

OUR LITTLE
VIKING
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



JULIA DARROW COWLES

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Our Little Viking Cousin of Long Ago

by

CHARLES H. L. JOHNSON





BIARNE HERJULFSON

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Hark to the story of Vinland,
 Vinland of grapes and wine,
Which Leif the Lucky discovered,
 —the land of hemlock and pine.
He sailed o'er the dark, blue ocean,
 with warriors thirty or more,
And planted his flag, with a cross and a shaft,
 on the beauteous, curving shore.
Huzzah, then, for Leif the Lucky!
 A hero may ever he be,
For his feet first trod on America's sod,
 in the year one thousand A. D.

PREFACE

The story of Biarne is laid at the time when the first venturesome seafarers crossed the Atlantic to explore the new and wonderful country of America. Although it is generally believed that Columbus discovered America, in 1492, the old Norse sagas give very conclusive evidence that the Vikings from Norway and Iceland were the first Europeans to set foot on the shores of the New World.

In the year 1000 A. D., Leif Ericson, known as Leif Lucky, a son of Eric the Red—the discoverer of Greenland—made a voyage from Greenland to the coast of New England. He was a hardy mariner, who feared no perils of land and sea. As an old Norse ballad says:

He scorns to rest 'neath the smoky rafter,
He plows with his boat the stormy deep;
The billows boil, and the storm howls after,
But the tempest is only a thing of laughter,
The sea-king loves it better than sleep!

With thirty-five strong and adventuresome followers, he first cruised along the coast of Nova Scotia; then he sailed southward and went ashore at a place where a river flowed out from a lake into the sea. Here the ship was anchored; the men transported the luggage from the hold and built dwell-

ings. They erected large buildings, and remained during the winter, and fared well upon the salmon with which the river abounded. In the spring they loaded their vessel with timber and set sail for Greenland. All of their friends were glad to see them again and eagerly heard tales of their good fortune. Two years later, Thorwald Ericson—Leif's brother—made a similar journey. If this story gives you, my dear boys and girls, a clear idea of the experiences and tribulations of these stalwart adventurers, the purpose of the author will have been fulfilled.

CHARLES H. L. JOHNSTON

CHAPTER I

The Christening

Joy reigned at the house of Biarne Herjulfson, for a little son had been born to that bold and hardy Norseman. At his great house, or boer, as it was called, all the retainers, maids-of-waiting, and fighting men went about with smiles upon their faces, and whispered to one another:

“The Nornir have left a message in the chimney that they will be with us to-morrow evening, and they said that the little one will have an adventurous life and will be a credit to our master.”

“Thor, himself, who is the foremost of the gods, could not have had a more lusty voice when he was a stripling,” spoke one of the serving men. “In truth, my good friends, I believe that the youthful heir to our house will be a great singer some day.” Then all laughed with good humor, for there was a feast in store for them in commemoration of the joyful event.

It was believed by Norsemen that the future life of every child was shaped at its birth by the Fates, or Nornir, who seemed to have control of the gods themselves. There were three of these: Urd, the past; Verdandi, the present; and Skuld, the future; who lived at the foot of Urd’s well, situated at the

bottom of a large ash-tree, whose roots they watered with their wisdom and experience of the past, and where they spun the threads of fate at the birth of every child.

So, when the word was passed around that the Nornir had left a message in the chimney, that the new-born would have a great career, even Biarne Herjulfson, the rough, old father, smiled and chuckled with glee.

Next morning all the family and servants gathered in the great hall to witness the christening of the little son of the house. He was placed upon the floor and was left there for some time without being touched by any one. Then an old retainer, called Gormanud, walked forward, picked up the little Norseman, and placed him in the arms of his father, who held out his cloak so that it covered the body of his new born heir.

It was a custom of the Norsemen to look at a child two days after he was born and decide whether he should be placed outside upon the ground and left to die, or should be allowed to live. This was as the old Spartans used to do and was certainly a brutal custom, although these wild people seemed to think nothing of it. So, after old Biarne Herjulfson had received the child in his arms, he looked at it very carefully, so as to decide, from its appearance, whether its fortunes would be good or bad, and whether it would or would not be a great sea rover.

