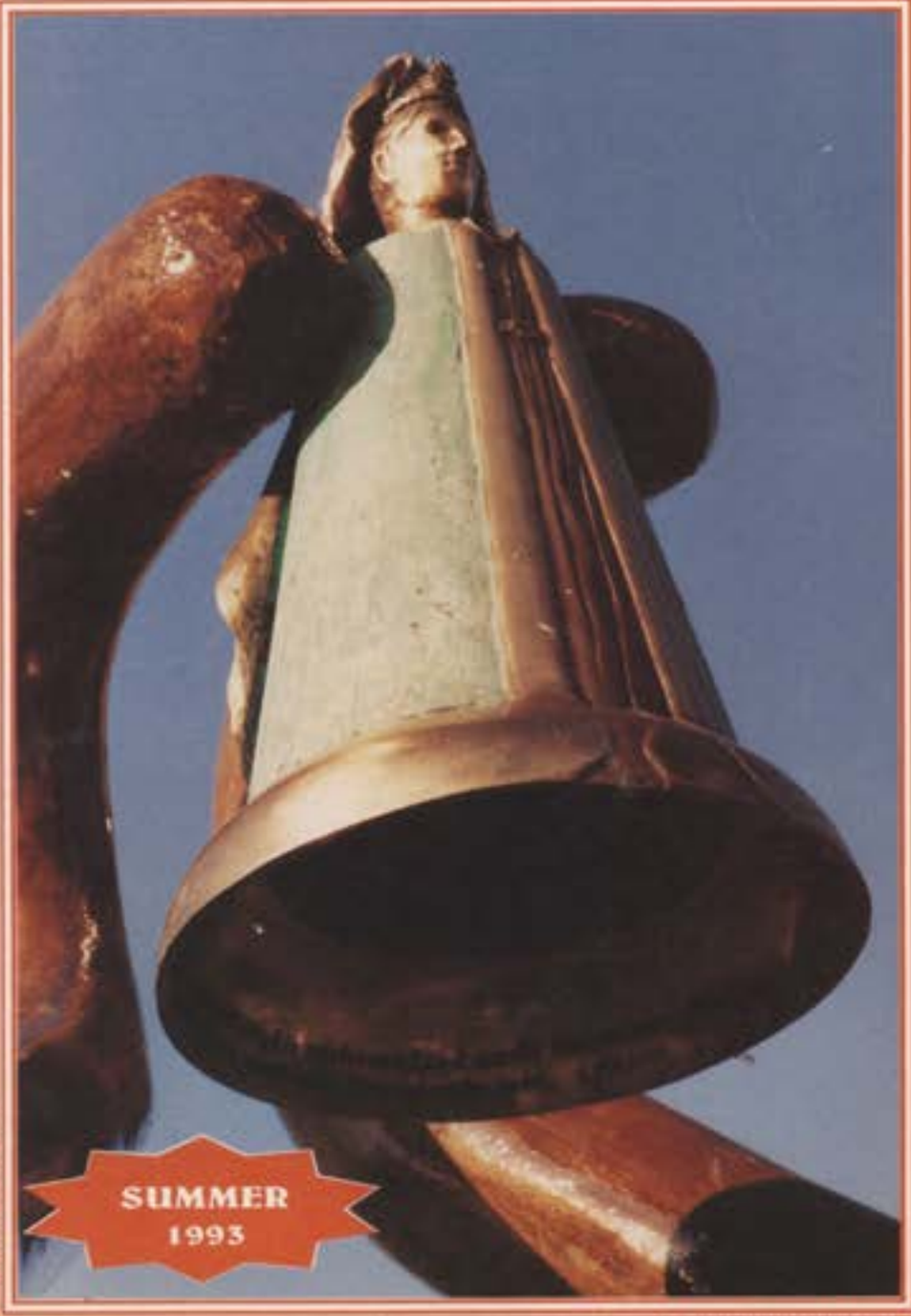
THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN



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SUMMER
1993

Íslendingadagsblaðka

1992 BILLBOARD

Fjallkona's Message ...

May I take this opportunity to invite you to join me at the 104th anniversary celebration of the ***Icelandic Festival of Manitoba***. A spectacular 3-day program has been planned for the weekend of ***July 31, August 1 and August 2*** at ***Gimli.***

Íslendingadagurinn is unique in its scope and purpose... that of celebrating a cultural heritage which we continue to cherish. The ties which bind us ancestrally to Iceland are woven into the fabric of our nationhood here.

Bless,
Shirley McCreedy

Shirley McCreedy is on the Board of the Icelandic Canadian Magazine. Her article "Profile: Marilyn Whitehead" can be found in this issue. Shirley is the daughter of Norma and Fred Thordarson (Winnipeg); maternal grandparents were Sveinn Þorbergsson, Vatnsdalur, and Helga Hinriksdóttir, Húnavatnssýsla, Iceland; paternal grandparents were Erlendur Þorðarson, Eyjafjörður, and Signý Björg Erlendsdóttir, Húnavatnssýsla, Iceland.

THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

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Cover photo: Courtesy Linda Collette

THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

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EDITORIAL

Summer Celebrations

by Sigrid Johnson

The summer season has long been one filled with celebrations for Icelanders and Icelandic Canadians alike. The First Day of Summer (Sumardagurinn fyrsti) and Iceland's National Day or Day of the Republic (Lýðveldisdagurinn) are celebrated on both sides of the ocean, while Íslendingadagurinn (The Icelandic Festival), the celebration held annually at Gimli, Manitoba, has the distinction of being "the second oldest continuous ethnic festival in North America."[1]

The First Day of Summer is the Thursday in the period April 19 - 25.

In Iceland where the winters are long and dark, it has always been of great importance that the spring and summer be good. Consequently, over the centuries, various attempts were made at forecasting the weather. For instance, the arrival and behaviour of migratory birds, such as the golden plover, the whimbrel and the common snipe, were thought to be indicative of the weather patterns. The general consensus throughout the country was that all the cold spells of spring were over when the long cry of the whimbrel was heard. However, it was significant from which direction the neighing-like sound of the common snipe was first heard. If it came from the east and south, it was usually a good omen; from the west and north, it was not so favourable. Similarly, in the south and west of the country, the early arrival of the golden plover was thought to forecast a cold spring, while in the north and east, it was thought that the earlier the plover arrived, the better. In all parts of the country, it would be observed whether there was frost during the night before The First Day of Summer, or whether summer and winter had "frozen together." This was generally thought to be a good omen.

In most areas of Iceland, all but the most essential work was halted on The First Day of Summer. It was, however, in some places, customary to make a symbolic beginning of spring work, such as by manuring the home fields. Weather permitting, it was also usual for the cows to be allowed out of their barns for the first time after the long winter, both in order to watch them frolic and to let them breathe the first air of summer. But, in general, people donned their holiday attire following the morning chores and the celebrating began.

The First Day of Summer was a day of great feasting all over the country, and was considered second only to Christmas and New Year's in terms of celebration. All the best of food and drink would be served on this day, although more often than not the larder would be nearly bare by this time of the year. People therefore tried throughout the autumn and winter to put away some tidbits specifically for this day. In the western part of Iceland it was customary to store food in a special barrel during the autumn, which was not to be touched until The First Day of Summer.

In Iceland "summer presents" predated even Christmas presents as a custom among the common people. Typically, the presents were home-made articles.

Because children did not have to work on The First Day of Summer, those living on neighbouring farms would get together to play games in which the adults frequently joined in. The elderly would also visit each other on this day and exchange gifts.

It was not until after the turn of the twentieth century, however, that celebrations involving entire parishes began. It was also around this time that the Youth Movement (Ungmenna-

félagshreyfingin) adopted the day as its own with speeches, poetry readings, sports, singing, dancing and dramatic performances.

In North America, Bruin, the Selkirk, Manitoba chapter of the Icelandic National League, carries on the Icelandic tradition of greeting The First Day of Summer. As in Iceland, speeches, poetry readings, singing and dramatic presentations, followed by refreshments, are the order of the day. In 1994 Bruin will be hosting its one hundredth annual celebration of The First Day of Summer.

Iceland's National Day or Day of the Republic is June 17th.

Although Iceland had been granted full independence from Denmark in a personal union under the Danish King in 1918, it was not until the Act of Union expired twenty-five years later that Iceland became a republic. On June 17, 1944 the Republic of Iceland was proclaimed at Þingvellir, the site of Iceland's first parliament. That date was selected primarily because it was the birthday of Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), the leading figure in Iceland's struggle for autonomy from Danish rule during the nineteenth century.

As early as 1911, on the centennial of Sigurðsson's birth, an elaborate commemorative festival was held in Reykjavík. At that time, a statue of him was erected in Reykjavík, and a wreath laid on his grave in the name of the Icelandic people. That wreath laying ceremony has been repeated on June 17th every year since.

In 1921, the Icelandic people had a copy of this statue of Jón Sigurðsson cast and sent to Winnipeg, Manitoba where it was placed on grounds of the province's Legislative Building. Since 1983, Iceland's National Day has been commemorated each year by Winnipeg's Jon Sigurdsson Chapter, IODE, in a special wreath-laying ceremony at the statue. Following the wreath-laying ceremony an evening of entertainment, food and drink is jointly sponsored by the Chapter and the Icelandic Canadian Frón chapter of the Icelandic National League.

In 1994, fifty years will have passed since Iceland became a republic. Plans for major festivities to mark this milestone are already well under way on both sides of the ocean.

For North American Icelanders, however, "the celebration of celebrations" is Íslendingadagurinn. Each year this "celebration of ethnicity" is held at the beginning of August.

In 1989, for the purpose of creating a permanent reminder of the centennial celebration of Íslendingadagurinn, Íslendingadagsklukka, Íslendingadagurinn's bell, was erected at the site of the annual celebration, Gimli Park. In this issue of ***The Icelandic Canadian***, Linda F. Collette relates the story of this unique bell in "The Saga of Íslendingadagsklukka."

In years gone by, many of the magazine's subscribers will probably have danced to the "Gimli Waltz" at Íslendingadagurinn. The editorial board therefore thought it would be appropriate to include in this issue an article by Arilius Isfeld entitled "The Gimli Waltz." This article was originally published in the Summer 1972 issue of ***The Icelandic Canadian***, but due to shortage of space was one of the articles that we were unable to accomodate in the fiftieth anniversary issue of the magazine.

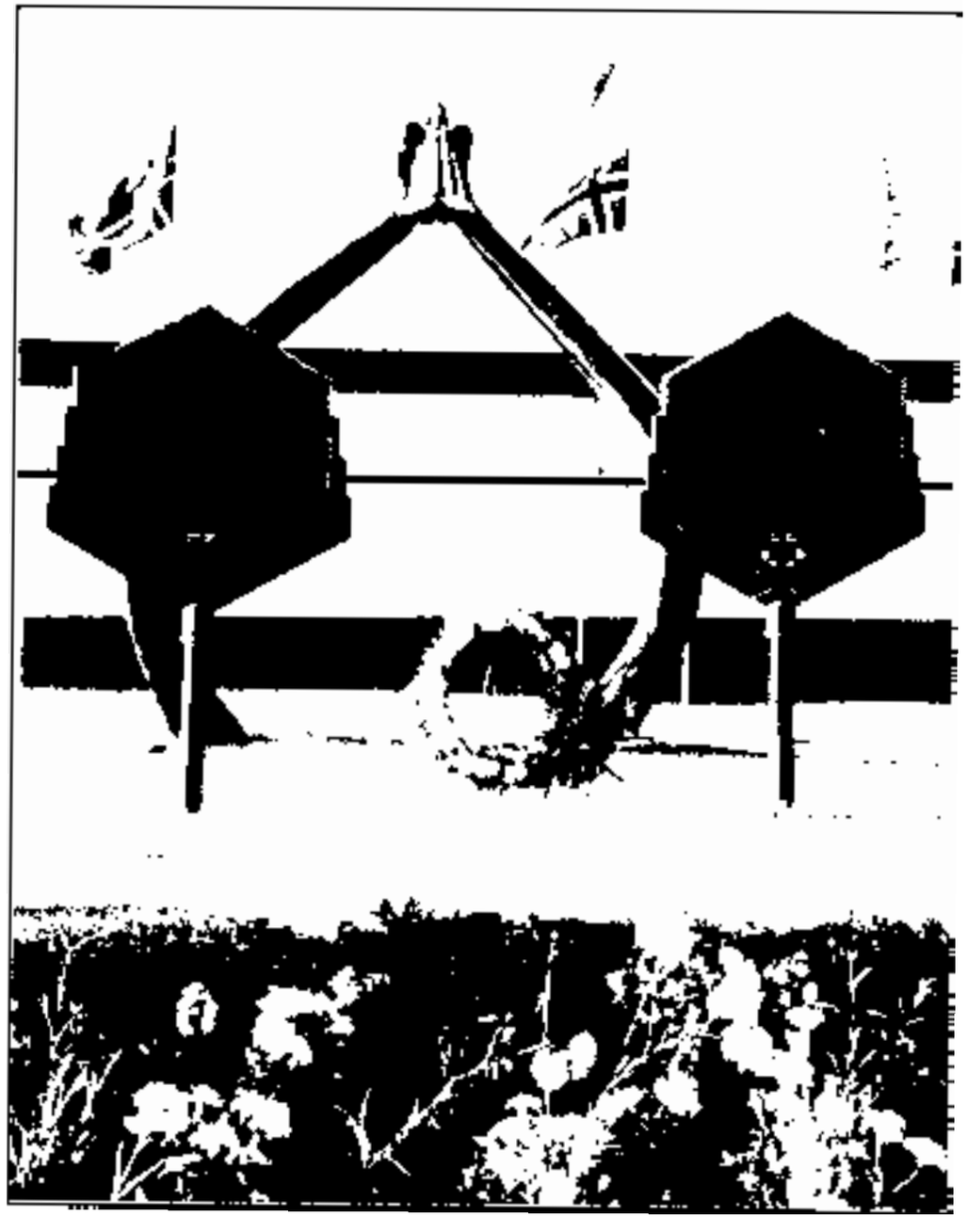
At this year's Íslendingadagurinn, which is being held July 31 - August 2, the toast to Iceland will be delivered by Betty Jane Wylie. Therefore in this issue of the magazine we have also chosen to include a short story by Betty Jane Wylie entitled "Dam."

