

# THE NORSEMEN IN THE WEST



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# The Norsemen in the West

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# Chapter 1 - The Curtain Rises and the Play Begins.

One fine autumn evening, between eight and nine hundred years ago, two large hairy creatures, bearing some resemblance to polar bears, might have been seen creeping slowly, and with much caution, toward the summit of a ridge that formed a spur to one of the ice-clad mountains of Greenland. The creatures went on all-fours. They had long bodies, short legs, shorter tails, and large round heads.

Having gained the top of the ridge they peeped over and beheld a hamlet nestled at the foot of a frowning cliff; and at the head of a smiling inlet. We use these terms advisedly, because the cliff, being in deep shadow, looked unusually black and forbidding, while the inlet, besides being under the influence of a profound calm, was lit up on all its dimples by the rays of the setting sun.

The hamlet consisted of one large cottage and half a dozen small cots, besides several sheds and enclosures wherein were a few sleepy-looking sheep, some lean cattle, and several half-starved horses. There was active life there also. Smoke issued from the chimneys; fresh-looking women busied themselves about household work; rosy children tumbled in and out at the doors, while men in rough garments and with ruddy countenances mended nets or repaired boats on the shore. On a bench in front of the principal cottage sat a sturdy man, scarcely middle-aged, with shaggy fair and flowing locks. His right foot served as a horse to a rapturous little boy, whose locks and looks were so like to those of the man that their kinship was obvious—only the man was rugged and rough in exterior; the boy was round and smooth. Tow typified the hair of the man; floss silk that of the boy.

Everything in and around the hamlet bore evidence of peace and thrift. It was a settlement of Norsemen—the *first* Greenland settlement, established by Eric the Red of Iceland about the year 986—nearly twenty years before the date of the opening of our tale—and the hairy creatures above referred to had gone there to look at it.

Having gazed very intently over the ridge for a considerable time, they crept backwards with extreme caution, and, on getting sufficiently far down the hill-side to be safe from observation, rose on their hind-legs and began to talk; from which circumstance it may be concluded that they were human beings. After talking, grinning, and glaring at each other for a few minutes, with gestures to correspond, as though on the point of engaging in mortal combat, they suddenly wheeled about and walked off at a rapid pace in the direction of a gorge in the mountains, the head of which was shut in by and filled up with cliffs and masses and fields of ice that overtopped the everlasting hills, and rested like a white crest on the blue sky. Vast though it seemed, this was merely a tongue of those great glaciers of the mysterious North which have done, and are still doing, so much to modify the earth's economy and puzzle antiquarian philosophy; which form the fountain-head of influences that promote the circulation of the great deep, and constitute the cradle of those ponderous icebergs that cover the arctic seas.

From out that gloomy gorge a band of more than a hundred hairy creatures issued with wild shouts and upraised arms to welcome back the adventurous two. They surrounded them, and forthwith the nation—for the entire nation was evidently there—held a general assembly or parliament on the spot. There was a good deal of uproar and confusion in that parliament, with occasional attempts on the part of several speakers to obtain a hearing at one and the same time—in which respects this parliament bore some resemblance to civilised assemblies of the present day.

There was also an immense amount of gesticulation and excitement.

At last there uprose a man clad in garments that had once belonged to a seal, and with a face that was quite as round and nearly as flat as a frying-pan. He stood fully half a foot higher than the tallest of his fellows. Like the adventurous two he had a tail—a very short tail—to his coat; but indeed this might be said of all the men of the tribe. The women's tails, however, were long. Perhaps this was meant as a mark of distinction, for their costume was so very similar to that of the men that their smaller size and longer tails alone marked the difference. To be sure there was additional presumptive evidence of their sex in the fact that most of them carried babies in their hoods; which hoods were made preposterously large for the express purpose of containing the babies.

To the tall man with the flat face the assembly listened with eager looks, bated breath, and open mouths. What he said—who can tell? His language was unintelligible to civilised ears. Not so, however, his actions, which were vigorous and full of meaning, and comprehensible by all nations. If there be any significance in signs at all he began by saying, "Hold your stupid tongues and *I* will speak." This drew forth loud and prolonged applause—as consummate impudence usually does. When he pointed with both hands to the women and children, and spoke in tender tones, instantly thereafter growling in his speech, gnashing his teeth, glaring fiercely, waving one hand at the surrounding hills and shaking the other, clenched, at the unoffending sea—he was obviously stating his grievances, namely, that the white men had come there to wrest from him his native hills and glaciers, and rob him of his wife and children, and that he defied them to come on and do their worst, seeing that, in regard to the whole assembled white world in arms he did not care a button—or a walrus-tusk, for buttons were unknown to these creatures at that time. When, suddenly

changing his manner and tone, he seized a spear, hissed his sentiments through his teeth with great volubility, and made a furious plunge that caused the assembly to gasp, and the man nearest the spear point to shrivel up—what *could* be his meaning save that nothing short of a hole right through the body of a Norseman could appease the spirit of indignation that caused his blood to boil? And when, finally, he pointed to the setting sun, traced a line with his finger from it downward to the centre of the earth under his feet, then shook his spear wrathfully toward the sea and wound up with a tremendous Ho! that would have startled the echoes of the place had there been any there, it was plain to the meanest capacity that an attack—impetuous and overwhelming—was to be made on the strangers at midnight.

