

THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER

Storks tell so many tales to their young, all of them from the marsh and the bog, normally adapted to suit their age and comprehension; the smallest are happy enough to hear 'cribble, crabble, puddly, muddly!' they find that excellent, but the older ones want the tales to have a deeper meaning, or at least something about the family. Of the two oldest and longest tales that have maintained their position with the storks we are all familiar with one of them, the one about Moses, who was placed out in the waters of the Nile by his mother, was found by the king's daughter, given a good upbringing and became a great man about whose burial place people later knew nothing. That is quite normal.

The second tale is as yet unknown, perhaps because it is almost a family one. This tale has passed down from mother stork to mother stork for a thousand years and each of them has told it better and better, and we are now going to tell it best of all.

The first pair of storks who came with it and familiarised themselves with it used to have their summer stay at the Viking log-fort up by Vildmosen in Vendsyssel; this lies in the shire of Hjørring, right up near Skagen in Jutland, to be absolutely correct; it is still a terribly large bog, one can read about it in the Account of the Shire. Once it used to be a sea-bed, but it rose up and now stands there; it stretches for miles and miles on all sides, surrounded by water meadows and springy fens, with peat bogs, cloudberry and stunted trees; a mist nearly always hangs over it and seventy years ago there were still wolves here; so it really deserves to be called the 'Wild Bog' and one can imagine how trackless, how marshy and lake-like it must have been a thousand years ago! well, the individual features were roughly what one can still see: the reeds had the same height, the same kind of long leaves and violet-brown feathery flowers that they still have, the birch stood with its white bark and fine, loosely-hanging leaves as it still does, and, as regards the living creatures that came here, well, the fly wore its dress of crape cut the same way as now, the stork's body was white with black and red stockings, whereas the cut of humans' clothing differed from today's, but each of them, bondsman or hunter, anyone at all who stepped out onto the quagmire suffered the same fate a thousand years ago as is still the case with those that come here – they fell in and sank down to the Marsh King, as he was called, who ruled down in the great bog kingdom. He could also be called the Mire King, but we prefer to say Marsh King; and that is also what the storks called him. We know very little about how he reigned, but perhaps that is a good thing too.

Near the bog, close to the Limfjord, lay the Viking log-fort with a stone-built cellar, tower and three storeys; up on the roof the stork had built its nest, the mother stork was lying on the eggs and was sure they would hatch out.

One evening the father stork was away for a long time and when he came home, he looked dishevelled and agitated.

'I've something terrible to tell you!' he said to the mother stork.

'Don't do that!' she said, 'remember, I'm sitting on the eggs, I could be upset by it and that would effect the eggs.'

'You've got to know it!' he said. 'She arrived, the daughter of our host in Egypt! She's risked the journey here! and now she's gone!'

'The one who is kith and kin with the fairies! Oh, tell me! You know I can't stand waiting during the time I'm on the eggs!'

Well, missus, she must have believed what the doctor said, as you told me; she's believed that the bog-flower up here could help her sick father and she's flown here in the guise of a feathered bird with the two other feathered princesses who come up north every years in order to bathe and rejuvenate themselves! she's come, and now she's gone!'

‘You’re making the story so long-winded!’ the mother stork said, ‘the eggs could get cold! I can’t stand all the excitement!’

‘I’ve kept a look-out!’ the father stork said, ‘and this evening I went out in the reeds where the quagmire can bear my weight, and three swans came along, there was something about their gait which said to me: watch out, they’re not exactly swans, they’re only in dressed as swans! You know the sort of feeling one gets, missus! just as I do, you know when something feels right or not!’

‘Yes, yes!’ she said, ‘but tell me about the princess! I’m tired of hearing about feathered dresses!’

‘Here in the middle of the bog, as you know, there something rather like a lake,’ the father stork said, ‘you can see a bit of it if you stretch up a bit; close to the reeds and the green quagmire there lay a large alder stump; on it the three swans sat, flapped their wings and looked around; one of them took off its guise, and I recognised her as our house-princess from Egypt; she was now sitting there with nothing else on than her long black hair; she asked the two others, I could hear, to take good care of her swan’s dress while she dived down into the water to pluck the flower which she thought she could see. They nodded and took off, lifting up the loose dress of feathers; well, I wonder what they’re going to do with it, I thought, and she asked them exactly the same thing and got her answer, she saw it for herself, they flew up with her dress of feathers: ‘Just you dive!’ they called out, ‘you’ll never fly in the guise of a swan again, never see the land of Egypt again! just you sit in the Wild Bog!’ and then they tore her dress into a hundred pieces, so that the feathers flew all over the place, as if it was a snowstorm! and off flew the two wicked princesses!’

‘That’s frightful!’ the mother stork said, ‘I can’t stand hearing it! – so tell me, what happened next?’

‘The princess moaned and wept! Her tears rolled down onto the alder stump and then it moved, for it was the Marsh King himself, the one that lives in the bog. I saw how the stump moved and then it was no longer a stump that stuck up long, muddy branches, like arms; then the poor child was frightened and ran off into the marshy quagmire, but it can’t bear my weight, let alone hers, she immediately sank into it, and the alder stump went down too, he was the one who dragged her; large, black bubbles came up and there was no more trace of her. Now she is buried in the Wild Bog, and will never return with the flower to the land of Egypt. You wouldn’t have been able to stand the sight of it, missus!’

‘You should never have told me anything of the sort at a time like this! it can affect the eggs! – the princess is sure to look after herself! she’s certain to get help! if it had been me or you, one of ours, that would have been the end of it!’

‘But I’ll take a look every day!’ the father stork said, and he did.

A long time now passed.

Then one day, he saw that from the very depths a green shoot was sprouting, and when it reached the surface, a leaf came out that spread wider and wider; next to it a bud grew, and when the stork flew over it one morning, it opened in the warmth of the sun’s rays, this bud, and in the middle of it there lay a lovely child, a little girl, just as if she had come from her bath; she looked so like the princess from Egypt that the stork at first believed that she had become small once more, but then he thought again, and found it more reasonable that it was the child of the princess and the Marsh King; that was why it lay in a water-lily.

‘It can’t just go on lying there;’ the stork thought, ‘there are already so many in my nest! but, I’ve just had an idea! The Viking’s wife has no children, she has often wished she had a baby, I’m always blamed for coming with them, just this once I could really do so! I’ll fly to the Viking’s wife with the child; it will bring great pleasure!’

And the stork took the little girl, flew to the log-fort, made a hole with its bill in the bladder-skin window-pane, laid the child at the Viking woman’s breast, then flew back to the mother stork and told her, and their young listened to the story; they were old enough to hear it.

‘So you see, the princess isn’t dead! she has sent the little child up here, and now I’ve found a home for it!’

‘I told you that from the very beginning!’ the mother stork said, ‘just you take a little care of your own children! it’s soon time for us to be off on our travels; I can feel my wings tingling from time to time! The cuckoo and the nightingale have already left, and I’ve heard the quails say that we are soon going to get a favourable wind! our young ones are also up to the dress rehearsal’, if I know them well!’

Well, how glad the Viking’s wife was when she woke up in the morning and found the lovely infant at her breast; she kissed and stroked it, but it screamed terribly and thrashed with its arms and legs, it didn’t seem at all satisfied; finally it cried itself to sleep and when it then lay there, it was such a delightful thing to see. The Viking’s wife was so happy, so light-hearted, so cheerful, she had this intuition that her husband and all his men would come just as unexpectedly as the small child, and so she and the whole household then got busy to get everything ship-shape. The long, brightly coloured tapestries that she and the maidservants had personally woven with portraits of their gods Odin, Thor and Freja, as they were called, were hung up, the thralls had to polish the old shields that were used for decoration, cushions were laid out on the benches, and dry firewood on the fireplace in the middle of the hall, so that the fire could immediately be lit. The Viking woman took part in all this herself, so that by late evening she were extremely tired and slept soundly.

