

THE PRETENDERS

Henrik Ibsen

1864

Translated by William Archer

CHARACTERS

Håkon Håkonsson, *the King elected by the Birchlegs.*

Inga of Varteig, *his mother.*

Earl Skule.

Lady Ragnhild, *his wife.*

Sigrid, *his sister.*

Margrete, *his daughter.*

Guthorm Ingesson.

Sigurd Ribbung.

Nicholas Arnesson, *Bishop of Oslo.*

Dagfinn the Peasant, *Håkon's marshal.*

Ivar Bodde, *his chaplain.*

Vegard Væradal, *one of his guard.*

Gregorius Jonsson, *a nobleman.*

Paul Flida, *a nobleman.*

Ingeborg, *Andres Skialdarband's wife.*

Peter, *her son, a young priest.*

Sira Viliam, *Bishop Nicholas's chaplain.*

Master Sigard of Brabant, *a physician.*

Jatgeir Skald, *an Icelander.*

Bård Bratte, *a chieftain from the Trondhiem district.*

Populace and Citizens of Bergen, Oslo, and Nidaros.

Priests, Monks, and Nuns.

Guests, Guards, and Ladies.

Men-at-Arms, etc. etc.

The action passes in the first half of the Thirteenth Century.

Pronunciation of Names: Håkon=Hoakoon (“oa” as in “board”); Skule=Skoolë; Margrete=Margraytë; Guthorm=Gootorm; Sigurd Ribbung=Sigoord Ribboong; Dagfinn (“a” as in “hard”); Ivar Bodde=Eevar Boddë; Vegard=Vaygard; Jonsson=Yoonson; Flida=Fleeda; Ingeborg=Ingheborg; Jatgeir=Yatgheir; Bård Bratte=Board Brattë. The name “Ingeborg” appears as “Ingebjörg” in Ibsen’s text. The form I have substituted is equally current in Norway, and less troublesome to pronounce.

119

ACT FIRST

The churchyard of Christ Church, Bergen. At the back rises the church, the main portal of which faces the spectators. In front, on the left, stands Håkon Håkonsson, with Dagfinn the Peasant, Vegard of Væradal, Ivar Bodde, and several other nobles and chieftains. Opposite to him stand Earl Skule, Gregorius Jonsson, Paul Flida, and others of the Earl’s men. Further back on the same side are seen Sigurd Ribbung and his followers, and a little way from him Guthorm Ingesson, with several chiefs. Men-at-arms line the approaches to the church; the common people fill the churchyard; many are perched in the trees and seated on the walls; all seem to await, in suspense, the occurrence of some event. All the church bells of the town are ringing far and near.

Earl Skule.

[*Softly and impatiently, to Gregorius Jonsson.*] Why tarry they so long in there?

120

Gregorius Jonsson.

Hush! The psalm is beginning.

[*From inside the closed church doors, to the accompaniment of trumpets, is heard a Choir of Monks and*

Nuns singing *Domine cœli, etc. etc.* While the singing is going on, the church door is opened from inside; in the porch Bishop Nicholas is seen, surrounded by Priests and Monks.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Steps forward to the doorway and proclaims with uplifted crozier.*] Inga of Varteig is even now bearing the iron on behalf of Håkon the Pretender.

[*The church door is closed again; the singing inside continues.*]

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*In a low voice, to the Earl.*] Call upon Holy King Olaf to protect the right.

Earl Skule.

[*Hurriedly, with a deprecating gesture.*] Not now. Best not remind him of me.

Ivar Bodde.

[*Seizing Håkon by the arm.*] Pray to the Lord thy God, Håkon Håkonsson.

Håkon.

No need; I am sure of him.

[*The singing in the church grows louder; all uncover; many fall upon their knees and pray.*]

121

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*To the Earl.*] A solemn hour for you and for many!

Earl Skule.

[*Looking anxiously towards the church.*] A solemn hour for Norway.

Paul Flida.

[*Near the Earl.*] Now is the glowing iron in her hands.

Dagfinn.

[*Beside Håkon.*] They are coming down the nave.

Ivar Bodde.

Christ protect thy tender hands, Inga, mother of the King!

Håkon.

Surely all my life shall reward her for this hour.

Earl Skule.

[*Who has been listening intently, breaks out suddenly.*] Did she cry out? Has she let the iron fall?

Paul Flida.

[*Goes up.*] I know not what it was.

Gregorius Jonsson.

Hark to the women weeping in the outer hall!

The Choir in the Church.

[*Breaks forth in jubilation.*] Gloria in excelsis Deo!

[*The doors are thrown open. Inga comes forth, followed by Nuns, Priests, and Monks.*

122

INGA.

[*On the church steps.*] God has given judgment! Behold these hands; with them I bore the iron!

Voices amongst the Multitude.

They are tender and white as before!

Other Voices.

Fairer still!

The whole Multitude.

He is Håkon's son! He is Sverre's[21] grandson!

Håkon.

[*Embraces her.*] Thanks to thee, thanks to thee, blessed among women!

Bishop Nicholas.

[*In passing, to the Earl.*] 'Twas ill done to press for the ordeal.

Earl Skule.

Nay, my lord Bishop, needs must we pray for God's voice in this matter.

Håkon.

[*Deeply moved, holding Inga by the hand.*] It is done, then, that which my every fibre cried out against—that which has made my heart shrivel and writhe within me— —

Dagfinn.

[*Turning towards the multitude.*] Ay, look upon this woman and bethink you, all that are gathered here! Who ever doubted her word, until certain folk required that it should be doubted.

123

Paul Flida.

Doubt has whispered in every corner from the hour when Håkon the Pretender was borne, a little child, into King Inge's[22] hall.

Gregorius Jonsson.

And last winter it swelled to a roar, and sounded forth over the land, both north and south; I trow every man can bear witness to that.

Håkon.

I myself can best bear witness to it. Therefore have I yielded to the counsel of many faithful friends, and humbled myself as no other chosen king has done for many a day. I have proved my birth by the ordeal, proved my right, as the son of Håkon Sverresson, to succeed to the throne of Norway. I will not now question who fostered the doubt, and made it, as the Earl's kinsman says, swell into a roar; but this I know, that I have suffered bitterly under it. I have been chosen king from boyhood, but little kingly honour has been shown me, even where it seemed I might look for it most securely. I will but remind you of last Palm Sunday in Nidaros,[\[23\]](#) when I went up to the altar to make my offering, and the Archbishop turned away and made as though he saw me not, to escape greeting me as kings are wont to be greeted. Yet such slights I could easily have borne, had not open war been like to break loose in the land; that I must needs hinder.

Dagfinn.

It may be well for kings to hearken to counsels

124

of prudence; but had my counsel been heard in this matter, it had not been with hot iron, but with cold steel that Håkon Håkonsson had called for judgment between himself and his foes.

Håkon.

Curb yourself, Dagfinn; think what beseems the man who is to be foremost in the State.

Earl Skule.

[With a slight smile.] 'Tis easy to call every one the King's foe who chimes not with the King's will. Methinks he is the King's worst foe who would counsel him against making good his right to the kingship.

Håkon.

Who knows? Were my right alone in question, mayhap I had not paid so dear to prove it; but higher things are here at stake: my calling and my duty. Deep and warm is the faith within me—and I blush not to own it—that I alone am he who in these times can sway the land to its weal. Kingly birth begets kingly duty— —

Earl Skule.

There are others here who bear themselves the like fair witness.

Sigurd Ribbung.

That do I, and with full as good ground. My grandfather was King Magnus Erlingsson— —

Håkon.

Ay, if your father, Erling Steinvæg, was indeed King Magnus's son; but most folk deny it, and in that matter none has yet faced the ordeal.

125

Sigurd Ribbung.

The Ribbungs chose me as king of their own free will, whereas 'twas by threats that Dagfinn the Peasant and other Birchlegs[24] gained for you the name of King.

Håkon.

Ay, so ill had you dealt with Norway that the stock of Sverrë had to claim its right with threats.

Guthorm Ingesson.

I am of the stock of Sverrë as much as you — —

Dagfinn.

But not in the true male line.

Bishop Nicholas.

You come on the spindle side, Guthorm.

Guthorm Ingesson.

Yet this I know, that my father, Ingë Bårdsson, was lawfully chosen king of Norway.

Håkon.

Because none knew that Sverrë's grandson was alive. From the day that became known, he held the kingdom in trust for me—not otherwise.

126

Earl Skule.

That cannot truly be said; Ingë was king all his days, with all lawful power and without reserve. 'Tis true enough that Guthorm has but little claim, for he was born out of wedlock; but I am King Ingë's lawfully begotten brother, and the law is with me if I claim, and take, his full inheritance.

Dagfinn.

Ah, Sir Earl, of a truth you have taken full inheritance, not of your father's wealth alone, but of all the goods Håkon Sverresson left behind him.

Bishop Nicholas.

Not all, good Dagfinn. Respect the truth;—King Håkon has kept a brooch and the golden ring he wears on his arm.

Håkon.

Be that as it will; with God's help I shall win myself wealth again. And now, ye barons and thanes, ye churchmen and chieftains and men-at-arms, now it is time we held the folkmote, as has been agreed. I have sat with bound hands until this day; methinks no man will blame me for longing to have them loosed.

Earl Skule.

There are others in like case, Håkon Håkonsson.

Håkon.

[*His attention arrested.*] What mean you, Sir Earl?

127

Earl Skule.

I mean that all we Pretenders have the same cause for longing. We have all alike been straitly bound, for none of us has known how far his right might reach.

Bishop Nicholas.

The Church has been even as unstable as the kingdom; but now must we abide by the sainted King Olaf's law.

Dagfinn.

[*Half aloud.*] Fresh subtleties!

[*Håkon's men gather more closely together.*]

Håkon.

[*With forced calmness, advances a couple of paces towards the Earl.*] I would fain think I have not rightly taken your meaning. The ordeal has made good my birthright to the kingdom, and therefore, as I deem, the folkmote has nought to do but to confirm my election, made at the Örething[25] six years ago.

Several of the Earl's and Sigurd's Men.

No, no! That we deny!

Earl Skule.

'Twas with no such thought that we agreed to hold the folkmote here. The ordeal has not given you the kingdom; it has but proved your title to come forward to-day, along with the other Pretenders here present, and contend for the right you hold to be yours— —

128

Håkon.

[*Constraining himself to be calm.*] That means, in brief, that for six years I have unlawfully borne the name of King, and you, Sir Earl, have for six years unlawfully ruled the land as regent for me.

Earl Skule.

In no wise. When my brother died, 'twas needful that some one should bear the kingly title. The Birchlegs, and most of all Dagfinn the Peasant, were active in your cause, and hastened your election through before we others could set forth our claims.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*To Håkon.*] The Earl would say that that election gave you but the use of the kingly power, not the right to it.

Earl Skule.

You have held all the marks of kingship; but Sigurd Ribbung and Guthorm Ingesson and I hold ourselves to the full as near inheritors as you; and now shall the law judge between us, and say whose shall be the inheritance for all time.

Bishop Nicholas.

In truth, Earl Skule reads the case aright.

Earl Skule.

There has been talk more than once in these years of both ordeal and folkmote; but something has ever come between. And, Sir Håkon, if you deemed your right for ever fixed by the first election, how came you to accept the ordeal?

129

Dagfinn.

[*Exasperated.*] To your swords, King's men, let them decide!

Many of the King's Men.

[*Rushing forward.*] Down with the King's enemies!

Earl Skule.

[*Calls to his men.*] Slay none! Wound none! Only keep them off.

Håkon.

[*Restraining his men.*] Up with your blades, all who have drawn them!—Up with your blades, I say! [*Calmly.*] You make things tenfold worse for me by such doings.

Earl Skule.

Even so are men flying at each other's throats all the country over. You see now, Håkon Håkonsson; does not this show clearly what you have to do, if you care aught for the country's peace and the lives of men?

Håkon.

[*After some reflection.*] Yes—I see it. [*Takes Inga by the hand and turns to one of those standing by him.*] Torkell, you were a trusty man in my father's guard; take this woman to your own abode and see you tend her well; she was very dear to Håkon Sverresson.—God

bless you, my mother,—now I must gird me for the folkmote.
[Inga presses his hand, and goes with Torkell. Håkon is silent awhile,
then steps forward and says with emphasis:] The law shall decide,
and it alone. Ye Birchlegs who, at the Örething, took me for

130

your King, I free you from the oath ye sware to me. You, Dagfinn,
are no longer my marshal; I will not appear with marshal or with
guard,[26] with vassals or with henchmen. I am a poor man; all my
inheritance is a brooch and this gold ring;—these are scant goods
wherewith to reward so many good men's service. Now, ye other
Pretenders, now we stand equal; I will have no advantage of you,
save the right which I have from above—that I neither can nor will
share with any one.—Let the assembly-call be sounded, and then let
God and the Holy King Olaf's law decide.

*[Goes out with his men to the left; blasts of trumpets and horns
are heard in the distance.]*

Gregorius Jonsson.

[To the Earl, as the crowd is departing.] Methought you seemed
afraid during the ordeal, and now you look so glad and of good
cheer.

Earl Skule.

[Well at ease.] Marked you that he had Sverre's eyes as he spoke?
Whether he or I be chosen king, the choice will be good.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[Uneasily.] But do not you give way. Think of all who stand or fall
with your cause.

131

Earl Skule.

I stand now upon justice; I no longer fear to call upon Saint Olaf.

[Goes out to the left with his followers.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[Hastening after Dagfinn the Peasant.] All goes well, good Dagfinn,
all goes well;—but keep the Earl far from the King when he is
chosen;—see you keep them far apart!

[All go out to the left, behind the church.]

*A hall in the Palace. In front, on the left, is a low
window; on the right, the entrance-door; at the back,*

a larger door which leads into the King's Hall. By the window, a table; chairs and benches stand about.

Lady Ragnhild and Margrete enter by the smaller door; Sigrid follows immediately.

Lady Ragnhild.

In here?

Margrete.

Ay, here it is darkest.

Lady Ragnhild.

[Goes to the window.] And here we can look down upon the mote-
stead.

Margrete.

[Looks out cautiously.] Ay, there they are, all gathered behind the church. [Turns, in tears.] Yonder must now betide what will bring so much in its train.

132

Lady Ragnhild.

Who will be master in this hall to-morrow?

Margrete.

Oh, hush! So heavy a day I had never thought to see.

Lady Ragnhild.

It had to be; to rule in another's name was no full work for him.

Margrete.

Ay, it had to be; he could never rest content with but the name of king.

Lady Ragnhild.

Of whom speak you?

Margrete.

Of Håkon.

Lady Ragnhild.

I spoke of the Earl.

Margrete.

There breathe not nobler men than they two.

Lady Ragnhild.

See you Sigurd Ribbung? With what a look of evil cunning he sits there—like a wolf in chains.

Margrete.

Ay, see!—He folds his hands before him on his sword-hilt and rests his chin upon them.

Lady Ragnhild.

He bites his beard and laughs — —

133

Margrete.

'Tis an evil laugh.

Lady Ragnhild.

He knows that none will further his cause; — 'tis that which makes him wroth. Who is yonder thane that speaks now?

Margrete.

That is Gunnar Grionbak.

Lady Ragnhild.

Is he for the Earl?

Margrete.

No, he is for the King — —

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Looking at her.*] For whom say you?

Margrete.

For Håkon Håkonsson.

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Looks out; after a short pause.*] Where sits Guthorm Ingesson? —
I see him not.

Margrete.

Behind his men, lowest of all there — in a long mantle.

Lady Ragnhild.

Ay, there.

Margrete.

He looks as though he were ashamed — —

134

Lady Ragnhild.

That is for his mother's sake.

Margrete.

So looked not Håkon.

Lady Ragnhild.

Who speaks now?

Margrete.

[*Looking out.*] Tord Skolle, the thane of Ranafylke.

Lady Ragnhild.

Is he for the Earl?

Margrete.

No — for Håkon.

Lady Ragnhild.

How motionless the Earl sits listening!

Margrete.

Håkon seems thoughtful—but strong none the less. [*With animation.*] If there came a traveller from afar, he could pick out those two amongst all the thousand others.

Lady Ragnhild.

See, Margrete! Dagfinn the Peasant drags forth a gilded chair for Håkon— —

Margrete.

Paul Flida places one like it behind the Earl— —

Lady Ragnhild.

Håkon's men seek to hinder it!

135

Margrete.

The Earl holds fast to the chair— —!

Lady Ragnhild.

Håkon speaks wrathfully to him. [*Starts back, with a cry, from the window.*] Lord Jesus! Saw you his eyes—and his smile— —! No, that was not the Earl!

Margrete.

[*Who has followed her in terror.*] 'Twas not Håkon either! Neither one nor the other!

Sigrid.

[*At the window.*] Oh pitiful! Oh pitiful!

Margrete.

Sigrid!

Lady Ragnhild.

You here!

Sigrid.

Goes the path so low that leads up to the throne!

Margrete.

Oh, pray with us, that all be guided for the best.

Lady Ragnhild.

[*White and horror-stricken, to Sigrid.*] Saw you him— —? Saw you my husband— —? His eyes and his smile—I should not have known him!

Sigrid.

Looked he like Sigurd Ribbung?

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Softly.*] Ay, he looked like Sigurd Ribbung.

Sigrid.

Laughed he like Sigurd?

Lady Ragnhild.

Ay, ay!

Sigrid.

Then must we all pray.

Lady Ragnhild.

[*With the force of despair.*] The Earl must be chosen King! 'Twill work ruin in his soul if he be not the first man in the land!

Sigrid.

[*More loudly.*] Then must we all pray!

Lady Ragnhild.

Hist! What is that? [*At the window.*] What shouts! All the men have risen; all the banners and standards wave in the wind.

Sigrid.

[*Seizes her by the arm.*] Pray, woman! Pray for your husband!

Lady Ragnhild.

Ay, Holy King Olaf, give him all the power in this land!

Sigrid.

[*Wildly.*] None—none! Else is he lost!

Lady Ragnhild.

He must have the power. All the good in him will grow and blossom should he win it.—Look

forth, Margrete! Listen! [*Starts back a step.*] All hands are lifted for an oath!

[*Margrete listens at the window.*

Lady Ragnhild.

God and St. Olaf, to whom do they swear?

Sigrid.

Pray!

[*Margrete listens, and with uplifted hand motions for silence.*

Lady Ragnhild.

[*After a little while.*] Speak!

[*From the mote-stead is heard a loud blast of trumpets and horns.*

Lady Ragnhild.

God and St. Olaf! To whom have they sworn?

[*A short pause.*

Margrete.

[Turns her head and says:] They have chosen Håkon Håkonsson king.

[The music of the royal procession is heard, first in the distance and then nearer and nearer. Lady Ragnhild clings weeping to Sigrid, who leads her quietly out on the right; Margrete remains immovable, leaning against the window-frame. The King's attendants open the great doors, disclosing the interior of the Hall, which is gradually filled by the procession from the mote-stead.]

Håkon.

[In the doorway, turning to Ivar Bodde.] Bring

138

me a pen and wax and silk—I have parchment here. [Advances exultantly to the table and spreads some rolls of parchment upon it.] Margrete, now am I King!

Margrete.

Hail to my lord and King!

Håkon.

I thank you. [Looks at her and takes her hand.] Forgive me; I forgot that it must wound you.

Margrete.

[Drawing her hand away.] It did not wound me;—of a surety you are born to be king.

Håkon.

[With animation.] Ay, must not all men own it, who remember how marvellously God and the saints have shielded me from all harm? I was but a year old when the Birchlegs bore me over the mountains, in frost and storm, and through the very midst of those who sought my life. At Nidaros I came scatheless from the Baglers[27] when they burnt the town with so great a slaughter, while King Ingë himself barely saved his life by climbing on shipboard up the anchor-cable.

Margrete.

Your youth has been a hard one.

Håkon.

[Looking steadily at her.] Methinks you might have made it easier.

Margrete.

I?

139

Håkon.

You might have been so good a foster-sister to me, through all the years when we were growing up together.

Margrete.

But it fell out otherwise.

Håkon.

Ay, it fell out otherwise;—we looked at each other, I from my corner, you from yours, but we seldom spoke— —*[Impatiently.]* What is keeping him? *[Ivar Bodde comes with the writing materials.]* Are you there? Give me the things!

[Håkon seats himself at the table and writes. A little while after, Earl Skule comes in; then Dagfinn the Peasant, Bishop Nicholas and Vegard Væradal.]

Håkon.

[Looks up and lays down his pen.] Know you, Sir Earl, what I am writing here? *[The Earl approaches.]* This is to my mother; I thank her for all her love, and kiss her a thousand times—here in the letter you understand. She is to be sent eastward to Borgasysse, there to live with all queenly honours.

Earl Skule.

You will not keep her in the palace?

Håkon.

She is too dear to me, Earl;—a king must have none about him whom he loves too well. A king must act with free hands; he must stand alone

140

he must neither be led nor lured. There is so much to be mended in Norway.

[Goes on writing.]

Vegard Væradal.

[Softly to Bishop Nicholas.] 'Tis by my counsel he deals thus with Inga, his mother.

Bishop Nicholas.

I knew your hand in it at once.

Vegard Væradal.

But now one good turn deserves another.

Bishop Nicholas.

Wait. I will keep my promise.

Håkon.

[Gives the parchment to Ivar Bodde.] Fold it together and bear it to her yourself, with many loving greetings— —

Ivar Bodde.

[*Who has glanced at the parchment.*] My lord—you write here—
“to-day” — —!

Håkon.

The wind is fair for a southward course.

Dagfinn.

[*Slowly.*] Bethink you, my lord King, that she has lain all night on
the altar-steps in prayer and fasting.

Ivar Bodde.

And she may well be weary after the ordeal.

141

Håkon.

True, true;—my good, kind mother— — [*Collects himself.*] Well, if
she be too weary, let her wait until to-morrow.

Ivar Bodde.

It shall be as you will. [*Puts another parchment forward.*] But this
other, my lord.

Håkon.

That other?—Ivar Bodde, I cannot.

Dagfinn.

[*Points to the letter for Inga.*] Yet you could do that.

Ivar Bodde.

All things sinful must be put away.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Who has drawn near in the meantime.*] Bind the Earl’s hands, King
Håkon.

Håkon.

[*In a low voice.*] Think you that is needful?

Bishop Nicholas.

At no cheaper rate can you buy peace in the land.

Håkon.

Then I can do it! Give me the pen!

[*Writes.*

Earl Skule.

[*To the Bishop, who crosses to the right.*] You have the King’s ear,
it would seem.

142

Bishop Nicholas.

For your behoof.

Earl Skule.

Say you so?

Bishop Nicholas.
Before nightfall you will thank me.

[He moves away.]

Håkon.

[Hands the Earl the parchment.] Read that, Earl Skule.

Earl Skule.

[Reads, looks in surprise at the King, and says in a low voice.] You break with Kanga the Young?

Håkon.

With Kanga whom I have loved more than all the world. From this day forth she must never more cross the King's path.

Earl Skule.

This that you do is a great thing, Håkon. Mine own memory tells me what it must cost.

Håkon.

Whoever is too dear to the King must away.—Tie up the letter.
[Gives it to Ivar Bodde.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[Bending over the chair.] You have made a great stride towards the Earl's friendship, my lord King.

Håkon.

[Holds out his hand to him.] I thank you, Bishop

143

Nicholas; you counselled me for the best. Ask a grace of me, and I will grant it.

Bishop Nicholas.

Will you?

Håkon.

I promise it on my kingly faith.

Bishop Nicholas.

Then make Vegard Væradal thane of Halogaland.

Håkon.

Vegard? He is well-nigh the trustiest friend I have; I am loath to send him so far from me.

Bishop Nicholas.

The King's friend must be royally rewarded. Bind the Earl's hands as I have counselled you, and you will be secure for ever and a day.

Håkon.

[*Takes a sheet of parchment.*] Vegard shall bear rule in Halogaland.
[*Writing.*] I hereby grant it under my royal hand. [*The Bishop retires.*

Earl Skule.

[*Approaches the table.*] What write you now?

Håkon.

[*Hands him the sheet.*] Read.

Earl Skule.

[*Reads, and looks steadily at the King.*] Vegard Væradal? In Halogaland?

144

Håkon.

The northern part stands vacant.

Earl Skule.

Bethink you that Andres Skialdarband[28] has also a charge in the north. They two are bitter foes;—Andres Skialdarband is of my following— —

Håkon.

[*Smiling and rising.*] And Vegard Væradal of mine. Therefore they must e'en make friends again, the sooner the better. Henceforth there must be no enmity between the King's men and the Earl's.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ha!—this may go too far. [*Approaches, uneasy.*

Earl Skule.

Your thoughts are wise and deep, Håkon.

Håkon.

[*Warmly.*] Earl Skule, to-day have I taken the kingdom from you— let your daughter share it with me!

Earl Skule.

My daughter!

Margrete.

Oh, God!

Håkon.

Margrete, will you be my Queen?

[*Margrete is silent.*

Håkon.

