

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE LIFE AND DEATH
OF CORMAC THE SKALD

W.G. Collingwood

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED





THE: LIFE: AND: DEATH: OF:

KORMAC
THE SKALD

BEING: THE: ICELANDIC

KORMÁKS= SAGA

RENDERED: INTO: ENGLISH: BY:

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AUTHORS: OF: A: PILGRIMAGE: TO

THE: SAGA= STEADS: OF: ICELAND:

This edition published 2021
by Living Book Press
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First published in 1902.

ISBN: 978-1-922619-79-2 (softcover)

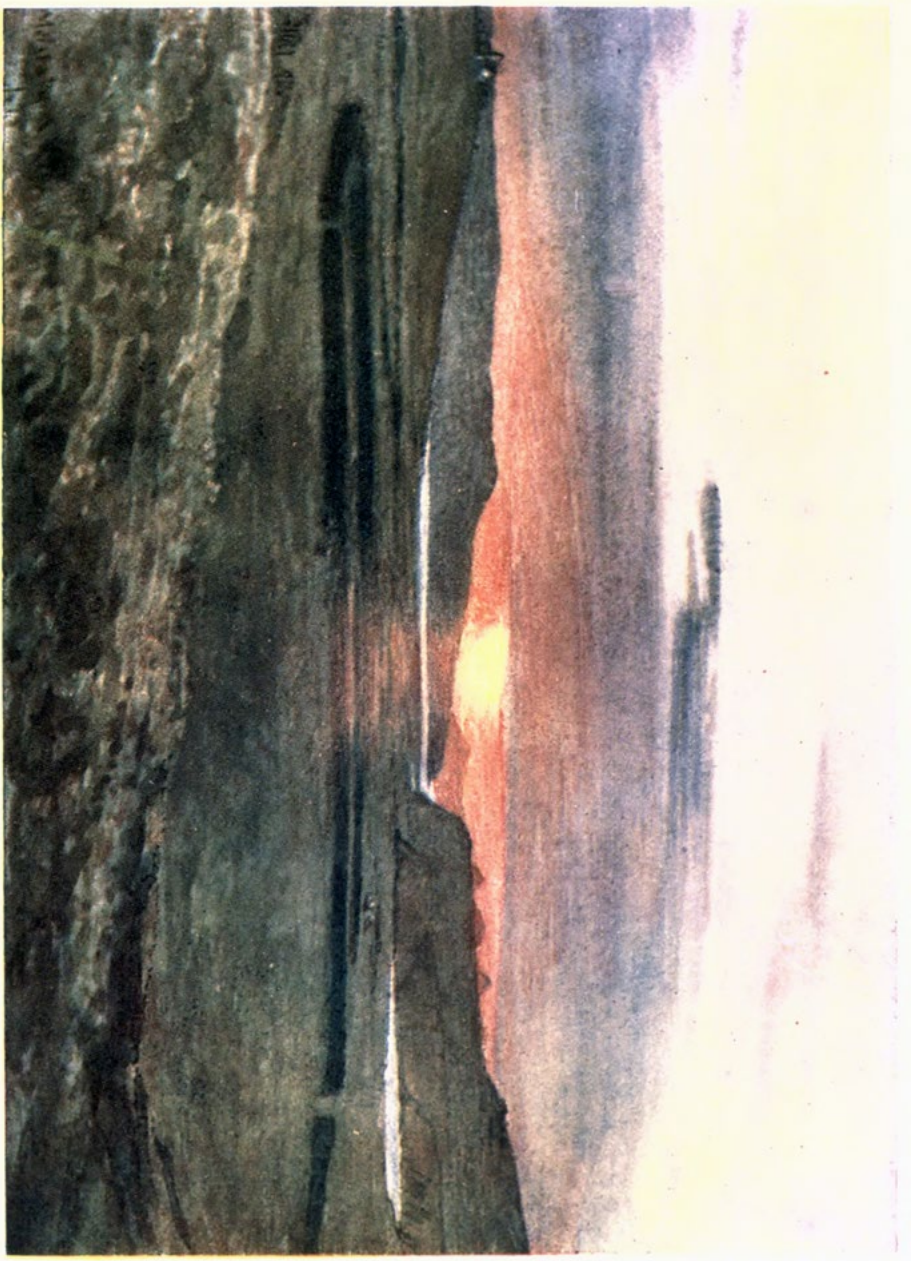
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CONTENTS