When she woke up early the following morning, she was badly scared, for the little child was completely gone; she leapt up, lit a pine splinter and looked around, and there, where she stretched out her feet in the bed, lay not the small child but a large, horrible toad; she felt quite nauseous at the sight of it, grabbed hold of a heavy pole and was about to kill the frog, but it looked at her with such strange, sad eyes that she was unable to. She looked around her one more time, the frog let out a faint, pathetic croak, this made her start and she ran from the bed over to the hatch, threw it open; the sun immediately streamed in, casting its rays directly onto the large toad in the bed, and it was at once as if the ugly creature’s broad mouth shrank and became small and red, its limbs stretched out into the most attractive creature, it was her own, lovely child that lay there, and not a horrible frog.

‘What’s all this?’ she said, have I been having a bad dream? it’s my own lovely elf-child lying there!’ and she kissed it and pressed it to her heart, but it scratched and bit her just like a wild kitten.

The Viking did not come that day, nor the next, although he has on his way home, but the wind was against him, it was blowing southwards for the storks. Fair weather to some means foul weather to others.

After a couple of days and nights the Viking’s wife realised how things stood with her little child, a terrible spell had been cast on her. During the day it was as delightful to look at as a sylph, but she had a wicked, wild nature; at night, on the other hand, she was a horrible toad, quiet and whimpering with sorrowful eyes; there were two natures in her that alternated, both externally and internally; this was due to the fact that the little girl which the stork had brought her had its rightful mother’s exterior during the daytime, but its father’s temperament; at night, on the other hand, it resembled him physically, but within gleamed the mind and heart of her mother. How could this power of this black-magic spell be broken? The Viking’s wife was fearful and sad at this, but in her heart she was attached to the poor creature, whose dual nature she did not feel able to tell her husband about when he soon arrived home, for then, as was customary, he would place the child way off the beaten track and let it be taken by whoever felt so inclined. The honest-natured Viking woman couldn’t bring herself to it – he would only be allowed to see the child in broad daylight.

One morning, stork wings could be heard swishing over the roof; that night, more than a hundred pairs of storks had been resting after the dress rehearsal, now they were airborne and travelling south.

‘All men at the ready!’ it was said, ‘Wives and children too!’

‘I am so light!’ the young storks said, ‘it tingles and tickles right down to my legs, as if I was full of live frogs! how lovely it is to be able to travel abroad!’

‘Keep to the flock!’ father and mother said, ‘and don’t clack your bills so much, it’s bad for your chest!’

And off they flew.

At the same moment the lur sounded over the heath, the Viking had landed with all his men; they were returning with rich spoils from the Gallic coast, where the people, as in Britain, sang out in fear:

‘Free us from the wild men of the North!’

Ah, what mirth and merriment there was in the Viking fort down by the Wild Bog. The vat of mead was brought into the hall, the fire was lit and horses were slaughtered; it was time for braising lots of meat. The priest sprinkled the warm horse-blood on the thralls as an offering; the fire crackled, the smoke billowed up under the roof, the soot dripped from the beams, but they were used to that. Guests had been invited, and they received fine gifts, all quarrels and deceit was forgotten; there was much drinking, and they threw the gnawed bones in each other’s faces, that was a sign of good humour. The bard – a kind of musician but also a warrior – had been with them and he knew what he was singing about, sang them a lay in which they heard about all their feats of war and peculiarities, and each verse ended with the same refrain: ‘Wealth dies, kinsmen die, one likewise dies oneself, but a glorious name never dies!’ and then all of them beat their shields and hammered with knives or knucklebones on the table top, making a mighty noise.

The Viking’s wife sat on the crossbench in the open banqueting hall, she was wearing a silken dress, gold bracelets and large amber beads; she was in all her finery, and the bard also mentioned her in his song, spoke of the golden treasure she had brought her rich husband, and the latter was extremely pleased with the lovely child he has only seen in daylight in all its loveliness; the wildness in it he liked, she could become, he said, a fierce shield-maiden, formidable in battle! she would not flinch if a practised hand, in jest, sliced off her eyebrows in jest.

The vat of mead was drained, a new one brought in, yes, serious drinking was done, these were people who could really quaff great quantities. The maxim then was: ‘Cattle know when to leave their grazing, but an unwise man never knows the measure of his maw.’ Well, they knew this, but one knows one thing yet does another! they also knew that ‘One wears out his welcome by sitting too long in another man’s house!’ but they stayed there even so, for meat and mead are a good thing! there was much merry-making; and that night the thralls slept in the warm ashes, dipped their fingers in the greasy soot and licked them. It was a pleasurable time!

Once more the Viking set out on an expedition that year, in spite of the rising autumn storms; he took his men to the coast of Britain, it was only ‘just across the water’ he said, and his wife remained at home with her little girl, and it was certain that the foster mother was almost fonder of the poor toad with the devout eyes and deep sighs than the lovely creature that tore and bit.

The raw, clammy autumn mist, ‘Mouthless’, that gnaws the leaves off, lay over forest and heath, ‘Bird of no Feathers’, which they call the snow, followed after it, winter was on the way; the sparrows took over the stork’s nest and argued in their own fashion about the lack of its distinguished owners – yes, what had become of them?

The storks were now in Egypt, where the sun shone hot, as it does back here on a lovely summer’s day, tamarinds and acacias bloomed everywhere, the crescent moon of Muhammed gleamed

brightly from the domes of the mosques; on the slender towers sat many a pair of storks, resting after their long journey; entire flocks had nest upon nest on the mighty columns and broken arches of temples and forgotten places; the date palms raised their protective roofs high up as if they wanted to be parasols. The white-grey pyramids stood like shadow figures against the clear air out towards the desert, where the ostrich showed it was able to use its legs, and the lion sat with large, wise eyes gazing at the marble Sphinx that lay half-buried by the sand. The waters of the Nile had receded, the entire river-bed was teeming with frogs and this was now the loveliest sight of all in this land for the stork family. The young storks thought it was an optical illusion, all of it was so incomparable.

‘This is how it is here, and how we always have it in our hot countries!’ the mother stork said, and her young were itching to see more.

‘Is there even more to see?’ they said, ‘do we have to go much further inland?’

‘There is nothing else particularly worth seeing!’ the mother stork said; ‘fringing the fertile bank there is only trackless forest where the trees grow into each other and are enmeshed by thorny creepers, only the elephant with its massive feet can force its way through; the snakes here are too big and the lizards too sprightly. If you want to go towards the desert, you will get sand in your eyes, no matter which way it goes, you will end up in a sandstorm; no, it’s best here! here there are frogs and locusts! this is where I am staying, and so are you!’

And they stayed; the old ones sat in their nest in the slim minaret, rested and were busy even so smoothing out their feathers and rubbing their red stockings with their bills; then they raised their necks, greeted each other solemnly and raised their heads with the high foreheads and the fine, smooth feathers, and their brown eyes gleamed so wisely. The young females walked solemnly among the juicy reeds, glanced sideways at the other young storks, got to know each other and, at every third step, swallowed a frog, or dangled a small snake, that looked good, they thought, and tasted good as well. The young males quarrelled, slapped each other with their wings, pecked at each other, even to the point of drawing blood, and then this one and that one got engaged, the male and female young – that was what they lived for; and they built their nest and then a new quarrel arose, for all those in the hot countries are so hot-tempered, but it was pleasurable, especially for the old ones: the young ones could do no wrong! every day there was sunshine, every day plenty to eat, one only had to think of one’s own pleasure. – But inside the rich palace of their Egyptian host, as they called him, no pleasure resided whatsoever.

