



## Havelok the Dane

### Overview



After the Anglo-Saxons had been living in England a long time and had become very different from the savage tribes that had first come to the land, the Danes, another band of people from northwestern Europe, conquered parts of the country. Havelok was one of the first of the

Danish kings. It is almost certain that he was a real person, for his name is to be found in the old, old historical chronicles. The story of his adventurous life was told by many bards, and was finally written down in about the ninth or tenth century. As the events of this story took place partly in the new land, we can see that this tale is not so old as "Beowulf." It was not written until nearly two hundred years later.

### The Tale of Havelok the Dane

There was once a Danish king who had three little children, two girls and a boy named Havelok. When he was near death, he called for his best friend Godard, the man he believed truest, and made him promise to take good care of the children until Havelok should be old enough to become a knight. Now this Godard was a very wicked man. No sooner had the king died than he took the three little children, the oldest of whom was not yet five, and shut them in a cold, damp tower. Then he seized the whole kingdom of Denmark.

After he had taken possession of all the land, he went to the tower where the children were shivering with cold and faint with hunger. He killed the little girls, but he did not kill Havelok because the child cried so pitifully. Instead, he sent for a slave of his, a fisherman named Grim. "Grim," he said, "you know that you belong to me. Do my bidding and tomorrow I will set you free and give you gold and land besides. Take this child, tie an anchor around his neck so that he will sink, and throw him into the sea tonight at high tide. Let the sin be on my head."

Grim took the little boy and bound him tight with a strong line. Then he wrapped him in an old coat, stuffed rags into his mouth to keep him from crying, and carried him off on his back in a big black bag. When the fisherman reached his hut, he told Leve, his wife, of their great good fortune, how they would be made free on the morrow and receive gold and land besides. When Leve heard the news, she was so glad that she took the bag and threw it down with a bounce. The boy's head was hurt against a stone and he started to cry, but the rag in his mouth choked him. Then Grim and Leve went to bed leaving him on the hard stone floor.

At midnight Grim bade his wife stir the fire and bring a light so that he could see to get up and get ready to throw Havelok into the sea. As Leve went out to do so, she saw a bright light in the corner where the boy lay, just as if a sunbeam were shining from the old bag.

"Get up, Grim, and look. What does this mean?" she called.

Grim got up. They unbound Havelok and found the royal cross marked on his right shoulder.

"This is the true heir of Denmark," said Grim.

“He will grow up to be a strong king. He will punish the wicked Godard and hold all England and Denmark in his power.

Then Grim fell at the boy’s feet and promised to serve and care for him. He knew that Havelok was the only one who could set him free, for Havelok was the only lawful ruler of Denmark.

Havelok was indeed happy to be let out of the big black bag. “Please give me something to eat,” he said. “I am almost dead from hunger and the hurt of the bands on my hands and the rag in my mouth.” Leve brought him bread and cheese and butter and milk and pasties.<sup>1</sup> Havelok was so hungry that he ate a whole loaf of bread. Then Grim undressed him and put him to bed on a soft couch. The next morning Grim went to Godard and told him that he really had thrown Havelok into the sea. Instead of rewarding Grim as he had promised, Godard drove him away with hard words and threats.

Now Grim knew that if Godard ever found out the truth, he would kill Havelok and Grim and his family, too. So Grim secretly sold his corn and his sheep and his cattle and his horse and his swine and his geese and his hens. Then he strengthened his boat with a new mast and sail and stout cables and oars. When there was not a nail more wanting, he went aboard ship with his wife and three sons and two daughters and young Havelok. When they were about a mile from shore, a north wind arose and drove them to England. There Grim settled by the shore and built a little earthen hut for his family. The place where he lived is called Grimsby to this very day.

Grim was a clever fisherman and could make a good living with his net and line. He made strong baskets in which to carry his fish to sell in the town and country round about. In the morning he and his sons would set out with their baskets full of fish and in the evening would always return with those same baskets full of bread and flour and corn and beans. Whenever Grim caught a great lamprey,<sup>2</sup> he carried it to the town of Lincoln and came back with his bags full of meal, mutton, pork, and hemp for the making of fishlines.

