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Eirik the Red
and other
Icelandic Sagas



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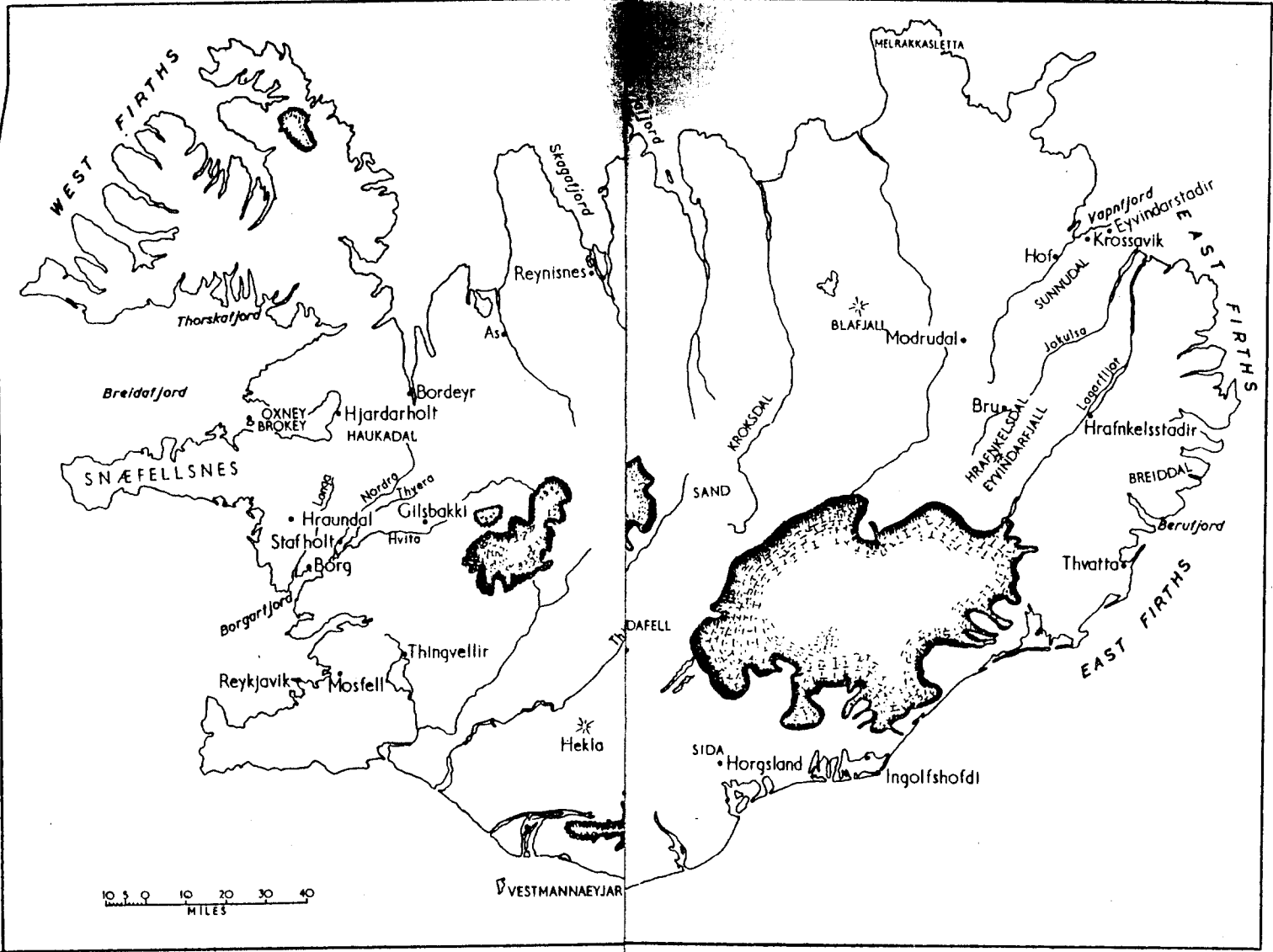
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	viii
SAGAS OF ICELANDERS	
HEN-THORIR	3
THE VAPNFJORD MEN	39
THORSTEIN STAFF-STRUCK	78
<u>HRAFNKEL THE PRIEST OF FREY</u>	<u>89</u>
EIRIK THE RED	126
THIDRANDI WHOM THE GODDESSES SLEW	158
AUTHUN AND THE BEAR	163
GUNNLAUG WORMTONGUE	171
SAGA OF TIMES PAST	
KING HROLF AND HIS CHAMPIONS	221
<i>Map of Iceland</i>	vi-vii

Keep King Harald
for Friday



(561)

INTRODUCTION

THE word *saga* means 'a saw', 'something said', something recorded in words, and hence by easy extension a prose story or narrative. Specifically it is the term used to describe, or rather distinguish, the prose narratives of medieval Iceland. These were of many kinds, but closest to our present purpose are the *Íslendingasögur* or Sagas of Icelanders, which relate the lives and feuds of individuals and families during the so-called Saga Age, A.D. 930–1030. They were first written down during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The Family Sagas, as they are also called, are the very heart-strand of the native literature of medieval Iceland; they are also part of the heroic literature of the Germanic peoples. 'Þú ert Grettir, þjóðin mín!' cries the poet: 'You are Grettir, O my people!'—and no people has ever more closely identified itself with, or owed more to, its written records than the Icelanders; yet the tales that tell of the star-crossed outlaws Grettir and Gisli, of Gunnar of Hlidarendi and *Burnt-Njal*, and the men and women of Laxardal, stand ranked in their prose kind alongside *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, the story of the Nibelungs, Waltharius, and the Eddic lays of Helgi and Sigrun. This twofold significance, native and Germanic, reinforcing their high literary merit and strong human interest, has made the Sagas of Icelanders a priceless legacy of medieval European literature.

