

said, without caring that they were all standing round her and heard every word.

The bailiff had driven quickly off in the pony-carriage to fetch a doctor and to report what he had done in defence of his life. The women stood round the pump and gossiped, while the men and girls wandered about in confusion; there was no one to issue orders. But then the mistress came out on to the steps and looked at them for a little, and they all found something to do. Hers were piercing eyes! The old women shook themselves and went back to their work. It reminded them so pleasantly of old times, when the master of the Stone Farm of their youth rushed up with anger in his eyes when they were idling.

Down in their room, Lasse sat watching Pelle, who lay talking and laughing in delirium, so that his father hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry.

XV

"SHE must have had right on her side, for he never said a cross word when she started off with her complaints and reproaches, and them so loud that you could hear them right through the walls and down in the servants' room and all over the farm. But it was stupid of her all the same, for she only drove him distracted and sent him away. And how will it go with a farm in the long run, when the farmer spends all his time on the high-roads because he can't stay at home? It's a poor sort of affection that drives the man away from his home."

Lasse was standing in the stable on Sunday evening talking to the women about it while they milked. Pelle was there too, busy with his own affairs, but listening to what was said.

"But she wasn't altogether stupid either," said Thatcher Holm's wife. "For instance when she had Fair Maria in to do housemaid's work, so that he could have a pretty face to look at at home. She knew that if you have food at home you don't go out for it. But of course it all led to nothing when she couldn't leave off frightening him out of the house with her crying and her drinking."

"I'm sure he drinks too!" said Pelle, shortly.

"Yes, of course he gets drunk now and then," said Lasse in a reproving tone. "But he's a man, you see, and may have his reasons besides. But it's ill when a woman

takes to drinking." Lasse was cross. The boy was beginning to have opinions of his own pretty well on everything, and was always joining in when grown people were talking.

"I maintain"—he went on, turning again to the women—"that he'd be a good husband, if only he wasn't worried with crying and a bad conscience. Things go very well too when she's away. He's at home pretty well every day, and looks after things himself, so that the bailiff's quite upset, for *he* likes to be king of the castle. To all of us, the master's like one of ourselves; he's even forgotten the grudge he had against Gustav."

"There can't be very much to bear him a grudge for, unless it is that he'll get a wife with money. They say Bodil's saved more than a hundred kroners from her two or three months as housemaid. Some people can—they get paid for what the rest of us have always had to do for nothing." It was one of the old women who spoke.

"Well, we'll just see whether he ever gets her for a wife. I doubt it myself. One oughtn't to speak evil of one's fellow-servants, but Bodil's not a faithful girl. That matter with the master must go for what it was—as I once said to Gustav when he was raging about it; the master comes before his men! Bengta was a good wife to me in every way, but she too was very fond of laying herself out for the landlord at home. The greatest take first; that's the way of the world! But Bodil's never of the same mind for long together. Now she's carrying on with the pupil, though he's not sixteen yet, and takes presents from him. Gustav should get out of it in time; it always leads to misfortune when love gets into a person. We've got an example of that at the farm here."

"I was talking to some one the other day who thought that the mistress hadn't gone to Copenhagen at all, but

was with relations in the south. She's run away from him, you'll see!"

"That's the genteel thing to do nowadays, it seems!" said Lasse. "If only she'll stay away! Things are much better as they are."

An altogether different atmosphere seemed to fill Stone Farm. The dismal feeling was gone; no wailing tones came from the house and settled upon one like horse flies and black care. The change was most apparent in the farmer. He looked ten or twenty years younger, and joked good-humouredly like one freed from chains and fetters. He took an interest in the work of the farm, drove to the quarry two or three times a day in his gig, was present whenever a new piece of work was started, and would often throw off his coat and take a hand in it. Fair Maria laid his table and made his bed, and he was not afraid of showing his kindness for her. His good humour was infectious and made everything pleasanter.

But it could not be denied that Lasse had his own burden to bear. His anxiety to get married grew greater with the arrival of very cold weather as early as December; he longed to have his feet under his own table, and have a woman to himself who should be everything to him. He had not entirely given up thoughts of Karna yet, but he had promised Thatcher Holm's wife ten kroners down if she could find some one that would do for him.

