

surroundings, and one fine day he had thrown aside all injunctions and intentions, and dived into the midst of the fun.

After this he had less information to impart, but on the other hand there were the thousands of knavish tricks to tell about. And Father Lasse shook his head and comprehended nothing ; but he could not help laughing.

XI

"A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and wea—pon ;
He'll help us clear from all the ill
That hath us now o'erta—ken.
The ancient prince of hell
Hath risen with purpose fell ;
Strong mail of craft and power
He weareth in this hour ;
On earth is not his fel—low."

THE whole school sat swaying backwards and forwards in time to the rhythm, grinding out hymns in endless succession. Fris, the master, was walking up and down the middle passage, smoking his pipe ; he was taking exercise after an hour's reading of the paper. He was using the cane to beat time with, now and then letting it descend upon the back of an offender, but always only at the end of a line—as a kind of note of admiration. Fris could not bear to have the rhythm broken. The children who did not know the hymn were carried along by the crowd, some of them contenting themselves with moving their lips, while others made up words of their own. When the latter were too dreadful, their neighbours laughed, and then the cane descended.

When one verse came to an end, Fris quickly started the next ; for the mill was hard to set in motion again

when once it had come to a standstill. "With for—!" and the half-hundred children carried it on—

"With force of arms we nothing can,
Full soon were we downrid—den;"

Then Fris had another breathing-space in which to enjoy his pipe and be lulled by this noise that spoke of great and industrious activity. When things went as they were now going, his exasperation calmed down for a time, and he could smile at his thoughts as he paced up and down, and, old though he was, look at the bright side of life. People in passing stopped to rejoice over the diligence displayed, and Fris beat more briskly with the cane, and felt a long-forgotten ideal stirring within him; he had this whole flock of children to educate for life, he was engaged in creating the coming generation.

When the hymn came to an end, he got them, without a pause, turned on to "Who puts his trust in God alone," and from that again to "We all, we all have faith in God." They had had them all three the whole winter through, and now at last, after tremendous labour, he had brought them so far that they could say them more or less together.

The hymn-book was the business of Fris's life, and his forty years as parish-clerk had led to his knowing the whole of it by heart. In addition to this he had a natural gift. As a child Fris had been intended for the ministry, and his studies as a young man were in accordance with that intention. Bible words came with effect from his lips, and his prospects were of the best, when an ill-natured bird came all the way from the Faroe Islands to bring trouble upon him. Fris fell down two flights from spiritual guide to parish-clerk and child-whipper. The latter office he looked upon as almost too transparent a punishment

from Heaven, and arranged his school as a miniature clerical charge.

The whole village bore traces of his work. There was not much knowledge of reading and writing, but when it was a question of hymns and Bible texts, these fishermen and little artisans were bad to beat. Fris took to himself the credit for the fairly good circumstances of the adults, and the receipt of proper wages by the young men. He followed each one of them with something of a father's eyes, and considered them all to be practically a success. And he was on friendly terms with them once they had left school. They would come to the old bachelor and have a chat, and relieve their minds of some difficulty or other.

But it was always another matter with the confounded brood that sat upon the school benches for the time being; it resisted learning with might and main, and Fris prophesied it no good in the future.

Fris hated the children. But he loved these squarely-built hymns, which seemed to wear out the whole class, while he himself could give them without relaxing a muscle. And when it went as it was doing to-day, he could quite forget that there were such things as children, and give himself up to this endless procession, in which column after column filed past him, in the foot-fall of the rhythm. It was not hymns either; it was a mighty march-past of the strong things of life, in which there stretched, in one endless tone, all that Fris himself had failed to attain. That was why he nodded so happily, and why the loud tramp of feet rose around him like the acclamations of armies, an *Ave Cæsar*.

He was sitting with the third supplement of his newspaper before him, but was not reading; his eyes were closed, and his head moved gently to the rhythm.

The children babbled on ceaselessly, almost without stopping for breath; they were hypnotised by the monotonous flow of words. They were like the geese that had been given leave by the fox to say a prayer before they were eaten, and now went on praying and praying for ever and ever. When they came to the end of the three hymns, they began again by themselves. The mill kept getting louder, they kept the time with their feet, and it was like the stroke of a mighty piston, a boom! Fris nodded with them, and a long tuft of hair flapped in his face; he fell into an ecstasy, and could not sit still upon his chair.

