

LAGERLÖF SELMA

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Selma Lagerlöf

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THE SPIRIT OF FASTING AND PETTER NORD

I

I can see before me the little town, friendly as a home. It is so small that I know its every hole and corner, am friends with all the children and know the name of every one of its dogs. Who ever walked up the street knew to which window he must raise his eyes to see a lovely face behind the panes, and who ever strolled through the town park knew well whither he should turn his steps to meet the one he wished to meet.

One was as proud of the beautiful roses in the garden of a neighbor, as if they had grown in one's own. If anything mean or vulgar was done, it was as great a shame as if it had happened in one's own family; but at the smallest adventure, at a fire or a fight in the market-place, one swelled with pride and said: "Only see what a community! Do such things ever happen anywhere else? What a wonderful town!"

In my beloved town nothing ever changes. If I ever come there again, I shall find the same houses and shops that I knew of old; the same holes in the pavements will cause my downfall; the same stiff hedges of lindens, the same clipped lilac bushes will captivate my fascinated gaze. Again shall I see the old Mayor who rules the whole town walking down the street with elephantine tread. What a feeling of security there is in knowing that you are walking there! And deaf old Halfvorson will still be digging in his garden, while his eyes, clear as water, stare and wander as if they would say: "We have investigated everything, everything; now, earth, we will bore down to your very centre."

But one who will not still be there is little, round Petter Nord: the little fellow from Värmland, you know, who was in Halfvorson's shop; he who amused the customers with his small mechanical inventions and his white mice. There is a long story about him. There are stories to be told about everything and everybody in the town. Nowhere else do such wonderful things happen.

He was a peasant boy, little Petter Nord. He was short and round; he was brown-eyed and smiling. His hair was paler than birch leaves in the autumn; his cheeks were red and downy. And he was from Värmland. No one, seeing him, could imagine that he was from any other place. His native land had equipped him with its excellent qualities. He was quick at his work, nimble with his fingers, ready with his tongue, clear in his thoughts. And, moreover, full of fun, good-natured and brave, kind and quarrelsome, inquisitive and a chatterbox. A madcap, he never could show more respect to a burgomaster than to a beggar! But he had a heart; he fell in love every other day, and confided in the whole town.

This child of rich gifts attended to the work in the shop in rather an extraordinary manner. The customers were waited on while he fed the white mice. Money was changed and counted while he put wheels on his little automatic wagons. And while he told the customers of his very last love-affair, he kept his eye on the quart measure, into which the brown molasses was slowly curling. It delighted his admiring listeners to see him suddenly leap over the counter and rush out into the street to have a brush with a passing street-boy; also to see him calmly return to tie the string on a package or to finish measuring a piece of cloth.

Was it not quite natural that he should be the favorite of the whole town? We all felt obliged to trade with Halfvorson, after Petter Nord came there. Even the old Mayor himself was proud when

Petter Nord took him apart into a dark corner and showed him the cages of the white mice. It was nervous work to show the mice, for Halfvorson had forbidden him to have them in the shop.

But then in the brightening February there came a few days of warm, misty weather. Petter Nord became suddenly serious and silent. He let the white mice nibble the steel bars of their cages without feeding them. He attended to his duties in the most irreproachable way. He fought with no more street boys. Could Petter Nord not bear the change in the weather?

Oh no, the matter was that he had found a fifty-crown note on one of the shelves. He believed that it had got caught in a piece of cloth, and without any one's seeing him he had pushed it under a roll of striped cotton which was out of fashion and was never taken down from the shelf.

The boy was cherishing great anger in his heart against Halfvorson. The latter had destroyed a whole family of mice for him, and now he meant to be revenged. Before his eyes he still saw the white mother with her helpless offspring. She had not made the slightest attempt to escape; she had remained in her place with steadfast heroism, staring with red, burning eyes on the heartless murderer. Did he not deserve a short time of anxiety? Petter Nord wished to see him come out pale as death from his office and begin to look for the fifty crowns. He wished to see the same despair in his watery eyes as he had seen in the ruby red ones of the white mouse. The shopkeeper should search, he should turn the whole shop upside down before Petter Nord would let him find the bank-note.

But the fifty crowns lay in its hiding-place all day without any one's asking about it. It was a new note, many-colored and bright, and had big numbers in all the corners. When Petter Nord was alone in the shop, he put a step-ladder against the shelves and climbed up to the roll of cotton. Then he took out the fifty crowns, unfolded it and admired its beauties.

In the midst of the most eager trade he would grow anxious lest something should have happened to the fifty crowns. Then he pretended to look for something on the shelf, and groped about under the roll of cotton till he felt the smooth bank-note rustle under his fingers.

The note had suddenly acquired a supernatural power over him. Might there not be something living in it? The figures surrounded by wide rings were like magnetic eyes. The boy kissed them all and whispered: "I should like to have many, very many like you."

He began to have all sorts of thoughts about the note, and why

Halfvorson did not inquire for it. Perhaps it was not Halfvorson's?

Perhaps it had lain in the shop for a long time? Perhaps it no longer had any owner?

Thoughts are contagious. – At supper Halfvorson had begun to speak of money and moneyed-men. He told Petter Nord about all the poor boys who had amassed riches. He began with Whittington and ended with Astor and Jay Gould. Halfvorson knew all their histories; he knew how they had striven and denied themselves; what they had discovered and ventured. He grew eloquent when he began on such tales. He lived through the sufferings of those young people; he followed them in their successes; he rejoiced in their victories. Petter Nord listened quite fascinated.

Halfvorson was stone deaf, but that was no obstacle to conversation, for he read by the lips everything that was said. On the other hand, he could not hear his own voice. It rolled out as strangely monotonous as the roar of a distant waterfall. But his peculiar way of speaking made everything he said sink in, so that one could not escape from it for many days. Poor Petter Nord!

"What is most needed to become rich," said Halfvorson, "is the foundation. But it cannot be earned. Take note that they all have found it in the street or discovered it between the lining and cloth of a coat which they had bought at a pawnbroker's sale; or that it had been won at cards, or had been given to them in alms by a beautiful and charitable lady. After they had once found that blessed coin, everything had gone well with them. The stream of gold welled from it as from a fountain. The first thing that is necessary, Petter Nord, is the foundation."

Halfvorson's voice sounded ever fainter and fainter. Young Petter Nord sat in a kind of trance and saw endless vistas of gold before him. On the dining table rose great piles of ducats; the floor heaved white with silver, and the indistinct patterns on the dirty wall-paper changed into banknotes,

big as handkerchiefs. But directly before his eyes fluttered the fifty-crown note, surrounded by wide rings, luring him like the most beautiful eyes. "Who can know," smiled the eyes, "perhaps the fifty crowns up on the shelf is just such a foundation?"

"Mark my words," said Halfvorson, "that, after the foundation, two things are necessary for those who wish to reach the heights. Work, untiring work, Petter Nord, is one; and the other is renunciation. Renunciation of play and love, of talk and laughter, of morning sleep and evening strolls. In truth, in truth, two things are necessary for him who would win fortune. One is called work, and the other renunciation."

Petter Nord looked as if he would like to weep. Of course he wished to be rich, naturally he wished to be fortunate, but fortune should not be so anxiously and sadly won. Fortune ought to come of herself. Just as Petter Nord was fighting with the street boys, the noble lady should stop her coach at the shop-door, and invite the Värmland boy to the place at her side. But now Halfvorson's voice still rolled in his ears. His brain was full of it. He thought of nothing else, knew nothing else. Work and renunciation, work and renunciation, that was life and the object of life. He asked nothing else, dared not think that he had ever wished anything else.

The next day he did not dare to kiss the fifty-crown note, did not dare even to look at it. He was silent and low-spirited, orderly and industrious. He attended to all his duties so irreproachably that any one could see that there was something wrong with him. The old Mayor was troubled about the boy and did what he could to cheer him.

"Did you think of going to the Mid-Lent ball this evening?" asked the old man. "So, you did not. Well, then I invite you. And be sure that you come, or I will tell Halfvorson where you keep your mouse-cages."

Petter Nord sighed and promised to go to the ball.

The Mid-Lent ball, fancy Petter Nord at the Mid-Lent ball! Petter Nord would see all the beautiful ladies of the town, delicate, dressed in white, adorned with flowers. But of course Petter Nord would not be allowed to dance with a single one of them. Well, it did not matter. He was not in the mood to dance.

At the ball he stood in a doorway and made no attempt to dance. Several people had asked him to take part, but he had been firm and said no. He could not dance any of those dances. Neither would any of those fine ladies be willing to dance with him. He was much too humble for them.

But as he stood there, his eyes began to kindle and shine, and he felt joy creeping through his I hubs. It came from the dance music; it came from the fragrance of the flowers; it came from all the beautiful faces about him. After a little while he was so sparkingly happy that, if joy had been fire, he would have been surrounded by bursting flames. And if love were it, as many say it is, it would have been the same. He was always in love with some pretty girl, but hitherto with only one at a time. But when he now saw all those beautiful ladies together, it was no longer a single fire, which laid waste his sixteen-year-old heart; it was a whole conflagration.

