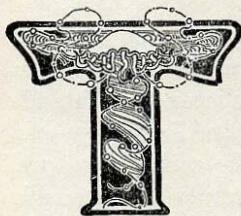


THE DARK CENTURY.



THE tenth century may fittingly be called the dark century of Orcadian history. We know very little of it except occasional glimpses afforded by obscure references in the Sagas; and the little that we do know tells of treachery and bloodshed and murder to an extent unusual even in the troubled annals of Orkney.

After the death of Torf-Einar the earldom came into the hands of his three sons, Thorfinn—usually called Thorfinn Skull-splitter—Arnkell, and Erlend. The disturbed state of Norway, consequent on the death of Harald Fairhair about the year 945, caused turmoil and confusion throughout all those lands which had been conquered and settled by the Norsemen. Harald left behind him a brood of wild, reckless sons, each of whom thought he had a right to a share of his father's dominions. They filled the whole land with turbulence and bloodshed.

Eric Bloody-axe had been Harald's favourite son, and he at first took over the chief rule in Norway. He was a brave and skilful warrior, but passionate, avaricious, and treacherous in his disposition. The

same qualities were possessed in an even greater degree by his queen, Gunnhilda. Their deeds of violence soon estranged the hearts of their subjects.

Hakon, Harald's youngest son, who had been brought up in England under the care of King Athelstan, came to Norway to claim his share of his father's dominions. Hakon was at this time only in his fifteenth year, but he was daring and ambitious, and was the darling of the Norsemen both at home and abroad. Eric Bloody-axe and Gunnhilda were, on the other hand, regarded everywhere with hatred and detestation. When, therefore, Hakon invaded Norway and attempted to wrest the sovereignty from the hands of his elder brother, the latter was deserted by his people and was forced to flee from the country.

Eric crossed first to Orkney, where he gathered a band of followers as reckless as himself, and then held on to England and began to ravage the land in the usual Viking fashion. Close friendship had long existed between Athelstan and Harald Fairhair. Athelstan professed similar friendship for Harald's sons, and now offered Eric the lordship of Northumbria. Eric was not so foolish as to reject this offer. Gunnhilda and he with their family abode in peace in Northumbria for about a year.

With the death of Athelstan fortune began once more to frown upon the exiled king. King Edmund thought it by no means desirable that the Norsemen should hold so large a portion of his kingdom. Knowing the insecurity of his tenure, Eric's reckless spirit flashed at once into open rebellion. He left Northumbria, sailed to Orkney, seized the Earls

Arnkell and Erlend, forced many other Orcadian chiefs to join him, and made a Viking raid on the west coast of England. The raiders met with resistance and a battle was fought; in this battle fell Eric himself, both the Orkney earls, and most of the other leaders.

When news of this disastrous expedition reached Gunnhilda, who had remained with her family in Northumbria, she in turn embarked for Orkney. She and her sons claimed the earldom, seized the taxes, and spread wrong and oppression over all the western colonies. For a short time the islands suffered the same misgovernment as Norway had already suffered at her hands. But war now broke out between Norway and Denmark. This seemed to afford her a chance of regaining the Norwegian crown, and Gunnhilda and her family sailed eastwards once more. Ragnhilda, her daughter, was left behind in Orkney to continue for a time her mother's acts of treachery and bloodshed.

There are few worse characters in history than Ragnhilda as depicted by the Saga. She seemed to have a mania for plots and murders. Married first to Arnfinn, one of the sons of Earl Thorfinn, she caused him to be murdered at Murkle in Caithness, for no reason that we can find out, and then married his brother Havard. On the death of his father Thorfinn, shortly afterwards, Havard became earl. He is known in history as Havard the Harvest-happy, because during his time the islands were blessed with good harvests. Havard also met his death at the instigation of his wife. Ragnhilda persuaded Einar Oily-tongue, his nephew, to murder the earl, promis-

ing to marry him and secure for him the earldom when the deed was done. Einar set on Havard in Stenness, and slew him after a hard struggle. But it was apparently no part of Ragnhilda's plan to marry Einar Oily-tongue. She now professed the greatest indignation and grief at the murder of Earl Havard, and called for vengeance on his murderer. Einar Oily-tongue had a cousin, also called Einar. He in turn fell a victim to the wiles of Ragnhilda. By promising or at least hinting that she would marry the man who avenged the murder of Earl Havard, she succeeded in getting the second Einar to murder the first, and ended by marrying Ljot, the third son of Earl Thorfinn, who was the real heir to the earldom.

