

The Culture of the Teutons- book II- Vilhelm Gronbech

Chapter III

Name and Inheritance

At the point where the new-born child is adopted by the clan he is brought into contact with the power that resides in the possessions of the race. When the father gives the little one a name, and thus determines his fate by speaking a soul into him, he confirms his act by a gift, and thus makes his "I look for, I wish", a reality. The gift is intended to "fix" the name, as the act is expressly called in the North, and what happens at the ceremony is nothing more or less than this: that the actual portion of luck and soul which is set in the name is actually hung upon the bearer, and by contact set in himself. If the weapon or ornament wherewith the child is consecrated to its future had been the property of a kinsman newly deceased, one whose memory has not faded away into the common honour of the clan, then the young kinsman steps immediately into the place of his predecessor, takes up his portion, and raises him up; he receives all his heillir, as that youth, thirsting for life, promised the child who should renew his name. In the story of Sigmund's naming of Helgi, we have the transfer of luck in its threefold confirmation: he names, he gives, and he "wishes" that the boy prove worthy of the honour of the Volsungs. Helgi was born while Sigmund was at wars, so the saga tells, and the king went from the battle to meet his son with a lily, gave him with it the name of Helgi, and in confirmation, Hringstad, Solfjill, and a sword, and wished that he might be furthered in strength and take after the race of the Volsungs. Of another famous Helgi, to wit, Helgi Hjorvardson, we are told that he was silent, no name was fixed upon him, he was one of those exceptional characters who go about soulless in their youth, as if no luck had entered into them, and as if the name had fallen loose away from them, if they had ever been given one. Then one day while he sat idly on the hill, a valkerie came to him and said: "You are slow in winning rings and treasures, Helgi." He answers: "Where is your gift to go with the name of Helgi?" "Swords I know lying on Sigar's holm," she returns, "one of them is better than all, gold-inlaid, a spoiler of weapons. A ring is on the hilt, courage in the middle, fear at the point, all these he shall enjoy who owns the sword, and along the blade lies a serpent, blood red, its tail curled about the base." Then he becomes a human being, and sets out to avenge his mother's father.

As often as the youth shows himself fit to receive more soul, he meets the gift as a confirmation of his kinsmanship. The appearance of the first tooth was regarded by some of the Germanic peoples as a happy event, and was celebrated by a "tooth-gift". Olaf the Saint's tooth-gift was nothing less than the family belt that had brought about his mother's delivery.

The promotion of a boy to right and seat among the men was probably the next step, and undoubtedly the day he laid aside his childhood for ever was accompanied by an increase in hamingja. Step by step he accumulates honour in himself, until he stands as full personification of the clan.

In the same way as the infant was consecrated, so the grown man had to be born into the clan. Theodoric once honoured the king of the Herules by an adoption; undoubtedly this ceremony, formal as it may seem in our eyes, was for Theodoric himself something more than a mere titular appointment, and the diploma prepared for the occasion by the chancellery of the Goths still

bear the old reality stamped in the words: "It has always been regarded as a great honour to be accepted as a son by arms...and we give you birth as a son by this gift, as is the custom of peoples and manly fashion...we send you horses, swords, shields and the other implements of war." From Norway, the circumstantial ceremony which secured to the new-comer full right of kinship is known in the outline, and we know also that the confirmation of name was not forgotten. When the leader of the clan had uttered the old formula: "I lead this man into all my inheritance, to all the goods I give him, to inheritance and land, gift and return, sitting and seat, and to that right which the law-book provides, and which one so adopted shall have according to law," he gave power to his words by adding: "and in witness of this adoption I give into his hand a cup."

With the honourable surname, the giver, by virtue of his own surplus luck, set something new into the receiver, and he too confirmed his act by a gift. "You are indeed a poet hard to please - a wayward scald, - but you shall be my man for all that, and you may keep the name," says Olaf Tryggvason to Hallfred, half in admiration of his obstinacy; and Hallfred at once breaks in: "What do you give me with the name?" The inner connection between the giving of a nickname and the adoption into one's own luck shows clearly through this little scene; both the king and Hallfred quite understand the exchange of words as carrying with it admittance to the king's immediate following.

