Peyter, Peter and Per

It is amazing how well today's children understand everything! It is hard to say what they do not know! They refuse even to listen to the old tale about how the stork found them in a well or in the millpond and brought them to papa and mama, yet that tale is the absolute truth.

The only question is: where do children come from in wells or millponds? Not everyone can answer this, but some people do know. If you have ever looked carefully at the sky on a starry night, you have surely seen many shooting stars. It seems as though the stars roll down from the heavens and vanish. The most learned men cannot explain what they do not understand, but if one knows what is really happening, it is not difficult to explain. Stars fall from the sky like little Christmas candles and go out; these are divine sparks flying down to earth. As soon as they enter our thick, dense air, their radiance fades, and our eyes cease to distinguish them, for they are more delicate and airy than the air itself. Now they are no longer a star, nor a spark, but a heavenly child, a little angel without wings, destined to become a human being. Quietly it glides through the air; the wind catches it and lowers it into the cup of a flower—now into a night violet, now into a dandelion, now into a rose, or perhaps into a carnation. There the child lies and gathers strength. It is so light and airy that a fly could carry it away on its wings, and a bee even more easily. Both hover over the flower in search of sweet nectar. Even if the airy child bothers them, they still dare not knock it onto the ground; instead, they carry it to the large round leaves of water lilies and leave it lying in the sunshine. The little one slowly slides off the leaf into the water, sleeps there, and keeps growing, growing, until it becomes so big that the stork sees it, catches it, and brings it to people, to some family that has long dreamed of having such a lovely child. Only whether it will be lovely or not depends on the water. It is good if the water in the well where it lay was clean, but sometimes the little one swallows mud and filth, and then expect no goodness. The stork grabs the first thing that catches its eye, making no distinctions. It carries children wherever it pleases: one may end up in a good family with flawless parents, another among coarse and unhappy people, so unhappy that it would have been better had the stork never pulled the baby from the pond.

Children no longer remember how they slept beneath the water-lily leaf, how the frogs sang to them in chorus every evening, "Croak-croak-croak!" which in our language means, "Sleep soundly, may you have good dreams!" Children do not remember the flower into which they fell from the sky; they do not even remember

its scent. And yet, when they grow up, something compels them to choose for themselves a favorite flower—the very one in which they lay after arriving on earth.

The stork lives to a ripe old age but does not forget the babies it brought to people; it watches over them and learns how their lives unfold. True, changing their lives is not within its power, nor can it help them—it has enough trouble with its own children. But these little ones never leave its thoughts.

I am acquainted with one old, experienced stork, very respectable indeed. It has already delivered many children to people and can tell a whole story about each of them, and in every story there will be a bit of mud and filth from the millpond. I asked it to tell me about just one of these infants, but it presented me not with one, but with three stories, all about the Petersen family.

It was a splendid family. The head of the household was one of the thirty-two fathers of the city, which is a great honor. And he himself had just turned thirty-two. That was when the stork arrived and brought little Peiter—that was the boy's name. The following year the stork brought another child; they named him Peter. And when the stork came with the third, they called him Per, because the names Peiter, Peter, and Per suit the surname Petersen very well.

So the three brothers grew up, three heavenly sparks. Each had grown in his own flower, each had slept beneath his own water-lily leaf in the millpond until the stork brought him to the Petersen family, who live on the corner. Well, you know their house perfectly well yourself.

The brothers grew, became wiser, and dreamed of becoming someone more important than their father.

Peiter dreamed of becoming a bandit. He saw the play "Fra Diavolo" in the theater and decided that the bandit's life was the most pleasant thing in the world. Peter wanted to become a tinsmith and clang iron all day long: what music that would be! But Per was an exemplary, quiet boy, plump and rosy-cheeked. True, he gnawed his nails, but that was his only fault. Per dreamed of becoming "like papa." That is how they all answered whenever anyone asked what they intended to be when they grew up.

They went to school. One became the top pupil, another the lowest, and the third somewhere in between. But what do grades matter? All three were clever, wonderful boys—at least, that is what their highly educated parents claimed.

The brothers attended children's parties, smoked when no one was looking, and gathered wisdom.