This was by no means the end of Ragnhilda's wickedness. Ljot had a brother, Skuli, who was not at all satisfied that the former should have the whole earldom. It was an easy matter to make trouble between the two brothers. In the end Skuli left the islands for Scotland, and became Earl of Caithness and a vassal of the Scottish king. Bad feeling continued between the brothers, and was carefully fostered by Ragnhilda. Ultimately they met in arms in Caithness, Skuli with a Scottish army, and Ljot with the forces of the earldom. The Scots were defeated and Skuli slain.

Ljot now added Caithness to his earldom, but the Scots again and again strove to reconquer it. Finally a great battle was fought at Skidmire in Caithness. The Norsemen gained the day, but the earl was fatally wounded. There remained one son of Thorfinn Skull-splitter, named Hlodver, who now became

earl over an earldom exhausted and impoverished by twenty years of misgovernment and bloodshed, and embroiled in an arduous struggle with Scotland for the possession of Caithness.

The Orkney earldom, however, was now on the eve of a great expansion. Under the son and grandson of Hlodver, Sigurd the Stout and Thorfinn the Mighty, the Norse dominion in the west attained its widest bounds, and the earldom of Orkney its greatest importance. For more than half a century, with little or no interference from Norway, the Orkney earls helped to mould the history of Ireland and of Scotland; and until the union of England and Denmark took place under Canute, the Norse Earls of Orkney were probably the most powerful chieftains in the British Isles.

It was in the time of Earl Sigurd that Christianity was first introduced among the Norse inhabitants of Orkney. Olaf, Tryggvi's son, King of Norway, had embraced the new faith, and his methods of promoting the religion which he professed were characteristic of his time and race. The story of the conversion of Earl Sigurd and his followers is thus given in the Saga:—

“Olaf, Tryggvi's son, sailed from the west to the Orkneys; but because the Pentland Firth was not passable, he laid his ship up under the lee in Osmund's Voe, off Rognvald's Isle. But there in the voe lay already Earl Sigurd, Hlodver's son, with three ships, and then meant to go a-roving. But as soon as King Olaf knew that the earl was there, he made them call him to come and speak with him. But when the earl came on board the king's ship, King Olaf began

his speech." (We pass over his long historical review of the establishment of the Orkney earldom and its dependence upon the kings of Norway, and give only his closing sentences.)

"Now, as so it is, Earl Sigurd, that thou hast come into my power, now thou hast two choices before thee, very uneven. One is that thou shalt take the right faith and become my man, and allow thyself to be baptized and all thy undermen; then shalt thou have a sure hope of honour from me, and to have and to hold as my underman this realm, with earl's title and full freedom as thou hast erewhile had it; and this over and above, which is much more worth, to rule in everlasting bliss with all-ruling God—that is sure to thee if thou keepest all His commandments. This is the other choice, which is very doleful and unlike the first—that now on the spot thou shalt die, and after thy death I shall let fire and sword ruthlessly rage over all the Orkneys, burn and brand homesteads and men, unless this folk will have salvation and believe on the true God.....'

"But when Earl Sigurd had heard so long and clever a speech of King Olaf, he hardened his heart against him, and spoke thus: 'It must be told thee, King Olaf, that I have firmly made up my mind that I will not and may not and shall not forego that faith which my kinsmen and forefathers had before me: for I know no better counsel than they, and I know not that that faith is better which thou preachest than this which we have now had and held all our lives.'

