

V

COMEDY

THE Poetical Justice of Tragedy is observed, and rightly observed, in many of the Sagas and in the greater plots. Fate and Retribution preside over the stories of Njal and his sons, and the *Lovers of Gudrun*. The story of Gisli works itself out in accordance with the original forebodings, yet without any illicit process in the logic of acts and motives, or any intervention of the mysterious powers who accompany the life of Gisli in his dreams. Even in less self-consistent stories the same ideas have a part; the story of Gudmund the Mighty, which is a series of separate chapters, is brought to an end in the Nemesis for Gudmund's injustice to Thorkell Hake. But the Sagas claim exemption from the laws of Tragedy, when poetical Justice threatens to become tyrannical. Partly by the nature of their origin, no doubt, and their initial dependence on historical recollections of actual events,¹ they are driven to include a number of things that might disappoint a well-educated gallery of spectators; the drama is

¹ *Vide supra*, p. 221 (the want of tragedy in *Viga-Glám's Saga*).

not always worked out, or it may be that the meaning of a chapter or episode lies precisely in the disappointment of conventional expectations.

There is only one comedy, or at most two, among the Sagas—the story of the Confederates (*Bandamanna Saga*) with an afterpiece, the short story of Alecap (*Olkofra pátttr*). The composition of the Sagas, however, admits all sorts of comic passages and undignified characters, and it also quietly unravels many complications that seem to be working up for a tragic ending. The dissipation of the storm before it breaks is, indeed, so common an event that it almost becomes itself a convention of narrative in the Sagas, by opposition to the common devices of the feud and vengeance. There is a good instance of this paradoxical conclusion in *Arons Saga* (c. 12), an authentic biography, apparently narrating an actual event. The third chapter of *Glúma* gives another instance of threatened trouble passing away. Ivar, a Norwegian with a strong hatred of Icelanders, seems likely to quarrel with Eyolf, Glum's father, but being a gentleman is won over by Eyolf's bearing. This is a part of the Saga where one need not expect to meet with any authentic historical tradition. The story of Eyolf in Norway is probably mere literature, and shows the working of the common principles of the Saga, as applied by an author of fiction. The sojourn of Grettir with the two foster-brothers is another instance of a dangerous situation going off without result. The whole action of *Vápnfirðinga Saga* is wound up in a reconciliation,

which is a sufficient close ; but, on the other hand, the story of Glum ends in a mere exhaustion of the rivalries, a drawn game. One of the later more authentic histories, the story of Thorgils and Haffidi, dealing with the matters of the twelfth century and not with the days of Gunnar, Njal, and Snorri the Priest, is a story of rivalry passing away, and may help to show how the composers of the Sagas were influenced by their knowledge and observation of things near their own time in their treatment of matters of tradition.

Even more striking than this evasion of the conventional plot of the blood-feud, is the freedom and variety in respect of the minor characters, particularly shown in the way they are made to perplex the simple-minded spectator. To say that all the characters in the Sagas escape from the limitations of mere typical humours might be to say too much ; but it is obvious that simple types are little in favour, and that the Icelandic authors had all of them some conception of the ticklish and dangerous variability of human dispositions, and knew that hardly any one was to be trusted to come up to his looks, for good or evil. Popular imagination has everywhere got at something of this sort in its views of the lubberly younger brother, the ash-raker and idler who carries off the princess. Many of the heroes of the Sagas are noted to have been slow in their growth and unpromising, like Glum, but there are many more cases of change of disposition in the Sagas than can be summed up under this old formula. There are stories of the quiet

man roused to action, like Thorarin in *Eyrbyggja*, where it is plain that the quietness was strength from the first. A different kind of courage is shown by Atli, the poor-spirited prosperous man in *Hávarðar Saga*, who went into hiding to escape being dragged into the family troubles, but took heart and played the man later on. One of the most effective pieces of comedy in the Sagas is the description of his ill-temper when he is found out, and his gradual improvement. He comes from his den half-frozen, with his teeth chattering, and nothing but bad words for his wife and her inconvenient brother who wants his help. His wife puts him to bed, and he comes to think better of himself and the world; the change of his mind being represented in the unobtrusive manner which the Sagas employ in their larger scenes.

