Ida Jessen

THE CAPTAIN AND ANN BARBARA

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by Martin Aitken

THE CAPTAIN

The heath is like no other place.

The heath is sky and flat land.

The heath is wasteland and emptiness.

The wind sweeps across the sky, and clouds and rain. Warmth and cold are borne along by the wind. The wind howls. No one knows where it comes from. It sings and whistles. The wind is there always. The heath is night and the heath is day. There are wolves. Adders coil. Buttery yellow butterflies patrol. The lark rises. There are birds of prey. But no dwellings. No people. The heath is light and dark, and dullish grey. Night and day, and the seasons. The wind. The heath is the wind.

The wind blows wherever it will. One hears it rush, but no one knows where it comes from or where it is bound.

There is nothing for shade, nothing for shelter. And the sky is cruel. It sends the heat that dries the depths of the soil. It sends frost in July. It makes it rain fish and worms which eat every green shoot, then burrow into the earth, later to emerge as red beetles which consume even the roots of the heather. It makes it rain blood.

From the sky come lightning bolts that cause the earth to tremble and break apart. Everything shudders, the ground opens and the springs plunge into the innards of the earth until they can plunge no further, and the ground closes again. Once, there was water on the heath. It is gone now. Deep gullies reveal where once it ran. An occasional mound in the flat land tells of a time when people lived on the heath. Small, brown men rest in cradles of oak inside the mounds. How rich with water the land must have been. Rivers of water.

Now the water comes from the brutal sky. It sends rain that the rock-hard soil cannot accommodate. Sour, thick, undrinkable surface water is what there is on the heath, a gooey slop of rain and sand, animal corpses and excrement.

Once in a while a cart comes lurching, or a person on foot, a bundle of something across their shoulders, a wayfarer, a pedlar compelled to cross the heath. He must be

watchful of the gullies, the rises and falls of the landscape. Wolves hide in the tall heather, which in some places is taller than a man, and nameless robbers may appear and assail him. No one will hear his cries for help. No sheep are there to graze the heath. No shepherd to tend his flock. No one to keep watch.

Some old stones lie strewn about in the heather. A king of old erected them, and they bear his mark. Over the years, most have disappeared. Stolen and taken away from the heath, broken up and tossed into holes in a road, incorporated into the foundations and doorsteps of farmhouses and smallholdings, the king's mark hidden from sight. Many kilometres now separate the few stones that remain. It is said that documents exist, going back hundreds of years, detailing boundaries and property rights. But where are they? Not on the heath. Not with the farmholders and land owners on the edge of the heath. Not in the town. Not with the Amtmand. Did they perish along with everything else in the great fire? Or are they filed at the Rentekammer? Things go missing from the Rentekammer, where matters more important require attention.

No one knows who owns the heath. It is someone's, and it is no one's. No one's is the name that prevails on the heath.

One day, two people come trundling on a cart, pulled by a grey and a dappled horse. The driver is young and strong. His feet are bare and he is clad in breeches, a coarse smock and a hooded head garment that covers his shoulders like a cape and leaves only his eyes to peer out through a slit, and on top of this hood he wears a woollen cap. Behind him sits a captain in a red uniform, a cocked hat on his head and a yellow sash of silk about his waist. On the bed of the cart are blankets and a tent, various tools and implements, and some flagons of water. The horses proceed laboriously through the heather. The cart lurches this way and that, occasionally precariously, as if it were about to turn on its side. The driver must have his wits about him in such a place. Here and there, he happens on a track trampled down by animals, or perhaps by human feet in ancient times, thousands of years ago, when man emerged crawling from the ground. Intermittently, a sunken track will lead among the hillocks, where their wheels will churn into the sand and both he and the captain must descend and dig them out. Such tracks must be avoided.

In certain places, the earth has been broken open, the turf scraped away and carried off to districts more fertile. Patches of bare sand stand out from afar on the hillsides. When the wind sweeps over them, the sand is whirled into the air, red and gritty, the captain notes in the journal that rests on his knee. ‘July 18, 1754,’ he writes, ‘the heath has been stripped, to the red and gritty sand.’

Outside the tent, the driver talks softly to the horses. The captain cannot make head nor tail his language. To him it sounds like Arabic, jerky and guttural, and yet he knows that the driver is more of a Dane than he, and that this is the region’s dialect. So softly he talks to the horses, stroking their muzzles as he gives them water from a flagon. The last of their water. They have miscalculated and now there is none left. The wind snatches at the tent. The captain spreads out bundles of heather on the floor. He takes off his hat and wig and hangs them on a staff he has driven into the ground. He removes his boots, though not his coat. The night brings with it the cold, and the salty air of the sea, though the sea is a hundred kilometres from the heath. There is nothing in the way to stop the cold before it reaches the tent. He places a pistol at his side.

Some hours later, he sits up abruptly at the sound of wolves. They are far in the distance. Again, he hears the driver, talking to the horses. He lies down, but remains motionless and wide awake on his back as the wolves move closer.

The next day, they find red water in a hollow and unhitch the horses so that they may drink. The animals submerge their muzzles and slurp. The captain bends down to examine the water. It is still, though he thinks he sees a tiny swirl, a near-microscopic eddy. While the horses rest and the driver lies propped up against a rock, knitting a long white stocking, the captain wanders about the heather with a spade which here and there he thrusts into the ground. The sky is overcast, heavy. He digs up a lump of turf, turns it over and crumbles the soil between his fingers. A spit and a half he digs, until the blade encounters something hard.

The driver sits up and watches. The captain beckons to him, and instructs him to fetch an earth auger from the cart. He kneels down, presses the point into the ground and winds the handle as the bit finds purchase. When finally he feels it penetrate, he has drilled nearly the full length of the auger. He removes it and studies the soil at its tip. It is dark red and cements better than the almost white earth on the underside of the heath turf. Insects scuttle on the stagnant, red water. In the evening, he commits it all to his journal. When morning comes, the wind is up.

