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THEIR ORIGIN AND CHARACTER

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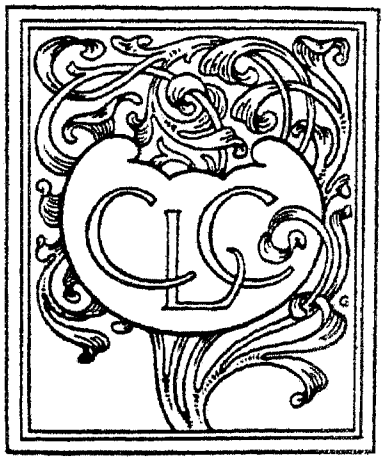

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THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

WHAT is a saga? This question, with all that it involves and implies, would be variously answered by the great scholars who have made a specialty of the subject and devoted their lives to its minute study and investigation. If there be any among you desirous of learning at first hand what these wise men of Teutonic scholarship think and teach about their science, I shall be glad at another time and in another place to be your bibliographical guide to, but not through, the dark morasses of Germanic philology and the dim twilight of Scandinavian origins. But on this occasion you must be content with the answer of an amateur, roughly interpreting the high masters of old saga lore.

The men who colonized Iceland were the flower of the race known as the Norsemen.

Dwelling along the shores of the Baltic and on either side of the Scandinavian peninsula, they had, from the very dawn of history, battled for existence against a harsh climate, a barren soil, and stormy seas forever lashing treacherous coasts. This perpetual fight for life and subsistence had much to do with giving the race the physical courage, ruthlessness, and contempt for death which characterized it.

The spectacular irruption of the Norsemen into modern European history began during the eighth and ninth centuries. An increasing population, political changes in Norway, and the adventurous character of the people themselves all led to a great outward movement of the race. This period, called the Viking Age, was marked by many warring expeditions, constant harrying of neighboring coasts, and the invasion of foreign lands for purposes of spoil and plunder, temporary refuge, and permanent settlement. Lured by the tidings of vast wealth hoarded in southern towns and monasteries, these dwellers by the creeks and fjords of the Northland swarmed forth and scourged the coast line of Europe. Their fleets numbered from four to seven hundred open, undecked warboats, each manned by a crew of from seventy-five to a hundred men. In these boats the Norsemen penetrated every nook and corner which could

be reached by sea or river. The Orkneys, Shetlands, Hebrides, and Faroe Islands fell first into their hands, an easy prey. In the year 787 the first of their black-prowed ships crept up the river Thames, and before this invasion ceased a Danish dynasty ruled a subject England. Between 837 and 846 a flourishing Norse kingdom was established in Ireland, with Dublin as its capital. In France the Norse chief Rolf forced from Charles the Simple the rich and splendid province ever afterwards known as Normandy. In Spain the Norsemen sailed up the Guadalquiver to Seville; they forced the Straits of Gibraltar and sacked the rich Mediterranean shores. The tall blonde men of the north became familiar figures in Egypt and on the Nile, and in Constantinople they were the trusted personal bodyguard of the Byzantine emperors. Iceland was a later seizure and America a later discovery of theirs. The terror inspired by their name throughout western Europe was so great that the monks added a new line to the Litany, and from church and monastery there arose the solemn chant: "From the fury of the Northmen, Good Lord, deliver us!"

Thousands of the Vikings remained among the peoples they had plundered or conquered, notably in the northern islands, in France and in England, and their mod-

ern descendants are proud of this Scandinavian strain in the French and English peoples. A bluff and breezy Englishman, Horace Marryat, brother of the more famous Captain Marryat, has expressed this feeling perhaps too bluntly in the following passage: "Who in their senses will for one moment allow that the maritime glory of our country, the dominion of the waves, could ever descend to us from German forefathers,—a race incapable of crossing a duck-puddle without being seasick,—or our love of colonization from a race who never possessed a single colony of their own? The Vikings of old—blackguards though they might be—were fine, bold, dashing fellows."[1] Another English enthusiast writes: "In them we see the forerunners of the buccaneers, and the ancestors of those naval heroes, voyagers, and discoverers,—those Drakes and Dampiers, Nelsons and Dundonalds, . . . who have won for Britain the title of Sovereign of the Seas."[2]

The immediate cause of the settlement of Iceland was a political one. In 872 the Norwegian king Harald Fairhair fought and won the battle of Hafrsfjord. This victory gave him supremacy and power over all Norway, and forced into exile or sub-

[1] Jutland and the Danish Isles. i, 228. 1860.

[2] A. J. Symington. Pen and Pencil Sketches of Faroe and Iceland. 1862.

mission the small kings and local chieftains who had hitherto held sway over their particular districts and territories. Defeated, and enraged at the new order of things, hundreds of these men declared that "rather than submit like low-born churls to rule and order, they would leave their country." So they sought new homes beyond the seas, in Ireland, England, the Orkneys, Shetlands, and Faroes, and finally in distant Iceland, which had recently been discovered and where land could be had for the taking. It is with the Icelandic colonists only that we are now concerned.