He had really put the whole matter out of his head as an impossibility, and had passed into the land of old age; but what was the use of shutting yourself in, when you were all the time looking for doors through which to slip out again? Lasse looked out once more, and as usual it was Pelle who brought life and joy to the house.

Down in the outskirts of the fishing-village there lived

a woman, whose husband had gone to sea and had not been heard of for a good many years. Two or three times on his way to and from school, Pelle had sought shelter from the weather in her porch, and they had gradually become good friends; he performed little services for her, and received a cup of hot coffee in return. When the cold was very bitter, she always called him in; and then she would tell him about the sea and about her good-for-nothing husband, who kept away and left her to toil for her living by mending nets for the fishermen. In return Pelle felt bound to tell her about Father Lasse, and Mother Bengta who lay at home in the churchyard at Tommelilla. The talk never came to much more, for she always returned to her husband who had gone away and left her a widow.

"I suppose he's drowned," Pelle would say.

"No, he isn't, for I've had no warning," she answered decidedly, always in the same words.

Pelle repeated it all to his father, who was very much interested. "Well, did you run in to Madam Olsen to-day?" was the first thing he said when the boy came in from school; and then Pelle had to tell him every detail several times over. It could never be too circumstantially told for Lasse.

"You've told her, I suppose, that Mother Bengta's dead? Yes, of course you have! Well, what did she ask about me to-day? Does she know about the legacy?" (Lasse had recently had twenty-five kroners left him by an uncle.) "You might very well let fall a word or two about that, so that she shouldn't think we're quite paupers."

Pelle was the bearer of ambiguous messages backwards and forwards. From Lasse he took little things in return for her kindness to himself, such as embroidered handkerchiefs and a fine silk kerchief, the last remnants of Mother

Bengta's effects. It would be hard to lose them if this new chance failed, for then there would be no memories to fall back upon. But Lasse staked everything upon one card.

One day Pelle brought word that warning had come to Madam Olsen. She had been awakened in the night by a big black dog that stood gasping at the head of her bed. Its eyes shone in the darkness, and she heard the water dripping from its fur. She understood that it must be the ship's dog with a message to her, and went to the window; and out in the moonlight on the sea she saw a ship sailing with all sail set. She stood high, and you could see the sea and sky right through her. Over the bulwarks hung her husband and the others, and they were transparent; and the salt water was dripping from their hair and beards and running down the side of the ship.

In the evening Lasse put on his best clothes.

"Are we going out this evening?" asked Pelle in glad surprise.

"No—well, that's to say I am, just a little errand. If any one asks after me, you must say that I've gone to the smith about a new nose-ring for the bull."

"And mayn't I go with you?" asked Pelle on the verge of tears.

"No, you must be good and stay at home for this once." Lasse patted him on the head.

"Where are you going then?"

"I'm going——" Lasse was about to make up a lie about it, but had not the heart to do it. "You mustn't ask me!" he said.

"Shall I know another day, then, without asking?"

"Yes, you shall, for certain—sure!"

Lasse went out, but came back again. Pelle was

sitting on the edge of the bed, crying; it was the first time Father Lasse had gone out without taking him with him.

"Now you must be a good boy and go to bed," he said, gravely. "Or else I shall stay at home with you; but if I do, it may spoil things for us both."

So Pelle thought better of it and began to undress; and at last Lasse got off.

When Lasse reached Madam Olsen's house, it was shut up and in darkness. He recognised it easily from Pelle's descriptions, and walked round it two or three times to see how the walls stood. Both timber and plaster looked good, and there was a fair-sized piece of ground belonging to it, just big enough to allow of its being attended to on Sundays, so that one could work for a daily wage on weekdays.

Lasse knocked at the door, and a little while after a white form appeared at the window, and asked who was there.

"It's Pelle's father, Lasse Karlsson," said Lasse, stepping out into the moonlight.

The door was unbolted, and a soft voice said: "Come inside! Don't stand out there in the cold!" and Lasse stepped over the threshold. There was a smell of sleep in the room, and Lasse had an idea where the alcove was, but could see nothing. He heard the breathing as of a stout person drawing on stockings. Then she struck a match and lighted the lamp.

