

## **Tales from the Longship: I**

### ***Kvetsalcoadjlsaga***

Marko was, as always, the last to leave the swimming baths. After a few joking farewells in the car park he got in his car and started the drive home. He missed Dave being in the classes. Truth to tell Dave had long since learnt everything Marko could teach him and gained all the safety certificates for diving. But Dave had kept coming 'to keep his hand in', as he put it. And Marko had welcomed his assistance when setting up and putting away. Indeed, there had been a few times when Marko knew he'd might be running tight on time to arrive and arranged with Dave for him to take charge of the setting up.

Marko rather hoped that Dave didn't actually feel he'd been put upon, even though he said to Marko several times that wasn't the case. While the rest of the trainees were more than willing to help with any setting out if asked, so far none of them seemed willing to take the initiative as Dave had done. But Marko realised that some of them should gain that confidence in coming months.

Dave couldn't come on Tuesday evenings very often now as he'd joined a Viking re-enactment society. Their main aim was to create a version of the Shetland winter festival of Up Helly Aa on the beach near Eaton St Torpid – complete with the burning of a replica longship. And the group opted to meet on Tuesday evenings, clashing with Marko's training sessions.

Seems from what Dave had said to Marko the 'weekend Vikings' were taking the whole shebang quite seriously, growing unkempt beards and hair as well as making or buying suitable war axes, swords, shields and cloaks. Those with a bit more money were buying helmets or talking about commissioning mail shirts – though these were heavy enough for some of the lads, hefty as they were, to doubt if they could stand up in them for very long. To practice the combat moves they had arranged to use the land at Friar's Ambling which had been acquired to form a sand mining museum. Once the museum's security fences had been put up they planned to start building the longship there.

However if the weather was wet the training sessions were cancelled for that week, enabling Dave to make it to the diving sessions. Marko made a point of saying to

Dave that he wouldn't have got as wet if he'd done the combat re-enactment instead. But they remained on good terms and Dave suggested to Marko each time that he should stop off at the pub in Friar's Ambling where the Vikings went for a drink afterwards. As Dave said, the Coffin Handles was only a few hundred yards from the coast road Marko used to get home.

Now the pub's sign clearly says the White Lion. But the locals always call it by its nickname, which refers to the impressive brass handles on the front doors. As the diving training had finished in good time it was only just after 9.30 when he left the car park. So no reason not to stop off and get to know Dave's group.

Marko pulled one of the door handles open and initially thought that the Vikings must have already gone as he was expecting to hear a rather rowdy group of blokes. But he walked into the lounge area and there they were – at least a dozen chaps, many with impressive hair and beards, sitting almost silently in a rough-and-ready circle and looking very attentively at Dave, who had his back to the rest of the room. Realising that his friends were casting glances beyond him, when the entrance door audibly shut Dave stopped speaking and looked to see who might have come into the bar.

'Marko!' Dave shouted with a big smile on his face. 'You've come to our rescue. We were just having a bit of a crisis meeting.'

'What's happened that a dozen blokes twice my size can't sort out?' Marko laughingly responded 'Have Norwich Rugby Club declared all-out war on you?'

'No Marko, worse than that!' Dave paused for dramatic effect. 'Cynthia at The Alex has got wind of us.'

Marko looked Dave dead in the eyes from just a few feet away and stayed silent for as long as he dared. 'Oh,' Marko said with deadpan sincerity, 'that is so much worse. Yes, I agree this requires a war cabinet to be set up to organise your defences.'

There was a predictable roar of laughter. Dave introduced Marko to the group. Turns out there were a couple of volunteers from Bill's workshop among them and a guy called 'Old Ben' – who looked younger than Marko, to be honest – who had recently taken up the role of cook on the railway's idiosyncratic dining car service.

Marko's face must have revealed that he thought 'Old Ben' was a bit confusing as a name so the lad next to him said 'Old Ben and I used to be in a *Star Wars* cosplay society. He was Obi-Wan Kenobi, hence the nickname.' Marko had never taken any interest in sci-fi films so was none the wiser.

Dave asked Marko to explain to those who didn't already know Cynthia what the problem might be. Marko tactfully avoided all the low-hanging fruit about her difficult personality and simply said 'Cynthia's easy to get along with. Just agree with all her completely OTT ideas and you can sleep safely in your beds at night. It's much easier than any other options.'

'Thanks Marko,' Dave responded. 'That very neatly sums up our predicament.' More laughter. The group shuffled seats to make room for Marko and the chap on the far side of Dave offered to get him a drink – Marko asked for his customary ginger beer – and several of the others took the opportunity to refresh their glasses. Before everyone had settled down again Dave outlined the 'story so far' to Marko.

