VII

CHRISTMAS EVE was a great disappointment. It was the custom for the herd-boys to come out and spend Christmas at the farms where they served in the summer, and Pelle's companions had told him of all the delights of Christmas—roast meat and sweet drinks, Christmas games and gingernuts and cakes; it was one endless eating and drinking and playing of Christmas games, from the evening before Christmas Eve until "Saint Knut carried Christmas out," on January 7th. That was what it was like at all the small farms, the only difference being that those who were religious did not play cards, but sang hymns instead. But what they had to eat was just as good.

The last few days before Christmas, Pelle had to get up at two or half-past two to help the girls pluck poultry, and the old thatcher Holm to heat the oven. With this his connection with the delights of Christmas came to an end. There was dried cod and boiled rice on Christmas Eve, and it tasted good enough; but of all the rest there was nothing. There were a couple of bottles of brandy on the table for the men, that was all. The men were discontented and quarrelsome. They poured milk and boiled rice into the leg of the stocking that Karna was knitting, so that she was fuming the whole evening; and then sat each with his girl on his knee, and made ill-natured remarks about everything. The old farm-labourers and their wives, who

had been invited to partake of the Christmas fare, talked about death and all the ills of the world.

Upstairs there was a large party. All the wife's relations were invited, and they were hard at work on the roast goose. The yard was full of conveyances, and the only one of the farm-servants who was in good spirits was the head man, who received all the tips. Gustav was in a thoroughly bad humour, for Bodil was upstairs helping to wait. He had brought his concertina over, and was playing love-songs. It was putting them into better spirits, and the evil expression was leaving their eyes; one after another they started singing, and it began to be quite comfortable down there. But just then a message came to say that they must make less noise, so the assembly broke up, the old people going home, and the young ones dispersing in couples according to the friendships of the moment.

Lasse and Pelle went to bed.

"What's Christmas really for?" asked Pelle.

Lasse rubbed his thigh reflectively.

"It has to be," he answered hesitatingly. "Yes, and then it's the time when the year turns round and goes upwards, you see! And of course it's the night when the Child Jesus was born too!" It took him a long time to produce this last reason, but when it did come, it was with perfect assurance. "Taking one thing with another, you see," he added after a short pause.

On the day after Christmas Day there was a kind of subscription merrymaking at an enterprising crofter's down in the village; it was to cost two and a half krones a couple for music, sandwiches, and spirits in the middle of the night, and coffee towards morning. Gustav and Bodil were going. Pelle at any rate saw a little of Christmas as it passed, and was as interested in it as if it concerned

himself; and he gave Lasse no rest from his questions that day. So Bodil was still faithful to Gustav after all!

When they got up the next morning, they found Gustav lying on the ground by the cow-stable door, quite helpless, and his good clothes in a sad state. Bodil was not with him. "Then she's deceived him," said Lasse, as they helped him in. "Poor boy! Only seventeen, and a wounded heart already! The women'll be his ruin one of these days, you'll see!"

At midday, when the farm-labourers' wives came to do the milking, Lasse's supposition was confirmed: Bodil had attached herself to a tailor's apprentice from the village, and had left with him in the middle of the night. They laughed pityingly at Gustav, and for some time after he had to put up with their gibes at his ill-success; but there was only one opinion about Bodil. She was at liberty to come and go with whomsoever she liked, but as long as Gustav was paying for her amusements, she ought to have kept to him. Who but the neighbour would keep the hens that ate their grain at home and laid their eggs at the neighbour's?

There had as yet been no opportunity to visit Lasse's brother beyond the stone-quarry, but it was to be done on the second day of the new year. Between Christmas and the New Year, the men did nothing after dark, and it was the custom everywhere to help the herdsman with his evening occupations. There was nothing of that here; Lasse was too old to assert himself, and Pelle too little. They might think themselves lucky they did not have to do the foddering for the men who went out as well as their own.

