The STORY OF ROLF and the VIKING BOW

Written by

ALLEN FRENCH

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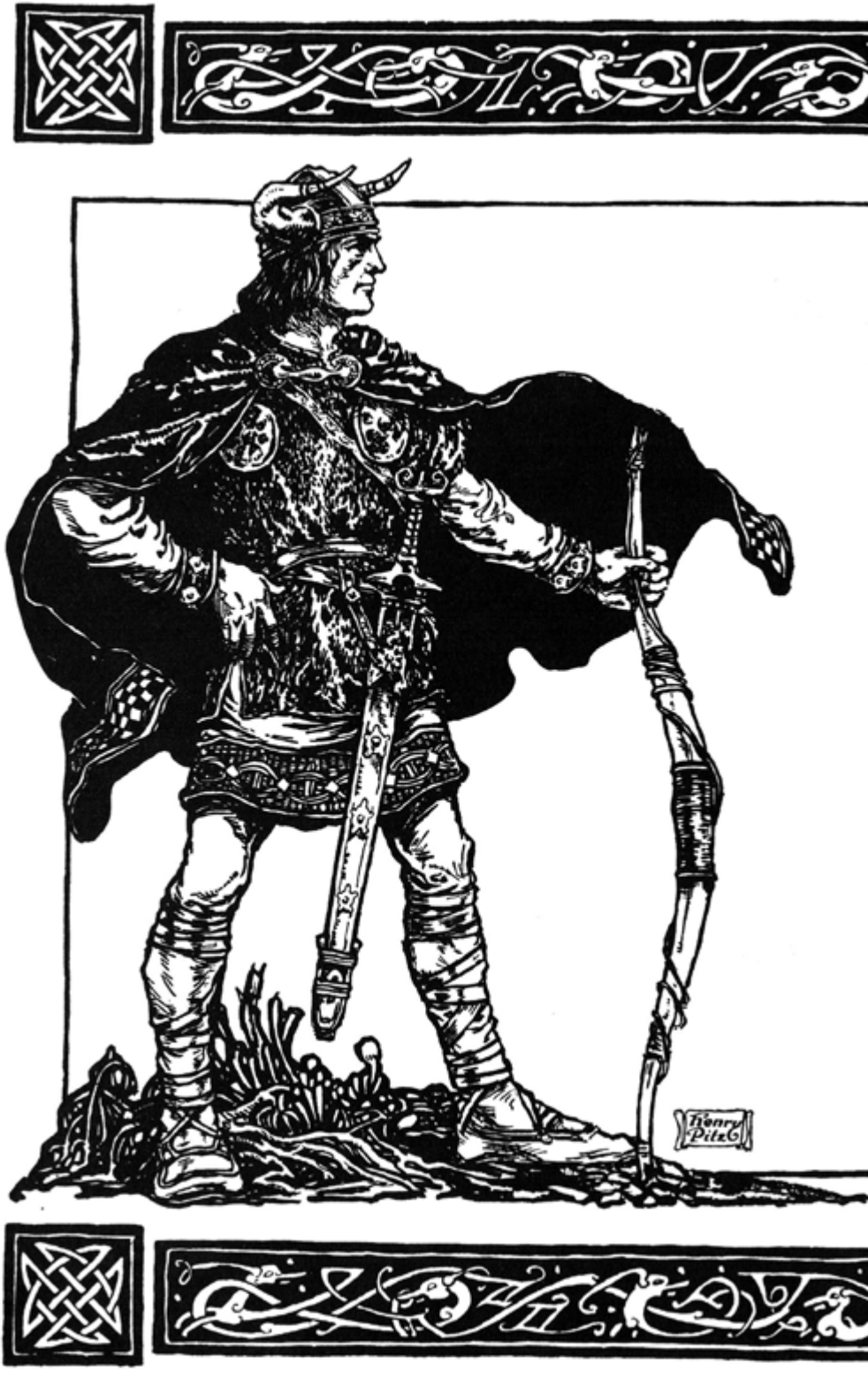
Henry Pitz

