

Author

LAXNESS, Halldor

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marks or recommendations (See over for report)

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READERS' REPORT

Author.....Laxness, Halldor.....Date submitted.....December 16, 1948.....Date of Report.....12-22-48
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 Yes, indeed! I have read Laxness' "Salka Valka" and "Independent People", was greatly impressed by these and would want to possess a further item by this author.

H. Synopsis. / comments:

Iceland's Bell (preferable English title, The Stolen Bell) as published in Swedish translation is three books in one, each a novel of average length. Together they comprise a larger unity. In the original Icelandic they appeared as

- 1) The Bell of Iceland (1943)
- 2) The Fair-haired Maid (1944)
- 3) Fire in Copenhagen (1946)

(more)

Good jacket
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like it, HS

If Independent People can be classified as an "epic," The Stolen Bell cannot be so classified. It can best be described, I believe, as a comedy - a comedy of justice - bitter, sardonic, obscene. For, despite the several major characters whose destinies are strangely intertwined, the true protagonist in this complex tale from 17th Century Iceland and Denmark is The Law - a gnarled club fashioned from ancient Icelandic precepts and spiked with the effects of Danish overlordship - a weapon of pure assault wielded in a jungle land of medieval courts and judges whose jurisdiction was never above prejudiced review and all of whose rulings were as devious as they were obscure.

Across the lives of the people of Iceland, proud of their ancient past, their golden poets, their sagas and their national heroes, as independent in spirit as they were crushed beneath Europe's economy, fell constantly the shadow of the law and much of their individual destiny revolved about the periodic meetings of the Alting, where men were flogged and branded for petty thievery, where witches were burned and women were drowned for adultery, and safe was no man's head who had breathed an ill word against the Danish Crown.

The Stolen Bell starts out as the story of one high-spirited farmer, Jon Heggvidsen, flogged for stealing a bit of fishline in a day of famine, found guilty of sneering at the King while the King's lash was on his back, later accused of murdering the executioner after a post-punishment drink-fest in which, curiously enough, both men indulged as old chums. Circumstantial evidence and the testimony of character witnesses are sufficient to have him adjudged a murderer by the district court and to have this judgment upheld by the Alting. After a winter in a dungeon, he awaits the day of his beheading, meanwhile taunting the lawmen with bellowed song and ~~juicy~~ juicy quip.

But it was in Jon's croft hut - in his aged mother's bed, in fact - that an ancient parchment manuscript, a priceless relic of Iceland's golden past, had been discovered one day by Arnas Arneus, passionate antiquarian and favorite of the King (the parchment not strong enough to patch the seat of Jon's pants, in the language of his mother) and indirectly it is

the manuscript, "Skalda," which saves Jon's head the night before his promised execution and which continues to save it for forty or more long years of trial and appeal, re-trial and re-appeal, of stormy adventure as soldier, emissary, convict, hero, servant and bag of humble bones whose only function in later life was to keep a case alive.

For it so happened that Snöfríð, the Fair-haired Maid, the Sun of Iceland - as a girl of sixteen in love with Arnas Arneus - had accompanied him on the day he had called at Jon Hreggvidson's hut and found the precious manuscript. Jon's mother remembered her and makes the long pilgrimage to her home and there to plead for her intercession with the Chief Lawman, Snöfríð's father, who would preside at the Alting on the day of Jon's final trial.

To Snöfríð, a girl of noble birth and sister-in-law of the Bishop, the appeal makes little sense ("A man is a murderer. His head must fall. I am no judge. My father is.") and the old woman is dismissed with a coin. But the stream of destiny runs deeper than this. For Snöfríð has lain with the scholar, Arnas Arneus, and Arneus has returned to Denmark with his enormous collection of Icelandic lore, in Copenhagen to continue, in the good graces of the King, to create a permanent library which would serve posterity as a living record of Iceland's golden age. Arnas' true love was his work, his recreation through pure scholarship of a bygone day, and Snöfríð had been but a pleasant interlude. Or did he love her still? Snöfríð must find out. And so to the prisoner, Jon Hreggvidson, she goes with money, a ring and a message. He it was who had supplied Arnas with his dearest treasure, the manuscript "Skalda," and he it should be who would carry her heart to Copenhagen. The fact that Jon's head was committed to the block and would fall in a matter of hours was a mere detail to a maiden of Snöfríð's charm and beauty. She prevails upon the guard to leave her alone with the prisoner. The guard is easily dissuaded from performing his simple duty and, alone with Jon Hreggvidson, Snöfríð releases him and dispatches him to Copenhagen with her heart. . . .

