**From Sognefjord**

**By P. Chr. Asbjørnsen**

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Translated by Ian Harkness

from

P. C. Asbjørnsen’s ‘Fra Sogneforden’ (1855)

Drawings by Ridley Borchgrevink (1934)

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**Introduction**

Most Norwegians, as well as tourists visiting Norway, observe a picture of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen (1812-1885) every time they reach in their wallets for a 50 *kroner* banknote; but few reflect on the tradition which the author stands for. Together with Jørgen Moe, he is primarily responsible for giving Norway a rich folk-tale tradition.

Asbjørnsen was born in 1812 in Kristiania (now Oslo), and went to school in Norderhov, in Ringerike, in 1826. It was here he met and formed an important friendship with Jørgen Moe, when they were both still schoolboys. Asbjørnsen and Moe had read Grimm’s *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, and they wrote a letter to Jacob Grimm in 1844, where they stated that the German collection of folktales had given them the idea of writing their own collection of Norwegian folktales. The first volume of *Norwegian Folk Tales* was published a year later, in 1845. They collected their tales by travelling around Norway, recording an oral tradition that was in the process of dying out.

*From Sognefjord*

Asbjørnsen and Moe are best known for *Norwegian Folk Tales.* However, Asbjørnsen also employed his creative skills in retelling sagas and tales. These are well-represented in his *Norske Huldreeventyr og Folkesagn* (Norwegian Fairy Tales and Folk Legends), which was published in 1845 and revised in 1870; it is from this collection that the narrative ‘From Sognefjord’ is taken.

In ‘From Sognefjord’, Asbjørnsen describes the characters, traditions, legends, myths, and customs of Sognefjord, as well as its magnificent scenery. These elements are woven together into a narrative; a kind of travelogue along Sognefjord. The author, as first person narrator, hires some local characters to row him along the fjord. The main character is Bård in the Shade (‘Bård i Skuggjen), a person who appears to have been created by the author from a mixture of personal experience and imagination. The boat party takes a rest from rowing along the fjord. They make a campfire near the shore, entertaining each other with tales of trolls and spirits. When they set off again, they meet a wedding party on the fjord and the beer flows freely ….

In order to retain a feeling authenticity in his writing, Asbjørnsen often used words associated with specific dialects. In ‘From Sognefjord’, the local dialect of the people of Sogn, *Sognemål*, is spoken by the local folk hired by the author. The narrative is written in the national romantic tradition, as illustrated by the use of dialect, legend, myth and poetic descriptions of the natural surroundings. One example of the use of legend and myth in the narrative is the reference to the *julaskreii (åsgårdsrei)*, a local, pagan, Yuletide myth and tradition; which takes place on December 13th. It coincides, and has much in common with, the wider tradition of Saint Lucia’s Night. On this night, according to the *julaskreii* tradition, ghosts are said to ride by horseback on a drunken rampage over the countryside. Associations with the devil are also explicit, i.e. references to ‘Old Nick’, or *nøkken*. In contrast to the folktales, which *record* an oral tradition, ‘From Sognefjord’ interestingly *utilizes* all the elements of folklore: character, legend, myth, and tradition; and transforms them into a fascinating narrative.

*Translation and Illustrations*

The translation was done by Ian Harkness. The illustrations were drawn by Ridley Borchgrevink who illustrated the 1934 edition of Asbjørnsen’s *Huldreveventyr.* They are used in this booklet with the kind permission of Ridley Borchgrevink’s niece, Sophie Nordrum.

**T**he brisk breeze, which earlier in the day had blown in over the Sognefjord bringing coolness from the sea, gradually died down, and the heat and humidity became almost unbearable for my people, who had been working the oars or dredging the depths of the fjord for sea creatures since early morning. Evening was approaching, and I knew that I could not reach my destination before morning, and so I decided to take the boat ashore at the first landing point we came to, and take some evening refreshment and rest a while until the cool of the late evening or night. The oar strokes now fell longer and stronger, and the boat surged swiftly over the fjord’s gleaming and glistening green surface towards the nearest point of land. It did not appear to be such a long way away, yet it took some time before we reached there, for the clear air, steep mountains and the strange majesty of the surroundings fooled us into misjudging the distance more than usual.

 We finally arrived. It is lush and green on this headland, a rich carpet of moss and grass, soft and inviting like silk and velvet. In the bay along the beach stands an ancient oak; its gnarled branches and great crown of foliage arch over the moss-covered roof of a tumbledown boathouse and the aged hull of a stranded coastal trader, half-hidden in a thicket of hazel and briars. The massive and dark crown of the tree stands out sharply against the delicate and light tracery of the weeping birches, which together with the wild apple and other deciduous trees cover the steep slopes and encompass a lustrous green clearing, where a barn shelters under an overhanging rock face. A gentle whispering passes through the woods and the hazel copse; it is almost certainly the woodland spirits ringing in vespers with the foxgloves, for the purple-tinted rows of bells swing to and fro, while not a breath of wind can be felt.

