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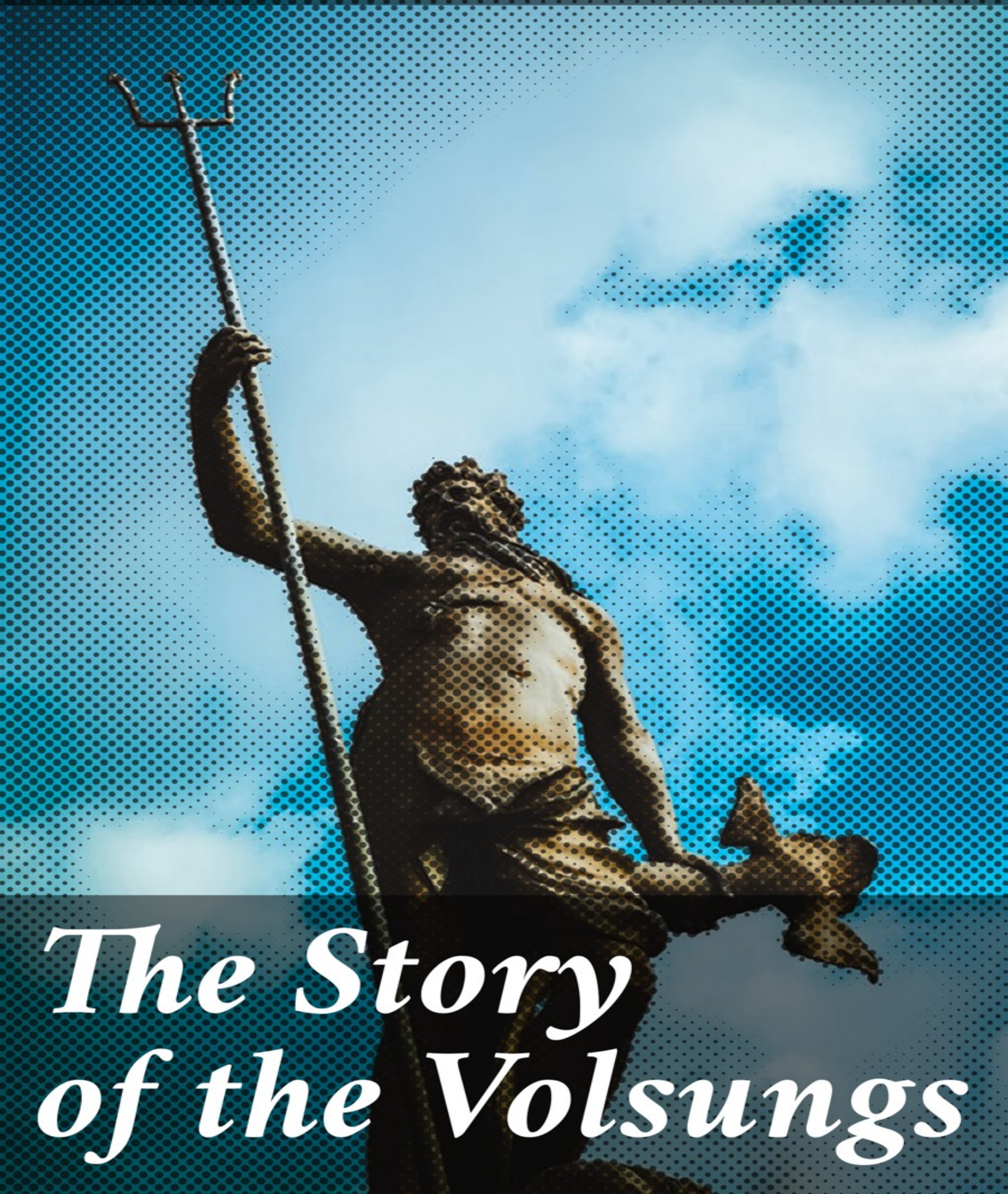

The Story of the Volsungs

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Introduction

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It would seem fitting for a Northern folk, deriving the greater and better part of their speech, laws, and customs from a Northern root, that the North should be to them, if not a holy land, yet at least a place more to be regarded than any part of the world beside; that howsoever their knowledge widened of other men, the faith and deeds of their forefathers would never lack interest for them, but would always be kept in remembrance. One cause after another has, however, aided in turning attention to classic men and lands at the cost of our own history. Among battles, "every schoolboy" knows the story of Marathon or Salamis, while it would be hard indeed to find one who did more than recognise the name, if even that, of the great fights of Hafrsfirth or Sticklestead. The language and history of Greece and Rome, their laws and religions, have been always held part of the learning needful to an educated man, but no trouble has been taken to make him familiar with his own people or their tongue. Even that Englishman who knew Alfred, Bede, Caedmon, as well as he knew Plato, Caesar, Cicero, or Pericles, would be hard bestead were he asked about the great peoples from whom we sprang; the warring of Harold Fairhair or Saint Olaf; the Viking[1] kingdoms in these (the British) Western Isles; the settlement of Iceland, or even of Normandy. The knowledge of all these things would now be even smaller than it is among us were it not that there was one land left where the olden learning found refuge and was kept in being. In England, Germany,

