

On the Heights

Henrik Ibsen – «På Viddene» 1859

1

My pack slung on my back at last,
My rifle in my hand,
The damper closed and door made fast
With pin and withy band;
A step, then, my old mother's way —
Her own hut stands close by, —
A parting handclasp, — just to say
"I shall be back as soon I may, —
And until then, — goodbye!"

The narrow path winds up the hill,
It curves into the trees;
Behind me fjord and valley fill
With moon-hazed reveries.
On past my neighbour's wall I press, —
The farmyard still as night;
But from the hedge-row gate I guess
At leaf-sounds on a linen dress,
A tinkling soft and light.

She stood there all in white arrayed
And bade me time of day;
She was so fair, so fine a maid,
Fresh as a highland spray.
One glance she used for teasing me,
One for a hint of smile! —
I smiled like her, and suddenly
I was hard by the gate, and she, —
Her eyes turned moist the while.

I threw my arm about her waist,
She blushed and paled as well;
I claimed her for my wife, embraced, —
Her bosom rose and fell.
Now she was mine — I swore it true,
Entire, not partly, no!
I sensed her gaze down at her shoe, —
The leaf-brooch tinkled forth anew:
Because she trembled so.

She begged so nicely, I refrained,
The teasing mood returned;
My pounding heart-beat throbbed and strained,
My frantic bosom burned; —
I begged so nicely, she fell still,
We made a well-matched pair;
I sensed a song came from the hill
As though sprites, elves and spectres shrill
Laughed in the leafage there.

The narrow path wound up the hill,
It curved into the trees;

Behind me fjord and valley fill
With moon-hazed reveries.
I sat so fevered, she so white
Near where the cliff's edge turned;
We whispered in the sultry night, —
I do not know what followed, quite,
But know my forehead burned.

I threw my arms about her waist,
She hung within their arc, —
As my young wife and I embraced
The sprite sang in the dark;
If ghouls laughed as I made her mine
I now but faintly know; —
I feared no sprite's contemptuous whine, —
I only saw her scared, and fine,
And felt her tremble so.

2

I lay in the south-facing coomb
And watched the sun's first rays;
The depths lay veiled in clouded gloom,
The ice- and snow-fields blaze.
I see the red house yonder where
Both I and mother bide.
My mother's slaved and drudged down there,
I've grown up blithe and free from care, —
God knows what else beside.

She's up betimes; the smoke-swirls reach,
I fancy, through the air,
I think I see her go to bleach
White-woven stuffs down there.
Yes, carry on your usual chores;
God bless you and provide!
I'll fetch you from the reindeer moors
A splendid pelt that shall be yours,
And some too for my bride!

And where is *she*? Must still delight
In dream's disjointed play.
Remember nothing of last night,
Though dream of it you may!
But once awake — rip out the stress
From memory, — as do I.
You are my lovely bride, no less,
Weave linen, sew your bridal dress;
Our way to church is nigh!

How hard seems separation's path
From her one's heart holds dear; —
But longing is a cleansing bath,
It brings me health and cheer.
I stand here like a soul inspired,
My blood's so purged I feel; —
A life not even half complete,
A life where sin and guilt compete

I tread beneath my heel.

Each dark desire, each passion wild
Expelled as by the rod;
I feel so blithe and reconciled
Both to myself and God!
A glance now over fjord and scree,
The pine-crests crowding tight, —
And then, the reindeer trail for me; —
Goodbye then mother! Bride-to-be!
And now I'm for the height!

3

Low in the west there's cloud ablaze,
There's flame above the fell,
But shrouding mist still overlays
The remnants of the dell.
My foot was weary, sad my mood,
I pondered ill at ease;
But from the cliff's edge where I brood
Ling gleams as though by blood imbued
And trembles to the breeze.

I picked myself a sprig of ling
And stuck it in my hat;
Close by, a sparse bush, furnishing
Snug lodging for all that.
And thoughts they came and thoughts they went
Like folk who go to pray;
They flocked around, they stared intent,
Held session, sentenced by consent,
Then softly slipped away.

Had I been close to you again,
My yesternight's plucked stem,
I would, a trusty hound, have lain
Before your kirtle's hem;
Have bathed deep in your eyes' sweet balm,
Have scoured my soul forlorn;
The troll that witched me with its charm
Last evening at your father's farm
I would have slain with scorn.

I sprang up triumph-flushed to raise
A winged prayer to the Lord,
That He throughout your length of days
Bright, radiant sun afford!
No! I'm too strong for that I swear,
Too young to shrink from strife,
I *will* a task more hard to bear,
And so, God, harken to my prayer:
Make hard her way through life!