Sometimes he looked down at his boots, which were by no means dancing shoes. But how he could have marked the time with the broad heels and spun round on the thick soles! Something was dragging and pulling him and trying to hurl him out on the floor like a whipped ball. He could still resist it, although his excitement grew stronger as the hours advanced. He grew delirious and hot. Heigh ho, he was no longer poor Petter Nord! He was the young whirlwind, that raises the seas and overthrows the forests.

Just then a hambo-polska [Note: A Swedish national dance of a very lively character] struck up. The peasant boy was quite beside himself. He thought it sounded like the polska, like the Värmland polska.

Suddenly Petter Nord was out on the floor. All his fine manners dropped off him. He was no longer at the town-hall ball; he was at home in the barn at the midsummer dance. He came forward,

his knees bent, his head drawn down between his shoulders. Without stopping to ask, he threw his arms round a lady's waist and drew her with him. And then he began to dance the polska.

The girl followed him, half unwillingly, almost dragged. She was not in time; she did not know what kind of a dance it was, but suddenly it went quite of itself. The mystery of the dance was revealed to her. The polska bore her, lifted her; her feet had wings; she felt as light as air. She thought that she was flying.

For the Värmland polska is the most wonderful dance. It transforms the heavy-footed sons of earth. Without a sound soles an inch thick float over the unplanned barn floor. They whirl about, light as leaves in an autumn wind. It is supple, quick, silent, gliding. Its noble, measured movements set the body free and let it feel itself light, elastic, floating.

While Petter Nord danced the dance of his native land, there was silence in the ball-room. At first people laughed, but then they all recognized that this was dancing. It floated away in even, rapid whirls; it was dancing indeed, if anything.

In the midst of his delirium Petter Nord perceived that round about him reigned a strange silence. He stopped short and passed his hand over his forehead. There was no black barn floor, no leafy walls, no light blue summer night, no merry peasant maiden in the reality he gazed upon. He was ashamed and wished to steal away.

But he was already surrounded, besieged. The young ladies crowded about the shop-boy and cried: "Dance with us; dance with us!"

They wished to learn the polska. They all wished to learn to dance the polska. The ball was turned from its course and became a dancing-school. All said that they had never known before what it was to dance. And Petter Nord was a great man for that evening. He had to dance with all the fine ladies, and they were exceedingly kind to him. He was only a boy, and such a madcap besides. No one could help making a pet of him.

Petter Nord felt that this was happiness. To be the favorite of the ladies, to dare to talk to them, to be in the midst of lights, of movement, to be made much of, to be petted, surely this was happiness.

When the ball was over, he was too happy to think about it. He needed to come home to be able to think over quietly what had happened to him that evening.

Halfvorson was not married, but he had in his house a niece who worked in the office. She was poor and dependent on Halfvorson, but she was quite haughty towards both him and Petter Nord. She had many friends among the more important people of the town and was invited to families where Halfvorson could never come. She and Petter Nord went home from the ball together.

"Do you know, Nord," asked Edith Halfvorson, "that a suit is soon to be brought against Halfvorson for illicit trading in brandy? You might tell me how it really is."

"There is nothing worth making a fuss about," said Petter Nord.

Edith sighed. "Of course there is nothing. But there will be a lawsuit and fines and shame without end. I wish that I really knew how it is."

"Perhaps it is best not to know anything," said Petter Nord.

"I wish to rise in the world, do you see," continued Edith, "and I wish to drag Halfvorson up with me, but he always drops back again. And then he does something so that I become impossible too. He is scheming something now. Do you not know what it is? It would be good to know."

"No," said Petter Nord, and not another word would he say. It was inhuman to talk to him of such things on the way home from his first ball.

Beyond the shop there was a little dark room for the shop-boy.

There sat Petter Nord of to-day and came to an understanding with

Petter Nord of yesterday. How pale and cowardly the churl looked.

Now he heard what he really was. A thief and a miser. Did he know the seventh commandment? By rights he ought to have forty stripes.

That was what he deserved.

God be blessed and praised for having let him go to the ball and get a new view of it all. Usch! what ugly thoughts he had had; but now it was quite changed. As if riches were worth sacrificing conscience and the soul's freedom for their sake! As if they were worth as much as a white mouse, if the heart could not be glad at the same time! He clapped his hands and cried out in joy – that he was free, free, free! There was not even a longing to possess the fifty crowns in his heart. How good it was to be happy!

When he had gone to bed, he thought that he would show Halfvorson the fifty crowns early the next morning. Then he became uneasy that the tradesman might come into the shop before him the next morning, search for the note and find it. He might easily think that Petter Nord had hidden it to keep it. The thought gave him no peace. He tried to shake it off, but he could not succeed. He could not sleep. So he rose, crept into the shop and felt about till he found the fifty crowns. Then he fell asleep with the note under his pillow.

An hour later he awoke. A light shone sharply in his eyes; a hand was fumbling under his pillow and a rumbling voice was scolding and swearing.

Before the boy was really awake, Halfvorson had the note in his hand and showed it to the two women, who stood in the doorway to his room. "You see that I was right," said Halfvorson. "You see that it was well worth while for me to drag you up to bear witness against him! You see that he is a thief!"

"No, no, no," screamed poor Petter Nord. "I did not wish to steal.

I only hid the note."

Halfvorson heard nothing. Both the women stood with their backs turned to the room, as if determined to neither hear nor see.

Petter Nord sat up in bed. He looked all of a sudden pitifully weak and small. His tears were streaming. He wailed aloud.

"Uncle," said Edith, "he is weeping."

"Let him weep," said Halfvorson, "let him weep!" And he walked forward and looked at the boy. "You can weep all you like," he said, "but that does not take me in."

"Oh, oh," cried Petter Nord, "I am no thief. I hid the note as a joke – to make you angry. I wanted to pay you back for the mice. I am not a thief. Will no one listen to me. I am not a thief."

"Uncle," said Edith, "if you have tortured him enough now, perhaps we may go back to bed?"

"I know, of course, that it sounds terrible," said Halfvorson, "but it cannot be helped." He was gay, in very high spirits. "I have had my eye on you for a long time," he said to the boy. "You have always something you are tucking away when I come into the shop. But now I have caught you. Now I leave witnesses, and now I am going for the police."

The boy gave a piercing scream. "Will no one help me, will no one help me?" he cried. Halfvorson was gone, and the old woman who managed his house came up to him.

"Get up and dress yourself, Petter Nord! Halfvorson has gone for the police, and while he is away you can escape. The young lady can go out into the kitchen and get you a little food. I will pack your things."

The terrible weeping instantly ceased. After a short time of hurry the boy was ready. He kissed both the women on the hand, humbly, like a whipped dog. And then off he ran.

They stood in the door and looked after him. When he was gone, they drew a sigh of relief.

"What will Halfvorson say?" said Edith.

"He will be glad," answered the housekeeper.

"He put the money there for the boy, I think. I guess that he wanted to be rid of him."

"But why? The boy was the best one we have had in the shop for many years."

"He probably did not want him to give testimony in the affair with the brandy."

Edith stood silent and breathed quickly. "It is so base, so base," she murmured. She clenched her fist towards the office and towards the little pane in the door, through which Halfvorson could

see into the shop. She would have liked, she too, to have fled out into the world, away from all this meanness. She heard a sound far in, in the shop. She listened, went nearer, followed the noise, and at last found behind a keg of herring the cage of Petter Nord's white mice.

She took it up, put it on the counter, and opened the cage door. Mouse after mouse scampered out and disappeared behind boxes and barrels.

"May you flourish and increase," said Edith. "May you do injury and revenge your master!"

II

The little town lay friendly and contented under its red hill. It was so embedded in green that the church tower only just stuck up out of it. Garden after garden crowded one another on narrow terraces up the slope, and when they could go no further in that direction, they leaped with their bushes and trees across the street and spread themselves out between the scattered farmhouses and on the narrow strips of earth about them, until they were stopped by the broad river.

Complete silence and quiet reigned in the town. Not a soul was to be seen; only trees and bushes, and now and again a house. The only sound to be heard was the rolling of balls in the bowling-alley, like distant thunder on a summer day. It belonged to the silence.

But now the uneven stones of the market-place were ground under iron-shod heels. The noise of coarse voices thundered against the walls of the town-hall and the church was thrown back from the mountain, and hastened unchecked down the long street. Four wayfarers disturbed the noonday peace.

Alas, for the sweet silence, the holiday peace of years! How terrified they were! One could almost see them betaking themselves in flight up the mountain slopes.

One of the noisy crew who broke into the village was Petter Nord, the Värmland boy, who six years before had run away, accused of theft. Those who were with him were three longshoremen from the big commercial town that lies only a few miles away.

How had little Petter Nord been getting on? He had been getting on well. He had found one of the most sensible of friends and companions.