The captain notes down the wind direction. As the driver feeds the horses, he polishes his boots and combs his grey hair, which reaches down to between his shoulder blades, gathering it with a green velvet tie before putting on his wig. The driver takes down his tent and places it in the cart. He clutches a hard hunk of dark bread to his chest and saws off some pieces which they eat with ale. ‘I’ve never been driven by such old nags as you before,’ the captain says to the munching horses. ‘You can pull a cart all right, but can you pull a plough?’

The horses pull the cart across the heath. The captain walks alongside, studying the white lichen that peeps from the heather. He considers the density of the heather. There

are places where it has been all but consumed by the lichen. ‘Here and there,’ he writes, ‘the crust of the soil is so thin that a plough would run through to the sand.’

They drink from puddles and pools. He believes them to be formed either by rainwater unable to seep into the earth, though it has not rained at all during the time they have been on the heath, or by underground springs. ‘A water inspector,’ he writes, ‘would be able to settle the matter.’ In the evening, when the sun has set, he lies down, the way he remembers seeing the old peasant farmholders lie down in his childhood, eye to the ground, peering along the line of the soil towards the horizon to see where the mist has gathered. The day after, he drills for water, though without luck. The driver remains passive and is of no help. ‘He scratches his scabby skin or else knits,’ he notes in his journal.

High, high in the land they are, almost as high as where the larks hang suspended. And not a tree in sight. Yet here and there something pokes from the ground. The captain has no idea what it can be. Something dead and skeleton-like, eaten by animals, perhaps, or perished from thirst? No. Stunted oak, no more than ten, perhaps twenty centimetres tall. Only the dry wood remains, but when he digs in the ground he finds the occasional root. Oak.

‘July 16, 1754,’ he writes. ‘South-westerly wind.’ He thinks the temperature to be around eighty degrees. There is no shade anywhere but under his hat. He proceeds in the direction of the pools he spies, which become increasingly smaller as he approaches, and turn out not to exist at all when he gets there. On the horizon, he plainly sees an inverted landscape of upside-down trees and dwellings. He asks the driver if he sees it too, but the man has no idea what he is talking about. The captain points towards the horizon, the driver staring without blinking in the indicated direction. The captain notes it down in his journal.

He studies the heather. Most is brownish-black and resembles the scorched earth left behind by mercenaries, stretching as far as the eye can see. But in the hollows, where no grass grows, the heather has small, reddish-coloured flowers. He is no botanist. He describes as best as he is able the flora he finds. He draws a yellow composite in his

journal, his pen sputtering and blotting the page. He draws the red flower of the heather and notes underneath the word ‘cowpat-like’.

The heat prevails, the wind bringing with it more of the same. One of the horses, the grey, is starting to look poorly. The driver no longer sits on the cart, but walks next to the horses, sparing them as much as possible. The two animals strain their necks and toss their heads against the onslaught of horseflies, which too are thirsty. Suddenly, a couple of days ago, the air was full of them. The torment is worst in the middle of the day. They drive the horses mad. The captain waves his staff or flaps a twig of heather. He walks with his coat buttoned up, in his hat and long boots, with yellow leather gloves that reach to above the elbow. The wind tugs at his wig and swipes off his hat. When for a moment he puts down his twig of heather in order to drill or dig, the horseflies bite his face, and the horses, brought to a standstill, shake their heads and show the whites of their eyes. The driver too is discomforted. His face and scalp are protected by his hood, but his feet, ankles and hands are knotted with bites. The captain hears him in the night, scratching and cursing without pause. He sings for the horses too, a song that sounds as old as the prehistoric graves. He sings of love and the cruellest of fates.

At six o’clock on the morning of July 22, he observes something that he notes in his journal: ‘At 6 a.m. two Sun-wolves observed and a ring encircling the sun which ran through the said creatures.’ The sky darkens through the day, and the horseflies bite.

He hammers and drills. The driver mounts the grey, a water flagon cradled at each of its flanks. The clopping of its hooves recedes into the landscape.

In the middle of the day, the captain quenches his thirst with crowberries. Singly they are bitter, but when he fills his mouth with a handful he finds them refreshing. The dappled horse will not eat the crowberries. It seems dispirited. In the afternoon, a whirlwind of sand sweeps past. He stands in front of the animal and shields it with his coat. It stands patiently, snorting against his stomach. ‘You’ll have water tonight,’ he tells it. Many hours have gone since he last heard his voice. He spits sand. When the air stills, he must empty his leggings and breeches of it. His wig is covered, its white hair engulfed.

Evening comes without the driver's return. The sky has a greenish tinge, and the wind picks up. The captain erects the tent, knocks his staff into the ground and hangs up his wig. He places the pistol at his side. The darkness falls too suddenly for a night in summer. He sits at the opening and hears the wolves as they bay. Rising and falling. They sing in chorus.

The dappled horse is jumpy.

'You're no wolf-horse, that's for sure,' he says, smoothing a yellow-gloved hand over its neck. 'You haven't got it in you. There are wolf-horses, but you'll never be one.'

Out at the horizon, the sky at first becomes a reddish haze, then begins to flicker. The storm moves at such a pace that its lightning tears the sky open crosswise. Rain comes lashing, and, after the rain, hailstones the size of blackbird eggs. The horse is out of its wits. The captain's bare hands grip its tethers. The sheer commotion of hail and rain, the violent cracks of thunder and lightning, mean he must raise his voice to a shout that the animal may hear his endeavours to comfort it. And then suddenly it has passed.