The Story of Rolf

And the Viking Bow

by Allen French

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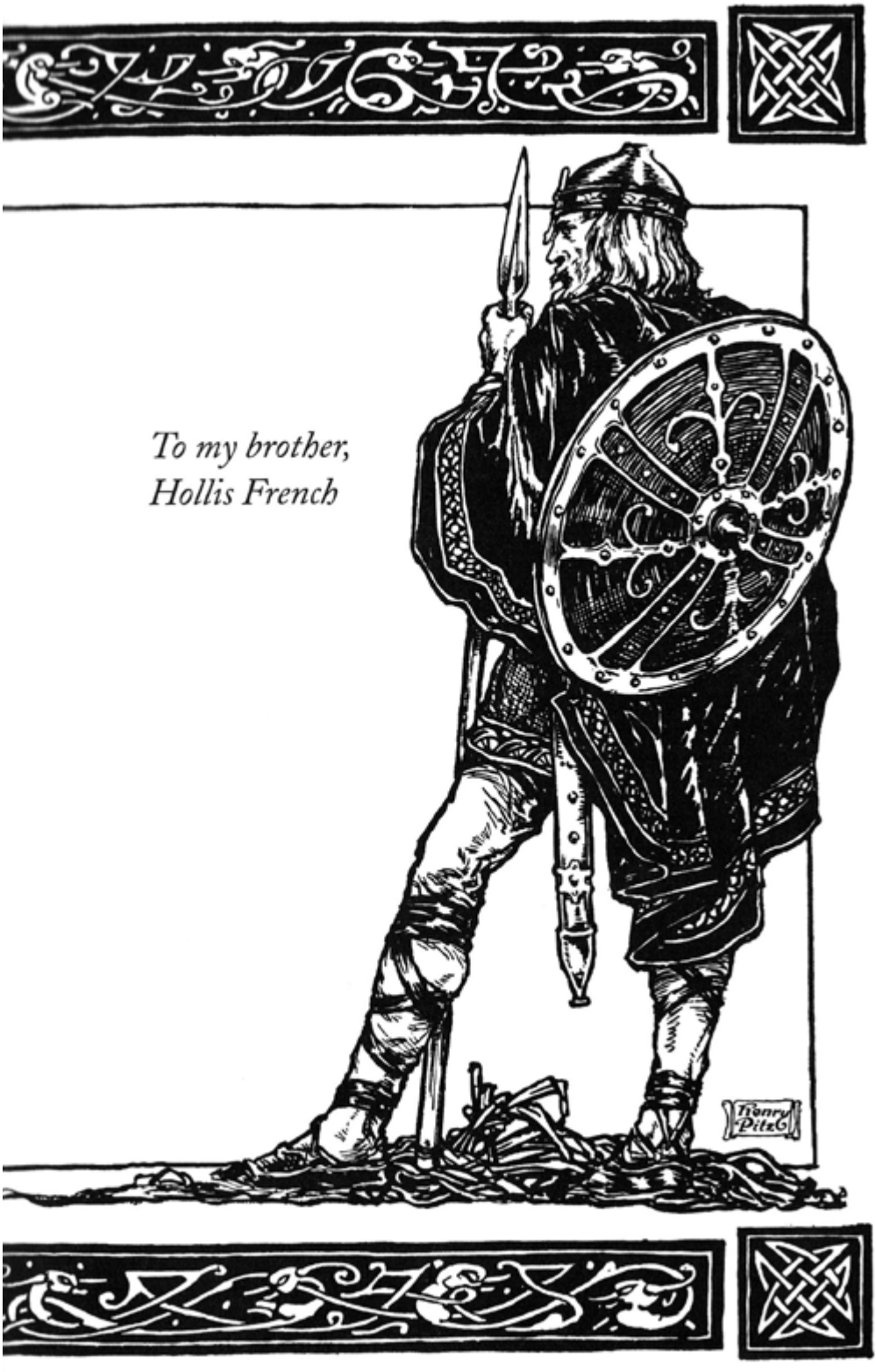

To my brother,
Hollis French

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Introduction

ALLEN FRENCH wrote this tale of Iceland—*The Story of Rolf and the Viking Bow*—in the early 1900's; Bethlehem Books is republishing it now because we think it deserves to be discovered by a new audience of readers. I was introduced to it myself when, one day, a young friend left his library copy around. I picked it up and couldn't put it down. Reading *Rolf* was somewhat like taking a drink of water straight from the glacier's source.

