

THE SLAYING OF EARL MAGNUS.



T. MAGNUS, the isle earl, was the most peerless of men, tall of growth, manly, and lively of look, virtuous in his ways, fortunate in fight, a sage in wit, ready-tongued and lordly-minded, lavish of money and high-spirited, quick of counsel, and more beloved of his friends than any man. Blithe and of kind speech to wise and good men, but hard and unsparing against robbers and sea-rovers, he let many men be slain who harried the freemen and land-folk. He made murderers and thieves be taken, and visited as well on the powerful as on the weak robberies and thieveries and all ill deeds. He was no favourer of his friends in his judgments, for he valued more godly justice than the distinctions of rank. He was open-handed to chiefs and powerful men, but still he ever showed most care for poor men.....

“Those kinsmen, Magnus and Hakon, held the wardship of the land for some while, so that they were well agreed.....But when those kinsmen had ruled the land some time, then again happened, what often and always can happen, that many ill-willing men set about spoiling their kinship. Then unlucky

men gathered more about Hakon, for that he was very envious of the friendships and lordliness of his kinsman Magnus.

“Two men are they who are named, who were with Earl Hakon, and who were the worst of all the tale-bearers between those kinsmen, Sigurd and Sighvat Sock. This slander came so far with the gossip of wicked men, that those kinsmen again gathered forces together, and each earl faced against the other with a great company. Then both of them held on to Hrossey [the Mainland], where the place of meeting of those Orkneyingers was. But when they came there, then each drew up his men in array, and they made them ready to battle. There were then the earls and all the great men, and there, too, were many friends of both who did all they could to set them at one again. Many then came between them with manliness and good-will. This meeting was in Lent, a little before Palm Sunday. But because many men of their well-wishers took a share in clearing up these difficulties between them, but would stand by neither to do harm to the other, then they bound their agreement with oaths and handsels. And when some time had gone by after that, then Earl Hakon, with falsehood and fair words, settled with the blessed Earl Magnus to meet him on a certain day, so that their kinship and steadfast new-made peace should not be turned aside or set at naught. This meeting for a steadfast peace and a thorough atonement between them was to be in Easter week that spring on Egil's Isle [Egilsay]. This pleased Earl Magnus well, being, as he was, a thoroughly whole-hearted man, far

from all doubt, guile, or greed; and each of them was to have two ships, and each just as many men: this both swore, to hold and keep those terms of peace which the wisest men made up their minds to declare between them.

“But when Eastertide was gone by, each made him ready for this meeting. Earl Magnus summoned to him all those men whom he knew to be kindest-hearted and likeliest to do a good turn to both those kinsmen. He had two long-ships and just as many men as was said. And when he was ready he held on his course to Egil's Isle. And as they were rowing in calm over the smooth sea, there rose a billow against the ship which the earl steered, and fell on the ship just where the earl sat. The earl's men wondered much at this token, that the billow fell on them in a calm where no man had ever known it to fall before, and where the water under was deep. Then the earl said, ‘It is not strange that ye wonder at this; but my thought is, that this is a foreboding of my life's end, may be that may happen which was before spoken about Earl Hakon. We should so make up our minds about our undertaking, that I guess my kinsman Hakon must not mean to deal fairly by us at this meeting.’ The earl's men were afraid at these words, when he said he had so short hope as to his life's end, and bade him take heed for his life, and not fare further trusting in Earl Hakon. Earl Magnus answers, ‘We shall fare on still, and may all God's will be done as to our voyage.’

