

Author:

LAXNESS, Halldor

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THE HAPPY WARRIORS

Submitted by:

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Methuen & Co. Ltd.
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REJECT

WYK 3.3.58

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Reject.

The first paragraph of Kenneth Chapman's letter of June 24, 1957 gives an eminently clear and sound description of this book as a parody on the Old Icelandic Sagas. Obviously the impact and appeal of any ~~everyday~~ parody depends upon the reader's familiarity with the object of the parody. I am sure ~~I represent the~~ my reaction of bewilderment, confusion, and finally boredom with this picaresque, loosely constructed, so-called saga would be only typical of the average reader's. Methuen's readers are, it seems to me, deceiving themselves into believing that the book can be read both as a debunking of the sagas and as a "straight piece of Nordic blood-and-thunder, extremely well-told, with plenty of murder and revenge and uninhibited love, etc., etc." Laxness's parodic purpose quite deliberately ~~destroys~~ disjoints the narrative line, makes buffoons of the "heroes", and exaggerates the blood and the thunder to make it seem ridiculous. The translation is suitably archaic, and therefore not very easy reading.

It is evident to me that this would be the wrong book to bring Laxness before the American public again.

HR

Methuen report on translation.

Copy of a reader's report on THE HAPPY WARRIORS by Halldór Kiljan Laxness.

This is a rich and refreshing book, enjoyable on several planes. First of all it can be read as a straight piece of Nordic blood-and-thunder, extremely well-told, with plenty of murder and revenge and uninhibited love, adventures in Iceland, Greenland and Norway, and wars extending to England and France. At the same time it is a well-sustained satire on the classical Nordic saga. There are two central characters, the oath-brothers Torgeir and Tormed, the one a fighting man, the other a skald. Their feats are described with apparent admiration, so that one has the impression of discovering almost against the author's intention how hollow and meaningless are Torgeir's murderous pursuits and Tormed's abandon of a happy life to avenge his friend's death. The point is never laboured, the tongue in the cheek is unobtrusive, but the conclusion is inescapable all the same: these legendary heroes were not larger than life, after all; they were what we would now call misfits, and a thundering nuisance to everyone. Thirdly, the book is a huge popular epic rather of the same kind as De Coster's TYLL ULENSPIEGEL. If Laxness does not think much of Viking prowess, he certainly does love the people of Iceland, their cunning and common sense, hardiness and caginess, their silence and poetry. Every one of a thousand characters is rounded and real. The women, for all their ferociousness, are wonderful. The dialogue is terse and full of surprises. Unwieldy though it is, the book fairly tingles with life.

The translation, too, is a pretty remarkable effort. I am glad the copy I saw was scribbled over with corrections: they are an improvement every time, and a translator who has good second thoughts is usually a good translator. There are still a few clumsy passages, but one more revision would probably do the trick. It reads like the real thing, hard and grand, with a fine cadence, sticking to a Saxon vocabulary as far as possible but without faddishness. It does not merely suggest the flavour of the original; it persuades you that you are not losing very much.

I am sure this is a book that ought to go forward, and can imagine it having a solid success. It might be worth considering having it illustrated, at least at the chapter heads. The text is chock-full of characteristic objects, weapons, tools, spinning and cooking implements, ships and beasts. To include drawings of these would emphasize the popular, enduring element which I have mentioned and which is, to my taste at least, the most attractive thing about this book.

Methuen report on Swedish original

Copy of a reader's report on HAPPY WARRIORS by Halldor Kiljan Laxness.

There's no question of this being one of a class of Scandinavian "sagas"; it's as outstanding as The Long Ships, though in a totally different and much more ambitious style. Nothing like such a brisk amusing story - but this one might be thought either a great book, or a great book manqué.

To put it very crudely, its chief end is a ferocious and grotesque debunking of the sagas and saga-virtues - and saga-heroes, including the historical ones. (At least it seemed so to me; one wouldn't guess it from what they say on the jacket). Yet in spite of gross realism in detail, it's not at all a "realistic" narrative, but more exaggerated and romantic (in a gothic way) than the sagas themselves. And it employs the saga-style, which can have the effect of parody when required, but is equally adaptable to the large, gothic moments.

In theory at least, it is the story of the two Icelandic foster-brothers (properly blood-brothers) Thorgeir and Thormod - the "hero" and his "skald". And the jacket does seem to be right in describing Thorgeir as "an Icelandic Don Quixote". He's a tough, stupid little boy, the son of a failed viking who brags incessantly about the number of berserks he has killed etc., and of a woman who knows nothing but viking stories. At the age of seven, he sees his father bashed to death in a brawl. Being densely stupid, he remembers him as a great champion, and accepts his mother's lore as gospel. A manly man never does anything but kill and loot. He speaks little, avoids women, and allows nobody to help him in any way. He aspires only to fame, and would as soon be killed as not. And for fame's sake he attached himself to the most bloodthirsty and victorious king he can find. - What makes Thorgeir a comic, but also a grotesquely heroic figure is his doctrinaire belief in this code, and determination to practise it literally in the teeth of circumstances: that is, in a prosaic farming and fishing community, which has neither scope nor reverence for "great deeds."