One of the sagas thus tells the story of that time: "King Harald went southward along the coast with a fleet, and subdued firths and fells, and arranged for men of his own to rule them. . . . Harald claimed as his own through every district all patrimonies, and all land tilled or untilled, likewise all seas and freshwater lakes. All landowners were to be his tenants, as also all that worked in the forest; salt-burners, hunters, and fishers, by land and sea, all these owed him duty. But many fled abroad from this tyranny, and much waste land was colonized far and wide, . . . and in that time Iceland was found."[1] The second chapter of the beautiful Laxdale Saga illustrates the attitude of the typical

[1] Egil Saga. c. iv.

chieftain towards Harald and the new era. "In the latter days of Ketill arose the power of Harald the Fairhaired, in such a way that no folkland king or other great men could thrive in the land. . . . When Ketill heard that King Harald was minded to put to him the same choice as to other men of might—namely, not only to put up with his kinsmen being left unatoned, but to be made himself a hireling to boot—he called together a meeting of his kinsmen, and began his speech in this wise: 'You all know what dealings there have been between me and King Harald, the which there is no need of setting forth; for a greater need besets us, to wit, to take counsel as to the troubles that now are in store for us. I have true news of King Harald's enmity toward us, and to me it seems that we may abide no trust from that quarter. It seems to me there are two choices left us, either to fly the land or to be slaughtered each in his own seat. Now, as for me, my will is rather to abide the same death that my kinsmen suffer, but I would not lead you by my wilfulness into so great a trouble, for I know the temper of my kinsmen and friends, that ye would not desert me, even though it would be some trial of manhood to follow me.' Bjorn, the son of Ketill, answered: 'I will make known my wishes at once. I will follow

the example of noble men, and fly this land. For I deem myself no greater a man by abiding at home the thrall of King Harald, that they may chase me away from my own possessions, or that else I may have to come by utter death at their hands.' At this there was made a good cheer, and they all thought it was spoken bravely. This counsel then was settled, that they should leave the country, for the sons of Ketill urged it much, and no one spoke against it."

In the Egil Saga we read that "Kveldulf and Skallagrim spoke often of their plans, and on this they were all agreed, that they would not be able to remain in the land any more than other men who were at enmity with the king, but their counsel must be to go abroad. And it seemed to them desirable to seek Iceland, for good reports were given about choice of land there. Already friends and acquaintances of theirs had gone thither — to wit, Ingolf Arnarson and his companions — and had taken to them land and homestead in Iceland. Men might take land there free of cost, and choose their homestead at will. So they quite settled to break up their household and go abroad." Thus they went, "simple yeomen, rich landowners, children of lords and earls," in two great streams, one from Norway and the other northern

kingdoms, about 874, and one twenty years later from the west. Such were their numbers, it was feared that all the best blood of the land was leaving Norway. In all, some four hundred heads of families and chieftains are known to have set forth for the new home with their retainers, dependents, and portable property. A learned Icelandic scholar remarks that these men were "a race of giants such as the old California days alone supply some parallel to. They had most of them passed through a stern training, holding their own by sheer strength of head and hand, in a stirring age, through a life of adventure by sea and land, and all their feelings and faculties seem to have been strengthened and expanded in the process."[1]

The physical and geographical characteristics of the island forbade centralization or town life. The settlements grew up irregularly along the coast line, where the good tillable land lay in scattered patches, but where deserts, glaciers and morasses, as well as torrents, passable only with difficulty and even danger, cut off one settlement from another. Each cluster of dales, opening on a separate bay, possessed an individuality and life of its own within the circle of which a man's days were chiefly passed; and the more so since nearly every firth had origi-

[1] Vigfússon, Prolegomena, xx-xxi.

nally been the "claim" of a single settler, who had divided it out by gift or sale among his kinsmen and dependents. The later comers were obliged to buy of the earlier ones where and how they could. Thus a series of almost "family" groups was formed, each living its own life amid its own interests, cares, and politics. It would be interesting to trace the gradual political development of the Icelanders, and to describe in detail how they worked out a republican form of government, established a constitution, and set up an annual Parliament, called the Althing, which formed a wonderful bond of union among the people, and proved a most effective instrument for expressing their will on matters not settled locally at the district Things. It is sufficient to say that by the middle of the tenth century there was created a republican government embracing all Iceland, a republic remarkable not only for its peculiar political structure, but also for the extremely limited range of its governmental activity. The Speaker of the Althing, or Parliament, was the one solitary state official. His decision on all matters of law and procedure was accepted as final. The general government, in fact, was developed mainly upon its judicial side; the legislative element was very slight; the executive and international elements were entirely wanting.

