

Heroes of Iceland

Adapted from Dasent's Translation of
"The Story of Burnt Njal," the
Great Icelandic Saga

With a new Preface, Introduction, and Notes
by Allen French

Illustrated by E. W. D. Hamilton

Also by Allen French

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Print book published by
Little, Brown, and Company, 1931

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297 pages in the print book edition

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

To F. J. M., Jr.

Preface

To the Story of Burnt Njal

This book contains a story of such interest and beauty that, after an existence of more than forty years in its English dress, it is here presented in an abridged form with full confidence in both its charm and its value.

At the time when Harold Fair-hair gained rule over all Norway, those who fled from his enmity took refuge in an isle in the sea till then unpeopled and little known. They called it Iceland, lest a better name should tempt pursuit; there they built up a commonwealth which long remained "the only absolutely free republic in the world." Through successive generations the Icelanders kept in touch with their brethren across the sea, whose history and whose legends they eventually wrote. That history and those legends have been used a thousand times in later song and story, until they are familiar to us all. But at the same time, during their long winters, the Icelanders wrote the tales of their own early times, which are still too little known. This book contains the greatest of them, a saga or story which is to be compared, in interest and beauty, with the great epics of the earlier races.

Men have told stories since the beginning of language, and have written them since the invention of writing. Out of this immense number of tales time has selected a very few which are so perfect as to be considered great. Each of them tells of the distant past of some race or nation, and so expresses the heroic period of the youth of the world. And while, from age to age, the world renewed its youth through the uprising of some new race, one of these great stories would rise into life.

Thus the Greeks produced their Iliad and Odyssey. After centuries the Romans brought forth their tale of the founding of their city, the book of the *Æneid*. The Germans, in a later time, made the Niebelungen Lied, the Song of the Niblungs; and the French wrote the cycle of stories about Charlemagne and his Peers, the greatest of whom was Roland, just as the greatest of the poems was the Song of Roland. And from the early English comes the great story of King Arthur and the Round Table. Each of these

nations made an imperishable book concerning its own national heroes.

If now we seek to add to these great stories yet another, it is proper that we should give our reasons. What are the main characteristics of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Nibelungen Lied*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Morte Darthur*, and does our saga equal them? We find it required that a great story shall have majesty of theme, heroic grandeur in the personages, a great catastrophe, unity of conception and action, and "poetic justice." The truly great story should also display "what is highest in human nature—valor, faith, tenderness, devotion to creed and country," and besides all this should have beauty and power of expression. Such qualities are almost too much to expect to find together in any book: does our *Story of Burnt Njal* have them?

Have we here, in other words, such a theme as the great struggle before the walls of Troy, as the wanderings of Ulysses or Æneas, of the battles of the knights of King Arthur? Have we such characters as Achilles and Nestor, Hagen, Lancelot, Roland, Arthur himself? Is our subject noble; have we a great and tragic climax, is the thread of the tale preserved, and are our moral ideals satisfied? Finally, is the language adequate to its subject? Perhaps our story may not meet every one of these severe tests, but on the whole we answer: Yes.

Certain allowances must be made for differences in the origin of the saga from that of the old epics. The great stories of the continental nations were written long after the events which they describe took place. Homer wrote centuries after the Trojan war, Vergil about seven hundred years after the beginning of Rome. Malory, again, lived almost a thousand years after the actual King Arthur. In the cases of the *Nibelungen Lied* and the *Song of Roland*, while much shorter periods elapsed, there yet was enough space for most of the precise happenings to have been blurred and magnified, in the minds of men, into far finer and grander events. Roland, so far as history reveals him to us, was but a semi-civilized commander under Charlemagne. How much more impressive is he in the poem! Achilles does not appear in history at all; Arthur and his knights are scarcely less definite persons. Caxton, indeed, says of these last: "In the castle of Dover ye may see Gawaine's scull; at Winchester the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword

and many other things. Then all these things considered, there can no man reasonably gainsay that there was a king of this land named Arthur." Yet history knows him only as a British chieftain. So while there was some true foundation for every one of these great books, they contain stories of persons who never lived, and of events which never happened. The localities are either forgotten or but vaguely described. Heroes and myths arose out of small beginnings, and were glorified in later poetry.

Far different is it with our saga. It tells, after the lapse of little more than a century, of the doings of men who actually lived, and speaks of places which were still well known in Iceland. The case is the same with all the Icelandic sagas. The hollow where Kari rested after the Burning, the sunken road by Gunnar's house, the lava road built by the baresarks of Slaying Stir, the Great Rift at the Thingvalla—these were all daily seen and daily used. Men who had seen Njal or known Snorri the Priest lived almost until the time of the writing of their stories, or at least were not so recently dead that their words could not be quoted. Local tradition was very reliable; and when authorities differed as to the meadow where Thorbiorn Oxmain was slain, the question was settled by finding the very spear-head which Grettir cast. As to the events themselves, each was gossiped about as it occurred; and when the tragedy was complete its tale was repeated year after year, whether at firesides or at public gatherings, until at last arose the geniuses who wrote the sagas down.

