

## SWEYN ASLEIFSON, THE LAST OF THE VIKINGS.



THE sudden disappearance of Earl Paul, by which Earl Rognvald had been left in sole possession of the Orkneys, was, as we have said, due to a certain Viking, Sweyn Asleifson of Gairsay. This Sweyn is one of the most remarkable men in all Orcadian history. Among the Vikings of old he was the greatest, and he was the last. Of him the Saga says: "He was the greatest man in the western lands, either in old time or at the present day."

For the slaying of one of Earl Paul's men Sweyn had had to escape out of the isles. He abode for a time in the Hebrides, and afterwards sought refuge in the dales of Scotland, where Margaret, the daughter of Earl Hakon, was married to Maddad, Earl of Athole. He had promised to help Harald, their son, to become Earl of the Orkneys, and it was with a view to this that he kidnapped Earl Paul.

On that morning Earl Paul had gone out early from Westness to hunt the otter near Scabro Head. Sweyn had sailed over from Thurso, keeping to the west of Hoy and the Mainland, and was now

rowing into Evie Sound, for he had heard that Earl Paul was staying with Sigurd of Westness. As they rowed near the land, Sweyn ordered all his men to lie hid except those at the oars, that the ship might look like a peaceful merchant-vessel.

When the earl saw the ship rowing near the rocks, he called out to the men that they should go on to Westness with their wares for Earl Paul. Then Sweyn, who was lying hid, bade his men ask where the earl was.

“The earl is here on the rocks,” was the reply.

“Row quickly to land at a place where they will not see us,” said Sweyn to his men; “and let us arm ourselves, for we have work to do.”

The ship was rowed to the shore, as he had said, and Sweyn and his men armed themselves and fell upon Earl Paul and his company. These, being unarmed, were soon disposed of. The earl was seized and taken aboard the ship, and Sweyn immediately set sail for Scotland by the way he had come.

Sigurd marvelled when the earl did not return from his hunting, and men were sent out to look for him. They came upon the bodies of the slain—nineteen of the earl’s men and six strangers—but the earl himself had disappeared. It was at first thought that Earl Rognvald had had something to do with his disappearance, and it was many days before men knew what had become of the vanished earl.

In the meantime Sweyn had carried Paul to Athole, and placed him in the keeping of Maddad and Margaret. His after fate is unknown. The story which Sweyn afterwards told is that Paul did not wish to return to Orkney, so shameful had been the

manner of his leaving it; and that he wished it to be reported that he had been blinded or maimed, in order that men should not seek to bring him back. Sweyn himself came back to Orkney with this story; and he acknowledged Earl Rognvald, and became very friendly with him.

As the great Earl of Warwick has been called "the king-maker" in England, so Sweyn may be called the "earl-maker" in Orkney. He it was who caused Harald, the son of Maddad, to be made earl, and he also supported Earl Erlend in his claims while Earl Rognvald was in the Holy Land. He gained the friendship of David, King of Scots, Viking though he was, and the terror of the Scottish and Irish seas. Many of Sweyn's Viking raids are told in the Orkney Saga, one of the most famous being that known as Sweyn's "Broadcloth Cruise." The following account is given of this cruise, and of the death of Sweyn:—

"These tidings happened once on a time, that Sweyn Asleifson fared away on his spring-cruise, and Hakon, Earl Harald's son, fared with him; and they had five ships with oars, and all of them large. They harried about among the Southern Isles. Then the folk were so scared at him in the Southern Isles that men hid all their goods and chattels in the earth or in piles of rocks. Sweyn sailed as far south as Man, and got ill off for spoil. Thence they sailed out under Ireland and harried there. But when they came about south under Dublin, then two keels sailed there from off the main, which had come from England, and meant to steer for Dublin; they were laden with English cloths, and great store of goods was aboard them.

“Sweyn and his men pulled up to the keels and offered them battle. Little came of the defence of the Englishmen before Sweyn gave the word to board. Then the Englishmen were made prisoners. And there they robbed them of every penny which was aboard the keels, save that the Englishmen kept the clothes they stood in and some food, and went on their way afterwards with the keels; but Sweyn and his men fared to the Southern Isles and shared their war-spoil.

