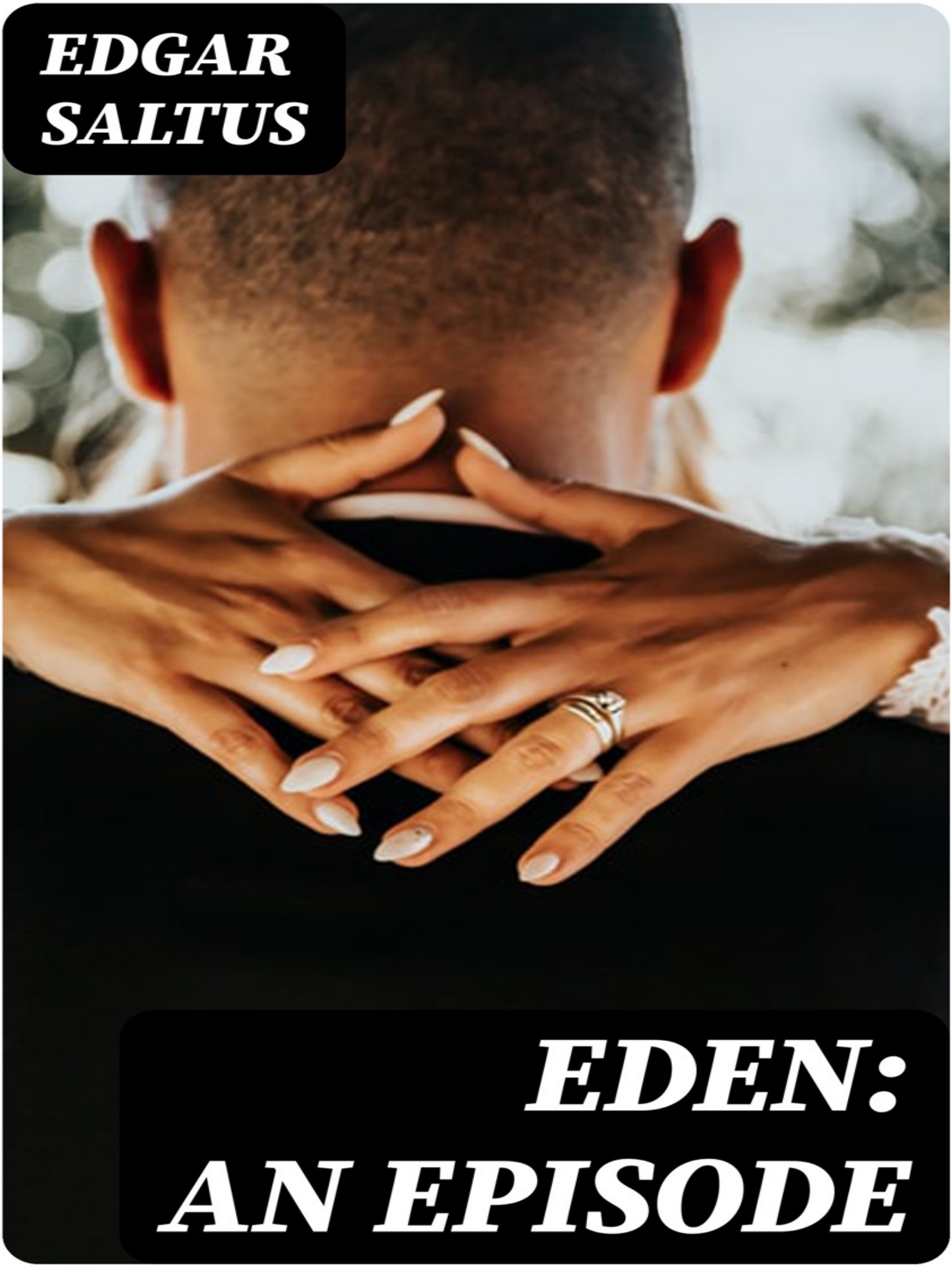
EDGAR SALTUS



EDEN: AN EPISODE

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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It was not until Miss Menemon's engagement to John Usselex was made public that the world in which that young lady moved manifested any interest in her future husband. Then, abruptly, a variety of rumors were circulated concerning him. It was said, for instance, that his real name was Tchurchenthaler and that his boyhood had been passed tending geese in a remote Bavarian dorf, from which, to avoid military service, he had subsequently fled. Again, it was affirmed that in Denmark he was known as Baron Varvedsen, and that he had come to this country not to avoid military service, but the death penalty, which whoso strikes a prince of the blood incurs. Others had heard that he was neither Bavarian nor Dane, but the outlawed nephew of a Flemish money-lender whose case he had rifled and whose daughter he had debauched. And there were other people who held that he had found Vienna uninhabitable owing to the number of persistent creditors which that delightful city contained.

In this conflict of gossip the real facts were as difficult of discovery as the truth about Kaspar Hauser, and in view of the divergence of rumors there were people sensible enough to maintain that as these rumors could not all be true, they might all be false. Among the latter was Usselex

himself. His own account of his antecedents was to the effect that his father was a Cornishman, his mother a Swiss governess, and that he had been brought up by the latter in Bâle, from which city he had at an early age set out to make his fortune. Whether or not this statement was exact is a matter of minor moment. In any event, supposing for argument's sake that he had more names than are necessary, has not Vishnu a thousand? And as for debts, did not Cæsar owe a hundred million sesterces? But however true or untrue his own account of himself may have been, certain it was that he spoke three languages with the same accent, and that a decennary or so after landing at Castle Garden his name was familiar to everyone connected with banks and banking.