Iceland was discovered by the continental Norsemen about the year 860, and permanent settlement began in earnest with Ingolf Arnarson at Reykjavik

some fourteen years later. The first settlers found a few Irish priests at Papey in the south-east, but otherwise inherited a land so empty and remote that, as *Egils Saga* tells us, 'all living creatures were then at their ease in the hunting-grounds, for men were unknown to them'. By 930 the coastal fringe and habitable valleys (together hardly one-sixth of this formidable fire- and ice-tormented island) were filled with chieftains from western Norway, in flight from the conquering Harald Fairhair,¹ and with men of Norse or mixed Norse and Celtic blood from earlier Norse settlements in Ireland and the Western Isles. The precise degree of Celtic influence upon the subsequent course of Icelandic literature has yet to be defined; but the quality of the settlers was demonstrably high, and among them was a notable percentage of well-born lordly men, restless of constraint, vigorous, and self-reliant, the inheritors, sustainers, and transmitters of a strong and distinctive culture. No country was ever happier in its founding families.

Limitations were at once imposed upon that culture. The visual arts had flourished in both Ireland and Scandinavia, but in Iceland there was no stone to hew, no wood to carve, no metal to mould; architecture and illumination were in the nature of things beyond their reach; and there is little evidence that they were a musical people. Their artistic expression

¹ Harald's long reign covered roughly the last quarter of the ninth century and the first third of the tenth, and thus coincided with the *Landnámatal*, or Period of Settlement. He was the first to subjugate the petty kings and lordlings of Norway and make the kingdom one. His victories in Norway, especially that at Hafrsfjord (c. 885), and his later punitive expedition to the Western Isles were thought by the saga-writers and historians to be the main cause of the colonization of Iceland.

must be in words, and by a singular stroke of fortune many of these words could be preserved. The long dark winters provided all the time in the world, the need to kill off most of their cattle ensured a large supply of week-old calves' skins for vellum, and the coming of Christianity in the year 1000 provided a practicable alphabet and a conventional format. Beginning on the estates of the wealthy chieftains and bishops, and in the monasteries south and north, but spreading later among the farmers over the whole island, transcription took place on an unprecedented scale. There still exist some 700 Icelandic manuscripts or fragments of manuscript on vellum, and these, in Sigurður Nordal's words, are 'like the poor wreckage from a proud fleet', which on a cautious estimate must have been ten times as numerous.

The substance of some of them is known to all. There are those precious repositories which contain the Eddic poems (for the mere fact of migration seems to have made the Icelanders jealous guardians of Scandinavian heroic and mythological poetry); there are the undisputed works of Snorri Sturluson, the prose Edda, and *Heimskringla* or 'The Lives of the Kings of Norway'; there are the family sagas and *þættir* or short interpolated stories, roughly 120 of them, with all the skaldic verses they preserve; and there are the *Fornaldarsögur*, or tales of times and heroes past, of which *Völsunga Saga* is the most famous exemplar. Less familiar, but still blessed with English readers, are such foundations of Icelandic history as *Landnámabók*, the 'Book of the Settlements'; the *Libellus Islandorum* of Ari the Learned, 'the Father of Icelandic history' and the first man, according to Snorri, to write scholarly

works in his native Icelandic; the Bishops' Sagas, and that dramatic sequence of twelfth- and thirteenth-century history whose title is *Sturlunga Saga*. But there is an immense literature besides, much of it hardly to be discerned in the shadow of these works of native, national impulse. The Icelanders were earnest translators and adaptors of foreign works. They rendered into their own tongue histories from Sallust to Geoffrey of Monmouth; there exist voluminous collections of story and lore concerning Our Lady, the Saints (including Thomas à Becket), and the Apostles; there is a full homiletic literature in Icelandic; and the treasuries of southern Romance were ransacked for 'sagas' of Gawain and Owain, Flores and Blanchiflor. The general impression is one of intense and unending activity, a broad, strong river of words—creative, informative, derivative—flowing from eager and acquisitive minds to the haven of the vellums.

The sagas, then, are written literature. For various reasons the point is worth emphasizing. Conditions in medieval Iceland, it is true, were remarkably favourable for the development of story-telling and oral tradition, and we hear a good deal about the practice of reciting stories before kings abroad and at entertainments, marriages, and assemblies at home. But the sagas, as we have them, are written. It is certain that oral tales, oral tradition, form no inconsiderable part of the raw material of the sagawriters; but it is no longer possible to regard the Icelandic saga as the mere transcription of an oral tale or tales. In Björn M. Ólsen's famous and decisive words: 'The more closely we read our sagas and conduct research into them, the clearer it becomes that they are works of art, that an artist's

quill inscribed them on vellum, and that behind him was no unified oral tradition enshrining a completely shaped saga, but only a mass of separate oral tales which the author must bring together, and from which he selected the material to make his integrated whole.' Further, we grow increasingly aware of the importance of written sources, both native and foreign, historical, legendary, homiletic, and exemplary, for the sagas. Thus the ultimate source of information about unipeds in *Eirik the Red* is as remote as Isidore of Seville, and Thorstein's dream in *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* and the episode in *The Vapnfjord Men* whereby Spike-Helgi wins his nickname both derive from *Trójumanna Saga*, the Icelandic Tale of Troy. On the other hand, considerable portions of some sagas are in exact accord with *Landnámabók* and Ari's *Libellus Islandorum*, and can often be shown to have been based on these sure historical foundations.

