

A Sea Queen's Sailing eBook

A Sea Queen's Sailing by Charles Whistler

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Page 1

Preface.

Few words of introduction are needed for this story, excepting such as may refer to the sources of the details involved.

The outfit of the funeral ship is practically that of the vessel found in the mound at Goekstadt, and now in the museum at Christiania, supplemented with a few details from the ship disinterred last year near Toensberg, in the same district. In both these cases the treasure has been taken from the mound by raiders, who must have broken into the chamber shortly after the interment; but other finds have been fully large enough to furnish details of what would be buried with a chief of note.

With regard to the seamanship involved, there are incidents recorded in the Sagas, as well as the use of a definite phrase for "beating to windward," which prove that the handling of a Viking ship was necessarily much the same as that of a square-rigged vessel of today. The experience of the men who sailed the reconstructed duplicate of the Goekstadt ship across the Atlantic to the Chicago Exhibition bears this out entirely. The powers of the beautifully designed ship were by no means limited to running before the wind.

The museum at Christiania has a good example of the full war gear of a lady of the Viking times.

Hakon, the son of Harald Fairhair, and foster son of our Athelstane, took the throne of Norway in A.D. 935, which is approximately the date of the story therefore. The long warfare waged by Dane and Norseman against the Irishman at that time, and the incidental troubles of the numerous island hermits on the Irish coast, are written in the Irish annals, and perhaps most fully in "the wars of the Gaedhil and the Gaill."

Chas. W. Whistler.

Stockland, 1906.

Chapter 1: The Old Chief And The Young.

The black smoke eddied and wavered as it rose over my father's burning hall, and then the little sea breeze took it and swept it inland over the heath-clad Caithness hills which I loved. Save for that black cloud, the June sky was bright and blue overhead, and in the sunshine one could not see the red tongues of flame that were licking up the last timbers of the house where I was born. Round the walls, beyond reach of smoke and heat, stood the foemen who had wrought the harm, and nearer the great door lay those of our men who had fallen at the first. There were foemen there also, for it had been a good fight.



At last the roof fell in with a mighty crash and uprush of smoke and sparks, while out of the smother reeled and staggered half a dozen men who had in some way escaped the falling timbers. I think they had been those who still guarded the doorway, being unwounded. But among them were not my father and brothers, and I knew that I was the last of my line by that absence.

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It was not my fault that I was not lying with them under our roof yonder. I had headed a charge by a dozen of our best men, when it seemed that a charge might at least give time for the escape of the few women of the house to the glen. My father had bidden me, and we went, and did our best. We won the time we fought for, and that was all. Some of us got back to the hall, and the rest bided where they fell. As for me, I had been stunned by an axe blow, which my helm had turned, and came to myself to find that I was bound hand and foot, and set aside under the stable wall with two others of our men, captives also. Thence I must watch all that went on, helplessly, and after the roof fell I cared no more what should be done with me, for I was alone and desolate.

Nor did I know who these foemen were, or why they had fallen on us. In the gray of the morning they had come from inland, and were round the hall while we broke our fast. We had snatched our weapons as best we might, and done what we could, but the numbers against us were too great from the first.

They had come from inland, but they were not Scots. We were at peace with all the Caithness folk, and had been so for years, though we had few dealings with them. My father had won a place for himself and his men here on the Caithness shore in the days when Harald Harfager had set all Norway under him, for he was one of those jarls who would not bow to him, and left that old Norse land which I had never seen. Presently, he handselled peace for himself here by marriage with my mother, the daughter of a great Scots lord of the lands; and thereafter had built the hall, and made the haven, and won a few fields from the once barren hillside. And now we had been well to do, till this foe came and ended all.

They were not Norsemen either. The Orkney jarls were our friends, and for us Harald cared not. Norsemen on the Viking path we knew and welcomed, and being of that brotherhood ourselves, we had nothing to fear from them. It is true that we owned no king or overlord, but if the Scots king asked for scatt we paid it, grumbling, for the sake of peace. My father was wont to call it rent for the hillsides we tilled.

Yet it would have been better to be swept out of the land by the Scots we won it from, than to be ruined thus for no reason but that of wanton savagery and lust of plunder, as it seemed. At least they would have given us fair warning that they meant to end our stay among them, and take the place we had made into their own hands.

Well, no doubt, I should find out more presently. Meanwhile, as I have said, I cared for naught, lying still without a word. Then the men from out of the hall were brought and set with us; for, blinded as they were with the smoke, it had been easy to take them. That one who was set down next me was black from head to foot and scorched with the burning, but he tried to laugh as his eyes met mine. It was

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Dalvin of Maghera, the Irish guest who was with us. He had taken a passage in a Norse ship from Belfast, meaning to see lands across the sea, and had bided here when he found that we could show him hunting such as he had never heard of. The mighty aurochs still fed on our hills, and we told tales in hall when guests wondered at the great heads that were on the walls, of how this one and that had been won. The ship had put in here to wait for wind, and of course we were glad to see her crew and hear what news they had of the greater world.

“Friend,” I said, “it is hard that you should be brought to this pass.”

“It has been the best fight I ever knew,” he answered. “The only pity is that it has gone the wrong way. But yonder is a grand funeral pile for the brave men who have fallen. Surely the smoke will bring down the whole countryside on these ruffians?”

I shook my head. What happened to us was the affair of no Scot. Rather they would be setting their own places in order in case their turn came next.

“Well,” said Dalvin, “whom are we fighting, then?”

One of our men answered him. He was a Norseman, named Sidroc.

“Red hand, wandering Vikings. Wastrels from every land, and no man’s men. Most of them are Danes, but I have heard the tongues of Frisian and Finn and Northumbrian amongst them. We are in evil case, for slavery is the least we have to fear.”

“Nay,” said Dalvin; “death is a lesser evil than that.”

“A man may make shift to escape from slavery,” answered the other, and both were silent.

Then for a moment I had half a hope that help was at hand for us, if too late. Round the westward point crept two longships under their broad, brown sails, making for our haven. But a second glance told me that they were the ships belonging to this crew. Doubtless, they had landed the force somewhere along the coast beyond our ken, and now were coming to see how the raid had fared. The matter was plain enough to me now.

Half a dozen men came toward us at this time, leaving the rest to sort the piles of plunder they had brought from the village. I was glad, in a sort of dull way, that none of it came from the hall, for at least no one of them might boast that he wore my father’s weapons and war gear. The foremost of these men were a gray-haired old chief and a young man of about my own age, who was plainly his son; and I thought it certain that these two were the leaders of the foe. They were well armed at all points, and richly

clad enough, and I could but think them of gentle birth. The men who followed them were hard-featured warriors, whose dress and weapons were strange to me.

We sat still and stared back at them, as they stood before us, wondering little and caring less, so far as I was concerned, for what they thought or would say. The old chief ran his eye down our wretched line, stroking his long beard as if noting our points, while the young man seemed to have a sort of pity for us written on his face.



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“Well,” said the old chief at last, “you have made a good fight, if foolish. You shall have your chance. Which of you will join me?”

“Tell us who you are first,” said Dalfin; “that is only fair.”

“I am Heidrek the Seafarer, and this is Asbiorn, my son. Mayhap you have heard of us before.”

I had done so. One of the men in our group had fled to us from Banff a year ago, after just such a raid as this. I heard him groan as the name was spoken.

Heidrek heard also, and laughed shortly.

“It seems that I am known,” he said. “Well, make your choice. The other choice is death, of course. I can leave no one to say that I am collecting goods from this shore.”

“Kill me, then,” said Dalfin, while I made no answer.

Two of our men cried that they would join him, and their bonds were cut by Heidrek’s followers. One of them set himself by my side and spoke to me at once.

“There are worse things than going on the Viking path, Malcolm, son of my jarl,” he said earnestly. “Blame me not.”

I turned my head from him. Maybe I was wrong, but it seemed like treachery. Yet, after all, save myself there was not one left of our line, and he was deserting no one. Both these two were single men.

Young Asbiorn heard the man name me, and he came a pace nearer.

“So you are the son of the chief here,” he said quietly. “What is your name and rank? Will anyone ransom you?”

“I am the youngest son—I am worth nothing to any man,” I said.

“He is Malcolm, the jarl’s best-loved son,” said that man of ours who had asked my pardon. “Maybe his mother’s folk will ransom him. His grandfather is Melbrigda, the Scots jarl over yonder.”

He pointed across the hills where the smoke hung among the heather, and at that old Heidrek laughed, while the men at his heels chuckled evilly. For some reason of their own, which, maybe, was not far to seek, they were certain that Melbrigda could find ransom for no one at this time, if he would. Asbiorn turned to our guest, seeing, no doubt, that he was not of the house carles. The great gold torque on his neck seemed to shine all the more brightly by reason of the blackened mail and cloak that half hid it.



“My name?” said Dalfin, with a flash of pride in his gray eyes. “It is Dalfin, prince of Maghera, in Ireland, of the line of the Ulster kings. Kill me, and boast that once you slew a prince. No need to say that I was bound when you did it.”

He spoke the Danish of Waterford and Dublin well enough.

Asbiorn flushed, with some sort of manly shame, as I believe, and even old Heidrek frowned uneasily. To have the deed they threatened set in all its shame before them was a new thing to them.

“Let the prince go, chief,” I said, seeing this look. “He is a guest, and if this is some old feud with my father of which I have not heard, he does not come into it. He is a guest of the house.”



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“Faith,” answered Heidrek savagely, “he has made it his own affair. He has been the bane of three of my best men. Aye, I have a feud here, and with all who dwell at ease. I am Heidrek the Seafarer.”

He turned away, and left us with some sign to his men; but Asbiorn stood still and spoke again to us.

“You bear a Scottish name,” he said. “Have you no Scottish kin besides Melbrigda?”

I shook my head, whereon Dalfin spoke for me.

“Here,” he said, “if it is just a matter of ransom, let us both go; and come to Belfast in a year’s time, or six months’ time, an you will. Then my father will pay chief’s ransom for the two of us. My word as a prince on it.”

“It is a new thing with us to take ransom, or the word of any man,” answered Asbiorn doubtfully, yet as if the plan seemed good to him.

One of the men who followed him broke in on that,

“No use, Asbiorn. We cannot put into any Irish port in safety. And over there princes are thick as blackberries, and as poor as the brambles that bear them.”

“Aye, and as prickly,” said Dalfin. “Have you learned that also?”

The men laughed. One of them said that the Irishman’s Danish speech was not bad, and that it was a pity—

“So it is,” Asbiorn put in hastily. “I will speak to my father.”

The old chief was back with his crew, settling the sharing of the plunder. His son took him aside, and their talk was long; and, as it seemed, not altogether peaceful. Soon the men began to gather round them, and those with us went to hear what was going on. So we were left alone for a moment.

“Men,” I said, “save your lives as this chief bids you. Join him now, and leave him when you may.”

“Do you join him?” said one in answer.

Not I.”

“Neither do we. We live or die with you. What else should courtmen of the jarl’s do?”



So said one of our Norsemen; but the eyes of the Scots were on the bleak hills, and for them the choice was harder, I think. They had no ties to us but those of common work and life together, and it was the old land that they must think of leaving. They said nothing, for until he has made up his mind a Scot will not answer.

They would have to decide directly, for now Heidrek was coming back to us. After him were a score or more of his men, and the rest were loading themselves with the plunder and starting one by one towards the haven, into which the two ships were just bearing up. They would be alongside the little wharf by the time the men reached it. Our own good longship lay there also, and I wondered what they would do with her. She was too good to burn.

Now Heidrek stood before me and looked at me, glowering, for a moment.

“Well,” he said curtly, “do you join me? Mind you, I would not give every man the chance, but you and yours are men.”

Before I could say aught, and it was on my mind to tell the pirate what I thought of him, if I spent my last breath in doing it, the courtman who had spoken with me just now answered for himself.



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“We do what the young jarl does,” he said; “we follow him.”

“The choice was whether you would follow me or not,” answered Heidrek coldly; “I will have no leader but myself.”

Some of his wilder followers cried out now that we were wasting time, and that an end should be made, while a sword or two were drawn among them. It was the way in which Heidrek’s crew were wont to deal with captives when they had no hope of ransom from them. That I and my men should join such a crew was not to be thought of, if for a moment I had half wondered if I ought to save the lives of these courtmen of ours by yielding. Both I and they would be shamed, even as Dalfin had said.

So I made no answer, and Heidrek was turning away with a shrug of his broad shoulders, while the men were only waiting his word to end the affair. Then Asbiorn, whose face was white and pitying as he looked at us, gripped his father by the arm and faced him.

“I will not have it thus,” he said hoarsely. “The men are brave men, and it were shame to slay them. Give them to me.”

Heidrek laughed at him in a strange way, but the men yelled and made a rush at us, sword in hand. Whereon Asbiorn swung his round shield into place from off his shoulder, and gripped his light axe and faced them. It was the lightness of that axe which had spared me; but the men knew, and feared it and the skill of the wielder, and they shrank back.

“What, again?” said Heidrek. “I thought we had settled that question. What would you with them?”

“That is to be seen. Let me have them.”

“Pay for them, then,” shouted one of the men. “They are over and above your share of plunder.”

“Aye,” said Asbiorn at once, “I claim them for my share. Have them down to the new ship, and set them in the forepeak till I need them.”

Then old Heidrek laughed harshly.

“Faith, I thought the lad a fool,” he said. “Now I know that he will not be so short-handed as I thought. Some of you who are his crew will have an easier time at the oar with these slaves to pull for you.”

The men laughed at that, and I knew that the danger was past. I minded what our man had said at first, how that one might escape from slavery. And I think that the nearness



of death—though, in truth, not one of us would have shrunk from the steel that was so ready—had taught me how good a thing life might be even yet.

Most of the men went away, the matter being settled. Heidrek went also, without another word to his son, and we were left to Asbiorn and a few men of his own crew. The young chief smiled a little as he looked again at us, but even Dalfin could not smile back again.

“Now,” said Asbiorn, “cast off the lashings from their feet, and let them walk to the ship. See that they all get there, and set a watch over the place where they are stowed.”

“Are we sailing at once?” a man asked.



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“Yes, as usual. The chief has some new plan on foot already.”

The end of it was that in a short time we were on board our own ship, and safely stowed forward, still bound. Heidrek had added her to his force, and manned her from the other two vessels; but before we reached the ship I saw that Heidrek’s men had piled their slain into an outhouse, set the fagot stack round it, and fired it to windward. There was no more honour for their fallen comrades than that.

So I saw the last of my home in Caithness, and before me was the life of a slave. They had stripped us of our mail and weapons, of course, and had handled us roughly, but that might be borne. The low door of the cramped sail room under the fore deck closed, and we were in darkness, and then Dalfin set into words the thought of us all, with a sort of dull groan:

“This morning I woke and thought it good to be alive!”

Almost at once the ship was warped out of the haven, and went to sea. The last hope I had that the Scots might yet gather and fall on these pirates left me at that time, and a sort of despair fell on me. I think I swooned, or slept at that time, for thereafter I can remember no more until the day was almost spent, and a man came and opened the low door that he might bring us food—oaten loaves, and ale in a great jug. Asbiorn stood outside.

“You may as well loose the men,” he said carelessly; “we can mind them well enough.”

“More likely to have them out on us in some sort of berserk rage,” said the man, growling. “I ken what I would do in their place well enough.”

Asbiorn stooped and looked in on us. The light was behind him, and I could not see his face; but he spoke evenly, and not unkindly.

“Will your men bide quiet if I unbind you all?” he said.

“Aye,” I answered. “Why not?”

“Good reason enough why you should,” he said.

“Let them loose.”

One by one we were unbound, some more men coming forward and watching us, with their weapons ready, in case we tried to fall on them. I dare say some old happening of the sort had taught them caution.



“There are thirty of us on board, mind you,” the man who set us free said, as he gathered the loose cords and went his way. “Better join us offhand, and make the best of the business.”

“Good advice that, maybe,” said Dalfin, stretching himself. “Pass along yon ale pot. I have a mighty thirst on me.”

“That is better,” said the man, and laughed.

I heard him tell another that the Irishman would come round first; but Dalfin’s foot had warned me that he spoke in no earnest. Whether my friend had any plan in his mind I could not say, but at all events there was no use in making our bondage worse than it might be by sullenness.

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It was good to be free from the lashings that had galled us so sorely, if we were still captives indeed, and had no mind to pass from the cramped cabin, if one may call the forepeak so much, to the deck where the foemen sat and made merry with the stores they had taken from us. The wind was steady and light, and they had naught to do but rest and eat their supper. Asbiorn steered, and was alone on the after deck. The two other ships were not to be seen, and I suppose that they outsailed ours, for she had never been of the swiftest, though staunch and seaworthy in any weather. We were heading due north as if we would make the Faroe Islands, leaving the Orkneys to the starboard.

I wondered if Heidrek had his lair in that far-off spot, whence we should have not the slightest chance of escape in the days to come; but I could say nothing to my comrades. Men of the crew sat just outside the low doorway, with their backs against the bulkhead, as if set there to overhear what we might say.

I looked among them for those two men of ours who had been ready to join Heidrek as their one chance of life, but I could not see them. Perhaps this was no wonder, as it is likely that they were drafted to the other ships in order to keep them apart from us. It was certainly the safest thing to do.

Asbiorn himself seemed to have some thought of this sort with regard to us seven presently. Before sunset, he called some of the men and bade them bring Dalfin and myself and shut us into the after cabin, under his own feet, as he sat at the steering oar. Two of my men were to be left in the fore peak, for they were unhurt and could be shut in safely, while the other three were set amidships, with men of the crew round them. These three had some slight hurts, and a man set about caring for them, roughly but skilfully enough.

But what I chiefly noticed as we were led aft, was that the ale was passing freely, and, as I should have thought, too often for good seamanship. That, however, was not my business, if it did seem to explain why Asbiorn separated us. Seven desperate men might do much among a helpless crowd, once they had snatched the arms they could reach from those who had forgotten to guard them.

The young chief paid no heed to us as we passed into the darkness of the low cabin. The door was closed and barred after us, and we were left to our own devices, though in a few minutes some man on the after deck took off the little square hatch cover which let the light into the place. It was half full of plunder of all sorts, and there was barely room, if soft stowage, for us.

“Well,” I said to Dalfin, “if we can sleep, let us do so. I know that every word we speak can be heard on deck.”

Whereon he answered me in Erse, and I could understand him well, for the old tongues of Scot of Ireland and Scot of Caithness are the same, if ages have wrought some changes in the way of speaking them here and there.



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“Let these Danes make what they can of that,” he said. “It will take a man born to the Gaelic to catch aught of it through yon hole, if he thinks he understands it in the open.”

So in the Erse we spoke for a little while, and it was a hopeless talk at best. Only we agreed that we would stand by one another through whatever might come, and that the first chance of escape was to be taken, be it what it might.

All the while that we talked thus the noise of the men who drank grew wilder and more foolish. It was a cask of our old heather ale which they had broached, and that is potent, if to the unwary it seems harmless enough. Once or twice Asbiorn called to the noisiest to be still, but they heeded him little.

Soon, however, the noise ceased, and we thought that most of the men slept. After that was no sound but the wash of the waves, and the hum of the sail, and the creak of the great steering oar as Asbiorn met the luff of the ship across the long, smooth sweep of the waves.

We, too, grew drowsy, for the cabin was close and warm beneath the sunny decks. All that could be said was said, and so we slept, if it were but uneasily.

Chapter 2: Men Of Three Kingdoms.

I was roused before long by a tapping on the deck overhead, which came now and again as if Asbiorn, who was steering still, was beating time to some air. So he was, for soon he began to whistle softly, and then to hum to himself. I will not say that the music was much; but he sat barely a fathom from the open hatch, and presently the words he sang caught my ear. They were of no song I had ever heard, and they seemed to have little meaning in them. I listened idly, and the next thing was that I knew, with a great leap of my heart, that what he sang, or pretended to sing, was meant for myself. It could only be so, for he sang of the Orkney Isles to the east of us, and of a boat, and of two men who could win thereto if they dared to try.

“Listen, Dalfin,” I said, and my comrade started up eagerly.

Asbiorn heard the movement, and he seemed to lean toward the hatch.

“Jarl’s son,” he hummed, “come under the hatch and listen. Is it in your mind to get away from us?”

I set my head through the little square opening carefully, and looked round. There was a bale of canvas, plunder from our ship sheds, across the break of the deck, and I could not be seen by the men, while Asbiorn was alone at the helm. It was almost as light as day, with the strange shadowless brightness of our northern June, when the glow of the sunset never leaves the sky till it blends with that of sunrise.



“Your boat is towing aft,” he said, still singing, as one may say. “It is shame to keep chiefs in thralldom thus; and I will not do it. Now, I am going forward, and you can drop overboard and take her. The men are asleep, and will not wake.”



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“What of my men?” I said.

“Glad enough they will be that you have escaped,” he said. “They will be all the more ready to do so themselves when they have the chance. They shall have such as I can give them. Leave them to me, for they fought and stood by you well.”

“Asbiorn,” I said then, “maybe I shall be able to thank you for this someday.”

“Mayhap,” he answered lightly. “Now, no more words; but take your chance as it comes. The sail is in the boat, and the course is due east hence. If the wind holds you should make the land by to morrow at noon. Hasten, for your time is short. There is a watch forward, and they may see you.”

He lashed the helm with a deft turn or two, and stood for a moment with his eyes on the sail. The ship was heading due north, and Heidrek’s two ships were some three miles ahead of us. This ship of ours was slow, if stout and weatherly. Then he went forward quickly, never looking behind him.

“Have you heard, Dalfin?” I asked; and he answered that he had, and that he was ready.

“Follow me closely,” I said. “I am going to cast off the boat’s painter and go over the side with it in my hand. You will be close on me.”

With that I drew myself up through the hatch, and crawled under cover of the long bale of canvas—which, doubtless, Asbiorn had set where it was on purpose—to the cleat, cast off the line, and swung myself overboard with as little noise as possible. The boat came up and nearly ran over me; but I had expected that, and was ready. The ship slipped away from me strangely quickly. Still, there was no shout from her, and so far all was well. Then came Dalfin, later than I had expected, for his head was at my heels as I left the hatchway.

He came slowly over the gunwale on all fours, and let himself go with a splash, which I thought every man in the ship must have heard. He fell on his back, with his arms in the air, grasping somewhat in them, which I thought was some man who tried to hold him. Yet I had not seen one come aft. Then there seemed to be a fight in the water where he was, and with that I left the boat to herself. There was a long, deep swell running, but it did not break, and I was maybe fourscore yards from him. The boat would drift after me with the wind, and I swam to his help with all my might. I could see him as the rollers lifted me on their crests now and then, and round him the white water flew as he struggled with somewhat. At that time I saw the tall figure of Asbiorn on the fast-lessening stern of the ship, and with him was another man. One of them seemed to come right aft and look over the stern, and then stooped to the cleat where the painter

had been fast. Then both went to the helm, and bided there. Neither looked into the cabin hatch, so far as I could tell.



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A long, oily roller slipped from under me, and in its hollow I saw Dalfin. He was learning to swim, with the little four-legged bench belonging to the helmsman as his support. It had never entered my mind that the son of a chief could not swim. I cannot remember when I could not do so, and any one of us would have thought it shame not to be at home in the water, whether rough or calm. Nor had he warned me that he could not do so; and therein I hold was the deed of a brave man. He would not hold me back in any way, but would give me my chance, and take his own. He had to reach the bench, too, which was risky, and that, no doubt, had delayed him. I swam up to him, and he laughed and spluttered.

“Is all going well? Where is the boat?” he gasped.

“Very well,” I said. “But why not tell me you could not swim? I would have hove up the boat alongside for you.”

“Aye, and so have been seen,” he said. “I saw this bench, and—”

The sea filled his mouth, and he had to be silent. I saw the boat coming to us as the wind drifted her, and swam round him, while he splashed wildly as the bench lifted to the waves. Then I saw what was amiss, and got it across and under his chest, and he was happy.

“It is the first time I have ever been out of my depth,” he said. “I shall be happier yet when I am in the boat. Yonder she comes!”

I turned my head sharply at that, for he was looking north. We had been running northward dead before the wind when we went overboard, and any boat thence must needs come from the ship.

Then I saw no boat at all, but only the head of a man who swam slowly toward us, and into my mind it came that this was one of our own men who had seen us go, from amidships, and had managed to follow. So I hailed him, but the answering voice was strange to me. With a few strokes the swimmer neared us, and I saw that he was a young man, brown-haired and freckled, with a worn, anxious face, that had desperation written on it. I had never set eyes on him before.

“I would fain make a third in this escape,” he said, speaking fair Danish, but slowly, as if unused to it. “I have been a captive with Heidrek like yourselves, and I saw you go.”

“You are no Dane?” I said, being somewhat cautious, as may be supposed.

“A Saxon of Wessex,” he answered. “On my word, I have had no part in this raid, for I was left with the ships.”



“Then you are welcome,” I said frankly. It was certain that no man would do as we had done, save he were in as sore straits.

The black bow of the boat lifted on the waves close to us, and I swam to her and climbed in over her stern. By this time the ship was too far off to be dangerous, unless it was thought worthwhile to come back to pick up the boat, which was unlikely, as it would have been done at once if at all. Between us, the Saxon and I managed to get Dalfin into her, and then our new companion followed. He wore a thrall's dress, and had not so much as a knife on him. Yet one could see that he bore himself as might a thane, while his voice was not a thrall's voice.



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Now a word or two passed as to whether we should step the mast and set sail at once, but it seemed safer not to do so. We could still be made out clearly from the ship if we did.

"I wonder someone has not looked into the cabin yet to see if we are still there," I said.

"Not likely," answered Dalfin. "I set back the cover on the hatch before I went for the bench."

"A good thought, too," said I. "Now, what I most hope is that none of my poor folk will be harmed for this. Mayhap it will be said that they helped us in some way."

"No," said the Saxon slowly. "They will blame me, and that matters not at all. But it must have been a mere chance that the terrible splashing our comrade made was not seen by Asbiorn; for he went aft, and looked long toward the boat. I heard him say that she had gone adrift, and that some lubber must have made fast the painter carelessly. The man who took the helm said that the boat was not worth putting about for, and that hardly a man of the crew was fit to haul sheet. Which is true enough."

"Asbiorn saw without doubt," I said. "This escape is his doing."

"Aye," answered the Saxon, "I can well believe it. He is the only one of all that crowd who is worth a thought. It is the first time they have let me sail with him—it is but a chance that I have done so now. Men get away from him too easily."

"How did you get away now?"

"There was no man awake near me. I had naught to do but roll over the rail. I dare say Asbiorn saw me also. He would not care, for he hates to have captives held as slaves on board his ship."

Dalfin shivered a little. "It is very cold," he said ruefully.

So it was, for the June nights in the north have still a nip in the air. I told him that sea water has no harm in it, but at the same time thought we might as well get out the oars and make what way we could. Then when we lifted the sail and looked for them, there were none. Only the short steering oar was there; but the new pair I had made myself this winter were gone. No doubt the pirates had put them in their own boat, for they were good. Not that it seemed to matter much, for so soon as the ship was a mile or two farther, we could make sail in safety. We could have done little in the time but warm ourselves. So we had to be content to sit still while the dark sail drew away, and our clothes dried on us.



“Well,” said the Saxon presently, “how you feel, friends, I do not know; but I want to shout and leap with the joy of being free again. Nine months I have been a thrall to Heidrek, watched, and bound betimes, moreover.”

He held out his hands, and they were hard with the oar, and there were yet traces of cords round the strong wrists.

“Tell us how you came into this trouble,” I said, “it is likely that we shall be comrades for a while.”



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“Easily told,” he said. “When I was at home in England, I was Bertric the ship thane, and had my place in Lyme, in Dorset. I owned my own ship, and was thane by right therefore, according to the old laws. Last year I fared to Flanders, where I had done well before, in the summer. In September I was homeward bound, and met this Heidrek outside the Scheldt mouth. He took my goods, and burned my ship, and kept me, because I was likely to be able to pilot him, knowing all that coast. Oh, aye, we fought him; but he had two ships to my one, and four to one in men. Asbiorn saved me, I think, at that time; but I have never had a chance of escape until tonight. I saw it coming, and was ready. You were but a few minutes before me. Now I know that I am in luck to find comrades.”

“May it be so,” I said, holding out my hand to him.

There was that in the frank way of this Saxon which won me, half Scot though I am, and therefore prone to be cautious with men. He took it with a steady grip, and smiled, while Dalfin clapped his broad shoulder, and hailed him as a friend in adversity.

“We three should do well in the end, if we hold together,” Dalfin said. “But you and I are in less trouble than Malcolm. He has lost all; while we were both wanderers from home only. My folk will trouble not at all for me for a year or so, and a shipmaster may be away as long as he chooses. None will look for you till you return, I suppose? Well, I came out to find adventures, and on my word, I am in the way to find them.”

“Not a bad beginning,” laughed Bertric. “As for me, it is no new thing that I should be a winter abroad, and my folk have long ceased to trouble much about me. I am twenty-five, and took to the sea when I was seventeen. Well, if Heidrek has spoilt this voyage, we can afford it. Luck has been with me so far. If I win home again it is but to start fresh with a new ship, or settle down on the old manors in the way of my forebears.”

Now, the remembrance that I had not one who would so much as think of me took hold of me, for the first time, as these two talked of their people, and it fell sorely heavily on me. I could say naught, and turned away from these light-hearted wanderers.

They knew, and left me to myself in all kindness, for there was no word they could say which would help me. Bertric spoke again to Dalfin, asking him how it came to pass that he could not swim, which was as much a wonder to him as it had been to me.

“Yesterday I would have asked you why I should be able,” Dalfin answered lightly, “today I know well enough. But my home in Maghera, where we of the northern O’Neills have our place and state, lies inland. Truly, there is the great Lough Neagh, on which, let me tell you, we have fought the Danes once or twice; but if there is any swimming to be done for the princes, there are always henchmen to get wet for them. Never did I dream that a day would come when there was swimming which no man could do for me. That is why.”



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“But it seems that you have ships, if you fought the Danes on the water?”

“Never a ship! We fell on them in the fishers’ coraghs—the skin boats.”

“And beat them?”

“Well, it was not to be expected; but we made them afraid.”

Dalfin stood up in the boat unsteadily, and swung his arms to warm himself. She was a wide and roomy fishing craft, and weatherly enough, if she did make more leeway than one would wish in a breeze.

“There is less wind,” he said. “It is not so cold.”

The long, smooth sea was going down also, or he would not have kept his footing as he did. I looked up sharply, and met the Saxon’s eye. A calm to come was the last thing we wished.

“Maybe there is a shift of wind coming,” Bertric said. “No reason why we may not make the most of what breeze is left now.”

“It is the merest chance if any man spies us by this time,” I said. “We will risk it.”

So we stepped the mast and set sail, heading eastward at once. We trimmed the boat by putting Dalfin in the bows, while I steered, and the Saxon sat on the floor aft and tended sheet. I asked him to steer, but he said the boat was my own, and that I was likely to get more out of her than a stranger. The sail filled, and the boat heeled to the steady breeze; and it was good to hear the ripples wake at the bows, and feel the life come back to her, as it were, after the idle drifting of the last hour. But there was no doubt that the wind was failing us little by little.

About sunrise it breezed up again, and cheered us mightily. That lasted for half an hour, and then the sail flapped against the mast, and the calm we feared fell. The long swell sank little by little until we floated on a dead smooth sea, under brightest sunshine, with the seabirds calling round us. Nor was there the long line of the Orkney hills to be seen, however dimly, away to the eastward as we had hoped.

“How will the tide serve us hereabout?” asked Bertric presently.

“The flood will set in to the eastward in two hours’ time,” I answered. “It depends on how we lie on the Orkney coasts whether it drifts us to the northward or to the southward. We have been set to the westward all night with the ebb.”

“Wind may come with the flood,” said he.



And that was the best we could hope for. But I set the steering oar in the sculling rowlock aft, and did what I could in that way. At least, it saved some of the westward drift, if it was of very little use else.

Dalfin curled up in the sun and slept. He had no care for the possible troubles which were before us, knowing naught of the sea; but this calm made the Saxon and myself anxious enough.

“After all,” I said, “maybe it will only be a matter of hunger for a day or two.”

Bertric smiled, and pointed to the locker under the stern thwart, on which I was sitting.



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“I think I told you that you were but a few minutes before me in this matter,” he said. “Well, when I heard that Asbiorn would take the boat, I knew my chance had come. So I dropped six of your barley loaves into her as she lay alongside the wharf, and stowed them aft when I went to bale out the rain water that was in her. The men were too much taken up with the plunder to mind what I was about. I think your little water breaker is full also. It is there, and I tried it.”

“Why, then, that will carry us far enough,” I said. “You are a friend in need in all truth.”

“I wrought for myself. I am glad that things have turned out thus in the end. Now do you sleep, if you can. You shall wake when need is.”

He came aft and took the oar from me, and I was glad to lie down on the floor boards amidships and rest. And the first thing that I noted was that the Saxon sculled better than myself, and wonderfully easily. Then I slept heavily for maybe three hours.

Bertric roused me about that time. The wind had come, and the sky had clouded over, and the boat was slipping fast through the water, looking eastward indeed, but the wind headed us too closely for that to be of much use. It was blowing from the worst quarter for us, the southeast, and freshening. The boat was fit for little but running, and at this time I waxed anxious as to what was before us, for any Caithness man has heard tales of fishers who have been caught in the southeast winds, and never heard of more.

Now, it would make a long tale to tell of what came thereafter on the open sea. Bertric would have me sleep now, and I did so, for I was fairly worn out, and then the weather grew wilder, until we were driving before a gale, and our hope of making even the Shetlands was gone.

So we drove for two whole days until we had lost all reckoning, and the gale blew itself out. But for the skilful handling of the boat by Bertric, I know we might have been swamped at times in the following seas, but Dalfin knew naught of the peril. He baled when it was his turn, cheerfully, and slept be times, so that I envied him his carelessness and trust in us.