The Lombards appear to have regarded themselves as the apple of Odin's eye, and the legend wherein they have proclaimed position as a chosen people is itself based upon the obligation of the name-giver towards the named. Odin had once just when they on their wanderings were about to enter upon a decisive battle, called them by name, saying: "What long-beards are these?" And as soon as the warriors heard the voice from above, they cried: "He who has given us a name must also give us victory."

Any wish, any blessing, was to a certain extent akin to this naming, inasmuch as their power lay in a psychic transference of what lay in the words. The giver must in some way or other make his words whole, and generally speaking, there was a tendency to regard his good will with suspicion, if he did not offer some tangible token of his well-wishing. If a man wished another joy of a thing gained or done, he would be required, in case of need, to strip the clothes from his body, or, as Harald Gilli, clear the board before him, if he would not stand as an empty hero of words. When Bishop Magnus was about to set off for his see in Iceland, he came to take leave of King Harald, and while the Bishop uttered his parting words, the king was looking about him - what could he give? The treasury, he knew well, was at a low ebb. So he emptied his drinking cup and gave it as a parting gift. The bishop then turned to the queen, who said: "Luck and good fortune on your way, Lord Bishop." "Luck and good fortune on your way," exclaimed the king: "did you ever hear a noble woman speak thus to her bishop and not give him something with it?" "what is there here to give?" asked the queen. And the king had his answer ready: "There is the cushion you are sitting on." - In like manner, we may imagine, the king would give a man something of his own luck to take with him on his way, when he said: "I will lay my luck to it."

A peculiar position among the goods of the clan is occupied by those treasures which more than others indicated its place in society; they possessed the luck, in its purest and strongest form. Generally, they

consisted of objects which more especially displayed wealth, the best weapons, swords of victory, very often no doubt in the arm rings and necklaces worn by warriors as marks of their standing. In the North, we often hear about the ring. There was one, according to the legend, in the clan of the Scyldings; it was first in the possession of Helgi, and given by him to his brother Hroar, in place of his part of the kingdom, and when, owing to the envy of his sister's son, Hrok, it had been left lying a long while at the bottom of the sea, Hroar's son Agnar, fetched it up again, and from that deed alone he attained greater fame than his father.

The collar of the Yngling clan has its counterpart elsewhere in the Germanic world. Among the princely gifts which Beowulf brought home from the Dane's hall was a precious necklace which he gave to his friend Hygelac, and which the latter wore on the battlefield in that unlucky fight when the Franks took his life and his treasures. And what gold was among the chieftains, woven fabrics were presumably among the peasantry; here, often enough the valuable - perhaps invulnerable - cloak serves as the bearer of the kinsmen's pride. Sword in hand, necklace at throat or ring on arm, and cloak over shoulder, this was no uncommon form for the fullness of a great luck.

These marks of distinction pertained to the head of the clan, or its leading man, as the one who bore the greatest share of responsibility for the health of its honour. According to ancient and deep-rooted sense of what was fitting, the dead man's weapons must pass to the most distinguished among his kinsmen, the one who would naturally feel chiefly responsible for bringing about due vengeance for his fall. So said Hjalti, after the death of Njal and his sons, when he took up Skarphedin's axe: "This is a rare weapon, not many can bear it." "I know one who can," puts in Kari, "one who shall bear the axe." - "Who is that?" - "Thorgeir Craggeir, for him I take now to be the greatest man in the clan." the feeling of being allied to what is right gives Gunnar's mother, Rannveig, her authority, when she declares her son's favourite weapon is not to be touched by any but him who intends to take full vengeance for him. Codified, this feeling becomes a definition of the law of succession, as we find in a German law-book. "He who takes the land as his inheritance, to him fall the garments of war, that is the coat of mail, with him lies vengeance for next of kin and payment of fine." The transfer of these treasures then, would be equivalent to an act of abdication of a sort, in that the centre of gravity passed from father to son or to some younger kinsman. Glum and Olaf the Peacock had from their childhood part and share in the strength, but as and when they take up the old heirlooms and put them on, they move in to the focus of luck and responsibility, becoming greater men thereby. The great turning-point in young Beowulf's life is when he had shown himself worthy of his clan, and his kinsman laid in his lap an old family sword, left by Hrethel, and with the sword gave him "seven thousand with house and kingly seat; to both of them fell the lands by inheritance, though the one of them, foremost in the clan, ruled the kingdom."