Whatever were his sentiments, the assembly heartily appreciated, applauded, and approved them. They cheered and shouted “Hear, hear,” after their own fashion, and then the whole band rushed back into the mountain gorge,—doubtless with the intent to gorge themselves with raw blubber, prepare their weapons, and snatch a little repose before issuing forth to battle.

But let us return to the Norsemen, over whose innocent heads such awful prospects were impending.

The sturdy man with the fair shaggy locks was Leif, the son of Eric the Red of Iceland. The boy with the silken curls, who rode on his foot so joyously, was his son Olaf.

Eric had died several years before the date on which our tale opens, and Leif inherited his cottage and property at Brattalid in Ericsfiord, on the west coast of Greenland—the hamlet which we have already described.

“Come now, Olaf,” said Leif, flinging the child from his foot to his knee, and thence to the ground, “give me your hand; we shall go see how the boats and nets get on.—Hey! there goes a puff of wind. We shall have more presently.” He paused and scanned the seaward horizon with that intent

abstracted gaze which is peculiar to seafaring men. So long did he gaze, and so earnestly, that the child looked up in his face with an expression of surprise, and then at the horizon, where a dark blue line indicated the approach of a breeze.

“What do you see, father?” asked Olaf.

“Methinks I see two ships,” replied Leif.

At this there came a sweet musical voice from the cottage:— “Ships, brother! Did I not tell you that I had a dream about two ships, and said I not that I was sure something was going to happen?”

The speaker appeared in the doorway, drying her hands and arms on a towel,—for she had been washing dishes. She was a fair comely young woman, with exceedingly deep blue eyes, and a bright colour in her cheeks,—for women of the richer class were remarkably healthy and well-made in those days. They did a great deal of hard work with their hands, hence their arms were strong and well developed without losing anything of their elegance.

“You are always dreaming, widow Gudrid,” said Leif, with a quiet smile,—for he was no believer in dreams or superstitions, in which respect he differed much from the men and women of his time; “nevertheless, I am bound to admit that you did tell me that ‘something’ was going to happen, and no one can deny that something *is* about to occur just now. But your dream happened a month or six weeks ago, and the ‘something,’ which you are pleased to assume is these two ships, is only happening to-day. See, now, I can be a more definite prophet than thou: I will prophesy that Yule is coming,—and it will surely come if you only wait long enough!”

“You are an unbeliever, brother-in-law,” retorted Gudrid, with a laugh; “but I have not time to reason with you. These ships will bring strangers, and I must prepare to show them hospitality.—Come, Olaf, help me to put the house in order.”



Thus summoned, Olaf followed Gudrid into the house with alacrity, for he was passionately fond of his pretty aunt, who stood in the place of a mother to him, his own mother having died when he was an infant.

“But, aunt,” said Olaf, checking himself in the doorway and looking wistfully back, “I want to see the ships come in.”

“You shall see that, my son; I will not keep you too long.”

This was quite sufficient. Olaf thoroughly believed in his aunt’s truthfulness and wisdom. He set to work to assist in clearing away the confusion—part of which, in the shape of toys and chips—was of his own creating—and became so busy that he almost forgot the ships—at least if he did remember them they did not weigh heavily on his mind.

“Now, Olaf,” said Gudrid, going to the window when the preparations were nearly completed, “you may run down to the shore, for the ships will soon be on the strand.”

The boy waited no second bidding, you may be sure. He flew out of the house, and to his great surprise beheld the two ships—which so lately had appeared like sea-birds on the horizon—coming grandly up the fiord, their great square sails bulging out before a smart breeze.

All the men of the little colony were assembled on the shore—all, at least, who chanced to be at home at the time; but many of the inhabitants were absent—some fishing, some gone to Iceland, and others on viking-cruise. There were probably about thirty men on the sands, besides a good many women and children.

It must not be supposed, however, that this was the whole of that Greenland colony. It was only the part of it that had settled at Brattalid in Ericsfiord. There was another portion, a few miles distant, named Heriulfness, nearly as large as that of Ericsfiord, which had been founded by Heriulf a friend and companion of Eric the Red. Heriulf had soon followed his friend Eric to the grave, leaving the management of the colony of Heriulfness to his son Biarne.

