

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.

The master had not yet arrived. Up at his desk stood Nilen, busily picking its lock to get at a pipe that Fris had confiscated during lessons. "Here's your knife!" he cried, throwing a sheath-knife to Pelle, who quickly pocketed it. Some peasant boys were pouring coal into the stove, which was already red-hot; by the windows sat a crowd of girls, hearing one another in hymns. Outside the waves broke without ceasing, and when their roar sank for a moment, the shrill voices of boys rose into the air. All the boys of the village were on the beach, running in and out under the breakers that looked as if they would crush them, and pulling driftwood upon shore.

Pelle had hardly thawed himself when Nilen made him go out with him. Most of the boys were wet through, but they were laughing and panting with eagerness. One of them had brought in the name-board of a ship. *The Simplicity* was painted on it. They stood round it and wrangled about what kind of vessel it was and what was its home-port.

"Then the ship's gone down," said Pelle gravely. The others did not answer; it was so self-evident.

"Well," said a boy hesitatingly, "the name-board may have been torn away by the waves; it's only been nailed on." They examined it carefully again; Pelle could not discover anything special about it.

"I rather think the crew have torn it off and thrown it into the sea. One of the nails has been pulled out," said Nilen, nodding with an air of mystery.

"But why should they do that?" asked Pelle, with incredulity.

"Because they've killed the captain and taken over the command themselves, you ass! Then all they've got to do is to christen the ship again, and sail as pirates." The other boys confirmed this with eyes that shone with the

spirit of adventure; this one's father had told him about it, and that one's had even played a part in it. He did not want to, of course, but then he was tied to the mast while the mutiny was in progress.

On a day like this Pelle felt small in every way. The raging of the sea oppressed him and made him feel insecure, but the others were in their element. They possessed themselves of all the horror of the ocean, and represented it in an exaggerated form; they heaped up all the terrors of the sea in play upon the shore: ships went to the bottom with all on board or struck on the rocks; corpses lay rolling in the surf, and drowned men in sea-boots and sou'westers came up out of the sea at midnight, and walked right into the little cottages in the village to give warning of their departure. They dwelt upon it with a seriousness that was bright with inward joy, as though they were singing hymns of praise to the mighty ocean. But Pelle stood outside all this, and felt himself cowardly when listening to their tales. He kept behind the others, and wished he could bring down the big bull and let it loose among them. Then they would come to him for protection.

The boys had orders from their parents to take care of themselves, for Marta, the old skipper's widow, had three nights running heard the sea demand corpses with a short bark. They talked about that too, and about when the fishermen would venture out again, while they ran about the beach. "A bottle, a bottle!" cried one of them suddenly, dashing off along the shore; he was quite sure he had seen a bottle bob up out of the surf a little way off, and disappear again. The whole swarm stood for a long time gazing eagerly out into the seething foam, and Nilen and another boy had thrown off their jackets to be ready to jump out when it appeared again.

The bottle did not appear again, but it had given a

spur to the imagination, and every boy had his own solemn knowledge of such things. Just now, during the equinoctial storms, many a bottle went over a ship's side with a last message to those on land. Really and truly, of course, that was why you learned to write—so as to be able to write your message when your hour came. Then perhaps the bottle would be swallowed by a shark, or perhaps it would be fished up by stupid peasants who took it home with them to their wives to put drink into—this last a good-natured hit at Pelle. But it sometimes happened that it drifted ashore just at the place it was meant for; and if not, it was the finder's business to take it to the nearest magistrate, if he didn't want to lose his right hand.

Out in the harbour the waves broke over the mole; the fishermen had drawn their boats up on shore. They could not rest indoors in their warm cottages; the sea and the bad weather kept them on the beach night and day. They stood in shelter behind their boats, yawning heavily and gazing out to sea, where now and then a sail fluttered past like a storm-beaten bird.

"In, in!" cried the girls from the schoolroom door, and the boys sauntered slowly up. Fris was walking backwards and forwards in front of his desk, smoking his pipe with the picture of the king on it, and with the newspaper sticking out of his pocket. "To your places!" he shouted, striking his desk with the cane.

"Is there any news?" asked a boy, when they had taken their places. Fris sometimes read aloud the Shipping News to them.

"I don't know," answered Fris crossly. "You can get out your slates and arithmetics."

"Oh, we're going to do sums, oh, that's fun!" The whole class was rejoicing audibly as they got out their things.

