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AN ICELANDIC ROMANCE.

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KORMAK,

AN ICELANDIC ROMANCE

OF THE

TENTH CENTURY.

IN SIX CANTOS.

William [unclear]



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P R E F A C E .

DURING the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, and later, the Scandinavians — rude, barbarous, and uncultivated, still adhering to their old religion of wild, romantic, and legendary superstition, or rude converts of Christianity, relinquishing old rites to grasp, with barbarian energy, the superficial principles of a new faith, that at first softened not their fierceness — were the active ruling-spirits of the world. From their homes in the primeval forests of the North, this nomadic people overran the lands of the more civilized but weaker

nations, then sunk in enervating luxury from that ancient vigor, that made the matchless force of Roman arms, the glittering splendor of Grecian enlightenment.

They descended in countless hordes from their wild fastnesses of the North, bringing dismay and destruction upon populous cities and wealthy, luxuriant lands. With a clash like the rush of a mountain torrent, the bands of the "yellow-haired Northmen" — the strong of limb, the dauntless and ruthless of heart — swept all before them in their resistless march, and returned to their homes laden with a wealth they knew not how to use, and clothed with savage terrors, more potent than even their savage arms, to break down the feeble resistance of their weaker, though more civilized, southern neighbors. Over all the seas swept the

armed ships of the Northmen, bound on missions of piracy and rapine; no shore, however remote, was safe from their attacks, that had aught to tempt their cupidity or love of martial deeds. Even into the wild Northern Ocean they pushed their adventurous voyages,—discovered and colonized the far-away island of Iceland; and here, with characteristic energy, in a climate that had so little to recommend it as the habitation of man, they established a republic, that for more than four hundred years flourished in its isolated liberty, and effectually resisted the many efforts of Norwegian princes to bring the island under their despotic rule.

The history of this little Northern republic is full of wild and strange romance, and from its Sagas, wonderfully preserved, might be found material sufficient to em-

ploy even the myriad romance-writers of this nineteenth century, without the fear of soon exhausting the supply.

From some of these old stories has been hastily and crudely constructed the following tale, that, aiming not at literary excellence, only proposes to interest, perhaps, a leisure hour, and call attention to this much-neglected field of romance. If this shall be accomplished, the author will be repaid for thus venturing unannounced before the public.

THE AUTHOR.

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Kormak.

CANTO I.

OGMUND.

CANTO I.

OGMUND.

NORTHMEN of old ! 't was ye awoke the
world
From its lethargic slumber, — broke the rest
Of slumbering centuries, — when from forth
Your own rough Northern home ye poured the
flood
Of a wild enterprife, — an energy,
A will to do, — a wild and reckless will,
That swept like storm-wind o'er the startled world.

Northmen of old ! 't was ye awoke the world
With your shrill trumpet-notes ; and where ye
came,
Your own strong spirit filled the hearts of men :
They saw you landing, armed, upon their shores,
From your light barges, with their brazen beaks :
Wild warriors of the North, they knew your fame,

And, leaping up from velvet couches, fled
From the wild torrent of your mountain spears.
The element of action, kindling up
The heart, firing the brain, and making life
Leap, with the life-blood, through the boiling
veins :

This wild, undaunted energy of soul
Bade ye, barbarian dwellers of the North !
Go forth, the pioneers whose work should be
To kindle up, regenerate the world.
Your sluggish neighbors of the lazy South
Caught inspiration from ye, as the garb
Of wealth and luxury, that made them weak,
Was rudely torn from off their trembling forms
By those who knew nor luxury nor fear.

Northmen of old ! though wild and rude ye
were,
Ye taught the feeble learning of the South
A useful lesson, that their wisest sage,
Poring o'er volumes, wondrous-written tomes,
Had never dreamed of in his wisest hour :
Your clash of steel proclaimed a mighty truth ;
And Northern swords spoke wiser than the pen.

A cloud of romance hangs around old names.
The hero decks the savage of the North :
There is a charm in wild and reckless deeds,

A thrilling sympathy with dauntless hearts ;
And gentle minds, while dwelling on the theme
Of the wild deeds of rapine and of war,
Still feel a kindly interest in those
Old hero-pirates of the early North.

Alone, in icy seas that gird it round,
A wintry belt, o'er which down from the pole
The frozen blast comes, clashing like a knight
Clad in a crystal armor, war waging
'Gainst its lone, defenceless shore, is Iceland.
Here, in old time, the rovers of the North
Planted their dwellings ; here, of old, they built
A rude republic : crude and rough indeed
As the wild beings, tribute of the sea,
Thrown like the sea-foam, gathered from afar,
Roughly upon the shore. The wild sea-king,
Steered by his raven compass to the isle,
Soon learned to call it home ; and from that home,
His ice-bound fortrefs, shadowed by the North,
He turned adventurous beaks ; home again,
Wearied in contest both with man and sea,
Sailed his storm-beaten barks ; when the white
 peaks
Of Iceland's mountains glittered o'er the sea,
Their frozen silence spoke to him of home :
And smiled pale welcome to their daring son, —
Their warlike son, born of an ocean fire.

Flying from the oppression of his king,
From the fierce and iron rule of Harald,
The stern tyrant of old warlike Norway,
Ogmund embarked his fortunes on the sea, —
His children and possessions, — and sailed forth
To seek those lands that in the far Northwest
Had been discovered, that haply he might live
Free from the yoke that galled his lion spirit ;
Willing to brave the dangers of new lands, —
Those vague, mysterious dangers, that hung
Like demon spirits round the realms afar,
Frighting the souls of such as knew of fear,
But not the soul of *Ogmund* : a brave heart
Was his inheritance from warlike fires ;
And not the perils of a stormy sea,
Nor the rough wildness of a northern clime,
Where Ice and Winter rule the realm supreme,
And scarcely yield to Summer's milder sway, —
Could daunt the Northman's heart, — a heart
 inured
To war and danger from his days of youth.

Ogmund embarked for Iceland ; and at length,
After much danger on the stormy sea,
He reached that island ; landed there his freight,
Himself, his children, and his household goods ;
Pitched on a spot where he might build his house,
And took possession of the lands around,

Somewhat regardless of the prior claims
 Of those first settlers, who supposed that they
 Had better rights than the last comer had.
 But when the warlike Ogmund fought, and slew
 A half a score of them, with a great sword,
 An heirloom of his race, tall as himself,
 And quite as little polished as its owner,
 The first possessors found that he had rights
 They had not at the first perceived, and so
 Left him to the enjoyment of their lands,
 Rather than meet his heavy argument,
 Which always silenced them.

But restless still,
 Ogmund would sometimes take a cruise at sea,
 And meeting other roving, warlike ships,
 Would still indulge an old propensity, —
 And sailing out with one ship, would return
 Sometimes with two. And thus his name be-
 came

Well known and famous. He grew in riches, —
 A wealth of Iceland fields and herds and flocks.
 And when at last he died, advanced in years, —
 Died quietly in his mansion, by the sea,
 On which so oft he perilled his wild life, —
 He left behind a heritage of fame ;
 And, what perhaps they valued more, riches
 And ships and large estates, to his two sons.

Kormak and Thorgils were the fons of Ogmund ;

Kormak the elder, and inherited
The larger part of all the large estates
Their warlike father had bequeathed to them,
With all that father's soul of reckless daring,
And restlessness, though softened and adorned
By many graces, both of mind and person.
He was a skilful scald, framing his verses
Sometimes relation of his father's deeds,
Though oftener telling of the beauty,
The countless charms, of some Icelandic fair ;
And often, too, the youthful scald would wage
A war of strophes with his poet friends :
His father vanquished neighbors with the sword ;
Kormak o'ercame them in the war of words.
Yet was he not unmindful of the gift, —
The last great gift his dying father gave, —
The huge two-handed sword, with this advice :
“ If you would win respect from men, my son,
Learn to use this ; 't will settle all debate,
Will make you honored, famous, wealthy, great ;
And be thy mark of rightful lineage too
From me, who in my youth received this blade
From my brave sire, my only heritage.”
And Kormak learned to use the famous sword :
And there were none, of all the youths around,
Who could compete with him and his great sword.

A handsome youth was Kormak, tall and strong,
As straight and firm as stands the Norway pine
In the old land from which his father came.
His raven hair hung round a dauntless brow,
And eyes that challenged all who met their gaze ;
Yet had their kindling glances generous warmth
When softer feelings moved him. He was loved
Of many friends, and first of these was Thorgils,
His younger brother ; for between the two,
Although dissimilar, was a strong love,
So great that their two hearts seemed only one ;
And it became a saying in the land,
When they would picture friendship strongly :
“ Closely knit in kindred love as Kormak
And his brother Thorgils.” Yet all unlike
Were they in mind and person ; for Thorgils
Was as gentle as his brother fiery :
A slender boy, with golden hair, and eyes
Of feminine softness ; a voice as sweet
As a young girl’s ; a winning gentleness
Had he, that seized upon the heart, and there
Enshrined itself, as though there was its home.
Yet did he not lack manhood, for he was
Born of a race that knew not how to fear.
Companion with his brother at all times,
In all adventures, both by land and sea ;
For they inherited their father’s love
Of seamanship, and were as much at home

Upon the deck of their swift-failing bark
As when they rode or clambered o'er the hills
Of their wild, icy, northern mountain home.

“Brother,” said Kormak, as one eve they sat
Together near the fire in the great hall,
“I have a tale to tell you : Thou dost know
Three days ago I galloped o'er the hills,
To see how fared our herdsmen in the west.
The sky was clear ; but ere the close of day
The sky was blackened with the heavy clouds,
That still grew darker, and obscured the sun.
I knew a storm was hanging in those clouds :
The air was still and heavy, and no breath
Of wind was stirring, as I crossed the hills
On my way homeward. Raven flew along,
And promised with his speed to bring me home
Ere the wild war of elements began.
As I came near to Gnupsdale, dashing on
With reckless speed, quick came a flash of light,
That almost blinded me, and with that flash
Came the loud crash of thunder, its wild roar
Bursting low down, almost upon my head.
Raven sprung wildly, madly, in the air,
And then, bewildered, stopped, and, snorting,
reared,
As though he battled with the storm above ;
Another instant, and a second crash

Burst on our ears ; the glaring sheet of flame,
The deaf'ning roar that mingled with the glare,
Maddened the frightened steed, and blinded him ;
Backward he fell, as though the bolt had struck,
And horse and rider rolled upon the ground.
And now the wind came roaring, sweeping past,
As though that crash had loosed its brazen gates ;
And floods of rain came, like a deluge, down,
Dashed in wild torrents on the trembling earth.
I gained my feet, and raised my frightened steed,
Whose quivering limbs, and drooping neck, and
eye

With fear dilated, told his soul was tamed
By the wild terrors of the elements,
Loosed from the laws that bind their fearful
strength.

“ I sought the shelter of the nearest roof.
Gnupsdale was near ; I could not choose but seek
E'en that protection from the raging storm.
I knew its owner was our father's foe,
But deemed him kinder than the foe without.
My horse was housed, and I beside the fire
Sat down, to dry my garments soaked with rain.
The fire burned brightly and my hosts were kind,
And soon I thought not of the storm without.
Gnupsdale, you know, is an estate of Thorkell,
But he resides at Tunga : this I knew,

And, knowing it, I thought to meet alone
 Dependents, or perchance his kinsmen, there.
 But while I sat beside the blazing fire
 There came a fair-haired lady to my side,
 And bade me welcome to her father's hall, —
 Bade me forget the storm that drove me there,
 And gently offered rest and kindly cheer.
 I stammered thanks, — I knew not what I said ;
 So fair a maiden I had never seen :
 Her eyes were gentle, and her golden hair
 Shone like a halo round her beauteous face.
 She asked me if my fall had done me harm :
 As in a dream, I vaguely answered, No ; —
 And other things she kindly, gently said ;
 And bidding me once more a welcome kind,
 Withdrew, and left me still as in a dream.

