VIII

THE NORTHERN PROSE ROMANCES

THE history of the Sturlungs is the last great work of the classical age of Icelandic literature, and after it the end comes pretty sharply, as far as masterpieces are concerned. There is, however, a continuation of the old literature in a lower degree and in degenerate forms, which if not intrinsically valuable, are yet significant, as bringing out by exaggeration some of the features and qualities of the older school, and also as showing in a peculiar way the encroachments of new "romantic" ideas and formulas.

One of the extant versions of the *Foster-brothers' Story* is remarkable for its patches of euphuistic rhetoric, which often appear suddenly in the course of plain, straightforward narrative. These ornamental additions are not all of the same kind. Some of them are of the alliterative antithetical kind which is frequently found in the old Northern ecclesiastical prose,[1] and which has an English counterpart in the

[1] *Fóstbr.* (1852) p. 8: "Því at ekki var hjarta hans seen fóarn í fugli: ekki var þat blóðfullt svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu, heldr var þat herdt af enum hæsta höfuðsmið í öllum hvatleik." ("His heart was not fashioned like the crop in a fowl: it was not gorged with blood that it should flutter with fear, but was tempered by the High Headsmith in all alacrity.")

alliterative prose of Ælfric. Others are more unusual; they are borrowed not from the Latin ecclesiastical school of prose, but from the terms of the Northern poetry, and their effect is often very curious. For instance, on page 13 there is a sudden break from the common, unemphatic narrative of a storm at sea ("they were drenched through, and their clothes froze on them") into the incongruous statement that "the daughters of Ran (the sea-goddess) came and wooed them and offered them rest in their embraces,"—a conceit which might possibly be mistaken by a modern reader for the fancy of Hans Andersen, but which is really something quite different, not "pathetic fallacy," but an irruption of metaphorical rhetoric from the poetical dictionary. There is another metaphorical flare-up on the next page, equally amazing, in its plain context:—

> She gave orders to take their clothes and have them thawed. After that they had supper and were shown to bed. They were not long in falling asleep. Snow and frost held all the night through; *all that night the Dog* (*devourer*) *of the elder-tree howled with unwearying jaws and worried the earth with grim fangs of cold.* And when it began to grow light towards daybreak, a man got up to look out, and when he came in Thorgeir asked what sort of weather it was outside;

and so on in the ordinary sober way. It is not surprising that an editor should have been found to touch up the plain text of a Saga with a few ornamental phrases here and there. Considering the amount of bad taste and false wit in the contemporary poetry, the wonder is that there should be such a

consistent exclusion of all such things from the prose of the Sagas. The *Fóstbræðra* variations show the beginning of a process of decay, in which the lines of separation between prose and poetry are cut through.

Except, however, as an indication of a general decline of taste, these diversions in *Fóstbræðra Saga* do not represent the later and secondary schools of Icelandic narrative. They remain as exceptional results of a common degeneracy of literature; the prevailing forms are not exactly of this special kind. Instead of embroidering poetical diction over the plain text of the old Sagas, the later authors preferred to invent new stories of their own, and to use in them the machinery and vocabulary of the old Sagas. Hence arose various orders of romantic Saga, cut off from the original sources of vitality, and imitating the old forms very much as a modern romanticist might imitate them. One of the best, and one of the most famous, of these romantic Sagas is the story of Frithiof the Bold, which was chosen by Tegnér as the ground-work of his elegant romantic poem, a brilliant example of one particular kind of modern medievalism. The significance of Tegnér's choice is that he went for his story to the secondary order of Sagas. The original *Frithiof* is almost as remote as Tegnér himself from the true heroic tradition; and, like Tegnér's poem, makes up for this want of a pedigree by a study and imitation of the great manner, and by a selection and combination of heroic traits from the older authentic literature. Hence Tegnér's work, an ingenious rhetorical adaptation of

all the old heroic motives, is already half done for him by the earlier romanticist; the original prose Frithiof is the same romantic hero as in the Swedish poem, and no more like the men of the Icelandic histories than Raoul de Bragelonne is like D'Artagnan. At the same time, it is easy to see how the authentic histories have supplied materials for the romance; as has been shown already, there are passages in the older Sagas that contain some suggestions for the later kind of stories, and the fictitious hero is put together out of reminiscences of Gunnar and Kjartan.