Jon's adventures are many and varied. Holland. The German border where he is seized as "an unlikely character" and condemned to be hanged without

trial. A hairbreadth escape with the aid of luck and a few corpses in the tower in which he was held for execution. Then back through Holland and on into Denmark - where he is immediately seized and impressed into the King's army.

The journey from Tingvalla to Copenhagen is long and arduous and ends in anti-climax. After one brisk war in the Carpathians and several even more brisk sallies against the Swedes, Jon finds himself in Copenhagen and in a position to deliver Snöfríð's ring and her message.

Arnas Arneus, by this time married to a hideous hunchback with money, is for this and other reasons deeper than ever in pursuit of his life's work. When at length Jon Hreggvidson stands in his presence and has identified himself as the owner of the hut in which the manuscript "Skalda" had been found, Arnas is all warmth and happiness. But when the ring is presented, he hands it straight back to Jon and refuses to hear Snöfríð's message.

Jon goes forth. The ring is now his to do with as he likes. And so, in the company of a few crude friends, he squanders its value on drink and whoring.

Add to this the fact that his identity as an escaped murderer is soon discovered. He is thus deprived of the dubious pleasure of participating in the latest skirmish with the Swedes and is cast into prison instead.

And thus endeth the early adventures of Jon Hreggvidson, humble but red-blooded farmer from home, adventurer with a head just waiting for every kind of trouble, a down-trodden wretch with considerable imagination, a convict with a price on his head - and to boot, an Icelfander in Denmark - one of those creatures whose natural body odor was more than the refined Danish nose could ever seem to bear.

The second volume (The Fair-Haired Maiden) returns the story to Iceland some 16 years later. Snöfríð, with Arnas still in her heart, and she in the heart of the Bishop's Chaplain, Sigurd, is unhappily married to a weakling junker, Sigurd i Braedrætunga, whose love^{for} her is confessed but whose love for the bottle is more frequently ~~indulged in~~^{indulged in}. When in his

cup's Sigurd's lost weekends are truly immense and piece by piece his landed estate goes by the board to the demon drink. At length when the manor itself is exchanged for brännvin and a riding horse, Snöfrid finds herself about to be cast out of her home. It is her father, the old Lawman Eydalín, who buys back the property from its new owner and presents it to Snöfrid, who in her own name thus becomes the owner of Braedratunga.

It is a weird tale of weakness and irresponsibility, of remorse and compassion, of trial and determined loyalty. The low point in Sigurd's wretched career is reached on the night when he signs a contract with a low-life Danish character to lease to him all marital rights in his good wife, Snöfrid, for a period of three full days and nights in exchange for a bottle of brännvin. Fortunately for Snöfrid, the Danish stumblebum gets into a fight while on his way to Braedratunga and is in no condition to continue on his journey to delight. But unfortunately for both Snöfrid and her husband the Dane is found asleep with his head against a stone and the foul contract in his hand. The scandal is soon all over the land.

It is her old suitor Chaplain Sigurd who breaks the news to Snöfrid about what her husband, Sigurd, has done. The Chaplain utilizes the balance of the interview to beg Snöfrid to divorce the worthless Sigurd and accept his, the Chaplain's, humble suit. But whereas Sigurd the Junker was in his sober moments a loveable child, Sigurd the Chaplain was at all times a bloodless theologian and Snöfrid is too much the red-blooded girl to consider a wilted lily, if leave her husband she must. The Chaplain does his own cause further injury by guessing her fond memories of the scholar, Arnas Arneus, and reporting that Arnas, as a matter of pure coincidence, is in Iceland again, this time as the King's Commissioner.

How Snöfrid would have reacted, without this knowledge - and the further knowledge that Arnas was residing for the nonce with her brother-in-law, the Bishop - on the night her husband entered her bed chamber, axe in hand and drunk, is a matter for sheer conjecture. But it is a matter of record that on this fateful night, in possession of just this interesting knowledge, she did in fact decide to leave her husband and in the morning rode forth to the Bishop's seat to confide her woe in her sister and spend the winter

in pleasant company.

And indeed the company was most pleasant! Old acquaintanceship was restored and further explored - to what extent the reader is never told, beyond the point that she was publicly charged by her husband with adultery. As a quaint gesture of holy affection, it is her old suitor, Chaplain Sigurd, who undertakes the reading of husband Sigurd's charge before a convocation of priests in the Cathedral! He for one is convinced that a would-be husband had every right in the world to feel outraged - and was prepared to offer himself as witness, should the matter of Snöfrid's alleged adultery (penalty drowning) ever come to trial.