Fris did not share the children's delight over arithmetic; his gifts, he was accustomed to say, were of a purely historical nature. But he accommodated himself to their needs, because long experience had taught him that a pandemonium might easily arise on a stormy day such as this; the weather had a remarkable influence upon the children. His own knowledge extended only as far as Christian Hansen's Part I.; but there were two peasant boys who had worked on by themselves into Part III., and they helped the others.

The children were deep in their work, their long, regular breathing rising and falling in the room like a deep sleep. There was a continual passing backwards and forwards to the two arithmeticians, and the industry was only now and then interrupted by some little piece of mischief that came over one or another of the children as a reminder; but they soon fell into order again.

At the bottom of the class there was a sound of sniffing, growing more and more distinct. Fris laid down his newspaper impatiently.

"Peter's crying," said those nearest.

"Oh-o!" said Fris, peering over his spectacles.

"What's the matter now?"

"He says he can't remember what twice two is."

Fris forced the air through his nostrils and seized the cane, but thought better of it. "Twice two's five!" he said quietly, at which there was a laugh at Peter's expense, and work went on again.

For some time they worked diligently, and then Nilen rose. Fris saw it, but went on reading.

"Which is the lightest, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead? I can't find it in the answers."

Fris's hands trembled as he held the paper up close to his face to see something or other better. It was his

mediocrity as a teacher of arithmetic that the imps were always aiming at, but he would *not* be drawn into a discussion with them. Nilen repeated his question, while the others tittered; but Fris did not hear—he was too deep in his paper. So the whole thing dropped.

Fris looked at his watch; he could soon give them a quarter of an hour's play, a good long quarter of an hour. Then there would only be one little hour's worry left, and that school-day could be laid by as another trouble got through.

Pelle stood up in his place in the middle of the class. He had some trouble to keep his face in the proper folds, and had to pretend that his neighbours were disturbing him. At last he got out what he wanted to say, but his ears were a little red at the tips. "If a pound of flour costs twelve öres, what will half a quarter of coal cost?"

Fris sat for a little while and looked irresolutely at Pelle. It always hurt him more when Pelle was naughty than when it was one of the others, for he had an affection for the boy. "Very well!" he said bitterly, coming slowly down with the thick cane in his hand. "Very well!"

"Look out for yourself!" whispered the boys, preparing to put difficulties in the way of Fris's approach.

But Pelle did one of those things that were directly opposed to all recognised rules, and yet gained him respect. Instead of shielding himself from the thrashing, he stepped forward and held out both hands with the palms turned upwards. His face was crimson.

Fris looked at him in surprise, and was inclined to do anything but beat him; the look in Pelle's eyes rejoiced his heart. He did not understand boys as boys, but with regard to human beings his perceptions were fine, and there was something human here; it would be wrong not to take it seriously. He gave Pelle a sharp stroke across his hands,

and throwing down the cane, called shortly "Playtime!" and turned away.

The spray was coming right up to the school wall. A little way out there was a vessel, looking very much battered and at the mercy of the storm; she moved quickly forward a little way, and then stood still and staggered for a time before moving on again, like a drunken man. She was going in the direction of the southern reef.

The boys had collected behind the school to eat their dinner in shelter, but suddenly there was the hollow rattling sound of wooden-soled boots over on the shore side, and the coastguard and a couple of fishermen ran out. Then the life-saving apparatus came dashing up, the horses' manes flying in the wind. There was something inspiring in the pace, and the boys threw down everything and followed.

The vessel was now right down by the point. She lay tugging at her anchor, with her stern towards the reef, and the waves washing over her; she looked like an old horse kicking out viciously at some obstacle with its hind legs. The anchor was not holding, and she was drifting backwards on to the reef.

There were a number of people on the shore, both from the coast and from inland. The country-people must have come down to see whether the water was wet! The vessel had gone aground and lay rolling on the reef; the people on board had managed her like asses, said the fishermen, but she was no Russian, but a Lapp vessel. The waves went right over her from end to end, and the crew had climbed into the rigging, where they hung gesticulating with their arms. They must have been shouting something, but the noise of the waves drowned it.

Pelle's eyes and ears were taking in all the preparations. He was quivering with excitement, and had to fight against

his infirmity, which returned whenever anything stirred his blood. The men on the beach were busy driving stakes into the sand to hold the apparatus, and arranging ropes and hawsers so that everything should go smoothly. Special care was bestowed upon the long, fine line that the rocket was to carry out to the vessel; alterations were made in it at least twenty times.