The rich, powerful master lay on the couch, all his limbs stiff, stretched out like a mummy, in the middle of the large hall with the motley-coloured walls; it was as if he lay in a tulip. Relatives and servants stood around him; he wasn’t dead, nor could only actually say he was alive – the healing bog-flower from the northern lands, the one that was to be sought of the person who loved him most, would never be brought him. His lovely young daughter, who in the guise of a swan had flown over sea and land, all the way to the northern lands, would never return: ‘she is dead and gone!’ the two returning swan-maidens had announced; they had made up a whole story about it together. This is what they related:

‘All three of us flew high in the air, then a huntsman saw us and let fly his arrow; it hit our young friend and, she sank, singing her farewell like a dying swan, down into the forest lake; there, on the bank we buried her beneath a weeping birch! Though we took our revenge; we bound fire under the wing of the swallow that built its nest under the reed-thatched roof of the hunter, it caught fire, the house flared up, he burnt inside it, it blazed so strongly across the lake it could be seen by the weeping-birch, where she now lies, earth amidst earth; she will never return to the land of Egypt!’

And then both of them wept, and the father stork, when he heard this, clacked his beak causing a great rattling sound:

‘Lies and fabrications!’ he said. ‘I feel like plunging my bill deep into their breast!’

‘Breaking it off in the process!’ the mother stork, ‘that would make you a pretty sight! think first of yourself, then of your family – everything else is secondary!’

‘But I intend to sit on the edge of the open come tomorrow, when all the learned and wise men meet to discuss the sick ruler; perhaps they will get a little closer to the truth!’

And the learned and wise men met and spoke a lot, about this and that the stork couldn’t make head or tail of, – nor did anything come of it for the sick man, or for the daughter in the Wild Bog; but we can listen to a little of the discussion nonetheless, one has to listen to so much else.

But it is most correct to listen and hear about what preceded all this, then we are better acquainted with the story, at least as much as the father stork was.

‘Love engenders life! the highest love engenders the highest life! other through life is the salvation from life to be won!’ was said, and that was exceptionally wisely and well said, the learned ones asserted.

‘It is also a nice thought!’ the father stork immediately said.

‘I can’t quite understand it!’ the mother stork said, ‘and that is not through any fault of mine but of the thought itself, though that doesn’t matter in the slightest, I’ve other things to put my mind to!’

And now the learned ones had talked about love between this and that, the difference existed, love that those in love felt, and that between parents and children, between the light and the plants, how the sun kissed the mud and that this caused the shoot to emerge – it was so discursively and learnedly compiled that it was impossible for the father stork to keep up with them, let alone repeat it; this made him highly pensive, he closed his eyes and stood on one leg for a whole day afterwards; learning was too heavy for him to bear.

In spite of this, the father stork understood – he had heard both common folk and those of highest rank speak straight from the heart – that it was a great calamity for many thousands of people as well as the country itself that this man lay sick and was unable to recover; it would be a source of happiness and a blessing if he regained his health. ‘But where does the flower grow that would give him back his health?’ that is what all of them sought to know, sought in learned books, the twinkling stars, wind and weather, sought along all the paths, direct and indirect, that it was possible to find, and finally the learned and wise men had, as mentioned, found this out: ‘Love engenders life, life for the father’, and there they were saying more than they themselves understood; they repeated it and even wrote it down as a prescription: ‘Love engenders life’, but how this thing was to be made up from the prescription, well, that was as far as they had got. Finally they agreed that help had to come from the princess, she who with her heart and soul loved this father. They also arrived at how this could be brought about, well they did so for more than a year and a day earlier, she was at night, when the new moon that was to be lit had been taken down again, to go out to the marble Sphinx in the desert, throw away the sand from the door at the base of it, and there walk along a long passage that led into the middle of one of the great pyramids, where one of the mighty kings of ancient times, surrounded by splendour and glory, lay in his mummy casing; here she was to bend her head down to the dead king, and then it would be revealed to her who life and salvation was to be gained for her father.

All this she had carried out, and in dreams discovered that from the deep bog in the land of the Danes, the location was described extremely accurately, she was to bring back the lotus flower that had touched her breast in the depths of the waters. Her father would then be saved.

That was why she flew in the guise of a swan from the land of Egypt up to the Wild Bog. See, all this father and mother stork knew, and now we know it more clearly that we did before. We know that the Marsh King dragged her down to himself, know that for those in her country back

home she is dead and gone; only the wisest of them all still said, like the mother stork: 'she's sure to look after herself!' and that is what they would wait for, since they did not know of anything better.

'I think that I will filch the swan dress from the two wicked princesses!' the father stork said, 'then they will not be able to get to the Wild Bog and cause mischief; the swan dresses I will hide up there until there is a use for them!'

'Up where do you intend to hide them?' the mother stork asked.

'In our nest down by the Wild Bog!' he said. 'I and our youngest ones could help each other to carry them, and if they become too troublesome, there plenty of place along our route where we could hide them until our next migration. One swan dress was probably enough for her, but two is better; it's a good idea to have lots of travelling clothes in a northern country!'

'No one will thank you for that!' the mother stork said, 'but you're the master! I have no say except when I'm lying on the eggs!'

In the Viking fort down by the Wild Bog, which the storks flew to with the coming of spring, the little girl had been given a name: they had called her Helga, but that name was far too soft for a temperament such as the one this loveliest of creatures had; month by month it became more obvious, and for years, yes, while the storks undertook the same journey, to the Nile in the autumn, to the Wild Bog with the coming of spring, the young child became a big girl, and before one had time to think about it, she was the loveliest maiden in her sixteenth year; with a beautiful shell, but a hard and bitter kernel, wilder than most in that hard, dark age.

She used to like to spatter her white hands with the steaming blood of the slaughtered sacrificial horse; in her savageness she bit through the throat of the black cockerel that the priest was going to slaughter, and to her foster father she said, in deadly earnest:

'If your enemy came and fixed ropes around the ends of the roof beams and lifted the roof up over your chamber while you were asleep, I wouldn't wake you even if I could! I wouldn't hear it, so does the blood still throb in the ear you once boxed many years ago, do you hear me! Oh yes, I remember alright!'

But the Viking did not believe her word, he was like the others, entranced by her loveliness; nor did he know that little Helga's temperament and appearance changed places. She rode bareback, as it glued to the horse, even at a full gallop, and she did not jump off it if it got into a fight with the other bad-natured horses. Fully dressed, she often threw herself from the hillside out into the strong current of the fjord and swam to meet the Viking when his boat was making for the land. Out of her lovely, long hair she cut off the longest lock and made a bowstring out of it:

'Self-made is best-made!' she said.

The Viking's wife was herself of a strong mind and temperament, by the standards of the age, but compared to her daughter she was like a soft, fearful woman; she also knew that there was a magic spell hanging over the terrible daughter.

It was as if Helga, out of sheer wicked pleasure, hit on the idea, when her mother stood in the upstairs gallery or went out into the courtyard, to sit down on the edge of the well, throw out her arms and legs and let herself fall down into the deep, narrow hole where, like a frog, she would dive down and come up again, and then clamber up as if she was a cat and enter the main hall soaking wet, causing the green leaves that had been strewn on the floor to swirl around in the stream of water.

