

"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.

"It's Lasse and Pelle," answered Lasse in a voice that did not sound altogether brave.

"Will you come in here?"

Kongstrup was lying on the sofa reading a magazine, and on the table beside him stood a pile of old magazines and a plateful of little cakes.

He did not raise his eyes from his book, not even while his hand went out to the plate for something to put in his mouth. He lay nibbling and swallowing while he read, and never looked at Lasse and Pelle, or asked them what they wanted, or said anything to give them a start. It was like being sent out to plough without knowing where. He must have been in the middle of something very exciting.

"Well, what do you want?" asked Kongstrup at last in slow tones.

"Well—well, the master must excuse us for coming like this about something that doesn't concern the farm; but as matters now stand, we've no one else to go to, and so I said to the laddie: 'Master won't be angry, I'm sure, for he's many a time been kind to us poor beggars—and that.' Now it's so in this world that even if you're a poor soul that's only fit to do others' dirty work, the Almighty's nevertheless given you a father's heart, and it hurts you to see the father's sin standing in the son's way."

Lasse came to a standstill. He had thought it all out beforehand, and so arranged it that it should lead up, in a shrewd, dignified way, to the matter itself. But now it was all in a muddle like a slattern's pocket-handkerchief, and the farmer did not look as if he had understood a single word of it. He lay there, taking a cake now and then, and looking helplessly towards the door.

"It sometimes happens too, that a man gets tired of the single state," began Lasse once more, but at once gave

up trying to go on. No matter how he began, he went round and round the thing and got no hold anywhere! And now Kongstrup began to read again. A tiny question from him might have led to the very middle of it; but he only filled his mouth full and began munching quite hard.

Lasse was outwardly disheartened and inwardly angry, as he stood there and prepared to go. Pelle was staring about at the pictures and the old mahogany furniture, making up his mind about each thing.

Suddenly energetic steps sounded through the rooms; the ear could follow their course right up from the kitchen. Kongstrup's eyes brightened, and Lasse straightened himself up.

"Is that you two?" said Fru Kongstrup in her decided way that indicated the manager. "But do sit down! Why didn't you offer them a seat, old man?"

Lasse and Pelle found seats, and the mistress seated herself beside her husband, with her arm leaning upon his pillow. "How are you getting on, Kongstrup? Have you been resting?" she asked sympathetically, patting his shoulder. Kongstrup gave a little grunt, that might have meant yes, or no, or nothing at all.

"And what about you two? Are you in need of money?"

"No, it's the lad. He's to be dismissed from the confirmation-class," answered Lasse, simply. With the mistress you couldn't help being decided.

"Are you to be dismissed?" she exclaimed, looking at Pelle as at an old acquaintance. "Then what have you been doing?"

"Oh, I kicked the parson's son."

"And what did you do that for?"

"Because he wouldn't fight, but threw himself down."

Fru Kongstrup laughed and nudged her husband. "Yes, of course. But what had he done to you?"

"He'd said bad things about Father Lasse."

"What were the things?"

Pelle looked hard at her; she meant to get to the bottom of everything. "I won't tell you!" he said firmly.

"Oh, very well! But then we can't do anything about it either."

"I may just as well tell you," Lasse interrupted. "He called me Madam Olsen's concubine—from the Bible story, I suppose."

Kongstrup tried to suppress a chuckle, as if some one had whispered a coarse joke in his ear, and he could not help it. The mistress herself was serious enough.

"I don't think I understand," she said, and laid a repressing hand upon her husband's arm. "Lasse must explain."

"It's because I was engaged to Madam Olsen in the village, who every one thought was a widow; and then her husband came home the other day. And so they've given me that nickname round about, I suppose."

Kongstrup began his suppressed laughter again, and Lasse blinked in distress at it.

"Help yourselves to a cake!" said Fru Kongstrup in a very loud voice, pushing the plate towards them. This silenced Kongstrup, and he lay and watched their assault upon the cake-plate with an attentive eye.

Fru Kongstrup sat tapping the table with her middle finger while they ate. "So that good boy Pelle got angry and kicked out, did he?" she said suddenly, her eyes flashing.

"Yes, that's what he never ought to have done!" answered Lasse, plaintively.

Fru Kongstrup fixed her eyes upon him.

"No, for all that the poorer birds are for is to be pecked at! Well, I prefer the bird that pecks back again and defends its nest, no matter how poor it is. Well, well, we shall see! And is that boy going to be confirmed? Why of course! To think that I should be so forgetful! Then we must begin to think about his clothes."

"That's two troubles got rid of!" said Lasse when they went down to the stable again. "And did you notice how nicely I let her know that you were going to be confirmed? It was almost as if she'd found it out for herself. Now you'll see, you'll be as fine as a shop-boy in your clothes; people like the master and mistress know what's needed when once they've opened their purse. Well, they got the whole truth straight, but confound it! they're no more than human beings. It's always best to speak out straight." Lasse could not forget how well it had turned out.

Pelle let the old man boast. "Do you think I shall get leather shoes of them too?" he asked.