The wind wore round to the northwest at its last and hardest, and then sank quickly. On the third morning we were in bright sunshine, and the sea was going down fast, and again we were heading east, with a half hope of making some landfall in Norway, if anywhere. At noon we shared the last loaf in just such a calm as had fallen on us at first; and at last Bertric and I might sleep again, leaving Dalfin to keep watch. We might be in the track of vessels from Norway westward and southward, but we could not tell, and maybe we expected him to see nothing. But it may tell how wearied we were that we left so untried a landsman to watch for us, though, indeed, either of us would wake with the least uneasiness of the boat in a rising wind. So we slept a great sleep, and it was not until near sunset that Dalfin roused us.



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“There is somewhat like a sail on the skyline to the eastward,” he said. “I have watched it this half hour, and it grows bigger fast. I took it for a bird at first and would not wake you.”

That brought us to our feet in a moment, and we looked in the direction he gave us.

“A sail,” said Bertric. “She is bearing right down on us, and bringing an easterly breeze off shore with her. If only we can hail her!”

“It is not Heidrek again?” asked Dalfin anxiously.

“No; his sails are brown. Nor does one meet men like him often. We shall find naught but help from any other, if we may have to work our passage to their port. That is of no account so long as we are picked up.”

In half an hour the breeze from the eastward reached us, and we bore up across the course of the coming ship. She came swiftly down the wind, but was either badly steered, or else was so light that with her yard squared she ran badly. At times the wind was almost spilt from out of her sail, and we looked to see her jibe, and then she would fill again on her true course and hold it a while.

“She is out of the way badly handled,” said Bertric, watching her in some puzzlement. “I only hope that they may know enough to pick up a boat in a seaway.”

Chapter 3: The Ship Of Silence.

Soon we knew that she must be the ship of some great chief, for her broad sail was striped with red and white, and the sun gleamed and sparkled from gilding on her high stemhead, and from the gilded truck of the mast. Then we made out that a carven dragon reared itself on the stem, while all down the gunwale were hung the round red and yellow war boards, the shields which are set along the rail to heighten it when fighting is on hand. We looked to see the men on watch on the fore deck, but there were none, though, indeed, the upward sweep of the gunwale might hide them.

Presently she yawed again in that clumsy way which we were wondering at, and showed us her whole side, pierced for sixteen oars, and bright with the shields, for a moment, and then she was back on her course. We could not see the steersman for the sail, in any case, but we saw no one on deck.

Now we were right across her bows, and within hail of her, and yet no man had shown himself. Bertric and I lifted our voices together in a great hail, and then in a second, and third, but there was no answer. Only she yawed and swung away from us as if she would pass us, and at that Dalfin cried out, while I paid off fast to follow her, and again Bertric hailed. Now she was broad off our bows and to the starboard, an arrow flight



from us, and Bertric and I were staring at her in amazement. She was the most wonderfully appointed ship in all sea bravery we had ever seen—but there was no man at the helm, and not a soul on deck.

“They are asleep, or dead,” said I; and hailed again and again, all the while edging down to her, until we were running on the same course, side by side.



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“We must overhaul her somehow,” said Bertric, “or we are left. This is an uncanny affair.”

The height of her great square sail told, and little by little she drew ahead of us. We felt the want of the oars more at this time than any, and I think that with them we might have overhauled her at once. Had she been steered, of course she would have left us astern without hope; but as we chased her now, the unsteady flaws of the rising breeze, which we could make full use of, rather hindered her. Now and again, with some little shift, her sail flapped and she lost her way, and yawed so that we gained on her fast, while a new hope of success sprang up in our minds. Then the sail would fill again, and she was away from us.

Once, as the breeze veered a point or two, I thought she must have jibed, for the clew of the sail almost swung inboard; but it filled again.

“She cannot jibe,” said Bertric. “See, her yard is braced square for running, and cannot shift. If all holds, she must run till doomsday thus. Her mast may go in a squall, or one of the braces may part—but I don’t see what else is to stop her.”

But the wind was light, and hardly strained the new rigging, while there was a stout running backstay set up with all care, and even the main halliard had been led far aft to serve as another. She was meant to run while she might, and that silent and lonely ship, passing us on an endless voyage into the great westward ocean, was as strange and uncanny a sight as a seaman could meet in a long life. Moreover, though she was in full war trim, she seemed to have some deck cargo piled amidships, which might be plunder.

So for an hour or more that chase went on. Once or twice we were a full half-mile astern of her, and then gained with the chance of the breeze. Once we might have thrown a line on board her, but had none to heave. Then she gathered way and fled from us, even as we thought we had her. It was just as if she knew that we chased her, and would play with us. We almost lost heart at that time, for it was sickening.

“The ship is bewitched,” said Dalfin, and in truth we agreed with him.

Why, and by whom, she had been set adrift thus, or what had befallen her crew, we could not guess. Still, she was our only hope, and we held on after her again. Neither Bertric nor myself had the least thought of giving up, for we knew that the chances of the breeze were all in our favour, so long as it came unsteadily as now. And always, when it fell, we sculled fiercely and gained on her, if only a little.

So another half hour passed, with its hopes and disappointments, and then we were flying down on her with a breeze of our own, when the end came. The wind shifted and I met it, and that shift did all for us. It reached the ship, and took the clew of the sail



inboard, shaking and thundering, while the sheets lashed to and fro across the deck. Then somewhere those sheets jammed and held fast, and as if the canvas had been flattened in of set purpose, she luffed, until with a great clap of the sail against the mast, the whole of her upper canvas was aback, and she was hove to helplessly. Maybe she was a furlong from us at the moment, and Bertric shouted.



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"We have her," I cried, "if only all holds!"

"She will gather stern way directly," said Bertric, with set teeth. "Then she will fall off again, and the sheets will get adrift."

We flew down on her, but we had been tricked so often before that we hardly dared to hope. Now we were close to her bows, and we heard the great yard creaking and straining, and the dull flapping of the loose canvas of both tack and clew which had blown inboard. The ship lurched and staggered under the uneasy strain, but the tackle held, and we had her. Bertric went to our halliards and lowered the sail as I luffed alongside, and then Dalfin had gripped the rail between two of the shining shields. There was no sea beyond a harmless ripple as yet, and we dropped aft to where a cleat was set for the boats on her quarter, and made fast.

Then as we looked at one another, there came to me as it were a breath from my lost home in far-off Caithness, for a whiff of peat smoke hung round us and was gone so quickly that I thought it almost fancy. But Dalfin had smelt it also.

"There is a fire alight on board," he said. "I smelt the smoke. That means food, and someone on board after all."

With that he shouted, but there was no answer. It would have been a relief to me if some ship's dog had flown out and barked at us; but all was silent, and that was uncanny here in the open sea, and on such a ship.

"Well," said Bertric, "crew or no, we must go on board. No use in waiting."

He swung himself up from the boat over the high gunwale, and then gave me a hand, and together we hauled up Dalfin, and so stood and stared at all we saw in wonder.

Everything was in perfect trim, and the ship was fitted as if for a long cruise. She had two handsome boats, with carven gunwales and stem and stern posts set on their chocks side by side amidships, with their sails and oars in them. Under the gunwales on either board were lashed the ship's oars, and with them two carved gangway planks which seemed never to have been used. Every line and rope's end was coiled down snugly, and every trace of shore litter had been cleared from the white decks as if she had been a week at least at sea, though we knew, from her course, that she could not be more than a few hours out from the Norway coast. We had guessed that she might have sailed at dawn.

But we wondered not so much at the trim of the ship, though that puzzled us; just aft of the mast, and set against its foot, was the pile we had taken for deck cargo, and the like of it I had never seen. There had been built of heavy pine timbers, whose ends butted against either gunwale below, and rose to a ridge pole above, a pent house, as it were,



which stood at the ridge some six feet high from the deck, and was about two fathoms long. Its end was closed with timbers also, and against this end, and round, and partly over the roof, had been piled fagots of



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brushwood, so that it was almost covered. Either from haste, or else loosened by the movement of the ship, one or two of these fagots had not found a place with the rest, but lay on the deck by the boats. As if to keep the pile steady, on either side had been set a handsomely carved sledge, and on the pile at the end was a light wagon, also carved, and with bright bronze fittings. The wheels had been taken off and set inside it. Under the piles showed a barrel or two, which it was plain were tar barrels.

“Firewood for a long sea passage,” I said. “And sledges and wagon for a land journey at its end. One would say that the ship was flitting a whole family to Iceland—the new land to which men go today.”

“Aye, I have heard of that land, and of families who go there,” said Bertric. “That seems to explain some things, but not why the ship is adrift.”

“What will be in the house yonder?” asked Dalfin.

“Maybe it was built for the women of the family,” I said.

Now, this was so likely that for the moment the wonder passed. We had to tend ship while the breeze held off if we would do anything with her presently. She was not of the largest build, but both Bertric and I knew that it would be all that we three could do, one of us being a landsman moreover, to handle her if it came on to blow at all freshly.

Now, I would not have it thought that we three castaways were much in the mind to puzzle over the ship which we had gained, almost against hope. It was enough for us to rejoice in the feel of firm planks under our feet once more, and to find naught terrible, but promise of all we needed, while the strain of the longboat voyage with its ever-present peril was over. Dalfin broke that first short silence.

“I am desperately hungry,” he said. “Surely there will be food on board?”

The breeze freshened up again, and the sail flattened against the mast with a clap, and the ship quivered. It was naught to us, but it made the landsman start and look upward as if expecting to see somewhat carried away, while I laughed at him.

“Work first and food afterward,” said Bertric. “We must tend ship while wind is little, if at all. Why, we are not more than half starved yet, for barley bread stands by one nobly.”

“Give me somewhat to do, and maybe I shall forget the hunger,” Dalfin answered ruefully. “Which of you two is to be captain?”

“Bertric,” I said at once. “That is his place by all right.”



“It is an old trade of mine,” the Saxon said quietly “Well, it is to be seen if I can justify my sayings of myself.”

The sun had set by the time we boarded the ship, but we had not noticed it in the bright twilight. The short northern night would be no darker than now until the sunrising, for we were close on midsummer, and there was every sign of settled fair weather after the gale. Even now the last breeze was dying away, leaving the sea bright and unruffled under the glow in the northwest sky. It was only to be hoped that presently some summer breeze might suffer us to lay our course southward or eastward, toward the land where we might find haven and help.



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Now Bertric set us to work, and we had little or no trouble, for the breeze fell altogether very quickly. The sheet had fouled the great cleat which was bolted to the deck beams amidships aft for the backstay, and that was easily cleared. Then we swung the yard fore and aft, Dalfin hauling as he was bidden, with fixed intent to haul till further orders, which was all we needed from him. Then Bertric would have two reefs taken in, for we could not tell what weather we might meet, or for how long we might have to stay on board without help. The foot of the sail was wet, as with heavy rain.

“We can take no chances,” he said. “Yet it is likely that we shall have a ship or two in chase of us shortly. It is a wonder to me that we have seen none yet. But word will go along the coast of what has happened. It is not the first time that a carelessly-moored vessel has got adrift in a calm, and found a breeze for herself, while her sail was hoisted to dry in the sun.”

Now, all we had to do was to carry forward the tack and set it up for reaching, and to do that we had to climb over the fagots at the foot of the penthouse, and the gunwale end of the timbers they rested on, the run of the deck being blocked altogether by the pile. Seeing that when the ship was to be put about the square sail had to be lowered, brought aft round the mast and rehoisted on the other board, the unhandiness of the thing was terribly unseamanlike. Bertric and I grumbled and wondered at it the while we worked, only hoping that by some stroke of luck we might be able to reach a haven without having to shift the sail. It was to the starboard of the mast now, which would serve us well if the wind came from east or north, as was most likely.

Maybe that was an hour's work, and we had done all we might. By that time the breeze had altogether gone, and the ship floated idly on still, bright water, with the hush of the night round us. There was time to tow her head round when we knew whence the morning wind would blow.

Bertric coiled down the fall of the tack purchase, and nodded to Dalfin. “Food now, if there is to be any,” he said. “What is in yon kettle?”

Now that we were forward we had seen that against this end of the penthouse no fagots had been piled. The red and white striped awnings of the decks were set there, carefully rolled up round their carved supports, and they rested on a stout sea bedstead, such as might be carried on board for the chief to whom the ship belonged. Two more chests stood at the head and foot of this bedstead, and they were carved, as indeed was the bed. It was plain that all the gear on board belonged to some great house.



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But six or eight feet forward of these things, and in the midst of a clear space of deck, was a shallow square box full of sand, and on that was set the covered kettle of which our comrade spoke. The sandbox was that on which a fire might be lighted at sea if need were, but none had been used on it as yet. Hard by were two casks lashed to ringbolts on deck, one of which was covered, and the other had a spigot in it. They held oatcake in one, and water in the other, as perhaps one might have expected, here where the men of the crew would gather forward. And the kettle was full of boiled meat, which was maybe the most welcome sight to us that we could have looked on. For, if we had managed to forget it, we were famished.

So then and there we made a royal meal, asking not at all what the meat might be, only knowing that it was good, thanks to the unknown hands which had made it ready. There was enough in that great sea cauldron for two more such meals as this, and the oatcake barrel was full. We had no fear of hunger again for a time, and if there was no more to be found by the time this store was ended, we should surely have found haven or help in some way, most likely by the coming of some ship in search with the morning at latest.

Now, as I sat on the deck and ate, once and again came to me that sharp smell of peat smoke, and at last I spoke of it, asking if the others had not smelt it.

"I smell somewhat strange to me," said Bertric. "It is a pleasant smell enough. What is amiss with it?"

"What, do your folk in England use no peat?" said Dalfin in surprise. "Why, we should hardly know how to make a fire without it. It is peat smoke you smell."

"Why, then, there must be fire somewhere!" said Bertric, leaping up.

"Smouldering peat, certainly," I said, rising with him. "Under yon fagots is the only place I can think of as possible—or under the deck planking."

We went to the penthouse, and climbed on the piles of fagots on the port side. When we trimmed sail afresh we had hauled it along the starboard, and had at least smelt nothing of the smoke there. But now we set to work and hove the fagots overboard, setting the handsome sledge from off them forward out of the way. The peat smoke grew stronger as we lowered the pile, and at last a little cloud of blue smoke came up to us.

"No hurry," said I to Bertric, who was anxious, "there is no wind to fan the turfs into flame. It can but smoulder slowly."

"It is here," cried Dalfin, lifting a fagot whose under side was scorched and blackened, though more by heat and smoke than flame.



Under that was a bushel or so of peat, the midst of which was but a black hollow, round the sides of which the fire glowed red, only waiting for the wind to fan it into life. The turfs blazed a little in the draught as we cast them overboard quickly. Then we sent all the fagots on that side after them.



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“This is no chance,” I said. “There may be more yet. We must get all this lumber cleared.”

It had been the same on the other side of the pile, but the peat was cold and dead, not having burned so long. Then we moved the wagon from the after end of the penthouse, and cleared that. Here again was peat, and more of it, and it had been lighted, and had only been out for a short time. Some of the turfs may still have had fire within them, but we did not wait to see. And all the while as we worked at this strange task, I wondered what the meaning of it all was.

The last fagot went overboard, and Bertric rose up and looked at me. His face was white as with some fear, and he stepped backward away from the penthouse aft.

“Comrades,” he said, “why did they want to burn this ship? She is not burnt, only because as she ran in the light breeze there was no wind to set the peat aflame. They meant her to burn when she was in the open sea—when the spark they set in the turf should have had time to grow to flame, and fire the brushwood. Look at those two tar barrels set handy.”

“Aye,” I said, for all this had been growing on me. “They meant her to run far from shore before her rigging went. That is why the halliards have been brought aft, out of the way of the flame.”

“And why the sail was wet,” said Dalfin. “And maybe why we are not chased.”

“It comes into my mind,” said Bertric slowly, “that there has been pestilence on board, and that they would rid themselves of it.”

But I hardly noted what he said. There had come to me, of a sudden, the memory of old tales of the ways of my Norse forefathers, and the certainty of what that penthouse might hold flashed on me. Many a time I had heard how in long ago days men would set the body of their dead chief afloat in his favourite ship, with all his treasure and war gear, and all else that a chief might need in Asgard; and so light his balefire on board, and let him pass to a sea grave beyond the ken of men in strange magnificence. For we of the old faith hold that what a man buries in life, or takes with him to the grave in death, is his to enjoy in the hall of Odin when he comes thither. It was the ancient way, and a wonderful one—the way of the Asir with the dead Baldur.

Yet I had ever been told that the custom was long past, and that such a sea and fire burial was unheard of now. It was only the finding of the half-dead fire which minded me of it; for that which we had thought of a family flitting across the seas to Iceland—the sail, wet with the thunder rain of yesterday, spread to dry, and then the coming over the hills of the cast wind suddenly, setting the carelessly-moored ship adrift from some



westward-looking haven, where lay no other craft which could follow her, had been quite enough to account for the wandering vessel.

Now I knew that only one thing would account for the purposeful firing of the ship. Yonder lay some mighty chief—and as I thought of that I clutched Bertric's arm and pointed.



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“Not the pestilence, comrade,” I said; “but what lies in yonder penthouse.”

“What should be there?” he asked, wondering, for my voice was unsteady.

“We have boarded the funeral ship of some chief,” I said. “He lies shut in that chamber with his treasures round him.”

“To be burned in his ship at sea,” said Bertric quietly. “Well, a Viking might find a less fitting funeral. Truly, it seems as if you may be right, and we must needs see if so it is.”

Now Dalfin had listened, crossing himself once or twice, and he nodded.

“I like it not at all,” he said; “but we must see what is yonder, and if Malcolm is right.”

It was strange to me that these two showed no fear of him who doubtless lay there, in the chamber which his men had made for him. We hold that the one who dares open the grave chamber is the hardiest of men, running most fearsome risk from the wrath of the dead hero. For, if aught will bring back the life to a warrior who has died, it will be that one should set hands on his war gear. And we hold that the ghost of a man hides near his body for many days, and therefore see that at hand is set the food that may be needful if the ghost hungers and will come back for a space to eat. Else he may wander forth, troll-like and terrible, to seek what he needs.

I think that it is no wonder if I feared, having been taught all this. But my comrades were Christians, and on them was no fear of the quiet dead; but only an awe, and reverence. But of that I knew naught.

“Why must we open the house?” I said. “It is as if we courted the wrath of the chief. I have been told of men who would try to win the treasure from a mound where one was buried, and died with fear of what he met with there.”

“Such an one deserved it,” said Bertric quietly; “but we seek no treasure, nor would rob the dead. No doubt the wrath of Heaven lies hard on one who does so. Yet all this time we do not know if we are right or not.”

“Let it be,” said I.

“I do not think that we should,” Dalfin said. “For if you are right—and you are a Norseman, and know—while it seems about the only possible reading of what has puzzled us—then we must needs sail to the Norway shore that the men of the chief may know what has happened, and either lay him in mound, or see this better carried out.”

“Aye,” said Bertric, “Dalfin is right. By chance we have been set in charge of this ship—maybe not at all by chance—that we may see honour done at last. Maybe we cannot



make for Norway when the wind comes. If not, we must plan otherwise. Come, I cannot rest till I know.”

But I held him back, making no secret of my fears.

“We shall have to reckon with the wrath of the hero,” I said. “It will be terrible—and we know not what may happen.”

At that Dalfin stared at me; but Bertric, who had seen other lands and knew the ways of men, smiled and set his hand on my arm.



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“I do not fear him,” he said. “It is impossible that if a chief lies there he can be wroth with men who will do naught but honour him. Think—is there any honour to the mighty dead that he should wander across the lone sea thus, as we met him?”

I knew that he was right, and did not gainsay him. After all, we were sure to have looked into that chamber presently, and to have found what I feared—suddenly and unexpectedly—would have been worse. So I set my fears aside as best I could, and went forward with them both to the end of the house, in which we had seen no sign of door. I thought that perhaps the upright timbers which closed the end might be loose; but they were nailed to the roof beam, against which they were set too firmly for us to move them, and we must look for some axe or other tool.

“One of the chests forward is the ship’s carpenter’s,” said Dalfin. “I opened it when we sought for food just now.”

He slipped round the house and came back with a heavy hammer and a broad chisel. Bertric took them, and prised away the upper end of the midmost timber without any trouble. Then he drew it toward him, and the lower end wrenched free at once, for the nails that held this building which was to be burnt were not long. And while he did this, he stood on one side, that he might not pry into the chamber idly, as it were, while Dalfin and I could see nothing from where we stood. Only a little peat smoke seemed to come out gently when the timber had gone.

It did but need that two more timbers should be moved thus, and there was room enough for a man to pass through. Then Bertric set down the hammer, and took off his rough sea cap, smiling a little, yet with grave eyes, and so looked in. Dalfin pressed close to him, but I stood aside still.

“The place is full of the peat smoke. I can see nothing,” Dalfin said.

“Somewhat white on the floor,” said Bertric; “but we block the light.”

He stood aside, and the shadowless brightness shone across the chamber through the thinning peat smoke. I saw him start a little, and Dalfin signed himself with his holy sign once or twice. Then I must look also, almost in spite of myself, and I went forward quietly.

Chapter 4: By Sea And Fire.

It was even as I thought. There lay in state, as his men had left him, a wonderful old chief, whose long, white beard swept like a snowdrift down the crimson cloak in which he was shrouded. They had set him on just such a low, carved bedstead as that which we had found outside the house, dressed in his full mail, and helmed, and with his sword at his side, such a priceless weapon, with gold-mounted scabbard and jewelled



hilt, as men have risked the terrors of grave mounds to win. His white hand rested on the pommel, and he was facing forward as if looking toward the far shore which he was to reach through the flames. But there was naught terrible in his look, and even my fears passed as I saw the peacefulness of that last sleep.



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The smoke thinned quickly from the chamber; for it had only soaked into it from the peat against its roughly made walls, over which the fagots had been piled too heavily and closely for their purpose. Then we saw that all the deck round the bier was full of caskets and bales, and that on the far wall hung weapons—swords and axes, spears, and bows and arrows, and with them mail shirts and helms and shields, such as the chief himself might wear. And by the side of the chief, packed carefully in a rushen basket, were the bowls, one metal, and the rest of black earthenware, which held the food for the grave, according to our custom. There was a tall jar of wine also, covered with its little silver drinking cup.

Now we stood for a little while silent, and then Dalvin spoke.

“What is that yonder?” he asked under his breath, and pointing to the far end of the chamber. “As it were a heap of mail and linen.”

I could not see what he meant, for I stood on one side, but Bertric stepped a pace toward him, and looked more closely past the bier, which almost hid whatever the pile might be. It seemed the only thing set carelessly, for all else was in perfect order. Then he started somewhat, and spoke hurriedly.

“As I live,” he cried, but so low that the cry was all but stifled, “it is a girl! Is she also dead or in a swoon?”

He stooped, after a moment’s doubt, and went straight into the place. It was so low at the sides of the bier which he must pass, that he was almost double until he reached the foot, and stood up under the ridge. Then he bent, and lifting his burden brought it out into the open air, carrying it toward the after deck away from the penthouse.

Then we saw that it was indeed a girl, tall and pale, with long tresses of yellow-golden hair plaited and bound with some strange gold-woven blue band, dressed in white, with a beautiful light coat of mail over the kirtle.

“She is alive,” said Bertric, setting her down very gently. “Either the smoke in that close chamber—or fear—has overcome her. One of you get water from the cask forward.”

I went hastily; but I had to search for somewhat in which to bring it, and was a few minutes before I found where the ship’s buckets hung under the gunwale right forward. But meanwhile, Dalvin, with no fears in him, had gone gently to the penthouse and brought thence the pitcher of wine and the silver bowl, so that when I came back those two were trying to get some of the wine between the pale lips, though without much success. Now we bathed her face with the cool water, and presently the colour began to come back slowly, though she did not stir.

“We are rough nurses at best,” said Bertric; “but we can do better than this. Let us get the bedstead that is forward, and set a fold or two of the awning on it for her to rest on. Better than the hard deck when she comes to herself, and maybe not so terrifying.”



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We left Dalfin to tend her, and brought the bedstead and canvas with all speed, and so lifted her on it. Then Bertric went back into the house and brought thence a blue cloak which lay where she had fallen, and covered her with it, for the night was chill now. It was her own, and with it he brought a light helm made of steel bands and transparent horn between them, which must have fallen from her head.

Maybe this maiden was of twenty years, or less, and to me, at least, who had no sisters as had the others, she seemed beautiful altogether. I know that had she faced us in life in the entry of the chamber, clad as she was in her mail and helm, I had been sure that she was a Valkyria, sent hither by Odin to choose the hero yonder for his halls.

“She is long in coming round,” said Bertric presently. “It may be as well to close up that chamber before she sees it open, lest she take us for common robbers, and be terrified.”

Dalfin laughed a little.

“Helm and mail and fear should not go together,” he said.

“She will wake without thought of what she has tried to be,” answered Bertric. “Get the place closed, Malcolm, anyway.”

Now Dalfin and I went together, and set back the timbers in their places. But they would not bide there properly, and I took up the hammer we had used to take them down, and drove one or two of the upper nails again lightly, Dalfin kneeling and holding the ends below. Whether the sharp click of the iron roused the girl or not I cannot say, but I had not driven more than three before I heard a little cry behind me, and turned to see if there was anything amiss.

The girl was sitting up, and seeming not to heed Bertric at all—for he was behind her and supporting her—was looking at us two with wide eyes of fear and wonder. And when I turned of a sudden, she set her hands together and held them out toward me as if she prayed, and cried to me:

“Asa Thor! Asa Thor! will you leave me? Is there no place in Freya’s hall—in Gladsheim—for a maiden, if to Asgard she may not come?”

I had no answer. For the moment I thought that she saw some vision of the Asir beyond my ken, and then knew that it was indeed to myself that she spoke. For I stood at the door of the house of the dead, with Thor’s weapon—the hammer—in my hand, and she wandered in her mind with the weakness that comes after a swoon.

“Hush, lady, hush,” said Bertric in a wonderfully gentle voice. “It is not Thor whom you see, but only a friend.”



But seeing that I made no answer, nor moved, for I was at a loss altogether, she turned to Dalfin, who still knelt beside me, watching her in blank amaze. The Norse gods were all but unknown to him, save perhaps as he had heard their names now and then from the Irish Danes.

“You must be Freyr, you other of the greeters of the slain. Speak for me, I pray you, to the hammer bearer, that I may go whither my grandfather is gone, if so be that I am dead.”



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“Nay, lady,” said Dalfin, with all courtesy, “I do not know him you mean. I am only Dalfin, Prince of Maghera, of the northern O’Neills.”

Now, at that magnificent “only” I saw Bertric trying to stifle somewhat like a grin beyond the shoulder of his charge.

“Lady,” he said, “we are but mortal men. We are here to help you, for the ship has not taken fire, and you are safe.”

She gave a little gasp and sank back on the roll of canvas we had set for a pillow, and her eyes closed. I put back the last timber hastily, and came aft, getting out of sight behind the bedstead, being in no wise willing to be hailed as Thor again. As for Dalfin, he poured out another cup of the wine and gave it to Bertric, who had signed to him for it.

“She will be herself directly,” he said sagely. “Who was it that she took me for?”

“Only a heathen god, and a worthy one,” answered the Saxon, setting the cup to the lips of the girl, and making her drink some of its contents slowly. “Neither you nor Malcolm will ever be held quite so highly again. Make the most of it.”

I think that he meant the lady to hear him speak thus cheerfully, and it is certain that she did so. A little wan smile flitted across her face, and then she flushed red, and opened her eyes. Her first glance fell on the penthouse, and she shuddered somewhat. Then she sat up and looked round for us, seeing Bertric for the first time, as he stood at the head of the rough couch.

“Forgive me, friends,” she said quietly. “I think I was not quite myself. I must have been in a long swoon. There was smoke also rising round me when last I knew anything.”

Now she slipped from the bedstead and set her feet on the deck, facing us. I saw her look pass quickly over our dress, and minded that we were in no holiday trim. She saw Bertric in the thrall’s dress, and Dalfin in his torn and scorched and sea-stained green hunting tunic and leather hose, and myself only in the Norse dress, and that war torn and grimed with the fight in the hall, which seemed so many years ago now, and with the long sea struggle that came thereafter. Yet she did not shrink from us.

“I cannot understand it all,” she said. “How comes it that you are here, and thus? You seem as men who have fought, and are hardly yet restored after the weariness of fight.”

“We have fought, lady, and have fared ill. We were captives and have escaped; and as we fled by sea we fell in with this ship when at our wits’ end.”

So I answered, for my comrades looked at me. The fight was mine, so to speak.



“It seems well for me,” she said, smiling somewhat sadly. “I had no thought but to be burnt. Now I have escaped that. Tell me how it may have been.”

I did so, wondering all the time how she came to be in that terrible place, for she spoke of escape. That she would tell us in her own time, no doubt.



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“What can be done now?” she asked, speaking to us as to known friends, very bravely.

If she had doubts of us, she hid them. Perhaps that we owed to being escaped captives explained much to her—else she had surely wondered that the tattered Dalfin claimed to be a prince. Yet he was princely, both in look and bearing, as he rose up and made himself known, with a bow which none but a courtier could have compassed.

“Bertric is shipmaster,” I said; “he will answer.”

“The ship is yours, lady, and we can but serve you,” he answered. “Now, it depends on the wind when it comes with dawn, as no doubt it will, what course we can take, for we are too few to work the ship rightly. We had thought of trying to make the Norway shore at the nearest point we could reach, and so setting the ship, and the hero who lies in her, in the hands of those who will do him the honour that he needs at the last.”

At that, to our great surprise, she shook her head.

“That you cannot do; at least, you may not go back to the land whence he came. Hall and town may be in the hands of our worst foe, else I had not been here.”

“We cannot be sure of making your haven in any case. We should have sought such haven as we might, had we been alone.”

“And you thought nothing of the treasure, which will be surely taken from you?”

“We had not thought of it, lady. We have been on board the ship but three hours or so. What thought might have come to us I cannot say. But it is not ours, and we could not rob the dead.”

He said that quite simply, and as the very truth, which must be to us as a matter of honour.

“Tell me who you are,” she said. “The prince I know already. Dalfin, I think it was, an Irish name.”

Dalfin bowed again, well pleased. Then he took on himself to make us known in turn, as gravely as if in his father’s court.

“This is my host, Malcolm, son of the Norse Jarl of Caithness, who has unfortunately succeeded his brave father after a gallant fight, in which I was honoured in taking part. This is Bertric the Thane, of Lyme, in England, a shipmaster of long standing. He joined us when we two escaped from Heidrek, who calls himself the Seafarer, and held us captive after burning out my host and his folk.”



“Heidrek the Seafarer!” she said, with a sharp sigh, looking up in wonder at us. “When was it that he did this harm to you?”

“It was three days ago,” I answered. “He fell on us at dawn, and by noon we were at sea with him as captives. That same night we escaped, thanks to the young chief, Asbiorn.”

“Then he came straightway from your home and fell on mine,” she said gravely. “Surely the wrath of the Asir will fall on Heidrek ere long, if, indeed, the Asir care aught what a warrior does of wrong.”

“Has he burnt you out also, lady?” asked Dalfin.

“That I doubt,” she answered shortly. “But it was with his help that I myself was set afloat to be burned.”



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Then her strength seemed to give way at last as the fullness of her trouble came to her, and she turned from us and sank down sideways on the bed where she sat, and wept silently. It was hard for us to stand and see this; but we were helpless, not at all knowing what we could do. I suppose that we could have done nothing, in truth; but it seemed as if we ought to have been of some help in word, at least.

At last she ceased, and sat up again, trying to smile.

“Yesterday, I had thought myself far from such foolishness as this,” she said. “Today, I know that this mail and helm of mine and the sword that lies yonder in the chamber where you found me are not fitting for me. They are an idle boast and empty. I am only a weak woman—and alone.”

Almost was she to breaking down again, but she was brave. And then Bertric spoke for the three of us.

“Lady,” he said, “we are homeless wanderers, but we would not have you think yourself altogether alone so long as we can plan for you. Mayhap we can do no more, but, at least, we shall see. I cannot think that all hope is lost. See, we have the ship, and it is high summer. Not one of us can be worse off than we have been of late, and we may win to comfort once more.”

Thereat she looked at the three of us, and rose up and stretched her hands toward us, as in greeting.

“I will trust you,” she said. “I will think of you as friends and brothers in trouble, and in enmity to Heidrek the evildoer. It must be that you three have wrought loyally together through the long storm, and you can never be aught but friends thereafter, for you have tried one another. Let me be as the fourth of you without favour.”

“Lady,” said Dalfin, “I have sisters at home, and they were wont to share all the sport of myself and my brothers, even as you say, as of our number without favour. But always the sisters had the favoured place, because we willed it, and should be unhappy if it were otherwise. There were some favours which they held as their unspoken right.

“Is not that so in your land, Bertric the Thane, and in yours, friend Malcolm the Jarl?”

Truly this Dalfin knew how to set things in the right way, for even I, who had no sisters, was not left out of that answer. So we both said that he was right, and she knew well what we meant, and was content. Moreover, by naming our titles once again, though they were barren enough here in all truth, he told her that it was on our honour to help her.



“I am more than content,” she said softly. “I am no longer friendless. Now I will tell you what befell me, and then you shall plan what you may, not in anywise thinking too much of me, but for all four of us.”

She set the blue cloak round her as if chill, and was silent, thinking for a few minutes. Bertric and I leant on the gunwale close by, and Dalfin set himself on the deck near us. And all the while she spoke, Bertric was glancing eastward across the still water for the first sign of the breeze we longed for. I know now that on him was a dread lest it should bring with it the brown sails of Heidrek’s two ships; but he did not show it. It was likely that men would have watched for the smoke of the burning ship, and that when they did not see it, would put out to search, guessing what had happened.