Seems Cynthia was entirely supportive of the group's plans. Indeed, she thought the Up Helly Aa was exactly what Eaton needed and was more than happy to organise an exhibition at The Alex themed around Scandinavian art which would coincide with the festival itself. She even wanted to create a trail of Viking chessmen – each about a metre or more high and made from white GRP – based on one of the Lewis chessmen. Different artists could paint each one in distinctive ways. These would then be sited around the area for visitors to 'discover' before being auctioned off for charity at the end of the summer.

'Ah, yes,' said Marko. 'I remember seeing that done with swans in Wells – the one in Somerset, not our one next the sea – a few years back.'

'Seems to have been lots over the years according to Cynthia,' responded Dave. 'Lions at Windsor, pigs at Bristol, bears at Sheffield, even owls and snails.'

'Presumably Cynthia's not expecting this group to organise all this?' Marko enquired.

'Oh no, certainly not.' answered Dave. 'Wouldn't be happening if that was the case. Almost the opposite really – Cynthia seems to take charge of the whole proceedings. If we're not careful our group will just be some sort of walk-on extras.'



agreed to Dave's request. But Dave was a good chap and Marko realised that he owed him some support. The rest of the lads seemed OK too. Actually, thought Marko, good on Dave for seeming to be the leader of the group – just the sort of experience which would do him good as he was never going to develop his seemingly-natural leadership skills while he carried on working as a delivery driver.

Before agreeing to anything though Marko realised he'd best find out first-hand what Cynthia had been cooking up. The next day at lunchtime he wandered off to The Alex. As he expected, Cynthia was manning the counter. 'There's a surprise!' she said with mock bemusement. 'I was only talking about you last week. You've not set foot inside here for months and then you turn up.'

'Could it be that you were talking to Dave?' Cynthia said nothing and kept a deadpan look on her face. 'About promoting me to the challenging role of recounting Scandinavian sagas?' Marko enquired.

'Oh well, I *might* have just suggested it in passing,' Cynthia unconvincingly replied. 'Though I'm sure it was Dave just asking me if it was a good idea.'

'Yea, right, as if...' Marko stifled a more cutting remark which had gone through his mind. 'Wouldn't it have been better if you had, ahmm, "volunteered" someone who actually knew some Scandinavian sagas. Or one of the storytellers you book for sessions here and at the library?'

'No, Marko, not the storytellers,' Cynthia said in her more authoritative voice. 'Firstly because I had already asked if any of them had done any performances of the sagas and they all said they hadn't.'

'But presumably they could learn one or more – and more easily than me,' responded Marko.

'Oh, yes, several of them were up for adding a saga or three to their repertoire,' replied Cynthia. 'But that wouldn't overcome the underlying problem with storytellers.'

Cynthia paused. Marko waited but Cynthia did not continue. 'Come on then, spill the beans. What's your beef with storytellers?'

‘Marko, I couldn’t have put it any better.’

Marko was even more perplexed. Cynthia paused another moment before saying ‘You just pop out jokes and puns without trying – most of them somewhat irreverent too. The storytellers take themselves much too seriously. So far as I’m aware they can’t improvise, still less improvise amusing remarks in the moment. They’d get nowhere trying to keep a boat-full of ale-drinking Viking warriors amused.’

‘I don’t know about you Marko,’ Cynthia continued in a slightly hammed-up manner. ‘But I get the collywobbles when someone gets up and says they’re going to tell a story. You just know they’re going to do some long-winded adjuration which ends with something like “And now don’t forget children, always do what Mummy says.” These days it’s more likely to be some save-the-planet moralising, such as “Don’t forget, children, always recycle your plastic bottles and turn the light off when you’ve finished in the bathroom.”

Marko smiled. Cynthia may be challenging but to her credit she did have a well-honed knack of making very accurate cutting remarks.

Cynthia needed no encouragement to continue riding her high horse. ‘We always know it’ll be a story where everything happens three times, because that’s what makes the stories into fairy stories. A princess doesn’t just get her kit off and get laid – sorry, she doesn’t just get “kissed” – if the prince met her at a posh meal in a palace. He has to get stuck in a hawthorn hedge and then swing through the air on a rope with a box of chocolates between his teeth first. And how old-fashioned is *that?*’

Cynthia paused briefly for breath before really getting into her stride. ‘And “proper” storytellers of course can’t resist doing different voices for all the characters.’ Emulating the relevant voices – much to Marko’s amusement – without pausing she continued ‘So the Princess is all squeaky and high-pitched, while the baddy is gruff and husky.’

