

Randvar *and*
The Songsmith



Ottilie A. Liljencrantz

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“ SHE KNELT DOWN BEFORE HIM. . . THE WOMAN IN HER
PLEADED AS BEFORE A LAWMAN ”

Randvar the Songsmith

A Romance of Norumbega

By

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"The Thrall of Leif the Lucky" etc.



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*“ Yet onward still to ear and eye
The baffling marvel calls ;
I fain would look before I die
On Norumbega’s walls.”*

—John Greenleaf Whittier

The Skeleton in Armor

By

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*"Speak! speak! thou fearful guest!
Who, with thy hollow breast
Still in rude armor drest,
Comest to daunt me!
Wrapt not in Eastern balms,
But with thy fleshless palms
Stretched, as if asking alms,
Why dost thou haunt me?"*

*Then, from those cavernous eyes
Pale flashes seem to rise,
As when the Northern skies
Gleam in December;
And, like the water's flow
Under December's snow,
Came a dull voice of woe
From the heart's chamber.*

*"I was a Viking old!
My deeds, though manifold,
No Skald in song has told,
No Saga taught thee!
Take heed, that in thy verse
Thou dost the tale rehearse,
Else dread a dead man's curse;
For this I sought thee.*

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*"Far in the Northern Land,
By the wild Baltic strand,
I, with my childish hand,
Tamed the gerfalcon;
And, with my skates fast-bound,
Skimmed the half-frozen Sound,
That the poor whimpering hound
Trembled to walk on.*

*"Oft to his frozen lair
Tracked I the grisly bear,
While from my path the hare
Fled like a shadow;
Oft through the forest dark
Followed the were-wolf's bark,
Until the soaring lark
Sang from the meadow.*

*"But when I older grew,
Joining a corsair's crew,
O'er the dark sea I flew
With the marauders.
Wild was the life we led;
Many the souls that sped;
Many the hearts that bled,
By our stern orders.*

*"Many a wassail-bout
Wore the long winter out;
Often our midnight shout
Set the cocks crowing,
As we the Berserk's tale
Measured in cups of ale,
Draining the oaken pail,
Filled to o'erflowing.*

*"Once as I told in glee
Tales of the stormy sea,
Soft eyes did gaze on me,
Burning yet tender;*

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*And as the white stars shine
On the dark Norway pine,
On that dark heart of mine
Fell their soft splendor.*

*"I wooed the blue-eyed maid,
Yielding, yet half afraid,
And in the forest's shade,
Our vows were plighted.
Under its loosened vest
Fluttered her little breast,
Like birds within their nest
By the hawk frightened.*

*"Bright in her father's hall
Shield gleamed upon the wall,
Loud sang the minstrels all,
Chanting his glory;
When of old Hildebrand
I asked his daughter's hand,
Mute did the minstrels stand
To hear my story.*

*"While the brown ale he quaffed,
Loud then the champion laughed,
And as the wind-gusts waft
The sea-foam brightly,
So the loud laugh of scorn,
Out of those lips unshorn,
From the deep drinking-horn
Blew the foam lightly.*

*"She was a Prince's child,
I but a Viking wild,
And though she blushed and smiled,
I was discarded!
Should not the dove so white
Follow the sea-mew's flight,
Why did they leave that night
Her nest unguarded?"*

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*"Scarce had I put to sea,
Bearing the maid with me,—
Fairest of all was she
Among the Norsemen!—
When on the white sea-strand,
Waving his armed hand,
Saw we old Hildebrand,
With twenty horsemen.*

*"Then launched they to the blast,
Bent like a reed each mast,
Yet we were gaining fast,
When the wind failed us;
And with a sudden flaw
Came round the gusty Skaw
So that our foe we saw
Laugh as he hailed us.*

*"And as to catch the gale
Round veered the flapping sail,
Death! was the helmsman's hail,
Death without quarter!
'Midships with iron keel
Struck we her ribs of steel;
Down her black hulk did reel
Through the black water!*

*"As with his wings aslant,
Sails the fierce cormorant,
Seeking some rocky haunt,
With his prey laden,
So toward the open main,
Beating to sea again,
Through the wild hurricane,
Bore I the maiden.*

*"Three weeks we westward bore
And when the storm was o'er,
Cloud-like we saw the shore
Stretching to leeward;*

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*There for my lady's bower
Built I the lofty tower,
Which, to this very hour,
Stands looking seaward.*

*"There lived we many years;
Time dried the maiden's tears;
She had forgot her fears,
She was a mother;
Death closed her mild blue eyes,
Under that tower she lies;
Ne'er shall the sun arise
On such another!"*

*"Still grew my bosom then,
Still as a stagnant fen!
Hateful to me were men,
The sunlight hateful!
In the vast forest here,
Clad in my warlike gear,
Fell I upon my spear,
O, death was grateful!"*

*"Thus, seamed with many scars
Bursting these prison bars
Up to its native stars
My soul ascended!
There from the flowing bowl
Deep drinks the warrior's soul,
SKOAL! to the Northland! SKOAL!"
Thus the tale ended.*

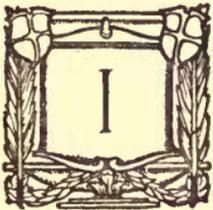
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I

"A man's foes are those of his own house"

—Northern saying.



IN the old world over the ocean the storm of the Norman Conquest was raging, but no rumble of it reached across the water to the new world and that oasis in the wilderness which men call now the lost city of Norumbega, but which was known in those days as the Town of Starkad Jarl. There in the primeval forest the breath of October was a silver elixir in the air, and the morning breeze carried only the notes of hunting-horns. When half a dozen young Norsemen came galloping down a tree-arched aisle, their talk dealt with no greater matter than the latest freak of their Jarl's freakish son.

"It is seen from the hoof-marks that he has

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not turned aside. We need not wait long to overtake—”

“Suppose he should not want to turn back—”

“Heard I never of a jarl’s hunt that began by hunting the Jarl’s son!”

“He was quiet in riding out of the Town with us; what caused him to spur ahead?”

“Only that he had a whim to be alone, as he is apt.”

“I remember how he broke away once last spring.”

“It may be that this fall he has done it once too often. Starkad is wroth.”

So the talk ran on until the tall leader drew rein, signalling to those behind him to check their pace.

“Slowly!” he said. “Yonder is his horse tethered. It would ill become us to ride upon Starkad’s son as though we were charging a boar.”

“Even though we shall be as ill-received as if we were,” the youngest of the horsemen added with a laugh of some uneasiness.

The leader smiled tolerantly. He wore on his long body fine clothes of scarlet leather, and on his thin lips the semblance of a perpetual smile.

“Everything grows big in your eyes,” he observed. “There! I think I see gray cloth among those green bushes. It were best to ride on until

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we come where he may see that there are too many of us to withstand; then one of us can dismount and approach him with the message."

The youngest of the riders laughed again, this time somewhat sarcastically. "No one is better fitted to take that task on him than yourself, Olaf, Thorgrim's son. For what else did you spend your fosterhood in France but to get smooth manners to use in rough places?"

"Yes, yes! By all means, Olaf is the man!" the others chorussed, a hint of malice in their promptness.

If Thorgrim's French-reared son read the sign, it made no difference in the confidence of his bearing. He answered that if it was their wish he would certainly undertake the errand, and immediately swung from his saddle as gaining the green bushes, they came into view of the wearer of the gray kirtle.

Prone on the earth's broad bosom the young noble had thrown himself and lay with his head pillowed on his folded arms, a figure of utter abandon. Only at the clink of spur and bridle-chain did he turn upon his side and fling back a mass of blood-red hair from a face of startling pallor. What look came into it when he beheld the horsemen, they were not near enough to tell. By the time Olaf stood before him, his teeth were showing a snarl.

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“Well, dog, you have tracked your quarry,” he said. “No wonder your trainers set store by you! What is the rest of your master’s bidding?”

Olaf laughed lightly. “Certainly, Jarl’s son, you should be a scald; you speak so glibly in figures. Starkad sends you orders to turn back and take your place again in the following.”

Starkad’s son drew himself slowly into a sitting posture. Then of a sudden his body was convulsed with laughter,—laughter mocking as the mirth of a devil.

“Who am I that I should stand in the way of the Jarl’s will?” he gasped between his paroxysms, and shaking with them rose to his feet.

But when he had come where the youngest of the riders was holding his horse in waiting, either the young man’s ill-concealed uneasiness, or some reminder growing out of it, caused his mood to change. With his foot in the stirrup he lingered, sobering until his face betrayed even the pinching hand of dread. Vaulting into his saddle, he spoke to his attendant without looking at him.

“I see they have turned my hound Sam into the pack, though the wound on his foot is still unhealed. Will you, Gunnar, do one thing for me? Separate him from the rest and bring him to me in a strong leash.”

“In this as in everything you have only to

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speak to have your will," Gunnar gave the prescribed answer absently. It¹ was not until he felt the foot of a friend behind him that he awoke to the mockery of the phrase, and glanced up appalled.

But the exasperation lightning at him did not strike. Amid silence, breathless, storm-charged, the Jarl's son took the reins from him, wheeled his horse and rode back up the leafy path and out of sight.

In a moment Olaf was spurring after Starkad's son, but the remainder of the escort appeared to be in no great haste to follow. First they waited while Gunnar examined the buckle of his girth; then they turned to scrutinize two figures just emerging into the open from a brush-hidden trail a few paces on their right.

Two young stags browsing the scarlet berries under the pines would scarcely have looked more natural to the scene, for one was a savage of that new-world race which the early Norse explorers called Skraellings, with hair as black as freshly turned leaf-mould, and a shining naked body of the hue of an oak-leaf in November; and the other, in the deer-skin garb of a forester, with uncovered locks reflecting the sun, was a descendant of the Vikings themselves and showed untamed blood in his handsome face as he raised it to look ahead at the horsemen.

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The red man the courtiers passed over indifferently, but on the white one they were beginning favorable comment when the call of a distant horn cut them short. Wheeling hastily, they gave their horses spur and rein, and passed up the shaded alley like a whirl of frost-tinted maple-leaves.

Upon them, the young forester made but one remark. He and his companion had halted as at a parting of the ways, and his hands were busy detaching a deer's-horn cup from his belt.

"I would travel a day's journey to see a horse run like that," he said. "Often I dream of feeling one between my knees, and waken because my enjoyment is too real for a vision."

The young savage's throat gave out a sound of comprehending, and his friend did not wait for a longer response. He had filled the horn from a flask of porcupine-skin that hung around his neck; now he raised it aloft.

"To you, comrade! May your arrows and your swallows always go the right way. Skoal!" he toasted, then refilled the cup and handed it to the other, who answered in the same Northern tongue, though haltingly.

"To my brother! May he drink much of his enemies' blood—as much as his friends have drunk of his wine. Skoal!"

It was not seen that the Northman made any

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grimace. While his mouth showed no blood-thirstiness, its hard line bespoke one used to grim ways. He said carelessly:

“My foster-mother has the gift of double sight, but even she has never seen that I have enemies. How came that notion into your head, brother?”

After the manner of his kind, the Skraelling was deliberate in answering, letting the purple juice trickle slowly down his throat; but he finished at last, and nodded in the direction of the departed courtmen.

“There went some of the young men who follow the head of my brother’s people. They are more bright than white fire-bugs with the gifts they get for their friendship. My brother is also young—a warrior—the son of a warrior—yet he lives apart in the forest, with a handful of women and old men—gets himself nothing. It must be that he has enemies among his people.”

The young forester shrugged his broad shoulders. “No gifts would I buy at the price Starkad Jarl asks, comrade. My little foster-brother Eric is page to his daughter; I know the lot of those who follow him. When he gives the sign they go to roost, whether they are sleepy or not. When his priest rings a bell they say their prayers, even though it break in at a time when cursing would come more easily to them. It is not allowed them

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to enjoy any sports that he sets his face against; and they drink no lower in the cup than he gives them leave. May illness eat me if I would ever tame myself to run with such a pack! That a man like my father should have been willing to lie quiet in a woman's net is something I shall never be able to comprehend. I understand him better when I see how he built the Tower with the lower part left open so that the wind could blow on him all the year round and help him to forget that he was under a roof."

Once more the Skraelling's deliberate speech was delayed, this time by a baying of deep-voiced hounds rumbling up out of the distance like thunder. Following it, the pack streamed past—stragglers bursting from the brush behind them to skirt them with extended noses or jostle between them, leaving froth-flecks on their sides—and hard after the hounds rode the hunting party, led by a band of green-clad pages winding gilded horns. With the leisureliness of one whose pride forbids a display of curiosity, the Skraelling set his eagle face again over his shoulder; and his companion, who had started to remark upon the scene, gave up with a shrug the attempt to make himself heard against the blaring.

The din passed at last, and on its heels came a colorful train—stately old priests and chieftains

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gravely discussing the hunts of their youth, high-born maidens with shining uncovered locks, and matrons whose lace veils floated cloudily from their moonlike faces, stocky young thralls bent under hampers and wine-skins, and towering leather-clad guardsmen bearing bright spears on their shoulders. With the hoof-beat of the prancing horses deadened by the matted leaves, they went by as lightly as shapes in a vision, each for an instant illumined as he passed where a shaft of sunlight fell through a rift in the arching tree-tops.

As the first pair of the noble maidens reached it, sitting gracefully erect in their saddles like gilded chairs, the forester motioned towards them.

“The one with her face turned away is the Jarl’s daughter, Brynhild the Proud. It is said that she is worth looking at, though it has never happened to me to do so.”

If the Skraelling looked at her, that was all the notice he vouchsafed. It was not until the last maiden had gone by that he was stirred to interest.

“That is the great sachim that the sun now shines on?” he asked.

“That is Starkad Jarl,” the Northman confirmed; and even as he said it, the old man with the jaw, like iron and the beard like steel had passed on into the shade, and the light was playing on the comely

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group that followed, revealing foppish secrets of gay embroidery and golden buckle.

“Here are the battle-twigs we saw a while ago,” the young forester added. “I wish I knew if any of them is Helvin, the Jarl’s son.”

The Skraelling answered but one word. “Blood!” he said; and while the young men remained in sight his eyes rested on one in garments of gray, whose bowed head was hooded by hair of the very shade of clotted blood.

Looking after the young courtmen, the forester seemed to lose all who followed. When leaves had blotted out the last guard’s broad brown back, and the music of the horns had dwindled to a silver speck in the gray silence, he spoke musingly:

“Take Helvin, now, if you wish to judge what metal comes of Starkad’s forging. It is said that he was born with the wanderlust upon him, so that his every breath is a panting to take ship and travel over the sea-king’s road wheresoever the wolf of the sail might choose to drive him. But because the sons that came before him are dead, and the only other heir is a maiden, his sister, it is not allowed him to risk his life. It may be they will find out that they have cherished the scabbard and rusted the blade,—they say that the fire cased in his flesh has given him an unlucky disposition.”

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The savage's black eyes gave forth a sympathetic flash, though his training in repression kept the feeling out of his voice. He said calmly:

“A day will come when it will be over. The old man cannot live forever. Already he has passed so far beyond the timber-line that nothing grows on his scalp.”

The Northman shook his head. “Starkad's death will bring Helvin no nearer what lies at his heart; he is oath-bound to take the rule after his father,—so full of fear are they lest quarrels over the inheritance gnaw at the root of the Jarldom. But I will say that I think his rule will prove to be a good thing for the Town, which is now in danger of becoming more lifeless than a bone-heap. From all I have heard of his dislike of making a show of himself and his love of free ways, I have good hopes of him. It has often been in my mind to take service under him when he shall get the leadership. For Starkad I have no respect whatever. It is told that when he was young he was called Starkad the Berserker, and had the most hand in every Viking voyage and man-slaying; but now that the sap has dried in him, and he has put on Olaf the Saint's religion, he expects all men to live like monks.”

The Skraelling gazed reflectively in the direction of the vanished cavalcade.

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“Truth to say, the young braves of my race do not feel much love for the white man,” he said, presently. “He comes among us as one who comes among animals—driving them out to possess himself of their feeding-ground—dealing with them only when he wants profit out of their hides. The grayheads give us counsel to live in peace with the settlers of Norumbega. On the four trading-days of the year when they let us into their walls, they trade us useful things for our furs. But those of us whose teeth are still firm in our jaws do not like it to be led in as white men’s cows are led in to be milked, then turned out to pasture, the bars put up behind them.”

Straightening, he stood a bronze image of wounded pride. The young forester, as he bent to fasten one of his moccasin-strings, looked up at him understandingly. The softening feature of the Northman’s face was his eyes, deep blue as an evening sky, under level brows, broad and dark. When the thong was tied, he put out a hand and rested it on his companion’s bare shoulder.

“Judge not, brother, all of the white race from the behavior of one overbearing old man. It seems to me as if your people and my people should dwell together like sons of one father. Our hands are equally open to a friend, and no less hard-clinched against a foe; and you do not surpass us

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much in freedom and fearing nothing. When it has befallen the other white men to see the wonder of your woodcraft as I have seen it, and to be sheltered and fed by your hospitality as I have been, there will be much awanting if they do not hold you as high in honor as I do."

Unbending gravely, the born heir of the forest laid his hand upon the breast of the forest's adopted son.

"I know good of you; I will try to believe good of your people," he said. "Come back with me now, brother. The lodge of the sachem, my father, is open to you. Always open to you."

A second time the Northman shook his head. "That cannot be, comrade, for I came up here to learn a trap secret from an old huntsman, and having got it, I must hasten back and put it to use before I forget it. Do you on your side bear in mind, when next you paddle your bark-boat near the island, that the Tower will offer heartier welcome to none than to you."

His hand fell from the bronze shoulder to the bronze palm, and with a strong clasp the two men parted,—the red man to melt into the russet shades beside them, the forester to go forward in the wake of the hunting party.

Had it blazed its path with axes, the cavalcade would scarcely have left a plainer track. Wher-

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ever foot and hoof had failed to print themselves on the path of leathery leaves, there was always the clew of a bruised lichen or a fern with a broken spine. Swinging along easily, mile after mile, the forester devoted his superfluous breath to humming scraps of melody and his alert eye to reading the fantastic runes. Here a bleeding tangle of wild grape-vine stretched out plundered hands. Yonder a long golden hair, floating like fairy gossamer from a low-growing limb, showed how the forest had exacted weregeld. Still farther on, a patch of flattened moss and ploughed-up earth told sly tales of a horseman brought low. When he came at last to the place where his road branched westward from theirs, he yielded the rune-page with regret.

That he might overtake any of the company did not occur to him. His attention was centred in his song, gradually becoming articulate and rising melodiously from under his breath. It broke a word in two when he caught the hoarse snarl of a hound in the thicket ahead.

As well as though he could see through the intervening leaves he knew the hideous landmark that lay before him,—a pond which the Skraellings called by a word meaning “the black pool,” because some sinister combination of soil and shadow gave its water the appearance of being dully

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thickly black. Tradition added that rather than enter it, a fleeing stag would let his pursuer kill him on the brink. If any hunted thing had been brought to bay there now, the finish might be worth seeing. Quickening his step, the young Northman leaped the stony channel of a dead brook and swept aside the screening boughs.

Set amid frost-blasted bushes and leafless barkless tree-skeletons, the Black Pool met his gaze; but it was no four-footed creature that fought for life at the black water's edge. Above the brush rose the gray-clad shoulders of the young courtman with the blood-colored hair. Rearing as tall as he, one of the great hunting-dogs had sprung upon him; while one hand strove to draw his dagger, the other was struggling to hold foaming jaws from his throat.

To see his peril was to will to aid him; and with the forester, to will was to act. But even as the impulse thrilled him, a strange sensation blotted it out. With his first forward motion, he was seized by a sudden whirling madness as though he had stepped within the ring of a whirlpool and was being sucked into a black abyss of horror.

It lasted but an instant. Battling against it, his fingers clutched instinctively at his knife-hilt, missed it and closed instead upon the blade, and the smart of cut flesh brought him to himself.

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But in the time that he hesitated, the courtman's hand had freed his weapon and plunged it into the straining throat; there was a death howl, the hiss of spurting blood, and the danger was over. The great body relaxed, stiffened, sank heavily out of sight between the bushes, and the young man stood wiping his blood-bathed face upon his sleeve.

Bewilderment and shame claimed the forester. He with a lion's strength in the girth of his chest and in his long sinewy limbs—he whose coolness had cheated Death a hundred times—*he* to falter when a man was in jeopardy of life before him! It was beyond belief.

He saw without caring that the courtman seemed all at once to become aware of another presence, and turned and espied him. He heard without heeding a peremptory order to approach. All that he was conscious of was a desire to get away and fight it out with himself. Raising his hand in apology, he stepped backward, pushed between two tall bushes, and let the wiry brush spring to like doors behind him.

As he drew clear of the branches a silvered arrow sped above them, so well aimed that it severed a lock of his hair. He caught his breath with a short laugh.

“I forgot that high-born men do not take it well

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to be disregarded," he muttered as he plunged into the undergrowth.

What would he have said if the shaft could have whispered as it whistled past that—back under the frost-blasted bushes — Starkad Jarl lay murdered, and that he of the guilty blood-colored hair believed the forester had witnessed his deed!

II

"No tree falls at the first stroke"

—Northern saying.



NE touch of a certain three-cornered leaf," the forester reasoned as he moved along the winding trail, "is able to make a man's flesh change color and swell over his eyes like a wild hog's fat. More power lies in the earth than simpletons think of. What would be wonderful about it if such water should breed a vapor befogging to the wits? Not the wits of all men, perhaps—it was seen that the courtman had his about him—but those of all who have not Sigmund's strength against poison." Reasoning relapsed into mortification. "It goes hard to be taught that I am one of the weaklings. Troll take the Pool!" For a while his track over the soft leaf-mould showed that his heels ground deeply.

Presently he made an effort to crowd the incident out of his thoughts by taking up the broken thread of his song, and reeling it off with a dogged energy that sent the words far through the silent

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forest and set its echo-heart athrob. They were brave words, telling the brave old tale of the wooing of Fridtjof the Bold; perhaps they would have charmed away his ill-humor if they had not been cut short.

Parting like gold-embroidered tapestries, two yellow-leaved bushes a little way ahead disclosed another courtman from the hunting train, a young man magnificent in scarlet leather clothes of distinctly un-Norse make. After a critical survey of the figure in deerskin, he lifted the forefinger of one gloved hand,—a gesture that had upon the forester the effect which the scarlet dress would have had upon a bull.

“Fellow,” he said blandly, “I have to tell you that your voice has had the good luck to please a noble maiden’s ears. Follow me that she may gratify her curiosity.”

Akin to the motion of his finger was a perpetual slight smile moulding his thin lips. The forester took note of that also, and felt antagonism become a deep satisfying force within him. Coming slowly to a halt, he picked his answer with drawling deliberation.

“Fellow, if you had not the good luck to be foreign to the forest, I would make you unpleasing to a noble maiden’s eyes. As it is, I have to say that to see me following you would be more apt

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to provoke curiosity than to gratify it,—and you may take that as best suits you!”

The stranger took it with the utmost quietness, observing as though to himself that it was surprising there should still be places where a churl thought he had the right to choose when he was commanded; but while he was saying it he was stepping from the bushes. Now he drew his sword from its jewelled sheath.

The gleam which the steel sent through the glade was reflected in the forester's face. He made cordial haste to pluck forth his hunting-knife.

Glancing from that short blade to his own long one, the courtman hesitated an instant; then he laughed softly at himself.

“It is no lie about Norse habits that they stick to one like iron in frosty weather!” he murmured. “Almost I was in danger of treating the matter as a combat between equals.”

Having escaped that danger, he wasted no more time on preliminaries, but delivered his first thrust. If his opponent had stood upon ceremony, he would have been disabled by a pierced right arm.

Luckily it was the school of emergency that had given the forester his training. Though a smothered word betokened surprise, his instant leap backward carried him lightly out of range, and yet not so far out of reach but that his knife was

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able to strike up the other's point and take advantage of the opening to land a stroke upon the tasselled breast. A buckle turned the blade away, but the profanity of the contact could not be denied. The courtman lowered his weapon for the purpose of removing his gold-stitched gloves.

"I see now that I shall have to let off more of your hot blood than I thought," he remarked as he tucked the gloves under his belt. "Since you *will* have it—"

Driving suddenly past the other's guard, he drove his sword into the deerskin shoulder,—would have driven it through, indeed, if the bite of the knife into his wrist had not momentarily relaxed his grasp.

The forester recovered his balance coolly.

"It will then be a fair bargain if I let off some of your breath," he returned, and straightway asserted the one advantage he had foreseen to offset the difference in blade-lengths by leading his adversary a round of gnarled roots and hidden hollows and tangles of creeping things.

As a trout knows the rapids, his feet knew the snares; but to the stranger it was like walking in fetters. What with the distraction of watching his footing and the difficulty of aiming, two out of every three thrusts went astray; while for every lunge that went home he got a wound in return.

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Twice his foot twisted on a hidden stone and he measured his length on the ground, plastering pine-needles and earth to every blood-stain. Twice he tripped over a root and fell headlong and almost into the arms of his jeering opponent. That the combat was between equals, there could now be no question.

That there could be any doubt of his ultimate victory, however, did not appear to enter into the courtman's reckoning. After each fall he merely became a little more quietly determined, came on with a little more glitter in his ice-blue eyes. His unshaken assurance exasperated the forester at last; when he saw a chance to end it, he seized the opportunity promptly.

At the next lunge, instead of springing aside he took advantage of a hollow behind him to duck suddenly, so that the blade hissed like an out-leaping flame above his head. Then, before the other could recover, he sprang upon him. Seizing his sword-wrist in an iron grip, he forced it aside, tore his own right arm free from the clutching fingers, and raised it to strike.

His arm rose,—but it did not fall. In the very instant of aiming, a cloak flew between him and his mark, enveloping him head and shoulders, smothering him head and face. Muscular hands followed the cloak, pinioning his elbows and drag-

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ging him backward. Through the folds he caught a babel of exclamations; above them a girl's anxious voice calling, "Is he wounded?" and a man's rough tones answering dryly, "Only enough to spot his clothes, Jarl's daughter."

Jarl's daughter! The forester had left off struggling—he understood that it would be foolishness in that grasp—now his wrath gave place to disgust. This was a pretty trick of the Fates, who had already snatched the fruit of victory from between his teeth, to follow it up by delivering him over to the upbraidings of an hysterical girl! Sullenly he gazed before him when at last they plucked off the cloak.

The first thing he saw was his little foster-brother in his gay page's livery, just picking up the courtman's plumed cap; but the sight did not improve his temper for he found that the boy avoided his glance of greeting. His brows drawing together, his gaze moved on over the picture.

It was a maiden's following, certainly. The rugged men-at-arms surrounding him were far outnumbered by the slim pages who made a green hedge around the wounded favorite. Bright against the dark background, groups of maids and matrons rustled and fluttered. Only one figure in the

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scene had composure, a girl standing a few paces ahead of the others, erect and motionless as a stone column against tossing trees. It was her stillness that drew the forester's attention to her curiously; then, looking, he forgot curiosity, forgot his recognition of her for the Jarl's daughter, felt only the thrill of her beauty.

Long of limb, long of throat, she was nobly tall, her eyes but little below the level of his own. The habit fitting close the flowing curves of her body trailed heavily behind her, and a velvet mantle dragged from jewelled clasps; but her broad sloping shoulders bore their weight as lightly as her proudly poised head held up its great braids, hanging far down the purple folds like cables of red gold. No power had the sight of bared blades and struggling men to deepen or pale the exquisite color of her face, or shake the pride of her beautiful mouth. In their high spirit, her clear gray eyes were Valkyria's eyes. Gazing at her, his heart leaped in his breast; he understood, for the first time, why a sea-wolf of a Viking might lie quiet in the net of a woman.

For the first time, also, he knew envy of his foe. Brushing aside the pages, the courtman advanced now, the long end of his mantle drawn up gracefully over his shoulder to hide the stains of his tunic. It was maddening to see how fit he looked

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to bend before Brynhild the Proud and set to his lips the hand she gave him.

"I should be glad to know, madam, that I am pardoned for thus marring your pleasure with alarm," he said. "Scarcely can I be easy in my mind until I hear that."

To see such favor as hers squandered on such as he was worse than maddening. She answered most kindly:

"No man should have a better right to mar my pleasure than you who have so often made it. And it was bearing my message that became a misfortune to you! Will you receive my necklace for weregeld?" Reminded by the law-term, she glanced for the first time towards the prisoner, her white lids drooping coldly. "Let Visbur lay bonds on the fellow and take him where the lawmen can deal with him."

It was not the tightening grip of the men that wrung words from the forester's silence; it was the pang of standing ill with her that caused him to speak earnestly.

"One thing I wish, Jarl's daughter, and that is that you yourself would hear how little I am to blame."

Again she looked at him, this time squarely.

"You will have no cause to complain of the lawmen's justice," she said.

"Then will they judge me innocent, and how

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shall it be made up to me that I have endured the disgrace of bonds, and been a gazing-stock for your followers? Be as fair in your actions as you are fair in your face, noble one.”

The guards around gasped, but she did not belie her Valkyria eyes. As steel answers steel with a spark they answered the demand, even while her proud mouth resented his boldness in every curve. After a moment she turned back where a tree had fallen across the glade, and seated herself upon the mossy trunk.

“Will you lay it upon Norse custom and not upon me, my friend Olaf, if I think it necessary to grant the forester’s request?” she asked. “And will you support me further by feigning that this is a law-place and telling me here what he did that you disliked?”

“Is it true that Norse custom is so childish?” Olaf queried, with rising shoulders. Then as she continued to look at him entreatingly, he yielded, smiling, to come forward with playful ceremony and take up his stand before her.

While he was bowing, however, one of the guards—a burly ruddy-faced fellow—entered into the conversation, after the off-hand manner of Northern retainers. Hemming loudly, he held up the horn-handled knife which he had taken from the forester’s unresisting hold.

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"This can be told about the youth, Jarl's daughter," he said, "that he is no better than a crazy Berserker. Behold with what a cheese-cutter he met the flail of Thorgrim's son!"

"And not alone met, but also mastered the flail!" a second guard chuckled; while a third, their grizzled old leader, vented a gruff laugh and openly patted his prisoner on the back.

"I will hang you if Starkad's daughter decides that way," he declared, "but you may hang me if I do not tell afterwards that you were a young hawk!" Whereupon a rumble of acquiescence came from every point where a brass helmet gleamed amid the russet leaves.

At any other time the forester might have shown appreciation of their friendliness, but just now it was the favor of the purple-robed judge upon which his heart was set. The silver-trunked birches behind her were not more impassive than her finely chiselled face, as she ignored all but the man she had addressed.

When quiet was entirely restored, Olaf spoke lightly: "Most gentle law-giver, if it is through Norse eyes that we must look, I have to tell you that the churl is in no way to blame. That he should show rudeness is a result to be expected from the barbarity in the land. That I who am French-bred should have a wish to civilize him

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was no less to be expected. As has been pointed out, he had no more than a hunting-knife; while my feet are more used to paved roads than to fox-trails. It made a merry game, altogether too merry to fall to the ground here. But for Norse law, fairest law-woman, there is no handle to take hold of. Turn him loose, and forget that so unworthy a happening ever quickened your fragrant breath." He ended with another bow, his last words almost lost amid the applauding murmurs of the women and the pages.

With an unconscious gesture of relief, the Jarl's daughter rose quickly.

"Now as always, your broad-mindedness puts all other Norsemen to shame," she said. "For taking it in this way and making my task easy, I thank you much." A second time she extended her hand to him, while over her shoulder she spoke coldly to the prisoner: "I give you peace, woodsman. Go your way."

"Come behind the bushes and tell us more news about this fight," the burly man-at-arms muttered in the forester's ear as he gave him back his hunting-knife.

Pretending to hustle him along, they accompanied him eagerly, the gentlewomen making a great show of getting out of his path as out of the way of a bear unchained. But after he had made

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a dozen paces, the forester stopped, shook them off and turned back to Brynhild the Proud.

“This I will beg of you, Jarl’s daughter,” he said, “that you will tell me why you wanted to see me.”

The guards gave him admonishing nudges. The prettiest of the veil-bound matrons uttered a little scream of derisive laughter. The Jarl’s daughter turned haughtily.

Of her alone he seemed to be conscious as he advanced. “You admit that I am not blame-worthy, yet I see that I have your dislike. Is it because I appear to you no better than a savage? I beg you to believe that I am not one. I beg you to believe that if I had known it was you who wanted me, I would have been as glad in coming to you as the lark in rising to the sun.”

Her gaze moving up and down between his moccasins and his mane of sun-burnished hair, she studied him wonderingly; but she was bred too high to flout him. She said, at last, with an inclination of her head:

“I owe you thanks for good-will. I will also confess that I was made curious by the Song of Fridtjof you were singing. You are the forester—are you not—whom men call the Songsmith? I have heard my brother tell of hearing you sing once, as he happened to be passing a hunter’s cabin. I

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wished to ask why you sang words about Fridtjof that my father's minstrels do not sing."

"That, and more, I will tell you," he answered. "The end of the song, I made out of my own imaginings. In the unsettled places where I live, one hears only those verses which the old people brought over the ocean under the hatches of memory. I got a habit of finishing out such fragments in the way I thought likeliest to be right. From that my nickname sprang. My foster-father, who had worked at a forge in his youth, said that all the skalds he had met with were like traders, who do no more than pass on what other men have made; but that a singer who melts scraps together and hammers them out in new shapes is a songsmith."

The figure appealed to the guardsmen, drawing forth laughter and compliment; but that to the Songsmith was nothing beside the fact that in the expression of their mistress curiosity had deepened to interest.

"Why, that is no small thing to do!" she said. "Times out of number, when I have been listening to my father's skald, I have wished that he could make an ending which would be new even if it were untrue, so that there might be something to keep awake for."

• Calmly oblivious to maidens' frowns and ma-

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trons' murmurs, she let herself sink again upon the tree-trunk, and made him a sign to come nearer.

"I want to know why you have not brought such an accomplishment to market?" she inquired. "Where is your home?"

"It is not so easy to tell that, Jarl's daughter, since it is unlikely that you have ever heard of Freya's Tower. But it stands south of here, on an island which a bridge links to this—"

For the first time, one of the court-maidens drew near,—a slender spray of a girl, whose face was a pink bud peeping from a wood of brown hair.

"I have heard of it!" she cried, eagerly. "The skalds are not so bold as to sing songs about it; but no maiden but knows how the Swedish Viking Rolf stole King Hildebrand's daughter out of her father's court in Norway, and brought her to these shores and built her a bower and—"

Her impulse would have carried her still further if the Jarl's daughter had not laid a light hand on her arm.

"I also know of the place," Brynhild said. "Is it there you live? A band of Rolf's comrades still live there, I have been told—Yet are you too young to have place among them! Will you tell me your name and kin?"

As he started to reply, the Songsmith's glance

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fell upon the handsome little page who had refused to recognize him, and who had now taken advantage of the delay to approach Olaf the French and set about removing the débris of dead leaves from his gold fringes. The forester's dark eyes gave out a glint of mischief.

"Willingly—and more than that—Jarl's daughter," he answered. "I will have one of your own train name me to you, so that you may know it is well done." Stepping aside, he touched the boy on the shoulder. "Eric, look up here and tell your mistress my name and kin."

In a panic the youngster whirled, denial trembling on his tongue. Then he met the unswerving gaze from under the level brows; his eyes fell and his color rose. Seemingly without his consent, his lips formed the words:

"Randvar is his name; and he is the son of Rolf and Freya, King Hildebrand's daughter."

Brynhild rose from her seat. "The son of King Hildebrand's daughter!" she repeated, and all her gentlewomen breathed it after her.

But it was Rolf's name that the guardsmen echoed, closing in upon Rolf's son to shake his hand and his shoulder.

"Rolf the Viking! A well-known name have you!"

"Now he was my shipmate for five years!"

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“My father harried England with him—”

“A better warrior never fed the ravens!”

“Small wonder his son measured a knife against—”

“I take credit upon myself that I was the first to clap you on the shoulder!”

But between the brass helmets Rolf's son caught a glimpse of the Jarl's daughter, and made the discovery that in turning his low rank into a high one he had but turned the cheek of his offence. She said, when she could make herself heard:

“There seems to me to be two sides to this matter. For a churl to bear such a bold look beneath his brows would be bad enough, but I find it far worse that a man of high birth should form himself after the manner of savages. Have you no regard for your King's blood?” Again her glance took stock of his deerskin husk and his untrimmed hair.

That she could not also take stock of the brand of temper with which the King and the Viking had bequested him, was shown by the fact that, even more than her words, her look was a challenge. In the fillip of a finger perversity possessed him, and moved him to answer:

“If my King's blood cannot show itself through a layer of deerskin, daughter of jarls, I hold it for a spring that is run dry.”

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A wrinkle of displeasure marred the satin smoothness of her forehead. "That speech would make your fortune with my brother. Pray keep such word-flourishes for him. I would show you honor if I might. This empty forest life is unbecoming a man of your birth. You are welcome to join my following and make new song-endings in my household, if you like."

His voice was more indifferent than formality prescribed, his bow less deep.

"With all thankfulness, I should not like it," he answered.

Her frown was more than a wrinkle as she asked him, "Why not?"

"I do not lack reasons. One is that I think my life more full than yours, that is laid out in straight lines like an old woman's herb-garden and weeded of all excitement. Another is that I do not think a man adds any honor to himself by following a woman."

Again she was the only quiet figure amid a hubbub, the women crying out, the guards themselves growling remonstrance. She stood queenfully quiet, though her face blazed.

"Even churls are apt to behave with respect towards me," she said, and the contempt in her voice was keen enough to draw blood in his cheeks. He answered in kind.

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“I behave with respect when I give you the truth. Are lies more to your mind?”

The tumult passed into the more alarming accompaniment of silence. The flash of her steel-gray eyes was as though they had drawn swords. From weapon-play Rolf's son had never turned back; he faced her readily, his look giving back whatever it received.

So they fronted each other until there was kindled in Brynhild's face a kind of fury, the rage of a Valkyria upon encountering her match. Just in time, the words on her lips were checked. Like a pebble into a pool, a page's voice fell upon the pause.

“Ingolf comes seeking you, Jarl's daughter.”

The spell was shattered. In less time than it took the Songsmith to shift his weight, Brynhild had shifted her expression, recalled to her wonted world. Women and pages started up like a covey of impatient birds. With his blandest smile, Olaf stepped forward and claimed his own.

“In all likelihood, madam, the messenger brings word that your noble father is ready to take his meal, and seeks you at the spot where he left you. Will you allow me so much happiness?” Baring his head, he extended his hand.

She laid hers upon it immediately, motioning Eric to take up the grape-purple train. All at

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once she seemed to the forester to have withdrawn herself an immeasurable distance beyond his ken. Across the space her voice came to him coldly.

