THE CHILDREN
OF THE SEA

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THE CHILDREN OF THE SEA

A Romance

By

H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

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The Skarsstöd of this book is not to be confused with the town of Skardsstöd situated on the Breidifjord.

BOOK I

THE WOMAN ON THE BEACH

CHAPTER I

THE "PRESIDENT GIRLING"

Dawn was breaking on the Sea of Japan—an absolutely cloudless and perfect dawn, with a puff of hot, moist wind from the east; a landwind scented with all the flowers of the Province of Hondo.

The last trace of morning bank had vanished and the coast of Japan lay to starboard, low land and a thousand little hills, and beyond all these the Asama-Sama Mountains, fringed with gold and fire.

On the bridge of the *President Girling* Captain Benedikt Grondaal stood with the chief cable engineer, Páll Jakob Briem. They were not exchanging a word, just watching the coast and the blaze of the haloed hills and the lazy white gulls fishing, and crying as they fished, the only sound from all that world of sea and sunrise.

The *President Girling* belonged to the Franco-Danish Telegraph Company. Her crew had signed on in Copenhagen seven months ago, and since then she had covered ten thousand miles of sea, visiting the strangest places in the execution of her business—the laying and mending of deep-sea cables.

The Franco-Danish Telegraph Company's works at Copenhagen are as big as Henly's of Silvertown, nearly. They make deep-sea cables, they make waterproof overcoats, they make everything, almost, that can be made out of indiarubber. With French money and Danish seamanship and energy, they have established a place of their own in the deep-sea cable business, though they can never hope to displace the English from the lead in this the most intricate sea industry in the world.

The *President Girling*, having tinkered a broken cable at Portuguese Timor, came up to Tonkin to lay a short river cable for the French Government; whilst there, Japan called her to the mending of a cable between the peninsula of Noto and an island which is a Japanese naval base and which lies a hundred and fifty miles to the west.

Now, the *President Girling* had laid this cable seven years ago, and when a cable is laid, the hydrographers of the laying ship make a chart of the sea with the track of the cable marked upon it. When it gets broken by any chance, the electricians on shore can tell the exact position of the break. So, when the telegram came to Tonkin stating the exact position of the break in the length of the cable, Amundsen, the hydrographer of the *President*

Girling, had only to look up his chart to be able to put his finger on the exact spot of the sea where the cable would have to be fished for and mended.

They were nearing the "spot" now and were heading obliquely for the land.

Whiffs of cooking coming on curls of the breeze told that the cable hands were getting their breakfast, and from aft a sound like the sound of a great sewing-machine at work told that the Kelvin deep-sea sounder was being tuned up. Forward of the bridge, right in the bows, the engine of the picking-up gear cumbered the deck, and Jurgensen, the donkey-man, was making its toilet, an oil-can in one hand, a lump of cotton waste in the other; now oiling cranks and piston-rods, now trying the taps by which the steam from the main boilers would come to revolve the great drum round which the grapnel rope was wound. Red-painted buoys, each numbered, and each bearing a socket for lamp and flagstaff, gave a touch of colour to the deck, and now, as Captain Grondaal and the chief cable engineer stood with one eye on the approaching shore, they could see Johansson, foreman of the cable hands, passing along the deck forward from his breakfast, and wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

He stood six feet six, a gigantic man with grizzled curly hair that blew in the wind as he took his place on the bow balks, envisaged the coast, and then turned and cast his eyes over the engines, the grapnel ropes, the grapnels, and the buoys.

The coast was only three miles distant now, and, though the sea's surface was smooth as oil, a long ground swell heaved it and broke in foam on the rocks of the distant shore.

Briem, who had taken a glass from its sling, glanced through it for a moment, and then handed it to Grondaal. He had spotted the cable hut where the shore end of the cable came in on a sandy strip of beach, a couple of miles ahead.

Then, turning, he came down the ladder to the main deck, and passed down the companionway to the cable deck. This was a place as big and airy as a ballroom, with great wide-open ports that let the wind sweep through without ever sweeping away the smell of rope and tar and cable. The cable hands, twelve in number, were busy seeing to the grapnel ropes, the grapnels, the hawsers for stoppering the cable, the mushroom anchors for the buoys, and the hundred and one details, each important and each inseparable from the most intricate and daring business in the world.

The cable hands were absolutely distinct from the crew, and berthed apart—Icelanders and Danes to a man, and all expert boatmen; most of them fishermen.

After Johansson, the foreman, chief amongst them was Erikr Ericsson, six feet two, handsome and blonde, with the daring face of a Viking, and the eye of a hawk when straining over sea distances, human and blue when cast on a woman. After Ericsson came Jonass Magnuss, middle-sized, dark, with a fanatical air about him, and given, like most Icelanders, to politics and poetry. He and Ericsson were bound companions; the most extraordinary pair, often quarrelling, yet absolutely necessary to each other. When Fate turns dramatist, she often binds two contrary natures together like this. Even in their follies they were different, for Ericsson's pet folly was girls; Magnuss's drink.

As Briem passed along on his tour of inspection, Magnuss and Ericsson were just finishing the job they were on. He had scarcely passed them when the faint sound of the engine-room telegraph bell was followed by the slowing of the main engines; then they stopped.

The two men came to one of the open ports to starboard and looked over the burning sea to the shore.

"This is the spot," said Magnuss. "I was here seven years ago, when we laid; that's the beach where the shore end comes in, and there are villages all amongst those little hills, and there's a village down by the shore there, where the men do all the women's work, and the women all the men's." He leaned forward and spat through the port into the sea.

"How d'ye mean?" said Ericsson.

"I mean what I say," replied Magnuss.

Another man had come up to look out of the port, for there was nothing doing just yet, as preliminary soundings were being taken.

"The men stay at home minding the children and doing the cooking and washing, and the women do the fishing, diving mostly for shell-fish. The best-looking and the strongest-looking women I have ever seen. By thunder, yes! And when the men misbehave themselves, the women spank them."

"Oh, tell that to the Dutchmen," said the other man.

Magnuss grew heated.

"I'm not lying. Who'd make such a yarn up out of his own head? You've got as much sense in you as a stock fish. I've seen 'em, and I tell you they're not like any other women I’ve ever seen.”

“Good-looking girls, you say?” put in the impressionable Ericsson.

“By thunder, yes!”

“I’ll go ashore there,” said Ericsson.

“If you do, mind they don’t spank you,” said the other man.

“And I’ll spank the first one I meet, for the matter of that. Who’ll bet me I won’t?”

“I will,” replied the other man, Helgi Olsen by name, also an Icelander, hailing from Akureyri. “I’ll bet you a pound of tobacco and a pair of new boots, the best the Edinburgh stores at Reykjavik can supply.”

“Done,” said Ericsson.

Magnuss sneered. Ericsson’s handsome face and figure and the way he got on with women were thorns in his flesh.

“You’ll get no chance,” said he.

“How?”

“There’ll be no going ashore; or not till we get to Nagasaki.”

“Who knows?” replied Ericsson, and as he said the words the noise of the Kelvin sounder ceased, and the depth was shouted by the leadsmen to the quartermaster by the bridge, who shouted it to the captain: “Seven hundred fathom. Hard rock.”

Briem, the cable engineer, standing now on the bow balks, raised his hand as the depth was reported to him. From this minute right on till the cable was mended, he was in virtual command of the ship.

“We’ll drop the first mark buoy here, sir,” shouted Briem to the bridge. “Ho there, Ericsson!”

Ericsson came forward at a run. He was chief in charge of the buoys and a past-master in the art and mystery of deep-sea buoying.

The buoying of harbours and shallow waters is a simple matter. You have only to anchor your buoy with a chain cable for moorings, but you cannot anchor with a chain in seven hundred fathom water or in three-mile water; chain is too heavy, you must use rope, and here is where the trouble comes in. For a deep-sea buoy is always spinning, and turning, and twisting and bobbing to the waves, and the rope, where it joins the buoy, is apt to get frayed to pieces and break.

Then, every buoy has a peculiarity of its own. Buoy No. 4 on the *President Girling* was a beast to break loose from any fastening. Ericsson swore it had teeth to gnaw the rope with. Buoy No. 6 rode askew in a heavy sea and washed its lamps off. Buoy No. 1 rode too deep, and Buoy No. 5 had killed a man once when being got inboard.

It was Briem's first duty, now that he had arrived at the spot where the cable lay, to drop a mark buoy on either side of the cable line at a quarter of a mile distant, so that he would have a course to steam upon whilst grappling for the cable.

The cable hands under the direction of Ericsson fixed the cable flag in the socket of Buoy No. 5, swung her out with the flag fluttering in the wind, dropped her mushroom anchor and over seven hundred fathom of rope, and then let her go. She went wallop into the water, span away from the ship's side, shaking herself like a duck, righted, and then rode to her moorings, a patch of red on the blazing blue of the sea, whilst the *President Girling* steamed off to lay the second mark buoy a mile away to southward.

They were getting the grapnel ready now for lowering. A grapnel in its simplest form consists of three prongs of steel like three hooked fingers; it is lowered on a rope over a wheel at the bow, and the ship, steaming slowly ahead, drags it over the bottom of the sea. Needless to say, it clutches at everything it is dragged over: rock, fragments of wreck, or clump of seaweed. Just before leaving the bow, the grapnel rope passes under a machine called a dynamometer, which registers on a graduated scale every strain put upon the rope. With a rocky bottom the fluctuations of the pointer are tremendous, but do not deceive the cable engineer. He knows that when the grapnel catches cable, the strain comes gradually and increasingly. Some of the old cable hands disregard the dynamometer entirely; just by putting their ear to the grapnel rope they can tell unerringly what the grapnel has caught.

The *President Girling*, having dropped her second mark buoy, turned her nose, dropped the grapnel, and began to steam dead slow for mark buoy No. 1.

The sun was now high over the coast of Japan, which lay clear-cut as a cameo across the blue and blazing sea. The cable hands, having nothing to do for a while, went aft to the shelter of the alley-ways, and Ericsson with Magnuss slipped down to the cable deck for a smoke. Here they found Thordursson, the man who did the cable splicings and odd jobs for the electricians, and a member of the crew, who went by the name of the

Zealander. He hailed from Zealand, though as a matter of fact Funnen was his birthplace.

CHAPTER II
THE ZEALANDER

The Zealander was an extraordinary specimen of a man: red-haired, unkempt, with a high retreating forehead, broad cheek-bones, and a beard which grew in two tufts on either side of his chin, like whiskers that had slipped down from their proper place. He was seated on the deck by Thordursson, who was also seated, engaged in welding some copper wire.

“Hullo,” said Ericsson, “here’s a foremast hand on the cable deck. What are you doing here, you Zealand dog?”

The man laughed good-humouredly. He was the only member of the crew who dared to come and make free on the cable deck. He was an oddity—besides, he was a soothsayer, could see the future in a glass of gin, and had the command of all sorts of spirits, evil and otherwise. His one desire in life was fat; all the fat unconsumed at the fo’c’s’le mess was devoured by him. So great was his passion for the carbon compounds that soap was not safe in his hands, to say nothing of tallow candles. Brandy, or any form of alcohol, was his next prime desire in life, yet no man had ever seen him drunk.

Ericsson and Magnuss sat down close to Thordursson on a coil of three-inch hawser, and lit their pipes. The Zealander begged a chew of tobacco, and Ericsson cut him off a piece of plug, then he chucked it at him, and the man caught it in his teeth; it was one of his accomplishments. Then off he went without a word.

“Bad luck go with him,” said Thordursson. “He makes me feel as if I were sitting with my back to an iceberg.”

“He says he has always seven red devils on his right hand and seven blue on his left,” said Magnuss; “and that’s what makes him such a good helmsman. You know, when he’s at the wheel the ship never goes a point off her course.”

“Ay, ay, he’s a good man at his work,” said the electrician. “The Funnen folk are all that. But he’s an ill man for a companion. He knows more about devils than angels, I’m thinking.”

As he said the words, the faint and far-off sound of the engine-room telegraph bell came from below, the trampling of the engine ceased, and almost immediately came the clank-clank of the picking-up gear.

Ericsson and Magnuss, without a word, shot off the coil of rope and came up the companion and down the alley-way into the full blaze of sunlight on the forward deck.

The wind had quite died away, and the *President Girling*, on a sea of almost impossible blue, lay rolling with a gentle movement to the swell.

The grapnel rope was coming in, dripping over the slowly revolving drum. The dynamometer showed a strain of four and a half tons, and was slowly rising. Briem, with his ear now and then to the dripping grapnel rope, wore a satisfied air. It was cable, and they had caught it at the very first grapple, a piece of luck not often come in with.

Briem knew everything that was going on at the bottom of the sea. He knew that the grapnel and its rope, as weighed in sea-water, weighed two and a half tons; the remaining two tons was the weight of the cable they had seized and lifted off the bottom. He knew that the floor of the sea just here was coral rock, and that the cable was sure to be glued down here and there with coral, and, knowing this, he stopped the picking-up gear now and then and left the movement of the ship rising and falling on the swell to break the cable gently from its coral attachments.

Then the clanking drum revolved again, and fathom by fathom and hundredweight by hundredweight the rope and its prey were slowly hauled to the surface, till at last the grapnel itself appeared, with a bight of the cable tangled in its prongs. It was hauled up to the bow; and a man, lowered in a sling, seized a rope to the cable hanging from the starboard side of the grapnel, another to the cable hanging from the port side, then he cut the cable from the grapnel itself, and the two pieces were left hanging by the ropes.

The piece on the port side was the cable connected with the shore, on the starboard side the “loose piece” leading to the broken end.

The loose piece was hauled in first; it proved to be only quarter of a mile long. It was stowed away in one of the cable tanks and then the shore end was hauled on board, dragged aft, and connected with the electric testing-room.

Away over the blue water a tiny flag could be seen hanging listless in the windless air above the cable hut on the beach. The Japanese electricians were there, waiting to talk to the ship on the cable that now connected the *President Girling* with the shore.

Then one of the junior electricians came running out of the testing-room, scrambled up the bridge and gave a message to Captain Grondaal. Briem was called up on the bridge, and the cable hands, watching, speculated on what the new business might be. The roaring voice of Briem soon informed them:

“Ready with a buoy for the cable, and a boat for landing; spades and all to dig up the shore end. There’s a fault on the beach. Ho, there! Ericsson, get four of your men to go with the boat party.”

Ericsson ran forward and clapped his hand on one of the buoys.

“Look alive with her lamp,” he cried, “and get ready for hoisting.”

CHAPTER III

THE SPANKING

In a moment the lamp, ready trimmed, was in its socket, and the buoy, hoisted on the derrick ropes, sailed up off the deck to the tune of the steam-winch pawls and swung-out board. The mushroom anchor and rope were dropped, and the cable was connected with the buoy. Then cable and buoy were lowered to the water, and sailed off to be brought up by the tug of their moorings. The lamp would burn for forty-eight hours.

“Lamp burning all right?” shouted Briem.

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied Ericsson.

Briem came down from the bridge to where the whale-boat was swinging at the starboard quarter davits. She was flush with the bulwarks, and the crew were already on board her. Ericsson and his men got in, Briem followed them and took his place in the stern sheets, and the boat, lowered by the steam winch, sank gently to the sea surface, kissed it, and was afloat.

Next moment they were making for the shore. They had not landed at Tonkin, not a foot of them had touched ground since leaving Dilli in Portuguese Timor, and they talked and laughed like children—even the fellows sweating at the oars, who knew full well the work before them, and that not one of the lordly cable hands would touch pick or shovel as long as they could get a shell-back to do the work, or native labour.

As for Briem, when on light duty like this, he was one with his men. He had risen from being a fisherman and was proud of the fact. A terrible martinet on the bow balks, ashore he would drink with them in a tavern, without, however, stepping over the line. This familiarity between cable and quarter-deck is only possible among Danes and Swedes and Icelanders without subversion of discipline.

They were nearing the shore now; great hawks, come out as if to meet them, were sailing and wheeling in the blue above, filling the air with a lamentable cry. Hahn! Hahn! Hahn! the sound of the surf on the rocks came mixed with the sound of the oars, and the chatter of the men, and Ericsson, seated beside Briem, could see now, clearly, the strange configuration of the land beyond the strip of beach.

Japan is quite distinct from any other country in the world. The very hills have a formation of their own, and the trees grow as they grow nowhere else. Ericsson, in the blazing light, could see, beyond the beach and the sea edge of the coast, fields of paddy and rice, fir-trees with flattened-out branches making rifts of dark green in the luminous pale blue of a sky that swept up into burning sapphire; houses of wood with heavy thatched roofs like hats far too big for them. But what held his eye more particularly was the crowd on the beach. The Japanese telegraph clerks were there, no doubt, and the usual crowd of country people always drawn by the visit of a strange ship. Ericsson could not make out any women, nor, after the first glance, did he look for them. His attention was all absorbed in the business of landing.

This man, who feared nothing, had one strange antipathy that almost amounted to fear—the foam of the sea. When quite a child, almost before he could speak, he had suffered from one of those dreams that sometimes come to very young children, and in this terrific vision he had been surrounded by sea-foam flung up by breaking waves and taking the form of white horses, cruel, vicious, and making at him to tear him with their teeth and trample him with their hoofs. Icelandic ponies and the sea foam on the rocks of Reykjavik had, no doubt, contributed to form this nightmare; or it may have been the vision of some sea death he had suffered before his rebirth. Who can tell? But it was a fact that this dream cropped up again and again through his life, making him depressed for days after, and generally heralding some bother. It was his bad dream.

The boat hung for a moment, waiting its opportunity, and then came racing for the beach on a gloriously rolling breaker. The oars came in with a crash, and tumbling over the sides the men, half-thigh-deep in water, rushed her up the sand.

The crowd of telegraphic operators and country folk surrounded the boat and the newcomers. The telegraph men spoke French, and Briem entered into business at once with them.

Twenty yards, or less, away, stood a group of women, as distinct from the ordinary Japanese women as English oak-trees are from twisted Japanese firs. Tall for their race, good-looking, bronzed, and healthy, they stood looking at the foreign sailors and evidently making fun of them.

“Those are the women I told you of,” said Magnuss; “the women who make the men do the work, and who spank them if they don’t. They live in that village you can see there, with the roofs poking over those sandhills.”

“How about that pound of tobacco and the pair of new boots?” said Helgi Olsen, who formed one of the shore party. “You’ll have your work cut out to get them, I’m thinking.”

“Come on,” said Ericsson, “and you’ll see.”

Followed by Olsen and Magnuss, he strolled in a leisurely way towards the group of women, who, on the approach of the three men, redoubled their chatter and laughter, neither of which seemed at all complimentary to the newcomers. Ericsson's blood was up, and he was all afire to teach these damsels a lesson in civility. He could quite believe Magnuss's story now of the henpecked husbands and their shameful treatment.

The foremost of the lot, and the best-looking, a bronzed and brazen-looking girl in a blue kimono, did not lower her eyes an inch as he came up to her; she turned her head to call out some jest to her companions—next moment, caught by the hand, she found herself being whirled round and round by a laughing giant and being spanked by a great hand as she whirled.

Then he caught her up and gave her a kiss, and she bit him.

He clapped his hand to his chin, where her teeth had nearly drawn blood, and the girl, darting off, followed by the laughter and jeers of the other women—human nature being always stronger than feminine nature—made for the village and disappeared amidst the sandhills.

"She's bit me," laughed Ericsson.

"Look!" said Olsen. "They're all going off."

The group of women had turned and were taking their way back to the village, laughing as they went, yet, even still, their laughter seemed directed against Ericsson and his companions.

"There's something bad about them," said Magnuss, who was a man full of susceptibilities to occult influences and ideas. "They don't seem real women; they make me think of the women of Grimstadir, who laugh at you and wave you to follow them till, all at once, they are gone, and you're floundering in the black bog."

"She was real enough," said Ericsson, still nursing his chin. "By Isten, she's the finest girl I've ever caught in my arms, and I'll court her and make her kiss me before we sail, or my name's not Ericsson. Who'll bet?"

"I'll bet you a bottle of Schnapps you don't," said Magnuss. "The same to be bought and paid for when we get back to Reykjavik."

"Done," said Ericsson.

They turned to the crowd by the boat. Briem had seen the incident with the girl and had laughed at it; so, too, had the Japanese telegraph officials; but the crowd of labourers that the Japanese officials had collected to help in digging up the beach were stolid as stones.

Then the work began, the mattocks making the white sand fly in showers, and whilst the work proceeded, Ericsson and his companions set to on the provisions they had brought with them, and talked, as they ate, with the Japanese.

Ericsson and Magnuss could talk French and English and Danish, to say nothing of their mother tongue, Icelandic—for the Icelanders are great linguists, even the poorest children learning at least Danish and English in the schools.

The tallest of the Japanese, and the one who talked French best, expressed his surprise in a laughing way at Ericsson's escape from the women after the indignity he had put on the girl.

"They are strange people,"[1] said he, "and not of the Japanese proper. Very hard-working. They dive for shell-fish and search for them among the rocks; they will be beginning their search now, as the tide is going out. See ——"

He pointed to the rocks to southward, and there, sure enough, the women could be seen moving among the rocks, following the outgoing tide, and hunting in the crevices and rock-pools for what they might find.

"Now that they are all at their fishing," said the Japanese, "would be the time to see their village. Would you like?"

Ericsson, turning to Briem, got leave, and with Magnuss and Olsen followed the Japanese across the sand and amidst the sandhills till they reached the first house of the village, a tiny wooden structure whose open door showed only one room, floored with matting and destitute of anything in the shape of furniture, if we except an hibachi standing on the matting and a rolled-up mattress in a corner. There was also hanging near the door a tiny cage in which a cricket sang, piercing the hot air with a thin, shrill, endless note.

The place was clean.

"It is the house of the girl you swung by the hand," said the Japanese. "She lived here with her mother, who is now dead. She lives here now alone."

They passed on to the next house, some twenty yards away, and then they saw the first man of the village. He was at a wash-tub, pounding away at some clothes, a meek-looking individual in a short blue vest, with naked arms and a bewildered expression as though he were always trying to remember some job which he had not done.

The Japanese official spoke to him, and he replied without raising his eyes for more than a momentary glance, as if ashamed of himself and his business in life.

At the next house the man had scuttled in and closed and barred the door. The whole male population of the village, in fact, had done likewise; every door was shut, though movements could be heard inside, and now and then the squalling of a baby being comforted by its unnatural nurse.

Ericsson burst into a laugh.

“Well, if I had not seen it I would not have believed it,” said he.

“The men are like that because they are unable to swim,” said the Japanese. “Those women can live in the water, and they can dive eight fathom for the shell-fish; they are in the water now, I expect, with the low tide.”

Ericsson glanced in the direction of the rocks. From this end of the village a good view could be obtained of them.

“Well, here’s a woman who doesn’t look as if she would be much good at diving,” said Magnuss, pointing to an approaching figure.

The Japanese glanced at her.

“Ladresse,” said he.

Magnuss did not know the word, but he soon knew the meaning of it.

The woman’s face, which was half hidden by a hood, looked as though she had been walking through a snowstorm.

“It’s a leper,” said he. It was not the first he had seen, for he had visited the leper hospital at Reykjavik.

“Oui, léprouse,” said the Japanese. “There are twenty or thirty of them—they live by themselves in a village away over there.” He waved his hand to the south as the woman passed them, and Ericsson turned away. The sight of the afflicted woman made him shudder.

“Where are you going?” asked Magnuss.

“Down on the rocks,” replied Ericsson, walking off in the direction of the sea.

He heard Magnuss laughing and talking to the Japanese. Then he heard Magnuss's voice calling after him:

"Take care of those women, or they may duck you."

Ericsson walked on without making reply, reached the rocks, and began scrambling over them.

Ericsson, though born in Reykjavik, was not a pure Icelander. His father was of Danish extraction, and he inherited a trace of French blood through his grandmother's family. It was this admixture of the Gallic, perhaps, that gave him his bent towards gallantry and the female sex. He was a brigand where women were concerned. Yet, strangely enough, he was not a libertine, as we use the word. He had all sorts of fine feelings about women, but no real heart that had yet shown itself. He would pursue a girl and fall in love with her, and make her fall in love with him (that was the essential), and then his passionate love would boil down, and he would sail off and leave her, and never see her again, nor think of her.

It was a form of drunkenness. One might say he got drunk on girls and that his past was strewn with empty wine-bottles. The coarser forms of love had little attraction for him; a woman was absolutely nothing to him unless he could light in her the spark of love and blow it to a flame.

Ericsson scrambled over the rocks, which were dressed with a dark-green slippery seaweed. In the rock-pools, had he sought, he would have found all sorts of strange things. The Sea of Japan hides in its depths some of the strangest forms of life. The sea all round the coast of Japan, in fact, is different from the sea anywhere else; its floor, if exposed, would terrify the mind of the beholder simply by the mountains and declivities that would be shown to the eye. At one place, called the Tuscarera Deep, the sounding-lead gives a depth of over five miles, and this submarine scenery, like nothing visible on earth, is always shifting and vibrating to the touch of earthquake. Sometimes a whole coastline is submerged by a huge tidal wave, due to one of the submarine volcanic eruptions, and with such depths and such convulsions things that grow to vast proportions, and only in the last depths of the sea are sometimes torn loose and sent to the surface, as if to prove what the gods below are doing.

Some years ago an octopus came ashore on the western coast. It measured over thirty feet across the body. In the small rock-pools one finds little octopods and decapods, vast star-fish, shell-fish of the quaintest patterns. As Ericsson went on his way he came on a strip of rocks different from the others, brown as sandstone and branched like the branch coral that grows at the bottom of the sea. He broke a branch off, and, lo and behold! the branch was only the casing of a big worm—a big, brown, motionless worm, exactly like that which one finds at the core of deep-sea branch coral. All the rocks had been built by worms, exactly as the branch coral is built, only the worms had used the sand to form their house, instead of the calcareous matter of the sea-water.

He passed on, avoiding the deep pools which are always dangerous. A cuttle-fish in the open sea is not dangerous—a swimmer frightens him; but a cuttle-fish trapped in a deep rock-pool will catch and kill a man automatically and urged by fear more than by anger or desire for food. He cannot escape, so he attacks. Escape and attack are the two laws and the two necessities that rule his life.

Ericsson could see nothing of the women till he came to where the out-jutting rocks formed a natural harbour. With the outgoing of the tide, the swell had fallen, and the water was coming in now satin-smooth and sapphire-blue, gurgling and chuckling amid the rocks, and playing with their seaweed beards, as a seamaid might play with the beard of Oceanos.

Ericsson paused at the deep-water edge. He could see the women now. The enormous pool on the edge of which he stood might have been a third of a mile long, by two hundred yards wide, and it lay with its longest diameter down the coast, rocks broke up through it near the middle, forming a small island, but the bottom was white sand, clearly visible at a depth of over forty feet. It was a paradise for shell-fish, and though communicating with the sea by a hundred openings, it was protected from the whirl and drag of the currents. The water, green as an emerald, was clear as crystal. Globe-shaped jelly-fish, quartered like melons, floated into sight, caught the eye for a moment, and floated away as if dissolved; sometimes, far down, a silvery cloud would pass as if driven before some submarine wind—it was a shoal of tiny fish; scraps of floating fucus showed jewel-like in the sun.

But Ericsson saw none of these things; his eyes were fixed on the rock island far away in the middle of the pool. It was evidently the base of operations for the divers. He could see their heads as they swam about it just like seals, and, like a seal-hunter he watched them.

Then, all of a sudden, as he watched, he heard a noise like the clamouring of gulls. They had seen him, and he guessed they were making fun of him.

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[1] There is another colony of these people in the Province of Shima.

CHAPTER IV

THE BUNCH OF FLOWERS

He turned on his heel, pretending to ignore them, and as he turned he had the full view of the coast right to Cape Noto where it ends in the sea that divides it from far-off Sado Island.

It was past noon, and in the hot blue weather the sea stretched to no horizon, but lost itself somewhere in a misty blueness born of sea and sky. In the near distance the *President Girling* held herself in place against the current with an occasional flap of the propeller. To north and south of her the mark buoys were clearly visible accentuating the blueness with their touch of scarlet.

On the beach he could see the shore party and the labourers digging away at the sand.

Then he turned again to the pool. It was studded with the heads of swimmers, all swimming towards him vigorously. Not a sound came from them; an ominous fact that caused him to think twice about his position alone and far beyond the reach of his companions.

Suppose they were to drag him in and duck him! He knew quite well that, if they set on him, resistance would be useless, and that the shame of the business would follow him to his dying day. Yet to retreat was impossible. Run away from a pack of women! Never! Besides, it was now too late, for if they were bent on business they would chase him over the rocks.

He held his ground and noticed that as they came they beat the water so that the broken surface made a veil for their submerged forms.

Then, when they were close to him, only an oar's length away, the hubbub began. He could not understand a word they said, but he could understand everything they meant.

Women all the world over have two methods of thinking: singly and *en masse*. A group of women will adversely criticise and jeer at a stray individual of the male sex against whom, singly, they would have nothing to say. Ericsson knew this intuitively, and it fortified him against the ridicule and the gibing of the shoal in the water, who, notwithstanding their clamour and the way they showered the spray about them, moved with the grace of seals.

Ericsson stood for a moment absolutely unmoved and as if oblivious of their presence. He knew that he was safe. They dared not leave the water, simply because they had nothing on, and though your soft and smiling Japanese girl of the old school thinks little enough of nudity, these brazen ones, strangely enough, had scruples that clung to drapery, and he guessed it at once by the way they kept beating the water.

Then he laughed. The girl he had swung by the hand was not amongst his assailants; she was swimming apart a little way out, softly, like a seal; her eyes were fixed on him—big brown eyes just like the eyes of a seal. He almost forgot the clamouring shoal at his feet. In an instant he had taken fire. It was as if light Love, sitting on the rocks, had suddenly twanged his bow.

He stepped back swiftly to avoid one of the women who, taking advantage of his preoccupation, had swum boldly up and as nearly as possible seized him by the foot. Then he beat a retreat, pausing every now and then to look back at the girl.

When he reached the land beyond the rocks and could see her no more, he took his way back to the beach party, striking through the village.

Between two of the houses of the village, growing wild for any one to pick, were some huge daisies, like marguerites, only larger.

He plucked a dozen of them, and as he passed her house he went in and placed his bouquet by the hibachi on the floor.

Then he returned to the working party.

The labourers had dug a trench in the sand over the buried shore end of the cable, and now the cable hands were getting to work on the finer business of raising the shore end from its bed in the sand. A boring shell-fish peculiar to the Noto coast had, despite all the precautions taken by the cable makers, got its centre-bit through the outer coverings. Thordursson, who was with them, had to cut the piece clean out and splice in a new piece. The business took two hours to accomplish, and the re-burying two hours more.

It was after sunset when all was done and, shaking hands with the Japanese officials, they returned to the ship.

Ericsson, before leaving, looked round again to see if there were any sign of his light-of-love, but the beach was desolate, and of the village nothing could be seen but the house-tops and a few spirals of smoke from the fires where the villagers were no doubt preparing their evening meal, and there was something almost sinister in the quietude of the place and the silence which brooded over the homes of the noisy crowd that had splashed him and shouted at him and derided him so short a time back.

Before stepping into the boat he took the little Japanese, who had shown them over the place, aside.

“If you see that girl, tell her I haven’t forgotten her,” said Ericsson.

The other laughed.

“I will tell her. But if you will have advice, do not think of her. They will play you some trick, those women.”

“Play me a trick?”

“They are a strange people. You have seen yourself the way they treat their men. I have known them play tricks on strangers.”

“Oh, I will take care of that,” said Ericsson.

He had an old Icelandic tobacco-box made of copper in his pocket. The Japanese had admired it that afternoon, and now Ericsson, taking it from his pocket, pressed it on his new friend. It was not given in the least with the idea of propitiation—just as a gift of friendship—and was understood and accepted as such.

One of the charming things about this brigand was his power to make friends of men as well as sweethearts of women; and this power lay in the fact that the friendliness he expressed for others was genuine. It is true that he was apt to forget friends when they were out of sight, but one can, at least, say that he was glad to see them when they came into sight again.

The sunset was holding a cloud, red as a flamingo’s feather, over Korea, and as they rowed to the ship the dusk closed more deeply on the world and the first faint sketch of the constellations showed itself in the sky.

When they reached the ship’s side the falls were lowered, the tackle fixed, and the boat and its crew, leaving the water to the tune of the winch pawls, sailed upwards till it was flush with the bulwarks.

Ericsson, as he sprang on the deck, looked shoreward.

CHAPTER V

“SKARSSTÖD BY THE BREIDIFJORD”

It was after supper and some of the cable hands were seated on the bow balks, smoking and yarning with a couple of the crew. The *President Girling*, going dead slow, was steaming on a measured course between the mark buoys; she would keep this tramp up all night, till dawn set her at work again grappling for the other end of the broken cable.

From the deck one could see the shore lights, some fixed, some moving like glowworms, and on the water the lamps of the two mark buoys and the cable buoy spilling their amber light on the swell. Ten million stars crusted the sky, and over the hills of Japan a pale glow heralded the great white lamp of the rising moon.

The night was windless and hot, and so still that in the pause of the talk they could hear the bow wash of the gently moving ship.

The conversation of sailors is always interesting. Down amid the tarry shellbacks of the fo’c’s’le you will hear the most extraordinary discussions sometimes, for brains are not peculiar to landsmen, nor are they only found in colleges. The Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian sailors are perhaps the best-educated and most intellectual, but the Icelanders are hard to beat in this respect. Magnuss, like many another of his class, was a poet, and had an intimate knowledge of the sagas. He had written poetry and was especially proud of one production that could be read backwards as well as forwards. He always repeated it when he was drunk.

Magnuss’s nature was of so curious a sort that the pen boggles at it, just as it boggles at the description of a jelly-fish.

One might say of him he was and he was not. Sometimes he would astonish you with his meanness in some little matter, sometimes by the display of a huge generosity in a big matter. It all depended whether the poet or the fisherman got the upper hand of him. The poet was capable of great deeds and thoughts, the fisherman of mean ones. He had also the faculty of standing aside from himself and looking at himself and his fate as though they were the self and fate of some other person. This faculty only came into play in times of disaster.

Once, in a shipwreck, he went through the most horrible experiences to all appearances unmoved. It seemed to him that he was watching another man's tragedy, taking in every detail, feeling acutely every hardship, yet interested as though he were watching a play.

The profound egotism of his nature was balanced by as profound a fatalism. It may have been this fatalism, added to a touch of second sight, that bound him to Ericsson with the sure knowledge that their fates were inextricably entangled. He was seated now on a mooring-bitt, whilst Ericsson and the others lounged on the bow balks; they were talking cable and weather, two inexhaustible subjects.

Thordursson, the splicer and odd-job electrical man, was reviling his job and wishing that he had chosen his father's business of fish-curing. There were three hundred miles of new cable in the after tank of the *President Girling*, and it was one of Thordursson's many businesses to take its temperature twice daily, as though it were a typhoid patient, and to look after it generally as though it were a baby. Twice daily the electricians ran a current through it to test it for faults, and it seemed that only an hour ago a fault had been discovered.

"And Pallander [the chief electrician] spoke as if the fault were mine," said Thordursson.

"You will have to roust it out to get at the fault," said Magnuss. "Where is it?"

"Seven miles from the God-damn testing-room," replied Thordursson. "I'll be half the night on the job." He swore in his beard and spat over the side at the moon-shot water.

The moon had risen above the hills of Hondo—immense, floating upwards like a balloon, barred by a faint trace of cloud and looking not unlike a great Japanese lantern. Japan lay beneath her silent as a dream from the dim shore-line to the Asama-Samu Mountains.

Then Magnuss broke out. The hot night and the thought of Korea away over there, and of Iceland so many thousand miles away, had suddenly given him an attack of home-sickness, North-sickness.

"Aïe," said he, "I would give a month's pay and my chance of a bonus for the sight of Vik and Vestmannaeyjar and Fuglasker standing alone in the sea. But this will be my last voyage. No more cables for me. I shall join my uncle in the fish-curing."

"Where did you say your home was?" asked one of the Danish foremast hands.

“Near Skarsstöd on the west coast, on the Breidifjord, where the Flóka runs into the sea,” replied Magnuss, talking like a man in a dream.

“I have been to Skarsstöd,” said Thordursson. “Four years ago I went on the *Ceres* to do some business for the telephone people. Ay, it’s a fine coast, and the Flóka is a fine river for salmon.”

“Then, if you have been to Skarsstöd, you’ve, maybe, seen my uncle, Stefan Gunarsson? He owns the fishing on a mile of the Flóka, and his house is reckoned the best in Skarsstöd.”

“Gunarsson! Surely I do—a big man with a pretty daughter.”

“Schwalla,” said Magnuss, in a contented tone of voice. “Yes, that’s him. She’s my cousin.”

“Ay, is she? Well, she’s the prettiest girl in Iceland, or promised to be—and he owns the fishing? Are the salmon good there?”

“Good enough when they don’t fail, and that’s seldom—not once in ten years. When I’ve saved up enough money, I’m going to buy him out. Then I’ll settle down there.”

“I’ll join you,” said Ericsson in a jesting voice. He had been lounging on the bow balks, looking at the coast and listening to the talk of the others without heeding it much. “We’ll go partners. Is the cod-fishing good?”

“I’d like to know where it’s better. Sea-trout, and shark, and cod, the best in Iceland. Then the herring come in like a wind blowing under the water. Ay, two good men with a little money could knock a good living out of the Breidifjord.”

Thordursson rose up.

“Well,” said he, “I must be off to my job.”

He went aft, taking the cable hands with him, with the exception of Ericsson. The foremast men went off to the fo’c’s’le, from which could be heard the faint strains of a fiddle played by Holgar Neilsson, one of the crew. Magnuss and Ericsson were left alone.

“Did you mean that?” said Magnuss.

“What?” asked Ericsson.

“About going partners.”

“Oh, that!—I don’t know. I just said it.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be bad if you had some money; but you’re such a one for spending your money on girls.”

“I—well, you ought not to talk. I don’t spend it on rum, like you—you old Schnapps bottle.”

Magnuss sniggered.

“Rum’s cheap enough, if you know where to get it. I spend money! No. I’m a saving man, and always have been. D’you know how much money I have in the Landsbanki at Reykjavik?—I’ve got three thousand kronur.”

“You!” said Ericsson.

“Yes, I. I’ve always put by, ever since I was a boy, and the cable service brings in good money, what with bonuses and one thing and another; and money breeds money. A kronur put by when you are fifteen will be two kronur by the time you are thirty.”

“And three by the time you are dead,” said Ericsson.

“Well, it’s better to die with three kronur than nothing.”

Ericsson was whistling a tune that he had picked up in Timor. He was scarcely paying any attention to Magnuss; he was thinking of the girl ashore and trying to solve the problem of how he was to see her again.

When the *President Girling* had finished the job she might send a shore party to the beach to say good-bye and brush the sand smooth, for Japan was a valuable customer, and the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Icelanders are possessed of the good manners that, according to Hugo von Trimburg, come from a good heart. But Ericsson wanted to land before that. The attraction of the girl was drawing him by every fibre of his being. He was in the grip of the greatest force in the universe, if we except the Force that presides over the dull machinery of the stars. He was not in the humour for talking of a kronur’s breeding power at compound interest, and Magnuss, guessing his abstraction, broke off the talk.

Now they saw a head poke up over the combing of the fo’c’s’le hatch. It was the Zealander. He had come on deck out of the inferno of the fo’c’s’le—risen to breathe, like a seal.

As he came forward, Magnuss, with a grunt of contempt, slipped from his place and went off.

“Ho, there you are!” said Ericsson. “Well, and what is the weather going to be?”

The other came to the bulwark rail and spat into the sea.

"I know nothing about anything," said he. "The noise of Neilsson's fiddle always splits my head so that the things in it go dancing like flies in a room."

"Tell me," said Ericsson, "is it true that you have always seven red devils on your right hand, and seven blue devils on your left?"

"When I am steering, they pull me like that, just as the rudder chains pull the rudder; then it is that I am only alive, truly."

"When you are steering?"

"Yes; it is my work, and a man is only alive when he is at his work; and so the Funnen folk are the greatest sailors that sail the sea. My father was a sailor and my grandfather before him, and my great-grandfather before him, and they were all helped by the spirits of the sea. The rudder talks to me as it talked to them; we were helmsmen when Holgar the Dane was King of Denmark, and one of us went down in the great fight in the Sound of Kalmar, off Borgholm, and they beat him to death with clubs at the steering-oar. Yes, and they cut his arm from him at the shoulder with an axe, but still the arm clung to the oar; then they cut it at the elbow, but still it clung to the oar; then they cut it at the wrist, and the hand, leaving its grip on the oar, opened wide and released his spirit, which it was holding gripped with the oar, and the spirit, like a black bird, flew away."

"And the devils—do the devils tell you what's going to happen to folk? You told Neilsson that, didn't you?"

"I know nothing about that."

"Is it true you can put spells on people?"

"No; only on things."

"What things?"

"Anything made of wood or from a growing plant, or that has been touched by sea-water."

"Could you put a spell on the cable so that I could get ashore again?"

"As surely as I put my hand on your arm I could put a spell on the cable."

"Well, I'll tell you what," said Ericsson, laughing. "If you'll humbug up the cable so that I have to go ashore again, I'll give you a bottle of rum at the first port we call at—I’ll smuggle it aboard for you.”

“And suppose you forget—hey?”

“I never forget a promise.”

“True—they say that of you.”

“Then you will?”

“It’s done.”

“What, already?”

“There is no already. To-morrow is yesterday, and yesterday is to-morrow.”

Ericsson laughed again.

“And to-day?”

“To-day is always to-day.”

The man asked for a chew of tobacco, and got it. Then he went off to the galley, where the baker was preparing the bread for the morrow.

It was his habit to collect all the scraps of fat from the fo’c’s’le mess, and the cable hands’ mess, and, packing it in an old tomato-tin, with scraps of biscuits, have it baked for a while in the oven. The baker gave him his tin piping hot, and, protecting his hands with a piece of cotton waste, he carried it off.

Ericsson, after another glance at the coast, dropped below to his bunk.

CHAPTER VI

THE WIRE-WOVE ROPE

The dawn had scarcely shown grey behind the Asama-Sama Hills when the *President Girling* began to show signs of the coming day's labour. A great arc-lamp, swung forward of the mainmast, blazed out, flooding with its light the deck and gear, and the work of the cable hands, who were going over the grapnels. The grapnel used yesterday lay on the deck, and the wooden jacket of its shank looked as though chawn by a tiger. The coral rock had done this. There were grapnels of all designs on board the *President Girling*, from the simple three-pronged wooden-shanked affair to the patent, all steel grapnel which, having once clutched a cable, never lets it go. Several of these lay about, veritable harrows for the tilling of the garden of the sea.

The lamps of the two mark buoys and the cable buoy still showed bright on the water; these lamps would burn for forty-eight hours and more. The work before the ship now was to pick up the mark buoys and re-lay them farther out to sea, then grapple for the sea end of the broken cable, bring it aboard, splice it on to the new cable in the after tank, steam back, paying out the new cable behind them, to the shore end, where it lay held in place by the cable buoy, bring buoy and shore end on board, and splice the shore end on to the new cable which they had been paying out. In more simple language, they had to let in a new piece of cable between the two broken ends.

Put a piece of string on the floor, break it at a certain point, then take one broken end and splice it to a new piece of string, and splice the other end of the new piece to the other broken end. That, roughly, was the *President Girling's* job, substituting cable for string and the floor of the sea for the floor of a room.

They had the buoys aboard just as the sun was breaking over the hills, and breakfast was served to the cable hands as they steamed to the new position two miles farther from the shore. The water here was one thousand one hundred fathoms, four hundred fathoms deeper than the first position. The cable was lying, in fact, on the slope of a vast submarine hill. Soundings were taken, the mark buoys dropped, and then, whilst the hands took a spell of rest, the grapnel was dropped by the clanking engine, and the fishing began.

Working at these depths, the strain is very great, and Briem was using an almost new grapnel rope to-day, the best Manila hemp, woven with wire. Its breaking strain—nominally—was twenty tons.

Ericsson and Magnuss took a spell off after the grapnel had touched bottom, and lounged near the door of the electric testing-room. The testing-room was in the form of a deck-house immediately forward of the bridge; here were the mirror galvanometers and all the instruments used in electric testing and telegraphy. Pallander, the chief electrician, had his berth here close to his precious instruments. He was a bit of a naturalist, and he had hung out pieces of coral taken from the cable yesterday, to dry. A cable seven years on the bottom of the sea has many strange things clinging to it, especially in the Sea of Japan. One of the strangest things brought up yesterday was a cup about four times the size of a thimble, as thin as an egg-shell, and pierced and patterned till it looked as though made of petrified lace.

This exquisite thing, that the tap of a fingernail would have shivered, had come in unharmed. Pallander had placed it out on a piece of board so that the sun might dry it, and Magnuss and Ericsson discussed it as they lounged against the bulwarks, shoulder to shoulder.

It appealed to the imaginative mind of Magnuss, who could not conceive why a thing of such delicacy and enchantment should have been formed down there in the dark, where no one could see it.

“Unless,” said he, “to please the eye of God, which sees everything.”

“If God is so pleased with pretty things, why, then, does He make such ugly ones?” demurred Ericsson, who inherited the free-thinking strain from his French ancestry. “And why did He make the ugly things the strongest?”

Magnuss did not reply, but turned and leaned on the bulwark rail, looking over the sea towards the distant shore.

“What day is this?” said he.

“The 13th of July,” replied Ericsson, also turning and leaning on the rail.

“Then to-night is the first night of Bommatsuri,” said Magnuss; “and if we have any luck we’ll see all the beach over there lit up with bonfires.”

“What is Bommatsuri?”

“It’s the Feast of the Dead, and the Japs always light lanterns and burn bonfires. I remember the date, for I was in Nagasaki just after we laid the cable seven years ago, and our captain—Olafur Johnsson was our captain then—said the 13th was an unlucky date, and if he wanted to feast his ancestors he'd choose some other. Funny how a saying like that sticks in one's head!"

"That girl will be lighting a bonfire for her mother, then," said Ericsson half to himself, half to Magnuss.

