

NOTE

movement; but social problems are never obtruded, except, again, in the last part, and the purely human interest is always kept well before the reader's eye through variety of situation and vividness of characterization. The great charm of the book seems to me to lie in the fact that the writer knows the poor *from within*; he has not studied them as an outsider may, but has lived with them and felt with them, at once a participant and a keen-eyed spectator. He is no sentimentalist, and so rich is his imagination that he passes on rapidly from one scene to the next, sketching often in a few pages what another novelist would be content to work out into long chapters or whole volumes. His sympathy is of the widest, and he makes us see tragedies behind the little comedies, and comedies behind the little tragedies, of the seemingly sordid lives of the working people whom he loves. "Pelle" has conquered the hearts of the reading public of Denmark; there is that in the book which should conquer also the hearts of a wider public than that of the little country in which its author was born.

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PELLE THE CONQUEROR

I

It was dawn on the first of May, 1877. From the sea the mist came sweeping in, in a grey trail that lay heavily on the water. Here and there there was a movement in it; it seemed about to lift, but closed in again, leaving only a strip of shore with two old boats lying keel uppermost upon it. The prow of a third boat and a bit of break-water showed dimly in the mist a few paces off. At definite intervals a smooth, grey wave came gliding out of the mist up over the rustling shingle, and then withdrew again; it was as if some great animal lay hidden out there in the fog, and lapped at the land.

A couple of hungry crows were busy with a black, inflated object down there, probably the carcase of a dog. Each time a wave glided in, they rose and hovered a few feet up in the air with their legs extended straight down towards their booty, as if held by some invisible attachment. When the water retreated, they dropped down and buried their heads in the carrion, but kept their wings spread, ready to rise before the next advancing wave. This was repeated with the regularity of clock-work.

A shout came vibrating in from the harbour, and a little while after the heavy sound of oars working over the edge of a boat. The sound grew more distant and at

last ceased; but then a bell began to ring—it must have been at the end of the mole—and out of the distance, into which the beat of the oars had disappeared, came the answering sound of a horn. They continued to answer one another for a couple of minutes.

The town was invisible, but now and then the silence there was broken by the iron tramp of a quarryman upon the stone paving. For a long time the regular beat of his footsteps could be heard, until it suddenly ceased as he turned some corner or other. Then a door was opened, followed by the sound of a loud morning yawn; and some one began to sweep the pavement. Windows were opened here and there, out of which floated various sounds to greet the grey day. A woman's sharp voice was heard scolding, then short, smart slaps and the crying of a child. A shoemaker began beating leather, and as he worked fell to singing a hymn—

“But One is worthy of our hymn, O brothers:
The Lamb on Whom the sins of all men lay.”

The tune was one of Mendelssohn's “Songs without Words.”

Upon the bench under the church wall sat a boat's crew with their gaze turned seawards. They were leaning forward and smoking, with hands clasped between their knees. All three wore ear-rings as a preventive of colds and other evils, and all sat in exactly the same position, as if the one were afraid of making himself in the very least different from the others.

A traveller came sauntering down from the hotel, and approached the fishermen. He had his coat-collar turned up, and shivered in the chill morning air. “Is anything the matter?” he asked civilly, raising his cap. His voice sounded gruff.

One of the fishermen moved his hand slightly in the direction of his head-gear. He was the head man of the boat's crew. The others gazed straight before them without moving a muscle.

“I mean, as the bell's ringing and the pilot-boat's out blowing her horn,” the traveller went on. “Are they expecting a ship?”

“May be. You never can tell!” answered the head man unapproachably.

The stranger looked as if he were deeply insulted, but restrained himself. It was only their usual secretiveness, their inveterate distrust of every one who did not speak their dialect and look exactly like themselves. They sat there inwardly uneasy in spite of their wooden exterior, stealing glances at him when he was not looking, and wishing him at Jericho. He felt tempted to tease them a little.

“Dear me! Perhaps it's a secret?” he said laughing.

“Not that I know of,” answered the fisherman, cautiously.

