

"It was he, he himself, with that beard, those garments----"

And so the conversation continued. Toli, the shepherd, took no part in the talk. He sat over on the floor, silent, impassive--like a moss-grown stone. Only occasionally he raised his bushy eyebrows, and a troubled, misty look shone in his eyes. Tega's wife wondered to herself, she could not understand him; really, what was the matter with him? He was brave, she knew he had not his equal for courage, when he had charge of the herd not an animal was ever lost; all the same, what a man he was, always frowning, and never a smile on his lips! There must be something with him, naturally it must be---- And breaking off her train of thought she suddenly spoke to him.

"Toli, during all the months you have been with us I have never asked you whether you are married?"

The question was unexpected. The shepherd seemed to be considering. Then he answered:

"No."

"What? You have never married? Have you no wife, no home?"

"Home--ah!" he sighed. "You are right, even I once had a home, even I had hopes of a bride, but they came to nought--what would you, it was not written in the book of destiny--I was poor."

He spoke haltingly, and his eyes wandered here and there. And after one motion of his hand, as though to say "I have much sorrow in my heart," he added:

"That girl is dead--and I, too, shall die, everything will die."

One afternoon in March, as the shepherd did not appear, Mitu Tega prepared to go alone to the fold. He brought out the horse, bought two bags of bread, and a lamb freshly killed, went to the mill where he procured some barley, and then on slowly, quietly--he on foot, the horse in front--till he reached his destination just as the sun was disappearing behind the Aitosh mountains.

The shepherds rubbed their eyes when they saw him, but he called out:

"I have brought a lamb for roasting."

"You must eat it with us," said Toli, "and stay the night here."

"No, for they expect me at home."

"Will you start back at this hour?" put in Panu, Toli's comrade. "The night brings many perils."

It was getting quite dark. Stars twinkled. Whether he wished to or not, Mitu Tega was obliged to remain. Then the shepherds set to work; one put the lamb on to the spit, and lit the fire; the other fetched boughs from the wood. He brought whole branches with which they prepared a shelter for the night for Tega--within was a bed of green bracken. Then all three stretched themselves by the fire. Gradually the flames sank a little, on the heap of live coals the lamb began to brown, and spit with fat, and send out an appetizing smell. The moon shone through the bushes; they seemed to move beneath the hard, cold light which flooded the solitude. The shadows of the mountains stretched away indefinitely. Above, some night birds crossed unseen, flapping their wings. Mitu Tega turned his head. For a moment his glance was arrested: by Toli's side, a gun and a long scimitar lay shining on the ground. He was not nervous, otherwise----He glanced at Toli.

"What a man!" thought Tega. "I have nothing to fear while I am with him."