and the rest of Europe, what is left of the traditions of pagan times has been altered in a thousand ways by foreign influence, even as the peoples and their speech have been by the influx of foreign blood; but Iceland held to the old tongue that was once the universal speech of northern folk, and held also the great stores of tale and poem that are slowly becoming once more the common heritage of their descendants. The truth, care, and literary beauty of its records; the varied and strong life shown alike in tale and history; and the preservation of the old speech, character, and tradition -- a people placed apart as the Icelanders have been -- combine to make valuable what Iceland holds for us. Not before 1770, when Bishop Percy translated Mallet's "Northern Antiquities", was anything known here of Icelandic, or its literature. Only within the latter part of this century has it been studied, and in the brief book-list at the end of this volume may be seen the little that has been done as yet. It is, however, becoming ever clearer, and to an increasing number, how supremely important is Icelandic as a word-hoard to the English- speaking peoples, and that in its legend, song, and story there is a very mine of noble and pleasant beauty and high manhood. That which has been done, one may hope, is but the beginning of a great new birth, that shall give back to our language and literature all that heedlessness and ignorance bid fair for awhile to destroy. The Scando-Gothic peoples who poured southward and westward over Europe, to shake empires and found kingdoms, to meet Greek and Roman in conflict, and levy tribute everywhere, had kept up their constantly-recruited waves of incursion, until they had raised a barrier

of their own blood. It was their own kin, the sons of earlier invaders, who stayed the landward march of the Northmen in the time of Charlemagne. To the Southlands their road by land was henceforth closed. Then begins the day of the Vikings, who, for two hundred years and more, "held the world at ransom." Under many and brave leaders they first of all came round the "Western Isles"[2] toward the end of the eighth century; soon after they invaded Normandy, and harried the coasts of France; gradually they lengthened their voyages until there was no shore of the then known world upon which they were unseen or unfelt. A glance at English history will show the large part of it they fill, and how they took tribute from the Anglo-Saxons, who, by the way, were far nearer kin to them than is usually thought. In Ireland, where the old civilisation was falling to pieces, they founded kingdoms at Limerick and Dublin among other places;[3] the last named, of which the first king, Olaf the White, was traditionally descended of Sigurd the Volsung,[4] endured even to the English invasion, when it was taken by men of the same Viking blood a little altered. What effect they produced upon the natives may be seen from the description given by the unknown historian of the "Wars of the Gaedhil with the Gaill": "In a word, although there were an hundred hard-steeled iron heads on one neck, and an hundred sharp, ready, cool, never-rusting brazen tongues in each head, and an hundred garrulous, loud, unceasing voices from each tongue, they could not recount, or narrate, or enumerate, or tell what all the Gaedhil suffered in common -- both men and women, laity and clergy, old and young, noble and ignoble -- of hardship, and of injury, and of

oppression, in every house, from these valiant, wrathful, purely pagan people. Even though great were this cruelty, oppression, and tyranny, though numerous were the oft-victorious clans of the many- familied Erinn; though numerous their kings, and their royal chiefs, and their princes; though numerous their heroes and champions, and their brave soldiers, their chiefs of valour and renown and deeds of arms; yet not one of them was able to give relief, alleviation, or deliverance from that oppression and tyranny, from the numbers and multitudes, and the cruelty and the wrath of the brutal, ferocious, furious, untamed, implacable hordes by whom that oppression was inflicted, because of the excellence of their polished, ample, treble, heavy, trusty, glittering corslets; and their hard, strong, valiant swords; and their well-riveted long spears, and their ready, brilliant arms of valour besides; and because of the greatness of their achievements and of their deeds, their bravery, and their valour, their strength, and their venom, and their ferocity, and because of the excess of their thirst and their hunger for the brave, fruitful, nobly-inhabited, full of cataracts, rivers, bays, pure, smooth-plained, sweet grassy land of Erinn" -- (pp. 52-53). Some part of this, however, must be abated, because the chronicler is exalting the terror-striking enemy that he may still further exalt his own people, the Dal Cais, who did so much under Brian Boroimhe to check the inroads of the Northmen. When a book does[5] appear, which has been announced these ten years past, we shall have more material for the reconstruction of the life of those times than is now anywhere accessible. Viking earldoms also were the

