

EARL THORFINN AND EARL ROGNVALD.



EARL SIGURD, as has been mentioned, took as his second wife the daughter of Malcolm the Second, King of Scots. They had but one son, Thorfinn, called the Mighty, the greatest of his race, who became the most powerful of all the Orkney earls. When he was but five winters old Thorfinn was sent to his grandfather Malcolm to be brought up at the Scottish Court, and on his father's death he was made Earl of Caithness and Sutherland.

Einar and Brusi, sons of Sigurd by his first wife, then ruled over the islands. Einar was ambitious and warlike, Brusi mild and peaceful. When they shared the earldom between them, Brusi was content with a third part, while Einar took over the remainder; and so matters stood for a time.

When Thorfinn grew up to manhood, he was not content with his large domains in Scotland. He put forward a claim to one-third of the Orkneys as his rightful share. Einar would have disputed the claim; but Brusi resigned his share to Thorfinn, and an agreement was made that when Einar died his share should be handed over to Brusi. So peace was kept

for the time. But when Einar died, Thorfinn seized half of the whole earldom.

Brusi was unable to resist the great power of Thorfinn, so he resolved to go east to Norway, and ask Ólaf the king to do justice between him and his brother. Thorfinn also went to Norway to plead his own cause. King Olaf, unwilling to increase the power of a subject already too powerful, decided in favour of Brusi. But when the two earls returned to the islands, Brusi found the task of ruling his dominions and defending them against the Vikings too heavy for him, and Thorfinn no doubt took care that there should always be plenty of trouble for him to face.

At last Brusi was glad to hand over two-thirds of the earldom to Thorfinn, on condition of his undertaking to defend the islands; and this arrangement lasted till Brusi's death.

In the meantime, Rognvald, Brusi's son, had been growing up at the Court of Olaf, King of Norway, and he was a close friend of Magnus, Olaf's son, who afterwards became king. When Rognvald heard that Brusi, his father, was dead, and that Earl Thorfinn had seized the whole earldom, he prepared to fare westward and claim his share of the land. Thorfinn was now the most powerful ruler in all the western lands. He had defeated the Scots in a great sea-fight off Deerness; he had subdued the Western Isles; he had conquered great realms in Scotland; and he had made himself master of the half of Ireland.

At the time when Rognvald came to the Orkneys, however, Thorfinn had wars on his hands in the Western Isles and in Ireland, and he was glad to

offer Rognvald two-thirds of the islands in return for his friendship and his help. So for a time the two earls lived in friendship with each other.

Then evil men made mischief between them, and Thorfinn demanded back the third of the land which had belonged to Earl Einar. Rognvald refused, and sailed away to Norway to ask help from King Magnus. With a fleet of Norwegian ships he came back to Orkney, and was met in the Pentland Firth by the ships of Earl Thorfinn. Earl Rognvald's ships were fewer in number, but their larger size at first gave him the advantage. Earl Thorfinn was hard pressed; but at last he persuaded his brother-in-law, Kalf Arnesson, whose ships were lying by watching the fight, to come to his aid and row against Rognvald. Then the tide of battle turned against Earl Rognvald, and only by the darkness of the night was he enabled to escape, and once more to find his way to Norway.

Again King Magnus came to his help; but this time Earl Rognvald tried to take Thorfinn by surprise, so he sailed away to Orkney in the dead of winter with only one ship. Before there was any news of his coming, he surrounded the house where Earl Thorfinn was feasting, and set it on fire. Only the women and children were allowed to go free; but while the warriors were in confusion, seeking some way of escape, the great earl broke a hole through the side of the house where the smoke was thickest, and, carrying his wife, Ingibiorg, in his arms, he escaped in the darkness to the seashore, took a boat, and rowed across to Caithness.

Now it seemed that Rognvald's success was com-

plete, for he thought that Earl Thorfinn was surely dead. When Christmas-time was at hand, he prepared to hold a great feast at Kirkwall, and with some of his men he took a ship to Papa Stronsay to bring over a cargo of malt for the brewing. They stayed there for the night, and sat long over the fire telling of all their adventures. Meanwhile, however, Earl Thorfinn had come back from Caithness to seek revenge. In the darkness he and his men surrounded the house where Earl Rognvald sat, and set it on fire. All except the earl's men were allowed to come out, being drawn over the pile of wood which Thorfinn's men had placed before the door.

While this was being done, a man suddenly leaped over the pile, and over the armed men beside it, and disappeared in the darkness.

"That must be Earl Rognvald," cried Thorfinn, "for no one else could do such a feat." Then they all ran to search for Earl Rognvald in the darkness. The barking of his dog betrayed the earl's hiding-place to his enemies, and soon he was found and slain among the rocks upon the shore.

Next morning Thorfinn and his men took Earl Rognvald's ship and sailed to Kirkwall. And when Rognvald's men who were in the town came, unarmed, expecting to meet the earl, they were set upon by Earl Thorfinn's men, and thirty of them were slain. These men were of the bodyguard of King Magnus, and only one of them was allowed to go back to Norway to tell the tidings to the king.

Then for eighteen years Thorfinn ruled the earldom, till the day of his death. He was by far the greatest of the Orkney earls. He built Christ's Kirk in

Birsay, and in his time the Bishopric of Orkney was founded. During his later years the islands enjoyed peace, and many wise laws were made; and when the great earl died there was much sorrow in the Orkneys. So the poet sings in his honour:—

“Swarthy shall become the bright sun,
In the dark sea shall the earth sink,
Finished shall be Austri’s labour,
And the wild sea hide the mountains,
Ere there be in these fair islands
Born a chief to rule the people—
May our God both keep and help them—
Greater than the lost Earl Thorfinn.”

Paul and Erlend, the two sons of Thorfinn, succeeded to the earldom, and for some time they ruled in harmony together. They fought for King Harald Hardradi against Harold, Godwin’s son, at the battle of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire in 1066, but were allowed to return in peace to their earldom. Trouble arose between the brothers when their sons grew to manhood, and Magnus Barefoot, King of Norway, made a descent upon the islands. He carried the two brothers into exile, appointing his own son Sigurd as “King” of Orkney, which post he held until his father’s death made him King of Norway. Hakon, Paul’s son, and Magnus, Erlend’s son, afterwards called St. Magnus, then became joint earls.

Their joint rule had the usual result, quarrels and misunderstandings, and was brought to an end by the murder of Earl Magnus in Egilsay in 1115. The story is told in the Saga of Earl Magnus, from which the next chapter is taken.