

HANS OF ICELAND

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649127108

Hans of Iceland by Victor Hugo

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

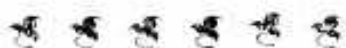
Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017







This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com




VICTOR HUGO

**HANS OF
ICELAND**



By       Victor Hugo



Chicago and New York   



HANS OF ICELAND.

CHAPTER I.

THE MORTUARY AND ITS VISITORS.

"Ah! Neighbor Niels; look where love leads to. Poor Guth Stersen would not be lying there, on that black slab, like a star-fish forgotten by the tide, if she had thought of nothing else but her father's boat and mending his nets. May Saint Usuph, the fisherman, console our comrade in this trying affliction."

"And what about her betrothed?" was the sharp rejoinder, given in quivering accents; "Gill Stadt, that handsome young fellow, now stretched out by her side? He would have been alive now, had he not fallen in love with Guth, and in consequence gone to seek his fortune in the Rœraas mines. He should have remained at home, quietly rocking his young brother's cradle, hanging from the smoky rafters of his mother's cottage."

"Your memory gets weaker with age, Mother Olly," interrupted Neighbor Niels. "Gill never had a brother; that deepens poor Widow Stadt's grief, for her cottage is now desolate: and if to console herself she casts her eyes upward, she finds between heaven and them the roof of her cottage, with the empty cradle of her child still hanging there, the son who now lies dead in the height of his prime."

"Poor mother!" said Mother Olly; "as for the young man, he has only himself to blame. Why did he go to Rœraas, and become a miner?"

"I thoroughly believe," muttered Niels, "that in those

infernal mines a man's life is sacrificed for every ascalin of copper that they yield. What is your opinion, Neighbor Braall?"

"Miners are mad," replied the fisherman. "A fish cannot live out of water; a man should not dive into the bowels of the earth."

"But," objected a young man in the crowd, "if to secure his betrothed, it were necessary for Gill Stadt to work in the mines?"

"We ought never to expose our lives," interrupted Olly, "for the sake of matters of far less importance. A fine dowry Gill has gained for his Guth!"

"Did this young girl drown herself in despair, on hearing of her lover's death?" inquired another.

"Who says so?" exclaimed a soldier, roughly, who was passing his way through the crowd. "I knew the girl well; and she was certainly engaged to a young miner, who was crushed to death by the fall of a rock, in one of the subterranean galleries of Storwaadsgrute, near Røraas. She was also the mistress of one of my comrades; and the day before yesterday she was venturing secretly to Munkholm, to celebrate with her lover the death of her betrothed, when her boat struck on a rock, and she was drowned."

A confused hubbub of voices arose, in the midst of which the old woman exclaimed:

"Impossible! brave sir."

The young ones remained silent. Neighbor Niels maliciously recalled the fisherman's remark:

"That is where love leads to."

The soldier was getting seriously angry at the old women's incredulity. He had already called them "a parcel of old witches from the Cave of Quiragoth," and they were not disposed to endure so gross an insult, when a sharp and commanding voice put an end to the debate, exclaiming:

"Silence! silence, you old dotards!" All became silent; as the cock's crowing causes the hens to cease their clucking. Before picturing the remainder of the scene, it would perhaps be as well to give some idea of the place in which it occurred.

It was, as the reader no doubt already guesses, one of those dreadful buildings which public pity and social forethought have erected for the reception of unknown corpses, the last asylum of the dead who have for the most part lived an unhappy life, and to which crowd

those persons who are moved by simple curiosity, as well as others filled with morbid or kindly feelings. Often the friends or weeping relations of the deceased come to see their worst fears realized, after a period of long suspense.

In times long past, in the only partially civilized country to which I have transported my readers, it had not entered into the minds of the authorities, as it has to those model cities of mud and gold, to make these places a receptacle for monuments, ingeniously ghostly and elegantly funereal.

The light did not fall through a tomb-shaped window of an artistically sculptured vault, upon sorts of couches on which the comforts of the living seem to have been accorded to the dead, and where the very pillow appears to court but slumber.

If the guardian's door were left open, the eye, wearied with the sight of nude and hideous corpses, could not then, as it does now, repose itself by the sight of smiling children and elegant furniture. Death was here in all its hideousness—in all its horror. As yet they had never ventured to deck the fleshless skeleton with bows and ribbons.

The hall in which the late conversation took place was vast, and so gloomy that it had the appearance of even being of greater extent. The only light came through a low square entrance door, and from a gap roughly pierced in the ceiling, through which a feeble and dull light fell, together with the rain, hail, or snow, according to the season of the year, on the corpses stretched directly under it. An iron balustrade ran across the hall, dividing it into two parts. The outer one toward the square door was for public admittance; in the inner were two long black granite slabs, placed flat down and arranged parallel to each other.