There was, however, one thing that could hold back little Helga, that was twilight; then she turned still and almost pensive, allowed herself to be called and led; then some inner feeling drew her towards her mother, and when the sun went down and the transformation inside and out then followed, she sat there quiet, sad, shrunk into the form of a toad, although her body was of course

far larger than that creature's, but precisely because of that even more horrible; she looked like a miserable dwarf with a frog's head and webbed fingers. There was something so melancholy about the eyes she saw with, the voice she did not have, only a hollow croak, just like a child that sobs in a dream; then the Viking's wife could take her up on her lap, she forgot the ugly exterior, only looked at the melancholy eyes and said more than once:

'I almost wish you always were my silent frog-child; you are more horrible to look at, when the loveliness is on the outside!'

And she wrote runes against sorcery and sickness, and tossed them over the poor child, but no improvement took place.

'One would hardly believe she has been so small that she has lain in a water-lily!' the father stork said; 'now she is a whole human being and the spitting image of her Egyptian mother; we have never seen her since! she didn't look after herself, as you and the wisest wise man thought. I have, year out and year in, flown back and forth over the Wild Bog, but she has never given any sign of herself! Indeed, I can tell you that all the years I have come up here a few days before you, so that I could repair the nest, but this or that in order, I have continually flown a whole night, as if I was an owl or a bat, over the open water, but to no avail! nor did we have any use for the two swan dresses that I and the fledglings hauled all the way here from the land of the Nile; it was troublesome enough, it took us three journeys. Now they have lain for many years at the bottom of the nest, and if some fire disaster takes place once more, it could be that the log-fort is burnt to the ground, and then they are gone too!'

'And our fine nest would be gone!' the mother stork said, 'that is less in your thoughts than that feathery clothing and your bog-princess! You ought perhaps to go down to her and stay down there in the mud! You're a poor father for your own children, I've said that from the first time I lay on eggs. I only hope we or our young don't get an arrow in our wing from that mad Viking minx! she doesn't know what she's doing. We've had this as our home quite a but longer than she has, she ought to bear that in mind; we never forget our obligations, we pay our dues every year, a feather, and egg and a chick, as is right and proper. Do you think that I feel like going down there when she is outside, as in the old days, and as I do in Egypt, where I am almost a friend with them, without forgetting myself, and I'm allowed to peek into every vessel and pot? No, I sit up here and am vexed by her – minx! – and I'm vexed with you too! You should have left her lying in the water-lily, then she would have been gone!'

'You are much more worthy of respect than your speech is!' the father stork said – 'I know you better than you know yourself!'

And he gave a hop, two heavy flaps of his wings, stretched his legs out backwards and flew, sailed off, without moving his wings, he was a good way off when he took a powerful strokes, the sun shone on his white feathers, his neck and head stretched out forwards! He flew with a combination of speed and style.

'He really is the handsomest of the lot!' the mother stork said, 'But I don't tell him that.'

Early that autumn the Viking returned with spoils and prisoners; among these was a young Christian priest, one of the men who persecuted the idols of the Northern lands. In hall and bower there was much talk of the new faith that had spread widely in the countries to the south, that, via the holy priest Ansgarius had actually reached up to Hedeby at the head of Slien fjord; even little Helga had heard about the belief in the White Christ, who out of love to humanity had sacrificed himself in order to save it; it went in one ear and out the other, as one says; the word love she only

seems to have any inkling of when in her wretched form of a frog she cowered in her locked chamber; but the Viking's wife had listened and felt herself strangely moved by the legends and sagas that were told about the son of the one true God.

The man, home from their expedition, had spoken of the magnificent temples of expensive hewn stone raised in honour of the one whose message was love; a couple of heavy golden vessels, beautifully carved and made entirely of pure gold, had been brought back and in each of these there was a distinctive spicy scent, they were censers full of incense that the Christian priests swung in front of the altar, where blood never flowed, but the wine and consecrated bread were transformed into *his* blood – he who had given himself for generations as yet unborn.

The young captive Christian priest was placed in the deep, stone-lined cellar of the log-house, bound hand and foot; he was handsome, 'as fine a sight as Baldur!' the Viking's wife said, moved by his dire situation, but young Helga wanted to have a rope put round his legs and attached to the tails of wild oxen.

'Then I would let loose the dogs; tallyho! and off across bogs and ponds, out to the heath! it would be a gleeful sight to see, even more gleeful to be able to ride alongside him on his travels!'

The Vikings, however, were unwilling to let him suffer such a death, but as a denier and persecutor of the high gods he was to be sacrificed the day after on the blood-stone in the grove, the first time it had been used for human sacrifice.

Young Helga asked to be allowed to spatter his blood on the images of the gods and those present; she whetted her gleaming knife and when one of the large, gluttonous dogs, of which there were plenty at the settlement, ran over her feet, she plunged the knife into its side: 'That's just to try it out!' she said, and the Viking's wife looked sadly at the wild, wicked girl, and when night came and the lovely form of the daughter's body and soul changed places, she spoke warm words of sorrow to her, out of a saddened soul.

The ugly toad with the body of a troll stood in front of her and fixed its brown, sorrowful eyes on her, it heard and seemed to understand with the mind of a human.

'Never, not even to my husband, have I ever uttered what I suffer twofold because of you!' the Viking's wife said, 'there is more pity in my heart over you than I myself believed! great is a mother's love! but love never entered your mind! Your heart is like a cold lump of mire! How did you ever come to be in my house!'

Then the wretched creature quivered strangely, it was as if the words touch an invisible cord between body and soul, large tears came into its eyes.

'Your time of tribulation will come at some point!' the Viking's wife said, 'and it will also be a horrible time for me! – it would have been better if you had been placed as a child far from the beaten track, and for the night cold to have been lulled you into a sleep of death!' And the Viking's wife wept salt tears and, angry and sad, went behind the loose hide curtain that hung over the beam and divided the room.

The shrunken toad sat alone in the corner; there was no sound, although after a short while, within her, there came a half-smothered sob; it was as if, in pain, lived was being born in a cranny of her heart. She took a step forward, listened, took another step and now, with clumsy hands, took hold of the heavy pole that barred the door; quietly she managed to remove it, silently she took away the pin that was inserted above the latch; she took hold of the lit lamp that stood at the front of the chamber; it was as if a strong will gave her strength; she pulled out the iron pin from the locked latch, stole down to the prisoner; he was asleep; she touched him with her cold, clammy hand, and he woke up and saw the repulsive figure, he shuddered, as if having a horrible vision. She took out her knife, cut through his bonds and indicated to him that he was to follow her.

He called several saints by name, made the sign of the cross, and when the figure stood there as before, he quoted the words from the Bible:

‘Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. Who are you? How come you have this outer appearance of an animal and are yet full of the deeds of mercy!’

The toad-like figure beckoned him to follow her and led him behind concealing curtains along a lonely passage, out to the stable, point to a horse, he swung himself up onto it, but so did she and sat in front of him, holding on to the animal’s mane. The prisoner understood her and at a brisk canter they followed a path he would never have found himself out to the open heath.

He forgot her repulsive appearance, he sensed that the mercy and compassion of the Lord was active inside the monster; he prayed devout prayers and struck up holy songs; then she quivered – was it the power of prayer and hymns that was at work in her, or was it a shudder of cold at the morning that would soon come? what was it she was sensing? she lifted herself high, wanted to stop the horse and jump down; but the Christian priest held onto her with all his strength, sang a hymn aloud that was able to break the magic spell that kept her in the horrible form of a frog, and the horse charged on even more wildly, the sky turned red, the first rays of the sun broke through the clouds, and with the clear flood of light came the transformation, she was the young beauty with the demoniacal, wicked mind; he was holding the loveliest, young woman in his arms and was appalled at this, leapt down from the horse, brought it to a halt, since he thought he was encountering a new destructive sorcery; but Helga leapt to the ground from the horse at the same time as he did, her short child’s smock only reached to her knees; she pulled the sharp knife from her belt and rushed at the astonished priest.

