

The Lucky Peer

Hans Christian Andersen
EnglishNordicScandinavian

Intermediate
26 min read

I.

In the principal street there stood a fine old-fashioned house; the wall about the court-yard had bits of glass worked into it, so that when the sun or moon shone, it was as if covered with diamonds. That was a sign of wealth, and there was wealth inside there; folks said that the merchant was a man who could just put away two barrels of gold in his best parlor; yes, could put a heap of gold-pieces, as a savings bank against the future, outside the door of the room where his little son was born.

This little fellow had arrived in the rich house. There was great joy from cellar up to the garret; and up there, there was still greater joy an hour or two afterward. The warehouseman and his wife lived up there, and here too there entered just then a little son, given by our Lord, brought by the stork, and exhibited by the mother. And here too there was a heap outside the door, quite accidentally; but it was not a gold-heap—it was a heap of sweepings.

The rich merchant was a very considerate, good man; his wife, delicate and gentle-born, dressed well, was pious, and, besides, was kind and good to the poor. Everybody congratulated these two people on now having a little son, who would grow up, and, like his father, be rich and happy. At the font the little boy was called “FELIX,” which means in Latin “lucky,” and that he was, and his parents still more.

The warehouseman, a right sound fellow, and good to the bottom of his heart, and his wife, an honest and

industrious woman, were blessed by all who knew them; how lucky they were at getting their little boy, and he was called "PEER!"

The boy on the first floor and the boy in the garret each got just as many kisses from his parents, and just as much sunshine from our Lord; but still they were placed a little differently,—one down-stairs, and one up. Peer sat the highest, away up in the garret, and he had his own mother for a nurse; little Felix had a stranger for his nurse, but she was a good and honest girl—you could see that in her character-book. The rich child had a pretty little wagon, and was drawn about by his spruce nurse; the child from the garret was carried in the arms of his own mother, both when he was in his Sunday clothes, and when he had his every-day things on; and he was just as much pleased.

They were both pretty children, they both kept growing, and soon could show with their hands how tall they were, and say single words in their mother tongue. Equally sweet, equally dainty and petted were they both. As they grew up they had a like pleasure out of the merchant's horses and carriages. Felix got permission from his nurse to sit by the coachman and look at the horses; he fancied himself driving. Peer got permission to sit at the garret window and look down into the yard when the master and mistress went out to drive, and when they were fairly gone, he placed two chairs, one in front, the other behind, up there in the room, and so he drove himself; he was the real coachman—that was a little more than fancying himself to be the coachman.

They had noticed each other, these two, but it was not until they were two years old that they spoke to each other. Felix went elegantly dressed in silk and velvet, with bare knees, after the English style. "The poor child will freeze!" said the family in the garret. Peer had trousers that came down to his ankles, but one day his clothes were torn right across his knees, so that he had as much of a draught, and was just as much undressed as the merchant's little delicate boy. Felix came with his mother and wanted to go out; Peer came with his, and wanted to go in.

"Give little Peer your hand," said the merchant's lady. "You two can talk to each other."

And one said "Peer!" and the other said "Felix!" Yes, that was all they said that time.

The rich lady petted her boy, but there was one who petted Peer just as much, and that was his grandmother. She was weak-sighted, and yet she saw much more in little Peer than his father or mother could see; yes, more than anybody at all could discover.

“The dear child,” said she, “is going to get on in the world. He is born with a gold apple in his hand. There is the shining apple!” And she kissed the child’s little hand. His parents could see nothing, nor Peer either, but as he grew to know more, no doubt he would find that out too.

“That is such a story, such a real wonder-story, that grandmother tells!” said the parents.

Indeed grandmother could tell stories, and Peer was never tired of hearing always the same ones. She taught him a psalm and to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, and he knew it not as a gabble but as words which meant something; every single petition in it she explained to him. Especially he thought about what grandmother said on the words: “Give us this day our daily bread;” he was to understand that it was necessary for one to get wheat bread, for another to get black bread; one must have a great house when he had a great deal of company; another, in small circumstances, could live quite as happily in a little room in the garret. “So each person has what he calls ‘daily bread.’”

