

## AUDUN'S STORY

THERE was a man in the Westfjords called Audun; he was not well off and worked as a farmhand for a kinsman of his, a man called Thorstein.

One summer a ship put in at Vadil and its captain, Thorir, took lodgings with Thorstein, since he could provide the best accommodation. Audun gave the captain useful advice and helped him to sell his merchandise to people he knew who could be trusted to pay. The captain offered to pay him back for his help, and Audun decided to travel abroad with him. Thorir said he was welcome to be a passenger on his ship.

Audun told Thorstein what he'd decided to do, and said that when he'd sold the sheep and paid in advance for his mother's food and lodgings over the next three years – she was staying with Thorstein – he'd still be left with three marks of silver.<sup>1</sup> Thorstein said he seemed likely to have his share of good luck.

In the autumn Audun sailed abroad with Thorir, and at the end of the voyage Thorir invited him to come and stay in More, where he had a farm; it was very pleasant there.

Thorir asked Audun what he intended to do. 'I'd like you to know what I have in mind myself. I'm going to Greenland, and you're welcome to join me.'

Audun said he would like to go, and they went to Greenland the following summer. They put in at Eiriksfjord, and all the richest people on board took lodgings

1. Three marks of (unrefined) silver was equivalent to the value of six milch cows.

there, but the rest of them – including Audun – travelled to the Western Settlement to look for somewhere to stay.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Greenlanders there was a hunter called Eirik, and he captured a magnificent polar bear. When Audun heard about it, he offered to buy the bear, but the hunter said it wouldn't be wise of him to spend all his money on the bear, 'I know you've only just about enough,' he said.

Audun said that didn't bother him in the least and bought the bear with all he had. Afterwards he went back to Norway with Thorir, who once more invited him to stay, but Audun said he'd try to get a passage on a cargo boat and sail south to Denmark as he meant to give the bear to King Svein Ulfsson.<sup>3</sup>

Thorir said it would be taking a great risk to travel with something as valuable as that, 'considering the great war going on between King Harald and King Svein.'

Audun travelled south, and when he reached Hordaland, he found that King Harald<sup>4</sup> was attending a feast there. The king was told a magnificent bear had been brought, and he sent for the owner. Audun presented himself before the king and greeted him.

The king returned the greeting and said, 'Do you have anything valuable?'

Audun said yes, he had a bear.

'Will you sell me this beast at the price you paid for it?' asked the king.

Audun said he wouldn't.

2. The Icelandic colony in Greenland was founded c. 985 A.D. There were two distinct settlements, both on the west coast; the Western Settlement was the more northerly of the two. See *The Vinland Sagas*, Penguin Classics, 1965.

3. King of Denmark 1047–74. See *King Harald's Saga*, Penguin Classics, 1966, and *Knyttlinga Saga*.

4. King Harald Hardradi, see p. 109 above.

'It wasn't a fair offer, anyhow,' said the king. 'But will you sell me the bear at double the price you paid for it? Then you'd make a profit, as of course you should, since you say you bought it with everything you had.'

Audun said he wouldn't.

'Will you make me a present of it then?' asked the king.

Audun said he wouldn't and the king asked him what he meant to do with the bear.

Audun said, 'I'm planning to travel south to Denmark to give the bear to King Svein.'

The king asked, 'Are you really so stupid that you don't know this country's at war with Denmark? Or do you think you're so much luckier than everyone else that you can take a precious thing like this where even harmless people carrying nothing with them can hardly manage to travel?'

Audun said, 'It's up to you to decide what will happen to my expedition. Naturally, I've often heard about this bitter fighting between King Svein and yourself, but maybe I won't get hurt.'

The king said, 'I think it'll be best to let you get on with your journey - it could be good luck will come your way. But I want you to do me a favour: let me know how the journey turns out.'