"What girl?"

"That girl I spanked on the beach."

"Oh, that one! What makes you think of her?"

"What makes any one think of a girl? Haven't you ever thought of a girl?"

"I only think of the girl I'm going to marry some day," replied Magnuss.

"And who's she?"

"Schwalla."

"Oh, your cousin?"

Fast companions as the two men were, Magnuss had never before spoken of his light-of-love. Men do not, as a rule. But there are psychological moments, and Magnuss was terribly homesick. The talk of the night before had brought the disease to an acute stage. The fact that Thordursson had seen his uncle and Schwalla had, in some magic way, brought Iceland and the Breidifjord more vividly before him. It was as though he half believed the place not to exist—or only as a dream—and that Thordursson's words had come to him as a confirmation of its existence.

"And you are going to marry her?" continued Ericsson. "Has she given you her word?"

"Oh, we understand each other, and she's a sensible girl, who knows a hard-working man when she sees one, and Stefan Gunarsson, her father, is content."

"But, man alive," said Ericsson, "that's not the way to make a girl care for you."

"What do you mean?"

"By being hard-working and getting her father to your side. A girl that marries a man because he's a hard-worker, is like a person who sets up a shop, and she generally sells her husband in the end for cash down or a kiss over the counter."

These words from any other man would have put Magnuss in a temper. It was indicative of the bond that held the two men together, and his own belief in his power over Schwalla, that he answered them with a little laugh. Then he spat into the sea.

"You don't know anything about the business. You have never met a girl of that sort; she is not one of the trulls you meet on the wharf. But maybe you'll see her yourself some day when we get back to Iceland."

They had rounded the second mark buoy and were steering back over the same course. They had missed the cable at the first grapple, and this fact turned the conversation to other matters.

At two o'clock Ericsson, who was down below, on the cable deck, attending to some matter, raised his head. The main engines had stopped working, and from away forward came the snorting of steam and the clank of the picking-up gear.

They had got the cable at last. He finished what he was doing, came up on deck, and went forward.

The dynamometer indicated a strain of five tons and a half, and was slowly rising with the slow, sure rise indicative of cable. The news had spread through the ship with the stopping of the main engines, and several people came forward to look on—Pallander, the chief electrician, the two junior electricians, and the purser.

Briem stood on the bow balks directing operations.

"She's coming up fine," said Magnuss. "We've got her this time, if she doesn't slip off, and we may have the whole job finished by to-morrow."

When a cable is caught too near the broken end, and if it is not tangled in the grapnel, but simply looped over one prong, it slips off, and this dismal fact is at once proclaimed by the slow falling of the dynamometer.

But this cable was held fast and sound, for the dynamometer now stood at seven tons, rising to seven and a half, then to eight.

At ten tons Briem began to grumble. He knew exactly from profound experience how much stuff they had raised from the bottom and what it ought to weigh. The coral crust must have been tremendously thick on it to give it this weight, and he announced the fact to the first officer, who had come forward to look on.

He put his ear to the taut and dripping rope as it came inboard, and he could tell by the hum of it that all was well; then he stepped back to his place. The dynamometer had indicated fourteen tons, and was rising fractionally when a report like the bursting of a gun shattered the air.

The wire-wove grapnel rope had parted.

CHAPTER VII

NANAO

When a wire-wove rope breaks under a strain of many tons, it mushrooms out like an umbrella and, flying back, cuts to pieces anything behind it.

Briem, who had his eye on the rope at the moment of its parting, six feet from its contact with the bow, saw what looked like a circular rainbow.

Then he saw Neilsson, one of the hands, lying on the deck; no other man had been touched.

The donkey-man had shut off steam and the drum had stopped revolving with the broken end of the rope sticking up from it like the end of a broom.

Neilsson ought to have been killed, yet his injury was confined entirely to the left arm. They carried him below, undressed him, and Dr. Petit, the ship's surgeon, examined the wound.

The arm looked as though it had been mangled by a tiger right from the shoulder to the elbow; the strands of the rope had struck it as the cat-o'-nine-tails strikes the back of a man being flogged. Though the cuts almost reached the bone, there was, strangely enough, little loss of blood.

Neilsson, who had fainted from the shock and was now recovered, did not seem to mind much. He laughed in the doctor's face and asked for a tot of rum, making the wound an excuse. Dr. Petit gave him the rum, dressed the wound, and came on deck with the captain.

"That arm may have to come off," said he; "and if it does, he'll want nursing and attention he can't get here. We'd better take him ashore. There's a hospital at Nanao, over there on the other side of the peninsula; it's only some fifteen miles away. Toyama is too far, but a rickshaw will easily take him to Nanao. They can wire from the cable hut. Have him got into the steam launch; the pain is nothing now, but to-night it will be bad. We can telegraph for a surgeon from Toyama to help—Company's expense."

"Will you stay with him?"

"Yes, till the other man comes. Of course I must get back here, but he's safe with the Japanese; they are the best surgeons in the world, and they'll often save a limb we can't."

The captain whistled for a quartermaster, gave the order, and next moment the bo'sun's pipe was shrilling. The launch was stripped of her covering, the engine got ready, and the crew aboard.

Then Neilsson came up, on his own steam, to use his expression; white, but confident-looking and warm with rum.

"You'll want a man with you, maybe, some one who can talk French," said Grondaal, glancing round. He was far more put out over the matter than Neilsson, the principal sufferer. It was the first serious accident during his command.

He looked round, saw Ericsson, and hailed him.

"Here, you, Ericsson, bundle in. We won't want you for the buoys till to-morrow. And get back to-night, if you can," he finished, turning to Petit.

Ericsson, up to this, had been so distressed by the accident that all things else were swept from his mind, but directly Captain Grondaal gave him the order for shore, squat before him came the ugly image of the Zealander and the remembrance of his promise to humbug up the cable. Certainly, if this was his work, he had done it well; but the very absurdity of the thought swept it away as he clambered over the bulwarks into the launch. Then they were lowered by the steam winch, the falls were cast off, and next moment they were making for the shore.

The swell of yesterday had fallen to a flat calm, otherwise they would have used the whale-boat for the landing. Ericsson, who had taken his place in the bow, glanced back. He could see the hands forward getting a new rope ready for another grapple, and as he looked a thought came forward in his mind, pushing all other thoughts aside. It was the thought of the Zealander.

He was just as superstitious as Magnuss, or any of the crowd on board, yet his superstition was leavened with the doubting element inherited from his French ancestry. Common sense told him that the thing was absurd. All the same, the thought of the Zealander was there in his mind, and that, coupled with the sight of Neilsson with his injured arm, made him feel depressed.

Why had the captain singled him out to go ashore? Common sense at once brought up the reply: "Because you are the chief hand at the buoys and can be better spared than the others, seeing that the buoys won't want handling yet." All the same, the answer did not quite satisfy him. The feeling of having linked arms for a moment with the devil clung to him.

He turned his thoughts to the girl whom this unfortunate accident might give him the chance to see, and lo and behold! the thought of her was no longer so pleasing to him. The something weird, the faint thing, uncanny, that clung to the sea women of Noto seemed strengthened in its reality by the happenings of the morning. The girl attracted him still, yet a repelling influence had been set at work.

They were near the shore now, and the Japanese telegraph men were on the beach, waiting to receive them, delighted at any break in the monotony of their existence. Neilsson, Dr. Petit, and Ericsson were landed, and the launch put back to the ship, after having arranged on the signals that would call it again when wanted.

Not a woman was to be seen.

Three rickshaws belonging to the cable people were got ready, and runners sent for; during the wait, Ericsson's Japanese friend took him aside.

"Your girl says she will speak to you at her house any night after dark," said he. "But I would not go. I think it is some trick they have against you, the women. I do not know what you have done to them to make them so. They pretend to laugh, but they are angry."

Ericsson laughed.

"They can keep their tricks," he said. "I won't have anything to do with them."

"She said to me to tell you she found the flowers by the hibachi."

"Oh, she said that! Did she say anything else?"

"No; she said nothing but that."

"Do you think she's against me as well as the others?"

"I would say so. Though she would make to seem friendly. Women are always worse when they do that."

The gift of the tobacco-box had made this man Ericsson's friend. He was most evidently speaking what he believed to be the truth, and Ericsson had full ground for belief that if these ladies caught him they would deal with him in a most unladylike manner. As for the girl herself, he was more doubtful. His "love" for her, springing from a millet-seed in a moment, had been seriously docked and pruned by the events of the morning. Yet, all the same, when, seated in his rickshaw and following the others, he was passing the entrance to the village, he found himself turning to glance at the little house where he had put the flowers by the hibachi.

The house looked deserted, and there was not a soul to be seen in the village street, with the exception of a man who was pounding something in a huge mortar.

It was an hour and a half's run to Nanao.

The peninsula of Noto may be likened to a great arm stretching out into the Sea of Japan, with the elbow pointing towards Korea. It clips in its embrace a bay seventy or eighty miles wide at its widest points. Toyama, which is a rail head, lies in the armpit of this great arm of land, Nanao in the bend of the elbow. The distance between the two places is about thirty miles.

The rickshaws passed rice-fields and took the hill road that leads by the great old Temple of Kwannon—Kwannon, the saver of souls. The tree roots were bursting the masonry apart, the furious figures of the guarding Ni-O at the entrance were grey with age as the temple—they who once were blood-red. In the glorious hot summer weather the clang of the hawks came lazily as they circled in the blue overhead, and from the black-green pine-trees of the mountain road to the dim haze of the azure distance the whole land thrilled to the tune of the cicada.

Nanao, when they reached it, proved to be a straggling little town, set in a pine-scented valley, with a glimpse of the bay, and quaint beyond words.

The hospital, built during the war with China, was a clean and airy-looking building; a Government medical man lived there, and when he had received Neilsson and was sending a telephone message to his chief at Toyama, asking him to come over and consult on the case, Ericsson, leaving Dr. Petit with the other, came out and strolled down the village street.

The houses, with their paper shoji and the roofs mossed and showing the growth of the purple roof-flower, the quaint shops, the background of green-black firs, the hint of blue sea, all these things affected Ericsson strangely. He seemed to have strayed into toy-land. A box of toys bought for him when he was a child by his father, toy houses and green fir-trees, opened again in his mind just as it had opened that morning in the little house at Reykjavik. The village street was full of people, for it was getting towards evening now, and country folk had come in from all the country around to attend the festival to be held at moonrise in the courtyard of the Buddhist temple that lay to the right of the village street.

Ericsson passed along with the crowd, glancing at the shops that sold lanterns for the decking of the graves, paper chrysanthemums, and the food which is spread out as an offering to the souls of the departed. He was turning from a little shop that sold singing insects prisoned in tiny cages, when he found himself face to face with all the women from the fishing-village.

They were coming along through the crowd all together in a troop, all demure, and with a strangely quiet aspect, and all empty-handed. The others in the crowd were bearing lanterns they had bought, and paper flowers. These bore nothing. They seemed apart from all the others, and their bronzed and vigorous appearance contrasted sharply with that of the other women, all softnesses and gracile curves.

They saw Ericsson, and he knew that they recognised him; but they made no sign at all, but passed on, walking quietly and chatting together in a low tone. The girl was with them, and he thought that as she passed him she gave a glance upwards towards him under her long lashes, but even of this he was not quite sure.

He did not look back at them till he had got some yards away, then he turned, but they were no longer to be seen. They had passed down one of the alleys that occurred here and there between the blocks of little houses and gardens. He walked back along the street, but search as he might he could see nothing of them, and he returned to the hospital, turning the matter over in his mind and trying to imagine what these mysterious people might be saying about him, and thinking.

The girl in her new setting did not look so attractive as she had done against the background of sand and sea, and yet the sight of her had brought back the old feelings about her. The words of the Japanese, warning him against some possible danger, only increased the new flame; the very antagonism of these people to him formed an attraction as powerful, almost, as the attraction of the girl.

It was after sundown before the doctor from Toyama arrived, an elderly, spectacled individual who, having examined the wounded man, declared that the limb could be saved.

It would be some weeks before he would be fit to return to the ship, so arrangements were made that he should be sent on to Osaka on the Island sea when fit to travel. The railway runs right from Toyama to Osaka, and the ship was bound to call there before leaving Japan. They bid good-bye to

Neilsson, who, drowsed with opium, scarcely recognised them. Then they came out to their rickshaws.

CHAPTER VIII

BON ODORI

The street and the town had wonderfully altered. With the coming of dark, the moon had risen and was shining across the glimpse of sea. The shore, just seen, like a thread of rose by the waters of the silver bay, was blushing with the glow of bonfires, and all down the street, as far as the eye could reach, torches were burning before the house-doors to welcome back the spirits of the departed.

Not a soul was in sight.

It was the absence of all signs of life that gave the picture its thrill and strangeness.

“Ah,” said the Japanese doctor, who had accompanied them to the door, “every one will be in the temple courtyard where the dance is. You have never seen it? Well, if you can spare half an hour before going, it will give me pleasure to accompany you—it is not far away.”

The rickshaw men came also, and the whole party moved down the street to the entrance of the great Buddhist temple.

Turning a corner and passing a heavy beamed gate they found themselves in a great open space lit by moonlight and lined by a crowd, motionless and all but voiceless. Children were here, and sometimes a child’s voice would strike the silence, but other sounds there were none, with the exception of a whisper now and then from the waiting people, faint as the sound of a gentle wind amidst foliage. A great bat passed across the moon, and here and there one could see white moths fluttering above the heads of the people, the only movement in all that mass of life.

Then, suddenly, came the deep boom of a drum, a single note, followed by the catching-back of the breath of all the crowd; a sound that, once heard, could never be forgotten. Immediately on it, like a mist blown through the doorway of the temple, came the long stream of the dancers of the Festival of the Dead: young girls and women all of them—spirits seen by the light of the moon and in that unearthly silence.

They moved without raising their feet from the ground, and the sigh of their sandals mixed with the sound of ghostly hand-clapping as they swayed, now to right, now to left, till the whole procession revealed itself, formed a circle great as the courtyard, and shivered into stillness.

The silence was now absolutely unbroken save by the voices of the cicadas in the moonlit branches of the trees that grew to the westward of the temple, and Ericsson, as he looked, felt his heart beat strongly, just as he had felt it beat one day when the ship, riding at a fouled cable, had been struck by heavy rollers.

Then the drum sounded again, and the ring of dancers shivered into movement, circling, swaying, and undulating to the whisper of sandals brushing the ground.

Immemorially old, the dance, that seemed composed of a dream, a mist, a memory, and the very soul of music, held the heart and mind of the gazers as nothing else could hold them. The soft clapping of hands—the Japanese call to the living as to the departed—which broke out every now and then along the whole circle of the dancers had a voice and an appeal of its own. It was the call of the living to the dead, and all the poetry in the world could not express in words the pathos and the poignancy of that simple sound. It was understandable without any translation or explanation. By Petit, the French surgeon, and Ericsson, the Icelandic cable hand, no less than by the native onlookers and the mysterious dancers.

Then, as though the thing had never been, dance and dancers, courtyard and temple passed from the mind of Ericsson. Some one pressing against him in the crowd had made him turn. It was the girl of the beach. The other women were with her.

Now, a few minutes before, a man had been beside him, and all around the crowd had been composed of the village and country people. The sea people had appeared as if from nowhere. They had, without doubt, seen the Icelander's towering form, and perhaps had edged their way towards him through the crowd, or they may have drifted there by accident. If so, it was a strange fact that the girl should be beside him and not one of the others.

She was watching the dancers and seemed quite unconscious of his presence. He felt her warm body pressing against him; he could feel her breath coming and going, and her arm against his arm. Then he felt for and found her hand. It let itself be taken captive.

At first it felt like the hand of a dead girl, new drowned and still warm. He felt the thickness between back and palm and the creases of the palm, and the soft cushion of the thumb muscles; the webbing between the fingers was more pronounced than in the ordinary woman's hand, as though the owner had for near ancestor some delightful form of amphibian. The fingers, thick at the roots, tapered without any thickening at the joints, and the nails were polished and smooth as burnished agate.

The most delightful little country in the world to explore is a woman's hand, especially when the exploration is conducted in the dark, and when you are telling the owner a story all the time about the places you visit.

"This is the palm and here is the line of the head, and what a beautiful and graceful line it must be, if it is anything like what it represents; and this is the line of the hardest heart in the world. No? Well, we will see about that later on. The line of Fate is double, for mine runs beside it, and here is the mountain of Venus, the only mountain in the world worth climbing."

He was feeling the unresponsive hand when suddenly, as if moved to speech, a finger closed on his thumb and embraced it.

The warmest kiss could not have said more.

Then, true to his instincts, he dropped the hand to grasp the waist, and in that short moment he lost her; she had slipped away in the crowd. He saw her head for a moment and tried to follow in her direction, but the women who had been with her were in the way, and blocked his progress. They had evidently guessed the meaning of the girl's evasion, and without any seeming intention they barred his path so effectively that, when he managed to pass them, the evasive one was utterly lost in the throng. He pushed his way right to the temple door, and then he came back slowly, searching to right and left—she was not to be found.

Then he was seized on by Dr. Petit, who knew nothing of the business, and who had seen enough of the dance. The dancers had broken into song, and as they left the courtyard to find the rickshaws they heard the voices of the girls, bell-like and golden, in the song beginning,

"Oomu otoko ni sowa sanu oya wa—"

which Hearn has translated:

"The parents who will not allow their girl to be united with her lover; they are not the parents, but the enemies of their child."

They took their way back to the ship through the dreamland of a Japanese summer's night. Great bats passed them, and owls flitting from the woods to the rice-fields. The great old Temple of Kwannon saluted them as they passed with the cry of a night-bird, and the village of the fisher-people as they drove by it showed a line of half-burnt-out torches, one before each door. The men who had been left behind to look after the houses and the children had attended to the ceremonial of Bommatsuri. There was a torch before the little house of the girl, and Ericsson, noting the fact, wondered if it had been lit for her by some lover amidst the emasculated male population. He did not trouble over the matter. He felt by instinct that she was his, that they would meet again and all would be well.

The end of the affair he never thought of, no more than the intoxicated man thinks of what will be the end of his intoxication.

At the cable hut they fired a rocket and burned a blue flare as a signal to the ship, and a moment later, away out in the moonlit distance of the sea, a thread of fire ran up and broke into a tiny crimson star; it was the answering signal.

When the launch had arrived and they were taking their departure, Ericsson, taking his Japanese friend aside for a moment, told him that he had met the girl again and that everything was all right.

“She is not like the others,” said he.

The Japanese laughed.

CHAPTER IX

MARK BUOY NO. 5

“The weather has broken.” They were the first words Ericsson heard next morning as he tumbled out of his bunk.

Briem would have had him out before daybreak under ordinary circumstances, but you cannot work cable in rough weather, and now, an hour after daybreak, the weather was rough enough in all conscience. The tide was flooding, and the North Pacific, coming down through La Perouse Strait and the Straits of Sangar, was met full front by a tearing south wind. There was not a cloud in the sky, and away to the east the coast of Japan lay sharp-cut and sure as the engraving on a gem. Across the flashing and tumbling tourmaline of the sea the foam on the distant rocks showed like a thin white fleece.

“This wind won’t last more than twelve hours,” said Johansson, the cable foreman, as they sat at breakfast, “and the tide’s making half the sea; but it’s a day lost, and if the shore end parts from her buoy there’ll be the devil to pay.”

“She won’t part,” said Ericsson. “I fastened her.”

The supreme self-confidence of the man spoke in his words. He left the mess and came up on deck to have a look at the sea, and he was standing on the after-gratings by the Kelvin sounder when a voice from forward hailed him. It was Johansson’s thunderous voice.

“Hi! there, Ericsson, Mark Buoy Number Five’s adrift.”

He came forward at a run.

The ship with her bow to the north was holding her place and making headway against the set of the current with the engines going dead slow and the help of the wind.

She was still on her course up and down between the two mark buoys, the most northern of which had broken adrift.

Ericsson, as captain of the buoys, hurried up to the bridge beside Briem, who had just got there. The cable engineer was shading his eyes from the sun and staring ahead at the patch of colour on the water.

Leaving aside the fact that she was out of her place, he could tell at a glance that she was adrift. Freed from the weight of the mooring tackle, she rode light and with a jaunty air; now cocking herself up to the sky and now boosting the sea about her in a lather of foam.

"The bitch!" said he, bringing his fist down with a bang on the rail.

It was the only word that fitted her.

"This tide will take her down to Tottori or on to the Oki Islands, and I'm not going to risk a boatful of men for her —— her." He turned from where he was standing and paced the bridge.

He could have got a boat away from the ship safely enough, yet without too much margin of safety; but for a boat to approach that tumbling eight-ton weight of metal, and rope it in such a sea, would have been courting destruction.

Suddenly Ericsson, who was standing gazing at her with his hand over his eyes, turned to Briem.

"I'll catch her."

"You?"

"Yes, I. She'll be up to us in less than ten minutes; give me a boat and crew."

"To send to the bottom!"

"I'll rope her, without bringing the boat near her. Don't lose time."

Briem had perfect confidence in Ericsson. Without seeing how the thing was to be done, he leant over the bridge rail and called to Johansson!

"Get the whale-boat ready for lowering, and a crew for her."

"And a hundred fathom of whale-line," shouted Ericsson, and, sliding down from the bridge on top of his order, he followed Johansson aft. Briem, watching, saw the whale-boat manned and lowered, and then making its way over the tumbling sea. Ericsson was in the stern beside Johansson, who was steering; there was not a foremast man among the crew, they were all cable hands, and they managed the boat as only such men can.

The buoy, coming with the current, was on a course that would take her past the ship about two cable lengths to starboard, and the boat was steering a course at right angles to that of the approaching buoy. Briem, watching through the glass, saw Ericsson stripping his clothes off and fastening one end of the whale-line about him.

Then, when the boat was right in the course of the oncoming monster, Ericsson took to the water and the boat rowed on; the stroke, who had shipped his oar, paying out the whale-line.

Ericsson, in the water, felt none of the trepidation of Briem watching him from the bridge. Lifted now on a wave, he could see the truant approaching him; he was swimming, and swimming hard, for they were both being borne on the same current, and if he waited for her to come to him he would have had to wait till they reached Tottori. It seemed that he would never reach her, and then, all at once, just as a love-affair comes to a crisis, she was on him.

He was in the hollow of a wave, and she was on the top of it, and going to crash down on him. The illusion was so perfect that he shouted out as men shout when death is on them; but the wave passed under the buoy, raising him in turn on its crest and leaving her in the hollow. He struck out vigorously and in the trough of the next wave they met.

Weighing over eight tons, with her lamps still burning and her flag flying triumphantly, cascading the green seas from her glittering paint, she met him in a welter of roaring foam.

Had he crossed her track by ever so little, she would have overrun the whale-line and sent him to the bottom or killed him with a blow of her submerged mooring tackle; as it was, he met her almost full front, seized one of the rings above the mid-girdle, and clung.

She heeled to his weight and the green seas rushed over his head; then she righted, lifting him like a giant till the sun burst in his face. With one foot on the mid-girdle and one hand clinging to the ring, by a supreme effort he clutched the ring by the flagstaff, got the other foot on the mid-girdle and scrambled on to the great dome of iron, sitting with flagstaff and lamp clipped between his naked thighs.

He was safe now for a moment, and the buoy, as though subjugated, rode easily, lifting and dropping him on the waves whilst he took breath and glanced around him. He was riding her like a horse, and like a horseman amidst broken country, he looked round him on the country of the sea. It seemed to him, for a second, that he had never seen it before; never had he been so closely in touch with it even when swimming. In that momentary and blazing vision of sea and wind, and sun and foam, he saw the ocean as a living thing, tremendous, jubilant, young, and fair—fresh as dawn.

The coast was almost invisible beyond the green peaks and tourmaline hollows; the ship, though close, seemed a great distance away. He shouted to it, laughing and waving his hand; then he set to work. Clinging with his legs hooked round the lamp and flagstaff socket, he freed himself from the rope and tied the rope-end to the mooring-ring; got the flagstaff and lamp from their socket and flung them into the sea; having thus cleared away anything that might tangle and mess up the rope, he had nothing more to do but return to the boat.

Drawing up his legs and squatting, he waited his opportunity till the buoy, riding for a moment steadily, gave him a chance; then, standing erect and balancing himself, he plunged clear of her, rose, and struck out for the boat. Then the boat, when they had hauled him on board of her, made for the ship with the line, and Mark Buoy No. 5 went on her triumphant course, insulting every wave she met, nodding defiance as she passed the *President Girling's* stern, and crying "Ho! for Tottori Island and a cruise all alone."

She had not gone a cable length astern of the ship, however, when a chuck at the mooring-ring brought her to her senses. It was the whale-line that had been fixed by her captor.

To be winched on board out of a heavy sea, to bash herself against the ship's plates, to crush a human being to pulp as she came walloping on deck, all that would have been joy, one might fancy, to her wicked heart.

To be streamed astern on a line like a dinghy and told to wait there till the weather moderated was her punishment.

CHAPTER X
THE REWARD

Magnuss had not formed one of the boat's crew. He had been down below when the order came, and so missed his chance. He did not come on deck till the boat was away, and then he found every living soul except the engine-room staff, the helmsman, and the officer of the watch, crowding the bow balks and spar deck, roosting aloft, or spread-eagled on the ratlins.

When he learned the cause of the excitement he found a place and gazed with the others.

He watched in a fiercely critical spirit the boat as she rowed to cross the course of the buoy. What on earth did Ericsson propose to do? Whistle to her? Then, when he saw the swimmer making for his objective, he shuddered. He knew the danger. Talking in an undertone, he kept giving directions to his friend, admonitions, and warnings:

"Mind and don't let her foul the rope; watch for the ring. Ah! look sharp! She's got him under her! No, she hasn't! He's got her! He's climbing! He's on her!" He joined in the shout that went up, and which Ericsson did not hear, with his ears singing with sea-water. Then, when all danger was over and the boat approaching the ship, black gloom and jealousy settled on Magnuss.

Only for a while, however, till a sense of fatality took its place. Where was the use in bothering? He, Magnuss, was not as good a man, and all the bothering in the world would not alter the fact.

Mind, he did not say that Ericsson was a better man. He took the more negative and feminine view that he was a worse man than Ericsson. This gave his strange soul something to hug and fret over. Later on, he would, no doubt, put Ericsson's deed into verse and glorify it to the skies, urged by genuine admiration for his friend and also by the ghastly and unhealthy pleasure to be got in self-depreciation:

"Of the valiant deeds of others I can only sing."

When Ericsson came on board, Briem clapped him on the shoulder and paid him a compliment in unprintable language. Then Ericsson slipped down to the engine-room for a warm, and the incident was over for the present.

The officers of the ship berthed in cabins off the saloon, and some off the space called the square, which surrounded the forward cable tank.

Dinner in the saloon was served at half-past six o'clock and at half-past seven that day a message came from the saloon that Captain Grondaal wanted to see Ericsson. Now, if there was one thing in the world more hateful to this man than another, it was thanks or praise of any description in public. As a matter of fact, it raised the devil in him almost as much as insult would have done: a sort of shy devil that hated to be raised, hated the light, hated publicity.

"What does he want now, I wonder?" said Ericsson, slipping into his coat.

He came aft to the saloon companionway and slipped down it to the door of the saloon.

Dinner was over and the place was full of cigar smoke. Grondaal sat at the head of the table, at the opposite end, and Ericsson, to reach him, had to pass down the whole length of the table, on either side of which were the first and second officers, the three electricians, the doctor, Briem, the chief cable engineer, the chief engineer, Amundsen the hydrographer, and the purser.

They banged on the table as he passed along and called out congratulations to him. When he reached Grondaal's place he halted dead and saluted.

Grondaal was one of those men who love a record. If he cut himself when shaving, he thought less of the gash than of the fact that he had broken (in an unsatisfactory sense) his record of so many weeks' shaving without an accident.

He had never lost a buoy during his command of the *President Girling*, and he had never lost a boat. Mark Buoy No. 5 had nearly spoiled this record, and would have done so but for Ericsson. Besides, the buoy was worth two or three thousand kronur, and the salving of it had been as brilliant and daring a piece of work as he had seen for years.

He poured out a glass of champagne for the hero, thanked him before the whole table, drank his health, and then:

"Ask what you like, my man," said he, "in reason, and you shall have it."

Ericsson, without a moment's hesitation, and urged by the irritable devil in his breast, made the extraordinary request for twelve hours' shore leave.

"Twelve hours' shore leave? You shall have it, at Nagasaki."

“No, sir; here.”

“Here? Well, if I can give it you, I will. But what on earth do you want with twelve hours’ shore leave in this desolate place?”

“Where there aren’t any taverns and there aren’t any girls,” put in the first officer.

“Well, you shall have it,” said Grondaal, “if it’s possible to be done; and, if not here, then at Nagasaki.”

Ericsson saluted and tramped off, with half a box of cigars which Briem handed to him as he passed.

Down on the cable deck he distributed the cigars, and whilst they were being smoked Johansson reported that the wind and sea were falling and that cable work would most likely be resumed at daybreak.

“And what did they say to you in the saloon?” asked Magnuss later on, as he and Ericsson came up on the main deck.

“Oh, nothing—the old man asked me to give a name to what I wanted most——”

“And you——”

“And I asked him for shore leave.”

Magnuss grunted.

They had climbed on to the after-gratings and, leaning over the after rail, they looked astern to where the buoy, riding at the end of the rope, bobbed and tossed on the sea.

The wind had fallen still more, and the sea was nothing to what it had been.

“What do you want shore leave for?” asked Magnuss, after a pause.

“What do I want it for? Why, to stretch my legs.”

“Well, it’s no affair of mine,” said the other in an injured tone.

“Now, what are you grumbling at? There never was such a man for grumbling! What would I have asked for unless shore leave? To be made cable foreman?”

“That’s just it. When a good chance comes to you, you throw it away. You might have had promotion, and you throw the chance away—for what? Just to run after a girl.”

Ericsson exploded.

“Promotion! What do you take me for? I do a piece of work that it’s my duty to do, and you’d have me ask to be paid for it!”

“I would not. You should have asked for nothing. If you’d left it, Jakob Briem would have seen that you got a shove up or a bonus. Now, he’ll say to himself, ‘Ericsson’s paid,’ and forget all about you—and all to see that girl! I know you.”

“What girl?”

Magnuss laughed.

“That girl you’re after—you can’t deceive me.”

“Deceive you! Who wants to? Yes, I am after a girl, and I tell you this—if I can’t get ashore by fair means to see her before we sail, I’ll swim ashore. So just shut your teeth. You’ve got a girl of your own, so just stick to her and leave me to mine.”

“To which one?” asked Magnuss sarcastically.

No other man in the world would have dared to speak to Ericsson as Magnuss had done. And now, instead of getting angry, Ericsson laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

“You can only live once, and when you’re dead you’ll be dead a precious long time. I live my own life; you live yours; and so we’ll be friends. It’s not good to interfere in a man’s life. If he’s not able to steer his own ship, then let her go on the rocks.”

“Ay, it’s the rocks I’m afraid of,” replied Magnuss, and turning on his heel he went forward.

Ericsson turned again and leaned on the after rail, whistling softly as he watched the buoy.

Magnuss’s double nature was always surprising him. He knew quite well that Magnuss was jealous of him—jealous of his daring and luck that day, jealous of the girl and the fact that he, Ericsson, was going to meet her, jealous of the praise given by the captain. All the same, he knew that Magnuss was genuine in his warning and advice. Nothing would please Magnuss more than to see him get on and make money, yet Magnuss would be jealous all the time.

In the depth of his consciousness he knew that Magnuss, were it to come to a push, would be capable of sacrificing anything for him; yet he also knew that Magnuss might be capable of playing him some little and mean trick; some fisherman's revenge.

Then he thought of the girl and his chance of meeting her on the morrow, if he got shore leave. He felt again her finger curling about his thumb; a mute confession whose recollection thrilled him as he gazed at the coast, visible from the foam-line to the moonlight on the Asama-Sama Mountains.

Then Briem's voice called him forward. Briem had determined that the weather had moderated enough for the purpose of getting the buoy aboard. So they set to on the work, which lasted an hour from the start till the derrick had her swung inboard, sweating water under the sizzling arc lamp, without her flagstaff, without her lamp, with her paint scraped and a dent in her side, a true prodigal daughter of the sea, with the appearance and conduct summed up in Briem's welcome:

"So you've come back, you——"

CHAPTER XI

A JAPANESE TRAGEDY

To nearly every man there comes a critical day—a day on which as on a pivot all his future life will swing.

On this, the morning of the 15th of July, Ericsson, unconscious of what the gods held in store for him, was at his post before the first streak of dawn touched the sky. The sea had fallen to a gentle swell, and Briem, who knew the Sea of Japan and its trickery, determined if possible to put the whole job through and finish it in one great blazing summer-day's work. If luck were with him, the thing could be done.

He put the call on Johansson, the cable foreman, and Ericsson, and they responded royally.

Ericsson was now preparing Buoy No. 5 for re-lowering. Under the electric light he was personally supervising the whole of her tackle from anchor to coupling. Johansson was going over the grapnels, hawsers, and grapnel ropes; Magnuss was aft, supervising the Kelvin sounder, and Grondaal was on the bridge, waiting for the first show of daylight to pick up their exact position for the dropping of the buoy.

An hour after daybreak the buoy was lowered, and half an hour later the grapnel was down and the great fishing began. Luck was with them.

Shortly after nine o'clock the cable was seized, and at ten it was at the bows. Ten minutes later it was in connection with the testing-room, and the electricians were talking to the Japan naval base island away below the western horizon.

Then came Thordursson's job. The cable end was dragged to him on the cable deck, where, squatting like a tinker with all his tools about him, he spliced it on to the end of the new cable brought to him from the tank. He finished this tremendous and intricate business at twenty minutes past eleven, and when it was done the *President Girling* turned and steamed for the shore end, and its buoy, paying out the new cable, behind her.

The buoy and shore end were hauled on board, and the shore end dragged to Thordursson, who sat waiting for it like a sphinx. He cut the cable they had been paying out, and joined the sea end of it to the shore end, and an hour later, when he rose, wiping his hands on his breeches, the job was done.

It only remained to fling the great loop of cable on board into the sea.

At five minutes to three the splash of it taking the water was followed by three cheers for the King of Denmark and the Emperor of Japan; grog was served out for all hands, and the *President Girling* steamed off to pick up the mark buoys.

At ten minutes to five they were on board, and the ship was back in a position a mile off shore and in a line with the cable hut.

Grondaal was in the highest spirits. Briem had done all the work, but Grondaal would get most of the credit. Before splicing, a message had been sent to Tonkin, asking for orders from the branch office of the Franco-Danish Company, and the reply had come back, "Communicating with Copenhagen; reply expected to-morrow."

The reply would come to the cable hut on the beach, and to notify the hut people Grondaal now ordered a boat away, and with the order, remembering his promise to Ericsson, he told him he might go in the boat.

"And mind you, it's only twelve hours' leave," said Grondaal. "I'll be sending a boat ashore at five o'clock in the morning for the message from Copenhagen, and you be on the beach to meet it, or the ship will sail without you."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Ericsson.

As they were being lowered, Ericsson underwent a fire from a whole line of cable hands hanging over the bulwarks.

"What hotel are you going to stay at, Ericsson?"

"He! He's going to stop at the sign of the True Lovers' Knot," etc.

Ericsson felt certain that Magnuss had been talking; more especially as Magnuss was nowhere to be seen on deck. He determined to have the matter out with Magnuss on his return to the ship. Then he forgot all about him.

There was scarcely any surf running, and they landed with ease, and Briem, having notified the hut of the expected cable from Copenhagen, the boat put off again, leaving Ericsson waving his hand to it on the beach.

Ericsson, on landing, had taken his Japanese friend aside and told him of his shore leave.

"Ah, then you will stay at the hut," said the Japanese. "We can put you up. You can have supper with us, and we will have a good time."

Ericsson agreed.

Then, when the boat was away, he took his friend by the arm and strolled with him towards the fishing-village. All the women were away at their work, and the place was deserted.

The house where the girl lived was empty, with the door pushed back so that the sea-breeze could enter. The hibachi was standing in the same place on the matting.

"I want to see her and speak to her to-night," said Ericsson, nodding at the house.

"Ah, you are still of the mind to see her?"

Ericsson nodded.

"Well, then, leave her a message same as you left her before."

"The flowers? But will she understand? She does not know I have come ashore."

"Oh, these sea people know everything. They have seen by this the boat come, and they have seen that you remained behind. If you are bent on the thing, leave the flowers; but I would not if I were you."

"I'll risk it," said Ericsson.

He went to where the flowers were growing, picked a dozen of them and, without tying their stalks together—this was a suggestion of the Japanese—placed them on the matting by the hibachi.

"Look," said the Japanese as the lover came out of the house.

A man was running down the village street, and as Ericsson caught sight of him he was in the act of disappearing round the corner at the far end. He looked just like a rabbit bolting for its hole.

"He is off to tell the women that you have been here. He was watching us all the time; he saw you pick the flowers and go into the house. Well, my friend, you have done it now, and there is no more to be said. But, if I am not mistaken, that same man is courting your girl. I have seen them walking together."

"Man!" said Ericsson. "You don't call that thing a man?"

"Well, at least he is not a woman. Neither is he what you would truly call a man. When I have seen them walking together, he was always behind, she in front. But there is no accounting for tastes. These women like a weak man who will look up to them, whereas ordinary women like a strong man to whom they can look up.”

“She is different from the others.”

“Who knows?”

The cable hut was quite a commodious place, erected during the war with China, built bungalow fashion and containing the instrument-room, a general living-room, and three other small rooms that could be used for bedrooms. There was scarcely a particle of furniture—just the matting, a couple of tobacco monos, and the rolled-up mattresses and mosquito-nets. The cooking was done in a shed at the back, and when they returned, supper was preparing.

There were three electricians, including Ericsson’s friend, and they had two servants with them, one to do the cooking and one to wait. They could all speak French—even the servants a few words—and as they sat cross-legged on the floor, whilst supper was served, Ericsson told them of the buoy breaking loose yesterday and of the salving of it, without, however, mentioning the fact that he was the man who did the job.

The supper was a marvel, and seemed made up from everything that could come from the sea: seaweed soup, shell-fish, cuttle-fish, to say nothing of salted plums and prawns dressed in sugar. The usual big bowl of rice and bottle of sauce finished the meal, and cigarettes and saki were brought out on the little platform that served for a verandah. Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Icelanders, all are gentlemen born, no matter to what class they belong. So are the Japanese, and had you been on the verandah with these men, who were truly men of the people, their conversation would have struck you mostly by its refinement in the best sense of the word. It was the talk of men of action and full of life, though any woman might have listened to it.

The Japanese, to whom the personal pronoun was as a wild elephant captured and tamed but always troublesome, and who were talking in a language which can never clothe Japanese thought entirely, still managed to hold their own. They were intensely interested in Iceland, and the talk ran on till the moon rose over the hills, touching the sea, and the lights of the *President Girling* looked like apples of gold on a picture of silver.

In these latitudes you get the northern stars just the same as in England. It might have been an English summer’s night, with just a trace, a flavour of something remote from the Western world as Canopus from the Bear, some faint musk of the soil, or the flowers, or the sea.

The tide was coming in and the boom and wash of it came from all down the coast. From the land, not a sound, save the ceaseless shrilling of the cicadas.

Then, one by one, the Japanese, praying to be honourably excused, retired. Ericsson's friend, having pointed out to him a futon and mosquito-net prepared for him in the general room, also departed for bed, and Ericsson was left alone, seated on the verandah and with nothing but the night and sea before him.

It was after ten o'clock, and the ship in the distance showed only her anchor lights and a glimmer from the chart-house.

As Ericsson stepped from the verandah on to the soft sand of the beach, some voice or premonition told him that the business he was setting out on was of a nature to be avoided. These sea people were not as other folk, and, should they resent his intrusion among them to the extent of ducking or drowning him, or worse, he would only have himself to thank.

This consideration did not cause him to flinch for a moment. He came straight across the sands till he reached the entrance of the village, where he paused for a moment, standing absolutely without movement, in the attitude of a man who is listening.

There was not a soul to be seen; the houses of the village lay before him, those on the right flooded over with moonlight, those on the left sunk in their own shadow, whilst the tall white daisies in the little garden patches stood spectral and stiff, unmoved by the least stirring of breeze.

The house of the girl was in shadow. It would not receive the moon full on its front for an hour yet.

He came towards it.

The sliding door was closed, all but for a space just sufficient for the insertion of one's fingers. He knocked softly on the panel and listened. Not a sound. He knocked again more loudly, and now, as if in reply, came the soft tread of feet upon the matting inside. He inserted his fingers in the opening and slid the panel back for a space sufficient to give him entrance, crossed the threshold, and the next moment he was holding her in his arms.

He tried to kiss her, but she had wound a shawl about her head and face, a shawl impregnated with some perfume he had never smelt before, a perfume that held all the musk of the East, curious, faint, yet penetrating and overpowering as a charm.

The moonlight showed a glimmer at the door panels and passed. It was time to go.

He turned, and as he turned, his hand touched hers. It evaded him; he felt her forearm, and then, rising from the futon, he searched for his coat on the floor, put it on, and, taking a box of matches from the pocket, struck a light.

He stood with the match burning in his hand and his eyes fixed on the face of the girl, who, crouched on the futon, in an attitude of terror, seemed waiting for him to kill her. He stared at her for one terrific moment.

Then, dropping the match, he rushed screaming from the house, bursting his way through the light door-panel and leaving it shattered behind him.

He made for the sea as if to dash into it, then, turning, he found himself caught by the arm.

It was his Japanese friend, who, attracted by the cries, had left the cable hut, and who now led him back to the building, trembling and shaking like a frightened child.

The moon, low over the western sea, cast the shadows of the two men far across the white sand as they went, one supporting the other. From the village of the sea people came not the slightest sound of life, nor from all the night around them, with the exception of a murmur from the waves.

BOOK II

THE LAND OF THE GUILLEMOT

CHAPTER I

NORTH!

The *President Girling* came back through the Straits of Tsu-shima, and then by the Inland Sea, through a paradise of islands to Osaka, burning tall factory chimneys against the blue of summer.

Here she took Neilsson on board, and an order from Copenhagen *via* Tonkin to proceed to Yaku Island and take soundings for the Japanese Government between there and Oho Sima.

Then she came down through the Pescadores and the Hainan Strait back to Tonkin.

Here she lay up over Christmas, and on New Year's Day took her departure for Manila.

When Ericsson came on board from his shore leave at Noto, so completely had he regained mastery over himself that no one suspected that his experiences ashore had been otherwise than pleasant. Even Magnuss was deceived, and it was not till the lapse of a couple of days that the latter noticed the change in his companion. Ericsson, whose spirits had always been good, was often gloomy for no apparent cause, he went about his work like an automaton, and sometimes, when taken unawares, his face had a hunted expression such as a man's face wears when pursued by the thoughts of some pressing debt, or when he has escaped from some disaster whose memory still haunts him.

If questioned upon his doings ashore he became savage and irritable, and Magnuss, putting all these things together, came to the conclusion that something had happened to his friend to change him like this, and that the thing, whatever it was, had to do with the girl he had sworn to see.

Later on, at Tonkin and Manila, Magnuss noticed another strange thing. Ericsson the philanderer turned glum at the very word "girl," and once, taken off his guard at mess, he broke into such violent abuse of women, that Johansson, a married man and father of a family, hauled him up sharp.

One day in Manila harbour the Zealander approached him with the reminder of the bottle of rum which Ericsson had promised him in jest for messing up the cable. He almost struck the man, then, regaining command over himself, he gave him a couple of kronur and turned on his heel. The man and Mark Buoy No. 5 were his two aversions, for it seemed to him that these two evil things had contributed to the tragedy of his night ashore, the tragedy which Magnuss suspected, and the full revelation of which Magnuss was to listen to yet.

From Manila the ship continued on her wonderful voyage, past Labuan, and then westward through the Malacca Straits into the Indian Ocean, past the northernmost of the Maldives, through the Red Sea and Mediterranean to Marseilles.

Here she received the order to return to Copenhagen and pay off.

Paying off after a long voyage is always rather a dismal business if the ship has been a happy one. It is like the breaking-up of a home, and at Copenhagen on the day the *President Girling* was paid off, Magnuss was so affected that when he received his money he stood drinks all round at the Riga Tavern and took so much rum that he became maudlin and embracive.

Ericsson remained by him, guarding him from sponges, and at last got him out in the open air and down by the wharves.

By the wharf, close to the *President Girling*, lay the red-funnelled *Botnia*, of the Danish Steamship Line.

She was due to sail that day for Leith and Iceland. At the sight of her decks and the lifebuoys, stamped "*Botnia*, Kjobenhavn," Magnuss took fire. He would go in her. They were going back to Iceland, anyhow—why not to-day, straight off? In his exalted condition it seemed to him that he could not get there quick enough. Vestmannaeyjar and Vik, and Fuglasker, standing all alone in the sea, rose before him, clearly seen as though they lay on the other side of the harbour. Then the second officer of the *Botnia*, who was superintending the last of the cargo, hailed him; they were old friends, and that completed the business.

Ericsson went off for the third-class tickets to the shipping-office, and to fetch their gear, which was still lying waiting for them on the cable deck of the *President Girling*, leaving Magnuss on board the *Botnia* to find more friends among the crew. As he was coming out of the steamship office he met Helgi Olsen, who with half a dozen others was coming out of the Riga.

Olsen, when he heard that Ericsson was off that day, laughed.

"And how about that pound of tobacco and pair of new boots I was to pay you when we got to Reykjavik?" said he. "And how am I to pay you, and you off like this? Better wait till the next boat."

Ericsson turned on his heel without replying.

CHAPTER II

REYKJAVIK

They touched at Leith and turned northwards, steaming with the coast of Scotland to port and all to starboard the tumbling North Sea, green and fresh and foam-capped beneath the chill blue sky of spring.

They passed Peterhead and the fishing fleets, Duncansby Head, and through the Pentland to the Western Ocean.

May was lighting all the northern world from the Húnaflói to Jan Meyen Island, and from Jan Meyen Island to the bergs of Greenland.