One of the most humorous and effective contradictions of the popular judgment is that episode in *Njála*, where Kari has to trust to the talkative person whose wife has a low opinion of him. It begins like farce: any one can see that Bjorn has all the manners of the swaggering captain; his wife is a shrew and does not take him at his own valuation. The comedy of Bjorn is that he proves to be something different both from his own Bjorn and his wife's Bjorn. He is the idealist of his own heroism, and believes in himself as a hero. His wife knows better; but the beauty of it all is that his wife is wrong. His courage, it is true, is not quite certain, but he stands his ground; there is a small particle of a hero in him, enough to save him. His backing of Kari in the fight is what many have

longed to see, who have found little comfort in the discomfiture of Bobadil and Parolles, and who will stand to it that the chronicler has done less than justice to Sir John Falstaff both at Gadshill and Shrewsbury. Never before Bjorn of *Njála* was there seen on any theatre the person of the comfortable optimist, with a soul apparently damned from the first to a comic exposure and disgrace, but escaping this because his soul has just enough virtue to keep him steady. The ordeal of Bjorn contains more of the comic spirit than all the host of stage cowards from Pyrgopolinices to Bob Acres, precisely because it introduces something more than the simple humour, an essence more spiritual and capricious.

Further, the partnership of Kari and Bjorn, and Kari's appreciation of his idealist companion, go a long way to save Kari from a too exclusive and limited devotion to the purpose of vengeance. There is much to be said on behalf of this Bjorn. His relations with Kari prevent the hero of the latter part of the book from turning into a mere hero. The humorous character of the squire brings out something new in the character of the knight, a humorous response; all which goes to increase the variety of the story, and to widen the difference between this story and all the monotonous and abstract stories of chivalrous adventures.

The Sagas have comedy in them, comic incidents and characters, because they have no notion of the dignity of abstract and limited heroics; because they cannot understand the life of Iceland otherwise than

in full, with all its elements together. The one intentionally comic history, *Bandamanna Saga*, "The Confederates," which is exceptional in tone and plot, is a piece of work in which what may be called the form or spirit or idea of the heroic Saga is brought fully within one's comprehension by means of contrast and parody. *Bandamanna Saga* is a complete work, successful in every detail; as an artistic piece of composition it will stand comparison with any of the Sagas. But it is comedy, not tragedy; it is a mock-heroic, following the lines of the heroic model, consistently and steadily, and serving as a touchstone for the vanity of the heroic age. It is worth study, for Comedy is later and therefore it would seem more difficult than Tragedy, and this is the first reasonable and modern comedy in the history of modern Europe. Further, the method of narrative, and everything in it except the irony, belong to all the Sagas in common; there is nothing particularly new or exceptional in the style or the arrangement of the scenes; it is not so much a parody or a mock-heroic, as an heroic work inspired with comic irony. It is not a new kind of Saga, it is the old Saga itself put to the ordeal by the Comic Muse, and proving its temper under the severest of all strains.

This is the story of the Confederates.—There was a man named Ufeig who lived in Midfirth, a free-handed man, not rich, who had a son named Odd. The father and son disagreed, and Odd, the son, went off to make his own fortune, and made it, without taking any further notice of his father. The two men are

contrasted; Ufeig being an unsuccessful man and a humorist, too generous and too careless to get on in the world, while Odd, his son, is born to be a prosperous man. The main plot of the story is the reconciliation of the respectable son and the prodigal father, which is brought about in the most perfect and admirable manner.

Odd got into trouble. He had a lawsuit against Uspak, a violent person whom he had formerly trusted, who had presumed too much, had been disgraced, and finally had killed the best friend of Odd in one of the ways usual in such business in the Sagas. In the course of the lawsuit a slight difficulty arose—one of Odd's jurymen died, and another had to be called in his place. This was informal, but no one at first made anything of it; till it occurred to a certain great man that Odd was becoming too strong and prosperous, and that it was time to put him down. Whereupon he went about and talked to another great man, and half persuaded him that this view was the right one; and then felt himself strong enough to step in and break down the prosecution by raising the point about the formation of the jury. Odd went out of the court without a word as soon as the challenge was made.

