

The Talking Valley

Erik and his men travelled on until they came to a green valley full of blue flowers. Thorkild sniffed the breeze and said: 'There is something curious about this valley.'

But they set off across it, until they came to a tree leaning over a clear pool. 'I have never seen such a tree before,' said Erik. 'Look! Its bark is lined with gold!'

'So it is!' cried his men, and they seized their knives and began to strip out the gold from the bark of the tree. But suddenly a gentle voice stopped them: 'Don't!' it said.

Erik and his men looked all around them, but they could see no one, so they shrugged and carried on. And then the gentle voice spoke again: 'Don't!' it said, 'for I will die.'

Erik and his men looked at each other. Then they looked behind the tree, and then they looked in its branches.

'I must be dreaming!' said Erik. 'But it seemed to me as if the tree spoke.'

'How can a tree speak?' cried Sven the Strong, and he took his knife again, and began to strip out more gold from the bark.

'Do not kill me,' said the gentle voice once more.

'Who are you?' cried Sven the Strong, letting go of his knife.

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'I am the tree that you are wounding with your sharp blade,' replied the voice.

'What sort of country is this,' cried Erik, 'where trees can speak?'

'This is the Talking Valley,' replied the tree. 'In it you will find many wonderful things, but you can do much harm.'

'What sort of tree are you?' asked Erik.

'I am a Stone Tree,' replied the tree, 'my bark is seamed with gold, my branches are shot through with silver, and my leaves are veined with fine filigree, but all my fruits are stones, and when summer ends my back is almost broken by their weight.'

'But how is it you can speak?' asked Ragnar Forkbeard.

'I can speak no more nor less than any tree,' replied the Stone Tree, 'it is just that you can understand, for everyone who touches the gold from my bark can ever after understand all plants.'

'Is that true, grass?' asked Erik.

'It's true!' whispered a million tiny voices, and a million blades of grass waved together in the wind.

'But this is more wonderful than anything I have ever seen or heard before!' exclaimed Ragnar Forkbeard, and he bent down and heard a daisy singing in a high voice:

I am bowing to the sun
And when my day is done
I shall turn away and wait
For my friend to come, to come.'

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'Daisy!' whispered Ragnar Forkbeard. 'We are seeking the land where the sun goes at night, since the sun is your friend, do you know where it is?'

And the daisy replied: 'I am only a daisy, living down here in this valley – why don't you ask the trailing vine that grows on the hill? He's sure to know.'

So Ragnar Forkbeard went to the hill and spoke to the trailing vine, that was clinging to a rock, and the vine replied: 'I grow up here and have a fine view over this valley ... I see all the flowers and all the trees are in their proper places ... and that's a heavy responsibility, as you can well understand ...'

'But do you know the land where the sun goes at night, vine?' asked Ragnar Forkbeard. 'Come to the point.'

'I like to go in all directions,' replied the vine, 'and take my time ... but right now I'm climbing up this rock ... perhaps in a year or two I'll be able to look over the top, and then I'll be able to answer your question ...'

'But we know!' said some voices from higher up, and Ragnar Forkbeard looked up to see some of the blue flowers, that filled the valley, waving down to him.

'Don't believe those orchids,' said the vine, 'they're full of tricks and they don't like strangers.'

But Ragnar Forkbeard had already climbed up to the blue orchids: 'Tell me,' he said, 'what you know.'

'Take one of my petals, and eat it,' said the blue flower nearest him. So Ragnar Forkbeard broke off a petal, and a hush went over all the orchids. Then he

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ate the petal and waited. But nothing happened. 'Well?' said Ragnar Forkbeard, but the blue orchids said nothing to him. So Ragnar Forkbeard turned back to the vine and said: 'Why do the orchids say nothing?' But the vine was also silent. Then Ragnar Forkbeard suddenly knew that the magic power to hear and understand all plants had left him and that he had been tricked by the blue orchids.

Meanwhile Erik and the others were still standing round the Stone Tree. Sven the Strong broke off a branch and sure enough, just as the tree had said, it was shot through with silver.

And while Sven was holding it, he heard a shout: 'Run! Run! Run for your lives!' and he turned round and saw three hares racing across the meadow. And the biggest of the hares was calling to the others: 'Run, little brothers! Run!'

'What is it you hear, Sven?' asked Erik, and he took the silver-lined branch from Sven's hand, and then he too heard the hares calling to each other, and he heard a buzzard high up in the sky crying: 'Run, little hares! Save yourselves for me!' Then a fox appeared from the wood, and glared up at the buzzard, crying: 'They're mine, buzzard! Mine!' and he raced after the hares.