"And with that the king saw the earl so stiffnecked in his error, he seized his young son, whom the earl had with him, and who had grown up there in the

isles. This son of the earl the king bore forward on the prow and drew his sword, and made ready to cut off the lad's head, with these words, 'Now mayst thou see, Earl Sigurd, that I will spare no man who will not serve Almighty God, or listen to my exhortations and hearken to this blessed message; and for that I will now on this very spot slay this thy son before thine eyes, with this same sword which I grasp, unless thou and thy men serve my God; for hence out of the isles will I not go before I have forwarded and fulfilled this His glorious errand, and thou and thy son, whom I now hold, have taken on you baptism.'

"And in the strait to which the earl was now come, he chose the choice which the king would have, and which was better for him, to take the right faith. Then the earl was baptized, and all the folk in the Orkneys. After that Earl Sigurd was made after this world's honour King Olaf's earl, and held under him lands and fiefs, and gave him for an hostage that same son of his of whom it was spoken before; he was called Whelp or Hound. Olaf made them christen the lad by the name of Hlodver, and carried him away with him to Norway. Earl Sigurd bound with oaths all their agreement, and next after that Olaf sailed away from the Orkneys, but set up there behind him priests to mend the folk's ways and teach them holy wisdom; so they, King Olaf and Sigurd, parted with friendship. Hlodver lived but a scanty time; but after that he was dead Earl Sigurd showed King Olaf no service. He took to wife then the daughter of Malcolm the Scot King, and Thorfinn was their son."

So does the Saga tell this dramatic tale; and we

may notice that the earl's allegiance to the new faith was as fickle as his fidelity to the king, for a few years later we find him fighting in the ranks of the heathen against the Christian king, Brian of Ireland, under the shadow of his raven banner, a flag endowed by his mother's spells with the twofold magical power of ensuring victory to those who followed it, but death to him who bore it.

The story of "King Brian's battle," or the battle of Clontarf, is one of the most stirring in the old records, and we give it here as told by the Saga-man:—

"Then King Sigtrygg [of Ireland] stirred in his business with Earl Sigurd, and egged him on to go to the war with King Brian. The earl was long steadfast, but the end of it was that he said it might come about. He said he must have his mother's hand for his help, and be king in Ireland if they slew Brian. But all his men besought Earl Sigurd not to go into the war, but it was all no good. So they parted on the understanding that Earl Sigurd gave his word to go; but King Sigtrygg promised him his mother and the kingdom. It was so settled that Earl Sigurd was to come with all his host to Dublin by Palm Sunday.

"Then King Sigtrygg fared south to Ireland, and told his mother, Kormlada, that the earl had undertaken to come, and also what he had pledged himself to grant him. She showed herself well pleased at that, but said they must gather greater force still. Sigtrygg asked whence this was to be looked for. She said that there were two Vikings lying off the west of Man; and they had thirty ships, and 'they are men of such hardihood that nothing can withstand them. The one's name is Ospak, and

the other's Brodir. Thou shalt fare to find them, and spare nothing to get them into thy quarrel, whatever price they ask.'

"Now King Sigtrygg fares and seeks the Vikings, and found them lying outside off Man. King Sigtrygg brings forward his errand at once; but Brodir shrank from helping him until he, King Sigtrygg, promised him the kingdom and his mother, and they were to keep this such a secret that Earl Sigurd should know nothing about it. Brodir, too, was to come to Dublin on Palm Sunday. King Sigtrygg fared home to his mother and told her how things stood. After that those brothers, Ospak and Brodir, talked together; and then Brodir told Ospak all that he and Sigtrygg had spoken of, and bade him fare to battle with him against King Brian, and said he set much store on his going. Ospak said he would not fight against so good a king. Then they were both wrath, and sundered their band at once. Ospak had ten ships and Brodir twenty. Ospak was a heathen, and the wisest of all men. He laid his ships inside in a sound, but Brodir lay outside him. Brodir had been a Christian man and a mass-deacon by consecration; but he had thrown off his faith and become God's dastard, and now worshipped heathen fiends, and he was of all men most skilled in sorcery. He had that coat of mail on which no steel would bite. He was both tall and strong, and had such long locks that he tucked them under his belt. His hair was black.

