

THE WOOING OF GERD

BY HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

FREY was busy enough in summer, when the sunlight was to fall warm and fruitful along the mountain ridges and deep into the valleys, and the gentle showers were to be gathered far out at sea and driven by the winds across the heavens, weaving soft draperies of mist about the hills, or folding the landscape in with blinding curtains of rain as they passed; for the sowing and the harvesting and the ripening of the fruit were his to watch over and care for. But when winter came, Frey was idle day in and day out, and so it happened, in this long dull season, that he was wandering restlessly one morning about Asgard, when he saw that Odin's throne was empty. To sit upon it and look out over the world was the thought that flashed into Frey's mind and out again, leaving him more idle and restless than before. Neither man nor god, save Odin, had dared to sit in that awful seat, from which nothing was hidden; but when one has nothing to do, it is easy to do wrong. Frey wandered about a little longer, and then boldly mounted the steps and sat down on the throne of the world.

What a wonderful view it was! There lay Asgard beautiful in the morning light; there were the rolling clouds like great waves in the clear heaven; there was the world with its steep mountains and tossing seas; and there was Jotunheim, the home of the giants, gloomy and forbidding,—great black cliffs standing along the coast like grim sentinels. Frey looked long and earnestly at this dreary place where the enemies of the gods lived, hating the sunshine and the summer, and always plotting to bring back winter and barrenness to the earth; and as he looked he saw a massive house standing alone amid the hills. Dark shadows lay across the gloomy landscape, cold winds swept over the stony valleys, and not one bright or beautiful thing was visible in all the country round. In a moment, however, a figure moved out of the shadows, and a maiden walked slowly to the desolate house, mounted the steps, paused a moment at the door, and then raised her arms to loosen the latch. Straightway a wonderful warmth and light stole over the hills. As she stood with uplifted arms she was so beautiful that earth and air were flooded with her loveliness, and even the heavens were radiant. When she opened the door and closed it behind her the shadows deepened among the hills, and Frey's heart was fast bound among the rocks of Jotunheim. He had been punished for sitting in the seat of Odin.

For days Frey neither ate, slept, nor spoke. He wandered about, silent and gloomy as a cloud, and no one dared ask him why he was so sorrowful. Njord, Frey's father, waited until he could wait no longer, and then with a heavy heart sent for Skirner, whom Frey loved as his own brother, and begged him to find the cause of all this sadness. Skirner came upon Frey walking about with folded

arms and eyes cast gloomily upon the ground.

"Why do you stay here all day alone?" he asked. "Where are the light and joy that have always been yours?"

"The sun shines every day, but not for me," answered Frey.

"We were children together," said Skirner, laying his hand on Frey's arm; "we trust each other's truth; tell me your sorrow."

And Frey told him how he climbed into the seat of Odin and looked upon Jotunheim and had seen the beautiful maiden like a sunbeam among shadows, like a sudden coming of summer when snows are deep, and that he could never be happy again until he had won her for himself.

"If that is all, it is easily managed," said Skirner when he had heard the story. "Give me your swiftest horse that can ride through fire and flame, and the sword which swings itself when giants are opposed, and I will go to Jotunheim."

Frey was too glad to get the desire of his heart to delay about giving up the horse and the sword, and Skirner was soon mounted and riding like the wind on his dreary journey. Night came on, the black shadows of the mountains lay across the fjords as he passed, and one by one the endless procession of the stars moved along the summits of the hills as if they would bear him company. All night the hard hoofs rang on the stony way, scattering showers of sparks at every step. Faster and faster the daring rider drove the faithful horse until his flight was like the flash and roar of the thunderbolt.

"Rush on, brave horse," shouted Skirner; "we shall return with the prize or the mighty giant will keep us both."

At last the long journey was over and the gloomy house reached. It was the home of the frost-giant Gymer, and the beautiful maiden who stood at the door when Frey was on Odin's throne was Gerd, the giant's daughter. Fierce dogs were chained about the gate and rushed savagely upon Skirner, barking furiously as if they would tear him limb from limb. So he turned aside and rode up to a shepherd sitting on a mound near by.

"Shepherd, how shall I quiet these dogs and speak with Gymer's daughter?" he asked.

The shepherd looked at him with wonder in his eyes.