“I would have shown you friendliness, Freya’s son, but it may be that this way is better. The truth grows in me that you would hardly know how to behave in a court. It is likely you have chosen your life wisely. I wish you good luck in it, and bid you farewell.”

She bent her head; her women dropped him awe-struck courtesies. Under cover of a salute, Olaf’s hard blue eyes held him long enough to remind him that their quarrel was by no means at an end. Then, leaning on the courtman’s arm, the Jarl’s daughter turned and left, nor looked back, though Rolf’s son watched as long as he could catch any gleam of her bright hair.

When the band had crossed the glade and gained the trees, they met the helmeted figure; and following the instant of meeting, it seemed to the forester that the breeze brought him a sound of shrieks. But whatever their cause, it did not delay the departure. Soon the many-colored troop had become blended with the many-colored leaves, and forest solitude closed again around him.

III

"Nose is next of kin to eyes"

—Northern saying.



WITH signs of the day's ruffling influence still visible at his mouth-corners, Randvar, Rolf's son, put aside the cables of wild grape-vine that drooped curtain-like over the end of the home-trail, and paused to look before him.

"Poor and mean must this have seemed in my mother's sight," he mused.

A few steps ahead the path broadened into an open grassy space, in whose middle rose a low round tower, touched by the last rays of the setting sun. Built of gray stones held together by gray mortar, it stood out coldly amid the green and garnet and golden maples that walled it round; and among branching trees and wreathing vines its outline was as stark as the outline of an Iceland rock. No spire sprouted from its flat top; no balconies rounded out beneath the windows of its upper story, and its lower part was no more than eight gray pillars standing in a circle. On

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one of them now a tangle of fish-nets was hanging; against another leaned a frame on which a wild-cat skin had been stretched to dry, and before a third stood a herring-keg and a barrel of wild-grape wine. Between the pillars, eight wide archways gave plain view into the round ground-room, in whose centre a fire was burning under a kettle. A flax-haired girl moved back and forth before the fire, and under one of the arches a tall, muscular woman stood looking out and wiping her heated face upon her homespun apron.

Understanding that her watch was for him, Randvar raised his hand in greeting; but his gaze remained on the small deep-set window high up on the Tower's seaward side, where he had often seen his mother's face looking out over the green wastes of trees and the blue wastes of water that stretched between her and the home she had left. It seemed to him now that he could see her again, flower-fair and crowned with hair like winter's pale sunshine. The contrast between her delicacy and the rough setting came home to him with new force. In the bubbling caldron of his mind, awe came uppermost.

"It was a wondrous thing, my mother's love," he murmured as he moved slowly forward.

The greeting of the woman in the archway brought him back to the present. She was a

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weather-beaten woman, almost as severe in outline as the Tower itself, and with but little more color; yet proof remained that she had once been as freshly blooming as her daughter, and her work-roughened hand had a gentle touch as she laid it on his arm. She spoke quickly, regarding him with keen eyes.

“There is a new stain on your kirtle, foster-son, and a cut in the middle of it. What have you been doing to yourself?” As she talked, she was unfastening a buckle, and now laid bare his blood-soaked shirt.

He looked down at it with surprised recognition. “Did the courtman do all that? I had altogether forgotten it.”

“Courtman! Have you seen someone from the Jarl’s Town?” The girl caught him up and left her broth-stirring eagerly, but her mother motioned her away.

“Go up and get one of his linen shirts out of my chest, and fetch down the ointment,” she ordered her; then to her foster-son: “Bring in the water-pail and pull off those things and sit down here. Some day your carelessness will bring it to pass that you bleed to death, and it will not be a brave end, but a foolish one.”

“None the less is it pleasant to realize what state the French One’s fine clothes must be in,” Rand-

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var chuckled, as he allowed himself to be pushed down on a bench by the fire.

The girl, returning headlong down the ladder-like stairs, repeated her entreaty for news; so while his foster-mother washed his wound, and his foster-sister rolled bandages for him, he related his adventure.

They listened without interruption until he came to the appearance of Brynhild and her following, when both stayed their hands to question him eagerly.

“Was Eric with her?”

“How did he look?”

“What did he say?”

“Did he send us a message?”

The first warm color came into the cheeks of Erna, the woman; her eyes shone hungrily.

Regarding her, her foster-son began deliberately to parry. “What did he say? Snowfrid, you are a simpleton! Do you suppose that folks gabble like wild turkeys while a noblewoman and her frippery are standing around? As for his looks, I can tell you that a red-headed woodpecker would get bashful beside him, all in green cloth from top to toe, with his hair cut like the Jarl’s. I did not wonder at all that the maiden wanted him for a page only from seeing him pick up her necklace in the road.”

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The thin lips of Eric's mother relaxed unconsciously into a smile, as her hands took up the last bandage; but Eric's sister gave her flaxen braids a toss.

"I think he would not have been hindered from asking about us if he had wished," she said. "It is my belief that the young one is puffed up with pride. Three times has the trading-ship on which he went up to see the wonders of the Town been back without bringing him for so much as a visit. It is my belief that he was ashamed to speak to Rand—" She was startled into swallowing the rest of the word by the sharpness with which Erna turned upon her.

"I know that he was not," his mother said, sternly. "That his wits get dizzy from living with high people may well be. I was foolish myself about court ways when I came to be bowermaid to King Hildebrand's daughter; but that he should ever fall off so much as to be ungrateful is not likely. I know that he remembered what is due to Freya's son, and greeted him with respect."

Randvar's face was hidden by the shirt he was drawing on, but from its linen depths he chuckled.

"Never fear but what he greeted me! And named me to his mistress besides, else might she have thought me some shaggy beast."

"There!" said Erna; and Snowfrid, somewhat

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abashed, turned her attention to dishing up the evening meal of venison broth and bread.

After the meal was under way, however, it occurred to her to ask concerning the appearance of Brynhild the Proud.

The power which the mere mention of that name had to upset his peace of mind amazed Randvar, even while he curtly denied any recollection of her whatever. It was a relief when at last eating was over, and Snowfrid had gone off to carry a jug of broth to the cabinful of old men, who were all that was left of Rolf's lusty crew. Erna took up her knitting, then, and retired into her wonted silence and to her wonted seat on the other side of the fire; and he was free to stretch himself upon the floor of cedar boughs, and yield unreservedly to the strange turmoil of his thoughts.

Gazing out where the moon was steering between white cloud - reefs towards the open blue, he spoke dreamily: "Foster-mother, you knew the turns of Freya's mind as a forester knows his home-trail—tell me how she took this life here."

Without lessening the click of her needles, Erna glanced over at him. "I suppose you were made curious by seeing for the first time what kind of things a high-born maiden is accustomed to. It is the truth, however, that Freya took it well. Out of everything she made a jest. She used to look

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at the leaf-walls around the Tower, and say that no queen had such an elf-woven tapestry, or changed her hangings so often. She was always smiling."

"Her lips were always smiling," Randvar said doubtfully, "but her eyes? It may be that I do not remember aright, since I was but a child in age when she died, yet it seems to me now that her eyes were always sorrowful."

To that, Freya's bowerwoman made no answer. The pause lasted so long unbroken by anything save the rattling of her wooden needles and the chirping of the crickets under the stone hearth that presently her foster-son threw a twig at her.

"Wake up, foster-mother! Are you going to have a weird spell, that you drowse and do not hear me?"

"Do your words need an answer, foster-son?" Erna returned. "As well as I, you should know that Freya's nature was not such that she could be altogether happy in a life that sprang from the death of her kin."

"I had forgotten that," Randvar admitted.

She looked at him again across the fire. "This is where you show Rolf's breed. I think he never even guessed it. Yet always the memory that he was the slayer of her father lay between them like a blade that no tenderness could sheathe. She

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loved him in spite of it, but I speak no more than the truth when I say that it was the effort of doing so which wore her out before half her life was lived."

Supporting himself on his hand, Rolf's son sat up and gazed at her earnestly. "The strange wonder is that she could feel any love towards him! Until to-day, what I could not get through my head was how my father could gentle himself to so weak a thing as a woman; but now I regard it as the greatest wonder that so proud and fine and wonderful a thing as a high-born maiden should give herself to a rough-minded brawling—"

"You need not take it upon yourself to speak in that manner of Rolf," Erna interrupted him with some sternness. "All the fineness that was possible to his nature he gave her. For Freya, he who had never handled aught but a sword, toiled and sweat like a thrall to build this Tower; and afterwards he made his drinking-bouts as mild as a woman's, lest she be touched with fear. And when she died, he slew himself from grief, as not many men have done before him. It is true that your mind is higher than his, through having her blood in your veins; but enough of his rough temper is in you, and his heedlessness about clothes and polite ways, to make any girl but a forest-bred wench like Snowfrid turn her eyes from you as from a bear."

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Wincing, Randvar dropped again to his elbow, averted his crimsoning face from the firelight. It came as a welcome diversion that at that moment Snowfrid's voice was heard out in the darkness.

But Snowfrid's half-frightened giggle, as she answered the questions of some one coming after her, was a surprise. It was not after that fashion that she conversed with Lame Farsek or his half-dozen decrepit old mates. Her mother and her foster-brother bestirred themselves to look out.

Erna's surprise was not lessened to see her daughter emerge from the bush-shadows followed by a strapping fellow in the brass helmet and leather clothes of the Jarl's guard; and Randvar's astonishment increased as he recognized in the visitor the guardsman who had first spoken up for him in his adventure with Olaf and the Jarl's daughter. While Erna rose hastily, smoothing down her apron, he leaped to his feet with a thumping heart. If by any possibility Brynhild should have sent him a message!

Even more than in the morning, the man-at-arms looked the soul of bluff good-fellowship as Snowfrid led him up to them, naming him as Bolverk of the Jarl's guard, and explaining stammeringly that she had found him beating about in a berry-tangle in search of the path. He added a wink for her to his jovial recognition of the Song-

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smith, vowed that if the soldiers of the Jarl's Town had but dreamed to what that path led, it would have been beaten broad enough to need no hunting for. Snowfrid relapsed into a blushing examination of her braids which struck her foster-brother as particularly ill-timed and foolish. He said with impatient politeness:

"It is to be regretted that the path failed your need, Guardsman Bolverk, for it must needs be urgent to bring you here at this hour."

The guardsman made an effort to pull his round face to a solemn length. "Certainly it is no light errand that keeps me abroad, though my being here springs from a whim of Helvin, Jarl's son—I should say, Helvin Jarl, for Starkad, his father, is dead. Saints grant him as much rest as he will accept of!"

After the manner of people hearing news, all three cried the word after him, "Dead!" Then Erna murmured, "Thus the old leaves drop off, one by one!" And Snowfrid cried impulsively: "Now will the young man take some comfort?" And Randvar smote his knee.

"No longer ago than this morning was I talking about Helvin, and how his father's death would but free him from one trap to spring another on him."

Bolverk's ruddy face relaxed into its wonted

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curves. "So you all know what manner of man he was? Then I need not pretend to shed tears for him, though I should think it sinful to wish any but an enemy such a death."

Even while they drew near together, the women questioned him with their eyes. Randvar put it into words.

"In what manner did he come to his death? I saw him ride past to the hunt,—I suppose it was caused by a fall from his horse?"

The guardsman shook his head ponderously. "No such quiet end for Starkad the Berserker. One of the hunting-dogs sprang on him and tore his throat to pieces. Ingolf brought the tidings just after we parted from you. The place where it happened was on the brink of as hideous a pond as a bad dream ever painted. I went and looked at it afterwards. I give you my word that the water was as black as—"

"The Black Pool!" cried Erna and Snowfrid together. Randvar had become as motionless as the bench on which his foot was resting.

Bolverk nodded. "Naught else should it be called; any dead branch sticking out of it gets the look of a bleached bone. You may imagine what a sight it was to come upon,—Starkad sprawling on the brink, and Helvin leaning against a tree, more white than a halter-corpse, except—"

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“Helvin!” This time the echo came from Randvar.

Drawing a step nearer, Bolverk lowered his voice.

“I will not be so mean as to draw the cup back after you have had one swallow. Only I ask you to forget who brought the tidings hither. The hound was Helvin’s. He had taken it out of the pack and kept it with him because of a wound in its foot, and it is thought that it did not attack the Jarl without cause. Father and son had many words about something before they set forth this morning. When Helvin dashed ahead by himself, the Jarl sent men after him to fetch him back. And when at last they came to the point where the party broke up, and the women went aside to the waiting-place and each man struck out for himself, Starkad forced Helvin to ride apart with him, though it was seen by every one that the young man had the greatest dread of accompanying him. What passed between them Helvin does not tell, and no one dares ask, but it is guessed that Starkad worked himself into a Berserk rage and fell upon him—”

“Odin!” gasped Erna, and at the same time crossed herself.

“And that the dog broke loose to protect its master. And many believe that the taste of blood

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maddened it so that it went so far as to attack Helvin when he dragged it off the Jarl, for the claws had torn the silver lace on his sleeves, and one of the proofs that he must have been grappling with it when he slew it is that his kirtle is all one gore of blood— What do you say?”

But Randvar would not repeat the curse that had been wrung from him; and Bolverk, encountering Snowfrid's horrified gaze, became diverted by the amiable desire to recall her blushing smile.

“And that,” he went on, “is the beginning of the reason why this bright-haired maiden of victory found me battling with thorns and led me to Valhalla. When a move was made to go back to the Town, Helvin seemed to come crazy out of his black silence. He vowed that he would have one night of freedom before the rule came on him, and forbade any to follow, and broke from us into the forest—It is likely you know, also, that he has dreaded the rule more than most men dread Hel! But old Mord, who was the first of Starkad's advice-givers, counselled us to follow at a distance, that we might be within call in case danger threatened him from Skraellings or other wild animals. In the moonlight we kept him in sight almost to the head of your Island, but there it happened that we lost him. The rest declared that he had turned aside, and I declared that he had not; so I set out

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alone, and finding so plain a path, kept on out of adventuresomeness. It is possible that I shall have to stand some banter, and yet I cannot find it in my heart to be sorry about my blunder." Again he winked at Snowfrid over the huge fist caressing his yellow mustache, then drew himself up with a prodigious sigh. "My one regret is that I must now return to my duty. Will you not guide me back as far as the cabin, my fair one? I cannot seem to remember the way at all between here and there."

Snowfrid's eyes answered him delightedly, but her lips waited bashfully for her mother. She ran no risk in doing so, however, for under Erna's apparent sternness there lay as much Norse simplicity as Norse kindness.

She said, "Go, child, of course," and poured Bolverk so excellent a stirrup-cup, and shook his hand so warmly at parting, that he went away without even observing that the master of the Tower had bidden him no farewell, but still stood with his foot on the bench and his eyes on the fire.

Erna looked at him curiously when she had resumed her seat and her knitting. At last she spoke:

"Hard tidings are these and great to hear; yet I cannot see, foster-son, that they touch us so nearly as you appear to feel."

"You will see when I tell you what spell some

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troll laid upon me," he retorted. Straightening, he went and threw himself down in his favorite place upon the fragrant mat, and began to pour out wrathfully the story of his adventure at the Black Pool.

"There you have it all before you," he wound up. "I was made to behave in an unfavorable manner before the man with whom, above all others, I would wish to stand well. I thought, first, it was some poison from the Pool that beset me; but since it worked no harm to any one else, I know it was a curse turned on me alone—Hel take the luck! Hel take it, I say!"

When she had let her suspended breath go from her in a yawn, murmuring, "That was a strange happening—a strange happening," she answered gravely: "You throw blame undeservedly. It is your guardian spirit that has given you power to feel it better than others when an evil deed is in the air. I have often heard of people who had such a gift—"

He flung up his arms to snap the fingers sharply. "Take my share of such white-livered gifts! Power? I call that a weakness which makes me a stick in the hands of something stronger than I! If I knew what part of me it had root in, it should not last long."

"You will bring punishment upon yourself for

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your ungratefulness," she said, but said it without force, seeming to wander among her thoughts. His scorn held the field.

"I should be glad to hear what I am to be grateful for! Nothing could make Helvin believe now that I am any better than a coward. It shows what a cur he took me for that his first impulse was to send an arrow after me. I am as much outlawed from his following as though a lawman had laid a ban upon me."

She had no answer to that, or else the heat of the fire was making her drowsy. Leaning forward, she sat blinking at it, her arms folded on her knees.

Breaking up twigs with one hand to jerk them into the flames with the other, he went on piling up causes for bitterness, though he no longer spoke them aloud,—they came from too near his heart for that.

"I should have helped him, if I had acted out my own nature, and he would have done me honor in return. I should have left this emptiness of beasts and trees to measure myself against men. It would go hard with me if I could not prove myself more than that grinning French-broken ape. She showed him favor; she would have shown me more. . . . She might . . . in time . . . she might even. . . . More unlikely things happened to my father!"

IV

"Where I see the ears, I expect the wolf"

—Northern saying.



EITHER of them paid any attention to Snowfrid on her return, and the girl on her side seemed to find her thoughts quite as interesting as conversation. After a few minutes, she said that she was going to bed, and lighted a splinter at the embers. The firelight, as she bent, showed her bashful mouth to be smiling with the memory of kisses. She seemed to be walking in a blissful dream as she went lightly up the stairs.

What aroused Randvar, finally, was the consciousness that his foster-mother was moving with unnatural deliberation. Sitting up to look at her, he found that her gaze had become fixed upon the space beyond the fire, and she was lifting her arm from her knee to stretch it out in that direction.

"Look at that wolf yonder," she said.

"A wolf?" He rose to his feet, bent to pick up a brand. Then as his gaze followed her finger,

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he dropped the wood impatiently. "It is the fire dazzling you. There is no wolf there."

Yawning, Erna lifted both her arms to stretch them above her head. "I forgot that I was seeing with the eyes of my mind, instead of with the eyes of my body," she said. "It stood yonder, where the moonlight ends and the firelight begins. There was a goldlike glow to its fur, and its eyes were as bright embers. It must have been the Other Shape of Helvin Jarl."

The voice in which he repeated the name was in such contrast to her monotone that it startled himself; he went on with stern restraint: "Do you intend to tell me that Helvin Jarl's wanderings will lead him here, where I shall have to face him and explain what ailed me to-day?"

She would not curtail the yawn that was stretching her jaws, but she nodded.

Randvar made no attempt to hide his impulse, snatching his coat down from the antler-rack for instant flight.

"It is a good thing that you can do the honors without me," he said. "I shall spend the night with the birds in Fenrir's Jaws."

But Erna's mouth was again practicable for talking, and she was using it drowsily. "Yes, I know for certain that he will come by here. And I am altogether too sleepy to remember anything about

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manners. I will lose no time in getting out of your way." Rubbing her eyes with one hand, she gathered up her knitting with the other, as oblivious to his position as though she had never understood it.

It came back to her foster-son, then, that mental numbness follows as well as precedes the use of double sight. There was nothing to do but throw the cloak upon the floor and himself into a sulk, while she moved through the routine of her nightly tasks, making sure that Snowfrid had covered the jar of venison broth, letting down against the fresh night-wind two or three of the bearskin curtains with which the arches were provided.

"If I should ever get so dulled by wine as she by this," he fumed inwardly, "I should smart for it while her tongue could wag; yet how much better is she than drunk?"

When she had climbed stiffly up the stairs, and the light of her torch-splinter had been swallowed by the upper darkness, his resentment overflowed his lips.

"Again I declare my belief that weird powers are an accursed hindrance. What avail is it to warn a man of coming evil if no way is shown him to ward it off?" He emphasized his words by a kick at the great log just before him.

The sudden flare of flames and flight of sparks

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and jarring of charred parts asunder seemed to afford him some relief; while regarding them, he bethought him of a loop-hole.

“After all, I do not know how we make it out that the visitor must be Helvin! A wolf is the animal-spirit that runs before many a valiant man. Nine chances to one, it will be no more than the French Olaf in search of him.”

The possibility made his alarm seem senseless. Snapping his fingers at the world beyond the bright ring, he gave the log a second kick, this time of friendly correction.

“Comes the Devil himself, he must have no fault to find with the hospitality of Freya’s Tower,” he said, and set to work to replenish the fire.

Tearing the great saplings free from the pile and breaking them resoundingly under his heel, he worked too vigorously for a while to leave any space for brooding, and he had no opportunity to take it up again when the task was finished. Even as he rose from laying on the last bough and turned again to the outer dusk, he saw the grape-vine thrust aside from the head of the path—saw a man appear in the opening and stand there—a peculiarly proportioned man whose breadth of shoulder and length of arm suggested that he had been formed for towering tallness, and that it was

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blasting mischance which had stopped him at medium height.

Randvar's panic took the form of obstinate unbelief. Even when the apparition quitted its hold on the vine and came slowly towards him over the grass, he doggedly refused to believe that the Fates would be so contrary.

But on the spot where the moonlight ended and the firelight began, the visitor came to a standstill; the red glow meeting him eagerly illumined him from head to foot. There was no mistaking the gray garments, blood-drenched and torn; there was no mistaking the mass of blood-red hair; and looking at the haggard face in the sinister frame, the Songsmith's own figure came back to him, "fire cased in flesh." In the ash-gray eyes, live embers were glowing. Suddenly something else came to Randvar,—a consciousness that murderous hatred was looking at him out of those eyes.

Scorn he had been prepared for, but this—this amazed him. It was instinct that acted to stiffen him alertly, as he made salute, saying, "I give you welcome, Helvin Jarl."

Whatever his temper, Starkad's son had a jarl's dignity of bearing. He answered grimly:

"I hold that welcome for true which is told by the face as well as by the tongue. I think you did not expect to see me so soon?"

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That seemed so easy to answer that Randvar had said "No," before he recollected the truth, when he amended it with "Yes," and stopped short in angry confusion. His embarrassment was not lessened by the inevitable next question:

"Why did you run away when I called to you?"

• He said desperately, at last: "Jarl, I do not know how to put it into words. You can believe that I went mad."

He had braced himself to meet jeering laughter, to endure it without strangling the jeerer. It took him a breath's space to realize that Helvin's mind was no longer on him. The arm by which he had been steadying himself against the pillar had doubled under him like a broken reed; now he swung forward against the stone, and would have pitched into the fire if Randvar had not leaped the flames and caught him.

When he had lowered him upon a bench with his back against a support, the next move was naturally to fill a horn at the wine-cask and bring it to him. Remembering only his old feeling towards the Jarl's son, Rolf's son performed the service with swift good-will. He was recalled to their present relations by Helvin's lifting a hand in refusal of his hospitality.

It obliged him to fall back a step and hesitate,

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balancing the rejected cup, but it emboldened him presently to protest.

“Jarl, it does not seem to me that this matter is going according to good sense. That I have done nothing to earn friendship, I own; but I deny that I have done aught to call for ill-will. If you think me a milksop, I cannot come to words with you about that; but it is the truth that I would have been eager in joining you.”

Leaning back with closed eyes, Helvin’s face was yet drawn awry by mocking laughter.

“Eager!” he murmured. “Eager!” Then, “It may be that if I had not come here to-night, your eagerness would have urged you to seek me out in the Town?”

“Surely not. I did not say that I had the wish to be thrown out of your hall.”

“More likely would you have been carried out,” Helvin answered dryly.

Despite his resentment, Randvar had a feeling of admiration for a man who dared say such a thing to him,—a man whose exhausted body would have been a rag in the forester’s hands. He said, as he turned and threw the untasted wine into the fire:

“If you have set your heart on hating me, have it your own way. It must be because your temper has been tried to-day. I will only say that I

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am sorry, for I have always felt a liking towards you."

Though his head continued to lean heavily against the pillar, the Jarl's eyes opened to flash at him. "Excepting once to-day and once last season, when you sang in a hunter's cabin, I do not know that I have ever seen you."

"I mean that I have been so told about you—" Randvar was beginning, but was checked as much by his own sense of intrusion as by a flame from the smouldering eyes.

The young Jarl went on haughtily: "It had come to my mind, before, that my affairs must be a juicy mouthful for gabblers to chew over the fire; but I did not know that the things they said were the kind to attract friends to me, and there will be much awanting before I believe it."

Randvar gave up then; shrugging, he said only: "Believe whatever you like about it; yet I wish I had a chance to prove my good-will."

Again he expected the jeering laughter, and again he missed his foretelling. A long time Starkad's son sat staring out at the darkness, strange expressions playing over his white face like flickerings of his inner fire; then, at last, his thoughts formed themselves into slow-spoken words:

"Never could it happen that my look encountered you without recalling how I saw you this

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morning,—yet what else is to be done? To hold enmity against a man who offers me good-will—This, at least, you have never heard of me, Songsmith, that I am low-minded! Only one way is open to me.” He stretched out his hand for the horn. “I will accept it from you now,” he said, and drained gratefully the second draught his host brought him, the rich juice imparting some of its own warm life to his ghastly face. He drew himself erect as he gave back the cup. “There shall be peace between us, only I make it a condition that you shall enter my following.”

Once or twice before the conversation had taken turns unexpected to Randvar, but nothing to compare with this.

“You make that a *condition!*” he repeated.

Helvin’s finely marked brows drew nearer together. “You should not take it ill, if you have as much mind to serve me as you said a while ago. You shall have the honorable post of my song-maker,—my father’s skald is years overdue in Valhalla.”

To imagine such an offer in his day-dreams had seemed to the Songsmith as natural as eating; but hearing it now in his waking ears, he wondered if he were not asleep. He said, “I give you thanks,” but so dazedly that like lightning playing over a distant peak, a flash of that devil-mockery flickered over Helvin’s face.

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“What now! Does your brisk friendship get weak in the knees when it comes to trusting yourself in my power?”

Flushing, Rolf's son swallowed a boast and answered only: “Why should I be afraid, Jarl? You have given me your word that this happening shall not weigh against me.”

Again it struck him as odd the way Helvin leaned forward and scrutinized him, long and incredulously.

“I did not mean because of this matter,” he said, at last. “I meant because you might feel some doubts about the turn of temper I have.” The strange mockery of the smile in which his lips drew away from his white teeth, as he said that, was made stranger still by the awful intentness of his eyes.

So much strangeness began to tell upon Randvar's stock of patience. He said bluntly:

“Jarl, if the truth must be told, I have no doubts whatever about your temper, for I have seen plainly that you have a very bad one. But neither have I been used to lamblike men. Willingly will I strike a bargain on these terms, if I have the choice.”

After they were out, the words struck him as being a trifle unceremonious; he did not wonder much that Starkad's son should sit staring like

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one dumfounded. But that scorn should gradually grow up in his face!

“Behold, I believe you!” the young Jarl said with biting slowness. “I believe you have the Devil’s boldness to match against my Devil’s nature,—and at the back of that, the ambition of Lucifer! Now, it is told that the closeness of a court breeds rottenness; but what shall be said of such foulness as this, out in the forest’s untainted air? When such as I go before, a worse is not to be looked for behind; and this man knows it; and still is he willing to sell his manhood for my miserable gifts!”

It was not only his voice and his words that bit, but his look as well. Rolf’s son winced under the smart, and spoke between his teeth.

“Such wrong you do me, Helvin, Jarl’s son, that it will be hard work for you to atone for it. If I had been willing to sell my manhood for gifts, would I not have put on your father’s yoke? That I want to become your man is because I expect that you will make following you an honor. The evil I know of you I think no more your fault than I think it blame to an oak that a poison vine is thrown around its branches. Now, as things stand, I believe you will shake it off, and the oak strength in your breast will send your mind up oak-high and oak-broad to be a strong pillar to other men.”

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He had got his temper back by the time he finished. From under his level brows, his eyes looked steadfast as sunlight into the face of his lord. As the sun draws a tree upward, so the young Jarl was drawn upright by the look.

"All my life," he breathed, "have I believed that of myself, but never did I think to find another who would believe it—who could believe it! Does not some troll mock me?"

The Songsmith answered: "I think you know that I speak the truth."

Looking into his eyes, it seemed that Helvin did know it. It seemed that he was opening his lips to say so, when into the stillness was dropped a sound like the distant clink of spur against stone. In the beat of a pulse, his face had become distorted by that hatred which springs from fear. He dropped back upon the bench, his words slipping out disjointedly.

"Let us see who has dared to follow me—who has dared! Mind this—that you make it appear as if I lingered to hear you sing. Go yonder to your harp, if that be a harp!"

Though of home-make and rude shape, it was a harp that hung on the pillar above the bed of foxskins. Laying it on his breast, the Songsmith played as he was bidden,—random chords that fell absently from the ends of his fingers. Standing

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there in the shelter of the bearskin that had been drawn across the arch, he could not longer see the head of the path; but he knew when the pursuer emerged from the bushes by Helvin's smothered cry:

“Olaf!”

Gripping the edge of the seat, the Jarl leaned there gazing out with distended eyes. “He is the likeliest man to find it out and follow. . . . Since the day of my birth he has hounded me. . . . He followed me into the world by an hour, but I think he will go out of it before me.” . . . His voice died away in murmur,—ceased at last so that between the harp-chords could be heard the soft rustle of footsteps through grass. Soon after that, the imposing form of Olaf the French came into the range of the Songsmith's vision.

Not to Randvar either had it occurred that Olaf could be seeking any but the Jarl. It amazed him, also, that at sight of the gray-clad figure leaning on the bench Thorgrim's son showed unmistakable surprise.

“Lord!” he said. Then, with the suavest gesture in his stock of French graces: “Lord, I would give much if I had not this appearance of having so little regard for your orders as to come prying upon your grief. Believe me—”

“My grief!” Helvin repeated. “My—” A quiver

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of terrible laughter undermined his voice and it fell; then, in the drawing of a breath it rose defiantly. "Since this matter has been spoken of, let me make it plain to you that you may make it plain to others, and tongue need never be laid to it again. *I have no grief.* Nor to save any one's feelings will I make pretence of any. Let no man urge it on me, if his ears would go unscathed!"

Olaf made no attempt to urge it, certainly. As in toleration of some noble whim, he smiled blandly and bowed acquiescence. After a moment the Jarl resumed curtly:

"If it was not to seek me that you came hither, what may it be that you want?"

That it might be to finish their interrupted duel had already occurred to Randvar; but if he imagined that Olaf would have any difficulty in presenting their quarrel in a light favorable to himself, his estimate fell short. The French One answered without hesitation:

"It so happens that I am in this neighborhood, Jarl, because your men have made a night-camp near the head of the Island. And I am come to the Tower to fulfil a task I have set myself, which is to avenge on this fellow his insolence towards your sister."

"My sister!" the young noble repeated, sitting erect.

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“In this wise will I answer you, lord, as is the very truth. This morning the gold-adorned maiden chanced upon him in the forest; and after the fashion of damsels with things that are new to them, she showed interest in his jingling accomplishments. Word followed word until, on discovering that there was gentle blood in him, she had gone so far as to honor him with an invitation to join her following. You would say that if he had one good strain in him he would have shown thankfulness for her favor. Instead of that, however, he answered her even with ill-temper, jeered at the life she offered him, ended the talk by informing her that he did not think her service good enough for him. If you think I am making it out worse than it is, I shall not blame you,—only ask him to deny it.”

It is strange how different one's own sentiments can seem when echoed by another's mouth, and after time has allayed the irritation from which they sprang. The song-maker had enough gentle blood to dye his face at the recollection of his quarrel with the beautiful Brynhild; nor could he meet the glance the Jarl bent on him, but stood grinding the cedar twigs under his heel and wishing that they were some portion of the French One's comely body.

But Helvin Jarl spoke tranquilly. With the

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passing of his belief that Olaf was in pursuit of him, fierceness like a storm wind had passed from his bearing and left him jarlfully poised.

“That is to be said of his fault, beausire, that it needs mending; but hardly are you the man to do it. This one thing is enough to hinder it, that you are known to be the most jealous of all my sister’s suitors. Think only how spiteful tongues might slander you, and say that instead of resenting rudeness you were in truth avenging it on the Songsmith that Starkad’s daughter showed him such great kindness! Better that you hand it over to me, beausire, since, besides being her brother, I am also answerable for this man. For I may as well take this time to make it known that the Songsmith has consented to enter my household, and make for me the songs which, even before I strayed here to-night, I found pleasure in. What needs be said, I will say, beausire, and overtake you shortly.”

Rising, he made a gesture of dismissal which, if it lacked French grace, had at least Norse decision. Before it Thorgrim’s bland son was forced to bow, and, bowing, to back out of the circle of the firelight. When he had become a dark shape in the moonshine, the Jarl turned to where his new follower was waiting in keen discomfort.

“Do not imagine,” he said, “that I am going

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to pretend to be surprised that you lost your temper with my sister. So has her haughtiness grown, that what I wonder at is that some man is not driven to slay her. Only for your own sake do I remind you—as so often I have been reminded—that good manners are like a coat of mail in that every breach of them opens a hole for the thrust of your enemies.”

Of reproof it was the mildest. In his self-dissatisfaction, the song-maker was even moved to outdo it, and muttered with another kick at the log in front of him:

“You say less than you might if you wanted to push the matter. It is seen that your sister thinks me no better than a boor.”

“I should be two-faced to say more,” Helvin returned, “for to me the happening is even of service. Now, when I no longer have before me the honesty of your face to make me believe in you, it will stand me in some stead to be able to tell myself that I know you spoke the truth about scorning court ways and preferring my service over that of another, as has not been the case before. Do not take it ill that I need proof. This happens to me for the first time that I trust any one. Yet I wish it were possible for you to fare back with me to-night.”

Remembering the crops that must be talked

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over with Erna, the traps that must be explained to the old Vikings, the young master of the Tower hesitated; but the instant the Jarl read his difficulty, he ended it courteously.

“I see, however, that you have needful business to arrange. Take two days to attend to it, and join me on the third day at sunset. Only assure me that you will not fail me on that day.”

Rather an appeal than a command did it become in the gentleness of his voice, the friendliness of the hand he stretched out. Taking the hand in both of his, the Songsmith answered from the sincerity of his heart:

“May my luck fail me if I fail you either in this or in greater things! For all it is worth you have my loyalty, I take oath on it.”

Returning the pressure of the Songsmith’s warm clasp, the Jarl’s gaze held him long and strangely.

“I believe you,” he said. “For whatever it is worth, I swear you my friendship—for whatever it is worth!”

On that they parted.

V

"His hands are clean who warns another"

—Northern saying.



WAIT a moment," Erna commanded, quickening her descent of the stairs. Wrapped in his cloak of russet homespun, Randvar had just come in from his morning swim, and was hastening where his heap of clothing waited by the fire. He quieted the chattering of his teeth to look at her inquiringly.

Two days and three nights had passed since the strain of using her double sight had numbed her wits; once more she was her capable keen-eyed self. Yet there was a quiver of unusual emotion in her stern face as she came up and laid her hand upon his arm.

"I want to find out whether you are in danger of sinking by swords," she said with her customary terseness, and her grasp tightened determinedly as he started to move away.

"I have declared, foster-mother, that I will endure no more magic though my life lies on it!"

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“What magic is it that my palms, like those of many another witchcraft-knowing woman, have the power to feel where steel is going to pierce a vital part, and to strengthen that part? I tell you to let me have my will. I dreamed last night that I saw a wounded eagle, which may well be your Other Shape.”

“Foster-mother, I tell you that any more of this spell-work is going to put me into a bad temper; and it is my wish to behave well towards you the last morning we are together.” Involuntarily, his voice softened.

Though usually she disdained them, she was not without a knowledge of woman’s weapons. She assumed them rather than lose her point.

“Maybe so, but you behave all the other way to set your self-will against my peace of mind. Do you think I could bear Eric’s absence if I had not the assurance of my hands that his body is sound?”

Wondering whether she had also tested the soundness of Eric’s head tempted the Songsmith to a chuckle. The discovery that half the fierce brightness of her eyes was due to tears finished his disarming. Half sighing, half growling, he let his cloak slip off his shoulders.

“When did I ever get my will against you,—after I got out of swaddling-bands? I ask, how-

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ever, that you do not keep me feeling foolish here longer than is necessary."

Probably it was the same to her as though he were still in swaddling-bands, when once she had closed her eyes that all her forces might be concentrated in her sense of touch. The palms she pressed upon his firm cool flesh—polished satin-smooth by the water, glistening satin-fair in the firelight—moved as tenderly as though the sinewy frame were still the soft child-body that she had tended in its helplessness. Each time his glance fell upon her worn face with its mouth hard-set in anxiety for him, he swallowed his impatience one time more; and when the waxing light made delay no longer possible, his efforts to free himself were begun with all gentleness.

"Foster-mother, be good enough to remember that I cannot start later than sunrise, if I am to reach there by sunset."

She clutched him with one hand, while the other pressed hard upon his left side.

"I thought I felt a place—stand still!—over your heart. It would be a death wound, indeed. *There!* Cold! A spot as cold as Hel's mouth!" She opened eyes dilated with excitement in a face that had become ashen pale.

An involuntary shiver passed over him, cooling his impatience. He watched thoughtfully while

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she began to knead his flesh with her warm and tingling finger-balls. After a time he said:

“It cannot be gainsaid that this is a better place to give a thrust than to take one. I admit that I expect to meet some unexpected things in the path I am entering. Not a little overgrowth hides it. Although I cannot tell why, much that the Jarl said that night came to me as a surprise. I suppose that the strangeness of his temper is the explanation of it. . . . Yet there is one thing that I can find no answer to,—why should he act as if it were important to him to have an unknown man like me in his following?”

Instead of answering, she began to rub at what she considered a vulnerable place in his discretion. “Never make the mistake of belittling yourself like that, and least of all where strangers can hear you. The result might be that they would take you at your word and believe you to be a man of no mark.”

He stirred impatiently. “Brisk enough am I, and many shall give place to me; but this I know not,—why it should matter to the Jarl of New Norway where I spend my days.”

Neither did she know, when she came to think it over. She soon gave up the attempt to fall back upon what she did know.

“It will be all the same in the end. I have done

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all I can in protecting your vitals. Safe into the fray you will go; safe out of the fray you will come,—if you do not let your flesh get cut so that you bleed to death. Stand still that I may see if I have brought back the life-warmth. . . . Yes . . . yes, the cold is entirely gone.” When she had pulled herself up stiffly by his arm, she released him. “Scant time will you have to jump into your clothes. The sun is not far away when the top of that chestnut-tree stands out so boldly.”

“That is true!” he assented, and cleared at a bound the distance between himself and his clothing.

For a while there were no other sounds to be heard save the simmering of the kettle and the song of Snowfrid overhead, sweet as the lilt of a meadow-lark in a field of golden grain.

As he rose from swallowing his last mouthful of broth, the girl came clattering down the stairs, waving over her head a great sword whose hilt was of iron inlaid with silver, and whose sheath was made from a rattlesnake-skin.

