

## The Last Dragon

Once upon a time in a small village perched high on a cliff over the North Sea, there lived a little girl all by herself under the roof in the attic of a tall house. The old man and woman who lived downstairs let her just have the room, and they made her take care of herself and wouldn't give her anything nice to eat or warm to wear, not even a pair of mittens in winter or a bowl of warm soup on a windy night. All she had in the world besides the clothes she wore every day were a rough linen

sack filled with straw that she used for a bed, one thin woolen blanket, a basin to wash her face in the morning, and a pitcher to carry water up to her room at night.

She didn't know who her parents were or what had happened to them, and whenever she asked, people just looked away with strange eyes and said nothing. Whenever any of the other children saw her, they whispered and laughed behind their hands as they ran away to play their games.

She called herself Lingæa for the tart red Lingenberry that grew in the woods, but everybody in the village called her the Goat Girl because all her daylight hours she spent herding goats for the villagers. Every summer morning before the sun came up she had to take them out to the

mountain above the village, and before she brought them back it was nearly night again.

On winter mornings she took them around the low meadows and brambles close to the village looking for some poor fodder, dry grass, or spiny shrubs not covered by snow or water. It was hard to find enough for them to eat before the short winter day chased them back to the barns again. Then she would climb up into her attic and eat a cold supper alone of goat cheese and bread and a little bit of water, and sleep until the stars just began to fade in the morning. Day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year went by and she wondered what would ever would become of her life.

Only when she was out on the mountain with her goats did she find happiness for a few hours. While the goats grazed and gamboled on the green slopes, she lay in the warm sunshine watching the clouds make brave pictures in the sky. She made believe she saw great ships dancing over green waves, with their shining shields and many oars swiftly bearing gold and precious stones and fine clothes from southern lands. And she told herself stories and made up songs of the ancient gods and heroes, pretending she could see them contend in the shadows which the clouds drew across the distant hills. One night after she put the goats in the barn and was going to her room, she saw bonfires lighting up the village square. The fires looked so warm, and she knew her room was so

cold, that she went to join the fire circle, even though she dreaded being laughed at and people holding their noses and making noises like goats to mock her.

But she was surprised that no one even seemed to notice her. Instead, they all listened intently to an old man standing up on the edge of the fountain telling a tale of how brave men of old went out from the village with axes and spears and killed all the dragons, so now there weren't any dragons any more.

Lingæa said to the woman standing next to her, "Were the dragons so bad?" and the woman said, "Oh, they carried away women and children and ate the animals and stole gold and hid it deep in caves. Listen, the Dragon Teller says it is so."

“What weary tales,” Lingæa thought to herself as she turned away and went to her tiny cold room up in the attic. She shivered through the night, partly from the cold and partly from feeling sorry for the dragons, and the next morning she went out in the mountains again with her goats thinking about the dragons, how the village had treated them even worse than her. She went to rest out of sight of the village, found a smooth place below two giant boulders that rose up like gates to the sky, and as she lay there in the warm sun, she began humming a new tune that grew with the wind and bounced from the rocks and echoed with the mystery of years gone by. And she found words coming up from deep memory, deeper than she had ever remembered before, words that rhymed in

strange hard syllables, and she pieced the lines together with her tune in a song that made the air grow heavy with the weight of centuries.

After a few moments she paused, but the song kept on as if singing by itself, a deeper and sadder tone that held great strength and terror and gentle musings all at once, and she looked around to see where the song came from. Between the giant boulders at her back she saw the sod broken and lifted the width of a hand, and from the crack came a wisp of sweet smoke and that same song which she had been singing a moment before. If it were not for the song, she would have frightened and run, but she felt from within her that the song was good and that whoever sang it must be good also.

Softly and shyly she began singing again, and this time the other singer shifted and sang a haunting counterpoint, deeper and lower and with a more shining resonance than before. Excited, she tried new melodies, and to each one the other voice added its own rich harmony.

Finally she stopped singing and said, "Who are you, friend, and why are you hiding like that under the grass?" After a long silence, then a deep sigh, the grass shook a little more, the crack widened, and a long green nose poked out. After the nose came a pair of sad red eyes and little ears pointing back at an angle.

Lingæa laughed right out loud and shrieked happily, "Oh, you silly dragon, sneaking around trying to scare me that way!"

But a tear grew large in one eye, a puff of smoke and a small tongue of flame darted out of a flared nostril, and the dragon said quietly, "That's always been the problem. People get scared, and then they bring axes and spears, and they won't give us any chance at all. Will you bring axes and spears and try to kill me, too?"

