

LAGERLÖF SELMA

THE GIRL FROM
THE MARSH
CROFT

Selma Lagerlöf

The Girl from the Marsh Croft

«Public Domain»

Lagerlöf S.

The Girl from the Marsh Croft / S. Lagerlöf — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

The Girl from the Marsh Croft	5
I	5
II	9
III	16
IV	21
V	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

Selma Lagerlöf

The Girl from the Marsh Croft

The Girl from the Marsh Croft

I

It took place in the court room of a rural district. At the head of the Judges' table sits an old Judge – a tall and massively built man, with a broad, rough-hewn visage. For several hours he has been engaged in deciding one case after another, and finally something like disgust and melancholy has taken hold of him. It is difficult to know if it is the heat and closeness of the court room that are torturing him or if he has become low-spirited from handling all these petty wrangles, which seem to spring from no other cause than to bear witness to people's quarrel-mania, uncharitableness, and greed.

He has just begun on one of the last cases to be tried during the day. It concerns a plea for help in the rearing of a child.

This case had already been tried at the last Court Session, and the protocols of the former suit are being read; therefore one learns that the plaintiff is a poor farmer's daughter and the defendant is a married man.

Moreover, it says in the protocol, the defendant maintains that the plaintiff has wrongfully, unjustly, and only with the desire of profiting thereby, sued the defendant. He admits that at one time the plaintiff had been employed in his household, but that during her stay in his home he had not carried on any intrigue with her, and she has no right to demand assistance from him. The plaintiff still holds firmly to her claim, and after a few witnesses have been heard, the defendant is called to take the oath and show cause why he should not be sentenced by the Court to assist the plaintiff.

Both parties have come up and are standing, side by side, before the Judges' table. The plaintiff is very young and looks frightened to death. She is weeping from shyness and with difficulty wipes away the tears with a crumpled handkerchief, which she doesn't seem to know how to open out. She wears black clothes, which are quite new and whole, but they fit so badly that one is tempted to think she has borrowed them in order to appear before the Court of Justice in a befitting manner.

As regards the defendant, one sees at a glance that he is a prosperous man. He is about forty and has a bold and dashing appearance. As he stands before the Court, he has a very good bearing. One can see that he does not think it a pleasure to stand there, but he doesn't appear to be the least concerned about it.

As soon as the protocols have been read, the Judge turns to the defendant and asks him if he holds fast to his denials and if he is prepared to take the oath.

To these questions the defendant promptly answers a curt yes. He digs down in his vest pocket and takes out a statement from the clergyman who attests that he understands the meaning and import of the oath and is qualified to take it.

All through this the plaintiff has been weeping. She appears to be unconquerably bashful, and doggedly keeps her eyes fixed upon the floor. Thus far she has not raised her eyes sufficiently to look the defendant in the face.

As he utters his "yes," she starts back. She moves a step or two nearer the Court, as if she had something to say to the contrary, and then she stands there perplexed. It is hardly possible, she seems to say to herself; he cannot have answered yes. I have heard wrongly.

Meanwhile the Judge takes the clergyman's paper and motions to the court officer. The latter goes up to the table to find the Bible, which lies hidden under a pile of records, and lays it down in front of the defendant.

The plaintiff hears that some one is walking past her and becomes restless. She forces herself to raise her eyes just enough to cast a glance over the table, and she sees then how the court officer moves the Bible.

Again it appears as though she wished to raise some objection, and again she controls herself. It isn't possible that he will be allowed to take the oath. Surely the Judge must prevent him!

The Judge is a wise man and knows how people in her home district think and feel. He knew, very likely, how severe all people were as soon as there was anything which affected the marriage relation. They knew of no worse sin than the one she had committed. Would she ever have confessed anything like this about herself if it were not true? The Judge must understand the awful contempt that she had brought down upon herself, and not contempt only, but all sorts of misery. No one wanted her in service – no one wanted her work. Her own parents could scarcely tolerate her presence in their cabin and talked all the while of casting her out. Oh, the Judge must know that she would never have asked for help from a married man had she no right to it.

Surely the Judge could not believe that she lied in a case like this; that she would have called down upon herself such a terrible misfortune if she had had any one else to accuse than a married man. And if he knows this, he must stop the oath-taking.

She sees that the Judge reads through the clergyman's statements a couple of times and she begins to think he intends to interfere.

True, the Judge has a wary look. Now he shifts his glance to the plaintiff, and with that his weariness and disgust become even more marked. It appears as though he were unfavorably disposed toward her. Even if the plaintiff is telling the truth, she is nevertheless a bad woman and the Judge cannot feel any sympathy for her.

Sometimes the Judge interposes in a case, like a good and wise counsellor, and keeps the parties from ruining themselves entirely. But to-day he is tired and cross and thinks only of letting the legal process have its course.

He lays down the clergyman's recommendation and says a few words to the defendant to the effect that he hopes he has carefully considered the consequences of a perjured oath. The defendant listens to him with the calm air which he has shown all the while, and he answers respectfully and not without dignity.

The plaintiff listens to this in extreme terror. She makes a few vehement protests and wrings her hands. Now she wants to speak to the Court. She struggles frightfully with her shyness and with the sobs which prevent her speaking. The result is that she cannot get out an audible word.

Then the oath will be taken! She must give it up. No one will prevent him from swearing away his soul.

Until now, she could not believe this possible. But now she is seized with the certainty that it is close at hand – that it will occur the next second. A fear more overpowering than any she has hitherto felt takes possession of her. She is absolutely paralyzed. She does not even weep more. Her eyes are glazed. It is his intention, then, to bring down upon himself eternal punishment.

She comprehends that he wants to swear himself free for the sake of his wife. But even if the truth were to make trouble in his home, he should not for that reason throw away his soul's salvation.

There is nothing so terrible as perjury. There is something uncanny and awful about that sin. There is no mercy or condonation for it. The gates of the infernal regions open of their own accord when the perjurer's name is mentioned.

If she had then raised her eyes to his face, she would have been afraid of seeing it stamped with damnation's mark, branded by the wrath of God.

As she stands there and works herself into greater and greater terror, the Judge instructs the defendant as to how he must place his fingers on the Bible. Then the Judge opens the law book to find the form of the oath.

As she sees him place his fingers on the book, she comes a step nearer, and it appears as though she wished to reach across the table and push his hand away.

But as yet she is restrained by a faint hope. She thinks he will relent now – at the last moment.

The Judge has found the place in the law book, and now he begins to administer the oath loudly and distinctly. Then he makes a pause for the defendant to repeat his words. The defendant actually starts to repeat, but he stumbles over the words, and the Judge must begin again from the beginning.

Now she can no longer entertain a trace of hope. She knows now that he means to swear falsely – that he means to bring down upon himself the wrath of God, both for this life and for the life to come.

She stands wringing her hands in her helplessness. And it is all her fault because she has accused him! But she was without work; she was starving and freezing; the child came near dying. To whom else should she turn for help? Never had she thought that he would be willing to commit such an execrable sin.

The Judge has again administered the oath. In a few seconds the thing will have been done: the kind of thing from which there is no turning back – which can never be retrieved, never blotted out.