It was a wonderful season, for the sea as they neared the Icelandic coast was held in one of those glacial calms that rarely occur except in late summer; the weather was warm, and a faint mist hid the horizon, whilst the sea-birds, diving, sent the ripples round them just as though they were fishing in a pond.

They were entering the paradise of the Northern birds; red-billed puffins dived before the advancing ship, whole coveys diving as one bird, and away in the haze over the glacial swell, the gannets could be seen fishing, hovering over the water, falling like stones, and jetting the spray yards high.

Then, Iceland appeared, with the sun spilling on Vatna Jokull, the great ice mountain sketched above a tremendous coast dimmed by the vague sea mist. They touched at the Westmann Islands, crags of basalt standing like teeth from the sea, with one green harbour protected by gull-haunted cliffs; here the guillemots, swarming in thousands and breaking in clouds from the rock ledges, greeted them with a lamentable voice that was taken up by the cliffs and returned in bagpipe echoes, chanting, wheezing, as though all the spirits of the desolate land were crying its desolation.

The sound followed them as they put out and steered westward for Reykjavik along the south coast past Bergthorshool and Krisuvik, till Fuglasker, the long-desired of Magnuss, showed far at sea; an island like a tower set in the midst of the ocean.

There is no other land in the world like Iceland. Here on the south coast you watch the hills and crags, and the broad tablelands, and the foam breaking on the rocks, and you know that you are watching desolation, and that those tablelands are untilled, those hills untrodden; that scarcely a tree grows in all that country, and that were you wrecked, the quicksands alone would receive you. You see a white puff of smoke like the smoke of a railway train—it is the smoke of a boiling laugg, boiling merrily and all alone amidst the rocks of basalt and the old moss of the lava beds.

And you gaze, feeding on the desolation till the charm of it seizes you, till the greys and vague mauves and purples, the sharp crags and the weary alone hills, stamp themselves on your imagination, never more to be effaced.

Towards evening they rounded Reykjanes, and there before them, lit by broad daylight and a sun that would never fully set all summer, lay the Faxa Fjord, with Reykjavik facing Snaefel, fifty miles away across the tremendous bay.

As the anchor went down, the ship was surrounded by shore boats, and Magnuss, wild with excitement, was hanging over the bulwarks, shouting to friends, Ericsson beside him, almost as excited, joining in.

"There's Bjarni Olsen's boat," cried Magnuss. "Hi there, Olsen! Don't you remember me? Give us a row ashore, me and my mate. It's Ericsson—Erikr Ericsson."

"Bjarni!" shouted Ericsson, as Magnuss vanished to fetch their gear. "Any news?"

"Ay, bad news—bad news for you, Ericsson. Did you not get the letters? It's your old father—he's gone. Ay, the winter did for him. But I'll tell you when you get in the boat."

Ericsson drew back from the bulwarks and looked around him stupidly at the crowd of passengers thronging the deck, and the Icelanders who had boarded the ship to meet friends.

So the old father was dead; the only living relative he had in the world. It hit him hard, for the old man had been a good father, and the memory of him went back to the earliest days of his youth. He flung the back of his hand across his eyes and then seemed himself again, following Magnuss down the companionway to the boat.

Magnuss, in his case, would have been lamenting and weeping and going into the first tavern on shore to drown his grief.

When they were in the boat, Olsen pushed off, rowing with oars whose blades were scarcely broader than the shafts.

"And how has business been in Reykjavik?" asked Magnuss.

The question made Olsen forget all about Ericsson's father. Business, indeed! and who could expect business, with this rotten Government playing into the hands of the Danes? Why, the latest thing was—guess what?—a law prohibiting the importation of spirits and alcohol of any sort.

“God in heaven?” said Magnuss. “Do you mean to say we won’t be able to get a drink ashore?”

Oh, it was not as bad as that. People were allowed to drink all the stuff there was on the island, but after that no more was to be imported.

Magnuss gave a sigh of relief; then he began to curse the Danes.

Iceland, over a thousand years ago, was peopled by Scandinavians. They brought with them the old root language from which all modern Scandinavian languages spring. Protected in this quiet backwater, the tongue has not altered, and when you hear two Icelanders talking, you hear people talking in just the same way that they talked in the days of Snorri and Burnt Njal. They think in pretty much the same fashion, too, only, instead of expressing their thoughts with clubs and spears, they use pens and ink and tongues, and their battle-ground, instead of being the plain of Thingveller, is the printed sheet and the little grey stone Parliament House in the middle of the town.

Every man is a politician, and there are twenty newspapers, mostly political, each with a circulation of a few thousand more or less, and bought by men of the class to which Magnuss belonged.

Now the Danes protect Iceland. They gave her Home Rule, and they give her doctors, educationalists, and a gunboat to protect her fisheries, yet the Icelander hates the Dane, Why? Simply because the spirit of the race can never forgive the injuries inflicted on it by the Danes in long-forgotten years.

So Magnuss abused the Danes, and Olsen joined in till they neared the stone boat-slip that runs right from the sea up to the main street of the town.

It was crowded with people: women, children and men. Half the population of the town had turned out to welcome the steamer from Leith, and as the two cable men went up through the crowd there was no lack of welcome and handshaking from the men, and side glances from the women at the handsome face of Ericsson.

Oh, those Iceland women! What a mystery lies in the expression of their faces! Fair or ugly, brunette or blonde, it is the same. Never, surely, have they smiled; over them all seems to hang the shade of a shadow of some gloomy yet uplifting thought. One might fancy that yesterday had died some great national hero—and that the fact was only known to the women.

"I don't see your father," said Magnuss, who had met the elder Ericsson on the last time he had passed through Reykjavik.

"He is dead," replied Ericsson.

Magnuss stopped short and gazed at his companion in astonishment.

"Dead! Who told you?"

"Bjarni Olsen."

For a moment it seemed to the emotional Magnuss that his friend was the hardest-hearted person in the world; then he saw his lip twitch and guessed the grief so powerfully held under. He took him by the arm and led him towards the bar of Zoega's Hotel.

It was still broad daylight, though getting on for ten o'clock, and the town with its corrugated-iron houses lay wide awake and moving with people—Danish sailors from the gunboat in the harbour; French sailors from a fishing-boat put in for repair; folk going to and from the newly arrived *Botnia*, and men from a Greenland sealer leaving on the morrow.

Reykjavik lies on the sea edge of a desolate plain, a plain that rises brokenly to the foothills of a vast volcanic range filling the whole visible horizon with mountain forms like the forms of great horsemen, cloaked, riding swiftly, and bending low.

Everything is just the same as it was in the beginning of things, when the Saurian wallowed on the black beach and the fires of the volcanic hills answered the blaze of Snaefel eighty miles away across the Faxa Fjord—just the same, with the exception that the Saurian has vanished and the fires are extinct.

The streets of the little town by the sea, with one exception, lead nowhere beyond the town. You come to the sea itself, to barbed wire, to codfish split open and drying on blocks of lava. One road only leads to the interior, striking by the boiling springs towards the hills and distant Thingveller. It is the only road of any extent in Iceland, and from it you can see the smoke of the boiling springs, where all the town's washing is done, and beyond this smoke the leper hospital by the far sea edge.

The bar of Zoega's Hotel was full, for it was near closing-time. It is the most extraordinary bar in the world, for here you may find, when Parliament is sitting, a Member of Parliament taking his coffee, a whaler captain or a man from a Greenland sealer taking his rum, an English Lord out for the salmon-fishing talking to a gillie. Frenchmen, Germans, Danes, Austrians, Swedes, Englishmen, Americans, Icelandic-Americans, Swiss guides, local poets and newspapermen, all are to be found here in the season, to say nothing of the men who let out ponies for hire, and the local guides.

Magnuss, having ordered a room and drinks for himself and Ericsson, was turning to find a seat at one of the tables, when a tall man, who was seated near by, reading the *Vizir*, put down his paper, rose, and came towards them. It was Helgi Stefansson, notary public, and one of the chief solicitors of Reykjavik.

“Why, it is Erikr Ericsson,” said he, “and Jonass Magnuss! This is a great surprise. You have no doubt heard the sad news?”

“About my father?” said Ericsson.

“Yes. It came as a shock to the town, for there was no man more respected. But did you not get my letter?”

“No,” said Ericsson. “I have had no letter from any one, and the first I heard of it was from Bjarni Olsen.”

“Ah, well,” said Stefansson, “it will then come as a surprise to you, perhaps, that your father had saved a good deal of money, all safely deposited in the Islandsbanki, and all yours. I was his man of affairs, and I have the will and all the papers safe at my office.”

“A good deal of money!” said Ericsson in surprise. The idea of money had never crossed his mind. The old man had carried on a small business in the fish-curing industry, but he had always seemed pressed for money; always pulling a poor mouth, he had always been filling a fat purse, even at the expense of his son; for Ericsson had time and again sent him contributions, fairly large sums from bonuses on cable-laying jobs, and small sums from his ordinary pay.

“A good deal of money! How much?”

“Why, there is over eight thousand kronur[2] in the bank in good money—then there is the house, that would bring you two thousand kronur were you to sell it. Call it ten thousand kronur when all expenses are paid.”

“Ten thousand kronur!” said Ericsson, delighted and astonished, and feeling as though the long and weedy Stefansson were some fairy godfather, a form too good to be true. “Ten thousand kronur! But it’s impossible! He had nothing.”

“Ah, he was a close man. Nothing! Why, how long was he in that little business? Twenty years and more. He had hard times now and then, I admit, but he clung to his aurar and left the kronur to look after themselves, and now you see the result. Well, I must be going. You will, of course, call at my office to-morrow morning. I have changed my address. I live now close to the Landsbanki—any one will show you my office.”

Off he went, and Ericsson turned to Magnuss for congratulations. But Magnuss was almost dumb. Black jealousy had him in her grip. He had been labouring all his life, denying himself pleasures, putting kronur to kronur; he had boasted to his companion on board ship of the three thousand kronur in the bank, and now Ericsson, the man who had never saved, the man who had flung his money about on girls, at one stroke of luck had ten thousand kronur to his name!

“Why, what ails you?” said Ericsson.

“Nothing, nothing,” replied Magnuss. “Here’s luck to you and your money; though it’s thrice what I’ve been working for all these years.”

He broke up the sugar in his glass of hot rum like an angry child; then he drank it off. There were tears in his eyes, and he put the glass down with a bang on the counter, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and fetched his pipe and tobacco-box out of his pocket.

“Magnuss,” said Ericsson, who had been watching him closely, “you’re a mate that’s not easy to get on with.”

Magnuss looked up from the lump of twist he was cutting with his knife.

“Then,” said he, “if I’m so hard to get on with, maybe you’d better find some one else.”

“You’re hard to get on with,” continued Ericsson, “and there’s not another man on the old hooker we’ve left who would have stood your crossings and your temper as I’ve stood them.” He pushed the glasses across the counter for the bar girl to refill. “You fought with Helgi Olsen, you fought with Neilsson, you fought with me, and I’m the only one that stuck to you as a friend——”

“Friend, indeed!” said Magnuss. “And how have you shown your friendship?”

“By pulling you out of bars when you’d had more than you could carry, and by carrying you on my back as I did at Tonkin, and you full of balloon juice, and half the native children in the place shouting at my heels. Now put a stopper on your tongue for a moment till I give you the rest of my opinion of you. I stuck to you because you were worth sticking to, and the only real friend I ever had. You’re my friend still, and half of that money is yours, if you’ll take it.”

Magnuss, who had pushed his glass of rum aside, as if disdaining to drink with such a man as Ericsson, stared at his companion without entirely comprehending for a moment what the other was driving at. Then, when he saw that Ericsson was in earnest, he flushed all over face and neck, the flush of shame at his own meanness. Ericsson had not triumphed over him by the help of Fortune alone, he had shown himself the better man in generosity.

“Not me,” said Magnuss. “The money is yours. I have enough, and money that I don’t earn never seems to me live money. All the same, I thank you.” His better nature suddenly burst through the mists of pettiness and jealousy and hatred of another man’s success, and, stretching out his hand, he clapped it in the palm of the other.

It was an extraordinary fact that, though Ericsson was always stirring the worse nature of Magnuss into being, that same worse nature had dwindled during the course of their companionship. Ericsson had hit it many a blow; the natural generosity and unconscious kindness of his disposition had always triumphed. On the other hand, Magnuss had in some strange way developed the good in Ericsson. The generosity that led him to offer half of his newly found wealth would never have existed but for Magnuss.

“Well,” said Ericsson, “there’s the offer, and you are free to take it. Or shall we club our money and go partners?”

“Partners?”

“Why, don’t you remember the night we were cruising off the Noto coast, and I proposed to you to go to the Breidifjord and start a fishing business?”

“Ay,” said Magnuss; “I had half forgotten it. But you said the other day, when I proposed to you to come back with me on a visit to the Breidifjord, that you intended staying in Reykjavik.”

“Yes, but I hadn’t ten thousand kronur the other day, d’ye see? One can do something with that. Go shares in a fishing-boat, or buy some of that river owned by your uncle. Besides, Reykjavik, now that my father is gone, doesn’t hold me. Once Reykjavik was the world and all to me, but it seems a mean place now, after Copenhagen and foreign ports. It’s nothing but a fishing-village trying to be a town, and I’d sooner cast my lines in a fishing-village—somewhere quiet, with less people.”

Magnuss was on fire in a moment. A gift of money he would not take, but a partnership wherein he could make up for want of capital by his work and real genius as a sailor and fisherman, that was a different matter.

"God's truth," said he— "there's something in that. I know the Breidifjord from Flatey to Breidavik, and not only the Breidifjord, but the Talknafjord and the Arnafjord, and all that coast up to Adalvik. I'm with you in any venture you like, and I make only one provision—that we begin small."

"I'm with you there," said Ericsson. "It's better to begin small and grow big than to begin big and grow small. But we can't make any plans till we get there. What size of a place is Skarsstöd, where your uncle lives?"

"Oh, big enough for us," replied Magnuss. "There's an inn, where we can put up, but Stefan Gunarsson is sure to want us to put up with him. He lives alone—he and Schwalla."

Ericsson had almost forgotten Schwalla, and the girl's name cast a momentary gloom over him. He had not spoken to a girl since the mysterious occurrence on the Noto coast, nor looked at one. The whole female sex had become for him abhorrent.

"I will stay at the inn," said he. "I have no mind for company—what I'm looking for is a place where a man is not always seeing people and having to talk to them. I'm going over there to work, and the sooner we get to work the better."

Magnuss agreed by saying nothing. He drank off the remains of his rum, for it was closing-time; then he followed Ericsson up to their room situated under the rafters. He recognised that it was the name of the girl that had turned Ericsson glum, and he fell to wondering for the hundredth time at the change that had come over him, and the cause of it.

That night, lying awake and building castles on this new prospect in life, he heard Ericsson tossing on his bed. Towards morning he was awakened by his companion crying out in a nightmare, and, springing from bed, shook him awake.

"What ails you?" cried Magnuss.

"The Japanese!" replied Ericsson, staring round him with eyes still filled with terror. "Ah!—she is gone."

Then, fully awake, he fell back on the pillows and murmured something about having dreamed of a ghost. But Magnuss knew that he had been dreaming of a girl.

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[2] A kronur equals one shilling and twopence.

CHAPTER III

AT STEFANSSON'S

At eight o'clock next morning, having breakfasted, they left the hotel and made for Stefansson's office. Ericsson had quite recovered from the effects of his nightmare and seemed in good spirits. Magnuss was silent and absorbed. The mysterious something that had happened to his companion, changing him so strangely and haunting him still with nightmare dreams, exercised a great fascination on the mind of Magnuss. Curiosity was one of his weaknesses, and on this question he was as curious as a woman.

They inquired the way to Helgi Stefansson's, and found him in.

Stefansson was one of the notabilities of Reykjavik, ranking with the Mayor and the British Consul, for in Reykjavik society is found in layers just as in London. First and topmost you find the Bishop and the Minister for Iceland, the chief physicians and the heads of Parliament; then come the Mayor, the chief representatives of the law, and the consuls. The newspaper men form a layer of their own, sandwiched between the Mayor's set and the upper circles of the business-folk; and the business-folk form several layers above the fisher-folk.

Though, from the sea, and at first glance when walking through its streets, Reykjavik seems little more than an overgrown fishing-village, it is really a town of considerable financial importance and has a social life whose season begins with the first crackle of the Northern lights, continuing its course with a round of balls and parties till spring brings across the Faxa Fjord the first sure promise of the endless summer day.

But this strange town of corrugated-iron houses, tin roofs and lava-block fish-drying grounds is more than a social centre—it is a centre of culture as well. Just as you find the poetry of wild flowers at the foot of the ice Jokulls and in the desolate basalt valleys, here, in this desolate town by the Faxa Fjord, you will find the feeling for things great and beautiful, not amongst the select few alone, but in the very heart of the people. The very fisher-folk and sailors have in them this salt which checks the decay caused by materialism and grossness, and each of those glittering particles holds some tinge of the blue sky of the world of dreams. Nothing is more charming than the natural refinement of a man of the people, the thing that makes what is vulgarly called a Nature's gentleman. Beside it all purely social refinement takes the vulgarity of a pose, the falseness of manufacture; and in Iceland this natural refinement permeates all classes, from Ericsson the fisherman and cable hand to the Bishop and the Minister.

Stefansson's offices were situated on the ground-floor of the house where he lived, and when Ericsson and Magnuss arrived, instead of interviewing them in the office, he took them upstairs to his sitting-room, a room furnished after the fashion of most of the better-class houses, rather heavily and in the Victorian style, without any of the cheap horrors of gimcrack art.

He produced cigars, and over them the business was conducted, Ericsson arranging to leave all the papers in the solicitor's hands and also all matters relative to the selling of the house.

"And you are going to the Breidifjord?" said Stefansson, when the business was concluded. "When do you start?"

"The *Botnia* is going on there the day after to-morrow," replied Ericsson, "and we will most likely go in her. There's nothing to be done waiting here now that my affairs are settled, but I'll look in before I start to see if there is anything more to be done."

As Stefansson showed them to the door, he asked Magnuss after the health of his uncle, whom he knew.

"Why," said Magnuss, "you are more likely to know than I. It's a year since I heard from him."

"Well, I saw him six months ago," said Stefansson, "and he was looking hale and hearty. Miss Schwalla was with him. She is engaged to be married."

"What!" cried Magnuss, turning. They had reached the door and he was on the step. He had to clutch at the door-jamb for support.

"Engaged to Olafur Gudmundsson, who owns the river above her father's holding."

"Engaged to be married! Engaged to Olafur Gudmundsson!" said Magnuss, who had not recovered himself. "Are they married yet?"

"I have not heard of it."

"To Olafur Gudmundsson! Why, he's married."

"His wife died nearly a year ago. Ah, you have been away so long you would not have known. Yes, she died a year ago, and now he is going to console himself with Schwalla."

“Console himself with Schwalla! God in heaven! why, the man must be over fifty.”

“Ay—and he has over fifty thousand kronur in the bank.”

“D—n him and the bank!” cried Magnuss. The idea of the fat Gudmundsson “consoling” himself with Schwalla nearly drove him frantic. He could not speak for a moment, nor see—tears filled his eyes. The feminine streak in his composite nature always made that happen in certain circumstances. Wild anger affected his lachrymal ducts as well as sentiment. He was a man who, with tears in his eyes, might have killed another man.

“But she,” he burst out—“what does she say to it? Surely to heaven she can’t care for the man!”

Stefansson shrugged his shoulders.

“Who can tell what a woman cares for?—There are not many men in Skarsstöd.”

“Ay, that’s it,” said Magnuss as they walked away, whilst Stefansson closed the door. “I’ve lost her because I wasn’t there. If I had stayed at home instead of wandering over the world, that fat hog of a Gudmundsson would not have played me this trick. I have no heart for the Breidifjord now.”

“How do you know you’ve lost her?”

“How do I know? Did you not hear Stefansson?”

“Yes, but that proves nothing. If I were in your case I would not think twice of the matter.”

“What would you do, then?”

“Do? Why, I’d go and take her off Gudmundsson’s hook. He hasn’t got her aboard yet, it seems; only hooked her.”

“It’s easy to say that,” said Magnuss.

“Easy to say! Aren’t you a man? Well, then, prove yourself one. Set your mind on the business and you’ll do it.”

“Ah, if I were like you,” said Magnuss. “You only have to whistle and the women follow you. But I have no way with them—and still, I’d swear she cared for me once.”

“Then make her care for you again. I’ll help you, and tell you what to do, and between us we’ll get the better of Gudmundsson. Not that I’ll mix up with these people, for I wish to live alone and have nothing to do with folk.”

“You’re a friend,” burst out Magnuss, “a true friend, and you’ve given me life again.” Then, flying off at a tangent in his sudden burst of gratitude, “But what ails you that has changed you like this? What have folk done to you that you wish to avoid them and turn your back on women?”

Ericsson did not seem to hear the question.

They took their way along the main street, till they reached a number of houses parallel with the shore, and only a few hundred feet away from the breaking sea. One of these small houses was closed, with the windows shuttered, and no fish were drying on the lava drying-blocks of the little yard.

Then they went to the little graveyard by the lake at the back of the town, where the old father was lying beyond sound of the sea, but within the peace of the desolate volcanic hills.

CHAPTER IV

SCHWALLA

The Breidifjord, when the *Botnia* entered it, was in a trance of calm.

The vast bay, island-strewn and clipped by the bold and rugged coast, stretched from Sandur to the headland hiding Breidavik without a ripple.

The blue sky was flecked with wings, and away on the blue gently heaving swell the gannets were hovering and splashing. Birds, birds, birds, everywhere birds, from foam-ringed Flatey to the islands of the Huammsfjordur; white swallow-like tern that, like dragonflies, seem to haunt a place rather than fly in it; puffin, guillemots, fulmars, and cormorants.

They rose as puffs and rings of smoke from the distant islands, and sank like smoke banked down by wind; they followed the *Botnia's* wake like a snowstorm and their cries now filled the cliffs of the nearing land. Then the syren hooted and the anchor fell in eight-fathom water, and the ship swung to the tide in this the fairest and strangest corner of all the garden of the sea.

A gunshot away lay the shore, and beside the Flóka river, racing diamond-bright between its boulders, lay the houses of the little town; to right and left of the river and town rose the cliffs of brown basalt, snowed with the roosting gulls.

The beach, clipped between the out-jutting cliffs, was strewn with people come down to welcome the ship, and a boat was putting off from the little stone landing-stage.

Ericsson and Magnuss, standing by the lowered gangway, watched the boat.

"Well," said Magnuss, "what do you think of Skarsstöd?"

"I've seen worse places," said Ericsson. "But where's the harbour?"

"Oh, there's a creek round beyond those cliffs where any boat can take shelter in rough weather. Ah!"

"What?"

"That's my uncle in the boat; he must be coming to meet me. Stefansson, or some one, must have told him I was coming. There's a telephone from Reykjavik, and they are always chattering the news."

“There’s a girl beside him in the boat,” said Ericsson.

Magnuss was silent; then, as the boat drew nearer, he gulped.

Could that be Schwalla? Could two and a half years have made that difference? The girl he had left wore the national dress; young, awkward, yet promising divine prettiness, she had the stamp of a girl of the people. This was a lady.

Even at a distance he could tell, after the first shock of the question, that this well-dressed person could not possibly be Schwalla. As the boat drew closer he was more sure of the fact. He could not see her face for the broad-brimmed hat she was wearing, but her attitude, her dress, everything banished the idea. It was some early tourist who had come out to take passage in the *Botnia* up the coast, or some one belonging to the upper classes in Reykjavik.

Then the boat clung on to the companion stage and the crowd on board her began to come up slowly enough, for they had to stop at nearly every step and shout greetings to friends hanging over the gangway.

First came several fishermen, carrying baskets; they were off for the more northern fjords for the summer; after them a local guide, looking anxiously about for the tourist who had engaged him by telephone from Reykjavik. Then came Stefan Gunarsson.

Stefan was a tall man of fifty-five or so, brown-bearded, with a face and head that might have been the face and head of a prophet, yet which fronted and held nothing in particular except obstinacy, a fine knowledge of the ways of salmon, and some fine old ringing lines from the sagas.

His obstinacy would have ruined him times out of mind, but for his wife, to whom, as is the case with many men, all his good fortune was due. She had been dead some years.

Gunarsson at once saw Magnuss and greeted him without a smile—he never smiled—but with a kindness of manner that was better still, and Magnuss replied to the greeting and shook his uncle’s hand like an awkward schoolboy, for his wits had been sent flying in every direction by the girl who was standing behind Gunarsson.

It was Schwalla.

He saw this at once now, though the girl before him was as different from the girl he had left as the full-plumed eider duck from the fledgeling.

Her face was delightful, slightly tanned by sun and wind, firm yet sensitive, practical yet hinting at divine possibilities.

Her deadly charm was her mouth.

It was the Cupid’s bow unbent, large and full-lipped, cut as if by some delicate yet daring hand and with a razor-edged chisel—a mouth sufficient to disturb the dreams of a saint and drive him mad with the desire to kiss it.

Her dark hair just showed beneath the broad straw hat, and her figure, half revealed by the dress of slate-grey tweed, hinted at rounded contours and lines of strength. She wore no gloves, and the hands thus exposed were plump and freckled and firm, well cared for, and developed by exercise.

But what killed the heart in Magnuss was the general impression produced by her picture on his retina. She was a lady. She stood as a lady stands, with perfect command of her hands, and person, and face; her dress, everything, completed the crushing effect. She belonged to a different world from the world he inhabited.

“Well,” said Stefan Gunarsson, “I am glad to see you back, and I have heard you have been doing well. Here has Schwalla, too, come to welcome you.”

He stepped aside, and Schwalla held out her hand with a smile.

“Welcome to Skarsstöd,” said she. “You have brought the smile of fine weather with you. Do you not remember the days when we went fishing, and how it was always fine on the days you said it would be?”

Magnuss’s bashfulness left him as he shook hands, though his gloom remained.

“Ay, those were pleasant days,” he replied, “and the sea-trout fishing—it is just as good, I suppose? But my friend is with me. Erikr Ericsson, the son of Helgi Ericsson of Reykjavik.”

He stepped aside, and Ericsson found himself being introduced to Gunarsson and his daughter.

Now, in Iceland they are always chattering across miles of country. Standing by the post office of Reykjavik and looking up in the air, you might fancy yourself in Chicago, from the number of wires you see, all telephone wires connecting the capital with farms and villages and towns spaced in a thousand square miles of desolation.

Gunarsson knew all about Magnuss and his companion, for the lawyer had talked to him for ten minutes or so yesterday, and, though Gunarsson was not in the least a worshipper of material things—beyond a certain point—the fact that Ericsson was a fairly well-to-do man did not lessen the cordiality of his greeting.

As for Schwalla, attracted at first by the picturesque handsomeness of the big man, a feeling came to her after the first moment of introduction such as she had never experienced before about a man—a feeling of vague antagonism.

Those blue eyes that met hers said absolutely nothing, gave no trace of kindliness of greeting or response. Had she met the water-nix that is said to haunt the Flóka, she might have felt towards it the same. For the water-nix has no soul.

As they went down to the boat, Magnuss noticed that Schwalla still possessed that lightness of movement which had distinguished her as a child. She moved like a bird. She had been christened Gudrun; Schwalla was only a pet name, but the pet name is very often the real name, the name with a soul, the name born from some endearing trait. Her mother, a Dane born in Copenhagen, had given her the name, and of all the names of birds and flowers she could not have found one more appropriate.

They left the boat-slip and walked up the beach to the street of the little town. There was only one street, on either side of which the houses lay, sometimes in small blocks, sometimes singly. The houses nearest the sea were occupied by fishermen, and the lava fish-drying-blocks stretched right to the cliff's base. Then came, on the right, the general store, owned by Björn Símonarsson; here you could buy everything, from tobacco to a suit of oilskins, from a pound of coffee to a frying-pan. Björn, a thin man eaten up with politics, a frightful gossip, and a Dane-hater of the first water, came running out of his store to greet Magnuss. Björn possessed a prophetic forehead and a delirious eye, and his business would have gone to rack and ruin years ago but for his wife, a small, pale, placid woman, all will and common sense.

Released from Björn, Magnuss fell into the arms of the baker, Jónsson. The village inn lay next to Jónsson's shop, set a few yards back from the street. Here Magnuss and his companion stopped.

"Well," said Stefan Gunarsson, "we will leave you here, if you are bent on staying at the inn, though I could have given you a room with all the will in the world. At all events, you must come to supper with us to-night. Seven o’clock.” He spoke in a general way, including Ericsson in the invitation, and then they went off, he and Schwalla, away up the queer street of toy tin houses, beyond the edge of which one could see the Flóka valley with its emerald-green grass and grey boulders and racing river, and beyond the valley the volcanic mountains, all dull purple and slate and mist-grey, with the vision of a vast ice-dome, on which the sunlight was spilling, eighty miles away.

The inn consisted of a kitchen, a general room where meals were served, and six or eight bedrooms, each with two sleeping-bunks set one above the other, after the fashion of those on board ship. Each bedroom had a tin washbasin on a ledge, and a towel. There was no other furniture in the place, with the exception of the tables and chairs in the *salle à manger*. But the rooms were specklessly clean and the food good for Iceland, the main items on the bill of fare being salmon from the Flóka, coffee, and the eternal pancakes.

When they had finished dinner, Magnuss, who had scarcely spoken since parting with Schwalla and her father, turned to Ericsson.

“Well,” said he, “what do you think of her?”

“Of whom?”

“Schwalla.”

Ericsson, who was cutting up some tobacco in the palm of his hand, did not reply for a moment.

CHAPTER V

THE OCTOPUS

Then he said:

"I'm thinking more of you than her. Why haven't you made inquiries?"

"How do you mean?"

"How do I mean! Why, about that man who is engaged to her."

"Gudmundsson?"

"Yes."

Magnuss moved uneasily in his chair:

"And what inquiries could I make?"

"What inquiries! Why, if I were in your place, I would know everything about him. You don't know even the date they are to be married on. Why, they may be married already, for all you know."

"They're not married," said Magnuss in a tone of conviction; "and as to when they are to be married——" He paused, and then burst out, "Can't you see she's gone from me? She's changed, flown above me. Can't you see she's a lady now?"

Ericsson laughed.

"There aren't any such things," said he. "There are only women in the world—they're all the same."

There was an edge and a touch of steel in his voice as though he were talking of people he hated and knew to the heart. It was no wonder that Schwalla had felt the chill of antagonism at his glance. It was she, indeed, who had crystallised in him and made definite the vague feeling against the sex that now filled his soul. She was woman apotheosised—woman triumphant in youth, beauty, and charm; and, to cap all, a type of the women socially above him. That last touch was all that was wanted to bring the woman dislike in him to a head.

He looked at Magnuss and contrasted him with her. Fisherman was stamped on Magnuss, and stamped to the bone. Schwalla was of the same breed, yet she exemplified the truth that in social life the female can rise to heights never to be attained by the male. Schwalla, with the help of a Reykjavik modiste, a touch of Copenhagen fashion, and her own taste, could take her place in any assembly of outdoor women unmarked. She might be a bit out of fashion and have a tinge of strangeness, but she would pass. To have made Magnuss presentable, you would have had to skin him first—and even then he would have been useless.

Ericsson recognised the great gulf fixed between the two, and the fact that he was on the wrong side of the gulf with Magnuss, and the recognition did not add any sweetness to his disposition. It gave additional impetus to an impish desire that had arisen in him to urge Magnuss on. Why should she disdain a fisherman?—a man who was of her own blood and her own people—like her impudence!

He was about to give his opinion on the matter and in no measured terms, when Madame Sturlusson, the landlady, came in to remove the things. She was a Reykjavik woman who had only been at Skarsstöd a year and a half, so she did not remember Magnuss.

"Mr. Gudmundsson," said she in answer to Ericsson's question. "Yes, he is engaged to marry Schwalla, the daughter of Stefan Gunarsson, right enough. Some people say in the autumn; some people say in the summer; some, next year. But there! what will you have? Some people will say anything. But she is engaged right enough. He is older than she, but he is the only man here of her class. If she does not marry him, whom would she marry? A fisherman? Oh, she is quite above every one here. She spent the winter before last in Copenhagen with her aunt Neilsson, and had many offers of marriage."

"Many offers of marriage!" said Magnuss.

"Numbers. I asked her myself why she did not choose some one in Copenhagen, instead of coming back to gloomy Iceland, and do you know her answer?"

"No."

"She said she could not leave the sea. Leave the sea!" burst out Madame Sturlusson, with all the fury of outraged common sense, and speaking as though she were speaking to Schwalla. "I said, 'God in heaven! can't you have the sea at Copenhagen?' And do you know what she replied?"

"No."

"She said, 'Ah, yes, but you cannot have the Breidifjord and the gulls.' Now, was not that a piece of madness? Well, there she is, engaged to a man twenty years older than she—a nice sort of gull to have attached to one!"

Off she went, with the dishes, plates, knives, and forks on a tray, for she never allowed gossip to interfere with her work.

When she came back for the tablecloth, Magnuss told her of their intention to start a fishing business.

"At Skarsstöd?" said she.

"Yes, at Skarsstöd."

She sat down on a chair, a most extraordinary proceeding for her when she was in the middle of work.

"Start here, fishing! You cannot."

"Why?"

"Why? Because Gudmundsson has the whole business in his hands. He owns all the boats."

"All the boats?"

"He has a hold on every boat in the place. All the petrol-boats are his, and the sail-boats too. Yes, it is true that some of the boats belong in name to the men who work them, but only in name; they are really Gudmundsson's. Not only that—he owns most of the houses. Not only that—he owns most of the farms. Not only that—I believe he wants Stefan Gunarsson's piece of the river, and that's why he wants Schwalla. He has everything; the place is his. It ought to be called Gudmundsson, not Skarsstöd."

Here was a nice piece of news! A one-man trust devouring everything, even Schwalla.

Magnuss groaned. I am not using the expression figuratively. He made the noise a person makes who is suddenly seized with cramp in its worst form.

Ericsson laughed.

"We will see about that later on," said he. "Now, tell me; since this man owns nearly all the place, is there any house he doesn't own—a house with a drying-ground where one could cure one's fish?"

Madame Sturlusson looked at Ericsson for a moment contemplatively. She divined in him a man of action and resource. Who knew but that he might be able to give the hated Gudmundsson a knock?

"There is just the house you want," said she; "a small house with a small drying-ground. It lies up the valley before you get to the church, and it has half an acre of land attached that you could turn into a drying-ground big enough to dry all the fish half a dozen boats could catch—but it belongs to Gudmundsson.”

“There you are,” said Magnuss, with another groan. “Gudmundsson again.”

Ericsson made a movement of his hand as if to tell the other to be silent.

“He might sell or let it if he didn’t know what we wanted it for.”

“Keep that from him, whatever you do,” said the woman.

“We’ll go and see him,” said Ericsson, rising. “Where does he live?”

“Up beyond the bend of the valley at the beginning of his piece of river. Some English fishermen built a bungalow there years ago, and he has taken it. You can’t mistake it; it’s painted white.”

“Come,” said Ericsson.

They left the inn and walked up the street.

“Let me do the talking,” said Ericsson. “This chap is like an octopus, with arms all over the place, clutching everything. We’ll cut them off one by one, or my name’s not Ericsson.”

“That must be the house she meant,” said Magnuss, stopping before a small house, closed and evidently tenantless. “And that’s the half-acre of ground. Yes, it would do us all right, if we can get it.”

“We’ll get it,” said Ericsson. “Come on. He’ll never suspect we have money behind us, and the moment we have the house, I’m off for Reykjavik to get a petrol-boat of our own. It will cost five thousand kronur, that and the gear, but it will pay right enough.”

They passed the little church and the parsonage with its paddock, where the parson made his own hay. Then they came to Stefan Gunarsson’s house. It was far bigger than the parsonage, built of corrugated iron, painted cream-colour, and enclosed with its own little garden by a paling painted to match the house. It was the finest house in the place; there was no sign to be seen of Schwalla or her father, nor did either of the men look for her, Magnuss being too shy to turn his head and Ericsson too indifferent. The thought of Gudmundsson and of how he could get the better of him had driven all thoughts of the girl away.

They turned the elbow of the valley, where the river ran deep and swift, and it was as though a door had been closed behind them. They were in a new world, a world that seemed to have been built and planned by demons fighting against demons. The basalt cliffs rose sheer on either side for seven hundred feet, but they seemed less cliffs than the remains of castles and fortifications, and to have been built by rule and plumbline. For quarter of a mile they hemmed the river in, and then they widened out, flung themselves apart, fronting one another across the wide stone valley where the river passed—here shallow and foaming, here mirroring the sky in deep salmon pools.

It was at this point that the idea of fortifications struck one most. The clear air showed the vertical and longitudinal splits in the basalt, occurring so evenly that it seemed impossible to believe that the stones had not been laid purposefully. Sometimes a black flag flickered for a moment above one of the distant bastions; it was the wing of a raven—the great Icelandic raven that kills and devours the lambs.

In winter, with the Northern lights in the sky and the castles snow-topped, and the river a raving voice in the darkness, the valley of the Flóka makes one pause. Doré alone could paint that picture. Yet in summer, when the river is roaring with the melting snows, the desolation is more supreme.

It is then that mirage lends its magic, making the scenery shake and move, till the Quorn seems in full cry along the basaltic ridges and the mountains gallop on the shaking horizon.

They could see Gudmundsson's bungalow from the bend of the valley. It was grey-painted and situated close to the river; it had a small verandah facing the running water, and as they drew closer they saw Gudmundsson himself seated in a cane chair in the verandah and smoking a long china-bowled pipe.

He was a very big, slow-moving man, heavily built and stout. He was dressed in a suit of tweed rather the worse for wear, but his linen was spotless and he had about him the atmosphere of prosperity.

He was, in reality, a nobody by birth, and in his youth had handled the cod-lines and the oar in his father's boat, but the oar could not hold him. He had the ambition to rise in life and a very large share of intelligence to help him. He had travelled in Denmark and France, using the first money he earned to increase his knowledge of the world, and he had noticed that the men who get on in life are not the men who work, but the men who make others work for them.

He was now over fifty, a successful man in his way, and at first glance his face struck one as being a fine face; the face of some old officer in some foreign legion who had risen from the ranks. But on close acquaintance this fine face lost in some miraculous way the salient features that had impressed one first; the small eyes did not agree with the powerful nose, nor the loose mouth with the boldly cut jaw. The features, in fact, warred with one another, and the victory was not with the noblest.

When Gudmundsson saw the two men approaching, he rose to meet them. He remembered Magnuss, for he had seen him on Magnuss's last visit to Skarsstöd two and a half years ago.

Magnuss was all of a tremble. He had never spoken before to this man, who, by virtue of his large size, his commanding face and personality, and the fact that Schwalla had considered him a fit person to be engaged to, exercised on Magnuss a hypnotising effect. It was different with Ericsson, who, though he possessed little of Magnuss's subtlety of mind and poetic perception, had a very direct vision of his own where men were concerned. He saw in Gudmundsson only a stout old swindler with a shifty eye, a moneybag louse; a type which his sailor's heart abhorred.

Magnuss got at once to business.

"They tell me you have got a house to let," said he. "I'm Stefan Gunarsson's nephew——"

"My mate and I have come back from the cable business," cut in Ericsson. "We've had about enough of it, and, seeing that there is fishing to be done here, we expect to find work."

Gudmundsson looked at Ericsson's powerful form and nodded. He had always work for plenty of hands in summer, and the more labour there was in the place the better. Those two fishermen we saw boarding the *Botnia* when she anchored were two of the best men in Skarsstöd, yet they had been driven away to the upper fjords by the dislike of Gudmundsson, his hard terms, and the idea of having to work for him.

"And you want to rent the house?" said he.

"Well, you see," replied Ericsson, "it will come cheaper for us to have a place of our own instead of staying at the inn. We can get some woman to come in to look after it at times; for the matter of that, we can do our own cooking."

"Well, the rent would be four kronur a week," said Gudmundsson. "There's a bit of land that goes with the house, or the rent would be less."

“Four kronur a week!” said Ericsson, who felt that he must bargain in order to fix the hook firm. “Isn’t that a lot?”

“I’m not asking you to take the place, am I?” replied the other.

He sat down on the chair again, tapped the ashes out of his pipe and re-lit it.

As a matter of fact, he was anxious to let the place, which was lying absolutely unprofitable, and he was anxious to bring more fishermen into Skarsstöd, especially such first-class hands as these. But he knew quite well the value of insolence and seeming indifference.

But he did not know Ericsson.

“That settles it,” said Ericsson, taking Magnuss by the arm. “Skarsstöd is no place for us. Three kronur a week we could have paid, but you can’t pay more than you’ve got.” He led Magnuss away by the arm, and Magnuss thought for a moment that his companion must have taken leave of his senses, for the price Gudmundsson had asked was well within their means. But he recognised the cleverness of his companion when, after they had gone a little distance, he heard Gudmundsson’s voice calling them back.

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” said the big man. “If you want the rent so low you must be prepared to take the place for a long term. Are you intending to settle in the place, either of you?”

“Who knows?” said Ericsson. “As for myself, I am tired of knocking about the world; but then one never knows one’s mind.”

“Well,” said Gudmundsson, “if I let it at three kronur a week, you must take it for a year, pay twenty kronur in advance, and the rent weekly.”

“And at the end of the year, should we want to stay on?”

“I will give you an option to stay on as long as you keep the place in decent repair, but I shall charge you four kronur a week after the first twelve months. Rents are going up.”

After considerable discussion and haggling, Gudmundsson rose—he had not invited either of them to be seated—led the way to the house, and made out the agreements on stamped paper, received Landsbanki notes for twenty kronur, and placed them in his desk.

“And now,” said he, “if you want work, you can call at my office by the waterside to-morrow morning. Eight sharp. And if you choose to work hard this summer, you will earn good money, for it's going to be the best season in years, or my name's not Gudmundsson."

"Yes, we'll work hard enough," said Ericsson. "What's your rate of pay?"

"Tell you to-morrow at my office," said Gudmundsson. "Good day to you!"

He had never once spoken to Magnuss of the latter's relationship with Stefan Gunarsson. If he married Schwalla he would be a connection of Magnuss's, but that troubled him little enough. He would exact his rent just the same and work Magnuss just as hard as though he were a stranger.

Ericsson, as they walked back, could scarcely contain his mirth. He had beaten his unconscious adversary in the first move.

"I'd like to see his face when he hears the truth," said he, "and when he sees our boat."

Magnuss was pessimistic.

"I hope he won't try to do us some injury," said he.

"Of course he will, but he'd better keep his grapnel out of my waters. I'm in no humour to take injuries. I shall start for Reykjavik to-morrow in the *Thordur*—she calls the day after to-morrow—and inside a week I'll be back with our boat. You can get some sticks of furniture into the place whilst I'm gone. A hundred kronur will get us all we want."

When they got back to the inn it was time for Magnuss to go to supper with his uncle. Ericsson refused to accompany him.

"I don't care to go," said he. "I'm not wanting to see people. I'm going over to look at the harbour; the tide is down, and you say you can get round the cliffs to it at low water."

"Ay, you can get round at low water," replied Magnuss absent-mindedly.

CHAPTER VI

AN ICELANDIC INTERIOR

Magnuss went off to his room and washed and brushed himself up. He was horribly nervous. The idea of going into company, even the simple company of Schwalla and her father, terrified him. He could be eloquent enough when the spirit moved him, but it was a very shy spirit, and only awoke when his heart or mind was stirred to the point where self was forgotten. He was a self-doubter—an egoist who doubted himself. Now the egoist would be in full feather, supreme, and Magnuss the finest man in the world; again, under depressing circumstances, it would moult and doubt.

He did not know now what he would do with his hands and feet when he found himself formally received by Schwalla and her father; what he would talk about; how he would hold himself. If Schwalla had only stayed as she was two and a half years ago, he would have felt at ease, and so concentrated was his mind on the immediate issue that for a moment his feeling for the girl vanished before his anger with her for turning into a fine lady and putting him in this awkward position.

Then he started off like an angry child for school. The little maid who helped Schwalla in her household duties opened the door for him. She was in a white cap and apron, Copenhagen style, and this and the fact that the narrow pitch-pine passage from which the sitting-room door opened had a fine new carpet, evidently recently laid down, gave him such a "turn" that he might have beaten a retreat even at this moment had not the sitting-room door opened and Gunarsson made his appearance.

"Ah, there you are," said Gunarsson. "Put your hat on the chair there and come in. Schwalla will be with us in a minute; she's looking to the supper. But where's your friend?"

"He wouldn't come," said Magnuss, following the other into the sitting-room, which was the dining-room and drawing-room. "He was shy, I think, not knowing you very well and only having just come here. But I don't seem to remember this room in your house."

"It is two rooms knocked into one," said Gunarsson. "It was Schwalla's idea. It makes it more airy in summer, but colder in winter."

Magnuss, as he sat down, looked around him.

It was a much larger sitting-room than one would have expected in a house of that size; longer than it was broad, with no disfiguring paper, but just the pitch-pine panelling, with here and there large plainly mounted photographs of Iceland, such as one can buy at Björn Kristjansson's shop in Reykjavik. Schwalla's good and simple taste was evident everywhere.

In a book-case by one of the windows stood some books of Schwalla's, Andersen and Björnson and Ibsen's *Pretenders*, in whose chief characters, Hakon and Skule, one might fancy some faint shadowing of Ericsson and Magnuss: one the incarnation of confidence and victory; the other, to use the words of Georges Brandes, "the brooder, the prey to inward struggles and endless distrust, brave and ambitious, but lacking the inexpressible, impalpable somewhat that would give a value to all the rest."

On a vase above the shelf a bunch of Icelandic wild flowers lent the touch that only flowers can give. The floor was covered with matting, with here and there a rug made from the long-haired Icelandic sheepskins, costing only four kronur apiece, yet silky as the skins of Angora goats.

The furniture, of English oak made by Christjansson of Copenhagen, was solid and plain. Everywhere lay the evidence of that simplicity and good taste to be found even in the humblest homes of Iceland.