"It so happened one night that a great din passed over Brodir and his men, so that they all woke, and sprang up and put on their clothes. Along with that came a shower of boiling blood. Then they

covered themselves with their shields, but for all that many were scalded. This wonder lasted all till day, and a man had died on board every ship. Then they slept during the day. The second night there was again a din, and again they all sprang up. Then swords leapt out of their sheaths, and axes and spears flew about in the air and fought. The weapons pressed them so hard that they had to shield themselves; but still many were wounded, and again a man died out of every ship. This wonder lasted all till day. Then they slept again the day after. The third night there was a din of the same kind. Then ravens flew at them, and it seemed to them as though their beaks and claws were of iron. The ravens pressed them so hard that they had to keep them off with their swords, and covered themselves with their shields. This went on again till day, and then another man had died in every ship.

“Then they went to sleep first of all; but when Brodir woke up, he drew his breath painfully, and bade them put off the boat, ‘For,’ said he, ‘I will go to see Ospak.’ Then he got into the boat and some men with him. But when he found Ospak he told him of the wonders which had befallen them, and bade him say what he thought they boded. Ospak would not tell him before he pledged him peace, and Brodir promised him peace; but Ospak still shrank from telling him till night fell, for Brodir never slew a man by night.

“Then Ospak spoke, and said, ‘When blood rained on you, therefore shall ye shed many men’s blood, both of your own and others. But when ye heard a great din, then ye must have been shown the

crack of doom, and ye shall all die speedily. But when weapons fought against you, that must forebode a battle. But when ravens pressed you, that marks the devils which ye put faith in, and who will drag you all down to the pains of hell.'

"Then Brodir was so wrath that he could answer never a word. But he went at once to his men, and made them lay his ships in a line across the sound, and moor them by bearing cables on shore, and meant to slay them all next morning. Ospak saw all their plan. Then he vowed to take the true faith, and to go to King Brian and follow him till his death-day. Then he took that counsel to lay his ships in a line, and punt them along the shore with poles, and cut the cables of Brodir's ships. Then the ships of Brodir's men began to fall aboard of one another. But they were all fast asleep; and then Ospak and his men got out of the firth, and so west to Ireland, and came to Kincora. Then Ospak told King Brian all that he had learnt, and took baptism, and gave himself over into the king's hand. After that King Brian made them gather force over all his realm, and the whole host was to come to Dublin in the week before Palm Sunday.

"Earl Sigurd, Hlodver's son, busked him from the Orkneys, and Flosi offered to go with him. The earl would not have that, since he had his pilgrimage to fulfil. Flosi offered fifteen men of his band to go on the voyage, and the earl accepted them; but Flosi fared with Earl Gilli to the Southern Isles. Thorstein, the son of Hall of the Side, went along with Earl Sigurd, and Hrafn the Red, and Erling of Straumey. He would not that Hareck should go, but

said he would be sure to tell him first the tidings of his voyage. The earl came with all his host on Palm Sunday to Dublin, and there, too, was come Brodir with all his host. Brodir tried by sorcery how the fight would go. But the answer ran thus, that if the fight were on Good Friday, King Brian would fall but win the day; but if they fought before, they would all fall who were against him. Then Brodir said that they must not fight before the Friday.....