Orkneys, Faroes, and Shetlands. So late as 1171, in the reign of Henry II., the year after Beckett's murder, Earl Sweyn Asleifsson of Orkney, who had long been the terror of the western seas, "fared a sea-roving" and scoured the western coast of England, Man, and the east of Ireland, but was killed in an attack on his kinsmen of Dublin. He had used to go upon a regular plan that may be taken as typical of the homely manner of most of his like in their cruising: "Sweyn had in the spring hard work, and made them lay down very much seed, and looked much after it himself. But when that toil was ended, he fared away every spring on a viking-voyage, and harried about among the southern isles and Ireland, and came home after midsummer. That he called spring-viking. Then he was at home until the corn-fields were reaped down, and the grain seen to and stored. Then he fared away on a viking-voyage, and then he did not come home till the winter was one month off, and that he called his autumn-viking."[6]

Toward the end of the ninth century Harold Fairhair, either spurred by the example of Charlemagne, or really prompted, as Snorri Sturluson tells us, resolved to bring all Norway under him. As Snorri has it in "Heimskringla": "King Harold sent his men to a girl hight Gyda.... The king wanted her for his leman; for she was wondrous beautiful but of high mood withal. Now when the messengers came there and gave their message to her, she made answer that she would not throw herself away even to take a king for her husband, who swayed no greater kingdom than a few districts; `And methinks,' said she, `it is a marvel that no king here in Norway will put all the land under him, after the

fashion that Gorm the Old did in Denmark, or Eric at Upsala.' The messengers deemed this a dreadfully proud-spoken answer, and asked her what she thought would come of such an one, for Harold was so mighty a man that his asking was good enough for her. But although she had replied to their saying otherwise than they would, they saw no likelihood, for this while, of bearing her along with them against her will, so they made ready to fare back again. When they were ready and the folk followed them out, Gyda said to the messengers -- `Now tell to King Harold these my words: -- I will only agree to be his lawful wife upon the condition that he shall first, for sake of me, put under him the whole of Norway, so that he may bear sway over that kingdom as freely and fully as King Eric over the realm of Sweden, or King Gorm over Denmark; for only then, methinks, can he be called king of a people.' Now his men came back to King Harold, bringing him the words of the girl, and saying she was so bold and heedless that she well deserved the king should send a greater troop of people for her, and put her to some disgrace. Then answered the king. `This maid has not spoken or done so much amiss that she should be punished, but the rather should she be thanked for her words. She has reminded me,' said he, `of somewhat that it seems wonderful I did not think of before. And now,' added he, `I make the solemn vow, and take who made me and rules over all things, to witness that never shall I clip or comb my hair until I have subdued all Norway with scatt, and duties, and lordships; or, if not, have died in the seeking.' Guttorm gave great thanks to the king for his oath, saying it was "royal work fulfilling royal rede." The new and

strange government that Harold tried to enforce -- nothing less than the feudal system in a rough guise - -- which made those who had hitherto been their own men save at special times, the king's men at all times, and laid freemen under tax, was withstood as long as might be by the sturdy Norsemen. It was only by dint of hard fighting that he slowly won his way, until at Hafrsfirth he finally crushed all effective opposition. But the discontented, "and they were a great multitude," fled oversea to the outlands, Iceland, the Faroes, the Orkneys, and Ireland. The whole coast of Europe, even to Greece and the shores of the Black Sea, the northern shores of Africa, and the western part of Asia, felt the effects also. Rolf Pad-th'-hoof, son of Harold's dear friend Rognvald, made an outlaw for a cattle-raid within the bounds of the kingdom, betook himself to France, and, with his men, founded a new people and a dynasty.

Iceland had been known for a good many years, but its only dwellers had been Irish Culdees, who sought that lonely land to pray in peace. Now, however, both from Norway and the Western Isles settlers began to come in. Aud, widow of Olaf the White, King of Dublin, came, bringing with her many of mixed blood, for the Gaedhil (pronounced "Gael", Irish) and the Gaill (pronounced "Gaul", strangers) not only fought furiously, but made friends firmly, and often intermarried. Indeed, the Westmen were among the first arrivals, and took the best parts of the island -- on its western shore, appropriately enough. After a time the Vikings who had settled in the Isles so worried Harold and his kingdom, upon which they swooped every other while, that he drew together a mighty force, and fell upon them

wheresoever he could find them, and followed them up with fire and sword; and this he did twice, so that in those lands none could abide but folk who were content to be his men, however lightly they might hold their allegiance. Hence it was to Iceland that all turned who held to the old ways, and for over sixty years from the first comer there was a stream of hardy men pouring in, with their families and their belongings, simple yeomen, great and warwise chieftains, rich landowners, who had left their land "for the overbearing of King Harold," as the "Landnamabok"[7] has it. "There also we shall escape the troubling of kings and scoundrels", says the "Vatsdaelasaga". So much of the best blood left Norway that the king tried to stay the leak by fines and punishments, but in vain.