1.	CORMAC'S FORE-ELDERS.	3
2.	HOW CORMAC WAS BORN AND BRED.	5
3.	HOW CORMAC FELL IN LOVE.	8
4.	HOW CORMAC LIKED BLACK-PUDDINGS.	14
5.	THEY WAYLAY CORMAC: AND THE WITCH CURSES HIM.	16
6.	CORMAC WINS HIS BRIDE AND LOSES HER.	21
7.	HOW STEINGERD WAS MARRIED TO SOMEBODY ELSE.	24
8.	HOW CORMAC CHASED BERSI AND HIS BRIDE.	29
9.	OF ANOTHER WITCH, AND TWO MAGIC SWORDS.	34
10.	THE FIGHT ON LEIDARHOLM.	39
11.	THE SONGS THAT WERE MADE ABOUT THE FIGHT.	44
12.	BERSI'S BAD LUCK AT THE THOR'S-NESS THING.	49
13.	STEINGERD LEAVES BERSI.	57
14.	THE BANE OF THORKEL TOOTHGNASHER.	60
15.	THE RESCUE OF STEINVOR SLIM-ANKLES.	62
16.	HOW VALI FELL BEFORE AN OLD MAN AND A BOY.	67
17.	HOW STEINGERD WAS MARRIED AGAIN.	72
18.	CORMAC'S VOYAGE TO NORWAY.	75
19.	HOW CORMAC FOUGHT, AND WENT HOME TO ICELAND; AND HOW HE MET STEINGERD AGAIN.	77
20.	OF A SPITEFUL SONG THAT CORMAC NEVER MADE; AND HOW ANGRY STEINGERD WAS.	84
21.	HOW THORVARD WOULD NOT FIGHT, BUT TRIED TO GET THE LAW OF CORMAC.	88
22.	WHAT THE WITCH DID FOR THEM IN THEIR FIGHTS.	90
23.	HOW CORMAC BEAT THORVARD AGAIN.	96
24.	HOW THEY ALL WENT OUT TO NORWAY.	98
25.	HOW THEY CRUISED WITH THE KING'S FLEET, AND QUARRELLED, AND MADE IT UP.	101
26.	HOW CORMAC SAVED STEINGERD; AND HOW THEY PARTED FOR GOOD AND ALL.	103
27.	THE SWAN-SONGS OF CORMAC.	106



SUNSET OVER MEL AND MIDEFJORD.

CHAPTER ONE.

CORMAC'S FORE-ELDERS.

HARALD Fairhair was king of Norway when this tale begins. There was a chief in the kingdom in those days and his name was Cormac; one of the Vik-folk¹ by kindred, a great man of high birth. He was the mightiest of champions, and had been with King Harald in many battles.

He had a son called Ogmund, a very hopeful lad; big and sturdy even as a child; who when he was grown of age and come to his full strength, took to sea-roving in summer and served in the king's household in winter. So he earned for himself a good name and great riches.

One summer he went roving about the British Isles and there he fell in with a man named Asmund Ashenside, who also was a great champion and had worsted many vikings and men of war. These two heard tell of one another and challenges passed between them. They came together and fought. Asmund had the greater following, but he withheld some of his men from the battle: and so for the length of four days they fought, until many of Asmund's people were fallen, and

1 Inhabitants of the Bight (Vikin) in the South of Norway

at last he himself fled. Ogmund won the victory and came home again with wealth and worship.

His father said that he could get no greater glory in war,—
“And now,” said he, “I will find thee a wife. What sayest thou to Helga, daughter of Earl Frodi?”

“So be it,” said Ogmund.

Upon this they set off to Earl Frodi’s house, and were welcomed with all honour. They made known their errand, and he took it kindly, although he feared that the fight with Asmund was likely to bring trouble. Nevertheless this match was made, and then they went their ways home. A feast was got ready for the wedding and to that feast a very great company came together.