[*Takes her hand.*] Answer me.

145

Margrete.

[*Softly.*] I will gladly be your wife.

Earl Skule.

[*Pressing Håkon's hand.*] Peace and friendship from my heart!
Håkon.

I thank you.

Ivar Bodde.

[*To Dagfinn.*] Heaven be praised; here is the dawn.

Dagfinn.

I almost believe it. Never before have I liked the Earl so well.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Behind him.*] Ever on your guard, good Dagfinn—ever on your guard.

Ivar Bodde.

[*To Vegard.*] Now are you thane in Halogaland; here you have it under the King's hand.

[*Gives him the letter.*

Vegard Væradal.

I will thank the King for his favour another time.

[*About to go.*

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Stops him.*] Andres Skialdarband is an ugly neighbour; be not cowed by him.

Vegard Væradal.

No one has yet cowed Vegard Væradal. [*Goes.*

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Following.*] Be as rock and flint to Andres

146

Skialdarband,—and, while I think on't, take my blessing with you.

Ivar Bodde.

[*Who has been waiting behind the King with the parchments in his hand.*] Here are the letters, my lord.

Håkon.

Good; give them to the Earl.

Ivar Bodde.

To the Earl? Will you not seal them?

Håkon.

The Earl is wont to do that;—he holds the seal.

Ivar Bodde.

[*Softly.*] Ay, hitherto—while he was regent—but now!

Håkon.

Now as before;—the Earl holds the seal.

[*Moves away.*

Earl Skule.

Give me the letters, Ivar Bodde.

[Goes to the table with them, takes out the Great Seal which he wears under his girdle, and seals the letters during the following.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[Muttering.] Håkon Håkonsson is King—and the Earl holds the royal seal;—I like that—I like that.

Håkon.

What says my lord Bishop?

147

Bishop Nicholas.

I say that God and St. Olaf watch over their holy church. *[Goes into the King's Hall.]*

Håkon.

[Approaching Margrete.] A wise queen can do great things in the land: I chose you fearlessly, for I know you are wise.

Margrete.

Only that?

Håkon.

What mean you?

Margrete.

Nothing, my lord, nothing.

Håkon.

And you will bear me no grudge if for my sake you have had to forgo fair hopes?

Margrete.

I have forgone no fair hopes for your sake.

Håkon.

And you will stand ever near me, and give me good counsel?

Margrete.

I would fain stand near to you.

Håkon.

And give me good counsel. I thank you for that; a woman's counsel profits every man, and henceforth I have none but you—my mother I had to send away— —

148

Margrete.

Ay, she was too dear to you— —

Håkon.

And I am King. Farewell then, Margrete! You are so young yet; but next summer shall our bridal be, — and from that hour I swear to keep you by my side in all seemly faith and honour.

Margrete.

[*Smiles sadly.*] Ay, 'twill be long, I know, ere you send me away.

Håkon.

[*Brightly.*] Send you away? That will I never do.

Margrete.

[*With tears in her eyes.*] No, that Håkon does only to those who are too dear to him.

[*She goes towards the entrance door. Håkon gazes thoughtfully after her.*

Lady Ragnhild.

[*From the right.*] The King and the Earl tarry here so long! My fears are killing me; — Margrete, what has the King said and done?

Margrete.

Oh, much, much! Last of all, he chose a thane and a Queen.

Lady Ragnhild.

You, Margrete!

Margrete.

[*Throws her arms round her mother's neck.*] Yes!

149

Lady Ragnhild.

You are to be Queen!

Margrete.

Queen only; — but I think I am glad even of that.

[*She and her mother go out to the right.*

Earl Skule.

[*To Ivar Bodde.*] Here are our letters; bear them to the King's mother and to Kanga.

[*Ivar Bodde bows and goes.*

Dagfinn.

[*In the doorway of the hall.*] The Archbishop of Nidaros craves leave to offer King Håkon Håkonsson his homage.

Håkon.

[*Draws a deep breath.*] At last, then, I am King of Norway.

Earl Skule.

[*Places the Great Seal in his girdle.*] But I rule the realm.

150

ACT SECOND

Banquet Hall in the Palace at Bergen. A large bay-window in the middle of the back wall, along which there is a dais with seats for the ladies. Against the left wall stands the throne, raised some steps above the floor; in the centre of the opposite wall is the great entrance door. Banners, standards, shields and weapons, with many-coloured draperies, hang from the wall-timbers and from the carven rafters. Around the hall stand drinking-tables, with flagons, horns, and beakers.

King Håkon sits upon the dais, with Margrete, Sigrid, Lady Ragnhild, and many noble ladies. Ivar Bodde stands behind the King's chair. Round the drinking-tables are seated the King's and the Earl's men, with guests. At the foremost table on the right sit, among others, Dagfinn The Peasant, Gregorius Jonsson, and Paul Flida. Earl Skule and Bishop Nicholas are playing chess at a table on the left. The Earl's house-folk go to and fro, bearing cans of liquor. From an adjoining room, music is heard during the following scene.

Dagfinn.

The fifth day now wears on, yet the henchmen are none the less nimble at setting forth the brimming flagons.

Paul Flida.

It was never the Earl's wont to stint his guests.

151

Dagfinn.

No, so it would seem. So royal a bridal-feast was never seen in Norway before.

Paul Flida.

Earl Skule has never before given a daughter in marriage.

Dagfinn.

True, true; the Earl is a mighty man.

A Man-at-Arms.

He holds a third part of the kingdom. That is more than any earl has held heretofore.

Paul Flida.

But the King's part is larger.

Dagfinn.

We talk not of that here; we are friends now, and fully at one.
[*Drinks to Paul.*] So let King be King and Earl be Earl.

Paul Flida.

[*Laughs.*] 'Tis easy to hear that you are a King's man.

Dagfinn.

That should the Earl's men also be.

Paul Flida.

Never. We have sworn fealty to the Earl, not to the King.

Dagfinn.

That may yet have to be done.

152

Bishop Nicholas.

[*To the Earl, under cover of the game.*] Hear you what Dagfinn the Peasant says?

Earl Skule.

[*Without looking up.*] I hear.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Looking steadily at Dagfinn.*] Has the King thoughts of that?

Dagfinn.

Nay, nay, — let be; — no wrangling to-day.

Bishop Nicholas.

The King would force your men to swear him fealty, Earl.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Louder.*] Has the King thoughts of that, I ask?

Dagfinn.

I will not answer. Let us drink to peace and friendship between the King and the Earl. The ale is good.

Paul Flida.

It has had time enough to mellow.

Gregorius Jonsson.

Three times has the Earl prepared the bridal — three times the King promised to come — three times he came not.

Dagfinn.

Blame the Earl for that: he gave us plenty to do in Viken.

153

Paul Flida.

'Tis said Sigurd Ribbung gave you still more to do in Vermeland.

Dagfinn.

[*Flaring up.*] Ay, and who was it that let Sigurd Ribbung slip through their fingers?

Gregorius Jonsson.

Sigurd Ribbung fled from us at Nidaros, that all men know.

Dagfinn.

But no man knows that you did aught to hinder him.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*To the Earl, who is pondering on a move.*] Hear you, Earl? It was you who let Sigurd Ribbung escape.

Earl Skule.

[*Makes a move.*] That is an old story.

Gregorius Jonsson.

Have you not heard, then, of the Icelander Andres Torsteinsson, Sigurd Ribbung's friend— —

Dagfinn.

Ay; when Sigurd had escaped, you hanged the Icelander—that I know.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Makes a move and says laughingly to the Earl.*] I take the pawn, Sir Earl.[29]

154

Earl Skule.

[*Aloud.*] Take him; a pawn is of small account.

[*Makes a move.*

Dagfinn.

Ay; that the Icelander found to his cost, when Sigurd Ribbung escaped to Vermeland.

[*Suppressed laughter amongst the King's men; the conversation is continued in a low tone; presently a man comes in and whispers to Gregorius Jonsson.*

Bishop Nicholas.

Then I move here, and you have lost.

Earl Skule.

So it would seem.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Leaning back in his chair.*] You did not guard the king well at the last.

Earl Skule.

[*Strews the pieces topsy-turvy and rises.*] I have long been weary of guarding kings.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Approaches and says in a low tone.*] Sir Earl, Jostein^[30] Tamb sends word that the ship now lies ready for sea.

155

Earl Skule.

[*Softly.*] Good. [*Takes out a sealed parchment.*] Here is the letter.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Shaking his head.*] Earl, Earl,—is this well bethought?

Earl Skule.

What?

Gregorius Jonsson.

It bears the King's seal.

Earl Skule.

I am acting for the King's good.

Gregorius Jonsson.

Then let the King himself reject the offer.

Earl Skule.

That he will not, if he has his own way. His whole heart is bent on cowing the Ribbungs, therefore he is fain to secure himself on other sides.

Gregorius Jonsson.

Your way may be wise,—but it is dangerous.

Earl Skule.

Leave that to me. Take the letter, and bid Jostein sail forthwith.

Gregorius Jonsson.

It shall be as you command.

[*Goes out to the right, and presently comes in again.*]

156

Bishop Nicholas.

[*To the Earl.*] You have much to see to, it would seem.

Earl Skule.

But small thanks for it.

Bishop Nicholas.

The King has risen.

[*Håkon comes down; all the men rise from the tables.*]

Håkon.

[*To the Bishop.*] We are rejoiced to see you bear up so bravely and well through all these days of merriment.

Bishop Nicholas.

There comes a flicker now and again, my lord King; but 'twill scarce last long. I have lain sick all the winter through.

Håkon.

Ay, ay,—you have lived a strong life, rich in deeds of fame.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Shakes his head.*] Ah, 'tis little enough I have done, and I have much still left to do. If I but knew whether I should have time for it all!

Håkon.

The living must take up the tasks of those who go before, honoured lord; we all have the welfare of the land at heart. [*Turns to the Earl.*] I marvel much at one thing: that neither of our thanes from Halogaland has come to the bridal.

157

Earl Skule.

True; I doubted not that Andres Skialdarband would be here.

Håkon.

[*Smiling.*] And Vegard Væradal too.

Earl Skule.

Ay, Vegard too.

Håkon.

[*In jest.*] And I trust you would now have received my old friend better than you did seven years ago on Oslo wharf, when you stabbed him in the cheek so that the blade cut its way out.

Earl Skule.

[*With a forced laugh.*] Ay, the time that Gunnulf, your mother's brother, cut off the right hand of Sira Eiliv, my best friend and counsellor.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Merrily.*] And when Dagfinn the Peasant and the men-at-arms set a strong night-watch on the King's ship, saying that the King was unsafe in the Earl's ward?

Håkon.

[*Seriously.*] Those days are old and forgotten.

Dagfinn.

[*Approaching.*] Now may we sound the call to the weapon-sports on the green, if so please you, my lord.

Håkon.

Good. To-day will we give up to nought but

merriment; to-morrow we must turn our thoughts again to the Ribbungs and the Earl of Orkney.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, he denies to pay tribute, is it not so?

Håkon.

Were I once well rid of the Ribbungs, I would myself fare westward.

[Håkon goes towards the dais, gives his hand to Margrete, and leads her out to the right; the others gradually follow.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[To Ivar Bodde.] Who is the man called Jostein Tamb?

Ivar Bodde.

There is a trader from Orkney who bears that name.

Bishop Nicholas.

From Orkney? So, so! And now he sails home again?

Ivar Bodde.

So I think.

Bishop Nicholas.

[Softly.] With a precious freight, Ivar Bodde.

Ivar Bodde.

Corn and raiment, most like.

Bishop Nicholas.

And a letter from Earl Skule.

Ivar Bodde.

[Starting.] To whom?

Bishop Nicholas.

I know not; it bore the King's seal — —

Ivar Bodde.

[Seizes him by the arm.] Lord Bishop, — is it as you say?

Bishop Nicholas.

Hush! Do not mix me up in the matter.

[Retires.]

Ivar Bodde.

Then must I straightway — — Dagfinn the Peasant! Dagfinn! Dagfinn — —!

[Pushes through the crowd towards the door.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[In a tone of commiseration, to Gregorius Jonsson.] Never a day but one or another must suffer in goods or freedom.

Gregorius Jonsson.
Who is it now?
Bishop Nicholas.
A poor trader, — Jostein Tamb methinks they called him.
Gregorius Jonsson.
Jostein — — ?
Bishop Nicholas.
Dagfinn the Peasant would forbid him to set sail.
Gregorius Jonsson.
Dagfinn, would forbid him, say you?
Bishop Nicholas.
He went even now.

160

Gregorius Jonsson.
Pardon, my lord; I must make speed — —
Bishop Nicholas.
Ay, do even so, my dear lord; — Dagfinn the Peasant is so hasty.
[Gregorius Jonsson *hastens out to the right along with the remainder of the company; only Earl Skule and Bishop Nicholas are left behind in the hall.*
Earl Skule.
[*Walks up and down in deep thought; he seems suddenly to awaken; looks round him, and says:*] How still it has become here of a sudden!
Bishop Nicholas.
The King has gone.
Earl Skule.
And every one has followed him.
Bishop Nicholas.
All, save us.
Earl Skule.
It is a great thing to be King.
Bishop Nicholas.
[*Tentatively.*] Are you fain to try it, Earl?
Earl Skule.
[*With a serious smile.*] I have tried it; every night that brings me sleep makes me King of Norway.

161

Bishop Nicholas.
Dreams forbode.

Earl Skule.

Ay, and tempt.

Bishop Nicholas.

Not you, surely. In bygone days, that I could understand—but now, when you hold a third part of the kingdom, rule as the first man in the land, and are the Queen's father— —

Earl Skule.

Now most of all—now most of all.

Bishop Nicholas.

Hide nothing! Confess; for verily I can see a great pain is gnawing you.

Earl Skule.

Now most of all, I say. This is the great curse that lies upon my whole life: to stand so near to the highest,—with an abyss between. One leap, and on the other side are the kingship, and the purple robe, the throne, the might, and all! I have it daily before my eyes—but can never reach it.

Bishop Nicholas.

True, Earl, true.

Earl Skule.

When they made Guthorm Sigurdsson king, I was in the full strength of my youth. It was as though a voice cried aloud within me: Away with the child,—I am the man, the strong man!—But

162

Guthorm was the king's son; there yawned an abyss between me and the throne.

Bishop Nicholas.

And you dared not venture— —

Earl Skule.

Then Erling Steinvæg was chosen by the Slittungs. The voice cried within me again: Skule is a greater chieftain than Erling Steinvæg! But I must needs have broken with the Birchlegs,—that was the abyss that time.

Bishop Nicholas.

And Erling became king of the Slittungs, and after of the Ribbungs, and still you waited!

Earl Skule.

I waited for Guthorm to die.

Bishop Nicholas.

And Guthorm died, and Inge Bårdsson, your brother, became king.

Earl Skule.

Then I waited for my brother's death. He was sickly from the first; every morning, when we met at holy mass, I would cast stolen glances to see whether his sickness increased. Every twitch of pain that crossed his face was as a puff of wind in my sails, and bore me nearer to the throne. Every sigh he breathed in his agony sounded to me like an echoing trumpet-blast, like a herald from afar, proclaiming that the throne should soon be mine. Thus I tore up by the roots every

163

thought of brotherly kindness; and Inge died, and Håkon came—and the Birchlegs made him king.

Bishop Nicholas.

And you waited.

Earl Skule.

I thought help must come from above. I felt the kingly strength within me, and I was growing old; every day that passed was a day taken from my life-work. Each evening I thought: To-morrow will come the miracle that shall strike him down and set me in the empty seat.

Bishop Nicholas.

Small was then Håkon's power; he was no more than a child; it wanted but a single step from you—yet you took it not.

Earl Skule.

That step was hard to take; it would have parted me from my kindred and from all my friends.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, there is the rub, Earl Skule,—that is the curse which has lain upon your life. You would fain know every way open at need,—you dare not break all your bridges and keep only one, defend it alone, and on it conquer or fall. You lay snares for your foe, you set traps for his feet, and hang sharp swords over his head; you strew poison in every dish, and you spread a hundred nets for him; but when he walks into your toils you dare not draw the string; if he stretch out his hand for the poison, you think it safer he should fall by

164

the sword; if he is like to be caught in the morning, you hold it wiser to wait till eventide.

Earl Skule.

[*Looking earnestly at him.*] And what would you do, my lord Bishop?

Bishop Nicholas.

Speak not of me; my work is to build up thrones in this land, not to sit on them and rule.

Earl Skule.

[*After a short pause.*] Answer me one thing, my honoured lord, and answer me truly. How comes it that Håkon can follow the straight path so unflinchingly? He is no wiser, no bolder than I.

Bishop Nicholas.

Who does the greatest work in this world?

Earl Skule.

The greatest man.

Bishop Nicholas.

But who is the greatest man?

Earl Skule.

The bravest.

Bishop Nicholas.

So says the warrior. A priest would say: the man of greatest faith,—a philosopher: the most learned. But it is none of these, Earl Skule. The most fortunate man^[31] is the greatest man. It is

165

the most fortunate man that does the greatest deeds—he whom the cravings of his time seize like a passion, begetting thoughts he himself cannot fathom, and pointing to paths which lead he knows not whither, but which he follows and must follow till he hears the people shout for joy, and, looking around him with wondering eyes, finds that he has done a mighty deed.

Earl Skule.

Ay, there is that unswerving confidence in Håkon.

Bishop Nicholas.

It is that which the Romans called *ingenium*.—Truly I am not strong in Latin; but 'twas called *ingenium*.

Earl Skule.

[*Thoughtfully at first, afterwards in increasing excitement.*] Is Håkon made of other clay than mine? The fortunate man?—Ay, does not everything thrive with him? Does not everything shape itself for the best, when he is concerned? Even the peasants note it; they say the trees bear fruit twice, and the fowls hatch out two broods every summer, whilst Håkon is king. Vermeland, where he burned and

harried, stands smiling with its houses built afresh, and its cornlands bending heavy-eared before the breeze. 'Tis as though blood and ashes fertilised the land where Håkon's armies pass; 'tis as though the Lord clothed with double verdure what Håkon has trampled down; 'tis as though the holy powers made haste to blot out all evil in his track. And how easy has been his path to the throne! He needed that Inge should die early, and Inge died: his youth needed

166

to be watched and warded, and his men kept watch and ward around him; he needed the ordeal, and his mother arose and bore the iron for him.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*With an involuntary outburst.*] But we—we two— —!

Earl Skule.

We?

Bishop Nicholas.

You, I would say—what of you?

Earl Skule.

The right is Håkon's, Bishop.

Bishop Nicholas.

The right is his, for he is the fortunate one; 'tis even the summit of fortune, to have the right. But by what right has Håkon the right, and not you?

Earl Skule.

[*After a short pause.*] There are things I pray God to save me from thinking upon.

Bishop Nicholas.

Saw you never an old picture in Christ's Church at Nidaros? It shows the Deluge rising and rising over all the hills, so that there is but one single peak left above the waters. Up it clammers a whole household, father and mother and son and son's wife and children;—and the son is hurling the father back into the flood to gain better footing; and he will cast his mother down and his wife and all his children, to win to the top himself;—for up there he sees a handsbreadth of ground, where he

167

may keep life in him for an hour.—That, Earl, that is the saga of wisdom, and the saga of every wise man.

Earl Skule.

But the right!

Bishop Nicholas.

The son had the right. He had strength, and the craving for life;— fulfil your cravings and use your strength: so much right has every man.

Earl Skule.

Ay, for that which is good.

Bishop Nicholas.

Words, empty words! There is neither good nor evil, up nor down, high nor low. You must forget such words, else will you never take the last stride, never leap the abyss. [*In a subdued voice and insistently.*] You must not hate a party or a cause for that the party or the cause would have this and not that; but you must hate every man of a party for that he is against you, and you must hate all who gather round a cause, for that the cause clashes with your will. Whatever is helpful to you, is good—whatever lays stumbling-blocks in your path is evil.

Earl Skule.

[*Gazing thoughtfully before him.*] What has that throne not cost me, which yet I have not reached! And what has it cost Håkon, who now sits in it so securely! I was young, and I forswore my sweet secret love to ally myself with a powerful house. I prayed to the saints

168

that I might be blessed with a son—I got only daughters.

Bishop Nicholas.

Håkon will have sons, Earl—mark that!

Earl Skule.

[*Crossing to the window on the right.*] Ay—all things fall out to Håkon's wish.

Bishop Nicholas.

And you—will you suffer yourself to be outlawed from happiness all your life through? Are you blind? See you not that it is a stronger might than the Birchlegs that stands at Håkon's back, and furthers all his life-work? He has help from above, from—from those that are against you—from those that have been your enemies, even from your birth! And will you bow before these your enemies? Rouse you, man; straighten your back! To what end got you your masterful soul? Bethink you that the first great deed in all the world was done by one who rose against a mighty realm!

Earl Skule.

Who?

Bishop Nicholas.
The angel who rose against the light!
Earl Skule.
And was hurled into the bottomless pit— —
Bishop Nicholas.
[*Wildly.*] And founded there a kingdom, and made himself a king,
a mighty king—mightier

169

than any of the ten thousand—earls up yonder!
[*Sinks down upon a bench beside the table.*
Earl Skule.
[*Looks long at him.*] Bishop Nicholas, are you something more or
something less than a man?
Bishop Nicholas.
[*Smiling.*] I am in the state of innocence: I know not good from evil.
Earl Skule.
[*Half to himself.*] Why did they send me into the world, if they meant
not to order it better for me? Håkon has so firm and unswerving a
faith in himself—all his men have so firm and unswerving a faith in
him— —

Bishop Nicholas.
Let it not be seen that you have no such faith in yourself! Speak as
though you had it, swear great oaths that you have it—and all will
believe you.

Earl Skule.
Had I a son! Had I but a son, to take all the great heritage after me!
Bishop Nicholas.
[*Eagerly.*] Earl—if you had a son?
Earl Skule.
I have none.
Bishop Nicholas.
Håkon will have sons.

170

Earl Skule.
[*Wringing his hands.*] And is king-born!
Bishop Nicholas.
[*Rising.*] Earl—if he were not so?
Earl Skule.
Has he not proved it? The ordeal— —
Bishop Nicholas.

And if he were not—in spite of the ordeal?

Earl Skule.

Do you say that God lied in the issue of the ordeal?

Bishop Nicholas.

What was it Inga of Varteig called upon God to witness?

Earl Skule.

That the child she bore in the eastland, in Borgasysse, was the son of Håkon Sverresson.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Nods, looks round, and says softly.*] And if King Håkon were not that child?

Earl Skule.

[*Starts a step backwards.*] Great God— —! [*Controls himself.*] It is beyond belief.

Bishop Nicholas.

Hearken to me, Earl Skule. I have lived seventy years and six; it begins to go sharply downhill with me now, and I dare not take this secret with me over yonder— —

171

Earl Skule.

Speak, speak! Is he not the son of Håkon Sverresson?

Bishop Nicholas.

Hear me. It was known to none that Inga was with child. Håkon Sverresson was lately dead, and doubtless she feared Inge Bårdsson, who was then king, and you, and—well, and the Baglers[32] too mayhap. She was brought to bed secretly in the house of Trond the Priest, in Heggen parish, and after nine days she departed homewards; but the child remained a whole year with the priest, she not daring to look to it, and none knowing that it breathed saved Trond and his two sons.

Earl Skule.

Ay, ay—and then?

Bishop Nicholas.

When the child was a year old, it could scarce be kept hidden longer. So Inga made the matter known to Erlend of Huseby—an old Birchleg of Sverre's days, as you know.

Earl Skule.

Well?

Bishop Nicholas.

He and other chiefs from the Uplands took the child, bore it over the mountains in midwinter, and brought it to the King, who was then at Nidaros.

Earl Skule.

And yet you can say that — — ?

172

Bishop Nicholas.

Needless to say, 'twas a dangerous task for a humble priest to rear a king's child. So soon as the child was born, he laid the matter before one of his superiors in the church, and prayed for his counsel. This his superior bade Trond send the true king's son with secrecy to a place of safety, and give Inga another, if she or the Birchlegs should afterwards ask for her child.

Earl Skule.

[*Indignantly.*] And who was the hound that gave that counsel?

Bishop Nicholas.

It was I.

Earl Skule.

You? Ay, you have ever hated the race of Sverre.

Bishop Nicholas.

I deemed it not safe for the king's son to fall into your hands.

Earl Skule.

But the priest — — ?

Bishop Nicholas.

Promised to do as I bade.

Earl Skule.

[*Seizing him by the arm.*] And Håkon is the other child?

Bishop Nicholas.

If the priest kept his promise.

173

Earl Skule.

If he kept it?

Bishop Nicholas.

Trond the Priest departed the land the same winter that the child was brought to King Inge. He journeyed to Thomas Beckett's grave, and afterwards abode in England till his death.

Earl Skule.

He departed the land, say you? Then must he have changed the children and dreaded the vengeance of the Birchlegs.

Bishop Nicholas.