As for the accuracy of our saga, let us remember that it was considered an evil deed to relate untruths. Even the ruffian Hrapp manfully acknowledged his murders, and no one blamed Karl for cutting short with his sword the false tale of the Burning. The many sagas help to corroborate each other, so that dates can be set with considerable accuracy. It is interesting, too, to read such personal descriptions as those of Gunnar and Skarphedinn; they are too individual not to be based on truth. Of the general reliability of the Icelandic sagas, Dasent says: "Much passes for history in other lands on far slighter grounds, and many a story in Thucydides or Tacitus, or even in Clarendon or Hume, is believed on evidence not one-tenth part so trustworthy as that which supports the narratives of these Icelandic story-tellers."

There is another great difference between epics and our saga. The supernatural and the divine figure prominently in the continen-

tal stories. In the ancient books Neptune and Thetis guarded Achilles, Venus protected Æneas, and the gods even quarrelled over the favoritism shown to mortals. How easy to be a hero when a god gives strength, another provides armor, and a third guides the weapons on their way! We remember the enchanted armor of the knights of Charlemagne, the miraculous weapon of Arthur himself, the seven men's strength of Gawaine, the giants, the dragons, the enchanters, the wholly impossible (though not improbable!) achievements of heroes struggling against tremendous obstacles. This is all romantic and delightful, to be read, and re-read, and remembered so long as we have the love of life.

Compared with these, the simplicity of the present saga is bare, yet this very simplicity gives strength. The most magical weapon is Gunnar's bill, which rang before its slayings. The most unnatural persons are the baresark who dared not tread the Christian's fire, and the wizards who could make no head against the missionary's zeal. Yet these are minor characters; and as for the bill, its power was in the arm of the man who wielded it. The very second-sight of Njal, uncanny as it is, in no way influences the course of the story. The saga depends for its interest upon truly human men and women, and upon very natural conditions.

These differences may be considerable, though not every one will count them against the saga. When we come to characters, the correspondence begins to be close. Generally speaking, our saga is nearest to the *Odyssey* in its setting. For we have no kings and men of power, no armies to slay and be slain, no great territories for the stage. The action takes place upon an island, among such farming people as the noble swineherd Eumæus. But greater than he are the heroes of our tale. Gunnar is an Achilles who depends upon himself, who has no fatal pride, who rules his temper and his tongue, and meets his fate without complaint. Njal is a Nestor who neither prattles nor boasts. With these are other noble figures, man for man equal with the heroes of the Trojan war, whether in personal courage or greatness of soul—Skarphedinn, Karl, even Flosi himself. The villain Mord, the spiteful Skamkell, the vindictive Thorgeir, form their opposites. We see, also, heroic women, Bergthora and Hildigunna, contrasted with the beautiful but ignoble Hallgerda. Other figures crowd the scene: the comic pair, Bjorn and his wife; the brothers Hauskuld and Hrut, honest even with

their foe; Hall of the Side, nobly mastering his sorrow for his son. There is scarcely a human motive that is not displayed, whether it be pride, affection, love, hate, revenge, spite, avarice, friendship, ambition. There is, again, scarcely a human characteristic that is not sketched here or there—Skarphedinn's boldness, Hogni's caution, Gunnar's perfect manliness, Njal's superhuman wisdom, Hauskuld's Christian forgiveness. Little side-stories are glimpsed: we see the great chiefs Gudmund and Snorri, each of whom has his own saga, but who appear here, however briefly, in their true characters of proud leader and crafty politician.

The story, like that of most epics, is tragic, and supplies in the Burning the "grand catastrophe" which the definition requires. The plot is double, describing in the first half the life and death of the hero Gunnar, in the second the fortunes of Njal's family and the vengeance taken for them. Yet unity of action is preserved, for while the numerous characters and incidents give constantly shifting interest, the main lines of the narrative are skilfully maintained, and the story as a whole is so complete that, stripped of the genealogies which earlier ages demanded, the action of the book is continuous and of great interest.

As for the idea of justice, it dominates the book. Nowhere is there a better picture of the growth of law and its application in an age when revenge was still regarded as a virtue. "With law," said Njal, "shall our land be built up and settled, and with lawlessness wasted and spoiled." Throughout the book the law is seen as a rising power against turbulence; justice is meted out to every one according to his due; "Kari's stern revenge" is followed out and finished, until at the end of the book we see the atonement of foes.

Finally as to the language of the story. The style is bare. The similes and explanations of Homer are not found here, nor even so little of description as there is in the *Morte Darthur*. One reason for this is familiarity of the auditor with the scene of the story, and with the method of living. All Icelandic halls and housekeepings were alike, therefore when it is told that Njal lived at Bergthor-sknull, or Gunnar at Lithend, enough has been said: there is no need to speak of pillars or porches, utensils, or the details of daily life, except for the purpose of making clear some important action, such as the tearing away of Gunnar's roof. Those of the hearers

who had been at Bergthorsknoll or Lithend recalled the places at once; those who had not been there could easily imagine either of them—the long hall with the thatched roof, the cluster of out-buildings, and the semi-fortified yard; while indoors were the fires along the length of the hall, the seats parallel with them, and across the end the dais.

Even upon the actions of daily life the saga spends little time. A ship is beached without Homer's descriptive formula (practically the same in all cases); rites and ceremonies are briefly passed by; and instead of the long speeches to guests, visitors are "welcomed" or "say farewell."

