

THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

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utterly of its time and utterly modern'

TOM HOLLAND



JAN GUILLOU

THE CRUSADES TRILOGY

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JAN GUILLOU

The Crusades Trilogy

*The Road
to Jerusalem*

Translated by Steven T. Murray

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THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

About the Author

Jan Guillou was born in Sweden in January 1944. He made his name as a journalist and rose to fame when he exposed a secret intelligence organization, was convicted of espionage and spent 10 months in prison, 5 of which were spent in solitary confinement. He is now a best-selling novelist and writes regularly for Sweden's leading tabloid, commenting on current affairs.

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'

Jacula Prudentum, 1651, no. 170

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

THE FOLKUNG CLAN

(including the Bjälbo branch)

Magnus Folkesson, master of Arnäs

Fru Sigrid, first wife of Magnus Folkesson and mother of
Eskil and Arn

Erika Joarsdotter, second wife of Magnus Folkesson

Eskil Magnusson, first son of Magnus Folkesson

Arn Magnusson, second son of Magnus Folkesson

Birger Brosa, younger brother of Magnus Folkesson

THE ERIK CLAN

King Erik Jedvardsson, king of Svealand

Joar Jedvardsson, brother of Erik Jedvardsson

Kristina Jedvardsson, wife of Erik Jedvardsson (and
kinswoman to Fru Sigrid)

King Knut Eriksson, son of Erik Jedvardsson

THE SVERKER CLAN

King Sverker, king of Eastern Götaland

Queen Ulvhild, first wife of King Sverker

King Karl Sverkersson, son of King Sverker and Ulvhild

Rikissa, second wife of King Sverker

Knut Magnusson, son from Rikissa's first marriage, later king
of Denmark

Emund Ulvbane (aka 'Emund One-Hand')

Boleslav and Kol, half-brothers of King Karl Sverkerson

THE PÅL CLAN

Algot Pålsson, steward of Husaby

Katarina Algotsdotter, older daughter of Algot

Cecilia Algotsdotter, younger daughter of Algot

THE CLERGY (Cistercians from France)

Father Henri de Clairvaux, prior of Varnhem

Brother Guilbert de Beaune, the weapons smith

Brother Lucien de Clairvaux, the gardener

Brother Guy le Breton, the fisherman

Brother Ludvig de Bêtécourt, the music master

Brother Rugiero de Nîmes, the chef

Archbishop Stéphan

THE DANES

King Sven Grate of Denmark

Magnus Henriksen, the king-slayer

THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

ONE

In the year of Grace 1150, when the ungodly Saracens, the scum of the earth and the vanguard of the Antichrist, inflicted many defeats on our forces in the Holy Land, the Holy Spirit descended upon Fru Sigrid of Arnäs and gave her a vision which changed her life.

Perhaps it could also be said that this vision had the effect of shortening her life. What is certain is that she was never the same again. Less certain is what the monk Thibaud wrote much later, that at the very moment the Holy Spirit revealed itself to Sigrid, a new realm was actually created up in the North, which at the end of the era would come to be known as Sweden.

It was at the Feast of St Tiburtius, the day regarded as the first day of summer, when the ice melts in Western Götaland. Never before had so many people gathered in Skara, since it was no ordinary mass that was now to be celebrated. The new cathedral was going to be consecrated.

The ceremonies were already into their second hour. The procession had made its three circuits around the church, moving with infinite slowness because Bishop Ödgrim was a very old man, shuffling along as if it were his last journey. He also seemed a bit confused, because he had read the first

prayer inside the blessed church in the vernacular instead of in Latin:

God, Thou who invisibly preserveth everything
but maketh Thy power visible for the salvation of
humanity,
take Thy house and rule in this temple,
so that all who gather here to pray
might share in Thy solace and aid.

