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ELSKET AND OTHER STORIES

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ELSKET.

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"The knife hangs loose in the sheath."

—Old Norsk Proverb.

I spent a month of the summer of 188- in Norway—"Old Norway"—and a friend of mine, Dr. John Robson, who is as great a fisherman as he is a physician, and knows that I love a stream where the trout and I can meet each other alone, and have it out face to face, uninterrupted by any interlopers, did me a favor to which I was indebted for the experience related below. He had been to Norway two years before, and he let me into the secret of an unexplored region between the Nord Fiord and the Romsdal. I cannot give the name of the place, because even now it has not been fully explored, and he bound me by a solemn promise that I would not divulge it to a single soul, actually going to the length of insisting on my adding a formal oath to my affirmation. This I consented to because I knew that my friend was a humorous man, and also because otherwise he positively refused to inform me where the streams were about which he had been telling such fabulous fish stories. "No," he said, "some of those —— cattle who think they own the earth and have a right to fool women at will and know how to fish, will be poking in there, worrying Olaf and Elsket, and ruining the fishing, and I'll be —— if I tell you unless you make oath." My friend is a swearing man, though he says he swears for emphasis, not blasphemy, and on this occasion

he swore with extreme solemnity. I saw that he was in earnest, so made affidavit and was rewarded.

"Now," he said, after inquiring about my climbing capacity in a way which piqued me, and giving me the routes with a particularity which somewhat mystified me, "Now I will write a letter to Olaf of the Mountain and to Elsket. I once was enabled to do them a slight service, and they will receive you. It will take him two or three weeks to get it, so you may have to wait a little. You must wait at L —— until Olaf comes down to take you over the mountain. You may be there when he gets the letter, or you may have to wait for a couple of weeks, as he does not come over the mountain often. However, you can amuse yourself around L ——; only you must always be on hand every night in case Olaf comes."

Although this appeared natural enough to the doctor, it sounded rather curious to me, and it seemed yet more so when he added, "By the way, one piece of advice: don't talk about England to Elsket, and don't ask any questions."

"Who is Elsket?" I asked.

"A daughter of the Vikings, poor thing," he said.

My curiosity was aroused, but I could get nothing further out of him, and set it down to his unreasonable dislike of travelling Englishmen, against whom, for some reason, he had a violent antipathy, declaring that they did not know how to treat women nor how to fish. My friend has a custom of speaking very strongly, and I used to wonder at the violence of his language, which contrasted strangely with his character; for he was the kindest-hearted man I ever knew, being a true follower of his patron saint, old Isaac

giving his sympathy to all the unfortunate, and even handling his frogs as if he loved them.

Thus it was that on the afternoon of the seventh day of July, 188-, having, for purposes of identification, a letter in my pocket to "Olaf of the Mountain from his friend Dr. Robson," I stood, in the rain in the so-called "street" of L——, on the —— Fiord, looking over the bronzed faces of the stolid but kindly peasants who lounged silently around, trying to see if I could detect in one a resemblance to the picture I had formed in my mind of "Olaf of the Mountain," or could discern in any eye a gleam of special interest to show that its possessor was on the watch for an expected guest.

There was none in whom I could discover any indication that he was not a resident of the straggling little settlement. They all stood quietly about gazing at me and talking in low tones among themselves, chewing tobacco or smoking their pipes, as naturally as if they were in Virginia or Kentucky, only, if possible, in a somewhat more ruminant manner. It gave me the single bit of home feeling I could muster, for it was, I must confess, rather desolate standing alone in a strange land, under those beetling crags, with the clouds almost resting on our heads, and the rain coming down in a steady, wet, monotonous fashion. The half-dozen little dark log or frame-houses, with their double windows and turf roofs, standing about at all sorts of angles to the road, as if they had rolled down the mountain like the great bowlders beyond them, looked dark and cheerless. I was weak enough to wish for a second that I had waited a few days for the rainy spell to be over, but two little bare-headed