From early childhood Peiter was stubborn, as befits a future bandit. He was terribly disobedient, but his mother said it was due to worms tormenting him. All disobedient children have worms; the cause is the mud in their stomachs! Soon his mother experienced on her new dress just how headstrong and unruly he was.

"Do not push the table, my lamb!" she said. "You will overturn the cream and stain my new dress."

Thereupon the "lamb" calmly lifted the creamer and quite tranquilly poured the cream right onto his mother's lap. She only kept saying:

"My dear lamb, what is wrong with you? Come to your senses!"

But she had to admit that the child had a will. And a will testifies to strength of character, which is very pleasing to a mother.

Peiter might well have become a bandit, but things turned out somewhat differently. In appearance he was a true bandit: long, shaggy hair, a bare neck, a hat pulled down over his nose. That is how artists dress, and he wanted to become an artist, but it went no further than the costume. Everyone he drew came out looking like a mallow plant—just as tall and thin. He himself was exactly like a mallow. No wonder he loved that flower so much, said the stork, for the mallow had been his cradle.

Peter, on the other hand, was found in an olive-tree flower. His lips gleamed as if oiled, his yellow skin shone; it seemed that if you pinched his cheek, oil would squirt out. He ought to have traded in oil; he would have been his own advertisement. But in his soul he remained, just as before, a tinsmith: of the entire Petersen family, he alone went in for music.

"Thank God at least one strives for all," the neighbors said.

In a week he could concoct seventeen polkas and stitch them together into an opera full of clanging and screeching. The opera turned out quite splendid!

Per was pale-faced and rosy-cheeked, small in stature and distinguished by nothing—for he had been rocked by a modest daisy. When other boys beat him, he never fought back. He said he was the most sensible, and sensible people always yield. First he collected slate pencils, then postage stamps, and finally he acquired a naturalist's corner, where he kept a skeleton of a smelt, three blind baby rats in a jar of spirits, and a stuffed mole. Per was drawn to the sciences, and he felt nature deeply. How pleasant this was both for himself and for his parents! Per preferred going to the forest to going to school; he favored naturalness over strict upbringing. His brothers were already engaged, while he still dreamed of only one

thing: how to bring his collection to perfection—he was collecting eggs of waterfowl. He knew animals far better than people and even believed that beasts had far surpassed humans in the holiest matter—in love. Per noticed that while the mother nightingale sits on her eggs, the father nightingale sings all night long for his beloved companion, trilling such melodies! Per could never sing like that, nor should he even try. And the storks? When the female stork sits in the nest with her young, the father stork guards them all night long, standing on one leg. Per could not stand like that even for an hour! And after he once examined closely a spider's web, he forever abandoned any thoughts of marriage. Mr. Spider works tirelessly at his web, catching in it carefree flies, young and old, lean and gorged with blood. He lives for the sole purpose of weaving his nets and providing sustenance for his family. And Madame Spider lives only

for her dear husband. She loves her spouse so much that she devours him alive, head, heart, and stomach; only his long, slender legs remain sticking out in the web he spun for the joy of his family. There you have a true story from the life of animals! Per observed all this and decided: "Now that is love! How passionately one must love to swallow one's own husband guts and all! No, people do not go that far, and should they?"

And Per vowed never to marry, never to kiss anyone nor to receive kisses himself, for a kiss is the first step toward the bonds of marriage. Yet one kiss he could not avoid; it comes to us all sooner or later—the long kiss of death. A person lives on earth, and Death receives the command: "Kiss him!"—and the person perishes. From the sky flashes a ray of light, so bright that darkness falls before the person's eyes. And the human soul, which once fell to earth like a little star, speeds upward again, to the sky. No longer will it rock in a flower's cup or slumber beneath a lily pad leaf. Greater tasks await it. It soars away into the great country of eternity. But what that country is like, where it lies and what is within it, no one knows. No one has seen it, not even the stork, though his eyes are keen and he knows everything in the world. Therefore he knows nothing more about Per either, though he could tell tales about Peyer and Peter; but I have heard enough about them, and likely you have too. So I politely thanked the stork and said that for now I had had my fill. And for this short story, which moreover contains nothing extraordinary, he demands from me three frogs and one young snake. He accepts payment, you see, in provisions. Well, do you agree to pay him? I do not! I have neither snakes nor frogs.