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“Yonder lies my grandfather,” the lady said presently. “He was a king in the old days before Harald made himself the one ruler in the land who should so call himself. But he cared not at all for the name, so that he held his own place among his own people, and therefore let it be, for he was a friend of Harald’s and helped him to the one throne. Whereby we have lived in peace till just now, when the old chief grew feeble. Then came my far cousin, Arnkel, and would take first place, for my father, the old man’s son, was dead. That my grandfather would not suffer. He would have me rule, for I should not be the first woman who had done so in his little realm. One of my ancestresses fought as a shield maiden—as I thought myself until today—in the great Bravalla fight long ago. It is her mail which I have on now. Arnkel pretended to agree to this, being crafty. It pleased the chief, and deceived me—till yesterday. Then at last I knew that he did but wait for the death of my grandfather, Thorwald, and then would get rid of me and my claims. So Thorwald died, and we would set him in his ship and build a mound over her in all honour. But to do that must sail her from up the long fjord, where we have our place, to a low shore which lies open to the sea near its mouth, for with us is no place where we may find such a spot as we needed. A little village of ours is there on the coast, at which we might beach and draw up the ship; and so we made all ready, even as you see it now, save for closing the chamber, and sailed thither after the storm had passed, in the bright night. There we beached the ship, with the rollers under her, while the people made ready the place for the mound.

“Then suddenly, from over the near hills came Heidrek and his men, and fell on us as the folk worked. I sat on the deck here alone at that time, clad thus for the last rites, and saw the warriors swarm out of a little valley on my folk, and rose up to go to them with my arms. Then came Arnkel on board in haste, and bade me shelter in the chamber. The ship was to be set afloat lest the fight should go against us. But I would not go.”

There she stopped, and a look of remembered terror crossed her face.

“He had two men with him; and all the rest—our courtmen and the freemen who loved me, as I think—were running to the fight. So they made no more ado, but carried me thither, bound me that I might not cry out, and then set up the timbers hastily and fastened them. So I must lie helpless and hear what went on. They went ashore, and soon the ship groaned and creaked over the rollers, but stopped before she was afloat. Men came then and cast things on board, which were the fagots and the peat for firing; but I could not cry out, for my head was too closely muffled. I think you would say that I was gagged. The noise of the fight went on, and seemed to come nearer. Then the ship took the water. I heard men leap on board her, and the sail was hoisted.



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One cried that the chief would have a fitting funeral after all, Heidrek or no Heidrek; and another said that the treasure Heidrek sought would be lost to him. I heard the creak of the yard, and I felt the ship swing to the wind, and then the men went over the side, and there was silence. Only from the shore after a little space came a great cry, 'Skoal to King Thorwald, and farewell!' and with that the war horns blew fiercely, and the battle cry rang again. Then came the terrible stifling smoke, and I knew that Arnkel had thus rid himself of me.

"Presently I freed myself from the gag and the bonds, and tried to beat down the end of the house, but I could not. I took an axe from the wall, feeling for it in the darkness, but I waxed faint and breathless, and the roof is low and I could not use it. I mind that I set it back; and that is all until I woke here to see, as I thought, Thor with his hammer and Freyr beside him, and so—"

That was all; and it was enough. Only Dalfin had one question to ask.

"I wonder this evil Arnkel parted with the treasure so lightly."

"My folk would not have let him lay hands on it in any case," she answered plainly. "And they would keep it from Heidrek."

"That is how the men of Heidrek fell on us," I said. "He must have landed his men beyond your sight, but not far off."

"There were two ships seen passing north in the storm," she said. "They will have been his, and he must have berthed them in some near fjord. There he would hear of this that was to be, and of the treasure which the old king took with him to his grave."

Then Bertric said thoughtfully enough:

"It may well be that the fight has gone hardly for Heidrek, else I think that he would have put off to follow the ship before this. After all, it may be that we can sail back to your fjord and tell this tale to your folk, and so make an end of Arnkel and his misdeeds. Now, lady—for as yet we do not know your name—we will rig the forward awning for you, and there you shall sleep. Here is this bed, and if there is aught else—"

"My name is Gerda," she answered, smiling. "I forgot that you could not know it. Yes, I am weary, and what you will do is most kind. See, there is one chest there which I would have with me. It holds the gear that was my grandmother's, and I may surely use it in my need. I had never to ask my grandsire for aught but he would give it me."

We had all ready in very little time, and there we left her, and she smiled at us and thanked us again, and so let fall the awning curtains and was gone. Then we three



went aft and sat down and looked at one another. We had a new care thrust on us, and a heavy one.

Chapter 5: Vision And Pursuit.

Bertric walked backward and forward, as a seaman ever will, across the deck, whistling softly to himself, and looking eastward.



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“Once,” he said, as if thinking aloud, “I was foolish enough to buy a bag full of wind from a Finn. He said that it depended on how much I let out what sort of breeze I had. When he was out of my reach, I found that he had not told me from which quarter the wind would come. So I hove the thing overboard. Now I wish I had it. Any wind is better than this doubt of what may come.”

“Aye,” I said. “We may be blown back into the arms of old Heidrek. What say you to taking one of these boats, or fitting out our own with their oars, and so trying to make the coast? Even Heidrek would pay no heed to a boat.”

“We may have to do that yet,” answered my friend. “Heidrek is not coming, or he would have sought this ship under oars at once. That Arnkel must have beaten him soundly—is that likely?”

“I think so,” I said. “Every warrior would be in his war gear at that funeral, and it would be a full gathering of the king’s folk. Now, I wonder how Arnkel explained the making away of the lady to her people.”

“One may think of many lies he could tell. Men do not heed what goes on behind them when a fight is on hand. He will say that she fled, or that Heidrek’s men took her—as the fight may go. They will search for her, in the first case, and presently think her lost for good.”

“If there is one thing which I should like more than another,” said Dalfin, “it would be to see Arnkel’s face when we take back the lady.”

“So we may—but not yet. We must know where Heidrek is. And we have to wait for wind. Eh, well! We had better sleep. I will take first watch.”

“No, Bertric,” I said; “do you two sleep. I could not if I tried.”

“Why not?” he asked, with a great yawn. “I could sleep anywhere at this minute, and Dalfin is as bad.”

“I think that I could not sleep with yonder chief so near me,” I said frankly.

Dalfin laughed, though Bertric did not; but without more ado, they took the sail from the nearest boat and rolled themselves under it on the after deck. They were asleep in a moment, knowing that I would call them with the first sign of wind, if it came before my watch was ended. It wanted about an hour to midnight at this time, and the red glow of the sun in the sky was flooding the north.

Now for a long while I paced the deck, thinking of all that had happened in these few days. Heavy things they were, but the heaviest were those of the summer morning

when Heidrek came, so that beside those terrors what else had passed was as nothing. And I passed through them all again, as it were, and hardened myself to bear them.



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I have said little or nothing of my folk, and I needed not to do so. They were gone, and from henceforth I was alone. What had been was no more for me. Even the little Norse village in Caithness, which had been my home, was destroyed, so far as I was concerned, for the Scots would have stepped into our place, if it was worth having after the fire and sword had been there. I could never regain it. Only, there were some things which I owed to my father, and no man could take them from me while I lived. Skill in arms I had from his teaching, and such seamanship as a man of two-and-twenty may have learned in short cruises; woodcraft, too, and the many other things which the son of a jarl should know. And with these, health and strength, and a little Scots coolness, maybe; for I could see that if aught was to be won, I had only myself to look to for the winning.

So I, in the weird twilight that had fallen now with midnight, thought and tried to foresee what should be in the days to come, and could plan nothing. Only I knew that now, for the time at least, I and these two friends who slept had the lady yonder to care for before ourselves.

I tired of the short walk to and fro presently, and I think that at last I forgot my fears of the dead king in my thoughts, for I went nearer the penthouse, and sat myself on the starboard boat on the deck. There had risen a light curling mist from the still sea now, as the air cooled, and it wrapped the ship round with its white folds, and hid the height of the drooping sails and the dragon head forward; and presently it seemed to me that out of the mist came the wraiths of those of whom I thought, and drew near me, and I had neither fear nor joy of their coming.

My father came and sat himself beside me, and he was as I had seen him last, dressed in his mail, but with a peace on his face instead of the war light. My brothers came, and they stood before us, not smiling, but grave and content. The courtmen whom I had loved came, and they ranged themselves across the deck, and I watched them, and felt no wonder that they should be here. Surely my longings had called them, and they came. So I and they all bided still for a little while; and then the courtmen raised their weapons toward me as in salute, and drifted from the deck into the white mists over the water, and were gone. Then those two mighty brethren of mine smiled on me, with a still smile, and so they, too, were gone, and only my father was left; and he, too, rose up, and stood before me where the brothers had been, and it seemed to me that he spoke to me.

“Now are you the last of our line, the line which goes back to Odin, my son; and on you it lies that no dishonour shall fall on that line, which has never yet been stained. And we trust you. So be strong, for there are deeds to be done yet in the days that lie before you.”

Then he set his hand on my shoulder, and passed to join those others, and how I do not know. I was alone.



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Then a longing to be with them again came over me, and I rose and stretched my hands to the place where I had seen them, but there was nothing—until I turned a little, looking for them; and then I knew that there was one who would speak to me yet.

The penthouse chamber was open, and it seemed to be filled with a white light and soft, and in the doorway stood the old king, beckoning to me, so that, for all my fears, I must needs go to him. Yet there was naught for me to fear in the look which he turned on me.

“Friend,” he said, “the old sea which I love should be my grave. See to it that so it shall be. Then shall you do the bidding of the maiden whom I have loved, my son’s daughter, and it shall be well with you, and with those friends of yours and of mine who sleep yonder.”

Therewith he paused, and his glance went to the things which lay round the boats and in them—the things which had been set in the ship for the hero to take to Asgard with him.

“See these things,” he said again. “They are hers, and not mine. There will be a time when she will have need of them. In the place where I shall be is no need of treasure, as I deemed before I knew. Nor of sword, or mail, or gear of war at all. And the ways of the peace of that place are the best.”

Then I was alone on the deck, and the tall figure with the long white beard and hair was no longer before me. The chamber was closed, even as we had left it, and there was neither sign nor sound to tell me how that had been wrought. And with that a terror came on me, and I went backward toward where my comrades lay, crying to them by name, and my knees failed me, and I fell on the deck, unknowing if they heard.

Bertric leapt up and saw me falling, and ran to me.

“Poor lad!” he said, “poor lad! Here is he worn out by fighting and watching, and I would let him watch yet more—I, who am used to the long hours at sea, and have grown hard in ill usage.”

With that he called to Dalfin, who was sitting up sleepily, being as worn out as myself, and they two hapt me in the sail, and made me drink of the wine—which I would not have done at all, if I had rightly known what I was about, considering whence it came—and presently I came to myself and thanked them, feeling foolish. But more than that I did not do, for the warmth took hold of me, and I fell asleep with the words on my lips. Nor did Dalfin need a second bidding before he lay down again alongside me and slept. And so Bertric went on watch silently, and I heeded nothing more, till the sun and the heave of the ship on a long swell that was setting from the north woke me.



In the sunlight those visions which I had seen seemed as if they had been but wrought of weariness and weakness, and of the long thoughts which I had been thinking. I would heed them as little as I might, therefore, lest they took hold of me again. But I had not forgotten the words which had been spoken to me, for they were good, and in no wise fanciful.



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I said nothing of what had happened before I cried out and fell. There was no need, for both Bertric and Dalvin made little of the matter, saying that it was no wonder, and that maybe I had been more hurt when I was struck down than I felt at the time—which is likely enough. However, I had no more trouble in that way. Food and sleep and the rest on that quiet deck were all that I needed.

“There is wind coming directly, and enough of it, if not too much for us,” Bertric said. “There has been a gale somewhere far north, to judge by this swell. Now, I want breakfast before it comes, but I dare not rouse the lady by getting yon kettle.”

As if she had heard him, from beyond the penthouse we saw the lady herself coming, and we rose up to greet her. Dalvin went quickly, and helped her over the slanting timbers of the house, where they blocked the way, and so she came aft to us. She had taken off her mail, and had put on a warm, blue kirtle over her white dress, and had made some differences otherwise, which are past my setting down. But now she looked fresh and bright after the rest, and the utmost of the trouble had gone from her face.

She greeted us as if we were old friends of her own household, and that was good. Then she sat on the steersman’s bench, which we set for her, and asked of the sea and wind, and the chances of the day, brightly. And so at last Bertric said what was nearest to his mind.

“The wind will be here shortly, lady, and meanwhile we were thinking of our breakfast. Yesterday we had no scruple in helping ourselves, but today we are somewhat shy, maybe. But we would bring the great kettle from forward, if you will break your fast with us.”

“Friend Bertric,” she said, laughing, “we made a pact concerning equal shares of favour and hardship alike. Yet I do not rightly know—”

She looked grave for a little while, staying her words and thinking.

“Aye,” she said at last, with a smile; “this ship was provisioned for a long voyage—for the longest of all, indeed. It seems that for part of the way we have to be her crew. Well, then, we may take what we will of her stores, and do no wrong. The great cauldron, too, holds but part of the funeral feast, and that was mine. Aye, fetch it. There are other things also which may be found, and you can take of them.”

But we had no need to search further, for what we had found last night was more than enough. We brought the cauldron aft, and some of the oatcake; and as we ate, first grew and darkened a long blue line which crossed the sea to the eastward, and then came stray airs which lifted the loose folds of the sail uselessly.



Bertric and I went forward and got out two of the ship's long oars, and pulled her head round to the southward. The water dimpled alongside of us and the sail filled as the breeze came. We laid in the oars and went aft to the helm; and so in a few minutes the ship had gathered way, and was heeling a little to the wind, and the foam gathered round her bows and slid along her side aft as she headed southward with the wind on her beam.



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"Now, Lady Gerda," said Bertric, "we are under way once more, and the question is, Whither? How far are we from the Norway coast?"

"I cannot tell," she answered. "It was a little before noon, however, when the ship was set afloat, as I have told you."

"We overhauled her at sunset," he said thoughtfully. "At that time she was not doing more than four knots. Maybe we are fifty miles from shore, for she may have done better than that, though I doubt it, seeing how wildly she sailed. Now we can hardly beat back there, for we are too few to work the sail."

"It is as well," she answered sadly. "There wait Arnkel and Heidrek."

"We think that Arnkel may have made an end of Heidrek's power," I said.

At that she shook her head.

"Arnkel has had old dealings with Heidrek. He has sailed with him, I know. It is more likely that after he had done with me, he made some sort of terms with him, finding out who the attackers were. We did not know at first, but I heard the men name Heidrek as the ship was fired."

"Well, then," Bertric said, after a little thought, "we must try to make the Shetlands or the Orkneys. Malcolm will find us friends there."

So, that being quite possible if the wind held, and I being sure of welcome for my father's sake, we set a course for Shetland as nearly as we could judge it. The ship sailed wonderfully well and swiftly, even under the shortened canvas, and Bertric was happy as he steered her. And at his side on the bench sat the Lady Gerda, silently looking ever eastward toward the home she had lost, while I and Dalfin well-nigh dozed in the sun on the warm deck amidships in all content, for things went well with us.

Presently Gerda rose up and came forward, as if she would go to her awning, and I went to help her over the timbers again.

"Come forward with me," she said; "I have something I must say to you."

I followed her, and she went to the gunwale, close to the penthouse, where she was screened from Dalfin, and leant on it.

"You are of my own folk," she said, "and of the old faith, and therefore I can tell you what is troubling me. These other two good friends are of the new faith I have heard of, for I saw them sign their holy sign ere they ate, and you signed Thor's hammer over the meat."



“They are Christians,” I said; “but I have nothing ill to say of that faith, for I have known many of them in Scotland. I am Odin’s man.”

“I have heard nothing but ill,” she said. “I was frightened when I knew that they were not Odin’s men. Will they keep faith with me?”

“To the last,” I answered. “Have no fear of that. It is one thing which the Christian folk are taught to do before all else.”

“I think that I could not mistrust these two in any case,” she said; “but all this is not what I would speak of, though it came uppermost. What I am troubling about is this which lies here,” and she set her hand for a moment on the penthouse. “What shall be done? For now we cannot fire the ship.”



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“If we make the Shetland Islands,” I answered, “there are Norsemen who will see that all is done rightly. There they will lay the king in mound as becomes a chief of our land.”

“And if not?”

“We might in any case make the Danish shore.”

“Where a Norse chief will find no honour. Better that he were sunk in the sea here. I would that this might be done, if we have any doubt as to reaching a land where your folk were known.”

“It may be done, Lady Gerda,” I answered, while into my mind came the words which the old chief seemed to have spoken to me in the night. “It may be the best thing in the end. But let us wait. Shall I speak of this to the others for you?”

“Aye, do so,” she said. “What have they thought?—for you three must have spoken thereof already.”

“It has been in the mind of all of us to take the chief back to some land where he will be honoured. We have spoken of naught else as yet. I will say that it has seemed to me that the Christian folk have more care for the honour of the dead than have we.”

“That is all I needed to hear,” she said simply. “I have feared lest it had been rather the other way.”

Now I looked aft, and saw Bertric staring under his hand astern, and stepped to the other gunwale to see what it was at which he looked. But I could make out nothing. The sea was rising a little, but that was of course as the breeze freshened steadily. There was no sign of change or of heavier weather to come, and no dark line along the eastward sea warned me of a coming squall. Yet Bertric still turned from the helm and looked astern.

“What is it?” asked Gerda. “Go and see, and call me if it is aught.”

So I went aft again, and stood beside Bertric, asking him what had caught his eye.

“I cannot say for certain,” he said; “but it seemed to me that for a moment somewhat like a sail lifted on the sea’s rim off yonder.”

He pointed off the port quarter, and turned to the helm again, leaving me to see if I could catch sight of what he had seen. Maybe it was but the dipping wing of a gull.

But it was not that. Presently I also saw the speck he meant, and it did not disappear again. It was the head of a square, brown sail, the ship herself to which it belonged



being hull down, but holding the same course as ourselves, or thereabouts, so far as one could judge as yet. And before long a second hove up from astern the first.

“They are running a bit freer than we,” Bertric said. “They have a shift of wind astern of them, whereby they are overhauling us.”

“Two brown-sailed ships,” said I. “They mind one too much of Heidrek to be pleasant, else one might welcome the coming of any honest Norsemen who would help us to do the right.”

“Wait, and I will tell you,” answered Bertric somewhat grimly. “I cannot mistake Heidrek’s ships once I get a fair sight of them.”



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In half an hour or so he did tell me. They were undoubtedly Heidrek's, and were in chase of us. This ship was not to be mistaken even from a long distance.

"Heidrek has followed in the track this vessel must needs have taken, and now supposes that some stray fishers have picked her up and are trying to get away with her and the treasure. Well, that is near enough to the truth, too," said Bertric, laughing a short laugh. "No, let Dalfin and the lady rest in peace until we know if they outsail us. This is a wonderful little craft, but she needs her crew on board."

Chapter 6: A Sea Queen's Champions.

We were sailing with the easterly wind on our beam, and making maybe six knots on it, with the two reefs down. The full crew of such a ship as this for such a cruise without any warlike ending to it would be about twenty, or perhaps a few less. She pulled sixteen oars a side, and with a war crew on board would muster ninety-six men—three to an oar—with a few extra hands, as the helmsman and the chiefs, to make a total of a hundred. Her decks would be crowded, of course, but she would be down to her bearings, being built for war cruises, and in a breeze all her men would be sitting up to windward as shifting ballast, so to speak. It is not likely, therefore, that we could have done much better had we managed to shake out the reefs, seeing that the ship was light. Her pebble ballast had been taken out when she was drawn up for the last time on shore, and in the hurry it had been needless to replace it.

So the two pirate longships overhauled us fast, and presently their low, black hulls were plain to us. It was time we did somewhat if we were not to be taken without an effort to escape.

"See here," said Bertric suddenly, "I know somewhat too well how those ships can sail; but I think that this ship would beat them in a reach to windward. That, of course, would run us in toward the Norway shore, and I have ever heard that it is as dangerous as any. I do not know it, but the Lady Gerda may do so. If the worst came to the worst, it is in my mind that we might take to the boat and let the ship go her own way, if she is beyond our handling when we make the shore."

"If we can sight land, it is possible that we may be sighted also," said I. "It seems our only chance. I will call Gerda."

Bertric nodded, and I went forward and called her accordingly, rousing Dalfin, who slumbered in the sun under the lee of the boats amidships, as I passed him.

Gerda came quickly from her awning as she heard me, and saw the two ships at once. They were then some eight miles astern of us, and she looked at me with an unspoken question.

“They are Heidrek’s ships,” I said. “We have to try one last chance of outsailing them.”

“Anything rather than that we should fall into such hands,” she said at once.



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Now Bertric told her what seemed to be our one plan, and she answered that she was well content to be guided by us. Neither she nor we knew rightly where we were, nor how far it might be to the coast. But she did know that everywhere that shore was belted by rocky islands, and sea-washed skerries.

“You may be able to steer into safety between them,” she said. “You may split the ship on some half-sunk rock not far from the land, and so we ourselves may be saved in the boat. I think that is the best—for so may come a sea grave for my grandfather—and no enemy’s hand shall touch him or his.”

Then said Bertric, with set teeth, “If we may not outsail Heidrek, it will be my part to sink one of his ships with our own, if it may be done.”

“Aye,” she said. “Do so.”

Therein I was altogether with them, and Dalfin smiled a strange smile in assent.

“You would steer this ship against the other?” he asked. “Then I suppose that over the bows here might go on board that other a man with an axe, and smite one blow or two before he is ended. It will be well enough if so.”

“You shall have your chance,” said I. “Maybe I will help.”

Now we said no more. Bertric luffed, and we flattened in the sheet, Gerda hauling with us, laughing, and saying that it was not for the first time. Then Bertric’s face cleared, for the ship went to windward like a swallow, her length helping her in spite of her lightness. We had to cut adrift our boat at this time, as she would hinder us. We had no more need of her.

Heidrek altered his course at once, sailing a point or two more free than we, either, as Bertric thought, because he could lie no closer to the wind, or else meaning to edge down on us. And, he being so far to windward, for a time it seemed as if he neared us fast.

In two hours we knew that we outsailed him, close hauled. Little by little we gained to windward, until he was three miles astern of us and losing still more rapidly, as he went to leeward. He could not look up to the wind any closer. One of his ships, indeed, was astern and to leeward of the other, so that if that one only had had to be counted with, we were safe.

Then he took to his oars, and Bertric and I knew that the worst was yet to come, as we saw the sun flash from the long row of rising and falling blades across the miles of sea.

“Some of them will be mighty tired yet before they overhaul us,” I said. “A stern chase is a long chase.”



Now I began to look restlessly for some sign of the high land of the Norway shore, but there was naught to be seen. Only to eastward the sky was dull and grayish, as it were with the loss of light in the sky over hill and forest. And Heidrek was gaining on us steadily if very slowly. We were very silent at this time.

Presently Gerda broke the silence.

“Friend Bertric,” she said in a still voice, “how long have we?”



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He glanced back at the ships, and answered her, after a moment's thought.

"Two hours—or maybe three, if the men who row tire—that is if the wind holds. If it freshens, we may beat them yet."

"I hear that you doubt that last," she said. "Now, is it still in your minds to die rather than fall into the hands of yon men?"

"Lady," said I, "we three would have no care for ourselves. We have to think of you."

"I will die, sooner," she answered, with set lips.

"Then," said Bertric simply, "it shall be as I have said. We will ram the pirate ship and sink with her."

Then Gerda rose up and looked at the three of us, and her face grew bright.

"Now I have one thing to ask you," she said, "and that is to let me arm you once more. It is not fitting that you three should fall and pass to Asgard all unlike warriors—in that thrall-like gear.

"Come with me, Malcolm, and bring what I shall find for you."

I followed her until she stayed at the entrance to the penthouse, and I half feared that she would bid me open and enter it. In truth, we had almost forgotten what lay there, but now I could not but remember, and the old dread came back to me. But she did not do so. She pointed to one of the great chests which had been stowed between the boats, and bade me open it. I had to tug at it to bring it forward, for it was heavy, and then threw the lid back.

It was full of mail, and with the close-knit ring shirts were helms, and some few short, heavy swords.

"War spoils of the old days before Harald Fairhair," she said. "When my grandfather had many foes, and knew how to guard himself. All these would have been rent and spoiled before they were laid in the ship mound—but at the last there was not time—thus."

Now she called to Dalfin, and he came eagerly, with a cry of delight on seeing the war gear.

"Lift them, and choose what you will for yourselves and Bertric," she said. "It will be strange if, among all, you do not find what will suit you."



Now there was no difficulty in finding suits of the best for the other two. There were seven in all in the chest, and we set two aside. Dalfin was tall and slight, and very active, and Bertric was square and sturdy, and maybe half a head shorter than either of us. But after the way of my forebears, both Norse and Scottish, I was somewhat bigger than most men whom I have met, though not so much in height as in breadth of shoulder. Maybe, however, I was taller than Dalfin, for I think he was not over six feet.

So it happened that as Dalfin, in all light-heartedness, as if no enemy was nearer than Ireland, took up suit after suit of the bright ring mail and stretched them across my shoulders, trying to fit me, not one of these would do by any means. Gerda stood by us, watching quietly.

“It does not matter,” I said at last. “Let me have a weapon, and I shall not be the first of us who has fallen unmailed.”



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“No,” said Gerda, “it is my fancy that my champions shall be well armed. Open the small chest yonder.”

I did so, and in that lay a most beautiful byrnie and helm, if anything better than those we had been choosing from. It was the only suit here, and Gerda looked wistfully at it.

“Take that one, Malcolm,” she said. “It will fit you. It was one of my father’s—and I had a fancy that Thorwald would take it to him in Asgard, for he lies on the Swedish shore, and it might not be laid in the mound with him. Now you shall bear it to him, and he will greet you.”

“I am not worthy to wear it,” I stammered. “It is too sacred to you.”

“No,” she answered. “I ask you to do so, and I think you will not refuse.”

Now I saw in the face of Dalfin that he thought it right that I should take the mail, and so I did. We went with the three suits and the helms back to Bertric, and so put them on, Gerda helping us, and I taking the tiller when it was Bertric’s turn. Even in this little while one could see that Heidrek’s leading ship had gained on us.

It was more than good to be in the mail of a free man and warrior once more. Dalfin shook himself, as a man will to settle his byrnie into place, and his eyes shone, and he leapt on the deck, crying:

“Now am I once more a prince of Maghera, and can look a foe—aye, and death, in the face joyfully. My thanks, dear lady, for this honour!”

Then he broke into a wild song in his own tongue, and paced the deck as if eager for the coming of Heidrek, and the promised crash of the meeting ships. And as suddenly he stopped, and looked at his hands.

“Faith,” he said, “I thought the song went amiss. It is the song of the swinging swords—and never a sword have I—nor either of us.”

Gerda laughed at him. It seemed that the pleasure of her champions, as she called us, in the war gear pleased her.

“Swords you shall have,” she said at once. “I did but wait.”

“For what, lady?” asked Dalfin.

She smiled and reddened somewhat, looking down on the deck.



“One can hardly be mistaken as to whether a man is used to war gear,” she said. “Now I see you three—prince, jarl, and thane—as I might have known you to be at first. Forgive me for the little doubt.”

Seeing what sort of scarecrows we must have been, we did not wonder at all that she had doubted. And, after all, not every day are three men of rank of different lands to be found adrift in an open boat, simply as it had come about in our case.

“It would have been a wonder if you had not doubted,” said Bertric. “We have naught to forgive, and, indeed, have held ourselves honoured that you took our words as you did. In all truth, I do feel myself again in mail, and so must Malcolm.”

I did, and said so. There are thoughts knit up in the steel ringwork which are good for a man.



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“The swords are in yon chamber,” Gerda said quickly, not being very willing, mayhap, to speak more in this wise. “I will ask Malcolm, for he is a Norseman, to come and choose them.”

That was the last thing I wished, but would not say so. Without a word I went forward with her to the penthouse, and took down the three loose timbers again. The dim chamber seemed very still, and across its dimness the shafts of sunlight—which came through the chinks in the rough timbering of walls and roofs—shifted and glanced as if alive, as the ship swayed. One golden ray lit on the still face of the old king, and it was almost as if he smiled as we stood in the doorway. Gerda saw it, and spoke softly, stepping to the side of the bier.

“It shall please you to arm these warriors who will seek Valhalla with you, my grandfather. You were wont to arm the friends who would be ready to fall at your side.”

A wave lifted the ship and swung her, and the shaft of light swayed across the chamber, sparkling on the arms which hung from the timbers. It lit up the hilt of a gold-runed sword for a moment, and then was gone.

“That is for you, Malcolm the Jarl,” Gerda said. “Take it. Then choose for the others.”

Then I unhelmed and stooped and went into the chamber, and took down the sword which the sunbeam had shown me. It hung from its own baldric with an axe and a round shield. Gerda bade me take the shield also, and I did so. Now I could see well enough to choose for the others, for the dimness was but the change from the sunshine outside on deck. I took a lighter weapon for Dalfin, and a heavy, short sword for Bertric, and with them shields. No long choice was needed, for not one of the weapons but was of the best. So I turned, and came forth from the chamber, and gave the weapons to Gerda, while I closed it once more. I think she bade the king farewell at that time.

“You have my father’s sword also,” she said to me softly. “I think that if you have but a little time to wear these things which he loved, you will not dishonour them.”

She gave me no time to say more, and I do not know what I could have answered, save that I hoped that I might be worthy. Little chance of much fighting were we likely to have—and yet there was just a hope that we might fall in a ring of foes on the deck of the pirate.

Gerda buckled on those weapons for us. And then Dalfin must end his song, and it was good to see and hear him, if only he and myself understood the words. But Heidrek crept up to us all the time, if we forgot him for the moment under the spell of the wild song.



The clear voice ceased, for the song was ended. A dimness crept across the decks, and the sail shivered and filled again. Bertric looked up at the sky and out to windward, and his face changed.

“What is it?” asked Gerda anxiously.

“Running into a fog bank,” he said. “Look ahead.”



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One could not see it. Only it was as if the ring of sea to windward had of a sudden grown smaller. Heidrek was not a mile astern of us, and still his ships were in bright sunshine. Even as we watched them, a grayness fell on them, and then they grew dim.

Then the fog closed in on us, and swallowed us up, and drifted across the decks so thickly that we could barely see from gunwale to gunwale, damp, and chilling. Still, the wind did not fail us, hurrying the fog before it.

“We must hold on until we know if this is but a bank of fog, or if it is everywhere,” Bertric said. “What say you, Malcolm?”

I thought a while, knowing the cold sea fogs of the north pretty well.

“Heidrek will be in it by this time,” I said. “Fog bank or more, I would about ship and run back past him with the wind. If it is a bank, we shall go with it, and he must lose us. If it is more, we can get on our southward course in it shortly, and if he sights us again, he will have all his work to catch us, for his men will be tired of rowing.”

“What if the fog lifts directly?”

“We shall be little worse off than now—and we shall be heading down on Heidrek before he knows it.”

“Aye,” he answered, “with way enough on us to sink him offhand, and maybe take this ship clear through his. Get to the sheets, you and Dalfin, and we will chance it.”

Bertric luffed, and we hauled the tack amidships. Then he paid off to the wind, and we slacked off the sheet with the help of a turn of its fall round the great cleat of the backstay. The wash of the waves round the bows ceased, and there was only the little hiss of the water as the sea broke alongside of us. It always seems very silent for a little while when one puts about for a run after beating to windward.

“Listen,” said Bertric under his breath, “we shall hear Heidrek directly on the starboard bow somewhere. Pray Heaven he has not changed his course, or we shall hit him! He will not have luffed any more, for certain.”

“Suppose he thinks that we have tried some such trick as this?” said Dalfin.

Bertric shook his head.

“He thinks we shall go on as we steered, making for the Norway shore. It is likely that he will think that we may have paid off a bit, for the sake of speed. Even if he did think we were likely to do this, what could he do? He cannot tell, and to put about and run on the chance would be to give away his advantage if we had held on after all. Listen!”



“I hear him,” said Gerda, who was leaning on the gunwale with parted lips, intent on catching any sound.

The sound she had heard came nearer and nearer as we slid silently through the water into the blinding fog. It was like a dull rumble at first, and then as a trampling, until the roll and click of the long, steadily pulled oars was plain to us. The ship was passing us, and not more than an arrow flight from us. It seemed almost impossible that we should not see her.



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Suddenly, there came a sharp whistle, and the roll of the oars ceased. Gerda started away from the gunwale and looked at us, and Dalfin set his hand on his sword hilt. It was just as if they had spied us, and I half expected to see the tall stemhead of the ship come towering through the thickness over our rail. There was nothing to tell us how fast we were going through the water, and we seemed still. I saw Bertric smiling.

“Shift of rowers,” he said in a whisper, and Gerda’s pale face brightened. Then I heard Heidrek rating someone, and I heard, too, the tramp and rattle of the men who left and came to the oars; but by the time the steady pull began again we had passed the ship by a long way, and lost the sound almost as soon as it came. Then there was silence once more, and the strain was past. Our course would take us clear of the other ship by a mile or more.

So we held on for half an hour, and the fog grew no thinner. Overhead, the sun tried to shine through it, but we could not see him, and still the wind drifted us and the fog together, and the decks grew wet and the air chill with the damp which clung round us.

Gerda sat very still for a long time after the last sounds were heard. But at last she rose up and shivered.

“Let me go to my awning,” she said unsteadily. “I have seen three brave men look death in the face, and they have not flinched—I will never wear mail or sword again.”

Then she fled forward, and something held us back from so much as helping her to cross that barrier. We knew that she was near to breaking down, and no wonder.