The novel is set around 1010 A.D., a generation or so after Christianity was introduced to the island —the same era as that in which Iceland's sagas take place. The sagas themselves were committed to writing at a later period, in the 12th and 13th centuries. They related the deeds of heroic figures from this early time, not a terribly distant past for the saga writers; a sharp sense of historical connection is evident in the many references to local places, family names, and to the institution of customs. How historical the heroes themselves are—Njal, Gisli, Grettir, and many others—is debated. Their greatness in literary terms, however, has many champions. There is no doubt of their place in heroic literature.

Allen French, like J.R.R.Tolkien, immersed his imagination in this ancient lore. Not all of us have

the preparation or hardihood to do likewise. The terse, condensed narrative of the originals, with its unfamiliar worlds of reference, can make hard going for an ordinary modern reader. What we so appreciate about Mr. French's achievement is that he emerged from that world and gave us this exceptional and readable tale: *The Story of Rolf.*

A glance at the book's opening sentence tells much:

> In the time after Iceland had become Christian, and after the burning of Njal, but before the deaths of Snorri the Priest and Grettir the Outlaw, there lived at Cragness above Broadfirth a man named Hiarandi, called the Unlucky.

Here we have the flavor of authentic saga: direct, brief, exact, and concerned to establish a historical context. The character of Rolf (son of Hiarandi) is the author's own invention. But Rolf's destiny is woven into the broad pattern of history passed down to us in Iceland's sagas.

The novel draws us into those events beginning with the fateful act of Hiarandi's lighting a fire-beacon on his coastland cliff.

In this initiative Rolf's father challenges the status quo and—to save lives—risks his own and his neighbor's prosperity.

The Story of Rolf traces the costly consequences of his act of generosity. The conflict in this tale must be worked out not simply between opposing individuals,

but between families. The Soursops, Rolf's family, and the family of Einar are at odds; the key to resolving the feud has a legal side to it, around which all the adventures play. But the personal side, as we proceed, grows more and more important. How will Rolf and Einar's son Grani come to terms?

Great development is given to the related themes of forgiveness and growth in character. In this respect the tale is true to the novels of our age, which focus on the inner life of the person. The final chapters of Rolf bring this focus to a climax. We ponder the wrong that must be righted, not by force nor shrewdness alone, but by longsuffering, patience, and meekness. French tells us in the preface to the original edition that for the closing incidents of his story, he drew upon a piece of writing from the early literature, "that wonderful fragment of Thorstein Staffsmitten," where "the spirit of those days is particularly well given." His manner of working with this fragment combines, to powerful advantage, the dramatic brevity of Icelandic speech and action with our latter-day sensitivity to moral development.

It's not just what is told, but how it's told that makes Rolf's story noteworthy. The texture of the writing embodies the time and place and people. It is characterized by uncluttered narration, curt dialogue full of compressed feeling, verbs shifting at times to the present tense to suggest heightened action, "skaldic" verse. The presence of these verse kernels is typical of the ancient sagas, which were

written in prose, but contained short sections of stylized poetry. That poetry marked the heightened import of certain moments. They were reminders of the days when verse was recited orally by skalds (poets) and even extemporaneously by heroes. Thus, the verse marks dramatic moments in the dialogue: the characters turn to lines of deep-felt import in a style true to the Icelandic temper.

