

XVIII

It was Pelle, who, one day in his first year at school, when he was being questioned in Religion, and Fris asked him whether he could give the names of the three greatest festivals in the year, amused every one by answering: "Midsummer Eve, Harvest-home and—and—" There was a third too, but when it came to the point, he was shy of mentioning it—his birthday! In certain ways it was the greatest of them all, even though no one but Father Lasse knew about it—and the people who wrote the almanac, of course; they knew about simply everything!

It came on the twenty-sixth of June and was called Pelagius in the calendar. In the morning his father kissed him and said: "Happiness and a blessing to you, laddie!" and then there was always something in his pocket when he came to pull on his trousers. His father was just as excited as he was himself, and waited by him while he dressed, to share in the surprise. But it was Pelle's way to spin things out when something nice was coming; it made the pleasure all the greater. He purposely passed over the interesting pocket, while Father Lasse stood by fidgeting and not knowing what to do.

"I say, what's the matter with that pocket? It looks to me so fat! You surely haven't been out stealing hens' eggs in the night?"

Then Pelle had to take it out—a large bundle of paper—and undo it, layer after layer. And Lasse would be amazed.

"Pooh, it's nothing but paper! What rubbish to go and fill your pockets with!" But in the very inside of all there was a pocket-knife with two blades.

"Thank you!" whispered Pelle then, with tears in his eyes.

"Oh, nonsense! it's a poor present that!" said Lasse, blinking his red, lashless eyelids.

Beyond this the boy did not come in for anything better on that day than usual, but all the same he had a solemn feeling all day. The sun never failed to shine—was even unusually bright; and the animals looked meaningly at him while they lay munching. "It's my birthday to-day!" he said, hanging with his arms round the neck of Nero, one of the bullocks. "Can you say 'A happy birthday'?" And Nero breathed warm breath down his back, together with green juice from his chewing; and Pelle went about happy, and stole green corn to give to him and to his favourite calf, kept the new knife—or whatever it might have been—in his hand the whole day long, and dwelt in a peculiarly solemn way upon everything he did. He could make the whole of the long day swell with a festive feeling; and when he went to bed he tried to keep awake so as to make the day longer still.

Nevertheless Midsummer Eve was in its way a greater day; it had at any rate the glamour of the unattainable over it. On that day everything that could creep and walk went up to the Common; there was not a servant on the whole island so poor-spirited as to submit to the refusal of a holiday on that day—none except just Lasse and Pelle.

Every year they had seen the day come and go without sharing in its pleasure. "Some one must stay at home, confound it!" said the bailiff always. "Or perhaps you think I can do it all for you?" They had too little

power to assert themselves. Lasse helped to pack appetising food and beverages into the carts, and see the others off, and then went about despondently—one man to all the work. Pelle watched from the field their merry departure and the white stripe of dust far away behind the rocks. And for half a year afterwards, at meals, they heard reminiscences of drinking and fighting and love-making—the whole festivity.

But this was at an end. Lasse was not the man to continue to let himself be trifled with. He possessed a woman's affection, and a house in the background. He could give notice any day he liked. The magistrate was presumably busy with the prescribed advertising for Madam Olsen's husband, and as soon as the lawful respite was over, they would come together.

Lasse no longer sought to avoid the risk of dismissal. As long ago as the winter, he had driven the bailiff into a corner, and only agreed to be taken on again upon the express condition that they both took part in the Midsummer Eve outing; and he had witnesses to it. On the Common, where all lovers held tryst that day, Lasse and she were to meet too, but of this Pelle knew nothing.

"To-day we can say the day after to-morrow, and to-morrow we can say to-morrow," Pelle went about repeating to his father two evenings before the day. He had kept an account of the time ever since May Day, by making strokes for all the days on the inside of the lid of the chest, and crossing them out one by one.

"Yes, and the day after to-morrow we shall say to-day," said Lasse, with a juvenile fling.

