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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELSKET ***

ELSKET

By Thomas Nelson Page

1891

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I.

*"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 boulders 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 bareheaded 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 Caesar.

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 boulders. 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 boulders, 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.

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 every angle and hole, they sought every coign of vantage, and the rocks were so thick and so sharp that from the time one of these veterans took the fly, it was an equal contest which of us should come off victorious. I was often forced to rush splashing and floundering through the water to my waist to keep my line from being sawed, and as the water was not an hour from the green glaciers above, it was not always entirely pleasant.

I soon made firm friends with my hosts, and varied the monotony of catching three-pounders by helping them get in their hay for the winter. Elsket, poor thing, was, notwithstanding her apparently splendid physique, so delicate that she could no longer stand the fatigue of manual labor, any extra exertion being liable to bring on a recurrence of the heart-failure, from which she had suffered. I learned that she had had a violent hemorrhage two summers before, from which she had come near dying, and that the skill of my friend, the doctor, had doubtless saved her life. This was the hold he had on Olaf of the Mountain: this was the "small service" he had rendered them.

By aiding them thus, I was enabled to be of material assistance to Olaf, and I found in helping these good people, that work took on once more the delight which I remembered it used to have under like circumstances when I was a boy. I could cut or carry on my back loads of hay all day, and feel at night as if I had been playing. Such is the singular effect of the spirit on labor.

To make up for this, Elsket would sometimes, when I went fishing, take her knitting and keep me company, sitting at a little distance. With her pale, calm face and shining hair outlined against the background of her sad-colored kerchief, she looked like a mourning angel. I never saw her smile except when her father came into her presence, and when she smiled it was as if the sun had suddenly come out. I began to understand the devotion of these two strange people, so like and yet so different.

One rainy day she had a strange turn; she began to be restless. Her large, sad eyes, usually so calm, became bright; the two spots in her cheeks burned yet deeper; her face grew anxious. Then she laid her knitting aside and took out of a great chest something on which she began to sew busily. I was looking at her, when she caught my eye and smiled. It was the first time she ever smiled for me. "Did you know I was going to be married?" she asked, just as an American girl might have done. And before I could answer, she brought me the work. It was her wedding dress. "I have nearly finished it," she said. Then she brought me a box of old silver ornaments, such as the Norsk brides wear, and put them on. When I had admired them she put them away. After a little, she arose and began to wander about the house and out into the rain. I watched her with interest. Her father came in, and I saw a distressed look come into his eyes. He went up to her, and laying his hand on her drew her toward a seat. Then taking down an old Bible, he turned to a certain place and began to read. He read first the Psalm: "Lord, thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting, and world without end." Then he turned to the chapter of Corinthians, "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept," etc. His voice was clear, rich, and devout, and he read it with singular earnestness and beauty. It gave me a strange feeling; it is a part of our burial service. Then he opened his hymn-book and began to sing a low, dirge-like hymn. I sat silent, watching the strange service and noting its effect on Elsket. She sat at first like a person bound, struggling to be free, then became quieter, and at last, perfectly calm. Then Olaf knelt down, and with his hand still on her prayed one of the most touching prayers I ever heard. It was for patience.

When he rose Elsket was weeping, and she went and leant in his arms like a child, and he kissed her as tenderly as if he had been her mother.

Next day, however, the same excited state recurred, and this time the reading appeared to have less effect. She sewed busily, and insisted that there must be a letter for her at L—. A violent fit of weeping was followed by a paroxysm of coughing, and finally the old man, who had sat quietly by her with his hand stroking her head, arose and said, "I will go." She threw herself into his arms, rubbing her head against him in sign of dumb affection, and in a little while grew calm. It was still raining and quite late, only a little before sunset; but the old man went out, and taking the path toward L— was soon climbing the mountain toward the Devil's Seat. Elsket sat up all night, but she was as calm and as gentle as ever.

The next morning when Olaf returned she went out to meet him. Her look was full of eager expectancy. I did not go out, but watched her from the door. I saw Olaf shake his head, and heard her say bitterly, "It is so hard to wait," and he said, gently, "Yes, it is, Elsket, but I will go again," and then she came in weeping quietly, the old man following with a tender look on his strong, weather-beaten face.