Magnuss had scarcely taken his seat when the door opened and Schwalla appeared. She was carrying the supper-tray, and the maid, following her, brought the cloth for the table.

This put Magnuss at once at his ease. The thought of what he should do with his hands and feet and tongue, the knowledge that his clothes were poor and rough, all vanished before this practical vision, and the smile with which the girl greeted him.

Then, at supper, the talk was all in practical channels where there was no deep water for him to flounder in.

Gunarsson talked of the salmon prospects for the season, and Magnuss told him how he and Ericsson had taken the house from Gudmundsson, and how Ericsson was going to Reykjavik to get a motor-boat. Now, both Gunarsson and Schwalla knew that Gudmundsson had his finger upon nearly all the fishing industry of Skarsstöd, but, being above the fishing-folk and only hearing occasionally a murmur of their complaints, they did not recognise the octopus hold that Gudmundsson had on the place. Gudmundsson and Gunarsson were the two rich men of Skarsstöd, they were both employers of labour, and were, so, in a class of their own; and whoever has employed Icelandic labourers, those dreamers to whom time is of little object, will know the bonds of sympathy that must exist between two employers in a small place.

So it came about that the Gunarssons, whilst feeling perhaps at times that Gudmundsson was a bit hard on his men, did not realise the extent of his small tyranny, nor did they recognise the fact that Ericsson's move would strike a blow at it.

"Well, I'm glad you are going to stay," said Gunarsson. "Skarsstöd wants more people in it, and your friend Ericsson looks strong enough to do two men's work."

"Strong enough"—the words touched Magnuss off. He found his tongue, the poet in him woke up, and he began to sing the praises of his friend. Envy was forgotten and banished by the bard instinct. He was a strong man and a brave man in his way, yet his nature never really woke to true being except when touched by love or hero-worship. In the old days he would have praised the exploits of Snorri or Burnt Njal in verse as now he praised the exploits of Ericsson, and without doubt, when the *estro* had passed, he would have felt just as envious of one as the other.

So he told the tale of their comradeship so admirably that Schwalla and her father saw, not only the heroic figure of the brave Ericsson, but also glimpses of the gorgeous backgrounds of the East; of Timor and its palms, and Tonkin and its pagodas; of the Pescadores swimming in the tropical heat haze, and the Noto coast and the summer sapphire of the Japan Sea.

He told of the roping of the buoy, and then he grew fretfully critical.

"And they offered him anything he pleased, and all he asked for was leave ashore to pay his court to some girl he'd fallen in love with, and who put some spell on him so that he's never been the same since."

Schwalla said nothing, whilst her father laughed.

"It's easy to see that he would be a favourite with girls," said Gunarsson. "Well, I hope he'll find some girl here to suit him, and settle down."

"Not he," said Magnuss in a tone of conviction. "I don't believe he'll ever marry, and I don't believe he will ever settle down."

Then the supper things were removed and Gunarsson brought out cigarettes. A cigarette to Magnuss was a thing as useless as a cherry to an elephant, yet he sat and gravely smoked, talking to Gunarsson whilst Schwalla sat by knitting. They required no lamps; broad, strong day came through the windows, though it was getting on for ten o'clock. Outside could be heard the Flóka raving towards the sea, and occasionally the melancholy cry of a whimbrel. The girl, as she knitted, listened to the men talking. She heard what they said just as she heard what the river was saying, and with about as much interest. She was thinking of Ericsson.

For one thing, he was different from the men she had known up to this. The modern Icelander is not an outstanding animal; he has grown and developed in a backwater of life, and a backwater imposes limitations. Ericsson would have stamped himself as a figure anywhere; she had seen no one like him even in Copenhagen. Apart from that, the way he had looked at her on being introduced by Magnuss marked him apart from other men. She was not accustomed to be looked at as though she were a stick, and an uninteresting stick at that. Had Ericsson been an ordinary man she would not have so much noticed his absolute indifference, but to be treated by this splendid specimen of humanity as though she were non-existent raised in her mind a feeling that had never been there before—a feeling of opposition. Up to this she had lived in the blind paradise of the young girl; everything relative to the other sex had been words, words, words—marriage, love, flirtation, and so forth: she had used them all and fancied that she knew what they expressed, without knowing, in fact, anything at all about the matter. In other words, her mind was absolutely virginal. Had she been capable of a nasty thought, she never would have accepted Gudmundsson as a prospective husband. She had accepted him because to her, in this relation, he was just the same as any other man. For a picnic she would have preferred one of the young men she had met at Copenhagen; for a husband Gudmundsson was just as good—better, for he was very sensible, and she had a great admiration for his wisdom and his knowledge of the world. Besides, he would not take her away from the Breidifjord, and, added to that, her father wished her to marry him. That to her was almost a command.

One might compare Schwalla to a wild swan hatched out in a colony of gannets and gulls, alien to them, yet unconscious of the fact, till some fellow wild swan should light on the rock, a swan that had roved the whole world over, blown hither and thither by chance and storm; a fierce male swan whom she would recognise vaguely as of her own breed, but who would know her not, staring at her with the same gaze with which he greeted the gannets and Burgomaster gulls.

As she sat knitting, her mind travelled far from the Breidifjord. Ay, those were strange lands and seas that Magnuss had talked of; the very names were pictures. She called to mind all the illustrations of Japan and its people she could think of, trying to imagine the girl that the tall Ericsson had fallen in love with, and for the first time in her life she found herself checked by the idea of a man falling in love with a girl, simply because the idea appeared before her in a perfectly new shape. It was as though some inane person with whom she had always lived had suddenly become acutely active-minded and clever and was questioning her about things of which she had not the slightest knowledge. What is marriage? What is love? What is man? What is woman?

Looking up from her knitting, she caught Magnuss's eye, and blushed as though he had caught her doing something she was slightly ashamed of.

Then she went on with her knitting, listening to the interminable talk of her father about the salmon. He knew more about this mysterious people of the sea than any one else in Iceland, or perhaps out of it; he knew from the state of the northern fjords what prospects were likely for the fjords to the south and west—there are no salmon rivers on the east, or only one—and could tell you from the first fish caught what the season was likely to bring forth. The only salmon river in Iceland that never fails is the Ellithaar, near Reykjavik. He had a theory to account for this mournful fact, and for the more pleasing one that the Ellithaar salmon are small and rarely run above fifteen pounds. He was discussing the problem of where the salmon went on leaving the rivers and returning to the sea, when Gudmundsson was announced.

The big man came in, greeted Gunarsson, kissed Schwalla gravely on the forehead, nodded to Magnuss, and then took his seat and a cigarette. Though he had treated Magnuss earlier in the day with the manner of the employer to the employed, meeting him here in Gunarsson's house he treated him as an equal, though frigidly enough, and Magnuss, under the influence of this frost, soon took his departure and returned to the inn.

Gudmundsson weighed on him as only a strong and coarse nature can weigh on a weaker and more delicate one. Strangely enough, he did not feel jealous of Gudmundsson; he felt overburdened by him as by a fate. The fact that Schwalla had chosen the man as a future husband raised the man into a position beyond even that given to him by his money and personality.

Though it was after ten it was broad daylight in the Flóka valley, and the little town was as wide awake as at noon—the summer Icelander takes little account of time—and the inn was still open, and would remain so till midnight. Ericsson had not yet returned.

CHAPTER VII
SÚRSSON

Ericsson, when Magnuss departed for the Gunarssons', had supper, and then left the inn to spy out the land for himself.

He possessed those capacities which had raised him on the *President Girling* to the captaincy of the buoys and which would have raised him to a cable foremanship had he remained in the service: the capacity to think simply, to perceive clearly, and to act rapidly. This capacity to think in a simple manner is sufficiently rare; it allows of great concentration of the mental powers, and when it is allied with clear perception it is one of the most valuable assets.

Magnuss saw everything through the mists that rose from himself, through the haze of his own personality. Ericsson, when not under the influence of a girl, saw things pretty much as they were.

He saw in Gudmundsson a stout old rogue, but he saw in him something more—a traditional enemy. It was the meeting of the dog-man and the fox-man. Without doubt, in undated ages, the ancestor of Gudmundsson had swindled the ancestor of Ericsson, trading bone arrows for walrus-meat on the shores of the frozen sea, and the ancestor of Ericsson had resented the dubious deal in the direct manner of the primitive man.

Ericsson was out now to get the lie of the enemy's land. He was going to fight Gudmundsson, and he wished to measure the ground. He came down to the stone boat-slip running into the sea. It was broad and well built, after the fashion of the slip at Reykjavik, and even now, at low tide, was not fully stripped of water. One could moor a launch here, high or low tide. All the fish caught off Skarsstöd were landed here, and in fine weather the fishing-boats, instead of taking shelter in the little harbour round the cliff to southward, anchored in three-fathom water a few cable lengths from the slip.

There were four or five at anchor now: squat, clinker-built craft fit to face any sea, riding like gulls asleep on the gentle swell of the Breidifjord that came in like oil, slobbering round the sea-tangle growing from the slip facings.

Several children were fishing for the tiny fish that haunt these waters by the million, and a man seated on a mooring-bitt was smoking and watching the children.

Ericsson gave the man good-day and ranged up beside him to watch the children. Then they got into conversation, and he learned that the other's name was Súrsson.

Súrsson was about fifty; his beard was streaked with grey and his face tanned like leather. Despite his eye, which was bright and steel-blue, almost the eye of a boy, this individual bore himself heavily, like a man who has many preoccupations and worries.

He owned the house next to the one that Ericsson had rented that day, and when he heard of the new tenancy he showed surprise.

"Are you come to Skarsstöd to live, then?"

"Yes, otherwise I wouldn't have taken the house."

"And your mate is Jonass Magnuss. I heard he'd come back to-day. And what are you going to do?"

"Work at the fishing."

Súrsson laughed in a mirthless sort of way.

"Then you'll be working for Gudmundsson, the man you took the house from?"

"Yes," said Ericsson. "What sort of man is he?"

Súrsson was silent for a moment. He sat watching the children.

"Well," said he, "as you're a friend of Magnuss and have come to live here, it's not like talking to a stranger. You've come to the wrong place."

"How so?"

"Gudmundsson is not the man to work for, and he's the only man here that can give you work at the sea-fishing. I know, for I work for him. Do you see that boat out there by the buoy that marks the shoal? She's the *Helga*—my boat." He laughed again as he said the words "My boat," and Ericsson guessed the meaning of his laughter.

"He lent me the money to buy her three years ago. I was to pay him off out of my earnings, and he was to buy my fish at his own price and sell me petrol; that was part of the agreement. I thought my fortune was made, and that with luck I'd pay him off in a couple of seasons. I've got a son and he works with me, and I've got a wife, and she keeps house for me, and we're saving people. The boat cost four thousand kronur, and in three years I've paid Gudmundsson only a thousand kronur, and we’ve starved ourselves to pay that.”

“Only a thousand kronur in three years! That’s bad luck.”

“It’s not bad luck—it’s Gudmundsson. First thing he did was to pay me half what he ought to have paid me for the fish; second thing he did was to put the price of petrol up on me—not at once, but gradually. Fortunately I own my house, so he can’t put my rent up.”

Ericsson whistled.

“And if I don’t pay him off in five years he takes the boat,” finished the wretched Súrsson with another laugh.

“Why don’t you fling the boat back on his hands and go somewhere else?”

“If I did, I’d have to pay him the balance of the four thousand kronur, and if I couldn’t he’d take my house and bit of land.”

“Damn him!” said Ericsson.

One of Ericsson’s fine points was a hatred of cruelty for one thing, and of oppression for another. This man who had used women badly enough in his time had, in questions not mixed up with sex, a tender heart for the unfortunate, and he cursed Gudmundsson with such evident sincerity that Súrsson became at once his friend.

“Look here,” said Ericsson, on whom a new idea had suddenly seized. “You owe him three thousand kronur. If you paid him that, would the boat be yours?”

“Yes, she would be mine.”

“In what condition is she?”

“Good as new; she has never touched rock or bank, and she was built by Thordursson. She’s got fifteen years more life in her.”

“And the engine?”

“Buffalo engine good as new.”

“Whose is the gear?”

“I’ve had to supply all the fishing-gear.”

“And the bait?”

“That falls on me, too.”

Ericsson sat for a moment in silence, whistling. Then he turned to Súrsson.

"How would you like it if I were to buy your boat, pay you a thousand kronur down and pay Gudmundsson the balance of three thousand—or rather, of course, give it to you to pay him—for he would not let me have the boat?"

"How would I like it?" said Súrsson. "Why, I'd like it well enough."

"You must remember," said Ericsson, "I'd be paying four thousand kronur for a boat that's not new. Still, if the hull and engine are in good condition I won't beat you down. I'd sooner you made a bit of profit over the business than not. You've been badly used, but I am not thinking of that. I'm thinking that if I settle here and start in the fishing it will mean fighting Gudmundsson, and I want you on my side."

"But are you truly meaning what you say?"

"I always mean what I say. Of course, when Gudmundsson finds I've bought the boat from you, he'll be in a temper, and you'll get no more work from him."

"Ah, I hadn't thought of that," said Súrsson, suddenly dashed by this new consideration.

"But you'll get work from me."

"From you?"

"Yes, from me. I've come here to fight Gudmundsson. I've got the money, and all I want are the men. You'll start with your thousand kronur back in your fist, and you'll put that thousand kronur in the Landsbanki. Then for the season I'll give you and your son fishermen's wages, and you'll work hard, and I'll tell you why. I've been thinking everything out since I began talking to you, and I see the way open here for me to do good business. I'll build a motor-boat here myself next winter with the profits I make out of the season's fishing, and with some of my own money added to it. Then we'll start next season with two boats, and I'll give you and your son a share in the business. That's why you'll work hard this summer."

"You'll build a boat yourself!"

"And why not? You can get all the parts ready-made from Copenhagen; the planking is all we'll have to do, and the fitting together. Of course you'll help, for, as I said, you'll have a share in the business."

“God in heaven!” said Súrsson, “what a man you are.”

“I’m a deep-sea cable hand, that’s all, and in the deep-sea cable business a man must be able to do everything. I’ve got thirteen thousand kronur to back me, for my mate is with me, and I’m going to hit that fat thief Gudmundsson and break his hold on Skarsstöd. I had intended going to Reykjavik in the *Thordur* the day after to-morrow, to buy a boat, but now I’ve changed that plan—that is to say, if you consent; and if your boat satisfies me.”

“When would you pay me the thousand kronur?”

“To-morrow morning. I have five thousand kronur in notes on the Landsbanki in my pocket, and to-morrow morning I will hand you four thousand kronur for your boat. You can go to Gudmundsson and pay him his three thousand, and we’ll start fishing to-morrow. If we have luck we’ll send our fish to Reykjavik by the *Thordur*. They tell me there’s good halibut to be caught now.”

“Ay, the halibut are good beyond the Fulmar rock, and the cod are promising the best season for years. I’m your man—I’m your man. Ay, but Gudmundsson will have a sore head over this—and he’s a bad man to cross.”

“I’m a worse,” said Ericsson. “It’s to be a fight between him and me, with nothing for you to do but stand by and look on, with your thousand kronur in your hand. Why, where is the courage of you people that you have not joined against him before?”

“When a man is poor,” said Súrsson, “his courage is all in his pocket, not in his heart. The curse of the poor man is his poverty, as I once heard Parson Olsen say in church.”

“Well, you’re poor no longer. Come, help me to shove that boat from the slip and we’ll go over to your craft and overhaul her.”

There was a light boat lying on the slip above high-tide mark. They carried her down between them and rowed over to the *Helga*. Ericsson boarded her and went over her from stem to phosphor-bronze propeller. He examined the engine, part by part, as a jeweller examines jewellery. Then he expressed himself satisfied, though there were evidences of wear sufficient to warrant him in making a deduction from the cost price. He pointed these defects out carefully to Súrsson and rose in the latter’s estimation a hundred points, both from this exhibition of knowledge and from his liberality in not making a charge for depreciation.

“And now,” said Ericsson, when he had finished, wiping his hands on a piece of cotton waste, “nothing remains to be done but pay the money. Will you strike the bargain?”

“Ay, will I,” replied Súrsson. “Gudmundsson or no Gudmundsson, and may he be sunk in the hole of Holmvik.”

Their palms met, and the boat rocked slightly to the handshake.

Big ripples spread over the oil swell, across which the islands of the fjord showed firmly sketched in the wonderful light of Iceland’s endless summer’s day.

Súrsson, when they reached the inn, refused to come in and have a drink. He had once drunk heavily, but he never touched the liquor now. Besides, he was anxious to get home and tell the news.

Ericsson went in alone; it was after ten, and Magnuss had just returned.

Magnuss was sucking an unlit pipe in the sitting-room, which was also the dining-room, and when he heard Ericsson’s tale he began to make objections. Every one has met Magnuss in some of his moods—the man who criticises one’s actions and takes soundings of one’s reasons, shaking his head over the sounding-lead and what it brings up; the man who has done nothing, yet who points out what we should have done.

“And there, the end of it is you’ve paid full price for a second-hand boat.”

“Paint-soiled,” replied Ericsson. “She’s as good as new, all but her paint. I don’t say the engine isn’t worn a bit, but a worn engine well tried is better than a new engine that may turn out a mule. You know yourself what engines are, from the main to the picking-up, and from the winch to the launch coffee-pot—not one of them but hasn’t a temper of its own; and you never know whether you’re handling a beast or a reasonable being till you’ve known her for a month. I have Súrsson’s word that she runs sweetly, and doesn’t eat petrol, and, more than that, he’s so pleased, he’s thrown in all his fishing-gear.”

“But you are so unsettled in your plans,” grumbled Magnuss. “To-day you were all for getting a new boat.”

“Yes, and what’s the good of a plan unless you can change it? I’ve bought something better than a new boat. I’ve bought friends and backers. I’ve bought good-will. I’ve bought two of the best fishermen in Skarsstöd.

I’ve bought what is going to bring us success. Well, and how have you fared? Have you seen the girl?”

Magnuss, instead of replying, rose up and paced the floor as if it were a deck. Then he filled his pipe.

“It’s all over and done with,” said he.

“She won’t look at you?”

“Yes, she looks at me, but I can tell by her look she has no heart for me, or eyes for me. She’s not the girl I left here when I went away.”

“The question is,” said Ericsson, “did she ever care for you?”

“Care for me! She’d have cared for me right enough if I hadn’t gone away. It was all settled in my mind to ask her when I came back from the cruise. I never expected she’d have turned into another person.”

“Own up,” said Ericsson, laughing. “Have you ever kissed her?”

“No,” said Magnuss, horribly confused; “but she——”

“Yes?”

“She kissed *me* once.”

“Kissed you! When?”

“When? Why, five years ago. One day she gave me a kiss and ran away, laughing.”

“Oh, she was a child.”

“Child or no child, I swore that day I’d marry her.”

“Did you tell her so?”

“Heavens! no. Tell her! I loved her too much. Oh, you can’t understand how a man feels properly for a girl he loves true. But there, it’s all ended.”

“Aren’t you going to make a try?”

“What for?”

“To get her away from that overgrown humbug she’s going to marry. If you don’t, I tell you flat I’ll have a try myself.”

Ericsson did not mean in the least what he said. It would have given him intense pleasure to see Magnuss snap this prize from Gudmundsson’s jaws, and he spoke with the purpose of urging him on. But Magnuss took it differently.

"You would never do a thing like that," said he. "You would never sell a friend. I'm not afraid of you. I can trust you."

Ericsson opened his mouth, but was too astonished for a moment to speak.

"Trust me! Why, wouldn't you be only too glad to see any one else get the better of Gudmundsson, if you can't do it yourself?"

Magnuss made no reply for a moment. The fact was that, though he could have endured to see Schwalla in the arms of the elderly and unattractive Gudmundsson, her capture by a young man would have driven him frantic, or so he thought. Gudmundsson was Fate, not flesh. He was above them all; the very incomprehensibility of the fact that Schwalla had accepted him added to the fatality of the affair. It was as though Schwalla had been rendered incapable of marriage with Magnuss by some hideous accident, half of her own devising. She did not love Gudmundsson—his heart told him that, and the fact was his mainstay. Were a man of his own age involved in the business it would be quite another matter. He was no longer in love with Schwalla, simply because the Schwalla he had always courted in imagination had vanished and the new Schwalla frightened him. All the same, he could not bear to think of another man after her—that is, a young man.

Then he broke out:

"It's not a question of getting the better of Gudmundsson. He is lawfully betrothed to her. She has chosen him. There is no use in talking of it any more. And when do you propose getting to work here?"

"To-morrow."

"You are going to pay this money down to-morrow? Well, I can't stop you; but it seems you are in a great hurry."

"I am."

"You know the old maxim, 'Go slowly.'"

"It is that maxim that's been the ruin of Iceland," said Ericsson. "Go slowly! Every one goes slowly, as though they were half asleep. Come on. I'm going off to bed, for we must be up early."

CHAPTER VIII

THE WONDERS OF THE BREIDIFJORD

Gudmundsson's office was situated in the first house on the right as you entered the little town from the sea. Here he had a big room with a roll-top desk, an office chair, and a safe, just like any merchant of Copenhagen. The room was well carpeted, and the walls were hung with a map of Iceland, some steamship timetables, an almanac, and some photographs of the Flóka valley.

To Gudmundsson, here, next morning, appeared Súrsson, with three thousand kronur in his hand to pay for the *Helga*.

The Octopus was prepared for a blow. Gunarsson had told him last night of Ericsson's intention as to buying a boat and the fact that Ericsson had money to back him. The news apparently left him quite unmoved, despite the fact that his heart turned in him with anger when he recognised how he had been tricked into letting his house. Now, instead of having two extra hands, he had two opponents—humble enough, to be sure, but still opponents.

He accepted the three thousand kronur without a murmur, gave his receipt, and laughed as he handed it.

"So you are in the service now of this new man, Ericsson?"

Súrsson, folding and thumbing the paper, was dumb. He was even still ridden by the fear of the poor man for the rich man, of the bond slave for his master.

"Well," said Gudmundsson, "may you prosper. But it seems to me you have turned to the wrong side. I don't know anything about this man Ericsson, and I believe he knows just as little about business. And how is a man to get on in the trade without knowing the business? Well, may you prosper. And you have sold your boat to him for three thousand kronur?—so you're a thousand kronur out of pocket."

"He gave me four thousand kronur for her," said Súrsson.

"Four! The price of a new boat! Then he's a fool, and the man who joins a fool in business is a fool—and that man is you. Good day to you!"

But in his heart he felt that Ericsson was no fool, and this last fact made him purse out his lips as he locked the money away. But only for a little while did he feel disturbed. He had full confidence in his own crushing power.

The Breidifjord was blue as a woman's eyes when they started; the islands crowned with creamy flights of gulls, and the sky rimmed on the sea-line with a faint opalescent haze.

Spring comes here with nothing but a few wild flowers in her hand, yet nowhere is she more beautiful, more fresh, and more free.

Away out beyond Flatey the sails of a Greenland sealer showed like the wings of a vast gull making north to where the bergs were putting out and the ice-floes parting to form streets of sapphire water.

Súrsson was at the tiller, Magnuss was looking to the engine, and Ericsson overhauling the tackle. Gulls followed them, racing the boat, and passed over them, showing honey-coloured as though the sunlight permeated their bodies, and fled away on the breeze. They passed rocks where the kittiwakes rose into the air, a storm of wings and a thousand voices all crying "Get away—get away—get away," whilst from far overhead came the "crak-crak-crak" of a long line of gannets stringing across the blue.

Three miles out they passed the Fulmar, half rock, half island, the loneliest place in the whole blue sea.

The Fulmar was made before man came on the world, and it will remain when man has gone. Once a giant, the rains and seas and storms of a million years have whittled it down to what it is—a tremendous dwarf.

The basalt cliffs of it rise seventy feet to an undulating top covered with emerald grass. Its base is riddled with caves that show at low tide, and to southward it has a small beach leading to a cave mouth that the sea never touches.

Though birds are plentiful here the Fulmar is avoided by bird-catchers and egg-hunters. It has a reputation for being haunted, and in certain conditions of the tide it sings and whispers to the waves. It is the song of the water in the caverns, but it needs little imagination to turn it into the song of sirens and sea people, especially when you hear it in a fog.

In the great storms of winter the shouting of the Fulmar fighting the sea can be heard at Skarsstöd. The waves hit the rock full front, and the rock hits the waves till they burst in foam and spindrift, so that from far off one can see the spray like the smoke of a battle rising to the sky and blown hither and thither by the wind.

Ericsson, as they passed, stared at the Fulmar. It seemed to him that he had seen this place before, but if so it must have been in the world of dreams, for this was his first visit to the Breidifjord. Half a mile beyond the Fulmar they anchored in four-fathom water over a bank running due north and south. The hooks were baited, lines dropped, and fishing begun.

After the noise of the engine the silence was supreme out here, broken only by the gulls that now and then burst out crying round the rocks to southward of the Fulmar. The shore seemed a vast distance away, and in that clear air, clearer even than the air of Greece, peaks eighty miles distant cut themselves sharply on the sky.

Away to the north-west could be seen the sails of the French fishing-boats from Paimpol.

Not a word was spoken as they sat smoking, each absorbed in his line and his thoughts.

Ericsson, as he fished, let his mind stray over towards Skarsstöd and its people.

The money that had come to him so unexpectedly had brought with it all sorts of new ideas and ambitions. You can never tell what is in a mind till you touch it with gold. A month ago Ericsson had been content with his position in the social scheme. Cable, cable all the time, and cable always, had seemed to him a good enough future. Ten thousand kronur had altered all that. Gudmundsson had acted on him almost as powerfully as the money. Gudmundsson had raised the devil in him.

The shy, lurking something in his nature that resented praise in public was the same shy, lurking something that resented Gudmundsson's disdain.

Gudmundsson had not asked him to sit down, had treated him as an employer of labour treats an employé; Gudmundsson wore the dress of a gentleman, and had something of a gentleman's cut and manners. It was all false—the man was of the people and born of the people, yet the fact remained that he was above the worker in the social scale.

Schwalla helped to feed the flame. She was no better than Magnuss, born in the same nest, so to speak, yet look at her! Dressed like a lady, and looking like one. He felt furious at the thought that this girl should consider Magnuss beneath her, simply because Magnuss was on his own level, and the fancied disdain of Schwalla covered him as well as his companion.

As he sat holding his line and biting on his pipe-stem, a new plan of campaign suddenly appeared before him. The shy devil lurking in his soul took voice and spoke:

“Why not do in earnest what you said last night in jest? Go after the girl yourself. Knock Gudmundsson out. Promise to marry her, even. Anything, so long as you hit that fat swab in the place you can hurt him quickest and surest.”

His new hatred of women did not interfere in the least with this bright idea—helped it, rather. But however bright an idea may be, it is not always immediately acceptable to the mind, and he put this one aside after a moment’s consideration, just as a person puts a document in a pigeon-hole for future reference.

Everything must stand aside when the fish are biting—and every one, even the king.

Magnuss had fallen a prey to some bait-snatcher and was re-baiting when Ericsson’s line seemed suddenly twitched at and pulled upon by the great giant Blunderbore crawling on the bottom of the sea. The boat listed a strake to starboard with the pull, and the line ran out, tautened, and thrilled to the struggle going on below.

“I’ve got him!” said Ericsson. “Sh! he’s off.” The line had slackened for a moment, but only for a moment, for when the slack was hauled in there was the weight, dead and motionless as though a corpse had got tangled in the line. It was a sulking halibut.

Foot by foot and fathom by fathom they hauled till the shape of him showed like a boat-sail spread in the green water. Súrsson, with the gaff, stood giving directions; he knew what was coming, for scarcely had the halibut’s snout touched the air when the great fish sprang to life, and, curving like a watch-spring, let out, hitting the boat a whack below water that nearly stove in her planking. Then, beating the sea into a storm of foam and flying spray, it fought its captors. The Iceland halibut is sometimes a great fighter. They fought it in a rainbow of spray, and you could have heard the beating of the water and the sounds of the battle at the Fulmar. Then it came aboard, helped by line and gaff and hand, three hundred pounds if an ounce, and was flung into the well, where it continued to heave and kick for half an hour, by which time it was joined by two others, a lump-fish and a halibut of seventy pounds.

“It’s the quickest luck I’ve had for years with halibut,” said Súrsson as they re-baited.

The boast brought bad luck. For two hours they fished without a bite, and then Magnuss brought in a cod.

Súrsson examined the fish, flung it into the well with the halibut, and went on fishing without saying a word. Cod had not been plentiful as yet, but the appearance of the fish gave him food for thought, and during half an hour, in which time two more cod were taken, he said nothing. Then, all at once, and without giving any reason to his companions, he declared his intention of shifting their position. The anchor was got in and, heading north-west, the boat put farther out to sea.

The floor of the Breidifjord, were it stripped of water, would show a volcanic country equal in ruggedness to the land.

Flatey, the Fulmar, the islands about Flatey, and every rock that shows, are but the topmost summits of submarine mountains. Now, as they went, guided by the sure hand of Súrsson, they could see the sea-tangle waving from rocks only a fathom and a half under the keel, and now, in twenty turns of the propeller, had they cast a lead, they would not have found bottom in fifty fathoms.

They were making in the direction of the French fishing-fleet, whose sails were now furled.

A mile away they could see the small boats out looking like black specks on the shimmer of the water, and at this sight Magnuss, though saying not a word, altered his position in a restless manner, and Ericsson, though new to the business, felt a vague excitement permeating his being with the warmth of alcohol.

“The cod are coming down the coast,” said Súrsson, suddenly breaking silence. “Think? Sure. The Frenchmen are filling up as hard as they can fill. Look at the gulls!”

Gulls were flying around the fleet, and more gulls were speeding seaward to join them, attracted by the sure promise of offal. Had you been able to see under water, you would have seen sharks making for the appointed place. The news had travelled through the depths of the sea no less than over the fields of the air: “The French fleet has struck luck. Bones, heads, offal, and tails. Hurry up.” Now, there had been no cod to speak of lately. If, by some unspeakable fatality, the shoals were to change their course, strike farther out, or in some different direction from the small area commanded by Skarsstöd, it would mean a very hard time in the winter to come.

For six seasons now the shoals had travelled the same road, and the Breidifjord had grown fat on them. Gudmundsson had prophesied a good season this year, but the people of Skarsstöd knew by generations of teaching that there is no fish more uncertain to count on with absolute faith than the cod.

Here, then, was at least evidence of Gudmundsson's wisdom. They were only a mile from the French boats when Súrsson gave orders to stop the engine. Then he dropped anchor in fifteen-fathom water and the lines with the hooks baited were cast overboard.

Ericsson, in the act of casting his line, looked down into the water, and saw a sight never to be forgotten.

He saw the cod.

They were coming straight down from the French fleet, leaving thousands of their number behind on the hooks of the Frenchmen, yet had they passed all the fishing fleets in the world their number would not have been sensibly diminished. They were coming by the million, like a green-grey submarine wind blowing against the tide; a bank fifty miles long by five miles broad by ten fathoms deep; a shoal of a hundred million moving as one fish, and the whole shoal driving in search of food with ravening mouths and blue staring eyes.

They would have taken a bare hook. They came aboard springing and leaping on the lines, poke-hooked most of them. The fishermen, after the first few minutes, had no breath to waste on speech; it was the labour of giants. The sea had opened her hand wide and full of treasure, and was crying to them to take whilst they could. And they took and took: twelve-pounders, thirteen-pounders, fifteen-pounders, varying from three feet to three feet eight inches, till the work, from wild excitement, turned to dull monotony, and from that to heart-breaking weariness. The lifting the fish from the water, the unhooking, the rising to fling the fish into the well, the re-baiting, the re-casting, all became the parts of one stupendous labour, and the men parts of one machine moving with the automatism of the great shoal that was swimming below.

Gulls came over them, wheeling and crying, and the gulls and their voices became part of the dream; the freshening breeze brought the quarrelling of the gulls from the fleet, where the work of beheading, disembowelling, and splitting open the fish was now going forward, as boat after boat poured its treasure on board the smacks.

It was a carnival of killing, and if one man got in the way of another, he cursed him without knowing, or the other man caring or wasting his breath in replying.

Then, when they could kill no more, they cast themselves down—one here, one there, dripping with sweat and sea-water, and the backs of their hands stiff with blood.

The well was full. The boat was sunk several strakes in the water with the weight of the catch, and the feeling of success brought them to their feet again quicker than brandy would have done.

“Well,” said Ericsson, “it has been a good first day.”

“We got the tail of the shoal in time,” said Súrsson. “Look!”

He pointed to the water. Not a fish was to be seen. It was not, as Súrsson imagined, that the fish had stopped flowing. The shoal had veered. Some obstruction, some streak of tainted water, some mystery beyond Sandur Point had caused the admiral of this submarine Armada to shift his helm, and, had you been watching, you would have seen the whole shoal heeling to starboard as they turned like one fish, and the flash of their bellies like the glimmer of sheet lightning in the water.

Magnuss crawled forward and looked at the catch.

“And not a Skarsstöd boat out,” said he.

“No,” said Súrsson. “Gudmundsson had work to do for the men ashore to-day; they told me they would not be able to start till this evening.”

“It’s near that now,” said Ericsson. “Well, this is the third lesson I’ve taught that fat thief in two days, and it won’t be the last.”

They washed themselves, talking and laughing. The highest spirits had come to them, blowing their depression and weariness away as the sea wind blows away fog. Then they hauled in the anchor and started the engine.

CHAPTER IX

HE TALKS TO SCHWALLA

As they drew near the shore they saw that the beach was moving with people. Skarsstöd in some miraculous way had guessed the news, and boats were already putting off to the petrol-launches anchored beyond the landing-stage. Men, women, and children crowded the stage, and among the rest the keen eye of Magnuss made out the form of Schwalla.

It was nearing low tide, yet, so well built was the stage that they could run the boat right alongside for the unloading.

Ericsson jumped out and fastened her to a mooring-bitt, and then began the unloading, amidst a storm of questions, to which Magnuss and Súrsson made answers as best they could.

Ericsson had determined to send every pound of the catch to Reykjavik on the morrow, by the *Thordur*, and Súrsson had agreed to the wisdom of this. The cod, to say nothing of the halibut, would fetch a good price. So the fish was carried up to the storehouse belonging to the steamship company beyond the boat-slip, Ericsson giving the orders and employing boys to help, without lifting a finger himself.

It was his first assumption of superiority over the others. He had struck Gudmundsson out of his path, he had made Súrsson his paid servant and taken his boat, he was now giving orders to Magnuss as a manager gives orders to a foreman, and pretty much as he used to give orders to the buoy hands, yet without the least assumption of superiority and without giving the least offence. He was the strong man of the little company, the rich man, and the directing hand.

His talent for organisation and command was evident in the way he ordered the fish to be handled. In five minutes everything was working smoothly, so that, like a man who had wound up and set a mechanism going, he had time to look on. Then he found himself talking to Schwalla.

Schwalla from her earliest childhood had been more accustomed to men than women. She could row and sail a boat and handle a petrol-launch as well as any fisherman, and she knew the Breidifjord by heart. The excitement of watching the catch being landed had eclipsed her vague interest in this new man, and he, absorbed in his work, had forgotten her presence on the landing-stage. Then, when the relaxation came and the crowd was thinning off and straying back to the town, he found her beside him and gave her "Good day!" It was the first time he had spoken to her since Magnuss introduced them yesterday on the deck of the *Botnia*.

"Yes," said Ericsson in answer to her remark, "it has been a good catch, and it is the first day's fishing I have had for seven years."

"My cousin Magnuss tells us you are going to stay in Skarsstöd with him, and go in for the fishing," said Schwalla. "That will be very good for Skarsstöd, for——" She stopped, laughed, and then went on, "Well, I may as well say it—they are very slow here."

Ericsson glanced at her sideways and laughed. He had one eye on the fish-carriers all the time, and without being rude to the girl, he talked to her as an overseer might talk whilst engaged in business.

"Now," said he, "you are the first Icelander I have ever heard say that about Icelanders. Yes, they are slow to start, but they work all right once you set them going." He broke off to give some directions, and Schwalla, glancing at him, observed him anew.

Perhaps the most attractive thing about Ericsson, from a woman's point of view, was his appearance of youth—not the youth that exists from want of years, but the youth that springs from the vividness of life. At seventy, though his hair might be white, he would still be young, as careless-looking and as free-giving, with the same far-seeing blue eye, and the same resolute and swift manner, and the same uptilt of the chin.

A true child of the sea.

Schwalla, now that they had spoken, utterly forgot all her preconceived ideas about him, the chief of which was the idea that he had looked at her as though she were a stock or a stone. She forgot all that Magnuss had said about him. She felt entirely at ease, and though he attracted her now strongly by his voice, person, and manner of speaking, it was not the attraction that a man exercises upon a woman, it was the attraction that a man exercises upon a child.

Children laid hands at once on Ericsson when they could. His voice, his size, his looks, and his manner made him at once the focus of their thoughts, and had he found himself by some miraculous chance in a country peopled entirely by children, they would have danced round him and made him king. He would at once have gained their confidence as well as admiration.

Something of this spell he now put on Schwalla, for Schwalla, though she was over eighteen, and though she had spent a season in Copenhagen, and though she was engaged to the fat Gudmundsson, was a child—a child still in the kingdom of childhood, despite those lips that would have tempted a saint from his vows for a kiss.

And Ericsson, who in the boat had been thinking what a good move it would be to hit Gudmundsson in his most tender place by going after Schwalla, now forget that thought and all his irritation against her for her superior airs. Schwalla had utterly vanished as a girl—she might have been a man, so completely did the idea of sex disappear from his mind. It was the tone of her voice, and the frank, childish way she spoke, and the utter naturalness of her manner that wrought this result.

Had he met her before his great dislike for women fell upon him, the result would have been the same. For Schwalla was of the order of women who, though they may be beautiful as the morning star, are negative to the animal in man, simply because their innocence spoils everything, and never can be spoiled, and the animal knows it.

If you would love a woman of this sort, you must begin by loving her as a child; then you will go on to love her as a woman—but you will always love her as a child, and your love for her will be deathless.

"Yes," said Schwalla, "they are all right once you set them going, and that is just the thing about here—they want some one to set them going. Look at them only now going out to the fishing, having missed the whole day!"

Ericsson glanced seawards at the boats. He did not say what was in his mind—that the fault was Gudmundsson's.

Then he went on giving his directions to the boys and talking to Schwalla as though he had known her all his life.

Magnuss was in the fish-house, overseeing the storage, and so had no idea of the intimacy that had suddenly sprung up like a pleasantly scented and healthy flower, on the old stone landing-stage of Skarsstöd.

"There!" said Ericsson, as the last fish went up in triumph, borne by a panting and struggling urchin. "That's done with. And now I must get round and find the harbour. Do you know, I've bought a boat, and never thought of looking at the harbour that I will have to put her in if rough weather comes; and some harbours aren't harbours, but just traps to catch a boat and break her back in."

"Ours isn't a trap," said Schwalla, firing up in defence of Skarsstöd. "It's the best harbour on the fjord. I'll show you it, if you like. Where is my cousin Magnuss? He might like to come with us."

“He’s in the fish-house,” replied Ericsson. “Ho, there, Magnuss!”

No reply came, and Ericsson, impatient of delay, jumped down from the landing-stage to the beach.

“He’ll find out where we’ve gone, and follow us,” said he. He held out his hand to Schwalla, who took it and jumped.

Then they walked along the beach towards the cliff base. The beach was of black-coloured shingle, just like the beach at Reykjavik. It was the same beach upon which the Saurian had wallowed and fought the Saurian when the twin cones of Snaefel were tipped with leaping flames and all those mountains beyond the valley of the Flóka were burning like torches against the grey dawn of the world.

Close to the cliff base lay the way round to the harbour. One could not call it a path; basalt rocks fallen from the cliff above blocked it here and there; at high tide it was impassable, for the waves broke right up to the cliffs. Schwalla, as she led the way round and over the rocks, went with the lightness of a flying tern, every movement of her body, every movement of her hands had this grace and delicacy and sureness. Magnuss at supper the night before noticed that she touched everything, even the commonest things, as though they were made of fragile porcelain that a breath might break, yet everything she touched she touched with the sureness and decision which comes from strength.

They turned the elbow of the cliffs and reached the entrance of the harbour. It was simply a gash in the cliffs a hundred yards broad, making a passage where the water lay black with depth and giving entrance to a tiny fjord, a tarn of the sea round which on every side rose the basalt rock, five hundred feet high. A ledge of the basalt ten feet wide ran from the beach for thirty feet or so, forming a natural quay for this quaint harbour of Nature’s making. One could see the tide-marks on the face of the opposite cliffs.

The depth of water at the entrance was forty fathoms; anywhere else between four and six. One fishing-boat only was at anchor, a smack, yawl-rigged and mirroring herself on the silvery-smooth surface of the water.

“Shout!” said Schwalla.

Ericsson hallooed, and was answered by a storm of echoes and a storm of birds. The cliffs had a hundred echoes, and all along the lines of ballast-ledges guillemots burst out crying and beat the air with their wings. It was just the same as in the harbour of the Westmann Islands: chanting, screaming; bagpipe-shrill, now like the last voice of a pig that is being slaughtered, now dying away to silence.

“I used to bird’s-nest here, years ago,” said Schwalla. “You can get all along that line of ridges over there if you walk with your back to the cliff and go slowly; but it’s dangerous, they say.”

“I should think so! You mean you used to go along that cliff face?”

“Yes, all along there. It’s easier climbing than the Fulmar.”

“You have climbed the Fulmar?”

“Yes, and Flatey, and the Burgomaster Rock—that is the hardest of all. But I only took eggs when I was too young to know any better. It is wicked to take eggs.”

Ericsson laughed.

“Do you know, I’ve sometimes thought that. I’ve seen our men dance on sea-gulls’ nests and the eggs squirting under their feet, and the gulls crying round. Pah! There are a lot of fools in the world. People kill just to kill, and I’ve never held with that. You see, killing has never been in my line, otherwise I wouldn’t mind it. What a thundering bluff bow that smack has. She’s a Frenchy, is not she?”

“Yes, she’s French,” said Schwalla. “All our sailing-smacks are out—there’s only two. Before the motor-boats came we had five.”

“It’s pleasant here,” said Ericsson, taking his seat on a projecting ledge of the cliff, and his pipe from his pocket. “You don’t mind tobacco-smoke, do you?”

“Every one smokes in Skarsstöd,” laughed Schwalla, who had taken her seat near him and was examining the smack with a critical eye. Scarcely had she spoken when a red cap appeared at the cabin hatch, and a big old man lumbered on deck.

“That’s Yves,” said Schwalla. “Hi, Yves!” The voice went over the water like the cry of a gull, and the cliff echoes answered, “Hi, Yves!”

Yves heard the call, saw the girl, and waved a hand in response. Then he leaned over the side, smoking and looking down at the water.

“He’s grumpy to-day. Yesterday morning he was all right, and took me over his boat. He’s in a bad temper because they have to lie up here. She started a butt or something, struck a rock, and the salvage ship from Reykjavik came round to see her, and a diver examined her and says she’ll have to go into the summer harbour at Reykjavik for repairs. The salvage ship alone coming round cost two thousand kronur. Poor old Yves!"

Ericsson sat smoking and watching poor old Yves, and thought that unless the distance belied him, Yves was a perfect specimen of the grousing French fisherman. He had mended a cable once that had been cut by French fishermen, pulled up tangled with a trawl net and cut with an axe—he felt little sympathy.

"You know the Breidifjord pretty well?" said he.

"I know every bit of it. I've known it since I was born. People praise the Faxa Fjord—Reykjavik people do—but what is it to the Breidifjord? It's broader—I know it is; but it hasn't an island to speak of. Look at Flatey and the islands round there; and look at the Fulmar, and the Horseman, and the Burgomaster. Then the gulls—where are there birds like the birds here? The very water is different—bluer and clearer—and the fish, where can you get such fishing as here?"

"The Ellithaar," said Ericsson, standing up for Reykjavik. "You haven't a river like that."

"Thank goodness, no!" cried Schwalla, getting angry. "Nor boiling springs where they wash the clothes and make the whole place ugly. And the Ellithaar salmon—they are not salmon, they are trout."

"It never fails, anyhow."

"I would sooner fail sometimes in producing a good thing than succeed always in a poor one. The Flóka may fail once in a dozen years, but the Flóka salmon—why, I landed one myself, only last year, that was twenty-five pounds."

"How did you catch him?"

"With a rod, as the English people do. Of course, my father nets the river, and Mr. Gudmundsson, to whom I am engaged to be married, nets his part of the river, but they let me fish sometimes with a rod. But we must be going; it is getting late."

Ericsson rose and followed her.

"And I'll tell you what we have got in the Flóka which you have not got in the Ellithaar," said Schwalla, as they took their way back along the beach.

"What's that?"

"A Nix."

Ericsson had been so long away from Iceland that he had almost forgotten the Icelandic superstitions. He remembered now the Nix, a being without soul, whose voice is heard in the chattering of the river water over the pebbles, and was heard ages ago by the old Icelanders as they forded the streams of the desolate valleys. You can hear the Nix still if you listen, and tune your mind to the loneliness of the volcanic hills and the melancholy crying of the whimbrel.

"Oh, you've got a Nix! Have you ever seen it?"

"I don't know," said Schwalla. "Sometimes, away up at the upper salmon pools, I have fancied that I saw a shape where the falls are, and the mist rises; but I am sure I have heard its voice; if you listen to the water on a very still day, when there is no wind, you hear a singing like—I don't know exactly what. One must never go to sleep beside the Flóka."

"Why?"

"Because the Nix may come and kiss you and steal your soul away."

"What would happen to you then?"

"Then you would have to be with the Nix always, and give it some of your soul. Of course that is a fable, and sometimes I laugh at the whole thing. In Copenhagen, for instance, I did not believe in the Nix at all; but back here in Iceland I—I do."

The beach and landing-stage were deserted, yet, though it was getting on for night, the light was brilliant and the fjord visible to its most distant capes and islands.

They walked up the street together to Gunarsson's house, where Ericsson bade the girl good night, lifting his cap as the poorest man in Iceland will do in honour of a woman.