They opened their eyes upon an incomprehensibly brilliant world, and did not at first remember that this was the day. Lasse had anticipated his wages to the amount of five kronas, and had got an old cottager to do

his work—for half a krone and his meals. "It's not a big wage," said the man; "but if I give you a hand, perhaps the Almighty'll give me one in return."

"Well, we've no one but Him to hold to, we poor creatures," answered Lasse. "But I shall thank you in my grave."

The cottager arrived by four o'clock, and Lasse was able to begin his holiday from that hour. Whenever he was about to take a hand in the work, the other said: "No, leave it alone! I'm sure you've not often had a holiday."

"No; this is the first real holiday since I came to the farm," said Lasse, drawing himself up with a lordly air.

Pelle was in his best clothes from the first thing in the morning, and went about smiling in his shirt-sleeves and with his hair plastered down with water; his best cap and jacket were not to be put on until they were going to start. When the sun shone upon his face, it sparkled like dewy grass. There was nothing to trouble about; the animals were in the enclosure and the bailiff was going to look after them himself.

He kept near his father, who had brought this about. Father Lasse was powerful! "What a good thing you threatened to leave!" he kept on exclaiming. And Lasse always gave the same answer: "Ay, you must carry things with a high hand if you want to gain anything in this world!"—and nodded with a consciousness of power.

They were to have started at eight o'clock, but the girls could not get the provisions ready in time. There were jars of stewed gooseberries, huge piles of pancakes, a hard-boiled egg apiece, cold veal and an endless supply of bread and butter. The carriage boxes could not nearly hold it all, so large baskets were pushed in under the seats. In the front was a small cask of beer, covered

with green oats to keep the sun from it; and there was a whole keg of spirits and three bottles of cold punch. Almost the entire bottom of the large spring-waggon was covered, so that it was difficult to find room for one's feet.

After all Fru Kongstrup showed a proper feeling for her servants when she wanted to. She went about like a kind mistress and saw that everything was well packed and that nothing was wanting. She was not like Kongstrup, who always had to have a bailiff between himself and them. She even joked and did her best, and it was evident that whatever else there might be to say against her, she wanted them to have a merry day. That her face was a little sad was not to be wondered at, as the farmer had driven out that morning with her young relative.

At last the girls were ready, and every one got in—in high spirits. The men inadvertently sat upon the girls' laps and jumped up in alarm. "Oh, oh! I must have gone too near a stove!" cried the rogue Mons, rubbing himself behind. Even the mistress could not help laughing.

"Isn't Erik going with us?" asked his old sweetheart Bengta, who still had a warm spot in her heart for him.

The bailiff whistled shrilly twice, and Erik came slowly up from the barn, where he had been standing and keeping watch upon his master.

"Won't you go with them to the woods to-day, Erik man?" asked the bailiff kindly. Erik stood twisting his big body and murmuring something that no one could understand, and then made an unwilling movement with one shoulder.

"You'd better go with them," said the bailiff, pretending he was going to take him and put him into the cart. "Then I shall have to see whether I can get over the loss."

Those in the cart laughed, but Erik shuffled off down

through the yard, with his dog-like glance directed backwards at the bailiff's feet, and stationed himself at the corner of the stable, where he stood watching. He held his cap behind his back, as boys do when they play at "Robbers."

"He's a queer customer!" said Mons. Then Karl Johan guided the horses carefully through the gate, and they set off with a crack of the whip.

Along all the roads, vehicles were making their way towards the highest part of the island, filled to overflowing with merry people, who sat on one another's laps and hung right over the sides. The dust rose behind the conveyances and hung white in the air in stripes miles in length, that showed how the roads lay like spokes in a wheel all pointing towards the middle of the island. The air hummed with merry voices and the strains of concertinas. They missed Gustav's playing now—yes, and Bodil's pretty face, that always shone so brightly on a day like this.

