

The Icelandic Sorceress

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Advanced
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“Tell me,” said Katla, a handsome and lively widow, to Gunlaugar, an accomplished and gallant young warrior, “tell me why thou goest so oft to Mahfahlida? Is it to caress an old woman?”

“Thine own age, Katla,” answered the youth inconsiderately, “might prevent thy making that of Geirrida a subject of reproach.”

“I little deemed,” replied the offended matron, “that we were on an equality in that particular—but thou, who supposest that Geirrida is the sole source of knowledge, mayst find that there are others who equal her in science.”

It happened in the course of the following winter that Gunlaugar, in company with Oddo, the son of Katla, had renewed one of those visits to Geirrida with which Katla had upbraided him.

“Thou shalt not depart to-night,” said the sage matron; “evil spirits are abroad, and thy bad destiny predominates.”

“We are two in company,” answered Gunlaugar, “and have therefore nothing to fear.”

“Oddo,” replied Geirrida, “will be of no aid to thee; but go, since thou wilt go, and pay the penalty of thy own rashness.”

In their way they visited the rival matron, and Gunlaugar was invited to remain in her house that night. This he declined, and, passing forward alone, was next morning found lying before the gate of his father Thorbiorn, severely wounded and deprived of his judgment. Various causes were assigned for this disaster; but Oddo, asserting that they had parted in anger that evening from Geirrida, insisted that his companion must have sustained the injury through her sorcery. Geirrida was accordingly cited to the popular assembly and accused of witchcraft. But twelve witnesses, or compurgators, having asserted upon their oath the innocence of the accused party, Geirrida was honourably freed from the accusation brought against her. Her acquittal did not terminate the rivalry between the two sorceresses, for, Geirrida belonging to the family of Kiliakan, and Katla to that of the pontiff Snorro, the animosity which still subsisted between these septs became awakened by the quarrel.

It chanced that Thorbiorn, called Digri (or the corpulent), one of the family of Snorro, had some horses which fed in the mountain pastures, near to those of Thorarin, called the Black, the son of the enchantress Geirrida. But when autumn arrived, and the horses were to be withdrawn from the mountains and housed for the winter, those of Thorbiorn could nowhere be found, and Oddo, the son of Katla, being sent to consult a wizard, brought back a dubious answer, which seemed to indicate that they had been stolen by Thorarin. Thorbiorn, with Oddo and a party of armed followers, immediately set forth for Mahfahlida, the dwelling of Geirrida and her son Thorarin. Arrived before the gate, they demanded permission to search for the horses which were missing. This Thorarin refused, alleging that neither was the search demanded duly authorised by law, nor were the proper witnesses cited to be present, nor did Thorbiorn offer any sufficient pledge of security when claiming the exercise of so hazardous a privilege. Thorbiorn replied, that as Thorarin declined to permit a search, he must be held as admitting his guilt; and constituting for that purpose a temporary court of justice, by choosing out six judges, he formally accused Thorarin of theft before the gate of his own house. At this the patience of Geirrida forsook her.

“Well,” said she to her son Thorarin, “is it said of thee that thou art more a woman than a man, or thou wouldst not bear these intolerable affronts.”

Thorarin, fired at the reproach, rushed forth with his servants and guests; a skirmish soon disturbed the legal process which had been instituted, and one or two of both parties were wounded and slain before the wife of Thorarin and the female attendants could separate the fray by flinging their mantles over the weapons of the combatants.

Thorbiorn and his party retreating, Thorarin proceeded to examine the field of battle. Alas! among the reliques of the fight was a bloody hand too slight and fair to belong to any of the combatants. It was that of his wife Ada, who had met this misfortune in her attempts to separate the foes. Incensed to the uttermost, Thorarin threw aside his constitutional moderation, and, mounting on horseback, with his allies and followers, pursued the hostile party, and overtook them in a hay-field, where they had halted to repose their horses, and to exult over the damage they had done to Thorarin. At this moment he assailed them with such fury that he slew Thorbiorn upon the spot, and killed several of his attendants, although Oddo, the son of Katla, escaped free from wounds, having been dressed by his mother in an invulnerable garment. After this action, more blood being shed than usual in an Icelandic engagement, Thorarin returned to Mahfahlida, and, being questioned by his mother concerning the events of the skirmish, he answered in the improvisatory and enigmatical poetry of his age and country—

