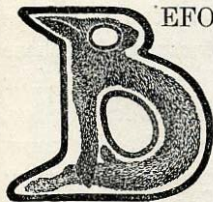


THE BEGINNING OF THE EARLDOM.



BEFORE our story begins, Norway was divided into a number of small kingdoms. About the year 890 A.D. a king called Harald, who ruled over one of these small kingdoms, resolved to make himself master of all Norway. He made a vow that he would not cut his hair until he was acknowledged king throughout the whole country. This ambitious aim took some time to accomplish, and as the years passed his thick locks grew long and shaggy. Thus he got the name of Harald Shockhead.

One after another, however, he subdued the smaller kingdoms, compelling the earls and chiefs to acknowledge him as their king, or to leave the country. Then began what may be called the second period of Norse colonization in the west. Many of the proudest and boldest of the Norsemen, deeming it a disgrace to serve a king who was at best only their equal, preferred to trust themselves and all their belongings to the ocean, and take whatever fortune might await them.

Those nobles who fled from Norway, regarding Harald as their enemy, soon began to spread terror

along the shores of Norway itself, returning to plunder, and slay, and burn, as their fellow-countrymen had so often done in the west. Their chief haunts were among the Orkneys and the Hebrides. Thither they betook themselves with their booty when winter came on. There they lived and feasted all through the winter, and when spring came they descended once more on the coasts of Norway. Ireland and the west coast of England also suffered from these raiders, and in France a determined effort to conquer the country was at this time made by the Norsemen. Hrolf or Rollo, the Norseman, became master of the north of France, and gave to it a new name—Normandy, the land of the Normans or Norsemen.

The last great effort made by these Norse nobles to break the power of King Harald was foiled by their defeat at Hafursfrith. A great league had been formed against Harald. Vikings from over the sea crowded back to Norway to avenge their own injuries and to help their kinsmen. The two fleets met at Hafursfrith in the south of Norway, and a long and stubborn battle ended in victory for Harald. This battle had far-reaching results. It was the end of the struggle for independence in Norway. Harald was then left free to turn his attention to the chastisement of the Vikings in the west. The result was the foundation of the Norse Empire in the west, and the colonization of Iceland and Greenland by those Norsemen who still scorned to own the sway of the Norwegian king.

With a large and splendidly equipped fleet, Harald swooped down on the Vikings in Orkney and the

Hebrides. Their resistance was feeble enough. Some yielded themselves to the king; others fled before him. Nowhere was there anything like a pitched battle. As far south as the Isle of Man, Harald pursued his career of conquest. Turning north once more, he established Norse jarldoms or earldoms in Orkney and the Hebrides, to be subject henceforth to the Norwegian crown. Then, considering that his vow was fulfilled, Harald at last had his long hair cut, and was afterwards known as Harald Fairhair.

One of Harald's chief friends and supporters was Rognvald, Earl of Moeri and Romsdal, who was called by the men of his time, "The mighty and wise in council." This Rognvald was the father of Rollo of Normandy. He had other sons named Ivar, Thorir, Rollaug, Hallad, and Einar, and he had a brother called Sigurd. The family makes a very large figure in the history of those times. In one of Harald's battles in the west fell Ivar, Rognvald's son. Harald assigned to Rognvald the newly created Jarldom of Orkney in order to compensate him in some measure for the loss of his son. But Rognvald had already large estates in Norway. He thought that these were quite enough for one man to govern. Accordingly he handed over the Orkneys to his brother Sigurd, who thus became the first Jarl or Earl.

Sigurd, the first Earl of Orkney, sometimes called Sigurd the Mighty, was a strong and energetic ruler. When King Harald departed for Norway, the earl at once began to strengthen himself in his new dominions. He first allied himself with Thorstein the Red, son of the Norse king of Dublin, and with

the Norsemen in the Hebrides, and then invaded Scotland in an attempt to add to his earldom Caithness and Sutherland. The Scots naturally offered a determined resistance. Their leader was Maelbride or Melbrigda—called Melbrigda Tusk because he had a large projecting tooth—Earl or Maormor of Ross.

After the war had lasted for some time, the two earls agreed to meet and settle their quarrel, each taking forty men with him. On the day fixed for the meeting, Sigurd, suspecting, as he said, the good faith of the Scots, mounted two men on each of his forty horses, and came thus to the place appointed. As soon as the Norsemen appeared in sight, Melbrigda saw that he had been trapped, and turning to his men, said, "We have been betrayed by Sigurd, for I see two feet on each horse's side. The men must therefore be twice as numerous as the horses that bear them. Nevertheless let us harden our hearts and sell our lives as dearly as we can."

Seeing the Scots prepared to die hard in the place where they were, Sigurd divided his force and attacked them at once in front and in flank. The battle was fierce and bloody, but it ended in the total extermination of the small band of Scots. Sigurd, exulting over his fallen foe, cut off Melbrigda's head and fixed it to his saddle. On his way home, in spurring his horse his leg struck against the great projecting tooth which had given Melbrigda his nickname, and the tooth pierced his leg. Blood-poisoning followed, and a few days later Earl Sigurd died in great pain on the banks of the Dornoch Firth. He was buried at a place now called Cyder Hall (Sigurd's Howe), near Skibo Castle.