Just as the defendant begins to repeat the oath, she rushes forward, sweeps away his outstretched hand, and seizes the Bible.

It is her terrible dread which has finally given her courage. He must not swear away his soul; he must not!

The court officer hastens forward instantly to take the Bible from her and to bring her to order. She has a boundless fear of all that pertains to a Court of Justice and actually believes that what she has just done will bring her to prison; but she does not let go her hold on the Bible. Cost what it may, he cannot take the oath. He who would swear also runs up to take the Bible, but she resists him too.

"You shall not take the oath!" she cries, "you shall not!"

That which is happening naturally awakens the greatest surprise. The court attendants elbow their way up to the bar, the jurymen start to rise, the recording clerk jumps up with the ink bottle in his hand to prevent its being upset.

Then the Judge shouts in a loud and angry tone, "Silence!" and everybody stands perfectly still.

"What is the matter with you? What business have you with the Bible?" the Judge asks the plaintiff in the same hard and severe tone.

Since, with the courage of despair, she has been able to give utterance to her distress, her anxiety has decreased so that she can answer, "He must not take the oath!"

"Be silent, and put back the book!" demands the Judge.

She does not obey, but holds the book tightly with both hands. "He cannot take the oath!" she cries fiercely.

"Are you so determined to win your suit?" asks the Judge sharply.

"I want to withdraw the suit," she shrieks in a high, shrill voice. "I don't want to force him to swear."

"What are you shrieking about?" demands the Judge. "Have you lost your senses?"

She catches her breath suddenly and tries to control herself. She hears herself how she is shrieking. The Judge will think she has gone mad if she cannot say what she would say calmly. She struggles with herself again to get control of her voice, and this time she succeeds. She says slowly, earnestly, and clearly, as she looks the Judge in the face: "I wish to withdraw the suit. He is the father of the child. I am still fond of him. I don't wish him to swear falsely."

She stands erect and resolute, facing the Judges' table, all the while looking the Judge square in the face. He sits with both hands resting on the table and for a long while does not take his eyes off from her. While the Judge is looking at her, a great change comes over him. All the ennui and

displeasure in his face vanishes, and the large, rough-hewn visage becomes beautiful with the most beautiful emotion. "Ah, see!" he thinks – "Ah, see! such is the mettle of my people. I shall not be vexed at them when there is so much love and godliness even in one of the humblest."

Suddenly the Judge feels his eyes fill up with tears; then he pulls himself together, almost ashamed, and casts a hasty glance about him. He sees that the clerks and bailiffs and the whole long row of jurymen are leaning forward and looking at the girl who stands before the Judges' table with the Bible hugged close to her. And he sees a light in their faces, as though they had seen something very beautiful, which had made them happy all the way into their souls.

Then the Judge casts a glance over the spectators, and he sees that they all breathe a quick sigh of relief, as if they had just heard what they had longed above everything to hear.

Finally, the Judge looks at the defendant. Now it is *he* who stands with lowered head and looks at the floor.

The Judge turns once more to the poor girl. "It shall be as you wish," he says. "The case shall be stricken from the Calendar," – this to the recording clerk.

The defendant makes a move, as though he wished to interpose an objection. "Well, what now?" the Judge bellows at him. "Have you anything against it?"

The defendant's head hangs lower and lower, and he says, almost inaudibly, "Oh, no, I dare say it is best to let it go that way."

The Judge sits still a moment more, and then he pushes the heavy chair back, rises, and walks around the table and up to the plaintiff.

"Thank you!" he says and gives her his hand.

She has laid down the Bible and stands wiping away the tears with the crumpled up handkerchief.

"Thank you!" says the Judge once more, taking her hand and shaking it as if it belonged to a real man's man.

II

Let no one imagine that the girl who had passed through such a trying ordeal at the bar of justice thought that she had done anything praiseworthy! On the contrary, she considered herself disgraced before the whole court room. She did not understand that there was something honorable in the fact that the Judge had gone over and shaken hands with her. She thought it simply meant that the trial was over and that she might go her way.

Nor did she observe that people gave her kindly glances and that there were several who wanted to press her hand. She stole by and wanted only to go. There was a crush at the door. The court was over and many in their hurry to get out made a rush for the door. She drew aside and was about the last person to leave the court room because she felt that every one else ought to go before her.

When she finally came out, Gudmund Erlandsson's cart stood in waiting at the door. Gudmund was seated in the cart, holding the reins, and was apparently waiting for some one. As soon as he saw her among all the people who poured out of the court room, he called to her: "Come here, Helga! You can ride with me since we are going in the same direction."

Although she heard her name, she could not believe that it was she whom he was calling. It was not possible that Gudmund Erlandsson wanted to ride with her. He was the most attractive man in the whole parish, young and handsome and of good family connections and popular with every one. She could not imagine that he wished to associate with her.

She was walking with the head shawl drawn far down on her forehead, and was hastening past him without either glancing up or answering.

"Don't you hear, Helga, that you can ride with me?" said Gudmund, and there was a friendly note in his voice. But she couldn't grasp that Gudmund meant well by her. She thought that, in one way or another, he wished to make sport of her and was only waiting for those who stood near by to begin tittering and laughing. She cast a frightened and indignant glance at him, and almost ran from the Court House grounds to be out of earshot when the laughter should start in.

Gudmund was unmarried at that time and lived at home with his parents. His father was a farm-owner. His was not a large farm and he was not rich, but he made a good living. The son had gone to the Court House to fetch some deeds for his father, but as there was also another purpose in the trip, he had groomed himself carefully. He had taken the brand-new trap with not a crack in the lacquering, had rubbed up the harness and curried the horse until he shone like satin. He had placed a bright red blanket on the seat beside him, and himself he had adorned with a short hunting-jacket, a small gray felt hat, and top boots, into which the trousers were tucked. This was no holiday attire, but he probably knew that he looked handsome and manly.

Gudmund was seated alone in the cart when he drove from home in the morning, but he had agreeable things to think of and the time had not seemed long to him. When he had arrived about half-way, he came across a poor young girl who was walking very slowly and looked as though she were scarcely able to move her feet because of exhaustion. It was autumn and the road was rain-soaked, and Gudmund saw how, with every step, she sank deeper into the mud. He stopped and asked where she was going. When he learned that she was on her way to the Court House, he invited her to ride. She thanked him and stepped up on the back of the cart to the narrow board where the hay sack was tied, as though she dared not touch the red blanket beside Gudmund. Nor was it his meaning that she should sit beside him. He didn't know who she was, but he supposed her to be the daughter of some poor backwoodsman and thought the rear of the cart was quite good enough for her.

When they came to a steep hill and the horse began to slow up, Gudmund started talking. He wanted to know her name and where she was from. When he learned that her name was Helga, and that she came from a backwoods farm called Big Marsh, he began to feel uneasy. "Have you always lived at home on the farm or have you been out to service?" he asked.

The past year she had been at home, but before this she had been working out.

"Where?" asked Gudmund hastily.

He thought it was a long while before the answer was forthcoming. "At the West Farm, with Per Mårtensson," she said finally, sinking her voice as if she would rather not have been heard.

But Gudmund heard her. "Indeed! Then it is you who – " said he, but did not conclude his meaning. He turned from her, and sat up straight in his seat and said not another word to her.

