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Opening extract from
The Saga of Erik the Viking

Written by
Terry Jones

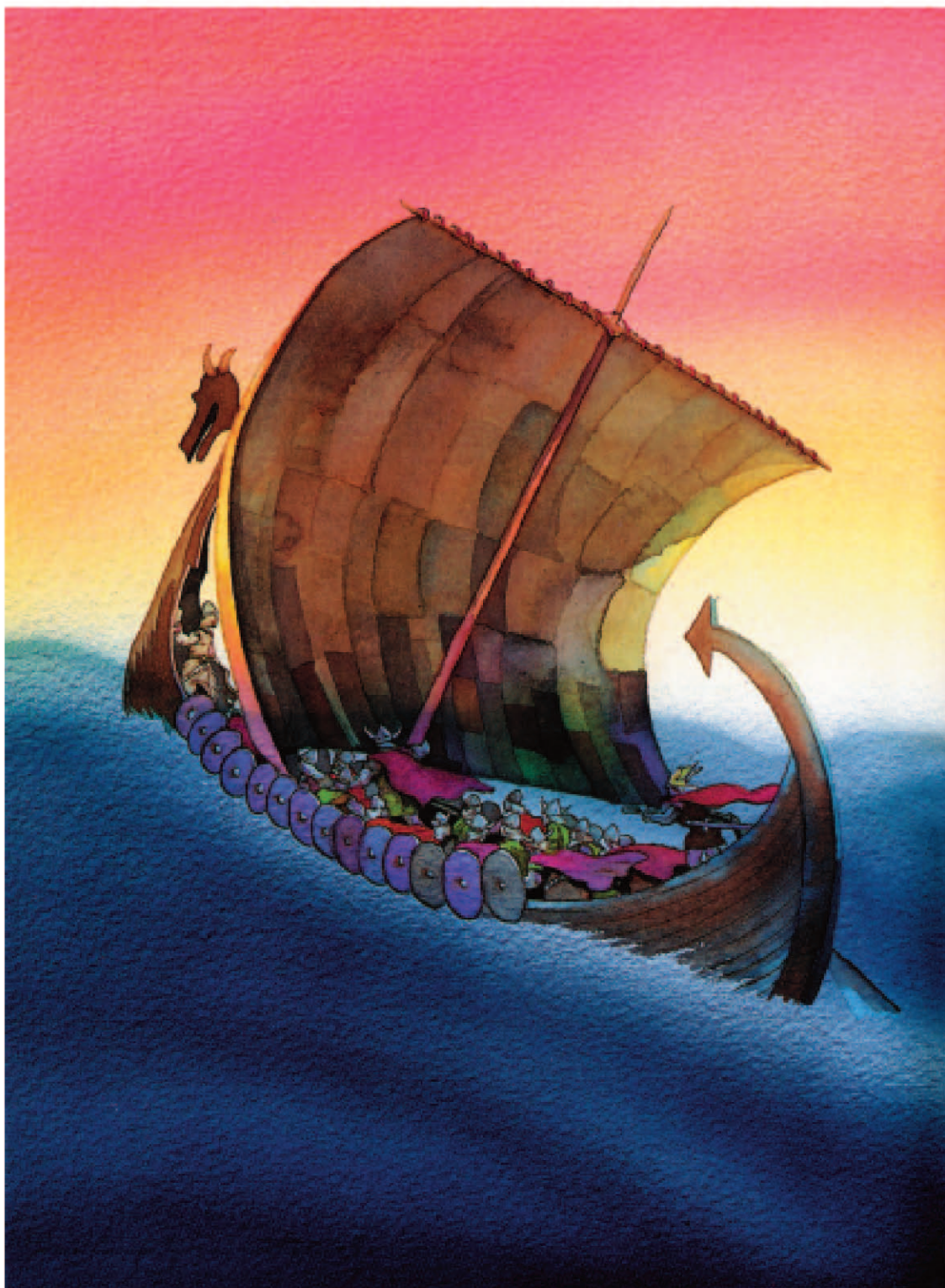
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Michael Foreman

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ERIK AND THE STORM

THIS IS THE TALE of a Viking warrior who lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago. His name was Erik. His ship was called Golden Dragon, and its figurehead was a fierce monster carved out of wood, and covered with gold leaf.

One day Erik said to his wife: 'I must find the land where the sun goes at night.' But his wife replied: 'No one has ever been to that far country. And of those who have tried few have ever returned.'

'You are right,' said Erik, 'but, until I have sought that distant land, I shall never sleep in my bed again.'

So he called his son who was fifteen years old and told him he must guard their home by day and night. Then he took his sword, which was called Blueblade, stepped on board Golden Dragon and sailed off towards the setting sun.

That night they sailed on far from land, and Erik stood at the helm of Golden Dragon gazing into the darkness. Erik's men whispered to each other that they were seeking the land where the sun goes at night, and that no one had ever found it and lived to tell the tale.