It would appear as if the Norsemen were people of few words. They were little given to the reminiscences which, pages long, interrupt the action of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; the Icelanders were not addicted to the "battle of violent words"; they boasted very little and even explained themselves seldom. Thus the sagas lack the poetic passages of Homer, or the beauty of such scenes as that in the *Morte Darthur*, where Palamides accounts to Tristram for his conduct toward Isoud. It is probably true that a little of description or explanation, if added to the saga, would make the picture of Icelandic life far more attractive and complete. And yet, if one is so familiar with the story as to be able to read between the lines, motives become clear, and the terse phrases give wonderful vividness to the scenes in that far-off time and place.

It is not explained, for instance, whether, when Gunnar's horse tripped on the way to the ship, he considered that an evil omen, and therefore turned back to meet his fate. And again, the saga does not give the reason of Skamkell's mean plot and of Gunnar's ire at his summons into court; and yet it is plain that Gunnar is so angry because thus is published his wife's theft, so that all Iceland gossips of a deed for which he had done his best to atone. Hallgerda's reason for her theft, Gunnar's scorn in accepting Otkell's offer to sell the thrall, and the various motives in speaking or acting—these are barely indicated, if at all. We hear occasionally of an action done "in great wrath," of Thiostolf's "spiteful grin," or Skarphedinn's "scornful smile"; but usually the bare action, the exact words are given and no more. There may be faults to such a style, but it certainly has this advantage, that in the absence of any attempt at "fine writing" it never offends good taste.

And what an impression of life we get from it! In the passage where Gunnar goes down into his field, lays aside his axe and cloak, "and so he sows the corn a while"—or again, when starting alone to the first of his great fights Gunnar "drives the butt of his bill into the earth, and throws himself into the saddle, and rides away"—or when in the later fight, as the two brothers rush at him at once, "Gunnar was standing with his body swayed a little to one side, and he made a sweep with his sword"—or in that plain, straightforward, vigorous passage, too long to quote, where Thorhall, speechless with anger at the news that is brought him, clutches his spear, cuts the boil from his foot, and walks "unhaling" to the court, where he abruptly begins the great battle—how perfect are these pictures, brief and fleeting though they are, of the life and action of those days! And for those swift touches of description, which prove that Icelanders were not insensible to the beauty of their land, read of Skarphedinn and Hogni at Gunnar's cairn in the night, when "the moon and stars were clear and bright, but every now and then the clouds drove over them"; or, at Thrain Sigfus' son's slaying, read of the river with its long ice-banks, the tongue of ice bridging the stream, the colors of the men's clothes, the shields gleaming at a distance, remembering always that "there was sunshine that day and bright weather."

Yet in spite of such passages, it must be admitted that the saga is very simple in its style. It is like a drama, while most of the epics are poems. The *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Æneid*, the *Nibelungen Lied*, and the *Song of Roland* are actually in metre; while the *Morte Darthur*, though lacking in external beauty, rises in many places to the dignity of poetry. Compared with them our saga is like a play of the modern kind, in which the speeches are brief and pithy and the stage directions few. Yet its force is undeniable.

If, then, with such characteristics the *Story of Burnt Njal* cannot be classed among the great tales, its many admirers may at least claim that the margin of difference is very narrow. In dignity, in variety, in interest, in force, and in its revelation of primitive human conditions and emotions, it is remarkable. Its figures are truly heroic, and its tragic power not to be denied.

The value of the saga to a modern reader is threefold. In the first place it tells a good story. The tale stirs the blood; it shows us people who are of perpetual interest, and who become our intimates—

friends in whose company we easily forget ourselves. The claim has not been idly made that "some of the best fighting in literature is to be found between its covers." Once we have tasted the flavor of the story, it tempts us on to the end; it lingers with us afterward, and we return to it periodically. It is individual, attractive, stirring. Such a book scarcely needs further excuse for existence.

Yet we offer the two remaining reasons. Our next is that the book shows us our part-ancestor, the Norseman, as he was in his natural surroundings. We see his command of the sea, his habits on the land, his religion, both the old and the new, and his customs and laws. Because he was what he was, we are to-day, in part, what we are: for he represents, with slight differences, all the old nations of Teutonic stock, and in this picture of him the modern Scandinavian, Englishman, German, and native-born American can see the strength of the root from which they spring.

Finally we learn his ideals, and here again we note a difference between the saga and the other great stories. The saga sets no premium on pride, on possessions, on greatness, scarcely upon achievements. What is perhaps more remarkable, it does not glorify bloodshed. "Am I less bold and brisk than other men," says Gunnar, "because I think more of killing men than they?" But the right in any quarrel is always clearly shown, and the book does present, with all possible power, the virtues of the Norseman. Of these we have outgrown one: the virtue, which was also the duty, of revenge. Yet this, an ideal in all barbaric times, the saga shows to be weakening before the combined forces of Christianity and law, and few passages in the book are more moving than Hall of the Side's words after the slaying of his son, the hope of his house. "I will do this for the sake of an atonement—I will put no price on my son, and yet will come forward and grant both pledges and peace to those who are my adversaries." Revenge, then, is already dying, but the other manly virtues stand out in full strength: honesty, hospitality, friendship, the habit of work, love of family, respect for women, and above all, courage, whether moral fearlessness or personal bravery. Courage is the great virtue of the men of our race,—not the courage of the Greek, to whom tears and flight are no disgrace, but the steadfastness in every stress of men dependent on themselves. This is the great point of superiority of all the northern epics over the southern, for the men of the Iliad,

Odyssey, and Æneid fall far short of the heroic standard of the Teutonic races. And among the northern epics (while nothing can surpass the Niebelungen Lied with its almost too terrible pictures of bloodshed) the Njal's saga must always take a high place for its picture of bold fighters. The lessons thus to be drawn from its pages, in the gentler as well as in the sterner virtues, and in the belief in the value of manliness and the ultimate triumph of right, are such as no generation and no nation can afford to pass by.