But to-day it was to come off; Gustav and Long Ole had undertaken to do the evening work. Pelle began to look forward to it as soon as he was up—he was up every

day by half-past three. But as Lasse used to say, if you sing before breakfast you'll weep before night.

After dinner, Gustav and Ole were standing grinding chopping-knives down in the lower yard. The trough leaked, and Pelle had to pour water on the grindstone out of an old kettle. His happiness could be seen on his face.

"What are you so pleased about?" asked Gustav. "Your eyes are shining like the cat's in the dark."

Pelle told him.

"I'm afraid you won't get away!" said Ole, winking at Gustav. "We shan't get the chaff cut time enough to do the foddering. This grindstone's so confoundedly hard to turn, too. If only that handle-turner hadn't been broken!"

Pelle pricked up his ears. "Handle-turner? What's that?" he asked.

Gustav sprang round the grindstone, and slapped his thigh in enjoyment of the joke.

"My goodness, how stupid you are! Don't you even know what a handle-turner is? It's a thing you only need to put on to the grindstone, and it turns it by itself. They've got one by-the-way over at Kaase Farm," he said, turning to Ole; "if only it wasn't so far away."

"Is it heavy?" asked Pelle in a low voice; everything depended upon the answer. "Can I lift it?" His voice trembled.

"Oh, no, not so awfully heavy. You could carry it quite well. But you'd have to be very careful."

"I can run over and fetch it; I'll carry it very carefully." Pelle looked at them with a face that could not but inspire confidence.

"Very well; but take a sack with you to put it in. And you'll have to be as careful as the very devil, for it's an expensive thing."

Pelle found a sack and ran off across the fields. He was as delighted as a young kid, plucking at himself and everything as he ran, and jumping aside to frighten the crows. He was overflowing with happiness. He was saving the expedition for himself and Father Lasse. Gustav and Ole were good men! He would get back as quickly as possible, so that they should not have to toil any more at the grindstone. "What, are you back already?" they would say, and open their eyes. "Then you must have smashed that precious machine on the way!" And they would take it carefully out of the sack, and it would be quite safe and sound. "Well, you are a wonder of a boy! a perfect prince!" they would say.

When he got to Kaase Farm, they wanted him to go in to a Christmas meal while they were putting the machine into the sack; but Pelle said "No" and held to it: he had not time. So they gave him a piece of cold apple out on the steps, so that he should not carry Christmas away. They all looked so pleasant, and every one came out when he hoisted the sack on his back and set off home. They too recommended him to be very careful, and seemed anxious, as if he could hardly realise what he was carrying.

It was a good mile between the farms, but it was an hour and a half before Pelle reached home, and then he was ready to drop. He dared not put down the sack to rest, but stumbled on step by step, only resting once by leaning against a stone fence. When at last he staggered into the yard, every one came up to see the neighbour's new handle-turner; and Pelle was conscious of his own importance when Ole carefully lifted the sack from his back. He leaned for a moment over towards the wall before he regained his balance; the ground was so strange to tread upon now he was rid of his burden; it pushed him away. But his face was radiant.

Gustav opened the sack, which was securely closed, and shook out its contents upon the stone pavement. They were pieces of brick, a couple of old ploughshares, and other similar things. Pelle stared in bewilderment and fear at the rubbish, looking as if he had just dropped from another planet; but when laughter broke out on all sides, he understood what it all meant, and crouching down, hid his face in his hands. He would not cry—not for the world; they should not have that satisfaction. He was sobbing in his heart, but he kept his lips tightly closed. His body tingled with rage. The beasts! The wicked devils! Suddenly he kicked Gustav on the leg.

"Aha, so he kicks, does he?" exclaimed Gustav, lifting him up into the air. "Do you want to see a little imp from Smaaland?" Pelle covered his face with his arms and kicked to be let down; and he also made an attempt to bite. "Eh, and he bites too, the little devil!" Gustav had to hold him firmly so as to manage him. He held him by the collar, pressing his knuckles against the boy's throat and making him gasp, while he spoke with derisive gentleness. "A clever youngster this! He's scarcely out of long clothes, and wants to fight already!" Gustav went on tormenting him; it looked as if he were making a display of his superior strength.