Lingæa bent down and kissed the green scaly snout, "Of course not. But dragons don't crawl out of the grass just every morning, and you do look terribly frightful when that fire comes out of your nose."

She bent down for another kiss, but before she could touch him, the dragon stuck out a long forked tongue, wrapped it around her hand and squeezed gently. She didn't like the looks of the long jagged

row of teeth, and remembering the Dragon Teller's songs, she feared for a moment that the dragon might pull her back into that crack in the grass. But after another gentle squeeze with his tongue, the dragon let her free, dropped his head onto the grass, closed his eyes and sighed again a deep and longing sigh.

Lingæa sat still for a long time just gazing at the long scaly face, feeling warm and happy to have a friend. At last she put her hand on the top of his nose and began to scratch it like it was the belly of a kitten and said, "It was good to meet you here today, but I must tell you that last night in the village an old man the people call Dragon Teller told tales that speak ill of you."

"It's an old story," the beast said softly. "This was once a happy place, but one day a young dragon got too lively playing with a maid from the village and cut her leg and burned her face, and the people got excited, and the more the older dragons tried to smooth the affair, the wilder stories the people told, and soon there was war between people and dragons, and it has gone very bad for us since. It happened when my grandfather was still a cub, and for all the hundreds of years we tried to make it right, people would hear nothing good of us, and one by one all were killed until I was the only one left. Now many hundred years I have hid in this hole, lonesome and tired of being alone, and when I heard your song today, I knew I could not be still another hour."

His eyes drooped, and Lingæa didn't know whether to join him in crying or to laugh at his funny wrinkled scaly eyelids, so at last she did nothing but sit there silently stroking his scaly nose.

After a long while he looked up at her again, said a quiet thanks with his eyes, then withdrew his head into the crack. And the earth closed, and there was nothing left to see but a small dark circle where the burst of flame from his nose had touched the grass.

Slowly Lingæa stood up, sad to be alone again, but happy to believe that she had found a friend and that she would see him again. She gathered her goats and hurried down the mountain bringing them home, but the sun had already sunk into

the waves of the bay long before she had them safely settled in the barn.

Again the fires were lit in the village square, and again the Dragon Teller stood on the rim of the fountain, his voice barking in strong rhymed syllables how the brave men of the village long ago destroyed the last of the dragons. This time she didn't hurry home, but stayed at the back of the fire circle and listened to tale after tale. The dragon wars were long ago when the tribes still swarmed across the land looking for a home. The great Helgesfrid brought his people to this shore from across the sea when their soil turned sour and the rye would no longer grow. After the first winter in their new home, when the Mayflowers were tied on the pole, dragons came down from the hill and

charged in among the playful youths, and one would have carried off the great chief's only daughter, but Helgesfrid charged with his sword, shouting and slashing in a frenzy until even the dragons were afraid and withdrew again into the hills. The next day more dragons came, many older and stronger ones, and all the young men, encouraged by the brave Helgesfrid, took swords and spears and axes and chased the dragons again into the hills. And year by year they pursued the beasts, and more and more of the dragons fell, and the sons and grandsons of the great Helgesfrid grew famous through all the northern lands as slayers of the fearful beasts, until many songs were sung among the peoples of their marvelous deeds.

Lingæa listened carefully to it all, but in her heart she delighted with another truth. After the tales were finished and the last fire died to embers, she slowly climbed the steps to her cold little room, and her heart heaved within her for the joy of her secret. It seemed she hardly slept at all, but arose happy and brisk as the stars began to fade and took her goats again to where the great granite gates stood gaping to the sky.

There she lay quiet for a long while until the sun warmed the grass and finally began her new song again. Again the earth opened a crack, she heard a happy little snort, and the grass beside her turned black from a sharp tongue of fire.

Then a shy voice murmured, "I'm sorry, I hope I didn't harm or frighten you."

I feared you wouldn't come again, and when I heard you singing, I couldn't help a little snort."

Lingæa laughed and scratched his hot scaly nose. "No, I wasn't afraid. If you had meant to hurt me, I wouldn't have come home safe last night. We shall be friends." And as she bent down to kiss the long scaly nose, another flame burst out and nearly burned her cheek. "I shan't ever be cold with you as a friend," she laughed, and took his whole head in her arms and hugged it tight.

After a long while she sat suddenly aright and said, "I don't even know your name."

"After my mother and father fell in the wars," he said after a silence, "my grandmother said I must be called Gorun-

duwakudur, 'The Last of the Unlucky Ones,' but that name was born in sorrow, and I would have you call me Gorandur, 'Lucky at Last.'"