While he was thinking it over, and not making much of it, there appeared an old, bent, ragged man, with a flapping hat and a pikestaff; this was Ufeig, his father, to whom he had never spoken since he left his house. Ufeig now is the principal personage

in the story. He asks his son about the case and pretends to be surprised at his failure. "Impossible! it is not like a gentleman to try to take in an old man like me; how could you be beaten?" Finally, after Odd has been made to go over all the several points of his humiliation, he is reduced to trust the whole thing to his father, who goes away with the comforting remark that Odd, by leaving the court when he did, before the case was finished, had made one good move in the game, though he did not know it. Ufeig gets a purse full of money from his son; goes back to the court, where (as the case is not yet closed) he makes an eloquent speech on the iniquity of such a plea as has been raised. "To let a man-slayer escape, gentlemen! where are your oaths that you swore? Will you prefer a paltry legal quibble to the plain open justice of the case?" and so on, impressively and emotionally, in the name of Equity, while all the time (equity + x) he plays with the purse under his cloak, and gets the eyes of the judges fixed upon it. Late in the day, Odd is brought back to hear the close of the case, and Uspak is outlawed.

Then the jealousy of the great men comes to a head, and a compact is formed among eight of them to make an end of Odd's brand-new prosperity. These eight are the Confederates from whom the Saga is named, and the story is the story of Ufeig's ingenuity and malice as applied to these noble Pillars of Society. To tell it rightly would be to repeat the Saga. The skill with which the humorist plays

upon the strongest motives, and gets the conspirators to betray one another, is not less beautifully represented than the spite which the humorist provokes among the subjects of his experiments. The details are finished to the utmost; most curiously and subtly in some of the indications of character and disposition in the eight persons of quality. The details, however, are only the last perfection of a work which is organic from the beginning. Ufeig, the humorist, is the servant and deputy of the Comic Muse, and there can be no doubt of the validity of his credentials, or of the soundness of his procedure. He is the ironical critic and censor of the heroic age; his touch is infallible, as unerring as that of Figaro, in bringing out and making ridiculous the meanness of the nobility. The decline and fall of the noble houses is recorded in *Sturlunga Saga*; the essence of that history is preserved in the comedy of the *Banded Men*.

But, however the material of the heroic age may be handled in this comedy, the form of heroic narrative comes out unscathed. There is nothing for the comic spirit to fix upon in the form of the Sagas. The Icelandic heroes may be vulnerable, but Comedy cannot take advantage of them except by using the general form of heroic narrative in Iceland, a form which proves itself equally capable of Tragedy and Comedy. And as the more serious Icelandic histories are comprehensive and varied, so also is this comic history. It is not an artificial comedy, nor a comedy of humours, nor a purely satirical comedy. It is no

more exclusive or abstract in its contents than *Njála*; its strict observance of limit and order is not the same thing as monotony; its unity of action is consistent with diversities of motive. Along with, and inseparable from, the satirical criticism of the great world, as represented by the eight discomfited noble Confederates, there is the even more satisfactory plot of the Nemesis of Respectability in the case of Odd; while the successful malice and craft of Ufeig are inseparable from the humanity, the constancy, and the imaginative strength, which make him come out to help his prosaic son, and enable him, the bent and thriftless old man, to see all round the frontiers of his son's well-defined and uninteresting character. Also the variety of the Saga appears in the variety of incident, and that although the story is a short one. As the solemn histories admit of comic passages, so conversely this comic history touches upon the tragic. The death of Vali, slain by Uspak, is of a piece with the most heroic scenes in Icelandic literature. Vali the friend of Odd goes along with him to get satisfaction out of Uspak the mischief-maker. Vali is all for peace; he is killed through his good nature, and before his death forgives and helps his assailant.

