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THE master and mistress of Stone Farm were almost always the subject of common talk, and were never quite out of the thoughts of the people. There was as much thought and said about Kongstrup and his wife as about all the rest of the parish put together; they were bread to so many, their Providence both in evil and good, that nothing that they did could be immaterial.

No one ever thought of weighing them by the same standards as they used for others; they were something apart, beings who were endowed with great possessions, and could do and be as they liked, disregarding all considerations and entertaining all passions. All that came from Stone Farm was too great for ordinary mortals to sit in judgment upon; it was difficult enough to explain what went on, even when at such close quarters with it all as were Lasse and Pelle. To them as to the others, the Stone Farm people were beings apart, who lived their life under greater conditions, beings as it were half-way between the human and the supernatural, in a world where such things as unquenchable passion and frenzied love wrought havoc.

What happened, therefore, at Stone Farm supplied more excitement than the other events of the parish. People listened with open-mouthed interest to the smallest utterance from the big house, and when the outbursts came, trembled and went about oppressed and uncomfortable.

No matter how clearly Lasse, in the calm periods, might think he saw it all, the life up there would suddenly be dragged out of its ordinary recognised form again, and wrap itself around his and the boy's world like a misty sphere in which capricious powers warred—just above their heads.

It was now Jomfru Köller's second year at the farm, in spite of all evil prophecies; and indeed things had turned out in such a way that every one had to own that his prognostications had been wrong. She was always fonder of driving with Kongstrup to the town than of staying at home to cheer Fru Kongstrup up in her loneliness; but such is youth. She behaved properly enough otherwise, and it was well known that Kongstrup had returned to his old hotel-sweethearting in the town. Fru Kongstrup herself, moreover, showed no distrust of her young relative—if she had ever felt any. She was as kind to her as if she had been her own daughter; and very often it was she herself who got Jomfru Köller to go in the carriage to look after her husband.

Otherwise the days passed as usual, and Fru Kongstrup was continually giving herself up to little drinking-bouts and to grief. At such times she would weep over her wasted life; and if he were at home would follow him with her accusations from room to room, until he would order the carriage and take flight, even in the middle of the night. The walls were so saturated with her voice that it penetrated through everything like a sorrowful, dull droning. Those who happened to be up at night to look after animals or the like, could hear her talking incessantly up there, even if she were alone.

But then Jomfru Köller began to talk of going away. She suddenly got the idea that she wanted to go to Copenhagen and learn something, so that she could earn her

own living. It sounded strange, as there was every prospect of her some day inheriting the farmer's property. Fru Kongstrup was quite upset at the thought of losing her, and altogether forgot her other troubles in continually talking to her about it. Even when everything was settled, and they were standing in the mangling-room with the maids, getting Jomfru Köller's things ready for her journey, she still kept on—to no earthly purpose. Like all the Stone Farm family, she could never let go anything she had once got hold of.

There was something strange about Jomfru Köller's obstinacy of purpose; she was not even quite sure what she was going to do over there. "I suppose she's going over to learn cooking," said one and another with a covert smile.

Fru Kongstrup herself had no suspicion. She, who was always suspecting something, seemed to be blind here. It must have been because she had such complete trust in Jomfru Köller, and thought so much of her. She had not even time to sigh, so busy was she in putting everything into good order. Much need there was for it too; Jomfru Köller must have had her head full of very different things, judging from the condition her clothes were in.

"I'm glad Kongstrup's going over with her," said Fru Kongstrup to Fair Maria one evening when they were sitting round the big darning-basket, mending the young lady's stockings after the wash. "They say Copenhagen's a bad town for inexperienced young people to come to. But Sina'll get on all right, for she's got the good stock of the Köllers in her." She said it all with such childish simplicity; you could tramp in and out of her heart with great wooden shoes on, suspicious though she was. "Perhaps we'll come over to see you at Christmas, Sina," she added in the goodness of her heart.

Jomfru Köller opened her mouth and caught her breath in terror, but did not answer. She bent over her work and did not look at any one all the evening. She never looked frankly at any one now. "She's ashamed of her deceitfulness!" they said. The judgment would fall upon her; she ought to have known what she was doing, and not gone between the bark and the wood, especially here where one of them trusted her entirely.