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While two of the men bore what we needed ashore, and another built a fire between some large stones to brew the coffee, which they had long talked of and yearned for, I lit a cigar, and tired of all the sitting in the boat, stretched out with pleasure on an old dragoon cloak which I spread out over the grass. The smoke from the fire rose thickly, and, wafted by the last trace of the morning’s breeze, drifted over the boat with its wondrous cargo of all those strange devices needed for catching deep-water creatures, and across the shining fjord.

We had enjoyed pleasant weather for several days, with alternating on-shore winds and calm, sea-breeze and good visibility, only occasionally dimmed by light summer clouds or heavier cloudbanks brought on by the cold sea wind in the evening. In this marvellous August weather, the fjord showed itself in all its glory. Ridges of massive mountains rose, one behind another, with their curved, broken and tumbling outlines, in harmonious, delicate shades, from the deepest blue and blue-black to the lighter tones of the sky’s horizon, which in the sunset took on a lucid violet or golden character with a rose-coloured glow on the snowfields, and as far as we could see in the bluish distance, the fjord in the evening was like a mirror, with the massive mountains swaying on its shining surface, together with the glory of the sky and the sunset.

The rivers and streams, which foamed down from the high ridges and peaks, rumbled more loudly in the quiet of the evening, and roared more wildly of the glaciers and barren mountain plateaux from which they came. Now I could see with my own eyes how they spoke of colours as if blind, those oh-so-clever foreigners and native sit-at-homes who, without knowing the true nature of the mountains and the fjords, amiably explain to us that the such atmosphere and light, the lucidity and abundance of colours, which the artists depict our Nordic landscapes with, is only to be found in the lands of the Mediterranean! We have heard time and time again that only the contours are drawn accurately; and that the portrayal of the landscapes is mere fancy - that the bluish-violet atmosphere of the mountains is a mere conventional form, reflecting the painter or the school, and does not faithfully represent the Norwegian landscape. Yet let them walk with their eyes open in these mountains or be rocked on the fjords, until nature reveals itself in its solemn garb, and they will see a glory they have never imagined, and understand that reality, in its wonder and splendour, stands out of reach and unattainable.

From early morning the crystalline air had allowed us to see the distant landscape in sharp outline, and given rise to all those wonderful bluish transitions, which appear especially when there is a fresh breeze on a sunny day. Now it gave way gradually to a light mist, which made the colours duller and heavier, making the mountains seem even more massive, magnificent and threatening. Banks of dark clouds, gleaming gold and copper, interwoven, trapped the evening sun-beams and spread them again broken, glowing and golden out across the mountain tops and glaciers; through a rift in the clouds a dazzling flood of light falls amongst the green foliage on the mountainside, starkly contrasting with the dark shadows and deep colours of the landscape, just like the baying of dogs after a flock of sheep with ringing bells on the steep rises echoes disturbingly in the still of the evening.

The sun sank behind the snow-covered mountain ridge reddening the glaciers, leaving only an afterglow in the clouds; the baying faded on the mountainside, just the echo reaching us mingled with the deeper resounding rumble of the rivers. But this rumbling, humidity, haze and the rising banks of clouds were all portents of a coming storm.

My people had brewed the ‘brown nectar’ and fed the fire eagerly, as if the air was not warm enough for them; now they lay straddled around the fire, only the gaffer remained standing and talked to me of the weather; he doubted the storm would break before midnight. *Bård i Skuggjen[[1]](#footnote-1),* as he stood there in front of the fire, appeared more massive than he actually was, and so seemed to fit in even better into the majestic surroundings. He was a tall, strongly built fellow with a somewhat overdeveloped torso, as is often the case among seamen. Yet his life on the sea and fjord had neither kept him away from the labour of the peasant nor the life in the mountains, and his leg was therefore just as strong and steady as his hand and arm; his body as hardened by the tiring hunt for the bear round the hills and streams of the mountainsides, as by the struggle against sea and storm.

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His face was finely carved with handsome, bold features; the great bushy eyebrows were grown together over a curved and very prominent nose, and the copious, and hereabouts uncommon, red beard, made his appearance seem almost wild; when he angrily gave the others loud orders or admonitions in the booming beer voice he occasionally used, his entire demeanour became so threatening and defiant that, had he been in Morocco or in the Greek Islands, with a change of clothing, he might have been taken for a pirate. But Bård was not as fierce as he appeared to be in such moments, because he never let the sun set on his wrath; as soon as he turned round, high spirits and good humour danced once again in his clear, dark blue eyes; and the pliant voice, often in a mild and friendly tone, supported his lively banter, both in conversation and in the tales which he often related in his beautiful, resonant *Sognemål[[2]](#footnote-2)* dialect. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him; in the eight days we journeyed together, we had not been ashore anywhere where he was not known, or met a boat or *jekt[[3]](#footnote-3)* where he was not acquainted with one or several, sometimes the entire lot; and had exchanged cheerful comments and banter, even when discussing the weather. It was not for joking alone, however, that he engaged other travellers in conversation; there was always one topic on which he always sought information, and that was beer; to find out where it was newly brewed, or where that drink could be found in plenty, seemed to lie close to his heart, and whenever the opportunity presented itself, the keg or little cask was always replenished with a fresh supply of home brew with a strong hop and malt taste. He said his far-flung familiarity with the good people of various parts of the country came from his years of fishing, or the many years he had spent as a pilot, *jekte* captain and the like; he had, as he said himself, “been in every nook and cranny between Varanger and Arendal.” It appeared that he had also learned about twists of fate; for though he had once owned both a farm and a coaster; he now had to make do with a little croft, and ran errands and day-jobs with a rented boat. I never found out whether the change in his circumstances was due to bad luck, or because of the beer he was so fond of, or the result of his somewhat unsteady disposition, not worrying about the problems the ’morrow might bring, or a combination of these.

