

Mamma Karasjok, by Per Hansson

Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1970

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The southern wind came and blew day and night to drive the cold back home to the Arctic Ocean, and gently, along with the laws of nature and the life rhythms of the animals, the nomadic Sami moved up from their wintering spots on the high tundra.

On the way to the coast many herds were driven past Karasjok near Svineng, and when the spring migration happened, the folks on the farm felt that winter was over.

Kirsten was excited. She knew that, on the days when the flocks would come over the river ice, she would be able to hear them all from a long distance -- the dogs' sharp barks, the loud calls of the herders, and a indistinct but ever-increasing sound of thousands of hooves against the rough surface of old snow and ice.

Always there were some does that gave birth too early in the snow underway to the calving grounds, and Kirsten's small eyes were fixed with concern whenever her gaze discovered a calf that helplessly straggled along at the edge of the herd.

With their backs tightly pressed together, the thousand-horned herd of reindeer moved like a wave toward the summer's lush meadows by the coast. They were driven like a brown flood along the river banks, swam like a huge undulating carpet up the ridge, and raced like a living avalanche down the long slopes on the other side of the mountain.

Kirsten ran along over the ridge. She yelled and screamed like the herdsmen, and shrieked with joy each time she spotted a calf that had strayed outside the herd's tight mass, and confused by its fear of the ferocious dogs, leaped back into the flock.

At Easter and Christmas, Kirsten often went with her mother to the Læstadian church meetings. She didn't understand much; in particular the word "damnation", which they said so often, had no real meaning for her.

She had heard the preacher speak that word like a huge wolf to scare the women and men on the church benches, so the word must be something frightening for the adults.

But for Kirsten, the doors of Paradise always stood open. She often enjoyed thinking that Jesus would come and get her with a white reindeer, and the sled would be made of white reindeer skin, and angels would stand

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quietly in the air so that they could drive on a road of soft wings. And "salvation", the word that brought happiness to the faces of all the adults, had a very worldly meaning for Kirsten. Salvation was Assebakte, the summer meadow and riverbank with golden sand and dark green pastures.

Even when the days were as dark as night and gray-white clouds of ice fog rolled into the meeting house whenever the door was opened, she could close her eyes and escape from the odorous paraffin lamps and fur-clad people, to the sandspits that stuck out, heated by the sun, into the summer-lazy Karasjokka.

Every year, on the fourteenth of July, this earthly salvation became reality. At that time, they would move with their cows and sheep to the seter (summer pasture) up by the river.

Three families had seter cabins on Assebakte. Kirsten, from lonely Svineng, could finally play with children her same age until, sated with fun, she tumbled exhausted onto the grass. The sun shone all night, and her mother didn't call her in for the night. In her flowered summer dress she lay where she had fallen on the seter grass and slept until the new day.

When she woke up, the first things she set her brown eyes upon were the nearby green ridges and the distant blue mountains. Then came the river, which was the same colour as the morning sky, and the cows and sheep and rustic stable and log seter cabins, which were silver-gray from decades of weather and wind.

With her dress lifted over her knees, she stood on the golden brown sandspit and washed herself, and afterwards she ate dried meat, creamy soured milk and Sami bread, which her mother made from rye flour, salt, and water. Then she played until she dozed off again wherever she set herself down, tired, on the grass, and slept until yet another day on the Assebakte of blessedness.

The grown women were also cheerful and smiled easily during the time on the seter. They didn't forget the table grace or Lord's Prayer, but the fear of eternal damnation and hell, which already was blown away by the south wind of spring, disappeared entirely in the nightless summer.

Only on Saturday evenings would Lensmanns-Marit feel heavy thoughts. Those thoughts arrived at the same time as the other women's menfolk, who came up to the Assebakte seter. Johannes had also come up on Saturday evenings, and he had always had a gleam in his eyes up on the

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seter. On the table in the cabin she had set creamy soured milk and crowberries, which the youngsters had picked for him that morning. He was hot and thirsty after poling the boat up the river, and he would eat before he spoke. He said little, and most of that was about the harvest work at Svineng, the horse, and the fields he had cultivated in order to get still more hay the next summer.