As his ship neared the shore, the new-coming chief would leave it to the gods as to where he settled. The hallowed pillars of the high seat, which were carried away from his old abode, were thrown overboard, with certain rites, and were let drive with wind and wave until they came ashore. The piece of land which lay next the beach they were flung upon was then viewed from the nearest hill-summit, and place of the homestead picked out. Then the land was hallowed by being encircled with fire, parcelled among the band, and marked out with boundary-signs; the houses were built, the "town" or home-field walled in, a temple put up, and the settlement soon assumed shape. In 1100 there were 4500 franklins, making a population of about 50,000, fully three-fourths of whom had a strong infusion of Celtic blood in them. The mode of life was, and is, rather pastoral than aught else. In the 39,200 square miles of the island's area

there are now about 250 acres of cultivated land, and although there has been much more in times past, the Icelanders have always been forced to reckon upon flocks and herds as their chief resources, grain of all kinds, even rye, only growing in a few favoured places, and very rarely there; the hay, self-sown, being the only certain harvest. On the coast fishing and fowling were of help, but nine-tenths of the folk lived by their sheep and cattle. Potatoes, carrots, turnips, and several kinds of cabbage have, however, been lately grown with success. They produced their own food and clothing, and could export enough wool, cloth, horn, dried fish, etc., as enabled them to obtain wood for building, iron for tools, honey, wine, grain, etc, to the extent of their simple needs. Life and work was lotted by the seasons and their changes; outdoor work -- fishing, herding, hay-making, and fuel- getting -- filling the long days of summer, while the long, dark winter was used in weaving and a hundred indoor crafts. The climate is not so bad as might be expected, seeing that the island touches the polar circle, the mean temperature at Reykjavik being 39 degrees.

The religion which the settlers took with them into Iceland -- the ethnic religion of the Norsefolk, which fought its last great fight at Sticklestead, where Olaf Haraldsson lost his life and won the name of Saint -- was, like all religions, a compound of myths, those which had survived from savage days, and those which expressed the various degrees of a growing knowledge of life and better understanding of nature. Some historians and commentators are still fond of the unscientific method of taking a later religion, in this case christianity, and writing

down all apparently coincident parts of belief, as having been borrowed from the christian teachings by the Norsefolk, while all that remain they lump under some slighting head. Every folk has from the beginning of time sought to explain the wonders of nature, and has, after its own fashion, set forth the mysteries of life. The lowest savage, no less than his more advanced brother, has a philosophy of the universe by which he solves the world-problem to his own satisfaction, and seeks to reconcile his conduct with his conception of the nature of things. Now, it is not to be thought, save by "a priori" reasoners, that such a folk as the Northmen -- a mighty folk, far advanced in the arts of life, imaginative, literary -- should have had no further creed than the totemistic myths of their primitive state; a state they have wholly left ere they enter history. Judging from universal analogy, the religion of which record remains to us was just what might be looked for at the particular stage of advancement the Northmen had reached. Of course something may have been gained from contact with other peoples -- from the Greeks during the long years in which the northern races pressed upon their frontier; from the Irish during the existence of the western viking-kingdoms; but what I particularly warn young students against is the constant effort of a certain order of minds to wrest facts into agreement with their pet theories of religion or what not. The whole tendency of the more modern investigation shows that the period of myth-transmission is long over ere history begins. The same confusion of different stages of myth- making is to be found in the Greek religion, and indeed in those of all peoples;

similar conditions of mind produce similar practices, apart from all borrowing of ideas and manners; in Greece we find snake-dances, bear-dances, swimming with sacred pigs, leaping about in imitation of wolves, dog-feasts, and offering of dogs' flesh to the gods -- all of them practices dating from crude savagery, mingled with ideas of exalted and noble beauty, but none now, save a bigot, would think of accusing the Greeks of having stolen all their higher beliefs. Even were some part of the matter of their myths taken from others, yet the Norsemen have given their gods a noble, upright, great spirit, and placed them upon a high level that is all their own.[8] From the prose Edda the following all too brief statement of the salient points of Norse belief is made up: -- "The first and eldest of gods is hight Allfather; he lives from all ages, and rules over all his realm, and sways all things great and small; he smithied heaven and earth, and the lift, and all that belongs to them; what is most, he made man, and gave him a soul that shall live and never perish; and all men that are right-minded shall live and be with himself in Vingolf; but wicked men fare to Hell, and thence into Niithell, that is beneath in the ninth world. Before the earth `'twas the morning of time, when yet naught was, nor sand nor sea was there, nor cooling streams. Earth was not found, nor Heaven above; a Yawning-gap there was, but grass nowhere.' Many ages ere the earth was shapen was Niflheim made, but first was that land in the southern sphere hight Muspell, that burns and blazes, and may not be trodden by those who are outlandish and have no heritage there. Surtr sits on the border to guard the land; at the end of the world he will fare forth, and harry and overcome all

