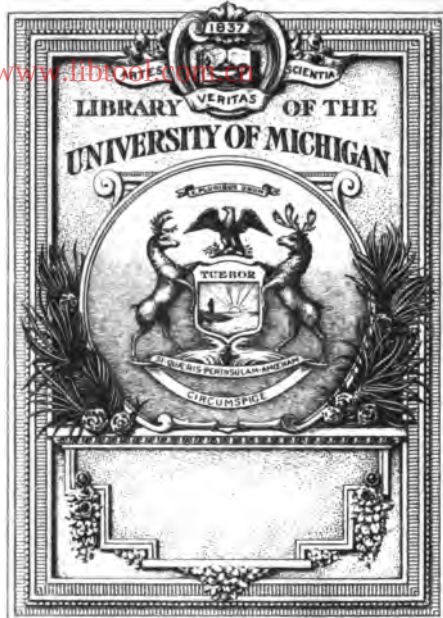


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BY
MAURICE HEWLETT

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A LOVERS' TALE

CHAPTER I

THE BROTHERS IN MIDFIRTH

INTO Midfirth runs the Mell river through mudflats and marl to mix green water with the salt waves. On either side the land is rich and wet, giving fine pasture, and you can hardly see the snow peaks beyond the fells from which Mell comes down cold and green and clear. There on the brae stood Melstead, and there it stands yet. Once it was the house of Ogmund and his wife Dalla; but he died before the tale begins, which begins with Dalla, a widow and blind, and her two grown sons—Thorgils and Cormac.

Dalla had been a fine girl when she married Ogmund, as he himself was a fine man, who had been a fighter and a Viking in his day. Between them they had this couple of fine sons, of whom Thorgils, the elder, favoured his father, but had little of his quality. A broad-shouldered, fair-haired, sleepy young man he was now, steady at his work, and in his ways mild and quiet. He thought twice before he spoke, and therefore seldom spoke at all. If everybody did that, the world would be a peaceful place and much work done in it; but it would be very dull. Cormac took after his mother in looks, being vivid black and white. His hair was jet-black and curled freely, his face was very high in colour, that ran off to white in his forehead and neck. His eyes were light grey and rather fierce. He was a wild young man, but very friendly after the bout. He had no idea how strong he was; but his brother knew, though they were very good

friends for all that. He had a keen eye for the flight of a bird or the play of a fish, knew the weather by the smell of it, and could sing and make verses. Sometimes he made verses because he had been moved; sometimes he was moved because he had made verses; and often he did not know which way it had been with him. Although he had no notion of setting up for a poet, he thought about himself and his sensations a good deal, and had found out already that he did not greatly care to do anything unless he could watch himself doing it, and watch the thing done as it suffered the doing. That's a poet all over; but he didn't know it. It gave him the conclusion, however, that he was very unlike his father, the Viking, to whom the killing of a man was not at all the same as the killing of a pig. But Cormac, who had never killed a man yet, fancied that, to him at least, there would be no essential difference. His father again (he had heard) had loved

many women, while he had loved never a one. But his father had been very jealous in his loves, and had killed almost as many men because they had intermeddled in his love-affairs. Now Cormac, thinking that over, felt very sure that he should never be jealous if he were a lover. He theorised at large about it; he gave the subject a great deal of attention. Love-making must enhance a woman, he thought, even in the minds of her lovers. If she was beautiful, it was surely her due. If she was plain, it would provoke desire. What more lovely sight could the world offer a man than to see the woman he longed for the burning-point of the world's longing? He kept these ideas to himself because he had nobody but his mother to whom he could have imparted them. She would have laughed at him and made him angry.

When this tale begins, Cormac was a full-grown man, strong for his age.

CHAPTER II

THE WHALE

WHEN the whale came ashore at Watersness, Thorgils heard of it first. He went down to look at it, and found it was upon his land. It lay there, a mountain of distress, and the flies about it were as thick as a snowstorm. At home that night he spoke of it to his mother, and said that one of them must set to work cutting it up next day, or all would be spoiled. It was late autumn, very close, still, and hot, as it often is before the weather breaks up. Dalla said: "Cormac will never go to such a work. He hates to foul his hands."

"Then I must do it myself," said

Thorgils; "but I had been going on to the fells to round up the sheep. It is fully time." www.libtool.com.cn

"Send Cormac after the sheep," Dalla said, "and let Toste go with him, and send some of the hands."

Just then Cormac came in. They heard him whistling outside in the dusk. He stayed there a good time whistling, singing scraps of songs, then came in and looked at them, scowling from under his black brows. He looked as if he had been expecting to find nobody and was annoyed by a sudden roomful of people. But they took no notice of him, and his face cleared. It was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. He threw his head up and laughed richly and snugly, as if to himself.

Dalla heard him. "What are you laughing at?"

"You," he said, and she asked:

"Why so?"

He came and kissed her. "Because I love you, I think."

"That's an odd reason," she said, turning up her sightless face.

"No, it's not," he said; "it's a very good reason. Whenever I come upon something I love, and find it, all closed in and ready to my hand, it tickles me. I laugh and think to myself, 'There's that pretty thing, snug against when I want it.' And then I go away and do what I've got to do, and remember that it's there all the time."

His hand was stroking her face, and she moved about to get the feel of it. She was very pleased. "Your brother here thinks you a madman; but I understand you," she said.

"So does he, when he wants me," said Cormac, and sat down to his supper.

"I shall want you in the morning," Thorgils said after much reflection, and told him about the whale. Cormac made a sour face.

But he took a long draught before he spoke, and then he said: "That will be a dirty business, Thorgils. Can't you give me one more to my liking? You know I do ill what I have no taste for."

Thorgils said: "Well, you can round up the sheep on the fells if you please. It matters little to me. These things have to be done. There's snow coming when the wind changes. It is banking in the north-west even now."

This was a long speech for Thorgils, who had no more to say after it, and soon went to bed. Cormac sat up, telling his mother tales or listening to her stories of his father when he had been seafaring in Ireland; and before he himself went to bed he must needs go out of doors again. There was a full moon shining in splendour over the firth, and the sky was wonderfully clear. You could see over the fells to the white cap of Eiriks-jökul gleaming in the Southern sky like a dome. Below that, and three

days' journey short of it, were the fells where the sheep lay, and Cormac must be betimes in the morning. He would go with Toste, who was the Melstead reeve and worked the dogs.

But though he shortened his night by it, Cormac nevertheless walked about the shore under the glory of the moon; and many a verse he made and sang to himself as he looked over the full, flowing water or marked the ducks bobbing about like a fisherman's floats in the broad path of light.

CHAPTER III

CORMAC GOES TO NUPSDALE

THEY rode out at sunrise, Cormac and Toste, with the dogs and house-carles, and worked all day fetching in the sheep. It was hard work; and the dusk came down early and found them still at it. Toste, who knew where they were, said that it would be well to put into Nupsdale-stead for the night. "They'll feed us well, and we shall hear some good talk," he said.

Cormac said it was all one to him where he stayed. He was ready to sleep out on the fell, or go home, as Toste pleased.

Toste was for Nupsdale-stead. He knew the master of the house, and was known of

him. "They will make you welcome, too," he told Cormac, "and you'll see the finest girl in the country, I believe."

"Who's that, then?" says Cormac.

"Why, Stangerd, Thorkel's daughter of Tongue. She's been fostered there these four years, and was like a spoiled hawk when I saw her last, three years back, I daresay. She will be of a likeable age by now—sixteen years old or thereabouts. A handful, I'll warrant her—a breaker of hearts."

"We'll go to Nupsdale-stead," Cormac said. "I should like to see her."

Toste went on with his meditations aloud. "A burning girl—a big girl. She'll set you afire. There'll be a pair of you."

Cormac laughed, and threw his head up. Then they went on through the acres to the homestead, which was a spacious place well sheltered from the wind; and soon they heard the dogs give tongue from the roof, and soon it was their business to fight

them off, and keep their own from dismemberment.

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* * * * *

They were well received in the hall, where they found a company sitting at drink, a good fire, and a table where there would be supper by and by. Cormac looked about for the finest girl in the country; but there were no women in the hall: a son of the house served the newcomers with drink. At the further end was the high seat with two great pillars carved with the heads of Odin and Thor; and on each side of that curtains were hung so that there could be a passage all round

Presently, as they sat listening to the talk, Toste gave Cormac a nudge, and when he got his attention, looked towards those curtains.

Cormac nodded. "I know," he said. "There are two of them there."

Behind the curtains were two pairs of bare feet shining in the light from the fire,

and a hand stirred the folds, as if to keep them together.

Cormac watched them for a little, then began to sing softly, as if to himself:

“O eye-deceit or heart-deceit,
Lo, there, my blessing or my bane!
A lover at a lady's feet
Holding his heart, and there a pain!

A lady's feet, and there a lover:
A patch of snow left by the rain!
Afield, or two tufts of white clover—
And near beside a young man slain.”

Then the white feet drew back; but presently Cormac saw another thing—or Toste did and showed it to Cormac. The heads upon the high seat pillars had had empty eyes; but now the eyes of Thor were a gleam.

“She is looking at you,” said Toste.

Cormac nodded.

“She has bright eyes. The fire plays with them.”

Then he sang again:

“The fire plays with my lady’s eyes,
And they make music in my head.
The sea-blue bird that flashing flies
Like a sword down the river-bed,
Links the green earth and azure skies;
And so with me is Stangerd wed,
When light with light is handfasted.”

Whether she heard him or not, her eyes remained shining in the empty sockets of Thor, and Cormac watched them. By and by the sockets showed empty; and not long after that, Stangerd and a companion came into the hall at the lower end and sat down together on a bench and looked guardedly at the company. Stangerd was a tall and big girl, with corn-coloured hair, very fine and abundant, and, as Toste said, she was fire-hued and bold-looking, with blue eyes. She was bold-looking, and had bold, free movements. Cormac looked at her, and spoke to himself. He looked and muttered, looked and muttered. Then he

broke out so that Toste could hear him, and others beside Toste. Stangerd herself could tell that he was talking verses, and be sure that they were about her. As for her friend, she revelled in it.

Cormac sang:

“O mood of mine—O fever song
Begot when I cast eyes upon her!
When eyes gave me this burning lass,
Daughter of Thorkel of the Tongue—
A goddess’ maid, a Maid of Honour,
Flusht in the face, with hair like brass,
Or corn that yellows to the sickle,
Full tall and free, and bold, and young;
Deep-bosom’d, too, with deep blue eyes
Like slumb’ring pools—a girl of size,
Whom seeing no man, you’d say, would stickle
To take to bed and make a woman—
Heart shows her me a spirit not human . . .”

There he stopped, not because all men were considering him and his muttering and his fixt eyes, but because words failed him. He still looked at Stangerd, but could not see her for the fiery mist which enwrapt her.

Toste said, "That's a splendid girl, that girl of Thorkel's. There won't be such another in the country. Yet he would be a bold man who would wive her."

"Why so?" Cormac asked him in a stare.

Toste said, "Look at the colour of her; look at her ease and boldness. She is the sort that will ask and have."

Cormac said, "All that is as it may be. What she wants should be hers by right. She is good to look upon—and that is enough for me."

"You seem to find her good," said Toste, "and you may look your fill. You'll never look her out of countenance. She's a match for you."

Cormac could see that the two girls were talking about him, for they looked sideways as they whispered together, but kept their faces turned away from him. He could not hear what they said.

Stangerd, it seemed, did not approve of

him very much, but the other girl praised him. www.libtool.com.cn

"A fine young man," she said, "with a fine way of looking at you, without offence. He looks at you as if you were a flowering tree."

Stangerd said, "He's like a magpie—all black and white. And I dislike a curly-headed man."

"He has good eyes, sweetheart," said the other girl. "He misses nothing."

Stangerd shrugged one of her shoulders. "Black eyes, he has. They are treacherous. They see much and show little."

"They see you, my dear," said the other, "and so much, at least, they show. If I am not a goose they show you a deal more than that."

Stangerd felt their scrutiny, and endured it for a good while; but presently she began to blush, and then must move, complaining of the fierceness of the fire.

The men brought in the food for supper; and then, as the custom was, the women

of the house waited on the men, pouring them their drink. Cormac's eyes followed Stangerd about from man to man. He said very little at table, but seemed as if he was bewitched. When she came to his side and stood above him to pour out the liquor, he did not look at her, but frowned at his platter. Nor did he watch her any more until she went out with her foster-mother and the other girls of the house.

He drank deeply from his horn, and then looked at Toste as he sang:

“Full in the hall, rob'd in her white
She sat at ease with her arms bare,
And gaz'd before her at the light,
Dreaming—and her blue eyes astare
Encompast me and gave me sight
Of their mystery and intent—

And when about the board she went,
Serving the men with mead, and came
And stood above me till I bent
Before her, as before the flame
The bushes in a forest bow
And show all white—I had her name
As if 'twas written on my brow:

A Valkyr, Chooser of the slain!
A storm-fraught spirit, fierce as pain,
With whom to clasp and kiss, or grapple
As man with woman, that were thought
To deaden a deed—as if you brought
The lovely Night to bed, or fared
To play below the gleaming thrapple
Of the keen daughter of the snow,
And froze when her white hills she bared.

Not possible! Nay, let her go,
Mistress of Destiny, unmov'd
Her way of the gods, her way of woe,
But ever lovely, ever lov'd,
Treading the necks of beaten men!"

Toste said: "You are badly hit, I see."

Cormac made no answer, and fixed his eyes upon the girl until she left the hall with her companion. The master of the house, who was fostering Stangerd and had observed the effect she had had, came over the hall and sat by his two guests. He pledged them, and encouraged Cormac to talk.

That was not at all hard, as the young man was excited, and had drunk enough

to loosen stiffer tongues than his own. He talked freely, but very well. Men gaped, then laughed at him, then laughed with him. Very often he broke naturally into verse; and soon his was the only voice you heard. His father, Ogmund the Viking, was his best theme; he had a way of picturing the scenes in which his life had been spent. Once, he said, Ogmund rowed up a broad English river in his long ship with a raven at the prow. His ship was called *Raven*. They rowed up between great banks of grass and mud until they came to a town lying on a sloping ground—a close-huddled town of red roofs, with a church overtopping all. They sacked the town, and had all the plunder to share—white women, children, cattle, flocks of sheep. They scorned the men and killed most of them. They drowned the headman by tying him to a stake in the channel at low tide. Cormac said that the sea came up at him solid, in a wall of brown water, curling

at the edge. It brimmed about his chin, and then filled his mouth and his eyes. Then you saw it dimpling over the top of his head; and then, for a long time, the wave he made, swaying there, slanted over the flood from bank to bank. He made a song about the women whom the rovers shared among them, and held the company spell-bound.

Stangerd lay awake listening to Cormac's singing.

"Now Stangerd lay abed within
The house's inmost sanctuaries,
With both her hands between her knees,
And them drawn up towards her chin
Touching the fulness of her breast;
And her wide eyes could get no rest
That sought the dark and saw clouds float,
Clouds of crimson radiant mist
Which gather'd, mass'd and cours'd above her
More lovely than the wings of the West—
If such wild heart should turn to love her,
What love-words would not such a throat
Pour for the overwhelming of her!"

CHAPTER IV

CORMAC WILL NOT BUDGE

IN the morning Cormac went out of the house to the water-trough, and dipped his head half a dozen times; and that was the best of his washing. Then he goes back into the hall and finds it empty, but voices of women come upon him from beyond the curtains, and one of them is Stangerd's. Straight as a hawk he goes thither, and finds the women's room, and Stangerd there in her shift and petticoat, combing her long, yellow hair. He had never seen such hair in his life; it was gold in colour, and reached below her knees. Her arms and shoulders were very white, but her neck was burning, and so was her

face. He stood looking at her in the doorway. The girl whom he had seen overnight was with her—a pale, slim girl, with light grey eyes and a laughing mouth. Stangerd went on with her affair, but this girl, called Herdis, nudged her, and whispered:

“Here is the fine stranger from the shore.”

But Stangerd’s head was sideways to him, and her face averted.

Cormac said to her, “Will you lend me the comb?”

She looked up then, tossing her hair in a wave behind her. She looked very boldly, but her colour was high. She held him out the comb without saying anything, and began to rope her hair, that she might coil and pin it with a pin.

While Cormac was combing his hair, the girl Herdis stood between them, and said to him, “What do you think of her hair?”

Cormac said, “It is like the silk which the worms make, when it is fresh carded.”

“What hair were that for a man’s wife

to have!" said Herdis. "And her eyes—
what say you?"

Cormac said, "They are like the sea when the sun is behind you as you stand wondering at it. They are bluer than the sky when you stand in a narrow valley and look up."

Stangerd had a rope of her hair in her mouth, and was pinning a coil. She looked from Herdis to Cormac without fear or confusion. Then she took the hair from her mouth and said: "Have you not done valuing me?"

Herdis laughed. "My dear, we have not yet cast up the figures, nor even set them all." Then to Cormac she said:

"Do you set a price upon her?"

Cormac, looking at Stangerd, said:

"For all that body's loveliness
I would give Iceland, and no less,
And all the lands that lie between
The land where the sun is never seen
And the roaring Western main;
And even so I should be fain
To search the world for more to give—
Yet search I must if I would live!"

Stangerd liked this song, and was more gentle in her ways. She looked at Cormac with interest.

"You are a skald," she said. "I knew that yesterday. I heard you singing in the hall."

"I sing when the words and music come to me," said Cormac. "Last night there was no trouble about it. I felt very greatly, and so sang greatly."

"I heard you," she said, "but not the words. What did you sing about?"

"My dear," said Herdis, "can you ask him that?"

"Why not," said Stangerd, "since I wish to know?"

"He sang about you," said Herdis.

Stangerd asked him fairly: "Is this true?"

"It is not true," Cormac said, "in the way she means it. Your name did not come into the song I sang. But the summer-time came into it, and the yellowing of

the corn-acres, and the stillness of the heat on summer mornings, and the hush of the noons, and the gentleness of the evenings; and the rising of the harvest moon, full and hot, and the brown intake she makes about her in the sky. All these things were in the song—but your name was not in it at all.”

Herdis took Stangerd's arm, and the pair of them stood together before Cormac.

Stangerd asked him if he was going away that morning.

“How do I know?” he said. “It may be that I shall be here talking to you. It does not rest with me.”

Stangerd smiled. “Does it rest with me?”

“Yes,” said Cormac, “and with no other.”

“Here is one coming,” Stangerd said, “who may wish to have a word in it.”

Toste came into the room.

“It is time we were away, Cormac,”

said he. "We have many a fell to beat over." www.libtool.com.cn

The eyes of Stangerd and Cormac met. Then Cormac said:

"It is written that I stay here this day. You will find me here when you come off the hill."

"Now where do you get that written?" said Toste with a grin.

Cormac said, "It is written in the heart of Stangerd."

"No, indeed," said Stangerd, "I don't read it there."

"But he does," said Herdis, and Toste said:

"A man can read his own runes, but not what is in the heart of a woman. Well, I wish you joy of your day; it will be better than mine."

So then he went, and Cormac remained all day talking to Stangerd.

* * * * *

In the evening Toste came back for him, and he must go.

Stangerd came to the door of the house with him. She did not wish him to go, but she said nothing about it. They stood together at the door without speaking. Stangerd leaned against the door-post, and Cormac was near her, but not touching her.

When Stangerd was moved her cheek-bones showed and the colour was fierce and high over them, as if she had been burned there. So they showed now. It grew dusk, but still Cormac could see those patches of red in her cheeks.

He said, "It grows late, and I must go after Toste. When shall I see you again?"

She said, "I am always here. You will see me when you come to look for me."

Cormac said, "That will be very soon, I am thinking." Then he said, "Good-

night, Stangerd," but did not touch her with his hand.

She said, "Good-night, Cormac," and stood there a long time after he had gone in the gathering dark.

Herdis came to her bed, and would have got into it, for she wanted to know all about it; but Stangerd pretended she was sleepy, and would not let her in.

CHAPTER V

CORMAC IN LOVE

CORMAC was very silent at home, and remained silent for several days; but he was intensely happy, feeling himself in bondage to Stangerd. He made up more situations for her than you would believe, and was not himself in one of them. In his fancy he saw Stangerd beloved by everything in the world, and beloved by everything in turn. He was happy enough in this possession of her without any other, and did not make any attempt to visit her.

After a while, he told his mother of his affair. Dalla looked rather grave.

"I hear she is a fine girl, much sought after."

"She is a beautiful girl," said Cormac, "and most reasonably sought."

"I am thinking that she will be too fine for your winning, my son. Thorkel will want a price for her. And he is no great friend of ours."

Cormac said, "There is no hurry. I shan't speak to him yet awhile. But I shall go to see Stangerd to-morrow."

"And what shall you say to her?"

"That is as may be. If I feel called upon to say anything, I shall say it. All that I need now is to see her."

* * * *

He went, as he had foretold. He reached Nupsdale about noon and, as he leaned over the wall of the intake, saw Stangerd through the open doorway of the kitchen, and two men with her, watching her while she worked. He watched her for a long time, speculating which of the two fellows loved her more, and whether either of them loved her as he did. He became very excited

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over his nearness to her, but had no immediate need to be nearer. The homestead seemed to him a holy place; everything about it was enhanced by her presence in it, moving familiarly about it; the two young men, her companions, grew tall and splendid to him. He felt more interested in them than he had ever been in any man. Then he sang, as the song moved in him:

"I love a lovely woman—well,
And if some other love her, good!
All goes to prove my hardihood,
All goes her magicry to tell.
For say she is a miracle,
Say that her beauty is my food,
Am I so surly in my mood
That what feeds me rings t'other's knell?
Nay, should a hundred be about her,
And she of her great bounty feed them,
Is that to say my heart must heed them?
Not so. 'Tis they can't do without her.
Women are so made, they grow stouter
Of heart the more their lovers bleed them."

He felt perfectly at ease. He wished the young men very well, hoped she was

kind to them, "as kind as she was to me when I was with her all day." The thought of that day came back upon him like a flood of sudden warm weather. His heart beat. "Oh, I am a fortunate man—that such a beautiful woman should be kind to me, and let me be about with her all day!"

Presently Stangerd, having finished what she was about, came to the door and stood there; she leaned against the doorpost. She saw Cormac out in the meadow, but made no sign. He stood still looking at her, and then leapt the wall and came directly to her. Two dogs rushed out of the house, barking furiously; but he took no notice of them, and kept his eyes upon Stangerd.

She coloured up, but he did not. He came and stood before her.

"When did you come?" she asked him.

"A long time ago. I don't know when it was."

"Why did you not come to the house?"

"Because I was looking at you."

"Will you come in now?"

"I will come in if you are going in. If not I will stay here."

"My foster-father will be in soon. He will ask me why you are here."

"You may tell him, if you please."

"What am I to tell him?"

"That I am come to see you."

"No—I shan't tell him that."

He laughed, but said no more for a time; nor had she anything to say.

Then, suddenly, he said, "The sun is loving you."

"He is burning me," she said, and put her hand up to shade her face.

* * * * *

The goodman came home to dinner, and was not very pleased. Whatever he may have asked Stangerd, he took little notice of Cormac, but ate his dinner grimly and

soon afterwards went out. Cormac stayed with Stangerd all the afternoon. It grew dark, and the moon came up over the fiord.

"Now it is her turn," Cormac said. "She will light me down the fell; but her eyes will be upon you all the time."

Then he said, "Will you come to the end of the court with me?"

"Why should I come?"

"The night is blue," said Cormac. "I wish to see you in the night's arms."

Stangerd said nothing to this; but she went with him into the air, and as far as the end of the court.

He told her, "I shall come again to-morrow."

"You were wiser not," she said.

"It is necessary for me to see you."

"It was not necessary yesterday."

"It will be necessary to-morrow."

Again she had no answer, being neither able to agree with him nor to deny. He

left her without a touch or a look, and was gone like a nightbird into the dusk that fleets far upon one stroke of his silent wings.

Stangerd remained where she was for a while. Many men had loved her, but not in this fashion, to say at once so much and so little about it, to be so plain and so dark. After this he came to see her most days, and treated her in just the same way.