This absence of administrative machinery was only possible in a region like Iceland, severed by a wide and stormy sea from the rest of the world, with a thin and scattered population, where men's needs were few and every one largely fended for himself.[1]

The inhabitants of each homestead passed their lives in an ordered round of necessary duties and activities. In the spring they were occupied with the fishing, in summer the hay harvest, and, in a few specially favored localities the grain harvest claimed their attention. Gunnar, going into exile, after having been judged an outlaw, "turned with his face up towards the Lithe and the homestead at Lithend, and said: 'Fair is the Lithe; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home and not fare abroad at all.'"[2] In the autumn the killing and salting of meat furnished constant occupation; in winter, after the wood cutting and stump grubbing had supplied a store of fuel, the indoor occupations of weaving and spinning, boat building, and making or mending the farm implements, filled up the time. These men were not idlers. All, high and low, worked and

[1]James Bryce. Primitive Iceland (Studies in History and Jurisprudence).

[2]Njalsaga. c. 74.

worked hard. In no other land does the dignity of labor stand out so conspicuously. The greatest chieftains sowed and reaped and drove their sheep from the fells. The mightiest warriors were the handiest carpenters and smiths. Njal's sons were busy at armorer's work when the news came that Sigmund had made a mock of them in his songs. Hoskuld, the Whitness priest, was sowing his corn when he was slain. To do something and do it well was the Icelanders' aim in life. The great holiday was the Yuletide, which sometimes lasted a fortnight. Friends, neighbors, and kinsmen would then assemble at some large farmstead in the dale and pass the time eating, drinking, and merry-making. Every man had his own place in the social organization, but there was no formal separation of ranks. The lowest thrall shared with the highest chief in the hospitality and relaxation of the season. In May the Althing met, and its sessions usually lasted a fortnight. All the great chiefs and their families attended, and a certain number of freemen from each district were expected to be present. When the men were not engaged in the business of the assembly there were all kinds of gatherings and reunions, games of hurling and football, match-making, love-making, feasting, recounting of adventures at home and abroad, etc. This annual

gathering had a marked influence on the life and thought of the people, and their literature is filled with descriptions of incidents and events occurring there. It strengthened the bonds which made the island during its classic period a united state and its people one with definitely understood common interests.

The four hundred years following the colonization of the island form the Heroic or Golden Age of Iceland. During these years occurred most of the stirring events and notable deeds which men later looked back upon with intense racial and family pride. And, before the last years of this time-cycle had rolled away, gifted but unknown men had shaped the record of their heroic age in immortal words, and ensured the preservation of its memory for all time by casting that record in a special form of prose narrative called the Saga—at once the most original and the most beautiful product of the Icelandic genius.

The word *Saga* is the name of a literary form, like novel, romance, etc. The German word *Sage* must not be confounded with it. The *Sage* (meaning story) usually treats of only a single episode in the life of its hero. An Icelandic Saga relates the whole life of its hero in a series of episodes. But the literary art and style of the Icelandic Saga have much in common with the

literary form called the *märchen* or fairy tale. Indeed, Alexander Bugge, a leading Scandinavian scholar, has recently asserted categorically that the *märchen* is the original Teutonic mother of the Icelandic Saga, and that the latter derives from the *märchen* its style, humor, and dramatic sense.

The typical Icelandic Saga is a prose narrative describing historical, traditional, and sometimes mythical events and incidents in the lives of distinguished persons and families who lived in Norway and Iceland between 930 and 1050. Its origin was largely due to certain peculiar conditions in the social life of the people, and in certain intellectual tendencies which characterized the race. In the olden times, in Iceland, there was no music, no dancing, no drama. The chief form of amusement and entertainment (besides athletic games and sports) was the hearing and telling of stories, the recounting of notable adventures. In the common room of the farmstead, at local gatherings in the dales, on long winter evenings in the chieftain's hall, and on summer nights at the Althing, this universal passion for story-telling found its gratification. The chief topics were the local heroes and the local traditions. The Icelander's pride of family was strong, and it was the duty of every chieftain to know his ancestral lineage. Genealogies thus

played an important part in old Icelandic life, and a Saga frequently begins with a statement and record of its hero's descent. The remembrance of the forefathers who fought at Hafrsfjord or in Britain and Iceland was kept green in every man's memory, and the story told and retold from generation to generation. When to this was added the account of the great deeds done during the emigration and land-taking times, the nucleus of a family Saga was formed. In every gathering, large or small, the narrative of past and recent events was an expected and accepted thing. They were a practical rather than a religious people, and although they had legends of a superstitious character they seem to have genuinely preferred truth to fiction. The Sagas are filled with illustrations of the eagerness with which the Icelander sought for news from the great world without. He never lost his sense of connection with the motherland, and whenever a Norwegian visited Iceland or an Icelander returned from Norway, England, or the Isles, he was plied with questions as to the most recent happenings in those lands. When Gunnar of Lithend returned to Iceland in 974, he hastened to the Althing, then in session, and, as the Saga says, "rode to the booths of the men of Rangriver and was there with his kinsmen. Many men came to see Gun-

nar, and ask tidings of him; and he was easy and merry to all men, and told them all they wished to hear." When Bishop Magnus returned, in 1135, and appeared at the Althing, people left the judicial arena where they were arguing their lawsuits and hastened to learn from him the latest news from Norway.

