The Feast at Solhoug

by Henrik Ibsen

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THE FEAST AT SOLHOUG.

by

HENRIK IBSEN

From The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen, Volume 1 Revised and Edited by William Archer

Translation by William Archer and Mary Morrison

INTRODUCTION*

Exactly a year after the production of Lady Inger of Ostrat—that is to say on the "Foundation Day" of the Bergen Theatre, January 2, 1866—The Feast at Solhoug was produced. The poet himself has written its history in full in the Preface to the second edition. The only comment that need be made upon his rejoinder to his critics has been made, with perfect fairness as it seems to me, by George Brandes in the following passage:** "No one who is unacquainted with the Scandinavian languages can fully understand the charm that the style and melody of the old ballads exercise upon the Scandinavian mind. The beautiful ballads and songs of Des Knaben Wunderhorn have perhaps had a similar power over German minds; but, as far as I am aware, no German poet has has ever succeeded in inventing a metre suitable for dramatic purposes, which yet retained the mediaeval ballad's sonorous swing and rich aroma. The explanation of the powerful impression produced in its day by Henrik Hertz's Svend Dyring's House is to be found in the fact that in it, for the first time, the problem was solved of how to fashion a metre akin to that of the heroic ballads, a metre possessing as great mobility as the verse of the Niebelungenlied, along with a dramatic value not inferior to that of the pentameter. Henrik Ibsen, it is true, has justly pointed out that, as regards the mutual relations of the principal characters, Svend Dyring's House owes more to Kleist's Kathchen von Heubronn than The Feast at Solhoug owes to Svend Dyring's House. But the fact remains that the versified parts of the dialogue of both The Feast at Solhoug and Olaf Liliekrans are written in that imitation of the tone and style of the heroic ballad, of which Hertz was the happily-inspired originator. There seems to me

to be no depreciation whatever of Ibsen in the assertion of Hertz's right to rank as his model. Even the greatest must have learnt from some one."

But while the influence of Danish lyrical romanticism is apparent in the style of the play, the structure, as it seems to me, shows no less clearly that influence of the French plot-manipulators which we found so unmistakably at work in Lady Inger. Despite its lyrical dialogue, The Feast at Solhoug has that crispiness of dramatic action which marks the French plays of the period. It may indeed be called Scribe's Bataille de Dames writ tragic. Here, as in the Bataille de Dames (one of the earliest plays produced under Ibsen's supervision), we have the rivalry of an older and a younger woman for the love of a man who is proscribed on an unjust accusation, and pursued by the emissaries of the royal power. One might even, though this would be forcing the point, find an analogy in the fact that the elder woman (in both plays a strong and determined character) has in Scribe's comedy a cowardly suitor, while in Ibsen's tragedy, or melodrama, she has a cowardly husband. In every other respect the plays are as dissimilar as possible; yet it seems to me far from unlikely that an unconscious reminiscence of the Bataille de Dames may have contributed to the shaping of The Feast at Solhoug in Ibsen's mind. But more significant than any resemblance of theme is the similarity of Ibsen's whole method to that of the French school—the way, for instance, in which misunderstandings are kept up through a careful avoidance of the use of proper names, and the way in which a cup of poison, prepared for one person, comes into the hands of another person, is, as a matter of fact, drunk by no one but occasions the acutest agony to the would-be poisoner. All this ingenious dovetailing of incidents and working-up of misunderstandings, Ibsen unquestionably learned from the French. The French language, indeed, is the only one which has a word—quiproquo—to indicate the class of misunderstanding which, from Lady Inger down to the League of Youth, Ibsen employed without scruple.

Ibsen's first visit to the home of his future wife took place after the production of

The Feast at Solhoug. It seems doubtful whether this was actually his first meeting with her; but at any rate we can scarcely suppose that he knew her during the previous summer, when he was writing his play. It is a curious coincidence, then, that he should have found in Susanna Thoresen and her sister Marie very much the same contrast of characters which had occupied him in his first dramatic effort, Catilina, and which had formed the main subject of the play he had just produced. It is less wonderful that the same contrast should so often recur in his later works, even down to John Gabriel Borkman. Ibsen was greatly attached to his gentle and retiring sister-in-law, who died unmarried in 1874.

The Feast at Solhoug has been translated by Miss Morison and myself, only because no one else could be found to undertake the task. We have done our best; but neither of us lays claim to any great metrical skill, and the light movement of Ibsen's verse is often, if not always, rendered in a sadly halting fashion. It is, however, impossible to exaggerate the irregularity of the verse in the original, or its defiance of strict metrical law. The normal line is one of four accents: but when this is said, it is almost impossible to arrive at any further generalisation. There is a certain lilting melody in many passages, and the whole play has not unfairly been said to possess the charm of a northern summer night, in which the glimmer of twilight gives place only to the gleam of morning. But in the main (though much better than its successor, Olaf Liliekrans) it is the weakest thing that Ibsen admitted into the canon of his works. He wrote it in 1870 as "a study which I now disown"; and had he continued in that frame of mind, the world would scarcely have quarrelled with his judgment. At worst, then, my collaborator and I cannot be accused of marring a masterpiece; but for which assurance we should probably have shrunk from the attempt.

W. A.

*Copyright, 1907, by Charles Scribner's Sons. **Ibsen and Bjornson. London,

Heinmann, 1899, p.88

THE FEAST AT SOLHOUG (1856)

THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

PREFACE

I wrote The Feast at Solhoug in Bergen in the summer of 1855—that is to say, about twenty-eight years ago.

The play was acted for the first time on January 2, 1856, also at Bergen, as a gala performance on the anniversary of the foundation of the Norwegian Stage.

As I was then stage-manager of the Bergen Theatre, it was I myself who conducted the rehearsals of my play. It received an excellent, a remarkably sympathetic interpretation. Acted with pleasure and enthusiasm, it was received in the same spirit. The "Bergen emotionalism," which is said to have decided the result of the latest elections in those parts, ran high that evening in the crowded theatre. The performance ended with repeated calls for the author and for the actors. Later in the evening I was serenaded by the orchestra, accompanied by a great part of the audience. I almost think that I went so far as to make some kind of speech from my window; certain I am that I felt extremely happy.

A couple of months later, The Feast of Solhoug was played in Christiania. There also it was received by the public with much approbation, and the day after the first performance Bjornson wrote a friendly, youthfully ardent article on it in the Morgenblad. It was not a notice or criticism proper, but rather a free, fanciful improvisation on the play and the performance.

On this, however, followed the real criticism, written by the real critics.

How did a man in the Christiania of those days—by which I mean the years between 1850 and 1860, or thereabouts—become a real literary, and in particular dramatic,

critic?

As a rule, the process was as follows: After some preparatory exercises in the columns of the Samfundsblad, and after the play, the future critic betook himself to Johan Dahl's bookshop and ordered from Copenhagen a copy of J. L. Heiberg's Prose Works, among which was to be found—so he had heard it said—an essay entitled On the Vaudeville. This essay was in due course read, ruminated on, and possibly to a certain extent understood. From Heiberg's writings the young man, moreover, learned of a controversy which that author had carried on in his day with Professor Oehlenschlager and with the Soro poet, Hauch. And he was simultaneously made aware that J. L. Baggesen (the author of Letters from the Dead) had at a still earlier period made a similar attack on the great author who wrote both Axel and Valborg and Hakon Jarl.

A quantity of other information useful to a critic was to be extracted from these writings. From them one learned, for instance, that taste obliged a good critic to be scandalised by a hiatus. Did the young critical Jeronimuses of Christiania encounter such a monstrosity in any new verse, they were as certain as their prototype in Holberg to shout their "Hoity-toity! the world will not last till Easter!"

The origin of another peculiar characteristic of the criticism then prevalent in the Norwegian capital was long a puzzle to me. Every time a new author published a book or had a little play acted, our critics were in the habit of flying into an ungovernable passion and behaving as if the publication of the book or the performance of the play were a mortal insult to themselves and the newspapers in which they wrote. As already remarked, I puzzled long over this peculiarity. At last I got to the bottom of the matter. Whilst reading the Danish Monthly Journal of Literature I was struck by the fact that old State-Councillor Molbech was invariably seized with a fit of rage when a young author published a book or had a play acted in Copenhagen.

Thus, or in a manner closely resembling this, had the tribunal qualified itself, which now, in the daily press, summoned The Feast at Solhoug to the bar of criticism in Christiania. It was principally composed of young men who, as regards criticism, lived upon loans from various quarters. Their critical thought had long ago been thought and expressed by others; their opinions had long ere now been formulated elsewhere. Their aesthetic principles were borrowed; their critical method was borrowed; the polemical tactics they employed were borrowed in every particular, great and small. Their very frame of mind was borrowed. Borrowing, borrowing, here, there, and everywhere! The single original thing about them was that they invariably made a wrong and unseasonable application of their borrowings.

It can surprise no one that this body, the members of which, as critics, supported themselves by borrowing, should have presupposed similar action on my part, as author. Two, possibly more than two, of the newspapers promptly discovered that I had borrowed this, that, and the other thing form Henrik Hertz's play, Svend Dyring's House.

This is a baseless and indefensible critical assertion. It is evidently to be ascribed to the fact that the metre of the ancient ballads is employed in both plays. But my tone is quite different from Hertz's; the language of my play has a different ring; a light summer breeze plays over the rhythm of my verse: over that or Hertz's brood the storms of autumn.

Nor, as regards the characters, the action, and the contents of the plays generally, is there any other or any greater resemblance between them than that which is a natural consequence of the derivation of the subjects of both from the narrow circle of ideas in which the ancient ballads move.

It might be maintained with quite as much, or even more, reason that Hertz in his Svend Dyring's House had borrowed, and that to no inconsiderable extent, from Heinrich von Kleist's Kathchen von Heilbronn, a play written at the beginning of

this century. Kathchen's relation to Count Wetterstrahl is in all essentials the same as Tagnhild's to the knight, Stig Hvide. Like Ragnhild, Kathchen is compelled by a mysterious, inexplicable power to follow the man she loves wherever he goes, to steal secretly after him, to lay herself down to sleep near him, to come back to him, as by some innate compulsion, however often she may be driven away. And other instances of supernatural interference are to be met with both in Kleist's and in Hertz's play.

But does any one doubt that it would be possible, with a little good—or a little ill-will, to discover among still older dramatic literature a play from which it could be maintained that Kleist had borrowed here and there in his Kathchen von Heilbronn? I, for my part, do not doubt it. But such suggestions of indebtedness are futile. What makes a work of art the spiritual property of its creator is the fact that he has imprinted on it the stamp of his own personality. Therefore I hold that, in spite of the above-mentioned points of resemblance, Svend Dyring's House is as incontestably and entirely an original work by Henrick Hertz as Katchen von Heilbronn is an original work by Heinrich von Kleist.

I advance the same claim on my own behalf as regards The Feast at Solhoug, and I trust that, for the future, each of the three namesakes* will be permitted to keep, in its entirety, what rightfully belongs to him.

In writing The Feast of Solhoug in connection with Svend Dyring's House, George Brandes expresses the opinion, not that the former play is founded upon any idea borrowed from the latter, but that it has been written under an influence exercised by the older author upon the younger. Brandes invariably criticises my work in such a friendly spirit that I have all reason to be obliged to him for this suggestion, as for so much else.