And God did indeed make His power visible, though whether for the salvation of humanity or for other reasons is unknown. It was a pageant like none ever seen before in all of Western Götaland: there were dazzling colours from the vestments of the bishops in light-blue and dark-red silk with gold thread; there were overpowering fragrances from the censers which the canons swung as they walked about, and there was a music so heavenly that no ear in Western Götaland could ever have heard its like before. And if you raised your eyes it was like looking up into Heaven itself, but under a roof. It was inconceivable that even the Burgundian and English stonemasons could have created such a high vault that would not come crashing down, if for no other reason than that God might be angry at the vanity of attempting to build an edifice that could reach up to Him.

Fru Sigrid was a practical woman. Because of this some people said that she was a hard woman. She had absolutely not wanted to set off on the difficult journey to Skara, since spring had come early and the roads had softened to a sea of mud. She was uneasy at the thought of sitting in a wagon that jolted and bounced and careened back and forth, in her blessed condition. More than anything else in this earthly life, she feared the coming birth of her second child. And she knew very well that if a cathedral was being consecrated, it would mean standing on the hard stone floor for several hours and falling to her knees

repeatedly in prayer. She was well versed in the many rules of church life, surely far better than most of the noblemen and their daughters surrounding her just now, but she had not acquired this knowledge through faith or free will. When she was sixteen years old her father, with good reason, took it into his head that she was paying too much attention to a kinsman from Norway of far too low birth, which might have led to something that belonged only within the sacrament of marriage, as her father gruffly summed up the problem. So she had been sent away for five years to a convent in Norway. She probably never would have been released if she hadn't come into an inheritance from a childless uncle in Eastern Götaland; thus she became a woman to be married off instead of languishing in a convent.

So she knew when to stand and when to kneel, when to rattle off the Pater Nosters and Ave Marias which some of the bishops at the altar were intoning, and when to say her own prayers. Each time she had to say her own prayer, she prayed for her life.

God had given her a son three years before. It had taken two days and nights to give birth to him; twice the sun had gone up and gone down again while she was bathed in sweat, anguish, and pain. She knew she was going to die, and in the end all the good women helping her knew it too. They had sent for the priest in Forshem, and he had given her extreme unction and forgiveness for her sins.

Never again, she had hoped. Never again such pain, such terror of death, she now prayed. It was a selfish thing to ask, she knew that. It was common for women to die in childbed, and a human being is born in pain. But she had made the mistake of praying to the Holy Virgin to spare her, and she had tried to fulfil her marital duties in such a way that they would not lead to another childbed. Their son, Eskil, had lived after all.

The Holy Virgin had punished her, of course. New torments

now awaited her, that was certain. And yet she prayed over and over to come through it easily.

To lighten the lesser but irksome nuisance of standing and kneeling, standing up and then kneeling down again, for hours on end, she'd had her thrall woman Sot baptized so that she could come along into God's house. She had Sot stand next to her, and she leaned on the thrall when she had to get up and down. Sot's big black eyes were open wide like terrified horse's eyes, staring at everything she now observed. If she wasn't a real Christian before then she ought to have become one by now.

Three man-lengths in front of Sigrid stood King Sverker and Queen Ulvhild. The two of them, both weighed down by age, were having more and more trouble standing up and kneeling down without too much puffing. Yet it was for their sake and not for God's that Sigrid was in the cathedral. King Sverker held neither her Norwegian and Western Götaland kinsmen nor her husband's Norwegian and Folkung lineage in high esteem. But now, at his advanced age, the king had grown both suspicious and anxious about his life after this earthly one. Missing the king's great and blessed church dedication might have caused a misunderstanding. If a man or woman offended God in some way, that matter might be taken up with God Himself. Sigrid considered it worse to be on the wrong side of the king.

But during the third hour Sigrid's head began to swim, and she was having more and more trouble kneeling down and getting up again. The child inside her kicked and stirred all the more, as if in protest. She had the feeling that the pale-yellow, polished marble floor was undulating beneath her. She thought she saw it begin to crack, as if it might suddenly open up and swallow her whole. Then she did something quite outrageous. She walked resolutely, silk skirts rustling, over to a little empty bench off to the side and sat down. Everyone saw it, the king too.

