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TO
MY DEAREST FRIEND,
BERTHA VAN DER VYVER,
IN RECOGNITION OF
HER SWEET COMPANIONSHIP, TENDER SYMPATHY,



ACERVO DE LITERATURA

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THELMA.

BOOK I.

THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN.

CHAPTER I.

Dream by dream shot through her eyes, and each
Outshone the last that lightened. SWINBURNE.

MIDNIGHT—without darkness, without stars! Midnight—and the unwearied sun stood, yet visible in the heavens, like a victorious king throned on a dais of royal purple bordered with gold. The sky above him—his canopy—gleamed with a cold yet lustrous blue, while across it slowly flitted a few wandering clouds of palest amber, deepening, as they sailed along, to a tawny orange. A broad stream of light falling, as it were, from the center of the magnificent orb, shot lengthwise across the Alten Fjord, turning its waters to a mass of quivering and shifting color that alternated from bronze to copper—from copper to silver and azure. The surrounding hills glowed with a warm, deep violet tint, flecked here and there with touches of bright red, as though fairies were lighting tiny bonfires on their summits. Away in the distance a huge mass of rock stood out to view, its rugged lines transfigured into ethereal loveliness by a misty veil of tender rose pink—a hue curiously suggestive of some other and smaller sun that might have just set. Absolute silence prevailed. Not even the cry of a seaweew or kittiwake broke the almost deathlike stillness—no breath of wind stirred a ripple on the glassy water. The whole scene might well have been the fantastic dream of some imaginative painter, whose ambition soared beyond the limits of human skill. Yet it was only one of those million wonderful effects of sky and sea which are common in Norway especially on the Alten Fjord, where, though beyond the Arctic circle, the climate in summer is that of another Italy, and the landscape a living poem fairer than the visions of Endymion.

There was one solitary watcher of the splendid spectacle. This was a man of refined features and aristocratic appearance, who, reclining on a large rug of skins which he had thrown down on the shore for that purpose, was gazing at the pageant of the midnight sun and all its stately surroundings, with an earnest and rapt expression in his clear hazel eyes.

"Glorious! beyond all expectation, glorious!" he murmured half aloud, as he consulted his watch and saw that the hands marked exactly twelve on the dial. "I believe I'm having the best of it, after all. Even if those fellows get the 'Eulalie' into good position they will see nothing finer than this."

As he spoke he raised his field-glass and swept the horizon in search of a vessel—his own pleasure yacht—which had taken three of his friends—at their special desire, to the opposite island of Seiland—Seiland, rising in weird majesty three thousand feet above the sea, and boasting as its chief glory the great peak of Jedke, the most northern glacier in all the wild Norwegian land. There was no sign of a returning sail, and he resumed his study of the sumptuous sky, the colors of which were now deepening and burning with increasing luster, while an array of clouds of the deepest purple hue swept gorgeously together beneath the sun as though to form his footstool.

"One might imagine that the trump of the Resurrection had sounded, and that all this aerial pomp—this strange silence—was just the pause, the supreme moment before the angels descended," he mused, with a half smile at his own fancy, for though something of a poet at heart, he was much more of a cynic. He was too deeply imbued with modern fashionable atheism to think seriously about angels or Resurrection trumps, but there was a certain love of mysticism and romance in his nature, which not even his Oxford experiences and the chilly dullness of English materialism had been able to eradicate. And there was something impressive in the sight of the majestic orb holding such imperial revel at midnight—something almost unearthly in the light and life of the heavens, as compared with the reverential and seemingly worshipping silence of the earth—that, for a few moments, awed him into a sense of the spiritual and unseen. Mythical passages from the poets he loved came into his memory, and stray fragments of old songs and ballads he had known in his childhood returned to him with haunting persistence. It was, for him, one of those sudden halts in life which we all experience—an instant—when time and the world seem to stand still, as though to permit us easy breathing; a brief space—in which we are allowed to stop and wonder awhile at the strange unaccountable force within us, that enables us to stand with such calm, smiling audacity, on our small pin's point of the present, between the wide dark gaps of past and future; a small hush—in which the gigantic engines of the universe ap-

pear to revolve no more, and the immortal soul of man itself is subjected and overruled by supreme and eternal thought. Drifting away on those delicate imperceptible lines that lie between reality and dreamland, the watcher of the midnight sun gave himself up to the half-painful, half-delicious sense of being drawn in, absorbed, and lost in infinite imaginings, when the intense stillness around him was broken by the sound of a voice singing—a full, rich contralto, that rang through the air with the clearness of a golden bell. The sweet, liquid notes were those of an old Norwegian mountain melody, one of those wildly pathetic *folk-songs* that seem to hold all the sorrow, wonder, wistfulness, and indescribable yearning of a heart too full for other speech than music. He started to his feet and looked around him for the singer. There was no one visible. The amber streaks in the sky were leaping into crimson flame; the Fjord glowed like the burning lake of Dante's vision; one solitary sea-gull winged its graceful, noiseless flight far above, its white pinions shimmering like jewels as it crossed the radiance of the heavens. Other sign of animal life there was none. Still the hidden voice rippled on in a stream of melody, and the listener stood amazed and enchanted at the roundness and distinctness of every note that fell from the lips of the unseen vocalist.