children, coming down the road laughing and chattering, recalled me to myself. They had no wrapping whatever, and nothing on their heads but their soft flaxen hair, yet they minded the rain no more than if they had been ducklings. I saw that these people were used to rain. It was the inheritance of a thousand years. Something, however, had to be done, and I recognized the fact that I was out of the beaten track of tourists, and that if I had to stay here a week, on the prudence of my first step depended the consideration I should receive. It would not do to be hasty. I had a friend with me which had stood me in good stead before, and I applied to it now. Walking slowly up to the largest, and one of the oldest men in the group, I drew out my pipe and a bag of old Virginia tobacco, free from any flavor than its own, and filling the pipe, I asked him for a light in the best phrase-book Norsk I could command. He gave it, and I placed the bag in his hand and motioned him to fill his pipe. When that was done I handed the pouch to another, and motioned him to fill and pass the tobacco around. One by one they took it, and I saw that I had friends. No man can fill his pipe from another's bag and not wish him well.

"Does any of you know Olaf of the Mountain?" I asked. I saw at once that I had made an impression. The mention of that name was evidently a claim to consideration. There was a general murmur of surprise, and the group gathered around me. A half-dozen spoke at once.

"He was at L—— last week," they said, as if that fact was an item of extensive interest.

"I want to go there," I said, and then was, somehow, immediately conscious that I had made a mistake. Looks were exchanged and some words were spoken among my friends, as if they were oblivious of my presence.

"You cannot go there. None goes there but at night," said one, suggestively.

"Who goes over the mountain comes no more," said another, as if he quoted a proverb, at which there was a faint intimation of laughter on the part of several.

My first adviser undertook a long explanation, but though he labored faithfully I could make out no more than that it was something about "Elsket" and "the Devil's Ledge," and men who had disappeared. This was a new revelation. What object had my friend? He had never said a word of this. Indeed, he had, I now remembered, said very little at all about the people. He had exhausted his eloquence on the fish. I recalled his words when I asked him about Elsket: "She is a daughter of the Vikings, poor thing." That was all. Had he been up to a practical joke? If so, it seemed rather a sorry one to me just then. But anyhow I could not draw back now. I could never face him again if I did not go on, and what was more serious, I could never face myself. I was weak enough to have a thought that, after all, the mysterious Olaf might not come; but the recollection of the fish of which my friend had spoken as if they had been the golden fish of the "Arabian Nights," banished that. I asked about the streams around L——. "Yes, there was good fishing." But they were all too anxious to tell me about the danger of going over the mountain to give much thought to the fishing. "No one without Olaf's blood could cross the

Devil's Ledge." "Two men had disappeared three years ago." "A man had disappeared there last year. He had gone, and had never been heard of afterward. The Devil's Ledge was a bad pass."

"Why don't they look into the matter?" I asked.

The reply was as near a shrug of the shoulders as a Norseman can accomplish.

"It was not easy to get the proof; the mountain was very dangerous, the glacier very slippery; there were no witnesses," etc. "Olaf of the Mountain was not a man to trouble."

"He hates Englishmen," said one, significantly.

"I am not an Englishman, I am an American," I explained.

This had a sensible effect. Several began to talk at once. One had a brother in Idaho, another had cousins in Nebraska, and so on.

The group had by this time been augmented by the addition of almost the entire population of the settlement; one or two rosy-cheeked women, having babies in their arms, standing in the rain utterly regardless of the steady downpour.

It was a propitious time. "Can I get a place to stay here?" I inquired of the group generally.

"Yes,—oh, yes." There was a consultation in which the name of "Hendrik" was heard frequently, and then a man stepped forward and taking up my bag and rod-case, walked off, I following, escorted by a number of my new friends.

I had been installed in Hendrik's little house about an hour, and we had just finished supper, when there was a murmur outside, and then the door opened, and a young

man stepping in, said something so rapidly that I understood only that it concerned Olaf of the Mountain, and in some way myself.

"Olaf of the Mountain is here and wants to speak to you," said my host. "Will you go?"

"Yes," I said. "Why does he not come in?"

"He will not come in," said my host; "he never does come in."

"He is at the church-yard," said the messenger; "he always stops there." They both spoke broken English.

I arose and went out, taking the direction indicated. A number of my friends stood in the road or street as I passed along, and touched their caps to me, looking very queer in the dim twilight. They gazed at me curiously as I walked by.