We hope that upon reading this issue of ***The Icelandic Canadian***, our subscribers find themselves well into the spirit of this upcoming summer celebration. See you at Íslendingadagurinn!

[1]Jónas Þór. *Islendingadagurinn: an illustrated history: saga Islendingadagsins.* (Gimli, Man.: The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, 1989), pp. vii.

FEATURE

The Saga of Íslendingadagsklukka



The Saga of Íslendingadagsklukka

by Linda F. Collette

Photos courtesy Linda Collette

> *"My attire, each year, is a visual reminder of your ancestral homeland. My headdress is as the snow-capped mountain peaks that rise above the grassy slopes and valleys just as my green velvet mantle cascades from my shoulders. My gold crown radiates sunshine and displays the unity of the guardian spirits, in the image of the falcon, the bull, the dragon, and the giant. The Icelandic flag is prominent in the centre."*
>
> *- from the address of Helga Sigurdson Fjallkona 1988*

Each year, since 1989, Íslendingadagsklukka rings to announce the entrance into Gimli Park of the Fjallkona, and thereby, begin the celebration of the bonds between Iceland and North America. The story of Íslandsklukka and the Fjallkona, two independent symbols becoming one in the Íslendingadagsklukka, is typically Icelandic — and recognizes FATE.

Arriving early for a meeting of the centennial committee for Íslendingadagurinn 1989, I browsed through the library. My thoughts for the past week had centred on the creation of a permanent reminder of this event. The pages of a book opened to one with the headline, "Iceland's Bell". I stared. I read with disbelief. I had never heard of this special bell. Here was a translation of a chapter from Halldór Laxness' book, *Íslandsklukkan.*

Believing this story to be purely fiction, I consulted *Iceland Saga* by Magnus Magnusson (Magnus Mastermind of Great Britain). There it was in the index, Iceland's Bell. I turned to the page indicated. Confirmation. Later, thanks to Sigrid Johnson, librarian of the Icelandic Collection, University of Manitoba, *Landið þitt* provided further information.

Iceland had accepted Christianity in the year 1000 A.D. by an Act of Parliament. Because of this, King Olaf (St. Olaf) Haraldsson of Norway (1014-30) sent to Iceland in 1018 a great bell and timber for building a church at Þingvellir, the site of the world's oldest parliament. Then, his half-brother, King Harald Sigurdsson (Haraldur Hardraade who was defeated at Stamford Bridge, England, in 1066) sent a smaller bell. According to the law people were to gather as the "lögmaður" rang or had the huge bell rung. He would then pronounce judgements such as the drowning of women and the putting to death of men.

In 1593, these "Alþingis" bells were melted down and a new bell cast. This new bell cracked in 1630, but was used for one hundred years. The Danes came to confiscate this worthless cracked bell for its metal content, but to the Icelanders, the bell which rang for justice, was their most prized possession, equal to the Crown Jewels of England. They refused and the Danes finally relented. It was sent away to be re-cast. When the bell arrived at Keflavík in 1733, no one was willing to pay for it. It was sent away or returned in 1742.

There was no bell for the Alþing until 1766 when Þorsteinn Magnússon, "sýslumaður Rangæinga", donated a bell. This one was used for the meetings at Þingvellir until 1804 when the "lögréttuklukka" was taken from Þingvellir and set up in a school house at Hólavelli in Reykjavík for the parliament to use.

In 1944, Þingvallakirkja was given a big bell. Halldór Laxness says he came walking down the rift just as the bell was rung on June 17th, Iceland's Independence Day. A stranger in the crowd whispered to him, "They are ringing 'Íslandsklukka' again." Then Laxness remembered "my bell, your bell" and this poem evolved:

Stóð ég við Öxará
árroða á fjöllin brá,
kátt tók að klingja og fast
klukkan sem áður brast.

Íslandsklukka did not ring for lawmaking but to call the land and the people together to celebrate. The bell had been the national treasure for 926 years. This is part one of the story.

Did fate arrange that my mother was Fjallkona in 1988, and that my sister, Sandra, and I with our two daughters, Elizabeth and Deidre, were the hirðmeyjar? We stood as three related generations, celebrating Íslendingadagurinn together. Because of this event, my understanding of the importance of the Fjallkona developed.

As David Arnason says, "We are ruled by our Fjallkona, maid of the mountain, not some young girl celebrated solely for her physical beauty, but an older woman, earth mother, celebrated for her contribution to the community as a whole. It is a wonderful and entirely unique position, a creation of the community here and not an imported ceremony from Iceland."

Later, I learned that the homesick Eggert Ólafsson, in 1750, wrote a poem entitled "Ísland" which describes the dress and adornments of a woman named Ísafold who represented the nation of Iceland. In 1810, Bjarni Thorarensen's "*Eldgamla Ísafold*" was published. In 1866, a picture of the Fjallkona appeared in a book of folktales and in 1874, it became part of Benedikt Gröndal's Millenial Celebration drawing. In 1924, the Fjallkona first presided over Íslendingadagurinn in North America and has graced the celebration ever since. She now appears in Iceland as well.

What to do? Enter Richard Osen, creator of Lundar's unique centennial sundial (1987), displays at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the granite backdrops for the aquariums at the Fort Whyte Nature Centre, displays at Oak Hammock Marsh, and many other artistic works. I presented Richard with my idea of the commemorative project. He said, "How about a bell in the shape of the Fjallkona?" — That was that! Once the centennial committee had accepted his proposal, Richard worked diligently with very little time left until Íslendingadagurinn.

Richard's ancestry is Norwegian and he understood what Íslendingadagurinn reflected. He carefully viewed the Gimli Park grounds and,

with the practised eye of the artist, considered all prospective sites for the bell. He felt that the site had to be within a stone's throw of the entrance gate. Finally, because of the two historical plaques, the flower bed, the rise of the pavilion, Richard thought the lines were right. Anyone standing on the sidewalk or driving down the street clearly saw Íslending-adagsklukka against the grey roof of the pavilion with the blue Manitoba sky behind. Permission was gratefully received from the Gimli town council, who supervise the park, and Richard set to work.

My mother and I had many discussions with regards to an appropriate inscription for the bell. I consulted other people, but none of their suggestions were ever quite right. FATE .... Enter Ingthor Isfeld, pastor of the First Lutheran Church and centennial committee member. At a meeting, I told him of my problem. His eyes brightened and with great animation, he said, "I know just the poem." And he did.

Pastor Ingthor explained that as a child in Iceland, one of the many poems that he committed to memory was Stephan G. Stephansson's "Úr Íslendingadags ræðu", which begins —

Þó þú langförull legðir
sérhvert land undir fót,
bera hugur og hjarta
samt þíns heimalands mót,

He said that when he learned the poem he thought Stephan G. was a fellow countryman, not a Western Icelander.

There have been many translations of this famous poem, but I have selected the one by Kristjana Gunnars —

Though you wide journeying place
every country underfoot,
your mind and heart bear
your homeland's resemblance,

I say, no matter where you go, you'll always be an Icelander, or as the late Dr. Kjartan Johnson told his grandchildren, "All you need is one drop of Icelandic blood."

From Jónas Þór's *Islending-adagurinn*, I later learned that Stephan G. had recited this poem at the 1904 celebration.

Íslendingadagsklukka was cast June 27, 1989 at 3:30 p.m. at the Bay Bronze company in Winnipeg. The bell is made of bronze and copper, weighs over 150 pounds, and is about three feet high.

For safety reasons, the bell had to be stationary with the clapper producing the sound when the cord is pulled. Richard learned how to tune the bell, as the only alternative — sending the bell to Europe for tuning — was cost prohibitive.

The inscription was etched by graphic designer Leo Simoens. Richard constructed two fourteen foot curved pillars, made of fiberglass and resting on two twelve foot supports anchored in the earth, to support the bell.

A shortage of finances prevented the completion of a time capsule for the year 2089, a plaque and a cement pad for the ground beneath the bell. However, when the project is completed, the site will encompass the three levels of the world as in Norse mythology — Álfheimar, Miðgarðr, Ásgarðr.

The stage was set. August 7th, 1989. Richard and I anxiously awaited the arrival of the dignitaries. Fred Isford commented on the procedures from the stage. When the dignitaries arrived, I explained the two symbols and said, "May Íslendingadagsklukka forever ring across the land — Velkomnir vinir! Velkomnir heim!"

Sculptur Richard Osen polishing the bell he created for the centenary.
Photo courtesy of The Interlake Spectator

Richard said a few words about the honour of constructing the bell, his Norwegian background, and that we should consider his work on the bell as a gift from our ancestors in Norway. He then passed the white ribbon, a pull on which would unveil the bell, to Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland. As the bell was unveiled, the Fóstbræður Choir from Iceland sang the inscription, *Þó þú langförull legðir* .... .

A close up of the finished bell, mounted on its stand, shows part of the wonderful inscription hidden inside..."Þó þú langförull legðir sérhvert land undir fót, bera hugur og hjarta samt þíns heimalands mót, ..."

Pastor Ingthor Isfeld then gave the blessing, following which Lilja Arnason, the centennial Fjallkona, pulled the cord attached to the clapper. With a flick of the wrist, she called the land and the people together to celebrate. The bell was rung three times. I now have suggested it be rung seven times, once for each of the seven seas. My Afi Holm informed me when I was young that vinarterta should have seven layers for the same reason.

Untold complications have of course gone unstated in this saga. However, Richard and I were finally able to relax. In fact, my personal highlight of August 7, 1989 occurred during the President of Iceland's departure from the park. She approached me, held my hand, kissed my cheek, and said

The centenary Fjallkona, Lilja Amason, rang the bell for the first time, Monday, August 7th, 1989.

Linda Collette unveiling Íslendingadagsklukka, accompanied by Pastor Ingthor Isfeld, Valdi Amason, President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and sculptor Richard Osen, among the throng of excited visitors to the 1989 Íslendingadagurinn.

how she thought the bell was beautiful. Her passion was Íslandsklukka. She thought this bell had a "strong, strong Icelandic sound." I told her of Richard's gift, the two drops of metal that fell on the edge of the bell mold as he poured. He scooped the drops up and gave them to me for earrings — so I would always have a piece of the bell. President Vigdís said, "They will bring you luck." In Iceland, in 1990, she told me to mention the earrings and she would always know who I am.

The final stage was my hearing the Dómkirkjuklukka in Reykjavík — it sounded like this new bell. The saga of Íslendingadagsklukka was complete.

The final words, however, must be words of gratitude to the Canadian National Railway for their sponsorship of the project and to Senator Janis Johnson. When the plaque is completed, the Canadian National Railway's name will appear and their gift recognized.

