

Something

Hans Christian Andersen

"I'm going to be something!" said the eldest of five brothers. "I'm going to be useful in the world, however humble a position I hold; if that which I'm doing is useful, that will be Something. I'll make bricks; people can't do without bricks, so at least I'll do Something."

"But something very unimportant," said the second brother. "What you'd be doing would be as good as nothing! That's a laborer's job and can be done by a machine. No, you'd better become a mason; that's really Something, and that's what I'm going to be. That is a position! Then you belong to a guild and become a citizen, have a banner of your own and your own quarters at the inn. Yes, and if things come out well I may get to be a master, and have workmen under me, and my wife will be known as the master's wife. That will be Something!"

"That's nothing at all," said the third. "Just think how many different classes there are in a town far above a master mason. You may be an honest man, but even as a master you'll only be what is called 'common.' No, I know Something better than that. I'll be an architect, will live among the thinkers, the artists; I'll raise myself up to the intellectual aristocracy. Of course, I may have to begin at the bottom; yes, I might as well say it - I will have to start as a carpenter's boy, wearing a cap, though I'm used to wearing a silk hat, and to fetch beer and spirits for the simple workmen, and listen to their insults. Of course, that's irritating, but I'll try to pretend it's only a masquerade. 'Tomorrow,' I'll say, 'when I'm a journeyman, I'll be on my own course, and I'll have nothing to do with the others.' Yes, I'll go to the academy, learn to draw, and get to be an architect. That is Something! That's a whole lot! I may even get a title - yes, have one placed before or after my name; and I shall build and build, as others have done before me. Yes, that's Something one can rely on; it's Something wholly worth while."

"But Something that I care nothing about," said the fourth. "I shouldn't care to travel on and on in the beaten track, to be only a copyist. I want to be a genius, cleverer than all of you put together. I want to create a new style, provide the idea for a building suitable to the climate and materials of our country, our national character, and the development of our age; besides, I want to build an extra floor for my own genius!"

"But suppose the climate and materials aren't good," said the fifth. "That will be very unfortunate, since they are of vital importance. As for our national character, to represent that in architecture would be sheer affectation, while the requirements of modern times may cause you to run wild, as youth frequently does. I can see that none of you will ever amount to anything, however much you yourselves think you will. But do as you like; I won't be like you. I shall consider what you do; there's something ridiculous in everything; I'll discover it, and it will be my business to expose it - that will be Something!"

He did as he promised; and people said of this fifth brother, "There's Something in him, certainly; he has plenty of brains, but he doesn't do anything!" But it was just that which made him Something.

This is only a little story, and yet as long as the world exists it will have no end.

But, then, did nothing more become of the five brothers? Listen further now, and you will hear the whole story.

The eldest brother, the brickmaker, found that every brick he made brought him in a small copper coin. It was only copper, but enough of these small copper coins added together could be changed into a bright dollar, and wherever he knocked with this - at the butcher's, the baker's, or the tailor's, yes, everywhere - the door flew open, and he was given what

he wanted.

That was the virtue of his bricks. Of course, some of them crumbled or broke in two, but a use was found even for them. You see, old Mother Margaret wanted so much to build herself a little house up by the dike; so all the broken bricks were given to her, and even a few whole ones too, for though he was only a brickmaker, the eldest brother had a generous heart. The poor woman built her house with her own hands; it was very narrow; its one window was all lopsided; the door was too low, and the thatching might have been laid on the roof more skillfully, but it gave her shelter and a home and could be seen from far out at sea. The sea in all its power sometimes broke over the dike and sprinkled a salty shower over the little house, which still stood there years after he who made its bricks was dead and gone.

As for the second brother - yes, he could now build in a different fashion, as he had decided to learn. When he had served his apprenticeship, he buckled on his knapsack and started out on his travels, singing as he went. When he came back to his home town, he became a master mason there and built house after house, a whole street of houses. There they stood, looking very handsome and giving an air of dignity to the town; and these houses soon built him a little house for himself. But how can houses build a house? If you ask the houses they will give you no answer, but the people will reply, "Why, of course, the street built him his house!" It was not very large, and had only a clay floor, but when he and his young bride danced over it that floor became as smooth as if it had been polished, and from every stone in the wall sprung a flower, gay as the costliest tapestry. It was a charming house, and they were indeed a happily married couple. The banner of the Masons' Guild waved gaily outside, and workmen and apprentices shouted, "Hurray!" Yes indeed, that was Something! And at last he died - and that was Something, too!

Next comes the third brother, the architect. He had begun as a carpenter's apprentice, wearing a cap and running errands all over town; but from the academy, he had steadily risen to become a builder. If the street of houses had built a house for his brother the mason, the street took its very name from the architect; his was the handsomest house in the whole street - that was Something, and he was Something with a long title before and after his name. His children could boast of their "birth"; and when he died his widow was a lady of standing - that is Something - and his name was on the corner of the street as well as on everybody's lips - that is Something indeed!