“ The storm was o'er. I fought my horse again,
 And galloped homeward, through the dark'ning
 night ;
 But still before me was that lovely face :
 I saw naught else, and since that hour have
 known
 No thought but of her beauty and her grace.
 I could not rest, and so again to-day
 To Gnupsdale went, to proffer her my thanks
 For the safe shelter, and her greeting kind.
 They coldly said, at morn that she had gone

With her fire, Thorkell, and a numerous train,
Her brothers and her kinsmen, back to Tunga.

“ Brother, it may be weakness, but I feel
A new emotion kindling in my heart :
I feel a restlessness, a strange desire
To look again upon that beauteous face,
To hear that gentle voice, and meet again
The kindly glances of her heavenly eyes.
Is this not love? You oft have heard me say
How vain and foolish are a lover’s sighs, —
That my free heart should never bend, and sue
For love or favors at a woman’s feet.
Nay, do not smile: my heart is surely won ;
And man must yield to the decrees of fate.”

And Thorgils, musing silently awhile,
Thus answered him : “ Kormak, listen to me ;
And though the tale I tell be one
That you have often heard, yet it is one
That it is well you now should think upon.
When first our father fought this island shore,
Thorkell dwelt here, upon the very spot
Where now we dwell ; our father settled near,
But soon disputes arose between the two.
Our father, Kormak, was a daring man,
Taught in the school of action and of war :
He ever held the rule, that ‘ might is right,’

And made men yield before his iron will.
Thorkell was proud, and would not yield his
lands,
His place, his power, unto a stranger's hand;
And so a mutual feud arose, and oft
From angry words they came to angry blows.

“Our father made a voyage to Norway once,
And, driven by a wild and fearful storm,
His ship was wrecked amid the Orkney Isles.
The news came home to Iceland that his ship
Was wrecked at sea, and all on board were lost.
Then Thorkell, thinking that his stubborn foe
Could never come to trouble him again,
Summoned his friends around him, and rode
forth
To wreak his vengeance on our father's friends.
They burned our house; they slew our faithful
friends;
They seized our goods; drove off our flocks
and herds.
A trusty servant fled with you and me,
And placed us safe beyond fierce Thorkell's rage.
He thought we died within our blazing house,
And, grimly muttering, ‘Thus my foes I crush,’
Turned joyful homeward, thinking Ogmund's
race
Could never stand before his path again.

“A year passed on: one morning in the bay
Anchored two ships. Our father had returned.
What words can paint the rage that filled his
breast,

When he beheld the ruins of his home!
Quickly he landed with his armed force,
And, learning who had dared to do this deed,
He led his followers swiftly here to Mel.

“Thorkell, when he beheld our father’s flag
Floating upon the masts of either ship,
Summoned his friends and servants all in haste;
For now he saw the dead returned to life, —
The sea had yielded up her daring son:
His ancient foe had come in arms and strength
To pay his vengeance for a deadly wrong.

“Here, on the slope before this house of Mel,
They met and fought. It was a deadly strife:
Our father fought, avenging his deep wrongs;
And Thorkell fought for safety, for his life.
The chieftains met; and each defiance hurled
Back on the other, as they madly rushed,
And clashed their blades together. Our father
Was famed the boldest soldier of his time;
And Thorkell, too, was known for strength and
skill,
And a bold heart, that never quailed to fear.

Our father, though his shield was cleft in twain,
 And his proud crest was shorn of floating plume,
 Cut Thorkell downward, with a sweeping blow
 That stretched the warrior, bleeding, on the earth.
 His friends were scattered, slain, or wounded fore;
 But one true friend his master's body begged,
 And, Ogmund granting, bore it from the field.

“Then Ogmund took possession of the lands
 And the estates of Thorkell, save Gnupsdale,
 Which he gave to Thorkell's sons. Here they
 bore

Their wounded father, as they thought, to die;
 But Thorkell's wound at length in time was cured:
 He journeyed northward, and soon gained new
 lands, —

Larger estates than those that he had lost, —
 By a rich marriage with the only child
 Of old Bajarni, famed for wealth and lands, —
 The richest man who dwelt upon our island.

“This is the feud between our house and hers:
 She you have seen at Gnupsdale is daughter
 To Thorkell, whom of old our father fought.
 Steingerda may be gentle, but her friends,
 Her father, brothers, kinsmen, all her house,
 Still hate our father, even in his grave:
 They still hate us, his sons, heirs of that wealth

Which once was theirs, but which our father
took, —

A rightful vengeance for the wrongs he bore.
You must indeed possess a valiant heart
(As well I know you do) even to hope
For love or favor from this hostile race,
Sprung from our father's ancient deadly foe.
Steingerda knew you not for Ogmund's son,
Or else, perchance, her greeting then had lacked
The cordial welcome that she gave to you :
When she shall know you as your father's son,
Her eyes will lose their gentle, kindly glance,
And in its place will come the stony look
We saw in Thorkell, when we met at End,
And when that chieftain knew us at a glance
For sons of Ogmund, and looked death at us.
Banish the thought, my brother, from your breast
Of loving her, from whom but hate is due ;
So shall you win repose of mind and heart ;
So shall you shun regrets that come too late."

"All this, dear Thorgils, has my own mind said:
Thus has it counselled ; yet, in spite of all
That reason, judgment, or your love advise,
I feel a restless, wild desire to seek
This maiden, even in her father's hall,—
To dash aside obstructions that arise,
And prove a love that nothing can withstand, —

A courage that shall bend e'en fate itself,
 Compelling destiny to yield to me.
 Say not that this is madness: there's a charm
 In very recklessness that still allures,
 And conquers judgment in the daring heart.
 Do not advise me more: to-morrow morn
 Alone I go, disguised as wandering minstrel,
 To seek Steingerda, — to brave her father, —
 And follow this adventure to the end."

"That shall you not!" Thorgils in haste replied;
 "Think you so meanly of my father's son,
 That he will lazily repose him here?
 Think you so poorly, brother, of my love?
 I go with you! come weal, come woe, come death,
 There is my place, brother, beside you still."

"Nay, Thorgils, I would rather go alone;
 But if you must, I will not say you nay:
 We'll show old Thorkell that a savage look
 Has not the power to awe brave Ogmund's sons;
 We'll show that chief that enterprise still lives,
 And courage died not in our father's stock
 When Ogmund died. We owe it to our name
 To show the world our father's sons are we.
 Yet I am plunging you in dangers, Thorgils,
 Foolishly, vainly, — you I should protect:

My younger brother, whom our father gave
Into my charge when his protection failed,
And bade me keep you with my stronger arm
From every danger. No! you must not go;
Alone, I shall not know what 't is to fear,
But you with me, my heart would fear for you,
And coward paleness blanch my manly cheek."

But Thorgils, too, could be resolved and firm,
For no persuasion could induce him stay;
And so it was resolved that they should go
Disguised to Tunga, there to act as chance
And time should offer, or events compel.

K o r m a k .

C A N T O I I .

THE MINSTREL.

CANTO II.

THE MINSTREL.

CIRCLES the year ! and when the sinking
 sun
Shines cold and distant on the freezing earth :
When Winter comes, clad in an icy garb,
Still hurried on by winds that wildly roar :
When the broad fields, so lately green and glad,
Blighted beneath the season's frosty touch,
Wrap silent round them their white robe of snow,
And, desolate and dreary, wait for Spring ;
When the dark forest sheds its leafy coat,
And the stript branches, dreary skeletons,
Stand spectre-like, or wave in dismal gloom,
Creaking and moaning in the icy wind ;
When the housed products of the fruitful year
Promise security from cold and want,
And crackling fires blaze brightly on the hearth,
And kindly friends are clustered round the board ;

We welcome Christmas ! as an old, dear friend,
We give it smiling welcome. What though Time
Has swept away another year of life !
How many blessings with the days have come !
How many mercies, comforts, joys, and hopes !
A year has passed since Christmas last was here :
A year full crowded with events and acts,
With thoughts and memories, once awakened,
That never more can sleep. The thoughtful mind
Finds food for contemplation, as arise
The varied pictures of the closing year ;
Unwritten histories come crowding fast,
And forms and faces that have passed away
Are mingled with them in the dreamy thought.
The sacred influence of the holy birth
Awakes the reverent feelings of the heart ;
But Memory, startled in the dreaming brain
By merry laugh and smiling friends around,
Forgets to think upon the silent past,
Under the noisy influence of the hour.

Back from the present to the days of old !
From our blithe Christmas to the feast of Jul !
From the religion of the lowly born
To the dark age when Odin's worship was !
In Tunga's halls, upon the Mother-night,
They feasted joyous, and the ample board
Groaned 'neath the weight of rich and generous
cheer.

Assembled here were friends and kinsmen ; all
Who claimed relation with old Thorkell's house
Came here this night to hold the annual feast,
And waste the hours until the morning's dawn
With festal revelry, with wassail, song and wine.

The banquet-hall, though rough and rudely
built,
Was large and lofty, and the arching roof
Of rough-hewn timber spanned full forty feet,
While twice that space measured its utmost length.
In brazen sockets fixed along the wall
On either side a score of torches blazed,
Throwing a bright but flickering light around,
While gleamed their light on shield and sword
and spear,
Hung in profusion on the lofty wall.
Beneath, along an oaken table ranged,
Sat the wild feasters of this night of Jul :
The drinking-horns from hand to hand passed
round,
Oft filled from the huge flagons on the board.

A platform, raised two steps above the floor,
Stretched from one end a space of thirty feet,
And here with tapestry the walls were hung,
And richer garnished with their warlike gear :
Rich suits of mail, and swords inlaid with gold,

And axes, on whose polished helms shined white
The lustrous gleaming of bright silver rings ;
Banners, the trophies of the well-fought field ;
And in the centre, from a brazen beak,
Captured in some wild battle on the sea,
Hung a rich canopy, beneath which sat
In regal state the master of the feast.

A tall old man was Thorkell, silver-haired,
And bent with age ; but still within his eye
Shone the proud glance that age can never tame.
He wore a robe of velvet, richly wrought ;
And, spite of age, the chieftain's look was bold,
As well befitted his state, — a feudal prince.
On Thorkell's left hand sat his youthful dame,
Through whom his rich estates had come to him,
And Steingerda, his daughter, famed for beauty,
The fairest maiden of that northern island ;
And other ladies, friends and kindred, graced
With their fair presence and bright smiles the
board.

Upon the right the sons of Thorkell sat,
Loptur and Alf ; the kinsmen of the house
Were ranged beyond, while on the lower floor
Sat the retainers, the well-tried soldiers,
Captains of vessels, petty officers,
Close seated all around the festal board.
In rich, half-warlike, holiday attire,
They came to revel at their chieftain's feast.

The Saxon face, the flashing Norman eye,
Spoke the wild, daring heart that filled each
breast.

Behind the chair of Thorkell Narfi stood,
His chiefest councillor, though still a youth.
Full of quips and witty sayings was he,
Yet shrewd withal, advising prudently
To his too fiery and impetuous master,
Who gave to him alone the liberty
To curb his anger, or restrain his rage; —
A slender youth, with small and sparkling eyes,
A keen, quick look of satire and of craft,
Masked with a smile, — an ever-ready smile,
That lighted up his pale, but handsome face;
So gayly drest, he blazed with gold and gems.
Ever beside his master was he found,
Filling the golden cup that Thorkell held,
But seldom drinking of the wine he poured;
With easy grace on Thorkell's shoulder leaned,
Whispered and chatted gayly in his ear,
Launching some bolt of wit, that hit the mark,
And won the applause of merriment around.

Now from the outer door a butler came,
To ask his master if an aged minstrel,
Who craved admittance there, might be allowed
To sing a ballad of a former age,

And, with his little skill, do all the grace
Within his art to the high festival.
An old man, with long locks of silver hair
His tall form bent, a trembling step of age,
His right hand leaning on a fair-haired boy,
The other resting on an oaken staff,
The minstrel entered. But ere yet he reached
One half the distance to the upper hall,
Two visitors arrived, who came in haste,
And, pressing past the old man, quickly stood
By Thorkell's side, who greeted them with joy,
And eagerly received the news they bore.
These were two brothers, Oddur and Gudmund,
Sons of Thorveiga, whose wild forceries
And oracles had given to her the fame
Of mind familiar with the *evil god*,
And power, through him, to prophecy what time
Had shrouded darkly in a future age ;
And these, reputed as her sons, who dwelt
With her in her secluded hut, — her strange,
Wild servitors, — were men of giant forms,
Rude in their manners, clumsy in their gait,
Ill-looking faces, where deceit and fraud
Mingled with coarseness and stupidity ;
Great brutes they were, so huge and strong,
And fullen in their looks, that a shudder —
Not fear, but loathing — passed around the hall.
Thorkell bade Narsi find them each a place ;

Then, rising, thus addressed his guests, who ceased
Awhile their revelry, and listened as
The old man spoke, with earnest voice, and eye
That flashed in fierceness when his passions woke.