Stangerd was a beautiful girl, richly coloured and finely formed. She had been admired since she was ten years old, and had often been told so. But she had never been admired as Cormac admired her, and had heard nothing like his admiration. Most men expressed themselves indirectly, by look or inference, by silence, by quarrelling with other men. If they told her in so many words that she was a beauty, they did it shamefacedly, and tried to make a joke of it. But Cormac from the first

told her so plainly, and seemed to devote himself to making clear to her exactly how and exactly how much she was beautiful. He was, without doubt, making it clear to himself, but she couldn't have known that. And everything that he told her was told in a plain, still voice, as if he were speaking about the weather or the crops, as indeed he thought he was.

Naturally, she was very much interested. Who in the world does not like to hear about herself?

He told her some very strange things, too, which she did not at all understand, but which none the less she accepted or passed over because they came from him. She would have been highly offended if any other man had so spoken.

He said that everything in the world was her lover. He said that in rhyme, and said it to her when she was sitting on the brae in full sunlight, with him kneeling on one knee behind her. She felt his eyes

bent upon her, boring like two augers through
the top of her head.

“Great joy of Stangerd have I had,
Joy to the full of one man's tether;
Greatly have loved her, hugely dared,
Riding the dales or upland heather,
Singing her bounty; being glad
Because her blissfulness I shared
With every other mother's son
In this good world: for this is true,
Stangerd, the whole world joys in you.

Let her have husbands, one, two, three—
A dozen are no more than one:
All Nature is her lord in fee,
And bird and hill-flower, stock and stone,
And spearing grass and springing tree,
The clouds, the river and the sun
Hold Stangerd in coparcenary.

For, as I look upon the thing,
Their beauty is a cup for hers,
And nothing worth considering
But what they tell as messengers
Of how she figures in their glass.
So the lark lift as she did pass
And said, ‘The world is bright with glee
Since Stangerd lookt and smiled at me;

Therefore I sing'—or grass, 'Her feet
Press me in love!'—or flower, 'How sweet
The breath of Stangerd when she goes
With parted lips!'—or tree, 'Who knows—
Passing, she laid a lingering hand
On me, and doubtful seemed to stand
Whether or no to take me to her;
Who knows but she will let me woo her
And be her lover in the dark
When the sap throbs beneath the bark?'"

She sat very still while he was singing this, nursing her cheek in her hand. Presently she said, "You say curious things in your songs. I think I ought to be offended, but I am not. I should be offended if I believed them, or if I thought that you believed them."

Cormac said, "You are wrong there. If you thought that I did not believe them, you would have cause to be offended. But I know them to be true. I read them in the face of things, I can't be mistaken."

Then he sang on:

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“So did the cloud, a jealous lover,
Beshadow her, as he would cover,
And prove himself her bosom's lord,
And make a guarded woman of her—
Had not the sun with his bared sword
Rent him with gashes, and outpour'd
His courage on her; the which the river
Rejoicing saw: ‘O, thou brave giver
Of heart to horse, and horse to pasture,’
Cried he, ‘I hail thee! Warm the blood
Of Stangerd, that she slip her vesture
And come to me, and know my flood!’”

She grew very hot, and got up to go. She thought he was following her, but he was not. When she turned to look for him behind her, he was not there; and presently she saw him far down the fell, springing from boulder to boulder, going down towards the sea.

Another day he told her that she was too beautiful to be the wife of one man. No plain-minded man, he said, would ever marry her, because he would know that

he had neither the power nor the right to engross so rare a thing. When she frowned and bent her blue eyes upon him, and presently asked him: "Why, what would you have done with me?" he said that his own opinion was that she ought to be the wife of everybody. Then he sang:

"There were four brothers loved one lass—
Ask not how much or when this was.
It was before the world took heed
Of more than how to serve its need.

Their need was sore, her bounty such,
They askt not, nor she gave, too much:
They roamed the heath, they fought and kill'd;
They were as one long sword and shield.

She kept the house; there was no strife
Within doors, such a sweet housewife
Was she, this kindly kindled lass,
Such wife as no man living has."

Then he turned his head and looked down upon her where she lay wondering, with her face between her hands. "So should you be the whole world's wife, since you

are as much more beautiful than she was, as she in her turn outwondered the women of her day. You should live in a temple by yourself, and be mate of every man who honestly and respectfully commended himself. In that way you would be Goddess and Bride of all Iceland and Goddess and Mother too. You would wear the Girdle of Fricka. No other woman would be thought of at all—which is as it should be. Some day soon I will make a song about that.” She moved away, saying that he must not.

What was she to make of it? She pretended to be angry, but was not so at all, for she knew that he meant it for a high compliment.

So the winter passed and the spring came on; and so the year wore to the summer. Cormac spent most of the time with Stangerd, but did not declare himself in any way that you could take hold of. It seemed that he talked to Stangerd as

if she were a beautiful landscape, a cornfield in heavy ear, or the fell when the heather was in flower, or a birch-wood in early spring, or the firth in the quiet of dawn. He never scrupled to say that she was as lovely as any of these, or that everything in nature loved her. It never occurred to him to say that he, in particular, loved her. As for asking for her, Stangerd was sure that such a thought had never entered his head. Meantime—she fed upon his talk as if it were bread and honey.

CHAPTER VI

DOINGS AT TONGUE

WHEN Thorkel of the Tongue heard what was going on at Nupsdale, he went up there after his girl. He did not see Cormac, but he called Stangerd to him, and said: "I hear that Cormac of Melstead is often up here after you. Now come you back with me, my girl."

Stangerd said that she was ready.

"Yes," said her father, "it seems to me that you are ready for many things. All in good time and one thing at a time. Let all be done in order and with decency."

So he brought her home to Tongue, and it was not long before Cormac heard that she was there, and went to see her.

Thorkel saluted him fairly, and passed the time of day with him, thinking that he would judge for himself how things were going to turn out. Cormac sought out Stangerd and talked to her so long as the daylight lasted. Thorkel watched him closely, and didn't know well what to make of it. He didn't know, for one thing, why Cormac irritated him so much; but presently he found out. It was because the young man did not know he was there. It was because he behaved as if the whole house held nobody but Stangerd and himself. Thorkel's house, mind you, and (if you come to that) Thorkel's daughter. No man could be expected to like that.

And so it went on for a time, and Stangerd used to watch for Cormac's coming, and to take it as a matter of course that he should be with her in whatever business she might have, and sit with her, and talk. Many men were in the hall at Tongue, for it was a busy place. But when Cormac was there,

Stangerd saw no other person, and Cormac saw none but her. The world indeed held but the pair of them, as it seemed.

Thorkel said little, but he did not like it, and did not like Cormac, who seemed to him too free of his house and child. He was a shrewd man of few words, and did not believe in Cormac. Such words as he let out were not hard to understand, and there were those about him who made the most of them.

There was a rough man named Narve who was about the place, and there were worse than he. The two sons of Thorveig the spae-wife were very often at Tongue after Stangerd: the eldest of them was called Ord, a blustering young customer always at rough play. Stangerd had no liking for him, and Cormac at this time no jealousy at all; but Ord was very jealous.

However, Narve, who was a fool, was the one that began. He said to Thorkel one day: "Master, it's not hard to see

that Cormac's visitings are not to your taste." www.libtool.com.cn

"Who told you that?" Thorkel asked him.

"My wits," said Narve.

Thorkel said, "I am glad they are of some use to you. They are not far out this time. I know no harm of Cormac, yet I wish he would leave my girl alone."

"He can be taught that," Narve said.

"As how?"

"In the old way," said Narve; "by a better man than himself."

Thorkel glanced at him. "Do you mean by you, perchance?"

Narve said "I do."

Thorkel had nothing to say to that; then Narve went on:

"Do you give me leave to deal with him?"

Thorkel said, "You need no leave of mine. Deal with him how you can—or if you can."

Narve took this for more than leave, and set his wits to work to provoke Cormac.

The year was wearing to the close. The harvest was all in, the sheep were in pen, and the cattle in byre. Now was the time when men were killing beasts for salting against the winter. At Tongue that was Narve's work in particular; but everybody was very busy.

Cormac came in there one evening and looked about, as he always did, for Stangerd. She was not in the hall, but in the kitchen, where the work was going on. She had covered herself with a great apron and was busy with the rest. Narve was stirring a cauldron of black puddings and watched the pair. They met without greeting; Stangerd scarcely looked at Cormac, but was very much aware of him; as for Cormac, he did not take his eyes from her, but went and stood by her, very close. Narve could not see that they had much to say to each other, and judged that

matters were beyond speech. Stangerd went on with her work under the eyes of Cormac. Presently Narve called out to Cormac: "Hither, runagate, and see my snakes in the kettle."

Cormac looked over to him. "What am I to see?"

"Come and see how they boil and bubble. See them all in love with one another. They can't leave each other alone."

Cormac frowned, but he went to the cauldron. Narve stuck his prong in and fished out a pudding. "Kettle-snakes, I call them," he said. "Wrigglers and hankerers. What do you think of them?" He stuck the hissing morsel under Cormac's nose, grinning, gleaming at the eyes.

"Why, I think," said Cormac, "that I could see you writhing in there after a few more [of your speeches—but you would foul the broth, and there are shorter ways with you."

Narve said, "The shorter the better."

Then Cormac took him suddenly by the ear, and cuffed him soundly, and flung him away. Narve went out of doors.

Ord came in among them, and went to Stangerd, where she was salting the meat. He nodded to Cormac, but spoke to her: "Oh, Stangerd," he said, "you should be out on the brae. The moon is coming up, and the evening is very still and warm."

Stangerd said she was too busy; and then Cormac said, "She will go—but not with you."

"With whom, then?" said Ord with a hot face.

"With me, then," said Cormac.

Ord clacked his tongue on his palate, but held his ground, red and furious, as he well may have been, seeing he had known her the longer, and considered her in a sense his own. Cormac also was troubled—not angry, but troubled because his sense of intimacy was gone. Yet very soon another

thought took possession of his mind. It was, that it was a beautiful thing to see a beautiful girl beset by lovers or admirers. He saw how calm and unconcerned she appeared, going on with her rubbing, with two flaming and fuming youths about her. He doubted if self-possession went deep; he guessed that within her her heart was drumming a lively measure. But her outward bearing was noble. She seemed not to have a care in the world but the rubbing in of salt; and then he thought of her as the bountiful Earth itself, the mother, the adored, the need of all men. He was inspired, and he sang of her:

“Well do they call you Sleeping Gold,
Since no man lives but cannot see
The light-flung glory which you hold
As Erda holds her majesty,
A thing of little worth, the fee
Of whoso asketh, being bold.
Let him draw nigh, the well is free,
Say you, the fire for who’s acold:
Let him drink, warm himself of me.

Your heart, O Stangerd, you hold up
For asking men; they need but need—
There is no bottom to the cup,
There is no pauper but may feed.
So in your calm eyes each may read
The truth he asks, if he be true—
So to your arms all come indeed
And die, as they have lived, of you—
And your gold sleeps, and takes no heed.”

Stangerd bent to her work, but she flushed, hearing this song. She felt that she did not yet know Cormac, and that she must either pretend that she did, or drive him to explain himself. She did not wish to do this before Ord, lest Ord should think less of her. So she bent to her task and said nothing.

But Ord fretted and fumed, then broke into scoffing.

“The skald is bold enough—with the tongue. Women take words for deeds, I believe. But men don’t.”

“Some men do,” said Cormac. “Narve is one. You have not yet been tried. But you may come to it.”

"And if I come to it, Cormac, what then?" Ord put back his shoulders.

"If I tell you," said Cormac, "that is tongue-work. But you ask for deeds."

Ord glared at him, very red, working his tongue about. Then he turned away.

"I won't ask—I'll do," he said. So Cormac held his place.

But Stangerd was cross. "You should not sing of me so," she said, "before other men. I am ashamed."

"Of what are you ashamed? Of me? That can hardly be. If I belittled you, or held you cheap, you might well be ashamed. But if I declare your glory?"

"You don't choose to understand me. You talk of—you talk of my eyes——"

"Of course I talk of them since I see them, and think of them all night," he said.

"——and of my arms, as if—I was—I don't know what."

"It is very possible that you don't know what you really are," Cormac said. "But I shall tell you before I have done with you."

"You may tell me what I please to hear," said Stangerd with heat; "but you shall not talk before other men of my person. It makes me ashamed."

Cormac threw up his head. "O warmth of the Earth! O heart of the World! There is no part of your person of which you need be ashamed. You might mate before the eyes of all men at the Thing, and you would but blind them with your splendour."

She bit her lip, but her eyes looked kindly at him; and presently she went with him to the door, and stood without it in the dark with him.

And they both stood trembling together, and presently, without word said, they turned and kissed.

"Eye-level and heart-level they,
And mouth-level; but till that day
Never had been what now must be:
Kissed mouth to kissing mouth is fast,
And two hearts beating to one tune.

Breathless and speechless for their boon,
They cling together; but they kiss
No more; but mouth and mouth co-mix
And make one being at the lips.
And all burnt splendour of the moon
Throbs with the heat of burning noon."

That was the first time that ever Cormac kissed Stangerd, and it was the first of many. For after that she let him take her in his arms and kiss her as he would, and bless Heaven for having made her, and cry to the stars to shoot from their sockets and make a wreath for her head. And she herself kissed him once or twice, and prayed him not to be foolish, and believed that he was not.

* * * * *

Cormac marched singing on his way under the stars. He went by the shore of the firth, and before he left the water he went in up to his middle, and soused his head and shoulders. He laughed suddenly, thinking of Narve.

"The scullion and his kettle-snake!
What ailed him and his blister'd tongue?
Will he scrape me with his muck-rake,
Scatter me, as he scatters dung
About the meadow? And the house
That holds her harbours that wood-louse!
Salmon and gudgeon in one lake,
One tree, sea-eagle and titmouse!"

Then he went home to bed.

But at Tongue, over the fire, Thorkel sat frowning while he heard what Narve had to say.

"The fellow is dull," said Narve, "or he shams dullness. I showed him as plain as I could speak that we had had more than enough of him. I insulted him; but no! It needs more than words."

"He had you by the ear, I understand," Ord said; and Thorkel said, "You're not man enough."

Narve flamed. "Man enough! I'll show him how much of a man I am—when there are not women in the room. But there was Stangerd and a maid or two more,

and you know what girls are about these things! Bloodshed? No, no. Not before women. Don't ask me to do that."

Ord said to Thorkel, "My brother and I are at your service when you want us."

Thorkel said, "There's room here for a ready hand, seemingly. Come up here to-morrow, the pair of you, and we'll have him out of it."

They laid a plot between them before they went their ways. Narve said that he was ready for anything, and Ord said he would bring in his brother Gudmund.

CHAPTER VII

FIGHTING AT TONGUE

THEY laid a trap for Cormac at Tongue, which Stangerd perceived, though she did nothing to prevent it, since not a word was said of him throughout their preparations. You do not ask a girl who respects herself to talk of her heart-concerns to men. She will never do it. She would as soon undress herself before them. Moreover, her father was about the house all that afternoon, the last person in the world to whom she could talk of Cormac.

The first thing was that Ord and Gudmund came to Tongue carrying weapons of war. They had swords and shields. With them came Narve, who had been out in the

meadow since dinner-time, looking for them. He brought a scythe over his shoulder.

They shut the front door, and shot one of the bolts. Then the scythe was hung upon a nail, with the blade across the entry, and on the other side of it two nails were driven aslant, so that a sword leaning upon them cut across the corner of the door itself. Both of these things must fall when the door was opened. Such preparations were made, and the men sat about drinking mead, not saying very much above a whisper.

Ord tried to sit with Stangerd, who had her yarn to wind, but she was very indignant, and would have nothing to say to him. Thorkel came in and out, but towards the time when Cormac might be looked for, he went into the kitchen, and waited there, peering. Stangerd saw him through the crack of the door. She continued to wind her yarn, and busied herself over it. She

had no fear, however, for Cormac: it was not that which troubled her. She was convinced of his better mettle and more fortunate star. It would take stronger, stiller men than Ord to put him down. But she was enraged at the injustice of her father, that he should abet Ord's jealousy, and knowing nothing against Cormac, yet take rank against him. Because he didn't relish song-making, was song-making therefore shameful? Her heart burned in her breast, and the edges of her cheek-bones burnt her cheeks.

The barking of the dogs declared the coming of her lover. Narve, the fool, could not keep still. He jumped in the air and cracked his fingers. Ord and Gudmund looked at each other, but said nothing. Then presently they heard Cormac's step in the court, and the sound of his voice singing.

The door was tried. He found it bolted. He drave against it with some staff or other

which he was carrying. Gudmund tiptoed to the door and shot back the bolt. Cormac drave into it again with his staff, and it flew open. The scythe and the sword came down together and met in midway, falling with a clash and shiver. Scythe, being heavier, brake sword. Cormac stood, smiling and bright-eyed, looking on. He saw Stangerd in her white gown, and was going directly to her over the wreckage at the door when Thorkel bounced out.

He was in a high rage. He shook his hand at Cormac. "You worthless rascal! You night-worker, get you gone! What have you been to this house but a cause of scandal and bitterness? Get you gone with your mouthful of folly and wind!"

Cormac laughed pleasantly, and made him worse.

"You grin, you grin, you bitch's whelp! But there shall be a ruefuller grinning for you before long."

He went into his hall, and took Stangerd by the arm. "Up with you, mistress, and come with me. Here is mischief enough for your fine eyes. There shall be no more."

She had risen, red and troubled herself. Holding her by the upper arm, he hustled her through the hall and out by the women's door. He thrust her into the byre, and shut the door upon her, locking her in. "Stay there, till we have scared out this gadfly skald," he said.

* * * * *

Meantime Cormac had gone into the hall. Narve was not there; but at the further end he saw the two brothers, with their bare swords on their knees.

"What is afoot?" he asked, looking from one to the other; but they said nothing.

He stood doubtfully, looking first at them, and then about the hall, next at the ruins on the floor. He stirred them with his toe.

"When scythe and broad-sword come to blows,
Plain men take heart, and meadow-grass.
But there's no pasture for the ass,
However fair the home-mead grows.
Cudgel your wits, I'll cudgel your hides,
Ye greedy pair of hoody crows."

They sat glum, glowering at him from beneath their brows. So far Cormac had not been in a rage, but now he got suddenly angry. He walked up to the brothers.

"What is the meaning of this foolery? What have I done to Thorkel or to you that I should be received in this manner?"

Ord said, "You are not wanted here. Is it not plain enough? What more can a man do than take his daughter out of the house the moment you come into it?"

Cormac answered him: "He can see that worse men than myself are out of it first. But he lets his house fill with smeary scamps, and then bolts them in lest he lose one of them. You are none of you fit to

sweep the floor for Stangerd's feet. You make that foul which was only gritty with good dust before." He turned suddenly and saw Narve in the entry of the Bower. In a flash he was upon him, and had him by the ear. "You—dish-washer—where is Stangerd?" He screwed his ear round, and Narve writhed.

"She's locked up in the byre then," he said in a hurry.

Cormac loosed him, and went straight through the house and out of the women's door, where the maids were clustered together, and saw him go. He shook the door of the byre, and called, "Stangerd, are you there?"

She answered him, "Yes, I am here."

"I must see you," he said; but she said, "No, no, you can't get in."

"Can I not?" said Cormac, and took a short run and butted into the door with his shoulder. It burst at the lock.

She was alarmed; her eyes were bright.

"Oh, you are mad to act so! My father will set on you!"

"He will not, then," said Cormac, and took her in his arms. He had never been so eager to hold and kiss her before. He had always seemed afraid of her, but now he was not at all afraid. Stangerd was glad of him, and very proud. Her father did not come near them, and there they stayed till it grew dusk. Then she bade him go for fear they should set upon him in the dark; and Cormac himself thought it was the better way.

"Farewell, my sweet," he said, with his lips to hers. "I think I never loved you like this before."

"No," she said, kissing him.

"You were Goddess to me," he told her; "but now you are woman."

"I like it better," she said.

He felt a sudden chill at the heart. He knew—something told him certainly—that it was not so good a way. Then he left her.

and went through the house to go home. The house was empty so far as he could see.

Beyond the court there were the meadows stretching downwards to the brook, with stone walls about them. Then came the valley-bottom where rushes grew and some sycamore-trees. Beyond the water the hill rose; and here was your path if you were going to Melstead.

Stangerd went to the door presently, and watched Cormac go through the meadows.

He went fast, vaulting wall after wall. She wasn't sure, but she believed that Thorveig's sons were waiting for him in the bottom. When Cormac came to the last wall she was sure; for he stood on the top of it and remained standing for a while. Then when he jumped down, and she could only see his head and shoulders, she saw the men come out of the trees. Her father was not one of them. They were Ord,

Gudmund, and Narve. Ord aimed a spear at him. She saw it fly.

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Cormac had seen the ambush before he got to the last stone wall. He stood on it that the ambushmen might know that he saw them and come out into the open. They all came out together, but when they were within hurling distance, they separated. Narve hung back in some alder bushes, Gudmund went to the left, and Ord to the right. Cormac jumped off the wall and went between them. He had an axe.

Ord ran a little way forward and hurled his spear. Cormac met it with the axe, and it glanced off and stuck in the moss. Then Gudmund, who had been running, doubled up, came behind him to cut him off from the wall; but Cormac was too quick for him, and was on him like a gust of wind. He swung his axe as the spear came, and cut it in half as if it had been a bulrush; then he whirled the axe round backhanded

and caught Gudmund in the neck with it, and brought him down. If he had not been giving ground at the moment his head had been off. As it was, the blade did not hit true; but he gushed blood from nose, mouth, and ears, and fell like a stone.

Cormac turned and waited for Ord, who, having shot his spear, now came at him with a sword.

Stangerd, watching by the door, turned quickly when she heard a man's foot in the hall, and saw her father coming out with his bill. Her eyes burned.

"What are you going to do, father?" she said.

"Get out of my way, you!" he answered; but she would not. She came to him and caught both his wrists. He raved at her; but she held on.

"You shall not—you shall not! It is shameful to be four against one."

He swore he would be the death of her; but she cared nothing now.

Narve came up the court on tiptoe, white as a cloth. "Master, hold you there! 'Tis all over," he said. "Cormac has slain Ord, and, as for Gudmund, I doubt he'll never move again. Fierce work! Bloody work!" He stared about him at the dusk. "We set our feet on a snake. That's what we did. And he's bitten us to the bone." Then he shuddered, and covered his face. Stangerd let go of her father's wrists and went into the house.

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It was true. Ord was no match for Cormac with any weapon; and sword has no chance with axe if the axe-bearer knows his business. He never touched Cormac, who, after two feints, split his head open.

This was the first man Cormac had ever killed. He looked thoughtfully at the body, his rage having left him, and then went over to the brother.

He believed him to be dead too; but he was not actually dead, though he died in

a few days. His rage had left him—no, not his rage, for he had had none. He had been very excited. That moment on the wall when he saw the three come out of the trees had been the greatest pleasure he had ever known. But now all this was gone, and a feeling of disgust, as if he had tasted something sour and stale, was in him. There seemed a tarnish upon Stangerd's gold. He would not think of Stangerd.

He found his axe-haft wet with Ord's blood, and the space 'twixt forefinger and thumb was wet too. He shuddered once or twice. It was all a nasty business. He wondered: Should he leave those two things alone there under the stars, or sit by them until it was light? Gudmund's face showed in the dark—for it was almost night by now—as if there was a light within it. But Ord's case was the worse. Ord had no face now—only horrible parts of a face. He could not bear to look at Ord, or help looking at him. He took off his

coat and covered Ord's head and shoulders with it. For Gudmund he had to content himself with boughs from a sycamore-tree. He was very careful of them, having no feeling against them. They had attacked him; he had provoked nothing—but he did not feel at all justified. A beastly business—and Stangerd involved in it. Tomorrow he would tell their mother; for the present his coat was testimony enough that this was no murder.

He went home full of thought; but no verses came into his head, since none were in his heart. He told his brother what he had done. Thorgils said there was no shame to him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPAE-WIFE'S CURSE

THORVEIG, the mother of Ord and Gudmund, was a grave, heavy woman with thin hair and light eyes, wide open, which seemed always to be looking at things which were not there. They were like dead eyes. The tale says that she knew too much. Certain it is that when Cormac rode to see her, accompanied by his testimony, betimes in the morning—certain it is that she had Ord laid out for burial and Gudmund in bed. She was sitting by the dead when they came to the door. It was covered with a sheet, as it had need to be.

Cormac said what he had to say. "I

was attacked from an ambush; I defended myself. It was unprovoked on my part, and well you know it. I offer no atonement nor ransom for this dead man, and I require you to leave our land as soon as may be, and carry yourself and your evil seed elsewhere."

