

Erik and the Great Bird

When the winter was over, Erik and his men set off on the long journey to find their ship, Golden Dragon. As they journeyed, Ragnar Forkbeard looked around him: 'This is a fine country,' he said. 'A man could lead a good life here if he chose.'

No sooner were the words out of his lips than a cloud came across the sun. And Erik and his men looked up to see – flying slowly through the air – the most monstrous bird that any of them had ever seen. It was black, and it was as big as six ships in full sail.

'Quick!' said Erik, and they dived behind a rock as the vast creature swooped down over them. And the tips of its wings seemed to brush the ground on either side of them, and a cloud of dust flew up and the draught of air from its wings was like a gale that threw them on their faces and left them gasping for breath.

As it passed over them they could see it had a huge razor-sharp beak and its claws were like iron hooks, and there was not one of Erik's band who was not filled with an unutterable fear.

When it had gone, Erik stepped out from the rock and said 'Let us make haste.'

But some of his men said: 'No, we dare not go another inch!'

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'Are you mad?' replied Erik. 'Do you think you can spend the rest of your lives behind that rock?' So one by one they came out, gazing fearfully up at the sky. 'Now,' said Erik, 'we must keep our eyes open for that monster, and stay near cover as we travel.'

And on they went, many of them still trembling with fear.

At last they came to an open plain. 'What shall we do now?' they asked each other. 'We must cross this plain where there is neither rock nor tree to give us shelter nor any hole to hide in. If the great bird returns while we are crossing such a place, it will snap us up as easily as worms off a plate!'

Erik stared across the plain, and he knew that they were right. Nevertheless, he shrugged his shoulders and said: 'We have no choice.'

'Let us return to our camp,' said some of his men, 'at least we can be safe there.'

'And live the rest of our lives in terror and hiding?' asked Erik.

'At least that is better than being eaten alive by that monster,' they replied.

But even as they spoke they heard a terrible noise, and on the far horizon they saw a black shape rising into the sky. Quaking with fear, Erik and his men hid once more. And if the bird had seemed gigantic before, it now seemed like a great thundercloud blotting out half the sky. And it wheeled overhead and swooped down over their hiding-place as if it knew they were there. And as it came low they could smell the strong bird-smell that clung to its talons.

'If we'd been out on that plain now,' muttered Sven

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the Strong, 'we would certainly have been snapped up as easily as worms off a plate . . . each and every one of us!'

'Caw - Caw!' screeched the bird, and its voice was like a thunderclap that made the rocks shake and the earth tremble.

'I can't hide away like a rabbit!' cried Ragnar Forkbeard. 'I will slay this crow!' and before anyone could stop him, he'd leapt out of the cleft of rock in which they were hiding and aimed his bow, strong and true, and let fly an arrow that struck the creature in its claw.

'CAW - CAW!' screeched the bird, and wheeled round in the sky and swooped low over where Ragnar Forkbeard was standing, and snatched him up in its monstrous claw, and then flew off over the great plain and beyond the furthest horizon.

The men were silent for some moments after this. Then Erik spoke: 'Now we cannot go back. We must find our comrade!'

'But what can we do?' moaned some of his men.

'I do not know,' said Erik.

'How can we hide from that monster, if we cross that open plain?' they cried.

'I do not know,' said Erik, and put his head in his hands. Then Thorkhild whispered to Erik, 'We must go!' and together they set off across that wide open plain in the direction the great bird had taken.

'It may be useless,' said Sven the Strong, 'but I cannot see them go alone,' and he followed after them. One or two followed him and then more and then no one was left behind. In this manner they walked for a

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mile across the open plain, expecting at any moment the great monster to darken the sky once more.

But they walked another mile and still there was no sign of the great bird. And after another mile, Thorkhild said: 'Who knows? Perhaps we shall make it safely across the plain after all.'

'Ssh!' said Erik. 'Look!' He pointed, and in the distance they could just see some mountains rising out of the ground. 'If we can make it to those mountains we shall be safe.' So, keeping their eyes on the sky, they quickened their pace.

But they hadn't gone more than a few yards before one of Erik's men yelled out: 'There it is again!' and they all threw themselves to the ground but, when they looked up, they saw it was not the great bird at all - just a black cloud scudding across the sun.

On they went once more, and eventually they reached the mountains, and found themselves beside a rocky stream. 'We shall be safe now,' said Erik, 'let us follow this stream, and perhaps it will take us to where the great bird lives, and there, perhaps, we will be able to kill it when it is asleep.'

Without more ado, Erik put his foot in the water, but the moment he did so there was a cackle of laughter, and he looked up and saw a curious creature sitting in a tree.

'Who are you?' asked Erik. 'And what are you laughing at?'

