

Tartan

They anchored the *Eagle* off the rock, in shallow water, between the horns of a white sandy bay. It was a windy morning. Behind the bay stretched a valley of fertile farms.

'We will visit those houses,' said Arnor the helmsman. Olaf who was the skipper that voyage said he would bide on the ship. He had a poem to make about rounding Cape Wrath that would keep him busy.

Four of the Vikings - Arnor, Havard, Kol, Sven - waded ashore. They carried axes in their belts.

Gulls rose from the crag, circled, leaned away to the west.

The first house they came to was empty. But the door stood open. There was a shirt drying on the grass and a dog ran round them in wild noisy circles. Two sheep were tethered near the back wall.

'We will take the sheep as we return,' said Havard.

Between this house and the next house was a small burn running fast and turbid after the recent rain. One by one they leapt across it. Kol did not quite make the far bank and got his feet wet. 'No doubt somebody will pay for this,' he said.

'That was an unlucky thing to happen,' said Sven.

'Everything Kol has done this voyage has been wrong.' Another dog came at them silently from behind, a tooth grazed Arnor's thigh. Arnor's axe bit the dog to the backbone. The animal howled twice and died where he lay. In the second house they found a fire burning and a pot of broth hanging over it by a hook. 'This smell makes my nostrils twitch,' said Sven. 'I am sick of the salted beef and raw fish that we eat on board the *Eagle*.'

They sat round the table and put the pot of soup in the centre. While they were supping it Sven raised his head and saw a girl with black hair and black eyes looking at them from the open door. He got to his feet, but by the time he reached the door the girl was three fields away.

They finished the pot of broth. 'I burnt my mouth,' said Kol.

There were some fine woollen blankets in a chest under the bed. 'Set them out,' said Arnor, 'they'll keep us warm at night on the sea.'

'They are not drinking people in this valley,' said Havard, who was turning everything upside down looking for ale.

They crossed a field to the third house, a hovel. From the door they heard muttering and sighing inside. 'There's breath in this house,' said Kol. He leapt into the middle of the floor with a loud berserk yell, but it might have been a fly buzzing in the window for all the attention the old woman paid to him. 'Ah,' she was singing over the sheeted dead child on the bed, 'I thought to see you a shepherd on Morven, or maybe a

fisherman poaching salmon at the mouth of the Naver. Or maybe you would be a man with lucky acres and the people would come from far and near to buy your corn. Or you might have been a holy priest at the seven altars of the west.'

There was a candle burning at the child's head and a cross lay on his breast, tangled in his cold fingers.

Arnor, Havard, and Sven crossed themselves in the door. Kol slunk out like an old dog.

They took nothing from that house but trudged uphill to a neat gray house built into the sheer brae.

At the cairn across the valley, a mile away, a group of plaided men stood watching them.

At the fourth door a voice called to them to come in. A thin man was standing beside a loom with a half-made web in it. 'Strangers from the sea,' he said, 'you are welcome. You have the salt in your throats and I ask you to accept ale from Malcolm the weaver.'

They stood round the door and Malcolm the weaver poured horns of ale for each of them.

'This is passable ale,' said Havard. 'If it had been sour, Malcolm the weaver, we would have stretched you alive on your loom. We would have woven the thread of eternity through you.'

Malcolm the weaver laughed.

'What is the name of this place?' said Amor.

'It is called Durness,' said Malcolm the weaver. 'They are good people here, except for the man who lives in the tall house beyond the cairn. His name is Duncan, and he will not pay me for the cloth I wove for him last winter, so that he and his wife and his snovelly-nosed children could have coats when the snow came.'

'On account of the average quality of your ale, we will settle matters with this Duncan,' said Amor. 'Now we need our cups filled again.'

They stayed at Malcolm the weaver's house for an hour and more, and when they got up to go Kol staggered against the door. 'Doubtless somebody will pay for this,' he said thickly.

They took with them a web of cloth without asking leave of Malcolm. It was a gray cloth of fine quality and it had a thick green stripe and a thin brown stripe running up and down and a very thick black stripe cutting across it horizontally. It was the kind of Celtic weave they call tartan.

'Take it, take it by all means,' said Malcolm the weaver.

'We were going to take it in any case,' said Sven.

'Tell us,' said Havard from the door, 'who is the girl in Durness with black hair and black eyes and a cleft chin?'

'Her name is Morag,' said Malcolm the weaver, 'and she is the wife of John the shepherd. John has been on the hill all week with the new lambs. I think she is lonely.'

'She makes good soup,' said Arnor. 'And if I could get hold of her for an hour I would cure her loneliness.'

It took them some time to get to the house of Duncan because they had to support Kol who was drunk. Finally they stretched him out along the lee wall of the house. 'A great many people will suffer,' said Kol, and began to snore.

The Gaelic men were still standing beside the cairn, a good distance off, and now the girl with black hair had joined them. They watched the three Vikings going in at the fifth door.

In Duncan's house were three half-grown children, two boys and a girl. 'Where is the purchaser of coats?' said Havard. 'Where is the ruination of poor weavers? Where is Duncan your father?'

'When the Viking ship came into the bay,' said a boy with fair hair, the oldest of the children,' he took the mare from the stable and put our mother behind him on the mare's back and rode off south to visit his cousin Donald in Lairg.'

'What will you three do when we burn this house down?' said Arnor.

'We will stand outside,' said the boy, 'and we will be warm first and afterwards we will be cold.'

'And when we take away the coats for which Malcolm the weaver has not been paid?' said Arnor.

'Then we will be colder than ever,' said the boy.

'It is a clever child,' said Sven, 'that will doubtless utter much wisdom in the councils of Caithness in a few years' time. Such an orator should not go cold in his youth.'

They gave the children a silver Byzantine coin from their crusade the previous summer and left the house.

They found Kol where they had left him, at the wall, but he was dead. Someone had cut his throat with a cornhook.

'Now we should destroy the valley,' said Havard.

'No,' said Arnor, 'for I'm heavy with the weaver's drink and it's getting dark and I don't want sickles in my beard. And besides all that the world is well rid of a fool.'

They walked down to the house where the sheep were tethered. Now eight dark figures, including Malcolm the weaver and Morag and the clever-tongued boy (Duncan's son), followed them all the way, keeping to the other side of the ridge. The men were armed with knives and sickles and hayforks. The moon was beginning to rise over the Caithness hills.

They killed the two sheep and carried them down the beach on their backs. The full moon was opening and shutting on the sea like the Chinese silk-and-ivory fan that Sven had brought home from Byzantium. They had a good deal of trouble getting those awkward burdens of wool and mutton on board the Eagle.

'Where is Kol?' said Olaf the skipper.

'In a ditch with his throat cut,' said Sven. 'He was fortunate in that he died drunk.'

The Durness people stood silent on the beach, a score of them, and the old bereaved woman raised her hand against them in silent malediction. The sail fluttered and the blades dipped and rose through lucent musical rings.

'The poem has two good lines out of seven,' said Olaf. 'I will work on it when I get home to Rousay.'

He steered the *Eagle* into the Pentland Firth.

Off Stroma he said, 'The tartan will go to Ingerd in Westray. Kol kept her a tattered trull all her days, but with this cloth she will be a stylish widow for a winter or two.'

Tartan by George Mackay Brown, 1969