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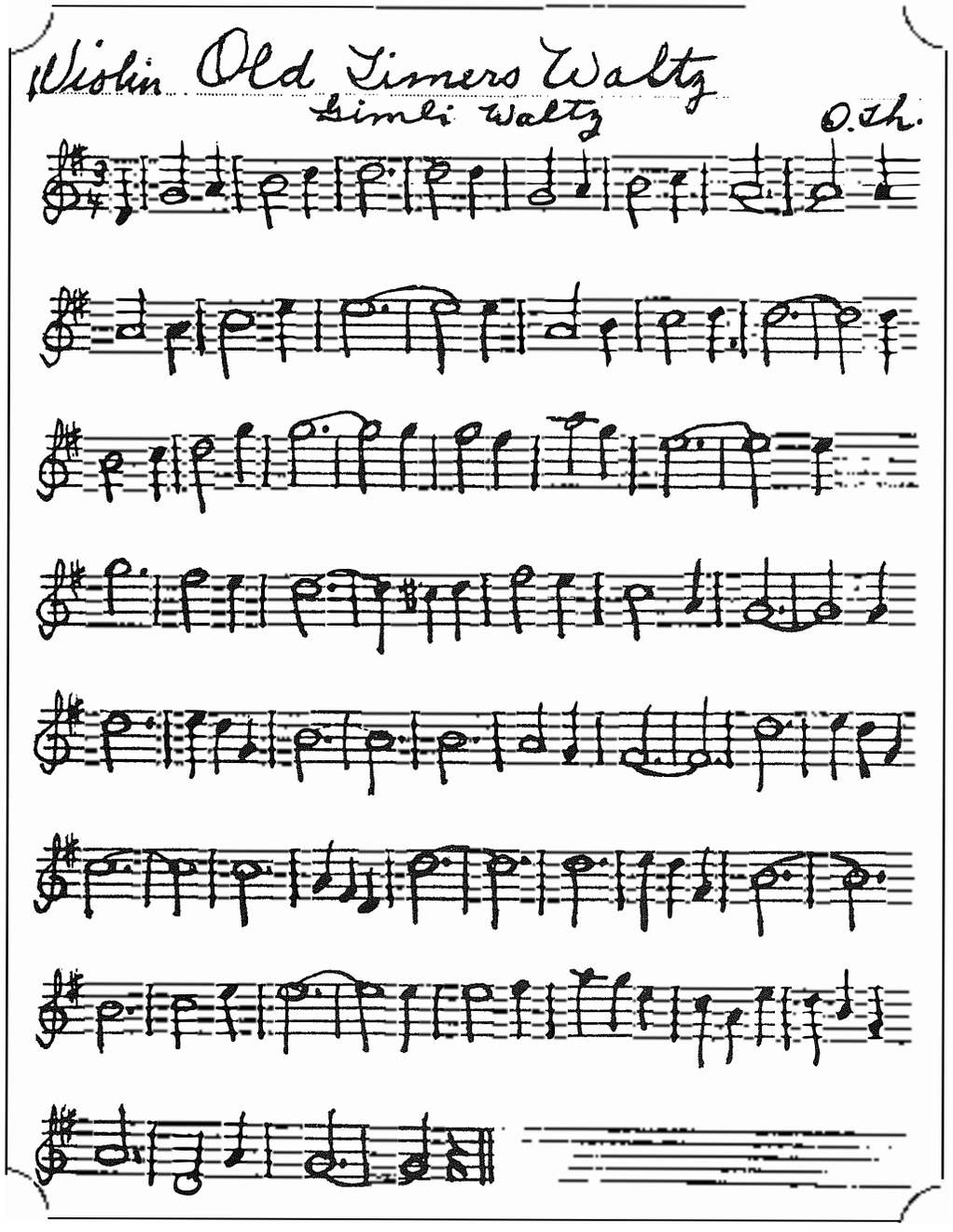
THE Gimli Waltz

by Arilius Isfeld



Jón Jónatanson
(right)
wrote the words

and

Olafur Thorsteinson
(below)
wrote the music
to
The Gimli Waltz

"In a house in Riverton, Manitoba in the early 1930's, Laugi Johanneson walked up to the front of a crowded room and tucked a violin under his chin. Two boys aged 12 and 9 followed suit. The tune they were playing was an old Icelandic song "Um Draumsins Huldar Heim", later to be known as The Gimli Waltz. The boys were his sons, Johnny and Kris. They were taking lessons from the most accomplished violinist in the district, Johannes Palsson from Geysir."

The foregoing quotation appears on the jacket of a long-play album entitled "The Gimli Waltz — Old-Time Dance Tunes, by Johnny and His Musical Mates" and is signed by Sol Sigurdson, Riverton, Manitoba.

That the tune they were playing was "an old Icelandic song" is incorrect. The lyrics were written by Jón Jónatanson and it is assuredly correct to say that the music was composed by the late Olafur Thorsteinson of Husavik, Manitoba – "assuredly correct" – because this tune has often been mistaken for the Westphalia Waltz. However, when listening to the latter as rendered by the Rodgers Brothers Band on a long-play album entitled "The Blue Skirt Waltz and other favourite Old Time Waltzes," Frank Olson, an accomplished musician assured me that the two waltzes were indeed not the same, having only a slight similarity at the beginning.

Just after the turn of the century Oli Thorsteinson and Frank Olson began travelling throughout the New Iceland district playing at the various old-time dances. At this time the tune in question was often referred to as Oli's Waltz. Later, when the Old Timers' Orchestra was organized, the Gimli Waltz became a regular request. "Millions" of miles no doubt have been danced to this tune that expresses a delightful lilting love story.

Some claim that Jón Jónatanson wrote the poem for his sweetheart. Others think they recall hearing that Jón had dedicated it to Maria and Sigurjon Isfeld. Sigurjon was often the floor manager at the old-time dances where he sang out in rhyme the directions for the square dances and took great pride in dancing the waltzes.

Oli Thorsteinson taught music in the Interlake district and was a skilled violin maker. There are in existence handwritten copies of the Gimli Waltz music showing the initials O. Th. A copy of one of these accompanies this article.

In *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, W. Kristjanson states, "Olafur Thorsteinson of Husavik arrived from Iceland as a young lad of fifteen in 1889. In 1951 he had successfully piloted over three hundred pupils through the Toronto Conservatory of Music examinations, including 109 with first class honours and 154 with honours." Among his many noteworthy students are Johannes Palsson, Pearl Palmason and Palmi Palmason.

Frank Olson, whose translation of the lyrics of the Gimli Waltz follows, has stated:

"The Gimli Waltz was introduced and popularized in the early days of the New Iceland colony by the late revered Oli Thorsteinson of Husavik, Manitoba. The Icelandic lyrics were written by the late Jón Jónatanson of Gimli and Winnipeg. It has been played, sung, danced to and cherished with nostalgic fervour by New Icelanders since the turn of the present century."

Gimli Valsinn

Um draumsins hulda heim, minn hugur svífur rótt.
Hann heyrir skæran hreim, um hljóða vetrar nótt.
Hann hvarlar lánga leið, uns loks hann nær til þín.
Ljúfasta ljósið og leiðarstjarnan mín.
Vagga mjer vært vina, ljúft og hlítt,
Kistu mig kært, klappaðu blítt.
Svæfðu mig sætt, sál þinni nær.
Láttu mig dreyma' um sæluna' og sumarið, sól fagra mær.

Svo hægt og ljúft og ljett, líður þú með mjer.
Held jeg hendi þjett, hægra mitti þjer.
Vinstri vermir þú, vánginn brennir þinn.
Blíðlega bærist þú barminn upp við minn.
svífum við svo, sælli í ró,
Skínandi skó, skiljum við þó.
Hvers annars alt, elskan mín kær.
Tra, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la;
leynt sem að grær.

Jón Jónatanson

The Gimli Waltz

O'er dreamland's mystic shores, my spirit hovers light.
On wings of song it soars, this silent winter night.
Though far afield it fare, it e'er returns to thee.
Light of my love and life's guiding star to me.

CHORUS
Bliss, heavenly bliss, rock me to rest.
Kiss, fervently kiss, lips tenderly pressed.
Sleep, lull me to sleep, in your arms caressed.
Let me dream of Love's rapturous summertime,
Sun maiden blest.

So through this wondrous world, we drift in dreams divine,
My right arm round you curled, and left hand clasped in thine.
Thus swirling cheek to cheek, we find eternal grace.
Two hearts as one, beating now as we embrace.

CHORUS

Soar peacefully, soar; sweet ecstacy!
Clear, perfectly clear to you and to me.
Love, oh perfect love, to our souls revealed.
Tra, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la;
blooms though concealed.

Translated by Frank Olson

DAN

By Betty Jane Wylie

"Come on!"

Dan wrenched her by the hand across the beach. Not across it, through it. Her sneakers filled with sand as her feet slipped and dragged through it, pushing sideways in futile attempts to gain friction and keep up with that insistent hand. But she never cried stop.

Catherine never had, never tried to stop her brother. She accepted everything he did to her with a strange, underwater passivity. Kate still remembers the time when her small self, called Catherine then, had warily descended to the basement to see Dan's model train set-up, new from Christmas. He had approached her in silence, as if performing some necessary ritual, and pressed a round smokestack from the engine against her face, encircling her mouth and drawing blood, a perfect circle of blood ringing her mouth and nose. She had drifted upstairs then with streamers of blood oozing from the bright red ring on her face, to startle her mother and some afternoon tea guests. No scar, only a memory.

Harder to deal with memories than scars and harder to bear. Kate looks with complete indifference at the scars the accident has etched onto her body – scarcely any keloid tissue yet, still raw and new-looking. Her memories have thickened and darkened with age.

So often the child Catherine peeks out from behind adult Kate's eyes; it's only fair for Kate to get equal time now, when she needs it. She has never claimed it before, never needed to. Now she does. She is lost. She doesn't know any more today than she did as a child, less, in fact, but she has to find out what Catherine knew that she has forgotten, what Catherine has learned that she may use.

"Take me by the hand, Catherine," Kate begs silently. "Take me by the hand and show me. Let me look through your eyes."

"Look," said her brother, "look," he orders. Kate struggles with memory as she gazes down time through Catherine's eyes. Her brother towers there in the sunlit past, waiting for praise as he commands her again to look.

Streams irrigated the beach at regular intervals, running down to the lake from the town ditches that carried off the water from the artesian wells posted at every other corner. During Catherine's childhood, no one in the little resort-fishing town had to walk more than two blocks for drinking water. Ice-cold, it shot out of blunt pipes, biting any hand thrust

into the jet. Later, it had to be pumped in slow, heavy spurts; later still, all the wells were capped and the water, as metallic as the pipes that bore it, was piped into the houses of Gimli. Kate wonders where the beach engineers developed their skill after the ditches dried up.

Dan had to be the most inventive, tireless hydro engineer of them all. He marshalled the efforts of the other kids, including ones he didn't know, for major projects. But long after their interest faded and they drifted away to bob in the inexorable, tugging waves of Lake Winnipeg, he rallied to his work, testing dams, deflecting streams, creating lakes and reservoirs and irrigation projects. Everything she surmises about dams and hydroelectric projects, Kate realizes now, she assimilated on the beaches of Gimli from her brother Dan.

He had been toiling for hours before Catherine arrived. His shoulders glowed and his nose gleamed under peeling layers of skin, sautéed by the sun. His cohorts had long since deserted him, but they would drift back in time to watch the results of this major undertaking.

Up at the beginning of the beach, where the long grass hung over the deep cold water in a steep-banked ditch, Dan had thrown up an earthwork of sand and driftwood, damming the water there where the banks would enclose it. He had produced a fair-sized miniature lake, growing constantly and building in pressure from the never-ending supply of water flowing into it. Checking and strengthening that dam to hold all morning, Dan had built another dam down stream.

A Hoover of dams reared up from the hot sand (though small Catherine had never heard of the Hoover Dam). Painstakingly structured, broad and wide at the base, it tapered to a narrower, accurately slanted top, a couple of feet above the level of the dry stream-bed. It curved and sloped majestically beyond the edges of the stream, as smooth as concrete—but was it as strong? Could it withstand the onslaught of that pent-up water that had been gathering in volume and power all morning?

Shouts volleyed up and down the beach that the time had come to test Dan's dam – the Lucas Dam, he called it. Kids gathered to watch on either side of the stream bed above and below the dam. Catherine stood combing the hot sand with her toes, first one foot and then the other, and slitted her eyes to follow Dan's march up to the ditch to break his holding dam.

He took two other boys with him. Together, following his instructions, they jumped up and plunged their feet down into the earthwork and smashed and kicked it aside to release the full power of the water behind it. The ice-cold water anaesthetized their burning feet, hot from the sand-oven. (Childhood, thinks adult Kate, is made up of delicious contrasts like that.)

Young Catherine stared at the wall of water as it poured through the broken earthwork, slashing toward the dry dam below. Pebbles and stones tumbled from deep lodging pried loose by the force of the water gouging at their foundations. Straighter lines sliced the diminishing banks of the stream-bed as the churning, frenzied water sluiced down. It hit the dam with tremendous force and shot a frustrated crest of water high into the air. Thwarted and checked, the water spread out across the width of the dam, mounting quickly, boiling into chinks in the wall where it might break through.

The Lucas Dam held. The kids shouted and cheered as if they had

been coached, then they all wavered, broke ranks, and drifted back over the beach like sand flies. Dan smiled, then suddenly bored, he walked slowly to the lake, lowered and rolled his body once in shallow water to wash the sand off, then ran from the beach without a glance at Catherine.

The next day the water ran its tranquil way over the smashed and scattered ramparts of the dam and on down the shallow stream-bed to the lake.

"Why did you show me that?" wonders Kate, and then realizes the all-too-easy pun of it. She is the stream and she is dammed up. She needs someone, something, to break her earthwork. And then what?