"Well, now we've seen that you're the strongest," said the head man at last, "so let him go!" and when Gustav did not respond immediately, he received a blow from a clenched fist between his shoulder-blades. Then the boy was released, and went over to the stable to Lasse, who had seen the whole thing, but had not dared to approach. He could do nothing, and his presence would only have done harm.

"Yes, and then there's our outing, laddie," he explained, by way of excuse, while he was comforting the boy. "I

could very well thrash a puppy like Gustav, but if I did we shouldn't get away this evening, for he wouldn't do our work. And none of the others either, for they all stick together like burrs. But you can do it yourself! I verily believe you'd kick the devil himself, right on his club-foot! Well, well, it was well done, but you must be careful not to waste your powder and shot. It doesn't pay!"

The boy was not so easily comforted now. Deep down in his heart the remembrance of his injury lay and pained him, because he had acted in such good faith, and they had wounded him in his ready, cheerful confidence. What had happened had also stung his pride; he had walked into a trap, made a fool of himself for them. The incident burnt into his soul, and greatly influenced his subsequent development. He had already found out that a person's word was not always to be relied upon, and he had made awkward attempts to get behind it. Now he would trust nobody straight away any more; and he had discovered how the secret was to be found out. You only had to look at people's eyes when they said anything. Both here and at Kaase Farm the people had looked so strange about the handle-turner, as if they were laughing inside. And the bailiff had laughed that time when he promised them roast pork and stewed rhubarb every day. They hardly ever got anything but herring and porridge. People talked with two tongues; Father Lasse was the only one who did not do it.

Pelle began to be observant of his own face. It was the face that spoke, and that was why it went badly with him when he tried to escape a thrashing by telling a white lie. And to-day's misfortune had been the fault of his face; if you felt happy, you mustn't show it. He had discovered the danger of letting his mind lie open, and his

small organism set to work diligently to grow hard skin to draw over its vital parts.

After supper they set off across the fields, hand in hand as usual. As a rule, Pelle chattered unceasingly when they were by themselves; but this evening he was quieter. The event of the afternoon was still in his mind, and the coming visit gave him a feeling of solemnity.

Lasse carried a red bundle in his hand, in which was a bottle of black-currant rum, which they had got Per Olsen to buy in the town the day before, when he had been in to swear himself free. It had cost sixty-six öres, and Pelle was turning something over in his mind, but did not know whether it would do.

"Father!" he said at last. "Mayn't I carry that a little way?"

"Gracious! Are you crazy, boy? It's an expensive article! And you might drop it."

"I wouldn't drop it. Well, only hold it for a little then? Mayn't I, father? Oh do, father!"

"Eh, what an idea! I don't know what you'll be like soon, if you aren't stopped! Upon my word, I think you must be ill, you're getting so tiresome!" And Lasse went on crossly for a little while, but then stopped and bent down over the boy.

"Hold it then, you little silly, but be very careful! And you mustn't move a single step while you've got it, mind!"

Pelle clasped the bottle to his body with his arms, for he dared not trust his hands, and pushed out his stomach as far as possible to support it. Lasse stood with his hands extended underneath the bottle, ready to catch it if it fell.

"There! That'll do!" he said anxiously, and took the bottle.

"It *is* heavy!" said Pelle, admiringly, and went on contentedly, holding his father's hand.

"But why had he to swear himself free?" he suddenly asked.

"Because he was accused by a girl of being the father of her child. Haven't you heard about it?"

Pelle nodded. "Isn't he, then? Everybody says he is."

"I can hardly believe it; it would be certain damnation for Per Olsen. But, of course, the girl says it's him and no one else. Ah me! Girls are dangerous playthings! You must take care when your time comes, for they can bring misfortune upon the best of men."