Thormod, the "foster-brother", is comparatively a playboy type - glib, amorous and goodlooking; but as a skald in embryo he is immensely struck with Thorgeir, and at once proposes to be his skald. There are no Thormod-poems in the book; but though a much dimmer personality than the "hero", he is the source of the gothic element - especially through his two loves, the "swan-woman" or "valkyrie", and the huge troll-woman who "lives in the depths of the abyss." These are real persons; but both of them, especially the troll-woman, also become super-real. Whereas Thorgeir generates no atmosphere: all though, his life-story remains as grimly concrete as his physical heart, "small as a rowan-berry, yet hard as an acorn."

The first part of the story shows the young men trying to be vikings on their native heath. All this is a kind of savage, grotesque genre-painting. The writer has uglified it in advance, by observing

- (a) that most Icelanders of the period were short and bow-legged, twisted and swollen-jointed with rheumatism, and blue in the face, and (b) that in spite of the saga-tales about cleaving people to the brisket, they were really incompetent smiths, with miserable, blunt weapons, reduced to slugging each other to death. But Thorgeir achieves very few slugging-matches, even. And the "great champion" he has heard of and is particularly looking for turns out to be so ludicrous and ignoble as almost to pass beyond low life and (especially later on, in relation to Thormod) become a kind of troll-figure. At this stage, he completely outwits the hero, and annexes one of his followers - a half-witted vagrant known as Louse-Odde.

Presently Thorgeir is banished. Thormod was intending to go with him - but their friendship has been strained ever since he saved the hero from falling off a cliff. (This is one of the best Thorgeir incidents). At the last moment, the poet stays behind and marries his valkyrie. And the tale moves on to England, to a real viking expedition. Henceforth we are out in the great world, with a whole complex of subjects for debunking - first of all the vikings themselves. Their life is not glamorous, but nasty, brutish and short; and their exploits are not heroic - they much prefer looting without a fight, and having only non-combatants to slaughter. If things get tough, they vanish in search of healthier fields. And the common people, when goaded to self-defence, can always make mincemeat of them. This theme is recurrent; it pertains to the debunking of kings and war-lords, and the first instance is Thorkell the Tall's English expedition. His men sack Canterbury, where there are only monks, women and children, and mutilate the hostages when their ransom does not come quick enough. But in London the people rise, and the vikings bolt like scalded cats. Whereupon Ethelred the Unready hastily patches things up and invites them in. For like all kings, he regards his own subjects as the enemy par excellence.

Thorgeir has drifted into the expedition. And of course he doesn't think much of it. In this milieu he appears in a comparatively sympathetic light - as an honest-to-God- viking-errant, without sense enough to come in out of the rain. He even declines to join in the usual fun of tossing all the babies on spears - not because he thinks it cruel, but on the ground that it's not heroic, and that the manly man despises fun. However, on this expedition he selects his King.

And here we have a very special Aunt Sally. Olav Haraldsson (the future St. Olav) has to be debunked on various counts: not only as Thorgeir's (and therefore incidentally Thormod's) elect leader, but as a historical hero-king and a martyr to Christianity. And the first thing is to make him look squalid - like the saga-Icelanders. On his first appearance he is a youth of seventeen, short and pot-bellied, flat-footed and knock-kneed, waddling in his gait, and wearing a lot of grotesque finery, "like a kitchen-count". Olav has no breeding; he has been a "cow-salting" sea-rover from the age of twelve. He has only two small ships, and is of no importance except for his cherished case of instruments, and his very small "surgeon's hands."

In other words, he is the chief torturer. It was Olav who tortured the monks and nuns of Canterbury. But when London has been used up, Thorkell's men are invited by the Earl of Normandy to plunder a neighbouring ruler; and having got them to France, he makes it a condition that they shall all be baptised. Olav is among those in favour; and most of the vikings take to Christianity like ducks to water. They become quite keen on hearing mass, and on having a bishop around to tell them when it is all right to burn churches full of refugees, etc., or to absolve them if they get it wrong. Thorgeir is one of the few recalcitrants, and during the mass-baptism hides in a tar-barrel.

The campaign in France follows much the same lines as the English one. When the vikings have sacked Chartres, the Earl turns them loose on his own peasants - till finally the peasants rise up, and the vikings run. All but Thorgeir, of course. He is disarmed, jeered at, driven away into the forest, bitten by an adder - and saved by the widow of a murdered peasant. This woman offers him marriage and the farm; but Thorgeir naturally goes limping off again, towards his "great deeds."

