

Havelok the Dane

anon

a late-thirteenth century Middle English romance

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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This story has been translated and retold from: Ronald B Herzman, Graham Drake and Eve Salisbury (Eds) 1997. *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. Taken from the only surviving (nearly) complete copy of the story, that found in Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Laud Misc. 108, dating to c. 1300–25.

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Havelok the Dane

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late thirteenth century

Herkneth to me, gode men · wives, maydnes and alle men · of a tale that ich you wile telle · wo so it wile here and thereto dwelle · The tale is of Havelok imaked · Whil he was litel, he yede ful naked – Gentlemen, wives, maidens, listen to me, all of you! Listen to this story I want to tell you. The tale is about Havelok, who was very impoverished when he was young but a good fellow to have around; he was very brave, and when the chips were down he was a man to be relied upon, that's for sure! He was magnificent on a horse, and very courageous – but my throat is dry, so all of you who have a mind to stay and to listen, fill a mug of good ale for me before I start. And while I drink, let me implore Christ to shield us all from hell and to give us the strength to live our lives so that we may come to him in the end. Let us praise Christ for giving us this gift.

So here's the beginning. And may Christ give us *all* a good ending! The story is of Havelok.

There was once a king who kept his country in good order and made good laws, and upheld them. He loved justice and truth and gave power to the just and the good. Villains and thieves got only what they deserved, for he hated them all. He cast all the outlaws and robbers that he could lay his hands on into fetters and then hanged them. No gold could save them. The king wouldn't allow himself to be bribed. In those days a man could carry fifty pounds or more of red gold on his back, in a satchel or in a bag, and nobody would molest him or try to rob him of it. Chapmen could travel with their wares the length and breadth of England in complete safety, buying and selling from town to town in the sure knowledge that thieves would be dealt with very severely.

England was at ease, thanks to this magnificent king. Everybody praised him. Christ of heaven was with him, he was the flower of England. No one dared to bring hunger or conflict to his people, for when he made war upon his enemies he put the fear of God into them, so that they preferred to keep as quiet as they could, and were willing to do whatever he told them to. But he held justice in the highest regard and wouldn't allow himself to be influenced by any gift, neither silver nor gold.

This king was generous to all those who had to fend for themselves, and if anybody threatened them, be he knight or cleric, he would see to it that justice prevailed. If any-



body harmed a widow, however strong and powerful he might be, he would quickly be cast into iron fetters for it. And if anybody forced himself upon a maiden and had sex with her without her consent, he would have his limbs cut off.

This king was the finest warrior who had ever wielded a weapon on horseback and he feared nobody. No knight would confront him without feeling the weight of his sword and the skill of his sword arm. The king would leap into the attack like the spark from a flint and fight until either he had stripped the knight of his horse and armour or received his outstretched hands in surrender, with a 'Lord, have mercy!' But this king was generous also; there was no food on his table so fine or magnificent that a poor man was not welcome to it. The king valued Christ's reward for goodness, his name was Athelwold and no lord had ever ruled over England with greater fairness and justice. But he had only a single heir, a young daughter who was still a babe-in-arms when he fell ill and knew that his last days had come.

'Christ, what shall I do?' he prayed. 'Lord, I know that I am saved, but what will become of my little girl? She's still an infant. If she could ride on horseback and command the allegiance of a thousand knights, I would still worry for her safety.' He shuddered at the thought.

Shortly afterwards he sent letters to all his earls and all his barons, from Dover to Roxburgh, urging them to come to him as quickly as possible. All those who received this communication made their way sorrowfully to the place where the king was lying ill. They were brought into the hall, at Winchester, and into the king's presence.

King Athelwold lay in sickness and discomfort, so stricken with fever that he could eat nothing and was in constant distress. Nobody had any idea how to help him, and everybody assumed that he was close to death. They wrung their hands and wept as they implored Christ to save him from this evil. When the barons had greeted the king and were all seated, they wept and wailed and became quite loud in their grief, but the king commanded them to be quiet.

'Welcome to you all, as always, and thank you for coming,' he said. 'I am about to die, and weeping will solve nothing. But now that you can all see that I am dying, I want to ask you to turn your thoughts to my daughter, who shall be your lady after me, and to consider who may best be appointed to protect and look after her, both she and Eng-

Havelok the Dane is a Middle English romance which gives the impression that it is based upon historical fact when it is not. Despite the fact that the fishing port of Grimsby, in England, has claimed Grim as its founder since medieval times, and that its seal, dating to the thirteenth century, depicts Havelok and his wife alongside Grim, there is no known record of a King Havelok, neither in English nor in Danish history.

Like many Middle English lais and romances, the story chronicles a hero's journey on the wheel of Fortune from the very top to the very bottom, and then back again to the very top. Havelok, the young son of a Danish king, like other such heroes and heroines of romance, seems to be facing certain death only to be whisked, instead, overseas. In Havelok's case, interestingly, he is rescued by a fisherman, a man named Grim, who, as Grimnar, may be Odin in disguise, given the possibly Scandinavian origins of this tale. He grows up in the household of this fisherman, then travels to Lincoln and works, like Sir Gawain's brother Gareth, as an unknown kitchen menial, before journeying back across the sea, like Sir Tristram, disguised as a merchant.

The Middle English Romance of Havelok the Dane was probably composed in the late thirteenth century and is found also in Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Laud Misc. 108, dating to c. 1300–25, with fragments of the tale surviving in Cambridge University Library Add. 4407.

land, until she is a grown woman and able to look after herself.’

Earl Godrich of Cornwall would make a suitable guardian, they all agreed. He is loyal and trustworthy, and could well protect her until she is able to assume the throne, they assured him.

The king liked this advice; he knew that the earl showed wisdom both in his actions and in his advice, and was greatly respected and feared by all his peers. The king had a fine cloth brought, laid a book of prayers, a chalice, a communion cloth and a holy wafer onto it and had the earl swear upon these holy things that he would protect the girl to the utmost of his ability until she was twelve years old and able to understand her obligations. Then, when she was able to converse with others sensibly and could begin to look for a husband, he should find for her the best suitors that he could, the strongest and



the most valiant in battle, and see whom she might fall in love with, and then pass the rule of England into her hands. He made the earl swear to all of this.

When these oaths had been taken, the king had his daughter brought forward and gave her into the custody of the earl, along with all his lands, that is, the whole of England.

There was nothing more for the king to do then, except to pray fervently for God’s grace, make his last confession and receive the sacrament – five hundred and five times I believe he did this – and he flagellated himself in penance so much that the blood ran from his wounds. He distributed his property with great care and authority and soon his bequests were all complete. When it was all given and there was nothing left to distribute, no chest nor box in the whole of England that had not been allocated to a grateful recipient, then the beatings began anew, the confessions, the sacrament: ‘Lord, I put my soul into your care...’ but his words were becoming less coherent now. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he murmured at last, and then he died in front of all his noblemen.

When the king was dead, there was the greatest outpouring of grief that any man has ever seen: sobbing, sighing and weeping, hair being torn and the wringing of hands. The bells were rung and monks and priests sang the Mass and read from the Book of Psalms so that God and Christ might lead the king’s soul into heaven to live there for eternity. Everybody wept; rich and poor alike.

The king was buried, and the earl was not slow to carry out the king’s wishes. He quickly secured England into his possession, installed trusted noblemen into all the castles and made sure that the people swore their allegiance to him. When he had taken oaths from earls and barons, the willing and the unwilling, knights and commoners, free men and surfs, he appointed judges to travel through the length and breadth of England, from Dover to Roxburgh, and appointed sheriffs and other officials, men-at-arms to keep the

peace and yeomen to protect the forests and roads from thieves and outlaws. Soon he had everything in his grasp and at his command. And at his mercy. No one dared to go against him, no earl nor baron, knight nor commoner. His rule went unchallenged. In a short while, the whole of England was in awe of him and feared him as cattle fear a sharply pointed stick.

The king's daughter grew into the most beautiful young lady in the whole world. Her name was Goldeburgh, and many a tear would be shed for her in the years to come. She became accomplished in all the things that are of any merit and of any worth, and when Earl Godrich was made aware of how Goldeburgh had grown and become a woman, how wise and intelligent she was becoming, how virtuous and beautiful, and when he was reminded that she was the rightful heir of England, he grieved and said: 'Is it right that she should tell me what to do? Is it right that she should be Queen of England and hold me and all my family in thrall? A curse on this! I curse anyone who might let this happen!

