

could not continue to exist side by side with his increasing decrepitude; in the boy's eyes it crumbled away from day to day. Unwilling though he was, Pelle had to let go his providence, and seek the means of protection in himself. It was rather early, but he looked at circumstances in his own way. Distrust he had already acquired—and timidity! He daily made clumsy attempts to get behind what people said, and behind things. There was something more behind everything! It often led to confusion, but occasionally the result was conspicuously good.

There were some thrashings that you could run away from, because in the meantime the anger would pass away, and other thrashings where it answered best to shed as many tears as possible. Most people only beat until the tears came, but the bailiff could not endure a blubberer, so with him the thing was to set your teeth and make yourself hard. People said you should speak the truth, but most thrashings could be avoided by making up a white lie, if it was a good one and you took care of your face. If you told the truth, they thrashed you at once.

With regard to thrashing, the question had a subjective side as well as an objective one. He could beat Rud whenever he liked, but with bigger boys it was better to have right on his side, as, for instance, when his father was attacked. Then God helped him. This was a case in which the boy put the omnipotence quite aside, and felt himself to be the old man's protector.

Lasse and Pelle were walking through life hand in hand, and yet each was going his own way. Lasse felt it to be so. "We've each got hold of an end," he sometimes said to himself despondently, when the difference was all too marked. "He's rising, the laddie!"

This was best seen in the others. In the long run they

IX

It was nothing for Pelle; if he were vanquished on one point, he rose again on two others: he was invincible. And he had the child's abundant capacity for forgiving; had he not he would have hated all grown-up people with the exception of Father Lasse. But disappointed he certainly was!

It was not easy to say who had expected most—the boy, whose childish imagination had built, unchecked, upon all that he had heard, or the old man, who had once been here himself.

But Pelle managed to fill his own existence with interest, and was so taken up on all sides that he only just had time to realise the disappointment in passing. His world was supersensual like that of the fakir; in the course of a few minutes a little seed could shoot up and grow into a huge tree that overshadowed everything else. Cause never answered to effect in it, and it was governed by another law of gravitation: events always bore him up.

However hard reality might press upon him, he always emerged from the tight place the richer in some way or other; and no danger could ever become overwhelmingly great as long as Father Lasse stood reassuringly over and behind everything.

But—Lasse had failed him at the decisive moment more than once, and every time he used him as a threat, he was only laughed at. The old man's omnipotence

had to like the boy, it could not be otherwise. The men would sometimes give him things, and the girls were thoroughly kind to him. He was in the fairest period of budding youth; they would often take him on their knee as he passed, and kiss him.

"Ah, he'll be a lady's man, he will!" Lasse would say. "He's got that from his father." But they would laugh at that.

There was always laughter when Lasse wanted to join the elders. Last time—yes, then he was good enough. It was always "Where's Lasse?" when gin was going round, or tricks were being played, or demonstrations made. "Call Lasse Karlsson!" He had no need to push himself forward; it was a matter of course that he was there. The girls were always on the look-out for him, married man though he was, and he had fun with them—all quite proper, of course, for Bengta was not good to quarrel with if she heard anything.

But now! Yes—well, yes—he might fetch the gin for the others and do their work for them when they had a holiday, without their doing anything in exchange! "Lasse! Where's Lasse? Can you feed the horses for me this evening? Can you take my place at the chaff-cutting to-morrow evening?"

There was a difference between then and now, and Lasse had found out the reason for himself: he was getting old. The very discovery brought further proof of its correctness, laid infirmity upon him, and removed the tension from his mind, and what was left of it from his body. The hardest blow of all was when he discovered that he was of no importance to the girls, had no place at all in their thoughts of men. In Lasse's world there was no word that carried such weight as the word "man"; and in the end it was the girls who decided whether you

were one or not. Lasse was not one; he was not dangerous! He was only a few poor relics of a man, a comical remnant of some by-gone thing; they laughed at him when he tried to pay them attention.

Their laughter crushed him, and he withdrew into his old-man's world, and despondently adapted himself to it. The only thing that kept life in him was his concern for the boy, and he clung despairingly to his position as his providence. There was little he could do for him, and therefore he talked all the bigger; and when anything went against the boy, he uttered still greater threats against the world than before. He also felt that the boy was in process of making himself independent, and fought a desperate battle to preserve the last appearance of power.