After that he would go out to look at the animals, and he would stand a long time beside each cow and examine her from hoof to forehead. If he was satisfied, he would nod, and if he was unhappy with an animal, he would look questioningly at Marit before he went on to the next. Always he treated Marit with a respect that bordered on deference, and just as in the kitchen at home, the seter cabin was filled with a great, quiet well-being as soon as he came in the door.

Marit used to sit on the river bank on Saturday evenings, and watch the men come up to their families on the seter by the Karasjokka.

Most of them had thrown their jackets in the bottom of their trim, tarred boats. They poled, relaxed and rhythmically, in their white homespun trousers and shirts.

If a group of young men came up the river in their boats and noticed that the women gazed at them from the river banks, they strove with all their muscles and the poles beat like drumsticks in the sun-glittering water. In the evening hours of Sunday they went home easily and effortlessly with the current, to six new, long days of work on the farm.

August 24 was the day for moving home, the only sorrowful day for little Kirsten on Assebakte. She would become beside herself with anxiety and anger when her mother and older siblings led the livestock toward the river bank to drive them swimming into the Karasjokka. Terrible visions of drowning cows and sheep came over her.

Kirsten had never been farther from home than Assabakte, and she know that the river must begin somewhere. There, she thought, the animals could go safely on dry land over to the other side of the valley. Because the river was just as long as winter, the adults laughed at her. Weeping, she picked up a branch to drive the cows back from the river bank.

Her mother held her tightly until the cows were over on the other side.

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The autumn that Kirsten started school, her brothers rowed her to Kirkestedet, where she was to board with relatives for the six weeks that instruction would last.

Her mother had given her white fur boots, and tucked inside her kofte she had a slate, chalk, and a rabbit's foot to erase with. She would need a lot of rabbits' feet during her school days at Kirkestedet.

At home in Svineng, they only spoke Sami, and Kirsten could not say one sentence in Norwegian when she started school. The ABC book had Sami text on one page and Norwegian on the opposite, but even though she and the other pupils finally could learn the alphabet mechanically, the words they wrote were mostly without meaning for them. The books were for children who didn't know about the endless high tundra with moss and snow, for boy and girls in a world without reindeer, aurora, wolves and swarms of midges, fur boots, Haldefjell, and days without light and nights without darkness.

The teacher was strict at his desk and hour after hour the children heard, "In Norwegian, it is called...", "You must say it in Norwegian!" "Say it in Norwegian, Norwegian, Norwegian..."

Because the teacher could speak Sami, they didn't understand at all why they could not say the words in their mother tongue. They felt harassed and persecuted. The foreign words were painful and impossible in the mouth, and many of the children began early to hate the ugly, unintelligible Norwegian language. Schoolroom language it was, for they never used it outside the classroom.

In October, Kirsten was finished with the fall semester, and the teacher thought that most of the children know the alphabet.

In the following April school continued with a new six-week semester of instruction, but in the course of the months the children had been at home, they had forgotten just about all the letters they had learned by rote half a year earlier.

That spring, the teacher spent all the hours of Norwegian and Christian instruction teaching the children to read Luther's little catechism. When school was finished again, they had completed the first page. Most of the children managed to recite the lines, but they understood not one word of what they said.

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The two first years, Kirsten's teacher was ethnically Sami. He was painfully clear about the children's difficulties with Norwegian, and didn't force them any more than the anti-Sami school rules required of him.

But in the third grade Kirsten got a teacher who had come from the far south of the country. He could not speak much Sami, and most often they didn't understand what he was asking them, for hours at a time.

"Say it in Norwegian! In Norwegian! In Norwegian!" He would shout and scream, and when they desperately tried to remember the foreign words, there were many they couldn't manage to say correctly, and then he would mimic their Sami accent and sounds.

Every word he imitated could tear into them like wolves' teeth, and the children would feel even smaller in their Sami clothing when he patronizingly mocked them in his Norwegian attire.

There were two classrooms in the old school house, and the walls were thin enough that Kirsten could hear the voice of the teacher she had had in the first two years, and that was enough to make her tears flow.