Gudmund gave the horse rap upon rap and talked loudly to himself about the wretched condition of the road and was in a very bad humor.

The girl sat still for a moment; presently Gudmund felt her hand upon his arm. "What do you wish?" he asked without turning his head.

Oh, he was to stop, so she could jump out.

"Why so?" sneered Gudmund. "Aren't you riding comfortably?"

"Yes, thank you, but I prefer to walk."

Gudmund struggled a little with himself. It was provoking that he should have bidden a person of Helga's sort to ride with him to-day of all days! But he thought also that since he had taken her into the wagon, he could not drive her out.

"Stop, Gudmund!" said the girl once again. She spoke in a very decided tone, and Gudmund drew in the reins.

"It is she, of course, who wishes to step down," thought he. "I don't have to force her to ride against her will."

She was down on the road before the horse had time to stop. "I thought you knew who I was when you asked me to ride," she said, "or I should not have stepped into the cart."

Gudmund muttered a short good-bye and drove on. She was doubtless right in thinking that he knew her. He had seen the girl from the marsh croft many times as a child, but she had changed since she was grown up. At first he was very glad to be rid of the travelling companion, but gradually he began to feel displeased with himself. He could hardly have acted differently, yet he did not like being cruel to any one.

Shortly after Gudmund had parted from Helga, he turned out of the road and up a narrow street, and came to a large and fine estate. As Gudmund drew up before the gate, the house door opened and one of the daughters appeared.

Gudmund raised his hat; at the same time a faint flush covered his face. "Wonder if the Juryman is at home?" said he.

"No, father has gone down to the Court House," replied the daughter.

"Oh, then he has already gone," said Gudmund. "I drove over to ask if the Juryman would ride with me. I'm going to the Court House."

"Father is always so punctual!" bewailed the daughter.

"It doesn't matter," said Gudmund.

"Father would have been pleased, I dare say, to ride behind such a fine horse and in such a pretty cart as you have," remarked the girl pleasantly.

Gudmund smiled a little when he heard this commendation.

"Well, then, I must be off again," said he.

"Won't you step in, Gudmund?"

"Thank you, Hildur, but I'm going to the Court House, you know. It won't do for me to be late."

Now Gudmund takes the direct road to the Court House. He was very well pleased with himself and thought no more of his meeting with Helga. It was fortunate that only Hildur had come out on the porch and that she had seen the cart and blanket, the horse and harness. She had probably taken note of everything.

This was the first time Gudmund had attended a Court. He thought that there was much to see and learn, and remained the whole day. He was sitting in the court room when Helga's case came up;

saw how she snatched the Bible and hugged it close, and saw how she defied both court attendants and Judge. When it was all over and the Judge had shaken hands with Helga, Gudmund rose quickly and went out. He hurriedly hitched the horse to the cart and drove up to the steps. He thought Helga had been brave, and now he wished to honor her. But she was so frightened that she did not understand his purpose, and stole away from his intended honor.

The same day Gudmund came to the marsh croft late in the evening. It was a little croft, which lay at the base of the forest ridge that enclosed the parish. The road leading thither was passable for a horse only in winter, and Gudmund had to go there on foot. It was difficult for him to find his way. He came near breaking his legs on stumps and stones, and he had to wade through brooks which crossed the path in several places. Had it not been for the bright moonlight, he could not have found his way to the croft. He thought it was a very hard road that Helga had to tramp this day.

Big Marsh croft lay on the clearing about half-way up the ridge. Gudmund had never been there before, but he had often seen the place from the valley and was sufficiently familiar with it to know that he had gone aright.

All around the clearing lay a hedge of brushwood, which was very thick and difficult to get through. It was probably meant to be a kind of defence and protection against the whole wilderness that surrounded the croft. The cabin stood at the upper edge of the enclosure. Before it stretched a sloping house-yard covered with short, thick grass; and below the yard lay a couple of gray outhouses and a larder with a moss-covered roof. It was a poor and humble place, but one couldn't deny that it was picturesque up there. The marsh, from which the croft had derived its name, lay somewhere near and sent forth mists which rose, beautiful, splendid, and silvery, in the moonlight, forming a halo around the marsh. The highest peak of the mountain loomed above the mist, and the ridge, prickly with pines, was sharply outlined against the horizon. Over the valley shone the moon. It was so light that one could distinguish fields and orchards and a winding brook, over which the mists curled, like the faintest smoke. It was not very far down there, but the peculiar thing was that the valley lay like a world apart, with which the forest and all that belonged to it seemed to have nothing in common. It was as if the people who lived here in the forest must ever remain under the shadow of these trees. They might find it quite as hard to feel contented down in the valley as woodcock and eagle-owl and lynx and star-flowers.

Gudmund tramped across the open grass-plot and up to the cabin. There a gleam of firelight streamed through the window. As there were no shades at the windows, he peeped into the cabin to see if Helga was there. A small lamp burned on the table near the window, and there sat the master of the house, mending old shoes. The mistress was seated farther back in the room, close to the fireplace, where a slow fire burned. The spinning-wheel was before her, but she had paused in her work to play with a little child. She had taken it up from the cradle, and Gudmund heard how she prattled to it. Her face was lined and wrinkled and she looked severe. But, as she bent over the child, she had a mild expression and she smiled as tenderly at the little one as his own mother might have done.

Gudmund peered in, but could not see Helga in any corner of the cabin. Then he thought it was best to remain outside until she came. He was surprised that she had not reached home. Perhaps she had stopped on the way somewhere to see an acquaintance and to get some food and rest? At all events, she would have to come back soon if she wished to be indoors before it was very late at night.

Gudmund stood still a moment and listened for footsteps. He thought that never before had he sensed such stillness. It was as though the whole forest held its breath and stood waiting for something extraordinary to happen.

No one tramped in the forest, no branch was broken, and no stone rolled down.

"Surely, Helga won't be long in coming! I wonder what she will say when she sees that I'm here?" thought Gudmund. "Perhaps she will scream and rush into the forest and will not dare come home the whole night!"

At the same time it struck him as rather strange that now, all of a sudden, he had so much business with that marsh croft girl!

On his return from the Court House to his home, he had, as usual, gone to his mother to relate his experiences of the day. Gudmund's mother was a sensible and broad-minded woman who had always understood how to treat her son, and he had as much confidence in her now as when he was a child. She had been an invalid for several years and could not walk, but sat all day in her chair. It was always a good hour for her when Gudmund came home from an outing and brought her the news.

When Gudmund had told his mother about Helga from Big Marsh, he observed that she became thoughtful. For a long while she sat quietly and looked straight ahead. "There seems to be something good in that girl still," she remarked. "It will never do to condemn a person because she has once met with misfortune. She might be very grateful to any one who helped her now."

Gudmund apprehended at once what his mother was thinking of. She could no longer help herself, but must have some one near her continually, and it was always difficult to find anybody who cared to remain in that capacity. His mother was exacting and not easy to get on with, and, moreover, all young folk preferred other work where they could have more freedom. Now, it must have occurred to his mother that she ought to take Helga from Big Marsh into her service, and Gudmund thought this a capital idea. Helga would certainly be very devoted to his mother.