“Now it must be told about Earl Hakon, that he summoned to him a great company, and had many

war-ships, and all manned and trimmed as though they were to run out to battle. And when the force came together, the earl makes it clear to the men that he meant at that meeting so to settle matters between himself and Earl Magnus that they should not both of them be over the Orkneys. Many of his men showed themselves well pleased at this purpose, and added many fearful words; and they, Sigurd and Sighvat Sock, were among the worst in their utterance. Then men began to row hard, and they fared furiously. Havard, Gunni's son, was on board the earl's ship, a friend and counsellor of the earl's, and a fast friend to both alike. Hakon had hidden from him this bad counsel, which Havard would surely not join in. And when he knew the earl was so steadfast in this bad counsel, then he jumped from the earl's ship and took to swimming, and swam to an isle where no man dwelt.

“Earl Magnus came first to Egil's Isle with his company, and when they saw Hakon coming they saw that he had eight war-ships; he thought he knew then that treachery must be meant. Earl Magnus then betook himself up on the isle with his men, and went to the church to pray, and was there that night; but his men offered to defend him. The earl answers, ‘I will not lay your life in risk for me, and if peace is not to be made between us two kinsmen, then be it as God wills.’ Then his men thought that what he had said when the billow fell on them was coming true. Now for that he felt sure as to the hours of his life beforehand, whether it was rather from his shrewdness or of godly foreshowing, then he would not fly nor

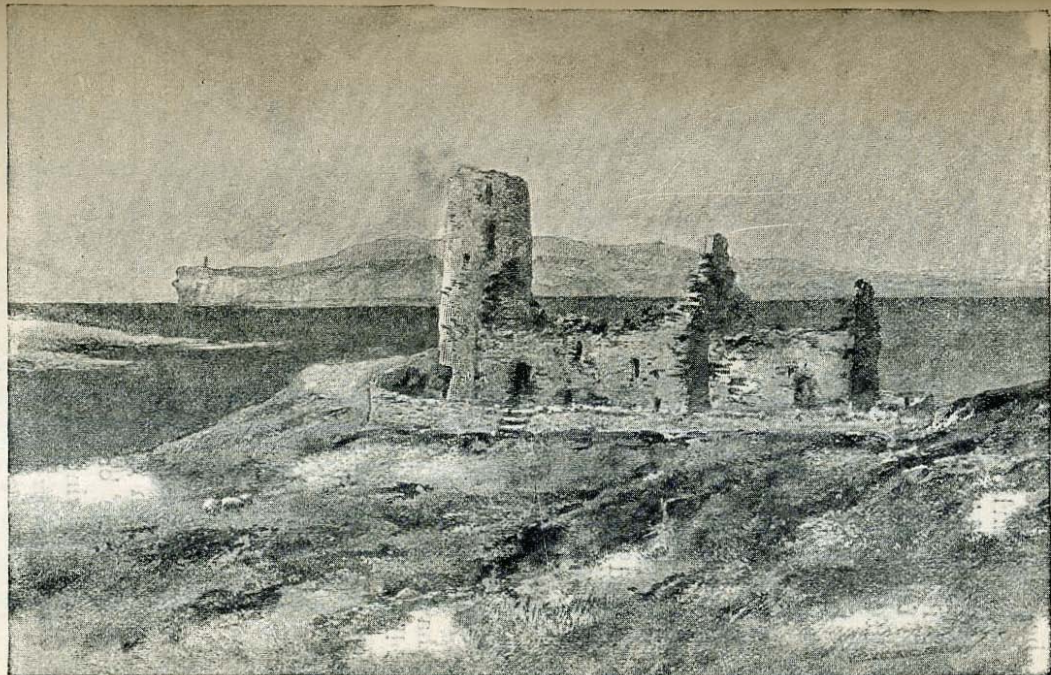
fare far from the meeting of his foes. He prayed earnestly, and let a mass be sung to him.

“Hakon and his men jumped up in the morning, and ran first to the church and ransacked it, and did not find the earl. He had gone another way on the isle with two men into a certain hiding-place. And when the saint Earl Magnus saw that they sought for him, then he calls out to them and says where he was; he bade them look nowhere else for him. And when Hakon saw him, they ran thither with shouts and crash of arms. Earl Magnus was then at his prayers when they came to him, and when he had ended his prayers then he signed himself [with the cross], and said to Earl Hakon, with steadfast heart, ‘Thou didst not well, kinsman, when thou wentest back on thy oaths, and it is much to be hoped that thou doest this more from others’ badness than thine own. Now will I offer thee three choices, that thou do one of these rather than break thine oaths and let me be slain guiltless.’