‘Just let me reach you!’ she shouted, ‘let me reach you and my knife shall enter your body! You are as pale as hay! Thrall! Callow youth!’

She got at close quarters; they grappled in a violent struggle, but it was as if an invisible force gave the Christian man strength; he held her fast, and the old oak tree close by came to his aid by apparently using its roots half freed from the earth to bind her feet, which had slid in under them. Close by was a gushing spring, he sprinkled her with the fresh water over her chest and face, commanded the impure spirit to depart and blessed her in Christian fashion, but the water of baptism has no power when there is no spring of faith within as well.

And yet here too he was the stronger; indeed, more than the strength of a man against the resisting evil force lay in his action, it seemed to impress her, she let her arms sink, looked with astonished eyes and paling cheeks at this man who appeared to be a mighty sorcerer, strong in magic and the secret art; the runes he read were dark, and what secret messages he drew in the air! She would not have batted an eyelid had he swung a dazzling axe or sharp knife at her eyes, but she did so when he traced the sign of the cross on her forehead and chest; and now she sat there like a tame bird, her head bowed down against her breast.

He then spoke gently to her about the act of love she had shown him that night, when she had come to him in the horrible guise of the frog, had loosened his bonds and led him out to light and life; she too was bound, bound with tighter bonds than he was, he said, but she too, through him, would come to light and life. He would take her to Hedeby, to the holy priest Ansgarius; there, in that Christian town, the spell would be broken; but not in front of him on the horse did he dare lead her, even if she was willing to sit there.

‘You must sit behind me on the horse, not in front of me! The magic of your beauty has a power that comes from evil, I fear it – although the victory shall be mine, through Christ!’

He went down on his knees, prayed so devoutly and fervently! it was as if the silent woodland scene was transformed into a holy church; the birds started to sing as if part of the new congregation, the wild mint exuded a fragrance as if it wanted to replace the ambergris and incense; he proclaimed the words of the Bible:

‘The dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

And he spoke of the Prolongation of all of Nature, and while he spoke the horse that had carried them off at a wild gallop stood still and shook the large bramble bushes, so that the ripe, juicy blackberries fell into Helga’s hand, inviting her to quench her thirst.

She patiently allowed herself to be lifted onto the horse’s back, sat there like a sleepwalker that neither wakes nor walks. The Christian man bound two branches together with raffia, so that they formed a cross, this he held up in his hand and then they rode through the forest, which grew more dense, the path deeper, or nor path at all. The blackthorn was like a barrier, they had to ride round it; the spring was no longer a running stream but a turgid bog, they had to ride round it; the forest air gave them strength and refreshment, and no less power in the words of clemency that sounded in faith and Christian love, in the inner urge to lead the bewitched girl into light and life.

Over time, people say, the raindrop hollows out the hard strong, over time the sea’s wave rounds the broken-off, sharp-edged boulder, the dew of mercy, which had now come to little Helga, was hollowing out what was hard, rounding what was sharp; it took place imperceptibly, she did not realise it herself, what does the shoot in the ground know of how by refreshing moisture and the warm sun’s ray it will grow and come into flower.

Just as the song a mother sings to a child gradually fixes itself permanently in its mind, and it imitates the individual words without understanding them, but they later gather together into thoughts that over time becomes clearer, so did the word that has the power to create have its effect on her.

They came out of the forest, rode across the heath, then passed once more through pathless forests, and towards evening met up with robbers.

‘Where have you stolen that lovely lass!’ they shouted, stopped the horse, pulled down the two riders, for they were strapping fellows. The priest had nothing to defend himself with than the knife that he had taken from little Helga, he stabbed around himself with it, one of the robbers swung his axe, but the young, Christian man made a lucky leap to one side, otherwise he would have been hit, now the sharp edge of the axe lodged deep in the horse’s throat, so that the blood spurted out and the animal crashed to the ground; then little Helga, as if wakened from her long, profound musings, rushed over and flung herself over the gasping animal; the Christian priest placed himself in front of her to defend and protect her, but one of the robbers swung his heavy iron hammer against his forehead, so that it was crushed and blood and brains gushed out – he fell to the ground, dead.

The robbers seized little Helga by her white-skinned arm, and at that very moment the sun set, the last ray of the sun was extinguished and she was transformed into a ugly toad; the white-green mouth filled over half her face, her arms turned thin and slimy, broad webbed hands spread out like fans – then the robbers let go of her in horror; she stood there like some repulsive monster in their midst and, as is the nature of frogs, she leapt in the air, higher than she herself was and disappeared into the thicket; when the robbers realised that it was Loki’s wicked cunning, or secret sorcery, they hurried away from the spot in terror.

The full moon had already risen, soon it shone and lit up the scene, and out from the underwood, in the wretched guise of the frog, crawled little Helga; she stopped at the corpse of the Christian priest and his slain steed, she looked at them with eyes that seemed to weep; the frog-head uttered a croak, like a child that bursts into tears. She threw herself over the one of them then over the other, filled her hands, which because of their webbed form were now larger and more hollow, and pour it over them. Dead they were, and dead they would remain! she knew that. Soon wild

beasts would come and devour their bodies; no, that must not happen! so she dug as deep a hole in the ground as she was able; she wanted to open up a grave for them, but all she had to dig with was a hard branch and both her hands, but they were webbed between the fingers, and this web split and the blood flowed. She realised that her task was impossible; then she took water and washed the dead man's face, covered it with fresh, green leaves, bore large branches over to it and laid them on top, shook leaves in between them, then took the heaviest stones she was able to lift and laid them over the dead bodies and filled in the openings with moss, then she believed that the barrow was strong and protected, but during this heavy work the night had passed, the sun came out – and little Helga stood there in all her beauty, with bleeding hands and for the first time with tears on her blushing, maidenly cheeks.

In the transformation, it was as if two natures were wrestling with each other inside her; she trembled, looked around as if wakening from an alarming dream, then went over to the slender beech, held on to it, to have some form of support, and then, in a trice, she climbed like a cat to the very top of the tree and clung on; she sat there like a frightened squirrel, sat there all day long in the deep solitude of the forest, where everything is silent and dead, well, that is what people say! – dead, well, a couple of butterflies fluttered around each other, in play or in earnest; there were some ant-hills close by, each with several hundred busy tiny creatures that milled back and forth; in the air danced countless mosquitoes, swarm upon swarm; hosts of buzzing flies rushed past, ladybirds, dragonflies and other small winged creatures, the worm crept out of the moist soil piled up by the moles – apart from that, it was still dead all around, dead, as people say and believe. No one noticed little Helga except the jays that flew shrieking around the tree top where she sat; they hopped along the branches towards her out of brazen curiosity; she blinked her eye and that was enough to chase them away again, – but they couldn't make her out, and she couldn't make herself out either.

When evening approached, and the sun began to set, the transformation called on her to move once more; she slid down the tree, and as the last ray of the sun was extinguished, she stood there in the shrunken form of the frog, with the torn membranes of her webbed fingers, but her eyes now gleamed with a sheen of beauty that they had hardly possessed before while she was in her daytime beauty; the gentlest, devout girlish eyes now shone behind the young frog's face, they bore witness to a profound mind, a human heart; and these lovely eyes burst into tears, wept the heart's heavy tears of relief.