The author found personal interest in the Norsemen (the Icelander being one branch) who "represents, with slight differences, all the old nations of Teutonic stock," and whose customs, languages, and blood-lines have contributed so much to our modern English-speaking world. In these saga heroes French singled out the quality of courage "not the courage of the Greek [hero], to whom tears and flight are no disgrace, but the steadfastness in every stress of men dependent on themselves." *

Such is Rolf's steadfastness. It feeds a hunger in us. It quenches a thirst. Drink, then, fellow reader, from this Icelandic stream.

Lydia Reynolds
Bethlehem Books
Summer 1993

* Preface to his adaptation of *The Story of Burnt Njal* (Dasent's translation), published in 1926 as *Heroes of Iceland.*

Pronunciation Guide

(Adapted from French's *Heroes of Iceland*)

The simplest rule for a uniform pronunciation of Icelandic names is to treat all vowel and consonant sounds as if they were German. Thus, on the stressed syllable:

a	has the sound of	**a** in *far,* as in Kiartin (pronounce "Kyartan")
e	"	**e** in *fed,* as in Grettir
ei	"	**i** in *pine,* as in Einar
i	"	**e** in *meet,* as in Gisli
o	"	**o** in *note,* as in Frodi
u	"	**u** in *pull,* as in Hrut
g	"	**g** in *get,* as in Gisli (pronounce with hard **g**)
th	"	**t** in *tot,* as in Thord of Laxriver; Althing

i, when it comes right after a consonant, is pronounced like "**y**" as in Kiartan (Kyartan)

I

Of the Lighting of the Beacon

IN THE TIME after Iceland had become Christian, and after the burning of Njal, but before the deaths of Snorri the Priest and Grettir the Outlaw, there lived at Cragness above Broadfirth a man named Hiarandi, called the Unlucky. And well was he so named, for he got a poor inheritance from his father, but he left a poorer to his son.

Now the farm of Cragness was a fertile fell, standing above the land round about, and girt with crags. Below lay Broadfirth, great and wide, and Cragness jutted out into it, a danger to ships. It had no harbor, but a little cove among the rocks, where Hiarandi kept his boat; and many ships were wrecked on the headland, bringing fortune to the owners of Cragness, both in goods and firewood. And all the land about once belonged to the farm. Rich, therefore, would have been the dwellers at Cragness, but for the doings of Hiarandi's father.

He would always be striving at the law, and he

was of ill judgment or ill luck, for what he gained at the farm he always lost. The older he grew, the more quarrelsome he became; and judgments heaped heavy on him, until at last he was so hard put that he must sell all his outlying lands. So the farm, from a wide estate, became only the land of Cragness itself, and another holding of a few acres, lying inland on the uplands, within sight of Cragness and the sea.

In the time when Hiarandi was young, Iceland was still heathen. He sought his fortune in a trading voyage, and sailed West-over-the-Sea, trading in the South Isles as a chapman, trafficking in goods of all kinds. And he made money there, so that at last when he sailed again for home he counted on a fair future. But the ship was wrecked in a storm, and few of the men came ashore; and Hiarandi himself was saved by means of a maid who dwelt at the place, who dragged him from the surf. So Hiarandi came home on foot, his clothes in tatters, having lost money rather than gained it. Then his father, whose losses pressed heavy on him, struggled no more with the world, but went to his bed and died. And in that summer when all Iceland took to the new faith, Hiarandi became master at Cragness.

Hiarandi was a silent man, not neighborly, but hard-working. An unworldly choice he made of a wife, for he took that woman who had saved him from the waves; she was the daughter of a small

farmer and brought neither dowry nor kinship of any power. So men said that Hiarandi had no wish to rise in the world. He lived upon his farm, with two thralls and a bondservant; and husbanding his goods well, by little and little he made money which he put out at call, and so bade fair to do better than his father, for all his poor start in life. And a loving spouse he had in Asdis, his wife, who one day bore him a son.