Or he did not change the children, and dreaded my vengeance.

Earl Skule.

Which surmise hold you for the truth?

Bishop Nicholas.

Either may well be true.

Earl Skule.

But the priest's sons of whom you spoke?

Bishop Nicholas.

They went with the crusaders to the Holy Land.

Earl Skule.

And there have since been no tidings of them?

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, tidings there have been.

174

Earl Skule.

Where are they?

Bishop Nicholas.

They were drowned in the Greek Sea on the journey forth.

Earl Skule.

And Inga— —?

Bishop Nicholas.

Knows nought, either of the priest's confession or of my counsel.

Earl Skule.

Her child was but nine days old when she left it, you said?

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, and the child she next saw was over a year— —

Earl Skule.

Then no living creature can here bring light! [*Paces rapidly to and fro.*] Almighty God, can this be true? Håkon—the King—he who holds sway over all this land, not born of royal blood!—And why should it not be like enough? Has not all fortune miraculously followed him?—Why not this also, to be taken as a child from a poor cottar's hut and laid in a king's cradle— —?

Bishop Nicholas.

Whilst the whole people believes that he is the king's son— —

Earl Skule.

Whilst he himself believes it, Bishop—that is the heart of his fortune, that is the girdle of

175

strength! [*Goes to the window.*] See how bravely he sits his horse! None rides as he does. His eyes are filled with laughing, dancing sunshine; he looks forth into the day as though he knew himself created to go forward, ever forward. [*Turns towards the Bishop.*] I am a king's arm, mayhap a king's brain as well; but he is the whole King.

Bishop Nicholas.

Yet no king after all, mayhap.

Earl Skule.

Mayhap no king after all.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Lays his hand on the Earl's shoulder.*] Hearken to me, Earl Skule—

—

Earl Skule.

[*Still looking out.*] There sits the Queen. Håkon speaks gently to her; she turns red and white with joy. He took her to wife because it was wise to choose the daughter of the mightiest man in the land. There was then no thought of love for her in his heart;—but it will come; Håkon has fortune with him. She will shed light over his life—
—[*Stops, and cries out in wonder.*] What is this?

Bishop Nicholas.

What?

Earl Skule.

Dagfinn the Peasant bursts violently through the crowd. Now he is giving the King some tidings.

176

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Looking out from behind the Earl.*] Håkon seems angered—does he not? He clenches his fist— —

Earl Skule.

He looks hitherward—what can it be?

[*About to go.*

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Holding him back.*] Hearken to me, Earl Skule—there may yet be one means of winning assurance as to Håkon's right.

Earl Skule.

One means, you say?

Bishop Nicholas.

Trond the Priest, ere he died, wrote a letter telling his whole tale, and took the sacrament in witness of its truth.

Earl Skule.

And that letter—for God's pity's sake—where is it?

Bishop Nicholas.

You must know that— —[*Looks towards the door.*] Hush!—here comes the King.

Earl Skule.

The letter, Bishop—the letter!

Bishop Nicholas.

The King is here.

177

[*Håkon enters, followed by his Guard and many guests. Immediately afterwards, Margrete appears; she seems anxious and alarmed, and is about to rush up to the King, when she is restrained by Lady Ragnhild, who, with other ladies, has followed her. Sigrid stands somewhat apart, towards the back. The Earl's men appear uneasy, and gather in a group on the right, where Skule is standing, but some way behind him.*]

Håkon.

[*In strong but repressed excitement.*] Earl Skule, who is king in this land?

Earl Skule.

Who is king?

Håkon.

That was my question. I bear the kingly title, but who holds the kingly might?

Earl Skule.

The kingly might should dwell with him who has the kingly right.

Håkon.

So should it be; but is it so?

Earl Skule.

Do you summon me to judgment?

Håkon.

That do I; for that right I have toward every man in the land.

Earl Skule.

I fear not to answer for my dealings.

178

Håkon.

Well for us all if you can. [*Mounts a step of throne-dais, and leans upon one arm of the throne.*] Here stand I as your king, and ask. Know you that Jon, Earl of Orkney, has risen against me?

Earl Skule.

Yes.

Håkon.

That he denies to pay me tribute?

Earl Skule.

Yes.

Håkon.

And is it true that you, Sir Earl, have this day sent him a letter?

Earl Skule.

Who says so?

Ivar Bodde.

That do I.

Dagfinn.

Jostein Tamb dared not deny to carry it, since it bore the King's seal.

Håkon.

You write to the King's foes under the King's seal, although the King knows nought of what is written?

Earl Skule.

So have I done for many a year, with your good will.

Håkon.

Ay, in the days of your regency.

179

Earl Skule.

Never have you had aught but good thereby. Earl Jon wrote to me praying that I would mediate on his behalf; he offered peace, but on terms dishonourable to the King. The war in Vermeland has weighed much upon your mind; had this matter been left to you, Earl Jon had come too lightly off. I can deal better with him.

Håkon.

'Twas our will to deal with him ourself.—And what answer made you?

Earl Skule.

Read my letter.

Håkon.

Give it me!

Earl Skule.

I deemed you had it.

Dagfinn.

Nay, you know better than that. Gregorius Jonsson was too swift of foot; when we came on board, the letter was gone.

Earl Skule.

[*Turns to Gregorius Jonsson.*] Sir Baron, give the King the letter.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Coming close to him, uneasily.*] Hearken Earl— —!

Earl Skule.

What now?

180

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Softly.*] Bethink you, there were sharp words in it concerning the King.

Earl Skule.

My words I shall answer for. The letter!

Gregorius Jonsson.

I have it not.

Earl Skule.

You have it not!

Gregorius Jonsson.

Dagfinn the Peasant was at our heels. I snatched the letter from Jostein Tamb, tied a stone to it— —

Earl Skule.

Well?

Gregorius Jonsson.

It lies at the bottom of the fiord.

Earl Skule.

You have done ill— ill.

Håkon.

I await the letter, Sir Earl.

Earl Skule.

I cannot give it you.

Håkon.

You cannot!

Earl Skule.

[*Advancing a step towards the King.*] My pride

181

brooks not to be put to shifts, as you and your men would call it—

—

Håkon.

[*Controlling his rising wrath.*] And so— —?

Earl Skule.

In one word—I will not give it you!

Håkon.

Then you defy me!

Earl Skule.

Since so it must be—yes, I defy you.

Ivar Bodde.

[*Forcibly.*] Now, my lord King, I scarce think you or any man can now need further proof!

Dagfinn.

Nay, now I think we know the Earl's mind.

Håkon.

[*Coldly, to the Earl.*] You will hand the Great Seal to Ivar Bodde.

Margrete.

[*Rushes with clasped hands towards the daïs, where the King is standing.*] Håkon, be a kind and gracious husband to me!

[*Håkon makes an imperative gesture towards her; she hides her face in her veil, and goes up towards her mother again.*]

Earl Skule.

[*To Ivar Bodde.*] Here is the Great Seal.

182

Ivar Bodde.

This was to be the last evening of the feast. It has ended in a heavy sorrow for the King; but sooner or later it needs must come, and methinks every true man must rejoice that it has come.

Earl Skule.

And I think every true man must feel bitter wrath to see a priest thus make mischief between us Birchlegs;—ay, Birchlegs, I say; for I am every whit as good a Birchleg as the King or any of his men. I am of the same stock, the stock of Sverre, the kingly stock—but you, Priest, you have built up a wall of distrust around the King, and shut me out from him; that has been your task this many a year.

Paul Flida.

[*Enraged, to the bystanders.*] Earl's men. Shall we abide this longer?

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Steps forward.*] No, we can and will no more abide it. 'Tis time to say it plainly—none of the Earl's men can serve the King in full trust and love, so long as Ivar Bodde comes and goes in the palace, and makes bad blood between us.

Paul Flida.

Priest! I bid you look to life and limb, wheresoever I meet you—in the field, on shipboard, or in any unconsecrated house.

Many Earl's Men.

I too! I too! You are an outlaw to us!

183

Ivar Bodde.

God forbid that I should stand between the King and so many mighty chieftains.—Håkon, my gracious lord, my soul bears me witness that I have served you in all faithfulness. True, I have warned you against the Earl; but if I have ever done him wrong, I pray God forgive me. Now have I no more to do in the palace; here is your Seal; take it into your own hands; there it should have rested long ago.

Håkon.

[*Who has come down from the daïs.*] You shall remain!

Ivar Bodde.

I cannot. If I did, my conscience would gnaw and rend me night and day. Greater evil can no man do in these times than to hold the King and the Earl asunder.

Håkon.

Ivar Bodde, I command you to remain!

Ivar Bodde.

If the Holy King Olaf should rise from his silver shrine to bid me stay, still I needs must go. [*Places the Seal in the King's hand.*] Farewell, my noble master! God bless and prosper you in all your work!

[*Goes out through the crowd, to the right.*]

Håkon.

[*Gloomily, to the Earl and his men.*] There have I lost a trusty friend for your sakes; what requital can you offer to make good that loss?

184

Earl Skule.

I offer myself and all my friends.

Håkon.

I almost fear 'twill not suffice. Now must I gather round me all the men I can fully trust. Dagfinn the Peasant, let a messenger set out forthwith for Halogaland; Vegard Væradal must be recalled.

Dagfinn.

[Who has been standing somewhat towards the back, in conversation with a man in travelling dress who has entered the hall, approaches and says with emotion:] Vegard cannot come, my lord.

Håkon.

How know you that?

Dagfinn.

I have even now had tidings of him.

Håkon.

What tidings?

Dagfinn.

That Vegard Væradal is slain.

Many Voices.

Slain!

Håkon.

Who slew him?

Dagfinn.

Andres Skialdarband, the Earl's friend.

[A short pause; uneasy whispers pass among the men.

185

Håkon.

Where is the messenger?

Dagfinn.

[Leading the man forward.] Here, my lord King.

Håkon.

What caused the slaying?

The Messenger.

That no man knows. The talk fell upon the Finnish tribute, and on a sudden Andres sprang up and gave him his death-wound.

Håkon.

Had there been quarrels between them before?

The Messenger.

Ever and anon. Andres would often say that a wise councillor here in the south had written to him that he should be as rock and flint toward Vegard Væradal.

Dagfinn.

Strange! Ere Vegard set forth he told me that a wise councillor had said he should be as rock and flint toward Andres Skialdarband.

Bishop Nicholas.

[Spitting.] Shame upon such councillors.

Håkon.

We will not question more closely from what root this wrong has grown. Two faithful souls have I lost this day. I could weep for Vegard, but 'tis no time for weeping; it must be life for life. Sir

186

Earl, Andres Skialdarband is your sworn retainer; you offered me all service in requital for Ivar Bodde. I take you at your word, and look to you to see that this misdeed be avenged.

Earl Skule.

Of a truth, bad angels are at work between us to-day. On any other of my men, I would have suffered you to avenge the murder— —

Håkon.

[Expectantly.] Well?

Earl Skule.

But not on Andres Skialdarband.

Håkon.

[Flashing out.] Will you shield the murderer?

Earl Skule.

This murderer I must shield.

Håkon.

And the reason?

Earl Skule.

That none but God in heaven may know.

Bishop Nicholas.

[Softly, to Dagfinn.] I know it.

Dagfinn.

And I suspect it.

Bishop Nicholas.

Say nought, good Dagfinn!

187

Håkon.

Earl, I will believe as long as I may, that you mean not in good sooth what you have said to me— —

Earl Skule.

Were it my own father Andres Skialdarband had slain, he should still go free. Ask me no more.

Håkon.

Good. Then we ourselves must do justice in the matter!

Earl Skule.

[With an expression of alarm.] There will be bloodshed on both sides, my lord King!

Håkon.
So be it; none the less shall the deed be avenged.
Earl Skule.
It shall not be!—It cannot be!
Bishop Nicholas.
Nay, there the Earl is right.
Håkon.
Say you so, my honoured lord?
Bishop Nicholas.
Andres Skialdarband has taken the Cross.
Håkon and Earl Skule.
Taken the Cross!
Bishop Nicholas.
And has already sailed from the land.

188

Earl Skule.
'Tis well for all of us!
Håkon.
The day wanes; the bridal-feast must now be at an end. I thank you, Sir Earl, for all the honour that has been shown me in these days.—You are bound for Nidaros, as I think?
Earl Skule.
That is my intent.
Håkon.
And I for Viken.—If you, Margrete, choose rather to abide in Bergen, then do so.
Margrete.
Whither you go, I go, until you forbid.
Håkon.
Good; then come with me.
Sigrid.
Now is our kindred spread far abroad. [*Kneels to Håkon.*] Grant me a grace, my lord King.
Håkon.
Rise, Lady Sigrid; whatever you crave shall be granted.
Sigrid.
I cannot go with the Earl to Nidaros. The nunnery at Rein will soon be consecrated; write to the Archbishop—take order that I be made Abbess.

189

Earl Skule.

You, my sister?

Håkon.

You will enter a nunnery!

Sigrid.

[*Rising.*] Since my wedding-night of blood, when the Baglers came and hewed down my bridegroom, and many hundreds with him, and fired Nidaros town at all its corners—since then, it has been as though the blood and flames had dulled and deadened my sight for the world around me. But power was given me to catch glimpses of that which other eyes see not—and one thing I see now: a time of great dread hanging over this land!

Earl Skule.

[*Vehemently.*] She is sick! Heed her not!

Sigrid.

A plenteous harvest is ripening for him that reaps in the darkness. Every woman in Norway will have but one task now—to kneel in church and cloister, and pray both day and night.

Håkon.

[*Shaken.*] Is it prophecy or soul-sickness that speaks thus?

Sigrid.

Farewell, my brother—we shall meet once more.

Earl Skule.

[*Involuntarily.*] When?

190

Sigrid.

[*Softly.*] When you take the crown; in the hour of danger,—when you are fain of me in your direst need.

[*Goes out to the right, with Margrete, Lady Ragnhild, and the women.*]

Håkon.

[*After a short pause, draws his sword, and says with quiet determination.*] All the Earl's men shall take the oath of fealty.

Earl Skule.

[*Vehemently.*] Is this your settled purpose? [*Almost imploringly.*] King Håkon, do not so!

Håkon.

No Earl's man shall leave Bergen ere he has sworn fealty to the King.

[Goes out with his Guard. All except the Earl and the Bishop follow him.]

Bishop Nicholas.

He has dealt hardly with you to-day!

[Earl Skule is silent, and looks out after the King, as though struck dumb.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[More loudly.] And mayhap not king-born after all.

Earl Skule.

[Turns suddenly, in strong excitement, and seizes the Bishop by the arm.] Trond the Priest's confession—where is it?

191

Bishop Nicholas.

He sent it to me from England ere he died; I know not by whom—and it never reached me.

Earl Skule.

But it must be found!

Bishop Nicholas.

I doubt not but it may.

Earl Skule.

And if you find it, you will give it into my hands?

Bishop Nicholas.

That I promise.

Earl Skule.

You swear it by your soul's salvation?

Bishop Nicholas.

I swear it by my soul's salvation!

Earl Skule.

Good; till that time I will work against Håkon, wherever it can be done secretly and unnoted. He must be hindered from growing mightier than I, ere the struggle begins.

Bishop Nicholas.

But should it prove that he is in truth king-born—what then?

Earl Skule.

Then I must try to pray—to pray for humbleness,

192

that I may serve him with all my might, as a faithful chieftain.

Bishop Nicholas.

And if he be not the rightful king?

Earl Skule.

Then shall he give place to me! The kingly title and the kingly throne, host and guard, fleet and tribute, towns and strongholds, all shall be mine!

Bishop Nicholas.

He will betake him to Viken — —

Earl Skule.

I will drive him out of Viken!

Bishop Nicholas.

He will establish himself in Nidaros.

Earl Skule.

I will storm Nidaros!

Bishop Nicholas.

He will shut himself up in Olaf's holy church — —

Earl Skule.

I will force the sanctuary — —

Bishop Nicholas.

He will fly to the high altar, and cling to Olaf's shrine — —

Earl Skule.

I will drag him down from the altar, though I drag the shrine along with him — —

193

Bishop Nicholas.

But the crown will still be on his head, Earl Skule!

Earl Skule.

I will strike off the crown with my sword!

Bishop Nicholas.

But if it sits too tight — — ?

Earl Skule.

Then, in God's name or Satan's—I will strike off the head along with it!

[Goes out to the right.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[Looks out after him, nods slowly, and says:] Ay—ay—'tis in this mood I like the Earl!

194

ACT THIRD

A room in the Bishop's Palace at Oslo.^[33] *On the right is the entrance door. In the back, a small door,*

standing open, leads into the Chapel, which is lighted up. A curtained door in the left wall leads into the Bishop's sleeping room. In front, on the same side, stands a cushioned couch. Opposite, on the right, is a writing-table, with letters, documents, and a lighted lamp.

At first the room is empty; behind the curtain on the left, the singing of monks is heard. Presently Paul Flida, in travelling dress, enters from the right, stops by the door, waits, looks around, and then knocks three times with his staff upon the floor.

Sira Viliam.

[Comes out from the left, and exclaims in a hushed voice.] Paul Flida! God be praised;—then the Earl is not far off.

Paul Flida.

The ships are already at Hoved-isle; I came on ahead. And how goes it with the Bishop?

Sira Viliam.

He is even now receiving the Extreme Unction.

195

Paul Flida.

Then there is great danger.

Sira Viliam.

Master Sigard of Brabant has said that he cannot outlive the night.

Paul Flida.

Then meseems he has summoned us too late.

Sira Viliam.

Nay, nay,—he has his full senses and some strength to boot; every moment he asks if the Earl comes not soon.

Paul Flida.

You still call him Earl; know you not that the King has granted him the title of Duke?

Sira Viliam.

Ay, ay, we know it; 'tis but old custom. Hist!

[He and Paul Flida cross themselves and bow their heads. From the Bishop's door issue two acolytes with candles, then two more with censers; then priests bearing chalice, paten, and crucifix, and a church banner; behind them a file of priests and monks; acolytes with candles and censers close the

procession, which passes slowly into the chapel. The door is shut behind them.

Paul Flida.

So now the old lord has made up his account with the world.

196

Sira Viliam.

I can tell him that Duke Skule comes so soon as may be?

Paul Flida.

He comes straight from the wharf up here to the Palace. Farewell!

[Goes.

[Several priests, among them Peter, with some of the Bishop's servants, come out from the left with rugs, cushions, and a large brazier.

Sira Viliam.

Why do you this?

A Priest.

[*Arranging the couch.*] The Bishop wills to lie out here.

Sira Viliam.

But is it prudent?

The Priest.

Master Sigard thinks we may humour him. Here he is.

Bishop Nicholas enters, supported by Master Sigard and a priest. He is in his canonicals, but without crozier and mitre.

Bishop Nicholas.

Light more candles. [*He is led to a seat upon the couch, near the brazier, and is covered with rugs.*] Viliam! Now have I been granted forgiveness for all my sins! They took them all away with them;— meseems I am so light now.

197

Sira Viliam.

The Duke sends you greeting, my lord; he has already passed Hoved-isle!

Bishop Nicholas.

'Tis well, very well. Belike the King, too, will soon be here. I have been a sinful hound in my day, Viliam; I have grievously trespassed against the King. The priests in there averred that all my sins should be forgiven me;—well well, it may be so; but 'tis easy for them to promise; 'tis not against them that I have trespassed. No no; it is

safest to have it from the King's own mouth. [*Exclaims impatiently.*]
Light, I say! 'tis so dark in here.

Sira Viliam.

The candles are lighted— —

Master Sigard.

[*Stops him by a sign, and approaches the Bishop.*] How goes it
with you, my lord?

Bishop Nicholas.

So-so—so-so; my hands and feet are cold.

Master Sigard.

[*Half aloud, as he moves the brazier nearer.*] Ha— 'tis the beginning
of the end.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Apprehensively, to Viliam.*] I have commanded that eight monks
shall chant and pray for me in

198

the chapel to-night. Have an eye to them; there are idle fellows
among them.

[*Sira Viliam points silently towards the chapel, whence singing
is heard, which continues during what follows.*

Bishop Nicholas.

So much still undone, and to go and leave it all! So much undone,
Viliam!

Sira Viliam.

My lord, think of heavenly things!

Bishop Nicholas.

I have time before me;—till well on in the morning, Master Sigard
thinks— —

Sira Viliam.

My lord, my lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Give me mitre and crozier!— 'Tis very well for you to say that I
should think— — [*A priest brings them.*] So, set the cap there, 'tis too
heavy for me; give me the crozier in my hand; there, now am I in my
armour. A bishop!— — The Evil One dare not grapple with me now!

Sira Viliam.

Desire you aught beside?

Bishop Nicholas.

No. Stay—tell me:—Peter, Andres Skialdarband's son,—all speak
well of him— —

Sira Viliam.

In truth, his is a blameless soul.

Bishop Nicholas.

Peter, you shall watch beside me until the King or the Duke shall come. Leave us, meanwhile, ye others, but be at hand.

[All except Peter go out on the right.]

Bishop Nicholas.

[After a short pause.] Peter!

Peter.

[Approaches.] My lord?

Bishop Nicholas.

Hast ever seen old men die?

Peter.

No.

Bishop Nicholas.

They are all afeard; that I dare swear. There on the table lies a large letter with seals to it; give it to me. *[Peter brings the letter.]* 'Tis to your mother.

Peter.

To my mother?

Bishop Nicholas.

You must get you northward with it to Halogaland. I have written to her touching a great and weighty matter; tidings have come from your father.

Peter.

He is fighting as a soldier of God in the Holy

Land. Should he fall there, he falls on hallowed ground; for there every foot's-breadth of earth is sacred. I commend him to God in all my prayers.

Bishop Nicholas.

Is Andres Skialdarband dear to you?

Peter.

He is an honourable man; but there lives another man whose greatness my mother, as it were, fostered and nourished me withal.

Bishop Nicholas.

[Hurriedly and eagerly.] Is that Duke Skule?

Peter.

Ay, the Duke—Skule Bårdsson. My mother knew him in younger days. The Duke must sure be the greatest man in the land!

Bishop Nicholas.

There is the letter; get you northward with it forthwith!—Are they not singing in there?

Peter.

They are, my lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Eight lusty fellows with throats like trumpets, they must surely help somewhat, methinks.

Peter.

My lord, my lord! Why not pray yourself!

Bishop Nicholas.

I have too much still undone, Peter. Life is

201

all too short;—besides, the King will surely forgive me when he comes— —[Gives a start in pain.

Peter.

You are suffering?

Bishop Nicholas.

I suffer not; but there is a ringing in mine ears, a twinkling and flickering before mine eyes— —

Peter.

'Tis the heavenly bells ringing you home, and the twinkling of the altar-lights God's angels have lit for you.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, sure 'tis so;—there is no danger if only they lag not with their prayers in there— —Farewell; set forth at once with the letter.

Peter.

Shall I not first— —?

Bishop Nicholas.

Nay, go; I fear not to be alone.

Peter.

Well met again, then, what time the heavenly bells shall sound for me too.

[Goes out on the right.]

Bishop Nicholas.

The heavenly bells,—ay, 'tis easy talking when you still have two stout legs to stand upon.—So much undone! But much will live after

me, notwithstanding. I promised the Duke by my soul's salvation to give him Trond the Priest's

202

confession if it came into my hand;—'tis well I have not got it. Had he certainty, he would conquer or fall; and then one of the twain would be the mightiest man that ever lived in Norway. No no,—what / could not reach none other shall reach. Uncertainty serves best; so long as the Duke is burdened with that, they two will waste each other's strength, wheresoever they may; towns will be burnt, dales will be harried,—neither will gain by the other's loss—*[Terrified.]* Mercy, pity! It is I who bear the guilt—I, who set it all agoing! *[Calming himself.]* Well, well, well! but now the King is coming—'tis he that suffers most—he will forgive me—prayers and masses shall be said; there is no danger;—I am a bishop, and I have never slain any man with mine own hand.—'Tis well that Trond the Priest's confession came not; the saints are with me, they will not tempt me to break my promise.—Who knocks at the door? It must be the Duke! *[Rubs his hands with glee.]* He will implore me for proofs as to the kingship,—and I have no proofs to give him!

Inga of Varteig enters; she is dressed in black, with a cloak and hood.

Bishop Nicholas.

[Starts.] Who is that?

Inga.

A woman from Varteig in Borgasysse, my honoured lord.

Bishop Nicholas.

The King's mother!

203

Inga.

So was I called once.

Bishop Nicholas.

Go, go! 'Twas not I counselled Håkon to send you away.

Inga.

What the King does is well done; 'tis not therefore I come.

Bishop Nicholas.

Wherefore then?

Inga.

Gunnulf, my brother, is come home from England— —

Bishop Nicholas.

From England— —!

Inga.

He has been away these many years, as you know, and has roamed far and wide; now has he brought home a letter— —

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Breathlessly.*] A letter— —?

Inga.

From Trond the Priest. 'Tis for you, my lord.

[*Hands it to him.*]

Bishop Nicholas.

