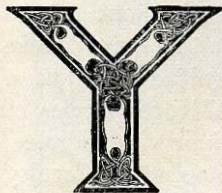


THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. MAGNUS.



YOU would hardly expect to find an ancient cathedral up in those Orkney Islands that one usually sees huddled away in a spare corner of the map, and made to look even smaller than they are by the exigencies of space. It is curious to think of: once, long ago, strange ships with monstrous figure-heads and painted sides, full of the northern actors of history, crawled with their lines of oars into the sounds and bays of these islands, till for centuries they became the stage for dramatic events and stirring personages. Some of the players bore names that any history book tells of. Harald Hardrada, old King Haco, Bothwell, and Montrose have all played their parts. And there are others, earls and prelates, and northern kings, and old sea-rovers, who were really far better worth knowing than half the puppets with more familiar labels. Then, gradually the lights went out and the audience turned away to look at other things, and the Orkneymen were left to observe the Sabbath and elect a County Council. One by one the old buildings toppled down, and the old names changed, and

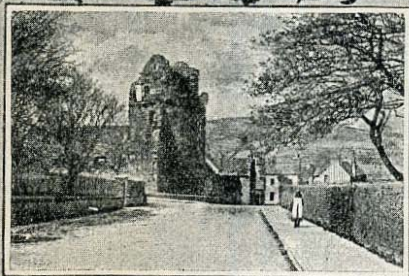
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In Kirkwall.

1. Earl's Palace. 2. Bridge Street. 3. Albert Street. 4. Bishop's Palace.

the old customs faded, till the place of the islands in history became their place upon the map; but time and men have spared one thing—this old cathedral church of St. Magnus in Kirkwall.

On the ancient houses of the little borough and the winding slit of a street, the old red church still looks down benignly, and sometimes (of a Sunday, I think, especially) a little humorously. Over the gray roofs and the tree-tops in sheltered gardens, and the black mites of people passing on their business, its lustreless Gothic eyes see a wide expanse of land and a wider and brighter sweep of sea. The winding sounds and broadening bays join and divide and join again, through and through its island dominions. Backwards and forwards, twice a day, the flood tide pours from the open Atlantic, and each channel becomes an eastward flowing river; and then from the North Sea the ebb sets the races running to the west. Everywhere is the sight or the sound of the sea—rollers on the western cliffs, salt currents among the islands, quiet bays lapping the feet of heathery hills. Out of the two great oceans the wind blows like the blasts of an enormous bellows, and on the horizon the clouds are eternally gathering.

It is over this land of moor and water and vapour that the cathedral watches the people; and though from the difficulty of passing through so narrow a street it has never moved from the spot where it first arose, and has never seen, one would suppose, the greater part of its territories, yet it knows—none better—the stories and the spirit of all the islands. Crows and gulls cruise round the tower familiarly, and perhaps bring gossip; but eyes so long and narrow, and of

so inhuman an anatomy, may very likely see through a hill or a heart for themselves.

The country is like a fleet at sea, and the old spirit of the people came from the deep. At first that spirit was only restless and fierce and free; in time it began to think, and at odd moments to be troubled, and they called it pious. Then it looked for a fitting house where it might live when it could no longer find a home in the people. So it built the red cathedral, and there it silently dwells to-day.

There is something in their church that none of the respectable townfolk have the slightest suspicion of—something alive that vibrates to the cry of the wind and the breaking of the sea, and the little human events that happen in the crow-stepped houses.

On the wild autumn afternoons when the hard north-east wind is driving rain and sleet through the town, the old church begins to remember. The wind and the sleet coming over the sea stir the quick spirit so sharply that every angle is full of sighing noises. As the shortened day draws to an end, and lights begin to twinkle in the town, and the showers become less frequent, and the clouds are rolled up and gathered off the sky, then the people come out into the streets and see the early stars above the gable-ends and high cathedral tower. They think it cold, and walk quickly, but a personage of sandstone takes little note of the temperature. The cathedral merely feels refreshed.