“I need not tell to you, my friends, the wrongs
I bore from Ogmund; these you know too well.
The robber now is dead, and unavenged
Are all the injuries he did to me.
The wealth he took his sons inherited,
And now enjoy. I swore a sacred oath
To wreak my vengeance dearly on the fire;
He has escaped me, but the sons remain.
And now I swear, by Thor, and Odin too,
Here, on this sacred, honored Mother-night,
To sweep the race of Ogmund from the earth,—
To shed each drop of blood that now doth flow,
Kindred to him, in any heart that beats
On this our island. You, my friends, I trust
To give me aid of arms and valiant hearts.
The sons of Ogmund boast of many friends,
And Kormak seeks to win a fame for arms
And daring deeds; but you shall scatter them
Like driving foam before the ocean wind,
And boastful Kormak shall go seek his fire,—
Shall bear my vengeance past the silent gate
To that dead foe; not even death shall save
From my fierce vengeance, nursed through many
years,

That thus at last in blood it may be drowned.
 Thorveiga, who did never speak in vain,
 Communing with the gods, bids me go on,
 And victory shall crown our undertaking.
 Give me your answer ! shall I have your aid,
 Freely and boldly, in this just emprise ?
 Or do you fear young Kormak's boasted sword ?”

And now arose a wild, tumultuous din ;
 Swords were clashed, and cries of “ Death to
 Kormak ! ”

Shook e'en the massive timbers of the hall, —
 Made the red torches flicker their wild light,
 And rustled swords and axes on the wall.
 A wild, fierce joy sprung up in Thorkell's eye ;
 Already he beheld his prostrate foes,
 And drank the deep, the long-delayed revenge.
 When now the silence was at length restored,
 He thanked his wild retainers for their zeal,
 And promised soon to bring them to the deed.

Meantime the aged minstrel and the boy,
 His harp-bearer, had rested on the bench
 That stood against the wall ; silent they sat,
 Yet once their eyes had met, and then there
 glanced
 A look of quick intelligence between,
 Though none had marked it 'mid the stirring
 scene

And the wild tumult that so shook the hall.
But now, remembered, Thorkell bade them come
Still nearer, and that Narfi bear a bowl
Of wine to the old man, which was declined ;
Then, bending o'er his harp, the minstrel sung.
With faltering hand at first the chords he pressed,
In trembling tones at first his voice was heard,
But, fired at length by the wild soul of song,
In strength and richness grew the swelling tones.

“ When Harald Harfagra was king,
And sat on Norway's throne
(’T was Harald made the kingdom his,
And all the power his own),

“ There dwelt at the court of Harald,
An Earl, who claimed that he
From the ancient kings of Norway
Could trace his pedigree.

“ He won the favor of Harald
By bending to his will,
And the king endowed him richly
With lands and wealth, until

“ His castles he counted by scores,
And ships like flocks that fly
Of the white-winged, sailing sea-birds
Amid the ocean sky.

- “ But dearer than castles on land,
Ships upon the water,
A richer boon than e'en Harald's love
Was his only daughter.
- “ Fair as the gleam of the sunshine
When morning greets the fight,
As the golden sun, uprising,
Rolls round 'mid crimson light.
- “ Fairer than words can picture her,
Fairer than tongue can tell,
As fair as the dead we cherish,
Within our hearts that dwell.
- “ While war was raging around her
(The life of man was war),
The heart of the maid was gentle
As light of evening star.
- “ She shuddered to think of battle,
Yet felt her pulses start
When they told some deed of daring,
Some deed of dauntless heart.
- “ And the maid had many suitors ;
Her beauty and her grace
Won the hearts of those old warriors,
A rude and savage race.

- “ And many a reckless foldier
 Within his mailed breast
Had often breathed a stifled sigh
 His lips had ne'er confessed ;
- “ And many who went to battle,
 As their wild war-cries rose,
Breathed soft the name of the maiden,
 And dashed against their foes.
- “ They recked not of death or danger,
 For a wilder strife by far
Had raged in their steel-clad bosoms,
 Than ever raged in war.
- “ But Skeggi, a famous warrior,
 And rich in ships and land,
Was still a constant wooer
 For gentle Unna's hand.
- “ And he won her father's favor,
 Who bade his daughter see
In Skeggi a fitting husband,
 For she his wife must be.
- “ But the maiden mourned in secret,
 Mourned with a grieving heart,
For she could not love the warrior,
 And oft her tears would start, —

“ Would start as she thought of another,
A gentle, gallant youth,
To whom she had pledged in secret
Her heart in maiden truth.

“ But her lover was poor, and yet
He had not won a fame,
And her father laughed at the stripling,
A youth without a name.

“ But the heart of a dauntless race
Beat in his youthful breast,
And he vowed to win the maiden,
Or death should be his rest.

“ And Unna told her father
How he had won her heart,
But the Earl was proud, and bade her
From this weak love to part.

“ With her tears she sought to move him,
But he coldly turned away,
And, true to his word with Skeggi,
He fixed her wedding-day.

“ At length the fatal day arrived,
The day when she must wed
The husband her sire had chosen, —
She wished that she was dead.

“ In the hall were hung the banners,
A rich and gallant show,
And Skeggi was flushed and joyous,
But Unna white as snow.

“ The Earl had filled up a goblet
Of rich and sparkling wine :
‘ I drink,’ cried he, ‘ to thee, Skeggi !
Now thou art son of mine.’

“ But ere he had drained the goblet,
There came a rushing sound,
That startled the guests assembled,
And shook the flags around.

“ That rushing sound came sweeping on
Like swell of ocean wave,
And Skeggi felt his strong heart tremble,
That heart he thought so brave.

“ Through opening doors a tide rushed in,
Of men and steel that tide ;
Fair Unna’s heart leaped up how wildly, —
Her lover, by her side,

“ Led on that band to win the maid,
Or, true to plighted word,
Lay down his life before the hazard,
The hazard of the sword.

“ The clash of steel rung wild and high,
And poured a crimson flow, —
Libations of the heart’s red wine
Fell on the floor below.

“ Through blood and strife the maid was borne
From that wild scene away,
Fainting, within her lover’s arms
A helpless burden lay.

“ They gained the shore, the bark was launched,
Quickly they spread the sail,
The fleetest ship of all the North
Was soon before the gale.

“ Behind them came a thousand foes,
The sea with sails was white,
Like the swift sea-bird on they flew,
And vanished in the night.

“ Thus Skeggi lost his lovely bride,
And yet, throughout the night,
He still failed on ; at morning’s dawn
There was no fail in fight.

“ Weary and sad, he turned his bark,
Homeward he steered his way,
And often cursed in bitterness
That darkly-ending day.

“ And thus the youth the maiden won ;
He bore her fouthward far,
And in new lands he gained a name
By valiant deeds in war.

“ But dearer than the name he gained,
Dearer than all befide, —
Than wealth and honors, that were his, —
Was his fair Norfeman bride.

“ And many fons were born to him,
Inheriting his fame :
Beft known of thefe throughout the North
Was Ogmund’s famous name.”

Thus far the minftrel fung ; but with the name,
The hated name of Ogmund, there arofe
A found of tumult wild throughout the hall,
And darkening brows and angry eyes were bent
On the old harper, while his voice was drowned
In their loud, angry murmurs : for Skeggi
Was Thorkell’s fire, and fuch a tale as this
Was all unfuited to the time and place.

On Thorkell’s brow was feen the flufh of rage ;
He bade his fervants break the minftrel’s harp,
And bear the old man and the boy away,
And lock them in the vaults beneath the hall,

Till he might judge what punishment was due
For their rash deed. The old man's harp was
feized,

And dashed in pieces at his very feet.

His tall form straightened, and his eye flashed
fire, —

One step he took, as though his age was lost
In the fierce insult, but the boy advanced,
And, with a whispered word, restrained him ;
Then, with downcast eyes and trembling step,
They led him from the hall. But once he turned,
And cast a glance of hate and menace round,
At which they only scoffed ; and Narfi cried :
“ The old man's angry that we did not choose
To praise his singing ; or he fears the cold,
Damp vault may spoil the sweetness of his voice.”
But Thorkell bade him hold his peace, for much
It chafed him that the praise of Ogmund's race
Should thus have sounded in his banquet-hall.

Norman.

CANTO III.

THE ESCAPE.

CANTO III.

THE ESCAPE.

GUDRIDA, Thorkell's dame, had left the
feast,

And Steingerda and all the lady guests
Attended her ; as wilder grew the scene
Each moment, for the red, bright, sparkling wine
Ufurped fair Reason's throne within each brain.
Thorkell withdrew, for age, with iron hand,
Had crushed in him the power, that once was his,
To revel with the wildest, and prolong
Through midnight to the dawn the mad carouse.
The revel still grew wilder ; all restraint
Was now cast off, and each abandoned him
To the wild genius of the festal night.
The mingling voices of an hundred guests
Were raised together, and in discord oft ;
And then again those massive castle-walls
Seemed reeling inward with the wild refrain,

As some old song or festal glee was sung,
And each one joined with fierce and frantic zeal.

Narfi was seated in the chair of state,
Where Thorkell late had sat; and he alone
Of all the feasters in that banquet-hall
Was not bewildered or o'erpowered with wine.
With meditative face, shading his eyes
With his white hand, he sat, observing all
That chanced around, but quite unmoved and
calm

Amid a tumult might have waked the dead.
And thus, thought he, men seek for happiness:
"O weak and brainless fools! what joy is there
In thus degrading man below the brutes!
Taking away from him the only thing,
His reason, that makes him better than the herds
Of grazing cattle, wand'ring o'er our hills! —
But soft! I see before me many men
Of wisdom greater than I dare to claim:
Men of sound minds, of strong and earnest
thought —

And am I better than all these I see
Thus drowned and stupefied in this red wine?
Or is there magic in your ruby stream,
Enchanting, with a deadly serpent power,
Your trembling captives, while you drink their
blood,

Changing the godlike mind to worthless dross !”
As thus he thought, and from a flagon poured
Its sparkling contents on the oaken floor,
His mind reverted to the minstrel’s song ;
And long he pondered, till a sudden thought
Flashed on his brain : rising, he seized a torch,
And bent his steps toward the vaults that lay,
Dreary and dark, beneath the banquet-hall.

A narrow room — eight paces in its length
By four in breadth, the walls and floor of stone,
The ceiling timber, and the door of oak —
Confined the minstrel who had dared to sing
The praise of Thorkell’s foe before that chief,
And the fair boy, his harp-bearer, who shared
His fortunes in the cold and dreary cell.
Against the wall, upon the other side
Of the long corridor, from which the vaults
Had entrance, those who brought the captives
here
Had placed a torch, whose flickering light
Shone faintly through the narrow open space
Above the door, and traced against the wall
And on the floor the crossings of the bars
That spread their iron network over it,
Admitting air and the faint, struggling light.
No bed, no straw, nothing but naked walls
And damp, cold floor ! It was a dreary place

To pass a night ; and the uncertainty
Of how much longer time their fate to stay
Within its walls made it seem still more drear.

Their jailers gone, the minstrel with a start
Sprung up erect, and paced with rapid strides
The narrow room. His hands were clenched
in rage,
And all the passions he had smothered down
Now woke to fury in his heaving breast.
Calm and serene the boy looked on, unmoved
By all the tempest of his rage, until,
Its wild burst o'er, the minstrel grew more calm ;
And then the boy advanced toward him,
And, placing one hand on his shoulder, said :
“ Passion is idle ; for the song you sung
Was sung in daring, to awake their rage, —
You knew the vengeance of an angry foe
Would fall on you, and reckless braved that rage.
Now, Kormak, do not waste your energy
In hurling curses, which can do no harm
To those at whom you aim ; but let us see
How best we can dispose to pass the night
In these poor lodgings ; for some sleep we'll need,
And with to-morrow may come stirring scenes.”