The "romantic movement" in the old Northern literature was greatly helped by foreign encouragement from the thirteenth century onward, and particularly by a change of literary taste at the Court of Norway. King Sverre at the end of the twelfth century quotes from the old Volsung poem; he perhaps kept the Faroese memory for that kind of poetry from the days of his youth in the islands. Hakon Hakonsson, two generations later, had a different taste in literature and was fond of French romances. It was in his day that the work of translation from the French began; the results of which are still extant in *Strengleikar* (the Lays of Marie de France), in *Karlamagnus Saga*, in the Norwegian versions of Tristram, Perceval, Iwain, and other books of chivalry.[1] These cargoes of

[1] "The first romantic Sagas"—*i.e.* Sagas derived from French romance—"date from the reign of King Hakon Hakonsson (1217-1263), when the longest and best were composed, and they appear to cease at the death of King Hakon the Fifth (1319), who, we are expressly told, commanded many translations to be made" (G. Vigfusson, Prol. § 25).

foreign romance found a ready market in the North; first of all in Norway, but in Iceland also. They came to Iceland just at the time when the native literature, or the highest form of it at any rate, was failing; the failure of the native literature let in these foreign competitors. The Norwegian translations of French romances are not the chief agents in the creation of the secondary Icelandic School, though they help. The foreigners have contributed something to the story of Frithiof and the story of Viglund. The phrase *náttúra amorsins* (=*natura amoris*) in the latter work shows the intrusion even of the Romance vocabulary here, as under similar conditions in Germany and England. But while the old Northern literature in its decline is affected by the vogue of French romance, it still retains some independence. It went to the bad in its own way; and the later kinds of story in the old Northern tongue are not wholly spurious and surreptitious. They have some claim upon *Njála* and *Laxdæla;* there is a strain in them that distinguishes them from the ordinary professional medieval romance in French, English, or German.

When the Icelandic prose began to fail, and the slighter forms of Romance rose up in the place of Epic history, there were two modes in which the older literature might be turned to profit. For one thing, there was plenty of romantic stuff in the old heroic poetry, without going to the French books. For another thing, the prose stories of the old tradition had in them all kinds of romantic motives

which were fit to be used again. So there came into existence the highly-interesting series of Mythical Romances on the themes of the old Northern mythical and heroic poetry, and another series besides, which worked up in its own way a number of themes and conventional motives from the older prose books.

Mythical sagas had their beginning in the classical age of the North. Snorri, with his stories of the adventures of the gods, is the leader in the work of getting pure romance, for pure amusement, out of what once was religious or heroic myth, mythological or heroic poetry. Even Ari the Wise, his great predecessor, had done something of the same sort, if the *Ynglinga Saga* be his, an historical abstract of Northern mythical history; though his aim, like that of Saxo Grammaticus, is more purely scientific than is the case with Snorri. The later mythical romances are of different kinds. The *Volsunga Saga* is the best known on account of its subject. The story of Heidrek, instead of paraphrasing throughout like the Volsung book, inserts the poems of Hervor and Angantyr, and of their descendants, in a consecutive prose narrative. *Halfs Saga* follows the same method. The story of *Hrolf Kraki*, full of interest from its connexion with the matter of *Beowulf* and of Saxo Grammaticus, is more like *Volsunga Saga* in its procedure.[1]

The other class[2] contains the Sagas of *Frithiof*

[1] The Mythical Sagas are described and discussed by Vigfusson, Prol. § 34.

[2] *Ibid.* § 11, "Spurious Icelandic Sagas" (*Skrök-Sögur*). For *Frithiof*, see § 34.

and *Viglund*, and all the fictitious stories which copy the style of the proper Icelandic Sagas. Their matter is taken from the adventures of the heroic age; their personages are idealised romantic heroes; romantic formulas, without substance.

Among the original Sagas there are some that show the beginning of the process by which the substance was eliminated, and the romantic *eidolon* left to walk about by itself. The introductions of many of the older Sagas, of *Gisli* and *Grettir* for example, giving the adventures of the hero's ancestors, are made up in this way; and the best Sagas have many conventional passages—Viking exploits, discomfiture of berserkers, etc.—which the reader learns to take for granted, like the tournaments in the French books, and which have no more effect than simple adjectives to say that the hero is brave or strong. Besides these stock incidents, there are ethical passages (as has already been seen) in which the hero is in some danger of turning into a figure of romance. Grettir, Gisli, Kjartan, Gunnlaug the Wormtongue, Gunnar of Lithend, are all in some degree and at some point or other in danger of romantic exaggeration, while Kari has to thank his humorous squire, more than anything in himself, for his preservation. Also in the original Sagas there are conventions of the main plot, as well as of the episodes, such as are repeated with more deliberation and less skill in the romantic Sagas.

