

## II

STONE FARM, which for the future was to be Lasse and Pelle's home, was one of the largest farms on the island. But old people knew that when their grandparents were children, it had been a crofter's cottage where only two horses were kept, and belonged to a certain Vevest Köller, a grandson of Jens Kofod, the liberator of Bornholm. During his time, the cottage became a farm. He worked himself to death on it, and grudged food both for himself and the others. And these two things—poor living and land-grabbing—became hereditary in that family.

The fields in this part of the island had been rock and heather not many generations since. Poor people had broken up the ground, and worn themselves out, one set after another, to keep it in cultivation. Round about Stone Farm lived only cottagers and men owning two horses, who had bought their land with toil and hunger, and would as soon have thought of selling their parents' grave as their little property; they stuck to it until they died or some misfortune overtook them.

But the Stone Farm family were always wanting to buy and extend their property, and their chance only came through their neighbours' misfortunes. Wherever a bad harvest or sickness or ill luck with his beasts hit a man hard enough to make him reel, the Köllers bought. Thus Stone Farm grew, and acquired numerous buildings and much importance; it became as hard a neighbour

as the sea is, when it eats up the farmer's land, field by field, and nothing can be done to check it. First one was eaten up and then another. Every one knew that his turn would come sooner or later. No one goes to law with the sea; but all the ills and discomfort that brooded over the poor man's life came from Stone Farm. The powers of darkness dwelt there, and frightened souls pointed to it always. "That's well-manured land," the people of the district would say, with a peculiar intonation that held a curse; but they ventured no further.

The Köller family was not sentimental; it throve capitally in the sinister light that fell upon the farm from so many frightened minds, and felt it as power. The men were hard drinkers and card-players; but they never drank so much as to lose sight and feeling; and if they played away a horse early in the evening, they very likely won two in the course of the night.

When Lasse and Pelle came to Stone Farm, the older cottagers still remembered the farmer of their childhood, Janus Köller, the one who did more to improve things than any one else. In his youth he once, at midnight, fought with the devil up in the church-tower, and overcame him; and after that everything succeeded with him. Whatever might or might not have been the reason, it is certain that in his time one after another of his neighbours was ruined, and Janus went round and took over their holdings. If he needed another horse he played for and won it at loo; and it was the same with everything. His greatest pleasure was to break in wild horses, and those who happened to have been born at midnight on Christmas Eve could distinctly see the Evil One sitting on the box beside him and holding the reins. He came to a bad end, as might have been expected. One morning early, the horses came galloping home to the farm, and he was found



lying by the roadside with his head smashed against a tree.

His son was the last master of Stone Farm of that family. He was a wild devil, with much that was good in him. If any one differed from him, he knocked him down; but he always helped those who got into trouble. In this way no one ever left house and home; and as he had the family fondness for adding to the farm, he bought land up among the rocks and heather. But he wisely let it lie as it was. He attached many to the farm by his assistance, and made them so dependent that they never became free again. His tenants had to leave their own work when he sent for them, and he was never at a loss for cheap labour. The food he provided was scarcely fit for human beings, but he always ate of the same dish himself. And the priest was with him at the last; so there was no fault to find with his departure from this life.

He had married twice, but his only child was a daughter by the second wife, and there was something not quite right about her. She was a woman at the age of eleven, and made up to any one she met; but no one dared so much as look at her, for they were afraid of the farmer's gun. Later on she went to the other extreme, and dressed herself up like a man, and went about out on the rocks instead of busying herself with something at home; and she let no one come near her.

Kongstrup, the present master of Stone Farm, had come to the island about twenty years before, and even now no one could quite make him out. When he first came he used to wander about on the heath and do nothing, just as she did; so it was hardly to be wondered at that he got into trouble and had to marry her. But it was dreadful!

He was a queer fellow; but perhaps that was what people were like where he came from? He first had one idea and then another, raised wages when no one had asked him to, and started stone-quarrying with contract work. And so he went on with his foolish tricks to begin with, and let his cottagers do as they liked about coming to work at the farm. He even went so far as to send them home in wet weather to get in their corn, and let his own stand and be ruined. But things went all wrong of course, as might well be imagined, and gradually he had to give in, and abandon all his foolish ideas.

The people of the district submitted to this condition of dependence without a murmur. They had been accustomed, from father to son, to go in and out of the gates of Stone Farm, and do what was required of them, as dutifully as if they had been serfs of the land. As a set-off they allowed all their leaning towards the tragic, all the terrors of life and gloomy mysticism, to centre round Stone Farm. They let the devil roam about there, play loo with the men for their souls, and ravish the women; and they took off their caps more respectfully to the Stone Farm people than to any one else.

All this had changed a little as years went on; the sharp points of the superstition had been blunted a little. But the bad atmosphere that hangs over large estates—over all great accumulations of what should belong to the many—also hung heavy over Stone Farm. It was the judgment passed by the people, their only revenge for themselves and theirs.

Lasse and Pelle were quickly aware of the oppressive atmosphere, and began to see with the half-frightened eyes of the others, even before they themselves had heard very much. Lasse especially thought he could never be quite happy here, because of the heaviness that always



seemed to surround them. And then that weeping that no one could quite account for!

