

He stood at the upper end of the meadow, and called his homeward-drifting flock together; and when the last tones of the call had died away, he began it himself, and stepped on one side. The animals ran with a peculiar little trot and heads extended. The shadow of the grass lay in long thin stripes across the ground, and the shadows of the animals were endless. Now and then a calf lowed slowly and broke into a gallop. They were yearning for home, and Pelle was yearning too.

From behind a hollow the sun darted long rays out into space, as if it had called all its powers home for the night, and now poured them forth in one great longing, from west to east. Everything pointed in long thin lines, and the eager longing of the cattle seemed visible in the air.

To the mind of the child there was nothing left out of doors now; everything was being taken in, and he longed for his father with a longing that was almost a pain. And when at last he turned the corner with the herd, and saw old Lasse standing there, smiling happily with his red-rimmed eyes, and opening the gate to the fold, the boy gave way and threw himself weeping into his father's arms.

"What's the matter, laddie? What's the matter?" asked the old man with concern in his voice, stroking the child's face with a trembling hand. "Has any one been unkind to you? No? Well, that's a good thing! They'd better take care, for happy children are in God's own keeping. And Lasse would be an awkward customer if it came to that. So you were longing for me, were you? Then it's good to be in your little heart, and it only makes Lasse happy. But go in now and get your supper, and don't cry any more." And he wiped the boy's nose with his hard, crooked fingers, and pushed him gently away.

V

PELLE was not long in finding out all about the man who had been sent by God, and had the grave, reproachful eyes. He proved to be nothing but a little shoemaker down in the village, who spoke at the meeting-house on Sundays; and it was also said that his wife drank. Rud went to his Sunday-school, and he was poor; so he was nothing out of the ordinary.

Moreover Gustav had got a cap which could turn out three different crowns—one of blue duffle, one of water-proof American cloth, and one of white canvas for use in sunny weather. It was an absorbingly interesting study that threw everything else into the background, and exercised Pelle's mind for many days; and he used this miraculous cap as a standard by which to measure everything great and desirable. But one day he gave Gustav a beautifully-carved stick for permission to perform the trick of turning the crown inside out himself; and that set his mind at rest at last, and the cap had to take its place in his every-day world like everything else.

But what did it look like in Farmer Kongstrup's big rooms? Money lay upon the floor there, of course, the gold in one place and the silver in another; and in the middle of each heap stood a half-bushel measure. What did the word "*practical*" mean, which the bailiff used when he talked to the farmer? And why did the men call one another "*Swede*" as a term of abuse? Why, they were all Swedes! What was there away beyond the

cliffs where the stone-quarry lay? The farm-lands extended as far as that on the one side. He had not been there yet, but was going with his father as soon as an opportunity presented itself. They had learnt quite by chance that Lasse had a brother who owned a house over there; so of course they knew the place comparatively well.

Down there lay the sea; he had sailed upon it himself! Ships both of iron and wood sailed upon it, though how iron could float when it was so heavy he did not know! The sea must be strong, for in the pond, iron went to the bottom at once. In the middle of the pond there was no bottom, so there you'd go on sinking for ever! The old thatcher, when he was young, had had more than a hundred fathoms of rope down there with a drag, to fish up a bucket, but he never reached the bottom. And when he wanted to pull up the rope again, there was some one deep down who caught hold of the drag and tried to pull him down, so he had to let the whole thing go.

God . . . well, He had a long white beard like the farmer at Kaase Farm; but who kept house for Him now He was old? Saint Peter was His bailiff, of course! . . . How could the old, dry cows have just as young calves as the young ones? And so on, and so on.

There was one subject about which, as a matter of course, there could be no question, nor any thought at all in that sense, because it was the very foundation of all existence—Father Lasse. He was there, simply, he stood like a safe wall behind everything that one did. He was the real Providence, the last great refuge in good and ill; he could do whatever he liked—Father Lasse was almighty.