Indeed a neat scandal! Snöfrid, daughter of the Chief Lawman Eydalín - whose pleasure it was to sit on all cases involving adultery - herself charged by her husband, backed up by the theory of a Cathedral priest, with that very crime. Arnas Arneus, an officer of the King - and a married man, to boot!

The denouement is swift and savage all round. Arnas leaves the Bishop's seat, armed with the facts of Jon Hreggvidson's trial before the Alting these 16 years ago, repairs to Tingvalla and, employing all the authority invested in him by the Crown, declares this and other decisions of Lawman Eydalín to have been incompetent, null and void, and to make matters worse puts a quick end to ^{Eydalín's} ~~his~~ further authority as a judge under the laws of Iceland. Sudden disgrace in an unexpected quarter. . . Followed by another sudden upset: Snöfrid ^{confesses her adultery,} meekly returns to her husband, at the same time conveying to him all her lands and properties.

The third volume of the trilogy - Fire in Copenhagen - finds all the characters intact, but somewhat older and wiser. Everything now is in the hands of divers courts and tribunals, both in the capital and in the colony. The Alting, acting upon the order of the Crown, finds Lawman Eydalín retroactively and presently incompetent and confiscates all his lands and properties. The old man dies in disgrace. Snöfrid coming to Tingvalla for the trial had fallen in with some beggar women - who while she slept had changed clothes with her - and next day it was at least symbolical that she should have received the news of her father's disgrace while attired in the lousy garments of a beggar. Squatting thus by the roadside, she had

seen the mighty Commissioner, Arnas Arneus, pass. They had looked each other in the eyes but, as she had thought then, without his having recognized her.

The status of Jon Hreggvidson was now somewhat complex. Tried and convicted of murder by a ~~court~~ ^{justice} whose ~~authority~~ ^{integrity} had been retroactively dissolved, he stood none the less accused of having murdered the King's executioner. A new trial was necessary - save that all those who had borne witness against him were now dead. Technically, therefore, the disposition of the case would have to be moved to Copenhagen. Also he had been a soldier of the King at the time he had been released from prison through the intervention of Arnas Arneus, and therefore he would have to be ~~imprisoned~~ ^{remanded to the Bremerholm} in the military prison, according to Danish law. He had meanwhile returned to his home in Skagi and taken up farming and fishing anew. He was there when the Bailiff arrived with a warrant for his arrest. And off to Copenhagen and military prison he was packed - only to be released after a day or so, again in the custody of the King's Commissioner, Arnas Arneus. His head was now white and his back was bent, but accused of murder he still was. . . He was retained meanwhile by the Commissioner as a woodchopper on his estate.

A new King came to the throne in Denmark and those privy councillors who had always detested Arneus for the ~~late~~ ^{late} King's favor now began a series of intrigues which, they sincerely hoped, might lead to his loss of favor with the present monarch. Arneus' position was therefore insecure - and that meant that Jon Hreggvidson's was no less insecure.

But the position of Arnas the Iclander was in another way secure, as matters turn out. The Hamburgers, it seemed, were taking advantage of the King's desire to have a go at the Swedes - for which he presently had insufficient cash. Ideland, they suggested, was the answer. They wanted to trade with the island (such trade being at the moment prevented by the existence of the Danish Iceland Company) and therefore they were in a position to offer spot cash for the island. In order to put through the deal, it would be necessary for them to appoint a native Iclander as governor, and who else could possibly fill the bill as neatly as Arnas Arneus? The proposition was made to him at the very moment his stock with the privy councillors hit a new low. He was sensible enough, however, not to give

an instant decision. Instead, he used the proposition effectively in putting a certain privy councillor in his place.

Meanwhile his work was going nicely. His library was nearing its completion and before he died he was certain he would be able to leave a most imposing monument to the former greatness of his native land, Iceland.

Then Snöfrid, having borrowed passage money and living expenses from a gentle benefactor, arrived in Copenhagen. The benefactor? None other than the Chaplain Sigurd - whose love for her turned out to be really great after all! Her reason for coming to Copenhagen? To appeal to the highest court in Denmark for the restitution of her late father's honor and authority post mortem. Her appeal was made directly to Prime Minister Gyldenløve - whose interest was in her feminine charm, rather than in her (to him) somewhat silly desire.