Helga the daughter of Earl Frodi had a nurse that was a wise woman, and she went with her. Now Asmund the viking heard of this marriage, and set out to meet Ogmund. He bade him fight, and Ogmund agreed.

Helga’s nurse used to touch men² when they went to fight: so she did with Ogmund before he set out from home, and told him that he would not be hurt much.

Then they both went to the fighting holm and fought. The viking laid bare his side, but the sword would not bite upon it. Then Ogmund whirled about his sword swiftly and shifted it from hand to hand, and hewed Asmund’s leg from under him: and three marks of gold he took to let him go with his life.

2 To feel by clairvoyance for wounds they might get.

CHAPTER TWO.

**HOW CORMAC WAS
BORN AND BRED.**

ABOUT this time King Harald Fairhair died, and Eric Bloodaxe reigned in his stead. Ogmund would have no friendship with Eric, nor with Gunnhild,³ and made ready his ship for Iceland.

Nor Ogmund and Helga had a son called Frodi: but when the ship was nearly ready, Helga took a sickness and died; and so did their son Frodi.

After that, they sailed to sea. When they were near the land, Ogmund cast overboard his high-seat-pillars; and where the high-seat-pillars had already been washed ashore, there they cast anchor, and landed in Midfiord.

At this time Skeggi of Midfiord ruled the countryside. He came riding toward them and bade them welcome into the firth, and gave them the pick of the land: which Ogmund took, and began to mark out ground for a house. Now it was a belief of theirs that as the measuring went, so would the luck go: if the measuring-wand seemed to grow less when they tried it again and again, so would that house's luck grow less: and if

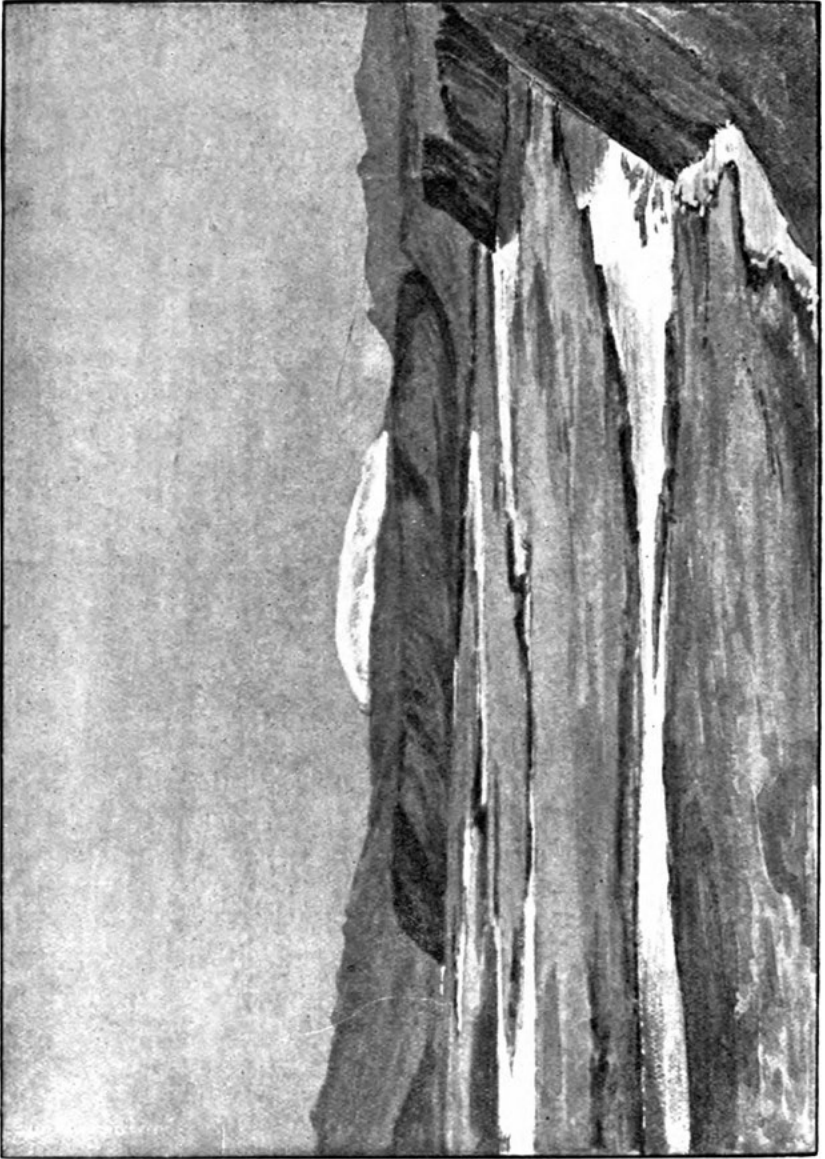
3 His wife, the witch.