ALLEN FRENCH
Concord, Massachusetts,
March, 1905.

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Introduction

The island of Iceland lies in the North Atlantic Ocean, about 600 miles from the coast of Norway, 500 from Scotland, and 250 miles from Greenland. Its length is 300 miles, its area less than 40,000 square miles, and its whole character is rocky, barren, and forbidding. All consideration of Iceland and its people must be influenced by the geographical character of the island—its high mountains, its volcanoes, and its glaciers, mostly in the center of the island, with the comparatively narrow strip of arable land along the coast. Although the period of greatest volcanic activity (rendering uninhabitable considerable areas which in the time of the sagas were fruitful) is subsequent to the heroic age of the land, Iceland was at all times a country of few harbors and dangerous coasts, with difficult land communications. The hills were at best but pastures for sheep; in the short summer the grass and other crops were very scant and ill-developed; at no time have such crops as wheat or barley been profitable, and at present not more than one quarter of the total land-surface is fruitful. Yet it was to Iceland that the Norsemen turned from oppression at home, and it was there that they conveyed their families and goods, landing with their flat-bottomed craft wherever there was a beach instead of a cliff, fearlessly venturing forth again for fishing or trade.

Iceland, practically uninhabited before the coming of the Norsemen, was settled by them in the year 874 A.D. and the following years, so great a flood of immigrants coming that the first sixty years showed a population of 50,000 souls, while almost a thousand years more (to 1890) did not increase that number beyond 71,000. The tales and customs of the "land-take" are of interest as showing the early patriarchal character of the people; the later comers either took allotments from the earlier, or bought land, or in rare cases fought for it. It was not long before a complete new common-wealth was set up, for in scarcely more than half a century the pressure of necessity brought about the establishment of a code of laws throughout the island, with a judicial and social system in fair working order. The government was a curiously democratic aristocracy without a central head, the administration was semi-religious and local, the men of influence being heads of

prominent families, ruling each over his lesser neighbors, who were more than half dependent upon him, although in theory free to seek protection elsewhere. Each chieftain had his "Thing" (pronounced *ting*) or meeting, to which he called the neighbors, from time to time, for religious or judicial purposes. The chieftain was a priest by virtue of owning the temple of meeting, where he officiated at sacrifices and ceremonies, but where he also dealt out justice, with the partial assistance of juries and arbitrators. With the growth of population came disputes between members of adjoining Things and the need of a means of adjusting them; a common code of laws was also needed. The result was the establishment of a yearly Thing, or Althing, and of a regulated number of lesser Things throughout the island.

The Althing met in midsummer at the Thingvalla, that wonderful volcanic valley, conveniently situated for the whole population. The steep cliffs on the western side were famous as the "Great Rift." The River Axewater supplied the prime necessity of a great gathering of people, and along its banks were built the booths or shelters for those who attended the Althing. In the center of the valley was the Hill of Laws, where sat the priests to make changes in the law; round about were the open spaces for holding the courts. In 930 the general code was accepted, and there was elected a Speaker of the Law, who, at the opening of each Althing, was to recite the law aloud, and to whom questions of the law were referred. The simple system thus established lasted for more than thirty years.

In 962 occurred the great crime of the burning of Blundkettle (described in the Hen-Thorir's saga, translated in Morris and Magnusson's Saga Library, vol. I), which so stirred up local antagonisms that justice for the crime was impossible at a local Thing. In consequence, a change was made: the Things were grouped into Quarters of the Island, each Quarter having its court at the Althing, having also three districts, each of which had its Spring Thing, with three lesser local Things. Thus each Quarter had nine local Things, which gathered yearly into three Spring Things, and met all together once a year at the Quarter Court at the Althing. Thus were established thirty-six Things throughout the island, each of which was subordinate to the greater central power. The number of the Priests, and their powers, became permanently limited, their

religious character largely disappeared, and a remedy was provided for any local outbreak of lawlessness. At the same time the Court of Laws became a non-elective Parliament, in which sat the thirty-six priests to make or amend the laws, and to appoint the judges in the courts.

So, all but for one final change, the Icelandic system of government was perfected, and we see it as an (in many ways) ideally circumstanced aristocracy, without external foes, and consequently without the need of an army or even of taxes, the priests and judges being paid chiefly out of the fines for offences, justice being assured to all by the system already described, and by a well-safeguarded jury system. The final step in the perfection of the judiciary is described in our saga, where we see the establishment of a Fifth Court or Court of Appeals, a necessity in all highly developed civilizations, which was finally suggested by Njal and accepted by the Lawman and the Court of Laws.

Icelandic culture developed in its natural course, after the land was at internal peace. From the first the people had been poetical, given to versifying; many warriors celebrated their own deeds, professional skalds, or minstrels, arising to sing of the remainder. Songs and family traditions were woven together and carefully handed down from father to son, being also recited publicly from time to time. At length came the time when men took to writing down the tales or sagas. The Landnama-Book and the Islendinga-Book are the two great chronicles of the settlement of the country, giving thousands of names and mentioning almost as many places, and preserving among the dry data interesting outlines of stories. Next were written the narratives of the deeds of heroes. The Gisli saga, the saga of Viga-Glum, the Erbyggia saga, the tale of the Heath-Slayings; the smaller stories of Howard the Halt, Hen-Thorir, and the Banded Men; the longest and greatest of all, the Njal's saga; besides these the saga of Grettir the Strong—these are the chief Icelandic sagas which have been translated, and the most interesting of them all. Practically all of them were written down before the year 1200.