Ah, truly;—and you bring it?

Inga.

It was Trond's wish. I owe him great thanks since the time he fostered Håkon. It was told

204

me that you were sick; therefore I set forth at once; I have come hither on foot— —

Bishop Nicholas.

There was no such haste, Inga!

Dagfinn the Peasant *enters from the right.*

Dagfinn.

God's peace, my honoured lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Comes the King?

Dagfinn.

He is now riding down the Ryen hills, with the Queen and the King-child and a great following.

Inga.

[*Rushes up to Dagfinn.*] The King,—the King! Comes he hither?

Dagfinn.

Inga! You here, much-suffering woman!

Inga.

She is not much-suffering who has so great a son.

Dagfinn.

Now will his hard heart be melted.

Inga.

Not a word to the King of me. Yet, oh, I must see him!—Tell me,—comes he hither?

Dagfinn.

Ay, presently.

205

Inga.

And it is dark evening. The King will be lighted on his way with torches?

Dagfinn.

Yes.

Inga.

Then will I hide me in a gateway as he goes by;—and then home to Varteig. But first will I into Hallvard's church; the lights are burning there to-night; there will I call down blessings on the King, on my fair son.

[Goes out to the right.]

Dagfinn.

I have fulfilled mine errand; I go to meet the King.

Bishop Nicholas.

Bear him most loving greeting, good Dagfinn!

Dagfinn.

[As he goes out to the right.] I would not be Bishop Nicholas to-morrow.

Bishop Nicholas.

Trond the Priest's confession— —! So it has come after all—here I hold it in my hand. *[Muses with a fixed gaze.]* A man should never promise aught by his soul's salvation, when he is as old as I. Had I years before me, I could always wriggle free from such a promise; but this evening, this last evening—no, that were imprudent.—But can I keep it? Is it not to endanger all that I have worked for, my whole life through? *[Whispering.]* Oh, could I but cheat the Evil

206

One, only this one more time! *[Listens.]* What was that? *[Calls.]* Viliam, Viliam!

Sira Viliam enters from the right.

Bishop Nicholas.

What is it that whistles and howls so grimly?

Sira Viliam.

'Tis the storm; it grows fiercer.

Bishop Nicholas.

The storm grows fiercer! Ay truly, I will keep my promise! The storm, say you— —? Are they singing in there?

Sira Viliam.

Yes, my lord.

Bishop Nicholas.

Bid them bestir themselves, and chiefly brother Aslak; he always makes such scant prayers; he shirks whenever he can; he skips, the hound! [*Strikes the floor with his crozier.*] Go in and say to him 'tis the last night I have left; he shall bestir himself, else will I haunt him from the dead!

Sira Viliam.

My lord, shall I not fetch Master Sigard?

Bishop Nicholas.

Go in, I say! [*Viliam goes into the chapel.*] It must doubtless be heaven's will that I should reconcile the King and the Duke, since it sends me Trond's letter now. This is a hard thing, Nicholas; to tear down at a single wrench what

207

you have spent your life in building up. But there is no other way; I must e'en do the will of heaven this time.—If I could only read what is written in the letter! But I cannot see a word! Mists drive before my eyes; they sparkle and flicker; and I dare let none other read it for me! To make such a promise— —! Is human cunning, then, so poor a thing that it cannot govern the outcome of its contrivances in the second and third degree? I spoke so long and so earnestly to Vegard Væradal about making the King send Inga from him, that at length it came to pass. That was wise in the first degree; but had I not counselled thus, then Inga had not now been at Varteig, the letter had not come into my hands in time, and I had not had any promise to keep—therefore 'twas unwise in the second degree. Had I yet time before me— —! but only the space of one night, and scarce even that. I must, I will live longer! [*Knocks with his crozier; a priest enters from the right.*] Bid Master Sigard come! [*The priest goes; the Bishop crushes the letter in his hands.*] Here, under this thin seal, lies Norway's saga for a hundred years! It lies and dreams, like the birdling in the egg! Oh, that I had more souls than one—or else none! [*Presses the letter wildly to his breast.*] Oh, were not the end so close upon me,—and judgment and doom I would hatch you out into a hawk that should cast the dreadful shadow of his wings overall the land, and strike his sharp talons into every heart! [*With a sudden shudder.*] But the last hour is at hand! [*Shrieking.*] No, no! You shall become a swan, a white swan! [*Throws the letter far from, him, on to the floor, and calls:*] Master Sigard, Master Sigard!

208

Master Sigard.

[*From the right.*] How goes it, honoured lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Master Sigard—sell me three days' life!

Master Sigard.

I have told you— —

Bishop Nicholas.

Yes, yes; but that was in jest; 'twas a little revenge on me. I have been a tedious master to you; therefore you thought to scare me. Fie, that was evil,—nay, nay—'twas no more than I deserved! But, now be good and kind! I will pay you well;—three days' life, Master Sigard, only three days' life!

Master Sigard.

Though I myself were to die in the same hour as you, yet could I not add three days to your span.

Bishop Nicholas.

One day, then, only one day! Let it be light, let the sun shine when my soul sets forth! Listen, Sigard! [*Beckons him over, and drags him down upon the couch.*] I have given well-nigh all my gold and silver to the Church, to have high masses sung for me. I will take it back again; you shall have it all! How now, Sigard, shall we two fool them in there? He-he-he! You will be rich, Sigard, and can depart the country; I shall have time to cast about me a little, and make shift with fewer prayers. Come, Sigard, shall we— —! [*Sigard feels his pulse; the Bishop*

209

exclaims anxiously:] How now, why answer you not?

Master Sigard.

[*Rising.*] I have no time, my lord. I must prepare you a draught that may ease you somewhat at the last.

Bishop Nicholas.

Nay, wait with that! Wait,—and answer me!

Master Sigard.

I have no time; the draught must be ready within an hour.

[*Goes out to the right.*

Bishop Nicholas.

Within an hour! [*Knocks wildly.*] Viliam! Viliam!

[*Sira Viliam comes out from the chapel.*

Bishop Nicholas.

Call more to help in there! The eight are not enough!

Sira Viliam.

My lord— —?

Bishop Nicholas.

More to help, I say! Brother Kolbein has lain sick these five weeks,—he cannot have sinned much in that time— —

Sira Viliam.

He was at shrift yesterday.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Eagerly.*] Ay, *he* must be good; call him!

210

[*Viliam goes into the chapel again.*] Within an hour! [*Dries the sweat off his brow.*] Pah—how hot it is here!—The miserable hound—what boots all his learning, when he cannot add an hour to my life? There sits he in his closet day by day, piecing together his cunning wheels and weights and levers; he thinks to fashion a machine that shall go and go and never stop—*perpetuum mobile* he calls it. Why not rather turn his art and his skill to making man such a *perpetuum mobile*? [*Stops and thinks; his eyes light up.*] *Perpetuum mobile*,—I am not strong in Latin—but it means somewhat that has power to work eternally, through all the ages. If I myself, now, could but— —? That were a deed to end my life withal! That were to do my greatest deed in my latest hour! To set wheel and weight and lever at work in the King's soul and the Duke's; to set them a-going so that no power on earth can stop them; if I can but do that, then shall I live indeed, live in my work—and, when I think of it, mayhap 'tis that which is called immortality.—Comfortable, soothing thoughts, how ye do the old man good! [*Draws a deep breath, and stretches himself comfortably upon the couch.*] Diabolus has pressed me hard to-night. That comes of lying idle; *olium est pulvis—pulveris*—pooh, no matter for the Latin— —Diabolus shall no longer have power over me; I will be busy to the last; I will— —; how they bellow in yonder— —[*Knocks; Viliam comes out.*] Tell them to hold their peace; they disturb me. The King and the Duke will soon be here; I have weighty matters to ponder.

Sira Viliam.

My lord, shall I then— —?

211

Bishop Nicholas.

Bid them hold awhile, that I may think in peace. Look you, take up yonder letter that lies upon the floor.—Good. Reach me the papers here— —

Sira Viliam.

[*Goes to the writing-table.*] Which, my lord?

Bishop Nicholas.

It matters not — —; the sealed ones; those that lie uppermost — So; go now in and bid them be silent. [*Viliam goes.*] To die, and yet rule in Norway! To die, and yet so contrive things that no man may come to raise his head above the rest. A thousand ways may lead towards that goal; yet can there be but one that will reach it; — and now to find that one — to find it and follow it — — Ha! The way lies so close, so close at hand! Ay, so it must be. I will keep my promise; the Duke shall have the letter in his hands; — but the King — he shall have the thorn of doubt in his heart. Håkon is upright, as they call it; many things will go to wreck in his soul along with the faith in himself and in his right. Both of them shall doubt and believe by turns, still swaying to and fro, and finding no firm ground beneath their feet — *perpetuum mobile!* — But will Håkon believe what I say? Ay, that will he; am I not a dying man? — And to prepare the way I will feed him up with truths. — My strength fails, but fresh life fills my soul; — I no longer lie on a sick-bed, I sit in my workroom; I will work the last night through, work — till the light goes out — —

Duke Skule.

[*Enters from the right and advances towards the*

212

Bishop.] Peace and greeting, my honoured lord! I hear it goes ill with you.

Bishop Nicholas.

I am a corpse in the bud, good Duke; this night shall I break into bloom; to-morrow you may scent my perfume.

Duke Skule.

Already to-night, say you?

Bishop Nicholas.

Master Sigard says: within an hour.

Duke Skule.

And Trond the Priest's letter — — ?

Bishop Nicholas.

Think you still upon that?

Duke Skule.

'Tis never out of my thoughts.

Bishop Nicholas.

The King has made you Duke; before you, no man in Norway has borne that title.

Duke Skule.

'Tis not enough. If Håkon be not the rightful king, then must I have all!

Bishop Nicholas.

Ha, 'tis cold in here; the blood runs icy through my limbs.

213

Duke Skule.

Trond the Priest's letter, my lord! For Almighty God's sake,—have you it?

Bishop Nicholas.

At least, I know where it may be found.

Duke Skule.

Tell me then, tell me!

Bishop Nicholas.

Wait— —

Duke Skule.

Nay, nay—lose not your time; I see it draws to an end;—and 'tis said the King comes hither.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, the King comes; thereby you may best see that I am mindful of your cause, even now.

Duke Skule.

What is your purpose?

Bishop Nicholas.

Mind you, at the King's bridal—you said that Håkon's strength lay in his steadfast faith in himself?

Duke Skule.

Well?

Bishop Nicholas.

If I confess, and raise a doubt in his mind, then his faith will fall, and his strength with it.

Duke Skule.

My lord, this is sinful, sinful, if he be the rightful king.

214

Bishop Nicholas.

'Twill be in your power to restore his faith. Ere I depart hence, I will tell you where Trond the Priest's letter may be found.

Sira Viliam.

[*From the right.*] The King is now coming up the street, with torchbearers and attendants.

Bishop Nicholas.

He shall be welcome. [William goes.] Duke, I beg of you one last service: do you carry on my feuds against all mine enemies. [*Takes out a letter.*] Here I have written them down. Those whose names stand first I would fain have hanged, if it could be so ordered.

Duke Skule.

Think not upon vengeance now; you have but little time left— —

Bishop Nicholas.

Not on vengeance, but on punishment. Promise me to wield the sword of punishment over all mine enemies when I am gone. They are your foemen no less than mine; when you are King you must chastise them; do you promise me that?

Duke Skule.

I promise and swear it; but Trond's letter— —!

Bishop Nicholas.

You shall learn where it is;— but see— the King comes; hide the list of our foemen!

[*The Duke hides the paper; at the same moment Håkon enters from the right.*

215

Bishop Nicholas.

Well met at the grave-feast, my lord King.

Håkon.

You have ever withstood me stubbornly; but that shall be forgiven and forgotten now; death wipes out even the heaviest reckoning.

Bishop Nicholas.

That lightened my soul! Oh how marvellous is the King's clemency! My lord, what you have done for an old sinner this night shall be tenfold— —

Håkon.

No more of that; but I must tell you that I greatly marvel you should summon me hither to obtain my forgiveness, and yet prepare for me such a meeting as this.

Bishop Nicholas.

Meeting, my lord?

Duke Skule.

'Tis of me the King speaks. Will you, my lord Bishop, assure King Håkon, by my faith and honour, that I knew nought of his coming, ere I landed at Oslo wharf?

Bishop Nicholas.

Alas, alas! The blame is all mine! I have been sickly and bedridden all the last year; I have learnt little or nought of the affairs of the kingdom; I thought all was now well between the princely kinsmen!

216

Håkon.

I have marked that the friendship between the Duke and myself thrives best when we hold aloof from one another; therefore farewell, Bishop Nicholas, and God be with you where you are now to go.

[Goes towards the door.]

Duke Skule.

[Softly and uneasily.] Bishop, Bishop, he is going!

Bishop Nicholas.

[Suddenly and with wild energy.] Stay, King Håkon!

Håkon.

[Stops.] What now?

Bishop Nicholas.

You shall not leave this room until old Bishop Nicholas has spoken his last word!

Håkon.

[Instinctively lays his hand upon his sword.] Mayhap you have come well attended to Viken, Duke.

Duke Skule.

I have no part in this.

Bishop Nicholas.

'Tis by force of words that I will hold you. Where there is a burial in the house, the dead man ever rules the roost; he can do and let alone as he will—so far as his power may reach. Therefore will I now speak my own funeral-speech; in days gone by, I was ever sore afraid lest King Sverre should come to speak it—

217

Håkon.

Talk not so wildly, my lord!

Duke Skule.

You shorten the precious hour still left to you!

Håkon.

Your eyes are already dim.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, my sight is dim; I scarce can see you where you stand; but before my inward eye, my life is moving in a blaze of light. There I see sights— —; hear and learn, O King!—My race was the mightiest in the land; many great chieftains had sprung from it; / longed to be the greatest of them all. I was yet but a boy when I began to thirst after great deeds; meseemed I could by no means wait till I were grown. Kings arose who had less right than I,—Magnus Erlingsson, Sverre the Priest— —; I also would be king; but I must needs be a chieftain first. Then came the battle at Ilevoldene; 'twas the first time I went out to war. The sun went up, and glittering lightnings flashed from a thousand burnished blades. Magnus and all his men advanced as to a game; I alone felt a tightness at my heart. Fiercely our host swept forward; but I could not follow—I was afraid! All Magnus's other chieftains fought manfully, and many fell in the fight; but I fled up over the mountain, and ran and ran, and stayed not until I came down to the fiord again, far away. Many a man had to wash his bloody clothes in Trondheim-fiord that night;—I had to wash mine

218

too, but not from blood. Ay, King, I was afraid;—born to be a chieftain—and afraid! It fell upon me as a thunderbolt; from that hour I hated all men. I prayed secretly in the churches, I wept and knelt before the altars, I gave rich gifts, made sacred promises; I tried and tried in battle after battle, at Saltösund, at Jonsvoldene that summer the Baglers lay in Bergen,—but ever in vain. Sverre it was who first noted it; he proclaimed it loudly and with mockery, and from that day forth, not a man in the host but laughed when Nicholas Arnesson was seen in war-weed. A coward, a coward—and yet was I filled with longing to be a chief, to be a king; nay, I felt I was born to be King. I could have furthered God's kingdom upon earth; but 'twas the saints themselves that barred the way for me.

Håkon.

Accuse not heaven, Bishop Nicholas! You have hated much.

Bishop Nicholas.

Ay, I have hated much; hated every head in this land that raised itself above the crowd. But I hated because I could not love. Fair women,—oh, I could devour them even now with glistening eyes! I have lived eighty years, and yet do I yearn to kill men and clasp women;—but my lot in love was as my lot in war: nought but an

itching will, my strength sapped from my birth; dowered with seething desire—and yet a weakling! So I became a priest: king or priest must that man be who would have all might in his hands. [*Laughs.*] I a priest! I a churchman! Yes, for one clerkly office Heaven had notably

219

fitted me—for taking the high notes—for singing with a woman's voice at the great church-festivals. And yet they up yonder claim of me—the half-man—what they have a right to claim only of those whom they have in all things fitted for their life-work! There have been times when I fancied such a claim might be just; I have lain here on my sick-bed crushed by the dread of doom and punishment. Now it is over; my soul has fresh marrow in its bones; / have not sinned; it is / that have suffered wrong; / am the accuser!

Duke Skule.

[*Softly.*] My lord—the letter! You have little time left.

Håkon.

Think of your soul, and humble you!

Bishop Nicholas.

A man's life-work is his soul, and my life-work still shall live upon the earth. But you, King Håkon, you should beware; for as Heaven has stood against me, and reaped harm for its reward, so are you standing against the man who holds the country's welfare in his hand— —

Håkon.

Ha—Duke, Duke! Now I see the bent of this meeting!

Duke Skule.

[*Vehemently, to the Bishop.*] Not a word more of this!

Bishop Nicholas.

[*To Håkon.*] He will stand against you so long

220

as his head sits fast on his shoulders. Share with him! I will have no peace in my coffin, I will rise again, if you two share not the kingdom! Neither of you shall add the other's height to his own stature. If that befell, there would be a giant in the land, and here shall no giant be; for I was never a giant!

[*Sinks back exhausted on the couch.*]

Duke Skule.

[*Falls on his knees beside the couch and cries to Håkon.*] Summon help! For God's pity's sake; the Bishop must not die yet!

Bishop Nicholas.

How it waxes dusk before my eyes!—King, for the last time—will you share with the Duke?

Håkon.

Not a shred will I let slip of that which God gave me.

Bishop Nicholas.

Well and good. [*Softly.*] Your faith, at least, you shall let slip. [*Calls.*] Viliam!

Duke Skule.

[*Softly.*] The letter! The letter!

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Not listening to him.*] Viliam! [*Viliam enters; the Bishop draws him close down to him and whispers.*] When I received the Extreme Unction, all my sins were forgiven me?

Sira Viliam.

All your sins from your birth, till the moment you received the Unction.

221

Bishop Nicholas.

No longer? Not until the very end?

Sira Viliam.

You will not sin to-night, my lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Who can tell—? Take the golden goblet Bishop Absalon left me—give it to the Church— and say seven high masses more.

Sira Viliam.

God will be gracious to you, my lord!

Bishop Nicholas.

Seven more masses, I say—for sins I may commit to-night! Go, go! [*Viliam goes; the Bishop turns to Skule.*] Duke, if you should come to read Trond the Priest's letter, and it should mayhap prove that Håkon is the rightful king—what would you do then?

Duke Skule.

In God's name—king he should remain.

Bishop Nicholas.

Bethink you; much is at stake. Search every fold of your heart; answer as though you stood before your Judge! What will you do, if he be the rightful king?

Duke Skule.

Bow my head and serve him.

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Mumbles.*] So, so: then bide the issue. [*To*

222

Skule.] Duke, I am weak and weary; a mild and charitable mood comes over me— —

Duke Skule.

It is death! Trond the Priest's letter! Where is it?

Bishop Nicholas.

First another matter;—I gave you the list of my enemies— —

Duke Skule.

[*Impatiently.*] Yes, yes; I will take full revenge upon them— —

Bishop Nicholas.

No, my soul is filled with mildness; I will forgive, as the Scripture commands. As you would forgo might, I will forgo revenge. Burn the list!

Duke Skule.

Ay, ay; as you will.

Bishop Nicholas.

Here, in the brazier; so that I may see it— —

Duke Skule.

[*Throws the paper into the fire.*] There, then; see, it burns. And now, speak, speak. You risk thousands of lives if you speak not now!

Bishop Nicholas.

[*With sparkling eyes.*] Thousands of lives. [*Shrieks.*] Light! Air! Håkon.

[*Rushes to the door and cries.*] Help! The Bishop is dying!

223

Sira Viliam and several of the Bishop's men enter.

Duke Skule.

[*Shakes the Bishop's arm.*] You risk Norway's happiness through hundreds of years, mayhap its greatness to all eternity!

Bishop Nicholas.

To all eternity! [*Triumphantly.*] *Perpetuum mobile!*

Duke Skule.

By your soul's salvation,—where is Trond the Priest's letter?

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Calls.*] Seven more masses, Viliam!

Duke Skule.

[*Beside himself.*] The letter! The letter!

Bishop Nicholas.

[*Smiling in his death-agony.*] 'Twas it you burned, good Duke!

[*Falls back on the couch and dies.*

Duke Skule.

[*With an involuntary cry, starts backwards and covers his face with his hands.*] Almighty God!

The Monks.

[*Rushing in flight from the chapel.*] Save you, all who can!

Some Voices.

The powers of evil have broken loose!

Other Voices.

There rang a loud laugh from the corner!—A

224

voice cried: "We have him!" — — All the lights went out!

Håkon.

Bishop Nicholas is even now dead.

The Monks.

[*Fleeing to the right.*] Pater noster—Pater noster

Håkon.

[*Approaches Skule, and says in a low voice.*] Duke, I will not question what secret counsel you were hatching with the Bishop ere he died;—but from to-morrow must you give up your powers and dignities into my hands; I see clearly now that we two cannot go forward together.

Duke Skule.

[*Looks at him absently.*] Go forward together— — ?

Håkon.

To-morrow I hold an Assembly in the Palace; then must all things be made clear between us.

[*Goes out to the right.*

Duke Skule.

The Bishop dead and the letter burnt! A life full of doubt and strife and dread! Oh, could I but pray!—No—I must act; this evening must the stride be taken, once for all! [*To Viliam.*] Whither went the King?

Sira Viliam.

[*Terrified.*] Christ save me, — what would you with him?

225

Duke Skule.

Think you I would slay him to-night?

[*Goes out to the right.*

Sira Viliam.

[Looks after him, shaking his head, while the house-folk bear the body out to the left.] Seven more masses, the Bishop said; I think 'twere safest we should say fourteen.

[Follows the others.]

A room in the Palace. In the back is the entrance door; in each of the side walls a smaller door; in front, on the right, a window. Hung from the roof, a lamp is burning. Close to the door on the left stands a bench, and further back a cradle, in which the King-child is sleeping; Margrete is kneeling beside the child.

Margrete.

[Rocks the cradle and sings.]

Now roof and rafters blend with
the starry vault on high;
now flieth little Håkon
on dream-wings through the sky.
There mounts a mighty stairway
from earth to God's own land;
there Håkon with the angels
goes climbing, hand in hand.
God's angel-babes are watching
thy cot, the still night through;
God bless thee, little Håkon,
thy mother watcheth too.

226

A short pause. Duke Skule enters from the back.

Margrete.

[Starts up with a cry of joy and rushes to meet him.] My father!—
Oh, how I have sighed and yearned for this meeting!

Duke Skule.

God's peace be with you, Margrete! Where is the King?

Margrete.

With Bishop Nicholas.

Duke Skule.

Ha,—then must he soon be here.

Margrete.

And you will talk together and be at one, be friends again, as in the old days?

Duke Skule.

That would I gladly.

Margrete.

'Twould rejoice Håkon no less; and I pray to God every day that so it may be. Oh, but come hither and see— —

[Takes his hand and leads him to the cradle.]

Duke Skule.

Your child!

Margrete.

Ay, that lovely babe is mine;—is it not marvellous? He is called Håkon, like the King! See, his eyes—nay, you cannot see them now he is sleeping—but he has great blue eyes; and he

227

can laugh, and reach forth his hands to take hold of me.—and he knows me already.

[Smooths out the bed-clothes tenderly.]

Duke Skule.

Håkon will have sons, the Bishop foretold.

Margrete.

To me this little child is a thousand times dearer than all Norway's land—and to Håkon too. Meseems I cannot rightly believe my happiness; I have the cradle standing by my bedside; every night, as often as I waken, I look to see if it be there—I am fearful lest it should prove to be all a dream— —

Duke Skule.

[Listens and goes to the window.] Is not that the King?

Margrete.

Ay; he is going up the other stair; I will bring him. *[Takes her father's hand and leads him playfully up to the cradle.]* Duke Skule! Keep watch over the King-child the while—for he is a King-child too—though I can never remember it! Should he wake, then bow deeply before him, and hail him as men hail kings! Now will I bring Håkon. Oh, God, God! now at last come light and peace over our house. *[Goes out to the right.]*

Duke Skule.

[After a short and gloomy silence.] Håkon has a son. His race shall live after him. If he die, he leaves an heir who stands nearer the throne than all others. All things thrive with Håkon. Mayhap he is not the rightful king; but his faith in

228

himself stands firm as ever; the Bishop would have shaken it, but Death gave him not time, God gave him not leave. God watches over Håkon, and suffers him to keep the girdle of strength. Were I to tell him now? Were I to make oath to what the Bishop told me? What would it avail? None would believe me, neither Håkon nor the others. He would have believed the Bishop in the hour of death; the doubt would have rankled poisonously in him; but it was not to be. And deep-rooted as is Håkon's faith, so is my doubt deep-rooted; what man on earth can weed it out? None, none. The ordeal has been endured, God has spoken, and still Håkon may not be the rightful king, while my life goes to waste. [*Seats himself broodingly beside a table on the right.*] And if, now, I won the kingdom, would not the doubt dwell with me none the less, gnawing and wearing and wasting me away, with its ceaseless icy drip, drip.—Aye; but 'tis better to sit doubting on the throne than to stand down in the crowd, doubting of him who sits there in your stead.—There must be an end between me and Håkon! An end? But how? [*Rises.*] Almighty, thou who hast thus bestead me, thou must bear the guilt of the issue! [*Goes to and fro, stops and reflects.*] I must break down all bridges, hold only one, and there conquer or fall—as the Bishop said at the bridal-feast at Bergen. That is now nigh upon three years since, and through all that time have I split up and spilt my strength in trying to guard all the bridges. [*With energy.*] Now must I follow the Bishop's counsel; now or never! Here are we both in Oslo; this time I have more men than Håkon; why not seize the advantage—'tis so seldom on my side.

