



The Marsh King's Daughter

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Advanced
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The storks tell their little ones very many stories, all of the moor and the marsh. These stories are generally adapted to the age and capacity of the hearers. The youngest are content if they are told “Kribble-krabble, plurre-murre” as a story, and find it charming; but the older ones want something with a deeper meaning, or at any rate something relating to the family. Of the two oldest and longest stories that have been preserved among the storks, we are only acquainted with one, namely, that of Moses, who was exposed by his mother on the banks of the Nile, and whom the king’s daughter found, and who afterwards became a great man and a prophet. That history is very well known.

The second is not known yet, perhaps, because it is quite an inland story. It has been handed down from mouth to mouth, from stork-mamma to stork-mamma, for thousands of years, and each of them has told it better and better; and now we’ll tell it best of all.

The first stork pair who told the story had their summer residence on the wooden house of the Viking, which lay by the wild moor in Wendsyssel; that is to say, if we are to speak out of the abundance of our knowledge, hard by the great moor in the circle of Hjörning, high up by the Skagen, the northern point of Jutland. The wilderness there is still a great wide moor-heath, about which we can read in the official description of districts. It is said that in old times there was here a sea, whose bottom was upheaved; now the moorland

extends for miles on all sides, surrounded by damp meadows, and unsteady shaking swamp, and turfy moor, with blueberries and stunted trees. Mists are almost always hovering over this region, which seventy years ago was still inhabited by wolves. It is certainly rightly called the “wild moor;” and one can easily think how dreary and lonely it must have been, and how much marsh and lake there was here a thousand years ago. Yes, in detail, exactly the same things were seen then that may yet be beheld. The reeds had the same height, and bore the same kind of long leaves and bluish-brown feathery plumes that they bear now; the birch stood there, with its white bark and its fine loosely-hanging leaves, just as now; and as regards the living creatures that dwelt here—why, the fly wore its gauzy dress of the same cut that it wears now; and the favourite colours of the stork were white picked out with black, and red stockings. The people certainly wore coats of a different cut to those they now wear; but whoever stepped out on the shaking moorland, be he huntsman or follower, master or servant, met with the same fate a thousand years ago that he would meet with to-day. He sank and went down to the “marsh king,” as they called him, who ruled below in the great moorland empire. They also called him “gungel king;” but we like the name “marsh king” better, and by that we’ll call him, as the storks did. Very little is known of the marsh king’s rule; but perhaps that is a good thing.

In the neighbourhood of the moorland, hard by the great arm of the German Ocean and the Cattegat, which is called the Lümfjorden, lay the wooden house of the Viking, with its stone water-tight cellars, with its tower and its three projecting stories. On the roof the stork had built his nest; and stork-mamma there hatched the eggs, and felt sure that her hatching would come to something.

One evening stork-papa stayed out very long; and when he came home he looked very bustling and important.

“I’ve something very terrible to tell you,” he said to the stork-mamma.

“Let that be,” she replied. “Remember that I’m hatching the eggs, and you might agitate me, and I might do them a mischief.”

“You must know it,” he continued. “She has arrived here—the daughter of our host in Egypt—she has dared to undertake the journey here—and she’s gone!”

“She who came from the race of the fairies? Oh, tell me all about it! You know I can’t bear to be kept long in suspense when I’m hatching eggs.”

“You see, mother, she believed in what the doctor said, and you told me true. She believed that the moor flowers would bring healing to her sick father, and she has flown here in swan’s plumage, in company with the other swan-princesses, who come to the North every year to renew their youth. She has come here, and she is gone!”

“You are much too long-winded!” exclaimed the stork-mamma, “and the eggs might catch cold. I can’t bear being kept in such suspense!”

“I have kept watch,” said the stork-papa; “and to-night, when I went into the reeds—there where the marsh ground will bear me—three swans came. Something in their flight seemed to say to me, ‘Look out! That’s not altogether swan; it’s only swan’s feathers!’ Yes, mother, you have a feeling of intuition just as I have; you know whether a thing is right or wrong.”

“Yes, certainly,” she replied; “but tell me about the princess. I’m sick of hearing of the swan’s feathers.”

“Well, you know that in the middle of the moor there is something like a lake,” continued stork-papa. “You can see one corner of it if you raise yourself a little. There, by the reeds and the green mud, lay a great alder stump; and on this the three swans sat, flapping their wings and looking about them. One of them threw off her plumage, and I immediately recognized her as our house princess from Egypt! There she sat, with no covering but her long black hair. I heard her tell the others to pay good heed to the swan’s plumage, while she dived down into the water to pluck the flowers which she fancied she saw growing there. The others nodded, and picked up the empty feather dress and took care of it. ‘I wonder what they will do with it?’ thought I; and perhaps she asked herself the same question. If so, she got an answer—a very practical answer—for the two rose up and flew away with her swan’s plumage. ‘Do thou dive down,’ they cried; ‘thou shalt never see Egypt again! Remain thou here in the moor!’ And so saying, they tore the swan’s plumage into a thousand pieces, so that the feathers whirled about like a snow-storm; and away they flew—the two faithless princesses!”

the princess left in the marsh.

“Why, that is terrible!” said stork-mamma. “I can’t bear to hear any more of it. But now tell me what happened

next.”

“The princess wept and lamented aloud. Her tears fell fast on the alder stump, and the latter moved; for it was not a regular alder stump, but the marsh king—he who lives and rules in the depths of the moor! I myself saw it—how the stump of the tree turned round, and ceased to be a tree stump; long thin branches grew forth from it like arms.

Then the poor child was terribly frightened, and sprang up to flee away. She hurried across to the green slimy ground; but that cannot even carry me, much less her. She sank immediately, and the alder stump dived down too; and it was he who drew her down. Great black bubbles rose up out of the moor-slime, and the last trace of both of them vanished when these burst. Now the princess is buried in the wild moor, and never more will she bear away a flower to Egypt. Your heart would have burst, mother, if you had seen it.”

“You ought not to tell me anything of the kind at such a time as this,” said stork-mamma; “the eggs might suffer by it. The princess will find some way of escape; some one will come to help her. If it had been you or I, or one of our people, it would certainly have been all over with us.”

“But I shall go and look every day to see if anything happens,” said stork-papa.

And he was as good as his word.

A long time had passed, when at last he saw a green stalk shooting up out of the deep moor-ground. When it reached the surface, a leaf spread out and unfolded itself broader and broader; close by it, a bud came out. And one morning, when stork-papa flew over the stalk, the bud opened through the power of the strong sunbeams, and in the cup of the flower lay a beautiful child—a little girl—looking just as if she had risen out of the bath. The little one so closely resembled the princess from Egypt, that at the first moment the stork thought it must be the princess herself; but, on second thoughts, it appeared more probable that it must be the daughter of the princess and of the marsh king; and that also explained her being placed in the cup of the water-lily.

“But she cannot possibly be left lying there,” thought stork-papa; “and in my nest there are so many persons already. But stay, I have a thought. The wife of the Viking has no children, and how often has she not wished for a little one! People always say, ‘The stork has brought a little one;’ and I will do so in earnest this time. I shall fly with the child to the Viking’s wife. What rejoicing there will be yonder!”

And the stork lifted the little girl out of the flower-cup, flew to the wooden house, picked a hole with his beak in the bladder-covered window, laid the charming child on the bosom of the Viking’s wife, and then hurried up to the stork-mamma, and told her what he had seen and done; and the little storks listened to the story, for they were big enough to do so now.

“So you see,” he concluded, “the princess is not dead, for she must have sent the little one up here; and now that is provided for too.”

“Ah, I said it would be so, from the very beginning!” said the stork-mamma; “but now think a little of your own family. Our travelling time is drawing on; sometimes I feel quite restless in my wings already. The cuckoo and the nightingale have started; and I heard the quails saying that they were going too, so soon as the wind was favourable. Our young ones will behave well at the exercising, or I am much deceived in them.”