"How do you swear, then? Do you say 'Devil take me'?"

Lasse could not help laughing. "No, indeed! That wouldn't be very good for those that swear false. No, you see, in the court all God's highest ministers are sitting round a table that's exactly like a horse-shoe, and beyond that again there's an altar with the crucified Christ Himself upon it. On the altar lies a big, big book that's fastened to the wall with an iron chain, so that the devil can't carry it off in the night, and that's God's Holy Word. When a man swears, he lays his left hand upon the book, and holds up his right hand with three fingers in the air; they're God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. But if he swears false, the Governor can see it at once, because then there are red spots of blood on the leaves of the book."

"And what then?" asked Pelle, with deep interest.

"Well, then his three fingers wither, and it goes on eating itself into his body. People like that suffer frightfully; they rot right away."

"Don't they go to hell, then?"

"Yes, they do that too, except when they give

themselves up and take their punishment, and then they escape in the next life; but they can't escape withering away."

"Why doesn't the Governor take them himself and punish them, when he can see in that book that they swore false?"

"Why, because then they'd get off going to hell, and there's an agreement with Satan that he's to have all those that don't give themselves up, don't you see?"

Pelle shuddered, and for a little while walked on in silence beside his father; but when he next spoke, he had forgotten all about it.

"I suppose Uncle Kalle's rich, isn't he?" he asked.

"He can't be rich, but he's a land-owner, and that's not a little thing!" Lasse himself had never attained to more than renting land.

"When I grow up, I mean to have a great big farm," said Pelle, with decision.

"Yes, I've no doubt you will," said Lasse, laughing. Not that he also did not expect something great of the boy, if not exactly a large farmer. There was no saying, however. Perhaps some farmer's daughter might fall in love with him; the men of his family generally had an attraction for women. Several of them had given proof of it—his brother, for instance, who had taken the fancy of a parson's wife. Then Pelle would have to make the most of his opportunity so that the family would be ashamed to oppose the match. And Pelle was good enough. He had that "cow's-lick" on his forehead, fine hair at the back of his neck, and a birth-mark on his hip; and that all betokened luck. Lasse went on talking to himself as he walked, calculating the boy's future with large, round figures, that yielded a little for him too; for, however great his future might be, it would surely come in time to

allow of Lasse's sharing and enjoying it in his very old age.

They went across country towards the stone-quarry, following stone dikes and snow-filled ditches, and working their way through the thicket of blackthorn and juniper, behind which lay the rocks and "the Heath." They made their way right into the quarry, and tried in the darkness to find the place where the dross was thrown, for that would be where the stone-breaking went on.

A sound of hammering came from the upper end of the ground, and they discovered lights in several places. Beneath a sloping straw screen, from which hung a lantern, sat a little, broad man, hammering away at the fragments. He worked with peculiar vivacity—struck three blows and pushed the stones to one side, another three blows, and again to one side; and while with one hand he pushed the pieces away, with the other he placed a fresh fragment in position on the stone. It went as busily and evenly as the ticking of a watch.

"Why, if that isn't Brother Kalle sitting there!" said Lasse, in a voice of surprise as great as if the meeting were a miracle from heaven. "Good evening, Kalle Karlsson! How are you?"

The stone-breaker looked up.

"Oh, there you are, brother!" he said, rising with difficulty; and the two greeted one another as if they had met only the day before. Kalle collected his tools and laid the screen down upon them while they talked.

"So you break stones too? Does that bring in anything?" asked Lasse.

"Oh, not very much. We get twelve krones a 'fathom,' and when I work with a lantern morning and evening, I can break half a fathom in a week. It doesn't pay for beer, but we live anyhow. But it's awfully cold work;

you can't keep warm at it, and you get so stiff with sitting fifteen hours on the cold stone—as stiff as if you were the father of the whole world." He was walking stiffly in front of the others across the heath towards a low, hump-backed cottage.