For our present purpose, then, we may conveniently define the true Icelandic Saga as a prose narrative of historic or biographical events; a tale or story of things known or supposed to have happened to the person or persons who form its chief characters. These Sagas were first given shape and form through oral composition and recitation during the tenth and eleventh centuries by the descendants of the men and heroes whose exploits were thus chronicled. In this period of oral composition and transmission the Sagas acquired a typical form, much of which was preserved when they came to be edited and written down by literary men in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the text and form in which we know them.

In its first stage, during the oral period, the Saga was a plain, unvarnished account of a local chief's career abroad and adventures at home. By degrees this became expanded into a full biography of the man and his immediate kinsmen. It began with

his genealogy; his childhood and youth in Iceland were then passed in review, and then the *Wanderjahre* spent in war, commerce, or service at some king's court abroad. As a ripened and experienced man he returns to Iceland, and there follows a description of his settling on his home estate, his love affairs, his friendships, private feuds and enmities, his lawsuits, his notable deeds as a trader, athlete, swordsman, etc., and finally his death, usually a violent or tragic one. The original material out of which these oral Sagas were formed was naturally made up largely of separate anecdotes loosely strung together by associations with a district or a family. Some of the stories had by nature a greater unity and completeness than others—history in the rough often has the outlines of tragedy in it. The theory of a composite epic may not inaptly be applied to the Saga. The Saga contains and consists of a series of short stories corresponding to the group of lays which may have formed the nucleus of some of our great epics. It is the short story or episodic chapter which gives to it its original unity. The Sagas that are least regular and connected are yet made up of well-shaped single blocks. They are not to be regarded as continuous histories,[1] but rather as collections of short,

[1] W. P. Ker. Epic and Romance.

separate narratives. Richard Heinzel, one of the first to attempt a scientific investigation of the spirit of the Sagas, called them historical romances. Finnur Jónsson, the great modern historian of Icelandic literature, constantly emphasizes their historical truth and value, as does also Vigfússon. Alexander Bugge seems to take a middle ground by saying that they are neither histories nor romances, but artistic narrative reproductions of tradition in which the historical and the unhistorical are indissolubly blended. Some are more, some are less, historical than others. Professor Ker describes them as memoirs and personal talk, as something different from regular history, though not beyond the jurisdiction of formal history. This much is certain: the Saga-tellers never wilfully lied. There is no record of a Psalmanazar, a De Rougemont, or a Doctor Cook Saga among the classic Sagas which profess to set forth tales and histories of famous men and deeds in historic Iceland. Giraldas Cambrensis, the 12th century Welsh chronicler, calls the Icelanders *gens breviloqua et veridica*, a people short of speech and truthful. The Saga-men told their story just as it had been told to them, and just as they believed that all its events had really happened. To tell a story truthfully was looked for and expected of all men in those days.

To relate a Saga falsely was regarded as an offense against public morality. The Saga-teller was bound to follow the narrations of those who had gone before him, and if he swerved to or fro in this respect public opinion and other men's memories were there to check and to contradict him. But he was allowed complete freedom in shaping his material and in presenting it in his own manner. For this reason some Sagas are better told than others, since the talent and power and dramatic sense of some Saga-tellers were greater than those of others.

The oral period, or the Age of Saga-telling, as Vigfússon names it, seems to have ended about 1125. By the middle of this century the writing down of the Sagas had begun. While those who performed this task must be considered the authors of the Sagas as we now have them, the Saga-writers nevertheless retained much of the form and shape given by the oral narrators from whose lips the stories were taken down. Curiously enough, the name of only a single one of these authors or editors has been recorded. At the end of the Droplaug Saga it is told from whose dictation it was written down. A certain Thorwald was a son of Grim Droplaugson, born *c.*1006; he had a son named Ingiald, who in his turn had a son named Thorwald,

"he who told the Saga." Thus in this one case of known authorship we have the interesting fact that the Saga was written from the dictation of the great-grandson of one of the heroes of the tale. All the great and all the other minor Icelandic Sagas are anonymous. The names of their compilers in the written form are as unknown as are those of the skilled men who first wove together the verbal versions. In swift succession Saga after Saga was put into writing by writers of varying skill and power. It is thought that by the year 1250 all the classic Sagas (those which relate the history of Icelanders who lived previous to the introduction of Christianity in the year 1000) had passed from the oral into the written form, and the necessity for memorizing the national history and local traditions ceased. But that the marvelous ability to memorize even the longest Sagas did not die out of the race is attested by many modern instances in Iceland. One such will suffice to illustrate this.