 In a conversation with the other people about the last spring herring fishing he had taken part in, he took up one of his favourite topics, the *stril* people[[4]](#footnote-4), and their strange and filthy way of life and means of existence, which he described in droll and somewhat exaggerated terms. Then he went over to the opposite point of view and began to tell of the admirable strength and stamina that many of this race exhibited that fearful time when cholera broke out during the spring herring fishing of 1849. To relate these stories in the way in which they were told would be a difficult task: we followed the fishermen under the angst-ridden journey home, heard conversations between the sick and the dying and their faithful comrades, who strived to the last moment to get them home, or to prepare them for a more peaceful and milder death under the hull of a boat, than under the cruel winter sky, and in these conversations a solemn despair was painted and a humour and contempt for death, which stood in the sharpest contrast to all the exaggerated and ludicrous fear and all the unreasonable inventions of the local people in those places where refuge and help had been sought.

 From such stories of horror and death, the transition to the supernatural was easy; we were soon listening to all kinds of stories about ghosts and ghouls, and they were much more entertaining to listen to. Bård was a master storyteller, and the rich and pithy *Sognemålet* gave his narrative an emphasis and a character which the written word with all its flexibility has a difficulty in rendering.

 When he took a break in his stories, another of the party also began to speak, while Bård shredded tobacco, filled his little metal pipe, and lit it at the fire, which by now was burning briskly and stronger than the last gleam of daylight which threw its light over the oak and boat house and the fox bells. When his comrade reached the end of his story, Bård started on a new one.

 “ ’deed, twas an ’orror of a ghost,” said he; “but the worst ghost I have ’eard tell of was the old *Lensmann[[5]](#footnote-5)* at Dalsøyri, and ’t’isn’t surprisin’; ’cause while he lived, he was an ’orrible and turrible man with a great bear-skin cap, and had done all the ill which anyone could have done; he had sucked the sweat and blood out of the poor, fleeced the needy and moved marking-stones; but then he met an abrupt end, because ’e dropped dead in a ditch ’for ’e could utter Jesus’ name. Never ’ad a’body heard such a ’ubbub, as twas with his corpse; ’deed ’twas the worst ghostliness ever. When t’corpse lay there, and they watched over it with candles, the flames went out, and when they came back in with ’em, a large black cat lay by t’ ’ead of t’ corpse, and no one was man ’nough t’ move it. No more than two brave and hardy men dared stay there; they lay on a bunk, but t’ whole night they felt how t’ floor was rocking under them, as if they’d been lyin’ on the waves. When they were going ter put t’ lid on t’ coffin, there was a mighty hailstorm which lasted as long as t’ wake lasted, and they couldn’t get the bells t’ ring ’fore Bell-ringer Daoe from Bergsbøen went up to the tower and loosened them; then so much trolldom and devilry was let loose that he ’most couldn’t save hisself. But ’e was one of them what knows somethin’ ’bout most everythin’. The *lensmann* was a huge man when ’e was alive, but the coffin was no heavier than if there ’ad been t’ carcass of an ’en in it, and there was those who both saw an’ b’lieved that it was the black cat what had taken ’im, before he was put in the coffin. When ’e came under the sod, the weather turned as fine as it had been turrible and foul under t’ wake. But on the grave grew all kinds of bushes with thorns on ’em, the like of which nobody had seen afore. Since that time, he has wandered with the *julaskreii[[6]](#footnote-6)*, and amongst them ’e ’as a ’igh standin’. He rides nearest the nixie[[7]](#footnote-7), on the back of a black horse, and for this reason no one in the followin’ is allowed t’ say ‘nick’ the reins”.

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“That was a fine bunch that feller ended up with, I’d say,” said Ådne Utigarden, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand after taking a swig of the beer, and tossing the cask over to Bård; “I’ve heard tell of a *skreii* in Nordfjord, and they say that in the whole lot there’s nothin’ but marking-stone movers, evil-doers, womenfolk and ugliness. But where they comes from, or is recruited, I ain’t heard.”