“Thou wilt be a bold and hardy warrior,” said Biarne Herjulfson. “Thou wilt be a brave adventurer and wilt see great hardships and perils upon the sea.”

He then walked to a large bowl in which was some water,

dipped in his hand, and sprinkled it over the body of the young Norseman, who was very quiet, and was gazing about him with wide, staring eyes. This was a religious rite called the *Ausa Vatni*.

Now it was time to give a name to the young Norseman; a custom which was called *nafnfesti*, or name-fastening. Consequently, an uncle of the child, called *Thrudvangar*, walked up to him, and, laying his hand upon the baby's head, said: "Little one, I christen thee *Biarne*, the second. I also give thee a sword, a helmet, a cuirass, and a spear, hoping that you will find good use for them in your life. I also present thee with a gold ring, which I trust that you will wear when your hand is of sufficient size to fill it. May you lead a brave and noble life; may you be a credit to your noble father, your good mother, and to all your family."

At this all of the servants and guests cried out:

"Hail! valorous *Biarne*!"

Large casks of ale had been rolled into the great *Sal*, or hall, in which this interesting event had taken place, and, after these were opened, great goblets of horn were dipped into them and were handed around among the guests. Two men with strange-looking fiddles, called *gigja*, came into the room, and also a harper with snowy-white hair, and a harp of gold. The sweet strains of music now arose above the hum of the voices of the guests, and all laughed loudly as the little Norseman—still in the folds of the cloak upon his father's arm—cried out with loud and vociferous tones.

But what was this?

Suddenly a hush fell upon all the guests assembled; the music ceased; and even the wails of young Biarne were stilled. At the far end of the room a strange figure was seen approaching. Clad in a long, black cloak was a woman with flowing gray hair, a thin, cadaverous face, and a large helmet upon her head, from which two great eagle wings extended into the air.

“It is one of the Nornir,” whispered a lady-in-waiting. “It is Urd, the past!”

“No,” whispered another. “It is Verdandi, the present!”

But the strange visitor looked neither to the right nor to the left. Stalking onward, she walked to where the long-bearded father was holding his little son in his arms, and, raising a thin arm above him, in a sort of benediction, she said, in deep, sonorous tones:

“Youth: Thy fate will be an auspicious one. Thou wilt wax strong and brave, and thou wilt go to far countries and wilt discover a land teeming with wild grapes. Thou wilt be a credit to thy parents and to thy country. But I, Skuld, do tell thee one thing which thou must remember: do not trust to one who passeth as thy friend, but who is not really such. Do not put your faith in a red-bearded man with a scar upon his forehead. I, Skuld, give you my blessing.”

Suddenly, as if by magic, the strange figure disappeared. All looked aghast, for the apparition had vanished into the air.



'I, SKULD, GIVE YOU MY BLESSING.'

CHAPTER II

The Training of a Young Viking

Come, little one, it is time for your exercise!”

The man who spoke was a large, bearded Norseman, who held a long spear in one hand and, in the other, a very small spear, which a boy could handle without much difficulty.

“I will be ready in a moment,” said young Biarne,—now grown to be a youth of ten years of age.

It was the custom among the Norsemen to have their children educated for their future duties of life, at the home of some distinguished friend. When a child was received by a Norseman, his foster parent was bound to treat him with the same love and kindness as he would his own child. The child was brought to his new home by his own parent, who placed him upon the knees of his foster-father. The boy was then called the Knesetningr, or the Knee-seated one. This custom was called Knesetia, or Kneeseating,

Young Biarne had been brought to fierce, old Thorwald Knutsen, who was a great warrior and had been in many a battle on the ocean. He lived in a big house, about five miles from the house of Blame’s father, and had a large ship of his own which lay in the bay, or fiord, before his residence, and

which was rowed by one hundred men. Just now he was living at home, and was attending to the duties of his farm, but every year he went upon a voyage to the southward and came back with much treasure and many stories of fierce adventure with the Picts, the Scots, and other tribes of men who lived in Britain, and the other lands which lay near the wild North Sea.