Just then a bright green light appeared above them, and a star shaped like a dragon leapt across the sky. Erik turned to his men and said: 'We shall find what we seek.' And no one dared say a word after that.

The next morning they found themselves alone on the ocean with great waves heaving the ship up and down. Erik looked up into the sky and smelt the wind.

'We shan't make it!' whispered Erik's men, one to the other, as the storm clouds blotted out the sun.

'We'll be wrecked at sea,' they murmured as the first drops of rain fell on the deck.

'There's land!' called out Erik. 'Take down the sails ... we'll have to row for it.'

They leant on their oars as the rain began to pour down on them. And the speck of land on the horizon got bigger as the skies got darker and the sea grew rougher.

‘Have no fear,’ replied Thorkhild. ‘I shall keep my side of the bargain, for you have kept yours.’

‘Then come and join me in the icy waves!’ grinned the Old Man of the Sea.

‘First may I fetch some bacon so that we may eat together?’ asked Thorkhild.

‘Very well,’ said the Old Man of the Sea, and he waited while Thorkhild took down a large flitch of bacon that hung from the mast, and tied it round his waist. At this the Old Man of the Sea laughed a loud laugh, then he said: ‘I am waiting for you. Now come and join me in the icy waves.’

‘First may I sharpen my knife so I may cut the bacon?’ asked Thorkhild.

‘Very well,’ said the Old Man of the Sea, and he waited while Thorkhild took a whetstone from under his seat and began to sharpen his knife until it shone. Then the Old Man of the Sea laughed twice as loud and long, and said: ‘Well! I am waiting for you ... now come and join me in the icy waves.’

‘One last thing,’ said Thorkhild.

‘What is it?’ cried the Old Man of the Sea.

‘I need some rope,’ said Thorkhild, ‘to hang my bacon up in your kitchen in the icy waves.’

Well at this the Old Man of the Sea laughed three times as loud and long and said: ‘Very well!’ So Thorkhild tied a length of rope around his waist and said: ‘Now I am quite ready to join you in the icy waves.’ And he climbed onto the side of Golden Dragon and prepared to jump.

But just then one of Erik’s men shouted out: ‘It’s a trick!’ and he pointed to the island which they had reached by now, and they all saw that it wasn’t an island at all but a gigantic narwhal, four times as long as Golden Dragon and four times as high as her mainmast.

‘Old Man of the Sea!’ called out Thorkhild, ‘you didn’t keep your side of the bargain, but I shall keep mine!’ And before anyone could stop him, he had leapt off the side of Golden Dragon and had joined the Old Man of the Sea in the icy waves.

‘Thorkhild!’ cried Erik, ‘the sea is too cold, and the Old Man of the Sea is too tricky – you will die for sure!’

But while they had been talking, Thorkhild had taken the flitch of bacon and rubbed its grease all over himself so that the icy waters ran off his skin like water off a duck’s back. And when he reached the Old Man of the Sea he grabbed him round his skinny neck,





As the Dogfighters waded nearer, the companions saw that, though the waves were high, the dog-headed warriors stood three feet above the highest!

Then Ragnar Forkbeard also threw his sword onto the stony beach and said: 'If Erik cannot fight these creatures, how can we? I too have never felt such fear.' Then the shore rang to the clatter of swords as each of Erik's men threw his sword down onto the stony beach ... all except for Sven the Strong, and he said: 'What has happened to us? Many times in my life I have been afraid, yet it has not made me throw down my sword ...'

And Erik and his men looked up and saw the dog-headed warriors wading through the boiling waters nearer and nearer to the shore and their eyes glittered in their helmets cold and hard. And then even Sven the Strong threw down his sword onto the stony beach saying '... and yet, I know, even I cannot fight with such fear in my heart ...'

But just then they heard another voice behind them, saying: 'It is not fear that you feel!' And they turned, and there was the old Enchanter's daughter standing white and frail in the wintry northern sun, but her face was strong.

'I feel fear,' said Erik to Freya, 'because I know that no one has ever faced these Dogfighters and lived ...' and he sank to his knees as if a great weight were pressing down on him, and all the time the dog-headed warriors waded closer and closer.

'But you are wrong!' cried Freya. 'Don't you remember there is one here who has faced them and lived!'

At this Sven the Strong looked up, and Thorkhild looked up, and they said: 'Who? Which one of us has ever faced these fearful creatures?' And Freya replied: 'None of you have, but my father has!' And without another word Sven the Strong strode over to the old man and said: 'Of course ... If you know them from the fearful past as you say, you have met with them and lived. Tell us how!'

And the old Enchanter wept: 'It is hopeless.'

'Tell us what happened!' cried Sven the Strong, and he lifted the old man up in his hands as the Dogfighters reached the beach at last.

The old man looked into Sven's eyes: 'Did I escape?' he asked.

'Of course you did!' cried Sven the Strong and he saw the fear flicker a moment in the old Enchanter's eyes.