thing, that there could have been no happiness for it had it lived. It was a great relief for her and the little lamb when it fell asleep.

“I spared no expense in the flowers!” said she; “and you must remember that it died at a very expensive time, when you have to cut the flowers in pots! Every Sunday I went to my grave and laid a wreath on it with great white silk bows; the silk bows were immediately stolen by small girls, and used for dancing bows, they were so attractive. One Sunday when I went there, I knew that my grave was on the left of the principal path, but when I got there, there was my grave on the right. ‘How is this?’ says I to the grave-digger; ‘isn't my grave on the left?’

“No, it isn't any longer!” said he. ‘Madam's grave lies there, to be sure, but the mound has been moved over to the right; that place belongs to another man's grave.’

“But I will have my corpse in my grave,” says I; ‘and I have a perfect right to say so. Shall I go and dress a false mound, when my corpse lies without any sign on the other side? Indeed I won't!’

“Oh, madam must talk to the dean.’

“He is such a good man, that dean! He gave me permission to have my corpse on the right. It would cost five rix-dollars. I gave that with a kiss of my hand, and stood myself by my old grave. ‘Can I now be very sure that it is my own coffin and my corpse that is moved?’

“That madam can!’ And so I gave each of the men a piece of money for the moving. But now, since it had cost so much, I thought I ought to send something to make it beautiful, and so I ordered a monument with an inscription. But, will you believe it, when I got it there was a carving of a butterfly at the top. ‘Why, that means Frivolity,’ said I. ‘I won't have that on my grave.’

“It is not Frivolity, madam, it is Immortality.’

“I never heard that,’ said I. Now, have any of you here in the carriage ever heard of a butterfly as a sign for

anything except Frivolity? I held my peace. I have no liking for talk, and I put the monument away in my pantry. There it stood till my lodger came home. He is a student, and has ever so many books. He assured me that it stood for Immortality, and so the monument was placed on the grave.”

In the midst of this chatter Peer came to the station where he was to stop, that he, too, might become student, and have ever so many books.

IV.

Herr Gabriel, the worthy man of learning, with whom Peer was to live as a boarding scholar, was himself at the railway station, waiting to meet him. Herr Gabriel was a lank, bony man, with great staring eyes that stuck out so very far, one was almost afraid that when he sneezed they would start out of his head entirely. He was accompanied by three of his own little boys; one of them stumbled over his own legs, and the other two trod on Peer’s toes in their eagerness to see him close to. Two larger boys besides were with them,—the older about fourteen years, fair-skinned, freckled, and very pimply.

“Young Madsen, Student in about three years, if he studies! Primus, the dean’s son.” That was the younger, who looked like a head of wheat. “Both are boarders, studying with me,” said Herr Gabriel. “Our little playthings,” he called his own boys.

“Trine, take the new-comer’s trunk on your wheelbarrow. The table is set for you at home.”

“Stuffed turkey!” said the two young gentlemen who were boarders.

“Stuffed turkey!” said the little playthings, and the first again fell over his own legs.

“Cæsar, look after your feet!” exclaimed Herr Gabriel; and they went into the town and out of it. There stood a great half-tumbled-down timber-work house, with a jasmine covered summer-house. Here stood Madame Gabriel, with more small “playthings,” two little girls.

“The new pupil,” said Herr Gabriel.

“Most heartily welcome!” said Madame Gabriel, a youthful, thrifty dame, red and white, with kiss-me-if-you-dare curls, and a good deal of pomade on her hair.

“Good heavens, what a well-grown lad you are!” said she to Peer. “You are quite a gentleman already. I

supposed that you were like Primus or young Madsen. Angel Gabriel, it was well that the inner door is nailed. You know what I think.”

“Fudge!” said Herr Gabriel; and they stepped into the room. There was a novel on the table, lying open, and a sandwich on it. One could see that it was used for a book mark—it lay across the open page.

“Now I must be the housewife!” and with all five of the children, and the two boarders, she carried Peer through the kitchen, out by the passage-way, and into a little room, the windows of which looked out on the garden; that was to be his study and sleeping apartment; it was next to Madame Gabriel’s room, where she slept with all the five children, and where the connecting-door, for decency’s sake, and to prevent gossip which spares nobody, had been that very day nailed up by Herr Gabriel, at Madame’s express request.