When the clear, windy night draws in, the people go to rest, and one by one the lights are put out till only the stars and the lighthouses are left. Looking over a darkened town and an empty night, with the

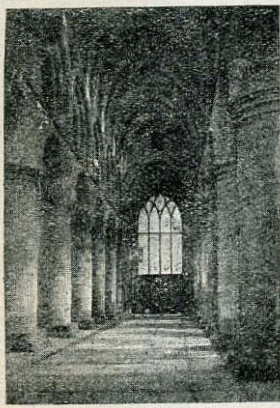
air moving fresh from Norway, the memories come thick upon the old church which shelters so many bones. It is like digging up the soil of those lands from which the sea has for centuries receded, and where the ribs of ships and the skeletons of sailors lie deep beneath the furrows of the plough.

Kirkwall must have been a strange little town before the cathedral's memory begins, when there was no red tower above the narrow street and the little houses, in the days when Rognvald, the son of Kol, had vowed to dedicate a splendid minster to his uncle, St. Magnus, should he come by his own and call himself Earl of Orkney; and when the islanders waited to see what aid the blessed saint would furnish to this enterprise.

It is one of the island tragedies—the saga of how the evil Earl Hakon slew his cousin, Earl Magnus, outside the old church of Egilsay with that high round tower that you can see over Kirkwall Bay from the cathedral parapet, and how the grass grew greener where he fell, and miracles multiplied, and they made him a saint in time.

Though all these events happened before a stone of the cathedral was laid, they may help to give the meaning of its story, and on that account they are worth, perhaps, a rough telling here. Earl Hakon had died, and his son Paul ruled in his stead. He was a silent, brave, unlucky man, upright and honourable in his dealings, but the shadow of his father's crime lay over the land. It brought old age and prosperity and repentance to the doer of the deed; and on his son the punishment fell.

Rognvald claimed the half of the earldom. Paul answered that there was no need for long words, "For



St. Magnus Cathedral, interior.

1. South aisle. 2. North aisle. 3. Nave.

I will guard the Orkneys while God grants me life so to do." And then the contest began. Rognvald attacked from north and south. Paul vanquished the southern fleet, and hurrying north drove his rival back to Norway; and so the winter came on, and the peace that in those days men kept in winter.

All had gone well with Paul, but his luck was to change with a little thing. He was keeping Yule with his friends and kinsmen, when upon a winter's evening, a man, wet with the spray of the Pentland Firth, came out of the dusk and knocked upon the door. He was hardly the instrument, one would think, a departed saint would choose to build a cathedral with—a Viking with his sword ever loose in its sheath, and his lucky star obscured, coming here for refuge, from the ashes of his father and his home. He was known as Sweyn Asleifson (a name to be famous in the islands), and was welcomed for his family's sake; they brought him in to the feast, and the drinking went on. In a little while there arose a quarrel over the cups; Sweyn killed his man, and fled into the night again. He was a landless outlaw this time, for the dead man had been high in favour, and the earl was stern. Meanwhile men went on drinking over the hall fires; but Paul's luck had departed, and St. Magnus had a weapon in his hand. In the spring the war began again, and suddenly in the midst of it Earl Paul disappeared—his bodyguard cut down upon the beach, himself spirited clean away. Sweyn Asleifson had come for him, and carried him to a fate that was never more than rumoured. So Rognvald won the earldom, and the first stones of his church were laid. The saint had certainly struck for him.