the gods and burn the world with fire. Ere the races were yet mingled, or the folk of men grew, Yawning-gap, which looked towards the north parts, was filled with thick and heavy ice and rime, and everywhere within were fog and gusts; but the south side of Yawning-gap lightened by the sparks and gledes that flew out of Muspell-heim; as cold arose out of Niflheim and all things grim, so was that part that looked towards Muspell hot and bright; but Yawning-gap was as light as windless air, and when the blast of heat met the rime, so that it melted and dropped and quickened; from those life- drops there was shaped the likeness of a man, and he was named Ymir; he was bad, and all his kind; and so it is said, when he slept he fell into a sweat; then waxed under his left hand a man and a woman, and one of his feet got a son with the other, and thence cometh the Hrimthursar. The next thing when the rime dropped was that the cow hight Audhumla was made of it; but four milk-rivers ran out of her teats, and she fed Ymir; she licked rime-stones that were salt, and the first day there came at even, out of the stones, a man's hair, the second day a man's head, the third day all the man was there. He is named Turi; he was fair of face, great and mighty; he gat a son named Bor, who took to him Besla, daughter of Bolthorn, the giant, and they had three sons, Odin, Vili, and Ve. Bor's sons slew Ymir the giant, but when he fell there ran so much blood out of his wounds that all the kin of the Hrimthursar were drowned, save Hvergelmir and his household, who got away in a boat. Then Bor's sons took Ymir and bore him into the midst of Yawning-gap, and made of him the earth; of his blood seas and waters, of his flesh earth was made; they set

the earth fast, and laid the sea round about it in a ring without; of his bones were made rocks; stones and pebbles of his teeth and jaws and the bones that were broken; they took his skull and made the lift thereof, and set it up over the earth with four sides, and under each corner they set dwarfs, and they took his brain and cast it aloft, and made clouds. They took the sparks and gledes that went loose, and had been cast out of Muspellheim, and set them in the lift to give light; they gave resting-places to all fires, and set some in the lift; some fared free under it, and they gave them a place and shaped their goings. A wondrous great smithying, and deftly done. The earth is fashioned round without, and there beyond, round about it lies the deep sea; and on that sea-strand the gods gave land for an abode to the giant kind, but within on the earth made they a burg round the world against restless giants, and for this burg reared they the brows of Ymir, and called the burg Midgard. The gods went along the sea-strand and found two stocks, and shaped out of them men; the first gave soul and life, the second wit and will to move, the third face, hearing, speech, and eyesight. They gave them clothing and names; the man Ask and the woman Embla; thence was mankind begotten, to whom an abode was given under Midgard. Then next Bor's sons made them a burg in the midst of the world, that is called Asgard; there abode the gods and their kind, and wrought thence many tidings and feats, both on earth and in the Sky. Odin, who is hight Allfather, for that he is the father of all men and sat there in his high seat, seeing over the whole world and each man's doings, and knew all things that he saw. His wife was called Frigg, and their

offspring is the Asa- stock, who dwell in Asgard and the realms about it, and all that stock are known to be gods. The daughter and wife of Odin was Earth, and of her he got Thor, him followed strength and sturdiness, thereby quells he all things quick; the strongest of all gods and men, he has also three things of great price, the hammer Miolnir, the best of strength belts, and when he girds that about him waxes his god strength one-half, and his iron gloves that he may not miss for holding his hammer's haft. Balidr is Odin's second son, and of him it is good to say, he is fair and: bright in face, and hair, and body, and him all praise; he is wise and fair-spoken and mild, and that nature is in him none may withstand his doom. Tyr is daring and best of mood; there is a saw that he is tyrstrong who is before other men and never yields; he is also so wise that it is said he is tyrlearned who is wise. Bragi is famous for wisdom, and best in tongue-wit, and cunning speech, and song-craft. `And many other are there, good and great; and one, Loki, fair of face, ill in temper and fickle of mood, is called the backbiter of the Asa, and speaker of evil redes and shame of all gods and men; he has above all that craft called sleight, and cheats all in all things. Among the children of Loki are Fenris-wolf and Midgards-worm; the second lies about all the world in the deep sea, holding his tail in his teeth, though some say Thor has slain him; but Fenris-wolf is bound until the doom of the gods, when gods and men shall come to an end, and earth and heaven be burnt, when he shall slay Odin. After this the earth shoots up from the sea, and it is green and fair, and the fields bear unsown, and gods and men shall be alive again, and sit in fair halls, and talk of old