They shook hands, and looked at one another as they did so. She wore a skirt of striped bed-ticking, which kept her night-jacket together, and had a blue night-cap on her head. She had strong-looking limbs and a good bust, and her face gave a good impression. She was the kind of woman that would not hurt a fly if she were not

put upon; but she was not a toiler—she was too soft for that.

"So this is Pelle's father!" she said. "It's a young son you've got. But do sit down!"

Lasse blinked his eyes a little. He had been afraid that she would think him old.

"Yes, he's what you'd call a late-born child; but I'm still able to do a man's work in more ways than one."

She laughed while she busied herself in placing on the table cold bacon and pork sausage, a dram, bread and a saucer of dripping. "But now you must eat!" she said. "That's what a man's known by. And you've come a long way."

It only now occurred to Lasse that he must give some excuse for his visit. "I ought really to be going again at once. I only wanted to come down and thank you for your kindness to the boy." He even got up as if to go.

"Oh, but what nonsense!" she exclaimed, pushing him down into his chair again. "It's very plain, but do take some." She pressed the knife into his hand, and eagerly pushed the food in front of him. Her whole person radiated warmth and kindheartedness as she stood close to him and attended to his wants; and Lasse enjoyed it all.

"You must have been a good wife to your husband," he said.

"Yes, that's true enough!" she said, as she sat down and looked frankly at him. "He got all that he could want, and almost more, when he was on shore. He stayed in bed until dinner, and I looked after him like a little child; but he never gave me a hand's turn for it, and at last one gets tired."

"That was wrong of him," said Lasse; "for one good action deserves another. I don't think Bengta would have anything like that to say of me if she was asked."

"Well, there's certainly plenty to do in a house, when there's a man that has the will to help. I've only one cow, of course, for I can't manage more; but two might very well be kept, and there's no debt on the place."

"I'm only a poor devil compared to you!" said Lasse despondently. "Altogether I've got fifty kroners, and we both have decent clothes to put on; but beyond that I've only got a good pair of hands."

"And I'm sure that's worth a good deal! And I should fancy you're not afraid of fetching a pail of water or that sort of thing, are you?"

"No, I'm not. And I'm not afraid of a cup of coffee in bed on a Sunday morning either."

She laughed. "Then I suppose I ought to have a kiss!" she said.

"Yes, I suppose you ought," said Lasse delighted, and kissed her. "And now we may hope for happiness and a blessing for all three of us. I know you're fond of the laddie."

There still remained several things to discuss, there was coffee to be drunk, and Lasse had to see the cow and the way the house was arranged. In the mean time it had grown late.

"You'd better stay here for the night," said Madam Olsen.

Lasse stood wavering. There was the boy sleeping alone, and he had to be at the farm by four o'clock; but it was cold outside, and here it was so warm and comfortable in every way.

"Yes, perhaps I'd better," he said, laying down his hat and coat again.

When at about four he crept into the cow-stable from the back, the lantern was still burning in the herdsman's

room. Lasse thought he was discovered, and began to tremble; it was a criminal and unjustifiable action to be away from the herd a whole night. But it was only Pelle, who lay huddled up upon the chest asleep, with his clothes on. His face was black and swollen with crying.

All that day there was something reserved, almost hostile, about Pelle's behaviour, and Lasse suffered under it. There was nothing for it; he must speak out.

"It's all settled now, Pelle," he said at last. "We're going to have a house and home, and a nice-looking mother into the bargain. It's Madam Olsen. Are you satisfied now?"

Pelle had nothing against it. "Then may I come with you next time?" he asked, still a little sullen.

"Yes, next time you shall go with me. I think it'll be on Sunday. We'll ask leave to go out early, and pay her a visit." Lasse said this with a peculiar flourish; he had become more erect.

Pelle went with him on Sunday; they were free from the middle of the afternoon. But after that it would not have done to ask for leave very soon again. Pelle saw his future mother nearly every day, but it was more difficult for Lasse. When the longing to see his sweet-heart came over him too strongly, he fussed over Pelle until the boy fell asleep, and then changed his clothes and stole out.

After a wakeful night such as one of these, he was not up to his work, and went about stumbling over his own feet; but his eyes shone with a youthful light, as if he had concluded a secret treaty with life's most powerful forces.