That day Elsket was taken ill. She had been trying to do a little work in the field in the afternoon, when a sinking spell had come on. It looked for a time as if the poor overdriven heart had knocked off work for good and all. Strong remedies, however, left by Doctor John, set it going again, and we got her to bed. She was still desperately feeble, and Olaf sat up. I could not leave him, so we were sitting watching, he one side the open platform fireplace in one corner, and I the other; he smoking, anxious, silent, grim; I watching the expression on his gray face. His eyes seemed set back deeper than ever under the shaggy gray brows, and as the firelight fell on him he had the fierce, hopeless look of a caged eagle. It was late in the night before he spoke, and then it was half to himself and but half to me.

"I have fought it ten long years," he said, slowly.

Not willing to break the thread of his thought by speaking, I lit my pipe afresh and just looked at him. He

received it as an answer.

"She is the last of them," he said, accepting me as an auditor rather than addressing me. "We go back to Olaf Traetelje, the blood of Harold Haarfager (the Fairhaired) is in our veins, and here it ends. Dane and Swede have known our power, Saxon and Celt have bowed bare-headed to us, and with her it ends. In this stronghold many times her fathers have found refuge from their foes and gained breathing-time after battles by sea and land. From this nest, like eagles, they have swooped down, carrying all before them, and here, at last, when betrayed and hunted, they found refuge. Here no foreign king could rule over them; here they learnt the lesson that Christ is the only king, and that all men are his brothers. Here they lived and worshipped him. If their dominions were stolen from them they found here a truer wealth, content; if they had not power, they had what was better, independence. For centuries they held this last remnant of the dominion which Harold Haarfager had conquered by land, and Eric of the Bloody Axe had won by sea, sending out their sons and daughters to people the lands; but the race dwindled as their lands had done before, and now with her dies the last. How has it come? As ever, by betrayal!"

The old man turned fiercely, his breast heaving, his eyes burning.

"Was she who came of a race at whose feet jarls have crawled and kings have knelt not good enough?" I was hearing the story and did not interrupt him—"Not good enough for him!" he continued in his low, fierce monotone. "I did not want him. What if he was a Saxon? His fathers were our boatmen. Rather Cnut a thousand times. Then the race would not have died. Then she would not be—not be so."

The reference to her recalled him to himself, and he suddenly relapsed into silence.

"At least, Cnut paid the score," he began once more, in a low intense undertone. "In his arms he bore him down from the Devil's Seat, a thousand feet sheer on the hard ice, where his cursed body lies crushed forever, a witness of his falsehood."

I did not interrupt, and he rewarded my patience, giving a more connected account, for the first time addressing me directly.

"Her mother died when she was a child," he said, softly. His gentle voice contrasted strangely with the fierce undertone in which he had been speaking. "I was mother as well as father to her. She was as good as she was beautiful, and each day she grew more and more so. She was a second Igenborg. Knowing that she needed other companionship than an old man, I sought and brought her Cnut (he spoke of him as if I must know all about him). Cnut was the son of my only kinsman, the last of his line as well, and he was tall and straight and strong. I loved him and he was my son, and as he grew I saw that he loved her, and I was not sorry, for he was goodly to look on, straight and tall as one of old, and he was good also. And she was satisfied with him, and from a child ordered him to do her girlish bidding, and he obeyed and laughed, well content to have her smile. And he would carry her on his shoulder, and take her on the mountain to slide, and would gather her flowers. And I thought it was well. And I thought that in time they would marry and have the farm, and that there would be children about the house, and the valley might be filled with their voices as in the old time. And I was content. And one day *he* came! (the reference cost him an effort). Cnut found him fainting on the mountain and brought him here in his arms. He had come to the village alone, and the idle fools there had told him of me, and he had asked to meet me, and they told him of the mountain, and that none could pass the Devil's Ledge but those who had the old blood, and that I loved not strangers; and he said he would pass it, and he had come and passed safely the narrow ledge, and reached the Devil's Seat, when a stone had fallen upon him, and Cnut had found him there fainting, and had lifted him and brought him here, risking his own life to save him on the ledge. And he was near to death for days, and she nursed him and brought him from the grave.