The third main source of material for the saga-writers consisted of poems and verses, whose highly disciplined form in general kept them from corruption. Often a single verse meant an anecdote or story, and in *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* a succession of verses means a saga. But we must remember here too that the saga-writer aimed to master as well as use his sources, and he would be an innocent reader who assumed that every verse in every saga was authentic and of the tenth century. Thus the dream-verses of *Gunnlaug Wormtongue*, whoever composed them, were not composed by Gunnlaug and Hrafn, who at the time were dead; and in his prose our author is silent about such apparently important verse-matter as that Thorstein married Helga to Hrafn for his money's sake.

It follows that the sagas cannot be regarded as strict historical documents. At times their material is historical, precisely and exactly; more often it is a reworking of history (if we allow that to include both oral and written sources), with an eye at once to entertainment and instruction; at times it is a more or less complete departure from history as we find it recorded in reliable sources. There are, of course, obvious non-historical sagas, fictitious sagas, *lygisögur*, which need not be taken into account at all here. One of the most striking features of recent saga scholarship has been the dispassionate assessment of their historicity; many cherished beliefs have been ruthlessly overthrown, and many a fond prejudice painfully discarded. Thus, *Hrafnkel the Priest of Frey*, long celebrated as a record of fact, has been shown to be quite unhistorical—to be, in fact, a brilliantly realistic novella, the work of a creative writer. *Hen-Thorir* now appears a work in which the author has allowed himself both historical freedom and geographical licence. *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* is an elaborate and romantic reworking of an old story, and its author has clearly been much influenced by southern chivalric and courtly patterns of behaviour. In brief, we no longer assume the truth of a saga. Rather we must ask ourselves the question: Is this history, though freely and perhaps not impartially presented, or is it a work of the imagination based upon oral and written sources? We get one kind of answer for the sagas of Hrafnkel and Gunnlaug, quite another for that of Eirik the Red. For there, the more hostilely the records are sifted and probed, the more securely the voyages of Eirik, Leif, and Karlsefni are seen to belong to European and American history. And with each answer nothing of lasting value is lost.

(137)

The sagas, we have said, are part of the heroic literature of Germania. They are the prose (and sometimes homespun) counterparts of Germanic heroic poetry. This is because the Icelandic conception of character and action was heroic. The men and women of the sagas had a comparatively uncomplicated view of human destiny, and of the part they were called upon to play in face of it. They had, it is not too much to say, an aesthetic appreciation of conduct. There was a right way to act: the consequences might be dreadful, hateful; but the conduct was more important than its consequences. In *Burnt-Njal's Saga* Flosi burns Njal and his sons (and incidentally an old woman and child) alive, not because he wants to; he loathes the task, but fate has put him in a position where it is the only thing he can do. So he does it. In part, this is the familiar tragic dilemma of the Germanic hero: he has a choice not between right and wrong, but between wrongs, and cannot renege. In part, it is a saga reading of character and destiny: to see one's fate and embrace it, with this curious aesthetic appreciation of what one is doing—it was this that made one a saga personage, a person worthy to be told about. The principal characters of *The Vapn fjord Men* carry out their deadly manœuvres like partners in a ballet: that arrogant, unhappy, and hell-bent Brodd-Helgi slaughtered like the doomed ox he was by the unforgiving, supple, and far-sighted Geitir; then Bjarni, for all his noble instincts (amply revealed at the end of the saga and in *Thorstein Staff-Struck*), brought inexorably, almost like a sleep-walker, to his bitter vengeance; and Geitir's son Thorkel stalking and snaring his prey in turn. Even Skald-Hrafn's betrayal of Gunnlaug when he brought him

water to drink was well done, because it was what he had to do. We know the name of Bjarni Grimolfs-son not so much because he sailed to America as because he gave up his place in a boat to a man more concerned to live than he. Certain death was the price of his gesture, but the name of the survivor was not worth remembrance. He was merely the occasion of Bjarni's moment of destiny. Death, it is true, was not to be sought, but it was not to be avoided either, if by avoidance a man lessened his own stature. For that reason, and not for false pride or folly, Eyvind Bjarnason would not ride away to safety from the pursuing Hrafnkel. Hrafnkel, an altogether tougher exponent of the heroic ideal, could bide his time because he knew his time would come. He knows both himself and the old proverb: 'A slave takes vengeance at once, a coward never.' The Saga Age in Iceland was a last flowering of the Germanic Heroic Age; it was wedded to the blood-feud, and the sagas mirror it in every detail. That is why, for all their realism and sobriety, the family sagas are heroic literature.