"It will be hard for the child," remarked the mother after a little, and Gudmund understood that she was thinking seriously of the matter.

"Surely the parents would let it stay with them?" said Gudmund.

"It does not follow that she wants to part with it."

"She will have to give up thinking of what she wants or doesn't want. I thought that she looked starved out. They can't have much to eat at the croft," said the son.

To this his mother made no reply, but began to talk of something else. It was evident that some new misgivings had come to her, which hindered her from coming to a decision.

Then Gudmund told her of how he had found a pretext for calling at the Juryman's at Älvåkra and had met Hildur. He mentioned what she had said of the horse and wagon, and it was easily seen that he was pleased with the meeting. His mother was also very much pleased. Where she sat in the cottage, unable to move from her chair, it was her constant occupation to spin plans for her son's future, and it was she who had first hit upon the idea that he should try and set his cap for the pretty daughter of the Juryman. It was the finest match he could make.

The Juryman was a yeoman farmer. He owned the largest farm in the parish and had much money and power. It was really absurd to hope that he would be satisfied with a son-in-law with no more wealth than Gudmund, but it was also possible that he would conform to his daughter's wishes. That Gudmund could win Hildur if he so wished, his mother was certain.

This was the first time Gudmund had betrayed to his mother that her thought had taken root in him, and they talked long of Hildur and of all the riches and advantages that would come to the chosen one. Soon there was another lull in the conversation, for his mother was again absorbed in her thoughts. "Couldn't you send for this Helga? I should like to see her before taking her into my service," said the mother finally.

"It is well, mother, that you wish to take her under your wing," remarked Gudmund, thinking to himself that if his mother had a nurse with whom she was satisfied, his wife would have a pleasanter life here. "You'll see that you will be pleased with the girl," he continued.

"Then, too, it would be a good deed to take her in hand," added the mother.

As it grew dusk, the invalid retired, and Gudmund went out to the stable to tend the horses. It was beautiful weather, with a clear atmosphere, and the whole tract lay bathed in moonlight. It occurred to him that he ought to go to Big Marsh to-night and convey his mother's greeting. If the weather should continue clear on the morrow, he would be so busy taking in oats that neither he nor any one else would find time to go there.

Now that Gudmund was standing outside the cabin at Big Marsh croft listening, he certainly heard no footsteps. But there were other sounds which at short intervals pierced through the stillness. He heard a soft weeping, a very low and smothered moaning, with now and then a sob. Gudmund thought that the sounds came from the outhouse lane, and he walked toward it. As he was nearing, the sobs ceased; but it was evident that some one moved in the woodshed. Gudmund seemed to comprehend instantly who was there. "Is it you, Helga, who sit here and weep?" asked Gudmund, placing himself in the doorway so that the girl could not rush away before he had spoken with her.

Again it was perfectly still. Gudmund had guessed rightly that it was Helga who sat there and wept; but she tried to smother the sobs, so that Gudmund would think he had heard wrongly and go away. It was pitch dark in the woodshed, and she knew that he could not see her.

But Helga was in such despair that evening it was not easy for her to keep back the sobs. She had not as yet gone into the cabin to see her parents. She hadn't had the courage to go in. When she trudged up the steep hill in the twilight and thought of how she must tell her parents that she was not to receive any assistance from Per Mårtensson in the rearing of her child, she began to fear all the harsh and cruel things she felt they would say to her and thought of burying herself in the swamp. And in her terror she jumped up and tried to rush past Gudmund; but he was too alert for her. "Oh, no! You sha'n't get by before I have spoken with you."

"Only let me go!" she said, looking wildly at him.

"You look as though you wanted to jump into the river," said he; for now she was out in the moonlight and he could see her face.

"Well, what matters it if I did?" said Helga, throwing her head back and looking him straight in the eye. "This morning you didn't even care to have me ride on the back of your cart. No one wants to have anything to do with me! You must surely understand that it is best for a miserable creature like me to put an end to herself."

Gudmund did not know what to do next. He wished himself far away, but he thought, also, that he could not desert a person who was in such distress. "Listen to me! Only promise that you will listen to what I have to say to you; afterwards you may go wherever you wish."

She promised.

"Is there anything here to sit on?"

"The chopping-block is over yonder."

"Then go over there and sit down and be quiet!"

She went very obediently and seated herself.

"And don't cry any more!" said he, for he thought he was beginning to get control over her. But he should not have said this, for immediately she buried her face in her hands and cried harder than ever.

"Stop crying!" he said, ready to stamp his foot at her. "There are those, I dare say, who are worse off than you are."

"No, no one can be worse off!"

"You are young and strong. You should see how my mother fares! She is so wasted from suffering that she cannot move, but she never complains."

"She is not abandoned by everybody, as I am."

"You are not abandoned, either. I have spoken with my mother about you."

There was a pause in the sobs. One heard, as it were, the great stillness of the forest, which always held its breath and waited for something wonderful. "I was to say to you that you should come down to my mother to-morrow that she might see you. Mother thinks of asking if you would care to take service with us."

"Did she think of asking *me*?"

"Yes; but she wants to see you first."

"Does she know that – "

"She knows as much about you as all the rest do."

The girl leaped up with a cry of joy and wonderment, and the next moment Gudmund felt a pair of arms around his neck. He was thoroughly frightened, and his first impulse was to break loose and run; but he calmed himself and stood still. He understood that the girl was so beside herself with joy that she didn't know what she was doing. At that moment she could have hugged the worst ruffian, only to find a little sympathy in the great happiness that had come to her.

"If she will take me into her service, I can live!" said she, burying her head on Gudmund's breast and weeping again. "You may know that I was in earnest when I wished to go down into the swamp," she said. "You deserve thanks for coming. You have saved my life." Until then Gudmund had been standing motionless, but now he felt that something tender and warm was beginning to stir within him. He raised his hand and stroked her hair. Then she started, as if awakened from a dream, and stood up straight as a rod before him. "You deserve thanks for coming," she repeated. She had become flame-red in the face, and he too reddened.

"Well, then, you will come home to-morrow," he said, putting out his hand to say good-bye.

"I shall never forget that you came to me to-night!" said Helga, and her great gratitude got the mastery over her shyness.

"Oh, yes, it was well perhaps that I came," he said quite calmly, and he felt rather pleased with himself. "You will go in now, of course?"

"Yes, now I shall go in."

Gudmund suddenly felt himself rather pleased with Helga too – as one usually is with a person whom one has succeeded in helping. She lingered and did not want to go. "I would like to see you safely under shelter before I leave."

"I thought they might retire before I went in."

"No, you must go in at once, so that you can have your supper and rest yourself," said he, thinking it was agreeable to take her in hand.

She went at once to the cabin, and he accompanied her, pleased and proud because she obeyed him.

When she stood on the threshold, they said good-bye to each other again; but before he had gone two paces, she came after him. "Remain just outside the door until I am in. It will be easier for me if I know that you are standing without."

"Yes," said he, "I shall stand here until you have come over the worst of it."

Then Helga opened the cabin door, and Gudmund noticed that she left it slightly ajar. It was as if she did not wish to feel herself separated from her helper who stood without. Nor did he feel any compunction about hearing all that happened within the cabin.