Dam up whatever stream she meet,
With ice the footbridge glaze,
Let screes draw blood from stone-gashed feet,
Make steep the sæter ways;

I'll raise her high upon my arm
Across the wildest chute;
I'll bench her in my bosom's calm, —
Dare then to visit her with harm,
And *that*, Lord, we'll dispute!

4

From a long way south he's travelled,
Travelled an expanse of waters;
On his brow mute thoughts lie ravelled
Like the lights in northern quarters.

Sorrow lurks within his laughter,
Lips speak though they do not utter;
But of what? As well ask after
Wind's song when the pine-slopes flutter.

His cold eye is overpowering;
I've no more its full depth sounded
Than the black tarn's which the towering
Glacier's breasts have bred and bounded.

Gloomy thoughts are there reflected,
Lumber bird-like, helter-skelter;
There's another squall expected, —
Take in sail then, — run for shelter!

In mid-moor occurred our meeting,
I with rifle, he with setters;
Fellowship from our first greeting, —
I would gladly break those fetters.

Why accept then this submission?
How I've wished this bond could sever;
Now I think it's *my* volition
That he's robbed me of, for ever.

5

"Why, come evening, yearn for mother's
House down yonder? Tell me whether
You sleep better under covers
Than on plumped brown highland heather?"

Mother, and the cat, watched o'er me
By my bed at close of daytime,
Span and sang until dreams bore me
Off into the night for playtime.

"Dreams, oh dreams, — why this abstraction?
Daytime deeds are better, trust me!
Drain life's cup; — more satisfaction
Than a nap with sires grown fusty!"

"Reindeer race across the moorland;
After them, go hell-for-leather! —
Better that than clearing poor land
Down there, piling stones together!"

But I hear the church bells ringing
From the headland stretched before us!
"Let them ring, and keep on singing —
Fosses make a better chorus!"

Churchward *she* and my old mother,
Prayer-book kerchiefed, will be wending.
"Trust me, man, you're meant for other
Tasks than routine church-attending!"

Organ sounds within the choir;
On the altar, candles glowing.
"Mountain storm-songs rate far higher,
Snow-glare makes a better showing!"

Hell-for-leather then! Come, wander
O'er the fells' white hump and hollow!
Let them walk to church down yonder,
Those that choose to, — I'll not follow!

6

Autumn's near; below the ranges
Hark, the last few herd-bells falter!
Upland freedom's lost — life changes
Back to cattle-stall and halter!

Winter soon will hang its awning
From the bluff, enfold it thickly;
Paths will soon be blocked — a warning
That I must head homeward, quickly.

Home? Is *that* my home then, truly,
Where my mind's no longer turning?
He's long chastened my unruly
Thoughts, I've steeled, myself, my yearning.

Dale-life stifles emulation!
Drudgery for mere survival;
I found *here* my stimulation,
I need fells and moors to rival.

Here in this deserted dwelling
I have housed my wealth of treasure;
There's a bench, a stove, sweet smelling
Air, and time to think at leisure.

Elf-thoughts in the night, evoking
Danger's scent to warn the chary;
He has offered magic's cloaking;
I, though tempted, am still wary.

Winter in these wildernesses
Steels weak thoughts I need to master, —
Bird-song's sickly-sweet excesses
Do not make the blood pulse faster.

If till Spring this loft's to house me,
Then I'll strive for their expansion, —
Raise them from their chores, and rouse me,
Bench them in the highlands' mansion,

Teach the doctrine that I've chosen,
Tempt them to home-spurning laughter;
Upland life, though ice-bound, frozen,
Will not seem as strange thereafter.

7

Here through long, long weeks I languished, —
Loneliness made heart the fonder;
Drained by warring memories, anguished,
I must seek my dear ones yonder.

Just one day, then break the tether,
Hers, my loved one's, and my mother's, —
Scale again my realms of heather
Which, come Spring, shall house two others.

I must go! — Ugh, drifts are forming!
I have been a little tardy.
Through the waste wild winter's swarming, —
And now every path's debarred me.

8

Long weeks passed; I shook off the cloud,
Nostalgia no longer disturbed me;
River and stream shared an icy shroud,
Round hung the moon where the drifts stood proud
And glittering stars shone superbly.

I was too lively to sit and mope
Indoors as the day descended;
The hut allowed spirits and thought no scope,
I went ranging the heights till the plunge of the slope
Halted me, where the fells ended.