Then comes the fourth brother, the genius who had wanted to invent something new and original and have an extra floor on top of that. But that floor gave way once beneath his feet, so that he fell and broke his neck. However, he had a splendid funeral, with music and banners, and flowery obituaries in the newspapers. Three eulogies were spoken over him, one longer than the other, and that would have pleased him, for he had so loved being talked about. Then a monument was erected over his grave - only one story high, but still that is Something!

So now he was dead, along with his three elder brothers. The youngest one, the critic, outlived them all, and that was quite proper, for it gave him the last word, which to him was a matter of great importance. "He has a good head on him," people said. But at last his hour came, too; he died, and his soul went to the gates of heaven. Souls always enter in couples, so there he stood beside another soul, old Mother Margaret from the house by the dike.

"I suppose it is for the sake of contrast that I and this miserable soul should come here at the same time," said the critic. "Well, now, my good woman," he asked, "who are you? Do you also want to go in there?"

The old woman curtsied as well as she could, thinking it was Saint Peter himself who spoke to her. "I am just a poor old soul with no family. Just old Margaret from the house near the dike."

"I see. And what have you done down below?"

"I have done really nothing in the world, nothing at all to warrant my being admitted here. It will be God's mercy, indeed, if I am allowed to pass through this gate."

It bored the critic to stand there waiting, so he felt he must talk about something. "And how did you leave the world?" he asked carelessly.

"How did I leave it? Well, I hardly know how; I was sick and miserable indeed in the last few years, and could hardly bear to creep out of bed at all in the cold and frosty weather. It has been a hard winter, but that's all past now. For a few days, as your reverence must know, the wind was quite still, but it was bitterly cold; the ice covered the water as far as you could see. Everybody in town was out on the ice, where there was what they called ski racing, and dancing, I think, with music, and entertainment. I could hear it where I lay in my poor room. And along toward evening the moon came up, but it still wasn't very bright. From my bed I looked through the window and saw a strange white cloud rising up over the sea. I lay there and watched it, watched the black spot in it grow bigger and bigger, and then I knew what it meant; you don't see that sign very often, but I was old and experienced. I knew it, and horror crept over me. Just twice before in my life had I seen that sign, and I knew it meant there would be a terrible storm and a flash flood; it would burst over the poor people who were drinking and dancing and making merry, out there on the ice. Young and old, the whole town was there; who could warn them, if no one saw the cloud or could recognize it as I could? I felt so terrified that it gave me more strength than I'd had in many years. I felt alive all over. I got out of bed and managed to get over to the window; I couldn't drag myself any farther, but I did get the window open; I could see the people dancing on the ice and the gaily colored flags, I could hear the boys shouting and the young men and women singing; all were so merry. But that white cloud with its black spot rose higher and higher. I screamed as loudly as I could, but they were all too far away to hear me. Soon the storm would break loose; the ice would be smashed into pieces, and all the people would be drowned! They could not hear me; I wasn't able to get out to them; how could I get them onto land? Then our Lord sent me the idea of setting fire to my bed; it would be better for my house to be burned to the ground than for so many people to meet a miserable death. So I made a light, and saw the red flame leap up! Somehow I got out of the door, but then I fell and lay there, for I could not rise again. But the flames burst out through the window and the roof; the people down below saw it and all ran as fast as they could to help me, the poor old woman they were afraid would be burned; there was not one who didn't come to my aid. I heard them come, but then, too, I heard a sudden roaring in the air, and then a thundering like the shots of heavy cannons; the flood was breaking up the ice, and it was all crumbling to pieces. However, the people had all come off the ice to the trenches, where the sparks were flying about me; I had saved all of them. But I couldn't stand the cold and the fright, and so I came up here to the gates of heaven. Do you think they can be opened to such a wretched old creature as I? I have no little house now by the dike, though I guess that fact will not gain me admission here.

Then the heavenly gates opened, and the Angel bade poor old Margaret to enter. As she crossed the threshold she dropped a straw, one of the straws from the bed she had set afire to save the people on the ice, and lo! it changed into the purest gold - gold that grew and twisted itself into the most beautiful shapes!

"See, this was brought by the poor woman," said the Angel. "Now what do you bring? Yes, I know full well that you have made nothing, not even bricks. If only you could go back and return here with at least one brick, not that it would be good for anything when you had made it, but because anything, the very last thing, if done with a kindly heart, is Something. But you cannot return, and I can do nothing for you."

Then the poor soul, the old woman from the hut by the dike, spoke up for him. "His brother gave me all the bricks and broken pieces I used to build my miserable shack - that was

great generosity to a poor old soul like me. Cannot all those bits and pieces, put together, be considered one brick for him? It would be an act of mercy; he needs mercy, and this is the very home of mercy."

"Your brother, he whom you called the humblest," said the Angel, "he whose honest labor seemed to you the lowliest, sends you this heavenly gift. You shall not be turned away, but shall be permitted to stand here outside and consider your manner of life below. But you shall not enter, not before you have done a good deed and thereby accomplished - Something!"

"I could have said that much better," thought the critic, but he didn't say it out loud. And for him that was already - Something!