In the upper yard the new man Pær was busy getting the closed carriage ready. Erik stood beside him idle. He looked unhappy and troubled, poor fellow, as he always did when he was not near the bailiff. Each time a wheel had to come off or be put on, he had to put his giant's back under the big carriage and lift it. Every now and then Lasse came to the stable-door to get an idea of what was going on. Pelle was at school, it being the first day of the new half-year.

She was going away to-day, the false wretch who had let herself be drawn into deceiving one who had been a mother to her! Fru Kongstrup must be going with them down to the steamer, as the closed carriage was going.

Lasse went into the bedroom to arrange one or two things so that he could slip out in the evening without Pelle noticing it. He had given Pelle a little paper of sweets for Madam Olsen, and on the paper he had drawn a cross with a lead button; and the cross meant in all secrecy, that he would come to her that evening.

While he took out his best clothes and hid them under some hay close to the outer door, he hummed:—

"Love's longing so strong
It helped me along,
And the way was made short with the nightingales' song."

He was looking forward so immensely to the evening;

he had not been alone with her now for nearly a quarter of a year. He was proud, moreover, of having taken writing into his service, and that a writing that Pelle, quick reader of writing though he was, would not be able to make out.

While the others were taking their after-dinner nap, Lasse went out and tidied up the dung-heap. The carriage was standing up there with one large trunk strapped on behind, and another standing on one edge on the box. Lasse wondered what such a girl would do when she was alone out in the wide world and had to pay the price of her sin. He supposed there must be places where they took in such girls in return for good payment; everything could be got over there!

Johanna Pihl came waddling in at the gate up there. Lasse started when he saw her; she never came for any good. When she boldly exhibited herself here, she was always drunk, and then she stopped at nothing. It was sad to see how low misfortune could drag a woman. Lasse could not help thinking what a pretty girl she had been in her youth. And now all she thought of was making money out of her shame! He cautiously withdrew into the stable, so as not to be an eye-witness to anything, and peered out from there.

The Sow went up and down in front of the windows, and called in a thick voice, over which she had not full command: "Kongstrup, Kongstrup! Come out and let me speak to you. You must let me have some money, for your son and I haven't had any food for three days."

"That's a wicked lie!" said Lasse to himself indignantly, "for she has a good income. But she wastes God's gifts, and now she's out to do some evil." He would have liked to take the fork and chase her out through the gate, but it was not well to expose one's self to her venomous tongue.

She had her foot upon the step, but did not dare to mount. Fuddled though she was, there was something that kept her in check. She stood there groping at the handrail and mumbling to herself, and every now and then lifting her fat face and calling Kongstrup.

Jomfru Köller came inadvertently up from the basement, and went towards the steps; her eyes were on the ground, and she did not see the Sow until it was too late, and then she turned quickly. Johanna Pihl stood grinning.

"Come here, miss, and let me wish you good-day!" she cried. "You're too grand, are you? But the one may be just as good as the other! Perhaps it's because you can drive away in a carriage and have yours on the other side of the sea, while I had mine in a beet-field! But is that anything to be proud of? I say, just go up and tell my fine gentleman that his eldest's starving! I daren't go myself because of the evil eye."

Long before this Jomfru Köller was down in the basement again, but Johanna Pihl continued to stand and say the same thing over and over again, until the bailiff came dashing out towards her, when she retired, scolding, from the yard.

The men had been aroused before their time by her screaming, and stood drowsily watching behind the barn-doors. Lasse kept excited watch from the stable, and the girls had collected in the wash-house. What would happen now? They all expected some terrible outbreak.

But nothing happened. Now, when Fru Kongstrup had the right to shake heaven and earth—so faithlessly had they treated her—now she was silent. The farm was as peaceful as on the days when they had come to a sort of understanding, and Kongstrup kept himself quiet. Fru Kongstrup passed the windows up there, and looked just like anybody else. Nothing happened!

Something must have been said, however, for the young lady had a very tear-stained face when they got into the carriage, and Kongstrup wore his confused air. Then Karl Johan drove away with the two; and the mistress did not appear. She was probably ashamed for what concerned the others.

Nothing had happened to relieve the suspense; it oppressed every one. She must have accepted her unhappy lot, and given up standing out for her rights, now, just when every one would have supported her. This tranquillity was so unnatural, so unreasonable, that it made one melancholy and low-spirited. It was as though others were suffering on her behalf, and she herself had no heart.

