

Ib and Little Christine

Not far from the Guden River, a mountain ridge runs through the Silkeborg Forest, like a great embankment. At its foot, on the western side, stood, and still stands, a peasant cottage. The soil here is poor; sand shines through the sparse rye and barley. That was many years ago. The owners of the cottage cultivated a small field, kept three sheep, a pig, and two oxen—in short, they scraped by somehow; if there was something, good, if not, don't ask! They could have kept a couple of horses too, but they said, like other peasants there:

"A horse eats itself up—if it gives anything, it takes just as much!"

Jeppe Jens worked in the fields in summer and diligently carved wooden clogs in winter. He also had an assistant, a young lad who knew how to make such clogs that they were sturdy, light, and stylish. Besides clogs, they also carved spoons and earned quite a bit of money, so Jeppe Jens and his wife could not be called poor people.

Their only little son, seven-year-old Ib, watching his father, also carved some wood shavings; of course, he cut his fingers while doing so, but finally he carved out of two stubs something like tiny wooden shoes—"as a gift for Little Christine," he said. Little Christine, the barge-man's daughter, was so pretty and delicate, like a young lady; even if she had dresses to match herself, no one would believe she was born in a poor hut roofed with heather, on the Seis moor. Her father was a widower and engaged in floating firewood from the forest to the Silkeborg eel fisheries, and sometimes even farther, to Randers. He had no one to leave six-year-old Christine at home with, and she almost always traveled back and forth on the river with her father. If he had to sail to Randers, the girl stayed with Jeppe Jens.

Ib and Christine were great friends both in play and at table. They dug and rummaged in the sand, went everywhere, and once even dared to climb the ridge alone and—march into the forest; there they found a lapwing's nest with eggs in it. What an event that was!

Ib had never before been on the moor, nor had he ever sailed from the Guden River into the lakes; so the barge-man once invited the boy to take a trip with them and took him to his home the day before.

Early in the morning the barge set off; atop the stacked cords of firewood sat the children, munching bread and raspberries; the barge-man and his assistant pushed

off with poles, the current helped them, and the barge flew like an arrow along the river and lakes. Often it seemed that the exit from the lake was blocked by a solid wall of trees and reeds, but as they drew closer, a passage was found, although old trees hung over the water in a continuous canopy, and oaks tried to block the way, stretching forward their bark-stripped branches—the giant trees seemed deliberately to have rolled up their sleeves to show their bare, sinewy arms! Old alders, washed away from the bank by the current, clung firmly with their roots to the bottom and looked like small forest islands. Water lilies floated on the water... It was a splendid journey! Finally they reached the fisheries, where water rushed noisily from the sluices. There was plenty for both Christine and Ib to see there!

In those days there was neither factory nor town here, only an old house where fishermen lived, and few people were kept at the fisheries. Only the noise of the water and the cries of wild ducks enlivened the locality. Having delivered the firewood to the spot, Christine's father bought a large bundle of eels and a slaughtered piglet; the provisions were packed into a basket and placed on the stern of the barge. On the way back they had to sail against the current, but the wind was favorable, they hoisted the sails, and the barge moved as if drawn by a pair of good horses.

Having reached that place in the forest from which the barge-man's assistant could easily reach home, the men went ashore and told the children to sit quietly. Yes, that's how they sat! Of course they had to peek into the basket where the eels and the piglet lay, pull out the piglet and hold it in their hands. Both wanted to hold it, naturally, and so the piglet ended up in the water and floated away with the current. What a horror!

Ib jumped ashore and started running away, but he had hardly run a few steps when Christine joined him.

"I'm coming with you!" she cried, and the children quickly found themselves in the bushes, from where neither the barge nor the river could be seen anymore. After running a little farther, Little Christine fell and began to cry. Ib lifted her up.

"Well, let's go together!" he said to her. "Our house is over there!"

That was just the trouble—it wasn't there. They walked and walked over dry leaves and branches that crackled under their little feet, when suddenly a loud cry rang out, as if someone were calling. The children stopped and listened. Then an eagle screamed: what an unpleasant cry! The little ones were frightened for a moment, but right in front of them they saw an incredible quantity of the most wonderful bilberries. How could they resist? And both, racing each other, began picking and

eating them by handfuls, smearing their hands, lips, and cheeks all over! Again a call was heard.

"Oh, we'll get it for the piglet!" said Christine.

"Let's go home better, to our place!" said Ib. "It's right here in the forest!"