The Viking’s wife was extremely glad when she woke next morning and found the charming infant lying in her arms. She kissed and caressed it; but it cried violently, and struggled with its arms and legs, and did not seem rejoiced at all. At length it cried itself to sleep; and as it lay there still and tranquil, it looked exceedingly beautiful. The Viking’s wife was in high glee: she felt light in body and soul; her heart leapt within her; and it seemed to her as if her husband and his warriors, who were absent, must return quite as suddenly and unexpectedly as the little one had come.

Therefore she and the whole household had enough to do in preparing everything for the reception of her lord. The long coloured curtains of tapestry, which she and her maids had worked, and on which they had woven pictures of their idols, Odin, Thor, and Freya, were hung up; the slaves polished the old shields, that served as ornaments; and cushions were placed on the benches, and dry wood laid on the fireplace in the midst of the hall, so that the flame might be fanned up at a moment's notice. The Viking's wife herself assisted in the work, so that towards evening she was very tired, and went to sleep quickly and lightly.

When she awoke towards morning, she was violently alarmed, for the infant had vanished! She sprang from her couch, lighted a pine-torch, and searched all round about; and, behold, in the part of the bed where she had stretched her feet, lay, not the child, but a great ugly frog! She was horror-struck at the sight, and seized a heavy stick to kill the frog; but the creature looked at her with such strange, mournful eyes, that she was not able to strike the blow. Once more she looked round the room—the frog uttered a low, wailing croak, and she started, sprang from the couch, and ran to the window and opened it. At that moment the sun shone forth, and flung its beams through the window on the couch and on the great frog; and suddenly it appeared as though the frog's great mouth contracted and became small and red, and its limbs moved and stretched and became beautifully symmetrical, and it was no longer an ugly frog which lay there, but her pretty child!

“What is this?” she said. “Have I had a bad dream? Is it not my own lovely cherub lying there?”

And she kissed and hugged it; but the child struggled and fought like a little wild cat.

Not on this day nor on the morrow did the Viking return, although he certainly was on his way home; but the wind was against him, for it blew towards the south, favourably for the storks. A good wind for one is a contrary wind for another.

When one or two more days and nights had gone, the Viking's wife clearly understood how the case was with her child, that a terrible power of sorcery was upon it. By day it was charming as an angel of light, though it had a wild, savage temper; but at night it became an ugly frog, quiet and mournful, with sorrowful eyes. Here were two natures changing inwardly as well as outwardly with the sunlight. The reason of this was that by day the child had the form of its mother, but the disposition of its father; while, on the contrary, at night the paternal descent became manifest in its bodily appearance, though the mind and heart of the mother then

became dominant in the child. Who might be able to loosen this charm that wicked sorcery had worked?

The wife of the Viking lived in care and sorrow about it; and yet her heart yearned towards the little creature, of whose condition she felt she should not dare tell her husband on his return; for he would probably, according to the custom which then prevailed, expose the child on the public highway, and let whoever listed take it away. The good Viking woman could not find it in her heart to allow this, and she therefore determined that the Viking should never see the child except by daylight.

One morning the wings of storks were heard rushing over the roof; more than a hundred pairs of those birds had rested from their exercise during the previous night, and now they soared aloft, to travel southwards.

“All males here, and ready,” they cried; “and the wives and children too.”

“How light we feel!” screamed the young storks in chorus: “it seems to be creeping all over us, down into our very toes, as if we were filled with frogs. Ah, how charming it is, travelling to foreign lands!”

“Mind you keep close to us during your flight,” said papa and mamma. “Don’t use your beaks too much, for that tires the chest.”

And the storks flew away.

At the same time the sound of the trumpets rolled across the heath, for the Viking had landed with his warriors; they were returning home, richly laden with spoil, from the Gallic coast, where the people, as in the land of the Britons, sang in frightened accents:

“Deliver us from the wild Northmen!”

the viking’s feast.

And life and tumultuous joy came with them into the Viking’s castle on the moorland. The great mead tub was brought into the hall, the pile of wood was set ablaze, horses were killed, and a great feast was to begin. The officiating priest sprinkled the slaves with the warm blood; the fire crackled, the smoke rolled along beneath the roof; but they were accustomed to that. Guests were invited, and received handsome gifts: all feuds and all malice were forgotten. And the company drank deep, and threw the bones of the feast in each others’ faces, and this was considered a sign of good humour. The bard, a kind of minstrel, but who was also a warrior, and

had been on the expedition with the rest, sang them a song, in which they heard all their warlike deeds praised, and everything remarkable specially noticed. Every verse ended with the burden:

“Goods and gold, friends and foes will die; every man must one day die;
But a famous name will never die!”

And with that they beat upon their shields, and hammered the table in glorious fashion with bones and knives.

The Viking's wife sat upon the high seat in the open hall. She wore a silken dress, and golden armlets, and great amber beads: she was in her costliest garb. And the bard mentioned her in his song, and sang of the rich treasure she had brought her rich husband. The latter was delighted with the beautiful child, which he had seen in the daytime in all its loveliness; and the savage ways of the little creature pleased him especially. He declared that the girl might grow up to be a stately heroine, strong and determined as a man. She would not wink her eyes when a practised hand cut off her eyebrows with a sword by way of a jest.

The full mead barrel was emptied, and a fresh one brought in; for these were people who liked to enjoy all things plentifully. The old proverb was indeed well known, which says, “The cattle know when they should quit the pasture, but a foolish man knoweth not the measure of his own appetite.” Yes, they knew it well enough; but one knows one thing, and one does another. They also knew that “even the welcome guest becomes wearisome when he sitteth long in the house;” but for all that they sat still, for pork and mead are good things; and there was high carousing, and at night the bondmen slept among the warm ashes, and dipped their fingers in the fat grease and licked them. Those were glorious times!

Once more in the year the Viking sallied forth, though the storms of autumn already began to roar: he went with his warriors to the shores of Britain, for he declared that was but an excursion across the water; and his wife stayed at home with the little girl. And thus much is certain, that the poor lady soon got to love the frog with its gentle eyes and its sorrowful sighs, almost better than the pretty child that bit and beat all around her.

The rough damp mist of autumn, which devours the leaves of the forest, had already descended upon thicket and heath. “Birds feather-less,” as they called the snow, flew in thick masses, and winter was coming on fast. The sparrows took possession of the storks’ nests, and talked about the absent proprietors according to their fashion; but these—the stork pair, with all the young ones—what had become of them?

The storks were now in the land of Egypt, where the sun sent forth warm rays, as it does here on a fine midsummer day. Tamarinds and acacias bloomed in the country all around; the crescent of Mahomet glittered from the cupolas of the temples, and on the slender towers sat many a stork pair resting after the long journey. Great troops divided the nests, built close together on venerable pillars and in fallen temple arches of forgotten cities. The date-palm lifted up its screen as if it would be a sunshade; the greyish-white pyramids stood like masses of shadow in the clear air of the far desert, where the ostrich ran his swift career, and the lion gazed with his great grave eyes at the marble sphinx which lay half buried in the sand. The waters of the Nile had fallen, and the whole river bed was crowded with frogs, and this spectacle was just according to the taste of the stork family. The young storks thought it was optical illusion, they found everything so glorious.

“Yes, it’s delightful here; and it’s always like this in our warm country,” said the stork-mamma; and the young ones felt quite frisky on the strength of it.

“Is there anything more to be seen?” they asked. “Are we to go much farther into the country?”

“There’s nothing further to be seen,” answered stork-mamma. “Behind this delightful region there are luxuriant forests, whose branches are interlaced with one another, while prickly climbing plants close up the paths—only the elephant can force a way for himself with his great feet; and the snakes are too big, and the lizards too quick for us. If you go into the desert, you’ll get your eyes full of sand when there’s a light breeze, but when it blows great guns you may get into the middle of a pillar of sand. It is best to stay here, where there are frogs and locusts. I shall stay here, and you shall stay too.”

