

From the Loom of the Dead

By Elia W. Peattie

When Urda Bjarnason tells a tale all the men stop their talking to listen, for they know her to be wise with the wisdom of the old people, and that she has more learning than can be got even from the great schools at Reykjavik. She is especially prized by them here in this new country where the Icelandmen are settled -- this America, so new in letters, where the people speak foolishly and write unthinking books. So the men who know that it is given to the mothers of earth to be very wise, stop their six part singing, or their jangles about the free-thinkers, and give attentive ear when Urda Bjarnason lights her pipe and begins her tale.

She is very old. Her daughters and sons are all dead, but her granddaughter, who is most respectable, and the cousin of a physician, says that Urda is twenty-four and a hundred, and there are others who say that she is older still. She watches all that the Iceland people do in the new land; she knows about the building of the five villages on the North Dakota plain, and of the founding of the churches and the schools, and the tilling of the wheat farms. She notes with suspicion the actions of the women who bring home webs of cloth from the store, instead of spinning them as their mothers did before them; and she shakes her head at the wives who run to the village grocery store every fortnight, imitating the wasteful American women, who throw butter in the fire faster than it can be turned from the churn.

She watches yet other things. All winter long the white snows reach across the gently rolling plains as far as the eye can behold. In the morning she sees them tinted pink at the east; at noon she notes golden lights flashing across them; when the sky is gray -- which is not often -- she notes that they grow as ashen as a face with the death shadow on it. Sometimes they glitter with silver-like tips of ocean waves. But at these things she looks only casually. It is when the blue shadows dance on the snow that she leaves her corner behind the iron stove, and stands before the window, resting her two hands on the stout bar of her cane, and gazing out across the waste with eyes which age has restored after four decades of decrepitude.

The young Icelandmen say:

“Mother, it is the clouds hurrying across the sky that make the dance of the shadows.”

“There are no clouds,” she replies, and points to the jewel-like blue of the arching sky.

“It is the drifting air,” explains Fridrik Halldersson, he who has been in the Northern seas. “As the wind buffets the air, it looks blue against the white of the snow. ‘Tis the air that makes the dancing shadows.”

But Urda shakes her head, and points with her dried finger, and those who stand beside her see figures moving, and airy shapes, and contortions of strange things, such as are seen in a beryl stone.

“But Urda Bjarnason,” says Ingeborg Christianson, the pert young wife with the blue-eyed twins, “why is it we see these things only when we stand beside you and you help us to the sight?”

“Because,” says the mother, with a steel blue flash of her old eyes, “having eyes ye will not see!” Then the men laugh. They like to hear Ingeborg worsted. For did she not jilt two men from Gardar, and one from Mountain, and another from Winnipeg?

Not even Ingeborg can deny that Mother Urda tells true things.

“To-day,” says Urda, standing by the little window and watching the dance of the shadows, “a child breathed thrice on a farm at the West, and then it died.”

The next week at the church gathering, when all the sledges stopped at the house of Urda's granddaughter, they said it was so -- that John Christianson's wife Margaret never heard the voice of her son, but that he breathed thrice in his nurse's arms and died.

"Three sledges run over the snow toward Milton," says Urda; "all are laden with wheat, and in one is a stranger. He has with him a strange engine, but its purpose I do not know."

Six hours later the drivers of three empty sledges stop at the house.

"We have been to Milton with wheat," they say, "and Christian Johnson here, carried a photographer from St. Paul."

Now it stands to reason that the farmers like to amuse themselves through the silent and white winters. And they prefer above all things to talk or to listen, as has been the fashion of their race for a thousand years. Among all the story-tellers there is none like Urda, for she is the daughter and the granddaughter and the great-granddaughter of storytellers. It is given to her to talk, as it is given to John Thorlaksson to sing -- he who sings so as his sledge flies over the snow at night, that the people come out in the bitter air from their doors to listen, and the dogs put up their noses and howl, not liking music.

In the little cabin of Peter Christianson, the husband of Urda's granddaughter, it sometimes happens that twenty men will gather about the stove. They hang their bear-skin coats on the wall, put their fur gauntlets underneath the stove, where they will keep warm, and then stretch their stout, felt-covered legs to the wood fire. The room is fetid; the coffee steams eternally on the stove; and from her chair in the warmest corner Urda speaks out to the listening men, who shake their heads with joy as they hear the pure old Icelandic flow in sweet rhythm from between her lips. Among the many, many tales she tells is that of the dead weaver, and she tells it in the simplest language in all the world -- language so simple that even great scholars could find no simpler, and the children crawling on the floor can understand.

"Jon and Loa lived with their father and mother far to the north of the Island of Fire, and when the children looked from their windows they saw only wild scaurs and jagged lava rocks, and a distant, deep gleam of the sea. They caught the shine of the sea through an eye-shaped opening in the rocks, and all the long night of winter it gleamed up at them, like the eye of a dead witch. But when it sparkled and began to laugh, the children danced about the hut and sang, for they knew the bright summer time was at hand. Then their father fished, and their mother was gay. But it is true that even in the winter and the darkness they were happy, for they made fishing nets and baskets and cloth together, -- Jon and Loa and their father and mother, -- and the children were taught to read in the books, and were told the sagas, and given instruction in the part singing.