And Lingæa and Gorandur spent that day, and the next, and all the rest of the summer together at the great stone gates, and she learned tales of the dragon wars more dreadful than any of the Dragon Teller's songs, and she learned to love the gentle dragon, even though she never saw more of him than his long scaly head, and missed him every night when she had to bring her goats down the hill to the barns. Far too soon the snows fell, and she kissed her dragon friend goodbye for the winter, promising to be back as soon as the grass appeared in the spring and mak-

ing him promise to come when she sang her song at the great stone gates.

That was the longest winter of her life. And the people of the village wondered as they watched her herding her goats in the meadow at the end of the village or feeding them about the barns that her eyes turned so often to the hills of summer. Some said she was bewitched and kept their distance even farther from her. Others asked what more could one expect from an ignorant goat girl and treated her as badly as before. But she ignored their aspersions, their taunts and their sneers as she watched the sun travel south, then all too slowly start his northward journey again.

Day by day she took her goats to the very edge of the snow, higher and higher

up the mountain, until she finally reached the great stone gates again. The earth burst open at the very first note of her song, and the familiar green nose poked out through the grass. So began another time of joy for them both as they traded stories of the old dragon wars—hers from the Dragon Teller in the village, and his from his own eyes and the eyes of his parents and grandparents. They laughed together how different the good and bad fell in the two sets of tales and how they were supposed to be enemies.

The days were so happy for Lingæa that she failed to notice how the dark looks in the eyes of the villagers narrowed and sharpened toward her. They had never liked her anyway, and now that she was so completely happy, it mattered even less to

her what they thought or said. So it happened one evening when she came to her room that her house mistress surprised her with a demand that she leave her room immediately and find another place to sleep. But Lingæa begged to stay in her poor little room and even promised to pay real money for it, though she knew not where to find any.

The house mistress told her, Yes , for real gold coin she could stay there, but she must have a whole crown by tomorrow sundown or she would have to go sleep with the goats, and the mistress walked away laughing to herself.

That night was longer and slower than any she could remember of her whole life, and in the morning even the joy of going up to see her friend Gorandur could

scarcely bring a smile to her eyes. He had long since quit waiting for her song before poking his nose through the sod and watched every morning as she hurried the goats up the hill to meet him. But this morning he saw her tread falter and lag. When she finally arrived, he waited for her to speak, but she just sat quietly, scratching his nose but leaving unsaid the trouble in her heart.

After a long silence Gorandur spoke gently, "What makes the maid so melancholy this fair morning?"

Lingæa sighed, then burst forth weeping that she had no more place to live and would have to sleep with the goats in a stall unless she gave over a gold crown before the sun went down that very day, and she had never in her life held even a

half crown in her hand and had no fair prospects of every holding any.

In a secret corner of his heart Gorandur sorrowed that she did not immediately think to come live with him and be his constant friend, but he hid his sadness from her, for he knew that as much as she loved him, he was to her still a dragon, a beast.

At last he said, "The gold I can give you. I have more than plenty. But I think small good will come of it." With that he pulled his head back into his hole and returned a moment later with a bright coin clamped between his teeth. He dropped it beside her in the grass and closed his eyes, almost wearily, she thought.

The rest of the day passed slowly with scarcely a word between them. Once

she tried to sing, but the melody stuck in her throat and not the first note would come. It was early yet when she gathered the goats to go down the hill, grasping the gold coin tightly in her hand and almost afraid to kiss her dragon friend goodbye. The house mistress stood waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a broom in her hand, ready to go up and sweep out the room after Lingæa took her bed, basin and pitcher away, But Lingæa gave her the gold coin and went quietly up the stairs. She didn't like the strange look in the house mistress' eyes, but she was too weary of the many years of bad treatment to care very much.

The next morning she got up earlier than usual, long before the stars began to fade, and got her goats up to the mountain

before the sun brightened the spruces in the valley. She shivered in the morning chill and wanted a breath from Gorandur to warm her, but in her heart there hung a heaviness that choked the calling note.

After a long while, when the sun was already high, the sod opened and the familiar green scaly nose poked slowly out. Lingæa managed a weak smile, and as she reached over to scratch Gorandur's nose, he raised an eyelid high and watched her with one red eye.

In answer to his unspoken question she said, "I just gave it to her. I didn't tell her where I got it."

"It is dangerous," he said, "They will be watching you." Then they both remained silent again for a long time.