‘Are you sure you don’t have an alter ego who does storytelling?’ Marko responded. ‘You seem to be very good at doing the voices.’

‘Marko! You’re just being naughty. If you don’t behave I will volunteer you for a stint of gong scouring. Which is much worse than you might think... ‘

Marko managed to establish that Cynthia was aware the re-enactors – the ‘Ambling Vikings’ as she’d wittily dubbed them, after the place where they were meeting – were working on a spoof saga. She wanted to get her hands on the script as early as possible because, if it wasn’t very well-written, she’d get one of the local authors to give it a once-over, or whatever might be needed. So she got Marko to promise to share anything – on the q.t. – as soon as he could. Marko saw the sense in that, although realised there was a risk that Cynthia might want to take charge of the script – but being aware of her inclinations was probably sufficient defence for the time being.

Cynthia then revealed to Marko that while she had volunteered him as the bard, he shouldn’t worry about having to recite a whole saga. What she really wanted to set up was a simple staging of the spoof saga, mostly using the re-enactors as the cast. It would need a simple replica longship, but they were planning on making one anyway. ‘That’s the real reason I want to see the script early on. If it’s got the right sort of potential then I’ll get a bit of advice on how to turn it into something which could be staged a bit like a “mystery play”.’

‘What, as in who-dunnits?’ queried Marko, trying to make ‘dunnits’ sound like ‘doughnuts’ but not quite pulling it off.

‘No, Marko. As in medieval mystery plays, when different city guilds performed Bible stories on the back of carts and such like.’

Marko was only slightly the wiser, but felt he didn’t need to know more.

‘You see,’ continued Cynthia enthusiastically, ‘although he doesn’t know it yet, Graham – the Punch and Judy “professor” who has worked the summer seasons round here for decades – is going to be invited to make at least a couple of puppets. As you must know, in the sagas there are two ravens – Huginn and Munnin – and I’m going to insist that they’re part of the saga. And that Graham makes – and operates them. I’ve got a small budget going spare so I can pay him – he’s bound to agree if there’s some money around.’



'Well, I don't think there's a need for that,' Dave said.

'Oh, that's a shame,' retorted Marko. 'I'd come up with something I thought rather suitable. It refers to pirates, but I'm sure we could change it to Vikings.'

Without pausing Marko adopted a more formal pose, cleared his throat dramatically then, in a louder and deeper voice than usual, said:

'Twas a dark and stormy night and the pirates sat in the stern of the boat. The captain turned to the first mate and said, "Bosun, tell us a story!" And the bosun said "Twas a dark and stormy night and the pirates sat in the stern of the boat. The captain turned to the first mate and said, "Bosun, tell us a story!"'

Marko stopped and looked at Dave who managed a wry smile. 'Shall we feed him to the crocodile or shall we keep him?' he asked the group. Among the laughter was a remark that the crocodile ought to be kept hungry in case they needed to 'dispatch' Cynthia down the gangplank, which brought further laughter. There was agreement that Marko's audition may well be wide of the mark, but at least he'd mentioned boats.

'I hate to say this, Marko,' Dave continued, 'but we weren't expecting your bardic skills to be so advanced that you didn't need any assistance. Ian here,' – and Dave pointed to a naturally red-hair chap who looked decidedly like a Viking – 'has been working on a spoof saga. Well, up until a few weeks ago we thought it was a spoof, but Old Ben discovered that an American professor of history had come up with almost the same ideas. So it seems facts follow fiction. Or at least the facts as this professor puts them together.'

As Dave and Ian recounted between them, one of the first sessions in the Coffin Handles after the group got together involved a discussion of how Vikings navigated across open water, and what they would do if they were blown a long way off-course by a storm. After some admiration that the Vikings could reliably get from Iceland to Greenland and back Ian had made the wry remark that they might only have got to Newfoundland about AD 1000 by accident, having lost their way in bad weather.



So, perforce, I've tended to make my own way in life. Keep away from the attentions of the storytellers, so to speak, so get neither fame nor infamy. Helps to keep moving on, buying and selling as I go. Happy to take on the longer journeys that carry bigger risks but bigger rewards. Not that I own a boat, you understand. I prefer to buy up the cargo and find a ship and a crew who can be persuaded – and sometimes it does take a little more persuasion than I would consider necessary – to get the goods where I want them taken.

Sinking a much-deserved flagon of ale. Nothing new there, anyone who knows me will say. But this one's more much-deserved than many. I've spent the best part of all day idling along the Dyflin dockside, trying to recruit crew for a trip to Havbukta med Gressmarkene in the new-found lands to the west. Really struggling to get an experienced navigator. Without a good un' this trip could go off course big time. But not that many navigators have done the trip so far north-west.