In this way they lived for twelve years. They would not let Havelok work because he was a king’s son. It made him very sad to have to lie

idle at home while Grim and his sons worked hard to support him.

“I am no longer a baby,” he said at last. “I can eat more than Grim and all his five children. I must work for my living. It is no shame to work. I will set out tomorrow.

On the next morning Havelok set forth and in his basket he carried more fish than all the other four. He carried it well and sold it well. At night he gave over all the money to Grim and did not keep back a penny of what he had earned.

After that, he went out to sell every day. Soon there came a great famine in the land. Grim could not get enough corn and bread to feed all his family. He was especially afraid on Havelok’s account, for Havelok was big and strong and could eat more fish than could be pulled from the sea.

“Havelok,” he said, “I am afraid we must die, for we are hungry and have no bread. It will be better for you to go away. In the town of Lincoln lives many a good man in whose service you may earn a living. You had better go there; but, alas, you have no clothes. I must cut you a coat out of my sail or you will take cold.” He took the shears down from a nail and made of the sail a new coat for Havelok. Havelok put it on, but he had no stockings or shoes and had to walk barefoot to Lincoln.

He had no friend in Lincoln and knew nowhere to go. For two whole days and nights he wandered around the streets without finding anything to eat, for no one would give him any work to do. On the third day came a call of “Porters, porters,<sup>3</sup> all come here!” It was the Earl of Cornwall’s cook, who wanted some one to carry home the meat he had bought at the market. Like a spark from the fire, Havelok jumped forward. He pushed down nine or ten men in his way, left them lying on the ground, and pressed forward to the cook. He took the earl’s meat and carried it to the castle. For pay he received a penny loaf of bread.

The next day he watched for the cook near the market and soon saw him with many fish, which he had bought for the Earl of Cornwall. At the call for porters, Havelok knocked down in a heap sixteen stout men who stood in his way and took up a whole cartload of fish on his head.

Then he did not stop a moment until he reached the castle, where men took the load from his head. The cook, seeing what a strong man he was, said to him, "Will you work for me? I shall be glad to feed you, for the meat which you eat is well spent."

"Kind sir," Havelok answered, "I ask nothing better. Give me enough to eat, and I will serve you in any way you wish. I can fetch and carry, break sticks, kindle and blow the fire, skin eels, and wash dishes."

"That is all I wish," said the cook. "Go sit over there and eat all the bread and broth you want." So Havelok lived on at the castle and ate and worked. He carried heavy burdens gladly. He always spoke cheerfully. The little children in the meadows loved to play with him. All men of high and low degree spoke of his strength and beauty and gentleness. Still he had nothing to wear but the old coat made out of a sail. The cook was sorry for that and bought him brand new garments and stockings and shoes. When he was dressed in the new clothes, he seemed the handsomest man in all the world. At the Lincoln games, he stood taller by head and shoulders than the strongest man there.

In those days Earl Godrich of Cornwall had all England in his power, even though he was not himself king. The real king had died, leaving his little daughter, Goldburgh, in the care of Earl Godrich. He had promised to protect her and her country until she was of age and then to find her the handsomest and strongest man in England for a husband. So Earl Godrich had all the power in England in his hands until Princess Goldburgh should be twenty. He could send judges and establish courts all over the kingdom, appoint sheriffs and hangmen, and set swordsmen to rid the forests of robbers and bandits. As time went on, he could not bear to think of ever losing all his power and serving Goldburgh. He was a wicked man and cared nothing for his promises. He sent Goldburgh from the royal palace at Winchester to the seashore at Dover. There he shut her in a gloomy castle and kept her for many long, lonely years.

Now Earl Godrich had brought into Lincoln many strong men--earls, barons, champions, and bondsmen.<sup>4</sup> Each year they held a contest of strength. One of the favorite games at these contests was called "Putting the Stone." Many had noticed the great strength of Havelok and at

last some one asked him to try his hand at the game. He picked up the huge stone, lifted it above his head, and threw it twelve feet and more beyond the mark of the champions. Then talk of his strength spread more than ever until it even reached the ears of Earl Godrich. When Godrich heard of the strength and beauty of his cook's servant, he said to himself, "This Havelok seems to be the strongest and handsomest man in all England. I will marry Goldburgh to him. Then I can keep all the power in England myself, for, if Goldburgh is married to a man below her rank, she will lose the right to the English throne."