In 1860 the Rev. Frederick Metcalfe, an English clergyman, spent a summer in Iceland which he has pleasantly described in an atrociously written book. One of his guides took him to visit a certain Thorsten Thorstensen. They found Thorsten "a tall, gaunt, grey-haired man, his cheeks arabesqued by the cares and hardships of three-

score winters, mending a fishing net just outside his dwelling. He at once ushered his guests into his little library, where he showed them many of his book and manuscript treasures. 'And now, Thorsten,' said Snorri, coaxingly, 'just recite us a bit out of one of the Sagas; the stranger wishes to satisfy himself whether your memory really is so good as he has heard it is.' Thorsten seemed to have become quite a different being, all life and animation, the moment he got among his books, like that giant of the classic mythology who acquired a fresh lease of vital energy the moment he touched his mother earth. His wrinkled face was flushed, and his eyes lit up with a new lustre. 'What is it to be, then?' he asked. 'From Grettisaga,' replied I; 'there, where he is murdered,' holding the book in my hand to verify his accuracy. Off the old fellow started, reciting the very words of the Saga, with extreme volubility. Snorri then tried him in the Eyrbyggia Saga, the Laxdaela Saga, and the Svarfadalsaga, with the same result. 'And now a bit of Niála,' said I; and away went the reciter at the same rapid pace. In short, he was not to be posed. The Landnama was the only Saga he did not profess to remember; and no wonder, for it contains some three thousand names of persons and fourteen hundred names of places. . . . This was all very remarkable; but

Snorri informed me that Thorsten is not the only man in the neighborhood gifted with these extraordinary powers of memory.''[1]

From just such men the editors in the early writing age gathered and wrote out the Sagas as we possess them. They wrote at first exclusively on vellum, and some of their productions are beautiful specimens of mediaeval manuscipts. It was not until about 1630 that copies were made on paper. The bulk of all existing Icelandic manuscripts of any importance are now preserved in the national and university libraries of Denmark and Sweden. In Norway and Iceland none of any importance remain.

As you have doubtless gathered from the foregoing, the Sagas were, in a way, local histories, like Freeman's ''History of Cape Cod,'' or Stiles' ''History and Genealogies of Ancient Windsor, Connecticut,'' except that these latter of course have no artistic value or form, and consequently are not literature in the *belles-lettres* sense. The principal Icelandic Sagas may, therefore, be divided geographically into five main groups, viz.: 1, the Northwestern group, comprising some of the oldest; 2, 3, those of the Northeast and East, very local in character and dealing little with events which touch the rest of Iceland; 4, those grouped

[1] The Oxonian in Iceland, pp. 185-186.

around the "Neck" which unites the north-western headlands to the body of the island, and those of the "Dales," rich in varied interest and scene; 5, those of the South-west, the most complete and perfect. These last are usually in a late and complex form (each one containing the substance of a small set of Sagas) and are of widest and most universal interest.[1] The completeness with which these Saga histories and biographies thus cover the greater portion of the island is striking evidence both of the zeal with which the Icelanders combined to maintain a living knowledge of the past, and of the universality of the Saga-telling habit. Each Saga, the most complete as well as the most disorderly, is taken out of a mass of traditional knowledge relating to certain recognizable persons, of whom any one may be chosen as the center of interest in one Saga, or become a subordinate character in another. One Saga plays into the others, and introduces people incidentally who may be the central figures of other stories.

There is still another way of classifying this literature, viz., by dividing it into two groups: 1, the *greater* Icelandic Sagas, and, 2, the *smaller* or *minor* Icelandic Sagas. The greater Sagas are wider in interest, deal with more than one generation of characters or more than one locality, and are more

[1] Vigfússon. Prolegomena, xli.

intricate in plot. They are the productions of literary men consciously working up diffuse and fragmentary matters into an artistic whole. They proceed in obedience to literary law with a certain consistency of purpose and balance of execution, subordinating less important incidents, and rounding off their somewhat chaotic material into a finished shape. Whether love, law, politics, or aristocratic feeling be the hinges on which the story turns, these characteristics run through them all. The greater, more complex Sagas were all, with the exception of the magnificent Njalsaga, worked up in the classic West, the Icelandic Ionia as Vigfússon aptly calls it.[1] The smaller Sagas are distinctly local in character, narrow in range of scene and subject-matter, simple in plot and interest, and represent more closely the original oral tradition as it was first committed to writing. The four great Sagas are the Njala, Eyrbyggia, Laxdaela, and Egla. The following very brief descriptions fairly represent the present views of critical scholarship and literary appreciation with regard to them. To describe in detail their many beauties and notable contents would extend this paper beyond its proper limits.

The Njal Saga has always been considered the foremost of all. It seems to stand

[1] Vigfússon Prolegomena, xli.

alone, belonging to no school, unique in matter, style, and spirit. The area which its subject-matter covers is wider than in any other Saga; in interest its appeal is the most universal. The Althing, the focus of Icelandic political life, is the center of its action; it notices men and places throughout the whole Scandinavian empire. Like a Greek trilogy, its subject falls into three divisions, each with its own plot and set of characters. The first plot tells of the friendship between Gunnar, the brave and simple chieftain, the ideal hero of his age, and Njal, the wise lawyer, a man of peace and pacific counsel, who never bore weapons. A quarrel arises between the wives of these two friends, the fault being on the side of the wife of Gunnar, the cold, envious Hallgerda, a woman who has already caused the death of two former husbands. Her efforts fail to break the tie that binds Gunnar to Njal; but her evil nature draws him into deadly feuds with others, and the end is his tragic death, fighting single-handed against a score of foes. His son and Njal's avenge his death. In the second part Njal becomes the central figure. His character has grown broader; he is shown as a sage and a prophet, and the writer's highest literary skill is lavished on this part of the Saga. Njal's sons slay a man, and this deed brings down on him and his house a fate