The dale was at rest in the gulf displayed;
Then chimes, from the headland winging — !
I listened — , how gentle the sound they made;
Where was it before that I'd heard it played — ?
Then I recognised church bells ringing!

They rang with the festival yule-tide sound,
The familiar chimes were assuring.
A light appears past my neighbour's pound,
My mother's hut casts a gleam around,
Beguiling me, strangely alluring.

Home, despite all its wretchedness,
Now a saga with images thronging!
Up here the harsh upland ruggedness,
Down there I'd a mother and wife, no less, —
Small wonder I felt such longing.

A laugh behind me, so dry and short;
It was the hunter, the stranger.
He had heard my every wordless thought;
"I think my young friend is overwrought, —
Ah, yes; home sweet home, there's the danger!"

Once more I stood resolute, staunch and bold,
Was strong again by my reckoning;
Upland winds fanned my bosom cold,
Never again would it throb as of old
To the yule-tide symbols' beckoning.

Then farm-yard and roof were caught in the play
Of light from my mother's dwelling.
At first like the dawn of a winter's day;
Then clouds of smoke spread an overlay
And then the red glare came welling.

It burned, it blazed, then a mighty fall;
I screamed in the night for sorrow;
The hunter soothed me: "Why fuss? — no call —
It's only the old house burning, that's all,
The cat and the punch for tomorrow!"

He sounded so wise in my despair
That I was seized with trembling;
He showed how effectively the glare
Blended with fitful moonbeams there,
A sunset sky resembling.

He viewed the setting, his hands cupped round
To gain just the right perspective;
Then music, a song made the fells resound,
And then I sensed mother's soul had found
The angelic host protective.

"Patient in drudgery, patient in pain,
Patient you passed through life's sorrow;
Thus gently we bear you to God's domain
Far o'er the heights to find peace again
Where heaven delights in the morrow!"

The hunter was gone, the moon concealed;
My blood — fire and frost contending, —
With my burden of grief I ranged far afield — —
But it must be confessed the effect appealed
Of that mingled sunset blending!

9

The perfect midsummer day released
Its shimmering light o'er the heather;
Church bells rang to the wedding feast,
Crowds on horseback down there increased,
Lining the route together.

A shot from my neighbour's ramp rang out,
There were birch-twigs to mark the turning,

The farmyard was crowded enough, beyond doubt,
But I laughed loud in my steep redout
Though wind-flushed tears were burning.

I seemed to hear rhymes that were meant to sting,
Cruel laughter from spite proceeding;
I sensed I was butt for crude ballading,
I lay on the cliff-edge, I tore at the ling,
And bit till my tongue was bleeding.

A gallant sight as away they go,
She riding tall as they started,
Her waist-long tresses about her flow,
They glisten, they shine — as well I know
From that evening down there when we parted.

She crossed the stream matching stride for stride,
The bridegroom and she together. —
My heart was set free and my tears were dried,
I had fought the fight to the end, sore tried;
I had no more trials to weather.

Composed, I stood on the brink and scanned
That summer scene, reflective.
The cavalcade seemed a glittering band, —
I cupped my eye with a hollowed hand
To gain just the right perspective.

The fluttering scarves, the coifs that shine,
The mens' coats gleaming redly,
Church with its consecrated wine,
Lovely bride who was once all mine,
The happiness that had fled me, —

I saw it all as I watched serene,
Viewing from life's high regions;
A nobler radiance bathed the scene
But lo, that is something that none have seen
Who huddle below in their legions.

Then laughter behind me, so dry and short,
It was the huntsman, the stranger:
"My dear man, from what I heard I've brought
My neatly-laced rucksack and all for nought, —
Not needed, now there's no danger!"

No, now I'm a man who can stand alone,
But thanks for your kind intention;
The blood in my veins doesn't race now, I've grown
Aware that my bosom becomes as stone,
Symptoms, not mere invention.

I drained the strengthening draught, the last;
The heights are no longer freezing;
My sail's collapsed, I've a broken mast, —
But look, the colour her red skirt cast
As it gleamed through birch-trees — how pleasing!

Away they gallop, then show anew
Far off, at the church-path turning.
My fairest memory, all joy to you.
I've traded my final verse for a view
That is loftier, more discerning.

I'm resolute now, respond to the call
That bids there are heights to wander!
I've lived out my life as the lowland's thrall;
Up here there is freedom and God withal,
The rest merely grope down yonder.

Leaf-sounds, leaf-brooch: a brooch hung with little metal leaves.

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