tales and the tidings that happened aforetime. The head-seat, or holiest-stead, of the gods is at Yggdrasil's ash, which is of all trees best and biggest; its boughs are spread over the whole world and stand above heaven; one root of the ash is in heaven, and under the root is the right holy spring; there hold the gods doom every day; the second root is with the Hrimthursar, where before was Yawning-gap; under that root is Mimir's spring, where knowledge and wit lie hidden; thither came Allfather and begged a drink, but got it not before he left his eye in pledge; the third root is over Niflheim, and the worm Nidhogg gnaws the root beneath. A fair hall stands under the ash by the spring, and out of it come three maidens, Norns, named Has-been, Being, Will-be, who shape the lives of men; there are beside other Norns, who come to every man that is born to shape his life, and some of these are good and some evil. In the boughs of the ash sits an eagle, wise in much, and between his eyes sits the hawk Vedrfalnir; the squirrel Ratatoskr runs up and down along the ash, bearing words of hate betwixt the eagle and the worm. Those Norns who abide by the holy spring draw from it every day water, and take the clay that lies around the well, and sprinkle them up over the ash for that its boughs should not wither or rot. All those men that have fallen in the fight, and borne wounds and toil unto death, from the beginning of the world, are come to Odin in Valhall; a very great throng is there, and many more shall yet come; the flesh of the boar Soerfmnir is sodden for them every day, and he is whole again at even; and the mead they drink that flows from the teats of the she-goat Heidhrun. The meat Odin has on his board he gives to his

two wolves, Geri and Freki, and he needs no meat, wine is to him both meat and drink; ravens twain sit on his shoulders, and say into his ear all tidings that they see and hear; they are called Huginn and Muninn (mind and memory); them sends he at dawn to fly over the whole world, and they come back at breakfast-tide, thereby becomes he wise in many tidings, and for this men call him Raven's-god. Every day, when they have clothed them, the heroes put on their arms and go out into the yard and fight and fell each other; that is their play, and when it looks toward mealtime, then ride they home to Valhall and sit down to drink. For murderers and men forsworn is a great hall, and a bad, and the doors look northward; it is altogether wrought of adder-backs like a wattled house, but the worms' heads turn into the house, and blow venom, so that rivers of venom run along the hall, and in those rivers must such men wade forever." There was no priest-class; every chief was priest for his own folk, offered sacrifice, performed ceremonies, and so on.

In politics the homestead, with its franklin-owner, was the unit; the "thing", or hundred-moot, the primal organisation, and the "godord", or chieftainship, its tie. The chief who had led a band of kinsmen and followers to the new country, taken possession of land, and shared it among them, became their head- ruler and priest at home, speaker and president of their Thing, and their representative in any dealings with neighbouring chiefs and their clients. He was not a feudal lord, for any franklin could change his "godord" as he liked, and the right of "judgment by peers" was in full use. At first there was no higher organisation than the local

thing. A central thing, and a speaker to speak a single "law" for the whole island, was instituted in 929, and afterwards the island was divided in four quarters, each with a court, under the Al-thing. Society was divided only into two classes of men, the free and unfree, though political power was in the hands of the franklins alone; "godi" and thrall ate the same food, spoke the same tongue, wore much the same clothes, and were nearly alike in life and habits. Among the free men there was equality in all but wealth and the social standing that cannot be separated therefrom. The thrall was a serf rather than a slave, and could own a house, etc., of his own. In a generation or so the freeman or landless retainer, if he got a homestead of his own, was the peer of the highest in the land. During the tenth century Greenland was colonised from Iceland, and by end of the same century christianity was introduced into Iceland, but made at first little difference in arrangements of society. In the thirteenth century disputes over the power and jurisdiction of the clergy led, with other matters, to civil war, ending in submission to Norway, and the breaking down of all native great houses. Although life under the commonwealth had been rough and irregular, it had been free and varied, breeding heroes and men of mark; but the "law and order" now brought in left all on a dead level of peasant proprietorship, without room for hope or opening for ambition. An alien governor ruled the island, which was divided under him into local counties, administered by sheriffs appointed by the king of Norway. The Al-thing was replaced by a royal court, the local work of the local things was taken by a subordinate of the sheriff, and things,

quarter-courts, trial by jury, and all the rest, were swept away to make room for these "improvements", which have lasted with few changes into this century. In 1380 the island passed under the rule of Denmark, and so continues.[9] During the fifteenth century the English trade was the only link between Iceland and the outer world; the Danish government weakened that link as much as it could, and sought to shut in and monopolise everything Icelandic; under the deadening effect of such rule it is no marvel that everything found a lower level, and many things went out of existence for lack of use. In the sixteenth century there is little to record but the Reformation, which did little good, if any, and the ravages of English, Gascon, and Algerine pirates who made havoc on the coast;[10] they appear toward the close of the century and disappear early in the seventeenth. In the eighteenth century small-pox, sheep disease, famine, and the terrible eruptions of 1765 and 1783, follow one another swiftly and with terrible effect. At the beginning of the present century Iceland, however, began to shake off the stupor her ill-hap had brought upon her, and as European attention had been drawn to her, she was listened to. Newspapers, periodicals, and a Useful Knowledge Society were started; then came free trade, and the "home-rule" struggle, which met with partial success in 1874, and is still being carried on. A colony, Gimli, in far-off Canada, has been formed of Icelandic emigrants, and large numbers have left their mother- land; but there are many co-operative societies organised now, which it is hoped will be able to so revive the old resources of the island as to make provision for the old population and ways of life. There

is now again a representative central council, but very many of the old rights and powers have not been yet restored. The condition of society is peculiar absence of towns, social equality, no abject poverty or great wealth, rarity of crime, making it easy for the whole country to be administered as a co-operative commonwealth without the great and striking changes rendered necessary by more complicated systems.