Of the Njal's saga all the existing manuscripts are of a later time. There is no record of the author; all that can be surmised of him is that he was probably a lawyer. But his literary skill and genius are undeniable, and we have his masterpiece in a practically

complete form. Long neglected in favor of merely romantic tales or theological fables, it at length made its way into modern notice, and was finally translated by Sir George Webbe Dasent, being published by him in the year 1861.

Unfortunately, the special Icelandic genius for genealogy has so overlaid the story with what the modern reader considers non-essentials that in the original translation the thread of the narrative is easily lost. At the same time many of these family accounts are inserted without system, pages away from the first real appearance of their characters in the story. It must be admitted that the genealogies are of great historic value, and that the instinct for their preservation is a true one. There is really a curious fascination in the subject: the present writer found himself constructing genealogical tables, very carefully comparing all the authorities at his disposal, and wishing that Dasent, with his so much greater facilities, had done the same earlier. Statements in Lehmann and Carolsfeld lead to the supposition that Dasent spared the general reader some of the wealth of this detail, but undoubtedly there still is in his English version far too much of it. It is to this fact, rather than from any want of merit or interest in the tale, that the public's lack of attention is due. As for the translation itself, it is admirable, and once a reader is well started in the book the story and the style will hold him to the end. It is the great modern tyrant, Time, that has prevented the popularity of the saga. In full conviction of the abiding power of the tale, this abridged edition has been prepared, hoping to give fresh life to a story which has lasted for nine hundred years.

Clearness of meaning and continuity of narrative have been the sole aims. Only so much of genealogy has been retained as is of direct interest. Irrelevant episodes (Hrut's journey abroad; the death of Lyting and his brothers; Brian's Battle), as well as many minor incidents, have been omitted; many of the verses (mostly regarded as spurious) have been cut out; and little besides the main narrative has been retained. Most of the accounts of trials, and much of the legal phrasing in the great suit for the Burning, have also been omitted. For all these things the reader is referred to the full translation, which exists in two editions: the original in two volumes, Edmonston and Douglas, Edinburgh, 1861; and a one-volume edition, the notes considerably abridged, London and New York, 1900. It is be-

lieved that the present edition contains everything of real interest, in a story without halt, or repetition, or irrelevancy.

A few words must be said upon the circumstances and civilization in which the events of the saga occurred. A fearless, hard-working, full-blooded race, the Icelanders were not more violent, nor more superstitious, than any other primitive people. Out of the conditions of their life grew the habits and religion which maintained them in the face of all dangers, and which we can but respect, although they are now out-grown. Living in a severe climate, on a land which could not supply even the wood of which their houses were built; dependent on their livestock, and yet with such a scant supply of hay that at times some of their herds must be slaughtered before winter; looking to the sea both for food and for communication with the rest of the world: it is no wonder that the Icelanders were hardy and self-reliant above others of their race. Wherever they went they took high rank. Hrut, Gunnar, Thrain, Njal's sons, and Flosi received great honor at the courts of kings and earls, and we see Kolskegg the captain of the Varangians at Constantinople. The Icelanders discovered Greenland and America, and were the boldest mariners of all times up to theirs.

Yet they were little advanced beyond the culture of their day. They had no luxuries, and few were rich; even such men as Gunnar and Njal's sons worked in their fields or mended their own weapons. Their home-life and customs were simple in the extreme, and it is because the Njal's saga so perfectly reveals the people as they were that it interests us so much. An understanding of their system of law, already described, is a help in the comprehension of the book; but still deeper than their surface customs of law and justice lies the great essential fact of family property in an individual's life.

A father owned his son; a cousin had interest in a cousin's life; even a distant relative, were he only next of kin, had a legal claim for damages for a man's slaying, and was bound to insist upon his right. This is a stage of civilization which most nations have passed through, but no epics show the stage so clearly as the Icelandic sagas. A wise custom required not revenge, but money payment, for a man's life; and payment once made, revenge was uncalled for. Thus Hauskuld, after the slaying of his father, answers Njal, the father of the slayers: "We need not keep his death in mind, when

an atonement has been made for it, and a full price paid for him." It was only in the extreme bitterness of personal feeling that revenge was sought to the exclusion of payment, as when Flosi, with the money for his nephew's death heaped before him, but with his niece's words burning in his mind, presses on to the insult and breach of atonement that bring about the great tragedy of the book. But, in general, all law and all personal endeavor were directed to bringing about peace, a third powerful motive to which was added by the introduction of Christianity.

The Icelandic system of law and atonement being understood, it remains to be said that punishments were first fines and second banishments; while an evil-doer had this to consider, that a refusal to accept his sentence meant danger to either the property or the lives of his relatives, who usually, in a sense, were bound for his good behavior, and in the case of his flight after a manslaughter were the visible objects upon which to wreak revenge. The strong family feeling of all primitive peoples was thus used for the public good.