“I knew that though you should forget to say farewell to me, you would remember to wait for this,” she said. “I took it up-stairs last night and polished it a long time after you were all asleep. Does it not look well?”

“I did not remember it,” Randvar admitted, “so little used am I to anything more than a hunt-

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ing-knife." Taking it from her as she unsheathed it, he felt its edges critically, and feigned to test them on one of her yellow braids. "The hilt cleaves to my hand like the palm of a friend. I shall feel more self-respecting to go among strangers with my father's sword at my side. Perhaps some of his good-fortune will come from it to me." His brown face reddened, and he turned it away suddenly to watch the girl's nimble fingers fastening at his hip the sword-belt which she had drawn across his shoulder.

But Snowfrid jumped up with her usual liveliness, crying, "If your luck is most good, it may even happen that the Jarl will make you a guardsman like Bolverk," and he bestirred himself to tease her as usual.

"Pooh! If he cannot do any more for me than that, I shall come home again!"

The emphasis with which her hands planted themselves upon her hips boded ill for him, but Erna came between them to make sure that the strap which held his harp to his back was also secure. When that had been seen to, there was no further excuse for lingering.

Stretching out his arms to his foster-mother, he said: "Live as well as you can, and do not worry about Eric or me. Your luck will take care of me, and I will take care of him."

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She clasped him around the neck, and kissed him with passionate fierceness.

"If you owe me anything, pay it to Eric," she whispered in his ear, and then turned away and began violently to stir the soup.

At that, Snowfrid took a hand from her hip to draw the back of the wrist across her eyes, and signified that she was going to see him off by slipping out ahead into the gray light.

Though the darkness had melted from the air, there lingered in it yet that chill of unreality which makes earth and trees and even rocks seem but phantoms of themselves. As they crossed the grass, Randvar said, "It has the look of a dead world that is waiting for the sun to bring it to life," and the girl shivered assent and drew closer to him.

At the entrance to the path she stopped, and he turned for a parting look at the dwelling that his father's gentled strength had built and his mother's courageous love had hallowed. In the grayness it loomed as remote and unreal as all the rest, the firelight that showed wanly through the archways only adding to its shadowy strangeness.

"It seems to me that life is only just beginning for me, too," he said slowly as he gazed.

"You ought not to feel so," the girl cried re-

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proachfully. "You ought to feel that you are going away from your father and mother."

He shook his head. "I feel instead that I am coming closer to them. It was my father's lot before me to leave his home and go forth to try what the gods would grant him." As standing on the same spot he had lifted his hand in greeting to Erna, so now he raised it in farewell to the home scene. "It was a good dream while it lasted, but I am glad to be awake at last."

Snowfrid burst into tears on his shoulder. "It is a wicked thing that men must grow up and go away!"

Times there were when she would have been shaken off with severity; even now he put her from him hastily, though he bent and kissed her, bantering.

"What foolishness is here! If a guardsman had not grown up and gone away from his home, where would your fun have come in?"

Rain clouds were not so thick in her blue eyes but that sun shone through at that. Tiptoeing to reach his ear, she whispered, "Remind him of me, sometimes!" Then hiding her face, she fled back to the Tower; and he set forth laughing.

A silvery haze veiled all but the path just before his feet, so that he appeared to be ever advancing from mystery to mystery. He would have

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been less than a song-maker if it had not seemed to him a symbol of the unknown life into which he was entering, if he had not given himself unreservedly to musing on his hopes and fears. His feet travelled the trails by instinct that day, and by instinct forded the streams and threaded the marshes; his mind was travelling the roads of the Jarl's Town, fording the deeps of Brynhild's pride, threading the maze of Helvin's temper.

Burning its way through the grayness, the sun came out. Like a ball of fire, it rolled up the eastern slope of the heavens. Like a ball of fire, it rolled down the sky's western side. Still he walked in a dream, conscious only of the light of his visions. It was not until the hills showed like nicks in the fire-ball's rim, and he had reached the last knoll rising between him and the sight of the Jarl's Town, that he was recalled to the present.

Half-way to the crest loomed a mass of cinder-hued rusty-veined rock. Rounding this brought him suddenly upon Eric the Page, squatted on his heels beside a patch of the wintergreen berries which the youth of New Norway valued next to honey. In the process of adjusting his attention to this abrupt demand, the Songsmith stood gazing at him; but the youngster scrambled up with an involuntary "Odin!" which was as much a prayer as an exclamation. When, presently, Randvar

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put out a hand and lifted him by his embroidered collar, he began to talk much more like a small boy caught robbing a trap than the haughty page of a jarl's daughter.

"Now, foster-brother! I have not done anything. I did your bidding with her. I have not done anything, foster-brother."

"Plain enough you have it before your mind what I ought to do," Randvar said with his short laugh. Then he gave him a slight shake and let him go. "Have it even as you have chosen. It may be that I shall not find it harder to forget you than you found it to forget me." While his one hand quitted the gay collar, his other took toll from the berry-laden cap, and he passed on.

That he should not be allowed to forget, however, he was able to guess. It was no surprise when the boy's voice sounded again at his elbow, in the wheedling tone that was as familiar as the gleam of his curly head.

"Foster-brother, what is the need of taking it in that way, either? I could explain it with a mouthful of words if you would listen."

As the Songsmith could not deny some curiosity to hear the explanation, he allowed his pace to slacken. Eric read the sign quickly.

"You need not think it was lack of friendliness. As well as you, I know that because I have been

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able to get honor and fine manners for myself is the more reason why I ought to protect and help lesser men, and I have the intention to do so. But the truth is that in these clothes you look so like a dead tree that has got out of a moss-bed and walked in from the forest, that I became too embarrassed at the thought of any one's remembering that I used to be like you to be able to think of aught else. It was not until afterwards that it crossed my mind that you might feel hurt, and I got ashamed of myself."

Of a sudden, Randvar began to laugh and pulled the boy up to him and hugged him; and then of a sudden he frowned and held him off at arm's-length.

"I suppose," he said, "that is also the explanation why you have not been home to see your kinswomen since the Jarl's sister picked you out for her page three seasons ago,—not because you do not have love towards them, but because you dislike to be put in mind of the poor way in which you used to live?"

Eric did not answer immediately, but walked a while making embarrassed snatches at the flaming sumacs they were passing.

"I have so little time," he muttered at last.

The Songsmith looked down at him severely. "Whether your dignity takes it well or not," he

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said, "I am going to tell you that I think you in a worse way than the man in the were-wolf story. Every ninth night it happened to him to change his man's shape for a wolf's body, but never did he lose his man's nature. Even when his appetite forced him to prey upon cattle, his man's eyes looked out of the wolf's sockets in loathing. You have shed your forest ways for these mincing court manners, but you have changed your manful nature also, that used to have honesty in it, and love of kin. I foresee that as time goes on there will be a harder nut to crack than this which we two have just had a hand in."

Enough honesty remained in the boy so that he showed himself abashed. Again his voice cajoled, when it came after a long interval of silent plodding.

"I *have* got love towards my kin. I was going to send good gifts to them the next time a trading-ship went that way. I will send some back by you now, if you are willing to take them. I suppose you fared hither to see Starkad set adrift?"

"To see *what*?" Randvar repeated, losing sternness in surprise.

A change of subject appeared to be much to Eric's taste. He launched forth eagerly:

"They are going to set him adrift on the river, of course. Is it possible that you have not heard

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of it? Saint Olaf was disposed of in that way, because after the battle his foes would for no sake allow him to be buried on Norwegian ground. His friends put his body on a boat and sent it out to sea; and so bound was old Starkad to follow him in everything, he gave orders long ago that this should be his end also. It will happen as soon as the sun sets, and it will be a great sight to see. I came over here myself to look at it, since Brynhild has little need of pages while she sits mourning in her bower."

Randvar made no answer, for they came just then to the top of the ridge and saw below them the broad river, uncoiled through the land like a Midgard serpent of glittering gold, and saw beyond it the spreading grain-fields and vine-clad slopes of the Jarl's Town, its light streaks of stone walls winding between dark tree-trunks, its clusters of brown roofs blotting the gay autumn foliage, its clouds of gray smoke drifting across the bright face of the sky.

Around every group of roofs circled broad acres of farm-land and pasture-land, for the settlement was no straggling line of cabins, no huddle of tented booths, but a typical Norse town almost as prosperous as Nidaros itself. From the Jarl's domain, the scores upon scores of great estates radiated like spokes from a hub, separated from it and from

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one another by stretches of wood and grassy common, and bound together by tree-arched lanes and broad white roads, and by the shining highway of the river with its stone wharves and anchored ships.

Truly it was a wonderful sight to come upon in the midst of the new-world wilderness. The two on the ridge lingered to gaze at it, and Randvar's air-castles paled beside the deeper interest of reality.

He said thoughtfully: "It is a testing-place of men's mettle. They alone will get fame here of whom it can be said that they are well-tempered. . . . Only by many accomplished men coming to a spot at one time, with all their wealth on their backs, could such a stronghold be built inside the space of twoscore years. Do you know, young one, how many people make up the Town?"

"While I cannot say for certain," Eric answered, "I think I have heard it reckoned that there are two thousand, counting in women and thralls; for it is said that every one brought all his kin and his property with him. That was not a little to take out of Norway at one time. Starkad was wont to say that if Saint Olaf's foes did get a great gain over him in the battle in which they slew him, yet was it some loss to them when so many of his following preferred rather to go into exile than to bear the new rule—"

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Randvar's uplifted hand checked him. "Hush! I heard a horn," he said, and they held their breath in listening.

For the first time they noticed that the sounds of the day had waned with its light, which was now almost gone, no more of the sun's fiery ball remaining than would have served for a signal-light on the hill-top. Already the eastern side of the trees was sombre with shadow; and the lazy splash of the river seemed to fill the world until, faint and sweet, the funeral music was brought to them by the breeze. Growing momentarily stronger with the emerging of the train of sable-garbed horsemen from the little wood through which the road ran, the dirge throbbed solemnly in their ears.

Upon Eric the Page it seemed to be borne in suddenly that he was in charge of a grand spectacle with which to amaze and delight his forest-bred companion. He assumed the responsibility willingly.

"Now am I well pleased," he said, "that you are going to get so good a chance to see something of court ways. That is the black bearskin that they are carrying the corpse on. Those men riding beside it are the priests. The tall haughty one is the Bishop. The name given him is Magnus Fire-and-Sword, because he has the custom of

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burning and slaying all who do not believe as he does. The clumsy one coming last men call the Shepherd Priest, because it was his lot to herd sheep on a Swedish dairy-farm before it came into his head to be a holy man. The leather-clad fellows who ride after him with bags at their saddle-bows are guards bearing the treasures that are to go with Starkad,—his armor and his weapons and his jewelled ornaments, even the gold circlet he wore on his head. The new Jarl would have it so; he would not keep so much as a—That is he—Helvin, Starkad's son—with the red hair—riding a black horse—do you see?"

Randvar nodded absently; since first the black horse came into view, his eyes had been fixed upon its rider.

"He bears himself as stark as the dead man," he muttered, then finding that he was speaking aloud, shook himself back to attention.

Wading waist-deep into the water, the eight bearers of the litter had placed their burden upon the black-draped boat waiting on the darkening waves. Now the contents of the treasure-bags were handed to them, piece by piece, and they built with it a glittering bulwark around the moundlike form. Then the oldest of the advice-givers, an old man gnarled and bald as an ancient oak, came stiffly down the bank with a lighted

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torch in his hand, and laid the flame against the rope of plaited straw that held the boat to the shore.

Leaping out hungrily, the yellow tongues licked up the morsel and reached out for the food that lay beyond, while the loosened boat swung gently from the land. With the rush of wind, the fire rose crackling and hissing, and gradually the sunset light was lost in the new glare that filled the river valley. Rising as it rose, and quivering like it, rose the voice of the dead Jarl's skald, chanting his death-song.

In the red glare the boat slipped seaward. As it drifted past them, the man and the boy on the knoll could see every fire-lit jewel sparkling and flashing in a ring of splendor around the form under the black pall. Then it drifted farther, and once more the sunset glory became visible around it. By-and-by it was no more than a star in the gathering dusk; and the old skald's voice—strained thin and high in the effort to send his song after the departing voyager—cracked and broke, and there was silence on both sides of the river.

On the side opposite the Town it was Eric who broke the pause, rousing himself with a yawn and a stretch.

"I declare this to be the best entertainment Starkad ever gave me," he remarked. "But one

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cannot be always enjoying himself. I suppose you will pass the night at the hostelry before going back?" He brushed a leaf from his tunic with Olaf's own elegance of gesture, then made use of Olaf's own oath as he glimpsed his companion's face. "By Saint Michael! you look as solemn as though you were going to be buried yourself."

Straightening from the cramped attitude of the watcher, the Songsmith shook off the mood that had held him and became quietly purposeful. He said briefly:

"I go neither back to the Tower nor forward to the hostelry, but to join the Jarl's following. Does it lie within your knowledge whether it is the custom to go directly to him? Or should I speak first to one of those around him?"

Whether or not the knowledge lay in Eric, his mouth was blocked by amazement; only horror could leak through.

"Go to Helvin Jarl in those clothes! He would order his dogs set on you! You look more like a stag than a man."

It is likely that he went on at some length, but Randvar gave him no further attention. Making his way down the hill and across the bridge, he came into the crowd just beginning to disperse. His final decision was to submit the question of etiquette to Bolverk, whose burly figure had come

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into sight in the throng; but before he could reach the guardsman, his glance encountered Helvin's.

Rigidly erect rode the young Jarl in his sable mourning clothes, his face an ivory mask to hide what lay beneath it; but into his eyes there leaped now such a look as a man gnawed by torturing fear might give the man who brought him relief. What the look meant, the Songsmith did not ask himself; he knew only that response to it rose in him as rises a river in flood-time. Like a wooden bridge before a freshet, etiquette was swept out of his thoughts.

Pushing between the courtmen, he made his way to the Jarl. Without speaking, Helvin put out a hand and gripped the deerskin shoulder, and so rode holding to it as Rolf's son walked beside him.

VI

"Ill luck is the end of ill redes"

—Northern saying.



It was three weeks later. A group of old fur-traders stood in the porch of the Jarl's feasting-hall, answering in chorus the remark of one of their number:

"A favorite so soon? Time is not allowed to go to seed when a young man gets the rule!"

"Ah, the good old days of peace and order!"

"More than ever, now, the doubt works in me whether it is Helvin's good training or his bad temper that will be uppermost."

"It is not to be looked for that he will get tame counsel from his new friend," returned the man who had spoken first. "My son, who brought the tidings home last week, says that already the forester has fought with Olaf, Thorgrim's son, and so won his way to great love with the young courtmen, who are all jealous of Olaf's favor with Starkad's daughter."

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The chorus interrupted him, growling in their beards.

“Though he came off with honor from the young men, still it is not settled that he will fare in the same way with us!”

“No man has brought back such accomplishments as Olaf the French—”

“It is plain in everything that little good will come from this sea-rover’s son—”

“I am getting curious to see him.”

“You will not have to wait long—”

“As soon as this pine-mast of a hunter gets out of the road—”

That was not very soon for a great throng was ahead of the hunter, and no hurrying or struggling competition marked their progress, since the course of a river between its banks is not more fixed than was the place of each. Dropping out or pushing on, they settled leisurely into orderly rows upon the long benches against the wainscot—advice-givers and courtmen and guards along the southern wall, priests and lawmen and land-owners along the northern, the eastern cross-bench for women guests, the western for the women of the court, such small-fry as armorers and harpers and tumblers filling the draughty corners by the doors. The time came at last, however, when the hunter’s tow head brushed under the lintel; and pushing

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after him, the traders came into the cheer of the heir's inheritance feast.

Gone was the darkness and coldness and silence of mourning that for three Norse weeks had brooded over the mighty pillared hall. Once more, the light of fragrant juniper torches played upon pictured tapestry and garlanded column. Once more, the round gilded shields hanging above the benches were turned into so many suns by the ruddy glow of fires leaping on the stone hearths down the middle of the long nave. At the white-spread tables that formed an oblong around the fires, the gorgeous feasting dresses of the court-folk made streaks of rainbow color through the brightness.

Running his eye up the line of the southern wall, the trader who had spoken last said over his shoulder: "Yonder he is, on Helvin's left, as was to be expected."

He might have done better to say, "on the left of the high-seat," whose towering carven posts marked plainly its place midway the length of the hall, for the heir was in no way conspicuous in the line of his guests as he sat on the footstool of the ruler's seat, awaiting the ceremony which should elevate him to its empty cushions. But the traders found the spot at once where the new face looked out over the scene, and they studied it critically as they moved forward.

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What they saw was a superbly proportioned young fellow of four-and-twenty, rising as erectly tall beside the guardsmen as a pine-tree beside oaks. Level as pine branches was the line of his thick dark brows, and no gold but the sun's glowing burnish was on the mass of hair that shadowed his sun-ripened face. Of the might of the primeval wastes and of the wilderness's virile beauty, he was expressive. One of the old men spoke for them all when he said:

"Since Helvin, Starkad's son, has been likened to a captive eagle, it would not be amiss to call this fellow an eagle of the forest that has come to perch beside him because of a kinship between their natures. The Fates alone can tell what will come of such a partnership!" Doubt was heavy in the wagging of their heads as they turned away to follow the overseer of guests to the seats appointed them.

Following after them went the eyes of Randvar the Songsmith. Though their words had not carried across the fire, their scrutiny had, so that gradually his mouth took on a satirical twist. Presently he spoke to the heir on the footstool—spoke without having been spoken to—to the indignation of the old counsellors on the right of the high-seat.

"Lord, when I see how your people stare at me

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as at a black Jotun, I realize it is not a dream that I am in your court. Other times it seems to me as if I must be lying on the cedar branches by the Tower fire and imagining what I should wish to happen.”

To the added displeasure of the old chieftains, Helvin justified the familiarity by returning it. He had been sitting with his chin on his hand, a figure of weary splendor in his furred and jewelled dress of state; now he straightened and resting his elbow on the seat-cushion, entered into conversation with the son of the sea-rover,—it was fortunate that the old men could not also hear his frank remarks.

“Your luck is great, Songsmith, that you can get interest out of this. Just before you spoke, I was thinking that though I were blindfolded, I should still be able to describe every tapestry on the walls, put every man, woman, and thrall in place, count up every dish and goblet and knife on the table. At times, when I sat where you sit now, I used to amuse myself by rearranging the people in my imagination, beginning by putting yonder fat-chopped buffoon in the proud priest’s place. I can tell you that it came the nearest to making sport of anything I have had in this hall.”

The song-maker’s smile came readily as he glanced across at the high-seat of the northern

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wall, which had been held during Starkad's time by that warrior-bishop of Saint Olaf who was known as Magnus Fire-and-Sword, but which now awaited in emptiness the pleasure of the new ruler.

"It will be rearranging them in earnest this time, Jarl. Lord, is it possible that you do not feel the excitement in the air as every person here draws breath with hope or fear of your rule? The force of their eyes upon you is like the beat of waves upon the shore."

As brand from brand, the face of the Jarl's son kindled; but before he was ready to reply, the Songsmith's glance had flown past him and lighted on the eastern door.

Through the broad portal was advancing a train of court-women, walking far apart because of the trailing length of their silken robes, stately matrons with towering head-dresses, and white-armed maidens whose bright tresses fell free from golden bands, and moving before them—the jewel for whom all their splendor was but a setting—Brynhild the Proud, bending now her queenly head to the greeting of some old warrior, now yielding a smile to some young courtman's eager salute.

It was the first glimpse Randvar had had of her since that day in the forest, so rigidly had mourning custom secluded her in her bower. As a man

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who has lived long on a memory, he drank thirstily of the wine of her beauty, felt it course hotly through his veins. He was still leaning forward when he felt the Jarl's gaze upon him, and knew that his face had betrayed him. In confusion he dropped his eyes.

Helvin said dryly: "It is seen that you did not reject my sister's favor because you did not find her good to look upon, Songsmith."

Randvar overcame enough of his embarrassment to mutter that no one could find her otherwise.

The Jarl's son shook his head as he watched his sister advance. "Here you may see how much man differs from man. To Olaf, Thorgrim's son, yonder, she looks like the goddess Sif after the dwarfs wove her hair of red gold, as no doubt he is telling her now with his smile. To me"—he turned wearily as her approach made rising incumbent—"to me she looks only like a rune standing for a life I hate." Rising, he faced her with cold civility.

Splendid in her feasting dress of shining gold color, she came towards them, bent in a deep courtesy before the high-seat, mocked the lowliness of the salutation by the loftiness to which she rose.

"Brother," she said, "will you grant me a boon which I would beg of you?"

He answered: "Grant it I would before it were

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asked if I were not desirous to hear how you would beg; but what is it you wish?"

Her white lids drooped haughtily. "It is known far and wide, brother, how you hate formalities, so it is not to be expected that you will hold to them now that you can do what you like about everything. What I want is your leave to retire with my women as soon as the amusements begin. I dislike brawling freedom."

Curling like the petals of a rose, her beautiful lips curved disdainfully. Helvin's smoke-gray eyes showed a spark as they rested on her.

"It is well that my face is not set against what you ask, kinswoman," he said, "for your way of entreating would be unlikely to move a man to much gentleness. This I grant you willingly, that you may leave as soon as any brawling begins."

She thanked him in the formal phrase, and mocking him again with the bend of courtly submission, made as though she would have passed on. Then, seemingly for the first time, she saw the deerskin-clad figure leaning on the arm of the high-seat, and paused to look him up and down in displeasure.

"Greeting, Randvar, Rolf's son, and welcome to you!" she said. "Yet I think, after all, you would have done better to take service with me, if my brother's generosity towards you is to be measured by the clothes you wear."

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Deep in the cave of his breast, Randvar felt his temper stir like a sleeping bear; but craving a smile from her starry eyes, he made an attempt at conciliation.

“I had thought you would guess, gold-bright maiden, that it is the Jarl’s forbearance which lets me be slow in shedding my bark.”

The tilt of her chin showed how little his deprecation had helped him.

“An economical virtue is the Jarl’s forbearance,” she said, “and Freya’s son is more than expectedly dull at learning what beseems him.”

The bear awoke then with a snarl. Randvar gasped afterwards at remembering what he would have answered if Helvin had not taken the word, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Do not grudge me one plain man, my kinswoman, while you have so many gay ones at your beck. It is at my desire he has kept on the woodland garb; that seeing how different the outside of him is from all around me, I may ever be reminded how much of new interest I have found inside him.”

Too courtly was she bred to dispute a ruler’s whim; to that she gave prompt if haughty acquiescence.

“In this as in everything, it must be done as you wish, brother, only I take it upon me to urge you to show us the inside of him as soon as you

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can," she made answer. Then she passed on; and her women went rustling by, moving to laughter as to music.

Randvar's bitter reflections were interrupted by the pressure of Helvin's hand upon his shoulder.

"If I had not taken the word out of your mouth, my friend," the Jarl said in his ear, "your hot head would have got you into further difficulties; but I like you none the worse for that. I liked it less when I thought that after the manner of all other men, you were going to fall on your knees to her only because she is beautiful of face. It would have been the first matter in which our minds did not match as blade matches sheath. So long as you have manfulness enough to resent her pride, I forgive it to you that her fairness has bewitched your eyes."

Again embarrassment left the song-maker speechless. Under the Jarl's hand he stood so constrainedly that the old men who were watching imagined him to be cast down by some rebuke, and experienced a sense of satisfaction. And their relief was no greater than his when the duties of the heir's station put an end to further confidences.

Bearing the baton of state, two pages advanced and took their place before the Jarl's son. While one received his sword from him with many flourishes, the other delivered to him the gilded wand.

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Stretching it forth, a bar of light, he gave the signal for the feasting to begin.

Like white-robed statues called to life, the thralls waiting at the doors moved forward with their burdens of gilded flagons and silver chargers. Through the fragrance of the juniper torches and the pine-tips of the floor-covering rose the savor of roasted meats and the spicy aroma of mead and wine. To the hum of blended voices was added the clink of silver-rimmed horns. The oftener the resounding salute rang out, the louder the hum arose, the merrier the laughter that burst forth where groups of young men were scattered among the old ones like poppies among wheat.

No higher note of noisy revelry was left to strike when at last the moment came for the old advice-giver, Mord, to lead the heir up into his father's seat and put in his hands the sacred horn that he might make his inheritance-vow. From high mirth they passed to deep feeling, as each man rose holding his shining horn above his head. Excitement shook some of the young hands so that their wine was spilled—excitement and exultation at the spectacle of a young ruler in the high-seat!—and to some of the old eyes tears came unconsciously, so that they seemed to look through a mist at the figure of their old leader's son.

Noble in splendor was Helvin Jarl as the fire-

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light caught the golden embroideries and jewelled clasps of his sweeping robes; and noble in purpose was his pale finely cut face under the mass of blood-red hair when he raised the great horn and spoke so that all could hear him.

“I drink the toast to the old gods and to the new,” he said, “and to those who have gone before me; but the vow I make is no vow that I shall be great. What I promise is that I shall make no other man small. I take oath that under my rule every man shall live a free life in all such matters as concern himself, nor shall any be forced into ways against which his mind rebels. I take Heaven and all of you as witnesses!” Putting the horn to his lips, he drank.

Mechanically, the ranks of standing men imitated the motion, their eyes continuing to stare at him over their cup rims. But before the draught was down, the call of free blood to free blood had been heard. From young courtmen and young guardsmen went up ringing cheers. It counted for little that some of the lawmen murmured, and Magnus Fire-and-Sword spoke to his neighbor from under a frown.

Only the Jarl noticed that, and noticing, smiled mockingly. When the tumult had sunk once more he spoke, the smile dwindling to a droop of his mouth-corner.

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“The first thing that I must try my hand on is the filling of the other high-seat with the man I hold highest in honor. That would be to take a great deal on my hands if custom did not say that he must be a holy man, which makes the choice easy.”

He paused to clear his throat with a swallow of wine, and perhaps to note how the arrogant face of Magnus was losing some of its displeasure. Then he went on, his voice so cool and keen that it bit like a blade:

“As for you, priests, I know only one of you for whom I have any honor at all. I have heard many talk of the mercy of Christ, whose hands had cut blood-eagles in other men only for being unable to believe as they did. I have heard not a few talk of Christ’s humbleness whose tempers were so overbearing that men would have risen up and slain them if they had not held up their holy names for shields. I have seen many Odin-men who put on the Christ-faith like a kirtle, but I have seen only one who made it a part of his nature and showed it forth in his acts. He is the Swede whom men call the Shepherd Priest. It is my offer and will that he shall come forward and take the place opposite me.”

At the eastern end of the room, in the lowliest seat by the door, a man rose hastily—an ungainly

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old man in rusty robes—and lifted a hand in protest; and in the same instant the stately velvet-draped form of Magnus became wrathfully erect before his place.

“This—this is sacrilege!” he thundered. “I call all Christian men to resist this mockery—this—”

“Sacrilege?” The young Jarl’s voice pierced like a spear, scorn-barbed. “This I have often said, that it was a sacrilege that you should give rein to a devil’s nature in the name of Christ! That I honor the cause by honoring the man who stands most truly for it—be he king-born or thrall-born—that is honesty. Had you any love of your faith amid your self-love, you would see it.”

If the rage-purpled face of the Fire-and-Sword had not been the face of a bishop, they might have thought it the face of a Berserker. The names which he called his godson were the names that fighting-men use when their tempers pressed hardest for relief. Upon the openest-minded of the old counsellors was forced slowly a doubt whether there really was much holiness about him; and the young men broke loose and drowned his voice in hisses.

But Helvin Jarl rose in his high-seat, his glance like the outleaping of flame.

“I am all that which you call me, and more,”

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he said, "and it is because I am—because I need only to bring forward the straits I have fallen in to prove what kind of harvests spring from your sowing—that I vow you shall never sow again while my rule is in New Norway. In the spring, ships shall take you back whence you came; meanwhile, come you no more before my face, hypocrite that you are to your marrow!"

Starkad's own inexorableness in the gesture, he levelled his baton at the door; then before the aghast silence could give rise to any sign, he turned where the Shepherd Priest waited and spoke to him respectfully and yet sternly.

"You whose sincereness has won my honor, bear in mind that cowardice no less than arrogance is love of self. If your faith is indeed first with you, remember that I offer you a chance to do great work for it, and forget any lesser thing."

With the ceasing of his voice there was again silence, but the Shepherd Priest made no attempt to use it for his protests. After a time he lifted his bent head, and his rugged face was as a mean lantern through which a light is shining. Amid breathless stillness, the velvet-clad form of Magnus stalked out of the western door, and the ungainly form in rusty black walked slowly to the northern high-seat, walking uncertainly like a man

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in the dark, holding to his crucifix as to a guiding hand.

Again the Jarl forestalled an outburst, speaking once more with the graciousness of a noble heir on his inheritance-night.

“One thing more I wish to tell you, then I will no longer hinder you from your amusements. It has to do with the Skraellings. Always it has seemed to me that much good might come of having them for partners in this business of settling the new lands, and now I have heard that of them which makes me want them also for friends. So have I sent a message to their lord which asks him to meet me ten days hence at some middle point between our abodes, and over a feast talk about how we can get good from each other. That is the end of my speaking.”

It was the beginning of uproar. All at once the half-dozen old traders, who had entered the hall in such doubting humor, rose to their feet, swung their horns above their heads and cried as with one voice:

“I drink to Helvin Jarl!”

Then: “Young blood for gainfulness!”

“New ways for new—”

“Down with old boundaries—”

“Spread out! Spread out!”

“Luck to the new rule!”

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The new step being approved by such undoubted authorities, the other old men joined for the first time in the applause; while the young men were brought to the point of handling their cups like gavels, and one whose wine did not sit well upon his wits clambered upon the seat and began to use shields from the wall for cymbals. Even to the women's cross-bench it sped. Eagerly Yrsa the Lovely spoke to her young mistress by whom she sat.

"Jarl's sister, do you call to mind how fair and fine we thought that bead-embroidery we saw last trading-day? Now we can get a Skraelling woman to teach us how to do it,—if so be there are women among them," she added doubtfully.

It seemed that Brynhild spoke because she had been addressed rather than because she heeded what was said to her. Fingering her jewelled necklace, she continued frowning at the fire.

"Never saw I aught to equal it," she said. "That Magnus should behave so boorishly— And yet that we should have a thrall-born bishop— And yet it seems to me that Helvin behaved well— It must be that the earth is coming loose from its moorings!"

From her place farther down the line, the pretty matron who had laughed at the forester bent forward urgently. "Jarl's sister, is it your will that

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we should take our leave now? The amusements are beginning. Yonder deerskin fellow has just beckoned to the harp-bearer." She motioned with her lace-crowned head. Brynhild's gaze, however, did not follow the motion, but remained upon her, gathering displeasure.

"Deerskin fellow!" she repeated. "Is it in that manner, Sigrid, that you speak of Freya's son? However he forgets it himself, it behooves you to remember that he has king's blood in him." Arranging her gold-colored draperies about her and settling to formal attention, she finished severely: "Had he no blood at all, a song-maker has the right to courteous treatment. I expect that you will, all of you, leave off chattering and give him the attention due a man of accomplishments." When she had seen her orders carried out, she fixed her eyes calmly upon the spot where Randvar stood beside the towering gilded harp of the court-skald.

The Songsmith's heart leaped and tried to strangle him as he met her gaze, yet it was not long that his hands swept aimlessly across the strings. In him had awakened a desire to interpret to these folk of Norse blood the lives of the forest men, whose creed was so like theirs in strong simplicity.

Soon he struck a chord and sang with a voice as untaught as a bird's, and as full of unconscious ecstasy, the story of the Skraelling chief who gave

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his life to save his followers from the wrath of their offended god.

Singing, he forgot that he sang among strangers. Listening, they forgot that he told a stranger's story; as at the deeds of a brother, their minds quickened with understanding. A stillness gathered over the room that lasted even after the song was ended, and was broken only when cries for more rose from every direction.

But it was not their applause that was the crown of his success. It was turning to find little Eric standing beside him—bewildered and ruffled—holding out an arm-ring of golden filigree, saying as one repeating a lesson:

“Starkad's daughter bids you cover some of the deerskin with this.”

VII

"The tongue is the bane of the head"

—Northern saying.



It was a fantastic scene, the wilds of a forest river-bank turned into a guest-house for court-folk. Athwart the living green of the pines, camp-fires sent their spirals of blue smoke, and groups of thralls made white rings around the blaze as they roasted the game and heated the wine with which pages skimmed to and fro. Down by the sparkling water, knots of old chieftains and young courtmen divided their time between eating and gazing across the stream at the Skraellings' encampment of the opposite shore. Back among the trees, where the drifted leaves had been heaped into cushions of russet and gold, groups of gentlewomen chatted as merrily amid the great stillness as though they were among the whirring wheels of their own bower. Still farther up the brown slope and deeper in the grove, Helvin Jarl, in his splendid riding dress of gold-embroidered green, sat upon a heap of bowlders over which red wolfskins had

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been thrown, his song-maker lounging beside him, wild-locked and wild-garbed as a creature of the wood, except for the harp at his back.

Randvar had finished eating and was staring contentedly at nothing. Over the forest lay the hush of that strange season which falls like a breathless pause in the brisk round of the autumn. Dropped suddenly motionless were the winds that had been lashing the trees like mighty flails; and as a conjuror changes knives to roses, so had the keen cold of the morning been changed to balmy warmth by the red noon sun. A fancy came to him that the golden haze veiling the end of every tree-aisle was the visible shape of a dream in the air.

“It feels like noon-spell in harvest-time,” he said aloud. “I think the earth has worked so hard that it has fallen asleep and dreams now of the summer.”

“Say the same thing later on when the day is at an end,” Helvin answered. “To me it feels like a devil’s fit of repentance. After his spite has been for weeks like a rasp in the air, and his fury has torn all within reach, he tires of his rage—for a day or two—holds his peace and puts on a watery smile.”

Even while the song-making part of Randvar smiled approval of the figure, his woodsman’s

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alertness detected something odd about the voice in which the words were uttered. Sideways he sent a glance at his lord.

It seemed to him that there was also something odd about Helvin's expression; but he had no chance to scrutinize it for on the instant it was gone, while the Jarl caught his look and challenged it.

"Why do you stare as if you saw a hedge-rider?"

"Lord, your voice sounded as though it came hard for you to breathe," Randvar answered after a moment.

Helvin's words leaped out like tigers from a cage. "Why should it not? in this smothering stillness where even the trees are holding their breath to listen for something. Oh, for the plains! the plains! where the wind blows, and a man can see all around him, and not so much as a ghost can creep on him unawares! It is a trap, this forest of yours; and every rank of trees is a wall to shut one tighter in with his thoughts. Had I an axe ready to my hand, and the might in my arm—"

Even as it seemed that his body would be wrung by a violent gesture, he caught himself; and his voice slackened to a mocking drawl.

"What a good thing it is that I have three wise-minded old ravens to make sport for me! Hither

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they wing their way now to give me final advice in this treaty-making. Odin be thanked, it will not be long before we are on the move! Yonder my kinswoman's hand sends a summons to you, Songsmith. Go, sting Olaf's jealousy again. The entertainment I have in torturing him, teaches me for the first time why Starkad had delight in bear-baiting."

In words now as well as voice, he was strange to his song-maker. Randvar mused on it as he descended the slope; again the feeling that he was wakening from a dream came over him.

"Seldom have I experienced such strange things in my sleep as I have done since that day at the Black Pool," he murmured; then as his wandering gaze fell upon the group before him, he finished contentedly: "But if it be a dream, it must be said that it is a good one."

Surrounded by her band of comely women, with the elegant Olaf outstretched before her, the Jarl's sister sat enthroned on the slope at the foot of an ancient oak. The masses of bronze foliage still clinging around the base of the mighty limbs, spread like a canopy above her. The huge trunk was as a background for her rounded form in its kirtle of wine-red, gold-embroidered; against the black bark, her hair was as a spot of golden fire. The song-maker saw neither Yrsa's pretty smile of

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welcome nor the shrug of Thorgrim's son when their mistress greeted him graciously.

"Make me a song in tune with the forest, Songsmith," she requested. "Olaf's French ballads that chime so well with my bower sound in this place like the tinkling of bells, though I would not seem thankless in saying so."

Olaf rose and acknowledged playfully the apologetic gesture she made him.

"Be in no fear of hurting my feelings, madam, by preferring his songs over mine," he said. "I have amusement in trifling with the singing-craft, as becomes a high-born man; but to do such work seriously is the portion of churls."

She took back the conciliating hand to fold it on the other in her lap, and spoke a trifle haughtily. "In France, it may be so, beausire. Among Norsemen, skaldship has always been held in honor. If the truth must be told, I am in best tune with Norse ways."

"Then will I take away the discordant note of my presence," he said, and smiled at her quizzically as he turned. But he was not so unscathed that his eyes could pass the Songsmith as they encountered him; there, with his will or without it, they froze. "Unless," he added, "the forester has the wish to make some reply to me."

Time was when the forester would have replied

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with the tongue of his snake-skin scabbard, but he was not dull in learning new ways. Almost his smile was a match for Olaf's as he answered:

"To what end should I do that, courtman? It is not for the contented moon to bark at the jealous dog."

It was not only Thorgrim's son who drew breath quickly, then; every maiden of the group caught hers with a little scream. The Jarl's sister rose swiftly, standing erect as a red lily.

"This thing comes ill to pass that you forget me as well as yourselves," she said.

After a moment, Olaf lowered his glittering eyes and finished his withdrawal; when Brynhild sank again to her place among the mossy roots, and settled herself as one preparing for a treat.

"Sing, I pray you," she said to the Songsmith.

For him, Olaf ceased to exist. Unslinging his rude harp, he leaned easily against a tree before her and sang her a Skraelling love-song, a song made of murmuring brook-sounds, of the calls of mating birds, of the wild note of the blast in the tree-tops, a song that tuned well with the hush and the haze of the autumn forest. In a silken tangle of interlocked arms, the women made a rapt circle around him; and the Jarl's sister was drawn forward on her moss-cushion. She freed a

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long breath when the last note had died away among the leafless branches above them.

"It seems to me," she said slowly, "that the work which interpreters do between men of different tongues is the work that song-makers do between people of different ranks. When I hear you sing, creatures who have seemed to me no more than beasts become human like myself. If there were enough singers to interpret people to one another, perhaps there would be no strife in the world."

Pleasure so deepened the color in the Songsmith's face that he was glad to shake his long hair over it by bowing low; he was saved the necessity of answering for after a little Brynhild spoke again, sinking back in her seat to regard him thoughtfully.

"The first time that ever it happened to me to hear your voice was also in the forest, as you sang the Song of Fridtjof the way you would have liked it to happen. Ever since then I have wondered what kind of ending you gave to it. It seems to me that this would be a good time to sing it, if you are willing that we should get further good from your gift of song."