'She has grown too proud, too fond of the good things in life which I have provided for her, the fine food and the fine clothes. I have been too generous. My care for her has been negligent in this regard and she shouldn't have been allowed to set her sights so high. I have a son, a fine young lad. He shall have England to rule over when the time is right. He will be king! This I swear!'

Earl Godrich cared not a straw for the oath that he had taken. When this treason was fully conceived, he quickly had Goldeburgh fetched from Winchester and taken to Dover, a town that stands on the coast, and he had her incarcerated in Dover Castle so that none of her friends could visit her and no one could protect her, and he made her dress in the clothes of a peasant.

But let us leave Goldeburgh for a moment, groaning and complaining in this prison. Earl Godrich will govern England until Goldeburgh is more than twenty years old, but Jesus Christ, who brought Lazarus back from the dead, may you bring about her release!

It happened, at this time, that there was a strong and wealthy ruler who governed in Denmark, and his name was King Birkabeyn. He was very brave and a fine warrior, the finest knight ever to have led an army, to level a lance or gallop a warhorse, and he had many knights and retainers. He had three children by his wife, a son and two daughters, and he loved them all very much. But Death, who proffers no favours, neither to rich nor to poor, took him unexpectedly. When he realised that his time was up, Birkabeyn sent for priests, canons and monks to hear his confession, to absolve him and to guide him towards a good end, while he still had time.

When his soul was fully prepared for death and he had distributed all his wealth, he sat all his knights down, for he wanted to know who to entrust the care of his children to, until such time as they were able to ride a horse, speak for themselves and maintain the loyalty of knights and attendants. As the discussion progressed, the king chose a certain knight whom he thought to be his most faithful and trustworthy, his friend Godard,

and he obtained this man's assurance that he would do his best for the children until the boy, Havelok, was old enough to wear a helmet, carry a spear and to ride at the head of an army as King of Denmark. Birkabeyn believed the assurances that Goddard gave to him and laid his hands upon Godard's head.

'Here I entrust to you my son, my two daughters and all my lands, along with the kingship of Denmark, until my son has come of age,' he said. 'But I require you to swear upon an altar and upon the holy chalice and other holy apparel, on the church bells and on the Mass book, that you will look after my children properly until my son is old enough to be made a knight. Then you shall pass on to him his rightful inheritance: Denmark, and all that belongs to it, its castles, its towns, its forests and farms.'

Godard swore to all this. Then he sat beside his fellow knights, who were all weeping for the king's imminent demise, which came very shortly afterwards.

Jesus Christ, who made the moon to shine upon the dark night, protect Birkabeyn's soul from the terrors of hell and let it live in heaven with God's dear son.

When Birkabeyn was laid in his grave, the earl took Havelok, along with the boy's two sisters, Swanburgh and Helfled, and placed them in a castle where none of their relatives were able to gain access to them. Here they wept and wailed, both for hunger and for cold, for they were all still infants. They were clothed in rags and had nothing but straw to lie on, for Godard cared nothing for the oath that he had given. He was the most treacherous villain that the world has ever seen, except for the wicked Judas. Earl Godard should receive the curse of everybody with a tongue



to utter it! But for now, he controls all of Denmark. All the folk have sworn allegiance to him, rich and poor, good and bad, and vowed to do whatever he commands and not to resist him in any way. And Godard has conceived a great villainy, a foul crime against these children, may the devil take him!

He went to the tower where the children were being imprisoned. They were shivering and crying for hunger and cold, and the little boy, being braver than his sisters, knelt before the earl and greeted him courteously.

'What's the matter?' replied Godard. 'Why all this weeping and wailing?'

'We're hungry,' replied Havelok. 'We have nothing to eat. There's nobody here to give us any food or drink. We barely get half of what we need. Woe it is that we were born! Is there a famine? Is there no corn to make bread with? We're hungry. We're starving!'

Godard listened to their complaints, but had no concern for them. He picked up the girls as though in fun and pretended to play with them. They were pale and emaciated. And in a sudden change of mood, he took out a knife and slit their throats. Then he cut

their bodies into pieces. Here is sorrow for anyone to see – the girls sprawled against the wall, draped in their own blood and gore.

Havelok looked on and stood stock still. He felt much empathy for his poor sisters, but felt fear for his own safety as well, for a knife was being held against his own heart now, threatening his life. The little boy quickly knelt before this Judas and said: ‘Lord, have mercy! I’ll give you my loyalty, I’ll give you all of Denmark if you’ll let me live. I’ll swear upon the book that I’ll never bear shield or spear against you, nor any other weapon. Lord, have mercy upon me! I will flee Denmark today and never come back again. I’ll deny that Birkabeyn was ever my father.’

When this devil heard Havelok say this, he hesitated. He withdrew the knife that was still warm with the girls’ innocent blood and – here is a miracle indeed! – Godard spared the little boy and did not kill him. Havelok thought that he was going to die, but Godard hesitated: ‘If I let him live, he might cause me a great deal of trouble in the future. I’ll spend the rest of my life waiting for him to strike and to take his revenge,’ the earl thought. ‘And if he is killed, and my children thrive, they will inherit all of Denmark and my descendants will be kings and queens.’

‘I shall cast him into the sea, and make sure that he’s drowned; I’ll put a heavy anchor around his neck, and let him try to float with that weighing him down!’

Earl Godard sent for a fisherman whom he knew to be loyal, and said: ‘Grim, you know that you are my man. Tomorrow I shall make you a free man, and wealthy to boot. Take this child with you tonight, when the moon is up, and throw him into the sea. I will take the sin upon myself and confess it as my own.’

Grim took the child and tied him up with rope. Havelok was in great pain. He had never been so frightened in all his life.

Jesus Christ, who has made the dumb speak and the lame walk, allow the boy to take revenge for this crime!

When Grim had secured all the knots in the rope, he put the bound child into a sack and thrust rags into his mouth so that Havelok couldn’t speak and could hardly breathe. When this was done, Grim prepared to carry out the instructions that he had been given and to drown the boy in the sea, so he put the sack over his back and carried Havelok to his hut.

‘Keep an eye on this boy,’ he told his wife, Dame Leve, ‘for my life depends on it. I’m going to drown the child in the sea, and as a reward for this we’ll receive our freedom and have gold and property in plenty. My lord has promised me this.’

Dame Leve jumped out of her chair and threw the sack down onto the floor so heavily that Havelok cracked his head on a stone. He would have been justified in crying: ‘I curse that I was born as I was: I wish an eagle or a vulture, a lion, a she-wolf or a bear was here protect me!’

The child lay in the sack until midnight and then Grim instructed his wife to bring a lantern, so that he could put on his clothes. 'I shall take him to the sea. I have to, you understand this. Then I'll drown him. Get up at once. Blow the fire into life and light a candle,' he said.

She did as he asked, but as she prepared to fetch his clothes and stir the fire, she saw, surrounding the little boy as he lay there, a light that was as bright as day. It was coming out of his mouth, like a sunbeam. The room was illuminated by this light, as though there were candles burning there.

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed Dame Leve. 'What have you brought into our hut? Get up, Grim. Come and see this!'

They both went up to the child, took him out of the sack, loosened the ropes that were binding him and immediately saw, as they pulled back his shirt, a birthmark on his shoulder that marked him out as a king's son.

'Christ!' exclaimed Grim. 'This boy is heir to the kingdom of Denmark! He'll have no mercy on Godard, that's for sure.' He fell at the boy's feet and cried: 'Lord, have



mercy upon me, and upon my wife. Lord, we are your faithful servants, we'll protect you, don't worry. We'll look after you until you're old enough to ride a horse and bear the weight of a helmet on your head, a shield and a lance. Godard will never know. You shall make me a free man, my lord. I will watch over you and protect you. You will make me free.'

Havelok sat up and asked for bread. 'I was so trussed up in that sack with the ropes that you bound me with and the gag you thrust into my mouth that I could hardly breathe, and I'm starving hungry.'

'I'll fetch bread and cheese for you at once,' said Leve, 'butter and milk, pasties and flans. We'll soon have your hunger satisfied, lord.'

She brought the food and Havelok tucked into it fiercely. He went at it like a grindstone, happily shovelling it in; he ate a whole loaf, and more, for he couldn't hide his hunger. It was obvious that he hadn't eaten for days!

When he had finished the meal, Grim made up a bed for him, helped him to take his clothes off and said: 'Have a good sleep now, son, it will do you good. Sleep soundly, you're perfectly safe here. Your sorrow has turned to joy.'