The foreman of the trained Rescue Party stood and took aim with the rocket-apparatus; his glance darted out and back again to measure the distance with the sharpness of a claw. "Ready!" said the others, moving to one side. "Ready!" he answered gravely. For a moment all was still, while he placed it in another position and then back again.

Whe-e-e-ew! The thin line stood like a quivering snake in the air, with its run-away head boring through the sodden atmosphere over the sea and its body flying shrieking from the drum and riding out with deep humming tones to cut its way far out through the storm. The rocket had cleared the distance capitally; it was a good way beyond the wreck, but too far to leeward. It had run itself out and now stood wavering in the air like the restless head of a snake while it dropped.

"It's going afore her," said one fisherman. The others were silent, but from their looks it was evident that they were of the same opinion. "It may still get there," said the foreman. The rocket had struck the water a good way to the north, but the line still stood in an arch in the air, held up by the stress. It dropped in long waves towards the south, made a couple of folds in the wind, and dropped gently across the fore part of the vessel. "That's it! It got there all right!" shouted the boys, and sprang on to the sand. The fishermen stamped about with delight, made a sideways movement with their heads towards the

foreman and nodded appreciatively at one another. Out on the vessel a man crawled about in the rigging until he got hold of the line, and then crept down into the shrouds to the others again. Their strength could not be up to much, for except for that they did not move.

On shore there was activity. The roller was fixed more firmly to the ground and the cradle made ready; the thin line was knotted to a thicker rope, which again was to draw the heavy hawser on board: it was important that everything should hold. To the hawser was attached a pulley as large as a man's head for the drawing-ropes to run in, for one could not know what appliances they would have on board such an old tub. For safety's sake a board was attached to the line, upon which were instructions, in English, to haul it until a hawser of such-and-such a thickness came on board. This was unnecessary for ordinary people, but one never knew how stupid such Finn-Lapps could be.

"They may haul away now as soon as they like, and let us get done with it," said the foreman, beating his hands together.

"Perhaps they're too exhausted," said a young fisherman. "They must have been through a hard time!"

"They must surely be able to haul in a three-quarter-inch rope! Fasten an additional line to the rope, so that we can give them a hand in getting the hawser on board—when they get so far."

This was done. But out on the wreck they hung stupidly in the rigging without ever moving; what in the world were they thinking about? The line still lay, motionless on the sand, but it was not fast to the bottom, for it moved when it was tightened by the water; it must have been made fast to the rigging.

"They've made it fast, the blockheads," said the

foreman. "I suppose they're waiting for us to haul the vessel up on land for them—with that bit of thread!" He laughed in despair.

"I suppose they don't know any better, poor things!" said "the Mormon."

No one spoke or moved. They were paralysed by the incomprehensibility of it, and their eyes moved in dreadful suspense from the wreck down to the motionless line and back again. The dull horror that ensues when men have done their utmost and are beaten back by absolute stupidity, began to creep over them. The only thing the shipwrecked men did was to gesticulate with their arms. They must have thought that the men on shore could work miracles—in defiance of them.

"In an hour it'll be all up with them," said the foreman sadly. "It's hard to stand still and look on."

A young fisherman came forward. Pelle knew him well, for he had met him occasionally by the cairn where the baby's soul burned in the summer nights.

"If one of you'll go with me, I'll try to drift down upon them!" said Niels Köller quietly.

"It'll be certain death, Niels!" said the foreman, laying his hand upon the young man's shoulder. "You understand that, I suppose! I'm not one to be afraid, but I won't throw away my life. So you know what I think."

The others took the same view. A boat would be dashed to pieces against the moles. It would be impossible to get it out of the harbour in this weather, let alone work down to the wreck with wind and waves athwart! It might be that the sea had made a demand upon the village—no one would try to sneak out of his allotted share; but this was downright madness! With Niels Köller himself it must pass; his position was a peculiar one—with the murder of a

child almost on his conscience and his sweetheart in prison. He had his own account to settle with the Almighty; no one ought to dissuade him!

"Then will none of you?" asked Niels, and looked down at the ground. "Well then I must try it alone." He went slowly up the beach. How he was going to set about it no one knew, nor did he himself; but the spirit had evidently come over him.