Then there was one natural centre in the world—Pelle himself. Everything grouped itself about him, everything

existed for him—for him to play with, to shudder at, or to put on one side for a great future. Even distant trees, houses and rocks in the landscape, that he had never been up to, assumed an attitude towards him, either friendly or hostile; and the relation had to be carefully decided in the case of each new thing that appeared upon his horizon.

His world was small; he had only just begun to create it. For a good arm's-length on all sides of him, there was more or less *terra firma*; but beyond that floated raw matter, chaos. But Pelle already found his world immense, and was quite willing to make it infinite. He attacked everything with insatiable appetite; his ready perceptions laid hold of all that came within their reach; they were like the mouth of a machine, into which matter was incessantly rushing in small, whirling particles. And in the draught they raised, came others and again others; the entire universe was on its way towards him.

Pelle shaped and set aside twenty new things in the course of a second. The earth grew out under him into a world that was rich in excitement and grotesque forms, discomfort and the most everyday things. He went about in it uncertainly, for there was always something that became displaced and had to be revalued or made over again; the most matter-of-fact things would change and all at once become terrifying marvels, or *vice versa*. He went about in a state of continual wonderment, and assumed an expectant attitude even with regard to the most familiar things; for who could tell what surprises they might give one?

As an instance; he had all his life had opportunities of verifying the fact that trouser-buttons were made of bone and had five holes, one large one in the middle and four smaller ones round it. And then one day, one of the men

comes home from the town with a pair of new trousers, the buttons of which are made of bright metal and are no larger than a sixpenny-piece! They have only four holes, and the thread is to lie across them, not from the middle outwards as in the old ones.

Or take the great eclipse of the sun, that he had wondered so much about all the summer, and that all the old people said would bring about the destruction of the world. He had looked forward to it, especially the destruction part of it; it would be something of an adventure, and somewhere within him there was a little bit of confident assurance that it would all come right as far as he was concerned. The eclipse did come too, as it was meant to; it grew dark too, as if it were the Last Day, and the birds became so quiet, and the cattle bellowed and wanted to run home. But then it grew light again and it all came to nothing.

Then there were fearful terrors that all at once revealed themselves as tiny, tiny things—thank goodness! But there were also anticipated pleasures that made your heart beat, and when you got up to them they were dulness itself.

Far out in the misty mass, invisible worlds floated by that had nothing to do with his own. A sound coming out of the unknown created them in a twinkling. They came into existence in the same way that the land had done that morning he had stood upon the deck of the steamer, and heard voices and noise through the fog, thick and big, with forms that looked like huge gloves without fingers.

And inside one there was blood and a heart and a soul. The heart Pelle had found out about himself; it was a little bird shut up in there. But the soul bored its way like a serpent to whatever part of the body desire occupied. Old thatcher Holm had once drawn the soul like a thin

thread out of the thumb of a man who couldn't help stealing. Pelle's own soul was good; it lay in the pupils of his eyes, and reflected Father Lasse's image whenever he looked into them.

The blood was the worst, and so Father Lasse always let himself be bled when there was anything the matter with him; the bad humours had to be let out. Gustav thought a great deal about blood, and could tell the strangest things about it; and he cut his fingers only to see whether it was ripe. One evening he came over to the cow-stable and exhibited a bleeding finger. The blood was quite black. "Now I'm a man!" he said, and swore a great oath; but the maids only made fun of him, and said that he had not carried his four bushels of peas up into the loft yet.

Then there was hell and heaven, and the stone-quarry where they struck one another with heavy hammers when they were drunk. The men in the stone-quarry were the strongest men in the world. One of them had eaten ten poached eggs at one time without being ill; and there is nothing so strengthening as eggs.

