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"Old Crutches"

(TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL OF HENRIK WRANCES.)

by Thorlief Larsen

A large crowd of people were standing outside the vestry in Magerheim's churchyard on a glorious September day. With the usual garrulity that characterizes country-people upon every occasion for conversation that is afforded them, they were busily engaged in gossiping about everything in general and nothing in particular.

Suddenly everyone reverently removed his headgear.

"Is the minister here already?" asked Kersti-Mons-Jeppes.

"No, it is the body," answered her cousin, Metta-Ola-Faders.

"Is there a body to-day? Ah, yes—such is life; nothing but births and deaths every day."

"Yes, 'Old Crutches' has gone home to his fathers. Didn't you know that?"

"Jeppe Skraeder dead? Is that so? Oh, well, it was about time; he has stumbled around here long enough, the poor old wretch," said Kersti.

"One should never speak ill of one, whom our Lord has taken."

"Yes, that's so. But then; our Lord has taken? Him! He was the stingiest soul that ever lived on this sinful earth."

"Well, I don't suppose anyone asked him if he wanted to come here. And he certainly felt his share of thorns in his journey through the world. He had no one whom he could call a friend and all his days he had limped around on his crutches, shoved and jostled on every side. The only thing that he was afraid of was that he should have to go to the poor-house where his mother died. And he didn't get any too much pay when he went out and started to sew either. He had only ten kreutzers a day—and board, of course—the first year he was working for my father. Right after my marriage he was with us for a while; there he got twenty kreutzers and now towards the last he took in as much as fifty kreutzers a day—that is, of course, without board."

"It would certainly be a sin to say that were very much."

"But do you know how much he has left behind him? Just think; six thousand florins! One can easily imagine how he must have turned every copper before he spent it."

"Why, one can hardly believe that. Six thousand florins!"

"I heard it myself from the sheriff yesterday, and the funniest of all is that there was as much more to it, but no one knows what has become of that."

"How some can save and save so that a little luxury will last from one Christmas to the next, while others can scarcely make both ends meet when they have both money inherited and money earned!"

"Yes, but then you know he always managed things for himself; made his own bed, lived on salt herring and potatoes and mouldy bread and every Saturday night begged some milk for Sunday. He never made a fire in his stove and he patched his old lambskin coat year after year so that at last one could hardly tell which was patch and which was original coat. His Sunday coat was always neat; it was, of course, a little better, but so saturated with snuff was it that it must have been a punishment to sit beside 'Crutches' in the Lord's House—why, it smelled so that one could perceive it all the way over to the women's side."

"Yes, the only pleasure that Jeppe afforded himself in life was to take snuff, but never more than three times a day—that is unless some one else invited him to have some."

"Have you heard of the time he went to town to get his kreutzer changed? No? A proclamation had been given out that all coins with the King's head on should be handed over to the banks within a certain time—or they would be no good. One day 'Crutches' came up to Hans Smed—for he had heard that Hans was to go to town. 'Will you go up to the bank and change this kreutzer for me?' said Jeppe. 'Are you crazy? No, thank you. Do you think I would make a fool of myself for one kreutzer? No, you can bet, I wouldn't do that.' 'Crutches' got angry and went away. After a while a came back. 'I am not going to sew to-day,' said he, 'and then I am not so very busy. Could I ride into town with you, and then I could change the money myself?' Yes, he could do that. Have you ever heard of the like for an old miser?"

"But is that really true?"

"As true as I am standing here. Oh, how people laughed! You know Jons Skraeder is his only relative and now he gets everything that 'Old Crutches' has scraped together; but he takes no thanks with him to the grave for that. They would not even pay a few cents for a decent grave and now he must lie in the 'Pauper's Row.'"

"That is certainly shameful of Jons," said Mette.

"Oh, well, he has lived like a pauper, and he may as well die like one too; he has only himself