

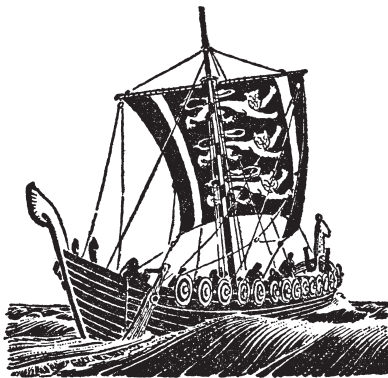
DOOR^{TO} THE NORTH

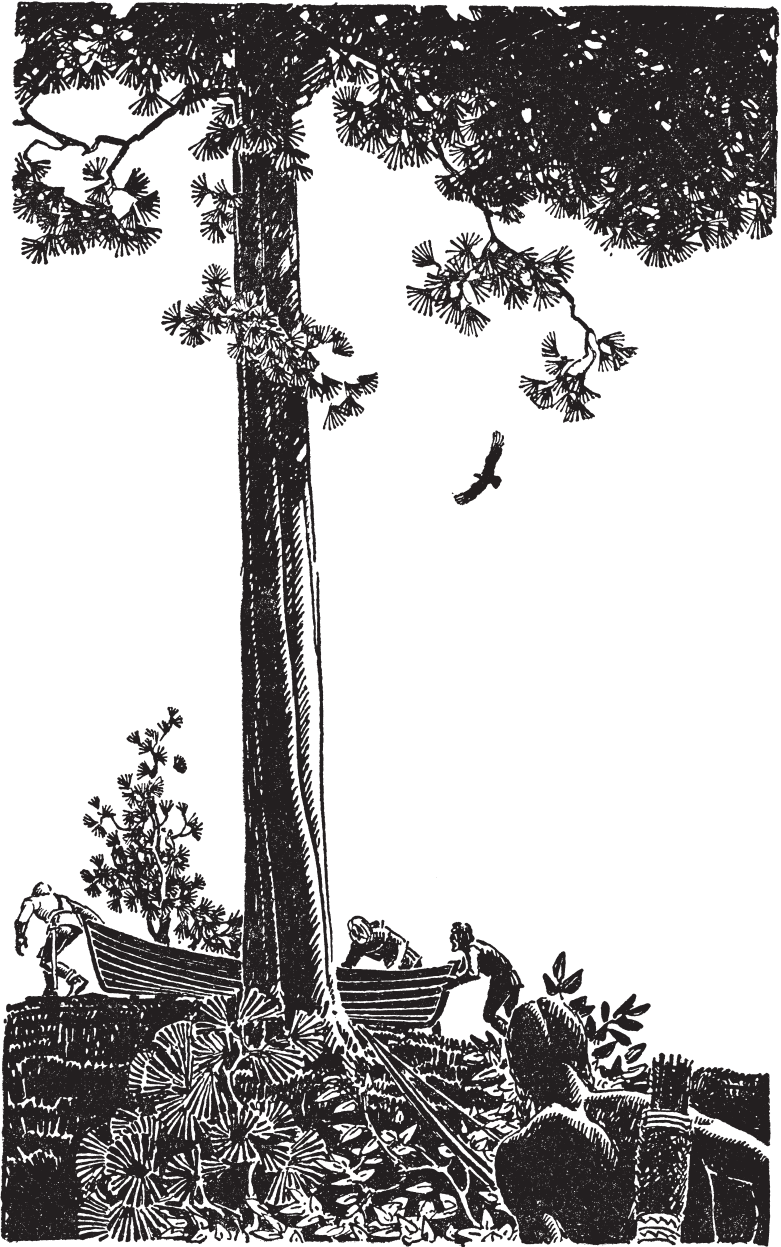
A SAGA OF 14TH CENTURY AMERICA



ELIZABETH COATSWORTH

DOOR TO THE NORTH





DOOR TO THE NORTH

A Saga of Fourteenth-Century America

By ELIZABETH COATSWORTH

Illustrated by Frederick T. Chapman

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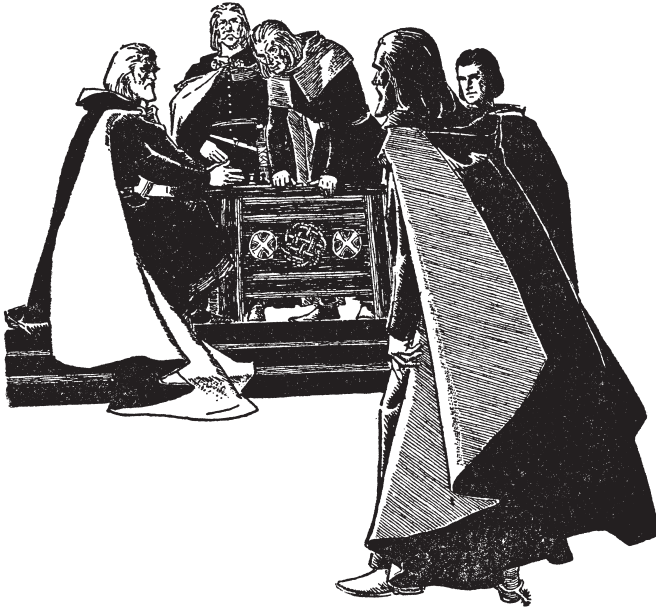
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1. *The King's House*

THE SPRING of 1360 came early.

The weather had been warm for an April week, and Paul Knutson, walking down the great hall of the king's house, left behind him the damp track of his shoes, wet from the streams that were bright as quicksilver across the old snow of the Bergen streets. He was still wearing his riding cloak, but under it, he had put on a long red robe and a belt of carved walrus ivory. There was no trace of his old limp, but he held his heavy lion's head even higher than usual and looked about him at the king's people with a kind of insolence. Although he had always been a loyal king's man in the long troubles which Magnus had entered into

with his Norwegian nobles, there were too many Swedes about the place for Paul Knutson's taste.

King Magnus Eirikson might be Norwegian on his mother's side, but it was his Swedish half that was turned toward the sun, and there flourished the Swedes of Gothland. Now as he sat in the carved high seat at the end of the hall, playing chess with Nicolas Byrgeson, he was surrounded by his Swedish attendants. There were not half a dozen Norsemen among them. It was an old dish to Paul Knutson, but it still had a bitter taste. He was not at home here. Yet where another man might have walked warily, he moved with arrogance toward the king, exchanging greetings with his acquaintances as he went, and looking at everyone from challenging blue eyes.

