XXII

GRANDMOTHER'S funeral was still like a bright light behind everything that one thought and did. It was like certain kinds of food, that leave a pleasant taste in the mouth long after they have been eaten and done with. Kalle had certainly done everything to make it a festive day; there was an abundance of good things to eat and drink, and no end to his comical tricks. And sly dog that he was, he had found an excuse for asking Madam Olsen; it was really a nice way of making the relation a legitimate one.

It gave Lasse and Pelle enough to talk about for a whole month, and after the subject was quite talked out and laid on one side for other things, it remained in the background as a sense of well-being of which no one quite knew the origin.

But now spring was advancing, and with it came troubles—not the daily trifles that could be bad enough, but great troubles that darkened everything, even when one was not thinking about them. Pelle was to be confirmed at Easter, and Lasse was at his wits' end to know how he was going to get him all that he would need—new clothes, new cap, new shoes! The boy often spoke about it; he must have been afraid of being put to shame before the others that day in church.

"It'll be all right," said Lasse, but he himself saw no way at all out of the difficulty. At all the farms where the good old customs prevailed, the master and mistress

provided it all; but here everything was so confoundedly new-fangled, with prompt payments that slipped away between one's fingers. A hundred krones a year in wages seemed a tremendous amount when one thought of it all in one; but you only got them gradually, a few öres at a time, without your being able to put your finger anywhere and say: You got a good round sum there! "Yes, yes, it'll be all right!" said Lasse aloud, when he had got himself entangled in absurd speculations; and Pelle had to be satisfied with this. There was only one way out of the difficulty—to borrow the money from Madam Olsen; and that Lasse would have to come to in the end, loth as he was to do it. But Pelle must not know anything about it.

Lasse refrained as long as he possibly could, hoping that something or other would turn up to free him from the necessity of so disgraceful a proceeding as borrowing from his sweetheart. But nothing happened, and time was passing. One morning he cut the matter short; Pelle was just setting out for school. "Will you run in to Madam Olsen's and give her this?" he said, handing the boy a packet. "It's something she's promised to mend for us." Inside, on the paper, was the large cross that announced Lasse's coming in the evening.

From the hills Pelle saw that the ice had broken up in the night. It had filled the bay for nearly a month with a rough, compact mass, upon which you could play about as safely as on dry land. This was a new side of the sea, and Pelle had carefully felt his way forward with the tips of his wooden shoes, to the great amusement of the others. Afterwards he learned to walk about freely on the ice without constantly shivering at the thought that the great fish of the sea were going about just under his wooden shoes, and perhaps were only waiting for him to drop through. Every day he went out to the high rampart of

pack-ice that formed the boundary about a mile out, where the open water moved round in the sunshine like a green eye. He went out because he *would* do what the others did, but he never felt safe on the sea.

Now it was all broken up, and the bay was full of heaving ice-floes that rubbed against one another with a crackling sound; and the pieces farthest out, carrying bits of the rampart, were already on their way out to sea. Pelle had performed many exploits out there, but was really quite pleased that it was now packing up and taking its departure, so that it would once more be no crime to stay on dry land.

Old Fris was sitting in his place. He never left it now during a lesson, however badly things might go down in the class, but contented himself with beating on the desk with his cane. He was little more than a shadow of his former self, his head was always shaking, and his hands were often incapable of grasping an object. He still brought the newspaper with him, and opened it out at the beginning of the lesson, but he did not read. He would fall into a dream, sitting bolt upright, with his hands on the desk and his back against the wall. At such times the children could be as noisy as they liked, and he did not move; only a slight change in the expression of his eyes showed that he was alive at all.

It was quieter in school now. It was not worth while teasing the master, for he scarcely noticed it, and so the fun lost most of its attraction. A kind of court of justice had gradually formed among the bigger boys; they determined the order of the school-lessons, and disobedience and disputes as to authority were respectively punished and settled in the playground—with fists and tips of wooden shoes. The instruction was given as before, by the cleverer scholars teaching what they knew to the others; there

was rather more arithmetic and reading than in Fris's time, but on the other hand the hymns suffered.

