

The Story of the Slave-girl's Son

The Vikings tell the story of a girl whom they called Melkorka. They said she was the daughter of a king in Ireland, and that she had been captured on a raid when she was fifteen. She was very beautiful but she pretended that she could not speak, so that no one would know she was a king's daughter. After many hardships, she was sold to a wealthy merchant named Gilli. They called him Gilli the Russian, and he wore a Russian hat.

Now there was a farmer named Hoskuld who lived in Iceland. His wife wanted a bigger house and better farm buildings, but Iceland has very little wood. So Hoskuld bought a ship and sailed to Norway to get wood. They had good winds and a smooth voyage and he landed in the south of Norway, where some of his relatives lived.

Hoskuld stayed with his relatives for the winter. In the spring there was a big fair not far away where the king of Norway was coming to hear cases and pass judgement. There were many people and traders, games and festivities, drinking and entertainment.

As Hoskuld went about, he noted a particularly richly-decorated tent set a little apart from the rest. He went inside. Gilli was sitting inside, in his fine clothing and his Russian hat and many beautiful things for sale around him. But Hoskuld said to Gilli: 'I have heard that you are the richest merchant here, but I want something quite different from all these things. What I want to buy is a slave-girl.'

'Ah,' said Gilli, 'You may think you are asking for something that I don't have, but I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you!' With that he pulled aside a curtain that was behind him. There were his slaves that he had for sale, twelve of them, all women, sitting in a row.

Hoskuld looked them over and liked Melkorka the best, even though she was poorly dressed. Gilli said that she cost three marks of silver even though she couldn't speak, while the other women only cost one mark each. But Hoskuld didn't mind. He emptied the silver out of the purse at his belt and they weighed it up in Gilli's weighing scales, and it came to three marks exactly. Hoskuld took away the girl with him.

When the fair was ending, Hoskuld approached the king and offered his services in the proper way. The king was very pleased, and Hoskuld served him all summer. When autumn came, the king rewarded him with a supply of building timber. He took a gold armring worth one full mark from his arm and gave it to Hoskuld, and he gave him a sword worth half a mark. Soon Hoskuld was sailing back to Iceland, taking his new slave-girl with him. Hoskuld had become very fond of his new slave, and he gave her much nicer clothes.

When he got back to Iceland his wife was not very pleased to see that Hoskuld had brought a girl with him, and Hoskuld took care not to pay her too much attention. But people couldn't help noticing that Melkorka had a very special air of distinction about her, even though she never spoke.

Late in the year Melkorka bore a boy-child, and very handsome he was, too. By the time he was two years old, he was running about and talking as though he were four. One day while out looking after the farm, Hoskuld heard voices: some people were talking down by the stream. To his astonishment Hoskuld discovered that it was Melkorka and her son, chattering away to each other. So Hoskuld said there was no point any more pretending that she couldn't speak: she must tell him her name and where

she came from. They sat down beside the stream and she told him how she had been captured by raiders when she was fifteen, and that her father was a king in Ireland.

The Story of the Slave-girl's Son

Melkorka's son grew into a fine man: Olaf was his name. He was strong and handsome, and he dressed so well that everyone called him Olaf Peacock. When Olaf was eighteen he took passage on a ship to Norway. There he took service with the king, and at the end of the winter the king provided him with a ship and sixty warriors to take him to Ireland. The weather was bad and they lost their way in fog. When they landed in Ireland the Irish wanted to take them prisoner and seize all their goods. Olaf and his men got ready for battle.

Fortunately the king of Ireland came along just then, and Olaf was soon able to convince him of their relationship. The king was very impressed with the tokens Olaf had brought from his mother and with the beautiful Irish Olaf's mother had taught him to speak. 'What's more,' the king said, 'you look just like your mother,' and he invited Olaf to come to his court.

Olaf spent the winter with the king of Ireland, and hard work it was, going up and down the country warding off invasions by Vikings and by others. When spring was near, the king called an assembly and announced publicly that Olaf should be made king after him. Olaf thanked him very much, but said that he preferred not to quarrel with his uncles, who had

expected that position. 'Better a brief spell of honour,' he said, 'than a long rule of shame.'

So the king of Ireland gave Olaf a spear with gold inlay, a decorated sword and much other wealth, and Olaf sailed back to Norway. There Olaf gave the king many precious things from Ireland and he spent the rest of the year there. At Yule-tide, which is our Christmas, the king gave Olaf Peacock a bright red suit of clothes. Now though the king wanted Olaf to settle in Norway permanently, Olaf was determined to return to Iceland, so in the spring the king gave him for his very own a good sized trading ship all stocked with food and water and timber.

There were good winds and Olaf soon reached Iceland. His mother rejoiced to see him again and hear the news of Ireland. Soon after, Olaf began to think of marrying and building his own farmhouse with the timber from Norway. There was a girl living up in one of the fjords some distance away who was considered to be a good match for him. But when she was asked, she turned up her nose, saying she wouldn't marry a slave-girl's son. 'But,' replied her father, 'Olaf is one of the most renowned people in the country now. Haven't you heard he is the grandson of the king of Ireland? He is of even better family on his mother's side than his father's.' And when the girl saw Olaf in his fine red clothes, and when he talked to her, she changed her mind and agreed to marry him, and a fine, happy and loving marriage it turned out to be. Olaf became an important chieftain and his farm was the most impressive in the region.

Exercises.

True of False

1. Iceland had plenty of wood, so there was never a problem building things.
2. Kings like to have warriors taking service with them, and rewarded them with gifts.
3. People sailed from Iceland to Norway and back at any time of year.
4. Slave girls were about the cheapest things you could buy.
5. Marriages in Iceland were arranged.

Questions

1. Why did Hoskuld sail to Norway?
2. What were some of the things Gilli the Russian had for sale?
3. When Hoskuld went to Norway, he sailed in his own ship. When Olaf sailed to Norway, he was just a passenger on someone else's ship. Why?
4. Olaf's initial reception in Ireland was not friendly. Why would that be?
5. Why did the girl whom Olaf proposed to marry not want to marry him at first?

Fill in the blanks.

1. Hoskuld lived in Iceland with his wife and family on a _____
2. Gilli and Hoskuld weighed out Hoskuld's silver on a set of _____
3. The king gave Hoskuld a ring that he took from his _____
4. Olaf learned to speak Irish from _____

5. When Olaf's grandfather offered to make him king of Ireland Olaf refused, saying that he preferred _____ than _____.

Match up the following items with the price they were worth in the story

Melkorka	1 mark
The king's gold armring	1/2 marks
The other slave girls (each)	3 marks
A sword	1 mark

Activities

1. Choose one of the following characters, and write their story from their point of view:

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| a) Melkorka; | b) Melkorka's father; |
| c) the king of Norway; | d) Gilli the Russian. |

2. Google 'ivory chessmen' (or 'Lewis chessmen?') on the internet to see the kind of chess pieces Gilli had to sell.

Can you draw these?