Nevertheless I must maintain that he, too, is in this instance mistaken. I have never specially admired Henrik Hertz as a dramatist. Hence it is impossible for me to

believe that he should, unknown to myself, have been able to exercise any influence on by dramatic production.

As regards this point and the matter in general, I might confine myself to referring those interested to the writings of Dr. Valfrid Vasenius, lecturer on Aesthetics at the University of Helsingfors. In the thesis which gained him his degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Henrik Ibsen's Dramatic Poetry in its First stage (1879), and also in Henrik Ibsen: The Portrait of a Skald (Jos. Seligman & Co., Stockholm, 1882), Valsenious states and supports his views on the subject of the play at present in question, supplementing them in the latter work by what I told him, very briefly, when we were together at Munich three years ago.

But, to prevent all misconception, I will now myself give a short account of the origin of The Feast at Solhoug.

I began this Preface with the statement that The Feast at Solhoug was written in the summer 1855.

In 1854 I had written Lady Inger of Ostrat. This was a task which had obliged me to devote much attention to the literature and history of Norway during the Middle Ages, especially the latter part of that period. I did my utmost to familiarise myself with the manners and customs, with the emotions, thought, and language of the men of those days.

The period, however, is not one over which the student is tempted to linger, nor does it present much material suitable for dramatic treatment.

Consequently I soon deserted it for the Saga period. But the Sagas of the Kings, and in general the more strictly historical traditions of that far-off age, did not attract me greatly; at that time I was unable to put the quarrels between kings and chieftains, parties and clans, to any dramatic purpose. This was to happen later.

In the Icelandic "family" Sagas, on the other hand, I found in abundance what I required in the shape of human garb for the moods, conceptions, and thoughts which

at that time occupied me, or were, at least, more or less distinctly present in my mind. With these Old Norse contributions to the personal history of our Saga period I had had no previous acquaintance; I had hardly so much as heard them named. But now N. M. Petersen's excellent translation— excellent, at least, as far as the style is concerned—fell into my hands. In the pages of these family chronicles, with their variety of scenes and of relations between man and man, between woman and woman, in short, between human being and human being, there met me a personal, eventful, really living life; and as the result of my intercourse with all these distinctly individual men and women, there presented themselves to my mind's eye the first rough, indistinct outlines of The Vikings at Helgeland.

How far the details of that drama then took shape, I am no longer able to say. But I remember perfectly that the two figures of which I first caught sight were the two women who in course of time became Hiordis and Dagny. There was to be a great banquet in the play, with passion-rousing, fateful quarrels during its course. Of other characters and passions, and situations produced by these, I meant to include whatever seemed to me most typical of the life which the Sagas reveal. In short, it was my intention to reproduce dramatically exactly what the Saga of the Volsungs gives in epic form.

I made no complete, connected plan at that time; but it was evident to me that such a drama was to be my first undertaking.

Various obstacles intervened. Most of them were of a personal nature, and these were probably the most decisive; but it undoubtedly had its significance that I happened just at this time to make a careful study of Landstad's collection of Norwegian ballads, published two years previously. My mood of the moment was more in harmony with the literary romanticism of the Middle Ages than with the deeds of the Sagas, with poetical than with prose composition, with the word-melody of the ballad than with the characterisation of the Saga.

Thus it happened that the fermenting, formless design for the tragedy, The Vikings at Helgeland, transformed itself temporarily into the lyric drama, The Feast at Solhoug.

The two female characters, the foster sisters Hiordis and Dagny, of the projected tragedy, became the sisters Margit and Signe of the completed lyric drama. The derivation of the latter pair from the two women of the Saga at once becomes apparent when attention is drawn to it. The relationship is unmistakable. The tragic hero, so far only vaguely outlined, Sigurd, the far-travelled Viking, the welcome guest at the courts of kings, became the knight and minstrel, Gudmund Alfson, who has likewise been long absent in foreign lands, and has lived in the king's household. His attitude towards the two sisters was changed, to bring it into accordance with the change in time and circumstances; but the position of both sisters to him remained practically the same as that in the projected and afterwards completed tragedy. The fateful banquet, the presentation of which had seemed to me of the first importance in my original plan, became in the drama the scene upon which its personages made their appearance; it became the background against which the action stood out, and communicated to the picture as a whole the general tone at which I aimed. The ending of the play was, undoubtedly, softened and subdued into harmony with its character as drama, not tragedy; but orthodox aestheticians may still, perhaps, find it indisputable whether, in this ending, a touch of pure tragedy has not been left behind, to testify to the origin of the drama.

Upon this subject, however, I shall not enter at present. My object has simply been to maintain and prove that the play under consideration, like all my other dramatic works, is an inevitable outcome of the tenor of my life at a certain period. It had its origin within, and was not the result of any outward impression or influence.

This, and no other, is the true account of the genesis of The Feast at Solhoug.

Henrik Ibsen. Rome, April, 1883.

*Heinrich von Kleist, Henrik Hertz, Henrik Ibsen.

THE FEAST AT SOLHOUG

CHARACTERS

BENGT GAUTESON, Master of Solhoug. MARGIT, his wife. SIGNE, her sister. GUDMUND ALFSON, their kinsman. KNUT GESLING, the King's sheriff. ERIK OF HEGGE, his friend. A HOUSE-CARL. ANOTHER HOUSE-CARL. THE KING'S ENVOY. AN OLD MAN. A MAIDEN. GUESTS, both MEN and LADIES. MEN of KNUT GESLING'S TRAIN. SERVING-MEN and MAIDENS at SOLHOUG.

The action passes at Solhoug in the Fourteenth Century.

PRONUNCIATION OF NAMES: Gudmund=Goodmund. The g in "Margit" and in "Gesling" is hard, as in "go," or in "Gesling," it may be pronounced as y—"Yesling." The first o in Solhoug ought to have the sound of a very long "oo."

Transcriber's notes:

—Signe and Hegge have umlauts above the e's, the ultimate e only in Hegge. —Passages that are in lyric form are not indented and have the directorial comments to the right of the character's name.

THE FEAST AT SOLHOUG

PLAY IN THREE ACTS

ACT FIRST

A stately room, with doors in the back and to both sides. In front on the right, a bay window with small round panes, set in lead, and near the window a table, on which is a quantity of feminine ornaments. Along the left wall, a longer table with silver

goblets and drinking-horns. The door in the back leads out to a passage-way,* through which can be seen a spacious fiord-landscape.

BENGT GAUTESON, MARGIT, KNUT GESLING and ERIK OF HEGGE are seated around the table on the left. In the background are KNUT's followers, some seated, some standing; one or two flagons of ale are handed round among them. Far off are heard church bells, ringing to Mass.

*This no doubt means a sort of arcaded veranda running along the outer wall of the house.

ERIK.

[Rising at the table.] In one word, now, what answer have you to make to my wooing on Knut Gesling's behalf?

BENGT.

[Glancing uneasily towards his wife.] Well, I—to me it seems— [As she remains silent.] H'm, Margit, let us first hear your thought in the matter.

MARGIT.

[Rising.] Sir Knut Gesling, I have long known all that Erik of Hegge has told of you. I know full well that you come of a lordly house; you are rich in gold and gear, and you stand in high favour with our royal master.

BENGT.

[To KNUT.] In high favour—so say I too.

MARGIT.

And doubtless my sister could choose her no doughtier mate—

BENGT.

None doughtier; that is what I say too.

MARGIT.

—If so be that you can win her to think kindly of you.

BENGT.

[Anxiously, and half aside.] Nay—nay, my dear wife—

KNUT.

[Springing up.] Stands it so, Dame Margit! You think that your sister—

BENGT.

[Seeking to calm him.] Nay, nay, Knut Gesling! Have patience, now. You must understand us aright.

MARGIT.

There is naught in my words to wound you. My sister knows you only by the songs that are made about you—and these songs sound but ill in gentle ears.

No peaceful home is your father's house. With your lawless, reckless crew, Day out, day in, must you hold carouse— God help her who mates with you. God help the maiden you lure or buy With gold and with forests green— Soon will her sore heart long to lie Still in the grave, I ween.

ERIK.

Aye, aye—true enough—Knut Gesling lives not overpeaceably. But there will soon come a change in that, when he gets him a wife in his hall.

KNUT.

And this I would have you mark, Dame Margit: it may be a week since, I was at a feast at Hegge, at Erik's bidding, whom here you see. I vowed a vow that Signe, your fair sister, should be my wife, and that before the year was out. Never shall it be said of Knut Gesling that he brake any vow. You can see, then, that you must e'en choose me for your sister's husband—be it with your will or against it.

MARGIT.

Ere that may be, I must tell you plain, You must rid yourself of your ravening train. You must scour no longer with yell and shout O'er the country-side in a galloping rout; You must still the shudder that spreads around When Knut Gesling is to a bride-ale bound. Courteous must your mien be when a-feasting you ride; Let your battle-axe hang at home at the chimney-side— It ever sits loose in your hand, well you know, When the mead has gone round and your brain is aglow. From no man his rightful gear shall you wrest, You shall harm no harmless maiden; You shall send no man the shameless hest That when his path crosses yours, he were best Come with his grave-clothes laden. And if you will so bear you till the year be past, You may win my sister for your bride at last.

KNUT.

[With suppressed rage.] You know how to order your words cunningly, Dame Margit. Truly, you should have been a priest, and not your husbands wife.

BENGT.

Oh, for that matter, I too could—

KNUT.

[Paying no heed to him.] But I would have you take note that had a sword-bearing man spoken to me in such wise—

BENGT.

Nay, but listen, Knut Gesling—you must understand us!

KNUT.

[As before.] Well, briefly, he should have learnt that the axe sits loose in my hand, as you said but now.

BENGT.

[Softly.] There we have it! Margit, Margit, this will never end well.

MARGIT.

[To KNUT.] You asked for a forthright answer, and that I have given you.

KNUT.

Well, well; I will not reckon too closely with you, Dame Margit. You have more wit than all the rest of us together. Here is my hand;—it may be there was somewhat of reason in the keen-edged words you spoke to me.

MARGIT.

This I like well; now are you already on the right way to amendment. Yet one word more—to-day we hold a feast at Solhoug.

KNUT.

A feast?

BENGT.

Yes, Knut Gesling: you must know that it is our wedding day; this day three years ago made me Dame Margit's husband.

MARGIT.

[Impatiently, interrupting.] As I said, we hold a feast to-day. When Mass is over, and your other business done, I would have you ride hither again, and join in the banquet. Then you can learn to know my sister.

KNUT.

So be it, Dame Margit; I thank you. Yet 'twas not to go to Mass that I rode hither this morning. Your kinsman, Gudmund Alfson, was the cause of my coming.

MARGIT.

[Starts.] He! My kinsman? Where would you seek him?

KNUT.

His homestead lies behind the headland, on the other side of the fiord.

MARGIT.

But he himself is far away.

ERIK.

Be not so sure; he may be nearer than you think.

KNUT.

[Whispers.] Hold your peace!

MARGIT.

Nearer? What mean you?

KNUT.

