

The Homestead Westward in the Blue Mountains

By Jonas Lie



Homestead Westward in the Blue Mountains

There was once a farmer's son who was off to Moen for the annual manoeuvres. He was to be the drummer, and his way lay right across the mountains. There he could practise his drumming at his ease, and beat his tattoos again and again without making folks laugh, or having a parcel of small boys dangling about him like so many midges.

Every time he passed a mountain homestead he beat his rat-tat-tat to bring the girls out, and they stood and hung about and gaped after him at all the farmhouses.

It was in the midst of the hottest summer weather. He had been practising his drumming from early in the morning, till he had grown quite sick and tired of it. And now he was toiling up a steep cliff, and had slung his drum over his shoulder, and stuck his drumsticks in his bandoleer.

The sun baked and broiled upon the hills; but in the clefts there was a coolness as of a rushing roaring waterfall. The little knolls swarmed with bilberries the whole way along, and he felt he must stoop down and pluck whole handfuls at a time, so that it took a long time to get to the top.

Then he came to a hilly slope where the ferns stood high, and there were lots of birch bushes. It was so nice and shady there, he thought, and so he couldn't for the life of him help taking a rest.

His drum he took off, his jacket he put beneath his head, and his cap over his face, and off he went to sleep.

But as he lay dozing there, he dreamt that some one was tickling him under the nose with a straw so that he could get no peace; and the instant he awoke, he fancied he heard laughing and giggling.

The sun had by this time begun to cast oblique shadows, and far down below, towards the valleys, lay the warm steaming vapours, creeping upwards in long drawn-out gossamer bands and ribands of mist.

As he reached behind him for his jacket, he saw a snake, which lay and looked at him with such shrewd quick eyes. But when he threw a stone at it, it caught its tail in its mouth, and trundled away like a wheel.

Again there was a giggling and a sniggering among the bushes.

And now he heard it among some birch trees which stood in such a wonderful sunlight, for they were filled with the rain and fine drizzle of a waterfall. The water-drops glistened and sparkled so that he really couldn't see the trees properly.

But it was as though something were moving about in them, and he could have sworn that he had caught a glimpse of a fine bright slim damsel, who was laughing and making fun of him. She peeped at him from beneath her hand, because of the sun, and her sleeves were tucked up.

A little while afterwards a dark-blue blouse appeared above the brushwood.

He was after it in an instant.

He ran and ran till he had half a mind to give up, but then a frock and a bare shoulder gleamed betwixt an opening in the leaves.

And off again he pelted as hard as he could, till he began to think that it must have all been imagination. Then he saw her right in a corner of the green bushes. Her hair had been torn out of its plaits from the speed with which she had flown through the bushes. She stood still, and looked back as if she were terribly frightened.

But the lad thought to himself that if she had run away with his drumsticks, she should pay for it.

And off they ran again, she in front, and he behind.

Now and again she turned round and laughed and gibed, and gave a toss and a twist, so that it looked as if her long wavy hair were writhing and wriggling and twisting like a serpent's tail.

At last she turned round on the top of the hill, laughed, and held out his drumsticks towards him.

But now he was determined to catch her. He was so near that he made grab after grab at her; but just as he was about to lay hold of her hand by a fence, she was over it, while he tumbled after her into the enclosure of a homestead.

Then she cried and shouted up to the house, "Randi, and Brandi, and Gyri, and Gunna!"

And four girls came rushing down over the sward.

But the last of them, who had a fine ruddy complexion and heavy golden-red hair, stood and greeted him so graciously with her downcast eyes, as if she was quite distressed that they should play such wanton pranks with a strange young man.

She stood there abashed and uncertain, poor thing! just like a child, who knows not whether it should say something or not; but all the while she sidled up nearer and nearer to him. Then, when she was so close to him that her hair almost touched him, she opened her blue eyes wide, and looked straight at him.

But she had a frightfully sharp look in those eyes of hers.

"Rather come with me, and thou shalt have dancing—or art thou tired, my lad?" cried a girl with blue-black hair, and a wild dark fire in her eyes. She tripped up and down, and clapped her hands. She had white teeth and hot breath, and would have dragged him off with her.

"Tie thyself up behind first, black Gyri!" giggled the others.

And immediately she let the lad go, and wobbled and twisted, and went backwards so oddly.

He couldn't help staring after the black lassie, who stood and writhed and twisted so uncomfortably, as if she were concealing something behind her, and had, all at once, become so meek.

But the fine bright girl with the slim slender waist, who had rushed on before him, and who seemed to him the loveliest of them all, began to laugh at him again and tease him.

Run as he might, he shouldn't catch her, she jibed and jeered; never should he find his drumsticks again, she said.

But then her mood shifted right round, and she flung herself down headlong, and began to cry. She had followed his drumming the whole day, she said, and never had she heard any fellow who could beat rat-tat-tat so well; nor had she ever seen a lad who was so handsome while he was as Jeep. "I kissed thee then," said she, and smiled up at him so sorrowfully.