On July 26, he comes to a dale and finds water to have gathered in a pond. He reasons it must stem from an underground spring, for the water is by no means stagnant. 'Its colour is dark,' he writes, 'though its taste is as fresh as from a beck.' He and the horse spend three nights at the pond. In the daytime, he wanders back and forth through the dale with his spade and his auger, exploring. 'The soil is of changing quality,' he writes. 'No sign of sand drift. A certain, sparse tree growth of willow and aspen.' He draws a leaning bush that stands at an angle of some forty-five degrees. He strikes a double line underneath. The night has various sounds. He lies in the tent and listens to the wind whistle through the dale. He hears the horse, and wolves, and foxes barking far away. He hears the nightjar too. There are other sounds as well: a rustling, a whimpering, a scurrying-away, even a whispering. 'The wind,' he notes in the journal, 'may in certain circumstances assume voices reminiscent of people and animals.' Since the driver went away he has not seen a human soul. The pistol is at his side.

On the fourth day at the pond, the captain leaves the heath. He acquires two fresh, brown horses at a posting station, and a better vehicle. He drives about and speaks with

the Amtmand and landowners. He journeys to the great forests of the Silkeborg area, producing a letter from the King wherever he goes. He makes agreements concerning various matters.

The following spring, he returns to the dale and its pond. It is April, the frost has left the ground. He comes with an ox-drawn wagon laden with tools and equipment. The captain himself is not seated on the wagon but mounted on a sheeny, black-brown horse. He comes riding into the dale in a red coat and green breeches, his feet in long leather boots. At a place he has decided on, he dismounts, unharnesses the ox and leads both animals to the pond, which he sees bubble with freshness. He crouches and fills his hand with yellowy, ice-cold water. He slurps handfuls and splashes his face. He opens his waistcoat and shirt and splashes his throat and chest, then takes off his hat and wig and runs his wet hands through his hair, before rising once more to his full and impressive height.

'Wasser!' he laughs out loud.

He wanders about a bit. Here, at the foot of the vale, he finds growing not only heather, but also sheep's fescue and bulrushes, as committed to his journal in drawings the year before.

The first thing he does is to build a makeshift stable, constructing a frame of heavy posts he has brought with him in the wagon, and covering it with heather and turf he cuts from the heath above the dale to the north. He knows such structures from his childhood, they can be used for almost anything, even for human habitation, triangular in shape, as if a roof had been lifted away from some large dwelling and placed directly on the ground. The turf ensures warmth inside, and darkness in the night, thick enough to withstand the elements and provide benumbing reassurance to ox and horse in the case of a storm.

When it is done, he clears a fireplace and erects the tent, carrying inside a wooden chest of paper and writing implements, drawings, books and periodicals. There is also a glass lantern, a box containing three candles, a two-pronged fork, a spoon, a mug, a bowl, a knife, a cast-iron pot and frying pan. There is a side of dried bacon, a sack of oats, a half-barrel of rye and a half-barrel of buckwheat, a quarter-barrel of clover seeds and a bag of salt. There is thin ale and a bottle of aquavit; a shirt, a pair of long, white socks and a pair of heeled shoes with square buckles and white, buttoned gaiters of canvas. There is a box with money in it.

There are two axes, a sledgehammer, iron wedges, chisels, a plumb line. There is an old knife with a rust-stained blade, marked with notches whose meaning only the captain knows. There are spades and augers and weighing scales. A fire-steel. The pistol. Moreover, a small amount of firewood.

He lights a fire. He makes a dough of flour and water and salt, shapes a loaf and leaves it to rise in the bowl. He fills the pot with sand and places it in the middle of the fire while the flames still leap.

When the fire has reduced to embers and the sand is heated up, he places the bowl with the dough in it like a lid on top of the pot. He will have freshly baked bread today, though for want of sour dough it will be unleavened. Yet he makes the day a feast day, and devours bacon as the evening closes in, dipping the bread in the fat of the pan. In the stable stand the horse and the ox, sated, calm, unthirsty. In a day or two, he will close the entrance with fencing to keep out the wolves. He takes out his journal and in the light of the dying fire writes: ‘Arrived April 4, 1755. The pond is replete with good water, only the slightest discolouring.’

This good day. This first day on the heath.

A cart comes with oak logs in the early morning. The captain, long since risen and at work breaking up turf at the upper end of the dale, has already heard the sound of the creaking vehicle, the squeaking of the wheels, carrying through the funnel of the dale. Out of the dim light of the dawn, a whole caravan of wagons and carts emerges. Slowly, rocking and swaying. Six, eight, nine vehicles, each with its load of long, uniform logs of oak.

The captain bids them welcome. 'Take them up there,' he says to each new driver, pointing at the hilltop above the dale. The vehicles pull up, the drivers climb down. *'Daroben?'* Why would he want timber brought to a hilltop? Who would build a structure in such a place, where the wind comes gusting through a funnel?

The draught animals and the drivers are tired. They have been a long time underway. Will he have them turn around and go back through the dale, to enter it again from the other side? They have been ordered into this job, receiving nothing for it, and while they are away their own holdings are neglected. They ought to be at home, sowing the seed in the ground, now, while the soil is amenable. They have no time for this. Working their animals into exhaustion, they will be no use for days, too weary to work the fields when they get home. They glare at the captain, who stands pointing in his polished boots and his cocked hat with its golden tassel, a whip in his hand.

They climb back onto their carts and wagons. The first of them turns, then the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth. The caravan trundles back through the dale, until finding a place where the slope is sufficiently gentle, and then begins the laborious climb, the drivers gathering around the vehicles, pulling and shoving, issuing shouts of encouragement to the struggling animals. The captain joins them with his own ox, and after a moment's perplexity they understand that the beast is to be harnessed to pull each and every vehicle in turn along with their own animals.

The captain's ox is young and strong and well-nourished, and has rested a good long night in the new stable. Its forearms are rugged and knotty, its hooves dig into the ground, veins and arteries swelling, and the captain drives the beast on while the peasants lean their shoulders into the back of the cart and push with all their weight. The dale

reverberates with shouts and cries, hands slapping against beastly flesh, the screeching of wheels and whooping men. But the ox is silent. It lowers its head and thrusts its way upwards, delivering vehicle upon vehicle to the place the captain has decided.