which he is powerless to avert. He strives to heal the feud resulting from the murder by adopting Hoskuld, his foeman's son, arranging a great marriage for him, and securing for him one of the new priesthoods created through Njal's efforts. A fancied slight causes Njal's sons to murder this foster brother of theirs. Njal, broken-hearted, still strives for peace, but a few bitter words undo all his work. Flosi, a kinsman of Hoskuld's widow, takes up the holy duty of blood-revenge, and by his means Njal and his wife and sons perish amid the flames and smoke of their burning homestead. This terrible catastrophe closes the second part. Flosi is the chief figure of the third part, which tells the later career and fate of the Burners. Interspersed throughout the story are some splendid scenes at the Althing, and the figures of every great chief of that day are introduced and boldly and humorously depicted. The events described occurred between the years 970 and 1014, and take place for the most part in the south of Iceland. The English translation of this Saga by Sir G. W. Dasent has itself become a classic.

The Eyrbyggia is the Saga of Politics as Njala is the Saga of Law. It is of the highest importance on account of its numerous references to the institutions and manners of the pagan age. It consists of a

set of stories, loosely connected, and covers a period of about 140 years, *c.* 890 to 1031. The early days of the settlement, the ventures of Erik the Red, the discoverer of Greenland, and the life of Snorri, the greatest chief of his time, and others, are told in an unequal style, sometimes vigorous and pointed, at others weak and inferior. In this Saga we see the passing away of the old generation of fighting men; there are men in it who once had fought "wagers of battle," furious individual combats which had to end in the death of one or both contestants.

The Laxdaela Saga ranks next to Njala in size, and is, perhaps, second also in beauty. It is, too, the most romantic; full of pathetic sentiment which is almost modern and which brings it closer to the thoughts and feelings of our day than any other story of Icelandic life. The characters of the plot, the varying situations, the fine dialogue, and the clear, sunny atmosphere which forms the background to its quickly moving incidents, all unite to strengthen this impression of modernity. Its style is remarkably rich and flowing, and skillfully adapted to the changing emotions on which the story touches in rapid succession. The late William Morris' beautiful poem, "The Lovers of Gudrun," which forms part of his "Earthly Paradise" is

founded on portions of this Saga. The scene is laid in the west of Iceland, and the incidents took place between 910 and 1026.

The Egil Saga embodies the aristocratic spirit of the great Norse families. It expresses dramatically and imaginatively that conflict of principals between the new monarchy and the old liberty which led to the Icelandic migration. The whole political situation is summed up and personified in the conflict of will between the leading characters of the story. Egil, the greatest chieftain and most famous warrior of his family, is the hero. Strong in body beyond his fellows, he was also a man of unusual mental attainment, being a poet as well as a soldier. He was a born leader, liked and trusted by his men. But he was also headstrong, sometimes brutal when provoked, determined to have his own way, and overbearing in pursuit of it. In his life, temperament, and person he united extremes which seem to make him a type of the age in which he lived. Steadfast in love and hate, cool, yet at times passionate to madness, crafty and reckless. he passes through a checkered career as poet and pirate, henchman of King Athelstan, now an honored guest at court, now a helpless prisoner. This Saga is especially interesting to English readers for its stirring accounts of the

Danish invasions of England, the settlements, piracy, the fight at Brunanburgh, etc. The incidents take place in Norway, England and the west of Iceland during the century from 870 to 980. It agrees well with other Icelandic Sagas, and is generally considered reliable in its statements. But it is to be remembered that it was kept in men's memories a very long time. Its events occurred before the year 1000, and it was not put into writing until nearly the year 1200, probably some time between 1160 and 1200. Finnur Jónsson says: "The Saga, in what concerns persons and events in Iceland and Norway, may be considered true, with small and unimportant exceptions. For what happens in other countries, it cannot be reckoned quite trustworthy. It shows extensive geographical knowledge, and insight into Icelandic and Norseland culture."

Of the lesser or minor Sagas there are many of great interest, but the one whose contents perhaps appeal most strongly to us is that known as the Saga of Erik the Red, or as it is sometimes less correctly called, the Saga of Thorfinn Karlsefne. This celebrated story, after the opening scenes in Iceland, relates mainly to the Greenland Colony and the discovery of America. It exists in two versions, which, though corresponding on the whole, are both separately

derived from oral tradition. The correspondence of these two distinct versions throws a strong light on the vitality and the faithfulness of a tradition and confirms the credibility, in its main points, of a Saga which is especially valuable for historic reasons. The two run parallel, and are merely separate accounts of the same set of events. They differ in some details, but each supplies some important facts passed over in the other. It is the only case of such a striking parallel among the Icelandic Sagas, and the chance preservation of these two recensions, each recording so important an event as the discovery of America, is nothing less than an historical miracle. The version which Vigfússon calls the "Northern" is found only in the Flateybók, a great vellum manuscript written out between 1380 and 1387. The second or "Western" version is found in two manuscripts written between 1305 and 1334, and is generally considered to be the better literary work of the two, though containing several grave errors of fact. Aside from the American interest of the Wineland episode, the Saga is a charming story in itself. It abounds in beautiful scenes and well-told incidents. Among its notable features are the noble character of the heroine, Gudrid, the honorable pride of her father, the admirable picture of the old Sibyl, and the vivid

portrayal of strange adventures in an unknown land.