It still sometimes happened that Fris woke up and interfered in the instruction. "Hymns!" he would cry in his feeble voice, and strike the desk from habit; and the children would put aside what they were doing to please the old man, and begin repeating some hymn or other, taking their revenge by going through one verse over and over again for a whole hour. It was the only real trick they played the old man, and the joke was all on their side, for Fris noticed nothing.

Fris had so often talked of resigning his post, but now he did not even think of that. He shuffled to and from school at the regular times, probably without even knowing he did it. The authorities really had not the heart to dismiss him. Except in the hymns, which came off with rather short measure, there was nothing to say against him as teacher; for no one had ever yet left his school without being able both to write his name and to read a printed book—if it were in the old type. The new-fashioned printing with Latin letters Fris did not teach, although he had studied Latin in his youth.

Fris himself probably did not feel the change, for he had ceased to feel both for himself and for others. None now brought their human sorrows to him, and found comfort in a sympathetic mind; his mind was not there to consult. It floated outside him, half detached as it were, like a bird that is unwilling to leave its old nest to set out on a flight to the unknown. It must have been the fluttering mind that his eyes were always following when they dully gazed about into vacancy. But the young men who came home to winter in the village, and went to Fris as to an old friend, felt the change. For them there was now an empty place at home; they missed the old growler, who,

though he hated them all in the lump at school, loved them all afterwards, and was always ready with his ridiculous "He was my best boy!" about each and all of them, good and bad alike.

The children took their playtime early and rushed out before Pelle had given the signal; and Fris trotted off as usual into the village, where he would be absent the customary two hours. The girls gathered in a flock to eat their dinners, and the boys dashed about the playground like birds let loose from a cage.

Pelle was quite angry at the insubordination, and pondered over a way of making himself respected; for to-day he had had the other big boys against him. He dashed over the playground like a circling gull, his body inclined and his arms stretched out like a pair of wings. Most of them made room for him, and those who did not move willingly were made to do so. His position was threatened, and he kept moving incessantly, as if to keep the question undecided until a possibility of striking presented itself.

This went on for some time; he knocked some over and hit out at others in his flight, while his offended sense of power grew. He wanted to make enemies of them all. They began to gather up by the gymnastic apparatus, and suddenly he had the whole pack upon him. He tried to rise and shake them off, flinging them hither and thither, but all in vain; down through the heap came their remorseless knuckles and made him grin with pain. He worked away indefatigably but without effect until he lost patience and resorted to less scrupulous tactics—thrusting his fingers into eyes, or attacking noses, windpipes, and any vulnerable part he could get at. That thinned them out, and he was able to rise and fling a last little fellow across the playground.

Pelle was well bruised and quite out of breath, but contented. They all stood by gaping, and let him brush himself down; he was the victor. He went across to the girls with his torn blouse, and they put it together with pins and gave him sweets; and in return he fastened two of them together by their plaits, and they screamed and let him pull them about without being cross; it was all just as it should be.

But he was not quite secure after his victory. He could not, like Henry Bödker in his time, walk right through the whole flock with his hands in his pockets directly after a battle, and look as if they did not exist. He had to keep stealing glances at them while he strolled down to the beach, and tried with all his might to control his breathing; for next to crying, to be out of breath was the greatest disgrace that could happen to you.

Pelle walked along the beach, regretting that he had not leaped upon them again at once while the flush of victory was still upon him: it was too late now. If he had, it might perhaps have been said of him too that he could lick all the rest of the class together; and now he must be content with being the strongest boy in the school.

A wild war-whoop from the school made him start. The whole swarm of boys was coming round the end of the house with sticks and pieces of wood in their hands. Pelle knew what was at stake if he gave way, and therefore forced himself to stand quietly waiting although his legs twitched. But suddenly they made a wild rush at him, and with a spring he turned to fly. There lay the sea barring his way, closely packed with heaving ice. He ran out on to an ice-floe, leaped from it to the next, which was not large enough to bear him—had to go on.

