

The Old Man of the Sea

After their encounter with the Sea Dragon, Erik and his men looked at their ship, Golden Dragon, and saw that the monster had done much damage and water was flooding in at the stern.

'We must bail this water out,' said Erik, 'or we shall not keep afloat for long.'

'But how can we bail?' cried his men. 'We have not one single bucket between us. We are lost for sure!'

'Then we must use our helmets,' said Erik, and he got down with his men and started to bail the water out of Golden Dragon with his own helmet.

But the more they bailed the water out, the more the water seemed to flood in.

'We shall sink before nightfall,' whispered Erik's men one to the other.

'Unless we reach land we are dead men,' they said. Thorkhild stood by the great oar at the back of the ship and steered. 'But I do not know where we are,' he said to himself, 'nor have I any idea in which direction there is land. I fear we are lost for sure.'

Just then Thorkhild saw a shape in the water, that looked as if it were following the boat. Thorkhild watched and watched this shape and it seemed to him that it was an old man swimming all alone in the sea.

The Saga of Erik the Viking

'Hey there!' called out Thorkhild. 'Who are you? Swimming alone in the icy waves so far from land?' The old man looked up out of the water at Thorkhild and laughed. But he said not a word.

'How do you come to swim so fast?' asked Thorkhild.

Again the old man in the water looked up and laughed. But again he said not a word.

'Can you help us find land?' asked Thorkhild, 'for we are badly damaged and will sink before nightfall.'

At this the old man did not laugh. He looked up at Thorkhild and said: 'I'll show you land, but if I do, one of you must come and join me in the icy waves.'

Thorkhild felt a sudden cold to the marrow of his bones, for he knew then that this was the Old Man of the Sea and that to join him in the icy waves meant certain death. But he said to the Old Man of the Sea: 'Show us where we can find land.'

The Old Man of the Sea laughed and replied: 'But which one of you will come and join me in the icy waves?'

'Show us land and I shall come and join you in the icy waves.'

When Thorkhild had said these words, the Old Man of the Sea laughed again and took the great oar in his hands and turned it until Golden Dragon was heading due North. But Thorkhild grieved in his mind, for he knew that the Old Man of the Sea always took a life before ever he saved one.

'I am as good as dead,' he said to himself, 'but at least my comrades will reach land.' But still he grieved in his mind, because he knew that the Old Man of the

The Old Man of the Sea

Sea was full of tricks, and no one could ever put his trust in him.

Well they sailed on like this for many hours, and every other hour Erik would look up from his bailing and say to Thorkhild: 'Any sign of land?'

And Thorkhild would reply: 'We are heading straight for it.' And Erik would nod and encourage his men, and they would all bail faster as the water kept flooding in.

At length, Thorkhild leaned over the side again and shouted down to the Old Man of the Sea: 'How much farther?'

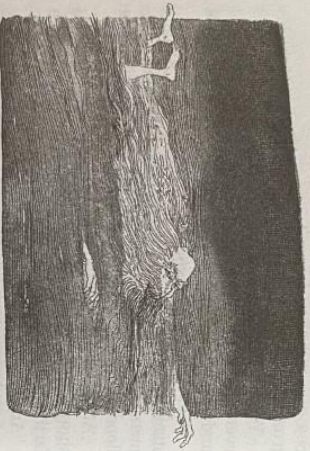
And the Old Man of the Sea laughed loud and long, and said: 'Far enough for you!' And Thorkhild looked towards the horizon and saw an island. 'Land ahead!' cried Thorkhild, and Erik and his men stood up and gave a mighty cheer.

'We are saved!' said Erik. 'Tonight we shall celebrate and dry ourselves around a great fire! And we shall drink a toast to Thorkhild who steered us safe to dry land.'

And all his men gave another mighty cheer, but Thorkhild looked grave and said 'I shall not be with you.' Then he explained to Erik how the Old Man of the Sea had guided the boat to land, and that in return one of their number must go and join him in the icy waves. 'And since I made the bargain with the Old Man of the Sea,' said Thorkhild, 'it is right that I go and join him in the icy waves.'

Just then they all heard the sound of laughter and they looked over the side and saw the Old Man of the Sea grinning up at them.

The Saga of Erik the Viking



'Well,' he said, 'I am waiting for you.'
'You need wait no longer,' said Thorkhild and he got up to go.

But Erik's men said to Thorkhild, 'Don't go! It will be death to join him in the icy waves, and we are almost at land!'

But Thorkhild replied: 'No! The Old Man of the Sea has kept his side of the bargain, I must now keep mine,' and he stood up on the side of Golden Dragon about to throw himself into the icy waves.

Then Erik took Thorkhild's arm and said: 'The Old Man of the Sea is full of tricks. Wait until we see this join him in the icy waves.'

At which words Thorkhild nodded and stepped back into the boat.

'I am waiting for you,' cried the Old Man of the Sea, 'or aren't you going to keep your side of the bar-

The Old Man of the Sea

gain?' And his eyes glistened wickedly and trickier than ever.

'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 fitch 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.'

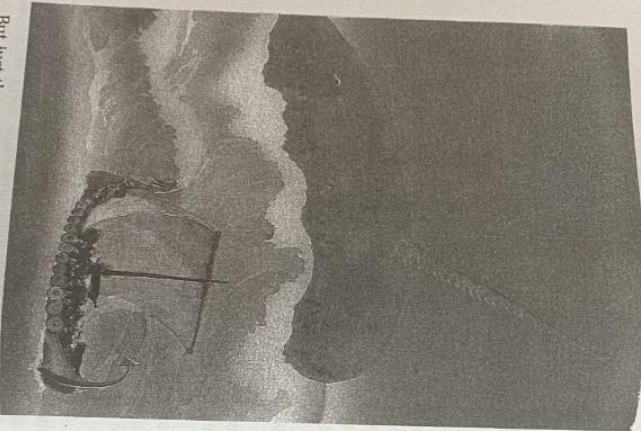
'One last thing,' said Thorkhild.

'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.

The Saga of Erik the Viking



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

26

The Old Man of the Sea

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, and took his newly sharpened knife and cut off his beard with one slice! Then he pulled on the rope, which he had round his waist, and, because he'd fixed the other end to the mast, he was able to pull himself back on board before the Old Man of the Sea could drag him back under!

Then Thorkhild nailed the Old Man of the Sea's beard to the mainmast and they all laughed and pointed at it. And the Old Man of the Sea was so furious and so ashamed that he swam off without another word, and the gigantic narwhal followed after him.

When the great creature had gone, Erik and his men saw on the distant horizon a tiny speck of land. Night had fallen by the time they reached it, but they rowed ashore and lit a fire on the beach. And many was the toast they drank that night to Thorkhild, who had not only steered them safe to land, but had become the first person ever to out-trick the Old Man of the Sea!