Down by the grave she had raised the cross of branches bound together with raffia still lay, the last thing done by the man who now was dead and gone; little Helga took it, the thought came of its own accord, planted it among the stones lying on top of him and the slain horse; the sad memory of this caused tears to well up once more, and in this mood of heart she scraped the same sign in the earth around the grave, it formed such a decorative fence around it – and as she scraped the sign of the cross with both hands, the web between her fingers well off like a torn glove, and when she washed herself in the water of the spring, and looked in astonishment at her fine, white hands, she once more made the sign of the cross in the air, between herself and the dead man, then her lips quivered, her tongue started to move and the name she had heard sung and spoken most frequently on their ride through the forest came audibly from her mouth, she spoke it: 'Jesus Christ!'

Then she sloughed off her outer toad-skin, she was once more the lovely young maiden; although she bowed her head from fatigue, her limbs needed rest – she fell asleep.

But her sleep was only to be brief; around midnight she was woken up; in front of her stood the dead horse, it looked radiant, full of life, a gleam shone out of its eyes and its wounded neck; close beside it the slain Christian priest was visible; 'more handsome than Baldur!' the Viking's wife would have said, even though he came in a blaze of flame.

There was a seriousness in the large, gentle eyes, a righteousness of judgment, so piercing a gaze that it seemed to light up the far corners of the one who had been tried so harshly. Little Helga

trembled at this, and her memory was woken with a force as that of the Day of Judgment. All the good that had been granted her, every loving word that had been said to her, became as if brought to life; she understood that it was love that had upheld her here during the days of her ordeal, in which offspring of soul and mire ferment and fight each other; she realised that she had only followed the promptings of her impulses, and not achieved anything herself – everything had been given her, every had been watched over; she bowed down, poor, humble, ashamed, before the One who must be able to read every fold of the heart; and at that moment she felt, like a lightning flash of a purging flame, the blaze of the Holy Spirit.

‘You daughter of the marsh!’ the Christian priest said: ‘Of earth are you formed – from earth you shall rise anew! The sun’s ray within you, aware of its physical existence, returns to its origin, the ray not from the physical sun, but from God! No soul shall be lost, but long-lasting is the temporal that is the flight of life into the eternal. – I come from the land of the dead; you too shall one day travel through the deep valleys into the gleaming mountainous realm where mercy and consummation dwell.

I am not taking you to Hedeby for a Christian baptism, first you must smash the shield of water over the deep bed of the bog, take up the living root of your life and your cradle, practise your calling before the consecration may take place.’

And he lifted her up onto the horse, handed her a golden censer like the one she had once seen in the Viking fort – it gave off such a strong and sweet fragrance. The open wound on the forehead of the slain man gleamed like a brilliant diamond; he took the cross from the grave, raised it high in the air, and now off they shot through the air, over the sougling forest, over the barrows where the warriors lay in the earth, seated on their slain steeds; and the mighty figures rose up, rode out and stood on the tops of the barrows; on their brows gleamed the broad gold band with its golden knot, their cloaks fluttered in the wind. The wyvern that brooded over treasures lifted its head and gazed after them. The people of the dwarfs looked out from barrows and plough furrows, they teemed with red, blue and green lights, like a whole host of sparks in the ashes of burnt paper.

Over forest and heath, rivers and fens they flew, up to the Wild Bog; above it they glided in large circles. The Christian priest raised his cross high, it gleamed like gold, and from his lips came the chant of the mass; little Helga sang it too, like a child sings to its mother’s song; she swung the censer, there came an altar-scent so strong, so miraculous that the reeds and rushes of the bog came into flower; all the shoots shot up from its bed, everything that had life in it lifted itself up, a profusion of water-lilies spread out as if it was an inlaid carpet of flowers and on it lay a sleeping woman, young and beautiful. Little Helga seemed to see herself there, her mirror image in the quiet water; it was her mother she saw, the wife of the Marsh King, the princess from the waters of the Nile.

The dead Christian priest prayed for the sleeping woman to be lifted up onto the horse, but it sank under the burden as if its body was only a winding sheet that flies in the wind, but the sign of the cross made the phantom strong, and all three of the rode out to firm land.

Then the cockerel at the Viking fort crowed and the apparitions dissolved into mist that was carried off by the wind, but facing each other stood mother and daughter.

‘Is it myself I am seeing in the deep water!’ said the mother.

‘Is it myself I am seeing in the gleaming shield!’ exclaimed the daughter, and they approached each other, breast towards breast, arms towards arms, the mother’s heart beat strongest and she understood it.

‘My child! flower of my own heart! my lotus from the deep waters!’

And she embraced her child and wept; her tears were a new baptism of life, of love, for little Helga.

‘I came here dressed as a swan and threw the dress away!’ the mother said, ‘I sank through the swaying flood down into the mire of the bog that closed around me like a wall, but soon I sensed a fresher current; a power pushed me deeper, ever deeper, I felt the weight of sleep on my eyelids, I fell asleep, I dreamt – I seemed to be lying once more among the pyramids of Egypt, but in front of me still stood the swaying alder stump that had frightened me on the expanse of the bog, I looked closely at the cracks in the bark and they started to glow and became hieroglyphs, I was looking at the casing of the mummy, but did not realise it. He twined his arms around me and it was as if I was going to die. I only sensed life once more when I felt warmth on my breast and there a little bird was beating its wings, chirruping and singing. It flew from my breast up towards the dark, heavy ceiling, but a long, green cord still connected it to me; I heard and understood its notes of longing: Freedom! Sunshine! home to the Father! – then I thought of my father in the sun-lit homeland, my life, my love! and I loosened the cord, let it flutter off – home to the Father. Since then I have not dreamt, I slept a sleep, assuredly just as heavy and as long, until strains of song and fragrance now have lifted and released me!’

The green cord from the mother’s heart to the bird’s wings, where did it now flutter, where did it lie discarded? only the stork had seen it; the cord was the green stem, the veil the shining flower, the cradle for the child that had now grown into a beautiful young woman and once more rested on her mother’s heart.

And while they stood there in each other’s embrace, the father stork circled above them, and then sped off to its nest, fetched the dresses of feathers that had lain there for years, threw down one to each of them, and they wrapped themselves around the two of them and they rose from the earth like two white swans.

‘Let us talk!’ the father stork said, ‘now we understand each other’s language, even if the bill is differently carved on the one bird than the other! It is as happy a coincidence as anything can be that you have come tonight, for tomorrow we would have been gone, the missus, I and our offspring! we fly southwards! well, just take a look at me! for I am an old friend from the land of the Nile and so is the missus, she has it more in her heart than in her prattling. She always believed that the princess would look after herself; I and my offspring have carried the dress of swan’s feathers up here! Oh, how happy I am! and what good luck that I am still here; when day dawns we shall be off! a large company of storks! We will fly out front, just you fly behind us, then you will not take a wrong turning; I and my offspring will also keep an eye on you!’

‘And the lotus flower I was to bring!’ the Egyptian princess said, ‘it flies in the dress alongside me! I have the flower of my heart also with me, everything has been resolved. Homewards, homewards!’

But Helga said that she could not leave the land of Denmark before she had seen her foster mother, the loving Viking’s wife, once more. In her mind Helga saw every beautiful memory, every affectionate word, every tear the foster mother had cried and at that moment it was almost as if she was more fond of that mother.

‘Yes, we must fly to the Viking fort!’ the father stork said, ‘that is where the missus and the children are waiting! how their eyes will roll and their bills clatter! Well, the missus doesn’t say all that much! she is brief and to the point, and then she means things better than she says them! I’ll let off a clattering rattle at once, so they will hear that we’re on our way!’

And the father stork clattered away with its bill and he and the swans flew to the Viking fort.