“Here you are, to live just as if you were at your parents’. We have a theatre, too, in the town. The apothecary is the director of a private company, and we have traveling players. But now you shall have your turkey;” and so she carried Peer into the dining-room, where the week’s wash was drying on a line.

“That doesn’t do any harm,” said she. “It is only cleanliness, and you are accustomed, of course, to that.”

So Peer sat down to the roast turkey, in the midst of the children, but not with the two boarders, who had squeezed themselves in behind, and were now giving a dramatic representation for the entertainment of themselves and the stranger. There had lately been strolling players in town, who had acted Schiller’s “Robbers;” the two oldest boys had been immensely taken with it, and at once performed the whole piece at home—all the parts, notwithstanding they only remembered these words “Dreams come from the stomach.” But they were made use of by all the characters in different tones of voice. There stood Amelia, with heavenly eyes and dreamy looki: “Dreams come from the stomach!” said she, and covered her face with both her hands. Carl Moor came forward with heroic stride and manly voice: “Dreams come from the stomach,” and at that the whole flock of children, boys and girls, tumbled in; they were all robbers, and murdered one another, crying out, “Dreams come from the stomach.”

That was Schiller’s “Robbers.” Peer had this representation and stuffed turkey for his first introduction into Herr Gabriel’s house. Then he betook himself to his little chamber, whose window, into which the sun shone warmly, gave upon the garden. He sat there and looked out. Herr Gabriel was walking there, absorbed in reading a book. He came nearer, and looked in; his eyes seemed fixed upon Peer, who bowed respectfully. Herr Gabriel opened his mouth as wide as he could, thrust his tongue out, and let it wag from one side to the other

right in the face of the astonished Peer, who could not understand what in the world he meant by this performance. Then off went Herr Gabriel, but turned back again before the window, and thrust his tongue out of his mouth.

What did he do that for? He was not thinking of Peer, or that the panes of glass were transparent ; he only saw that one on the outside was reflected in them, and he wanted to see his tongue, as he had a stomach-ache; but Peer did not know all this.

Later in the evening Herr Gabriel went into his room, and Peer sat in his. It was quite late. He heard scolding—a woman’s voice scolding in Madame Gabriel’s sleeping chamber.

“I shall go up to Gabriel, and tell him what rascals you are!”

“We should also go to Gabriel and tell him what Madame is.”

“I shall go into fits!” she cried out.

“Who’ll see a woman in a fit! four skillings!”

Then Madame’s voice sank deeper, but distinctly said: “What must the young gentleman in there think of our house at hearing all this plain talk.” At that the scolding grew less, but then again rose louder and louder.

“*Finis*,” cried Madame. “Go and make the punch; better peace than strife.”

And then it was still. They went out of the door; the girls and Madame knocked on the door to Peer:—

“Young man! now you have some notion what it is to be a housewife. Thank Heaven, you don’t keep girls. I want peace, and so I give them punch. I would gladly give you a glass,—one sleeps so well after it,—but no one dares go through the entry after ten o’clock; my Gabriel will not allow it. But you shall have your punch, nevertheless. There is a great hole stopped up in the door; I will push the stopper out, put the nose of the pitcher in, and do you hold your tumbler under, and so I’ll give you the punch. It is a secret, even from my Gabriel. You must not worry him with household affairs.”

And so Peer got his punch, and there was peace in Madame Gabriel’s room, peace and quiet in the whole house. Peer lay down, thought of his mother and grandmother, said his evening prayer, and fell asleep. What one dreams the first night one sleeps in a strange house has special significance, grandmother had said. Peer

dreamt that he took the amber heart, which he still constantly wore, laid it in a flower-pot, and it grew into a great tree, up through the loft and the roof; it bore thousands of hearts of silver and gold; the flower-pot broke in two, and it was no longer an amber heart—it had become mould, earth to earth—gone, gone forever! Then Peer awoke; he still had the amber heart, and it was warm, warm on his own warm heart.

Note: The story continues in *The Lucky Peer*, Part V

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