229

[*Vacillating.*] But to-night— —? At once— —? No, no! Not to-night! Ha-ha-ha—there again!—pondering, wavering! Håkon knows not what that means; he goes straight forward, and so he conquers! [*Going up the room, stops suddenly beside the cradle.*] The King-child!—How fair a brow! He is dreaming. [*Smooths out the bed-clothes; and looks long at the child.*] Such an one as thou can save many things in a man's soul. I have no son. [*Bends over the cradle.*] He is like Håkon— — [*Shrinks suddenly backwards.*] The King-child, said the Queen! Bow low before him and hail him as men hail kings! Should Håkon die before me, this child will be raised to the throne; and I—I shall stand humbly before him, and bow low and hail him as king! [*In rising agitation.*] This child, Håkon's son, shall sit on high, on the seat that should in right, mayhap, be mine—and I shall stand

before his footstool, white-haired and bowed with age, and see my whole life-work lying undone—die without having been king!—I have more men than Håkon—there blows a storm to-night, and the wind sweeps down the fiord— —! If I took the King-child? I am safe with the Trönders.[34] What would Håkon dare attempt, were his child in my power? My men will follow me, fight for me and conquer. Their reward shall be kingly, and they know it.—So shall it be! I will take the stride; I will leap the abyss, for the first time! Could I but see if thou hast Sverre's eyes—or Håkon Sverresson's— —! He sleeps. I cannot see them. [*A pause.*] Sleep is as a shield. Sleep in peace, thou little Pretender! [*Goes over to the table.*] Håkon shall decide; once again will I speak with him.

230

Margrete.

[*Enters, with the King, from the room on the right.*] The Bishop dead! Oh, trust me, all strife dies with him.

Håkon.

To bed, Margrete! You must be weary after the journey.

Margrete.

Yes, yes. [*To the Duke.*] Father, be kind and yielding—Håkon has promised to be the like! A thousand good-nights, to both of you!

[*Makes a gesture of farewell at the door on the left, and goes out; two women carry out the cradle.*]

Duke Skule.

King Håkon, this time we must not part as foes. All evil will follow; there will fall a time of dread upon the land.

Håkon.

The land has known nought else through many generations; but, see you, God is with me; every foeman falls that would stand against me. There are no more Baglers, no Slittungs, no Ribbungs; Earl Jon is slain, Guthorm Ingesson is dead, Sigurd Ribbung likewise—all claims that were put forth at the folkmote at Bergen have fallen powerless—from whom, then, should the time of dread come now?

Duke Skule.

Håkon, I fear me it might come from me!

Håkon.

When I came to the throne, I gave you the third part of the kingdom— —

231

Duke Skule.

But kept two-thirds yourself!

Håkon.

You ever thirsted after more; I eked out your share until now you hold half the kingdom.

Duke Skule.

There lack ten ship-wards.[35]

Håkon.

I made you Duke; that has no man been in Norway before you.

Duke Skule.

But you are king! I must have no king over me! I was not born to serve you; I must rule in my own right!

Håkon.

[*Looks at him for a moment, and says coldly:*] Heaven guard your understanding, my lord. Good night.

[*Going.*

Duke Skule.

[*Blocking the way.*] You shall not go from me thus! Beware, or I will forswear all faith with you; you can no longer be my overlord; we two must share!

Håkon.

You dare to say this to me!

Duke Skule.

I have more men than you in Oslo, Håkon Håkonsson.

232

Håkon.

Mayhap you think to— —

Duke Skule.

Hearken to me! Think of the Bishop's words! Let us share; give me the ten ship-wards; let me hold my share as a free kingdom, without tax or tribute. Norway has ere this been parted into two kingdoms;— we will hold firmly together— —

Håkon.

Duke, you must be soul-sick, that you can crave such a thing.

Duke Skule.

Ay, I am soul-sick, and there is no other healing for me. We two must be equals; there must be no man over me!

Håkon.

Every treeless skerry is a stone in the building which Harald Hårfager and the sainted King Olaf reared; would you have me break in twain what they have mortised together? Never!

Duke Skule.

Well, then let us reign by turns; let each bear sway for three years! You have reigned long; now my turn has come. Depart from the land for three years;—I will be king the while; I will even out your paths for you against your home-coming; I will guide all things for the best;—it wears and blunts the senses to sit ever on the watch. Håkon, hear me—three years each; let us wear the crown by turns!

Håkon.

Think you my crown would fit well on your brow?

233

Duke Skule.

No crown is too wide for me!

Håkon.

It needs a God-sent right and a God-sent calling to wear the crown.

Duke Skule.

And know you so surely that you have a God-sent right?

Håkon.

I have God's own word for it.

Duke Skule.

Rest not too surely on that. Had the Bishop had time to speak— but that were bootless now; you would not believe me. Ay, truly you have mighty allies on high; but I defy you none the less! You will not reign by turns with me? Well—then must we try the last resort;—Håkon, let us two fight for it, man to man, with heavy weapons, for life or death!

Håkon.

Speak you in jest, my lord?

Duke Skule.

I speak for my life-work and for my soul's salvation!

Håkon.

Then is there small hope for the saving of your soul.

Duke Skule.

You will not fight with me? You shall, you shall!

234

Håkon.

Oh blinded man! I cannot but pity you. You think 'tis the Lord's calling that draws you toward the throne; you see not that 'tis nought but pride of heart. What is it that allures you? The royal circlet, the purple-bordered mantle, the right to be seated three steps above the

floor;—pitiful, pitiful: Were that kingship, I would cast it into your hat, as I cast a groat to a beggar.

Duke Skule.

You have known me since your childhood, and you judge me thus!

Håkon.

You have wisdom and courage and all noble gifts of the mind; you are born to stand nearest a king, but not to be a king yourself.

Duke Skule.

That will we now put to the proof!

Håkon.

Name me a single king's-task you achieved in all the years you were regent for me! Were the Baglers or the Ribbungs ever mightier than then? You were in ripe manhood, yet the land was harried by rebellious factions; did you quell a single one of them? I was young and untried when I came to the helm—look at me—all fell before me when I became king; there are no Baglers, no Ribbungs left!

Duke Skule.

Beware how you boast of that; for there lies the greatest danger. Party must stand against party, claim against claim, region against region,

235

if the king is to have the might. Every village, every family, must either need him or fear him. If you strike at the root of faction, at the same stroke you kill your own power.

Håkon.

And you would be king—you, who think such thoughts! You had been well fitted for a chieftain's part in Erling Skakke's days; but the time has grown away from you, and you know it not. See you not, then, that Norway's realm, as Harald and Olaf built it up, may be likened to a church that stands as yet unconsecrate? The walls soar aloft with mighty buttresses, the vaultings have a noble span, the spire points upward, like a fir-tree in the forest; but the life, the throbbing heart, the fresh blood-stream, is lacking to the work; God's living spirit is not breathed into it; it stands unconsecrate.— / will bring consecration! Norway has been a kingdom, it shall become a people. The Trönder has stood against the man of Viken, the Agdeman against the Hordalander, the Halogalander against the Sogndalesman; all shall be one hereafter, and all shall feel and know that they are one! That is the task which God has laid on my shoulders; that is the work which now lies before the King of

Norway. That life-work, Duke, I think you were best to leave untried, for truly it is beyond you.

Duke Skule.

[*Impressed.*] To unite— —? To unite the Trönders and the men of Viken,—all Norway— —? [*Sceptically.*] 'Tis impossible! Norway's saga tells of no such thing!

236

Håkon.

For you 'tis impossible, for you can but work out the old saga afresh; for me, 'tis as easy as for the falcon to cleave the clouds.

Duke Skule.

[*In uneasy agitation.*] To unite the whole people—to awaken it so that it shall know itself one! Whence got you so strange a thought? It runs through me like ice and fire. [*Vehemently.*] It comes from the devil, Håkon; it shall never be carried through while I have strength to buckle on my helm.

Håkon.

'Tis from God the thought comes to me, and never shall I let it slip while I bear St. Olaf's circlet on my brow!

Duke Skule.

Then must St. Olaf's circlet fall from your brow!

Håkon.

Who will make it fall?

Duke Skule.

I, if none other.

Håkon.

You, Skule, will be harmless after to-morrow's Assembly.

Duke Skule.

Håkon! Tempt not God! Drive me not out upon the last ledge of the deep!

Håkon.

[*Points to the door.*] Go, my lord—and be it

237

forgotten that we have spoken with sharp tongues this night.

Duke Skule.

[*Looks hard at him for a moment, and says:*] Next time, 'twill be with sharper tongues we speak.

[*Goes to the back.*]

Håkon.

[*After a short pause.*] He threatens! No, no, it cannot come to that. He must, he shall give way and do my will; I have need of that strong arm, that cunning brain.—Whatsoever courage and wisdom and strength there maybe in this land, all gifts that God has endowed men withal, are but granted them to my uses. For my service did all noble gifts fall to Duke Skule's share; to defy me is to defy Heaven; 'tis my duty to punish whosoever shall set himself up against Heaven's will—for Heaven has done so much for me.

Dagfinn the Peasant.

[*Enters from the back.*] Be on your guard to-night, my lord; the Duke has surely evil in his mind.

Håkon.

What say you?

Dagfinn.

What may be his drift, I know not; but sure am I that something is brewing.

Håkon.

Can he think to fall upon us? Impossible, impossible!

Dagfinn.

No, 'tis something else. His ships lie clear for sailing; he has summoned an Assembly on board them.

238

Håkon.

You must mistake— —! Go, Dagfinn, and bring me sure tidings.

Dagfinn.

Ay ay, trust to me.

[*Goes.*]

Håkon.

No,—'tis not to be thought of! The Duke dare not rise against me. God will not suffer it—God, who has hitherto guided all things for me so marvellously. I must have peace now, for 'tis now I must set about my work!—I have done so little yet; but I hear the unerring voice of the Lord calling to me: Thou shalt do a great king's-work in Norway!

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Enters from the back.*] My lord and King!

Håkon.

Gregorius Jonsson! Come you hither?

Gregorius Jonsson.

I offer myself for your service. Thus far have I followed the Duke; but now I dare follow him no further.

Håkon.

What has befallen?

Gregorius Jonsson.

That which no man will believe, when 'tis rumoured through the land.

Håkon.

Speak, speak!

239

Gregorius Jonsson.

I tremble to hear the sound of my own words; know then — —

[He seizes the King's arm and whispers.]

Håkon.

[Starts backwards with a cry.] Ha, are you distraught?

Gregorius Jonsson.

Would to God I were.

Håkon.

Unheard of! No, it cannot be true!

Gregorius Jonsson.

By Christ's dear blood, so is it!

Håkon.

Go, go; sound the trumpet-call for my guard; get all my men under arms.

[Gregorius Jonsson goes.]

Håkon.

[Paces the room once or twice, then goes quickly up to the door of Margrete's chamber, knocks at it, takes one or two more turns through the room, then goes again to the door, knocks, and calls.]

Margrete!

[Goes on pacing up and down.]

Margrete.

[In the doorway, attired for the night, with her hair down; she has a red cloak round her shoulders, holding it close together over her breast.] Håkon! Is it you?

240

Håkon.

Yes, yes; come hither.

Margrete.

Oh, but you must not look at me; I was in bed already.

Håkon.

I have other things to think of.

Margrete.

What has befallen.

Håkon.

Give me a good counsel! I have even now received the worst tidings.

Margrete.

[*Alarmed.*] What tidings, Håkon?

Håkon.

That there are now two kings in Norway.

Margrete.

Two kings in Norway!—Håkon, where is my father?

Håkon.

He has proclaimed himself king on board his ship; now he is sailing to Nidaros to be crowned.

Margrete.

Oh God, thou almighty— —!

[*Sinks down on the bench, covers her face with her hands and weeps.*]

Håkon.

Two kings in the land!

241

Margrete.

My husband the one—my father the other!

Håkon.

[*Pacing restlessly up and down.*] Give me a good counsel, Margrete! Should I cross the country by way of the Uplands, come first to Nidaros, and prevent the crowning? No, it may not be done; My men are too few; there in the north he is more powerful than I.— Give me counsel; how can I have the Duke slain, ere he come to Nidaros?

Margrete.

[*Imploringly, with folded hands.*] Håkon, Håkon!

Håkon.

Can you not hit upon a good device, I say, to have the Duke slain?

Margrete.

[*Sinks down from the bench in agony and remains kneeling.*] Oh, can you so utterly forget that he is my father?

Håkon.

Your father— —; ay, ay, it is true; I had forgotten.

[*Raises her up.*] Sit, sit, Margrete; comfort you; do not weep; you have no fault in this. [*Goes over to the window.*] Duke Skule will be worse for me than all other foemen! God, God,—why hast thou stricken me so sorely, when I have in nowise sinned! [*A knock at the door in the back; he starts, listens, and cries:*] Who knocks so late?

Inga's Voice.

[*Without.*] One who is a-cold, Håkon!

242

Håkon.

[*With a cry.*] My mother!

Margrete.

[*Springs up.*] Inga!

Håkon.

[*Rushes to the door and opens it; Inga is sitting on the doorstep.*] My mother! Sitting like a dog outside her son's door! And I ask why God has stricken me!

Inga.

[*Stretches out her arms towards him.*] Håkon, my child! Blessings upon you!

Håkon.

[*Raising her up.*] Come—come in; here are light and warmth!

Inga.

May I come in to you?

Håkon.

Never shall we part again.

Inga.

My son—my King—oh, but you are good and loving! I stood in a corner and saw you, as you came from the Bishop's Palace; you looked so sorrowful; I could not part from you thus.

Håkon.

God be thanked for that! No one, truly, could have come to me more welcome than you. Margrete—my mother—I have sorely sinned; I have barred my heart against you two, who are so rich in love.

243

Margrete.

[*Falls on his neck.*] Oh, Håkon, my beloved husband; do I stand near you now?

Håkon.

Ay, near me, near me; not to give me cunning counsels, but to shed light over my path. Come what will, I feel the Lord's strength within me!

Dagfinn the Peasant.

[Enters hastily from the back.] My lord, my lord! The worst has befallen!

Håkon.

[Smiles confidently while he holds Margrete and Inga closely to him.] I know it; but there is nought to fear, good Dagfinn! If there be two kings in Norway, there is but one in Heaven—and He will set all straight!

244

ACT FOURTH

The great hall in Oslo Palace. King Skule is feasting with the Guard and his Chiefs. In front, on the left, stands the throne, where Skule sits, richly attired, with a purple mantle and the royal circlet on his head. The supper-table, by which the guests are seated, stretches from the throne towards the background. Opposite to Skule sit Paul Flida and Bård Bratte. Some of the humbler guests are standing, to the right. It is late evening; the hall is brightly lighted. The banquet is drawing to a close; the men are very merry, and some of them drunk; they drink to each other, laugh, and all talk together.

Paul Flida.

[Rises and strikes the table.] Silence in the hall; Jatgeir Skald will say forth his song in honour of King Skule.

Jatgeir.

[Stands out in the middle of the floor.] [36]

Duke Skule he summoned the Örething; [37]
when 'twas mass-time in Nidaros town;
and the bells rang and swords upon bucklers clashed bravely
when Duke Skule he donned the crown.
King Skule marched over the Dovrefjeld,
his host upon snow-shoes sped;

245

the Gudbranddalesman he grovelled for grace,

but his hoard must e'en ransom his head.
 King Skule south over Miösen fared, —
 the Uplander cursed at his banner;
 King Skule hasted through Raumarike to Låka in Nannestad manor.
 'Twas all in the holy Shrove-tide week
 we met with the Birchleg horde;
 Earl Knut was their captain—the swords with loud tongue
 in the suit for the throne made award.
 They say of a truth that since Sverre's days
 was never so hot a fight;
 red-sprent, like warriors' winding-sheets,
 grew the upland that erst lay white.
 They took to their heels did the Birchenlegs,
 flinging from them both buckler and bill there;
 many hundreds, though, took to their heels nevermore,
 for they lay and were icily chill there.
 No man knows where King Håkon hideth;—
 King Skule stands safe at the helm.
 All hail and long life to thee, lord, in thy state
 as King of all Norway's realm!

Skule's Men.

*[Spring up with loud jubilation, hold goblets and beakers aloft,
 clash their weapons, and repeat:*

All hail and long life to thee, lord, in thy state as King of all Norway's
 realm!

King Skule.

Thanks for the song, Jatgeir Skald! 'Tis as

246

I best like it; for it gives my men no less praise than myself.

Jatgeir.

The King is honoured when his men are praised.

King Skule.

Take as guerdon this arm-ring, stay with me, and be of my
 household; I will have many skalds about me.

Jatgeir.

'Twill need many, my lord, if all your great deeds are to be sung.

King Skule.

I will be threefold more bountiful than Håkon; the skald's song shall
 be honoured and rewarded like all other noble deeds, so long as I

am king. Be seated; now you belong to my household; all you have need of shall be freely given you.

Jatgeir.

[*Seats himself.*] Ere long there will be a dearth of what I most need, my lord.

King Skule.

What mean you?

Jatgeir.

Foes to King Skule, whose flight and fall I can sing.

Many of the Men.

[*Amid laughter and applause.*] Well said, Icelander!

Paul Flida.

[*To Jatgeir.*] The song was good; but 'tis

247

known there goes a spice of lying to every skald-work, and yours was not without it.

Jatgeir.

Lying, Sir Marshal?

Paul Flida.

Ay; you say no man knows where King Håkon is hiding; that is not true; we have certain tidings that Håkon is at Nidaros.

King Skule.

[*Smiling.*] He has claimed homage for the King-child, and given it the kingly title.

Jatgeir.

That have I heard; but I knew not that any man could give away that which he himself does not possess.

King Skule.

'Tis easiest to give what you yourself do not possess.

Bård Bratte.

But it can scarce be easy to beg your way in midwinter from Bergen to Nidaros.

Jatgeir.

The fortunes of the Birchlegs move in a ring; they began hungry and frozen, and now they end in like case.

Paul Flida.

'Tis rumoured in Bergen that Håkon has forsworn the Church and all that is holy; he heard not mass on New Year's day.

248

Bård Bratte.

He could plead lawful hindrance, Paul; he stood all day cutting his silver goblets and dishes to pieces—he had naught else wherewith to pay his household.

[Laughter and loud talk among the guests.]

King Skule.

[Raises his goblet.] I drink to you, Bård Bratte, and thank you and all my new men. You fought manfully for me at Låka, and bore a great part in the victory.

Bård Bratte.

It was the first time I fought under you, my lord; but I soon felt that 'tis easy to conquer when such a chieftain as you rides at the head of the host. But I would we had not slain so many and chased them so far; for now I fear 'twill be long ere they dare face us again.

King Skule.

Wait till the spring: we shall meet them again, never fear. Earl Knut lies with the remnant at Tunsberg rock, and Arnbiörn Jonsson is gathering a force eastward in Viken; when they deem themselves strong enough, they will soon let us hear from them.

Bård Bratte.

They will never dare to, after the great slaughter at Låka.

King Skule.

Then will we lure them forth with cunning.

Many Voices.

Ay, ay—do so, lord King!

249

Bård Bratte.

You have good store of cunning, King Skule. Your foemen have never warning ere you fall upon them, and you are ever there where they least await you.

Paul Flida.

'Tis therefore that the Birchlegs call us Vårbælgs.[\[38\]](#)

King Skule.

Others say Vargbælgs; but this I swear, that when next we meet, the Birchlegs shall learn how hard it is to turn such Wolf-skins inside out.

Bård Bratte.

With their good will shall we never meet-'twill be a chase the whole country round.

King Skule.

Ay, that it shall be. First we must purge Viken, and make sure of all these eastward parts; then will we get our ships together, and sail round the Naze and up the coast to Nidaros.

Bård Bratte

And when you come in such wise to Nidaros, I scarce think the monks will deny to move

250

St. Olaf's shrine out to the mote-stead, as they did in the autumn, when we swore allegiance.

King Skule.

The shrine shall out; I will bear my kingship in all ways lawfully.

Jatgeir.

And I promise you to sing a great death-song, when you have slain the Sleeper.

[An outburst of laughter among the men.]

King Skule.

The Sleeper?

Jatgeir.

Know you not, my lord, that King Håkon is called "Håkon the Sleeper," because he sits as though benumbed ever since you came to the throne?

Bård Bratte.

They say he lies ever with his eyes closed. Doubtless he dreams that he is still king.

King Skule.

Let him dream; he shall never dream himself back into the kingship.

Jatgeir.

Let his sleep be long and dreamless, then shall I have stuff for songs.

The Men.

Ay, ay, do as the skald says!

King Skule.

When so many good men counsel as one, the

251

counsel must be good; yet will we not talk now of that matter. But one promise I will make: each of my men shall inherit the weapons and harness, and gold and silver, of whichever one of the enemy he slays; and each man shall succeed to the dignities of him he lays low. He who slays a baron shall himself be a baron; he who slays a

thane, shall receive his thaneship; and all they who already hold such dignities and offices, shall be rewarded after other kingly sort.

The Men.

[*Spring up in wild delight.*] Hail, hail, King Skule! Lead us against the Birchlegs!

Bård Bratte.

Now are you sure to conquer in all battles.

Paul Flida.

I claim Dagfinn the Peasant for myself; he owns a good sword that I have long hankered after.

Bård Bratte.

I will have Bård Torsteinsson's hauberk; it saved his life at Låka, for it withstands both cut and thrust.

Jatgeir.

Nay, but let me have it; 'twill fit me better; you shall have five golden marks in exchange.

Bård Bratte.

Where will you find five golden marks, Skald?

Jatgeir.

I will take them from Gregorius Jonsson when we come northward.

252

The Men.

[*All talking together.*] And I will have—I will have— —[*The rest becomes indistinct in the hubbub.*]

Paul Flida.

Away! Every man to his quarters; bethink you that you are in the King's hall.

The Men.

Ay, ay—hail to the King, hail to King Skule!

King Skule.

To bed now, good fellows! We have sat long over the drinking-table to-night.

A Man-at-Arms.

[*As the crowd is trooping out.*] To-morrow we will cast lots for the Birchlegs' goods.

Another.

Rather leave it to luck!

Several.

Nay, nay!

Others.

Ay, ay!

Bård Bratte.

Now the Wolf-skins are fighting for the bear-fell.

Paul Flida.

And they have yet to fell the bear.

[All go out by the back.]

King Skule.

[Waits till the men are gone; the tension of

253

his features relaxes; he sinks upon a bench.] How weary I am, weary to death. To live in the midst of that swarm day out and day in, to look smilingly ahead as though I were so immovably assured of right and victory and fortune. To have no creature with whom I may speak of all that gnaws me so sorely. *[Rises with a look of terror.]* And the battle at Låka! That I should have conquered there! Håkon sent his host against me; God was to judge and award between the two kings—and I conquered, conquered, as never any before has conquered the Birchlegs! Their shields stood upright in the snow, but there was none behind them—the Birchlegs took to the woods, and fled over upland and moor and lea as far as their legs would carry them. The unbelievable came to pass; Håkon lost and I won. There is a secret horror in that victory. Thou great God of Heaven! there rules, then, no certain law on high, that all things must obey? The right carries with it no conquering might? *[With a change of tone, wildly.]* I am sick, I am sick!—Wherefore should not the right be on my side? May I not deem that God himself would assure me of it, since he let me conquer? *[Brooding.]* The possibilities are even;—not a feather-weight more on the one side than on the other; and yet—*[shakes his head]*—yet the balance dips on Håkon's part. I have hatred and hot desire to cast into my scale, yet the balance dips on Håkon's part. When the thought of the kingly right comes over me unawares, 'tis ever he, not I, that is the true king. When I would see myself as the true king, I must do it with forethought, I must build up a whole fabric of subtleties, a work of cunning; I must hold memories aloof, and take faith by

254

storm. It was not so before. What has befallen to fill me so full of doubt? The burning of the letter? No—that made the uncertainty eternal, but did not add to it. Has Håkon done any great and kingly deed in these later days? No, his greatest deeds were done while I

least believed in him. [*Seats himself on the right.*] What is it? Ha, strange! It comes and goes like a marsh-fire; it dances at the tip of my tongue, as when one has lost a word and cannot find it. [*Springs up.*] Ha! Now I have it! No— —! Yes, yes! Now I have it!—“Norway has been a kingdom, it shall become a people; all shall be one, and all shall feel and know that they are one!” Since Håkon spoke those madman’s words, he stands ever before me as the rightful king. [*Whispers with fixed and apprehensive gaze.*] What if God’s calling glimmered through these strange words? If God had garnered up the thought till now, and would now strew it forth—and had chosen Håkon for his sower?