“Well, of course I don't expect anything for nothing! And besides it wears out your talking-apparatus to be continually opening and shutting it. How much do you generally get?” He took out his purse; it was his intention to insult them now.

The other fishermen threw stolen glances at their leader. If only he did not run them aground!

The head man took his pipe out of his mouth and turned to his companions: “No, as I was saying, there are some folks that have nothing to do but go about and be clever.” He warned them with his eyes, the expression of his face was wooden. His companions nodded. They enjoyed the situation, as the commercial traveller could see from their doltish looks.

He was enraged. Here he was, being treated as if he were air and made fun of! "Confound you fellows! Haven't you even learnt as much as to give a civil answer to a civil question?" he said angrily.

The fishermen looked backwards and forwards at one another, taking mute counsel.

"No, but I tell you what it is! She must come some time," said the head man at last.

"What 'she'?"

"The steamer, of course. And she generally comes about this time. Now you've got it!"

"Naturally—of course! But isn't it a little unwise to speak so loud about it?" jeered the traveller.

The fishermen had turned their backs on him, and were scraping out their pipes.

"We're not quite so free with our speech here as some people, and yet we make our living," said the head man to the others. They growled their approval.

As the stranger wandered on down the harbour hill, the fishermen looked after him with a feeling of relief. "What a talker!" said one. "He wanted to show off a bit, but you gave him what he won't forget in a hurry."

"Yes, I think it touched him on the raw all right," answered the man with pride. "It's these fine gentlemen you need to be most careful of."

Half-way down the harbour-hill, an inn-keeper stood at his door yawning. The morning stroller repeated his question to him, and received an immediate answer, the man being a Copenhagenener.

"Well, you see we're expecting the steamer from Ystad to-day, with a big cargo of slaves—cheap Swedish labourers, that's to say, who live on black bread and salt herrings, and do the work of three. They ought to be flogged with red-hot icicles, that sort, and the brutes

of farmers too! You won't take a little early morning glass of something, I suppose?"

"No, thank you, I think not—so early."

"Very well, please yourself."

Down at the harbour a number of farmers' carts were already standing, and fresh ones arrived at full gallop every minute. The new-comers guided their teams as far to the front as possible, examined their neighbours' horses with a critical eye, and settled themselves into a half-doze, with their fur collars turned up about their ears. Custom-house men in uniform, and pilots, looking like monster penguins, wandered restlessly about, peering out to sea and listening. Every moment the bell at the end of the mole rang, and was answered by the pilot-boat's horn somewhere out in the fog over the sea, with a long, dreary hoot, like the howl of some suffering animal.

"What was that noise?" asked a farmer who had just come, catching up the reins in fear. His fear communicated itself to his horses, and they stood trembling with heads raised listening in the direction of the sea, with questioning terror in their eyes.

"It was only the sea-serpent," answered a custom-house officer. "He always suffers from wind in this foggy weather. He's a wind-sucker, you see." And the custom-house men put their heads together and grinned.

Merry sailors dressed in blue with white handkerchiefs round their necks went about patting the horses, or pricking their nostrils with a straw to make them rear. When the farmers woke up and scolded, they laughed with delight, and sang—

"A sailor he must go through
A deal more bad than good, good, good!"

A big pilot, in an Iceland vest and woollen gloves, was

rushing anxiously about with a megaphone in his hand, growling like an uneasy bear. Now and then he climbed up on the mole-head, put the megaphone to his mouth, and roared out over the water: "Do—you—hear—any—thing?" The roar went on for a long time out upon the long swells, up and down, leaving behind it an oppressive silence, until it suddenly returned from the town above, in the shape of a confused babble that made people laugh.

"N-o-o!" was heard a little while after in a thin and long-drawn-out cry from the sea; and again the horn was heard, a long, hoarse sound that came rocking in on the waves, and burst gurgling in the splash under the wharf and on the slips.