Fodder and bottles of aquavit and haversacks of food are produced, and everyone rests, sleeping a short while in the middle of the day. Presently, the first man rolls onto his side and sits up. The logs are rolled off the carts. A man has two fingers crushed. But thank goodness, for no serious accident occurs, and no one will be carried home on his back on the bed of a wagon.

And then they are finished. The caravan begins its long journey home. The captain is already digging the turf again, and continues until the final light has gone. If anyone were there to see him, they would have difficulty picking out his skinny figure in the dusk on top of the hill. They would hear the thrust of his spade in the turf, the dull thud of the sods being turned.

He does not light a fire, but chews the bread from the day before, drinks water from the pond. The air is as fresh as the smell of snow. The air of April. And the sky above the earth is filled with stars. He sees them not, and feels no fatigue, though he is now a man of 54 years. Many men his age are kaput. Toothless, clapped-out, and steeped in drink. But not the captain. His name is Ludwig von Kahlen.

There are rumours now about Ludwig von Kahlen, the captain who will build a house on a hilltop on the heath. Drivers no longer risk coming through the dale, but come now from the other side of the hill. Day after day, carts and wagons arrive. Carts with fieldstones from the manor at Hald. Hald's owner is so thrifty and niggardly, how can he give up even a single stone from the hundreds of loads he has gathered and stockpiled? They come with stones from the great brick kilns in the north. A wagon carrying open barrels of burnt lime too comes trundling.

He is noticed in the town whenever he has business there. He comes riding on the black-brown horse that is so light-footed it seems to dance, and children and folk collect and follow him through the streets. It is known that he has ordered a plough quite unlike the ploughs used here. He has delivered a drawing to the smith and instructed him to adhere exactly to its specifications. It matters not what the smith says about the excellence of the good Danish plough, for the captain will have this German plough, and none other. He orders glass windows from a glazier, not one, but four large ones and two small. It is said that he pays in advance with ready money from a box with iron bands around it, which folk are able to describe, though none has seen it. His horse and his ox, too, are the stuff of rumour, and his pistol, his staff, his height, the yellow sash about his waist.

The captain has removed his red coat and is chopping timber together with a couple of men he has hired in the town. All through the day, the sound of the axes lingers on the wind. There is never a lull, never a moment of peace in this place, which has not heard the sound of men before. When the men tire, the captain works on. He needs no pause and is quick to lose his patience with folk. The day is too short for him. To stop and warm oneself, to eat, rest and drink aquavit, such inclinations are only to his dissatisfaction. No sooner does he feel fatigue upon him, a stiffening of the muscles, than he rouses the men from their slumbers. They hesitate to rise, demanding to rest in the middle of the day. 'A man must keep going,' he tells them, 'then he will feel no fatigue. He who rests becomes old and tired.' Grudgingly, they find their feet, consenting to be ordered about like dogs. They have seen his whip, and they have seen his pale eyes.

The days grow longer. Darkness comes late. In the dusk he works alone, breaking the turf for a patch of land while the men light their fires in their camp further inside the dale. The sound of the spade, the dull thud of the sods as the earth is turned. The same unbroken rhythm. *Wer schläft wird alt und müde*. He who sleeps becomes old and tired.

The captain goes into the town again. This time he is not on horseback, but has harnessed the horse in front of the wagon. No one has seen such a magnificent horse used to draw such an ordinary wagon before. He goes to the smith and to the wheelwright, and various other places, and when he returns home he has with him half a load of hay and two peat spades, a kettle, two iron hoes, two dung forks, a wheelbarrow and the German plough. Besides these items: two tall tea cups with gilt edging, and a pound of tea. Behind the wagon comes a sheep which he stables with the ox. He closes the door of the stable and secures it with the beam. No wolves can get in without first having scrabbled their way through the sods, and before that happens he will surely have heard them. The captain, who hardly ever sleeps, sleeps lightly.

That evening he again fills the pot with sand and bakes a bread of flour and water, salt and sour dough he has put aside from the first time. He fries a hunk of bacon and dips the bread in the fat of the pan. He sits on a log and reads about decomposition processes in a periodical concerning land management for crop production. The flickering light of the fire illuminates his face and the pages in his lap, which he turns slowly. He studies illustrations and tables. His face is long, the corners of his mouth downturned. No one who saw him would realise how content he is.

Further inside the dale, the men's fire glows, and in gusts of wind he hears the mutter and song of their voices, like frogs in a distant bogland.

Some two hours after midnight, he puts the periodical away in the chest with his books. He is too tired to write in the journal. He lies down on his bed of heather, his feet still in his boots, and draws his coat over him. He closes his eyes and sniffs in the smell of hay that clings to his sleeve. Then he sleeps. This good night. Stars above the tent. The wild sky, pulsating with light. Banks of white, shimmering light: the Milky Way. But the captain sleeps and sees it not. The captain sleeps.

Now is the month of May, and around the pond is built a dyke of turf. Here he waters the ox and the horse, and two new-born lambs that frisk after the ewe. He must tether them, for he has no one to watch them.

On the hill above the pond the captain paces out the ground and lays down logs. For some time, he has toiled breaking up fieldstones, and now a dwelling will be risen. It is heavy work, and he is alone and without help. He fills the stones into the trench and shifts them about until he considers them to be in place. The two men have disappeared, gone one morning, their camp taken down, their fire trampled out. Single-handedly, the captain lays the cornerstone and the foundation stone. He measures, paces, and measures again, with long measuring rods. He works from before the dawn until late at night.