As he ran away from the village in the dark, rainy February morning, the polska tunes seethed and roared in his ears. And one of them was more persistent than all the others. It was the one they all had sung during the ring dance.

Christmas time has come,
Christmas time has come,
And after Christmas time comes Easter.
That is not true at all,
That is not true at all,
For Lent comes after Christmas feasting.

The fugitive heard it so distinctly, so distinctly. And then the wisdom that is hidden in the old ring dance forced itself upon the little pleasure-loving Värmland boy, forced itself into his very fibre, blended with every drop of blood, soaked into his brain and marrow. It is so; that is the meaning. Between Christmas and Easter, between the festivals of birth and death, comes life's fasting. One shall ask nothing of life; it is a poor, miserable fast. One shall never trust it, however it may appear. The next moment it is gray and ugly again. It is not its fault, poor thing, it cannot help it!

Petter Nord felt almost proud at having cheated life out of its most profound secret.

He thought he saw the pallid Spirit of Fasting creeping about over the earth in the shape of a beggar with Lenten twigs [Translator's Note: In Sweden, just before Easter, bunches of birch twigs with small feathers tied on the ends, are sold everywhere on the streets. The origin of this custom

is unknown.] in her hand. And he heard how she hissed at him: "You have wished to celebrate the festival of joy and merry moods in the midst of the time of fasting, which is called life. Therefore shame and dishonor shall befall you, until you change your ways."

He had changed his ways, and the Spirit of Fasting had protected him. He had never needed to go farther than to the big town, for he was never followed. And in its working quarter the Spirit of Fasting had her dwelling. Petter Nord found work in a machine shop. He grew strong and energetic. He became serious and thrifty. He had fine Sunday clothes; he acquired new knowledge, borrowed books and went to lectures. There was nothing really left of little Petter Nord but his white hair and his brown eyes.

That night had broken something in him, and the heavy work at the machine-shop made the break ever bigger, so that the wild Värmland boy had crept quite out through it. He no longer talked nonsense, for no one was allowed to speak in the shop, and he soon learned silent ways. He no longer invented anything new, for since he had to look after springs and wheels in earnest, he no longer found them amusing. He never fell in love, for he could not be interested in the women of the working quarter, after he had learned to know the beauties of his native town. He had no mice, no squirrels, nothing to play with. He had no time; he understood that such things were useless, and he thought with horror of the time when he used to fight with street boys.

Petter Nord did not believe that life could be anything but gray, gray, gray. Petter Nord always had a dull time, but he was so used to it that he did not notice it. Petter Nord was proud of himself because he had become so virtuous. He dated his good behavior from that night when Joy failed him and Fasting became his companion and friend.

But how could the virtuous Petter Nord be coming to the village on a work-day, accompanied by three boon companions, who were loafers and drunken?

He had always been a good boy, poor Petter Nord. And he had always tried to help those three good-for-nothings as well as he could, although he despised them. He had come with wood to their miserable hovel, when the winter was most severe, and he had patched and mended their clothes. The men held together like brothers, principally because they were all three named Petter. That name united them much more than if they had been born brothers. And now they allowed the boy on account of that name to do them friendly services, and when they had got their grog ready and settled themselves comfortably on their wooden chairs, they entertained him, sitting and darning the gaping holes in their stockings, with gallows humor and adventurous lies. Petter Nord liked it, although he would not acknowledge it. They were now for him almost what the mice had been formerly.

Now it happened that these wharf-rats had heard some gossip from the village. And after the space of six years they brought Petter Nord information that Halfvorson had put the fifty crowns out for him to disqualify him as a witness. And in their opinion Petter Nord ought to go back to the town and punish Halfvorson.

But Petter Nord was sensible and deliberate, and equipped with the wisdom of this world. He would not have anything to do with such a proposal.

The Petters spread the story about through the whole quarter. Every one said to Petter Nord: "Go back and punish Halfvorson, then you will be arrested, and there will be a trial, and the thing will get into the papers, and the fellow's shame will be known throughout all the land."

But Petter Nord would not. It might be amusing, but revenge is a costly pleasure, and Petter Nord knew that Life is poor. Life cannot afford such amusements.

One morning the three men had come to him and said that they were going in his place to beat Halfvorson, "that justice should be done on earth," as they said.

Petter Nord threatened to kill all three of them if they went one step on the way to the village.

Then one of them who was little and short, and whose name was

Long-Petter, made a speech to Petter Nord.

"This earth," he said, is an apple hanging by a string over a fire to roast. By the fire I mean the kingdom of the evil one; Petter Nord, and the apple must hang near the fire to be sweet and tender; but if the string breaks and the apple falls into the fire, it is destroyed. Therefore the string is very important, Petter Nord. Do you understand what is meant by the string?"

"I guess it must be a steel wire," said Petter Nord.

"By the string I mean justice," said Long-Petter with deep seriousness. "If there is no justice on earth, everything falls into the fire. Therefore the avenger may not refuse to punish, or if he will not do it, others must."

"This is the last time I will offer any of you any grog," said

Petter Nord, quite unmoved by the speech.

"Yes, it can't be helped," said Long-Petter, "justice must be done."

"We do not do it to be thanked by you, but in order that the honorable name of Petter shall not be brought to disrepute," said one, whose name was Rulle-Petter, and who was tall and morose.

"Really, is the name so highly esteemed!" said Petter Nord, contemptuously.

"Yes, and the worst of it is that they are beginning to say everywhere in all the saloons that you must have meant to steal the fifty crowns, since you will not have the shopkeeper punished."

Those words bit in deep. Petter Nord started up and said that he would go and beat the shopkeeper.

"Yes, and we will go with you and help you," said the loafers.

And so they started off, four men strong, to the village. At first Petter Nord was gloomy and surly, and much more angry with his friends than with his enemy. But when he came to the bridge over the river, he became quite changed. He felt as if he had met there a little, weeping fugitive, and had crept into him. And as he became more at home in the old Petter Nord he felt what a grievous wrong the shopkeeper had done him. Not only because he had tried to tempt him and ruin him, but, worst of all, because he had driven him away from that town, where Petter Nord could have remained Petter Nord all the days of his life. Oh, what fun he had had in those days, how happy and glad he had been, how open his heart, how beautiful the world! Lord God, if he had only been allowed always to live here! And he thought of what he was now – silent and stupid, serious and industrious – quite like a prodigal.

He grew passionately angry with Halfvorson, and instead of, as before, following his companions, he dashed past them.

But the tramps, who had not come merely to punish Halfvorson, but also to let their wrath break loose, hardly knew how to begin. There was nothing for an angry man to do here. There was not a dog to chase, not a street-sweeper to pick a quarrel with, nor a fine gentleman at whom to throw an insult.

It was early in the year; the spring was just turning into summer. It was the white time of cherry and hawthorn blossoms, when bunches of lilacs cover the high, round bushes, and the air is full of the fragrance of the apple-blossoms. These men who had come direct from paved streets and wharves to this realm of flowers were strangely affected by it. Three pairs of fists that till now had been fiercely clenched, relaxed, and three pairs of heels thundered a little less violently against the pavement.

From the market-place they saw a pathway that wound up the hill. Along it grew young cherry-trees which formed vaulted arches with their white tops. The arch was light and floating, and the branches absurdly slender, altogether weak, delicate and youthful.

The cherry-tree path attracted the eyes of the men against their will. What an unpractical hole it was, where people planted cherry trees, where any one could take the cherries. The three Petters had considered it before as a nest of iniquity, full of cruelty and tyranny. Now they began to laugh at it, and even to despise it a little.

But the fourth one of the company did not laugh. His longing for revenge was seething ever more fiercely, for he felt that this was the town where he ought to have lived and labored. It was his lost paradise. And without paying any attention to the others he walked quickly up the street.

They followed him; and when they saw that there was only one street, and when they saw only flowers, and more flowers the whole length of it, their scorn and their good humor increased. It was perhaps the first time in their lives that they had ever noticed flowers, but here they could not help it, for the clusters of lilac blossoms brushed off their caps and the petals of cherry-blossoms rained down over them.

"What kind of people do you suppose live in this town?" said

Long-Petter, musingly.

"Bees," answered Cobbler-Petter, who had received his name because he had once lived in the same house as a shoemaker.

Of course, little by little, they perceived a few people. In the windows, behind shining panes and white curtains, appeared young, pretty faces, and they saw children playing on the terraces. But no noise disturbed the silence. It seemed to them as if the trump of the Day of Doom itself would not be able to wake this town. What could they do with themselves in such a town!

They went into a shop and bought some beer. There they asked several questions of the shopman in a terrible voice. They asked if the fire-brigade had their engines in order, and wondered if there were clappers in the church bells, if there should happen to be an alarm.

They drank their beer in the street and threw the bottles away. One, two, three, all the bottles at the same corner, thunder and crash, and the splinters flew about their ears.

They heard steps behind them, real steps; voices, loud, distinct voices; laughter, much laughter, and, moreover, a rattling as if of metal. They were appalled, and drew back into a doorway. It sounded like a whole company.