They named the lad Rolf, and he grew to be well knit; he was not powerful, but straight and supple, and of great craft in his hands. And from delight in the boy Hiarandi changed his ways, and became more cheerful, going to fairs and meetings for the sake of Rolf. And Hiarandi taught the lad all he knew of weapon-craft, which was not a little. The lad was swift of foot; he was skilled in the use of the sword and javelin, but most he delighted in the use of the bow.

And that was natural, for upon the cliffs seabirds lived in thousands, hard to catch. The boy went down to their nests with ropes, and took eggs in their season, or the young before they could fly, and both for food. So skilled was he in this that he was called Craggeir, the Cragsman; and no man could surpass him, whether in daring or skill. But there were times when there were no eggs nor fledglings, and from his earliest boyhood Rolf practised in shooting with his bow at the birds, and he kept the larder ever full.

Happy was Hiarandi watching his son, and his pride in him was great. As the lad grew stronger, the father made for him stronger bows and heavier arrows, until at the age of fourteen Rolf used the bow of a man. Then one winter they went down together into the valley, father and son, and watched the sports and games on the frozen mere.

There the men of the place played at ball, and great was the laughter or deep was the feeling. Now Hiarandi would not let Rolf play, for often matters came to blows, and he would not have his son maimed. But when it came to shooting with the bow, Hiarandi put Rolf forward, and it was seen who was the best at that play. For though the men shot, Rolf surpassed them all, not in distance but in skill. He hit the smallest mark at the greatest distance; and when Hiarandi brought a pigeon and freed it, then Rolf brought it down. No one there had seen such shooting. Then those who were not envious named the lad Rolf the Bowman.

But a man named Einar stood by, and he lived on the land which Hiarandi's father had sold. He was rich but covetous, and fond of show, and fond of praise. There lived with him one named Ondott, an Eastfirther who had left his district and come west, a man without property. He stood with Einar and watched the games.

"See," said Einar, "how proud is Hiarandi of his son!"

"Thou hast a son as well," said Ondott. "How he

will shine among these churls when he returns from his fostering in the South Isles!"

"Aye," answered Einar. "Like an Earl will he be, and no farmer of these parts will compare with him."

"And as for the shooting of this lad," remarked Ondott, "it is not so fine after all."

"In the Orkneys," said Einar aloud, so that others should hear him, "they are better bowmen than here, and the Earl will have my son taught everything."

Now some who stood by brought Hiarandi this tale. "Have a care," said they. "Thy neighbor Einar sets himself above thee."

"Then he must set himself high," answered Hiarandi with a laugh, "for his land lies far lower than mine."

Then others carried that tale to Einar, and he laid it up in his mind; but Hiarandi forgot all that had been said, nor did he remember to tell of it to Asdis when they had returned from the games.

Then the winter passed on with severe storms, and ships were wrecked on Cragness rocks, but no men reached shore. And Einar envied the more the riches that came to Hiarandi from the wrecks, in firewood, timber, and merchandise. And once a whale came ashore, and that was great fortune. But one evening, as those at Cragness sat within the hall, Asdis came and stood beside her husband, and said, "Listen to the wind."

"There is no need to listen," said Hiarandi. "The wind howls for a storm, and this night will be bad."

Then Thurid the bondservant, who sat by the fire, looked up and said, "Ships are off the land."

"Hearest thou that?" asked Asdis in a low voice. "The woman is strange, but she forecasts well."

"Aye," answered Hiarandi, "it is likely that ships will be on the rocks by morning."

"Now," asked Asdis, "dost thou remember the time thou camest ashore, these many years ago?"

"How should I forget it?" responded Hiarandi.

"But no one can rush into the water here," said Asdis, "to save those who are wrecked."

"That is true," quoth Hiarandi. "I am sorry for the mariners, yet how is one to help?"

Then the bondservant raised her head and sang this song:

"The sea brings money;
Money is bonny.
Bless then the sea
Which brings good to thee."

After that she sat silent and sunken as before.

"Hear the hag," said Asdis, shuddering. "But we prosper through the misfortunes of others."