The sagas of the present volume have been chosen for their excellence and variety from among the shorter Icelandic sagas. There is a general critical agreement that *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða* stands first among these, by virtue of its construction, style, narrative strength, characterization, and persuasive realism. Not that it has ever rivalled *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* in the affection or number of its foreign readers; all the world loves a lover—especially a foredoomed one—and during the nineteenth century at least the classical virtues were less admired than the romantic. *Hænsna-Þóris Saga* is an admirable example of one kind of historical fiction, in

which everything leads to or follows from one central incident, the burning of Blund-Ketil (though according to Ari the Learned it was not Blund-Ketil but his son Thorkel who was burned to death); while *Vapnfirðinga Saga* supplies in reasonably short space an example of a saga covering a family feud through two generations. *Þorsteins Þáttr Stangarhöggs* is an admirable little tale in itself, homely and vivid, and skilful in its use of native and knightly convention; it is also a sequel or tailpiece to *Vapnfirðinga Saga*. *Eiríks Saga Rauða* (sometimes called *Þorfinnis Saga Karlsefnis*) with its account of the Greenland and American voyages, and such extras as the Little Sibyl, has a most eloquent claim on our attention. *Þiðrandi Þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar* serves to represent the many legends of the early Church; and *Auðunar Þáttr Vestfirzka*, so seeming-simple, is the best of all Icelandic *þættir* and one of the most flawless short stories ever written. Finally, *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*, which probably approximates closer to popular notions of a saga than any family saga can hope to do, has been translated as representative of the heroic sagas, the Sagas of Times Past, a genre neglected not so much by choice as for lack of opportunity by the English reader. It is deservedly among the best-esteemed of its episodic, savage, and legend- and folklore-laden kind.

The history of the first Icelandic Republic, from 860 to 1264, with its literary aftermath for another seventy years, consider it how we will, is a remarkable record of human endeavour. We end in admiration and wonder that a people so small (never more than 70,000 in number during the creative centuries), inhabiting an island so stern and remote, in conditions so apparently daunting, could bring forth

from its scanty soil so rich and continuous a harvest of poetry, history, and saga. *Inopiam ingenio pensant*. Saxo's adage of seven and a half centuries ago carries less than a full freight of truth, yet what lover of Iceland and the sagas ever found himself disposed to contradict it? 'They make good their impoverishment with the imagination.' What the Normans gave to statecraft and war, their northern brothers gave to the blood-feud and literature, and their greatest victories are on the vellums.

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The Story of Helgi

139
There was a king by the name of Northri ruling over part of England, and his daughter's name was Ogn. Hroar spent long years with king Northri as his land's stay and defender; there was close friendship between them, and finally Hroar came to marry Ogn and settled down to rule that kingdom with king Northri his father-in-law, while Helgi ruled over Denmark, their patrimony. Earl Sævil ruled over a kingdom of his own together with Signy; their son's name was Hrok. Helgi Halfdanarson stayed unmarried in Denmark. Regin fell ill and died, which seemed a great pity to everyone, for he was a well-beloved man.

Ruling over Germany at this same time was a queen by the name of Olof, who was every inch the war-king in her ways, wearing shield and corslet, a sword at her side, and a helm on her head. In that mould was she made: lovely of countenance, but fierce-hearted and haughty. By common consent she was the best match men had ever heard tell of in those days in the Northlands, yet she would not take a husband. King Helgi learned of this queen's imperious temper, and thought he would greatly enhance his fame by winning the lady for wife, whether she happened to be for it or against. So one day he travelled that way with a great host. He came to the land where this greatest of queens held sway, and came there all unknown to her. He sent men of his on to the hall, bidding them have queen Olof informed that he would be pleased to receive hospitality there along with his retinue. The

messengers announced this to the queen; it caught her unawares, with no chance of gathering an army, so she chose what she thought the lesser of two evils: to invite king Helgi to a feast with all his retinue.

King Helgi came now to the feast and occupied the high-seat alongside the queen. They drank together during the evening. There was no lack of good things there, nor was the least sign of low spirits to be discerned in queen Olof. Then king Helgi had this to announce to the queen: 'The case is this way,' he said, 'that I want us to drink our wedding feast this same evening. There is a sufficient gathering present for it, and you and I will share one bed tonight.'

'In my opinion, sire,' she replied, 'that is to proceed over-abruptly. No man alive strikes me as more admirable than you, if I have no option but to yield myself to a husband, but I trust you are not proposing to act dishonourably in the matter.'

The king replied that what she deserved for her arrogance and pride was that 'we spend such time together as I please'.

'I should choose,' said she, 'to have more of my friends present, but there is nothing I can do about it; it is for you to command, and you will treat our person with due consideration.'

That evening there was hard drinking, and long into the night. The queen was merry enough, and no one could detect any sign in her but that she looked forward to her nuptials with pleasure. In course of time the king was led off to bed, and she was there before him. The king had drunk so hard that without more ado he collapsed on the bed in a stupor. The queen took advantage of this and pierced him with a sleep-thorn; and the minute they

(121)
 were all gone, up she got, shaved off all his hair, and daubed him with tar. Next she took a closed hammock and stuffed it with various garments, after which she laid hold of the king and swaddled him up in the hammock. After that she got hold of some men and had them lug him away to his ships. She then roused his men, telling them that their king had gone to his ships and was wanting to sail, because a favourable wind had sprung up. They tumbled out as fast as they could, but they were so drunk that they hardly knew what they were doing. In this state they reached the ships, where they saw no sign of the king, but they did see that an enormous hammock had been delivered there. They grew curious to know what was inside it, and after this fashion passed the time of waiting for the king, thinking he would be along any moment. But when they unfurled the hammock, they found their king inside, disgracefully maltreated. The sleep-thorn was then shaken out of him, and the king awoke from a dream by no means pleasant. He now felt most evilly disposed towards the queen.