He brought Goldburgh to Lincoln with great ringing of bells and told her that he would give her to the fairest man alive. Goldburgh answered that she would marry no man but a king or a king's son. Then Godrich was very, very angry.

"You never will be mistress over me, my fine lady," said he. "Tomorrow you are to marry my cook's servant."

The next morning, when the bell at daybreak had rung, Earl Godrich sent for Havelok and said, "Do you want to marry, sir?"

"No," answered Havelok, "for how can I keep a wife? I can neither feed nor clothe her. I have no house nor stick nor sprout nor bread nor cloth, except a piece of an old sail. Even the clothes I wear belong to the cook, and I am his servant."

Then Godrich had him seized and beaten, and threatened to put his eyes out if he did not marry. So he forced Havelok to agree to be married. By threatening to burn Goldburgh alive, he forced her, also, to obey his commands. Soon Havelok and Goldburgh were married hard and fast. Now Havelok knew that Earl Godrich hated Goldburgh and would put her to shame if she stayed in Lincoln as the wife of a kitchen servant.

So he decided to take her back to the faithful Grim and his family. When Havelok and Goldburgh reached Grimsby, they found that Grim was dead, but his five children were still living.

They ran out joyfully to greet Havelok. Grim had left them horses and cattle and gold and silver. They offered to give all to Havelok and Goldburgh and to serve them faithfully. They

built a roaring fire and spared neither goose nor hen to make a wedding feast.

That night Goldburgh lay awake grieving because she had been forced to marry the cook's servant and lose her right to the English throne. Suddenly she saw a light as bright as ten candles shining from Havelok's mouth. She was astonished. As she looked more closely, she saw a cross of red gold glowing on his shoulder. Then she heard a strange voice saying, "Goldburgh, sorrow no more, for Havelok is a king's son. He will rule over all Denmark and England and you will live to be queen of two countries."

The next morning Havelok told Goldburgh that he had dreamed a marvelous dream. It seemed that he was in Denmark on a high hill overlooking all the country. As he stretched out his arms to it, they grew so long that they surrounded the whole land, and when he went to draw them back, castles and towns clung to them, and keys fell at his feet. Then he dreamed that the same thing happened to him in England. Goldburgh told him that the dream meant that some day he would hold both England and Denmark in his power. She advised him to take Grim's three sons, Robert the Red, William Wendath, and Hugh Raven, and go at once to Denmark.

So Havelok and Goldburgh and the three brothers set forth for Denmark. They went disguised as travelling merchants. When they arrived at the province ruled by Ubbe, a great Danish earl, they asked him for permission to trade throughout the country and made sure of his friendship by giving him a gold ring. Then Ubbe asked Havelok to meet him at his castle and there feasted him and Goldburgh with the best of everything. After dinner he sent them to the house of Bernard Brun, the best man in town, to pass the night.

As they were all sitting at supper, sixty strong thieves attacked the house with long knives and swords. They broke the door through. Havelok jumped up, pulled up the door post for a weapon, and slew three at the first stroke. He gouged out the eye of the fourth and hit him on the head, struck the fifth on the shoulders, and broke the neck of the sixth. Still they all rushed on him like a pack of wolves and struck at him with stones, clubs, and swords until his blood flowed from twenty wide wounds as water from a spring. Yet

he fought on and on until he had twenty men lying dead around him.

Hugh Raven heard the great clamor and, looking out, saw men beating on Havelok as blacksmiths beat upon an anvil. He called to his brothers to take up weapons and follow him. Robert the Red gripped a staff and William Wendath a club. Their host, Bernard Brun, held his ax. Then they sprang out like wild men and broke arms and knees and shanks and thighs and heads. They killed the whole sixty thieves.

In the morning Earl Ubbe heard of the fight and the strength of the stranger. He went at once to the house of Bernard Brun. There he found Havelok sorely wounded<sup>5</sup> but his leech said that Havelok's wounds could be cured. Earl Ubbe was so struck by Havelok's strength and fairness that he took him to the castle and put him in the room next to his own. That night he saw a light bright as day shining out of the room where Havelok lay.