At the time of the Thing fair, he makes pause to ride into the town and hire labour. The streets mill with entertainers, animals, beggars, musicians, waddling lines of geese. Now is the time when important transactions are concluded, farms and land change hands. Plaits of hair are cut and sold to wig-makers. Drunken lads and lasses make merry. A girl wishes to show him her teeth, which are white and fine, but he turns her away. After a while, he picks out three workmen who agree to spend the summer in his employ, and a couple of days later an old man too appears in von Kahlen's dale and says his name is Christian Erichsen. He wears the red hood of the peasants, which falls like a cape over his shoulders. Only his eyes are visible, bright eyes whose lashes are nearly white. He has come without anything but an axe. He says he has heard that the captain is in need of folk.

Timber constructions take shape, great skeletons put together on the foundation, and in the nights, now so filled with the light of summer as never properly to darken at all, the captain at last puts his plough to the turned earth. He sows buckwheat in a patch crawling with heather roots, rye in a patch where the spike he hammers down encounters a layer of something which is as hard as rock, at a depth of two spits. And all around, on outlying farms, laughter resounds. Small children too laugh, because the grown-ups laugh. Oh, how delightful it feels to laugh, for once to laugh so well. But with laughter comes afterthought. Can it be true? Can anyone be so foolish, so impatient and full of haste, as not to begin by

burning off the heather? And what is it they say? A sheep? Only the one? Oh, how they roll about then with laughter again.

There are visits. Three visits the captain receives during his first year on the heath.

After the first visit, the same evening, the captain writes this in his journal: ‘June 12, 1755: Trappaud.’

(…)

Now the captain has a housekeeper again. She sets about the work as soon as they have finished eating. In the heat of the day she carries up water. She carries water like a man. She washes up, inspects the depleted pantry, cleans the alcoves in the sleeping room, tears the flattened heather from Katrin Full-up's and Roland's bed, finding there the skeletons of mice and four live adders that she kills with a stick. She replenishes the mattress with fresh heather, and sweeps away the cobwebs throughout the house, all the time saving the washing of the windows until last, as she did the slice of sausage she laid on her bread, looking forward to it with great anticipation.

She decides on cabbage for supper. In the vegetable patch she finds a few carrots, though only a little cabbage, and so she makes do. She goes about, searching. Thyme is everywhere, and sorrel too, she finds. She carries the leaves inside, bundled in her apron, and boils them in a pot on the stove, adding a crust of bread for taste and stirring in buckwheat until she deems it to suffice.

As the meal simmers, she washes the windows, and the fierce sun is admitted into the house. She is light of heart. Such a fine house to go about in. So well she does her work. If only she knew how to defend herself. If only she knew how a person decides that no one will ever hurt me again. But such firmness is unknown to her. Instead, she can forget, and do her work well. At a pinch, she might scold a child. Moreover, she can tell fortunes. Fortunes are a knack of hers. She tells the fortunes of women she knows, reading their palms, their tea leaves. She tells them about their men and children. Her own fortune remains hidden to her, so far removed in her mind from the here and now. Fortune is something awaiting in the future, and what she does today, or did yesterday, has no bearing on it. Today, she surprises the captain with a meal of cabbage, sorrel leaves and carrots, and a thick pancake made from six newly laid eggs.

He comes in from the field. She makes sure he has sufficient on his plate. The food tastes so good that he almost moans with delight.

'What do they call you?' he asks.

'Ann Barbara,' she replies.

They exchange glances. The blush of her lips has paled since last he saw her, and though she takes pains to keep her mouth closed, she cannot entirely hide the fact that she is missing a pair of teeth. Whereas he, the old man who sat so proudly on the square and picked her out, has acquired a jarred hip, noticeable in a slight sway to one side when he walks.

'Ann Barbara,' he says. 'And a surname?'

'Nielsdatter. Ann Barbara Nielsdatter.'

'Have you got what you need, Ann Barbara Nielsdatter?' he asks.

'There's no washing line,' she says.

And then she jumps with fright as Anmai-Mouse returns home with the flock. What? Is she to share a bed with a gypsy bairn? Rather with rats! At least she has been used to that, she informs the captain.

'It will be as it is,' he says, and goes into the parlour, closing the door behind him. She stirs her pots indignantly. It will be as it is! But she will insist on her own alcove. Not on her life will she sleep with such a little rat.

'*Fosling*! Are we having *fosling*?' Anmai-Mouse cries with delight.

'Talk properly.'

'*Flaader*.'

'It's called pancake, you little cuckoo. How long do you think the captain will want doing with you, anyway? He'll send you packing, he will. And then you'll have to go begging and stealing like the rest of the rabble you came from. If it weren't for riffraff like you, there'd be no need for any gaol. The cells are full up with you. Look at you, you've not even learnt to brush your hair. A pair of sheep shears, that's what you need. I'll have the captain cut it off. In fact, I'll do it myself now with a knife.'

Anmai-Mouse barely looks up from her food. Ann Barbara raises her voice: 'It's a good thing my mother doesn't know I've to look at you. She'd turn in her grave, if she did. Eat properly, greedy guts. There's no need to stuff your mouth all at once. You won't go hungry.'

It is the most unimaginable thing Anmai-Mouse has ever heard. An unprecedented kindness. She will not go hungry.

From the washing line, four adder skins flutter in the breeze.

Ann Barbara is here, there and everywhere. Now she carries water. Now she scrubs the blackened pots with sand. Now she waters the vegetable patch. Now she sweeps the cobwebs away, now she washes up. Now she feeds the hens. Now she shears the sheep. Now she picks cranberries. Now she carries the beehives out and stands them on a timber platform, all of her own making, in the hollow down by the pond. Now she brews bitter ale from yarrow and bayberry and barley groats. Now she breaks the legs of a skinny old heathland ewe, the Bleater, so-called, the most headstrong and obstinate of all the sheep, whose legs Ann Barbara crushes between a pair of rocks, much to her satisfaction. So now there is mutton to put in the cabbage pot, and no shortage of it for a long time to come. Now she cleans its guts. Such messy work. Now she fills the casings with barley groats, and the sausages will be fried in bacon fat in the autumn, on a wet and miserable day. She splits open the head and roasts it on a griddle. Oh, the taste of it! The lean, sour sheep's toes are boiled long enough for the skin to become soft and delicate, and then they too are devoured. What a change from all that bleedin' bread, is Anmai-Mouse's comment.