It was the duty of every teacher to endeavor to make his pupil as strong as he could. Consequently, a boy was taught to ride, to swim, to travel over the deep snow on snowshoes, and how to use the sword and javelin.

Young Biarne followed his teacher out into the garden where a huge target had been hung upon a tree. Then Thorwald made him stand about ten feet away from it, take the javelin in his hand, and throw it at a bull's eye marked in the center.

"You are doing well," said Thorwald, after Biarne had made ten or twelve throws and had twice struck the bull's eye. "Now we will have an hour or two at walking with the dogs."

The Vikings all kept hawks for chasing birds, and also hounds for hunting. They had grey-hounds for running down small game, and also huge, shaggy wolf and bear-hounds for use in the deep forests. Thorwald had a kennel of dogs and he went down to let them out. But, before he did so, he walked up to the house and called out: "Eric! Eric! Come and join us in a hunt with the dogs."

A cry went up from inside: "All right, I am coming!" and soon a boy of the same age as Biarne, with pink cheeks and

golden hair, came running down the graveled path which led from the great house.

Eric Grimolfson had also been sent to school under Thorwald, and his father lived not very far away. He was very fond of Biarne, and although they had only been together for a year, they were great companions.

Now the kennel door was opened, and the dogs, eight in all, bounded into the open. In a very few moments they reached the edge of the deep woods which surrounded the mansion house. No sooner had the dogs entered the edge of the forest than one of them set up a deep baying and howling, showing that he had smelled something.

In a moment all the dogs had started off upon a hot scent. They were soon out of sight, and almost out of hearing, although the boys tried their best to keep up with them.

After a short time, a deep baying in the woods showed that the dogs had stopped running. Thorwald cried out:

“Hurry up, boys, hurry. We must see what they have been after!”

Thorwald wore a big sword and had a javelin in his hand, while both Eric and Biarne were armed with short spears. As they pressed onward they heard a great commotion in the woods, and, coming up with the dogs, saw that they had surrounded a huge, gray wolf, which showed its fangs, snarled evilly, and snapped at them when they approached.

“My, what a big fellow,” said Eric. believe that he could kill any dog that attempted to seize him.”

“I’ll fix Mister Wolf,” said Thorwald, as he walked up to within striking distance of the animal. Taking his javelin in his right hand, he hurled it at the beast with all of his might. The sharp point penetrated the animal’s side, and, as he turned to bite at the shaft, the dogs were upon him with a rush.

“Good!” shouted Eric. “Now they will finish off Mister Wolf.”

It was as he said. The odds were too great against the big, gray fellow, and in a few moments he was lying dead upon the moss of the forest, while the dogs savagely growled above his shaggy body.

“Now that you have seen a hunt,” said Thorwald to the boys, “I will show you how to call off the dogs.”

Putting a ram’s horn to his lips, he blew a sharp blast, and started to walk away into the forest. The boys followed, and, after Thorwald had cried out right lustily: “High-on! High-on!” the dogs left their quarry and followed after.

“Now, boys, it is time for more gentle exercise,” said Thorwald. “We will go to the house and will have some lessons upon the harp.”

Although the young Vikings were taught how to be warriors and huntsmen, they were also taught to work in wood and metal, and how to play on the harp. To be a good harpist was considered to be the duty of every well-born Norwegian.

They soon reached the great house, called the Holl, and the dogs were put back into the kennels. Thorwald then led the boys into a long room, at the end of which was a large fireplace, and

which was carpeted with heavy rugs. Several harps were here, and, taking his position before one, Thorwald gave a harp to each of the boys. Soon they were busily learning the music to a famous Norse saga, or song.