Iceland. has always borne a high name for learning and literature; on both sides of their descent people inherited special poetic power. Some of older Eddaic fragments attest the great reach and deep overpowering strength of imagination possessed by their Norse ancestors; and they themselves had been quickened by a new leaven. During the first generations of the "land-taking" a great school of poetry which had arisen among the Norsemen of the Western Isles was brought by them to Iceland.[11] The poems then produced are quite beyond parallel with those of any Teutonic language for centuries after their date, which lay between the beginning of the ninth and the end of the tenth centuries. Through the Greenland colony also came two, or perhaps more, great poems of this western school. This school grew out of the stress and storm of the viking life, with its wild adventure and varied commerce, and the close contact with an artistic and inventive folk, possessed of high culture and great learning. The infusion of Celtic blood, however slight it may have been, had also something to do with the swift intense feeling and rapidity of passion of the earlier Icelandic poets. They are hot-headed and hot-hearted, warm, impulsive, quick to quarrel or to love, faithful, brave; ready with sword or song to battle

with all comers, or to seek adventure wheresoever it might be found. They leave Iceland young, and wander at their will to different courts of northern Europe, where they are always held in high honour. Gunnlaug Worm-tongue[12] in 1004 carne to England, after being in Norway, as the saga says: -- "Now sail Gunnlaug and his fellows into the English main, and come at autumntide south to London Bridge, where they hauled ashore their ship. Now, at that time King Ethelred, the son of Edgar, ruled over England, and was a good lord; the winter he sat in London. But in those days there was the same tongue in England as in Norway and Denmark; but the tongues changed when William the Bastard won England, for thenceforward French went current there, for he was of French kin. Gunnlaug went presently to the king, and greeted him well and worthily. The king asked him from what land he came, and Gunnlaug told him all as it was. `But,' said he, `I have come to meet thee, lord, for that I have made a song on thee, and I would that it might please thee to hearken to that song.' The king said it should be so, and Gunnlaug gave forth the song well and proudly, and this is the burden thereof --

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"'As God are all folk fearing
The fire lord King of England,
Kin of all kings and all folk,
To Ethelred the head bow.'
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The king thanked him for the song, and gave him as song-reward a scarlet cloak lined with the costliest of furs, and golden- broidered down to the hem; and made him his man; and Gunnlaug was with him all the winter, and was well accounted of." The poems in this volume are part of the wonderful fragments which are all that remain of ancient

Scandinavian poetry. Every piece which survives has been garnered by Vigfusson and Powell in the volumes of their "Corpus", where those who seek may find. A long and illustrious line of poets kept the old traditions, down even to within a couple centuries, but the earlier great harvest of song was never again equalled. After christianity had entered Iceland, and that, with other causes, had quieted men's lives, although the poetry which stood to the folk in lieu of music did not die away, it lost the exclusive hold it had upon men's minds. In a time not so stirring, when emotion was not so fervent or so swift, when there was less to quicken the blood, the story that had before found no fit expression but in verse, could stretch its limbs, as it were, and be told in prose. Something of Irish influence is again felt in this new departure and that marvellous new growth, the saga, that came from it, but is little more than an influence. Every people find some one means of expression which more than all else suits their mood or their powers, and this the Icelanders found in the saga. This was the life of a hero told in prose, but in set form, after a regular fashion that unconsciously complied with all epical requirements but that of verse -- simple plot, events in order of time, set phrases for even the shifting emotion or changeful fortune of a fight or storm, and careful avoidance of digression, comment, or putting forward by the narrator of ought but the theme he has in hand; he himself is never seen. Something in the perfection of the saga is to be traced to the long winter's evenings, when the whole household, gathered together at their spinning, weaving, and so on, would listen to one of their number who told anew some old