There everyone still lay fast asleep; the Viking’s wife had only managed to fall asleep late at night; she lay worrying about little Helga, who had disappeared with the Christian priest three days earlier; she must have helped him to escape, it was her horse that was missing from the stable, what force had enabled all this to take place? The Viking’s wife thought of all the miracles that were said to have been performed by the White Christ and by those who believed in him and followed him.

These shifting thoughts assumed the form of a dream, in which it seemed to her that she was still sitting there on her bed, awake and pensive, and outside the darkness was brooding. The storm came, she could hear the heaving of the sea to the west and the east, from the North Sea and the waters of the Kattegat; the enormous snake that encircled the earth in the depths of the ocean shook in spasms; the night of the gods, Ragnarök, as the heathens called the final hour was approaching when everything would perish, even the high gods. The Gjallerhorn sounded and over the rainbow rode the gods, clad in steel, to fight the last battle; ahead of them flew the wing-clad shield-maidens, and the ranks were completed by the forms of the dead warriors; the whole sky shimmered around them with Northern lights, but the darkness was triumphant. It was a dreadful time.

And close to the terrified woman little Helga sat on the floor in the horrible form of a frog, she too trembled and pressed herself up close to her foster mother, who took her up on her lap and out of love held her tightly, no matter how repulsive the toad's appearance was. The air resounded with the blows of sword and club, with swishing arrows, as if it was a violent shower of hail that passed over them. The hour had come for the earth and heaven to rend, the stars fall, everything perish in the fire of Surtur, but she knew that a new earth and sky would come, the corn wave where the sea now rolled over the barren bed of sands, the unnameable god would rule and up to him Baldur would rise, the mild, loving one, released from the land of the dead – he was coming – the Viking's wife saw him, she recognised his countenance – it was the captured Christian priest. 'White Christ!' she cried, and in calling out his name she pressed a kiss on the horrid frog's forehead; then the toad skin fell off, and little Helga stood there in all her loveliness, gentle as never before and her eyes more radiant; she kissed her foster mother's hands, blessed her for all the care and love she had shown her in her days of trial and tribulation; thanked her for all the thoughts she had sown in her and woken to life, thanked her for naming the name and repeated it: White Christ! and little Helga lifted herself up as a mighty swan, her wings spread out wide, as when the flock of migrating birds fly off.

The Viking's wife woke up at this, and outside there was the same sound of strongly beating wings – it was the time of year, she knew, that the storks migrated, that was what she could hear; just once more she wanted to see them before they departed and bid them farewell! She got up, went out onto the gallery, and there on the ridge of the side-building roof she saw one stork after the other, and all around the house, above the tall trees, flocks of them wheeled in great circles, but right ahead of her, on the edge of the well where little Helga had sat so often and frightened her with her wildness, two swans now sat and looked at her with their wise eyes; and she recalled her dream, it still filled her completely, just as if it was reality, she thought of little Helga in the guise of a swan, she thought of the Christian priest, and suddenly her heart felt strangely glad.

The swans flapped their wings, bowed their necks as if they too wanted to give her their greeting; and the Viking's wife stretched out her arms towards them, as if she understood, smiled through her tears and many thoughts.

Then all the storks rose with the swishing of wings and clattering of bills and set off on their journey south.

'We won't wait for the swans!' the mother stork said, 'if they want to join us, they must come along! we can't stay here until the plovers set out! Though there is something rather nice about travelling in families like this, not like chaffinches and ruffs and reeves, with the males on their own and the females on their own, that's not really decent and proper! and what sort of wing beats are those the swans are taking?'

'Everyone flies in their own way!' the father stork said, 'the swans do it on the slant, the cranes in triangles and the plovers in a snaking line!'

'Don't you mention snakes while we're flying up here!' the mother stork said, 'it will only give the young ones urges that cannot be satisfied!'

‘Is that the high mountains down there that I’ve heard about?’ Helga asked, in in the guise of a swan.

‘It is thunderclouds drifting beneath us!’ her mother said.

‘What are the white clouds that rise up so high?’ Helga asked.

‘What you can see are the mountains clad in eternal snow!’ her mother said, and they flew over the Alps, down towards the blue Mediterranean.

The land of Africa! the shores of Egypt!’ the daughter of the Nile, likewise in the guise of a swan, called out joyously as high up in the sky she caught sight of a whitish yellow, wave-shaped strip of land, her homeland.

The birds also saw it and flew more rapidly.

‘I can smell the Nile mud and juicy frogs!’ the mother stork said, ‘I feel this tingling inside me! – Yes, now you are in for a tasty treat, and will see marabouts, ibises and cranes! they are all part of our family, but not nearly as attractive as we are; they put on airs, especially the ibis; he has been spoilt by the Egyptians, they turn him into a mummy, stuff him with herbs. I’d rather be stuffed with live frogs, as would you and so you shall be! Better to have something in your belly while you’re alive than be decorative when you’re dead! that’s my opinion and I’m always right about everything!’

‘Now the storks have come!’ people said in the rich house on the banks of the Nile, where in the open hall, on soft cushions draped with leopard skins, the royal master lay outstretched, neither alive nor dead, hoping for the lotus flower from the deep bog in the North. Relations and servants stood around him.

And into the hall flew two magnificent white swans, they had arrived with the storks; they threw off their dazzling coats of feathers and there stood two lovely women, as alike as two drops of dew; they bent over the pale, shrunken old man, they tossed back their long hair, and as little Helga bent down over her grandfather, his cheeks grew red, his eyes started to gleam, life returned to his stiff limbs. The old man got up, reinvigorated and rejuvenated: his daughter and granddaughter held him in their arms as if in a morning greeting after a long, heavy dream.

And there was joy everywhere in the palace and in the stork’s nest as well, but here it was mainly because of the good food, the teeming mass of frogs; and while the learned men hurriedly wrote down roughly the story of the two princesses and the health-bringing flower, which was a great event and a blessing for both house and land, the stork parents told it in their own way to their family, but not until all of them had satisfied their hunger, for otherwise they had better things to do than to listen to stories.

‘Now you’ll be quite someone!’ the mother stork whispered; nothing else would be reasonable in the circumstances!’ ‘Oh, and what will I be!’ the father stork said, ‘and what have I done? Nothing!’

‘You’ve done more than all the rest! without you and the young ones the two princesses would never have seen Egypt again and made the old man well. You’ll be quite someone! You’re sure to

be given a doctor's degree, a title that our children will also inherit, and their children too, in all perpetuity! You already look a bit like an Egyptian doctor – in my eyes!

The learned and wise men developed the basic concept, as they called it, that ran through the whole occurrence: 'Love engenders life!' explaining it in various ways: 'the warm ray of the sun was the Egyptian princess, she descended to the Marsh King and in their meeting the flower came into being –'

'I can't repeat the exact words!' the father stork said, who had been listening from the roof and was trying to relate everything in the nest. 'What they said was so complicated, it was so wise that they were immediately given a higher rank and presents, even the personal chef was given a mark of distinction – that was probably for the soup!'

'And what did you get?' the mother stork asked, 'They shouldn't forget the most important person, and that's you! the learned men have only prattled away! but *your* turn will come!'

In the small hours of the morning, when the peace of sleep pervaded the rich, happy house, there was one person who was still awake, and it was not the father stork, despite the fact he was standing on one leg in the nest and sleeping sentry duty, no, little Helga was awake, she was leaning out over the balcony gazing at the clear sky with the large, gleaming stars, larger and purer in their gleam than she had seen them in the North, and yet the self-same stars. She was thinking of the Viking's wife beside the Wild Bog, of the gentle eyes of her foster mother, the tears she had shed over the poor frog-child now standing here in the gleaming splendour of the stars beside the waters of the Nile in the delightful spring air. She was thinking of the love in the breast of the heathen woman, the love she had shown a miserable creature who in her human skin was a wicked animal and in her animal skin was horrible to look at and touch. She looked at the radiant stars and recalled the gleam on the dead man's forehead when they flew over forest and bog; she could hear sounds in her memory, words she had heard uttered when they rode off and she sat there like one entranced, words about the great origin of love, the highest form of love that included all generations of creation.