The idea of flight possessed him and made the fear of what lay behind overpoweringly great. The lumps of ice

gave way beneath him, and he had to leap from piece to piece; his feet moved as fast as fingers over the notes of a piano. He just noticed enough to take the direction towards the harbour breakwater. The others stood gaping on the beach while Pelle danced upon the water like a stone making ducks and drakes. The pieces of ice bobbed under as soon as he touched them, or turned up on edge; but Pelle came and slid by with a touch, flung himself to one side with lightning rapidity, and changed his aim in the middle of a leap like a cat. It was like a dance on red-hot iron, so quickly did he pick up his feet, and spring from one place to another. The water spurted up from the pieces of ice as he touched them, and behind him stretched a crooked track of disturbed ice and water right back to the place where the boys stood and held their breath. There was nobody like Pelle, not one of them could do what he had done there! When with a final leap he threw himself upon the breakwater, they cheered him. Pelle had triumphed in his flight!

He lay upon the breakwater, exhausted and gasping for breath, and gazed without interest at a brig that had cast anchor off the village. A boat was rowing in—perhaps with a sick man to be put in quarantine. The weather-beaten look of the vessel told of her having been out on a winter voyage, in ice and heavy seas.

Fishermen came down from the cottages and strolled out to the place where the boat would come in, and all the school-children followed. In the stern of the boat sat an elderly, weatherbeaten man with a fringe of beard round his face; he was dressed in blue, and in front of him stood a sea-chest. "Why, it's Boatswain Olsen!" Pelle heard one fisherman say. Then the man stepped ashore, and shook hands with them all; and the fisherman and the school-children closed round him in a dense circle.

Pelle made his way up, creeping along behind boats and sheds; and as soon as he was hidden by the school-building, he set off running straight across the fields to Stone Farm. His vexation burnt his throat, and a feeling of shame made him keep far away from houses and people. The parcel that he had had no opportunity of delivering in the morning was like a clear proof to everybody of his shame, and he threw it into a marl-pit as he ran.

He would not go through the farm, but thundered on the outside door to the stable. "Have you come home already?" exclaimed Lasse, pleased.

"Now—now Madam Olsen's husband's come home!" panted Pelle, and went past his father without looking at him.

To Lasse it was as if the world had burst, and the falling fragments were piercing into his flesh. Everything was failing him. He moved about trembling and unable to grasp anything; he could not talk, everything in him seemed to have come to a standstill. He had picked up a piece of rope, and was going backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, looking up.

Then Pelle went up to him. "What are you going to do with that?" he asked harshly.

Lasse let the rope fall from his hand and began to complain of the sadness and poverty of existence. One feather fell off here, and another there, until at last you stood trampling in the mud like a featherless bird—old and worn-out and robbed of every hope of a happy old age. He went on complaining in this way in an undertone, and it eased him.

Pelle made no response. He only thought of the wrong and the shame that had come upon them, and found no relief.

Next morning he took his dinner and went off as usual,

but when he was half-way to school he lay down under a thorn. There he lay, fuming and half-frozen, until it was about the time when school would be over, when he went home. This he did for several days. Towards his father he was silent, almost angry. Lasse went about lamenting, and Pelle had enough with his own trouble; each moved in his own world, and there was no bridge between; neither of them had a kind word to say to the other.

But one day when Pelle came stealing home in this way, Lasse received him with a radiant face and weak knees. "What on earth's the good of fretting?" he said, screwing up his face and turning his blinking eyes upon Pelle—for the first time since the bad news had come. "Look here at the new sweetheart I've found! Kiss her, laddie!" And Lasse drew from the straw a bottle of gin, and held it out towards him.

Pelle pushed it angrily from him.

"Oh, you're too grand, are you?" exclaimed Lasse. "Well, well, it would be a sin and a shame to waste good things upon you." He put the bottle to his lips and threw back his head.

"Father, you shan't do that!" exclaimed Pelle, bursting into tears and shaking his father's arm so that the liquid splashed out.

"Ho-ho!" said Lasse in astonishment, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "She's uncommonly lively, ho-ho!" He grasped the bottle with both hands and held it firmly, as if it had tried to get away from him. "So you're obstreperous, are you?" Then his eye fell upon Pelle. "And you're crying! Has any one hurt you? Don't you know that your father's called Lasse—Lasse Karlsson from Kungstorp? You needn't be afraid, for Lasse's here, and he'll make the whole world answer for it."