Then he came back to the inn and found Magnuss in high good spirits. Magnuss had imported a bottle of gin into the temperance hotel, and he was smoking and drinking gin-and-water, and so happy with himself that he forgot to ask Ericsson where the latter had been.

Ericsson had his supper. He hated gin, and would not drink with the other, but sat smoking and talking over the doings of the day till Magnuss began to talk poetry and to quote his infernal verses that could be read backwards or forwards. Then Ericsson went off to bed. Ericsson had no taste for poetry. He was of the practical type of Icelander, and the practical type looks down on the poetical, and generally rules him.

CHAPTER X

THE BERG

It took them a month to get their house in order, and to extend the drying-ground, during which time Súrsson, his son, and a relative attended to the fishing, taking large catches with the help of the long line. They used a line the better part of a mile in length, with short lines—snoods—attached to it at a distance of twelve feet one from the other. They shot this line at the interval between ebb and flood, and left it down, buoyed at each end, for six hours, during which they occupied themselves with the hand lines; all the fish they took were split open and dried on Súrsson's ground, and Gudmundsson had the satisfaction, on walking to his office every morning, of seeing the progress of their labour.

Gudmundsson had cornered all the petrol in Skarsstöd, and Ericsson had countered by ordering a big supply from Reykjavik. He had made a big hole in his ten thousand kronur, but the money had not been mis-spent.

As a matter of fact, after Gudmundsson and Gunarsson, he was now the first man in Skarsstöd. The general storekeeper and the baker might have more money in the bank, but they had not the prestige of this man, who had suddenly appeared in the little community from far-away lands, who had put up to fight Gudmundsson, and who was evidently succeeding in the business.

His treatment of Súrsson, and the way he had secured the house—the whole business—appealed to the hearts of the people, all except a few who, from pessimism, or perhaps a more profound knowledge of Gudmundsson, predicted disaster in the long run for the newcomer.

The humorous part of the business was the fact that Gudmundsson remained outwardly on good terms with Magnuss and Ericsson. Magnuss was the cousin of the girl he was about to marry, and it did not suit him to make bad blood; besides, there were some elements of real greatness in Gudmundsson. He felt no anger against Ericsson. Ericsson he would crush by fair means or foul, but after the first natural irritation at finding this opponent in his path, his feelings calmed down. Gudmundsson was perfectly sure of himself, and he had no passions, he had only instincts. His love for Schwalla was a compound of animal instinct and the instinct to grab the lower part of the river, which would be hers when her father died—perhaps before. To do him justice, it is only fair to add that he was not a vicious man, nor brutal. He moved in business with the chill indifference and precision of an asteroid moving in space, and when he hit an object in his path, the viciousness of the blow came, not from the viciousness of the man, but from his momentum.

So he would pass of a morning, and observe the preparation of the new drying-ground and the furnishing of the house without comment, pausing even one day to criticise Magnuss at work, and offer some suggestions.

Schwalla took a good deal of interest in the new proceedings, and came in one day to look at the new furniture, which was of the scantiest.

“We haven’t any money to waste on furniture,” said Magnuss, “and, you see, two men living alone don’t want much furniture, just a bed and a table and some chairs—we will be busy all the time; we are going to build a motor-boat next winter.”

“Build her in Skarsstöd?” said Schwalla.

“Yes. It’s Ericsson’s idea; and he’ll do it. He can do anything.”

She quite believed this. She had formed a high opinion of Ericsson’s capacities. She had the awful eye of a woman for a man—not for his looks, but his capacity—and she saw quite clearly the man in Ericsson, just as she saw the woman in Magnuss. When she met Ericsson, she always stopped and spoke to him; she felt a great friendliness towards him; it seemed to her that he was one of the pleasantest things in Skarsstöd, in the category that held her father, and the Breidifjord, and fine weather; and Ericsson was beginning to feel pretty much the same about Schwalla.

He was a man with a soft side to his nature, despite his directness and iron, and that hard business streak inherited from his father, which was beginning to show too clearly under the influence of money. This soft side was the side that Magnuss had adhered to, but there was room for Schwalla, and the girl pleased him mostly by the fact that she did not stir his sex instinct, but fell into that category which held Magnuss and children and dogs—just as he fell into the category that held the Breidifjord, and Gunarsson and fine weather.

One day Ericsson was working in the little garden fronting the house. It was a tiny affair, where nothing grew but a few bushes, but in Iceland, where there is scarcely a tree, the smallest bit of green stuff is prized and treasured, and a gooseberry-bush has the honour of an oak.

He was rising up from his work when he saw Schwalla coming down the street; she was followed by Helgi. Helgi was a little blue fox that had been given to her the summer before by a man from the northern fjords. She had raised it on sheep's milk, the only milk to be had in Skarsstöd, and when she took it with her, it followed like a dog.

She stopped to speak to Ericsson, and Helgi sniffed about, sometimes sitting up on his hind quarters, just like a dog when it is begging.

"Why, your garden is beginning to look quite nice," said Schwalla. "Where is my cousin, Magnuss?"

"He's fishing," said Ericsson. "He and Súrsson have taken the boat out. I was lazy this morning. I ought to have been finishing the drying-ground, but I got tired of putting those lava blocks in their places, so I just turned to the garden."

They talked for a few minutes, and then Schwalla went on in the direction of the beach, followed by the little fox, and Ericsson returned to his work.

Ten minutes later she came running back, Helgi gambolling round her, and tugging at her skirts when she stopped at the palings.

"There's a berg," she cried, "away out at sea, the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Come down and look at it, but wait till I leave Helgi at home."

She ran off, and Ericsson put on his coat. A berg is the rarest thing in the Breidifjord. In some years the Huna Flói and the northern fjords are packed with Arctic ice, but the Breidifjord and the Faxa Fjord are always free. Once only, in the terrible summer of 1695, has Iceland been entirely bound by ice; then every fjord was filled, and the island entirely encircled, with the exception of the peninsula of Snaefellsness.

Then Schwalla came running back, and they hurried down to the beach, where several people, including Gunarsson, were on the landing-stage.

There it was, away out on the blue, spar-white, and like a ship in full sail. It was bigger than the Fulmar. Just as a touch of white cloud gives the blue sky an extra depth and meaning, so did this ship of ice to the Breidifjord.

Gunarsson's sailing-boat, which he had been using that morning, was moored to the slip, and when Schwalla had feasted her eyes on the berg long enough, the boat caught her attention.

"I'm going to sail out and see it closer," said she. "Who'll come? Father — —"

"I'm busy," said Gunarsson. "I have to attend to those new salmon-nets. You will but waste your time, for a berg is only a piece of ice, and it looks better from a distance."

"I have never seen one close," said Schwalla, "and I am not going to miss this chance."

"I'll go with you, if you like," said Ericsson. "I've nothing to do for once."

"Don't go too close to it," said Gunarsson, as he undid the rope for them. "I've heard of bears coming along on the ice like that; it's an old story that one landed at the Skagafjord from a berg."

"We'll take care of the bears," laughed Schwalla. They pushed out, and Ericsson stepped the mast; there was a fair breeze from the land, which strengthened as they got farther out. Schwalla steered and minded the sheet, whilst Ericsson sat amidships, noting that she handled the boat as if born to the work, which, in fact, she was.

There is nothing pleasanter than going before the wind over a gentle swell. The wind comes gusty in the Breidifjord, and sailing before the wind, unless the boat is well handled, is a dangerous business, but Ericsson had no reason to give any warning to the helmsman. No old seaman of the Isafjord, where they fancy themselves a bit, could have given instructions to Schwalla.

They passed the Fulmar. It was the full nesting season now, and the Fulmar presented a quaint enough spectacle.

All up the faces of the rock the birds were sitting in rows. The lowest ledges were occupied by the guillemots. The guillemot lays her Jargonelle pear-shaped egg on the bare rock; how it escapes destruction is a mystery, but there she lays it and there she sits on it, as these sat in their black-and-white dress watching the approaching boat. Above the guillemots came several rows of razor-bills; above these, puffins in holes in the rock; above these, kittiwakes.

Schwalla, as the boat glided past, called to the birds.

The call gave Ericsson a little shiver.

It was not like the call of a human being, it was the call of a bird to a bird. Yet it was neither harsh, like the sea-birds', nor thin, like the land-birds' call.

The guillemots and razor-bills made a vague movement with their wings, as if a wind had puffed under their feathers, and a voice or two came across the water.

"Just to let them know it's me," said Schwalla.

Ericsson thought she was jesting.

"You mean to say they know you?"

"The Breidifjord knows everything about every one," said Schwalla. "Birds never forget. The same birds always nest on the same rock, and do you think that, with their eyes that can see miles over the sea, they cannot tell the different boats coming? They know every boat and man. And they were saying to themselves, 'That's Gunarsson's boat. I wonder, is Schwalla in it'—you see, I never take their eggs—so I just gave them a call."

"Well, they seemed to answer, anyhow," admitted Ericsson, half believing. Born of the sea like her, he had a capacity for refusing many stupid land disbeliefs, though the sceptical tinge in his nature might sometimes make him carp.

"The Breidifjord knows everything about every one." No poetry ever said anything truer than that, though, if she had declared that it knew everything about everything, she would have been truer still.

For the Breidifjord is a compound eye and a compound mind; below water and above, it dreams and knows and broods; it remembers by heredity what happened in the days of the sagas, and all under that wonderful stretch of water, and all through those crystal-clear cube leagues of air, what happened a thousand years ago still lives in the memory of instinct, and what happened yesterday in the memory of mind.

Schwalla was part of the Breidifjord, as were the birds, and the birds were part of the Breidifjord as was Schwalla; they had seen her from childhood, and, surely as anything is, their faultless instinct proclaimed her the antithesis of the Skua and the Burgomaster gull, and the human nest-robber of the coast. She had not taken a nest since she was six years of age.

A big predatory gull passed over them, and the girl at the helm gave the kittiwake's cry after it in derision.

"I once saw one of those pulling a puffin chick from its nest in a rock hole," said Schwalla. "It played with it just as our cat plays with a mouse. I was up above and I shouted at it to stop, and it looked up at me; it saw me coming, and it picked up the chick in its beak and flew off with it. Mean—

they are the meanest things, they rob the other birds of their fish—too lazy to fish for themselves. Look at the berg now!"

Ericsson looked ahead. He had not been noticing their progress; now, for a moment, as he turned, it seemed to him that they were steering straight for land, and the white cape of some icebound coast on whose shore the waves were beating. As he turned, the voices of gulls came up against the wind. Gulls were following and blowing about the berg, looking, at this distance, like scraps of white paper blown by the wind. They were chasing it, and they seemed deriding it. This white ghost from the north had broken into the dreams of the Breidifjord, awakening who knows what recollections, so that the gannets in its path ceased tumbling into the sea after fish, and flew in a long line with their goose-necks stretched straight out, as though the whole flock were strung on a string, foolishly and in a huge circle; and the razor-bills and oyster-catchers and little auks, terns and puffins flickered and flew, joining their voices now and then in a lamentable chorus, led by the kittiwakes' "Get away, get away, get away."

All down the coast, the great berg had been saluted like this by every fjord. The Sugandafjord, the Onundafjord, the Dyrafjord, the Arnafjord, the Talknafjord, and the Patreksfjord all had sent bird contingents to greet it, inspect it, storm about it, and tell it to get away.

One might fancy that the bird instinct in Schwalla had brought her out to look at this new thing—at all events, she was there with the others. When they had reached to within a few cable lengths of the berg, she let go the sheet, and Ericsson furled the sail and got the sculls out to keep the boat in position.

Schwalla gazed, fascinated.

The ice close to the sea was almost foam-white with imprisoned air-bubbles, and rounded into heads and muffled forms by the washing of the seas. Then it rose in capes and shoulders and spires, tremendous, definite, and shrill against the blue. New fractures showed like veins of azure air, terraces of aquamarine streaked the slopes, and here and there some deep pocket showed the night-black heart of the thing, like the truth of its being peeping forth.

The chime and wash of the waves on the ice came clearly heard, for the gulls, seeing the approach of the boat, had ceased crying, flying off this way and that.

"I want to get on it," said Schwalla, "but it's impossible on this side. Let's row round to the other."

Ericsson rowed round to leeward. Here the water was almost dead smooth, and the air still and cold. The sun struck full on this face of the berg, and to Schwalla the thing seemed covered with frozen sunlight.

Near the centre, and almost awash with the water, lay, as if dropped for them by Nature, a landing-stage of floe ice; it was only from a yard to a yard and a half broad, but from it one could scramble on to the berg itself.

“Can you put us alongside it?” asked Schwalla.

“If you like,” replied Ericsson.

Schwalla put out the boat-fenders, and, as they came alongside, Ericsson jumped on to the ice and steadied the boat, whilst Schwalla landed.

There was a small anchor on board. He sank one fluke of it firmly in a crack of the floe, and moored the boat with a bight of the anchor rope. Opposite the floe ice was a deep chasm cutting into the heart of the berg, and turning upon itself at a right angle. The berg which you see floating like a solid mass upon the sea is often far less solid than it looks, cut with chasms and valleys and honeycombed with caves; and nothing is more like a coast cave in the rock than one of these ice-caves which have even stalactites, caused by the water-drip from the sun-melted surface of the ice. The chasm down which they came was runnelled with small water-channels, down which tiny streams raced merrily to the sea. They turned the elbow, and here, instead of the chasm narrowing, it spread out fan-like, rising in a gentle slope of broken ice to one of the highest shoulders of the berg.

The whole of the slope was lit by the sun, and burning with the brilliancy of incandescence, and down a broad runnel that seemed cut out with a gouge, a waterfall raced, breaking here and there into a cascade of diamonds.

“Listen!” said Schwalla.

Mixed with the tinkle of the waterfall, they could hear the chiming of the waves on the ice to windward, the cough of a cave suddenly flooded, and another sound occasional and heart-searching, ethereal and musical—the voice of the berg itself. The voice of the great crystal island rubbed like a musical glass by the finger of the sea. Sometimes would come a “plop,” like the sound of a seal taking the water, and caused by a lump of ice detaching itself from one of the slopes, and falling into the waiting sea.

It was the strangest thing to stand in this glittering valley, filled with sunlight and fairy tunes and stealthy sounds, and to know that one was afloat and drifting.

They climbed the slope without difficulty, and from its shoulder they saw the great sweep of the fjord as no one had ever seen it before. Snaefel, the bay-broken coast, the islands, and, away to the north-west, the French fishing-fleet and the Icelandic boats beyond the French, all sharply defined in the crystal-clear air.

Skarsstöd was just a trace on the coastline, Flatey, a rock on the distant blue, the Horseman, the Burgomaster, the Petrel, and the Fulmar points. And from all that world of mountain, fjord, and sky, from all that wonder of distance, brilliancy and azure—not a sound.

Then, after ten minutes or so, they came down, retraced their path to the floe, and found that the boat was gone.

CHAPTER XI

THE ANGER OF MAGNUSS

Had Ericsson known as much about ice as he knew about cables, he would not have moored the boat as he did.

The boat was floating on the same current as the berg, but the surface current on which the boat floated was swifter than the deep-water current affecting the berg's base. So the boat kept tugging at her moorings, the split in which the fluke of the anchor was fixed completed itself, not vertically, but diagonally, a big chunk of ice came away, and, the moorings freed, the boat drifted gaily off, going in the same direction is the berg, but swifter.

Ericsson saw the whole thing at a glance; there was not a moment to waste, and, flinging off his coat and shoes, he plunged into the water.

Schwalla knew that the boat could not be far, and that the reason why she could not see it was simply because the floe ice was held in an indentation of the berg, a little bay, the projecting horns of which hid the coast of the berg in both directions.

The boat might be only a few yards away; it could not be far, in any case. She saw the head of the swimmer vanish beyond the projecting cape of ice, then she waited without the slightest tremor of fear. Schwalla had never in her life felt fear. Death is part of the Breidifjord, just as are night and dawn and sunlight and the gulls. He is liquid in the water, and fluent in the air, and floating in the fogs; she had played with him all her life, and she feared him no more than she feared life.

She waited; and as she waited, she heard the berg singing to the sea, the bells of the ripples and the waves ringing round the great bell of the ice.

Two minutes passed—three—four—five. Five minutes is an appalling length of time under some circumstances, and Schwalla, in whose mind anxiety had been growing, felt all at once as though the Ice Spirit had laid his hand on her heart; for the first time in her life, she felt fear—fear, not for herself, but for her companion.

"Something has happened to him."

The thought struck her suddenly, like an east wind, blighting the whole world around her. Had the frozen water round the ice overcome him?

She asked the question, but the only answer was the voice of the berg, indifferent to all things human as the voice of the water-nix in the river.

More minutes passed, and the question began to answer itself. Yes, beyond doubt, something must have happened to him. If he had found the boat, he could easily have boarded it, and he would have been back by this.

She was just preparing to take to the water and swim in the same direction that he had gone, when the sound of oars struck her ear, and the next moment the bow of the boat appeared rounding the cape of ice.

Ericsson was dripping-wet, and he looked like a man who had just had a bad experience; he laid the boat alongside the floe, and the girl jumped in, and scarcely had her feet touched the boards of the boat, when she leaned forward and placed her hand on his arm as if to make sure that he was there really and truly.

The little action said a good deal. Two land-people just escaped from such a danger would have talked a lot, but these children of the sea, now that the danger was over, said scarcely anything about it.

"She had cleared the berg," said Ericsson, "and the cold water got hold of me. I thought I was done, till I struck the water beyond; it seemed boiling hot after the berg water. Then I boarded her."

Schwalla had cast his coat and shoes into the boat before boarding her, but he did not put them on.

"I will row back," said he, "it will dry me and warm me at the same time. Pah! that ice-water, it seems round me still."

The boat was a trifle too large to be comfortably sculled by one man, but it was nothing to Ericsson, who, after half a mile, entirely recovered himself.

His strength and form had been steadily built up from boyhood by the sea. One might say of him that he was unbreakable. Only in the navies of the northern world, and perhaps in the Ponantaise division of the French navy, do you find men like this—men who can row for ten hours with only a short rest now and then, men who can endure, and who can suffer almost without knowing it. They are the true masters of the world, because they are the masters of the sea.

There was no one on the boat-slip to greet them, though several of the fishing-boats were in, including Súrsson's.

Ericsson, as he tied up the boat, looked round to see if Magnuss were anywhere about, but there was no sign of him. Then he walked up the street with Schwalla and, having said good-bye to her at her door, returned.

There was no sign of Magnuss in the garden, or on the drying-ground, so opening the door he went in. The door opened straight into the main living-room, which was exactly like that of all Icelandic houses of this class. A bed where Ericsson slept was in one corner; a stove, a table, and some chairs made up the rest of the furniture. On a shelf was the inevitable Icelandic box of carved wood, and pinned on the wall the inevitable picture of Jón Sigurdsson.

Jón Sigurdsson, patriot and statesman, is the national idol, and there is scarcely a farmhouse throughout the land without his picture in the living-room. The portrait belonged to Magnuss; it had been given to him by Schwalla—as ardent a patriot as himself. It was her contribution to the furnishing of the place.

Magnuss was seated with his back to the portrait of Jón Sigurdsson, his elbow was resting on the table, and he was smoking.

"Hullo," said Ericsson, "you are back—how's the fishing?"

"The cod have ceased running," said Magnuss.

"Well, they'll run to-morrow," said Ericsson, flinging his cap on a chair and lighting a pipe.

Magnuss made no reply. He seemed in a desperately bad temper about something, and Ericsson, instead of letting the surly dog lie, poked it up.

"I've been out to see the berg," said he.

"Did you go alone?" asked Magnuss, who had been told, only half an hour ago by Gunarsson, that Schwalla and Ericsson had gone out together.

"No," said Ericsson, "I didn't. I took company with me—your cousin."

"Schwalla?"

"Yes, Schwalla."

"Oh, you took her with you?" Magnuss was swallowing, after the fashion of a person who has taken a pill and is trying to get it down without a draught of water.

The growing familiarity between Schwalla and Ericsson had been a thorn in his heart for days past, and the fact that they had been out together alone for hours was like a probe in a wound, a wound that reached to remote and unknown regions of his being.

Then he burst out:

"She had no right to go with you."

"No right to go with me?—and why not?"

"She had no right to go with you. She is engaged to Gudmundsson, and you very well know it. You know it, and you know she is my cousin."

"What are you talking about?" said Ericsson.

"I'm talking about Schwalla."

"You are talking a lot of nonsense, and you have no reason in your head."

"No, but I have a heart in my body. Which is more than you have."

"Oh, go on—go on," said the other. "Go on talking as much as you like. You are like that blessed stuff of yours that reads backwards or forwards, but has no sense either way."

This insult to his poem calmed Magnuss, whilst concentrating his anger.

"You needn't shift your helm in that fashion," said he. "Whatever sense there is in me has nothing to do with the question; stick to the question."

"What question?"

Then Magnuss blazed out. He sprang to his feet, and struck the table a bang with his closed fist as he faced the other.

"I didn't bring you here to betray me. I didn't bring you here to ruin my cousin. She's Gudmundsson's future wife. I know you. I'll tell Gudmundsson. I'll tell her father. By G—d, I'll tell her father, I know you. You have no right to be out alone with her in a boat. I know you."

He was shouting like a lunatic. Then he suddenly turned, and rushed from the house.

Ericsson went to the door and looked after him, watching him till he vanished down the street in the direction of the sea.

Then Ericsson fetched his cap and went out, walking in the opposite direction up the Flóka valley. He passed the parsonage, where, in the little paddock, Parson Olsen was at work. He passed the church and Schwalla's house, and turned the angle of the valley, pursuing his way along the bank of the raving river, almost unconscious of his surroundings.

He was disturbed in his mind.

He was not thinking of Magnuss so much as of Schwalla. Magnuss had irritated and angered him by his stupidity. He had no designs against Schwalla; the whole thing was absurd. Yet Magnuss's speech had brought the idea of Schwalla more definitely before him; her picture which he carried in his mind had suddenly taken warmer tints; it had gained movement and voice.

What was this new sensation which filled him and disturbed him, and surprised him with the surprise of the thing that is absolutely new.

Was he in love with Schwalla?

No, it was not love, or at least the love of a man for a woman according to his conception of love. That feeling was entirely objective, this new sensation was subjective.

For the last fortnight, indeed ever since they had visited the harbour together, all sorts of pleasant little threads had been spinning between him and the girl, as if woven by some spirit of good fellowship and sunshine. Her bright and frank greeting when they met, her voice, tuneful and friendly, her interest in their house, the picture she had given to Magnuss—from all these, some good spider had woven a web to catch his liking. Even Helgi, the fox, had contributed a few blue threads. The little blue fox gambolled through his mind with the girl, tugging at her skirts.

No—certainly he was no more in love with Schwalla than with Helgi. But the pair of them had found a warm corner in his heart, a corner never explored before, an unknown corner; and they had captured it by some trick, just as he had captured the house from Gudmundsson.

Magnuss's absurd speech, if it had not irritated him so much, would have made him laugh. It was as though a blind and honest man had been accused of card-sharping. Or a man with no desire for sweets, of designs on a beehive.

Schwalla was to him just Schwalla—a bit of brightness and welcome, a patch of good sky, a handshake from a firm and warm hand. If he could have found words for his thoughts as he cursed the stupidity of Magnuss, he would have said:

"Confound women; what do they want coming between me and Schwalla for? Why couldn't she have been a man? Now every time I meet her, or speak to her, or shake her by the hand, that fool Magnuss will begin to shout and squeal."

"Whooo—whrill."

The cry of a whimbrel woke him from his thoughts. He had gone far beyond the bungalow of Gudmundsson. The devil's bastions of the Flóka valley surrounded him and hemmed him in, and in the supreme silence of this great desolation the voice of the river spoke loud. He sat down on a rock by a salmon pool that lay like a silent thought in the midst of the river's babbling speech. He remembered what Schwalla had said about the nix and the danger of one falling asleep by the banks of the Flóka, and the remembrance came to him, not in the fashion of ordinary remembrance, but as a voice.

It was Schwalla's voice. He heard the words as though they had only been spoken a minute ago—the sweet, full voice, one of those rare women's voices that seem brimming to the rim of speech, taking every ripple from every breeze of thought that blows, and always ready to spill over into quiet laughter.

Most people's words seem pumped up, the effortless voice is rare, and as he sat listening to it something in the depths of his mind, something that had never moved before, moved and turned.

His heart went right out of him down the desolate valley, and away to the house with the palings, before which stood a girl and a little blue fox; caught them up in its arms—for the heart has arms as well as wings—held them for a moment, and then came back up the valley.

The little fox had found room in his arms as well as the girl, for the soul when touched by love has love for all things.

In every man lies the seed of a soul, but it never can come to full flower unless it is touched by love; then in a night, sometimes almost in a moment, the miracle takes place without the man fully comprehending.

To Ericsson, the change came as a mild warmth and fulness of feeling, a tolerance for things that would have angered him an hour ago. Just as a glass of good wine makes a man richer in kindliness for a moment, so did this opening of his heart make him generous towards mean things.

And still, though love had touched his soul, he was not yet consciously in love with Schwalla. The conscious mind limps miles behind the subconscious, and though passion would have stricken the conscious mind to recognition like the blare of a trumpet, this new stirring of the depths of his being came to his understanding only as a warmth from Nowhere, a wind from the south to the hedge that knows not north from south, yet whose life has so altered from that touch of south wind, that presently the thorns will bear company with little green shoots.

He came back along the valley, no longer angry with Magnuss. As he passed Gunarsson's house, he looked all over the place to catch a sight of Schwalla; it would have given him pleasure to have greeted her, and he walked on feeling a bit lonely at not having seen her. Near the church he passed Gudmundsson. Gudmundsson gave him "Good day," as he always did, and Ericsson returned the greeting of the "fat old rogue," without recognising that his own greeting was a trace more friendly.

When he reached his house, he found that Magnuss had returned and was seated at supper. There was a touch of humour in this return to the trough, after all the fury and melodrama of a couple of hours ago. It was Magnuss all over, and Ericsson, as he flung his cap on the bed, stood for half a second looking at Magnuss's back; at the humble table and the poor food spread upon it. There was something pathetic in the sight. Poor Magnuss, after all his journeyings and scrapings, he had found this humble little home, and he had stood up for Schwalla, fancying that she was about to be injured!

He went up to Magnuss and laid his hand on his shoulder, in a kindly fashion.

"Magnuss," said he, "you are a fool."

Magnuss turned his face; it was flushed. His mouth was full, and his eyes were watery. Crying and eating at the same time—it was Magnuss all over.

He was trying to swallow his food in a hurry, so that he might resent Ericsson's speech, then something in the manner of the other checked him, so that he swallowed what was in his mouth and said nothing.

Ericsson went over and stood at his place, which was laid.

"You don't understand me at all. When I went out to-day to see the berg, I went just as I would have gone with you. I have no idea of harming your cousin. Good God! I would just as soon think of hitting one of Olsen's children. Don't you *know* that I have done with women?"

Magnuss, with his woman's intuition, saw that Ericsson was speaking the truth; with his instinct for some things fine and delicate as the mirror galvanometer on board the *President Girling*, he also recognised some change in Ericsson. Ericsson never explained himself or apologised.

So, though he knew now quite well that Ericsson had no evil designs on Schwalla, a new fear was born in his heart. What if Ericsson were to fall honestly in love with Schwalla, and she with him?

The vision of Schwalla ruined by Ericsson seemed almost less terrible to him than the vision of her married to Ericsson and loving him.

He could bear to see her married to Gudmundsson, because such a marriage precluded the idea of love. But he could *not* bear to see her married to another man in a marriage born of love—or so he fancied. He would kill Ericsson before such a thing could happen—so he told himself.

"Well," said he, "let us say no more about it. She is my cousin, and that is why I spoke."

He went on with his food, and Ericsson, taking his place at the table, began his meal.

When they had finished, Helga Thordursson, one of the girls of the village who cooked and looked after the place for them, appeared to clear the things away and wash up.

Helga was quite young, only seventeen or so; dressed in the national dress, her figure left much to be desired; she was sloppy and uncouth, yet her face was charming and benign. Amongst the Scandinavians, you find often quite young girls with this benignity of expression, like the prefiguration of happy and peaceful motherhood.

When Helga had finished her work, they started on mending and examining one of the long lines to be used in the next day's fishing. The keeping of these lines in order, to say nothing of the baiting of them, is a tremendous piece of business.

The short lines—snoods—with hooks attached, are six feet in length, and are spaced at a distance of twelve feet apart, otherwise they would get tangled. Just where the hook joins the snood, the texture of the snood must be loose, so that the cod's teeth may go through it without dividing it. Every hook, every snood, and all attachments must be examined and tested for faults, just as every yard of electric cable, grapnel rope, and hawser in the cable business must be "passed" by vigilant and detective eyes.

"On the strength of the weakest link dependeth the strength of the cable."

That motto of the English navy holds good in the mind of the obscurest toiler of the sea.

The sea has no pity for faults, and she will break a battleship and ruin a nation, or break a fishing-line and ruin a day's labour with the same indifferent fingers—fingers that are always fumbling for faults.

It is the same with Life, whose fingers are always fumbling for weaknesses in lives, even though the lives be as humble as those of Erikr Ericsson and Jonass Magnuss.

CHAPTER XII

HOW LOVE CAME TO SCHWALLA IN THE NIGHT

When Schwalla reached home, her father was out, so that she could not tell of her adventure on the berg. It was not till supper that she spoke of it, and then Gunarsson was in no humour to take interest in it. His mind was filled with a petty worry about a salmon-trap which his men were putting up. Gunarsson's mind was of the dimension that is exactly filled by a petty worry, and it generally held one.

So was it this evening, and Gunarsson engaged in the business of a hundred kronur salmon-trap had no ears for Schwalla's story.

The girl did not mind.

The adventure, over and done with, had passed away like the berg, but the recollection endured—a coloured picture of the Breidifjord and the gulls, the blinding snow-white of the bergs' faces, the chiming of the waters on the ice, and the silent world of blueness and light which had come to her as a revelation when standing by Ericsson on the berg's shoulder.

The berg had shown her the Breidifjord as she had never seen it before. The Breidifjord had become for her a new thing. Ericsson had become part of it.

She did not know this in the least.

Love, who is really a person, armed, not with a bow and arrow, but with a hammer and portable anvil, and who is a past-master in the art of fetter forging, had landed with them on the berg, and, catching up the long chain of the Breidifjord, link after link, gulls, islands, mountains, coast, blue waves, and brown sails, had flung it round Schwalla with one last link added, the welding link—Ericsson.

He had fixed it so that Ericsson and the sea would be for her one part of the other—for ever.

She did not mind her father's preoccupation, for, pleasant as her day's experience had been and full of incident, she preferred to think of it rather than talk about it, especially to a half-deaf man. She left him still at the table and went off to feed Helgi. Helgi's hutch was in the yard adjoining the kitchen entrance, and as she fed him with scraps of raw mutton she told him the whole thing.

She had the art of talking to an animal naturally and not as if she were talking to a fool, and when she told Helgi stories, which she often did, she believed that he understood them.

And he did. Helgi's mind to Schwalla's was less even than his little body to hers, yet it could follow her and understand—if not the story—the story-telling tone of her voice.

The story-telling voice is almost as old as speech, and Helgi's ancestors had no doubt heard it listening at the cave men's doors whilst the cave women talked prehistoric children to sleep with tales of Bubblyjub the Pterodactyl.

Skarsstöd has one peculiarity; wherever you may go, and in whatever room of any of the houses you may be, you have a companion—the voice of the river. The fall from the angle of the valley to the sea edge is sufficient to give the river a voice at all times.

Schwalla, who had retired to rest at ten o'clock, was awakened after midnight by the voice of the river. The river's voice had not altered in the least since she had closed her eyes on going to sleep, it was just the same, a low, monotonous, musical murmur made up of the fuss of the falls, the wimple of the ripple, and the chime of moving pebbles, yet it had broken into her sleep.

"I want to tell you something—I want to tell you something—I want—to—tell—you—something," sang the river.

Then, when she woke up and listened, it had nothing to say.

Through the wide-open window the wind stirred the curtains, filling the room with the freshness of the mountains, and the voice of the river came, now louder, now lower with the wind.

Sleep had vanished utterly. When sleep goes off like this in Iceland, he does not come back again in a hurry, and Schwalla was not the person to lie awake waiting for him and entertaining meanwhile that hideous phantom, Insomnia.

She rose, dressed herself, and came out.

It was nearly one o'clock, yet daylight lay on the world.

Skarsstöd was sound asleep. It looked like a forsaken village, and the river, flashing and dancing past Skarsstöd, had an appearance of life; vivid, speaking life, as though some spirit were half showing itself—some elemental released from the presence of man; the hills looked different, and the very sky.

Night seen by sunlight is full of charming surprises, and you can see it only when you are absolutely alone as Schwalla was now.

You are looking into the deep dark well of nature, which by day gives you little more than the reflections on its surface; looking into it all illuminated by sun-rays which show you glimpses of its illimitable mystery and depth.

She came down the deserted street to the beach and took her seat on a mooring-bitt of the landing-stage. It was half-tide and the sea was flooding in, haze-blue, from the far horizon stretched like a spider-thread beneath the haze-blue sky. Not a gull was to be seen, nothing but the coast and the islands, the sea and the sky, all seen clearly as by day in the stillness of sleep.

The berg had vanished utterly and the French fishing-fleet were hidden by Breidavik Point. In all that world of vague tints and ethereal distances, there was nothing visible that had not been there since the dawn of creation. It was not the first time that Schwalla had seen the Breidifjord so, and as she sat lulled by the peace and the supreme silence that was broken only by the washing of the sea on the beach, the voices of the little waves came to her just as the voice of the river had come, waking her from her sleep.

"I want to tell you something—I want to tell you something—I want to tell you something," sang the sea. The sea as well as the land had some subtle message for her, yet even the Breidifjord, her second mother, hesitated over the message.

Then the great fjord began to speak to her, leading her eye from point to point:

"What are you seeking for? Here is Flatey, but the guillemots are all asleep sitting on their huge eggs on the rock ledges, and the puffins are asleep in the rock holes; there is nothing that you seek for here; and the strand of Skagastrond, where the fishing-boats were lost last season, there is nothing here but dead men's bones. The Burgomaster, and the Fulmar, and the Horseman, they hold not what you seek. Snaefel away over there knows nothing of what you want."

Led from point to point, her mind wandered till, tired with distance, it sought the near waters of the fjord.

Then, just as a gull lights with folded wings on some rocky point, her mind, after its long, long journey, came to rest on an object a few cable lengths from the shore.

It was Ericsson's boat.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VIKING SHIP

Next day, as Ericsson and Magnuss were going down street to the beach carrying the tubs with the long lines for the fishing, they met Schwalla and Helgi.

The girl gave them, “Good day!” spoke a few words, and passed on.

She scarcely looked at Ericsson.

The good companion who had always met him with a smile, the good gardener who had dug up the arid soil of his nature and planted all sorts of simple flowers, had suddenly vanished from the earth.

She had looked at him without a smile, just barely greeted him.

Magnuss noticed it, and it seemed to Ericsson that Magnuss’s manner as they went on their way to the beach pointed to the fact.

Magnuss had suddenly become odiously cheerful. Súrsson was waiting for them on the landing-stage, and as they got the line tubs off to the *Helga*, Magnuss noticed in turn a change in Ericsson’s manner.

Ericsson seemed in wild good spirits all of a sudden, laughing and joking at Súrsson as though they were off on a picnic or some party of pleasure.

But if Magnuss could have seen Ericsson’s heart he would have been quite content.

They got the anchor in and made out to sea. At the fishing-ground they laid the line, buoyed at each end, a wearisome long job, and Ericsson got a cod-hook in his thumb, and cut it out with his knife, and laughed over the business as though it were a joke. The thing seemed to give him satisfaction —and as a matter of fact it did.

There had suddenly sprung up in his mind a cold bitterness that could only find expression in jokes and laughter. It was the triumph of the thorns when a sudden east wind strikes the hedge, setting back all the little green shoots that yesterday were beginning to sprout.

Now there is one thing about the Breidifjord, and indeed about the whole Icelandic coast, one evil spirit that ruins everything whilst it rules—Fog.

The Icelandic fog comes up from nowhere, dims the sun, blows over you, passes, and appears again. It may last for days, or for hours; it may hang about for a week. The only certain thing about it is its uncertainty, at least to those not born and bred on the coast.

It is caused by the meeting of the Gulf Stream and the cold currents from the north.

Whilst they were fishing with the hand lines, with five or six hours before them till the long line could be taken up, Breidavik Point was suddenly blotted out and the fog was on them, blowing over them in billows.

"I thought it was coming," said Súrsson. "I felt it in my bones. Well, we're anchored safe and sound, and we've got the compass to get back with if it lasts more than a little."

"It won't last long," said Magnuss. "I've known the weather here since I was a boy no higher than your knee, and a boy picks up weather and what it means better than any grown man can—you were born and bred on the east coast and you'd beat me there, no doubt."

Súrsson assented. He was an east-coast man. He was also a man with some experience of the world, having made several deep-sea voyages in one of the great German sailing-ships that trade from Hamburg, so he could hold his own in talk with these two men from the cable service.

The fishing was bad to-day; had the weather been clear they would have shifted to another ground, but fog-bound as they were, there was nothing to be done but take their luck and smoke and talk.

Magnuss was telling of the sea-trout fishing he had done when a boy, giving weights and sizes to prove that the trout had gone off in later years, when he suddenly stopped talking and turned an ear to the wind.

The wind blowing down from Breidavik was so slight that the stirring of the air could only be just felt as it moved the billows of the fog.

The sound of oars was coming on the wind. Ericsson could hear them now, and Súrsson. It was an eight-oared boat to judge by the sound.

"It's not a Skarsstöd boat," said Súrsson, "and Stykkisholmur is too far for her to have come from there, and they are bigger oars than are used hereabouts"—he was referring to the little match-shaped oars used on the coast—"ship's galley, sounds like."

He had scarcely spoken when a hail came through the fog; thin, like the call of a sea-bird.

"Don't answer," said Magnuss.

He was too late. Ericsson had split the fog with the bellowing hail of the Danish navy, and faint, like a reply, came the sound of derisive laughter and the sound of oars holding the water.

Then, as the oars took hold again, and the boat, evidently changing her direction, made off, faint and dying in the distance came another hail, "Skule—skule—skule," repeated and dying away like the chanting of sea-gulls.

"We've hit a viking ship," groaned Magnuss, "and you've answered her—couldn't you have *told* those oars weren't real oars? Hark at them and their cry! Luck! you'll never have luck again; we'll all be drowned, and all through you answering her. Fool that I was to come out on the Breidifjord with a fool."

"Why, I'm blessed if I wouldn't sooner come out fishing with the seven old women of Kuvikr," retorted Ericsson. "It was a boat from the French fleet, and if I hadn't hailed her she'd have cut into us. Haven't you ever heard Frenchies row, you Barnacle-goose?"

"Ay," said Súrsson, "it must have been a French boat, there's no other place a boat, rowed like her, could come from, only the fleet! smuggling brandy most like. They say there's a deal of that done now that the new law has come in, and I've heard Gudmundsson has a finger in it."

"You've no ears or sense, either of you," said Magnuss. "Did it sound like a boat made of wood and driven by men? It was a viking ship, and it's not the first time one has been hailed on the Breidifjord. It's only in the fog they dare come and you'd know it if you had been born and bred here."

"D—n them and their ship. Who cares?" said Ericsson.

"You will," retorted Magnuss; "and maybe the luck will fall on us too." Then he turned glum.

"As for me," said Súrsson, "I don't believe old ships can come back—no, I do not believe it. Men, yes; but ships, no. It is not sense that wood and iron can have spirits. I am a spiritualist,[3] and I have seen what I have seen, but that was in the case of men; but to say that ships and oars can return, well—I do not believe it."

"I don't believe anything of all that, either men or ships," said Ericsson. "My father was a spiritualist—but for myself I have no understanding at all in the matter."

Súrsson, hauling up his line and unhooking an inconspicuous codling, re-baited, and flung his line over again.

Then he broke out:

“There is no doubt men come back, and not only when called as spirits. Men are born many, many times. It has all been revealed to me, and the purpose. Men are born and born again, so that through sorrow they may become better. It is all very simple so that even a poor man may see it.

“I speak of myself, and you know I was born at Thorshofen on the east coast, away up there so high to the north that the winter is all night. At Reykjavik or even Skarsstöd you will get some daylight in the winter, but at Thorshofen it is all darkness. The whalers and sealers put in along that coast, and when I was very small, so small that I had scarcely learned to speak, I remembered dreams of killing seals on floe ice and drinking brandy and beating folk, men and women, with my fists; perhaps they were dreams of what I heard men telling one another, but I think not. I think they were dreams of what I did before I was born, in those times when I was some one else.

“Anyway, I grew up a right bad man, ay, though I say it myself, I was right bad, wrong to the heart and a drunkard, and would have gone heels up to hell but for the woman, my wife, who married me. She was the daughter of Olafur Jónsson who kept the store at Thorshofen, a little quiet woman, as you know her, with eyes like a seal; and when I was drinking sometimes I would see the picture of her watching me with her seal eyes, and she married me against the wish and will of her people, and, though I loved her, yet the drink still had hold of me.

“Now, by the God that made me, I swear that for two years after I married her I drank and suffered, and she, who knew that the devils of sin had hold of me, never complained and never left me.

“And then there came a time when the shame of her patience and my own wickedness broke me down and I cast the devils from me, and I learned that men are born again and again through women, not only in flesh, but in spirit. There is but one thing can save a man’s soul alive and that thing is a woman.

“But I do not believe that a ship can live after it is dead or come back again in the fashion of a man.”

Magnuss made no reply, nor did Ericsson. The fishing continued in silence, half an hour passed, and then to windward the water began to clear so that they could see several cable lengths from the boat, and away beyond the clear water appeared a veil of blue gauze which lifted and broke, showing Breidavik Point away across the clear water of the fjord.

Then rapidly, and as if swept by invisible brooms, the fog cleared away to the south. Tags and banners of mist still clinging to Flatey and the Burgomaster and the lesser islands fumed for a moment before vanishing in the diamond-clear air, and the Breidifjord from its northern horn to cloud-piled Snaefel lay sparkling in the light of the sun.

“Now, where is your French fishing-boat?” asked Magnuss grimly and triumphantly.

Súrsson and Ericsson swept the fjord with their eyes. There was nothing to be seen of boat or ship, though a boat might have sheltered itself, perhaps, behind Flatey or one of the hundred islands and rocks.

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[3] Spiritualism is rampant in Iceland.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REFUSAL

When Schwalla had met Ericsson and her cousin that morning, she had greeted them as briefly as possible, and had passed on as quickly as she could.

Ericsson fancied that she had changed completely towards him, and she had. She was ashamed to look him fully in the face, afraid of his very presence. She, who had never known shame or fear, knew them now.

Like two absurd ghosts, taking advantage of her innocence, shame and fear pursued her, making her blush and pale in turn.

She was engaged to Gudmundsson; all her notions heretofore of love and marriage were cut and dried, and taken from the words of her father and the conversation of her friends—dried as those flowers, once fresh and coloured, which we find between the leaves of some stupid book. And now, as though Gudmundsson had never been, she was dreaming of a man.

She could no more help turning to Ericsson than the flower can help turning to the sun, but this fact was beyond her knowledge. She only knew that, in thinking of this new man, she was wronging Gudmundsson.

The idea of breaking her tie with Gudmundsson never occurred to her. She had promised to marry him, and the thing was done; her promise was a sacred thing, and Gudmundsson had become in her mind almost a sacred thing, just as the frightful idol, on whose altar some heathen virgin is to be sacrificed, becomes for the virgin not only sacred, but the symbol of her right and proper ending.

She must drive this new vision from her mind, it had no place there; and she drove it out, and, lo and behold! in its place up sprang the vision of Gudmundsson.

But it was no longer the vision of the man she had promised to marry; the sacred idol had lost, in some miraculous way, its sanctity—more than that, it had become suddenly and dimly hateful to her; she could never have dreamed of such an antagonism towards another human being, as this which had suddenly sprung up in her mind. Up to this, she had been the friend of all the world; dislike and loathing had been impossible to her nature, yet here they were, promising to flourish finely in the new soil that had been provided for them by sex.

Her love for Ericsson had been born in a night, but her loathing for Gudmundsson had been born a million years ago, and had lain, unknown to her, a sealed packet in her mind, till now. It was the loathing of the fit for the unfit, and of youth for age in the field of love.

That day she went about her business at home as usual, and her father, with his mind still filled by the salmon-trap worry, did not notice any alteration in her; but when Gudmundsson called that evening, she had a headache and did not come down.

Now Gudmundsson took a month or six weeks' holiday every summer, going to Copenhagen, and sometimes as far as England, and as he was off on the morrow for the annual trip, he was rather put out at not seeing his *fiancée* before starting.

Next morning, however, as he was making for the landing-stage, bag in hand, he had his reward, for Schwalla, ready dressed, was standing at the gate waiting to accompany him to the boat and see him off.

They walked down the street together. The *Ceres*, with steam up, was lying out in the fjord where she had anchored the night before, and the last shore boats were putting off to her.

Schwalla, who had been talking of indifferent matters all the way to the beach, had talked, scarcely knowing what she said; one idea alone had full possession of her mind—

"Will he want to kiss me?"

She knew quite well he would; besides, it was the right and proper thing for him to do, yet it seemed impossible.

To put the last moment off as long as she could, she accompanied him on board.

There, in the confusion amidst egg-baskets and clucking hen-crates, fish-baskets and bales of sheep-skin, Skarsstöders bound for Reykjavik and North Fjord, people hailing friends from Skarsstöd, the psychological moment came.

Gudmundsson, with heavy lips pursed for the act, bent to kiss her, and kissed the air.

"I cannot," gasped Schwalla, drawing back and keeping him at arms' length. "I meant to tell you—I must tell you—I cannot marry you—I am wicked, but I cannot help it—I will write."