Kormak put one arm round his brother's neck,
Looking in his calm, gentle eyes, he said

“Your brave, strong heart, dear brother, tells
to me

How much more manly you are than I am ;
While I in passion rage and fret myself,
Wasting my energy and strength and time,
You calmly think, — are always still unmoved :
But when the time for stirring action comes, —
When danger threatens, — then a lion heart
Speaks out in daring from those gentle eyes.
In time of danger I am fearless too,
But cannot curb my passion, nor restrain
Impatience or desire, as you, dear brother, can.”

And now they talked of all had chanced that
night, —

Of Thorkell's enmity ; how their mad freak
Had placed them in his power ; and what their
fate,

If he should learn who they, his captives, were.
But no sigh or vain regret they uttered :
Spoke in all calmness of the coming morn,
And measured all their chances for escape.
And Kormak, too, found time to speak again
Of fair Steingerda, — her grace, her beauty :
Not e'en reflecting that her lustrous eyes
Had been the lure to this their strange mishap ;
Or, if the thought occurred, his heart leaped up,
And welcomed every danger for her sake.

Now, in one corner of their dreary cell,
Upon their cloaks the brothers laid them down,
And soon, in spite of danger, cold, or e'en
Of anxious thoughts, they lost themselves in
 sleep.

At times the muffled sounds above their heads
Waked them a moment, and they fell asleep
Again, with faint consciousness of waking.

When Steingerda had left the banquet-hall,
She sought her chamber; but the sounds that
 came

Wild from below forbade the thought of sleep.
Seated beside the fire, unconsciously
Her thoughts turned to the minstrel and his
 song;

And much she dwelt upon the fearful hate
That urged her father to a fierce revenge
On Ogmund's sons, for wrongs done by their
 fire;

And then the form of Kormak came before
Her meditative mind, — and well she knew
There was no hatred in her heart toward him;
For she had learned at length, when he was gone,
That it was Kormak who had been her guest
That eve at Gnupsdale; and since then her
 thoughts

She often found returning to the youth,

Recalling those few words he said to her.
And now the minstrel and her evening guest,
In spite of her, engrossed her thoughts, and
came

Always together, mingling in her mind.
At length the thought occurred to her to seek
The vault where Thorkell had imprisoned him,
And question the old bard, why he had sung
The song that so excited Thorkell's rage.
She called her maid ; the girl, quite overcome
With weariness, in spite of all the sounds
That thundered still below, had fallen asleep :
So, taking up her lamp, and throwing on
A heavy cloak, — for the night air was cold, —
She went alone toward the dungeon vaults.

He who had seen her as she passed along,
So silent and so fair, through those rude halls,
Her beauty half unseen, and yet augmented,
By the faint glimmer of her fluttering light,
Might well have thought some Peri of the air
Had left her home amid the realms of light,
To do a good deed for weak, erring man. —
Yet oft within the fairest forms are found
The souls least beautiful ; — for curiosity,
Or woman's light caprice, Steingerda sought
Her father's captives at this lonely hour ;
Or perchance the adventure of the act

Had lured her to it ; but not that holy thought
That bids the gentle heart to those that mourn
Go offer consolation, urged her on.
She had a soft and kindly woman's heart,
That would not do a cruel act ; but yet
By her fair presence in his lonely cell
She might inflict on that poor captive youth
A deeper wound than e'en her father's hate,
In all its fierceness, had the power to give.

The bolts were drawn, the heavy key was
turned,
And Narfi entered at the opening door ;
His glittering dress contrasted with the walls,
Like diamonds flashing in a leaden ring.
Still on the floor the minstrel and the boy
Were lying. Narfi held his torch above
Their heads, and with a scrutinizing eye
Examined the appointments of their dress,
And last their faces ; Thorgils' gentle eye
Was bent, with look of childish wonderment,
Upon his rich-apparelled visitor,
And Narfi turned from him, well satisfied
That he, at least, was only what he seemed, —
A very simple boy, the harp-bearer.
But when he met the minstrel's eye, its flash
Had more of youth than trembling age in it :
And his firm limbs, not wholly hid from view

Within his ample cloak, showed full and round,
 And lacked the weak and shrunken form of age.
 A smile arose on Narfi's scornful lip,
 As thus he found his first suspicion true.
 Still as a statue, with his blazing torch
 Throwing its full, red light on them, he stood.
 At length he spoke : —

“ Minstrel, in vain you seek
 To cover youth with age. Old you are not ;
 Nor are you wandering minstrel, as you seem,
 Though something of the minstrel's art is yours,
 And you can sing a very stirring song.
 And did you think to sing your father's praise
 Here in these walls, the dwelling of his foe,
 And pass unharmed away ? Kormak, your fate
 Is sealed ; and you will pay the penalty
 Of death for this, your latest, maddest act.
 And your young brother, in his home at Mel,
 Shall soon be wakened with a storm of steel ;
 And all the wrongs done to our noble house,
 By your base robber fire, in blood avenged.”
 Kormak sprung up, and dropped the shrouding
 cloak

From off his agile limbs ; with flashing eye
 He answered him : “ He was no robber, slave !
 Back to your master ! tell him, that his foe
 Hurls a defiance in his very teeth.

Think you my soul is tamed, because my limbs
Are bound within this dungeon? Think it not:
No more I fear your master, Thorkell, now,
Than when he threatened what he could not do.”
Narfi had drawn his sword when Kormak rose,
But never moved a foot. “Wear out,” he said,
“Your few brief hours in cursing: thus alone
Have you the power to vent your rage on us;
For you are harmless as a hissing snake
Whose fangs have been extracted. Now to sleep,
If sleep you can: to-morrow you must die.”

Narfi was gone; his footsteps died away
In the long corridor, on the stairway.
Once more the brothers laid them down to sleep
The few short hours till morn; but once again
There came the sound of footsteps, till at length
It stopped before their door: the key was turned;
Again the heavy door swung grating back:
Oswald, the jailer, entered, raised his torch,
And looked around, and then passed out again,
And Steingerda advanced. Kormak beheld,
But scarce could deem the vision real, so fair
So dreamlike in her beauty the young girl
Stood, trying to pierce the gloom; for her lamp,
Flickering in the doorway, gave faint light,
And Oswald's torch was shaded by the wall.
“Minstrel,” she said, “you braved my father's
rage;

Yet still, in pity for your age and art,
 I fain would know why thus you dared to sing;
 I fain would shield you from the fate you
 fought.”

“Fair lady,” spoke the minstrel, “you alone
 Are cause of this adventure; for your love
 The youth you sheltered from the raging storm
 One eve at Gnupsdale, though your father’s foe,
 Has come to seek you in your father’s hall;
 And, though death meet him, feel his heart
 repaid

By one bright smile, one gentle look from thee.”
 And Kormak threw aside the silver hair,
 His badge of age, and, kneeling at her feet,
 Poured out his wild, passionate heart of love,
 With the rich eloquence that lovers have.
 And Steingerda, amazed, bewildered, listened,
 While Kormak kissed her hand, and uttered vows
 That scarce she heard in her bewilderment.

“But why awake my father’s rage?” she said;
 “Wherefore your song?”

“I heard them basely speak
 Of my brave father: they called him robber;
 My soul chafed at it; but I could not speak
 While my full heart was hissing hot to tell,
 That, when he lived, he taught them fairer
 speech,

But now, being dead, their coward lips were
loofed

To slander him. I could not tell them this,
For my disguise; but when they bade me sing,
The thought came to me, that, in Thorkell's hall,
'T were some revenge to sing my grandfire's
praise;

And hence my song."

"Your life is forfeited
The instant that my father knows your name."

"That gay-dressed youth who stood by
Thorkell's chair
Has lately left us, threatening me with death.
He knows of my disguise; though how he
guessed
My name I cannot tell."

Steingerda mused,
But quickly said: "If you to-morrow morn
Are found within these walls, no power can save
You from my father's long-delayed revenge.
If that I dare release my father's foe,
Will you, for love of me, appease his wrath
By such concessions, in your power to make,
As may at length extinguish this fierce feud,
And in its place build up a friendship strong?"

"For love of thee," Kormak replied to her,

“There’s naught I will not do, fo honor
And my dead father’s name, that now I bear
Proudly and bravely, fhall receive no ftain.
I were fo much lefs worthy of thy love,
If I could ftoop to aught unworthily :
I muft not tamper with my father’s fame,
A heritage of honor or of fhame, —
Honor, if I keep it ftill unblemifhed,
But fhame, if I fhould fully his brave fhield
By act unworthy of my father’s fon.
But that which one ftiong, earneft heart may do,
With aid of friends and youth and enterprife,
That will I do, to win a boon fo dear
As thy rich heart, fair lady. But perchance
All this I fpeak in vain ; yet in my heart
There is a fanguine voice, and it tells me
I fhall not die to-morrow, — fhall efcape ;
If through thy kindly aid, then doubly dear
Will be thy image, fhruined within my heart.”
Then Kormak took his brother by the hand,
And told the lady what a daring heart
Beat in that gentle, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy.

Ofwald flood by, with wonder in his eyes,
To fee the aged minftrel thus transformed.
Fofter-brother to his gentle lady,
He held the true devotion of his life
Due to her fervice. Now ſhe turned to him :

“Ofwald,” she said, “my dear foster-brother,
 This captive minstrel is a youth I love,
 And Thorkell has resolved upon his death.
 Dare you conduct him from these walls to-night,
 And fly with him, and this brave boy, ere dawn
 Beyond my father’s anger and his power?”

“For thee I’ll dare whatever man may dare,
 My lady,” Ofwald answered.

“Then away!

Make all arrangements for their instant flight;
 Saddle the horses: steeds of swiftest foot
 Select from all that stable here to-night;
 And should you borrow of my father’s guests,
 The purpose must excuse for once the breach
 Of hospitality. Use urgent haste,
 For one hour later underneath this roof,
 And there would be no hope for your escape.
 My father wakes at dawn; and well I know
 That Narfi will not sleep till he has poured
 The night’s discovery in his master’s ear.”

Ofwald was gone. “No longer must I stay,”
 Steingerda said; “wrong have I done to come
 Here in the night, in secret, to your cell;
 Nor had I come, perhaps, if I had known
 It was no aged minstrel whom I sought.
 Wrong have I done to hear the words of love
 Spoken by one my father hates the most;
 But my weak woman’s heart is moved for you,

And thus I shield you from my father's hate.
But hear me, Kormak : do not seek again
To stir my father's rage against yourself
By such wild deed as this ; for were I not
A renegade from him whom I should serve,
Your fates were sealed : before to-morrow's sun
Sunk in the west your souls were with the dead."'
And Kormak kissed her hand again, while she
Threw o'er his neck the silken scarf she wore,
And hurried from the cell ; but at the door
Half turned, to give a last and farewell glance
To Kormak, kneeling still, as at the shrine
Kneels Odin's rapt, adoring worshipper.

When Narfi left the captives in their cell,
Dwelling on what had chanced, he first returned
Unto the revellers ; but they were few
Who now remained awake. Upon the floor,
'Mid scattered goblets, and seats overturned,
And pools of wine, in stupid sleep were seen
The mad carousers of an hour ago.
Sleep had o'erwhelmed their wine-encumbered
minds,
And in the midst of song and speech they fell,
And as they fell they slept. Narfi beheld
The changed appearance of the hall, and smiled,
But stayed not long ; the heated, o'er-breathed
air.

The fumes of wine and ale, the long-drawn
breaths
Of the deep, heavy sleepers, troubled him,
And he went forth, still thinking, as he passed
Into the night-air, of his discovery
Of Kormak, and still seeking for the clew
To his strange visit there: nor could he frame
Another purpose than his earliest thought.
He knew that Kormak had met Steingerda
At Gnupsdale, and much he feared more than
once

Had been her visitor. Why came he here?
And why had he excited Thorkell's ire
By his mad song? This would not further love.
Himself less careless, he knew not what deeds
Might be performed for very recklessness,
And sought a reason for a reckless act.

