

## XVI

ERIK was standing on the front steps, with stooping shoulders and face half turned towards the wall. He stationed himself there every morning at about four, and waited for the bailiff to come down. It was now six, and had just begun to grow light.

Lasse and Pelle had finished cleaning out the cow-stable and distributing the first feed, and they were hungry. They were standing at the door of the stable, waiting for the breakfast-bell to ring; and at the doors of the horse-stables, the men were doing the same. At a quarter-past the hour they went towards the basement, with Karl Johan at their head, and Lasse and Pelle also turned out and hurried to the servants' room, with every sign of a good appetite.

"Now, Erik, we're going down to breakfast!" shouted Karl Johan as they passed, and Erik came out of his corner by the steps, and shuffled along after them. There was nothing the matter with his digestive powers at any rate.

They ate their herring in silence; the food stopped their mouths completely. When they had finished, the head man knocked on the table with the handle of his knife, and Karna came in with two dishes of porridge and a pile of bread-and-dripping.

"Where's Bodil to-day?" asked Gustav.

"How should I know? Her bed was standing untouched this morning," answered Karna, with an exulting look.

"It's a lie!" cried Gustav, bringing down his spoon with a bang upon the table.

"You can go into her room and see for yourself; you know the way!" said Karna, tartly.

"And what's become of the pupil to-day, as he hasn't rung?" said Karl Johan. "Have any of you girls seen him?"

"No, I expect he's overslept himself," cried Bengta from the wash-house. "And so he may! I don't want to run up and shake life into him every morning?"

"Don't you think you'd better go up and wake him, Gustav?" said Anders with a wink. "You might see something funny." The others laughed a little.

"If I wake him, it'll be with this rabbit-skinner," answered Gustav, exhibiting a large knife. "For then I think I should put him out of harm's way."

At this point the farmer himself came down. He held a piece of paper in his hand, and appeared to be in high good humour. "Have you heard the latest news, good people? At dead of night Hans Peter has eloped with Bodil!"

"My word! Are babes and sucklings beginning now?" exclaimed Lasse with self-assurance. "I shall have to look after Pelle there, and see that he doesn't run away with Karna. She's fond of young people." Lasse felt himself to be the man of the company, and was not afraid of giving a hit at any one.

"Hans Peter is fifteen," said Kongstrup, reprovingly, "and passion rages in his heart." He said this with such comical gravity that they all burst into laughter, except

Gustav, who sat blinking his eyes and nodding his head like a drunken man.

"You shall hear what he says. This lay upon his bed." Kongstrup held the paper out in a theatrical attitude and read:

"When you read this, I shall have gone for ever. Bodil and I have agreed to run away to-night. My stern father will never give his consent to our union, and therefore we will enjoy the happiness of our love in a secret place where no one can find us. It will be doing a great wrong to look for us, for we have determined to die together rather than fall into the wicked hands of our enemies. I wet this paper with Bodil's and my own tears. But you must not condemn me for my last desperate step, as I can do nothing else for the sake of my great love.

"HANS PETER."

"That fellow reads story-books," said Karl Johan. "He'll do great things some day."

"Yes, he knows exactly what's required for an elopement," answered Kongstrup merrily. "Even to a ladder, which he's dragged up to the girl's window, although it's on a level with the ground. I wish he were only half as thorough in his agriculture."

"What's to be done now? I suppose they must be searched for?" asked the head man.

"Well, I don't know. It's almost a shame to disturb their young happiness. They'll come of their own accord when they get hungry. What do you think, Gustav? shall we organise a battue?"

Gustav made no answer, but rose abruptly and went across to the men's rooms. When the others followed him, they found him in bed.

All day he lay there and never uttered a syllable when any one came in to him. Meanwhile the work suffered, and the bailiff was angry. He did not at all like the new way Kongstrup was introducing—with liberty for every one to say and do exactly as they liked.

"Go in and pull Gustav out of bed!" he said in the afternoon, when they were in the threshing-barn, winnowing grain. "And if he won't put his own clothes on, dress him by force."

But Kongstrup, who was there himself, entering the weight, interfered. "No, if he's ill he must be allowed to keep his bed," he said. "But it's our duty to do something to cure him."

"How about a mustard-plaster?" suggested Mons, with a defiant glance at the bailiff.

Kongstrup rubbed his hands with delight. "Yes, that'll be splendid!" he said. "Go you across, Mons, and get the girls to make a mustard plaster that we can stick on the pit of his stomach; that's where the pain is."

When Mons came back with the plaster, they went up in a procession to put it on, the farmer himself leading. Kongstrup was well aware of the bailiff's angry looks, which plainly said, "Another waste of work for the sake of a foolish prank!" But he was inclined for a little fun, and the work would get done somehow.

Gustav had smelt a rat, for when they arrived he was dressed. For the rest of the day he did his work, but nothing could draw a smile out of him. He was like a man moonstruck.

A few days later a cart drove up to Stone Farm. In the driving-seat sat a broad-shouldered farmer in a fur coat, and beside him, wrapped up from head to foot, sat Hans Peter, while at the back, on the floor of the cart, lay the pretty Bodil on a little hay, shivering with cold. It

was the pupil's father who had brought back the two fugitives, whom he had found in lodgings in the town.