The old folks nodded pleasantly to Helga as she came in. Her mother promptly laid the child in the crib, and then went over to the cupboard and brought out a bowl of milk and a bread cake and placed them on the table.

"There! Now sit down and eat," said she. Then she went up to the fireplace and freshened the fire. "I have kept the fire alive, so you could dry your feet and warm yourself when you came home. But eat something first! It is food that you need most."

All the while Helga had been standing at the door. "You mustn't receive me so well, mother," she said in a low tone. "I will get no money from Per. I have renounced his help."

"There was some one here from the Court House this evening who had been there and heard how it turned out for you," said the mother. "We know all."

Helga was still standing by the door, looking out, as if she knew not which was in or out.

Then the farmer put down his work, pushed his spectacles up on his forehead, and cleared his throat for a speech of which he had been thinking the whole evening. "It is a fact, Helga," said he, "that mother and I have always wanted to be decent and honorable folk, but we have thought that we had been disgraced on your account. It was as though we had not taught you to distinguish between

good and evil. But when we learned what you did to-day, we said to each other – mother and I – that now folks could see anyway that you have had a proper bringing up and right teaching, and we thought that perhaps we might yet be happy in you. And mother did not want that we should go to bed before you came that you might have a hearty welcome home."

III

Helga from the marsh croft came to Närlunda, and there all went well. She was willing and teachable and grateful for every kind word said to her. She always felt herself to be the humblest of mortals and never wanted to push herself ahead. It was not long until the household and the servants were satisfied with her.

The first days it appeared as if Gudmund was afraid to speak to Helga. He feared that this croft girl would get notions into her head because he had come to her assistance. But these were needless worries. Helga regarded him as altogether too fine and noble for her even to raise her eyes to. Gudmund soon perceived that he did not have to keep her at a distance. She was more shy of him than of any one else.

The autumn that Helga came to Närlunda, Gudmund paid many visits to Älvåkra, and there was much talk about the good chance he stood of being the prospective son-in-law of this estate. That the courtship had been successful all were assured at Christmas. Then the Juryman, with his wife and daughter, came over to Närlunda, and it was evident that they had come there to see how Hildur would fare if she married Gudmund.

This was the first time that Helga saw, at close range, her whom Gudmund was to marry. Hildur Ericsson was not yet twenty, but the marked thing about her was that no one could look at her without thinking what a handsome and dignified mistress she would be some day. She was tall and well built, fair and pretty, and apparently liked to have many about her to look after. She was never timid; she talked much and seemed to know everything better than the one with whom she was talking. She had attended school in the city for a couple of years and wore the prettiest frocks Helga had ever seen, but yet she didn't impress one as being showy or vain. Rich and beautiful as she was, she might have married a gentleman at any time, but she always declared that she did not wish to be a fine lady and sit with folded hands. She wanted to marry a farmer and look after her own house, like a real farmer's wife.

Helga thought Hildur a perfect wonder. Never had she seen any one who made such a superb appearance. Nor had she ever dreamed that a person could be so nearly perfect in every particular. To her it seemed a great joy that in the near future she was to serve such a mistress.

Everything had gone off well during the Juryman's visit. But whenever Helga looked back upon that day, she experienced a certain unrest. It seems that when the visitors had arrived, she had gone around and served coffee. When she came in with the tray, the Juryman's wife leaned forward and asked her mistress if she was not the girl from the marsh croft. She did not lower her voice much, and Helga had distinctly heard the question.

Mother Ingeborg answered yes, and then the other had said something which Helga couldn't hear. But it was to the effect that she thought it singular they wanted a person of that sort in the house. This caused Helga many anxious moments. She tried to console herself with the thought that it was not Hildur, but her mother, who had said this.

One Sunday in the early spring Helga and Gudmund walked home together from church. As they came down the slope, they were with the other church people; but soon one after another dropped off until, finally, Helga and Gudmund were alone.

Then Gudmund happened to think that he had not been alone with Helga since that night at the croft, and the memory of that night came forcibly back to him. He had thought of their first meeting often enough during the winter, and with it he had always felt something sweet and pleasant thrill through his senses. As he went about his work, he would call forth in thought that whole beautiful evening: the white mist, the bright moonlight, the dark forest heights, the light valley, and the girl who had thrown her arms round his neck and wept for joy. The whole incident became more beautiful each time that it recurred to his memory. But when Gudmund saw Helga going about among the

others at home, toiling and slaving, it was hard for him to think that it was she who had shared in this. Now that he was walking alone with her on the church slope, he couldn't help wishing for a moment that she would be the same girl she was on that evening.

Helga began immediately to speak of Hildur. She praised her much: said she was the prettiest and most sensible girl in the whole parish, and congratulated Gudmund because he would have such an excellent wife. "You must tell her to let me remain always at Närlunda," she said. "It will be a pleasure to work for a mistress like her."

Gudmund smiled at her enthusiasm, but answered only in monosyllables, as though he did not exactly follow her. It was well, of course, that she was so fond of Hildur, and so happy because he was going to be married.

"You have been content to be with us this winter?" he asked.

"Indeed I have! I cannot begin to tell you how kind mother Ingeborg and all of you have been to me!"

"Have you not been homesick for the forest?"

"Oh, yes, in the beginning, but not now any more."

"I thought that one who belonged to the forest could not help yearning for it."

Helga turned half round and looked at him, who walked on the other side of the road. Gudmund had become almost a stranger to her; but now there was something in his voice, his smile, that was familiar. Yes, he was the same man who had come to her and saved her in her greatest distress. Although he was to marry another, she was certain that he wanted to be a good friend to her, and a faithful helper.

She was very happy to feel that she could confide in him, as in none other, and thought that she must tell him of all that had happened to her since they last talked together. "I must tell you that it was rather hard for me the first weeks at Närlunda," she began. "But you mustn't speak of this to your mother."

"If you want me to be silent, I'll be silent."

"Fancy! I was so homesick in the beginning that I was about to go back to the forest."

"Were you homesick? I thought you were glad to be with us."

"I simply could not help it," she said apologetically. "I understood, of course, how well it was for me to be here; you were all so good to me, and the work was not so hard but that I could manage with it, but I was homesick nevertheless. There was something that took hold of me and wanted to draw me back to the forest. I thought that I was deserting and betraying some one who had a right to me, when I wanted to stay here in the village."

"It was perhaps –" began Gudmund, but checked himself.

"No, it was not the boy I longed for. I knew that he was well cared for and that mother was kind to him. It was nothing in particular. I felt as though I were a wild bird that had been caged, and I thought I should die if I were not let out."

"To think that you had such a hard time of it!" said Gudmund smiling, for now, all at once, he recognized her. Now it was as if nothing had come between them, but that they had parted at the forest farm the evening before.

Helga smiled again, but continued to speak of her torments. "I didn't sleep a single night," said she, "and as soon as I went to bed, the tears started to flow, and when I got up of a morning, the pillow was wet through. In the daytime, when I went about among all of you, I could keep back the tears, but as soon as I was alone my eyes would fill up."

"You have wept much in your time," said Gudmund without looking the least bit sympathetic as he pronounced the words.