Peer had regularly his good daily bread, and very delightful days, too, but they were not to last always. Stern years of war began; the young were to go away, the old to stay at home. Peer’s father was among those who were enrolled, and soon it was heard that he was one of the first who fell in battle against the victorious enemy.

There was terrible grief in the little room in the garret. The mother cried, the grandmother and little Peer cried; and every time one of the neighbors came up to see them, they talked about “father,” and then they cried all together. The widow, meanwhile, received permission, the first year, to lodge rent free, and afterward she was to pay only a small rent. The grandmother stayed with the mother, who supported herself by washing for several “single fine gentlemen,” as she called them.

Peer had neither sorrow nor want. He had his fill of meat and drink, and grandmother told him stories so extraordinary and wonderful about the wide world, that he asked her, one day, if they two might not go on Sunday to foreign lands, and come home again as prince and princess, with gold crowns on.

“I am too old for that,” said grandmother; “and you must first learn a terrible lot of things, become great and strong; but you must always be a good and affectionate child—just as you are now.”

Peer rode around the room on hobbyhorses; he had two such; but the merchant’s son had a real live horse; it was so little that it might as well have been called a baby-horse, as Peer called it, and it never could become any bigger. Felix rode it about in the yard; he even rode outside the gate with his father and a riding-master from

the king's stable.

For the first half-hour Peer did not like his horses, and would not ride them—they were not real. He asked his mother why he could not have a real horse like little Felix; and his mother said:

“Felix lives down on the first floor, close by the stables, but you live high up, under the roof. One cannot have horses up in the garret except like those you have; do you ride on them.”

And so Peer rode: first to the chest of drawers, the great mountain full of treasures; both Peer's Sunday clothes and his mother's were there, and there were the shining silver dollars which she laid aside for rent. He rode to the stove, which he called the black bear; it slept all summer long, but when winter came it must do something: warm the room and cook the meals.

Peer had a godfather who usually came every Sunday in winter and got a good warm dinner. It was rather a coming down for him, said the mother and the grandmother. He had begun as a coachman; he took to drink and slept at his post, and that neither a soldier nor a coachman may do.

Then he became a carter and drove a cart, and sometimes a drosky for gentfolk; but now he drove a dirt-cart and went from door to door, swinging his rattle, “snurre-rurre-ud!” and out from all the houses came the girls and housewives with their buckets full, and turned these into the cart: rags and tags, ashes and rubbish were all turned in. One day Peer had come down from the garret, his mother had gone to town, and he stood at the open gate, and there outside was godfather with his cart.

“Will you take a drive?” he asked. Right willingly would Peer, but only as far as the corner. His eyes shone as he sat on the seat alone with godfather and was allowed to hold the whip. Peer drove with real live horses, drove quite to the corner. His mother came along just then; she looked rather dubious. It was not so grand to her to see her own little son riding on a dirt-cart. He must get down at once. Still she thanked godfather; but when they reached home she forbade Peer to take that excursion again.

One day he went again down to the gate. There was no godfather there to entice him off for a drive, but there were other allurements three or four small street urchins were down in the gutter, poking about to see what they could find that had been lost or had hidden itself there. They had often found a button or a copper coin; but they had quite as often scratched themselves with a broken bottle, or pricked themselves with a pin, which was just now the case. Peer must join them, and when he got down among the gutter-stones he found a silver coin.

Another day he was down on his knees again, digging with the other boys. They only got dirty fingers; he found a gold ring, and showed, with sparkling eyes, his lucky find, and then the others threw dirt at him, and called him Lucky Peer; they would not let him be with them then when they poked in the gutter.