And they went, came out onto a carriage road, but it did not lead home. It grew dark; the children became afraid. A strange silence stood in the forest; only occasionally a sharp, unpleasant cry of an owl or some other bird unfamiliar to the children sounded... Finally the children got stuck in the bushes and burst into tears. After crying their fill, they stretched out on the dry leaves and fell asleep.

The sun was already high when they woke up.

A shiver ran through them from the morning chill, but sunlight shimmered on the hill between the trees; Ib decided they must climb up there: they would warm themselves there, and from there they could see his parents' house. Alas! The children were at the very opposite end of the forest, and home was far away! Somehow they scrambled up the hill and found themselves above a precipice; below sparkled a clear, bright lake. Fish crowded at the surface, their scales glittering in the sun. The children had not expected such a sight. Moreover, the edges of the precipice were all overgrown with hazel bushes laden with nuts; in some little nests there were even as many as seven! The children picked them, cracked the nuts, and ate the tender kernels, which had already begun to ripen. Suddenly—what a fright!—out of the bushes stepped a tall old woman with a brown face and hair black as coal; the whites of her eyes sparkled like a Negro's; on her back was a bundle, in her hand a knotted stick. She was a gypsy woman. The children did not immediately understand what she was saying to them, but she took three nuts from her pocket and said these were magic nuts—in each were hidden the most wonderful things!

Ib looked at her; she looked so kindly; he gathered his courage and asked her for the nuts. She gave them to him and picked a whole pocketful of fresh ones for herself.

Ib and Christine stared at the magic nuts.

"Well, is there a carriage and horses in it?" asked Ib, pointing to one.

"Yes, and a golden one too, and the horses are golden as well!" answered the old woman.

"Give it to me!" said Christine.

Ib gave it, and the old woman tied the nut into the girl's neckerchief.

"And in this one is there such a pretty kerchief as Christine has?" asked Ib.

"Ten whole ones!" answered the old woman. "And wonderful dresses, stockings, and a hat too!"

"Then give me this one too!" said Christine.

Ib gave her the second one as well, and only one small, black one remained for him.

"Keep this one for yourself!" said Christine. "It's good too."

"And what's in it?" asked Ib.

"What will be best for you!" said the gypsy woman.

And Ib tightly clenched the nut in his hand. The gypsy woman promised the children to lead them to the road, and they went, but not at all in the direction they should have. From this, however, it did not follow at all that the gypsy woman intended to steal the children.

Finally the children somehow stumbled upon the forester Kræn. He knew Ib and brought the children home, where everyone was in terrible alarm. The children were forgiven, although they deserved a good whipping, first for letting the piglet fall into the water, and second for running away.

Christine returned home to the moor, and Ib remained in the forest cottage. His first task that same evening was to take his nut out of his pocket. He pinched it in the door, and the nut cracked open, but inside there was not even a kernel—only black dust, earth, like snuff. The nut, as they say, was worm-eaten.

"That's just what I thought!" Ib said to himself. "How could 'what is best for me' fit into such a tiny nut? And Christine won't get any dresses or a golden carriage from hers either!"

Winter came, and New Year came with it.

Several years passed. Ib began preparing for confirmation and attending the priest, and

He lived far away. Once a bargee visited them and told Ib's parents that Christinotchka was entering service—it was time for her to earn her bread. And luck was on her side: she was going to good, wealthy people—just think, to the very owners of the inn in Herning! At first she would simply help the mistress, and

later, once she grew accustomed to the work and was confirmed, they would keep her with them permanently.

And so Ib said farewell to Christina, though they had long been called betrothed. Christinotchka showed Ib, as a parting gesture, the two nuts he had once given her in the forest, and said she kept safe in her little chest also the wooden clogs he had carved for her when he was still a boy. With that they parted.

Ib was confirmed, but he remained living at home with his mother, diligently carving wooden shoes in winter and working in the fields in summer; his mother had no other helper—Ib's father had died.

Only rarely, through the postman or through fishermen, did he receive news about Christina. She was doing excellently with her employers, and after her confirmation she sent a letter to her father with greetings to Ib and his mother. The letter also spoke of a wonderful dress and half a dozen shirts that her employers had gifted her. The news, therefore, was good.

The following spring, on one fine day, someone knocked at the door of Ib's little house, and the bargee appeared with Christina. She had come to visit her father—an opportunity had arisen to travel with someone to Thum and back. She was exceedingly pretty, looking quite like a young lady, and dressed very well; the dress fit her neatly and suited her greatly—in short, she was in full parade attire, while Ib met her in his old, everyday clothes and, embarrassed, did not know what to say. He only took her hand, pressed it firmly, evidently very glad, but his tongue somehow would not move. Meanwhile, Christinotchka chattered without cease; she was a master at talking! And upon greeting him, she kissed Ib straight on the lips!