The new teacher from the south didn't just follow the letter of the law when it came to the curriculum, he felt it was his patriotic and Christian duty to teach the children Norwegian. Sami should be only a helping language in the instruction. That was what the department had decided, and Parliament had concluded that Sami teachers should not be employed in Sami villages as long as they could find Norwegian teachers for the positions. Sami souls could only be saved if the nation drove their mother tongue and culture out and replaced them with Norwegian language and insecurity.

The teacher laboured and lectured, and he felt frustrated and depressed that the children didn't understand his best efforts. He had come from far in the south to barren Finnmark to teach them the only correct and proper language, so they could become real Norwegian citizens, but nonetheless the pupils were resistant and uninterested! Yes, the harder he drove them in Norwegian, the harder they found it to read and speak it. Behind all the blushing and stammering he also noticed, in the older students, a deep dislike of him and everything Norwegian. And in some of them it grew to more than dislike and bitterness. They had to lock their humiliation and fury in their thoughts, and in some students the powerless anger, year after year in the classroom, developed into active hatred.

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Kirsten's brother, Johannes, worked hard at his lessons, and only once did he have to stretch out his hands over the edge of the teacher's desk so that the teacher – easily for him and more painfully for the boy – could hit him over his fingers with a birch rod. This was a usual punishment method, but until he died at an old age, Johannes hated that teacher. He was sure that was because of the blows to his fingers. But Johannes was punished only once...

Kirsten was more fortunate.

When her brothers rowed her to the first school days at Kirkestedet, her mother had given her more than just a slate, chalk, and rabbit's foot.

Kirsten was a lively and curious child, and Lensmanns-Marit had therefore hammered into her that she must sit quietly on her bench, not speak before the teacher asked her something, and tolerate everything without complaint. And when Kirsten – mostly out of fear – memorized her lessons every day, she was among those who managed the best.

The things she liked about school were arithmetic and feeding the stove.

Each day the children had to bring wood to the classroom and keep the stove so hot that its iron glowed red.

Her brothers had brought a sled load of wood from the farm to Kirkestedet and stored it outside their uncle's house, where Kirsten stayed during the six weeks of school each fall and spring.

There were ten children in the class, so every tenth day Kirsten was up before the others to load the firewood onto her uncle's sled and pull it to the schoolhouse. It was supposed to be warm in the room when the teacher came in, and she was out so early that he had barely awakened before she had got the stove lit. Kirsten was so happy to be doing something she was accustomed to that she wished she had stove duty every day.

She slept in the loft at her uncle's house and shared a bed with his two youngest children, and just about every evening she suffered from homesickness. The first autumn at Kirkestedet she lay in the darkness and prayed that God would take her home to her mother's bed at Svineng. She had never prayed before for a miracle, and cried when it didn't happen. But her brother wasn't concerned that God had forgotten her. "He who is God for everyone doesn't have time to move you between the beds at Kirkestedet and Svineng," Johannes said.

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The family at Kirkestedet had four children of school age, and along with Kirsten they used one end of the kitchen table for reading and writing. The rest of the table was needed by Kirsten's aunt and her older daughters for food preparation, household chores, and eating.

They could afford only one paraffin lamp, which hung over the middle of the table. The young students sat bent over with their necks stretched out in order to see the numbers and letters. They all read out loud, and those who tried to read Norwegian read the loudest. Sometimes they almost screamed the words out, in bitterness over the foreign language.

Kirsten's uncle didn't understand Norwegian, but just the sound of it made him think of the Læstadian preacher who called Norwegian the language of self-righteousness, Sami the language of love, and Finnish the language of the spirit.

If many people were eating, the children had to leave the table and sit down on the floor by the fireplace to get light from the flames, until they could return to the light of the paraffin lamp.

Kirsten never played with Norwegian-speaking children at Kirkestedet, and only the teacher's sons and daughters attended school with the Sami students. The other Norwegian children were taught at home. When Kirsten would encounter a Norwegian child, she would look curiously at their clothes and the games they played, but she never thought about whether or not she liked them. The divide between them was so broad and deep that she never once thought to extend her hand to them, and there was no need to do that in any case.