"At first I was cold to him, but there was something about him that drew me and held me. It was not that he was young and taller than Cnut, and fair. It was not that his eyes were clear and full of light, and his figure straight as a young pine. It was not that he had climbed the mountain and passed the narrow ledge and the Devil's Seat alone, though I liked well his act; for none but those who have Harold Haarfager's blood have done it alone in all the years, though many have tried and failed. I asked him what men called him, and he said, 'Harold;' then laughing, said some called him, 'Harold the Fair-haired.' The answer pleased me. There was something in the name which drew me to him. When I first saw him I had thought of Harald Haarfager, and of Harald Haardraarder, and of that other Harold, who, though a Saxon, died bravely for his kingdom when his brother betrayed him, and I held out my hand and gave him the clasp of friendship."

The old man paused, but after a brief reflection proceeded:

"We made him welcome and we loved him. He knew the world and could tell us many-things. He knew the story of Norway and the Vikings, and the Sagas were on his tongue. Cnut loved him and followed him, and she (the pause which always indicated her who filled his thoughts)—she, then but a girl, laughed and sang for him, and he sang for her, and his voice was rich and sweet. And she went with him to fish and to climb, and often, when Cnut and I were in the field, we would hear her laugh, clear and fresh from the rocks beside the streams, as he told her some fine story of his England. He stayed here a month and a week, and then departed, saying he would come again next year, and the house was empty and silent after he left. But after a time we grew used to it once more and the winter came.

"When the spring returned we got a letter—a letter to her—saying he would come again, and every two weeks another letter came, and I went for it and brought it to—to her, and she read it to Cnut and me. And at last he came and I went to meet him, and brought him here, welcome as if he had been my eldest born, and we were glad. Cnut smiled and ran forward and gave him his hand, and—she—she did not come at first, but when she came she was clad in all that was her best, and wore her silver—the things her mother and her grandmother had worn, and as she stepped out of the door and saluted him, I saw for the first time that she was a woman grown, and it was hard to tell which face was brighter, hers or his, and Cnut smiled to see her so glad."

The old man relapsed into reflection. Presently, however, he resumed:

"This time he was gayer than before:—the summer seemed to come with him. He sang to her and read to her from books that he had brought, teaching her to speak English like himself, and he would go and fish up

the streams while she sat near by and talked to him. Cnut also learned his tongue well, and I did also, but Cnut did not see so much of him as before, for Cnut had to work, and in the evening they were reading and she—she—grew more and more beautiful, and laughed and sang more. And so the summer passed. The autumn came, but he did not go, and I was well content, for she was happy, and, in truth, the place was cheerier that he was here.

“Cnut alone seemed downcast, but I knew not why; and then the snow came. One morning we awoke and the farm was as white as the mountains. I said to him, ‘Now you are here for the winter,’ and he laughed and said, ‘No, I will stay till the new-year. I have business then in England, and I must go.’ And I turned, and her face was like sunshine, for she knew that none but Cnut and I had ever passed the Devil’s Ledge in the snow, and the other way by which I took the Doctor home was worse then, though easier in the summer, only longer. But Cnut looked gloomy, at which I chid him; but he was silent. And the autumn passed rapidly, so cheerful was he, finding in the snow as much pleasure as in the sunshine, and taking her out to slide and race on shoes till she would come in with her cheeks like roses in summer, and her eyes like stars, and she made it warm where she was.

“And one evening they came home. He was gayer than ever, and she more beautiful, but silenter than her wont. She looked like her mother the evening I asked her to be my wife. I could not take my eyes from her. That night Cnut was a caged wolf. At last he asked me to come out, and then he told me that he had seen Harold kiss her and had heard him tell her that he loved her, and she had not driven him away. My heart was wrung for Cnut, for I loved him, and he wept like a child. I tried to comfort him, but it was useless, and the next day he went away for a time. I was glad to have him go, for I grieved for him, and I thought she would miss him and be glad when he came again, and though the snow was bad on the mountain he was sure as a wolf. He bade us good-by and left with his eyes looking like a hurt dog’s. I thought she would have wept to have him go, but she did not. She gave him her hand and turned back to Harold, and smiled to him when he smiled. It was the first time in all her life that I had not been glad to have her smile, and I was sorry Harold had stayed, and I watched Cnut climb the mountain like a dark speck against the snow till he disappeared. She was so happy and beautiful that I could not long be out with her, though I grieved for Cnut, and when she came to me and told me one night of her great love for Harold I forgot my own regret in her joy, and I said nothing to Harold, because she told me he said that in his country it was not usual for the father to be told or to speak to a daughter’s lover.