And when with the spring the days of summons came on, Odd rode out with twenty men, till he came near by the garth of Svalastead. Then said Vali to Odd: "Now you shall stop here, and I will ride on and see Uspak, and find out if he will agree to settle the case now without more ado." So they stopped, and Vali went up to the house. There was no one outside; the doors were open and Vali went in. It was dark within, and suddenly there leapt a man out of the side-room and

struck between the shoulders of Vali, so that he fell on the spot. Said Vali: "Look out for yourself, poor wretch! for Odd is coming, hard by, and means to have your life. Send your wife to him; let her say that we have made it up, and you have agreed to everything, and that I have gone on about my own gear down the valley!" Then said Uspak: "This is an ill piece of work; this was meant for Odd and not for you."

This short heroic scene in the comedy has an effect corresponding to that of the comic humours in the Icelandic tragedies; it redresses the balance, it qualifies and diversifies what would otherwise be monotonous. Simple and clear in outline as the best of the short Icelandic stories are, they are not satisfied unless they have introduced something, if only a suggestion, of worlds different from their own immediate interests, a touch to show where their proper story branches out into the history of other characters and fortunes. This same story of the Confederates is wound up at the end, after the reconciliation of the father and son, by a return to the adventures of Uspak and to the subordinate tragic element in the comedy. The poetical justice of the story leaves Uspak, the slayer of Vali, dead in a cave of the hills; found there, alone, by shepherds going their autumn rounds.

VI

THE ART OF NARRATIVE

THE art of the Sagas will bear to be tested in every way: not that every Saga or every part of one is flawless, far from it; but they all have, though in different measure, the essentials of the fine art of story-telling. Except analysis, it is hardly possible to require a story from anything which will not be found supplied in some form or other in the Sagas. The best of them have that sort of unity which can hardly be described, except as a unity of life—the organic unity that is felt in every particular detail. It is absurd to take separately the details of a great work like *Njála*, or of less magnificent but not less perfect achievements such as the story of Hrafnkel. There is no story in the world that can surpass the *Bandamanna Saga* in the liveliness with which each particular reveals itself as a moment in the whole story, inseparable from the whole, and yet in its own proper space appearing to resume and absorb the life of the whole. Where the work is elaborated in this way, where every particular is organic, it is not possible to do much by way of illustration, or to

exhibit piecemeal what only exists as a complete thing, and can only be understood as such. It is of some importance in the history of literature that the rank and general character of these Icelandic works should be asserted and understood. It would be equally laborious and superfluous to follow each of them with an exposition of the value of each stroke in the work. There are difficulties enough in the language, and in the history, without any multiplication of commentaries on the obvious; and there is little in the art of the Sagas that is of doubtful import, however great may be the lasting miracle that such things, of such excellence, should have been written there and then.

There is one general quality or characteristic of the Sagas which has not yet been noticed, one which admits of explanation and illustration, while it represents very well the prevailing mode of imagination in the Sagas. The imaginative life of the Sagas (in the best of them) is intensely strong at each critical point of the story, with the result that all abstract, makeshift explanations are driven out; the light is too strong for them, and the events are made to appear in the order of their appearance, with their meaning gradually coming out as the tale rolls on. No imagination has ever been so consistently intolerant of anything that might betray the author's knowledge before the author's chosen time. That everything should present itself first of all as appearance, before it becomes appearance with a meaning, is a common rule of all good story-telling; but no

historians have followed this rule with so complete and sound an instinct as the authors of the Sagas. No medieval writers, and few of the modern, have understood the point of view as well as the authors of the story of Njal or of Kjartan. The reserve of the narrator in the most exciting passages of the Sagas is not dulness or want of sensibility; it is a consistent mode of procedure, to allow things to make their own impression; and the result is attained by following the order of impressions in the mind of one of the actors, or of a looker-on. "To see things as they are" is an equivocal formula, which may be claimed as their own privilege by many schools and many different degrees of intelligence. "To see things as they become," the rule of Lessing's *Laocoon*, has not found so many adherents, but it is more certain in meaning, and more pertinent to the art of narrative. It is a fair description of the aim of the Icelandic authors and of their peculiar gift. The story for them is not a thing finished and done with; it is a series of pictures rising in the mind, succeeding, displacing, and correcting one another; all under the control of a steady imagination, which will not be hurried, and will not tell the bearing of things till the right time comes. The vivid effect of the Saga, if it be studied at all closely, will be found to be due to this steadiness of imagination which gives first the blurred and inaccurate impression, the possibility of danger, the matter for surmises and suspicions, and then the clearing up. Stated generally in this way, the rule is an elementary one, but