I turned the corner of a house which stood half in the road, and just in front of me, in its little yard, was the little white church with its square, heavy, short spire. At the gate stood a tall figure, perfectly motionless, leaning on a long staff. As I approached I saw that he was an elderly man. He wore a long beard, once yellow but now gray, and he looked very straight and large. There was something grand about him as he stood there in the dusk.

I came quite up to him. He did not move.

"Good-evening," I said.

"Good-evening."

"Are you Mr. Hovedsen?" I asked, drawing out my letter.

"I am Olaf of the Mountain," he said slowly, as if his name embraced the whole title.

I handed him the letter.

"You are——?"

"I am——" taking my cue from his own manner.

"The friend of her friend?"

"His great friend."

"Can you climb?"

"I can."

"Are you steady?"

"Yes."

"It is well; are you ready?"

I had not counted on this, and involuntarily I asked, in some surprise, "To-night?"

"To-night. You cannot go in the day."

I thought of the speech I had heard: "No one goes over the mountain except at night," and the ominous conclusion, "Who goes over the mountain comes no more." My strange host, however, diverted my thoughts.

"A stranger cannot go except at night," he said, gravely; and then added, "I must get back to watch over Elsket."

"I shall be ready in a minute," I said, turning.

In ten minutes I had bade good-by to my simple hosts, and leaving them with a sufficient evidence of my consideration to secure their lasting good-will, I was on my way down the street again with my light luggage on my back. This time the entire population of the little village was in the road, and as I passed along I knew by their murmuring conversation that they regarded my action with profound misgiving. I felt, as I returned their touch of the cap and bade them good-by, a little like the gladiators of old who, about to die, saluted Cæsar.

At the gate my strange guide, who had not moved from the spot where I first found him, insisted on taking my

luggage, and buckling his straps around it and flinging it over his back, he handed me his stick, and without a word strode off straight toward the black mountain whose vast wall towered above us to the clouds.

I shall never forget that climb.

We were hardly out of the road before we began to ascend, and I had shortly to stop for breath. My guide, however, if silent was thoughtful, and he soon caught my gait and knew when to pause. Up through the dusk we went, he guiding me now by a word telling me how to step, or now turning to give me his hand to help me up a steep place, over a large rock, or around a bad angle. For a time we had heard the roar of the torrent as it boiled below us, but as we ascended it had gradually hushed, and we at length were in a region of profound silence. The night was cloudy, and as dark as it ever is in midsummer in that far northern latitude; but I knew that we were climbing along the edge of a precipice, on a narrow ledge of rock along the face of the cliff. The vast black wall above us rose sheer up, and I could feel rather than see that it went as sheer down, though my sight could not penetrate the darkness which filled the deep abyss below. We had been climbing about three hours when suddenly the ledge seemed to die out. My guide stopped, and unwinding his rope from his waist, held it out to me. I obeyed his silent gesture, and binding it around my body gave him the end. He wrapped it about him, and then taking me by the arm, as if I had been a child, he led me slowly along the narrow ledge around the face of the wall, step by step, telling me where to place my feet, and waiting till they were firmly planted. I began now to understand why no one

ever went "over the mountain" in the day. We were on a ledge nearly three thousand feet high. If it had not been for the strong, firm hold on my arm, I could not have stood it. As it was I dared not think. Suddenly we turned a sharp angle and found ourselves in a curious semicircular place, almost level and fifty or sixty feet deep in the concave, as if a great piece had been gouged out of the mountain by the glacier which must once have been there.

"This is a curious place," I ventured to say.

"It is," said my guide. "It is the Devil's Seat. Men have died here."

His tone was almost fierce. I accepted his explanation silently. We passed the singular spot and once more were on the ledge, but except in one place it was not so narrow as it had been the other side of the Devil's Seat, and in fifteen minutes we had crossed the summit and the path widened a little and began to descend.

"You do well," said my guide, briefly, "but not so well as Doctor John." I was well content with being ranked a good second to the doctor just then.

