Hortherssaga, the Good

Gloriana St. Clair
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Gloriana St. Clair, June 2014, revised April 2016, more of Trapped in the Outhouse

One purpose of all my trips to Iceland is to commune with the spirits of the sagas, to think in terms of history and story, character and craft. My friend and guide Horthur reads these stories over and over reflecting on their locations and implications. After spending some days with him chasing locations for the Njal’s saga and the Grettir the Strong saga, I wanted to tell Horthur’s own story in the saga style. It would be called the Saga of Horthur, the Good.

There was a man named Horthur, called Hoeddi or sometimes the Captain. He was the son of Harthur who was the son of Horther who was the son of Kristin or something like that. Horthur was born in the Reykjavik district and grew up in a town just south of there. I took careful notes about the genealogy of our Icelandic guide because Icelandic family sagas begin with a recounting of the ancestors, sometimes back to the god Odin or Thor. All of the diacritics in my notes are precise so that the vowels and added consonants can be distinguished. Coming home from the 2014 trip, I lost the notes and perhaps the story’s historical thread.

Horthur’s family descended from Jon Arason who had been beheaded at the time of the Protestant Reformation because he refused to leave Catholicism. As soon as his followers brought his body into the valley to be buried, the church bells began to peal although there was no one at the ropes. In another miracle, Jon Arason’s wife (Icelanders did not embrace celibacy) had been an outstanding woman who was able to elude all the soldiers searching for her because they feared she would lead the opposition.

All these stories were recounted as Dan, Matt, and I stood in a beautifully ornamented church whose folding triptych altarpiece had been brought to Iceland with an earlier bishop. A later tower now commemorates Jon Arason’s good pastoral skills and martyrdom while a 1500s psalter sits next to the altar. Horthur still feels a mystical connection to this church, the first built of red stones that were carried down from the mountains. Fittingly, Horthur’s favorite saga character is the pagan lawyer Thorgeir, who convinces the chieftains that Iceland should have one religion—Christianity—though the old pagan faith should be tolerated.

A typical saga would then comment on the protagonist’s youth with the saga writer making ample use of understatement. Horthur was clever in his growing up. When he was only eleven, his uncle taught him to drive an old army truck that had no brakes. He had to shift up and down to control the speed and finally come to a hill to stop the truck. He was honest in all things. Driving his motor cycle, he had been observed speeding. When the police came to the door and asked, he said he had been going a little fast. They told him not to do that again and he did not. He bought a gun and kept it disassembled until he came to the proper permit age.

He had many adventures as a fisherman, once leaving a ship because he had been reprimanded for helping out less fortunate passengers. He got a bad reputation as being a do gooder. In his next career as a driver, he could be relied on to take the bus out in the worst of
weather and once was isolated at Stykkisholmur for many days while the snow was drifting up to the window sills. A high government minister who had arrived in a limousine entourage rode home on the bus as the only transportation in the severe weather.

For some years, Horthur worked on whale watching ships. The sight of these large mammals glimpsed alongside the boat created a certain reverence in the observers. For instance, I felt humbled as I watched the humpback rise, and blow, and then dive. Those who have been privileged to see the whale actually jump out of the water are inevitably awestruck.

Horthur had many unusual friends. One had been flying a small plane across to Reykjavik and was having to roll side to side to pick up the last bits of fuel in the tank. The engine sputtered out as he was coming in, but he finally managed to land. The ground crew asked if anything had happened, “I was a bit low on fuel,” he responded. On another trip, the pilot landed a Coast Guard colleague over near Reykjavik, but certain warrants prevented him from taking him into the city itself. “Would it be any problem if I let you off somewhat short of your destination,” he asked. The man replied that it would not. And that was done.

Hildebrand, the shark master of Iceland, is another friend. When sharks are inadvertently killed in fishing nets, they are brought out to the shark farm. We saw one arriving in a trailer, two tons that had once been an efficient killing machine, now silently rotting outside the shark museum. Hildebrand buries the sharks and then hangs them for months to create stinky shark, a delicacy found in Icelandic homes and washed down in bars with the black death liquor Brennivin. Sharks have no kidneys and extensive processing is required to release the poison. Although my international librarian friend Sigrun Klara enjoys it, I demurred just from the smell in the room.

Horthur, whose knowledge of geology is extensive, recounted many tales of snow slides, rockslides, floods, and volcanic events. In trips on glaciers, he has driven multi wheeled trucks over deep crevices. The likelihood of challenges on the big glaciers requires that at least two properly equipped vehicles are together for any trip. In 2015, a long New Yorker story recounted adventures of these dedicated rescue teams. Our own snow difficulties came on a short quad biking trip through the Oxa valley where the mud flung by the tires made rusty colored snow cones. The melting snow created shallow rivers beneath the ice, and the bikes had to be dug out from the mud time after time.

As we drove down to look at the site of her homestead, my favorite character Aud the Deep Miinded, an outstanding widowed chief who settled enormous holdings in the Laxdale country, stopped our meandering with a sharp stone to the tire. She bade us pause to change the tire and get it repaired. The men with whom I was travelling, being men, did not need manuals. But stories, those written and those related in the long trips through the rural countryside, are more than just directions, they are rationales.

Horthur has recently been deprived of the companionship of his beloved cat. Now his winters are wholly dedicated to his study of the sagas. He waits for my return. Alone of the hundreds
of Americans, Scandinavians, and Europeans whom he has guided, I know and love his beloved sagas and enjoy reliving them with him. The most famous sagas are family sagas, and we, my companions and I, have become part of Horthur's family.