And there they remained. The parents sat in the nest on the slender minaret, and rested, and yet were busily employed smoothing and cleaning their feathers, and whetting their beaks against their red stockings. Now and then they stretched out their necks, and bowed gravely, and lifted their heads, with their high foreheads and fine smooth feathers, and looked very clever with their brown eyes. The female young ones strutted about

in the juicy reeds, looked slyly at the other young storks, made acquaintances, and swallowed a frog at every third step, or rolled a little snake to and fro in their bills, which they thought became them well, and, moreover, tasted nice. The male young ones began a quarrel, beat each other with their wings, struck with their beaks, and even pricked each other till the blood came. And in this way sometimes one couple was betrothed, and sometimes another, of the young ladies and gentlemen, and that was just what they wanted, and their chief object in life: then they took to a new nest, and began new quarrels, for in hot countries people are generally hot-tempered and passionate. But it was pleasant for all that, and the old people especially were much rejoiced, for all that young people do seems to suit them well. There was sunshine every day, and every day plenty to eat, and nothing to think of but pleasure. But in the rich castle at the Egyptian host's, as they called him, there was no pleasure to be found.

The rich mighty lord reclined on his divan, in the midst of the great hall of the many-coloured walls, looking as if he were sitting in a tulip; but he was stiff and powerless in all his limbs, and lay stretched out like a mummy. His family and servants surrounded him, for he was not dead, though one could not exactly say that he was alive. The healing moor flower from the North, which was to have been found and brought home by her who loved him best, never appeared. His beautiful young daughter, who had flown in the swan's plumage over sea and land, to the far North, was never to come back. "She is dead!" the two returning swan-maidens had said, and they had concocted a complete story, which ran as follows:

"We three together flew high in the air: a hunter saw us, and shot his arrow at us; it struck our young companion and friend; and slowly, singing her farewell song, she sunk down, a dying swan, into the woodland lake. By the shore of the lake, under a weeping birch tree, we laid her in the cool earth. But we had our revenge. We bound fire under the wings of the swallow who had her nest beneath the huntsman's thatch; the house burst into flames, the huntsman was burnt in the house, and the glare shone over the sea as far as the hanging birch beneath which she sleeps. Never will she return to the land of Egypt."

And then the two wept. And when stork-papa heard the story, he clapped with his beak so that it could be heard a long way off.

"Treachery and lies!" he cried. "I should like to run my beak deep into their chests."

"And perhaps break it off," interposed the stork-mamma; "and then you would look well. Think first of

yourself, and then of your family, and all the rest does not concern you.”

“But to-morrow I shall seat myself at the edge of the open cupola, when the wise and learned men assemble, to consult on the sick man’s state: perhaps they may come a little nearer the truth.”

And the learned and wise men came together and spoke a great deal, out of which the stork could make no sense—and it had no result, either for the sick man or for the daughter in the swampy waste. But for all that we may listen to what the people said, for we have to listen to a great deal of talk in the world.

But then it’s an advantage to hear what went before, what has been said; and in this case we are well informed, for we know just as much about it as stork-papa.

“Love gives life! the highest love gives the highest life! Only through love can his life be preserved.” That is what they all said, and the learned men said it was very cleverly and beautifully spoken.

“That is a beautiful thought!” stork-papa said immediately.

“I don’t quite understand it,” stork-mamma replied: “and that’s not my fault, but the fault of the thought. But let it be as it will, I’ve something else to think of.”

And now the learned men had spoken of love to this one and that one, and of the difference between the love of one’s neighbour and love between parents and children, of the love of plants for the light, when the sunbeam kisses the ground and the germ springs forth from it,—everything was so fully and elaborately explained that it was quite impossible for stork-papa to take it in, much less to repeat it. He felt quite weighed down with thought, and half shut his eyes, and the whole of the following day he stood thoughtfully on one leg: it was quite heavy for him to carry, all that learning.

But one thing stork-papa understood. All, high and low, had spoken out of their inmost hearts, and said that it was a great misfortune for thousands of people, yes, for the whole country, that this man was lying sick, and could not get well, and that it would spread joy and pleasure abroad if he should recover. But where grew the flower that could restore him to health? They had all searched for it, consulted learned books, the twinkling stars, the weather and the wind; they had made inquiries in every byway of which they could think; and at length the wise men and the learned men had said, as we have already told, that “Love begets life—will restore

a father's life;" and on this occasion they had surpassed themselves, and said more than they understood.

They repeated it, and wrote down as a recipe, "Love begets life." But how was the thing to be prepared according to the recipe? that was a point they could not get over. At last they were decided upon the point that help must come by means of the princess, through her who clave to her father with her whole soul; and at last a method had been devised whereby help could be procured in this dilemma. Yes, it was already more than a year ago since the princess had sallied forth by night, when the brief rays of the new moon were waning: she had gone out to the marble sphinx, had shaken the dust from her sandals, and gone onward through the long passage which leads into the midst of one of the great pyramids, where one of the mighty kings of antiquity, surrounded by pomp and treasure, lay swathed in mummy cloths. There she was to incline her ear to the breast of the dead king; for thus, said the wise men, it should be made manifest to her where she might find life and health for her father. She had fulfilled all these injunctions, and had seen in a vision that she was to bring home from the deep lake in the northern moorland—the very place had been accurately described to her—the lotos flower which grows in the depths of the waters, and then her father would regain health and strength.

And therefore she had gone forth in the swan's plumage out of the land of Egypt to the open heath, to the woodland moor. And the stork-papa and stork-mamma knew all this; and now we also know it more accurately than we knew it before. We know that the marsh king had drawn her down to himself, and know that to her loved ones at home she is dead for ever. One of the wisest of them said, as the stork-mamma said too, "She will manage to help herself;" and at last they quieted their minds with that, and resolved to wait and see what would happen, for they knew of nothing better that they could do.

"I should like to take away the swan's feathers from the two faithless princesses," said the stork-papa; "then, at any rate, they will not be able to fly up again to the wild moor and do mischief. I'll hide the two swan-feather suits up there, till somebody has occasion for them."

"But where do you intend to hide them?" asked stork-mamma.

“Up in our nest in the moor,” answered he. “I and our young ones will take turns in carrying them up yonder, on our return, and if that should prove too difficult for us, there are places enough on the way where we can conceal them till our next journey. Certainly, one suit of swan’s feathers would be enough for the princess, but two are always better. In those northern countries no one can have too many wraps.”

“No one will thank you for it,” quoth stork-mamma; “but you’re the master. Except at breeding-time, I have nothing to say.”

In the Viking’s castle by the wild moor, whither the storks bent their flight when the spring approached, they had given the little girl the name of Helga; but this name was too soft for a temper like that which was associated with her beauteous form. Every month this temper showed itself in sharper outlines; and in the course of years—during which the storks made the same journey over and over again, in autumn to the Nile, in spring back to the moorland lake—the child grew to be a great girl; and before people were aware of it, she was a beautiful maiden in her sixteenth year. The shell was splendid, but the kernel was harsh and hard; and she was hard, as indeed were most people in those dark, gloomy times. It was a pleasure to her to splash about with her white hands in the blood of the horse that had been slain in sacrifice. In her wild mood she bit off the neck of the black cock the priest was about to offer up; and to her father she said in perfect seriousness,

“If thy enemy should pull down the roof of thy house, while thou wert sleeping in careless safety; if I felt it or heard it, I would not wake thee even if I had the power. I should never do it, for my ears still tingle with the blow that thou gavest me years ago—thou! I have never forgotten it.”

But the Viking took her words in jest; for, like all others, he was bewitched with her beauty, and he knew not how temper and form changed in Helga. Without a saddle she sat upon a horse, as if she were part of it, while it rushed along in full career; nor would she spring from the horse when it quarrelled and fought with other horses. Often she would throw herself, in her clothes, from the high shore into the sea, and swim to meet the Viking when his boat steered near home; and she cut the longest lock of her hair, and twisted it into a string for her bow.

“Self-achieved is well-achieved,” she said.

The Viking’s wife was strong of character and of will, according to the custom of the times; but, compared to

her daughter, she appeared as a feeble, timid woman; for she knew that an evil charm weighed heavily upon the unfortunate child.