A few words are necessary for the understanding of the home and social life of the Icelanders. Each man of property lived in his great hall, a structure with few spaces for privacy (such as the locked beds) and with its great room for general living, where men sat on the benches according to rank, and where warmth was gained and food was cooked at fires down the middle of the hall. Here were held the frequent feasts, and here all the formal life of a patriarchal family was carried on. Some halls had smaller rooms, or sitting rooms, or separate kitchens; all had grouped around them the outhouses, storehouses, and barns, which, in a northern climate, must be conveniently placed. A wall usually enclosed the whole, making a yard of the exact use and convenience of the Yankee barnyard. It was Njal's abandonment of this wall, as a means of defence, which gave to the Burners their great security at the attack upon his house.

The Icelanders had thralls, or slaves; paid servants; and family dependents. The women were notable housewives, with as much personal freedom (even extending to the right of divorce) as is enjoyed anywhere to-day, save that the father claimed property in his daughter as well as in his son; her marriage was used to cement family alliances, and on the displeasure of a father-in-law a wife

might be recalled from her husband's home, a right—as we see in our saga—more than once threatened but seldom enforced, for the son-in-law of such a man as Gudmund the Powerful, for instance, was seldom willing to brave the anger of the father of his wife.

Besides all this, let it be remembered that the Icelanders were an active people, loving the open air, fond of the sea, fearless in battle, and given to telling the truth. They believed that a man who died bravely in fight went to Valhalla, the Norseman's heaven; they were no respecters of persons, but at the root of all their customs, almost as deep as their natural passions and of equal importance with their religion and superstitions, lay their respect for right and justice. These things being borne in mind, no further explanation is needed of the social conditions surrounding the events of the greatest of all Icelandic sagas.

As to the locality, the scene of the story is in the south of Iceland, with Njal's house about central between Hauskuld's house by Broadfirth, where the story opens, and Flosi's at Swinefell, where it ends. After the first few scenes near Broadfirth the story shifts to the neighborhood of Bergthorsknoll, Njal's home, from which it seldom wanders far. The country here is all cut up by rivers and streams. Gunnar of Lithend lived northeast of Njal across the Markfleet, and convenient to him were Kirkby and Threecorner and Sandgil, the homes of the neighbors with whom he fell into feud; also near at hand was Hof, the home of Mord, the relative who hated Gunnar so well. Nearby on Gritwater lived Thrain, Gunnar's relative, whom the sons of Njal slew; and not far away lived Thrain's brothers, the sons of Sigfus, whose dwellings are unnamed. Also central near Njal lived Hauskuld, Thrain's son, at Ossaby. Northwest across two rivers lived Asgrim at Tongue; southerly from him lived Gizur the White at Mossfell; and a fair journey west of Asgrim was the Thingfield, the scene of all the suits at law. Going east from Njal's house, and crossing Markfleet, one came to the house of Runolf of the Dale, and further up the river to the dwelling of Kettle of the Mark; while still further up Markfleet was Midmark in Thorsmark, where lived Bjorn, who befriended Kari. But following the coast road east from Njal's one came to Holt, the dwelling of Thorgeir Craggeir and his brothers, Njal's cousins. Going farther, around Portland Head, the southernmost point of Iceland, and then taking the road inland, one

came to the Side, where Hall of the Side lived. Following this road on, and joining the coast road again, one comes at last to Swinefell (above Ingolf's Head), the dwelling of Flosi. All these are shown on the present map. So accurately has Iceland preserved its traditions that no essential point of knowledge is missing, and we are able, as in no other epic, to gain an excellent understanding of the locality.

Note on the Pronunciation of Names

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

a—has the sound of a in far—ä
au—has the sound of ou in house
e—has the sound of e in fed—e
ei—has the sound of i in pine—ī
ie—has the sound of e in mete—ē
i —has the sound of e in mete—ē
o — has the sound of o in note—ō
u —has the sound of u in pull—u
w—has the sound of v, except in such words as are evidently English combinations, as Axewater, Swinefell. Th has invariably the sound of T. Thor is pronounced Tor.
g is always hard, as in good, and never has the sound of j. j becomes a semi-silent y, not lengthening the word.

Examples

Njal is pronounced Nyäl, a word of one syllable.
Bjorn—Byörn, a word of one syllable.
Bjarni—Byärn-ē, a word of two syllables.
Thorgeir—Tör-gīr.
Hauskuld—House-kuld.
Gudmund—Gud-mund.
Kari—Kär-ē.
Flosi—Flō-sē.
Gunnar—Gun-när.
Helgi—Helg-ē.
Skarphedinn —Skärp-hed-inn.
Thorwalld —Tör-väld.

Table of Dates

A.D.

874. First settling in Iceland.

929. Althing established and code of laws accepted.

930–35. Njal born.

c.945. Gunnar of Lithend born.

965. Hrut marries Unna.

970–71. Gunnar regains Unna's dowry.

972–4. Gunnar is abroad.

974. Gunnar marries Hallgerda.

975. The slaying of Swart.

976. The slaying of Kol.

977. The slaying of Atli.

978. The slaying of Brynjolf the Unruly.

979. The slaying of Thord, and of Sigmund the White.

983. Hallgerda steals from Otkell.

985. Otkell rides over Gunnar. Slaying of Otkell.

986. The slaying of Hjort and fourteen men.

989. Slaying of Thorgeir, Otkell's son. Banishment of Gunnar. Helgi and Grim, Njal's sons, also Thrain, Sigfus' son, go abroad.