At the time contemporaneous to the episodes with which these pages have to deal John Usselex had reached that age in which men begin to take an interest in hair restorers. In his face was the pallor of a plastercast, his features were correct and coercive, in person he was about the average height, slim and well-preserved. He carried glasses rimmed with tortoise-shell. He wore a beard cut fan-shape and a moustache with drooping ends. Both were gray. In moments of displeasure he smiled, but behind the glasses no merriment was discernible; when they were removed his eyes glowed luminous and shrewd, and in them was a glitter that suggested a reflection caught from the handling and glare of gold. In the financial acceptation of the term he was good; he was at the head of a house that possessed the confidence of the Street, his foreign correspondents were of

the best, but in the inner circles of New York life he was as unknown as Ischwanbrat.

Miss Menemon, on the other hand, had no foreign correspondents, but in the circles alluded to she was thoroughly at home. Her father, Mr. Petrus Menemon, was not accounted rich, but he came of excellent stock, and her mother, long since deceased, had been an Imryck. Now, to be an Imryck, to say nothing of being a Menemon, is to be Somebody. Miss Menemon, moreover, was not quite twenty-two years of age. To nine people out of ten she represented little else than the result of the union of an Imryck and a Menemon; but to the tenth, particularly when the tenth happened to be a man, she was as attractive a girl as New York could produce. As a child she had not been noticeably pretty, but when, as the phrase is, she came out, she was assuredly fair to see. She was slight and dark of hair, her face was like the cameo of a Neapolitan boy, but her eyes were not black, they were of that sultry blue which is observable in the ascension of tobacco-smoke through a sunbeam; and about her mouth and in the carriage of her head was something that reminded you of the alertness and expectancy of a bird. She was not innocent, if innocence be taken in the sense of ignorance, but she was clean of mind, of eye, and of tongue. She had been better instructed than the majority of society girls, or, if not better instructed, at least she had read more, and this perhaps, because on emerging from the nursery her father's first care had been to make her unafraid of books.