“They were much taken up together after that, and I was alone, and I missed Cnut sorely, and would have longed for him more but for her happiness. But one day, when he had been gone two months, I looked over the mountain, and on the snow I saw a black speck. It had not been there before, and I watched it as it moved, and I knew it was Cnut.

“I said nothing until he came, and then I ran and met him. He was thin, and worn, and older; but his eyes had a look in them which I thought was joy at getting home; only they were not soft, and he looked taller than when he left, and he spoke little. His eyes softened when she, hearing his voice, came out and held out her hand to him, smiling to welcome him; but he did not kiss her as kinsfolk do after long absence, and when Harold came out the wolf-look came back into his eyes. Harold looked not so pleased to see him, but held out his hand to greet him. But Cnut stepped back, and suddenly drawing from his breast a letter placed it in his palm, saying slowly, ‘I have been to England, Lord Harold, and have brought you this from your Lady Ethelfrid Penrith—they expect you to your wedding at the New Year.’ Harold turned as white as the snow under his feet, and she gave a cry and fell full length on the ground.

“Cnut was the first to reach her, and lifting her in his arms he bore her into the house. Harold would have seized her, but Cnut brushed him aside as if he had been a barley-straw, and carried her and laid her down. When she came to herself she did not remember clearly what had happened. She was strange to me who was her father, but she knew him. I could have slain him, but she called him. He went to her, and she understood only that he was going away, and she wept. He told her it was true that he had loved another woman and had promised to marry her, before he had met her, but now he loved her better, and he would go home and arrange everything and return; and she listened and clung to him. I hated him and wanted him to go, but he was my guest, and I told him that he could not go through the snow; but he was determined. It seemed as if he wanted now to get away, and I was glad to have him go, for my child was strange to me, and if he had deceived one woman I knew he might another, and Cnut said that the letter he had sent by him before the snow came was to say he would come in time to be married at the New Year; and Cnut said he lived in a great castle and owned broad lands, more than one could see from the whole mountain, and his people had brought him in and asked him many questions of him, and had offered him gold to bring the letter back, and he had refused the gold, and brought it without the gold; and some said he had deceived more than one woman. And Lord Harold went to get ready, and she wept, and moaned, and was strange. And then Cnut went to her and told her of his own love for her, and that he was loyal to her, but she waved him from her, and when he asked her to marry him, for he loved her truly, she said him nay with violence, so that he came forth into the air looking white as a leper. And he sat down, and when I came out he was sitting on a stone, and had his knife in his hand, looking at it with a dangerous gleam in his eyes; and just then she arose and came out, and, seeing him sitting so with his knife, she gave a start, and her manner changed, and going to him she spoke softly to him for the first time, and made him yield her up the knife; for she knew that the knife hung loose in the sheath. But then she changed again and all her anger rose against Cnut, that he had brought Harold the letter which carried him away, and Cnut sat saying nothing, and his face was like stone. Then Lord Harold came and said he was ready, and he asked Cnut would he carry his luggage. And Cnut at first refused, and then suddenly looked him full in his face, and said, ‘Yes.’ And Harold entered the house to say good-by to her, and I heard her weeping within, and my heart grew hard against the Englishman, and Cnut’s face was black with anger, and when Harold came forth I heard her cry out, and he turned in the door and said he would return, and would write her a letter to let her know when he would return. But he said it as one speaks to a child to quiet it, not meaning it. And Cnut went in to speak to her, and I heard her drive him out as if he had been a dog, and he came forth with his face like a wolf’s, and taking up Lord Harold’s luggage, he set out. And so they went over the mountain.