But Pelle could not afford to give support to his fancy, nor had he the understanding to do it. He was growing fast, and had a use for all that he possessed himself. Now that his father no longer stood behind to shield him, he was like a small plant that has been moved out into the open, and is fighting hard to comprehend the nature of its surroundings, and adapt itself to them. For every root-fibre that felt its way into the soil, there fell to the ground one of the tender leaves, and two strong ones pushed forth. One after another the feelings of the child's defencelessness dropped and gave place to the harder ones of the individual.

The boy was engaged in building himself up, in accordance with invisible laws. He assumed an attitude towards his surroundings at all points, but he did not imitate them. The farm men, for instance, were not kind to the animals. They often lashed the horses only as a vent for their ill-humour, and the girls were just the same to the smaller animals and the dairy-cows. From these considerations, Pelle taught himself sympathy. He could not

bear cruelty to animals, and thrashed Rud for the first time when the latter had one day robbed a bird's nest.

Pelle was like a kid that makes a plaything of everything. In his play he took up, without suspecting it, many of the serious phenomena of life, and gambolled with them in frolicsome bounds. He exercised his small mind as he exercised his body, twisted himself into everything and out of everything, imitated work and fun and shirking, and learned how to puff himself up into a very devil of a fellow where his surroundings were yielding, and to make himself almost invisible with modesty when they were hard. He was training himself to be that little Jack-of-all-trades, man.

And it became more and more difficult to catch him unprepared. The first time he had to set about a thing in earnest, he was generally handy at it; he was as difficult to take unawares as a cat.

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It was summer again. The heat stood still and played over the ground, sparkling, with indolent voluptuousness and soft movements like the fish in the stream. Far inland it quivered above the rocks that bounded the view, in a restless flicker of bluish white; below lay the fields beneath the broiling sun, with the pollen from the rye drifting over them like smoke. Up above the clover-field stood the cows of Stone Farm in long rows, their heads hanging heavily down, and their tails swinging regularly. Lasse was moving between their ranks, looking for the mallet, and now and then gazing anxiously down towards the meadow by the dunes, and beginning to count the young cattle and the bullocks. Most of them were lying down, but a few of them were standing with their heads close together, and munching with closed eyes. The boys were nowhere to be seen.

Lasse stood wondering whether he should give Pelle a warning call; there would be no end of a row if the bailiff were to come now. But then the sound of voices came from among the young firs on the dunes, a naked boy appeared, and then another. Their bodies were like golden flashes in the air as they ran over the grass-wrack and across the meadow, each with his cap held closed in his hand.

They sat down upon the edge of the stream with their feet in the water, and carefully uncovered their captives; they were dragon-flies. As the insects one by one crawled out at the narrow opening, the boys decapitated them and laid them in a row on the grass. They had caught nine, and nine times thirty-five—well, it would be more than three kronas. The stupendous amount made Pelle sceptical.

"Now isn't that only a lie?" he said, and licked his shoulder where he had been bitten by a mosquito. It was said that the chemist gave thirty-five öres apiece for dragon-flies.

"A lie?" exclaimed Rud. "Yes, perhaps it is," he went on meekly. "It must be a lie, for anything like that always is. You might give me yours too!"

But Pelle would not do that.

"Then give me your half-krona, and I'll go to the town and sell them for you. They cost thirty-five öres, for Karl says so, and his mother washes the floor in the chemist's shop."

Pelle got up, not to fetch the half-krona—he would not part with that for all the world—but to assure himself that it still lay in his waistcoat pocket.

When he had gone a little way, Rud hastily lifted a piece of turf at the edge of the stream, pushed something

in under it, and jumped into the water; and when Pelle came back with slow, ominous steps, he climbed up the other side and set off at a run.

Pelle ran too, in short, quick leaps. He knew he was the quicker, and the knowledge made him frolicsome. He flapped at his naked body as he ran, as if he had no joints, swayed from side to side like a balloon, pranced and stamped on the ground, and then darted on again. Then the young firs closed round them again, only the movement of their tops showing where the boys ran, farther and farther, until all was still.

In the meadow the cattle were munching with closed eyes and attentive ears. The heat played over the ground, flickering, gasping, like a fish in water. There was a heavy, stupefying humming in the air; the sound came from everywhere and nowhere.

Down across the cornfields came a big, stout woman. She wore a skirt, a chemise, and a handkerchief on her head, and she shaded her eyes with her hand and looked about. She crossed the meadow obliquely, found Pelle's dinner-basket, took out its contents and put them in under her chemise upon her bare, perspiring bosom, and then turned in the direction of the sea.