The love-adventures of Viglund are like those of Frithiof, and they have a common likeness, except

in their conclusion, to the adventures of Kormak and Steingerd in *Kormaks Saga*. Kormak was too rude and natural for romance, and the romancers had to make their heroes better-looking, and to provide a happy ending. But the story of the poet's unfortunate love had become a commonplace.

The plot of *Laxdæla*, the story of the *Lovers of Gudrun*, which is the Volsung story born again, became a commonplace of the same sort. It certainly had a good right to the favour it received. The plot of *Laxdæla* is repeated in the story of Gunnlaug and Helga, even to a repetition of the course of events by which Kjartan is defrauded. The true lover is left in Norway and comes back too late; the second lover, the dull, persistent man, contrasted with a more brilliant but less single-minded hero, keeps to his wooing and spreads false reports, and wins his bride without her goodwill. Compared with the story of Kjartan and Gudrun, the story of Gunnlaug and Helga is shallow and sentimental; the likeness to *Frithiof* is considerable.

The device of a false report, in order to carry off the bride of a man absent in Norway, is used again in the story of *Thorstein the White*, where the result is more summary and more in accordance with poetical justice than in *Laxdæla* or *Gunnlaug*. This is one of the best of the Icelandic short stories, firmly drawn, with plenty of life and variety in it. It is only in its use of what seems like a stock device for producing agony that it resembles the more pretentious romantic Sagas.

Another short story of the same class and the same family tradition (Vopnafjord), the story of *Thorstein Staffsmitten*, looks like a clever working-up of a stock theme—the quiet man roused.[1] The combat in it is less like the ordinary Icelandic fighting than the combats in the French poems, more especially that of Roland and Oliver in *Girart de Viane;* and on the whole there is no particular reason, except its use of well-known East-country names, to reckon this among the family histories rather than the romances.

Romantic Sagas of different kinds have been composed in Iceland, century after century, in a more or less mechanical way, by the repetition of old adventures, situations, phrases, characters, or pretences of character. What the worst of them are like may be seen by a reference to Mr. Ward's Catalogue of MS. Romances in the British Museum, which contains a number of specimens. There is fortunately no need to say anything more of them here. They are among the dreariest things ever made by human fancy. But the first and freshest of the romantic Sagas have still some reason in them and some beauty; they are at least the reflexion of something living, either of the romance of the old mythology, or of the romantic grace by which the epic strength of *Njal* and *Gisli* is accompanied.

There are some other romantic transformations of the old heroic matters to be noticed, before turning away from the Northern world and its "twilight of

[1] Translated by Mr. William Morris and Mr. E. Magnússon, in the same volume as *Gunnlaug*, *Frithiof*, and *Viglund* (*Three Northern Love Stories*, etc., 1875).

the gods" to the countries in which the course of modern literature first began to define itself as something distinct from the older unsuccessful fashions, Teutonic or Celtic.

The fictitious Sagas were not the most popular kind of literature in Iceland in the later Middle Ages. The successors of the old Sagas, as far as popularity goes, are to be found in the *Rímur*, narrative poems, of any length, in rhyming verse; not the ballad measures of Denmark, nor the short couplets of the French School such as were used in Denmark and Sweden, in England, and in High and Low Germany, but rhyming verse derived from the medieval Latin rhymes of the type best known from the works of Bishop Golias.[1] This rhyming poetry was very industrious, and turned out all kinds of stories; the native Sagas went through the mill in company with the more popular romances of chivalry.

They were transformed also in another way. The Icelandic Sagas went along with other books to feed the imagination of the ballad-singers of the Faroes. Those islands, where the singing of ballads has always had a larger share of importance among the literary and intellectual tastes of the people than anywhere else in the world, have relied comparatively little on their own traditions or inventions for their ballad themes. Natural and popular as it is, the ballad poetry of the Faroes is derived from Icelandic

[1] Vigfusson, Prol. p. cxxxviii. *C.P.B.*, ii. 392. The forms of verse used in the *Rímur* are analysed in the preface to *Riddara Rímur*, by Theodor Wéisn (1881).

literary traditions. Even Sigmund Brestisson, the hero of the islands, might have been forgotten but for the *Færeyinga Saga;* and Icelandic books, possibly near relations of *Codex Regius*, have provided the islanders with what they sing of the exploits of Sigurd and his horse Grani, as other writings brought them the story of Roncesvalles. From Iceland also there passed to the Faroes, along with the older legends, the stories of Gunnar and of Kjartan; they have been turned into ballad measures, together with *Roland* and *Tristram*, in that refuge of the old songs of the world.