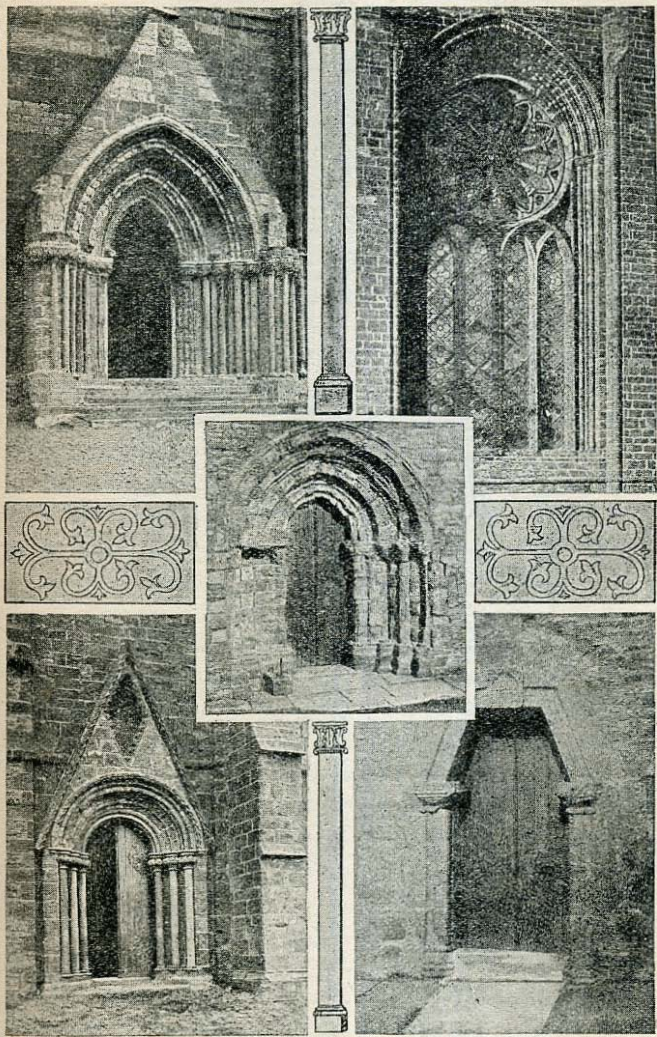
That is the true story of the vow and the building of the cathedral, a tale too old for even the venerable church to remember. But all the long history of the seven centuries since it knows; and indeed it has played such a part in scene after scene and act after act, that a memory would have to be of some poorer stuff than hewed sandstone to forget a past so stirring. And who can be so far behind every scene as the house which during men's lives listens to their prayers, and at last upon a day takes them in for ever?

When it first began to look down from its windows upon those men going about their business in the sunshine or the rain, it saw among the little creatures some that were well worth remembering, though there be few but the cathedral to remember them now. There was Rognvald himself, that cheerful, gallant earl who made poetry and war, and sailed to Jerusalem with all his chiefs and friends, fighting and rhyming all the way, and riding home across the length of Europe, and who, when he fell by an assassin's hand, was laid at last beneath the pavement of this cathedral he had founded. And then, most memorable of all the great odallers who followed him in war and sat at his Yule feasts, there was the Viking, Sweyn Asleifson, he who kidnapped Paul, and afterwards became the lifelong and, on the whole, faithful friend of Rognvald, and the faithless enemy of almost every one else; the most daring, unscrupulous, famous, and—judging by the way he always obtained forgiveness when he needed it—the most fascinating man in all the northern countries. He was the luckiest, too, till the day he fell in an ambush in the streets of Dublin,

exclaiming with his last breath, in most remarkable contrast to the tenor of his life: "Know this, all men, that I am one of the Saint Earl Rognvald's body-guard, and I now mean to put my trust in being where he is, with God." May he rest in peace wherever his bones lie, even though his reformation came something late, the turbulent, terrible old Viking, whom the Saga writers called the last of that profession.

The generation who built it had passed away, when on a summer's day, after it had weathered nearly a century of storm and shine, the cathedral saw the greatest sight it had yet beheld. Haco of Norway had come with his fleet to conquer the Western Isles of Scotland, the Norse kings' old inheritance. The pointed windows watched ship after ship sail by with coloured sails and shining shields, bearing the Norsemen to their last battle in southern lands; and then the islands waited for the news that in those days was brought by the men who had made the story.

