

## XXI

PELLE had been to confirmation-class, and was now sitting in the servants' room eating his dinner—boiled herring and porridge. It was Saturday, and the bailiff had driven into the town, so Erik was sitting over the stove. He never said anything of his own accord, but always sat and stared; and his eyes followed Pelle's movements backwards and forwards between his mouth and his plate. He always kept his eyebrows raised, as if everything were new to him; they had almost grown into that position. In front of him stood a mug of beer in a large pool, for he drank constantly and spilt some every time.

Fair Maria was washing up, and looked in every now and then to see if Pelle were finished. When he licked his horn spoon clean and threw it into the drawer, she came in with something on a plate: they had had roast loin of pork for dinner upstairs.

"Here's a little taste for you," she said. "I expect you're still hungry. What'll you give me for it?" She kept the plate in her hand, and looked at him with a coaxing smile.

Pelle was still very hungry—ravenous; and he looked at the titbit until his mouth watered. Then he dutifully put up his lips, and Maria kissed him. She glanced involuntarily at Erik, and a gleam of something passed over his foolish face, like a faint reminiscence.

"There sits that great gaby making a mess!" she said,

scolding as she seized the beer-mug from him, held it under the edge of the table, and with her hand swept the spilt beer into it.

Pelle set to work upon the pork without troubling about anything else; but when she had gone out, he carefully spat down between his legs, and went through a small cleansing operation with the sleeve of his blouse.

When he was finished he went into the stable and cleaned out the mangers, while Lasse curried the cows; it was all to look nice for Sunday. While they worked, Pelle gave a full account of the day's happenings, and repeated all that the parson had said. Lasse listened attentively, with occasional little exclamations. "Think of that!" "Well, I never!" "So David was a buck like that, and yet he walked in the sight of God all the same! Well, God's long-suffering is great—there's no mistake about that!"

There was a knock at the outer door. It was one of Kalle's children with the message that grandmother would like to bid them good-bye before she passed away.

"Then she can't have long to live," exclaimed Lasse. "It'll be a great loss to them all, so happy as they've been together. But there'll be a little more food for the others, of course."

They agreed to wait until they were quite finished, and then steal away; for if they asked to be let off early, they would not be likely to get leave for the funeral. "And that'll be a day's feasting, with plenty of food and drink, if I know anything of Brother Kalle!" said Lasse.

When they had finished their work and had their supper, they stole out through the outside door into the field. Lasse had heaped up the quilt, and put an old woolly cap just sticking out at the pillow-end; in a hurry it could easily be mistaken for the hair of a sleeper, if

any one came to see. When they had got a little way, Lasse had to go back once more to take precautions against fire.

It was snowing gently and silently, and the ground was frozen so that they could go straight on over everything. Now that they knew the way, it seemed no distance at all; and before they knew where they were, the fields came to an end and the rock began.

There was a light in the cottage. Kalle was sitting up waiting for them. "Grandmother hasn't long to live," he said, more seriously than Lasse ever remembered to have heard him speak before.

Kalle opened the door to grandmother's room, and whispered something, to which his wife answered softly out of the darkness.

"Oh, I'm awake," said the old woman, in a slow monotonous voice. "You can speak out, for I am awake."

Lasse and Pelle took off their leather shoes and went in in their stockings. "Good evening, grandmother!" they both said solemnly, "and the peace of God!" Lasse added.

"Well, here I am," said the old woman, feebly patting the quilt. She had big woollen gloves on. "I took the liberty of sending for you for I haven't long to live now. How are things going on in the parish? Have there been any deaths?"

"No, not that I know of," answered Lasse. "But you look so well, grandmother, so fat and rosy! We shall see you going about again in two or three days."

"Oh, I dare say!" said the old woman, smiling indulgently. "I suppose I look like a young bride after her first baby, eh? But thank you for coming; it's as if you belonged to me. Well, now I've been sent for, and I shall depart in peace. I've had a good time in this world, and

haven't anything to complain of. I had a good husband and a good daughter, not forgetting Kalle there. And I got my sight back, so that I saw the world once more."