“Hakon’s men asked what offer he made. ‘That is the first, that I will go south to Rome, or out as far as Jerusalem, and visit holy places, and have two ships with me out of the land with what we need to have, and so make atonement for both of our souls. This I will swear, never to come back to the Orkneys.’ To this they said ‘Nay’ at once. Then Earl Magnus spoke: ‘Now seeing that my life is in your power, and that I have in many things made myself an outlaw before Almighty God, then send thou me up into Scotland to some of both our friends, and let me be there kept in ward, and two men with me as a pastime. Take thou care then that I may

never be able to get out of that wardship.' To this they said 'Nay' at once. Magnus spoke: 'One choice is still behind which I will offer thee, and God knows that I look more to your soul than to my life; but still it better beseems thee than to take my life away. Let me be maimed in my limbs as thou pleasest, or pluck out my eyes, and set me in a dark dungeon.' Then Earl Hakon spoke: 'This settlement I am ready to take, nor do I ask anything further.' Then the chiefs sprang up and said to Earl Hakon, 'We will slay now either of you twain, and ye two shall not both from this day forth rule the lands.' Then answers Earl Hakon: 'Slay ye him rather, for I will rather rule the realm and lands than die so suddenly.' So says Holdbodi, a truthful freeman from the Southern Isles, of the parley they had. He was then with Magnus, and another man with him, when they took him captive.

"So glad was the worthy Earl Magnus as though he were bidden to a feast; he neither spoke with hate nor words of wrath. And after this talk he fell to prayer, and hid his face in the palms of his hands, and shed out many tears before God's eyesight. When Earl Magnus, the saint, was done to death, Hakon bade Ofeig his banner-bearer to slay the earl, but he said 'Nay' with the greatest wrath. Then he forced Lifolf his cook to kill Earl Magnus, but he began to weep aloud. 'Thou shalt not weep for this,' said the earl, 'for that there is fame in doing such deeds. Be steadfast in thine heart, for thou shalt have my clothes, as is the wont and law of men of old, and thou shalt not be afraid, for thou doest this against thy will.



Church of St. Magnus, Egilsay.
(From a painting by T. Marjoribanks Hay, R.S.W.)

and he who forces thee misdoes more than thou.' But when the earl had said this he threw off his kirtle and gave it to Lifolf. After that he begged leave to say his prayers, and that was granted him.

"He fell to earth, and gave himself over to God, and brought himself as an offering to Him. He not only prayed for himself or his friends, but rather there and then for his foes and banemen, and forgave them with all his heart what they had misdome towards him, and confessed his own misdeeds to God, and prayed that they might be washed off him by the outshedding of his blood, and commended his soul into God's hand, and prayed that God's angels would come to meet his soul and bear it into the rest of Paradise. When the friend of God was led out to slaughter he spoke to Lifolf: 'Stand thou before me, and hew me on my head a great wound, for it beseems not to chop off chiefs' heads like thieves'. Strengthen thyself, wretched man, for I have prayed to God that he may have mercy upon thee.' After that he signed himself [with the cross], and bowed himself to the stroke. And his spirit passed to heaven.

"That spot was before mossy and stony. But a little after, the worthiness of Earl Magnus before God was so bright that there sprung up a green sward where he was slain, and God showed that, that he was slain for righteousness' sake, and inherited the fairness and greenness of Paradise, which is called the earth of living men.....There had then passed since the birth of Christ one thousand and ninety and one winters."

*From the "Orkneyinga Saga," translated by Sir G. W. Dasent, D.C.L.
(By permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.)*