Never, for one moment, had she the idea of saying all this, nor up to the last moment had she the idea of breaking her engagement. It all came as if spoken by another person, gabbled deliriously, half-unconsciously. Then, with the anchor-chain coming in, and Olsen the boatman yelling for her, she was bundled down the side, and, as they pushed off, she had the vision of Gudmundsson's face staring over the rail at her. The ship, the huge red funnel, the boats at the davits, all were dwarfed to nothing by that great face, the face of Blunderbore, half stunned, yet hideously angry, and robbed of his prey.

And though she had escaped from worse than death, she felt no relief, for she did not know fully what she had escaped from. She only knew that she had broken her engagement, broken her word, turned everything upside down, and brought sorrow to her father.

Olsen, labouring at the sculls, noticed nothing. He put her flushed cheeks, and the trembling of her hands, down to the flurry of the ship's departure. Landed on the quay, she thanked Olsen and went home, running.

It was one of her gifts that she could run as easily and as naturally as a child, without effort or loss of breath.

Gunarsson was out, and she ran up to her room and sat at the open window, waiting and watching for his return, her hand sometimes on her heart, half dazed, and trying to recognise fully what she had done. Ericsson, who had brought this dramatic change about, was, for the moment, far from her thoughts. Gudmundsson's great face and its expression cut off everything else from her view.

Then she saw her father coming along down the valley. He paused to speak to some men, and on the breeze that entered the room, stirring the curtains, she could hear their voices and their conversation, punctuated by the "yow-yow" of the Icelandic "yes." Then she saw the party break up, and her father coming towards the house. He saw her at the window and waved his hand; then he entered the house and she came down.

It was an hour before dinner-time, and the table was not yet laid; Gunarsson had flung his hat on it, and was turning to the bureau for his pipe and tobacco-jar, when Schwalla entered.

"Well," said he, referring to Gudmundsson, "you saw him off as I told you? I would have been down at the landing-stage myself to wish him good-bye, but I was kept. He'll have a fine day for his journey." He had taken up the long-stemmed pipe, and was charging it with tobacco. He never smoked in the house till evening, and he was going out now to sit on the little seat by the front door.

"Father," said Schwalla, "I want to tell you something. I saw him off. I went on board the *Ceres*, and I told him——"

"Yes?" said Gunarsson, looking up. "Why, what is the matter with you, Schwalla?"

"I cannot marry him."

She was standing by the table, with her head drooped; she glanced up as she said the words, and then looked down again. Gunarsson, who had finished filling his pipe, stood with it in his hand, staring at her.

"You can't marry who?"

"Olafur Gudmundsson."

"Why, God bless me," cried the other, "have you gone mad? and what has Olafur Gudmundsson done that you cannot marry him?"

"He has done nothing, but I cannot marry him."

Gunarsson had all sorts of queer notions about women. His mind, as far as women were concerned, held a queer mixture of reverence and contempt. He was quite sure that women are immeasurably above men in spirituality and good, and in this he was entirely right, but he was also sure that women are immeasurably below men in everything else. He was possessed of the belief that a woman is always liable to act in a contrary manner, moved, not by common sense, but by some mysterious and contrary instinct peculiar to womanhood.

Here was an instance:

"He has done nothing, but you can't marry him. Now, where is the reason in that? God in heaven! where is the sense in that? Have you no sense in your head that you should say such a thing to me! Here is the best man in Skarsstöd, ay, or in Reykjavik either, and you have promised to marry him, and now you say, 'I cannot marry him,' just as though I were to say to Parson Olsen, 'I will give you five kronur a load for your hay,' and then next day turn on him and say, 'No, I will not take your hay at any price.' Would that be just or fair? Even if the hay had been damaged by God's visitation, it would not be fair to deny the bargain once it was struck. And what has happened to Olafur Gudmundsson? Nothing. He is just as he was when you made your bargain."

"But I did not make a bargain with him," said Schwalla. "It was not that way at all. I did not know myself when I promised him, and my heart has turned against him, and I can never, never marry him."

Her breath caught back in a sob, which Gunarsson did not notice in the least.

"Your heart has turned against him, and, in the name of Heaven, why?"

"I do not know."

Gunarsson laughed in a cheerless fashion, and turned to put the lid on the tobacco-jar.

All through the conversation his mind had held the fact that the tobacco-jar was without its lid. Then he turned again, having taken up the match-box that was lying by the jar.

"You do not know your own heart, and that is the fact—you refuse this good man and break your word and mine, too, for I gave him my word that he should have you—and all you have to say is that your heart has turned against him. That is a woman's answer, and I will not take it. You must reason with your heart."

"Never, never!" Schwalla suddenly broke out, flushing all over her face and neck. "I will not! I will never marry him; I will never speak of him again."

She turned and ran from the room.

Gunarsson struck the table with the bowl of the pipe in his hand. Then he left the room also, and came out to the seat by the front door.

He lit his pipe and sat down, biting on the pipe-stem till he nearly bit it through.

Gunarsson was a bad man to thwart; he could not take any view on any subject except the view that came to him between his blinkers, and he was armed with a persistency sufficient to break down the endurance of the hills.

His determination that Schwalla should marry Gudmundsson was not in the least shaken by what she had said. As he sat smoking and turning the matter over in his mind, an unfortunate idea occurred to him. Was Schwalla in love with any one? had some other man crossed Gudmundsson's path?

There was no one in Skarsstöd he could think of as likely to be the trespasser. Then he remembered Ericsson, and the fact that Ericsson had taken her out the day before yesterday to see the berg. Then he remembered

Magnuss's words about Ericsson on that first evening when Magnuss came to supper—how he had said that Ericsson was a great man for running after girls.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, he rose, placed his pipe on the ledge by the seat, came into the house, and, going to the foot of the stairs, he called to the girl. She came down, and he beckoned her into the living-room, where the little maid-servant was now laying the cloth for dinner. He sent the maid out, closed the door, and turned to Schwalla.

"I have been thinking over this, and I can see nothing in it, unless you have given your heart to some one else. Is that so?"

Schwalla made no reply.

"Ah, then I was right. Well, you have no mother who can talk to you on a matter like this, and give you advice so that you may beware of loving an unworthy man. But I am your father, and it falls to me to protect you from yourself. Is it this new man, Erikr Ericsson, that you care for?"

The question was like a blow in the face to the unfortunate girl. She had not asked it yet fully of herself.

Ericsson had never given the least indication that he cared for her other than as a companion, and it was this fact which made the sudden question put to her by the stupid man before her horrible to her sensitive mind.

It filled her with flaming anger. It was as though some blunderer had suddenly surprised her bathing and, instead of withdrawing, had stared at her.

She grew white as death, stood rigid as a statue, and said nothing.

Gunarsson struck the palms of his hands together sharply, as though he were trying to kill a fly imprisoned between them.

"It is so then? Well, I forbid it. I forbid you to speak to that man again. I will not have it." He was making towards the door, pulling at his beard exactly as a person works at a cow's udder when milking. Then, at the door, he wheeled round.

"I forbid it—and there's an end of it."

Off he went. She had never seen him angry with her before, and she had never been angry with him before. Never had she felt anger like this, anger that, like a great white sheet of flame, enveloped everything and everybody.

It was as if the coming of love had remade her mind, making it capable of passions and resentments impossible in her undeveloped state.

This outrage committed on her by the blundering man who had just left the room seemed to come less from him than from the whole world.

It was as if her soul, stepping timidly into the world to find love, had received a blow.

CHAPTER XV

THE BUNCH OF POPPIES

Next morning, meeting Ericsson in the street, she passed him by without looking at him. Ericsson, ever since her cold reception of him on the day before yesterday, had been dull and irritable, and the pretty picture that Schwalla made as she came along down the street towards him, with her skirts blowing in the wind, did not improve his temper.

“Now,” he said to himself, “if she’s the same as before, I’ll just let her see I don’t care a bit.”

On she came, with Helgi, tail down, trotting behind her. He fixed her with his eyes, determined to lower them not a hairbreadth, and to freeze her with the absolute indifference of his gaze. She passed him without a glance. He turned and looked after her. The fox had cut him, too—never turned an eye towards him.

He watched them for half a minute, and then, turning, went on towards the beach.

All his bad humour had vanished, and his heart, that had lain flaccid for the last forty-eight hours, bounded in him.

She was angry, that was the reason of her seeming coldness the other day. She was not indifferent to him. She was in a temper with him because of some trifle, he could not tell what. Had Magnuss been in his position, this cut direct would have driven Magnuss to gin and despair. Not so Ericsson. He knew women too well.

The flush on the girl’s cheek as she passed him said, as plainly as though it had spoken the words, “This is a quarrel.” Well, so be it; a quarrel was a very good thing, and a quarrel over nothing, like this, a better. Only depths are stirred to big waves, and when they are stirred for no apparent cause, there is sure to be some commotion in the infinite sea beyond.

On the boat-slip, Magnuss and Súrsson were preparing to start for the day’s fishing; Súrsson’s son was going with them.

“You aren’t coming?” said Magnuss.

“No,” replied Ericsson. “I’m going birds-nesting.”

Magnuss said nothing. Ericsson, whilst doing his share of the work and treating his companions as equals in most respects, never for a moment withdrew from his position as capitalist and chief. It was an understood thing that he should go to the fishing when he chose, and remain behind when he chose, and he never touched the fish-curing. Súrsson and his son did all that, assisted by Súrsson's wife and other members of the family. There was now about twenty pounds' worth of split codfish drying on the blocks, and almost ready to be packed in bales for shipment to Reykjavik. The fresh fish, halibut and so on, already sent by steamer to Reykjavik, had brought in a good amount of money, the enterprise promised well, and Magnuss and the others recognised clearly that any success coming to them was due, not only to Ericsson's money, but to his brains.

In this little, tiny industry you might have observed the fact, ignored by trade unions and labour leaders the world over, that success in business is not born of men, but of a man, that the outcome of the fight between business and business, like the fight between battleship and battleship, rests on the tactics developed by a single mind.

Súrsson could have carried on a successful fishing industry, so could Magnuss, but they could not have developed it against opposition, nor could they have broken down the opposition of Gudmundsson. They had not the astuteness and daring of Ericsson, and they recognised the fact without grumbling.

He watched them as they boarded the *Helga* and put off; a strong breeze was blowing, ruffling up the waters of the fjord, and filling the air with the spirit of spring. It was late June, yet the world had the feeling of April. Only up here, in the far north, do you get these touches of early spring in summer, these April days dropped and left behind in the Arctic that come floating down on the polar current, spreading ice-blue tints through the waters of the fjords.

Then he turned away, and came along the beach towards the harbour.

He was not going in search of sea-gulls' eggs, but poppies.

Away up in a coign of the cliffs, above the harbour, grew Iceland poppies, of a sort to be found nowhere else.

Schwalla had pointed out the flush of colour which showed where they grew, and had told him of them that day they visited the harbour together. To get at them, one would have to climb right from the landing-ledge along the rock face, and upwards in a diagonal line to the broad ledge where they grew.

This he did, risking his life half a dozen times in the business, and returning with a huge bunch of the flowers, stalk downward, in the side pocket of his coat.

He took them home, and filling a bowl with water, placed the flowers in it, then he placed the bowl on a shelf.

He would go to-night and leave them in at Schwalla's window. He knew the window of her room, for she had pointed it out to him one day. It was only six feet or so from the ground, and if it was not open, or if he could not open it, he would leave the flowers on the sill.

Having placed the bowl on the shelf, he turned to some garden work.

Then, after a while, he stopped working, and, folding his arms, seemed engaged in contemplating what he had done.

He was not looking at it in the least. His thoughts were thousands of miles away, where the sun was shining on the sand dunes of the coast of Japan. He saw himself picking the white flowers in the street of the Japanese village, and leaving them by the hibachi of the Japanese girl's house; and then from Japan his mind wandered, with one sweep of memory's wing, over all his past life, over the girls he had fooled and followed, and the girls who had followed and fooled him, lights of love and honest girls.

He had given them presents, cheap presents, but the best within his means, and he had given many of them flowers. Was Schwalla, then, the same as these, and was this a return to the old business?

He stood for a moment with his arms folded, and then turned to the house. He went in, and took the bowl from the shelf and the flowers from the bowl, and cast them on the midden heap.

CHAPTER XVI

FATE

Gudmundsson was so astonished by Schwalla's words that he did not even put out his hand to detain her. He saw her disappearing over the side, and then, leaning over the bulwarks, he saw her in Olsen's boat.

It was impossible for him to call out or make a fuss, equally impossible to reach her, for the anchor was now at the bows, and the *Ceres* under way was turning her head southward towards Stykkisholmur.

The revolt of a sheep is nothing to the revolt of a lamb.

Schwalla all innocence, Schwalla unto whom his least wish was law, Schwalla whom he reckoned as one of his most valuable possessions had said to him those words, had discovered a mind of her own and that mind in opposition to his—impossible!

Yet it was a fact.

Had she gone mad, then? No, she was sane enough, she had been playing with him all the time—with him, Gudmundsson.

He was a man difficult to move to anger; as a rule he never lost his temper, and this gift had played a considerable part in his success in life. Súrsson, once, in his unregenerate days, flown with drink and smarting under injustice, had struck him with his fist, and Gudmundsson, though he was twice as strong as Súrsson, had not returned the blow. This, considering the fact that Gudmundsson was no coward, was a fine act, or, rather, a fine piece of inaction.

Men had tried to stir his wrath in business, and they might just as well have tried to stir the wrath of the Lang Jokull.

But he was angry now; all that was hard and brutal in his nature rose up against the girl who had flouted him.

He managed to swallow his wrath, however, and put on a cheerful countenance before his fellow passengers, most of whom were known to him.

He did not land when they reached Stykkisholmur, but remained on board drinking beer in the saloon with some fellow traders who were coming down from the northern fjords to do business in Reykjavik.

When they reached Reykjavik next morning he went straight to Stefansson's office.

Stefansson was not his business man, but he was an old friend and he knew all about the engagement to Schwalla; he was a man to be trusted, and he was a man for whose general worldly wisdom Gudmundsson had a great respect.

"Well," said Stefansson when they had shaken hands, "and how are things with you on the Breidifjord?" The question touched Gudmundsson off. He began the tale of his woes.

"Not a word did she say till we were on the *Ceres* and the anchor coming up, and then she spoke like that, waited till she'd got me in a trap like a salmon, so to say—yes, it is just as I am telling you."

"Ah," said Stefansson, "there is no accounting for women and what they will do; all the same it is strange—you did not have any quarrel with her?"

"Quarrel with her—no; what would we quarrel about?"

"Well, then," said Stefansson, "if you did not quarrel with her, and if she suddenly went on like that, you may depend there is some one else."

"Some one else?"

"Yes, some one else after her. Now I will tell you something as a friend. Jonass Magnuss, when he called here on his return and when I told him of Schwalla's engagement, took the news badly—it hit him hard; I could see that, for it seems he had some idea of her for himself."

"That fisherman!"

"Ay, but you see he's her cousin."

"He's had no hand in it," said Gudmundsson, in whose mind a new idea was beginning to dawn.

"Maybe—or maybe not," replied Stefansson. "If not him, who else?"

Gudmundsson, who had been so filled with anger at Schwalla's perversity up to this, that thoughts of rivals had never occurred to him, suddenly and instinctively began to perceive the truth.

Ericsson—the man who had thwarted him, the man who had got the lease by a trick, got Súrsson's boat and Súrsson's services, who had foiled him in his attempt to corner the petrol, who had up to this had such amazing luck with the fishing—Ericsson had captured Schwalla. He knew of the fact that they had been out together to see the berg, he knew that they were on friendly terms, and for the first time he recognised that Ericsson, as a man, had, from his physical attributes, a commanding position as regards women.

A man less sure of himself than Gudmundsson would have taken fright before this. Up to this, however, he had regarded Ericsson simply as a fisherman, a man who worked with his hands. The idea of Schwalla casting her eyes on a fisherman had never dawned on him. But now, shaken in his pride by her rejection, he began to see as in a glass darkly the form of the man whom Fate had put in opposition to him.

The more he thought of the matter the more fully convinced did he become of the truth of Stefansson's suggestion that there was some one else; and the more fully convinced was he that this some one was Ericsson.

He left Stefansson's office and walked down the street towards Zoega's Hotel.

Gudmundsson was an Icelander, that is to say a man in whom superstition, the belief in the evil eye, Fate, and the power of spirits was ingrained. His surface was entirely modern, he read the papers, took an interest in European politics, had visited London, and Copenhagen, and Paris—yet at heart he was far removed from the present day. He believed in the nix of the Flóka just as Schwalla believed in it, yet had you spoken to him of it he would—unlike Schwalla—have ridiculed the idea. He believed in second sight and witches; and he secretly attended meetings of spiritualists.

Now, as he walked down the street, he was less engaged in thinking of Schwalla than Ericsson.

Ericsson had suddenly loomed up in his mind as an opposing force and therefore evil to him. It was not natural that a stranger should come to Skarsstöd and sweep all before him like that.

He went into the bar of Zoega's Hotel and had a drink, drinking seated at a table by himself and turning the matter over in his mind as he sipped his liquor.

He felt that he must get even with Ericsson if the fight between them was not to be all one-sided. If Ericsson were backed by powers of darkness, he, Gudmundsson, would have to apply for assistance to those who were best able to help him in this matter.

He knew, in Reykjavik itself, several people who could supply him with charms against the evil eye, but he wished for more powerful aid than these could give him, and he knew where to find it, though the finding of it would cost him a journey of a couple of days. He had left his luggage at the Reykjavik hotel, and, having finished his drink, he returned there and ordered a pony to be got in readiness for him.

The *Stirling*, on which he had booked his passage to Copenhagen, would not start till the following Saturday at noon, and as this was Wednesday, he had three clear days before him, more than enough for his purpose.

It was half-past twelve when he started, taking the road that leads by the boiling springs to Thingveller.

He crossed the bridge leading over the Ellithaar, which was in flood, and followed the road till he reached the last farmhouse in the Reykjavik district. Here he stopped to rest the pony and have coffee and a chat with the farm people on the hay harvest prospect and the tourist traffic. It was indicative of the man that, bothered as he was about the recent upset of his affairs, he found time and interest enough to collect information on these questions.

Having mounted his pony again he rode off, heading for Thingveller.

The road had been steadily rising ever since leaving the Ellithaar, and it now struck across an immense plateau, boulder and moss-strewn, where nothing was to be seen at all in the way of life with the exception of an occasional raven. Cairns, set up to mark the way in the snows of winter, occurred at intervals of less than quarter of a mile, and the long procession of these cairns, each with an out-jutting stone, looked not unlike a line of sinister mendicants mute and motionless and stretching as far as the eye could see.

The road from Reykjavik to Thingveller is the most desolate road in the world for a traveller who is travelling alone, and the companionship of these vague figures of stone does not rob it of any of its desolation. The wind blowing over the plateau brought every now and then the crying of a whimbrel, a sound full of melancholy and fate; but Gudmundsson, as he rode, paid little heed to the whimbrels, or the ravens, or the desolation around him; though filled with superstitious and dark beliefs his mind was unimpressionable to weather or scenery and all their subtleties and suggestions.

He stopped for half an hour at the rest-house, a barn of a place on the left-hand side of the road, where travellers are glad enough to take shelter in the snowstorms of winter. Then he pushed on and, drawing towards seven o’clock, reached the plateau edge, from which the plain of Thingveller can be seen.

Gush more abundant than the waters of Gallfoss has been spouted by travellers over this grim place, whose surrounding hills have been likened to surpliced angels.

In the days of fire and desolation, when all this land was boiling and bubbling, when the sulphur clouds cast black night on a world whose hills were made of ashes and whose rivers were fluid rock, a vast bubble in the lava heaved itself skyward and then sank without bursting to form the plain of Thingveller—a plain three miles broad, whose south-western border forms the shore of a great lake.

Lake and plain lie there now circled by the volcanic hills, just as they lay when the boiling, and the groaning, and the fuming of Creation died away, and the sun, bursting through the sulphur clouds, found a lake and plain.

The hills are coloured now with the emerald grass and the wild flowers that grow in the most unexpected and desolate places, yet the gloom of the early days of the world still hangs upon the gigantic amphitheatre whose floor is the plain of Thingveller. It is this gloom, hanging like the mist from a long-past conflagration, that gives the place its individuality.

Gudmundsson reined in for a moment's rest and cast his eye over the vast prospect before him. He was well acquainted with the place and had often taken char from the lake and trout from the river Sögg that drains it.

Then he turned his pony's head and came downhill through the great chasm in the basalt that leads to the plain.

He passed over the bridge that spans the river Oxara. The old stone bridge, in whose balustrade was incorporated the blood-stone on which criminals' backs were broken in the old days, has vanished, giving place to a wooden structure; but the drowning pool where unfortunate women were cast remains, deep, and sinister, and dark.

He cast his eyes over it as he rode on, passing the farmhouse on the left of the road and making for the little inn that lies towards the centre of the plain. Here he put up for three hours, rested, had some food, and, borrowing a fresh pony, started again.

Gudmundsson had no special need for sleep when he had business on hand, and though it was now past midnight it was almost as bright as it would be in Skarsstöd, though Skarsstöd lies much farther to the north. He pursued his way for half an hour or so, and then where a little river crossed the track he turned from the path and followed the river-bed.

He was ascending against the stream, and the little river as it passed him sang and bubbled and leaped on its way, and the tract of country upon which Gudmundsson now entered, though strewn with boulders here and there, was green and smiling with vivid emerald grass and moss and curious plants that thrive only where water is abundant. But the innocence of the river was the specious innocence of an evil child, and the smile of the valley concealed death, for here were tracks of quick mud and horrible bog-pits that will swallow a man at a gulp.

The pony scented danger and walked carefully, spreading its nostrils and stretching its neck; but Gudmundsson had no fear—it was not the first time he had been in this place, and he knew the safe path by experience.

He kept by the side of the little river which grew smaller and smaller till it vanished as though swallowed up in the morass, and then he kept in a path marked out by a line of guiding stones till he sighted a hut like a great brown molehill to which the line of guiding stones led straight as a pointing finger.

As he drew near the hut he heard a sound. It was the sound of a spinning-wheel accompanied by a woman's voice. The voice of the wheel and the voice of the woman answered one another with a monotonous and desolating effect, and now, as Gudmundsson drew nearer, he could see a spark of light struggling at the hut door with the broad light of the valley. A few yards off he dismounted, and leaving the pony to crop at the grass and weeds came towards the hut on foot. The spinning-woman ceased her work when she saw the man at the door.

She was a large stout woman with a placid and smiling face. After the first glance the mind revolted at her. One might have fancied her to have grown fat on desolation, and her placidity and content seemed remote from human sources.

The hut was poorly furnished but clean, and here and there on the wall bunches of plants were hung to dry. The woman was dressed in the Icelandic national dress, and as she turned, the silver tags hanging from the cap shone in the light of the whale oil lamp that burned on a bench near by the wheel.

"Why, it is Olafur Gudmundsson!" said she as the lamplight showed her the face of the newcomer.

"Yes," said Gudmundsson, "it is I myself, come to see you; but you are late at your work."

The woman laughed as she put her work by.

"And you are late in your visit. Well, what can I do for you?"

Gudmundsson, refusing to take a seat, started at once on the business in hand.

This was the third time that he had come here seeking advice in his affairs and a forecast of his future, for this woman had a great reputation as a spiritualist and a seer; she had also a whispered reputation as a witch, that is to say, a person who could interfere actively in human affairs through the agency of the evil one.

This, of course, was nonsense; yet she made a profit out of it by the sale of charms and spells to the more ignorant folk.

Gudmundsson did not believe in the devil nor would he pay a penny for rats' tails warranted to bring a curse on an enemy or toad stones as a guard against the evil eye, but he did believe in the power of second sight and divination supposed to be possessed by this woman and in her shrewd advice.

He told her his story with all the openness of a patient dealing with a physician, suppressing only names, and referring to Ericsson as "that man who has come to bother me at Skarsstöd," and to Schwalla as "the girl I told you of."

She took all this information with the detachment of an accountant taking a statement of accounts, then, holding both his broad hands in hers, she began reading the palms as though they were two books.

For awhile she said nothing. She seemed utterly at fault, or as though she had come across something that she did not care to speak of.

Then all at once she began to speak.

"You have been meeting with success since last you came here, but a man has crossed you."

"That is the man I spoke of," said Gudmundsson.

"Well, you have nothing to fear from that man."

"He will leave Skarsstöd?"

"I do not know that, but he will not cross your path."

"And the girl?"

"You will never marry the girl."

"And the girl—will she marry him?"

"She will marry him, but there will be no child of the marriage."

“The man will not cross my path—perhaps it is I who will drive him from it—can you tell me what to do?”

“You can do nothing. Olafur Gudmundsson, you are going a long journey.”

“Ay, that’s true,” said he. “I am going to Leith.”

“Farther than that.”

“That’s true, for when I have finished my business in Leith I go to Copenhagen.”

“You will travel farther than Copenhagen.”

“Who knows?” said Gudmundsson. “I may go on to England or France. And can you tell me what to avoid on my journey?”

“No man can avoid danger.”

“Do you see danger on my path?”

“Great danger.”

“From what?”

“Water.”

“I shall be shipwrecked?”

“No, you will die far from the sea.”

“Die!” cried Gudmundsson aghast. “Do you see my death!”

The woman dropped his hands.

“I see nothing more—death is given to none to see. But the waves will not take you, nor salt water.”

“Then,” said Gudmundsson, “unless I choose to go on Thingvellavaten or cross some river in flood, where is the danger of water?”

“I know nothing more,” said the woman, “than what I have told you.”

She turned to her spinning again, and Gudmundsson took a bundle of kronur notes from his pocket. He laid twenty kronur on the board by the lamp and turned to the door.

“Well, good-bye to you!” said he. “I’ll look out for the water, but little I care for it as long as that man goes from my path.”

“Good-bye to you!” said the woman.

The pony was cropping the scant grass close to the door. He mounted and rode away.

For all his brave words he was disturbed in his mind and irritated; he had taken a long journey and paid twenty kronur for little enough. It was some satisfaction to believe that Ericsson would be removed from his path, but there was little satisfaction in the idea that he was to marry Schwalla, even with the mysterious statement that the marriage would be fruitless borne in mind. So immersed was he in his thoughts he did not notice that the air of the valley was now dim with mist and he had not gone more than a couple of hundred yards on his way when, looking up from the track marked by the stones, he saw before him a dense white wall of smoke fantastic and fuming upwards like the smoke of a conflagration. It was a fogbank travelling up the valley swift as the tide up the Bay of Fundy. Banners and streamers of fog blew past him, yet he pressed on, not choosing to return to the hut and sure in his mind that he could see the guiding stones, however thick the fog might be.

Then, all of a sudden, he was surrounded, ground and guiding stones which were of a like colour were rendered indistinguishable one from the other, and the pony half turned, snorted, and then stood still.

Gudmundsson dismounted and, leading the pony by the bridle, began to advance, feeling the ground carefully foot by foot. He had not gone ten yards when his foot sank; it was as though a toothless mouth had tried to suck it down.

Then he knew that he was off the track, with quagmires and death on every side of him, and the freezing fog chilling him to the bone.

He shouted and hallooed for help, well knowing that the hut must be within reach of his voice, but no answer came.

He knew that the woman had a lantern, as well as the lamp which had been burning, for he had seen it hanging from a hook on the wall. With the help of a lantern and with her knowledge of the place she might have reached him and guided him back to the hut.

He called again, but no reply came. He had not noticed it before, but now, as he strained his ears to listen, faint and far away, came the sound of the spinning-wheel and the monotonous song.

The sound made his scalp tingle and the sweat to start on the palms of his hands. He knew that his voice must have reached her. He called again and again, pausing each time to listen, but the busy tune of the wheel never ceased.

Suddenly the pony behind him began to plunge. It had shifted its position a bit and, doing so, one of its hind hoofs had became bogged; extricating it, another hoof had got sucked in, and in trying to free the pony, Gudmundsson found that the seemingly solid ground beneath his feet was bending and breaking like piecrust. In that moment he lost all self-possession and reason and became possessed of one fatal passion—to get away from the place where he was, to safety.

BOOK III

THE FULMAR

CHAPTER I

THE HAUNT OF THE NIX

For three days Ericsson saw nothing of Schwalla; he went out with the boat, returning only late at night.

On the fourth day he caught a glimpse of her coming down the street towards him. He was passing the parsonage, and he turned in at the gate as if to avoid her. Parson Olsen was at the back of the house, breaking up some old fish-boxes to make a rabbit-hutch; and Ericsson, as he watched him and talked to him, could hear Schwalla's voice calling to Helgi, who had stopped to sniff at the parsonage gate.

"Ah, there is Schwalla Gunarsson," said the parson, pausing in his hammering to listen. "She is calling to her fox."

He went on with his work, stopping every now and then, as if he hoped to catch the voice again, and then, stirred by the recollection of it, he began to speak of the girl, punctuating his sentences with blows of the hammer, and pausing every now and then, with head on one side, to contemplate his work.

Olsen was over sixty; he had lived at Skarsstöd all his life, and had baptized most of the inhabitants. When he began to speak of any one, he began at the beginning and went on to the end, that is to say, he told all about them. He knew every one in Skarsstöd, except Schwalla and Ericsson, from the inside, the good and the bad of them, and he was the only person in Skarsstöd beside Madame Sturlusson, who resented the engagement of Schwalla to Gudmundsson, though he never said a word on the matter to any one.

The thing that had always filled him with wonder and surprise was Schwalla's acceptance of Gudmundsson; for he fancied that he knew them both, whereas, in reality, he only knew Gudmundsson.

Ericsson listened to him as he talked, and then went off on the business he had been about when the sight of the girl drove him into the parsonage yard.

His avoidance of her during the last few days had brought matters to a head with him. Love, with whom he had trifled all his life, had suddenly taken revenge. This was no casual passion to be worn out and dropped—his soul and spirit were in the trap.

That night he scarcely slept, and when he did sleep, his dreams were terrific; mountains, lava domes, and ice Jokulls lay before him, all to be surmounted before he could reach Schwalla.

He sent Magnuss and Súrsson off to the fishing next morning, and remained at home mending lines and sharpening hooks.

The weather was gloriously bright, and, as he sat at work he could hear through the half-open door the voice of the river and the sounds of Skarsstöd; the whole world, wound up and set going by day, was playing its tune, absolutely indifferent to him and his existence.

Suddenly, as if arriving at last at some decision that had been slowly forming in his mind, he placed his work down, rose up, took his hat, and left the house.

He was going to end the business, going to find Schwalla, going to tell her straight out what was in his heart.

She might fling him off—perhaps—but he did not think of that. It was the case of the derelict buoy over again. The buoy tried to fling him off, tried to drown him, yet he captured it mainly by shutting his eyes to consequences and not thinking.

The essence of daring is blindness to what may happen, and were the bravest man in the world to choose a crest, he could find none more appropriate than a pair of blinkers.

Ericsson came up the street, passed the parsonage, reached Gunarsson's house, and lifted the latch of the little gate.

His heart heaved in him as the gate opened, then it grew still. The worst seemed over. He was on the premises now, and there was no drawing back. He knocked at the front door, which was opened to him almost immediately by the little servant.

Schwalla was out.

Gunarsson was also out, but he did not ask for Gunarsson. He turned and left the place and walked up the valley, baulked and scarcely knowing where his steps were carrying him.

He should have waited and made sure that she was at home. Now the servant would tell her that he had called, and she would have time to think, and she would know very well why he had called. She would think it an impertinence. Had he only met her, the fire in him would have brought the thing to a hot conclusion. Now he would have to call again, with everything grown cold, and she prepared, and her father, perhaps, present.

No, he would not call again. He took her absence from home almost as a carefully prepared insult; he remembered how she had passed him, and his mind swung round to fretful anger. No, he would not call again, let her wonder as she might. He would leave Skarsstöd, sell the boat, and go back to the cable business.

Turning the angle of the valley, his eye caught sight of Gudmundsson's bungalow.

Actually, for the last few days, he had completely forgotten Gudmundsson's relationship to Schwalla. He had never looked upon it seriously, simply because he knew quite well in his heart that the girl could not possibly care for the fat Gudmundsson as a lover, and he was quite assured of his own power to knock the other out should he choose to exercise it.

But the sight of the bungalow, now, brought before him the fact that he had been calling openly on another man's *fiancée*, whilst the other man was away.

He had forgotten Gudmundsson, and the humour of the thing struck him open-handed, so that he had to laugh. His acidity disappeared, and he forgot his disappointment at finding her from home; the exercise, too, had calmed him down, and, even more than that, the Spirit of the Flóka valley.

This place, like the Breidifjord, has the magical power of absorbing, or perhaps annulling, one's personality, destroying fret and worry, and dwarfing to insignificance the world. Here wakes up the old, old heart of man; the stone man's heart which the modern man carries in his breast, just as he carries the eye of an extinct reptile in the pineal gland of his brain.

Ericsson passed the bungalow and kept on up the valley, till he reached a spot where boulders and rough ground gave place to a great tract of moss.

This moss, which covers the old lava beds of Iceland, is greyish in colour, and thick and springy as a mattress; there are square miles of it in the Flóka valley, and where the river cuts through it, the river always seems to run more silently.

At the border edge of this moss he paused. Away ahead of him, and half-way between the river and the basalt cliff on the right, lay a huge boulder, and close to the boulder a little dark form was gambolling on the moss.

It was Helgi.

He knew that Schwalla could not be far off, but there was no sign of her in all the valley, and he concluded that she must be hidden by the boulder.

He stood for a minute or two watching the fox, till it vanished behind the rock, then he came forward. The soft carpet of the moss took his footsteps without the least sound; he turned the angle of the boulder and there, sure enough, curled up and asleep, with the fox nuzzling up close to her, was Schwalla.

She had taken her hat off, and was lying on her left side with her head resting on her arm, and the fox, curled like a dog against her lap, stirred when it saw the man, raised its head, and showed its teeth.

Almost in the same instant, the girl opened her eyes.

CHAPTER II

THE PROPOSAL

In the break-up of dreamland, banishing all the flying shapes and shadows, she saw the great basalt cliffs, and against them the man.

His form had been haunting her for days, ever since she had passed him without recognising him in the street.

It seemed to her simple mind that, in her anger against the whole world, she had committed an irrevocable act. The instant she had passed him, the pain had begun. Gunarsson had forbidden her to have anything more to do with him, but it was not in obedience to Gunarsson that she had acted. She had visited on Ericsson her anger against Gunarsson and the world in general, and, in one moment, she had done something never to be recalled. So she told herself.

Yet here was Ericsson standing before her as though nothing had happened, and before she had fully raised herself on her arm, Helgi had scampered away, and he was down, sitting beside her on the moss, and her hand was in his, and before she could speak she was in his arms, and he was kissing her mouth, and hair, and eyes—without a word.

And he had started out that morning determined to say to her, "I love you!" as though, on a hot summer's day, a man were to say, "The sun is shining."

They sat with Helgi between them. The fox seemed to recognise that Ericsson was no longer a stranger, and let him stroke and pull its fur without showing a tooth; and they talked like two people who had known each other since birth, but had been separated for years and years.

But that was all over; they belonged to one another, now, for ever and ever.

There was something almost startling in the quiet content of their happiness; after the first few minutes, one might have fancied them companions not lovers, sitting there, with the fox between them, talking, telling each other all manner of things, trifling incidents of the last few days. How she had passed him because—because she could not exactly tell why, and how he had guessed that she was angry without knowing in the least the reason.

She told him about Gudmundsson, the whole thing, quite simply, and then they put Gudmundsson aside for ever, and talked of Skarsstöd and the future.

The whole future belonged to them.

The future is one of the most charming gifts of Love, even if it is the most elusive; they turned it over between them, talked of it, made it almost a real thing.

Then Schwalla remembered her father, and told about him, and of how he would be absolutely sure to oppose them.

“I will see him to-night,” said Ericsson. “I will see him the moment we return; all that is my business, and he will say nothing when he has heard what I have to say to him.”

“Ah,” said Schwalla, with a sigh, “if you only knew him.”

Ericsson laughed.

“I know him quite well. He is a good man, but he is obstinate. That is nothing. He is a straight man, and when he sees I am not a crooked man, he will listen to what I have to say to him.”

Helgi, who had left them, was wandering about in an uneasy manner. It was long past dinner-time, and he was hungry.

Schwalla rose hurriedly, and they returned along the valley, walking side by side and scarcely speaking. When they drew near the house, they stopped.

“If you are going to speak to him now,” said Schwalla, “I will not come in with you—I will go round by the side way and feed Helgi; you can go in at the front door. He is sure to be in.”

Next moment Ericsson found himself ringing at the front door. The little maid-servant opened it. She looked surprised to see Ericsson again, and was just on the point of volunteering the information that Schwalla had not yet returned, when the visitor stopped her by asking for her master.

Yes, he was in; and leading the way to the sitting-room door, she opened it.

Gunarsson had dined alone. He was anxious about Schwalla, as she had not returned to dinner, and he half rose from his arm-chair to greet his visitor, whom he fancied to have come on some business connected with the fishing.

He was not long in being undeceived.

Ericsson, having turned to see that the door was shut, advanced on the enemy boldly, like a breezy and good-humoured highwayman about to demand his purse.

“Stefan Gunarsson,” said Ericsson, “I have come to ask you for the hand of your daughter. She loves me and we are betrothed, but I count nothing settled till I have the consent of her father.”

Gunarsson made as if to rise from his chair, but he controlled himself. Ericsson’s speech had completely put him out of court. If Ericsson had come beating about the bush, Gunarsson would have flown at him like a savage dog, but this brave attack, which was half an act of homage, paralysed his anger. He sat staring at the big man towering above him. He knew nothing against Ericsson; on the contrary, Ericsson had proved himself a man both industrious and resourceful, he had some money to back him, he came of a decent Reykjavik family, and was, as a matter of fact, quite on an equality with Schwalla. The Ericssons were just as good as the Gunarssons, or the Gudmundssons, for the matter of that. Just so. But the affair between Gudmundsson and Schwalla had been of her father’s planting, he had watered it, and blessed it, and nourished it, and he was not going to see his lily torn up by the roots without a struggle.

He pointed to a chair.

“Sit you down,” said Gunarsson. “I’m in no mind to talk of the matter, but seeing it’s come on me so suddenly, talk I must, and I will tell you before I say another word, that my daughter is not her own to give away, nor is she mine to hand you. Why, it is just as you might say I went to your partner Magnuss, and said to him, ‘Give me Erikr Ericsson’s boat.’ What would he say to me? Why, he would say, ‘She is not mine to give away.’ It is just so with Schwalla; she has pledged herself to another man, and she cannot give herself away.”

“Well then, I will tell you this,” said Ericsson. “Pledge or no pledge, she will never marry Gudmundsson. I am talking to you fairly and straightly, as man to man, and I tell you as a truth that I never ran after your daughter to try and get her away from Gudmundsson, nor did she turn her head at me wrongfully. It is just this: we two have come together by nature, nor could we help ourselves, and it is not in man to part us.”

"Then why come and ask my leave?" said Gunarsson.

"Because, without your leave, things would not be shipshape, nor would Schwalla be happy, nor, for the matter of that, would I. You are her protector, and you have brought her up, and to break in between you is not my wish. No, rather than that, I would up anchor and look for new moorings, but if I did that it would be to leave Schwalla, and if I left her"—he broke off, and then went on—"I couldn't leave her. It's outside my will. I might say to my legs, 'Carry me out of Skarsstöd,' but they wouldn't move. It's not that I'm setting up my will against your will. I've no will in the matter but to make Schwalla happy."

Gunarsson fumbled about in his mind for something to say against all this, and the only thing he could find to say was:

"All the same, that does not alter the fact that she has engaged herself to Gudmundsson."

Then Ericsson exploded, not in anger, but in virtuous wrath.

"Gudmundsson! I tell you this, Stefan Gunarsson, I believe you folks in Skarsstöd are all cut out of the same piece of stupidity. You would tie a girl to Gudmundsson, and he an old man and she not twenty. And in another ten years where would Schwalla be, and in another twenty, where would she be? You aren't fit to have charge of a girl, and I tell you that to your face; you can't see farther than the length of your nose; you'd tie your own daughter up to a man who's old enough to be her father, and you grumble and grieve when a man near her own age comes along, a man who loves her, and a man, what's more, who's going to marry her—there, I can't say any more, take what I've said how you will, it's the truth—and what I want to ask you now is, what have you against me?"

Gunarsson had got on his feet, and was walking up and down the room. No man had ever spoken to him before like this. No one—except his wife.

Ericsson's outburst was horribly like some of the outflyings of the late Mrs. Gunarsson, and if she could have got out of the grave, she would, without doubt, have dealt with him in pretty much the same fashion. He was not in the least angry, Ericsson's warmth was too sincere to stir anger, but it had thawed his frozen assurance of himself.

"Whatever I have done has been for the best," said he. "Olafur Gudmundsson is a good man, and a man well-to-do in the world. He is older than she, but where can you find perfection in anything? He is well-to-do."

Then, turning on Ericsson:

"And what can you offer her, that you come and break an engagement that offers her so much? A good house, money, and land."

This was Ericsson's opportunity. Taking the other, so to speak, by the ear, he began to talk of his prospects, of what he had done, and what he proposed to do.

Now, though Ericsson had been but a short time in Skarsstöd, he had ransacked every possibility of the place. Without running Gudmundsson down, he showed quite clearly that, not only was Gudmundsson antiquated in his methods and starving his business by suppression of labour, but that he, Ericsson, had in a few weeks founded, with a few thousand kronur, a business that might yet be big as the fjord itself. There should be a canning industry (an idea Gunarsson had often played with). The fishing business should be properly organised, communication with Reykjavik facilitated, and an agency established in Reykjavik, to supply the steamship companies and to facilitate export to Leith and Copenhagen.

The game was won before he began to talk of his immediate prospects, but if you imagined that Gunarsson, though now virtually consenting in his own mind, gave any clear indication of this change in him, you would be greatly mistaken.

He shuffled and grumbled, and said he would think the whole matter over, and Ericsson left him, light-hearted and assured, and took his way home.

It was nine o'clock in the evening before Magnuss was back.

Ericsson had not gone to supper, and the two men sat down opposite one another, Magnuss's face shining from the wash-tub in the yard.

Magnuss was in a grumbling mood. He often grumbled about his food. Icelandic potatoes are not of much account, and vegetables in general are scarce, the mutton is tough, and the milk comes from sheep not cows, but the excellence of the fish makes up for a great deal, for, in the whole wide world, there are no fish equal to the fish of the Icelandic coast.

Magnuss was in such a perverse mood to-night, that he grumbled even at the cod-steaks, tough and flaky and creamy, steaks from a cod that had been swimming in the Breidifjord only a few hours ago.

As for Ericsson, he scarcely heard the other. He was full of the thought of how Magnuss would take the news he had to tell him, and he determined to tell it at once. He waited till the other had finished eating, and then, rising and lighting his pipe, he cast himself down on the bed by the door.

"Magnuss," said he, "I've been speaking to Schwalla."

Magnuss, still at the table, was finishing the coffee in his cup. He swung round, cup in hand, on the other.

"You've been speaking to Schwalla! What do you mean?"

"I've asked her to marry me."

He expected an outburst, but Magnuss said nothing for a moment. Then he spoke:

"You have asked Schwalla to marry you?"

"Yes, and she has consented."

Again Magnuss was dumb.

Had you said to Magnuss a few hours ago, out in the boat, "What would you do if Ericsson were to marry Schwalla?" he would have replied, "Do? I'd kill him first." Now, here was Ericsson telling him of the fact, yet the news raised no fury in his mind at all. The thing was accomplished, it had now nothing to do with his imagination, it was a fact as solid as the table before him—and, more extraordinary still, it did not seem news.

In a flash of thought he recognised that it had been coming, and not only that—he recognised that it was inevitable. It was inevitable that Schwalla and Ericsson should come together, inevitable as the mating of two swans in a duck-yard.

He rose to his feet and took his cap. Ericsson also rose to his feet.

Magnuss was making for the door, when the other put his hand on his arm.

"Haven't you anything to say to me?" said Ericsson. "It wasn't I that went after her, it just came about—I know you cared for her once; well, I didn't step in your way, I kept off your ground, and then I was hit myself. Don't let this come between us."

"Let me go," said Magnuss. "I want to think about it. It's hit me a hard knock, and I want to get alone."

He went out.

In the street beyond the gate, he paused as if undecided which way to take, then he walked towards the sea.

The unfortunate Magnuss was in the condition of an earwig that has been skilfully cut in two, the fore end vividly alive, yet wondering what on earth has become of its sting. As a matter of fact, he had renounced Schwalla ever since the evening when he had taken supper at Gunarsson's, perhaps ever since the first moment when, on the deck of the *Botnia*, he had discovered that the Schwalla of long ago had turned into a new being. But his imagination had refused the idea of any other man trespassing on these preserves, over which he had now no more right than he had over Gunarsson's piece of the river.

It did not object to Gudmundsson, but it had fought furious battles with phantasmical Ericssons. And, now that the thing was accomplished, his imagination had nothing to say. It could stir him no longer to anger.

We see nations acting in a precisely similar manner—furiously resenting some aggression *in nubibus*, yet folding their hands to the *fait accompli*.

He went and sat on a rock, and looked at the sea. Then he lit his pipe and smoked.

No, he would not give in; he would go away from Skarsstöd; he could not stop Ericsson marrying Schwalla, but he would not be there to see it. He tried to take pleasure in the thought that his leaving the fishing business would injure Ericsson, but the pleasure would not come. He sat for a long time smoking and looking at the sea. Then he began to recognise that there was no anger in his heart, and vaguely, very vaguely, that now Ericsson and Schwalla had come together, he was thinking of them as one—that their personalities were rapidly fusing.

His wonderful imagination was beginning to wake up again. Could it be possible that, after all, it would be the bard of the new household, singing the praises, yet, of the marriage and the children born of the marriage, with frequent breakdowns into prose carpings, and criticisms and other manifestations of jealousy? The poet in him recognised the fitness of the match, and the friend in him joined with the poet, but the fisherman[4] was dumb, and when not dumb, surly and trying to be abusive.