Petrus Menemon himself was a tall, spare man, scrupulous as to his dress, and quiet of manner. In his face

was the expression of one who is not altogether satisfied, and yet wishes everyone else to be content. He had an acquired ignorance which he called agnosticism. He enjoyed the formidable reputation of being well-read; but it is only just to explain that he was well read chiefly in the archaic sense—in the bores and pedants of antiquity. Yet, if his taste was stilted, he made no effort to inculcate that taste in his daughter; he gave her the run of the library and allowed her to drag from the Valhalla of the back books-helves what friends and relatives she chose. Indeed, his attitude to her was one of habitual indulgence. By nature she was as capricious as a day in February, a compound of sunlight, of promise, and of snow; and when she was wilful—and she was often that—he made no effort to coerce, he argued with her as one might with a grown person, seriously, and without anger. And something of that seriousness she caught from him, and with it confidence in his wisdom and trust in his love. To her thinking no one in all the world was superior to that gentle-mannered man.

When she left the nursery she was supplied with a governess, and as she grew older, with masters of different arts and tongues. But as a child she was often lonely, and the children whom she saw playing in the streets were to her objects of indignant envy. On Sunday it was her father's custom to take her to morning service, and afterward to her grandmother, a lady who lived alone in a giant house in South Washington Square, in the upper rooms of which the child was persuaded that coffins lay stored in heaps. During these visits, which were continued every Sunday until the old lady died, an invariable programme was observed: the

child repeated the catechism, recited a verse from the hymnal, after which she was gratified with sponge-cake and a glass of milk, and then was permitted to look at the pictures in a large Bible, in which, by way of frontispiece, was an engraving of a man with a white beard, whom her grandmother said was God. Such, with the exception of tiresome promenades on Second Avenue, where her father's house was situated, such were her relaxations.

And so it came about that in the enforced loneliness of her childhood she ransacked a library in which the "Picara Justina" of Fray Andrs Perez stood side-by-side with the Kalevala, a library in which works stupid as the Koran and dead as Coptic touched covers with the "Idyls of the King" and the fabliaux of mediæval France. Soon she had made friends with the heroes and heroines that are the caryatides of the book-shelves. In their triumphs she exulted; by their failures she was depressed. At the age of thirteen she spoke of King Arthur as though he were her first cousin. The next year she was in love with Amadis of Gaul.

A little later she hung on the wall of her bedroom a bit of embroidery of her own manufacture, a square piece of watered silk, on which in bold relief stood the characters 60 H, a device understood by no one but herself, one which her imagination had evolved out of the aridity of a French copy-book, and which each night and each morning said to her, *Sois sans tache*.

Indeed, her brain had been the haunt of many an odd conceit, the home of fays and goblins. Her imagination was always a garden to her except when it happened to be a morass. She had not only castles in Spain, she had

dungeons as well; and of them she was architect, mason, and inhabitant too. It was her mood—a circumstance aiding—that dowered her fancy with wings. Now she would be transported to new horizons where multicolored suns battened on intervales of unsuspected charm, now she would be tossed into the opacity of an abyss where there would not be so much as a goaf for resting-place. Now Pleasure would lord the day, now the sceptre would be held by Pain. As often as not the intonation of a voice, the expression of a face, any incident however trivial would suffice, and at once a panorama would unroll, with no one but herself for spectator. As she grew older her mind became more staid, its changes and convolutions less frequent. The goblins were replaced by glyptodons, Perrault by Darwin. But the prismatic quality of her fancy remained unimpaired. She garmented everyone with its rays. Those who were nearest to her enjoyed the gayest hues; in others she looked steadfastly for the best. And yet, in spite of this, or precisely on that account, no one was ever better able to distort trifles into nuclei of doubt. In brief, she was March one minute and May the next. Apropos of some misunderstanding, her father said to her jestingly one day, "Eden, did you ever hear of such a thing as hemiopia?" The girl shook her head. "Well," he continued, "there is a disease of that name which affects the eye in such a manner that only half the object looked at is seen. Don't you think you had better consult an oculist?"