That evening Lingæa tried to get from the barns to her room without anyone seeing her, but it seemed that eyes peered out at her from the very timbers in the white stuccoed walls. Even the steep grey slate roofs seemed to peer at her as she passed, and the sparkles of moonlight on the bedewed cobblestones each one looked to her like a curious eye. At last she broke and ran for her door, rushed up the stairs and flung herself on her bed without even a thought to the dry bread and cheese she had laid up for her supper. She slept poorly and rose late in the morning, so that the people of the village watched her as she hurried out with her goats to the mountain.

The next few weeks were fearful ones, not only for what she felt the people

were thinking, but also for the strange new tension she felt between her and her dear dragon.

The hay was yellow in the fields around the village when her house mistress stopped her one night going up the stairs and demanded another coin.

“But I don’t have any,” she stuttered, “I was lucky to find the last one, and I don’t know if I will ever see another.”

“Then you can plan to sleep with the goats this winter,” said the mistress and trotted back down the stairs. She turned at her door and said, “I’ll give you three days this time. Maybe you can encourage your luck a little.”

The next morning she walked heavier and slower up the hill than before, and the goats were far ahead of her before she

came near the stone gates. But once she glanced over her shoulder and spied a man from the village darting behind a tree. She put on a smile, swung her shoulders, and pretended not to have a care as she slyly watched every rock and bush for signs of movement. It soon became clear to her that she was being followed by half the men of the village. Desperately she hoped Gorandur would not poke his head out to greet her, and she was frightened when she saw the grass crack open at his hole. But it quickly closed again, and she was sure he had seen the danger.

She couldn't help walking by her favorite place. As she approached, she spied a gold coin lying in the grass. It would be dangerous to pick it up with everyone watching her, so she sat down some dis-

tance away, picked up some sticks and pebbles and began tossing them down the hill. When she had thrown every stick and stone close to where she sat, she moved closer to the coin and gathered and threw some more. And bit by bit she came to the stone gates, took up the coin as if it were just another pebble, and held it tightly while she kept tossing whatever else she could find. Soon she moved on to another place and continued her game until she thought she would throw the whole mountain down the hill.

With evening she felt the eyes follow her down the hill again, and as her mistress confronted her at the stairs up to her room, she put on a woeful face and sighed and went up without a word. In the morning she went to the barns long before the light

began to spread and placed the coin in a crack covered with straw and dung. Then she went up the hill and played the same game as the day before, only drifting farther and farther away from the stone gates.

On the third day she brought the goats in early and made a big fuss of cleaning out the barn as if preparing to sleep there. The men were supposed to clean it for her, but it never got done unless she did it herself. She complained loudly and long to make sure many people heard, then began pitching the dung out the barn window into the street. At least she knew the fussy women of the village wouldn't let the men leave the dung in the street, and she didn't care if they blamed her for making the mess.

When she was done, she took the gold coin and went to her room. She passed her house mistress on the steps, dropped the coin in her hand and said simply, "It was under the dung in the barn. The men should clean as is their duty."

During the next several weeks she felt the villagers were watching her less when she went to the mountain, but they trailed and watched her even more severely around the village. Several times she found the barn cleaned when she came down in the evening, and she could see the greed and the anger growing in the people's eyes until she knew that things would go badly for her before the matter was finished.

During these days she only rarely got to have a quick word with Gorandur,

sometimes lying down by the stone gates and reaching her hand into the crack to scratch his nose. Never would she let him show his face out in the sun. Often she could see him watching her through a narrow slit in the sod as she walked with the goats, and she took comfort that he was there, even if she could not be with him.

The first storms of the autumn equinox had already come and gone, and she was preparing to take winter leave from her Gorandur, when one day an eagle swooped down to attack a kid. Lingæa saw him coming and ran and struck him with her rod just as he would have clutched the kid in his claws. But she reached too far. Her foot turned on a stone, and she stumbled and rolled down

the mountain toward the high cliff that fell to to the sea.

From his crack in the sod Gorandur watched as she tumbled toward the edge, and he saw that certain death awaited her. With a sudden bound he burst open the hill that held him back, stroked his wings and caught her just as she fell over the edge. He cradled her in his claws and set her down near the goats, who had scattered in fright. He licked her face and hurried back to his hole, but it was too late. The hole was too large to repair quickly, and the watchers from the village had seen.

At first all was quiet just as before. Then Lingæa heard from the village a clanging of weapons and the wailing of many women. She tried to run to Goran-

dur, but a man armed with a battle axe stepped out from hiding into her way. Others joined him, until she was surrounded by hard faces and spears and swords and axes. For a moment she was very frightened, until she saw in their faces that they were more frightened than she.

“So that is it,” she said to herself, “The Goat Girl holds off a whole army of brave men. They think I may be a dragon, too.”

