

**GUDRID THE FAIR, A  
TALE OF THE DISCOVERY  
OF AMERICA. [1918]**

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**MAURICE HEWLETT**

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS tale is founded upon two sagas, which have been translated literally and without attempt to accord their discrepancies by York Powell and Vigfussen in their invaluable *Origines Icelandicæ*. As well as those versions I have had another authority to help me, in Laing's *Sea-Kings of Norway*. I have blent the two accounts into one, and put forward the result with this word of explanation, which I hope will justify me in the treatment I have given them.

I don't forget that a "saga" is history, and that these sagas in particular furnish an account of the first discovery of America, no less a thing. Nevertheless, while I have been scrupulous in leaving the related facts as I found them, I have not hesitated to dwell upon the humanity in the tales, and to develop that as seemed fitting. I don't think that I have put

anything into the relation which is not implied in the few words accorded me by the text. I believe that everything I give Gudrid and Freydis, Karlsefne and Leif and Eric Red to say or to do can be made out from hints, which I have made it my business to interpret. Character makes plot in life as well as in fiction, and a novelist is not worthy of his hire who can't weave a tale out of one or two people to whom he has been able to give life. All romantic invention proceeds from people or from atmosphere. Therefore, while I have shown, I hope, due respect to the exploration of America, I admit that my tale turns essentially upon the explorers of it. My business as a writer of tales has been to explore them rather than Wineland the Good. I have been more interested in Gudrid's husbands and babies than I had need to be as an historian. I am sure the tale is none the worse for it--and anyhow I can't help it. If I read of a woman called Gudrid, and a handsome woman at that, I am bound to know pretty soon what colour her hair was, and how she twisted it up. If I hear that she had three hus-

bands and outlived them all I cannot rest until I know how she liked them, how they treated her; what feelings she had, what feelings they had. So I get to know them as well as I know her—and so it goes on. Wineland does not fail of getting discovered, but meantime some new people have been born into the world who do the business of discovering while doing their own human business of love and marriage and childbirth.

All this, I say, is implicit in the saga-history. So it is, but it has to be looked for. The saga listeners, I gather, took character very much for granted, as probably Homer's audience did. Odysseus was full of wiles, Achilles was terrible, Paris "a woman-haunting cheat," Gunnar of Lithend a poet and born fighter, Nial a sage, and so on. The poet gave them more than that, of course. Poetry apart, he did not disdain psychology. There is plenty psychology in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—less in the sagas, but still it is there. And when you come to know the persons of these great inventions there is as much psychology as any one can need, or



may choose to put there—as much as there is in *Hamlet*, as much as there is in *La Guerre et La Paix*.

In Kormak's Saga, for instance, which I put forward some years ago as *A Lover's Tale*, is there no psychology? It is no way out of it to put down Kormak's tergiversations to sorcery. I doubt if that was good enough for the men who first heard the tale; it is certainly no good to us. In the strange barbaric recesses of the tale of Gunnar Helming and Frey's wife, what are we to make of it all unless we reckon with the states of poor Sigrid's soul, married to a gog-eyed wooden god? How came Halgerd to betray Gunnar to his foes, how came Nial to be burned in his bed? Can one read *Laxdale* and not desire to read through it into the proud heart of Gudrun?

And having once begun with them one could go on, I believe, until the hearts of all those fine, straight-dealing people were as plain to us as those of our superfine, sophisticated moderns. For Nature is still our mother and mistress, no less now than she ever was—and that's a good

thing for the story-reader as well as for the story-teller.

Out of the Saga of Thorgils, which is a tale of Greenland's exploration, I hope that I drew a portrait of a good Icelfander. Out of Eric's Saga and Karlsefne's Saga combined I believe there is a no less faithful picture of a good Icelfandish woman. Gudrid was wise as well as fair, if I have read her truly; she was a good woman, wife and mother. The discovery of Wineland is to my own feelings quite beside the mark where she is involved; but I have put it all in, and wish there had been more of it. Psychology and romantic imagination will not help us much there. We want the facts, and they fail us. All that can be made out is that Karlsefne sailed up the Hudson. His Scraelings were Esquimaux. But who was the black-kirtled woman who appeared to Gudrid and gave herself the same name? And where was the Maggoty Sea? And what goaded Freydis to her dreadful deeds? I admire Freydis myself; I think she was a *femme incomprise*. I

have taken pains with Freydis, though personally I had rather been Gudrid's fourth husband than Freydis's first.

I am not afraid of the accusation of vulgarising the classics. It is good that they should be loved, and if simplification and amplification humanise them I can stand the charge with philosophy. Of all classics known to me the sagas are the most unapproachable in their naked strength. Their frugality freezes the soul; they are laconic to baldness. I admire strength with anybody, but the starkness of the sagas shocks me. When Nial lies down by his old wife's side with the timbers roaring and crackling over his head, and Skarphedin, his son, says, "Our father goes early to bed, but that was to be expected, as he is an old man," Professor Ker, exulting in his strength, finds it admirable. I say it is inadequate, and not justified to us by what else the saga tells us of the speaker. I am sure that Skarphedin had more to say, or that if he had not the poet could have expressed him better. It recalls the humorous callousness of our soldiers, which, nakedly rendered, is