Besides the hate he bore the captive youth,
In common with the wronged house of Thorkell,
There was another reason for his joy
In finding Kormak in the aged bard:
He loved Steingerda, though that love unknown
To all but his own heart; and ambition
Joined with love had been the leading motives
Guiding his action, ruling all his thoughts,
For many, many months; he knew himself
Full of stratagems, and had dared to hope

He might by these achieve the purposed ends
Of both his passions, — marry his mistress,
And win through her position. Now, thought

he,

I can gain more of Thorkell's confidence
By this disclosure, at the same time strike
A dangerous rival from my path of love :
Thus I advance still nearer to my ends.

The found of horses' feet aroused his thoughts ;
Three horsemen came dim through the shades
of night,

And almost rode on him. As he drew back,
The foremost hailed him : " Ho, Sir Boaster !
stay,

And bear a message from me to your lord :
Tell him the minstrel could not wait for him,
But sends, instead, his greeting. For yourself,
Learn not to threat ; for boasting words are weak,
And often are as unfulfilled as those

You gave to me to-night. I may not stay :
The lines of day are lighting up the east,
And time is precious ; for you prophesied
This day should be my last : and so adieu ! "

And Narsi saw the three dash on again.

He stood transfixed, gazing on vacancy
Where they had vanished ; then, as the sounding
Of their quick gallop died away, at length
The power of utterance came back to his tongue,

And through his close-set lips he hissed his curse,
Its burning heat quenched by the cold night-air,
Upon their flight; in frenzy stamped his foot
Upon the frozen earth, that took the blow
As little harmed by it as those he cursed
Were by the maledictions heaped on them.
His anger spent, he turned toward the gate,
Questioning in his mind by what strange means
The captives had escaped. Raising his eyes,
He saw the gleaming of the light come down
From a high casement in the lofty wall
Of the square tower upon the western side.
“My lady’s lamp is burning late,” he said.
“Who was their jailer? Ofwald! All is clear!
Her foster-brother set her lover free!
That love is hopeless, lady! If not I,
At least not he shall ever be thy lord!”
With upturned face and burning eyes he spoke,
But the cold walls heard not his threatening
words.

Conscious of weakness, conscious too of strength,
He summoned all his art to guide his way,
Dark and obscure, toward his destined end.

Kormak.

CANTO IV.

BATTLE ISLE.

CANTO IV.

BATTLE ISLE.

THE winter months were past, — those
cold, long months
Through which the sunshine sleeps, forgetting
earth,
Or looking coldly and obliquely down ;
No loving warmth in even noontide beams,
No friendship in his rays. But awaking
From his long lethargy, at last the sun
Began to climb the arch, and lift the veil
That hid his kindness from the eyes of men,
And show himself again the genial god
Before whose face the tributary world
Arrays itself in verdure. The white robe
Of frigid Winter melted in his light ;
The fast-bound streams resumed their rapid flow ;
Through the warm earth the little blades of grass
Came forth so cautiously, as if in fear

The icy blasts of winter might return
To kill their tender life; the naked trees
Arrayed their hundred arms in leafy garb,
And drank the sunbeams up. From milder
climes

Came back the migratory flocks, that learn
By Nature's telegrams when the young Spring
Leaps to his feat, the ruler of the world,
And Winter melts in his cold snows away.
And in this northern clime a wondrous change
Came in a few bright days: the dreary world
Lay one day like the lifeless crystalis,
The next arrayed itself in summer's hues, —
A butterfly, and like the butterfly,
Flashed gayly, brightly, through as brief a life.

There was an island with a rocky shore
Upon its northern side, where the high crags
Climbed up above the sea a thousand feet;
Many an iceberg, floating from the north,
Had wrecked itself upon those moveless rocks,
And shivered peak by peak, until the sea
Was covered with a floating wreck of ice, —
The crumbled fragments of the frozen berg,
That once was vaster than the island crags
On which its voyage was wrecked. A mile away
From the main shore of Iceland was the isle;
Though the wild, rocky shore was strewn with ice

Through the whole year, yet, sloping from the
 crag

Toward the south and west, the other shore
Caught the first sunshine of the early Spring,
Put the first verdure of the season on,
And smiled secure beneath the rocky wall.

It was a sunny spot, as fair and bright
As though it lay within a milder zone :
Here the huge pines rose towering to the sky,
Clothed in their garb of an eternal green ;
While groves of birch-trees bent their graceful
 boughs

To the light airs breathed gently from the south ;
And the green grass grew greener, fresher here
Than on the mainland shore. No one dwelt here :
But oft in summer parties came, and pitched
In this sweet spot their tents, and whiled away
The days, forgetful that they lived so near
The frozen regions of perpetual cold, —
The home of glaciers, and those northern seas,
Fixed, silent, motionless, congealed forever.

No one dwelt here ; yet 'mid the lofty pines
I see white tents, and many moving forms :
Perchance some idlers come to greet the Spring
In this fair spot where first she greets the earth.
Upon an open space, a grassy lawn,
Smooth as a carpet, sloping to the west,

And soft with verdure, the encampment stood.
The pine-trees formed the back ; advanced from
these,

Yet scarce beyond their shade, a group of tents,
With streamers gayly floating from their peaks,
Were clustered. On the right and on the left,
Two arrow-flights apart, were also set

Two other groups of tents : separate both,
Like little villages ; in each a tent

Higher than those around, in front of which
From a tall standard hung a blazoned flag :

The tallest standard stood before the group
Of tents that formed the centre. Armed men

Were moving to and fro, and lances, swords,
And suits of mail flashed brightly in the rays
Of the now setting sun ; yet mixed with these
Were other forms, that wore no warlike mien :

For there were groups of ladies, gayly drest,
Straying from tent to tent, watching the sun,

As in a crimson glow his bright orb sunk
Beneath the mainland's white-topped mountain
heights,

Kindling their cold snows with his lurid fire,
As he withdrew behind their ridgy wall ;

Or chatting gayly of the coming morn,
Or flirting, 'mid the birch-groves, with the
youths

Who bore them company. Thus evening passed,

And night came down amid the dark-leaved
 pines,
And hushed them all to silence and repose.

When Thorkell learned that his most hated foe
Had been within his power, and yet escaped,
His rage o'erleaped all bounds: fiercely he hurled
On Narsi the torrent of his curses ;
That artful youth in silence bent his head
Until the storm was past ; nor did he speak
The thought within his heart, that Steingerda
Had given the means to set the captives free :
He locked this secret fast within his breast,
Hoping to find a time when it might serve
Some better service than it now could serve ;
Nor did he deem it wise to bring the rage
Of Thorkell on the lady ; for he knew
That she would trace the thought back to its
 source,
And he should bear the blame ; and then, beside,
He could not prove his shrewd suspicion true.
And now the long-nursed plan in Thorkell's
 heart,
Of an armed vengeance, grew dearer to him ;
And all the preparation, mustering men,
Collecting arms, to make that vengeance sure,
Went briskly on ; but scarce a week had passed,
When came a messenger from Olaf Pa,

Whose Thingsman Thorkell was, forbidding him
To march against his neighbor with armed men,
To plunge in war and blood the peaceful land
O'er which he claimed to rule. Thorkell at first
Bade Olaf's messenger return to him

Who sent him, with the answer, that he chose
To bear no question of his purposed act, —
That he denied the right to interfere
To Olaf Pa, or any living man.

But Narfi calmed his master's boiling rage,
Showing him thus that he would bring himself
To certain ruin ; and counselled him to lay
His wrongs before the chief, and claim from him
That the estates the father took by force
The sons should now return : “ And weakened
thus,

’T will then be easy,” cunning Narfi said,
“ To wreak more vengeance on their beggared
heads ;

But ’t is destruction to oppose your chief :
Yield to his will ; you but delay the hour
Of vengeance ; and that hour will surely come.”
Then Thorkell, most reluctantly, at last
Agreed to send a gentler answer back ;
And Narfi was despatched to lay the claims
Before the chief.

When Olaf heard the cause
That Narfi brought to him, he sent at once

For Kormak and his brother: heard the whole,
On either side, and, after much debate,
Decreed a single combat should decide
The weighty difference that was between them:
Bade them each send a champion to the lifts;
Appointed time and place; and having learned
From Kormak of his love for Steingerda,
Made the conditions of the battle these, —
If Thorkell's champion should be overcome,
Thorkell should give his daughter to the youth;
But if Kormak should fail, the large estates
That Ogmund took from Thorkell should return
Unto their first possessor. The appointed time
Had come; and hence on Battle Isle were seen
The tents, the bustle, and the armed men;
For here had Olaf summoned them to meet,
And for the morrow was the combat set.

While yet alone a few gray lines of light,
And fading stars, told that the morning hour
Was near at hand, Kormak had left his tent,
And with his brother fought the rocky heights
To catch the early sunlight. From his feet,
Far down the precipitous crag, the waves
Came swelling inward from the open sea,
Dashing the floating ice upon the shore,
Grinding to fragments masses huge as ships,
And piling mass on mass, only to crush

The whole, as some great wave came in,
 Hurling the weight of many thousand tons
 Light as a bubble on its foaming crests.
 Kormak stood gazing far away to sea,
 Where the dark line of waters met the sky,
 On which had now appeared the blush of dawn,
 Faintly reflected in a roseate tint,
 That glimmered on the sea; — but not of dawn,
 Nor of the sea, nor of the ocean airs,
 That swept their cooling freshness o'er his brow,
 Nor of the combat that a few hours more
 Would bring to him, did Kormak think that
 morn.

'T was no armed brow that rose above the sea,
 And fixed his eye, till faded sea and sky,
 And lived alone the vision, — a fair face,
 With curls of golden hair, and deep blue eyes,
 In which her gentle heart seemed floating up
 To give his own her greeting, met his eye,
 And fixed him there enchanted. A long sigh
 Swelled in his bosom as the vision passed,
 Melting again in wave from whence it rose.
 “A woful sigh,” quoth Thorgils; “I am glad
 That 't was I alone, my lovesick brother,
 Who heard that sigh; an enemy might say
 You sighed to think of Narfi's strength of arm;
 But I do think the sigh was due to one
 Whose strength lies not in arms: no! I am
 wrong;

Two snowy arms will often move a heart
That hundred-armed Briareus might assail,
And seek to bend in vain. Listen, brother,
And I will sing a song will please you now,
Or I will ne'er attempt to sing again.

“ I stood on the rocky ocean-shore,
As the waves came wildly rolling in ;
And deep on my ear came the waters' roar,
And all around me the ocean's din ;

“ And my heart sprung out to meet each wave,
To roll and toss on its foamy crest ;
For I loved the music ocean gave,
And I longed to plunge on her heaving breast.

“ I lay at night 'mid the pine-trees' shade,
And heard them sigh as the wind swept past ;
I loved the sighs that their branches made, —
The song they sung with the wind's wild blast.

“ I heard the yelp of the straining pack
When first to view came the hunted game,
Wildly I echoed the glad sounds back,
And my hunter's heart was all aflame.

“ I stood by the sacred Druid-stone,
And heard the chant, and the mystic strain ;
And I felt a might, beyond my own
Sweep o'er my soul with the deep refrain.

- “I heard the youth with his blithesome song,
And the infant lip his artless lay ;
My heart has swept with the strains along,
And bowed itself to their simple sway.
- “Last night we wandered from all apart,
And, down on the ocean’s marge of sand,
I asked the gift of her maiden heart,
And clasped in my own her trembling hand.
- “The dearest sound that was ever heard
Was the whispered word she spoke to me ;
And my own rough heart was as madly stirred
By that soft word as man’s heart could be.
- “O, tell me not of the songs they sing
In Odin’s palace, above the skies !
Valhalla ! thy halls may wildly ring !
The song of the spheres may round me rise !
- “It never can drown that low, sweet tone
She spoke last night on the sandy shore :
That tone will live in my heart alone,
When Odin’s palace shall be no more.”