It was one, too, but of young girls. All the maids of the town were going out in a body to the pastures to milk.

It made the deepest impression on these city men, these citizens of the world. The maids of the town with milk-pails! It was almost touching!

They suddenly jumped out of their doorway and cried "Boo!"

The whole troop of girls scattered instantly. They screamed and ran. Their skirts fluttered; their head cloths loosened; their milk-pails rolled about the street.

And at the same time, along the whole street, was heard a deafening sound of gates and doors slammed to, of hooks and bolts and locks.

Farther down the street stood a big linden tree, and under it sat an old woman by a table with candies and cakes. She did not move; she did not look round; 9111' only sat still. She was not asleep either.

"She is made of wood," said Cobbler-Petter,

"No, of clay," said Rulle-Petter.

They walked abreast, all three. Just in front of the old woman they began to reel. They staggered against her table. And the old woman began to scold.

"Neither of wood nor of clay," they said, – "venom, only venom."

During all this time Petter Nord had not spoken to them, but now, at last, they were directly in front of Halfvorson's shop, and there he was waiting for them.

"This is undeniably, my affair," he said proudly, and pointed at the shop. "I wish to go in alone and attend to it. If I do not succeed, then you may try."

They nodded. "Go ahead, Petter Nord! We will wait outside."

Petter Nord went in, found a young man alone in the shop, and asked about Halfvorson. He heard that the latter had gone away. He had quite a talk with the clerk, and obtained a good deal of information about his master.

Halfvorson had never been accused of illicit trade. How he had behaved towards Petter Nord every one knew, but no one spoke of that affair any more. Halfvorson had risen in the world, and now he was not at all dangerous. He was not inhuman to his debtors, and had ceased to spy on his shop-

boys. The last few years he had devoted himself to gardening. He had laid out a garden around his house in the town, and a kitchen garden near the customhouse. He worked so eagerly in his gardens that he scarcely thought of amassing money.

Petter Nord felt a stab in his heart. Of course the man was good. He had remained in paradise. Of course any one was good who lived there.

Edith Halfvorson was still with her uncle, but she had been ill for a while. Her lungs were weak, ever since an attack of pneumonia in the winter.

While Petter Nord was listening to all this, and more too, the three men stood outside and waited.

In Halfvorson's shadeless garden a bower of birch had been arranged so that Edith might lie there in the beautiful, warm spring days. She regained her strength slowly, but her life was no longer in danger.

Some people make one feel that they are not able to live. At their first illness they lie down and die. Halfvorson's niece was long since weary of everything, of the office, of the dim little shop, of money-getting. When she was seventeen years old, she had the incentive of winning friends and acquaintances. Then she undertook to try to keep Halfvorson in the path of virtue, but now everything was accomplished. She saw no prospect of escaping from the monotony of her life. She might as well die.

She was of an elastic nature, like a steel spring: a bundle of nerves and vivacity, when anything troubled or tormented her. How she had worked with strategy and artifice, with womanly goodness and womanly daring, before she had reached the point with her uncle when she was sure that there was no longer danger of any Petter Nord affairs! But now that he was tamed and subdued, she had nothing to interest her. Yes, and yet she would not die! She lay and thought of what she would do when she was well again.

Suddenly she started up, hearing some one say in a very loud voice that he alone wished to settle with Halfvorson. And then another voice answered: "Go ahead, Petter Nord!"

Petter Nord was the most terrible, the most fatal name in the world. It meant a revival of all the old troubles. Edith rose with trembling limbs, and just then three dreadful creatures came around the corner and stopped to stare at her. There was only a low rail and a thin hedge between her and the street.

Edith was alone. The maids had gone to milk, and Halfvorson was working in his garden by the custom-house, although he had told the shop-boy to say that he had gone away, for he was ashamed of his passion for gardening. Edith was terribly frightened at the three men as well as at the one who had gone into the shop. She was sure that they wished to do her harm. So she turned and ran up the mountain by the steep, slippery path and the narrow, rotten wooden steps which led from terrace to terrace.

The strange men thought it too delightfully funny that she ran from them. They could not resist pretending that they wished to catch her. One of them climbed up on the railing, and all three shouted with a terrible voice.

Edith ran as one runs in dreams, panting, falling, terrified to death, with a horrible feeling of not getting away from one spot. All sorts of emotions stormed through her, and shook her so that she thought she was going to die. Yes, if one of those men laid his hand on her, she knew that she should die. When she had reached the highest terrace, and dared to look back, she found that the men were still in the street, and were no longer looking at her. Then she threw herself down on the ground, quite powerless. The exertion had been greater than she could bear. She felt something burst in her. Then blood streamed from her lips.

She was found by the maids as they went home from the milking. She was then half dead. For the moment she was brought back to life, but no one dared to hope that she could live long.

She could not talk that day enough to tell in what way she had been frightened. Had she done so, it is uncertain if the strange men had come alive from the town. They fared badly enough as it was. For after Petter Nord had come out to them again, and had told them that Halfvorson was not at home, all four of them in good accord went out through the gates, and found a sunny slope where they could sleep away the time until the shopman returned.

But in the afternoon, when all the men of the town, who had been working in the fields, came home again, the women told them about the tramps' visit, about their threatening questions in the shop where they had bought the beer, and about all their boisterous behavior. The women exaggerated and magnified everything, for they had sat at home and frightened one another the whole afternoon. Their husbands believed that their houses and homes were in danger. They determined to capture the disturbers of the peace, found a stout-hearted man to lead them, took thick cudgels with them and started off.

The whole town was alive. The women came out on their doorsteps and frightened one another. It was both terrible and exciting.

Before long the captors returned with their game. They had them all four. They had made a ring round them while they slept and captured them. No heroism had been required for the deed.

Now they came back to the town with them, driving them as if they had been animals. A mad thirst for revenge had seized upon the conquerors. They struck for the pleasure of striking. When one of the prisoners clenched his fist at them, he received a blow on the head which knocked him down, and thereupon blows hailed upon him, until he got up and went on. The four men were almost dead.

The old poems are so beautiful. The captured hero sometimes must walk in chains in the triumphal procession of his victorious enemy. But he is proud and beautiful still in adversity. And looks follow him as well as the fortunate one who has conquered him. Beauty's tears and wreaths belong to him still, even in misfortune.

But who could be enraptured of poor Petter Nord? His coat was torn and his tow-colored hair sticky with blood. He received the most blows, for he offered the most resistance. He looked terrible, as he walked. He roared without knowing it. Boys caught hold of him, and he dragged them long distances. Once he stopped and flung off the crowd in the street. Just as he was about to escape, a blow from a cudgel fell on his head and knocked him down. He rose up again, half stunned, and staggered on, blows raining upon him, and the boys hanging like leeches to his arms and legs.

They met the old Mayor, who was on his way home from his game of whist in the garden of the inn. "Yes," he said to the advance guard, – "yes, take them to the prison."

He placed himself at the head of the procession, shouted and ordered. In a second everything was in line. Prisoners and guards marched in peace and order. The villagers' cheeks flushed; some of them threw down their cudgels; others put them on their shoulders like muskets. And so the prisoners were transferred into the keeping of the police, and were taken to the prison in the market-place.

Those who had saved the town stood a long time in the market-place and told of their courage and of their great exploit. And in the little room of the inn, where the smoke is as thick as a cloud, and the great men of the town mix their midnight toddy, more is heard of the deed, magnified. They grow bigger in their rocking-chairs; they swell in their sofa corners; they are all heroes. What force is slumbering in that little town of mighty memories! Thou formidable inheritance, thou old Viking blood!

The old Mayor did not like the whole affair. He could not quite reconcile himself to the stirring of the old Viking blood. He could not sleep for thinking of it, and went out again into the street and strolled slowly towards the square.

It was a mild spring night. The church clock's only hand pointed to eleven. The balls had ceased to roll on the bowling alley. The curtains were drawn down. The houses seemed to sleep with closed eyelids. The steep hill behind was black, as if in mourning. But in the midst of all the sleep there was one thing awake – the fragrance of the flowers did not sleep. It stole over the linden hedges; poured

out from the gardens; rushed up and down the street; climbed up to every window standing open, to every skylight that sucked in fresh air.

Every one whom the fragrance reached instantly saw before him his little town, although the darkness had gently settled down over it. He saw it as a village of flowers, where it was not house by house, but garden by garden. He saw the cherry trees that raised their white arches over the steep wood-path, the lilac clusters, the swelling buds of glorious roses, the proud peonies, and the drifts of flower-petals on the ground beneath the hawthorns.

The old Mayor was deep in thought. He was so wise and so old. Seventy years had he reached, and for fifty he had managed the affairs of the town. But that night he asked himself if he had done right. "I had the town in my hand," he thought, "but I have not made it anything great." And he thought of its great past, and was the more uncertain if he had done right.