In the treasures of kings lay in the luck of a ruler, and when the Ynglings, as the legend runs, so faithfully bore Visbur's ornament, one of the reasons for their doing so was that land and kingdom lay in it. In princely families, then, such an investiture as that with which Hoskuld honoured his son would mean consecration to rule over peoples. The Vatsdoela sword, Aettartangi, fell, on division of the inheritance, to the second son, Jokul, but his brother Thorstein, who acted as the chief of the clan, and maintained its leadership, wore it when he presided at the law meetings.

this transference of luck is the reality which lies behind the act of the Frankish king Gunnthram, when he hands his lance to his brother's son, Childebert, with the words: "This is a sign that I hand over to you my kingdom; go forth, then, and take all my cities under your sway."

The Lombard king Theodoric who adopted the Herule and sent him a patent adoption in the form of an elaborate diploma, could not, perhaps, any more than Gunnthram, think the thoughts we attribute to them, but they had this advantage over us, that they had no need to think the justification, for the force of the treasures themselves at that time outweighed any lack of understanding as to how this was possible. In course of time, the treasure separates itself from the luck which originally gave it strength, and assumes a self-sufficient might of its own. The spear-shaft becomes a royal symbol, or sceptre, an incarnation of abstract kingship, but a sceptre that has its authority from within, and needs not to draw its right from the jurist's exposition of the meaning of such regalia. The lance, in Childebert's hand, was both an evidence and a power, the mere presence of which closed men's mouths and bowed their heads, and of itself added something to the man who grasped it.

In such treasures then, the luck of the clan resides, and in them it is handed down from generation to generation. they form that backbone which keeps the race upright throughout all changes. In the heirloom is gathered together all that men are; and therefore it contains an illustration both of the intensity wherewith men assimilated one another in friendship, and of the complex character of every hamingja. They illustrate how the clan gathered honour and luck from many sources and thus grew and changed in continuity. When the treasure was assimilated by the family it came to carry not only the new conquest but all the ancient deeds and fate as well, since it was filled with the ever present hamingja of the circle of men to which it belonged. In such an idea of possession, the distinction between old and new fall away. Poetry rightly honours every weapon with the epithet of old, for even though a sword has been forged but the year before, it assumed its antiquity, and its quality of heirloom, from its companions in the men's equipment. It drew up the ancient strength that inspired all things worn or used by the family, and in the same way, the last adopted is a relic from the ancestors the moment reception has been completed. In the fullest agreement with truth, Grettir's mother calls to mind, by the sword, all the former Vatsdoela men, even though she and all the others knew that Aettartangi had come to the family through Ingimund.

The question of inheritance and order of succession then becomes a vital problem in Germanic society, though in another sense than we are apt to surmise. On this point the laws fail us because their provisions date from Christian times, when the spiritual welfare of men and their life hereafter was looked after by a professional body of dealers in eternal life; the testator was possessed of eternal life everlasting for good or ill, and it was assumed that he made to himself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness - these words are often quoted in the deeds of gift - to receive him into everlasting habitations, and further that he had handed over a sufficient amount of the dross of this world to the church. The question of inheritance has changed - in the official documents, though by no means in the minds of the people - into a temporal problem as to who was to take the chattels left by the deceased, and the solution of this modern problem naturally fell under the influence of foreign legal principles. The anxiety that formerly overshadowed all pecuniary interest, how the hamingja which

had inspired the dead man and resided in his belongings should be secured without loss or infringement in his successors, is barely indicated in isolated survivals, such as that rule which assigns the weapons to the chief avenger. The intricate systems of the mediaeval law-books regulating the order of succession give practically no positive clue to ancient custom; what evidence they contain is of a negative character insofar as the weak points of the systems sometimes suggest spontaneous assumptions from ancient times, which were but slowly and laboriously overcome by the Roman principle. The difficulty which the mediaeval lawyers had in recognising the son's son as rightful heir is an instance of ancient prejudice obstructing a smooth adaptation of the simple rule of succession.