Later, as the sky brightened, Grim prepared to go to see that wicked traitor Godard, the steward of Denmark.

'Lord, I've done to that boy what you asked me to,' he said to him. 'I've drowned him in the sea. I threw him in with an anchor tied around his neck, so he's dead. Bread will

never pass *his* lips again. He's lying asleep on the seafloor. Give me the gold and possessions that you said you would. Make me a wealthy man and give me my freedom. It's what you promised.'

Godard stood and looked at him, as though weighing him up. 'What are you asking for? Do you want me to make you an earl? Go home. Go home you peasant. Get lost. You are what you are. You'll get nothing more from me. I've a mind to send you to the gallows. By God, you've murdered a child. You should be hanged for it! If I was you, I'd get going while the going's good.'

Grim fled, thinking: 'What can I do? If he finds out that the boy is still alive, he *will* have me hanged.'

Grim quickly sold all his corn, his sheep and his cattle, his horse and his pigs, his bearded goats, his geese and his hens, everything that would fetch a price, and he got the best that he could for it all. Then he fitted out a ship, had it properly tarred and made seaworthy, got a good mast for it, strong ropes, sturdy oars and a fine sail. Not a nail was lacking when he had finished. And when the ship was fully prepared and provisioned, he put the little boy in it, along with his wife, his three sons and his two lovely daughters and then he heaved on the oars, and soon the vessel was out on the open sea where he could raise the sail and make his escape. He was only a mile from land when a wind began to blow from the north and it drove them swiftly towards England.

England is where Havelok will one day rule; but first he will have to endure great shame and sorrow, much pain and discomfort, but it will all be his in the end, as you will discover, if you listen.

Grim sailed into the Humber estuary and made land at Lindsey, where his ship sat on the sand. Soon, he made a place for it on the high beach and built a cottage by the shore for himself and his family. He built a little house with earthen walls that gave them shelter and security, and the place became known as Grimsby; this was its name, everybody called it that, and it bears that name to this day.

Years passed. Grim was a good fisherman and knew the sea well, and took many fine catches and landed many excellent fish, both with a net and with a hook. He caught sturgeons and whales, turbot, salmon and eels. He made a good living at it. He caught porpoises and seals, as well as herring, mackerel, cod, sole and skate, and made baskets to carry the fish to market in: one basket for himself and another three for his sons. They took the fish everywhere to sell; no town or village was too small for them to visit and he never came away empty-handed but always had corn and beans in his bag, and bread and pickles tucked away in his shirt. His efforts were never for nothing, and when he caught a Great Lamprey, he knew exactly what to do: he went straight to Lincoln with it and made a good profit there. He would come away very happy, with cakes, bread made from the finest flour, bags full of corn and meal, beef, mutton and bacon, and hemp to make his fishing lines with, as well as rope for his nets.

In this way, Grim led a good life. He maintained his family like this for twelve years or more. Havelok was well aware that Grim worked hard to put a meal on the table for him, while he stayed at home doing nothing to help.

‘I’m no longer a boy,’ he thought to himself. ‘I’ve grown tall and could eat even more than Grim is able to provide. Let’s be honest, I can already eat more than Grim and his five children put together! Things can’t go on like this. I will go with them and learn how to make myself useful. I would rather work for my keep. There is no shame in working. If a man wants food and drink, he must work for it. I will gladly carry the baskets for it won’t hurt me to do so, even if they weigh as much as an ox. Tomorrow, I’m going out to help them, and to earn my keep.’

The next morning, as soon as it was light, Havelok got up, took a pannier that was stacked high with fish and put it on his back. I swear, it was so heavy that four men would have struggled to carry it between them! But off he went with it, sold all the fish and brought the silver back, every penny of it. He didn’t keep a farthing for himself. He did this every day; he didn’t stay at home any more but went out to learn his trade.

One autumn, there was a shortage of food. Bread became scarce and famine threatened. Grim didn’t know what to do and was very worried, for Havelok had an appetite that dwarfed everyone else’s. Grim didn’t know how he was going to get enough food for them all, and fish were scarce as well; there was no skate nor ling nor any other species that might sustain them over the winter. He was not so much worried for his children as for Havelok.

‘Havelok, my dear son,’ said Grim, ‘I fear that we will all die of hunger, this shortage of food is becoming so severe. All our stores have been used up. It may be better for you to go off and make your own way than to stay here with us. You know the way to Lincoln, you’ve travelled it often enough. In Lincoln there are many good men and you’ll be able to earn you keep there, I’m sure. But look how shabbily dressed you are! I’ll make a coat for you from my sail, so that you won’t freeze to death on the way.’

Grim took a pair of shears that were hanging on the wall and soon had a garment for Havelok to wear. The young man quickly put it on, and then set off. He had no shoes, no hose to keep his legs warm and no other clothes at all, just a cape made of sailcloth as he made his way barefoot to Lincoln.

When he arrived at the fine city of Lincoln, Havelok realised that he had nowhere to go. He spent two days looking for work, and didn’t eat anything during this time. But on the third day he heard a shout of: ‘Bearers, bearers, come here. We’ve some work for you!’

Havelok muscled his way to the front of a crowd of men, pushing nine or ten of them into the mud, and took up the load that the chief cook at the castle had just bought at the bridge over the river, and wanted transported. He took it to the castle, leaving all the others behind, and earned a cake for himself.

The next day: 'Bearers, bearers, come quickly!' Havelok saw the earl's cook on the bridge again, with a consignment of fish from Cornwall and pushed his way through the crowd, knocking over sixteen young lads who got in his way. He left all these young men toppled in a heap, filled his basket full of fish until he had almost a cartload to carry – salmon, plaice, squids, eels and Great Lampreys – then hurried with all the speed that he could muster until he arrived at the castle and gave his burden over to the porters there. The porters lifted the consignment from his head while the cook looked on with pleasure, impressed with the young man's strength and enthusiasm.

'Will you work for me?' the cook asked. 'I'll feed you well, and give you fair wages.'

'Goodness,' replied Havelok. 'Sir, I won't require anything else except the food that I need, and I'll fetch water and fire for you, I'll blow on coals to keep them burning and break sticks for kindling and make a good blaze in the hearth for you. I can split branches and skin eels, wash dishes and do anything else that you want me to.'

'That's sounds ideal, then,' said the cook. 'Go and sit over there. Sit down and eat as much as you like.'

Havelok sat at once and remained there until he'd eaten his fill and felt satisfied. Then he made his way to the well, drew up some water and without asking for any help, took a large tubful of water in his arms and carried it to the kitchen. He didn't need any help fetching water from the well, nor for carrying food and kitchen stores and firewood from the bridge. He carried peat for the fire and cut up all the firewood by himself with an axe. But although he never rested, he was of all men the least assertive, the most modest, good-humoured and always quick to make a joke. He hid his misfortunes well. There was no child he didn't like to have a game with; he was popular with everybody, with knights, children, young and old. All who saw him loved him, both noblemen and commoners.

Word went about, far and wide, how strong Havelok was, how big and fine-looking, although he was dressed in a single garment that looked as though it had been made out of the sail from a fishing boat! It was a dreadful thing to be clothed in, not worth a stick of firewood! The cook took pity on him and bought Havelok a brand new set of clothes, some hose and some shoes. Havelok quickly put them on, and when he was dressed and sporting his new attire, he looked absolutely magnificent. He looked like a king, or an emperor; no man born of woman had ever looked so handsome. His new clothes transformed him.

Nobody could get the better of Havelok at wrestling and he could soon topple anybody to the ground. When he was amongst other men in Lincoln, and all the earl's men were there as well, playing together, he stood head and shoulders above everybody. He stood over everyone like a mast. He was tall, strong and agile, and there was nobody in England to match him. But whilst he was very strong, he was also very gentle and good-natured. Even if mistreated, he wouldn't retaliate, he wouldn't shout or get angry, and neither had he developed any interest in love, and hadn't felt any desire to explore

a woman's body yet.

All this while, Earl Godrich was still ruling. One day, the earl summoned to Lincoln many earls and barons, all those who lived in England, to attend a parliament there. These noblemen brought along their champions, and many servants. And it happened that some young men, about nine or ten I think, had organised a game amongst themselves and the spectacle had attracted a large number of men from the city to come to watch, the strong and the weak, free men and servants; there were strong men and pugnacious youths, even peasants with their sticks looking on, as though they'd come straight from prodding an ox at the plough. A large audience had assembled. Even grooms who should have been looking after their horses had abandoned their duties to attend.

