

VIII

OH! what a pace she was driving at! The farmer whipped up the grey stallion, and sat looking steadily out over the fields, as if he had no suspicion that any one was following him; but his wife certainly did not mind. She whipped the bay as hard as she could, and did not care who saw her.

And it was in broad daylight that they were playing the fool like this on the high-road, instead of keeping their quarrels within four walls as decent people did! It was true enough that gentle folks had no feeling of shame in them!

Then she called out and stood up in the trap to beat the horse—with the handle even! Couldn't she let him drive out in peace to his fair charmer, whoever she was, and make it warm for him when he came home? How could she do the same thing over and over again for twenty years? Really women were persevering creatures!

And how *he* could be bothered! Having everlasting disturbances at home for the sake of some hotel landlady or some other woman, who could not be so very different to be with than his own wife! It would take a long-suffering nature to be a brute in that way; but that must be what they call love, properly speaking!

The threshing-machine had come to a standstill, and the people at Stone Farm were hanging out of the doors and windows, enjoying it royally. It was a race, and a sight for the gods to see the bay mare gaining upon the stallion;

why, it was like having two Sundays in one week! Lasse had come round the corner, and was following the mad race, his hand shading his eyes. Never had he known such a woman; Bengta was a perfect lamb compared to her! The farmer at Kaase Farm, who was standing at his gate when they dashed past, was secretly of the same opinion; and the workers in the fields dropped their implements, stared and were scandalised at the sight.

At last, for very shame, he had to stop and turn round. She crawled over into his carriage, and the bay followed quietly with her empty vehicle. She put her arm about his shoulder, and looked happy and triumphant, exactly like the district policeman when he has had a successful chase; but he looked like a criminal of the worst kind. In this way they came driving back to the farm.

One day Kalle came to borrow ten kronas and to invite Lasse and Pelle to the christening-party on the following Sunday. Lasse, with some difficulty, obtained the money from the bailiff up in the office, but to the invitation they had to say "No, thank you," hard though it was; it was quite out of the question for them to get off again. Another day the head man had disappeared. He had gone in the night, and had taken his big chest with him, so some one must have helped him; but the other men in the room swore solemnly that they had noticed nothing, and the bailiff, fume as he might, was obliged to give up the attempt to solve the mystery.

One or two things of this kind happened that made a stir for a day or two, but with these exceptions the winter was hard to get through. Darkness ruled for the greater part of the twenty-four hours, and it was never quite light in the corners. The cold, too, was hard to bear, except when you were in the comfortable stable. In there it was

always warm, and Pelle was not afraid of going about in the thickest darkness. In the servants' room they sat moping through the long evenings without anything to occupy themselves with. They took very little notice of the girls, but sat playing cards for gin, or telling horrible stories that made it a most venturesome thing to run across the yard down to the stable when you had to go to bed.

Per Olsen, on account of his good behaviour, was raised to the position of head man when the other ran away. Lasse and Pelle were glad of this, for he took their part when they were put upon by any one. He had become a decent fellow in every respect, hardly ever touched spirits, and kept his clothes in good order. He was a little too quiet even for the old day-labourers of the farm and their wives; but they knew the reason of it and liked him because he took the part of the weak and because of the fate that hung over him. They said he was always listening; and when he seemed to be listening within to the unknown, they avoided as far as possible disturbing him.

"You'll see he'll free himself; the Evil One'll have no claim upon him," was the opinion of both Lasse and the labourers' wives when they discussed Per Olsen's prospects at the Sunday milking. "There are some people that even the Almighty can't find anything to blame for."

Pelle listened to this, and tried every day to peep at the scar on Per Olsen's thumb. It would surely disappear when God removed his judgment!

During most of the winter Pelle drove the horse for the threshing-machine. All day he trotted round upon the horse-way outside the farm, over his wooden shoes in trodden-down snow and manure. It was the most intolerable occupation that life had yet offered him. He could not even carve, it was too cold for his fingers; and

he felt lonely. As a herd-boy he was his own master, and a thousand things called to him; but here he had to go round and round behind a bar, always round. His one diversion was to keep count of the times he drove round, but that was a fatiguing employment and made you even duller than the everlasting going round, and you could not leave off. Time held nothing of interest, and short as it was the day seemed endless.

