

The Maiden of Finnmark

By Elle Rooney

Every Christmas, Gerda and Kai recount old tales to each other, even though they both know them by heart. Back when they were very young, however, it was Gerda's grandmother who told them the stories passed among the folk of Andar for generations. She would refuse to tell them anywhere other than in the old armchair by the window, the almost mildewed smell of which often caused Kai to wrinkle his nose. The young children would huddle close to the fire, as far away as possible from the window, which froze over in tessellating crystals each Winter. It was one such evening, when Gerda and Kai were but knee high on the elderly lady, that they settled down to hear the tale of the Maiden of Finnmark.

"There was once a young maiden in the Northern lands of Finnmark," began their grandmother.

"Do you mean Finland or Denmark?" Gerda interrupted matter-of-factly, "Finnmark isn't a place!"

The grandmother shook her head gently. "Yes, Finnmark is a place. It's to the east of Lapland, if you know where that is."

"It's cold in Lapland!" Kai piped up.

"Yes it is Kai, but back in those days it was even colder, because the Winter lasted for half a year! The maiden wished, as many a young maiden would, to be free from her parents, nobles who ruled over much of the region. Alas, the icy storms in Finnmark would be too great for her to tolerate without a great coat and hat, of which she had none. Oh, how she wished for these, and her wish, it seems, was heard."

"Why doesn't she have a hat?" the young Gerda crossed her arms. "I have one and I'm not a noble!"

"Maybe it fell in the snow like mine did when we were playing yesterday, Gerda," replied Kai, very seriously, "she'd catch a cold if she wore it after that!"

"Maybe she did, Kai," their grandmother chuckled. Gerda crossed her arms tighter to show her disagreement.

"But her wish must've been heard, for one day at the estate appeared a merchant, with eyes white and unseeing. There was something odd about this merchant, the ground staff whispered to each other, since though he must have been able to see (how else could he have opened the great door), he seemed to look straight through people, as if they were not there at all. Onto the grounds he came, with a bounty of warm woollen hats and coats in his wooden, ice-bitten cart. The maiden, in her dormitory, awoke to the clattering wheels and saw the merchant coming, and hope, not often seen in those days when the Winter darkness ruled the sky, welled in her heart.

"The merchant spoke to the maiden in a low, lilting tone, as she descended the stairway. It was as though he'd been expecting her, but she had not in the least expected him. "These are the cloaks of Muspelheim, certain to provide you with eternal warmth."

"Cloaks?" Gerda interjected. "But I thought they were hats and coats!"

"Are they different things?" Kai asked. Gerda patted him on the head, as if to baby him, though they were the same age.

"Of course, Kai; they're very different."

“Well,” their grandmother thought, “it was a long time ago, perhaps they were once one and the same? The maiden turned toward the cart and reached her hand into the wool and felt at once a great, unrivalled warmth that left Winter forgotten. She asked the price, yet the merchant’s sole response was, “You shall know before the day’s end.” Of course, the maiden was bemused by this, but when she turned back to the merchant to demand the price there and then, the merchant had vanished, leaving only a coat and hat upon the floor. Now, the maiden waited until dusk, before making her way out into the cold, for the first time in her life, with only the warmth of the coat and hat.”

“Didn’t she bring any food?” Gerda asked, confused. “And where was she even going?”

“Yes,” Kai nodded, “you can’t go out without biscuits.”

“Oh yes, of course she brought biscuits,” their grandmother laughed. “She took them from the pantry when the kitchen staff had all settled for the evening. But as for a destination, Gerda, she had none, other than to get away from her family, for she had tired of them.”

Gerda shook her head. “That must be very lonely, to go off by yourself.”

“Perhaps for a person like you or me, but the maiden had a heavy-determination to be free. But before long, the maiden began to grow hot in her hat and coat, despite the wind lapping at her face. Still, she pressed on, but it became insufferably hot, until she felt she may burst into flames if she kept the garb on much longer. So, she took off the hat and coat, and threw them into the snow. But it was then that the cold began to set in.

“Oh, what am I to do?” she despaired. She wondered if perhaps she should go back home after all, but in the blizzard she could no longer see her home, and was left with only unbearable heat or unbearable cold. Was there no other option?

“And so she sat, putting on the coat until she would burn and taking it off again until she would freeze. But the maiden did not perish, and in this constant cycle of ice and fire, the snow thawed and the grass began to bloom into flowers around her. The trees blossomed and spread their spores into the world, as the snow melted away from fair Finnmark, marking the first Spring. As for the Spring maiden, they say she continues to walk Midgard to this day, her purpose now to bring each year an end to the Snow Queen’s reign.”

Whenever Gerda and Kai now tell the tales each Christmas eve, they still sit at the old armchair. And though they’ve moved it closer to the fire, they still remember the tale of the Maiden of Finnmark, and keep it balanced between the heat of the fire and the cold by the window.