it is followed in the Sagas with a singular consistency and success, and with something more than a compulsory obedience. That both the narrators and their audience in that country had their whole lives filled with momentous problems in the interpretation of appearances may well be understood. To identify a band of riders in the distance, or a single man seen hurrying on the other side of the valley, was a problem which might be a matter of life or death any day; but so it has been in many places where there is nothing like the narrative art of Iceland. The Icelandic historian is like no other in putting into his work the thrill of suspense at something indistinctly seen going on in the distance—a crowd of men moving, not known whether friends or enemies. So it was in *Thorgils Saga* (one of the later more authentic histories, of the Sturlung cycle), when Thorgils and his men came down to the Althing, and Bard and Aron were sent on ahead to find out if the way was clear from the northern passes across the plain of the Thing. Bard and Aron, as they came down past Armannsfell, saw a number of horses and men on the plain below just where Haffidi, the enemy, might have been expected to block the way. They left some of their band to wait behind while they themselves went on. From that point a chapter and more is taken up with the confused impression and report brought back by the scouts to the main body. They saw Bard and Aron ride on to the other people, and saw the others get up to meet them, carrying weapons; and then Bard and Aron went out

of sight in the crowd, but the bearers of the report had no doubt that they were prisoners. And further, they thought they made out a well-known horse, Dapplecheek, and a gold-mounted spear among the strangers, both of which had belonged to Thorgils, and had been given away by him to one of his friends. From which it is inferred that his friend has been robbed of the horse and the spear.

The use of all this, which turns out to be all made up of true eyesight and wrong judgment, is partly to bring out Thorgils; for his decision, against the wish of his companions, is to ride on in any event, so that the author gets a chapter of courage out of the mistake. Apart from that, there is something curiously spirited and attractive in the placing of the different views, with the near view last of all. In the play between them, between the apprehension of danger, the first report of an enemy in the way, the appearance of an indistinct crowd, the false inference, and the final truth of the matter, the Saga is faithful to its vital principle of variety and comprehensiveness; no one appearance, not even the truest, must be allowed too much room to itself.

This indirect description is really the most vivid of all narrative forms, because it gives the point of view that is wanting in an ordinary continuous history. It brings down the story-teller from his abstract and discursive freedom, and makes him limit himself to one thing at a time, with the greatest advantage to himself and all the rest of his story. In that way the important things of the story may

be made to come with the stroke and flash of present reality, instead of being prosed away by the historian and his good grammar.

There is a very remarkable instance of the use of this method in the Book of Kings. Of Jehoram, son of Ahab, king of Israel, it is told formally that "he wrought evil in the sight of the Lord," with the qualification that his evil was not like that of Ahab and Jezebel. This is impressive in its formal and summary way. It is quite another mode of narrative, and it is one in which the spectator is introduced to vouch for the matter, that presents the king of Israel, once for all, in a sublime and tragic protest against the sentence of the historian himself, among the horrors of the famine of Samaria.

So we boiled my son and did eat him : and I said unto her on the next day, Give thy son that we may eat him, and she hath hid her son.

And it came to pass when the king heard the words of the woman, that he rent his clothes ; and he passed by upon the wall, and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth within upon his flesh.

No more than this is told of the unavailing penance of Jehoram the son of Ahab. There is no preparation ; all the tragedy lies in this notice of something casually seen, and left without a commentary, for any one to make his own story about, if he chooses. There is perhaps nothing anywhere in narrative quite so sudden as this. The Northern writers, however, carry out consistently the same kind of principles, putting their facts or impressions forward in a right order and leaving them to take care of themselves ; while in the

presentation of events the spectator within the story has a good deal given him to do. Naturally, where the author does not make use of analysis and where he trusts to the reader's intellect to interpret things aright, the "facts" must be fairly given; in a lucid order, with a progressive clearness, from the point of view of those who are engaged in the action.