The farmers were out of it all. They dozed a little or sat flicking their whips to pass the time. But every one else was in a state of suspense. A number of people had gradually gathered about the harbour—fishermen, sailors waiting to be hired, and master-artisans who were too restless to stay in their workshop. They came down in their leather aprons, and began at once to discuss the situation; they used nautical expressions, most of them having been at sea in their youth. The coming of the steamer was always an event that brought people to the harbour; but to-day she had a great many people on board, and she was already an hour behind time. The dangerous fog kept the suspense at high pressure; but as the time passed, the excitement gave place to a feeling of dull oppression. Fog is the seaman's worst enemy, and there were many unpleasant possibilities. On the best supposition the ship had gone inshore too far north or south, and now lay somewhere out at sea hooting and heaving the lead, without daring to move. One could imagine the captain storming and the sailors hurrying here and there, lithe and agile as cats. Stop!—Half-speed

ahead! Stop!—Half-speed astern! The first engineer would be at the engine himself, grey with nervous excitement. Down in the engine-room, where they knew nothing at all, they would strain their ears painfully for any sound, and all to no purpose. But up on deck every man would be on the alert for his life; the helmsman wet with the sweat of his anxiety to watch every movement of the captain's directing hand, and the look-out on the fore-castle peering and listening into the fog until he could hear his own heart beat, while the suspense held every man on deck on tenterhooks, and the fog-horn hooted its warning. But perhaps the ship had already gone to the bottom!

Every one knew it all; every man had in some way or other been through this overcharged suspense—as cabin-boy, stoker, captain, cook—and felt something of it again now. Only the farmers were unaffected by it; they dozed, woke up with a jerk, and yawned audibly.

The seafarers and the peasants always had a difficulty in keeping on peaceable terms with one another; they were as different as land and sea. But to-day the indifferent attitude of the peasants made the sea-folk eye them with suppressed rage. The fat pilot had already had several altercations with them for being in his way; and when one of them laid himself open to criticism, he was down upon him in an instant. It was an elderly farmer, who woke from his nap with a start, as his head fell forward, and impatiently took out his watch and looked at it.

"It's getting rather late," he said. "The captain can't find his stall to-day."

"More likely he's dropped into an inn on the way!" said the pilot, his eyes gleaming with malice.

"Very likely," answered the farmer without for the

moment realising the nature of the paths of the sea. His auditors laughed exultingly, and passed the mistake on to their neighbours, and people crowded round the unfortunate man, while some one cried: "How many inns are there between this and Sweden?"

"Yes, it's too easy to get hold of liquids out there, that's the worst of it," the pilot went on. "But for that any boobey could manage a ship. He's only got to keep well to the right of Mads Hansen's farm, and he's got a straight road before him. And the deuce of a fine road! Telegraph-wires and ditches and a row of poplars on each side—just improved by the local board. You've just got to wipe the porridge off your moustache, kiss the old woman, and climb up on to the bridge and there you are! Has the engine been oiled, Hans? Right away, then, off we go; hand me my best whip!" He imitated the peasants' manner of speech. "Be careful about the inns, Dad!" he added in a shrill falsetto. There were peals of laughter, that had an evil sound in the prevailing depression.

The farmer sat quite still under the deluge, only lowering his head a little. When the laughter had almost died away, he pointed at the pilot with his whip, and remarked to the bystanders—

"That's a wonderful clever kid for his age! Whose father art thou, my boy?" he went on, turning to the pilot.

This raised a laugh, and the thick-necked pilot swelled with rage. He seized hold of the body of the cart and shook it so that the farmer had a difficulty in keeping his seat. "You miserable old clodhopper, you pig-breeder, you dung-carter!" he roared. "What do you mean by coming here and saying 'thou' to grown-up people and calling them 'boy'! And giving your opinions on navigation into the bargain! Eh! you lousy old money-grubber! No, if you ever take off your greasy night-cap

to anybody but your parish clerk, then take it off to the captain who can find his harbour in a fog like this. You can give him my kind regards and say I said so." And he let go of the cart so suddenly that it swung over to the other side.

"I may as well take it off to you, as the other doesn't seem able to find us to-day," said the farmer with a grin, and took off his fur cap, disclosing a large bald head.