Ann Barbara instructs her to collect the tots of wool from the heather the sheep have rubbed up against, and to twist the wool around a twig for a spindle. Anmai-Mouse comes running back eagerly. There is barely a thing she will not do for Ann Barbara, whose cooking smells of boiled sheep's milk mixed with crumbled bread and leftover porridge wake her up in the mornings.

'We've no carding brushes in the house,' Ann Barbara says to the captain.

To which, of course, he could reply by asking where her own carding brushes are, and why she came here without them. But instead he provides her with carding brushes, as he provided her too with a washing line, and from then on the evenings are filled with an unceasing rasping and scratching.

He is astonished by how little of the Bleater Ann Barbara will allow to go to waste. That skinny beast, so useless when it was alive, small, fidgety and cantankerous, with barely enough wool to cover its frame and hardly a pinch of fat, and all it ever did was stand and bleat on top of the byre, whose turfed roof slopes all the way to the ground. She

melts off some fat, sufficient to moisten a thread, which she twists around a twig, which she places in a cup, and then she has a lamp in a cup.

She makes cheese out of the sheep's milk. She boils the milk and makes butter of it. She serves boiled whey with little squares of bread in it. The captain puts a hand to his mouth; it tastes awful.

'We need a cow,' she says.

And the captain laughs.

'First a washing line, then carding brushes,' he says. 'And now you want a cow.'

'A cow gives milk and butter and calves,' she says.

'Do you know how much a cow costs?' the captain asks.

'A lame cow with three teats and a broken horn won't cost the earth,' she says. 'A cow is such a kindly creature.'

'You must have lost your senses,' the captain says.

She spares her clothes at night and sleeps without, and when she gets up to pass her water or see to the embers or attend to some matter of housekeeping that it has occurred to her needs her attention, she goes through the house wearing not a stitch, her hair hanging loose all the way down her back, her luminous figure passing through the rooms, and she knows the house and its every nook and cranny now. She looks in on the skinny oxen that need to be indoors at night even in summer. She whispers to the sheep and shows them the moonlight that falls on the floor of the roomy byre. Her belly is streaked with silver.

One evening she knocks on the door of the parlour and asks for a day off.

'You'll have one in April,' the captain says without looking up from his book.

Immediately, she turns on her heel with a swish of her skirt. The next day she serves porridge for breakfast, lunch and supper. And the following days: porridge. The evenings are silent. The only sound is of her fiery carding.

After some days, in a voice dark and distorted with offence, she says: 'You didn't ask me why I wanted a day off.'

'I didn't then, and I won't now,' says the captain.

A week later, and she no longer looks up when he comes in.

‘What would you be wanting with a day off?’ he asks.

‘I’ll tell you,’ she says. ‘I’ve wool I want selling, and dried cranberries too, and Anmai-Mouse collects honey when she’s out watching the flock. There could be a nice little shilling for us, all in all.’

‘You’re not going anywhere, not if I can help it,’ the captain says.

‘A servant girl has a right to earn her own money, that’s how it’s been since Adam was a boy.’

‘Are you not fed well enough here? Besides, the wool is mine,’ he says. ‘The honey, too.’

‘You do it, then. You’re in the town often enough. Only don’t sell the carded wool for anything less than twenty shillings.’

She brings out various things she wants him to sell. Little baskets she has woven out of crowberry vines, and four papery adder skins, each with a small white bone poking out of the top.

‘What kind of hocus-pocus is this?’ he asks.

‘They’re good for many things,’ she says. ‘Boil a soup from them and you’ll be able to tell fortunes. I know from experience. Or you can make a powder of them for a cow, if it won’t have calves. And if you put one amongst your clothes, it keeps the moths from making holes in them. Then there’s the tongue. The tongue’s worth a lot of money. If a girl places the tongue underneath her own and then kisses a man, he’ll fall in love with her.’

‘Is that from experience, too?’ the captain asks.

‘It’s not hocus-pocus,’ she tells him. ‘It’s dried adder, and it’s worth money.’

‘What do you want money for?’

‘We need a cow,’ she says.

The captain sits down.

‘Do you know how little all this will bring?’

‘We’ve got to start somewhere,’ Ann Barbara replies.

‘We’ve managed without a cow this far.’

‘But we do need a cow,’ she insists, and turns away.

‘So you want me to stand and screech like a fishwife on the town square and peddle hocus-pocus and unwashed wool?’ He laughs scornfully. ‘In that case, you’re stupider than you look.’

‘It’s no good without a cow,’ she retorts, and tightens her lips.

‘He can’t keep hold of his servants,’ Ann Barbara says. ‘He’s never had anyone who wanted to stay with him, and he’s frightened I’ll run away too.’

Who would be so daft as to run away from the captain? Anmai-Mouse cannot fathom it. She thinks of all the things she gets to do: to look after the animals, to eat until full, to lie undisturbed in the night. Indeed, she eats and sleeps like a princess, receives no beatings, has never once been forced to go begging in barely any clothes, and no toothless slobbering mouth has ever pressed itself against her lips here. She looks in the captain’s books with him in the evenings, and he teaches her the alphabet and how to use it. The captain has a drawer filled with sand in which she writes the letters with a stick. Anmai-Mouse, she writes uncertainly. Sheep. Sun. Dog. Book.

‘How do you write *Knasper* and *madrum*?’ she wants to know.