Karasjok was purely a Sami area. The few Norwegian families were immigrants. As civil servants and officials, they had power and authority, but outside the office, business, or classroom, it was still the Sami in their koftes and fur boots who had the experience and skill to work the land and make a living in the wilderness without feeling alone. That was because they were at one with the great high tundra in a land where the darkness was more formidable and the light more splendid than in other places. In their own houses and cabins, they felt stronger than the foreign immigrants, and if a Karasjok man met a Norwegian on the narrow, hard-packed path, he would only reluctantly step off the path into the deep snow to let the Norwegian pass.

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By being both tractable and wise, the Sami had, from time immemorial, done well enough in the battle with nature to survive.

And in Kirsten's village, the valley was forested, and they took so many salmon in the Karasjokka that there was plenty of salt fish in the barrels for the winter. In the mountain lakes there were whitefish and trout, herds of reindeer grazed on the high tundra, and cloudberry and lingonberry ripened over mile after mile in the autumn, hares and ptarmigan could be trapped, and nearly everyone had a cow or two in the barn.

Even the lazy people in Kirsten's valley seldom felt hunger pangs in an empty belly. But even if they were secure, they must rest on the Sabbath. The struggle for food and thoughts of God in heaven and the devil in hell required all their strength and attention.

Therefore, many were not concerned that the children couldn't speak much Norwegian when they were finished with school. They couldn't be stuffed with more knowledge from books, and as for the fear of God, that was the business of the pastors and preachers to inculcate in them.

Lensmanns-Marit did what she could to get the children to learn Norwegian. She remembered her father, who could speak so well that he talked with the Norwegian immigrants without stuttering or stammering. He had given Kirsten some money from ptarmigan trapping so she could buy a catechism and another Norwegian book at the pastor's home.

The pastor could speak Sami himself, and he had invited Kirsten in and chatted with her about things she understood and liked. The pastor's home was the only Norwegian house that Kirsten visited in all her school years at Kirkestedet, and only twice was she inside the door of that big house.

The first time she was with a group of other children, who had been invited by the pastor's family for a Christmas party. They had received cakes and hot chocolate, which Kirsten had never tasted before. Nor had she seen a Christmas tree, and when she saw it there glittering and covered with bright candles, she thought of Paradise.

She wasn't bothered that they didn't have a Christmas tree at Svineng. That was for the Norwegians, and even though Kirsten had seen it shining at the priest's house, her mother was immovable in her Læstadian belief and thought a Christmas tree was a vanity and a sin against God. They did not give one another Christmas gifts, and the food was the same as any other

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day of the year. But the kitchen and other rooms were thoroughly cleaned, and on Christmas Eve, Marit drove the horse and sled to the service at Kirkestedet.

In Kirsten's memory the pastor's Christmas tree became steadily bigger, the lights innumerable, and the decorations so glittery that she and her friends got misty-eyed when they talked about the party at the pastor's house, which they did often -- until Anne-Klement held *his* party at Kirkestedet.

He was in his thirties, and spoke softly and seldom. So quiet was he that wherever he was, people paid him no more mind than a bench or an obedient dog. If some men were chatting together at the store, and one of them turned naturally to Anne-Klement, he didn't answer, but a smile spread slowly on his dark face and stayed there until he silently left the group.

His mother had been named Anne, and therefore they called him Anne-Klement -- on the rare occasions when his name was mentioned before the day when Anne-Klement was on everyone's tongue in the houses and cabins.

They had heard that he would travel to America, a name mentioned even less often than Anne-Klement's, a land that seemed to them farther away than the stars.

He had a house and fields and livestock, but no children. His wife got everything except the horse, which had to be sold so he would have enough money for the trip and at least two hundred and fifty sugar pastries.

The storekeeper had never before received such an order. He had to get the pastries from a baker near the coast, and when they arrived at Karasjok he personally drove them to the schoolhouse, which Anne-Klement had reserved for his farewell party.

The teachers had been asked to tell the children that they were welcome to eat all the cake they wanted.

The sugar pastries were set in a pile on a big table, and behind all this splendour stood Anne-Klement smiling in his Sunday best.