Paul Flida.

[*Enters from the back.*] My lord King, I have tidings for you.

King Skule.

Tidings?

Paul Flida.

A man who comes from down the fiord brings news that the Birchlegs in Tunsberg have launched their ships, and that many men have gathered in the town in these last days.

King Skule.

Good, we will go forth to meet them—to-morrow or the day after.

255

Paul Flida.

It might chance, my lord King, that the Birchlegs had a mind to meet us first.

King Skule.

They have not ships enough for that, nor men.

Paul Flida.

But Arnbiörn Jonsson is gathering both men and ships, all round in Viken.

King Skule.

The better for us; we will crush them at one blow, as we did at Låka.

Paul Flida.

My lord, ’tis not so easy to crush the Birchlegs twice following.

King Skule.

And wherefore not?

Paul Flida.

Because Norway’s saga tells not that the like has ever befallen. Shall I send forth scouts to Hoved-isle?

King Skule.

'Tis needless; the night is dark, and there is a sea-fog to boot.

Paul Flida.

Well well, the King knows best; but bethink you, my lord, that all men are against you here in Viken. The townsfolk of Oslo hate you, and should the Birchlegs come, they will make common cause with them.

256

King Skule.

[*With animation.*] Paul Flida, were it not possible that I could win over the men of Viken to my side?

Paul Flida.

[*Looks at him in astonishment, and shakes his head.*] No, my lord, it is not possible.

King Skule.

And wherefore not?

Paul Flida.

Why, for that you have the Trönders on your side.

King Skule.

I will have both the Trönders and the men of Viken!

Paul Flida.

Nay, my lord, that cannot be!

King Skule.

Not possible! cannot be! And wherefore—wherefore not?

Paul Flida.

Because the man of Viken is the man of Viken, the Trönder is the Trönder; because so it has always been, and no saga tells of a time when it was otherwise.

King Skule.

Ay, ay—you are right. Go.

Paul Flida.

And send forth no scouts?

King Skule.

Wait till daybreak. [Paul Flida goes.] Norway's

257

saga tells of no such thing; it has never been so yet; Paul Flida answers me as I answered Håkon. Are there, then, upward as well as downward steps? Stands Håkon as high over me as I over Paul Flida? Has Håkon an eye for unborn thoughts, that is lacking in me? Who stood so high as Harold Hårfager in the days when every

headland had its king, and he said: Now they must fall—hereafter shall there be but one? He threw the old saga to the winds, and made a new saga. [*A pause; he paces up and down lost in thought; then he stops.*] Can one man take God's calling from another, as he takes weapons and gold from his fallen foe? Can a Pretender clothe himself in a king's life-task, as he can put on the kingly mantle? The oak that is felled to be a ship's timber, can it say: Nay, I will be the mast, I will take on me the task of the fir-tree, point upwards, tall and shining, bear the golden vane at my top, spread bellying white sails to the sunshine, and meet the eyes of all men, from afar!—No, no, thou heavy gnarled oak-trunk, thy place is down in the keel; there shalt thou lie, and do thy work, unheard-of and unseen by those aloft in the daylight; it is thou that shalt hinder the ship from being whelmed in the storm; while the mast with the golden vane and the bellying sail shall bear it forward toward the new, toward the unknown, toward alien strands and the saga of the future! [*Vehemently.*] Since Håkon uttered his great king-thought, I can see no other thought in the world but that only. If I cannot take it and act it out, I see no other thought to fight for. [*Brooding.*] And can I not make it mine? If I cannot, whence comes my great love for Håkon's thought?

258

Jatgeir.

[*Enters from the back.*] Forgive my coming, lord King— —

King Skule.

You come to my wish, Skald!

Jatgeir.

I overheard some townfolk at my lodging talking darkly of— —

King Skule.

Let that wait. Tell me, Skald: you who have fared far abroad in strange lands, have you ever seen a woman love another's child? Not only have kindness for it—'tis not that I mean; but love it, love it with the warmest passion of her soul.

Jatgeir.

That do only those women who have no child of their own to love.

King Skule.

Only those women— —?

Jatgeir.

And chiefly women who are barren.

King Skule.

Chiefly the barren— —? They love the children of others with all their warmest passions?

Jatgeir.

That will oftentimes befall.

King Skule.

And does it not sometimes befall that such a

259

barren woman will slay another's child, because she herself has none?

Jatgeir.

Ay, ay; but in that she does unwisely.

King Skule.

Unwisely?

Jatgeir.

Ay, for she gives the gift of sorrow to her whose child she slays.

King Skule.

Think you the gift of sorrow is a great good?

Jatgeir.

Yes, lord.

King Skule.

[*Looks fixedly at him.*] Methinks there are two men in you, Icelander. When you sit amid the household at the merry feast, you draw cloak and hood over all your thoughts; when one is alone with you, sometimes you seem to be of those among whom one were fain to choose his friend. How comes it?

Jatgeir.

When you go to swim in the river, my lord, you would scarce strip you where the people pass by to church; you seek a sheltered privacy.

King Skule.

True, true.

Jatgeir.

My soul has the like shamefastness; therefore I do not strip me when there are many in the hall.

260

King Skule.

Ha. [*A short pause.*] Tell me, Jatgeir, how came you to be a skald? Who taught you skald-craft?

Jatgeir.

Skaldcraft cannot be taught, my lord.

King Skule.
 Cannot be taught? How came it then?
 Jatgeir.
 The gift of sorrow came to me, and I was a skald.
 King Skule.
 Then 'tis the gift of sorrow the skald has need of?
 Jatgeir.
 I needed sorrow; others there may be who need faith, or joy—or
 doubt— —

King Skule.
 Doubt as well?
 Jatgeir.
 Ay; but then must the doubter be strong and sound.
 King Skule.
 And whom call you the unsound doubter?
 Jatgeir.
 He who doubts of his own doubt.
 King Skule.
 [*Slowly.*] That, methinks, were death.

261

Jatgeir.
 'Tis worse; 'tis neither day nor night.
 King Skule.
 [*Quickly, as if shaking off his thoughts.*] Where are my weapons? I
 will fight and act—not think. What was it you would have told me
 when you came?
 Jatgeir.
 'Twas what I noted in my lodging. The townsmen whisper together
 secretly, and laugh mockingly, and ask if we be well assured that
 King Håkon is in the westland; there is somewhat they are in glee
 over.

King Skule.
 They are men of Viken, and therefore against me.
 Jatgeir.
 They scoff because King Olaf's shrine could not be brought out to
 the mote-stead when you were chosen king; they say it boded ill.
 King Skule.
 When next I come to Nidaros, the shrine shall out! It shall stand
 under the open sky, though I should have to tear down St. Olaf's
 church and widen out the mote-stead over the spot where it stood.

Jatgeir.

That were a strong deed; but I shall make a song of it, as strong as the deed itself.

King Skule.

Have you many unmade songs within you, Jatgeir?

262

Jatgeir.

Nay, but many unborn; they are conceived one after the other, come to life, and are brought forth.

King Skule.

And if I, who am King and have the might, if I were to have you slain, would all the unborn skald-thoughts you bear within you die along with you?

Jatgeir.

My lord, it is a great sin to slay a fair thought.

King Skule.

I ask not if it be a sin; I ask if it be possible!

Jatgeir.

I know not.

King Skule.

Have you never had another skald for your friend, and has he never unfolded to you a great and noble song he thought to make?

Jatgeir.

Yes, lord.

King Skule.

Did you not then wish that you could slay him, to take his thought and make the song yourself?

Jatgeir.

My lord, I am not barren; I have children of my own; I need not to love those of other men.

[Goes.

King Skule.

[*After a pause.*] The Icelander is in very deed a skald. He speaks God's deepest truth and knows

263

it not— —I am as a barren woman. Therefore I love Håkon's kingly thought-child, love it with the warmest passion of my soul. Oh, that I could but adopt^[39] it! It would die in my hands. Which were best, that it should die in my hands, or wax great in his? Should I ever have peace of soul if that came to pass? Can I forgo all? Can I stand

by and see Håkon make himself famous for all time! How dead and empty is all within me—and around me. No friend—; ah, the Icelander! [*Goes to the door and calls:*] Has the skald gone from the palace?

A Guard.

[*Outside.*] No, my lord; he stands in the outer hall talking with the watch.

King Skule.

Bid him come hither. [*Goes forward to the table; presently Jatgeir enters.*] I cannot sleep, Jatgeir; 'tis all my great kindly thoughts that keep me awake, you see.

Jatgeir.

'Tis with the king's thoughts as with the skald's, I doubt not. They fly highest and grow quickest when there is night and stillness around.

King Skule.

Is it so with the skald's thoughts too?

Jatgeir.

Ay, lord; no song is born by daylight; it may be written down in the sunshine; but it makes itself in the silent night.

264

King Skule.

Who gave you the gift of sorrow, Jatgeir?

Jatgeir.

She whom I loved.

King Skule.

She died, then.

Jatgeir.

No, she deceived me.

King Skule.

And then you became a skald?

Jatgeir.

Ay, then I became a skald.

King Skule.

[*Seizes him by the arm.*] What gift do I need to become a king?

Jatgeir.

Not the gift of doubt; else would you not question so.

King Skule.

What gift do I need?

Jatgeir.

My lord, you are a king.

King Skule.

Have you at all times full faith that you are a skald?

Jatgeir.

[*Looks silently at him for a while, and asks.*] Have you never loved?

265

King Skule.

Yes, once—burningly, blissfully, and in sin.

Jatgeir.

You have a wife.

King Skule.

Her I took to bear me sons.

Jatgeir.

But you have a daughter, my lord—a gracious and noble daughter.

King Skule.

Were my daughter a son, I would not ask you what gift I need. [*Vehemently.*] I must have some one by me who sinks his own will utterly in mine—who believes in me unflinchingly, who will cling close to me in good hap and ill, who lives only to shed light and warmth over my life, and must die if I fall. Give me counsel, Jatgeir Skald!

Jatgeir.

Buy yourself a dog, my lord.

King Skule.

Would no man suffice?

Jatgeir.

You would have to search long for such a man.

King Skule.

[*Suddenly.*] Will you be that man to me, Jatgeir? Will you be a son to me? You shall have Norway's crown to your heritage—the whole land shall be yours, if you will be a son to me, and live for my life-work, and believe in me.

266

Jatgeir.

And what should be my warranty that I did not feign— —?

King Skule.

Give up your calling in life; sing no more songs, and then will I believe you!

Jatgeir.

No, lord—that were to buy the crown too dear.

King Skule.

Bethink you well — 'tis greater to be a king than a skald.

Jatgeir.

Not always.

King Skule.

'Tis but your unsung songs you must sacrifice!

Jatgeir.

Songs unsung are ever the fairest.

King Skule.

But I must—I must have one who can trust in me! Only one! I feel it—had I that one, I were saved!

Jatgeir.

Trust in yourself and you will be saved!

Paul Flida.

[*Enters hastily.*] King Skule, look to yourself! Håkon Håkonsson lies off Elgjarness with all his fleet!

King Skule.

Off Elgjarness— —! Then he is close at hand.

267

Jatgeir.

Get we to arms then! If there be bloodshed to-night, I will gladly be the first to die for you!

King Skule.

You, who would not live for me!

Jatgeir.

A man can die for another's life-work; but if he go on living, he must live for his own.

[*Goes.*

Paul Flida.

[*Impatiently.*] Your commands, my lord! The Birchlegs may be in Oslo this very hour.

King Skule.

'Twere best if we could fare to St. Thomas Beckett's grave; he has helped so many a sorrowful and penitent soul.

Paul Flida.

[*More forcibly.*] My lord, speak not so wildly now; I tell you, the Birchlegs are upon us!

King Skule.

Let all the churches be opened, that we may betake us thither and find grace.

Paul Flida.

You can crush all your foemen at one stroke, and yet would betake you to the churches!

King Skule.

Yes, yes, keep all the churches open!

268

Paul Flida.

Be sure Håkon will break sanctuary, when 'tis Vårbælgs he pursues.

King Skule.

That will he not; God will shield him from such a sin;—God always shields Håkon.

Paul Flida.

[*In deep and sorrowful wrath.*] To hear you speak thus, a man could not but ask: Who is king in this land?

King Skule.

[*Smiling mournfully.*] Ay, Paul Flida, that is the great question: Who is king in this land?

Paul Flida.

[*Imploringly.*] You are soul-sick to-night, my lord; let me act for you.

King Skule.

Ay, ay, do so.

Paul Flida.

[*Going.*] First will I break down all the bridges.

King Skule.

Madman! Stay!—Break down all the bridges! Know you what that means? *I* have assayed it;—beware of that!

Paul Flida.

What would you then, my lord?

King Skule.

I will talk with Håkon.

269

Paul Flida.

He will answer you with a tongue of steel.

King Skule.

Go, go;—you shall learn my will anon.

Paul Flida.

Every moment is precious! [*Seizes his hand.*] King Skule, let us break down all the bridges, fight like Wolves,[\[40\]](#) and trust in Heaven!

King Skule.

[*Softly.*] Heaven trusts not in me; I dare not trust in Heaven.

Paul Flida.

Short has been the saga of the Vargbælgs.

[*Goes out by the back.*]

King Skule.

A hundred cunning heads, a thousand mighty arms, are at my beck; but not a single loving, trusting heart. That is kingly beggary; no more, no less.

Bård Bratte.

[*From the back.*] Two wayfarers from afar stand without, praying to have speech with you my lord.

King Skule.

Who are they?

Bård Bratte.

A woman and a priest.

270

King Skule.

Let the woman and the priest approach.

[*Bård goes; King Skule seats himself, musing, on the right; presently there enters a black-robed woman; she wears a long cloak, a hood, and a thick veil, which conceals her face; a priest follows her, and remains standing by the door.*]

King Skule.

Who are you?

The Woman.

One you have loved.

King Skule.

[*Shaking his head.*] There lives no one who remembers that I have loved. Who are you, I ask?

The Woman.

One who loves you.

King Skule.

Then are you surely one of the dead.

The Woman.

[*Comes close to him and says softly and passionately.*] Skule Bårdsson!

King Skule.

[*Rises with a cry.*] Ingeborg!

Ingeborg.

Do you know me now, Skule?

King Skule.

Ingeborg, — Ingeborg!

Ingeborg.

Oh, let me look at you—look long at you, so long! [*Seizes his hands; a pause.*] You fair, you deeply loved, you faithless man!

King Skule.

Take off that veil; look at me with the eyes that once were as clear and blue as the sky.

Ingeborg.

These eyes have been but a rain-clouded sky for twenty years; you would not know them again, and you shall never see them more.

King Skule.

But your voice is fresh and soft and young as ever!

Ingeborg.

I have used it only to whisper your name, to imprint your greatness in a young heart, and to pray to the sinners' God for grace toward us twain, who have loved in sin.

King Skule.

You have done that?

Ingeborg.

I have been silent save to speak loving words of you;—therefore has my voice remained fresh and soft and young.

King Skule.

There lies a life-time between. Every fair memory from those days have I wasted and let slip— —

Ingeborg.

It was your right.

King Skule.

And meantime you, Ingeborg, loving, faithful woman, have dwelt there in the north, guarding and treasuring your memories, in ice-cold loneliness!

Ingeborg.

It was my happiness.

King Skule.

And I could give you up to win might and riches! With you at my side, as my wife, I had found it easier to be a king.

Ingeborg.

God has been good to me in willing it otherwise. A soul like mine had need of a great sin, to arouse it to remorse and expiation.

King Skule.

And now you come— — ?

Ingeborg.

As Andres Skialdarband's widow.

King Skule.

Your husband is dead!

Ingeborg.

On the way from Jerusalem.

273

King Skule.

Then has he atoned for the slaying of Vegard.

Ingeborg.

'Twas not therefore that my noble husband took the Cross.

King Skule.

Not therefore?

Ingeborg.

No; it was my sin he took upon his strong, loving shoulders; 'twas that he went to wash away in Jordan stream; 'twas for that he bled.

King Skule.

[*Softly.*] Then he knew all.

Ingeborg.

From the first. And Bishop Nicholas knew it, for to him I confessed. And there was one other man that came to know it, though how I cannot guess.

King Skule.

Who?

Ingeborg.

Vegard Væradal.

King Skule.

Vegard!

Ingeborg.

He whispered a mocking word of me into my husband's ear; and thereupon Andres Skialdarband drew his sword, and slew him on the spot.

King Skule.

He kept ward over her whom I betrayed and forgot.—And wherefore seek you me now?

Ingeborg.
To bring you the last sacrifice.
King Skule.

What mean you?

Ingeborg.
[*Points to the Priest who stands by the door.*] Look at him!—Peter,
my son, come hither!

King Skule.
Your son— —!

Ingeborg.
And yours, King Skule!

King Skule.
[*Half bewildered.*] Ingeborg!

[*Peter approaches in silent emotion, and throws himself
before King Skule.*]

Ingeborg.
Take him! For twenty years has he been the light and comfort of
my life.—Now are you King of Norway; the King's son must enter on
his heritage; I have no longer any right to him.

King Skule.
[*Raises him up, in a storm of joy.*] Here, to my heart, you whom I
have yearned for so burningly! [*Presses him in his arms, lets him go,
looks at him, and embraces him again.*] My son! My son! I have a son!
Ha-ha-ha! who can stand against me now? [*Goes over
to Ingeborg and seizes her hand.*] And you, you give him to me,

275

Ingeborg! You take not back your word? You give him to me
indeed?

Ingeborg.
Heavy is the sacrifice, and scarce had I strength to make it, but
that Bishop Nicholas sent him to me, bearing a letter with tidings of
Andres Skialdarband's death. 'Twas the Bishop that laid on me the
heavy sacrifice, to atone for all my sin.

King Skule.
Then is the sin blotted out, and henceforth he is mine alone; is it
not so, mine alone?

Ingeborg.
Yes; but one promise I crave of you.
King Skule.

Heaven and earth, crave all you will!

Ingeborg.

He is pure as a lamb of God, as I now give him into your hands. 'Tis a perilous path that leads up to the throne; let him not take hurt to his soul. Hear you, King Skule: let not my child take hurt to his soul!

King Skule.

That I promise and swear to you!

Ingeborg.

[*Seizes his arm.*] From the moment you mark that his soul suffers harm, let him rather die!

King Skule.

Rather die! I promise and swear it!

276

Ingeborg.

Then shall I be of good cheer as I go back to Halogaland.

King Skule.

Ay, you may be of good cheer.

Ingeborg.

There will I repent and pray, till the Lord calls me. And when we meet before God, he shall come back to me pure and blameless.

King Skule.

Pure and blameless! [*Turning to Peter.*] Let me look at you! Ay, your mother's features and mine; you are he for whom I have longed so sorely.

Peter.

My father, my great, noble father! Let me live and fight for you! Let your cause be mine; and be your cause what it may—I know that I am fighting for the right!

King Skule.

[*With a cry of joy.*] You trust in me! You trust in me!

Peter.

Immovably!

King Skule.

Then all is well; then am I surely saved! Listen: you shall cast off the cowl; the Archbishop shall loose you from your vows; the King's son shall wield the sword, shall go forward unwavering to might and honour.

277

Peter.

Together with you, my noble father! We will go together!

King Skule.

[*Drawing the youth close up to himself.*] Ay, together, we two alone!

Ingeborg.

[*To herself.*] To love, to sacrifice all and be forgotten, that is my saga.^[41]

[*Goes quietly out by the back.*

King Skule.

Now shall a great king's-work be done in Norway! Listen, Peter, my son! We will awaken the whole people, and gather it into one; the man of Viken and the Trönder, the Halogalander and the Agdeman, the Uplander and the Sogndaleman, all shall be one great family! Then shall you see how the land will come to flourish!

Peter.

What a great and dizzy thought— —

King Skule.

Do you grasp it?

Peter.

Yes—yes!—Clearly— —!

King Skule.

And have you faith in it?

278

Peter.

Yes, yes; for I have faith in you!

King Skule.

[*Wildly.*] Håkon Håkonsson must die.

Peter.

If you will it, then it is right that he die.

King Skule.

'Twill cost blood; but that we cannot heed!

Peter.

The blood is not wasted that flows in your cause.

King Skule.

All the might shall be yours when I have built up the kingdom. You shall sit on the throne with the circlet on your brow, with the purple mantle flowing wide over your shoulders; all men in the land shall bow before you— —[*The sounds of distant horns*^[42] *are heard.*] Ha! what was that? [*With a cry.*] The Birchleg host! What was it Paul Flida said— —?

[*Rushes towards the back.*

Paul Flida.

[*Enters and cries:*] The hour is upon us, King Skule!

King Skule.

[*Bewildered.*] The Birchlegs! King Håkon's host! Where are they?

279

Paul Flida.

They are swarming in thousands down over the Ekeberg.

King Skule.

Sound the call to arms! Sound, sound! Give counsel; where shall we meet them?

Paul Flida.

All the churches stand open for us.

King Skule.

'Tis of the Birchlegs I ask— —?

Paul Flida.

For them all the bridges stand open.

King Skule.

Unhappy man, what have you done?

Paul Flida.

Obedied my King!

King Skule.

My son! My son! Woe is me; I have lost your kingdom!

Peter.

No, you will conquer! So great a king's-thought cannot die!

King Skule.

Peace, peace! [*Horns and shouts are heard, nearer at hand.*] To horse! To arms! More is here at stake than the life and death of men!

[*Rushes out by the back; the others follow him.*]

280

A street in Oslo. On each side, low wooden houses, with porches. At the back, St. Hallvard's churchyard, enclosed by a high wall with a gate. On the left, at the end of the wall, is seen the church, the chief portal of which stands open. It is still night; after a little, the day begins to dawn. The alarm-bell is ringing: far away on the right are heard battle-shouts and confused noises.

King Skule's Hornblower.

[*Enters from the right, blows his horn, and shouts.*] To arms! To arms, all King Skule's men!

[Blows his horn again, and proceeds on his way; presently he is heard blowing and shouting in the next street.]

A Woman.

[Appears at a house door on the right.] Great God of mercy, what is astir?

A Townsman.

[Who has come out, half dressed, from a house on the other side of the street.] The Birchlegs are in the town! Now will Skule have his reward for all his misdeeds.

One of Skule's Men.

[Enters with some others, bearing their cloaks and weapons on their arms, from a side street on the left.] Where are the Birchlegs?

Another of Skule's Men.

[Coming from a house on the right.] I know not!

281

The First.

Hist! Listen!—They must be down at the Geite-bridge!

The Second.

Off to the Geite-bridge then!

[They all rush out to the right; a townsman comes running in from the same side.]

The First Townsman.

Hey, neighbour, whence come you?

The Second Townsman.

From down at the Lo-river; there's ugly work there.

The Woman.

St. Olaf and St. Hallvard! Is it the Birchlegs, or who is it?

The Second Townsman.

Who else but the Birchlegs! King Håkon is with them; the whole fleet is laying in to the wharves; but he himself landed with his best men out at Ekeberg.

The First Townsman.

Then will he take revenge for the slaughter at Låka!

The Second Townsman.

Ay, be sure of that.

The First Townsman.

See, see! The Vårbælgs are flying already!

282

A troop of Skule's men enter in full flight, from the right.

One of Them.

Into the church! None can stand against the Birchlegs as they lay about them to-night.

[The troop rushes into the church and bars the door on the inside.]

The Second Townsman.

[Looking out to the right.] I see a standard far down the street; it must be King Håkon's.

The First Townsman.

See, see, how the Vårbælgs are running!

A second troop enters from the right.

One of the Fugitives.

Let us take to the church and pray for grace.

[They rush at the door.]

Several Vårbælgs.

'Tis barred! 'tis barred!

The First.

Up over Martestokke then!

Another.

Where is King Skule?

The First.

I know not. Away! yonder I see the Birchlegs standard!

[They flee past the church, out to the left.]

283

Håkon enters from the right with his Standard-bearer, Gregorius Jonsson, Dagfinn the Peasant, and several other men.

Dagfinn.

Hark to the war-cry! Skule is gathering his men behind the churchyard.

An Old Townsman.

[Calls from his porch, to Håkon.] Take heed for yourself, dear my lord; the Vargbælgs are fierce, now they are fighting for life.

Håkon.

Is it you, old Guthorm Erlendsson? You have fought both for my father and for my grandfather.

The Townsman.

Would to God I could fight for you as well.

Håkon.

For that you are too old, and there is no need; men pour in upon me from all sides.

Dagfinn.

[*Pointing off over the wall to the right.*] There comes the Duke's standard!

Gregorius Jonsson.

