

CHOICE LITERATURE.

HACON BORK.—A TALE OF THE ORKNEY ISLES.

CHAPTER I.

"As a city broken down and without walls, so is he that hath no rule over his own spirit."

"Well, and so—but know this, Hacon; the man who has learnt to forbear is master of all knowledge. Thy friend was very good a month syne, and he cannot be very bad now."

"I came to thee, Saxa, because thou hast ever before gone on my side; and make up thy mind that I shall take it ill if now thou doest not so."

"But, my brother, thou art angry, and anger is worse than the wrong that caused it. Is not a friend to be taken with his faults? They would be queer folk that had no failings, Hacon. But thou wilt come into the fore-house—yes, thou wilt!—and I will call my husband from the peat-stack, and he will talk with thee until the tide serves."

"I have no mind to come in."

Saxa was silent, and she looked anxiously at the handsome fellow leaning against the low stone wall. He was her twin-brother, and she loved him with a great love; besides that, there was no young man in the Orkades that could match Hacon Bork in whatever thing he put his hands to. If it was a seal or otter hunt, Hacon was the leader, if a shoal of caving whales were driven into the bay, he was first and last in their midst; if the herring fleet were to sail, every boat followed Hacon's—for he knew as surely as the sea-gulls where to find the fish: if the peat was to cut, Hacon's stacks were first done; and when the storms of winter shut them in their rock-built homes, who could sing and play the violin, and recite Sagas like Hacon Bork?

But he had an impulsive and passionate temper, and with this fault few of his companions could sympathize. Slow of speech and pulse, with a double portion of Scotch caution, the Orcadian is only roused by some unusual excitement. Then, indeed, nothing is too great for his enthusiasm and his exertions; the spirit of his forefathers is on him; he is at once the son of Thor and the descendant of the Vikings. But these outbreaks are the exceptions, ordinarily, his quiet intensity of character develops itself in a religious severity of more than Covenanting strictness, or in a commercial cleverness which makes even the canny Scot of Aberdeen acknowledge that the Orcadian "is too far north for him."

Hacon had his share of both the faults and virtues of his race; he was a character compacted of many extremes, good and bad. And many judged him severely, they thought that in consequence of his unusual abilities he ought to be unusually wise; they did not consider that the proper management of ten talents is much more difficult than that of two. Even Saxa did not always understand her brother, but then she loved him, and prayed for him, and to Love and Faith all things seem possible. Both of them have moved mountains.

In the complaint he had just been making about his friend, John Darrel, she understood him less than ever. Darrel was a young Englishman who had spent two or three summers in Orkney, attracted, at first, by the delicious climate and fine fishing, and afterwards by his love for Hacon. Every one knew that during the last two summers the men had been always together, John sometimes sharing in Hacon's labors, and Hacon not unfrequently making short excursions with John to the neighboring islands and to the coasts of Zetland.

But this summer a shadow had come between them. Saxa was inclined to believe that it was Hacon's fault, for it is impossible to love two objects with an all-absorbing affection, and she knew that Hacon's heart had gone out after the beautiful Margaret Bewis. But Hacon would listen to neither blame of himself nor defense of his friend.

"Let us speak no more of it," he said, sullenly, "the end of it will be seen."

"And thou wilt not come in?"

"No; the tide serves in an hour. I will go to my boat."

"Then 'Peace be with thee!'"

He could not resist the force of the good habit, and he answered—this time with the glimmer of a smile—"And with thee, too!"

It was nine o'clock, but the gloaming lingers there in the summer until it blends with the dawning, and in addition to its mellow beauty, the aurora was flashing soft green and rosy red lights from the horizon to the zenith. In that wondrous glow everything had a softened and spiritual aspect. The old town of Stromness was still as a dream; a passing ripple of laughter, the distant wash of the waves, the bark of a solitary sheep dog on "the Links" only seemed to intensify the air of sleepy peacefulness; and Hacon's feet on the flagged streets had an individual character and voice they lost in the busier daytime. They said to Saxa, as plainly as words could have done, "We carry an angry man."

When she went within, her husband, Auloer, had taken down the Bible for the evening exercise. "Why did not thy brother wait!" he asked. "I had sorted a chapter for him, and it had been well if he had heard it."

"Hacon has somewhat to vex him to night, Auloer."

"Hacon has always somewhat to vex him. It would be a good hour that taught him the world was made for other folk beside Hacon Bork."

"Auloer, thou wilt not say such things—no; thou wilt not! Hard words once spoken can't be wiped out with a sponge. No—and then one grieves."

In the meantime Hacon went rapidly toward Kirkwall. There were more signs of life here; groups of fishermen sat smoking on the door steps; some Dutch skippers were finishing a bargain in a change house, and a number of matrons and young girls were knitting and talking around the public fountain. But nothing could vulgarize the picturesque old town in that supernatural light, and the handsome Hacon

threading its narrow streets had something of the grand simplicity of one of its old sea-kings about him.