Month upon month went by; men wondered and rumours flew; the days grew shorter, and the gales came out upon all the seas. At last, when winter was well upon the islands, what were left of the battered ships began to struggle home. They brought back stories that the cathedral remembers, though six centuries have rolled them out of the memories of the people—tales of lee-shores and westerly gales, of anchors dragging under the Cumbræes, and Scottish knights charging down upon the beach where the Norwegian spears were ranked on the edge of the tide; then of more gales and whirlpools in the Pentland, until at length they carried their old sick king ashore, to die in the bishop's palace at Kirkwall.



St. Magnus Cathedral, exterior.

1. West doorway, nave. 2. East window. 3. Doorway, south transept.
4. Doorway, north aisle. 5. Doorway, south aisle.

He lay for two months in that ancient building—now a roofless shell, standing just beyond the churchyard wall—his most faithful friends beside him, the restless Orkney wind without, and the voice of the Saga reader by the bed. First they read to him in Latin, till he grew too sick to follow the foreign words; and then in Norse, through the Sagas of the saints, and after of the kings. They had come down to his own father, Sverrir, and then, in the words of the old historian, “Near midnight Sverrir’s Saga was read through, and just as midnight was past Almighty God called King Hakon from this world’s life.” They buried him in the great red church that had stood sentinel over the sick-chamber; and as the race of Vikings died with Sweyn, so the roving, conquering kings of Norway passed away with Haco, and never again came south to trouble the seaboards.

The Orkneys, however, were not yet out of the current of affairs. They cut, indeed, but a small figure compared with the Orkney of the great Earl Thorfinn in the century before Rognvald founded his cathedral—he who owned nine earldoms in Scotland and all the Southern Isles, besides a great realm in Ireland. But there was still a bishop in the palace and an earl with powers of life and death in his dominion, and an armed following that counted for something in war; and the cathedral was still the church of a small country rather than of a little county. The sun cast the shadows of dignitaries in the winding street, and the bones they were framed of were laid in time beneath the flags of St. Magnus’s church. When one comes to think of it, the old cathedral must hold a varied collection of these,

for here lie the high and the low of two races, and no man knows how many chance sojourners and travellers.

At last, upon a dark day for the islands, their era of semi-independence and Vikingism and Norse romance came to a most undignified end. A needy king of the north pledged them to Scotland for his daughter's dowry, as a common man might pledge his watch. East to Norway was no longer the way to the motherland, and the open horizon meeting the clouds, the old highroad, led now to a foreign shore. Henceforth they belonged to the long coast with its pale mountain peaks far away over the cliffs, which had once, so far as the eye could see, belonged to them. It was a transaction intended for a season, but the season has never run to its limit yet. Now, it is to be hoped, it never will; but for centuries it would have been better for the Orkneys if they had gone the way of some volcanic islet and sunk quietly below the gray North Sea.

One might think that, when they had ceased to be a half-way house between their sovereign and his neighbours of Europe, and were become instead a geographical term applied to the least accessible portion of their new lord's dominions, their history and their troubles would soon have ceased, and the islanders been left to fish and reap late crops and try to keep out the winter weather. But there was no such good luck for many a day to come. Alas for themselves, they were too valuable an asset in the Scotch king's treasury. Orkney too valuable! That collection of windy, treeless islands, where great ponds of rain-water stand through the fields for

months together, and a strawberry that ripens is shown to one's friends! The plain truth is that, measured by a Scotch standard of value in those days, it would have been hard to find a pocket not worth the picking. The rental of Orkney was more than twice that of the kingdom of Fife, and Fife, I suppose, was an El Dorado compared with most provinces of its impecunious country. So north they came, Scotch earls and bishops and younger sons, to make what they could before the pledge was redeemed. And to the old cathedral was flung the shame of standing as the symbol of oppression. It was not its fault, and every stone must have silently cried to Heaven for forgiveness. But a cathedral meant a bishop, and an Orkney bishop meant the refinement of roguery and exaction. When these prelates in their turns came to inhabit permanently their minster, and they could at last hear the voice of its spirit that loves the land it watches, demanding an account of their stewardship, what could they say? The old excuse—"We must live"? I can hardly think the church perceived the necessity.