"Yes, of course you will! And I shouldn't wonder if they made a confirmation-party for you too. I say *they*, but it's her that's doing it all, and we may be thankful for that. Did you notice that she said *we—we* shall, and so on—always? It's nice of her, for he only lies there and eats and leaves everything to her. But what a good time he has! I think she'd go through fire to please him; but upon my word, she's master there. Well, well, I suppose we oughtn't to speak evil of any one; to you she's like your own mother!"

Fru Kongstrup said nothing about the result of her drive to the parson; it was not her way to talk about things afterwards. But Lasse and Pelle once more trod the earth

with a feeling of security ; when *she* took up a matter, it was as good as arranged.

One morning later in the week, the tailor came limping in with his scissors, tape-measure, and pressing-iron, and Pelle had to go down to the servants' room, and was measured in every direction as if he had been a prize animal. Up to the present, he had always had his clothes made by guess-work. It was something new to have itinerant artisans at Stone Farm ; since Kongstrup had come into power, neither shoemaker nor tailor had ever set foot in the servants' room. This was a return to the good old farm-customs, and placed Stone Farm once more on a footing with the other farms. The people enjoyed it, and as often as they could went down into the servants' room for a change of air and to hear one of the tailor's yarns. "It's the mistress who's at the head of things now!" they said to one another. There was good peasant blood in her hands, and she brought things back into the good old ways. Pelle walked into the servants' room like a gentleman ; he was fitted several times a day.

He was fitted for two whole suits, one of which was for Rud, who was to be confirmed too. It would probably be the last thing that Rud and his mother would get at the farm, for Fru Kongstrup had carried her point, and they were to leave the cottage in May. They would never venture to set foot again in Stone Farm. Fru Kongstrup herself saw that they received what they were to have, but she did not give money if she could help it.

Pelle and Rud were never together now, and they seldom went to the parson together. It was Pelle who had drawn back, as he had grown tired of being on the watch for Rud's continual little lies and treacheries. Pelle was taller and stronger than Rud, and his nature—perhaps because of his physical superiority—had taken more open ways.

In ability to master a task or learn it by heart, Rud was also the inferior ; but on the other hand he could bewilder Pelle and the other boys, if he only got a hold with his practical common sense.

On the great day itself, Karl Johan drove Pelle and Lasse in the little one-horse carriage. "We're fine folk to-day!" said Lasse with a beaming face. He was quite confused, although he had not tasted anything strong. There was a bottle of gin lying in the chest to treat the men with when the sacred ceremony was over ; but Lasse was not the man to drink anything before he went to church. Pelle had not *touched* food ; God's Word would take best effect in that condition.

Pelle was radiant too, in spite of his hunger. He was in brand-new twill, so new that it crackled every time he moved. On his feet he wore elastic-sided shoes that had once belonged to Kongstrup himself. They were too large, but "there's no difficulty with a sausage that's too long," as Lasse said. He put in thick soles and paper in the toes, and Pelle put on two pairs of stockings ; and then the shoes fitted as if they had been cast for his foot. On his head he wore a blue cap that he had chosen himself down at the shop. It allowed room for growing, and rested on his ears, which, for the occasion, were as red as two roses. Round the cap was a broad ribbon in which were woven rakes, scythes, and flails, interlaced with sheaves all the way round.

"It's a good thing you came," said Pelle as they drove up to the church, and found themselves among so many people. Lasse had almost had to give up thought of coming, for the man who was going to look after the animals while he was away, had to go off at the last moment for the veterinary surgeon ; but Karna came and offered to water and give the midday feed, although neither could truthfully

say that they had behaved as they ought to have done to her.

"Have you got that thing now?" whispered Lasse when they were inside the church. Pelle felt in his pocket and nodded; the little round piece of lignum-vitæ that was to carry him over the difficulties of the day lay there. "Then just answer loud and straight out," whispered Lasse, as he slipped into a pew in the background.

Pelle did answer straight out, and to Lasse his voice sounded really well through the spacious church. And the parson did absolutely nothing to revenge himself, but treated Pelle exactly as he did the others. At the most solemn part of the ceremony, Lasse thought of Karna, and how touching her devotion was. He scolded himself in an undertone, and made a solemn vow. She should not sigh any longer in vain.

For a whole month indeed, Lasse's thoughts had been occupied with Karna, now favourably, now unfavourably; but at this solemn moment when Pelle was just taking the great step into the future, and Lasse's feelings were touched in so many ways, the thought of Karna's devotion broke over him as something sad, like a song of slighted affection that at last, at last has justice done to it.

Lasse shook hands with Pelle. "Good luck and a blessing!" he said in a trembling voice. The wish also embraced his own vow and he had some difficulty in keeping silence respecting his determination, he was so moved. The words were heard on all sides, and Pelle went round and shook hands with his comrades. Then they drove home.

"It all went uncommonly well for you to-day," said Lasse proudly; "and now you're a man, you know."

"Yes, now you must begin to look about for a sweetheart," said Karl Johan. Pelle only laughed.

In the afternoon they had a holiday. Pelle had first to go up to his master and mistress to thank them for his clothes and receive their congratulations. Fru Kongstrup gave him red-currant wine and cake, and the farmer gave him a two-krone piece.

Then they went up to Kalle's by the quarry. Pelle was to exhibit himself in his new clothes, and say good-bye to them; there was only a fortnight to May Day. Lasse was going to take the opportunity of secretly obtaining information concerning a house that was for sale on the heath.