He stood in the market-place, looking out over the river. A boat came with oars. A few villagers were coming home from a picnic. Girls in light dresses held the oars. They steered in under the arch of the bridge, but there the current was strong and they were drawn back. There was a violent struggle. Their slender bodies were bent backwards, until they lay even with the edge of the boat. Their soft arm-muscles tightened. The oars bent like bows. The noise of laughter and cries filled the air. Again and again the current conquered. The boat was driven back. And when at last the girls had to land at the market quay, and leave the boat for men to take home, how red and vexed they were, and how they laughed! How their laughter echoed down the street! How their broad, shady hats, their light, fluttering summer dresses enlivened the quiet night.

The old Mayor saw in his mind's eye, for in the darkness he could not see them distinctly, their sweet, young faces, their beautiful clear eyes and red lips. Then he straightened himself proudly up. The little town was not without all glory. Other communities could boast of other things, but he knew no place richer in flowers and in the enchanting fairness of its women.

Then the old man thought with new-born courage of his efforts. He need not fear for the future of the town. Such a town did not need to protect itself with strict laws.

He felt compassion on the unfortunate prisoners. He went and waked the justice of the peace, and talked with him. And the two were of one mind. They went together to the prison and set Petter Nord and his companions free.

And they did right. For the little town is like the Milo Aphrodite.

It has alluring beauty, and it lacks arms to hold fast.

III

I shall almost be compelled to leave reality, and turn to the world of saga and extravagance to be able to relate what now happened. If young Petter Nord had been Per, the Swineherd, with a gold crown under his hat, it would all have seemed simple and natural. But no one, of course, will believe me if I say that Petter Nord also wore a royal crown on his tow hair. No one can ever know how many wonderful things happen in that little town. No one can guess how many enchanted princesses are waiting there for the shepherd boy of adventure.

At first it looked as if there were to be no more adventures. For when Petter Nord had been set free by the old Mayor, and for the second time had to flee in shame and disgrace from the town, the same thoughts came over him as when he fled the first time. The polska tunes rang again suddenly in his ears, and loudest among them all sounded the old ring-dance.

Christmas time has come,
Christmas time has come,
And after Christmas time comes Easter.
That is not true at all,

That is not true at all,
For Lent comes after Christmas feasting.

And he saw distinctly the pallid Spirit of Fasting stealing about over the earth with her bundle of twigs on her arm. And she called to him: "Spendthrift, spendthrift! You have wished to celebrate the festival of revenge and reparation during the time of fasting, that is called life. Can you afford such extravagances, foolish one?"

Thereupon he had again sworn obedience and become the quiet and thrifty workman. He again stood peaceful and sensible at his work. No one could believe that it was he who had roared with rage and flung about the people in the street, as an elk at bay shakes off the dogs.

A few weeks later Halfvorson came to him at the machine-shop. He looked him up, at his niece's desire. She wished, if possible, to speak to him that same day.

Petter Nord began to shake and tremble when he saw Halfvorson. It was as if he had seen a slippery snake. He did not know which he wished most – to strike him or to run away from him; but he soon perceived that Halfvorson looked much troubled.

The tradesman looked as one does after having been out in a strong wind. The muscles of his face were drawn; his mouth was compressed; his eyes red and full of tears. He struggled visibly with some sorrow. The only thing in him that was the same was his voice. It was as inhumanly expressionless as ever.

"You need not be afraid of the old story nor of the new one either," said Halfvorson. "It is known that you were with those men who made all the trouble with us the other day. And as we supposed that they came from here, I could learn where you were. Edith is going to die soon," he continued, and his whole face twitched as if it would fall to pieces. "She wishes to speak to you before she dies. But we wish you no harm."

"Of course I shall come," said Petter Nord.

Soon they were both on board the steamer. Petter Nord was decked out in his fine Sunday clothes. Under his hat played and smiled all the dreams of his boyhood in a veritable kingly crown; they encircled his light hair. Edith's message made him quite dizzy. Had he not always thought that fine ladies would love him? And now here was one who wished to see him before she died. Most wonderful of all things wonderful! – He sat and thought of her as she had been formerly. How proud, how alive! And now she was going to die. He was in such sorrow for her sake. But that she had been thinking of him all these years! A warm, sweet melancholy came over him.

He was really there again, the old, mad Petter Nord. As soon as he approached the village the Spirit of Fasting went away from him with disgust and contempt.

Halfvorson could not keep still for a moment. The heavy gale, which he alone perceived, swept him forward and back on the deck. As he passed Petter, he murmured a few words, so that the latter could know by what paths his despairing thoughts wandered.

"They found her on the ground, half dead – blood everywhere about her," he said once. And another time: "Was she not good? Was she not beautiful? How could such things come to her?" And again: "She has made me good too. Could not see her sitting in sorrow all day long and ruining the account-book with her tears." Then this came: "A clever child, besides. Won her way with me. Made my home pleasant. Got me acquaintances among fine people. Understood what she was after, but could not resist her." He wandered away to the bow of the boat. When he came back he said: "I cannot bear to have her die."

He said it all with that helpless voice, which he could not subdue or control. Petter Nord had a proud feeling that such a man as he who wore a royal crown on his brow had no right to be angry with Halfvorson. The latter was separated from men by his infirmity, and could not win their love. Therefore he had to treat them all as enemies. He was not to be measured by the same standard as other people.

Petter Nord sank again into his dreams. *She* had remembered him all these years, and now she could not die before she had seen him. Oh, fancy that a young girl for all these years had been thinking of him, loving him, missing him!

As soon as they landed and reached the tradesman's house, he was taken to Edith, who was waiting for him in the arbor.

The happy Petter Nord woke from his dreams when he saw her. She was a fair vision, this girl, withering away in emulation with the rootless birches around her. Her big eyes had darkened and grown clearer. Her hands were so thin and transparent that one feared to touch them for their fragility.

And it was she who loved him. Of course he had to love her instantly in return, deeply, dearly, ardently! It was bliss, after so many years, to feel his heart glow at the sight of a fellow-being.

He had stopped motionless at the entrance of the arbor, while eyes, heart and brain worked most eagerly. When she saw how he stood and stared at her, she began to smile with that most despairing smile in the world, the smile of the very ill, that says: "See, this is what I have become, but do not count on me! I cannot be beautiful and charming any longer. I must die soon."

It brought him back to reality. He saw that he had to do not with a vision, but with a spirit which was about to spread its wings, and therefore had made the walls of its prison so delicate and transparent. It now showed so plainly in his face and in the way he took Edith's hand, that he all at once suffered with her suffering, – that he had forgotten everything but grief, that she was going to die. The sick girl felt the same pity for herself, and her eyes filled with tears.

Oh, what sympathy he felt for her from the first moment. He understood instantly that she would not wish to show her emotion. Of course it was agitating for her to see him, whom she had longed for so long, but it was her weakness that had made her betray herself. She naturally would not like him to pay any attention to it. And so he began on an innocent subject of conversation.

"Do you know what happened to my white mice?" he said.

She looked at him with admiration. He seemed to wish to make the way easier for her. "I let them loose in the shop," she said. "They have thriven well."

"No, really! Are there any of them left?"

"Halfvorson says that he will never be rid of Petter Nord's mice.

They have revenged you, you understand," she said with meaning.

"It was a very good race," answered Petter Nord, proudly.

The conversation lagged for a while. Edith closed her eyes, as if to rest, and he kept a respectful silence. His last answer she had not understood. He had not responded to what she had said about revenge. When he began to talk of the mice, she believed that he understood what she wished to say to him. She knew that he had come to the town a few weeks before to be revenged. Poor Petter Nord! Many a time she had wondered what had become of him. Many a night had the cries of the frightened boy come to her in dreams. It was partly for his sake that she should never again have to live through such a night, that she had begun to reform her uncle, had made his house a home for him, had let the lonely man feel the value of having a sympathetic friend near him. Her lot was now again bound together with that of Petter Nord. His attempt at revenge had frightened her to death. As soon as she had regained her strength after that severe attack, she had begged Halfvorson to look him up.

And Petter Nord sat there and believed that it was for love she had called him. He could not know that she believed him vindictive, coarse, degraded, a drunkard and a bully. He who was an example to all his comrades in the working quarter, he could not guess that she had summoned him, in order to preach virtue and good habits to him, in order to say to him, if nothing else helped: "Look at me, Petter Nord! It is your want of judgment, your vindictiveness, that is the cause of my death. Think of it, and begin another life!"

He had come filled with love of life and dreams to celebrate love's festival, and she lay there and thought of plunging him into the black depths of remorse.

There must have been something of the glory of the kingly crown shining on her, which made her hesitate so that she decided to question him first.

"But, Petter Nord, was it really you who were here with those three terrible men?"

He flushed and looked on the ground. Then he had to tell her the whole story of the day with all its shame. In the first place, what unmanliness he had shown in not sooner demanding justice, and how he had only gone because he was forced to it, and then how he had been beaten and whipped instead of beating some one himself. He did not dare to look up while he was speaking; he did expect that even those gentle eyes would judge him with forbearance. He felt that he was robbing himself of all the glory with which she must have surrounded him in her dreams.