The Duke himself! He rides his white war-horse.

Dagfinn.

We must hinder his passage through the gate here!

284

Håkon.

Wind the horn, wind the horn! [*The Hornblower does so.*] You blew better, you whelp, when you blew for money on Bergen wharf.

[*The Hornblower winds another blast, louder than the first; many men come rushing in.*

A Vårbælg.

[*From the right, fleeing towards the church, pursued by a Birchleg.*] Spare my life! Spare my life!

The Birchleg.

Not though you sat on the altar! [*Cuts him down.*] 'Tis a costly cloak you wear, methinks 'twill fit me well. [*Is about to take the cloak, but utters a cry and casts away his sword.*] My lord King! Not another stroke will I strike for you!

Dagfinn.

You say that in such an hour as this?

The Birchleg.

Not another stroke!

Dagfinn.

[*Cuts him down.*] Well, you may e'en let it alone.

The Birchleg.

[*Pointing to the dead Vårbælg.*] Methought I had done enough when I slew my own brother.

[*Dies.*

Håkon.

His brother!

285

Dagfinn.

What!

[*Goes up to the Vårbælg's body.*

Håkon.

Is it true?

Dagfinn.

I fear me it is.

Håkon.

[*Shaken.*] Here see we what a war we are waging. Brother against brother, father against son;—by God Almighty, this must have an end!

Gregorius Jonsson.

There comes the Duke, in full fight with Earl Knut's troop!

Dagfinn.

Bar the gate against him, king's men!

On the other side of the wall, the combatants come in sight. The Vårbælg's are forcing their way towards the left, driving the Birchlegs back, foot by foot. King Skule rides his white war-horse, with his sword drawn. Peter walks at his side, holding the horse's bridle, and with his left hand uplifting a crucifix. Paul Flida bears Skule's standard, which is blue, with a golden lion rampant, without the axe.[43]

King Skule.

Cut them down! Spare no man! There is come a new heir[44] to the throne of Norway!

286

The Birchlegs.

A new heir, said he?

Håkon.

Skule Bårdsson, let us share the kingdom!

King Skule.

All or nought!

Håkon.

Think of the Queen, your daughter!

King Skule.

I have a son, I have a son! I think of none but him!

Håkon.

I too have a son;—if I fall the kingdom will be his!

King Skule.

Slay the King-child, wherever you find it! Slay it on the throne; slay it at the altar; slay it—slay it in the Queen's arms!

Håkon.

There did you utter your own doom!

King Skule.

[*Slashing about him.*] Slay, slay without mercy! King Skule has a son! Slay, slay!

[*The fighting gradually passes away to the left.*]

Gregorius Jonsson.

The Vargbælgs are hewing their way through!

Dagfinn.

Ay, but only to flee.

287

Gregorius Jonsson.

Yes, by Heaven,—the other gate stands open; they are fleeing already!

Dagfinn.

Up towards Martestokke. [*Calls out.*] After them, after them, Earl Knut! Take vengeance for the slaughter at Låka!

Håkon.

You heard it: he proclaimed my child an outlaw—my innocent child, Norway's chosen king after me!

The King's Men.

Ay, ay, we heard it!

Håkon.

And what is the punishment for such a crime?

The Men.

Death!

Håkon.

Then must he die! [*Raises his hand to make oath.*] Here I swear it: Skule Bårdsson shall die, wherever he be met on unconsecrated ground!

Dagfinn.

'Tis every true man's duty to slay him.

A Birchleg.

[*From the left.*] Duke Skule has taken to flight!

The Townsfolk.

The Birchlegs have conquered!

288

Håkon.

What way?

The Birchleg.

Past Martestokke, up towards Eidsvold; most of them had horses waiting up in the streets, else had not one escaped with his life.

Håkon.

Thanks be to God that has helped us yet again! Now may the Queen safely come ashore from the fleet.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Points off to the right.*] She has already landed, my lord; there she comes!

Håkon.

[*To those nearest him.*] The heaviest task is yet before me; she is a loving daughter;—listen—no word to her of the danger that threatens her child. Swear to me, one and all, to keep ward over your King's son; but let her know nothing.

The Men.

[*Softly.*] We swear it.

Margrete.

[*Enters, with ladies and attendants, from the right.*] Håkon, my husband! Heaven has shielded you; you have conquered and are unhurt!

Håkon.

Yes, I have conquered. Where is the child?

Margrete.

On board the King's ship, in the hands of trusty men.

289

Håkon.

Go more of you thither.

[*Some of the men go.*]

Margrete.

Håkon, where is—Duke Skule?

Håkon.

He has made for the Uplands.

Margrete.

He lives, then!—My husband, may I thank God that he lives?

Håkon.

[*In painful agitation.*] Hear me, Margrete: you have been a faithful wife to me, you have followed me through good hap and ill, you have been unspeakably rich in love;—now must I cause you a heavy sorrow; I am loath to do it; but I am King, therefore must I—

Margrete.

[*In suspense.*] Has it to do with—the Duke?

Håkon.

Yes. No bitterer lot could befall me than to live my life far from you; but if you think it must be so after what I now tell you—if you feel

that you can no longer sit by my side, no longer look at me without turning pale—well, we must even part—live each alone—and I shall not blame you for it.

Margrete.

Part from you! How can you think such a thought? Give me your hand— —!

290

Håkon.

Touch it not!—It has even now been lifted in oath— —

Margrete.

In oath?

Håkon.

An oath that set its sacred seal upon a death-warrant.

Margrete.

[*With a shriek.*] My father! Oh, my father!

[*Totters; two women rush forward to support her.*]

Håkon.

Yes, Margrete—his King has doomed your father to death.

Margrete.

Then well I know he has committed a greater crime than when he took the kingly title.

Håkon.

That has he;—and now, if you feel that we must part, so let it be.

Margrete.

[*Coming close to him, firmly.*] We can never part! I am your wife, nought else in the world but your wife!

Håkon.

Are you strong enough? Did you hear and understand all? I have doomed your father.

Margrete.

I heard and understood. You have doomed my father.

291

Håkon.

And you ask not to know what was his crime?

Margrete.

'Tis enough that you know it.

Håkon.

But it was to death that I doomed him!

Margrete.

[*Kneels before the King, and kisses his hand.*] My husband and noble lord, your doom is just!

292

ACT FIFTH

A room in the palace at Nidaros. The entrance door is on the right; in front, on the same side, a window; to the left a smaller door. It is after night-fall. Paul Flida, Bård Bratte, and several of King Skule's principal followers are standing at the window and looking upward.

A Man-at-Arms.

How red it glows!

A Second.

It stretches over half the sky, like a flaming sword.

Bård Bratte.

Holy King Olaf, what bodes such a sign of dread?

An Old Vårbælg.

Assuredly it bodes a great chief's death.

Paul Flida.

Håkon's death, my good Vårbælg. He is lying out in the fiord with his fleet; we may look for him in the town to-night. This time, 'tis our turn to conquer!

Bård Bratte.

Trust not to that; there is little heart in the host now.

293

The Old Vårbælg.

And reason enough, in sooth; ever since the flight from Oslo has King Skule shut himself in, and will neither see nor speak with his men.

The First Man-at-Arms.

There are those in the town who know not whether to believe him alive or dead.

Paul Flida.

The King must out, however sick he may be. Speak to him, Bård Bratte—the safety of all is at stake.

Bård Bratte.

It avails not; I have spoken to him already.

Paul Flida.

Then must I try what I can do. [*Goes to the door on the left, and knocks.*] My lord King, you must take the helm in your own hands; things can no longer go on in this fashion.

King Skule.

[*Within.*] I am sick, Paul Flida.

Paul Flida.

What else can you look for? You have eaten nought these two days; you must nourish and strengthen you—

King Skule.

I am sick.

Paul Flida.

By the Almighty, 'tis no time for sickness.

294

King Håkon lies out in the fiord, and may at any time be upon us here in Nidaros.

King Skule.

Strike him down for me! Slay him and the King-child.

Paul Flida.

You must be with us, my lord!

King Skule.

No, no, no,—you are surest of fortune and victory when I am not there.

Peter.

[*Enters from the right; he is in armour.*] The townsfolk are ill at ease; they flock together in great masses before the palace.

Bård Bratte.

Unless the King speak to them, they will desert him in the hour of need.

Peter.

Then must he speak to them. [*At the door on the left.*] Father! The Trönders, your trustiest subjects, will fall away from you if you give them not courage.

King Skule.

What said the skald?

Peter.

The skald?

King Skule.

The skald who died for my sake at Oslo. A man cannot give what he himself does not possess, he said.

295

Peter.

Then neither can you give away the kingdom; for it is mine after you!

King Skule.

Now I will come!

Paul Flida.

God be praised!

King Skule.

[Comes forward in the doorway; he is pale and haggard; his hair has grown very grey.] You shall not look at me! I will not have you look at me now that I am sick! *[Goes up to Peter.]* Take from you the kingdom, you say? Great God in heaven, what was I about to do!

Peter.

Oh, forgive me;—I know that what you do is ever the right.

King Skule.

No, no, not hitherto; but now I will be strong and sound—I will act!

Loud Shouts.

[Without, on the right.] King Skule! King Skule!

King Skule.

What is that?

Bård Bratte.

[At the window.] The townsmen are flocking together; the whole courtyard is full of people;—you must speak to them.

King Skule.

Do I look like a king? Can I speak now?

296

Peter.

You must, my noble father!

King Skule.

Well, be it so. *[Goes to the window and draws the curtain aside, but lets it go quickly and starts back in terror.]* There hangs the flaming sword over me again!

Paul Flida.

It bodes that the sword of victory is drawn for you.

King Skule.

Ah, were it but so! *[Goes to the window and speaks out.]* Trönders, what would you? Here stands your King.

A Townsman.

[Without.] Leave the town! The Birchlegs will burn and slay if they find you here.

King Skule.

We must all hold together. I have been a gracious King to you; I have craved but small war-tax— —

A Man's Voice.

[*Down in the crowd.*] What call you all the blood, then, that flowed at Låka and Oslo?

A Woman.

Give me my betrothed again!

A Boy.

Give me my father and my brother!

Another Woman.

Give me my three sons, King Skule!

297

A Man.

He is no King; homage has not been done him on St. Olaf's shrine!

Many Voices.

No, no—no homage has been done him on St. Olaf's shrine! He is no king!

King Skule.

[*Shrinks behind the curtain.*] No homage— —! No king!

Paul Flida.

'Twas a dire mischance that the shrine was not brought forth when you were chosen.

Bård Bratte.

Should the townsfolk desert us, we cannot hold Nidaros if the Birchlegs come.

King Skule.

And they will desert us, so long as homage has not been done to me on the Saint's shrine.

Peter.

Then let the shrine be brought forth, and take our homage now!

Paul Flida.

[*Shaking his head.*] How should that be possible?

Peter.

Is aught impossible, where he is concerned? Sound the call for the folkmote, and bring forth the shrine!

Several of the Men.

[*Shrinking back.*] Sacrilege!

298

Peter.

No sacrilege!—Come, come! The monks are well disposed towards King Skule; they will agree— —

Paul Flida.

That will they not; they dare not, for the Archbishop.

Peter.

Are you King's men, and will not lend your aid when so great a cause is at stake! Good, there are others below of better will. My father and King, the monks shall give way; I will pray, I will beseech; sound the summons for the folkmote; you shall bear your kingship rightfully.

[Rushes out to the right.]

King Skule.

[Beaming with joy.] Saw you him! Saw you my gallant son! How his eyes shone! Yes, we will all fight and conquer. How strong are the Birchlegs?

Paul Flida.

Not stronger than that we may master them, if but the townsfolk hold to us.

King Skule.

They shall hold to us. We must all be at one now and put an end to this time of dread. See you not that 'tis Heaven's command that we should end it? Heaven is wroth with all Norway for the deeds that have so long been doing. A flaming sword glows night by night in the sky; women swoon and bear children in the churches; a frenzy creeps abroad among priests and monks, causing them to run through the streets and proclaim

299

that the last day is come. Ay, by the Almighty, this shall be ended at one stroke!

Paul Flida.

What are your commands?

King Skule.

All the bridges shall be broken down!

Paul Flida.

Go, and let all the bridges be broken.

[One of the Men-at-arms goes out to the right.]

King Skule.

Gather all our men upon the foreshore; not one Birchleg shall set foot in Nidaros.

Paul Flida.

Well spoken, King.

King Skule.

When the shrine is borne forth, let the horn sound to the folkmote.
The host and the townsfolk shall be called together.

Paul Flida.

[*To one of the men.*] Go forth and bid the hornblower wind his horn
in all the streets.

[*The man goes.*

King Skule.

[*Addresses the people from the window.*] Hold fast to me, all my
sorrowing people. There shall come peace and light over the land
once more, as in Håkon's first glad days, when the fields yielded two
harvests every summer. Hold fast

300

to me; believe in me and trust to me; 'tis that I need so
unspeakably. I will watch over you and fight for you; I will bleed and
die for you, if need be; but fail me not, and doubt not— —! [*Loud
cries, as though of terror, are heard among the people.*] What is that?

A Wild Voice.

Atone! Atone!

Bård Bratte.

[*Looks out.*] 'Tis a priest possessed of the devil!

Paul Flida.

He is tearing his cowl to shreds and scourging himself with a whip.

The Voice.

Atone, atone! The last day is come.

Many Voices.

Flee, flee! Woe upon Nidaros. A deed of sin!

King Skule.

What has befallen?

Bård Bratte.

All flee, all shrink away as though a wild beast were in their midst.

King Skule.

Yes, all flee. [*With a cry of joy.*] Ha! it matters not. We are saved!
See, see—King Olaf's shrine stands in the middle of the courtyard.

301

Paul Flida.

King Olaf's shrine!

Bård Bratte.

Ay, by Heaven—there it stands!

King Skule.

The monks are true to me; so good a deed have they never done before!

Paul Flida.

Hark! the call to the folkmote!

King Skule.

Now shall lawful homage be done to me.

Peter.

[*Enters from the right.*] Take on you the kingly mantle; now stands the shrine out yonder.

King Skule.

Then have you saved the kingdom for me and for yourself; and tenfold will we thank the pious monks for yielding.

Peter.

The monks, father—you have nought to thank them for.

King Skule

'Twas not they that helped you?

Peter.

They laid the ban of the Church on whoever should dare to touch the holy thing.

302

King Skule.

The Archbishop then! At last he gives way.

Peter.

The Archbishop hurled forth direr curses than the monks.

King Skule.

Ah, then I see that I still have trusty men. You here, who should have been the first to serve me, stood terrified and shrank back—but down in the crowd have I friends who for my sake fear not to take so great a sin upon their souls.

Peter.

You have not one trusty man who dared to take the sin upon him.

King Skule.

Almighty God! has then a miracle come to pass? Who bore out the holy thing?

Peter.

I, my father!

King Skule.

[*With a shriek.*] You!

The Men.

[*Shrink back appalled.*] Church-robber!

[Paul Flida, Bård Bratte, *and one or two others go out.*

Peter.

The deed had to be done. No man's faith is sure ere homage be lawfully done to you. I begged, I besought the monks; it availed not.

303

Then I broke open the church door; none dared to follow me. I sprang up to the high altar, gripped the handle, and pressed hard with my knees; 'twas as though an unseen power gave me more than human strength. The shrine came loose, I dragged it after me down the nave, while the ban moaned like a storm high up under the vaultings. I dragged it out of the church; all fled and shrank from me. When I came to the middle of the courtyard the handle broke; here it is!

[*Holds it aloft.*

King Skule.

[*Quietly, appalled.*] Church-robber.

Peter.

For your sake; for the sake of your great king's-thought! You will wipe out the sin; all that is evil you will wipe away. Light and peace will follow you; a glorious day will dawn over the land—what matter, then, if there went a storm-night before it?

King Skule.

There was as 'twere a halo round your head when your mother brought you to me; now I see in its stead the lightnings of the ban.

Peter.

Father, father, think not of me; be not afraid for my woe or weal. Is it not your will I have fulfilled?—how can it be accounted to me for a crime?

King Skule.

I hungered for your faith in me, and your faith has turned to sin.

304

Peter.

[*Wildly.*] For your sake, for your sake! Therefore God dare not deny to blot it out!

King Skule.

“Pure and blameless,” I swore to Ingeborg—and he scoffs at heaven!

Paul Flida.

[*Entering.*] All is in uproar! The impious deed has struck terror to your men; they flee into the churches.

King Skule.

They shall out; they must out!

Bård Bratte.

[*Entering.*] The townsfolk have risen against you; they are slaying the Vårbælgs wherever they find them, on the streets or in the houses!

A Man-at-Arms.

[*Entering.*] The Birchlegs are sailing up the river!

King Skule.

Summon all my men together! None must fail me here!

Paul Flida.

They will not come; they are benumbed with dread.

King Skule.

[*Despairingly.*] But I cannot fall now! My son must not die with a deadly sin upon his soul!

305

Peter.

Think not of me; 'tis you alone that are to be thought of. Let us make for Indherred; there all men are true to you!

King Skule.

Ay, to flight! Follow me, whoso would save his life!

Bård Bratte.

What way?

King Skule.

Over the bridge!

Paul Flida.

All bridges are broken down, my lord.

King Skule.

Broken down— —! All the bridges broken, say you?

Paul Flida.

Had you broken them down at Oslo, you might have let them stand at Nidaros.

King Skule.

We must over the river none the less;—we have our lives and our souls to save! To flight! To flight!

[*He and Peter rush out to the left.*]

Bård Bratte.

Ay, better so than to fall at the hands of the townfolk and the Birchlegs.

Paul Flida.

In God's name, then, to flight!

[All follow Skule.

306

The room stands empty for a short time; a distant and confused noise is heard from the streets; then a troop of armed townsmen rushes in by the door on the right.

A Townsman.

Here! He must be here!

Another.

Slay him!

Many.

Slay the church-robber too!

A Single One.

Go carefully! They may yet bite!

The First Townsman.

No need; the Birchlegs are already coming up the street.

A Townsman.

[*Entering.*] Too late—King Skule has fled!

Many.

Whither? Whither?

The New-comer.

Into one of the churches, methinks; they are full of the Vargbælgs.

The First Townsman.

Then let us seek for him; great thanks and reward will King Håkon give to the man who slays Skule.

Another.

Here come the Birchlegs.

307

A Third.

King Håkon himself!

Many of the Crowd.

[*Shout.*] Hail to King Håkon Håkonsson!

Håkon.

[*Enters from the right, followed by Gregorius Jonsson, Dagfinn the Peasant, and many others.*] Ay, now are you humble, you Trönders; you have stood against me long enough.

The First Townsman.

[*Kneeling.*] Mercy, my lord! Skule Bårdsson bore so hardly on us!

Another.

[*Also kneeling.*] He compelled us, else had we never followed him.

The First.

He seized our goods and forced us to fight for his unrighteous cause.

The Second.

Alas, noble lord, he has been a scourge to his friends no less than to his foes.

Many Voices.

Ay, ay,—Skule Bårdsson has been a scourge to the whole land.

Dagfinn.

That, at least, is true enough.

Håkon.

Good; with you townsfolk I will speak later;

308

'tis my purpose to punish sternly all transgressions; but first there are other things to be thought of. Knows any man where Skule Bårdsson is?

Many.

In one of the churches, lord!

Håkon.

Know you that for certain?

The Townsman.

Ay, there are all the Vargbælgs.

Håkon.

[*Softly to Dagfinn.*] He must be found; set a watch on all the churches in the town.

Dagfinn.

And when he is found, he must straightway be slain.

Håkon.

[*Softly.*] Slain? Dagfinn, Dagfinn, how heavy a deed it seems!

Dagfinn.

My lord, you swore it solemnly at Oslo.

Håkon.

And all men in the land will call for his death. [*Turns to Gregorius Jonsson and says, unheard by the others.*] Go; you were once his friend; seek him out and prevail on him to fly the land.

Gregorius.

[*Joyfully.*] You will suffer it, my lord!

309

Håkon.

For the sake of my gentle, well-beloved wife.

Gregorius Jonsson.

But if he should not flee? If he will not or cannot?

Håkon.

Then, in God's name, I may not spare him; then must my kingly word be fulfilled. Go!

Gregorius Jonsson

I go, and shall do my utmost. Heaven grant I may succeed.

[*Goes out by the right.*]

Håkon.

You, Dagfinn, go with trusty men down to the King's ship; you shall conduct the Queen and her child up to Elgesæter^[45] convent.

Dagfinn.

My lord, think you she will be safe there?

Håkon.

Nowhere safer. The Vargbælgs have shut themselves up in the churches, and she has besought to be sent thither; her mother is at Elgesæter.

Dagfinn.

Ay, ay, that I know.

Håkon.

Greet the Queen most lovingly from me; and greet Lady Ragnhild also. You may tell them that so soon as the Vargbælgs shall have made

310

submission and been taken to grace, all the bells in Nidaros shall be rung, for a sign that there has come peace in the land once more.—You townsfolk shall reckon with me to-morrow, and punishment shall be meted to each according to his misdeeds.

[*Goes with his men.*]

The First Townsman.

Woe upon us to-morrow!

The Second.

We have a long reckoning to pay.

The First.

We, who have stood against Håkon so long—who bore our part in acclaiming Skule when he took the kingly title.

The Second.

Who gave Skule both ships and war-tribute—who bought all the goods he seized from Håkon's thanes.

The First.

Ay, woe upon us to-morrow!

A Townsman.

[*Rushes in from the left.*] Where is Håkon? Where is the King?

The First.

What would you with him?

The New-comer

Bring him great and weighty tidings.

Many.

What tidings?

311

The New-comer.

I tell them to no other than the King himself.

Many.

Ay, tell us, tell us!

The New-comer.

Skule Bårdsson is fleeing up toward Elgesæter.

The First.

It cannot be! He is in one of the churches.

The New-comer.

No, no; he and his son crossed over the river in a skiff.

The First.

Ha, then we can save us from Håkon's wrath!

The Second.

Ay, let us forthwith give him to know where Skule is.

The First.

Nay, better than that; we will say nought, but ourselves go up to Elgesæter and slay Skule.

The Second.

Ay, ay—that will we!

A Third.

But did not many Vargbælgs go with him over the river?

The New-comer.

No, there were but few men in the boat.

The First.

We will arm us as best we can. Oh, now are

312

we townsfolk safe enough! Let no man know what we are about; we are enough for the task!—And now, away to Elgesæter.

All.

[*Softly.*] Ay, away to Elgesæter!

[*They go out to the left, rapidly but cautiously.*]

A fir-wood on the hills above Nidaros. It is moonlight, but the night is misty, so that the background is seen indistinctly, and sometimes scarcely at all. Tree-stumps and great boulders lie round about. King Skule, Peter, Paul Flida, Bård Bratte, and other Vårbælg's come through the wood from the left.

Peter.

Come hither and rest you, my father.

King Skule.

Ay, let me rest, rest.

[*Sinks down beside a stone.*]

Peter.

How goes it with you?

King Skule.

I am hungry! I am sick, sick! I see dead men's shadows!

Peter.

[*Springing up.*] Help here—bread for the King!

Bård Bratte.

Here is every man king; for life is at stake.

313

Stand up, Skule Bårdsson, if you be king! Lie not there to rule the land.

Peter.

If you scoff at my father, I will kill you.

Bård Bratte.

I shall be killed whatever betides; for me King Håkon will have no grace; for I was his thane, and deserted him for Skule's sake. Think of somewhat that may save us. No deed so desperate but I will risk it now.

A Vårbælg.

Could we but get over to the convent at Holm?

Paul Flida.

Better to Elgesæter.

Bård Bratte.

[*With a sudden outburst.*] Best of all to go down to Håkon's ship and bear away the King-child.

Paul Flida.

Are you distraught?

Bård Bratte.

No, no; 'tis our one hope, and easy enough to do. The Birchlegs are ransacking every house, and keeping watch on all the churches; they think none of us can have taken flight, since all the bridges are broken. There can be but few men on board the ships; when once we have his heir in our power, Håkon must grant us peace, else

314

will his child die with us. Who will go with me to save our lives?

Paul Flida.

Not I, if they are to be saved in such wise.

Several.

Not !! Not !!

Peter.

Ha, but if it were to save my father — —!

Bård Bratte.

If you will go with me, come. First I go down to Hladehammer; there lies the troop we met at the bottom of the hill; they are the wildest dare-devils of all the Vargbælgs; they had swum the river, knowing that they would find no grace in the churches. They are the lads for a raid on the King's ship! Which of you will follow me?

Some.

!! !!

Peter.

Mayhap I too; but first must I see my father into safe shelter.

Bård Bratte.

Ere daybreak will we make speed up the river. Come, here goes a short way downwards towards Hlade.

[*He and some others go out to the right.*

Peter.

[*To Paul Flida.*] Let not my father know aught of this; he is soul-sick to-night, we must act for him. There is safety in Bård Bratte's deed;

315

ere daybreak shall the King-child be in our hands.

Paul Flida.