"Do you not recognize me?" she asked him.

But he, even when they were left alone, said only:

"Truly, you look like an important lady, Christina, while I am such a ragamuffin! And how often I have remembered you... and the good old times!"

And they walked hand in hand to the ridge, admiring from there the river and the steppe covered with heather, yet Ib still spoke not a word, and only when the time came to part did it become clear to him that Christina must become his wife; after all, since childhood they had been called betrothed, and it even seemed to him that they were already engaged, although neither of them had ever uttered a single word about anything of the sort. Only a few hours remained for them to spend together: Christina had to hurry to Thum, from where she was to depart back home the next morning. Her father and Ib escorted her to Thum: the night was so bright, so moonlit. When they reached the place, Ib began to take leave of Christina and

for a long, long time could not release her hand. His eyes shone brightly, and finally he spoke. He said little, but every word came straight from his heart:

"If you are not yet too accustomed to rich life, if you think you could settle here with us, with my mother, and marry me, then... we might someday get married!.. But, of course, we must wait a little!"

"Of course, let us wait!" said Christina, pressing his hand firmly, and he kissed her on the lips. "I believe you, Ib!" she continued. "And I think I love you myself, but still we must think it over!"

With that they parted. Ib told her father that he and Christina had almost come to an agreement, and the father replied that he had long expected this. They returned together to Ib's place, and the bargee spent the night there, but not another word was spoken about the engagement.

A year passed. Ib and Christina exchanged two letters. "Faithful—faithful—until the grave," they both signed. But once the bargee came to Ib to convey Christina's greetings and... yes, here the words seemed to stick in his throat... In the end, however, the matter became clear. Christina was living very well, she was such a beauty, everyone loved and respected her, and the eldest son of her employers, who had come to visit his parents—he held a significant position in some office in Copenhagen—had fallen in love with her. She liked him too; the parents, it seemed, were not opposed, but Christina was evidently very troubled by the fact that Ib thought so much about her... "And so she wishes to renounce her happiness," concluded the bargee.

At first Ib did not utter a single word, only turned pale as a sheet, then shook his head and said:

"Christina must not renounce her happiness!"

"Then write her a few words!" said Christina's father.

And Ib did write, though not immediately; his thoughts somehow would not flow onto paper as he wished, and he crossed out and tore up letter after letter into scraps. But by morning the letter was nevertheless written. Here it is:

"I have read your letter to your father and see that you are well and will be even better. Consult your own heart, Christina, think carefully about what awaits you if you marry me; I do not possess great means. Therefore do not think about me or how I feel, but think only of your own happiness! I have bound you with no word, and if you gave me one mentally, I return it to you. May God grant you every happiness, Christinochka! And may the Lord comfort me!

Your eternally devoted friend,

Ib."

The letter was sent, and Christina received it. Around St. Martin's Day, their engagement was announced in the nearby church; likewise in one of the churches in Copenhagen, where the groom lived. And soon Christina departed with her mistress for the capital—the groom could not abandon his business for long. By agreement, Christina was to meet her father in the town of Funder—it lay directly on the route, and it was not far for the old man either. There father and daughter met and parted. Afterwards the bargee visited Ib to inform him about the meeting with his daughter; Ib listened but did not utter a single word in reply. He became so thoughtful, according to his mother. Yes, he thought about many things, among others about the three nuts the gypsy woman had given him in childhood. Two of them he had given to Christina; those were magic nuts: in one was a golden carriage and horses, in the other—the most wonderful dresses. And so everything came true. All this luxury now awaited her in Copenhagen! Yes, for her everything turned out exactly as written, while Ib found in his nut only black dust, earth. "That which will be best for you," the gypsy woman had told him; yes, so it was: now he understood the meaning of her words—in the black earth, in the grave, it would be best for him!

Several more years passed; how long they dragged on for Ib! The old owners of the inn died one after another, and all the wealth, many thousands of rigsdalers, passed to the son. Now Christina could acquire even a golden carriage, not merely wonderful dresses.

Then for two whole years there was neither sight nor sound of Christina; finally her father received a letter from her, but it brought no joyful news. Poor Christina! Neither she nor her husband knew how to save money, and their wealth, having come, just as quickly disappeared; it did them no good—they themselves did not wish it.