In front of them all lay a tree trunk that had been placed to form a barrier and the lads – quite a number of them – were throwing a huge boulder over it as far as they could. The stone was enormous. It weighed as much as an ox! A man had to be very strong to lift it to his knees; no clergyman could have raised it an inch! The champions who had come with their noble lords were seeing how far each of them could throw this rock beyond the barrier. Whoever could throw this stone a tiny bit further than anybody else was held to be a true champion and a man of great strength. They all stood and looked closely at every throw, and disputes arose over where the stone had landed exactly and whose throw had gone the furthest.

Havelok looked on with interest but didn't really understand what was going on, for he'd never seen sport like this before. His master urged him to have a go, and being a little fearful of him, Havelok complied at once. He picked up the heavy stone and heaved it twelve feet further than anybody else had managed to do, at his first attempt.

The men who saw this had a good laugh and shoved each other playfully. 'Time to go!' they declared. They had no desire to throw the stone any more.



News of this astonishing feat soon spread far and wide. Word carried throughout England how strong Havelok was, and also how meek and mild. There was particular amazement amongst the knights who were assembled in Lincoln Castle, and so it wasn't long before Earl Godrich heard of it. He learned everything about Havelok, how tall he was, how strong and able, and thought to himself: 'This young man is a godsend! He will give all of England to me and to my son after me. King Athelwold made me swear upon all the sacred things of the holy Mass that I should give his daughter away in marriage to the greatest man in the kingdom, to the strongest, the fairest and the best. Well here he is! Who better could I find to fulfil that to which I swore on the Book, even if I searched as far as India? He's the one! He shall marry Goldeburgh.'

These were the treasonous thoughts that ran through Godrich's head, for he was sure that Havelok was the son of some landless peasant who wouldn't have the wit or intelligence to administer so much as a single furrow of ground with she who was the rightful heir of England, the good and beautiful Goldeburgh. He believed that Havelok was a menial, a servant, and he therefore supposed that Goldeburgh's rightful inheritance was now his for the taking. May he be hanged for it!

So Godrich sent for Goldeburgh and had her brought to Lincoln. He had the cathedral bells rung for her and made out that he was delighted to see her. He told her that he had arranged for her to marry the strongest, fittest and most good-natured man alive. She replied that, by Christ and Saint John, she wasn't going to marry anybody. She wasn't about to let anyone take her to bed unless he was a king or a king's son and heir, however magnificent he might be.

Earl Godrich got very angry with her, and exclaimed: 'Do you aspire to be a queen? You'll have this king's pawn because he's the only thing near to a king that you're going to get! He's a cook's scullion, there's no other man for you and a curse on anyone who thinks otherwise. Tomorrow you shall be married and brought to bed, however much you may hate the idea.'

Goldeburgh wept. She cried out in sorrow and wished herself dead.

The next morning, when the church bells rang to welcome in the new day, Earl Godrich asked Havelok if he was interested in getting married.

'No, not at all,' replied Havelok, with complete honesty. 'Upon my life, I haven't the means to keep a wife, I couldn't feed her or clothe her or give her shoes even. Where could I take her? I have no house, no cottage even. I haven't even a piece of wood to my name! I couldn't provide her with food. I've no clothes except for an old white cloak made from sailcloth. These clothes that I'm wearing now are the cook's, not mine. I'm his servant.'

Godrich strode over and punched Havelok in the face. 'Unless you take this woman that I'm going to give you to be your wife,' he shouted, 'I'll have you hanged. I'll have your eyes gouged out.'

Havelok was alone and fearful, so he agreed to do what was being asked of him.

Earl Godrich quickly sent for Goldeburgh. 'Unless you accept this man,' he said, 'I'll have you banished, sent abroad, hanged even. I'll have you burnt at the stake!'

She was very frightened by these threats and agreed to do as he said. Although she didn't like it at all, she imagined that it was God's will – God who makes the wheat grow and who decreed that she should be born a woman.

When Havelok, out of sheer terror, had reluctantly made his marriage vows, and Goldeburgh had very reluctantly agreed to become his wife, Mass pennies were given in plenty. He gave her his and she accepted them and they were married properly; nothing was

forgotten that pertained to the marriage ceremony. The service was conducted by the Archbishop of York, who happened to be there because of the parliament.

When Havelok and Goldeburgh were husband and wife, as witnessed by everybody in Lincoln, Havelok hadn't the slightest idea what to do or where to go. All he knew was that they couldn't stay where they were, because it was obvious that Earl Godrich hated them both and there was a danger that the men around him would bring shame upon Goldeburgh, slander upon them both or even worse. It didn't bear thinking about. He'd rather die than have this happen. So Havelok decided that they should flee to Grimsby. He would return to Grim and his three sons, for this was the best way of securing food and clothing he thought. So he and Goldeburgh set off on foot – he could think of no other way of making the journey – and they followed the right paths until they came to Grimsby.

When Havelok arrived he found that Grim had died. He'd had no idea that this had happened. But Grim's five children were alive and they were very pleased to see Havelok when they saw him. They made much joy on his return, for Havelok had always been very kind to them. They fell to their knees before Havelok and greeted him enthusiastically:

'We are *so* pleased to see you!' they exclaimed. 'You can provide for us, if you stay here. We have lots of things, a horse, oxen, a fishing boat floating on the sea, gold and silver and much besides, that Grim, our father, left to us. He gave it all to us to give to you. We have sheep, we have pigs. Come and live with us, and it shall all be yours. You shall be lord and master here, and we will serve you and your wife. A blessing upon your marriage! Our sisters will obey her. They'll wash her clothes, and wring them dry, and fetch water, and make up your bed at night. She'll be our mistress and our lady.'

They broke up sticks and kindled a fire with them, then killed a goose and a hen, a duck and a drake, and began to prepare a feast. No good food was lacking, they fetched wine and ale as well and joyously made many fine toasts to the new couple.

But every night, as Goldeburgh lay in bed, sorrow was her constant companion. She knew that she had been deceived, and that she had been forced to marry beneath her.

But then, one night, in the darkness, she saw a light. It was very bright and very beautiful, as though it was coming from a flame somewhere. She glanced around and saw that it was coming from Havelok's mouth. Suddenly, she was terrified! 'What can this mean,' she thought in a panic. Then it occurred to her: 'Is there some strange destiny in store for my husband?' She noticed on his shoulder a red birthmark in the shape of a cross, and at that very moment an angel's voice came to her: 'Goldeburgh, grieve no more. Havelok, whom you have married, is a king's son and the heir to a kingdom. This is the meaning of the cross that you can see on his shoulder. He shall govern both Denmark and England. He will be a powerful ruler of both these countries, and you will bear witness to this with your own eyes, for you will be his queen.'

Goldeburgh was so overjoyed to hear this that she couldn't hide her delight. She kissed Havelok where he lay beside her. He was asleep and hadn't heard what the angel had said, but he woke up now and said:

'Darling, are you asleep? I've just had a peculiar dream. Listen to this: I was in Denmark, I think, but on top of the highest mountain I've ever seen! It was so high that I thought I could see the whole world beneath me. I felt that I owned all of Denmark, all its towns, all its castles, and my arms were so long that I could reach out to embrace it all, and I did, and when I wanted to bring my arms back in again, all the people of Denmark were clinging to them, and all the castles and towns as well. The keys to these towns and castles were falling at my feet. Then I dreamed that I was flying over the sea towards England, with all the people of any worth in Denmark still clinging to my arms, and I enclosed England in my hand, and I gave it to you.'

'Be joyful!' Goldeburgh exclaimed. 'You're going to wear the crowns of Denmark and of England. My darling, I know that all who live in Denmark will come to you, uncle, brother, father and son, earl and baron, peasant and nobleman. Within a year it will all be yours. But we must travel quickly to Denmark. We must drop everything and go. Ask Grim's three sons to come along with us. They won't say no, they'll be happy to come along, for they love you. Get them to prepare the boat at once. We must act as quickly as we can.'

As soon as it was light, Havelok got up and dressed, then went straight to the church, fell before the cross and cried out: 'Lord! You hold the whole world in your hands, wind and water, woods and fields. Through your holy benevolence, have mercy on me now! Let me take revenge upon the man I saw with my own eyes killing my sisters so cruelly with a knife. He wanted to take my life as well, he instructed Grim to drown me in the sea. He holds my land through great injustice. Lord, have mercy and let me cross the sea safely. I know that the voyage will be dangerous, but let the storms pass over and don't let me be drowned or punished for my sin, but bring me safely to those shores where Godard rules and which is my birthright. I've never done him any harm and he's done this to me; Jesus, you know this to be true.'