‘Those aren’t the kind of words one writes,’ the captain tells her.

Ann Barbara cannot read and has never learned to write her name. But Ann Barbara can tell stories.

‘Have you noticed how careful he is to put the beam in place in the evenings?’ she says.

Anmai-Mouse has never given it a thought.

‘Mostly, of course, it’s so the likes of you don’t come sneaking in, stealing and setting the place alight. I doubt you’ve ever burned down farms yourself, but the rabble you come from, your people or whatever you call them, they won’t think twice about it, not if they don’t come away with the side of bacon they’ve been hoping to lay their hands on. Anyway, out at Koldkur there’s a couple of farms, and one morning one of the farmholders there gets up to start the day’s work, and he goes into the cart shed to draw the cart out, and lo and behold what does he find there but two men, stark naked on the back of his cart, and what’s more both of them are dead.

The folk are called together. They stare at the two strangers on the cart. No one on the farm has ever seen them before. And they’ve not a scrap of clothing on them that can say a thing about them.

No one heard a peep in the night.

The farmholder's wife had even been up to pass her water. Maybe there'd been a murderer standing behind her. And of course, she didn't look in the cart shed. How was she to know two men would be murdered there that same night?

Or were they already dead when they were put there?

Was someone trying to cast suspicion on the farmholder of Koldkur?

Their throats had been cut.

So anyway, the farmholder takes two young heifers that have never borne a yoke and never drawn a cart. He puts them in front of the cart and lashes them good and proper, and off they bolt, careering madly across the heath.

The next day, everyone goes out looking for them, and eventually they find them, the two heifers, resting in a hollow, and the cart and the two men as well.

And there, in that hollow, in that very place, the two men lie buried to this day.

It's easy to find the place, because someone comes and leaves flowers there. There's an oblong-shaped mound, with flowers on it.

I know a girl who says there's always flowers on the grave. She says no one knows who puts them there.

She's been there herself.

The two men had all their hair cut off. So not even the colour of their hair was known.'

One evening, Ann Barbara is nowhere to be found. It would have been best if she had been there that evening. It begins with the dog getting up to bark. For that evening, at bedtime, a carriage arrives, and seated on the box is a thin, whiskered man in a tall black hat and a striped waistcoat. In the dim light of the two carriage lamps he leans down and says to the captain, who has come to the gate: 'I bring a passenger.'

The captain raises the lantern he holds in his hand and peers at the carriage window. But all he can see is his own reflection.

'What passenger?' he demands to know.

'A woman in need of shelter.' A nervous flicker crosses the man's face. 'I can say no more.'

An arm brushes the pane, and the captain glimpses black lace. He steps aside and allows the carriage to pass into the yard.

The driver climbs down.

'We'd best shut the gate,' he says.

The captain does so, and puts the beam in place. The door of the carriage opens, and without waiting for the driver's assistance, a corpulent woman, round-shouldered and hunched in all her meaty bulk, face hidden behind a black lace veil, in a black dress and black gloves, steps out.

'We've come a long way,' the driver says. 'My passenger is weary.'

The captain leads them through the house. Only moments ago, when the dog began to bark, Ann Barbara was sat in her usual place in front of the fire.

He shows them into the parlour and pulls out a chair for the woman, leaving the driver to stand.

'Is the lady hungry?' he asks.

The woman nods. The captain absents himself and goes to the sleeping room to wake Ann Barbara. Anmai-Mouse is sound asleep, but Ann Barbara is not there. He searches for her. He goes outside to see if she might be there. The beam is in place.

'Ann Barbara,' he calls.

He spoons some leftovers into a bowl and finds a knife and fork.

‘My passenger asks if she might have a dram to fortify herself,’ the driver says.

The captain brings out a bottle and a glass. The woman’s hand reaches under her veil, and she drinks.

‘Forgive our coming so late,’ says the driver, ‘only we heard the captain’s is a good place to hide.’

‘I wouldn’t know about that,’ the captain says.

‘It’s said that no one ever comes here,’ the driver adds, his voice faltering. Edgy and clearly ill at ease with the situation, he fidgets with his whiskers, twisting them between the yellowed tips of his fingers.

‘What’s said is stuff and nonsense,’ the captain says, and rises to his feet, noticing that the woman’s skirt is torn at the hem, as if it has been trodden upon.

‘Help me in God’s name,’ she suddenly blurts. The captain looks down into her eyes, which peer from behind her lace. They look upon him imploringly, as if she were about to dissolve into tears.

He finds the whole situation increasingly odd.

The woman stands.

‘Help a poor woman soon to be plunged into marriage. My father has given me away to a beast of a man, and now I dread the wedding night.’

The captain stares in perplexity at this peculiar, veiled individual and senses the alertness of the dog at his side.

‘I know he will beat me black and blue, and render me so weary that I shall be unable to walk for days,’ the woman goes on. ‘Oh, he is as wicked as the Devil himself, though wealthy as a prince and as miserly as any captain, and the wedding is to be held in only four weeks. Help a poor woman, I beseech thee, before the shackle closes about her neck. I fear he shall make mincemeat of me. Everyone trembles at his name, and it is I, poor, wretched woman,’ she wails, ‘who am singled out to be his wife.’ As she speaks, the character of her voice changes almost imperceptibly, from high-pitched to deep, from a piercing screech to a throaty whisper. ‘He, who gets whatever he wants, who takes whomever he will, he, he, has singled me out, and I am afraid of what he might be in the

mind to do.' And then, abruptly: 'But if thinks he can get away with monkey business, then …' A pause. 'Then he had best watch out.' Unsettlingly, the voice has now descended to a bass. The dog begins to growl. The person behind the veil begins to laugh, then suddenly erupts: 'For then I shall kick his sorry arse!' And amid hysterical splutters, the veil is snatched away to reveal: Schinkel.

