THE FRIEND'S INGRATITUDE: BY PAUL HARBOE

T WAS not a pleasant day for travel. The cold was intense, and the hard, fine snow slashed against the cheeks like grains of dry sand. Strong, gusty winds hurled hats and caps high into the air, spinning them round like tops, on the face of the whirling clouds of drifting snow. To keep my cigar lighted was a sheer impossibility. I was obliged to do without its friendly service. Fortunately the distance from my stopping place to the station was not great, my train was waiting, and before I had shed my heavy ulster in the coach I heard the engineer's signal, and we were off.

The best time to go to Steenstrup is in midsummer or early autumn, when the big, square fields on either side of the railroad tracks are filled with active peasantry—men and women, youths and maids, gathering hay, perhaps, leaping about like young grasshoppers, with snatches of song, a frolic, making sport of their work—you can see and hear it all from the windows of your car.

Peter was at the station with a prodigious umbrella. The gray mare, he explained, had a bad foot and Hr. Larsen was sorry we would have to walk. At this he took my satchel and swinging the umbrella over my head at once set off at breakneck speed.

Larsen was in the doorway of the inn when we arrived.

"The deuce!" he cried. "How you must have sprinted! The mare could have done no better, even if as well. So," he called to the grinning Peter, "the American has beaten you at your own game. Well done, Doctor! But come in, come in! The snow will soon be over and the wind is dying; we'll have a clear night."

My host had a bottle of wine waiting for me. "I knew you would be ready for it," he said.

"Now tell me, Larsen, why you sent for me on such a beastly day as this," was my first question.

"Ah," he replied quickly, "I thought you would be interested. You see," he went on, "I do not know when he will leave us. He only came yesterday, and I wanted you to have a good look at him. To be honest, I think he is dangerous if meddled with; so we had better be careful."

"Where is the man now?"

"He has been away since dinner. He takes long walks during the day, returning only at meal-times."

"Nothing irregular in that." I was disappointed and impatient.
"Of course not. But have patience, Doctor! You will find I have estimated him correctly. Why, only this morning, when I told him a friend of mine was coming, meaning you, he leaped up like one stark mad. I thought he would strike me. 'Friend,' he yelled wildly, 'you have no friends; you are deceived. There is no such thing.' Now what do you say to that?"

"Oh, well," I admitted, "perhaps he is interesting after all. But in mercy get me something to eat, my good Larsen, and hurry about it. I can devour an ox."

"You Americans are always in a hurry—and always want to do big things," he laughed, and ran off to the kitchen. In a moment he returned.

"He is coming," he said, almost with excitement. "I saw him from the kitchen window. Maria pointed him out." Maria was his wife.

The knob was turned round quickly and the door flew back. The object of our curiosity stamped his feet on the threshold, the snow from his shoes spattering in every direction. He glanced at neither of us, but crossed the room in a few hurried steps.

"Now!" spoke my host, a bit exultingly.

"He is queer. Will he come down again?"

"He will—if he is hungry." Larsen shot one of his knowing glances at me.

A N HOUR passed, during which curiosity held my appetite in check. The mysterious guest had not looked like a man to be afraid of. While his jaw was broad and square, his eyes, a dark gray, made him seem harmless enough. Of course I had not seen much of him, and was in no position to form a conclusive judgment. At last the big, old-fashioned timepiece cracked off six strokes very emphatically, and Larsen, smiling, issued from the kitchen. "Supper is ready, Doctor. Now we'll have a good look at him. Lucky I have so few guests at this time. I fancy my friend is not fond of company," he added, chuckling.

Peter, arrayed in a clean, white shirt, came in to announce that he thought the mare's foot was now so much improved that if I chose we might drive to Svendborg in the morning.

"The snow is excellent," he explained, "and the mare will like it better than the bare road."