Sigurd was succeeded in the earldom by his son Guttorm. Guttorm ruled the islands for one short and uneventful winter, and then died childless. For some time the earldom was without a ruler. Vikings once more began to make the Orkneys their headquarters, and to harass the more peaceful inhabitants of the islands. When King Harald heard that the Orkneys were without a ruler, he asked Earl Rognvald to make haste to send them another earl. Rognvald then had the title of Earl of Orkney conferred on his son Hallad, who sailed for the west as the third earl. But Hallad was weak and indolent. The western earldom was too turbulent and difficult to govern. He soon wearied of his dignity, and at last, deserting his earldom, went back to Norway. After his ignominious withdrawal from the earldom, the islands came under the rule of two Danish Vikings.

Although Hallad preferred a simple farmer's life to an earl's dignity, there were others of Rognvald's sons who were more ambitious. Einar especially was eager to redeem the family honour by the expulsion of the Vikings from the islands. Accordingly Einar was chosen as Earl of Orkney, and after King Harald had conferred on him the title, he set out for his earldom. The old Earl of Moeri had never regarded his youngest son with much favour, and, to tell the truth, neither desired to see the other's face again.

Einar was the best and greatest of the early Norse earls. In appearance he was tall and manly; his face was somewhat disfigured by the loss of an eye, but in spite of this he was reputed to be very sharp-sighted. His father had prophesied that Einar would never become a great chief; yet he became the most

famous of all Earl Rognvald's sons, with the exception of Rollo of Normandy.

The earldom was in a state of great disorder when Einar arrived. The Vikings had to be expelled, the government had to be settled and established, and the people had to learn to trust and obey their new earl. All these things were accomplished in a marvellously short space of time. The new earl also taught his people many useful arts. Wood was scarce: Einar knew that the people of Scotland used peat for fuel, and he taught the Norsemen in the islands to do the same. From this he got the name of Torf-Einar.

Soon a serious trouble arose. King Harald's sons had now grown up to be very turbulent and overbearing men. They quarrelled with their father's chiefs and earls. Two of them, Halfdan Highleg and Gudrod Bright, attacked and slew Rognvald, Earl of Moeri. Harald was enraged that his sons should thus murder his best and most faithful counsellor and friend. He marched against them with an army, and ordered them to be seized and brought before him. Gudrod gave himself up to his father, but Halfdan seized a ship and sailed west to the Orkneys.

Halfdan's sudden arrival in the earldom caused panic for a time. Einar was quite unprepared for an invasion. He accordingly thought it wiser to escape to Caithness until he had time to collect his forces. In the meantime Halfdan seized the government of the isles, taking the title of King of Orkney and Shetland. The same summer saw Einar back in the Orkneys with a fleet and an army to regain his earldom. The two fleets met somewhere off the island

of Sanday. A fierce battle took place, and Halfdan's force was practically annihilated. In the dusk of the evening he himself leaped overboard and escaped.

Next morning the shores were searched for fugitives. All who were found were slain, but Halfdan himself had disappeared. While the search was still proceeding, Einar was observed to stop suddenly and gaze across the sea towards the island of North Ronaldsay, or Kinansey, as it was then called.

"What see'st thou, jarl?" asked one of his companions. "I know not what it is," was the reply. "Sometimes it appears to rise up, and sometimes to lie down. It is either a bird in the air or a man on the rocks, and I will find out."

This object which the earl saw was Halfdan, who had probably just dragged his weary limbs from the water, and was now struggling up over the rocks to the land. The earl's men pursued and captured him. He was at once brought before the earl, who ordered him to be slain, to avenge his father's murder, and as a sacrifice to Odin for the victory.

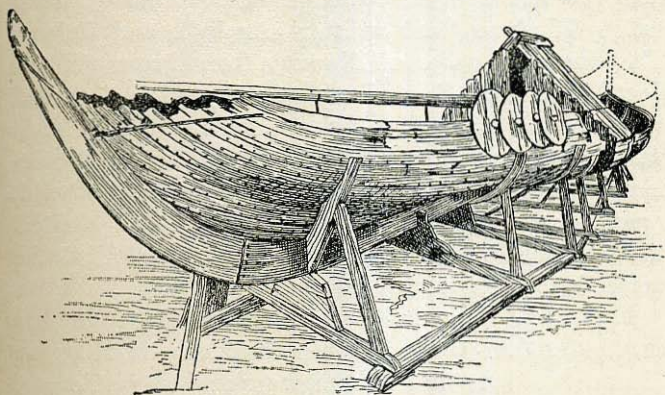
Angry as King Harald had been because of the murder of Earl Rognvald, the death of his son at the hands of Rognvald's son was not likely to be very agreeable to him. Harald therefore determined to make a second expedition to the west.

When Einar heard of Harald's intended visit to the Orkneys, he thought that he would be safer out of the king's way, and accordingly he crossed the Pentland Firth. Messengers went backwards and forwards between the king and the earl for a while, arranging terms of settlement. At length the king demanded that the earldom should pay a fine of sixty marks.

To that Einar agreed, and King Harald Fairhair bade farewell to his western dominions for ever.

It was no easy matter for the Orkney men to raise the sixty marks, and the earl called a Thing or council to discuss the matter. At length the earl offered to pay the whole fine himself, on condition that all the freehold or udal lands of the Orkney men were handed over to him in pledge for the amount that each had to pay, and to this the islanders agreed.

In this way the earl came into possession of all the udal lands in the Orkneys; and it was not till the time of Earl Sigurd the Stout, a century later, that the udal rights were restored to the Orkney men. Earl Einar spent the rest of his days in peace. The earldom was well ruled. Vikings were afraid to plunder the dominions of so powerful a chief; and after a long and honourable reign the good earl died on a sickbed—what the Vikings called a “straw death”—about the year 933.



Remains of a Viking Ship found in Sweden.