Biarne had not been present when the two sails were first observed, but he chanced to come over to Brattalid just before their arrival.

“What, ho! Biarne,” shouted Leif, as the son of Heriulf went down to the beach, “come up hither.”

Leif stood on an elevated rock apart, and Biarne, a good deal excited, went up to him.

“Why, what ails thee?” asked Leif.

“Nothing,” replied Biarne, “but I think I know whose ship that first one is.”

“Ay! is it the ship of a friend or a foe?”

“A friend,” replied Biarne—“at least he was a friend when I knew him in Norway, nigh twenty summers past, and I did not think him changeable. You and I, Leif, have often sailed these northern seas together and apart, but I do not think that in all our wanderings either of us has met before or since a finer man than Karlsefin, though he was a mere stripling when I knew him.”

The Norseman’s eyes flashed as he spoke of his friend, for, besides being a strong and handsome man, he possessed a warm enthusiastic heart. Indeed, he had been noted in the settlement for the strength of his affection for his father Heriulf, and his dutiful conduct towards him as long as the old man lived.

“Karlsefin,” repeated Leif, musing; “I know him not.”

“Yet he knows you,” said Biarne; “when I met him in Norway I told him all about your discovery of Vinland.”

“Nay, thine own discovery of it,” said Leif.

“Not so,” replied the other, with a blush, in which a frown mingled; “I did but look upon the land—you went ashore and took possession.”

“Well, if I did so I have not retained it,” replied Leif, with a laugh; “but say, how know you that this is Karlsefin’s ship?”

“I know by the cut of her figure-head and the colour of her sails. Karlsefin was always partial to stripes of white and blue.”

“Well, it may be as you say; we shall soon know.” Thus saying, Leif descended to the beach as the vessels approached and ran their keels straight on the sandy shores of the bay. There was great bustle on board, and there were many men, besides some women, who could be seen looking over the bulwarks with keen interest, while Leif’s men brought planks with which to make a gangway from the ship to the shore.

The ships which had thus come to Greenland were of the quaint build peculiar to the Norse vessels of those days—a peculiarity of build, by the way, which has not altogether disappeared, for to this day the great central mast, huge square sail, and high prow may be seen in the fiords of Norway.

Each of the vessels which now lay beached in Ericsfiord had a high forecastle and poop, with figure-heads on stem and stern-posts that towered higher still. The ships were only half-decked, with benches for numerous rowers, and each had a crew of sixty men.

When the gangway was laid to the leading ship the first man who descended to the shore was of striking appearance. It was not so much that he was tall and strong enough to have been a worthy foeman to the stoutest colonist in Ericsfiord, as that his demeanour was bland and courtly, while there was great intellectuality in his dark handsome countenance. Unlike most Norsemen, his hair and beard were black and close-curling, and his costume, though simple, was rich in quality.

The moment he landed, Biarne stepped forward, exclaiming, “Karlsefin!”

The stranger’s face lighted up with surprise and pleasure.

“Biarne!” he said, seizing his hand, “I thought you were in Iceland.”

“So I was, but now I am in Greenland, and right glad to be the first to welcome my friend.”

Hereupon the two shook hands fervently; but, not content with this, they seized each other in an embrace, and their bearded mouths met with a hearty masculine smack that did credit to their hearts, and which it might have gratified the feelings of an affectionate walrus to behold.

## **Chapter 2 - Strong Emotions are Succeeded by Supper, and Followed by Discussions on Discovery, which End in a Wild Alarm!**

When Karlsefin had been introduced to Leif Ericsson, the former turned round and presented to him and Biarne his friend Thorward, the captain of the other ship. Thorward was not a tall man, but was very broad and stout, and had a firm yet pleasing cast of countenance. Both Thorward and Karlsefin were men of about thirty-five years of age.

“Are you not on viking-cruise?” asked Leif as they walked up to the house together, while the male members of his household and the men of the settlement assisted the crews to moor the ships.

“No; my friend Thorward and I are not men of war. We prefer the peaceful occupation of the merchant, and, to say truth, it is not unprofitable.”

“I would that more were of your way of thinking,” said Leif. “I do not love the bloody game of war, and glad am I that we have got into a quiet corner here in Greenland, where there is small occasion for it. Biarne, too, is of our way of thinking, as no doubt you already know.”

“He has often told me so, and, if I mistake not, has feathered his nest well by merchanting.”

“He has,” answered Biarne for himself, with a laugh.