Of the other camp there is this to report, that queen Olof assembled her army overnight, so that she did not want for men, and king Helgi saw no chance of getting at her. Next they heard the sound of trumpets and a war-blast ashore. The king recognized that his best prospect was to hold out and away as fast as he could. There was a good wind for this too. King Helgi now sailed back home to his kingdom with this shame and dishonour. He was full of resentment and often studied how he might be revenged on the queen.

Queen Olof now stayed in her own country for a while, and her arrogance and tyranny had never

been greater than now. She kept strong watch and ward about her after that feast she had given king Helgi. News of that exploit soon spread far and wide, and it seemed a monstrous thing to everyone that she had made a laughing-stock of such a king as he. No great while afterwards, Helgi held from land with his ship, and on this particular expedition brought her to Germany, where queen Olof was in residence, with a strong body of men about her. He ran his ship into a hidden creek, and then announced to his crew that they should wait for him there till the third day, but be on their way if he had not then returned. He had two chests with him, full of gold and silver, and wore rags and tatters for his outer garments. He now made his way to the forest, where he hid his riches in a safe place, moving off thereafter into the neighbourhood of the queen's hall. He came across one of her thralls and asked him what news of the land. The times were good and peaceful, said the thrall, and asked him who he might be.

He was a beggarman, he said. 'And yet a rich find has come my way in the forest, and I think it might be a good move to show you where that treasure is.' So back they went to the forest and he showed him his treasure, and the thrall was much impressed by the good fortune which had come his way.

'How greedy is the queen after money?' the beggarman asked.

She was the most avaricious of women, said the thrall.

'Then she has a pleasure in store,' said the beggarman, 'and will consider that she owns this money I have found here, because this is her territory. Well, good luck must not now be changed to bad. I will

not conceal these riches, but the queen shall allot me such shares as she will, and that will prove best for me. But will she be prepared to take the trouble of coming here to fetch it?’

‘I am sure of it,’ said the thrall, ‘if it can be managed secretly.’

‘Here is a necklace,’ said the beggar, ‘and here a ring, which I will give you if you will bring her here all alone to the forest, and I will put everything right again, should she be angry with you.’

This was their compact and bargain, so off he went now and told the queen how he had found in the forest riches so immense as to furnish out the happiness of many, many men; and he begged her go with him in haste to fetch the treasure.

‘If what you tell me is true,’ she said, ‘you shall reap fortune from your tale, but death otherwise. However, since I have hitherto found you a man to be trusted, I will believe in your words now.’

She showed in this how grasping she was, going off with him secretly by dead of night, so that none but they two knew of it. But once they reached the forest, who should be there but Helgi, who caught her in his arms, declaring this encounter of theirs a happy occasion for avenging his dishonour. The queen confessed she had used him badly. ‘But I will now make you full amends for all that, and do you arrange my wedding in honour.’

‘Never!’ he told her. ‘There is no question of it. You shall come on board ship with me and stay as long as I choose. For my pride’s sake I cannot bring myself not to get my own back on you, such a vile, humiliating trick as you played on me.’

‘It is for you to command,’ she admitted, ‘this time.’

For many a night the king slept with the queen, after which she returned home, and such vengeance had now been taken on her as is reported. She was bitterly resentful of her state. After this incident king Helgi sailed away raiding, and a famous man was he. But Olof in course of time gave birth to a child, a little girl, for whom she had no natural feelings whatsoever. She had a hound called Yrsa, and it was after this hound she named her child. Yrsa, that was what she should be called. She was a lovely child to look upon, but once she was twelve years old she had to tend the sheep, and never knew herself to be other than the child of a peasant and his peasant wife. For the queen had gone about this so secretly that few men knew that she had conceived and borne a child.

So it continued till the girl was thirteen years old. What happened then was that king Helgi came sailing to that land, and was curious to know what had happened there. He was wearing the trappings of a beggar. Near the forest he observed an immense flock, and tending it a young girl so lovely that he thought he had never seen woman more fair. He asked what might her name and lineage be.

‘I am a peasant’s daughter,’ she told him. ‘My name is Yrsa.’

‘You have not thrall’s eyes,’ he said, and that same instant love of her pierced his heart. How right it would be, he said, for a beggarman to marry her, since she was only a peasant man’s daughter. She begged him not to do this, but he seized her as he had thought to do, betaking himself off to his ships, and then sailing back to his own country. When queen Olof learned this, she acted with cunning and deceit regarding it, pretending to know nothing of

what was taking place, and what came into her head was this: that this would work to king Helgi's sorrow and shame, and bring him no profit or happiness either. So king Helgi married Yrsa and loved her dearly.