As he approached a group of large houses built upon rocks which the sea washed at all times, his pace became slower. One of them belonged to Baillie Bewis, and once or twice Margaret had been at the window to give him a good wish as he went to the fleet. To-night the Baillie himself sat in the window drinking his glass of *blanda* and talking to his opposite neighbor. He spoke cheerily to Hacon and bade him in a while.

"Nay, sir, for the fleet wait for me."

"Then there is but one thing to be done, Hacon. thou must to the fleet; go, and good luck to thy hand. I saw Darrel pass a bit ago; I suppose he goes with thee. You two are finger and thumb."

The greeting was so pleasant and hearty that Hacon forgot his anger, and as he untied his skiff he determined to sail around the back of the house; perhaps Margaret might be at some of the sea-ward windows. But he had scarcely turned the little rocky bluff when his face grew black as night, and an exclamation of passionate hatred escaped him. He rested on his oars as if to feed his temper on the sight that angered him.

It was another boat approaching Margaret's residence pulled by John Darrel. He drifted directly under a window and called "Margaret!" in a clear, happy voice. Then Hacon saw the white swaying curtains put aside and Margaret lean downwards to take from the hands of her visitor a small parcel. There was a little difficulty in reaching each other's hands, and the merry laughter over the failures and the success irritated him beyond endurance. He pulled for the herring fleet like a madman, and gave orders for immediate sail, though he had heard John call him, and knew that he was coming with all possible speed.

"Master Darrel's place can't be supplied now, Hacon," said his mate, Nicol Vedder, "and it is my counsel that thou wait for him, he will be on board in five minutes."

Nicol spoke truth, and it would not do to be short-handed, so John was waited for. A merry, thoughtless, good natured fellow, he was yet a little angry at Hacon. But Hacon had been daily growing more and more unequal in temper; for a month their intercourse had lost the sweetness of their first friendship, and John was quite determined no longer to affect ignorance of the change.

So next day as Hacon was mending a net on the rocky beach John sat down beside him. "Hacon, what have I done, or not done, that you are so changed towards me? You must know, surely, for I declare I don't. I was all but angry with you last night, for you saw and heard me well enough."

"All but 'saves many a man. It was good for thee I did not speak then."

"Come, come, Hacon, I am not likely to be afraid of anything you can say. I had a message for you from lovely Margaret Bewis, only—"

"I advise thee not to speak of Margaret Bewis, all that touches her is a thing by itself."

"It can't be that you are jealous, Hacon. I but took Margaret a book that she wanted to read."

"Have I not told thee not to name Margaret Bewis?" Then Hacon leaped savagely to his feet. It was in vain that John parried his blows, and strove with calm patience to control his unreasonable passion. The dispute soon attracted attention, and some fishermen drew near and separated them.

It was easy to see that every one took John's part. Hacon received more than one reproof from the older men, and John's sorrowful, set face cut him to the heart. For though he had made much money out of John, Hacon's love was by no means a selfish one; the gay, good-hearted Darrel was really very dear to him.

That night he went to see his sister Saxa again, and he told her what had happened. He was trying to make himself believe that John had been false to him by continually asserting it. "He is rich and gives my men money," he said angrily, "and last night they would not sail without him. No one likes his men tampered with, now does he, Saxa?"

"Well, that is so; but, Hacon—"

"And then, Saxa, I saw himself under Margaret's window in his boat; and she took something from his hand. He says it was a book, but I don't believe it; no, indeed!"

"Angry men tell many lies to themselves, my brother; and it might well be a book. Thou knows that Margaret is ever reading. I think myself she might spend her time better, and so thinks her good mother; but she is an only child, and the end is, that she has her way."

Saxa easily perceived from this conversation that Hacon was bitterly jealous, not only of John's influence with Margaret Bewis, but also of his general popularity. John was free of all the fishermen's houses around, and welcome in all their boats; his cheerful temper, his ready hand, his simple manners and open purse, had made him universally beloved. In three summers Hacon's and John's relations had somewhat changed. When John had first known Hacon he had been his pupil in all seafaring and fishing matters, and he had greatly admired him. John was now Hacon's equal in these things, and his superior in many others. It is very easy to love those who admire us. It is not so easy to love those whom we are compelled to admire.

"Well, Hacon, I will tell thee what thou shalt do. Go home, and talk with thy good mother. Friends' gree best separate, but 'Mother's truth keeps constant youth;' and our father is sure to have a wise word for thee."

Hacon's parents lived on a small island, divided from Pomona by a rapid "race," and during the fishing and trading season he very seldom visited his home. But he saw them every Sunday, for the few families inhabiting Lambness had come to Stromness for divine worship, a duty nothing but impossibilities prevents an Orcadian from attending to.

So he thought a moment over Saxa's advice, and then answered, "To-night I must to the herring fleet; to-morrow there is the salting, and the wages, and more than another

things; then comes the Sabbath, and it may be my father will speak with me."

"That is a thing not to be thought of; neither our father nor mother will speak on the Lord's Day anent thy private matters, Hacon. But if thy trouble be a real trouble, a day's time is surely no great matter to lose for good advice."