it grew greater, so would the luck be. This time the measure always grew less, though they tried it three times over.

So Ogmund built him a house on the sandhills,⁴ and lived there ever after. He married Dalla, the daughter of Onund the Seer, and their sons were Thorgils and Cormac. Cormac was dark-haired, with a curly lock upon his forehead: he was bright of blee and somewhat like his mother, big and strong, and his mood was rash and hasty. Thorgils was quiet and easy to deal with.

When the brothers were grown up, Ogmund died; and Dalla kept house with her sons. Thorgils worked the farm, under the eye of Midfiord-Skeggi.

4 Melar, like the Meols of Lancashire and Cheshire, Esk-meals in Cumberland, etc., from which Cormac's home was called Mel, now Melstadr.



THE RIVER OF MIDFIORD

CHAPTER THREE.

HOW CORMAC FELL IN LOVE.

THERE was a man named Thorkel lived at Tunga (Tongue). He was a wedded man, and had a daughter called Steingerd who was fostered in Gnupsdal (Knipedale).

Now it was one autumn that a whale came ashore at Vatnsnes (Watsness), and it belonged to the brothers, Dalla's sons. Thorgils asked Cormac would he rather go shepherding on the fell, or work at the whale. He chose to fare on the fell with the house-carles.

Tosti, the foreman, it was should be master of the sheep-gathering: so he and Cormac went together until they came to Gnupsdal. It was night: there was a great hall, and fires for men to sit at.

That evening Steingerd came out of her bower, and a maid with her. Said the maid, "Steingerd mine, let us look at the guests."

"Nay," she said, "no need": and yet went to the door, and stepped on the threshold, and spied across the gate. Now there was a space between the wicker and the threshold, and her feet showed through. Cormac saw that, and made this song:—

(1)

“At the door of my soul she is standing,
So sweet in the gleam of her garment:
Her footfall awakens a fury,
A fierceness of love that I knew not,
Those feet of a wench in her wimple,
Their weird is my sorrow and troubling,
—Or naught may my knowledge avail me—
Both now and for aye to endure.”

Then Steingerd knew she was seen. She turned aside into a corner where the likeness of Hagbard⁵ was carved on the wall, and peeped under Hagbard’s beard. Then the firelight shone upon her face.

“Cormac,” said Tosti, “seest eyes out yonder by that head of Hagbard?”

Cormac answered in song:—

(2)

“There breaks on me, burning upon me,
A blaze from the cheeks of a maiden,
—I laugh not to look on the vision—
In the light of the hall by the doorway.
So sweet and so slender I deem her,
Though I spy but a glimpse of an ankle
By the threshold:—and through me there flashes
A thrill that shall age never more.”

And then he made another song:—

(3)

“The moon of her brow, it is beaming
‘Neath the bright-litten heaven of her forehead:
So she gleams in her white robe, and gazes
With a glance that is keen as the falcon’s.
But the star that is shining upon me

5 Hagbard, a famous early mythical king. In the Volsunga Saga (chapter 25) Brynhild names him with the sons of Haki as the first of men before the time of Sigurd the dragon-slayer.

What spell shall it work by its witchcraft?
Ah, that moon of her brow shall be mighty
With mischief to her—and to me?”

Said Tosti, “She is fairly staring at thee!”—And he answered:—

(4)

“She’s a ring-bedight oak of the ale-cup,
And her eyes never left me unhaunted.
The strife in my heart I could hide not,
For I hold myself bound in her bondage.
O gay in her necklet, and gainer
In the game that wins hearts on her chessboard,—
When she looked at me long from the doorway
Where the likeness of Hagbard is carved.”