Pelle had the appetite of years of fasting for the great world, and devoured everything with his eyes. "Look there, father! Just look!" Nothing escaped him. It made the others cheerful to look at him—he was so rosy and pretty. He wore a newly-washed blue blouse under his waistcoat, which showed at the neck and wrists and did duty as collar and cuffs; but Fair Maria bent back from the box-seat, where she was sitting alone with Karl Johan, and tied a very white scarf round his neck, and Karna, who wanted to be motherly to him, went over his face with a corner of her pocket-handkerchief, which she moistened with her tongue. She was rather officious, but for that matter it was quite conceivable that the boy might have got dirty again since his thorough morning wash.

The side roads continued to pour their contents out on to the high-roads, and there was soon a whole river of conveyances, extending as far as the eye could see in both directions. One would hardly have believed that there were so many vehicles in the whole world! Karl Johan was a good driver to have; he was always pointing with his whip and telling them something. He knew all about every single house. They were beyond the farms and tillage by now; but on the heath, where self-sown birch and aspen trees stood fluttering restlessly in the summer air, there stood desolate new houses with bare, plastered walls, and not so much as a henbane in the window or a bit of curtain. The fields round them were as stony as a newly-mended road, and the crops were a sad sight; the corn was only two or three inches in height, and already in ear. The people here were all Swedish servants who had saved a little and had now become land-owners. Karl Johan knew a good many of them.

"It looks very miserable," said Lasse, comparing in his own mind the stones here with Madam Olsen's fat land.

"Oh well," answered the head man, "it's not of the very best, of course; but the land yields something anyhow." And he pointed to the fine large heaps of road-metal and hewn stone that surrounded every cottage. "If it isn't exactly grain, it gives something to live on; and then it's the only land that'll suit poor people's purses." He and Fair Maria were thinking of settling down here themselves. Kongstrup had promised to help them to a farm with two horses when they married.

In the wood the birds were in the middle of their morning song; they were later with it here than in the sandbanks plantation, it seemed. The air sparkled brightly, and something invisible seemed to rise from the undergrowth; it was like being in a church with the sun

shining down through tall windows and the organ playing. They drove round the foot of a steep cliff with overhanging trees, and into the wood.

It was almost impossible to thread your way through the crowd of unharnessed horses and vehicles. You had to have all your wits about you to keep from damaging your own and other people's things. Karl Johan sat watching both his fore wheels, and felt his way on step by step; he was like a cat in a thunderstorm, he was so wary. "Hold your jaw!" he said sharply, when any one in the cart opened his lips. At last they found room to unharness, and a rope was tied from tree to tree to form a square in which the horses were secured. Then they got out the curry-combs—goodness, how dusty it had been! And at last—well, no one said anything, but they all stood expectant, half turned in the direction of the head man.

"Well, I suppose we ought to go into the wood and look at the view," he said.

They turned it over as they wandered aimlessly round the cart, looking furtively at the provisions.

"If only it'll keep!" said Anders, lifting a basket.

"I don't know how it is, but I feel so strange in my inside to-day," Mons began. "It can't be consumption, can it?"

"Perhaps we ought to taste the good things first then?" said Karl Johan.

Yes—oh yes—it came at last!

Last year they had eaten their dinner on the grass. It was Bodil who had thought of that; she was always a little fantastic. This year nobody would be the one to make such a suggestion. They looked at one another a little expectant; and they then climbed up into the cart and settled themselves there just like other decent people. After all the food was the same.

The pancakes were as large and thick as a saucepan-lid. It reminded them of Erik, who last year had eaten ten of them.

"It's a pity he's not here this year!" said Karl Johan. "He was a merry devil."

"He's not badly off," said Mons. "Gets his food and clothes given him, and does nothing but follow at the bailiff's heels and copy him. And he's always contented now. I wouldn't a bit mind changing with him."

"And run about like a dog with its nose to the ground sniffing at its master's footsteps? Oh no, not I!"

"Whatever you may say, you must remember that it's the Almighty Himself who's taken his wits into safe keeping," said Lasse admonishingly; and for a little while they were quite serious at the thought.