So she stood her ground, facing the men with a hard eye and pretending herself ready to jump at them. For long minutes the men just stood there looking at her, afraid to approach her, but obviously ready to strike if she began to approach them. Gradually she began to worry what she would do when one of them would

catch her if she slept. But soon she realized that she need not wait for night. The clamor of voices in the village pressed slowly up the hill, and she saw the sun glancing from polished spearheads, swords, and axes. The Dragon Teller led them all, shouting in stern cadences the songs of ancient dragon wars and urging the men to be brave for the safety of their women. She knew that when the crowd arrived, there would be no mercy either for her or for Gorandur, and she half sank in despair.

The new group from the village was only a few yards away when she heard a soft flutter of great wings, and suddenly Gorandur was upon her. He took her in his claws, harder and faster this time so that he hurt her a little, and gave a great

flap of his long wings. The circle of men closed in with a shout. Gorandur blew a blast of fire from his nose that felled six of them, but the seventh got a good swing with his axe that cut deep into a rear foot. Gorandur staggered in the air, but regained his flight and carried her up beyond the reach of the spears thrown by the new crowd from the village as they rushed forward.

From the crest northward and down the other side the mountain was covered with dense spruce forest, and the cut in Gorandur's foot rained a trail of blood on the treetops as he strained his wings to keep flying in spite of the great loss of blood, until he finally slumped into a small clearing on the edge of a dark canyon that dropped off toward the sea. Lingæa took

the foot in her lap and tore a strip from her petticoat to bind the wound, and the flow of blood soaked through the apron of her dress. When she saw she could do nothing more, she curled up against his hot neck, and they slept a fitful hour.

When they awoke, they heard in the distance the shouts of the Dragon Teller still urging the men on, and they knew they could not remain hidden for long where the trail of blood showed the way. The flow of blood from Gorandur's foot had stopped. He stood and bade Lingæa climb on his neck before his wings, and with his last reserve of strength he leapt into the air and flapped across the canyon to a small clearing on the other side, hidden by a pile of rocks from the path of blood his wound had left but close enough

to hear the villagers if they should try to follow. He landed on his three good feet, careful not to break open his cut and leave a telltale spot of blood visible in the grass. There they found a trickling spring, some fine ripe berries, and a good southwest exposure that gave them the best of the dwindling autumn sun.

The days stretched into weeks as they warmed and fed themselves the best they could. Several times they heard the shouts of the men and the clanging of their weapons across the canyon where the trail of blood ended. Then they would crawl back into the thicket and lie still until all was quiet again.

Lingæa grieved for the sadness in Gorandur's eyes, but she feared to ask of the future. She knew that all his suffering

was for her, that he could have stayed hidden safe in his warm cave by the great stone gates for another five hundred years and that she belonged to a hated people that had destroyed all his race. She watched the winter storms begin to press up from the sea and despaired of living to see another spring.

Early one morning, when a few weak stars yet struggled through the bitter freezing mists, Gorandur stood, tested his wings, and said, "The time has come. We must go to a place of healing."

He bade her again climb onto his neck, tested his strength against the cold morning breeze, lunged into the air and flew down the canyon to the fjord and out to the open sea, always keeping just above the waves. Lingæa marveled how his

strength endured and knew not what pain ate at his weakness as he struggled on. The sun rose at their backs, coursed a low circle to their left and came around into their eyes, Gorandur's wing strokes became slower and more labored, and his feet splashed now and then in the crest of a wave. Lingæa wondered if death in the cold salt sea would be kinder than death by an axe, but she leaned up and forward as if to make herself lighter on his back to help him along.

When it seemed he could struggle no longer, she reached forward and planted a wet cheek against his heaving hot neck and scratched him lovingly with her fingers. The sun sank into the sea ahead, the cold mists reached to enclose her, and she closed her eyes and waited for the final

splash into the dark sea. Her breath caught as she felt his wings slacken and his body stretch and fall. But instead of water she felt a whisk of wet sand against her legs, and she looked and saw ahead the outline of a verdant island.

Gorandur took one step forward toward dry beach, then crumpled and fell. She jumped off and ran and kissed him all over his scaly head, pleading with him not to die. After a long while, he opened his eyes, licked her hand, and began to crawl up the sand. It was long into night already before they reached the first green branches.

That night the heat in Gorandur's neck nearly failed, and she hugged and caressed him, hoping to give some of her own failing heat back into his body. In the

morning she found a tree with hanging red fruit nearby and tried to feed him. When he could not bite, she chewed the fruit herself, then took it from her mouth and pressed it into his.