Have you not heard, then, that Gudmund Alfson has come back to Norway? He came with the Chancellor Audun of Hegranes, who was sent to France to bring home our new Queen.

MARGIT.

True enough, but in these very days the King holds his wedding- feast in full state at Bergen, and there is Gudmund Alfson a guest.

BENGT.

And there could we too have been guests had my wife so willed it.

ERIK.

[Aside to KNUT.] Then Dame Margit knows not that—?

KNUT.

[Aside.] So it would seem; but keep your counsel. [Aloud.] Well, well, Dame Margit, I must go my way none the less, and see what may betide. At nightfall I will be here again.

MARGIT.

And then you must show whether you have power to bridle your unruly spirit.

BENGT.

Aye, mark you that.

MARGIT.

You must lay no hand on your axe—hear you, Knut Gesling?

BENGT.

Neither on your axe, nor on your knife, nor on any other weapon whatsoever.

MARGIT.

For then can you never hope to be one of our kindred.

BENGT.

Nay, that is our firm resolve.

KNUT.

[To MARGIT.] Have no fear.

BENGT.

And what we have firmly resolved stands fast.

KNUT.

That I like well, Sir Bengt Gauteson. I, too, say the same; and I have pledged myself at the feast-board to wed your kinswoman. You may be sure that my pledge, too, will stand fast.—God's peace till to-night!

[He and ERIK, with their men, go out at the back. [BENGT accompanies them to the door. The sound of the bells has in the meantime ceased.

BENGT.

[Returning.] Methought he seemed to threaten us as he departed.

MARGIT.

[Absently.] Aye, so it seemed.

BENGT.

Knut Gesling is an ill man to fall out with. And when I bethink me, we gave him over many hard words. But come, let us not brood over that. To-day we must be merry, Margit!—as I trow we have both good reason to be.

MARGIT.

[With a weary smile.] Aye, surely, surely.

BENGT.

Tis true I was no mere stripling when I courted you. But well I wot I was the richest man for many and many a mile. You were a fair maiden, and nobly born; but your dowry would have tempted no wooer.

MARGIT.

[To herself.] Yet was I then so rich.

BENGT.

What said you, my wife?

MARGIT.

Oh, nothing, nothing. [Crosses to the right.] I will deck me with pearls and rings. Is not to-night a time of rejoicing for me?

BENGT.

I am fain to hear you say it. Let me see that you deck you in your best attire, that our guests may say: Happy she who mated with Bengt Gauteson.—But now must I to the larder; there are many things to-day that must not be over-looked.

[He goes out to the left.

MARGIT. [Sinks down on a chair by the table on the right.]

'Twas well he departed. While here he remains Meseems the blood freezes within my veins; Meseems that a crushing mighty and cold My heart in its clutches doth still enfold. [With tears she cannot repress.

He is my husband! I am his wife! How long, how long lasts a woman's life? Sixty years, mayhap—God pity me Who am not yet full twenty-three! [More calmly after a short silence.

Hard, so long in a gilded cage to pine; Hard a hopeless prisoner's lot—and mine. [Absently fingering the ornaments on the table, and beginning to put them on.

With rings, and with jewels, and all of my best By his order myself I am decking— But oh, if to-day were my burial-feast, 'Twere little that I'd be recking. [Breaking off.

But if thus I brood I must needs despair; I know a song that can lighten care. [She sings.

The Hill-King to the sea did ride; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— To woo a maiden to be his bride. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

The Hill-King rode to Sir Hakon's hold; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— Little Kirsten sat combing her locks of gold. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

The Hill-King wedded the maiden fair; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— A silvern girdle she ever must wear. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

The Hill-King wedded the lily-wand, —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— With fifteen gold rings on either hand. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

Three summers passed, and there passed full five; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— In the hill little Kirsten was buried alive. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

Five summers passed, and there passed full nine; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— Little Kirsten ne'er saw the glad sunshine. —I am waiting for thee, I am weary.—

In the dale there are flowers and the birds' blithe song; —Oh, sad are my days and dreary— In the hill there is gold and the night is long. —I am waiting for thee, I am

weary.— [She rises and crosses the room.

How oft in the gloaming would Gudmund sing This song in may father's hall. There was somewhat in it—some strange, sad thing That took my heart in thrall; Though I scarce understood, I could ne'er forget— And the words and the thoughts they haunt me yet. [Stops horror-struck.

Rings of red gold! And a belt beside—! 'Twas with gold the Hill-King wedded his bride! [In despair; sinks down on a bench beside the table on the left.

Woe! Woe! I myself am the Hill-King's wife! And there cometh none to free me from the prison of my life.

[SIGNE, radiant with gladness, comes running in from the back.

SIGNE.

[Calling.] Margit, Margit,—he is coming!

MARGIT.

[Starting up.] Coming? Who is coming?

SIGNE.

Gudmund, our kinsman!

MARGIT.

Gudmund Alfson! Here! How can you think—?

SIGNE.

Oh, I am sure of it.

MARGIT.

[Crosses to the right.] Gudmund Alfson is at the wedding-feast in the King's hall; you know that as well as I.

SIGNE.

Maybe; but none the less I am sure it was he.

MARGIT.

Have you seen him?

SIGNE.

Oh, no, no; but I must tell you—

MARGIT.

Yes, haste you—tell on!

SIGNE.

'Twas early morn, and the church bells rang, To Mass I was fain to ride; The birds in the willows twittered and sang, In the birch-groves far and wide. All earth was glad in the clear, sweet day; And from church it had well-nigh stayed me; For still, as I rode down the shady way, Each rosebud beguiled and delayed me. Silently into the church I stole; The priest at the altar was bending; He chanted and read, and with awe in their soul, The folk to God's word were attending. Then a voice rang out o'er the fiord so blue; And the carven angels, the whole church through, Turned round, methought, to listen thereto.

MARGIT.

O Signe, say on! Tell me all, tell me all!

SIGNE.

'Twas as though a strange, irresistible call Summoned me forth from the worshipping flock, Over hill and dale, over mead and rock. 'Mid the silver birches I listening trod, Moving as though in a dream; Behind me stood empty the house of God; Priest and people were lured by the magic 'twould seem, Of the tones that still through the air did stream. No sound they made; they were quiet as death; To hearken the song-birds held their breath, The lark dropped earthward, the cuckoo was still, As the voice re-echoed from hill to hill.

MARGIT.

Go on.

SIGNE.

They crossed themselves, women and men; [Pressing her hands to her breast.

But strange thoughts arose within me then; For the heavenly song familiar grew: Gudmund oft sang it to me and you— Ofttimes has Gudmund carolled it, And all he e'er sang in my heart is writ.

MARGIT.

And you think that it may be—?

SIGNE.

I know it is he! I know it? I know it! You soon shall see! [Laughing.

From far-off lands, at the last, in the end, Each song-bird homeward his flight doth bend! I am so happy—though why I scarce know—! Margit, what say you? I'll quickly go And take down his harp, that has hung so long In there on the wall that 'tis rusted quite; Its golden strings I will polish bright, And tune them to ring and to sing with his song.

MARGIT. [Absently.]

Do as you will—

SIGNE. [Reproachfully.]

Nay, this in not right. [Embracing her.

But when Gudmund comes will your heart grow light— Light, as when I was a child, again.

MARGIT.

So much has changed—ah, so much!—since then—

SIGNE.

Margit, you shall be happy and gay! Have you not serving-maids many, and thralls?

Costly robes hang in rows on your chamber walls; How rich you are, none can say. By day you can ride in the forest deep, Chasing the hart and the hind; By night in a lordly bower you can sleep, On pillows of silk reclined.

MARGIT. [Looking toward the window.]

And he comes to Solhoug! He, as a guest!

SIGNE.

What say you?

MARGIT. [Turning.]

Naught.—Deck you out in your best. That fortune which seemeth to you so bright May await yourself.

SIGNE.

Margit, say what you mean!

MARGIT. [Stroking her hair.]

I mean—nay, no more! 'Twill shortly be seen—; I mean—should a wooer ride hither to-night—?

SIGNE.

A wooer? For whom?

MARGIT.

For you.

SIGNE. [Laughing.]

For me? That he'd ta'en the wrong road full soon he would see.

MARGIT.

What would you say if a valiant knight Begged for your hand?

SIGNE.

That my heart was too light To think upon suitors or choose a mate.

MARGIT.

But if he were mighty, and rich, and great?

SIGNE.

O, were he a king, did his palace hold Stores of rich garments and ruddy gold, 'Twould ne'er set my heart desiring. With you I am rich enough here, meseeems, With summer and sun and the murmuring streams, And the birds in the branches quiring. Dear sister mine—here shall my dwelling be; And to give any wooer my hand in fee, For that I am too busy, and my heart too full of glee!

[SIGNE runs out to the left, singing.

MARGIT.

[After a pause.] Gudmund Alfson coming hither! Hither—to Solhoug? No, no, it cannot be.—Signe heard him singing, she said! When I have heard the pine-trees moaning in the forest afar, when I have heard the waterfall thunder and the birds pipe their lure in the tree-tops, it has many a time seemed to me as though, through it all, the sound of Gudmund's songs came blended. And yet he was far from here.—Signe has deceived herself. Gudmund cannot be coming.

[BENGT enters hastily from the back.

BENGT.

[Entering, calls loudly.] An unlooked-for guest my wife!

MARGIT.

What guest?

BENGT.

Your kinsman, Gudmund Alfson! [Calls through the doorway on the right.] Let the best guest-room be prepared—and that forthwith!

MARGIT.

Is he, then, already here?

BENGT.

[Looking out through the passage-way.] Nay, not yet; but he cannot be far off. [Calls again to the right.] The carved oak bed, with the dragon-heads! [Advances to MARGIT.] His shield- bearer brings a message of greeting from him; and he himself is close behind.

MARGIT.

His shield-bearer! Comes he hither with a shield-bearer!

BENGT.

Aye, by my faith he does. He has a shield-bearer and six armed men in his train. What would you? Gudmund Alfson is a far other man than he was when he set forth to seek his fortune. But I must ride forth to seek him. [Calls out.] The gilded saddle on my horse! And forget not the bridle with the serpents' heads! [Looks out to the back.] Ha, there he is already at the gate! Well, then, my staff—my silver-headed staff! Such a lordly knight—Heaven save us!—we must receive him with honour, with all seemly honour!

[Goes hastily out to the back.

MARGIT. [Brooding]

Alone he departed, a penniless swain; With esquires and henchmen now comes he again. What would he? Comes he, forsooth, to see My bitter and gnawing misery? Would he try how long, in my lot accurst, I can writhe and moan, ere my heart-strings burst— Thinks he that—? Ah, let him only try! Full little joy shall he reap thereby. [She beckons through the doorway on the right. Three handmaidens enter.

List, little maids, what I say to you: Find me my silken mantle blue. Go with me into my bower anon: My richest of velvets and furs do on. Two of you shall deck me in

scarlet and vair, The third shall wind pearl-strings into my hair. All my jewels and gauds bear away with ye! [The handmaids go out to the left, taking the ornaments with them.

Since Margit the Hill-King's bride must be, Well! don we the queenly livery!

[She goes out to the left. [BENGT ushers in GUDMUND ALFSON, through the pent-house passage at the back.

