

MAGNHILD UTISTUEN AND THE BEAR HUNTER

By Jacob B. Bull

North in Rendalen on the eastern side of the valley of Unnsett and close to the beginning of the mountains, there once was a lonely summer farm. It was situated between the wild waterfalls and mounds of big stones where the Uggelaaen creek runs down towards the bottom of the valley. It is still known in the district as The Old Summer Farm but no one uses the dilapidated houses any more. Maybe a hunter of reindeer might stop there to make himself a cup of coffee, or a catcher of mountain grouse might spend a night there in winter while he waits for the traps he has set in the nearby birch woods to be sprung.

Everyone who in the old days had their livestock there has long since moved far south to the Kverninga creek and Sovollen. The bear population had increased in such numbers in the area around The Old Summer Farm that it became impossible to keep the livestock safe. Almost every year a monster of a bear would appear close to the fields, usually an old, huge, grey killer bear with a ring of white fur around its neck.

One of the last years that there were livestock at this farm, the owner had hired a girl called Magnhild. She was tall and blond with sharp blue eyes, quick on her feet and a very good worker. Everyone who knew her liked her and it was said that if she liked someone she never forgot them. If she took a job on she would see it through whatever the cost. That is why the farmer's wife at Utistu answered, when people asked her how she dared to bring her livestock up to The Old Summer Farm that summer, quite simply, "I have Magnhild." To which they all just nodded.

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The summer grew warm and mild, and in the mountains there was peace. The marshland was first white with flowers and then red with unripe arctic cloudberries; there were mountain grouse and wood hens aplenty around the marshes and even in the forest snares. Bear tracks were a seldom sight and only once did the shepherd's boy report that he had seen tracks up by the Uggelaaen creek, but they seemed to him to be only the tracks of a young bear.

But then the dark fall evenings arrived. The north wind and snow blasted through the forests and the cloudberry marshes had a greyish-yellowish hue in the cold night air. And if for once the temperature was mild, the rain at night would come thrashing down and the south wind would howl down the chimney. Now Magnhild was anxious all day about the livestock and watched over them every evening as soon as the sun went down. She knew that if a monster were to come, he would come now.

And when it did come, it was far worse than she had imagined.

One day as she was standing out on the flagstones making butter, she suddenly heard the sheep come rushing home scared and bolting straight into the sheep barn. At once she understood that something was wrong up on the mountain, and as she stood listening, she heard the shout of the herdsboy as he arrived breathless and in tears.

"Killer bear!" he shouted.

"Are you crazy?" replied Magnhild, as she sprang up and put away the churn.

Then she rushed into the milk room and returned with an axe in her hand before she headed for the cattle track to the north. The herdsboy followed closely with a hunting horn in his hand. As they entered the stony land at the creek they were met by a terrible sight.

In the birch woods on the other side of the creek the herd of bellowing cows were running wildly in panic. Among them was a big, grey-brown bear running and jumping with an occasional roar that echoed eerily from the mountain. Pursuing the herd closely, it tried to get in a blow at any cow that momentarily strayed from the rest of the animals.

Leading the herd was Dagros, the bell cow with bloodshot eyes and lowered head. Time after time she was close. Time after time the bear rose to deliver a blow but every time some other cow was there, ready to spear the bear with its horn and forcing it to jump away as fast as it could. However, as they moved closer and closer to the marshland Dagros got further and further ahead of the others.

Magnhild rushed into the creek so the water splashed high around her and managed to drag herself up the other bank through the juniper bushes. As she got to the top she stopped and stared as her blood ran cold.

“Dagros!” she screamed, “Dagros!” Then, breathing heavily all the way, she started to run through the bushes and shrubs in the direction of the marsh. Ahead of the others Dagros had gone out into the marsh where the bear was waiting. The bell cow moved with heavy steps, sinking at times, and aware of no danger.

Magnhild stopped breathless at the edge of the marsh. “Dagros!” she cried, wild with fear. But Dagros has already arrived at the bear and lowers her horns to attack. However the monster leaps to the side and with a great roar delivers a crushing blow with its paw. As if hit by a bullet, Dagros goes down on her knees, with her head slowly sinking into the marsh.

Another great roar and the bear jumps on her back.

Then Magnhild wades into the marsh with the axe lifted high above her head.

“Get away, you beast!” she screams.

The herdsboy, on a stony hill not far away, puts his horn to his mouth and the shrill sound reverberates through the hilltops and the lowing herd head heavily one by one into the marsh.

The snarling bear rises and shows its teeth, but Magnhild is close by, so it slowly leaves its prey and with another angry roar heads out of the marsh. Reaching the other side it sits up with its paws together and snarls again at the girl.

“Get away, you beast!” she screams again and makes to go after it again. The bear now turns and runs off in the direction of the hills, while the herdsboy on the hill keeps blowing his horn till the eyes in his head turn red.