"And were this world all devils o'er,
And watching to devour—us,
We lay it not to heart so sore;
Not they can overpower—us."

It sounded like a stamping-mill; some were beating their slates upon the tables, and others thumping with their elbows. Fris did not hear it; he heard only the mighty tramp of advancing hosts.

"And let the prince of ill
Look grim as e'er he will,"—

Suddenly, at a preconcerted signal, the whole school stopped singing. Fris was brought to earth again with a shock. He opened his eyes, and saw that he had once more allowed himself to be taken by surprise. "You little devils! You confounded brats!" he roared, diving into their midst with his cane. In a moment the whole school was in a tumult, the boys fighting and the girls screaming. Fris began hitting about him.

He tried to bring them back to the patter. "Who puts his trust in God alone!" he shouted in a voice that

drowned the clamour; but they did not take it up—the little devils! Then he hit indiscriminately. He knew quite well that one was just as good as another, and was not particular where the strokes fell. He took the long-haired ones by the hair and dragged them to the table, and thrashed them until the cane began to split. The boys had been waiting for this; they had themselves rubbed onion into the cane that morning, and the most defiant of them had on several pairs of trousers for the occasion.

When the cracked sound proclaimed that the cane was in process of disintegration, the whole school burst into deafening cheers. Fris had thrown up the game, and let them go on. He walked up and down the middle passage like a suffering animal, his gall rising. "You little devils!" he hissed; "You infernal brats!" And then, "Do sit still, children!" This last was so ridiculously touching in the midst of all the rest, that it had to be imitated.

Pelle sat farthest away, in the corner. He was fairly new at this sort of thing, but did his best. Suddenly he jumped on to the table, and danced there in his stockinged feet. Fris gazed at him so strangely, Pelle thought; he was like Father Lasse when everything went wrong; and he slid down ashamed. Nobody had noticed his action, however; it was far too ordinary.

It was a deafening uproar, and now and then an ill-natured remark was hurled out of the seething tumult. Where they came from it was difficult to say; but every one of them hit Fris and made him cower. False steps made in his youth on the other side of the water fifty years ago, were brought up again here on the lips of these ignorant children, as well as some of his best actions, that had been so unselfish that the district put the very worst interpretation upon them. And as if that were not enough—but hush! He was sobbing.

"Sh—sh! Sh—sh!" It was Henry Bödker, the biggest boy in the school, and he was standing on a bench and sh—ing threateningly. The girls adored him, and became quiet directly, but some of the boys would not obey the order; but when Henry held his clenched fist up to one eye, they too became quiet.

Fris walked up and down the middle passage like a pardoned offender. He did not dare to raise his eyes, but they could all see that he was crying. "It's a shame!" said a voice in an undertone. All eyes were turned upon him, and there was perfect silence in the room. "Play-time!" cried a boy's voice in a tone of command: it was Nilen's. Fris nodded feebly, and they rushed out.

Fris remained behind to collect himself. He walked up and down with his hands behind his back, swallowing hard. He was going to send in his resignation. Every time things went quite wrong, Fris sent in his resignation, and when he had come to himself a little, he put it off until the spring examinations were over. He would not leave in this way, as a kind of failure. This very winter he had worked as he had never done before, in order that his resignation might have somewhat the effect of a bomb, and that they might really feel it as a loss when he had gone. When the examination was held, he would take the hymn-book for repetition in chorus—right from the beginning. Some of the children would quickly drop behind, but there were some of them, into whom, in the course of time, he had hammered most of its contents. Long before they had run out, the clergyman would lift his hand to stop them, and say: "That's enough, my dear clerk! That's enough!" and would thank him in a voice of emotion; while the school committee and the parents would whisper together in awed admiration.

And then would be the time to resign!