BENGT.

And now once more—welcome under Solhoug's roof, my wife's kinsman.

GUDMUND.

I thank you. And how goes it with her? She thrives well in every way, I make no doubt?

BENGT.

Aye, you may be sure she does. There is nothing she lacks. She has five handmaidens, no less, at her beck and call; a courser stands ready saddled in the stall when she lists to ride abroad. In one word, she has all that a noble lady can desire to make her happy in her lot.

GUDMUND.

And Margit—is she then happy?

BENGT.

God and all men would think that she must be; but, strange to say—

GUDMUND.

What mean you?

BENGT.

Well, believe it or not as you list, but it seems to me that Margit was merrier of heart in the days of her poverty, than since she became the lady of Solhoug.

GUDMUND.

[To himself.] I knew it; so it must be.

BENGT.

What say you, kinsman?

GUDMUND.

I say that I wonder greatly at what you tell me of your wife.

BENGT.

Aye, you may be sure I wonder at it too. On the faith and troth of an honest gentleman, 'tis beyond me to guess what more she can desire. I am about her all day long; and no one can say of me that I rule her harshly. All the cares of household and husbandry I have taken on myself; yet notwithstanding— Well, well, you were ever a merry heart; I doubt not you will bring sunshine with you. Hush! here comes Dame Margit! Let her not see that I—

[MARGIT enters from the left, richly dressed.

GUDMUND.

[Going to meet her.] Margit—my dear Margit!

MARGIT.

[Stops, and looks at him without recognition.] Your pardon, Sir Knight; but—? [As though she only now recognized him.] Surely, if I mistake not, 'tis Gudmund Alfson.

[Holding out her hand to him.

GUDMUND.

[Without taking it.] And you did not at once know me again?

BENGT.

[Laughing.] Why, Margit, of what are you thinking? I told you but a moment agone that your kinsman—

MARGIT.

[Crossing to the table on the right.] Twelve years is a long time, Gudmund. The freshest plant may wither ten times over in that space.

GUDMUND.

'Tis seven years since last we met.

MARGIT.

Surely it must be more than that.

GUDMUND.

[Looking at her.] I could almost think so. But 'tis as I say.

MARGIT.

How strange! I must have been but a child then; and it seems to me a whole eternity since I was a child. [Throws herself down on a chair.] Well, sit you down, my kinsman! Rest you, for to-night you shall dance, and rejoice us with your singing. [With a forced smile.] Doubtless you know we are merry here to-day—we are holding a feast.

GUDMUND.

'Twas told me as I entered your homestead.

BENGT.

Aye, 'tis three years to-day since I became—

MARGIT.

[Interrupting.] My kinsman has already heard it. [To GUDMUND.] Will you not lay aside your cloak?

GUDMUND.

I thank you, Dame Margit; but it seems to me cold here—colder than I had foreseen.

BENGT.

For my part, I am warm enough; but then I have a hundred things to do and to take order for. [To MARGIT.] Let not the time seem long to our guest while I am absent. You can talk together of the old days.

[Going.

MARGIT.

[Hesitating.] Are you going? Will you not rather—?

BENGT.

[Laughing, to GUDMUND, as he comes forward again.] See you well— Sir Bengt of Solhoug is the man to make the women fain of him. How short so e'er the space, my wife cannot abide to be without me. [To MARGIT, caressing her.] Content you; I shall soon be with you again.

[He goes out to the back.

MARGIT.

[To herself.] Oh, torture, to have to endure it all.

[A short silence.

GUDMUND.

How goes it, I pray, with your sister dear?

MARGIT.

Right well, I thank you.

GUDMUND.

They said she was here With you.

MARGIT.

She has been here ever since we— [Breaks off.

She came, now three years since, to Solhoug with me. [After a pause.

Ere long she'll be here, her friend to greet.

GUDMUND.

Well I mind me of Signe's nature sweet. No guile she dreamed of, no evil knew. When I call to remembrance her eyes so blue I must think of the angels in heaven. But of years there have passed no fewer than seven; In that time much may have altered. Oh, say If she, too, has changed so while I've been away?

MARGIT.

She too? Is it, pray, in the halls of kings That you learn such courtly ways, Sir Knight? To remind me thus of the change time brings—

GUDMUND.

Nay, Margit, my meaning you read aright! You were kind to me, both, in those far-away years— Your eyes, when we parted were wet with tears. We swore like brother and sister still To hold together in good hap or ill. 'Mid the other maids like a sun you shone, Far, far and wide was your beauty known. You are no less fair than you were, I wot; But Solhoug's mistress, I see, has forgot The penniless kinsman. So hard is your mind That ever of old was gentle and kind.

MARGIT. [Choking back her tears.]

Aye, of old—!

GUDMUND. [Looks compassionately at her, is silent for a little, then says in a subdued voice.

Shall we do as your husband said? Pass the time with talk of the dear old days?

MARGIT. [Vehemently.]

No, no, not of them! Their memory's dead. My mind unwillingly backward strays. Tell rather of what your life has been, Of what in the wide world you've done and seen. Adventures you've lacked not, well I ween— In all the warmth and the space out yonder, That heart and mind should be light, what wonder?

GUDMUND.

In the King's high hall I found not the joy That I knew by my own poor hearth as a boy.

MARGIT. [Without looking at him.]

While I, as at Solhoug each day flits past, Thank Heaven that here has my lot been cast.

GUDMUND.

'Tis well if for this you can thankful be—

MARGIT. [Vehemently.]

Why not? For am I not honoured and free? Must not all folk here obey my hest? Rule I not all things as seemeth me best? Here I am first, with no second beside me; And that, as you know, from of old satisfied me. Did you think you would find me weary and sad? Nay, my mind is at peace and my heart is glad. You might, then, have spared your journey here To Solhoug; 'twill profit you little, I fear.

GUDMUND.

What, mean you, Dame Margit?

MARGIT. [Rising.]

I understand all— I know why you come to my lonely hall.

GUDMUND.

And you welcome me not, though you know why I came? [Bowing and about to go.

God's peace and farewell, then, my noble dame!

MARGIT.

To have stayed in the royal hall, indeed, Sir Knight, had better become your fame.

GUDMUND. [Stops.]

In the royal hall? Do you scoff at my need?

MARGIT.

Your need? You are ill to content, my friend; Where, I would know, do you think to end? You can dress you in velvet and cramoisie, You stand by the throne, and have lands in fee—

GUDMUND.

Do you deem, then, that fortune is kind to me? You said but now that full well you knew What brought me to Solhoug—

MARGIT.

I told you true!

GUDMUND.

Then you know what of late has befallen me;— You have heard the tale of my outlawry?

MARGIT. [Terror-struck.]

An outlaw! You, Gudmund!

GUDMUND.

I am indeed. But I swear, by the Holy Christ I swear, Had I known the thoughts of your heart, I ne'er Had bent me to Solhoug in my need. I thought that you still were gentle-hearted, As you ever were wont to be ere we parted: But I truckle not to you; the wood is wide, My hand and my bow shall fend for me there; I will drink of the mountain brook, and hide My head in the beast's lair.

[On the point of going.

MARGIT. [Holding him back.]

Outlawed! Nay, stay! I swear to you That naught of your outlawry I knew.

GUDMUND.

It is as I tell you. My life's at stake; And to live are all men fain. Three nights like a dog 'neath the sky I've lain, My couch on the hillside forced to make, With for

pillow the boulder grey. Though too proud to knock at the door of the stranger, And pray him for aid in the hour of danger, Yet strong was my hope as I held on my way: I thought: When to Solhoug you come at last Then all your pains will be done and past. You have sure friends there, whatever betide.— But hope like a wayside flower shrivels up; Though your husband met me with flagon and cup, And his doors flung open wide, Within, your dwelling seems chill and bare; Dark is the hall; my friends are not there. 'Tis well; I will back to my hills from your halls.

MARGIT. [Beseechingly.]

Oh, hear me!

GUDMUND.

My soul is not base as a thrall's. Now life to me seems a thing of nought; Truly I hold it scarce worth a thought. You have killed all that I hold most dear; Of my fairest hopes I follow the bier. Farewell, then, Dame Margit!

MARGIT.

Nay, Gudmund, hear! By all that is holy—!

GUDMUND.

Live on as before Live on in honour and joyance— Never shall Gudmund darken your door, Never shall cause you 'noyance.

MARGIT.

Enough, enough. Your bitterness You presently shall rue. Had I known you outlawed, shelterless, Hunted the country through— Trust me, the day that brought you here Would have seemed the fairest of many a year; And a feast I had counted it indeed When you turned to Solhoug for refuge in need.

GUDMUND.

What say you—? How shall I read your mind?

MARGIT. [Holding out her hand to him.]

Read this: that at Solhoug dwell kinsfolk kind.

GUDMUND.

But you said of late—?

MARGIT.

To that pay no heed, Or hear me, and understand indeed. For me is life but a long, black night, Nor sun, nor star for me shines bright. I have sold my youth and my liberty, And none from my bargain can set me free. My heart's content I have bartered for gold, With gilded chains I have fettered myself; Trust me, it is but comfort cold To the sorrowful soul, the pride of pelf. How blithe was my childhood—how free from care! Our house was lowly and scant our store; But treasures of hope in my breast I bore.

GUDMUND. [Whose eyes have been fixed upon her.]

E'en then you were growing to beauty rare.

MARGIT.

Mayhap; but the praises showered on me Caused the wreck of my happiness—that I now see. To far-off lands away you sailed; But deep in my heart was graven each song You had ever sung; and their glamour was strong; With a mist of dreams my brow they veiled. In them all the joys you had dwelt upon That can find a home in the beating breast; You had sung so oft of the lordly life 'Mid knights and ladies. And lo! anon Came wooers a many from east and from west; And so—I became Bengt Gauteson's wife.

GUDMUND.

Oh, Margit!

MARGIT.

The days that passed were but few Ere with tears my folly I 'gan to rue. To think, my kinsman and friend, on thee Was all the comfort left to me. How empty now seemed

Solhoug's hall, How hateful and drear its great rooms all! Hither came many a knight and dame, Came many a skald to sing my fame. But never a one who could fathom aright My spirit and all its yearning— I shivered, as though in the Hill-King's might; Yet my head throbbed, my blood was burning.

GUDMUND.

But your husband—?

MARGIT.

He never to me was dear. 'Twas his gold was my undoing. When he spoke to me, aye, or e'en drew near, My spirit writhed with ruing. [Clasping her hands.

And thus have I lived for three long years— A life of sorrow, of unstanched tears! Your coming was rumoured. You know full well What pride deep down in my heart doth dwell. I hid my anguish, I veiled my woe, For you were the last that the truth must know.

GUDMUND. [Moved.]

'Twas therefore, then, that you turned away—

MARGIT. [Not looking at him.]

I thought you came at my woe to jeer.

GUDMUND.

Margit, how could you think—?

MARGIT.

Nay, nay, There was reason enough for such a fear. But thanks be to Heaven that fear is gone; And now no longer I stand alone; My spirit now is as light and free As a child's at play 'neath the greenwood tree. [With a sudden start of fear.

Ah, where are my wits fled! How could I forget—? Ye saints, I need sorely your succor yet! An outlaw, you said—?