They stood looking after him. Then a young sailor said slowly: "I suppose I'd better go with him and take the one oar. He can do nothing by himself." It was Nilen's brother.

"It wouldn't sound right if I stopped you from going, my son," said "the Mormon." "But can two of you do more than one?"

"Niels and I were at school together and have always been friends," answered the young man, looking into his father's face. Then he moved away, and a little farther off began to run to catch up Niels.

The fishermen looked after them in silence. "Youth and madness!" one of them then said. "One blessing is that they'll never be able to get the boat out of the harbour."

"If I know anything of Karl, they will get the boat out!" said "the Mormon" gloomily.

Some time passed, and then a boat appeared on the south side of the harbour, where there was a little shelter. They must have dragged it in over land with the women's help. The harbour projected a little, so that the boat escaped the worst of the surf before emerging from its protection. They were working their way out; it was all they could do to keep the boat up against the wind, and they scarcely moved. Every other moment the whole of the inside of the boat was visible, as if it would take nothing

to upset it; but that had one advantage, in that the water they shipped ran out again.

It was evident that they meant to work their way out so far that they could make use of the high sea and scud down upon the wreck—a desperate idea! But the whole thing was such sheer madness, one would never have thought they had been born and bred by the water. After half an hour's rowing, it seemed they could do no more; and they were not more than a couple of good cable-lengths out from the harbour. They lay still, one of them holding the boat up to the waves with the oars, while the other struggled with something—a bit of sail as big as a sack. Yes, yes, of course! Now if they took in the oars and left themselves at the mercy of the weather—with wind and waves abaft the beam!—they would fill with water at once!

But they did not take in the oars. One of them sat and kept a frenzied watch while they ran before the wind. It looked very awkward, but it was evident that it gave greater command of the boat. Then they suddenly dropped the sail and rowed the boat hard up against the wind—when a sea was about to break. None of the fishermen could recollect ever having seen such navigation before; it was young blood, and they knew what they were about. Every instant one felt one must say Now! But the boat was like a living thing that understood how to meet everything; it always rose above every caprice. The sight made one warm, so that for a time one forgot it was a sail for life or death. Even if they managed to get down to the wreck, what then? Why they would be dashed against the side of the vessel!

Old Ole Köller, Niels's father, came down over the sandbanks. "Who's that out there throwing themselves away?" he asked. The question sounded harsh as it broke in upon the silence and suspense. No one looked

at him—Ole was rather garrulous. He glanced round the flock, as though he were looking for some particular person. "Niels—have any of you seen Niels?" he asked quietly. One man nodded towards the sea, and he was silent and overcome.

The waves must have broken their oars or carried them away, for they dropped the bit of sail, the boat burrowed aimlessly with its prow, and settled down lazily with its broadside to the wind. Then a great wave took them and carried them in one long sweep towards the wreck, and they disappeared in the breaking billow.

When the water sank to rest, the boat lay bottom upwards, rolling in the lee of the vessel.

A man was working his way from the deck up into the rigging. "Isn't that Niels?" said Ole, gazing until his eyes watered. "I wonder if that isn't Niels?"

"No; it's my brother Karl," said Nilen.

"Then Niels is gone," said Ole plaintively. "Then Niels is gone."

The others had nothing to answer; it was a matter of course that Niels would be lost.

Ole stood for a little while shrinkingly, as if expecting that some one would say it was Niels. He dried his eyes, and tried to make it out for himself, but they only filled again. "Your eyes are young," he said to Pelle, his head trembling. "Can't you see that it's Niels?"

"No, it's Karl," said Pelle softly.

And Ole went with bowed head through the crowd, without looking at any one or turning aside for anything. He moved as though he were alone in the world, and walked slowly out along the south shore. He was going to meet the dead body.

There was no time to think. The line began to be alive, glided out into the sea, and drew the rope after it.

Yard after yard it unrolled itself and glided slowly into the sea like an awakened sea-animal, and the thick hawser began to move.

Karl fastened it high up on the mast, and it took all the men—and boys too—to haul it taut. Even then it hung in a heavy curve from its own weight, and the cradle dragged through the crests of the waves when it went out empty. It was more under than above the water as they pulled it back again with the first of the crew, a funny little dark man, dressed in mangy grey fur. He was almost choked in the crossing, but when once they had emptied the water out of him he quite recovered and chattered incessantly in a curious language that no one understood. Five little fur-clad beings, one by one, were brought over by the cradle, and last of all came Karl with a little squealing pig in his arms.