While they thus advanced, talking, little Olaf had kept walking in front of the tall stranger, looking up into his face with unbounded admiration. He had never before seen any man so magnificent. His father and Biarne, whom he had hitherto regarded as perfect specimens of mankind, were

quite eclipsed. Looking backward and walking forward is an unsafe process at any time. So Olaf found it on the present occasion, for he tripped over a stone and in falling hit his little nose with such violence that it soon became a big nose, and bled profusely.

Karlsefin picked him up and set him on his legs. "My poor boy, don't cry," he said.

"No fear of *him* crying," observed Leif; "he never cries,—save when his feelings are hurt. When you touch these he *is* addicted to blubbering.—Run, lad, and Gudrid will wash you."

Olaf bounded into the house, where he was carried off to a sleeping-room and there carefully sponged by the sympathetic Gudrid. "Oh!—" he exclaimed, while his face was being washed.

"Does it pain you much, dear?" said the pretty aunt, interrupting him.

"Oh!" he continued, enthusiastically, "I never did see such a splendid man before."

"What splendid man, child?"

"Why, Karlsefin."

"And who is Karlsefin?"

"The stranger who has come across the sea from Norway."

"Indeed," said Gudrid.

Whether it was the sound of the stranger's voice in the adjoining room, or anxiety to complete her hospitable preparations, that caused Gudrid to bring her operations on Olaf to an abrupt termination, we cannot tell, but certain it is that she dried him rather quickly and hastened into the outer hall, where she was introduced to the two strangers in due form as widow Gudrid.

She had no difficulty in distinguishing which was Olaf's "splendid man!" She looked at Karlsefin and fell in love with him on the spot, but Gudrid was modest, and not sentimental. It is only your mawkishly sentimental people who are perpetually tumbling into love, and out of it, and

can't help showing it. Cupid shot her right through the heart with one powerful dart, and took her unawares too, but she did not show the smallest symptom of having been even grazed. She neither blushed nor stammered, nor looked conscious, nor affected to look unconscious. She was charmingly natural!

But this was not all: Karlsefin also fell in love on the spot,—over head and ears and hair, and hat to boot; neither did he show sign of it! After the trifling ceremonies usual on an introduction were over, he turned to continue his conversation with Leif and paid no further attention to Gudrid, while she busied herself in preparing supper. It is true that he looked at her now and then, but of course he looked at everybody, now and then, in the course of the evening. Besides, it is well-known what is said about the rights of the feline species in reference to royalty. At supper Gudrid waited on the guests, Karlsefin therefore, necessarily paid her somewhat more attention in accepting her civilities, but Thorward was quite as attentive as he, so that the most sharp-witted match-maker in the world would have failed to note any symptom of anything whatever in regard to either of them.

Gudrid felt this a little, for she was accustomed to admiration from the young men of Ericsfiord and Heriulfness, and, you know, people don't like to want what they are accustomed to. What Karlsefin thought, he did not show and never mentioned, therefore we cannot tell.

Now, good reader, pray do not run away with the notion that this love affair is the plot on which the story is to hinge! Nothing of the kind. It ran its course much more rapidly, and terminated much more abruptly, than you probably suppose—as the sequel will show.

During supper there was not much conversation, for all were hungry, but afterwards, when cans of home-brewed ale were handed round, the tongues began to move. Leif

soon observed that Karlsefin merely sipped his beer, but never once drank.

“You do not drink,” he said, pushing a large silver tankard towards him; “come, fill up.”

“Thanks, I drink but sparingly,” said Karlsefin, taking up the large tankard and admiring the workmanship.

“In good sooth ye do,” cried Biarne, with a laugh; “a mouse could hardly slake his thirst with all that you have yet imbibed.”

“I have been so long at sea,” rejoined Karlsefin, smiling, “that I have lost my relish for beer. We had nothing but water with us. Where got you this tankard, Leif, it is very massive and the workmanship such as one seldom meets with save in kings’ houses?”

“It belonged to a king!” replied Leif, with a look of pride.

“Good King Olaf Tryggvisson gave it to me on an occasion when I chanced to do him some small service. Many winters have passed since then.”

“Indeed, Leif! then you must be a favourite with King Olaf,” exclaimed Karlsefin, “for I am the bearer of another gift to you from his royal hand.”

“To me?”

“Ay. Hearing that I meant to sail over to Greenland this summer, he asked me to bear you his remembrances, and gave me two slaves to present to you in token of his continued friendship.”

Leif’s face beamed with satisfaction, and he immediately filled and quaffed a bumper of ale to King Olaf’s health, which example was followed by Biarne and the guests, as well as by the house-carls who sat on benches in various parts of the hall drinking their ale and listening to the conversation. Even little Olaf—who had been named after the king of Norway—filled his tankard to the brim with milk, and quaffed it off with a swagger that was worthy of a descendant of a long line of sea-kings, who could trace their lineage back to Odin himself.