Up in the office Hans Peter received a thrashing that could be heard, and was then let out into the yard, where he wandered about crying and ashamed, until he began to play with Pelle behind the cow-stable.

Bodil was treated more severely. It must have been the strange farmer who required that she should be instantly dismissed, for Kongstrup was not usually a hard man. She had to pack her things, and after dinner was driven away. She looked good and gentle as she always did; one would have thought she was a perfect angel—if one had not known better.

Next morning Gustav's bed was empty. He had vanished completely, with chest, wooden shoes and everything.

Lasse looked on at all this with a man's indulgent smile—children's tricks! All that was wanting now was that Karna should squeeze her fat body through the basement window one night, and she too disappear like smoke—on the hunt for Gustav.

This did not happen, however; and she became kindly-disposed towards Lasse again, saw after his and Pelle's clothes, and tried to make them comfortable.

Lasse was not blind; he saw very well which way the wind blew, and enjoyed the consciousness of his power. There were now two that he could have whenever he pleased; he only had to stretch out his hand, and the women-folk snatched at it. He went about all day in a state of joyful intoxication, and there were days in which he was in such an elevated condition of mind that he had inward promptings to make use of his opportunity. He had always trodden his path in this world so sedately, done his duty and lived his life in such unwavering decency.

Why should not he too for once let things go, and try to leap through the fiery hoops? There was a tempting development of power in the thought.

But the uprightness in him triumphed. He had always kept to the one, as the Scriptures commanded, and he would continue to do so. The other thing was only for the great—Abraham, of whom Pelle had begun to tell him, and Kongstrup. Pelle too, must never be able to say anything against his father in that way; he must be clean in his child's eyes, and be able to look him in the face without shrinking. And then—well, the thought of how the two women would take it in the event of its being discovered, simply made Lasse blink his red eyes and hang his head.

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Towards the middle of March, Fru Kongstrup returned unexpectedly. The farmer was getting along very comfortably without her, and her coming took him rather by surprise. Fair Maria was instantly turned out and sent down to the wash-house. Her not being sent away altogether was due to the fact that there was a shortage of maids at the farm now that Bodil had left. The mistress had brought a young relative with her, who was to keep her company and help her in the house.

They appeared to get on very well together. Kongstrup stayed at home upon the farm and was steady. The three drove out together, and the mistress was always hanging on his arm when they went about showing the place to the young lady. It was easy to see why she had come home; she could not live without him!

But Kongstrup did not seem to be nearly so pleased about it. He had put away his high spirits and retired into his shell once more. When he was going about like this, he often looked as if there was something invisible lying

in ambush for him and he was afraid of being taken unawares.

This invisible something reached out after the others too. Fru Kongstrup never interfered unkindly in anything, either directly or in a roundabout way; and yet everything became stricter. People no longer moved freely about the yard, but glanced up at the tall windows and hurried past. The atmosphere had once more that oppression about it that made one feel slack and upset and depressed.

Mystery once again hung heavy over the roof of Stone Farm. To many generations it had stood for prosperity or misfortune—these had been its foundations, and still it drew to itself the constant thoughts of many people. Dark things—terror, dreariness, vague suspicions of evil powers—gathered there naturally as in a churchyard.

And now it all centred round this woman, whose shadow was so heavy that everything brightened when she went away. Her unceasing, wailing protest against her wrongs spread darkness around and brought weariness with it. It was not even with the idea of submitting to the inevitable that she came back, but only to go on as before, with renewed strength. She could not do without him, but neither could she offer him anything good; she was like those beings who can live and breathe only in fire, and yet cry out when burnt. She writhed in the flames, and yet she herself fed them. Fair Maria was her own doing, and now she had brought this new relative into the house. Thus she herself made easy the path of his infidelity, and then shook the house above him with her complaining.

An affection such as this was not God's work; powers of evil had their abode in her.

## XVII

OH, how bitterly cold it was! Pelle was on his way to school, leaning, in a jog-trot, against the wind. At the big thorn Rud was standing waiting for him; he fell in, and they ran side by side like two blown nags, breathing hard and with heads hanging low. Their coat-collars were turned up about their ears, and their hands pushed into the tops of their trousers to share in the warmth of their bodies. The sleeves of Pelle's jacket were too short, and his wrists were blue with cold.

They said little, but only ran; the wind snatched the words from their mouths and filled them with hail. It was hard to get enough breath to run with, or to keep an eye open. Every other minute they had to stop and turn their back to the wind while they filled their lungs and breathed warm breath up over their faces to bring feeling into them. The worst part of it was the turning back, before they got quite up against the wind and into step again.

The four miles came to an end, and the boys turned into the village. Down here by the shore it was almost sheltered; the rough sea broke the wind. There was not much of the sea to be seen; what did appear here and there through the rifts in the squalls, came on like a moving wall and broke with a roar into whitish green foam. The wind tore the top off the waves in ill-tempered snatches, and carried salt rain in over the land.