King Helgi had a ring to which great fame was attached. Both brothers wished to possess it, and Signy too, their sister. One day king Hroar came visiting the realm of king Helgi his brother, and Helgi prepared a noble feast against his coming. Said king Hroar, 'You will be the better man of us two, and because I have made my abode in North-umberland, I will readily grant you this kingdom which we possess between us, if only you will share with me some great valuable. I should like to obtain this ring, which is the best treasure in your possession, and which the two of us would then own.'

'Brother,' said king Helgi, 'nothing will meet the case but that the ring is all yours.'

They were both well pleased with this talk of theirs. King Helgi now gave the ring to king Hroar his brother, who departed for his own kingdom and remained there in peace and quiet.

The next thing that happened was that their uncle earl Sævil died, and Hrok his son succeeded him to his dominion. He was a grim-hearted man and highly covetous. His mother had much to tell him about this ring the brothers owned. 'To me,' she said, 'it would have seemed only right for my brothers to remember us with some territory or other for the way we stood by them in the vengeance for our father, but they have shown no gratitude whatever for this to your father and me.'

'What you say is plain as day,' agreed Hrok, 'and such conduct is a scandal. I will now take up with

them whether they are prepared to give us our dues in this matter.'

Later on he went to see king Helgi and claimed from him a third of the Danish realm, or that good ring, for he was not aware that Hroar had it now.

'You express yourself very forcibly, not to say arrogantly,' replied the king. 'We won this realm by daring, staking our lives for it with the help of your father, and Regin my foster-father, and other good men who were willing to give us their aid. Now, we are willing to make you some return, to be sure, if you are prepared to accept it, for the sake of our kinship with you. But this kingdom has cost me so dear that I will on no account relinquish it, while as for the ring, king Hroar has now taken possession of it, and I doubt whether it will be handed over on your account.'

With that away went Hrok, much disgruntled, and sought a meeting with king Hroar. Hroar gave him a welcome both warm and gracious, and he stayed with him for a while. Then one day when they were sailing off the coast, and lay at anchor in a certain firth, Hrok said this: 'It would seem to me a deed well worthy of you, uncle, if you gave me that good ring of yours, and so remembered our relationship.'

'I have given so much to obtain this ring,' said the king, 'that I will on no account let it go.'

'Then you must permit me to look at the ring,' said Hrok, 'for I have the greatest curiosity to know whether it is so precious a jewel as they say.'

'That is a small thing to grant you,' said Hroar. 'You shall certainly be indulged so far.' And he put the ring into his hands.

Hrok contemplated the ring for some time, and

agreed it was impossible to overpraise it. 'I have never seen such a treasure, and there is every excuse for your thinking it the very paragon of rings. And now the best thing is that neither you nor I shall enjoy it, nor anyone else for that matter.' And with those words he hurled the ring from his hand as far out to sea as he could.

(143) 'Scoundrel that you are!' cried king Hroar. He had Hrok's feet chopped off, and packed him off so to his own country. But in no time at all he was so far recovered that his stumps were healed, whereupon he assembled himself a host and determined to avenge his shame. He obtained a great following of men and came upon Northumberland all unawares, at a place where king Hroar was feasting with a small company. Hrok at once launched his attack, there was a fierce struggle, and the difference in numbers was great. King Hroar was slain, and Hrok subjugated the kingdom. He usurped the royal title and demanded Ogn, king Northri's daughter, in marriage, she who before had been wife to king Hroar his kinsman.

King Northri now found himself in a cruel dilemma, for he was an old man and in poor trim for fighting. He told Ogn his daughter to what straits they were come. Old though he was, he assured her, it was not his wish to evade continuing the struggle, so long as that did not go contrary to her own inclination. In great sorrow she answered: 'Truly it is contrary to my wish. But on condition that some respite is granted, even so I will not reject him, because I see that your life lies at stake; for I am with child, and that is the business that must be worked out first. For it was king Hroar begot that child on me.'

The matter was now put to Hrok, who was willing to grant a respite if he should then proceed the more easily to the kingdom and his marriage. Hrok thought he had done great things for himself on this campaign, when he had slain so famous and powerful a king. But at this same moment Ogn was sending men to seek audience of king Helgi, bidding them inform him that she would never enter Hrok's bed if she were free to choose and not compelled to it. 'For I am with child by king Hroar.'

The messengers went and reported exactly what they were bidden. Said king Helgi: 'This was wisely spoken on her part, for I will avenge Hroar my brother.' But of this Hrok had no suspicion.

Queen Ogn now gave birth to a son who was called Agnar, who at an early age was big and full of promise. And once king Helgi had news of this he assembled a host and went to encounter Hrok. A battle took place, and it ended in Hrok's being taken prisoner. 'You are the vilest of chieftains,' said king Helgi, 'yet I shall not have you put to death, for it is a greater shame for you to live in torment.' He then had his legs and arms broken, and packed him off to his own country in such condition that he was good for nothing at all.

When Agnar Hroarsson was twelve years old, people thought they had never seen the like of him, for in all accomplishments whatsoever he went far beyond other men. He became a warrior so great and famous that it is widely reported of him in old stories that he will have been the greatest champion of times past and present too. He inquired where was the firth where Hrok had flung the ring overboard. Many had tried for it with all kinds of stratagems, yet failed to find it. But according to the story,

Agnar brought his ship into this firth, saying: 'It would be a good move now to try for the ring, if only somebody had a clear bearing for it.' He was then informed where it had been cast into the sea, and later Agnar made ready and dived into the depths, and came up but had no ring. Down he went a second time, but had not laid hands on it when he surfaced. 'A slovenly search so far,' remarked Agnar, and went down for the third time, and now came up with the ring. By this deed he grew famous past telling, more famous than his father even.