"The *best* time!" cried Yrsa, clapping her hands; while urgent murmurs came from all the rest, from Sigrid, the haughtiest of the matrons, down to the shyest of the maids.

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Once Randvar would have struck up without further consideration; now he fingered the harp-strings hesitatingly before he answered.

“Jarl’s sister, we have not quarrelled for two weeks, and I confess that the friendliness has been worth much to me. I beg you not to urge me to do that which will set us against each other again.”

Her eyebrows went down with displeasure, then up in wonder.

“I do not know what you mean,” she said.

“The ending I have made would offend your pride, noble one; and then your scorn would tread on the heel of my temper. When plenty of paths open before us, why choose one that we know leads to bad walking?”

Why, indeed? Unless because she was a woman? Her gray Valkyria eyes lighted as at a challenge, for all that she remained leaning against her tree.

“You make a mistake, Songsmith,” she told him, “to think that I would be offended with you for doing a thing which I asked you to do. Give me a chance, I pray, to show that I am not so without sense.”

Randvar drew his harp up higher upon his breast, then lowered it until it rested upon the ground.

“My singing-mood has passed,” he said shortly,

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“but I will tell you the ending, since you will have your way. My story branches from your skald’s song where Fridtjof comes to ask Ingeborg of her brother Helge. Your song has it that when Helge refuses to make the match, because Fridtjof has no more than a freeman’s rank while Ingeborg is king-born, she takes it quietly and marries the old King Ring and sees no more of the man she loves, until Ring gets so old as to be tired of living and gives her to the young man, with his crown and the other things he is through with. Bah!” The Songsmith warmed in spite of himself, flung back his sun-burnished mane with the fierce grace of a stallion. “A man of spirit, your Fridtjof! Mine would have laughed in her face. My Fridtjof takes her in the teeth of Helge’s refusal; and she comes to him willingly, as befits a woman of brave kin; and he wrests Ring’s kingdom from him in battle. That is the way I end it.”

“That is the best way!” cried two little pages who had come up with cups of hot spiced wine, and their shrill enthusiasm changed the women’s breathless listening into laughter.

The Jarl’s sister laughed too, turning aside to beckon her favorite, Eric, to bring her own particular cup.

“Have thanks for the telling, Songsmith,” she said, and swung the horn lightly aloft in the grace-

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ful gesture of drinking to him. "Would it be to your mind now to tell us some tale of forest adventure?"

No word of comment! It was in accordance with her promise not to be offended, but Randvar discovered of a sudden that he would rather she had quarrelled with him. He did not answer her question, but busied himself drinking the wine that was offered him. When he had given the cup back, he said abruptly:

"It is to my mind to see first how this matter stands. Maybe you believe that because she was king-born, Ingeborg would marry Ring even though she had love towards Fridtjof?"

"I do not believe that she would have had love towards Fridtjof," Brynhild answered calmly.

He felt himself growing angry as he asked her why not.

Her shapely shoulders rose. "For one thing, his manners would not be at all after her taste. He would think it big and manful to be careless about his clothes and his hair and such matters, and she would think it disgusting."

A moment Rolf's son was dumb, marvelling that a word-arrow could sting so; then, as blood to a wound, his temper surged into his face, till Eric thought it an imposing thing to step in front of his mistress. Immediately after, he was picking him-

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self out of a briar-patch, a dozen steps away; and Randvar faced the Jarl's sister, his voice deep with ire.

"Have you the intention to tell me," he demanded, "that it is a woman's turn of mind to care only about the cut of a man's garments or the length of his hair? That a great love could not lay hold of her as a hurricane lays hold of an oak and shake down all little matters like acorns?" He folded his arms tightly across his breast as he waited for her answer, conscious that if she should shrug her shoulders at him again he would be tempted to shake her.

But she yawned instead.

"I dare say it might befall a bondmaid to get carried out of herself," she assented. "Rulers' daughters learn to rule themselves, and noblewomen take everything coldly."

He unfolded his arms, then, and began to laugh. "Coldly! It were good had I a shield to show you yourself in as you say that, Starkad's daughter! Through every fibre of your beauty, from the light in your eyes to the ruddy gold of your hair, runs the color of flame. The red of your lips is the fiery blood of the North that no ice can cool; and every motion of your slim hand kindles fire in the breasts of the men who look on you. Jarl's sister, when that fire shall break out against your

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rule, it will blaze as much higher than a bondmaid's passion as your spirit is stronger than hers. Coldly!" He laughed again, as he stepped back to swing his harp over his shoulder.

It seemed that his laughter pressed her pride hard; she rose suddenly, her hand crushing a mottled eagle-feather she had picked up; but she did not quite lose the composure she had pledged. After a moment she tossed the feather aside, smiling haughtily.

"Behold how you are so bent on a quarrel that you try to make one all by yourself," she said. "Let us talk about something else. I wish you would tell me whether it is because the Skraellings cannot say the word 'Norway' that they call the Town by that queer name of 'Norumbega'— But, listen! Is it as it seems, that I hear my kinsman calling you?"

Randvar hoped that she did, realizing that his humor made a change of scene advisable. He welcomed the sound of his name shouted peremptorily from the group around the bowlders. A muttered word and a hasty bow, and he was in retreat, trampling savagely every creeping green thing he encountered.

The temper of the group into which he came matched well his own. The three old counsellors were growling like three dogs over a bone; and like

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a bone picked almost bare of endurance, the Jarl held his rigid place among them. He turned sharply as the song-maker approached, and Randvar was startled to see how in that short time the fleeting expression had become fixed upon him. Fierceness unmistakable it showed now. In the struggle to hold it under, he had bitten his lips bloody.

“Songsmith,” he said, “you know best why you gave me the counsel to fare across the river with but few men, and trust myself unarmed in the Skraelling camp. If any power lies at your tongue-roots, make the reason clear to these Mimir-heads. I have tried until my tongue foams like a goaded horse, but it seems that I do not speak their language.”

Sigvat Smooth-Speech made him a gesture that was half deprecating, half paternal. “There is nothing new in that, lord, that to the ears of age the fancies of youth sound like a forgotten language. To talk of trusting a wild man that he may trust you—Jarl, the Fenrir-wolf will be let loose before good will come of that!”

“To talk of trusting wild beasts because they have the shape of men!” snorted the adviser who stood beside Sigvat.

And Mord the Grim frowned at the son of Rolf, as he stroked the grizzled beard that clung to his

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chin like foliage to an oak's lower branches after its poll is bare.

"Jarl, it will never answer our end that you should give yourself into the guidance of a raw woodsman. That the youth is skilled in woodcraft, no one gainsays,—let him rule your hunting, then. Since he has the singing-gift, hand over your entertainments to him. But when it comes to a matter in which one may so act that men's lives hang on it—lord, leave that to us!"

"Leave that to us!" the others echoed.

Helvin made no reply. He had flung himself back upon the wolfskins and was gazing far away into the haze, his blood-streaked lip held between his white teeth. It was left for Randvar to answer.

Long enough to conquer the itch to bandy words with them, the forester stood pushing about a stalk of orange-splotched fungus with his moccasined foot. Then he spoke curtly:

"To this I will reply that because you are raw in knowledge of the Skraellings, you could not follow the track of my reasoning. But like enough you will believe that I am not guessing if I prove how sure of it I am. On what I have said, I will lay down my life. Say, then, that the Jarl shall leave me bound in your hands to suffer death for any harm that befalls him."

The stillness seemed to deepen around them as

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the three old chiefs drew nearer to him. It was Mord who broke the silence.

“That you would bear yourself boldly was to be looked for, but it will not stand to your good if your dream-spinning has made you over-trustful. Though there be no guile behind it, and your mistake be the most excusable that man was ever tricked into, you should not come off with your life.”

“I shall make no mistake,” Randvar answered.

Again the stillness settled, as the Grim One’s eyes probed from their beetling ambush. But he moved at last with a curt gesture.

“So be it,” he assented, and laid a light hand on the young Jarl’s knee. “Lord, all is in readiness.”

As though the touch were fire, Helvin started up. “Too long have we waited as it is! Songsmith, I forgot to listen to your pleading, but it must have been all-powerful. Thorbiorn, be good enough to call those whom I have chosen to accompany me,—I have warned you openly that no old men shall have part there. Such suspicion as cries from your wrinkles would breed murder in a lamb’s heart! Call Bolverk and five guardsmen, and Gunnar and—” He broke off at the spectacle of Randvar delivering his sword into the keeping of Mord. “What is the meaning of this?”

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When Mord had told him in a few words, he burst out angrily.

“That shall not be! He is my friend. The risk is mine. How is any peace-talk to be made without him? Who else can speak enough of the Skraelling tongue?”

“It is no less your people’s risk,” the old counsellor made him stern reminder; and Randvar reassured him briefly:

“Lord, when I learned the Skraelling tongue of the sachim’s son, as I told you, he learned Norse of me in return.”

It would seem that all objections had been met, but Helvin did not yield with his usual reasonableness. Instead, he stood scowling at the tree beside him, his hands picking and tearing at a gray lichen plastered on the bark. Finally, while they waited perplexed around him, he turned his head and looked at the Songsmith.

Meeting the look, Randvar stiffened and spoke amazedly: “Lord, what have I done?”

In words, Helvin made him no answer; but for the space of a heart-beat murder glared from his murky eyes. Then, flinging a sign towards the waiting escort, he strode down to the point where the horses waited at the fording-place, hailed eagerly by the idling groups.

Mord’s tap on the song-maker’s shoulder remind-

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ed him of his share in the bargain. Going aside with the three old men to the prison-chamber they had selected, he submitted his body to be bound to a tree with ropes of walrus-hide.

A wall of evergreens hid the water from his view, but he could follow the progress of the peace party only by interpreting the outbursts of the throng. A farewell of cheers marked the Jarl's departure from this bank; a babel of comment showed when his dark-skinned hosts had received him on the other. Then a waning of interest betokened that he had passed beyond the spectators' range of vision as the Skraelling ranks closed about him to conduct him to the council-fire.

With the suspension of the amusement, the crowd on the shore broke up and came strolling back; sound dwindled to the buzz of the gossips, the occasional shouts of the dice-throwers. Out of the lull there came again to the Songsmith the feeling that he was wakening from a dream, and this time the sensation remained with him.

Slowly, amid the chaos of his mind, thought took shape like this: "When a man is asleep, a hundred strange tokens are of no account; but too many of them in waking life should be taken heed of. I cannot see wherein I have done aught to deserve anger. . . . Once before has he been wroth without enough cause,—the night he came to the

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Tower. . . . Surely I must have been dreaming these five weeks to have so seldom thought of the strange things which took place that night! . . . Now I begin to understand why he harped upon his temper when he offered me to join his following. Offered? Commanded! Here is a riddle that is not solved yet! Why should he force the skaldship on me as though it were the penalty for some crime against him, instead of an honor for which every mouth is watering? Unless, indeed, he feels that his fretfulness makes it more a peril than a pleasure. . . . Certainly to follow a chief who for no cause whatever shifts from a friendly mood to a murderous one — Now that is not possible! I have ever found him the highest-minded man. Some hidden reason must lie under this. It must be that I have stumbled into some misdeed without knowing it. But what? . . . What?"

Slowly his thoughts lost shape, resolved into chaos again. He stood staring down abstractedly at the billowing leaves.

VIII

"Courage is better than sword-strength"

—Northern saying.



NCE, as time dragged by, the song-maker had a vague impression that Olaf was looking at him over a bush; but he was too absorbed to care whether it was so or not. He did not come out of his meditations until the dark hemlock tapestry before him was put aside by a white hand and between the gloomy branches there appeared the bright figure of the Jarl's sister, the trailing riches of her gown up-gathered on her arm as she strolled forth to explore the recesses of the new guest-house.

At sight of him bound to a pine and staked in by three stark old chiefs looking like three shell-barked hickories in their sombre robes, she came to a stand-still, stood with shining head aloft as one who has caught the note of a distant battle-horn. At sight of her, the blood rose in a hot wave to the roots of his hair, and he muttered a prayer to the nearest of his keepers.

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“Be kind enough to tell her that I have no man’s blame for anything,—that I put on these bonds of my own free will.”

It chanced that the man appealed to was Mord the Grim; the old counsellor justified the nickname by the look he bent on Rolf’s son.

“Are you forward in this direction, also?” he inquired. “Starkad’s daughter will not think that news so much worth having.”

Brynhild drew a step nearer and answered for herself: “I should think it a sad story if I did *not* want news about a brave man’s fate. To come from a circle of merry-makers into a group of such menace— Though it were no more than a thrall that was bound here, I should wish to know what this betided him! I beg you to tell me as quick as you can.”

Like a nurse who would scare away an inquisitive child, Mord made his voice ominous. “You guess well that we are not in play, young maiden. The fellow has given himself as a hostage for the Skraellings’ good faith. If he has made any false step in truthfulness or judgment—” A motion towards the sword at his side completed the meaning. “I warn you that you will get sorry sport here. Be pleased to return to your playmates.”

With peremptoriness thinly disguised as courtesy, he stepped forward and swung back the branches

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that she might pass out of the prison-chamber. From the other side of the hemlock wall came like an invitation the rippling laughter of the gossips, the shouts of the dice-throwers. For an instant it was as though she stood on the threshold between two worlds.

It did not take her more than an instant to choose between them. Even disdainfully, she put aside Mord and the merry-makers.

“Do you think me fit only to watch throws for light stakes? I prefer to watch your game with the Fates,” she said, and joined the sinister group under the pine.

In his bound wrists, Randvar’s pulses leaped; but the three advice-givers raised a chorus of protest, of entreaty, of command. What would have resulted is doubtful if there had not come suddenly from the river-bank sounds that struck them dumb,—an outburst of voices rising high above the hum of the slope, a clangor of weapons, a piercing cry:

“The Jarl is attacked!”

In the wink-long hush that followed the outbreak there was discernible a distant noise of savage whoops and yells.

Forgetting his helplessness, the Songsmith tried to leap forward, so that the thongs that held him strained and creaked; and at the same instant the

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three old chiefs turned upon him such faces that Brynhild stepped in front of him as though their knotted hands on their hilts had already drawn their weapons.

“Make sure of it, first!” she demanded. “It may be no more than one of their hideous dances of entertainment. It is said that they sound as bad as battles.”

Disputing, their voices rose shrilly; but Randvar relaxed in his bonds, and bent his head to wipe off on his shoulder the cold drops that had sprung to his upper lip.

“You have a cool wit, Jarl’s sister!” he breathed. “That is the only thing it can be.” He spoke curtly to his keepers: “Why do you spend your force on me? There will be time enough for that hereafter. I advise you to see to it that your own people do not imperil Helvin by breaking the peace without cause.”

It seemed that that danger had already occurred to the old chieftains, as well it might with such uproar of voice and weapon coming from the river-bank. Before Randvar ceased speaking, Thorbiorn and Sigvat had plunged through the hemlocks into the seething caldron below. Now, cursing and brandishing his weapon, Mord flung himself after them, his voice distinguishable above the tumult until the din gradually sank and he occupied the air alone.

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Far removed from the turmoil of the bank seemed the stillness of the hemlock nook where Rolf's son stood worshipping Starkad's daughter. Much as he had claimed to know of the spirit under her pride, he gathered wonder with gazing at her now. As Northern skies by Northern Lights, so were her gray eyes fired; and measured constraint had melted like ice from her motions. Swallow-swift, she had slipped through the branches and come back again, bearing in her white fingers a glowing brand from one of the deserted camp-fires.

He looked at her somewhat blankly, then, asking in wonder: "Are you going to light my funeral pyre?"

"I am going to set you free," she answered, "so that you may have more chances for life than Mord's mercy will grant you if it should prove that the Skraellings are not dancing."

Her silken robes sweeping the leaves, she knelt down before him. Almost she had the fire laid to the ankle-thongs before he could speak.

"No, no! What is coming to me, I must abide here, as I have sworn."

In her upturned face, Valkyria's honor fought with woman's pity. Yet though she took the brand away, she did not rise; the woman in her pleaded as before a lawman.

"Death is too hard an atonement for a mistake.

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Forfeit your post, your hopes of fame, but not your life. I admit that you must pay some fine,—but not your life!” Again she stretched forth the burning wood, desperately, this time, as one who dreads interference.

Strong as a hand, his voice overtook her. “No. I should get the greatest shame.”

The purpose failed in her face before her arm yielded; but at last she rose and cast the brand from her, and stood with hands pressed hard upon her breast.

He had seen in his visions that she would be true to a friend, but he saw now for the first time that she could suffer for one. His love fed on her distress, even while he hastened to reassure her.

“Let it not worry you a jot, sunbright maiden. No likelihood at all is there that I shall come to harm. As I know the temper of my sword, I know the trustworthiness of the men I am leaning on.”

She took her hands from her bosom to wring them. “How can you be certain of that? Your mind is shapen altogether like a dream-spinner’s, that believes good of every one—of savages whom others hold no better than beasts—of Helvin, whom every one else thinks— Ah!” A sudden thought seemed to arrest her. “Now is that likely? That Helvin would be so foolish as to let them dance when he knows what lies upon it for you?”

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As easily believe that he wishes your death! I must find out what is happening now." Heedless of her trailing skirts, she was gone over stubble and stone, her step more light and free than the tread of Odin's shield-maidens in the high halls of his chosen, as she climbed farther up the hill to a ledge of rock which had pushed through the soil and risen in a watch-tower.

When he could no longer catch any gleam of her glowing robes, the song-maker stood with his head leaning back against the tree as if his hope would mount to the sky. He wandered among singing stars until his attention was gradually drawn earthward by a stealthy crackling of the brush on his left.

Between the interlacing twigs, he made out presently a patch of such blue fabric as Thorgrim's son's cloak was fashioned of; but it did not seem reasonable to him that the French One should have strayed so far from the scene of excitement. He could not understand it until Olaf glided into the open and moved towards him, an unsheathed knife glittering against his blue sleeve.

No impulse to call for help came to Randvar—that instinct his life of solitude had blunted—but he put forth all his strength against his bonds, swelling out his chest, hardening the sinews of his limbs, until the thongs that withstood him were

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as iron sawing the flesh. When he found that they would not yield, he became as motionless as the tree behind him; his mouth twisted sardonically as he wondered in what way Erna's proving of his heart against steel was going to serve him now.

As their eyes held each other it is unlikely that either man realized that any but his foe was in the world. Upon their tense nerves it vibrated like a blow when the voice of the Jarl's sister rang out behind them:

"Stand!"

The surprise of it seemed to paralyze Olaf so that for an instant he did stand, remaining poised in the air. Then the curve of his parted lips lost all resemblance to a smile.

"Bright Brynhild, this hand shall show you Helvin avenged!" he said, and cleared the remaining space at a stride, his arm uplifted.

In the draught of a breath she was before him, her slim hands locked about his wrist in the effort to pull it down.

"I bid you stop! Helvin is safe! Do you hear me?"

Perhaps his mind really did not hear her. With each word, his eyes froze faster to the Songsmith. Without so much as glancing at her, he put up his sinewy left hand and pried loose her grasp. The

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bound man cried out to her to give way and leave them,—so little even he knew her Valkyria spirit.

Thunder - strong it gathered in her, lightning-swift it struck. Swooping on the sword which Olaf's move left exposed at his side, she tore it free. With its upward sweep, she struck the knife from his hold. With its downward stroke she levelled at his breast. He leaped back just in time to save his life, if the rigidness of her arm told the truth.

“Do you think I am as poor-spirited as you are dastardly?” she said.

At a bound his mind was brought back to her, then; and once back, it would have been a dull mind not to see that his suit was in even greater danger than his body. In a trice he had doffed passion, donned reproach.

“Brynhild! Is it really as it seems, that because my loyalty runs away with my manners, you speak so to me?”

“I know not why you will talk of manners,” she retorted, “when what your passion ran away with was your honor, that ought to have taught even a thrall better than to fall upon a fettered man.”

“A thrall?” He spread out his hands in indignant protest. “Little shall a thrall know of a high-born man's wrath over the slaying of his chief! Am I not, before all else, a free Norseman? Only this morning, maiden, did you upbraid me

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because my French rearing had underlaid my Norse temper! Now, behold, when my Northern blood breaks out in its native wildness you stab me with eyes, words!—oh, use the sword! The steel would be more kind.”

Gracefully he sank on his knee before her, making as though he would bare his breast for the stroke. Perhaps a maid of France would have shrunk or swooned. Perhaps it took him by surprise that she stood with unshaken hand, studying him as one studies an unfamiliar object.

“I do not know that I have the wish to be kind to you,” she said slowly. “I do not know how I feel towards you, for you are not the man I thought I knew. Perhaps you should not have blame, since you believed Helvin slain, yet—”

Her voice quickened as a chorus sounding through the trees heralded the old counsellors' return. She shifted the sword with an imperious gesture.

“Rise up! It will happen to you to be seen in that foolish position! I cannot tell whether I shall ever have liking towards you again or not. Rise up, and go away from me until I find out.”

He had risen while she was speaking, but whether he would obey her last command was for an instant uncertain. Turning from her, his eyes rested again on the Songsmith; his empty hands began to open

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and shut at his sides. Only the grim voice of Mord, falling on the pause, seemed to catch and hold him. Even as he gave way step by step, his vulture eyes clung to the song-maker until the bushes rose like walls between them.

While the branches that closed behind Olaf were still aquiver, the hemlock boughs opened upon Mord and his associates. Filing in stiffly, they sat them down heavily upon boulder and hummock.

“A man of my years,” Mord panted, “does not take it lightly to have his heart turned over in him because some red apes choose to hop around in mock warfare. Get what enjoyment you can out of it, Rolf’s son, that so far your savages have not belied you. When their foolishness was over, the Jarl let so much news out as to send a messenger over to tell us that he was safe and getting all the favors he asked for,—after we had spent that much time in doubt and endangered as many lives as there are bodies among us! May Hel take fools and leave knaves, if she have not room for both! Jarl’s sister, even you seem to have lost your wits, to go about flourishing a sword, with cheeks as red to look at as your kirtle. I thought you made it your boast to take things coldly.”

*Coldly!** For the first time Randvar recalled their dispute of the morning, looked at the fire-breathing Valkyria, and smiled in spite of himself.

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At the same breath, she darted him a glance that was half startled and half menacing. The flaming of her color was not more marked than the stiffening of her spine as she caught his expression.

He sobered in haste. "Jarl's sister, no faintest intention had I of making mockery!"

She deigned him no answer whatever. With awful precision she planted the sword in the earth beside her, with awful deliberation gathered up her silken skirts, without a backward glance swept from the prison-chamber. Twice he called after her without avail,—so disastrous may a victory be!

Like a fog, sullen rage settled upon him then. When the old chiefs asked him what Starkad's daughter was doing with the sword, he clipped his answer as close as might be:

"Olaf, Thorgrim's son, lent it to her to cut his luck-thread with."

When they questioned him about her displeasure, he conceded no more than an ungracious movement of his shoulders. Old Mord was impelled at last to scowl at him over the cloak-end with which he was mopping his face.

"Olaf the French," he observed, "was fostered in a land where they have the good custom of teaching manners as well as courage. Sure am I that such a training would have bettered you, Rolf's son, more than you think. I have, however,

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a good hope that even as autumn thunder ripens the grain, this tempest may have ripened your green judgment; so that hereafter you will be less quick to sneer at the caution of old men, and more slow to stake your all on any belief. Though the Skraellings keep faith with you, remember this—that you came near losing your life through your lord's folly, who accepted such entertainment without any regard to the effect it might have upon your state. If you had offended him so that he had the wish to murder you, he could not have gone about it better."

Mopping his face, he continued to speak at intervals in praise of discretion; but Rolf's son lost what followed by reason of the ringing of that one sentence in his ears—"If you had offended him so that he had the wish to murder you, he could not have gone about it better." . . . It seemed that Helvin had thought himself offended . . . that murder had looked out of his eyes. . . .

His head falling forward upon his breast, Randvar stood as one listening to an evil voice within him.

IX

"Gift always looks to recompense"

—Northern saying.



THROUGH the dusk, the Skraelling fires across the river made no more showing than a cluster of glow-worms on a log; but—true to the saying that "Famine-pinched stomachs are the greatest gluttons"—the Norse fire-builders had heaped wood on blaze until their forest guest-house revelled in a brightness as of noonday.

The peace-party had been back for the space of three candle-burnings, long enough for the first tumult of greeting to have subsided, and yet not so long but that the aroma of the new interest still flavored the air. In complacent beard-stroking groups, the old chiefs stood about the bank, congratulating one another upon the advantages which the alliance would secure to the fur-traffic and the trade in massur-wood. Trying on shell necklaces and quill-embroidered shoes, Brynhild's women were turning the leaf-carpeted slope into

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a bower. In the hemlock nook which had been the prison-chamber, two guardsmen were giving an imitation of an Indian war-dance which sent the pages rolling on the earth in convulsions of merriment; and near by, another gathering watched with breathless interest while Gunnar the Merry experimented with the trophy which he had brought back,—a strange smoke-producing implement made up of a long reed, a big stone thimble, and a pinch of strangely smelling leaves.

Of none of these groups, however, was the Jarl or his song-maker a part. Still farther up the rising ground, on the very edge of the shadow-breeding wood, a mighty pine had toppled over and lay head downward, its huge clod of roots and soil upturned like a dead giant's feet. There, skulking wolf-like in the shade, Helvin leaned against the writhen mass, bending and tearing the tough fibres with his restless hands; while along the huge trunk below him, as a panther along a bough, the deerskin-clad figure of Rolf's son lay stretched out.

Now and again, from the fireside groups came up snatches of song or a merry outburst of voices. But none of it moved the Jarl to speech, and for once the Songsmith chose to remain under cover of custom and wait until he was addressed.

Now and again, a largess of dead leaves caused

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a grateful dancing of the flames that stretched the circle of ruddy light even to the timber's edge. Gazing upward, Randvar had a fleeting glimpse of the brooding white face on which that strange, evil expression had deepened to a stain. But always before he had a chance to study it, the light failed.

Convinced at last that he fronted the unknown, he waited tense as a bowstring, alert as an arrow. Almost he shot from his place when low laughter burst from Starkad's son,—laughter so devil-like that a wave of coldness started at his neck and rippled down to his heels.

"You think yourself a sly fox as you lie there watching me!" Helvin said, "but you need not take so much trouble. I have got over the wish to kill you."

It seemed to Randvar as if the rippling wave must have frozen, so rigid did he become.

"Is it even so, then, that you tried to betray me?" he asked slowly.

"I hope you did not look for anything better from me," Helvin returned, and laughed again.

So unbearable was the low sound that Randvar sat up sharply, and spoke with anger: "I did though! I expected that even if your wrath rose like a sea-wall against me, you would vent it in some honorable way."

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“You know better now,” Helvin answered grimly.

“That is certain,” Randvar assented with equal curtness; and for a space there was silence between them, save for the sound of Helvin’s hands tearing the root-fibres.

In the low choked voice of one holding under a fearful force, Helvin broke out at last. “I never saw a greater blockhead! and I treated you better than you deserved. It mattered not that you were quick to mark the change in my manner,—still you could not guess that from the time the trees closed around me, I saw nothing but the old troll’s twisted face in every shadow, heard nothing but his cursed ghost gibbering vengeance in my ear! Never did I so need that you should closely stand by me with your fearless mind; and what did you do, instead, but bungle it so that I had to leave you behind! I can tell you that death was likelier than life as you stood then. I wonder I did not become the fiend you saw at the Pool.”

“The fiend I saw at the Pool!” Randvar repeated, and the impulse to face standing whatever might lie before him made him start to rise to his feet. But at the first motion, Helvin’s hand fell upon his shoulder with the weight of a lion’s paw and crushed him back upon his seat.

“Now are you hot-headed,” he snarled, “and

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there is rashness in your actions, and that is foolish in a cool-witted man like you. It is not enough that you have made the bargain to go through Torment with me; you have got to go quietly. Quietly! do you understand that or not? *Ah!* You are not going to be so great a fool as to struggle.—Bear in mind what it means to thwart me!”

But it was not the gripping hand that Randvar was struggling against, though the fingers had sunk into his flesh like iron hooks. It was against that awful dizzy madness that had come again upon him at the touch of Starkad's son. In the same flash of time he knew two things—that his “gift” was making him aware of a terrible presence, and that he resented that gift with every fibre of his forest-bred body. Doubly racked, he battled for the space of a heart-beat, then reached instinctively for the sharp medicine of his blade.

Even as his flesh tasted it and his disorder passed, the fire leaped redly, revealing the blazing eyes of rage above him, disclosing his horror-twisted mouth to the Jarl. With a stifled cry, Starkad's son quitted his hold.

“Why do you look at me like that? Oh God, do the marks show on me? I thought I should escape—escape—”

His voice lost the semblance of a voice, became an inarticulate wail; and to it was added the sound

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of rending cloth as he started up in his lair. In frantic haste he strove to disentangle his cloak and draw it up over his breast and around him in a hood; but he only tangled it harder and pulled the folds awry and lost the end from between his numb fingers. Giving up the attempt, finally, he cast it over his head and flung himself down upon the earth, moaning a single word over and over like a wounded bird of one note.

More like was it to a sound of bird or beast than to human speech. Every nerve strained in the endeavor to comprehend, every sense baffled, the song-maker stood staring down at him. At last he bent, speaking desperately:

“Either you are dumb or I am deaf! Make me a sign.”

Plunging and reeling, the black shape reared itself from the ground; though even in the shadow it would not uncover its face. From the cloak-folds came forth a shaking hand, which fell on the Songsmith's arm and groped its way to his shoulder. Brushing his cheek, it left the skin wet, though its touch was the touch of fire. From his shoulder, it passed over to the harp at his back and put all its force into smiting the strings into one discordant cry, before it fell back into the cloak-folds, and the cloaked form fell prone upon the earth.

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Randvar understood then that he was to sing; and before he was erect, the harp was off his back. Like the voice of a night-bird pouring out its soul to the listening forest, his voice rang from the shadow.

Down on the firelit slope, the merry groups, ceased their sports and gave him joyous hearing; and the echoes in the hills across the splashing river awoke and answered him sleepily; but of what he sang he had no consciousness, nor ever afterwards could recall it. Like a dead thing lay the mound at his feet; and as flies around the dead, his thoughts buzzed around its secret.

Slowly understanding came. . . . The troll-temper of the father had descended upon the son . . . Denied the vent of battle-fury, it had taken some uglier shape, some monstrous shape that galled the Jarl's pride to own! . . . It had possessed him that day at the Pool, and he believed that the for-ester had seen its degrading marks. . . . Its marks! Shrinking, Randvar's memory groped among the myriad tales he had heard of men accursed . . . yelping teeth-gnashing Berserkers with frothing distorted mouths . . . souls doomed to raven in brutes' bodies . . . wits to sleep in the bestial forms of swinish cinder-biters. . . .

Like a strain falling from Valhalla to the World of the Dead, the voice of Yrsa the Lovely fell pres-

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ently on his ear, calling out a merry good-night as she went away with the rustling train of women to the booths that had been erected for them. A moment his gaze wandered to follow out of sight the head of fiery gold that moved before them, but still he sang on.

Above the trees, presently, Night raised her silver bow and shot bright arrows through the leafless branches. Watching the shafts strike and melt into pools of moonshine at his feet, his eyes lost their alertness; his song grew dreamy, slackened and sank low as the note of a dreaming bird. But still he kept on.

Breathing the melody rather than singing it, he saw unheeding how the bright beams reached to the cloak-wrapped form and groped like hands along it; he was slow in realizing that one of the pale spots in the shadow was not moonlight, but a wan face upturned. His song ended in a gasp, when the truth did come home to him. Sometime he stood motionless before he dared speak and ask: "Lord, how is it with you?"

The answer came out of the shadow, "It is well with me," but no minor chord ever made the song-maker's heart swell in his breast as did the voice in which the words were spoken. It became nothing to him what mask the tortured face might be wearing. Kneeling beside the prostrate

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body, he raised it up until the mass of blood-red hair rested even on his shoulder.

As a drowned man rises out of the deeps, so the Jarl seemed to rise out of the shadow into the moonlight. And as the face of one who has known the agony of buffeting waves, so was his face blanched and drawn; but no other mark was upon him. Only infinite weariness was on the finely cut mouth; in the sea-gray eyes, only infinite sadness. The swelling of the song-maker's heart became a sharp pain in his throat.

But the Jarl said gently: "Once when I had fallen into such a strait as this, I would not accept your help. See now how I lean on you! There will ever be most help in you when there is most need of it. My true friend, for this—this!—what shall requite you?" He put up his hand; and because Randvar could not speak, he wrung it in silence.

Then gradually Helvin's strength came back to him; so that he put out his other hand and taking hold of a branch, drew himself to his feet, and stood supported half by the tree, half by the shoulder of the Songsmith.

"Soon are my powers renewed in me," he said. "Even as David did for Saul, you cast the devil out; and before he had gone his length—God! the length he goes! Can you raise before your mind what my state was that day, when I turned

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and espied a man watching me from the bushes? When my arrow missed him, and I knew that my secret was loose in the world? Ah! I do not want to remember that! Wine! Give me wine!"

Randvar's hand unfastened the flask from his neck without the knowledge of his wits, that were like thunder in his ears, roaring explanation of all that had puzzled him. Out of the tumult, he spoke earnestly:

"Jarl, I am five weeks too slow in telling you that a great mistake has been made. It is the truth that horror drove me mad that day, but not horror of you,—never of *you!* Listen! Even as I stepped from the bushes and saw the Pool and saw you—"

On the Songsmith's lips, Helvin's hand fell lightly. Wincing, he had turned away.

"Let not that be put into words which in thought alone is more than I can bear!" he said. "Besides, to what end is it? I know that it was not from me that you shrank, but from the devil that uses my body; and for any hatred you feel towards that, or harm you do it—if ever you come together, which God avert!—you need have no remorse. Though all your power were bent upon it, you could never hate it—abhor—"

A shuddering fit shook him, so that words became but bubbles of sound bursting idly on his

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lips. When he spoke again, his voice was very low.

“Bitter is it to speak of! For love’s sake, spare me the need. I know now that—even with that vision before your eyes—your song-maker’s spirit was able to separate me from the Thing which Fate has linked me to. Had not myself experienced it, I would not have believed any man brave enough to make that separation. Times there are when *I* cannot make it; when I loathe myself as Satan never loathed himself, else would his heart change and the world be sinless! I call your help no more than it is when I tell you that I should die of self-horror if I could not look at you and say, ‘I am not beyond the pale, for here is a man who gives me friendship and honor even while knowing the worst of me!’” His voice, which had sunk to an unsteady breath, was smothered out as he pressed his face against the rough bark of the tree.

The Songsmith did not use the opportunity, however, to finish the explanation he had begun. Instead, he stood staring down at the sleeping camp and weighing the possibility of seeming to have this knowledge, foreseeing the blind maze he should enter on, the sword he should hang over his life, the horror to which he should bind himself.

It was Helvin who ended the pause, as he had

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made it. Turning, he laid both hands on Randvar's shoulders, and as he spoke, looked lovingly into his face.

“Good is your singing and your service, but your friendship is worth still more! Such it is, that no reward can match it,—the joy of giving must be its own reward. Only can I tell you what it has meant to me that never hoped to know the support of a friend. When my dreams were brightest, I dreamed only of getting good-will by hiding the truth. What makeshift would that have been! What peace is this! Greater loss to me than to you would it have been if you had lost your life to-day. My friend, I do not ask that this may be forgiven me, for that would be to own that it was I who sought to work you harm, and that fiend was not I. Yet this I will say, that I should think it the best gift I ever got if you could tell me with a whole heart that this has not caused any breach to rise in our friendship.”

After a little, the Songsmith raised his bowed head and met the gray eyes steadily.

“My love is great, lord, towards many men,” he said, “but towards none so much as you. Till my death-day, I will hold to my faithfulness to you.”

X

"It must be worse before it gets better"

—Northern saying.



THIS ruddy face thrice ruddy with cold, Bolverk, the guardsman, came stamping into the great trading-booth, kicked the door shut upon the ice-bound out-of-doors and let go a shivering breath of appreciation at the sight of the fur-littered weapon-hung room, down whose middle fires were leaping, and along whose wall-benches shaggy-maned hunters and sleek-locked Skraellings sat consuming hot drink in the intervals of bargaining.

"Hail, friends!" he greeted the company. "Now does the bread of life seem to be buttered on both sides! Here are you on the inside, as snug as fleas on a goat; and outside, I just met a young one merry because his breath froze in such clouds that he had only to stick a knob-ended root between his lips to have the appearance of smoking like a Skraelling."

The double row of faces that had turned towards

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him answered variously by grins or jests or grunts, but the trader's headman looked up from the heap of beaver skins that thralls were sorting before him to wave a cordial hand.

"Now this day seems to have been set for the return of long-absent people! Welcome to you, Bolverk the Bold! Not so much as a hair have I seen of you for three months and more."

"That is easily true," the guardsman assented, "for since Treaty Day I have camped as far south as Freya's Tower. And I have worn out my shoes there, as you may see. How long would it be before you could look me up another pair? From the appearance of your benches, I should not say that the lack of my custom had caused suffering to you."

"Nay, it is your company that we have suffered for," the trader's man answered, as became a trader's man. "But I need not keep you waiting if you will give to Eldir, here, one of your old shoes for a sample."

He beckoned a bondsman to attend on the guard, while with his head he signed another thrall to bring forward the smoking ale; and Bolverk succumbed contentedly into a seat.

"Mind this, that you get me a pair that is easy across the toes," he admonished the slave kneeling before him. Then he stretched out his

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hand to take the offering of the one standing beside him, and questioned lazily as he sipped: "Who are the rest of the long-absent people who have arrived?"

"Some score of them you may see before you; and in that end room yonder, among the gold things, is Olaf, Thorgrim's son,—the most open-handed man! Since Treaty Day, for some reason, he has turned his back on the court and dwelt at the house of Mord the Grim, and only—"

Bolverk left off sipping to interrupt joyfully: "Now I wonder if it is going to happen that there is a fight? As I turned in here, I looked down a lane and saw Randvar the Songsmith headed in this direction."

The row of hunters straightened, some of them rolling on their tongues the word "fight"; some raising their horns with shouts of "The Songsmith!" but the trader's man shook his head above the furs to which he had turned back.

"They cannot lock horns. The lawmen have bound them to peace, on pain of outlawry to the one who breaks it. On the way home from the treaty-making, it befell that the Songsmith flew at Olaf, and would have given him a swift death if men had not come between them. They do not dare to do aught else than be good. It is unlikely, moreover, that the Songsmith has the

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slightest intention of coming hither. So long as he has that deerskin-husk and that battered sword, no use has he for a trading-booth."