There is another and somewhat different function of the spectator in the Sagas. In some cases, where there is no problem, where the action is straightforward, the spectator and his evidence are introduced merely to give breadth and freedom to the presentment, to get a foreground for the scene. This is effected best of all, as it happens, in a passage that called for nothing less than the best of the author's power and wit; namely, the chapter of the death of Kjartan in *Laxdæla*.

And with this talk of Gudrun, Bolli was made to magnify his ill-will and his grievance against Kjartan; and took his weapons and went along with the others. They were nine altogether; five sons of Osvifr, that is to say Ospak and Helgi, Vandrad, Torrad, and Thorolf; Bolli was the sixth, Gunnlaug the seventh, sister's son of Osvifr, a comely man; the other two were Odd and Stein, sons of Thorhalla the talkative. They rode to Svinadal and stopped at the gully called Hafragil; there they tied their horses and sat down. Bolli was silent all the day, and laid him down at the edge of the gully, above.

Kjartan and his companions had come south over the pass, and the dale was opening out, when Kjartan said that it was time for Thorkell and his brother to turn back. Thorkell said they would ride with him to the foot of the dale. And when they were come south as far as the bothies called the North Sheilings, Kjartan said to the brothers that they were not to ride further.

"Thorolf, the thief, shall not have this to laugh at, that I was afraid to ride on my way without a host of men."

Thorkell Whelp makes answer: "We will give in to you and ride no further; but sorry shall we be if we are not there and you are in want of men this day."

Then said Kjartan: "Bolli my kinsman will not try to have my life, and for the sons of Osvifr, if they lie in wait for me, it remains to be seen which of us shall tell the tale afterwards, for all that there may be odds against me."

After that the brothers and their men rode west again.

Now Kjartan rides southward down the valley, he and the two others, An the Swart and Thorarinn. At Hafratindr in Svinadal lived a man called Thorkell. There is no house there now. He had gone to look after his horses that day, and his shepherd along with him. They had a view of both companies; the sons of Osvifr lying in wait, and Kjartan's band of three coming down along the dale. Then said the herd lad that they should go and meet Kjartan; it would be great luck if they could clear away the mischief that was waiting for them.

"Hold your tongue," said Thorkell; "does the fool think he can give life to a man when his doom is set? It is but little I grudge them their good pleasure, though they choose to hurt one another to their hearts' content. No! but you and I, we will get to a place where there will be no risk, where we can see all their meeting and have good sport out of their play. They all say that Kjartan has more fighting in him than any man; maybe he will need it all, for you and I can see that the odds are something."

And so it had to be as Thorkell wished.

The tragic encounter that follows, the last meeting of the two friends, Kjartan throwing away his weapons when he sees Bolli coming against him, Bolli's repentance when he has killed his friend, when he sits with his knee under Kjartan's head,—all this is told as well as may be; it is one of the finest passages in all the Sagas. But even this passage has something to gain from the episode of the churl and his more generous servant who looked on at the fight. The scene opens out; the spaces of the valley are shown

as they appear to a looker-on; the story, just before the critical moment, takes us aside from the two rival bands and gives us the relation between them, the gradually-increasing danger as the hero and his companions come down out of the distance and nearer to the ambush.

In this piece of composition, also, there goes along with the pictorial vividness of the right point of view a further advantage to the narrative in the character of the spectator. Two of the most notable peculiarities of the Icelandic workmanship are thus brought together,—the habit of presenting actions and events as they happen, from the point of view of an immediate witness; and the habit of correcting the heroic ideal by the ironical suggestion of the other side. Nothing is so deeply and essentially part of the nature of the Icelandic story, as its inability to give a limited or abstract rendering of life. It is from this glorious incapacity that there are derived both the habit of looking at events as appearances, before they are interpreted, and the habit of checking heroics by means of unheroic details, or, as here, by a suggestion of the way it strikes a vulgar contemporary. Without this average man and his commentary the story of the death of Kjartan would lose much. There is first of all the comic value of the meanness and envy in the mind of the boor, his complacency at the quarrels and mutual destruction of the magnificent people. His intrusion on the scene, his judgment of the situation, is proof of the variety of the life from which the Saga is drawn.