All through the long, bright day, the sound of weeping came from the rooms of Stone Farm, like the refrain of some sad folk-song. Now at last it had stopped. Lasse was busying himself with little things in the lower yard, and he still seemed to have the sound in his ears. It was sad, so sad, with this continual sound of a woman weeping, as if a child were dead, or as if she were left alone with her shame. And what could there be to weep for, when you had a farm of several hundred acres, and lived in a high house with twenty windows!

"Riches are nought but a gift from the Lord,  
But poverty, that is in truth a reward.  
They who wealth do possess  
Never know happiness,  
While the poor man's heart is ever contented!"

So sang Karna over in the dairy, and indeed it was true! If only Lasse knew where he was to get the money for a new smock-frock for the little lad, he would never envy any one on this earth; though it would be nice to have money for tobacco and a dram now and then, if it was not unfair to any one else.

Lasse was tidying up the dung-heap. He had finished his midday work in the stable, and was taking his time about it; it was only a job he did between whiles. Now and then he glanced furtively up at the high windows and put a little more energy into his work; but weariness had the upper hand. He would have liked to take a little afternoon nap, but did not dare. All was quiet on the farm. Pelle had been sent on an errand to the village shop for the kitchen-folk, and all the men were in the fields

covering up the last spring corn. Stone Farm was late with this.

The agricultural pupil now came out of the stable, which he had entered from the other side, so as to come upon Lasse unexpectedly. The bailiff had sent him. "Is that you, you nasty spy!" muttered Lasse when he saw him. "Some day I'll kill you!" But he took off his cap with the deepest respect. The tall pupil went up the yard without looking at him, and began to talk nonsense with the maids down in the wash-house. He wouldn't do that if the men were at home, the scarecrow!

Kongstrup came out on to the steps, and stood for a little while looking at the weather; then he went down to the cow-stable. How big he was! He quite filled the stable doorway. Lasse put down his fork and hastened in in case he was wanted.

"Well, how are you getting on, old man?" asked the farmer, kindly. "Can you manage the work?"

"Oh yes, I get through it," answered Lasse; "but that's about all. It's a lot of animals for one man."

Kongstrup stood feeling the hind quarters of a cow. "You've got the boy to help you, Lasse. Where is he, by the by? I don't see him."

"He's gone to the village shop for the women-folk."

"Indeed? Who told him to go?"

"I think it was the mistress herself."

"H'm. Is it long since he went?"

"Yes, some time. He ought soon to be back now."

"Get hold of him when he comes, and send him up to me with the things, will you?"

Pelle was rather frightened at having to go up to the office, and besides the mistress had told him to keep the bottle well hidden under his smock. The room was very high, and on the walls hung splendid guns; and up upon



a shelf stood cigar-boxes, one upon another, right up to the ceiling, just as if it were a tobacco-shop. But the strangest thing of all was that there was a fire in the stove, now, in the middle of May, and with the window open! It must be that they didn't know how to get rid of all their money. But wherever were the money-chests?

All this and much more Pelle observed while he stood just inside the door upon his bare feet, not daring from sheer nervousness to raise his eyes. Then the farmer turned round in his chair, and drew him towards him by the collar. "Now let's see what you've got there under your smock, my little man!" he said kindly.

"It's brandy," said Pelle, drawing forth the bottle. "The mistress said I wasn't to let any one see it."

"You're a clever boy," said Kongstrup, patting him on the cheek. "You'll get on in the world one of these days. Now give me the bottle and I'll take it out to your mistress without letting any one see." He laughed heartily.

Pelle handed him the bottle—*there* stood money in piles on the writing-table, thick round two-krone pieces one upon another! Then why didn't Father Lasse get the money in advance that he had begged for?

The mistress now came in, and the farmer at once went and shut the window. Pelle wanted to go, but she stopped him. "You've got some things for me, haven't you?" she said.

"I've received the *things*," said Kongstrup. "You shall have them—when the boy's gone."

But she remained at the door. She would keep the boy there to be a witness that her husband withheld from her things that were to be used in the kitchen; every one should know it.

Kongstrup walked up and down and said nothing.

Pelle expected he would strike her, for she called him bad names—much worse than Mother Bengta when Lasse came home merry from Tommelilla. But he only laughed. "Now that'll do," he said, leading her away from the door, and letting the boy out.

Lasse did not like it. He had thought the farmer was interfering to prevent them all from making use of the boy, when he so much needed his help with the cattle; and now it had taken this unfortunate turn!

"And so it was brandy!" he repeated. "Then I can understand it. But I wonder how she dares set upon him like that when it's with *her* the fault lies. He must be a good sort of fellow."

"He's fond of drink himself," said Pelle, who had heard a little about the farmer's doings.

"Yes, but a woman! That's quite another thing. Remember they're fine folk. Well, well, it doesn't become us to find fault with our betters; we have enough to do in looking after ourselves. But I only hope she won't send you on any more of her errands, or we may fall between two stools."

Lasse went to his work. He sighed and shook his head while he dragged the fodder out. He was not at all happy.