Down in the meadow, will-o'-the-wisps hopped about looking for something in the deep summer nights. There was always one of them near the stream, and it stood and danced on the top of a little heap of stones that lay in the middle of the meadow. A couple of years ago a girl had one night given birth to a child out there among the dunes, and as she did not know what to do about a father for it, she drowned it in one of the pools that the brook makes where it turns. Good people raised the little cairn, so that the place should not be forgotten; and over it the child's soul used to burn at dead of night at the time of year at which it was born. Pelle believed that the child itself was buried beneath the stones, and

now and then ornamented the mound with a branch of fir; but he never played at that part of the stream. The girl was sent across the sea, sentenced to penal servitude for many years, and people wondered at the father. She had not named any one, but every one knew who it was all the same. He was a young, well-to-do fisherman down in the village, and the girl was one of the poorest, so there could never have been any question of their marrying. The girl must have preferred this to begging help of him for the child, and living in the village with an illegitimate child, an object of universal derision. And he had certainly put a bold face on the matter, where many another would have been ashamed and gone away on a long voyage.

This summer, two years after the girl went to prison, the fisherman was going home one night along the shore towards the village with some nets on his back. He was of a callous nature, and did not hesitate to take the shortest way across the meadow; but when he got in among the dunes, he saw a will-o'-the-wisp following in his steps, grew frightened, and began to run. It began to gain upon him, and when he leaped across the brook to put water between himself and the spirit, it seized hold of the nets. At this he shouted the name of God, and fled like one bereft of his senses. The next morning at sunrise, he and his father went to fetch the nets. They had caught on the cairn, and lay right across the stream.

Then the young man joined the Revivalists, and his father abandoned his riotous life and followed him. Early and late the young fisherman was to be found at their meetings, and at other times he went about like a malefactor with his head hanging down, only waiting for the girl to come out of prison, so that he could marry her.

Pelle was up in it all. The girls talked shudderingly about it as they sat upon the men's knees in the long

summer evenings, and a lovesick fellow from inland had made up a ballad about it, which Gustav sang to his concertina. Then all the girls on the farm wept, and even Lively Sara's eyes filled with tears, and she began to talk to Mons about engagement rings.

One day when Pelle was lying on his face in the grass, singing and clapping his naked feet together in the clear air, he saw a young man standing by the cairn and putting on it stones which he took out of his pocket; after which he knelt down. Pelle went up to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked boldly, feeling that he was in his own domain. "Are you saying your prayers?"

The man did not answer, but remained in a kneeling posture. At last he rose, and spat out tobacco-juice.

"I'm praying to Him Who is to judge us all," he said, looking steadily at Pelle.

Pelle recognised that look. It was the same in expression as that of the man the other day—the one that had been sent by God. Only there was no reproach in it.

"Haven't you any bed to sleep in then?" asked Pelle. "I always say my prayers under the clothes. He hears them just as well! God knows everything."

The young man nodded, and began moving about the stones on the cairn.

"You mustn't hurt that," said Pelle, firmly, "for there's a little baby buried there."

The young man turned upon him a strange look.

"That's not true!" he said thickly; "for the child lies up in the churchyard in consecrated earth."

"O—oh inde—ed?" said Pelle, imitating his father's slow tones. "But I know it was the parents that drowned

it—and buried it here.” He was too proud of his knowledge to relinquish it without a word.

The man looked as if he were about to strike him, and Pelle retreated a little, and then, having confidence in his legs, he laughed openly. But the other seemed no longer aware of his presence, and stood looking dully past the cairn. Pelle drew nearer again.

The man started at Pelle’s shadow, and heaved a deep sigh. “Is that you?” he said apathetically, without looking at Pelle. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“It’s *my* field,” said Pelle, “because I herd here; but you may stay here if you won’t hit me. And you mustn’t touch the cairn, because there’s a little baby buried there.”

The young man looked gravely at Pelle. “It’s not true what you say! How dare you tell such a lie? God hates a lie. But you’re a simple-hearted child, and I’ll tell you all about it without hiding anything, as truly as I only want to walk wholly in God’s sight.”

Pelle looked at him uncomprehendingly. “I should think I ought to know all about it,” he said, “considering I know the whole song by heart. I can sing it to you, if you like. It goes like this.” Pelle began to sing in a voice that was a little tremulous with shyness—

“So happy are we in our childhood’s first years,
Neither sorrow nor sin is our mead;
We play, and there’s nought in our path to raise fears
That it straight into prison doth lead.

Right many there are that with voice sorrowful
Must oft for lost happiness long.
To make the time pass in this prison so dull,
I now will write down all my song.