There fell an uneasy silence on us when she was within the shelter of the awning and its folds closed after her. Dalfin broke it at last.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose that you two seamen know which way you are steering in the fog—but it passes me to know how.”

Bertric and I laughed, and were glad of the excuse to do so. We told him that we steered by the wind, which had not changed. But now we had only one course before us. We must needs head south and try to make the Shetlands. Eastward we might not sail for fear of Heidrek, and westward lay the open ocean. Still, we held on for half an hour, and then, still shrouded in the white folds of the fog, headed south as nearly as we might judge.

In an hour the wind fell. The fog darkened round us as the sun wore to the westward, and the sea went down until only the long ocean swell was left, lifting the ship easily and slowly without breaking round her. There was naught to be done; but, at least Heidrek could not find us.



“There may be days to come like this,” Bertric said, with a sort of groan. “What is to be planned for him who lies yonder?”

Now, I told them what Gerda had said to me, and I could see that Bertric was relieved to hear her thought of a sea burial.

“I had thought of the same,” he said at once. “It is not fitting that here the old warrior should be drifted to and fro, well nigh at the mercy of the wind, with the chances of a lee shore or of folk who make prey of hapless seafarers presently. A sea burial such as many a good man of our kin has found will be best. I could ask no more for myself.”



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“And what of the treasure?” I asked. “Shall that go with him?”

“It is Gerda’s, and she must say,” he answered. “Yet she will need it.”

Then Dalfin said:

“It will be hard to tell her so, but she must not part with it. It stands between her and want, if it may be saved for her. Yet, if it was the will of the old king that it should be set in his grave, I do not know how we can persuade her to keep it. He is not here to say that he does not need it; for he has learnt that now.”

I glanced at the penthouse with the thought of that strange vision of mine. I could not tell my comrades of it, but I thought that, if need was, I might tell Gerda presently. I said in answer to Dalfin that he was right, and that we must set the matter thus before Gerda.

“The sooner the better,” said Bertric. “Do you go and speak with her. We must not let the night pass without this being done, as I think”

Chapter 7: The Treasure Of The King.

Gerda heard me coming, and met me at the same spot where we had first spoken of this matter. She saw that I had come to tell her what we had said thereof.

“What of the others?” she asked anxiously.

“They have spoken in all thought for you, even as I knew they would,” I answered. “We are at one in thinking that the sea grave is most fitting.”

She asked me why, as if to satisfy some doubts which she yet had, and I must needs tell her therefore what our own dangers were, though I made as light of them as I could. I told of the perils of a lee shore to this under-manned ship; of the chance of meeting another ship at any time here on the Norway coast; of crews and of wreckers who would hold naught sacred; of the chance of our drifting thus idly for many days in this summer weather—all chances which were more likely than the quiet coming to the islands where my father’s name was known and honoured enough for us to find help. From these chances it was best to save the king, who was our care, and at once. She heard me very bravely to the end.

“So let it be,” she said, sighing. “You will suffer the treasure to go with him?”

“That is as you will, lady,” I said; “it is yours. Was it the wish of Thorwald that it should pass to the mound with him?”



She glanced at me, half proudly and half as in some rebuke.

“Thorwald would ask for naught but his arms,” she said. “The treasure was mine, for he did but hoard to give. I would set him forth as became Odin’s champion. He was no gold lover.”

“Should it not be, then, as he would have wished?” I said. “Let him pass to the depths with his war gear, and so through Aegir’s halls to the place of Odin, as a warrior, and unburdened with the gold he loved not at all.”

She looked sharply at me, and shrank away a little, half turning from me.

“Is the treasure so dear to you men after all?” she asked coldly.



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That angered me for the moment, and I felt my face flush red, but I held myself in.

“No,” I answered as coldly. “These arms you have given us are all the treasure we need or could ask. They are a warrior’s treasure, and mayhap we hold them as dear as did Thorwald. What else may lie in those chests we do not know or care, save only for one reason.”

“What is that?” she asked, glancing at me again as if she knew that she had spoken unkindly.

“That if it goes into the sea depths it leaves you, Lady Gerda, helpless. When you were at home, with your folk round you, the hoarded spoils might be spent in all honour to their winner without thought of why he had kept them thus. Now, in the power they have for you lies your comfort, and maybe the regaining of your home. Doubtless, the king hoarded at last for you, and we cannot see your wealth pass from you without a word to bid you think twice of what you do here and as things are.”

“Aye,” she said bitterly, “I am helpless—beholden to you three strangers,” and she turned away swiftly, going to the gunwale and leaning her arms and head on it as in a storm of grief.

Hard words indeed those seemed; but I knew well enough that they were meant in no unkindness. They came from the depths of her utter loneliness. Only a day or two ago she had been the queen in her little realm, and now—well, I did not wonder at her. Few women in her place would have kept the brave heart she did before us, and this weakness would pass. But it was a long while before she turned to me again, so that I began to fear that in some way I had set things too bluntly before her, and wished that Dalfin had been sent to manage better in his courtly way. Yet, I had only spoken the truth in the best manner I could. At last she straightened herself, and looked once more at me. There was the light of a wan smile on her face, too, though she had been weeping.

“Forgive me, jarl,” she said softly. “I have wronged you and those good friends of ours by my foolish words. Indeed, I hardly knew what I said, for I was hard pressed with the thoughts of what had been. I do believe that you three have not a thought of yourselves in this matter.”

She set her hand on my arm pleadingly, and I raised it and kissed it in answer, having no word at all to say. After all, I do not know that any was needed.

“Then I am forgiven?” she said more brightly. “Now, tell me what may be done if I keep the treasure. I must needs hear good reasons.”



Good reasons enough there were, and they needed no long setting into words. If she had not enough to raise men and so win back her home from Arnkel, at least there must be sufficient to keep her in comfort in any land until she could find a passage back to Norway, and claim guardianship and help from Thorwald's friends. We could and would help her in either way. She heard me to the end, and then sighed a little, and said that I was altogether right.



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“Whether aught of these plans may come to pass is a matter which the Norns {1} have in their hands,” she said. “We shall see. But now I am sure that I may not lightly part with the treasure as I had meant, though it is hard for me to forego what I had set my heart on. It is true that all was hoarded for me—at least since my father died. It is well that Thorwald never knew the sore need there would be for what he could set by for me.”

Then I tried to tell her that all our wish was to lighten the trouble as much as we might, but she stayed me, laughing as if well content.

“Nay; but you shall mind that pact which we made at the first, neither more nor less.”

She signed to me to go to the others and set all in readiness for what must be done; but as I bowed and turned to go, she stayed me.

“For us Norse folk,” she said, “there is one word needed, perhaps. I heard my men cry the last farewell to Thorwald as the ship left the shore. The temple rites were long over. All that was due to a son of Odin has been done.”

Now, it is needless for me to say that I could not tell all that had passed. All I had to say was that Gerda was content with our plan, and all three of us were somewhat more easy in our minds. It had been by no means so certain that she would be so.

Now we made no more delay, but quietly and reverently Bertric showed us how to make all ready for such a sea burial as he had many a time seen before. So it was not long before the old king lay with his feet toward the sea on the fathom of planking which we had lowered from where it was made to unship for a gangway amidships for shore-going and the like. We had set him so that it needed but to raise the inboard end of this planking when the time came that he should pass from his ship to his last resting in the quiet water; and he was still in all his arms, with his hands clasped on the hilt of his sword beneath the shield which covered his breast, but now shrouded in the new sail of one of his boats in the seaman’s way.

At this time the fog was thinning somewhat, and the low sun seemed likely to break through it now and then. It was very still all round us, for there was no sound of ripple at the bows or wash of water alongside, and the swell which lifted us did not break. Only there was the little creaking of the yard and the light beating of the idle sail against the mast as the ship rolled and swung to the swell. Some little draught of wind, or the send of the waves, had set her bows to it, and she rode the water like a sea bird at rest.

Gerda came at a word when all was ready, and stood beside us with clasped hands. And so for a little time we four stood with a space between us and the head of that rough sea bier, and over against us beyond it the open gangway and the heaving, gray water, which now and then rose slowly and evenly almost to the deck level and again

sank away. It was almost as if, when the end had come, that we waited for some signal which there was none to give.



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What those two of the other faith had said to one another I do not know; but for a little time they stood with bare, bent heads as in one accord, and I saw them make their holy sign on their breasts before they moved. Then Bertric signed to me that I should help him lift the inboard end of the planking, and we stepped forward together and bent to do so. Even as my hands touched the wood there came a sudden rushing, and I felt a new lift of the ship, and into the open gangway poured the head of a great, still wave, flooding the deck around our feet, and hiding in its smother of white foam and green water that which lay before us, so that we must needs start back hastily. The ship lurched and righted herself, and the wave was gone. Gone, too, was the old king—without help of ours. The sea he loved had taken him, drawing him softly to itself with the ebb of the water from the deck, and covering the place alongside, where I had feared for Gerda to see the dull splash and eddy of the end, with a pall of snow-white foam.

For a long moment we stood motionless, half terrified. Neither before this had any sea come on board since we lowered the gunwale nor did any come afterward. Gerda clutched my arm, swaying with the ship, and then she cried in a strange voice:

“It is Aegir! Aegir himself who has taken him!”

That was in my mind also, and no wonder. The happening seemed plainly beyond the natural. I turned to Gerda, fearing lest she should be over terrified, and saw her staring with wide eyes into the mists across that sea grave, wondering; and then of a sudden she pointed, and cried once more:

“Look! what is yonder? Look!”

Then we all saw what she gazed at. As it were about a ship’s length from us sailed another ship, tall and shadowy and gray, holding the same course as ourselves, and keeping place with us exactly, rising and falling over the hills of water as we rose and fell. And we could see that she had the same high dragon stem and stern as our ship, and on her decks we could make out forms of men amidships, dim and misty as the ship herself. Yet though we could see her thus, in no wise could we make out the sea on which she rode—so thick was the curling fog everywhere, though the sun was trying to find a way through it, changing its hue from gray to pearly white. Now, Bertric started from the stillness which held us, and hailed the ship loudly.

“Ahoy! what ship is that?”

The hail rang, and seemed to echo strangely in the fog, but there came no answer. Nor was there any when he hailed again and for the third time. I thought that the outline of the strange sail grew more dim at the first cry, and again that it was plainer, for the mist across the sun drifted, though we could feel no breeze.

“It is Aegir’s ship,” whispered Gerda, still clinging to me. “Thorwald is therein,” and she raised her hand as if to wave a farewell, hardly knowing what she did.



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At that, one of the shadowy forms on the strange deck lifted its arm with the same gesture, and at the same moment. Still no sound came to us, close as the ship must surely be—so close that we might have heard even a foot fall on her deck in the stillness that weighed on us.

Gerda's hand sank to her side, and she swayed against me so that I had to support her hastily, for she was fainting. I do not know what my face was like as I saw that ghostly greeting, but Dalfin's was white and amazed, and he crossed himself, muttering I know not what prayers.

But for all that I heard what was like a half laugh come from Bertric, and he went quickly aft to the sternpost and rested his hand on it for a moment, still watching the ship. And as he went, one of that ghostly crew went also, and stood as he stood, with outstretched arm set on the dim sternpost. Then the fog turned dusky and gray again, and the ship alongside us was gone as it came, suddenly, and in silence, and Bertric came back to us.

Gerda's faintness was passing, for she was but overwrought, though she still leaned against me.

"What is it?" she asked. "What does it mean?"

"There is no harm in it, lady," answered Bertric. "I have seen it once or twice before, and naught came thereof."

"It is the ship of ghosts," said Dalfin. "I have heard tell of it. It comes from the blessed isles which holy Brendan sought."

"Nay," said Gerda; "it is Aegir's ship, and it came for my grandsire."

"Maybe," answered Dalfin. "I ken not who Aegir is of whom you speak. But the ship may indeed have come for Thorwald to take him to some land, like those isles, beyond our ken."

"Aye, to Valhalla," said Gerda. "Take me to my place now, for I am weary, and would be alone. I have no fear of aught more."

I helped her forward, and she thanked me, saying that now she would be at rest in her mind. And, indeed, so were we all, for that penthouse, and its awesome tenant, had weighed on us more than we had cared to say. We would clear the decks of it all in the morning.

All that night long we floated on a windless sea, and the fog hemmed us round until it began to thin and lift with the first rays of the rising sun. But the night had no more



visions for me, and with the morning I was fresh and fit for aught, after a great swim in the still water, and breakfast.

Then we set to work and cleared away the penthouse, stowing its heavy timbers beneath the deck along the keel, for they would in some degree take the place of the ballast which the little ship needed. There was some water in her bilge from the great wave, and that we baled out easily, but she was well framed and almost new. It was good to see the run of the decks clear again from that unhandy barrier.

I think that Gerda waited till all was gone, and we were wondering how best to stow all the goods which lumbered the deck. Then she came to us, looking brighter and content, with words of good morrow in all comradeship, which were pleasant to hear, and so stood and looked at the things we were busied with.



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“I have seen our men take things from below the decks,” she said. “Is it not possible to stow all, or nearly all, there? For it may be as well that folk whom we may meet with shall not see that we have these chests on board.”

That was good counsel; and though there is not much stowage room on such a ship as this, it could be done. Still the wind did not come, and there was time. Far off, toward where the land should be, the fog still hung in banks, and doubtless Heidrek was still wrapped in it. Not that we had much fear of him now, though it was certain that he would not care to lose us without a search.

Now we raised some of the deck planking aft, and found a floor laid in one place for stowage on either side of the keel. It would take all we wished to get out of sight from off the deck.

“Now let me show you what is in these chests,” Gerda said brightly. “Then you will know how to set them.”

I think she had a sort of sad pleasure in going through these things. One by one, as we brought them to the open place, she lifted the lids of the chests, and in them was treasure more than I had ever heard of. Maybe it was only a small hoard for one who had been a king in more than name in his time, but there was enough to make Gerda a rich woman in any land where she might care to make a home, if only we could save it for her. One chest held bags of silver coin, stamped with the heads of many kings, and won from many lands, though most came from the English shores, where the burgesses of coast towns would pay ransom for their safety when the longships sailed into their havens with the menace of fire and sword. In another smaller chest, hardly more than a casket, was gold—rings and links and chains of the sort with which men trade by weight, and withal, some coined money from the East and from the British land.

Jewels there were also, brooches of gold and silver and gilded bronze, set with gems and bright with enamel, and arm rings and torques of gold. Women’s jewels there were, necklaces and bracelets, hung with the round golden plates, coin-like, with the face of Thor stamped on them, and written runes. Two bales there were also of wondrous stuffs from the looms of eastern lands, gold inwoven and shining, bought in far-off Gardariki, where the great fair is, or won from hall and palace in the wars of Harald Fairhair. And not the least part of the treasure lay in the arms, which were almost beyond our pricing, so good were they, whether mail or helm or weapon. Yet none were better than those Gerda had given us yesterday in our need.

“It is no small treasure which you have made me keep,” Gerda said somewhat sadly, as we set the last of the chests in their hiding.

“You will find a use for it, dear lady,” Dalvin said cheerfully. “It is a great thing to have somewhat of the sort to fall back on.”

She sighed a little, and turned to a big plain chest which she had bidden us leave on deck.



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"You three fall back on that," she said, laughing. "It is no part of the treasure, and is here by mistake. Yet I know what it holds, and you may be glad thereof."

Dalfin threw it open, and laughed also. It was full of the holiday clothes of some half-dozen of the head courtmen of the old king; blue and brown jerkins, and white and blue hose, short red cloaks, and fair linen underwear. They had brought it for the feasting after the mound was made, and had forgotten it in the onset of Heidrek. I have seen men of some rank wear no better. Thorwald's men were in good case.

"You have made new men of us from head to foot," said Dalfin gleefully. "In very truth we have sore need of change."

Now we went to replace the deck planking, and she bethought herself.

"Let us keep the little chest with the gold where we can reach it easily," she said. "Supposing we are wrecked it will be well to have it at hand."

That was wise, and we set it on deck again. It was not more than one could carry easily, though heavy, having iron rings at either end as handles. I took it aft out of the way, and set it by the steering bench. And then we ended our work, and things were shipshape once more.

It was very hot as the sun rose higher. There was a feeling of thunder in the air, and Gerda was glad to seek the shelter of her awning from the heat and glare from sea and sky. The ship swayed gently to the dying swell, and the sail flapped idly against the mast, while ever we looked to see the longships of Heidrek coming in the offing in search of us.

Once I climbed the mast, and was glad to see no sign of his sails. Though we must have baffled him for the time, we could not have sailed far ere the wind failed. Presently, in the shelter of the boats, we fitted ourselves out afresh from the courtman's chest, and felt more like ourselves again. We set the mail we needed no longer for the time in the chest, and that done, longed for the wind which did not come. It was breathless.

The awning grew stifling, and Gerda left it for our midday meal, coming to the after deck, and sitting there with us. Presently she looked at our dress and smiled, jesting a little. Then she set her hand on the little chest of gold which stood on the deck by her and opened it.

"I am going to ask you to wear some of these things," she said, half shyly. "I have a fancy to see you three as you should be, with the things which belong to your rank on you."

Bertric shook his head at that. "No, lady," he said. "What need?"



“Maybe I would see my friends as they should be,” she answered. “Maybe I would fain for once give the gifts a queen may give, if never again. And maybe it is as well that some of these treasures should be shared among us because we know not what may come.”

“Well,” said Bertric, laughing, “maybe they will not be so likely to go overboard without us.”

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Now, I cannot tell all that was in her mind, but so she would have it; and as it was true enough that if we were wrecked we were more likely to save somewhat if it was on us, we let her have her way. So in the end she chose out the heavy golden bracelets which Bertric and I should wear, and then asked Dalvin, laughing, what was the token of the rank of a prince in his land. It was the torque which Heidrek's men had taken from him, and I told her so.

Whereon she took from the casket a wonderful, twisted torque, the like of which I had never seen, for it was not of Norse work, and gave it to him. He took it and looked at it curiously, and his face lighted up. It had some strange writings on it, and he read them. Then he turned to Gerda, and it was plain that somewhat had pleased him mightily.

"Queen," he said, "this is a greater gift to me than you ken. It is strange that this torque should come to me here, for there is a song of it which I have known since I was able to learn aught. It is the song of its losing."

"Thorwald, my grandfather, won it on the high seas from Danish Vikings," she answered eagerly. "What is the story?"

"It is the royal torque of our house," he said. "It was lost when my kinsman, Dubhtach of the Spearshafts, fell at Howth. In the song are the names of Danish princes who fell ere it was won from us, and they are not a few. Now your folk have avenged the loss, and the luck of the O'Neills has come back. And, faith, it was time it did, for mighty little luck have we had since it went from us."

Then he bent his knee in princely fashion, and kissed the hand of the giver, and so set the torque on his neck. It bent easily, and fastened with hooked ends. Plain enough it was that he felt that he had recovered a treasure.

"See," said Bertric, "here is wind coming."

There were thunder clouds working up from the north and east, and a haze was gathering overhead. Soon, in the stillness, the thunder rumbled across the sea, and the heavy drops of the first rain fell, bringing with them cold draughts of wind, which filled the sail for a moment, uselessly, and were gone.

Then across the northern sea grew and spread a line of white which swept down on us swiftly, and with a roar the squall, which came before the wall of rain, was on us. Something lifted forward and fled downwind like a broken-winged red and white bird. Gerda's awning had gone; and Dalvin shouted. But we could not heed that. We were wrestling with the helm, for the wind was heavy and unsteady, and the thunder rolled round us and above us, while the lightning shot in jagged streaks from cloud to sea incessantly. The rain came in torrents, whitening the sea; but Gerda stood with her arm

round the high sternpost, with her yellow hair flying and the water streaming from her, seeming to enjoy the turmoil.



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The rain swept past, and the wind fell suddenly, as it had come. For a few minutes the sail hung and flapped, and then the worst happened. I heard Bertric cry to us to hold on, and a fresh squall was on us. It came out of the south as if hurled at us, taking the sail aback. The forestay parted, and then with a crash and rending of broken timber the mast went some six feet from the deck, falling aft and to port, and taking with it half the length of the gunwale from amidships.

After that crash we stood and looked at one another, each fearing that there must be some hurt. But there was none. We had been well aft, and the falling masthead and yard had not reached us, though it had been too near to be pleasant. Maybe the end of the yard, as it fell, missed me by a foot or so.

But though Gerda's face was pale, and her eyes wide with the terror of the wreck, she never screamed or let go her hold of the sternpost to which she had been clinging. She was a sea king's daughter.

Chapter 8: Storm And Salvage.

The ship took a heavy list, and some sea broke on board, but though it was rising fast, there was not yet enough to do much harm. The floating bights of canvas hove us round broadside to the run of the waves, and needs must that we cleared away the wreck as soon as might be.

There were two axes slung at the foot of the mast in case of such chances as this, and with them we cut the mast adrift from the shattered gunwale, and got it overboard, so that the ship recovered herself somewhat. The yard lay half on deck, and I climbed out on it, and cleared it from the mast without much trouble, cutting away all the rigging at the masthead, and letting the mast itself go to leeward as the waves would take it.

After that we had some hard work in getting the sail on board again, but it was done at last, and by that time the squall was over, while the wind had flown back to its old quarter—the northeast—and seemed likely to bide there. Overhead the scud was flying with more wind than we could feel, and we had cause to be anxious. The sea would get up, and unless we could set some sort of sail which would at least serve to keep her head to it, we should fare badly. Moreover, it was likely enough that the ship was strained with the wrench of the falling mast.

There was no spare sail on board which we could use in the way of storm canvas, and the sails of the boat were too small to be of any use. Nor was there a spar which we could use as mast, save the yard itself. It must be that or nothing, and time pressed.

I suppose that we might have done better had we the chance, but what we did now in the haste which the rising sea forced on us, was to lash the forward end of the yard to



the stump of the mast, without unbending the sail from it. Then we set it up as best we might with the running rigging, and so had a mightily unhandy three-cornered sail of doubled canvas. But when we cast off the lashings which had kept the sail furled while we worked, and sheeted it home, it brought the ship's head to the wind, and for a time we rode easily enough.



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Then we baled out the water we had shipped, and sought for any leak there might be. There was none of any account, though the upper planking of the ship was strained, and the wash of the sea found its way through the seams now and then. We could keep that under by baling now and again if it grew no worse.

But in about an hour it was plain that a gale was setting in from the northeast, and the sea was rising. We must run before it whether we would or no, and the sooner we put about the better, crippled as we were. We must go as the gale drove us, and make what landfall we might, though where that would be we could not tell, for there was no knowing how far we were from the Norway shore, or whither we had drifted in the fog.

So we put the ship about, shipping a sea or two as we did so, and then, with our unhandy canvas full and boomed out as best we could with two oars lashed together, we fled into the unknown seas to south and west, well-nigh hopeless, save that of food and water was plenty.

I have no mind to tell of the next three days. They were alike in gray discomfort, in the ceaseless wash of the waves that followed us, and in the fall of the rain. We made terribly heavy weather of it, though the gale was not enough to have been in any way perilous for a well-found ship. We had to bale every four hours or so, and at that time we learned that Gerda knew how to steer. Very brave and bright was she through it all, and maybe that is the one pleasant thing to look back on in all that voyage. We rigged the sail of the boat across the sharp, high gunwales of the stern as some sort of shelter for her, and she was content.

It was on the morning of the fourth day when we had at last a sight of land. Right ahead of us, across the tumbling seas, showed the dim, green tops of mountains, half lost in the drifting rain. We thought they might be the hills of the western islands of Scotland, but could not tell, so utterly had we lost all reckoning.

Whatever the land might be we had to find out presently, for in no way could we escape from a lee shore. Nor was it long before we found that here was no island before us, such an we expected, but a long range of coast, which stretched from east to west, as far as we could see, in a chain of hills. All I could say for certain was that these hills were none which I knew, and so could not be those of the northern Scottish coasts, which I had sailed past many a time.

There was more sun this morning, for the clouds were breaking. Once or twice the light fell on the far hilltops, bringing them close to us, as it were, and then passing. Out to seaward astern of us it gleamed on the white wavetops, hurried after us, and cheered us for a time, and so swept on to the land that waited our coming, with what welcome we could not say. Presently a gleam lit on a small steady patch of white far astern of us, which did not toss with the nearer waves, and did not shift along the skyline. It was the first sail we had seen since we had lost sight of Heidrek, and it, too, cheered us in a



way, for the restless, gray and white sea was no longer so lonely. Yet we could look for no help from her, even if she sighted us and was on the same course. We could not heave to and wait her, and by the time she overhauled us, we were likely to be somewhat too near the shore for safety.



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For the mountains hove up from the sea very fast now. Some current had us in its grip, setting us shoreward swiftly. Soon we could see the lower hills along the coast, with sheer, black cliffs, and a fringe of climbing foam at their feet, which was disquieting enough as we headed straight for them. We forgot the other ship in that sight, as we looked in vain for some gap in the long wall which stretched across our course. Only in one place, right ahead, the breakers seemed nearer, and as if there might be shelving shore on which they ran, rather than shattering cliffs on which they beat. And presently we knew that between us and the shore lay an island, low and long, rising to a green hill toward the mainland, but seeming to end to the seaward in a beach which might have less dangers for us than the foot of the cliffs beyond. So far as we could make out from the deck, the strait between this island and the mainland might be two miles wide, or a little less.

"If only we could get under the lee of that island we were safe," said Bertric to me. "It would be calm enough to anchor."

"We can but try it," I answered.

And with that we luffed a little, getting the island on our port bow, but it was of no use. The unhandy canvas set us to leeward, and, moreover, the water gained quickly as the strained upper planking was hove down with the new list of the ship. I went to the open space amidships whence we baled, and watched for a few minutes, and saw that we could do nothing but run, unless the other tack would serve us.

That we tried, but now we were too far from the eastern end of the island, and it was hopeless to try to escape from the breakers.

"Stem on it must be, and take the chances," said my comrade. "It does seem as if the water were deep up to the beach, and we may not fare so badly. Well, there is one good point about these gifts which Gerda has given us, and that is that we shall have withal to buy hospitality. There are folk on the island."

"I saw a wisp of smoke a while ago," I said; "but I took it that it was on the mainland. There is no sign of a house."

"That may lie in some hollow out of the wind," he said. "I am sure of its being here."

Then I said that if we were to get on shore safely, which by the look of the beach as we lifted on the waves seemed possible, it might be better that we were armed.

"Aye, and if not, and we are to be drowned, it were better," he said grimly. "One would die as a warrior, anyway."

Now, all this while Dalfin sat with Gerda under the shelter of the boats forward, having stayed there to watch the water in the hold after we had tried to weather the island.



Now and again Dalfin rose up and slipped into the bilge and baled fiercely, while Gerda watched the shore and the green hills, which looked so steady above the tumbling seas, wistfully.

I went to them and told them that we must needs face the end of the voyage in an hour or so, and that we would arm ourselves in case the shore folk gave trouble.



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“They will do no harm,” he said; “but it may be as well.”

“One cannot be too sure of that,” I answered; but saying no more, as I would not alarm Gerda with talk of wreckers.

“Bad for them if they do,” he said. “We will not leave one alive to talk of it.”

I laughed, for he spoke as if he had a host at his heels.

“No laughing matter,” he said, rising up; “but it is not to be thought of that a prince of Maghera should be harmed in his own land.”

“What is that? Your own land?”

“Of course,” he said, staring at me. “Will you tell me that you two seamen did not know that yonder lies Ireland? Why, that hill is—”

I cannot mind the names, but he pointed to two or three peaks which he knew well, and I had to believe him. He said that we were some way to the westward of a terrible place which he called the Giant’s Causeway, too far off for us to see.

“Why did you not tell us this before?” I asked, as we took the mail from the courtmen’s chest where we had laid it.

“You never asked me, and therefore I supposed you knew,” he answered gaily. “Now, where you suppose you are going to find a haven I cannot say, but I hope there is one of which I never heard.”

Then I told him of our case, and he listened, unmoved, arming himself the while. Only, he said that it would be hard to be drowned with the luck of the O’Neills round his neck, and therefore did not believe that we should be so. But he knew nothing of the island, nor whether it was inhabited. He had seen it from the hills yonder once or twice, when he was hunting, and the chase had led him to the shore.

I think that in his joy at seeing his own land again he was going to tell me some story of a hunt on those hills; but I left him and bade him help Bertric to arm while I took the helm. The shore was not two miles from us at that time, and Bertric hastened, whistling a long whistle in answer to me, when I told him Dalfin’s news. Then Gerda came aft and stood by me.

“Is there danger ahead, Malcolm?” she asked very quietly.

“We hope, little; but there is a great deal of risk. We may be able to beach the ship safely, though she will be of no use thereafter.”



“And if not?”

“She must break up, and all we can hope for is that she will not be far from shore. We shall have to take to the boat or swim.”

“I can swim well,” she said. “I have heard you laugh at the prince because he cannot do so. What of him?”

But those two joined us at this time, and I did not answer, at least directly. Only, I told Dalvin that he had better get hold of somewhat, which might stand him in as good stead as had Heidrek’s steersman’s bench, in case it was wanted. Whereon he laughed, and said that the luck of the O’Neills would be all that he needed, while Bertric went without a word and cut the lashing of the ship’s oars, and set two handy on the after deck.



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Now we could see the beach and the white ranks of breakers which lay between us and it. Bertric looked long as we neared the first line of them, and counted them, and his face brightened.

“Look at the beach,” he said to me. “It is high water, and spring tide, moreover. There will be water enough for our light draught. Get Gerda forward, for the sea will break over the stern the moment we touch the ground.”

I looked at him, and he nodded and smiled.

“It will be nothing,” he said, knowing what I meant. “One is sheltered here under this high stern. I shall take no harm. Nay, I am ship master, and I bid you care for the lady. There are no signs of rocks.”

For I hesitated, not altogether liking not to stand by him at the last. However, he was right, and I went forward with Gerda, bidding Dalfin get one of the oars and follow us.

Now, what that beach may have been like in a winter gale I can only guess. Even now the breakers were terrible enough, as we watched them from the high bows, though the wind was, as I have said, not what one would trouble about much in the open sea, in a well-found ship. But naught save dire necessity would make a seaman try to beach his ship here at any time, least of all when half a gale was piling the seas one over the other across the shallows. Only, we could see that no jagged reef waited us under the surges.

Gerda stood with her arm round the dragon head which stared forward. I minded at that moment how I had ever heard that one should unship the dragon as the shore was neared, lest the gentle spirits of the land, the Landvaettir, should be feared. But that was too late now, and I do not think that I should have troubled concerning it in any wise, on a foreign coast. The thought came and went from me, but I set Gerda's cloak round her loosely, so that if need was it would fall from her at once; and I belted my mail close, and tried to think how I might save her, if we must take to the water perforce. I could swim in the mail well enough, and she could swim also. There might be a chance for her. I feared more for Dalfin.

Now we flew down on the first line of breakers, lifted on the crest, half blinded with the foam, and plunged across it. I held my breath as the bows swooped downward into the hollow of the wave, fearing to feel the crash of the ship's striking, but she lifted again to the next roller, while the white foam covered the decks as the broken gunwale aft lurched amid it. So we passed four great surges safely, and we were not an arrow flight from land. The water was deep enough for us so far. Then we rose on the back of the fifth roller, and it set us far before we overtook its crest and passed it. The sharp bows leapt through the broken water into the air, and hung for a long moment over the hollow, until the stern lifted and they were flung forward and downward. Then came a sharp

grating and a little shock, gone almost as it was felt, but it told of worse to come, maybe. We had felt the ground.



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But the next roller hove us forward swiftly, and we hardly overran it, so that it carried us safely. Now we were so near the shore that a stone would have reached it, and but two ranks of breakers were to be passed. I bade my two companions hold on for their lives, and set my arm round Gerda before the crash should come, and we lifted to the first of them, but it was almost as swift as we, and it carried us onward bravely.

Then the keel grated on the ground, and we lost way. The surge overtook us and drove us forward, crashing on the stones of the beach, but hardly striking with any force. The bows lifted, and I saw the rattling pebbles beneath us as the sea sucked them back. A great sea rolled in, hissing and roaring round the high stern, and breaking clear over it and Bertric as he stood at the helm, and it lifted us once more as if we were but a tangle of seaweed, and hurled us upward on the stony slope, canting the stern round as it reached us. We were ashore and safely beached, and the danger was past. The ship took the ground on her whole length as the wave went back.

Out of the smother of water and foam astern, as the next wave broke over the ship, Bertric struggled forward to us, laughing as he came. The sea ran along the deck knee deep round him as far as the foot of the mast, but it did not reach us here in the bows, though the spray flew over us, and our ears were full of the thunder of the surf on the beach. But the sharp bows were firmly bedded in the shingle, and we were in no danger of broaching to as wave after wave hurled itself after us.

Bertric had stayed to take the casket of gold from the place in the stern where we had set it.

"I had no mind to see the stern go to pieces and take this with it," he said, setting the load at his feet. "The tide has not reached its height yet, and she will be roughly handled. We had best get ashore while we can. We may do it between the breakers."

I watched the next that came roaring past us. It ran twenty yards up the shelving beach, and then went back with a rush and rattle of pebbles, leaving us nearly dry around the bows. We might have three feet of water to struggle through at first for a few paces, but that was nothing. Even Gerda could be no wetter than she was, and the one fear was that one might lose foothold when the next wave came. It did not take long to decide what we had to do, therefore.

A wave came in, spent itself in rushing foam, and drew back. I was over the bows with its first sign of ebb, and dropped into the water when it seemed well-nigh at its lowest, finding it neck-deep for the moment. It sank to my waist, and Dalfin was alongside me, spluttering. Then Bertric helped Gerda over the gunwale, and I took her in my arms, holding her as high as I could, and turning at once shoreward. I tried to hurry, but I could not go fast, for the water sucked me back, while Dalfin waded close behind me. Then I heard Bertric shout, and I knew what was coming. The knee-deep water gathered again as the next roller stayed its ebb, swirled and deepened round me, and



then with a sudden rush and thunder the wave came in, broke, and for a moment I was buried in the head of it, and driven forward by its weight. I felt Gerda clutch me more tightly, and Dalfin was thrown against me, gasping, and he steadied me.