It was soon luncheon time. The music room was left behind and the boys went into the dining room, a low chamber hung with shields, with spears, and with the skins of bears, of wolves, of otter, mink, and foxes. Here they were cheerfully greeted by Thorwald's wife, Enid, and his two daughters, Rodny and Thorhilda, who spread a hearty meal before them.

Thorwald's wife was dressed in a long gown, or kirtle, which was made very wide with a train, and had big sleeves reaching to the wrists. It was fastened around the waist with a belt made of silver, from which a bag was suspended for keeping keys, rings, and ornaments. Over the kirtle was worn a bloeja, a kind of apron, with a fringe at the bottom.

After luncheon was over, the boys were told that they were to go riding. Three fine steeds were brought around to the door; Thorwald had soon mounted; the boys clambered upon the backs of their own horses, and soon all were off for a gallop into the country. When they returned, both Eric and Biarne were quite willing to remain quietly in the house, until bed time.

Thus were young Vikings trained. It was an athletic life, and, under such teaching, they were expected to develop into strong and hardy men.

CHAPTER III

Some Lessons in Viking Beliefs

No sooner had the bright beams of the sun penetrated the room in which Eric and Biarne were sleeping upon some bear skins, than both boys leaped to their feet and began to splash into their faces some water from a big stone jug which was in a corner of the chamber. Breakfast was soon over, and then Thorwald told the boys that a famous Skald, or poet, named Lothair, was coming that morning to instruct them in the Norse religion and also to recite some of the sagas or songs of the Vikings.

The boys were delighted to hear this, and when a tall man with a long, brown beard, came into the house, they ran to him and eagerly asked if he were Lothair.

“Yes, I am Lothair the Skald,” said he, laughing. “And I have brought my harp with me so that I can sing to you boys after I have finished telling you about the Valkyrias.”

“Who are they?” asked both of the boys, almost with the same breath.

Lothair seated himself in a big chair, after saying “good morning” to Thorwald, and began to speak:

“My boys,” said he, “you must know that away up in

the heavens live the gods who watch over all of us. Thor is the foremost of them all, and he lives at Thrudvangar, 'The Plains of Strength,' in a hall of five hundred and forty rooms, called Bilskirnir.

"Each of us is watched over by a guardian spirit. Each of you boys has a guardian spirit who, though unseen, is always near you, and whose hand you can clasp in right good fellowship, although he is not visible to you."

"That is nice," said Eric. "I hope that I can see my guardian spirit some day. Some day when he is off his guard and needs company."

Lothair laughed.

"I am afraid that you will never see him," he answered. "But, when you are older and go into battle, I am sure that you will see some strange maidens near you. These are sent from Valhalla, the home of the gods, to determine the fate of battle, and they are called the Valkyrias. They can ride through the air, and also over the sea. Sometimes they ride upon the shafts of lightning, which are rays of sunshine coming from the face of the gods. Often they ride upon fiery steeds, clad in glittering armor, and they bear with them long spears, sharpened either for victory, or for death.

"At first, my boys, there were only six Valkyrias; but, as the years passed onward, there were nine. Once, indeed, twenty-seven of them were seen on a battle field; for an old poet has sung:

"There were three times nine maidens,
But one rode foremost
A white maiden under a helmet;
Their horses tremble,
From their manes fell
Dew into the deep dales,
And hail on the lofty woods."

"Although these maidens nearly always live in the Heavens, at times they come to dwell upon the earth; and, upon one of these occasions, they were discovered by three royal princes.

"These princes were sons of one of the Kings of Sweden and used to spend much of their time running about upon snowshoes, for there was much snow in their country. They also hunted wild beasts, and killed many a large wolf and shaggy bear.

"One day the three young men came to a lake hidden deep in the forest, and they liked the place so much that they tarried there and built a house, where they lived for some time. Going down to the edge of the lake, one early morning, they beheld three beautiful women, who were spinning flax. The princes knew that they were Valkyrias, for nearby lay the swan-skins in which Valkyrias usually disguised themselves. It could be plainly seen that they had been caught unawares.