Or, perhaps best to say, not many have done the trip and come back to Dyfin in the last few days. The only one who'd been sworn he'd never do that trip again and planned to spend the rest of his days going no further than the Elbe. Got sight of him on a boat casting off to go to Dorestad at the mouth of the Rhine. Lots of trade, but too much competition for easy money.

Anyways so far the crew includes some old mates: 'Snowy' Hrafnhayrd, 'Knutkrakr' Hardknutson, 'Djrdjkj' Jotuntakl, Djavj and Djkj Jotunbrow plus some lads who Knutkrakr recommends but are new to me. Also new to me is the captain. He seems to have a rather dubious reputation and refers to himself as Djaks Karrow, though I find it hard to believe that is the name his mother knows him by. Cagey about everything, and seems to have disputed ownership of his longship, so is keen to sail as soon as possible. It's called the *Hrafnperl* and has seen better days.

I don't fancy him as a captain, but he's the nearest to a navigator I've got so far. His lodestone looks the best I've seen in many a while, almost certainly from one of the best Arabic workshops. You have to wonder how he came by it – me thinks not by legitimate means. But, though it certainly looks the part, if you ask me – and I know you didn't, but what the feck – he ain't got a clue how to use it. Between him, his lodestone and my charts and sunstone we

ought to figure out the direction. Never been one for lodestones myself, I learnt the basics of navigation using only a sunstone. But the last trip back from the new-found lands went best of all with both a lodestone and a sunstone to set the way. I made sure to add some north points to my chart whenever I was fairly certain of my position.

Hopefully by darkrise I'll have mustered or press-ganged more crew. Seems flagons of mead are a good recruitment tactic. Seems best not to mention that the food we'll be taking is mostly smoked herrings and black pudding. Apparently my preferences for breakfast and supper aren't shared by all folks. Can't imagine why. Huginn and Muninn don't hesitate to share my snap.

Aye, those two *hrafn* will be pleased to be on the rigging of a ship called the *Hrafnperl* I'll be sure. Got me out of some tight corners they have, when it's difficult to see land from the deck. From the height they fly land is visible at least twenty more miles afar – and off they go in search of fresher food. Trick is to keep a more-or-less constant eye on them circling above, so as to spot the moment when they start flying away. Then set course to follow them. Can pretty much rely on them being back on the rigging again by sundown – they rarely eat well enough by their own endeavours to spend a night or two away.

Ian finished his email with a little explanation that Dyflin was the Viking pronunciation of the Irish *Duib linn*, 'the black pool'; now known as Dublin. 'Havbukta med Gressmarkene' was his own way of referring to L'Anse aux Meadows – just a fictional back-formation. There is no evidence the area was known as L'Anse aux Meadows ('the bay with the grasslands') before the 1860s French naval chart dubbed it *L'Anse à la Médée* – perhaps named after a French naval vessel called the *Medea* or *Medusa*, or a corruption of *L'Anse aux Méduses*, which means 'Jellyfish Cove'. But nevertheless it was fun to change 'the bay with the grasslands' into Norwegian – Havbukta med Gressmarkene – as it seemed to add veracity.

The thought passed through Marko's mind that it's a saga that's been waiting for its time. He could easily imagine Noggian recounting it to a longship crew, the warriors listening in rapt silence, sipping mead and munching on black pudding and smoked herrings, occasionally giving a loud cheer and quaffing more mead at the climax of

the more dramatic moments and becoming more boisterous with each cheer and wassail.

That said, Marko realised that, as written, Ian's draft would be almost impossible for him to pull off. But there were certainly lots of wonderful material to adapt. Cynthia's idea of giving some of the re-enactors speaking roles would side-step many of the problems of it being a long monologue.

Marko then followed Ian's link to the professor's online article. He was especially taken by some of the details. L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland was so far north that the winters were harsh enough for game to either hibernate or venture south. Indeed the archaeological evidence suggested the site was only seasonally occupied by the Norsemen too – almost certainly being a boat-repair facility for vessels about to return to Greenland, laden with timber (trees were absent from Greenland even then) and furs. Surviving bones included caribou, wolf, fox, bear, lynx, marten, all types of birds and fish, seal, whale and walrus. Probably the Norsemen hunted these themselves, though there was some evidence they traded the distinctive red cloth they wove in Greenland with the indigenous tribes.

Seems there was real evidence the Vikings had ventured further south as the history professor had picked up on the remains of butternuts at L'Anse aux Meadows, which do not grow naturally north of New Brunswick. So their presence clearly indicates the Norse inhabitants travelled farther south to obtain them.