She watched him, but said nothing. Thorgils added his testimony. "I am with Cormac in this, Thorveig. I know that he did nothing against Ord. If you doubt of that, do you ask Thorkel of Tongue, or his man Narve, who was of the ambush too, but never came to blows. And when Cormac says that you must leave our land, I am with him there also. We will not have enemies at our doors."

Then Thorveig got up and said: "Ill fall him who takes land from another, but worse fall them who take again what they have freely given. Think not you, Cormac Ogmundsson, to prosper in these ways. True enough you can get me gone from the

hundred; like enough you will not ransom my sons. But I have that within me to put me even with you yet. You think you have cleared your way to Stangerd by such doings. You are a fool, then, for you will never have her."

Cormac looked as if he would laugh at her; but he changed his mind. "The settlement of such a thing is not with you, woman," he said.

"Ah," said she, "you are right there. It is with you, and I see it in you, and know it. And this, too, I see: that the foolishlest thing you ever did was to fall foul of me and mine. It will come to pass also that you will wish me back at Melstead before many years are gone over. These things I see, but you cannot see. Now get you gone with your friends and leave me with my dead."

With that she sat down by the covered corpse, and Cormac rode away.

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He did not go to Tongue that day, nor the next, though he thought of Stangerd, and never had her out of his mind. He wandered about the country by himself, asking of himself why he did not go to see her. He hungered and thirsted for her; he was sure of that. But it was a new kind of love—it was more than love, or less. It was a craving. He knew what he had felt when he brake open the door of the byre, and took her. He knew that he should feel that again directly he was in her neighbourhood. To look at her with eyes of desire, not with eyes of wonder; to hold her close, to kiss her long; to need, more and more, never to have done—all this she could call out of him now; but, in the doing, she would lose her first power over him, to evoke amazement and delight, to reveal to him glory and power. One thing or the other, but not both. How was it to be? He thought of these things all day and went to bed with them. In

the morning he woke up to find them all about the bolster like flies. He made a bitter song, wherein she suffered as much as he did.

“This is not love that drains me—nay,
This is to crave. O girdled Fricka,
Dare I come near thee with lips gray
For need of thine, and hot tongue-liquor
Where once my mouth was clean to pray?

I would go back! There is no way
To thin the blood I have made thicker;
Save scratch for itch is no allay.
The flame is at its dying flicker,
Blown by hot breath, it cannot stay.
Speed it with scorn, that it die quicker—
Alas, the hour! Alas, the day!”

But there was another thing: He must go to Tongue to show Thorkel that he was as good a man as he, and not one to be scared off by a door-trap. He must go to Tongue, as his right was; and if it was his pleasure to talk to Stangerd, he would do it, let come what might—even if so to

do were to cheapen her. And thus he left it, and thus it was when he did go up to Tongue.

He got scowling looks from Thorkel, and very scared looks from Narve in response to his pleasant greeting. From Stangerd he got little. She was rather cool, he thought; whereas the truth was that she was conscious of her company and conscious of herself. Men had been fighting for her, and here she was now in the presence of two of them, and of a third, you may say, since her father would have been a fighter if she had not stopped him. All this made her shy and awkward. She could not feel herself that day; it was now for Cormac to begin. But Cormac did not begin.

He was with her most of the morning, saying little. He felt that a look from her, a sigh, however little, would set him blazing like dry hay. But he did not get it, and he began to wonder whether he

wanted it. He watched the play of her hands at the loom, he watched the light show silvery on her chin and neck as she moved about. He had glimpses of her deep blue eyes; while, as for her hair, he bathed in the golden glow and strength of that. She was indeed a burning lass; but she was not what she had been at first—a light and wonder of the earth. Tears came to his eyes as he remembered his first estate, and knew it lost for ever. And yet he loved her, and could not keep away from her.

He began to judge her. He thought she was slow to move, somewhat insensible; he felt sure that she did not love him. To be sure, it was some testimony to a girl, lovely as she might be (and was, God knew), that a man should dare a houseful to see her, and fight single-handed against three. It was not much—poetry was much more—but it was something. And she reckoned it for nothing, and waited to be

wooed. But had she not been wooed by that fighting? He went away early, and did not ask her, since she did not offer, to come to the door with him.

Next day he was in a black mood and most wretched. He did not go to Tongue, which was a remarkable thing in these days. His mother waited for him to speak, but as he would not, she herself began upon the affair, and got short answers from him. Presently she said, "I will tell you this, my son. It was not thus that your father, a captain of men, wooed me."

"Why, what did he?" said Cormac.

"He saw me at a wrestling, and spoke to me before it was over. Then he went to your grandfather and asked for me, and gave gifts; but I only saw him through the half-open door, for my mother kept me in the Bower. He went away without asking for me, and came rarely to the house. He used to say, 'There is time enough. You will find me a good husband to you.

I should not have asked for you if I had not believed that. All I see of you, and all I hear, satisfies me. I am a man of full measures, not of half. Wait until the wedding-day and trust to me.' That I did. Your father was a true man of his word, and his deeds suited his words, as a sword lies in a sheath."

"He was a true man," said Cormac; but he thought in his bitterness, "That was a way to buy cows at a fair, but not to love a woman." He went out by himself on to the heath; but Stangerd called him from afar, and he rose up presently and went to a place whence he could see the house and steading at Tongue, settling down into the dusk. "It is a wonderful thing that within those walls is the loveliest body upon earth, sitting on a bench, leaning by the board. Men are about her insensible of her glory, not trembling in the air which is about her. And I, who know and tremble even here, I am so

cursed that I cannot go down there and tell my knowledge! This is madness in me, and must be fought. To-morrow I go and claim her of Thorkel. But my father's way will not suit me. I shall do it in my own way." He rose up and went home comforted.

So much for what was to be a bad business. He thought nothing of the spae-wife and her curse upon his doings. He was too disturbed to think of anything or anybody. He seemed to be groping about with scummed eyes. There was a blur, a tarnish upon everything. The pity of it—with the glory so new!

* * * * *

But as for the spae-wife herself, it is told of her that after a while she buried her sons—for Gudmund never got better, and died without knowing her again—and crossed the hills into Sowerby and came to the house of a strong man called Berse. To him

she told her tale, that her sons had been killed, ~~were gild refused~~ her, and she turned out of her holding by the slayer. "Therefore," said she, "I come to you, Berse, because you are a just man."

Berse sat well back in his leather-seated chair, and laid the ankle of one leg upon the knee of another, and twirled his thumbs.

"Who was the man that slew your sons?"

She told him. "It was Black Cormac Ogmundsson, who lives in Midfirth."

Berse blinked. "I have heard tell of him. His father was a great Viking, and died ashipboard. Now wherefore did he so to your sons?"

"They got bickering," she said, "over Stangerd, Thorkel's daughter."

Said Berse, "From breaking hearts to broken sconces there is a short and straight road. I will wager that Cormac was no more forward on it than your sons. If

I don't blame them, I don't blame him either." www.libtool.com.cn

She said nothing to that, but waited on where she was.

Berse said, "That girl of Thorkel's is a fine girl, I hear."

Thorveig said she was. "But they will spoil her," she said, "with all this quarrelling about her. Yet Cormac will never have her—that's certain."

"Who says so?" said Berse.

She answered, "I say so. I know it."

Berse went on twirling his thumbs for a time. Then he said, "Well, you shall have land of me. I know nothing against you. There is a steading down on the firth—a good small house and intake. You shall have that. It has a staithe into the water, and there are some boats go with it. You shall have that—but remember, I don't blame Cormac Ogmundsson. I am the last man to do it. They call me

Battle-Berse, Holmgang Berse. I'm a fighting man myself."

The spae-wife said, "And you will have more to do yet, Berse, with your charmed sword."

"Get along with you," said Berse, rather pleased with her. "I am not so young as I was, and Whiting keeps the fireside nowadays." Now Whiting was his famous sword, with which he had fought thirty wagers-of-battle and won them all. It had a magical stone in the hilt, and was said never to lose its edge.

"Look to Whiting," said the spae-wife, "and you won't be sorry." She thanked him for his open-handedness, but he only said, "Get along with you."

She took up her abode in Berse's ferry-house, which is called Bersestead to this hour. It was a good house upon the further shore of Ramfirth, with a haven and a mole. Boats lay snug there. There was a ferry, and many men used the place to cross over

the water to go into Sowerby. Berse himself used it, for his own house was far from the water, high up in the hills of Sowerby. You can see it from the staithe, like a patch of snow afar off; and a great force of water near by.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLIGHTING

THORKEL spoke to Stangerd about Cormac. It was on the evening of the day after the battle, when he had gone early. "My girl," he said, "what is wrong with this man of yours?"

She flushed, and looked away from him. Her eyes were cloudy. "He is no man of mine," she said.

"Well," said Thorkel, "he slew a couple of fine fellows last night, and I suppose that was not for nothing."

She flashed him a look. "He was set upon by three at once—and there would have been a fourth at him but for me."

Thorkel could not deny it. "And what

is to be done now?" he asked her instead. "Is he to make free of my house, and of you; to sit here scowling at you, looking you over, and no one to say a word? Are you not ashamed to be so treated? If your brother were here, things might go differently, I think. They don't call him Toothgnasher for nothing."

Stangerd was angry; her cheek-bones showed it. She twisted her hands about and stared out of doors. "Cormac would not be afraid of his teeth," she said. "He has teeth of his own, and has shown them."

"Little sense has he shown in this affair," says Thorkel. "What does he mean by his singing and nonsense? He calls you every sounding name he can get at, and talks two-score to the dozen. He'll tell you by the hour together what he is going to do with you—and you suffer it. He sets you up sky-high, but can't see you because your head is in the clouds. What do you

make of it, you who are a sensible girl, or were so before he ran on about your good looks?"

Stangerd looked stormy, but handsomer than ever. Her father could not but notice how fine she was, with her rich colour and golden hair and dark blue eyes. But she had not much to say because she did not know what to make of Cormac herself, and she had a feeling that, sweet as his kisses were, she ought not to allow them until he declared himself. Cormac had a way with him which was hard to resist. He had a way of looking at her with narrow eyes, and of saying, "O Stangerd, how sweet and lovely you are!"—and of taking her. She found that very pleasant. But what baffled her was that at another time he would treat her as if she was unearthly—a being of the other world—and as if he dared not to touch her at all. Lastly, there was his manner of to-day, when he had sat dull and troubled before her, neither

looking at her nor avoiding the sight of her, but preoccupied, with his thoughts elsewhere.

Meantime Thorkel had nothing to conceal. He did not understand Cormac any better than she did; but he did not want to understand him.

"I see that you choose to sulk with me," he said; "but look you here, my girl. If this man of yours comes after you, he must deal with me for you; and let him get it into his head that I will not have my daughter talked about. That would be a disgrace upon my house which I should not put up with. If he don't want you, let him say so, or prove it by keeping out of your way. I can get a husband for you any day; and so I shall if I am to be bothered by this hankering and moon-gazing."

With that he took himself off.

* * * * *

In the morning she was troubled, finding the need of Cormac, and she did what she had never yet done. She went out across the meadows and on to the fell-side to look for him. There was a fine rain falling, but the light was behind it, and it was more like silver mist than rain. She saw him coming and went down to meet him. The rain was shining in her hair; her cheeks and lips were wet. He saw her in his turn, and his feet answered to the leap of his heart. They met without words; but he took both her hands. She could not look at him, but let him hold her hands. She felt the might of his eyes, and liked the feeling.

Presently he said: "Stangerd, now you shall tell me truly why you have come out to meet me."

She hung her head and would not let him see her face. But he did see it. She was burning red.

"By that," he said, "you have answered

me. And now I ask you this—Whom would you choose to wed?"

After a little she shook her fear from her and showed him her face. The love-light was in her eyes, and made her bold. "I should choose to wed the blind woman's son," she said.

Cormac was very grave. "You have chosen as you ought," he said. "You have chosen me, who have courted you long. So it shall be." He drew her in and put his arm about her. So they stood awhile together. Then Cormac stooped his head to her, and kissed her mouth. He did it just so, deliberately, and without passion. No words were said. She did not know what to make of it. His mood was very strange.

They went together to the house, and by degrees Cormac's tongue was loosened and he told her of the battle, and spoke of his glumness of the other day. "I felt as if I had been enticed into cheapening

you by that bout. I felt on a level with those snarling swine—one of a pack about your skirts. I felt that I had been digging a dyke between you and me; it was full of black sludge and slipping eels. When I loved you first you were glorious to me—as you are to-day; but yesterday there was a skin over my eyes. I did not see you glorious. If I cannot love you well, I will not love you at all. You shall be more than wife to me—or nothing.”

He kissed her very often after that and comforted her. She was not bewildered any more, and could talk to him freely.

“Will you not make peace with my father now?” she asked him. “Do it for my sake. He says hard things to me, and I can’t answer him for fear he may say what I could not bear.”

Cormac promised her that, and she was pleased. “Nobody could refuse you anything when you are like that,” she said.

"Ho!" said he; "but I shall not kiss your father."

"If you are friendly to him, he will take it well," she told him. "You are of good fortune—as good as he is—and of good descent. That is what he will look to."

"Such things mean little to me," said Cormac. "The best thing I can say for myself is that you, who might choose the King of Norway, choose me, Cormac Ogmundsson of Melstead."

She laughed. "You must find a better thing to say than that. If I don't believe you, how shall he?"

"Shall I make you believe me, Stangerd?" he said with eagerness.

But she would not let him. "Ask for me," she said, "as the custom is, and not in the way of skalds and minstrels. He does not like your rhyming about me."

"But you, Stangerd, are pleased when I sing of you?"

She thought for a little while, then cast herself upon his breast. "Oh," she said, "I am pleased, whatever you do with me."

Then he said fondly: "I will tell you what I would do with you now, Stangerd. I would carry you in my arms out of the house, and through the meadows, and up into the fells. I know a place—a high place where there is a holm, and the grass grows green, and there are tall trees, and within them a hush. And there I would wed you upon a bed of rock-rose, under the stars. And I would build you a house there, and make an altar of stones before it, and keep a fire of fragrant wood burning there perpetually. Nobody should see you for a long time but the sun, the moon, the stars, and me. And you should be loved as never woman was loved before, your body by my body, and your spirit by mine. When you were a mother, I would summon all men to come and do you worship. And

the songs I would make of you would go all over the world, and your name would be whispered about like the name of Fricka, the goddess who gives love and life to men."

She blushed at his ardent talk, and welcomed it, for she was susceptible to his moods, though she did not at all understand them, and knew that this was the one that became him best. "Oh," she said, "what wild words! But you must woo me as a girl and not as a goddess. Therefore you shall ask for me properly of my father, and then you shall take me where you will."

"Well," he said, "I will do it; but it is proper to have witnesses and upholders with me. Therefore I will come to-morrow with my brother Thorgils, and then everything will be in order. But for all that I should like it best that I might carry you away now in my arms."

She believed that that was very true,

but she had an orderly mind, and could not consider such wild-goose plans.

He stayed with her till it grew dark, and then left her. She felt very much drawn to him; more than she had ever been when he was away from her, for his power was strong upon her when he was with her, and seemed little when he had gone. But now she knew that she had desire of him and was ready for the day when he should take her home to Melstead. For all her beauty and high colour she was a slow-blooded girl; nobody had ever stirred her as Cormac had now done. Many men had courted her, and she had been pleased with their attentions, and flattered by them; but this man had awoken the woman in her.

* * * * *

As for Cormac, he went homewards with feet of lead. He had no idea what was the matter with him; but matter there was. Once he stopped short and rubbed his eyes.

“What is the meaning of this? I leave Stangerd, the wonder of the world, her accepted lover, and my heart is like cold plum-pudding. And at the sheep-homing, after I had been a day with her, I came flying, with feet that scarcely touched the heather tufts! What is this? She is the same—nay, she is more beautiful than she was. She is like golden fruit upon a wall. To lie in the arms of Stangerd is a thing scarce to be thought of—to love her at night under the stars—a man might go mad waiting for such a joy. But I am not mad; though now I wait. There is something the matter with me. When I talk to her of her beauty I grow by degrees to believe it; but when I think of it, or see it, I don’t believe it. And yet I am the same man that I was; I am that Cormac who believed because he knew. Am I so truly? If I am not—but I tell you that I am. Love her? Ah, but I do love her—I do—I tell you I do.” Then he went

on his way, but at the edge of his heart there was fear like a blanket of fog, threatening to muffle, and deaden, and stifle it.

He told his mother and brother about his doings, and asked Thorgils to go with him on the morrow to ask for Stangerd. Thorgils said he would certainly go; and "They say that you have got a fine, tall girl for a wife, and a handsome girl, and a good one."

"She is all that," Cormac said, "and much more than that. I believe she is the most beautiful girl that ever was born."

Dalla, his mother, shook her head. "I shall never see her; but I shall tell by the feel of her. I hope she is even-tempered; for your wife will need to be."

Cormac said, "I am sure that she has given me her heart. I am sure that she has mine in exchange. With that, all is well, I take it."

"If you are sure of these things, all is well indeed," said Dalla.

Cormac grew hot.

"It does not become you to doubt me. I tell you again that I have loved her so much that I have slain two men to prove it. I have loved her night and day. I have made good songs, I have been in great heart. Love has made me taller than other men. When I first saw her it seemed to me that she was like the core of light—that strong light enclosed her like a sheath—and that she lay quivering within it like a sword."

"All this," said his mother, "is very fine," and put Cormac into a rage.

"Ah, you scoff at my way—as if by a lip curled back you could refute a lover. Well, you must find out for yourself how much I love her. You will have time."

"I shall find out," Dalla said. But Cormac had gone out of the house.

Dalla stretched out her hands to the fire. "I am not contented," she said.

Thorgils looked troubled. "It was a bad piece of work that he outed Thorveig. I backed him, because I could not do otherwise. But he was wrong. Her ill-conditioned boys were dead. He might have left her alone. He has never been the same since."

"Nay," said Dalla, "she would have cast misfortune upon him because he would not pay a ransom."

"A bad business," said Thorgils, "a bad business. He'll take it hard."

Said Dalla, "Do you take me to Thorveig. The spell must be moved."

"Too late," said Thorgils.

Dalla did her best to hearten him. "Cormac is moody by nature; there may be no spell at all."

Thorgils said, "I doubt that she has done it. She read it into him. She has the second sight."

Next day they rode over the hill to Tongue, ~~to ask for Stangerd~~. Three of them went—Cormac, Thorgils, and Toste the reeve. They took gifts with them—a fine saddle, scarlet cloaks embroidered with gold and blue, and long horns for drinking, with golden covers and chains—treasure of Ogmund the Viking, long laid up for such a use. They found Thorkel sitting in his hall, in his finest clothes, on the daïs, surrounded by his men and his friends. He loved things to be ceremonious. Stangerd was not present.

Cormac asked squarely for her, promising a good price. "I set this sum upon her," he said, "not because it represents her worth, which is to me beyond human prices; but because it is the custom."

"She is worth a good price," Thorkel said.

One of the company added: "She is the best-made girl I ever saw." Another said: "Many would be after her if they knew she

was to be had. Or Thorkel might take her to Norway and find some earl glad to have her."

Cormac chafed, and looked very black, biting his cheek.

"The less we say about prices the better," he said. "I have complied with custom, to serve you. But I can't go on with it."

"All in order, Cormac," Thorkel said. "Law is law, and money is money."

So the talk ran on in this fashion; and then Thorkel said, "This will want thinking about—a deal of thinking it will want. It seems to me that your offer should be stretched. If my son Toothgnasher were here he would say so—that I know. But he is on the sea, levying war. Should he come home in the spring with a good cargo, that will make us look foolish—to have bargained away his sister to the first comer. Toothgnasher sets great store by Stangerd. We must think of the absent as much as we can."

Toste said, "Our land is as much as yours, and much of it is better. Your girl will be no loser by coming to Melstead."

"Nay, it is I will be the loser, it seems," Thorkel said—and his friends took his side.

Cormac was beside himself with rage. "You shall finish this talk without me," he said. "My brother knows more of such matters than I do. By your leave, I will go and see Stangerd." Whereupon he broke away from the company and went through the door which led to the Bower. She was there at the loom, other girls with her. She looked strangely at him. Her eyes were like blue flowers.

Cormac went to her and kissed her, not very gently. "Stangerd, they are haggling over you as if you were a heifer. Such things sicken me. You and I know what is to be, and those dealers can never know. Give me your hand."

She did. He put a ring upon her finger.

"That is a token, my love," he said. "Let them do their foulest. I have gone to work in my own fashion. Speak to me now and tell me what I wish to hear."

She asked him. "What is it that you wish to hear?"

"Ah!" said Cormac, "if you don't know that by this time, I can hardly tell you before these girls."

She grew red. "You are angry with me. I don't know why. I thought that a betrothal was otherwise done."

It is true that he was angry; and if she did not know why, neither could he tell her, for he didn't know himself. While they were standing there, handfasted but yet far apart, one came in to say that the bargain was made, and that Stangerd must come in for the plighting before witnesses. Cormac said that he would bring her in, but was told that could hardly be. He tossed up his head and tapped with his foot; but Stangerd paid no attention to

him. She signalled to her maids that they should follow her, and went into the hall, leaving Cormac to follow as best he might.

He was well called Black Cormac for that day, at any rate. But the thing was done, and there was a feast. He had no songs for them, though.

CHAPTER X

THE DAY OF THE WEDDING

THE wedding was to be in early spring; as soon as the weather was open, because Cormac would not wait any longer, and there were no signs of Toothgnasher's ship. Stangerd did not at all understand why he was in such a hurry, and he could not tell her, though he knew very well why it was.

He felt that if he was not married very soon he would not be married at all. It was not that he did not love Stangerd, and love her very much, but that he loved her in another way—a way which irritated and confused him and hampered the free passage of his mind. He could not enjoy

the sight of her beauty, or be happy in seeing her do things beautifully, as formerly he had. He loved her now in a greedy and grudging way, which seemed to sap the roots of happiness. He did not like to see her look at another man or even give her mind to anything which was not to do with him. He said to himself, "I think of nothing but her—and why should she be otherwise? Must all the giving be on my side?" It was not so at all, if he had thought, or been able to think, of it. She loved him with the whole of her being; and what more could she have done? But there it was. His happiness was destroyed by this love; his song forsook him. His mind was preoccupied: he had no hold on it. He could not think, or see good things, or take pleasure in anything. Stangerd filled him up. There were times when he cursed the day on which he saw her; times when he hated her.

And while he must by all means see her,

know what she was doing, and prevent her being with other people, he was not happy with her. He was silent and morose. He made her unhappy, and knew that he did. There seemed always a grievance unatoned for, and another forming upon the scar of the old. All this was so unlike himself that he could not help contrasting it with what he had been before disaster fell upon him. In thinking it over, it seemed to him that he had been inconceivably happy before this fell upon him. He seemed to be looking back from a dark place upon himself free and glorious in the light of the sun. That he should count the day of his plighting his day of disaster shows you to what a state he had come. And yet he desired her keenly, and thought day and night of what he should do to her when she was his.

As for Stangerd, she would have been happy enough if he could have left her alone. It was very pleasant to her to feel his

domination when it was plainly exerted by love. His kisses were fierce and furious, but they were sweet if they were dangerous. She had a cool head and a steady heart; she did not love in that sort of way; but she admired those who did, and allowed him what he chose without fear or sense of danger. But when love became something like hate, when kisses turned to biting, she was made unhappy, and came to resent it as an indignity.

"What have I done? Why do you treat me like this?" she would ask him, and he would gloom and scowl.

"You have shown me what you really are. You have no heart, but in your beautiful bosom you have a dark nest of pride. Pride like a bed of snakes is there—a dozen angry heads with darting tongues. Flat heads with narrow eyes looking all ways to strike."

Tears clouded her blue eyes. "You are hateful to say such things. I let you do

what you choose with me; you come and go as you will, and I am always here for you. You are free of the house, and free of me—and yet you never have kind looks for it. I don't know what has come over you.”

In her heart of hearts she believed that he had been cursed by the spae-wife; but she dared not hint it for her life. Some such thing had been whispered, and Cormac had flown into a great passion and gone out with his sword in his hand to find the man who had said it.

* * * * *

So the time wore on, and the ice broke up upon the firth, and the days grew longer, and through the fog you could hear the thunder of the falling snow. Cormac said that the wedding must be soon; and then about the equinox there came a ship from Ireland into the firth, and reported the Toothgnasher's ship as on the way

home. Thorkel said that they must wait for him by all means, and Cormac was left to his mother to deal with.