"You're not doing enough," Kate says to her inner child. "You must do more. Pulling me through that sand to watch a dam hold, and then leaving me. What am I supposed to do with that? And why my brother? He left me too."

No one possessed the energy and singleness of purpose that Dan Lucas concentrated on a project when it caught his attention. A lot of things caught his attention when he was younger. He had dragged Catherine into some of them with him, swearing her to secrecy when a chemistry experiment torched his bedroom, when his first efforts at hypnotism wiped away her will, when her budding breasts provided him with his first sexual forays into tactile experience. His first beer, Kate remembers, demanded from their mother and granted in the heat of a summer day when he was cutting the grass and wanted to experience an advertised pleasure, was left half drunk, dismissed as over-rated. (Years later, celebrating his imminent wedding with an over-dose of hard liquor and serviced gallantly by his brother-in-law, Kate's husband Tom, Dan was swiftly diagnosed by Tom as possessing the attention span of a migratory bird with a fad for all seasons.)

Always, Dan left what he attacked almost as soon as he plundered it. Always, always, he abandoned Catherine, leaving her bewildered and unsatisfied before she understood what was happening. She could never understand, never follow him fully. He was four years older, but that wasn't it. He laid siege to ideas, things, and later, people, explored them, used them, milked them, finished with them before they were finished, got bored, and drifted on. Somewhere along the way he had run out of even initial enthusiasm and nothing mattered anymore. His attention span, always brief, has dwindled to nothing. Kate doesn't know him now.

Catherine had known him, idolized him, but that knowledge and that idolatry are some forty years out of sync with Kate's memory now. They have nothing to do with Kate's brother Dan who lives alone, far away, and sees no one.

He had soloed, as he put it, at Tom's funeral. Kate wasn't there, unable to get out of bed, still in hospital, still drifting in and out of consciousness, scarcely aware of anything. Dan had come to see her afterwards, in her hospital room, one of the few allowed in to see her, for he was "family." The hospital staff could not know that her brother was a stranger.

"Tom's on automatic pilot now," he had said, reluctant as always to express emotion, "but you still have some navigating to do."

"Shut up," she had said, or wished she had. I'll be flying blind from now on, she thought, and hated Dan for evoking these stupid images.

"I'm going to write you a letter,"

Dan had said. But of course he hadn't. The intention, stated, represented all he could muster.

What had happened to all that energy spent on the projects of his childhood? Pent-up, or deflected? He abandoned his marriage too, soon after Tom died. Kate wonders whether Dan used his brother-in-law's death as some kind of permission for him to leave his marriage, too.

Death of a person. Death of a relationship. End of an era. End of a rope.

Small Catherine was swinging on one, waiting for Kate to pay attention again. Dan had tied chunky knots in a thick rope, to use as footholds. He had nailed it with a couple of rusty spikes to a beam in the barn roof. There never had been horses in the barn, in Kate's memory, just Grandpa's store truck. And no hay, but lots of sacks, piled high and deep enough to cushion a fall or a jump. Dan wanted her to test the rope. Test pilot.

"Jump!" Dan shouted at her. "Jump!"

He had caught the rope and pulled it in to the loft where they perched. Audibly twittering, Catherine had hopped onto the rope, tucked her feet on either side of a knot, clutching with her hands. Dan pushed her off. Swinging crazily in the air with her head spinning and her stomach left behind on the platform with Dan, Catherine shut her eyes.

"Jump!" he roared at her.

She jumped, and flew, and fell.

She crashed into the sacks. When she opened her eyes Dan was grinning down at her from the loft.

"Does anything hurt?" he shouted.

Catherine did a quick check, and shook her head. "No," she said.

"There, you see?" he said. "You survived." He turned and climbed down the ladder, and left her in the sacks. Left her again.

Kate has to make sense of all this. All those summers telescoped into one long, bright day, or series of days, strung together like beads to be fingered idly in reminiscence. This is no idyll for Kate. She needs to tell her beads. One by one, she brings them out, to sort over, to find pieces of herself she has forgotten or assumed. She has to discover where she has come from and where she is going now. She has lots of time, but she wonders whether it is worth the effort.

Is this really the way to learn to accept the death of her husband, and her own near escape – by dredging up her past, trying to understand her first lessons about life and love and fear and death? She's getting better at total recall. She can conjure up taste and texture, mood and atmosphere, but what is she learning? She must be learning something. She must, to survive. Survive.

Survived by his wife, Kate. Her body is healing nicely, so the doctor tells her. What about her mind? Nothing hurts now. She just has to start feeling again.

Damn!

Editor's note: "Dam" is a companion piece to "Memories of Chocolate Sauce" which was published in: Gunnars, Kristjana, ed. *Unexpected Fictions: New Icelandic Canadian Writing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1989).

In The Red River Valley

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

(continued from the winter 1992 issue)

Book II
Chapter VIII

The Story Told by O'Brian

Translated by Thelma Guðrún Whale

In the year 1850, in Belfast, Ireland there was a driver named Cormigan. He was young and newly-married. He was the strongest and hardiest of men. But he was not thought to be handsome, and his hearing was poor. He owned a closed carriage and two black horses, which were more capable and in better condition than the horses of the other drivers in the city, and he always left home early in the morning and never returned until late at night. He always gave his horses the best fodder and let them rest for two hours in the middle of the day. He was one of the few drivers who never used a whip on his horses. He was one of the few who know, with certainty, that a full-grown animal loses a bit of its strength every time it is beaten and never recovers this strength completely. After it is beaten, it is never as strong as it was before. And this is scientifically proven.

It so happened one evening, during the summer of 1850, that two short, young men with nicely curled moustaches, got in the way of Cormigan when he was driving home after a long, hard work-day. Both men were wearing the uniforms of English seamen, and their accent indicated they were from London, England.

"Good evening, Mr. Driver!" said one of the little men to Cormigan.

"Good evening, young gentlemen," said Cormigan, adjusting the carriage seat.

"I'm Paul Lukas," said the little man, "and this is Peter Lukas, my brother. We're sailors on her Majesty the Queen's battleship. And we've urgent business with you."

"What do you want?" said Cormigan, bending down towards the young seamen to better hear what they were saying.

"I say that we've urgent business with you, Mr. Driver," said Paul Lukas. "We've just arrived from Cyprus which is south in the Mediterranean Sea, scarcely a stone's throw from the Holy Land, and we brothers were entrusted with a chest which is to go to a woman who lives in Room No. 10 on the fourth floor of Tipperary Rooms."

"Tipperary Rooms is in the east end of the city and almost a mile and a half from here," said Cormigan.

"Is that so?" said Paul Lukas. "We were told that it was just about one English mile from the church over there. But however that is, we want to ask you to take us and the chest all the way east to Tipperary Rooms tonight."

"Couldn't it wait until tomorrow?" said Cormigan. "The horses are tired out, and so am I. And I'm just about to start off for home."

"The chest must get to the woman tonight," said Paul Lukas. "We must ourselves hand her the chest and a letter which goes with it. In the morning, at nine o'clock, the ship will be gone from here. We must complete our errand tonight and be back on board before midnight."

"You'll have to get someone else to go east with you tonight," said Cormigan, taking up the reins. "I'm going home. Goodnight, young gentlemen."

"No, wait a second!" said Peter Lukas, who had been standing behind his brother up till then and said not a word. "Let's come to some agreement," he said, taking hold of the reins just in front of Cormigan's hands.

"There are other drivers in this city besides me," said Cormigan, rather crossly, and he quietly drew the reins out of the young sailor's hands.

"But we see no other driver here, only you," said Peter Lukas, staring at his hands. "We are absolute strangers here and in a tight spot. We solemnly promised a young friend of ours on his death bed to deliver the chest and letter to his mother. And we must, whatever it costs, hand over both items to his mother tonight. We didn't get leave to be on land past midnight tonight. The ship leaves the harbour tomorrow. And if we miss the ship and are left behind, we'll be arrested as deserters and runaways."

"Please be so good as to take us and the chest to where the mother of our departed friend lives. And tell us what you'll charge for your trouble. You don't have to make the horses go except at a walk one foot in front of the other."

"Couldn't you ask the police to deliver the chest and the letter to the lady?" said Cormigan.

"We must hand over both to the woman ourselves," said Peter Lukas, "because we swore an oath to do this without fail. And then there's something, that we, and no one else, must tell her. No, charge whatever you want for your trouble but don't refuse to do us this favour."

"Where's the chest?" said Cormigan, watching the horses.

"The chest is kept in a small warehouse down by the harbour not far from here," said Peter Lukas. "We brought it on land a short time ago."

"What time is it?" said Cormigan, putting his hand into his bosom.

Peter Lukas was quicker looking at his watch. "It's about half-past seven," he said.

"That's far too late," said Cormigan. "I won't go a step with you tonight. There are enough other drivers. Two or three of them are always waiting by Flanigan's Pier until ten or eleven at night. Find them. Good-bye!"

Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

"No, no, Mr. Driver!" said Paul Lukas, pushing his brother gently aside. "For once, be kind and merciful. Don't you see we're in a very difficult situation? We offer you whatever you ask. Tell us how much you want."

"Would you pay in advance if I decide to go?"

"Of course, we'll pay in advance, very willingly," said Paul Lukas.

"How much will you offer me?" said Cormigan.

"We'll give you a guinea," said Paul Lukas, taking a gold coin out of his pocket and handing it to Cormigan.

"Add an English shilling," said Cormigan, after staring at the gold coin for a second.

"Certainly," said Peter Lukas, handing him a silver coin.

Cormigan pocketed the money and sniffed with great satisfaction. He had seldom earned that much in a whole day, let alone one evening. At that time, it was certainly rare that drivers were paid one pound sterling and two shillings to drive a mile and a half there and back with only two men and one chest. He thought he had found a gold mine.

"Get into the carriage, young gentlemen," said Cormigan gladly, "but first tell me where the chest is stored."

They named the pier where the warehouse was and jumped into the carriage. Cormigan drove off immediately, and in a few minutes they arrived at a small warehouse near a pier managed by an old Jewish merchant.

It was now getting dark, and no one was to be seen near this pier except the night watchman. The young sailors spoke a few words to him in low voices, and he then went with them into the warehouse while Cormigan waited beside the horses. There was coalblack darkness inside the warehouse, but out on the pier there was a glimmer of light from the two lanterns on the pierhead. Not even a match was lit in the warehouse, and the doors stood open while the men were inside. Presently, the men came out of the warehouse, the sailors carrying a long, narrow chest between them. They seemed to be handling it very carefully, as if it contained something breakable or as if it concealed explosives. The chest was dark, the lock was round, and there was a large square tag of thick brown paper hanging almost at the other end, not in the middle, as is usual.

Cormigan's carriage was closed

and in the old style - a kind of "omnibus." The door was at the back, not on the side, and it had a small window. On the inside, there were benches on both sides where twelve people could sit. On top of the flat roof of the carriage one could have suitcases and small trunks, and there was a handrail all around to keep the baggage from falling off. The driver's seat was exceptionally high up, and the driver never saw what was going on inside the carriage unless he went down and opened the door, but he could talk with his passengers, or they with him, even though they and he sat still, by calling through a small hole on the front beside the driver's seat. However, this was generally closed when it was windy or on cold days, in order to prevent a draught.

"What?" said Cormigan, when the sailors brought the chest to the carriage. "Is this a coffin?"

"No, Mr. Driver," said Paul. "It is a travelling chest like they have in eastern lands, but still fragile like thin glass."

"Then put it up on the roof of the carriage," said Cormigan.

"We dare not," said Paul. "We'd like to have it with us in the carriage. We've promised to allow it to undergo the least ill-treatment and see to it that nothing in it is broken. It contains, among other things, both a gilded glass vase and some very thin porcelain bowls, which are very valuable works of art. You can imagine that we wish to take the greatest care to try and deliver it all without breakage."

"Put it inside the carriage, then, if there's room between the benches," said Cormigan, "but you won't be as comfortable."

"What does it matter how we fare?" said Paul. "The only thing we're thinking about is to carry out, conscientiously and well, what we promised our departed friend. And I can say truthfully, Mr. Driver, that my brother and I'll breathe easier when we come back, than we do now."

The brothers now put the chest into the carriage with the greatest care, took leave of the watchman, and stepped into the carriage themselves.

"You may start, Mr. Driver," called Paul through the hole beside the driver's seat. "But don't go very fast where the road is rough."

"I hear and obey, young gentlemen," said Cormigan, driving off.

All went well for a while. The road was hard and smooth like planed boards. The horses trotted slowly along, and the carriage wheels ran softly. The night was cool and dark and there were few people in the streets. Cormigan sat calmly in the driver's seat, thinking about the liberal payment he had received for going this short distance. But from time to time his thoughts went to the young woman who waited impatiently for him. He knew she had long since made his evening meal. His mouth watered when he thought of the meal; he knew the food would be good this evening, for it was their wedding anniversary. They had been married for a whole year.