"What is to be done?" asked Hiarandi.

"It is in my mind," said Asdis, "that if we made a fire-beacon, people could steer from shore and so into safe harbor farther up the firth."

"Now," quoth Hiarandi, "that might be done."

"Wilt thou do it?" asked Asdis.

Then the woman raised her head and sang again:

"He is a fool
Who leaves old rule.
Set heart 'gainst head,
How then butter thy bread?"

Then Hiarandi said to Asdis: "No man has ever yet set beacons against shipwreck. All men agree to take the fortune of the sea; and what is cast on a man's beaches, that is his by old custom."

"Thinkest thou that is right?" asked Asdis.

"Moreover," went on Hiarandi, "the sea is but giving me again what it took away."

"Never can the sea," answered Asdis, "give thee true happiness through other men's misfortunes."

"Remember the boy," said Hiarandi. "Shall I leave him with nothing to begin the world with? For my own earnings bring me at most a mark of silver in the year."

"For all that," replied Asdis, "it is in my mind that to do otherwise were to do better. How canst thou have the heart that men should die longer on our rocks, and we not do our best to save them?"

Then Hiarandi, answering nothing, rose and paced up and down before the fire. And the carline sang once more:

"Take what is given.
No man is wise
Who asketh twice
If earth or heaven
Sends him his prize."

But Asdis stood upright, and she sang:

"Suffer not wrong
To happen long,
Lest punishment
From heaven be sent."

Now in Iceland all men loved the singing of skalds; but though Hiarandi had heard the carline sing many times before, never had he heard rhymes from his wife. So he stood astonished.

Then the bondservant sang again:

"Ill will attend
The beacon's lighting.
Bad spirit's guiding
Will bring false friend."

But Asdis sang with great vehemence:

"Let God decide
What fate shall ride
Upon the wind.
Be thou not blind
To duty's hest.
My rede is best.
List to the storm!
Go! Save from harm
The mariner
Whose fate is near.
To others do
As I did once to you."

And it seemed to Hiarandi as if she commanded him. Moreover, as he listened, the storm roared louder. Then he seized his cloak, and cried to his thralls, "Up, and out with me to make a beacon!"

Though they dared not disobey, they grumbled,

and they got their cloaks slowly. For they saw slipping away from them the fine pickings from the wreck, which brought them warm clothes and handsome. Out they went with Hiarandi into the storm, and kindled a great fire at the edge of the cliff. And Rolf toiled too; but Asdis did best of all, for she brought out in a kettle great strips of whale's blubber, and flung them on the fire. Then the flames flared high and wide, as bright as day. And Rolf sprang to the edge of the cliffs and gazed upon the water. Then, pointing, he cried, "Look!"

Down below was a ship; its sail flapped in rags, and the crew were laboring mightily at the oars to save themselves, looking with dread at the white breakers and the looming rocks. Now in the strength of their fear they held the vessel where she was; and by the broad light of the fire every man of them was visible to the Cragness-dwellers. To Rolf that was a dreadful sight. But the bit of a sail was set, and men ran to the steering-oar to hold the vessel stiff; and behold, she moved forward, staggered past the rocks, made clearer water, and wore slowly out into the firth. Even the thralls shouted at the sight.

Then Hiarandi left one of the thralls to keep the fire, and went back to the hall with those others. There the carline still sat.

"So he is safe past the rocks?" she asked, yet speaking as if she knew.

"Aye, safe," answered Hiarandi.

"Now," said she, "thou hast brought thy evil fortune

on thyself, and it will be hard to avoid the extreme of it."

"I care not," answered Hiarandi, "even though I suffer for a good deed."

"Nevertheless," said the carline, "the future may be safe, though without riches, if thou wilt be guided by me. Wilt thou follow my redes?"

"No advices of thine do I follow," replied Hiarandi. "For methinks thou still servest the old gods, and canst work witchcraft. Speak no more of this matter in my house; and practise not thy sorcery before my eyes, for the law gives death as punishment."