Disapproval was in the headman's gesture as he kicked aside the fur heap he had finished examining. But Bolverk shook his helmed head in disapproval of him.

"It is your traders' thrift that talks now, comrade, not your Norse spirit," he said. "Some bad habits the Fates allot every man at his birth; and he should be considered lucky who uses up his allowance of them on clothes, and keeps his mind high and his courage without stain, as Randvar, Rolf's son, has done."

"Yes, yes!" chorussed the fur-clad hunters, banging the benches with their fists. And the youngest of them brought his drink-drenched body upright with a jerk, and tried to look severely through sleepy eyes.

"Whosoever says aught slighting of Rolf's son gives offence to me," he made announcement. "I l-ove him because he wears clothes like mine. I l-l-ove him because he is poor. I l-l-l—"

"Poor!" The trader's man laughed impatiently. "Good Bend-the-Bow, are you too drunk to understand that I am talking about the Jarl's favorite, whose shabby belt-pouch is fuller of gold than your head of wits, — even when you

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are sober and they are all at home? If he were still a ringless forester, who would stir tongue about his habits? It is because he has gold to spend but is too careless to do it, that he has my blame; and I would lay my purse on it that this is a part of the cause why he has lost credit with the Jarl's sister, as gossips say he has. Yet you need not think that I undervalue what is inside his shell. Far and wide, it is known that he brought this treaty to pass which is going to send such ship-loads to Norway in the spring as never left port before. For that, all traders lift their horns to him; and I should dislike to have it come to his ears that I—"

"Then hold your peace for here he comes!" the guardsman interrupted, and stood up with a genial bellow to pitch at the opening door one of the shoes which a thrall had just handed him.

It was a rash act since the new-comer might just as easily have been the Jarl as the Jarl's song-maker—the trading-house standing at the junction of many paths—but it came to no bad end for the doorway actually did frame the tall sinewy form of Randvar, Rolf's son, his harp occupying a cloak's place at his back. At sight of him, even the Skraelings changed from bronze images into men with cordial eyes; while the hunters swung up their horns with a burst of cheers. Barely they gave him time

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to hand over his broken harp to the trader's man before they forced him into the place they had made for him, plied him with drink, with toasts, with questions and banter. Bolverk was obliged to limp over in one shoe to get a seat beside him, and get his attention for the confidences with which he was bursting.

They seemed to be of a nature more absorbing to the teller than to the listener for even while he gave one ear to them, Randvar left the other open to the hunter's chaff, and broke out restlessly, now and again, to gibe back or to answer in their own tongue some inquiries from his Skraelling friends. But he did not fail to make the required promise to go down to the wedding-feast in the spring, and aroused himself with proper enthusiasm when the lover came at last to an exulting climax.

"There! If you can anywhere see a better look-out than that, I shall say your eyesight is keener than Erna's."

"Nothing but the sun's can equal it in brightness! I call upon every man who hears my voice to drink to your luck at my expense," the Songsmith answered promptly, and drew a handful of silver rings from his shabby pouch.

If cup-wishes count, never was bride more richly dowered than Snowfrid of Freya's Tower. When

Randvar the Songsmith

it was over, the beaming Bolverk slapped his prospective foster - kinsman affectionately upon the back.

“Nowhere have I found a better comrade than you! To talk one’s affairs over with you is a good help. Now let me show as much friendship and hear how matters have fared with you, these three months. I can see one thing that you have not done, and that is to get fat.”

An old trapper clad in bear’s fur uttered a bear-like grunt.

“Huh! See the gainfulness of having young eyes! As soon as the boy came into the room, I saw that there were lines between his eyebrows like a wagon’s ruts,—and not an empty wagon, either! Better take to the forest again, Rolf’s son, if it weighs so heavily upon your spirit to be a Jarl’s favorite.”

“Better come back to the forest than bear any harness!” the young hunter who sat next to the Songsmith cried scornfully; and a chorus rose after him:

“Never did I think you would stand it, who hate rules as a bear hates a chain!”

“You are a fool to stay in it—”

“Sooner should the Troll take me than I should follow a man who behaved overbearingly, as one of Starkad’s breed must needs—”

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“It is not possible that you can be contented in his service—”

“Come back—”

“What is the jest?”

“What is the cause of your grinning?”

The song-maker's smile ended in his short laugh.

“You,” he answered. “It crossed my mind to fancy myself listening to a pack of wild wolves yelping at a tame one, who had found love for a man and followed him home and broken himself to house-ways. But I will give you a better answer than that to your foolishness.”

He leaned forward where all could see him, the fire showing his thin face to be unmistakably earnest.

“For what you said about Helvin's behavior towards me, I will tell you the first half of a saying the courtmen have made, which is altogether truthful, and which is this: ‘If the Jarl's song-maker should want the Jarl's crown for a dog-collar, he would have to do no more than ask for it.’ And now, for what you said about my liking his service, I will give you the rest of the saying, which is even more true than what went before: ‘And if it should happen to the Jarl to want the Songsmith's head for a hand-ball, he would have to do no more than ask for that.’ Is it clear to you now or not?”

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The hunters had no opportunity to answer. While they were still adjusting their minds to the amazing conviction that their one-time comrade had meant what he said, the door was flung open with a flourish. In all his bravery of embroidered cloak and silver-spurred riding-boots, Eric the Page appeared and proclaimed in his young treble:

“Way for the Jarl’s sister!”

It was the first time the woodsmen had seen this woodland sprig in his splendor. To assail him with familiar greetings and ironical comment became instantly their sole object in life, carried on under their breath even after the Jarl’s sister had entered, and they had scrambled to their feet in rough homage. Randvar was able to step unobserved behind a smoke-blackened pillar and gaze with what bitterness he would upon the face that his pride had come to curse by day while his love starved for it in his dreams.

“I would give all I own in the world had I not known how to smile!” his heart cried out in sudden sharp wretchedness. Then he cursed himself for a fool, cursed her vanity for a curse worse than Helvin’s, and wore the rut deeper between his heavy brows with scowling at her as she passed.

Of rich purple, fur-edged, was the mantle that hung from her fine shoulders; and purple was the velvet hood that lay like an evening cloud upon

Randvar the Songsmith

the sunset glory of her hair; but it needed not the royal coloring to betoken the loftiness of her temper. Even more than its wonted haughtiness was in the carriage of her head as she moved up the long room and passed into the inner chamber, which was the shrine of the jewelled ornaments and gold things.

Bolverk shut one eye expressively, when the fox-skin curtain had fallen behind her and her page.

“Every man to his taste!” he said. “Yet I for one feel no envy of Olaf, Thorgrim’s son, that he is kissing her fingers at this moment. Give me Snowfrid with the kissable mouth!” He was reaching for his horn to seal the sentiment when Randvar’s hand closed on his arm.

“Is Olaf, Thorgrim’s son, in there?” the Songsmith asked in his ear.

The man-at-arms regarded him admonishingly. “Why, I think they say he is. But they say also that the one of you two who begins a fight will get outlawed.”

Randvar made no answer; his gaze had gone back to the door-curtain. If the French One should remain there after she entered, it would be a sign that his disfavor was at an end, that she had taken him back into her friendship— He broke off to watch with suspended breath.

Dashing the fox - skins aside, Mord the Grim

Randvar the Songsmith

stamped through the door; and after him Olaf backed into the room, bowing ceremoniously before the presence he was leaving. If further proof were needed that the greeting of the Jarl's sister had not been cordial, that proof was furnished as he turned on the threshold and espied his rival watching him. Seizing his sword-hilt, regardless of Mord's shrill expostulations, he strode towards the Songsmith.

They seemed for once to have changed places for Randvar made no more motion to attack than to evade, only stood smiling at him in unconcealed malicious enjoyment. When Thorgrim's son was within a pace of him, he took off his fur cap and swept him a salute mockingly elaborate, then folded his arms upon his breast in the formal sign of peace.

White on purple showed the veins of Olaf's forehead, as he came to a stand-still before the exasperating figure. Perhaps even at the price of banishment he would have purchased revenge, if his friends had not saved him from the rash bargain. To the utter disgust of the by-standers, three of the traders' men seized upon him now and with respectful words but peremptory hands, dragged him past temptation and out of the door.

Raising a chorus of disappointment, the loungers closed again around the laughing Songsmith, scold-

Randvar the Songsmith

ing him, some of them, for not preferring banishment to a life of such restraint; others chaffing him for his decline in spirit; while the Skraellings became almost urgent in their desire to understand why two men should start to fight each other and stop before either was killed.

Lingering to buckle his many mantles, old Mord watched the group. When at last he was muffled for his ride, he halted on his way out to look at the jesting song-maker from under an arch of bristling brows.

"Since I see what a man you are to get friends behind you," he said, "my wonder grows less at the boldness you showed at the treaty-making. Soon, instead of the favorite of the Jarl, you will be calling yourself the favorite of New Norway."

Over the ring of tow manes surrounding him, Randvar gave back his look carelessly, wondering what new fuel his fiery prejudice had chanced upon. He found out when Mord had reached the door and, opening it, flung this parting shot over his shoulder.

"A most beloved man you appear to be,—I bid you only beware how you carry it too far. The sagas do not lack instances of king-born men whose bane came out of their boldness. It would be unlucky if some one should whisper to the Jarl that you are ambitious to get more popularity than he has."

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The Songsmith doffed his merry mood at that, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Then they widened in dismay as darting past Mord to the threshold, they encountered the gray-clad form of the Jarl himself, silhouetted against the white glare of the sunlit snow.

In the pause that followed, Starkad's son appeared to be the only one at ease. Inclining his head in acknowledgment of the advice-giver's salute and the hunters' uncertain murmur, he came slowly forward, drawing off his furred gloves.

"That is rightly said," he assented, "that if such a whisper should come to my ears it would be very unlucky. The prophecy is wrong only in hinting that it is for the song-maker that the bad luck would come in." He answered with a reproachful look Randvar's look of relief.

What Mord answered could not be heard for the cheers that the hunters let forth for Helvin Jarl. Only the slamming of the door behind the advice-giver made a faint jar.

The Jarl thanked them graciously when the racket was over, then addressed himself to his friend:

"So long was your harp-string in mending that it pleased me to come on here and look for an arrow-ornament to take the place of the one I lost. Let us betake ourselves now to the search. It is

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likely to be in the inner chamber among the gold things." Laying a hand upon Randvar's shoulder, he moved him forward, speaking carelessly of this or that weapon on the wall.

But only so long as they were within ear-shot of the groups on the benches did the Songsmith yield to the pressure. Fire-color had flamed in his face. By main force he came at last to a stand-still, and spoke without looking at his companion:

"I think, lord, that I will not go in with you. I am not used to so much heat—and the smell of the furs— I will await you under the oak. I find that—I am not well. By your leave!"

But the tightening of his lord's hand upon his shoulder showed that he did not have his leave.

"Not well? What nonsense is here! It was on my tongue to say that not since Treaty Day have I seen you wear such a merry face. For more than two months have you moped like a captive hawk, with sullen temper and feathers adroop, but now— Why, it was the first thing I marked when I looked through the door and saw you bantering with your hunter friends! Comrade, swear to me that your mind-sickness is not homesickness. If I should think that the fetters of my service were eating into your brave heart—"

Randvar the Songsmith

“I swear I have no homesickness.”

“God is to be thanked for that! Take oath also that I would have no power to straighten the threads if you should tell me what the snarl is.”

The song-maker flung back his hair restlessly from his face of fierce unhappiness. “Jarl, it stings my pride that I have not been able to hide from you the soreness of my mind. Let it pass for the spring sap working in me. I take oath that no man alive can give me aught I want. Be pleased, lord, since it is your will!” As with one hand he put the matter aside, with the other he put aside the fox-skin curtain. After a moment, Helvin yielded and entered.

It was plainly indifferent to the Jarl that Brynhild the Proud should chance to be coming from the iron-bound chests, preceded by a walking heap of rainbow silks. He returned her reverence with a courtly greeting, then turned and made a kindly motion towards the figure drawn up rigid as a spear-shaft in the shadow of the doorway.

“We have seen little of you, my kinswoman, since you made the winter weather an excuse for staying away from our feasts,” he added, “yet do not lose us your remembrance. Will you not give a greeting to my song-maker here? It is not unlikely that he has felt the lack of your presence as much as you have missed his songs.”

Randvar the Songsmith

Perforce, the Songsmith plucked the cap from his head and advanced. Perforce, her gaze was turned upon him.

“Oh, is it your song-maker?” she said indifferently. “I thought one of the woodsmen had followed you in to get some hunting-gear.” Deliberately she looked him up and down, her gray eyes more forbidding than a gray ice-waste under Northern skies. With a shrug she turned from him at last.

“If you please, brother, I think I would rather not greet him,” she said. “Better that we should look on it as though he were a woodsman after all, who might mistake my condescension and become forward.”

Courtesying as low as her manner was high, she swept past the Jarl and through the door, beyond which the silk-laden page was awaiting her.

XI

"A wise man's guess is a prophecy"

—Northern saying.



UT in the long trading-hall there was a confusion of shuffling feet, as the company rose to show respect to the Jarl's kinswoman; but over the inner chamber such silence reigned that the rows of rich garments hanging around the walls took on the semblance of listening figures. Rooted where his sister had left him, the Jarl stood gazing incredulously at his friend, and the song-maker's head was bowed over the cap he was tearing in strips.

Helvin said at last: "Songsmith, you took oath that no man could give you aught,—is it as it would seem, that what you desire is a woman's help?"

The Songsmith made no other answer than a movement of his bent shoulders, but that was answer enough. Starkad's son said disgustedly:

"This is how it is, then,—you have sulked and chafed for lack of my sister's favor, even though

Randvar the Songsmith

you have my friendship and every honor that friendship can devise. There is more shame in your falling before her than of all men else. I wonder not that you were ashamed to own it to me. To confess that after all your boasted wildness you had put on her yoke as tamely as any mincing courtman among them! Tamely? Cravenly! How does this hang together, that you have a man's pride yet like any whipped hound give love in return for abuse!"

"*Trolls*, lord!" the song-maker gasped, flinging his cap on the floor.

Helvin made a change from scorn to sternness. Placing his foot upon an iron-bound chest, he set his elbow on his knee in an attitude of exhortation.

"Curse and stamp as much as suits you, — I should do no friend's part if I did not deal severely with you. You go not hence until I have given you such a bitter dose as shall cure your mind of that sickness while life lasts in you. So take breath to swallow—"

Randvar let breath go, instead, in desperate protest. "It needs not, lord! I am cured. Could you give me anything to equal her look in bitterness? I am cured from this day forth. Give me leave to go."

But the Jarl's out-stretched arm made a bar across the path to the door.

Randvar the Songsmith

“Too sudden is your recovery; it suggests that of a child who sees the medicine-bowl coming his way. It has come to this, that I shall be convinced only when we have talked the matter out at length and— What! wincing already? Is that a sign of sound flesh? Face about, there! You may make up your mind to one of two things: either to answer my questions and so disgust yourself with your folly, or else to listen while I drag your weakness forth into such bright light as—”

“I will answer,” Randvar said between his teeth, and set them hard.

“Begin then by telling me what I think I know already, that she had no reason for believing her dignity trod upon.”

“Who shall say what looks like reason to a woman? If you must know, she had this much cause that on Treaty Day we disputed together about a matter and in an evil hour it happened that I was proved to be right, and when I saw it, I smiled,—no more than a twitching back of the lips, lord! In the same breath I asked her to excuse it! But she left me without a word, refused me admittance when I went to her hall, flouted me when I accosted her — slighted — scorned— Only the Devil who made them knows why women do anything!” He gave the cap a vicious kick as he started to pace the floor.

Randvar the Songsmith

But Helvin added severely: "And only the Lord who made men knows why they hanker after such creatures! Behold how your own mouth has convicted you of the greatest folly!"

That was all, perhaps, that the song-maker was able to behold, even though his gaze halted here and there upon garments and weapons as he moved restlessly to and fro. At last he cried out for mercy.

"I will confess myself the greatest fool alive if it will save me from your tongue! I know now what I have always suspected, that King Helge in the song wasted his time in avenging it on Fridtjof that he loved the boneless Ingeborg. That love alone was punishment enough—" Like one struck by a new thought, he stopped before the Jarl.

"It occurs to me, lord," he said, "that you are not carrying out your share of that song! Here am I, a man of no more than free birth—since no one gets his rank from his mother—who have dared to love a ruler's daughter. Why do you not rage against it, as is to be expected? I swear an oath that I would rather endure your wrath for my boldness than continue this talk about my weakness."

"That choice is less hero-like than it sounds, my friend," Helvin answered gravely. "You do

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yourself wrong if you do not know that since Time's morning a man whom Odin has led into the high-seat of skaldship has been held the equal of any blood. And you do me wrong to think that I should forget the nobleness of your mind, whatever your rank. Is it not even because I love you as the very eyes in my head that I cannot bear to see you bend your neck to a pride-crazed woman?"

He took his foot down from the coffer to face the song-maker fairly.

"Oh my comrade, what shall I do to ease you?" he said. "Will you that I should grapple with you and pluck out the barb, though your heart-roots come with it? Or are there any kindly services I might do to heal the flesh and let the thing remain imbedded and forgotten? Do you prescribe now for my love,—I swear no dose shall be too bitter. Though that course be not so good, I would still go to her myself on your behalf, were there hope that she had a heart in her bosom to answer when one knocked."

"It is not that she has not a heart, lord. It is that I am not high enough to reach the bolt upon its door," Randvar answered sadly. He wrung the hand that had clasped his, then threw himself down upon the chest and buried his face in his palms. His words came disjointedly.

Randvar the Songsmith

“Think only what her love would be like, who is so steadfast in her friendship! Had you seen her that day of the Treaty when she came upon me in my bonds—! Why do I rail at her pride, when I would not have her bright head held one jot lower? When Mord turned upon me, I had her as my shield— Lord, when Olaf came against me with his knife, she closed with him! Her slim fingers twined vinelike around the great bole of his wrist. And one of her long braids flew out as she whirled and brushed like a bird’s wing across my lips! Likely it is the last time they will ever feel it.” He got up suddenly and resumed his walking, too deep in wretchedness to heed the quiver of mocking laughter to which Helvin was stirred.

“Think only what her love of her brother must be like, who was so cool-witted while she thought he was being slaughtered!” Starkad’s son murmured.

As swiftly as the mood came, so swiftly it passed. Stepping forward, he began to move beside his friend, speaking indulgently:

“Be of good cheer, comrade,—I foresee now that you shall even kiss her lips if you will.”

Randvar came to himself with a start, and stopped short in anger. “Lord, there are some remedies that even you may not try upon me.

Randvar the Songsmith

If this is done to deride—" His manner changed as he met the gentleness of the gray eyes. "Bear with me! I know you mean me only good. But I cannot see your cheer."

"It is not to the man down in the thick of the fight, but to the man up in the crow's-nest, that it is given to see which way the battle is going. You see only the fury of your foe. I see that she is putting that fury forward to hide the weakness that lies behind it."

Again the song-maker checked his pacing, but this time to ask wonderingly: "Lord, what mean you?"

"My meaning is that she has found out that her breast holds love for you."

"Love!"

"What else, my friend, would make Brynhild the Cold forget her estate and show openly—to Mord—to Olaf—to whomsoever chose to look—the store she set by your safety?"

So lightning-bright grew the radiance in Randvar's face that it could last only lightning-long, then flickered and died in gloom.

"Lord, how dare I believe that? It might have been no more than friendliness, or woman's pity."

Through the mass of dark hair from which he had plucked off his jewelled cap, the Jarl ran his white hands, throwing back his head with a movement of impatience.

Randvar the Songsmith

“Why is it that it comes so much easier to believe in Hel than in Valhalla? Is it because the earth-clods we are made of weigh us down when we try to mount? If I cannot prove her love to you through her gentleness, then will I prove it through her hardness. No ball leaps up high that has not gone down hard,—had she stooped no lower than pity, she had never risen so high as hate. Now I can make a guess that the most surprised person to whom Brynhild betrayed her love was Brynhild herself! One thing I hope,—that it was not this moment which a bantering fate took to make you smile?”

“What other time should it have been, lord? It was not until the excitement was over that I called to mind how she had boasted that nothing could shake her coldness. When I saw her—sword in hand—eyes ablaze—Odin himself would have drawn back his lips!”

“Then would Odin himself have gone behind the clouds for a while,” Helvin said; and one of his rare smiles, faint as a glimmer of arctic sunshine, touched the curves of his mouth. “Think of the firebrand it hurled into her pride, when she thought that this love which she herself had just discovered had been betrayed to you, and that you were triumphing—”

The Songsmith cried out the word “Triumph-

Randvar the Songsmith

ing!" with such bitterness in his voice that, to hide a smile, the Jarl turned away and feigned to be absorbed in a kirtle on the wall, nor looked around again until Randvar appealed to him. Dropped heavily upon the chest, the Songsmith sat frowning desperately at the floor.

"If you, lord, would but do one thing which is easy to you?" he said. "Furnish me with some errand that will bring me into her presence, even against her will. I mean so to act that it will be made evident to her that she misjudged in fearing I should become forward."

Again the Jarl set his foot upon the coffer and his elbow on his knee, but the look he bent on his friend now had a hint of amiable amusement.

"True it is that much lies on that! You might feign sickness and be taken into the guest-chamber off the women's hall, where it is the custom for sick men to— But the ill-luck might befall you that unless you seemed balancing on the grave-edge, she would leave you to her women. Better would it be to make up some errand concerning the dress of state which she and her maids are covering with needlework for my wear— Yet that is not certain, either, for I have some fear that she might hear your message and then dismiss you before you could get out your conciliating words."

Randvar the Songsmith

Some diffidence had come into the Songsmith's manner, as if he foresaw chaff for what he was about to say. Yet now he said it:

"One plan came to me, lord, by which I could show without words that I had a desire to please her. You heard how she spoke of woodsmen? . . . More than once has she upbraided me for wearing clothes unbecoming the son of Freya, the king-born. For myself, I prefer to be the son of Rolf the Viking, but for her sake—to show that I will do all in my power to deserve the honor she does me—I would go so far as to change—"

He broke off in embarrassment, for even as he had feared, the Jarl's whimsical amusement increased. Laying hold of the shoulder before him, Helvin shook it banteringly.

"Let us hope it will not be with you as the priest's story says it was with Samson and Delilah! And I will forbear reminding you that in casting off your forest garb you cast off my livery, and confess that I no longer stand first in your allegiance— Nay, I said that I would forbear reminding you of that, so never stir your tongue to protest. Now that I see that you have not thrown your dice for a worthless stake, I begin to find interest in the game. Call the trader in to set forth his goods. You shall go to her at once, while her heart is still at war with her temper for

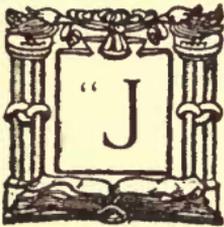
Randvar the Songsmith

having ill-treated you. There is no good striving against me! I say you shall. Call Asgrim— Nay, if you will not, I will do it myself— Ah, that is better! Since I have staked my reputation as a foretelling man, I am going to see that the game is played properly.”

XII

"The mind rules one-half of the victory"

—Northern saying.



JARL, it is not fitting that you should even seem to attend on me! Let me accompany you to your hall as becomes me, and afterwards go my way alone—"

"And rob me of a chance to see the horses come up to the post in a race I have wagered on?" the Jarl interrupted. "Out upon your idea of fitness! I am not sure that I shall not even go upon that slope behind the women's house and watch you through a broken window I know of. Would it not give you a sense of being supported to feel my eyes upon you?" He walked on as one serenely unaware that his companion had stopped short in dismay.

He did not go so far as to carry out his threat, however. When—by snow-banked roads and snow-buried lanes, dim in the early gloaming—they had come to the court-yard and the looming pile of the women's house, Helvin halted in the shadow of a tree.

Randvar the Songsmith

“I think I will go no farther,” he said. “If it happen as I expect, they will not close the doors after you immediately, as after one whose welcome is certain. I shall be able to see some of the sport from here, before the banging of them in my face tells me that my foretelling has come true.”

“It is for you to decide,” Randvar made use of the proper phrase. And he had made a stride forward when—like the jerk of a cord suddenly stretched—an impulse turned him back.

“Lord,” he said, almost with fierceness, “tell me that you were jesting when you accused me of forsaking my allegiance to you. Say that you do not hold me for a deserter, or my foot shall wither before ever it makes a move to leave you!”

Out of the shadow in which he stood, Helvin’s voice sounded presently like a harp strain with one minor chord.

“We must take this, comrade, as it is. It was a jest,—and it was the truth. You could no more hold back than I could stay you, and I would not keep you if I could. All that man can give to man, you have given me,—I ask not woman’s share besides. Go, and good go with you for your love!”

Down in the shadow, their hands met and clasped; then the song-maker turned and once more went forward towards the dark mass. After some

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delay the broad doors opened before him, and—as had been foretold—did not close after him.

Through the ruddy gap, the Jarl's gaze followed his song-maker into a fire-bright hall whose wall-benches were aflower with women in kirtles of deep red and dull yellow and corn-flower blue. Like green beads from a broken necklace, pages were scattered over the floor playing a game of ball; and dodging between them and stumbling over them, swarthy thrall-men were bringing in tables for the evening meal. A fancy came to amuse the Jarl that it was like the arrival of a war-arrow in a peace-camp when his messenger stepped into the ring of the firelight. From chess-board and bead-stringing and gossip, the women turned with smothered exclamations; while the purple-robed girl in the high-seat sat like one stricken motionless, her hand still holding out the silk ball she was winding from the skein which a page held apart before her.

Splendid in raiment now was the son of Freya, the king-born. As sun-burnished waves shone his newly trimmed hair, and his garments were all of velvet banded with fine sable, and sable lined the cloak that fell from his mighty shoulders. Regarding him, another fancy brought a smile to the Jarl.

“He put on fine clothes as a man puts on armor,

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and like a flight of arrows are the glances shot against him. I would lay down my life on it that he would sooner go against arrows."

If that were so, still no one could tell from the song-maker's bearing whether desperation or confidence ruled in his mind. Passing between the fires, he came before the footstool of Brynhild the Proud. When he had made salute, he stood waiting in the attitude of courtly submission, one hand on his hilt and one on his breast, an attitude that took on new meaning because proud strength spoke from every line of his virile face and his sinewy body.

Motionless, she sat gazing at him, whether in speechless displeasure or speechless amazement, no one could tell from her expression. Signing the petrified page to withdraw out of ear-shot, she said at last:

"This behavior seems to me so bold that I have never seen any act so bold as this. What is your errand with me?"

"I will speak it aloud and not mutter about it," he answered. "I have two. The first, which I care the most about, is to reconcile myself to you. The other is a message from the Jarl, which I hold as a shield against an unfavorable reception."

She drew back to the extreme limit of her high-seat, her face set like a cameo against the dark

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wood. The best she could do was to observe presently, with haughtiness:

“To me it would seem more becoming to carry out your lord’s business first.”

“Becoming it might be, but more imprudent than to lay aside a shield in unequal combat.”

“Unequal?” She managed to curl her flower-like lips. “Hear a wonder! On Treaty Day, you claimed the victory over me.”

“Said I that I got the victory over you? Here now I do confess that you have me at your pleasure. If you bid me leave you, I can do nothing against it. If you refuse me your friendship, no power is strong enough to get it for me; though no man on earth will lack joy more than I, if that must be.”

One swift look she sent round to make sure that no one else could hear the low-voiced words, then sat tapping the chair arm with her jewelled fingers, her bosom rising and falling like a white billow under the lace of her kerchief. Out of the stormy deeps, passionate words rose at last.

“I do not wish that you should value me like that, any more than I want to feel the way you make me feel. Do you not know that your offence against me was heavier even than Olaf’s? He pushed my hands away, and recked little what I said; but you—though you stood with bound hands

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—you laid hold of my mind and moulded it to your will! You made of me — of *me* — a screaming shield-maiden, ready to slay my childhood's friend! And then you stood there and laughed in your triumph!”

He said slowly: “True enough I laughed—for one breath's space—and that passed for an offence; but for three months you have made me the soberest man in the New Lands. Is not that atonement?”

A glance she flashed to challenge his sincerity, but her eyes could not withstand his eyes' steady wooing. She spoke without looking at him:

“If that were all! But you have done more. There is that which survives even that madness. Some door you have opened in my mind through which all my peace and pride have gone. Things I have never wanted before, now look good to me; and all I have seems as nothing, and the heavens reel around me, and I do not know one day what I am going to want the next. You have made me a thrall-woman in my own eyes, in proving to me that the passions that shake such base creatures can also shake me—that I can fear like them—hate like them—sin like them—love like them! Only if this be love, I tell you this,—that I will never yield to it! *I will not love you!*”

Her gaze was meeting his now with all a Val-

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kyria's weapon-play. It was he who lowered his eyes, lest their fire offend her.

"Why you should love me, I know no reason at all," he said. "I hope for it only as a priest hopes for a miracle. This alone I know,—that I love you, so that to waken in the morning and look forward to the hope of speaking with you is to sit in a Greenland winter and look forward to the summer. Will you not grant me the boon I beg because to you it means so little, and to me it means so much?"

"I will not say that it meant little to hear your songs and your adventures," she answered presently, with courtesy. Soon after that, in the gloaming of her eyes a light flickered starlike. "Any more than I can deny that Freya's son can be a courtman when he chooses," she added. Then her mouth became as grave as it was gracious. "It may be that if you will give me your promise never to talk to me about—miracles—"

"So shall it be that I will take banishment from you as from a lawman, if once I break the agreement!"

After a moment she rose with queenful composure, stretching out her hand to the group around the entrance.

"Why do you allow the doors to remain open?" she called. "Our guest will not leave until he has partaken of our hospitality."

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With a crash, the great doors swung to, startling the Jarl where he stood in the darkness of the court-yard. At first he smiled whimsically, and made a gesture of drinking to his companion within. Then, as he turned to go back alone, the smile faded. The face he lifted to the stars seemed to be asking a bitter question of the planet that had stood over his birth.

XIII

"Mix hops with honey when thou mead wilt brew"
—Northern saying.



TIRRING before the great awakening, the southern slopes had thrown off their coverings of snow, and bared their brown bosoms to the fresh wind. The pools of the muddy road gave back unclouded blue, and blithe as the call of the robins in the sunny meadows were the voices of the young courtmen who had met at a crossing of the ways. Winter maintained its hold only on the face of Mord the Grim, as looking back from the crest of the hill he was riding over, he saw that the centre of the group was the Jarl's tall song-maker.

Some of the young nobles had set forth to shoot ducks from the broken ice of the river, and were unfolding their plans to the forester's sympathetic ear. Some were seeking ground for a horse-race, when the sod should be firm enough, and were demanding of the favorite that he use his influence with the Jarl to have a feast given in honor of the

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sport. And others, who knew that Rolf's son was now on his way home to the Tower to take part in the wedding-feast of his foster-sister, were chaffing him about the effect his fine clothes of buff leather would have upon such Skraellings as he might encounter. The chatter came to an end only when the hoof-beat of two horses was heard on a road near by; and one youth surmised that it must be the bridegroom and the priest, whom Randvar was waiting to join; and another stepped out to look around the curve, vowing that if Bolverk's dress was too fine it should be subdued by a rain of mud. The youth stepped back, however, with a shrug.

"Only Brynhild's pet page; and behind him, Olaf the French. Tighten the peace-bands on your sword, Songsmith!"

A third gave Randvar's ribs a nudge with his elbow.

"No better than wasted breath is that warning!" he laughed. "As though the Songsmith had any cause now to be jealous of Olaf, Thorgrim's son!" So the laughter and chaff went up boisterously.

The Songsmith who had stood quietly listening, save for an occasional word of comment or banter, became yet more silent, and gave his entire attention to remedying a mistake in the lacing of one of his high Cordovan boots.

On his bent head, half the hail of jests continued

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to fall; and the other half flew on to meet the boy just turning into the road, fresh as a sprouting grass blade in his green livery.

“Lucky Bolverk, to be allying himself with such splendor!”

“Picture the cub doing the honors from the high-seat!”

“Are you going to give the bride away, young one?”

“Oh, why give your sister to an every-day body like a guardsman, Eric?”

“Nobody less than the Jarl himself—”

“Ay, the Jarl, by all means! Has it not been proved that jarls’ sisters take well to forest-bred men?” Again a shout of laughter went up, and the song-maker gravely addressed himself to the relacing of his other boot.

Because Randvar remained stooping, the page on his arrival did not notice him; disdainfully he answered the merry group before which he had drawn rein.

“No intention have I to break through the brush to any wedding-feast. My errand hither is to tell the Songsmith that my mind has changed about going,—only I shall tell him that it is because Brynhild cannot spare me. He is to meet Bolverk here and go with him; but they must get along without me. It is to be seen that he left the Tower

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too late to outgrow his fondness for moose-hump! Much better would you save your banter for his backwoods' ways."

Like the impudent red-breasted bird now strutting on a stone wall across the road, Eric thrust out his chest with an air. Laughing and nudging, the young courtmen made a semicircle around him.

"Oh, a well-bred man is what you are, that is clear as day!"

"Small wonder you have no admiration for that lout of a song-maker!"

"Tell us what you think of the showy clothes he has begun to—"

"Yes, give us your opinion of his habits!" they chorussed.

Still like the bright-eyed bird on the wall, Eric cocked his handsome little head knowingly; but even as they waited in laughing expectation, Olaf the French came cantering around the bend, and Eric's censure gave way to eulogy as he turned and recognized the new-comer.

"I will tell you a man I have got admiration for, and that is the one who comes riding hither! When I have my growth, I shall be as near like him as possible; and I am going to France with him whenever he goes back,—am I not, Olaf?"

"So it shall be," Thorgrim's son assented benign-

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ly, as he returned with inimitable grace the rather careless greetings of the group.

Importance swelled in Eric's chest until it burst out of his lips as ecstatically as the red-breasted bird's song.

"That will be the finest part of my life! I shall wipe this little town of cabins off my mind as completely as I have wiped off that old Tower,—and that is as much gone from remembrance as though it had never been. Do you know, masters, it looks to me sometimes as though I could never have been born there? What seems likeliest is that some great chief of Norumbega had one child too many, so that he gave it to thralls to carry into the forest; and then Erna came along and found it and called it hers, so much nobler is my nature than my moth—" He left the word unfinished as his rapt gaze came down for the first time to the Songsmith, where he had risen and stood beside Gunnar the Merry. "By that I do not mean that she is not a worthy woman," he added hastily.

His foster-brother answered not a word. Stepping to the head of Eric's horse, he said briefly:

"Get down."

It did not appear that the page liked the tone overmuch, but neither did he seem willing to trifle with it. He made a parade of stretching in his saddle.

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"You need not say it as though I meant to keep on," he retorted. "I have been waiting until you came, as every one here knows, to get down and talk to you." Slowly he dismounted, taking great pains to keep his bright spurs out of the puddles.

"Give me now that chain off your neck, as a gift for your sister."

The page muttered something about meaning to give her a better gift, when he should have had time to visit the trading-booth; but his foster-brother's hand remained before him, immovable as a stone cup. He dropped the chain into it at last, and watched ruefully the stowing away of the trinket in the pouch of buff leather. Then the owner of the pouch made another demand:

"Now give me a message to go with it. Say, 'I send therewith my hearty greeting.'"

At that, Eric so far forgot his finery as to stamp and spatter it with mud. But after a second look from under the heavy brows, he said the words, rebelling only when the circle of grinning courtmen sent up a roar of laughter at the contrast between the sentiment and the tone in which it was uttered.

"In meddling in private affairs you show bad manners," he told them, and sent Rolf's son a glance that was half sulky, half coaxing. "Nor do I think you have any right to scold me after I have made atonement."

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Far from scolding, his foster-brother turned to one of the courtmen who had come from a horse-fight and borrowed his riding-rod of twisted leather.

“You have made atonement for slighting Snowfrid,” he said, “but for the way you behaved about Erna, you cannot redeem yourself from stripes. Pluck off your kirtle and stand forth.”

“Foster-brother! If you will listen while I explain—”

“Already you have talked enough. Stand forth.”

“Foster-brother—”

“In a word, you will take it or run.”

“That is a good hint, young one,” laughed Gunnar the Merry. “Pick up your heels.” Then he laughed again at the glare that Eric turned on him.

“Will you keep your nose out of this?” the small Viking demanded. “If you think I am afraid to bear a flogging—!”

The end of the sentence was that his gay tunic lay on the ground and he stood forth in his shirt of fine linen, his arms locked upon his sturdy chest. From that attitude he did not flinch when the lashes fell, though they were neither light nor few. When it was over, the young men gave him good-humored applause.

Gratification pulled at his mouth-corners as he

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looked at them out of the corner of his eye; but enough vanity had been taken out of him so that when his gaze passed on to his stern foster-kinsman, he showed only as a shamefaced little boy, now humbly desirous of being restored to favor.

“If you think it will give my kinswomen a great deal of pleasure, I will go to the feast with you,” he offered, when he was clothed again and lingered shaping mud-balls with the toe of his boot.

“If I have my way, you will not be allowed to go back until it will give you so much pleasure that you cannot stay away,” the Songsmith returned severely, rejecting utterly the blandishments of the rosy coaxing face. The culprit gave up the attempt, after a while. Climbing into his saddle he rode back up the highway—his sleeve in suspicious proximity to his eyes—and vanished into a brush-walled lane.

Watching the dejected withdrawal seemed to suggest to Olaf the French a welcome thought. He moved his horse a step forward, and broke in upon the scattered chatter.

“Surely,” he said, “if you, Rolf’s son, choose to attack a young friend of mine, and I choose to avenge the boy on you, that should be sufficient to excuse me in challenging you?”

Over his shoulder, Randvar looked at him with his short laugh,—he had stepped aside to whistle

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back his horse from the meadow in which it had strayed to browse.

“Surely! If you, Thorgrim’s son, believe that you could get that excuse accepted,—in case you were alive to offer it!” he consented.

But three of the young courtmen spoke in the same breath: “Far from it, Olaf! Unless you were the boy’s master.”

Rolf’s son said nothing, only stood waiting with his bridle in his hand.

But gradually Olaf settled back in his saddle, and sat thoughtfully stroking his short mustaches. “Ill might it be, then, since I lack a lawful claim. I should kill you, and then if I could not save myself from outlawry, I should get no good from your death.”

“This I take the ring-oath on, that I would do my best to keep you from being put in that unsatisfying position,” Randvar retorted.

It seemed to Gunnar the Merry that the conversation had gone as far as was advisable; and he said so, good-naturedly, several others seconding him. And while they debated, their cause drew strength from another source.