In each division there was a side door, which served as entrances for the guardian and his assistants, whose quarters were situated in the rear of the building, which ran back toward the sea.

The miner and his betrothed occupied two of these granite beds. The large blue and purple spots plainly denoted that decomposition had already commenced in the young girl's body.

Gill's features were harsh and rigid; his body was so terribly mutilated, that it was impossible to judge if he had been as handsome as Dame Olly had asserted.

It was before these disfigured remains that the conver-

sation we have just related took place. An old man, tall and thin, with folded arms and head bowed down, was seated on a broken stool in one of the darkest corners of the hall. He seemed to pay but slight attention to what was going on around him, until the moment when he arose, suddenly exclaiming: "Silence, dotards, silence!" and seized the soldier's arm. All then became silent. The soldier turned round, and burst into a rude shout of laughter at the sight of the person who had interrupted him so strangely, whose pale face, scanty hair, and long fingers, together with his complete suit of reindeer leather, fully justified so mirthful a greeting. A murmur rose from the crowd of women, who had remained silent a while.

"It is the guardian of the Spladgest" (dead-house at Drontheim). "The accursed porter of the dead. The diabolical Spiagudry. The wicked sorcerer."

"Peace, you dotards, peace! If to-day is your devil's Sabbath, hasten for your broomsticks, or they will fly off alone, and leave in peace this valiant descendant of the god Thor."

Then Spiagudry, trying to twist his countenance into a gracious smile, addressed the soldier.

"You were saying, my brave fellow, that this wretched woman——"

"The old scoundrel!" muttered Olly; "we are wretched women, as far as he is concerned; when we have the misfortune to fall into his clutches, his fee is only thirty ascalins, while the miserable carcass of a man brings him in forty."

"Silence, hags!" said Spiagudry. "In truth, these daughters of Satan are like their own kettles; when they boil, they must sing. Tell me, my king of the swords, will your comrade be likely to kill himself in despair at the loss of Guth, his mistress?"

Here the long-repressed explosion burst forth.

"Listen to the miscreant, the old heathen!" cried simultaneously twenty sharp and discordant voices. "He is on the lookout for another dead body, for the sake of the forty ascalins."

"Well, if so, what then?" retorted the guardian of Spladgest. "Does not our gracious king, Christian V., whom may Saint Hospice protect, does he not declare himself the born guardian of all miners in the kingdom, so that he may enrich himself with the miserable pittance they may possess at their death?"

"You do great honor to his majesty," said Braall, the fisherman, "to compare the royal treasury to the strong-box of your charnel-house, and yourself to him, Neighbor Spiagudry."

"Neighbor, indeed!" sneered the guardian, disgusted at the familiarity. "Your neighbor, say rather, your host; some day, my dear citizen of the sea, I'll offer you one of my six stone beds for a week. Besides," he continued, "I alluded to the death of this soldier simply to know if suicide, committed on account of the passions inspired by these ladies, was to become a regular custom."

"Well, you guardian of corpses, much like one yourself, what is the meaning of that amiable expression of countenance, more like a smile on the face of a dying man?"

"Splendid, my gallant sir," replied Spiagudry. "I have always thought there was more wit under the helmet of the soldier Thurn, who defeated Satan both with saber and tongue, than under Bishop Isleef's mitre, he who wrote the "History of Iceland," or under the college cap of Professor Schœnning, who has so well described our cathedral."

"In that case, take my advice, old leather-coat, forsake your charnel-house, with all its profits, and betake yourself to the Viceroy of Berghen's Muscum. I swear to you by Saint Belphegor, that they give their weight in gold for curious beasts. Now tell me, what do you want with me?"

"When bodies are fished out of water and brought to us, we have to give half our fee to the fisherman. I therefore wished, noble heir of Soldier Thurn, to ask you to urge upon your unhappy comrade not to drown himself, but to choose some other form of death; it can little matter to him, and I am sure that he would not wish to wrong the poor Christian, who is hospitable enough to receive his body, if Guth's loss should drive him to such an act of destruction."

"You deceive yourself, most charitable and hospitable guardian of the dead; my comrade will not have the satisfaction of being received into your charming retreat, with its six beds. Don't you think he has already consoled himself with another? Why, he was tired of Guth a long time ago."

At these words the storm, which Spiagudry had for a while drawn upon himself, burst with redoubled violence upon the soldier's head.

"So, you scoundrel!" shrieked the old women, "it is