'I am the spirit of that stream you're standing in,' said the creature, 'and I always laugh', and it opened its wide mouth and it laughed a laugh like the tinkling of water in a brook.

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Erik looked at his men, but they were talking earnestly amongst themselves.

'You're the only one that can see me!' laughed the spirit of the stream. 'And then, only while you're standing in the water. What do you want with me?'

'I want you to take me to where the great bird lives,' replied Erik.

Again the spirit of the stream opened its wide mouth and laughed a laugh like the tumbling of waterfalls. 'There is no great bird,' it said.

'But we have seen it . . . twice!' cried Erik.

'Don't believe *everything* you see!' smiled the spirit of the stream.

'And we have felt the wind from its wings on our faces,' said Erik.

'Don't believe *everything* you feel!' laughed the spirit of the stream.

'And it has carried away our comrade, Ragnar Forkbeard!' cried Erik.

The spirit of the stream stopped laughing, and looked at Erik and said: 'There is no great bird. It is something inside you that has taken wing, and it will continue to carry off your comrades until you find out what it is.'

Then the spirit of the stream opened its mouth wider than ever and laughed a laugh like the breaking of oceans, and then climbed into its own mouth and disappeared. Erik sat down on the edge of the stream with his head in his hands. 'Now I fear we shall never see Ragnar Forkbeard again . . . for how can that great bird be something inside *me*? And even if it were – how could I even begin to find out what it was?'

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Then Thorkhild knelt down beside Erik and asked: 'What have you seen that troubles you so?'

And Erik replied: 'I have seen the end of our hopes. I have seen that we shall never reach Golden Dragon nor find the land where the sun goes at night.'

'Erik,' said Thorkhild, 'you must not say such things for – even if they are true – how could we follow you, knowing you believed them?'

'Thorkhild,' replied Erik, 'you are right.' Then he turned to the others and said: 'Come! Let us find our comrade, Ragnar Forkbeard,' and they all moved on up the mountain stream.

They climbed higher and higher, and then all at once they rounded a corner and found themselves confronted by a dark forest.

'How strange,' muttered Erik, 'to find a forest so high up a mountainside.' Nevertheless, he led his men straight into the gloomy depths. They hadn't gone far, however, before they found their way blocked. In front of them the trees no longer stood upright, but lay horizontal, piled one on top of the other, up as high as the men could see.

'Who has ever seen a forest like this?' asked Sven the Strong.

'We must climb up, and see what we can see,' said Erik.

'I do not like this,' murmured more than one of Erik's men as they climbed. 'Who knows how this forest came to be like this?'

But Erik told them to be quiet, and up they climbed, until at last they reached the top. And there a most extraordinary sight met their eyes: the pile of horizontal

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trees stretched out in a great circle, half a mile wide, in the shape of a basin.

'Don't you see where we are!' cried Erik.

'I've never seen such a thing,' said Sven the Strong, 'and it means nothing to me.'

'We are in the nest of the great bird!' cried Erik. 'And see! Who is that small figure in the middle?'

They all looked and saw, down in the bottom of the great bird's nest, amongst the threaded trunks of trees, their comrade whom they thought was lost, Ragnar Forkbeard.

'Is he alive or dead?' they asked each other, and then they saw him scramble to his feet and wave at them.

Erik turned to Thorkhild and said: 'Now I truly believe that we shall find Golden Dragon and that we shall reach our final goal.'

Then without another thought, they all ran down into the great nest of trees, jumping from trunk to trunk, until they had reached their comrade. And there they hugged and clapped each other on the back.

'But we must make haste,' said Thorkhild. 'We are right in the middle of the great bird's nest, it might return at any moment!'

'Indeed it might!' said Ragnar Forkbeard, 'and yet the curious thing is that it did not harm me. Its talons were great and strong and yet it scarcely scratched the surface of my skin.'

'We can take our time,' said Erik, 'the bird will not return.'

'But how can you be so sure?' asked his men.

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'That I may not tell you,' replied Erik, 'but, as I am your leader, you can believe what I say.'

And so they took their way out of the great bird's nest and down the mountain, and set off once more in search of Golden Dragon.

That night, as they lay down to sleep, Thorkhild took Erik on one side and said: 'Erik, what made you so certain that the great bird would not return?'

Erik swore Thorkhild to secrecy and then told him what the spirit of the stream had said. 'But it was you, Thorkhild, who made me see what it was within me. There was no great bird, as the spirit of the stream said, but it was the doubt that had grown in my mind, taking wing and casting a cloud over all of us.'

Thorkhild shook his head: 'This is a fine country,' he said, 'and a man could lead a good life here, but you cannot live for long in a land in which there is no room for doubt.'

'No,' said Erik, 'let us get away from here as soon as we are able.'

So they slept, and the next day they set off to find their ship.