990. Gunnar slain at Lithend.

992. Thrain returns to Iceland with Hrapp.

994. Njal's sons return with Kari.

996. Slaying of Thrain.

998-1000. The Change of Faith.

1003 or 1004. Fifth Court established. Hauskuld, Priest of Whiteness, married.

1009. Mord's backbiting begins.

1011. Hauskuld, Priest of Whiteness, slain. Suit at the Althing comes to naught. Njal's Burning.

1012. Suit for the Burning and Battle at the Althing. Kari and Thorgeir Craggeir seek revenge.

1013. Flosi and the Burners go abroad. Kari follows and slays Gunnar Lambi's son.

1014. Brian's Battle in Ireland. Kari slays Kol. Flosi goes to Rome.

1016. Flosi goes to Iceland. Kari goes to Rome. His wife dies in Iceland.

1017. Kari returns to Iceland, is reconciled with Flosi, and marries Hildigunna Hauskuld's widow.

1. Of Gunnar of Lithend

THERE lived in Iceland two half-brothers, Hauskuld and Hrut, and they dwelt in Laxriverdale. Hrut was handsome, tall, and strong, well skilled in arms and mild of temper; he was one of the wisest of men,—stern toward his foes, but a good counsellor on great matters.

It happened once that Hauskuld bade his friends to a feast, and his brother Hrut was there, and sat next him.¹ Hauskuld had a daughter named Hallgerda, who was playing on the floor with some other girls. She was fair of face and tall of growth, and her hair was as soft as silk; it was so long, too, that it came down to her waist. Hauskuld called out to her: “Come hither to me, daughter.” So she went up to him, and he took her by the chin and kissed her, and she went again to her play.

Then Hauskuld said to Hrut: “What dost thou think of this maiden? Is she not fair? Hrut held his peace. Hauskuld asked a second time, and then Hrut answered: “Fair enough is the maid, and many will smart for it, but this I know not, whence thief’s eyes have come into our race.” Then Hauskuld was wroth, and for a time the brothers saw little of each other, but afterwards they were friends again.

Now Hrut took a wife from the east, Unna the daughter of Fiddle Mord, but because of a spell that was laid upon Hrut she was unhappy with him, and separated herself from him and went back to her father. Mord was a great lawyer, but when he sued Hrut for his daughter’s dower, then Hrut challenged the old man to fight for it, and Mord gave up the suit, for Hrut was a famous swordsman.

When Mord died his wealth came to Unna; she was so lavish and unthrifty that at last she had little left. She thought of her dower, and for aid in getting it back she turned to the best of her kinsmen. He was Gunnar of Lithend.

Gunnar was a tall man in growth, and a strong man,—best skilled in arms of all men. He could cut or thrust or shoot as well with his left as with his right hand, and he smote so swiftly with his sword that three seemed to flash through the air at once. He was the best shot with the bow, and never missed his mark. He could leap more than his own height with all his war-gear, and as

far backwards as forwards. He could swim like a seal, and there was no game in which it was any good for anyone to strive with him, and so it has been said that no man was his match. He was handsome of feature and fair-skinned. His nose was straight, and a little turned up at the end. He was blue-eyed, and bright-eyed, and, ruddy cheeked; his hair was thick and of good hue, hanging down in comely curls. The most courteous of men was he, of sturdy frame and strong will, bountiful and gentle, a fast friend, but slow at first to give his trust.

Unna told Gunnar her need, and said that he was the only one of her kinsmen with the daring to undertake the suit, for Hrut must be summoned² in his own house.

“I have courage enough,” said Gunnar, “but I do not know how to begin the suit.”

“Well!” she answered, “go and see Njal of Bergthorskoll; he will give thee advice.” So Gunnar undertook her cause, and rode to see Njal.

Njal dwelt at Bergthorskoll; he was wealthy in goods and handsome of face, but no beard grew on his chin. He was so great a lawyer that his match was not to be found; wise too he was, and foreknowing and foresighted. Of good counsel, and ready to give it, and all that he advised men was sure to be the best for them to do. Gentle and generous, he unravelled every man’s knotty points who came to see him about them.

Njal said he would give Gunnar his help. “And the end will be good if thou breakest none of the rules I lay down; if thou dost, thy life is in danger.”

“I will break none of them,” said Gunnar.

Then Njal held his peace for a little while, and after that he spoke as follows:

“Thou shalt ride from home with two men at thy back, and each of you must have two horses, one fat and the other lean; ye shall load the fat ones with hardware and smith’s work. Over thy good clothes³ thou shalt wear a cheap russet kirtle, and over that a great rough cloak. Thou shalt ride to the west, and when ye come into the Broadfirth dales, mind and slouch thy hat well over thy brows. Then men will ask who is this tall man, and thy mates shall say, ‘Here is Huckster Hedinn the Big, with smith’s work for sale.’ This Hedinn is ill-tempered and a boaster; very often he snatches

back his wares, and flies at men if everything is not done as he wishes. Be sure often to break off thy bargains, so that it shall be noised abroad that Huckster Hedinn is the worst of men to deal with. So thou shalt ride till thou comest to Hauskuld's house; there thou must stay a night, and sit in the lowest place, and act surlily. Hauskuld will tell them all not to meddle nor make with Huckster Hedinn, saying he is a rude, unfriendly fellow.