She found him difficult. He jibbed at the Toothgnasher, and it seemed to her that he had been anxious all along to get Stangerd away before her brother could be home.

"But I had sooner be done with them without Toothgnasher," he said to his mother. "I shall have to deal with him later, I don't doubt. No, decidedly I shall not wait for Toothgnasher. Let him ease his hot gums on other men's affairs—not mine."

"But he is Thorkel's only son; he is Stangerd's only brother," said she. "You are unreasonable."

"Ah!" cried Cormac, "how do you know I am unreasonable? I tell you I won't have him there."

"What has Stangerd to say to this?" She put this to him because she was at her

wits' end. Cormac gloomed, and jugged out his chin. www.libtool.com.cn

"I have not spoken to her. She knows that I have no liking for Toothgnasher. She will say what I wish her to say."

But it appeared that here he was wrong. Stangerd wanted her brother to be at the wedding. She begged it of Cormac. She went so far as to kiss him of her own accord—a thing which she very rarely did. He remarked upon it, with bitterness, and stored the memory in his troubled heart. There it remained as a grievance, instead of a happy memory: the grievance was that she had not done it before. But he would not promise. Then Stangerd grew hot and showed her cheek-bones.

"You treat me very ill. It is the bride's right to fix her wedding-day. You force me to tell you so."

Cormac turned rather grey in the face. "If force drives you against my wish it is a poor look-out from where we stand

now. And I will tell you this, Stangerd. It will take more force than you and your brother and Thorkel have at call to drive me against my will." With that he left her.

He did not see her again until the day which had formerly been fixed for the wedding. On that day he had expected his mother and Thorgils to ride with him to Tongue as if for the wedding; but they would not go with him. Dalla said that he was acting outrageously, and he knew that he was. But the black fit was upon him. "If you will not come to my wedding," he said, "I shall go alone."

Go he did, and found Stangerd with her sleeves rolled up, at the well, washing linen. The morning was a fair one, with a fresh wind blowing from the land, and spray from the firth. Cormac had fine clothes on him, with a new scarlet cloak fastened at the shoulder with a golden brooch.

Two of the girls stood up to look at him;

but Stangerd bent down to the bulging linen, and pommelled it with a will.

"Is that your bridal gown you are wetting there?" said Cormac.

"The bride's dress is still on the loom," said one of the maids.

"What day is this?" he cried out.

"Washing day," said she, "and a good drying day."

"Ah," said Cormac, "and you will be drying more than linen this day. You will be drying up the sap of a man."

Stangerd had nothing to say. In a fury he slipped off his horse and went to her. He stood over her with threatening eyes.

"Is this how you greet your husband? Is this how our wedding is to be?"

She did not flinch, but gave him a steady look upwards from where she knelt below him.

"It will not be so when the day comes—not so on my part," she said.

"However it be, it will be you who have

made it as it will be," he told her. She said no more.

One of the girls said, "Toothgnasher is off the islands. He will be here soon."

"The trolls take Toothgnasher," said Cormac, and mounted, and rode home.

In the mood he was in now, nothing could be done with him at home. Thorgils, his brother, was a peacefully-disposed man who never said very much. His mother had learned the limits of her tether and did not pull against a rope and an iron peg. Both of them thought him in the wrong; but Thorgils was sure that the spae-wife had done all the mischief. What Dalla may have thought about that, she kept to herself, for she knew how furious Cormac would have been. He took to the fells in these days and was seldom seen. Nobody knew what he did there. Stangerd never saw him, and felt herself aggrieved.

At the beginning of the summer, Toothgnasher brought his ship into the firth and

laid her up. He was a tall, high-coloured man, with a fine flaxen beard on his lip. He had dark blue eyes like Stangerd's: they were a fine couple. Thorkel made much of him, and very soon gave him his bearings.

He stared when he heard the state of the case. "Why, what possesses the man? Is it witchcraft?"

"Some fiend has him. There is no doing anything with him," Thorkel said.

"There is one thing to do with him," said Toothgnasher. "You had better let me go and talk with him."

Thorkel shook his head. "Stangerd would not like that."

"Well," said Toothgnasher, "and do you think she likes the thing as it stands?"

But Thorkel's advice prevailed, that Cormac should be summoned to the marriage. This was done. Word was brought by Narve, who saw Thorgils.

Thorgils said he would give Cormac the

message, but that he was from home just now. "And I think he is up in the fells," he said.

"And what will he be doing there at this season?" Narve asked.

"Amusing himself," said Thorgils, "with trapping and such-like."

"He will find few things there so hard to trap as we find at home," Narve said.

At Tongue the opinion was that he would come; but that was not Stangerd's opinion. She kept her thoughts very private, and would not talk to her maids. Her heart was sore at the slight put upon her for no fault of her own, and as well as that she had the memory of Cormac in his days of eager wooing. They had been sweet, and the sweeter they the bitterer her present dule. But she did not cry, for that was not her way when she was sad, but only when she was offended. At this time she was more sad than offended. And she hoped up to the very last that the cloud

would lift from her sky before it was too late. She was not yet offended; but she was a proud girl, and knew that she could never forgive him if he failed her.

And so the time wore on to the day of the wedding, when she was dressed in fine clothes, and wore a gold crown on her head. She sat still and flushed with clenched hands, on the daïs with her maids; her kinsfolk and acquaintances sat at the tables; but none came from Melstead.

They sat there, saying at first little, and then nothing for an hour or more. Presently Narve, who was always hopping to the door and back, cried out, "I see a man riding this way."

No one spoke. Stangerd's heart was a stone.

He said again, "I know him. It is Thorgils, Cormac's brother. And he comes alone."

Thorgils came into the hall and saluted the company. Thorkel bade him welcome.



Then he said, "We looked to see more of you from Melstead, but you come alone. What are we to make of it?"

Thorgils was very much troubled. "I can only tell you what I know myself. The summons was given to Cormac on the day it was delivered to me. I bade him to the marriage, and he said he would remember it and do what was right. After that he went away, and I have not seen him since. What's more, I can't tell where he is. He may be on the sea for all I know."

There was silence for some time. Then Stangerd went away, with her maids following her. She could not now hide her tears, and they came freely, and burning hot.

When she was gone, Thorkel said, "This is a great affront put upon me by your brother, and I am not to pass over it. He sought the girl, and I agreed to it, as you know, though not willingly, for I never fancied the match. Then he began to behave

strangely, and it has gone on from bad to worse. You tell me you have nothing more to say—and now I tell you that I also have come to an end of speaking.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Toothgnasher. “It is not a case for talk; but Cormac and I shall have other things to do than talk to each other.”

Thorgils said, “That will be as it must be. It is likely that there will be more to come. I can only say that we are concerned for Cormac. He is not himself in this. His life has been crossed. There is a spell upon him. But you have nothing to do with that, and I can’t ask you even to believe it. But do not think that Cormac is pleasing himself in this affair. He is of all men the most unhappy. But Fate rules us all.”

They stared or gloomed at him according as their natures moved them. It was plain there was nothing more to be said to Thorgils, who presently saluted the company and took

himself off. Toothgnasher went into the Bower to see Stangerd.

She had stopped her tears, but her eyes were very red; and she was tired, without heart to speak much about it. When, however, Toothgnasher began to talk about the affront, she broke out afresh, "Oh, he is cruel, he is cruel to use me so!"

"He is tired of you, sweetheart," her brother said; but she would not have it so.

"No, no, no! That is not so. He loves me—he loves me too much. But he is proud, and he makes me feel his pride. I know very well how it is. He is the most wretched of men just now. He wants me sorely, but will not come. He knows that I could soothe him—and so I could—but he will not allow it."

"By Heaven and Earth," said Toothgnasher, "I have the means to humble that pride of his."

She put hands upon him. "Brother," she said, "you shall not touch him—or if you

do you will have seen the last of me. It is the way of men to think that they can assuage every grief by slashing at each other. They do nothing but comfort to themselves."

"It is the business of kinsfolk to avenge each other, however you take it," said Toothgnasher.

"And what comfort is it to me if you slay the man I love or if he slay you?" she asked him, and then she asked herself, "Is there any fool in the world the equal of a man?"

* * * * *

As for Cormac, he did not appear at Melstead for two days more. Then he came in haggard and unwashen, and would do nothing but sit and gaze about him, taking quick and short breath. Nobody knew where he had been. He was splashed all up his legs with brown—so he had been in the peat hags, they judged. He said nothing about Stangerd, but sat about the

house for two or three days without speaking at all. After that he seemed to have gathered strength, for he collected himself and did some work in the meadows. He seemed to have forgotten Stangerd altogether,—but he had not, as it turned out.

Now as to this curious business there is plenty to say, and every man will put his own interpretation upon it, and every woman also. There must be few women who will not have experience within them to bring to the reading. A poet (not Cormac) has reasoned it out, but we need not bring in any more poets to the argument—at present. On the showing of this instructed man the day of misfortune was the day when Cormac kissed Stangerd first. There may be much truth in this.

CHAPTER XI

BERSE COMES IN

WHETHER or no Cormac had got the better of his love-affair—and nobody knew but himself—it had made a great to-do at Tongue. But the people there did not see how to set about avenging the slight put upon them, since Stangerd would not hear of fighting, or have Cormac challenged for atonement. It was judged finally, after much talk, that they must get her married, lest the countryside should think that she had lost her only chance—which was nonsense, seeing what a splendid girl she was, and how much counted.

So they brought up the name of this man and that man, but could not decide upon

any one man, until Narve, always ready with the tongue, lit upon Berse of Sowerby. "Now there's a man," he said, "of all men in the world the most proper. A powerful man, a very pleasant, affable, middle-aged man, a man of wealth, and a man of his hands. Bring him into your quarrel, and the thing is done. Your young fire-eater will have little to say to *him*, you may be sure."

That was true. The man was a notable champion. They called him Battle-Berse, Holmgang Berse, and Wager-of-Battle Berse—which all mean the same thing; for the Holmgang is to go to the holm for the fight's sake; and in the wager-of-battle you back your quarrel with another man's blood. In that way Berse had backed his no less than thirty times, and had never lost it. Besides that, he had I don't know how many homicides to his account. It has been said before that he had had about enough of it, and was for peace and plenty in these

days. He was a widower, survivor of a fine woman called Finna the Fair; he was rich, and he was getting fat—not unwieldy, you understand, but comfortably fat. But still, not a doubt about it, he would give a good account of himself upon the field when he was called there.

He was the man, let me remind the reader, who had given harbourage to Thorveig the spae-wife after the killing of her sons. He gave her the ferry-house at Bersestead, where you cross over to go into Sowerby.

Well, they talked him over at Tongue, with other men, and none was found so suitable; so presently, without a word to Stangerd, Toothgnasher, Narve and one or two others went over to his country and found him at home. As well as himself there were his sister Hilda in the house, a personable, active woman, a pretty girl, very fond of Berse, called Stanvor Slimlegs, and his young son Osmund—a boy of ten

years old or so. He was very glad to see them, and made them a good entertainment.

They talked in the evenings of this, that, and the other. To get Berse upon his fighting days was to get him at his best; and it appeared that he was still a roaring boy for all his grizzled beard and dewlap. There was the girl Stanvor, for example, as pretty a girl as ever you saw, with legs which certainly deserved to be famous—as they were. Now that girl was daughter to a man called Ord who lived, not at Tongue on Midfirth, but at Tongue in Bitra. He was a fisherman with many men in his employ, and in a quarrel which arose over the merits of men in those parts, this Ord maintained that Berse of Sowerby, Battle-Berse, was the bigger man as against one Thorarin of Gutdale. The story came to Thorarin's ears—an ill-conditioned, strong man—who one fine day came down to Tongue in Bitra when no men were about, and picked up Stanvor out of the garth

and carried her off with him. Ord in his trouble went to Battle-Berse, saying, "This blow was struck at me because I spoke well of you. I look to you now, Berse, to wipe out my shame." Berse said that he wanted no man's good word, but would do what he could. He armed himself with sword and three spears, and rode down the valley and over the ridge and down again into Gutdale. He got there late, when the men were come in from the fields and the women setting the tables. He saw Stanvor at the back door and beckoned to her. She ran up and told him her troubles. Berse got off his horse, and took her by the hand. "Hold the horse," he said, "and these spears, and wait for me here." "Oh, where are you for?" she said, and he told her. It was a pity to come so far for such a little thing as she was—and "I'm going to see who's at home." She said, "The men are all in there at the fires." "I know that," says Berse, and goes up and bangs at the

door with his fist. A man came out. "Go and tell Thorarin that Berse wants to see him," he was told. Presently out comes Thorarin with a bill in his hand and makes a slash at Berse with it. Berse had his famous sword Whiting ready for him, and gave him a cut through the neck into the shoulder, which was his death-blow. Then he went back to his horse, mounted, pulled up Stanvor, put her before him, and galloped down the road to a wood. Deep in the wood he left Stanvor with the horse, but he himself went back to the skirts of it to wait for the hue-and-cry. Thorarin had three sons, who came out after Berse, expecting to trap him further on as he entered the pass into the hills. It proved otherwise, for it was Berse who trapped the trappers. He had three spears to Thorarin's three sons, and he threw each of them, and with each brought his man down. The rest of the outcry ran back to the house. Berse lay the three bodies out side by side, and his

cloak across them to show who had done the business, and then went back to the horse and the girl. He took Stanvor home with him to his walled house in the hills; and she would not leave him, and never did. That was the kind of man Battle-Berse was; and always very good-tempered over it, a most agreeable man, as Narve had said.

He told this tale now to his guests, sitting in his elbow-chair with his arm round Stanvor herself, she leaning against the elbow with her head on one side, and eyes cast down. When it came to the point where Berse said that she would not leave him and never did, she looked at him gravely, with a little half-smile, very pretty to see. Berse gave her a squeeze and said: "Hey, sweetheart, is that true?"

Stanvor nodded her head, still smiling, and said, "I shan't leave you till you tell me to go."

You couldn't help liking the man.

Many such stories Berse had to tell, but it was not for such things they had come out. The talk flew about from men's courage to women's looks; and presently Narve spoke of Stangerd as the fairest of women, and Berse did not deny it.

"There's a pretty girl here," he said, "and a dainty girl, very fond of me; but I know that Stangerd's beauty is like a corn-field in bearing to a poor man's patch of rye-grass compared to little Stanvor's."

"You heard, most likely," Narve said, "of the way she was treated by Cormac Ogmundsson of Melstead? A great shame."

Berse twinkled and set his thumbs twirling like the sails of a mill. "I heard something of it," he said; "and a fine young man, too, by all accounts."

"Too fine," says Narve; and then Toothgnasher said, "Not fine enough."

Berse nodded very comfortably. "These young men go about on the tips of their toes, asking you to stand out of their way

lest by chance they should walk into you. Not but what the match was a good one. I've been told something of Cormac's handiness with weapons."

Narve snapped his fingers. "What are his hands or his weapons to you, Berse?"

Berse smiled. "Well, to me, maybe, they are less than to yourself, my friend."

"And the match is clean off, mind you," Narve went on. "They say, indeed, that he's out of the country, and like enough gone Viking like his father before him."

Berse said no more at the time, but he turned it over. He knew Thorkel was rich, he knew Stangerd was very handsome. He liked good-looking girls, and he liked riches. When Toothgnasher was getting ready to go home, Berse said he thought he would go down with him. And so he did.

Before he started Stanvor came to him. "Where are you going, master?" she asked him.

He twinkled all over his face, and looking

quizzically at her, pinched her cheek. "I am going down to the frith," he said, "to see a fine girl, and like enough that is what I shall do with her when I get on terms."

She stood flushed and serious before him. "It is like enough, indeed," she said, "and you may do what you will with her for me. But I know that she will not love you as I do."

Berse put his heavy hand on her shoulder. "I think that's true. But what if I bring her back to Sowerby? What will you say then, pretty one? By all accounts she's big enough to eat you up and want more."

She bore his glance. "There will still be room here for me," she said. "I shall do no harm to anybody."

"No, indeed," said Berse. "But you'll bring happiness wherever you are." With that he kissed her.

She saw him away, and stood in the rain looking after him until he was swallowed up in it. Then she went back into the house

and was busy. She was a slightly-made, graceful girl, with a pale, round face, and large, blue-grey eyes. She had brown hair which rippled like running water and curled at the ends. She looked delicate, but was extremely strong. She never had much to say to anyone but Berse; but with him she would talk freely.

CHAPTER XII

STANGERD'S WEDDING

BERSE, with all his experience to back him, admired Stangerd very much. She was a big girl, with a strong throat and deep chest; she had not much to say, but was not at all shy. These qualities pleased him; but he thought her golden hair and hot colouring splendid, and would certainly marry her if he could come to terms with her father. When she came to serve him with mead in the hall, he took her hand and looked up at her.

"I wonder that a girl like you should remain at home, Stangerd," he said.

She blushed. "That may not be my fault, sir."

"No, no," said Berse, "but it will be a strange fault in the fine young men I see hereabouts if they leave you alone. I shall look to see you in the golden wreath before many days."

"That is as my father pleases, sir," said she.

That was about all he said to her, but he kept his eyes upon her most of the evening, and when she had gone to bed he talked to Thorkel about her, and asked what he would give with her.

Thorkel, who had small eyes, shifted them about Berse without meeting his, and said that he didn't rightly know, but he supposed that a girl like his was worth a goodish deal in herself. He had been thinking it over, and had no doubt Berse would have done the same. He would like to know what Berse thought about it.

Berse said that there had been some talk about her lately in respect of Cormac

Ogmundsson. "And no man cares for that," he said. www.libtool.com.cn

Thorkel said there was nothing in it, and Berse said, "Perhaps not." But he heard that Cormac was a bold man with his hands. Then he said: "I will tell you this, Thorkel, that I will take your quarrel upon me, and quit you of any mischiefs with Cormac and his friends. But you must deal fairly in the matter of dowry," he said.

So they haggled over it till far into the night, and came to terms, one of which was that the wedding should be done quickly, and another that Stangerd was not to be told anything about it until just before. Berse boggled at that. "You cut me out of my respectable pleasures," he said. "It is very pleasant to court a girl. It is very pleasant to see her deal with a matter so momentous to her. Can anything in her life touch her so nearly?"

But Thorkel knew better than to listen to him. "You may be sure that my counsel

is wise," he said. "Stangerd is a good girl if ever there was one, but her heart was very much set upon Cormac, who lives just over the hill. Who can say what she might not contrive? Do you wish for bloodshedding upon your marriage-day?"

"Well," said Berse, "I am not sure—but have it as you will."

Next day he went home, but not before he had talked with Stangerd. "We shall meet again, Stangerd," he said to her. "I hope that you and I may be good friends."

"It takes two to make a friendship," said Stangerd.

Berse said, "You are right. But one may begin, and the other catch the complaint. Now I am a man very prone to friendships. How is it with you?"

She thought that she was slow to make friends—and slow to lose them.

Berse said that he was pleased to hear that, and would have given her a kiss; but

she wouldn't allow that, and told him that she didn't like kissing. He took the rebuff with good humour, and soon afterwards rode away.

Whatever Stangerd may have thought about Berse and his behaviour, nothing was said to her, and she did nothing towards seeing Cormac. But it is certain that he was seldom out of her head. She was still deeply offended, and would have shown him that she was, very plainly, if he had come to see her. But at the bottom of her heart she had a warm conviction of his love, and of her own. Her nature was slow to move, but she had spoken the truth when she told Berse that she was steadfast.

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Berse made his preparations quickly, and was ready to go back to Tongue in eight days. He set out with a party of some fifteen men—good men all, and well armed. Thord Arndisson of Mull was one of them, and Wige was another. Wige was a man

who had dealings with unseen powers, and was said to be mighty in the dark. Some people deemed that he was a werwolf. Berse would not have gone without him on any account; and before he went he told him that Cormac might give trouble. Wige thought that he could cope with Cormac.

"Why, yes," said Berse, "and so can I; but Thorkel, look you, is a rare coward, and although I have sworn to take the venture on myself, yet he can't rest in his bed for thinking of what they may do at Melstead. Now I want to keep this quiet until it's all over, and she is mine. Then Cormac may do what he will, for then he will work in Sowerby, and not there."

Wige said, "Enough, I'll see to it."

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They got to Tongue towards evening, and then Stangerd was told what was about to befall her. Berse told her himself.

She showed flame-red, and gave him a stare for answer. Her eyes were like the flower of flax.

"Was this in your mind a week ago," she said, "when you spoke to me of your friendship?"

"Yes, it was," said Berse.

"You use a strange way," said she, "to win my friendship. I will tell you this, that it is not to be captured by a trick, as you take a hare, nor by a spear. Use that with a salmon, but not with a girl."

Berse looked rather foolish. He had not thought the thing out properly. "Well," he said, "you shan't repent it. I'll use you well. You will be mistress of a good house—and you will have no bad looks from me."

Stangerd turned away her face, not choosing that he should see her tears. She was taking this badly, but her mind was full of shifts and schemes how she could let Cormac know what was being done with her. Berse had hold of her hand by this time, and was trying to coax her.

"Look now, Stangerd," he said, "it is

not very pleasant for you here these days. The neighbourhood will talk about a girl that has been jilted on her wedding-day, and your father don't like that, nor your brother either. It is putting a slight upon the house, don't you see? Now, I'm a man well known in my own country for a ready hand, and there won't be things said about me which you or I won't care to hear. At least, they won't be said twice. Do your best to make a friend of me, and remember that a girl has to let her father be the judge of what's to be done with her. I am older than you are—that's certain—but see what experience I've had. Now my first wife was a woman called Finna, of great family and riches; and she was a beauty, too. They called her Finna the Fair. I don't say that she was your match in that respect—but she was very well indeed, I can assure you. Now that woman got to be very fond of me before she died. She used to say there was no one like me for wheedling.

Now you give me a fair field, and you shall see. I know what can be said for that Cormac of yours—a fine, bold way with him, I don't doubt, and when the mood was on him I can understand that no girl could resist him. But what about his black moods, my dear? How did you find him then? Scowling, glooming; not a word to say for himself. That don't make for a happy homestead—no, no! Now there's this to say for old Battle-Berse, that in peace or war no man has ever seen him out of temper. Still less any woman. Always ready with his crooked smile and lifted eyebrow—full of his quips and crankums—always ready to kiss and cuddle; with a knee would seat half a dozen of you at once—and all yours, Stangerd, when you want it. Try me, my dear,—and if you want Cormac after a year in Sowerby, why, you shall have him, for me. That's a queer way of wooing a wife, but it's Berse's way, and not a bad one. Now, what do you say?"

He was an insinuating man. His arm was round her waist by now, and before she lifted her head up his good-natured face was close to hers; and when she did look at him, he kissed her.

It was too late to be angry; but of course she didn't like it. "If it must be," she said, "it must be; but spare me your kisses."

"No, no," he said. "They are part of the bargain."

"They are not, then," said she, "until the bargain's done"—and she went away.

The hall was very full that night, and she had to serve them all; but she was desperate to find a way of reaching Cormac. Presently there is a call for more drink, and she sends Narve out to fill the pitchers, and goes out to meet him half-way.

She has a moment with him alone. She takes him by both shoulders and stares at him. He puts down his pitchers and gapes into her face.

"Oh, Narve, Narve, help me if you can," she says. www.libtool.com.cn

"That I will," he says.

She looks about her fearfully. "Tell Cormac—let him know to-night; to-morrow will be too late," she says. He sees that she is shaking all over, and staring about as if she didn't know what she was doing.

"I'll go to him," says Narve. "I'll go to him to-night—after they are abed."

She is swaying about. "Ah," she says, "catch me—I'm going to fall down!"

She falls into his arms. He picks her up and takes her out of doors, and into the Bower by the women's door. Then he goes back and picks up his pitchers.

In the hall he tells a maid to go and look after her.

* * * * *

It was late before they were all got to bed. Some of them were very drunk. Toothgnasher had to be carried. Berse had all his wits about him, and Wige the

wolf-man had more than ever he had in the day. Narve gave them an hour to get sound asleep and then slipped down the hall and unfastened the door without noise.