Pelle saw that his father was quickly becoming more

fuddled, and ought to be put to bed for fear some one should come and find him lying there. "Come now, father!" he begged.

"Yes, I'll go now. I'll make him pay for it, if it's old Beelzebub himself! You needn't cry!" Lasse was making for the yard.

Pelle stood in front of him. "Now you must come with me, father! There's no one to make pay for anything."

"Isn't there? And yet you're crying! But the farmer shall answer to me for all these years. Yes, my fine landed gentleman, with your nose turned up at everyone!"

This made Pelle afraid. "But father, father!" he cried. "Don't go up there! He'll be in such a rage, he'll turn us out! Remember you're drunk!"

"Yes, of course I'm drunk, but there's no harm in me." He stood fumbling with the hook that fastened the lower half of the door.

It was wrong to lay a hand upon one's own father, but now Pelle was compelled to set aside all such scruples. He took a firm hold of the old man's collar. "Now you come with me!" he said, and drew him along towards their room.

Lasse laughed and hiccupped and struggled; clutched hold of everything that he could lay hands on—the posts and the animals' tails—while Pelle dragged him along. He had hold of him behind, and was half carrying him. In the doorway they stuck fast, as the old man held on with both hands; and Pelle had to leave go of him and knock his arms away so that he fell, and then drag him along and on to the bed.

Lasse laughed foolishly all the time as if it were a game. Once or twice when Pelle's back was turned, he tried to get up; his eyes had almost disappeared, but there was

a cunning expression about his mouth, and he was like a naughty child. Suddenly he fell back in a heavy sleep.

The next day was a school holiday, so there was no need for Pelle to hide himself. Lasse was ashamed and crept about with an air of humility. He must have had quite a clear idea of what had happened the day before, for suddenly he touched Pelle's arm. "You're like Noah's good son, that covered up his father's shame!" he said; "but Lasse's a beast. It's been a hard blow to me, as you may well believe! But I know quite well that it doesn't mend matters to drink oneself silly. It's a badly buried trouble that one has to lay with gin; and what's hidden in the snow comes up in the thaw, as the saying is."

Pelle made no answer.

"How do people take it?" asked Lasse cautiously. He had now got so far as to have a thought for the shameful side of the matter. "I don't think they know about it yet here on the farm, but what do they say outside?"

"How should I know?" answered Pelle, sulkily.

"Then you've heard nothing?"

"Do you suppose I'll go to school to be jeered at by them all?" Pelle was almost crying again.

"Then you've been wandering about and let your father believe that you'd gone to school? That wasn't right of you, but I won't find fault with you, considering all the disgrace I've brought upon you. But suppose you get into trouble for playing truant even if you don't deserve it? Misfortunes go hand in hand, and evils multiply like lice in a fur coat. We must think what we're about, we two; we mustn't let things go all to pieces!"

Lasse walked quickly into their room and returned with the bottle, took out the cork and let the gin run slowly

out into the gutter. Pelle looked wonderingly at him. "God forgive me for abusing his gifts!" said Lasse; "but it's a bad tempter to have at hand when you've a sore heart. And now if I give you my word that you shall never again see me as I was yesterday, won't you have a try at school again to-morrow, and try and get over it gradually? We might get into trouble with the magistrate himself, if you keep on staying away; for there's a heavy punishment for that sort of thing in this country."

Pelle promised and kept his word; but he was prepared for the worst, and secretly slipped a knuckle-duster into his pocket that Erik had used in his palmy days when he went to open-air fêtes and other places where one had to strike a blow for one's girl. It was not required, however, for the boys were entirely taken up with a ship that had had to be run aground to prevent her sinking, and now lay discharging her cargo of wheat into the boats of the village. The wheat already lay in the harbour in great piles, wet and swollen with the salt water.

And a few days later, when this had become stale, something happened which put a stop for ever to Pelle's school attendance. The children were busy at arithmetic, chattering and clattering with their slates, and Fris was sitting as usual in his place, with his head against the wall and his hands resting on the desk. His dim eyes were somewhere out in space, and not a movement betrayed that he was alive. It was his usual position, and he had sat thus ever since playtime.