Three days and three nights they stayed there before Gorandur finally raised his head and breathed warm on her face again. After three more days he struggled to his feet and led her up up a narrow path to the top of the island. There she saw the cause of the rich tropical verdure in that cold sea. At the very top of the island was a great round meadow, and in the middle a wide stone basin of warm water breathing steam into the winter air. On four sides the water trickled over the edges into four streams that divided and divided again as they tumbled down the slopes,

warming and watering everything below. In the center of the basin was a small islet, and in the center of the islet a tree with four main branches, each with a different kind of fruit. From the center of the tree, in the crotch of the four spreading branches, rose a golden chalice whence tumbled the warm water that fed the basin.

Stone stairs led from the path around the basin up to the rim, and more stairs led up out of the water to the tree. Gorandur murmured softly, "Now shall come the healing," and he motioned for Lingæa to step up and into the water.

She looked at her stained and tattered dress, now much too small for her already, and her bloodied apron, and she felt ashamed to enter such purity. But Gorandur nudged her forward gently with his

nose, and she stepped up the stairs and into the water. She stood shyly aside in water above her waist as he stepped in beside her. Then he bowed himself toward the tree at the center and buried himself in the water. Lingæa did likewise.

When she arose a moment later, she felt new strength throbbing within her and a great hunger toward the fruit on the tree ahead of her. She stepped gravely toward it and felt Gorandur stepping forward beside her. When she reached the islet, the tree bent down a limb to her, and she took of the fruit in her hand. Then she climbed the stairs and knelt on the stone bench in front of the tree and ate. Gorandur was kneeling at her side, also with a fruit in his front claws, and he ate also.

They were silent for long time there together, then without a word between them, they moved together back down the steps, back through the water in the basin, and still facing the tree, down from the basin to the stone path circle and down the steep hillside to a bower that opened toward the lowering sun. There they sat together in silence until the sun faded in the west and rose again in the morning.

With the morning light Gorandur arose, blew a long stream of white hot fire from his nose, sang a noble tune with melody and counterpoint at once, leapt into the air and flew a great circle in the sky before coming lightly to Lingæa again. She jumped up to greet him, and she found herself singing, leaping high into the air and dancing lightly on her toes. At a gen-

tle smile from Gorandur she jumped onto his back before his wings, and together they made wide circles over the sea, looking at their new island home from high and low, near and far.

When they landed back at their bower, Lingæa stopped to look at herself, and she saw that her dress was spotless, her apron bright and clean without a trace of blood, her stockings fine and white, and the slippers on her feet finer than she had ever worn before. She looked at Gorandur's foot and saw not a trace of the cut that had nearly killed him only a few weeks before, and his scales were fresh and clean, his eyes piercing red, and his breath hot and spicy. She put her arms around his long face and held it tight against her breast while she sang of joy and freedom.

Finally she released him with a gentle laugh, and he joined in a duet, singing double counterpart to her melody.

The next days and months melted one into another, and Lingæa rejoiced in her rides on Gorandur's back, the fresh cool fruit from many kinds of trees, and the warm sweet waters from the basin above. Every seventh day the two went together to the tree of four in the center of the basin and took of its fruit, but the sevens became one in her memory, and she never thought how many there had been or how many might yet come.

She knew not how long she had been there when one day a derelict ship drifted to their shore. The sails and oars and canvass roof were still whole, but of the men there was not a trace. As she stepped on

board and fingered the things made by men of her race, there grew suddenly within her a great longing to be again among her own.

Gorandur sat on the sand along side for a long while, then spoke, "It was in ships such as this that the cruel Helgesfrid came to destroy us."

Lingæa looked at him sharply and said, "I am of the race of Helgesfrid, and we are friends," And she climbed up into the bow and rested her cheek against the side of the tall carved snake of the figure-head. After a long silence, she whispered, "I wonder what my people are doing, if they are still angry at me."

"I will take you," Gorandur said, "but I think small good will come of it."

She climbed onto his back, and without a word he winged up and eastward, higher and faster this time so that they saw the coasts of her village while the sun still glistened on the slate roofs, even though the morning was far spent when they started. Gorandur turned left and coursed low up the fjord where they had departed long before, flew over the clearing where they had rested in their flight, retraced the path, long since disappeared, where he rained blood on the spruces, kept carefully behind the ridge out of sight of the village as he floated down the slope, and alighted at the great stone gates where she had first called him with her singing.