Standing farthest out in the road, where he could see around the curve, a youth named Aslak called out that the bridegroom and the priest were coming at last. With that announcement, all serious-

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ness was put to rout; it was not even noticed that on a sudden impulse, Thorgrim's son wheeled and galloped back up the highway and disappeared into the lane whose bush-whiskered mouth had already swallowed up the crestfallen page.

Around the bend bowled the wedding party, the gorgeous bridegroom explaining at the top of his lungs how mistakes in the coming home of his marriage clothes had detained him. At sight of him, such cheers and chaff arose that he shouted himself hoarse with trying to repay a quarter of it, gave it up finally and set spurs to his horse and fled, followed by the ruddy-cheeked priest, cursing genially at the unwonted jolting of his fat sides. After them galloped the laughing song-maker, dividing his gibes between the group behind and the pair before.

What could have suited his wild blood better than to wander through the wonder-world of awakening forest? What could taste sweeter than a wedding-feast to a man who was watching his own hope grow with every day of spring shine and spring storm?

XIV

"More than all winter can one spring day yield"

—Northern saying.



THE third month of spring was come upon the year when the Songsmith rode back through the forest from his visit at Freya's Tower; and the spirit of spring was come upon him, so that his blood worked in his veins like sap in a tree.

Sometimes the billowy clouds above him parted over tender blue, and let through bursts of radiant sunshine that tiled his path with gold and golden-lighted the dim aisle stretching out before him. Sometimes they drew together in a lowering mass of gray, and let fall snow-flakes to lie daisy-like upon the patches of springing green. Sometimes it was bright streaks of rain that fell, meeting his cheek like so many soft mouths, changing with the returning sun into laughing eyes winking from every leaf. Whatever came, he took as joyously as the teeming earth.

The thrill that the earth must have known when

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it looked up at the first rainbow, the Songsmith knew when he came at last to the cross-roads and, through a bushy lattice, glimpsed bright-colored mantles and divined that Brynhild had ridden out to meet him.

Feigning that she had checked her horse only to give her pages more time to search the sodden thickets for flowers, she was lingering between the budding walls of the lane, herself very like a spring flower in her wrappings of leaf-green. When the horseman appeared at the head of the lane, her first impulse was plainly to wheel and ride away from him; her second, to draw her queenful self erect and flash such lightnings from her eyes' gray sky as should strike dead any presumptuous thought.

But he had no need to tame his joy for it had mounted to that height where it was changed into a delicious terror. Almost was it beyond his power to salute her, to answer becomingly the merry welcome of her women. When at last he had reached her side and dismounted to receive her greeting, the touch of her white hand lighting bird-like on his brown one made his fingers tremble so that she could not fail to mark it.

A moment it seemed as though the blissful panic would even fall on her, so speechless she sat before him, the wild-rose color blowing in her cheeks.

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But even at the first hint of a surprised pause in the women's chatter, she recovered herself, and spoke with gracious composure.

"The weeks have seemed long without your songs, my friend. They say my brother has begun to suffer in his temper through missing you and them. Tell us if you gained enough pleasure by the visit to make up his loss; and tell us about the bride, and how her mother likes her strapping new son."

She said "us," but after a little space of polite pretence it became doubtful how much interest her maidens had in the telling. As if enamoured of the song-maker's sleek black horse, they gathered around it to caress its arching neck while they listened. From that, they drew off to the side of the path to pluck up young grass spears for its refreshment; then still farther off to the hedge of lilac bushes, gemmed with long green buds. The time came at last when all who had not slipped through the hedge had vanished around it, into the road, whence the murmur of their voices came back sweetly, blending softly with the tinkle of a brook flowing somewhere through the thicket.

It did not appear that their mistress knew whether they stayed or went, save that she seemed to feel more freedom now in allowing her eyes to follow their inclination to droop and rest on the

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trailing sprays of fragrant buds with which the pages had filled her lap. Her lover neither knew nor cared. He rambled on without even knowing what he was saying, more than that it was something which held her listening while his eyes drank their fill of her exquisite face. He would have stood there gazing at her in silence, when he had finished telling of the feast, if she had not roused herself hastily to end the pause.

"It has the sound of a song come true," she said. "I wish I had better tidings to give in return than this which you will think bad, that your little foster-brother has deserted my service for Olaf's, Thorgrim's son."

"For Olaf's!" he repeated in surprise. "What possessed the cub?"

"It surprised me also," she assented, "for since he came to me, we have never been apart either in word or deed. Yet Olaf looks grand in his eyes, and lavishes on him a great store of gifts and privileges. I am afraid he will get spoiled by it."

His straight brows joining, the Songsmith gazed before him reflectively.

"I wonder if it would have been better had I taken him with me?" he mused. "Yet would it have been to Erna a lasting sorrow to see the change in him. . . . And it would have made him set greater store by himself to see their mean

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clothes. . . .” His musing branched unconsciously. “It is a poor place, the Tower, yet I would not trade it for the Jarl’s house to be born in.”

“Tell me how it appeared to you now?” she asked him, smiling. “The Tower that let the wind blow in all the year around! Did it stir your wild blood so that it became a hardship for you to come back to walls?”

It seemed that she saw the danger of such a question as soon as she had given it voice, for she half put out her hand to snatch it back. But he read the meaning of the gesture and obeyed it.

“It was no hardship to come back, Jarl’s sister. . . . Yet the place had never seemed to me so fair. When I came home to it, that day after it had happened to me to meet you in the forest, I saw only its bareness and its poverty. Now it was as a song, every stone a word to tell of my father’s love. I never knew a greater love among all men upon earth. Night after night, while the others slept, I walked before the gray pile and read its runes. Great boulders are there that must have challenged his strength to wrest from their beds in the earth, which yet he wrestled with rejoicingly, since even so ingloriously he was conquering something for his beloved one. The fragments over the archways— Could you but see, Jarl’s sister, the patient labor of their fitting! Never monk

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toiled more devoutly with his brush! Night after night, it was as though Rolf walked beside me pouring out his mind, so could I enter into his joy that knew his love returned. Knowing that, what was it to fight Hildebrand and twenty—forty—horsemen! Here I, his son, may not even end where he began. I—”

He broke off because her hand had risen to forbid him, and stood awhile with head bent and turned aside, his breath coming fast. But she did not call her women as he had feared; he had time to master himself and begin again.

“The stones Rolf placed were the words of the song; the memory of my mother was the music. When I said the Tower was poverty stricken, I was blind. More rich than an altar-shrine I think it, now that I know what a woman’s love may mean. Jarl’s sister, you could not even dream such visions as my memory gave me to see in the moonlight there! . . . Visions of my king-born mother watering linen on the grass before the Tower . . . bringing drink to Rolf as he rested from his labor . . . standing waiting to bear back the cup when he should have finished, the leaf-shadows playing on the soft masses of her hair. . . . Waiting before him, Freya, the king-born! As I live, it looks to me now as if it must have been a dream! Here, I cannot myself believe it.”

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"I can," the Jarl's sister said dreamily, then started awake as she saw passion flame up in his face past any checking. As a straw, it burned away the barrier she sought to raise.

"Brynhild! If you had aught to give me, it cannot be that you would hold it back! I will await your pleasure. I will wrestle with the roughness in me even as Rolf wrestled with the bowlders, till I have made my mind a place more worthy of your dwelling. But even as Freya cheered with her love the man who loved her, give me some token that in time your pride will yield! Some sign!"

"What would you?" she murmured. "My hands—"

He seized them both, crushed them against his lips. But he stayed not at the arm's-length she would have kept him. Holding her hands, he leaned nearer; and the mystic might of spring throbbing in his veins purpled his eyes and held her like a spell.

"Your mouth!" he prayed. "Olaf—Gunnar—fifty others—have had your hands. Your mouth!"

He knew not that he drew her towards him; doubtless she knew not that she yielded. Only, each knew that her lips were there before his, and he had gathered their perfect flower.

XV

"Bare is back without brother behind it"

—Northern saying.



HE waning light falling into the Jarl's bedchamber from its one small window under the eaves disclosed dimly the figures of the priest and the counsellor and the courtman, as they waited in the middle of the floor, but showed little more than the mass of the high curtained bed that stood under the window against the wall. The old advice-giver, declaiming before it, had the feeling that he was talking into space, even while he knew that somewhere in the gloom beneath the hangings the young ruler must lounge listening to him.

"Whether you take it well or not, you shall not keep on in a false step for want of my foresight. Long ago I told you that the son of Freya, the king-born, was trying to get friends behind him. Now I tell you that he has got them. Courtmen tag at his heels. Traders and guardsmen clink horns at the sound of his name; while the saying

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runs that hunters show fight if they think that so much as his cloak-hem has been trod on. In a year more, he will have wormed his way into the high-seat. I foretell it."

Mord's voice rose to a wrathful climax; and the gesture of his knotted hands, when it looked as though the silence of the bed was going to continue unmoved, suggested that he would like to use them on the sullen shoulders.

But the Jarl's voice sounded presently in measured accents: "Has it come to your ears that men are speaking against my rule?"

Slightly appeased, Mord's hands relaxed to smooth his beard. "I do not mean that, Starkad's son. You mistake me if you think I mean that the fellow has yet power enough to get you disliked. Well spoken of over all the land is your rule. Only—"

Measured and relentless as the boom of surf, the Jarl's voice sounded through his. "When it happens that they do find fault, come and tell me of it; and I will listen patiently. Only about aught which belongs to my life as a free man—"

A moment it seemed as though his control weakened, as if measure might be lost in fury; but he recovered himself and beat it out slowly to the end.

"Witness, priest! and Olaf as well! I know how

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well-beloved the Songsmith is; and I know also how little loved I am. Plain as you, I see how proud my sister is; nor do I forget that she is my heir. Yet I have given leave to the son of Freya, the king-born, to woo and wed her and join his power to her ambition. Judge from that how I trust him, and take other counsel than to slander him to my ears again."

Deeper than ever seemed the stillness when he had ceased. All that stirred it was the grating of iron hinges, as Mord jerked open the door which led from the alcove-chamber out into the great living-room of the body-guard.

The action let in a rush of ruddy firelight that illumined the counsellor's bent figure from head to foot, made a leap at the silver rosary of the black-robed priest behind him, a snatch at the shining lute in the hand of Olaf the French, and came to a halt only at the edge of the curtained bed. Gradually, amid tumbled cushions and blankets of fur, Helvin's brooding recumbent figure became visible. Frowning at it, Mord paused.

"So, I suppose, it must be; but never yet have I thought your behavior more untoward. I think now that it would have been good counsel if Starkad had given you a voice in things here, so that you might have found out the danger in it."

As one expecting an explosion, the priest in-

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voluntarily shrank into himself; but what came instead was a sly chuckle.

"It has crossed my thoughts also that Starkad might have managed some things better," Helvin's voice drawled. "I wonder how it looks to the old troll himself now."

The advice-giver turned on the threshold to say with sternness: "Young lord, is it in that manner you speak of the honored dead?"

For all answer, there came from the bed a peal of mocking laughter.

Like one who dares trust himself no longer, Mord made a swift stride through the door and away; and the Shepherd Priest spoke soothingly:

"Most dear lord!"

It could be seen that the Jarl lowered one of the fists propping his chin and turned and looked at him. He said presently, with ominous slowness:

"Are you going to take the text now, priest, and edify me with exhortations about honoring the dead? If so, pray begin by explaining why a man should be honored only because he changes from serving the Devil on earth to serving him in—"

The priest lifted a gentle hand. Brawny shepherd's hand though it was, it had no lack of dignity.

"My lord and son, turn not your good gift of

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speech to your own ill. I would in no way vex you. That you were sorely tried under Starkad's rule was before all eyes. How should I who have not felt the burden chide you that your back is weary? Only I would beseech of you that fairness towards him which we show to you, when in your less worthy turns of mind we still remember how noble is your nature. Old sayings have it that men are wolves and bears in their Other Shapes,—it is but a turn of the cloak to hold with the Christ-faith that the blackest-hearted man has a better self within him. Believe of your father that he had a gentler spirit somewhere hid, that his life bound him as yours binds you. Believe, and pardon."

From resting on his elbow, Starkad's son started passionately upright.

"Pardon,—and give up my hate that is as meat to my teeth! Priest, are you Northern born and know not that such satisfaction comes from hating a foe as makes the joy of loving a friend look like pale moonshine by red fire? My foe was what he was—doubly my foe in that he owed me help—and blow shall go for blow between us. Pardon that I may be pardoned? Rather than forgive him one jot of his punishment would I share his torture and count it gain! Rather would I burn by his side until that spirit which cannot be subdued by Norway's rocks or Greenland's snow-

Randvar the Songsmith

wastes or Iceland's belching mountains has burned out of both of us, and left no more than two dead cinders! Nor will I bear rebuke!"

"Nay, how should I do aught else than sorrow for you who choose for yourself so hard a way?" the old priest said sadly. "Methinks my heart would break over you if I did not know that even at the goal of that road, at the end of that torture, One will stand waiting for you beside whose love mine is but a taper to a star. His mercy be upon you and save you from yourself!"

As a star through the night, shone his soul through his swarthy face; but Starkad's son averted his eyes that he might not see it.

"Everything bides its time. When I feel desire for that goal, it may be that I shall believe in it. You are an honest man,—do what you can among my people. For my malady, your medicine is too mild."

With a hand raised in dismissal, he met the hand raised in benediction and flung himself back on his cushions, speaking curtly to Olaf, Thorgrim's son.

"Do you sing, until I decide whether your jingling or my humor makes the worst discord in my ears."

As a man wakened out of deep abstraction, the courtman came to himself with a start. Though he sought to cover it with his graceful bow, and

Randvar the Songsmith

set his shapely fingers instantly to their task on the lute-strings, his customary tactfulness was lacking. In the middle of the first verse of his ballad, the Jarl's hand—that had come out into the firelight and begun to pick and tear at the gold-embroidered flowers of the bed-hangings—flew up irritably.

“What the devil! Have you nothing but tinkling love-tunes in stock? Do they rear their men in the women's house in France? Some song of might—fire—you milksop!”

Murmuring apologies, Olaf tried plainly to regain his wonted poise; but before he had got out so much as the first couplet of the battle-song he had struck into, the hand had leaped from the embroidery, snatched his instrument from his hold and dashed it against the opposite wall.

“Fool! I have warned you that battle-songs are my love-songs,” Helvin's voice rose in thunder. “To sing them to me when I am doomed to inaction is to heat the fever in my veins to madness! Oh, where in the Troll's name is the Songsmith? The three weeks leave I gave him was up when the candle of the sun marked noon to-day; and here the sun is burned out, and he has not come. What can he mean by it?”

Olaf laughed, neither mirthfully nor yet perfunctorily, but with the frank discordance of his mind.

Randvar the Songsmith

“Lord, who shall take it on him to say what any one means at this court? If it were in France, now, I could interpret your relations well enough; but here—here you go not by any rules I know. I give up the riddle.” With a gesture of less than usual grace and more than usual feeling, he went over to pick up his lute.

But Helvin spoke with unusual softness from the darkness of the bed-curtains: “How would you interpret our relations if you were in France, beausire?”

“Nay, noble one, it has no meaning here,” Thorgrim’s son answered almost impatiently, “here where no house reaches underground, and women count for naught. There, men would say that the fellow had some secret of yours in his power and you took insolence from him because you feared to resent it.”

That he was aiming a shaft is unlikely for he did not look up to see if the shot told, but went on examining the broken strings, his mouth working like that of a man who is trying also to mend a rift in his damaged composure. It was not until the stillness behind the curtains had lasted so long as to become ominous that he started as though struck by a possibility, lowered the lute slowly, and slowly turned his gaze towards the recumbent figure.

Randvar the Songsmith

Even the restless hand had been drawn in from the light now; crouching as for a spring, Starkad's son loomed in the dimness. Like vultures hovering over their prey, Olaf's eyes settled on him, tearing their way in as though they would reach the inmost places of his heart.

So they faced each other until they were startled by an outburst of jovial voices in the guard-room without, shouting the name of Rolf's son with words of noisy welcome.

Straightening, then, Olaf made a salute of studied mockery.

"Lord," he said, "I will give place to your—confidant."

The Jarl stretched out an arm grown strangely unsteady, and spoke in a voice become strangely breathless. "Wait! You think that I am afraid to make him smart for an offence? Wait a little."

Surprise took some of the assurance from Olaf's bearing, as he resumed his place at the bed-foot; then, in expectant malice, he folded his arms and leaned against the carven post to watch through the open door the song-maker's buoyant approach.

Delayed by the questions rained on him, by the hands thrust out to clasp his, Randvar was long in making his passage through the hall; but the alcove doorway framed him at last, a vision of light and of life as the fire-glow touched his

Randvar the Songsmith

burnished hair and the new happiness in him rang in his voice of greeting.

The Jarl's grim tone sounded doubly grim by contrast. "However wroth I was before, now I am half as wroth again. What befits you, lazy-goer, is humblest explanation."

Accustoming his light-filled eyes to the gloom, the Songsmith had lingered on the threshold; now as he was about to advance he stopped once more, attuning his harmony-filled ears to this discord.

"Lord!" he said in amazement. "Lord, what should I explain?" then, incredulously, "This cannot be because I am a half-day late! No stress was laid upon the time—no need of haste—" He broke off as his clearer vision separated Olaf's blue-and-gold figure from the blue-and-gold curtains. "You here! Now is it likely that any lying tale of yours could have worked this— Yet it is not possible, lord, that you would have listened to him! That—"

Again he broke off; but this time with a smothered cry as, turning, he beheld the face that Helvin thrust into the light. Gnawed and blood-streaked lips, it showed; while bright as the ruddy light in the dusky room flickered devil-fire in the murky eyes. They turned to keep watch of Thorgrim's son, even while the tongue belonging to them addressed the song-maker.

Randvar the Songsmith

“Is it not possible, boor that you are, that you could have leaned too heavily on my favor? Olaf says justly that one would think I feared you had some secret knowledge of me, so forbearing have I been. What! because out of my service I spare you three weeks’ time — ‘ill spare it — must you take a half-day more? Without a word—a sign—and then defend your fault with noisy voice and rampant head? Let me see you tame it. Speak me humbly if you would not push my temper to the uttermost.”

And yet Rolf’s son did not throttle him,—only stood looking at him with head lowered and thrust forward like a bull moose at bay. The hand Olaf had laid on his hilt, in the hope of being called upon to defend his lord, fell paralyzed. He doubted the ears that brought him Randvar’s low answer:

“Lord, I entreat you to hold down your anger. Remember that we are not alone, and—”

“Call you that humbleness which would command me where and before whom I shall rebuke you?” Starkad’s son snarled. “Now do you stand so stubborn as to think that I will hold back from punishing you? Bend lower—low as your knee!”

Again Olaf made a hopeful move towards his sword. Again his arm fell benumbed. Rigidly as a man of iron, Rolf’s son had knelt, his sinewy, brown hands gripping each other behind his back.

Randvar the Songsmith

Who was the stillest for a while it would have been hard to say — the Songsmith or the gaping courtman or the young ruler, who stood wiping great drops from his forehead while his devil-like eyes watched Olaf from under his palm.

“Are your French courtmen better broken?” he sneered at last.

Out of his trance Olaf came slowly. Drawing his shapely form erect, he laughed mellowly in his enjoyment.

“Jarl, I make you a hundred compliments! The proudest king in France had not dared say one-half as much to his meanest lackey. I make you a thousand apologies for my stupidity! I see now that what makes the forester a comfort to you is not his boldness but his meekness. I give you ten thousand thanks for the merry lesson you have taught me!”

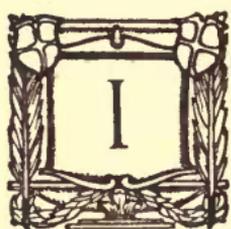
Bowing almost at the song-maker’s side, he laughed almost in the song-maker’s ear, and laughing bowed himself gracefully out of the room.

Swiftly as well as gracefully it must have been, for while the sound of the soft mirth was still in the air, the Jarl rushed forward with the snarl of a wolf robbed of its bone, yet Randvar had time to leap ahead of him. On Olaf’s heels, the song-maker shut the door with a thunderous crash, and set his back against it.

XVI

"He that guesseth, often goes wrong"

—Northern saying.



IN the sudden darkness that shut down upon them, the Songsmith felt Helvin's body dash against his, heard Helvin's hiss at his ear:

"Let me after him,—do you hear?"

"Let you betray your state to all men? Lord, I have saved your secret—"

"I will kill him only for coming so near to guessing it!"

"Has all sense left you?"

"Off, or he will reach the hall-door before I can catch him! Would you turn my wrath upon yourself?"

"Keep your wrath within bounds, lord, as I kept mine. Do you suppose that after stripping off my pride to wrap it about your cursed secret, I shall allow your folly to undo—"

"Allow? Mother of Heaven! do you know what you are defying?"

Randvar the Songsmith

“Do you forget that I am not the rabbit-hearted thing I feigned to be—”

“Out of the way!”

“No—”

Short as the word was, it was cut in two by the slam of the great doors at the guard-room's farther end. One breath Randvar let out in relief, then drew in one in dread and braced himself for the grapple.

But nothing came.

No use to strain his eyes, for darkness was now so thick upon them that it carried a sense of smothering with it. He strained his woodsman's ear, trained to catch the lightest bending of a twig beneath a fox's foot, but not so much as the sound of a faintly drawn breath rewarded him. Delicately as a butterfly uses its feelers, he put out a finger, then, and found that the spot where Helvin had stood was empty. More silent than the stealthiest wind that tries to creep unnoted through the forest, he had withdrawn to some quarter of the darkness.

From his head to his feet, shuddering shook the song-maker as his mind strove to follow that withdrawal to its goal, to picture him who stood hidden there. The temptation to let in the fire-light to show what thing he faced was so torture-strong that he took his hands off the door-panels

Randvar the Songsmith

on which they were spread out and locked them before him, and gave himself the relief of speaking Helvin's name in a low voice, entreating, soothing.

No answer came. A windless cavern in the marrow of the earth's bones had not been stiller. From the living-room without came the rattle of knife and trencher, as the evening meal wore on; the clink of horns with the arrival of drinking-time; by-and-by, snatches of maudlin song. Even the shuffling patter of the thralls the Songsmith caught through the oaken panels, but in the room where he kept vigil, only the thundering echo of his heart throbbing in his ears.

Perhaps its pealing was enough to blunt his hearing. Though he detected no rustle of approach, his cheek was touched of a sudden by a fiery breath, which like a poisonous vapor brought with it dizzy horror. The torture of two hands falling stealthily upon his shoulders—tightening swift to the grip of claws—recalled him for an instant to himself; then again his brain whirled, as a bushy thing that he knew for the mass of Helvin's blood-red hair was pressed against his face.

Back from it he strained with all his might, fought it off with all the power of his toughened sinews; but with a strength beyond the strength of man, the hands drew him slowly steadily downward.

Randvar the Songsmith

Suddenly, to his mounting madness, it was no longer Helvin with whom he struggled. It was some being from another world, some nameless Thing against which his gorge rose up in loathing hate. Twice he gasped out warning, then loosened his grasp on the bushy hair, wrenched out his sword and stabbed downward.

With the sinking of blade in flesh, a sharp un-human scream rang out; the clutch on his shoulders loosened. Even before he could tear off the dragging weight and hurl it from him, it had fallen heavily, shaking the timbered floor.

Like an echo came cries from the guard-room without, thunder of feet, clangor of weapons. Randvar was sent staggering across the room as the door behind him was burst open by a dozen brawny shoulders. On the threshold appeared Visbur, the grizzled old leader; behind him, two-score excited faces.

On the threshold they paused, staring at the sight the intruding firelight revealed,—Helvin Jarl lying in a pool of blood; beyond him the figure of his song-maker, bristling-haired, a bloody sword in his hand. Half wrathful, half incredulous, their voices rose:

“Rolf’s son a traitor!”

But no thought had the Songsmith for them. On the face upturned from the blood pool his gaze

Randvar the Songsmith

was riveted. It was Helvin's face, unmarred, unchanged; in the gray eyes only unutterable anguish; anguish unutterable on the finely cut mouth that was trying vainly to form and send forth words. It was Helvin, his friend, that his madness had laid low. With a hoarse cry, he flung the weapon from him, and turned and buried his head in the bed-curtains.

As from a distance, he heard the scuffling of feet staggering under a heavy burden, and felt the jar of the bed as they lowered their load upon it; but he came back to consciousness only when stern hands laid hold of him and drew him from his shelter. He realized, then, the consequences of his deed as he met the awful reproach of the looks bent on him and saw the barrier of crossed spears that had been set before him.

Visbur said: "Chief, there is no need for us to wait for lawmen. Say only whether he is to be shot or hanged."

Pushing off those who were trying to cut away his robe and find his wound, the Jarl dragged himself up by the bed-draperies, turning a ghastly face upon the room.

"Free him," his lips made out to shape.

After a bewildered pause, the old warrior said slowly: "I suppose what you are trying to order is, 'Slay him,' not understanding that I said it

Randvar the Songsmith

should be done before the clots on his blade were dry. All I ask, chief, is in what manner he is to suffer death?"

With as much force as his half-swoon left him, the Jarl shook his head, repeating the words so that there was no mistaking them: "Free him—and let him to me."

But even as the Songsmith turned, speaking his friend's name unsteadily, Visbur made his men a sign; and the spear-wall remained.

"Hold him and take him forth," the leader commanded. "Starkad's son has gone astray out of his wits. I will answer for the act when he is sane again."

"You will answer—with your life," the Jarl said between gasping breaths. "While I live—I shall have my way. And my luck is not so good that I am dying. It is no more than a flesh-wound. I swooned from—from my rage. Let him to me."

This time he stretched out a shaking hand, and the spears fell. In a moment the Songsmith was kneeling beside the bed, the arm that had so nearly mastered him lying around his neck.

"Tell them — enough. Enough to clear yourself," Helvin murmured.

Around the circle of hard old faces that until now had met his glance so cordially, Rolf's son

Randvar the Songsmith

sent a beseeching look, then dropped his eyes in despair.

“Jarl, I could never say so much as to make them believe me; before them I stand proved a traitor who has turned blade against his lord. And how shall I speak against the truth of that judgment? I am every man’s dastard. Lord, I would as lief go out with them.” His voice broke, and he did not seek to mend it.

But Helvin spoke as curtly as his faintness allowed, “Raise me up,” and when that was done, “Bring me wine.” From the beaker, he lifted a face pitched to determination.

“Let all listen to my words, that I need not speak twice. He bore from me more than any of you would have borne. He lost his temper only when I drove him to frenzy. He struck only to save his life.”

“To save his life, chief? And you with bare hands!” old Visbur said slowly.

Of a sudden, sick shuddering seized upon the Jarl, so that his head drooped and sank. But even as they started towards him, he raised it—raised himself with the force of his passion.

“Now damnation take such loyalty!” he cried. “I have told you that he is not guilty as you think,—I will lower myself to no more explaining. He goes free because I will it. And if any man re-

Randvar the Songsmith

ports this happening outside, so that even in people's thoughts my friend be held up to reproach, that man shall be outlawed, and have my wrath besides. Bear that in mind—and leave me now to him—whose support I have always found best.”

Upon the song-maker's shoulder he fell, spent; and the guard who went last from the room heard his moan:

“My friend, my friend, this is that one thing that could tear us asunder! It will be your life or mine.”

The man had passed out of hearing when Randvar answered slowly: “If that be true, lord, then mine is the life that will end. I know now which would be the easier to bear.”

XVII

"Cold are the counsels of women"

—Northern saying.



BLINDED by the change from the hall's unbroken shade to the courtyard's untempered light, Randvar lingered on the threshold. As upon helpless prey, the unsparing sunshine of the spring morning fastened on him and pointed out that his leather tunic had been dragged open at the throat and his sleeves torn out at the shoulders, that his face was haggard and his eyes blood-shot. The thralls, hurrying to and from the buildings with fresh water and clean straw, laughed indulgently as they glanced at him, and murmured one to another: "Behold a man who drank deep last night!"

No more than if he had been wine-deadened was he conscious of their comments or their presence. He had drunk of misery as of a heady liquor, and like a drunkard's thirst for water was his longing for the presence of the woman he loved. Seeking her—conscious only of his need of her—he made

Randvar the Songsmith

his way across the glaring stretch of the courtyard, through the dim length of the women's hall, to the shrine of her alcove bower.

Before he reached it, its open door gave him view of tapestried walls in whose dusky east a mirror of silver-gilt hung like a rising sun, of white-robed tirewomen moving now and again across it, of the girl who stood before it while they finished dressing her, her exquisite head agleam against the dark hangings like a jewel in its casket. His sense of beauty stirred through his heaviness, and quickened song-makers' fancies in his mind.

"The web of her hair glows as the dragon's treasure glowed in the gloom of his den. . . . As a pearl from a setting of red gold shines her face from her tresses. . . . As rare as a jewel is Brynhild the Proud . . . as unbending . . . as untender . . ."

Into his longing crept something akin to wistfulness. He stood gazing at her in silence as—encountering his eyes in the mirror—she raised her head with a motion of surprise. He wondered why she did not turn when he advanced, but remained regarding his reflection and spoke as to the man in the bright oval.

"Has Freya's son lost sight of my dignity, as well as of his own, that he comes in disorder into my presence?"

Randvar the Songsmith

“Disorder?” he repeated, looking for the first time at his reflection.

An instant he stood abashed before it, so did it jar upon the stately harmony; then the grim scene that had brought him to that condition came back and dwarfed everything else. With a gesture of passionate scorn, he turned from the mirror.

“Jarl’s sister, if ever it happen to you to reach the sap of the Tree of Life, such things as clothes will seem less important than cobwebs blowing from its branches!” he said, and whirling on his heel, he turned and stood in the door, staring away with unseeing eyes.

Yrsa the Lovely, fastening a velvet pouch to her mistress’s girdle of filigree, let it fall with a soft thud; but that was all the sound there was in the room until the Jarl’s sister began to speak coldly to the other maids:

“I want to wear the silver neck-chain— No, not that one—the one to match this girdle. Yes, that. And, Nanna, I wish you would bring me the kerchiefs,—all that have a silver fringe.” As light footsteps answered her, and the rustle of silk, she gave other low-voiced orders.

Gradually, the calm routine brought the Songsmith back into touch with the world about him. Staring away over the whirring wheels, he told

Randvar the Songsmith

himself that it must look to her as though he had come unsobered from a night's carousal,—that it was even better she should think so than guess the true reason for his dulled wits. Girding up his patience for this new trial, he turned back wearily.

“It is fair and right, Jarl’s sister, that I should have blame for showing you aught but the bright side of my manners, which are tarnished enough at best. I will take my leave now, and come back only when the wine-clouds have cleared from my mind.” He was crossing the threshold when her outstretched hand stayed him.

“I would rather you would remain, if you have nothing against it,” she said, then spoke over her shoulder to the kneeling tirewomen, who were making the arrangement of her train an excuse for lingering. “Maidens, you have done enough work on those folds. Go out now to your spinning,—excepting only Yrsa. Foster-sister, do you take your quill embroidery to that stool under the window, yonder.”

When she had seen them obey her, she turned back to her lover a face whose expression he could not understand.

“I will begin by saying outright that you need not try to hide the truth under the pretence that it is wine instead of trouble which ails you. I

Randvar the Songsmith

should know better than that even if Thorgrim's son had not taken pains to let me hear how you were likely to pass the night."

In his mind he repeated the name of Thorgrim's son, at first wonderingly, then vengefully; but aloud he said nothing, only continued to look at her in haggard suspense.

A moment her high pride wavered, her beautiful mouth seeming to struggle against tenderness. Coming up to him, she touched her fingers lightly to his rent sleeves, his torn collar, the furrow between his dark brows.

"It is seen that Helvin went even further, after Olaf left! Do you think that his, being my brother holds me back from hating him?"

Two emotions the song-maker suddenly knew,—relief that the whole truth was still unknown to her, and a desire to delay those caressing fingers. Capturing them, he held them against his cheek while he asked her what had been said to make her think the Jarl was behaving badly towards him.

At that, her mouth surrendered to indignation.

"Enough was said—and more! I liked it well to have Olaf fetch such news,—Olaf, whom I cast off in your favor! And he brought it around so artfully that I could not stop him until it was out. He said that because you had lingered that little

Randvar the Songsmith

while in the lane, Helvin dared to upbraid you, to threaten you— Now, I will not put it into words! He said that the Jarl spoke to you as a man dare not speak to his thrall, lest the slave turn,—and that you did not turn!” She plucked her hands from his hold, drew herself away from him. “He said that you took it submissively—that when he came away, you were on your knees!”

No longer was she pearl-pale, but crimson with the blood of her scourged pride. An instant her passion reacted on him, so that his face reflected her flush. He muttered that Thorgrim’s son went heavily into debt for a creature that had only one life with which to pay. Then the emotion passed, too slight really to stir his heaviness.

“Yes, I submitted to him,—” he said, “as a well man puts up with the fretfulness of a sick one. Would you have a whole man contend against a cripple? For that is what Helvin is when he speaks temper-trying words, a man crippled in his mind. What difference does it make? since you must know that cowardice could have nothing to do with my behavior. I can think of much pleasanter things to speak of.”

Again a certain wistfulness came into his eyes, and he drew nearer to her.

“Let me feel that I have a peace land in your heart, though all other ports are war-bound. If

Randvar the Songsmith

I were in a death-swoon, the sound of your voice would trickle into my ears like cordial and spread healing through me. Give me of its balm now—of your smile—your love.”

Another step he made towards her,—then stopped short. For it was not as a minister of healing she faced him, but as a Valkyria of battle, armored in pride. Like spears she threw her words at him.

“As soon would I that you were a coward as a churl! Churl’s blood—Rolf’s blood—that must be what it is! Freya’s stock would have struck the words from his lips though he were thrice a jarl. Now better be a coward than a clod, too base to know it when you are insulted.”

This time the color that rose to his face remained there, a darkling shade. From under lowering lids he stood looking at her.

“If you would not have me show churl’s blood by losing temper with you,” he said presently, “I ask you to stop talking about this happening. So soon as Helvin got himself in hand again, he made atonement; and that is an end to the matter. What lies on you, who say you love me, is to have faith in my manfulness. And I ask you, moreover, to remember that you are fretting a churl who has already been galled to the quick.”

She greeted the warning as a Valkyria might

Randvar the Songsmith

greet a sign that her opponent is aroused. In her governed voice was the thrill of a trumpet.

“Lose your temper, then, as fast as you may,—and so find your pride! Half-way, I think it is good-nature that makes you bend to him; and half-way, gratefulness for the favors you have taken from him; though you have long known what my wish is, that you should never look to any one else than to me when you stand in need of anything.”

Her satin-shod foot stirred with an angry impulse. “A fine atonement that is given in secret, while he chose that time when you were under the eyes of your enemy to put shame upon you! Can you not understand, Rolf’s son, that you drag me down in your disgrace, since I have done you the honor to promise to wed you? If you have no pride for yourself—for Freya’s name—make some for me, that it be not told around that the man I hold highest in honor is a man Starkad’s son uses like a thrall!”

The Songsmith opened his compressed lips wide enough to let a question through: “Is this a sample of the honor you hold me in?”

“It is the kindest treatment you will ever receive from me until you have wiped out this stain,” she told him.

Then because he did not reply to her, but fold-

Randvar the Songsmith

ing his arms across his breast, turned as though to leave her, she blazed out at him:

“The end of this shall be that you take your choice of two things! Either you go to him and renounce his service, or else you go from me and renounce the hope that I shall ever call you husband.”

He answered her then, his arms outflung like stones from a volcano’s crest, though his voice only deepened.

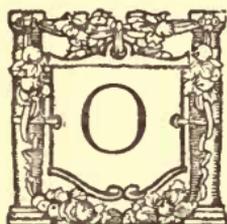
“May my tongue wither if ever I ask to call myself your thrall! A bad bargain would that be to throw off a man’s rule to be commanded by a woman! Not though she be as fair as you, and I love her as I love you! I have sworn an oath to Helvin Jarl to stand by him as by a brother, and never shall you egg me on to break it. If your lover’s love is not enough, and you must have his freedom also, seek out a lesser man for your favor; for as God lives, my pride that you have scorned—be it king-born or churl-born—will never stoop to your rule!”

With the last word, the door closed behind him.

XVIII

"But a short while is hand fain of blow"

—Northern saying.



VER field and fallow, through wood and meadow, up hill and down, on—on—on—the song-maker strode, no goal before him, only driving revolt within him.

Whenever road or lane made a turn towards the east, the glaring May sunshine struck him in the face. Fending it off with his bended arm, he conceived a hatred of its stare, of the garish blue sky it fell from, of the bustling sounds it called forth. On all sides they rose in a strident chorus, chattering birds in the hedges, screaming cocks in the barn-yards, racketing children on every green, shrill-laughing women washing clothes at every pond,—even the shouts of distant ploughmen were added by the breeze.

In fitful gusts the warm dry wind went with him like some romping oaf, now rushing ahead down the road to beat up the dust with clumsy glee, now lying in wait around some corner to

Randvar the Songsmith

pounce upon him with snorts of mirth and buffet him and wind his hair across his face. Struggling with it, his fury rose as against some boorish jester. He shouted in its teeth:

“If you had but a body that hands could lay hold of—!”

The craving for combat—like fire it was fanned in him by the dry gusts. He drew breath sharply when following a narrow wood-trail brought him suddenly into the highway and face to face with Gunnar and half a dozen of the young courtmen. If they would but jostle him in their careless mood—so much as kick up the dust about him—give him any excuse whatsoever— His mouth watered at the thought of what would follow! Disappointment increased his rage when—after one look at him—they toned their familiar hails down to punctilious salutes, and picked their way around him as around a fire.

His head set low, he was standing looking after them, when another wayfarer came cantering around the bend behind him and almost rode him down. He had seized the horse by its bridle and forced it back upon its haunches before he realized that the befringed and befeathered rider in blue-and-silver was no other than his small foster-brother.

Releasing the bronze chain, he stepped aside with a smothered oath.

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“You elf!” he said. “Erna’s luck will not last you long if you draw on it often in this way. Take yourself on.”

Undeniably, the elf’s first impulse was towards obedience. He had drawn in his chin and let his horse carry him by, before he remembered his new dignity and pulled rein alike on steed and inclination. Like one adjusting new garments, he thrust out his chest and stiffened his spine as he turned.

“I must ask you not to call me by familiar names as though we were still on good terms,” he said. “I find that it concerns my honor, while I am page to the noble Olaf, to stand up for my rights with point and edge.”

The Songsmith’s impulse towards laughter was strong enough to send a note beyond his unmirthful lips. Then, as the splendid personage began solemnly to clamber to the ground, he shook himself irritably.

“Eric, you are not wont to be a fool—with me—and this is a bad time to begin. Stay in your saddle and ride along.”