It seemed as if, out of mere malice, when her mother stood on the threshold or came out into the yard, Helga, would often seat herself on the margin of the well, and wave her arms in the air; then suddenly she would dive into the deep well, when her frog nature enabled her to dive and rise, down and up, until she climbed forth again like a cat, and came back into the hall dripping with water, so that the green leaves strewn upon the ground floated and turned in the streams that flowed from her garments.

But there was one thing that imposed a check upon Helga, and that was the evening twilight. When that came she was quiet and thoughtful, and would listen to reproof and advice; and then a secret feeling seemed to draw her towards her mother. And when the sun sank, and the usual transformation of body and spirit took place in her, she would sit quiet and mournful, shrunk to the shape of the frog, her body indeed much larger than that of the animal whose likeness she took, and for that reason much more hideous to behold; for she looked like a wretched dwarf with a frog's head and webbed fingers. Her eyes then assumed a very melancholy expression. She had no voice, and could only utter a hollow croaking that sounded like the stifled sob of a dreaming child. Then the Viking's wife took her on her lap, and forgot the ugly form as she looked into the mournful eyes, and said,

“I could almost wish that thou wert always my poor dumb frog-child; for thou art only the more terrible when thy nature is veiled in a form of beauty.”

And the Viking woman wrote Runic characters against sorcery and spells of sickness, and threw them over the wretched child; but she could not see that they worked any good.

“One can scarcely believe that she was ever so small that she could lie in the cup of a water-lily,” said stork-papa, “now she's grown up the image of her Egyptian mother. Ah, we shall never see that poor lady again! Probably she did not know how to help herself, as you and the learned men said. Year after year I have flown to and fro, across and across the great moorland, and she has never once given a sign that she was still alive. Yes, I may as well tell you, that every year, when I came here a few days before you, to repair the nest and attend to various matters, I spent a whole night in flying to and fro over the lake, as if I had been an owl or a bat, but every time in vain. The two suits of swan feathers which I and the young ones dragged up here out of the land

of the Nile have consequently not been used: we had trouble enough with them to bring them hither in three journeys; and now they lie down here in the nest, and if it should happen that a fire broke out, and the wooden house were burned, they would be destroyed.”

“And our good nest would be destroyed too,” said stork-mamma; “but you think less of that than of your plumage stuff and of your moor-princess. You’d best go down into the mud and stay there with her. You’re a bad father to your own children, as I said already when I hatched our first brood. I only hope neither we nor our children will get an arrow in our wings through that wild girl. Helga doesn’t know in the least what she does. I wish she would only remember that we have lived here longer than she, and that we have never forgotten our duty, and have given our toll every year, a feather, an egg, and a young one, as it was right we should do. Do you think I can now wander about in the courtyard and everywhere, as I was wont in former days, and as I still do in Egypt, where I am almost the playfellow of the people, and that I can press into pot and kettle as I can yonder? No, I sit up here and am angry at her, the stupid chit! And I am angry at you too. You should have just left her lying in the water-lily, and she would have been dead long ago.”

“You are much better than your words,” said stork-papa. “I know you better than you know yourself.”

And with that he gave a hop, and flapped his wings heavily twice, stretched out his legs behind him, and flew away, or rather sailed away, without moving his wings. He had already gone some distance, when he gave a great flap! The sun shone upon his grand plumage, and his head and neck were stretched forth proudly. There was power in it, and dash!

“After all, he’s handsomer than any of them,” said stork-mamma to herself; “but I won’t tell him so.”

Early in that autumn the Viking came home, laden with booty, and bringing prisoners with him. Among these was a young Christian priest, one of those who contemned the gods of the North.

Often in those later times there had been a talk, in hall and chamber, of the new faith that was spreading far and wide in the South, and which, by means of Saint Ansgarius, had penetrated as far as Hedeby on the Schlei. Even Helga had heard of this belief in One who, from love to men and for their redemption, had sacrificed His life; but with her all this had, as the saying is, gone in at one ear and come out at the other. It seemed as if she only understood the meaning of the word “love,” when she crouched in a corner of the chamber in the form of a

miserable frog; but the Viking's wife had listened to the mighty history that was told throughout the lands, and had felt strangely moved thereby.

On their return from their voyage, the men told of the splendid temples, of their hewn stones, raised for the worship of Him whose worship is love. Some massive vessels, made with cunning art, of gold, had been brought home among the booty, and each one had a peculiar fragrance; for they were incense vessels, which had been swung by Christian priests before the altar.

In the deep cellars of the Viking's house the young priest had been immured, his hands and feet bound with strips of bark. The Viking's wife declared that he was beautiful as Bulder to behold, and his misfortune touched her heart; but Helga declared that it would be right to tie ropes to his heels, and fasten him to the tails of wild oxen. And she exclaimed,

“Then I would let loose the dogs—hurrah! over the moor and across the swamp! That would be a spectacle for the gods! And yet finer would it be to follow him in his career.”

But the Viking would not suffer him to die such a death: he purposed to sacrifice the priest on the morrow, on the death-stone in the grove, as a despiser and foe of the high gods.

For the first time a man was to be sacrificed here.

Helga begged, as a boon, that she might sprinkle the image of the god and the assembled multitude with the blood of the priest. She sharpened her glittering knife, and when one of the great savage dogs, of whom a number were running about near the Viking's abode, ran by her, she thrust the knife into his side, “merely to try its sharpness,” as she said. And the Viking's wife looked mournfully at the wild, evil-disposed girl; and when night came on and the maiden exchanged beauty of form for gentleness of soul, she spoke in eloquent words to Helga of the sorrow that was deep in her heart.

The ugly frog, in its monstrous form, stood before her, and fixed its brown eyes upon her face, listening to her words, and seeming to comprehend them with human intelligence.

“Never, not even to my lord and husband, have I allowed my lips to utter a word concerning the sufferings I have to undergo through thee,” said the Viking's wife; “my heart is full of woe concerning thee: more powerful,

and greater than I ever fancied it, is the love of a mother! But love never entered into thy heart—thy heart that is like the wet, cold moorland plants.”

Then the miserable form trembled, and it was as though these words touched an invisible bond between body and soul, and great tears came into the mournful eyes.

“Thy hard time will come,” said the Viking’s wife; “and it will be terrible to me too. It had been better if thou hadst been set out by the high-road, and the night wind had lulled thee to sleep.”

And the Viking’s wife wept bitter tears, and went away full of wrath and bitterness of spirit, vanishing behind the curtain of furs that hung loose over the beam and divided the hall.

The wrinkled frog crouched in the corner alone. A deep silence reigned around; but at intervals a half-stifled sigh escaped from its breast, from the breast of Helga. It seemed as though a painful new life were arising in her inmost heart. She came forward and listened; and, stepping forward again, grasped with her clumsy hands the heavy pole that was laid across before the door. Silently and laboriously she pushed back the pole, silently drew back the bolt, and took up the flickering lamp which stood in the antechamber of the hall. It seemed as if a strong hidden will gave her strength. She drew back the iron bolt from the closed cellar door, and crept in to the captive. He was asleep; and when he awoke and saw the hideous form, he shuddered as though he had beheld a wicked apparition. She drew her knife, cut the bonds that confined his hands and feet, and beckoned him to follow her.

He uttered some holy names, and made the sign of the cross; and when the form remained motionless at his side, he said,

“Who art thou? Whence this animal shape that thou bearest, while yet thou art full of gentle mercy?”

The frog-woman beckoned him to follow, and led him through corridors shrouded with curtains, into the stables, and there pointed to a horse. He mounted on its back; but she also sprang up before him, holding fast by the horse’s mane. The prisoner understood her meaning, and in a rapid trot they rode on a way which he would never have found, out on to the open heath.

He thought not of her hideous form, but felt how the mercy and loving-kindness of the Almighty were working

by means of this monstrous apparition; he prayed pious prayers, and sang songs of praise. Then she trembled. Was it the power of song and of prayer that worked in her, or was she shuddering at the cold morning twilight that was approaching? What were her feelings? She raised herself up, and wanted to stop the horse and to alight; but the Christian priest held her back with all his strength, and sang a pious song, as if that would have the power to loosen the charm that turned her into the hideous semblance of a frog. And the horse galloped on more wildly than ever; the sky turned red, the first sunbeam pierced through the clouds, and as the flood of light came streaming down, the frog changed its nature.