But seriousness could not claim more than was its due. Anders wanted to rub his leg, but made a mistake and caught hold of Lively Sara's, and made her scream; and this so flustered his hand that it could not find its way up, but went on making mistakes, and there was much laughter and merriment.

Karl Johan was not taking much part in the hilarity; he looked as if he were pondering something. Suddenly he roused himself and drew out his purse. "Here goes!" he said stoutly. "I'll stand beer! Bavarian beer, of course. Who'll go and fetch it?"

Mons leaped quickly from the cart. "How many?"

"Four." Karl Johan's eye ran calculating over the cart. "No, just bring five, will you? That'll be a half each," he said easily. "But make sure that it's real Bavarian beer they give you."

There was really no end to the things that Karl Johan knew about; and he said the name "Bavarian beer" with no more difficulty than others would have in turning

a quid in their mouth. But of course he was a trusted man on the farm now, and often drove on errands into the town.

This raised their spirits and awakened curiosity, for most of them had never tasted Bavarian beer before. Lasse and Pelle openly admitted their inexperience; but Anders pretended he had got drunk on it more than once, though every one knew it was untrue.

Mons returned, moving cautiously, with the beer in his arms; it was a precious commodity. They drank it out of the large dram-glasses that were meant for the punch. In the town, of course, they drank beer out of huge mugs, but Karl Johan considered that that was simply swilling. The girls refused to drink, but did it after all, and were delighted. "They're always like that," said Mons, "when you offer them something really good." They became flushed with the excitement of the occurrence, and thought they were drunk. Lasse took away the taste of his beer with a dram; he did not like it at all. "I'm too old," he said in excuse.

The provisions were packed up again, and they set out in a body to see the view. They had to make their way through a perfect forest of carts to reach the pavilion. Horses were neighing and flinging up their hind legs, so that the bark flew off the trees. Men hurled themselves in among them, and tugged at their mouths until they quieted down again, while the women screamed and ran hither and thither like frightened hens, with skirts lifted.

From the top they could form some idea of the number of people. On the sides of the hill and in the wood beyond the roads—everywhere carts covered the ground; and down at the triangle where the two wide high-roads met, new loads were continually turning in. "There must be far more than a thousand pairs of horses in the wood

to-day," said Karl Johan. Yes, far more! There were a million, if not more, thought Pelle. He was quite determined to get as much as possible out of everything to-day.

There stood the Bridge Farm cart, and there came the people from Hammersholm, right out at the extreme north of the island. Here were numbers of people from the shore farms at Dove Point and Rønne and Neksö—the whole island was there. But there was no time now to fall in with acquaintances. "We shall meet this afternoon!" was the general cry.

Karl Johan led the expedition; it was one of a head man's duties to know the way about the Common. Fair Maria kept faithfully by his side, and every one could see how proud she was of him. Mons walked hand in hand with Lively Sara, and they went swinging along like a couple of happy children. Bengta and Anders had some difficulty in agreeing; they quarrelled every other minute, but they did not mean much by it. And Karna made herself agreeable.

They descended into a swamp, and went up again by a steep ascent where the great trees stood with their feet in one another's necks. Pelle leaped about everywhere like a young kid. In under the firs there were anthills as big as haycocks, and the ants had broad trodden paths running like footpaths between the trees, on and on endlessly; a multitude of hosts passed backwards and forwards upon those roads. Under some small fir-trees a hedgehog was busy attacking a wasps' nest; it poked its nose into the nest, drew it quickly back, and sneezed. It looked wonderfully funny, but Pelle had to go on after the others. And soon he was far ahead of them, lying on his face in a ditch where he had smelt wild strawberries.

Lasse could not keep pace with the younger people up

the hill, and it was not much better with Karna. "We're getting old, we two," she said as they toiled up panting.

"Oh, are we?" was Lasse's answer. He felt quite young in spirit; it was only breath that he was short of.

"I expect you think very much as I do; when you've worked for others for so many years, you feel you want something of your own."

"Yes, perhaps," said Lasse, evasively.