King Helgi now stayed in his own kingdom over the winters, but went on viking cruises of a summer, and became a famous man. He and Yrsa loved each other dearly and had a son who was called Hrolf and with the passing of the years became a man of great renown. Queen Olof heard tell how Helgi and Yrsa loved each other so dearly and were happy in their marriage. This displeased her greatly, and she went to renew acquaintance with them. When she arrived in their country she sent word to queen Yrsa, and when they met Yrsa invited her back to the hall with her. She had no desire for that, she said. It was not for her to repay king Helgi any honour.

'How shamefully you treated me when I lived with you,' said Yrsa. 'And can you not tell me something about my parentage, what it really is, for I suspect it is not as I am told, that I am the daughter of a peasant man and woman?'

'It is not out of the question that I could tell you a thing or two about that too,' queen Olof agreed. 'It was the whole point of my errand here to enlighten you on that head. But tell me, are you happy in your marriage?'

'I am so, and well may I be happy, since I have

the most magnificent and far-famed king for husband.'

'That is not such a good reason for happiness as you suppose,' said queen Olof, 'for that same king is your father, and you are my daughter.'

'I think my mother the vilest and cruellest of women,' cried Yrsa, 'for this is an enormity that can never be lost to mind.'

'In this you have suffered for Helgi and my anger,' Olof admitted, 'but I am now going to invite you to return home with me in honour and esteem, and in every respect I will treat you as best I know how.'

'I do not know how that will work out,' said Yrsa, 'but I must not stay here, now that I have learnt of this horror which lies over us.'

Later she met king Helgi and told him what a cruel pass they were come to.

'Cruel enough is the mother you had,' said the king; 'yet for my part I would leave things as they are.'

It was impossible, she answered, in such circumstances, for them to live together from that day forth. So now Yrsa went away with queen Olof and dwelt in Germany for a while, which so cut king Helgi to the heart that he took to his bed and was unhappy past telling. It was thought there could be no better match than Yrsa, but for all that the kings were slow to ask for her hand, and what had most to do with this was that no real assurance could be felt but that Helgi would yet come for her and show his displeasure if she were bestowed on another.

There was a king named Athils, powerful and covetous, who ruled over Sweden and dwelt at his chief stronghold, Uppsala. He heard tell of the lady Yrsa, then put his ships in readiness, and sailed

to seek audience of Olof and her daughter. Olof prepared a feast against king Athils's coming and welcomed him with every refinement and courtesy. He asked for queen Yrsa as his wife. 'You will have heard how things stand with her,' replied Olof, 'but granted her consent, we make no denial here.' The matter was now put to Yrsa, who answered thus. No good would come of it, she claimed. 'For you are a king without a friend to your name.' But the affair went forward, whether she was for it or against, and Athils took her away without reference to king Helgi, because Athils reckoned himself the greater monarch. Indeed, king Helgi knew nothing about this till they had arrived back in Sweden, where king Athils married her with pomp and ceremony. It was only then that king Helgi got news of it, and felt twice as bad as before. He slept now in a house apart, with no companions. And now queen Olof is out of the story, and so things continued for a while.

Then one Yule-eve, when king Helgi had gone to bed and there was foul weather abroad, the story goes that there came a knocking, a rather faint knocking, at the door. It struck him how unkingly it would be to leave this benighted creature outside when he might help it, so he went and opened the door, and saw how some poor tattered creature had come there. It spoke—'This is well done of you, king'—and then came inside the house.

'Cover yourself with straw and a bearskin,' said the king, 'that you may not freeze to death.'

'Share your bed with me, sire,' it pleaded. 'I would sleep alongside you, for my very life is at stake.'

'My gorge rises at you,' said the king, 'but if it

is as you say, then lie here in your clothes at the bed's edge, and then it will not harm me.'

She did so, and the king turned the other way from her. There was a light burning in the house, and after a while he peered over his shoulder at her, and saw that it was a woman lying there, so lovely that he thought he had never before beheld woman more fair. She was dressed in a gown of silk. He turned to her quickly and joyfully, but, 'I wish to take my leave now,' she told him. 'You have released me from hard durance, for this was my stepmother's curse on me, and many kings have I visited in their homes. Do not now end with wickedness. It is not my wish to stay here any longer.'

'No, no,' said the king, 'there can be no question of your leaving so soon. We will not part so. And now we must patch up a wedding for you, for you please me greatly.'

'It is for you to command, sire,' she said, and they slept together that night. Then in the morning she had this to say: 'Now that you have subjected me to your lust, you may know this, that we will have a child. Now, king, do as I tell you. Come to collect our child at this same time next winter at your boat-house. If you do not, you shall pay for it.' And with that she went away.

King Helgi was now in somewhat better spirits than before. Time wore on, but to this he paid no heed. Then after a three years' interval it happened that three men came riding to this same house where the king lay sleeping. It was midnight. They had with them a girl child and set her down near the house. The woman who had brought the child had this to say: 'Know, king,' she said, 'that your kinsfolk must pay for this, that you set at naught the thing I

bade you. Yet you yourself shall reap the benefit that you freed me from the spell laid upon me. Know too that this girl's name is Skuld. She is our daughter.'