And Erik's men passed the silver branch from one to another, and whoever touched it could from then on understand not only the plants but the animals as well.

'Stone Tree!' said Erik, 'your bark makes us hear plants speaking, your branches make us understand the language of animals ... now tell us ... what do your leaves do?'

And the Stone Tree replied: 'Do not hurt me further.

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for everything you take from me is a little death.' 'But you'll soon grow new leaves!' cried Erik.

'Alas . . . no,' said the Stone Tree, 'I am not like other trees. My fruit are stones, that break my back with their weight, and I cannot grow anything else.'

But one of Erik's men had already broken off a leaf, and the Stone Tree sighed and said: 'Drop it in the pool and then taste the water.'

And when they did . . . can you guess what happened? They heard the pool chuckling in a deep cool voice: 'So you're looking for the land where the sun goes at night.'

'How do you know, pool?' asked Erik.

'Because,' said the pool, 'the rocks told me.'

And Erik and his men heard the rocks say: 'We heard it from the vine.'

'Now,' said Thorkhild, 'we can understand the plants and the wild beasts and even the very earth itself!'

'And perhaps now,' said Erik, 'we shall also learn something of the land where the sun goes at night.'

But before he had finished speaking a terrific noise filled their ears.



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'Ah!' said the pool, 'the trees of the forest are beginning their choir practice. They usually do about this time.' And at once all the stones started chattering away with excitement, and the grass giggled, and the birds shouted and yelled at the trees.

'This is indeed the Talking Valley!' exclaimed Erik, and for the rest of the day he and his men wandered through the valley marvelling at the thousands of voices that they heard, and listening to the birds and the insects, the fish in the stream, the reeds at the water's edge, and the water itself and even the sticks and stones that lay by the wayside.

Only Ragnar Forkbeard remained on his own. He did not tell anyone that he had lost the power to hear those wonderful things, but he set himself on guard over the baggage and equipment.

Many days passed, and Erik and his men never tired of listening to the Talking Valley. Indeed they scarcely noticed how the days were passing. But at length Erik came to Thorkhild and said: 'I am troubled.'

'Have you grown tired of the Talking Valley so soon?' asked Thorkhild.

'No,' answered Erik, 'but it troubles me that our ship, Golden Dragon, is lying unguarded in some foreign bay.'

'Listen!' said Thorkhild, 'the mountains are shouting to each other across the valley!'

'And it troubles me,' went on Erik, 'that while we stay in the Talking Valley here, we are forgetting our quest: to find the land where the sun goes at night.'

'Listen!' said Thorkhild, 'the frogs are telling each other jokes and the stream is singing a new song!'

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At this Erik wandered away from Thorkhild lost in thought.

Then Erik called all his men together and said: 'We must leave this Valley of Talk and find our ship Golden Dragon.'

But the men were not listening to him. They were listening to the trees and creatures calling from the dark wood.

'We must carry on with our quest!' shouted Erik, but it was no use. The men had already wandered away, and he stood there on his own. Then it was that he came across Ragnar Forkbeard sitting on guard.

'How is it, Ragnar Forkbeard, that *you* alone pay no attention to all that the plants and animals and stones are saying?' asked Erik.

So Ragnar Forkbeard told Erik what he had told to no one else – how he had been tricked by the orchids, and he hung his head, expecting Erik to laugh. But Erik did not laugh.

'Perhaps you have saved us all, Ragnar Forkbeard!' he said.

'Saved us all from what?' asked Ragnar Forkbeard.

'From wasting the rest of our lives away in this Valley of Talk,' replied Erik.

And he ran to the blue orchids and tore off as many petals as he could and crushed them into the mead that they all drank that night. And the next day they woke up as men from a dream.

'Did the flowers really sing yesterday?' they asked each other. 'Is it really possible that the hills were talking to us last night?'

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Then they went on their way, and Erik did not tell them what he had done, until they were many miles away from the Talking Valley. And when Erik finally told them, the men grumbled and said he had taken away from them the most wonderful gift anyone had ever possessed.

'But what good is such a gift to us?' replied Erik. 'If it stops us being ourselves it is as useless as the fruits of the Stone Tree itself. We are men, and we must do what we set out to do.'

And so they went on their way, and came to the bay where Golden Dragon lay at anchor.