I played with my father, with mother I played,
And childhood’s days came to an end;
And when I had grown up into a young maid,
I played still, but now with my friend.

I gave him my day and I gave him my night,
And never once thought of deceit;
But when I him told of my sorrowful plight,
My trust I had cause to regret.

‘I never have loved you,’ he quickly did say;
‘Begone! I’ll ne’er see you again!’
He turned on his heel and went angry away.
‘Twas then I a murd’ress became.”

Here Pelle paused in astonishment, for the grown-up man had sunk forward as he sat, and he was sobbing. “Yes, it was wicked,” he said. “For then she killed her child and had to go to prison.” He spoke with a certain amount of contempt; he did not like men that cried. “But it’s nothing that you need cry about,” he added carelessly after a little.

“Yes, it is; for she’d done nothing. It was the child’s father that killed it; it was me that did the dreadful thing; yes, I confess that I’m a murderer! Haven’t I openly enough acknowledged my wrong-doing?” He turned his face upwards, as though he were speaking to God.

“Oh, was it you?” said Pelle, moving a little away from him. “Did you kill your own child? Father Lasse could never have done that! But then why aren’t you in prison? Did you tell a lie, and say *she’d* done it?”

These words had a peculiar effect upon the fisherman. Pelle stood watching him for a little, and then exclaimed: “You do talk so queerly—‘blop-blop-blop,’ just as if you were from another country. And what do you scabble in the air with your fingers for, and cry? Will you get a thrashing when you get home?”

At the word “cry,” the man burst into a flood of tears. Pelle had never seen any one cry so unrestrainedly. His face seemed all blurred.

"Will you have a piece of my bread-and-butter?" he asked by way of offering comfort. "I've got some with sausage on."

The fisherman shook his head.

Pelle looked at the cairn. He was obstinate, and determined not to give in.

"It *is* buried there," he said. "I've seen its soul myself, burning up on the top of the heap at night. That's because it can't get into heaven."

A horrible sound came from the fisherman's lips, a hollow groan that brought Pelle's little heart into his mouth. He began to jump up and down in fear, and when he recovered his senses and stopped, he saw the fisherman running with head bent low across the meadow, until he disappeared among the dunes.

Pelle gazed after him in astonishment, and then moved slowly towards his dinner-basket. The result of the encounter was, as far as it had gone, a disappointment. He had sung to a perfect stranger, and there was no denying that that was an achievement, considering how difficult it often was only to answer "yes" or "no" to somebody you'd never seen before. But he had hardly more than begun the verses, and what made the performance remarkable was that he knew the entire ballad by heart. He sang it now for his own benefit from beginning to end, keeping count of the verses on his fingers; and he found the most intense satisfaction in shouting it out at the top of his voice.

In the evening he as usual discussed the events of the day with his father, and he then understood one or two things that filled his mind with uncomfortable thoughts. Father Lasse's was as yet the only human voice that the boy wholly understood; a mere sigh or shake of the head from the old man had a more convincing power than words from any one else.

"Alas!" he said again and again. "Evil, evil everywhere; sorrow and trouble wherever you turn! He'd willingly give his life to go to prison in her stead now it's too late! So he ran away when you said that to him? Well, well, it's not easy to resist the Word of God even from the lips of a child, when the conscience is sore; and trading in the happiness of others is a bad way of earning a living. But now see about getting your feet washed, laddie."

Life furnished enough to work at and struggle with, and a good deal to dread; but worse almost than all that would harm Pelle himself, were the glimpses he now and then had of the depths of humanity: in the face of these his child's brain was powerless. Why did the mistress cry so much and drink secretly? What went on behind the windows in the big house? He could not comprehend it, and every time he puzzled his little brain over it, the uncomfortable feeling only seemed to stare out at him from all the window-panes, and sometimes enveloped him in all the horror of the incomprehensible.

But the sun rode high in the heavens, and the nights were light. The darkness lay crouching under the earth and had no power. And he possessed the child's happy gift of forgetting instantly and completely.