It was broad moonlight, and a river of black shade ran before every wall; but he was well over them all, and had forded the river before he knew he was being followed. He only knew it, indeed, by something which is beside sense; for when he looked back he couldn't see a sign of a man. But he ran like a hare, did Narve, and was up the shoulder of the hill and speeding down the path through a little pine wood, when all of a sudden he felt a hand on his shoulder, and his heart jumped burning into his throat.

His knees failed, and down he sank upon them. By his side, right over him as he found, was Wige, all silver-grey in the moonlight.

"Oh! Mercy! What do you want with me?" he said.

Wige said nothing, but stood still above him with hollow, sightless eye-sockets. He was a very tall, thin man.

Narve's teeth were clattering together: it was a cold night. Suddenly Wige stretched out a long arm, pointing the way back to Tongue. Narve got upon his feet, and, watching the arm, began to edge along the way he was intended to go. He walked sideways that he might keep an eye upon the apparition; through the wood and up the wood he went, and got into the open. In the broad moonlight Wige looked shining like metal. Narve took to his heels and ran home as fast as he had come out, and Wige fled behind him with long, noiseless strides.

In the morning it was Narve's business to get out and see to the cattle in the byre. He was to drive them afield, and so he did. There was not a soul in sight, but a light mist covered the ground so that you could not see very far. He thought the chance a

good one to steal over the hills to Melstead, and took it. He made his way through brushwood and rocks, and was half-way up the fell when out of the mist there loomed before him a shape, tall and shadowy. The terrors of the night came back to him, but something else also; for Wige fell upon him with a ragged staff, and beat him about the shoulders and back. Again nothing was said, and again nothing was done towards the help of Stangerd. Narve saw her when he got home again, at the door of the Bower, with her hair all over her shoulders. It had been washed for the wedding, and she was drying it in the sun. He caught her eyes, and shook his head sadly. She turned away her face.

* * * *

But by noon she had recovered her composure, and, looking extremely handsome, she went through the ceremonies which married her to Battle-Berse. She made no difficulties and gave no trouble, but when

it came to handfasting, Thorkel her father saw the ring on her finger which Cormac had put there, and told her to take it off. That she refused. "Never," she said. "That stays where it is." Toothgnasher grew rather rough. "We'll soon see about that!" he said; but Berse stopped him. "Leave my wife alone," he said. "The ring suits her very well—and she shall have plenty more for the other fingers when she wants them."

She was wedded by the afternoon, and the feast began and lasted all night, as the custom is. On the morning after the Sowerby people set off home. They rode by the shore, and they rode quietly, so that few should know what was going on. There was to be a boat ready for them on Ramfirth, by the landing of Thorveig the spae-wife. They would reach it by noon.

Directly they were well on their road, Narve started off to run to Melstead.

CHAPTER XIII

CHASE

IN those days Cormac went about the work of the place; but he was a changed man. He was fallen very silent, and grown thin and grim-looking. You never heard his voice singing about the acres or up the hill-side. He did not care to swim or to fish. He never spoke about Stangerd, but neither Thorgils nor his mother supposed that she was out of his mind. And she never was, not for a few moments together; but yet he did not go near her, or even over the hills which would lead him into the dale where Tongue was. From the top of the ridge you could see Tongue lying snug in sycamore-trees with

its fields orderly about it; but Cormac would never go there now. He could not have told you why that was; but he felt that he could not.

Sometimes he reasoned with himself about it—especially when he felt a great hunger for the sight of her, when his eyes ached for her. Then he thought—“No, I cannot go, for I might see her. Then it might begin all over again, and end as vainly—and I cannot go on like that.” He told himself it was certainly true that Stangerd was too beautiful for a man to marry; for what could any man do or enjoy which would be worthy of so high a possession? Lie in her bosom, mingle with her in love—but what were such things to compare with the thought of her, which was like the wildest music, to the knowledge of her, which made the heart beat and the eyes grow dim? The things which a man could do with the woman he loved were good enough to do with common women—the pleasure of love,

the getting of children: that was the end of common desire, and filled it. But with Stangerd, who made you faint at the wonder of her—with Stangerd, whose touch made you tremble—such things could not be, for they would tarnish the splendour of her, and serve you little. It is better to think of kissing Stangerd than to kiss her; it is better to dream of her bosom than to lie in it; for kisses cloy, but the mind of a man endures. With such false reasoning he had to be content, for he could not bring himself to go to her. Not once did it enter his head that he was doing her a wrong. It never occurred to him that she had given him her heart before she gave him her hand; that she was in great want of him as well as wounded in her self-esteem. He could not think of such things because he could never have believed that she loved him. He put her above mankind or womankind. He said, She is a Spirit who may be loved, but cannot love. Had he loved her less,

he would have had more joy of her, and she of him. That's the truth of it.

* * * * *

Now that morning he was at work below the house, and Thorgils with him, and some others. They were building a wall of turves. Thorgils was piling the turves, and Cormac was beating them in with a mallet. They both looked up when they heard steps on the fell, and watched the man coming over the stepping-stones of the river. Then Cormac turned to his work, and worked hard.

Thorgils said, "I think it is Narve from Tongue." Cormac said nothing to that. All except himself were watching the man. Thorgils said again, "He has weapons, and carries a shield. What can he be about?"

Toste said, "He looks back. His weapons are for somebody behind him. What is the matter with him?"

Thorgils said, "He is coming here. We shall know pretty soon."

Cormac took no notice, but went on working at his wall.

Then Narve came up, stepping warily, with his eyes every way at once, as if every wall-end or tussock of rushes might hold an ambush.

"How now, Narve?" Toste called out to him. "What do you fear, man? And whom are you after, with your war-gear?"

Narve puffed out his cheeks, staring about him. "Pheugh!" he said. "There's need of war-gear in these days—and in the nights it's worse still. When silver-grey men rise up suddenly in thickets, and chase you on silent feet——"

"What news, Narve?" said Thorgils, who wanted to know it. "What news do you bring from Tongue?"

"I'm late with my news," said Narve; "but I came as soon as I could. We were busy last night."

"Were you so?" Thorgils asked him. "Had you guests with you?"

"Guests," said Narve. "Ah, we had guests. One was a werwolf."

Cormac at this point straightened himself. "Who were your guests?" he asked.

Narve said: "There was Battle-Berse from Sowerby, and seventeen with him—of whom one was just what I told your brother."

But Cormac held him with his eye, and would not leave him. "And what was Battle-Berse doing at Tongue?"

"He was sitting at his wedding," said Narve.

Everybody was now very still.

"And who was the bride?" Cormac asked that in a quiet way.

"The bride was Stangerd, Thorkel's daughter," Narve said.

Silence was upon all, and Cormac looked slowly about him, from face to face. He was grey and pinched, but as he looked about, and saw in every man's face what could not be hid, rage gathered in him.

He rolled his eyes about, and suddenly whirled his mallet round his head and struck with all his might at Narve. Narve gave a loud cry, and put up his shield. That may have saved his life, but he fell back with a clatter, and lay still, just as if he was dead.

Thorgils said: "That was a shame, brother. The marriage was not of his making."

"Bah!" said Cormac. "He croaks like a raven. Let him lie!"

But Thorgils fetched water from a spring and brought the man round. Narve sat up and held his head.

"That was too bad," he said. "I did my best to come here yesterday—and this is how you serve me."

Thorgils asked him then, "Was this marriage done to Stangerd against her will?"

Narve said, "It was then. She was in a sad way about it, fluttering and holding

her heart. She got me aside and begged me to run to fetch Cormac; and so I set out to do, in the middle of the night; but Wige the wolf-man rose up silvery in the wood and scared me back. And yet again before sunrise I started to come over the hill—and there in the mist was Wige, a terrible man.”

Thorgils looked at Cormac, who was leaning on his wall but listening.

Narve went on complaining: “It is very well for Cormac to play the lord of lands, and choose his time to have women come to him. A fine girl like that! And so to treat a man that runs, at peril of his life, to tell him bad news! He will find old Berse of another mettle, I’m thinking, and then maybe he’ll look over his shoulder for help and backing, and wish he had served me differently.”

Thorgils wanted to know about the marriage-bargain, and Narve told him what he knew. The risk was all to be Berse’s.

He had promised to keep harmless Stangerd's kindred.

* * * * *

When Narve had taken himself off, Cormac threw down his mallet, and turned to go down to the house. Thorgils watched him, let him go, and presently followed him, running, caught him up and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Whither now?" he said.

Cormac showed him the profile of a stern face. "I am going after her," he said.

Thorgils was very sorry for him. "Ah, but that will do you no good," he said. "It's too late."

"No, no," said Cormac, "it's not too late—for one thing or another."

Thorgils knew what he meant. "Well," he said, "I am sure Berse will be home before you can fetch at him—but I shall go with you."

"I shall wait for nobody," Cormac said, and went into the house. Thorgils turned

back to summon all hands, and before he had got them together, he saw Cormac spur out of the yard on his black horse. He threw up his head and flacked his hands against his thighs in despair; but he followed him with something like a dozen men, and by hard riding managed to keep him in sight.

* * * * *

Cormac came down to the ferry where Thorveig's house was. There was a fine wind blowing, but all the boats were beached. Not one was in the water, and nobody about the place. Well out in the firth he saw a crowded boat—men and horses packed together. The gleam of white told him all. Stangerd was there in a white dress—she seldom wore anything else. They were too far off for him to make her out; but he saw that she sat in the fore-part of the boat, and thought that she must see him. He held up his hand that held the axe. His heart beat high. He fancied that she lifted

hers. He was no longer under the curse. All his thoughts of her were purely good. He should see her soon. When he turned about he saw Thorveig standing in the door of her house, the tall, thin-haired woman with her faded, all-seeing, unseeing eyes.

"What do you want here, Cormac?" she said. "I have no more sons for you to slay."

"I want a boat to cross the water," he said. "You shall be well paid for it."

"Ah, you'll find no boats here," she said. "They are all high and dry, as you see. They wait for the shipwright. They are all unseaworthy."

Cormac was looking at the boats. One after another he entered and eyed over. There was a hole in every one of them.

"You hag!" he said. "This is your doing. You have been at your tricks."

She frowned at him, but lifted her head high and seemed to look down at him with scorn.

“And what is it to you what I please to do with my own? Did you not so with yours when you bade me off your land? And why may you be wanting a boat on this water, which is none of yours?” And then she came closer to him and pried into his face. “And why should I help you at all, Cormac?” she asked him.

But Cormac had forgotten her and her boats and was looking over the blue and windy water. The boat was more than half-way across. Again he flung up his hand with the axe; and when again he saw the white sleeve lift he pressed his knees into his horse as if he would ride into the water and swim after Stangerd. But just then Thorgils and his company rode up.

Thorgils asked the spae-wife the same question—Could they have a boat?

“Boats! Boats!” she cried. “Look at the boats. There’s not one sound one amongst them all.”

"No, you old vixen!" Cormac said. "That's because you have stove them in."

He picked out one of them, nevertheless. "I'll try this," he said to Thorgils. "We can caulk her with mud and rushes."

Thorgils shook his head. "Better not—she'll sink you. It will be quicker in the end to ride round by the head of the firth."

"Go as you will," said Cormac. "I shall take this boat."

"You shall pay for her—you shall pay!" cried the spae-wife.

Cormac was on his feet, tugging at the boat.

"Give her the hire, and let me be out," he said.

Thorgils bargained with her for half a mark, and Cormac led his horse into the boat, when they had caulked her with rope and pitch. Toste went with him to help him row. They had got about a bowshot out when the old tub began to fill. Almost before those on shore understood as much,

the water was over the gunwale, and men and horses were in the water.

"Ah, you old b——h!" Thorgils cried to the woman. "You would drown my brother, would you?"

She had her lips locked together, and cold fire in her eyes. She nodded her head sharply three or four times. She was a great hater.

But the men and the horses came ashore; and Cormac owned that there was nothing for it but to go round the firth-head. That put a good fifteen miles on to the journey, and would make him too late. He had lost her!

He said nothing about it, and was surprised himself to find that he had no wish to kill anybody. Before he could reach Sowerby Stangerd would be lost to him. He found that he loved her the more for the thought of that. He had not—at least, not at this moment of first certainty—the jealous rage of the lover who knows that his mistress is

possessed by another man. The thought of her beauty mounted his head like wine.

The whole troop of them rode round the head of Ramfirth. The first house they came to was Mull, where a man called Wale lived. He was a friend of Berse's, and had been at the wedding.

This Wale was standing at the gate of his court, waiting for them. Greetings passed.

Cormac said, "Shall we find Berse up at his house, think you? We are come to deal with him?"

Wale answered him: "You will find him there, sure enough. It is two hours' riding. And he has been home this two hours or more. There's a great company there with him. I think you will do little good."

Thorgils looked at Cormac, being himself sure they were come on a fool's errand. But Cormac was thinking of other things. So then Thorgils said, "Brother, what say you? To my mind it is foolishness, going

on. We can do nothing against them. They have the law, they have the lady, and they will be more than we."

Cormac then gave him a glance: it was no more than a glance. "Do as you will," he said. "I shall go on, for I must see Stangerd."

"You will never see her," said Thorgils.

Cormac made no reply, but still looked up the shadowed valley whither they had taken her.

Presently he seemed to come to himself, and gathered up the reins, and moved up the path at a walk. Thorgils looked about at the faces of his friends. "What are we to do with him?" he said to Toste. "We had better follow. No one knows what may befall him."

Toste tossed his head up. "A bad business to my thinking—but you are right."

So they went up the road after Cormac, and all together into the dark valley among the rocks, where Berse had his homestead

well fortified against the weather and his enemies. As they rounded the tongue of land which made a natural outpost to the place, they saw that they were expected. Berse stood there in war-gear, surrounded by his friends. There were twenty to thirty of them.

The party from Melstead drew rein, and each side looked at the other for a while. Then Cormac left his company and cantered forward alone. Seeing that, Berse, who was on foot, came out to meet him, but not a long way.

CHAPTER XIV

PARLEY

CORMAC was hot and fierce. "Berse," he said, "you have behaved falsely to me, who never did you any harm."

"Not a bit of it," said Berse.

"But I say that you have. Stangerd was my plighted wife, and all the country knew it. This wedding was done without my knowledge and against her will—and you have betrayed us."

Berse looked away from him into the sky. There was a queer light in his eyes, as if he saw strange birds flying, and was more amused than curious about them.

"All this," he said, "is very wild talk; but I understand you. You had better

tell me what it is you want—seeing the deed is done.”

Cormac mastered himself, and spoke as coolly as he could, but in a carrying voice. “I am come to have Stangerd back again, and ransom of the affront.”

Berse looked now at his friend Thord Arndisson, who was by him. He nodded his head two or three times, and had the same gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“Fine talk,” he said, “brave talk, but——” He gave up the attempt. Whatever was the use of talking like this?

Thord Arndisson spoke.

“Cormac,” said he, “when you are cooler you will see that you are asking outlandish things. Now let us be reasonable. Berse here acted as his right was, knowing nothing of you or your affairs. What he was told, that he understood; and it was that a day was fixed for the marriage, and that you did not come, but instead of you, your brother Thorgils came with the news

that he could not find you; and 'Maybe he is abroad,' he said. Now I offer you terms on behalf of Berse; but certainly Berse keeps the woman."

Berse said: "Cormac, there is no question of Stangerd going back with you. That I shall never agree to, nor will she, as you will find if you ask her. Instead of her, I will give you my sister Hilda for a wife. She is here in the house, and you can go and look at her. But if you get her, you will be very well married, in my opinion. I can't say fairer for you than that."

Cormac stood frowning and biting his cheek. He was looking at the house for any sign of Stangerd, but the door was shut, and there was nothing to see.

Thorgils thought very well of Berse's offer. "It is very fair," he said, and then to Cormac: "Let us talk about this, Cormac."

Just then a woman called out from the throng behind the two brothers: "Do no

such folly, Thorgils." And then she stepped out from the company. She was a woman called Thordis, who lived at Spaewife's Fell.

"Out on it," she said sharply. "Don't you be trickt by them. That woman is a fool; and you expect a fine man like Cormac to take to her? Madness, Cormac!"

Thord Arndisson was much put out. "Get back with you, witch-wife." He turned to Cormac, saying: "I tell you that Hilda will turn out a wonder of the world."

Cormac said, "She may burn the world out for aught I care. She will never burn me."

Thorgils would have urged him again; but now Cormac could hear no voice but his own. He confronted Berse.

"Berse," he said, "there is but one thing to do. I challenge you to wager-of-battle in fifteen days at the Leet-holm."

At this place Berse had fought many and many a wager out.

"I know the way to Leet-holm very well,"

he said; "better than you do, I expect. I will be there, don't doubt me; but I take leave to tell you that there is less joy for you at Leet-holm than there may be here in Sowerby if you choose for it."

"But I don't choose," said Cormac, and made to go by him towards the house. Thord Arndisson went after him.

"Where are you for?" he called out. Cormac stopped, and turned full round to face him and Berse.

"I am going into Berse's house, to see Stangerd. Are you for stopping me?"

Thord said to Berse: "Do you hear that?"

"I do," said Berse.

"Is he to go in?"

"Why not?" said Berse.

Cormac by this time was half-way to the house. Berse's men made a road for him. He went to the door, shook the latch, and gave a kick with his foot which sent it flying open.

The great hall was set for a feast, and the women were still about the tables. Hilda was there, and Stanvor also; but not Stangerd.

Cormac asked for her. Hilda looked doubtfully about her; but Stanvor was not at all afraid.

"You will find her in the Bower," she said, and went on with her business.

* * * * *

Cormac went into the Bower. Stangerd rose up. She wore her golden wreath, and was very quiet. She said nothing, and they looked at each other for a while.

Then Cormac went to her and put a hand on either shoulder.

"You could not wait for me, my dear, —and now I am too late."

She would not look up. "I should have waited if I could," she said; "but you kept me too long."

He said, "Had I kept you a thousand years, that would not have cooled my love. You told me that you were steadfast."

"So I am," she said.

"You should have come with me when I called you," he said. "I told you long ago how I would have wedded you. You should have come into my arms then and there, and I would have carried you away—but you have chosen differently."

She said: "I have not chosen at all."

"No more reproaches," said Cormac, "between you and me. I shall never give you up. You are my love. But I will do you no wrong."

She was more moved than he was, though she stayed very quiet under his hands. She did not raise her head to look at him, nor did he ask her. For a little time longer they remained standing so together; and then he shook his head suddenly and left her.

Presently Stanvor Slimlegs came into the Bower and moved about Stangerd where she still stood in mid-floor.

Then Stanvor came near her, and said:

"Listen, Stangerd. I love Berse, and shall not leave him unless you force me."

"I shall not force you," said Stangerd.

"He does not care for me in the way of marriage, or he could have married me when he chose. And you care little for him, I fancy. The world is a strange one for women. I would give all I have to be where you will be to-night, and you, I suppose, would give the same for my place."

"No, I would not," said Stangerd. "I would keep what I have if I could."

"You would keep it for Cormac?"

But Stangerd said, "Cormac will never have anything of mine."

They stood near together, these two, looking out of window. Words seemed upon the edges of their lips, which might have been winged if they had gained utterance. Stanvor always looked like that, as if she was full of sayings which she could not frame into speech. She seemed to be worn thin and fine with the burden of what

she wanted to declare. Stangerd was silent also. She was deeply despondent, and had not, perhaps, any desire to unbosom herself. They stood so for quite a long time, looking out at the dusk gathering about the folds of the mountain.

CHAPTER XV

CORMAC MAKES READY

CORMAC made this song, and sang
it to himself as he wandered the
fell:

Berse, you have dared impossibly,
Taking what I have feared to take—
Looking where I have feared to see,
Dipping where none may dip and be
Still man, within the lonely lake.

To have scaled the awful mountain pass,
To have seen unblencht the untrod snows,
Affronting with your front of brass
The heart of the everlasting rose—
You have dared enough and shall give o'er
Your daring. You have dared so much:
Let it suffice. No more, no more.

Yet seeing by that desperate touch
There is come glory on your brow;
And to your name the pride is such
The man who bears it he must die,
I tell you, Berse, the time is now
Before you've time to blur and dull it
With your gross brain and teeming eye
And tongue, when righteous hand shall clutch
Your throat and take you by the gullet
And wrench the life out, and the lie
You make of it—and here's the sign—
The clutching hand writes this: 'tis mine.

He got great comfort out of these lines,
but his brother looked askance at them,
and his mother gave him other counsel.

"My son," she said, "you have to confront a champion in a play which he knows by heart. Have you thought how you shall go to work?"

Cormac said that he had.

"Well," said his brother, "have you considered with what weapon you will meet Berse?"

Cormac said, "I will have a heavy axe, with a long handle."

"And he," said Dalla, "will have Whiting, which is a sharp sword, and a charmed sword. It has a healing-stone in its hilt. It would turn any axe you could get."

Cormac was put out. "I would trust my fingers to reach his windpipe," he said, "and after that let Whiting bite the grass."

"All this is foolishness," his mother replied. "I am the widow of your father, who was a fighting man, and know what I am talking about. Now do you go to see Skeggi of Reykir and ask him for Shavening. That is a sword of renown."

"I know it is," said Cormac.

He thought after a while that he would go.

Skeggi was an elderly man who lived at Reykir, across the Mid-river. Melstead looked upon Reykir. Skeggi was also a heavy, ruminating man who, instead of answering a direct question directly, used to say, "Let us see," or "Let us think about it." That was just what he said when Cormac came for the loan of

Shavening. He was threshing corn in his barn, and, having heard what Cormac wanted, said that they must think it over, and went on with his threshing. Cormac contained himself as well as he could, which was very little indeed; but Skeggi was not to be moved by finger-nail biting or ramping up and down the doorway.

Then, when he had done all he had a mind to do, he hung up his flail, and came to Cormac.

"My son," he said, "it would never do."

"Do you mean," said Cormac, "that you will not lend me your sword?"

"My meaning," said Skeggi, "is like this. You two would not get on together. That is what I mean."

"I don't understand that," Cormac told him.

"Shavening, my sword," said Skeggi, "is what we call a slow sword. It is a deliberate sword, a sword of queer temper. Now you, too, are of a queer temper, I can see; but

the queerness of your temper is not the queerness of Shavening's temper. Why, you would be for slicing and hewing before Shavening had made up his mind to quit the sheath. Tush! no good could come of it." He shook his head, and felt the beard on his chin. He raised his head and stroked up the beard of his neck.

"My question, Skeggi, is, Will you or will you not lend me your sword?"

Skeggi looked at him, suspending his work at his beard.

"That's a question!" he said. "We must think about that."

"Pish!" said Cormac, and went away.

* * * * *

He came home in a red flurry of rage, and it was long before his mother could get a word out of him. Then she said, "You go to work madly, my son. Skeggi will lend you Shavening, but not that gait. You must take a man as a man takes you.

If he is slow-minded, you must keep yourself slow. He will lend you Shavening."

Cormac frowned. "It will be a fine thing for a man who is to meet a champion at the Holm that he owes his weapon to his mother."

Dalla said, "He owes it to his mother that he is able to go there at all."

* * * * *

After a few days she spoke to her unruly son again. "Go and see Skeggi," she said, "and treat him fairly. He will lend you his sword."

So Cormac rides over to Reykir a second time.

Skeggi was ready for him. He brought the sword out from under his bedding; it was wrapped up in a sheepskin. He unfolded the fleece and laid Shavening on his knees. Shavening had a long handle with a short guard. Attached to the handle by two leather thongs was a purse of leather sewn up. "This purse," he said, "goes

about with Shavening everywhere. Now, you must leave that alone."

Cormac, frowning at the sword, nodded his head shortly.

Skeggi went on talking. "Now these are the matters to be known in your conduct of Shavening. First, the sun must not shine upon either hilt or guard: see first of all to that, and keep him in his sheepskin until you want him. Next, you shall not wear him until the morning of the day when you have use for him—not, indeed, until you are to ride out for the place of your battle. And when you get to your battle-place, this is what you shall do. You shall take yourself apart from all men, and draw Shavening slowly from his scabbard until you have him fair in the light. Stretch him out his length, hold him up, and blow upon him. Then watch him. A little snake will come forth from under the guard, with a flat head. He will come out half-way and look at you. Now you must hold

Shavening steady, and in such a way that the snake can go back under the hilt. Do you follow me in every point?"

Cormac was frowning himself black. "I hear you," he said, "and I understand you. But let me tell you that those are tricks-for a wizard."

Skeggi said, "It may be so; but you will either do as I tell you, or be sorry for it." He wrapped Shavening again in his sheepskin and handed him over without another word.