The Junker, Sigurd, her husband, had come over somewhat earlier to squander what was left of her diminishing estate, had been pushed into a canal and drowned, and Snöfrid was a widow now.

Out of this extremely complex situation emerges an interesting possibility: Iceland to be sold to the Germans, Arnas Arneus to become the governor of the island, to move his mighty archives of Icelandic lore to its rightful home and there preside over it. Add to this an even more interesting possibility: Snöfrid to accompany him as Governor's lady - for what mattered it that Arnas already had a hunchbacked wife? His marriage to her was under the Danish law, and that law, after the German purchase, would no longer apply in Iceland!

As purely incidental items, he would have the full authority to clear her father's name (which he had once ruined) and at the same time clear away the murder charge still hanging over Jon Hreggvidsen's head.

But such would be equivalent to selling his people down the river. The Icelanders, the heroes of his scholastic dreams, were not mere pawns to be pushed in the prosecution of an international game. These were people to whom independence was a fierce, an elemental hope. It could not be traded for trader's gold. Independence from the Danish crown was something which might one day, after much hard work and struggle, be achieved. In the hands of German traders the people would only perish.

Therefore, great as the temptation was, Arnas Arneus could not entertain it and still remain true to his worship. . .

For his pains, Arnas returned one day to his library to find his clerk in tears. The most precious item in his possession, the crowning jewel of his collection, the book "Skalda," was gone - stolen. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ The Swedes, according to the theory of the day, were endeavoring to prove that the origin of Icelandic culture was Swedish and were endeavoring by fair means or foul to come by those precious parchments which, by a slight twisting of archeological facts, might be made to prove their case. A certain wharf-rat - ~~originally~~ a native of Iceland - had been known to traffic with the Swedes and was immediately suspect, but none of ~~MM~~ Arnas' agents - not even the trustworthy Jon Hreggvidsson who knew this wharf-rat well - was able to prove that he had in fact pilfered the missing treasure.

On the eve of Snöfrid's departure for Iceland, after having left her late father's case in the hands of the highest court in the land for review and final disposition, Arnas calls at her lodgings for one final interview -- an interview which began with a kiss, proceeded through an exchange of lyrical dreams, and ended with a last goodbye.

After the loss of both Snöfrid and his precious "Skalda," Arnas is no longer the man he was. He ages rapidly and the fire of his life flickers low on the hearth.

But Iceland is safe - contemptible in Danish eyes, her people starving and plague-ridden, her declining settlements blasted by winter on the one side and perched on the lip of a flaming hell on the other - but safe from German hands, free to dream through the long winter night, free to dream of the future.

And in the high courts dead facts pass coldly in review and the rumble of legality goes on.

Arnas Arneus lives on with his hunchbacked wife. There isn't much to live for - and then one night there is less.

A great fire breaks out in Copenhagen - the historic fire of 1728 - and destroys a great part of the city, including most of Arneus' collection of Icelandic lore.

Three Icelanders flee the flames - three Jons - Jon Hreggvidsen, the convict, Jon Grindvikingen, the great scholar's clerk, and Jon Marteinsson, the wharf-rat. Escaping across the river, they duck into a brothel for liquid refreshments. More than one they hoist and Jon Marteinsson becomes very drunk. When it comes time to pay up, there isn't money enough ~~among~~ among the three. "It's your shoes then!" the landlady declares. "Nay, stay you, woman!" Jon Marteinsson grunts. "I have here in my sack that as can pay for all the drinks in the world. Never heard ye of these pages called 'Skalda'?" He pulled from his sack the lost parchment. "Never them!" the tavern woman spat disdainfully. "They're not such as would even start me a good fire in my stove!"

But at that the eyes of two Jons popped open. The first saw before him his master's missing treasure, while the other thought he recognized his late mother's skin patches from home. It was the book "Skalda." Silently both Jons took off their shoes.

Thus, despite the devastating fire, the greatness of Iceland lives on. It is a small thing, perhaps, but it lives.