"At this time of night only a thief has a light," he said to himself. "I must go and see what it means.

He went into the room where Havelok was sleeping. From Havelok's mouth came the bright light and on his bare shoulder glowed the cross, red as a ruby. Ubbe knew that these were signs of royalty and came closer. Then he noticed that no brothers could look more alike than this stranger and the former King of Denmark, and he knew that Havelok must be the King's son. He fell at Havelok's feet and kissed them until Havelok awoke. At first Havelok suspected some treachery, but Ubbe's promises to be faithful to him showed him that here indeed was a valuable friend.

The next morning, Ubbe made Havelok a knight. Then he called together all the people in his province and told them that Havelok was the real ruler of Denmark and that Godard was a traitor. They all swore allegiance to Havelok. Next, Ubbe sent messages far and wide throughout Denmark to summon all the barons and knights and sheriffs. When they were all at his castle, he told them that he had found their King's son.

Then Havelok was crowned King of Denmark. There was feasting for forty days. The nobles jostled,<sup>6</sup> wrestled, put the stone, and hunted the wild boar. In the evening, the gleeman played

upon the harp and the drum and sang ballads and read romances. King Havelok rewarded Robert the Red, William Wendath, and Hugh Raven by making them barons and giving them each broad lands and twenty knights to serve them.

As soon as the celebration was over, King Havelok and his barons set out to find the wicked Godard. Robert the Red was the first to come upon his tracks. When they all found him, he fought terribly. Even after his own knights had run away from him, he wounded and killed twelve of Havelok's men. At last he was captured and bound and cast into prison.

Then Havelok and Goldburgh and a large company of Danish knights sailed back to England and landed at Grimsby. When Earl Godrich of Cornwall heard that Havelok had become king of Denmark and that he and his queen, the true heir of England, had come to Grimsby, he commanded all his knights to join him at Lincoln.

Whoever disobeyed the command would be made a slave and held in slavery forever. When they had come together, he told them that the Danes were at Grimsby threatening to capture England. They all jumped to their horses and hurried to find the enemy at Grimsby. There a mighty battle was fought, and many brave deeds were done.

The fight lasted from sunrise until sunset. The wicked Godrich wounded Ubbe sorely and attacked the Danes and struck them to the ground on every side until Havelok came riding down upon his warhorse. Godrich cleft Havelok's shield in two. For a moment it seemed as though he would win. Then Havelok struck off Godrich's sword hand. After that he took him by the neck, bound him in chains, and sent him to Queen Goldburgh. He commanded that no man harm Godrich, for he was a knight and had the right to a fair trial by his fellow knights.

The Englishmen soon found that Havelok was a just ruler and that his wife, the fair Goldburgh, was the true heir to their kingdom. They came to Havelok and promised to serve him and they hailed Goldburgh as their own queen. They wanted to hang the traitor, Godrich, at once, but Havelok bade them wait for his trial by the knights. The knights tried him and sentenced him to death.

Then Havelok received an oath of allegiance from the English and was crowned King of England. He rewarded all his old friends generously, even the cook, whom he made Earl of Cornwall in Godrich's place. He sent all his Danish subjects home with many rich presents and appointed Ubbe to rule in Denmark in his name. After this King Havelok and Queen Goldburgh ruled happily in England for sixty years and had fifteen children, of whom every son became a king and every daughter a queen.

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<sup>1</sup> A pasty was a kind of meat pie. It was a favorite dish of the people of the Middle Ages.

<sup>2</sup> A lamprey is a fish rather like an eel. It has a round sucker-like mouth by which it can attach itself to rocks or to other fishes.

<sup>3</sup> There were two kinds of porters in the Middle Ages: those who were gatekeepers of a castle and those, like Havelok, who were carriers of burdens.

<sup>4</sup> A bondsman was one who belonged to another, like a slave or thrall.

<sup>5</sup> Physicians in olden times were called leeches because their first and principal method of cure was the use of the worm called the leech or bloodsucker. Even after they no longer used bloodsuckers to let blood, they still bled people for all sorts of ailments.

<sup>6</sup> When knights jostled, they fought mock battles. They went through all the forms of regular fighting, but did not use sharp weapons.