"One wouldn't come to it quite empty-handed either—if it should happen."

"Oh, indeed."

Karna continued in this way, but Lasse was always sparing with his words, until they arrived at the Rockingstone, where the others were standing waiting. That was a block and a half! Fifty tons it was said to weigh and yet Mons and Anders could rock it by putting a stick under one end of it.

"And now we ought to go to the Robbers' Castle," said Karl Johan, and they trudged on, always up and down. Lasse did his utmost to keep beside the others, for he did not feel very brave when he was alone with Karna. What a fearful quantity of trees there were! And not all of one sort as in other parts of the world. There were birches and firs, beech and larch and mountain-ash all mixed together, and ever so many cherry-trees. The head man led them across a little, dark lake, that lay at the foot of the rock, staring up like an evil eye. "It was here that Little Anna drowned her baby—she that was betrayed by her master," he said lingeringly. They all knew the story, and stood silent over the lake; the girls had tears in their eyes.

As they stood there silent, thinking of Little Anna's sad fate, an unspeakably soft note came up to them, followed by a long, affecting sobbing. They moved nearer

to one another. "Oh Lord!" whispered Fair Maria, shivering. "That's the baby's soul crying!" Pelle stiffened as he listened, and cold waves seemed to flow down his back.

"Why that's a nightingale," said Karl Johan. "Don't you even know that? There are hundreds of them in these woods, and they sing in the middle of the day." This was a relief to the older people, but Pelle's horror was not so easily thrown off. He had gazed into the depths of the other world, and every explanation glanced off him.

But then came the Robbers' Castle as a great disappointment. He had imagined it peopled with robbers, and it was only some old ruins that stood on a little hill in the middle of a bog. He went by himself all round the bottom of it to see if there were not a secret underground passage that led down to the water. If there were, he would get hold of his father without letting the others know, and make his way in and look for the chests of money; or else there would be too many to share in it. But this was forgotten as a peculiar scent arrested his attention, and he came upon a piece of ground that was green with lily-of-the-valley plants that still bore a few flowers, and where there were wild strawberries. There were so many that he had to go and call the others.

But this was also forgotten as he made his way through the underwood to get up. He had lost the path and gone astray in the damp chilly darkness under the cliff. Creeping plants and thorns wove themselves in among the overhanging branches, and made a thick, low roof. He could not see an opening anywhere, and a strange green light came through the matted branches, the ground was slippery with moisture and decaying substances; from the cliff hung quivering fern-fronds with their points downwards, and water dripping from them like wet hair. Huge tree-roots,

like the naked bodies of black goblins writhing to get free, lay stretched across the rocks. A little further on, the sun made a patch of burning fire in the darkness, and beyond it rose a bluish vapour and a sound as of a distant threshing-machine.

Pelle stood still and his terror grew until his knees trembled; then he set off running as if he were possessed. A thousand shadow-hands stretched out after him as he ran; and he pushed his way through briars and creepers with a low cry. The daylight met him with the force of a blow, and something behind him had a firm grasp on his clothes; he had to shout for Father Lasse with all his might before it let go.

And there he stood right out in the bog, while high up above his head the others sat, upon a point of rock all among the trees. From up there it looked as if the world were all tree-tops, rising and falling endlessly; there was foliage far down beneath your feet and out as far as the eye could see, up and down. You were almost tempted to throw yourself into it, it looked so invitingly soft. As a warning to the others, Karl Johan had to tell them about the tailor's apprentice, who jumped out from a projecting rock here, just because the foliage looked so temptingly soft. Strange to say he escaped with his life; but the high tree he fell through stripped him of every stitch of clothing.

Mons had been teasing Sara by saying that he was going to jump down, but now he drew back cautiously. "I don't want to risk my confirmation-clothes," he said, trying to look good.

After all, the most remarkable thing of all was the Horseman Hill with the royal monument. The tower alone! Not a bit of wood had been used in it, only granite; and you went round and round and round. "You're