To be slain, most like. See you not that it is a sin— —

Peter.

Nay, it cannot be a sin; for my father doomed the child in Oslo. Sooner or later it must die, for it blocks my father's path;—my father has a great king's-thought to carry through; it matters not who or how many fall for its sake.

Paul Flida.

Hapless for you was the day you came to know that you were King Skule's son. [*Listening.*] Hist!—cast you flat to the ground; there come people this way.

[All throw themselves down behind stones and stumps; a troop of people, some riding, some on foot, can be seen indistinctly through the mist and between the trees; they come from the left, and pass on to the right.]

Peter.

'Tis the Queen!

Paul Flida.

Ay; she is talking with Dagfinn the Peasant. Hush!

Peter.

They are making for Elgesæter. The King-child is with them!

Paul Flida.

And the Queen's ladies.

316

Peter.

But only four men! Up, up, King Skule—now is your kingdom saved!

King Skule.

My kingdom? 'Tis dark, my kingdom—like the angel's that rose against God.

A party of Monks comes from the right.

A Monk.

Who speaks there? Is it King Skule's men.

Paul Flida.

King Skule himself.

The Monk.

[*To Skule.*] God be praised that we met you, dear lord! Some townsmen gave us to know that you had taken the upward path, and we are no less unsafe than you in Nidaros.

Peter.

You have deserved death, you who denied to give forth St. Olaf's shrine.

The Monk.

The Archbishop forbade it; but none the less we would fain serve King Skule; we have ever held to him. See, we have brought with us robes of our Order for you and your men; put them on, and then can you easily make your way into one convent or another, and can seek to gain grace of Håkon.

317

King Skule.

Ay, let me put on the robe; my son and I must stand on consecrated ground. I will to Elgesæter.

Peter.

[*Softly, to Paul Flida.*] See that my father comes safely thither.

Paul Flida.

Bethink you that there are Birchlegs at Elgesæter.

Peter.

But four men; you may easily deal with them, and once inside the convent walls they will not dare to touch you. I will seek Bård Bratte.

Paul Flida.

Nay, do not so!

Peter.

Not on the King's ship, but at Elgesæter, must the outlaws save the kingdom for my father.

[*Goes quickly out to the right.*]

A Vårbælg.

[*Whispering to another.*] Go you to Elgesæter with Skule?

The Other.

Hist; no; the Birchlegs are there!

The First.

Neither will I go; but say nought to the rest.

318

The Monk.

And now away, two and two, — one spearman and one monk.

Another Monk.

[*Sitting on a stump behind the rest.*] I will guide King Skule.

King Skule.

Know you the way?

The Monk.

The broad way.

The First Monk.

Haste you; let us take different paths, and meet outside the convent gate.

[They go out among the trees, to the right; the fog lifts and the comet shows itself red and glowing, through the hazy air.]

King Skule.

Peter, my son— —! *[Starts backwards.]* Ha, there is the flaming sword in heaven!

The Monk.

[Sitting behind him on the stump.] And here am I!

King Skule.

Who are you?

The Monk.

An old acquaintance.

King Skule.

Paler man have I never seen.

319

The Monk.

But you know me not?

King Skule

'Tis you that are to lead me to Elgesæter.

The Monk.

'Tis I that will lead you to the throne.

King Skule.

Can you do that?

The Monk.

I can, if you but will it.

King Skule.

And by what means?

The Monk.

By the means I have used before;—I will take you up into a high mountain and show you all the glory of the world.

King Skule.

All the glory of the world have I seen ere now, in dreams of temptation.

The Monk.

'Twas I that gave you those dreams.

King Skule.

Who are you?

The Monk.

An envoy from the oldest Pretender in the world.

320

King Skule.

From the oldest Pretender in the world?

The Monk.

From the first Earl, who rose against the greatest kingdom, and himself founded a kingdom that shall endure beyond doomsday.

King Skule.

[*Shrieks.*] Bishop Nicholas!

The Monk.

[*Rising.*] Do you know me now? We were friends of yore,
and 'tis you that have brought me back;
once the self-same galley our fortunes bore,
and we sailed on the self-same tack.

At our parting I quailed, in the gloom and the blast;
for a hawk in his talons had gripped my soul fast;
I besought them to chant and to ply the bell,
and I bought me masses and prayers as well, —
they read fourteen, though I'd paid but for seven;
yet they brought me no nearer the gates of heaven.

King Skule.

And you come from down yonder — — ?

The Monk.

Yes, from the kingdom down yonder I'm faring;
the kingdom men always so much miscall.

321

I vow 'tis in nowise so bad after all,
and the heat, to my thinking, is never past bearing.

King Skule.

And it seems you have learnt skald-craft, old Bagler-chieftain!

The Monk.

Not only skald-craft, but store of Latinity!
Once my Latin was not over strong, you know;
now few can beat it for ease and flow.
To take any station in yonder vicinity,
ay, even to pass at the gate, for credential
a knowledge of Latin is well-nigh essential.
You can't but make progress with so many able
and learned companions each day at the table, —
full fifty ex-popes by my side carouse, and

five hundred cardinals, skalds seven thousand.

King Skule.

Greet your Master and give him my thanks for his friendship. Tell him he is the only king who sends help to Skule the First of Norway.

The Monk.

Hear now, King Skule, what brings me to you—
my Master's henchmen down there are legion,
and each up here is allotted a region;
they gave Norway to me, as the place I best knew.
Håkon Håkonsson serves not my Master's will;
we hate him, for he is our foeman still—
so he must fall, leaving you at the helm,
the sole possessor of crown and realm.

322

King Skule.

Ay, give me the crown! When once I have that, I will rule so as to buy myself free again.

The Monk.

Ay, that we can always talk of later— —
we must seize the time if we'd win the fight.
King Håkon's child sleeps at Elgesæter;
could you once wrap him in the web of night,
then like storm-swept motes will your foes fly routed,
then your victory's sure and your kingship undoubted!

King Skule.

Think you so surely that the victory were mine?

The Monk.

All men in Norway are sighing for rest;
the king with an heir^[46] is the king they love best—
a son to succeed to the throne without wrangling;
for the people are tired of this hundred-years' jangling.
Rouse you, King Skule! one great endeavour!
the foe must perish to-night or never!
See, to the northward how light it has grown,
see how the fog lifts o'er fiord and o'er valley—
there gather noiselessly galley on galley—
hark! men are marching with rumble and drone!
One word of promise, and all is your own—
hundreds of glittering sails on the water,
thousands of warriors hurtling to slaughter.

King Skule.

What word would you have?

The Monk.

For raising you highest, my one condition
is just that you follow your heart's ambition;
all Norway is yours, to the kingship I'll speed you,
if only you vow that your son shall succeed you!

King Skule.

[Raising his hand as if for an oath.] My son shall — *—[Stops suddenly, and breaks forth in terror.]* The church-robber! All the might to him!
Ha! now I understand;—you seek for his soul's perdition! Get thee
behind me, get thee behind me! *[Stretches out his arms to heaven.]*
Oh have mercy on me, thou to whom I now call for help in my sorest
need!

[He falls prone to the earth.]

The Monk.

Accurs'd! He's slipped through my fingers at last—
and I thought of a surety I held him so fast!
But the Light, it seems, had a trick in store
that I knew not of—and the game is o'er.
Well, well; what matters a little delay?
Perpetuum mobile's well under way;
my might is assured through the years and the ages,
the haters of light shall be still in my wages;
in Norway my empire for ever is founded,
though it be to my subjects a riddle unsounded.

[Coming forward.]

While to their life-work Norsemen set out
will-lessly wavering, daunted with doubt,
while hearts are shrunken, minds helplessly shivering,
weak as a willow-wand wind-swept and quivering,—
while about one thing alone they're united,
namely, that greatness be stoned and despited,—
when they seek honour in fleeing and falling
under the banner of baseness unfurled,—
then Bishop Nicholas 'tends to his calling,
the Bagler-Bishop's at work in the world!

[He disappears in the fog among the trees.]

King Skule.

[*After a short pause, half rises and looks around.*] Where is he, my black comrade? [*Springs up.*] My guide, my guide, where are you? Gone!— No matter; now I myself know the way, both to Elgesæter and beyond.

[*Goes out to the right.*]

The courtyard of Elgesæter Convent. To the left lies the chapel, with an entrance from the courtyard; the windows are lighted up. Along the opposite side of the space stretch some lower buildings; in the back, the convent wall with a strong gate, which is locked. It is a clear moonlight night. Three Birchleg Chiefs stand by the gate; Margrete, Lady Ragnhild, and Dagfinn the Peasant come out from the chapel.

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Half to herself.*] King Skule had to flee into the church, you say! He, he, a fugitive! begging

325

at the altar for peace—begging for his life mayhap—oh no, no, that could never be; but God will punish you who dared to let it come to this!

Margrete.

My dear, dear mother, curb yourself; you know not what you say; 'tis your grief that speaks.

Lady Ragnhild.

Hear me, ye Birchlegs! 'Tis Håkon Håkonsson that should lie before the altar, and beseech King Skule for life and peace.

A Birchleg.

It ill beseems loyal men to listen to such words.

Margrete.

Bow your heads before a wife's sorrow!

Lady Ragnhild.

King Skule doomed! Look to yourselves, look to yourselves all of you, when he regains his power!

Dagfinn.

That will never be, Lady Ragnhild.

Margrete.

Hush, hush!

Lady Ragnhild.

Think you Håkon Håkonsson dare let his doom be fulfilled if the King should fall into his hands?

Dagfinn.

King Håkon himself best knows whether a king's oath can be broken.

326

Lady Ragnhild.

[To Margrete.] And this man of blood have you followed in faith and love! Are you your father's child? May the wrath of heaven— —! Go from me, go from me!

Margrete.

Blessed be your lips, although now they curse me.

Lady Ragnhild.

I must down to Nidaros and into the church to find King Skule. He sent me from him when he sat victorious on the throne; then, truly, he had no need of me—now will he not be wroth if I come to him. Open the gate for me; let me go to Nidaros!

Margrete.

My mother, for God's pity's sake— —!

[A loud knocking at the convent gate.]

Dagfinn.

Who knocks?

King Skule.

[Without.] A king.

Dagfinn.

Skule Bårdsson.

Lady Ragnhild.

King Skule.

Margrete.

My father!

King Skule.

Open, open!

Dagfinn.

We open not here to outlaws.

327

King Skule.

'Tis a king who knocks, I tell you; a king who has no roof over his head; a king whose life is forfeit if he reach not consecrated ground.

Margrete.

Dagfinn, Dagfinn, 'tis my father!

Dagfinn.

[*Goes to the gate and opens a small shutter.*] Come you with many men to the convent?

King Skule.

With all the men that were true to me in my need.

Dagfinn.

And how many be they?

King Skule.

Fewer than one.

Margrete.

He is alone, Dagfinn.

Lady Ragnhild.

Heaven's wrath fall upon you if you deny him sanctuary!

Dagfinn.

In God's name, then!

[*He opens the gate; the Birchlegs respectfully uncover their heads. King Skule enters the courtyard.*]

Margrete.

[*Throwing herself on his neck.*] My father! My dear, unhappy father!

328

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Interposing wildly between him and the Birchlegs.*] Ye who feign reverence for him, ye will betray him, like Judas. Dare not to come near him! Ye shall not lay a finger on him while I live!

Dagfinn.

Here he is safe, for he is on holy ground.

Margrete.

And not one of all your men had the heart to follow you this night!

King Skule.

Both monks and spearmen brought me on the way; but they slipped from me one by one, for they knew there were Birchlegs at Elgesæter. Paul Flida was the last to leave me; he came with me to the convent gate; there he gave me his last hand-grip, in memory of the time when there were Vargbælgs in Norway.

Dagfinn.

[*To the Birchlegs.*] Get you in, chieftains, and set you as guards about the King-child; I must to Nidaros to acquaint the King that

Skule Bårdsson is at Elgesæter; in so weighty a matter 'tis for him to act.

Margrete.

Oh, Dagfinn, Dagfinn, have you the heart for that?

Dagfinn.

Else should I ill serve King and land. [*To the men.*] Lock the gates after me, watch over the child, and open to none until the King be come.

329

[*Softly to Skule.*] Farewell, Skule Bårdsson—and God grant you a blessed end.

[*Goes out by the gate; the Birchlegs close it after him, and go into the chapel.*]

Lady Ragnhild.

Ay, let Håkon come; I will not loose you; I will hold you straitly and tenderly in my arms, as I never held you before.

Margrete.

Oh, how pale you are—and aged; you are cold.

King Skule.

I am not cold—but I am weary, weary.

Margrete.

Come in then, and rest you— —

King Skule.

Yes, yes; 'twill soon be time to rest.

Sigrid.

[*From the chapel.*] You come at last, my brother!

King Skule.

Sigrid! you here?

Sigrid.

I promised that we should meet when you were fain of me in your sorest need.

King Skule.

Where is your child, Margrete?

Margrete.

He sleeps, in the sacristy.

330

King Skule.

Then is our whole house gathered at Elgesæter to-night.

Sigrid.

Ay, gathered after straying long and far.

King Skule.

Håkon Håkonsson alone is wanting.

Margrete and Lady Ragnhild.

[*Cling about him, in an outburst of sorrow.*] My father!—My husband!

King Skule.

[*Looking at them, much moved.*] Have you loved me so deeply, you two? I sought after happiness abroad, and heeded not the home wherein I might have found it. I pursued after love through sin and guilt, little dreaming that 'twas mine already, in right of God's law and man's. —And you, Ragnhild, my wife, you, against whom I have sinned so deeply, you take me to your warm, soft heart in the hour of my sorest need; you can tremble and be afraid for the life of the man who has never cast a ray of sunshine upon your path.

Lady Ragnhild.

Have you sinned? Oh, Skule, speak not so; think you I should ever dare accuse you! From the first I was too mean a mate for you, my noble husband; there can rest no guilt on any deed of yours.

King Skule.

Have you believed in me so surely, Ragnhild?

331

Lady Ragnhild.

From the first day I saw you.

King Skule.

[*With animation.*] When Håkon comes, I will beg grace of him! You gentle, loving women,—oh, but it is fair to live!

Sigrid.

[*With an expression of terror.*] Skule, my brother! Woe to you if you stray from the path this night.

[*A loud noise without; immediately afterwards, a knocking at the gate.*]

Margrete.

Hark, hark! Who comes in such haste?

Lady Ragnhild.

Who knocks at the gate?

Voices.

[*Without.*] Townsfolk from Nidaros! Open! We know that Skule Bårdsson is within!

King Skule.

Ay, he is within; what would ye with him?

Noisy Voices.

[*Without.*] Come out, come out! Death to the evil man!

Margrete.

You townsfolk dare to threaten that?

A Single Voice.

King Håkon doomed him at Oslo.

332

Another.

'Tis every man's duty to slay him.

Margrete.

I am the Queen; I command you to depart!

A Voice.

'Tis Skule Bårdsson's daughter, and not the Queen, that speaks thus.

Another.

You have no power over life and death; the King has doomed him!

Lady Ragnhild.

Into the church, Skule! For God's mercy's sake, let not the bloodthirsty caitiffs approach you!

King Skule.

Ay, into the church; I would not fall at the hands of such as these. My wife, my daughter; meseems I have found peace and light; oh, I cannot lose them again so soon!

[*Moves towards the chapel.*]

Peter.

[*Without, on the right.*] My father, my king. Now will you soon have the victory!

King Skule.

[*With a shriek.*] He! He!

[*Sinks down upon the church steps.*]

Lady Ragnhild.

Who is it?

333

A Townsman.

[*Without.*] See, see! the church-robber climbs over the convent roof!

Others.

Stone him! Stone him!

Peter.

[Appears on a roof to the right, and jumps down into the yard.] Well met again, my father!

King Skule.

[Looks at him aghast.] You—I had forgotten you— —! Whence come you?

Peter.

[Wildly.] Where is the King-child?

Margrete.

The King-child!

King Skule.

[Starts up.] Whence come you, I ask?

Peter.

From Hladehammer; I have given Bård Bratte and the Vargbælgs to know that the King-child lies at Elgesæter to-night.

Margrete.

O God!

King Skule.

You have done that! And now— —?

Peter.

He is gathering together his men, and they are

334

hasting up to the convent.—Where is the King-child, woman?

Margrete.

[Who has placed herself before the church door.] He sleeps in the sacristy!

Peter.

'Twere the same if he slept on the altar! I have dragged out St. Olaf's shrine—I fear not to drag out the King-child as well.

Lady Ragnhild.

[Calls to Skule.] And he it is you have loved so deeply!

Margrete.

Father, father! How could you forget us all for his sake?

King Skule.

He was pure as a lamb of God when the penitent woman gave him to me;— 'tis his faith in me has made him what he now is.

Peter.

[Without heeding him.] The child must out! Slay it, slay it in the Queen's arms,—that was King Skule's word in Oslo!

Margrete.

Oh shame, oh shame!

Peter.

A saint might do it unsinning, at my father's command! My father is King; for the great king's-thought is his!

335

Townsmen.

[*Knocking at the gate.*] Open! Come out, you and the church-robber, else will we burn the convent down!

King Skule.

[*As if seized by a strong resolution.*] The great king's-thought! 'Tis that has poisoned your young loving soul! Pure and blameless I was to give you back; 'tis faith in me that drives you thus wildly from crime to crime, from deadly sin to deadly sin! Oh, but I can save you yet: I can save us all! [*Calls toward the background.*] Wait, wait, ye townsmen without there: I come!

Margrete.

[*Seizing his hand in terror.*] My father! what would you do?

Lady Ragnhild.

[*Clinging to him with a shriek.*] Skule!

Sigrid.

[*Tears them away from him, and calls with wild, radiant joy.*] Loose him, loose him, women;—now his thought puts forth wings!

King Skule.

[*Firmly and forcibly, to Peter.*] You saw in me the heaven-chosen one,—him who should do the great king's-work in the land. Look at me better, misguided boy! The rags of kingship I have decked myself withal, they were borrowed and stolen—now I put them off me, one by one.

336

Peter.

[*In dread.*] My great, my noble father, speak not thus!

King Skule.

The king's-thought is Håkon's, not mine; to him alone has the Lord granted the power that can act it out. You have believed in a lie; turn from me, and save your soul.

Peter.

[*In a broken voice.*] The king's-thought is Håkon's!

King Skule.

I yearned to be the greatest in the land. My God! my God! behold, I abase myself before thee, and stand as the least of all men.

Peter.

Take me from the earth, O Lord! Punish me for all my sin; but take me from the earth; for here am I homeless now!

[Sinks down upon the church steps.]

King Skule.

I had a friend who bled for me at Oslo. He said: A man can die for another's life-work; but if he is to go on living, he must live for his own.—I have no life-work to live for, neither can I live for Håkon's,—but I can die for it.

Margrete.

Nay, nay, that shall you never do!

King Skule.

[Takes her hand, and looks at her tenderly.] Do you love your husband, Margrete?

337

Margrete.

Better than the whole world.

King Skule.

You could endure that he should doom me; but could you also endure that he should let the doom be fulfilled?

Margrete.

Lord of heaven, give me strength!

King Skule.

Could you, Margrete?

Margrete.

[Softly and shuddering.] No, no—we should have to part,—I could never see him more!

King Skule.

You would darken the fairest light of his life and of yours;—be at peace, Margrete,—it shall not be needful.

Lady Ragnhild.

Flee from the land, Skule; I will follow you whithersoever you will.

King Skule.

[Shaking his head.] With a mocking shade between us?—To-night have I found you for the first time; there must fall no shade between me and you, my silent, faithful wife;—therefore must we not seek to unite our lives on this earth.

Sigrid.

My kingly brother! I see you need me not;—I see you know what path to take.

338

King Skule.

There are men born to live, and men born to die. My desire was ever thitherward where God's finger pointed not the way for me; therefore I never saw my path clear, till now. My peaceful home-life have I wrecked; I can never win it back again. My sins against Håkon I can atone by freeing him from a kingly duty which must have parted him from his dearest treasure. The townsfolk stand without; I will not wait for King Håkon! The Vargbælgs are near; so long as I live they will not swerve from their purpose; if they find me here, I cannot save your child, Margrete.—See, look upwards! See how it wanes and pales, the flaming sword that has hung over my head! Yes, yes,—God has spoken and I have understood him, and his wrath is appeased. Not in the sanctuary of Elgesæter will I cast me down and beg for grace of an earthly king;—I must into the mighty church roofed with the vault of stars and 'tis the King of Kings I must implore for grace and mercy over all my life-work.

Sigrid.

Withstand him not! Withstand not the call of God! The day dawns; it dawns in Norway and it dawns in his restless soul! Have not we trembling women cowered long enough in our secret rooms, terror-stricken and hidden in the darkest corners, listening to all the horror that was doing without, listening to the bloody pageant that stalked over the land from end to end! Have we not lain pale and stone-like in the churches, not daring to look forth, even as Christ's disciples lay in Jerusalem on the Great Good Friday when

339

the Lord was led by to Golgotha! Use thy wings, and woe to them who would bind thee now!

Lady Ragnhild.

Fare forth in peace, my husband; fare thither, where no mocking shade shall stand between us, when we meet.

[Hastens into the chapel.]

Margrete.

My father, farewell, farewell,—a thousand times farewell!

[Follows Lady Ragnhild.]

Sigrid.

[Opens the church door and calls in.] To your knees, all ye women! Assemble yourselves in prayer; send up a message in song to the Lord, and tell him that now Skule Bårdsson comes penitent home from his rebellious race on earth.

King Skule.

Sigrid, my faithful sister, greet King Håkon from me; tell him that even in my last hour I know not whether he be king-born; but this I know of a surety: he it is whom God has chosen.

Sigrid.

I will bear him your greeting.

King Skule.

And yet another greeting must you bear. There dwells a penitent woman in the north, in Halogaland; tell her that her son has gone before; he went with me when there was great danger for his soul.

340

Sigrid.

That will I.

King Skule.

Tell her, it was not with the heart he sinned; pure and blameless shall she surely meet him again.

Sigrid.

That will I. [*Points towards the background.*] Hark! they are breaking the lock!

King Skule.

[*Points towards the chapel.*] Hark! they are singing loud to God of salvation and peace!

Sigrid.

Hark again! All the bells in Nidaros are ringing — —!

King Skule.

[*Smiles mournfully.*] They are ringing a king to his grave.

Sigrid.

Nay, nay, they ring for your true crowning! Farewell, my brother, let the purple robe of blood flow wide over your shoulders; under it may all sin be hidden! Go forth, go into the great church and take the crown of life.

[*Hastens into the chapel.*

[*Chanting and bell-ringing continue during what follows.*

Voices.

[*Outside the gate.*] The lock has burst! Force us not to break the peace of the church!

341

King Skule.

I come.

The Townsmen.

And the church-robber must come too!

King Skule.

Ay, the church-robber shall come too. [*Goes over to Peter.*] My son, are you ready?

Peter.

Ay, father, I am ready.

King Skule.

[*Looks upwards.*] O God, I am a poor man, I have but my life to give; but take that, and keep watch over Håkon's great king's-thought.—See now, give me your hand.

Peter.

Here is my hand, father.

King Skule.

And fear not for that which is now to come.

Peter.

Nay, father, I fear not, when I go with you.

King Skule.

A safer way have we two never trodden together. [*He opens the gate; the Townsmen stand without with upraised weapons.*] Here are we; we come of our own free will;—but strike him not in the face.

[*They pass out, hand in hand; the gate glides to.*

342

A Voice.

Aim not, spare not;—strike them where ye can.

King Skule's Voice.

'Tis base to deal thus with chieftains.

[*A short noise of weapons; then a heavy fall is heard; all is still for a moment.*

A Voice.

They are dead, both of them!

[*The King's horn sounds.*

Another Voice.

There comes King Håkon with all his guard!

The Crowd.

Hail Håkon Håkonsson; now have you no longer any foemen.

Gregorius Jonsson.

[*Stops a little before the corpses.*] So I have come too late!

[*Enters the convent yard.*

Dagfinn.

It had been ill for Norway had you come sooner. [*Calls out.*] In here, King Håkon!

Håkon.

[*Stopping.*] The body lies in my way!

Dagfinn.

If Håkon Håkonsson would go forward, he must pass over Skule Bårdsson's body!

Håkon.

In God's name then!

[*Steps over the corpse and comes in.*

343

Dagfinn.

At last you can set about your king's-work with free hands. In there are those you love; in Nidaros they are ringing in peace in the land; and yonder he lies who was your direst foe.

Håkon.

All men misjudged him, reading not his secret.

Dagfinn.

His secret?

Håkon.

[*Seizes him by the arm, and says softly.*] Skule Bårdsson was God's step-child on earth; that was the secret.

[*The song of the women is heard more loudly from the chapel; all the bells are still ringing in Nidaros.*

THE END.

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook. The original Plain Vanilla ASCII version can be located at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/66186>.

This eBook was converted to Portable Document Format (PDF) by Theatre Links at <https://theatrelinks.com>.