"Who are you," he answered, "and whence do you come? Are you doomed to die, or are you a ghost already? Whoever you are, you will never get speech with Gymer's daughter."

"I am not afraid," said Skirner proudly; fate has already fixed the day of my death, and it cannot be changed."

Skirner's voice rang clear and strong above the howling of the dogs, and Gerd in her chamber heard the brave words.

"What noise is that?" she called to her maidens. "The very earth shakes and the foundations tremble."

One of the maidens looked out and saw Skirner.

"A warrior stands without the wall," she answered; "and while he waits, his horse eats the grass before the gates."

"Bid him enter at once and quaff the pleasant mead, for I fear the slayer of my brother has come."

Skirner needed no second invitation, and, quickly springing to the ground, walked through the stony halls and stood before the beautiful Gerd. She looked keenly at him for a moment and knew from his brightness and beauty that he was from Asgard.

"Are you god, or elf?" she asked; "and why have you come through night and flame to visit Gymer's halls?"

"I am neither elf nor god," said Skirner; "and yet I have come to your home through night and flame. Frey, beautiful among the gods and loved of all the earth, has seen your beauty and can never be happy again until he has won you for himself. I bring you eleven beautiful apples if you will go back with me."

"I will not go," was Gerd's quick answer.

"This wonderful ring, which every ninth night drops eight other rings as rich as itself, shall be yours," said Skirner, holding Draupner in his hand and gently urging her.

Gerd frowned angrily. "I will not take your wondrous ring. I have gold enough in

my father's house."

"Then," said Skirner, casting aside his gentleness, "look at this flashing sword! If you will not return I will strike your fair head from your body."

Gerd drew herself up to her full height and answered, with flashing eyes, "I will never be won by force. As for your threats, my father will meet you sword for sword."

"I will quickly slay him," said Skirner angrily. But Gerd only smiled scornfully; she was too cold to be won by gifts and too proud to be moved by threats.

Skirner's face suddenly changed. He drew out a magic wand, and with eyes fixed upon her and in a solemn voice, as he waved it over her, he chanted an awful mystic curse. There was breathless silence in the room while Skirner with slow movements of the wand wove about Gerd dread enchantments and breathed over her the direful incantation:—

"If you refuse, may you sit in everlasting darkness on some dreary mountain top; may terrors crowd round you in awful shapes and tears never cease to fall from your eyes; hated of gods and men, may you pass your life in solitude and desolation!

"'Tis done! I wind the mystic charm;
Thus, thus I trace the giant form;
And three fell characters below,
Fury, and Lust, and Restless Woe.
E'en as I wound, I straight unwind
This fatal spell, if you are kind."

Skirner stopped, and an awful stillness followed. Gerd, trembling under the terrible curse, stood quivering with bowed head and clasped hands. Her pride could not yield, but something told her that to live with a god was better than to stay in the home of a frost-giant. A gentle warmth seemed to steal through and melt her icy coldness. She raised her face, and it was so softened that they hardly knew her.

"I greet you," she said, "with this brimming cup of mead, but I did not think that I should ever love a god."

When Skirner pressed her to go back with him, she promised to meet Frey nine days hence and become his bride in the groves of Bar-isle.

Skirner was soon mounted and riding homeward as fast as his horse could carry him. He was so happy in the thought of Frey's happiness that the distance seemed short, and as he drew near he saw Frey standing before his father's halls, looking anxiously for his coming.

"She is yours!" he shouted, urging his horse into swifter flight.

"When?" said Frey eagerly.

"Nine days hence, in the groves of Bar-isle," joyfully replied Skirner, who expected to be loaded with thanks. Frey, however, was so eager that he forgot what night and flame his friend had ridden through for love of him.

"One day is long; long, indeed, are two. How shall I wait for three?" was all the thanks Skirner got.

The days that followed were long enough for Frey; but even the longest day comes to an end, and at last the ninth day came. Never sun shone so brightly or south wind blew so musically as on the morning when at Bar-isle, under the branches of the great trees, Frey found the beautiful Gerd waiting for his coming, far lovelier than when she stood before her father's door. And the whole earth was happy in them, for while they stood with clasped hands the skies grew soft, the trees put on a tender green, the flowers blossomed along the mountain side, the ripening grain swayed in the fields, and summer lay warm and fragrant over the land.