“Yes, indeed, I’ll tell yer right out,” answered Bård, who knew everything, or at least always had a convincing opinion at hand. “In Luster there was two girls, who was bickerin’ over a local lad who they both liked. But t’ lad only liked the one of ’em and she was with child. When t’girls were goin’ t’ tend the sheep in the mountains, they rode past Kringlevatne på Stupe, when one of them wanted t’ shove t’other over the edge into the water. It didn’t go no better than wot both of ’em landed in the water. When the *julaskreii* turned up, the girls was ridin’ up from out’a the water. And the old *lensmann* came up to a big aspen tree at Øygarsboen, where ’e ’ad ’elped to move marking-stones. And every time he went past, the aspen started burnin’ jus’ like it was on fire, but the flames wasn’t like our’n, not like open flames, but they was darker, darker than embers and the dawn sky. There was eleven men wot saw it at t’ same time. Others followed the *skreii,* comin’ from all directions, some bareback, some in the saddle, some sittin’on barrels, some on carts. And they brought with ’em a great racket and din, as if a whole herd of cattle had stampeded through Dalsdalen, - past Øygaren and through Skåragaradne in Dalsøyri. There they held a dance. Right by Maltgroi is where they use’ ter stop. Once they ran inta Halvar Bringe there on the ice, an’ he was scared, ’cuz they was a nasty crowd to meet there, where it was both icy and steep. He wuz so scared ’at he promised to give a whole barrel of fish t’ the poor, if only he got away from them. And it really took a lot for Halvar Bringe to go that far – from wot I’ve heard. Ol’ Black Ragnelda met ’em on a footbridge at Morsmyri. She took off through the bog, leavin’ her shoes and socks behind, an’ t’ milk she was plannin’ to use for Christmas porage splashed out of her bucket, when she saw that one feller in the *skreii* wasridin’ with his head under his arm.

 A long conversation about the *julaskreii* followed, and in the hope of calling forth other memories and stories, I told some of the legends from Telemark, Setesdal and Valdres about the *åsgårdsreien[[8]](#footnote-8).* This, however, did not succeed. One of the party recalled vaguely that the *skreii* rode around the countryside in Uddland before Yule and visited all the cellars and tasted the Yule-drink; Bård, of course, found this interesting, and said that he wouldn’t mind tagging along on such trips before Yule, if only he had the throat to take all the beer and a horse which could keep up with the *skreii.* Nor were they acquainted with the saga from Nordhordaland of the two dogs that travelled around with the *skreii* at Yuletide, and like the German “Frau Holle” or “Bertha”, gave rewards and nice gifts to those who helped them. All they knew of was that in the old days there had been more wandering about than now; but now folk had lost their belief, and to prove this, they mentioned how in the old days in Justedalen there had been a tradition of leaving money in the cowshed, the barn and in the creek, so that the *skreii* would not steal or bewitch them, and that one could prevent them from visiting by painting a cross of tar on doors and barns; you can also see such crosses today; but now people often say that they don’t believe in it anymore. Since there wasn’t anymore to say about the *julaskreii*, Bård started to tell an old story about the Black Smith[[9]](#footnote-9); but first we had to listen to what knowledge and family relationship his great grandfathers had had with the Smith, and the story followed:

“The Black Smith lived in Bjedla in Sogndal; ’e were a strong and stout fellow, who warn’t scared of a mug of ale or a brawl, nor trolls an’ ghouls. But ’e had no need to be neither, ’cause he was strong as a bear, an’ he had a little magic sword ’e called Flusi, which ’e always carried. There come a Tuesday evenin’ in late autumn, an’ the Black Smith ’ad bin at sea. Just when ’e come ter Lundemyri[[10]](#footnote-10), ’tween t’ fjord an’ Bjedla , ’e saw t’ Lundemyr-troll. It were layin’ flat in the marsh, baskin’ in the moonlight. It were near as long the marsh was wide, and its eyes was big as griddles. The Black Smith warn’t neither scared nor frightened. He jus’ run right up to the troll and stuck Flusi in t’ heart. T’ troll knew what kinda steel had pierced it, an’ felt it were goin’ ter die, and wanted ter get its ’ands on the Smith; but long as Flusi were pinnin’ it down, it couldn’t budge. “Stick and pull it out,” said t’ troll. “Let it stay there ’til Monday,” said t’ Black Smith. He knowed better than ter draw t’ sword outa t’ wound, so t’ troll stayed put. When it had drawn its las’ breath, and its life ebbed out, t’ Smith saw seven glowin’ iron gates openin’ on t’ mountainside on t’other side o’ of t’ fjord; and outa these gates crept so many small trolls ’at they was fallin’ all over each other, pourin’ out just like Saturday mornin’ at Triangedlen in Bergen, all wailin’ and howlin’: “ol’ grandpa is dead, ’ol grandpa is dead,” an’ lifted him up t’gether, and bore him through t’ largest of t’ gates. Since then, no one ’as heard tell of t’ Lundermyr-troll.”