Just after he left the warehouse, Cormigan thought he heard the sailors talking together off and on, but he was never able to understand any words. After a while the conversation stopped, and for some minutes he heard a lively tune being whistled. Then the whistling stopped all at once and right after, he felt the carriage jerk or pitch. He was then more than half-way to Tipperary Rooms.

"Is something wrong?" called Cormigan through the opening beside the driver's seat.

"I don't know," was the answer from within the carriage, and the voice was strangely piteous and weak.

"Are you ill or what?" shouted Cormigan.

"I don't know where I am," said the strange voice from inside.

Cormigan could hear it was a female voice.

"Now, what is this?" he said. "Don't you know where you are? Well we are almost there."

"Where are you taking me?" was said from inside, and it sounded like an aged woman, toothless and consumptive, talking and using all the strength of body and soul to utter the words.

Cormigan stopped the horses.

"Who's speaking?" he shouted into the opening.

"It's only poor me," said the distressed voice within.

"Is it you, Paul Lukas?" said Cormigan. "Or maybe you're talking, Peter."

"There is no one here but me," was the response.

"What kind of unlucky farce is this!" said Cormigan, and jumping down off the seat, he walked to the door and opened it.

Inside the carriage was complete darkness because Cormigan had only one lantern, and it was fastened outside beside the driver's seat. Cormigan lit a match and saw that both the sailors had disappeared. In their place, a bent old woman was sitting beyond the chest. She was wearing a dark coat and had a veil over her face, and her hands were crossed over her breast. Cormigan stood petrified with astonishment. His eyes were riveted on the woman until the match burned his finger and the light died.

"Where're the sailors?" said Cormigan.

"I don't know," said the old woman, whimpering. "I have seen no man until you now."

"There were two young sailors here just now," said Cormigan. "They asked me to take them and that chest to No. 10 on the fourth floor of Tipperary Rooms. They paid me in advance. I saw them get into the carriage, and I heard them talking off and on on the way. But now they're gone and you've come in their stead, but you say you know nothing about them. How can this be? Is it a hoax or what?"

"I'm telling you the truth," said the old woman. "I've seen no living person in the carriage."

"But how did you get into the carriage?" asked Cormigan. "You can hardly have jumped up into the carriage."

"I don't know," said the old woman in a trembling voice. "I know you won't believe me, but still it is as true as day follows night, that I haven't the least idea how I got here. I knew nothing before I was here on the bench and heard you call through the opening on the wall above my head."

"You must have come out of the chest," said Cormigan who was becoming more and more aghast.

"No, good sir," said the old woman. "Believe me, I've never been in that chest. In fact, I'd not noticed until this moment that there's a chest in this carriage. But the chest is so small, or at least so narrow that I wouldn't fit into it. Neither would I hide myself in a chest for fun. I'd be afraid. I'd feel I was buried alive. I'd quickly suffocate. Nothing is more frightening than to be alive inside a coffin."

Cormigan now lifted up the end of the chest nearest the door to find out

if it was empty. It wasn't empty, but not so heavy that a human body could be in it. And, although it was long and narrow, it was not quite the shape of regular coffins. However, it seemed to Cormigan that it could not be a traveller's trunk. And he felt it contained something unpleasant, if not a body, then something else, singular and secret.

"If you cannot tell me how you came here," said Cormigan, "then you can tell me where you are going."

"I don't have the faintest idea," said the old woman, sighing. "As I told you just now, I knew nothing until I was sitting here all alone. And I was just racking my brain about where I might be going and who it could have been that showed me in here, when I heard you call. I couldn't understand how I got up into the carriage without help, sickly as I have become."

"But tell me where you come from and where you live, so that I can take you there afterwards or send word there," said Cormigan.

"I'm embarrassed to tell you that I know absolutely nothing about where I come from or where I live," said the old woman on the verge of tears. "I'm ashamed that I've become so forgetful, but I can't help it. That's what old age does to you. But still, I think it's better to be forgetful than to remember incorrectly."

"You can tell me something," said Cormigan. "Yes, you must remember your name."

"No, no, no!" said the old woman, "I'm quite unable to remember my name. I was afraid that you'd ask me that. When you opened the door, I knew you'd want to know my name. I tried to recall it. I went over various female names in my mind beginning with the names which begin with 'A', for instance: Anne, Arabella, Anita, and then I started with 'B': Bertha, Bodecea, and then 'C': Cordelia, Cleopatra, then 'D' and so on. - But my name came nowhere to light. It is hidden in the farthest corners of the mind, and the memory became dim-sighted and slow and gave up the search. Such is man's dotage."

"Do you have a husband and children?" asked Cormigan. He did not like the look of this.

"I don't think so - not that I remember," said the old woman, "but I've some dim notion that I've a husband, or did have a husband, big and handsome and good, but children – no!"

"Although you've forgotten your home, your husband, and your own name," said Cormigan, "it's quite impossible that you've forgotten your parents, at least not your mother. Surely you remember your mother's name."

"Now comes my dotage again," said the old woman heavily, "what an affliction it is to have forgotten the names of my brothers and sisters, my father and my mother! However, I remember my mother's face. I remember I called her mamma but what others called her is hidden somewhere in the most secret vaults of my mind."

"Don't you remember where you were born?" said Cormigan. "For example, do you remember if you were born here in Belfast? Perhaps you were born in England, or maybe west in America?"

"Oh dear, it's all a fog in my imagination!" said the old woman, sounding very dejected. "Still, I think I see my motherland in the distance like a mirage. It seems to be white, blue and green, white as swansdown, blue as the clear spring sky, and green as emeralds in water. And I think the country where I was born was called – and is still called – Iceland."

"Iceland!" said Cormigan. "No, you were going to say Ireland."

"I was going to say what I've said," said the old woman, her voice a little clearer than before. "I said that, and I still say that I remember being born in Iceland. And I could well believe that I'm a princess under a spell – the daughter of an Icelandic king."

"I thought there were no kings in Iceland," said Cormigan, with simple sincerity.

"No king in Iceland?" said the old woman, more clearly than before. "Perhaps you think no kings exist except in China and no queens except in Arabia. But I know there are also a king and queen in Iceland. They wear crowns of ice crystals. Their thrones are made of the most expensive ice, and their castles of polished ice, and all containers, all tables, all benches and all valuables in those wonderful castles are of bright ocean ice from the north pole. Who would dare to state that no king or queen exists in the land of rainbow colours – the land of the midnight sun, my homeland, Iceland?"

"I humbly ask your forgiveness," said Cormigan in a weak voice, "I didn't know; I'm so ignorant. We'll stop talking about this. And now I must keep going and try to take you back. Most likely, you are supposed to go with the chest – to the woman who lives at No. 10 on the fourth floor of the Tipperary apartments."

"What nonsense are you talking now, good sir?" said the old woman. Her voice had become a tiny bit stronger and more pleasing than before. "You don't have to deliver me anywhere. I'm in the hands of a good man. Do you hear that?"

"Yes, I hear that clearly," said poor Cormigan with sweat breaking out on his forehead. He thought the woman must be crazy. And he also thought that the sailors had somehow got her into the carriage. "What a fool I was," he thought, "to let those villains dupe me with one gold coin and a shilling!"

"Aren't you going to drive me home to your house?" said the old woman shrilly. "I know it's a good place to be. I think I'll be best off there. Certainly some goddess of luck brought me into your carriage. She's known the best place for me."

But Cormigan had his own ideas about that.

"Well, I'm not going to throw you out of the carriage, out into the blue, as they say," said Cormigan, wiping his forehead on his shirt sleeve. "But I must first and foremost deliver the chest, and then I must find a shelter for you."

"No, good sir," said the old woman rather urgently. "You really don't have to look for a shelter for me, neither a poor house nor a mental hospital; my shelter shall be in your house. In your house I'll live for the rest of my days, and there I will die, my good sir; so you don't need to make an extra trip in order to find me shelter. Your house is good enough for me even though I'm an Icelandic princess under a spell. But as to the chest, you must decide what to do with it. It's not for me to pay attention to such small things."

"I hear what you're saying," said Cormigan. "I'm going on, and don't think of throwing yourself out of the carriage."

"Do you perhaps think, " said the old woman, "I find life so burden-some that I want to kill myself?"

"I don't know," said Cormigan wearily. "Only God knows that."

"Of course He knows that," said the old woman piously. "He knows I'll not kill myself, since I was so

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lucky as to find you. – He knows that I'll be happiest with you."

Cormigan shook his head, closed the carriage door, sat down in the driver's seat, took up the reins and started off. In a few minutes he had arrived at the Tipperary apartments and stopped in front of the main door. He walked into the house immediately and found the caretaker who lived in the room nearest the door.

"I brought a chest here," said Cormigan.

"Well, bring it in," said the caretaker.

"I want to ask you to carry one end of it," said Cormigan.

"Is it heavy?"

"It isn't heavy," said Cormigan, "but I want you to be present when I deliver it."

"Who is to receive the chest?"

"A woman who lives in Room No. 10 on the fourth floor of this building," said Cormigan.

"You've made a mistake, as you drivers often do," said the caretaker.

"Isn't this the Tipperary Rooms?" said Cormigan.

"Certainly, it's that large and well-known building which has been called Tipperary for more than half a century."

"I was asked to take the chest to the Tipperary apartments," said Cormigan.

"I well believe that," said the caretaker impudently, "but you've made a mistake as you fellows so often do."

"Am I mistaken?" said Cormigan meekly. "How can that be? Aren't there four floors in this building?"

"If you'd had your eyes open when you approached the house," said the caretaker with a scornful look, "you could well have seen there aren't only four stories, but five. No, it wasn't the height I meant when I said you'd made a mistake – yes, a bad mistake."

"Now I'm beginning to understand," said Cormigan. "You mean that Room No. 10 is not on the fourth floor."

"You are still being careless, as you drivers often seem to be," said the caretaker, and the smell of alcohol drifted from him to where Cormigan stood with his hat in his hand. "Yes, you are really on the wrong track, for there aren't only ten rooms on the fourth floor, but three times ten and two more."

"But how am I wrong?" asked Cormigan pleasantly. "Haven't I said that I've brought a chest for a woman in Room No. 10 on the fourth floor of this building?"

"I admit that you said that."

"And haven't I asked you to please hold on to one end of the chest and be present when I deliver the chest to the woman?" said Cormigan calmly.

"Yes, I admit that you asked me those favours," said the caretaker haughtily, "and I'd unquestionably have done you that favour if I hadn't noticed right away that you made a mistake when you accepted this wonderful chest."

"I'm asking you another favour," said Cormigan, speaking a little louder than before. "Tell me how I've been wrong."

"I can do you that favour," said the caretaker, his nostrils flaring. "I know you made a mistake because no one in this house owns the chest you brought."

"How do you know that no one in this house owns the chest," said Cormigan, "when you've not seen and don't even know the name of the woman who is to have it?"

"But do you know that woman's name?" said the caretaker.

"No," said Cormigan reddening a

little, "I don't know the woman's name, but I think her name is on the tag on the chest."

"Now it comes!" said the caretaker, hissing. "You don't know the name of the woman who lives in room No. 10 on the fourth floor in this building, and that isn't strange because I can tell you that there is no woman in that room and has never been and likely will never be. This is a shelter for Irish seamen, and to my knowledge, no woman has ever passed through that door, with the exception of my wife who lives far south in the city." He lowered his voice as he said the last words.

Cormigan's eyes widened. "I see that I've been made a fool of," said Cormigan.

"Or you've not heard right," said the caretaker.

"I'm taking the chest to the police."

"Or to the devil," said the caretaker.

Cormigan said goodbye to the caretaker and hurried out. The horse and carriage were where he had left them. He opened the carriage door. The old woman was still there and also the chest.

"You were away a long time," said the old woman, "I was getting lonesome."

"Oh yes," said Cormigan, "one runs the risk of getting delayed at Tipperary because of the pleasant welcome! – But now I'm thinking of driving straight to the police station and giving the chest to the superintendent and also asking them to look after you."

"You can ask them to look after the chest if you want," said the old woman and her voice rang strangely in Cormigan's ears. "You may ask about the chest, though I'd have taken it home if I were you, since the owner cannot be found. But as to myself, I can tell you that I won't step out of this carriage until I come home to your house. Your home is my home now and forever. Amen!"

"But what do you think my wife will say?" said Cormigan. "Can't you imagine that my wife will have something to say about this affair? She owns the house as much as I. She's the one in charge there and I can't let anyone come unless she wishes it."

"But women are men's servants," said the old woman sounding as if there was a rattle in her chest.

"However that is," said Cormigan, "the woman is always the ruler of the home and the crown of the man."

"What terrible doctrine is this?" said the old woman, chortling. "But we'll find out what your wife says to you. If she doesn't want me in the house, she is a bad ruler and a crown of thorns to her husband, and then I'll turn to someone else, but if she'll allow me to come in, she is a ruler and crown, set with precious stones and then I'll stay with you until death does us part."