Audun gave his promise. He set out and travelled south along the coast, then east to Oslofjord and from there across to Denmark. When he arrived he didn't have a penny and had to start begging food for himself and the bear. One evening he met a man called Aki, one of King Svein's stewards. Audun told him about his travels and asked him to give him food for the bear. Aki offered to sell him some, but Audun said he had nothing to pay with. 'I'd very much like to give the bear to King Svein.'

The steward said, 'I want a half-share in the bear. You must know it won't live long if no one helps you.'

Realizing the predicament he was in, Audun accepted the offer and sold Aki a half-share in the bear. Then they set out to see the king, with a large crowd following them. The steward and Audun came up to the royal table and greeted the king. He asked Audun what country he came from.

Audun said, 'I'm an Icelander, but I've just arrived from Norway, and before that I was in Greenland. I'd hoped to present you with this bear I bought with everything I had. I met King Harald, and he gave me leave to travel where I wanted after he made me an offer for the bear that I wouldn't take. But, my lord, when I came to see this man Aki my last penny had been spent; I was dying of hunger, and so was the bear. Now the gift's been spoiled. Aki wouldn't help me or the bear unless he got a half-share in it.'

The king asked, 'Is the man telling the truth, Aki?'

'Everything Audun has said was true', said Aki, 'and that's why I wanted him to have the other half.'

'You were a little man, Aki, and I made you great,' said the king; 'yet you thought it proper to stand in the way of this man who wanted to give me a priceless gift which he'd paid for with all he had. Even King Harald, our enemy, saw fit to let him travel in peace. You deserve to be put to death. Leave this land at once, I never want to set eyes on you again. But as for you, Audun, I feel just as much in your debt as if you'd given me the entire bear. You're a welcome guest and you must stay here for a long time.'

Audun accepted the invitation. However, one day he said, 'I want to leave, my lord.'

The king was slow to reply, and eventually he asked what Audun had in mind. Audun said he wanted to go on a pilgrimage to Rome.

'I'd have been offended if your reason hadn't been so

noble,' said the king. 'I'll give you money, and arrange for you to travel with some other pilgrims.' Then he asked Audun to come and see him on his way back.

Audun travelled to Rome. On his journey back he fell ill and grew terribly haggard. All his money was gone so he took to begging and was very thin and miserable when he came back to Denmark and arrived at Easter at the king's residence. Audun was too timid to come forward and hid in a corner of the church. He meant to approach the king as he returned from Vespers, but when he saw the king and his courtiers in their elegant attire, he couldn't muster courage to step forward.

The king went to his banquet in the palace, and Audun had something to eat outside the church, as is the custom of pilgrims before they throw off their staff and scrip. Audun made up his mind to speak to the king when he went to Compline, yet hard as he'd found it earlier in the evening, it seemed much harder now when the courtiers had been drinking. But as they were going inside, the king noticed this man and realized he hadn't had the courage to come forward to speak to him.

So when the courtiers had gone inside, the king turned back and said, 'The man who wants to see me can come forward now.'

Audun came forward and fell at the feet of the king, who could hardly recognize him. The king seized him by the hand to welcome him. 'You've changed,' he said.

The courtiers started laughing at Audun, but the king told them not to. 'He's provided better for his soul than you have.'

Then a bath was prepared for Audun, and the king gave him a set of his clothes which he'd worn during Lent. The king invited Audun to stay on and become his cup-bearer.

Audun said, 'It's a generous offer, my lord, but I'm going back to Iceland.'

'That's a strange choice,' said the king.

Audun said, 'I couldn't bear the thought of living here in luxury, while out in Iceland my mother is scraping a beggar's existence; time's up and the money I provided for her's finished.'

The king said, 'You must be a lucky man. It's the only reason you could give for wanting to leave, without offending me. But you'll stay with me until the ships are ready to sail.' Audun accepted gladly.

One day late in the spring, they went down to the harbour where ships were being fitted out for voyages to various countries in the Baltic, and to Saxony, Sweden and Norway. They came at last to a splendid ship which was being fitted out.