“The slaves,” continued Karlsefin, “are from the land of the Scots. Wouldst like to see a Scotsman, Gudrid?” he added, turning to the widow who sat near him.

“I should like it much. I have heard of the Scots in Iceland. ’Tis said they are a well-favoured race, stout warriors, and somewhat fond of trading.”

Leif and Biarne both laughed loud and long at this.

“In good truth they are a stout race, and fight like very wild-cats, as Biarne and I can testify; as to their being well-favoured, there can be no question about that; though they are rather more rugged than the people farther south, and—yes, they *are* good traders, and exceedingly cautious men. They think well before they speak, and they speak slowly—sometimes they won’t speak at all. Ha! ha! Here, I drink to the land of the Scot. It is a grand good land, like our own dear old Norway.”

“Brother-in-law,” exclaimed Gudrid, reproachfully, “do you forget that you are an Icelander?”

“Forget!” exclaimed Leif, tossing back his yellow locks, and raising the tankard again to pledge his native land; “no, I shall only forget Iceland when I forget to live; but I don’t forget, also, that it is only about 130 years since my great-grandfather and his companions came over from Norway to Iceland. Before that it was an unpeopled rock in the Northern Sea, without name or history. (Iceland was colonised by Norsemen about the year 874.) ’Twas as little known then as Vinland is known now.”

“By the way, Biarne,” said Karlsefin, turning to his friend, “the mention of Vinland reminds me that, when you and I met last, you did not give me a full account of that discovery, seeing that you omitted to mention your own share in it. Tell me how was it, and when and where was it? Nay, have I unintentionally touched on a sore point?” he added, on observing a slight shade of annoyance pass over Biarne’s usually cheerful countenance.

"He *is* a little sore about it," said Leif, laughing. "Come, Biarne, don't be thin-skinned. You know the saying, A dutiful son makes a glad father. You had the best of reasons for acting as you did."

"Ay, but people don't believe in these best of reasons," retorted Biarne, still annoyed, though somewhat mollified by Leif's remarks.

"Never mind, 'tis long past now. Come, give us the saga. 'Tis a good one, and will bear re-telling."

"Oh yes," exclaimed Olaf, with sparkling eyes, for the boy dearly loved anything that bore the faintest resemblance to a saga or story, "tell it, Biarne."

"Not I," said Biarne; "Leif can tell it as well as I, if he chooses."

"Well, I'll try," said Leif, laying his huge hand on the table and looking earnestly at Karlsefin and Thorward. The latter was a very silent man, and had scarcely uttered a word all the evening, but he appeared to take peculiar interest in Vinland, and backed up the request that Leif would give an account of its discovery.

"About twenty summers ago," said Leif, "my father, Eric the Red, and his friend Heriulf, Biarne's father, came over here from Iceland. (A.D. 986.) Biarne was a very young man at the time—little more than a boy—but he was a man of enterprise, and fond of going abroad, and possessed a merchant-ship of his own with which he gathered wealth, and, I will say it, reputation also—though perhaps I should not say that to his face.

"He was a good son, and used to be by turns a year abroad and a year with his father. He chanced to be away in Norway when Heriulf and my father Eric came over to Greenland. On returning to Iceland he was so much disappointed to hear of his father's departure that he would not unload his ship, but resolved to follow his old custom and take up his winter abode with his father. 'Who will go with me to Greenland?' said he to his men. 'We will all go,'

replied the men. 'Our expedition,' said Biarne, 'will be thought foolish, as none of us have ever been on the Greenland sea before.' 'We mind not that,' said the men—so away they sailed for three days and lost sight of Iceland. Then the wind failed; after that a north wind and a fog set in, and they knew not where they were sailing to; and this lasted many days. At length the sun appeared. Then they knew the quarters of the sky, and, after sailing a day and a night, made the land.

"They saw that it was without mountains, was covered with wood, and that there were small hills inland. Biarne saw that this did not answer to the description of Greenland; he knew he was too far south, so he left the land on the larboard side, and sailed two days and nights before they got sight of land again. The men asked Biarne if this was Greenland, but he said it was not, 'For on Greenland,' he says, 'there are great snowy mountains, but this is flat and covered with trees.' Here the wind fell and the men wanted to go ashore, 'Because,' said they, 'we have need of wood and water.' Biarne replied, 'Ye are not in want of either;' and the men blamed him for this,—but the season was far spent, he knew not how long it might take him to find Greenland, so he had no time to spare.—Was it not so?" said Leif, appealing to his friend.

"It was so," replied Biarne, nodding gravely.

