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**“In the King’s Castle the Entrance is Wide  
But the Exit Narrow”**

by *Felix J. Oinas*, Bloomington, Indiana

In a lengthy study<sup>1</sup> Bo Almqvist discusses in detail the Old Icelandic expression (in *Egils saga*) *er konungsgarðr rúmr inngangs, en þröngur brottfarar* “in the king’s castle the entrance is wide but the exit narrow”. He argues convincingly that this expression is a genuine proverb, and connects it with an Irish proverb, *ní hionann dul tigh rí agus teacht as* “it is not the same to go to the king’s house as to depart from it”. The latter “is used about the dangers involved in departing from ‘the king’s house’”<sup>2</sup>. Several considerations, such as the proverb’s being well established in Irish and certain knowledge of Ireland and Scotland as displayed in *Egils saga*, cause Almqvist to conclude that it was borrowed into Old Icelandic from Irish. However, this conclusion is termed by him as tentative for the reason that he had found no further parallels to it<sup>3</sup>.

In a “Korrekturnot” added<sup>4</sup>, Almqvist tells us that he has found a Swedish parallel to this proverb, which “up to the eleventh hour” had eluded his notice. It appears in Swedish collections from 1604 up to the present time in almost the same form: *Herredörren är vid in men trång ut* “the doors of the gentlefolk are wide for [going] in, but narrow for [going] out”. This discovery has prompted Almqvist to modify the conclusion given in his study. He now finds that there is a greater agreement between the Swedish and Icelandic forms of the proverb in the antithesis than between the Irish and Icelandic forms, and that “the step between the ‘king’s yard’ and the ‘doors of the gentlefolk’ is not long”. Although he does not completely reject the possibility that the Icelandic proverb goes back to the Irish, he gives preference to its Nordic origin. But he leaves open the question whether the Irish proverb came from Scandinavia during the time of the Vikings, or from the continental tradition, or in some other way.

The proverb about the dangers involved in entering the house of the mighty is known actually much more widely than it appears from Almqvist’s discussion. As early as 1913, A. A. Koskenjaakko had given examples of it in several languages—Finnish, Estonian, Swed-

<sup>1</sup> Bo Almqvist, *Er konungsgarðr rúmr inngangs, en þröngur brottfarar*. ARV 22 (1966) 173–193.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 186ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 191–192.

ish, Danish, German, and Russian (but not Old Norse and Irish)<sup>5</sup>. I have obtained some additional data on Finnish versions of this proverb in the Finnish Folklore Archives. In the following brief discussion I will treat the forms the proverb takes in these different languages.

The most widespread is the following type (A): "The door (gate, entrance) is wide (for entering), but narrow for leaving." This type is obviously the original one. To it belong the Swedish proverb quoted above and the Danish, German, Estonian, and Russian proverbs.

The Swedish variant in Koskenjaakko is slightly different from that of Almqvist:

Herredören är högh och vijdh til at ingå, men lågh och trång til at vtgå.

The doors of the gentlefolk are high and wide for entering, but low and narrow for going out<sup>6</sup>.

Danish:

Herredøren er vid ind og trang ud.

The doors of gentlefolk are wide for going in and narrow for going out.

Estonian:

Kohtu ukсед on küll suured (laiad) sisse minne [sic], aga kitsad välja tulla.

The doors of the court are, to be sure, big (wide) for entering, but narrow for coming out.

Russian:

V bojarskij dvor vorota široki, da von uzki (o kabale).

Into the boyar's yard the gates are wide, but those [that lead] out are narrow (about serfdom).

The German version has, in the first part, "beautiful" instead of "wide", and, in the second, a direct statement instead of the metaphoric image:

Grosser Herren Thüren haben einen schönen Eingang, aber wie kommt man heraus!

<sup>5</sup> A. A. Koskenjaakko, *Sananlaskututkimuksia*, 1: Laki, oikeus ja oikeudenkäynti suomalaisissa sananlaskuissa. Helsinki 1913, 31–33.

<sup>6</sup> The proverbs given without the indication of the source are taken from Koskenjaakko's work (see note 5 above) 31–32.

The doors of great gentlemen have a beautiful entrance, but how can one get out!

The Finnish proverb,

Avoi portti Herrois tullesa, vaan kijnni lähteisä

The gate is open when the gentlemen come, but closed when they leave

constitutes a special subtype (A 1). Koskenjaakko suggests that it has come from the West, most probably from Sweden<sup>7</sup>. This is, however, impossible, since there is to my knowledge no counterpart to it in the West. It evidently is the result of a further development of type A, in which the idea of the gate's being "wide"—"narrow" has been replaced by its being "open"—"closed". This has brought about a complete change in its meaning.