"And all that night she lay awake, and I heard her moaning, and all next day she sat like stone, and I milked the goats, and her thoughts were on the letters he would send.

"I spoke to her, but she spoke only of the letters to come, and I kept silence, for I had seen that Lord Harold would come no more; for I had seen him burn the little things she had given him, and he had taken everything away, but I could not tell her so. And the days passed, and I hoped that Cnut would come straight back; but he did not. It grieved me, for I loved him, and hoped that he would return, and that in time she would forget Lord Harold, and not be strange, but be as she had been to Cnut before he came. Yet I thought it not wholly wonderful that Cnut did not return at once, nor unwise; for she was lonely, and would sit all day looking up the mountain, and when he came she would, I thought, be glad to have him back.

"At the end of a week she began to urge me to go for a letter. But I told her it could not come so soon; but when another week had passed she began to sew, and when I asked her what she sewed, she said her bridal dress, and she became so that I agreed to go, for I knew no letter would come, and it broke my heart to see her. And when I was ready she kissed me, and wept in my arms, and called me her good father; and so I started.

"She stood in the door and watched me climb the mountain, and waved to me almost gayly.

"The snow was deep, but I followed the track which Cnut and the Englishman had made two weeks before, for no new snow had fallen, and I saw that one track was ever behind the other, and never beside it, as if Cnut had fallen back and followed behind him.

"And so I came near to the Devil's Seat, where it was difficult, and from where Cnut had brought him in his arms that day, and then, for the first time, I began to fear, for I remembered Cnut's look as he came from the house when she waved him off, and it had been so easy for him with a swing of his strong arm to have pushed the other over the cliff. But when I saw that he had driven his stick in deep to hold hard, and that the tracks went on beyond, I breathed freely again, and so I passed the narrow path, and the black wall, and came to the Devil's Seat; and as I turned the rock my heart stopped beating, and I had nearly fallen from the ledge. For there, scattered and half-buried in the snow, lay the pack Cnut had carried on his back, and the snow was all dug up and piled about as if stags had been fighting there for their lives. From the wall, across and back, were deep furrows, as if they were ploughed by men's feet dug fiercely in; but they were ever deeper toward the edge, and on one spot at the edge the snow was all torn clear from the black rock, and beyond the seat the narrow path lay smooth, and bright, and level as it had fallen, without a track. My knees shook under me, and I clutched my stick for support, and everything grew black before me: and presently I fell on my knees and crawled and peered over the edge. But there was nothing to be seen, only where the wall slants sharp down for a little space in one spot the snow was brushed away as if something had struck there, and the black, smooth rock showed clean, cutting off the sight from the glacier a thousand feet down."

The old man's breast heaved. It was evidently a painful narrative, but he kept on.

"I sat down in the snow and thought; for I could not think at once. Cnut had not wished to murder, or else he had flung the Englishman from the narrow ledge with one blow of his strong arm. He had waited until they had stood on the Devil's Seat, and then he had thrown off his pack and faced him, man to man. The Englishman was strong and active, taller and heavier than Cnut. He had Harald's name, but he had not Harald's heart nor blood, and Cnut had carried him in his arms over the cliff, with his false heart like water in his body.

"I sat there all day and into the night; for I knew that he would betray no one more. I sorrowed for Cnut, for he was my very son. And after a time I would have gone back to her, but I thought of her at home waiting and watching for me with a letter, and I could not; and then I wept, and I wished that I were Cnut, for I knew that he had had one moment of joy when he took the Englishman in his arms. And then I took the scattered things from the snow and threw them over the cliff; for I would not let it be known that Cnut had flung the Englishman over. It would be talked about over the mountain, and Cnut would be thought a murderer by those who did not know, and some would say he had done it foully; and so I went on over the mountain, and told it there that Cnut and the Englishman had gone over the cliff together in the snow on their way, and it was thought that a slip of snow had carried them. And I came back and told her only that no letter had come."

He was silent so long that I thought he had ended; but presently, in a voice so low that it was just like a whisper, he added: "I thought she would forget, but she has not, and every fortnight she begins to sew her dress and I go over the mountains to give her peace; for each time she draws nearer to the end, and wears away more and more; and some day the thin blade will snap."