"A real trouble! Saxa, what mean you? Is not a false friend and a lost love real enough?"

"Be a friend to thyself; and as for Margaret, thou hast not asked her 'yea' or 'nay' in the matter. Art thou not too passionate and jealous? This is what all think, though I alone utter it."

Then Hacon walked angrily away, and Saxa was heavy with anxiety. During the next day an old woman with whom Darrel stayed brought over her knitting and spent the afternoon at Auloer's house; and she said that John was going back to England in a few days. Saxa spoke to her about Hacon's quarrel, and very easily perceived that her brother was generally much blamed in the matter.

"Deed I heard say," continued old Gesla, making her needles click emphatically, "that Hacon drew his dirk, and would have used it, too, if Bryce Snackoll hadna ta'en it awa' by main force."

"To have 'heard say' is half a lie," answered Saxa, calmly, "and it is not Bryce Snackoll that could take aught out of Hacon Bork's hand."

"Ah, weel, my English lad has a kind heart, an' a sweet way wi' him, and God aye arms the harmless. Hacon Bork is doubtless ane o' the sons of Anak, but for a' that when it's God's will to plague a man a mouse can bite him to death."

"Gesla, thou art white-haired, and I may not say 'no' to thy 'yes'; but it is an ill office for the old to spair dool to the young."

"Thou hast got a drop o' Hacon Bork's hot blood i' thee; and it's my advice that thou seek counsel o' them that can give it."

"Thou art right, Gesla; I will seek it of Him who when he was reviled answered not again."

Then both were silent, Gesla knitting with double speed, and Saxa calmly spreading the little round tea-table—for tea is to these island women all that tobacco is to the men. Gesla was much mollified by the delicious souchong, the buttered seed cakes, and the imported sweetmeats. She had to go away without saying one-half of the bitter things she intended; for after Saxa's mental resignation of her case nothing could drive her into further discussion. She followed the example of Him who had once chosen no answer at all, as even better than the soft answer.

Gesla had not been long gone when Auloer came home. "I met Hacon, wife," he said. "The lad hath an evil spirit in him, but he says he is going home on Monday, and will call for thee and the little ones. Perhaps it were well thou went; he was ever fond of our little Erland."

"Now that is good, Auloer, and there is need that something be done. Here has been old Gesla, and she said many things of our Hacon very hard to bear."

"Gesla would see faults if her eyes were out. The Englisher has brought her a silver penny every day, and she grudges that he should leave a week or two o'er soon. I shall take it well when he is out of Orkney. I like not men who spend good gold so wastefully."

"There is one thing Hacon complains of. He says that it is hard guiding those who are feed' for doing naught at all but their duty."

"And there is Hacon right. And if it has brought the stranger trouble, I think he is well worthy of trouble that buys it with his own siller."

Auloer very seldom took Hacon's part, and Saxa was much pleased at the circumstance. It was Saturday night, and until the Sabbath was over she must put her own thoughts away from her heart; it was at least a comfort to dismiss her care for Hacon pleasantly.

The Sabbath broke with a charming stillness over the ancient town; and the Sabbath bell rung musically through the very streets where pagan sea kings had shouted their wild drinking songs to Thor and Woden. The silent, thoughtful groups, seeking by many paths the one sacred house, were groups of no ordinary character. The men, with their faces of grave reserve and serious acuteness, were all of them every-day heroes, and did constantly deeds of bravery and heroism, for which no earthly stars and orders would be recompense sufficient; and the white-hooded, brown-faced women, sedate and grave, called up involuntarily visions of lonely life and silent tragedies in dreary moorland huts. But among these sombre groups were many lovelier ones—fair maidens whose beautiful forms and color and air of pure serenity made them sweet, welcome wonders, and handsome stalwart youths with all the glow and stateliness of unbroken hope and undiminished strength.

Of these none were to-day more remarkable than Hacon Bork. The dark shadow was off his face; he had talked things over with Auloer, and they looked brighter. John Darrel was going away, and Margaret Bewis had smiled sweetly on him as he passed, the previous evening.

Harcus Bork and his wife were in church when Hacon entered, but it was doubtful if they saw either him or their daughter Saxa, for to them the house of God was far too holy a place for the notice of any save spiritual things. There was a strange minister also in the pulpit, and though he bore his great commission in his face Harcus was not assured of his orthodoxy, and he watched his argument with a dubious criticising aspect, while Dame Bork pulled her hood over her face and seemed lost in meditation.

After the service was not a favorable time to speak to Harcus; and when Hacon, in the fewest possible words, told him that Saxa and the children and he were coming to Lambness on the following day, he only showed his acceptance of the news by the faintest flicker of pleasure, a symptom of worldly sympathy he instantly checked. But Hacon knew all that the irrepressible change of countenance meant, and was satisfied; besides, he had seen his mother's eyes, and the love in them made him very glad. His whole soul was sweetened.

In the morning he went out very early, having some ar-