After that these men rode away. His visitor had been an elf-woman, and the king never learned what became of her thereafter; but Skuld grew up in his household and soon grew fierce of heart. Then one day, says the story, king Helgi made his preparations for a voyage abroad, proposing in that way to forget his troubles. He left his son Hrolf behind him, and went raiding far and wide, and wrought many a deed of might.

All this while king Athils was dwelling at Uppsala. He had twelve berserks whom he kept for his land's defence and against all perils and onsets. And now king Helgi made preparations for his voyage to Uppsala, to carry off Yrsa. He reached the land, and when king Athils had news of this, how king Helgi had arrived there in his kingdom, he asked queen Yrsa how she would have king Helgi welcomed.

'You will decide as to that,' she told him, 'but you know already that there is no man alive to whom I stand in closer relationship than he.'

So king Athils saw fit to invite him to a feast, not that he intended it to be free from guile. King Helgi accepted and went to the feast with a hundred men, but his main force stayed down at the ships. King Athils welcomed him with open arms. Queen Yrsa thought to reconcile the kings, and conducted herself in the most gracious manner towards king Helgi; while king Helgi was so happy to see the queen that he let all else slip by unheeded. He wished to be talking with her all the hours he could find, and so they sat down to the feast.

It happened now that king Athils's berserks re-

turned home, and the minute they reached land king Athils went off to meet them, in such fashion, too, that no one else knew about it. He ordered them to proceed to the forest which lay between his stronghold and king Helgi's ships, telling them to launch an attack from there on king Helgi as he was going to his ships. 'Also, I will send a company to your help which shall take them in the rear, so that they are caught as in a pincers. For I want to make certain now that king Helgi does not get away, for I discern that he still so loves the queen that I am taking no chances over any design of his.'

Meanwhile king Helgi sat at the feast, and this treachery was kept from him carefully, and from the queen too. Queen Yrsa told king Athils that she desired him to give king Helgi great and costly presents at parting, and so he did; he gave the king gold and jewels too, yet in fact he intended them only for himself. So now king Helgi made his departure, and king Athils and the queen saw him on his way, and the queen and the two kings made a cordial parting. But not long after king Athils had turned back, king Helgi and his men found that hostilities were come upon them, and the fighting started at once. King Helgi put up a fierce resistance, and fought like a hero, but because of the overwhelming odds against him king Helgi fell there with much glory, and with many and great wounds upon him, for part of king Athils's force took them in the rear, so that they were crushed between the hammer and the anvil. Queen Yrsa knew nothing of this until king Helgi had fallen and the battle was over. With Helgi fell the entire force which had gone ashore, but the rest of his following fled back home to Denmark. And there ends the story of king Helgi.

King Athils now exulted in his victory, and thought he had taken a great step forward when he overcame a king of such fame and wide renown as Helgi. But as Yrsa told him: 'Bragging your head off is not what you should be doing, even though you have betrayed the man who stood closest to me and whom I loved most. And for this same reason I shall never be loyal to you if you clash with king Helgi's kinsmen. I will contrive the death of your berserks just as soon as I can, should there be any so brave as to do that for my sake and of their own prowess.'

King Athils advised her not to threaten him or his berserks. 'For it will do you no good. But I am willing to make you amends for your father's death with generous gifts, large grants of money, and precious jewels, if you can bring yourself to agree.'

By this means the queen was pacified and accepted redress from the king. Yet at heart she still remained unappeased, and often watched her opportunity to do the berserks harm and dishonour. From now on men never found the queen very joyful or sweet-tempered after king Helgi's fall; there was more wrangling in hall than ever before, nor would the queen do anything to please the king if she could help it.

King Athils now considered himself to have become very famous, and anyone who served with him and his champions was considered to be a very great man. He remained in his own kingdom for a while, believing none would lift shield against him and his berserks. King Athils was a great idolator and full of sorcery.

Gopuram
behaviour
(Svip a Norse Palomir?)

The Story of Svipdag

Living in Sweden, remote from other men, was a farmer by the name of Svip. He was well-to-do and had been a great champion, and was by no means the simple man he appeared to be: he was, indeed, a man of divers strange skills. He had three sons whose names come into this story, one called Svipdag, a second Beigath, and a third Hvitserk, who was the eldest of them. They were all men of mark, strong, and of handsome appearance.

One day when Svipdag was eighteen years old he spoke to his father this way: 'Dreary is our life, living up here in the mountains, in hidden folkless valleys, never visiting other people, nor other people us. It would be a better move to go to king Athils, and if only he would have us take service in his retinue, along with him and his champions.'

'That seems no such good plan to me,' replied the good Svip, 'for king Athils is a grim man, and not trustworthy, though his outward showing is a fair one; while his men, though mighty, are full of malice. Yet, admittedly, king Athils is a powerful and famous man.'

'Something must be risked if a man is to distinguish himself,' said Svipdag, 'nor can we know till we try which way our luck will go. Certainly I am not going to stay here any longer, whatever else the future may hold.'

So since he was so set on this, his father gave him a big axe, as handsome as it was sharp, and spoke thus to his son: 'Covet nothing of your neighbour's; act without arrogance, for that is open to