"They *were* a poor lot of seamen!" said Karl, in the intervals of disgorging water. "Upon my word, they understood nothing. They'd made the rocket-line fast to the shrouds, and tied the loose end round the captain's waist! And you should just have seen the muddle on board!" He talked loudly, but his glance seemed to veil something.

The men now went home to the village with the shipwrecked sailors; the vessel looked as if it would still keep out the water for some time.

Just as the school-children were starting to go home, Ole came staggering along with his son's dead body on his back. He walked with loose knees bending low, and moaning under his burden. Fris stopped him and helped him to lay the dead body in the schoolroom. There was a deep wound in the forehead. When Pelle saw the dead body with its gaping wound, he began to jump up and down, jumping quickly up, and letting himself drop like

a dead bird. The girls drew away from him screaming, and Fris bent over him and looked sorrowfully at him.

"It isn't from naughtiness," said the other boys. "He can't help it; he's taken that way sometimes. He got it once when he saw a man almost killed." And they carried him off to the pump to bring him to himself again.

Fris and Ole busied themselves over the dead body, placed something under the head, and washed away the sand that had got rubbed into the skin of the face. "He was my best boy," said Fris, stroking the dead man's head with a trembling hand. "Look well at him, children, and never forget him again; he was my best boy."

He stood silent, looking straight before him, with dimmed spectacles and hands hanging loosely. Ole was crying; he had suddenly grown pitifully old and decrepit. "I suppose I ought to get him home?" he said plaintively, trying to raise his son's shoulders; but he had not the strength.

"Just let him lie!" said Fris. "He's had a hard day, and he's resting now."

"Yes, he's had a hard day," said Ole, raising his son's hand to his mouth to breathe upon it. "And look how he's used the oar! The blood's burst out at his finger-tips!" Ole laughed through his tears. "He was a good lad. He was food to me, and light and heat too. There never came an unkind word out of his mouth to me that was a burden on him. And now I've got no son, Fris! I'm childless now! And I'm not able to do anything!"

"You shall have enough to live upon, Ole," said Fris.

"Without coming on the parish? I shouldn't like to come upon the parish."

"Yes, without coming on the parish, Ole."

"If only he can get peace now! He had so little peace in this world these last few years. There's been a song

made about his misfortune, Fris, and every time he heard it he was like a new-born lamb in the cold. The children sing it too." Ole looked round at them imploringly. "It was only a piece of boyish heedlessness, and now he's taken his punishment."

"Your son hasn't had any punishment, Ole, and neither has he deserved any," said Fris, putting his arm about the old man's shoulder. "But he's given a great gift as he lies there and cannot say anything. He gave five men their lives and gave up his own in return for the one offence that he committed in thoughtlessness! It was a generous son you had, Ole!" Fris looked at him with a bright smile.

"Yes," said Ole, with animation. "He saved five people—of course he did—yes, he did!" He had not thought of that before; it would probably never have occurred to him. But now some one else had given it form, and he clung to it. "He saved five lives, even if they were only Finn-Lapps; so perhaps God will not disown him."

Fris shook his head until his grey hair fell over his eyes. "Never forget him, children!" he said; "and now go quietly home." The children silently took up their things and went; at that moment they would have done anything that Fris told them: he had complete power over them.

Ole stood staring absently, and then took Fris by the sleeve, and drew him up to the dead body. "He's rowed well!" he said. "The blood's come out at his finger-ends, look!" And he raised his son's hands to the light. "And there's a wrist, Fris! He could take up an old man like me, and carry me like a little child." Ole laughed feebly. "But I carried him; all the way from the south reef I carried him on my back. I'm too heavy for you, father! I could hear him say, for he was a good son; but I carried him, and now I can't do anything more. If only they see that!"—he was looking again at the blood-stained fingers.

"He did do his best. If only God Himself would give him his discharge!"

"Yes," said Fris. "God will give him his discharge Himself, and He sees everything, you know, Ole."

Some fishermen entered the room. They took off their caps, and one by one went quietly up and shook hands with Ole, and then, each passing his hand over his face, turned questioningly to the schoolmaster. Fris nodded, and they raised the dead body between them, and passed with heavy, cautious steps out through the entry and on towards the village, Ole following them, bowed down and moaning to himself.