Cormigan said not a word, but only shook his head. He jumped into the driver's seat and started off again. Half an hour later he arrived at the police station. He walked in at once and talked to one of the officers who was his wife's cousin. Cormigan told him the whole tale as it had happened from the time the seamen had approached him until he arrived at the police station, and asked the policeman to take the chest and the old woman. The policeman listened carefully and walked out to the carriage with him, lantern in hand. He opened the door and looked in.

"Well, well," said the old woman when she saw the face of the policeman. "I see we've come to this domain."

"You'd better come out of the carriage," said the policeman, "it's cold."

"I'm quite comfortable here, my dear," said the old woman, "and I refuse to leave this carriage until we've reached the home of my sweetheart who stands there."

"It won't do you any good to complain, good mother," said the policeman. "You'll have to come with me and I'll have you taken to your family."

"Let me tell you something, my dearest," said the old woman, trying to speak gently, "I tell you that my dear friend, who is standing beside you, has as much as promised me to let his wife decide whether I'll stay in his home, and I've promised to abide by her decision. Therefore I demand that I may sit in this carriage until she's pronounced her judgement in this problem."

"Is there any sense in this?" said the constable to Cormigan.

"I don't know," said Cormigan, embarrassed. "But I remember that she mentioned this when we left the Tipperary apartments. But you can imagine what my wife will say if I bring this unknown, crazy old woman home to our house tonight, especially tonight, which is our wedding anniversary."

"But couldn't I be an anniversary gift?" shouted the old woman, her voice becoming terribly shrill.

"Many have no doubt received worse gifts," said the policeman, smiling. "But would you be so kind, good mother, as to come out of the carriage. Here's my hand. I'll steady you while you step down."

"First do me this favour, my dearest," said the old woman to the policeman. "Come into the carriage to me and let me whisper a few friendly words in your ear. I'll leave with you without grumbling when I've whispered those few words in your ear, that is, if you insist that I leave the carriage."

"It's best to do as she asks," murmured the constable to Cormigan, "I'll likely have to get into the carriage anyway."

The policeman went into the carriage holding the lantern in his hand. He bent over the old woman as she whispered in his ear.

"What is this?" said he; it was evident from his tone that he was extremely surprised at what the old woman told him. "Now I'm really surprised," he said a little later. "No one can guard against that," he said, finally.

"What do you say about all these instructions?" said the old woman after whispering all she wanted into the policeman's ear.

"I don't know what to say about it," said the policeman, looking a little serious. "Still I think it's best to let you paddle your own canoe. At least, I don't want to have anything to do with your business. But I hope you recover your memory later and ask both God and man forgiveness for your sins."

"Amen!" said the old woman.

"Is she going to stay in the carriage?" said Cormigan.

"I'm afraid so," said the constable, "at least until you've arrived home. There's absolutely no doubt that your wife and no one else can bring reason to this old woman. If your wife tells her to go, then she'll go, but if she invites her to stay, then she'll remain in your house forever."

"This is terrible!" said Cormigan, plaintively. "If the Belfast police can't get one old woman out of my carriage, then I'll hardly have the strength to do it. But what about the chest? Am I to be saddled with the chest as well?"

"Let's examine the chest," said

the constable, "and first look at the tag that is glued over the lock. What is written on the tag?"

"Yes, let's read what is on the tag," said Cormigan and went into the carriage to the constable and the old woman. "Not once this evening have I thought of looking at that tag."

"Well, now I'm completely surprised!" said the constable when he had read what was on the tag.

"What's the matter?" said Cormigan.

"Read it," said the constable.

The tag read as follows: "Mrs. Kathleen Cormigan, 10 Tipo-Erin Street (fourth house from the corner), Belfast."

"This chest is supposed to go to my wife," said Cormigan, after reading the lettering on the tag four or five times. He was visibly astounded.

"So it seems," said the officer, "your wife's name is Kathleen, and you live in the house at No. 10 Tipo-Erin Street, and it is the fourth house from the corner. But why were you taking the chest over to the Tipperary Apartments?"

"I was sure I heard the seamen say that the chest was to go to a woman who lived in room No. 10 on the fourth floor of the Tipperary Apartments."

"But you heard wrong," said the policeman, "you know you don't hear well."

"I think," said Cormigan, "that some busybodies are playing tricks on me."

"That I can well believe," said the officer archly, "because this is Halloween night. – But I advise you to go home to your wife as quickly as possible and find out how she receives the old woman and what she finds in the chest. Good night!"

"Good night!" said Cormigan. He jumped up into the driver's seat and once again set off with the chest and the old woman and did not slacken pace until he had arrived at home. He unhitched the horses, put them into the stable and fed them enough good hay. Then he invited the old woman to come inside the house with him and helped her out of the carriage and up the steps which led to the front door. He showed her to a seat in the living room and asked her to wait there while he called his wife.

"There's no hurry," said the old woman when she was seated. "I'm satisfied to be here, and here I'll stay all my life, for it's good to be here."

Cormigan walked into the dining room and then into the kitchen. But he did not see his wife. The table was set with a cloth and dishes and the kettle was boiling on the stove. Cormigan walked to the stairs which led to the second floor, and called to his wife, but no one answered. "She's run over to the next house," he said to himself. "She must have been lonesome." He went out to the carriage again, took the chest and carried it in. How heavy it was! It would not be so heavy even if a body were in it. Most likely it was full of lead or gold! What else could be in this strange chest? He was racking his brain as he was struggling to get it into the house. He took it into the kitchen and then into the dining room. As he was doing this, his wife appeared from upstairs. She was wearing her everyday dress and had a linen cap on her head.

"Hello, my love," he said when he saw her coming down the stairs.

"Bless you, my dear," she said yawning. "You've been away a very long time! And this our anniversary! I've waited with the food all this time. I was afraid that something had happened to you. I was even thinking of running to the police and

asking them to look for you. But I fell asleep and awoke when you called me."

"Yes, it's no wonder that you're tired of waiting," said Cormigan. "But here I am with a chest which someone sent you."

"A chest for me!" cried Mrs. Cormigan, reading the words on the tag glued to the lock. "Now I'm dumbfounded! It's got to be a mistake. Where is it from? Who gave it to you?"

"That's some story to tell," said Cormigan, sitting down on a chair. "It's such a long story that I'll have to let it wait until I've finished my evening meal. But I can tell you this right away, that I've had a strange and rare adventure this night. And one thing I've forgotten to tell you is that I've brought a guest."

"A guest?" said Mrs. Cormigan, very surprised. "Who is it?"

"An old woman of whom I know nothing," said Cormigan, gazing upwards and hesitating. "She wants urgently to talk with you."

"Where's she?"

"In the living room," said Cormigan.

"Why didn't you bring her in here where it's warm?" said Mrs. Cormigan. "We'll get her in here at once. And I'm going to make her welcome. I'm so happy to have a guest on our first anniversary, and an old woman to boot. What good luck!"

"Is that a sign of good fortune?" said Cormigan.

"Yes, it's good fortune to give shelter to the sick, poor and old," said Mrs. Cormigan, "and not least on anniversaries and holidays."

"I'm always learning something new," said Cormigan.

They both went into the living room. And Cormigan was not a little startled when he saw that the old woman had gone. But on the chair where she had been sitting was her black cloak and veil, and on the edge of the chair was a little note with these words: "Thank you for the welcome! I wish you every happiness and many blessings! Goodbye!"

"Am I dreaming, or what?" said Cormigan.

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Cormigan after reading the note. "But this much is certain: the woman is gone and leaves thanks and blessings, and also her coat and veil, which signify sincerity and faithfulness."

"I don't understand," said Cormigan.

"I do," said Mrs. Cormigan, smiling and taking her husband's hand. "We'll go now and look into my chest."

"I'm afraid you may be in for a disappointment," sighed Cormigan.

"We'll be brave," said she.

A short time later, they opened the chest. Cormigan almost lost his mind when he saw what was in the chest, and his wife lifted her arms with joy.

It would take far too much time to count up the many large and small gifts which the chest contained. But they were all beautiful and useful. Among them were a hundred pounds in gold, a silver table service, and what was most valuable, the title to their house and land. And on a gold-bordered card which was at the top of the chest was printed in decorative lettering: "Everything in this chest, and the chest itself, is a small friendly gift to Daniel Cormigan and Mrs. Kathleen Cormigan from some of their friends and relatives on their first wedding anniversary, and is accompanied by sincere wishes for happiness."

"Things have gone remarkably well," said Cormigan later that

evening, breathing easily.

"All's well that ends well," said his wife.

"But in spite of that, someone was playing tricks on me tonight," said Cormigan. "And there were many who took part in it, among them Officer O'Shea – your cousin O'Shea."

"Yes," she said, "both O'Shea and several others whom we know nothing about."

"But I want most of all to know who the old woman was," said Cormigan, "and how she got into the carriage."

"Perhaps it was - " she smiled.

"Perhaps who?" said Cormigan.

"An elf woman, or an Icelandic princess in disguise!"

"You know everything, dear," said Cormigan and kissed his wife, warm kisses of love and faithfulness. "It's true what has been said: a wife is the husband's crown. And she is more. She is also his heart."

Cormigan and his wife were soon prosperous, but they remained hospitable and often gave large gifts to the poor. They had several children, all of whom were handsome and gifted. But Cormigan never found out who the old woman was, who had come into his carriage in such a strange way, nor did he ever find out what it was that she had whispered in the policeman's ear. But some people joked and said that the old woman had been Mrs. Cormigan herself.

Prairie Wind

By Kristiana Magnusson

O prairie wind of many moods
how fickle are thy ways
as you spiral twist melodic tones
of syncopated rhythm
across this land of ours.

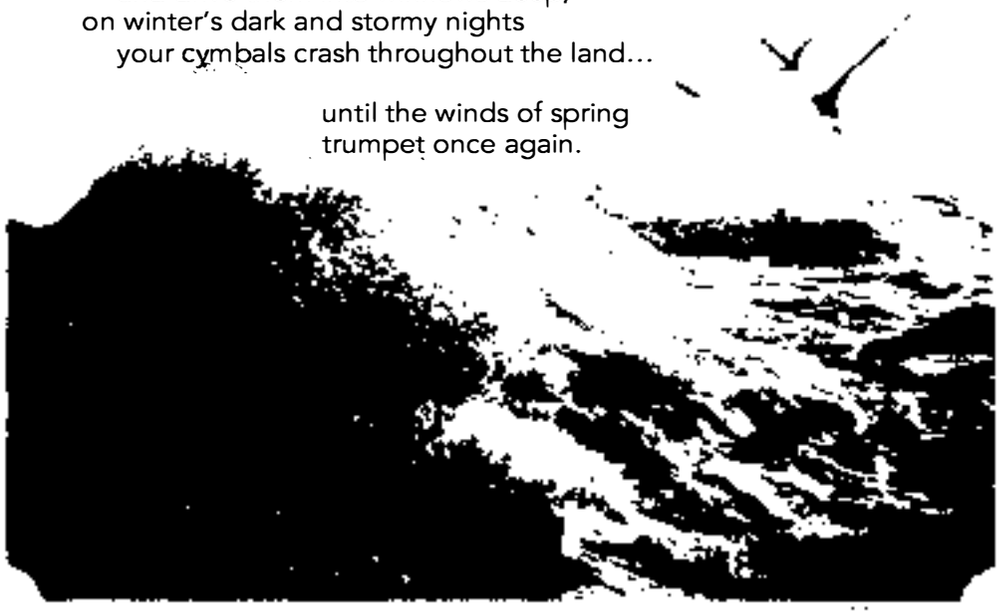
Your winds of spring, unfettered and free
rift asunder the dark night of winter
and soaring high you taunt and tease
breathing new life on the sleeping earth;
your spirit sings over hill and dale
as you trumpet your joyful melodies.

Your summer winds with sudden strength
strike terror in the sailor's heart
as you cleave the mighty ocean waves,
and when your balmy breezes blow
with fluted sounds of wondrous harmony
you then become the wing beneath my sails.

Your winds of fall with eerie sounds
scatter the leaves of red and gold
like phantom spirits in the night;
as you flit across the harvest moon
your moans resound with doleful tones
like the haunting strains of a violin.

Your winds of winter shriek and rail
with descant voices of a thousand drums
as they scoop up fluted drifts of snow
and drive them into winnows deep;
on winter's dark and stormy nights
your cymbals crash throughout the land...

until the winds of spring
trumpet once again.



REVIEW

W. D. VALGARDSON

W. D. Valgardson.

What Can't Be Changed Shouldn't Be Mourned

Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990. Pp. 146.

Reviewed by Kirsten Wolf.

W. D. Valgardson, well known for his award-winning novel, *Gentle Sinners*, as well as his two books of poetry (*In the Gutting Shed* and *The Carpenter of Dreams*) and three short story collections (*Bloodflowers*, *God Is Not a Fish Inspector*, and *Red Dust*),now takes his readers on a whirlwind tour of Canada (west-coast and mid-west) and Iceland with his most recent publication, *What Can't Be Changed Shouldn't Be Mourned*, a collection of sixteen stories.