GUDMUND. [Smiling.]

Nay, now I'm at home; Hither the King's men scarce dare come.

MARGIT.

Your fall has been sudden. I pray you, tell How you lost the King's favour.

GUDMUND.

'Twas thus it befell. You know how I journeyed to France of late, When the Chancellor, Audun of Hegranes, Fared thither from Bergen, in royal state, To lead home the King's bride, the fair Princess, With her squires, and maidens, and ducats bright. Sir Audun's a fair and stately knight, The Princess shone with a beauty rare— Her eyes seemed full of a burning prayer. They would oft talk alone and in whispers, the two— Of what? That nobody guessed or knew. There came a night when I leant at ease Against the galley's railing; My thought flew onward to Norway's leas, With the milk-white seagulls sailing. Two voices whispered behind my back;— I turned—it was he and she; I knew them well, though the night was black, But they—they saw not me. She gazed upon him with sorrowful eyes And whispered: "Ah, if to southern skies We could turn the vessel's prow, And we were alone in the bark, we twain, My heart, methinks, would find peace again, Nor would fever burn my brow." Sir Audun answers; and straight she replies, In words so fierce, so bold; Like glittering stars I can see her eyes; She begged him— [Breaking off.

My blood ran cold.

MARGIT.

She begged—?

GUDMUND.

I arose, and they vanished apace; All was silent, fore and aft:— [Producing a small phial.

But this I found by their resting place.

MARGIT.

And that—?

GUDMUND. [Lowering his voice.]

Holds a secret draught. A drop of this in your enemy's cup And his life will sicken and wither up. No leechcraft helps 'gainst the deadly thing.

MARGIT.

And that—?

GUDMUND.

That draught was meant for the King.

MARGIT.

Great God!

GUDMUND. [Putting up the phial again.]

That I found it was well for them all. In three days more was our voyage ended; Then I fled, by my faithful men attended. For I knew right well, in the royal hall, That Audun subtly would work my fall,— Accusing me—

MARGIT.

Aye, but at Solhoug he Cannot harm you. All as of old will be.

GUDMUND.

All? Nay, Margit—you then were free.

MARGIT.

You mean—?

GUDMUND.

I? Nay, I meant naught. My brain Is wildered; but ah, I am blithe and fain To be, as of old, with you sisters twain. But tell me,—Signe—?

MARGIT. [Points smiling towards the door on the left.]

She comes anon. To greet her kinsman she needs must don Her trinkets—a task that takes time, 'tis plain.

GUDMUND.

I must see—I must see if she knows me again.

[He goes out to the left.

MARGIT.

[Following him with her eyes.] How fair and manlike he is! [With a sigh.] There is little likeness 'twixt him and— [Begins putting things in order on the table, but presently stops.] "You then were free," he said. Yes, then! [A short pause.] 'Twas a strange tale, that of the Princess who— She held another dear, and then— Aye, those women of far-off lands— I have heard it before—they are not weak as we are; they do not fear to pass from thought to deed. [Takes up a goblet which stands on the table.] 'Twas in this beaker that Gudmund and I, when he went away, drank to his happy return. 'Tis well-nigh the only heirloom I brought with me to Solhoug. [Putting the goblet away in a cupboard.] How soft is this summer day; and how light it is in here! So sweetly has the sun not shone for three long years.

[SIGNE, and after her GUDMUND, enters from the left.

SIGNE. [Runs laughing up to MARGIT.]

Ha, ha, ha! He will not believe that 'tis I!

MARGIT. [Smiling to GUDMUND.]

You see: while in far-off lands you strayed, She, too, has altered, the little maid.

GUDMUND.

Aye truly! But that she should be— Why, 'Tis a marvel in very deed. [Takes both SIGNE's hands and looks at her.

Yet, when I look in these eyes so blue, The innocent child-mind I still can read— Yes, Signe, I know that 'tis you! I needs must laugh when I think how oft I have

thought of you perched on my shoulder aloft As you used to ride. You were then a child; Now you are a nixie, spell-weaving, wild.

SIGNE. [Threatening with her finger.]

Beware! If the nixie's ire you awaken, Soon in her nets you will find yourself taken.

GUDMUND. [To himself.]

I am snared already, it seems to me.

SIGNE.

But, Gudmund, wait—you have still to see How I've shielded your harp from the dust and the rust. [As she goes out to the left.

You shall teach me all of your songs! You must!

GUDMUND. [Softly, as he follows her with his eyes.]

She has flushed to the loveliest rose of May, That was yet but a bud in the morning's ray.

SIGNE. [Returning with the harp.]

Behold!

GUDMUND. [Taking it.]

My harp! As bright as of yore! [Striking one or two chords.

Still the old chords ring sweet and clear— On the wall, untouched, thou shalt hang no more.

MARGIT. [Looking out at the back.]

Our guests are coming.

SIGNE. [While GUDMUND preludes his song.]

Hush—hush! Oh, hear!

GUDMUND. [Sings.]

I roamed through the uplands so heavy of cheer; The little birds quavered in bush

and in brere; The little birds quavered, around and above: Wouldst know of the sowing and growing of love?

It grows like the oak tree through slow-rolling years; 'Tis nourished by dreams, and by songs, and by tears; But swiftly 'tis sown; ere a moment speeds by, Deep, deep in the heart love is rooted for aye.

[As he strikes the concluding chords, he goes towards the back where he lays down his harp.

SIGNE. [Thoughtfully, repeats to herself.]

But swiftly 'tis sown; ere a moment speeds by, Deep, deep in the heart love is rooted for aye.

MARGIT.

[Absently.] Did you speak to me?—I heard not clearly—?

SIGNE.

I? No, no. I only meant—

[She again becomes absorbed in dreams.

MARGIT. [Half aloud; looking straight before her.]

It grows like the oak tree through slow-rolling years; 'Tis nourished by dreams, and by songs and by tears.

SIGNE.

[Returning to herself.] You said that—?

MARGIT.

[Drawing her hand over her brow.] Nay, 'twas nothing. Come, we must go meet our guests.

[BENGT enters with many GUESTS, both men and women, through the passageway.

GUESTS.

With song and harping enter we The feast-hall opened wide; Peace to our hostess kind and free, All happiness to her betide. O'er Solhoug's roof for ever may Bright as to-day The heavens abide.

ACT SECOND

A birch grove adjoining the house, one corner of which is seen to the left. At the back, a footpath leads up the hillside. To the right of the footpath a river comes tumbling down a ravine and loses itself among boulders and stones. It is a light summer evening. The door leading to the house stands open; the windows are lighted up. Music is heard from within.

THE GUESTS. [Singing in the Feast Hall.]

Set bow to fiddle! To sound of strings We'll dance till night shall furl her wings, Through the long hours glad and golden! Like blood-red blossom the maiden glows— Come, bold young wooer and hold the rose In a soft embrace enfolden.

[KNUT GESLING and ERIK OF HEGGE enter from the house. Sounds of music, dancing and merriment are heard from within during what follows.

ERIK.

If only you come not to repent it, Knut.

KNUT.

That is my affair.

ERIK.

Well, say what you will, 'tis a daring move. You are the King's Sheriff. Commands go forth to you that you shall seize the person of Gudmund Alfson, wherever you may find him. And now, when you have him in your grasp, you proffer him your friendship, and let him go freely, whithersoever he will.

KNUT.

I know what I am doing. I sought him in his own dwelling, but there he was not to be found. If, now, I went about to seize him here—think you that Dame Margit would be minded to give me Signe to wife?

ERIK.

[With deliberation.] No, by fair means it might scarcely be, but—

KNUT.

And by foul means I am loth to proceed. Moreover, Gudmund is my friend from bygone days; and he can be helpful to me. [With decision.] Therefore it shall be as I have said. This evening no one at Solhoug shall know that Gudmund Alfson is an outlaw;— to-morrow he must look to himself.

ERIK.

Aye, but the King's decree?

KNUT.

Oh, the King's decree! You know as well as I that the King's decree is but little heeded here in the uplands. Were the King's decree to be enforced, many a stout fellow among us would have to pay dear both for bride-rape and for man-slaying. Come this way, I would fain know where Signe—?

[They go out to the right. [GUDMUND and SIGNE come down the footpath at the back.

SIGNE.

Oh, speak! Say on! For sweeter far Such words than sweetest music are.

GUDMUND.

Signe, my flower, my lily fair!

SIGNE. [In subdued, but happy wonderment.]

I am dear to him—I!

Gudmund.

As none other I swear.

SIGNE.

And is it I that can bind your will! And is it I that your heart can fill! Oh, dare I believe you?

GUDMUND.

Indeed you may. List to me, Signe! The years sped away, But faithful was I in my thoughts to you, My fairest flowers, ye sisters two. My own heart I could not clearly read. When I left, my Signe was but a child, A fairy elf, like the creatures wild Who play, while we sleep, in wood and mead. But in Solhoug's hall to-day, right loud My heart spake, and right clearly; It told me that Margit's a lady proud, Whilst you're the sweet maiden I love most dearly.

SIGNE. [Who has only half listened to his words.]

I mind me, we sat in the hearth's red glow, One winter evening—'tis long ago— And you sang to me of the maiden fair Whom the neckan had lured to his watery lair. There she forgot both father and mother, There she forgot both sister and brother; Heaven and earth and her Christian speech, And her God, she forgot them all and each. But close by the strand a stripling stood And he was heartsore and heavy of mood. He struck from his harpstrings notes of woe, That wide o'er the waters rang loud, rang low. The spell-bound maid in the tarn so deep, His strains awoke from her heavy sleep, The neckan must grant her release from his rule, She rose through the lilies afloat on the pool— Then looked she to heaven while on green earth she trod, And wakened once more to her faith and her God.

GUDMUND.

Signe, my fairest of flowers!

SIGNE.

It seems That I, too, have lived in a world of dreams. But the strange deep words you to-night have spoken, Of the power of love, have my slumber broken. The heavens seemed never so blue to me, Never the world so fair; I can understand, as I roam with thee, The song of the birds in air.

GUDMUND.

So mighty is love—it stirs in the breast Thought and longings and happy unrest. But come, let us both to your sister go.

SIGNE.

Would you tell her—?

GUDMUND.

Everything she must know.

SIGNE.

Then go you alone;—I feel that my cheek Would be hot with blushes to hear you speak.

GUDMUND.

So be it, I go.

SIGNE.

And here will I bide; [Listening towards the right.

Or better—down by the riverside, I hear Knut Gesling, with maidens and men.

GUDMUND.

There will you stay?

SIGNE.

Till you come again

[She goes out to the right. GUDMUND goes into the house. [MARGIT enters from

behind the house on the left.

MARGIT.

In the hall there is gladness and revelry; The dancers foot it with jest and glee. The air weighed hot on my brow and breast; For Gudmund, he was not there. [She draws a deep breath.

Out here 'tis better: here's quiet and rest. How sweet is the cool night air! [A brooding silence.

The horrible thought! Oh, why should it be That wherever I go it follows me? The phial—doth a secret contain; A drop of this in my—enemy's cup, And his life would sicken and wither up; The leech's skill would be tried in vain. [Again a silence.