As a rule, Pelle awoke happy, but now every morning when he woke he was weary of everything; it was to be that everlasting trudging round behind the bar. After a time doing this for about an hour used to make him fall into a state of half-sleep. The condition came of itself, and he longed for it before it came. It was a kind of vacuity, in which he wished for nothing and took no interest in anything, but only staggered along mechanically at the back of the bar. The machine buzzed unceasingly, and helped to maintain the condition; the dust kept pouring out at the window, and the time passed imperceptibly. Generally now dinner or evening surprised him, and sometimes it seemed to him that the horses had only just been harnessed when some one came out to help him in with them. He had arrived at the condition of torpor that is the only mercy that life vouchsafes to condemned prisoners and people who spend their lives beside a machine. But there was a sleepiness about him even in his free time; he was not so lively and eager to know about everything; Father Lasse missed his innumerable questions and little devices.

Now and again he was roused for a moment out of his condition by the appearance at the window of a black, perspiring face, that swore at him because he was not driving evenly. He knew then that Long Ole had taken the place of Per Olsen, whose business it was to feed the

machine. It sometimes happened, too, that the lash of the whip caught on the axle and wound round it, so that the whole thing had to be stopped and drawn backwards; and that day he did not fall into a doze again.

In March the larks appeared and brought a little life. Snow still lay in the hollows, but their singing reminded Pelle warmly of summer and grazing cattle. And one day he was wakened in his tramp round and round by seeing a starling on the roof of the house, whistling and preening its feathers in delight. On that day the sun shone brightly, and all heaviness was gone from the air; but the sea was still a pale grey down there.

Pelle began to be a human being again. It was spring, and then, too, in a couple of days the threshing would be finished. But after all, the chief thing was that waistcoat-pocket of his; that was enough to put life into its owner. He ran round in a trot behind the bar; he had to drive quickly now in order to get done, for every one else was in the middle of spring ploughing already. When he pressed his hand against his chest, he could distinctly feel the paper it was wrapped in. For it was still there, wasn't it? It would not do to open the paper and look; he must find out by squeezing.

Pelle had become the owner of fifty öres—a perfectly genuine fifty-öre piece. It was the first time he had ever possessed anything more than two and one öre pieces, and he had earned it by his own cleverness.

It was on Sunday, when the men had had a visit from some quarrymen, and one of them had hit upon the idea of sending for some birch-fat to have with their dram. Pelle was to run to the village shop for it, and he was given a half-krone and injunctions to go in the back way, as it was Sunday. Pelle had not forgotten his experience at Christmas, and kept watch upon their faces. They

were all doing their best to smooth them out and busy themselves with one thing and another; and Gustav, who gave him the money, kept turning his face away and looking at something out in the yard.

When he stated his errand, the shopman's wife broke into a laugh. "I say, don't you know better than that?" she exclaimed. "Why, wasn't it you who fetched the handle-turner too? You've all found that very useful, haven't you?"

Pelle turned crimson. "I thought they were making fun of me, but I didn't dare say no," he said in a low voice.

"No, one has to play the fool sometimes, whether one is it or not," said the woman.

"What is birch-fat, then?" asked Pelle.

"Why, my gracious! You must have had it many a time, you little imp! But it shows how often you have to put up with things you don't know the name of."

A light dawned upon Pelle. "Does it mean a thrashing with a birch-rod?"

"Didn't I say you knew it?"

"No, I've only had it with a whip—on my legs."

"Well, well, you needn't mind that; the one may be just as good as the other. But now sit down and drink a cup of coffee while I wrap up the article for them." She pushed a cup of coffee with brown sugar towards him, and began ladling out soft soap on to a piece of paper. "Here," she said. "You give them that: it's the best birch-fat. And you can keep the money yourself."

Pelle was not courageous enough for this arrangement.

"Very well, then," she said. "I'll keep the money for you. They shan't make fools of us both. And then you can get it yourself. But now you must put on a bold face."

Pelle did put on a bold face, but he was decidedly

nervous. The men swore at the loss of the half-krone, and called him the "greatest idiot upon God's green earth"; but he had the satisfaction of knowing that that was because he had not been stupid enough. And the half-krone was his!

A hundred times a day he felt it without wearing it out. Here at last was something the possession of which did not rob it of its lustre. There was no end to the purchases he made with it, now for Lasse, now for himself. He bought the dearest things, and when he lingered long enough over one purchase and was satiated with the possession of it, he set about buying something else. And all the while he kept the coin. At times he would be suddenly seized with an insane fear that the money was gone; and then when he felt it, he was doubly happy.