In Finland, there is another type (B) of our proverb: "The threshold is low for entering, but high for leaving." Some variants refer to courts (justice), others to marriage.

The following variants clearly emphasize the difficulties that an ordinary citizen has when turning to the courts, such as high expenses, justice not being done, etc.:

Oikeuskynnys on matala mennessä, mutta korkea tullessa.

The threshold of the law is low when going [in], but high when coming [out].

Matala on kynnys sisään mennessä, korkea ulos tullessa<sup>8</sup>.

The threshold is low when going in, [and] high when coming out.

Matala kynnys on männess mut korkia poistulless (käräjistä)<sup>9</sup>.

The threshold is low when going [in], but high when coming away (about courts).

The pitfalls of marriage are subject of the following Finnish variant:

Matala kynnys männä, korkia pois tulla (esim. miehelään)<sup>10</sup>.

The threshold is low for going, [it's] high for coming (e.g., getting married [of a girl]).

It probably indicates the gladness with which a girl, after marriage, is received in her husband's home as an unpaid hand, and the difficul-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>8</sup> According to Koskenjaakko (p. 33), this proverb refers to the "threshold of justice."

<sup>9</sup> A. Neovius, Sakkola. Paraske Nikitin. Finnish Folklore Archives 1 (1894).

<sup>10</sup> Kuokkola, Hämeenlinnan alkukouluseminaari. Finnish Folklore Archives 6 (1925).

ties she has when she wants to leave it—either for visits to her parents or permanently.

Additional variants of type B in the Finnish Folklore Archives are primarily from eastern Finland (e.g., Lappee, Metsäpirtti, Salmi). Since no information has been given of their usage, we do not know whether they refer to litigation, married life, or something else.

The Finnish proverb,

Kynnys on hirttä korkeampi, porras askelta pitempi

The threshold is higher than the beam, the stair is longer than a pace,

expresses, according to Koskenjaakko, the alienation of the young wife from her old home after being married<sup>11</sup>. It bears only a remote similarity to type B.

The Finnish type B (the threshold “high”—“low”) is structurally close to type A (the gate or door “wide”—“narrow”; cf. especially the Swedish version: *herredören* “högh”—“lång”), not recorded in Finland. There is no doubt that type A was also known formerly in Finland, since type B must have come from it. It is possible that the custom of the groom carrying the bride across the threshold into her new home was instrumental in introducing the “threshold” into the Finnish proverb. After type B took hold in Finland and aptly expressed certain marriage and court situations, type A simply disappeared.

Thus far we have not touched upon the question of whose doors or gates are referred to in the proverb. The most frequent term is “gentlefolk”, “great gentlemen”, etc.: German *Grosser Herren* (*Thüren*), Danish *Herredøren*, Swedish *Herredören*, Finnish *Herrois* (*tullesa*), and Russian *bojarskij* (i.e., the high nobility’s). These terms make us believe that the proverb originally referred to a nobleman’s house (castle). One who got in there, was in the power of its lord. He could have been, for the slightest reason, detained. This holds especially true of the king’s castle (Old Icelandic, Irish). However, the proverb came to be used metaphorically, referring to nobility’s, judges’, or husbands’ unlimited power—i.e., serfdom (in Russia), courts (in Estonia and Finland), and marriage (in Finland).

Guershoo<sup>12</sup> presents the Russian proverb on serfdom among a group of proverbs on the same topic and remarks: “Serfdom having either never existed or been abolished for many centuries in other European countries, proverbs on the state of bondage of the peas-

<sup>11</sup> Koskenjaakko (see note 5 above) 33.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Guershoo, *Certain Aspects of Russian Proverbs*. London 1941, 105.

antry are unique". The proverb in question is by no means unique. It belongs to the internationally current expressions which originally cautioned one from entering the house of the powerful, but was reinterpreted in Russia as relating to serfdom.

The proverb has, as our discussion has shown, wide distribution in Europe appearing among the Celtic, Germanic, Finnic, and Slavic peoples. Its presence in Old Icelandic (*Egils saga*) is an indication of its great age. The structural proximity of the proverb in *Egils saga* to the Scandinavian versions tends to confirm Almqvist's suggestion (in his "Korrekturnot") of the Nordic origin of the Old Icelandic proverb. The Finnish and Estonian versions must belong together, since both of them refer to courts. The limited corpus that we have at our disposal does not permit us to pinpoint the area of ultimate origin of this proverb. My learned friend Archer Taylor tells me that its absence in Burton Stevenson's *Home Book of Proverbs* may point to its origin in the east.

Finally, it could be mentioned that this proverb shows some similarity to the exhortation in the Bible to enter in at the strait gate, "for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction" (Matt. 7:13). In both of them, there is the contrast between the wide and narrow gates, and especially the implication of the dangers waiting the one tempted to enter by the wide gate.