The school lay on the outskirts of the fishing-village, and the playground was the shore. When the boys were let out after a few hours' lessons, they were like young cattle out for the first time after the long winter. They darted, like flitting swallows, in all directions, threw themselves upon the fresh rampart of sea-wrack and beat one another about the ears with the salt wet weeds. Pelle was not fond of this game; the sharp weed stung, and sometimes there were stones hanging to it, grown right in. But he dared not hold himself aloof, for that would attract attention at once. The thing was to join in it and yet not be in it, to make himself little and big according to the requirements of the moment, so as to be at one time unseen, and at another to exert a terrifying effect. He had his work cut out in twisting and turning, and slipping in and out.

The girls always kept together in one corner of the playground, told tittle-tattle and ate their lunch, but the boys ran all over the place like swallows in aimless flight. A big boy was standing crouching close to the gymnastic apparatus, with his arm hiding his face, and munching. They whirled about him excitedly, now one and now another making the circle narrower and narrower. Peter Kofod—Howling Peter—looked as if the world were sailing under him; he clung to the climbing-pole and hid his face. When they came close up to him, they kicked up behind with a roar, and the boy screamed with terror, turned up his face and broke into a long-drawn howl. Afterwards he was given all the food that the others could not eat.

Howling Peter was always eating and always howling. He was a pauper child and an orphan; he was big for his age, but had a strangely blue and frozen look. His frightened eyes stood half out of his head, and beneath them the flesh was swollen and puffy with crying. He

started at the least sound, and there was always an expression of fear on his face. The boys never really did him any harm, but they screamed and crouched down whenever they passed him—they could not resist it. Then he would scream too, and cower with fear. The girls would sometimes run up and tap him on the back, and then he screamed in terror. Afterwards all the children gave him some of their food. He ate it all, roared, and was as famished as ever.

No one could understand what was wrong with him. Twice he had made an attempt to hang himself, and nobody could give any reason for it, not even he himself. And yet he was not altogether stupid. Lasse believed that he was a visionary, and saw things that others could not see, so that the very fact of living and drawing breath frightened him. But however that might be, Pelle must on no account do anything to him, not for all the world.

The crowd of boys had retired to the shore, and there, with little Nilen at their head, suddenly threw themselves upon Henry Bödker. He was knocked down and buried beneath the swarm, which lay in a sprawling heap upon the top of him, pounding down with clenched fists wherever there was an opening. But then a pair of fists began to push upwards, *tchew, tchew*, like steam punches, the boys rolled off on all sides with their hands to their faces, and Henry Bödker emerged from the heap, kicking at random. Nilen was still hanging like a leech to the back of his neck, and Henry tore his blouse in getting him thrown off. To Pelle he seemed to be tremendously big as he stood there, only breathing a little quickly. And now the girls came up, and fastened his blouse together with pins, and gave him sweets; and he, by way of thanking them, seized them by their pigtails and tied them together, four or five of them, so that they could not get away from one another.

They stood still and bore it patiently, only gazing at him with eyes of devotion.

Pelle had ventured into the battle and had received a kick, but he bore no malice. If he had had a sweet, he, like the girls, would have given it to Henry Bödker, and would have put up with ungentle treatment too. He worshipped him. But he measured himself by Nilen—the little bloodthirsty Nilen, who had no knowledge of fear, and attacked so recklessly that the others got out of his way! He was always in the thickest of the crowd, jumped right into the worst of everything, and came safely out of it all. Pelle examined himself critically to find points of resemblance, and found them—in his defence of Father Lasse the first summer, when he kicked a big boy, and in his relations with the mad bull, of which he was not in the least afraid. But in other points it failed. He was afraid of the dark, and he could not stand a thrashing, while Nilen could take his with his hands in his pockets. It was Pelle's first attempt at obtaining a general survey of himself.

Fris had gone inland, probably to the church, so it would be a playtime of some hours. The boys began to look about for some more lasting ways of passing the time. The "bulls" went into the schoolroom, and began to play about on the tables and benches, but the "blennies" kept to the shore. "Bulls" and "blennies" were the land and the sea in conflict; the division came naturally on every more or less serious occasion, and sometimes gave rise to regular battles.

Pelle kept with the shore boys; Henry Bödker and Nilen were among them, and they were something new! They did not care about the land and animals, but the sea, of which he was afraid, was like a cradle to them. They played about on the water as they would in their mother's