Helga was again the beautiful maiden with the wicked, demoniac spirit. He held a beautiful maiden in his arms, but was horrified at the sight: he swung himself from the horse, and compelled it to stand. This seemed to him a new and terrible sorcery; but Helga likewise leaped from the saddle, and stood on the ground. The child's short garment reached only to her knee. She plucked the sharp knife from her girdle, and quick as lightning she rushed in upon the astonished priest.

“Let me get at thee!” she screamed; “let me get at thee, and plunge this knife in thy body! Thou art pale as straw, thou beardless slave!”

She pressed in upon him. They struggled together in a hard strife, but an invisible power seemed given to the Christian captive. He held her fast; and the old oak tree beneath which they stood came to his assistance; for its roots, which projected over the ground, held fast the maiden's feet that had become entangled in it. Quite close to them gushed a spring; and he sprinkled Helga's face and neck with the fresh water, and commanded the unclean spirit to come forth, and blessed her in the Christian fashion; but the water of faith has no power when the well-spring of faith flows not from within.

And yet the Christian showed his power even now, and opposed more than the mere might of a man against the evil that struggled within the girl. His holy action seemed to overpower her: she dropped her hands, and gazed with frightened eyes and pale cheeks upon him who appeared to her a mighty magician learned in secret arts; he seemed to her to speak in a dark Runic tongue, and to be making cabalistic signs in the air. She would not have winked had he swung a sharp knife or a glittering axe against her; but she trembled when he signed her with the sign of the cross on her brow and her bosom, and she sat there like a tame bird with bowed head.

Then he spoke to her in gentle words of the kindly deed she had done for him in the past night, when she came

to him in the form of the hideous frog, to loosen his bonds, and to lead him out to life and light; and he told her that she too was bound in closer bonds than those that had confined him, and that she should be released by his means. He would take her to Hedeby (Schleswig), to the holy Ansgarius, and yonder in the Christian city the spell that bound her would be loosed. But he would not let her sit before him on the horse, though of her own accord she offered to do so.

“Thou must sit behind me, not before me,” he said. “Thy magic beauty hath a power that comes of evil, and I fear it; and yet I feel that the victory is sure to him who hath faith.”

And he knelt down and prayed fervently. It seemed as though the woodland scenes were consecrated as a holy church by his prayer. The birds sang as though they belonged to the new congregation, the wild flowers smelt sweet as incense; and while he spoke the horse that had carried them both in headlong career stood still before the tall bramble bushes, and plucked at them, so that the ripe juicy berries fell down upon Helga’s hands, offering themselves for her refreshment.

Patiently she suffered the priest to lift her on the horse, and sat like a somnambulist, neither completely asleep nor wholly awake. The Christian bound two branches together with bark, in the form of a cross, which he held up high as they rode through the forest. The wood became thicker as they went on, and at last became a trackless wilderness.

The wild sloe grew across the way, so that they had to ride round the bushes. The bubbling spring became not a stream but a standing marsh, round which likewise they were obliged to lead the horse. There was strength and refreshment in the cool forest breeze; and no small power lay in the gentle words, which were spoken in faith and in Christian love, from a strong inward yearning to lead the poor lost one into the way of light and life.

They say the rain-drops can hollow the hard stone, and the waves of the sea can smooth and round the sharp edges of the rocks. Thus did the dew of mercy, that dropped upon Helga, smooth what was rough, and penetrate what was hard in her. The effects did not yet appear, nor was she aware of them herself; but doth the seed in the bosom of earth know, when the refreshing dew and the quickening sunbeams fall upon it, that it hath within itself the power of growth and blossoming? As the song of the mother penetrates into the heart of the child, and it babbles the words after her, without understanding their import, until they afterwards

engender thought, and come forward in due time clearer and more clearly, so here also did the Word work, that is powerful to create.

They rode forth from the dense forest, across the heath, and then again through pathless roads; and towards evening they encountered a band of robbers.

“Where hast thou stolen that beautiful maiden?” cried the robbers; and they seized the horse’s bridle, and dragged the two riders from its back. The priest had no weapon save the knife he had taken from Helga; and with this he tried to defend himself. One of the robbers lifted his axe to slay him, but the young priest sprang aside and eluded the blow, which struck deep into the horse’s neck, so that the blood spurted forth, and the creature sank down on the ground. Then Helga seemed suddenly to wake from her long reverie, and threw herself hastily upon the gasping animal. The priest stood before her to protect and defend her, but one of the robbers swung his iron hammer over the Christian’s head, and brought it down with such a crash that blood and brains were scattered around, and the priest sank to the earth, dead.

Then the robber’s seized beautiful Helga by her white arms and her slender waist; but the sun went down, and its last ray disappeared at that moment, and she was changed into the form of a frog. A white-green mouth spread over half her face, her arms became thin and slimy, and broad hands with webbed fingers spread out upon them like fans. Then the robbers were seized with terror, and let her go. She stood, a hideous monster, among them; and as it is the nature of the frog to do, she hopped up high, and disappeared in the thicket. Then the robbers saw that this must be a bad prank of the spirit Loke, or the evil power of magic, and in great affright they hurried away from the spot.

The full moon was already rising. Presently it shone with splendid radiance over the earth, and poor Helga crept forth from the thicket in the wretched frog’s shape. She stood still beside the corpse of the priest and the carcass of the slain horse. She looked at them with eyes that appeared to weep, and from the frog-mouth came forth a croaking like the voice of a child bursting into tears. She leant first over the one, then over the other, brought water in her hollow hand, which had become larger and more capacious by the webbed skin, and poured it over them; but dead they were, and dead they would remain, she at last understood.

Soon wild beasts would come and tear their dead bodies; but no, that must not be! so she dug up the earth as well as she could, in the endeavour to prepare a grave for them. She had nothing to work with but a stake and

her two hands encumbered with the webbed skin that grew between the fingers, and which were torn by the labour, so that the blood flowed over them. At last she saw that her endeavours would not succeed. Then she brought water and washed the dead man's face, and covered it with fresh green leaves; she brought green boughs and laid them upon him, scattering dead leaves in the spaces between. Then she brought the heaviest stones she could carry and laid them over the dead body, stopping up the interstices with moss. And now she thought the grave-hill would be strong and secure. The night had passed away in this difficult work—the sun broke through the clouds, and beautiful Helga stood there in all her loveliness, with bleeding hands, and with the first tears flowing that had ever bedewed her maiden cheeks.

Then in this transformation it seemed as if two natures were striving within her. Her whole frame trembled, and she looked around, as if she had just awoke from a troubled dream. Then she ran towards the slender tree, clung to it for support, and in another moment she had climbed to the summit of the tree, and held fast. There she sat like a startled squirrel, and remained the whole day long in the silent solitude of the wood, where everything is quiet, and, as they say, dead. Butterflies fluttered around in sport, and in the neighbourhood were several ant-hills, each with its hundreds of busy little occupants moving briskly to and fro. In the air danced a number of gnats, swarm upon swarm, and hosts of buzzing flies, lady-birds, gold beetles, and other little winged creatures; the worm crept forth from the damp ground, the moles came out; but except these all was silent around—silent, and, as people say, dead—for they speak of things as they understand them. No one noticed Helga, but some flocks of crows, that flew screaming about the top of the tree on which she sat: the birds hopped close up to her on the twigs with pert curiosity; but when the glance of her eye fell upon them, it was a signal for their flight. But they could not understand her—nor, indeed, could she understand herself.

When the evening twilight came on, and the sun was sinking, the time of her transformation roused her to fresh activity. She glided down from the tree, and as the last sunbeam vanished she stood in the wrinkled form of the frog, with the torn webbed skin on her hands; but her eyes now gleamed with a splendour of beauty that had scarcely been theirs when she wore her garb of loveliness, for they were a pair of pure, pious, maidenly eyes that shone out of the frog-face. They bore witness of depth of feeling, of the gentle human heart; and the beautiful eyes overflowed in tears, weeping precious drops that lightened the heart.

