

The Tale of Roi the Fool

translated by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris

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Chapter I: Of Roi

There was a man called Roi who was born and bred in Denmark; he was the son of a good bonder, a man of prowess, and strong enow and of good wit. Roi was ever a-going chaffering, and got money together that wise; a good smith he was to wit, and that way also he got money full oft. In those days King Swein, the son of Harald, who was called Twibeard, ruled over Denmark, and was a king well loved of his folk.

Now on a summer Roi wrecked his ship on the south parts of Denmark, and lost goods and all, though the crew were barely saved. So they went up a-land, and Roi took to smithying, and gat goods thus; he was well loved of his fellows, nor had he long followed this craft before the money grew on his hands, for a full famous smith he was; yet was the story still the same, and he fared but ill with his goods; for as soon as he had gotten together what he would he went to sea and lost it all.

Roi had a mark in the face of him whereby he was lightly known from other men, for one of his eyes was blue and the other black: but a most manly man he was, and ruled his temper well, yea even were he ill dealt with; ever he got wealth a-land, and lost it a-voyaging, and so when he had now thrice lost his ship in his chaffering voyages, he thought he could see, that he was not made for that craft, and yet going from land to land with his merchandise was the thing most to his mind:

so he bethought him of going to King Swein, if perchance he might have any counsel of him, for he wotted that he was a man of good counsel, and that many had been the better thereof. Wherefore he went thither, and coming before the king greeted him.

And the king asked, "Who art thou?"

"Roi am I called," said he.

Quoth the king, "Art thou Roi the Come-to-nought?"

He answered, "I am wanting somewhat else from thee than mocks such as these. I would rather of thee the help of thy money and goodhap; maybe it shall avail me, for I would fain hope that thy health and hap may perchance prevail over my ill-luck."

King Swein said: "If thou be minded to seek luck of me it were well, so please you, that we were partners together."

Then said folk to the king, that it were ill counselled to be partner of one so unlucky as Roi, and that he would lose his money at once: but the king answered "It shall be risked which may most prevail, a king's luck or his ill-luck."

Therewith he gave money to Roi that they should have together, and Roi went a-chaffering on such covenant with the king, that he should pay nought if the goods were lost, and share what there was of gain, and that he should pay the king as much as he got from him to begin with. So Roi went his ways, and things went well with his voyages, and the money grew speedily, and he came back in autumn-tide to the king with much wealth; and no long time was passed before he became right wealthy, and was now called Roi the Wealthy, or the Stately, and every summer he went from land to land, chaffering, on the covenant aforesaid with the king.

Chapter II: Of Roi

Now on a time spake Roi with the king. "Now will I that thou take thy share, lord, lest things go ill and I lose thy goods."

Said the king: "Thou art minded then that it were better for our partnership to come to an end: but I was deeming it not ill-counselled for thee to abide in the land here under my good keeping, and that thou shouldst wed and dwell quietly here, with me to further thee. Nor do I deem it hopeful, this mind of thine for trading; a slippery matter it seems to me, even as thou hast proved aforetime." Nevertheless Roi would have the money shared, and so it was done, and the king said: "This is thy rede, Roi, and not mine; and better meseems it had been since thou hast come to seek luck at my hands that it had abided by thee." Men took up the word therewith, and said how he himself had proven how the king's luck had come to him in time of need. But the king said that Roi had dealt well with him, and that it would be great scathe if he tumbled into any ill-luck: and therewithal they parted.

So Roi went on his voyage and had plenteous wealth. He sailed to Sweden this time, and made up the Low, and brought-to off certain meads: and now had Roi all the ship's lading to himself. On a day he went a-land by himself alone, and when he had gone awhile he met a man with red hair and straight, and somewhat of a brisk lad to look on.

Roi asked him of his name, and he said he was called Helgi, and was a court-man of King Eric; and he asked withal who the chapman was. Roi told his name, whereon Helgi said he knew him and had seen him before; and therewith he said he would deal with him: Roi asked how much he would deal for, and Helgi answered: "I wot that ye Danes are new come a-land, and I hear say that they are all thy servants, and that all the ship's lading is thine; and I will buy the whole lading of thee if thou wilt."

Roi said he was no whit of a peddler then; and Helgi said he could deal both in small and in great. Then asked Roi: "Where are the goods that I am to take of thee?" Helgi bade him go with him, and said that he would show him that there was no fooling in that his offer. So they went till they came to a storehouse all full of merchandise, and all that was therein Helgi offered Roi for his lading: Roi deemed it good chaffer, and thought that little would be his loss therein though they made a deal of it, and that the wares were good cheap. So it came to this that they struck the bargain, and a flitting-day was appointed between them; wherewith they parted, and Roi went back to his ship.