Back of the merchant's yard there was some low ground which was to be filled up for building lots; gravel and ashes were carted and tipped out there. Great heaps lay about. Godfather drove his cart, but Peer was not to drive with him. The street boys dug in the heaps; they dug with a stick and with their bare hands. They were always finding one thing or another which seemed worth picking up. Hither came little Peer.

They saw him and cried out:— "Clear out, Lucky Peer!"

And when he came nearer, they flung lumps of dirt at him. One of these struck against his wooden shoe and fell to pieces. Something shining dropped out; Peer took it up; it was a little heart made of amber. He ran home with it. The rest did not notice that even when they threw dirt at him he was a child of luck.

The silver skilling which he had found was laid away in his little savings bank; the ring and the amber heart were shown down stairs to the merchant's wife, because the mother wanted to know if they were among the "things found" that ought to be given notice of to the police.

How the eyes of the merchant's wife shone on seeing the ring! It was no other than her own engagement ring, which she had lost three years before; so long had it lain in the gutter. Peer was well rewarded, and the money rattled in his little box. The amber heart was a cheap thing, the lady said; Peer might just as well keep that. At night the amber heart lay on the bureau, and the grandmother lay in bed.

"Eh! what is it that burns so!" said she. "It looks as if some candle were lighted there." She got up to see, and it was the little heart of amber. Ah, the grandmother with her weak eyes often saw more than all others could see. Now she had her private thoughts about this. The next morning she took a small strong ribbon, drew it

through the opening at the top of the heart, and put it round her little grandson's neck.

"You must never take it off; except to put a new ribbon into it; and you must not show it either to other boys. If they should take it from you, you would have the stomach-ache!" That was the only dreadful sickness little Peer had thus far known. There was a strange power too in the heart. Grandmother showed him that when she rubbed it with her hand, and a little straw was laid by it, the straw seemed to be alive and sprang to the heart of amber, and would not let it go.

II.

The merchant's son had a tutor who heard him say his lessons alone, and walked out with him alone. Peer was also to have an education, so he went to school with a great quantity of other boys. They studied together, and that was more delightful than going alone with a tutor. Peer would not change.

He was a lucky Peer, but godfather was also a lucky Peer,² for all he was not called Peer. He won a prize in the lottery, of two hundred rix-dollars, on a ticket which he shared with eleven others. He went at once and bought some better clothes, and he looked very well in them. Luck never comes alone, it always has company, and it did this time. Godfather gave up his dirt-cart and joined the theatre.

"For what in the world," said grandmother. "is he going to the theatre? What does he go as?"

As a machinist. That was a real getting on, and he was now quite another man, and took a wonderful deal of enjoyment in the comedy, which he always saw from the top or from the side. The most charming thing was the ballet, but that indeed gave him the hardest work, and there was always some danger from fire. They danced both in heaven and on earth. That was something for little Peer to see, and one evening when there was to be a dress rehearsal of a new ballet, in which they were all dressed and adorned as in the evening when people pay to see all the fine show, he had permission to bring Peer with him, and put him in a place where he could see the whole.

It was a Scripture ballet—Samson. The Philistines danced about him, and he tumbled the whole house down over them and himself; but there were fire-engines and firemen on hand in case of any accident.

Peer had never seen a comedy, still less a ballet. He put on his Sunday clothes and went with godfather to the theatre. It was just like a great drying-loft, with ever so many curtains and screens, great openings in the floor, lamps and lights. There was a host of nooks and crannies up and down, and people came out from these just as

in a great church with its balcony pews.³ The floor went down quite steeply, and there Peer was placed, and told to stay there till it was all finished and he was sent for. He had three sandwiches in his pocket, so that he need not starve.