"Next morning thou must be off early and go to the farm nearest Hrut's house. There thou must offer wares for sale, praising up the faults of thy goods, and when the master of the house differs with thee, thou shalt fly at him; but mind and spare thy strength, lest thou be found out. Then a man will be sent to tell Hrut to come and part you, and when he comes and asks thee to his house, thou shalt accept his offer. A place will be given thee on the lower bench over against Hrut's high-seat. He will ask thee if thou hast journeyed much, to which thou must answer: 'I know all Iceland by heart.'

"Then when he asks thee what champions live here or there, thou shalt belittle everyone, saying that in one place are shabby fellows enough and to spare, and in another are only thieves and scoundrels. Hrut will smile and think it sport to listen to thy scolding. But when he asks of this quarter, thou shalt say there is small choice of men left here since Fiddle Mord died; and thou shalt praise Mord as so wise a man and so good a lawyer that he never made a false step.

"Then Hrut will ask: 'Dost thou know how matters went between me and him?'

"'I know all about it,' thou must reply. 'He took thy wife from thee, and thou hadst never a word to say.'

"Then Hrut will say: 'But there was some disgrace in losing his suit for the dower.'

"'He was old,' thou shalt say, 'and his friends advised him not to fight with thee. But still I think the suit might be taken up again.'

"Then he will ask: 'Dost thou know anything about the law?'

"'A little,' thou shalt say, 'and though it does not concern me, I should like to know how one should begin a suit against thee for Unna's dower.'

"Hrut will say: 'I must be summoned so that I can hear the summons, or else here in my lawful house.'

“‘Recite the summons, then,’ thou must say, ‘and let me see if I can say it after thee.’

“Then Hrut will recite the summons, so mind and pay great heed to every word he says. After that Hrut will bid thee repeat the summons, and thou must do so, and say it all wrong.

“Then he will smile and not mistrust thee, but say that scarce a word is right. Thou must throw the blame on thy companions, and say they put thee out, then thou must ask him to say the summons again, word by word, and let thee repeat the words after him. He will give thee leave, and will summon himself in the suit; thou shalt summon after him, and this time say every word right. When it is done, ask Hrut if that is rightly summoned, and he will answer: ‘There is no flaw to be found in it.’ Then thou shalt say in such a voice that thy companions may hear:

“‘I summon thee in the suit which Unna Mord’s daughter has made over to me with her plighted hand.’ And mind and say this as if thou art only silly and boastful.

“But when men are sound asleep, ye three shall rise and tread softly, and go out of the house, and saddle your fat horses and ride off on them, leaving the others behind. Ye must ride up into the hills away from the pastures and stay there three nights, for about so long will they seek you. After that ride home; riding always by night and resting by day. Then this summer, at the Thing, I will help thee in thy suit.”

So Gunnar thanked Njal and went to do as he had bid. He rode with two companions to the west, doing everything as Njal had laid it down for him; and when he came to Hauskuld’s house he stayed there the night, and thence he went on down the dale till he came to the house next to Hrut’s. There he offered his wares for sale, and soon fell foul of the farmer, and Hrut was sent for to separate them; so the huckster was bidden to Hrut’s house.

There Hrut seated Gunnar opposite himself, and their talk went pretty much as Njal had guessed, till it came to the summoning, and Gunnar repeated it all wrong. Hrut burst out laughing, and had no mistrust, and said the summons again; this time Gunnar repeated it right, and called his companions to witness the summons, but he so acted the braggart that Hrut thought it sport to listen. At night they went to bed like other men; but in the night all three took their clothes and arms, and went out and took their horses and

rode up among the hills to a spot where they could not be found except by chance.

Hauskuld waked up that night at his house, and roused all his household. "I have dreamed," said he, "that I saw a great bear and two cubs go from this house to Hrut's. Now tell me if any of you saw aught strange about Huckster Hedinn."

One man answered: "I saw how a golden fringe and a bit of scarlet cloth peeped out at his arm, and on his right arm he had a ring of gold."

Hauskuld said: "The bear can mean no man save Gunnar of Lithend, and now methinks I see all about it. Up! let us ride to Hrut's." They did so, and Hauskuld roused Hrut and asked what guests were there.

"Only Huckster Hedinn," says Hrut.

"A broader man across the back it will be, I fear," says Hauskuld. "I guess here must have been Gunnar of Lithend."

"Then here has been a pretty trial of cunning," says Hrut, and tells all about the summoning.

"There has, indeed, been a great falling-off of wit on one side," says Hauskuld, "and Gunnar cannot have planned it all by himself. Njal must be at the bottom of this plot, for there is not his match for wit in all the land."

Now they look for Gunnar, but he is off and away; they gathered folk and looked for him three days, but could not find him. Then Gunnar rode home safely.

Now all men ride to the Althing to bring suits and to plead causes before the Judges, and to make the laws. Hrut and Hauskuld rode there with a very large following, and when Gunnar opened his case they wished to make an onslaught on him, but mistrusted their strength. Gunnar took his oath, and declared his case, and brought forward his witnesses, though as yet Njal was not at the court. Hrut answered Gunnar, and showed flaws in the pleading. Then Njal came into the court.

He learned what had been done, and said that if they chose to strive by quibbles the suit would drag a long time. Gunnar said he would not have that, but he would do to Hrut as Hrut had done to Mord, and he asked if those brothers were so near that they could hear his voice.

"Hear it we can," answered Hrut. "What dost thou wish?"