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# HAFBUR AND SIGNE A BALLAD

BY  
GEORGE BORROW

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## HAFBUR AND SIGNE

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Young Hafbur King and Sivard King  
They lived in bitter enmity;  
'Twas Signe proud that caused their feud,  
Of maidens all the fairest she.

It was youthful Hafbur King  
Awaked at midnight with a bound,  
And full of dread he straightway said  
His wondrous dream to all around.

"Methought I was in heaven's domain,  
Within that place so fair to view,  
And held to my breast my loved one prest,  
When down we fell the cloudlets through."

And there sat all the Dames and maids  
And little heeded what he said;  
But lent an ear his mother dear,  
'Twas she alone attention paid.

"My son do thou to the mountain go,  
And look that thou dost go with speed;  
The Daughter demand of Elfin land,  
And she to thee thy dream will rede."

It was young King Hafbur bold  
In his left hand he took his blade,  
And away he hied to the mountain's side  
To seek the lovely elfin maid.

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With his fingers white he thrice tapped light  
Upon the mountain's side so green;  
The daughter of Elle lay awake, and well  
Could guess what did that tapping mean.

"Hail, daughter fair of Elfland's King,  
Whom here I see in costly wede!  
I beg for love of the God above  
That thou to me my dream wilt rede.

"Methought I was in Heaven's domain,  
Within that place so fair to view,  
And held to my breast my loved one prest,  
When down I sank the cloudlets through."

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"Thy dreaming thou wast in heaven, doth mean  
That thou shalt win the damsel proud;  
But that thou shalt die for her is shown  
By thy falling through the little cloud."

"And if for me it destined be  
To win the maid for whom I sigh,  
I'll ne'er complain if Fate ordain  
That afterwards for her I die."

Sir Hafbur lets his hair grow long,  
And maiden's clothes he caused be made;  
And away he rode to the high abode  
Of Siward King, to learn to braid.

For himself he clothes has caused be made,  
All such as high born damsels wear;  
Then away rode he o'er hill and lea  
To seek King Siward's daughter fair.

When he had reached the castle yard  
In haste he smoothed his array;  
To the hall of state where ladies wait,  
And maids, then swift he takes his way.

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"Now hail to you, ye lovely dames,  
And hail ye, maids of high degree!  
And hail the child that's Signild styled,  
The Dane King's child, if here she be!

"Hail Signild, daughter of the King,  
Who here art spinning silken thread;  
Sir Hafbur me has sent to thee  
That thou mayst teach me how to braid."

"If thou dost come by Hafbur sent,  
A welcome guest thou here shalt be;  
What I can impart of the braiding art  
I'll willingly impart to thee.

"Whate'er I know of the braiding art  
I'll willingly to thee disclose;  
And thou thy meat from my dish shalt eat,  
And with my best loved maid repose."

"O I have eat with princely maids,  
And by their sides have often lain;  
I should pine, I trow, if bid to go  
To bed with one of the servant train."

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"Well do not grieve my pretty may!  
We'll do thee no disgrace nor harm;  
And thou thy meat from my dish shalt eat,  
And thou shalt sleep within my arm."

And there sat all the damsels proud,  
And with their work dispatch they made,  
Save Hafbur alone, the King's good son,  
Who with his needle often play'd.

They sewed the hart, and they sewed the hind,  
In good green wood that ran about;  
Of cup of gold he scarce got hold  
But Hafbur all the wine drunk out.

In came the wicked servant maid,  
In evil hour in came she:  
"Where'er I've been I ne'er have seen  
A maid know less of broidery.

"A damsel fair I ne'er have seen  
Who understood of stitching less;  
And ne'er on earth a maid of birth  
Drink wine with greater eagerness."

Then out and said the wicked maid,  
And loud with her sharp voice she spake:  
"No maid I've viewed of noble blood  
Such draughts of power ever take.

"She never sews so small a seam  
But with her needle she doth stop;  
No cup so great she gets, but straight  
She drains it to the bottom drop.

"Two eyes she has, and eyes so bold  
In high born maid I ne'er have seen;  
And she doth bear of hands a pair  
Which cast of iron seem, I ween."

"Now do thou hear, thou servant maid,  
Thy jeers at me why dost thou throw?  
Thou needst not fear or blame or sneer  
From me, however thou may'st sew.

"Forego thy scoffs, forego thy jeers,  
And do not watch me in such guise;  
I thee don't mark on thy hand's work  
Whatever way I turn my eyes."

'Twas Hafbur then the King's good son  
To sew at length with zeal began;  
And he sewed hart and hind with art,  
E'en as they run pursued by man.