"But Petter Nord, what would have happened if you had met Halfvorson?" asked Edith, when he had finished.

He hung his head even lower. "I saw him well enough," he said. "He had not gone away. He was working in his garden outside the gates. The boy in the shop told me everything."

"Well, why did you not avenge yourself?" said Edith.

He was spared nothing. – But he felt the inquiring glance of her eyes on him and he began obediently: "When the men lay down to sleep on a slope, I went alone to find Halfvorson, for I wished to have him to myself. He was working there, staking his peas. It must have rained in torrents the day before, for the peas had been broken down to the ground; some of the leaves were whipped to ribbons, others covered with earth. It was like a hospital, and Halfvorson was the doctor. He raised them up so gently, brushed away the earth and helped the poor little things to cling to the twigs. I stood and looked on. He did not hear me, and he had no time to look up. I tried to retain my anger by force. But what could I do? I could not fly at him while he was busy with the peas. My time will come afterwards, I thought.

"But then he started up, struck himself on the forehead and rushed away to the hotbed. He lifted the glass and looked in, and I looked too, for he seemed to be in the depths of despair. Yes, it was dreadful, of course. He had forgotten to shade it from the sun, and it must have been terribly hot under the glass. The cucumbers lay there half-dead and gasped for breath; some of the leaves were burnt, and others were drooping. I was so overcome, I too, that I never thought what I was doing, and Halfvorson caught sight of my shadow. 'Look here, take the watering-pot that is standing in the asparagus bed and run down to the river for water,' he said, without looking up. I suppose he thought it was the gardener's boy. And I ran."

"Did you, Petter Nord?"

"Yes; you see, the cucumbers ought not to suffer on account of our enmity. I thought myself that it showed lack of character and so on, but I could not help it. I wanted to see if they would come to life. When I came back, he had lifted the glass off and still stood and stared despairingly. I thrust the watering-pot into his hand, and he began to pour over them. Yes, it was almost visible what good it did in the hotbed. I thought almost that they raised themselves, and he must have thought so too, for he began to laugh. Then I ran away."

"You ran away, Petter Nord, you ran away?"

Edith had raised herself in the arm-chair.

"I could not strike him," said Petter Nord.

Edith felt an ever stronger impression of the glory round poor Petter Nord's head. So it was not necessary to plunge him into the depths of remorse with the heavy burden of sin around his neck. Was he such a man? Such a tender-hearted, sensitive man! She sank back, closed her eyes and thought. She did not need to say it to him. She was astonished that she felt such a relief not to have to cause him pain.

"I am so glad that you have given up your plans for revenge, Petter Nord," she began in friendly tones. "It was about that that I wished to talk to you. Now I can die in peace."

He drew along breath. She was not unfriendly.

She did not look as if she had been mistaken in him. She must love him very much when she could excuse such cowardice. – For when she said that she had sent for him to ask him to give up his thoughts of revenge, it must have been from bashfulness not to have to acknowledge the real reason of the summons. She was so right in it. He who was the man ought to say the first word.

"How can they let you die?" he burst out.

"Halfvorson and all the others, how can they? If I were here, I would refuse to let you die. I would give you all my strength. I would take all your suffering."

"I have no pain," she said, smiling at such bold promises.

"I am thinking that I would like to carry you away like a frozen bird, lay you under my vest like a young squirrel. Fancy what it would be to work if something so warm and soft was waiting for one at home! But if you were well, there would be so many – "

She looked at him with weary surprise, prepared to put him back in his proper place. But she must have seen again something of the magic crown about the boy's head, for she had patience with him. He meant nothing. He had to talk as he did. He was not like others.

"Ah," she said, indifferently, "there are not so many, Petter Nord.

There has hardly been any one in earnest."

But now there came another turn to his advantage. In her suddenly awoke the eager hunger of a sick person for compassion. She longed for the tenderness, the pity that the poor workman could give her. She felt the need of being near that deep, disinterested sympathy. The sick cannot have enough of it. She wished to read it in his glance and his whole being. Words meant nothing to her.

"I like to see you here," she said. "Sit here for a while, and tell me what you have been doing these six years!"

While he talked, she lay and drew in the indescribable something which passed between them. She heard and yet she did not hear. But by some strange sympathy she felt herself strengthened and vivified.

Nevertheless she did get one impression from his story. It took her into the workman's quarter, into a new world, full of tumultuous hopes and strength. How they longed and trusted! How they hated and suffered!

"How happy the oppressed are," she said.

It occurred to her, with a longing for life, that there might be something for her there, she who always needed oppression and compulsion to make life worth living.

"If I were well," she said, "perhaps I would have gone there with you. I should enjoy working my way up with some one I liked."

Petter Nord started. Here was the confession that he had been waiting for the whole time. "Oh, can you not live!" he prayed. And he beamed with happiness.

She became observant. "That is love," she said to herself. "And now he believes that I am also in love. What madness, that Värmland boy!"

She wished to bring him back to reason, but there was something in Petter Nord on that day of victory that restrained her. She had not the heart to spoil his happy mood. She felt compassion for his foolishness and let him live in it. "It does not matter, as I am to die so soon," she said to herself.

But she sent him away soon after, and when he asked if he might not come again, she forbade him absolutely. "But," she said, "do you remember our graveyard up on the hill, Petter Nord. You can come there in a few weeks and thank death for that day."

As Petter Nord came out of the garden, he met Halfvorson. He was walking forward and back in despair, and his only consolation was the thought that Edith was laying the burden of remorse on the wrong-doer. To see him overpowered by pangs of conscience, for that alone had he sought him out. But when he met the young workman, he saw that Edith had not told him everything. He was serious, but at the same time he certainly was madly happy.

"Has Edith told you why she is dying?" said Halfvorson.

"No," answered Petter Nord.

Halfvorson laid his hand on his shoulder as if to keep him from escaping.

"She is dying because of you, because of your damned pranks. She was slightly ill before, but it was nothing. No one thought that she would die; but then you came with those three wretched tramps, and they frightened her while you were in my shop. They chased her, and she ran away from them, ran till she got a hemorrhage. But that is what you wanted; you wished to be revenged on me by killing her, wished to leave me lonely and unhappy without a soul near me who cares for me. All my joy you wished to take from me, all my joy."

He would have gone on forever, overwhelmed Petter Nord with reproaches, killed him with curses; but the latter tore himself away and ran, as if an earthquake had shaken the town and all the houses were tumbling down.

IV

Behind the town the mountain walls rise perpendicularly, but after one has climbed up them by steep stone steps and slippery pine paths, one finds that the mountain spreads out into a wide, undulating plateau. And there lies an enchanted wood.

Over the whole stretch of the mountain stands a pine wood without pine-needles; a wood which dies in the spring and grows green in the autumn; a lifeless wood, which blossoms with the joy of life when other trees are laying aside their green garments; a wood that grows without any one knowing how, that stands green in winter frosts and brown in summer dews.

It is a newly-planted wood. Young firs have been forced to take root in the clefts between the granite blocks. Their tough roots have bored down like sharp wedges into the fissures and crevices. It was very well for a while; the young trees shot up like spires, and the roots bored down into the granite. But at last they could go no further, and then the wood was filled with an ill-concealed peevishness. It wished to go high, but also deep. After the way down had been closed to it, it felt that life was not worth living. Every spring it was ready to throw off the burden of life in its discouragement. During the summer when Edith was dying, the young wood was quite brown. High above the town of flowers stood a gloomy row of dying trees.

But up on the mountain it is not all gloom and the agony of death. As one walks between the brown trees, in such distress that one is ready to die, one catches glimpses of green trees. The perfume of flowers fills the air; the song of birds exults and calls. Then thoughts rise of the sleeping forest and of the paradise of the fairy-tale, encircled by thorny thickets. And when one comes at last to the green, to the flower fragrance, to the song of the birds, one sees that it is the hidden graveyard of the little town.

The home of the dead lies in an earth-filled hollow in the mountain plateau. And there, within the grey stone walls, the knowledge and weariness of life end. Lilacs stand at the entrance, bending under heavy clusters. Lindens and beeches spread a lofty arch of luxuriant growth over the whole place. Jasmines and roses blossom freely in that consecrated earth. Over the big old tombstones creep vines of ivy and periwinkle.

There is a corner where the pine-trees grow mast-high. Does it not seem as if the young wood outside ought to be ashamed at the sight of them? And there are hedges there, quite grown beyond their keeper's hands, blooming and sending forth shoots without thought of shears or knife.

The town now has a new burial-place, to which the dead can come without special trouble. It was a weary way for them to be carried up in winter, when the steep wood-paths are covered with ice, and the steps slippery and covered with snow. The coffin creaked; the bearers panted; the old clergyman leaned heavily on the sexton and the grave-digger. Now no one has to be buried up there who does not ask it.