 The other fellows in the boat party possessed none of those distinctive traits which characterized Bård i Skuggjen; they were just ordinary fjord farmers, all of them simple and rather slow. Despite Bård’s ironic tone, they assumed that he himself believed in the truth of every single word of his own stories, and adamantly refused to believe his last story, saying it was only fable and humbug. The most spirited in his objections was Cottar Tom[[11]](#footnote-11); an oldish, broad-shouldered man with a short neck and an angular head sunk between his shoulders; his eyes were sour-milk blue and his hair a blond, almost white, crop; he was excitable and impetuous in his speech, and this coupled with an odd stammer, often resulted in the words falling backwards out of his mouth, so that he was always in danger of making a slip of the tongue, resulting in the most ridiculous and fabulous assertions. This almost never failed to have an effect on his comrades’ laughter muscles, which made him even more agitated and befuddled.

 “People with any sense ain’t so stupid,” he exclaimed excitedly, “y’ can’t b’lieve it when Bård tells ya that Flussi stuck the Smith in the troll!” – “It’s like I say”, said Bård laughing, “when ol’ Cottar Trond starts talkin’ backwards, we’re in for a spell of murky weather.” The others joined in the fun, but Trond continued even more excitedly: “I bin in m’ childhood fer fifty years now – yes, its bin in fact 50 years since I were such a child an’ was so imagin’tive ’at I could b’lieve that there was a slashing like Flusi told, that the Black Smith run Bård into t’ Lundemyrs Troll – well, y’know what I mean,” he said correcting himself, when he could see from the faces of the others that he had made a mistake and got his words tangled again. “But *this* is what I was gonna say – I’ll tell yer ’bout a slash I know t’ be true, ’cause I know it. There was a man called Bratten, and ’e were a good frien’ of t’ Black Smith. Them two was t’ best skiers in many parishes, and they was so good at it ’at there war’nt no one caught so many fish as Bratten; ever’ time ’e dipped ’is skis in the water, Bratten got somethin’ on the hook – so good ’e was. Once ’e was in t’ mountains, an’ ’e come t’ a little round tarn, in t’ middle o’ a marsh. He’d never heard tell of anyone catchin’ any fish there b’fore; but no sooner had ’e cast out in the water, than ’e caught a trout. – It must’a bin as big as a small calf, and so fat ’at it was ’most like pork. Sech a big ’un ’e ’ad never b’fore seen. He spat in God’s name and said “shame on ya” down its throat, ’cause ’e always did that with t’ furs’ fish he caught. No sooner ’ad ’e got a bite, than ’e put the bait on and cast out ag’in; and so ’e carried on t’ whole evenin’, baitin’ and bitin’, and t’ fish was biting all the while – well y’ get t’ picture -, so ’e got a big basket full o’ fish. Then ’e wanted ter go home, but t’ closer ’e come to t’ basket, t’ lighter ’is cottage b’came.”

 That was just too much, and what with all the stuttering and stammering it became so ridiculous that we couldn’t help laughing, and it didn’t help when Bård burst out: “More murky weather ahead.” But now Cotter Trond was even more offended, and said that those who wanted to could tell the rest of the story; *he* wouldn’t say another word - the young pups might snigger and sneer like a bunch of girls, that didn’t matter, but Bård wasn’t an inch better; he whooped worse than a gander.

 In a conciliatory voice, Ådne Utigarden, one of the youngest of the party, said, “Jest calm down, gran’pa, an’ *I* will tell the rest.” He continued the story in the even and simple manner in which such tales are usually related; “When Bratten felt t’ basket gettin’ lighter and lighter, ’e thought it odd, ’cause the basket were new, and there warn’t no hole in it; but when ’e put it down an’ saw there warn’t mor’n *one* fish left, ’e got flamin’ mad. ‘E didn’t say nuthin’ to the wife; but on t’ second day he jus’ couldn’t hol’ back no more an’ went fishin’ ag’in. An’ the fish was bitin’ just as lively as they’d done the day b’fore. After a while, when ’e got ’em outa the water, ’e strung ’em on a branch, ’cause he wanted t’ see where they was goin’ to. But on t’ way home, t’ trout jus’ vanished, one by one, and ’e couldn’t see what was ’appenin’ to ’em. ‘E finally come to t’ conclusion ’at it mus’ be the hill folk and tarn trolls who didn’ want him to ’ave t’ fish, an it mus’ be them what was takin’ ’em. But ’e was mad ’cause ’e couldn’t see how they took ’em. So ’e went to Stedje Church wi’ t’ basket, and filled the basket with consecrated mould, an’ walked back to t’ tarn ag’in. When ’e got there, ’e sprinkled a ring o’ church mould ’round the whole tarn, an’ went ’ome ag’in. On Midsummer Night ’e went back up t’ mountain. ‘E wanted see wot ’ad ’appened. But soon as ’e come to t’ tarn, he ’eard mis’able cryin’ and lamentin’. It were t’ tarn trolls and the nix, and when they seen ’im, they took off their ’ats, so ’e could see ’em, and shouted an’ screamed: “Yer done us wrong, Christian man, yer closed t’ tarn fer us.” “Yer done worse – yer took t’ fish from me, what I ’ad caught,” answered Bratten. “T’ tarn is our’n, and t’ fish is our’n, ’cept for the furs’ one; yer spat in its throat an’ said a Christian man’s words to it. But if yu’ll jus’ leave us a little gap in t’ mould, yer can take as many fish as yer want.” Bratten done as they wished, an’ scraped away the mould in one place, so they could pass through, jus’ like a gate on a farm. But furs’ ’e made the trolls promise not t’ cast any spells on t’ fish, so they’d be hard t’ catch, or play any other kind of mischief. After that ’e be good friends with the tarn trolls, an’ fished as much as ’e wanted for the rest of his days.