Helga thought that he was laughing to himself all the while. "You surely don't comprehend how hard it was for me!" she said, speaking faster and faster in her effort to make him understand her. "A great longing took possession of me and carried me out of myself. Not for a moment could I feel

happy! Nothing was beautiful, nothing was a pleasure; not a human being could I become attached to. You all remained just as strange to me as you were the first time I entered the house."

"But didn't you say a moment ago that you wished to remain with us?" said Gudmund wonderingly.

"Of course I did!"

"Then, surely, you are not homesick now?"

"No, it has passed over. I have been cured. Wait, and you shall hear!"

As she said this, Gudmund crossed to the other side of the road and walked beside her, laughing to himself all the while. He seemed glad to hear her speak, but probably he didn't attach much importance to what she was relating. Gradually Helga took on his mood, and she thought everything was becoming easy and light. The church road was long and difficult to walk, but to-day she was not tired. There was something that carried her. She continued with her story because she had begun it, but it was no longer of much importance to her to speak. It would have been quite as agreeable to her if she might have walked silently beside him.

"When I was the most unhappy," she said, "I asked mother Ingeborg one Saturday evening to let me go home and remain over Sunday. And that evening, as I tramped over the hills to the marsh, I believed positively that I should never again go back to Närlunda. But at home father and mother were so happy because I had found service with good and respectable people, that I didn't dare tell them I could not endure remaining with you. Then, too, as soon as I came up into the forest all the anguish and pain vanished entirely. I thought the whole thing had been only a fancy. And then it was so difficult about the child. Mother had become attached to the boy and had made him her own. He wasn't mine any more. And it was well thus, but it was hard to get used to."

"Perhaps you began to be homesick for us?" blurted Gudmund.

"Oh, no! On Monday morning, as I awoke and thought of having to return to you, the longing came over me again. I lay crying and fretting because the only right and proper thing for me to do was to go back to Närlunda. But I felt all the same as though I were going to be ill or lose my senses if I went back. Suddenly I remembered having once heard some one say that if one took some ashes from the hearth in one's own home and strewed them on the fire in the strange place, one would be rid of homesickness."

"Then it was a remedy that was easy to take," said Gudmund.

"Yes, but it was supposed to have this effect also: afterwards one could never be content in any other place. If one were to move from the homestead to which one had borne the ashes, one must long to get back there again just as much as one had longed before to get away from there."

"Couldn't one carry ashes along wherever one moved to?"

"No, it can't be done more than once. Afterwards there is no turning back, so it was a great risk to try anything like that."

"I shouldn't have taken chances on a thing of that kind," said Gudmund, and she could hear that he was laughing at her.

"But I dared, all the same," retorted Helga. "It was better than having to appear as an ingrate in your mother's eyes and in yours, when you had tried to help me. I brought a little ashes from home, and when I got back to Närlunda I watched my opportunity, when no one was in, and scattered the ashes over the hearth."

"And now you believe it is ashes that have helped you?"

"Wait, and you shall hear how it turned out! Immediately I became absorbed in my work and thought no more about the ashes all that day. I grieved exactly as before and was just as weary of everything as I had been. There was much to be done that day, both in the house and out of it, and when I finished with the evening's milking and was going in, the fire on the hearth was already lighted."

"Now I'm very curious to hear what happened," said Gudmund.

"Think! Already, as I was crossing the house yard, I thought there was something familiar in the gleam from the fire, and when I opened the door, it flashed across my mind that I was going into our own cabin and that father and mother would be sitting by the hearth. This flew past like a dream, but when I came in, I was surprised that it looked so pretty and homelike in the cottage. To me your mother and the rest of you had never appeared as pleasant as you did in the firelight. It seemed really good to come in, and this was not so before. I was so astonished that I could hardly keep from clapping my hands and shouting. I thought you were all so changed. You were no longer strangers to me and I could talk to you about all sorts of things. You can understand, of course, that I was happy, but I couldn't help being astonished. I wondered if I had been bewitched, and then I remembered the ashes I had strewn over the hearth."

"Yes, it was marvellous," said Gudmund. He did not believe the least little bit in witchcraft and was not at all superstitious; but he didn't dislike hearing Helga talk of such things. "Now the wild forest girl has returned," thought he. "Can anybody comprehend how one who has passed through all that she has can still be so childish?"

"Of course it was wonderful!" said Helga. "And the same thing has been coming back all winter. As soon as the fire on the hearth was burning, I felt the same confidence and security as if I had been at home. But there must be something extraordinary about this fire – not with any other kind of fire, perhaps – only that which burns on a hearth, with all the household gathered around it, night after night. It gets sort of acquainted with one. It plays and dances for one and talks to one, and sometimes it is ill-humored. It is as if it had the power to create comfort and discomfort. I thought now that the fire from home had come to me and that it gave the same glow of pleasure to every one here that it had done back home."

"What if you had to leave Närlunda?" said Gudmund.

"Then I must long to come back again all my life," said she. And the quiver in her voice betrayed that this was spoken in profound seriousness.

"Well, I shall not be the one to drive you away!" said Gudmund. Although he was laughing, there was something warm in his tone.

They started no new subject of conversation, but walked on in silence until they came to the homestead. Now and then Gudmund turned his head to look at her who was walking at his side. She had gathered strength after her hard time of the year before. Her features were delicate and refined; her hair was like an aureole around her head, and her eyes were not easy to read. Her step was light and elastic, and when she spoke, the words came readily, yet modestly. She was afraid of being laughed at, still she had to speak out what was in her heart.

Gudmund wondered if he wished Hildur to be like this, but he probably didn't. This Helga would be nothing special to marry.

A fortnight later Helga heard that she must leave Närlunda in April because Hildur Ericsdotter would not live under the same roof with her. The master and mistress of the house did not say this in so many words, but the mistress hinted that when the new daughter-in-law came, they would in all probability get so much help from her they would not require so many servants. On another occasion she said she had heard of a good place where Helga would fare better than with them.

It was not necessary for Helga to hear anything further to understand that she must leave, and she immediately announced that she would move, but she did not wish any other situation and would return to her home.

It was apparent that it was not of their own free will they were dismissing Helga from Närlunda.

When she was leaving, there was a spread for her. It was like a party, and mother Ingeborg gave her such heaps of dresses and shoes that she, who had come to them with only a bundle under her arm, could now barely find room enough in a chest for her possessions.

"I shall never again have such an excellent servant in my house as you have been," said mother Ingeborg. "And do not think too hard of me for letting you go! You understand, no doubt, that it is not my will, this. I shall not forget you. So long as I have any power, you shall never have to suffer want."

She arranged with Helga that she was to weave sheets and towels for her. She gave her employment for at least half a year.

Gudmund was in the woodshed splitting wood the day Helga was leaving. He did not come in to say good-bye, although his horse was at the door. He appeared to be so busy that he didn't take note of what was going on. She had to go out to him to say farewell.

He laid down the axe, took Helga's hand, and said rather hurriedly, "Thank you for all!" and began chopping again. Helga had wanted to say something about her understanding that it was impossible for them to keep her and that it was all her own fault. She had brought this upon herself. But Gudmund chopped away until the splinters flew around him, and she couldn't make up her mind to speak.