As Thorgils ceased his song, he turned his eyes
Toward the spot where Kormak late had been :
The place was vacant ; but on looking round,
He saw his brother standing on the verge

Of a high cliff that overhung the sea,
Where a ravine cleft the great wall in twain,
And formed a narrow channel, into which
The green waves plunged, but quick were dashed
to foam,

And rose, as white as milk, along the walls,
And then fell back again to join the swell
Of the next wave advancing ; — there he stood,
A stone's-throw off, his plumed cap in his hand ;
And on the other side of the huge rift
Thorgils beheld the fluttering of a dress,
And, drawing nearer, recognized the face
And the light form of her who set them free
From Thorkell's power. They may not need
me there,

The young man thought, and climbed again the
rocks

Down to the vale below. But Kormak stayed
To hear the lady bid him win her hand,
And take the heart he had already won.

“ Dear lady ! this would nerve a feeble hand,
Fill up with daring e'en a coward's heart :
I feel within my heart a power spring up
I never knew before ; — thy love would lift
A peasant to a king ! Doubt not the end :
If thy fair lips put up their prayer for me,
If thy soft heart appeal unto the gods,
They never can deny you ; — and the charm

Of thy dear love will be a coat of mail
 To fence me round about ; and Narfi's sword,
 Though dug from out the ancient sea-king's
 grave,
 And charmed by blood-rites at the midnight
 hour,
 In Druid-ring, told by the lips inspired
 Of the all-sacred priests, will harmless fall
 On my broad shield, thy love."

"I do trust you,
 And yet, with woman's weakness, still I fear,"
 Steingerda said ; "though born and bred 'mid
 wars,

I love not war nor battle ; still I feel
 Proud, my brave soldier, of your strength and
 skill,

And I would have you win an added fame
 By your brave deeds to-day. Adieu," she said,
 "The sun's bright edge is gleaming o'er the sea :
 'T was a strange chance by which we met this
 morn ;

But many feet will soon be climbing here,
 And curious eyes may mark us."

"Dearest maid !"

Said Kormak, "I will win the right to-day
 To claim your hand, or Battle Isle shall be
 Wedded to me by death ; this filken scarf
 You gave me once shall be my talisman,

Your sign of favor, twined around my breast,
 While all is yours within." And she was gone —
 The waves came dashing through the narrow way,
 And then swept out again: he marked them not;
 A moment stood, gazing where she had been,
 Then turned to seek the uneven pathway down;
 His mind still dreamily away from him,
 And still her image rose amid the crags, —
 A rugged framing for so fair a face.

The sun had risen, but his rays were hid
 From the encampment by the rocky wall
 That shut the ocean airs out from the vale,
 And cast huge shadows darkly o'er the pines,
 And on the verdant slope. Against the sky,
 So brightly gleaming with the crimson light
 And golden radiance of the morning sun,
 The wild and craggy battlemented rocks
 Stood black and frowning, till the rising sun
 At length looked o'er their tops, and brightly
 flung
 Long golden lines upon the highest pines;
 Danced o'er the groves of birch, just touched
 with light
 The highest hillocks, calling into life
 From every dew-drop richly tinted gems,
 That far outshone the crystals that they mocked
 In their mad blaze of sunlight. Now awoke

To active life the island visitors ;
From the white tents poured forth the busy
forms ;
From tent to tent run breathless messengers ;
Around the standard of their chief were met
The men of note, and Olaf, in their midst,
Received their counsels, as each plan was weighed
And all the laws discussed by which they used
In those old times to settle every case
Wherein a doubt of right and justice lay.

The flag of Olaf was an azure field,
Bearing on its centre an ice island
Floating upon the sea ; beneath this flag
The chieftain stood, amid a brilliant throng,
His Thingmen, powerful chiefs, who only payed
A slight allegiance to their island lord,
Acknowledging his power, but suffered each
To be the supreme ruler over all
Who dwelt upon his lands ; though once a year
Olaf convened a council of them all,
In which they framed some necessary laws,
And made decision, when the law of arms
Was not appealed to, of each several cause
Of difference that arose, by any chance,
Within the province. Higher up the mound
O'er which the banner flew had assembled
Many groups of ladies, for now drew near

The appointed hour of battle ; and below,
 An arrow's flight beyond the chieftain's flag,
 Gathered retainers, soldiers, serfs, and all
 Whose lower rank would not entitle them
 To gain a place above ; and here a rope,
 Fastened to stakes around a half-circle,
 Kept the space clear within, — an ample field,
 In which the combatants were now to meet,
 To measure strength and skill, and life 'gainst life.

The trumpets sounded forth their martial
 notes ;

The people shouted ; every eye was turned
 Toward the centre. From the throng of chiefs
 That stood round Olaf, Kormak now advanced,
 And, kneeling, swore to abide the judgment,
 As battle should decide ; then took his place
 Upon the field, and by his side, Thorgils,
 His shield-bearer. And Thorkell then stood
 forth,

Raised up his aged hands, and took the oath :
 Named Narfi as his champion, who at once,
 In front of Kormak, took the place assigned
 To him ; and Thorkell's son, young Loptur,
 came

To be his shield-bearer. As they stood there,
 And while the Holmgang laws were read aloud,
 All eyes were bent on them ; and all was hushed

Into deep silence, as the herald read.
Each combatant was clad in mail, and held
Upright before him his two-handed sword:
He had no other arms; helmets of steel,
But visorless, — on Kormak's a white plume,
While Narfi's plume was red; iron gantlets
They wore, and over his close mail was drawn,
On Kormak's breast, a filken scarf of green.
When Narfi first beheld this scarf, his eyes
Kindled with rage; for he recognized it
As one his mistress had been used to wear;
And half he muttered, "That fair filk shall bear
A deeper stain, if envy, jealousy,
And a deep hatred lend me any strength."
The shield-bearers held, each on his right arm
An oval shield, covered with knobs of brass;
They wore no mail, nor carried any arm,
Were lightly dressed; Thorgils had bound his
brow
With a gold band, wearing nor cap nor plume,
But Loptur's cap was gayly plumed with red.

Again the trumpet notes rung out, — a sign
The combat was begun: lightly they swung
The heavy swords above their heads, and moved
Toward each other; eye fixed upon eye,
And every nerve braced up. Kormak struck first,
And Loptur caught the blow upon his shield,

But reeled and fell beneath the heavy stroke ;
And Narfi's sword cut Thorgils' shield in two
With its keen edge ; then came quick ringing
blows

As their swords met ; but the trumpets sounded,
And called them back. Thorgils' shield replaced,
again

They came together ; feints and stratagems,
And heavy blows, and quickly changing place,
Followed each other ; their long swords would
gleam

Swift through the air ; and when you thought the
blow

Almost upon the crest, a shield would flash
Between. Advancing, Kormak stumbled, fell,
And Narfi's sword came straight above his head,
But Thorgils' shield caught the descending blow ;
Again his shield was cleft ; and from the helm
Of Kormak, rising, glanced aside the sword ;
Again they closed, and sword was dashed on
sword, —

One blow cut Narfi's scarlet plume away,
The next glanced downward from his polished
helm,

And broke the mail on his left arm, staining
With blood the armor and the sword. Again
The trumpets warned them back ; Narfi bound up
His wounded arm with Loptur's scarf, and when

The trumpets sounded, rushed upon Kormak
More madly than before, fearing his strength
Would soon be sapped by the fast flowing blood
That moistened all his arm; and Thorgils' shield
Was for the third time cleft; Narfi pressed on,
Struck Kormak on the crest, but his sword broke
With the strong blow, and Kormak, reeling
back,

At the same moment struck at Narfi's helm,
And dashed him to the earth — they raised him
up,

But he was stunned, and lay a helpless weight
In Loptur's arms. A moment, all was still;
Then Kormak, as, bewildered still, he leaned
On his two-handed sword, his father's gift,
Heard a long shout, and then the herald's voice
Proclaiming something, — what, he knew not
then,

For that last blow, resounding on his helm,
Drowned every sound beside; and now he stood
Beneath the standard. Olaf grasped his hand,
And he awaked from his bewilderment
To hear the greeting of his friends around,
To catch one glance of fair Steingerda's eye,
As from the throng she passed; yet that one
glance

Was dearer to him than the thousand words
Of others' praises, — than his triumph even.

Kormak.

CANTO V.

THE SORCERESS.

CANTO V.

THE SORCERESS.

KORMAK and Thorgils, with a gallant
band

Of friends, arrived at Tunga, to demand
The forfeit lost and won at Battle Isle, —
The hand of fair Steingerda. And Thorkell —
Though rage and passion warred within his
breast, —

Though a hot fire blazed fiercely in his heart,
And in each vein the scanty blood of age
Thickened and tingled with a youthful force,
Born of his angry passion — received them
Most graciously; and taking Kormak's hand,
Thus answered him: —

“Your father did me wrong,
And I have sworn revenge; but that fierce
oath

The gods who sway this lower realm of man,

And break and mar each plan that he may make,
 To fuit their higher purpose, have cancelled.
 To their power I fain must yield: 't were
 madness

For me, a man, to combat with the gods.
 I swore by Odin's sacred ruling arm,
 That his arbitrament, by battle shown,
 Should govern me. He has ruled against me:
 My daughter's hand is yours, — one condition
 Alone I ask of you. At Spakonfell
 Lives one who has a power mysterious
 And wonderful over all the fortunes
 Of our house, — the famous witch Thorveiga.
 Perhaps it is the whim of an old man,
 To whose weak age a second childhood comes, —
 I would ask her favorable assent
 Unto this marriage; thus would be removed
 A shapeless dread that lives within my heart
 Of some impending ill about to fall
 Upon the union of your father's son
 With those who were your father's bitter foes.
 To-night I feast you as my future son, —
 You and your friends; the hospitality
 Of my poor house is yours; to-morrow morn
 Seek you alone the witch's mountain hut,
 And gain her favor; bring an oracle
 Propitious from the gods, breathed through her
 lips,

And the third day I hail you as my son ;
The marriage rites shall then be duly said,
And she you seek shall be your wedded wife.
Grant this, — my superstition or my whim,
As you may judge it ; — it is all I ask.”

Once more in Tunga's ancient banquet-hall
Was revelry and feasting ; and old foes
Pledged cup to cup as flowed the ruddy wine,
And hand met hand that never met before
Save in the grasp of battle ; tales of old
Were told to ears that never heard those lips
Speak aught but challenge or a battle-cry ;
The clash of cups outrung the clash of swords,
As each swore friendship to his ancient foe.
And Kormak, to his harp, sung in those halls,
That heard him once before, — not new dis-
guised
By aged garb, but with his youthful limbs
In filken garments clad, and his dark hair
Thrown careless backward from his handsome
face,
Steingerda's scarf still twined about his breast ;
And all were silent when his song begun.

“ Came Thorbiorn and all his band
To Mahfahlida's outer wall,
And loudly beat, with sword in hand ;
But no one answered to his call.

“‘Thou thief, Thorarin!’ then he cried,
‘Where are the steeds you stole from me?
Give up your spoil, or worse betide:
My vengeance now shall fall on thee!’

“And Black Thorarin stood within,
And laughed to hear the chieftain fret;
He said, ‘You cursed me once before,
But, braggart! I am living yet.’

“Then spoke Geirrida to her son, —
She, the enchantress, famed for skill
In magic art, — ‘Well hast thou won
The name you merit, Sluggard still!

“‘O flow Thorarin! ’tis not mine,
The sluggish current of your life;
Nor did thy fire bequeath it thee:
He bore no taunt, he shunned no strife.’

“Thorarin heard her taunt, and cried,
‘No more, my mother, peace! I go
To drive the boaster from our gate:
Think you I fear to meet my foe?’