Cormac rode home.

He thanked his mother for her help. "I was uncivil," he said. "Without you I should never have got it."

"So you *have* got it?" she asked.

"Here is the wonder-brand," he said, and took it out of the sheepskin. Dalla felt it up and down with her hands.

Cormac shook it, weighed it in his hand, and turned it about. Then he set his other hand to it and tried to draw it; but it would

not budge. "A plague take it," he said. "It works too stiff for me. It works as stiff as its master."

"Take care," said Dalla; "you are too rough with him."

But Cormac was angry, and the more he tugged the angrier he got.

"A blight on wizardry!" he cried. He put his foot on the scabbard and tugged at the hilt. The purse got in his way: he tore it off. Then he pulled with all his might. Shavening screamed, but would not come out. Cormac flung it on the floor, and went out of the house. Dalla picked it up, mended the purse-strings, and wrapped Shavening again in his fleece.

Cormac took no further heed of it.

CHAPTER XVI

BATTLE

SO the day came round for the battle, and Cormac with his brother and his men rode out to the Holm which is called Leet-holm, a day's and a night's journey for the party; but not so far for Berse and his party.

Berse went off before it was light, and left Stangerd in bed. She would have nothing to say to him about it, but he kept his temper. Young Stanvor Slimlegs was astir to give him a horn of hot drink and to see him ride away. She served him while he was fastening up his fighting-gear; she brought him Whiting and buckled it upon him; then his cloak to go over all. There was no

speech between them till just the end, when Berse put his hand on her shoulder and said: "Good girl!"

Stanvor then said, "Good luck to your fighting!"

Berse pulled a wry face, and jerked back his head on his shoulders.

"That is much more than *she* says."

Stanvor replied, "She does not know her own fortune. But she will know it."

Stangerd, lying in her bed with her hands between her knees, heard them talking. She ground her teeth together and listened. There was no more said. "Now they are kissing," she thought.

But it was not so. Berse left the house without more ado and rode away down the valley, neither speaking to Stanvor any more, nor looking at her.

* * * * *

Leet-holm on Whamfirth is a flat meadow beside the river. The fells stand all round

about, so that you scarcely see where is the road to the sea. It is hard ground at most times of the year, and a very good battle-ground.

Cormac and his men were first to be there; he was in a bad temper, and had done, so far, none of the things he had been told to do. He had girt himself with Shavening outside his clothes, so that the sun had shone upon the hilt from its first rising. And he had taken off and left behind him the purse which Skeggi said was to be left in place. He was, in fact, most perverse.

When the two parties were within hail, Berse rode forward and saluted Cormac's company.

"Let me have a word with you, my friends," he said pleasantly, "and most of all with you, Cormac."

Cormac, scowling, said, "We are not come to have words with you."

"But you shall have them, whether or no," said Berse; "and I have this to say.

You are a young man and I am not; you have fought little and I have fought much. You have challenged me to wager-of-battle, which is a tricky game wherein neither rage, nor spleen, nor youth, nor muscle will help you so much as a cool head and a knowledge of the game. These have I. Now, if you will, the battle shall be changed to a fighting-match. That is, a bout where there are no rules but the rules of nature. Wild cats can play that game, and moor-cocks know it well. Take it as you will: I mean fairly."

Thorgils said, "Nothing could be more honourably spoken," and all his friends agreed among each other that he was right.

Cormac would not accept of it. He shook off Thorgils and moved apart.

"I will abide by the challenge," he said. "I will face you in any way, and match myself with you in everything. If you know the rules, I will learn them."

Berse shrugged his shoulder. "Be it so. I have done my best for you."

* * * * *

Then they prepared the ground according to the laws of wager-of-battle. They stretched an ox-hide on the ground and pegged it out with hazel-wands. Upon this they set the champions facing each other; and then the shield-bearers stood up. In wager-of-battle either man has a shield-bearer, who defends him with three shields in turn. If these are cloven without a scratch given or received, the men fight without shields, save the targets they carry for themselves, until blood falls upon the hide or one man is driven off it.

* * * * *

Now Cormac forgot all the rest of Skeggi's instructions. He did not withdraw himself when he unbuckled Shavening, and instead of unsheathing him slowly he tried to get him out with a quick jerk. Shavening

would not budge. Cormac, red and furious, took him by the point of the scabbard, set his feet upon the guards of the hilt and tore the scabbard off him by main force. Shavening screamed as he came out. The snake did not show himself at all, but instead a dull mist settled down upon the blade, and did not all clear off again, running before the strength of the sun; but some remained in blotches upon him.

Berse said, "I know that sword of old. That's not the way to treat him." His little bright eyes were twinkling, and he twitched his cheek-bones incessantly. He took his stand upon the hide without any fuss, walking to it as if he knew the way very well—as indeed he did—talking as he went to his shield-bearer, and making jokes. Cormac was serious, and had nothing to say. He felt that all eyes were on him, to see where and how he failed in the laws of this battle. But he did not require to be shown where to stand. Thorgils was his

shield-bearer, and the first blow was to Berse. www.libtool.com.cn

Whiting seemed to cut leather and wattle like butter. He sliced through the rim and shore the shield in two halves, but did not touch Cormac, or drive him back. Then Cormac, in his turn, cut at Berse's shield. Shavening would have worked more easily if he had not been so driven. But as it was, the shield was broken rather than cut, and Shavening required some force to be withdrawn. Berse blinked, and shook his head to see that. It was on the tip of his tongue to give advice—but he stopped himself in time.

The three shields to a man, allowed by the laws, were broken, and then the champions faced each other with sword and targe. Berse was now warmed to his work, and the battle-joy shone like points of fire in his eyes. He meant business now, one could see. Cormac was very still, and rather grey in the face. He was the first to attack

and Berse parried him, took a step backwards, which brought him to the edge of the hide, dipped sideways, ran in under cover of his round shield, and made a feint at Cormac's left shoulder. Cormac stopped him there, and Berse swung Whiting round and brought him down like a squall to Cormac's right. Cormac got Shavening up in time, and caught Whiting at the point where the ridge ends and the blade gets thin. Shavening sliced through Whiting and disappointed him. The point spun in the air like a coin and struck Cormac on the sword hand. It cut the knuckle to the bone, and the blood spurted. Men gave a cry, and then it was seen that Shavening had come down upon Berse's target and got a jag in himself. Berse had given back to the edge of the hide, and Cormac was in the act to rush in upon him when Thorgils lifted his arm and prevented him.

"Bloodshed," he said. "The fight is done, brother."

Cormac glared at him, and next at Berse; but now the onlookers were between the champions. The fight was over, Cormac bleeding freely from the hand.

Berse was wiping the sweat from his face. "I'm shorter in the wind than I was," he said to his friends. "If Cormac were not in such a rage, he would have done better. As it is, he has done well."

"He'll not be satisfied with this," a man said.

"He'll have to pay the blood-money," said Berse.

* * * * *

Cormac was not at all satisfied. "Does he call that victory? A scratch from a broken sword-point? Can he do no better? Let him get a sword from his kindred and meet me again. I have one hand left." He was talking wildly.

Presently Berse pushed through the crowd and came to him.

"I claim the ransom," he said. "You did well, Cormac; but I bled you."

"You shall be paid," said Cormac; "but this is not the end."

"It is, for me," Berse said. "Now you have a nasty jag in the hand—no fault of yours, but pure misfortune—and you have far to ride. Now, will you come home with me and get it dressed there? Stangerd shall see to you. I promise you that."

Cormac shook the blood from his hand. "Do you think that I will see my love in your house, and the bed wherein you lie? I would bleed to death before I saw it. Get you gone with your broken sword, and find you another. There is no end to the strife between us. You have stolen my love, and every hour that you spend with her is horrible to me. For every hour of it you shall pay me back."

"You are talking wildly," said Berse. "But I see that you would take anything

amiss. Even if she came to you now you would revile her for the deed. We had better part now; but I wish you well—and more sense.”

So they parted.

CHAPTER XVII

BERSE GOES HOME

AT the door of his house stood Stanvor Slimlegs in a white gown, with the fire of welcome shining in her face. Berse chuckled to himself to see her there, and said to his friend Thord: "That's a good little girl, mighty fond of me."

"So she is, then," says Thord. "Anybody might see that."

Berse at first had no better comment than a grunt. "There's one at home might see it and care no more than one fly cares for another that has his legs in the honey-pot."

"You married her against her will," Thord told him.

"I'll get her good-will yet," Berse said. "I've had everything I wanted out of the world so far, and I'm not going to be denied now." He stopped there; then, just as they were in the court, he said, "She's as cold as a fish. You might as well make love to a dead woman."

"If Stangerd is cold," said Thord, "it is because she is banking her fire. The fire is there."

Stanvor did not move from the doorway, for she was shy, and always wary in what she showed. She was used to Berse's plain way, and expected no more than she got.

"One-and-thirty battles now," she said as Berse came up.

Berse suddenly laughed. "One-and-thirty battles, my pretty one!" and put his arms round her and kissed her mouth. She took that quietly, and freed herself from him without making a fuss. You notice—as Berse noticed—that she took his victory for granted.

He asked her, Where was Stangerd. She told him, In the Bower.

"Does she not know we have come home?"

"I think she does. I am sure she does, because I told her when I saw you coming round the shoulder."

Berse twinkled, looking at her. "You have a far sight, my child."

She made no answer to that, and moved away, because Stangerd had come into the hall, and stood looking at Berse and his company.

She had a blue gown and a green scarf over one shoulder and half her bosom. Her eyes were watchful, and brighter blue than her gown; her colour was high, burning on her cheek-bones. Certainly she was the most lovely woman in Iceland. Berse's courage rose to meet her.

"Well," she said, "have you killed Cormac?" She spoke sullenly, without curiosity or anxiety; but Berse was very gay and laughed at her.

"I have not, my dear. I am too old a hand for such folly as that. Now shall I tell you in Cormac's way what I have done?"

She looked at him steadily. "You shall," she said, "if you can."

Berse did not lose heart. He lifted his sword Whiting as if it had been the backbone of a harp, and struck upon it with his fingers.

"Listen all— The battle flame
Flickered from the cloudy dark,
Breathing slaughter; on he came,
Stood within the withied hide;
There the old war-dog stood stark.
Shavening screamed, but Whiting met him:
Whiting fell, but Shavening bit him—
Took his nose off, flung it wide.
Ill to see and ill to bide
When the shard flew off and hit him—
Red blood flowed—the law must hold.
Yet the young man matcht the old."

Stangerd, whose colour was very hot now, said, "That is bad poetry, if ever

I heard it, but it shows you a generous man." www.libtool.com.cn

Berse laughed. "Sweetheart," he said, "I should like to please you if I could. I tell you he made a good match. A fine fighter. A champion."

She said, "You do please me by such dealing."

He put his arm round her. "You have never said a kinder thing to me. You make me a generous man by treating me so."

Stanvor Slimlegs watched them from a corner of the room.

Stangerd drew away, but not roughly. Her eyes were full of thought.

Afterwards she and Stanvor served the men in the hall, and once, as she stood over Berse to pour into his horn, she put her hand on his shoulder and left it there for a while. Berse said nothing and did nothing except twitch his face and blink his eyes; but he did not stay very long in the hall. That night she was kinder to him than she had

ever been since he had married her; and by and by he told her so.

She sighed and turned away. "You are easily satisfied," she said.

Little Stanvor, lying awake, was full of thought. "He is a wonderful man to have brought her round. Now he will be happy. He can't bear to have glum looks about him. He might have four women here instead of two. His heart is large enough for them all."

In the morning her sharp eyes saw confirmation. Stangerd was very sedate, but her eyes were not haggard; nor was she peevish. Berse was full of his jokes and mischievous tricks. He played with Stanvor and made Stangerd jealous. Then he made friends with Stangerd against her will. She would not look at him, but she listened to him, and in spite of herself laughed at what he whispered in her ear, and let him kiss her. There was no more talk of Cormac; and when Berse brought out Whiting from his

scabbard and showed him to the two girls with his ragged square end where the point had been sliced off by Shavening, Stanvor, looking guardedly askance, saw that Stangerd's eyes were very bright. She said nothing—but it was she herself who turned the grindstone when Berse repointed the blade.

Then she began to do little offices for Berse, which Stanvor had always done before. She used to come to the door to wait for him, and find Stanvor there. After a few days of that, Stanvor gave up going there; but she watched for him out of the window of the hall. She fancied sometimes that Stangerd might really be jealous, but would be too proud to show it. That made her very careful. She told herself that she would be showing her love for Berse a very shabby thing if she stood in the way of what his heart was set upon. He was making progress with Stangerd, it was very
He used to discuss that with

Stanvor whenever he found himself alone with her. He would say, "The proud girl laughed at me this morning. She has a kindness for me, you know, child."

Stanvor would say, "Be sure she has. I have noticed her."

Once Stanvor told him things which she had found out. "Stangerd was very restless because you were so late home," she told him.

"Was she indeed, child?"

"Yes. She couldn't settle to anything. She asked me three times to tell her who would be at the horse-fighting, and afterwards at Thord's house."

Berse twinkled, and rubbed his chin. "She thought there might be women there."

Stanvor did not answer at first. Presently she said, "She asked me if I thought there would be any girls there."

"And what did you say?"

Stanvor opened her eyes wider. "I said there would not be any."

"Good!" said Berse. "I like her question, and I like your answer. You are a girl of gold." He rubbed his hands together. "We are getting on—oh, yes, we are getting on. She's a beauty—isn't she now?"

"I think she's very beautiful," Stanvor said.

"So she is, then," said Berse, then looked closely at Stanvor, and then stopped. She had turned her head away, but showed by no other sign that the talk was painful to her. Berse had very kind looks for the young girl, and served her with them very often.

* * * * *

Cormac made no sign until the Spring, nor was the ransom paid. But when the weather opened and the Spring was come there was talk about the Thing at Thorsness where Berse would go and some of Cormac's

friends would certainly be. Berse made sure of being paid there.

When the time came that Berse was to set out for the Thing, Stangerd wished to go with him; but he would not allow her. "No, no, my beauty," he said. "The Thing is no place for women. It's rough lodging there, and rough work is done. Besides that, you would meet your old flame there, and I shouldn't like that now."

She looked at him steadily. "Is that what you are afraid of?"

"I don't know that I'm afraid of anything," he said; "but you've taken a liking for me lately which I should be sorry to have disturbed."

She did not answer him directly. She was always slow to speak. Nobody but Cormac had ever got a confession out of her. She kept her eyes fixed towards the ground. "I should like to go with you," was all she had to say.

Berse's face flickered. "It can't be so,

my dear. I am sorry about it. But it would make trouble."

"No," she said, "it would not. It would spare trouble."

"I'll take all the trouble that comes to me about you," Berse said. "I told your kindred as much and will be as good as my word. You are worth it."

She looked at him now. "I don't often ask you to do a thing for me."

"My dear," he said, "that is true. I wish you did."

"You won't let me come with you?" She was very insistent. It was plain to Stanvor that she wanted to go, and why she wanted to go. It was plain, also, that Berse misunderstood her. To this last question of hers he shook his head. "That can't be."

She turned away. "Have it as you will," she said, and went away without another word. He thought that she would be sulky with him later on; but she was not.

She never opened her heart to him—that was not her way. Yet he felt that she was inclined to him, and said to himself as he went off to sleep: “This is the best of my battles—to have engaged with this stormy heart and to have quelled it.”

When he was ready to go and came to bid her farewell, she clung to him. That touched him, and he stayed with her for a while.

“Speak to me, Stangerd,” he said. “You are a strange girl to be so quiet when I am such a magpie.”

“I can’t talk,” she said; “but you should have let me come. I had a reason.”

“I knew that,” he answered. “Come, now, what was your reason?”

She wouldn’t tell him for some time; but at last she said, “I could have shown that to Cormac which would have made him leave you alone.”

He held her close. “My dear one,” he said, “you make me happy. Now under-

stand that I can take care of myself very well, and that Cormac shall take no harm from me." Then he kissed her, and she looked at him sadly.

"You should have taken me with you," she said again. "You will be sorry that you did not."

"Why, so I shall, sweetheart," he said with a laugh; "but I shall be the merrier for you when I come back."

So he went off to the Thing, without a good-bye for Stanvor, who watched him go from the window of the Bower.

The two girls were very guarded with each other while Berse was away. They never once spoke of him.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOINGS AT THE THING

TO the Thing at Thorsness came all the West. When Berse came there with his friends he was late. Most of the booths were full, and he could not get his proper place in that of his chief, Anlaf Peacock of Herdholt. There was a great crowd. In the seat which Berse had always had, next to his friend Thord, there sat a large man, very broad-shouldered, covered with a bear-skin. Over his head he had a hood made of the skin, which fell before his eyes and made a darkness. He had a black beard down to his breast. Between his knees was a long sword in a grey sheath

of walrus hide, and both his hands were upon the hilt of it.

Berse looked him over, and puzzled who he was.

He asked his neighbour—"Tell me, who is our huge friend?"

"Some call him Glum, some call him Grim. I don't know what his real name is, but I am sure it is neither of those."

"Well," said Berse, "we'll have it out of him presently."

Men were jostling and crowding in the booth, all talking together, drinking and making jokes. Berse bided his time, and presently trod heavily on the foot of the covered man.

He drew it in hastily. "Steady, there!" he said.

Then Berse turned to look at him. "So you live—some part of you? I was thinking you disposed for burial, and was minded to pile stones over you."

"A cairn will be built, it is very like,"

said the Stranger, "but the dead man is not known who shall sit in it."

"Now," said Berse, "we will make some way towards knowing his name. You shall tell us yours, to begin with, whether Scrum, or Glum, or Bears'-Paws, or whatever it may be. And then you shall tell us why you choose to sit in the dark."

The Stranger pushed his hood back and showed his fierce face and black beard. He was very white-skinned, but his hair and eyes dark as thunder.

"Stanhere is my name," he said, "and I am of this country. I may have money of Cormac's to pay over to you, or I may not."

"Oho! That's it, then?" says Berse. "Cormac has been long settling his accounts. I wonder that I don't see him here."

"You will see him," said Stanhere, "but not yet. Now I challenge you, Berse, to wager-of-battle here at the Thing, and it may be that you will get double ransom;

but I think myself that you will get none." www.libtool.com.cn

Berse chuckled. "You and your friends are in a hurry to get rid of me," he said; "but I have been too bony for Cormac to swallow, and perhaps I may give you a stomach-ache before I've done with you. You take a high road, it seems to me. Perhaps you may stumble one of these fine days. One-and-thirty men have tried to stretch me out, you must know."

Stanhere looked straight before him, an immovable kind of man. "We don't desire your death," he said.

"Then what in thunder do you desire?" Berse asked him.

"We desire to put you in your place," said Stanhere.

"You've done that already," Berse told him.

Afterwards the day of meeting was appointed, and before it was reached Cormac had come to the Thing. Nobody

but Stanhere knew where he had been or what he had been doing. He had not been at home since his battle with Berse, but he had returned Shavening to Skeggi without a word, and then had betaken himself to his cousin Stanhere's house. There he had remained ever since, hardly speaking or moving. Stanhere, who was a silent, heavy, slow-moving man himself, saw nothing in this; but it was very unlike Cormac to be brooding.

* * * * *

Berse armed himself for the battle in his usual brisk manner. He had Whiting, he had a target which Thorveig the spæ-wife had given him; he had Anlaf Peacock to hold his shield. He came joking to the Holm, and when he saw Cormac was to be Stanhere's shield-bearer, he nodded and laughed, as if it was all a good joke.

Scryme was the name of Stanhere's sword, and they say of it that it never got rusty. The reason of that may be that it had no

time; for its master was as frequent a champion as Berse.

Now Berse, who began the battle, cut away two of Stanhere's shields one after the other; but at the third shield he got Whiting jammed in the iron rim, and for a moment could not get him out. Cormac turned the shield sideways and jammed Whiting the faster; then Stanhere, with both hands to Scryme, made a huge cut at Berse, who parried with his target—Thorveig's gift. The target was true, and turned Scryme, but the force of the blow could not be stayed. Scryme slid off the target and caught Berse upon the buttock. It split the flesh from there down the thigh to the shin-bone, and there it stuck. Berse tottered, but his sword Whiting was free. He drove at Stanhere with all his might, shore through his shield and target and smote him on the left breast. Then Berse fell forward on his face, and his blood poured from him.

They carried him to the booth, and bound up his wound. It was an ugly gash, full two feet long, and had reached the bone. The muscles were cut clean through. But Berse was still full of his jokes. "Dig that trench deep enough," he said, "and Cormac will lay me in it at the next bout." And then he sang:

"There was a carle at Windy-Gate,"

which is a well-known song; and also:

"When on my chin the young beard grew,"

which is another.

And he said: "Steady, you there at your scraping. I have a handsome wife at home who married a man, not a bulrush. Leave the pith in my leg: I have a use for it." But he was very ill, and not able to be moved for a week or more. Even then they had to make a litter for him and carry him down to the firth.

So it was that Stanvor, who was on the look-out every day, saw them carrying

him up. She turned rather grey, and went to find Stangerd, who was working at a loom.

"Stangerd," she said, "there are men coming up from the water."

Stangerd looked at her. "Berse will be coming." Her blue eyes were large and bright.

"Yes, I think Berse is there," said Stanvor, "or what is left of him."

Stangerd grew suddenly red. "Is he dead? Is he dead?"

Stanvor said, "I am sure that he is not. He is hurt, I believe." Then she added: "I shall go to meet them. Or do you go?"

Stangerd said, "I shall not go. I knew that this would come of it. He should have taken me with him. I will not go."

Then Stanvor ran out of the house just as she was and down the path to meet them.

Berse was in great torment, but heard her coming from a long way off, and

listened. "That's Slimlegs," he said. And then he sighed, and turned away his head.

But he had a twinkle for her when she came. No words passed between them; but Stanvor walked beside the litter, with her hand on it. And so Berse was carried into his house.

CHAPTER XIX

STANGERD FREES HERSELF

STANVOR SLIMLEGS tended Berse night and day, and only slept when he slept—which was not often, because he had fever and was light-headed with it, and wandered in his wits. She grew very thin and looked more than her age; her eyes grew larger and lighter, as if they would absorb danger from all about before it could get at Berse. But she never failed, and felt sure that she was not tired. From the first Stangerd had withdrawn herself and taken no part in the issue of the quarrel—though she herself hardly knew why. Her first thought when she heard of the mishap was one of anger against her husband.

"I offered myself to save him from this. He would not let me go with him. On his head be it. I know very well what I can do with men, and what I am worth. He thought he knew better—and this is the end of it." So she sat fuming while they were bringing him in, and would not go to see him. Stanvor had come to her to say that he was put to bed, and that he had asked where she was. "Well," she had replied, "and you told him, I suppose?" Yes, Stanvor said, she had told him. "And did he ask you to come and fetch me?" Stangerd wanted to know. Stanvor said No, he did not ask in so many words. "Let him ask, then," Stangerd said. "He is not slow to seek what he wants."

Stanvor, who was very grave, said that the wound was bitter. "He is slit from the buttock to the knee. He may limp till his death-day."

Stangerd flamed and said, "He was Battle-Berse when he took me. Now he

is Buttock-Berse. I am wife to a maimed man. ~~Wife to Buttock-Berse.~~"

Stanvor, looking scared and grave, left her without another word, and she sat on in the dusk by herself, twisting her white fingers together in her lap. When it was dark she got herself some supper, and made a bed in the Bower, where she slept ever after.

She was left very much to herself by some sort of common consent among those of the house and Berse's friends who came to see him. Stanvor saw her on and off during the days that followed, but offered her no news, and was not asked for any. But she did hear from common talk how the fight had gone, and how Cormac had taken some part in it. She did not praise him for that. She said to herself, "That was not done for love of me, or to get me. It was done to spite Berse. Between them these men bring me to shame." Then she looked at herself a long time in the glass.

She observed the sheen of her cheek where the light caught the round of it; she felt her smooth throat, and drew her hair between her fingers and saw it like a mesh of golden silk. She drew her gown tight across her bosom, and said to herself: "Here am I even as I am, jilted by a young man, and bought by an old one who is lame of one leg. What does this mean? I was taught to love without my asking; I was married without my leave; and now I am to be housewife to a limping dotard just when my beauty is ripe. Here's a pretty end to Cormac's songs; here's a good use to make of the girdle of Fricka."