When he returned home, Ericsson was still lying on the bed smoking, but Helga had cleared away the things. Magnuss came in and pretended to be amazingly busy over a sinker, which he had to fix on a hand line for the morrow's work. Without saying a word, he fetched it over into the lamplight, it and the line, and now he was standing to the work, his pipe gripped between his teeth so tight, that the masseter muscles of his jaw on either side showed like bands.

Ericsson watched him for a bit in silence, smiling to himself. He knew that Magnuss had accepted the new situation, else he would not have returned like this, and he lay waiting for him to speak, but Magnuss was dumb.

Then Ericsson broke the ice.

“Had a good day?” he asked.

Magnuss grunted in assent.

“Well,” said Ericsson, speaking in a general manner, and not as though he were addressing Magnuss in particular, “it’s no lie that the Breidifjord is the best fishing-ground hereabouts; the Faxa Fjord isn’t a button on its trousers.”

Magnuss grunted again, but whether in assent or dissent it would be difficult to say.

“Then there’s the river,” said Ericsson. “Between the river and the fjord, Skarsstöd ought to be humming like a turbine with work, and it will, too, before I have done with it. I tell you Iceland wants waking up, here and Reykjavik too. I tell you what you’ll see here in a couple of years: you’ll see a canning business for the salmon; you’ll see the fishing-fleet properly pulled together, and the men not doing farmwork when the cod are running. You’ll see the halibut and fresh fish going to Reykjavik twice a week in a special boat, and you’ll see Gudmundsson our partner.”

Magnuss gave three grunts rapidly, and one after the other as if in derision of the latter statement.

“Gudmundsson has got to step aside,” continued Ericsson, “now that I have got Gunarsson with us. He’ll come in; you need never doubt that, when he sees how things are going. I’m not saying that he won’t be sore at first about the whole of this business, but it was a fair stand-up fight. I’m not denying that I didn’t go behind his back a bit in getting this house, but from that on, it was a fair stand-up fight, with no knifing. Oh, he’s all right, he hasn’t the make of a vicious man, he’ll take to the grapnel when he finds he’s caught by the three prongs, and he’ll come up sure.”

Magnuss made no comment, but he had “come in.” He might grumble and sulk as much as he chose, but he had been roped by Ericsson just as Gunarsson had been roped, and Gudmundsson, and Súrsson; and just as presently the whole of Skarsstöd would be roped, tamed, and put to work by the master hand of this cable man, who, till money gave him the opportunity, had shown no sign of the genius that was in him, except in his amorous tendencies—perhaps the surest sign of genius in man.

The idea of breaking Gudmundsson's power, taking his girl from him, and yet making him his partner, would never have occurred to a man who was not a genius. For the idea was based on a fairly sure knowledge of Gudmundsson's character, and the trend that events were most likely to take. Gudmundsson and he would be the two men in Skarsstöd, and there was no room for them to fight. The huge schemes that were already developing in the valley, unseen by all but Ericsson's mind, left no room for fighting. Gudmundsson, robbed of Schwalla, was really only a person robbed of a mile of river and some money; he would be repaid twice over by the increase of prosperity.

The loss of Schwalla as a wife might hit him, but it would not interfere with his business passions. So Ericsson fancied.

As he lay on his bed thinking these things over, whilst Magnuss went on with his work, all of a sudden a fit of restlessness came on him; he rose up on his elbow, and listened to the wind that had risen a bit and was blowing in gusts from the north-west. Then he got up and looked at the glass that was hanging on the wall, near the door. The mercury had dropped a bit. Then he opened the door, and took a look at the sky.

"What's the matter with you now?" asked Magnuss, testily.

"I don't know," replied the other; "but it seems to me there's a gale coming, and a big one, too. I'm as full of electricity as a running dynamo, and I believe I'd spark if you touched me."

Magnuss laughed.

"Gale in your eye," said he. "You don't know the Breidifjord weather. I do, for I was bred here. There's going to be a bit of a breeze, that's all."

"It's low tide?" asked Ericsson.

"Yes, it's on the turn."

"Well, I'm going to get the boat into the harbour."

"I tell you, there's going to be nothing but a bit of wind," said Magnuss, with a snarl in his voice. "She's safe as she is, and there's no call to go shifting her moorings at this time of night."

Ericsson wavered. He knew that Magnuss was no fool, and that he certainly had an eye for the weather of the west coast. If he were to shift the moorings at this hour, and harbour the boat without justification, he knew that Magnuss would ridicule him all over the place.

All the same, his nervous system gave him warning that a big change was coming; his skin felt dry and uncomfortable, and the vile restlessness that had seized him was worse than physical discomfort.

He looked at the glass again; even during the minute or two since he had looked at it last, the mercury had fallen. Almost imperceptibly, it is true, but still it was lower.

"I'll put her in," said he. "Blow or not, she's safest in the harbour."

He left the house.

As he passed the inn, he called there, and found Súrsson and half a dozen others drinking ginger-beer and talking politics.

"I'm going to put the boat into the harbour," said he.

"Why, what ails the boat?" asked Súrsson.

"Nothing, but I don't like the look of the weather." It was equivalent to telling the whole lot of them that he, a stranger, knew more about the Skarsstöd weather than any man there, and the remark was received in dead silence by all but Súrsson.

"Well," said he, "you can put her in if you want to, but she's safe where she is." He rose up and came out, and they walked down to the slip.

The wind was coming in strong puffs, but the sky was as clear as a diamond. Two other motor-boats, beside the *Helga*, were moored close to the slip; the rest of the Skarsstöd fleet were in the harbour.

"Maybe, I'm wrong," said Ericsson, "but I have that in me that tells me it's safer to get her in shelter, so we'll just put her there, and let the rest say what they like. I'm not afraid of being laughed at. Jonass Magnuss says he knows this coast better than any one else; so he may, but I'll tell you this about weather, east coast or west coast—you never know what's below the horizon till it shows its head. Of course, sometimes a blind man can tell you a gale's coming, but I'll tell you this for truth—the worst gales sometimes spring from nowhere, and it's not till they're on you that the glass begins to tumble."

"By God, that's true!" said Súrsson.

They rowed out to the *Helga*, got the anchor up, started the engine and, towing the boat, made for the harbour.

Here they berthed her safe and sound, and rowed back. The sky was still diamond-clear, but the wind had suddenly fallen to a dead calm. Away out beyond Flatey the horizon had dimmed and darkened along the sea edge; there was no other sign or indication of danger.

When Ericsson got back, he found Magnuss in bed. He looked at the glass. The mercury had fallen a full inch. For a moment he thought of warning the fellows who owned the two other boats still out, but the recollection of their faces at the inn checked him. Besides, these were Gudmundsson's boats in reality, and it was no business of his to risk insult for the sake of Gudmundsson's pocket.

He lay down fully dressed, and dropped off to sleep.

Two hours later Ericsson and Magnuss were awakened by the crash of the storm falling on Skarsstöd. Had they been less soundly asleep, they might have heard it coming from away beyond Breidavik Point—wind, hail and rain, driving like a solid wall across the fjord, and bursting upon the Flóka valley with the first crash of thunder.

Wild as the scene on the Breidifjord might be, with Flatey sheeted in spray and the Fulmar fighting the waves, it was nothing to the valley of the Flóka. Here, cliff seemed fighting cliff, and cloud, cloud; and with the first crash of thunder, every rock castle was manned, and the artillery of the echoes answered from bastion to bastion, till the sound of the battle came booming back from the foothills. The lightning struck right across from rock to rock, where the ravens, like black, drifting leaves, were whirling and crying and fighting the gusts above the crag towers and basaltic battlements; gulls flickered electric-white, and the sea-spray blew with the rain and hail, and the roar of the sea, through the sounds of the great fight, could be heard as far up as Folkness and the farms of Bjarnarnes.

Ericsson, slipping into his oilskins, and followed by Magnuss, came out, and they were nearly blown against the house wall by the wind.

Though it was blowing at the rate of ninety miles an hour, and though it was bringing with it the voice of the whole Breidifjord, it could not blot out the roar of the battle in the valley, where the thunder was literally trapped and fighting for exit; every crash from above added to that hell of sound that seemed to come from armies at war decimating each other with bursting shrapnel and rifle fire.

They paused for a moment to take breath, and then fought their way against the wind down to the sea edge. The whole of the fishing population was out, and in the grey twilight of the storm, jetted over by the incessant lightning, the flooding Breidifjord was tossing to the wind and breaking shoreward through fields of foam.

The two petrol-boats had been torn from their moorings, and smashed together and picked to pieces, and flung hither and thither, so that here a spar, and here a keel, with ribs and planking still sticking to it, and here a rudder could be seen played with by the waves, brought shoreward, shown to the beach for a moment, and then sucked off by the undertow.

"Well," said Magnuss, "there's eight or ten thousand kronur worth of gear and boats gone in an hour. I've never seen a storm like this come up in this fashion on the Breidifjord. Well, you were right, and it's a good job the *Helga* is safe in the harbour."

So Ericsson was thinking, as he watched the wreckage and the crowd of people standing mute and uncomplaining, holding their own against the wind, and watching the remains of two of the best fishing-boats played with by the sea.

Had the *Helga* gone down, he could scarcely have fought such a loss. It would have put him back a year, at least; and the *Helga* would not have been safe now perhaps, but for Schwalla.

Schwalla, and the thought of gaining her, had sharpened his apprehensions, quickened his sense of approaching danger and his perceptions. Otherwise, he might have taken Magnuss's word that all was right, and not have troubled to harbour the boat.

As they made their way back to the house, his mind was already engaged on a new problem that the storm had put before him.

When they got in, Magnuss set to to make some coffee on the paraffin stove, and Ericsson, sitting on the side of his bed, lit his pipe.

"I'm thinking," said Ericsson, "that there will be two men thrown out by this, Bjarnsson and Briem—good men they are, too, and each has got a son as good as himself; then there's the women who can do the curing, and they own their houses and drying-grounds. There's more than a good half of the season still to run, too."

"Well," said Magnuss, "what about that?"

"I'll take them on."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll get another boat, and double our business right away."

Magnuss was aghast.

"Another boat! but we haven't the money to stand that. Good Lord, what a man you are! Another boat!—where are you going to get her from?"

"Reykjavik. If there's one to be had, and there is; for I was talking to Stefansson on the telephone only the other day, telling him of what I was going to do here, and how I was going to build in the winter, and he said buying was cheaper, for we'd have to stick up a shed here to build in. He told me Thordursson was building two new boats, and one was all but finished and not sold."

"But the money?" said Magnuss.

"That's what I'm coming to. Thordursson would want five to six thousand kronur—that would leave us too short; but I can pay him three thousand without crippling myself, and the balance by the end of the season. Or I'll get Gunarsson to put up the money."

Ericsson laughed, as the last idea struck him. It was an uncommonly good one. Gunarsson would not risk anything beyond the risks of the sea, as he could have a lien on the *Helga*; and for Schwalla's sake he would not ask much interest. Ericsson saw the prospect of having, next season, three or four boats by this means; boats breed boats, and two boats bought and paid for would be security for the buying of two more. Even the storm had brought him luck, not only in putting two of Gudmundsson's craft out of action, but—what his prescient mind prized much more—in giving him two more drying-grounds, two more households to work for him, and four first-class fishermen in Bjarnsson and Briem and their sons.

But Magnuss saw nothing of all this. Magnuss's imagination had nothing to do with the material world; he was of the true type of worker who, though he may be a politician, or even a poet, never rises above the ordinary level in his trade, simply because he cannot see beyond it. One fishing-boat quite contented him, the waters of speculation terrified him; in fact, he knew nothing of them. In Ericsson's powerful hands he was like a child in the hands of a bathing-woman, being taught to swim and violently resisting the tuition.

He poured out the coffee, and his arguments against the dangers of going beyond one's depth, both at the same time, and Ericsson listened, quite unmoved.

"Besides," finished Magnuss, "Stefan Gunarsson is my uncle, and you would not have known him but for me, and I would not like him to lose money in the affair.”

“He will lose nothing.”

“Oh, you say that. Well, I tell you, you are putting too great a strain on the rope. You are going ahead too fast.”

“It’s better than going astern. You leave me to do the business. Caution! I tell you, I’m full of caution. I have too much to risk.”

Magnuss said nothing more.

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[4] By using the word “fisherman,” I do not mean to cast discredit on fishermen, but to connote the everyday man.

CHAPTER III

ERICSSON GOES AWAY

Next morning the storm had blown itself out, but the weather was still broken.

Skarsstöd, with several roofs blown off, and the church spire damaged, was collecting the remains of the motor-boats broken by the storm.

The whole population was down on the beach where the Breidifjord, green and white-capped and shot over by sunlight and cloud shadow, was coming in thundering on the shale.

Ericsson, early that morning, had called upon Gunarsson for a definite answer and had got it. The affair of last night had completed the business for him. His caution and foresight in harbouring the boat had gone straight to the heart of the unemotional Gunarsson. That was the sort of thing he could understand, and it suddenly came home to him that a man who was capable of looking after his property so well was a man who might be trusted to look after a woman.

So he agreed—not to consent to Ericsson's courting of Schwalla, but not to stand in the way. And there was to be no marriage for at least a year, and Schwalla would have to see Gudmundsson, from whom no word or telephone message had come, and explain her extraordinary action in discarding such a good man, a man, moreover, who was Gunarsson's friend and whose jilting had given Gunarsson more pain than anything that had happened since his dear wife died, etc.

Then Schwalla was called down and the lovers embraced, whilst Gunarsson occupied himself in filling his pipe with his back turned to them.

During the next couple of days, Ericsson busied himself forwarding his new projects.

He telephoned to Stefansson in Reykjavik about the new motor-boat and made arrangements to come over and conclude the business when the *Ingolfur*—the little coasting steamer that runs along the coast—called on her next visit. Briem and Bjarnsson had agreed to come in with him and work at reduced terms and give him the use of their drying-grounds; it was a godsend to them to get work at any price.

Ericsson, since coming to Skarsstöd, had never looked back, his course had been a triumphant progress, luck had fallen on him from the sky, risen to greet him from the ground, and embraced him from the sea.

One day, returning to the house for dinner, Magnuss found that Ericsson was not in.

The girl, who laid the table and got the dinner ready, said that the door was open when she arrived, and the tin washbasin that stood on a shelf outside the door was lying on the ground as if some one had flung it there, also that the place was in confusion, things tossed hither and thither so that it had taken her some ten minutes to get the room right.

“He must have been in a temper about something,” said Magnuss.

He ate his dinner wondering what could have put Ericsson out. Ericsson had a temper rarely stirred to wrath. Perhaps it was not anger, after all, but irritation at not being able to find something. He had been dressing, no doubt, to go and pay his court to Schwalla.

When Ericsson did not return in the afternoon, Magnuss thought nothing of it, fancying that he was at the Gunarssons’. It was an off day at the fishing and he had plenty to do mending lines and so forth, and it was whilst he was at this business, somewhere about four o’clock, that Olsen, the parson, looked in.

“Has Ericsson returned yet?” asked Olsen.

“No,” replied Magnuss. “How did you know that he wasn’t in?”

“Why, I met him at noon,” replied Olsen, “away up the valley, beyond Bjarnarnes. I was on my pony and he was afoot; he passed me without speaking to me or seeming to recognise me. Have they quarrelled, do you think, that he should be in such a taking?”

“He and Schwalla?” asked Magnuss. “I don’t know.”

“Well, something has happened,” said Olsen, “for I have never seen a man more changed and older-grown in so short a time, for I was talking to him only yesterday and congratulating him on his engagement.”

“They must,” said Magnuss, meditatively.

“What?” asked Olsen.

“Have quarrelled. He’s gone off in a temper. I expect he’ll walk it off and be back soon.”

“Well,” said Olsen. “I’m glad you think it’s that, for his appearance disturbed me.”

He went off, and Magnuss went on with his work. Now Magnuss was rapidly falling in with the new state of things. In fact he had got so far that, forgetting the impossible Schwalla, he was beginning to cast his eyes at Helga, the girl who came in to look after them. Though, if real danger had threatened Ericsson and Schwalla, he would have joined arms to resist it, he could not help feeling a vague satisfaction at the thought of the lovers quarrelling.

He was trying to imagine what it was all about, when a tap came to the door, and Schwalla’s charming face appeared in answer to his call to come in.

He jumped up to greet her.

She looked round the room and then blushed; she had expected to find her lover, and she did not like to ask for him; but Magnuss helped her out.

“He’s not in,” said Magnuss, “he wasn’t in to dinner; he went off this morning on some business, and he has not returned yet.”

“Well, I just called as I was passing,” said Schwalla, completely restored by Magnuss’s acceptance of the fact that she had called to see Ericsson. “I thought I would ask him how the business about the new boat was getting on. It will be a great thing for Bjarnsson and Briem to be in work again, a good thing for Skarsstöd, too.”

She was standing at the open door. Magnuss did not dare to ask her to sit down. Besides, it would not be the right thing for her to sit talking to him with no one by, in a house. He had tremendous notions of propriety.

“Have you not seen Erikr to-day?” he asked.

“No,” replied Schwalla. “But maybe he will call in to see us this evening. You too,” said she, as she turned to go, “you know we are always glad to see you, Cousin Magnuss.”

She went off, and Magnuss sat down again, but he did not go on with his work. A feeling of dread had suddenly fallen upon him.

Ericsson had not quarrelled with Schwalla, evidently. Why, then, had he suddenly gone off like this? and why should he, Magnuss, suddenly feel like this? The thing that frightened him was not so much Ericsson’s strange conduct as this feeling of dread, this chillness of the heart that had fallen upon him suddenly, as though some danger had arrived and was standing outside the door, unseen, unheard, but guessed by some sixth or seventh sense.

Ericsson was really the only person with whom his life had been at all bound up. The bond of union between them was complex almost as the mind of Magnuss, and the strongest strand was perhaps antithesis.

Intellects have genders. Magnuss's mind, fussy and exacting, at times, as the mind of some old wife, had, besides other female attributes, that of attachment. It required another mind to cling on to. It was almost parasitic in the best sense of the term, and it had learned to cling to the mind of Ericsson as the sponge clings to the crab-shell, astonished at the places to which it was sometimes carried.

The mind of Ericsson, direct and forcible, advanced almost unconscious of the intellect clinging to it, just as the crab disregards the sponge, yet finding food for both and, who knows? some dim satisfaction at being the predominant one and the feeder.

Magnuss, after a while, took up his work again, but the monotony of it only served to increase his forebodings and gloom. Now it was that his superstitious mind recalled the incident of a few days ago in the fog: the hail, and Ericsson's answer, the laughter of the unseen rowers and the chanting cry, "Skule, skule, skule!" dying away, thin as the crying of sea-birds.

"Ay, they were crying 'Skoal' right enough," he murmured. "French! No Frenchies ever hailed like that."

He put down his work after a while and came out. Súrsson was down on the beach, looking after some gear, when Magnuss joined him. They were due to go out at five o'clock to catch the tide, and Magnuss gave Súrsson directions to go without him.

"I'm going up the valley," said he, "to look after Ericsson and see what's become of him."

"Why, what's wrong with him?" asked Súrsson.

Magnuss was silent for a moment; then he burst out:

"I don't know. I wish I did. He's gone off since morning, and the parson met him away up at the farms. I don't like it. Don't ask me why. I don't know. But I'm not coming back without him. There's only one road he can take, so I must meet him if I keep on."

“Well,” said Súrsson, “I’ll take the boat out. There’s lots of hands to choose from now we’ve got those two others. I hope nothing’s gone wrong with Erikr Ericsson.”

“What makes you think that?” said Magnuss sharply, forgetting his own gloomy words of a moment before.

“Oh, nothing,” said Súrsson. “Only Gudmundsson is a very lucky man. I’ve seen man after man go down before Olafur Gudmundsson, and there are folk here who say that Ericsson has matched himself against more than he can fight. They say that Gudmundsson’s luck is sure to win in the end. It’s a hard thing to match yourself against luck. A man is nothing; it’s the luck he carries with him that’s everything.”

Briem came up as he was finishing.

“What’s that you say about luck?” asked he.

“Nothing,” replied Súrsson. “I was only saying that it’s a man’s luck that counts more than himself.”

“Then you are talking without sense,” replied Briem. “A man’s luck is himself. He plays the fool with himself, and then, when he gets a bit wiser and the fool rises up on him, he calls it bad luck. There’s no such thing. There’s only bad steering.”

“Well, I must be going,” said Magnuss. Off he went. He returned to the house and put some biscuits in his pocket, closed the door without locking it, and started.

He came along up the valley past the bend. The weather was warm to-day, the air windless, and the sky above the valley summer-blue. The artillery called out by the storm was well masked, and nothing spoke of life but the voice of the river and the occasional flutter of a raven’s wing above the battlements of basalt.

Yet the rockbound scenery was not destitute of a semblance of life. The hideous mirage was at work and the hounds of the air were running full-cry along the shaking ridges.

Magnuss kept on, past Gudmundsson’s bungalow, over the moss of the lava beds to the boulder-strewn ground beyond.

Away up here, four miles from the bend, the valley for a mile or two took on a kindlier aspect. Here were the several farmhouses making up the place called Bjarnarnes; there was grazing-land here, vivid with the emerald-green grass of Iceland. Beyond this fertile strip the road became the merest bridle-track climbing steadily to a rugged summit where Magnuss paused to look backward and forward.

To seaward lay the Flóka valley. Skarsstöd was cut off from view by the valley bend, but a glimpse of the distant sea was visible beyond the cliffs.

Landward lay all Iceland: a petrified storm; mountains, valleys, crags, and jokulls all dominated by the frozen glittering hump of the Lang Jokull, beyond which just a point showed of the Hoffs Jokull, beyond which, vast but hidden by distance, lay Vatna Jokull, a mountain-world of ice, stretching from Tungnafels to the Hornafjordur on the eastern sea.

The mountain colours of Iceland are always changing, always elusive and delicate; slate-greys and thyme greens and vague purples; mist mauves—all these are there, with an added colour which no artist's palette can yield—the colour of desolation.

Far as he might look, Magnuss could see nothing of human life in all the country before him. Farms there might be, tucked away in those valleys, but nothing told of them nor hinted of them. Far to the south, in a depression amidst the hills, a white puff of smoke rose like a tiny plume in the windless air; it was the smoke of a boiling laugg. From far below in the valley towards which the bridle-track led came a melancholy bird's cry. It was the cry of a whimbrel.

He came along, following the track till he reached the valley below, which seemed as though it had been hacked out of the basalt with an axe wielded by some giant of the old days. The path led along this valley, which seemed a smaller edition of the valley of the Flóka, save that here no river gave voice and cheerfulness to the place, and that here, instead of being hemmed in by two cliffs, one had a cliff to the right, and to the left a sloping wall of cinders; cinders from the bowels of the earth, ejected maybe a score of thousands of years ago, once blazing, now cold, and banked down by Time into a solid mass.

The cinder-heap is the most repellent feature in Icelandic scenery and the acme of all desolation.

As Magnuss came along this valley the constantly recurring thought became more insistent: "What ailed Ericsson? What brought him out here? Why has he not turned back?"

At every turn and angle of the way he had half expected to meet the man he sought.

Beyond the valley the path struck right across a plain of lava, where the moss grew in acre-wide patches, and the only indication to mark the way was a long line of cairns that stood like dwarfs made of stone. Each cairn, like those on the road to Thingveller, had one stone that projected a foot or eighteen inches from the rest, and these stone men seemed each holding out a sinister hand to the traveller as he passed.

Close to the cairns and parallel to them ran a great crack in the lava extending right across the plain. It was just like a crevasse in ice; here three yards broad, here three feet, and varying from twenty to sixty feet in depth.

Magnuss crossed over to the crevasse and looked down at the water contained in it, as if questioning the place as to whether it knew anything of his friend. It was now after eight o'clock, yet there was little diminution of the daylight, and the crevasse was lit almost as fully as though it were noon.

No, it knew nothing of the whereabouts of Ericsson, or if it knew, it was well able to keep its secret.

He rose up and continued his way, walking more swiftly, whilst the whimbrels pursued him with their thrilling cry, and now and then one of the cairns divested itself of a black top-knot, and a raven flew away, frightened, at his approach.

It took him half an hour to cross the plain, and then the path, free of moss, showed itself rising over a boulder-strewn slope.

Just at the plain edge, and near the beginning of the path, Magnuss was attracted by a puff of steam rising from the ground. He came towards it and found a pot hole, little more than a foot in diameter, black, and clean-cut in the lava.

With every puff of steam from it came the snoring, bubbling sound of water boiling merrily below, and now and then a sound of struggling, as if some heavy-breathing animal were trapped under the lava and attempting to escape.

CHAPTER IV
JAN

It was midnight when he came across Jan. Jan is a geyser who lives all alone and keeps his state in a little plain where cone-shaped cinder-hills casting cone-shaped shadows are his only company. He is out of the tourist track, and little known even to the coastwise natives. Why he is called Jan, and not by some name more racy of the soil, is a mystery. To see him in perfection you must pay your court to him alone, at midnight, in midsummer, with the light of the sun still clinging to the world and the cone-shaped cinder-hills.

He erupts every four hours or so, and every eruption is heralded, after the fashion of the Great Geyser, by three or four muffled, booming notes, like the sound produced by rubbing-stroke on a big gong.

Magnuss, though born and bred on the coast, knew nothing of the existence of the geyser. He saw a water pool steaming by the track, he heard the gong strokes beneath the lava, and then he saw the pool working like a boiling cauldron. The water rose in the centre to a dome, broke, and up sprang Jan, twenty feet high and struggling like a maniac tangled in a sheet.

For two minutes he swayed from side to side, fought and struggled; then he began to dwindle and shorten, made one more effort to escape, and then —boost!—vanished in a shower of spray, dragged down to the hell he sprang from, whilst the waters of the pool shook and chuckled—a bobbly chick—a bobbly chick—against the lava edges, and then shivered to stillness.

Magnuss drew his coat-sleeve across his brow. Wearied out and shaken by his fruitless journey, he was not in a condition to meet and appreciate Jan. The place filled his imaginative mind with auguries of evil. He passed the geyser basin hurriedly and, leaving the plain behind him, followed the leading of the path to a hill-top beyond. He knew that the path must lead him at length near some farm, and there, surely enough, and less than a mile away, he saw a house in a sheltered dip—one of those Icelandic farmhouses built of turf and stone, the loneliest thing in the way of a building to be found anywhere on the broad earth.

The sight of it was enough for him, and the knowledge that in the morning he could obtain food there. So heavy with sleep and weariness that the object of his search was nearly forgotten, he lay down on a mattress of moss in the shelter of a rock, and fell asleep.

He awoke at six in the morning. Though he had slept soundly, even in his sleep he had not entirely escaped from daylight. The terror of eternal light is only less than the terror of eternal darkness. In the far North the endless day of summer wears and frets the nerves and pursues one even into the cavern of sleep. He sat up on the moss. It was a breezy and cloudless morning, and through the quiet blue of the sky a flock of birds were passing overhead from west to east in the direction of the Lang Jokull. They were wild swans, and their shadows passed over the moss, so low were they flying, and vanished, birds and shadows dissolved in the luminous haze of day.

Magnuss rose up and took his way towards the farmhouse in the distance. It seemed to him that he could go no farther; the search seemed hopeless, and the attempt to find Ericsson as fruitless a business as the attempt to unravel the mystery of his disappearance.

Besides, he argued with himself that Ericsson might have returned to Skarsstöd by this. He used this argument in an attempt to break down the reasonless something that had led him on all yesterday, the something that said to him, “You must go on till you find Ericsson; you cannot go back to Skarsstöd without him.” He knew quite well that, unless Ericsson had gone completely mad, he would keep to the bridle-track; even had he left it and taken to the hills, it was many chances to one that the keen eyes of Magnuss would have discovered him. No, he was somewhere on the track, and all arguments to the contrary were useless.

I have said that Magnuss was an egoist. There is no friend like an egoist, if you can make him your friend, for then you become part of himself.

At the farm he found only a woman; all the others were out at work. She gave him what food he wanted and he learned from her that a man answering to Ericsson’s description had passed the night there, not in the farmhouse but in the byre. They had offered him a bed, but he preferred the more open space and had slept on a truss of moss. He had left only two hours ago, going south-west. How far did the bridle-path lead? Why, if one followed it long enough it would lead to Great Geyser, and then on to Reykjavik.

Magnuss, having paid a few aurar for his food, started again. He was hot on the track, and Ericsson was only two hours ahead of him. He reckoned that Ericsson would be sure to pause for a rest, probably at noon; but before noon his reckoning came true.

Four hours after leaving the farm he reached the westernmost spurs of the range that culminates in the Lang Jokull, and there on the mountainside he saw a figure seated upon a rock. It was Ericsson. He stopped dead, sheltered his eyes against the glare to make sure, and then began to climb.

Half-way up he raised his eyes. The figure was still seated on the rock; it had seen him coming, and was waiting for him, and Magnuss, half-spent with the rapidity of his climb and pausing for a moment to take breath, raised his arm.

Ericsson raised a hand in response, and five minutes later they were within speaking distance.

There seemed nothing at all wrong with Ericsson. Seen from a little distance he looked just the same as ever; but close to him, Magnuss's heart was daunted. Ericsson's face showed no sign of recognition, and his eyes wore a blind and brooding look, as though they saw nothing of the material world before them.

"I've followed you," gasped Magnuss, "ever since yesterday. What made you go? What is wrong with you?"

He was advancing with hand outstretched, and Ericsson, just like a person suddenly awakened from a reverie, started, rose to his feet and drew back.

"Do not touch me," he said.

For a moment Magnuss fancied that the other was angry with him, and his pride flared up.

"Touch you!" said he. "I was not going to touch you. And what has happened to make you so grand that no one may touch you?"

"What has happened to me?—I am a leper."

CHAPTER V

HOW A STRONG MAN MEETS FATE

Magnuss stood for a moment without speaking, and as he stood Ericsson removed his coat and drew up his right shirt-sleeve. On the back of his arm, just above the elbow, lay three grey marks, as though three grey fingers had grasped him there, leaving an indelible stain.

Magnuss drew back a step, and Ericsson, seeing his movement, laughed.

“You see now for yourself,” he said. “No one must touch me. No one must come near me again. I don’t mind. I have fought it all out since yesterday.”

“But—but—but——” stammered Magnuss, terrified, yet telling himself that the thing could not be, that his eyes deceived him, that Ericsson was wrong. He tried to speak, but his tongue had become dry as the tongue of a parrot, and his lips were like pumice-stone.

Ericsson put on his coat and sat down again on the boulder, whilst Magnuss, after standing for a moment, took his seat on the ground close by.

“It was yesterday, when I was washing. I did not see it before; it was at the back of my arm. If you came out to find me, you have wasted your time, for you will never find the man you knew again. He is dead. Everything is over for me. I thought I would have gone mad at first, but my mind has come right again. It does not seem to care now. Look here: I was getting everything I wanted; I had everything that a man could have—luck, fortune, health, everything. All gone.”

He did not seem to be speaking of his own affairs; he seemed to be telling of some other man’s misfortune. At times he seemed like a dead man talking of himself, and all the time he nursed the afflicted arm, as though it pained him.

The excitable mind of Magnuss was not constructed to sit still under a horror like this. It broke out:

“You talk enough to make one freeze! How do you know that it is what you say? You have seen no doctor. A nice thing to frighten one like this, maybe for no cause. I tell you it’s impossible. There’s no leprosy in Iceland now, except a few people in the hospital at Reykjavik. You must see a doctor. We will go to Stykkisholmur and see the Government doctor there. We must do that at once.”

"I did not get it in Iceland," said Ericsson quite calmly.

"Then where did you get it?"

"In Japan."

"In Japan!"

"Yes, on the Noto coast. You remember that night I landed to see the girl? Well, those people played a trick on me. The girl was not there at all; they put a leper woman in her stead. She was quite young, and the leprosy was only on her face, which she covered with a shawl."

He told in a few words the story of the night. Magnuss listened, and as he listened, the words of Briem, heard yesterday, repeated themselves horribly in his mind: "There is no such thing as bad luck; there's only bad steering."

"That is what they did," finished Ericsson, "and there is no use in talking any more—no use at all."

Magnuss, in the face of this tragedy, had risen so far above his ordinary nature that he was dry-eyed and calm. Nothing like this had ever come to him before. Here was the man whom he had envied, the superior and successful man, in the grip of a fate more terrible than the fate that held Œdipus. For the gods blinded Œdipus, but to Ericsson they had left his sight. Here was the man of resource and ability who had broken Gudmundsson's hold on Skarsstöd, the man whom even the storm had helped to success, the man who had drawn love to his side, suddenly arrested as though a hand had been stretched out from the past and laid upon his arm, a viewless hand that had not relinquished its clutch and never would relinquish it till the victim was dead.

Though he had questioned Ericsson's diagnosis, he knew in his heart that it was right. He had seen leprosy too often to doubt.

In bygone years the leper in Iceland was a familiar figure, and in the play *Fjalla Evandur* you will see the leper seated and carousing with the other village folk, and even drinking from the same bottle; but the leper in the Iceland of to-day has vanished from public life, and the tolerance of long ago has been replaced by an unspeakable dread of him. Magnuss, seated on the bare hillside, was gazing, not at the desolate scenery, but at the vision of the leper hospital at Reykjavik. There Ericsson must surely go, unless—unless—what? Where could he hide? What could he do? If he had committed some crime, he might escape to some foreign land, but there was no escape from the crime of leprosy.

He rose to his feet, and Ericsson rose also, and without a word they came down the hill to the bridle-track.

“You are going back to Skarsstöd?” said Ericsson.

“To Skarsstöd?” said Magnuss stupidly. “I don’t know. Skarsstöd! I have nothing to do there now; all that is no use to me—not a bit, now.”

“Listen,” said Ericsson. “There is no use in making a trouble about this. If I had fallen down the cliffs the other day and broken my neck I would be only just the same as I am now; and you would have gone on with the work. So you must go on with it. Briem and the other man are to be thought of. You will work the boat with them. The boat is yours now, and everything I possess. You will find all the money I have hidden under the floor in the place you know of, and keep it; and you will go to Reykjavik and see Stefansson, and get him to draw up a paper for me to sign, giving you charge of everything——”

“But you,” said Magnuss, “where will you go?”

“I am going to tell you. All I want is the sea. I will go back with you and wait in the Flóka valley till midnight. You will get your boat and put all the stuff you can into it, and row me to a place I want to go to, and where I can hide for the present.”

“And the place?”

“The Fulmar.”

“Ay, you might hide there,” said Magnuss drearily. “Anything you wish——”

“I have only one wish—to get to the sea. Whilst I am there, you will see Stefansson. You may tell him all. He is to be trusted.”

Magnuss sighed bitterly. Then he turned, and, walking beside Ericsson, they began the journey to the Flóka. They scarcely spoke as they went. It seemed an understood thing between them that the tragedy was not to be spoken of. The name of Schwalla had never been mentioned once, though she was the thing uppermost now in the mind of Magnuss.

CHAPTER VI

THE GUILLEMOT'S EGG

They reached the Flóka valley two hours before midnight, and at a point half-way between the farms and Gudmundsson's bungalow Ericsson stopped, and, taking his seat by the river-bank, left Magnuss to walk on and prepare the boat.

"I will follow you in an hour or so," said Ericsson. "I'll strike Skarsstöd after twelve; there will be no one about then."

He had an old silver watch that would give him the time, and as he sat he watched Magnuss till he was lost to sight.

Then he sat listening to the water flowing and chuckling amidst the boulders.

His mind, maimed by the catastrophe, was incapable of much thought. He could scarcely see beyond the immediate moment. Only one desire filled him—the sea.

He had no horror of the thing that held him in its grip, for the goodness of God to the afflicted is shown in nothing so much as the way in which they make the most terrible diseases their own.

Some time after eleven he rose up and continued his journey. It was the sight of Gudmundsson's bungalow that first caused all the things that seemed dead in his heart to stir, but they did not wake to clamorous life till the bend of the valley showed him Skarsstöd, with the day of the northern midnight upon its sleeping houses.

He came along the path by the river, and as he neared Gunarsson's house it was as if a strong wind were blowing against him to drive him away. White to the lips and walking stealthily as a thief, he drew near, his eyes fixed on the window of Schwalla's room. It was half-open, and he could see the white curtains moving slightly to the night wind, as if beckoning to him. At the palings before reaching the house, he stopped, his eyes still fixed on the window.

He would never see her again, and she was there, sleeping peacefully and knowing nothing of his trouble.

His breath came in deep sighs. There, almost within touch, lay his paradise, and there he stood before it—ruined; dead.

He touched the white-painted paling with his hand, then he turned and went on.

He passed the church and the parsonage, his own house, and the inn where he had stopped with Magnuss. He passed Gudmundsson's office, with Gudmundsson's name above it in big letters. It was the triumph of Gudmundsson, yet Ericsson did not notice it. He heeded nothing till, on the landing-stage with the sea wind blowing on his face, he saw Magnuss.

Magnuss had stripped the house of blankets, the cooking-stove, everything he could find that was likely to be useful, and all its provisions; he had placed them all in the boat, which was moored to the stage. Ericsson got in and went forward, whilst Magnuss pushed off, stepped the mast, and took the tiller.

In the wonder light that filled the world the fjord lay blue beneath the vague blue sky and ruffled into meadows of shadow by the breeze. Not a trace of haze touched the sky-line or the hills. From sleeping Skarsstöd and the luminous valley to far distant Breidavik Point the world lay voiceless, save for the thread-thin tune of the surf on the beach.

The Fulmar, as they neared it, showed vague purple splashed with the white of the roosting gulls. The tide, midway between ebb and flow, was creaming around its base and the caves at tide-mark were breathing and snoring to the sea.

As the boat approached, the gulls roused up, wings flapped and folded again, and then, thin like the crying of spirits in distress, the voices of the guillemots came against the wind.

Magnuss, steering for the little beach to southward, ran the boat cleverly ashore, and Ericsson helped to run her up a bit on the sand.

This tiny beach, not more than thirty feet wide, gave entrance to the one cave that was beyond high-tide mark. From the beach a path that any one could climb led to the plateau of emerald-green grass above. The cave had a flooring of sand, hard almost as earth.

They brought everything into the cave. Magnuss had forgotten nothing: matches, oil for the stove, biscuits to last a month, tinned stuff, fishing-lines, even a breaker of water, though there was a natural cistern in the rock above where rain-water might always be found, except in a season of unusual dryness.

When they had finished placing the things, they came out on to the little beach.

“The *Ingolfur* is due to call at Skarsstöd to-morrow,” said Ericsson. “You will go in her to Reykjavik. I want everything settled with Stefansson. You see, I have no family, no one to bother; so you take everything. I do not know at all what ought to be done, but as you are my partner there would be no one to dispute you taking everything. But Stefansson will know best.”

“I want nothing,” said Magnuss. “I am only thinking of what will happen to you.”

“Everything that can happen to a man has happened to me, so you need not trouble about that.”

Magnuss was silent for a moment.

“If I go to Reykjavik, as you wish,” said he at last, “will I find you here on my return?”

“You will find me here, else I would say good-bye to you now. And, Magnuss——”

“Yes?”

“You must tell her.”

Magnuss went to the boat and slapped his hand on the gunwale. Then he turned on the other.

“I can’t, and that’s flat. I can’t go to her and tell her. How can I? Aïe, it’s beyond what a man can do.”

“You have been a good friend, and you can do that for me. If you don’t, she will think I have gone away and left her. That is what’s cutting me now. She will think I have deserted her. When she hears the truth, it will be different. It’s for her sake I want you to tell her, for I would sooner die a thousand times before she knew.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because she may pity me, but she will turn in her soul against me. If I had died a decent death, it would be different, but as I am she will loathe me. That’s why. But it’s better for her to do that than to break her heart. God’s truth is that.”

“I would sooner lose my right hand than have to tell her,” said Magnuss. “You know I do not care for her any more as a man for a woman. She is above me and different from the girl I knew when I was here last. But she is Schwalla Gunarsson, and different from all other women; and to tell her that —to tell her that. And I had fallen in with it all. I was no longer jealous of you, for I saw that you and she were made one for the other. I said to myself when you told me first, ‘I will go away from Skarsstöd before I see him marry her,’ but that all passed. I came to be glad about it. I said to myself, ‘I will see them grow together and children grow from them.’ I said to myself, ‘We will all grow old together here in Skarsstöd, and his children’s children will pull my beard when I am an old man.’ I saw my own children growing by yours in the peace of happy days and fine weather. And now it has all come to this! And I have to tell her of it!”

He flung himself down, kneeling by the boat, with his head on the gunwale, as if he were praying, and Ericsson, white as death, watched him.

Then Magnuss got up, slowly and like an old man.

“I will tell her,” he said.

Ericsson helped him to push the boat off. When she was afloat and Magnuss had taken the oars, the two men nodded to each other mournfully, without a word, and Ericsson stood watching the boat row away.

Then he left the beach and climbed up the path to the plateau.

The sun had turned and the Breidifjord was awakening to a new day. All the bird world was astir, and the cries of the kittiwakes and guillemots beneath him were answered by the cries of the birds round the rocks to southward. Wings were snowing round the Burgomaster and the Horseman, and out towards Flatey the gannets were fishing and the fulmars sailing in the blue. He watched the boat till it was the merest speck; he could see the dent in the far-off cliffs that marked the strand of Skarsstöd and the beginning of the Flóka valley. The sun was touching the Lang Jokull and the slate-grey and purple hills beyond Bjarnarnes, the islands of the Huammsfjordur and the whole sweep of the coast from the Huammsfjordur to Skagastrond, where the dead men lay. But Ericsson saw only the mark that indicated Skarsstöd. Then he took his seat on the edge of the plateau and watched the gulls flying and fishing below.

All down the ledged cliff he could see the bird city and its affairs. The hatching was nearly over and most of the young were out. The mother guillemots were fishing and returning to their young, holding three or four small fish at a time in their bills tight-clutched by their toothed tongues; a few of the guillemots’ eggs, come to nothing, lay deserted on the bare rock, and just below where Ericsson was sitting were the kittiwakes’ nests, built of seaweed—the kittiwakes always build the highest—and away below, on the rocks that formed the base of the Fulmar, auks were sitting straight up like penguins.

The terns were everywhere, flitting like dragonflies, and the black puffin chicks showed, peeping from their holes waiting for their mothers, who were swimming and diving like ducks on the blue water below.

The lonely man on the cliff edge watched the birds. He remembered the day when, sailing with him towards the berg, Schwalla had called to them, and how they had answered, or seemed to answer, her. That day seemed a thousand years distant from him now; and so remote that the remembrance scarcely brought him suffering.

When we talk of suffering, we always refer to the conscious mind. The suffering that counts is the suffering of the subliminal mind, and perhaps the only real tears are those that are shed in the darkness of our being.

So, after a great disaster, you will see a man apparently unchanged. But who can tell what is going forward in his soul? Not even he himself.

Ericsson, gazing at the birds, followed them hither and thither with his eyes. They reminded him of Schwalla; their movements, their gracile forms, and the nameless charm that birds alone possess—Schwalla had something of all these. She loved them, and her very name was a bird's name. He repeated it in his mind, yet, strange to say, his memory made scarcely a response; all the past was crushed out and shapeless, a thing belonging to another man. But the birds brought to his heart what memory could not bring: the sweetness and the form of the woman he never more might see.

As he sat watching the birds, the water broke below and a seal's head appeared. The seal had a codling in its mouth. The seal wallowed out of the sea, trampled with its flippers on the half-submerged rocks, thick with sea-tangle and oar weed, and then drew itself on to a ledge of basalt broad as a dining-table.

Scarcely had it done so when a skua swept down and seized the codling by the tail. Ericsson watched the tug-of-war between the seal the bird. It was the first thing to give him the slightest interest since the catastrophe fell upon him. For a moment it seemed that the bird would carry the day; then the seal, with a sudden swift side-jerk of its head, nearly succeeded in dashing the bird against the rock. It was touch and go; and then the bird flew away, clanging down the wind, and the seal swallowed the fish in peace and comfort, and lay basking in the sun.

The birds did not mind Ericsson in the least. They knew in some mysterious way that he was not there to harm them, and the whole business of their wonderful life went on undisturbed. The strangest thing was the manner in which they would pursue, each its individual labours or pleasures, and then of a sudden all join in an outcry over some matter undiscoverable by the watcher on the plateau.

The kittiwakes would suddenly burst away from the rock in a storm of wings and voices; but what ailed the kittiwakes left the puffins unmoved, and the razor-bills indifferent, and the guillemots and auks perfectly undisturbed.

Two puffins would have a dispute—and a male puffin is such a valiant individual that he will fight a buck rabbit and beat him—and then the whole puffin colony would be in an uproar.

The auks alone, sitting like penguins on the lower ledges and rocks, seemed to have no cause for quarrel or excitement. Ericsson, after a while, left his seat on the edge and began to climb down towards the water-line. This, the eastern face of the rock, was only less difficult than the western face, which was unclimbable, but its difficulty was nothing to him, and he managed carefully to pick his way, disturbing none of the nests. The birds, after a momentary flutter and clamour, calmed down; only the seal resented his intrusion and took the water with a splash. Its round head showed for a moment beneath the water surface and vanished.

Some of the guillemot chicks hatched out earlier than the others were swimming about, bobbing like corks on the swell. The guillemot chick can swim and fish long before it can fly, and Ericsson, sitting on a ledge just above high-tide mark, saw a mother guillemot bringing her chick down to the water on her back. It was clinging with its bill to the back feathers and, when she was afloat, she ducked, the water passed over her, and the chick was launched.

This thing deeply absorbed the mind of the man who sat watching it, as though it were a matter of high significance relative to himself. His mind, material and direct of thought, was all astray in the new world where he found himself, where he could no more labour, or make profit, or take thought for the morrow; all the more was it held by these signs and signals from a world hitherto only half seen and uncomprehended.

He had come to the Fulmar to hide, and be alone with his trouble; and to die there when he chose to put an end to his existence. Yet on the Fulmar he was not alone. Utterly cut off from human society and unable to think of it without a shudder, he was yet not shut into an empty room.

Like the bird city of Grimsoe, where the swarming kittiwakes darken the sun, and the great bird city north of Sylt, the Fulmar is a place where no man can reject the company of the spirit of Nature, or refuse to recognise its hand.