When he had said this prayer, Havelok made an offering on the altar, asked Jesus Christ and his sweet mother Mary to look favourably upon his voyage, then made the same request to the cross before which he had lain, and left the church weeping.

When he arrived home, Grim's sons were all ready to take the boat out fishing, so that they could catch enough food to give to Havelok. But Havelok had other plans. First he called the eldest brother, whose name was Robert the Red, then the other two, whose names were William Wenduth and Hugh Raven, and said: 'Listen to me. I'm going to remind you all who I am, for you know well that my father was the King of Denmark, but he received some evil advice and gave my sisters and I into the care of an utter villain. He entrusted everything that was dear to him to this devil, including me, my sisters and the whole of his kingdom. I saw this man kill my two sisters with his own hands; he cut

their throats and dismembered their bodies, then he told your father Grim to throw me onto the sea and drown me. But Grim was intelligent and noble-minded, and had no intention of risking his soul in this way. He preferred to risk God's wrath for breaking an oath rather than for murder. So he fled from Denmark, because if I had been found alive he would have been put in irons and then hanged. So he fled from Denmark and looked after me well, and fed me, and he did this for many years. But now I am old enough to wield a weapon and to take up arms, and I shall never be happy again until I have seen Denmark once more. So I'm asking you to come along with me. I'll make you rich men. Each of you shall have ten castles, and all the lands that come with them, towns, villages, woods and fields.'

There is a gap in the story here, where a page of the manuscript is missing, amounting to about a sixteenth of the tale. All that can really be stated with certainty is that:

The three brothers agreed to accompany him. So Havelok, Goldeburgh and Grim's three sons sailed for Denmark. When they arrived on the Danish shore, disguised as merchants, William, Robert and Havelok went ashore. Havelok was keen to seek permission to carry out buying and selling from a nobleman whose name was Earl Ubbe.

There is no certainty as to how, where or when they assumed this disguise, nor where a ring has come from, one which will be significant in a moment. But now they are speaking with the earl:

'We are merchants, come from England,' Havelok informed him. 'We hope to sell what we have brought with us from overseas, and to buy and sell as we see fit. Then I would like to return to England with the things we have obtained in Denmark. So I'm asking for your permission to conduct my business from town to town. I'm asking you as the highest magistrate, for I recognise no other authority than yours.'



Havelok produced a gold ring – the stone was worth a hundred pounds! – and gave it to Ubbe as a sweetener. The man who first gave a gift in the hope of services rendered was very wise indeed, and Havelok was no less wise now; he will obtain a fine profit from the exchange of this gold ring! Never was a ring sold by merchants able to yield such a huge return. You will appreciate this if you listen carefully to the rest of the story.

When Ubbe had the gold ring, he wouldn't have parted with it for the world. He looked carefully at Havelok, saw how strong he was and how tall, how broad-shouldered and athletic-looking and thought to himself: 'Jesus! Why is this man not a knight? It would suit him much better to be wearing a helmet on his head and carrying a shield and spear than to go around buying and selling things like this. Alas, that this should be his occupation! God, if he takes my advice, he'll leave off this buying and selling and do something more

suitied to his obvious worth.’

Nevertheless: ‘That’s fine by me, Havelok,’ he said. ‘But please, come and eat with me today, you and your beautiful wife. I will guarantee her safety, don’t worry.’

Havelok was a little apprehensive. He couldn’t be sure of Ubbe’s loyalties and was hesitant to accept this invitation, fearing that his wife might be molested or interfered with. He would rather die than let this happen. But he accepted the invitation nonetheless.

Earl Ubbe spurred his horse and then called back, so that all his men could hear: ‘See that you both come, for that will be best, that’s what I want.’

This only served to stoke Havelok’s fears, but he dared not openly defy the earl. So he took his wife along with him and entered the high court of the castle. She was accompanied by Robert, who was intelligent and worldly and willing to protect her with his life, if anyone tried to lay so much as a finger on her. With her also was William Wenduth, Robert’s brother, who could also be relied upon in a fight. Good men are worth looking after.

When Havelok, Goldeburgh and Grim’s two sons entered Ubbe’s hall, Ubbe rose and came towards them, and all his knights and men did as well, as though curious to see who was visiting them. Havelok stood a head taller than anyone else and Ubbe seemed very happy to be gazing upon such a fine specimen of a man. In fact, if the truth be known, he felt a great attraction to Havelok, and to his wife, and would soon love them as much as his own life. There was no one in Denmark, he thought, so worthy of his love. I swear that he felt more love for Havelok than for the whole of Denmark. See how God can lend his help!

When the midday meal was ready to serve, Ubbe fetched his wife and said to her lightheartedly: ‘Madam, you and Havelok should eat together, and the beautiful Goldeburgh, who is fairer than may blossom, shall eat with me. There is no lady more beautiful than her in the whole of Denmark, by Saint John!’

The trestles were put up, the boards laid out, grace was said and before them appeared the most wonderful meal, dishes fit for a king or an emperor. There were cranes, swans, venison, salmon, lampreys and caviar, fine wines, both red and white in plentiful supply; not even the most insignificant page was required to drink ale. But I won’t describe the food, nor the wine, in any more detail than this, there isn’t time to do it justice and it would become boring for you. When all the after-dinner drinks had been poured and many toasts had been made with some splendid spiced wine, it was time for everybody to go back to the places they had come from. But Ubbe thought: ‘If I let them go alone like this, just the four of them, they’ll be in great danger. Men might kill Havelok to get to his beautiful wife.’

He took ten knights along with him, and more than sixty other men, all of them well armed with spears and bows, and went to the watchman, whose name was Bernard Brun. He asked Bernard to put them up for the night and to watch over them until

morning, and instructed him to protect Havelok and Goldeburgh as though his life depended on it.

Bernard was trustworthy and loyal, a most reliable man and a fine warrior as well; there was no other knight in the town better at controlling a horse in combat and wielding a sword. He understood the situation perfectly and was more than happy to comply; he prepared a fine supper for Havelok, like the generous man that he was, and made sure that everything was to their taste. But as soon as they were at the boards and ready to eat, a well-dressed young man appeared outside. He was accompanied by sixty others, strong men bearing swords and knives, each brandishing a sword in his hand.

‘Undo the door, Bernard!’ the young man shouted. ‘Open up quickly and let us in, or you’re a dead man, by Saint Austin!’

Bernard jumped to his feet, seized a coat of chainmail and put it on. Then he grabbed an axe and ran to the door.

‘Who are you, out there, making all this noise?’ he shouted. ‘Go away, you thieves! By Christ, if you don’t, I’ll throw open the door and kill as many of you as I can before I have the rest of you thrown into irons!’

‘Do you think that we’re frightened of you?’ shouted one of the men outside. ‘We’re coming in, whether you like it or not.’

The man picked up a heavy boulder and hurled it hard against the door, splintering the timber. Havelok understood what was happening. He ran out to the door, lifted the enormous beam that was securing it and threw the door wide open.

‘Here I am!’ he cried, holding the crossbeam. ‘Come to me, and a curse upon anyone who runs away.’

‘No, the curse is on you,’ cried one, and ran towards Havelok with his sword drawn. Two others joined into the attack with relish. Havelok raised the end of the timber beam and with one swing of it killed all three of them; their heads were smashed and their brains laid bare to the stars. A fourth attacker was given a similar welcome by the end of the beam: it smashed his right eye out of its socket, and a follow-up stroke killed him stone dead. The fifth was served with a massive blow across his shoulders that severed an artery and as he lay bleeding to death a sixth tried to make a run for it and received a blow across the back of his neck that took his head off. When this one was down, a seventh drew his sword and lunged at Havelok’s face, intending to take out one of Havelok’s eyes with the point of his sword, but the beam was already bearing down on him: it struck him so hard across the chest that there was no time to call a priest for him, he died rather quickly. The others decided to attack Havelok together; they drew their swords and surrounded him, like dogs that are trying to tear a bear to pieces at bear-baiting. The men were quite athletic and managed to encircle their quarry; some hit Havelok with lumps of wood, others with stones, and still others pierced him with their swords in the back and in the sides. They gave him some nasty wounds, from head to toe, in twenty places

or more.

When Havelok saw how badly injured he was getting, he became mad with anger. It was amazing to see him still standing, the blood was pouring from him like spring water from a fountain, but he continued to swing the beam wildly from side to side in front of him like someone cutting wheat with a scythe, or like a Danish axeman, making it hard for them to get near him, and there was not one whom he managed to make contact with who did receive a fatal injury from the blow. In a short while he had killed twenty of them in this way.