“They sailed from the west with great pomp. They did this as a glory for themselves when they lay in harbours, that they threw awnings of English cloth over their ships. But when they sailed into the Orkneys, they sewed the cloth on the fore-part of the sails, so that it looked in that wise as though the sails were made altogether of broadcloth. This they called the Broadcloth Cruise.

“Sweyn fared home to his house in Gairsay. He had taken from the keels much wine and English mead. Now when Sweyn had been at home a short while, he bade to him Earl Harald, and made a worthy feast against his coming. When Earl Harald was at the feast, there was much talk amongst them of Sweyn's good cheer. The earl spoke and said: ‘This I would now, Sweyn, that thou wouldst lay aside thy sea-rovings; 'tis good now to drive home with a whole wain. But thou knowest this, that thou hast long maintained thyself and thy men by sea-roving; but so it fares with most men who live by unfair means, that they lose their lives in strife, if they do not break themselves from it.’

“Then Sweyn answered, and looked to the earl, and

spoke with a smile, and said thus: 'Well spoken is this, lord, and friendly spoken, and it will be good to take a bit of good counsel from you; but some men lay that to your door, that ye too are men of little fairness.' The earl answered: 'I shall have to answer for my share, but a gossiping tongue drives me to say what I do.'

"Sweyn said: 'Good, no doubt, drives you to it, lord. And so it shall be, that I will leave off sea-roving, for I find that I am growing old, and strength lessens much in hardships and warfare. Now I will go out on my autumn-cruise, and I would that it might be with no less glory than the spring-cruise was; but after that my wayfaring shall be over.' The earl answers: 'Tis hard to see, messmate, whether death or lasting luck will come first.' After that they dropped talking about it. Earl Harald fared away from the feast, and was led out with fitting gifts. So he and Sweyn parted with great love-tokens.

"A little while after, Sweyn busks him for his roving cruise; he had seven long-ships, and all great. Hakon, Earl Harald's son, went along with Sweyn on his voyage. They held on their course first to the Southern Isles, and got there little war-spoil; thence they fared out under Ireland, and harried there far and wide. They fared so far south as Dublin, and came upon them there very suddenly, so that the townsmen were not ware of them before they had got into the town. They took there much goods. They made prisoners there those men who were rulers there in the town. The upshot of their business was that they gave the town up into Sweyn's power, and agreed to pay as great a ransom as he chose to lay

upon them. Sweyn was also to hold the town with his men and to have rule over it. The Dublin men sware an oath to do this. Next morning Sweyn was to come into the town and take the ransom.

“Now it must be told of what happened in the town during the night. The men of good counsel who were in the town held a meeting among themselves, and talked over the straits which had befallen them; it seemed to them hard to let their town come into the power of the Orkneyingers, and worst of all of that man whom they knew to be the most unjust man in the western lands. So they agreed amongst themselves that they would cheat Sweyn if they might. They took that counsel, that they dug great trenches before the burg-gate on the inside, and in many other places between the houses where it was meant that Sweyn and his men should pass; but men lay in wait there in the houses hard by with weapons. They laid planks over the trenches, so that they should fall down as soon as ever a man’s weight comes on them. After that they strewed straw on the planks so that the trenches might not be seen, and so bided the morrow.

“On the morning after, Sweyn and his men arose and put on their arms; after that they went to the town. And when they came inside beyond the burg-gate, the Dublin men made a lane from the burg-gate right to the trenches. Sweyn and his men saw not what they were doing, and ran into the trenches. The townsmen then ran straightway to hold the burg-gate, but some to the trenches, and brought their arms to bear on Sweyn and his men. It was unhandy for them to make any defence, and Sweyn

lost his life there in the trenches, and all those who had gone into the town. So it was said that Sweyn was the last to die of all his messmates, and spoke these words ere he died: 'Know this, all men, whether I lose my life to-day or not, that I am one of the Saint Earl Rognvald's bodyguard, and I now mean to put my trust in being there where he is with God.' Sweyn's men fared at once to their ships and pulled away, and nothing is told about their voyage before they come into the Orkneys."

*From the "Orkneyinga Saga," translated by Sir G. W. Dasent, D.C.I.  
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