The Icelandic Sagas are sharply distinguished from the contemporary literature of other nations by reason of their keener sense for the dramatic and personal elements in their material. Their unencumbered language and the fact that they were written so early in a style which no later authors ever equaled also render them notable phenomena in literary history. The art of the Saga is distinctly modern and realistic. Its characters, both men and women, are intensely real. They stand before us as if in flesh and blood. The reader soon comes to feel that he is actually present with them as they love and hate, live and die, and round out the stirring drama of their careers. Their words fall curtly, sharp as a sword thrust, and are often packed with a grim and pithy humor. The language of both dialogue and descriptive text is very close to that actually used and spoken in real life by the characters. But the Saga writers present no analysis of soul conditions, no moralizing observations, no depiction of diseased or perverted imagination or action. Such things were not a part of their lives or experience. They held close to the healthy, open, vigorous life they knew and lived from day to day. The action of a well-written Saga

proceeds straight-forwardly, without digressions, and almost always ends tragically. The story is told without emotion; it betrays no feeling on the part of the narrator. His opinions and personality are kept entirely in the background. His province is to shape well his material and to move and interest his readers as much as possible. Hence he endeavors to select and to make prominent such subjects and characters as he knows or feels will make close appeal and arouse general interest.

The first Saga artists were impelled to their work by historical motives and by personal and local considerations. But if they had not possessed a sense of form and an instinct for the dramatic presentation of men and things, they would have produced nothing more than a stupid record of pedigrees, annals, and dull chronicles. Such dry matter as the ordinary facts of local history and genealogy were undoubtedly felt to be an artistic hindrance, and the Sagas differ according as this handicap is conquered. Some succeed remarkably well; others only indifferently. But in the main the material they had to work with possessed the marked advantage of having a more substantial and stronger human interest than that which is frequently the subject-matter of "mere literature." Some of the best Sagas are those which make most use of the various kinds

of historical material at hand. Njala and Laxdaela act out their tragedies in a commanding way that carries along with it the whole crowd of minor persons that touch the story, but in such a masterly fashion that the latter do not interfere with the principal action. Such Sagas (or rather their authors) have found a way to save the details and particulars without injury to the imaginative and shapely form for which they strove in their narratives.

And, after all, we could ill spare the little details and particulars with which the Sagas are filled, for they have a priceless value of their own in mirroring and reflecting as they do the minutiæ of every-day life in Iceland in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Nowhere else in Tetuonic literature has such an intimate picture been preserved. The best of the Sagas are all accessible in English translations; one has not to learn Icelandic in order to add this delightful field of literature to his intellectual possessions. One by one admirable versions of them have appeared during the last half-century.

Of all the tribes and races whose blood is assumed to flow in the veins of the modern Anglo-Saxon, the Norse is the only one of which he has some real reason to feel proud. Briton, Celt, Angle, and Saxon have small claim to our admiration. But the

Norseman was an heroic type, an epic figure, a kingly man, and in his Sagas and in the histories of the peoples he subdued, his fame is secure forever. And even in a wider field he has conquered. For thrice the literary genius of his race has made indelible impress on the whole intellectual world of Western Christendom: First, through the Eddic poems; second, through the beautiful prose literature we have reviewed this evening; and thirdly, through the epoch-making dramas of Henrik Ibsen.

APPENDIX I

THE DEATH OF GUNNAR[1]

Then Gunnar still shoots with his bow so that they could never come nigh him. Then Mord said again that they must burn the house over Gunnar's head, but Gizur said: "I know not why thou wilt speak of that which no one else wishes, and that shall never be."

Just then Thorbrand, Thorleik's son, sprang up on the roof, and cuts asunder Gunnar's bowstring. Gunnar clutches the bill with both hands, and turns on him quickly and drives it through him, and hurls him down on the ground.

Then up sprang Asbrand, his brother. Gunnar thrusts at him with the bill, and he threw his shield before the blow, but the bill passed clean through the shield and broke both his arms, and down he fell from the wall.

Gunnar had already wounded eight men and slain those twain (Thorgrim Easterling and Thorbrand). By that time Gunnar had

[1] From the *Saga of Burnt Njal; translated by Sir G. W. Dasent*, chapter 76.

got two wounds, and all men said that he never once winced either at wounds or death.

Then Gunnar said to Hallgerda, "Give me two locks of thy hair, and ye two, my mother and thou, twist them together into a bowstring for me."

"Does aught lie on it?" she says.

"My life lies on it," he said; "for they will never come to close quarters with me if I can keep them off with my bow."

"Well!" she says. "Now I will call to thy mind that slap on the face which thou gavest me; and I care never a whit whether thou holdest out a long while or a short."