The title, *What Can't Be Changed Shouldn't Be Mourned*, is drawn from a remark made by Ruby in the story "The Couch" after she, her husband, and her father-in-law make an arduous and hazardous trip to town to buy a new couch, only for Ruby to learn that "It's not the way I imagined it .... It isn't what I thought." In many respects this story expresses the sentiments of the collection, quietly—almost in passing—revealing the chasm between the real and the created fiction of the observer, and between the soft-spoken resignation to the circumstances of life and the world of tension through which characters move. These are stories about individual dramas played out in an arena of the everyday; but it is an arena where commonplace emotions are given uncommon voice, urgency, and meaning.

Valgardson's brand of fiction offers readers a circumstantial universe characterized by an inexorable movement through the ordinary, even banal episodes of human life; but it is precisely from this world that Valgardson's book draws its strength. In "Snow," we are pulled immediately into the strained world of Cliff and Arlene: "For the last two weeks, their days had been filled with indefinable exasperation's, making them irritable with each other and quick to take offence at even so slight a thing as a tone of voice." Having traded their crowded city apartment for an abandoned railway station in the country, the characters themselves become isolated from one another, until, by the story's end, we are left with the figure of Arlene crouched in the snow,

W. D. Valgardson

hearing Cliff's voice calling "across a vast unbridgeable distance." Valgardson offers glimpses of people's lives in which events happen, good or bad, and characters exist, in harmonious relation or in strained community. Like the narrators of these stories, like Valgardson, the reader stands at a distance, sensing the necessity for engagement, yet never fully allowed to participate in the fiction. And yet, the reader, allowed to witness the movement of events, but not able to alter them or affect them in any way, thus charges the collection by investing it with a type of emotional response that Valgardson does not force, but nevertheless allows to happen.

Not all of Valgardson's stories are about conflict and resignation in the face of events that seem to sweep over the individual on their relentless course. At times, Valgardson displays a wry humour that, in "Circus," for example, exposes reality, stripping it of its romance. Thus, the child-like excitement of a seven-year old, on one day enchanted by animals, clowns, and the enormous tent of the circus, is tempered in the end by an empiricism that is both comic and disturbing: "I slipped outside looking for souvenirs, but there weren't any, only deep ruts gouged into our baseball diamond and, where the animals had been chained, piles of shit already covered with flies." More gentle, perhaps, is "The Man Who Was Always Running Out of Toilet Paper," a whimsical story that plays on the contrast between characters caught in a changing age of political posturing, in which the astute "commoner," Uncle Einar, stands squarely before the political scientist narrator—himself a product of consumer culture—challenging him to examine his world and its progress.

Readers will find much to admire in this varied and evocative collection of stories. It is a collection that engages the reader precisely because in the emotions, the conflicts, the tension, the humour, there is something that strikes a common chord, that makes the reader not in quiet understanding. The events may not be the same, the characters people we have never met, but we have shared their experiences and emotions. In touching these common strains, Valgardson offers readers moments for reflection, and, by the collection's end, the "vast unbridgeable distance" may no longer seem so great an abyss. ■

A Change on the Horizon?

If you are in the process of moving or planning a move, please send us your new address! We can then make certain that you receive all of your issues. Send your new address to:

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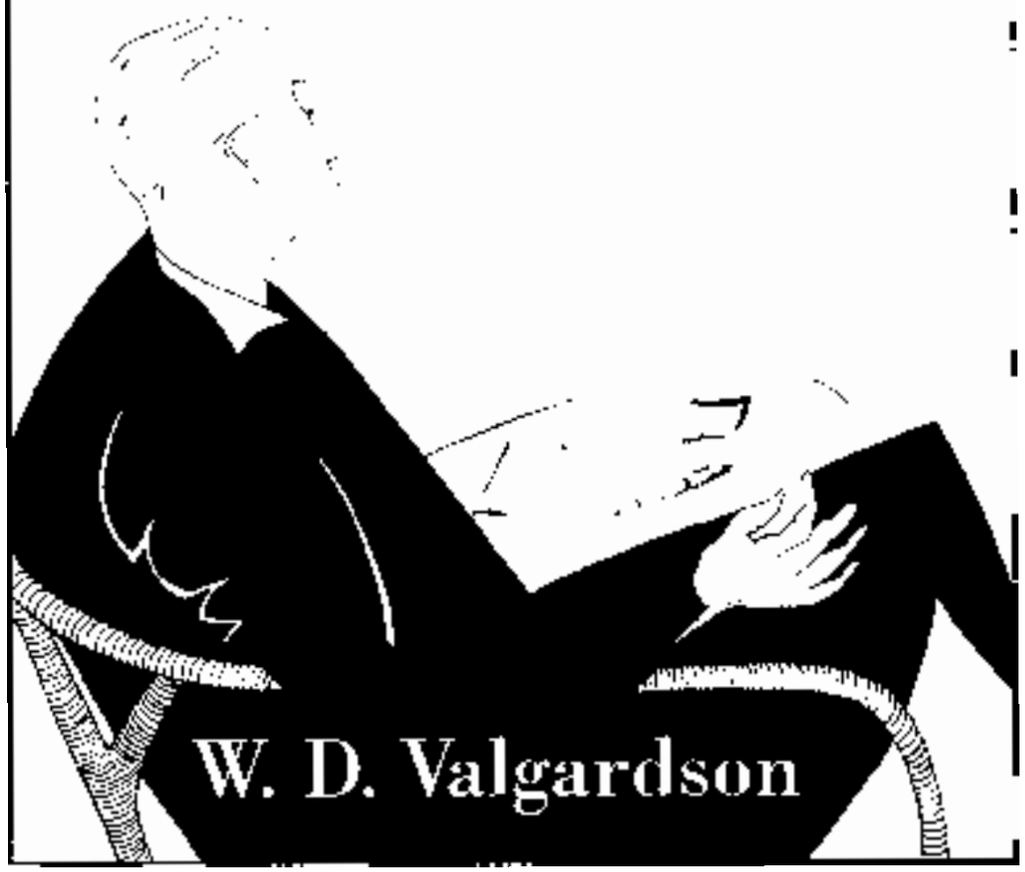
REVIEW

The Girl with the Botticelli Face

a novel



W. D. Valgardson.

The Girl with the Botticelli Face

Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992. Pp. 214.

Reviewed by Kirsten Wolf

The Girl with the Botticelli Face is W. D. Valgardson's most recent publication and his first novel since *Gentle Sinners*, which won the Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1980.

Contrary to most of Valgardson's previous publications, which are set in the Icelandic communities in Manitoba, the geography of the new novel is Victoria, British Columbia. In a cold, steady drizzle we meet Bob, a middle-aged professor of creative writing, walking along beside a hoarding. Suddenly he hears a couple fighting in the construction pit below him and recognises the man as his corrupt marriage counsellor, who is having it out with his wife. While his wife is scouring the bottom gathering various debris to use as missiles and weapons, the counsellor is trying to make his way up the muddy slope of the pit begging for advice, and Bob is not slow to give him back some of his own solutions to marital problems: "'There's lots of ways of being married. Work out a compromise,' I suggest. 'Make it your unique way of being together. Don't become a statistic. Increase her credit limit. Generosity is always appreciated. Send her flowers. Take her out for dinner. Go on separate vacations. Give each other a little leeway for romance as long as it's discreet. Make her fantasies real." When the counsellor has almost reached the top, Bob puts his toe gently on his head and gives him "a little nudge, not hard, not unkind, just enough to throw him off balance and start him sliding."

After this comic opening, Valgardson tells the story of Bob's pursuit for emotional healing. To his searching, somewhat aimless movements through a rather mundane present, Bob brings a childhood marked by mental and physical abuse and imbued with the guilt and severity of a fire-and-brimstone brand of Lutheranism gone awry. He has become a timid and reclusive man who cannot bear to be touched. His sense of self-worth has been undermined by a marriage that is crumbling and a myopic marriage counsellor (". . . I agreed to go to the marriage counsellor. I figured he'd be a referee, make both of us play by the rules, but it wasn't like that at all. We'd get into his office

and they'd gang up on me. Everything I said and did was wrong"), and he is on the verge of a severe breakdown. His only refuge from the rage that is almost paralysing him is the Green Café where his table is always waiting, where Pachelbel's *Canon* is always playing, and where his saviour-waitress knows exactly how he wants his cappuccino: "The Girl with the Botticelli Face. That's how I thought of her. With capital letters. She brought me a cup of coffee without being asked, she touched my shoulder, she was silent when she realised that words hurt, she wouldn't let anyone sit at my table when I was writing. She had, I realised, made a space around me and I'd never known it." After months of deliberation, Bob finally asks her to the ballet, they make a date, but then she mysteriously disappears. "Someone told me that you can tell how deprived someone is by how little it takes of what is lacking to make them react. A drop of water for a man dying of thirst. A speck of food for someone who is starving. Kindness, I thought, and I couldn't stop tears from trickling out of my left eye. I wiped them away with my hand."

What follows is a search, a search for love, reconciliation, and peace combined with a search for the girl with the Botticelli face: "I'll find you, I whispered. Wherever you are. I'll bring you back. Except for the occasional car passing by, the city was silent. From where I stood I could see across the shallow valley in which the city sat. Somewhere out there the sarcophagus of my dream loomed. All I had to do was find it and have the strength to pry it open." Bob's physical search takes him from an occultist's shop, to a folk dance club, to a survivalist group, and to a single mother with her daughter. Simultaneously, with the aid of a skilled psychiatrist, he undertakes a mental journey that takes him back to suppressed and painful memories of his past and helps him explore and understand his infatuation with the lost young woman and that helps him as well to come to terms with the breakdown of his marriage: "The coffee's just short of battery acid but I don't need the Divol anymore. I quit carrying Divol six months ago. She's not so bad, I think, not that I'd want her back, but there were good times, it all wasn't a waste. It's like my grandfather. After he retired, he voted for the Legion to accept German and Italian soldiers and when I asked him how he could do that, he said, 'We went through it together, and after a while, after you get over the hate, that counts for more than who was on what side.'"

It is not only the actual story and the clever structure of the novel that capture the reader, but also Valgardson's superb prose style, his rich and imaginative use of language to create, for example, a mood or a feeling, and his ear for dialogue, which, at times, is very humourous: "'That's Freudians,' my wife said. 'Bob doesn't need a Freudian. The marriage counsellor is also a psychologist. His speciality is reality. He helps people deal with reality. You've got an illusion, he kills it. You got too big for your britches, he deflates you. Bob should still be going to him. Reality is exactly what he needs. I don't approve of this new one. I think his credentials are mail order.'"

The Girl with the Botticelli Face is Valgardson at his best. It is a novel about loneliness, about alienation, about emptiness, but it is also about love and kindness. It is a powerful book.

PROFILE:

Marilyn Whitehead

By Shirley McCreedy

Saskatoon's Marilyn Whitehead has emerged as one of the leading choral conductors in Canada. Both her choirs, the 'Fireside Singers' and the 'Junior Fireside Singers', won Canadian National Music Festival gold medals in August 1991.

The Fireside Singers choir of twenty-five voices won the prestigious City of Lincoln Choral Award and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce scholarship for excellence among senior choirs. The Junior Fireside Singers won the Dr. and Mrs. J.F.K. English Award and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce scholarship for the fourteen years and under category. The two choral groups had each won two national awards previously, but this was the first time they swept both honours in the same year.

Marilyn Whitehead holds Performance diplomas from the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto, A.R.C.T. in both piano and voice, as well as a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Saskatchewan. She is an active member of the Saskatchewan Registered Music Teachers' Association, and has held numerous offices on the executives of both the Saskatoon Branch and the Provincial Branch. She is the immediate past president of the Saskatchewan Registered Music Teacher's Association (Saskatoon Branch), and holds an executive position on the Saskatoon Music Festival Association. Marilyn is also co-ordinator of the planning committee for the Canadian Federation of Music Teachers' Associations biennial convention which will be held in Saskatoon in July 1995.

Marilyn Whitehead

Marilyn was an elementary school teacher for four years, and served as church organist, soloist and choir director for many years as well. She subsequently began teaching voice, piano and theory privately, as well as adjudicating at music festivals and conducting workshops in voice and piano. In 1989, Marilyn was the recipient of the first Dorothy Bee Memorial Scholarship awarded to an outstandingly member of the Saskatchewan Registered Music Teachers' Association. In 1990 she was vocal and choral clinician at the Summer School of the Performing Arts in Saskatchewan.

Marilyn received her early training from Sister Dolores Schneider at St. Angela's Academy in Prelate, Saskatchewan. She later studied piano under Dr. Lyell Gustin and Robin Harrison at the University of Saskatchewan. She also studied voice with Frances Adaskin and Jean Marie Scott at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto as well as with Barbara Collier of the

Canadian Opera Company.