"Now," answered the woman, "like a foolish man, thou rushest on thy fate. And I see clearly that thou art not he who was spoken of in the prophecy. Not a fortunate Soursop art thou."

"Since the slaying of Kol, who put the curse on all our stock," answered Hiarandi, "has but one of the Soursops prospered. How then should I be fortunate?"

"Two were to prosper," the woman replied. "And each was to put an end to the curse in his branch of thy race. Snorri the Priest is one of those two, as all men know. But thou art not the other; and I believe that thou art doomed to fail, even as thy father was."

"So I have long believed," said Hiarandi calmly.

Then the carline rose, and her eyes were strange, as if they saw beyond that upon which she looked. "More misfortune is coming than thou deemest," she said. "Outlawry. Mayhap even death. Be warned!"

"Thou art a heathen and a witch," said her master. "Be still!"

But she said: "I will not abide the curse. Hiarandi, I have worked long in thy house. Give me now my freedom and let me go."

"Thou hast long been free to go," he replied. "Take thy croaking to another man's board! But this little prophecy I give to thee, that no man will believe thine ill-speaking."

"No great foresight hast thou in that," she answered. "Never have I been believed." Then she drew on her cloak and hooded her face.

"Thou will not go in the storm?" asked Asdis.

"All times are alike," the woman said. "Heed thou this, Hiarandi. Beware the man who came in the ship thou didst save!"

"He is one," answered Hiarandi, "whom I fear not at all."

"Beware suits at law," said the carline again, and she turned to go.

"It needs no great wisdom to say that," retorted Hiarandi upon her. "But stay! I send not people from my door penniless. Nothing is owing from me to thee, yet I will give a piece of money."

"Soon," answered Thurid, "thou wilt need all thou hast." And she went out into the night.

II

Of the Soursops, and the Curse which Hung on Them

OF THOSE THINGS which had been said, Rolf heard all, yet he had not spoken. Now he drew near to his father, and said to him: "Explain to me, father, the things of which the woman spoke. What is the curse upon us, and can such a thing be true?"

Then Hiarandi answered: "Thou knowest we are of the Soursops, who got their name when they sopped with sour whey the fire which was kindled to burn them in their house. Now Gisli, the first of us, slew Kol, his wife's foster-father, for the sake of his sword Graysteel, and Kol laid the curse of misfortune on us. Slayings arose by means of that sword; there came the outlawing of Gisli, the grandson of the first Gisli, and death fell in most branches of the house. Fourteen years Gisli was outlaw, even as has been, to this year, Grettir the Strong, who is the great outlaw of our day. But Gisli was slain, and his brother, while his sister died. Son of that sister is Snorri the Priest, who alone of us has prospered; for though no slayings have ever

happened in our branch, unlucky are we all, as is plain to see."

"I have often wondered," said Rolf, "how it is that we live here in this great hall and have but us three and the servants to fill it. There are places for seven fires down the middle of the hall, yet we use but one. And all the benches were once used, since they are worn: seats for fifty men, and the women's seats besides."

"Once," said Hiarandi, "my father had so many on his farm that nightly the hall was full. But those serving-men are Einar's now, and all our riches have passed away to him. Yet this house is the finest in all these parts. I was at the building of it in my youth, and" (here he was made sure that the thrall was not listening) "I myself made the secret panels by which we can escape in case of burning. For since that burning so long ago, no Soursop builds himself a house in which men may trap him."

"But thou hast no enemies, father?" asked the lad.

"No enemies, I hope," answered Hiarandi, "but few friends, I am sure, since only Frodi the Smith, my mother's cousin, is of our kin; for I count not Snorri the Priest."

"But why not Snorri the Priest?" asked Rolf.

"My father," answered Hiarandi, "quarrelled with him and called him coward. For Snorri would not take up at arms a suit my father lost at law."

