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THE KING'S WAKE AND OTHER BALLADS

BY
GEORGE BORROW

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THE KING'S WAKE

p. 5

To-night is the night that the wake they hold,
To the wake repair both young and old.

Proud Signelil she her mother address'd:
"May I go watch along with the rest?"

"O what at the wake wouldst do my dear?
Thou'st neither sister nor brother there.

"Nor brother-in-law to protect thy youth,
To the wake thou must not go forsooth.

"There be the King and his warriors gay,
If me thou list thou at home wilt stay."

"But the Queen will be there and her maiden crew,
Pray let me go, mother, the dance to view."

So long, so long begged the maiden young,
That at length from her mother consent she wrung.

"Then go, my child, if thou needs must go,
But thy mother ne'er went to the wake I trow."

Then through the thick forest the maiden went,
To reach the wake her mind was bent.

When o'er the green meadows she had won,
The Queen and her maidens to bed were gone.

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And when she came to the castle gate
They were plying the dance at a furious rate.

There danced full many a mail-clad man,
And the youthful King he led the van.

He stretched forth his hand with an air so free,
"Wilt dance, thou pretty maid, with me?"

"O, sir, I've come across the wold
That I with the Queen discourse might hold."

"Come dance," said the King with a courteous smile,
"The Queen will be here in a little while."

Then forward she stepped like a blushing rose,
She takes his hand and to dance she goes.

"Hear Signelil what I say to thee,
A ditty of love sing thou to me."

"A ditty of love I will not, Sir King,
But as well as I can another I'll sing."

Proud Signil began, a ditty she sang,
To the ears of the Queen in her bed it rang.

Says the Queen in her chamber as she lay:
"O which of my maidens doth sing so gay?"

"O which of my maidens doth sing so late,
To bed why followed they me not straight?"

Then answered the Queen the little foot page,
"'Tis none of thy maidens I'll engage.

"'Tis none I'll engage of the maiden band,
'Tis Signil proud from the islet's strand."

"O bring my red mantle hither to me,
For I'll go down this maid to see."

And when they came down to the castle gate
The dance it moved at so brave a rate.

About and around they danced with glee,
There stood the Queen and the whole did see.

The Queen she felt so sore aggrieved
When the King with Signil she perceived.

Sophia the Queen to her maid did sign:
"Go fetch me hither a horn of wine."

His hand the King stretched forth so free:
"Wilt thou Sophia my partner be?"

"O I'll not dance with thee, I vow,
Unless proud Signil pledge me now."

The horn she raised to her lips, athirst,
The innocent heart in her bosom burst.

There stood King Valdemar pale as clay,
Stone dead at his feet the maiden lay.

"A fairer maid since I first drew breath
Ne'er came more guiltless to her death."

For her wept woman and maid so sore,
To the Church her beauteous corse they bore.

But better with her it would have sped,
Had she but heard what her mother said.

SWAYNE FELDING

Swayne Felding sits at Helsingborg,
He tells his deeds with pride;
Full blythe at heart I ween he was,

His faulchion at his side.

He vows that he on pilgrimage
To regal Rome will go;
And many a Danish warrior bold
Doth make the self same vow.

So out they rode from Danish land,
And only two were they;
They stopped to rest them in a town,
Its name was Hovdingsey.

They stopped to rest in a lofty town,
Its name was Hovdingsey;
They gusted with a Damsel proud,
A wondrous lovely may.

She placed Swayne highest at the board
Amidst a knightly band;
And then wherefrom they two were come
The Damsel did demand.

“Thou art no needy pilgrim, Sir,
Who honorest us this eve;
And that can I by thy small shirt
Hooked with red gold perceive.

“O I can plain by thy small shirt
With red gold hooked discern,
Thou art the King of Denmark come
To do us a noble turn.”

“I am not Denmark’s King, fair maid,
Nor any thing so high;
I’m but a needy pilgrim, born
Within the Dane country.

“Now list to me thou Damsel fair,
List kindly I beseech,
There’s many a child in Denmark born,
And with his own luck each.”

And there sat she the damsel fair,
And the silken seam she sewed;
For every stitch she sew’d a tear
From her eyes of beauty flowed.

“Now do thou hear, my damsel dear,
Why dost so sorely grieve?
If thou declare thy bosom’s care
Perchance I can relieve.”

“Within our land a Giant lives
Who waste our land will lay;
Upon no other food than maids
And ladies will he prey.

“Within our country lives a troid
From us our land will tear,
Unless we can procure a man
To fight with him will dare.

“But I have heard in all my days
That Danemen know no fear;
No doubt it is to help us now
That God has sent one here.”

“And had I horse and harness now
Well suited to my back,
Then would I break with him a spear,
Proud damsel, for thy sake.”

They led three hundred horses forth,
Milk white was every one;
But the first sank down like a messan dog
That Swayne laid the saddle on.

They led the Spanish horses forth,
Their eyes were very bright;
Swayne drew the bridle o’er their heads,

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And straightway they took fright.

It was the brave Swayne Felding then
Was sorely sad in mood:
"O had I but a Danish horse
Who had eat of Denmark's food.

"Full fifteen golden rings so good
From Denmark I did bring,
But for a horse of Jutland breed
They every one should spring."

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Then up came striding a millerman
So gaily o'er the wold:
"O I have got a Danish horse,
In Denmark he was foal'd.

"A mottled Danish horse I've got,
In Sadbylund was born;
He bears each time that he goes to mill
Full sixty bolls of corn."

"Now hear thou honest millerman,
Let me this same horse see,
For if we both be Daners born
We'll beat Italians three."