He lilies sews, and roses bright,  
The birds upon the bough he sews;  
At his address they all express  
Surprise, they'd him by no means lose.

And on sewed they till end of day,  
And till some part of night was fled;  
With drowsy brows the proud maids rose,  
It lists them now to go to bed.

So late it was at nightly tide,  
Down fell the dew o'er hill and mead;  
Then lists it her proud Signild fair  
With all the rest to bed to speed.

"O where shall I a bed procure?"  
Said Hafbur then, the King's good son.  
"O thou shalt rest in chamber best  
With me the bolsters blue upon."

Proud Signild foremost went, and stepped  
The threshold of her chamber o'er;  
With secret glee came Hafbur, he  
Had never been so glad before.

Then lighted they the waxen lights,  
So fairly twisted were the same.  
Behind, behind, with ill at mind,  
The wicked servant maiden came.

The lights were out, the train retired,  
They thought that they were all alone;  
His upper wede the knight with speed  
Did off, then bright his faulchion shone.

King Hafbur with delighted heart  
Upon the bed himself has flung;  
I tell to ye for verity  
That as he fell his hauberk rung.

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Then out and spake proud Signelil,  
 She could not wonder half enough:  
 "Since I've been born no maid has worn,  
 That I have known, a sarke so rough."

Her hand upon young Hafbur's breast  
 Which shone with ruddy gold she laid:  
 "To me make known why are not grown  
 Your breasts like those of another maid?"

"'Tis custom in my father's land  
 For maids to mount and ride to fight;  
 My breasts not growing more, is owing  
 Unto the chafe of my hauberk tight."

And there reclined the night so long  
 The youthful hero and the may;  
 They talking kept and nothing slept,  
 For in their hearts so much there lay.

"Now do thou hear, proud Signild fair,  
 Since all alone ourselves we find,  
 Tell me the truth, who is the youth  
 For whom most stands your maiden mind?"

"O there is none within the world  
 For whom I feel the least inclined,  
 Save Hafbur young, whose deeds are sung,  
 And he for me is not designed.

"Save Hafbur young whom it has been  
 These eyes hard fortune ne'er to see;  
 I've heard alone his bugle blown,  
 When to and fro the Ting rides he."

"And if it is prince Hafbur young  
 Whom them dost hold at heart so dear,  
 Straight turn your face and on him gaze,  
 For he does lie to thee so near."

"If thou art he, why dost thou seek  
 A princely maiden to inveigle?  
 In manly sort to Siward's court  
 Why cam'st thou not with hawk and beagle?"

"O maiden, to your father's house  
 Long since I came with hawk and hound;  
 But my desire he met with ire,  
 Still in my ear his scoffs resound."

All, all the time that they did talk  
 They thought that quite alone were they;  
 But one stood near, and lent an ear  
 To every word that they did say.

Shame, shame befall the wicked maid,  
 'Twas she brought much mishap to pass;  
 She sly removed the sword approved  
 Of Hafbur, and the new cuirass.

When she had removed the sword approved,  
 And Hafbur's good cuirass beside;  
 To the hall away where Sivard lay  
 The wicked maiden swiftly hied.

"Awake, awake, good Sivard King,  
 Too much of sleep is in thy head!  
 Prince Hafbur know is lying now  
 With Signild fair in silken bed."

"O young Prince Hafbur is not here,  
 And it is false what thou hast told;  
 To the Eastern main his way he's ta'en,  
 With Russ and Finman fight to hold.

"So hold thy peace, thou wicked wench,  
 Nor lying tongue 'gainst Signe turn;  
 Ere morn shall dye the Eastern sky  
 For thy foul slander thou shalt burn."

“Now do thou hear, my noble Lord,  
Believe me all my words are true!  
For see, I have his polished glaive,  
And his cuirass of beaming blue.”

So wroth grew Sivard at the sight,  
And loud around he ‘gan to shout:  
“Upstand ye all my merry men tall,  
For here is come a Kemp so stout.

“Now take ye brand and shield in hand,  
And look ye wield them both aright;  
Unto our home is Hafbur come,  
Unasked by me, the hard necked wight.”

Upon the door they struck with power,  
With shield and faulchion struck they hard:  
“Come out, come out, young Bear,” they shout,  
“Come out unto the castle yard.”

When that heard she, proud Signelil  
Her lily hands she fell to wring:  
“Ah! dost not hear, Prince Hafbur dear,  
How they for thee are clamouring?”

Praise be to Hafbur, princely youth,  
Against a host he made a stand;  
They could not all the youth enthrall  
Till snapped the bed post in his hand.