But the strangest thing about this whole moving affair was that the master himself, old Erland Erlandsson, drove Helga up to the marsh.

Gudmund's father was a little weazened man, with a bald pate and beautiful and knowing eyes. He was very timid, and so reticent at times that he did not speak a word the whole day. So long as everything went smoothly, one took no notice of him, but when anything went wrong, he always said and did what there was to be said and done to right matters. He was a capable accountant and enjoyed the confidence of every man in the township. He executed all kinds of public commissions and was more respected than many a man with a large estate and great riches.

Erland Erlandsson drove Helga home in his own wagon, and he wouldn't allow her to step down and walk up any of the hills. When they arrived at the marsh croft, he sat a long while in the cabin and talked with Helga's parents, telling them of how pleased he and mother Ingeborg had been with her. It was only because they did not need so many servants that they were sending her home. She, who was the youngest, must go. They had felt that it was wrong to dismiss any of those who were old in their service.

Erland Erlandsson's speech had the desired effect, and the parents gave Helga a warm welcome. When they heard that she had received such large orders that she could support herself with weaving, they were satisfied, and she remained at home.

IV

Gudmund thought that he had loved Hildur until the day when she exacted from him the promise that Helga should be sent away from Närlunda; at least up to that time there was no one whom he had esteemed more highly than Hildur. No other young girl, to his thinking, could come up to her. It had been a pleasure for him to picture a future with Hildur. They would be rich and looked up to, and he felt instinctively that the home Hildur managed would be good to live in. He liked also to think that he would be well supplied with money after he had married her. He could then improve the land, rebuild all the tumble-down houses, extend the farm, and be a real landed proprietor.

The same Sunday that he had walked home from church with Helga, he had driven over to Älvåkra in the evening. Then Hildur had started talking about Helga and had said that she wouldn't come to Närlunda until that girl was sent away. At first Gudmund had tried to dismiss the whole matter as a jest, but it was soon obvious that Hildur was in earnest. Gudmund pleaded Helga's cause exceedingly well and remarked that she was very young when first sent out to service and it was not strange that things went badly when she came across such a worthless fellow as Per Mårtensson. But since his mother had taken her in hand, she had always conducted herself well. "It can't be right to push her out," said he. "Then, perhaps, she might meet with misfortune again."

But Hildur would not yield. "If that girl is to remain at Närlunda, then I will never come there," she declared. "I cannot tolerate a person of that kind in my home."

"You don't know what you are doing," said Gudmund. "No one understands so well as Helga how to care for mother. We have all been glad that she came to us. Before she came, mother was often peevish and depressed."

"I shall not compel you to send her away," said Hildur, but it was clear that if Gudmund were to take her at her word, in this instance, she was ready to break the engagement.

"It will probably have to be as you wish," said Gudmund. He did not feel that he could jeopardize his whole future for Helga's sake, but he was very pale when he acquiesced, and he was silent and low-spirited the entire evening.

It was this which had caused Gudmund to fear that perhaps Hildur was not altogether what he had fancied her. He did not like, I dare say, that she had pitted her will against his. But the worst of it was that he could not comprehend anything else than that she was in the wrong. He felt that he would willingly have given in to her had she been broad-minded, but instead, it seemed to him, she was only petty and heartless. Once his doubts were awakened, it was not long before he perceived one thing and another which were not as he wished. "Doubtless she is one of those who think first and foremost of themselves," he muttered every time he parted from her, and he wondered how long her love for him would last if it were put to the test. He tried to console himself with the idea that all people thought of themselves first, but instantly Helga flashed into his mind. He saw her as she stood in the court room and snatched the Bible, and heard how she cried out: "I withdraw the suit. I am still fond of him and I don't want him to swear falsely." It was thus he would have Hildur. Helga had become for him a standard by which he measured people. Though certainly there were many who were equal to her in affection!

Day by day he thought less of Hildur, but it did not occur to him that he should relinquish his prospective bride. He tried to imagine his discouragement was simply an idle whim. Only a few weeks ago he regarded her as the best in the world!

Had this been at the beginning of the courtship, he would have withdrawn, perhaps, but now the banns were already published and the wedding day fixed, and in his home they had begun repairing and rebuilding. Nor did he wish to forfeit the wealth and the good social position which awaited him. What excuse could he offer for breaking the engagement? That which he had to bring against Hildur was so inconsequential that it would have turned to air on his lips had he attempted to express it.

But the heart of him was often heavy, and every time he had an errand down to the parish or the city he bought ale or wine at the shops to drink himself into a good humor. When he had emptied a couple of bottles, he was again proud of the marriage and pleased with Hildur. Then he didn't understand what it was that pained him.

Gudmund often thought of Helga and longed to meet her. But he fancied that Helga believed him a wretch because he had not kept the promise which he voluntarily made her, but had allowed her to go away. He could neither explain nor excuse himself, therefore he avoided her.

One morning, when Gudmund was walking up the road, he met Helga, who had been down in the village to buy milk. Gudmund turned about and joined her.

She didn't appear to be pleased with his company and walked rapidly, as if she wished to get away from him, and said nothing. Gudmund, too, kept still because he didn't quite know how he should begin the conversation.

A vehicle was seen on the road, far behind. Gudmund was absorbed in thought and did not mark it, but Helga had seen it and turned abruptly to him: "It is not worth your while to be in my company, Gudmund, for, unless I see wrongly, it is the Juryman from Älvåkra and his daughter who come driving back there."

Gudmund glanced up quickly, recognized the horse, and made a movement as if to turn back; but the next instant he straightened up and walked calmly at Helga's side until the vehicle had passed. Then he slackened his pace. Helga continued to walk rapidly, and they parted company without his having said a word to her. But all that day he was better satisfied with himself than he had been in a long while.

V

It was decided that Gudmund and Hildur's wedding should be celebrated at Älvåkra the day following Palm Sunday. On the Friday before, Gudmund drove to town to make some purchases for the home-coming banquet, which was to be held at Närlunda the day after the wedding. In the village he happened across a number of young men from his parish. They knew it was his last trip to the city before the marriage and made it the occasion for a carouse. All insisted that Gudmund must drink, and they succeeded finally in getting him thoroughly intoxicated.

He came home on Saturday morning so late that his father and the men servants had already gone out to their work, and he slept on until late in the afternoon. When he arose and was going to dress himself, he noticed that his coat was torn in several places. "It looks as though I had been in a fight last night," said he, trying to recall what he had been up to. He remembered this much: he had left the public tavern at eleven o'clock in company with his comrades; but where they had gone afterwards, he couldn't remember. It was like trying to peer into a great darkness. He did not know if they had only driven around on the streets or if they had been in somebody's home. He didn't remember whether he or some one else had harnessed the horse and had no recollection whatever of the drive home.

When he came into the living-room of the cottage, it was scoured and arranged for the occasion. All work was over for the day, and the household were having coffee. No one spoke of Gudmund's trip. It seemed to be a matter agreed upon that he should have the freedom of living as he chose these last weeks.

Gudmund sat down at the table and had his coffee like the others. As he sat pouring it from the cup into the saucer and back into the cup again to let it cool, mother Ingeborg, who had finished with hers, took up the newspaper, which had just arrived, and began reading. She read aloud column after column, and Gudmund, his father, and the rest sat and listened.

