

## **The Grave of a Viking**

After church the inhabitants of the little town used to go home and eat their Sunday dinner. The streets were emptier and quieter than ever and the clatter of knives, forks and spoons could almost be heard outside the dining-rooms or the kitchens, where the workers usually ate. Here and there snores could be heard from people who were already sleeping off a heavy dinner. Otherwise the town appeared deserted and hardly alive.

One Sunday afternoon during this dead period a strange sight was to be seen: five boys marching down the long, long street in Indian file. They were dressed in their Sunday best and munching enormous open sandwiches. Apparently they had cut long loaves lengthwise and then put on butter and all kinds of good things. But this was not all: between each mouthful the five boys sang bits of strange-sounding marching songs. The street rang with their wild cries that sometimes seemed to come from another world. The inhabitants of the peaceful town rushed from their steaks or woke up from their dreams and went to the windows to watch the mad Scots in their window-mirrors. Then they returned to their steaks or to their beds, sighing and shaking their heads. Nobody tried to stop the Sangsters, not even the elderly policeman who looked fierce but was as mild as a lamb.

Eventually the procession reached the Castle end of the town. By their singing the boys had managed to make the loaves last until they were just outside the Castle walls. They swallowed the last piece and, breaking line, ran up the hill and past the Castle to where there were two large mounds, containing the remains of two Viking chieftains. For a while the boys stayed near the mounds, measuring and discussing various things. Bill Sangster had a book in his hand. Now and then he read from it. Everyone appeared to be taking matters very seriously. Nobody shouted or sang. Their doings were watched by some Swedish boys who peeped at them behind the castle walls but dared not risk being seen.

After about an hour the boys ran across a meadow on the other side the Castle grounds. They looked excited. At the other side of the meadow was a wood with dense undergrowth. The Sangsters disappeared into the underbrush. It was marshy in there and dark. Nobody ever went into the marshy wood. Rumour had it that it was haunted. Besides, it did not exactly invite people to come in. In the summer, clouds of mosquitoes and gnats hung over the undergrowth, sometimes leaving it to pester visitors to the Castle ruins.

No one knew who owned the wood and the marsh, in rainy summers it was impossible to walk across that land: people were known to have got lost and been swallowed up by the mud. On the other side the ground was stony. Nothing grew there.

The summer had been very dry when the Sangster boys went into the mysterious marsh and disappeared into its almost tropical vegetation. The watching Swedish youngsters saw them go into the jungle, but not one dared follow the "mad Scots".

Some weeks passed. The memory of the sandwich-eating and yelling line of Sangsters marching through the town was kept alive by the gossips, who in their usual manner exaggerated the event. Then a new sensation hit the town.

One morning the local newspaper carried a letter of the most interesting kind. It was signed "An Old Citizen". This gentleman related how he had one evening wandered into the marsh beyond the Castle grounds. He had done the same thing only once before, in his boyhood, after a summer as dry as the one that had just passed. Now he had wanted to revive old memories, memories of his happy childhood. With some difficulty he had managed to work his way through the bushes and low trees that tried to trip him up. At last he had come to a little hill that was almost in the middle of the marsh. Arrived there he had paused to catch his breath. Sitting down he had been struck by the resemblance of the hill to the Viking mounds by the Castle. Couldn't the "hill" be the grave of yet another Viking chieftain.

The letter created quite a stir. Soon people were seen directing their steps towards the Castle end of the town. The local expert on Vikings received numerous telephone calls from

citizens who were all aglow over this wonderful find. Those who got through to Mr Swedeman were told that it was all a hoax. No Viking lay buried in the marsh. In the end Mr Swedeman got so angry that he rang up the editor of the newspaper and asked to know the name of the fellow who had sent in the letter. He was told that the letter had said that it was from Mr Swedeman himself! It had been signed *An Old Citizen* (alias S. Swedeman). Now Mr Swedeman's Christian name was Eric, but the poor newspaper-man had not thought of that when he picked up the letter late at night from the newsbox.

Of course, the newspaper printed an apology and confessed shamefacedly that its leg had been pulled. But people went on believing in the story. Old citizens recalled tales from their childhood about a Viking chieftain having been buried "beyond the Castle". Before the first snow fell, a path had been trodden across the meadow and into the marsh right up to the little hill. It did look rather like the Viking mounds near the Castle, smaller but certainly as genuine.

The news of the fake Viking grave got into the national dailies and the inhabitants of the little town were laughed at over the whole country. The news even went as far as the columns of *The Scotsman*, the national paper of Scotland, where the hoax was briefly mentioned under the headline *Gotham in Sweden*.

Through all this, many people went on believing that the little hill in the marsh was the last resting-place of an ancient Viking. Some clung to their belief even after it came out that the mound in the marsh had been more or less built by the "mad Scots". The Sangster boys were greatly interested in the Vikings. They knew more about them and their customs than most of the citizens of the little town, perhaps more than any of them except Mr Eric Swedeman, who had taught them a good deal about his Viking forefathers and everything he knew about how the Vikings erected their burial mounds.