“From me the foul reproach be far,
With which a female waked the war,
From me, who shunned not in the fray
Through foemen fierce to hew my way
(Since meet it is the eagle’s brood
On the fresh corpse should find their food);
Then spared I not, in fighting field,
With stalwart hand my sword to wield;
And well may claim at Odin’s shrine
The praise that waits this deed of mine.”
To which effusion Geirrida answered—

“Do these verses imply the death of Thorbiorn?”

And Thorarin, alluding to the legal process which Thorbiorn had instituted against him, resumed his song—

“Sharp bit the sword beneath the hood
Of him whose zeal the cause pursued,
And ruddy flowed the stream of death,
Ere the grim brand resumed the sheath;
Now on the buckler of the slain
The raven sits, his draught to drain,
For gore-drenched is his visage bold,
That hither came his courts to hold.”

As the consequence of this slaughter was likely to be a prosecution at the instance of the pontiff Snorro, Thorarin had now recourse to his allies and kindred, of whom the most powerful were Arnkill, his maternal uncle, and Verimond, who readily premised their aid both in the field and in the Comitia, or popular meeting, in spring, before which it was to be presumed Snorro would indict Thorarin for the slaughter of his kinsman. Arnkill could not, however, forbear asking his nephew how he had so far lost his usual command of temper. He replied in verse—

“Till then, the master of my mood,
Men called me gentle, mild, and good;
But yon fierce dame’s sharp tongue might wake
In wintry den the frozen snake.”

While Thorarin spent the winter with his uncle Arnkill, he received information from his mother Geirrida that Oddo, son of her old rival Katla, was the person who had cut off the hand of his wife Ada, and that he gloried in the fact. Thorarin and Arnkill determined on instant vengeance, and, travelling rapidly, surprised the house of Katla. The undismayed sorceress, on hearing them approach, commanded her son to sit close beside her, and when the assailants entered they only beheld Katla, spinning coarse yarn from what seemed a large distaff, with her female domestics seated around her.

“My son,” she said, “is absent on a journey;” and Thorarin and Arnkill, having searched the house in vain, were obliged to depart with this answer. They had not, however, gone far before the well-known skill of Katla, in optical delusion occurred to them, and they resolved on a second and stricter search. Upon their return they found Katla in the outer apartment, who seemed to be shearing the hair of a tame kid, but was in reality

cutting the locks of her son Oddo. Entering the inner room, they found the large distaff flung carelessly upon a bench. They returned yet a third time, and a third delusion was prepared for them; for Katla had given her son the appearance of a hog, which seemed to grovel upon the heap of ashes. Arnkill now seized and split the distaff, which he had at first suspected, upon which Kalta tauntingly observed, that if their visits had been frequent that evening, they could not be said to be altogether ineffectual, since they had destroyed a distaff. They were accordingly returning completely baffled, when Geirrida met them, and upbraided them with carelessness in searching for their enemy.

“Return yet again,” she said, “and I will accompany you.”

Katla’s maidens, still upon the watch, announced to her the return of the hostile party, their number augmented by one who wore a blue mantle.

“Alas!” cried Katla, “it is the sorceress Geirrida, against whom spells will be of no avail.”

Immediately rising from the raised and boarded seat which she occupied, she concealed Oddo beneath it, and covered it with cushions as before, on which she stretched herself complaining of indisposition. Upon the entrance of the hostile party, Geirrida, without speaking a word, flung aside her mantle, took out a piece of sealskin, in which she wrapped up Katla’s head, and commanded that she should be held by some of the attendants, while the others broke open the boarded space, beneath which Oddo lay concealed, seized upon him, bound him, and led him away captive with his mother. Next morning Oddo was hanged, and Katla stoned to death; but not until she had confessed that, through her sorcery, she had occasioned the disaster of Gunlaugar, which first led the way to these feuds.

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