"Beware of the serpent's tongue, lest it bite thee, swain! 'Tis worst of all when it licks thee first," whispered the bashful one with the golden-red hair. She would fain have stolen between them so softly.

And all at once the swain recollected the snake, which was as slender, and supple, and quick, and sparkling as the girl who lay there on the hill-side, and wept and made fun at the same time and looked oddly alert and wary.

But a stooping, somewhat clumsy little thing now stuck her head quickly in between, and smiled shamefacedly at him, as if she knew and could tell him so much. Her eyes sparkled a long way inwards, and across her face there passed a sort of pale golden gleam, as when the last sunbeam slowly draws away from the grassy mountain slope.

"At my place," said she, "thou shalt hear such *Lanngelejk*¹ as none else has ever heard. I will play for thee, and thou shalt listen to things unknown to others. Thou shalt hear all that sings, and laughs, and cries in the roots of trees, and in the mountains, and in all things that grow, so that thou wilt never trouble thy head about anything else in the world."

Then there was a scornful laugh; and up on a rock he saw a tall strongly built girl, with a gold band in her hair and a huge wand in her hand.

She lifted a long wooden trumpet with such splendid powerful arms, threw back her neck with such a proud and resolute air, and stood firm and fast as a rock while she blew.

And it sounded far and wide through the summer evening, and rang back again across the hills.

But she, the prettiest and daintiest of them all, who had cast herself on the ground, stuck her fingers in her ears, and mimicked her and laughed and jeered.

Then she glanced up at him with her blue eyes peeping through her ashen-yellow hair, and whispered—

"If thou dost want me, swain, thou must pick me up."

She has a strong firm grip for a gentle maiden," thought he to himself, as he raised her from the ground.

"But thou must catch me first," cried she.

And right towards the house they ran—she first, and he after her.

Suddenly she stopped short, and putting both arms akimbo, looked straight into his eyes: "Dost like me?" she asked.

The swain couldn't say no to that. He had now got hold of her, and would have put his arm round her.

"'Tis for thee to have a word in the matter, father," she shouted all at once in the direction of the house; "this swain here would fain wed me."

¹ A long slow dance, and the music to it.

And she drew him hastily towards the hut door.

There sat a little grey-clad old fellow, with a cap like a milk-can on his head, staring at the livestock on the mountain-side. He had a large silver jug in front of him.

“’Tis the homestead westward in the Blue Mountains that he’s after, I know,” said the old man, nodding his head, with a sly look in his eyes.

“Raw, haw! That’s what they’re after, is it?” thought the swain. But aloud he said, “’Tis a great offer, I know; but methinks ’tis a little hasty too. Down our way ’tis the custom to send two go-betweens first of all to arrange matters properly.”

“Thou *didst* send two before thee, and here they be,” quoth she smartly, and produced his drumsticks.

“And ’tis usual with us, moreover, to have a look over the property first; though the lass herself have wit enough and to spare,” added he.

Then she all at once grew so small, and there was a nasty green glitter in her eyes—

“Hast thou not run after me the livelong day, and wooed me right down in the enclosure there, so that my father both heard and saw it all?” cried she.

“Pretty lasses are wont to hold back a bit,” said the swain, in a wheedling sort of way. He perceived that he must be a little subtle here; it was not all love in this wooing.

Then she seemed to bend her body backwards into a complete curve, and shot forward her head and neck, and her eyes sparkled.

But the old fellow lifted his stick from his knee, and she stood there again as blithe and sportive as ever.

She stretched herself out tall and stiff, with her hands in her silver girdle; and she looked right into his eyes and laughed, and asked him if he was one of those fellows who were afraid of the girls. If he wanted her he might perchance be run off his legs again, said she.

Then she began tripping up and down, and curtseying and making fun of him again.

But all at once he saw on the sward behind her what looked like the shadow of something that whisked and frisked and writhed round and round, and twisted in and out according as she practised her wheedling ways upon him.

“That is a very curious long sort of riband,” thought the drummer to himself in his amazement. They were in a great hurry, too, to get him under the yoke, he thought; but they should find that a soldier on his way to the manœuvres is not to be betrothed and married offhand.

So he told them bluntly that he had come hither for his drumsticks, and not to woo maidens, and he would thank them to let him have his property.

“But have a look about you a bit first, young man,” said the old fellow, and he pointed with his stick.

And all at once the drummer saw large dun cows grazing all along the mountain pastures, and the cow-bells rang out their merry peals. Buckets and vats of the brightest copper shone all about, and never had he seen such shapely and nicely dressed milkmaids. There must needs be great wealth here.

“Perchance thou dost think ’tis but a beggarly inheritance I have here in the Blue Mountains,” said she, and sitting down on a haycock, she began chatting with him. “But we’ve four such *sætar*² as this, and what I inherit from my mother is twelve times as large.”