“Then backward swung the heavy gate,
And Black Thorarin stood beside
His angry foe, and lightly said,
‘I come to meet the “worse betide;”’

- “And by his side his servants all,
With sword and buckler, faced the foe ;
To tumult wild the strife arose :
Sword clashed on sword, blow followed blow.
- “But Ada, Black Thorarin’s wife,
Looked from a casement in the wall
Down on the court, and ’mid the strife,
She saw her husband, struggling, fall.
- “She stayed no more, but rushed below,
Out ’mid the noisy, wild warfare,
And cast herself before the sword
Of Thorbiorn, who slew her there.
- “But Black Thorarin was not slain ;
He fell, yet gained again his feet,
To see his bride rush wildly forth,
On Thorbiorn’s sword, her death to meet.
- “The world spun round him as he gazed ;
A fearful cry burst from his lip ;
On Thorbiorn he madly rushed,
And cut him down from helm to hip ;
- “Then knelt beside his slaughtered wife,
And took her head upon his breast ;
‘O, speak to me again !’ he said,
‘My darling bride ! my dearest ! best !

“ ‘Thy lips are warm, though pale each cheek,
Thy pure, dear heart’s-blood stains thy side ;
Speak but one word, ere it be gone !
Speak but one word ! my wife ! my bride !

“ ‘Alas ! alas ! she will not speak ;
Mother, bring here your magic art :
Summon each spell, and stay the blood
That ebbs so swiftly from her heart.

“ ‘Your spells are vain ! in vain your power !
You cannot rule the storm you woke !’
His head sunk down upon his breast ;
With a deep sigh, his sad heart broke.

“ ‘He never spoke, nor raised his head ;
For Thorbiorn’s sword, when Ada fell,
And stained its blade with her pure blood,
Had slain with her’s his life as well.

“ ‘And Geirrida, who saw him die,
Curfed the dread god that gave her power :
‘An idle gift you gave to me,
That serves not in the needful hour !

“ ‘Thus they who trust thee are betrayed :
A bauble buys a soul so fair ;
The bauble pleases for an hour ;
The hour is past, — then comes despair !’

“That god — dread Loki — heard her curfe,
And crushed her in his angry might ;
One frenzied shriek rung wildly forth,
As plunged her soul in endless night.”

The song was ended, and a wild applause
Greeted the youthful bard ; for every heart,
Fraught with the superstition of the age,
Felt the strange thrill that superstition lends
To tales of wild adventure ; every heart,
Though seldom tutored to a gentle thought,
Turned from the din of battle to lament
With Black Thorarin for his slaughtered wife.
And thus the feast went on ; and midnight came
And passed, and left them at their revels still.

At midnight, to the chamber of their chief
Oddur and Gudmund came ; and Narfi led
Them there, where, while the feast and song
went on
And revelry below, a plan was made.
Oddur and Gudmund took their chief's
commands,
And, silently as they had come, retired.
Narfi dismissed them from the western gate,
Watching them till the dusk of Night had closed
Around her children ; then he passed within,
And muttered, “ Now at last it will be done :

The brothers will not fail; the brutes would
strike

At sleeping Odin, if their swords were paid
To shed his blood. Yes: the sudden onslaught
And their great strength must give them victory,
If they obey directions. To make sure,
Before 't is daylight I will go myself
To see the work performed; I have designed
To ask Thorveiga what the future has
In store for me. I have, in truth, no faith
That she can tell me more than I could tell
Of what must come with time; but I would see
Her whom the people fear; would try my heart.
I never feared a mortal being yet,
So, dread Thorveiga, drop your Gorgon shield,
For superstition has no power o'er me."

Up, amid rocks and crags, at Spakonfell
Thorveiga dwelt, a forcerefs renowned
Through all the island; a rude stone-built hut,
Raifed 'gainst a caverned cleft in the huge rock
That frowned precipitous above, was her home.
Here, with her sons, she lived, apart from all,
In this wild, desolate, and lone ravine.
Her name was spoken with a trembling dread,
And none had seen her save the daring few
Who fought her hut to learn from her what fates
Lay darkly in the future, or to seek

A talisman wrought by her magic spells
And mystic power, — invulnerable mail,
A shield no sword could cleave, a thrice-charmed
 sword,

Obtained by midnight spell from some old ghost,
Conjured to earth again by her dread power, —
A sword now gifted with strange strength to kill.
None ventured near the rocks where she abode,
And seldom was her dreaded name pronounced,
For all remembered Ulfar, and his death.

He was a hunter, who, delayed by night,
Waited until the moon arose, for light
To find his way down the rough mountain-side.

On the high rock that overhung the hut
Where dwelt Thorveiga and her brutish sons
He paused a moment in his steep descent ;
And there he saw strange sights. A hundred
 ghosts

Were dancing round a spectral wizard fire ;
The dread forcerefs, Oddur, and Gudmund
Were mingling gayly with their midnight guests,
And dancing wildly to a dismal tune,
Beat on phantom drums by skeleton arms ;
And all the rocky dell was filled with forms
Strange and uncouth. And Ulfar, trembling, saw
The moonbeams shining through transparent
 shapes

From which no shadows fell ; he saw, and swooned

On the cold rock, nor waked until the sun
With morning beams shone on his frozen limbs,
And warmed them into life. Then with slow steps
He left the spot, but cast one frightened glance
Into the dell below. All now was still
And lifeless, and no sign remained of those
That he had seen dancing beneath the moon.
He told his friends, with trembling tongue, the
tale ;
But from that hour his strength ebbed slow away,
And ere the season passed away he died ;
And it was whispered that he went to join
The ghosts that danced before Thorveiga's hut.

Within her hut the Sorceress now sat,
And twirled her flying wheel, from which the yarn
Spun rapidly. No light of day was there :
The hut was windowless, and from the cleft
And ragged cavern in the rock beyond
All light was close shut out, save what was shed
O'er all around from a huge silver lamp,
Hung from the ceiling by a chain of bronze.
Upon the walls were strangely mingled shield
And sword, with the stuffed skins of snake and
toad,
Lizard and tortoise ; whitened bones, that seemed
As if of human kind. But she who sat,
Her muttering mingling with the noisy wheel,

The living inmate of this strange abode,
Herself was stranger than all else around :
A stately woman, with a pale, wild face,
O'er which fell straggling locks of raven hair,
Laced here and there with threads of silver hue.
A gown of black was robed around her form,
From which contrasted, deathly pale, her face
And her half-naked breast. She raised her head,
Threw back her hair with thin and trembling
hands,

And stopped her rapid wheel, that she might hear
With more distinctness the faint sounds without
That came to her quick ear; for now the sound
Of footsteps came along the rocky path
Up to the doorway. "It is a stranger,"
Thorveiga muttered, as she raised the latch
In answer to his knocking. The daylight
Came flooding inward through the opening door,
Struggling a moment in the darkened hut
With the pale lamplight; and with the daylight
Narfi stepped o'er the threshold. The door closed,
And, ere the youth could bear the change of light
Upon his eyes, Thorveiga once more sat
Beside her wheel, and plied the busy thread
Then Narfi doffed his cap to her, and said :
"I come, good mother, by your aid, to look
Beyond the present to the time to come.
Love and ambition, tell me of their fate,

And how to guide my steps in the dark way
Through which I pass ! ”

When Narfi first appeared,
The Sorcerers had cast a quick, keen glance
On him, ere she resumed her feat. That glance
Narfi had lost. When now she heard him speak,
Her hands fell idly by her side, her breath
Came gaspingly ; but still the wheel sped on,
Nor did she raise her eyes. The youth drew forth
A purse of gold, and dropped it at her feet.
Thorveiga raised her eyes : “ Your name,” she
said,

“ Is Narfi ; your father’s name you know not ;
Why ask you not that, by my magic art,
I should reveal your birth and parentage ? ”

The ruby color fled from Narfi’s lip :
“ If you have power,” he said, “ I bid you speak ! ”

“ If I have power ! ” the Sorcerers replied ;
“ Listen and judge : you seek from me to know
The end of your ambition and your love ?
You love Steingerda, daughter to Thorkell,
And your ambition is to gain the place
That Thorkell’s death will vacate. Yours by
right

That place should be, for *you are Thorkell’s son!*
Well may you start ; but listen to me still.

“ Many years ago, near Tajaldnes dwelt
Leidolf Kappa. His dwelling was a tower,
Rough-built of stone, that stood by the sea-shore.
The coast was wild and rocky ; but, beneath
The massive rocks on which the tower was built,
A narrow beach came up against the wall,
And every tide swept smooth the snow-white sand
As it rolled out to sea. One stormy night,
When the wild waves came plunging up the sands
To dash upon the rocks, Thorunna sat,
And, from a window in the lofty tower
Gazed o’er the troubled sea ; she watched each
wave,

As, capped with foam, it dashed resistless on,
And broke to atoms in a tumult wild
Of mingled foam and spray ; when on the sea,
Red, ’mid the lines of white, she saw a light
Come moving in from the wild waste without,
As though some barque was steered toward the
light

That glimmered from their walls. Swift it
came on,
And scarce the maid could warn her sire and
friends

To hasten to the spot, when the barque, borne
On the high top of a huge surging wave,
Dashed on the sounding rock. One man alone
Of all her crew was saved from death that night.

That man was your fire, Thorkell ; wounded,
stunned,

And helpless, he was thrown within the reach
Of Leidolf and his friends, who rescued him
From the fierce wave, that would have drawn
him back

Into the angry sea. They took him up,
Conveyed him to the tower, brought back the life
To his dead limbs, to his cold heart again.

And many anxious hours beside his couch
Thorunna sat, and watched him as he slept,
Or as he struggled feebly for his life
In fever's burning grasp. But youth at last
Gained triumph o'er disease ; his strength came
back,

And still his gentle nurse sat by his side,
And cheered his weary hours. He did her wrong :
Won her young heart, deceived her, and then fled.
You are his son and hers. Her father died.

Uni, a wild sea-rover, one dark night
Landed his crew upon the sands, and took
From weak Thorunna her lone tower. Thy youth
Was passed upon the deck of his light barque.
When you grew older you rebelled 'gainst him,
Seduced his sailors from allegiance to him,
Slew him at night amid his helpless sleep,
And brought your service here unto Thorkell,
Although you knew not that he was your fire."

While Thorveiga told this strange history,
 Narfi had stood with pallid cheeks, his hands
 Clenched in his strong emotion. "Is this true?"
 He cried; "or have you conjured up the tale
 But to deceive me? True, I slew Uni.
 He struck me on my cheek, called me bastard;
 I waited till the night, and then he died.
 Thorkell my fire! Ambition! now I see
 The road by which to mount.

Thorveiga said:

"Have you no thought of her who gave you
 birth?
 Whether alive or dead?"

"Speak on!" he said,
 "And tell me all. Mother! the very word
 Sounds strangely to my ear; yet in my mind,
 Dim, like a dream, comes back a gentle face
 That smiled upon me once."

"That face was mine!"

The Sorceress exclaimed. "Yes, I am she,
 Thorunna, who once dwelt in that lone tower
 Upon the sea-shore; she whom Thorkell wronged,
 Who nursed thy youth till madness drove her
 forth;

She who by madness gained the mystic gift
 Of prophecy. I have watched over you,
 Known of each chance that time has ever brought,
 But found, alas! that I was powerless

To aid you,—some stronger force controlled you.
 Nor can I read *your* future. All is hid
 From me beyond the present of your fate.”
 She held her thin, white hands outstretched to
 him,
 And Narfi trembled when those hands touched
 his.

“Mother,” he said, “thy gift of prophecy
 Descends to me. Thorkell has lived too long ;
 ’T is time we were avenged —”

 “’T is not by thee,
 My son, shall Thorkell die. I know his fate ;
 The stars have told me how his end shall be.
 The time approaches, but ’t is not *thy* hand
 Must cut his thread of life.” But while she spoke
 The sound of struggling feet, the clash of swords,
 Was heard without the hut. Narfi started,
 And raised the latch. Thorveiga called aloud :
 “Stay, stay, my son ; the future comes to me,
 And dangers cluster now around your head !”
 But he stayed not, — sprung through the open-
 ing door,
 And left her. For a moment she stood still,
 With eyes bent down, as though upon the earth
 She read, in her own mystic characters,
 What time now wrote in the material type
 Of act and deed without. Then to the door,

With a wild and pitiful cry, she sprung,
And staggered o'er the threshold, — the first time
In twenty years the sunlight fell on her.