"But you only saw it with one eye, like the birds, grandmother," said Kalle, trying to laugh.

"Yes, yes, but that was quite good enough; there was so much that was new since I lost my sight. The wood had grown bigger, and a whole family had grown up without my quite knowing it. Ah yes, it has been good to live in my old age and have them all about me—Kalle and Maria and the children. And all of my own age have gone before me; it's been nice to see what became of them all."

"How old are you now, grandmother?" asked Lasse.

"Kalle has looked it up in the church-book, and from that I ought to be almost eighty; but that can scarcely be right."

"Yes, it's right enough," said Kalle, "for the parson looked it up for me himself."

"Well, well, then the time's gone quickly, and I shouldn't at all mind living a little longer, if it was God's will. But the grave's giving warning; I notice it in my eyelids." The old woman had a little difficulty in breathing, but kept on talking.

"You're talking far too much, mother!" said Maria.

"Yes, you ought to be resting and sleeping," said Lasse. "Hadn't we better say good-bye to you?"

"No, I really must talk, for it'll be the last time I see you, and I shall have plenty of time to rest. My eyes are so light, thank God, and I don't feel the least bit sleepy."

"Grandmother hasn't slept for a whole week, I think," said Kalle, doubtfully.

"And why should I sleep away the last of the time I shall have here, when I shall get plenty of time for that

afterwards. At night when you others are asleep, I lie and listen to your breathing, and feel glad that you're all so well. Or I look at the heather-broom, and think of Anders and all the fun we had together."

She lay silent for a little while, getting her breath, while she gazed at a withered bunch of heather hanging from a beam.

"He gathered that for me the first time we lay in the flowering heather. He was so uncommonly fond of the heather, was Anders, and every year when it flowered, he took me out of my bed and carried me out there—every year until he was called away. I was always as new for him as on the first day, and so happiness and joy took up their abode in my heart."

"Now, mother, you ought to be quiet and not talk so much!" said Maria, smoothing the old woman's pillow. But she would not be silenced, though her thoughts shifted a little.

"Yes, my teeth were hard to get and hard to lose, and I brought my children into the world with pain, and laid them in the grave with sorrow, one after another. But except for that I've never been ill, and I've had a good husband. He had an eye for God's creations, and we got up with the birds every summer morning, and went out on to the heath and saw the sun rise out of the sea before we set about our day's work."

The old woman's slow voice died away, and it was as though a song ceased to sound in their ears. They sat up and sighed. "Ah, yes," said Lasse, "the voice of memory is pleasant!"

"What about you, Lasse?" said the old woman suddenly. "I hear you're looking about for a wife!"

"Am I?" exclaimed Lasse in alarm. Pelle saw Kalle wink at Maria, so they knew about it too.

"Aren't you soon coming to show us your sweetheart?" asked Kalle. "I hear it's a good match."

"I don't in the least know what you're talking about," said Lasse, quite confused.

"Well, well, you might do worse than that!" said the grandmother. "She's good enough—from what I know. I hope you'll suit one another like Anders and me. It was a happy time—the days when we went about and each did our best, and the nights when the wind blew. It was good then to be two to keep one another warm."

"You've been very happy in everything, grandmother," exclaimed Lasse.

"Yes, and I'm departing in peace and can lie quiet in my grave. I've not been treated unfairly in any way, and I've got nothing to haunt any one for. If only Kalle takes care to have me carried out feet first, I don't expect I shall trouble you."

"Just you come and visit us now and then if you like! We shan't be afraid to welcome you, for we've been so happy together here," said Kalle.

"No, you never know what your nature may be in the next life. You must promise to have me carried out feet first! I don't want to disturb your night's rest, so hard as you two have to work all day. And besides you've had to put up with me long enough, and it'll be nice for you to be by yourselves for once; and there'll be a bit more for you to eat after this."

Maria began to cry.

"Now look here!" exclaimed Kalle, testily. "I won't hear any more of that nonsense, for none of us have had to go short because of you. If you aren't good, I shall give a big party after you, for joy that you're gone!"