That monument which the old sailors and fighters of the north had built, that they might link a better world with the rough and warring earth, had to stand immovable for century upon century, watching the trouble of their sons. It saw them make their stand at Summerdale in the old fashion, with sword and halbert and a battle-cry on their lips, and march back again to the town in a glimpse of triumph. But that quickly faded, and the weight of new laws and evil rulers gradually broke the high spirit entirely. It saw the proud odallers reduced to long-suffering

'peerie lairds,' and all their power and romance and circumstance of state pass over to the foreigner, until after a time it was hard to believe that, some pages further back, there was a closed chapter of history which read quite differently from this.

Down below the parapet of the tower the narrow streets were full of the most splendid-looking people, all in steel and the Stewart arms. Earls Robert and Patrick of that royal name, each, through his scandalous life, made the island the home of a prince's court; and out among the moors and the islands the old race wondered whose turn it should be for persecution next, and how long Heaven would let these things be.

The downfall of the Stewarts' rule came at last, violently as was fit, but to the end they used the old church on behalf of the wrong. The tower was wrapped in the smoke of the rebels' musketry when old Earl Patrick lay by the heels in Edinburgh awaiting his doom as a traitor, and his son held Kirkwall against what might, by comparison, be termed the law, and it was only at the point of the pike that they turned the last Stewart out of the sepulchre of St. Magnus.

Then the long windows watched the shadows of all manner of persons, who are well forgotten now, darken the prospect for a while, and pass away to let other clouds gather; and in all that time there cannot have been many whom a critical edifice can recall with pride.

The bishops were sent about their business, and the Solemn League and Covenant was solemnly sworn. The troopers of Cromwell stalked through the old pillars with their wide hats the firmer set on. The

Covenant was unsworn, and the bishops came back and acquired emoluments for a little while longer, till at last they went altogether, and in good, sober Presbyterian fashion the awakened people set about purifying their temple. Poor old church! they did it thoroughly. Away went carving and stained glass, and ancient tombs and bones, and everything that the austere taste of Heaven is supposed by man to dislike. They made it clean with a kind of yellowish white-wash, and divided it by a sanitary deal screen impervious to draught. In this shameful guise the cathedral has watched the advent of quiet days and the slow healing of time. To-day the greatest clamour it hears is made by the rooks. No earl's men or bishop's men quarrel in the streets; no one either fears or harries the islanders; the history of Orkney is written and closed and laid upon the shelf. The hands of the clock move evenly round, and the seasons change by the almanac.

But there stands the old red church, silently remembering and arranging in their due perspective all these things remarkable and true. The worst of it is that it makes no comment that a mortal can understand, so that no one can say what a seasoned, well-mortared observer of seven centuries of affairs thinks of changing dynasties and creeds, and whether it is disposed to take them more seriously than so many moultings of feathers, and if one can retain any optimism through a course of whitewash and draught-proof screens.

It is pleasant to think, for the old minster's sake, that it heeds the rubs of fortune very little, and regards material changes just as so many shifts of

plumage. Its people are still flesh and blood, and its islands rock and turf and heather, and it will take more than pails and paint-brushes, and pledges and covenants to make them otherwise. The winter days are as bleak as ever, and the summer evenings as long and light, and the sun rises out of the North Sea among the flat green islands, and sinks in the Atlantic behind the western heather hills; and it is likely enough that from the height of the cathedral tower many other most serious events look surprisingly unimportant.

J. STORER CLOUSTON.

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Kirkwall in winter.