Chapter III: Earl Thorgnyr's Talk With His Daughter

The very next day came Helgi down with many men and beasts, and let flit away the lading, so that all was gone by nightfall; and soothly he had no lack either of men or of yoke-beasts hereto. A few days after Roi went up a-land alone, with the mind to settle matters for the flitting of his wares: and by this time was worn by one night over and above the time that he should have let fetch them. Roi deemed it mattered nought for a night, though he had come later than was appointed; for in sooth he was busied about many things. Roi was clad full goodly, for he was a very showy man, and he had a right noble knife and belt, on either whereof had many a penny been spent: good weapons he had, and a fair scarlet kirtle, with a broidered cloak over all.

The weather was fair, and he went till he came to the bower: it stood open, but his wares were not to be seen: this seemed marvellous to him, so he went all round about the bower till he came to the place whereas Helgi slept: so Roi asked him where was his goods? but Helgi said he knew nought of any goods he had. Roi asked how was that. Quoth Helgi, that he had borne out his goods at the time agreed on. "But I saw nought of thee to fetch them away: and it was not likely that I was going to let the things stand there for any one to lay hands on; so I let flit all of it away, and I call it mine and not thine."

Roi said he dealt hastily and unjustly: "No marvel though thou get rich speedily if thou play such tricks as this often." Helgi said he had gone on in that wise for some while now, and found it availed him well enough. "But," says he, "the king hath a case against thee whereas thou heedest not thy goods: for it is the law of the land, that every man shall keep his own so that no thief may steal it, or else hath the king a case against him: now shall the king doom hereover." Roi said it looked little like making money if the king must needs charge him herewith.

Therewith they parted.

Then went Roi to another court, and when he was gotten well into the garth he saw two men coming hastily after him, and one was full like to his late customer to look on. Roi had cast his belt about his neck, and thereby hung that costly knife of his. Now this first of those twain was Thorgils, brother of Helgi: he made a snatch at the belt as soon as they met, and said withal: "Every man may take his own how he may: this belt and knife thou tookest from me in Normandy, but I let smithy the things for me in England."

Said Roi: "This looks little like making money," and smiled withal.

Then he went his ways and they turned back But he had gone no long way ere he met a man, big and ill-looking, who had but one eye: so when they met Roi asked who he was; he answered: "I ought to know thee; for I have on me a token that we have met." Roi asked what the sign might be, and the man said: "No need for thee to feign that thou knowest not: thou wert born and bred in Denmark as thou wottest, and wert a one-eyed man; and on a time thou wentest a chaffering voyage, and layest by Samsey certain nights, whereat I chanced to be: thou hadst those men with thee, and bargained with them to bewitch me of my eye. Any man with his wits about him may see that both these eyes have been in one head: and now thou hast one, and I the other: but the king shall judge thereof to-morrow; yea, and of thy taking the knife and belt from Thorgils my brother."

"I wot not thereof," said Roi, "but belike heavy charges are flying about to-day;" and therewith he smiled somewhat. Therewith they parted, and Roi went to his ship: he told no man of all this, nor might any see of him but he was well content with all things.

The next morning went Roi to the town-gate, and was all alone: and when he came thereby there was hard by a certain house wherein he heard men talking: and one took up the word, and said: "Whether will Roi the Fool come to the Thing to-morrow I wonder." Another answered: "Well, things look ugly for him, for the king ever dooms according to the urging of those brethren, whether it be right or wrong."

Roi made as if he heard not, and went his ways till he came on a young maiden going to the water, and him-seemed he had never seen a fairer woman than her: and when he came up to her she looked on him and said, "Who art thou?"

"I am called Roi," said he.

Quoth she, "Art thou Roi the Fool?"

He answered: "Well, belike it may now be a true name enough for me: yet have I borne, time was, a nobler name. What is thy name?" said he.

She said: "I am called Sigrbjorg, and I am the daughter of Thorgnyr the Lawman."

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Said Roi: "Fain were I to be holpen somewhat of his wisdom: but wilt thou do anything for my helping?"

Said she: "My father hath ever little to say to men of Denmark:

moreover, he is no friend to those brethren, and they have oftentimes had to bow before him."

Roi said: "But wilt thou give me some counsel herein?"