Then forth was led the miller's horse,
He look'd a very Dane;
High hip, broad chest, the saddle gilt
Upon his back laid Swayne.

Away he cast his gloves so small,
His hands were white to see;
And he himself girded the noble horse,
The groom ne'er trusted he.

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He girded the horse with a saddle girth,
He girded him with three;
The horse he gave a single shake
And all broke instantly.

He girded the steed where he was most thick
With such tremendous force,
That the girth did fly into pieces ten,
And fell on his knee the horse.

"With fifteen golden rings so good
From Denmark out I sped,
But I with every one would part
Got I a good girth instead.

"Send ye a message o'er the mead
Unto the beauteous lady,
And beg her for her champion's steed
To get a new girth ready."

Full fifteen were the Damsels proud
Who wove the ruddy gold,
And formed with care a saddle girth
Swayne Felding's horse to hold.

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The maids of Hammer, the maids of Pommer,
And many more maids with heed,
Wove silk and gold to form a girth
For the mottled Danish steed.

The saddle girth was ready and made
By the early morning tide;
'Twas seven ells long, and a quarter thick,
And more than five span wide.

But when the horse he girded was
So fierce he ramped and reared,
That there was none of Austria's men
But to look upon him feared.

"Now do thou hear thou gallant horse,
I think thou'st human wit,
Before I mount thy back upon

I thee will ease a bit.

“Now do thy best, my gallant horse,
Who like a buck dost play;
Here may ye see, ye German knights,
Of Danish men the way.

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“Now take away the crowned sword,
To bear it would break my vow;
And fetch ye hither a vessel’s mast,
I’ll wield it well I trow.”

The first course they together rode
The Troid show’d mighty force,
Their splintered spears a furlong flew,
And down fell either horse.

“I would but prove my horse’s strength,
I call not this a fight;
But meet me here tomorrow’s morn
And harder thee I’ll smite.”

Swayne Felding took the sacrament,
And round the churchyard paced;
Within his acton next his breast
The holy host he placed.

“And do thou hear, my Damsel fair,
Be never down at heart;
Either shall he the saddle quit
Or his tough neck shall start.”

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Out of the city followed him
Alike both man and dame:
“O may God grant,” the people said,
“The Knight his foe may tame!”

“Now hand me not the puny lance
Which ye are wont to bear;
But do ye bring, for me to wield,
My native country’s spear.”

And now the second course they ride
Their cheeks with fury red;
The Devil’s neck asunder went,
Flew o’er the mead his head.

His head flew into pieces nine,
His back asunder burst;
Swayne hied him to the Damsel’s house,
There first he quenched his thirst.

Nine stately warriors out there came,
Took Swayne from off his steed:
“Broad lands on thee we will bestow
If thou wilt wed the maid.”

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“O I’m betrothed to one as fair
In Ostland realms already;
For seven tons of ruddy gold
I would not prove unsteady.

“But build before your Hovdingsey
A house upon the mead,
And there to Danish pilgrims give
Good wine and best of bread.”

So Danish pilgrims there they give
Good wine and best of bread;
They pray for brave Swayne Felding’s soul,
He now has long been dead.

INNOCENCE DEFAMED

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Misfortune comes to every door,
And who can hope to ‘scape its might?

And that can little Kirstine say,
And none alas with greater right.

It was the good Sir Peter, he
At fall of eve came home from Ting;
And it was little Kirstine fair,
That fell the knight to welcoming.

“Now welcome, welcome home from Ting,
Most welcome thou my father dear;
Whilst thou at Ting this day didst stand
Didst any news or tiding hear?”

“Enough of tidings I have heard,
To break my heart however sound;
Thy plighted youth has thee forsworn
Because thy name was bandied round.

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“Thy plighted youth has thee forsworn,
And none can blame the youth I ween;
For eight long years it seems thou hast
A murdress and a harlot been.”

“Now do thou hear, my father dear,
Such wicked rumours thou shouldst scorn;
For thus is many a virtuous maid
Of fame and honor daily shorn.”

“And do thou hear, my daughter dear,
Thou shalt confess it to thy sorrow;
This evening thou shalt gather wood,
And burn upon that wood tomorrow.”

And so they took the fair Kirstine,
And her arrayed in scarlet weed;
And mournfully they lifted her
Upon the grey and lofty steed.

It was little Kirstine fair,
She reached at last the verdant wold;
“Now bless’d be God on high that dwells,
My bride-bed yonder I behold.

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“So red, red are my bridal sheets,
My bridal bolsters are so blue,
The knights who thus their daughters wed
I hope and trust are very few.”

And so they took the little Kirstine,
And bade her sit a stump upon:
Then forward stepped her plighted youth,
And her yellow hair he has undone.

“Now do thou hear, my plighted maid,
I rede thee be of blythesome cheer,
For thou, I ween, dost here perceive
Thy bride-bed and thy funeral bier.”

When she had sat a little space
No longer there she cared to wait;
Now stand thou up, Sir Archbishop,
And Kirstine’s bride-bed consecrate.

The little Kirstine then they took
And midst the roaring blazes threw;
The fire recoiled on every side,
So fair and bright she stood to view.

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“I thank the God who me has helped,
The God who made the earth and sky;
Now to a cloister I will go,
And serve my master till I die.”

And thither little Kirstine went,
And with her all her maidens fair;
Her father and her plighted youth,
They quickly died of grief and care.

And now within the cloister wall
The beauteous little Kirstine goes;

So joyous o'er her yellow hair
The veil so long and black she throws.

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