The rain had ceased, the sky had partly cleared, and, as we began to descend, the early twilight of the northern dawn began to appear. First the sky became a clear steel-gray and the tops of the mountains became visible, the dark outlines beginning to be filled in, and taking on a soft color. This lightened rapidly, until on the side facing east they were bathed in an atmosphere so clear and transparent that they seemed almost within a stone's throw of us, while the other side was still left in a shadow which was so deep as to be almost darkness. The gray lightened and lightened into

pearl until a tinge of rose appeared, and then the sky suddenly changed to the softest blue, and a little later the snow-white mountain-tops were bathed in pink, and it was day.

I could see in the light that we were descending into a sort of upland hollow between the snow-patched mountain-tops; below us was a lovely little valley in which small pines and birches grew, and patches of the green, short grass which stands for hay shone among the great bowlders. Several little streams came jumping down as white as milk from the glaciers stuck between the mountain-tops, and after resting in two or three tiny lakes which looked like hand-mirrors lying in the grass below, went bubbling and foaming on to the edge of the precipice, over which they sprang, to be dashed into vapor and snow hundreds of feet down. A half-dozen sheep and as many goats were feeding about in the little valley; but I could not see the least sign of a house, except a queer, brown structure, on a little knoll, with many gables and peaks, ending in the curious dragon-pennants, which I recognized as one of the old Norsk wooden churches of a past age.

When, however, an hour later, we had got down to the table-land, I found myself suddenly in front of a long, quaint, double log cottage, set between two immense bowlders, and roofed with layers of birch bark, covered with turf, which was blue with wild pansies. It was as if it were built under a bed of heart's-ease. It was very old, and had evidently been a house of some pretension, for there was much curious carving about the doors, and indeed about the whole front, the dragon's head being distinctly visible in the

design. There were several lesser houses which looked as if they had once been dwellings, but they seemed now to be only stables.

As we approached the principal door it was opened, and there stepped forth one of the most striking figures I ever saw—a young woman, rather tall, and as straight as an arrow. My friend's words involuntarily recurred to me, "A daughter of the Vikings," and then, somehow, I too had the feeling he had expressed, "Poor thing!" Her figure was one of the richest and most perfect I ever beheld. Her face was singularly beautiful; but it was less her beauty than her nobility of look and mien combined with a certain sadness which impressed me. The features were clear and strong and perfectly carved. There was a firm mouth, a good jaw, strong chin, a broad brow, and deep blue eyes which looked straight at you. Her expression was so soft and tender as to have something pathetic in it. Her hair was flaxen, and as fine as satin, and was brushed perfectly smooth and coiled on the back of her shapely head, which was placed admirably on her shoulders. She was dressed in the coarse, black-blue stuff of the country, and a kerchief, also dark blue, was knotted under her chin, and fell back behind her head, forming a dark background for her silken hair.

Seeing us she stood perfectly still until we drew near, when she made a quaint, low courtesy and advanced to meet her father with a look of eager expectancy in her large eyes.

"Elsket," he said, with a tenderness which conveyed the full meaning of the sweet pet term, "darling."

There was something about these people, peasants though they were, which gave me a strange feeling of respect for them.

"This is Doctor John's friend," said the old man, quietly.

She looked at her father in a puzzled way for a moment, as if she had not heard him, but as he repeated his introduction a light came into her eyes, and coming up to me she held out her hand, saying, "Welcome."

Then turning to her father—"Have you a letter for me, father?" she asked.

"No, Elsket," he said, gently; "but I will go again next month."

A cloud settled on her face and increased its sadness, and she turned her head away. After a moment she went into the house and I saw that she was weeping. A look of deep dejection came over the old man's face also.

II.

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I found that my friend, "Doctor John," strange to relate of a fisherman, had not exaggerated the merits of the fishing. How they got there, two thousand feet above the lower valley, I don't know; but trout fairly swarmed in the little streams, which boiled among the rocks, and they were as greedy as if they had never seen a fly in their lives. I shortly became contemptuous toward anything under three pounds, and addressed myself to the task of defending my flies against the smaller ones, and keeping them only for the big fellows, which ran over three pounds—the patriarchs of the streams. With these I had capital sport, for they knew