The men made one final attempt. With a great noise they hurled flints and rocks at Havelok and cast spears at him from a distance, for they desperately wanted to kill him. But they dared not get any closer, any more than if he was a lion or a wild boar.

Hugh Raven had heard this commotion and guessed at once that Havelok was being attacked, so he searched for a weapon and grabbed an oar and a long knife and raced towards the noise with the speed of a running deer. He soon came to where the men were angrily surrounding and attacking his lord Havelok and beating him like angry blacksmiths attacking a piece of iron.

‘Alas!’ cried Hugh. ‘Robert! William! Where are you both? Find a weapon, each of you! Come quickly, follow me! I’ve got a sturdy oar in my hands. Let’s crack their heads open!’

‘We’re with you!’ shouted Robert. ‘There’s plenty of moonlight to see by.’

Robert gripped a staff, William a cudgel and Bernard a battle axe, and they attacked the young men with wild ferocity. Here was a savage beating indeed! They broke ribs and beat the living daylights out of these youths who were assaulting Havelok; they broke arms, knees, shins and thighs, and caused blood to flow in streams. No head was spared; they fractured many a skull, and beat the young men’s backs until they were as soft as their stomachs. They made them cry out like babies for their mother. And don’t feel sorry for them either, they deserved it!

Not one of them escaped with his life. In the morning, when it was light, they all lay in a mangled heap, like savaged dogs. Some were thrown into ditches, others dragged by the hair and left to die.

News soon reached Earl Ubbe that Havelok had killed sixty-one of his best and most powerful young fighters with a wooden beam. ‘Christ!’ he exclaimed ‘How could this have happened? I’d better find out what’s been going on, for men might try to take revenge upon Havelok and I wouldn’t want that to happen. I love him well, by Christ! I wouldn’t want to see any harm come to him.’

The earl leapt quickly upon a horse and made his way to the town, taking a number of knights with him. He called Bernard Brun out of his house when he arrived, and Bernard appeared in a dreadful state, cut and bruised and torn to pieces, as naked as the day he was born.

‘Bernard, what’s happened!’ exclaimed the earl. ‘Who’s done this to you?’

‘Lord, mercy,’ replied Bernard. ‘Last night, as the moon arose, more than sixty thieves came to visit me here, with fastened cloaks and wide sleeves, looking to rob and kill me and all those in my household. They broke down the door, but when my guests saw what was going on, I mean Havelok and the others, they jumped up quickly from the wall, grabbed timber and stones and drove them all out. It was like beating dogs out of a mill house! Havelok grabbed the wooden beam that barred the door and killed three of them with one swing of it. He’s a good man to have around in a crisis, I can tell you! He’s worth a thousand men, so help me God! If it hadn’t been for him, I’d be dead now. But he’s got a gash on his side from a sword stroke, a nasty cut on his arm and the worst wound I’ve ever seen on the back of his thigh. He’s got more than twenty nasty injuries, but despite that, no boar has ever fought as fiercely. None of the men he battled against had a skull so hard that he wasn’t able to smash it to smithereens! He didn’t spare any of them but left them all lying as still as a stone, and he bears no blame for this. It was either him or them. If he hadn’t killed them, they would have cut him to pieces. They would have killed me too, but, thank God, they met their match. But he’s dreadfully injured. I don’t think he’s got long to live.’

‘Is this true, Bernard?’ asked the earl. The people standing there swore that Bernard was telling the truth and concurred with what he said: that if the thieves hadn’t been stopped, they would have tied Bernard up and seized all his valuables from his chests and coffers, stuffed it all into sacks and carried it away. Large and small, young and old, they all supported him.

‘There were seventy of them,’ they said. ‘Strong lads, powerful men, and their leader was a man named Griffin Galle. No one could have possibly stood against so many, and this foreigner was able to kill them all with a lump of wood! Good on him! May God reward him! He’s worth his salt, that’s for sure.’

‘Fetch him at once,’ said Ubbe. ‘I want to see if his wounds can be healed. If he can be looked after and is able to make a full recovery, I’ll make him a knight, he’s so strong and valiant. If those foul thieves were still alive, they’d be hanged and good riddance, for choosing to go around at night threatening to tie people up and steal their things. I hate villains like that. Their lives are worthless.’

Havelok was brought before Ubbe and the earl looked with concern at his wounds; they looked very bad. But when a physician had examined them properly and declared that he could treat them and that Havelok would be able to walk again and ride a horse, then Ubbe was very relieved and said: ‘Come with me, and bring your wife Goldeburgh with you and your three companions as well, for you shall come under my protection. I don’t want any friends of those men that you’ve killed coming to take revenge on you. I’ll loan you a room up in the high tower until you’re fit again and fully recovered. There’ll be nothing between your room and mine except for a wooden partition and you’ll be able to hear every word that I say through it, however softly I speak. We’ll be under one roof,

and nobody will be able to bring shame to your wife at night, any more than to mine, by Christ!’

So Havelok, Goldeburgh and Grim’s three sons occupied this room with great pleasure. The first night that they were there, when it has been pitch dark for many hours, Ubbe woke to see a light shining through the partition, coming from the room where Havelok was sleeping. It seemed as bright as day in there!

‘Jesus!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’d better go and have a look. Is he having a drinking session in there, or some other foolishness? Only wicked men are awake at this time of night: drunkards, thieves and other ne’er-do-wells. Men staying up this late usually end their days in ponds and ditches.’

He went softly over to a doorway in the partition wall and saw all the occupants of the next room sleeping soundly. The light was coming from Havelok: it was coming from his mouth.

‘Christ!’ Ubbe gasped. ‘What can this mean?’ He called all his men to him, knights and sergeants, the wise and the worldly, more than a hundred all told, and asked them to come and witness this strange thing. When his knights had arrived, they could see a light coming from Havelok’s mouth that was as bright as seven candles, no, a hundred I swear!



All five were lying asleep, as quietly as though they were dead. Havelok lay on his left side, naked, holding his wife in his arms; they lay breast to breast, and no two people ever looked more serene and magnificent. The knights all thought it good sport just to look at them, for it was Havelok who had his back to them. On his right shoulder was a bright cross that shone like gold glinting in sunlight. They all knew at once that they were looking at a mark of kingship. They stared, and were certain that it must be Birkabeyn’s son they were looking at.

‘There are no two brothers in the whole of Denmark who resemble each other more than this man does our late king,’ they said, and they entered the room and fell at Havelok’s feet and wept for joy; it was as though he had risen from the grave. They kissed his feet a hundred times, his toes and his nails. Havelok began to wake up, pale with fear for he thought they all intended to kill him or tie him up and torture him.

‘Lord, have no fear,’ cried Ubbe, loudly and reassuringly. ‘I can see what you are thinking, but lord, accept my homage. I owe it to you, for you are the son of Birkabeyn. He was a powerful ruler, and so shall you be, for although you are still a young man, you shall be King of Denmark. No Dane has ever exhibited such strength as you have. Tomorrow you shall receive the fealty of everyone in this town; knights, citizens, everybody. And you will be made a knight.’

Havelok was very happy to hear this and thanked God many times.

In the morning, when it was light, Ubbe got a young retainer of his to mount a horse and to ride quickly from place to place, summoning earls, barons, clerics, knights, townsfolk, everybody he came across, instructing them to come before him as quickly as possible, all those who loved their lives, and to bring their children and their wives along with them as well.

Nobody dared to refuse this command, and everybody went to see what the earl wanted them for. When all had assembled, Ubbe rose and said: 'Listen to me, everybody. I want to remind you of something that you are all well aware of. You know how this land was once ruled over by Birkabeyn, and how, on the day of his death, he was advised to place his three small children under the protection of Earl Godard, along with all his kingdom. He gave his son Havelok, his two daughters and all that he possessed into the care of this man. You all heard Godard swear upon the Mass book, and upon all the accoutrements of Holy Mass, that he would look after them well and to the best of his ability.

'Well, I must tell you now that he reneged upon this promise, may every ill-fortune descend upon him! He cut the girls' throats with a knife and would have killed the boy as well, but God made him take pity on Havelok, so instead, that despicable bastard instructed a fisherman to drown him in the sea. When Grim realised that the boy was the rightful heir of Denmark, he fled the country and went to England, where he looked after Havelok for many years, and to this day he has been fed and looked after very well. Look at him now! In all this world there is none so tall and handsome, so well-built nor so strong. So celebrate everybody! Be happy! Come quickly! Swear fealty to your new lord. Let everybody do this. I shall be the first, and then you shall all follow my lead.'