By the raised hearth in the corner of the room sat the queen and her ladies, busy over their endless embroideries. He saw his wife among them and thought he caught a glimpse of his daughter Ingrid's pale hair. They had wasted no time. The pages, as usual, seemed drawn toward where the maidens might be found. He knew most of them, or could guess their fathers from their faces and bearing. But there was one who stood by himself against a wall hanging of leaves and small animals. There was nothing to call attention to his tall, lean, young figure except an air of unhappiness or ill fortune about it. His page's clothes were neat; he held himself straight; he might, with his brooding face, have been merely thinking up some new boy's escapade; yet no one but guessed that he stood deep in some well of misfortune. When he glanced up at Paul Knutson, passing within six feet of him, he did not seem to see him. His eyes were extraordinary in that northern world, for they were nearly black under black brows, although his hair was fair enough.

People had called him Olav Blackbrows sometimes, but Paul Knutson, startled by that black blind stare, exclaimed to himself, "What! King Magnus still keeps the coward's son about him? I thought he would have been sent home long before this! I wish I had not brought Ingrid here."

Even so, he had an impulse to stop to speak with the boy. If there had been any recognition in the eyes that brushed his face, he would in all decency have said something. But there was none. He might have been a tree or a stone, for all the life that came into Olav's eyes. "Well, well," thought Paul soberly. "Whatever we have been to each other, we are strangers now," and once again the sharp physical pain struck through him as he remembered Olav's father, Sigurd Olavson, once his sworn friend and honored of all men.

But the king had seen him and had pushed away the table on which he had been playing, so that the chessmen were thrown over, and Nicolas Byrgeson had risen, his small monkey's face eager with welcome. He said something to the king, whose hand went to the broad cross he wore at his neck, and he too looked eagerly toward Paul Knutson, now mending his pace toward them. Paul saw that whatever the business might be, Nicolas was at the bottom of it. Since his son had been killed by a falling horse, and his wife had left him, he had become deeply religious. People called him the King's Conscience.