"No man hath asked my counsel heretofore," said she, "and it is not all so sure that I know aught that may avail thee, if I were to counsel thee aught: but thou art a man to be desired, so come with me, and take thy place under my loft-bower, and take good heed to what thou hearest spoken; and that may avail thee, if any give counsel in thy case."

He said that so it should be; and she went her ways, but Roi abode under her loft-bower.

Now Thorgnyr knew the voice of his daughter as she came into the chamber, and asked her: "What like weather is it abroad, daughter?"

"Good is the weather," said she.

Said Thorgnyr: "Will Roi the Fool come to the Thing to-day?"

She said she knew not.

"Why sighest thou so heavily, daughter?" said Thorgnyr. "Hast thou met Roi the Fool? didst thou think him a goodly man, and one to be desired? wouldst thou give him help and furtherance?"

She said: "Say thou now, if thou wert so grievously bestead as he is, whither thou wouldst turn to, whenas no man would take money to further thy case?"

Thorgnyr answered: "I see nought hard to deal with herein: I would let trick meet trick. Roi will know well enow how to answer Helgi: every man may understand, that if one take another's goods by guile and treason, and do nought for him in return, the king hath a case against him, if the truth come uppermost: and he may make him a thief, and put him from all his wealth and honour; and well may Roi pay back lie for lie—forsooth he knoweth all about this already."

She answered: "He would not be Roi the Fool were he as wise as thou: but what wouldst thou do if a man claimed the eye from out thine head?" said she, "or how wouldst thou answer him?"

Thorgnyr answered: "Let marvel meet marvel," and therewith he told her what he would meet either case withal; but the tale showeth hereafter what he said.

Chapter IV: The Strife Of Roi And Helgi

After these things Sigriberg went away and found Roi, and asked him whether he had laid to heart that which had been counselled him; and he said he deemed he would be able to call to mind much of it. Then she said:—

"Join thyself to my father's company when he rideth to the Thing, and heed not his hard speech though he cast but cold words at thee: for he knoweth belike that I have met thee, and that my heart yearneth toward thee; wherefore I hope that he will help thee in thy need: all the more, as he wotteth that I deem the matter to touch me closely. But no counsel can I give thee if thou art not counselled herewith."

Therewithal they parted; and when Thorgnyr was ready he rides to the Thing, and Roi met him by the very town-gate, and greeted him well.

Thorgnyr said: "Who art thou?" and Roi told of himself.

Thorgnyr said: "What would Roi the Fool in my company? go thou another road, I will not have thee with us."

Roi answered: "Nay, thou wilt not spare a word to bid me follow thee, and go by the road I will, whereas there nought is to hurt thee in me, and I am a stranger here, and would fain get the good of thy company: and need enough withal driveth me on this journey, and biddeth me further my case somewhat."

So men took up the word, and said that sooth it was. So they go on till they came to the Thing, and Thorgnyr had a great company, and thither were come withal many folk of the land.

So Thorgnyr spake when men were come to the Thing: "Are those brethren, Helgi and Thorgils, come hither?" They said yea.

"Then is it due," said Thorgnyr, "to make known to the king concerning your dealings with Roi the Fool."

Then said Helgi: "I say so much, that it was agreed between us that Roi should have all the wares that were in the bower, but I should bear them out and empty the bower; and a day was appointed for his coming back again: but I was to take in return all the lading of his ship and flit it away. And now, lord," says he, "I did according to covenant; but when I had cleared the storehouse and borne out the wares Roi was not come; so I let flit it all away, for I would not that a thief should steal it: and now I claim the goods for mine own. But I say that thou, king, hast a case against him, because he took no heed of his goods, but would have other men come to ill by his wealth: so give thou judgment, lord, concerning these things."

Said the king: "A trick was this; yet it may be that thou wilt come by the money, if things went that road. Was such the covenant, Roi?"

He said that he might not gainsay it. "Yet is there a flaw herein, lord:

on such terms were Helgi and I agreed, when we struck the bargain, that I was to own all that was in the storehouse: and now a part of all call I creeping things, cankerworm, and moth, and all hurtful things that were therein. All these I say he should have cleared out of his storehouse, and meseems he hath not done it: and therewithal I claim Helgi as mine own; for he was in the storehouse with me when we struck the bargain: and though he be but a sorry man, yet may I keep him for my thrall, or perchance sell him at a thrall-cheaping: so give thou judgment, lord king, concerning these things."

The king said: "With a crafty one hast thou to do now, Helgi, and no witless man."