Were I sure that Gudmund—held me dear— Then little I'd care for—

[GUDMUND enters from the house.

GUDMUND.

You, Margit, here? And alone? I have sought you everywhere.

MARGIT.

'Tis cool here. I sickened of heat and glare. See you how yonder the white mists glide Softly over the marshes wide? Here it is neither dark nor light, But midway between them— [To herself.

—as in my breast. [Looking at him.

Is't not so—when you wander on such a night You hear, though but half to yourself confessed, A stirring of secret life through the hush, In tree and in leaf, in flower and in rush? [With a sudden change of tone.

Can you guess what I wish?

GUDMUND.

Well?

MARGIT.

That I could be The nixie that haunts yonder upland lea. How cunningly I should weave my spell! Trust me—!

GUDMUND.

Margit, what ails you? Tell!

MARGIT. [Paying no heed to him.]

How I should quaver my magic lay! Quaver and croon it both night and day! [With growing vehemence.

How I would lure the knight so bold Through the greenwood glades to my mountain hold. There were the world and its woes forgot In the burning joys of our blissful lot.

GUDMUND.

Margit! Margit!

MARGIT. [Ever more wildly.]

At midnight's hour Sweet were our sleep in my lonely bower;— And if death should come with the dawn, I trow 'Twere sweet to die so;—what thinkest thou?

GUDMUND.

You are sick!

MARGIT. [Bursting into laughter.]

Ha, ha!—Let me laugh! 'Tis good To laugh when the heart is in laughing mood!

GUDMUND.

I see that you still have the same wild soul As of old—

MARGIT. [With sudden seriousness.]

Nay, let not that vex your mind, 'Tis only at midnight it mocks control; By day I am timid as any hind. How tame I have grown, you yourself must say, When you think on the women in lands far away— Of that fair Princess—ah, she was wild! Beside

her lamblike am I and mild. She did not helplessly yearn and brood, She would have acted; and that—

GUDMUND.

'Tis good You remind me; Straightway I'll cast away What to me is valueless after this day—

[Takes out the phial.

MARGIT.

The phial! You meant—?

GUDMUND.

I thought it might be At need a friend that should set me free Should the King's men chance to lay hands on me. But from to-night it has lost its worth; Now will I fight all the kings of earth, Gather my kinsfolk and friends to the strife, And battle right stoutly for freedom and life.

[Is about to throw the phial against a rock.

MARGIT. [Seizing his arm.]

Nay, hold! Let me have it—

GUDMUND.

First tell me why?

MARGIT.

I'd fain fling it down to the neckan hard by, Who so often has made my dull hours fleet With his harping and songs, so strange and sweet. Give it me! [Takes the phial from his hand.

There!

[Feigns to throw it into the river.

GUDMUND. [Goes to the right, and looks down into the ravine.]

Have you thrown it away?

MARGIT. [Concealing the phial.]

Aye, surely! You saw— [Whispers as she goes towards the house.

Now God help and spare me! [Aloud.

Gudmund!

GUDMUND. [Approaching.]

What would you?

MARGIT.

Teach me, I pray, How to interpret the ancient lay They sing of the church in the valley there: A gentle knight and a lady fair, They loved each other well. That very day on her bier she lay He on his sword-point fell. They buried her by the northward spire, And him by the south kirk wall; And theretofore grew neither bush nor briar In the hallowed ground at all. But next spring from their coffins twain Two lilies fair upgrew— And by and by, o'er the roof-tree high, They twined and they bloomed the whole year through. How read you the riddle?

GUDMUND. [Looks searchingly at her.]

I scarce can say.

MARGIT.

You may doubtless read it in many a way; But its truest meaning, methinks, is clear: The church can never sever two that hold each other dear.

GUDMUND. [To himself.]

Ye saints, if she should—? Lest worse befall, 'Tis time indeed I told her all! [Aloud.

Do you wish for my happiness—Margit, tell!

MARGIT. [In joyful agitation.]

Wish for it! I!

GUDMUND.

Then, wot you well, The joy of my life now rests with you—

MARGIT. [With an outburst.]

Gudmund!

GUDMUND.

Listen! 'tis the time you knew—

[He stops suddenly. [Voices and laughter are heard by the river bank. SIGNE and other GIRLS enter from the right, accompanied by KNUT, ERIK, and several YOUNGER MEN.

KNUT.

[Still at a distance.] Gudmund Alfson! Wait; I must speak a word with you.

[He stops, talking to ERIK. The other GUESTS in the meantime enter the house.

MARGIT.

[To herself.] The joy of his life—! What else can he mean but—! [Half aloud.] Signe—my dear, dear sister!

[She puts her arm round SIGNE's waist, and they go towards the back talking to each other.

GUDMUND.

[Softly as he follows them with his eyes.] Aye, so it were wisest. Both Signe and I must away from Solhoug. Knut Gesling has shown himself my friend; he will help me.

KNUT.

[Softly, to ERIK.] Yes, yes, I say, Gudmund is her kinsman; he can best plead my cause.

ERIK.

Well, as you will.

[He goes into the house.

KNUT.

[Approaching.] Listen, Gudmund—

GUDMUND.

[Smiling.] Come you to tell me that you dare no longer let me go free.

KNUT.

Dare! Be at your ease as to that. Knut Gesling dares whatever he will. No, 'tis another matter. You know that here in the district, I am held to be a wild, unruly companion—

GUDMUND.

Aye, and if rumour lies not—

KNUT.

Why no, much that it reports may be true enough. But now, I must tell you—

[They go, conversing, up towards the back.

SIGNE.

[To MARGIT, as they come forward beside the house.] I understand you not. You speak as though an unlooked-for happiness had befallen you. What is in your mind?

MARGIT.

Signe—you are still a child; you know not what it means to have ever in your heart the dread of— [Suddenly breaking off.] Think, Signe, what it must be to wither and die without ever having lived.

SIGNE.

[Looks at her in astonishment, and shakes her head.] Nay, but, Margit—?

MARGIT.

Aye, aye, you do not understand, but none the less—

[They go up again, talking to each other. GUDMUND and KNUT come down on the other side.

GUDMUND.

Well, if so it be—if this wild life no longer contents you— then I will give you the best counsel that ever friend gave to friend: take to wife an honourable maiden.

KNUT.

Say you so? And if I now told you that 'tis even that I have in mind?

GUDMUND.

Good luck and happiness to you then, Knut Gesling! And now you must know that I too—

KNUT.

You? Are you, too, so purposed?

GUDMUND.

Aye truly. But the King's wrath—I am a banished man—

KNUT.

Nay, to that you need give but little thought. As yet there is no one here, save Dame Margit, that knows aught of the matter; and so long as I am your friend, you have one in whom you can trust securely. Now I must tell you—

[He proceeds in a whisper as they go up again.

SIGNE.

[As she and MARGIT again advance.] But tell me then Margit—!

MARGIT.

More I dare not tell you.

SIGNE.

Then will I be more open-hearted than you. But first answer me one question. [Bashfully, with hesitation.] Is there no one who has told you anything concerning me?

MARGIT.

Concerning you? Nay, what should that be?

SIGNE.

[As before, looking downwards.] You said to me this morning: if a wooer came riding hither—?

MARGIT.

That is true. [To herself.] Knut Gesling—has he already—? [Eagerly to SIGNE.] Well? What then?

SIGNE.

[Softly, but with exultation.] The wooer has come! He has come, Margit! I knew not then whom you meant; but now—!

MARGIT.

And what have you answered him?

SIGNE.

Oh, how should I know? [Flinging her arms round her sister's neck.] But the world seems to me so rich and beautiful since the moment when he told me that he held me dear.

MARGIT.

Why, Signe, Signe, I cannot understand that you should so quickly—! You scarce knew him before to-day.

SIGNE.

Oh, 'tis but little I yet know of love; but this I know that what the song says is true:

Full swiftly 'tis sown; ere a moment speeds by, Deep, deep in the heart love is rooted for aye—

MARGIT.

So be it; and since so it is, I need no longer hold aught concealed from you. Ah—

[She stops suddenly, as she sees KNUT and GUDMUND approaching.

KNUT.

[In a tone of satisfaction.] Ha, this is as I would have it, Gudmund. Here is my hand!

MARGIT.

[To herself.] What is this?

GUDMUND.

[To KNUT.] And here is mine!

[They shake hands.

KNUT.

But now we must each of us name who it is—

GUDMUND.

Good. Here at Solhoug, among so many fair women, I have found her whom—

KNUT.

I too. And I will bear her home this very night, if it be needful.

MARGIT.

[Who has approached unobserved.] All saints in heaven!

GUDMUND.

[Nods to KNUT.] The same is my intent.

SIGNE.

[Who has also been listening.] Gudmund!

GUDMUND AND KNUT.

[Whispering to each other, as they both point at Signe.] There she is!

GUDMUND.

[Starting.] Aye, mine.

KNUT.

[Likewise.] No, mine!

MARGIT.

[Softly, half bewildered.] Signe!

GUDMUND.

[As before, to KNUT.] What mean you by that?

KNUT.

I mean that 'tis Signe whom I—

GUDMUND.

Signe! Signe is my betrothed in the sight of God.

MARGIT.

[With a cry.] It was she! No—no!

GUDMUND.

[To himself, as he catches sight of her.] Margit! She has heard everything.

KNUT.

Ho, ho! So this is how it stands? Nay, Dame Margit, 'tis needless to put on such an air of wonder; now I understand everything.

MARGIT.

[To SIGNE.] But not a moment ago you said—? [Suddenly grasping the situation.] 'Twas Gudmund you meant!

SIGNE.

[Astonished.] Yes, did you not know it! But what ails you, Margit?

MARGIT.

[In an almost toneless voice.] Nay, nothing, nothing.

KNUT.

[To MARGIT.] And this morning, when you made me give my word that I would stir no strife here to-night—you already knew that Gudmund Alfson was coming. Ha, ha, think not that you can hoodwink Knut Gesling! Signe has become dear to me. Even this morning 'twas but my hasty vow that drove me to seek her hand; but now—

SIGNE.

[To MARGIT.] He? Was this the wooer that was in your mind?

MARGIT.

Hush, hush!

KNUT.

[Firmly and harshly.] Dame Margit—you are her elder sister; you shall give me an answer.

MARGIT.

[Battling with herself.] Signe has already made her choice;—I have naught to answer.

KNUT.

Good; then I have nothing more to do at Solhoug. But after midnight—mark you this—the day is at an end; then you may chance to see me again, and then Fortune must decide whether it be Gudmund or I that shall bear Signe away from this house.

GUDMUND.

Aye, try if you dare; it shall cost you a bloody sconce.

SIGNE.

[In terror.] Gudmund! By all the saints—!

KNUT.

Gently, gently, Gudmund Alfson! Ere sunrise you shall be in my power. And she—your lady-love— [Goes up to the door, beckons and calls in a low voice.] Erik! Erik! come hither! we must away to our kinsfolk. [Threateningly, while ERIK shows himself in the doorway.] Woe upon you all when I come again!

[He and ERIK go off to the left at the back.

SIGNE.

[Softly to GUDMUND.] Oh, tell me, what does all this mean?

GUDMUND.

[Whispering.] We must both leave Solhoug this very night.

SIGNE.