The children grew restless; it was nearly time for them to go home. A farmer's son who had a watch, held it up so that Pelle could see it, and said "Two" aloud. They noisily put away their slates and began to fight; but Fris, who generally awoke at this noise of departure, did not stir. Then they tramped out, and in passing, one of the

girls out of mischief stroked the master's hand. She started back in fear. "He's quite cold!" she said shuddering and drawing back behind the others.

They stood in a semicircle round the desk, and tried to see into Fris's half-closed eyes; and then Pelle went up the two steps and laid his hand upon his master's shoulder. "We're going home," he said, in an unnatural voice. Fris's arm dropped stiffly down from the desk, and Pelle had to support his body. "He's dead!" the words passed like a shiver over the children's lips.

Fris was dead—dead at his post, as the honest folks of the parish expressed it. Pelle had finished his schooling for good, and could breathe freely.

He helped his father at home, and they were happy together and drew together again now that there was no third person to stand between them. The gibes from the others on the farm were not worth taking notice of; Lasse had been a long time on the farm, and knew too much about each of them, so that he could hit back. He sunned himself in Pelle's gentle childlike nature, and kept up a continual chatter. One thing he was always coming back to. "I ought to be glad I had you, for if you hadn't held back that time when I was bent upon moving down to Madam Olsen's, we should have been in the wrong box. I should think he'd have killed us in his anger. You were my good angel as you always have been."

Lasse's words had the pleasant effect of caresses on Pelle; he was happy in it all, and was more of a child than his years would have indicated.

But one Saturday he came home from the parson's altogether changed. He was as slow about everything as a dead herring, and did not go across to his dinner, but came straight in through the outer door, and threw himself face downwards upon a bundle of hay.

"What's the matter now?" asked Lasse, coming up to him. "Has any one been unkind to you?"

Pelle did not answer, but lay plucking at the hay. Lasse was going to turn his face up to him, but Pelle buried it in the hay. "Won't you trust your own father? You know I've no other wish in the world but for your good!" Lasse's voice was sad.

"I'm to be turned out of the confirmation-class," Pelle managed to say, and then burrowed into the hay to keep back his tears.

"Oh no, surely not!" Lasse began to tremble. "Whatever have you done?"

"I've half killed the parson's son."

"Oh, that's about the worst thing you could have done—lift your hand against the parson's son! I'm sure he must have deserved it, but—still you shouldn't have done it. Unless he's accused you of thieving, for no honest man need stand that from any one, not even the king himself."

"He—he called you Madam Olsen's concubine." Pelle had some difficulty in getting this out.

Lasse's mouth grew hard and he clenched his fists. "Oh, did he! Oh, did he! If I had him here, I'd kick his guts out, the young monkey! I hope you gave him something he'll remember for a long time?"

"Oh no, it wasn't very much, for he wouldn't stand up to me—he threw himself down and screamed. And then the parson came!"

For a little while Lasse's face was disfigured with rage, and he kept uttering threats. Then he turned to Pelle. "And they've turned you out? Only because you stood up for your old father! I'm always to bring misfortune upon you, though I'm only thinking of your good! But what shall we do now?"

"I won't stay here any longer," said Pelle, decidedly.

"No, let's get away from here; nothing has ever grown on this farm for us two but wormwood. Perhaps there are new, happy days waiting for us out there; and there are parsons everywhere. If we two work together at some good work out there, we shall earn a peck of money. Then one day we'll go up to a parson, and throw down half a hundred krones in front of his face, and it 'u'd be funny if he didn't confirm you on the spot—and perhaps let himself be kicked into the bargain. Those kind of folk are very fond of money."

Lasse had grown more erect in his anger, and had a keen look in his eyes. He walked quickly along the foddering passage, and threw the things about carelessly, for Pelle's adventurous proposal had infected him with youth. In the intervals of their work, they collected all their little things and packed the green chest. "What a surprise it'll be to-morrow morning when they come here and find the nest empty!" said Pelle, gaily. Lasse chuckled.

Their plan was to take shelter with Kalle for a day or two, while they took a survey of what the world offered. When everything was done in the evening, they took the green chest between them, and stole out through the outside door into the field. The chest was heavy, and the darkness did not make walking easier. They moved on a little way, changed hands, and rested. "We've got the night before us!" said Lasse, cheerfully.