Then said Thorgnyr: "Thou hast spoken well, Roi, and may not lightly be gainsayed: but what is to be said about thy dealings, Thorgils?"

Thorgils answered: "I say that Roi hath taken from me knife and belt, either of them dear-bought things."

Thorgnyr said: "Then must Roi answer somewhat hereto, or else confess, if he knoweth it for true."

Roi said: "Well, I will answer somewhat. I was born and bred in Denmark, and had a brother called Sigurd, a likelier lad than I in all wise, but younger, as might well be seen: so on a time I fared with him chaffering in Normandy, and he was then twelve winters old. On a day the lad met a man in the wood, big and straight-haired, and they fell a-chaffering together; and a deal of money had got into the purse the lad bore, so that the other had nought to give in return: but this new-met man was keen-eyed at money, and would have the more part of what was there, wherefore he smote the lad to murder him, and when men were ware thereof they came and told me; but when I came there my brother lay dead, and the man was gone, and had left behind him this knife and belt, but all the money was gone. In such wise came I by these good things; and I say that Thorgils has stolen my money and slain my brother: doom thou, lord, concerning this."

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Thorgnyr said: "Surely such men as these brethren are worthy of death."

Chapter V: What Roi Offered Unto Thorir

Now came forward Thorir, the brother of Helgi and Thorgils, and spake thus: "This that appertains unto me is a hard case;" and he told his tale, how he had lost his eye as is afore-written. "Lord," says he, "I look to thee to make my case good for me, for he may not gainsay it that even so it befell as I say: and it behoveth thee, lord, not to account outland men of more worth than we brethren, who this long while have been men useful to thee, and have not slept over any matters thou hast charged us with."

The king said: "This is a marvellous matter, and such as is seldom heard of: now, Roi, answer thou somewhat hereto."

Answereth Roi: "I know nought of it; and well might I show by ordeal that unsoothly it is said of me: yet shall there be somewhat bidden on my part for thine honour's sake, lord king."

"Let us hear it," said the king.

Said Roi: "I offer Thorir this; that the eye be pulled out of the head of each of us, and that the two of them be laid in the scales thereafter, and then if they be both come out of one head, they shall be heavy alike, and I shall atone to Thorir according to thy dooming: but if Thorir will not take this, then shall he be proven a liar in more matters than this one."

Thorir said that he would not take it.

Said Thorgnyr: "Then it comes to this, that thou liest, and ye brethren do as ever wickedly and unmanly: and belike overlong ye have woven a web of lies about you, and overlong and unmeetly have been trusted of the king, who hath deemed you better men than ye were. Now is there no need to hide the truth longer about these things: for it has now become as clear as day to all that no other doom is right, but that Roi shall do his will on the life and wealth of those brethren."

Said Roi: "Soon is my doom spoken, and I shall grow no wiser about it hereafter. The brethren Thorgils and Thorir do I doom to death, their lands to thee, king, and their chattels to me: but Helgi will I have put forth from the land so that he never show his face there again, and to be taken and slain if he ever set foot in Sweden; and all his wealth I adjudge to myself."

Then were the brethren Thorgils and Thorir taken, and a gallows was raised for them, and they were hanged thereon as thieves, according to the law of the land.

So was the Thing broken up, and each man fared thence to his own home: and now was Roi called Roi the Wise. Now he thanked Thorgnyr the Lawman for his aid, saying that he had scarce got off clear but for his counsel and wisdom. "And now," quoth he, "it may be thou wilt deem me importunate if I crave thy daughter of thee in wedlock."

Thorgnyr answered: "Well, I deem it wise to give thee a good answer herein; for betimes it was that my daughter showed me that she had set her heart upon thee to have thee."

So the wedding was done with great honour and glory, and the fairest of feasts was holden there.

Thereafter Roi arrayed him for departure, and fared to Denmark, and came to King Swein, and told him all about his voyage, and how it had gone with him: and said, that to no man was he bound to be so good as to King Swein; and therewith he gave him many good things from Sweden. King Swein said he had done well and happily, howbeit there had been close steering in the matter how it would turn out: wherewith he and the king departed, and were friends ever after while they lived.

Then Roi went to Sweden, and found Thorgnyr the Lawman dead, but Thorgnyr, his son, was Lawman in his stead, and was the wisest of men: he and Roi shared the money according to the law of the land, and in all concord. Roi was accounted a right good man, and his wife had the gift of foreseeing: many noble folk in Sweden are come from them.