Close to where Ericsson was sitting a guillemot's egg was lying on the bare rock. It was unfruitful and had been cast out from above and, falling on some soft moss unbroken, had rolled on to the rock. It was big as an eagle's egg and shaped like a Jargonelle pear; it could not roll into the sea, nor could the wind blow it into the sea, simply because any movement imparted to it only caused it to rotate on its smaller end. Only for this provision, carefully thought out a million years ago, there would not be a guillemot left, for the guillemot lays her egg on the bare rock, careless of its fate as many a man is of his soul, which would be lost were it not equally in Love's keeping.

Ericsson after a while re-climbed the rock and returned to the beach, where the cave was, and the stores. He had not yet envisaged the terrific fate that he had allotted to himself—the fate of a man condemned to imprisonment on a bare rock. But for the small interest of the birds, and the little things which he set himself to do, presently, in arranging his stores and making the cave habitable, his mind in those first hours might have been driven by despair to madness. It rotated on its lesser axis and was saved, as many a mind is saved, by the little from the great.

Magnuss had not forgotten tobacco, and the sight of it as he was going over the stores, brought Ericsson's hand to his pocket for his pipe. Then the fishing-lines drew his attention and he began to overhaul them.

There was good fishing to be had on the western face of the Fulmar, but only at half-tide could one get round to the rocks there, unless one swam; but he did not propose to fish to-day; it would be something to do on the morrow; and when he had finished going over the lines he fell to smoking and thinking about Magnuss's return. The most terrible thing in his position was the fact that his imagination had to stay on the Fulmar as well as his body. The world beyond, and all its affairs, were banned to his mind. If it wandered there, it had to return at once. All that did not interest him pained him, but the pain was relatively small to the sense of negation. The convict may speculate upon the world; it is still alive for him and waiting for him to return to it. For Ericsson the world was dead for ever. Once he tried to revive the remembrance of Schwalla: Schwalla coming down the street with Helgi; Schwalla asleep on the moss of the lava bed; Schwalla in the boat sailing with him to the berg. He saw her, but the figure seemed divided from him by something greater than distance or time; she was a person belonging to the life of another man.

It was towards evening, and he had climbed to the cliff edge facing the western sea; the sun was creeping down towards the sea-line beyond Breidavik Point, and the French boats of the fishing-fleet, still in their old position, to which they had returned after a journey farther north, showed clearly on the sea. He had no fear of Skarsstöd boats coming near the Fulmar, for now that the cod-fishing was on, they would go much farther north and farther out; and he was sitting smoking and occasionally picking up a bit of the loose basalt and flinging it at the rocks below when he suddenly found that Schwalla was beside him, viewless, but still beside him—in the air around him, permeating his mind with her presence. I do not mean to hint at any occult manifestation, but simply that his mind, to which Schwalla was dead as a woman, had suddenly recovered itself, and discovered the fact that it held something warm in its embrace, something that dispelled loneliness and brought him comfort; that something was with him indestructible by misfortune and living, and that, though he might never love again, Love was with him still.

He did not recognise this as I have put it, nor did the idea of love cross his mind. He only knew that his mind, in the midst of the destruction of his world, had a point to rest on as the dove rested on Ararat, and that on the Fulmar with him was a presence at which the sea-birds first hinted that morning, and which Life had first hinted of when Schwalla had appeared to him in the first days of their acquaintance as a good companion—a bit of good weather.

He had done many bad things in his life, many foolish things, but he had done one great thing. He had loved, and, though Schwalla might be dead to him for ever, Love, like the child of some ghostly marriage, would be with him till he died.

CHAPTER VII

THE OUTCAST

The Fulmar had a hundred voices. Like the berg it was far more solid in appearance than in reality, and no man had ever explored the caves honeycombing its base. Every change of tide played a new tune and every shift of weather brought a new note. In some winds a deep musical vibration stirred the air, the drone of the caves answering to wind and sea, and in the great high tides, deep from the surcharged galleries, the booming of the imprisoned water could be heard like the booming of a drum.

Ericsson, in the cave where he lay down to sleep, could hear the voices of the other caves adjoining. It was half-tide and the Fulmar breathed and sighed like a giant to the swell. The great rock seemed weary and full of unrest, and the foam breaking on its spurs answered the breathing of its caves.

The foam on the sea beach at Noto had recalled to him that dream of the white seahorses that had haunted his childhood, and it was perhaps the sound of the foam that now, as he slept, brought the dream on him again. He was in the midst of them being trampled upon by icy hoofs, threatened by snow-white heads, flung hither and thither, dashed this way and that, till they vanished, dissolving into creamy foam on which he was being borne past an island where a girl was standing with arms outstretched towards him—and the girl was Schwalla.

Then he awoke.

Though it seemed to him that he had slept for a very short time, yet his sleep must have lasted for hours. The sun was high above the horizon when he came out on the little beach and he could see the far-away sails of some of the Skarsstöd boats putting out for the fishing.

He went towards the path leading upwards to the plateau and then, as though remembering something, he turned back towards the cave.

Only from the plateau could a glimpse of distant Skarsstöd be obtained.

When he reached the cave again he began in a mechanical way to make preparations for the morning meal.

He lit the stove and boiled some water for making coffee. Magnuss, true friend that he was, had forgotten nothing; some salt screwed up in a piece of paper caught Ericsson's eye as he unpacked the canned stuff from the piece of matting in which it was wrapped. Magnuss had forgotten nothing, and the little packet of salt brought Ericsson to a pause in his preparations and filled his eyes with tears.

He remembered his first meeting with Magnuss three years ago. It was at Copenhagen on board the *Funnen*, a small telegraph ship belonging to the Franco-Danish Company. They had just joined, and Magnuss had stowed his gear away in the bunk that Ericsson had settled upon for himself. Ericsson had chucked the gear out, and they would have fought but for the cable foreman who interfered; for weeks they had been speechless one towards the other, and then, somehow, they had patched the matter up and become friends of a sort. Magnuss was a terribly hard man to get on with, and this fact attracted Ericsson towards him. When other and smaller natured men were always quarrelling with Magnuss, Ericsson, when he got to know the man better, was always friendly—friendly in a rough and outspoken fashion, but still friendly. As a matter of fact Ericsson had not a particle of that littleness which makes for irritability. He was too healthy. His good humour was of the type that springs from perfect digestion and unlimited stores of vitality, and after a while he began to take pleasure in Magnuss's quirks and queernesses. The two men, unconsciously, had exercised a powerful influence one upon the other and always for good, they had got into the habit of give and take, and their very faults and weaknesses had helped in the strengthening of that most precious bond, Brotherhood. That mysterious care of man for man, that spirit of kindly feeling and understanding and tolerance, the thing that in future years may join nation to nation as it now frequently joins individual men, had wrought, all unknown to them, between Ericsson and Magnuss, keeping their hearts alive and their humanity warm, stirring, and quickening what good there was in them till this last tremendous trial came to prove them.

Ericsson, with his little screwed-up packet of salt before him, had a vision of Magnuss such as no great act of abnegation on the part of Magnuss could have given him. Great things done for us often leave us cold, if not fretful, under a sense of obligation, or even vaguely sceptical at a nobility in others the possession of which we doubt in ourselves.

But the accidental discovery of the kindly thought of another for us will strike to the core of our being.

It was so with Ericsson, and as he sat looking over the past, separating the dross from the gold, he saw Magnuss clearly for the first time, and the nobility of that strange nature at once so little and so great, so little in face of little things, so great in disaster.

He saw the truth, that Magnuss would sacrifice everything for him, would stick to him till he died, even at the risk of sharing a terrible fate. This must not be, nor could it be as long as he held the only power that destiny cannot deny to man.

He turned to the food that he had prepared, and having finished his meal and put the things away came out on to the strip of beach. The plateau called again to him to climb up to it, but he resisted the invitation, for he knew that it was the view of distant Skarsstöd that was calling to him, "Come up and look at me, you can see a glimpse of me from the plateau, just a dent in the cliffs; but beyond there lies the village street where you first met the girl and the little blue fox."

He turned from the upward leading path and stood looking at the sea. The tide was falling and it was far enough down to enable him to reach the rocks at the western face of the Fulmar. He came back to the cave, prepared one of the fishing-lines, and then started climbing over the rocks and examining as he went the rock-pools that had been laid bare.

In the beginning of time the Fulmar had risen straight from the floor of the fjord, the western ocean had eaten it away on this the western side, and the felled cliffs falling in great blocks had cast out a natural breakwater to fend off the sea. Once these great masses of basalt had shown dry above high-tide mark, but in the course of ages the floor of the Breidifjord just here has sunk perceptibly, so that the rocks are covered at high tide now, and the whole mass of the Fulmar has sunk some fifteen feet with the subsidence of the bottom of the fjord.

He climbed over the rocks and the heavy coat of sea-tangle and oar weed; seals were sunning themselves on the rocks to seaward, and when they heard his approach they slipped off into the water. The Breidifjord is a great haunt for seals and the beach of Skagastrond Bay is sometimes alive with them; they only come to the Fulmar in very calm weather. It seemed to Ericsson as he watched them taking to the water that they were avoiding him personally. The gulls alone had welcomed him to this rock by not resenting his presence. It was almost as though these friends of Schwalla's had by some intuition become his friends also.

As he went he struck limpets from the exposed portions of the rocks for bait. Then, when he reached the deep-water edge he began to fish.

This western face of the Fulmar, at low tide, is hauntingly lonely. The cliff behind you cuts off all view of the land and before you lies nothing but the sea breaking among the huge shaggy rocks covered with weed. There are no gulls on the cliff face, but there is an echo which catches the sea's voice and sends it back to you in a singing whisper. Round at the eastern side of the rock the water is full of little fish, they feed and shelter there and are fed on by the gulls in turn, but here on the western side the water falls to a depth of fifty fathoms and you have a chance of halibut and lump-fish, to say nothing of conger big as the kraken.

Ericsson had not been fishing ten minutes when he had taken all the fish he wanted and enough to last him for a week. He rolled up his line, strung the fish together by the gills, and then, for want of something better to do, began to explore the rock-pools and to make his way round to the northern face.

The pools held little of interest, but the cliff base showed cave mouths on the northern side. Some of these cave mouths were mere holes not large enough to admit the body of a man, and some were large as doorways, but half submerged even at low tide. The green swell entering them passed away silently into the utter darkness, but now and again a bigger lump of sea would make trouble and be spewed out with a burst of spray and a booming sound like the stroke of a drum.

Only one of these caves had a floor level above low-tide mark, and Ericsson leaving his fish on a ledge of rock entered it.

Unlike the rest this cave was not entirely dark, a luminous haze filled it, a light vague as the earliest light of dawn.

He had not gone ten yards when he found the origin of this light, for the floor of the cave ceased suddenly at the edge of a great pond of vaguely luminous water.

Some huge opening below tide-mark admitted the light of the outside sea to this lake in the fastness of the rock, and Ericsson, lying down on the cave floor and peeping over the edge, could see, now that his eyes were accustomed to the light, fish flitting hither and thither in the green glow beneath and ribbons of seaweed stirring as if blown by some gentle wind.

He watched a conger pass from the darkness towards the sea light like an undulating ribbon, and a rock cod hanging in the green glow with moving gills; and then the water cleared of all sign of life till a seal, swimming far down, passed, making for the rock ledges at the far end of the cave. The seal had a fish in its mouth.

Scarcely had it passed when two rushing shadows entered from the sea, one in pursuit of the other. It was a battle to the death between two large fish, but so swiftly did they move that it was impossible to tell their species, they streaked and ringed the luminous glow and then vanished to finish their work in the sea outside.

Ericsson was in the act of rising when a rush of small fish held him for a moment longer. They were pursued by a tope. Trapped in the pool they fled hither and thither too confused to find safety by the way they had come, whilst the devouring dogfish snapping to right and left followed them with incredible swiftness and ferocity.

Whilst Ericsson was gazing at this sight the surface of the pool suddenly stirred and the water with a sigh lipped up over the edge on which he was leaning. It was the turn of the tide.

He rose, and came back up the shelving floor. Outside he turned to the rock ledge where he had placed the fish. They were gone. The gulls had taken them in his absence. Auks had dragged them into the water; the string tying them together by the gills had parted. Burgomaster gulls, gannets, and a storm of hovering kittiwakes were disputing over the floating food.

Ericsson watched the sight. He did not particularly care what became of the fish, he had caught these less for food than to pass the time, and when he had watched the last of the dispute, he picked up his line and made back round the western face of the rock to his cave.

When he reached the little beach the plateau again called to him to climb to it; all the morning it had been in his mind, and the view of Skarsstöd to be obtained from it, yet he still resisted the call.

He determined not to go there again, for the past, which had yesterday been a dead thing in his mind and a thing which seemed to belong to some other man, was slowly becoming alive again. Yesterday, whilst the disaster to his world was still fresh, Schwalla had seemed a phantom, a ghost from the dead past; to-day she was materialising again, taking form and voice, saying to him, “You love me, and I am still alive, and only a few miles away across that sea lies Skarsstöd, and there am I, but there is no boat to take you to me and when Magnuss returns to you, it will be too late, for then he will have told me all.”

He sat down on the sand of the beach and watched the little waves breaking a few yards from his feet. Had Magnuss told her yet? He asked himself the question, scarcely knowing which answer to hope for, which answer he would desire; it was a battle between his love for her and love for himself.

If she did not know the truth she would be stricken to the heart by his leaving her, she would wait for him to return, and he would return never; days, and weeks, and months, and years would pass and the mystery of his conduct would never be solved, and she would go to her grave knowing only that he had left her. That was too terrible to be imagined.

On the other hand, if she knew the truth she would loathe him; pity him, no doubt, but loathe him. It could not be otherwise.

He tried to imagine how it would be if the situation were reversed. If Schwalla had been the afflicted one, how would he have felt towards her, how would he have acted, what would he have done? He put this question to himself in vain. He tried to imagine the position, but it was useless. He could not visualise the thing nor answer to his own conviction the problem that he had set before himself.

Had you asked him the same question a week ago he would have answered you at once, “If Schwalla were afflicted like that I would marry her and cling to her till she died,” and he would have answered in this ready fashion simply because a week ago tragedy had not touched him to the deepest depths of his being, because a week ago he was using the surface of his mind.

Now, naked upon this rock, his mind had to answer a question like that as though it were answering to God; the romantic sentiment that would have dictated a ready answer had flown away, and whatever reply he made would have to be made without false weight, without adorning or gilding, right from the heart of his being.

He turned his mind from the thought and fancied that he had done with it, but it was there, all the same, patiently waiting for its answer.

After a while he rose up and began to make preparations for the midday meal; he lingered over them as long as possible, but when the food was cooked and ready he scarcely touched it.

Everything was useless here; one fished and the birds took one’s fish and one did not care; one prepared food just for something to do, and when it was prepared it was useless except to throw away. Limpets knocked off the rocks would have been just as acceptable. One lived for no earthly reason except to die.

Yesterday the past had seemed a phantom; to-day the past only seemed alive and the present a dream.

He put away the things and, coming to the rocks at the eastern end of the little beach, flung the remains of the food he had cooked to the birds.

As he watched them quarrelling over it he saw, staining the sky, the smoke of a steamer. It was doubtless the *Ingolfur* leaving Skarsstöd on its way to Reykjavik. Magnuss would be aboard her.

The sun was low upon the evening sea when Ericsson, who had been seated by the cave smoking and looking at the water breaking upon the beach, laid his pipe down on the rock beside him and sat for a moment with his head drooped and his eyes following the configuration of the bits of rock and the wind ridges on the sand before him.

His mind, working unknown to him, had answered the question which he had asked himself earlier in the day, "How would you act were Schwalla the afflicted one?" The answer was, "I would stick to her till she died. The world might cast her out, but I would go with her. Yes, that is the truth, before God."

He had tried to put Schwalla from his mind, he had refused to climb to the plateau, fearing the sight of distant Skarsstöd. It was all useless. Since morning the thought of her had never left him, try as he would to distract his mind. She was dead to him and he to her, so he might tell himself, yet the reality was far from that.

He rose to his feet and paced the sand of the beach, then, unable to resist the impulse, he climbed the path to the plateau.

Though it was not yet night a gull perched on a rock point by the westernmost edge of the plateau was asleep, its head slewed round and its beak buried in its wing feathers. At the sound of his approach it roused up, shook its wings, and then took to the air.

He did not notice it. He was standing with his arms folded and facing the distant shore. His eyes fed on the coastline and the far-off hills, always returning to the same spot, the dent in the cliffs showing the entrance of the Flóka valley and the hint of Skarsstöd.

For a long, long time he stood motionless and scarcely breathing. Then he flung out his arms as if seeking to clasp in his embrace the woman and the world he had lost.

CHAPTER VIII

HELGA

Magnuss, when he beached the boat yesterday morning on his return from the Fulmar, had made straight for the house. It was still so early that no one was astir.

Arrived at the house, he entered, locked the door, and sat down. His mind, pulled this way and that by the events of the last few hours, received a tonic from the disorder and barrenness of the house. The blankets from both beds, the cooking-stove, all the provisions were gone. How was he to account for the condition of the place when Helga arrived, as she did every morning, at six o'clock?

He had no plans about Ericsson's future. He had only one immediate dread—that, were the truth known, the authorities might insist on his being removed to that terrible hospital at Reykjavik.

He had vague ideas of getting Ericsson away from the Fulmar to some deserted place on the coast, building some sort of hut for him, and supporting him there till the inevitable end came, even if he had to go and live with him and nurse him at the risk of sharing the same fate.

It was in Magnuss to do this.

Magnuss the jealous one, Magnuss who had felt pleasure that day when Schwalla half-ignored Ericsson, was yet quite prepared to sacrifice everything now that the great trial had come.

As a beginning, he was now called upon to sacrifice his present comfort.

Ericsson had hidden all the Landsbanki notes constituting their joint money beneath a board of the flooring under his bed, and Magnuss, having moved the bed and secured the notes, replaced the bed in position and left the house, locking the door behind him.

It was now five o'clock, and Skarsstöd was beginning to stir. Súrsson was out on his drying-ground, helping to spread out the fish that had been caught on the previous day. When he saw Magnuss, he came to the fence and gave him good morning.

"And what's the news about Ericsson?" asked Súrsson.

"Ericsson is all right," replied Magnuss. "He's gone to Reykjavik."

“Gone to Reykjavik! But how did he go to Reykjavik? Reykjavik! why, there’s no boat till the *Ingolfur* calls to-morrow.”

“He’s gone overland,” replied Magnuss.

“Overland! Why, ’tis a five-days’ journey!”

“No, it’s only four with a pony, and he got a pony from one of the farms. But four or five days, it doesn’t matter to him. You know when he takes a thing into his head, nothing stops him.”

“Ay, he’s a hard man to put aside,” said Súrsson. “But what set him on to going to Reykjavik, and in such a hurry, too?”

“It was something about the new boat he is buying,” said Magnuss. “I couldn’t rightly make out from him all there was to it, but he knows his business best.”

“Ay,” said Súrsson, “he’s a good man, and he hasn’t gone to waste his time over nothing.”

Magnuss was a terribly bad liar. Any one more observant than Súrsson would have noticed his agitated manner and evasive glance, but Súrsson noticed nothing.

“Well,” said he, “when I’ve got this fish laid out and a bite of something to eat, I’m off for the fishing. Are you coming?”

“No,” replied Magnuss. “I’m not going to-day or to-morrow, and that’s what I wanted to see you about. I want to leave the boat and gear and everything in your charge, for I’m going to Reykjavik in the *Ingolfur* myself.”

“You too?”

“Yes. Ericsson asked me to meet him there.”

“Ah,” said Súrsson, “it’s easy to be seen he has some big thing on, with all this secrecy——”

“Secrecy!” Magnuss fired up at the word. “There’s no such thing. There’s nothing we have to hide. What do you mean by talking about secrecy?”

Súrsson grew a bit testy at the other’s tone.

“I didn’t mean any wrong. What are you getting in such a state about? I meant that Ericsson has some plan against Gudmundsson. But there! there’s no use in talking without profit.”

He turned back towards the drying-ground.

"You'll look after the boat and the fishing, then?" called Magnuss.

"Ay, ay," replied Súrsson, "I'll look after them."

Magnuss turned down the street. He felt that he had bungled the business. Reykjavik! When Súrsson had time to think over that and talk to his wife about it, they would be sure to question such a statement, for a man would be a fool indeed to make such a journey, fording two rivers and climbing such paths, when even by waiting for the *Ingolfur* he could make the journey in quicker time.

Jónsson, the baker, was just opening his shop, and Magnuss went in to buy some bread, thinking to eat it down on the beach.

Jónsson was just on the point of taking his bread from the oven, and Magnuss waited in the little bare shop, with its steamship almanac and portrait of Jón Sigurdsson staring from the wall across the counter.

"Any news about Erikr Ericsson?" asked Jónsson, as he handed the rolls across the counter and gave change.

"News about him?" said Magnuss. "What news do you want?"

"Why, they were saying at the inn last night that he'd gone off up the valley, and hadn't come back."

"Well, you can just tell them to shut their mouths," said Magnuss, furious at this new questioner. "Erikr Ericsson knows his own business, and if he's gone off for a few days on affairs of his own, he knows what he is about."

He turned and left the shop. Here was a new trouble. How would it ever be possible to escape the eye and the tongue of Skarsstöd? In a week or a fortnight the place would be fermenting with the non-return of Ericsson; and to get him from the Fulmar to some more distant spot on the coast without the knowledge of this hive of busybodies would be a task indeed; and if Skarsstöd once knew the facts, the Government medical man at Stykkisholmur would not be long without the knowledge.

As he turned down the street, whom should he meet but Helga Thordursson, making for the house.

Helga, when she arrived of a morning, always found the two men up and generally out. She made the beds and cleaned and tidied the place, lit the stove and prepared breakfast, all for a kronur a week, to say nothing of the fact that she cooked and prepared their supper, and washed the plates and dishes. Besides this, she did most of the housework for her own family. She was carrying now a broom in one hand and a jug with the milk for their coffee in the other.

She was one of those characters absolutely uncomplaining, honest, faithful, and enduring, that are found now and then, like examples set up by God for all folk to copy—examples that are rarely even understood.

She had drawn Magnuss to her from the first. Everything under her touch straightened itself and went right. She was like the good spirit of the house; and when he met her now face to face, it was like meeting a solution of all his difficulties. The stupidity that had prompted him to lock the door and prevent her from entering the house, lest she might see the bareness and confusion of the place, vanished.

He turned and walked with her up the street and, arrived at the house, he unlocked the door and they entered.

"Helga," said Magnuss, before she could speak, "Erikr Ericsson has left Skarsstöd, and he never can come back again, and he is near here, quite close, but in a place I cannot tell you of. He is in great affliction. And look! You see I have taken our blankets, the stove, all the food—everything I could find I have taken to him."

The girl looked around her at the bare room, where nothing remained but the bedsteads, the chairs, and tables, the picture on the wall, and some odds and ends in the way of clothing and fishing-gear. She was pale and her lips trembled slightly as she turned to Magnuss. It was as though the disaster had touched her too.

"And Erikr Ericsson will not come back?" said she. "Never again?"

"Never again," said Magnuss.

"And you," said Helga, "what will you do in this bare place, and without him? for you and he were like one, always together. Ay, but this is bad news. And Schwalla Gunarsson—she whom he was engaged to marry—does she know the news?"

"No, she knows nothing yet, and that is the hardest part of the thing, for I have to tell her. It is bad news, as you say; bad news. And what will I do without him? That is still to be told."

He took his seat on a chair near the door and picked up some of the fishing-gear and began to play with it and examine it as though it had some interest for him. Helga, who had placed the jug upon the table and the broom against a chair, stood now close to the table, with her eyes fixed on Magnuss. She did not seem to see him; she seemed staring through him and beyond him. She had not asked as to the nature of this affliction that had fallen upon Ericsson; she accepted Magnuss's word that it was of a nature that would prevent his return.

"So you see," went on Magnuss, after a moment's pause, and speaking as though he were continuing some conversation, "it is a thing that no one must know about, only you and me and Schwalla Gunarsson. Not even Stefan Gunarsson must know of it."

"No one will learn of it from me," said Helga. She fancied that Ericsson had broken the law in some way. When she was quite small, Jón Sturlusson, whose name is remembered still, a wild, bad man and a fiend under the influence of the cursed drink, had gone out on the fjord one day with a brother fisherman. They had taken drink with them, and the boat had come back rowed by Sturlusson, with the other man lying on the few fresh-caught fish, dead, with a Norwegian knife in his heart, and Sturlusson laughing and singing and fighting the men who had tried to take him. Sturlusson escaped to the hills, where he hid for weeks before he was caught.

It was the only instance Helga had known of a man having to hide away in secret. Ericsson, she felt, had done something equally against the law—what it was she could not imagine, nor did she seek to inquire, though she was sure it could be nothing like Sturlusson's act.

All her heart went out to Magnuss, sitting there miserable and fumbling with the fishing-gear. Her eyes filled with tears. Going over to him, she placed her hand on his shoulder as if to comfort him. Magnuss started, then, looking up, he drew her down towards him. He had no idea of love; the tragedy was too heavy upon him to let him have thought of anything else for the moment, yet he held her to him for a moment close.

He had lost Ericsson, and it seemed to him that God had sent him Helga.

Helga did not resist. Then in a moment or so, when his grasp relaxed, she slipped away and, as though nothing had happened, began to put the place in order, moving hither and thither and doing her work with an air of abstraction, almost as though she were unconscious of the other's presence. As she worked, he told her of the journey he proposed to make to Reykjavik on the morrow.

He had still in his pocket the two rolls he had bought, and mechanically, as he talked to her, he brought them out and began eating them.

When the place was in order, she looked round as though taking stock of its contents. Then, without a word, she went out, returning presently with a small oil-stove which she had borrowed from one of the neighbours.

"I told them yours wouldn't burn," said she. "But I will have to take it back when I have made your coffee, so you must get another one at the store." He helped her to light it, and then she put some water on to boil, and went off to the store for coffee and sugar and eggs. She had scarcely asked a question about Ericsson; she had offered no condolences; all her energies had been concentrated on doing what she could for the stricken man; and she forgot nothing.

She reminded him that he would want blankets, and offered to buy them for him. Then she left him, and Magnuss ate the food she had placed before him and drank the coffee.

He had determined after all to go out to the fishing with Súrsson. It would pass the time and put off the chance of his meeting with Schwalla.

He had promised to tell her, and he would tell her; but he wished to put the interview off as near as possible to the time of his starting for Reykjavik.

He left the house when he had finished breakfast, turned down the street to the beach, and the first person he met was Schwalla.

Schwalla had not slept. The absence of Ericsson and the way in which he had gone off, without saying a word, alarmed her. She had heard none of the gossip of Skarsstöd as to Olsen the parson having met Ericsson away up at the farms, and Ericsson's not recognising him; she only knew that Ericsson had left Skarsstöd on some business, and had said no word to her of his going.

"You see I am out early," said she. "I came out to look at the sea. I thought I might meet either you or Erikr. Has he not returned yet?"

"He has not come back yet," replied Magnuss. The terror of what he had to tell her never seemed so monstrous as just now, facing her there in the bright morning. He was an absolute coward in this matter. There was plenty of time for him to tell her before the *Ingolfur* took him to Reykjavik, so he temporised.

Schwalla paused for a moment before speaking again. Then she said:

"He did not tell me he was going, and he did not tell you, did he? You remember, when I called the day before yesterday, you said he would be back soon."

“No,” said Magnuss; “but he sent me a message to say he was gone on business. You see, he has so much to think of with this new boat he is getting from Reykjavik.”

“He sent you a message?” said Schwalla.

“Yes,” replied the other, hating himself for the lie.

Schwalla said nothing more. She passed on; and Magnuss, having glanced back at her, went towards the beach, where Súrsson was getting ready for the fishing.

The girl was deeply disturbed. If Ericsson had communicated with Magnuss, why had he not sent her a message too? She was too proud to put this question in words; she felt hurt and slighted. But there was worse to come.

At breakfast Gunarsson broached the question. Gunarsson had been out even earlier than Schwalla, and his chief factor, who had talked to Súrsson, had got all the news from him and had repeated it.

“Why did you not tell me Erikr Ericsson had gone off to Reykjavik?” asked Gunarsson. “It was a fool’s journey to go there overland, when the *Ingolfur* would have taken him just as quick if he had waited for her. But there you are! These young men nowadays think that they have every knowledge about everything in their own heads, and that their elders are fools. Yes, it is so. And if he had come to me, I would have pointed out the stupidity of the business. But oh, no! old Gunarsson is a fool. Well, there you are! But he’s not such a fool as to waste his time and money making a fool’s journey like that.”

Schwalla said nothing. So Ericsson had gone to Reykjavik! started without a word—left her. Ah! the pain came suddenly and sharp like a dagger-thrust; the sudden realisation that this was no ordinary journey. He had gone away, left her, never to return. He had tired of her, or there was some one else. That was the only explanation; that *could* be the only explanation. And the conviction came to her, straight and bleak and hard as the north wind from Jan Meyen Island comes to Skarsstöd, freezing the air and filling the Flóka valley with whirling snowflakes.

And Gunarsson went on with his breakfast, and noticed nothing.

After breakfast the girl went about her household duties as usual.

During the last few days, every now and then a feeling had come to her that her happiness was too great to last. Born of the true Icelandic stock on the father's side, there was always with her an ingrained suspicion of the world when it smiled too cheerfully on her. Her forefathers had known the ice and the earthquakes and the floods of centuries—and the Danes. They had known the fact that fine weather is the sure precursor of bad, and now in her own person she was summing up the instinctive learning of a thousand years and proving its truth and value. That was why she faced her loss now without flinching, without a word and without a tear, just as Ericsson had faced the news of his father's death, and his own terrific fate.

Loss and disaster were as terrible to these two as to you and me, but they were possessed of their own souls by virtue of the sufferings of their forefathers and the patience that suffering alone can give.

CHAPTER IX

SHE HEARS THE NEWS

The *Ingolfur* was due to start at four on the following day, and at two o'clock Magnuss, having gone down to the beach to see if the boat had arrived, took his way back hurriedly to Gunarsson's house. Gunarsson he knew to be out, away up the valley.

When he reached the door he was breathing hard and his lips were dry, so that when the little servant appeared he could scarcely speak.

Yes, Schwalla was in. He followed the girl down the passage to the sitting-room, where she left him whilst she went upstairs to call her mistress.

Magnuss walked up and down the room whilst he waited. Though his lips were dry enough, the palms of his hands were sweating so that he had to keep rubbing them on his coat.

He stopped every now and then to look at the photographs on the wall.

Here was Thorsmörk and the Eygafjalla Jokull, with the ice spilling all over it as though emptied on it by a vast ladle; here was Skarsstöd, and here was the source of the Flóka, a dim glen cut in the basalt and showing the far-away snow of the Lang Jokull.

He examined them, losing not a detail. Every peak and rock seemed to him mixed up with the business upon which he had come. He was looking at the last picture when the door opened and Schwalla came in.

She shut the door mechanically and without taking her eyes from the man at the opposite side of the room. She knew at once that he had come about Ericsson, and that he had some fateful news. She came straight towards him, pale to the lips, but showing no hesitation. He had come to tell her the truth, of that she was sure—as sure as of the fact that Ericsson had deserted her and left her for ever.

"What is it?" asked Schwalla.

Magnuss had now one finger in the neck-band of his shirt, as though it were a noose strangling him; his face had become congested, and he began talking rapidly, running his words together, tripping and stumbling, but always making for the dreadful goal.

"I should have told you yesterday. I couldn't. I put it off. It is about Erikr Ericsson. He is gone, and you will never see him again."

His hand left his throat, and he stood with both hands clasped together, staring at the opposite wall as though something there had mesmerised him.

“Is he dead?” said Schwalla in a voice scarcely raised above a whisper.

Magnuss shook his head.

“No, it is not that. Worse.”

Then he told her, and she listened, standing erect, with her hand resting heavily on a chairback and her eyelids half drooped, like a person drugged.

She only said one word: “*That!*” It summed up everything. The fate that had fallen on her lover and her own fate. *That*. The one thing, the worst in life, the thing she knew of, but which she never had suspected, and which had yet been creeping towards her from the hour of her birth like a white panther, to destroy her life and the life of the man she loved. Magnuss, who had expected tears and outcries, felt vaguely relieved yet almost resentful, at the way in which she had taken the news. The worst of the business was over, and he did not restrain himself. He told all, painting the picture of the man on the Fulmar, alone there, with nothing but the birds and waves. Tears ran down his face as he talked half to Schwalla, half to himself.

“And I have to go to Reykjavik. It is his wish; he thought of others when he was like that; he said the fishing must go on, for the sake of Briem and the other. I never wish to see a fish taken from the sea again. Well, it is all the same. What is the good? We live and die, and all for what? I do not see the good of a world where such things happen. But there! there is no use talking. No one must know where he is.”

“Did he speak of me?” said Schwalla, and her voice almost frightened Magnuss, for it seemed to come from a great way off, small, like a voice heard in one’s head.

“Ay, he spoke of you. He told me to tell you. I did not want to tell you, but he said it must be. Well I am going to Reykjavik—and good-bye, for who knows in this world what may happen? Ay, one never knows. But there! there is no use talking.”

She went with him to the door. Then she went upstairs to her room, locked herself in, and sat down by the window.

So that was it. The most terrible fate that earth could devise had fallen upon Ericsson—but he had not deserted her. Like the sunshine on bleak mountains this thought lit the scenery of her mind. The whole world had turned for her to a desert, but the sun remained.

She rose up and paced the floor; her cheeks became flushed and her eyes brightened. Now and then she would pause at the window and look out at the distant mountains and the near valley; she saw it all as Magnuss saw the photographs in the room below; every detail of the scenery impressed itself upon her mind and became personal to her thoughts and an aid to thought. She was facing the overthrow of her world and the destruction of her future as she had planned it, and the most terrific problem that time has ever set to woman. What was she to do? How was she to act?

Never for a moment did she question herself on this point. The elaborate problem which Fate had constructed for her to solve, once glanced at by Love, had been crumpled up and cast aside, answered.

She left the house and took her way up the valley. Movement was essential to her till the moment came when she could act.

She passed Gudmundsson's bungalow, and the salmon pools beyond, and the meadow of lava moss where she had lain that day asleep. The boulder was there still, and the whimbrels were calling and the river wimpling amidst the stones and the crag castles gazing down on her just as they had gazed that day when, awakening from sleep, she saw Ericsson standing before her.

She paused, just as one pauses at a grave. Then she passed on, away and up the valley.

At supper that night Gunarsson did not notice any change in Schwalla. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and she was absent-minded, but he did not notice small signs like these. His mind, free of the salmon-trap business, had become filled with another petty worry. Freights had gone up, and the consignment of salmon, dried and fresh, that had gone to Reykjavik by the *Ingolfur* that day had cost him a kronur or two more than he had reckoned on.

He put the extra charges down, not to the steamship company, but to the Government and the Danes, and he gave the girl a history of Danish misrule, which, of all speeches ever made by man, was the most lost in the world.

When she bade him good night she kissed him as usual, and then, just as she was leaving the room, she returned and kissed him again, this time on the forehead. She had done just the same on the night before leaving for Copenhagen on the visit to her Aunt Neilsson. Copenhagen had seemed to her worlds away, so far that one might never come back.

In the hall outside she paused for a moment, and then passed down it, and through the kitchen to the side yard. She went to Helgi's hutch and, taking the fox out, held it in her arms for a moment. Then she came back and went upstairs to her room.

It was nine o'clock, and as she sat down by the bureau next the window she could hear the Skarsstöd boys playing and shouting at the corner of the valley, and the voice of the river chattering over the stones and the occasional cry of a gull come landward. She opened the top drawer of the bureau and took from it a few letters tied together by a piece of narrow ribbon. They were old letters of her mother's, written to her father. She placed them in the bosom of her dress and went on examining the rest of the contents of the drawer. There was nothing of importance: a few letters from her Aunt Neilsson and some of her girl friends in Copenhagen. She opened one of these. It was from Olga Finsen, a stout, flaxen-haired, sentimental girl who was about to be married, and who poured forth her heart on the subject, describing her trousseau and the preparations for the festivities, and her own feelings on the subject. The descriptions of the trousseau and the preparations were written in a free and unfettered style and from the heart, the emotional passages were all stereotyped. She knew as much about love as the goose knows of the emotions that thrill the nightingale, yet she would, doubtless, make an excellent wife and be a happy woman.

Schwalla put all the papers back and closed the drawer. She had no other preparations to make, and she lay down on the bed to rest, staring wide-eyed at the light upon the side wall and the pattern of the wall-paper. The sound of the boys died away, and she could hear them running off home.

The tide would not allow her to get round to the harbour for the purpose she required till after twelve o'clock. She had over two hours to wait, and, wearied out with the events of the day, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

THE REVENGE OF WOMAN

It was past midnight when she awoke.

She rose from the bed and glanced at the little clock on the side-table. Then, taking her hat, she looked round as though to carry with her a last impression of the place she had known from childhood, and left the room.

She left the house by the front door, closing it softly behind her, unlatched the gate in the paling and then stood looking up and down the desolate street. There was not a soul in sight, and Skarsstöd lay beneath the dim blue sky, with a soft glow touching the houses and the road, the little gardens and the white-painted rails, as though sunlight were dissolved in the air and touching to life a world of vague blue and palest rose. The place had the strangest appearance of stillness and unreality, like a coloured stereoscopic picture. The river only was alive, and leaped and whispered, creaming over the stones and passing in swift dark sheets over the pools.

Schwalla glanced once at the house she had left, and then came down the street towards the sea.

A southerly breeze was blowing right up from the Huammsfjordur, bringing with it the faint perfume of leagues of coast and darkening the vague blue of the Breidifjord from Sandur to the hundred islands round Flatey.

The Fulmar, far and desolate, seen by the midnight day seemed remote and unearthly, as some island of the sea of dreams.

She stood for a moment on the beach, with her eyes resting on it just as they had rested on Ericsson's boat that night when, weary with searching for the cause of her unrest and disquiet, she found it in her own heart. Then she came along the beach to the harbour, where several boats were tied up to the mooring-rings let into the basalt of the ledge that did duty for landing-stage. Ericsson's boat, the small one he used in connection with the *Helga*, was there amongst the others; the sculls and sail were in her, and Schwalla, having untied the painter from the ring, drew her close up and stepped in. She pushed off with a scull, and rowed out beyond the harbour mouth till she caught the breeze; then she stepped the little mast, shook out the sail, and, bringing the sheet aft, steered out to sea.

She was steering for the Fulmar.

The great rock stood out sharply against the sky-line, and now she could see the white of the birds lining the basalt, the long battalions of the guillemots like streaks of grey chalk drawn by a steady hand upon the purple of the rock. The course she was steering lay quarter of a mile to southward of her destination. When she had got almost abreast of the southern beach she put the helm over, let out the sheet and came in before the wind. It had died a bit, and the sail, just filling, brought the boat along on the gentle swell, soundless as a gull in flight before the wind.

She could hear now the water washing on the beach and the "hoch" and spit of a cave refusing the sea. But there was no earthly sign of life, and her heart, brave till now, quailed at the thought that rose in her mind.

As the boat touched the beach she let the sheet run loose, and as the boat came broadside on to the shale she sprang out, but so lightly that there was scarcely a sound. She knew the Fulmar well, and that any one not seen on the plateau or on the beach must be in the cave, and, heedless of the boat or what became of it, she came up the slight incline softly and timorously, her hand pressed on her heart.

She looked in.

Ericsson, lying on two of the blankets, was asleep, his right fist clenched and lying on his chest. There was sufficient light to show his face, and he moved uneasily and muttered like a man who is fighting a nightmare.

This was the second time he had slept since coming to the Fulmar, and each time his dreams had been terrible.

He was now engaged in one of these superhuman dreams. Unconscious of what was the matter with him, he was acting on the stage of dreamland the part of a man who had committed some sin from which he can never escape. He was walking up the street of Skarsstöd, followed by all the fisher-folk and villagers, pursuing him in dead silence and loathing. Gudmundsson paused to watch him pass, and it was his punishment that he had to go straight to Gunarsson's house. He had passed his own house when he suddenly became aware of his crime. He was a leper. His hands were white, and now, coming towards him, he saw two forms—Schwalla and Helgi.

They stopped, and then Schwalla ran away, ran with the speed of Atalanta, and as he cried out after her, the dream fell to ruins around him. He woke up, and there, kneeling beside him, was Schwalla.

CHAPTER XI

THE FEATHER

Magnuss, when he reached Reykjavik, went straight from the quay to Stefansson's office, where he received a shock from the way in which Stefansson took the news he had to tell him about Ericsson.

Stefansson was horrified at the news, but more so at the way in which things had been hushed up. This was no trifling matter; the authorities ought to be informed.

"So that they may put him in hospital?" said Magnuss.

"Precisely," replied Stefansson, not taking the other's tone.

The two men were seated opposite to one another, at the table in Stefansson's sitting-room. He had produced cigars and brandy for the traveller, and Magnuss was leaning in his chair, with his arm hooked over the back of it.

"Well," said Magnuss, "he is not going into any hospital. He is going to remain where he is for the present, and then I will take him up coast to the Arnafjordur. I have thought it all out."

"But think of the danger to yourself and other people."

"I will look after myself, and there are no other people up there."

"Well," said Stefansson, "that is all right for you, but it seems to me that my duty——"

"If you were to go and tell of this," said Magnuss, in whom the brandy was working, "I would kill you. That's short and straight. So now let us talk of something else and get to business."

Stefansson turned from the subject and spoke of Gudmundsson, who had left Reykjavik some days before and had not since been heard of; but Magnuss took little interest in the matter of Gudmundsson's disappearance.

The *Ingolfur*, having discharged cargo and passengers, hung for a day idle, and then put back up coast with Magnuss on board.

They reached Skarsstöd at nine in the morning, and the first news that Magnuss received was the news that Schwalla had vanished. Fishing had been suspended—everything—and the whole population of Skarsstöd had for the past four days scoured the country round, the Flóka valley, the hills, and the coastline.

They had never dreamt of the islands, or of looking to see if one of the boats had been taken. Helga guessed the whole matter, but as she did not know in the least where Ericsson was hiding, and as Magnuss had made her promise to say nothing of the business, she was dumb. Magnuss guessed at once the truth and hurried round to the harbour.

Yes, the boat was gone. The *Helga* was anchored in three-fathom water, but the small boat was gone. Never had he imagined that Schwalla would take such a course—and she had been four days on the Fulmar, alone with Ericsson!

He sat down on the same ledge of rock upon which Schwalla and Ericsson had sat that day.

So she had gone to him, casting everything to the winds—life and reputation!

Magnuss, amongst his other attributes, had something of the soul of an old maid where respectable women and their dealings with men were concerned. Besides, Schwalla was his cousin and any stain upon her was a stain on him.

He must act at once. He must do something to get her back, or, failing that, to hide the disgrace. He began to see now the inevitable end of the man whom he had determined to cherish and protect, even should he—Magnuss—share the same fate.

But what was to be done?

Suddenly an idea struck him, and, rising, he made his way back along the beach to the town. Gunarsson was still away on the search; so were Súrsson and Briem and most of the other men. Gunarsson was paying them five kronur a day for the business, with an offer of a thousand kronur to the first who brought news of the missing one.

Olsen the parson alone had taken no part in the hunt, except that of offering up prayers. He was a delicate man, and even his visit to Bjarnarnes that day on which he had met Ericsson had done him up.

As luck would have it, Olsen was the first person whom Magnuss met on leaving the beach. Magnuss took him by the arm and led him down to the landing-stage. The *Ingolfur*, having discharged her passengers, had departed, and was now only a speck on the distant sea. The landing-stage was deserted, and there, standing before Olsen, Magnuss told the whole story.

“And she went to him!” said Olsen, when Magnuss had finished. He was a seemingly unemotional man, but he had taken fire now, under the skin, and his eyes were bright, and he had drawn himself up so that he looked an inch taller.

“Yes, she went to him.”

“Ah!” said Olsen. “What a woman!”

“And now,” said Magnuss, “I am going to them, and I want you to bear me company. She has thrown everything away, but there is one thing yet to be saved, and I want you to save it.”

Olsen understood him.

“I will come,” said he.

They walked back to the harbour, and Magnuss made one of the sailing-boats ready; then Olsen got in and, Magnuss steering and managing the sail at the same time, they started.

It was full noon now, and the wind that had been blowing from the south for the last few days had veered to south-west, and all along the horizon a line of white clouds like a flock of white swans deepened by contrast the blue of the sea.

As they drew nearer to their destination, gulls from the Fulmar flew out as if to meet and inspect them, and the terns chased each other round the boat.

Magnuss, as he put the helm over and steered straight for the beach, drew his breath hard. Where was the boat in which Schwalla had come? The beach was the only possible place where it could be, yet there was not a sign of it.

As the stem touched the shale, they jumped out and pulled the light craft up on the beach, and Magnuss leading the way, they hurried up to the cave.

The cave was tenantless. Yet Schwalla had been there, for on the blankets, carefully folded in a corner, was laid the black-and-white feather of a himbrimi. Ericsson had picked it up one day on the cliffs, and had given it to Schwalla, who had always worn it in her hat.

Magnuss picked up the feather and stood with it in his hand. Then, without a word, he hurried from the cave and, followed by his companion, climbed to the plateau.

There was no one there.

From the plateau every bit of the Fulmar on which a foot might rest was visible. Nothing was to be seen but the gulls and the rocks and the creaming waves whose voices came like a requiem from below.

Magnuss's eyes, leaving the Fulmar, travelled far and wide over the blue fjord, as if in the despairing hope of seeing some sail, some sign of the vanished ones. There was nothing.

Noon held the whole world in her keeping; the very gulls had rested from their eternal labour; all but a flock of gannets far overhead, stringing southward against the sun.

From Sandur Point to the Huammsfjordur and from there to Skagastrond Bay, the coast showed from the foam-line to the distant and delicately coloured hills, and from Breidavik Point to Snaefellsness the unfettered sea lay peacefully sleeping in the blue weather.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Children of the Sea* by Henry de Vere Stacpoole]