God shield me—you would—!

GUDMUND.

Say nought of it! No word to any one, not even to your sister.

MARGIT.

[To herself.] She—it is she! She of whom he had scarce thought before to-night. Had I been free, I know well whom he had chosen.— Aye, free!

[BENGT and GUESTS, both Men and Women enter from the house.

YOUNG MEN AND MAIDENS.

Out here, out here be the feast arrayed, While the birds are asleep in the greenwood shade, How sweet to sport in the flowery glade 'Neath the birches.

Out here, out here, shall be mirth and jest, No sigh on the lips and no care in the

breast, When the fiddle is tuned at the dancers' 'hest, 'Neath the birches.

BENGT.

That is well, that is well! So I fain would see it! I am merry, and my wife likewise; and therefore I pray ye all to be merry along with us.

ONE OF THE GUESTS.

Aye, now let us have a stave-match.*

*A contest in impromptu verse-making.

MANY.

[Shout.] Yes, yes, a stave-match!

ANOTHER GUEST.

Nay, let that be; it leads but to strife at the feast. [Lowering his voice.] Bear in mind that Knut Gesling is with us to-night.

SEVERAL.

[Whispering among themselves.] Aye, aye, that is true. Remember the last time, how he—. Best beware.

AN OLD MAN.

But you, Dame Margit—I know your kind had ever wealth of tales in store; and you yourself, even as a child, knew many a fair legend.

MARGIT.

Alas! I have forgot them all. But ask Gudmund Alfson, my kinsman; he knows a tale that is merry enough.

GUDMUND.

[In a low voice, imploringly.] Margit!

MARGIT.

Why, what a pitiful countenance you put on! Be merry, Gudmund! Be merry! Aye,

aye, it comes easy to you, well I wot. [Laughing, to the GUESTS.] He has seen the huldra to-night. She would fain have tempted him; but Gudmund is a faithful swain. [Turns again to GUDMUND.] Aye, but the tale is not finished yet. When you bear away your lady-love, over hill and through forest, be sure you turn not round; be sure you never look back—the huldra sits laughing behind every bush; and when all is done— [In a low voice, coming close up to him.] —you will go no further than she will let you.

[She crosses to the right.

SIGNE.

Oh, God! Oh, God!

BENGT.

[Going around among the GUESTS in high contentment.] Ha, ha, ha! Dame Margit knows how to set the mirth afoot! When she takes it in hand, she does it much better than I.

GUDMUND.

[To himself.] She threatens! I must tear the last hope out of her breast; else will peace never come to her mind. [Turns to the GUESTS.] I mind me of a little song. If it please you to hear it—

SEVERAL OF THE GUESTS.

Thanks, thanks, Gudmund Alfson!

[They close around him some sitting, others standing. MARGIT leans against a tree in front on the right. SIGNE stands on the left, near the house.

GUDMUND.

I rode into the wildwood, I sailed across the sea, But 'twas at home I wooed and won A maiden fair and free.

It was the Queen of Elfland, She waxed full wroth and grim: Never, she swore, shall

that maiden fair Ride to the church with him.

Hear me, thou Queen of Elfland, Vain, vain are threat and spell; For naught can sunder two true hearts That love each other well!

AN OLD MAN.

That is a right fair song. See how the young swains cast their glances thitherward! [Pointing towards the GIRLS.] Aye, aye, doubtless each has his own.

BENGT.

[Making eyes at MARGIT.] Yes, I have mine, that is sure enough. Ha, ha, ha!

MARGIT.

[To herself, quivering.] To have to suffer all this shame and scorn! No, no; now to essay the last remedy.

BENGT.

What ails you? Meseems you look so pale.

MARGIT.

'Twill soon pass over. [Turns to the GUESTS.] Did I say e'en now that I had forgotten all my tales? I bethink me now that I remember one.

BENGT.

Good, good, my wife! Come, let us hear it.

YOUNG GIRLS.

[Urgently.] Yes, tell it us, tell it us, Dame Margit!

MARGIT.

I almost fear that 'twill little please you; but that must be as it may.

GUDMUND.

[To himself.] Saints in heaven, surely she would not—!

MARGIT.

It was a fair and noble maid, She dwelt in her father's hall; Both linen and silk did she broider and braid, Yet found in it solace small. For she sat there alone in cheerless state, Empty were hall and bower; In the pride of her heart, she was fain to mate With a chieftain of pelf and power. But now 'twas the Hill King, he rode from the north, With his henchmen and his gold; On the third day at night he in triumph fared forth, Bearing her to his mountain hold. Full many a summer she dwelt in the hill; Out of beakers of gold she could drink at her will. Oh, fair are the flowers of the valley, I trow, But only in dreams can she gather them now! 'Twas a youth, right gentle and bold to boot, Struck his harp with such magic might That it rang to the mountain's inmost root, Where she languished in the night. The sound in her soul waked a wondrous mood— Wide open the mountain-gates seemed to stand; The peace of God lay over the land, And she saw how it all was fair and good. There happened what never had happened before; She had wakened to life as his harp-strings thrilled; And her eyes were opened to all the store Of treasure wherewith the good earth is filled. For mark this well: it hath ever been found That those who in caverns deep lie bound Are lightly freed by the harp's glad sound. He saw her prisoned, he heard her wail— But he cast unheeding his harp aside, Hoisted straightway his silken sail, And sped away o'er the waters wide To stranger strands with his new-found bride. [With ever-increasing passion.

So fair was thy touch on the golden strings That my breast heaves high and my spirit sings! I must out, I must out to the sweet green leas! I die in the Hill-King's fastnesses! He mocks at my woe as he clasps his bride And sails away o'er the waters wide. [Shrieks.

With me all is over; my hill-prison barred; Unsunned is the day, and the night all unstarred.

[She totters and, fainting, seeks to support herself against the trunk of a tree.

SIGNE.

[Weeping, has rushed up to her, and takes her in her arms.] Margit! My sister!

GUDMUND.

[At the same time, supporting her.] Help! help! she is dying!

[BENGT and the GUESTS flock round them with cries of alarm.

ACT THIRD

The hall at Solhoug as before, but now in disorder after the feast. It is night still, but with a glimmer of approaching dawn in the room and over the landscape without.

BENGT stands outside in the passage-way, with a beaker of ale in his hand. A party of GUESTS are in the act of leaving the house. In the room a MAID-SERVANT is restoring order.

BENGT.

[Calls to the departing GUESTS.] God speed you, then, and bring you back ere long to Solhoug. Methinks you, like the rest, might have stayed and slept till morning. Well, well! Yet hold—I'll e'en go with you to the gate. I must drink your healths once more.

[He goes out.

GUESTS. [Sing in the distance.]

Farewell, and God's blessing on one and all Beneath this roof abiding! The road must be faced. To the fiddler we call: Tune up! Our cares deriding, With dance and with song We'll shorten the way so weary and long. Right merrily off we go.

[The song dies away in the distance. [MARGIT enters the hall by the door on the right.

MAID.

God save us, my lady, have you left your bed?

MARGIT.

I am well. Go you and sleep. Stay—tell me, are the guests all gone?

MAID.

No, not all; some wait till later in the day; ere now they are sleeping sound.

MARGIT.

And Gudmund Alfson—?

MAID.

He, too, is doubtless asleep. [Points to the right.] 'Tis some time since he went to his chamber—yonder, across the passage.

MARGIT.

Good; you may go.

[The MAID goes out to the left. [MARGIT walks slowly across the hall, seats herself by the table on the right, and gazes out at the open window.

MARGIT.

To-morrow, then, Gudmund will ride away Out into the world so great and wide. Alone with my husband here I must stay; And well do I know what will then betide. Like the broken branch and the trampled flower I shall suffer and fade from hour to hour. [Short pause; she leans back in her chair.

I once heard a tale of a child blind from birth, Whose childhood was full of joy and mirth; For the mother, with spells of magic might, Wove for the dark eyes a world of light. And the child looked forth with wonder and glee Upon the valley and hill, upon land and sea. Then suddenly the witchcraft failed— The child once more was in darkness pent; Good-bye to games and merriment; With longing vain the red cheeks paled. And its wail of woe, as it pined away, Was ceaseless, and sadder than words can say.— Oh! like the child's my eyes were sealed, To the light and the life of summer blind— [She springs up.

But now—! And I in this cage confined! No, now is the worth of my youth revealed! Three years of life I on him have spent— My husband—but were I longer content This hapless, hopeless weird to dree, Meek as a dove I needs must be. I am wearied to death of petty brawls; The stirring life of the great world calls. I will follow Gudmund with shield and bow, I will share his joys, I will soothe his woe, Watch o'er him both by night and day. All that behold shall envy the life Of the valiant knight and Margit his wife.— His wife! [Wrings her hands.

Oh God, what is this I say! Forgive me, forgive me, and oh! let me feel The peace that hath power both to soothe and to heal. [Walks back and forward, brooding silently.

Signe, my sister—? How hateful 'twere To steal her glad young life from her! But who can tell? In very sooth She may love him but with the light love of youth. [Again silence; she takes out the little phial, looks long at it and says under her breath:

This phial—were I its powers to try— My husband would sleep for ever and aye! [Horror-struck.

No, no! To the river's depths with it straight! [In the act of throwing it out of the window, stops.

And yet I could—'tis not yet too late.— [With an expression of mingled horror and rapture, whispers.

With what a magic resistless might Sin masters us in our own despite! Doubly alluring methinks is the goal I must reach through blood, with the wreck of my soul.

[BENGT, with the empty beaker in his hand, comes in from the passageway; his face is red; he staggers slightly.

BENGT.

[Flinging the beaker upon the table on the left.] My faith, this has been a feast that

will be the talk of the country. [Sees MARGIT.] Eh, are you there? You are well again. Good, good.

MARGIT.

[Who in the meantime has concealed the phial.] Is the door barred?

BENGT.

[Seating himself at the table on the left.] I have seen to everything. I went with the last guests as far as the gates. But what became of Knut Gesling to-night?—Give me mead, Margit! I am thirsty Fill this cup.

[MARGIT fetches a flagon of the mead from a cupboard, and and fills the goblet which is on the table before him.

MARGIT.

[Crossing to the right with the flagon.] You asked about Knut Gesling.

BENGT.

That I did. The boaster, the braggart! I have not forgot his threats of yester-morning.

MARGIT.

He used worse words when he left to-night.

BENGT.

He did? So much the better. I will strike him dead.

MARGIT.

[Smiling contemptuously.] H'm—

BENGT.

I will kill him, I say! I fear not to face ten such fellows as he. In the store-house hangs my grandfather's axe; its shaft is inlaid with silver; with that axe in my hands, I tell you—! [Thumps the table and drinks.] To-morrow I shall arm myself, go forth with all my men, and slay Knut Gesling.

[Empties the beaker.

MARGIT.

[To herself.] Oh, to have to live with him!

[Is in the act of leaving the room.

BENGT.

Margit, come here! Fill my cup again. [She approaches; he tries to draw her down on his knee.] Ha, ha, ha! You are right fair, Margit! I love thee well!

MARGIT.

[Freeing herself.] Let me go!

[Crosses, with the goblet in her hand, to the left.

BENGT.