Meanwhile her education had been completed by Shakspere. Love she had learned of Juliet, jealousy of Othello. But of despair Hamlet had been incompetent to

teach. She was instinct with generous indignations, enthusiastic of great deeds, and through the quality of her temperament unable to reason herself into an understanding of the base. When she "came out" she found herself unable to share the excited interest which girls of her age exhibited in Delmonico balls. At the dinners and dances to which she was bidden, she was chilled at the discovery that platitude reigned. As a rule, the younger men fought shy of her. She acquired the reputation of making disquieting answers and remarks of curious inappositeness. But now and then she met people that found her singularly attractive and whose hearts went out to her at once, yet these were always people with whom she fancied herself in sympathetic rapport.

Among this class was a man who succeeded Amadis. His name was Dugald Maule; he was six or seven years her senior, and by profession an attorney and counsellor-at-law. It should be noted, however, that he did not look like one. He looked like an athlete that had taken honors, a man to be admired by women and respected by men. In private theatricals he was much applauded. He had studied law in the hope of being judge, and in being judge of pronouncing the death sentence. He could imagine no superber rôle than that. To him, after months of self-examination, Eden Menemon surrendered her heart. The surrender was indeed difficult, but as surrenders go it was complete.

The threads by which he succeeded in attaching her to him it is unnecessary to describe. Suffice it to say that little by little she grew to believe that in him the impeccable resided. She had accustomed herself to consider love in the

light of a plant which if rightly tended would bloom into a witherless rose. She had told him this, and together they had watched the bud expand, and when at last it was fulfilled to the tips he saw it in her eyes. That evening, when he had gone, the sense of happiness was so acute that she became quasi-hysterical. The joy of love, slowly intercepted and then wholly revealed, vibrated through the chords of her being, overwhelming her with the force of an unexperienced emotion, and throwing her for relief into a paroxysm of tears. Then followed a day of wonder, in which hallucinations of delight alternated with tremors of self-depreciation. It seemed to her that she was unworthy of such an one as he. For, to her, in her inexperience, he was perfection indeed, one unsulliable and mailed in right. And then, abruptly, as such things occur, without so much as a monition, she read in public print that he had been summoned as a co-respondent. To overwrought nerves as were hers, the announcement was rapider in its effect than a microbe. A fever came that was obliterating as the morrow of steps on the sand. For a week she was delirious, and when at last she left her room the expression of her face had altered. She felt no anger, only an immense distrust of the validity of her intuitions. Had Dugald Maule been in trouble, she would have, if need were, forsaken life for his sake; but the Dugald Maule for whom she would have been brave had existed only in her own imagination. It was this that brought the fever, and when the fever went, disgust came in its place. It was then that the expression of face altered. She looked like one who is done with love. Presently, and while she was still convalescent, her father

sent her abroad with friends, and when she returned, Dugald Maule had to her the reality of a bad dream, a nightmare that she might have experienced in the broad light of an earlier day.

In the course of that winter it so happened that her father one evening brought in to dinner a man whom he introduced as Mr. Usselex. Eden had never seen him before and for the moment she did not experience any notable desire to see him again. She attended, however, with becoming grace to the duties of hostess, and as the conversation between her father and his guest circled in and over stocks, she was not called upon to contribute to the entertainment. When coffee was served she went to her own room and promptly forgot that Mr. Usselex existed.

But in a few days there was Crispin again. On this occasion Eden gave him a larger share of attention than she had previously accorded. There were certain things that she noticed, there was an atmosphere about him which differed from that which other men exhaled. In the tones of his voice were evocations of fancies. He seemed like one who had battled and had won. There was an unusualness in him which impressed and irritated her simultaneously. It was annoying to her that he should intrude, however transiently, into the precincts of her thought. And when he had gone she took her father to task: "What do you have that man to dinner for?" she asked. "Who is he?"

Mr. Menemon, who was looking out of the window, announced that it was snowing, then he turned to her. "Eden," he said, "I am sorry. If you object he need not come

again. Really," he continued, after a moment, "I wish you could see your way to being civil to him."