And at length the wheels of the law grind to a stop. From the high place at long last come two mighty decisions:

1. - "Because of lack of evidence, Jon Regvidsen of Skagi is declared innocent of the old charge of having murdered the King's Executioner, Sivert Snorresen, ~~and~~ and is thereby relieved of the punishment to which he was sentenced on account of his former conviction, and is declared free to return home to Our Royal Majesty's land of Iceland."
- 2.- "The late Lawman Eydalín is acquitted on all charges made against him by the Royal Legate Arneus and his rehabilitation is hereby adjudged post mortem, and all his possessions, including the sixty landed estates formerly forfeited by him to the Crown, are hereby returned to him and as true and lawful inheritance to his daughter, Snöfríð" etc. "The so-called Commissioner's Judgment in the trial of said Lawman Eydalín is hereby set aside, declared null and void, and the Commissioner himself, Arnas Arneus, is hereby declared beholden to the Crown in the matter of such fines as are in keeping with his indiscretion in exceeding his authority."

The irony of these two decisions can speak for itself.

As does that in the book's final paragraphs:

The blind felon, who had been sitting there silent, now came out with these words: "Our crime is that we aren't human, even though we're called that. Or what do you say, Jon Hreggvidson?"

"Nothing, except that I'm thinking of going home by way of Leggjabrot today." said Jon. "Last time they let me go, I found my daughter lying there dead in the house. Maybe my new daughter, who was standing in the door when they took me away again, is still alive. Maybe she's got her a son by this time who will grow up and some day be telling his grandchildren about their ancestor, Jon Hreggvidsson pa Rein, and about his friend and helper, the master Arnas Arneus."

Just then a thunder of hoofs filled the cleft to the east and when the lawbreakers stepped forward to look, they saw a large group of horsemen - a man and a woman, surrounded by many mounted servants - making their way out across the grassy slopes in the direction of Kaldadal. Both were somberly attired and all the horses were black.

"Who rides there?" the blind one asked.

"Snöfrid Islandssol," he was told. "She's in black and with her is her lawful sweetheart, the Latin skald, Sigurd Sveinsson, the new Bishop of Skalholt. They're off together to take over her inheritance which she managed to get back from the Crown."

And the lawbreakers stood at the foot of the cliff and watched the new Bishop and his lady ride on their way, saw the flanks of their black horses glisten with moisture in the early morning light.

the
Such is/plot in general outline. The characters and situations, the author warns us, are purely fictional - but the drama is enacted in all its growing complexity against a background of sober history. The period was a dark one for Iceland and the lives of her people were dark - at times even grotesquely so. The cynicism and occasional sardonic humor detectable in Independent People are intensified in The Stolen Bell. In working out such a story Author Laxness appears to have been motivated consciously by his intense nationalism, his murderous dislike of privilege - whether political, economic or ecclesiastical - and unconsciously by the national inferiority complex of small people living in a big world. His narration is frequently reminiscent of Hamsun's - as in the case of Independent People - but his style is wholly his own, for the most part a brittle, modernized saga style, interspersed with an occasional burst of wholly intentional verbosity, as though in such passages he would

supe up his sarcasm with all the words at his command. He is particularly hard on the courts and the clergy, with their affected reliance upon Latin word and phrase, and fills even his descriptive passages at times with wild borrowings from the lips of 17th Century scholarship in order to give wings to his scorn.

Laxness is perhaps more emotional than intellectual, but this fact gives his work personality and color. If he is ever to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, it will have to be for a work of greater inspiration than Islands Klocka. But there is indication here at least that he may be well on the road to discovering the needed inspiration and producing a true literary masterpiece.

That his thinking is anything but superficial is well indicated in the observation he utters through the lips of Arnas Arneus. Refusing to support the selling of Iceland to the Germans, Arnas delivers the following into the ears of the negotiator from Hamburg:

"A man intending to choke a small animal in his grasp can grow tired in the end. He holds it at arms length, tightens his grip about its throat as far as he possibly can, But it does not die. It looks at him, its claws extended. This animal expects no help - even from a troll that might come with a friendly offer to save it. Its only hope of staying alive is that time will be on its side and weaken the enemy's grip. If a small, defenseless people in the midst of national tragedy are fortunate enough to gain/sufficiently powerful enemy, time will form an alliance with that people, as in the case of the small animal I took as my example. But if in their darkest moment they accept the troll's protection, they will be swallowed at a gulp. I know that you Hamburgers would send to us in Iceland cereals free from maggots and that you would not consider it worth the trouble to cheat us by weight and measure. But once German fisheries and German market towns have sprung up along the coast of Iceland, how long do you suppose it would be before German fortifications and German troupes and German commandants would also put in their appearance? And what then would ~~humanity~~ be the lot of this people and their books? The Icelanders at their peak would have developed into fat servants in a German vassal state. A fat servant

is not a great man. A beaten slave is great, for in his breast dwells freedom."