Then the girls went into the hall, and sat down. He heard what they said about his looks,—the maid, that he was black and ugly, and Steingerd, that he was handsome and everyway as best could be,—“There is only one blemish,” said she, “his hair is tufted on his forehead!”—and he said:—

(5)

“One flaw in my features she noted
—With the flame of the wave⁶ she was gleaming
All white in the wane of the twilight—
And that one was no hideous blemish.
So highborn, so haughty a lady
—I should have such a dame to befriend me:
But she trows me uncouth for a trifle,
For a tuft in the hair on my brow!”

Said the maid, “Black are his eyes, sister, and that becomes him not.” Cormac heard her, and said in verse:—

6 The flame of the wave, the fire of the sea, and so forth are commonly used in these verses for gold.

(6)

“Yes, black are the eyes that I bring ye,
O brave in your jewels, and dainty.
But a draggel-tail, dirty-foot slattern
Would dub me ill-favoured and sallow.
Nay, many a maiden has loved me,
Thou may of the glittering armlet:
For I’ve tricks of the tongue to beguile them
And turn them from handsomer lads.”

At this house they spent the night. In the morning when Cormac rose up, he went to a trough and washed himself; then he went into the ladies’ bower and saw nobody there, but heard folk talking in the inner room, and he turned and entered. There was Steingerd, and women with her.

Said the maid to Steingerd, “There comes thy bonny man, Steingerd.”

“Well, and a fine-looking lad he is,” said she.

Now she was combing her hair, and Cormac asked her, “Wilt thou give me leave?”

She reached out her comb for him to handle it. She had the finest hair of any woman. Said the maid, “Ye would give a deal for a wife with hair like Steingerd’s, or such eyes!”

He answered:—

(7)

“One eye of the far of the ale-horn⁷
Looking out of a form so bewitching,
Would a bridegroom count money to buy it
He must bring for it ransom three hundred.⁸
The curls that she combs of a morning,
White-clothed in fair linen and spotless,
They enhance the bright hoard of her value,—
Five hundred might barely redeem them!”

⁷ The goddess or nymph of the ale is often used in verses for a lady; who then, as now “poured out” for the men.

⁸ A hundred ells of cloth (vadmal) was the standard of value,—worth one good milch cow.

Said the maid, "It's give and take with the two of ye! But thou'lt put a big price upon the whole of her!" He answered:—

(8)

"The tree of my treasure and longing,
It would take this whole Iceland to win her:
She is dearer than far-away Denmark,
And the doughty domain of the Hun-folk.
With the gold she is combing, I count her
More costly than England could ransom:
So witty, so wealthy, my lady
Is worth them,—and Ireland beside!"

Then Tosti came in, and called Cormac out to some work or other; but he said:—

(9)

"Take my swift-footed steel for thy tiding,
Ay, and stint not the lash to him, Tosti:
On the desolate downs ye may wander
And drive him along till he weary.
I care not o'er mountain and moorland
The murrey-brown weathers to follow,—
Far liefer, I'd linger the morning
In long, cosy chatter with Steingerd."

Tosti said he would find it a merrier game, and went off; so Cormac sat down to chess, and right gay he was. Steingerd said he talked better than folk told of; and he sat there all the day; and then he made this song:—

(10)

"Tis the dart that adorneth her tresses,
The deep, dewy grass of her forehead.
So kind to my keeping she gave it,
That good comb I shall ever remember!
A stranger was I when I sought her

—Sweet stem with the dragon's hoard shining—⁹
With gold like the sea-dazzle gleaming—
The girl I shall never forget.”

Tosti came off the fell and they fared home. After that Cormac used to go to Gnupsdal often to see Steingerd: and he asked his mother to make him good clothes, so that Steingerd might like him the most that could be. Dalla said there was a mighty great difference betwixt them, and it was far from certain to end happily if Thorkel at Tunga got to know.

⁹ A tree decked with gold, the treasure of the dragon Fatnir, is a frequent metaphor for a lady: as “tree of weapons,” etc., for a warrior. Our Christmas tree is a recurrence to old Northern habits of adorning sacred trees.