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It passed, and I could see again, and struggled on. Then the outward flow began again, and wrestled with me so that I could not stem it, and together Dalfin and I, he with one arm round my shoulder, and in the other hand the oar which he held and used as a staff, fought against it until it was spent. The rounded pebbles slipped and rolled under my feet as they were torn back to the sea, but the worst was past. Up the long slope through the yeasty foam we went, knee deep, and then ankle deep, ever more swiftly with every pace, and the next wave broke far behind us, and its swirl of swift water round my waist only helped me. Through it we climbed to the dry stretches of the beach, and were safe.

I heard Gerda speak breathless words of thanks as I set her down, and then I looked round for Bertric. He was two waves behind us, as one may say, and I was just in time to see a breaker catch him up, smite his broad shoulders, and send him down on his face with whirling arms into its hollow, where the foam hid him as it curled over. He, too, had an oar for support, but it had failed him, and as he fell I caught the flash of somewhat red slung like a sack across his back.

Gerda cried out as she saw him disappear, but Dalfin and I laughed as one will laugh at the like mishap when one is bathing. That was for the moment only, however, for he did not rise as soon as he might, and then I knew what had kept him so far behind us, and what was in the red cloak I had seen. He had stayed to bring the gold and jewels in their casket, and now their weight was holding him down. So I went in and reached him through a wave, and set him on his feet again, gasping, and trying to laugh, and we went back to shore safely enough. I grumbled at the risk he had run, but he said that his burden was not so heavy as mine had been.

For a few minutes we sat on the beach and found our breath again, Gerda trying to tell us what she felt concerning what we had done, and then giving up, because, I suppose, she could not find the right words; which was a relief, for she made too much of it all. Then the four of us went up the beach to the shelter of the low, grassy sand hills above it, and there Dalfin turned and faced us with a courtly bow, saying gravely:

“Welcome to Ireland, Queen Gerda, and you two good comrades. There would have been a better welcome had we come in less hurry, but no more hearty one. The luck of the O’Neills has stood us in good stead.”

“If it had not been for the skill of these two friends, it seems to me that even the luck of the torque had been little,” said Gerda quietly. “You must not forget that.”

“It is part of the said luck that they have been here,” answered Dalfin, with his eyes twinkling as he bowed to us. “All praise to their seamanship.”

Then he sat down suddenly as if his knees had given way, and looked up as if bewildered.

“Is this silly island also afloat?” he asked, “for it feels more like a ship than any other dry land I was ever on.”



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“It will do so for a time,” I said. “Wait till you lose the swing of the decks and find your shore legs again.”

“Look yonder,” Bertric said. “There is the other ship.”

We had forgotten her for a time in our own perils. She had followed our course, though for what reason we could not tell. Now she had borne up and was heading away westward, some four miles from shore, and sailing well and swiftly, being a great longship. Soon a gray wall of rain swept over her and hid her, and when it cleared in half an hour’s time she was beyond our sight.

It seemed pretty certain by this time that there could be no people on this side of the island at least, or they would have been here. We climbed to the highest of the sand hills, and looked over what we could see of the place, but there was no sign of hut or man. Beyond the sand hills there was a stretch of open moorland, which rose to the hill across by the strait between us and the mainland, and both hill and moor were alike green and fresh—or seemed so to us after the long days at sea. It was not a bad island, and Dalfin said that there should be fishers here, though he was in no way certain. All round us the sea birds flitted, scolding us for our nearness to their nests among the hills and on the edge of the moor, and they were very tame, as if unused to the sight of man. I thought we could make out some goats feeding on the hill side, but that was all. So far as we could judge, the island may have been a mile long, or less, and a half mile across.

We went back to the lee of the sand hills after seeing that there was no better shelter at hand. There it seemed warm after the long days on the open sea, but we were very wet. So we found a sheltered hollow whence we could look across the beach to the ship, and there gathered a great pile of driftwood and lit a fire, starting it with dry grass and the tinder which Bertric kept, seamanlike, with his flint and steel in his leathern pouch, secure from even the sea. Then we sat round it and dried ourselves more or less, while the tide reached its full, left the bare timbers of the ship’s stem standing stark and swept clean of the planking, and having done its worst, sank swiftly, leaving her dry at its lowest.

So soon as we could, Bertric and I climbed on board over the bows, and took what food we could find unspoiled by the water, ashore.

“Neither of the boats is harmed,” we told Gerda. “And presently we can leave this island for the mainland. And we can save all the goods we stowed amidships before the tide rises again. But your good little ship will never sail the seas more.”

“It is as well,” she answered sadly. “This should have been her last voyage in another way than this, and her time had come. I do not think that it had been fitting for her to



have carried any other passenger, after he who lies in the sea depths had done with her.”

Bertric shook his head as one who doubts, being sore at the loss of a vessel under his command, though there was no blame to him therein. But I knew what Gerda felt, and thought with her.



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By the great fire we made our first meal ashore since we left my home in Caithness eight long days ago. Nor can I say that it was a dismal feast by any means, for we had won through the many perils we had foreseen, and were in safety and unhurt; and young enough, moreover, to take things lightly as they came, making the best of them.

Chapter 9: The Isle Of Hermits.

As may be supposed, we were worn out, and the warmth may have made us drowsy. The roar of the sea, and the singing of the wind in the stiff grass of the sand hills was in our ears, unnoticed, and we had made up our minds that there was no man on the island and that we need fear no meddling with the ship until the sea calmed, and men might come from the mainland to see what they could take from the wreck. Presently we ourselves would get what was worth aught to us and hide it here.

So it came to pass that when from out of the hills round us came a small, rough brown dog which barked wildly at us, we leapt to our feet with our hands on our swords as if Heidrek himself had come. But no man came with him, and suddenly he turned and fled as if he had heard a call. I was about to follow him to the top of the sand hill to see what his coming meant, when the pebbles rattled on the near beach, and I halted. There were sounds as of a bare foot among them.

Into the little cleft between the dunes, out of which we looked over the sea, came a short man, dressed in a long, brown robe which was girt to him with a cord, and had a hood which framed his pleasant, red face. Black-haired and gray-eyed he was, and his hands were those of one who works hard in the fields. There was a carved, black wooden cross on the end of his cord girdle, and a string of beads hung from it. At his heels was the brown dog, and in his hand a long, shepherd's crook.

He came carelessly into the opening, looking from side to side as he walked as if seeking the men he knew must be shipwrecked, and stayed suddenly when he came on us. His face paled, and he half started back, as if he was terrified. Then he recovered himself, looked once more, started anew, and fairly turned and ran, the dog leaping and barking round him. After him went Dalfin, laughing.

"Father," he cried in his own tongue, "father! Stay—we are Irish—at least some of us are. I am. We are friends."

The man stopped at that and turned round, and without more ado Dalfin the Prince unhelmed and bent his knee before him, saying something which I did not catch. Whereon the man lifted his hand and made the sign of the Cross over him, repeating some words in a tongue which was strange to me. I could not catch them.



Dalvin rose up and called to me, and I went toward them, leaving Gerda and Bertric to wait for what might happen.

“This is Malcolm of Caithness, a good Scot,” said he.

“Malcolm, we are in luck again, for it seems that we have fallen into the hands of some good fathers, which is more than I expected, for I never heard that there was a monastery here.”



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I made some answer in the Gaelic, more for the comfort of the Irish stranger than for the sense of what I spoke. And as he heard he smiled and did as he had done to Dalfin, signing and saying words I could not understand. I had no doubt that it was a welcome, so I bowed, and he smiled at me.

“I was sorely terrified, my sons,” he said. “I thought you some of these heathen Danes—or Norse men, rather, from your arms. But I pray you do not think that I fled from martyrdom.”

“You fled from somewhat, father,” said Dalfin dryly; “what was it?”

The father pointed and smiled uneasily.

“My son,” he said slowly, “I came to this place to be free from the sight of—of aught but holy men. If there were none but men among you, even were you the Lochlann I took you for—and small wonder that I did—I had not fled. By no means.”

“Why,” said Dalfin, with a great laugh, “it must be Gerda whom he fears! Nay, father, the lady is all kindness, and you need fear her not at all.”

“I may not look on the face of a lady,” said the father solemnly.

“Well, you have done it unawares, and so you may as well make the best of it, as I think,” answered Dalfin. “But, without jesting, the poor lady is in sore need of shelter and hospitality, and I think you cannot refuse that. Will you not take us to the monastery?”

“Monastery, my son? There is none here.”

“Why, then, whence come you? Are you weather bound here also?”

“Aye, by the storms of the world, my son. We are what men call hermits.”

Dalfin looked at me with a rueful face when he heard that. What a hermit might be I did not at all know, and it meant nothing to me. I was glad enough to think that there was a roof of any sort for Gerda.

“Why, father,” said my comrade, “you do not sleep on the bare ground, surely?”

“Not at all, my son. There are six of us, and each has his cell.”

“Cannot you find shelter for one shipwrecked lady? It will not be for long, as we will go hence with the first chance. We have our boats.”



Now all this while the hermit had his eye on Dalfin's splendid torque, and at last he spoke of it, hesitatingly.

"My son, it is not good for a man to show idle curiosity—but it is no foolish question if I ask who you are that you wear the torque of the O'Neills which was lost."

"I am Dalfin of Maghera, father. The torque has come back to me, for Dubhtach is avenged."

At that the hermit gave somewhat like a smothered shout, and his stately way fell from him altogether. He went on his knee before Dalfin, and seized his hand and kissed it again and again, crying words of welcome.

"My prince, my prince," he said, with tears of joy running down his cheeks. "It was told me that you had gone across the seas—but I did not know it was for this."

Dalfin reddened, and raised the hermit from the sand.



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“Father,” he said quickly, “I am not the avenger. It is a long tale—but the lady, who is a queen in Norway, shipwrecked with us here by a strange fate, has to do with the winning back of the torque.”

“A queen!” said the hermit quickly. “Then the rule of which I spoke must needs be broken; nay, not broken, but set aside. Now, where are your men?”

“Never a man have we. There is Malcolm here, and Bertric, a Saxon thane, who is my friend also and a good Christian, and the poor young queen, and no more.”

The hermit threw up his hands.

“All drowned!” he cried. “Alack, alack! May their souls rest in peace!”

“We sailed without them, father. There were none, and so they are all safe at home.”

“Good luck to them—for if they had been here they were drowned, every man of them,” said the hermit with much content, looking at me with some wonder when I laughed.

“They would not be the first by many a score whom we have buried here,” he said in reproof. “Aye, heathen Lochlann and Christian Scot, and homely Erse yonder. It is good to see even a few who have escaped from this shore.”

He bowed his head for a moment, and his lips moved. Then he turned to Dalfin as a councillor might turn to his prince, and asked what he would have the brothers do for him.

“Come and ask the lady,” answered Dalfin, and so we went to the fire, where Gerda and Bertric rose up to meet us.

Now the hermit had set aside his fear of the lady, if he had any beyond his rules, and welcomed her in Erse, which I had to translate. Also he told her that what shelter he and his brethren could give was hers, if she would be content with poor housing.

“Thank him, and tell him that any roof will be welcome after the ship’s deck,” she said, smiling at the hermit.

“Ask him to send men and help us get our stores ashore and out of the way of the fisher folk, who will be here as soon as they see the wreck,” said Bertric. “No need to tell him that the stores are treasure for the most part.”

“Tell him it is treasure, and it will be all the safer,” Dalfin said. “These are holy monks, of a sort who care for poverty more than wealth. This man was well born, as you may guess from his speech.”



I told the hermit what Bertric needed, and he laughed, saying that the whole brotherhood would come and help at once. And then he bade us follow him. We went across the moorland for about half a mile, to the foot of the hill or nearly, and then came on a little valley amid the rising ground, where trees grew, low and wind twisted, but green and pleasant; and there I saw a cluster of little stone huts for all the world like straw beehives, built of stones most cunningly, mortarless, but fitting into one another perfectly.



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The huts were set in a rough circle, and each had its door toward the sun, and a little square window alongside that, and a smoke-blackened hole in the top of the roof. Doubtless it was from one of these that Bertric had seen the smoke from the sea, though there was none now. From the hill and down the valley across the space between the huts ran a little brook, crossed in two or three places by wandering paths, some with a stepping stone, and others with only a muddy jumping place. The stream was dammed into a deep, stone-walled pool in the midst of the space, and close to the brink of this stood a tall, black stone cross, which was carved most wonderfully with interlacing patterns, and had a circle round its arms.

We saw no men at first. Pigs there were, fat and contented, which rooted idly or wallowed along the stream, and fowls strolled among the huts. I saw one peer into an open door, raise one claw slowly as if she was going in, and then turn and fly, cackling wildly, as if some inmate had thrown something at her.

“That is brother Fergus,” said our guide. “The more he throws things at the hens, the more they pester him. It is half a loaf this time. See.”

The hen had gone back into the doorway in a hurry, and now retired behind the hut with the bread, to be joined there by hurrying friends.

“The pigs will come in a minute,” our hermit said, chuckling and rubbing his hands together. “They know that Fergus hurls what comes first without heed of what it may be.”

He half stayed to watch, and then remembered that he was not alone or with some of his brethren. We had been silent as we came, and he had gone before us with the dog in front of him, musing. I think that he had forgotten us.

“Pardon, prince,” he said. “Year in and year out in this place we have naught but these little haps to lighten our thoughts. We watch for them, and are disappointed if we miss them. Ah, well, tonight at least we shall have somewhat more wonderful of which to talk. I only pray that you, with your breath of the outer world—warfare and wreck, victory and vengeance—may not leave us unsettled.”

He sighed, and turned back to the way once more with bent head. He seemed a young man to be in this desolate place of his own free will, for his black beard and hair were hardly grizzled with the passing years yet.

There was a low wall round the gathering of huts, the gate being closed with a wattled hurdle, lest the pigs should wander. Here the hermit stopped, and before he opened the gate lifted his voice and cried loudly in the tongue which I did not know.



There was a stir then in the peaceful enclosure. Out of the huts came in all haste men clad like our guide, speaking to one another fast, with eager faces and gestures. At that time I counted nine huts, and thought that we need turn out none of these strange hosts of ours.

P Again our hermit cried out, for the rest did not come to meet us. I saw Dalfin smiling, and asked what it all meant in a low voice.



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"I have more than half forgotten the little Latin they taught me at Monasterboice long ago," he answered; "but he is telling them that here we have not a lady merely, but a queen. It is the first trouble again."

Now the brethren consulted, still standing in the hut doors, and at last, being thereto exhorted once more by our friend, they came toward us slowly, as if wishing to show that they had no longing for things outside their island cares. Five out of these six were old men, our guide being the youngest, and two of them were very old, with long, white beards. One of these two came forward as they neared us, and spoke for the rest, greeting Dalfin first, as their prince, with all respect, though not at all in the humble way in which he had first been hailed.

"It is our good fortune," he said, "that we are able to shelter you. It has been our sorrow that up till this time those strangers who have come from the sea have needed nothing from us but the last rites. We are all unused to guests, and you will forgive us if we know not how to treat them rightly. But what we can do we will."

He waved his hands toward the huts, and said no more. Dalfin thanked him, and after he had heard, he paid no more heed to us, but turned to our guide.

"Brother Phelim," he said wearily, "see you to all that may be done. The care must be yours, as was the first welcome. I do not know why you wandered so far at this hour."

"Because I thought there might be poor folk in need, father," said Phelim meekly. "Moreover, I am shepherd today."

The old man waved his hand as if to say that the excuse was enough, and with that turned and went his way, leaning on the arm of the other ancient brother, the three who had stood behind them making way reverently.

"He is our superior," whispered Phelim. "He has been here for forty years. He will forget that he has seen you presently. Now, come, and we will see how we may best bestow you."

"Concerning what is on board the ship," said Bertric, staying him. "It is needful that we get it ashore before the tide turns. It is but half an hour's hard work, at the most, if you folk help."

Phelim stared, for Bertric spoke in the Dansk tongue we had been using. I had to translate for him, and Phelim nodded.

"Tell the sea captain that all will be well. We will return at once. We do but find a house for the queen."



So we went on to the central green amid the huts, and there stood and looked round, while Phelim and Fergus deliberated for a time. It seemed that the pigs had one empty hut, and the fowls another. The largest was the chapel, and so there was not one vacant. I think that they each wished for the honour of turning out for us.

“Father Phelim,” I said at last, for Bertric waxed impatient, “let one good brother leave his cell for that of another, leaving it free for the queen, and then we can shift for ourselves. We do not at all mind sleeping in the open, for so we have fared for the last week and more.”



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But they would not have that, and in the end Phelim himself led Gerda with much pride to his own cell and handed it over to her, while another brother left his cell to us three, it being a large one, which, indeed, is not saying much for the rest. We were likely to be warm enough in it; but the cells were clean and dry, each with a bed of heather and a stone table and stool, and some little store of rough crockery and the like household things. There were blankets, too, and rugs for hanging across the doors, which seemed in some abundance. Afterwards, I found that they were washed ashore from wrecks at different times.

Then we went back to the shore in all haste. I had doubts as to whether Gerda would care to be left alone in this strange place, but she laughed, and said that there was naught to fear. The two old brothers had gone their way to their own cells, and would not come forth again till vesper time, as Phelim told us. She had the little village, if one may call it so, to herself, therefore, till we returned. But Phelim set his crook against the hut wall as he went.

“The pigs need a stick at times,” he said; “it may be handy.”

The tide had ebbed far when we reached the place of the wreck again, and had bared a long, black reef, which, with never an opening in it, reached as far as we could see along the shore. It was only the chance of the high spring tide, driven yet higher than its wont by the wind on the shore, which had suffered us to clear it. It was that which we touched slightly as we came in among the first breakers. We had had a narrow escape.

In an hour we had all that was worth taking ashore saved. The chests of arms, and those of the bales which the sea had not reached, and the chest of silver, were all on the beach, and we got the larger of the two boats over the side, and ran her up into safety, with her fittings. And then, for there was yet time, Dalfin would have us save the wonderful carved wagon which was on the deck unhurt, and that, too, we took ashore, and with it some of the casks of food stores which had been so lavishly stored for that strange voyage. We should not burden the good brothers with this to help feed us.

For the sea was coming in more heavily still as it gathered weight with the long gale, which was still blowing hard. It was more than likely that the ship would go to pieces in the night as the tide rose again. Now and then the rain squalls came up and drenched us, and passed; but the brothers cared as little for them as did we, and enjoyed the unusual work more. It was a wonder to them to see their young prince working as hard as themselves as we carried the heavy things up the beach.

“It is a matter which I have learned while on my travels,” he said, when Fergus said somewhat of the sort to him gently. “I have seen these two friends, who are nobles in their own lands, work as hard at oar and rope’s end as they would at fighting. Moreover, it is well to do things for myself now and then—as, for instance, swimming.”



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Now we loaded the wagon, which was easy to put together, and the brethren harnessed themselves to it, laughing. They would not suffer us to help, and we had to walk behind the wagon in a sort of idle train, not altogether sorry to rest, for we were very weary by this time. As for the hermits, they made light of the rough way and the load, being like schoolboys let loose. I do not suppose that they had laughed thus for many a long day, and it was good to watch them.

So we came to the huts, and set down our load. Presently the brothers would bestow the things under cover, but there was no more to come. So we did but take Gerda her own chest, and have the court men's to the hut which had been given us. We bade Phelim, as guest master, take what he would of the provender as he liked, saying it was theirs altogether; and he thanked us simply, more for our own sake than theirs, as I know. They would not let us go back to the shore for the next load.

"Bide and rest," said Fergus; "this is a holiday for us, and we enjoy it. We shall talk of it all for many a long day; but for you it is but an added and needless weariness."

So, nothing loath, we sat on the stone blocks which were set for seats outside Gerda's hut, and watched them go with the wagon. Presently Gerda came and asked for a little help, and I went and moved her chest for her, and hung a heavy curtain, which I have no doubt was a wrecked boat's sail once, to its stone pegs across the door. They had lit a fire for her at the first, and the cell was comfortable altogether.

"Now I shall rest," she said. "By and by, no doubt, you will bring me supper, but it is strange not to feel the tossing of the ship. It is wonderful to be warm and in safety once more. You have been very good to me."

But I thought of her patience and cheerfulness through the countless discomforts and dangers of the voyage, and knew that the praise was hers.

"We have said truly that you are a sea-king's daughter indeed, my queen," I answered. "It is enough to hear you say that we are not useless courtmen."

We three went to our hut and took off our mail, and found dry clothing in the chest, with many thanks to the careful half-dozen warriors who had kept their best therein. Then in much comfort we saw to our arms, red with the sea rust, and hung them round the cell, which was some nine feet across and about the same height, and by the time that pleasant work was done the brothers were back, and the little bell on the chapel, where it hung in a stone cote, rang for their vespers.

They bade us come also, and Bertric and Dalfin rose up and went gladly. I had no thought that I could be welcome, and was staying, but Phelim called me.



“Malcolm is a Norse Scot,” said Dalvin quietly. “He is not of our faith, and I do not know if he may come.

“If he will, he may,” answered the hermit kindly. “He can be no evil heathen, seeing that he is your friend.”



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So, not wishing to seem ungracious, I followed them into the chapel, which was stone built after the same manner as the cells, but with a ridge roof instead of the rounded top, and much larger, being about fifteen feet long and ten wide. Over the door was a cross of white stones set in the wall, and at the eastern end was a cross also, and an altar, on which were candles of wax, at which I wondered, seeing them in this place. Round the walls ran a stone slab as bench, but I was the only one who used it. The others knelt, facing eastward, and I, at a sign from Bertric, sat by the door, wondering what I should see and hear.

There was enough for me to wonder at. I heard them pray, and I heard them sing, and whether of prayer or song the words were good to listen to. I heard them pray for the safety of men at sea in the gale, and for men who fought with the Danes ashore. They prayed that the hands of the Danes who slew their brethren in the churches round the coast wantonly might be stayed from these doings; but they did not pray for the destruction of these terrible foes. They asked that they might be forgiven for the wrong they did to harmless men. And I heard them read from a book whose leaves, as the reader turned them, I saw were bright with gold and colours, words that I cannot set down—words of uttermost peace in the midst of strife. I had never heard or thought the like. I did not know that it could be in the minds of men so to speak and write. I thought that I would ask Phelim more concerning it at some time if I had the chance.

The brethren rose up with still faces and happy, and the vespers were over. We went out into the wind again, and across to the cell they had given us, and there they gave us a supper of barley bread and milk, setting aside some for Gerda in a beautiful silver bowl, which Phelim said had come from the shore after a wreck long ago.

Now, we three had some thought that one of us had better watch through the night, if only for Gerda's comfort. But Phelim heard us speak thereof, and laughed.

"My sons," he said, "there is naught to watch against in all this little island, save only the ghostly foe, against whom your arms were of no avail. Nay, do you sleep in peace. All the night long we watch in turns in the chapel, and will wake you, if by some strange chance there is need."

"What do you watch against then, father?" I asked, somewhat idly. "Wolves round your folds?"

"Aye," he answered; "the wolf of all wolves."

"Ah, the wolf will come from the mainland, betimes, I suppose."

"Most of all we fear him thence," Phelim answered, with a quaint smile. "Nay, my son, it is no earthly wolf we watch against. Hereafter you may learn, or the prince will tell you even now, if you will. Rest in peace."

He lifted his hand and blessed us, even as he had done when he met us on the shore, and left us. They had brought fresh heather for our bedding while we ate, and blankets, and though the light still lingered in the west, we did not wait for darkness. We slept, as shipwrecked men will sleep, when at last others watch for them.



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Chapter 10: Planning And Learning.

Twelve good hours I slept that night without stirring, and woke feeling like a new man and fit for aught. The first thing I noticed was the strange calm which brooded over all things, for the wind had gone down, and the long, steady roar of the surf was far off and all unlike the ceaseless rush and countless noises of the labouring ship at sea. There came a little drone of chanting from the chapel a hundred yards away, and there was now and again the bleat of a sheep, and the homely crow of the cocks, sounding as if shut up somewhere still. For a time I stayed, enjoying the unwonted calm, and then the sunlight crept into the little window, and I rose, and went out. My two comrades still slept.

It was a wonderful morning after the storm. The coast of the mainland across the narrow strait seemed close at hand, piled with great, soft, green mountains above the black cliffs, tier after tier of them stretching inland as far as the eye could see. In the valleys between them nestled forests, dark and deep, and in one place I saw the thin lines of smoke rising, which told of houses. The hill which made the best part of this island barred my view to the westward, but it was not high enough to hide the mountain tops on the mainland altogether. There was a fire lighted on it this morning as if it might be a beacon. I minded that Phelim had said that they would call the fishers from the mainland to come over for us when they might venture, and I supposed that this was their signal.

I looked across, past the tall, black cross to where Gerda's hut stood, and it was as I had last seen it. The folds of the curtain at the door had not been moved, and Phelim's crook stood where he set it. The pigs were shut up somewhere even yet. Then the bell on the roof of the little chapel rang once or twice, and I went near. But this morning there was a closed door before me, the only door in all the place. I know now that it was the hour of the morning mass, but wondered at the time why the door was closed and why the bell rang.

My going out woke Bertric, and he joined me, saying, half to himself, that he should have been in time for the service. He, too, looked all the better for the rest, and I dare say that the help of the comb, which Fergus lent us in sheer compassion overnight, had worked no small change in that direction.

We wandered down to the shore and looked at the wreck. The ship had broken up in the night, and nothing but her gaunt ribs stood in a deep pool on the wet sands. On the beach at our feet lay the gilded and green dragon's head from her stem, and all along were strewn oars and planking, and the like. It was pitiful enough. But the brothers had toiled till light failed them, for they had saved the other boat and the sledges, and also the sail, together with smaller things, among which was the cauldron of our first meals,

which was a treasure to them. Inside it, on the sand hill, was the little silver cup from the penthouse, too, and the empty wine pitcher lay hard by.



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“There are men who would pray for a wreck like this every week,” said Bertric, with a short laugh. “But it will be all that we can do to get these good men to keep what they have saved, even if the things are of any use to them. They need little and covet naught.”

Presently he heaved a great sigh, and half turned from the sea, as if impatient.

“As good a little ship as ever was framed,” he said. “And to come to such an end. Mishandled on a lee shore.”

“Why, there is no blame to us,” I said. “We were helpless.”

“It lies heavy on my mind that we ought to have weathered the point yonder; I held on too long. At best I knew where she was strained, and should have gone on the other tack first. And the canvas we got on her! We might have done better than that.”

“It did not seem so at the time,” I answered, laughing. “It is easy to think now of what might have been done.”

“So it is. But for all my days I shall feel it in my bones that I threw the ship away. I shall dream that I am weathering the island. Two ships I have lost running.”

“One by war and the other by sheer misfortune,” I answered. “You make too much of it altogether.”

He laughed ruefully. “Well, think what a voyage we might have had if we had chanced to pick up a crew.”

“It was your own doing that Heidrek did not pick us up,” I said. “Maybe that thought will comfort you somewhat.”

“I was never glad of a fog before,” he answered.

And there that matter ended, for now we had wandered to a place whence we could see the strait between us and the mainland, which we must cross presently.

That was not yet possible, for here the currents, as the tide rose and swirled round either end of the island, were like a mill race, while the heavy sea which still beat on the shore made the turmoil still wilder as it set across the narrow opening.

“Here we have to bide till that mends,” said Bertric. “We must make the best of it, for a day or two. Maybe it matters little, for Gerda needs rest. And Dalfin will sleep till midday if we let him. He is worn out.”



“He was full of all that would happen when we came as honoured guests to his father’s place, as we talked last evening,” I said. “That all sounds well enough for a time. But thereafter—what are our plans to be?”

“In what way?” he answered, staying his steps, and looking gravely at me.

Now this was the first chance we two had had of private talk. As may be supposed, we had been drawn together much during the voyage, partly as seamen, and also partly because Norseman and Saxon are kin, while the Irishman was almost as much a stranger to me as to Bertric. Moreover, Dalfin was at home once more, and we were wanderers. So I spoke plainly, not seeing any need to beat about the bush with this quiet friend, of whom I surely learnt so much in the long days of peril together.

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"I have no plans beyond those I may make for the help of Gerda," I said. "If your home does not call you maybe it is well for her."

"There are none who will trouble much concerning me until the autumn," he answered. "I am a free man in that matter, and it need not trouble you. Let me work with you in this, for, indeed, I shall not be happy until I have seen her in safety again, and in her own land, if that may be what she wishes."

"That will be her first wish," I answered, being sure thereof.

In those last days on board the ship, when I was not taking my turn at the helm, I had spoken much with Gerda, sitting on the deck just without the little shelter we had rigged for her aft, and ever her thoughts had gone back to Norway and a home there.

"You and I must see this through together," Bertric said frankly. "I knew that this would be your one thought, and you will be none the worse off for someone to help. 'Bare is back without brother behind it,' as your old saw goes."

I held out my hand to him on that bargain with a great relief, and he took it and laughed.

"Maybe we are making much of what need be little trouble," he said; "but we cannot tell. We are in a strange land, and, from all I ever heard, a troubled one. A lady is no light charge. Let us see if we can find her before Dalfin wakes. I think we must plan apart from him for a while, for he is full of our bidding always here in Ireland. Which, of course, is out of the question."

Now we turned back to the village, and as we went I asked Bertric what he would do when our end had been gained, and Gerda was once more in Norway, and at rest.

"Make my way home," he answered. "There will be ships who will be glad of a pilot into English ports, if none happen to want a master. That is easy for me. What of yourself?"

"A Norse king is always glad of a courtman," I said. "Or the Orkney earl will not let me be idle if I go to him."

"Aye," he said, "a man can always find a place. I do not think you will have to seek far."

We found Gerda up the glen, watching Fergus milk the little black and white kine which had their byres in that sheltered place. Among the trees wandered half a score of goats, and the ground was white with the wind flowers everywhere. She was bright, and seemed very fair that morning, rejoicing in rest and the peace that was all around.

"See," she said, after our greeting, "even the birds are not feared of us here. They are the little brothers and sisters of the hermits."



So indeed it seemed, for the wood birds flew to us, seeking the food which the brethren never failed to bring them. Gerda stretched out her hand with some crumbs of bread, and they perched thereon, fearless, while Fergus looked up at us and smiled a good morning.

“Have you found your breakfast, my sons?” he asked. “We set it in your cell; but the prince slept still, and we did not wake him.”



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We had not looked into the hut, and so went back slowly, Gerda with us. And on the way we asked how we might try to plan for her.

“Oh, if you will but do so,” she said eagerly. “In any case, let me go back to Norway as soon as I may. Yet I do not know where to look for a friend who can help me to my own there.”

“We had thought of Harald Harfager, the king,” I said. “He was Thorwald’s friend, as you told us. He will act as your guardian.”

She looked at us in some surprise.

“Have you heard naught from Norway of late?” she asked.

Bertric had heard none, and we in Caithness were out of the way of news.

“Harald has been dead these six months and more,” she said sadly. “Now his son, Eric Bloodaxe, reigns unquietly. Men hate him, and with reason. That terrible name of his may tell you why. Arnkel, who tried to burn me, is hand in glove with him.”

Then Bertric said:

“Have you heard naught of Hakon, that son of Harald, whom our king, Athelstane, has brought up in England?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “We have heard naught. We would that we had, for all men speak well of him, and it was hoped that he would be back rather than that this terrible half-brother of his should take the throne.”

“I know him,” Bertric said. “It were well for Norway if he did return. Good warrior and good Christian he is, and that means good friend, moreover.”

“We must make for Dublin,” I said. “We must go to the Norse king, Sigtryg, who is there, and ask him for help. It will be hard if we cannot find a ship to serve us—even if not men who will sail to set a queen in her place once more.”

“If that fails,” put in Bertric, “we will go to England and speak with Hakon himself. Maybe he will take you back to Norway when he sails. For he will sail.”

Gerda laughed, and shook her head again.

“You make too much of me. Hakon would not heed so small a matter. No, take me to Norway, and I will find my cousins who are in the south, and there I may be welcome. At least, I shall be no burden to them, and they are folk who live on their own land. It will be the quiet life of the homestead and the saeter which I love.”



She sighed, and there was a far-off look in her eyes as if she saw again the Norse mountains and streams and the flower-edged glaciers, and heard the song of the maidens on the pastures round the saeters, and the homing call for the cattle, and longed for them.

“What of yourselves?” she said presently, and a little timidly as I thought.

“We shall not be content till we have seen you in safety, and in Norway if that may be,” I answered. “That is all we have to think of now.”

“We are two men at a loose end if we have not you to follow as your courtmen,” added Bertric. “We would pray you not to turn us off.”

“It is good to hear you speak so,” she said, with a smile that was of sheer relief. “But it is a barren service, though I would not part with you if it must be put in that way. I think that I could not have found better friends, and I fear nothing while you are near.”



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So she went on to thank us for all our thought for her, as if we did something wonderful, and we were fain to laugh and make light of it.

“Now we are bound for Norway,” said Bertric. “What shall be done with all this troublesome treasure? We cannot hale it all over Ireland.”

We thought it best to leave the bulk of it with the hermits, taking enough for all possible needs in silver coin and in the rings and links of gold, which were easily carried and hidden. For we had heard from Dalfin how that between the courts of the Irish kings and that of Sigtryg of Dublin was little intercourse, save when fighting was on hand. But of that there was no need to tell Gerda, there being peace at present, so far as the hermits knew, and good reason for at least civility when she was concerned. As for the things we left here, they might be picked up on our way to Norway. So we planned, and thereafter went back to the cells and to Dalfin, who woke at noontide or thereabout with a great hunger on him.