"Well then," continued Leif, "it must be told that he ordered them to hoist the sail, which they did, and, turning the bow from the land, kept the sea for three days and nights, with a fine breeze from the south-west, when a third time land was seen, with high snowy mountains. Still Biarne would not land, for it was not like what had been reported of Greenland. They soon found it to be an island, and, turning from it, stood out to sea, when the breeze increased to a gale, forcing them to take in a reef; so they sailed for three days and nights more, and made land the fourth time. This turned out to be Greenland, and quite close to Heriulf's

dwelling at Heriulfness. Biarne then gave up seafaring, and dwelt with his old father as long as he lived; but since his death he has been sometimes at sea and sometimes at home. Now, these lands which Biarne discovered, were what I have since called Vinland."

"Yes," exclaimed Biarne, with a look of indignation; "and when I afterwards fared to Norway they blamed me for not going on shore and exploring these lands—as if I, at the end of autumn, could afford to put off time in explorations, when it was all I could do to make my port before the winter set in!" He finished off by striking the table with his fist, seizing his tankard, and draining it to the bottom.

"I have often observed," said Karlsefin, quietly, "that people who sit by their firesides at home, and do nothing, are usually very severe and noisy in their remarks on those who fare abroad and do great things; but that arises not so much from ill-will as ignorance."

"But what of your own doings, Leif?" said Thorward, breaking in here impatiently.

"Well, I didn't do much," replied Leif. "I only took possession, and didn't keep it. This was the way of it. Fourteen years after this voyage of Biarne, (about the year A.D. 1000) I was seized with a desire to see these new lands. I bought Biarne's ship from him, set sail with a good crew, and found the lands, just as Biarne had described them, far away to the south of Greenland. I landed and gave names to some places. At the farthest south point we built huts and spent the winter, but returned home in spring. I called this part Vinland, and this is the reason why: We had a German with us named Tyrker, who is with me here still. One day Tyrker was lost; I was very anxious about him, fearing that he had been killed by wild beasts or Skraelingers, (Esquimaux or savages, probably Indians,) so I sent out parties to search. In the evening we found him coming home in a state of great excitement, having found fruit which, he said, was grapes. The sight and taste of the

fruit, to which he was used in his own land, had excited him to such an extent that we thought he was drunk, and for some time he would do nothing but laugh and devour grapes, and talk German, which none of us understood. At last he spoke Norse, and told us that he had found vines and grapes in great abundance. We found that this was true—at least we found a berry which was quite new to us. We went off next day, and, gathering enough to load our boat, brought them away with us. From this circumstance I called it Vinland. Two years after that my brother Thorwald went to Vinland, wintered three years there, was killed by the Skraelingers, and his men returned to Greenland. Then my youngest brother, Thorstein, who was Gudrid's husband, went off to Vinland to fetch home the body of our brother Thorwald, but was driven back by stress of weather. He was taken ill soon after that, and died. Since then Gudrid has dwelt with my household, and glad we are to have her. This is the whole story of Vinland; so if you want to know more about it you must e'en go on a voyage of discovery for yourself."

"I should like nothing better," replied Karlsefin, "if I could only—"

At that moment the door was burst violently open, and a man with bloodshot eyes and labouring breath rushed in exclaiming, "The Skraelinger! the Skraelinger are upon us!"

## **Chapter 3 - Dark War-Clouds Lower, but Clear away without a Shower—Voices and Legs do Good Service.**

“Up, carls, buckle on your war-gear!” cried Leif, rising hastily on hearing the announcement with which the last chapter ended.

“Run, Thorward, call out our men,” whispered Karlsefin; “I will stay to learn what Leif means to do. Bring them all up to the door.”

Thorward was gone almost before the sentence was finished. Leif and his house-carls, of whom there were ten present at the time, did not take long to busk them for the fight. The Norse of old were born, bred, and buried—if they escaped being killed and cut to pieces—in the midst of alarms. Their armour was easily donned, and not very cumbrous. Even while Leif was giving the first order to his men, Gudrid had run to the peg on which hung his sword and helmet, and brought him these implements of war.

“My men and I shall be able to render you some service, Leif,” said Karlsefin; “what do you intend to do?”

“Do!” exclaimed Leif with a grim laugh, as he buckled on his sword, “why, I shall give the Skraelingers a tremendous fright, that is all. The rascals! They knew well that we were short-handed just now, and thought to take advantage of us; but hah! they do not seem to be aware that we chance to have stout visitors with us to-night. So, lads, follow me.”

Biarne, meanwhile, had darted out on the first alarm, and assembled all the men in the settlement, so that when Leif, Karlsefin, and the housemen issued out of the cottage they found about a dozen men assembled, and others running up

every moment to join them. Before these were put in array most of the men of Karlsefin's ship, numbering forty, and those belonging to Thorward, numbering thirty, came up, so that when all were mustered they were little if at all short of one hundred stout warriors.