But she did not yet know what she could do. She was resolved that she would not stay with Berse, and clear that she could not call Cormac to her. If he came of his own will she might take him; but she would want more wooing. Her heart was cool; he must chafe it till it was hot again. Sometimes she thought of calling Cormac

in to help her; sometimes she turned to her brother Toothgnasher. Finally she decided that she would go by herself as the law allowed her. There was one thing against it. If she went she would leave Stanvor alone with Berse, who almost certainly would make her his third wife. Now she told herself that it was no concern of hers what became of either of the pair. She had no quarrel with Stanvor, whom she despised; but she felt that she might be affected by it if they came together, and did not wish to be affected by a girl of whom she had so light an opinion. She wished, on the whole, to go on despising Stanvor. But you cannot despise a person who makes you uneasy in your mind.

One day—it was towards evening—she stopped Stanvor as she was carrying a warm drink to Berse.

“Where are you going?” she said, though she knew quite well.

Stanvor looked at her quietly, without

a flicker in her light blue eyes. "I am going to take him this," she said, "and then he will sleep."

Stangerd grew angry. "*Him!*" she said. "*He!* You talk strangely, my girl. One might think you talked of your husband or lover, to hear you."

"No one would think so who knows us," Stanvor said. "You at least know better."

"Do I know that he is not your lover, that old man?"

"Yes, you know that."

"I know that I found you here when I was brought. You have been here ever since. If I am to share a husband with you, let him be a whole one, not a fragment."

Stanvor said now: "Forgive me if I leave you. This gruel will get cold, and then he will make a grimace and refuse it. I will take it to him, and then come back and listen to you." With that she went away.

* * * * *

When she came back she found Stangerd in a cold rage. She stood quietly before her with unfaltering eyes. Stangerd looked all ways but hers, then broke out:

"What are you here for? Why are you here?"

"I thought that you had more to say."

"No, no; there is nothing more to say. You know all that is in my heart."

"If I knew that," said Stanvor, "I should know more than you do."

"If I knew what was in your heart, my girl," Stangerd cried, "I should kill you."

"No, indeed you would not," said Stanvor. "You would be sorry for me." With that she went about her business.

She lay on the floor below Berse's bed, having covered herself with a bearskin. She was awake, and listened to him grumbling and muttering to himself.

"There's no sense in it," said Berse. "I'm an old fool for my pains. A great,

splendid, sizable girl beside a handy, vigorous man—and a dead fire between them, cold ashes.” Then he stopped for a while, but grunted as his pains shot in him. “A pretty child, a pretty girl,” he went on. “All that the heart of a man could desire—mine at a nod. But the other touches my pride. I’ve always had what I wanted.” Then he dropped off to sleep, but Stanvor lay with her eyes wide open, staring into the dark corners. She was very excited. Her heart was beating fast. But she was so guarded that not even to herself would she voice that which made her blood race in her. And she would do nothing one way or the other.

As the days wore on she knew that Stangerd was busy about something. Stangerd used to go out by herself, and was away for a good many hours of the day. One of the house-carles said that she had been seen down by the firth talking to Thorveig the spae-wife. Berse had given

up asking about her. He was getting better, and had begun to take notice of Stanvor. One day he said to her, "You ought to be married, sweetheart."

Stanvor's heart stood still, but she recovered herself. "Get well again, and we can think about it."

"That I will," said Berse. "He'll be a lucky fellow that gets you."

She turned away her head.

Then came the day when he could get about the house. He came hobbling out into the sun, leaning upon a stick and Stanvor's shoulder. They came full upon Stangerd, who was sunning herself in the court. There were house-carles at work in the outhouses. Stangerd clapped her hands together, and when they looked up, she called to them to come to her. Berse all this time was shaking on his stick, watching her, twitching his eyebrows.

When the men were standing about, Stangerd, whose colour was like flame,

swept Berse into her talk with a stretched-out arm. "Take notice, all of you, and bear me witness," she said, "that I, Stangerd, Thorkel's daughter, separate myself from this half-man. He was called Battle-Berse when I took him; but now he is Buttock-Berse, and I will have nothing to do with a blemished man. I separate myself from him, and claim my liberty and my goods. That is all I have to say."

"Mistress," said Berse, who was very still, leaning on his two sticks, "you have said enough. Less would have served your turn." Then he turned and left her, hobbling along the flags in the sun with Stanvor walking beside him. Stanvor held herself as stiffly as a young birch-tree. Not a word upon the scene passed between them: Berse talked gently and quietly, and Stanvor helped him all she could.

* * * * *

That same day Stangerd left him and rode down to the water. She went home to her own people. Berse made no effort to stop her, and when she was gone he called Stanvor to him and took her in his arms. She came readily.

"It's you and me now, sweetheart," he said.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Do you mean that?" said Berse, holding her close. "Have you no pride?"

"I have a great deal," she said. "But I gave it to you long ago."

Berse kissed her, but immediately put her down.

"If I have your pride to keep, I'll use it to the best advantage. You and I will keep our distance of each other for a while longer. We must see what that termagant does next. She is a fine woman—I never saw a finer—but some fiend is in her. Let him take her. She is nothing to me now."

"She is beautiful," Stanvor said.

Berse regarded her. "Yes," he said, "so she is—as a field of corn full of red poppy is a goodly sight. But there's the less corn, there's the less nourishment for the husbandman. Now in your little slim body, in your kitten face and great blue eyes there may be the joy of a man's days and nights. Wait till I can get about again, and we'll see what can be done."

Stanvor said, "I am yours when you want me. I have always been that."

Things went quietly for a few days; but Stanvor was aware that Berse often looked at her when he thought she did not know anything about it. She smiled to herself and kept a good heart. By and by, before the winter had come, and no tidings yet from Stangerd's kin, Berse stopped in front of Stanvor and said, "I am minded to take a child in fostership. It will be good for you, and the money will be kept for you when you want it. What do you say to this, sweetheart?"

Stanvor said, "I say what you say. What child have you in mind?"

"I shall take Anlaf Hoskil's son Haldor," said Berse. "A good, strong boy, more than twelve years old. He shall be in your fostership and sleep in your bed."

Stanvor said, "Very well; I'll do my best with him."

* * * * *

So that was done. Haldor was a bold lad, saucy, and forward for his age. Stanvor got very fond of him, and he of her. He learned of her to consider Berse the greatest paragon in Iceland. Berse, except for a slight limp, was now as well as ever he had been, and amused himself that winter by teaching Haldor how to exercise himself. He showed him the use of the sword, the bill, the axe, and the spear; he gave him horses to ride, and made him swim in the river every day. Haldor was a rough boy

when he came, but this sort of work made him as fierce as a young man. Stanvor used to talk to him every night about Berse's gentleness and good temper. Between them they were in a fair way to make a man of Haldor.

CHAPTER XX

TOOTHGNASHER

NOW in the Spring Thorkel Toothgnasher, who was Stangerd's brother, came up to Sowerby and asked for Berse. He had a man called Wale with him, a red-haired, broken-nosed man with a very shiny face. Stanvor saw them, and said that Berse was from home. They said that they would wait, and sat down in the hall. Stanvor served them with drink, and Toothgnasher, before his draught, looked at her over the rim of the horn.

"You had something to do with my sister's flitting, little mistress, I think."

"Nothing that I know of," said Stanvor.

"She told Berse why she was going. I heard her." www.libtool.com.cn

"Did she not tell you another reason?"

"No," said Stanvor.

"What! Was she not jealous of you for ever about her husband?"

Stanvor said, "She could have tended him herself if she had cared. Then I should have kept away. I never did anything that she offered to do. She will never tell you that she was jealous of me."

Toothgnasher said, "Well, it's strange if a man don't know his sister's mind."

"It is strange," Stanvor agreed; "but it seems to be your case."

Toothgnasher had no more to say. Then Wale, having drained his horn, said slyly: "Old Berse likes pretty girls about him."

"Ah," said Toothgnasher, taking him up, "a man must pay for his pleasures."

Haldor was listening to all this, sitting by the fire, nursing his foot. He frowned.

"Do you think he would pay such as you two are?" he said.

Wale started. "How now, you little egg?"

"You will see," said Haldor. "My foster-father will make short work with you."

"Oh, be done!" said Toothgnasher, and turned again to Stanvor. "You, mistress," he said, "were an inmate of Thorarin's house once upon a time?"

"Yes," said Stanvor, "very much against my will."

"Thorarin paid Berse for that," said Wale. "He did so."

Stanvor answered quietly, "Yes, he paid with his life, and the life of his sons."

"And now it is Berse's turn to pay," said Toothgnasher, very red.

Just then Berse came in and greeted the strangers civilly.

Toothgnasher at once opened his affair. He desired the bride-price and the dowry

of Stangerd, who had declared that she would ~~not be the wife of~~ a maimed man. Berse sat and twiddled his thumbs, while Stanvor, kneeling, took his boots off.

"I don't pay," said Berse. "I'm as well as ever I was in my life, and could marry a dozen like Stangerd if I had a mind. But I have not. I'm as pleased as daylight that she has taken herself off; but I won't pay, and that's flat."

"It is much too flat for us," said Toothgnasher. "You shall fight me for that, Berse."

"So I will," says Berse.

Toothgnasher got up. "Wager-of-battle at the holm by Tiltness it shall be."

"So it shall, then," Berse said. "You'll be making little of me, I daresay, such a stout man as you be grown; but I shall be there for you."

Then Wale had something to say. His eyes were bright, but he was rather short of breath. "If I were to come to you,

Berse, with money in my hand, and ask for that young girl in marriage, what would you say to me?"

Berse, twinkling, looked about for Stanvor. She stood in the shadow, but he saw her steady eyes, very watchful. He smiled and nodded to her.

"I should say that you were too late in the day," he told Wale. Everybody was tense and quiet. Everybody spoke shortly, and those who did not speak held themselves in waiting for something.

"I don't care much for that answer," Wale said.

"It's all you will get from me," says Berse; "but you may ask her, if you please."

Wale said that he should ask her. "And I'll ask Ord, her injured parent," he said, growing angry. "You reckoned to do him a service when you took her out of Gutdale and gave Thorarin his death-blow—but what have you done? You have turned a

pretty girl into a byword with your snug vices." www.libtool.com.cn

Stanvor said, "You lie. He has been more than good to me."

Berse said, "Get you gone, the pair of you, and do your worst."

"By my head," Toothgnasher said, "I'll get me gone, as you say, but I'll do my worst beforehand."

With that he reached back for his bill and hewed at Berse. Haldor slipped into the fray with Whiting, and saved Berse's life. He cut in like a flash of lightning, and knocked the bill sideways. Then he handed Berse the sword, and Berse in his stocking feet engaged with Toothgnasher. Haldor took down a spear from the wall, and stood leaning on it to watch the fight. It was long and arduous. Toothgnasher had a great reach and was very active. Berse could not get in at him at all.

Stanvor stood where she was, in the shadow of the great hearth, and was so

intent upon the battle that she did not see what Wale was about. He had got behind her to the door which led to the Bower, and suddenly threw his cloak over her head and drew it across her mouth so that she could not cry out. Holding that fast in one hand, he put the other about her body, lifted her and turned to take her out by the back door.

Haldor saw him and went after him. He caught him just by the door and drove his spear into the middle of his back. That was his death-blow; he fell forward on to the top of Stanvor, and there he lay. She lay quiet, too, until Haldor got the cloak off her head. Then the two of them went back to see what was being done. They found Berse wiping the blade of Whiting.

"Hot and dirty work," said Berse; "but there lies Toothgnasher."

Haldor said, "Foster-father, I have killed a man. I have killed Wale."

"Have you so?" said Berse. "What did you do that for?"

Haldor told him. Then said Berse, "You have done well, my lad. Now get we these two without the house; and then we'll have supper, and then we'll go to bed." So they dragged out of doors Toothgnasher and Wale and covered them decently with a cloth.

When they came back they found that Stanvor and the women had set the table. They had supper, and Stanvor waited upon Berse as she had always done.

But towards the end, Berse, who had said nothing, told Stanvor to fetch another jug of mead. When she brought it and had filled his horn, he held it up and said to her, "Drink of it, sweetheart."

"Why should I drink?" she asked him, smiling shyly.

"Drink to the night," said Berse. So she put her lips to the horn, and gave it back to him. Berse drained it.

He said no more, but sent Haldor to bed, and sat by the fire, knitting and clearing

his brows. Stanvor was at work upon embroidery on the other side of the hearth. When the time came, she put the work away in its place, and came to Berse to say good-night. He put his arm round her, and kept her there.

Presently he said, "Two wives have I had, and intend for a third. What do you say to that, sweetheart?"

"I say what you say," she replied, looking down at him; for he sat in his chair while she stood over him.

"My first wife was very well. They called her a paragon, but I don't know. We fell out now and then about trifles. She had a quick temper, and was very particular. Myself, I'm a careless sort of man, always in scrapes. She could not bear that. She liked the same things to take place at the same hour every day. Now, they never did with me, and never will. However, we made a shift to get on. Then there was Stangerd. I don't know what had warped

her; but I was a fool to be talked over. Ah, and a fool to be taken by her good looks when I had a better beside me. But when I told you I was going to take her, what did you say? You said: 'Well and good, master.' Now why did you say that?"

She still smiled, tolerantly and wisely, and still looked down kindly at him. "Because you must always do as you like," she said.

"And so I will," he said, "and you shall marry me, sweetheart, when you will."

"I will marry you now," she said. He got up and took her in his arms. She stood on tiptoe and raised him her face. He kissed her long, and feeling her fierce young body against his, he laughed for joy, and said: "All's well that ends well. Come, sweetheart, I'm not too old to teach you the way of marriage."

She said, "You'll teach me little, Berse."

Berse said, "We'll see."

In the morning Haldor asked her where

she had been all night. She smiled with her eyes, and kissed him. "I was at a wedding," she said.

"Whose wedding was that?" asked Haldor.

She kissed him again; and then he understood, and kissed her.

The tale has no more to say of Battle-Berse.

CHAPTER XXI

THORWALD THE TINSMITH

NOW back we go to Tongue on Midfirth to see what was going on there.

Stangerd's father was not overjoyed to have her back again at home, but he said that she had been very right to leave Sowerby and a husband who put her to ridicule. He was sanguine, too, that she would get her property back either by a pleading at the Thing or by Berse's sense of justice; but his son Toothgnasher thought differently, and as the season wore away, it seemed that Toothgnasher was right. Then came the battle in Berse's house, and the end of Toothgnasher and Wale. Thorkel took that hardly, and showed Stangerd by his dealing

that he put some of the blame upon her. He now talked of ransom and the need of a champion to take up his quarrel. He talked more than once of Cormac as of the right man in the right place, as the natural champion of his family, and all the rest of it. Stangerd said nothing, but remained handsome, silent, and self-possessed as she had always been. Yet there's no doubt but she expected Cormac to come, and looked for him every day.

But he did not come, though he was known to be at home and at work about his house and fields. Narve had seen him, and had even hailed him from afar off; but as Cormac made no sign of access, the timid man had not cared to pass the time of day with him, or to slip in the news which was so much in Thorkel's mouth just now.

But it must needs be that Cormac knew of her return: in fact, he did know it, for his brother had told him. He took the news quietly; he was fallen very glum of late,

and made no more poetry. He went on with his work as if there was no such person as Stangerd in the world—and then he began to get restless again, and irritable. He lost his temper with things (not with persons), and could not stay long at one job. Then, in the late summer, suddenly, he told his brother that he thought of going to sea. He said that there was a ship in the firth to be had at a moderate figure. He would get some stuff together, and a crew, and go off trading to Norway. Maybe they could do some raiding: he wouldn't say, but they might go to Ireland.

Thorgils said that he would go too, and as soon as the gear could be got on board and the men found; but nothing much was done until the early winter. Not a word, so far, of Stangerd—not a word!

* * * * *

But by this time news had come to Midfirth that Berse had married Stanvor Slimlegs, and had made himself very

comfortable, being perfectly recovered of his slit buttock. He had fortified his house with a great wall of stone and turf, and it was thought that Stanvor was going to give him a son. Thorkel was in a fine way over these tales, and went about saying that he had fallen on evil days and that Iceland was no longer the home for free men or honest men. If a man could turn his wife out of the house at a moment's notice, kill her brother and take a new wife, and no call to be made upon him—what were we coming to? Narve's teeth chattered, and he said it was very dreadful.

The upshot was that Thorold Tinsmith came into the story: a well-to-do man of large presence and a comely, fair beard, which lay upon his chest like a force of water. He was always fondling it, and had a trick of squeezing it up in his hand so that he could make a brush of the end of it, and brush his nose with it. He had flat, light blue eyes, and spoke slowly and gravely.

A rich man, one of the Skiddings of Fleet, a widower without children, an excellent tinsmith. After a great deal of debating with his brother Thorvard and his neighbours, he took boat and sailed into Midfirth.

He stayed the night on board, and rode up next day, with his brother and a couple more witnesses and tokeners, to see Thorkel. The day was spent in talking. He saw nothing of Stangerd till the evening meal, when she came out in white—just as she had been when Cormac first set eyes upon her—and served the table. She was, maybe, more matronly than she had been then. Experience had made her more sedate. There was no spying through Hagbard's eyes, no tip-toe work behind the hangings: but then there was no seer to view her feet and no singer to cry upon her starry beauty. The grave, portly tinsmith hardly looked at her; and when she had gone to bed, and the men drew closer together to bicker

the thing to an end, and Thorkel began to vaunt her as a wonder of the world, Thorwald roundly said that one wife was as good as another to him, so far as her looks went. A wife, he said, should be well found in money and other movables, a good breeder, and handy in the house. She must have a pleasant nature and not be always asking the reason of things. It might easily happen, he said, that a man did not know, or have at call, the reason for something said or done, or required to be done. He did not care—nor was it convenient—that he should have to own up to ignorance. It made him look foolish; moreover, it might lead to debate, and bring endless confusion in the household. For everything he said he appealed to his brother Thorvard for confirmation. Thorvard confirmed him every time; and the end of it was that they were too many for Thorkel, who found himself asking them to take Stangerd off his hands, offering to make good the gear which she

had left behind her at Sowerby, and to add more to it. With these terms the tinsmith was content, and said that he would talk to Stangerd next day.

When her father told her what was forward, she gloomed and said nothing for a time, neither assenting nor refusing. Presently she began to breathe quickly, as if thought troubled her breast. And then she said: "It is a strange thing to me that I am so unhappy in my dealings with men. See that little pale slip of a thing, Stanvor: she has been made happy with what I despised. See Cormac, who loved me first—what have I done—what did I do—that he should treat me so? It seems to me that a girl's good looks are her bad fortune. I wish I had never been born."

Thorkel had little comfort for her. "Thorwald," he told her, "thinks nothing of your looks. He is a peaceful man who wants to be quiet. If you let him alone,

he will let you alone. What more do you want?"

"I don't want to be let alone by the man I marry," she said. "I don't marry to be let alone."

"Then you ought to have married Cormac," Thorkel told her. There was more; but in the end she dried her eyes and consented to see the tinsmith.

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Thorwald stroked his fine beard as he looked at her the next day. She stood up before him, but he did not at first think it necessary to rise from the bench.

"So, Stangerd, it seems you are inclined to try again," he said. "Well, I am not one who says that a woman is the worse for experience. Far from it. Now, let me speak to you of myself, for I would not have you say afterwards that I had deceived you, or hear you tell me that you separate yourself

from me on that account. I am a well-to-do man of quiet and ruminating temper. I do not jump at a thing. I like to turn it over and about. You must not expect me to be always fondling and kissing. I have many irons in the fire, and when my mind is occupied, I expect to be let alone. All in good time, and a time for everything is my favourite saying. I have turned off many a trouble by the use of that lore. I have a good house, and many people about it, one way and another. You will have half a dozen women to oversee, and there are house-carles and labourers and shepherds. It is well stored, and I choose to have a generous table; yet I love thrift and detest wastefulness. My brother Thorvard lives with us. He will please you: he can be very merry at times, and sings a good song. So do I, for that matter, but I don't profess to be a skald. I hope we shall be very happy together, and don't doubt of it if you remember that I am a serious man

who has no time for trifling or outbreaks of temper." www.libtool.com.cn

Then he got up and, putting one hand upon her shoulder, put the other under her chin. Lifting her face, he looked kindly into her beautiful stormy eyes, and then kissed her.

Stangerd had never been wooed after this sort, and her heart was like lead within her. She had, indeed, no heart wherewith to fling away from such a suitor; but she was very near to tears. She was as lovely as ever she had been, and yet the light seemed to have left her, so that she was anybody's for the picking up. But she had lost her spirit. Cormac, perhaps, had got that: she didn't know, and didn't care. She allowed her lips to the tinsmith; she faltered that she would do her best; and then she went away.

Within a short time she was married to him, and knew the best and worst of him. He, for his part, might as well have married

a block of wood; but he neither knew nor cared what she was made of.

They were married at Thorkel's house, and there they stayed for the mid-winter season. Then, suddenly, one day, Cormac came to the house and saw her again.

CHAPTER XXII

CORMAC COMES BACK

SHE hadn't seen him since the day of her first bridal, the day when Berse brought her home into Sowerby. They had parted in unkindness, and it seems that they were to meet so; for her first feeling in her discontent was of hot rage against him as the maker of it. Her eyes were angry, and her cheek-bones were angry; she sat where she was by the fire with her needlework still in her lap, and watched him, waiting for him to speak.

Cormac, also, at first said nothing to her. He stood framed in the doorway, wryly smiling, frowning with one eyebrow. He

considered her as a painter considers his unfinished work, whistling in his teeth as he wonders where he shall begin. Words and phrases sang and danced in his head, as he absorbed her again. Then he said, "Stangerd, you are like a morning in April, when the sun is breaking through the rain, and thinning it into mist. If I could stand always at this distance from you, Stangerd, and look at you like this, I should make songs which would be the music of all Iceland. But I can't, and you know that I can't, keep so far from you now, after what has been between you and me; and so I am going away from you, my golden wonder, and will put the blue water between us. What do you say to that?"

He spoke lightly and mockingly, or so she felt it. She governed herself therefore, so that he should never guess that she was unhappy. She picked up her needlework and took a stitch or two, as she said, "You will do as you please, I suppose. It is what

you have always done. When will you sail?" www.libtool.com.cn

"Not yet, not yet," he said. Then he came into the hall and stood near her, right over her. "So you tired of Berse, and have taken another husband?"

She said nothing to that. "By and by," he went on, "you may be willing to have me."

That time she could not answer him. He was hurting her.

He sat down beside her, and picked up an edge of the shift she was hemming. "I remember very well, when you and I were plighted, that I used to say you should be much married. You didn't like it. It made you angry. But you have done it. You are much married; and now it is I who don't like it. Do you remember that, Stangerd?"

She nodded, but could not look at him.

"I don't like it at all," he went on; "but I will tell you this—believe it or not as you will. When I wished to see you with many

lovers, many husbands, Stangerd, I loved you much better than I do now."

A large tear rolled down her cheek, and hung there, until it fell into her needlework. Cormac saw it gather and drop, but he did not alter his manner.

"I am going with my brother Thorgils to Norway," he told her; "but I thought that I would come to see you again before I went. What are you making there?"

She told him—a shift.

"It is for yourself? You will wear it?"

"I suppose so," she said. "Why do you ask me?"

He said, "It would be strange if I was not interested in anything which will be as near to you as this linen. It would be strange if I felt very friendly-disposed towards it."

"You need not tumble it in your hands, at least," she said.

"I feel as if I were feeling about for a grip at its windpipe," he said, then stopped

himself with a short laugh, and let go of it. www.libtool.com.cn

"Will you do me a service?" he asked her.

"What do you want me to do?"

"That linen you are stitching would make me a shirt to wear over my mail. Will you make it for me instead of yourself?"

She looked at him quickly. "Are you going to wear mail? Are you going Viking?"

His eyes laughed. "I think so," he said; "like my father before me—but not by any means for so good a reason."

"What was your father's reason?" she asked him; and he told her.

"He was a man of large mind and great passions. He felt that the world lay to the hand of the man who could handle it. He said that the might followed the mind. He was restless, and cramped in this country of stony hills and narrow dales and strait seas. The fire burned in him and he gave

it vent. He went far and did greatly; he went often, and at last he never came back. But he died as he had lived, greatly."

She thought that very fine, and expected much the same answer to her next question; but she did not get it.

"And what is your reason?"