 The ashes and flames of the campfire were barely glowing, and the clouds were gathering more and more from the sea, and when we getting ready to be on our way, it became darker between the high mountains than was usual at that time of the afternoon, but the summer evening was still light enough to see a couple of boats with large crews heading inward along the fjord towards the headland on which we stood. Bård soon recognized some of the crew; it seemed as though he was using his ears as much as his eyes, and this wasn’t very difficult, because the people in the boats were quite boisterous, and a slight wind wafting in from the sea carried nearly every single word to us. They wore fine clothes and chattered noisily, so it soon became evident that they must be on their way home from a wedding. There were also women in the company. Bård soon reeled off a string of names of those on the first boat, and then the second boat. There was Ola i Hagen and Hans i Hammaren, Haldor på Haugen and Per i Vallen, Åmund på Øyren and Knut i Viken, and many others. But how old Bacon-Hans, Flour-happy Ala and Preacher Per had managed to join the company, which was otherwise quite respectable, at least as far as *Sognings[[12]](#footnote-12)* go, was something Bård or the others couldn’t understand. When *they* were in the company, it was easy to predict that it would come to blows and cracked foreheads before they got home; because the word on every man’s tongue was that Flour-happy Ala and the preacher had once helped Bacon-Hans steal *stabbur* food[[13]](#footnote-13), and it wasn’t to be expected that the others, in their excited and beer-drenched state, would be able to refrain from taunting them for this. For the moment though, song and merriment prevailed rather than fighting. In accompaniment to the melody of “One Sunday Evening I was Sad,”[[14]](#footnote-14) played by the fiddler, they started to sing a song on one of the boats; it was “The Sow’s Song”[[15]](#footnote-15), said Bård, and it contained just the bait for a fight; they sang it slowly just to taunt the three lovers of *stabbur*-food. In the quiet of the evening air the song drifted clearly in to us:

# Three o’ the bes’ farmers in our parish

Was goin’ ter fetch a pig.

When they was on t’ road, they met another,

Who they was glad t’ meet.

Atle Bald-Pate, e’ come furs’,

Einar Tambarskjelvar e’ bore t’ pig,

Porker-Snakupp were with ’em;

All three of ’em.

The boy carried the ’ead.

Do yer think sech people ar’ right in t’ ’ead?

T’ head was long in curin’.

T’ stolen sow slaughtered was on a dish,

She’d been fattened fer two-three weeks.

Snakupp come an’ got down on ‘is knees,

Sniffed, swore an’ cursed, the pig ’e would ’ave.

The sow were carried away,

She ended up on ’is table,

The wife didn’ ’ave t’ eat it.

It ain’t so hard t’ be a well-off farmer,

Going aroun’ t’ farms an’ stealin’,

When one can get a slaughtered pig that way,

Hangin’ from t’ ceilin’.

That’s what made t’ wife so proud,

She got a half-pound of fat outa t’ pig.

How can that be enough,

When they be travellin’ aroun’?

It won’t las’ fer eight days.

We had put out to sea, and when the song came to an end, we lay close alongside the two boats; the crew of the boats and my people now exchanged the kind of banter common when peasants meet, about the fine weather, how pleasant it is to meet, what kind of vessel they are sailing in, what sort of chap I was, the refreshments, the wedding gifts, the dance, and mostly about the ale at the wedding; it was excellent, it was said, and Bård grumbled that he didn’t have a little of this fine draught in his own keg – now there only remained the last dregs of what Åbmund i Reina had given him for fair words and old times sake. When the master of ceremonies overheard this, a broad smile spread over his face, plainly witnessing how splendid the wedding-ale had been; nodding blissfully, he handed Bård a mighty tankard with a frothy top, freshly tapped from a newly-opened cask of brew intended for the trip home.

While the tankard was passed round and the ale was praised according to its merits, and each man said his piece, Preacher Per, in a whimpering and whining moralising tone, with manner and gestures of a holier-than-thou person, began to expound on the vanity and perniciousness of drink; but the stuttering and stammering, the glazed gaze and unsteadiness, witnessed that he had drunk just as much of the good draught as anybody else. In the end he turned on Bård with admonitions and threats of fire and brimstone; he probably thought Bård had drunk too much. However, Bård wasn’t the type to be at a loss for words; without beating about the bush, he told him the truth, plain and simple, while the others laughed and loudly applauded.