Either Eric’s flowery phrases felt the blight of contempt, or else no more of them had taken root under his curly hair. In silence he came on, his rosy mouth screwed up to the point of his resolve, and planted himself before his foster-brother.

“You have got to do one of two things—either

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make atonement for the blows I received at your hand, or else cross swords with me," he issued his ultimatum, with a circling sweep of his arm towards the longer of the two silver-ornamented sheaths that were a part of his new attire.

Again the song-maker wavered between laughter and irritation, looking down at the manful swagger in which the small legs were spread apart.

"Be good enough to say what use you could be put to after I had crossed swords with you?" he inquired.

The boy pushed back his curls eagerly.

"I told Olaf that I believed you would not be slow in understanding honorable ways!" he cried. "It is not my meaning that we should really fight each other. Only that you shall draw your weapon and let me make some thrusts at you, and then you can make some passes at me—easy ones—and after that I will declare myself satisfied and—"

"So that is the kind of stuff your new master is filling your head with," his foster-brother's voice crossed his. "If I were not afraid of losing my temper with you, I would use the flat of my blade on your back in a way that would not increase your dignity, but rather—" Of a sudden, what patience he had deserted him; he flung out his arms in a gesture before which the small warrior

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scuttled involuntarily. "Trolls, am I to be plagued by a gnat when I am in the mood to attack giants? Keep away from me if you would not run the risk as to how it turns out."

Pressing his fingers to his ears to shut out another burst of French-made eloquence, he strode on, and stopped only to save himself from stumbling over the youngster, who had again thrown himself in the way, dancing gnatlike.

"You have got to fight me," he was shrieking. "I shall lose my credit with Olaf unless you do. I will cut your kirtle with my knife,—do you hear? I will cut off one of your buttons."

Whether or not Rolf's son heard the threats or the grating of the steel against the gold, he felt the sharp jerk at his sleeve, and exasperation rose in him. Before he well knew what he was about, he had reached out and seized the boy by a leg and an arm and swung him high in the air. Only that he realized what a toy the body was to his strength saved him from dashing it head foremost against the stones of the road-side wall, and recalled him to himself so that he tumbled it lightly on the grass instead.

"Well that it was no worse! Do you want to be killed that you try me so?" he cried under his breath, and turned to flee temptation before the blue-and-silver heap could right itself.

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Turning, he found himself within a dozen paces of Olaf, Thorgrim's son, who had followed his page round the curve and sat in his saddle awaiting the boy's fate with keen interest.

Not soon enough could Olaf hide the disappointment that had convulsed him on seeing Eric dropped unscathed. The Songsmith caught the expression and read it and understood at last the snare that had been set for him. Scorn brought his rage to that point of white heat where his voice sounded curiously still.

"You—dastard!" he said. "So that is what you were plotting, that I should be fretted into slaying the young one, and furnish you with the excuse of avenging him. That is why you beguiled him into your service—poisoned his mind against me—set him on me when you suspected that my temper would be raw."

No answer came from Olaf's parted curving lips; only he leaped expectant from his horse and stood looking at his enemy, the glitter of his eyes heightened to a white glare. As metal bars under white heat, Randvar's prudence lost shape and ran. In the relief from its restraint, he vented his short laugh, plucking the cap from his head with a fantastic flourish before he tossed it aside.

"Behold, how much needless trouble you took!" he cried. "Here have I walked the roads all morn-

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ing only in the hope of meeting you, caring never a whit whether you gave me a new excuse or not! At any price would the joy of slaying you be a bargain. Shall I make it plain that I challenge?"

As a bolt from a bow shot his fist from his shoulder, landing fair and square on the smiling mouth he hated. At sight of its marred line, its starting blood, he laughed again and drew back and unsheathed his sword.

Olaf's curse cut the short laugh shorter, as his brand flashed forth. The next sound was curter still, the jarring clash of steel on steel.

Far as sound could carry, it bore the news that mortal enemies had met. Catching no more than a faint echo, Gunnar and his mates—far down the road—whirled, crying, "The Songsmith!" and, "Thorgrim's son!" and then, as with one voice, "Randvar is not his match!" and after that came loping back, their eyes agleam. Sweeter than harp-music, it filled the ears of the men wielding the swords.

Fierce is the thirst for water, but fiercer still the thirst for life. Parching his veins, it spread through Rolf's son. Now it seemed appeased as he felt the parting of flesh under his blade, saw red water rise in the well he had digged. Now he knew the fiery pang of Olaf's point entering his own flesh,

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and the thirst consumed him anew. *Kill! kill! kill!* it roared in his ears above the clashing.

Olaf's greater skill against his charmed body—it was a fair game. To leave his heart unguarded that Thorgrim's son might lunge at the opening and in the act of lunging leave himself exposed—that was the way to play it; and he played with all his might, drove home each thrust with laughter.

Round the road-bend Gunnar came panting, followed by Aslak, and behind him, the others. At the ghastly glimpse they caught, through swirl-dust-clouds, of the song-maker laughing like a madman while blood oozed through every slit in his slashed garments, they uttered cries of dismay; but he paid them back with jests shouted hoarsely above the clatter. How could they know what wild joy it was, unhampered as the sweeping fury of a storm! He would have wished never to end it, had he not feared betrayal by that oozing blood. If his strength were to fail before his vengeance was complete—!

To the friends watching him, it was a welcome relief when laughter left his face, and it set instead in the stony lines of one rallying all his forces. Gripping his sword in both hands, he abandoned all pretence of defending himself, bent all his might on beating down Olaf's guard. Twice, they saw the French One's blade reach him and open

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crimson gaps; but he seemed not to feel it. Step by step, he drove his enemy backward until he had him at bay against a tree—until it wanted but one thrust to pin him there—

Why he did not give that thrust, the on-lookers knew first, who saw Eric spring forward with a shrill cry and strike his foster-brother on the breast, plunging into his heart a knife he held. Then their wrath was lost in wonder that the Songsmith did not fall, only staggered back against the low stone wall and leaned there, passing his hand before his eyes as a man trying to clear mist from his vision.

“Eric! It was never you?” he said.

But even as he said it, his glance fell to the reddened blade in the boy’s hand; while Olaf jeered him over the heads of those who were holding him back, telling him that the fight was finished:

“You need not to stare at him. It is even as you see; he has betrayed you.”

No more effort the Songsmith made to maintain his weakening hold upon his sword. Slipping, swaying, staggering, he sank, nor struggled against it. If friends had not been there to care for him, his life had surely passed out through his wounds’ open gates.

XIX

"By bending most, the truest sword is known"

—Northern saying.



CROSS the court-yard came the Jarl's sister and her following of white-armed maids and graceful pages, and the evening breeze went before her like a herald. With sleepy sighs, the budding fruit-trees dreaming in the starlight bestirred themselves to offer tribute of fragrant bloom, made the earth fair for her treading, made the air sweet for her breathing. Floating down upon her bosom, the roseate petals blended with it as flower with flower. Drifting down upon her hair, they lay like unmelting flakes amid its golden fire. So wondrous lovely was she thus crowned that Yrsa walking beside her had an impulse of admiring affection, and slipped a caressing hand into hers.

Immediately after she would have withdrawn it, making excuses for her boldness, but that Brynhild's gray eyes came down to her as serene as the starlit sky. Gathering up the timid fingers

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with her own firm supple ones, she drew her foster-sister's arm around her; and so they moved on together to the women's house that awaited with open doors their return from evening service. Gaining the light that came through the dusk to meet them like a golden welcome, the Jarl's sister paused to look back and raise a warning finger.

"Keep in mind our guest," she cautioned.

Soft as the rippling chat and laughter had been, it smoothed out now to waveless quiet. With only the swish of trailing silk, the rustle of feet through grass, they went up the bright path to the door.

On the threshold they were met by the stately old stewardess, who was mother to Yrsa and the foster-mother of Brynhild the Proud. Cheerily the Jarl's sister accosted her:

"If he has changed by so much as the set of an eyelash, good Thorgerda, I expect you to tell me without delay," she said. Then she took her hand from Yrsa's, took a swift step forward, as from the lace lappings of the head-dress the old face looked towards her somewhat soberly. "It is not possible that you are going to tell me that his heart-wound is serious after all! That the saints would let it be so, when I have been daily to their altars praising them for the miracle by which they saved him!"

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“By no means,” Thorgerda answered hastily. “Just after you left, I looked at it again; and it has knit together as by a miracle during the sleep which has held him so strangely. But as I was putting the bandages back, he came out of his sleep.”

“Ah!” Brynhild said softly, and put an uncertain finger to her lips. “What was his mood?” she asked at last.

“I wish I were altogether sure, foster-daughter. If I tell the truth of him, I must say that there is a squareness to his mouth which I— But you shall hear— But, first, be pleased to come in and take your seat. It is not fitting—”

“I will not take time to put one foot over the threshold until I hear what lies so near my happiness,” the Jarl’s sister interrupted her. Her foster-mother began without preamble.

“Thus it was, then. The first thing I knew, he had put up his eyelids like a man putting off blankets, and was gazing at the embroideries on the bed-curtains. Then he saw me, where I stood near the head, and asked me slowly what place he was in. I said it was the room in the women’s house whither it was the Jarl’s custom to send sick courtmen to be taken care of,— I thought it unadvisable to be hasty in speaking your name. And then—”

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The Jarl's sister crossed the threshold to get nearer to her. "And then?"

"For a while his expression told me nothing. He lay so long staring ahead of him that I thought he was falling asleep again, and turned to leave. He has more strength than you would think likely in a man so drained of blood. A rustle made me turn back to find that he had pulled himself up and was looking about for his clothes."

A sound that was half a laugh and half a sob came from Brynhild's round throat. "His clothes! Those slashed and slitted — blood-sponges! Yet what said he when he saw what garments we had prepared?"

"Nothing, foster-daughter. As yet, stained and tattered leather and gold-embroidered fabric are all one to him. I pointed out where they hung, and did not even tell him that they were useless to him. As I had expected, he was not long in finding it out. With his first motion to rise, he fell back on his pillows, nor even argued with me when I proved to him how foolish he was to attempt to move. Yet if I know anything about the set of a man's mouth, he will not do our bidding long," the old dame ended somewhat unexpectedly.

The Jarl's sister made Yrsa a sign to help her off with the lace scarf that lay around her shoulders, like a mist about a rose.

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“I will go to him,” was all she said.

If Thorgerda had any thought of dissuading her, it was abandoned upon a second glance. She spoke only a word of admonishment as Starkad's daughter turned towards the foot of the hall.

“So it shall be, then. Still it is good counsel to tread softly. It may be that he is sleeping. I advised him to do so when I left.”

The girl nodded her bright head impatiently, then shook it at the thralls who sprang forward from the benches at her approach. Hushing with her hands the rustling of her skirts, she hastened down the hall to the western guest-chamber, and gently pushed open the door.

The song-maker was not sleeping. Instead, he had risen and dressed himself in the garments of grape-purple,—as the sheen on ungathered grapes the precious embroideries were sparkling with every move he made in the flickering torch-light. Under one of the fragrant juniper wall-candles, he stood buckling the last buckle of the tunic. From the task he did not look up as the hinges creaked, but seemed to take for granted that it was Thorgerda returned.

“I beg that you will come in and close the door behind you before you make any fuss,” he said.

She came in and closed the door behind her,

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without making any fuss; and he went on, his eyes still aiding his fingers.

“While it is altogether unlikely that the Jarl’s sister would raise any objections to my departure, yet because Helvin sent me here it might be that she would think it her duty to make some protests; so I beg of you that you will not say anything to her about my going.”

Again from the fountain of Brynhild’s white throat welled up a sound that was half of laughter, half of weeping.

“I will promise you that,” she answered.

He looked up, then; and from bloodless white, his face went blood-red. After a moment, he made her the most ceremonious salutation at his command.

“I ask you to understand that I mistook you for your stewardess,” he said. “She was with me but a short while ago, when I came back to my wits. It may be you know that I have been out of them these days, or I would have gone before.”

To grope along the walls for the weapon that was missing from his belt, he turned away. She had a strange feeling that his mind was so far from her as scarcely to realize that she was there. She offered the feeble commonplaces she might have offered a stranger.

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“Why should you leave? It is the custom for Jarl’s men to be taken care of here.”

From his eyes that were like dark caves in the side of a snow-mountain came forth a flash as he glanced round at her. “That you have a poor opinion of me I know, but I did not know you thought me capable of making Helvin’s order an excuse for quartering myself upon you.”

Feeling with his hands where the sword leaned in a corner, he brought it forth, and stood gazing at the highly polished blade. Once more she had the sensation of being forgotten.

“It is cleaner than it was the last time I saw it,” he said, “but I liked it better then. What is Olaf’s fate?”

She answered mechanically: “It is told that he still keeps his bed at Mord’s house.”

“Is that true?” he asked wonderingly, and a smile that had no connection with her widened his nostrils. When he had laboriously buckled on the sword, he came unsteadily towards her. “All the thanks that are due to your women I pay, —or at least I pay all I have. If you will allow me to pass now, I will take the task off their hands.”

Some of her sense of strangeness was lost, then, in alarm. But even before she could tell him of his weakness, he was forced to catch at a chair’s high back to save himself from falling.

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“And bid one of your servants give me his shoulder across the court-yard,” he murmured.

“I will bid two of them take you by force and put you back in bed where you belong,” she said indignantly, and turned to throw open the door.

Though he remained leaning heavily on the chair, he spoke slowly: “If you do—I swear to you—that I will struggle against them—until every wound on me starts open.”

She took her hand from the door, but only to make of her rounded arms a bar across it, defying him:

“You would not struggle against me.”

Holding to the chair-back he stood looking at her, at first in surprise, then with weary patience.

“I should have remembered,” he said, “that it would be a part of your high breeding not to let me feel that I had been a burden on your hospitality.”

Of one color were her cheeks and her rose-red kirtle, as she shaped her unskilled lips to pleading. “It was not Helvin who ordered them to bring you here. It was I who asked it. . . . I shared the care of you with my women . . . and found it . . . no burden.”

Lowered for the first time was the lofty banner of her head. His gaze rested on it wistfully even while he continued his slow progress towards the door.

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“My wounds have made you wondrous kind,” he said. “I have heard it told that such crimson mouths, for all that they are tongueless, are full of eloquence for women. But you see that they are healing fast. It would not last much longer anyway. Let me go while I can.”

Pain sharpened his voice, yet his hand was in every way gentle when he put aside the living bar that dared not tempt his weakness by overmuch resistance.

Almost in fear she looked up at him. “Randvar! Has it happened that this has slain your love for me?”

He touched with his lips the wrist he had taken. “I wish it had done so; then I should dare to stay and sun myself, and take it easily when, to-morrow or the day after, the skies change and you storm me forth with hard words—”

“Never, my loved one! Never again!” April-faced, she leaned towards him. “It will always be good weather for you now. Always! You a song-maker, and doubt the summer because of a storm or two!”

“It must be because I am a song-maker that I have had faith in so many things,” he answered. “It is mercy I am asking of you, Brynhild. You have so much for my body,—have a little for my mind, that since first I saw you has been a leaf in

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the wind of your moods. Let me go while I can, before your fairness knits the net once more around me."

As gently as might be, he gathered her other wrist into his clasp, and holding the two in one hand, laid the other on the door. She dared not struggle with him. But one way was left her. Light as the apple-blossoms float down, she drifted to her knees.

"My friend, you prayed me once to let you stay because to you it meant so much and to me—you thought—it meant so little. I beg the boon back from you. Stay, because it will be easy to you who are so generous in giving, and to me it would be so hard to give you up."

As he had done that day in the road, he passed his hands before his eyes to clear them.

"This—and my blood on Eric's blade—are the two last sights that ever I thought to see," he murmured. "Yet since that one was true, it may be that this other is." Looking down at her, a faint smile touched his mouth. "What dream-mockery to see you so,—you who twist me between your fingers like any willow out of the forest! But your work will seem better to you if you have your way in this. Until your mind changes, then!"

Releasing her, he sat down on the stool beside the door, his elbows on his knees, his head on his

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hands. From kneeling, she sank into a sitting posture on the rush-strewn floor beside him, glad perhaps to hide her face against his sleeve. It was he who kept their footing against the swaying shimmering dream-river that seemed to rise about them, and forded it at last to the shore of reality.

“Yet what right have I to a place in your hall, who have made myself an outlaw?”

Stifling a sigh, she walked on land again.

“It is unlikely that you will be banished. In the teeth of all the lawmen, Helvin has refused it. And while it may not turn out to your honor with the advice-givers, I think the Jarl will push it through by boldness. To-day, he rode out himself to seek counsel from Flokki of Iceland, who is the greatest man for bending the law to his wishes. I might be tempted to reproach you for doing this joy to your foe, my friend, if I did not guess that I have some blame for your temper.”

Perhaps she wanted to lure him into taking her part against herself, but he did not even see the bait. Through the hands still supporting his head, he spoke absently.

“You had not the most share in the matter, Jarl’s sister. For the hardships he dragged me under with Helvin, I should have followed up Olaf; and on top of that, there was the trap he

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baited with Eric. Eric! Who would have believed a false heart grew in the boy!"

Looking up through his hands, she saw how bitter his mouth had become. Of a sudden she rose and pressed her lips to it, as one who would draw poison from a wound.

"The little viper! Never think of him!" she breathed.

Whether it changed his look she did not see, for even more quickly she dropped back and hid her eyes upon his arm. Only she knew that he sat a long time looking down at her.

"At least you cannot take the memory of that from me. Give you thanks for that!" he said at last, and for an instant she felt the touch of his lips upon her hair. But he ventured no further caress. When he spoke again, she knew that his gaze had gone back to the rush-strewn floor.

"What I should do is to be grateful that I was hindered from killing the boy. To have had that news come to Erna's ears—" She felt the muscles harden in his arm with the clinching of his fist. Then he went on somewhat anxiously: "Yet she would like his deed little better. I hope there is no likelihood of her hearing of it. It seems that he has not fled to the forest, since you say he was before the lawmen. I suppose Olaf has taken him under his safeguard?"

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She shook her head without raising it. "You do not know Thorgrim's son, if you think he troubles himself about a tool after it has served his purpose. In the first place, he prevented the boy from running away that he might send him as a witness before the lawmen. Then, when that had been accomplished, he resigned him willingly to Helvin's demand. Nothing has been done to him as yet, for it was not until to-day that the herb-woman would say how it was like to go with your life—so has your heart-wound puzzled everyone—but to-morrow they are to take him out and hew off his hand—" She broke off in a gasp, as the Songsmith's fingers crushed her arm unknowingly.

"Ill will it be, then! Do they forget that he is but a child?"

The eyes which she lifted to his were Valkyria's eyes, that would look without flinching on the torture of a friend's foe.

"Now you argue like the goddess Frigg when, because it was young, she allowed the mistletoe-bush to become the shaft which killed Balder the Beautiful. If you had got your death from the boy, Helvin would have had him slain,—and it would have been rightly done!"

The song-maker's broad shoulders shrugged as once more he leaned forward upon his knees.

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“Though it may sound less well to your ears, Jarl’s sister,” he said dryly, “the true reason why Helvin is set against the boy is because the young one was the hinderance in the way of my killing Olaf. Is it also out of love towards me that Eric’s friends have failed to help him? Or is it another reason that no one dares to go against the Jarl’s pleasure?”

“It might be that and yet be no shame to their manhood,” she answered suddenly, and put back the clustering masses of her hair to look at him with earnestness. “An unheard-of thing is his temper becoming, Randvar! The evening after the duel, he rode out to Mord’s house and went in where Olaf lay and stood for the space of two candle-burnings staring down at him, without speaking, only tearing his mantle between his teeth. And yesterday when he was here, he put to me the most unexpected question. He asked me if ever I saw our father in my sleep, or in dark corners. And when I said, ‘By no means,’ he laughed—cold trickled over me at the sound!—and muttered that Starkad showed favoritism in giving all the visits to him. Heard you ever anything to equal that in strangeness?”

“Never,” the song-maker assented. But he said no more, nor moved so much as his bent shoulders. After a glance up at him, she began

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studying his face from the ambush of her hair, and sank so deep in musing that she started when he spoke.

“Where have they caged the cub?”

“In that storehouse loft, which has been thought bad enough to be a prison since a guard killed another one there by pushing him through the floor-hole so that he drowned in the beer-vat below.” She came further out of her study to slip her hand into his, where it hung between his knees. “Laugh if you will, my friend, still I shall hold it for true that no one has freed the little snake because no man will lift a finger for one who has injured you. Only bolts keep the door—no guard stands watch there—any could have helped him if they had a mind.”

He did laugh, shortly and suddenly; then pressing her hand, he released it and stood up.

“By this time, the Jarl will have returned from Flokki’s; and I will go to him.” As she rose swiftly, he lifted one of her silken braids and laid it lightly across her lips. “Noble maiden, I am a wild hawk that has been caged over-long. Let me stretch my wings, and I shall come back all the more gladly,—if so be your kind mood lasts until to-morrow.”

Above the shining bar of her hair, her color flamed so brightly that she was fain to extinguish

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it upon his breast. Her words came to him faintly :

“Will you believe, when I tell you that I have made this plan,—that to-morrow shall be our wedding-day?”

He stood a long time looking down at her, then said slowly: “If—after this—you fail me, I shall lose the wish to live.”

“If ever I fail you again, I give you leave to die,” she answered.

Then she let him take from her mouth a kiss of farewell; she clasped behind her the hands that wished to hold him back, and let him go forth into the starlit night.

XX

"Need proves a friend"

—Northern saying.



STEEP as the way to Heaven seemed the steps of the prison loft as Randvar dragged himself up them; yet he dared not pause on the unsheltered landing, but goaded his nerveless fingers on to their task of drawing the bolts. Whining, the rusty bars yielded, and he staggered into the musty gloom. Closing the door behind him, he leaned against it to recover his breath.

Across every corner of the huge one-windowed room, the spider Night had woven dense shadows. Like a small blue fly in the meshes of a black web, Eric was curled upon the straw-littered floor,—a forlorn and crumpled fly with limp legs and gaudy wings adroop. To stare at the opening door, he started up; but recognizing the Songsmith in the wink of time that the tall form was silhouetted against the starlight, he tipped over again, hiding his face upon the straw as though he would burrow into it, while his voice rose in a muffled wail:

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“Oh, foster-brother, do not be angry with me! Do not be angry with me!”

“Come here—and give me your shoulder—to that bench yonder,” Randvar commanded between breaths.

When it had been twice repeated, the boy obeyed shrinkingly. As soon as he felt the weight lighten on his shoulder, he would have drawn back into the darkness again if the hand had not slipped down his arm to his wrist and held him. He curved his other arm before his face, then, and began to wail anew.

“I beseech you not to scold me! I have had all the blame that I can stand!”

“I am not going to scold you,” the song-maker said wearily. His head had fallen back heavily against the wall behind him, and his eyes were shut. “It has happened to older people than you to think that the man who gives them hard words is their foe and the man who smiles on them is their friend. If you have not found out yet that you behaved badly, no good is to be had from talking about it.”

The boy burrowed further into the bend of his arm.

“I *hate* Olaf,” he sobbed.

“It is likely that you do now, since he has stopped making much of you,” the Songsmith

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returned sternly, "still it should be remembered for a while longer that you thought enough of him once to try to take my life for his sake."

Wriggling, the culprit tried hard to pull away. "Now you are scolding me, though you said you would not. You know I did not mean to stab you."

His foster-brother shook the arm he held. "Never lie to me, Eric!"

"I am not lying to you," Eric lifted up his voice and wept. "Never did I lie to you in my life,—not even though I had meddled with your skin-boat and you were trimming a willow switch as you asked me about it. If you had any sense, you would guess that it had gone out of my mind that I was holding a knife. I thought I was striking you with my fist,—and for that you cannot throw blame on me for you have told me yourself that a man must be loyal to the lord he has chosen, and Olaf says the Devil gets all pages who do not fight for their masters. I thought that if I attacked you, you would turn on me, and he would get a chance to recover himself and—"

The Songsmith brought him nearer by the wrist he held, and drew down with his other hand the arm shielding the woe-begone face.

"Say that over again, Eric, while I look in your eyes."

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They were swollen eyes, and now resentful and now beseeching, but clear as blue lakes to show what lay under them. Before the explanation was half repeated, his foster-brother showed that he accepted it by drawing him into a close embrace and holding him so. Feeling the encircling arm change from a shackle to a caress, the boy subsided on the broad shoulder and wept there unrestrainedly.

“Tell them that you do not blame me, so they will not look at me the way they did. You cannot imagine how they behaved! When I met some of my best friends out of Brynhild’s house, not a maiden of them would speak to me. And old Visbur said that the forest bred traitors like acorns, and that they ought to hang like acorns on the trees; and his eyes—you could not bring before your mind how his eyes looked!”

“I wish I could not!” the song-maker muttered, and shook himself as though he were a baited bear and his memories sharp-toothed hounds. But the boy pressed harder against him.

“You must not go until you promise me your help. The guards will act in any way you say,—tell them to let me go back to the Tower. If you knew how much I want to see my mother and Snowfrid!—and Lame Forsek and the others—who look at me as if they thought well of me. I

Randvar the Songsmith

cannot bear to be looked at the other way. My heart will break if I have to see one of these hateful court-people again. Until I get to be a man, when I shall come back and kill Olaf and— Foster-brother, you are not going to refuse me?”

He abandoned vengeance to press his face coaxingly against the Songsmith's, and try to forestall the answer he read there.

“I *beg* it of you! You wanted me to go back to see Erna,—and now I will do everything she asks of me. Foster-brother, listen! I will not once forget to chop the wood or fetch the water. I— Listen! If I do, she can tell you and you can—”

“What I am trying to say,” the Songsmith made himself heard at last, “is that my words would have no weight at all with the guards. Even the Jarl's favor I dare not lean on this time— Stand still! I am not saying it to frighten you, only to show you that carefulness is necessary. The worst part of your bad fortune is past, for I have already planned it that you are to slip away to - night. Yonder is the door with the bolts drawn, and beyond the court lies an open road to the forest. Some starlight is in the court - yard, but there are also many trees; and you have learned Skraelling tricks of skulking. The night has only just passed its noon, so you are unlikely to see any one,—but a beggar snoring on

Randvar the Songsmith

the steps of the women's house. You can avoid the sentinels at the gates by getting over the wall where the Jarl's stable shadows it. After you are once in the road, you know what to do as well as I. Luck go with you!"

Before the last word was out, the boy had reached the door; but the impulse was not quite strong enough to carry him through it. Digging his boot-toe into the straw, he hesitated, squirming in evident anguish of mind.

"Are you going to stay here and be their prisoner instead of me?" he faltered.

A light that was not starlight made the Songsmith's white face bright as he turned it towards him. "You show in this that you have a good heart, little comrade; but you need not trouble yourself. I do not intend that any one shall know that I have been here. As soon as you have had time to get clear of the court-yard, I shall go back and lie down under a tree, and pretend that I have been swooning there all night."

Again the boy laid a hand on the door; then again he turned,—and this time he came all the way back and threw his arms about his foster-brother's neck in a strangling hug. From somewhere under the curly mop came the broken whisper:

"Say that you think as much of me as ever."

Randvar the Songsmith

Tousling the yellow head in the old familiar caress, his foster-brother gave him the desired assurance and tried to disengage himself; but Eric clung burrlike.

“Never did I love Olaf one-half as well as you,—may the Giant take me if I did! When are you coming back to the Tower? Olaf says that the Jarl behaves so badly towards you that one of you will surely kill the other, if you do not run away.”

“If I were not unwilling to pay compliments to Olaf, I should say that truth came out of his mouth,” the song-maker muttered; then he put the boy from him firmly. “Do you want to linger so long that the thralls will be waking up and coming out to catch you?”

Eric made one dash at his foster-brother’s cheek, flattening his face against it, and was gone through the narrowest opening of the door.

Like the patter of spring rain, the tap of his feet on the steps came back to the Songsmith. Smiling faintly he followed him with his fancy, pictured him holding himself down to creep across the court, then letting himself out as he reached the sheltered lane, snuffing in freedom until he broke and ran—ran—ran like a homeward-turned horse.

“It will be some time before *I* shall be able to run,” he reflected ruefully, and began to realize

Randvar the Songsmith

how exhausted he was now that excitement like a prop had fallen from under him. He shook his knees irritably.

“Troll take a man’s legs, that will go back upon him at such a time as this!” he muttered. “If I do not look out, I shall founder here. . . . He has had time now to gain the lane. . . . I wish I knew if the room is really darkening, as it seems, or if it is only a trick of my eyes!” He tried in vain with groping hands to sweep the shadows from before him, then to shake off the heaviness settling on him.

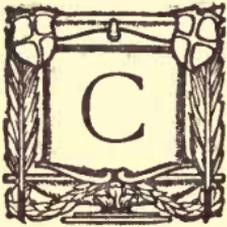
“A grim jest that would be, to be caught within three strides of an unbarred door!” he told himself with an impulse of anger. Again he shook off the heaviness, desperately; summoning all his strength, he rose to his feet.

One step he made, and part of another; then his knees sank under him as under a crushing weight; his body sank until his head rested on the floor,—then it seemed that the floor began to sink! After that, he let the Fates have their way.

XXI

"What must be is sure to happen"

—Northern saying.



COMING back to his senses, the Songsmith lay awhile adjusting his memory. . . . Once, he had fallen asleep on bloody grass and wakened amid the silken fragrance of the women's house. . . . Here was another change. . . . Cobwebbed rafters and bare walls and heavy air as close as the grave. He snuffed up a resentful breath of it—then forgot to exhale in the suddenly added consciousness that some one was gazing at him. Turning his head, his eyes met gray eyes staring at him from a jungle of blood-colored hair.

On the bench to which the song-maker had been helped the night before, Helvin Jarl was now sitting, his elbows on his knees, his hands dropped between to hold the sword with which he was stirring and prodding the straw of the floor. He laid the flat of the blade against Randvar's breast as the Songsmith started up, forcing him gently back.

"Lie still. No one is looking to see whether

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we go through with the foolish rules which some simpleton has laid down. I have sent the guards below." He took the blade away as he felt the song-maker yield to its pressure, sheathing it as he went on: "Their state was laughable, between not knowing whether they should get my wrath because they had not at once carried you out of here, or because they had not at once slain you. See how they have tried to trim both sides of their sail to the wind, by making you comfortable and at the same time holding you prisoner."

He nodded floorward, and Randvar noticed for the first time that a charger of food and drink stood within reach of his hand, that a cushion had been put under his head and a cloak spread over him. At another time he might have smiled. Now his gaze came back with unrelieved gravity to the Jarl's face that in some way was strange to him.

"Which kind of behavior is most to your mind, lord?" he asked.

Clasping his hands behind his head, Helvin leaned back against the wall and returned his look sombrely.

"I am only just getting to know surely, comrade. When they brought me word this morning that you had set free the brat who stepped between Olaf and death, there was a spell when my fingers

Randvar the Songsmith

itched for your throat. You can see that I came to you straight out of the hands of my shoe-boy." He lifted one of his legs to show that the silk bands which should have been wound around it were still hanging. "If the sight of your peaceful sleep had not fallen coolingly upon my hot humor, there is a likelihood that . . . that . . ." Though his eyes remained upon the song-maker, they set in a vacant stare. "You would be lying there like an empty wine-skin . . . and I should be raving beside you, trying to put back the wine I had spilled . . . seeing it creep away towards the cracks . . . feeling it slip slimy through my fingers. . . . Ah!"

The hand that had gone out groping before him he dashed against his eyes as though to break the spell that bound them, springing to his feet with a wild cry.

"Why do I torture myself with what is not true? I have not slain you. You are alive, for all that you have the color of a dead man. Speak to me! Drive away this madness!"

White as the dead the song-maker was, as much from increasing alarm as from the weakness of his blood-drained body; yet he managed to lift himself to his knees and then to his feet, to stand steadying himself against the wall. Only his voice failed to obey his summons, so that he was glad to have the pause filled by the thundering

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tread of a man hurrying up the steps. In the doorway appeared a guard, his spear gripped in his hand.

"Jarl, was it for help you cried out?" he demanded.

A moment Starkad's son held his breath, as though the nethermost deeps of his mind must be dredged for adequate words,—then all words seemed to prove inadequate. Snatching a wine-flagon from the tray, he hurled it at the intruder's head. The force with which it crashed against the door-frame suggested what it would have done to the mark that it missed.

How the guardsman took his leave, Randvar did not see. Dropping down upon the bench, he burst into high-keyed laughter.

"Help—against—*me!*" he gasped, and leaned there laughing until Helvin's hand fell upon his shoulder and shook him with friendly severity.

"Stop! That is the end of such laughter that weeping follows it. Stop! Drink this."

The pressure of a cup against his lip compelled obedience, and the draught brought some of his strength back to him; but the Jarl's remained the dominating spirit.

"More of that is needed, and food in your stomach. I will be your dish-bearer for a change," he said, and himself dropped down cross-legged on

Randvar the Songsmith

the straw beside the charger that he might pass up its contents.

Patient as the hand of a woman, his hand that had sped the missile ministered now to his friend. Now and again, over crust or bone, Randvar met in the gray eyes a brooding tenderness that tightened the muscles around his heart.

It was a relief when Helvin's mind began to turn away to musing, drawing him over upon his elbow to lie staring into the empty cup he held, like a wizard reading fortunes in the wine-dregs. Dreamy as the note of droning bees, his voice sounded when presently he began to muse aloud.

"I only wish I could have found some excuse to give drink to Olaf. . . . Every moment I stood by him, I was wondering if there was not some way. . . . It would not have been necessary to kill him. One drop of the right herb-juice would be enough to addle his wits until he could pass for mad. Whatever he betrayed, I should have only to shrug my shoulders and tap my head. Conceive of his rage! It would have been sport for a king!"

As a dog over a sweet bone, he put out the tip of his tongue and noiselessly licked his lips. Wincing, Randvar spoke hastily:

"Jarl, this is an unprofitable mood! Recall it to your mind that Olaf knows nothing to betray."

From the folds of strange craftiness that had

Randvar the Songsmith

been drawing over them, Helvin's eyes looked up dazedly. Then—slowly—the gaze that he met steadied the flickering torch of his reason.

“Why, that is true,” he admitted. “I forgot that he had not yet found the carrion which his vulture-scent warned him of. . . . Still in the Fates' hands is that happening. . . . Only I can see it coming . . . slipping through their bony fingers. . . .” In a mutter his voice died away. Stretched at full length he lay in brooding reverie, so sombre a figure that the cup of dregs took on new suggestiveness.

The song-maker began to speak quietly, gazing out through the open door where the rosy snow of blossoming crab-trees was banked against the blue sky, and sun like golden wine steeped all the noonday world.

“It befell me once to see a place far west of here where the earth had shaken and rent a rock in twain, and out of the chasm had leaped a brook of sweet water. So I think this happening with Eric must have shaken me; for like a well of water, a song rose in my mind while I slept,—a song that never had place there before.”

In the black morass of his musing the Jarl turned, lured by the will-o'-the-wisp curiosity.

“Never have I heard of a song coming in that manner,” he said. “Even you have always ham-

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mered them out before. Has it risen as far as your lips so that any of it could brim over into words?"

Though he continued to gaze out at the blowing trees, the song-maker bent all his energies upon his story-weaving.

"Little of it has yet got so high as that. But it will be a song about the good which is in a man even though his actions appear to be evil. . . . Perhaps I shall say that he had Thor's wrath for turning to the Christ-faith; and the Thunderer cursed him so that he had no other choice than to do three nothing deeds, even though his mind was noble. . . . He will have a friend—perhaps it will be a maiden—who is brave enough to believe in his honorable mind in spite of the unworthiness of his actions. . . . I do not know yet what those crimes will be . . . except that the first must be that he slays a kinsman—"

"Are—you—mad?" Starkad's son said slowly.

With a start, Randvar turned. That the Jarl had risen gradually from his place on the straw he had realized, but he had taken it for interest. Now for the first time he looked at him. Looking, he sprang to his feet.

"What ails you?"

"Are you mad?"—Helvin repeated his slow question—"that you dare to make my life into a song and tell it to my face?"

Randvar the Songsmith

“*Your* life!” the Songsmith breathed. Then, even angrily, he swept the suspicion aside with his arm. “Lord, this is an unbecoming jest! You must know that such a song would be true of any man in the world.”

Futile as the dash of waves against a rock, the words fell down unheeded. Unmoved as a rock, Helvin stood gazing at him.

“Has your swooning so dulled your wits that you really cannot see that to sing that song in any one’s hearing would be to tell him that you saw me murder my father?”

It was too late to check the words, though Randvar’s arm had shot out in the attempt. Then he stood with his head gripped in his hands, like a man into whose mind a terrible truth is eating. As though he had forgotten he was not alone, he started when Helvin’s hand fell upon his breast and pressed him back upon the bench.

A strange softness had come into the voice of Starkad’s son,—a softness from which the ear recoiled as the hand recoils from the softness of decayed fruit.

“Now I see by your dismay at finding how near you had come to betraying me that it was neither madness nor treachery that prompted you, but the awful knowledge working in you as the awful guilt has worked in me. Of no avail to remind

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myself that he brought it on his own head—that I tried to keep away from him when I felt it coming but he forced me aside with him, goaded me until I could no more keep hold of myself than my shaking hands could keep hold of the leash—It may well be forgiven you that you shudder! I might have known that soon or late the horror must work out of you. Yet am I glad that I trusted you as long as was possible. Bear that in mind about me, even though it must come here to an end.”

With quick light step he went and shut the door. The sound of its closing fell ominously on the song-maker's ears, even as a sense of smothering fell on him with the passing of the glimpse of sky. He asked slowly:

“Is it my death-warning that you give me?”

Still with gentleness, Starkad's son shook his head. “Only what my safety has need of I take,—your liberty. I will give you the comforts and amusements you may choose yourself—”

“Amusements!” Rough scorn was in the gesture with which the Songsmith sprang up. “Why do you talk thus, or what do you think of me? Do you forget that I am bred to no lower roof than the tent of the sun? Better might you cage an eagle and bid him be content with a branch where before he had ranged the forest! But I belie you

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in thinking it! Your sane self could never deal so wrongfully with me,—and you must be sane! You *must* be sane! No marks of the curse are on you. If you are whole-minded, listen to me! For this song, I take the Cross-oath that it shall never pass my lips—even in solitude. Nay, I will dash it out of my memory! By your love, believe me!”

To take his hand and press and stroke it, the Jarl came all the way from the door.

“Do I not believe you?” he said caressingly. “On your good intentions I would lay down my life. It is luck that I dare not trust so much to. Did I not for a dozen years hide my curse so that not even my own kin dreamed it was there, only to have it burst out like smouldering fire at last? So would your uttermost effort be set at naught with such a secret pressing for outlet—”

Almost with repulsion, Randvar freed himself from the fondling hands, and pushed the other away that he might front him squarely.