"A woman's voice," he thought; "but where is the woman?"

Puzzled, he looked to the right and left, then out to the shining fjord, half expecting to see some fisher-maiden rowing along, and singing as she rowed, but there was no sign of any living creature. While he waited, the voice suddenly ceased, and the song was replaced by the sharp grating of a keel on the beach. Turning in the direction of this sound, he perceived a boat being pushed out by invisible hands toward the water's edge from a rocky cave that jutted upon the fjord, and, full of curiosity, he stepped toward the arched entrance, when—all suddenly and unexpectedly—a girl sprung out from the dark interior, and, standing erect in her boat, faced the intruder. A girl of about nineteen she seemed, taller than most women—with a magnificent uncovered mass of hair, the color of the midnight sunshine, tumbled over her shoulders, and flashing against her flushed cheeks and dazzlingly fair skin. Her deep blue eyes had an astonished and certainly indignant expression in them, while he, utterly unprepared, for such a vision of loveliness at such a time and in such a place, was for a moment taken aback and at a loss for words. Recovering his habitual self-possession quickly, however, he raised his hat, and, pointing to the boat, which was more than half-way out of the cavern, said simply:

"May I assist you?"

She was silent, eying him with a keen glance which had something in it of disfavor and suspicion.

"I suppose she doesn't understand English," he thought, "and I can't speak a word of Norwegian. I must talk by signs."

And forthwith he went through a labored pantomime of gesture, sufficiently ludicrous in itself, yet at the same time expressive of his meaning. The girl broke into a laugh—a laugh of sweet amusement which brought a thousand new sparkles of light into her lovely eyes.

"That is very well done," she observed, graciously speaking English with something of a foreign accent. "Even the Lapps would understand you, and they are very stupid, poor things!"

Half vexed by her laughter, and feeling that he was somehow an object of ridicule to this tall, bright-haired maiden, he ceased his pantomimic gestures abruptly and stood looking at her with a slight flush of embarrassment on his features.

"I know your language," she resumed quietly, after a brief pause, in which she had apparently considered the stranger's appearance and general bearing. "It was rude of me not to have answered you at once. You can help me if you will. The keel has caught among the pebbles, but we can easily move it between us." And, jumping lightly out of her boat, she grasped its edge firmly with her strong white hands, exclaiming gayly, as she did so: "Push!"

Thus adjured, he lost no time in complying with her request, and, using his great strength and muscular force to good purpose, the light little craft was soon well in the water, swaying to and fro as though with impatience to be gone. The girl sprang to her seat, discarding his eagerly proffered assistance, and, taking both oars, laid them in their respective rowlocks, and seemed about to start, when she paused and asked abruptly:

"Are you a sailor?"

He smiled. "Not I! Do I remind you of one?"

"You are strong, and you manage a boat as though you were accustomed to the work. Also you look as if you had been at sea."

"Rightly guessed!" he replied, still smiling; "I certainly *have* been at sea; I have been coasting all about your lovely land. My yacht went across to Seiland this afternoon."

She regarded him more intently, and observed, with the critical eye of a woman, the refined taste displayed in his dress, from the very cut of his loose traveling coat to the luxurious rug of fine fox-skins that lay so carelessly cast on the shore at a little distance from him. Then she gave a gesture of hauteur and half contempt.

"You have a yacht? Oh! then you are a gentleman. You do nothing for your living?"

"Nothing, indeed!" and he shrugged his shoulders with a mingled air of weariness and self-pity, "except one thing—I live!"

"Is that hard work?" she inquired, wonderingly.

"Very."

They were silent then, and the girl's face grew serious as she rested on her oars and still surveyed him with a straight, candid gaze, that, though earnest and penetrating, had nothing of boldness in it. It was the look of one in whose past there were no secrets—the look of a child who is satisfied with the present and takes no thought for the future. Few women look so after they have entered their teens. Social artifice, affectation, and the insatiate vanity that modern life encourages in the feminine nature—all these things soon do away with the pellucid clearness and steadfastness of the eye—the beautiful, true, untamed expression, which, though so rare, is, when seen, infinitely more bewitching than all the bright arrows of coquetry and sparkling invitation that flash from the glances of well-bred society dames, who have taken care to educate their eyes if not their hearts. This girl was evidently not trained properly; had she been so, she would have dropped a curtain over those wide, bright windows of her soul; she would have remembered that she was alone with a strange man at midnight—at midnight, though the sun shone; she would have simpered and feigned embarrassment, even if she could not feel it. As it happened, she did nothing of the kind, only her expression softened and became more wistful and earnest, and when she spoke again her voice was mellow with a suave gentleness that had something in it of compassion.

"If you do not love life itself," she said, "you love the beautiful things of life, do you not? See yonder! There is what we call the meeting of night and morning. One is glad to be alive at such a moment. Look quickly! The light soon fades."