“Per’aps Per,” he said, as he handed the tankard back with thanks and praise, “it were best not t’ answer ye; it be an ol’ proverb ’at ye shouldn’t speak t’ a preacher in ’is pulpit; but what I were goin’ ter tell ye was that if Saint Peter should ever set y’ to guardin’ the gates o’ heaven, I will lower m’ sail an’ tip me ’at t’ ye; but ’til I gets a letter from heaven, me ’at will remain on me ’ead, and me sail shall remain where it be. And regardin’ that likker, wot yer talks so much about, I’ve drunk it for the sake of me ’ealth when fishin’, an’ as often as I could get ’old o’ it, when things got bad. But otherwise nobody ken say,” he added forcibly, “’at Bård i Skuggjen ’as come ’ome from a trip t’ town with an empty likker cask or a befuddled ’ead. Since I’ve ’eard how gifted ye are, an’ how well ye preaches the Holy Scripture, I c’n appreciate ’at y’ might need t’ to go to the cupboard an’ take a drop to steady yerself, even in t’ middle o’ a sermon, else t’ bin might run dry and empty, fer both you an’ yer lis’ners. But wi’ respect t’ ale, I don’t agree wi’ ye, an’ proper temp’rance folk don’t agree wit’ ye neither. Yer not, an’ will never be as good as them; they’ve used a word which be worth seven of yer sermons. That word be a’most what I might’a said m’self. Do ye know what it be? No, ’course not! So ye’d better look out ’fore you go sticking yer nose into temp’rance matters, hadn’t ye?,” he added, half jokingly, half in contempt, as he took the tankard which had gone the rounds of the entire boat, and had now been topped up and handed back to him again. And no one drank as heartily to the praise of the ale as Bård, as he said, “did y’ see that big bill of t’ temp’rance pe’ple? It be near as big as the sail of a *færing* boat[[16]](#footnote-16); it’s easy ’nough to read and un’erstand, I should think. Y’ don’t need t’ be well-read or a Bible-pounder to do so; ’cause the letters are mos’ly as long and plain as the ribs o’ a starvin’ sow. Have y’ seen it? It says this,” he added, and started to read ‘The Bill’, first in a deep and solemn tone, slowly, using the words in which it was written, but soon went over to his own more lively interpretation: “Our ancestors were great - and powerful - and brave, and they subdued ha’f the world; for they did not intoxicate themselves wi’ either wine or spirits or any drink made from spirits -- But what *did* they drink, do y’ think? - They drank ale, home-brewed Sogn-ale, me good father; *that* is what gave ’em marrow in their bones; accordin’ to t’ bill, an’ those ’at made it, those temp’rance folk, are my people. It is ale, - *that* is what gives yer strength. Drink ale an’ you’ll feel ’ow strong yer back is, and how brave ye be. Y’ won’t ’av t’ hang yer ’ead an’ roll yer eyes, when y’ sees a seaman. - - - Do y’ think I would’a been man enough t’ take a barrel of herring on me shoulders, jus’ as easy as Ola throws a sack of flour across ’is back, or you and Hans run off wi’ a side of pork, if’n I ’adn’t drunk no ale? Ale – that’s t’ stuff!”

The ringing laughter, which drowned out the grumbling from those who had been insulted, showed that Bård had hit the nail on the head; it bore out his talent as a spokesman, and deflected the outburst of anger that might have been expected from the sour expressions and hateful glances from those grossly insulted. The women hurried to give thought and mood another course; they started to sing a song which the fiddler also immediately picked up on his Hardanger fiddle. The comic lyrics and the lively melody soon had some of the men singing along, and while the song chimed melodiously, the boats once again surged over the dark mirror of the fjord with quick strokes of the oars.

**Svarterabben**

Svarterabben was fetchin’ fuel,

’is wife was threshin’ corn,

Home wi’ t’ wood rode t’ fool,

’is trousers they got torn,

Man an’ mare fell in a ditch,

There they lay down in t’ pitch,

“Knut and Brita,” ’e shouted an’ screamed,

Fer t’ wife as well, or so it seemed.

Knut an’ Brita, maid an’ man,

Heard ’im scream an’ yell,

All for t’ door t’gether they ran,

Along come t’ dog as well.

Some with a staff, and some with a pole

Swarmin’ like ants ’round the mare in t’ hole,

All t’gether they hauled on t’ mare,

Heavin’ an’ haulin’ an’ strugglin’ there.

A hundred an’ ninety hoists was brought

Oiled an’ ready to hitch,

Shiny an’ new, but all fer naught

Jus’ to get ’em outa’ t’ ditch,

All t’ winches broke an’ got stuck,

Ev’ryone jus’ got mired in t’ muck,

‘til a giant did suddenly appear,

Carryin’ chains an’ a load of gear.

‘E throwed down ’is load an’ let it lie,

T’ field an’ t’ man an’ t’ horse ’e saw

’E lifted the mare jus’ as easy as pie,

T’ mare jus’ lay there an’ stared in awe.