Since then, people had talked a lot about the unbelievable golden-brown pastries with myriads of glittering sugar crystals, which, at the

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beginning, were so overwhelming that the children couldn't see Anne-Klement until at least a hundred pastries had been devoured.

But this wasn't quite true. Kirsten had been frightened right away when she entered the classroom and couldn't see more of Anne-Klement than his face and his big Karasjok hat as a decoration atop the mountain of pastries.

Incredulous, as though they expected that the mountain of pastries would disappear into thin air at any moment, the crowd of children approached the table with small, careful steps, and the whole time the smile never left his face while he repeated that the children could stuff themselves to satisfaction.

They all eventually got going like the hordes of grasshoppers in Egypt, and when they finally wiped their hands on their jackets in gratitude, he had disappeared, never to be seen again in Karasjok.

Many who had striven for respect and a worthy reputation until their backs were bent and their senses hardened, were forgotten before the birch leaves near their graves had twice turned to gold, while he who disappeared without a trace over the tundra and into that foreign land, remained immortal in the villagers' memory.

Even seventy years after all the children at Kirkestedet and the nearby farms had eaten their fill of sugar pastries, people still say about anyone who is unusually generous, "You are just too much like Anne-Klement now." And few have been called "Anne-Klement" more often than Kirsten in the long time since she stared in astonishment at the generous face over the table's unbelievable splendour of golden brown sugar pastries.

Kirsten grew and the seasons came and went, but otherwise the days at the farm were so similar that they didn't notice the passing of time. Spring and children, summer and adults, autumn and the elderly, winter and death - that was nature's law and the Lord's will, and no one at Svineng sat and lost days by counting them...

As a result, at times when they needed to know how old they were, it took some thought to figure it out. For their birthdays were just like other days, without cakes or special food, without presents and good wishes. It was seldom noted that anyone on the farm had become a year older.

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They had no clocks that ticked away the seconds or measured time. They reckoned morning started when they opened their eyes. They ate when they were hungry and needed a rest, and went to bed when they no longer had the strength to do more in the kitchen or in the fields.

If they didn't manage to finish something one day, they knew they could continue and get it done on the second or fifth day, and because the requirements of life were so limited, they were spared jealousy and dissatisfaction. They were grateful to have enough to eat each day, and their house never seemed too small.

It was indeed made of the best logs, and its moss-covered roof was made thicker and tighter each summer. They had a kitchen, bedrooms, and a loft, and no farmer had more.

The few spartan pieces of furniture stood in the same places they had been set when Lensmanns-Marit and Johannes lived in the house. No one wishes anything more than the kitchen table, stools, footstools, and the two wooden chairs with backs, which were for the oldest people in the family...

Between the six weeks' semesters each autumn and spring, Kirsten herded the sheep each summer. And from the age of ten she cared for the children of a Kirkestedet family each winter.

For her work caring for the children, she received board and slept on reindeer and sheep skins on the floor of the loft or in bed within one or two of the farmer's youngest children.

In several of the houses at Kirkestedet, they would gladly have employed Kirsten. It was in her nature to be kind and affectionate toward children, and Kirsten showed them such gentleness and patience that the aunt she first worked for called her "the family's little mother".

Kirsten would have liked to care for children all year, but Lensmanns-Marit needed a sheep herder, and at Svineng the sons and daughters did what their mother asked of them.

Each morning, Kirsten drove the flock to the pastures by the birch forest, which grew in a thick belt between the farm and the wilderness. The grazing was good, and most of the day she sat on a tussock or stone and played and daydreamed. She made dolls from twigs which she wrapped with moss, and if she needed to talk, she talked with the sheep.

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Even though they often stopped grazing and lifted their heads, she was never really sure that they understood human speech. Therefore, she made up her own secret sheep-language. In some words, the last letter was put first. In others, she switched around the vowels and consonants, and between most of the words she made long or short, light or dark baa-ing sounds.

Because she didn't know any other life, she didn't feel that she was bored or missing out on anything.

