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Something

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

"I will become something," said the eldest of five brothers. "I mean to be of some use in the world; let it be ever so humble a position, so long as what I produce is good, that's something. I'll make bricks: they are things people can't do without. Then I shall have done something."

"But something not nearly big enough," said the second brother. "What you'll do is as good as nothing: it's mere manual work, it can be done with a machine. No! Better be a bricklayer, that's something. That's what I'll be, it's a craft: you enter into a corporation, you become a citizen, you have your guild-banner, and your own special inn. Why, if things go right, I can employ labourers and be called Master, and my wife Mistress. That's something."

"It's nothing at all," said the third. "It's not within the classes, and there are lots of classes in a town, above the masters. You may be a respectable man, but even as a master you're only what is called 'Lower Class'. No, no. I know something better than that. I shall be an architect, and go in for the artistic side, the thinking side, and get up to the higher levels in the realm of the mind. Of course, I shall have to begin at the bottom. Yes, I don't mind putting it into plain language—I shall have to begin as a builder's boy, and wear a cap—though I'm accustomed to a silk hat—and run about and fetch beer and brandy for the ordinary journeymen, and they will say 'thou' to me, which is annoying, but I shall pretend to myself that it is all a masquerade, and these are the liberties that belong to it. To-morrow, I mean, when I've got to being a journeyman, I shall go my own way, and the rest of them won't concern me. I shall go to the college, and learn to draw and be called an architect. That's something, nay, that's a great deal. I may become 'Your Excellency' and 'well-born'—may have a tail to my name as well as a title in front—and build and build like the rest of them before me: that's always something to reckon on. The whole thing is something."

"Something I don't care a rap about," said the fourth. "I won't sail in the wake, I won't be a copy of someone else; I shall be a genius, and become better than all the lot of you. I shall create a new style, and frame the conception of a building that shall be in accord with the climate and materials of the country, with our nationality, with the evolution of this age of ours; yes, and pile an extra story on by my own genius."

"But suppose the climate and the materials are no good?" said the fifth. "That'll be a bad job: it will affect the whole: besides, nationality may easily become so diluted that it becomes an affectation; and the evolution of the age may make you run off the rails, as often happens in youth. No, I see none of you will really attain to being something, whatever you may think. However, do as you please, I won't be like you. I shall take up a detached position. I shall criticize what you produce. There's always something wrong in everything, and I shall pick it out and discuss it: that's something."

And so he did, and people said of that fifth brother: "There's something to him, he's a good head of his own. But he doesn't do anything!" Which of itself made him something.

Well now, that's only a bit of a story, and yet it never will come to an end so long as the world stands.

But, did nothing more happen to these five brothers? That wouldn't have been something. You must go on listening, for there is a whole tale to come.

The eldest brother, who took to brick-making, found that out of every brick when it was finished there rolled a little coin—only a copper, to be sure, but a great many little copper coins when they are put together turn into a bright dollar, and whenever you knock on the door with that, at the baker's, the butcher's, the tailor's, or all of them together, the door flies open and you get what you want. So you see that was what the bricks gave him. Some of them, to be sure, fell to bits or broke in the middle, but a use was found for them too.

Up on the dyke old mother Margaret, the poor woman, wanted very much to build herself a little house, and she was given all the broken bricks, and some whole ones into the bargain; for the eldest brother had a good heart, even though in

practice he only used it to make bricks. The poor woman built her house herself. It was very little, and the only window was put in crooked. The door was much too low, and the thatched roof might have been much better. But there was shelter and dwelling there, and a wide view from it over the sea, which when it was high broke against the dyke. The salt spray spurted all over the house. It was still standing when the man who had made the bricks of it was dead and gone.

The second brother—ah, he could lay bricks after another fashion, and he was trained up to it. When his labourer's time was up, he buckled his knapsack and struck up the prentice's song

I travel can whilst I am young

and the rest of it, and so he did. In the town, when he came back and became a master, he built house after house, a whole street of them. And when they were up, and looked well, and made an ornament for the town, why, the houses built him a little house, for his very own. But how could the houses build? Well, you may ask them and they won't say anything, but the people will answer and tell you: "Why, certainly the street built his house for him." It was small, and it had a clay floor, but when he and his bride danced over it, the floor grew bright and polished, and out of every brick in the wall there burst a blossom, and that was every bit as good as an expensive paper. It was a pretty little house, and they were a happy couple. The guild-flag fluttered outside it, and the prentice boys and the men shouted "Hurrah!" That was something. And then he died, and that too was something.

Next came the architect, the third brother, who had begun as a carpenter's prentice, worn a cap and run errands in the town, and now from the college had risen to be Director of Buildings, "illustrious" and well-born. Indeed, if the houses in the street had built a house for the brother who was a master bricklayer, the street itself was named after this brother, and the prettiest house in the street was his. That was something, and he was something—yes, and with a long title before his name and after it. His children were called gentry, and when he died his widow was a widow of Position. That's something, and his name stood permanently at the corner of the street, and was in people's mouths, being the name of the street, and I say that is something.