But then it broke down, and the sound of weeping began to ooze out over the farm, quiet and regular like flowing heart's blood. All the evening it flowed; the weeping had never sounded so despairing; it went to the hearts of all. She had taken in the poor child and treated her as her own, and the poor child had deceived her. Every one felt how she must suffer.

During the night the weeping rose to cries so heart-rending that they wakened even Pelle—wet with perspiration. "It sounds like some one in the last agonies!" said Lasse, and hastily drew on his trousers with trembling, clumsy hands. "She surely hasn't laid hands upon herself?" He lighted the lantern and went out into the stable, Pelle following naked.

Then suddenly the cries ceased, as abruptly as if the sound had been cut off with an axe, and the silence that followed said dumbly that it was for ever. The farm sank into the darkness of night like an extinguished world. "Our mistress is dead!" said Lasse shivering and moving his fingers over his lips. "May God receive her kindly!" They crept fearfully into bed.

But when they got up the next morning, the farm looked as it always did, and the maids were chattering and making as much noise as usual in the wash-house. A little while after, the mistress's voice was heard up there, giving directions about the work. "I don't understand it," said Lasse, shaking his head. "Nothing but death can stop anything so suddenly. She must have a tremendous power over herself!"

It now became apparent what a capable woman she was. She had not wasted anything in the long period of idleness; the maids became brisker and the fare better. One day she came to the cow-stable to see that the milking was done cleanly. She gave every one his due too. One day they came from the quarry and complained that they had had no wages for three weeks. There was not enough money on the farm. "Then we must get some," said the mistress, and they had to set about threshing at once. And one day when Karna raised too many objections she received a ringing box on the ear.

"It's a new nature she's got," said Lasse. But the old work-people recognised several things from their young days. "It's her family's nature," they said. "She's a regular Köller."

The time passed without any change; she was as constant in her tranquillity as she had before been constant in her misery. It was not the habit of the Köllers to change their minds once they had made them up about anything. Then Kongstrup came home from his journey. She did not drive out to meet him, but was on the steps to greet him, gentle and kind. Everybody could see how pleased and surprised he was. He must have expected a very different reception.

But during the night, when they were all sound asleep, Karna came knocking at the men's window. "Get up

and fetch the doctor!" she cried, "and be quick!" The call sounded like one of life and death, and they turned out headlong. Lasse, who was in the habit of sleeping with one eye open, like the hens, was the first man on the spot, and had got the horses out of the stable; and in a few minutes Karl Johan was driving out at the gate. He had a man with him to hold the lantern. It was pitch-dark, but they could hear the carriage tearing along until the sound became very distant; then in another moment the sound changed, as the vehicle turned on to the metalled road a couple of miles off. Then it died away altogether.

On the farm they went about shaking themselves and unable to rest, wandering into their rooms and out again to gaze up at the tall windows, where people were running backwards and forwards with lights. What had happened? Some mishap to the farmer evidently, for now and again the mistress's commanding voice could be heard down in the kitchen—but what? The wash-house and the servants' room were dark and locked.

Towards morning, when the doctor had come and had taken things into his own hands, a greater calm fell upon them all, and the maids took the opportunity of slipping out into the yard. They would not at once say what was the matter, but stood looking in an embarrassed way at one another, and laughing stupidly. At last they gradually got it out by first one telling a little and then another: in a fit of delirium or of madness Kongstrup had done violence to himself. Their faces were contorted with a mixture of fear and smothered laughter; and when Karl Johan said gravely to Fair Maria: "You're not telling a lie, are you?" she burst into tears. There she stood laughing and crying by turns; and it made no difference that Karl Johan scolded her sharply.

But it was true, although it sounded like the craziest nonsense that a man could do such a thing to himself. It was a truth that struck one dumb!

It was some time before they could make it out at all, but when they did there were one or two things about it that seemed a little unnatural. It could not have happened during intoxication, for the farmer never drank at home, did not drink at all as far as any one knew, but only took a glass in good company. It was more likely to have been remorse and contrition; it was not impossible considering the life he had led, although it was strange that a man of his nature should behave in such a desperate fashion.

But it was not satisfactory! And gradually, without it being possible to point to any origin, all thoughts turned towards her. She had changed of late, and the Köller blood had come out in her; and in that family they had never let themselves be trodden down unrevenged!