"My reason is that I may forget that you ever lived and made me suffer," he said plainly.

She bit her lips, and her eyes filled with smarting tears.

"You are ungenerous. You are a coward to say so. And it is not at all true. I was living at Nupdale when you came there. I could not know that you were coming, or who you were that came. You saw me, and after that never left me alone. You taught me to love you—and then you left me, when you had made your songs about me. That was all you wanted out of me, I see very well. Well, go now, and make your songs of whom you will."

He stood over her now, dark with rage. "Song! Song! What song is left in me? What have I left to sing of? The glory of song is departed from me. Once I had it like a running water in me, a well-spring that never ran dry. Then you came and dipped your hands in it, and it flowed all about you as if it would carry you away to the sea. And then it slept. It went when you were false to me."

And now she jumped up, flaming. "I was never false to you. I was never false. You are lying. It was you who tired of me, and left me in the lurch on my wedding-day. I sat alone here in my crown, with my maids, waiting for you—and you did not come. Now go to sea or where you will—but leave me. I will never make a shirt for you, so long as I live."

There where she stood, all flushed and splendid in her fury, he came to her and took her in his arms. Before she could stop him he had kissed her twice, roughly

and fiercely. Then she broke away, and left him without another word.

But when she came back more than an hour later, he was still there in the same place. She stiffened her neck and squared her shoulders.

"I required you to go," she said, "but you are still here. What sort of conduct is this, do you think? My father and my husband will be here soon, and there will be more trouble on your account. Has there not been enough?"

Cormac said, "Stangerd, I can't go until you forgive me. I acted badly, I am very sorry."

"You forgot yourself," she said; "but I shan't bear a grudge. Go in peace."

"Yes," he said, "I will go. But I shall see you again."

"You cannot," she told him. "Thorwald will be angry."

"That makes no matter," he said, "so long as you are not angry."

She said, "Ah, but I shall be very angry if you use me so." She spoke more kindly.

"I will not," he said. "I will not touch you again, unless I go mad again."

"That's no promise at all," she said.

"When you are angry," he said, "I want you more than ever I did in my life. And you call up something in me which must subdue you at all costs. That's the way of it. Fire calls to fire, and the two burn and leap together."

She was grave now, and shook her head. "This must not be," she said. "I shall go away from here as soon as I can."

"You will do no good by that. I shall find you."

"I hope you will not try."

"I also hope so. I could not be happy with you if I had you—nor you with me."

"Cormac," she said, and touched his arm, "you must learn to do without me. It is not to be. Now I see very well that it was true what your brother Thorgils said when

he was here that day—when you were not. He said ~~that the spae-wife~~ had put a spell upon our plighting, that you and I could never come together. And it is true; we have not, and we shall not.”

He seized both her hands. “Stangerd, come now—come with me! I am parcht with thirst.”

She tried to get away. “No, no, no! You can never drink of me.”

He implored her, he raved; but she was ready for him now. She was kind, but she would do nothing. Then she heard her people coming in, and told him to go. He said he would not unless she kissed him. She did it, but not as he wished.

He went out, brushing by Thorkel and Thorwald, who were coming in to dinner. He took no notice whatever of them; but Thorwald asked who he was.

Thorkel said shortly, “That’s a man whom I don’t want to see any more. That is Black Cormac of Melstead, a dangerous

man. He has been after Stangerd, you may be sure. Now you must deal quietly with that man, or you will be sorry for it. He has brought more troubles to this house than enough."

Thorwald brushed his nose with the golden end of his beard and was silent through dinner. Afterwards he asked Stangerd about Cormac. She told him that he was going abroad and had come to say good-bye.

Thorwald said he was glad to know that. "He was not very civil to Thorkel or to me."

"He had no reason to be," Stangerd said rather shortly.

Thorwald said, "You surprise me. What, is he to treat your husband like so much brushwood?"

"He is a man," Stangerd replied, "who treats other men as he finds them. If they are friendly, so is he; if unfriendly, he is more so. If they are indifferent, so is he."

"But," said Thorwald, "I was not in-

different—though he was. How could I be indifferent to the men who come to visit you?"

"You had better learn to be indifferent when Cormac comes," she said.

Thorwald was very surprised, and brushed his nose a long time, until she asked him to cease.

"And why, pray, am I to cease?" he asked.

She said, "Because I ask it."

He found the reason bad. "Nobody has ever asked me that before."

She said, "I hope that I shan't have to ask it again."

He considered this answer. "It's a little trick I have," he said.

She replied, "It's a little trick I don't like. It makes you look very foolish."

"Nobody," he said, "has ever told me so before."

"I wish that somebody had," said she,

"for then it would not have been for me to tell you."

He drew himself up and squared his shoulders. "Do you think it seemly to tell your husband that he looks foolish?"

She returned to her seat by the fire and her sewing. "I think it more seemly," she said, "than that he should continue to look so."

CHAPTER XXIII

STANGERD GOES TO THE FLEET

NOW the poet of whom I spoke a long time ago as having his own idea of Cormac's affair, singing about his troth broken on his wedding-day, says:

“But of this matter, when Cormac,
Betroth'd, handfasted as he was,
Lover accepted, yet drew back
At the last hour, a thing unchancy—
Witch-finders hint at spell or curse
Upon the plighting. Each man has
His own curse in him, and my fancy
Sees Cormac storing her to heart
To sing about in sounding verse,
Making a goddess of a lass,
Not better but so much the worse
The more herself has art and part
In the business. Call this nigromancy

Done by the spae-wife out of spite—
I tell you, Love's a tricky sprite
For poets' bosoms. Love says, Kiss
Your well-belov'd, she'll kiss again,
Apt pupil; but it's also true
The more you kiss, the more you strain
Together, the less lover you,
And the more she. Skald's wisdom is
To love apart, since love is pain
At all events, howe'er you do;
And out of pain that Song cometh
The which you live by, as by bread
Live some, and other some by kiss
(As women all). Where there are two,
And one a poet, one must rue.
Here it was Stangerd, as the case is
Whene'er a girl accepts the embraces
Of poet-lover."

And he's right, there's no doubt. But Cormac could not be expected to know that.

What puzzled the young man, however, was this, that he felt happier, more uplifted, as he went away from Stangerd than he had known himself to be when he was with her. In her presence all the wicked feelings which beset mankind had been about him

—rage, greed, grudging, jealousy, and the rest of them. Her beauty had made his heart blacker; the more he needed her the less fit he felt himself to touch the border of her gown. But now he had left her, the clouds parted, and she shone dazzling like the sun in the blue sky. To love her was not only reasonable, but it was a career. It was food and drink, occupation and fame. It was a fire within him which would never go out—unless he saw her. Strange freak of fate that he could only love her when he didn't see her!

He was happier than he had been for a year or more. He began to sing again, naturally, like a bird.

“Ah, now indeed I have her—now
 When I am leaving her for good.
 For good? Ah, yes, for now I know
 What Christians call their heavenly food.
 You see no flesh, you taste no blood,
 The holy flake shines like the snow;
 The sweet thin wine has the red flow,
 But not the salt that drencht the Rood.”

Now I have feasted as I would
And go my way with a full heart:
Stangerd and I shall never part
If I can keep this holy mood."

And in this mood he remained for the rest of the day, finding himself strong enough to think of her without needing to see or to touch her.

In the morning he found himself down on the lees again, and life a brackish flat business unless there was a hope of seeing Stangerd. But he fought with himself, and to such purpose that he set a day for sailing and kept to it.

They all went aboard, men and horses, and headed for the Floe with a fair wind on their quarter. That was four or five days after he had seen Stangerd; but meantime Thorwald had taken her off to Fleet.

He took her off the very next day; in fact, after his unceremonious meeting with Cormac in the entry of the house. He got the whole story out of Thorkel that

night, and the more of it he got the less he liked it. It wasn't so much that he shirked an encounter with Cormac, even though he was not much of a fighter. He explained to Thorkel how he felt about it.

"Stangerd," he said, "was very short with me after Cormac had been with her. No man cares to be thought tiresome. I am not at all accustomed to it; I have always been treated with respect. I am a weighty, sententious man, and I know it. But if these handsome, flashing poets get about a young woman, she is dazzled. She fills herself with their heady drink, their spiced food, and turns up her nose at the good roast or soused, at the good white bread or curdy cheese upon which the body is built up. It is so. I wish my wife to admire me. Is that so extraordinary? She will be happier if she can do it, and so shall I be. Now when I was talking to her about her Cormac, I noticed that little tricks of mine with the beard seemed to vex her.

I have an uncommon beard: it has often been noticed. But all she had to say of it was to ask me not to brush my nose with it. That was distressing. It can't go on like this. Within the first few days of a man's married life, to feel that a man is ridiculous in his wife's eyes intimidates a man."

So he took her away to Fleet, a long way from Midfirth, where there is more open water; and there she began her house-keeping.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NIGHT IN THE WOOD

CORMAC'S ship *Raven* had a fair way over the Floe, and made Skaganess on one tack. But past the Ness they were as good as in the open sea; the wind freshened and blew from the south-east. They thought it well to stand inshore, and found smooth water at once, and plenty of it. Drängey showed up before the night fell, and as they were in strange waters, they decided to seek a haven there for the night. They found a good harbour with a sandy bottom on the west of the island and lay as snug as fish in the sea.

Next day they crossed the frith and coasted up the further shore. The mountains come

right down to the sea on that shore, and the lower slopes of them are covered with wood. Cormac sat on deck looking at this magic country of rocks and thin, grey stems. The sunlight was like mist between them, and above they were blushing with the rising sap.

Then, on a sudden, as he looked his heart stood still. He saw a woman in a blue cloak riding through the trees. Her head was bare, and her hair shone like gold. He went white, and stared with his eyes. His lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Then he called Thorgils his brother. "Thorgils," he said, "yonder woman riding there is Stangerd. She is alone. Shape your course closer in, and be ready to cast anchor."

"Why," said Thorgils, "what are you about?"

"I am going to see Stangerd," Cormac said.

"And what then?"

"I don't know yet. We shall see."

"Will you make trouble for us and her?"

"I don't know. It will be to do that, or to end the trouble. Alter our course, I say."

Thorgils did as he was told. The water was as clear as glass on a bottom of hard, white sand. They stood to within a spear's throw of the shore. Stangerd, if it was she, had seen the ship, and had reined up her grey horse in a clearing in the wood. She was looking at them. Thorgils now saw that it was Stangerd sure enough. They heaved the anchor overboard, and the *Raven* brought up, but before she was fast, Cormac was in the water to his middle.

Stangerd did not move from where she was, but the light in her eyes answered the light in his, and her flushed face to his face.

He came directly to her through the trees, and stood beside her. His hand rested on

the horse's mane, but he did not touch her. www.libtool.com.cn

She spoke first. "You have come then."

"I saw you—so I came."

Her eyes engulfed him. But she was not smiling. She was too deeply satisfied for any outward sign. She consumed her happiness within. Nothing in her life had ever pleased her so much as this.

Cormac said, "What is this? Where are you going? Do you live here? Where is your husband?"

Then she laughed. "A string of questions! I live at Fleet, which is not far from here. I was lonely at home, so I came out. Thorwald is away, brushing his nose somewhere."

Cormac said, "Let him be. We haven't much time. But we have to-day."

"You are for Norway?" she asked him. His eyes were upon her.

"I am for you at this hour—and the ship

is fast. Come with me for a little. You are not afraid?"

She said seriously, "No, I'm not afraid. I'll walk with you."

He stood beside her, and took her down from the horse. When he had her in his arms he held her for a moment, and she made sure that he was going to kiss her. But he did not. He held her for a moment, and then put her down. Both of them were very red, and both out of breath. They began to walk slowly through the wood. Cormac led her horse.

There was no wind. The sun was hot, and the sky blue. The sea lay glittering without a ripple. The ground was dry underfoot, and the stems of the birch-trees were silver-grey. It was good to be alive and young on such a day. Cormac and Stangerd walked slowly side by side, with very little to say, but each very conscious of the other. They spoke seldom, and in low voices. The hour of great desire seemed

to be past. He did not talk of love to her; but ~~were~~ ~~great~~ ~~love~~ ~~was~~ in everything he said and hushed every tone of his voice.

At noon, being out of sight of the ship and, so far as could be seen, quite alone together in the world, they sat and shared some bread which Stangerd had with her. After that Stangerd said that she was sleepy, and lay down with her head on Cormac's lap, and his cloak over her. He himself sat quite still, looking out over the sea, sometimes with great tenderness at her unconscious form gently stirring in sleep. He thought to himself that it would be very easy to suffer if she was always as innocent as that. When the evil moments came upon him, he said to himself, let him remember her as she lay there soft and pure, nothing but the most lovely thing in the world. Let him forget that she must lie in another man's arms and put her arms round another man's neck, and do him a wrong thereby. Even as he urged himself

to forget that he remembered it, and felt his blood boil. He startled violently with the pain, and she awoke, and looked up, smiling lazily with her blue eyes.

Immediately he said to himself: "It is nothing, what she does with herself, or is done to. She is as incapable of wrongdoing as a tree or a flower. It is I who do wrong."

"Why did you wake me?" she asked him, and he said, "A serpent stung me, and I started. But I have killed it."

She laughed as she snuggled her cheek in her hand. "I don't believe it. There are no serpents above ground in March."

"There are always serpents above ground when a man walks the world," said Cormac.

She thought of that for a while, and then she sat up and moved beside him, and took his arm. He would not look at her, but he listened acutely.

"You are unhappy at leaving me?" she said.

He replied at once, "No, I am not. That is what is so bad about it. If I were leaving you enchanted in this wood, to sleep until I come back—in a year, in two or ten years—I should go without a thought or a look back. But it is because I am leaving you in the power of another man that I grieve and fret. Therefore I know that I love you not well. Therefore I know that I must leave you."

She lifted her eyebrows and opened her eyes wide. "Are all men like you? Do all men love women so?"

"I believe that they do," Cormac said: "but I don't want to be like other men. I want to love you as I love the sky and the wind on the hill. You are as beautiful as they are—indeed, more beautiful, for they only represent parts of you. They are your eyes and your breath. But there's your fragrance, and your gait, and the flame of your golden hair; there are your brows, your chin, your bosom, your hands.

And last of all, there is yourself, which makes men sing and go mad. When I first loved you I rejoiced in you; but afterwards I could not rejoice, because I wanted more than I could have. Sometimes I could have killed you for love, and that's a terrible thing."

She said, "Yes, that is terrible; but I will tell you this now, Cormac—that there have been times when I have wished you to kill me with love. No other man has ever made me wish that."

Cormac gloomed and frowned over this saying, and did not speak for a time. Then he said, "Do women feel such things? Do they desire to give what a man desires to take? Is that possible?" He looked at Stangerd, but she had turned her head away, and when he touched her hand she moved it and got up.

"We must go," she said. The sun was down behind the mountains, the air was colder, and dusk had begun to haunt the wood,

But Cormac must be answered. He made her face him, he made her look at him. She did it, but a storm lay gathering behind her eyes.

"Stangerd," he said, "it is not too late."

She flamed, she stamped her foot. "You fool," she said fiercely, "it is too late. You have made me suffer horribly. I shall never forget it—and I will not forget it."

He shut his eyes, rocked about. "A curse is upon me. A moment ago and I was happy, loving you as I should. But now I feel the fire again."

She put her hand on his arm. "Let us go," she said, "let us go. We have had a happy day." She was quite close to him now, and put her face up to his as she spoke. She had no fear. He stooped and kissed her. His eyes were full of tears.

* * * * *

Then they went to look for her horse; but he had strayed, and they could not

find him. It grew dark quickly, and it was necessary to do something. "What shall we do?" said Cormac. They walked on in silence together, and by and by a light showed up out of a hollow where the hill ran sharply down to a river and the sea-level.

"There's a house down yonder," Cormac said. "They will shelter us for the night. We had better go and ask them."

She agreed to that, and took his arm. The way was very steep, and it was almost dark. Soon they heard the roaring of a force, and could make out the roof-line of a small house. And then a dog barked sharply, and ran out to meet them—a black and white dog.

A woman answered to their knocking, and asked them in. It was a poor house. She said that her sons were away at the fishing. There was room enough for them, but not much to eat.

"There's a good bed for you," she said,

"for you can have mine. I'm a widow, worse luck!"

Cormac said at once, "You must give us two beds, mother. This is my sister."

"You don't favour each other much, by the looks of *you*," she said. "You're dark enough for an Irishman."

They ate her meal and dry fish and sat by the fire for a little, and then the woman came in and said that the beds were ready. They were side by side, but a wooden partition ran up between them to within a foot of the rafters. Cormac, who thought that he should be awake all night, went to sleep almost immediately. It was Stangerd who kept watch, and tossed and turned the better part of the night.

* * * *

In the morning Cormac got out of the house early and went up the hill to look for the horse. He found him without trouble, and brought him down to the farmhouse. Stangerd was waiting for him in the porch.

She wished him good-morning with a smile and kind eyes. He took her in his arms and kissed her. The woman of the house, who was stirring her oatmeal, sniffed. "I never saw a man kiss his sister like that," she said to herself.

* * * * *

They set out and climbed the hill into the woods. It was a fresh, mild morning of Spring, and the birds were busy everywhere at their nesting and courtship. The sea sparkled and the air quivered. Life was a good thing to look forward to, even if to look back was a bad thing.

Cormac found his singing voice again.

O land where the sea-eagle hovers,
O mountain-land and river flood.
Here is the wonder of the wood,
And here a tale of love and lovers.

What have I done? I've heard the note
Thrill'd by the wood-bird in the dark;
It set me soaring like a lark
That on his own song seems afloat.

But what have I done? I was blind
That thought I saw a fair maid pass
And stroke my cheek. That was no lass,
That spirit of the wandering wind.

What have I done? O silly hands,
That thought to hold and starve the fire,
And teach it leap to your desire
And burn within your puny bands!

What have I done, but love too high?
What have I done, but fall too far?
I set my longing on a star,
And there it burns, and here I lie.

And then he changed the time, and his
voice had a jarring sound here and there,
though the words were tender. Whiles, it
croaked like a June nightingale's.

Of Stangerd and her beauty, now,
What shall I sing? Was she in sooth
The Spirit few see but some may know,
Even as believ'd an ardent youth:
The Essence at the heart of things,
Which makes them things? substantial truth?

The secret rose of loveliness,
The very flicker in the wings
Of birds, the thrill of sweet distress
You get at heart, when a bird sings
At night? The fragrance, hue, impress,
The very life within the dress
That bodies beauty? Was all this
Chance-held in Stangerd's blossomings
For Cormac's vision and his bliss?
Was she so rare or he so tender?
He found her so by hit or miss.

There he stopped, and reined up
the grey horse. He put his hand upon
Stangerd's knee, and held her eyes with
his eyes while he sang again his last
song.

And so he paid for his lachess,
Or, if you please, his soul-surrender;
For plain men saw—a piece of goods,
Just a fine girl, for all her splendour
Of form and favour, made of moods
And whim and hearty appetite,
Who liked her supper and was clear
What was and what was not her right.

And so two took her for delight,
And serv'd them of her aptitude
For work by day and play by night,
And found all well, and made good cheer;
And when their turn came round she dight
Their burial-clouts——

He stopped again abruptly, for he saw that Stangerd was crying.

"Shame upon me!" he said; "my love, forgive me, and let me go."

She spoke through her tears. "You don't know—you don't know women. I am glad all men are not like you, because then all women would be as miserable as I am."

He strained up to take her, but she would not let him. After a while she dried her eyes and spoke to him again.

"Go now," she said. "There is your ship, and my way lies yonder."

Far below them, truly enough, the *Raven* lay swaying at her anchor. Beyond the Ness the sea sparkled and crisped.

Stangerd stooped from her saddle and met Cormac's clouded face. Their lips met

and stayed together for a while. Then she said good-bye and turned and rode through the wood. She had no tears in her eyes now, and carried her head high. The fire showed on her cheek-bones. She did not hurry her horse, but kept at a walking pace through the wood, and out on to the heath. Presently she saw Thorwald's house-stead in the hollow of the hills. It looked grey in the shadow, for at this time of the year it did not get the sun till noon.

She rode down the hill and through the meadows to the garth. Her husband stood, a portly man, in the doorway, brushing his nose with his fine golden beard.

"I am glad to see you, wife," he said.

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF IT

THEY say that Cormac set sail in the *Raven* before noon of the day when he said good-bye to Stangerd. And they say that when he was in the open sea, clearing Grimsey, which is the most northerly of the islands, he saw a sea-beast of grey colour in the sea upon the port bow. He had a spear in his hand, and, as the beast swirled up alongside the ship, he threw the spear and pierced her side. She rolled over, and he saw her dead blue eyes and broad, expressionless face. He said to his brother Thorgils, "That was the face of

Thorveig the spae-wife, who set a curse upon me. If she is dead now? What had I best do?"

Thorgils said, "There's no going back now."

"There's no going back at all, in my belief," Cormac said.

* * * * *

It is true that just about then Thorveig the spae-wife did die; but Cormac did not go back, and I believe he never saw Stangerd again, though he never forgot her, and died at last with her name in his mouth. He served the Kings of Norway for many years; became a great Viking; was known in Ireland and Scotland. They say, indeed, that he made a settlement for himself at Scarborough in England; but I don't know how that may be. So far as I am concerned, I have done with him.

As is the case with all good tales, there are more sides than one to Cormac's. Was he cursed by the spae-wife, (or by his own nature?) Did he well by Stangerd, or ill? Was the poet right who said that when one of his kind loves a woman, the woman will be sorry for it?

The same poet, who is not Cormac, closes his version of the story upon a note which can be variously interpreted.

He says:

So much for Cormac. And what *she*
gain'd
Of her wild lover, or how suffer'd
To have her well of sweetness drain'd
By one or other as he offer'd—
She was a woman and, men think,
Rewarded; for they crav'd, she proffer'd;
They thirsted and she gave them drink.
They dipt their cups for what she coffer'd,
And if they needed, should she shrink
Lest she might come to want? Their
thriving
Was hers, we say—without a wink,

Because we mean it. She got by giving.
For giving man life is her living.
At least, that's man's serene persuasion.
He calls it her re-generation.

Now that's all very well; but—I should
like to have Stanvor Slimlegs' opinion more
than anyone's.



NOTE

TWO English versions of this tale are known to me, both literal translations of the Saga as it now stands. One of them, the more critical and crabbed of the pair, is to be found in the second volume of York Powell's and Vigfussen's *Origines Islandicæ*; the other, which includes a good deal omitted in the first, and is a more genial work altogether, if not so correct, is by Messieurs W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, and was published at Ulverston, in Lancashire, in 1902. It is embellished with charming landscapes of the places named in the tale. Both of these versions have been useful to me, and I hereby express my obligations

to their learned authors; but both of them render Cormac's tale exactly as it now exists, with all its joints loose, and some missing, with an abrupt beginning, no middle, and no end. My business with it has been to make it accountable, and relate part to part; for as it stands it is not reasonable; its parts don't cohere; it seems to lack human nature and that logic of events which only a study of human nature can give. Those must have been in the tale once, but they are not there now, and I have tried to put them back again. We are apt to stumble upon the discrepancies in old stories, to put them down to outlandish customs, or outmoded ones, or the vagaries of the romancer, and to slur them over. But it's not the way to get the good out of a good tale to say: "To be sure, it might be better, but let's get on" Human nature knows neither time nor place, has been very much the same in Odin's day and in Christ's, is very much

the same in Iceland and in England, and in all the countries I ever heard of or saw. Reading closely into Cormac's tale, I find it quite reasonable and full of human nature as we know it now.

Cormac was a poet, so much the better or so much the worse than other poets before him or since in that he didn't know it, or at any rate didn't know what his *poiesis* involved. He didn't know when he began, but he had an inkling before he had done. Men of his sort, who joy in the thought rather than the deed, and see beauty the better the less they handle it, have flourished in the world at all ages of it—in the days of Paris,* who did basely, in the days of Dante, who did sublimely, and in our own, when thinking and doing alike are going out of fashion in favour of talking about one or the other. Therefore, according to me, there is sound human nature in the

* This may seem a hard saying, yet I am very sure that Paris had more joy in considering Helen's beauty than in consuming it.

tale of Cormac's preposterous love-making, and no less in the account of the lovely Stangerd whom he so long and squeamishly beset. As for old Berse of the many battles, he is a man of men, and deserves a saga all to himself. He had one once, but it has perisht.

M. H.

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