Marilyn formed her first 'Fireside Singers' by having the students she taught privately sing in ensemble. That was seventeen years ago. Both groups have since become choirs of renown, singing locally, provincially and nationally in music festivals and recitals, and performing for service clubs, hospitals, senior citizens' homes and rehabilitation centres in Saskatoon. As well they have produced several recordings, including the very successful "Christmas with the Fireside Singers."

Marilyn says, "I've always made the choirs a compulsory part of the training because not everyone is suited to pursue a solo career, and the choral work is so beneficial to everyone. You develop a camaraderie within choirs that you can't attain as a soloist. When you're a soloist, you're all alone on that stage."

Marilyn's students, in both piano and singing, have achieved top ratings in solo performances from adjudicators in the annual Saskatoon Music Festival over the years. Two of her student choir members have won Canadian solo voice gold metals and another has won a silver medal in the Canadian Festival finals. She helps her students achieve confidence in themselves, entering each of them individually in four or more classes. This experience is invaluable to the students, many of whom go on to careers in music.

Marilyn Whitehead is married and the mother of three children. She is the daughter of Ken and Margaret (Thordarson) Hunter of Saskatoon. Her mother, Margaret, is the daughter of the late Norma (Thorbergsson) and J. Fridrik (Fred) Thordarson of Winnipeg. Margaret's maternal grandparents were Sveinn Bergman Þorbergsson, Vatnsdalur, and Helga Hinriksdóttir, Húnavatnssýsla, Iceland; her paternal grandparents were Erlendur Þórðarson, Eyjafjörður, and Signý Björg Erlendsdóttir of Húnavatnssýsla, Iceland).

Marilyn can indeed be proud of her achievements. She will no doubt go on to reach greater heights. We wish her well in her future endeavours.

Axel Vopnfjord: A Tribute

by Stefan Jonasson

Editor's Note:
Our subscribers will note that the name of Axel Vopnfjord, editor emeritus, has disappeared from the masthead of the Magazine. The Board of *The Icelandic Canadian* was deeply saddened to learn of Axel's passing away on May 13, 1993. Here, Stefan Jonasson, Axel's great-nephew and a former member of the Magazine Board, pays tribute to this special individual.

Axel Vopnfjord was a man of uncommon character whose life spoke more loudly than words can echo. Through most of this century, he lived and worked on several fronts, seeking to embody the vision and ideals that warmed his soul. A loyal Canadian of Icelandic heritage, he promoted the values of citizenship, ethnic pride and tolerance. A trustworthy relative and friend, he was a comfort and fit companion to those around him. A gentle teacher and civic leader, he touched the lives of thousands with his wit, charm and compassion.

Axel passed away peacefully on May 13, 1993, at the age of 91. He was born on January 8th, 1902, in Husavik, Manitoba, the oldest child of Jakob Vopnfjord and Dagbjort Kjernested. His parents moved several times, so Axel lived as a child in Husavik, Gimli, Selkirk and St. James. He graduated from the Jón Bjarnason Academy in 1918 and, five years later, he was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree by United College (now the University of Winnipeg). Then a year after that, he graduated from the Winnipeg Normal School and began his teaching career.

Axel taught for nearly two decades throughout southern Manitoba, at places like Belmont, Manson, Sanford and Pilot Mound. He often said that the happiest times of his teaching career were spent as principal of the school at Pilot Mound. While serving as principal there he was elected president of the Western Manitoba Teachers' Association in 1941. The following year, he moved to Winnipeg, where he began teaching at Isaac Brock School. While there, he completed his Bachelor of Education degree at the

University of Manitoba. In Winnipeg, he was once again elected to represent his peers, becoming president of the Winnipeg Teachers' Association in 1954.

In 1950, Axel was assigned to help establish the Technical-Vocational School of Winnipeg, a school which became the envy of educational circles across the continent. Axel taught math and science there. From 1956 until 1961, he was principal of the evening school — at a time when the evening school accounted for 1900 of the 3000 students enrolled at Tec-Voc. In 1961, he became an instructor at the Manitoba Teachers' College. Four years later, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Manitoba, retiring in 1968.

Axel was an advocate of liberal educational methods intended to broaden people's sense of perspective, not merely equip them with the skills necessary to earn a living. He argued that the school system needed to make the curriculum conform to the child, rather than the child to the curriculum. I've often imagined that Axel must have been something like the fictional John Keating, in Tom Schulman's *Dead Poets Society* — that kind of teacher who could draw out the best from his students, who could point them toward a world of possibilities. "Carpe Diem, lads!," John Keating says. "Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!"

Axel was committed to a rather lofty notion of citizenship, believing that Icelandic Canadians, in particular, had something to contribute to this vast multicultural society of ours. "There can be no doubt," he wrote, "that the ideals and traditions that sustained the Icelandic immigrants in their time of trial and tribulation, and led them to victory over unfavourable and undesirable conditions, must have been built on solid foundations. We, their descendants, can still draw the living waters of inspiration from the heritage they cherished." He sought to draw those living waters of inspiration in his own life and to draw them out in the lives of others. But he also cautioned that "it is not desirable that we consider ourselves hyphenated Canadians" but rather Canadians first, who seek to build the paradise that is within our grasp — right here, right now. But he also said that "our patriotism must transcend national boundaries. To be good Canadians we must be good World Citizens. Upon the development of that concept throughout the world depends the welfare, and perhaps, the very existence of the human race."

From 1944 until 1946, Axel was president of the Icelandic Canadian Club, a group which sought to pass on the Icelandic heritage in the English language, since they feared it would otherwise decline. He was the editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic Canadian* more than once, but most recently from 1979 until 1989, when he was named editor emeritus. He was a member of the magazine board from its earliest years until the time of his death.

Axel was someone of immense character. "Character involves so many factors," he said. "... It involves faith in the inherent goodness of the human race and the faith, too, that Man is slowly but surely improving and heading towards a higher destiny." Through his gentle manner and respect for others, Axel showed that he believed in human goodness and destiny not merely as an abstract ideal, but as a living truth. I can honestly say — and I think there are very few people that anyone can

say this about — that I never heard Axel utter an unkind or malicious word about anyone! Not once! That wasn't his style. That wasn't his spirit. That wasn't his faith, for he had faith in the fundamental goodness of all people and believed that most of the things that divide us are misunderstandings; that if we would only seek to talk to one another and to hear one another, somehow we would be able to overcome them. "The world," he lamented, "unfortunately has too many mists that tend to obscure the essential goodness and kindness of the human heart and the basic soundness of human nature."

Axel married Karlotta (Lottie) Olafson in 1935 and they spent more than four decades together, until Lottie's death in 1976. Theirs was a rich and loving relationship. Together they raised two children: Lorraine, who married Henry Bjornson, and Leonard, who married Karen Thorlakson. Axel was immensely proud of his three grandchildren — Kristjan and Linden Vopnfjord and Dale Bjornson — and no visitor to his home could escape hearing about them! It would have brought him much joy to watch his great-granddaughter Berkley-Marie grow and mature. In recent years, Axel was buoyed by the companionship of his special friend, Jill Killeen.

I cherish many deep and fond memories of Axel, who was both my great-uncle and godfather. He was someone that you could always rely upon. Axel was always there for my immediate family, as he was available for most anyone who needed counsel or assistance. When my grandmother was widowed at a very young age and left to raise two boys and a daughter on her own, he opened his home to her, offering invaluable help in her time of need. He was there for her when her son was killed overseas, naming his own son in his honour. And he was there with us when we buried my father so many years ago now, when we needed a touchstone — someone we could rely on, someone we could hold, someone who represented continuity in our lives. He was always there! So it is very hard to imagine this world without him.

I recall that Axel was one of the few people I have known who sat in my father's favourite chair with impunity. My father's deference to his uncle impressed me early on that this was a man to be respected and admired. My brother Chuck recently observed that Axel could sit in a room a-buzz with conversation, but when he started to speak in his soft, quiet way, people would stop to listen.

I'll always remember that sparkle in his eye, that sparkle like the stars. His eyes glistened and twinkled. One might have imagined that he was an angel. Axel peppered his conversation with poetry and literary allusions. I remember him quoting the oath that the young men of Athens took when they became citizens of that great city-state. Part of that oath was, "I will transmit my native commonwealth, not lessened, but larger and better than I received it.... I will honour the ancestral faith." Well, Axel did honour the faith throughout his life and there can be no question but that he transmitted his native commonwealth, not lessened, but larger and better than he received it. We can be grateful for people such as him, who have enriched our lives and made our communities the kind of places that they are.

"At all times," he wrote, "we walk in the shadow of history. We are part of all that we have met, and all that our ancestors have met. The ghosts

of former years and past events cast an illuminating light upon our forward march, and guide and assist whenever our footsteps falter or fail." Axel will continue to be for us, in the years ahead, that kind of illuminating light that will lead us in our forward march. And though we can't speak to him in the flesh, we can yet speak to him in our hearts and remember his example, seeking to make real his dreams and vision in our own lives. It is difficult to say goodbye to a man such as he, but "there are times," he said, "when everything we hoped for, believed in, trusted, lies in ruins at our feet.... At such times, like a beacon of light on a dark night, hope sustains us." So, as we take refuge in our memories of Axel and the procession of all who have gone before us, hope abides in our hearts. He was a wonderful man who made a deep impression in our lives and an enduring contribution to the world. He knew that he walked in the shadow of history. We know that history will judge him kindly.

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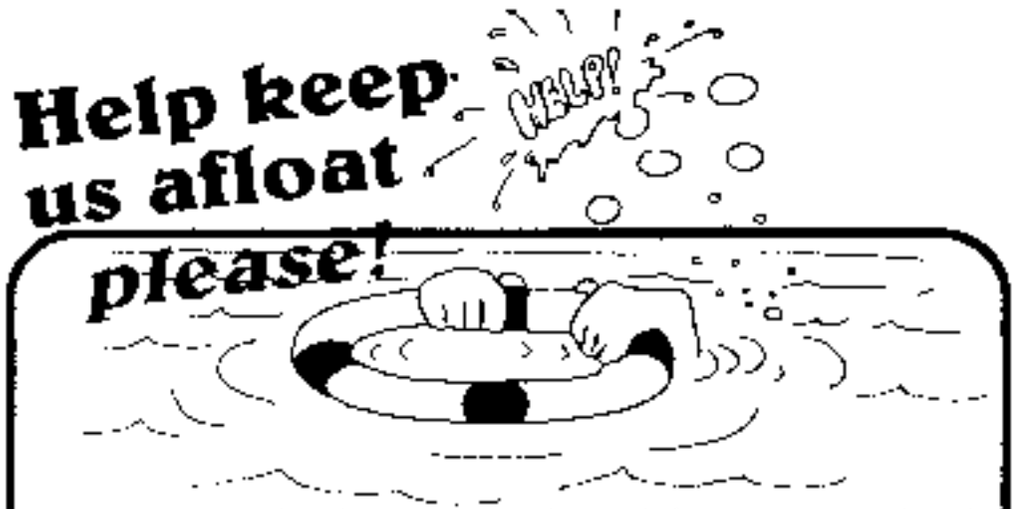

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Arilius Isfeld, Manitoba educator, was born in the Husavik district of the province. He has the distinction of having the longest continuous service record of a board member of *The Icelandic Canadian*. His twenty-six year tenure (1955-1981) included a term as assistant editor.

Sigrid Johnson is Head of The Icelandic Collection in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba. She is editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

Stefan Jonasson is chaplain of the Unitarian Church in Arborg, Manitoba. He is a frequent contributor to *The Icelandic Canadian* and in the past he has served on the board of the magazine.

Kristiana Magnusson of White Rock, British Columbia, formerly from the Arborg-Riverton area of Manitoba, is an author and a poet, and a frequent contributor to *The Icelandic Canadian*. She is also the British Columbia editor for the magazine.

Shirley McCreedy is a Winnipeg music teacher. An active member of several Icelandic Canadian organizations, she has been selected to be the Fjallkona at the 1993 Íslendingadagurinn to be held at Gimli, Manitoba. She is the familiar essays editor for *The Icelandic Canadian*.

Thelma Guðrún Whale was born in Winnipegosis, Manitoba, to Kristinn Vigbald Stevenson and Margrét Ísleif Guðmundsdóttir. She holds degrees in Arts and Education from the University of Manitoba. She is now a retired educator and is keeping up her Icelandic (her first language) through reading and translation. In addition to *Í Rauðárdalnum*, she has translated *Eiríkur Hansson* and *Brasilíufaramir*.

Kirstin Wolf is Chair and Head of the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba, and past co-editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

Betty Jane Wylie was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and spent her childhood summers in Gimli. She received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English from the University of Manitoba. Since her husband's death in 1973, she has made her living as a writer. Her published works include children's books, cookbooks, plays, a biography and self-help books. She presently lives in MacTier, Ontario.