"The three brothers spoke gracefully and courteously to them and asked the Valkyrias to go home with them. The maidens consented, and lived seven years with the young men. But they were not happy; for, hearing afar the sound of battle, they were restless. One day they disappeared, never to

return. In vain the princes sought for them. The sisters were soon amidst the din and carnage of war, and the brothers never saw them again!"

"What a nice story," Eric interrupted. "And do you think that we will see these sisters when we are men and can use sword and javelin in battle?"

Lothair laughed with great good humor.

"I've no doubt that you will, my son," he replied; "for the Valkyrias always hover over a battle-field, and look after those who are in trouble and distress.

"But never forget that only the valorous, and those who have done great deeds, shall be welcomed in Valhalla, 'The Hall of the Slain.' It has five hundred and forty doors, and each door is so wide that eight hundred warriors can pass through it at the same moment.

"Death should have no terror for you, for it is good to be welcomed to the glad halls of Valhalla; to sit down to feast at the festive board; and to welcome the brave in the halls of the gods. Death you shall not fear; but shame you must always dread, and this can only come to you if you flee before the foe. The greatest thing that a Viking can do is to win fame,—fame that will live in the sagas of the nation and will be handed down from generation to generation."

Both of the boys listened to him with the greatest attention. Already they had determined to stick manfully to their lessons so as to become strong men and noble warriors.

"Now, boys," Lothair continued, "I will tell you the story

of Bjorn, a son of one of the Kings of Norway. Bjorn's own mother had died when he was a baby, and he had a step-mother who did not love him. Therefore, one day, she struck him with a bearskin glove, saying, as she did so, 'Thou shalt become a fierce bear, and thou shalt eat no food save thy father's cattle. So much cattle shalt thou kill that all men shall hear of it, and never shalt thou escape from this spell.'

"As she finished speaking, a great bear ran out of the courtyard, and Bjorn was never seen or heard of again.

"The King, who was very fond of his son, sought for him throughout the realm, but it was in vain. No signs of him were ever seen. But, from the day that Bjorn vanished, it is said that a fierce, gray bear was often to be seen prowling around among the cattle of the King, until the numbers grew less and less.

"So you see, boys," said Lothair, "that you can change your form into that of an animal. And, if you but eat the flesh and drink the blood of some wild beast, you will become as strong and fierce as the animal of whose blood you have partaken."

"Then I shall drink wolf's blood," said Biarne. "But how is it that you are not fierce, Lothair, as you are a great huntsman?"

The Skald laughed with much good humor.

"My boys," said he, "I am a singer, and singers are not fierce, for their souls are softly tempered by the music which they play. Now, if you wish, I will sing to you to the music of my harp."

The boys sprawled out, full length, upon a big bearskin

rug, while Lothair took his harp and sang to them a song of the valorous deeds of the Vikings. Thus were they instructed in the history of their forefathers and were told of the great battles which had been fought both on land and upon the surging ocean.

CHAPTER IV

How Thor Lost His Hammer

The next morning dawned cold and blustery, with a chill wind blowing, so the boys were informed by Thorwald that they would not go out horseback riding, or to practice with the javelin; but would spend their time in playing upon the harp and learning about the gods and their life at Thrudvangar, “The Plains of Strength.”

Lothair had spent the night with them, and, in the morning, told them that he had a story to tell them. They all went into the long room, and, after some huge logs had been heaped upon the fireplace, the boys lay down before it, while Lothair and Thorwald stretched themselves out in long chairs.

“Boys, as I have told you before,” said Lothair, “Bilskirnir, the Palace of the great god Thor, King of all the gods, is built in his Kingdom of Thrudvangar, the realm that lies beyond the thunder clouds. It is the largest palace that has ever been roofed over for it has five hundred and forty halls beneath its silver dome, and it is so bright and so dazzling that when people on the earth catch a glimpse of it through the clouds, they blink their eyes and say that they have seen lightning. Thor spends most of his time there. When he is not away