

Pelle the Conqueror

by Martin Andersen Nexö

Translated from the Danish by Jessie Muir and
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NOTE

When the first part of “Pelle Erobreren” (Pelle the Conqueror) appeared in 1906, its author, Martin Andersen Nexö, was practically unknown even in his native country, save to a few literary people who knew that he had written some volumes of stories and a book full of sunshiny reminiscences from Spain. And even now, after his great success with “Pelle,” very little is known about the writer. He was born in 1869 in one of the poorest quarters of Copenhagen, but spent his boyhood in his beloved island Bornholm, in the Baltic, in or near the town, Nexö, from which his final name is derived. There, too, he was a shoemaker’s apprentice, like Pelle in the second part of the book, which resembles many great novels in being largely autobiographical. Later, he gained his livelihood as a bricklayer, until he somehow managed to get to one of the most renowned of our “people’s high-schools,” where he studied so effectually that he was enabled to become a teacher, first at a provincial school, and later in Copenhagen.

“Pelle” consists of four parts, each, except perhaps the last, a complete story in itself. First we have the open-air life of the boy in country surroundings in Bornholm; then the lad’s apprenticeship in a small provincial town not yet invaded by modern industrialism and still innocent of socialism; next the youth’s struggles in Copenhagen against employers and authorities; and last the man’s final victory in laying the foundation of a garden-city for the benefit of his fellow-workers. The background everywhere is the rapid growth of the labor movement; but social problems are never

obtruded, except, again, in the last part, and the purely human interest is always kept well before the reader's eye through variety of situation and vividness of characterization. The great charm of the book seems to me to lie in the fact that the writer knows the poor from within; he has not studied them as an outsider may, but has lived with them and felt with them, at once a participant and a keen-eyed spectator. He is no sentimentalist, and so rich is his imagination that he passes on rapidly from one scene to the next, sketching often in a few pages what another novelist would be content to work out into long chapters or whole volumes. His sympathy is of the widest, and he makes us see tragedies behind the little comedies, and comedies behind the little tragedies, of the seemingly sordid lives of the working people whom he loves. "Pelle" has conquered the hearts of the reading public of Denmark; there is that in the book which should conquer also the hearts of a wider public than that of the little country in which its author was born.

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Professor of English in the University of Copenhagen.
GENTOFTE, COPENHAGEN.
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Pelle the Conqueror

I. BOYHOOD

I

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

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

A shout came vibrating in from the harbor, and a little while after the heavy sound of oars working over the edge of a boat. The sound grew more distant and at last ceased; but then a bell began to ring—it must have been at the end of the mole—and out of the distance, into which the beat of the oars had disappeared, came the answering sound of a horn. They continued to answer one another for a couple of minutes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fishermen looked backward and forward at one another, taking mute counsel.

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

“What ‘she’?”

“The steamer, of course. And she generally comes about this time. Now you’ve got it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, you see we’re expecting the steamer from Ystad today, with a big cargo of slaves—cheap Swedish laborers, that’s to say, who live on black bread and salt herrings, and do the work of three. They ought to be flogged with red-hot icicles, that sort, and the brutes of farmers, too! You won’t take a little early morning glass of something, I suppose?”

“No, thank you, I think not—so early.”

“Very well, please yourself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The farmers were out of it all. They dozed a little or sat flicking their whips to pass the time. But every one else was in a state of suspense. A number of people had gradually gathered about the harbor—fishermen, sailors waiting to be hired, and master-artisans who were too restless to stay in their workshop. They came down in their leather aprons, and began at once to discuss the situation; they used nautical expressions, most of them having been at sea in their youth. The coming of the steamer was always an event that brought people to the harbor; but to-day she had a great many people on board, and she was already an hour behind time. The dangerous fog kept the suspense at high pressure; but as the time

passed, the excitement gave place to a feeling of dull oppression. Fog is the seaman's worst enemy, and there were many unpleasant possibilities. On the best supposition the ship had gone inshore too far north or south, and now lay somewhere out at sea hooting and heaving the lead, without daring to move. One could imagine the captain storming and the sailors hurrying here and there, lithe and agile as cats. Stop!—Half-speed ahead! Stop!—Half-speed astern! The first engineer would be at the engine himself, gray with nervous excitement. Down in the engine-room, where they knew nothing at all, they would strain their ears painfully for any sound, and all to no purpose. But up on deck every man would be on the alert for his life; the helmsman wet with the sweat of his anxiety to watch every movement of the captain's directing hand, and the look-out on the fore-castle peering and listening into the fog until he could hear his own heart beat, while the suspense held every man on deck on tenterhooks, and the fog-horn hooted its warning. But perhaps the ship had already gone to the bottom!

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

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

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