"No, you won't!" said the old woman quite sharply. "I won't hear of a three days' wake! Promise me now,

Maria, that you won't go and ruin yourselves to make a fuss over a poor old soul like me! But you must ask the nearest neighbours in in the afternoon, with Lasse and Pelle, of course. And if you ask Hans Henrik, perhaps he'd bring his concertina with him, and you could have a dance in the barn."

Kalle scratched the back of his head. "Then hang it, you must wait until I've finished threshing, for I can't clear the floor now. Couldn't we borrow Jens Kure's horse, and take a little drive over the heath in the afternoon?"

"You might do that too, but the children are to have a share in whatever you settle to do. It'll be a comfort to think they'll have a happy day out of it, for they don't have too many holidays; and there's money for it, you know."

"Yes, would you believe it, Lasse—grandmother's got together fifty kronas that none of us knew anything about, to go towards her funeral-party!"

"I've been putting by for it for twenty years now, for I'd like to leave the world in a decent way, and without pulling the clothes off my relations' backs. My grave-clothes are all ready too, for I've got my wedding chemise lying by. It's only been used once, and more than that and my cap I don't want to have on."

"But that's so little," objected Maria. "Whatever will the neighbours say if we don't dress you properly?"

"I don't care!" answered the old woman decidedly. "That's how Anders liked me best, and it's all I've worn in bed these sixty years. So there!" And she turned her head to the wall.

"You shall have it all just as you like, mother!" said Maria.

The old woman turned round again, and felt for her

daughter's hand on the quilt. "And you must make rather a soft pillow for my old head, for it's become so difficult to find rest for it."

"We can take one of the babies' pillows and cover it with white," said Maria.

"Thank you! And then I think you should send to Jacob Kristian's for the carpenter to-morrow—he's somewhere about anyhow—and let him measure me for the coffin; then I could have my say as to what it's to be like. Kalle's so free with his money."

The old woman closed her eyes. She had tired herself out after all.

"Now I think we'll creep out into the other room, and let her be quiet," whispered Kalle, getting up; but at that she opened her eyes.

"Are you going already?" she asked.

"We thought you were asleep, grandmother," said Lasse.

"No, I don't suppose I shall sleep any more in this life; my eyes are so light, so light. Well, good-bye to you, Lasse and Pelle! May you be very, very happy, as happy as I've been. Maria was the only one death spared, but she's been a good daughter to me; and Kalle's been as good and kind to me as if I'd been his sweetheart. I had a good husband too, who chopped firewood for me on Sundays, and got up in the night to look after the babies when I was lying-in. We were really well off—lead weights in the clock and plenty of firing; and he promised me a trip to Copenhagen. I churned my first butter in a bottle, for we had no churn to begin with; and I had to break the bottle to get it out, and then he laughed, for he always laughed when I did anything wrong. And how glad he was when each baby was born! Many a morning did he wake me up and we went out to see the sun come up out

of the sea. 'Come and see, Anna,' he would say, 'the heather's come into bloom in the night.' But it was only the sun that shed its red over it! It was more than two miles to our nearest neighbour, but he didn't care for anything as long as he had me. He found his greatest pleasures in me, poor as I was; and the animals were fond of me too. Everything went well with us on the whole."

She lay moving her head from side to side, and the tears were running down her cheeks. She no longer had difficulty in breathing, and one thing recalled another, and fell easily in one long tone from her lips. She probably did not now know what she was saying, but could not stop talking. She began at the beginning and repeated the words, evenly and monotonously, like one who is carried away and *must* talk.

"Mother!" said Maria, anxiously, putting her hands on her mother's shaking head. "Recollect yourself, mother!"

The old woman stopped and looked at her wonderingly. "Ah yes," she said. "Memories came upon me so fast! I almost think I could sleep a little now."

Lasse rose and went up to the bed. "Good-bye, grandmother!" he said, "and a pleasant journey in case we shouldn't meet again!" Pelle followed him and repeated the words. The old woman looked at them inquiringly, but did not move. Then Lasse gently took her hand, and then Pelle, and they stole out into the other room.