Pelle had suddenly become a capitalist, and by his own cleverness; and he made the most of his capital. He had already obtained every desirable thing that he knew of—he had it all, at any rate, in hand; and gradually as new things made their appearance in his world, he secured for himself the right to their purchase. Lasse was the only person who knew about his wealth, and he had reluctantly to allow himself to be drawn into the wildest of speculations.

He could hear by the sound that there was something wrong with the machine. The horses heard it too, and stopped even before some one cried "Stop!" Then one after another came the shouts: "Stop! Drive on! Stop! On again! Stop! Pull!" And Pelle pulled the bar back, drove on and pulled until the whole thing whizzed again. Then he knew that it was Long Ole feeding the machine while Per Olsen measured the grain: Ole was a duffer at feeding.

It was going smoothly again, and Pelle was keeping an eye on the corner by the cow-stable. When Lasse made his appearance there, and patted his stomach, it meant that it was nearly dinner-time.

Something stopped the bar, the horses had to pull hard, and with a jerk it cleared the invisible hindrance. There was a cry from the inside of the threshing-barn, and the sound of many voices shouting "Stop!" The horses stopped dead, and Pelle had to seize the bar to prevent it swinging forward against their legs. It was some time before any one came out and took the horses in, so that Pelle could go into the barn and see what was the matter.

He found Long Ole walking about and writhing over one of his hands. His blouse was wrapped about it, but the blood was dripping through on to the floor of the barn. He was bending forward and stumbling along, throwing his body from side to side and talking incoherently. The girls, pale and frightened, were standing gazing at him while the men were quarrelling as to what was the best thing to do to stop the flow of blood, and one of them came sliding down from the loft with a handful of cobwebs.

Pelle went and peered into the machine to find out what there was so voracious about it. Between two of the teeth lay something like a peg, and when he moved the roller, the greater part of a finger dropped down on to the barn-floor. He picked it up among some chaff, and took it to the others: it was a thumb! When Long Ole saw it, he fainted; it could hardly be wondered at, seeing that he was maimed for life. But Per Olsen had to own that he had left the machine at a fortunate moment.

There was no more threshing done that day. In the afternoon Pelle played in the stable, for he had nothing to do. While he played, he suggested plans for their future to his father: they were engrossed in it.

"Then we'll go to America, and dig for gold!"

"Ye-es, that wouldn't be a bad thing at all. But it would take a good many more half-krones to make that journey."

"Then we can set up as stone-masons."

Lasse stood still in the middle of the foddering-passage, and pondered with bent head. He was exceedingly dissatisfied with their position; there were two of them toiling to earn a hundred krones, and they could not make ends meet. There was never any liberty either; they were simply slaves. By himself he never got any farther than being discontented and disappointed with everything; he was too old. The mere search for ways to something new was insuperable labour, and everything looked so hopeless. But Pelle was restless, and whenever he was dissatisfied with anything, made plans by the score, some of the wildest, and some fairly sensible; and the old man was carried away by them.

"We might go to the town and work too," said Lasse, meditatively. "They earn one bright krone after another in there. But what's to be done with you? You're too little to use a tool."

This stubborn fact put a stop for the moment to Pelle's plans; but then his courage rose again. "I can quite well go with you to the town," he said. "For I shall——" He nodded significantly.

"What?" asked Lasse, with interest.

"Well, perhaps I'll go down to the harbour and be doing nothing, and a little girl'll fall into the water and I shall save her. But the little girl will be a gentleman's daughter, and so——" Pelle left the rest to Lasse's imagination.

"Then you'd have to learn to swim first," said Lasse, gravely. "Or you'd only be drowned."

Screams were heard from the men's bedroom. It was Long Ole. The doctor had come and was busy with his maimed hand. "Just run across and find out what'll happen to it!" said Lasse. "Nobody'll pay any attention to you at such a time, if you make yourself small."

In a little while Pelle came back and reported that three fingers were quite crushed and hanging in rags, and the doctor had cut them off.

"Was it these three?" asked Lasse, anxiously, holding up his thumb, fore-finger, and middle finger. Truth to tell, Pelle had seen nothing, but his imagination ran away with him.

"Yes, it was his swearing-fingers," he said, nodding emphatically.

"Then Per Olsen is set free," said Lasse, heaving a deep sigh. "What a *good* thing it has been—quite providential!"

That was Pelle's opinion too.

The farmer himself drove the doctor home, and a little while after he had gone, Pelle was sent for, to go on an errand for the mistress to the village-shop.