Soon it grew lighter and lighter: there came up in front, just as if straight out of the earth, a number of musicians with both flutes and violins. At the side where Peer sat people came dressed as if they were in the street; but there came also knights with gold helmets, beautiful maidens in gauze and flowers, even angels all in white with wings on their backs. They were placed up and down, on the floor and up in the "balcony pews," to be looked at. They were the whole force of the ballet dancers; but Peer did not know that. He believed they belonged in the fairy tales his grandmother had told him about. Then there came a woman, who was the most beautiful of all, with a gold helmet and spear; she looked out over all the others and sat between an angel and an imp. Ah! how much there was to see, and yet the ballet was not even begun.

There was a moment of quiet. A man dressed in black moved a little fairy wand over all the musicians, and then they began to play, so that there was a whistling of music, and the wall itself began to rise. One looked out on to a flower-garden, where the sun shone, and all the people danced and leaped. Such a wonderful sight had Peer never imagined. There the soldiers marched, and there was fighting, and there where the guilds and the mighty Samson with his love. But she was as wicked as she was beautiful: she betrayed him.

The Philistines plucked his eyes out; he had to grind in the mill and be set up for mockery in the dancing hall; but then he laid hold of the strong pillars which held the roof up, and shook them and the whole house; it fell, and there burst forth wonderful flames of red and green fire. Peer could have sat there his whole life long and looked on, even if the sandwiches were all eaten—and they were all eaten.

Now here was something to tell about when he got home. He was not to be got off to bed. He stood on one leg and laid the other upon the table—that was what Samson's love and all the other ladies did. He made a treadmill out of grandmother's chair, and upset two chairs and a bolster over himself to show how the dancing-hall came down. He showed this, and he gave it with all the music that belonged to it; there was no talking in the ballet. He sang high and low, with words and without; there was no connection in it; it was just like a whole opera. The most noticeable thing, meanwhile, of all was his beautiful voice, clear as a bell, but no one spoke of that.

Peer was before to have been a grocer's boy, to mind prunes and lump sugar; now he found there was

something very much finer, and that was to get into the Samson story and dance in the ballet. There were a great many poor children that went that way, said the grandmother, and became fine and honored people; still no little girl of her family should ever get permission to go that way; a boy—well, he stood more firmly.

Peer had not seen a single one of the little girls fall before the whole house fell, and then they all fell together, he said.

Peer certainly must be a ballet-dancer.

“He gives me no rest!” said his mother. At last, his grandmother promised to take him one day to the ballet-master, who was a fine gentleman, and had his own house, like the merchant. Would Peer ever get to that? Nothing is impossible for our Lord. Peer had a gold apple in his hand when he was a child. Such had lain in his hands; perhaps it was also in his legs.

Peer went to the ballet-master, and knew him at once; it was Samson himself. His eyes had not suffered at all at the hands of the Philistines. That was only a part of the play, he was told. And Samson looked kindly and pleasantly on him, and told him to stand up straight, look right at him, and show him his ankle. Peer showed his whole foot, and leg too.

“So he got a place in the ballet,” said grandmother.

It was easily brought about at the ballet-master’s house; but first his mother and grandmother must needs make other preparations, and talk with people who knew about these things; first with the merchant’s wife, who thought it a good career for a pretty, well-formed boy without any prospect, like Peer. Then they talked with Miss Frandsen; she understood all about the ballet. At one time, in the younger days of grandmother, she had been the most favorite danseuse at the theatre; she had danced goddesses and princesses, had been cheered and applauded whenever she came out; but then she grew older,—we all do—and then she no longer had principal parts; she had to dance behind the younger ones; and finally she went behind all the dancers quite into the dressing-room, where she dressed the others to be goddesses and princesses.

“So it goes!” said Miss Frandsen. “The theatre road is a delightful one to travel, but it is full of thorns. Chicane grows there,—chicane!”

That was a word Peer did not understand; but he came to understand it quite well.

“He is determined to go into the ballet,” said his mother.

“He is a pious Christian child, that he is,” said grandmother.

“And well brought up,” said Miss Frandsen. “Well bred and moral! that was I in my heyday.”