You are not in the humour to-night. Ha, ha, ha! That means no great matter, I know.

MARGIT.

[Softly, as she fills the goblet.] Oh, that this might be the last beaker I should fill for you.

[She leaves the goblet on the table and is making her way out to the left.

BENGT.

Hark to me, Margit. For one thing you may thank Heaven, and that is, that I made you my wife before Gudmund Alfson came back.

MARGIT.

Why so?

BENGT.

Why, say you? Am not I ten times the richer man? And certain I am that he would have sought you for his wife, had you not been the mistress of Solhoug.

MARGIT.

[Drawing nearer and glancing at the goblet.] Say you so?

BENGT.

I could take my oath upon it. Bengt Gauteson has two sharp eyes in his head. But he may still have Signe.

MARGIT.

And you think he will—?

BENGT.

Take her? Aye, since he cannot have you. But had you been free,—then— Ha, ha, ha! Gudmund is like the rest. He envies me my wife. That is why I set such store by you, Margit. Here with the goblet again. And let it be full to the brim!

MARGIT.

[Goes unwillingly across to the right.] You shall have it straightway.

BENGT.

Knut Gesling is a suitor for Signe, too, but him I am resolved to slay. Gudmund is an honourable man; he shall have her. Think, Margit, what good days we shall have with them for neighbours. We will go a-visiting each other, and then will we sit the live-long day, each with his wife on his knee, drinking and talking of this and that.

MARGIT.

[Whose mental struggle is visibly becoming more severe, involuntarily takes out the phial as she says:] No doubt no doubt!

BENGT.

Ha, ha, ha! it may be that at first Gudmund will look askance at me when I take you in my arms; but that, I doubt not, he will soon get over.

MARGIT.

This is more than woman can bear! [Pours the contents of the phial into the goblet,

goes to the window and throws out the phial, then says, without looking at him.] Your beaker is full.

BENGT.

Then bring it hither!

MARGIT.

[Battling in an agony of indecision, at last says.] I pray you drink no more to-night!

BENGT.

[Leans back in his chair and laughs.] Oho! You are impatient for my coming? Get you in; I will follow you soon.

MARGIT.

[Suddenly decided.] Your beaker is full. [Points.] There it is.

[She goes quickly out to the left.

BENGT.

[Rising.] I like her well. It repents me not a whit that I took her to wife, though of heritage she owned no more than yonder goblet and the brooches of her wedding gown.

[He goes to the table at the window and takes the goblet. [A HOUSE-CARL enters hurriedly and with scared looks, from the back.

HOUSE-CARL.

[Calls.] Sir Bengt, Sir Bengt! haste forth with all the speed you can! Knut Gesling with an armed train is drawing near the house.

BENGT.

[Putting down the goblet.] Knut Gesling? Who brings the tidings?

HOUSE-CARL.

Some of your guests espied him on the road beneath, and hastened back to warn

you.

BENGT.

E'en so. Then will I—! Fetch me my grandfather's battle-axe!

[He and the HOUSE-CARL go out at the back. [Soon after, GUDMUND and SIGNE enter quietly and cautiously by the door at the back.

SIGNE. [In muffled tones.]

It must then, be so!

GUDMUND. [Also softly.]

Necessity's might Constrains us.

SIGNE.

Oh! thus under cover of night To steal from the valley where I was born? [Dries her eyes.

Yet shalt thou hear no plaint forlorn. 'Tis for thy sake my home I flee; Wert thou not outlawed, Gudmund dear, I'd stay with my sister.

GUDMUND.

Only to be Ta'en by Knut Gesling, with bow and spear, Swung on the croup of his battle-horse, And made his wife by force.

SIGNE.

Quick, let us flee. But whither go?

GUDMUND.

Down by the fiord a friend I know; He'll find us a ship. O'er the salt sea foam We'll sail away south to Denmark's bowers. There waits you there a happy home; Right joyously will fleet the hours; The fairest of flowers they bloom in the shade Of the beech-tree glade.

SIGNE. [Bursts into tears.]

Farewell, my poor sister! Like my mother tender Thou hast guarded the ways my feet have trod, Hast guided my footsteps, aye praying to God, The Almighty, to be my defender.— Gudmund—here is a goblet filled with mead; Let us drink to her; let us wish that ere long Her soul may again be calm and strong, And that God may be good to her need.

[She takes the goblet into her hands.

GUDMUND.

Aye, let us drain it, naming her name! [Starts.

Stop! [Takes the goblet from her.

For meseems it is the same—

SIGNE.

'Tis Margit's beaker.

GUDMUND. [Examining it carefully.]

By Heaven, 'tis so! I mind me still of the red wine's glow As she drank from it on the day we parted To our meeting again in health and glad-hearted. To herself that draught betided woe. No, Signe, ne'er drink wine or mead From that goblet. [Pours its contents out at the window.

We must away with all speed.

[Tumult and calls without, at the back.

SIGNE.

List, Gudmund! Voices and trampling feet!

GUDMUND.

Knut Gesling's voice!

SIGNE.

O save us, Lord!

GUDMUND. [Places himself in front of her.]

Nay, nay, fear nothing, Signe sweet— I am here, and my good sword.

[MARGIT comes in in haste from the left.

MARGIT.

[Listening to the noise.] What means this? Is my husband—?

GUDMUND AND SIGNE.

Margit!

MARGIT.

[Catches sight of them.] Gudmund! And Signe! Are you here?

SIGNE.

[Going towards her.] Margit—dear sister!

MARGIT.

[Appalled, having seen the goblet which GUDMUND still holds in his hand.] The goblet! Who has drunk from it?

GUDMUND.

[Confused.] Drunk—? I and Signe—we meant—

MARGIT.

[Screams.] O God, have mercy! Help! Help! They will die!

GUDMUND.

[Setting down the goblet.] Margit—!

SIGNE.

What ails you, sister?

MARGIT.

[Towards the back.] Help, help! Will no one help?

[A HOUSE-CARL rushes in from the passage-way.

HOUSE-CARL.

[Calls in a terrified voice.] Lady Margit! Your husband—!

MARGIT.

He—has he, too, drunk—!

GUDMUND.

[To himself.] Ah! now I understand—

HOUSE-CARL.

Knut Gesling has slain him.

SIGNE.

Slain!

GUDMUND.

[Drawing his sword.] Not yet, I hope. [Whispers to MARGIT.] Fear not. No one has drunk from your goblet.

MARGIT.

Then thanks be to God, who has saved us all!

[She sinks down on a chair to the left. Gudmund hastens towards the door at the back.

ANOTHER HOUSE-CARL.

[Enters, stopping him.] You come too late. Sir Bengt is dead.

GUDMUND.

Too late, then, too late.

HOUSE-CARL.

The guests and your men have prevailed against the murderous crew. Knut Gesling

and his men are prisoners. Here they come.

[GUDMUND's men, and a number of GUESTS and HOUSE-CARLS, lead in KNUT GESLING, ERIK OF HEGGE, and several of KNUT's men, bound.

KNUT.

[Who is pale, says in a low voice.] Man-slayer, Gudmund. What say you to that?

GUDMUND.

Knut, Knut, what have you done?

ERIK.

'Twas a mischance, of that I can take my oath.

KNUT.

He ran at me swinging his axe; I meant but to defend myself, and struck the death-blow unawares.

ERIK.

Many here saw all that befell.

KNUT.

Lady Margit, crave what fine you will. I am ready to pay it.

MARGIT.

I crave naught. God will judge us all. Yet stay—one thing I require. Forgo your evil design upon my sister.

KNUT.

Never again shall I essay to redeem my baleful pledge. From this day onward I am a better man. Yet would I fain escape dishonourable punishment for my deed. [To GUDMUND.] Should you be restored to favour and place again, say a good word for me to the King!

GUDMUND.

I? Ere the sun sets, I must have left the country.

[Astonishment amongst the GUESTS. ERIK in whispers, explains the situation.

MARGIT.

[To GUDMUND.] You go? And Signe with you?

SIGNE.

[Beseechingly.] Margit!

MARGIT.

Good fortune follow you both!

SIGNE.

[Flinging her arms round MARGIT's neck.] Dear sister!

GUDMUND.

Margit, I thank you. And now farewell. [Listening.] Hush! I hear the tramp of hoofs in the court-yard.

SIGNE.

[Apprehensively.] Strangers have arrived.

[A HOUSE-CARL appears in the doorway at the back.

HOUSE-CARL.

The King's men are without. They seek Gudmund Alfson.

SIGNE.

Oh God!

MARGIT.

[In great alarm.] The King's men!

GUDMUND.

All is at an end, then. Oh Signe, to lose you now—could there be a harder fate?

KNUT.

Nay, Gudmund; sell your life dearly, man! Unbind us; we are ready to fight for you, one and all.

ERIK.

[Looks out.] 'Twould be in vain; they are too many for us.

SIGNE.

Here they come. Oh Gudmund, Gudmund!

[The KING's MESSENGER enters from the back, with his escort.

MESSENGER.

In the King's name I seek you, Gudmund Alfson, and bring you his behests.

GUDMUND.

Be it so. Yet am I guiltless; I swear it by all that is holy!

MESSENGER.

We know it.

GUDMUND.

What say you?

[Agitation amongst those present.

MESSENGER.

I am ordered to bid you as a guest to the King's house. His friendship is yours as it was before, and along with it he bestows on you rich fiefs.

GUDMUND.

Signe!

SIGNE.

Gudmund!

GUDMUND.

But tell me—?

MESSENGER.

Your enemy, the Chancellor Audun Hugleikson, has fallen.

GUDMUND.

The Chancellor!

GUESTS.

[To each other, in half-whisper.] Fallen!

MESSENGER.

Three days ago he was beheaded at Bergen. [Lowering his voice.] His offence was against Norway's Queen.

MARGIT. [Placing herself between GUDMUND and SIGNE.]

Thus punishment treads on the heels of crime! Protecting angels, loving and bright, Have looked down in mercy on me to-night, And come to my rescue while yet it was time. Now know I that life's most precious treasure Is nor worldly wealth nor earthly pleasure, I have felt the remorse, the terror I know, Of those who wantonly peril their soul, To St. Sunniva's cloister forthwith I go.— [Before GUDMUND and SIGNE can speak.

Nay: think not to move me or control. [Places SIGNE's hand in GUDMUND's.

Take her then Gudmund, and make her your bride. Your union is holy; God's on your side.

[Waving farewell, she goes towards the doorway on the left. GUDMUND and SIGNE follow her, she stops them with a motion of her hand, goes out, and shuts the door behind her. At this moment the sun rises and sheds its light in the hall.

GUDMUND.

Signe—my wife! See, the morning glow! 'Tis the morning of our young love. Rejoice!

SIGNE.

All my fairest of dreams and of memories I owe To the strains of thy harp and the sound of thy voice. My noble minstrel, to joy or sadness Tune thou that harp as seems thee best; There are chords, believe me, within my breast To answer to thine, or of woe or of gladness.

CHORUS OF MEN AND WOMEN.

Over the earth keeps watch the eye of light, Guardeth lovingly the good man's ways, Sheddeth round him its consoling rays;— Praise be to the Lord in heaven's height!

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FEAST AT SOLHOUG ***

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