² A *Sæter* (Swed. *säter*) is a remote pasturage with huts upon it, where the cows are tended and dairy produce prepared for market and home use during the summer.

But the drummer had seen what he had seen. They were rather too anxious to settle the property upon him, thought he. So he declared that in so serious a matter he must crave a little time for consideration.

Then the lass began to cry and take on, and asked him if he meant to befool a poor innocent, ignorant, young thing, and pursue her and drive her out of her very wits. She had put all her hope and trust in him, she said, and with that she fell a-howling.

She sat there quite inconsolable, and rocked herself to and fro with all her hair over her eyes, till at last the drummer began to feel quite sorry for her and almost angry with himself. She was certainly most simple-minded and confiding.

All at once she twisted round and threw herself petulantly down from the haycock. Her eyes spied all about, and seemed quite tiny and piercing as she looked up at him, and laughed and jested.

He started back. It was exactly as if he again saw the snake beneath the birch tree down there when it trundled away.

And now he wanted to be off as quickly as possible; he cared no longer about being civil.

Then she reared up with a hissing sound. She quite forgot herself, and a long tail hung down and whisked about from behind her kirtle.

He shouldn't escape her in that way, she shrieked. He should first of all have a taste of public penance and public opinion from parish to parish. And then she called her father.

Then the drummer felt a grip on his jacket, and he was lifted right off his legs.

He was chucked into an empty cow-house, and the door was shut behind him.

There he stood and had nothing to look at but an old billy-goat through a crack in the door, who had odd, yellow eyes, and was very much like the old fellow, and a sunbeam through a little hole, which sunbeam crept higher and higher up the blank stable wall till late in the evening, when it went out altogether.

But towards night a voice outside said softly, "Swain! swain!" and in the moonlight he saw a shadow cross the little hole.

"Hist! hist! the old man is sleeping at the other side of the wall," it sounded.

He knew by the voice that it was she, the golden-red one, who had behaved so prettily and been so bashful the moment he had come upon the scene.

"Thou need'st but say that thou dost know that serpent-eye has had a lover before, or they wouldn't be in such a hurry to get her off their hands with a dowry. Thou must know that the homestead westwards in the Blue Mountains is mine. And answer the old man that it was me, Brandi, that thou didst run after all the time. Hist! hist here comes the old man," she whispered, and whisked away.

But a shadow again fell across the little hole in the moonlight, and the duck-necked one stuck her head in and peeped at him.

"Swain, swain, art thou awake?"

"That serpent-eye will make thee the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. She's spiteful, and she stings. But the homestead westward in the Blue Mountains is mine, and when I play there the gates beneath the high mountains fly open, and through them lies the road to the nameless powers of nature. Do but say that 'twas me, Randi, thou wert running after, because she plays so prettily on the *Langelijk*.—"Hist, hist ! the old man is stirring about by the wall!"—she beckoned to him and was gone.

A little afterwards nearly every bit of the hole was darkened, and he recognised the Black one by her voice.

“Swain, swain!” she hissed.

“I had to bind up my kirtle to-day behind,” said she, “so we couldn’t go dancing the *Halling-fling*³ together on the green sward. But the homestead in the Blue Mountains is my lawful property, and tell the old man that it was madcap Gyri thou wast running after to-day, because thou art so madly fond of dancing jigs and *hallings*.”

Then she clapped her hands aloud, and straight-way was full of fear lest she should have awakened the old man.

And she was gone.

But the lad sat inside there, and thought it all over, and looked up at the thin pale summer moon, and he thought that never in his whole life had he been in such evil case.

From time to time he heard something moving, scraping, and snorting against the wall outside. It was the old fellow who lay there and kept watch over him.

“Thou, swain, thou,” said another voice at the peep-hole.

It was she who had planted herself so firmly on the rock with such sturdy hips and such a masterful voice.

“For these three hundred years have I been blowing the *langelur*⁴ here in the summer evenings far and wide, but never has it drawn any one westward hither into the Blue Mountains. And let me tell thee that we are all homeless and houseless, and all thou seest here is but glitter and glamour. Many a man has been befooled hither time out of mind. But I won’t have the other lasses married before me. And rather than that any one of them should get thee, I’ll free thee from the mountains. Mark me, now! When the sun is hot and high the old man will get frightened and crawl into his corner. Then look to thyself. Shove hard against the door of the hayloft, and hasten to get thee over the fence, and thou wilt be rid of us.”

The drummer was not slow to follow this counsel. He crept out the moment the sun began to burn, and cleared the fence with one good bound.

In less than no time he was down in the valley again.

And far, far away towards sunrise in the mountains, he heard the sound of her *langelur*.

He threw his drum across his shoulder, and hied him off to the manœuvres at Moen.

But never would he play rat-tat-tat and beat the tattoo before the lasses again, lest he should find himself westwards in the Blue Mountains before he was well aware of it.

³ A country dance of a boisterous jig-like sort.

⁴ A long wooden trumpet.