On the sepulchral mound she had raised there yet lay the cross of boughs, the last work of him who slept beneath. Helga lifted up the cross, in pursuance of a sudden thought that came upon her. She planted it upon

the burial mound, over the priest and the dead horse. The sorrowful remembrance of him called fresh tears into her eyes; and in this tender frame of mind she marked the same sign in the sand around the grave; and as she wrote the sign with both her hands, the webbed skin fell from them like a torn glove; and when she washed her hands in the woodland spring, and gazed in wonder at their snowy whiteness, she again made the holy sign in the air between herself and the dead man; then her lips trembled, the holy name that had been preached to her during the ride from the forest came to her mouth, and she pronounced it audibly.

Then the frog-skin fell from her, and she was once more the beautiful maiden. But her head sank wearily, her tired limbs required rest, and she fell into a deep slumber.

Her sleep, however, was short. Towards midnight she awoke. Before her stood the dead horse, beaming and full of life, which gleamed forth from his eyes and from his wounded neck; close beside the creature stood the murdered Christian priest, "more beautiful than Bulder," the Viking woman would have said; and yet he seemed to stand in a flame of fire.

Such gravity, such an air of justice, such a piercing look shone out of his great mild eyes, that their glance seemed to penetrate every corner of her heart. Beautiful Helga trembled at the look, and her remembrance awoke as though she stood before the tribunal of judgment.

Every good deed that had been done for her, every loving word that had been spoken, seemed endowed with life: she understood that it had been love that kept her here during the days of trial, during which the creature formed of dust and spirit, soul and earth, combats and struggles; she acknowledged that she had only followed the leading of temper, and had done nothing for herself; everything had been given her, everything had happened as it were by the interposition of Providence. She bowed herself humbly, confessing her own deep imperfection in the presence of the Power that can read every thought of the heart—and then the priest spoke.

“Thou daughter of the moorland,” he said, “out of the earth, out of the moor, thou camest; but from the earth thou shalt arise. I come from the land of the dead. Thou, too, shalt pass through the deep valleys into the beaming mountain region, where dwell mercy and completeness. I cannot lead thee to Hedeby, that thou mayest receive Christian baptism; for, first, thou must burst the veil of waters over the deep moorland, and draw forth the living source of thy being and of thy birth; thou must exercise thy faculties in deeds before the consecration can be given thee.”

And he lifted her upon the horse, and gave her a golden censer similar to the one she had seen in the Viking’s castle. The open wound in the forehead of the slain Christian shone like a diadem. He took the cross from the grave and held it aloft. And now they rode through the air, over the rustling wood, over the hills where the old heroes lay buried, each on his dead war-horse; and the iron figures rose up and galloped forth, and stationed themselves on the summits of the hills. The golden hoop on the forehead of each gleamed in the moonlight, and their mantles floated in the night breeze. The dragon that guards buried treasures likewise lifted up his head and gazed after the riders. The gnomes and wood-spirits peeped forth from beneath the hills and from between the furrows of the fields, and flitted to and fro with red, blue, and green torches, like the sparks in the ashes of a burnt paper.

Over woodland and heath, over river and marsh they fled away, up to the wild moor; and over this they hovered in wide circles. The Christian priest held the cross aloft; it gleamed like gold; and from his lips dropped pious prayers. Beautiful Helga joined in the hymns he sang, like a child joining in its mother’s song. She swung the censer, and a wondrous fragrance of incense streamed forth thence, so that the reeds and grass of the moor burst forth into blossom. Every germ came forth from the deep ground. All that had life lifted itself up. A veil of water-lilies spread itself forth like a carpet of wrought flowers, and upon this carpet lay a sleeping woman, young and beautiful. Helga thought it was her own likeness she saw upon the mirror of the calm waters. But it was her mother whom she beheld, the moor king’s wife, the princess from the banks of the Nile.

The dead priest commanded that the slumbering woman should be lifted upon the horse; but the horse sank under the burden, as though its body had been a cloth fluttering in the wind. But the holy sign gave strength to the airy phantom, and then the three rode from the moor to the firm land.

Then the cock crowed in the Viking’s castle, and the phantom shapes dissolved and floated away in air; but

mother and daughter stood opposite each other.

“Am I really looking at my own image from beneath the deep waters?” asked the mother.

“Is it myself that I see reflected on the clear mirror?” exclaimed the daughter.

And they approached one another, and embraced. The heart of the mother beat quickest, and she understood the quickening pulses.

“My child! thou flower of my own heart! my lotos-flower of the deep waters!”

And she embraced her child anew, and wept; and the tears were as a new baptism of life and love to Helga.

“In the swan’s plumage came I hither,” said the mother; “and here also I threw off my dress of feathers. I sank through the shaking moorland, far down into the black slime, which closed like a wall around me. But soon I felt a fresher stream; a power drew me down, deeper and ever deeper. I felt the weight of sleep upon my eyelids; I slumbered, and dreams hovered round me. It seemed to me that I was again in the pyramid in Egypt, and yet the waving willow trunk that had frightened me up in the moor was ever before me. I looked at the clefts and wrinkles in the stem, and they shone forth in colours, and took the form of hieroglyphics: it was the case of the mummy at which I was gazing; at last the case burst, and forth stepped the thousand-year-old king, the mummied form, black as pitch, shining black as the wood-snail or the fat mud of the swamp; whether it was the marsh king or the mummy of the pyramids I knew not. He seized me in his arms, and I felt as if I must die. When I returned to consciousness a little bird was sitting on my bosom, beating with its wings, and twittering and singing. The bird flew away from me up towards the heavy, dark covering; but a long green band still fastened him to me. I heard and understood his longing tones: ‘Freedom! Sunlight! to my father!’ Then I thought of my father and the sunny land of my birth, my life, and my love; and I loosened the band and let the bird soar away home to the father. Since that hour I have dreamed no more. I have slept a sleep, a long and heavy sleep, till within this hour; harmony and incense awoke me and set me free.”

The green band from the heart of the mother to the bird’s wings, where did it flutter now? whither had it been wafted? Only the stork had seen it. The band was the green stalk, the bow at the end, the beautiful flower, the cradle of the child that had now bloomed into beauty, and was once more resting on its mother’s heart.

And while the two were locked in each other’s embrace, the old stork flew around them in smaller and smaller

circles, and at length shot away in swift flight towards his nest, whence he brought out the swan-feather suits he had preserved there for years, throwing one to each of them, and the feathers closed around them, so that they soared up from the earth in the semblance of two white swans.

“And now we will speak with one another,” quoth stork-papa, “now we understand each other, though the beak of one bird is differently shaped from that of another. It happens more than fortunately that you came to-night. To-morrow we should have been gone—mother, myself, and the young ones; for we’re flying southward. Yes, only look at me! I am an old friend from the land of the Nile, and mother has a heart larger than her beak. She always declared the princess would find a way to help herself; and I and the young ones carried the swan’s feathers up here. But how glad I am! and how fortunate that I’m here still! At dawn of day we shall move hence, a great company of storks. We’ll fly first, and do you follow us; thus you cannot miss your way; moreover, I and the youngsters will keep a sharp eye upon you.”

“And the lotos-flower which I was to bring with me,” said the Egyptian princess, “she is flying by my side in the swan’s plumage! I bring with me the flower of my heart; and thus the riddle has been read. Homeward! homeward!”

But Helga declared she could not quit the Danish land before she had once more seen her foster-mother, the affectionate Viking woman. Every beautiful recollection, every kind word, every tear that her foster-mother had wept for her, rose up in her memory, and in that moment she almost felt as if she loved the Viking woman best of all.

“Yes, we must go to the Viking’s castle,” said stork-papa; “mother and the youngsters are waiting for us there. How they will turn up their eyes and flap their wings! Yes, you see mother doesn’t speak much—she’s short and dry, but she means all the better. I’ll begin clapping at once, that they may know we’re coming.” And stork-papa clapped in first-rate style, and they all flew away towards the Viking’s castle.