“King Brian came with all his host to the burg; and on the Friday the host fared out of the burg, and both armies were drawn up in array. Brodir was on one wing of the battle, but King Sigtrygg on the other. Earl Sigurd was in the mid-battle. Now, it must be told of King Brian that he would not fight on the fast-day, and so a shieldburg was thrown round him, and his host was drawn up in array in front of it. Wolf the Quarrelsome was on that wing of the battle against which Brodir stood. But on the other wing, where Sigtrygg stood against them, were Ospak and his sons. But in mid-battle was Kerthialfad, and before him the banners were borne. Now the wings fall on one another, and there was a very hard fight. Brodir went through the host of the foe, and felled all the foremost that stood there, but no steel would bite on him. Wolf the Quarrelsome turned then to meet him, and thrust at him twice so hard that Brodir fell before him at each thrust, and was well-nigh not getting on his feet again. But as soon as ever he found his feet, he fled away into the wood at once.

“Earl Sigurd had a hard battle against Kerthialfad, and Kerthialfad came on so fast that he laid low

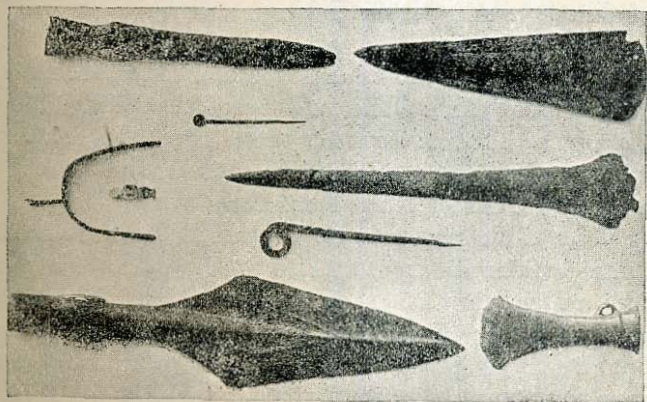
all who were in the front rank, and he broke the array of Earl Sigurd right up to his banner, and slew the banner-bearer. Then he got another man to bear the banner, and there was again a hard fight. Kerthialfad smote this man too his death-blow at once, and so on one after the other all who stood near him. Then Earl Sigurd called on Thorstein, the son of Hall of the Side, to bear the banner, and Thorstein was just about to lift the banner. But then Amundi the White said, 'Don't bear the banner! for all they who bear it get their death.' 'Hrafn the Red!' called out Earl Sigurd, 'bear thou the banner.' 'Bear thine own devil thyself,' answered Hrafn. Then the earl said, 'Tis fittest that the beggar should bear the bag;' and with that he took the banner from the staff and put it under his cloak. A little after, Amundi the White was slain, and then the earl was pierced through with a spear. Ospak had gone through all the battle on his wing. He had been sore wounded, and lost both his sons ere King Sigtrygg fled before him. Then flight broke out throughout all the host. Thorstein, Hall of the Side's son, stood still while all the others fled, and tied his shoestring. Then Kerthialfad asked why he ran not as the others. 'Because,' said Thorstein, 'I can't get home to-night, since I am at home out in Iceland.' Kerthialfad gave him peace.....

"Now Brodir saw that King Brian's men were chasing the fleers, and that there were few men by the shieldburg. Then he rushed out of the wood, and broke through the shieldburg, and hewed at the king. The lad Takt threw his arm in the way, and the stroke took it off and the king's head too; but

the king's blood came on the lad's stump, and the stump was healed by it on the spot. Then Brodir called out with a loud voice, 'Now man can tell that Brodir felled Brian.' Then men ran after those who were chasing the fleers, and they were told that King Brian had fallen; and then they turned back straight-way, both Wolf the Quarrelsome and Kerthialfad. Then they threw a ring round Brodir and his men, and threw branches of trees upon them, and so Brodir was taken alive.....After that they took King Brian's body and laid it out. The king's head had grown to the trunk.....

"This event happened in the Orkneys, that Hareck thought he saw Earl Sigurd, and some men with him. Then Hareck took his horse and rode to meet the earl. Men say that they met and rode under a brae; but they were never seen again, and not a scrap was ever found of Hareck."

*From the "Njala Saga," translated by Sir G. W. Dasent, D.C.L.
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Ancient Bronze Weapons and Ornaments.