If we wish to view this field in its proper foreshortening, we must set aside the human being as the central point in inheritance, and look at the thing itself. The only possible order of succession was hand reaching over into hand, and the life of the grandsons was best guarded by their grandfather's adopting the fatherless, as seems to have been the Iceland custom.

In modern times, inheritance is a question first and foremost of preventing property from being left without an owner: the general endeavour concentrates upon the providing of a clear and legally defined way for the money to take, along which it can roll according to the law of gravity from man to man, until a hand is reached that can rake it in; on no account must the fortune be left idle and ownerless in the market-place, as a proof that gold can really exist without belonging to anyone. The Germanic mind was never troubled by a conception of property as a casual possession, and consequently it was difficult to realise that inheritance could go a-wandering after an owner or jump gaps. In ancient society, inheritance is not a question of finding a place for a fortune, but of obtaining a prolongation of life, and the step that seems so natural to us, over to the next of kin, was no solution of the difficulty. The chain of life must remain unbroken, and the natural, almost necessary presumption was that every man had a successor, a son who took over his father's valuables, because he continued his life.

There is no problem of succession as long as the hamingja proves healthy; it arises only when life and luck have failed, and the difficulty consists in procuring a man to fill the gap in the clan, not in hunting out an heir. When the hope of offspring in the flesh was extinguished, a man was given birth to in order to provide a successor; then the widow or the mother or the sister of the deceased had to raise up the clan and bear a son who should be able to wear the cloak and wield the sword of the father. In the Eddic poem of *Reginsmal*, Hreidmar cries for a son to his daughter, one who could help in the hour of need, when his own sons have cut themselves off from family relationship with him by conspiring against him; and in his deathly fear he adds to his daughter: "Then give birth to a daughter, if you cannot have a son, and get your girl a husband that this need may be met, then her son will avenge your sorrow."

In the Salic law, there is a paragraph which cannot be derived from the actual requirements of the Middle Ages, and which therefore necessarily must lead back to the customs that came most naturally to the people, as long as they followed the ways of their ancestors. It says, that the dead man's mother is nearest heir in the absence of sons, after her come brother and sister; failing these, then the mother's sister, and not until she fails

does the inheritance fall to the nearest of kin. And then it adds significantly that this rule only applies to the personal effects, goods and chattels: land can never pass down through a woman's hands. The daughter is not named, the old legal provisos never start from an abstract standpoint; a particular case is supposed, and the words arranged to fit it, and the case is here evidently that of a young man dying childless. On this piece of law we cannot at any rate establish any dissimilarity between Frankish and Norse custom. Nor can we from this positive rule draw the negative conclusion that the Franks would not acknowledge the solution which evidently comforted the Northmen, that the wife might raise up seed to her husband. Glum's daughter, Thorlaug, renewed, as we know, her husband Eldjarn after his death in the first son by her marriage with Arnor Kerlingarnef.

According to the Salic idea, then, the mother is nearest to the task of giving the son new birth, and we have every right to believe that the mother's duty held valid whether the father still lived or were dead, whether the widow continued to dwell in his house, or went back to her kinsmen, or perhaps from them into a new marriage. After the mother, the dead man's sister is next called upon; she has to look to the interests of the deceased before bearing a child for herself and her husband. From her, the duty passes to the one who was nearest to the mother, and not until woman in the nearest family community is altogether wanting the hope of continuing the branch of the family is relinquished, and the family takes the hamingja contained in the chattels into itself.