"The thin blade" was already snapping, and even while he was speaking the last fibres were giving way.

The silence which followed his words was broken by Elsket; I heard a strange sound, and Elsket called feebly, "Oh, father."

Olaf went quickly to her bedside. I heard him say, "My God in Heaven!" and I sprang up and joined him. It was a hemorrhage.

Her life-blood was flowing from her lips. She could not last like that ten minutes.

Provisionally the remedies provided by Doctor John were right at hand, and, thanks to them, the crimson tide was stayed before life went out; but it was soon apparent that her strength was gone and her power exhausted.

We worked over her, but her pulse was running down like a broken clock. There was no time to have got a physician, even had there been one to get. I mentioned it; Olaf shook his head. "She is in the hands of God," he said.

Olaf never left the bedside except to heat water or get some stimulant for her.

But, notwithstanding every effort, she failed to rally. The overtaxed heart was giving out, and all day she sank steadily. I never saw such a desperate face as that old man's. It haunts me now. He hung over her. He held her hand, now growing cold, against his cheek to keep it warm—stroked it and kissed it. As towards evening the short, quick breaths came, which precede dissolution, he sank on his knees. At first, he buried his face in his hands; then in the agony of his despair, he began to speak aloud. I never heard a more moving

appeal. It was a man speaking face to face with God for one about to enter his presence. His eyes were wide open, as if he saw His face. He did not ask that she should be spared to him; it was all for his "Elska," his "Darling," that Jesus would be her "Herder," and lead her beside the still waters; that she might be spared all suffering and sorrow, and have peace.

Presently he ended and buried his face in his hands. The quick, faint breaths had died away, and as I looked on the still white face on the pillow I thought that she had gone. But suddenly the large eyes slowly opened wide.

"Father," she said, faintly.

"Elsket," the old man bent over her eagerly.

"I am so tired."

"My Elsket."

"I love you."

"Yes, my Elsket."

"You will stay with me?"

"Yes, always."

"If Cnut comes?"

"Yes, my Elsket."

"If Cnut comes——" very faintly.

Her true lover's name was the last on her lips.

He bent his ear to her lips. "Yes?"

But we never knew just what she wanted. The dim, large eyes closed, and then the lids lifted slowly a little; there was a sigh, and Elsket's watching was over; the weary spirit was at peace.

"She is with God," he said, calmly.

I closed the white lids gently, and moved out. Later I offered to help him, but he said "No," and I remained out of doors till the afternoon.

About sunset he appeared and went up toward the old church, and I went into the house. I found that he had laid her out in the large room, and she lay with her face slightly turned as if asleep. She was dressed like a bride in the bridal dress she had sewn so long; her hair was unbound, and lay about her, fine and silken, and she wore the old silver ornaments she had showed me. No bride had ever a more faithful attendant. He had put them all upon her.

After a time, as he did not come back, I went to look for him. As I approached I heard a dull, thumping sound. When I reached the cleared place I found him digging. He had chosen a spot just in front of the quaint old door, with the rude, runic letters, which the earliest sunbeams would touch. As I came up I saw he was digging her grave. I offered to help, but he said "No." So I carried him some food and placing it near him left him.

Late that evening he came down and asked me if I would sit up that night. I told him, yes. He thanked me and went into the house. In a little while he came out and silently went up the path toward the mountain.

It was a strange night that I spent in that silent valley in that still house, only I, and the dead girl lying there so white and peaceful. I had strange thoughts, and the earth and things earthly disappeared for me that night shut in by those mountain walls. I was in a world alone. I was cut off from all but God and the dead. I have dear ones in heaven, and I was nearer to them that night, amid the mountain-tops of Norway, than I was to earthly friends. I think I was nearer to heaven that night than I ever shall be again till I get there.

Day broke like a great pearl, but I did not heed it. It was all peace.

Suddenly there was a step outside, and Olaf, with his face drawn and gray, and bowing under the weight of the burden upon his shoulder, stepped wearily in at the door.