And so Peer went to dancing-school, and got some summer clothes and thin-soled dancing-shoes to make it easier. All the old dancers kissed him, and said that he was a boy good enough to eat.

He was told to stand up, stick his legs out, and hold on by a post so as not to fall, while he learned to kick first with his right leg, then with his left. It was not so hard for him as for most of the others. The ballet-master clapped him on the back and said he would soon be in the ballet; he should be a king's child, who was carried on shields and wore a gold crown. That was practised at the dancing school, and rehearsed at the theatre itself.

The mother and grandmother must go to see little Peer in all his glory, and they looked, and they both cried, for all it was so splendid. Peer in all his glory and show had not seen them at all; but the merchant's family he had seen; they sat in the loge nearest the stage. Little Felix was with them in his test clothes. He wore buttoned gloves, just like grown-up gentlemen, and sat with an opera-glass at his eyes the whole evening, although he could see perfectly well—again just like grown-up gentlemen. He looked at Peer. Peer looked at him; and Peer was a king's child with a gold crown on. This evening brought the two children in closer relation to one another.

Some days after, as they met each other in the yard, Felix went up to Peer and told him he had seen him when he was a prince. He knew very well that he was not a prince any longer, but then he had worn a prince's clothes and had a gold crown on.

“I shall wear them again on Sunday,” said Peer.

Felix did not see him then, but he thought about it the whole evening. He would have liked very well to be in Peer's shoes; he had not Miss Frandsen's warning that the theatre way was a thorny one, and that chicane grew on it; neither did Peer know this yet, but he would very soon learn it.

His young companions the dancing children were not all as good as they ought to be for all that they sometimes were angels with wings to them. There was a little girl, Malle Knallemp, who always, when she was dressed as page, and Peer was a page, stepped maliciously on the side of his foot, so as to see his stockings; there was a bad boy who always was sticking pins in his back, and one day he ate Peer's sandwiches by mistake; but that

was impossible, for Peer had some meat-pie with his sandwich, and the other boy had only bread and butter. He could not have made a mistake.

It would be in vain to recite all the vexations that Peer endured in the two years, and the worst was not yet,—that was to come. There was a ballet to be brought out called The Vampire. In it the smallest dancing children were dressed as bats; wore gray tights that fitted snugly to their bodies; black gauze wings were stretched from their shoulders, and so they were to run on tiptoe, as if they were just flying, and then they were to whirl round on the floor. Peer could do this especially well; but his trousers and jacket, all of one piece, were old and worn; the threads did not hold together; so that, just as he whirled round before the eyes of all the people, there was a rip right down his back, straight from his neck down to where the legs are fastened in, and all his short, little white shirt was to be seen.

All the people laughed. Peer saw it, and knew that he was ripped all down the back; he whirled and whirled, but it grew worse and worse. Folks laughed louder and louder; the other vampires laughed with them, and whirled into him, and all the more dreadfully when the people clapped and shouted bravo!

“That is for the ripped vampire!” said the dancing children; and so they always called him “Ripperip.”

Peer cried; Miss Frandsen comforted him. “’Tis only chicane,” said she; and now Peer knew what chicane was.

Besides the dancing-school, they had another one attached to the theatre, where the children were taught to cipher and write, to learn history and geography; ay, they had a teacher in religion, for it is not enough to know how to dance there is something more in the world than wearing out dancing-shoes. Here, too, Peer was quick,—the very luckiest of all,—and got plenty of good marks; but his companions still called him “Ripperip.”

It was only a joke; but at last he would not stand it any longer, and he struck out and boxed one of the boys, so that he was black and blue under the left eye, and had to have it whitened in the evening when he was to go in the ballet. Peer was talked to sharply by the dancing-master, and more harshly by the sweeping-woman, for it was her son he had punished.

Note: The story continues in The Lucky Peer, Parts III and IV.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com