"Her flame's burning clear to the end!" said Lasse, when the door was shut. Pelle noticed how freely their voices rang again.

"Yes, she'll be herself to the very end; there's been extra good timber in her. The people about here don't like our not having the doctor to her. What do you think? Shall we go to the expense?"

"I don't suppose there's anything more the matter with her than that she can't live any longer," said Lasse, thoughtfully.

"No, and she herself won't hear of it. If he could only keep life in her a little while longer!"

"Yes, times are hard!" said Lasse, and went round to look at the children. They were all asleep, and the room seemed heavy with their breathing. "The flock's getting much smaller."

"Yes, one or two fly away from the nest pretty well every year," answered Kalle, "and now I suppose we shan't have any more. It's an unfortunate figure we've stopped at—a horrid figure; but Maria's become deaf in that ear, and I can't do anything alone." Kalle had got back his roguish look.

"I'm sure we can do very well with what we've got," said Maria. "When we take Anna's too, it makes fourteen."

"Oh yes, count the others, too, and you'll get off all the easier!" said Kalle teasingly.

Lasse was looking at Anna's child, which lay side by side with Kalle's thirteenth. "She looks healthier than her aunt," he said. "You'd scarcely think they were the same age. She's just as red as the other's pale."

"Yes, there is a difference," Kalle admitted, looking affectionately at the children. "It must be that Anna's has come from young people, while *our* blood's beginning to get old. And then the ones that come the wrong side of the blanket always thrive best—like our Albert, for instance. He carries himself quite differently from the others. Did you know, by-the-by, that he's to get a ship of his own next spring?"

"No, surely not! Is he really going to be a captain?" said Lasse in the utmost astonishment.

"It's Kongstrup that's at the back of that—that's between ourselves of course!"

"Does the father of Anna's child still pay what he's bound to?" asked Lasse.

"Yes, he's honest enough! We get five kronas a month for having the child, and that's a good help towards expenses."

Maria had placed a dram, bread and a saucer of dripping on the table, and invited them to take their places at it.

"You're holding out a long time at Stone Farm," said Kalle when they were seated. "Are you going to stay there all your life?" he asked with a mischievous wink.

"It's not such a simple matter to strike out into the deep!" said Lasse, evasively.

"Oh, we shall soon be hearing news from you, shan't we?" asked Maria.

Lasse did not answer; he was struggling with a crust.

"Oh, but do cut off the crust if it's too much for your teeth!" said Maria. Every now and then she listened at her mother's door. "She's dropped off after all, poor old soul!" she said.

Kalle pretended to discover the bottle for the first time. "What! Why we've got gin on the table too, and not one of us has smelt it!" he exclaimed, and filled their glasses for the third time. Then Maria corked the bottle. "Do you even grudge us our food?" he said, making great eyes at her—what a rogue he was! And Maria stared at him with eyes that were just as big, and said: "Yah! you want to fight, do you?" It quite warmed Lasse's heart to see their happiness.

"How's the farmer at Stone Farm? I suppose he's got over the worst now, hasn't he?" said Kalle.

"Well, I think he's as much a man as he'll ever be. A thing like that leaves its mark upon any one," answered

Lasse. Maria was smiling, and as soon as they looked at her, she looked away.

"Yes, you may grin!" said Lasse; "but I think it's sad!" Upon which Maria had to go out into the kitchen to have her laugh out.

"That's what all the women do at the mere mention of his name," said Kalle. "It's a sad change. To-day red, to-morrow dead. Well, she's got her own way in one thing, and that is that she keeps him to herself—in a way. But to think that he can live with her after that!"

"They seem fonder of one another than they ever were before; he can't do without her for a single minute. But of course he wouldn't find any one else to love him now. What a queer sort of devilment love is! But we must see about getting home."

"Well, I'll send you word when she's to be buried," said Kalle when they got outside the house.

"Yes, do! And if you should be in want of a ten-krone note for the funeral, let me know. Good-bye then!"