* * * * *

"Every one has something to boast of," says Gunnar, "and I will ask thee no more for this."

"Thou behavest ill," said Rannveig, "and this shame shall long be had in mind."

Gunnar made a stout and bold defense, and now wounds other eight men with such sore wounds that many lay at death's door. Gunnar keeps them all off until he fell worn out with toil. Then they wounded him with many and great wounds, but still he got away out of their hands, and held his own against them a while longer, but at last it came about that they slew him.

APPENDIX II

THE BURNING[1]

Now they took fire, and made a great pile before the doors. Then Skarphedinn said:

"What, lads! Are ye lighting a fire, or are ye taking to cooking?"

"So it shall be," answered Grani, Gunnar's son; "and thou shalt not need to be better done."

"Thou repayest me," said Skarphedinn, "as one may look for from the man that thou art. I avenged thy father, and thou settest most store by that duty which is farthest from thee."

Then the women threw whey on the fire, and quenched it as fast as they lit it. Some, too, brought water or slops.

Then Kol, Thorstein's son, said to Flosi:

"A plan comes into my mind; I have seen a loft over the hall among the cross-trees, and we will put the fire in there, and light it with the vetch-stack that stands just above the house."

Then they took the vetch-stack and set

[1] From the *Saga of Burnt Njal; translated by Sir G. W. Dasent*, chapter 128.

fire to it, and they who were inside were not aware of it till the whole hall was ablaze over their heads.

Then Flosi and his men made a great pile before each of the doors, and then the women-folk who were inside began to weep and to wail.

Njal spoke to them and said, "Keep up your hearts, nor utter shrieks, for this is but a passing storm, and it will be long before ye have another such; and put your faith in God, and believe that he is so merciful that he will not let us burn both in this world and the next."

Such words of comfort had he for them all, and others still more strong.

Now the whole house began to blaze. Then Njal went to the door and said:

"Is Flosi so near that he can hear my voice?"

Flosi said that he could hear it.

"Wilt thou," said Njal, "take an atonement from my sons, or allow any men to go out?"

"I will not," answers Flosi, "take any atonement from thy sons, and now our dealings shall come to an end once for all, and I will not stir from this spot till they are all dead; but I will allow the women and children and house-carles to go out."

Then Njal went to the house, and said to the folk:

"Now all those must go out to whom leave is given, and so go thou out, Thorhalla, Asgrim's daughter, and all the people also with thee who may."

Then Thorhalla said:

"This is another parting between me and Helgi than I thought of a while ago; but still I will egg on my father and brothers to avenge this manscathe which is wrought here."

"Go, and good go with thee," said Njal, "for thou art a brave woman."

After that she went out and much folk with her.

Then Astrid of Deepback said to Helgi, Njal's son:

"Come thou out with me, and I will throw a woman's cloak over thee, and tie thy head with a kerchief."

He spoke against it at first, but at last he did so at the prayer of others.

So Astrid wrapped the kerchief around Helgi's head, but Thorhilda, Skarphedinn's wife, threw the cloak over him, and he went out between them, and then Thorgerda, Njal's daughter, and Helga, her sister, and many other folk went out too.

But when Helgi came out Flosi said:

"That is a tall woman and broad across the shoulders that went yonder; take her and hold her."

But when Helgi heard that, he cast away

the cloak. He had got his sword under his arm, and hewed at a man, and the blow fell on his shield and cut off the point of it, and the man's leg as well. Then Flosi came up and hewed at Helgi's neck, and took off his head at a stroke.

Then Flosi went to the door and called out to Njal, and said he would speak with him and Bergthora.

Now Njal does so, and Flosi said:

"I will offer thee, master Njal, leave to go out, for it is unworthy that thou shouldst burn indoors."

"I will not go out," said Njal, "for I am an old man, and a little fitted to avenge my sons, but I will not live in shame."

Then Flosi said to Bergthora:

"Come thou out, housewife, for I will for no sake burn thee indoors."

"I was given away to Njal young," said Bergthora, "and I have promised him this, that we would both share the same fate."

After that they both went back into the house.

"What counsel shall we now take?" said Bergthora.

"We will go to our bed," says Njal, "and lay us down; I have long been eager for rest."

Then she said to the boy, Thord, Kari's son:

"Thee will I take out, and thou shall not burn in here."

"Thou hast promised me this, grandmother," said the boy, "that we should never part so long as I wished to be with thee; but methinks it is much better to die with thee and Njal than to live after you."

Then she bore the boy to her bed, and Njal spoke to his steward and said:

"Now shalt thou see where we lay us down, and how I lay us out, for I mean not to stir an inch hence, whether reek or burning smart me, and so thou wilt be able to guess where to look for our bones."

He said he would do so.

There had been an ox slaughtered and the hide lay there. Njal told the steward to spread the hide over them, and he did so.

So there they lay down, both of them in their bed, and put the boy between them. Then they signed themselves and the boy with the cross, and gave over their souls into God's hands, and that was the last word that men heard them utter.

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