So that day wore on in utter quietness and rest, while the wind and sea fell. Late in that afternoon, when the tide was at its lowest and the slack water was more still, Phelim came hastily and told us that there were fishers on the way from their village to us. Whereat we wondered; for still the sea ran high, and we ourselves had not dreamed of putting out in our boat.

But when we reached the rocky shore which looked on the strait, so it was. Rising and falling on the waves came a tiny craft with two men in it, and I have seldom seen a boat better handled in a sea way. Yet when they came close, it was but a wicker framework, covered with skins, the two men kneeling on the floor, and using narrow, single-bladed paddles, one on either side or both on the same side as need might be.

They came carefully alongside a flat rock which they were wont to use as a landing place, and one leapt out, running to Father Phelim, and kneeling to him for his blessing. It was hard to make out his rough speech, but it was plain that his folk had feared lest somewhat should be amiss with the hermits. Phelim told them that their prince was here, and then there was much homage done of a humble sort to Dalfin, who took it as a matter of course, though the manner of it was more cringing and excited than any Norseman could have put up with. Presently, when all that was over, they asked him what his commands were, knowing that they had been summoned for his service.

He told them that they must go to his father, their king, and ask him to send a guard to meet us as soon as possible at their village, with all that was needed for our journey to the court. Thereafter they were to send their largest boat to ferry us across to the other side. Then he dismissed them, bidding them use all speed, and again they did homage after their manner, and bent before Phelim, and so paddled out among the waves as swiftly and skilfully as they had come. There was never a word of pay or even reward spoken. It would seem to be enough for them that they should be honoured in serving

their lord, or else they had no choice but to do his bidding. Maybe that last is most likely.



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Now we had to wait for their signal that all was ready for us, and how long that might be we could not tell. It depended mostly on where the king was holding his court, which the fishers did not know. In the end it came to pass that we had to wait four days here, and I will not say that they went at all quickly.

Dalfin waxed moody before the next day was over. He was one of those who loved excitement, and are only happy when one thing follows another fast, caring not what it may be so long as there is somewhat, even danger. I think it was as well that he was a mighty sleeper, being content to lie on a warm sand hill and slumber between his meals. Bertric and I built a pig sty out of wreck wood for the hermits, which pleased them mightily, and was certainly better than doing nothing. Gerda watched us quietly, and then we would climb to the top of the hill and look out toward the land in hopes of seeing the fire which the fishers were to light when all was in order for our going.

So it chanced on the second day that she and I had been up the hill together, and were coming back to Bertric and his work down the little glen, when we came suddenly on the old superior, who was walking with bent head among the trees of a clearing, musing. We had not seen him since the day when we came ashore.

He started when he saw us, and looked at us as if it was the first time that he had met us; and we were about to pass him quickly, with a little due reverence. But he spoke, and we stopped.

"I remember," he said. "You are the Lochlannoch who were cast ashore. Is all well with you?"

"In every way, father," I answered in the Gaelic.

He looked hard at me for a moment, and his face flushed slowly. It had been white before with the whiteness that comes of a dark cell and long biding within it. Only the warm sun had taken him out today, for Phelim said that he was close on ninety years of age. Then he set forth his hand to me, and laid it on my arm.

"Tell me who you are," he said.

"We are Norse folk, cast ashore here by mischance in the gale."

"Norse?" he said. "Yet you speak the tongue of my childhood—the kindly Gaelic of the islands which is not that altogether of the Erse of today. It is full sixty years since I heard it."

"My mother was a Scottish lady," I answered. "My own name is Malcolm."

"Tell me more," he said eagerly. "Let me hear the old tongue again before I die."



Now, it is in no wise easy to be told to talk without a hint in the way of question on which to begin, and I hesitated. Gerda asked me softly what was amiss, and I told her in a few words. The old hermit looked kindly at her, but did not speak.

“Tell him of your home,” she said. “Tell him without saying aught of the end of it.”

I did so, slowly at first, for the words would not come, and then better as I went on. The old man listened, and the tears came into his eyes.



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“Ah, the old days,” he said, when I stopped. “Your voice is a voice from the days that are gone, and the old tongue comes back to me, with the sound of the piper on the hill and the harper in the hall, with the sigh of the summer wind in the fir trees, and the lash of the waves on the rocks. Oh, my son, my son, I would that you had never come here to make me mind the things that are dead.”

Now he was trembling, and I took his white hand and set it on my arm to steady him. His hand felt the cold touch of the great gold bracelet Gerda would have me wear, and he looked at it, and turned it in his fingers.

“Jarl, and son of a jarl,” he whispered. “War and flame, and the cry of the victors! Oh, my son, you mind me of bitter things.”

“I and mine have never hurt Christian folk, father,” I said, knowing what he meant.

The sword and fire had fallen heavily on the Scottish islands when the Norseman first came thither. But surely he could not mind that.

Thereafter Phelim told me that he thought the old man spoke of the burning of some monastery on the mainland of Scotland, whence he had fled, with those of his brethren who escaped, to Ireland, coming hither at last to end his days in peace. But I heard no more from himself now. What I had just spoken turned his thoughts afresh, and I was glad.

“Then you are a heathen; and this lady also?”

“We are Odin’s folk,” I answered. “I suppose that is what you mean, father.”

“Yet I think now that I saw you once in the chapel.”

“You may do so again, father, if it is permitted by you. I have heard naught but good words there.”

His eyes brightened, and he smiled at me.

“You know nothing of the faith then?” he asked.

I shook my head. I had heard never a word of it until I met my friends.

“We will teach you,” he said eagerly. “Sit here, my children, in this warm place, and let me tell you somewhat thereof. It may be the last time I may teach the heathen. Aye, I have done it in days long ago.”

I spoke to Gerda then, telling her what the old father wished, and she smiled at the thought.



“We have naught to do,” she said, “and if it will give him pleasure we may as well bide here.”

So we sat down on the bank in the sun amid the quiet of the woodland, and listened. The wood flowers carpeted the ground, and Gerda plucked those that were in reach and played with them while the father began his words. Presently he saw that Gerda was paying no heed, and he bade me translate, hearing that she did not understand. And by that time he spoke the old tongue of his youth, and the Erse way of speaking was forgotten.

Then he told us things which every Christian child knows; but which were new and wonderful and very good to hear, to us two. Soon Gerda had forgotten the flowers, and was listening, and presently asking questions as might a child who hears the sweetest tale ever told. So still we were, and so soft the voice of the old man, that the birds the hermits were wont to feed came close to us, and a robin perched on the shoulder of the father, and he smiled at it.



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“See,” he said, “the breast of the little bird is red because it had compassion on its Maker as He suffered, and would pluck the cruel thorns away.”

And so with all homely words and simple he taught us, and we were fain to listen. Odin and the Asir seemed far off at that time and in that place, and I half blamed myself for harkening.

“What of our Asir?” I said at last.

“Heroes of the old days,” he said. “Heroes whom their sons have worshipped; because a man must needs worship the greatest whom he knows.”

“And what has become of them?”

He shook his head. “They are in the hands of the true Allfather,” he answered. “I cannot tell more than that. It is enough.”

“I have heard it said,” I went on, for here was somewhat which troubled me, “that you Christians hold that we worship fiends—that the Asir are such.”

“That were to wrong the heroes of the past, my son,” he answered. “It is meant that you know not what you worship under those honoured names. There are those among you who know that the Asir were your forefathers. Did you ever hear that Alfred, the wise and most Christian king of England, was ashamed of that ancestry of his?”

“I myself cannot be ashamed thereof. I am from the line of Odin,” I said. “If you speak truth, father, one count against Christians has passed, from my mind at least.”

But now Gerda spoke timidly, for she too had her question at this time.

“What of women, father? Is there a place for them in the heaven of which you speak? Was it won for us?”

“Most truly, my daughter. It is for the woman as for the man. There is no difference.”

I saw her face light up with a new wonder and joy, which told me that here was no idle listener. And so the old teacher went on in all kindly wisdom, never hurting us in aught he said of the old gods, but leading us to see the deeper things which our forebears had forgotten. I listened, and thought it all good; but betimes Gerda wept quietly, and would fain hear more and more. The little bell on the chapel rang for the vespers or ever we ended that long talk, and the old man must go. I raised him up, for he was very feeble, and again the touch of the gold put a word into his mind.



“Jarl, and son of Odin,” he said, smiling, “no need for you to wait that dim Ragnarok fight of yours for warfare against evil. That fight has begun, and in it you may take your part now, that you may share in the victory hereafter.”

Then I said, for I minded how useless to me seemed this life here:

“What part have you therein, father—you and the brethren?”

“We pray for those who have forgotten to do so for themselves,” he answered. “And we are of those whose sorest fight has been against evil within.”

So we went into the chapel for the vespers with him, and the day was done. But in the morning there hung on the black cross on the green grass a wreath of white flowers which no brother had set there.



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Chapter 11: The Summons Of The Beacons.

Now, for all the peace of this holy island there hung over it an ever-present fear of which I learned when we spoke to Phelim concerning the treasure which we would leave in the care of the brethren when we went hence.

He said that it was well if we would do so, and that they would bury it under that new shed which we had helped to build, since no Danes would wonder at seeing newly-turned earth there.

“Moreover,” he said, “if we are not here when you come for it, you will know where it is.”

He said this quietly, and as a matter of course, and I asked him in surprise if it was likely that they would leave their island.

“Not alive,” he answered; “but the Danes may spy our easily-taken flocks at any time, and come ashore here.”

“Why, they would not harm the unresisting,” I said.

“Nay, but we are priests of the faith, therefore the heathen rage against us. Already they have slain almost every brotherhood along the shores of this land, and of Scotland. Our turn may come at any time.”

He was in no way disquieted at this terrible thought. Thereafter I knew that to him such a death was martyrdom, and most glorious.

But Bertric listened with a troubled face, and presently, when we were alone again, he said that he was anxious.

“I only hope that we may not have brought trouble on these good men who have sheltered us,” he said. “There was a ship which must have seen us cast ashore here.”

“We should have had her back by this time if she meant seeking us.”

“It is not her whom I fear,” he answered. “This ship of ours was too precious for Heidrek to let go easily. So soon as that fog cleared, and he found we were not ahead on the Norway shore, he would put about. He knew that we must be undermanned, being so close to us. Then he would get back to where he lost us, and thereafter would guess the only course we could have taken, for the matter of handling the sail would settle that. We could not have gone far ere the wind dropped. Then supposing he picked up our mast?”

“Unlikely enough,” I said. “We are raising trouble for ourselves.”



Bertric shook his head. "I know Heidrek only too well. He may spend this season in hunting for the treasure which he so nearly had. News of a wreck flies fast, and he has but to touch here and there on our track or thereabout to hear of us sooner or later."

Now, I did not trouble much more about this, but it bided in Bertric's mind, and made him restless. That third day passed without sign from the mainland, as was likely, seeing that the fishers had to reach the king. It would have been of no use for us to take the boat and cross, for Dalfin told us that we needs must have horses, and maybe a guard when we would go to his place, which was a long day's ride from the shore. We were well cared for here, and it was a pleasant place wherein to wait.



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In the evening the old superior sent for us again, and sitting once more in the sheltered glen, he taught us, taking up his tale where we had left it, after making me speak the old tongue of his youth to him for a little while. He was a wonderful teacher, clear and patient, and it would have been strange if we had not learned from him.

Yet I cannot say that I seemed to learn much. I clung to the old faith of my fathers, and that was not wonderful. But Gerda learned, and loved all that she heard. I had to turn the words of the teacher into the homely Norse for her, and her questions were many and eager.

Somewhere about midnight thereafter, Bertric woke with a start which roused me, so that I sat up and asked what was amiss.

"I do not know," he answered; "but it lies on my mind that somewhat has happened, or is to happen. Somewhat evil."

"The last talk of Heidrek has raised fears in your mind," I said.

Then across the stone-framed window came a flare of red light, and we both sprang to our feet and went to the door. Dalfin stirred, but did not wake. And when we were in the open all was still in the moonlight round us, but on the mainland every hill inland to the westward was tipped with the flame of beacon fires, newly lighted.

That which had waked Bertric, as one may suppose, with its first flash, was set on the hill over the fishers' village, whence we were to look for the signal to tell us to be ready for departure. It had been just lighted, and blazed up fiercely as we stood outside the cell. Five minutes later another fire answered it to the eastward, and again beyond that a third, and fourth, one after the other, as men saw the glare.

"Foes landing to the westward," said Bertric. "The fires run thence. Maybe the ship we saw went down the coast and has returned."

Now we woke Dalfin, who came out yawning, and looked.

"Danes, I suppose," he said carelessly. "That is the usual trouble; or else Connaught men on the raid. Well, as we cannot get at them, we need not trouble concerning them. And they cannot reach us."

"The fires sprang up quickly as if men watched by them tonight," said Bertric. "Some enemy was looked for."

"You have seen the like before then?" asked Dalfin.

"Not once or twice. And for the same reason—the Danes."



“Have you fought with them?”

“I was at my own place when we beat them off once.”

So we stood and watched the fires until they twinkled as far as we could see to the eastward. Westward the hill, as I have said, cut off sight of both cliffs and open sea, but over it was the glow in the sky of far-off beacons.

Fergus came out of the chapel, and I heard him give a little cry as he saw the fires. Then he came to us, seeing us in the moonlight, which was bright.

“No need to fear, my sons,” he said in his still voice. “Many a time I have seen those fires before, and doubtless shall see them again. The trouble may be far off, and of little account. Sleep in peace.”



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We turned in again, but sleep was broken until daylight came, and we were astir with the first gleam of sun across the door. It was a bright morning, with a steady sea breeze from the northeast, and every promise of the fine weather that comes withal in the summer. On the hills the smoke of the war beacons still rose and drifted, but there was no sign of stir at the foot of the glen on the mainland where the fishers had their haven, such as it was.

The brethren came from their cells, looked at the black smoke wreaths, and sighed, and went their ways into the chapel for the matins, and the little bell rang. Then Gerda came from her cell and saw us, for she, too, was early wakeful here in the quiet.

“Why are you looking so troubled?” she asked us, as we bade her good morrow. Her eyes went from one to the other in some dismay, for I dare say we showed that the night had been unquiet for us.

“There seems to be some trouble on the mainland,” I answered. “There are beacon fires yonder, but the brothers think little of them. They are not unusual here from all accounts.”

“By no means,” said Dalfin. “And they may mean little. At the most, we may be kept waiting here for a day or two longer while my father gathers men and goes to see what is amiss. Now I have a mind to ask the hermits to call the fishers and let me cross and help, if so be there is fighting on hand.

“You would come also, would you not?” he asked, looking at us two.

“Hardly,” Bertric answered, before I could do so in the same word.

“Why not?”

“It is not to be supposed that we could leave our charge,” he answered.

“Forgive me; I forgot,” said Dalfin at once.

But even that word had made Gerda pale with the thought that she might be left alone, with the fear of our not returning for her. She smiled at Bertric as he answered, and then asked if we should not follow the brothers into the chapel, as we were told we might do at any time, though this first service was not one for which she and I might stay all the while.

So we went in, and there bided while we might. Presently we two had to rise up and leave the place, unwillingly, so far as Gerda was concerned. Phelim and I between us had told her the words of the service.



Now we walked away together toward the shore, and were silent for a time. It was plain that she thought deeply on somewhat. At last she said sadly:

“What is to come is all dim and unknown, but if it does come to pass that I may ever have home of my own again, I would that there was one of these brothers to teach me and mine.”

“That might easily be,” I answered.

“They would not go to a heathen land?” she said in surprise.

“Maybe not these hermits, but some man like to them would. I have heard them talk of men who are held in the greatest honour because they have dared to do so.”



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Thereafter she said nothing, but in her face grew a great content. We came to the shore and looked on the bare timbers of the wreck, and with all my heart I would that they were not quite so plain to be seen. The tides were slack now, and the water did not hide them in the least, even at the full flood. Moreover it was calm enough.

“Malcolm,” she said presently, “do you and Bertric want to go with the prince and see if there is fighting?”

She looked in my face quickly and half turned away, and I wondered what she was thinking. For a moment I had a foolish thought that mayhap she expected us to be full of longing for the weapon play, and that to please her I might say somewhat which would tend that way. But I bethought myself and answered her frankly:

“I must speak for myself,” I said; “but I think it will be the same with Bertric. I have no mind to meddle with the affairs of another man until I am sure that he needs my help. I cannot say that I do not like a fair fight when there is good reason for it; but there is no wisdom or courage in going out of the way to seek for one.”

So I laughed, and she laughed also, as relieved.

“I feared lest I held you back from the game you love,” she said.

“If we were alone—” I said, and there stopped, for I had said too much. No doubt if she had not been here we should have been off with Dalfin at once with light hearts.

“Then I do stay you,” she said, catching my meaning.

Whereon it came to me that I had better say what I meant outright.

“We need no better reason for staying. That we have you to care for is good, and in that care is more honour to us than we might win in fighting in a quarrel which is not ours.”

“Little honour can you win here, Malcolm,” she said half sadly, and yet smiling. “Yet I know what you mean, and I thank you both.”

Now, a thought which had been growing up in my heart for these many days came to the surface, as it were, and I had almost spoken it. I knew that if this charge were taken from me I should be lonely indeed, and that it were honour enough for me to care for and guard Gerda through all my life as the one thing that I could care for. I think that it would have been strange if this had not come to me in these long hours of companionship with her, seeing what she was in all respects, whether as she stood here on the windy shore with her fair hair tossed by the sea breeze, fair and full of health and life, or as I had seen her on the decks of the doomed ship, brave and steadfast, with the cruel terror of the pirates on her.

But here and now I could say nothing of this that was so near to me. I had naught to offer her but my poor presence, no future, and no home. And maybe there were long days of companionship and service due from me, and I would not that there should be the least thing said to mar the ease with which that went so far. One can be wise at times, when the comfort of another is in the balance, as it were.



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Moreover, how could I tell that some of her longing for home might not be also from pain of separation? And that was now no happy thought to me. Well, I must wait and find out all that. If it was in my power that longing should be stilled, and then I might know the best and worst of all that might lie before me.

Thoughts like these do not grow up all at once as I have set them down. At this time they seemed to gather from the many times they had passed through my mind, and rank themselves against my words. So it came to pass that I was silent, and was glad presently that so I had been.

“Look!” said Gerda suddenly, pointing out to the far eastward, “yonder are sails on the skyline.”

Far off they were, but plain enough under the morning sun. Two white specks on the blue circle’s edge, sails of ships which sailed westward, as if beating to windward in long boards against the northeast breeze. They might be Norse vessels from Dublin on their way homewards, though it had been more easy for such to wait a slant from the south or west.

“They cannot be the ships which have caused the firing of the beacons,” I said. “That trouble was to the westward.”

I half turned to look at the hills and their fires, and saw our comrades coming to us. Dalfin was ahead, and plainly excited.

“Malcolm,” he cried, so soon as he was within hearing, “I cannot hold back if there is fighting in our land. Will you two take the boat there and set me across to the mainland?”

I suppose that he had talked of this to Bertric as they came, for the Saxon nodded to me.

“It will but take half an hour,” he said. “Moreover, if we cross we may learn what is amiss. What says the queen?”

“If the prince must go,” she said, “I do not see how I can stay him. I can sit and watch you there and back, and cannot feel lonely. But need he go?”

“Faith,” said Dalfin, laughing, “can a prince of Maghera sit still when the fires are burning yonder to call him? That would be a shame to him, and a wonder to his folk. I must go.”

His eyes shone, and it was plain that even had we wished to do so, we could not stay him. The place of the prince was with his men, and he would return for us. Gerda



smiled at his eagerness, and bade him hasten to return, and so we went to where the boats lay in the sand hills.

The larger had all her gear in her as we left it, and the smaller, which was meant for three only, had but her oars. We took this latter, as it was easy to get her to the water, and she was all we needed.

“Go and get your arms,” I said to Dalfin. “We will pull round and meet you at the rock where the fishers landed.”

“Hurry, then,” he said, and went his way to the cells in all haste.

More slowly Gerda followed him, and we pushed off and bent to the oars. There was little sea, and we went swiftly from the open round the eastern point of the island and into the strait.



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Now I pointed out the distant sails to Bertric, but he had already seen them.

“I do not rightly make out what they are yet,” he said; “but I do not think them Danish. Honest Norse traders from Dublin, most likely.”

It was at the time of the slack water at the top of high tide now, and we found Dalfin and Gerda waiting with Phelim and another of the brothers at the flat rock. At the first sight I thought the prince had changed his mind, and would stay, as if Gerda had over-persuaded him. For he stood there bare headed, and without mail or shield, though he had the axe and sword which Gerda had given him, and the great torque was on his neck.

“Where is the mail?” I asked, as we steadied the boat by the rock.

“Waiting my return,” he answered. “Today I am an Irish prince—tomorrow the queen’s courtman again, if she will.

“Now farewell, fathers.”

He bent his knee to the priests, and then bowed over Gerda’s hand as he kissed it in parting.

“Forgive me, queen,” he said. “The call of Eirinn must take me from you for a time. It cannot be denied by me.”

“Come back soon, and as a victor, and you will be forgiven,” she answered, laughing, and he stepped into the boat.

Then as he put off she sat down on a rock with the brethren behind her, to watch us, and we saw her wave her hand in farewell.

“Concerning the arms, or the want thereof,” said Dalfin presently. “Our folk hold that a warrior should need naught but his weapons, and that mail or shield are but cowardly devices. So I have had to leave them, though I am not of that mind myself. Moreover, I shall be likely to find a long tramp across the hills before me presently, and I have no mind to be set on by my own people as a wandering Dane, for the sake of wearing outland arms to please myself.”

It was not a quarter of an hour before we were alongside the little tottering landing stage which the fishers had built for themselves of the ribs of some wreck at the foot of their glen. Some of the children who swarmed in the village of huddled turf huts caught sight of us first, and fled, yelling. Out of the huts came their mothers in all haste to see what ailed them, and they too saw and shrieked.



Whereon the men came running, each with a long-handled axe in his hand, as if caught up from close by where each had been working. Though they were wild and short of stature they were wiry and active men, who might be good warriors if well led.

Dalvin leapt ashore and called to them, and they knew him, welcoming him with a yell of delight, and crowding to do him noisy homage. There were ten or fifteen of them, and it was some time before the prince had a chance to make himself heard. When he could, he called for the head man of the place, and one, with fiery-red hair and beard, came and knelt before him to hear his commands, while the rest drew back and stared, in a half circle. As for us, we waited in the boat and laughed.



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“What are all these beacon fires about?” asked Dalfin shortly.

“Danes in the river Bann, lord,” the head man said.

“Have they landed yet?”

“No, lord. They wait for ransom they have demanded. If it comes not, they will burn and harry all Ulster.”

“How many ships, then?” asked Dalfin, on hearing that threat.

“Two ships, lord, and great ones.”

The prince laughed at the man.

“What, burn all Ulster with two shiploads of men? That is a great boast which we shall not care for. Where is my father, the king—and where is the muster?”

The man told him that the king was at some place or other, with the mustering warriors. Thereat Dalfin bade the man get him a horse at once, and the fisher threw up his hands and said that there was never a horse within ten miles. Dalfin laughed and spoke to us.

“Just what I thought,” he said. “If I get to the muster by sunset I shall be lucky, unless I meet with a horse on the way. And—I am out of condition with these long days on board ship.”

He groaned, and we bade him wait till he was sent for; but that he would not hear.

“I shall take a dozen of these knaves as guard—and maybe to carry me betimes. Wish me luck, for I must be going.”

Now the wild fishers had been whispering among themselves, and one of them made up his mind to tell somewhat. He came and knelt before Dalfin, and asked him to forgive him.

“What for?” asked the prince.

“For telling foolishness,” answered the man. “Yet I think it should be told with the rest of the news.”

“Tell it, then.”

“I spoke with the man who carried the gathering cry, and he said that the evil Lochlannoch, concerning whom are the beacons, have bidden men give up the treasure



which they say we must needs have won from a certain wreck. There has been no wreck, lord, save yours, and the prince will ever have treasure.”

Now a sudden heat of rage seemed to fall on Dalfin, and he cried aloud to the men:

“Hearken, fools! It is not to be said that the prince was wrecked like a fisher churl. There has been no wreck—if there has been, there was no treasure. Mind you that.”

“Lord,” said the man, trembling, “I cannot tell if aught was told the Lochlannoch. We have said naught to them, not having seen them.”

“Dalfin,” I said, with a great chill on me, “ask if they know the name of the leader of these men.”

He changed colour, for I think that the knowledge of what I feared came to him in a flash. He asked, and the man at his feet muttered what was meant for the name of Heidrek. He said it once or twice, stammering, but I knew it, and Bertric caught it also.

“What is it that the man says?” he asked quickly. He had been content to wait until presently to hear what the news was, until this came to his ears.

“What you feared,” I answered. “Heidrek treasure hunting.”



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Dalfin turned to us now, and his face was troubled.

“Malcolm,” he said, “you have heard all this. It is a mere chance if Heidrek has not heard of the wreck by this time. Now, it will be best for you to bring Gerda across here at once, and so let these men take you to a hiding in the hills. I will come back swiftly with men and horses and take you thence. Make the hermits come also, if you can—but they will not.”

Then he spoke to the fishers and told them that they had to do this, at the same time bidding some get provender and be ready to go with him instantly. That pleased them well enough, and a dozen ran to the huts to find what was needed. I heard the women scolding them.

“Farewell, friends,” he said, coming alongside again, and taking our hands with a great grip. “I left Ireland to find adventure, and, faith, I have not been disappointed. Now, the sooner I am away the sooner I will be back.”

“Good luck to you,” we cried; and he shouted for his ragged men, and was away up the glen.

Behind the little straggling crowd the women came out and wept and howled as if not one would be back again. It was their way of sending their men off in good spirits, I suppose. Not that the men heeded the noise at all, being used to it. One looked back and grinned.

The few men left lingered on the shore, and I called one to me.

“We shall be back here shortly with the young queen,” I said. “You will be ready for us.”

“As the word of the prince bade us,” he answered. “It will be done.”

We pulled away, and it was time. The falling tide was setting westward through the strait, and we had to row more or less against it now as we crossed to where Gerda’s white dress shone on the farther shore.

“Heidrek will not risk a landing,” Bertric said. “The sooner we are back here with Gerda the better. He has heard of that wreck.”

I told him the words of the fishers, and he was the more sure of it. We pulled on the faster therefore, and the light boat flew as only a Norse-built boat can fly.

Bertric was in the forward rower’s place, steering, and now and again he turned his head to set the course. I suppose we had covered half the distance across, when I heard him draw in his breath sharply.



“Holy saints,” he said, “look yonder!”

He was staring toward the westward mouth of the strait, half a mile away. There was a long black boat there, and the sun sparkled on the arms of the men in her. They were rowing slowly against the tide, toward us.

“Too late,” said Bertric between his teeth. “That is Heidrek treasure hunting, and we shall not get back to the mainland.”

Chapter 12: With Sail And Oar.

I looked over my shoulder at Gerda. Her white dress seemed to shine in the morning sun like silver against some dark bushes, and my first fear was that it could be seen as plainly by the men in the big boat down the strait.



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“It cannot be Heidrek’s,” I groaned.

“I know that boat only too well,” answered Bertric; “pull, if you never pulled before.”

The oars bent, and the water boiled round the blades. Bertric headed straight across, letting the tide have its way with us. In five minutes we were ashore a hundred yards below where Gerda sat, and then I knew that the bushes must screen her from the view of those who came from the sea. We leapt out and looked at the boat we feared. The men in her did not seem to be heeding us, for, at all events, they had not quickened their stroke. They were keeping over on the far shore. Either they had not seen us, or took us for no more than fishers—or else knew that they had us trapped if they wanted us.

“Give me a lift here,” said Bertric, going to a great stone which was a load for any two men. “We must sink this boat—we have the other, if that is any good to us.”

Together we hove the great stone into the boat as it rocked on the edge of the tide, starting a plank or two. I stove in one altogether with an oar, shoved her off with all my might, and saw her fill at once, and sink with the weight in her some twenty yards from shore. She would not be seen again till dead low water. Then we hove the oars into the bushes. Maybe it was all useless, but we would leave nothing to be spied which might bring the men to the island sooner than needful.

That took only a few minutes, but in them I cannot tell how many wild plans for Gerda’s safety went through my mind. Beyond the bare chance which lay in getting to the hillside and trying to keep out of sight of the men when they landed, there seemed to be nothing we could do.

Now, along the little shore path came Gerda to seek us, smiling at our haste. The boat she missed at once, and looked round for it.

“Why, what has become of the boat?” she asked. “I thought you landed here.”

Bertric looked at me, and I at him, and Gerda caught the glance.

“There is something which you fear to tell me,” she said steadily. “Let it be spoken at once, for we have faced danger together ere this, have we not?”

“Have you not seen a large boat down the strait?” I asked lamely.

“No,” she said, and was stepping forward to the edge of the water, past the screen of low shore bushes to look, but I stayed her.

“It is the boat which we fear,” I said. “There are Danes in her, and we think they are seeking the wreck.”



She looked me in the face for a moment, and read what was written there.

“We might welcome the coming of honest Vikings,” she said, “whether Dane or Norse. They know how to befriend a woman who needs help. These men whom you fear and who seek the wreck can only be the men of our enemy.”

Then Bertric said:

“I cannot mistake the boat which I have helped to pull so many a weary time. It is Heidrek’s. He has followed us, and has somewhere heard of the fate of the ship. We have sunk the little boat, lest the sight of it should bring them ashore straightway.”



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"Then we must hide somewhere," she said, looking round her as if to see what place might be.

"Aye, we must hide. There will be fifteen men, or more, in the boat. Malcolm and I cannot stay their landing."

Gerda caught her breath suddenly. "What of the hermits?" she said.

"We waste time," said I. "Come and let us tell them. They may have some hiding place."

Then we went swiftly to the cells. Once we looked back to the strait, from the little rise behind which the cells were sheltered, and saw the boat still working against the tide along the far shore. Heidrek had certainly not heard that the wreck was on the island itself. Most likely it was thought that we had made for the shelter of the strait, and had gone ashore in trying to reach it. Unless the ship which we had seen knew the coast well, her crew could hardly have told that an island was here.

There were no hermits to be seen, for they were either in their cells, or at their tasks about the place. So I went to the first cell and looked in, and finding it empty, went to the next. Fergus sat there, writing in some beautiful book which he was busied with. One never found a brother idle.

"Father," I said, "I must disturb you. There is danger at hand, I fear."

"Ah," he answered, setting down his pen, and rising hastily. "The Danes at last. Well, we have long expected them to come to us, as to our brethren elsewhere. But what shall the poor queen do?"

"Is there no place where you can hide her?" I said.

"None," he answered gloomily. "Tell me more."

I told him, and he shook his head.

"Men in the narrow waters, and men in the open," he muttered. "Hemmed in on every side."

"Danes in the open sea?" I said, with a new fear on me. The end might be nearer than we deemed it.

"Aye, two ships sailing this way."

They were those which we had seen and forgotten. I ran out, and while Fergus went to Bertric, climbed the little hill beyond the village, and looked seaward. The ships were



six miles away, and heading due west, having edged somewhat farther from the shore than when we first sighted them. They were not coming hither.

“There need be no fear of those ships, father,” I said. “They are making a passage past us—bound elsewhere at all events.”

“Then,” he said at once, “there lies your boat on the shore of the open sea. Make away to the main land eastward while there is time, and take to the hills inland. You are not likely to be followed thither. We will give you some token which the poor folk of the shore will know.”

Now, while the hermit had been speaking, I was translating for the other two, as was my way by this time.

“Father,” cried Gerda, and I spoke her words as she said them, “will you not fly also?”

He shook his head with a sad smile. Neither he nor any one of his brethren would leave the place.



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"We shall hide in the hill and behind it while we may," he said. "They may not trouble to hunt us."

"The good father is right," said Bertric. "We must get away as soon as we can. It is our one chance. I had thought of it, but was not sure how the shore folk would greet us. Now we must hasten. Ask the hermit to come and help us launch the boat."

Then he turned to Gerda, who stood with clasped hands waiting to hear the end of the rapid speech.

"It is our only hope," he said again. "We must take that way, though it is hard to leave these holy men to their fate."

Then, of a sudden, a light came into Gerda's eyes, and she flushed as with a fresh hope.

"Those other ships!" she cried. "You said they were not Danish. Norse or Irish, they would help us, if we could reach them!"

Bertric said never a word, but ran to the place whence he could look out to sea, and came back with a brighter face.

"They are not Danish," he said. "I am sure thereof. And it is just a chance that we might reach them. If they see we are in need, there is another hope for us, for they will meet us, or heave to for us."

Then some fear took hold of Gerda, born of the chase by Heidrek, as I believe.

"No," she said, "rather the poor folk ashore than chance what men we may meet at sea."

"As you will," answered Bertric. "You may be right. Now will you gather what you must needs take, and that swiftly? Malcolm and I will get our arms."

She went to her cell, and Fergus hurried to call his brethren. We two went to the cell which had been given us.

"Just as well not to put them on," I said. "We have a long pull before us, and if armed men are seen in the boat we must be chased."

The casket of gold was under the heather pillow of my bed, and I dragged it out. From it we took what we could stow away on us in one way or another, and then, with our war gear bundled in our arms, went out.



Across the strait rose a thick smoke from the foot of the glen. Heidrek's folk were burning the wretched huts for sport. All the fisher people would have fled at their first coming.

"They are busy now," said Bertric grimly, nodding toward the signs of pillage. "They will be here next."

Now Gerda came with a little bundle, wrapped in her blue cloak. She was pale, and near to weeping as she looked on the hermits, who were coming together from their work to the black cross in the midst of their home. The old superior caught sight of me and called to me in his still voice.

"So you must fly, my son," he said. "I would that we had had more speech together. Give this to the lady who has listened to me so patiently. Now, I have bidden Fergus and Phelim to go with you. They can row, and that well, and you need help. Aye, I ken the ways of the boatwork well enough. You will make them go with you, for hardly will they obey me, now at the last."