Then came the genius, the fourth brother, who meant to hit on something new, something original, with an extra story on top. But it broke down with him, and he tumbled down and broke his neck. Still, he had a beautiful funeral with guild banners and a band and flowers on the posters and in the street, right across the pavement: and there were three funeral orations spoken over him, every one of them longer than the one before it, and that would have pleased him, for he enjoyed being talked about. There was a monument, too, put upon his grave; only one story to it, but still that's always something.

So now he was dead like the three other brothers; but the last, the one who criticized, outlived them all, which was very proper, for in that way he got the last word, and it was of great importance to him to have the last word. He was the one with the good head to him, people said, and now his hour struck too, and he died and arrived at the gate of heaven. People always come there in pairs, and here stood he with another soul who also wanted to enter in: and who should it be but old mother Margaret of the house on the dyke!

"No doubt it is for the sake of the contrast that I and this poor creature are made to come here together," said the critic. "Well, and who are you, my good woman? Are you by way of coming in here too?" he asked.

The old woman curtsied as well as she knew how, for she thought it was St. Peter himself who was speaking. "I'm a poor old body, without any belongings, Old Margaret, from the house on the dyke."

"Well, and what did you do or produce down there?"

"Really, I didn't do nothing at all in the world, nothing as can open the door for me here. It 'ud be a real mercy if I could get leave to come inside of the door."

"And in what sort of way did you leave that world?" he asked—just in order to be saying something, for it bored him to stand there waiting.

"How did I leave it? Well, I'm sure I don't know. Very sick and poorly I was in the last few years, and really I hadn't the strength to creep out of my bed and go into the frost and cold outside. It's a hard winter—but I've won through it now. For a couple of days it was dead still, but bitter cold, as your reverence knows well enough. The ice was along the shore

and as far out as eye could see. All the people in the town were gone out on the ice, there was what they call skating and dancing. I believe there was a big band and refreshments out there. I could hear it indoors where I lay in my poor little room, and it had got towards evening time: and the moon was risen though twasn't yet full, and from my bed I could look from the window right out over the shore: and there, right in the corner betwixt the sky and the sea, there came a strange white cloud. I lay and looked at it, and I looked at the black spot in the middle of it, and it grew bigger and bigger, and then I knew what that meant. I'm old and weatherwise: though it's not often one sees that sign, I knew it, and it gave me a turn. Twice afore in my lifetime I've seen that same thing, and I knew there'd be a terrible tempest with a spring tide, as would come right over those poor people out there that was drinking and dancing and making merry.

Young and old, the whole town was out there, and who was to warn 'em if nobody that was there saw and knowed what I did? I was that frightened that I got more strength than I'd had in a long time. Out of my bed I got and over to the window, I couldn't manage no further. However, I got the window open, and I could see the people running and jumping out there on the ice, and all the gay flags, and hear the boys shouting out 'Hurrah!' and the girls and the lads singing, all as merry as could be, and still that white cloud with the black bag in it climbed up higher and higher. I screamed out as loud as I could, but nobody heard me, I was too far away. Very soon the tempest would break loose and the ice go to pieces, and everybody that was on it go down through it, and no one to save 'em! Hear me they could not, and get out to them I could not: how could I manage to get 'em to shore? Just then our good God put it in my mind to set fire to my bed and let the house burn down, sooner than all them people should die in that dreadful way. I got a light and I see the red flames—yes, and I managed to get outside the door; but there I lay, I couldn't do no more. The fire come after me out of the window, and up over the roof. Then they saw it from out there, and all of 'em ran as hard as they could to help me, the poor old body they thought was burning to death inside. There wasn't one but what ran. I heard 'em coming, and I heard besides how all at once there came a rushing in the air. I heard it thundering like great guns fired off, and the spring tide heaved up the ice and it broke in two. But they got to the dyke where the sparks was flying all about me. I got 'em every one into safety. But I couldn't get over the cold and the fright, and so I came up here to the gate of heaven. They say that's opened for poor bodies like me, and now I haven't got my house on the dyke no more, though to be sure that don't give me the right to get in here."

At that moment the gate of heaven opened, and the angel led the old woman in. She let fall a straw outside, one of the straws that had been in her bed, the bed she had set on fire to save all those people, and it had turned into pure gold, a sort of gold that grew and twined itself into the loveliest tendrils.

"Look, that is what the poor woman has brought," said the angel. "What are you bringing? Yes, I know. You have produced nothing, not even made a brick: if you could only go back again and bring back at least so much as that! It wouldn't have been much of a one if you had made it. Still, if made with a good intent, it would always have been something. But you cannot go back, and I can do nothing for you."

Then the poor soul, the woman from the house on the dyke, pleaded for him: "It was his brother who made and gave me all the bricks and bits I built my poor little house with. That was a great thing for a poor body like me. Now can't all them bits and pieces count as one brick for him? That 'ud be an act of mercy, and he wants one now, and this is the place of mercy."

"Your brother, the one whom you called the least of you," said the angel, "he whose calling with all its honesty seemed lowest of all to you, he is now giving you his heavenly mite. You shall not be turned away, you shall be permitted to stand out here and think over your life on earth, and try somehow to raise it up. But in you shall not come till by some act of good you have achieved something."

"I could have expressed that better," said the critic, but he did not say it aloud, and that was something to begin with.