Just as she sank with relief onto the stone bench next to the church wall in the middle of the side aisle, the monks from the island of Lurö came filing in. Sigrid wiped her brow and face with a small linen handkerchief and gave her son, standing next to Sot, an encouraging wave.

Then the monks began to sing. Silently and with bowed heads they walked up the entire length of the centre aisle and took their places by the altar, where the bishops and their acolytes now drew aside. At first it sounded like a muffled, soft murmur, but then the high voices of the boys joined in. Some of the Lurö monks had brown cowls, not white, and were quite clearly young boys. Their voices rose like ethereal birds up to the huge vaults of the ceiling. When their singing had risen so high that it filled the entire enormous space, the low voices of the monks themselves joined in, singing the same melody and yet not the same. Sigrid had heard psalms sung in both two and three voices, but this had at least eight different parts. It was like a miracle, something that could not happen, since even a three-part psalm was difficult to master.

Exhausted, Sigrid stared wide-eyed in the direction of the miracle, listening with her entire being, her entire body. She began to tremble with excitement. Blackness fell over her eyes, and she no longer saw but only heard, as if her eyes too had to lend their powers to her hearing. She seemed to vanish, as if she were transmuted into tones, into a part of the holy music, more beautiful than any music ever heard in this earthly life.

A while later she came to her senses, when someone took her by the hand, and when she looked up she discovered King Sverker himself.

He patted her gently on the hand and thanked her with a wry smile because he, as an old man, was in need of a woman with child who would be the first to sit down. If a blessed woman could do so, then so too could the king, he said. It would not have looked proper for him to go first.

Sigrid firmly suppressed the idea of telling him that the Holy Spirit had just spoken to her. It seemed to her that such an admission would merely seem as if she were boasting, and kings saw more than enough of that, at least until someone chopped off their heads. Instead she quickly whispered an idea that had come to her.

As the king no doubt already knew, there was a dispute over her inheritance of Varnhem. Her kinswoman Kristina, who had recently married that upstart Erik Jedvardsson, was laying claim to half the property. But the monks on the island of Lurö needed to live in a region with less severe winters. Much of their farming had been in vain out there, and everyone knew it; not to disparage King Sverker's great generosity in donating Lurö to them. But if she, Sigrid, now donated Varnhem to the Cistercian monks, the king could bless the gift and declare it legal, and the whole problem would be resolved. Everyone would gain.

She had been speaking quickly, in a low voice, and a little breathlessly, her heart still pounding after what she had witnessed in the heavenly music after the darkness turned to light.

The king seemed a bit taken aback at first; he was hardly used to people near him speaking so directly, without courtly circumlocutions. Especially women.

'You are a blessed woman in more than one respect, my dear Sigrid,' he said at last, taking her hand again. 'Tomorrow when we have slept our fill in the royal palace after today's feast, I shall summon Father Henri, and we will take care of this entire matter. Tomorrow, not now. It's not proper for us to sit here together for very long, whispering.'

With the wave of a hand she had now given away her inheritance, Varnhem. No man could break his word to the king, nor any woman either, just as the king may never break his word. What she had done could not be undone.

But it was also practical, she realized when she had

recovered a bit. The Holy Spirit could indeed be practical, and the ways of the Lord were not always inscrutable.

Varnhem and Arnäs lay a good two days' ride from each other. Varnhem was outside Skara, not far from the bishop's estate near Billingen Mountain. Arnäs was up in the north of the region, on the eastern shore of Lake Vänern, where the forest Sunnanskog ended and the woods of Tiveden began, near Kinnekulle Mountain. The Varnhem estate was newer and in much better condition, which is why she wanted to spend the coldest part of the year there, especially as the dreaded childbed approached. Magnus, her husband, wanted them to take his ancestral estate Arnäs as their abode, while she preferred Varnhem, and they had not been able to agree. At times they could not even discuss the subject in a friendly, patient manner as befitted a husband and wife.