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Thereat those two brethren threw themselves at the feet of the old man, and besought him to let them bide with the rest for that crown of martyrdom which they might gain.

“No, my sons,” he said sternly, and yet lovingly; “your lives may yet be of use. Ours are done. Now you shall win more by saving the lives of these friends of ours who came to us in need than by losing your own.”

Then he bent toward them, and spoke rapidly in the Latin tongue, and I saw their faces change, and they rose up. Thereafter they had no more to say of staying, though at the time I could not tell what the words which wrought this change might be. Without another word they took Bertric’s arms and mine and Gerda’s little pack, and started for the shore, and as they went the old man smiled as if content. Then he bent toward us.

“Go, my children,” he said; “you have no moment to waste longer. It has been good to speak with you.”

Now I set that which he had given me in Gerda’s hand. It was a little black crucifix carven of the bog oak by one of the brothers who was skilful at that work. She took it with a flushing face.

“Malcolm,” she said, “tell him that we will not forget.”

So I told him, and he smiled, saying nothing in answer. I dare say he knew that Gerda would not do so, if he had less hopes for myself. Gerda first, and then we two in turn, bent and kissed his thin hand, and he blessed us, and we must needs go.

Across the sand hills we went, keeping out of sight of the opposite shore, and I looked back once and saw that the little black-robed group was moving away up the glen. One brother was coming from the chapel with a burden, which, no doubt, was the case containing the holy vessels.

“Four of us to pull, and Gerda to steer,” said Bertric, whose spirits, like my own, were rising. “We should do well. These brothers, moreover, know where we can land, which was the difficulty I most feared. They are terrible cliff walls yonder.”

“How far must we go before we can find a landing?” I asked Phelim on this.

“Some five miles or more,” he said, after a little thought. “There is a cove and beach at the foot of a valley. The fishers took me there once to help a sick man. I can find the place.”

So it seemed that a village lay there also, which was good hearing, for the sake of Gerda, even if it were naught but of turf huts. Thence we could send a message to Dalfin.



Now, while we spoke thus, we were getting the boat down to the water quickly enough between the four of us. She was very light for her size, and we had all her gear in her already. There was room in her for four rowers and two passengers aft, and I dare say might have carried two more at a pinch. With the five of us she would be in her best trim, therefore, and we might well distance a larger boat if it was overladen at all. But the boat we fled from was not to be seen now, even from the higher sand hills. Some rise in the island hid her, or else she was well over to this shore.



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The brothers cast off their long, black robes now, and stowed them in the bows of the boat with our gear. They had thick woollen tunics, like those of the fishers, under them, and their arms were bare, and sinewy with long toil with spade and hoe, for these two were the working brothers in field and garden.

We helped Gerda into the stern sheets, and pushed off, splashing knee deep into the water as we ran the boat out among the waves. Then we took our places and headed straight out to sea, across the broken water where the reef lay still well covered, and so into the long, steady seaway of the offing. Then we turned eastward for the long row which was before us, and settled down to the work, Bertric rowing the stroke oar, with myself next him, and the brothers in the bows.

The boat travelled swiftly and easily, so that Phelim praised her as the best he had ever known. He had come from some burnt monastery on Lough Neagh, where the boat was in constant use, whether for fishing or travelling to the cells round the shores.

Soon we opened up the mouth of the strait, and looked anxiously for Heidrek's boat along the shore, whence the smoke rose still thicker and more black from the burning turf huts of the fishing village. It was not to be seen in that direction, and we thought for the moment that the men had already crossed to the island, whose strand we could not see until we were well off the mouth.

A dozen more strokes of the oars and we saw it, and were ourselves seen at the same moment. Whether the men had caught some fisher and had heard where the wreck lay, or whether they had seen the bare ribs of the ship from the far shore I do not know, and it is of little account. But whatever had led them this way, they were close on us, pulling leisurely toward the end of the island past which we were going, as if to round it to the wreck. They were not more than a quarter of a mile from us, and had been hidden under the near shore.

One of the men in her stern pointed to us, and the rowers stopped and turned to look. Then a great hail came over the water, bidding us hold on and wait. She was full of men, pulling five oars a side, with six or eight in the bows and stern.

We said nothing, but held on quickly. Bertric never hastened the long stroke he was setting us, but we put more power into it without need of bidding. Heidrek's men watched us for a short space, and then made up their minds to chase us, no doubt seeing that this could only be one of the wrecked ship's boats, and making sure that we had the treasure on board.

They ran the boat ashore hastily, and some of the men landed, hurrying across the narrow head of the island toward the wreck, while the rest put off again. Now there were but two men in the stern, and the ten rowers bent to their work and were after us.

We could see that they were all armed, and the sun flashed from the bright helms as they rose and fell at the work.



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Phelim saw the men cross the island and groaned, fearing that when they found nothing on the beach or in the sand hills they would pass on to the village at once. But, like ourselves when we first came ashore, they had no knowledge that a village was there, and it was not to be seen as it nestled in its little valley. So they bided on the shore and watched the chase as it began.

By the time that the big boat was after us in earnest, we had set a full half mile between us and it, owing to the little delay in landing the men. Then they hailed us again, but though we heard the hail we paid no heed to it. So for a little while we held on, until it was plain that the ten oars must needs wear down our four, and then we stepped the mast and made sail, at least holding our own under it and the oars. The northeast breeze was helping us, though we must sail close-hauled, and my only fear was lest the pursuers should do the same. But they had no sail with them.

Now we held on thus for a matter of two miles, and neither of the boats seemed to gain much on the other. It began to come into my mind that we should win after all, if only we did not tire too soon. They had two fresh men, who could take their turn presently. And then it came across me that even if we ran ashore before they reached us, we should hardly have time to get away before they, too, were on the beach. The fisher folk, if there were any huts at the landing place, might all be away at the muster, and no aid might be waiting us.

I know that all these things went through the mind of my comrade at this time, and from the troubled look on the face of Gerda as she steered, it was plain that she, too, had her doubts as to the end of this race. Then Bertric spoke to me over his shoulder.

“We had better head seaward after all,” he said. “What think you of our chance of reaching yon ships before we are overhauled? We shall be caught before we reach a landing, or else taken on the very beach, as we go now.”

I looked at the two strange ships. They were three miles from shore, and perhaps at the same distance from us eastward, still heading west and a little out to sea.

“It is our best plan,” I answered. “We shall get the wind abeam, and ought to sail away from that great boat. It may be a choice of two evils, but one cannot well meet with another Heidrek.”

“We must cut across their course and try to hail them,” said Bertric, somewhat wearily. “It all depends on how the boat sails on the wind, and if we can keep the oars going. What say you, Queen Gerda?”

“Do as you think best,” she answered bravely. “I know how this boat can sail, and I will answer for her. And I can see no sign of a break in these black cliffs for many a long mile ahead.”

Now Bertric turned and took a long look at the ships, and his face was half toward me. He seemed puzzled.

“It is hardly possible,” he muttered to me, “but I could almost swear that they were English. If not, they are Frisian. But what could have brought either into these seas? Have we taken to the Viking path?”



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“No,” I answered, “the Vikings have taken them.”

He gave a short laugh and bade me and Phelim lower the sail and hoist it afresh for the new tack, while he and Fergus pulled on. Gerda put the boat about into the wind and it was soon done. Astern the enemy howled, thinking that we had given up, for the moment. Then the sail filled, and the boat heeled to the breeze abeam, and we headed out to sea, taking as wide a sweep as we could, lest we should give the foe too much advantage in the change of course.

As it was, they seemed to gain hand over hand for a while, but they had to pull dead to windward in following us as we went off at an angle to the old course. Then we began to draw ahead steadily, and they hailed us with threats which made Gerda pale somewhat, for if we were still too far for the words to be heard there was no mistaking them. But her faith in the boat was justified, for she sailed wonderfully well with the beam wind. The big rowing boat astern began to go somewhat to leeward also, with the set of wind and wave and the tide together on her high side.

Now I glanced at the island which was lessening fast astern. I could make out that the men were still on the beach, searching, as it seemed, for what they might pick up of value from the wreck. The hermits were safe so far, and I told Gerda so in a word or two, and she smiled for the first time since we put off from shore. Her fear for our kind hosts passed from her for the moment.

We covered a mile or more in silence after that, tugging grimly at the oars, with a wary eye on the waves as they came. It was well for us that they were long and even, with little way in the heads of them. The sail, too, steadied the boat, and the hermits rowed well and evenly. But ever astern of us those ten oars rose and fell, unflinching, until I grew dazed with the flash of the steadily-swung blades. Then I looked at the iron shore, and saw the long lines of cruel cliffs with the white foam at their feet, seeming endless. There may have been a cove in sight, but I could not make it out, and anyway it must have been too far for us.

Then I looked at Gerda, and saw that there was some trouble in her face as she looked forward. Once she smiled as if to cheer the hermit brothers, and at that I felt the lift of the boat that comes with a fresh life set into the swing on the oar, and that told me somewhat. Fergus was failing. Behind me, Phelim, the younger and stronger man, was still breathing deeply and easily, and I had no fear of his failing yet.

Then I grew certain that the enemy was gaining. We had held our own up till this time, but barely. Gerda's lips tightened, and she had to meet the pull of Bertric and Phelim, lest they should overpower us. I did my best and she knew it, and kept the balance for a while, until I must needs speak.

“Bertric,” I said quietly, and in the Norse, “the bow oar is failing. Pull easy on your side for a little.”



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He did so, and the enemy crept nearer.

“Half a mile more,” said Gerda. “Only half a mile—and we can hail the ships.”

Bertric looked back, and his face brightened.

“We may do it yet,” he said; “and they are English-built ships.”

Now I cried to Phelim in the Gaelic that we had but a half mile more, and I felt the flagging oar of Fergus take up the work afresh, with a swifter swirl of the water round its blade as he pulled, while Phelim muttered words in Latin which doubtless were of thanks. I heard him name one Clement, who, as I have heard since, is the patron saint of seamen. The boat leapt and quivered again as she fled toward safety.

Now I had looked to see the pursuers give up the chase as we neared the ships, but they did not, and a cold fear came over me. Maybe these were known friends of Heidrek's. Then I thought that if so they might as well leave the matter to be ended by them. We should be helpless directly if so. But it seemed rather that they quickened the pace. They would not share the treasure with anyone.

There was a sound as of a groan from the bows, and the boat swung aside before Gerda could meet her with the helm. An oar flashed past me on a wave, and Phelim shipped his oar with a smothered cry. Fergus had fainted at last. I heard the sharp howl of delight from the men astern as they saw that, but Bertric and I never ceased pulling.

And suddenly Gerda's face lit up with a new hope, and she pointed to the ships and cried to us to look.

“The leading ship is heading for us,” she said breathlessly. “She has just paid off from the wind and is coming swiftly.”

Another moment and she cried that they had run up somewhat red to the masthead, and at that Bertric called to me, and he ceased pulling. He turned on the thwart and looked, and his eyes gleamed in his pale face. Then he rose up and set his hands to his mouth, and sent a great hail to the ship:

“Ahoy! Hakon Haraldsson, ahoy! Hakon! Hakon!”

The ship was near enough for her men to hear that. I saw a man on her high bows lift his hand in the silent answer of the seaman who hears and understands a hail, and I saw a red shield, blazoned with a golden lion, at the masthead. Then Bertric sat down and laughed as if he could not cease.



“It is Hakon, Athelstane’s foster son, on the way to win Norway for himself. Alfred taught us how to build ships like that.”

Chapter 13: Athelstane’s Foster Son.

We laid in the oars now and watched the pursuers. They had not the least chance of overhauling us before we were picked up by the ship, and they knew it. Still they were pulling after us, and one of the men in the stern hailed once or twice, making signs that we were to be taken by the ships. I thought that the figure seemed like that of Asbiorn, as I had seen him on the stern after I went overboard, but I could not be sure. Our boat slipped along fast, and his crew were not hurrying so much at this time.



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I looked back at the ships, and they were worth a second glance. I had never seen such splendid vessels, for they were higher and longer than any which sailed our northern waters, while their lines were clean cut and graceful as those of the little ship which had brought us hither so well—Thorwald's favourite cutter.

Now Bertric lifted up his head, for he had been finding his breath again after that last despairing pull, and he looked to the westward and pointed without a word. Round a great point which barred the view beyond the island came two ships, and their sails were brown. They were Heidrek's, and no doubt were looking for their boat. The men left on the island saw them at about the same time, and lit a fire to show where they were. They had not gone from the sand hills yet.

"Heidrek is running into danger," Bertric said grimly.

The enemy hailed again at that moment. I could hear now that they cried to the ship that we had their boat—that we were Irish knaves who had stolen it and all that was in it. It is quite likely that they honestly thought us such, but never wondered why Irishry should seek refuge with these ships.

Now the leading vessel was close on us. I could hear the hum of the wind in her broad sail and rigging, and the wash of the waves round her sharp bows. Then a tall young man came and looked at us from her high foredeck, and lifted his hand. The ship luffed and waited for us. As we slid alongside into the still water under her lee, he cried to us:

"Who knows Hakon, and calls on him?"

"An old comrade—Bertric of Lyme."

Hakon stared at Bertric under his hand for a moment, and laughed.

"And so it is!" he cried. "Well met, old friend; but what is that boat astern of you, and why were you in so desperate a hurry?"

"Needs must hurry when the worst pirate in the North Sea is after one. We have escaped once before from him—from Heidrek the Seafarer."

One or two men were beside Hakon, watching us curiously. One whistled when he heard that name, and spoke quickly to Hakon, who nodded. Then a line came uncoiling in the air from the ship to us, and across the huddled body of his comrade Phelim caught it, while I lowered the sail. He made it fast in the bows, and then bent over his brother, setting him more easily against the thwart. He had not dared shift his place to help him before, lest he should alter the sailing trim of the boat, and that must have been hard for him.



The men took the line astern, and the great ship paid off from the wind. We swung astern of her, wondering what this meant. I could hear Heidrek's men shouting, but I could not see how near they were, for the ship hid them.

The next moment told me. I saw, as I looked past the long black side of the ship, the bow of the boat come into view. A man stood up in it with his hand stretched out in a strange way, and I heard a yell. Then the boat was gone, and past us drifted oars and crushed planking, and a helm floating like an upturned bowl. She had been run down.



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Close by the bows of our boat a head came to the surface, and the face was turned to us. I knew it, for it was that of Asbiorn Heidreksson, and in a flash I minded that once I said that the day might come when I could repay him for letting us go—saving our lives, rather. He had his full mail on him, and was sinking, when I gripped his hair and held it. Then he got his hands on the gunwale and stared at us.

Gerda had hidden her face in her hands, for he was not the only one who had been swept past us. There were still cries, which rang in my ears, from men who were sinking as we passed on.

Bertric felt the boat lurch, and looked round. He saw the head above the gunwale, and the clutching hands on it, and reached for his oar.

“Hold hard!” I cried, staying the thrust which was coming. “It is Asbiorn!”

He dropped the oar again with a short laugh.

“Lucky for him that so it is,” he said; “but I am glad you saved him.”

“It is not to be supposed that I am welcome,” said Asbiorn, mighty coolly; “but on my word I did not know it was you whom I was chasing. You ought to be in Shetland. Now, if you think this a mistake, I will let go.”

“Well,” said Bertric, “you are the only man of your crews whom we could make welcome. Get to the stern and we will help you into the boat.”

He shifted his hands along the gunwale and we got him on board, while Gerda looked on in a sort of silent terror at all that had happened in that few minutes. There was a row of faces watching us over the rail of the ship by this time, and now Hakon came aft.

“Why,” he said, “you have a lady with you. I had not seen that before. We will get you alongside.”

So it came to pass that in five minutes more we were on the deck, and some of Hakon’s men were helping Phelim to get his still-swooning brother on board. There were a dozen men of rank round us at once, with Hakon at their head. There were not so many warriors to be seen as one might have expected, but all were picked men and well armed.

As for Hakon himself, I have never seen a more handsome young man. He was about seventeen at this time, and might have been taken for three years older, being tall and broad of shoulder, with the wonderful yellow hair and piercing eyes of his father Harald, whom he was most like, as all men knew. It was certain that he did the great English king, Athelstane, who had fostered him, credit, for he was in all ways most kinglike even now.



He took off the blue cap he wore as he went to meet Gerda, and greeted her with all courtesy, asking to know her name. She answered him frankly, though it was plain that the gaze of all the strange faces disquieted her.

“I am Gerda, granddaughter of that Thorwald who was a king in the south lands in the time of your great father, King Hakon,” she said. “I have been wrecked here with these friends, who have cared for me, and now will ask for your help.”



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"They will tell me all the story," said Hakon. "Now, I hold that I am lucky, for Thorwald has ever been a friend of our house."

"Thorwald is dead," she answered in a low voice, which shook somewhat. "I am the only child of the line left."

"Why, then, I am still happy in being hailed as king by Queen Gerda here and now.

"It is a good omen, friends, is it not?"

He turned to the nobles round us with a bright smile, and they laughed and said that none could be better. But one, a very tall man, older than most there, spoke to one of the courtmen hard by, and sent him aft with some message. Then he went to Gerda and asked if she did not remember him.

"You were a little thing, though, when I came with your father to Thorwald's hall," he said; "mayhap you do not recall it, but we were good friends then for a week or two. You have changed less than I."

Gerda looked shyly at him, and at last smiled.

"I remember," she said. "You are Thoralf the Tall."

Now, from aft came two ladies hastily, brought by Thoralf's message, from the after cabin under the raised deck of the ship, and the little throng parted to let them reach us. One was the wife of this Thoralf, and the other his daughter, and they looked pityingly at Gerda as they came, with all kindness in their faces. And when the elder lady saw that she seemed distressed at all the notice paid her, she took Gerda into her arms as might a mother, and so drew her away with her to her own place gently, with words of welcome. And that was a load off my mind, for I knew that Gerda was in good hands at last.

Hakon watched them go gravely, and then turned to Bertric and greeted him as an old and most welcome friend, and so Bertric made me known, and I also was well greeted. Then Hakon turned to Asbiorn, who stood by, watching all this quietly.

"Who is this prisoner of yours, Malcolm?" he asked. "You have not taken his sword from him, as I see."

"He is Asbiorn Heidreksson, King Hakon," I answered. "I cannot call him a prisoner, for I owe my own life to him, and freedom also. He saved me from his father's men."

"And let you go thereafter. I see," answered Hakon.

"Do you know aught of this Viking, Earl Osric?"



This was the chief to whom Hakon had spoken before the boat was run down. He had told the young king that which had led him to crush her as if her crew were vermin, and wondered to see us save one of them.

“I have heard much of Heidrek, seeing that I am a Northumbrian,” he said. “The track of that ruffian lies black on our coasts; but I have not heard of his son. We have naught against his name, at least.”

Then said Bertric: “I sailed as a thrall with yon ships for six months or more, and have naught against Asbiorn here. He is the only one of all the crew who follow Heidrek of whom I could say as much.”



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“Faith!” said Asbiorn, with a grave face, “it is somewhat to have no sort of character at all, as it seems.”

Hakon looked at him and laughed a little.

“Take service with me and make a good name for yourself,” he said. “It is a pity to see a good warrior who will do a kindly turn to a captive naught but a wolf’s-head Viking. I have need of courtmen.”

“I might do worse,” he answered; “but hither comes my father, and I have no mind to fight him at the very beginning of my service.”

Hakon looked at the two ships, which were nearing us fast, though we were still close-hauled, as when the boat was brought alongside.

“I had no mind to fight him,” said Hakon.

“It is not his way to let a ship pass without either toll or battle,” Asbiorn said bluntly.

“Why, then, go forward and get dried,” Hakon said. “We will speak of this presently, after we have met your ships.”

Thereon Asbiorn ungirt his sword and gave it to me solemnly.

“It is in my mind that this might get loose when our men come over the side,” he said. “Better that I am your captive for a while.”

With that he walked forward, and Hakon looked after him with a smile that was somewhat grim. Then someone touched my arm, and there was Father Phelim, with a face full of trouble. With him were two men, dressed in somewhat the same way as himself. They were Hakon’s English chaplains, and they could not understand his Erse.

“Malcolm,” he said, “what of our brethren on the island? There are the wild Danes yet there—on the shore. I can see them.”

Hakon asked with some concern what was amiss with the hermit, and I told him, adding that they had only too much reason to fear the Danes. And when he heard he turned to Earl Osric, who seemed to be his shipmaster, and asked him to send a boat with men enough to take these Danes, if possible, and anywise to see that the hermits came to no harm.

“If we are to fight this Heidrek,” the earl said doubtfully, “you will want us all. We are not over-manned.”



Nor were they. The ship pulled five-and-thirty oars a side, but had no more than two men to each, instead of the full fighting number, which should be three—one to row, one to shield the rower, and one to fight or relieve. King Athelstane had given Hakon these ships and sailing crews, but could not find Norsemen for him. Those who were here had been picked up from the Norse towns in Ireland, where many men of note waited for his coming. Eric, his half brother, was not loved in Norway.

Presently I learned that Hakon was steering westward thus in order to find that ship which we had seen when we were wrecked. It belonged to some friend of his cause.

But Hakon would have the hermits protected, and Osric manned our boat and sent it away, bidding the men hasten. They had a two-mile sail to the island now, but the Danes stood and watched the coming of the boat as if unconcerned. Doubtless they had not seen what happened to their comrades, and thought they were returning.



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“Tell me about these ships,” Hakon said to Bertric when the boat had gone. “Is there to be fighting, as this Asbiorn says?”

“Heidrek will not fight without surety of gain,” my comrade answered. “His ships are full of men, but he cannot tell that you are under-manned. He can see that he must needs lose heavily in boarding, for you have the advantage in height of side. I doubt if he will chance it. There is an Irish levy waiting ashore for him, and he has not faced that—or has been driven off.”

“Rid the seas of him,” growled Earl Osric. “Get to windward of him and run his ships down, and have done.”

“There is not a seaman in the North Sea who will not thank you if you do so,” said Bertric. “Those two ships are a pest.”

“See to it, Osric,” answered Hakon.

Then he glanced at us and saw our arms lying at our feet, for his men had brought them from the boat.

“I was going to offer to arm you, but there is no need. Bertric and I have drawn sword together against Danes before now, but I do not know whether Malcolm may not owe some fealty to Eric, my half brother. I am going to try to turn him out of Norway—as men have begged me to do—and I would sooner have you on my side than against me.”

“Thanks, King Hakon,” I answered. “I have owned no king as yet. My sword is yours to command; but first I have promised to see Queen Gerda into safety, at least, in Norway, if her home may not be won again for her.”

Hakon laughed, as if pleased enough.

“I think you have done the first already,” he said. “As for the winning her home afresh, who knows if you may not be in a fair way to do so from this moment? It is likely.”

“Hakon does not forget the friends of the house of Harald,” Thoralf the Tall said. “Tell him all the tale presently, for there seems to be one, and be content.”

“It would be strange if I were not,” I answered.

Hakon held out his hand to me and I took it, and thereby pledged myself to help set him on the Norse throne. It was a hazardous, and perhaps hopeless errand on which he was setting forth, but I did not stay to weigh all that. I knew that at least I had found a leader who was worth following, and who had claimed friendship with Gerda from the first.



Maybe there was another thought mixed up with all this. I will not say that it might not have had the first place. Gerda was in Hakon's care now, and I would not be far from her.

Now, there was the bustle of clearing ship for action. Already it was plain that Heidrek meant fighting, if he could make no gain of these ships otherwise, for we could see that his men had hung the war boards—the shields—along the gunwales. He would see the same here directly, and make up his mind either to fight or fly. As we armed ourselves, Bertric and I had some thoughts that he might choose the latter.

Now, I would not have it thought that I had forgotten Fergus, who had spent himself so bravely for us. The two English chaplains and Phelim were caring for him forward, and I had seen that he was himself again, so far as coming to his senses is concerned. Now we went and spoke to him, with all thanks for his help.



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He smiled and shook his head.

“The flesh is very weak,” he answered. “Now tell me if I may not go back to the cells again. This crowd of men bewilders me after the quiet. I am not fit now for the open world.”

“In truth you may, father,” I answered, somewhat surprised, for I had not a thought but that both would do so. “We shall not take you far. You will be landed when we go to take up the queen’s treasure.”

“Then we will ask the superior to send me alone,” said Phelim. “You mind that we deemed that the end of our life here had come. Now, all is safe once more, for this time at least.”

“I do not think that we shall go to the court of the Irish king now,” said I, thinking that they were sent with us thither. “King Hakon, who is a friend of the queen’s, is bound for Norway.”

There that talk ended, for Hakon came forward to watch the enemy, and called us to go to the raised foredeck with him. But he spoke to the hermits in passing, and though they could not understand him, yet they might see that his words were kindly.

We were going to windward of Heidrek fast. His ships had tried to weather on us, but had failed. Neither side had taken to the oars, for he saw that we had the advantage, and we had no need to do so, therefore. It was a fair sailing match.

But now Heidrek saw what sort of ships he had to deal with, and he did not like the look of them, being near enough to note their height of side and strength of build. It is likely that, like myself, he saw at last what manner of shipbuilder that Alfred was of whom we had heard such tales. I had ever been told, when shipmen gathered in our hall, that the ships of the west Saxons were framed with all the best points of the best ships yet built, with added size and power, and now I knew that all I had heard was but truth. Also I minded how Bertric had laughed when I said that most likely Vikings had taken these vessels, and understood why.

Heidrek saw that he had no chance if there was to be a fight, and acted accordingly. Had he been an honest Viking, cruising for ransom from coast towns, and toll from cargo ships as he met them, or ready to do some fair fighting for any chief who had a quarrel on hand, and needed a little more help toward the ending of it, no doubt he would have borne down on us and spoken with Hakon. Being what he was, with the smoke of the burning village of the harmless fishers rising black against the hills to prove the ways of his men; or else, being in no wise willing to let us hear of the treasure he had found at last, he did but take a fair look at the great ships, put his helm over, and fled down the coast westward whence he had come.



Asbiorn sat below the break of the foredeck, paying no heed to what went on. He had taken off his mail, and was drying it carefully with some cloths which Hakon's men had given him. I called down to him and told him what had happened.



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“Best thing my father could have done,” he growled, without looking up. “He does not take foolish risks, as a rule.”

Hakon came down the short ladder which led to the maindeck and heard, and laughed. Then he went aft, and Asbiorn looked after him. Some order passed, and the men ran to the sheet and braces.

“Eh, but I am sorry for father,” quoth Asbiorn. “Your friends are after him.”

The ships paid off to the wind and followed Heidrek. At that time we were broad off the end of the island, and I saw it again as we had first sighted it from the sea in the gale. Phelim and Fergus stood looking at it and the swift boat which was nearing the beach, and I joined them. The good men were full of fears for their brethren, but the Danes were gathered quietly on the beach, watching the boat. There were five of them, and Hakon had sent eight men ashore.

The long reef showed up with a fringe of curling breakers over it, and the boat could not cross it. Hakon’s men skirted it, and found some channel they could pass through, and by that time the Danes had learned their mistake, and were plainly in some wonderment as to what they had best do. They gathered together and followed the course of the boat, for I have no doubt they hoped to see one or two of Asbiorn’s men with the strangers. Then the boat reached the beach, and they went to meet it.

Whereon was a sudden scattering, and some ran one way and some the other. One man stayed with the boat, and the rest chased the Danes into the sand hills, where we lost sight of them for the most part. Once or twice we spied men between them, and once I thought there was a fight on the slope of one of the nearest hills.

But before we passed beyond further view we knew that the Danes had been taken, for Hakon’s men, some of whom wore scarlet cloaks and were easily to be known, came back to the shore, and drove their captives before them. Whereby we knew that the hermits were safe, and the two here gave thanks, almost weeping in their joy. The two English clergy came then, and led them forward to the dim cabin under the foredeck. Until they were sure that the island was to be in peace, neither Phelim nor Fergus would touch aught of food, and they needed it somewhat sorely.

Chapter 14: Dane And Irishman.

Once we had settled down to that chase there was quiet on the decks, and the ship was on an even keel. The ladies came out of their cabin under the after deck and sat them down on a bench which ran across under the shelter of the bulkhead, and I saw Gerda with them. Thoralf’s wife had cared for her, and had done it well, so that she seemed to be a very queen as she sat there with those two making much of her. The elder lady



had known her as a child, for she had been in Thorwald's hall with Thoralf the Tall on that visit of which he spoke. The younger lady, whose name I knew afterward to be Ortrud, was of Gerda's age.



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Presently it was plain that Gerda would have us speak to them, and we went and were made known to them, and after that we sat and told of our doings for half an hour. Thoralf's wife had naught but thanks to us for caring for Gerda, so that I was glad when Hakon joined us for a little while.

He went forward soon, taking us with him, and sought Asbiorn, who sat on the deck still scouring his wet arms and mail with the cloths the men had lent him. Hakon asked if he could tell anything of a large Norse ship which should have gone west some days ago. It was that which we had seen on the day of our wreck.

"I have heard of a ship which has gone to trade at Sligo," said Asbiorn. "It was in our minds to look for her ourselves presently. That is far to the westward, and if you are in any hurry, you may as well let my folk go, and follow her."

"No hurry at all," answered Hakon. "It seems that these ships of yours are too well known for me to overlook. My men say that I am sure to have to settle with Heidrek at some time, and I may as well do so here as on the Norway shore next summer. I shall be busy then, and Heidrek will have heard thereof. I am not busy just now."

"You will be when you overhaul the ships," said Asbiorn. "But they are of less draught than yours, and you may miss them yet. Round yon point is the Bann River, whence we came this morning."

Hakon turned away with a laugh, and watched the chase for a time. Then he went aft and sat him down by the steersman, with Earl Osric and Thoralf the Tall. Heidrek's ships were swift when before the wind, and these great vessels might not overhaul them until they had reached some shallow waters in the river mouth which Heidrek had already entered. But there waited Dalfin and the Irish levies, who would be gathered by this time in force.

Mayhap Heidrek would not chance being pent between two foes.

So that chase went on, and I wearied of watching it at last. Then Bertric and I went to Asbiorn, for we would ask concerning some things which had happened. Men were serving round the midday meal at the time, and we ate and talked. The first thing I asked him was what he had done with our ship.

"Sold her to one Arnkel in Norway, so to speak," he answered, with a grin. "He was the man who had to do with this treasure ship you picked up."

"Then you had some pact with Arnkel?"

"More or less," he said; "but there was a deal of chance in the matter. In the gale I was outsailed, for your ship is not speedy, as you know. The other two took refuge among the islands on the Norse shore, and there heard of the great mound laying of Thorwald



which was to be. The ship had passed in the dawn of that morning, and had not far to go. Whereon my father sent a message to Arnkel, whom he knew, to say that he was at hand, and landed and fell on him. As it turned out, he had better have taken his ships, for Thorwald's folk set the ship adrift to save her from pillage. It seems that they meant her to burn, but blundered that part. There was nothing to fight for then, so they ceased. I came to the islands and there had news of my father, and followed him. On the way I passed Thorwald's ship at a distance, and was afraid of her, she seeming to be a fully-armed war vessel. So I let her pass."



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“Then you brought the news to Arnkel that she was not burning?”

“So it was. Whereon he would have us sail at once in chase of her on his account. As we would not do that, and he would not let us go on our own, there was a small fight. In the end Arnkel’s men manned your ship and we sailed in company, the bargain being that the treasure was to fall to the finder. We thought we might have little difficulty in overhauling the vessel, and should have had none if it had not been for you. Had you picked up a crew of fishers?”

“No; we managed somehow by ourselves.”

“I always told my father that Bertric was the best seaman we had in all our crowd,” Asbiorn said frankly. “You did well that time.”

Then he told us how they had searched for us much in the way which we had thought likely, and so at last had heard of a wreck when they reached the river Bann.

“Asbiorn,” I said, “did you know that there was a lady on board this ship which was to be burnt?”

“No, on my word,” he said, starting somewhat. “So that is where the young queen was hidden, after all? There was wailing when her men found that she was missing, and they said that she must have gone distraught in her grief, and wandered to the mountains. How was she left on board?”

“Arnkel put her there,” I answered.

“So that explains his way somewhat. He seemed to want that ship caught, and yet did not. When we did sail, he steered wide of the course she took, and too far to the northward.”

Then his face grew very black, and he growled: “Bad we are, but not so bad as Arnkel, who would have men think him an honest man. Now, if it were but to get in one fair blow at him for this, it were worth joining Hakon. I take it that he will hear your tale—and maybe mine.”

“And the lady’s also,” Bertric answered. “Well—wait until you know what befalls your ships.”

“And my father,” answered Asbiorn, getting up and looking ahead. “To say the truth, I am not altogether sorry of an excuse to leave that company, which is bad, though I say it. Yet he was driven out of his own home by his foes, and thereafter his hand has been against all men. It is the crew he has gathered which I would leave, not him.”



We had not gained on the two pirate ships. Now they were rounding that headland whence they had come, and were altering their course. Asbiorn said that they were making for the river mouth, and half an hour thereafter we opened it out and saw that Heidrek was far within it, heading landward. The beacon fires blazed up afresh as the watchers knew that he had returned, and presently each fire had a second alongside it. Men thought that Heidrek had brought us to help him raid the land.

There were Norsemen on board, men from Dublin, who knew the mouth of the river as well as need be, and better than Heidrek, who had been into it but this once before. One of them piloted the ships after him, for Hakon meant to end the business even as he had said, here and now, if he could, and sent for Bertric that he might tell him more of the enemy. He heard somewhat of our story at this time, we sitting on the after deck with him, but he said little about it then.