The moon came out brightly at the time, and Leif chuckled as he watched Biarne put the men hastily into marching order.

"Methought you said that war was distasteful," observed Karlsefin, in some surprise.

"So it is, so it is, friend," replied Leif, still laughing in a low tone; "but there will be no war to-night. Leave your bows behind you, lads," he added, addressing the men; "you won't want them; shield and sword will be enough. For the matter of that, we might do without both. Now, lads, follow my leading, and do as I bid you; advance with as little noise as may be."

So saying, Leif led the way out of the little hamlet towards the extremity of the ridge or spur of the mountains that sheltered Ericsfiord from the north-west.

Towards that same extremity another band of men were hastening on the other side of the ridge. It was a band of our hairy friends whom the Norsemen called Skraelingers.

Truly there was something grand in the look and bearing of the tall man with the flat face, as he led his band to attack the warlike Norsemen, and there was something almost sublime in the savage, resolute aspect of the men who followed him—each being armed with a large walrus spear, and each being, moreover, an adept in the use of it.

Flatface (in default of a better, let that name stick to him) had ascertained beyond a doubt that the entire available force of Norsemen in Ericsfiord had, in consequence of fishing and other expeditions, been reduced to barely thirty fighting men. He himself could muster a band of at least one hundred and fifty good men and true—not to mention hairy, a hundred and fifty seals having unwillingly

contributed their coats to cover these bloodthirsty Skraelingers. The Norsemen, Flatface knew, were strong men and bold, besides being large, but he resolved to take them by surprise, and surely (he argued with himself) a hundred and fifty brave men with spears will be more than a match for thirty sleepy men unarmed and in bed!

Flatface had screwed himself up with such considerations; made a few more inflammatory speeches to his men, by way of screwing them up also, and then, a little before midnight, set forth on his expedition.

Now it chanced that there was a man among the Norsemen who was a great hunter and trapper. His name was Tyrker—the same Tyrker mentioned by Leif as being the man who had found grapes in Vinland. Leif said he was a German, but he said so on no better authority than the fact that he had originally come to Norway from the south of Europe. It is much more probable that he was a Turk, for, whereas the Germans are known to be a well-sized handsome race of fair men, this Tyrker was an ugly little dark wiry fellow, with a high forehead, sharp eyes, and a small face; but he was extremely active, and, although an elderly man, few of the youths in Ericsfiord could beat him at feats requiring dexterity.

But, whether German or Turk, Tyrker was an enthusiastic trapper of white, or arctic foxes. These creatures being very numerous in that part of Greenland, he was wont to go out at all hours, late and early, to visit his traps. Hence it happened that, on the night in question, Tyrker found himself in company with two captured arctic foxes at the extremity of the mountain spur before referred to.

He could see round the corner of the spur into the country beyond, but as the country there was not attractive, even at its best, he paid no attention to it. He chanced, however, to cast upon it one glance after setting his traps, just as he was about to return home. That glance called forth a steady look, which was followed by a stare of surprise, and the



deep guttural utterance of the word “zz-grandimaghowl!” which, no doubt, was Turkish, at that ancient date, for “hallo!”

It was the band of hairy creatures that had met his astonished sight. Tyrker shrank behind the spur and peeped round it for a few seconds to make quite sure. Then, turning and creeping fairly out of sight, he rose and bounded back to the hamlet, as though he had been a youth of twenty. As we have seen, he arrived, gasping, in time to warn his friends.

Between the hamlet and the spur where Tyrker’s traps were set there were several promontories, or projections from the cliffs, all of which had to be passed before the spur came in view. Leif led his men past the first and second of these at a run. Then, believing that he had gone far enough, he ordered his band to draw close up under the cliffs, where the shadow was deepest, saying that he would go alone in advance to reconnoitre.

“And mark me, lads,” he said, “when I give a loud sneeze, do you give vent to a roar that will only stop short of splitting your lungs; then give chase, and yell to your hearts’ content as you run; but see to it that ye keep together and that no man runs past *me*. There is plenty of moonlight to let you see what you’re about. If any man tries to overshoot me in the race I’ll hew off his head.”

This last remark was no figure of speech. In those days men were but too well accustomed to hewing off heads. Leif meant to have his orders attended to, and the men understood him.

On reaching the second projection of cliff after leaving his men, Leif peeped round cautiously and beheld the advancing Skraelingers several hundred yards off. He returned at once to his men and took up a position at their head in the deep shadow of the cliffs.