Now it is time for Olav's great deeds. Briefly, he has not the shadow of a rational claim on Norway. And he has no excuse - the state of the country is represented as idyllic, and Christianity as making excellent progress. He is not a fighter, or even a politician, but a kind of horrible innocent. However, he gets himself proclaimed by bribery, and settles down to loot, burn, torture etc., as he has been doing from boyhood.

Then the story returns to Iceland. Here Thormod has been enjoying a golden age, with his valkyrie and two adored little girls. But one morning, a stake with a frightful head on it is discovered before the door. Thormod recognises it at once, wakes from his elysium, and vows to avenge Thorgeir and then offer himself as a skald to Thorgeir's King. But in the first place, he never finds out exactly who did it. The hero was murdered in his sleep, by men who came off a ship looking for driftwood. But the head, it seems, was planted by the "troll"-champion Butralde and his satellite Louse-Odde. And they have gone off to Greenland. So Thormod follows them to Greenland...

These Greenland chapters are perhaps the most amazing part of the book. There are two colonies, each with a wretched, struggling, soon-to-be-extinct little band of settlers. Beyond is the North Shore, where desperate men can make a good thing out of walrus and narwhal hunting. And further still are the "trolls" - to wit the Eskimos - whom the Norse regard as non-human, and massacre whenever they get the chance for aping humanity. The trolls never defend themselves - they don't seem to realise that man-killing is possible, still less heroic. And the strange thing is that while the Norse are starved, frozen, disease-ridden and dying out, these trolls, much

~ further north, contrive to live in great jollity and plenty.

Thormod arrives at the East settlement, which is the less grim, only to learn that Butralde and his companion have gone West. He too goes west - and they have left with a crew of hunters for the North Shore. And then he falls in with his "woman of the abyss." Her presence has a natural explanation; but Thormod's stay with her is like an abyss-version of the Venusberg. At last he wakes up, remembers Thorgeir and Thorgeir's King, and starts for the North Shore. An Eskimo-massacre is followed by a shipwreck; and Thormod, the sole survivor, badly smashed up, is found and looked after by another group of "trolls." In the ensuing months, he never stops thinking "what a pity it is that freeborn heroes and skalds are not strong enough to exterminate such stupid and boring people." And he tries to preserve his morale with thoughts of King Olav's greatness, and dreams of returning from "Nifelheim and the world's end," and seeing him face to face.... There is a wonderful, grotesque pathos and irony in these dreams. As for Butralde and Louse-Odde, he recalls them as "fancies of a sick mind".....

After three or four years, compatriots find and bring him home. The ex-playboy is now lame in both legs; he has lost his teeth, hair and ears, and some of his fingers, and looks like a broken-down old tramp. And he learns that his King has been driven out of Norway by the peasants and King Canute. He has to subsist by cleaning pitstyes etc., and even loses his faith. But then comes news of Olav's impending return. For reasons of his own, the King of Sweden has encouraged him to enlist all the thieves, beggars and vagabonds who can be rounded up on either side of the Baltic, for an attempt to reconquer Norway. As there is famine throughout the Baltic area there are a great many of them. They are all heathens of one kind or another, and very few speak Norse. Olav's own friends have abandoned him; so have the priests, because in Russia he has been hobnobbing with the Orthodox, knowing no better. The whole peasantry are in arms against him. And the tale ends with an ironic, desolate encounter between the martyr-skald and his desired King, on the eve of Stiklastad.

I thought there were two major faults in the story. First (as usual in Scandinavia) it's too long. And secondly, it's not at all well-constructed. In theory, as I said, it concerns the blood-brothers. And yet the bond between them is never thoroughly put across; they are quite often apart, even in their Icelandic phase; and after Thorgeir's banishment, not only do they never meet again, but for increasing stretches of time we don't see either of them. A number of wider subjects crop up - more than I have mentioned; and it seems as if the author couldn't bear not to use anything. For instance, there's a good deal about King Canute: including a longish diversion on how he murdered his brother-in-law in church. And this occurs after the Greenland chapters; when we are getting near Stiklastad, and the tension ought to be mounting. Still later, we have a view of Olav in Kiev (which may be justified), and then a chapter on his bishop's visit to Rome - which could be justified, and certainly gives a striking and horrific picture of Rome, but it's really too late for these novelties.

To make up, we have a broad, sensational canvas, great energy and originality, and a lot of staggering bits and pieces. Thorgeir is much the most solid figure; and it's extraordinary how the writer exacts pathos from his wooden idiocy, not just here or there, but time and again. Moreover, he is a hero, just as the woollier Thormod is a real poet. And though perhaps Thormod's final martyrdom is overplayed, he has his ludicrously touching moment in "Nifelheim." Even Olav ends up as a figure of pathos and indeed near-tragedy - without the slightest prejudice to his monstrousness. And the advance of the rabble-army on Stiklastad has an epic flavour. In fact, after all the debunking, the saga seems to have achieved a kind of back-door triumph.