Earl Ubbe went down on his knees and swore fealty there and then. Everybody witnessed this. Immediately afterwards, ten young retainers stood up and swore a similar oath, and then every nobleman who was present did the same. Then everybody else, servants, knights, young men and old, did so as well, until by the time the day was nearing to its close there was not a single person who had not become Havelok's man. His position was secure.

When these oaths had been taken, Ubbe sent letters to every castle and every town instructing noblemen and everyone of any worth to come at once to hear some good news which he had to tell them. Everyone responded to this summons at once; those who had no horse came on foot, and within a fortnight, there was no knight in the whole of Denmark, no constable, no sheriff born of man who had not arrived and joined those who had assembled before Ubbe; for they all feared him as a thief fears a big stick.

When they had all sat down, Ubbe said: 'Look here! It's our dear lord who shall be king of this land and rule over us all. It's Birkabeyn's son! It's the son of our fine king who looked after us well and defended us stoutly with a sharp sword and a long spear. See how magnificent he is? There can be no doubt. Fall at his feet, everyone, and quickly swear your allegiance to him.'

They all did as Ubbe asked. When they had all sworn their fealty, Ubbe dubbed Havelok a knight with a bright sword and the people gave him sovereignty over all Denmark. They made him their king.

When Havelok was made king, then you would have witnessed the greatest joy that has ever been seen! Everybody made merry – there was jousting and wrestling, competitions of strength and swordplay, harping and piping, board games and games of chance, and minstrels reciting from books of romance. There you would have heard songs of adventure, recounted to the beat of a tabor. There was bull baiting and the setting of dogs onto wild boars. Such a lively and exuberant festival had never before broken out through the release of such spontaneous joy. There was so much giving-away of clothes that if I told you on oath how much, you wouldn't believe me, I'll swear to that! There was magnificent food and wonderful wines from distant lands, so much of it that it might have been ladled up from the sea. The feast lasted for forty days, the most magnificent that has ever been seen.

During the festivities, the king knighted Robert the Red and also William Wenduth and Hugh Raven and made them barons; he gave them so much land and income that they were each of them able to support twenty knights.

When the feast was over, a thousand strong knights on magnificent horses, with helmets and shields, good coats of chainmail and every conceivable weapon that becomes a knight, put themselves under the king's command. Along with them came five thousand good men-at-arms who were eager to fight for their new king. What need is there to lengthen this story? When Havelok had taken every castle and installed his own constables in them, he had fifty of his knights swear that they would not rest until they had found Earl Godard and brought the man before him, bound in irons.

Earl Godard was out hunting with a large retinue of followers. Robert was the first to encounter him. 'Stop, you villain!' he cried. 'Come at once to the king. He has summoned you, and he asks you to remember what you once did to him, and to his sisters. He's going to give you your reward, you traitor, by Christ who died on the cross for us!'

When Godard heard these threats: 'My knights, what are you doing?' he cried. 'Are you going to run away? I have shared my table with you and will do so again, so help me! Don't let them do what they want with me. If you do, you'll bring shame upon yourselves, and great dishonour.'

When they heard this, his men turned around, gathered their courage and killed a knight and a man-at-arms in the king's troop, but when the king's men saw this they struck them high and low and killed every one of them. Godard was bound so tightly that he roared like a bull in a pit when dogs are attacking and biting it, he pleaded for his hand to be cut off, but this didn't stop them binding him even tighter, hand and foot, and a curse on anybody minded to stop them! They bound him as men do a bear and then threw him stomach down onto a mangy horse with his face pressed against the animal's arse. He was led in this way until he was brought before Havelok, whom he had caused

to suffer all kinds of deprivation through hunger and cold, with heavy work and scant food, little to drink and nothing to wear but sailcloth when he was less than twelve years old. Well, the pigeons had come home to roost now! What goes around comes around, as they say.

When that foul traitor was brought so shamefully before the king, Havelok instructed Ubbe to call everyone together, noblemen, knights, town dignitaries and every man of worth, and asked them to pass judgement upon Godard, for they were all well acquainted with him and knew what a nasty piece of work he was. So they sat themselves down on the benches, rich and poor, high and low, the old and the young – the king sat as still as a stone as they did so – and they gave their verdict.

‘We deem that he should be skinned alive and then that he be taken to the gallows in the same manner that he was brought here, that is, with his face pressed against a mare’s arse, and then a large nail should be driven into his feet and he should be suspended on two chains with a placard near him saying: “This is the traitor who thought that he would rob the rightful king of the land of Denmark and kill his two sisters with a knife.” This writing shall hang beside him. This is our verdict.’

WARNING the following execution is a bit horrific. It is included as a postscript below.

When Godard was dead, his possessions were quickly seized and given to the king: his land, his income and all his property. Then the king passed every bit of it into Ubbe’s hands and gave him legal possession of it all.

Shortly afterwards, Havelok sailed to England. He vowed that he would establish, for Grim’s sake, a priory of black monks to serve Jesus Christ day and night, until Doomsday, because of the kindness that he had shown to him. And Havelok held to that promise, for he had a priory built in the town where Grim was buried, and which bears his name to this day, for it is called Grimsby. But I shall speak no more of Grim.

Godrich, Earl of Cornwall, learned that Havelok was now King of Denmark and was further informed, worryingly, that he had arrived in England with an army of mighty warriors, intending to win England for himself. To top it all, Goldeburgh, who was the rightful heir of England, was in Grimsby with him.

‘What can I do?’ he asked. ‘I must kill them both! May I lose the sight of my right eye if I don’t drive them both out of England!’

He quickly summoned an army, instructing all who could ride a horse and carry a shield and spear – or wield any sort of weapon at all to be honest: a battle axe, a mace, any sort of halberd, a stabbing blade or just a good long knife – he told them that, if they valued their limbs and their lives, they should come with their sturdy weapons to Lincoln, where he would thank them in person, by the seventeenth of March. And if anyone was so obstinate and foolhardy as to refuse to make this journey, he swore by Christ and by Saint John that he would throw them into poverty and servitude, and extend this to all

their children as well.

The Englishmen who heard this did not fail to comply, for they feared Earl Godrich as a horse fears the spurs, or more so. They arrived in Lincoln at the due time, on good horses and with a broad array of weapons.

The earl was keen to give battle to the Danes as quickly as possible and when they were all assembled, he addressed his army thus: 'Listen everybody. I haven't summoned you all for fun, so I'll tell you why you're here. It's a serious business. A foreign army has landed at Grimsby, they've captured the priory already and they're burning everything they come across; they're sacking churches, tying up priests, strangling monks and nuns, so my friends, what do you advise me to do? If we let them stay, they'll overrun us. This usurper will kill us along with all our wives and children, or cast us into servitude and make our lives a misery. But if you do as I ask, and do it at once, you will earn my gratitude and save yourselves into the bargain, so let's quickly take the fight to them and kill these dogs! Let's go at once and drive them out. Follow my lead. I shall be the first to draw my sword to use against them, and a curse on anyone who won't fight alongside me while he's still able to fight.'

'Yes!' cried Earl Gunter. 'Yes!' echoed Rayner, the Earl of Chester, and so did everyone else. They leapt to it with all the speed that they could muster. Coats of chainmail were thrown over backs, armour laced on correctly, helmets set properly onto heads and swords and spears fetched, so that in only a short while they had prepared themselves with as much care and attention as they would if they had been counting money. Then they leapt onto their steeds. And by keeping to lanes and byways, travelling as discretely as they could, they made their way to Grimsby.

Havelok, who had his spies out and was well aware of their progress, gathered his army to confront them. The first knight he encountered he greeted with his sword and took the man's head off with it, without a second thought. Robert witnessed this and so did William Wenduth, and they emulated this feat, and neither did Hugh Raven forget the sword that he had brought with him either: he raised it and brought it down with such force upon an earl who was riding nearby that he split the man's head in two. The edge of the sword cut down through the man's shoulder blade and buried itself in his heart.

'Time for me to play my part!' cried Ubbe, and, seeing that Earl Godrich was carrying a spear, he galloped his horse towards him with his own spear levelled. The impact was immense. Both knights found themselves sprawling on the ground, so they got to their feet, drew their swords and fought together like madmen. The sweat was soon pouring from their brows to their feet; they fought from morning until dusk, and the smallest blow they gave would have smashed a flint to pieces.