The graves are not beautiful. There are few who know how to make the resting-place of the dead attractive. But the fresh green sheds its peace and beauty over them all. It is strangely solemn to know that those who are buried are glad to lie there. The living who go up after a day hot with work, go there as among friends. Those who sleep have also loved the lofty trees and the stillness.

If a stranger comes up there, they do not tell him of death and loss; they sit down on the big slabs of stone, on the broad burgomaster tombs, and tell him about Petter Nord, the Värmland boy, and of his love. The story seems fitting to be told up here, where death has lost its terrors. The consecrated earth seems to rejoice at having also been the scene of awakened happiness and new-born life.

For it happened that after Petter Nord ran away from Halfvorson, he sought refuge in the graveyard.

At first he ran towards the bridge over the river and turned his steps towards the big town. But on the bridge the unfortunate fugitive stopped. The kingly crown on his brow was quite gone. It had disappeared as if it had been spun of sunbeams. He was deeply bent with sorrow; his whole body shook; his heart throbbed; his brain burned like fire.

Then he thought he saw the Spirit of Fasting coming towards him for the third time. She was much more friendly, much more compassionate than before; but she seemed to him only so much the more terrible.

"Alas, unhappy one," she said, "surely this must be the last of your pranks! You have wished to celebrate the festival of love during that time of fasting which is called life; but you see what happens to you. Come now and be faithful to me; you have tried everything and have only me to whom to turn."

He waved his arm to keep her off. "I know what you wish of me. You wish to lead me back to work and renunciation, but I cannot. Not now, not now!"

The pallid Spirit of Fasting smiled ever more mildly. "You are innocent, Petter Nord. Do not grieve so over what you have not caused! Was not Edith kind to you? Did you not see that she had forgiven you? Come with me to your work! Live, as you have lived!"

The boy cried more vehemently. "Is it any better for me, do you think, that I have killed just her who has been kind to me, her, who cares for me? Had it not been better if I had murdered some one whom I wished to murder. I must make amends. I must save her life. I cannot think of work now."

"Oh, you madman," said the Spirit of Fasting, "the festival of reparation which you wish to celebrate is the greatest audacity of all."

Then Petter Nord rebelled absolutely against his friend of many years. He scoffed at her. "What have you made me believe?" he said. "That you were a tiresome and peevish old woman with arms full of small, harmless twigs. You are a sorceress of life. You are a monster. You are beautiful, and you are terrible. You yourself know no bounds nor limits; why should I know them? How can you preach fasting, you, who wish to deluge me with such an overmeasure of sorrow? What are the festivals I have celebrated compared to those you are continually preparing for me! Begone with your pallid moderation! Now I wish to be as mad as yourself."

Not one step could he take towards the big town. Neither could he turn directly round and again go the length of the one street in the village; he took the path up the mountain, climbed to the enchanted pine-wood, and wandered about among the stiff, prickly young trees, until a friendly path led him to the graveyard. There he found a hiding-place in a corner where the pines grew high as masts, and there he threw himself weary unto death on the ground.

He almost lost consciousness. He did not know if time passed or if everything stood still. But after a while steps were heard, and he woke to a feeble consciousness. He seemed to have been far, far away. He saw a funeral procession draw near, and instantly a confused thought rose in him. How long had he lain there? Was Edith dead already? Was she looking for him here? Was the corpse in the coffin hunting for its murderer? He shook and sweated. He lay well hidden in the dark pine thicket; but he trembled for what might happen if the corpse found him. He bent aside the branches and looked out. A hunted deserter could not have spied more wildly after his pursuers.

The funeral was that of a poor man. The attendance was small. The coffin was lowered without wreaths into the grave. There was no sign of tears on any of the faces. Petter Nord had still enough sense to see that this could not be Edith Halfvorson's funeral train.

But if this was not she, who knows if it was not a greeting from her. Petter Nord felt that he had no right to escape. She had said that he was to go up to the graveyard. She must have meant that he was to wait for her there, so that she could find him to give him his punishment. The funeral was a greeting, a token. She wished him to wait for her there.

To his sick brain the low churchyard wall rose as high as a rampart. He stared despairingly at the frail trellis-gate; it was like the most solid door of oak. He was imprisoned. He could never get away, until she herself came up and brought him his punishment.

What she was going to do with him he did not know. Only one thing was distinct and clear; that he must wait here until she came for him. Perhaps she would take him with her into the grave; perhaps she would command him to throw himself from the mountain. He could not know – he must wait for a while yet.

Reason fought a despairing struggle: "You are innocent, Petter Nord. Do not grieve over what you have not caused! She has not sent you any messages. Go down to your work! Lift your foot and you are over the wall; push with one finger and the gate is open."

No, he could not. Most of the time he was in a stupor, a trance. His thoughts were indistinct, as when on the point of falling asleep. He only knew one thing, that he must stay where he was.

The news came to her lying and fading in emulation with the rootless birches. "Petter Nord, with whom you played one summer day, is in the graveyard waiting for you. Petter Nord, whom your uncle has frightened out of his senses, cannot leave the graveyard until your flower-decked coffin comes to fetch him."

The girl opened her eyes as if to look at the world once more. She sent a message to Petter Nord. She was angry at his mad pranks. Why could she not die in peace? She had never wished that he should have any pangs of conscience for her sake.

The bearer of the message came back without Petter Nord. He could not come. The wall was too high and the gate too strong. There was only one who could free him.

During those days they thought of nothing else in the little town. "He is there; he is there still," they told one another every day. "Is he mad?" they asked most often, and some who had talked with him answered that he certainly would be when "she" came. But they were exceedingly proud of that martyr to love who gave a glory to the town. The poor took him food. The rich stole up on the mountain to catch a glimpse of him.

But Edith, who could not move, who lay helpless and dying, she who had so much time to think, with what was she occupying herself? What thoughts revolved in her brain day and night? Oh, Petter Nord, Petter Nord! Must she always see before her the man who loved her, who was losing his mind for her sake, who really, actually was in the graveyard waiting for her coffin.

See, that was something for the steel-spring in her nature. That was something for her imagination, something for her benumbed senses. To think what he meant to do when she should come! To imagine what he would do if she should not come there as a corpse!

They talked of it in the whole town, talked of it and nothing else. As the cities of ancient times had loved their martyrs, the little village loved the unhappy Petter Nord; but no one liked to go into the graveyard and talk to him. He looked wilder each day. The obscurity of madness sank ever closer about him. "Why does she not try to get well?" they said of Edith. "It is unjust of her to die."

Edith was almost angry. She who was so tired of life, must she be compelled to take up the heavy burden again? But nevertheless she began an honest effort. She felt what a work of repairing and mending was going on in her body with seething force during these weeks. And no material was spared. She consumed incredible quantities of those things which give strength and life, whatever they may be: malt extract or codliver oil, fresh air or sunshine, dreams or love.

And what glorious days they were, long, warm, and sunny!

At last she got the doctor's permission to be carried up there. The whole town was in alarm when she undertook the journey. Would she come down with a madman? Could the misery of those weeks be blotted out of his brain? Would the exertions she had made to begin life again be profitless? And if it were so, how would it go with her?

As she passed by, pale with excitement, but still full of hope, there was cause enough for anxiety. No one concealed from themselves that Petter Nord had taken quite too large a place in her imagination. She was the most eager of all in the worship of that strange saint. All restraints had fallen from her when she had heard what he suffered for her sake. But how would the sight of him affect her enthusiasm? There is nothing romantic in a madman.

When she had been carried up to the gate of the graveyard, she left her bearers and walked alone up the broad middle path. Her gaze wandered round the flowering spot, but she saw no one.

Suddenly she heard a faint rustle in a clump of fir-trees, and she saw a wild, distorted face staring from it. Never had she seen terror so plainly stamped on a face. She was frightened herself at the sight of it, mortally frightened. She could hardly restrain herself from running away.

Then a great, holy feeling welled up in her. There was no longer any thought of love or enthusiasm, but only grief that a fellow-being, one of the unhappy ones who passed through the vale of tears with her, should be destroyed.

The girl remained. She did not give way a single step; she let him slowly accustom himself to the sight of her. But she put all the strength she possessed in her gaze. She drew the man to her with the whole force of the will that had conquered the illness in herself.

He came forward out of his corner, pale, wild and unkempt. He advanced towards her, but the terror never left his face. He looked as if he were fascinated by a wild beast, which came to tear him to pieces. When he was quite close to her, she put both her hands on his shoulders and looked smiling into his face.

"Come, Petter Nord, what is the matter with you? You must go from here! What do you mean by staying so long up here in the graveyard, Petter Nord?"

He trembled and sank down. But she felt that she subdued him with her eyes. Her words, on the other hand, seemed to have absolutely no meaning to him.

She changed her tone a little. "Listen to what I say, Petter Nord. I am not dead. I am not going to die. I have got well in order to come up here and save you."

He still stood in the same dull terror. Again there came a change in her voice. "You have not caused my death," she said more tenderly, "you have given me life."

She repeated it again and again. And her voice at last was trembling with emotion, thick with weeping. But he did not understand anything of what she said.