Kormak and Thorgils with the dawn set forth
To pay the promised visit to the hut
Of the witch Thorveiga. The hills were passed ;
They clambered up the deep ravine, and now
Drew near her desolate and lone abode,
When Thorgils, who went first, felt a sharp wound
Piercing his side, and heard the bowstring's
 twang, —

Saw two huge figures leap adown the rock
Before him : drew his sword, and slew Oddur
With his first blow. But now the heavens
 whirled round,

And in a dream he fell. With a wild cry
Kormak rushed on, as the giant Gudmund
Raised his right arm to slay the prostrate youth,
And dashed his sword aside. Now, o'er the form
Of Thorgils their swords met and rung again
In desperate battle. As Gudmund fell
Never to rise, down from Thorveiga's hut,
With desperate purpose gleaming in his eyes,
His face still pale, rushed Narfi, with sword
 drawn,

And took the giant's place. " Now you or I,"
He said, " fight our last fight !"

“ Not all the lives
Of all the house of Thorkell will repay
My brother’s death ! ” Kormak replied to him.
“ You shall go first ; the rest shall follow you,
If that dear life be slain. You shall go first !
I feel the strength of all my warrior fires
Come to me now. Back, back to death you go ! ”
And Narfi’s blood was flowing fast ; forced back,
He fell upon his knee, beheld the sword
Of Kormak blazing in the air above,
Then saw no more of earth. Forth from her hut,
Her hair dishevelled and her eyes on fire,
Thorveiga came, and raised her fallen son,
Tore off her robes to stanch his flowing blood,
But came too late to save ; his head fell back
Upon her arm, and Narfi’s soul had fled.
The Sorceress arose, stretched her thin hand
Toward the sky, and called upon the gods
To smite his slayer. “ Wherefore strike ye not ?
Odin, great Thor, Thorveiga calls on ye !
They heed me not. Then let him live ! ” she cried ;
“ My curse shall follow him : his life be short,
But filled with pains and anguish ; disappoint
His dearest hopes ; crush every joy of life,
And make his path as desolate and drear
As mine hath been ; let his death be cruel,
Bloody, terrible. By every spell
Of magic art I call destruction down

On his doomed head ! And in his latest hour
May I be there to curse his passing soul,
As from the earth it flies ! ”

But Kormak kneeled
Beside his brother, drew the arrow forth,
And stanch'd his blood ; called back the life again
To his white lips and to his half-closed eyes,
Nor heard, nor heeded then, her fearful curse.

Kormak.

CANTO VI.

THE MARRIAGE.

CANTO VI.

THE MARRIAGE.

WHILE by his brother's sick-couch Kor-
mak sat,
And tended him gently as a sister,
Forgetting other love, and e'en revenge,
Remembering only that deep, strong love
That bound him to his brother; while his hand
Held to his fevered lips the cooling draught,
And smoothed his weary pillow, as he bent
O'er him while sleeping, held in his the hand
That burned with pain and fever, — at Tunga,
Thorkell was brooding over what had chanced,
And dwelling on the future; and alone
He sat, gloomy, within the deepening gloom
Of his own chamber, when Steingerda came
And knelt beside his knee, and took his hand,
In silence watched his close-contracted brow
And firm-set lips. At last she spoke to him: —

“ Father,” she said, “ give up your fiercer
thought,
I pray of you ; the anger that you nurse
Gnaws, like a vulture, deeply in your heart,
Writes suffering on your brow, helps the years
To bow your frame, works more than even time
On you. Forgive the wrong you bore of old ;
Forgive his son of old who injured you.
'T is noble to forgive, — a braver part
Than, by opposing gods and men, to bring
Destruction on us all. Father, I love
Him whom you seek to kill, — destroying him,
You strike my heart as well : his heart is mine,
As mine is his, — my life with his is joined.
I pray you soften down your ancient hate,
Pardon the past, remember not old wrongs ! ”

While thus she pleaded, Thorkell's firm-set face
Relaxed not line nor muscle, and his eye
Turned on her face its unrelenting glance.
“ Thou art no daughter of my blood,” he said,
“ If thou dost love my hated enemy,
The son of him who wronged both me and mine,
Thee, being mine, and all our kindred house,
And now himself hath slain my servants true,
And braved my anger with an idle boast,
And armed my prince in wrath against our house :
Is this the way to quench the old-time feud ?

A fitting marriage this would be indeed !
Blood lies between you, a red, warning stream,
And you would dip your garments in the stain,
Would hold the hand whose kindred shed my
blood,

Would swear to love where you should give
but hate !

Shame on you, daughter ! you are none of mine ;
Your mother must have wronged me. Say no
more !

When you can stay the waves that wash our shores,
And heap their masses up against the sky ;
When you can change the frost to summer's heat,
Melt the vast iceberg with beseeching eye ;
When you can call the sun down from above,
Blot out the moon, and dim the shining stars, —
Then may you hope to move me. Tears are vain ;
Their feeble drops hiss on my burning heart,
And feed its blazing fires. Away ! away,
Before I curse the child that loves my foes
Better than me or mine !” He shook her off,
And, trembling both with rage and passion, stood
A fearful image of unbridled rage.

Then with quick footsteps, nervous and infirm,
He paced the room.

And Steingerda replied :
“ Curse me not, father ; do not curse the child
Who loves thee now and ever. None the less

My love for thee, — who gave my life its life,
 To whom my heart now clings as firm as clings
 The ivy to the strong, sustaining oak,
 Nestling round its great trunk, — because, alas!
 Another love than thine must share with thine.
 I *gave* not love, but loved unwillingly,
 Knowing thou call’st him foe: could not but love,
 Despite myself and thee, and every thought
 That bade my heart beat coldly; and my heart
 Grew with my love, nor gave thee smaller place
 Because his place was there. Forgive, forget,
 And curse me not because my heart speaks out,
 Confiding all to thee.”

When the sunshine
 Falls on the high ice-plain, cold and frigid
 It casts the bright reflection off, — melts not,
 Yields not; as stony-hearted as that plain,
 As coldly unrelenting, Thorkell heard,
 But gave no word of answer, save to bid
 Her leave him; and sadly she obeyed him.

Alone again with thought, he nursed revenge,
 Repeating to himself: “I will not change,
 And basely give my hand where I have sworn
 To give the sword’s edge; not though Odin send,
 In his great thunder tones, divine commands,
 And light his messenger with all the glare
 Of the keen lightning! His power may crush me,

But it can never change : my foul at least
Is all my own, nor gods nor men shall bend
Its earnest purpose !”

’Mid his reverie
Came one to speak with him ; and there entered
A woman, dressed in black, with a masked face
And stately air. The thin, pale hand, half hid
Amid the folds of her dark robe, was that
Which held the head of Narsi when the life
Flowed from his breast with the dark crimson
stream

That Kormak’s sword had freed. Long they
sat there

In consultation, and when they parted
Thorkell said : “Thou wilt not fail ! Remember
His, the Venetian cup, and he must drink
Oblivion to the past.”

She answered :
“He shall drink oblivion, and the wrongs
That time has gathered, unavenged, shall then
Find retribution. Doubt it not ; bring thou
The nuptials speedily, — I will not fail.”

For the third time we visit Tunga’s halls
Amid festivity ; for on this night
The daughter of the house shall wed its foe,
And bridge by her alliance the deep gulf
That long has yawned between. When Steingerda

Heard Thorkell bid to deck herself in robes
 Meet for her wedding with the man she loved,
 While yet his bitter and passionate words
 Of enmity were ringing in her ears,
 She feared that rage had overpressed his brain,
 And made him mad.

“ My father, late you said
 I must not love him, for he was thy foe ;
 And now you bid me wed him ! you are changed ?

Thorkell replied : “ I looked behind the veil,
 And found thy marriage was a thing decreed.
 I may not war with fate, for destiny
 Laughs at man’s feeble efforts, and sweeps on
 Its full, strong tide, regardless of us all.
 To-night you wed ; to-night shall Kormak cease
 To bear my hate ; too long, by far too long,
 Has he been hated.”

While she heard his words,
 She looked in vain for kindness in his eye
 To match the gentler speech, and to her heart
 There came a sad distrust, a boding sense
 Of some calamity. More in sorrow
 Than in joy she clad herself in gay robes,
 And waited for her bridegroom ; and at eve
 He came, and Thorgils, with a cheek still pale,
 But with recovery beaming in his eye,
 And many friends were with him. As she saw

Her lover, felt the thrill when their hands met,
Read his love in every passionate glance
That passed between them, her sad foreboding
Vanished as night at sunrise, and dear thoughts,
Fair anticipations for the future,
Came to her heart, and banished every fear.

And Thorkell gave them welcome in few words;
His mind seemed absent, brooding on some
thought;
And oft he started, and looked wildly round,
Then sunk again in moodiness; but when,
Each in his place in the great banquet-hall,
The hour had come to pledge his ancient foe
And call him son, the old man roused himself,
And bade the wine be poured; each cup was
filled
With dancing, sparkling drops. "My son," he
said,
And raised his cup, "the wrongs are now atoned
That long have warred between thy house and
mine, —
I drink with thee — *Oblivion to the past.*"

And Kormak gazed on the fair face of her
Whom now he wedded, raised the crystal bowl,
And drank the sparkling wine; each cup was
drained.

While empty goblets clattered on the board,
 Rose the long shout of "Kormak and his bride!"
 "Live, Kormak and his bride!" Thorkell spoke
 not,

But gazed, like one entranced, on him who now
 Claimed kindred with his house.

As the cry ceased,

A dark-robed form, that stood within a niche
 Concealed by drooping foldings of a flag
 That swept from ceiling to the oaken floor, —
 The tattered banner of an old sea-king, —
 Came wildly through their midst, threw back
 her hood,

And bared her pallid face, o'er which there fell,
 In tangled masses and in elfin locks,
 Her long gray hair; and every breath was hushed,
 And every heart beat slower, as she poured
 A cup of wine, and raised it to her lips.

"Thorveiga drinks your pledge," she cried
 aloud;

"Thorkell, rememberest thou the wronged maid
 Of the lone tower upon the ocean cliff?
 Thorunna comes again to drink with thee
 Thy latest pledge, 'Oblivion to the past.'
 Kormak, I drink to thee; my son you slew,
 But here I pledge 'Oblivion to the past.'
 Why stand ye awed? I drink to all of ye.

What! feel ye yet the poison in your veins?
Works the drugged wine on ye so soon, so soon?"

And every face grew pale, the blood froze chill
In each cold heart, as, with her arms upraised
And burning eyes, the Sorceress spoke on:
"Thorkell, you bade me poison but one cup:
Lo, I have poisoned all! Ye all have drunk,
And I with you, the fatal pledge of death!
Now pales the blood in warrior cheeks, and now
Chills round your boastful hearts the ice of death!
Your keen-edged swords, your shining suits of
mail,

Avail not now, — the foe has passed within.
No power can save ye; with a gallant train
Thorveiga marches to the world beyond,
And wronged Thorunna takes at last revenge."

Thorkell had started when Thorunna's name
First passed her lips; for with that name there
rushed

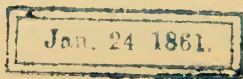
A flood of recollection back to him,
And in her fearful, pallid face he traced
The wreck of beauty that was hers of old;
Her fair young face came back before his eye,
The while its ghostly, dread reality
Mocked at his recollection, with the change
That years and wrongs had written on her brow;

And the old wrong rose up before his mind,
And, while the poison thickened in his veins
And froze his heart, his conscience froze his soul.

The deadly poison mingled with the wine
Preyed instant on each life. Scarce time had they
To bid a last farewell to friends around,
Ere the fell sickness crushed the germ of life,
And Death transfixed them with his fatal spear.
One kiss, one last embrace, and, hand in hand,
The wedded lovers fought their bridal bed
In the cold halls of death; and Thorgils kneeled,
Kissing his brother's lips, and kissing died;
And many fled from out the fatal hall,
But in their flight they died. Not one of those
Who drank that pledge, but drank the draught
of death.

And years rolled on: in Tunga's ancient hall
There dwelt no inmate; for the walls were cursed,
And gliding ghosts were seen at midnight hour;
And, as the wind a moment hushed its sweep
Round those dread walls, within the goblins
shrieked,
And drank again — "Oblivion to the past!"

THE END.





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