And, from Mayan city of Chichén Itzá, two frescoes are known from illustrations made by archaeologists, although the frescoes themselves have not survived. One depicted a plank-built boat very much like Scandinavian boats of the time but a method of construction then unknown in the New World. And the other showed prisoners of war with blond hair, light eyes and pale skin thrown into the water to drown. Less conclusively Vikings, but certainly consistent. So the seemingly bonkers idea that Norsemen from Greenland had been blown off-course to the Yucatan peninsula was not so bonkers after all – the Greenlanders had just traded all the way down the east coast of America.

Marko wryly thought of the Vikings enjoying mugs of hot chocolate on their way back to Newfoundland. Perhaps hot chocolate with a drop of mead in it – must test out that idea with Dave's mates.

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A few weeks later, at about the usual time on a Tuesday, Marko walked into the bar at the Coffin Handles to discover that, as a way of winding down after practising armed combat, the Vikings were discussing *Noggin the Nog*. Seems nearly all of them remembered the children's TV series from the 1960s – though mostly from repeats in the 1980s – but only a few knew that the characters were inspired by the Isle of Lewis chessmen carved in the twelfth century from walrus ivory. Even before saying 'Hello', Marko chipped in with 'That'll be Peter Firmin then – he did the drawings and Oliver Postgate did the scripts and the narration.' After being told he was a know-all and show-off the conversation restarted by Dave asking Marko if he had any bright ideas how they might get the longship from where they planned to build it, here at Friar's Ambling, to the beach at Eaton St Torpid. Other than hiring a large artic, for which they didn't have the budget.

Marko said that Sid and Alf Barrett had been very helpful when the 'Tommy was a Punk Engine' event had been staged at Whittlecreek, so it might be worth chatting to them. Dave thanked Marko. 'But,' continued Marko, 'that will only get you to the turning circle by the cafes. How you going to get it over the sea defences?'

'Good question,' Old Ben chipped in. About a dozen Vikings collectively ummed and erred for a few moments.

'What if,' Marko proposed, 'instead of making the longship replica here you make it in the station yard at Eaton?'

'Could you arrange that?' asked one of the Vikings who Marko knew was a volunteer at the railway's workshop adjoining that yard.

'Well, I could ask. With any luck Bill would let you use some of the equipment in his workshop, should you need to.'

'Oh, yes, that would be wicked,' the volunteer responded.

'But,' said Old Ben, 'that saves us getting from here to Eaton. But we still need to get from the railway yard to the beach.'

‘Any chance you could shift the venue from Eaton beach to St Torpid’s Bay?’ Marko paused. But no one said ‘No’. Dave eventually asked ‘Why?’ ‘That way,’ resumed Marko, ‘you could take the longship to the beach by train as the track there is elevated over the sea defences. OK, there’s a bit of a drop from the track to the beach, but I guess it’s easier to lower something heavy than raise it up.’

‘Isn’t it just!’ chipped in Dave.

Several conversations broke out at the same time. But there was soon broad agreement that this might make perfect sense. Not least because the car parking and toilets at St Torpid’s Bay were more suited to a significant number of people turning up. The volunteer – Marko still couldn’t remember his name – said that there was even a pair of single-axle bogies in working order which were earmarked for a wagon which had yet to be built. If they could build the longship on top of those then it would save having to get the replica vessel onto a wagon. Marko simply said that he’d have to check all that out with Bill. But to say to Bill that he’d already spoken to Marko about it, and Marko was happy, as otherwise Bill wouldn’t make a definite decision as he usually checked anything unusual with Marko first.

And so the ‘Viking charabanc’ came about. So called, not because it looked like a charabanc, but because the bogies were intended for a charabanc-style carriage that was yet to be built, apart from the bonnet and mudguards.

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## **sources**

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The Sheringham Scira Viking Festival of 2018 included the burning of a 16 feet long replica of longship: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-norfolk-43105351](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-norfolk-43105351)

There really is a pub with the nickname 'The Coffin Handles'. But not in Norfolk: [www.historywebsite.co.uk/articles/Darlaston/pubs2.htm](http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/articles/Darlaston/pubs2.htm)

The real 'Noggian' has helped considerably with the inspiration of this tale and some of the ideas and remarks are adapted from his feedback. Although, just to confound readers, the draft script attributed to Ian is not the real Noggian's work. Just to clarify, the real Noggian and the present author did indeed come up with the idea for *Kvetsalcoadjlsaga* before being aware of Professor Hansen's publications. 'Ruth is stranger than Richard' and all that.