“Jarl, as God hears me, I would sooner that you should rage! It is not sound, this softness! Face me like a man—or a devil—or anything but this! Listen, and I will lay the truth before you so that no room shall be left for doubt to stand between us. If it rouse you to anger, so much the better! Lord, I never knew your secret,—only I let you think so because in no other way would you be-

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lieve in my love. Of that hard happening at the Pool, I saw no more than your struggle with the hound. That you loosed him on Starkad, I become aware for the first time—”

He broke off because it was plain that Helvin was no longer listening. He stood gazing at his song-maker, his eyes retreating deeper and deeper between crafty folds.

He said as to himself: “Love of life! How strong it must be in a mighty man like you! . . . Doubly strong since you have the love of the maiden that is dear to you. . . . It is not strange that it should be strong enough to make you lie to me—”

“Jarl!” the Songsmith broke in fiercely,—but stopped, conscious that his voice could not carry across the chasm that had opened between them. Only he could see across it the expression with which Helvin was regarding him; and more awful than the slyness of his half-shut eyes was the gaze in which they were widening, the rapt gaze of one who sees beyond the veil.

“Behold, what weird powers are allotted to me!” he said under his breath. “As through a key-hole, I can see through this lie into the hall of What Is To Come. The next time fear pricked you, you would lie again. . . . And then to keep off fear, you would begin to act lies. . . . And after that it would

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seem so natural that you would be thinking lies . . . lies . . . lies . . . till, like a worm-riddled boat, only your fair shape would be left. You who were the most unlying and bravest-hearted of men! Rather than you shall come to that pass, I will slay you in your prime." From the tangled mass of blood-colored hair, his wide eyes turned slowly to the song-maker, fired with crazy purpose.

Then at last Randvar understood that the torch of his friend's reason—so often flickering, so often burned low—had been extinguished forever. To shut out the sight of the ghastly ruin it left, he hurled himself against the wall and flattened his face against the rough boards. Unreal as the mouth-ing of a vision, the caressing voice came to him.

"Does your heart speak so heavily about dying? Try if you cannot bring your mind to the mountain-top on which my mind stands. Then shall you see that what looks to be a storm-sky is but a cloud over one valley, while sun hallows all the rest. I kill you when life holds much for you, yet see this! I keep you from sin. I save your memory fair for those who love you. Above all, I preserve our friendship from the first tremble of dissolution. A nobler tree than our friendship never sprang from man-clay. Would you rather see it withered and decayed than laid low in all its glory by one axe-stroke?"

Randvar the Songsmith

As from a man on the rack, a cry was wrung from the song-maker: "Oh, Powers of Might, must it indeed end so?"

Yet softer grew the voice of Starkad's son, till it was hushed to the unearthly stillness of a forest-deep.

"Alas, how has the love of woman clouded your eyes, that were once so clear to see the truth! Yet think not I blame the weakness of your flesh. So shrinking is my own that, plain as I see the goodness of the deed, I could not do it as we stand. It is the working of fate that when my Other Shape possesses me, I know no qualms. Until I come in that guise, then! Yet before we part, press my hand once more in love. Friends clasp when they separate for a day,—shall souls sunder forever and say no farewell?"

It was a strange embrace; for in the eyes of Starkad's son, the doomed man was as one dead; and to the mind of the song-maker, his friend had ceased to live. Like the sound of a clod upon a coffin-lid was the sound of the door closing for the last time between them.

XXII

"Those live long who are slain by words alone"

—Northern saying.



IN a black tide night had risen, submerging the farther windowless end of the great loft, blotting out the sides and corners of this end. Like a raft of light afloat upon a sea of darkness was the bright square which the moon let fall from the window under the eaves; and now and again, like a shipwrecked mariner, the song-maker rose out of the engulfing blackness and stood in the light, reviving himself with the sight of the infinite wind-swept sky. Deeper and deeper into his spirit cut the thongs of the trap that had caught him. Ranging his prison up and down—up and down—his step was the ceaseless hurried tread of a caged tiger. Higher and higher rose the frenzy of impulse to hurl himself against the walls and batter them with hands and feet and head till they or he gave way.

It bent him at last to a thing he scorned, drove

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him against his will to the door, wrung from him a hoarse appeal.

“Visbur! I cannot meet death like a fox in his earth! Let me fight my way out against your sword. It will come to the same in the end!”

At first it was only the clang of a spear on the landing outside that answered, so slow was the old guard’s voice of irony.

“Why do you talk of dying, Rolf’s son? Surely you heard the Jarl say that you are only held here to appease the lawmen who want your punishment for challenging Olaf.”

Upon the cross-bar of the door, Randvar’s hand clinched. He had forgotten that the Jarl would cloak his purpose in that excuse. After a moment Visbur spoke again, this time with biting contempt:

“You need not think, however, that I put more belief than you do in that reason. A witless thing would Helvin’s justice be, to forgive you two attacks upon his life and then imprison you only for challenging your foe or loosing a worthless cub. Likely he is afraid to take open vengeance because so many people are fooled by you as to stand your friends; and therefore—even to me—he makes this poor excuse, and adds an order that no others of his household shall even know that you are here, but believe that it is still Eric that I hold prisoner.

Randvar the Songsmith

He might make himself easy that no guardsman who saw you as you stood over your chief's wounded body, with a bloody sword in your grip, would lift a finger to save you from torture."

The song-maker's voice sounded strange to himself as it came out of the darkness in which he stood: "Only grant me to die a man's death! You can say that you looked in to see how it went with me, and I tried to force my way out, and you slew me. Only that, as you were Rolf's friend!"

The force with which Visbur's spear came down upon the landing made up for the low key in which he was obliged to pitch his voice.

"Do you know how I could find it in my heart to behave because I was Rolf's friend? Because you have stained an honorable name with traitor's deeds, I could see you hanged like a dog. Never make so bold as to speak my name again." Suddenly his feet went thundering down the steps, and his spear could be heard striking against the side of the house as he took up a new post below.

As suddenly, Randvar moved away from the door; and with his coming into the moonlight it could be seen that he held his sword naked in his hand. When he had stood awhile looking down at it, he set its point against his heart; and then he stood for another space with musing eyes fixed on the gleaming blade.

Randvar the Songsmith

To slay one's self, to run away from the fight—how could that be aught but the act of a coward? And yet to die in a fit of mad terror—with shaking limbs and blanched cheeks and reason overthrown—was that a death for a brave man? Muscle by muscle, his grip on his sword tightened; and then muscle by muscle it relaxed; and he stood arguing it over and over.

Deaf to all but that inner strife, he heard neither voices at the foot of the steps nor the tread of feet ascending. The sound which he had been dreading came at last and even that he did not know. Like the rattling of the casement in some wandering breeze it befell at first, and then slowly it revealed itself for the fumbling of unsteady fingers upon a bolt. Only when a river of moonlight streamed across the floor at his feet did he start awake and turn his head.

On the threshold, dark against the silver night, stood the man who had drawn the bolts. A hood concealed his face, but massive shoulders showed under his cloak; and over one of them could be seen the mailed form of Visbur drawn up in respectful salute. Though it was but a flash of time before the door had closed behind the muffled figure, merging its dark drapery into the darkness of the wall, the song-maker felt no doubt of the visitor's identity. Indeed, almost the only thing

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he felt—amid the sudden stiffening of his muscles and chilling of his blood—was wild relief that for once his wits stood firm. Pitched to utter recklessness, he flung his sword from him as at sight of the bare blade a smothered cry came from the other's wrappings.

“Have no fear that that was meant for you!” he said, and his strained voice vibrated as with discordant laughter. “Easier were it to be slain by you than to bear the burden of being your slayer. Have your will with—”

Like over-strained wire his voice snapped, and he did not gather up the ends. Only in passing through that strip of shadow, the man had become another man; and it was the Shepherd Priest who stood revealed in the moonlight.

“I bring you life and not death, my son,” he said gently. “Nor was it in my head that Helvin meant to push the matter so far, even though his sister told me that it had stirred his unreasoning wrath against you that you set the boy free. God is to be twice thanked that I can at once save my lord a crime and you a wrong! Yet no long space is given me to do it in.”

Moving on up the room, he bent and swept the straw away from the middle of the floor. Across the long cracks of the boarding showed dimly the lines of the wooden hatch that had been set in

Randvar the Songsmith

the hole through which—in the days when the prison-loft had been a store-chamber—the huge vat below had been refilled each brewing season. Easily as one pries the head out of a barrel, he pried up the clumsy door and laid it back from the opening.

Like a half-hanged man whose body has been cut down in time but whose emotions have gone on out of the world of the living, the Songsmith remained gazing at him.

“Even if it had happened to me to remember that place,” he said slowly, “I should have been so sure that it was fastened on the under side that I would not have thought it worth while to try it.”

“It was fastened by bolts on every corner until I drew them,” the Shepherd Priest answered.

Dusting his hands upon his cloak in an unconscious habit from his youth, he came back to the moonlight and began to give further directions for the carrying out of the plan he had made, his quiet tones as well-fitted to seem the voice of a priest preparing a sinner for death as the voice of a man guiding a brother man to life.

“For much talking I have now no time, but everything lies on your understanding this much. Listen then, my son! So soon as the door closes upon me, let yourself down through the opening,—I will keep the guard in talk to cover any noise

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you may make. The door at the back you will find ajar, and an oak's shadow screens the entrance from without. That oak clump, and the shadow of the wall, will make it easy for you to reach the western gate, where a man stands guard whose love for you has got in his eyes so that he will not be able to see you as you pass. When you reach the lane outside— But it will turn out that I reach that before you do, since my road need not be so roundabout—”

Upon his speech fell the sound of Visbur's great fist on the door. He broke off to lay hands upon the song-maker's shoulders and press him down upon his knees. It was a benediction that he was saying over the prisoner when the door opened and the brass-bound head was thrust in. Its owner said gruffly:

“Good-luck go with your prayers, since for love of my soul I let you up to him! But I love my body also, father; and the risk to that gets greater the longer you stay.”

“I was even now coming,” the priest answered, turning; and Visbur lost no time in fastening up behind him.

As one trying to rouse himself out of a stupor, Randvar arose and stood shaking back his hair and opening and shutting his hands. As one in a dream, he heard the old man's unsteady steps

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following the guard's rapid descent, heard the gentle voice pleading with the gruff one. Then of a sudden his wandering glance fell upon the black gap in the floor—the loop-hole in what had seemed a dead wall. Like the leap of flame through smoke leapt his blood through his dulness, parching his throat, roaring in his ears. Now it was to restrain frantic eagerness that he crushed his lip between his teeth as he swung himself swiftly through the opening.

A fur-bale that had been placed at the bottom of the now empty vat received him without noise. Drawing himself up to the top of the wall which the vat's side made, he balanced there until on the darkness shrouding him he had found the thread of silver light. Using hands, then, in place of eyes, he climbed out and groped his way between bales and boxes and barrels to the door that had been set ajar, drew it open and stepped through it into the moonlight, and then stepped aside into the shadow of a giant oak that grew there.

Lifting the damp hair on his forehead, the night wind met him freshly. As to meet the lips of a woman, he lifted his burning face and spread wide his arms. For that long a space, his heart sang a song of wild exulting.

For that long—but for no longer. Around the

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great bole of the oak, looming dark beyond a silver sea, he glimpsed the silent mass of Brynhild's bower. Brynhild! And this should have been their wedding-day!

His hands tearing at his collar to relieve the swelling agony of his throat, he had taken a dozen blind steps towards the silent pile before his senses came back to him, before he thought to ask himself what good would come of it even should he succeed in making his way to her. She armored in pride, and he an outlawed man! Like a sail which the breeze has deserted, his head sank; he stood becalmed.

When he looked up again, the lines of his white face had hardened as iron settling in a mould.

"Once in his lifetime it is well for a man to tell himself the truth," he said. "To lose me will strike as near her heart as though she had lost a jewel from her ring—no nearer. Once she might look for it, once frown over the loss, once speak regretfully of it,—and that is soon over! The memory of my arms around her, the fire of her lips on mine, the dream of possessing her—what more could I hope for? For the dreamer, a dream-bride! It is well-befitting!"

A smile curled his lips that was new and ill to see, as he looked his last upon the shrine of her he loved. Then he turned and walked on rapidly

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over the tree-guarded path that led eventually to the shadow of the wall and the western gate.

From a distance he glimpsed again the gray-cloaked beggar, out-stretched as if in slumber; but he saw no other living thing until he saw the black-robed priest move across the bright court and pass out of the gate ahead, the sentinel making him reverent salute. Even though it had been foretold him, it deepened his sense of belonging no more to the living world that when he himself reached the exit the man remained gazing fixedly at the sky, and he dared neither greet nor touch him as he passed.

The gate gained and left behind, his instructions were exhausted; and he would have halted to plan further but that out in the radiant lane he found the Shepherd Priest awaiting him, his heavy shock of hair turned into a silver glory around his swarthy face. Moving down the dewy path beside him, the old man began at once to speak:

“One thing I think needful to say, my son; and that is that I should not be less afraid of taking this second step than of taking the first one, if God had not given me to see most plainly what His will is. I want you to know that one week ago He moved the Jarl’s heart to speak and call me as witness that he had solemnly consented in your espousal of his sister.”

Randvar could not have replied if he would.

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His gaze had gone ahead to a blossoming crab-tree that leaned over the low stone wall and canopied half the lane. Masses of snowy bloom were its branches, and snowed over with petals was the earth beneath it, but that white shape moving before it—was that only another branch blowing in the soft night wind? Coming to meet them, it looked like a girl in a thrall's robe of white wool; but the queenful poise of the head—the glint of red-gold hair as the light fell upon it— He put out a hand and gripped the old priest's shoulder.

“Tell me how much this means?” he demanded.

She answered for herself, the girl in the bondmaid's kirtle, as she stopped before them; and in voice as well as face she was Brynhild, the Jarl's sister.

“I should have thought there was more risk of a man's forgetting anything than his wedding-day,” she said with lips that smiled through trembling.

Even then he dared not believe it, but stood gazing from her to the pair of saddled horses tethered in the shelter of a spreading tree. Drawing yet nearer, she held out her hands, her gray eyes meeting his as steadfast as the gray North star.

“It means,” she said, “that even as Freya followed Rolf, your wife follows you into banishment—Love, what is it?”

For he had flung himself on his knees before her and was kissing the hem of her coarse robe.

XXIII

"Once must every man die"

—Northern saying.



It was a radiant earth that kindled into color with the coming of the light. Dipping from a hill-top into a little valley abrim with the yellow of hickory buds and the new green of maples and the red-and-pink of budding oak leaves, the girl on the roan horse spoke dreamily:

"Once you told me that trees put on their brightest hues in the autumn as warriors go bravest clad to battle. Now it seems to me as if the spring world had put on its showiest garments to welcome you and me to a new life."

"May that become a true omen!" the man who rode behind her responded absently.

To turn and scan from under his hand the country they had passed over, he had drawn rein upon the crest. On the gray anxiety of his face confidence dawned as slowly as rosy day upon gray night.

Smiling, the girl looked around at him. "What are you doing back there where I cannot see you,

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my friend? Since daybreak have you made me go first, even when the path was broad enough for two. What masterfulness is that for a man but six hours wed!"

"It must be looked for that a man would be tempted to make the trial of mastering you," he answered as lightly as he could. "What I am doing back here is to watch the haughtiness of your head making derision of your thrall-garb."

"I think thorns are making derision of the fine wedding clothes I sewed for you," she laughed. "It was quite another place that I expected you would wear them in. Yet it pleases me also that you should go fine while I go plain, for in the realm of the forest are you not lord and I the most lowly of followers? Saw you ever a raw man newly come to the body-guard that bent his neck better to orders?"

A note of laughter was silvering her voice, but passionate earnestness was in his as he spurred abreast of her and leaned over to murmur at her ear:

"Never did woman so stoop to man since the Valkyria came down to Sigurd! How ill do I deserve such love who doubted that love!"

The smile with which she had welcomed him deepened into laughter as tender as the murmur of the brook flowing beside them. "My dear one,

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if you but knew how warm it lies at my heart—my victory over your doubt! For the first time, I feel myself worthy of your love.”

She pressed her face to his, and so they rode a while, cheek to cheek. His arm tightened around her with feeling how she drooped against him in the weariness she was too proud to own. He said under his breath:

“I would give all I hope to possess in the world to spare you this. My one fear is that you will come to repent the choice you have made.”

She said without lifting her drooping lids: “Freya came to Rolf over the bodies of slaughtered kin, yet she did not repent it; and between you and me there is no shadow.”

He was thankful then that her eyes were closed. Before she could open them and catch the dread which he felt drawing at his mouth, he had made the narrowing of the trail an excuse to draw away and rein back to his post in the rear.

Narrowing to a thread between leaf-walls, the trail wound through a copse of thorn-trees in blossom. The blending of her kirtle with their woolly branches seemed to give Brynhild's thoughts a new turn. Over her shoulder, she opened conversation again:

“It would not be difficult for me to hide among these trees. For another reason I am pleased with

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myself for thinking of this disguise. Without it, I should never have been able to pass out of the hall unmarked. For two days now there has been a gray-cloaked beggar hanging around the doorstep,—a fellow too ill-natured to speak even to the women who gave him food, but so prying of eye that I have felt his gaze from under his hat-brim every time I went out or in. Why, even you could not pass last night without arousing his curiosity! He was staring out of the western gate after you, as you and the good father came up the lane towards me—”

“Staring after me?” Curt as man’s to man was the Songsmith’s voice. “And you have not told me of it before!”

She started at the change of tone. Then she said gently:

“I forgot him in—in the other things we spoke of when we met, my friend. And it did not seem in any wise important to me. A wandering beggar could not know you for a prisoner escaped.”

He did not tell her that a suspicion had risen in him that the beggar was not a beggar. He did not tell her anything for a space, but rode staring fixedly between his horse’s ears. Her question was twice repeated before it reached him:

“What harm could spring from it, Randvar?”

He said, slowly, then: “You saw the fellow more

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than I, though I have seen him twice. Did it ever cross your mind that he might be Olaf, Thorgrim's son, lying in wait for me when I should come healed out of your bower?"

She cried out in mingled amazement and assent: "Olaf! Then he carried his news straight to the Jarl! Before we had crossed the first hill, guards were spurring after us!"

The whiteness of her face, as she peered back between the flowery branches, brought him out of his musing. Pressing forward, he took the hand she had involuntarily put out.

"Never will Helvin Jarl send guards after me, that I have reason to know for certain. Have faith in my assurance, and no fear."

To get his eyes away from hers, he bent over her hand and touched it with his lips. Whether or not she read his secret dread that Helvin himself would be the pursuer, he could not tell. She made no other answer than to give back his hand-clasp firmly, then turned and urged her tired horse forward.

Falling on the velvet sod, the hoofs brought forth no sound. With the ceasing of their voices, silence like a great sea closed about them. Whenever it was rippled by the splash of wind in the tops of the pines or by the soft trill of a bird, the song-maker knew a sense of relief. Nerve and sinew, he

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was strained forward towards the moment when they should have won through this scented and smothering stillness to some elevation from which he could look back over their track.

So gradually the slope arose that he might not have known when they reached the crest if he had not seen the bright head before him beginning to descend, sunlike. His nails sinking into the leather of his saddle from the force with which he gripped it, he turned and looked back.

Nothing to be seen amid the white drifts of the thorn-trees. Nothing among the furry gray willows bordering the brook. His eye leaped on down to the bottom of the hollow, carpeted with the white flowers of wild berry vines,—and leaping, lost a moving dark shape even as they caught it, a moving slinking shape. It might have been a skulking wolf,—and it might have been a man!

The girl riding ahead heard his voice just behind her, speaking with chill quietness:

“As soon as ever you come to that black-budded bush, turn to the left. I remember that a trail begins there. It does not matter where it leads to. It is not a beaten track; hood your head and bend low, if twigs catch at you.”

If she wondered why he did not go first to break the road, she did not say so. “Yes,” she answered

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as quietly as he had spoken, and obeyed him as she answered.

Even before the leaves closed on her bravely carried head, his eyes had lost her through the mist that gathered in them. "For her sake!" his heart cried out a prayer to the old gods and the new. Then he had plunged into the thicket behind her, his hand clinched in agony upon his empty sheath. Riding with one ear set over his shoulder, he still kept on telling himself that it was impossible that it should be a man; that no man without the scent of a beast could have followed their trail, even if human limbs could be strong enough to overtake them.

Because his attention was held so fast by what lay behind them, he gave no heed to the sinister road they were flying over, to its blasted bushes and the bone-white trench of a dead brook that cut again and again across it. He leaped in his saddle at a sharp cry from Brynhild before him.

"Randvar! What place are we coming to?"

So like a bolt it fell upon him that he had pushed into the open after her, and checked his horse beside hers, before he himself realized to what goal the unused trail led. Even then it was not he who put it into words, but she, with her distended eyes upon the pond of murky water in the ring of gray tree-skeletons.

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“The Black Pool! Where my father got his death! It is an omen!”

He spoke no word either of denial or of comfort. Throwing himself from his horse, he snatched her from her saddle, half carried, half dragged her to where a pile of boulders rose like a cairn amid the dead trees. Upon the earth behind it, he pushed her down.

“Hide there!” he told her hoarsely. “Whatever happens, hide there,—and *keep your face covered!* He comes now whom I would die sooner than that you should see.”

The warning came too late. While he was still speaking, he heard the horses behind him snort and run, saw her eyes flash past him. With a shrill cry, she staggered from her knees to her feet and stood as one frozen there, one rigid arm thrust out in pointing. As an echo to her cry came from the blasted bushes of the trail a note of low laughter, deepening suddenly to a throaty gurgle that was of neither man nor beast.

To that whirlpool of horror, the Songsmith’s mind was drawn in. Reeling with its madness, he plunged forward, bruising his fists on the trees in the effort to rouse himself out of it, dashing his hands against his eyes to break the spell of that blind dizziness. As through rents in a veil of blindness, he saw Starkad’s son creeping towards them, saw wolf

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eyes glaring above a frothing mouth. With a final despairing effort, he brought his fist down where the jagged stump of a branch stuck out before him; and pain broke the spell. The strength of desperation on him, he leaped forward and closed with the rearing form.

But even as they grappled, the curse-ridden man sought to free himself, loosing a sudden cry that was half a pealing laugh and half the bark of a wolf. Hurling the song-maker from him upon the earth, he was gone on a bound to some dearer prey beyond.

Struggling to his elbow, Randvar stared after him. Among the trees beside the black water had come in sight a horseman wearing the gray cloak of a beggar but the livid face of Olaf the French,—livid, sweating, from the haste with which he was spurring Towerward by the only path he knew. Now creeping, now bounding, the madman had reached him. Springing upon him with outflung claw-barbed hands, he had dragged him fighting from his saddle and flung him upon the ground. Snarling, he dropped upon him and buried his teeth in the upturned throat. An instant of gurgling gasping noises, and he was up and gone into the forest, sounding his terrible cry; and Olaf lay dead even as Starkad Jarl had died, from the fangs of the demon wolf that was the Other Shape of Starkad's son.

XXIV

"He is happy who gets himself fame while living"

—Northern saying.



IT was two Norse weeks after the death of Olaf, and it was nearly two-score miles south of the Black Pool. Filtering through the dark forest, a long ray of sun lay on Freya's Tower and revealed it as a sanctuary embattled. Here, from the lengthening shadows, the bright beam picked out a circle of shaggy deerskin-clad foresters hammering arrow-heads at a forge made of boulders. There, in touching the earth, the slanting ray touched another brawny group squatted at knife-sharpening. Yonder, the light streaming golden down a tree-aisle broke over a deerskin-garbed sentinel pacing to and fro. Now the murmur of blended heavy voices and heavier laughter swelled like the noise of the breakers,—until some one's exuberance betrayed him into a burst of over-facetious song, when he was silenced by nudges and missiles and thumbs pointing Towerward. Now the lull that followed was broken by

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scattered hails and chaff, as a Skraelling burdened with a double string of glistening fish came like a shadow up the path of sunshine.

Making his way gravely between the jovial groups, the red man gravely evaded the jesting hands stretched out towards his treasure, and stalked on to the Tower. At the foot of one of the gray columns, he lowered the silvery mass to the earth and stood awaiting a chance for speech with his white brother's new wife.

In the dim ground-room there was the flutter of a blue robe—the glint of red-gold hair—and she had appeared in one of the rude archways. Against its gray gloom, the glowing beauty of her face was like a fire; while the stark pillars were a foil for her body's soft and flowing curves. Without speaking, the savage stood gazing at her,—even as every woodsman within eyeshot had stopped short in speech or work to gaze. It was she who spoke, composedly, giving him thanks for his gift, then went and poured him a horn of wild-grape wine and brought it to him.

Even while his mouth busied itself with the drink, his eyes stared at her over the silver rim. But as he gave the horn back, he spoke in broken Norse:

“Say to the white chief that the men of the stone-axe race have set up their houses around

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him. Say to him that they turn their weapons whither he points. Say to him that they will bring him the white sachem's red scalp whenever he gives the sign."

The hand of the white sachem's sister made a convulsive movement that lost her the horn, but her brave gray eyes continued to meet his steadily.

"I will tell him," she answered. "His heart will be thankful towards his friends."

Though his face remained set in her direction, the Skraelling turned the rest of him and moved away as he had come, until his dusky shape was lost in the dusky wood.

Gazing after him with unseeing eyes, she stayed a moment in the archway, while—mute and motionless as so many boulders—the foresters stayed gazing furtively at her. Then a curly-headed boy in a page's ragged dress of blue came out of the Tower and broke in upon her thoughts, as he bent to pick up the forgotten cup.

"How clumsy in their manners such creatures must look to you, Jarl's sister, it is easy for me to understand, for in former days they went against my taste also. But when your experience of life has been as broad as mine has, sooner will you choose their ugly worth than the fair falseness of the Town-people. I say it, though I am hard to please!"

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A note of unsteady laughter shook the long breath with which the Jarl's sister straightened; but her arm lay lightly around the boy's neck as they went back in-doors, and he expanded under the caress as a bantam that is about to crow.

"It is my wish that you should always lean upon me! I told my mother this noon—when she asked me to fetch you the fowl and the loaf—that it was in my mind to visit you as often as I could find time. And I told her that I meant always to wear these fine clothes so that you should feel at home with me, and not feel that I had grown savage and terrible like the others around you. And perhaps it will also help you to lose it out of your thoughts for a while that you are poor, with no one to wait on you."

Though she laughed again, the sound was more soft than a caress.

"Poor?" she repeated. "Listen, little Viking! Once I was poor, when I thought there was no more to the world than the few hedged roads I knew, and my life was but an empty round that others marked out for me, and I had nothing but ring-bought gifts to give my friends. But now! Now when each hour some wondrous path undreamed of is opened to me—Now that my life is a fabric I weave myself till from the roots of my hair to the soles of my feet I thrill with the joy of

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the work—Now that my breast is so full of love that oftentimes it aches with the burden and yearns for a worldful of folk to lavish it upon—”

Her ecstasy mounted higher than her words could follow. While it soared, she stood silent. When, because it was of earth, it sank again earthward, she spoke under her breath:

“Only shall I be poor, Eric, if the Fates take from me the man who has wrought this change in my nature. If it happen to him to meet with—with my kin—some day—and the same overtake him that overtook Olaf—”

Her hand gripped the boy's shoulder so that he would have cried out if he had not guessed from the whitening of her lips how much harder Dread was clutching at her heart. Gritting his teeth, he supported her manfully.

“There is no man like Randvar in all the new lands,” he panted, “and I would fight for none as I would fight for him.”

Loosening their hold, the fingers rose and swept his cheek fondly, and the Jarl's sister moved away and bent over the smouldering fire to stir it. Though she did not turn again, her voice came to him with its wonted gracious composure.

“Have thanks for your friendship, little friend! And give my thanks to your mother for her good gifts; and tell her that if she does not come oftener

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to visit me I shall take it as a sign that because she has gone to live in Snowfrid's booth, she feels that I have crowded her out of her home. Will you bear that in mind?"

For the fourth time since he had begun to think of tearing himself away, Eric picked up his feathered blue cap.

"Naught shall be forgotten, Jarl's sister," he reassured her. "And now I fear that I must in truth take leave of you. With Bolverk so often away on hunts, I find that the wants of Snowfrid and my mother put not a little care on my shoulders; and my intention is that they shall never lack for anything now that I have come home to take care of them. Jarl's sister, I bid you farewell until to-morrow."

The purpose of the plumed cap became apparent as by its aid he added elaborate flourishes to his bow. Then fixing the bauble upon his curly head, he went away hurriedly, as became one weighted with responsibility; and as became one torn between love and fear, the Jarl's sister went up the ladder-like stairs with a hand pressed to her heart, and crossing the strange little fur-hung bower, dropped down beside Freya's window to watch as Freya before her had watched.

Higher and higher slanted the long rays, until only the tree-tops knew their golden glory. The

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horizon became as a band of red fire behind the black net-work of the woods. The lower that fire burned, the farther the great outside world seemed to fall away from the little world of the Tower. As though to make a stand against impending isolation, the foresters drew their circle closer and beacons it with cheery fires. Over the young wife's vigil crept a spell of awe, so that though she leaned wide-eyed upon the sill she did not see the one for whom she watched when presently he came up a twilit trail, a spear gleaming on his shoulder, Bolverk's brawny bulk looming beside him.

It was he who espied her—her bright head like a star hung low in the gloaming—and slackened his pace to stand looking at her.

Following his friend's gaze, Bolverk spoke with his buoyant laugh: "Small wonder you stare, comrade, at seeing Freya's ghost filling Freya's blue kirtle!"

The song-maker roused himself with a deep breath that was like a sigh. When he moved forward again, the springiness was gone from his step.

"Would that I did not see the ghost of Freya whenever I looked at my wife!" he said. "Like goblin-bells they start out of space and clang in my ear, the words Erna spoke that night by the Tower fire,—'Freya loved Rolf in spite of all, but

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it was the effort of doing so that wore her out before half her life was lived.'”

A second time Randvar came to a stand-still; and as the sun from the wood, so had the light fled from his face and left it a place of shadowy dread.

“Suppose,” he said, “that my quarrel with—the Jarl—come to no round end one way or the other but, as oftenest happens, drag on and on in uncertainty. . . . Suppose the Jarl’s sister wearing out year after year between these walls of solitude . . . eating into her memory, the murder of her father . . . burning into her eyes, the thing we saw at the Pool . . . gnawing at her heart, her fear for me. . . . Suppose it should not be her love that gave way—”

“Nor her life!” Bolverk finished hastily. “Nor her life!”

But the weight did not lift from the Songsmith’s bent shoulders. He said slowly: “When grisly thoughts had dwelt long enough in her brother’s mind, it was not his body that they killed, but his reason.”

Gasping a dread word, Bolverk caught him by the arm. In heavy silence they walked the rest of the distance that lay between them and the cordon of fires.

Giving them greeting and at the same time demanding their news, a score of voices broke in upon their reverie. In a moment, the song-maker was

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the centre of a cordial group that listened eagerly while he told how the Skraelling chief had received him, and approved boisterously the new trading treaty which the chief had granted to the new colony at the Tower.

“No better pleader than you was Njal of Iceland!” growled the veteran in bearskin. “Next spring we shall send to Nidaros a richer ship than ever sailed from Norumbega; and no less a man than you shall stand by the steering-oar.”

“Yes! Yes!” the chorus gave jovial approbation, and made a jesting onslaught as though they would have raised him to their shoulders. But his expression grew in grimness as he motioned them back.

“A ship that had a corpse on board would get better luck than one that had me at the steering-oar,” he said. “I have told you without deceit that I stand so with most Northmen that my name and the word traitor has the same meaning. Never make the mistake of thinking that I shall let you put me forward where I should draw down hatred and failure on your heads. When you have lent me your weapons to guard my wife, you have done me as great a service as a man can do another, and I have reaped all the good of your love that I can bear. Never can I repay you as it is!”

He broke off abruptly. Perhaps they were glad

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that he did not wait for them to answer, but leaving them strode on towards the Tower. Yet it would have been no unworthy response if they had put into words what spoke from their hard faces as they watched him gain the firelit archway and take his young bride in his arms. To search with passionate anxiety the eyes she lifted to his, he held her there, forgetful of all the world beside; while her hands betrayed a passionate eagerness to clasp his hands, to cling to his deerskin-sleeve, to feel him safe and whole.

It may be that when life is at its fullest, the need of words falls away like a husk that is shed. By-and-by when the two had gone in to their rude hearth, tongue-speech grew less and less frequent between them, less and less until—like candle-light into sunshine—it faded into the perfect communion of silence.

Bringing the fowl from its bed in the hot ashes, the bread from its birch basket, the wine from its cask, the young mistress of the Tower moved to and fro in the firelight. Resting on a fur-heaped bench in the shadow, the young master followed her every motion with worshipful eyes. Sometimes, as their gaze met, the gracious gravity of her demeanor sparkled into a moment's playful mimicry of some pompous servitor they had known in the pageantry of the Jarl's house, and their laugh-

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ter, bass and treble, blended in a full chord. Sometimes it was his hand that encountered hers, and closing on it with an inarticulate cry, put it to his lips in place of wine, and pressed it there while for them both Time ceased to be.

And then again, a moment came when for him all jest went out of her service, when to see her waiting before him in Freya's faded robe of blue was a thing he could not bear. Rising, he took horn and trencher from her hands and flung them aside, and almost roughly placed her on the cushion-heaped bench, and placed himself on the cedar mat at her feet.

"One high-seat you shall have, and one thrall!" he said fiercely; and drawing his harp towards him, he played for her as he had never played for himself nor yet for the Jarl in all the splendor of his feast-hall.

She made but one alteration, stretching out her hand that it might thread his hair as his head leaned against her knee; then with eyes softly closed and lips softly parted, she rested listening.

Floating through Paradise on the wings of the music, she knew nothing of it when the circles of the outlying camp-fires were thrown into commotion as reeds by an incoming wave. Only when Randvar plucked a twanging discord from

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the harp-strings, and then flung the instrument from him, did she start awake.

One hand stretched behind him to grasp her robe, and one hand thrust across him to clutch his knife-hilt, he had risen to his knee before her. Over his shoulder she saw what he saw—a brass helmet glowing in the firelight where the path gave upon the open, more brass helmets glinting like fire-flies far up the dusk of the trail. Now four figures separated themselves from the throng, and pushing through the wavering rank of foresters, came Towerward,—two figures in dark robes and one wearing the plumed cap of a courtman and one clad in shining mail.

“Mord—and the Shepherd Priest! Gunnar—Visbur!” the Songsmith told them off mechanically.

The arms Brynhild had locked around his neck tightened as she whispered at his ear: “God be praised, Helvin is not there! Love, if they meant us ill, they would not have fetched Gunnar and the Priest, who are our friends.”

But Randvar’s voice was harsh as he loosened her hands that he might rise. “If they mean us well, why do they come with a troop of armed men at their heels?” Never quitting his grip on his hilt, he strode forward and stood a pace beyond his threshold, awaiting them.

Glancing down at her poor attire, it seemed for

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an instant as though the Jarl's sister would have shrunk back into the shadow; and then as one would catch up a deserter she caught herself, and holding her head high, moved forward until she stood at her husband's side.

At sight of the Songsmith, the sentinel of the path cried out earnestly: "We let them through, Rolf's son, only because they pledged you peace. If they have spoken false—"

He did not finish, but it was not needful that he should. Around the ring of hunters, like the light of a moonbeam, sped the glint of steel. And still beyond that, where wood encompassed the open, there passed of a sudden a noiseless stir, as if from every tree-shadow there had glided a lithe and dusky body. Joining soundlessly as shadows blend, the dark mass drew nearer, until here the firelight was reflected in rows of glittering eyes, there through the gloaming gleamed the pale shapes of stone axes uplifted. It is no shame to the courage of Gunnar the Merry that his handsome face blanched as his glance made the circuit. Mord spoke sternly when they came to a halt before the young master of the Tower.

"What right have you to speak of peacefulness, Randvar, Rolf's son, that surround yourself with outlaws and savages of the wood, ready to do murder at your bidding?"

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Even in the twilight it could be seen how the blood mounted in the Songsmith's brown face, but there was no wavering in his mouth's steady line as he answered.

"I take friendship and help where I find them freest and truest, and I expect evil from the quarter whence evil has risen against me before. Though you come in the name of the Jarl, to whom you hold me traitor, I shall not yield a whit more. Your blood be on your heads if you heed me not!"

From the gathering circle of foresters came back a sound like an ominous echo; and the murmur was taken up in the wood beyond, till it rose like the roar of the wind in the trees. But all at once Visbur made a long stride forward and held out his huge hand.

"Never look at me with that look on your face, comrade!" he said gruffly. "I know now that you were no traitor to Starkad's son, and Rolf's self would not be gladder of the knowledge. Take now my hand as a token that you will accept atonement from me."

The Songsmith and his young wife spoke in one breath: "You know—?"

"From him who alone had the right to tell it," Visbur answered briefly. "While the day was still young, we came upon Starkad's son in the forest near the Town, with Olaf's blood yet on

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him. Because his wits were not in him, he mistook us for Shapes risen to torment him, and stood and shouted his secret at us in defiance. And then his strength went from him; and he fell down to the earth; and death came to him where he fell."

"And it was on your name that he called as he died," the gentle voice of the Shepherd Priest sounded amid the stillness that had spread. "Because I was the first to reach him and raise his head to my breast, it is likely he thought it was you, for he spoke your name in a tone of love; and that was his last breath."

No longer was there steadiness in Randvar's voice as he tried to speak. Of a sudden it broke, and he turned away from the eyes upon him and stood with his face in the shadow, his clinching hand still holding his young wife to his side. What she said softly in his ear—whether of grief for her kin or gratitude for her loved one's safety—none could hear.

Then it was Mord the Grim who spoke with ceremony: "Now the end of it is that Helvin Jarl has been five days dead and five days buried, and we have come to offer the rule to you, Starkad's daughter, who are the next of kin—" He lifted his hand as, turning, Starkad's daughter would have interrupted him, indignantly. "To you and to your husband, who is of all men most beloved

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by the folk of the new lands. To you two together.”

What Brynhild cried out, as she stretched her hands towards them, could not be heard for the acclamations that burst from the listening foresters. Then, drowning even that, rose the clangor of the guardsmen's shields as they pounded on them with their swords.

Once more the Songsmith's lips became unsteady, so that he dared not trust his voice to them; but presently he turned and made the shouting throna a gesture of acceptance of their honor and of thankfulness for their love, and all understood him.

THE END