The three of us repaired to the little, low-lofted dining room, where Maria was running about placing dishes on the square old
table that had probably seen twenty years of service. "Only por-
ridge and pancakes, sir," she said simply, giving me a chair. But
I knew that Maria could make porridge and pancakes as few women
in Denmark could, and I was quite satisfied.
I had despatched my first plateful of porridge and called for a
second one, which Maria had gone for, when our silent guest came
in. He stopped to look at us a moment, then walked slowly
around the table to a chair next to mine.
Peter and Larsen both turned their eyes upon me; I turned mine
upon the guest, who looked about indifferently.
"He is my friend," said my host, coming opportunely to the
rescue. "I spoke to you of him this morning."
"Yes, you said he was a friend," the man replied shortly. Then
to Maria, who stood waiting. "A small portion."
I took up the thread.
"I am from America——"
"So am I," he snapped out.
The gruffness of his manner irritated me. He was, perhaps,
more dangerous than I had at first supposed. I must be careful.
There was a long while of oppressive silence. Larsen left the table
without ceremony, Peter following. I lingered over my coffee.
"Superior pancakes," cried the man suddenly. "They can’t
make these over there." This last was spoken half unconsciously,
as if to himself. Folding his arms and half closing his eyes, he
stared at the empty plate in front of him. He drew a long sigh.
With tense interest I watched and waited. Presently he spoke
again. But the articulation was vague. "America—back—tell—
all." I could catch only a word or two. All at once his head fell
lifelessly on his breast. I sprang up and made a cry, at which Larsen
and Peter darted into the room. The guest did not move.
"He is dead," cried Larsen with terrified concern.
But the syncope was quickly over. A few drops of cognac re-
vived him. He sat up again and looked at me hard.
"Why did you bother me?" he demanded sullenly, but I could
see that he was rather pleased than resentful.
"Because," I replied, soberly enough, "you are our friend."
I had touched the wound. He reflected a moment.
"I cannot believe you," he said, "yet——"
"We stood by you, perhaps saved you," I urged.
He glanced suspiciously at us; then exclaimed, with fierce de-
cision.
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"I might as well tell you. I am going back to give myself up. "No, not to you," he said sharply to Larsen and Peter, who, frightened, drew back. He put a hand on my shoulder. "Come," he whispered. In his room he sat down on the edge of the bed; I took the only chair and placed it very close.

"It's my conscience," he began abruptly, fixing his eyes upon mine. "I thought I could forget. I thought I was strong, heartlessly strong." He laughed a little and paused.

"No, you are not strong," I put in.

"But I was," he insisted vehemently, rising and beginning to pace the floor. "I was strong enough to—-." He checked himself. "Oh, a weaker man, a boy could have done it."

After a minute of silence he made a new start.

"It is twenty years ago or more. He called himself my friend; you are listening—my friend. He was poor and I helped him. We were both young then; both orphans; that was the common tie. He had always been sickly, and could do but little work. He looked to me as to a guardian, a protector. The happiest hours of my life were spent in taking care of him. He was a companion. I wanted him the weakening he was. I could not picture him otherwise. I should have hated him if he had been strong." His eyes flashed and the blood was in his cheek.

"I took him to America—to Dakota. In watching his slim, boyish figure my own strength seemed to increase. My sole ambition was to make a cosy home for him. Thus I lived for him alone. The clean, crisp air of the west had a strange effect upon him. He said he wished he could join me in the work. We had a farm out there. He begged me to let him handle the plow. He was strong now, he said. But I was afraid to lose him. Then his will grew stronger. He begged me no more. I was angry. Remonstrances were vain. A day of hard work would kill him, I thought.

"Then he upbraided me, relentlessly, I who had thrown every stone out of his path. He upbraided me. He threatened me, saying he would go away. 'You shall not leave me,' I cried, frenzied at the change. But he only smiled. And that night he left me."

His eyes flashed again, and he sprang up.

"But I found him. I found him and I killed—-." He stopped and turned upon me.

"Tell them, Larsen and Peter, to bring the police. I am ready."

The next morning the guest did not come down. He was gone.