"They did not know there was such a thing as sorrow in the world, for no one had ever mentioned it to them. But one day their mother died. Then they had to learn how to keep the fire on the hearth, and to smoke the fish, and make the black coffee. And also they had to learn how to live when there is sorrow at the heart.

"They wept together at night for lack of their mother's kisses, and in the morning they were loath to rise because they could not see her face. The dead cold eye of the sea watching them from among the lava rocks made them afraid, so they hung a shawl over the window to keep it out. And the house, try as they would, did not look clean and cheerful as it had used to do when their mother sang and worked about it.

"One day, when a mist rested over the eye of the sea, like that which one beholds on the eyes of the blind, a greater sorrow came to them, for a stepmother crossed the threshold. She looked at Jon and Loa, and made complaint to their father that they were still very small and not likely to

be of much use. After that they had to rise earlier than ever, and to work as only those who have their growth should work, till their hearts cracked for weariness and shame. They had not much to eat, for their stepmother said she would trust to the gratitude of no other woman's child, and that she believed in laying up against old age. So she put the few coins that came to the house in a strong box, and bought little food. Neither did she buy the children clothes, though those which their dear mother had made for them were so worn that the warp stood apart from the woof, and there were holes at the elbows and little warmth to be found in them anywhere.

"Moreover, the quilts on their beds were too short for their growing length, so that at night either their purple feet or their thin shoulders were uncovered, and they wept for the cold, and in the morning, when they crept into the larger room to build the fire, they were so stiff they could not stand straight, and there was pain at their joints.

"The wife scolded all the time, and her brow was like a storm sweeping down from the Northwest. There was no peace to be had in the house. The children might not repeat to each other the sagas their mother had taught them, nor try their part singing, nor make little doll cradles of rushes. Always they had to work, always they were scolded, always their clothes grew thinner.

"'Stepmother,' cried Loa one day, -- she whom her mother had called the little bird, -- 'we are a-cold because of our rags. Our mother would have woven blue cloth for us and made it into garments.'

"'Your mother is where she will weave no cloth!' said the stepmother, and she laughed many times.

"All in the cold and still of that night, the stepmother wakened, and she knew not why. She sat up in her bed, and knew not why. She knew not why, and she looked into the room, and there, by the light of a burning fish's tail -- 'twas such a light the folk used in those days -- was a woman, weaving. She had no loom, and shuttle she had none. All with her hands she wove a wondrous cloth. Stooping and bending, rising and swaying with motions beautiful as those the Northern Lights make in a midwinter sky, she wove a cloth. The warp was blue and mystical to see, the woof was white, and shone with its whiteness, so that of all the webs the stepmother had ever seen, she had seen none like to this.

"Yet the sight delighted her not, for beyond the drifting web, and beyond the weaver she saw the room and furniture -- aye, saw them through the body of the weaver and the drifting of the cloth. Then she knew -- as the haunted are made to know -- that 'twas the mother of the children come to show her she could still weave cloth. The heart of the stepmother was cold as ice, yet she could not move to waken her husband at her side, for her hands were as fixed as if they were crossed on her dead breast. The voice in her was silent, and her tongue stood to the roof of her mouth.

"After a time the wraith of the dead mother moved toward her -- the wraith of the weaver moved her way -- and round and about her body was wound the shining cloth. Wherever it touched the body of the stepmother, it was as hateful to her as the touch of a monster out of sea-slime, so that her flesh crept away from it, and her senses swooned.

"In the early morning she awoke to the voices of the children, whispering in the inner room as they dressed with half-frozen fingers. Still about her was the hateful, beautiful web, filling her soul with loathing and with fear. She thought she saw the task set for her, and when the children crept in to light the fire -- very purple and thin were their little bodies, and the rags hung from them -- she arose and held out the shining cloth, and cried:

“‘Here is the web your mother wove for you. I will make it into garments!’ But even as she spoke the cloth faded and fell into nothingness, and the children cried:

“‘Stepmother, you have the fever!’

“And then:

“‘Stepmother, what makes the strange light in the room?’

“That day the stepmother was too weak to rise from her bed, and the children thought she must be going to die, for she did not scold as they cleared the house and braided their baskets, and she did not frown at them, but looked at them with wistful eyes.

“By fall of night she was as weary as if she had wept all the day, and so she slept. But again she was awakened and knew not why. And again she sat up in her bed and knew not why. And again, not knowing why, she looked and saw a woman weaving cloth. All that had happened the night before happened this night. Then, when the morning came, and the children crept in shivering from their beds, she arose and dressed herself, and from her strong box she took coins, and bade her husband go with her to the town.

“So that night a web of cloth, woven by one of the best weavers in all Iceland, was in the house; and on the beds of the children were blankets of lamb’s wool, soft to the touch and fair to the eye. After that the children slept warm and were at peace; for now, when they told the sagas their mother had taught them, or tried their part songs as they sat together on their bench, the stepmother was silent. For she feared to chide, lest she should wake at night, not knowing why, and see the mother’s wraith.”