There was a sudden break in the edge of the fir-plantation, and out came Rud with Pelle hanging upon his back. Rud's inordinately large head hung forwards and his knees gave way; his forehead, which receded above the eyes and projected just below the line of the hair, was a mass of bruises and scars, which became very visible now with his exertions. Both the boys had marks all over their bodies from the poison of the pine-needles. Pelle dropped on to the grass, and lay there on his face, while Rud went slowly to fetch the half-krone, and handed it reluctantly to its owner. He stooped like one vanquished,

but in his eye the thought of a new battle lay awaiting its opportunity.

Pelle gazed lovingly at the coin. He had had it now ever since April, from the time when he was sent to buy birch-fat. He had purchased with it everything that was desirable, and he had lost it twice: he loved that piece of money. It made his fingers itch, his whole body; it was always urging him on to spend it, now in one way and now in another. Roll, roll! That was what it was longing to do; and it was because it was round, Father Lasse said. But to become rich—that meant stopping the money as it rolled. Oh, Pelle meant to be rich! And then he was always itching to spend it—spend it in such a way that he got everything for it, or something he could have all his life.

They sat upon the bank of the stream and wrangled in a small way. Rud did his best to inspire awe, and bragged to create an impression. He bent his fingers backwards and moved his ears; he could move them forward in a listening position like a horse. All this irritated Pelle intensely.

Suddenly he stopped. "Won't you give me the half-krone, then? You shall have ten kroners when I grow up." Rud collected money—he was avaricious already—and had a whole boxful of coins that he had stolen from his mother.

Pelle considered a little. "No," he said. "Because you'll never grow up; you're a dwarf!" The tone of his voice was one of sheer envy.

"That's what the Sow says too! But then I'll show myself for money at the fairs and on Midsummer Eve on the common. Then I shall get frightfully rich."

Pelle was inwardly troubled. Should he give him the whole fifty öres for nothing at all? He had never heard of

any one doing such a thing. And perhaps some day, when Rud had become enormously rich, he would get half of it. "Will you have it?" he asked, but regretted it instantly.

Rud stretched out his hand eagerly, but Pelle spat into it. "It can wait until we've had our dinner anyhow," he said, and went over to the basket. For a little while they stood gazing into the empty basket.

"The Sow's been here," said Rud, putting out his tongue.

Pelle nodded. "She *is* a beast!"

"A thief," said Rud.

They took the sun's measure. Rud declared that if you could see it when you bent down and looked between your legs, then it was five o'clock. Pelle began to put on his clothes.

Rud was circling about him. "I say!" he said, suddenly. "If I may have it, I'll let you whip me with nettles."

"On your bare body?" asked Pelle.

Rud nodded.

In a second Pelle was out of his trousers again, and running to a patch of nettles. He pulled them up with the assistance of a dock-leaf, as many as he could hold, and came back again. Rud lay down, face downwards, on a little mound, and the whipping began.

The agreement was a hundred strokes, but when Rud had received ten, he got up and refused to have any more.

"Then you won't get the money," said Pelle. "Will you or won't you?" He was red with excitement and the exertion, and the perspiration already stood in beads down his slender back, for he had worked with a will. "Will you or won't you? Seventy-five strokes then!"

Pelle's voice quivered with eagerness, and he had to dilate his nostrils to get air enough; his limbs began to tremble.

"No—only sixty—you hit so hard! And I must have the money first, or you may cheat me."

"I don't cheat," said Pelle, gloomily. But Rud held to his point.

Pelle's body writhed; he was like a ferret that has tasted blood. With a jerk he threw the coin at Rud, and grumbling pushed him down. He wept inwardly because he had let him off forty strokes; but he made up his mind to lay into him all the harder for it.

Then he beat, slowly and with all his might, while Rud burrowed with his head in the grass and clasped the money tightly to keep up his strength. There was hatred in every stroke that Pelle struck, and they went like shocks through his playmate's body, but he never uttered a cry. No, there was no point in his crying, for the coin he held in his hand took away the pain. But about Pelle's body the air burnt like fire, his arms began to give way with fatigue, and his inclination diminished with every stroke. It was toil, nothing but hard toil. And the money—the beautiful half-krone—was slipping farther and farther away, and he would be poor once more; and Rud was not even crying! At the forty-sixth stroke he turned his face and put out his tongue, whereat Pelle burst into a roar, threw down the frayed nettle-stalks, and ran away to the fir-plantation.

There he sat for the rest of the day under a dune, grieving over his loss, while Rud lay under the bank of the stream, bathing his blistered body with wet earth.