The heather in the field bloomed and faded, snow covered the steppe, the mountain ridge, and Ib's cozy little house many times. One spring, Ib was walking across the field behind the plow; suddenly the plow struck something hard—a flint, as it seemed to him, and from the earth protruded something like a large black shaving. But when Ib took it in his hands, he saw it was not wood but metal, gleaming where the plow had cut it. It was an ancient, heavy, and large gold ring from the heroic age. On the spot where the plowed field now stretched, once stood an ancient burial mound. And thus the plowman found a treasure. Ib showed the ring to the priest, who explained to him how valuable it was, and Ib went to the

local judge; the judge reported the precious find to Copenhagen and advised Ib to personally present it where required.

"The earth could not have given you anything better than this!" added the judge.

"So there it is!" thought Ib. "So after all the earth has given me that which is best for me! Meaning the gypsy woman was right!"

Ib traveled by sea from Aarhus to Copenhagen. For him this was nearly a voyage around the world—until now he had sailed only along his own river, the Guden. And so he reached Copenhagen. He was paid the full value of the find, a large sum: a whole six hundred rigsdalers. For several days the steppe-dweller Ib wandered through the foreign, enormous city, and once

In the evening, just on the eve of his departure back to Aarhus, he got lost, crossed some bridge, and instead of heading toward the Western Gates, ended up in Christianshavn. He was indeed walking westward, yet not where he ought to have gone. There was not a soul in the street. Suddenly, out of one wretched little house came a small girl. Ib asked her to show him the way; she stopped in fright, looked at him, and he saw that she was weeping bitterly. Ib immediately asked what was wrong; the girl answered something, but he could not make it out. Just then they found themselves beneath a streetlamp, and the light fell directly upon the girl's face—Ib could not believe his eyes: before him stood living Christinette, exactly as he remembered her from the days of her childhood!

Ib followed the little one into the poor house, climbed a narrow, slippery staircase to the attic, into a tiny room right under the roof. A heavy, stifling air struck him; the room was utterly dark and quiet; only in the corner could be heard someone's labored sighs. Ib struck a match. Upon a miserable bed lay the child's mother.

"Can I not help you?" asked Ib. "The little one called me in, but I am a stranger here and know no one. Tell me, are there any neighbors nearby whom one might summon to your aid?"

And he lifted the sick woman's head.

It was Christine from the Seis Heath. For many years, even her name had not been mentioned in Ib's presence—it would have disturbed him, especially since the rumors about her were most disheartening. Gossip spoke truly: a large inheritance had completely turned the head of Christine's husband; he gave up his position, went abroad, lived there for half a year, returned, and began squandering money. More and more the cart tilted, until finally it overturned completely! Merry drinking companions remarked that this was only to be expected—how could one

lead such a mad life? And then one morning he was dragged out of the Palace Canal dead!

Christine's days too were numbered; her youngest child, born in poverty, had already died, and she herself was preparing to follow him... Dying, forgotten by all, she lay in such a wretched room as she might perhaps have been content with in her youth, on the Seis Heath, but not now, after having grown accustomed to luxury and wealth. And so it happened that her elder daughter, also named Christinette, who had suffered cold and hunger together with her mother, met Ib!

"I fear I shall die and leave my poor little one a complete orphan!" moaned the sick woman. "Where will she go?!"

She could speak no more.

Ib again struck a match, found a candle stub, lit it, and illuminated the miserable room.

Then he looked at the child and remembered Christinette—the companion of his childhood years... Yes, for that Christinette's sake, he must take upon himself the care of this girl, who was a stranger to him! The dying woman looked at him; her eyes opened wide... Did she recognize him? It is unknown; he heard not another word from her.

We are once more in the forest, by the Guden River, near the Seis Heath. It is autumn; the sky is gray, the heather has bared itself, western winds tear the yellowed leaves from the trees, fling them into the river, scatter them across the heath, where still stands the little house roofed with heather, though strangers now dwell within it. But at the foot of the mountain ridge, in a place sheltered from the wind, behind tall trees, stands an old cottage, freshly whitewashed and repainted. A fire merrily blazes in the stove, and the little room is bathed in sunlight: it streams from two childish eyes, from a rosy laughing mouth comes the chirping of a lark; cheerful and lively is the room: here lives Christinette. She sits upon Ib's knees; Ib is both father and mother to her, while she has forgotten her real parents as if they were a distant dream. Ib is now a man of means and lives merrily with Christinette. And the girl's mother rests in the paupers' cemetery in Copenhagen.

Ib has some money stored in his chest; he dug it out of the earth, people say about him. Ib now has Christinette too!