The woman's inheriting means that she took over the treasures of the dead man in trust for the son to be born, and brought them out when he had reached the years of maturity. In such a way the famous sword of the Vatsdoela men, the Aettartangi, came to Grettir through his mother, Asdis, daughter of the son of the old Jokul. When Grettir left home to travel and cut out a path for himself, his mother went with him along the road to give her parting salutation. She took from under her mantle a precious sword and said: "This sword has been the possession of Jokul, my father's father, and of the ancient Vatsdoela men, and it carried victory in their hands; I will give you the sword and bid you use it well." The last words contain at once an exhortation and a blessing, or rather, an induction to the right and enjoyment of the power inherent in the weapon: the power of the sword be yours to use! In this case we know that Asdis had a brother, and the reason why the heirloom went into the distaff line is to us obscure. As an illustration of the inner meaning we may cite a scene in Glum's saga. When Glum visited his mother's father in Norway, Vigfus, the old man invited his grandson to settle in his maternal home and succeed to the chieftainship after his kinsman, but Glum wished for some reason to visit Iceland and look after his paternal inheritance before emigrating. When they parted, Vigfus said: "I think it is your fate to raise a family out there, I will give you some treasures, a cloak and a spear and a sword in which our kinsmen have put trust."

This means really that the Norwegian chief awaits a future for himself in the offspring of his daughter's son, and in point of fact the hamingja or genius of Vigfus appeared to Glum in his sleep; when he saw the mighty woman stride up the valley he knew at once that she announced the death of the old man and had come to dwell with him for evermore. Another family legend tells how Olaf the Saint got the sword Baesing, the old family heirloom. When Olaf was eight years old, he excelled all boys of his own age in wit and skill. One day, his mother, Asta, opened a chest and the boy espied a glittering object among its contents. What is it? - It is the hilt of a sword? - Whose

is it? - It is yours, my son; the sword is called Baesing, and it belonged to Olaf Geirstadaalf. - I will have it and wear it myself. And Asta gave him the sword.

These passages are prosaic parallels to the high-strung words of the legend, where Hervor transmits the famous sword which had belonged to her father, Angantyr, and had first gone with him into his barrow, to her son, and begs the young hero ever to bear in mind how keen is that sword of his, how much prowess had manifested itself in the men who had borne it, and how victory was bound up in it. We recall the words of the dying youth who prayed his brother to raise up seed to him: "And to him will I give all the luck I had, and then my name shall live as long as the world stands."

The question we have to solve is not what arrangement the ancient Teutons made regarding inheritance, but what inheritance meant in their case. Through all branches the same clan luck flowed down to posterity, and it would be misleading to interpret the exclusion of women from inheritance in later times as indicating that the sons assumed all the riches themselves and abandoned their sisters to the luck of strangers. Through the gifts wherewith a maiden was attached to the bridegroom's clan, the daughter's sons were bound to their mother's father and their mother's brothers by the very strongest bonds. But the central treasures in which the hamingja was found at its purest and strongest descended from father to son as the string of life that linked one generation to another. How the matter was settled in detail between the brothers we have no means of ascertaining; thus much only is certain, from the hints in law and history, that the insignia, the weapons and ornaments which contained the chieftain's luck of leading the clan went to the son who made promise to be a fit representative of the hamingja. This would normally be the eldest heir, but it would be merely drawing upon our own prejudices, were we to lay down a hard and fast line of law where procedure was always governed by the firm but plastic laws of life. There may be a kernel of truth in Tacitus' casual remark as to the Tenchtri who were addicted to riding and gave their horses after them to the finest warrior among the host of sons; at least it is not out of keeping with the intimations of history and legends.

Should it now come to so ill a pass that the clan dries up, then the last of the race hides its barren luck in the earth, no other shall enjoy it; He says - if he be an Anglo-Saxon - :

"Now hold thou, Earth, the heirloom of the athelings, since the noble no longer can hold it. On thee it was won by the brave. Battle-death, the fierce life-destroyer, has reft away my people to the last kinsman.... There is no one left who can wield the sword or grasp the cup richly chased, the precious beaker. The manly host was hurried off afar. From the hard helm, embossed with gold, the plating will part; the mindful owners sleep who should burnish the battle-mask. The coat of war which offered itself to the bite of steel in the battle at the clanging of shields crumbles with the bones of the hero. The rings of the byrnie do not fare abroad on the breast of the chieftain.... There is no delight of the harp, no hawk winging through the hall, no fleet horse stamping in the courtyard. Dire death has carried off the host of men."