More than that, there is here a rather cruel test of the heroics of *Laxdæla*, of the story itself; the notable thing about this spectator and critic is that his boorish judgment is partly right, as the judgment of Thersites is partly right—"too much blood and too little brains." He is vulgar common sense in the presence of heroism. In his own way a critic of the heroic ideals, his appearance in Svinadal as a negative and depreciatory chorus in the tragedy of Kjartan is a touch of something like the mood of *Bandamanna Saga* in its criticism of the nobles and their rivalries; although the author of *Laxdæla* is careful not to let this dangerous spirit penetrate too far. It is only enough to increase the sense of the tragic vanity of human wishes in the life and death of Kjartan Olafsson.

Everything in the Sagas tends to the same end; the preservation of the balance and completeness of the history, as far as it goes; the impartiality of the record. The different sides are not represented as fully as in *Clarissa Harlowe* or *The Ring and the Book*, but they are allowed their chance, according to the rules, which are not those of analytical psychology. The Icelandic imagination is content if the character is briefly indicated in a few dramatic speeches. The brevity and externality of the Saga method might easily provoke from admirers of Richardson a condemnation like that of Dr. Johnson on those who know the dial-plate only and not the works. The psychology of the Sagas, however, brief and superficial as it may be, is yet of the sort that

may be tested; the dials keep time, though the works are not exposed. It may be doubtful at any moment how Skarphedinn will act, but when his history is in progress, and when it is finished, the reader knows that Skarphedinn is rightly rendered, and furthermore that it is impossible to deal with him except as an individual character, impressing the mind through a variety of qualities and circumstances that are inexplicably consistent. It is impossible to take his character to pieces. The rendering is in one sense superficial, and open to the censures of the moralist—"from without inwards"—like the characters of Scott. But as in this latter case, the superficiality and slightness of the work are deceptive. The character is given in a few strokes and without elaboration, but it is given inevitably and indescribably; the various appearances of Skarphedinn, different at different times, are all consistent with one another in the unity of imagination, and have no need of psychological analysis to explain them.

The characters in the best of the Sagas grow upon the mind with each successive appearance, until they are known and recognised at a hint. In some cases it looks almost as if the author's dramatic imagination were stronger and more just than his deliberate moral opinions; as if his characters had taken the matter into their own hands, against his will. Or is it art, and art of the subtlest order, which in Kjartan Olafsson, the glorious hero, still leaves something of lightness, of fickleness, as compared both with the intensity of the passion of Gudrun and the dogged

resolution of Bolli? There is another Saga in which a hero of the likeness of Kjartan is contrasted with a dark, malevolent, not ignoble figure,—the story of the Faroes, of Sigmund Brestisson and Thronð of Gata. There, at the end of the story, when Thronð of Gata has taken vengeance for the murder of his old enemy, it is not Sigmund, the glorious champion of King Olaf, who is most thought of, but Thronð the dark old man, his opponent and avenger. The character of Thronð is too strong to be suppressed, and breaks through the praise and blame of the chronicler, as, in another history, the character of Saul asserts itself against the party of David. The charge of superficiality or externality falls away to nothing in the mind of any one who knows by what slight touches of imagination a character may be brought home to an audience, if the character is there to begin with. It is not by elaborate, continuous analysis, but by a gesture here and a sentence there, that characters are expressed. The Sagas give the look of things and persons at the critical moments, getting as close as they can, by all devices, to the vividness of things as they appear, as they happen; brief and reserved in their phrasing, but the reverse of abstract or limited in their regard for the different modes and aspects of life, impartial in their acknowledgment of the claims of individual character, and unhesitating in their rejection of conventional ideals, of the conventional romantic hero as well as the conventional righteous man. The Sagas are more solid and more philosophical than any romance or legend.