Then Rolf thought a while. All men knew of Snorri the Priest, who was no temple priest at all

but a priest of the law. For the title had come down from heathen times, when leaders had sway over all matters, both in religion and law, and to be priest was to be chieftain. But usage and the new religion changed that by degrees; so that to be priest now meant to be a giver of the law, with a seat at the Quarter Courts and at the Althing, the great yearly gathering to which from all Iceland men went to settle suits. And Snorri the Priest was well known as the richest man in Broadfirth dales, the shrewdest and wisest in all things worldly, and a master at the law.

"It would be well," said the lad, "to have Snorri on our side."

"It is better," said Asdis, "never to go to the law. Lawsuits and quarrels are bad things, and they bring a man's fortune to naught."

And Hiarandi added, "By law we have ever suffered."

Then Rolf was silent, and thought of what had been said: how the old woman had prophesied trouble at the law, and by what man that trouble should come. And as he thought upon the words she and his father had spoken, he thought that they had spoken with knowledge, though of different kinds: for while the woman prophesied vaguely, his father had seemed to know who the man should be.

"Father," asked Rolf, "knowest thou who the man is that came upon the ship?"

"I know," answered Hiarandi.

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"Father," asked Rolf, "knowest thou who the man is that came upon the ship?"

"I know," answered Hiarandi.

Asdis asked: "Who then is he?"

Hiarandi said: "Saw ye upon the ship, as it lay below us, the faces of any of the men?"

"Aye," answered they both, "for it was as clear as day."

"Saw ye then," asked Hiarandi, "one who stood by the mast, a tall man with a great beard?"

"I saw him," answered Rolf. "He stood and held by a rope and the mast, and I thought he should be the captain; but he gave no commands, nor did any man heed him, for all worked of themselves."

"Yet, as I guess," said Hiarandi, "the captain was he, and he was the man of whom the carline spoke."

"Who is he, then?" asked the boy.

"Listen," said Hiarandi, "and I will tell thee of one in my family of whom I have never yet spoken. There were two of us when I was a lad, brothers; and the other was named Kiartan. He was younger than I by a year, and different in all his ways; yet I have often thought that my father had not enough patience with him. For he sent him to bad companions rather than weaned him from them, and at last he drove him from the house altogether. Then Kiartan took to the sea—he was not bad, remember, but weak perhaps and foolish—took to the sea, and we saw him not for years. Once only he came back, out at elbow, and asked my father for money. Money he got, but gave the promise to ask nothing from the inheritance; and this was handselled before witnesses, my father giving much, the rest to come to me. Then Kiartan went

VEMUND WAS READY to return; he bore no shield nor armor; he threw down his bow, and shouted that this should be between whatever weapons each man chose. Then with sword in hand he began to walk to the knoll. Rolf took an arrow from his quiver and laid it on the string.

When Vemund was nearer, Rolf drew the bow; no bow had ever drawn harder, yet none had been so lively in his hand. The arrow sped; Vemund turned not aside, but when the shaft struck on his breast the wood flew to splinters, and the point fell down. All the Orkneymen cried out in fear, but the baresarks shouted. Rolf took a second arrow and waited a while.

Then he shot again, and the arrow struck Vemund on the throat; it turned aside, and flew sliddering away. Some of the Orkneymen withdrew to the door of the church, crying that they should be let in. But the outlaws began to come forward.

Then Rolf drew one of those arrows from the ground, and wiped the point, and made ready. . . .

After Hiarandi is unjustly slain, his sixteen-year-old son Rolf is made outlaw by the same murderous neighbors. Rolf flees Iceland with his faithful cousin Frodi, only to be enslaved in the Orkneys by proud Grani. However, when the marauding baresarks arrive, master and slave alike must fight for their lives—and Rolf is the only man who can string the mighty Viking bow.

Allen French's tale of Iceland, told in the classic saga form, is an exciting story of Christian versus pagan values, forgiveness versus pride. The way Rolf comes to terms with his enemies in the face of injustice creates a suspenseful, thought-provoking book difficult to put down.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

The Red Keep

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