Although absolutely invisible themselves, the Norsemen could see the Skraelingers quite plainly in the moonlight,

as they came slowly and with great caution round each turn of the footpath that led to the hamlet. There was something quite awe-inspiring in the manner of their approach. Evidently Flatface dreaded a surprise, for he put each leg very slowly in advance of the other, and went on tiptoe, glancing quickly on either side between each step. His followers—in a compact body, in deep silence and with bated breath—followed his steps and his example.

When they came to the place where the men crouched in ambush, Leif took up a large stone and cast it high over their heads. So quietly was this done that none even of his own party heard him move or saw the stone, though they heard it fall with a *thud* on the sand beyond.

The Skraelingers heard it too, and stopped abruptly—each man on one leg, with the other leg and his arms more or less extended, just as if he had been suddenly petrified. So in truth he had been—with horror!

To meet an open enemy, however powerful, would have been a pleasure compared with that slow nervous advance in the midst of such dead silence! As nothing followed the sound, however, the suspended legs began to descend slowly again towards the ground, when Leif sneezed!

If Greenland's icy mountains had become one monstrous polar bear, whose powers of voice, frozen for prolonged ages, had at last found vent that night in one concentrated roar, the noise could scarcely have excelled that which instantly exploded from the Norsemen.

The effect on the Skraelingers was almost miraculous. A bomb-shell bursting in the midst of a hundred and fifty Kilkenny cats could not have been more effective, and the result would certainly have borne some marks of resemblance. Each hairy creature sprang nearly his own height into the air, and wriggled while there, as if impatient to turn and fly before reaching the ground. Earth regained, the more active among them overshot and overturned the clumsy, whereby fifty or sixty were instantly cast down, but

these rose again like spring-jacks and fled, followed by a roar of laughter from their foes, which, mingled as it was with howls and yells, did infinitely more to appal the Skraelingers than the most savage war-cry could have done.

But they were followed by more than laughter. The Norsemen immediately gave chase—still yelling and roaring as they ran, for Leif set the example, and his followers remembered his threat.

Karlsefin and Biarne kept one on each side of Leif, about a pace behind him.

“If they fight as well as they run,” observed the former, “they must be troublesome neighbours.”

“They are not bad fighters,” replied Leif; “but sometimes they deem it wise to run.”

“Not unlike to other people in that respect,” said Biarne; “but it seems to me that we might overhaul them if we were to push on.”

He shot up to Leif as he spoke, but the latter checked him.

“Hold back, Biarne; I mean them no harm, and wish no bloodshed—only they must have a good fright. The lads, no doubt, would like to run in and make short work of them; but I intend to breathe the lads, which will in the end do just as well as fighting to relieve their feelings.—Enough. It is ill talking and running.”

They were silent after that, and ran thus for fully an hour, at nearly the top of their speed. But Leif sometimes checked his men, and sometimes urged them on, so that they fancied he was chasing with full intent to run the Skraelingers down. When the fugitives showed signs of flagging, he uttered a tremendous roar, and his men echoed it, sending such a thrill to the hearts of the Skraelingers that they seemed to recover fresh wind and strength; then he pushed after them harder than ever, and so managed that, without catching or killing one, he terrified them almost out of their wits, and ran them nearly to death.

At last they came to a place where there was an abrupt bend in the mountains. Here Leif resolved to let them go. When they were pretty near the cliff round which the path turned, he put on what, in modern sporting phraseology, is termed a spurt, and came up so close with the flying band that those in rear began to glance despairingly over their shoulders. Suddenly Leif gave vent to a roar, into which he threw all his remaining strength. It was taken up and prolonged by his men. The horror-struck Skraelingers shrieked in reply, swept like a torrent round the projecting cliff, and disappeared!

Leif stopped at once, and held up his hand. All his men stopped short also, and though they heard the Skraelingers still howling as they fled, no one followed them any farther. Indeed, most of the Norsemen were panting vehemently, and rather glad than otherwise to be allowed to halt.

There were, however, two young men among them—tall, strong-boned, and thin, but with broad shoulders, and grave, earnest, though not exactly handsome countenances—who appeared to be perfectly cool and in good wind after their long run. Leif noticed them at once.

“Yonder youths seem to think little of this sort of thing,” he said to Karlsefin.

“You are right, Leif; it is mere child’s play to them. These are the two Scots—the famous runners—whom I was charged by King Olaf to present to you. Why, these men, I’ll engage to say, could overtake the Skraelingers even yet, if they chose.”

“Say you so?” cried Leif. “Do they speak Norse?”

“Yes; excellently well.”

“Their names?”

“The one is Heika, the other Hake.”

“Ho! Hake and Heika, come hither,” cried Leif, beckoning to the men, and hastening round the point, where the Skraelingers could be seen nearly a mile off, and still