"Surely I am that," she answered.

To this Mr. Menemon assented. "The matter is this," he said. "While you were abroad I became interested in a mine; he is trying to get me out of it. He is something of a prophet, I take it. Though, as yet," he added despondently, "his prophecies have not been realized."

"Then he is a philosopher," said Eden, with a smile; and her father, smiling too, turned again to interview the night.

Thereafter Mr. Usselex was a frequent guest, and presently Eden discovered that her annoyance had disappeared.

The people whom we admire at first sight are rarely capable of prolonging that admiration, and when circumstances bring us into contact with those that have seemed antipathetic, it not infrequently happens that the antipathy is lost. It was much this way with Eden. Little by little, through channels unperceived, the early distaste departed. Hitherto the world had held for her but one class of individuals, the people whom she liked. All others belonged to the landscape. But this guest of her father's suggested a new category; he aroused her curiosity. He left the landscape; he became a blur on it, but a blur on which she strained her eyes. The antipathy departed, and she discovered herself taking pleasure in the speech of one who had originally affected her as a scarabæus must affect the rose.

She discerned in him unsuspected dimensions. He was at home in recondite matters, and yet capable of shedding

new light on threadbare themes. During discussions between him and her father at which she assisted she gained an insight into bi-metallism, free trade even, and subjects of like import, the which hitherto she had regarded as abstract diseases created for the affliction of politicians and editorial hacks. He was at home too in larger issues, in the cunning of Ottoman tactics and the beat of drums at Kandahar. Concerning King Arthur he was vague, but he had the power to startle her with new perspectives, the possibilities of dynamics, the abolition of time, the sequestration and conquest of space. And as he spoke easily, fluently, in the ungesticulatory fashion of those that know whereof they speak, more than once she fell to wondering as to the cause of that early dislike. In such wise was Desdemona won.

It so happened that one evening she chanced to dine with a friend of hers, Mrs. Nicholas Manhattan by name, a lady whose sources of social information were large. Among other guests was Alphabet Jones, the novelist.

"Did you ever hear of Mr. Usselex?" Eden asked, over the sweets.

Mrs. Manhattan visibly drew on the invisible cap of thought. "Never heard of him," she presently exclaimed, as one who should say, "and for me not to have heard argues him unknown."

But Jones was there, and he slipped his oar in at once. "I know him," he answered. "He is the son of a shoemaker. No end of money! Some years ago a cashier of his did the embezzlement act, but Usselex declined to prosecute."

"Yes, that is like him," said Eden.

"Ah! you know him, then?" and Jones looked at her. "Well," he continued, "the cashier was sent up all the same. He had a wife, it appeared, and children. Usselex gave them enough to live on, and more too, I believe."

"He must have done it very simply."

"Why, you must know him well!" Jones exclaimed; and the conversation changed.

Meanwhile winter dragged itself along, and abruptly, as is usual with our winters, disappeared. In its stead came a spring that was languider than summer. Fifth Avenue was bright with smart bonnets and gowns of conservatory hues. During the winter months Mr. Menemon's face had been distressed as the pavements, but now it was entirely serene.

It was evident to Eden that Mr. Usselex was not a philosopher alone, but a prophet as well. Concerning him her store of information had increased.

Toward the end of May her father spoke to her about him and about his success with the mine. He seemed pleased, yet nervous. "I saw him this afternoon," he said; "he is to be here shortly. H'm! I am obliged to go to the club for a moment. Will you—would you mind seeing him in my absence?" For a moment he moved uneasily about and then left the room. Eden looked after him in wonder, and took up the *Post*. And as her eyes loitered over the columns the bell rang; her face flushed, and presently she was aware of Usselex' presence.

"What is this my father tells me?" she asked, by way of greeting.

"What is it?" he echoed; he had found a chair and sat like Thor in the court of Utgarda.