He was quite animated, and while they sat resting upon the chest talked about everything that awaited them. When he came to a standstill, Pelle began. Neither of them had made any distinct plans for their future; they simply expected a fairy-story itself with its inconceivable surprises. All the definite possibilities that they were

capable of picturing to themselves fell so far short of that which *must* come, that they left it alone and abandoned themselves to what lay beyond their powers of foresight.

Lasse was not sure-footed in the dark, and had more and more frequently to put down his burden. He grew weary and breathless, and the cheerful words died away upon his lips. "Ah, how heavy it is!" he sighed. "What a lot of rubbish you do scrape together in the course of time!" Then he sat down upon the chest, quite out of breath. He could do no more. "If only we'd had something to pick us up a little!" he said faintly. "And it's so dark and gloomy to-night."

"Help me to get it on to my back," said Pelle, "and I'll carry it a little way."

Lasse would not at first, but gave in, and they went on again, he running on in front and giving warning of ditches and walls. "Suppose Brother Kalle can't take us in!" he said suddenly.

"He's sure to be able to. There's grandmother's bed; that's big enough for two."

"But suppose we can't get anything to do, then we shall be a burden on him."

"Oh, we shall get something to do. There's a scarcity of labourers everywhere."

"Yes, they'll jump at you, but I'm really too old to offer myself out." Lasse had lost all hope, and was undermining Pelle's too.

"I can't do any more!" said Pelle, letting the chest down. They stood with arms hanging, and stared into the darkness at nothing particular. Lasse showed no desire to take hold again, and Pelle was now tired out. The night lay dark around them, and its all-enveloping loneliness made it seem as if they two were floating alone in space.

"Well, we ought to be getting on," exclaimed Pelle, taking a handle of the chest; but as Lasse did not move, he dropped it and sat down. They sat back to back, and neither could find the right words to utter, and the distance between them seemed to increase. Lasse shivered with the night cold. "If only we were at home in our good bed!" he sighed.

Pelle was almost wishing he had been alone, for then he would have gone on to the end. The old man was just as heavy to drag along as the chest.

"Do you know I think I'll go back again!" said Lasse at last in a crestfallen tone. "I'm afraid I'm not able to tread uncertain paths. And you'll never be confirmed if we go on like this! Suppose we go back and get Kongstrup to put in a good word for us with the parson." Lasse stood and held one handle of the chest.

Pelle sat on as if he had not heard, and then he silently took hold, and they toiled along on their weary way homewards across the fields. Every other minute Pelle was tired and had to rest; now that they were going home, Lasse was the more enduring. "I think I could carry it a little way alone, if you'd help me up with it," he said; but Pelle would not hear of it.

"Pee-u-ah!" sighed Lasse with pleasure when they once more stood in the warmth of the cow-stable and heard the animals breathing in indolent well-being—"it's comfortable here. It's just like coming into one's old home. I think I should know this stable again by the air, if they led me into it blindfold anywhere in the world."

And now they were home again, Pelle too could not help thinking that it really was pleasant.

XXIII

On Sunday morning, between watering and midday feed, Lasse and Pelle ascended the high stone steps. They took off their wooden shoes in the passage, and stood and shook themselves outside the door of the office; their grey stocking-feet were full of chaff and earth. Lasse raised his hand to knock, but drew it back. "Have you wiped your nose properly?" he asked in a whisper, with a look of anxiety on his face. Pelle performed the operation once more, and gave a final polish with the sleeve of his blouse.

Lasse lifted his hand again; he looked greatly oppressed. "You might keep quiet then!" he said irritably to Pelle who was standing as still as a mouse. Lasse's knuckles were poised in the air two or three times before they fell upon the door; and then he stood with his forehead close to the panel and listened. "There's no one there," he whispered irresolutely.

"Just go in!" exclaimed Pelle. "We can't stand here all day."

"Then you can go first, if you think you know better how to behave!" said Lasse, offended.

Pelle quickly opened the door and went in. There was no one in the office, but the door was open into the drawing-room, and the sound of Kongstrup's comfortable breathing came thence.

"Who's there?" he asked.