"Ah, there comes the moon, now there's no use for it!" said Kalle, whose spirits were beginning to rise. "And, my word, what a sight the old dormouse looks! He must have been at a New Year's feast in heaven."

"You're the same merry devil that you were in the old days," said Lasse.

"Well, good spirits'll soon be the only thing to be had without paying for."

The wall of the house stuck out in a large round lump on one side, and Pelle had to go up to it to feel it all over. It was most mysterious what there might be on the other side—perhaps a secret chamber? He pulled his father's hand inquiringly.

"That? That's the oven where they bake their bread," said Lasse. "It's put there to make more room."

After inviting them to enter, Kalle put his head in at a door that led from the kitchen to the cowshed. "Hi, Maria! You must put your best foot foremost!" he called in a low voice. "The midwife's here!"

"What in the world does *she* want? It's a story, you old fool!" And the sound of milk squirting into the pail began again.

"A story, is it? No, but you must come in and go to bed; she says it's high time you did. You are keeping up much too long this year. Mind what you say," he whispered into the cowshed, "for she is really here! And be quick!"

They went into the room, and Kalle went groping about to light a candle. Twice he took up the matches and dropped them again to light it at the fire, but the peat

was burning badly. "Oh, bother!" he said, resolutely striking a match at last. "We don't have visitors every day."

"Your wife's Danish," said Lasse, admiringly. "And you've got a cow too!"

"Yes, it's a biggish place here," said Kalle, drawing himself up. "There's a cat belonging to the establishment too, and as many rats as it cares to eat."

His wife now appeared, breathless, and looking in astonishment at the visitors.

"Yes, the midwife's gone again," said Kalle. "She hadn't time to-day; we must put it off till another time. But these are important strangers, so you must blow your nose with your fingers before you give them your hand!"

"Oh, you old humbug! You can't take me in. It's Lasse, of course, and Pelle!" And she held out her hand. She was short, like her husband, was always smiling, and had bowed arms and legs just as he had. Hard work and their cheerful temperament gave them both a rotund appearance.

"There are no end of children here," said Lasse, looking about him. There were three in the turn-up bedstead under the window—two small ones at one end, and a long, twelve-year-old boy at the other, his black feet sticking out between the little girls' heads; and other beds were made up on chairs, in an old kneading-trough, and on the floor.

"Ye-es; we've managed to scrape together a few," said Kalle, running about in vain to get something for his visitors to sit upon; everything was being used as beds. "You'll have to spit on the floor and sit down on that," he said laughing.

His wife came in, however, with a washing-bench and an empty beer-barrel.

"Sit you down and rest," she said, placing the seats round the table. "And you must really excuse it, but the children must be somewhere."

Kalle squeezed himself in and sat down upon the edge of the turn-up bedstead. "Yes, we've managed to scrape together a few," he repeated. "You must provide for your old age while you have the strength. We've made up the dozen, and started on the next. It wasn't exactly our intention, but mother's gone and taken us in." He scratched the back of his head, and looked the picture of despair.

His wife was standing in the middle of the room. "Let's hope it won't be twins this time too," she said laughing.

"Why, that would be a great saving, as we shall have to send for the midwife anyhow. People say of mother," he went on, "that when she's put the children to bed she has to count them to make sure they're all there; but that's not true, because she can't count farther than ten."

Here a baby in the alcove began to cry, and the mother took it up and seated herself on the edge of the turn-up bedstead to nurse it. "And this is the smallest," she said, holding it out towards Lasse, who put a crooked finger down its neck.

"What a little fatty!" he said softly; he was fond of children. "And what's its name?"

"She's called Dozena Endina, because when she came we thought that was to be the last; and she was the twelfth too."

"Dozena Endina! That's a mighty fine name!" exclaimed Lasse. "It sounds exactly as if she might be a princess."

"Yes, and the one before's called Ellen—from eleven, of course. That's her in the kneading-trough," said Kalle. "The one before that again is Tentius, and then Nina, and