"Cover up that great bald pumpkin, or upon my word I'll give it something!" cried the pilot, blind with rage, and beginning to clamber up into the cart.

At that moment, like the thin metallic voice of a telephone, there came faintly from the sea the words: "We—hear—a—steam—whistle!"

The pilot ran off on to the breakwater, hitting out as he passed at the farmer's horse, and making it rear. Men cleared a space round the mooring-posts, and dragged up the gangways with frantic speed. Carts that had hay in them, as if they were come to fetch cattle, began to move without having anywhere to drive to. Everything was in motion. Labour-hirers with red noses and cunning eyes, came hurrying down from the sailors' tavern where they had been keeping themselves warm.

Then as if a huge hand had been laid upon the movement, everything suddenly stood still again, in strained effort to hear. A far-off, tiny echo of a steam whistle whined somewhere a long way off. Men stole together into groups and stood motionless, listening and sending angry glances at the restless carts. Was it real, or was it a creation of the heart-felt wishes of so many? Perhaps a warning to every one that at that moment the ship had gone to the bottom? The sea always sends word of its evil doings; when the bread-winner is taken his

family hear a shutter creak, or three taps on the windows that look on to the sea—there are so many ways.

But now it sounded again, and this time the sound came in little waves over the water, the same vibrating, subdued whistle that long-tailed ducks make when they rise; it seemed alive. The fog-horn answered it out in the fairway, and the bell in at the mole-head; then the horn once more, and the steam-whistle in the distance. So it went on, a guiding line of sound being spun between the land and the indefinite grey out there, backwards and forwards. Here on terra firma one could distinctly feel how out there they were groping their way by the sound. The hoarse whistle slowly increased in volume, sounding now a little to the south now to the north, but growing steadily louder. Then other sounds made themselves heard, the heavy scraping of iron against iron, the noise of the screw when it was reversed or went on again.

The pilot-boat glided slowly out of the fog, keeping to the middle of the fairway, and moving slowly inwards hooting incessantly. It towed by the sound an invisible world behind it, in which hundreds of voices murmured thickly amidst shouting and clanging, and tramping of feet—a world that floated blindly in space close by. Then a shadow began to form in the fog where no one had expected it, and the little steamer made its appearance—looking enormous in the first moment of surprise—in the middle of the harbour entrance.

At this the last remnants of suspense burst and scattered, and every one had to do something or other to work off the oppression. They seized the heads of the farmers' horses and pushed them back, clapped their hands, attempted jokes, or only laughed noisily while they stamped on the stone paving.

"Good voyage?" asked a score of voices at once.

"All well!" answered the captain cheerfully.

And now he, too, has got rid of his incubus, and rolls forth words of command; the propeller churns up the water behind, hawsers fly through the air, and the steam winch starts with a ringing metallic clang, while the vessel works herself broadside in to the wharf.

Between the forecastle and the bridge, in under the upper deck and the after, there is a swarm of people, a curiously stupid swarm, like sheep that get up on to one another's backs and look foolish. "What a cargo of cattle!" cries the fat pilot up to the captain, tramping delightedly on the breakwater with his wooden-soled boots. There are sheepskin caps, old military caps, disreputable old rusty hats, and the women's tidy black handkerchiefs. The faces are as different as old, wrinkled pigskin and young, ripening fruit; but want, and expectancy, and a certain animal greed are visible in all of them. The unfamiliarity of the moment brings a touch of stupidity into them, as they press forward, or climb up to get a view over their neighbours' heads and stare open-mouthed at the land where the wages are said to be so high, and the brandy so uncommonly strong. They see the fat, fur-clad farmers and the men come down to engage labourers.

They do not know what to do with themselves, and are always getting in the way; and the sailors chase them with oaths from side to side of the vessel, or throw hatches and packages without warning at their feet. "Look out, you Swedish devil!" cries a sailor who has to open the iron doors. The Swede backs in bewilderment, but his hand involuntarily flies to his pocket and fingers nervously his big pocket-knife.

The gangway is down, and the two hundred and fifty passengers stream down it—stone-masons, navvies, maid-servants, male and female day-labourers, stablemen,