In the castle every one was sunk in deep sleep. The Viking’s wife had not retired to rest until it was late. She was anxious about Helga, who had vanished with a Christian priest three days before: she knew Helga must have assisted him in his flight, for it was the girl’s horse that had been missed from the stables; but how all this had been effected was a mystery to her. The Viking woman had heard of the miracles told of the Christian priest, and which were said to be wrought by him and by those who believed in his words and followed him.

Her passing thoughts formed themselves into a dream, and it seemed to her that she was still lying awake on her couch, and that deep darkness reigned without. The storm drew near: she heard the sea roaring and rolling to the east and to the west, like the waves of the North Sea and the Cattegat. The immense snake which was believed to surround the span of the earth in the depths of the ocean was trembling in convulsions; she dreamed that the night of the fall of the gods had come—Ragnarok, as the heathen called the last day, when everything was to pass away, even the great gods themselves. The war-trumpet sounded, and the gods rode over the rainbow, clad in steel, to fight the last battle. The winged Valkyrs rode before them, and the dead warriors closed the train. The whole firmament was ablaze with northern lights, and yet the darkness seemed to predominate. It was a terrible hour.

And close by the terrified Viking woman Helga seemed to be crouching on the floor in the hideous frog form, trembling and pressing close to her foster-mother, who took her on her lap and embraced her affectionately, hideous though she was. The air resounded with the blows of clubs and swords, and with the hissing of arrows, as if a hailstorm were passing across it. The hour was come when earth and sky were to burst, the stars to fall, and all things to be swallowed up in Surtur's sea of fire; but she knew that there would be a new heaven and a new earth, that the corn fields then would wave where now the ocean rolled over the desolate tracts of sand, and that the unutterable God would reign; and up to Him rose Bulder the gentle, the affectionate, delivered from the kingdom of the dead; he came; the Viking woman saw him, and recognized his countenance; it was that of the captive Christian priest. "White Christian!" she cried aloud, and with these words she pressed a kiss upon the forehead of the hideous frog-child. Then the frog-skin fell off, and Helga stood revealed in all her beauty, lovely and gentle as she had never appeared, and with beaming eyes. She kissed her foster-mother's hands, blessed her for all the care and affection lavished during the days of bitterness and trial, for the thought she had awakened and cherished in her, for naming the name, which she repeated, "White Christian;" and beautiful Helga arose in the form of a mighty swan, and spread her white wings with a rushing like the sound of a troop of birds of passage winging their way through the air.

The Viking woman woke; and she heard the same noise without still continuing. She knew it was the time for the storks to depart, and that it must be those birds whose wings she heard. She wished to see them once more, and to bid them farewell as they set forth on their journey. Therefore she rose from her couch and stepped out upon the threshold, and on the top of the gable she saw stork ranged behind stork, and around the

castle, over the high trees, flew bands of storks wheeling in wide circles; but opposite the threshold where she stood, by the well where Helga had often sat and alarmed her with her wildness, sat two white swans gazing at her with intelligent eyes. And she remembered her dream, which still filled her soul as if it were reality. She thought of Helga in the shape of a swan, and of the Christian priest; and suddenly she felt her heart rejoice within her.

the disguised princesses bid farewell to the viking woman.

The swans flapped their wings and arched their necks, as if they would send her a greeting, and the Viking's wife spread out her arms towards them, as if she felt all this; and smiled through her tears, and then stood sunk in deep thought.

Then all the storks arose, flapping their wings and clapping with their beaks, to start on their voyage towards the South.

"We will not wait for the swans," said stork-mamma: "if they want to go with us they had better come. We can't sit here till the plovers start. It is a fine thing, after all, to travel in this way, in families, not like the finches and partridges, where the male and female birds fly in separate bodies, which appears to me a very unbecoming thing. What are yonder swans flapping their wings for?"

"Well, everyone flies in his own fashion," said stork-papa: "the swans in an oblique line, the cranes in a triangle, and the plovers in a snake's line."

"Don't talk about snakes while we are flying up here," said stork-mamma. "It only puts ideas into the children's heads which can't be gratified."

"Are those the high mountains of which I heard tell?" asked Helga, in the swan's plumage.

"They are storm clouds driving on beneath us," replied her mother.

"What are yonder white clouds that rise so high?" asked Helga again.

"Those are the mountains covered with perpetual snow which you see yonder," replied her mother.

And they flew across the lofty Alps towards the blue Mediterranean.

“Africa’s land! Egypt’s strand!” sang, rejoicingly, in her swan’s plumage, the daughter of the Nile, as from the lofty air she saw her native land looming in the form of a yellowish wavy stripe of shore.

And all the birds caught sight of it, and hastened their flight.

“I can scent the Nile mud and wet frogs,” said stork-mamma; “I begin to feel quite hungry. Yes; now you shall taste something nice; and you will see the maraboo bird, the crane, and the ibis. They all belong to our family, though they are not nearly so beautiful as we. They give themselves great airs, especially the ibis. He has been quite spoilt by the Egyptians, for they make a mummy of him and stuff him with spices. I would rather be stuffed with live frogs, and so would you, and so you shall. Better have something in one’s inside while one is alive than to be made a fuss with after one is dead. That’s my opinion, and I am always right.”

“Now the storks are come,” said the people in the rich house on the banks of the Nile, where the royal lord lay in the open hall on the downy cushions, covered with a leopard skin, not alive and yet not dead, but waiting and hoping for the lotos-flower from the deep moorland, in the far North. Friends and servants stood around his couch.

And into the hall flew two beauteous swans. They had come with the storks. They threw off their dazzling white plumage, and two lovely female forms were revealed, as like each other as two dewdrops. They bent over the old, pale, sick man, they put back their long hair, and while Helga bent over her grandfather, his white cheeks reddened, his eyes brightened, and life came back to his wasted limbs. The old man rose up cheerful and well; and daughter and granddaughter embraced him joyfully, as if they were giving him a morning greeting after a long heavy dream.

And joy reigned through the whole house, and likewise in the stork's nest, though there the chief cause was certainly the good food, especially the numberless frogs, which seemed to spring up in heaps out of the ground; and while the learned men wrote down hastily, in flying characters, a sketch of the history of the two princesses, and of the flower of health that had been a source of joy for the home and the land, the stork pair told the story to their family in their own fashion, but not till all had eaten their fill, otherwise the youngsters would have found something more interesting to do than to listen to stories.

"Now, at last, you will become something," whispered stork-mamma, "there's no doubt about that."

"What should I become?" asked stork-papa. "What have I done? Nothing at all!"

"You have done more than the rest! But for you and the youngsters the two princesses would never have seen Egypt again, or have effected the old man's cure. You will turn out something! They must certainly give you a doctor's degree, and our youngsters will inherit it, and so will their children after them, and so on. You already look like an Egyptian doctor; at least in my eyes."

"I cannot quite repeat the words as they were spoken," said stork-papa, who had listened from the roof to the report of these events, made by the learned men, and was now telling it again to his own family. "What they said was so confused, it was so wise and learned, that they immediately received rank and presents—even the head cook received an especial mark of distinction—probably for the soup."

"And what did you receive?" asked stork-mamma. "Surely they ought not to forget the most important person of all, and you are certainly he! The learned men have done nothing throughout the whole affair but used their tongues; but you will doubtless receive what is due to you."

Late in the night, when the gentle peace of sleep rested upon the now happy house, there was one who still watched. It was not stork-papa, though he stood upon one leg, and slept on guard—it was Helga who watched. She bowed herself forward over the balcony, and looked into the clear air, gazed at the great gleaming stars, greater and purer in their lustre than she had ever seen them in the North, and yet the same orbs. She thought of the Viking woman in the wild moorland, of the gentle eyes of her foster-mother, and of the tears which the kind soul had wept over the poor frog-child that now lived in splendour under the gleaming stars, in the beauteous spring air on the banks of the Nile. She thought of the love that dwelt in the breast of the heathen

woman, the love that had been shown to a wretched creature, hateful in human form, and hideous in its transformation. She looked at the gleaming stars, and thought of the glory that had shone upon the forehead of the dead man, when she flew with him through the forest and across the moorland; sounds passed through her memory, words she had heard pronounced as they rode onward, and when she was borne wondering and trembling through the air, words from the great Fountain of love that embraces all human kind.