"Are they planning between them another campaign to Christianize the Russians?" Paul wondered. "After the tales we've heard of the black death in Russia, surely our people won't follow them. Haven't we had our bellyful of the plague here at home? Whatever Magnus may urge, I'll not take a step toward Russia, and that I swear by all the holy saints."

Obstinacy and pleasure struggled across Paul Knutson's face as the king took him by the hand and clapped his shoulder warmly. They were men of an age, with grown children, but still in their full vigor. They had known one another, and, in the main, trusted one another for twenty years now, twenty years of foreign wars and civil outbreaks and plague, yet good years, too.

Many who had followed the old king faithfully had broken with his grandson, but Paul could look Magnus Eirikson in the face without shame. He had been faithful to him in word and deed, and he had been rewarded by being made warden of the northern provinces, and lawman at the meeting of the people. Now Magnus spoke to him with open affection.

"And how is my Paul?" he asked. "Never was man more welcome to me than are you this day. Sit down, sit down! Bring ale, someone. Nicolas, you must sit with us while I explain the business. Now first tell me why you think I sent for you?"

Paul's face, which had become open and frank, clouded, and he said warily, "Perhaps Russia, my lord?"

The king smiled.

"And if it were Russia?"

"I would not go."

The king laughed, but without amusement.

"There speaks a good Norwegian," he said impatiently. "No, no, Paul Knutson, this matter does not concern Russia. Turn your thoughts from the east, man, westward—westward as far as the mind can reach. Now what do you see?"

"Iceland?"

"Oh, stretch! You have not sailed far enough."

“Greenland?”

“Yes, Greenland and beyond. Vinland, and who knows where the world may end? But if they go beyond the world, even so we must find them and bring them back to Christ.”

“My lord, you speak darkly, like an old rune. I do not follow your meaning.”

“Wait, my lord, let me explain to Paul,” interrupted Nicolas Byrgeson, thrusting his small ugly head forward like a sheep getting to its feet. “The matter would be clearer, Paul, if you had been here when the ship arrived from Greenland. You haven’t heard of it yet? It was the talk of all Bergen. You did not linger at your inn, I see, but came here directly as soon as you arrived.”

“Ever faithful,” put in Magnus, whose flow of ill humor had abated.

Nicolas paid no attention to the king. His face looked smaller and more lined than ever in his earnestness, his small eyes sparkled like bits of mica in a seamed rock, and his words rushed out over one another like sheep driven by a rough dog down a narrow lane.

“It was a great thing, Paul,” he went on, “the first time in our lives that a ship has come from Greenland. The men! the boat! but first the ship. It was a thing to wonder at; yet, seeing it, my eyes were filled with tears. No proper beams, the wood was driftwood, and only the Lord in heaven knows how long it had been tossed about in the seas, or from what lost shores it had floated. They had carved a prow ornament of a walrus with real tusks, and that was a fine sight. But, man, there were almost no nails in her; only a few which they had secured from a stranded ship found on the eastern uninhabited shore, with skeletons in a cove above it. They burned the keel there and took the iron and brought back

the bones to be buried in Christian soil. But for the rest, instead of nails, they had used pegs of wood and withies to strengthen her. You would not have believed that such a ship could live a day among the waves, yet they had come from Greenland to Iceland, and from Iceland here."

He paused, swallowed painfully, and said in a low voice: "I see the hand of God in it."

"Have they no iron, then, in Greenland?" Paul asked with interest.

Magnus answered before Nicolas could speak.

"Yes, they say there is iron, but too little wood to melt it. Arne, the last bishop, had his men burn bones for fuel, but got little iron by that at Gardar. Truly, as Nicolas has said, the ship was a moving sight. And they had no anchor, even."

"But it was the men!" Nicolas broke in. "The men more than the ship. There were seventeen of them, dressed in frieze of their women's spinning. I am called a little troll of a man—no, do not deny it—but I was tall among these Greenlanders. And in their mouths, our language had changed so that they seemed like strangers who have but half-learned our speech. Not that the outer case of a man matters. It is the soul that counts."

"And their souls are in peril," Magnus said quietly, his hand again on the gold cross he wore. "They have had, for a long time, no wine or bread for the sacrament. Only the dish upon which the consecrated host was once laid is still shown to them, and their Communion is but to gaze upon it. Those are my people, and before heaven, I should be held to account if this were to go on."

"You have still, my lord, the Knarr, the royal trading vessel which in former times sailed to Greenland," Paul