Around the farm and valley lay the tundra-covered plateau and beyond that was a world so distant and unknown that she thought it was all like America, where Anne-Klement was supposed to be. But because no one had heard from him, it was as though she was looking through an ice-covered window when she tried to imagine the land he had traveled to.

When she wasn't making moss dolls or talking with the sheep, she liked best to dream of herself in a blue kofte with a white silk scarf over her shoulders and white boots with dark spots on the heels. It was like the salvation of Assebakte, to see herself dressed like that.

She would get the materials to sew and sell the finest boots in Karasjok and weave Karasjok's most beautiful textiles. Sometimes she would fantasize all day about all that would happen before she stood one evening in all her splendour.

A white reindeer must be brought in for the boots, and from sheep would come the softest wool. Then she would think about the preachers who spoke so softly and seriously about the Lamb of God. If she could just get wool from a sheep that had been God's lamb, her clothes would be the grandest of all.

She would sew belts of red, gold, green, and blue, and when she closed her eyes, she could see her innumerable belts waving in splendid colour like Heaven's aurora, and boots as numerous and white as snowflakes. She would be beautiful! Often when she sat on the edge of the forest and daydreamed, she pressed her nose up with her finger. A turned-up nose was seen as a mark of beauty in a girl's face, and Kirsten's nose was straight.

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Just twice during the years that Kirsten herded sheep, did unpleasant events happen on the pastures just in front of the dense wall of the birch forest.

In winter, occasionally wolves howled around Svineng, and Kirsten had heard her school friends tell about wolves that ate small children in Finnish communities. But Lensmanns-Marit had told her that wolves killed only sheep. If a wild animal should approach Kirsten, it would run off on its way with its tail between its legs if Kirsten would just stand her ground and scream her loudest.

Therefore, Kirsten almost never thought about wolves before she had been herding two summers and was ten years old.

She was sitting on a tussock, amusing herself, when several sheep came running past her. Kirsten called out, but the sheep ran on towards the strip of forest and the houses on the riverbank.

Kirsten went to look for the rest of the flock, but she had not gone far before she saw four dead sheep. Wolves had bitten their throats and lapped up their blood.

She bent down quickly to pick up a stone, while screaming and shouting. She knew the wolves must still be in the underbrush nearby, for blood was still running from the sheep's wounds onto their white wool.

She and those sheep had been together from morning to night. They had lain with their heads in her lap and she had talked with them in her sheep language day after day, and there they lay on the moss, as dead as her father and the ptarmigan.

In a red fog of fury she ran around the groves and underbrush to find the wolves and attack them with stones. All the time she was shrieking ugly, harsh screams from the darkness deep in her soul.

When the fire in her eyes burned out, tearlessly she picked up some bloody strands of wool so her mother would believe her story of the wolves.

During the next few days, her brother Johannes accompanied her, but eventually she had to look after the sheep by herself. When a few more days had passed, Kirsten began again to make dolls and dream of the blue kofte, the white silk kerchief, and the boots with the dark spots on the heels...

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Anger could still rise in her when a wolf would howl near the farm in the winter. And once they set out some innards from a slaughter as bait in the farmyard and shot a wolf from the kitchen window. She went out and looked at the body with dark pleasure.

A wolf's howl made everyone angry, but if a fox yelped outside the log walls, a dark sense of foreboding came over them. This was a warning that someone soon would die.

They had heard the cry of a fox outside the house of Kirsten's godmother, and not long afterward, her husband, Anders, had died.

Two Norwegian men had been at Svineng asking directions to the gold fields some distance up the Karasjokka. But when Kirsten's older brothers were up in the mountains, those gold miners had persuaded Anders to go with them. Just a few hours after Anders said farewell at home, some nomadic Sami brought his body back to the farm. Blood had run from his nose and mouth, and the two Norwegian miners came a little later and said that Anders had fallen, sliding and tumbling to his death. But the people who washed his body said they found knife wounds in his back.

For a long time, Kirsten was more afraid of Norwegians than of wolves. While herding, she was always ready to run. She was frightened by the sight of foreigners in the birch groves and fir forest, and small patches of water in the sunshine became shining knives. After she had run home twice in the middle of the day, Johannes was once again sent with Kirsten to watch over the sheep.