'What do you think of this ship?'

'It's a fine one,' said Audun.

The king said, 'I want to give you this ship in return for the bear.'

Audun thanked him for the gift.

A little later, when the ship was ready, the king said, 'Since you're determined to go, I shan't try to keep you back. I've been told that long stretches of the coast of Iceland are harbourless and dangerous for shipping, so your ship could be wrecked and the cargo lost. If that happened you'd have little to show that you'd visited King Svein and given him a most valuable gift. So here's a leather purse for you - it's full of silver - and you won't be penniless as long as you have this money. However, you might possibly lose this money too, and then you'd still have little proof that you'd visited King Svein and given him everything you owned.'

Then the king pulled a splendid bracelet off his arm and gave it to him.

'Should the worst come to the worst and you wreck your ship and lose your money,' the king continued, 'you will

not be quite penniless when you get ashore if you keep the bracelet, and it will serve as proof that you've visited King Svein. But should you owe some highborn person a great favour, I think it would be a good idea for you to give him the bracelet. It suits a man of noble birth. Farewell!

Audun sailed off and took the usual route through Ore Sound, north along the coast, until he reached the port where King Harald was in residence. This time Audun needed many hands to help him. He went to see the king and greeted him. The king received Audun cordially and invited him to join him in a drink, which Audun accepted.

'Did you give King Svein the bear?' asked the king.

'Yes, my lord,' said Audun.

'How did he repay you?' asked the king.

'First, he accepted my gift,' said Audun.

'I'd have repaid you in that way, too,' said the king. 'Did he reward you further?'

'He gave me provisions and a lot of money to go on a pilgrimage to Rome,' said Audun.

'King Svein gives money to a good many people, even to those who don't bring him priceless gifts, and I'd have given you such money, too,' said the king. 'What else did he give you?'

'He invited me to stay at his court when I came back from Rome, a beggar more dead than alive,' said Audun, 'and he gave me the clothes he'd worn during Lent.'

'I think it's no more than proper he shouldn't have starved you or denied you the use of his Lenten clothes,' said the king. 'One can easily treat beggars to that sort of thing, and I would have done the same. Was there anything else?'

'He invited me to become his cup-bearer,' said Audun.

'That was a great honour,' said the king, 'and I'd have done the same. What else did he repay you with?'

'He gave me a trading ship fully rigged and loaded with the finest cargo to come to this country.'

The king said, 'That was very generous of him, and just what I'd have done. When did he stop repaying you?'

Audun said, 'He gave me a large purse, full of money, and said I wouldn't be penniless even though I wrecked my ship off Iceland.'

The king said, 'That was really generous, and more than I'd have done. I'd have thought I'd settled my debt when I'd given you the ship, whatever happened to it afterwards. Did he then stop rewarding you?'

Audun said, 'He gave me this bracelet and said I might possibly lose the rest of my possessions but that I wouldn't be penniless as long as I kept the bracelet. He asked me not to give it away unless I felt so much in debt to a highborn person I felt I must give him the bracelet. Now I've found such a man, for you could easily have had me put to death, my lord, and confiscated my precious bear. But you let me go in peace although other people were not free to travel. I owe my good fortune to you.'

The king said, 'King Svein has very few equals indeed, although he and I have never got on well together. I accept the bracelet you give me, and you must stay with me here. I'll make sure your ship is made ready and I'll provide you with all you need for the voyage.'

Audun accepted the offer, and when he was ready to put out again, the king said, 'I'm not going to give you any expensive presents, but accept this sword and cloak.' Both were splendid gifts.

Audun sailed to Iceland in the summer and made land in the Westfjords. He became a man of great good fortune. He had splendid progeny. Thorstein Gyduson and many other good men are descended from him.<sup>5</sup>

5. Thorstein Gyduson died in 1190.