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In the middle of the marsh lies Dagros silent and dead. Magnhild stands staring at her side. The jaw-bone of the cow had been smashed and a deep hollow could be seen. The blow had been so powerful that the head and the right horn had been driven far down into the marsh and were stuck there. The rest of the cows came wading out now, snorting and breathing heavily. The herdsboy also arrived.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" Magnhild suddenly says, and from her sharp, blue eyes small, but heavy tears start to fall. Then she bends down and caresses the dead animal's neck again and again without saying anything. The herdsboy stands silent at her side. Then finally Magnhild slowly rises.

"It could have been worse. He could have killed more," the herdsboy says. Magnhild again bends down.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" she repeats.

Then she turns around. "Come," she says, starting to walk slowly over the marsh.

It took over half an hour to calm the livestock down. She had to coax each and every one of them with gentle words and even give them salt. But all the while she was looking across the marsh to where Dagros lay. Then she tried to get the cows to head home but none wanted to go even though the herdsboy tried both kind, encouraging words and blows. They were of course waiting for the bell cow to come as they stood around, staring and lowing. None would go home without a bell or leader's call to follow. Then Magnhild again goes across the marsh to Dagros and takes off the bell. She looks once more at the poor animal, sighs heavily and finally walks away.

Then she started calling:

"Come on, you poor cows." The call filled the air, sounding louder and louder, a wild dying note.

"Come on, you poor cows." She walked ahead calling, now and then ringing with Dagros' heavy bell. Lowing gently, the cows started to follow one by one.

Magnhild took the shortest route, calling all the time. But in the middle of this calling something seemed to break inside her. Tears gushed out and the sound of the calling suddenly stopped. She could not take any more. Putting both her hands to her eyes, she sat down where she was and stayed sitting there for a while.

Then a broad, wet muzzle disturbed her. It was Svartsi. She rose quickly, patted the cow on its snout and went on. Once again she started to call:

"Come on, you poor cows. Come on, you poor cows." And so they went home with the bell jangling as though nothing had happened.

But up on the marsh lay Dagros dead and cold.

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The same evening the herdsboy went down to the valley, breathlessly relating what had happened. The farmer's wife clasped her hands together, wailing and complaining.

"Isn't that what we said?" claimed the wives at all the neighbouring farms, shaking their heads knowingly.

But the farmer himself left for Millehaugen to find Lagener, the bear killer, and told him to leave at once for the mountains because a killer bear had slain one of his best cows. The following morning the herdsboy returned to the summer farm together with Lagener.

"Here comes the man who is going to take down the bear," Lagener said with a smile and sat down by the fireside.

"That's exactly what is needed," replied Magnhild coldly and went off to bring food to the table. During the following days she was as taciturn in all her replies and her eyes were hard as if her mind were occupied by something else. As indeed it was.

Lagener left for the marsh with a horse and sledge in order to bring Dagros home, but when he arrived he found that the bear had been there, torn open the animal's stomach and made off with some of the entrails.

Langener left the head, entrails and some bones, and the rest was taken to the summer farm. Here it was mixed with salt and put in a vat. However, Lagener had to do this himself as Magnhild would not participate. At twilight he headed for the creek to try and ambush the bear if it should come back, but in the middle of the night Lagener returned. Magnhild lay in her bed, awake and fully dressed.

"Well?" she said and rose.

"It got too dark to shoot", said Langener, putting the gun away.

"You could have waited till it got light," replied Magnhild and chopped some dry wood and added it to the fire. But when the flames took hold she saw Lagener's pale face.

"Did you see anything?" she asked.

"No I only heard it," he replied almost in a whisper. "It has to be a huge beast," he added.

"Oh, yes, it was huge," she replied coldly.

Then Langener sat down at the table to eat and Magnhild returned to bed, but once again fully clothed.

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Dawn drew near. The dying heat from the fire place cast flickering shadows on the misty windows. Once in a while a piece of smouldering wood slid further down into the fire. Now and then the flames rose higher when they got hold of a fat bit of a branch or root. Over on a bench Langener, the bear killer, lay sleeping noisily. By his side the gun was standing and on the table the empty dish.

Then suddenly Magnhild gets up silently. She puts her shoes on, tiptoes quietly towards the gun, grabs it and walks out, while on his bench Langener, the bear killer, snores his healthy, just and self-satisfied sleep. From the very start of dawn till the sun began to shine the lovely girl lay on the stony hills close to the marsh waiting for the bear to come. But nothing did she see or hear and so, shivering from the cold, she left for home.

In the doorway she met the bear killer.

"Have you ever seen such a girl?" he said, laughing and took the gun from her. He had been looking for it high and low for half an hour.