’E seized the mare and gave ’er a tug,

Tossed ’er up in t’ field with nary a shrug,

Stretchin’ an’ kicking, there she lay,

Rolled on t’ grass an’ started to neigh.

Svartrabben should give to t’ giant some bread,

A hundred an’ ninety slices thin,

Seven sheep slaughtered, seven sheep-head,

An’ sixteen rein-deer skin.

Twelve barrels sour cream, twelve o’ ale,

Twelve barrels sour milk, an’ flour, twelve pail,

A knife with a sheath, an’ also a belt,

All ’cause t’ giant the mare did ’elp.

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Bård and the others also hummed along at first, but they didn’t seem to know the lyrics, and therefore soon gave it up. The wedding boats had more men at the oars, so we soon fell astern, and after a short time we could barely make out the tones of the melody.

In the spreading dusk, the mountains rise giant-high over our heads; some are lost in the clouds, which makes them seem even higher. The fjord lies in half-darkness, which becomes deeper under the dense bank of clouds, and the shadows of the heaven-aspiring mountains, which black and threatening seem to be gathering to trample down those who dare to pass beneath them. But high up in a pass through a rift in the lower-lying clouds, we can glimpse even higher mountains, far above the others; deep blue, they soar above the heavy clouds, pregnant with rain, and the snow-covered tops are wrapped in the faint lustre of the night sky, which gleaming arches over them.

From out of the deep clefts and dales, which like black shadows throw themselves between the mountain ranges, falls a cold gust, which at once rifles the surface of the fjord, like when breath dews and darkens shiny steel. In this moment there is no other disturbance in the evening peace than this sigh from nature, which we also sense from the stronger murmur of the rivers and becks, and in the aromatic air which is carried across the fjord from the trees and herbs, which refreshes and strengthens us after the sultriness. But the calmness is not to be trusted; these sudden gusts of winds are the first portents of stormy weather. Thunder storms are rare here in the fjords, but now lightning blazes over mountains and glaciers, and the clouds’ wondrous forces advance in the fleeting illumination of the lightning flashes, so as to stand even more wondrous for the imagination in the deep darkness afterwards. One bolt of lightning follows another, crash after crash, whose rolling and thundering is repeated by the language of the dwarves. It sounds like the old God of Thunder is abroad and leading the way for the *asgårdsrei*.

The stormy weather now approached rapidly, and my people, who now seemed to realise what kind of weather we were in for, drew on every ounce of their strength in order to reach the only landing point which existed on the long way under the precipitous rock walls.

“It’s goin’ t’ be ravagin’ -weather,” said Bård, when the boat was hauled ashore, and the first violent gusts of wind threw themselves down; “the wind comes as if it was thrust outa a giant bellows; God ’elp those ’o is out on t’ fjord this night!”

It didn’t take long before the storm tore down from the glaciers; screeching and rushing like a waterfall, it whipped the fjord into a smoking froth; it whistled and roared from out of the clefts, as if all the trolls had been let loose and would outdo each other in howling and screaming; and through all this din, it was as if we for a moment heard human voices, but wild and agitated, like nature’s own discord. Bård thought he had caught a momentary glimpse of one of the boats during a flash of lightning, floating keel up far out on the fjord, and close by, the other boat with the men fighting each other. I did not see anything except for flashes and darkness, but so much is certain; we heard a shriek or a scream, a hopelessly lamenting wail, out there on the fjord. The others whispered of dragons and water sprites; but Bård told them to get the boat ready and throw everything out of it; because as soon as the weather let up just a little, they would be out on the fjord again, “an’ then,” he said, “it’s a question o’ whether we ’ave marrow in our bones an’ our hearts in t’ right place.” So he gave them the beer keg, and said: “Y’ see things are goin’ t’ get tough, so furs’ take a drop o’ Åbmund I Reina’s brew.”

1. ‘Bård in the Shade’ - ‘å’ is pronounced ‘o’: - Bård is thus pronounced like English ‘board’: /bo:d/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Sognemål* – the dialect spoken in Sogn. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Jekt:* A northern broad, one-masted freight vessel with a room aft and windows in the stern. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *stril* is the typical farmer of the barren land of Nordhordland, who was dependent on both fishing and agriculture in order to carve out a means of existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Lensmann:* approx: sheriff. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. **Julaskreii. December 13th - an old Norse tradition - the day when a host of ghosts and spirits was said to ride through the air and sweep away people foolish enough to stay outside (also called: *oskoreia, åsgårdsreia*).** [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Norwegian: *nøkken*: water demon. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Similar to *julaskreii.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Norwegian: *Svartesmeden*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lunde Marsh. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Norwegian: *Trond på Plassen*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Sognings:* a person from the county of Sogn. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Stabbur*: A storehouse on pillars where food is kept. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Norwegian: *Stusle sundags-eftan eingong for me va.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Norwegian: *Purkevisao*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A four-oared boat. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)