To do Elsket honor he had been over the mountain to get it. I helped lift it down and place it, and then he waited for me to go. As I passed out of the door I saw him bend over the quiet sleeper. I looked in later; he had placed her in the coffin, but the top was not on and he was on his knees beside her.

He did not bury her that day; but he never left her side; he sat by her all day and all night. Next day he came to the door and looked at me. I went in and understood that he wanted me to look for the last time on her face. It was fairer than I ever saw it. He had cut her flowers and placed them all about her, and on her breast was a small packet of letters. All care, all suffering, all that was merely of the earth were cleansed away, and she looked as she lay, like a dead angel. After I came out I heard him fastening on the top, and when he finished I went in again. He would have attempted to carry it by himself, but I restrained him, and without a word he took the head and I the foot, and so lifting her tenderly we went gently out and up toward the church. We had to pause and rest several times, for he was almost worn out. After we had lowered her into the grave I was in doubt what to do; but Olaf drew from his coat his two books, and standing close by the side of the grave he opened first the little Bible and began to read in a low but distinct voice: "Lord, thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting, and world without end."

When he finished this he turned and read again: "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept," etc. They were the Psalm and the chapter which I had heard him read to Elsket that first day when she became excited, and with which he had so often charmed her restless spirit.

He closed, and I thought he was done, but he opened his hymn-book and turning over a few leaves sang the same hymn he had sung to her that day. He sang it all through to the end, the low, strange, dirge-like hymn, and chanted as it was by that old man alone, standing in the fading evening light beside the grave which he had dug for his daughter, the last of his race, I never heard anything so moving. Then he knelt, and clasping his hands offered a prayer. The words, from habit, ran almost as they had done when he had prayed for Elsket before, that God would be her Shepherd, her "Herder," and lead her beside the still waters, and give

her peace.

When he was through I waited a little, and then I took up a spade to help him; but he reached out and took it quietly, and seeing that he wanted to be alone I left him. He meant to do for Elsket all the last sacred offices himself.

I was so fatigued that on reaching the house I dropped off to sleep and slept till morning, and I do not know when he came into the house, if he came at all. When I waked early next morning he was not there, and I rose and went up to the church to hunt for him. He was sitting quietly beside the grave, and I saw that he had placed at her head a little cross of birchwood, on which he had burned one word, simply,

“Elsket.”

I spoke to him, asking him to come to the house.

“I cannot leave her,” he said; but when I urged him he rose silently and returned with me.

I remained with him for a while after that, and each day he went and sat by the grave. At last I had to leave. I urged him to come with me, but he replied always, “No, I must watch over Elsket.”

It was late in the evening when we set off to cross the mountain. We came by the same path by which I had gone, Olaf leading me as carefully and holding me as steadily as when I went over before. I stopped at the church to lay a few wild flowers on the little gray mound where Elsket slept so quietly. Olaf said not a word; he simply waited till I was done and then followed me dumbly. I was so filled with sorrow for him that I did not, except in one place, think much of the fearful cliffs along which we made our way. At the Devil’s Seat, indeed, my nerves for a moment seemed shaken and almost gave way as I thought of the false young lord whose faithlessness had caused all the misery to these simple, kindly folk, and of the fierce young Norseman who had there found so sweet a revenge. But we came on and passed the ledge, and descending struck the broader path just after the day broke, where it was no longer perilous but only painful.

There Olaf paused. “I will go back if you don’t want me,” he said. I did not need his services, but I urged him to come on with me—to pay a visit to his friends. “I have none,” he said, simply. Then to come home with me and live with me in old Virginia. He said, “No,” he “must watch over Elsket.” So finally I had to give in, and with a clasp of the hand and a message to “her friend” Doctor John, to “remember Elsket,” he went back and was soon lost amid the rocks.

I was half-way down when I reached a cleared place an hour or so later, and turned to look back. The sharp angle of the Devil’s Ledge was the highest point visible, the very pinnacle of the mountain, and there, clear against the burnished steel of the morning sky, on the very edge, clear in the rare atmosphere was a small figure. It stood for a second, a black point distinctly outlined, and then disappeared.

It was Olaf of the Mountain, gone back to keep watch over Elsket.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELSKET ***

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