There was a small dip in the ground between the stones, and with a flick of his claw, Gorandur made a hole just large

enough for his narrow head. His long neck entered, then withdrew again, and his eyes drooped with sadness. "So unnecessary," he murmured, "They found the gold, and disputed over it, and their families lived on without them." Lingæa felt deep sadness in his voice as he continued, "I will wait here," and disappeared into the hole.

Left suddenly alone in the fading afternoon, but excited to be near home again, she started down the hill, but a moment later she heard Gorandur calling behind her, "Wait, you will need these," and he dropped several gold coins at her feet. She picked them up, said her thanks with a quick kiss on the hot scaly nose, and turned again down toward the village, tripping gaily through the fresh spring flowers.

The long afternoon had settled into evening when she finally came into the village. She ignored the faces going by in the dusk as she hurried back to her old house, wondering who would be in her room and if her house mistress were still angry with her. But the face that appeared in answer to her knock was that of a much younger woman, who said she did not know the person Lingæa asked for. With a word of thanks, she turned away and sought out the innkeeper. He looked at her closely, but gave her a room without saying a word when she laid a small gold coin on the desk.

In the morning she sat quietly at her table and wondered how things were the same yet so very different, especially that she saw no one she had ever seen before

and that the speech of the villagers was vaguely different from her own.

The morning sun stood high already when she went out into the town square, and she leaned on the fountain where the Dragon Teller had stirred up the villagers to hunt Gorandur, waiting to see what the day would bring her. The square was empty, but she felt suspicious eyes upon her, and she saw that the day would bring small good for her if she could not bring things to order soon. At last a girl of about five years came out playing with a hoop, and Lingæa called to her. She came with wide frightened eyes, but Lingæa smiled and and told her she needed a friend.

“Where are you from?” the little girl asked.

And Lingæa sat down beside her and said, "I have a hard story, if you would like to hear it." She said she lived in a village across the water, she knew not where or how far, but that angry men came in the night to burn her home with her family all in it. Just before the fire started, her father gave her several pieces of gold, a skin of water and some hard rye bread and told her to creep out in the darkness, down to the shore, take the first boat she found there, and push out to sea. Many days she drifted before the wind, but last night she touched the sand below this village, the boat drifted out to sea again, and she hoped the people here to be kind to her.

The little girl accepted the story with wide eyes and disappeared, and after a

long empty silence Lingæa went back to the inn.

When she came out again the next morning, people were in the streets, and some looked kindly to her as they passed. After several more days she was able to speak with an old woman and offered to care for her in exchange for a bed and some company. Soon the evenings were filled with stories of days gone by. Lingæa listened as the old woman told of dragons and brave warriors that lived long ago, how a dragon carried away the Goat Girl long after the last one was thought dead. All the men went after it but only a few came back and none would say what happened to the others.

Day by day the stories continued, and Lingæa wondered how so many years had

passed while she was on the island. She saw that this world was no longer hers and that she did wrong to return. But it was so interesting to hear her own adventure mixed in as one with the ancient tales the Dragon Teller had told that she stayed on to hear more and more.

Soon great excitement filled the village. On the morning before the long-day dances the youths built fire stacks, and when the evening finally grew dim, the fires roared into the dusk while boys and girls took hands in circles and danced and sang rounds in ancient cadences. Lingæa's light and merry dancing caught the excitement of the evening, and she enjoyed too much the attentions of the boys who crowded to dance and leap through the fires with her.

When the morning sun finally dimmed the fires, Lingæa went back to her old mistress and slept, but several of the boys determined that they would have her to wife. During the next several weeks they contended with each other for her attention, and she had scarce time to think of her dragon friend sleeping alone in his cold cave up on the mountain. When she did think of him, she missed the songs they made together with their ancient and wild harmonies. But when the boys held her hand, she thought skin was nicer than green scales.

The son of the chief won her heart, and they were married under the harvest moon. At the next long-day dances, she held a son to her breast and laughed as the boys and girls chased each other through

the flames. Slowly the dragon on the hill sank into deep memory, and sometimes her own early life seemed no more real to her than the songs the old Dragon Teller sang around the fountain so long ago. Her husband became chief after his father, and life seemed rich and full of promise as the passing summers brought more children, who grew strong and eager to make their way in the world.

But gradually, as they grew, she noticed how the people of the village began to look sharply at her. She remembered with pain the taunts she suffered as the Goat Girl so long ago and began to watch and listen more closely. At first she thought they were only jealous because her maiden beauty stayed with her. But one evening walking home she heard

through an open window two women talking. Both were rivals years before for the attentions of the chief's son, and she expected jealousy from them. But she chilled when she heard one say, "It is not right that she never grows old. Do you remember how she came here?" And the other one, "In old times fays appeared as beautiful young women and brought bad blood into our people. I thought those days were gone, but the old stories live around us."