"Petter Nord, I love you so much, so much!" she burst out.

He was just as unmoved.

She knew nothing more to try with him. She would have to take him down with her to the town and let time and care help.

It is not easy to say what the dreams she had taken up there with her were and what she had expected from this meeting with the man who loved her. Now, when she was to give it all up and treat him as a madman only, she felt such pain, as if she was about to lose the dearest thing life had given her. And in that bitterness of loss she drew him to her and kissed him on the forehead.

It was meant as a farewell to both happiness and life. She felt her strength fail her. A mortal weakness came over her.

But then she thought she saw a feeble sign of life in him. He was not quite so limp and dull. His features were twitching. He trembled more and more violently. She watched with ever-growing alarm. He was waking, but to what? At last he began to weep.

She led him away to a tomb. She sat down on it, pulled him down in front of her and laid his head on her lap. She sat and caressed him, while he wept.

He was like some one waking from a nightmare.

"Why am I weeping?" he asked himself. "Oh, I know; I had such a terrible dream. But it is not true. She is alive. I have not killed her. So foolish to weep for a dream."

Gradually everything grew clear to him; but his tears continued to flow. She sat and caressed him, but he wept still for a long time.

"I feel such a need of weeping," he said.

Then he looked up and smiled. "Is it Easter now?" he asked.

"What do you mean by now?"

"It can be called Easter, when the dead rise again," he continued. Thereupon, as if they had been intimate many years, he began to tell her about the Spirit of Fasting and of his revolt against her rule.

"It is Easter now, and the end of her reign," she said.

But when he realized that Edith was sitting there and caressing him, he had to weep again. He needed so much to weep. All the distrust of life which misfortunes had brought to the little Värmland boy needed tears to wash it away. Distrust that love and joy, beauty and strength blossomed on the earth, distrust in himself, all must go, all did go, for it was Easter; the dead lived and the Spirit of Fasting would never again *come into power*.

THE LEGEND OF THE BIRD'S NEST

Hatto the hermit stood in the wilderness and prayed to God. A storm was raging, and his long beard and matted hair waved about him like weather-beaten tufts of grass on the summit of an old ruin. But he did not push his hair out of his eyes, nor did he tuck his beard into his belt, for his arms were uplifted in prayer. Ever since sunrise he had raised his gnarled, hairy arms towards heaven, as untiringly as a tree stretches up its branches, and he meant to remain standing so till night. He had a great boon to pray for.

He was a man who had suffered much of the world's anger. He had himself persecuted and tortured, and persecutions and torture from others had fallen to his share, more than his heart could bear. So he went out on the great heath, dug himself a hole in the river bank and became a holy man, whose prayers were heard at God's throne.

Hatto the hermit stood there on the river bank by his hole and prayed the great prayer of his life. He prayed God that He should appoint the day of doom for this wicked world. He called on the trumpet-blowing angels, who were to proclaim the end of the reign of sin. He cried out to the waves of the sea of blood, which were to drown the unrighteous. He called on the pestilence, which should fill the churchyards with heaps of dead.

Round about stretched a desert plain. But a little higher up on the river bank stood an old willow with a short trunk, which swelled out at the top in a great knob like a head, from which new, light-green shoots grew out. Every autumn it was robbed of these strong, young branches by the inhabitants of that fuel-less heath. Every spring the tree put forth new, soft shoots, and in stormy weather these waved and fluttered about it, just as hair and beard fluttered about Hatto the hermit.

A pair of wagtails, which used to make their nest in the top of the willow's trunk among the sprouting branches, had intended to begin their building that very day. But among the whipping shoots the birds found no quiet. They came flying with straws and root fibres and dried sedges, but they had to turn back with their errand unaccomplished. Just then they noticed old Hatto, who called upon God to make the storm seven times more violent, so that the nests of the little birds might be swept away and the eagle's eyrie destroyed.

Of course no one now living can conceive how mossy and dried-up and gnarled and black and unlike a human being such an old plain-dweller could be. The skin was so drawn over brow and cheeks, that he looked almost like a death's-head, and one saw only by a faint gleam in the hollows of the eye sockets that he was alive. And the dried-up muscles of the body gave it no roundness, and the upstretched, naked arms consisted only of shapeless bones, covered with shrivelled, hardened, bark-like skin. He wore an old, close-fitting, black robe. He was tanned by the sun and black with dirt. His hair and beard alone were light, bleached by the rain and sun, until they had become the same green-gray color as the under side of the willow leaves.

The birds, flying about, looking for a place to build, took Hatto the hermit for another old willow-tree, checked in its struggle towards the sky by axe and saw like the first one. They circled about him many times, flew away and came again, took their landmarks, considered his position in regard to birds of prey and winds, found him rather unsatisfactory, but nevertheless decided in his favor, because he stood so near to the river and to the tufts of sedge, their larder and storehouse. One of them shot swift as an arrow down into his upstretched hand and laid his root fibre there.

There was a lull in the storm, so that the root-fibre was not torn instantly away from the hand; but in the hermit's prayers there was no pause: "May the Lord come soon to destroy this world of corruption, so that man may not have time to heap more sin upon himself! May he save the unborn from life! For the living there is no salvation."

Then the storm began again, and the little root-fibre fluttered away out of the hermit's big gnarled hand. But the birds came again and tried to wedge the foundation of the new home in between

the fingers. Suddenly a shapeless and dirty thumb laid itself on the straws and held them fast, and four fingers arched themselves so that there was a quiet niche to build in. The hermit continued his prayers.

"Oh Lord, where are the clouds of fire which laid Sodom waste? When wilt Thou let loose the floods which lifted the ark to Ararat's top? Are not the cups of Thy patience emptied and the vials of Thy grace exhausted? Oh Lord, when wilt Thou rend the heavens and come?"

And feverish visions of the Day of Doom appeared to Hatto the hermit. The ground trembled, the heavens glowed. Across the flaming sky he saw black clouds of flying birds, a horde of panic-stricken beasts rushed, roaring and bellowing, past him. But while his soul was occupied with these fiery visions, his eyes began to follow the flight of the little birds, as they flashed to and fro and with a cheery peep of satisfaction wove a new straw into the nest.

The old man had no thought of moving. He had made a vow to pray without moving with uplifted hands all day in order to force the Lord to grant his request. The more exhausted his body became, the more vivid visions filled his brain. He heard the walls of cities fall and the houses crack. Shrieking, terrified crowds rushed by him, pursued by the angels of vengeance and destruction, mighty forms with stern, beautiful faces, wearing silver coats of mail, riding black horses and swinging scourges, woven of white lightning.

The little wagtails built and shaped busily all day, and the work progressed rapidly. On the tufted heath with its stiff sedges and by the river with its reeds and rushes, there was no lack of building material. They had no time for noon siesta nor for evening rest. Glowing with eagerness and delight, they flew to and fro, and before night came they had almost reached the roof.

But before night came, the hermit had begun to watch them more and more. He followed them on their journeys; he scolded them when they built foolishly; he was furious when the wind disturbed their work; and least of all could he endure that they should take any rest.

Then the sun set, and the birds went to their old sleeping place in among the rushes.

Let him who crosses the heath at night bend clown until his face comes on a level with the tufts of grass, and he will see a strange spectacle outline itself against the western sky. Owls with great, round wings skim over the ground, invisible to any one standing upright. Snakes glide about there, lithe, quick, with narrow heads uplifted on swanlike necks. Great turtles crawl slowly forward, hares and water-rats flee before preying beasts, and a fox bounds after a bat, which is chasing mosquitos by the river. It seems as if every tuft has come to life. But through it all the little birds sleep on the waving rushes, secure from all harm in that resting-place which no enemy can approach, without the water splashing or the reeds shaking and waking them.

When the morning came, the wagtails believed at first that the events of the day before had been a beautiful dream.

They had taken their landmarks and flew straight to their nest, but it was gone. They flew searching over the heath and rose up into the air to spy about. There was not a trace of nest or tree. At last they lighted on a couple of stones by the river bank and considered. They wagged their long tails and cocked their heads on one side. Where had the tree and nest gone?

But hardly had the sun risen a handsbreadth over the belt of trees on the other bank, before their tree came walking and placed itself on the same spot where it had been the day before. It was just as black and gnarled as ever and bore their nest on the top of something, which must be a dry, upright branch.

Then the wagtails began to build again, without troubling themselves any more about nature's many wonders.

Hatto the hermit, who drove the little children away from his hole telling them that it had been best for them if they had never been born, he who rushed out into the mud to hurl curses after the joyous young people who rowed up the stream in pleasure-boats, he from whose angry eyes the shepherds on the heath guarded their flocks, did not return to his place by the river for the sake of the little birds. He knew that not only has every letter in the holy books its hidden, mysterious meaning,

but so also has everything which God allows to take place in nature. He had thought out the meaning of the wagtails building in his hand. God wished him to remain standing with uplifted arms until the birds had raised their brood; and if he should have the power to do that, he would be heard.

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