Among other things which she read, there was an account of a fight that had taken place the night before, on the big square, between a gang of drunken farmers and some laborers. As soon as the police turned up, the fighters fled, but one of them lay dead on the square. The man was carried to the police station, and when no outward injury was found on him, they had tried to resuscitate him. But all attempts had been in vain, and at last they discovered that a knife-blade was imbedded in the skull. It was the blade of an uncommonly large clasp-knife that had pierced the brain and was broken off close to the head. The murderer had fled with the knife-handle, but as the police knew perfectly well who had been in the fight, they had hopes of soon finding him.

While mother Ingeborg was reading this, Gudmund set down the coffee-cup, stuck his hand in his pocket, pulled out a clasp-knife, and glanced at it carelessly. But almost immediately he started, turned the knife over, and poked it into his pocket as quickly as though it had burned him. He did not touch the coffee after that, but sat a long while, perfectly still, with a puzzled expression on his face. His brows were contracted, and it was apparent that he was trying with all his might to think out something.

Finally he stood up, stretched himself, yawned, and walked leisurely toward the door. "I'll have to bestir myself. I haven't been out of doors all day," he said, leaving the room.

About the same time Erland Erlandsson also arose. He had smoked out his pipe, and now he went into the side room to get some tobacco. As he was standing in there, refilling his pipe, he saw Gudmund walking along. The windows of the side room did not, like those of the main room, face the yard, but looked out upon a little garden plot with a couple of tall apple trees. Beyond the plot lay a bit of swamp land where in the spring of the year there were big pools of water, but which were almost dried out in the summer. Toward this side it was seldom that any one went. Erland Erlandsson wondered what Gudmund was doing there, and followed him with his eyes. Then he saw that the son

stuck his hand into his pocket, drew out some object, and flung it away in the morass. Thereupon he walked back across the little garden plot, leaped a fence, and went down the road.

As soon as his son was out of sight, Erland, in his turn, betook himself, as he should have done, to the swamp. He waded out into the mire, bent down, and picked up something his foot had touched. It was a large clasp-knife with the biggest blade broken off. He turned it over and over and examined it carefully while he still stood in the water. Then he put it into his pocket, but he took it out again and looked at it before returning to the house.

Gudmund did not come home until the household had retired. He went immediately to bed without touching his supper, which was spread in the main room.

Erland Erlandsson and his wife slept in the side room. At daybreak Erland thought he heard footsteps outside the window. He got up, drew aside the curtain, and saw Gudmund walking down to the swamp. He stripped off stockings and shoes and waded out into the water, tramping back and forth, like one who is searching for something. He kept this up for a long while, then he walked back to dry land, as if he intended to go away, but soon turned back to resume his search. A whole hour his father stood watching him. Then Gudmund went back to the house again and to bed.

On Palm Sunday Gudmund was to drive to church. As he started to hitch up the horse, his father came out. "You have forgotten to polish the harness to-day," he said, as he walked by; for both harness and cart were muddy.

"I have had other things to think of," said Gudmund listlessly, and drove off without doing anything in the matter.

After the service Gudmund accompanied his betrothed to Älvåkra and remained there all day. A number of young people came to celebrate Hildur's last evening as a maid, and there was dancing till far into the night. Intoxicants were plentiful, but Gudmund did not touch them. The whole evening he had scarcely spoken a word to any one, but he danced wildly and laughed at times, loudly and stridently, without any one's knowing what he was so amused over.

Gudmund did not come home until about two in the morning, and when he had stabled the horse he went down to the swamp back of the house. He took off his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers, and waded into the water and mud. It was a light spring night, and his father was standing in the side room behind the curtain, watching his son. He saw how he walked bending over the water and searching as on the previous night. He went up on land between times, but after a moment or two he would wade again through the mud. Once he went and fetched a bucket from the barn and began dipping water from the pools, as if he intended to drain them, but really found it unprofitable and set the bucket aside. He tried also with a pole-net. He ploughed through the entire swamp-ground with it, but seemed to bring up nothing but mud. He did not go in until the morning was so well on that the people in the house were beginning to bestir themselves. Then he was so tired and spent that he staggered as he walked, and he flung himself upon the bed without undressing.

When the clock struck eight, his father came and waked him. Gudmund lay upon the bed, his clothing covered with mud and clay, but his father did not ask what he had been doing. He simply said, "It is time now to get up," and closed the door.

After a while Gudmund came down stairs, dressed in his wedding clothes. He was pale, and his eyes wore a troubled expression, but no one had ever seen him look so handsome. His features were as if illumined by an inner light. One felt that one was looking upon something no longer made up of flesh and blood, – only of soul and will.

It was solemnly ceremonious down in the main room. His mother was in black, and she had thrown a pretty silk shawl across her shoulders, although she was not to be at the wedding. Fresh birch leaves were arranged in the fireplace. The table was spread, and there was a great quantity of food.

When they had breakfasted, mother Ingeborg read a hymn and something from the Bible. Then she turned to Gudmund, thanked him for having been a good son, wished him happiness in his new life, and gave him her blessing. Mother Ingeborg could arrange her words well, and Gudmund was

deeply moved. The tears welled to his eyes time and again, but he managed to choke them back. His father, too, said a few words. "It will be hard for your parents to lose you," he said, and again Gudmund came near breaking down. All the servants came forward and shook hands with him and thanked him for the past. Tears were in his eyes all the while. He pulled himself together and made several attempts to speak, but could scarcely get a word past his lips.

His father was to accompany him to the wedding and be one of the party. He went out and harnessed the horse, after which he came back and announced that it was time to start. When Gudmund was seated in the cart, he noticed that it was cleansed and burnished. Everything was as bright and shiny as he himself always wished it to be. At the same time he saw, also, how neat everything about the place looked. The driveway had been laid with new gravel; piles of old wood and rubbish, which had lain there all his life, were removed. On each side of the entrance door stood a birch branch, as a gate of honor. A large wreath of blueberry hung on the weather-vane, and from every aperture peeped light green birch-leaves. Again Gudmund was ready to burst into tears. He grasped his father's hand hard when he was about to start; it was as though he wished to prevent his going.

"Is there something – ?" said the father.

"Oh, no!" said Gudmund. "It is best, I dare say, that we go ahead."

Gudmund had to say one more farewell before he was very far from the homestead. It was Helga from Big Marsh, who stood waiting at the hedge, where the foliage path leading from her home opened into the highway. The father was driving and stopped when he saw Helga.

"I have been waiting for you, as I wanted to wish you happiness to-day," said Helga.

Gudmund leaned far out over the cart and shook hands with Helga. He thought that she had grown thin and that her eyelids were red. Very probably she had lain awake and cried all night and was homesick for Närlunda. But now she tried to appear happy and smiled sweetly at him. Again he felt deeply moved but could not speak.

His father, who was reputed never to speak a word until it was called forth by extreme necessity, joined in: "That good wish, I think, Gudmund will be more glad over than any other."

"Yes, of that you may be sure!" said Gudmund. He shook hands with Helga once more, and then they drove on.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.