'Ha ha!' he roars with delight. 'One should be thankful not to be a woman, suffocating in all that bloody lace. There, had you fooled, eh, von Kahlen? Had you fooled, as true as I'm standing here!'

The captain clicks his heels and dips his head in suggestion of a bow. 'Schinkel makes a fine woman in his skirts.'

'And von Kahlen is quite the wag, it seems,' Schinkel retorts, extricating himself from the veil which he then emphatically tramples into the floor. 'I felt the sudden urge to go for a drive. A man must make the most of his final time in freedom. Who's to say if my bride-to-be will appreciate such dressing up? I wished to see if I could amuse you a bit, my dear Captain. For your sake entirely, of course. But we must speak of clothing. I've brought my tailor along as promised. He's even got his tape measure with him. I think we can say he wasn't quite as happy about my little whim as I myself, but there you have it. What did you think of his performance? Was he convincing?'

'I find it rather peculiar,' the captain replies, 'to turn up in such manner. What's the idea?'

'Peculiar, indeed, you have the point,' Schinkel barks. 'The very point. There was no idea. I did it only because I was able. And, I will add, because I may do as I please. You avert your eyes, Captain. You deign not to look at me. Have you not seen a man in women's clothing before? Alas, I suppose the life of a eunuch is not an easy one. A man can get the wrong urges, and refuse to acknowledge them. Unless he is a eunuch, that is. Are you a eunuch, Captain? You have seen war, I take it?'

'I served with the auxiliary corps in the Polish and Austrian wars of succession.'

'And was he gelded by it? Is he a castrate? Ha ha ha!' Schinkel leafs absently through a book. 'Forgive a little joke. But as someone familiar with regimental life the captain

surely knows the custom of drawing lots amongst the new recruits, dressing the lucky winner up as a woman, with a corset and red-painted lips, sending her on the rounds from bunk to bunk for the common joy and delight? You answer me not? Perhaps the custom is unfamiliar to him? Very well. Anyway, I've brought my tailor along, as I said. Mr Vonsild is his name. A tailor versed in gentleman's outfitting, and he has kindly agreed to outfit you, Captain. Of course, I've impressed upon him the importance, nay, the necessity of keeping it cheap. Indeed, I have taken pains to stress how careful the captain is obliged to be with his meagre means, have I not, Mr Vonsild? Have I not stressed the fact? A suit of clothes, nothing fancy, but serviceable. That is the agreement. Black, of course, none of the gaudy scarlet of which you captains are so fond. Mr Vonsild, get out your measuring stick so we can make something presentable of the man.'

Mr Vonsild removes his hat and places it on the table.

'May I ask the captain to take off his coat?' he says.

But the captain keeps his coat on. 'I already have a suit of clothes,' he says. 'And now if the gentlemen will excuse me? The time is nearly midnight.'

'You're throwing us out?' Schinkel replies in a menacing tone, only then to make light of it. He laughs, and wags his finger under the captain's nose. 'The captain's a card, I say. And moreover, he's no eunuch, is he? This house used to smell of nothing more than man-folk and soot,' he says. 'Now,' he goes on, sniffing the air theatrically, 'I sense the smell of a woman. You have a woman in the house. Or was I mistaken to notice the knitting over by the fireplace just before? Have you taken on a housekeeper, Louse-wig?'

'Indeed, I have,' says the captain.

'I should like to have cast my eye upon her. A shame that she wouldn't present herself. Another time, then. Good. I shall see you next on the entrance of my bride into the manor. Don't be late. Wear something decent. Come, Mr Vonsild. Come.'

The carriage rattles out through the gate. The captain makes sure the beam is securely in place. He returns inside to Ann Barbara's alcove in the sleeping room, carrying the lamp. There she lies, pretending to sleep. He shines the light on her. Then shakes her gently. She emits a squeal and pulls the cover up to her chin.

‘Stop it,’ he says. ‘I won’t hurt you. Stop looking at me like that.’

He withdraws into the parlour. He feels tired and out of sorts. He sits down at his desk. He ought to go to bed. Instead, he sits in the chair with his legs stretched out in front of him. He hears Ann Barbara attend to the fire, blowing on the embers. She has returned. Once Schinkel had gone, she was back in her bed as if she had never been away. He is both relieved and in poor spirits. He feels he could sit up all night, if needs be. It is as if he has become petrified. If he tells his hand to help him up, it remains on his knee.

She comes in with a cup of tea for him. She looks at him. ‘Is the captain ill?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me,’ he says. ‘I just need to sit a while, that’s all.’ He takes the cup in his hand. ‘Where were you?’ he asks. ‘You can’t just run off when it suits you. You’re to come when I call.’

She is wearing her everyday clothes, but without the scarf she normally has wound about her head. The captain squints at her. It is the first time he has seen her hair. She has a plait that reaches to her waist. It is the loveliest hair.

He sips his tea.

‘Sit down,’ he says.

She pulls out a chair and sits down at the other side of the desk.

‘Where were you?’ he asks again.

‘I could hear it was his carriage coming,’ she says. She makes to get up, only he stops her. ‘Stay a minute,’ he says.

Steam rises from his cup. It feels like his eyes are being bathed.

‘I suppose you’ve got to let him in, if he wants in,’ she says. ‘But do you know the person he is? He makes the farm lads tie rocks into the sheaves the poor folk come for at Christmas. An old woman lugged just such a sheaf home with her one year. It was so heavy she could barely carry it. Full of joy she was, even if it nearly broke her back. But when she got home and pulled the sheaf apart, she saw that it was full of rocks. You must never accept anything from him. He does things a lot worse than that.’

‘What things?’ the captain asks.

He grips her wrist. She does not look away. Her cheeks bloom red. ‘One day, his coffin, and those of his wife and his little children too, will be hauled to their graves on the back of a dung cart,’ she says.

Sample pp. 3-17, 105-117 MS

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