"Have you ever seen such a man?" replied Magnhild sharply. Then she took the milk bucket and headed for the cowshed. The bear killer stood scratching his head and stared after her. Then he dragged himself slowly down to the cowshed, where he stood in the door opening, watching her as she sat with her head leaning against Svartsi and milking her so the milk gushed into the bucket.

"I'll not allow you to go after this bear at night," he finally says.

She does not answer, but goes on milking.

"He might be hostile towards humans," he says, smiling.

"Well, he's certainly not afraid of the woods," she replies, then gets up, takes the bucket and moves to the nearest cow.

"What a girl you are!" says Langener and forces a laugh. Then he slowly trudges out of the cowshed.

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After a while he is back again. The herdsboy is at his side whittling a stick. It is time for the herd to go back out again.

"Do you want me to help you with the milking?" Langener suddenly asks.

"Do as you like," Magnhild replies and looks at him coldly.

"Where do you want me to start?" Langener smiles again, trying to be nice.

"Oh, you can take the one from Oppistu," Magnhild replies drily, and the herdsboy breaks out laughing and turns away. Some time earlier Mr Langener had shot dead a big sheepram belonging to Simen Oppistuen when he was lying in wait for a bear outside a cabin near the Neka creek. The following night Langener lay hiding in wait near the bait he had put out on the marsh, but when he returned in the morning sunshine he had seen nothing.

"Bears like this are extremely cautious," he explained.

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It is the third night and Langener is sleeping inside, as the north wind howls and the newly fallen snow lies in drifts around the walls. Early in the morning Magnhild awakes and jumps up. She has heard a cracking sound from the wooden fence down by the sheep shed. She walks in her stocking-feet over to the window, wipes off the condensation with her hand and looks out. She suddenly hears a splintering noise from the door to the sheep shed and the sound of running sheep. In the grey morning light close to the shed door she sees the dark shadow of an animal lifting its front paw and striking for a second time so the door splinters into many pieces. Then the beast jumps into the flock of sheep.

Magnhild grabbed the nearby gun and started to go out, but at the same moment the bear appeared with a big, kicking sheep in its mouth. Magnhild cried out, and then stuck the gun straight through the window so that pieces of glass flew all over. Just as the bear was about to jump over the fence with the sheep in its mouth, she took aim and pulled the trigger.

At the sound of the gun going off, Langener jumped up from his bench, rubbed his eyes and stared at the girl.

"What on earth....?" he stammered.

But Magnhild stood bolt upright staring out through the broken window.

On the other side of the fence something huge and dark was twisting and turning violently while howls of pain broke the silence of the night.

Langener was staring the same way. His mouth hung half-open as he gazed at the girl with big, amazed eyes.

"What on earth....?" he stammered again.

But then the girl slid down onto a stool and dropped the gun with a bang on the floor.

"I think I got him," she said.

Langener again stared out, but now everything was silent.

"Shall we take a look?" he asked.

"No, you can go. You are the man," she says, holding her hand to her chest breathlessly.

He bends down for the gun.

"I have to reload first," he says. "The beast could still be alive," he adds.

Then, after a long time spent carefully reloading, he finally opened the door and slowly went out.

The herdsboy followed taking the axe. Magnhild moved over to the door.

"No, look at the sheep!" she cried.

In the yard a lame sheep was limping badly with a big red mark on its shoulder. And before Magnhild had time to think, she was over in the middle of the yard.

"It must be a miracle!" she cried again.

She had caught the sheep and stood staring at its wound.

"No, come over here!" Langener shouted, standing at the wooden fence.

"Yes, yes" the herd boy called and lifted up the axe.

Magnhild slowly headed for them.

There lay a huge killer bear with its mighty paws drawn together as if from cramp.

A thin, dark trail of blood was visible on the stones; otherwise nothing was to be seen.

Langener took a piece of the wooden fence and poked the bear.

It made no movement.

For a while he just stood there staring.

Then he turned to Magnhild.

"Dead," he said.

She stood for a while without answering. Then suddenly she started to laugh.

"Oh my, oh my!" she then said, doubling over in delight and beating at her knees.

"Yes, you've never seen anything like this before," the herdsboy added.

Then he looked up at Langener and everything seemed to fall into place for him.

'Ha, ha,' he chortled, looking from Langener and then to Magnhild before running off.

Langener stood a long time there just scratching his ear.

"Never seen a woman like that," he finally mumbled grumpily.

Then he got out his knife and started skinning the bear.

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The same evening the farmer himself and his wife came up to bring the herd home so the tale about Magnhild's deed soon reached the valley.

"Magnhild, oh Magnhild," the farmer's wife exclaimed while they all stood around watching Langener skinning the beast.

"But God in Heaven, Ener, how could this have happened?" The old farmer stood with a little smile playing round his mouth.

"Good question," Ener replied, sulking.

For a while no one said anything.

"But did you do anything at all then?" the old farmer from Utistu asked again.

"Well, he did bring home the dead cow," the herdsboy said drily.