They Hafbur took, and him they placed  
In shackles strong and newly made;  
But them in twain he burst amain,  
As had they only been of lead.

Then raised the ancient maid her voice,  
And cursèd counsel came from her:  
“Bind yonder Bear with Signe’s hair,  
And hand or foot he will not stir.

“Sirs, straightway bind ye Hafbur’s hands  
With one of Signe’s silken hairs;  
That little hair he will not dare  
To break, such love for her he bears.”

And they took two of Signild’s hairs,  
And bound with them his mighty hands;  
Such love possesseth the Hero’s breast,  
He would not burst the tiny bands.

Then out and spake proud Signelil,  
Adown her cheeks the tears ran fast:  
“O Hafbur tear the paltry hair,  
Thy Signe’s free consent thou hast.”

And they placed Hafbur, son of the King,  
Fast bounden in the castle hall;  
Both maid and dame to see him came,  
And his own maiden first of all.

They Hafbur took, the son of the King,  
And in strong irons him they laid;  
In woeful mood before him stood  
Full speedily his loving maid.

To him with burning tears she spake:  
“If Hafbur thou consent will give,  
My good aunts three on bended knee  
Shall intercede that thou shalt live.

“My father threatens steadfastly  
To hang thee on the oaken bough,  
Upon the moor at early hour  
Before again the sun shall glow.”

Then answered young King Hafbur bold,  
And in high wrath the Hero spake:  
“Too light I heed my life, to need  
That women prayer for me should make.

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"Hear, Signild, hear, do thou show clear  
This day for me thy love is great;  
When in the string thou see me swing  
Within thy bower burn thee straight."

Then answered him proud Signelil,  
With streaming eyes and heaving breast:  
"By the God above, my dearest love,  
I'll grant to thee thy last request."

From out the gate they Hafbur led,  
The King's good son, at solemn pace;  
For him sore cried all him that eyed,  
So hard and stern they thought his case.

And when they reached the verdant plain,  
Where he the gallant youth should die;  
He begged he might have a short respite,  
He'd prove his Signe's constancy.

"Do ye hang up my mantle red,  
That Sivard King the same may see;  
He may repent, and yet prevent  
Young Hafbur's hanging on a tree."

When Signild proud the mantle saw,  
The sight it pierced her like a knife:  
"He's dead," she thought, "it vails me nought  
To tarry longer here in life."

She called together her maids with speed,  
Concealing well her bosom's woe:  
"To have some play we'll wend our way  
Unto the lofty chamber now."

Then out and spake proud Signelil,  
She spake in stern determined guise:  
"This day I will my own self kill,  
And Hafbur join in Paradise.

"If any one in our band has helped  
To bring him to his death so foul,  
Shall rue his wrong when we ere long  
Shall burn together all to coal.

"So many there are in this palace fair  
Whom now the death of Hafbur gladdens;  
But venge will I their cruelty  
This moment on their plighted maidens."

Then fire she set to her bower high,  
The fire so hastily it blazed;  
How well she loved to all she proved  
Who on that conflagration gazed.

It was Hafbur, son of the King,  
O'er his shoulder blade he cast his sight;  
Of Signe good the bower stood,  
Enwrapt in one tremendous light.

"Now take ye down my mantle red,  
And let it lie upon the plain;  
Within my breast if I possessed  
Ten lives to beg them I'd disdain."

King Sivard out of the window looked,  
And on his mind such horror came;  
For Hafbur he saw hang on a tree,  
And Signild's bower enwrapt in flame.

Outspake amain the little foot swain,  
And he a mantle red had on:  
"Now burns in bower the beauteous flower  
With her fair maidens, every one."

Then up and spake grey Sivard the King,  
His face with paleness ghastly all:  
"A fate so dour as this I'm sure  
Did never princes two befall.

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"If I before had heard or known  
The power of love was half so great,  
I'd ne'er, I swear, have vexed the pair  
For all the wealth of Denmark's state.

"Run some of ye to Signild's bower,  
And strive to bear my child relief;  
Let others race to the gallows place,  
For Hafbur bold was ne'er a thief."

And when they came to Signe's bower  
All burnt they found the Lady fair;  
When out of breath they reached the heath,  
Hafbur was hanging dead in air.

They Hafbur took, the son of the King,  
And round him linen white they roll'd;  
And him they laid beside his maid,  
With many a tear in Christian mould.

And then the wicked maid they took,  
And to a death so horrid doomed;  
A fitting bed for her they made,  
Alive the wretch they have entombed.

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