Lingæa hurried home with her face buried in her hands, knowing in her heart that evil would soon come down upon her. But she looked in on her children in their beds, and her heart went out to them and forbade her to leave. In the next days she listened closely to the dark voices gather-

ing behind walls on every side. She longed for her husband, gone at sea, but the people seemed determined to have an end with her before he returned. One day she went out toward the mountain, hoping to find comfort and advice from Gorandur because there was no one else in the world she could talk to about the heaviness in her heart, but she found sentries at the end of the village spying on her, and she pretended to be looking for thistle down for her baby's bed.

Day by day the voices became darker and the threats more urgent, until one day she thought to take all of the children away in a boat. But the way to the shore was denied them, and as they came back up the hill from the sea, she found swords crossed in the way.

She knew the end had come, and she sent the children home and broke and ran up the mountain toward the great stone gates, determined to find Gorandur and seek his help against her enemies. Once she looked back over her shoulder and saw the village watching her. Then when she looked again, she saw a group moving toward her house. She ran to the stone gates and pounded with her fists upon the grass, but the hill remained still and mute. Screams echoed from the village below, and she pounded again and again on the grass without response. Finally she sat down broken and alone, and she wept for her husband, her children and her lost dragon friend.

As she wept, she found her voice returning to a song of long ago. It grew with

the wind and bounced from the rocks and echoed with the mystery of years gone by. And as she poured her tears into the melody, she felt the earth move beneath her hand. The sod opened crack and a familiar green nose came out and pressed against her arm. She reached into the crack and scratched the scales as she did so long ago, and again the tongue came out and embraced her arm. Then she threw back her head and howled as a she-wolf robbed of her young. The ground broke open at her side, and Gorandur stood beside her with a roar that broke trees into slivers and tore rocks from the bowels of the mountain.

She jumped onto his back before his wings, and he leapt into the air and climbed with her high among the clouds. They circled out over the sea where a boat

bearing her husband struggled against the tide. Gorandur turned the clouds around, hiding himself and Lingæa among them, and shaped the winds behind the sail, so that the boat danced across the waves.

Soon it touched the shore, and the men shouted for joy and ran up the cliff to the village. But the joy turned to terror as the chief found wickedness written in the blood of his own loins upon his home. The strength of his anger shook the clouds round about Lingæa and Gorandur as they flew, and they saw his sword flash and turn red as he stormed through the village. When no voices were left but his own, they watched as he pulled the houses apart one by one and carried the timbers to the head of the cliff above the sea until a great mountain of wood rose against the sky.

Then the remains of the villagers he laid one by one upon it, and finally he himself stood among them sword in hand and howled into the lowering sun.

When the deed was done, Gorandur flew down and breathed upon the pyre, and it leapt into flame that shone higher than the moon. Seven days and nights the fire burned, as Lingæa and Gorandur circled overhead. On the eighth day they swooped down again to the meadow beside where the village had been and lowered their heads and wept. But their weeping found an echo in a child's cry. Lingæa ran thither and found a young child, not yet two summers old, caught in a bramble, and as she reached out her hand, she saw it was her own baby, the only one left alive from the village. And

she took the child in her arms, placed it on Gorandur's back and bade them flee.

When they were gone, Lingæa gathered a few more sticks from the bramble where she had found her child and added them to the top of the pyre. Then she blew the embers into flame and lay in the fire's warm embrace, singing her last farewell to Gorandur and her child circling close overhead. "I was not true to you, my friend, but returned to those who hated me. Now my lot is with them forever. I was not worthy of your love, but take my child and teach her that which I could not understand." Then her voice departed as the flames gathered her at last to final union with her people.

Gorandur took the child to the western isle for a time, but she would not grow

up in that land, eating its fruits and bathing in the fountain of young waters, and he took her to another village under a mountain by the sea and left her by night in the street and watched from among the clouds as an old couple took her in and fed her.

But the blood of ages was in the child, and she grew too slowly. Gorandur taught her to look for him, and he moved her from village to village until she was old enough to live alone. Then he took her from land to land, and she danced in the forests and knew to marry for a season to the best young men until throughout all the northern lands were people who stayed young and had great powers.

But the village where Lingæa grew up Gorandur guarded as his own and kept barren, and he watched over the great pyre

that no one should learn its meaning. Men later said it was the scene of a great battle between warring tribes. But those of long life spoke among themselves that after many years Gorandur himself piled new wood high upon it and breathed it into flame and sang of Lingæa as his breath departed.