Yes, great things had been achieved and won! Day and night beautiful Helga was absorbed in the contemplation of the great sum of her happiness, and stood in the contemplation of it like a child that turns hurriedly from the giver to gaze on the splendours of the gifts it has received. She seemed to lose herself in the increasing happiness, in contemplation of what might come, of what would come. Had she not been borne by miracle to greater and greater bliss? And in this idea she one day lost herself so completely, that she thought no more of the Giver. It was the exuberance of youthful courage, unfolding its wings for a bold flight! Her eyes were gleaming with courage, when suddenly a loud noise in the courtyard below recalled her thoughts from their wandering flight. There she saw two great ostriches running round rapidly in a narrow circle. Never before had she seen such creatures—great clumsy things they were, with wings that looked as if they had been clipped, and the birds themselves looking as if they had suffered violence of some kind; and now for the first time she heard the legend which the Egyptians tell of the ostrich.

Once, they say, the ostriches were a beautiful, glorious race of birds, with strong large wings; and one evening the larger birds of the forest said to the ostrich, "Brother, shall we fly to-morrow, God willing, to the river to drink?" And the ostrich answered, "I will." At daybreak, accordingly, they winged their flight from thence, flying first up on high, towards the sun, that gleamed like the eye of God—higher and higher, the ostrich far in advance of all the other birds. Proudly the ostrich flew straight towards the light, boasting of his strength, and not thinking of the Giver or saying, "God willing!" Then suddenly the avenging angel drew aside the veil from the flaming ocean of sunlight, and in a moment the wings of the proud bird were scorched and shrivelled up, and he sank miserably to the ground. Since that time, the ostrich has never again been able to raise himself in the air, but flees timidly along the ground, and runs round in a narrow circle. And this is a warning for us men, that in all our thoughts and schemes, in all our doings and devices, we should say, "God willing." And Helga bowed her head thoughtfully and gravely, and looked at the circling ostrich, noticing its timid fear, and its stupid pleasure at sight of its own great shadow cast upon the white sunlit wall. And seriousness struck its

roots deep into her mind and heart. A rich life in present and future happiness was given and won; and what was yet to come? the best of all, "God willing."

In early spring, when the storks flew again towards the North, beautiful Helga took off her golden bracelet, and scratched her name upon it; and beckoning to the stork-father, she placed the golden hoop around his neck, and begged him to deliver it to the Viking woman, so that the latter might see that her adopted daughter was well, and had not forgotten her.

"That's heavy to carry," thought the stork-papa, when he had the golden ring round his neck; "but gold and honour are not to be flung into the street. The stork brings good fortune; they'll be obliged to acknowledge that over yonder."

"You lay gold and I lay eggs," said the stork-mamma. "But with you it's only once in a way, whereas I lay eggs every year; but neither of us is appreciated—that's very disheartening."

"Still one has one's inward consciousness, mother," replied stork-papa.

"But you can't hang that round your neck," stork-mamma retorted; "and it won't give you a good wind or a good meal."

The little nightingale, singing yonder in the tamarind tree, will soon be going north too. Helga the fair had often heard the sweet bird sing up yonder by the wild moor; now she wanted to give it a message to carry, for she had learned the language of birds when she flew in the swan's plumage; she had often conversed with stork and with swallow, and she knew the nightingale would understand her. So she begged the little bird to fly to the beech wood, on the peninsula of Jutland, where the grave-hill had been reared with stones and branches, and begged the nightingale to persuade all other little birds that they might build their nests around the place, so that the song of birds should resound over that sepulchre for evermore. And the nightingale flew away—and time flew away.

a message to the viking woman.

In autumn the eagle stood upon the pyramid and saw a stately train of richly laden camels approaching, and richly attired armed men on foaming Arab steeds, shining white as silver, with pink trembling nostrils, and great thick manes hanging down almost over their slender legs. Wealthy guests, a royal prince of Arabia,

handsome as a prince should be, came into the proud mansion on whose roof the stork's nests now stood empty: those who had inhabited the nest were away now, in the far north; but they would soon return. And, indeed, they returned on that very day that was so rich in joy and gladness. Here a marriage was celebrated, and fair Helga was the bride, shining in jewels and silk. The bridegroom was the young Arab prince, and bride and bridegroom sat together at the upper end of the table, between mother and grandfather.

But her gaze was not fixed upon the bridegroom, with his manly sun-browned cheeks, round which a black beard curled; she gazed not at his dark fiery eyes that were fixed upon her—but far away at a gleaming star that shone down from the sky.

Then strong wings were heard beating the air. The storks were coming home, and however tired the old stork pair might be from the journey, and however much they needed repose, they did not fail to come down at once to the balustrades of the verandah; for they knew what feast was being celebrated. Already on the frontier of the land they had heard that Helga had caused their figures to be painted on the wall—for did they not belong to her history?

“That’s very pretty and suggestive,” said stork-papa.

“But it’s very little,” observed stork-mamma. “They could not possibly have done less.”

And when Helga saw them, she rose and came on to the verandah, to stroke the backs of the storks. The old pair waved their heads and bowed their necks, and even the youngest among the young ones felt highly honoured by the reception.

And Helga looked up to the gleaming star, which seemed to glow purer and purer; and between the star and herself there floated a form, purer than the air, and visible through it: it floated quite close to her. It was the spirit of the dead Christian priest; he too was coming to her wedding feast—coming from heaven.

“The glory and brightness yonder outshines everything that is known on earth!” he said.

And fair Helga begged so fervently, so beseechingly, as she had never yet prayed, that it might be permitted her to gaze in there for one single moment, that she might be allowed to cast but a single glance into the brightness that beamed in the kingdom.

Then he bore her up amid splendour and glory. Not only around her, but within her, sounded voices and beamed a brightness that words cannot express.

“Now we must go back; thou wilt be missed,” he said.

“Only one more look!” she begged. “But one short minute more!”

“We must go back to the earth. The guests will all depart.”

“Only one more look—the last.”

And Helga stood again in the verandah; but the marriage lights without had vanished, and the lamps in the hall were extinguished, and the storks were gone—nowhere a guest to be seen—no bridegroom—all seemed to have been swept away in those few short minutes!

Then a great dread came upon her. Alone she went through the empty great hall into the next chamber. Strange warriors slept yonder. She opened a side door which led into her own chamber; and, as she thought to step in there, she suddenly found herself in the garden; but yet it had not looked thus here before—the sky gleamed red—the morning dawn was come.

Three minutes only in heaven and a whole night on earth had passed away!

Then she saw the storks again. She called to them, spoke their language; and stork-papa turned his head towards her, listened to her words, and drew near.

“You speak our language,” he said; “what do you wish? Why do you appear here—you, a strange woman?”

“It is I—it is Helga—dost thou not know me? Three minutes ago we were speaking together yonder in the verandah!”

“That’s a mistake,” said the stork; “you must have dreamt all that!”

“No, no!” she persisted. And she reminded him of the Viking’s castle, and of the great ocean, and of the journey hither.

Then stork-papa winked with his eyes, and said:

“Why, that’s an old story, which I heard from the time of my great-grandfather. There certainly was here in Egypt a princess of that kind from the Danish land, but she vanished on the evening of her wedding-day, many hundred years ago, and never came back! You may read about it yourself yonder on the monument in the garden; there you’ll find swans and storks sculptured, and at the top you are yourself in white marble!”

And thus it was. Helga saw it, and understood it, and sank on her knees.

The sun burst forth in glory; and as, in time of yore, the frog-shape had vanished in its beams, and the beautiful form had stood displayed, so now in the light a beauteous form, clearer, purer than air—a beam of brightness—flew up into heaven!

The body crumbled to dust; and a faded lotos-flower lay on the spot where Helga had stood.

“Well, that’s a new ending to the story,” said stork-papa. “I had certainly not expected it. But I like it very well.”

“But what will the young ones say to it?” said stork-mamma.

“Yes, certainly, that’s the important point,” replied he.

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