She pointed toward the east. Her companion gazed in that direction, and uttered an exclamation—almost a shout—of wonder and admiration. Within the space of the past few minutes the aspect of the heavens had completely changed. The burning scarlet and violet hues had all melted into a transparent yet brilliant shade of pale mauve—as delicate as the inner tint of a lilac blossom—and across this stretched two wing-shaped gossamer clouds of watery green, fringed with soft primrose. Between these cloud-wings, as opaline in luster as those of a dragon-fly, the face of the sun shone like a shield of polished gold, while his rays, piercing spear-like through the varied tints of emerald—brought an unearthly radiance over the landscape—a luster as though the moon were, in some strange way, battling with the sun for mastery over the visible universe, though looking southward, she could dimly be perceived, the ghost of herself—a poor, fainting, pallid goddess—a perishing Diana.

Bringing his glance down from the skies, the young man turned it to the face of the maiden near him, and was startled at her mar-

velous beauty—beauty now heightened by the effect of the changeful colors that played around her. The very boat in which she sat glittered with a bronze-like, metallic brightness as it heaved gently to and fro on the silvery green water; the midnight sunshine bathed the fallen glory of her long hair, till each thick tress, each clustering curl, appeared to emit an amber spark of light. The strange, weird effect of the sky seemed to have stolen into her eyes, making them shine with witch-like brilliancy—the varied radiance flashing about her brought into strong relief the pureness of her profile, drawing as with a fine pencil the outlines of her noble forehead, sweet mouth, and rounded chin. It touched the scarlet of her bodice, and brightened the quaint old silver clasps she wore at her waist and throat, till she seemed no longer an earthly being, but more like some fair wandering sprite from the legendary Norse kingdom of *Alfheim*, the “abode of the Luminous Genii.”

She was gazing upward—heavenward—and her expression was one of rapt and almost devotional intensity. Thus she remained for some moments, motionless as the picture of an expectant angel painted by Raphael or Correggio; then reluctantly and with a deep sigh she turned her eyes toward earth again. In so doing she met the fixed and too visibly admiring gaze of her companion. She started, and a wave of vivid color flushed her cheeks. Quickly recovering her serenity, however, she saluted him slightly, and, moving her oars in unison, was on the point of departure.

Stirred by an impulse he could not resist, he laid one hand detainingly on the rim of her boat.

“Are you going now?” he asked.

She raised her eyebrows in some little surprise and smiled.

“Going?” she repeated. “Why, yes. I shall be late in getting home as it is.”

“Stop a moment,” he said, eagerly, feeling that he could not let this beautiful creature leave him as utterly as a midsummer night’s dream without some clew as to her origin and destination. “Will you not tell me your name?”

She drew herself erect with a look of indignation.

“Sir, I do not know you. The maidens of Norway do not give their names to strangers.”

“Pardon me,” he replied, somewhat abashed. “I mean no offense. We have watched the midnight sun together, and—and—I thought—”

He paused, feeling very foolish, and unable to conclude his sentence.

She looked at him demurely from under her long, curling lashes.

“You will often find a peasant girl on the shores of the Alten Fjord watching the midnight sun at the same time as yourself,”

she said, and there was a suspicion of laughter in her voice. “It is not unusual. It is not even necessary that you should remember so little a thing.”

“Necessary or not, I shall never forget it,” he said, with sudden impetuosity. “You are no peasant! Come; if I give you my name will you still deny me yours?”

Her delicate brows drew together in a frown of haughty and decided refusal. “No names please my ears save those that are familiar,” she said, with intense coldness. “We shall not meet again. Farewell!”

And without further word or look, she leaned gracefully to the oars, and pulling with a long, steady, resolute stroke, the little boat darted away as lightly and swiftly as a skimming swallow out on the shimmering water. He stood gazing after it till it became a distant speck sparkling like a diamond in the light of sky and wave, and when he could no more watch it with unassisted eyes, he took up his field-glass and followed its course attentively. He saw it cutting along as straightly as an arrow, then suddenly it dipped round to the westward, apparently making straight for some shelving rocks that projected far into fjord. It reached them; it grew less and less—it disappeared. At the same time the luster of the heavens gave way to a pale, pearl-like uniform gray tint, that stretched far and wide, folding up as in a mantle all the regal luxury of the sun-king’s palace. The subtle odor and delicate chill of the coming dawn stole freshly across the water. A light haze rose and obscured the opposite islands. Something of the tender melancholy of autumn, though it was late June, toned down the aspect of the before brilliant landscape. A lark rose swiftly from its nest in an adjacent meadow, and, soaring higher and higher, poured from its tiny throat a cascade of delicious melody. The midnight sun no longer shone at midnight; his face smiled with a sobered serenity through the faint early mists of approaching morning.

CHAPTER II.

Viens donc—je te chanterai des chansons que les esprits des crimetières m’ont apprises!—MATURIN.

“BAFFLED!” he exclaimed, with a slight vexed laugh, as the boat vanished from his sight. “By a woman, too! Who would have thought it?”

Who would have thought it, indeed! Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, baronet, the wealthy and desirable *parti* for whom many match-making mothers had stood knee-deep in the chilly though sparkling waters of society, ardently plying rod and line with patient persistence, vainly hoping to secure him as a husband for one of their