As the sun was beginning to set, Earl Godrich gave Ubbe a nasty wound in the side and would have cut off his head, had God not intervened and allowed Hugh Raven to rescue Earl Ubbe. But by now, a thousand knights had been killed, on both sides. There was such slaughter that there was not a dip or a hollow on the battlefield that was not over-

flowing with blood. Earl Godrich, once Ubbe had been plucked from his grasp, began killing Danes left, right and centre, like a lion that spares nothing that gets in its way. Every Dane he encountered fell to his sword, like grass before a sharp scythe.

When Havelok saw his army getting the worst of it, he came galloping up on a steed and shouted: 'Godrich, why are you doing this to me? You knelt before an altar and swore upon a book and a chalice and other holy things that you would give England over to Goldeburgh when she came of age. Now do what is right! Stop all this fighting and give back to her what is hers! Then I'll be able to forgive you for all this, all the dead and all my slain men, for I can see that you are a valiant warrior and a magnificent knight.

'Never!' shouted Earl Godrich. 'I'll have that woman hanged first! I'll gouge out that blazing right eye of yours unless you flee this battlefield at once.'

He drew his sword and struck Havelok some terrible blows with it, cutting his shield in two. Havelok was ashamed to find himself humiliated like this in front of all his knights and his men, so he quickly drew his own sword and gave Godrich such a heavy blow on the head with it that Godrich fell to the ground. But the Earl of Cornwall recovered quickly and brought a stroke down upon Havelok's shoulder that cut through more rings of steel than I could number, wounding his flesh so badly that Havelok's blood flowed down to his feet. Mortified to find himself bleeding so badly, Havelok attacked Godrich with renewed ferocity and soon got the better of him; he raised his sword, brought it down and struck Godrich's hand so hard that it went flying off. What greater or more fitting shame could he bring to this criminal than to inflict a punishment due to thieves?

Havelok seized Godrich, thus cruelly maimed, and led him by the neck as a traitor. And let no one feel any pity for him. Havelok had him put in irons and sent to the queen, with the suggestion that she make sure that he was not harmed in any way until knights had had a chance to pass judgement upon him.

When the English saw what had happened, and remembered that Goldeburgh was, after all, the heir to England and their rightful queen, and that the Danish king had lawfully married her, and that they shared one bed together, they all acknowledged this and with one voice cried: 'Mercy!' and offered to swear fealty to Havelok and promised never to go against him, or ride against him, ever again.

King Havelok was not so negligent as to forget to make them formalise this pledge of allegiance and to swear it upon the Book. But before this, Havelok was keen to have Goldeburgh brought before them, to be certain that they would accept her, for by this test he would know whether or not it was right to make her their queen.

Six earls were sent off to fetch her, and it was not long before they returned. When she appeared, all the Englishmen fell to their knees, began to weep and cried: 'Lady! May Christ have mercy on us! We've done a great wrong against you, for England ought to be yours, and we your men. There is no one here, young nor old, who does not remember

when Athelwold was king of this country and that you were his rightful heir.’

‘Now that you understand what has happened, please, sit down all of you,’ said Havelok. ‘And since you all know how that traitor Godrich has held onto power unjustly and brought misery down upon himself, see that you pass proper judgement, for justice applies equally to a cleric and to a knight and no one should be above the law. Afterwards, according to the laws of this land, I will have you all swear fealty and make your oaths of allegiance, if you are willing to do this.’

So Havelok had them all sit down and they deliberated and passed judgement that Godrich should be tied to a mule that was caked with mud and filth, and slung over the animal face down so that his nose was over its tail, and then led to Lincoln dressed in filthy rags. And when he arrived, he should be led in shame through that city and out through the south gate onto a green – which is still there, I believe – and there tied to a stake and a great fire made around him, and that he should be burnt to ashes in front of everybody. And yet more: so that others might be discouraged from doing what he had done, his children should be disinherited from all his wealth and possessions for this outrage, and lose everything.

When this judgement had been given, the traitor was quickly set upon the mule, led to that green and burnt alive. Goldeburgh thanked God many times that the foul villain who had wanted to violate her and get rid of her was now dead. ‘It is time for you to swear fealty anew,’ she said, ‘now that my enemy has been dealt with.’

Havelok took the oaths of all Englishmen, on the Book, and got them to swear that they would bear him good faith, against all who might challenge his rule. When he had secured these promises and obtained sureties, he summoned the Earl of Chester, who was a young man and as yet unmarried, and said:

‘Sir earl, upon my life, I want to give you the hand in marriage of the most beautiful woman alive. Her name is Gunhilde of Grimsby, Grim’s daughter; Grim, who looked after me, fled from Denmark with me, gave me food and saved my life. Certainly, it is because of him that I have survived, may his soul be blessed forevermore! I urge you to take her, for she is beautiful, she is generous and has a noble disposition and I shall give you this promise, that forevermore, whilst I live, you shall be my dearest friend for her sake, and I’m happy to say this in front of everybody.’

The earl had no desire to go against the king’s wishes, and the couple were married that same day. And the marriage certainly took place under favourable auspices, for no two people coming together in any place could have gone on to have such a happy life together. They had five sons in total, all of whom grew up to be fine young men, the best that anyone could hope to rely on in need, and the finest horsemen.

When Gunhilde was given to the Earl of Chester, Havelok the Good didn’t forget Bertram either, who had been the earl’s cook. He called him into his presence and said: ‘Friend, may God advise me, but now you’re going to receive the reward you deserve for

supporting me in a time of great need, when I was going around wearing sailcloth and lacked even bread and dripping to eat. Although I came with nothing, you clothed and fed me, so accept from me the earldom of Cornwall and all the lands that Godrich held in his own right, its towns and villages, its woods and fields. And I desire that you marry, and take with you into your new home, Grim's daughter, the gracious Levice. Let her go with you. She seems courteous and she's as beautiful as may blossom, with a complexion like fresh rose petals in bright sunlight.'

Then in front of everybody, Havelok gave him the sword of the earldom of Cornwall, and with his hand conferred upon him the order of knighthood and gave him arms, for that was right, and then he witnessed his marriage to this lady who was so sweet in bed.

After the wedding, the new Earl of Cornwall didn't want to stay for long but was eager to travel to his new lands and to secure them for himself; and he lived there, he and his wife, for a hundred winters, and they produced many children together and lived their lives in comfort and joy.

When both of Grim's daughters were happily married, Havelok quickly organised the distribution of lands and wealth to all his Danish men, so that they became very well off, for Havelok was a generous man. Soon afterwards, he journeyed with his army to London to be crowned, so that everybody, English and Danish, could witness him proudly bearing the English crown and witness the power that he commanded. The coronation feast lasted for a month or more. Afterwards, the king was not minded to keep anyone in England against his will, for he could see that many wanted to return to Denmark, so he commended them to Saint John and instructed Ubbe to travel back with them and to look after Denmark for him, and to see that no complaints about his rule ever reached England.

When the ships had sailed for Denmark, Havelok stayed in England and remained there for sixty years, with much happiness and a great deal of success. He was king and Goldeburgh was queen, and there was so much love between them that the whole world spoke of it. Neither had any joy unless the other was there to share it, and never a cross word passed between them. They had fifteen children, sons and daughters, and the sons all became kings, by God's grace, and the daughters all became queens. Lucky is the man who benefits from such fine children!

Now you have heard the whole story of Havelok and Goldeburgh, how they were born and raised, how they were wronged in their youth by treachery, dispossessed of what was rightfully theirs, and how they were able to right this wrongdoing in the end. I've told you the whole story, and I would ask you all now, all those who have listened, to say an Our Father for he who has spent many long nights composing this verse, so that Jesus Christ may bring his soul before his heavenly father, when he dies.

Amen.

The execution of Earl Godard: WARNING, graphic

When judgement had been given, Godard received absolution from a priest and, there being no doubt at all now that he should be killed, a young warrior came forward with a knife and began at the toe, cutting and pulling back the skin. Godard began to roar with pain so loudly that his screams could be heard a mile away, that foul villain, but the young man gave no heed to his roars or to his cries of: 'Mercy! Mercy!' and skinned him completely with his knife of sharpened steel.

Then quickly, they brought up the scabby mare, tied Godard above her tail with the rope from an old fishing boat and carried him to the gallows, which was placed not beside the road but in the middle of some muddy fields, then they hanged him there by the neck and left him there like a scarecrow, and a curse on anyone who gives a damn!