Arnäs needed to be repaired and rebuilt. But it lay in the unclaimed borderlands along the edge of the forest; there was a great deal of common land and royal land that could be acquired by trade or purchase. Much could be improved, especially if she moved all her thralls and livestock from Varnhem.

This was not precisely the way the Holy Spirit had expressed the matter when He revealed Himself to her. She had seen a vision that was not altogether clear: a herd of beautiful horses shimmering in many colours like mother-of-pearl. The horses had come running toward her in a meadow covered with flowers. Their manes were white and pure, their tails were raised haughtily, and they moved as playfully and lithely as cats. They were graceful in all their movements, not wild but not free either, since these horses belonged to her. And somewhere behind the gambolling, frisky, unsaddled horses came a young man riding on a silver stallion. It too had a white mane and raised tail. She knew the young man and yet did not. He carried a shield but wore no helmet. She didn't recognize the coat of arms from any of her own kinsmen

or her husband's; the shield was completely white with a large blood-red cross, nothing more.

The young man reined in his horse right next to her and spoke to her. She heard all the words and understood them, and yet did not grasp their import. But she knew what they meant – she should give God the gift that was now needed most of all in the country where King Sverker ruled: a good place for the monks of Lurö to live. And Varnhem was a very good place.

When she came out onto the steps of the cathedral her head cleared with the cold, fresh air. She understood with sudden insight, almost as if the Holy Spirit was still upon her, how she would tell all this to her husband, who was coming toward her in the crowd carrying their cloaks over his arm. She regarded him with a cautious smile, utterly confident. She was fond of him because he was a gentle husband and a considerate father, although not a man to be respected or admired. It was hard to believe he was actually the grandson of a man who was his direct opposite, the powerful jarl Folke the Stout. Magnus was a slender man, and if he hadn't been wearing foreign clothes he might be taken for anyone in the crowd.

When he came up to Sigrid he bowed and asked her to hold her own cloak while he first swung his large, sky-blue cloak lined with marten fur around him and fastened it under his chin with the silver clasp from Norway. Then he helped her with her cloak and tentatively caressed her brow with his soft hands, which were not the hands of a warrior. He asked her how she had managed to stand for such a long praise-song to the Lord in her blessed state. She replied that it hadn't been any trouble, because she had brought Sot along to serve as support, and because the Holy Spirit had granted her a revelation. She spoke in the way she did when she wasn't being serious. He smiled, thinking it was one of her usual jokes, and then looked around for his man who was bringing his sword from the church entryway.

When Magnus swept his sword in under his cloak and began fastening its scabbard, both his elbows jutted out, making him look broad and mighty in a way that she knew he was not. Then he offered Sigrid his arm and they made their way carefully through the crowd, where the most distinguished churchgoers now mixed with the common folk and thralls. In the middle of the marketplace Frankish acrobats were performing, along with a man who spit fire; pipes and fiddles were being played, and muffled drums could be heard over by one of the large ale tents. After a while Sigrid took a deep breath and bluntly told him everything at once.

‘Magnus, my dear husband, I hope you’ll take it with manly calm and dignity when you hear what I’ve just done,’ she began, taking another deep breath and continuing quickly before he could reply. ‘I have given my word to King Sverker that I will donate Varnhem to the Cistercian monks of Lurö. I can’t take back my word to a king, it’s irreversible. We’re going to meet him tomorrow at the royal estate to have the promise written out and sealed.’

As she expected, he stopped short to give her a searching glance, looking for the smile she always wore when she was teasing him in her own special way. But he soon realized that she was completely serious, and then anger overcame him with such force that he probably would have struck her for the first time if they hadn’t been standing in the midst of kinsmen and enemies and all the common folk.

‘Have you lost your wits, woman? If you hadn’t inherited Varnhem you’d still be withering away in the convent. It was only because of Varnhem that we were married at all.’

He managed to control himself and speak in a low voice, but with his teeth firmly clenched.

‘Yes, all that is true, my dear husband,’ she replied with her eyes lowered chastely. ‘If I hadn’t inherited Varnhem, your parents would have chosen another wife for you. I would have been a