Ah, what had not been given, won, attained! Little Helga's thoughts included – by night, by day – the entire sum of her good fortune and she viewed it like the child who quickly turns from the giver to what has been given, all the lovely gifts; she seemed to be taken up in the rising bliss that could come, that would come; she had after all been borne via miracles to ever-greater joy and happiness and she lost herself so completely for one day in such thoughts that she no longer recalled the giver. It was the spirited boldness of youth that had made a rapid cast of the dice! this caused her eyes to gleam, but she was immediately torn away from such thoughts by a great commotion in the courtyard below her. There she saw two extremely large ostriches rushing around in tight circles; she had never before seen such a creature, so big a bird, so clumsy and heavy, its wings looked as if they had been clipped, the bird itself as if it had been injured, and she asked what had happened to it, and for the first time heard the legend the Egyptians tell about the ostrich.

Once its family had been an attractive sight, its wings large and strong; then one evening the powerful birds of the forest said to it: 'Brother! shall we tomorrow, God willing, fly to the river and drink!' And the ostrich answered: 'this I certainly will!' When dawn came they flew off, first high up towards the sun, God's eye, higher and higher, the ostrich far ahead of all the others; it flew in pride towards the light; it relied on its own strength and not on the giver; it did not say: 'God willing!' Then the avenging angel pulled aside the veil from the flaming, radiant orb, and at once the bird's wings were singed, it fell down, wretched, to the earth. Nevermore was its family able to rise above the ground; it flees in fear, storms around in circles in a restricted space; it is a reminder for us humans, so that in all our thoughts, in our every deed, we remember to say: 'God willing!'

And Helga bowed her head in thought, looked at the ostriches chasing around, saw their fear, saw their foolish joy at the sight of their own shadows on the white, sun-lit wall. And seriousness put

down its deep roots in her mind and thoughts. A life so rich, so full of good fortune had been given, had been won – what lay ahead, what was still to come: The best of all: ‘God willing!’

In the early spring, when the storks set off northwards once more, Helga took her golden bracelet, scratched her name in it, waved to the father stork, placed the gold ring around his neck, asked him to take it to the Viking’s wife, so that she would understand that her foster daughter was alive, happy and remembered her.

‘It’s pretty heavy!’ the stork thought when it was placed around his neck; ‘but gold and glory are not to be cast aside! it will make them understand up there that a stork brings good luck!’

‘You lay gold, and I lay eggs!’ the mother stork said, ‘but you only lay once, I do it every year! but neither of us gets any appreciation! it’s insulting!’

‘But we are aware of the fact, missus!’ the father stork said.

‘You can’t hang that out like a sign!’ the mother stork said, ‘that brings neither a favourable wind nor a good meal!’

And away they flew.

The little nightingale that sang in the tamarind bush also wanted to be off northwards soon; up there by the Wild Bog little Helga had often heard it; she would ask it to take a message for her, she understood the language of birds from the time she had flown in the guise of a swan, often since then she had spoken to storks and swallows, the nightingale would understand her; and she asked it to fly to the beech wood on the Jutland peninsula where the grave had been raised of stones and branches, and asked it to ask all the small birds that watch over the grave to sing a song and yet another song.

And the nightingale flew – and time flew past!

The eagle stood on the pyramid and in autumn saw an imposing procession of heavily laden camels, with richly dressed, armed men on snorting Arab horses, gleaming white as silver, and with red, quivering nostrils, large thick manes that hung down around their slim legs. Rich guests, a royal prince from the land of Arabia, as handsome as a prince should be, entered the proud house where the stork’s nest was now empty; those who used to live up in it were now in a northern country, but soon they would be returning. – And they arrived precisely on that day when joy and merriment were at their greatest. A great wedding was being got ready, and little Helga was to be the bride, clad in silk and jewels; the bridegroom was the young prince from the land of Arabia; they sat at the head of the table between her mother and grandfather.

But she did not look at the bridegroom’s brown, manly cheeks with its curly black beard, she did not look at the fiery, dark eyes that were fixed on her, she looked outside, up at the winking, twinkling stars that shone down from the sky.

Then there was a swishing of powerful wings out there in the sky, the storks were returning; and the old stork couple, no matter how tired they were from their journey and could certainly do with a rest, immediately flew down onto the railings of the verandah, they knew what the celebration was all about. They had already heard when crossing the border that little Helga had had a painting of them be done on the wall, they were part of her story.

‘That is most considerate of her!’ the father stork said.

‘It’s not very much!’ the mother stork said, ‘less would have been too little!’

And when Helga saw them, she got up and went out onto the verandah to them, to stroke their backs. The old stork couple nodded their heads, and the youngest of their offspring looked on and felt extremely honoured.

And Helga gazed up at the gleaming star that gleamed ever more brightly; and a figure moved between it and her, even purer than the air and thus visible, it hovered very close to her, it was the dead Christian priest, he too was attending her solemn celebration, had come down from the kingdom of heaven. 'Splendour and magnificence that surpasses anything known on earth!' he said.

And little Helga prayed so sensitively, so fervently, prayed as she never had prayed before that she, just for a single minute, might look inside, merely have a single glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, of the Father.

And he lifted her into splendour and magnificence, in a stream of sounds and thoughts; it was not only outside her that there was light and sound but within her as well. Words cannot express it.

'Now we must return, you are missed!' he said.

'Only just one more look!' she begged him; 'only a single brief minute!' 'We must return to earth, all the guests will leave!'

'Only one look! the last one —!'

And little Helga was once more standing on the verandah — but all the torches out there had been extinguished, all the lights in the bridal hall were gone, the storks gone, no guests were to be seen, no bridegroom. It was as if everything had been spirited away in just three short minutes.

Then Helga felt afraid, she walked through the large, empty hall, into the next room, there unknown soldiers were sleeping, she stood outside in the garden — it was not as it had been before; the sky had a reddish tinge to it, it was almost dawn.

Only three minutes in heaven, and a whole night on earth had passed!

Then she saw the storks; she called out to them, spoke their language, and the father stork turned his head, listened and approached her.

'You speak our language!' he said, 'what do you want? Why do you come here, woman stranger?'

'But it's me! it's Helga! don't you recognise me? We spoke together three minutes ago, over on the verandah.'

'You are mistaken!' the stork said; 'you must have dreamt all of it!'

'No, no!' she said and reminded him of the Viking fort and of the Wild Bog, the journey to this place!

Then the father stork blinked: 'But that is an ancient story I have heard from the time of my great-great-great-grandmother! There was indeed such a princess from Denmark here in Egypt once, but she disappeared on the evening of her wedding many hundreds of years ago and never returned! you can read about it yourself on the monument in the garden, with both swans and storks carved on it, with you yourself standing on the top of the white marble.'

And so it was. Little Helga saw it, understood it and sank to her knees.

The sun came out in all its brilliance, and as in the days of old the frog-skin fell off when touched by its rays and the lovely figure reappeared, and at this baptism of light a figure of beauty rose up that was brighter, purer than the air, a ray of light — to the Father.

The body sank into the dust: there lay a withered lotus flower where she had stood.

'Well, that was a new ending to the story!' the father stork said, 'that I hadn't expected in the slightest! but I quite like it!'

'What, I wonder, will the young ones say about it,' the mother stork asked.

'Yes, that is certainly the most important thing!' the father stork replied.