story of adventure or achievement. In very truth the saga is a prose epic, and marked by every quality an epic should possess. Growing up while the deeds of dead heroes were fresh in memory, most often recited before the sharers in such deeds, the saga, in its pure form, never goes from what is truth to its teller. Where the saga, as this one of the Volsungs is founded upon the debris of songs and poems, even then very old, tales of mythological heroes, of men quite removed from the personal knowledge of the narrator, yet the story is so inwound with the tradition of his race, is so much a part of his thought-life, that every actor in it has for him a real existence. At the feast or gathering, or by the fireside, as men made nets and women spun, these tales were told over; in their frequent repetition by men who believed them, though incident or sequence underwent no change, they would become closer knit, more coherent, and each an organic whole. Gradually they would take a regular and accepted form, which would ease the strain upon the reciter's memory and leave his mind free to adorn the story with fair devices, that again gave help in the making it easier to remember, and thus aided in its preservation. After a couple of generations had rounded and polished the sagas by their telling and retelling, they were written down for the most part between 1141 and 1220, and so much was their form impressed upon the mind of the folk, that when learned and literary works appeared, they were written in the same style; hence we have histories alike of kingdoms, or families, or miracles, lives of saints, kings, or bishops in saga-form, as well as subjects that seem at first sight even less hopeful. All sagas that have yet appeared in English

may be found in the book-list at end of this volume, but they are not a tithe of those that remain.

Of all the stories kept in being by the saga-tellers and left for our delight, there is none that so epitomises human experience; has within the same space so much of nature and of life; so fully the temper and genius of the Northern folk, as that of the Volsungs and Niblungs, which has in varied shapes entered into the literature of many lands. In the beginning there is no doubt that the story belonged to the common ancestral folk of all the Teutonic of Scando-Gothic peoples in the earliest days of their wanderings. Whether they came from the Hindu Kush, or originated in Northern Europe, brought it with them from Asia, or evolved it among the mountains and rivers it has taken for scenery, none know nor can; but each branch of their descendants has it in one form or another, and as the Icelanders were the very crown and flower of the northern folk, so also the story which is the peculiar heritage of that folk received in their hands its highest expression and most noble form. The oldest shape in which we have it is in the Eddaic poems, some of which date from unnumbered generations before the time to which most of them are usually ascribed, the time of the viking-kingdoms in the Western Isles. In these poems the only historical name is that of Attila, the great Hun leader, who filled so large a part of the imagination of the people whose power he had broken. There is no doubt that, in the days when the kingdoms of the Scando-Goths reached from the North Cape to the Caspian, that some earlier great king performed his part; but, after the striking career of Attila, he became the recognised type of a

powerful foreign potentate. All the other actors are mythic-heroic. Of the Eddaic songs only fragments now remain, but ere they perished there arose from them a saga, that now given to the readers of this. The so-called Anglo-Saxons brought part of the story to England in "Beowulf"; in which also appear some incidents that are again given in the Icelandic saga of "Grettir the Strong". Most widely known is the form taken by the story in the hands of an unknown medieval German poet, who, from the broken ballads then surviving wrote the "Nibelungenlied" or more properly "Nibelungen Not" ("The Need of the Niblungs"). In this the characters are all renamed, some being more or less historical actors in mid-European history, as Theodoric of the East-Goths, for instance. The whole of the earlier part of the story has disappeared, and though Siegfried (Sigurd) has slain a dragon, there is nothing to connect it with the fate that follows the treasure; Andvari, the Volsungs, Fafnir, and Regin are all forgotten; the mythological features have become faint, and the general air of the whole is that of medieval romance. The swoard Gram is replaced by Balmung, and the Helm of Awing by the Tarn-cap -- the former with no gain, the latter with great loss. The curse of Andvari, which in the saga is grimly real, working itself out with slow, sure steps that no power of god or man can turn aside, in the medieval poem is but a mere scenic effect, a strain of mystery and magic, that runs through the changes of the story with much added picturesqueness, but that has no obvious relation to the working-out of the plot, or fulfilment of their destiny by the different characters. Brynhild loses a great deal, and is a poor creature when

compared with herself in the saga; Grimhild and her fateful drink have gone; Gudrun (Chriemhild)is much more complex, but not more tragic; one new character, Rudiger, appears as the type of chivalry; but Sigurd (Siegfred) the central figure, though he has lost by the omission of so much of his life, is, as before, the embodiment of all the virtues that were dear to northern hearts. Brave, strong, generous, dignified, and utterly truthful, he moves amid a tangle of tragic events, overmastered by a mighty fate, and in life or death is still a hero without stain or flaw. It is no wonder that he survives to this day in the national songs of the Faroe Islands and in the folk-ballads of Denmark; that his legend should have been mingled with northern history through Ragnar Lodbrog, or southern through Attila and Theodoric; that it should have inspired William Morris in producing the one great English epic of the century;[13] and Richard Wagner in the mightiest among his music-dramas. Of the story as told in the saga there is no need here to speak, for to read it, as may be done a few pages farther on, is that not better than to read about it? But it may be urged upon those that are pleased and moved by the passion and power, the strength and deep truth of it, to find out more than they now know of the folk among whom it grew, and the land in which they dwelt. In so doing they will come to see how needful are a few lessons from the healthy life and speech of those days, to be applied in the bettering of our own.

H. HALLIDAY SPARLiNG.

Footnotes