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I suppose that we stood into the river over the falling tide for five miles or more. Then Heidrek took to his oars, finding that he was chased in earnest, and Hakon did so likewise at once. It was a beautiful river, wide and clear, with great, green hills on either side, and thick forests at their feet. But never a boat on its waters, or man on its shores did we see. Only from each hilltop the smoke of the war beacons rose and eddied.

The channel narrowed presently as we held on, going with all caution. Then we opened out a wide valley, down which ran a fair stream, and there we saw the Irish at last. High up they were, crossing the valley in a column of black-garbed warriors which seemed endless. There was no sparkle of mail among them, but here and there a speck of light flashed from an axe blade or spear point, to tell us that they were armed men. They were keeping pace with Heidrek's ships by crossing from point to point, and how long they may have watched him and us from the forests I cannot say.

Now the river took a sharp bend, and I heard the pilot say to his mate that Heidrek had better have a care at this stage of tide, while Asbiorn, forward, was watching intently. The tide was almost at its lowest by this time, and Heidrek's hindmost ship was about half a mile ahead of us. Hakon meant to pen them in some stretch of the river which the pilot knew, and there deal with them. It was said to be a deep reach with a bar at its head, beyond which no ship might pass until high water.

Suddenly there came a shout from the men forward, and the pilot cried to the oarsmen to cease rowing. Heidrek's second ship had gone aground. We could see her crew trying to pole her off, and Hakon asked if we could reach her.

"Not by five score yards," answered the pilot; "but see what happens."

I suppose that he knew the Irish ways, for he had hardly spoken when somewhat did happen. Out of the fringe of thicket and forest along the bank of the river swarmed the Irish, with yells and howls which reached us plainly, and flung themselves into the water to wade out to the ship. The bank was black with them, and the light from their axes overhead shimmered and sparkled in a wave of brightness. The water was full shoulder deep round the ship, but they did not heed that. Nor did they pay any attention to us, for we could not reach them, and they knew it. They would deal with us presently in one way or another. Meanwhile, this ship was at their mercy.

Heidrek's other ship held on round the bend, and may have been out of sight of her consort before she grounded, as the river bent with its channel close under the banks. At all events, she did not return to help.

"This affair is off our hands," said Hakon. "Best not meddle therewith, even if we could. It is a great fight."



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So it was, for the Danes fought well. The sides of the ship were high above the wading men, and the spears flashed out between the war boards, and the axe and sword were at work across the gunwales. Yet the Irish never fell back from their swarming attack, and their cries never ceased. One or two wounded men floated, paddling with their hands, down past us, and hurled curses and defiance at us also. Phelim and Fergus cried to them to forbear, for we were friends, but they did not heed them, and passed, to reach the shore below us as they might. We did not watch them.

For now the Irish had borne down the defence amidships, where the run of the gunwales was lowest. The sheer weight of them as they clambered, one over the other, on board, listed the ship over, and made the boarding easier for those who followed. The wild Danish war shout rose once or twice, and then it was drowned by the Irish yell. After that there was a sudden silence, for the fighting was over.

Then the victors leapt out of the ship and went ashore as swiftly as they had come, and the forest hid them. The ship was hard and fast aground now, and we pulled up abreast of her slowly, having no mind to share her fate. Whether the Irish took any of her crew with them as captives I do not know, but I saw her decks, and it seemed hardly possible. So terrible a sight were they, that I feared lest Gerda should in any way see it. But the doors of the cabin had been shut, doubtless lest the fighting should fray the ladies.

“Will you venture farther, King Hakon?” asked the pilot.

“We will take one ship farther,” he said. “The other shall bide here, and see that this ship is not burnt by these wild folk. Mayhap we shall want her.”

Thoralf laughed at that. “We have no men to man her withal,” he said.

“We have men to sail her to Norway, and there wait the men to fight for us,” Hakon answered gaily. “We shall meet no foes on the high seas, and we have met a queen whose men will hail us as their best friends.”

Thoralf shrugged his shoulders and laughed. “None can say that you fare forward sadly, Hakon.”

“This is the worse of the two ships,” Bertric said. “The other is Heidrek’s own. He is not here. Asbiorn yonder commanded this.”

“Asbiorn is in luck today,” Earl Osric said, nodding toward those terrible decks.

But Asbiorn stood on the foredeck with his back to that which he had looked on, biting the ends of his long moustache, and pale with rage. I did not wonder thereat.



Now Osric hailed the other ship and bade her anchor in the stream while we went on. The pilot said that we could safely do so, and that the next reach was the one of which he had spoken as a trap. Then his comrade went into the bows with a long pole, sounding, and so we crept past the stranded vessel, and into the most lovely reach of river I had ever seen. It was well nigh a lake, long and broad,



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between the soft hills and forest-clad shores, and the water was bright and clear as glass beneath our keel, so that I saw a great silver salmon flash like an arrow past the ship as we held on. There was a village at the head of the reach, and men swarmed in it like angry bees round a hive's mouth. Only the long black ship, which still pulled slowly away from us, and the fiercely-burning fires on every hilltop spoilt the quiet of the place.

"Now it is a question whether the Irish or we take Heidrek," said Hakon. "It is plain that his time has come, one way or the other. On my word, I am almost in the mind to hail him and bid him yield to us to save himself from these axes."

I believe that so Hakon would have done, but that the chance never came. And that was the doing of Heidrek himself, or of his crew. What madness of despair fell on those pirates I cannot say, but Asbiorn has it that they went berserk as one man at the last, as the wilder Vikings will, when the worst has to be faced.

The Irish swarmed at the upper end of this reach, as I have said, and those who had dealt with the other ship were coming fast along the shore to join them. There must have been five hundred of them in all, if not more. The river beyond the broad reach narrowed fast, and one could see by the broken water that there was no passing upward any farther until the tide was at its height. But before the village was a long sloping beach, on which lay two or three shapeless black skin boats, as if it was a good landing place with deep water up to the shore. Above the village, on the shoulder of the near hill, was an earthwork, and some tents were pitched within its ring. It was the gathering-place to which Dalfin had gone this morning, and no doubt his father, Myrkiartan the King, was there.

There came a hoarse roar across the water to us, which rose and fell, and shaped itself into a song, so terrible that I saw Hakon's men grow restless as they heard it. The pirates were singing their war song for the last time.

Their ship swung round and headed for the village, and with all her oars going, and the white foam flying from her bows, and boiling round the oar blades, she charged the beach and hurled herself half out of the water as she reached it.

Over her bows went her men with a shout. Before the Irish knew that anything had happened, the last of the Danes were halfway up the little beach, and were forming up into a close-locked wedge, which moved swiftly toward the village even as it grew into shape.

"What are they about?" asked men of one another as they watched, breathless, from our decks.



“They will try to win to yonder camp,” one said in answer, and that was likely, though what hope could lie in that none could say.

Now the wedge had reached the little green which was between the village and the shore. Before it lay the road hillward, steep and rough, and that was full of Irish.



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Still the Irish held back. They looked to see our ship follow, no doubt, and would have all their foes ashore at once, lest we should make some flank attack in the heat of the fight. But the Danes moved onward steadily.

Then into the opening of the lane rode a man on a tall chestnut horse, and the Irish yelled and thronged to him as he leaped off it. It was Dalfin himself, as I saw when he was on foot. I suppose that he had managed to find this steed somewhere on the way, meeting with mounted men hurrying to the levy like himself most likely. If the fishers were yet with him I could not see. They were lost in the crowd round him.

Now Dalfin's sword went up, and the men shook themselves into some sort of order. A slogan rose, wild and shrill, and with the prince at their head they flung themselves on the Danes, lapping round them, so that they hid them from our sight. Only in the midst of the leaping throng there was a steady, bright cluster of helms, above which rose and fell the weapons unceasingly.

The Irish could not stay that wedge. It went on, cleaving its way through the press as a ship cleaves its way to windward through the waves, and after it had passed, there was a track of fallen men to tell of how it had fared. There were mail-clad men among that line of fallen, and those, of course, were not Irish. They, like Dalfin, would wear neither helm nor byrnie.

Slowly the Danes fought their way, uselessly to all seeming, away from the water and hillward. Without heeding the depth of the lane from the village, though the darts rained on them from its banks, they went on, and we lost sight of the fighting, though the black throng of warriors who could not reach their foe still swarmed between them and the village. Some of them came back and yelled at us from the shore, and once they seemed as if they were about to launch the two boats which lay on the strand for an attack on us. We had dropped a small anchor at this time.

Father Phelim saw that and came to me.

"Let me go to the young prince," he said; "I may be of use here. There will be trouble, unless someone tells the poor folk that these ships are friendly in very deed."

So we went to Hakon, and I told him what Phelim thought.

"The good father is right enough," he answered. "But how is he to get ashore unharmed? To send a boat would mean that it would be fallen on before it was seen who was in it."

"Let me swim," said Phelim stoutly.

"Maybe your tonsure might save you, father," said Hakon; "but I would not risk it. One cannot see much of a man in the water."



“Let me have one of the small boats—it can be launched from the far side of the ship—and I will row him ashore,” I said. “I can speak the Gaelic.”

Hakon considered. “Well,” he said, “it may save endless trouble, and I do not see why you should not go. Phelim must stand up, and they will see him.”



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Thoralf would have us bide on board, letting Phelim stand on the bows and hail the shore. But that would have made trouble at once, for he would have been thought to be a captive. Then Earl Osric said that we might as well wait until we must, but Hakon and I and Phelim thought it easier to deal with the few men here than to wait until the rest returned, most likely flushed with the victory their numbers must needs give them. So in the end the small quarterboat was got over the side away from the village, and we took our place. Phelim was in the bows, and I set my helm at my feet, and had a dark cloak over my mail.

I pulled away from the ship and came round her stern in a wide sweep, in order not to seem at once as if we came from her. Then we went swiftly to the beach, and Phelim stood in the bows and signed to the men who stood along it. They saw what he was, and ran together to meet him, ceasing their cries to hear him. But I was not going to run more risk than I could help. So soon as we were twenty yards from the beach, I stopped pulling, and bade Phelim say his say.

He told them what was needful, and they growled at first, as if they could not believe him. Then he pointed to Fergus, who could be seen on board the ship, and they grew more satisfied. At last he told them that they must fetch Dalfin the Prince as soon as possible, for that we of the ship, or some of us, were those who had brought him back. And at last he told how there was a queen on board who had avenged the death of Dubhtach of the Spearshafts, and given back the torque which was lost.

That was all they needed to hear, for the torque had been seen, and word had passed round concerning it. The black looks faded, and there was naught but friendliness thereafter. Phelim asked for some leader, and a man stepped forward, and so took messages for Dalfin, and went across the green and up the lane with its terrible token of the fighting, that he might give them as soon as it was possible. Then we rowed back slowly, for it was not worthwhile to go ashore.

"Thanks," said Hakon, meeting us at the gangway. "That is well done. I will own that we had nearly run ourselves into a trap, and you have taken a load off my mind."

"No need to have stayed here," said Thoralf.

"Nay, but I want that ship, and now I think we may get her. I did but stay to see if it might be done."

I went and found Asbiorn, for somewhat was troubling me. The thought of the men who had been taken at the same time as myself, and must needs be in one or other of these ships.

"We took seven in all," he said. "Well, I had five. Two got away in Norway as soon as we fell out with Arnkel. One was too much hurt to be of use, and we left him there. My

father took the other two, and they are yonder with him, I suppose. Those two who joined us of their own free will were in my ship. They were good men.”



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Chapter 15: The Torque And Its Wearer.

The roar of that unseen battle came across the still water to us without cease for well nigh half an hour. The first surety we had that it was over was in the dying away of the noise and the coming back to the shore of men from the front who were unwounded. After that we could see the black mass of Irish climbing the hill to the camp quietly, as if to tell their king that they had conquered. There was much shouting thence shortly after they had passed within the earthworks.

Then out of the gate of the camp, which was toward the river, came a train of men, the leaders of which were mounted, and after them swarmed the levies again. Dalfin was bringing his father to see the place of the fight, and to welcome us as friends. It was not altogether a new thing that Norseman and Dane should be known as foes to one another here on the Irish coast, which both wasted. The folk called us the "white" and the Danes the "black" Lochlannoch, and I cannot say which they feared the most, though the Danes were the most hated. But the Irish kings were not slow to take advantage of our rivalries when they could.

Asbiorn came to me as I stood and watched the king coming out of the camp. His face was white and drawn, but he was calm enough.

"Who was the tall, young chief on the red horse?" he asked me.

"Dalfin of Maghera, whom you let go with me," I answered.

"So I thought. Now, I think that he has avenged that doing on the Caithness shore for you. It is not likely that my father has not fallen; he was the leader of the wedge. There is no feud now between you and me."

"There is not," I answered. "I do not know that I had ever thought of one as possible."

"There would have been had Hakon slain Heidrek," he said.

The old law of the blood feud had its full meaning to him.

"If Heidrek had stayed his men to meet us, Hakon would have given him terms rather than that this should have been the end," I said.

"I know it, for I heard him say so. But there was a touch of the berserk in my father since his troubles came. This is not the first time he has tried to fall fighting against odds. He would not have listened to Hakon."



He sighed heavily, and then shook himself, so that his mail rattled. I took his sword from the bottom of a boat on deck in which I had set it, and gave it back to him, and he girt it on.

“So that is the end,” he said. “And now I am my own man. Well, it was a better end than might have been had Hakon waited to see if we came raiding to Norway, as we most certainly should. Now I can follow Hakon with a light heart, and maybe come to be known as an honest man once more.”

He said no other word, but turned and went forward. Bertric looked after him and smiled.

“Hakon has a good follower there,” he said. “I will see that he is not overlooked. Heidrek was the son of a king in Jutland, and the good blood will show itself at last.”



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"You know Hakon well," I said, having seen that the greeting between those two was not of an every day sort, or as between prince and follower merely.

"We two were long together in Athelstane's court," he answered. "I also am Athelstane's foster son. He has many, according to our custom."

There was a rush made for the entrance to the village by the Irish who yet loitered on the shore staring at us. Some of them had carried away the wounded from off the green already, and now they left nothing to be seen of the track of the Danes across it. The king was coming, and Hakon sent word to the cabin that the ladies should come and see him. We lay perhaps three hundred paces from the shore, and there was no sight to fray them now.

So they and we went to the after deck and watched, and there was not long to wait. But it was Dalfin who came alone, and mounted on a fresh horse. It was plain that he had been fighting, because he had his left arm in a sling, though he managed his horse none the worse for that. He rode down to the beach in all haste, with a dozen men after him, and waved his hand to us. Then he dismounted, and the men put off the nearest boat, into which he stepped. In five minutes he was on the deck, and greeting us.

"This is wonderful," he said. "All this morning I have been crossing the hills to reach here in the nick of time. I heard no news, and I saw no messengers. I did not even know that Heidrek had sailed hence and returned. Now you are here first, and one comes with a message from you on the spot. The luck of the torque lingers with Queen Gerda even yet."

He bowed to her in his way, and she laughed, and looked for the gold. He had not it on him now.

"Have you parted with it already?" she asked.

"With the torque, but not with the luck, as it is to be hoped," he said. "You will see my father wearing it soon. It must needs be on the neck of the head of the realm."

"What were you while you wore it?" asked Thoralf, who knew the Irish ways.

"Deputy king for the time," answered Dalfin dryly. "And in a hurry to hand it over to my father therefore."

Now, as Dalfin had elder brothers, and there were chiefs almost as powerful as the king himself, that was to be expected. Otherwise, our friend might have had an evil time between them. Unless he had chosen to put himself at the head of the men whom he had just led to victory, and called to them to set the torque wearer on the throne. They would have done it, by reason of the magic of the thing; but there was no thought of treason in the mind of Dalfin, though many a king's son would have grasped at the



chance, holding, perhaps, that as the sign of royalty had come to him, the throne must needs come with it, though his father held it.

Then he told us how the fight had gone—how Heidrek fell at the forefront of his steadfast wedge, and how but few men had been taken unhurt. Hakon asked what he would do with those who were taken.



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“Give them to you,” Dalfin answered carelessly, “if you will take them out of this land.”

“I was going to ask for the ship,” Hakon said.

“She is yours already. You drove her ashore, and the honour falls to us. We should only make a big fire of her and dance round it. Where is the other?”

“Your men took her round the bend below. There will be no more trouble with Heidrek. We have his son, Asbiorn, here with us.”

“Give him to me,” said Dalfin at once; “give him to me, King Hakon. I owe him much for a good turn he did me and Malcolm here, and I cannot see him a captive.”

“Malcolm and Bertric have claimed him already,” said Hakon, with a smile. “He is yonder, and has taken service with me, and I think I must keep him.”

“That is all one could want for a man,” answered Dalfin. “Now, I have to ask if you will go ashore and meet my father. He would also see my two comrades, and, if it may be so, Queen Gerda.”

But Thoralf would not hear of the king going ashore, nor would Earl Osric. Gerda, too, shrank from facing the wild crowd of warriors and the sights of the field which she needs must see more or less of. Nor did Dalfin press the matter, for he knew that any little spark might be enough to rouse the wild Irish against the Norsemen. It was but a chance that Hakon had played the part of an ally. So in the end Bertric and I went ashore with Dalfin and the two hermits, as an embassy, so to speak, to represent Hakon.

We had a good welcome at all events, I suppose because men had heard the tale of our voyage and wreck, and maybe of how Hakon saved the hermits at last. Phelim had spoken thereof when he and I went ashore just now, and word passes swiftly without losing in the telling. They took us up through the village to the camp, and there a tent was pitched, large and open in front, as the court of the king.

The enclosure swarmed with men, wilder than any I had ever seen, and picketed rows of most beautiful horses were along one side.

It was a strange court. The nobles were dressed in black or dull saffron-coloured tunics, with great, shaggy cloaks of the natural hue of the wool they were made of, and but for the rich gold ornaments they wore on their arms and necks, there was little to choose between their attire and that of their followers. Not one wore mail, but their swords were good, and their spears heavy and well cared for. As for helms, they had no need of them. Their hair was amazingly thick and long, and was massed into great shocks on their heads, and might turn a sword stroke. Even Dalfin had twisted his up into somewhat like what it might have been before he left Ireland, lest he should be out of



the fashion, and it spoilt his looks, though it would be many a long day before he had it properly matted together again. It was strange to see men tossing these shocks aside as they turned.

One other thing I noted at once, and that was how every man, high or low, carried a long-handled axe, bright and keen. It was the only weapon of some, and if they knew how to handle it, maybe they needed no other.



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Among all that crowd there were only two men who seemed to shine in any magnificence. One was the old king, who sat waiting us in a great chair, clad in royal robes of scarlet and white and green which no Irish looms could have compassed, with a little golden crown on his white hair, and the torque round his neck. The other was a bishop in mitre and all state robes, wonderfully worked, and with a crosier in his hand. Not having seen the like before I wondered most at him, but his looks were kind and pleasant. Phelim told me who and what he was afterward.

Myrkiartan came from his throne to greet us as we passed through a lane of wild courtiers, who had looks which were not all of the most friendly for us. But we paid no heed to them, though I thought that Hakon was well advised when he sent us instead of coming himself. That first greeting was for us alone as the comrades of Dalfin, and it was a good welcome. Then the king went back to his throne with all ceremony, to receive us as the embassy from Hakon. There was no little state kept up in this court, and matters were to be kept in their right order.

Now, I need say little of all this ceremony and the words which passed of thanks to Hakon for driving the enemy to his end. Myrkiartan made no suggestion that Hakon should stay here, and seemed more willing to speed him on his way elsewhere. Presently, he said, there should be sent to the strand oxen and casks of mead as provender for the voyage, and Hakon was most welcome to take the ship if he would.

Thereon Dalfin asked for the captives, and they were brought in—a dozen Danes, who stared at their captors haughtily in spite of their bonds. Then they spied Bertric in the splendid arms which Gerda gave him, for we had come fully armed, and they looked toward him as if they would ask his help, but were too proud to do so. And then of a sudden one of them spoke my name, and I knew him, though his face was half-hidden in the mud of the field on which some common chance had sent him down. It was that man of ours who had told me that there was always the chance of escape, and had tried to gnaw my bonds when we were in the ship's forepeak—Sidroc, the courtman. I did not pretend to know him then and there, thinking it might seem proof that Hakon was in league with Heidrek in some way. Presently, when his low cry was forgotten, I looked at him, and he saw that I knew him, and was content.

“Look at the men, Bertric,” said Dalfin. “See if there are any you will care to take. You know them.”

“We cannot leave any of them here,” Bertric said to me. “Hakon can set them ashore anywhere if he does not like them. Asbiorn might manage them though, and with Hakon's men they will learn manners.”

He spoke our own tongue of course, and the king asked what he said. Dalfin said that Hakon would take them away altogether if the clemency of the king would allow it.

Whereon the king waved his hand, and said that they should be sent down with the oxen.



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Now, I did not think that this pleased the men of the court. There was a sort of uneasy murmur for a time, and then there was a silence, which grew somewhat awkward at last. I thought it was time for us to go, for there was nothing else to say, but the bishop came forward. He had been speaking with Phelim for some time, and now told Myrkiartan how that Hakon was a good Christian man and had saved the hermit brotherhood even now. That story made the black looks pass at once, and after that it was easy to take our leave and make our way out of the tent; and glad enough I was to be in the open once more. The whispering of the nobles had not been pleasant at times.

Dalvin came out with us, and he was grave. There had been words and looks now and then among the group of men with his two brothers which he did not like.

“You had better tell Hakon from me that he had best sail hence as soon as possible. Maybe as soon as tide will serve. I will see that you get the men now and at once. Never wait for the provender unless it comes soon.”

“Come down to the ship with us,” I said. “Tell Hakon this yourself if you will.”

He shrugged his shoulders at that and glanced round him.

“If it were not for you two I doubt if Hakon would not have been fallen on by this time,” he said. “There are boats enough, hidden in the village from Heidrek, which can be brought out at any moment.”

He was speaking in the Dansk, but suddenly took to the Erse with some words or other of common farewell, as a tall Irish chief passed with a scowl at us.

“Jealousies through and through this court,” he said quickly, when the man was out of hearing. “Already some pretend to be wroth with me for having any dealing with Lochlannoch at all. I am the youngest son, and my father favours me, more’s the pity.”

“Better quit it all, and come and help Hakon to the throne,” I said.

“If it were not for my father,” he answered.

So then and there he bade us farewell, with messages to Gerda and Hakon, and called some of his own men to see us to the ship. We left him standing in the gate, looking after us somewhat sadly, as we thought.

“Now,” said Bertric, “it seems to me that one may guess why Dalvin went to sea to find adventure. This court is not a happy home, take it all round.”

Halfway down to the ship we heard some one running after us, and looked round. It was Father Phelim.



“Take me with you, my sons,” he said, breathless. “I feared that you would go without me.”

“We had not thought you would care to sail with us again,” I said.

He made no answer beyond a smile, and we went on. Men stood and stared at us at every turning, axe in hand. In the lane they wrangled over the spoils they gathered there from the fallen Danes, and fought fiercely with the long helms of their weapons without hurting one another at all by reason of their shock heads. One who was felled thus would rise and laugh, and the quarrel was at an end. They were a light-hearted folk to all seeming.

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Once a handsome, frowning chief came past us at a gallop on his swift horse. He was glittering with gold, but the steed had neither saddle nor bridle. Its only harness was a halter, but the man rode as if he were part of the horse, so that it was a pleasure to watch him. It was more than either Bertric or I could have managed.

The Danish ship was afloat when we reached the waterside, for the tide had risen swiftly in these upper waters, and the Irish had helped to get her off, after plundering her. There were a dozen or more of Hakon's men on board at this time, making her decks shipshape again. But below the bend rose a black cloud of smoke, for the other ship was on fire, and Hakon had sent a boat to see that all was well with the ship he had left there.

There was no surprise at the message from Dalfin. Thoralf only laughed, and Hakon said he would wait for half an hour in case the supplies came. As for the men, he would take them willingly. There was no need to arm them, and they would take their spell at the oars.

Presently Irish came to the beach holding up spoils—helms and mail shirts, and the Danish swords they did not know how to use. Hakon bought them for silver pennies easily, and the folk thought themselves well paid. So an hour passed, and then the hapless Danes were driven down in a string to the water's edge, and we sent a boat for them. One had a hasty message from Dalfin to say that in no wise were we to wait for aught else. The Dane told me that there was strife up at the camp, and the young prince had had difficulty in getting them away.

Hakon spoke to the men, when they came on board, kindly, and bade them take service with him if they would, as had Asbiorn, and, as may be supposed, they were only too willing. And then I asked for our courtman, telling Hakon how it came about that he was with these pirates, and he turned him over to me at once as my special follower. Nor need it be said how Sidroc greeted me after that escape. He said that Heidrek's men had thrust a spear into his hand and hustled him over the bows to take his chance with the rest, unarmed save with that.

Thereafter, Hakon found mail and helm and sword for him, which had come from the spoils, and he was happy. Nor was I any the less comfortable on board for having him to tend myself and Bertric. But that is of course.

From him we learned two things—one which Asbiorn had not yet told us, and the other which he also would learn. Heidrek had fled from us thinking that the ships could be only those of Sigtryg, the Dublin king, with whom he had some deadly feud. I minded that when Dalfin had offered ransom for both of us how Asbiorn had said that the Irish shore was not open to him. Then, when he was thus pent up by us, Heidrek had tried to cut his way to the camp and take Myrkiartan prisoner, that he might hold him as hostage for safe departure. It was a mad attempt, but at least had some meaning in it which we

could not understand at the time. Moreover, had it not been for the men who came up with Dalfin it had been done.



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Now Hakon made no delay. Thoralf and as strong a crew as could be spared took charge of the Danish ship, and together the two vessels cautiously made their way down the long reach and past the place where Heidrek's other ship was still burning. By that time the dusk was falling, but we were sure that all along the shores the Irish watched us as they had watched us as we came.

The beacon fires had died down now, for their work was done, and the fair reaches of water were still and peaceful in the evening glow, looking even more beautiful than in the morning, for the tide was full to the banks. Gerda came with the other ladies and sat on deck, and spoke with Hakon of the treasure, which he promised to seek with daylight.

"I would have you take it, King Hakon," she said. "I do not altogether know its worth, but it may go toward the freeing of Norway from Eric and the men who follow him."

"Nay," he answered, "I cannot take it from you."

"Once," she said, and she looked at me as I sat on the deck hard by with Bertric, "once—it seems long ago, though it is but so few days—I would have sent it into the deep with him who gathered it. These friends of mine over-persuaded me, saying that I should need it. Now I am in your care, and I have not so much as to hire a ship to take me home. It was Thorwald's. What if you had come back and asked him to help you? Would it not have been laid at your feet for the sake of the old land and the old friendship?"

He smiled, but did not answer. So she set the gift before him once more, with eager words. I knew, as I listened, that she would be the happier if the wealth once dedicated, so to speak, to so high an end as that gift to the old hero were taken from her charge, and used to the freeing of the land she loved; and at last Hakon saw that there was some deeper feeling about it than gratitude to himself only.

"Well," he said, "it seems that I must not refuse. Only, I will put it in this way—I am to know that you hold it for me in case I need it. Be sure that if it is needed I will make haste to ask."

"Aye, and you will need it," said Earl Osric bluntly.

Then Gerda said: "Take it now, and use it if and when you need it. Let it be so, I pray you, King Hakon."

The young king bowed and thanked her, and there that matter ended for the time. Presently, after the ships had come to anchor with the last light in the river mouth, and the men had spread the awnings for us aft, he spoke to us about it, and I told him what I



thought. Also I told him how that Bertric and I had enough wealth on us at this moment for the fitting out of a ship as we had planned. Whereon he laughed.

“Keep that,” he said, “and I shall be content. Gerda will know nothing of the worth of what you have, and you will use it for her if needed. I have a plan in my mind for her, which may be told hereafter.”



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Then one of the men came to the opening of the awning.

“A boat, King Hakon, with two men in her, pulling to us from the western bank.”

“Hail her to keep off,” said Hakon.

And Osric added that they should heave a big stone into her if she did not. “Spies, most like,” he said.

They hailed the boat, and had an answer at once.

“Tell Hakon that hither comes a courtman of Queen Gerda’s.”

Hakon said that it must be some man who had escaped; but Bertric and I knew at once.

“It is Dalfin the Prince,” we said. “He has had to fly from those brothers of his.”

So it was, and he had come to see more adventure with King Hakon.

“I might find enough if I stayed,” he said; “but of an evil sort.”

“Why, what is amiss then?” I said.

“Only that my brothers do not like favourites, and I happen to be one for the moment. There would have been fighting if I had stayed, and that would have ended in my good father being pushed off his throne by my elder brother lest I should be named as successor to the crown. Or else in sudden end to myself.”

Then he laughed, as if somewhat pleasant came to mind.

“There are strange stories afloat concerning me and the torque already,” he went on. “It is said that the fairy queen has had me in her court for all this time I have been away, and that she gave me back the thing. So I have even fled suddenly and secretly, and they will hold that she has lured me back again.”

“It is not altogether for your own safety that you have fled,” said Hakon gravely.

“Faith, and so it is not,” he answered. “I had but to lift my finger, and the wearing of the torque would have set me on the throne. And a mighty uneasy seat that would have been, too! I think my father is used to it, and might have missed the seat. So I left.”

“For your father’s sake,” said Hakon, smiling at him. “Well, come and help me to not quite so uneasy a realm, and all may be for the best. There is little freedom for him who holds an Irish throne, as it seems to me.”



Chapter 16: In Old Norway.

The ships were under way with the tide in the gray of the early morning, and crept along the shore to the island slowly. There were men watching our going from the cliffs, but there had been no alarm from the Irish in the night. I dare say they claim to have driven Hakon of Norway from their shores even to this day, but I do not know that it matters if they do. No one is the worse for the boast, or the better either, for that matter.

Hakon took the ships into the little strait for easier landing than from the open shore. His men were waiting at the water's edge for us, but there were no hermits to be seen at first, for it was one of their hours of service in the chapel. We had heard the faint ringing of its little bell as we drew up to the opening of the strait. Bright and clear it was in the early morning sunlight, and it was peaceful as ever. Even Hakon's men had set aside their mail here, looking as quiet as the place itself.

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Gerda would go ashore with us, and so in no long time we, who had left here so hastily, stood once more on the shore, and wondered to find ourselves back again, and safe; for the memory of that flight came back to us afresh with all we saw. We had forgotten it in the wild doings of the long day which came thereafter.

Now, there is no need for me to tell of the greetings which were for us, and for the young king. They were those of men who owed much on either side, and yet must part again straightway. It seemed that Hakon's men who had been landed were either Christians, or else men who had taken the "prime signing" on them, which was the way in which they proved that they were ready to learn the new faith. Phelim would call them "catechumens," therefore, and that word may be known as meaning the same thing. Presently I was to hear more of that from him. The good hermits were ready to praise them and their ways to the king, while, as for Asbiorn's men, they had given no trouble at all, for they were tied up in the cell we had used. One or two of Hakon's men, who were from Dublin, could speak the Erse, and that had been good.

So there was gratitude and content when the hermits came and spoke with Hakon through Dalfin, while I set the men to work getting the treasure down to the boats. The brothers had buried it as they promised, risking somewhat as they worked, for Asbiorn's Danes might have wandered from the beach at any time. When that was done they fled to the hill, until one of Hakon's men had gone altogether unarmed and spoken with them, telling them that we and they were safe.

Now, we had left Fergus behind us with the bishop, and he would find his way back here shortly. Presently Phelim sought the old superior and spoke long with him, and at last came and asked Gerda to do the same. She went willingly enough, as she revered the old teacher, taking me with her.

"My daughter," he said, "have you a mind to learn more of those things of which we have spoken?"

"I can wish nothing better," she answered.

"Then," he said, "I have bidden Phelim go across the seas with you to teach you and yours. Will it please you that he shall do so?"

She flushed with delight, for that was what she had most wished, as she had told me yonder on the shore. And I suppose that because she had so told me, she looked to me to answer.

"Aye, what says Malcolm, my countryman?" asked the old man.

"If Father Phelim will undertake the task, which will be hard," I answered.



“He will bear hardship for that work,” the superior said, setting his hand on the shoulder of the strong man, who had knelt before him. “We shall miss him, but we shall know that mayhap he will bring you twain to meet with us hereafter.”

Then I said, being moved by words and tone, “So may it be, father,” and he smiled at me in much content.

After that Phelim said naught of his own feelings in the matter, but went to the brothers one by one and took leave of them. Afterwards I heard that yesterday the bishop had loosed him from some vows which bound him to the island-hermit life, if it came to pass that we would take him with us. And that was what he had thought would befall him when he and Fergus rowed with us, with Asbiorn in chase.



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So we took leave of the old man then, for he was feeble, and time was very short. He bade us remember that day by day in the little chapel our names, and the name of Hakon also, would not be forgotten; and blessed us, and went to his cell. Then one of the brothers came and asked Gerda to see what she had left in her cell, for none had touched it yet, and she went with him. Soon she came out with that little silver cup, which we had found in the penthouse when we first opened it, and asked me if she might give it to the hermits.

“They will have no use for it,” I said, smiling at the thought.

“I think they will,” she said. “Ask, for I cannot.”

So I asked the brother who was with us, and he looked at the cup gravely. It was wrought with a strangely twisted and plaited pattern.

“Why, yes,” he said. “I myself can set a stem to it, and thereafter it will be a treasure to us, for our chalice is but of white metal. It will mind us of you every day, in ways which are more wondrous than you can yet know. We may take it, therefore, but you must not offer us aught else. We are vowed to poverty.”

Now, I did not know of what he spoke, but Gerda did in some way, which is beyond me. Wherefore she was more than content. It is my thought that all her days it will be a good and pleasant thing to mind the use that cup came to at the last, and where it is.

The treasure was all on board Hakon’s ship, and we must go with the tide. The Danes were unbound and sent to help Thoralf on the ship which had been theirs, with the offer of freedom if they worked well; and I will add that they gave no trouble, and took service with Hakon as free men afterward, having learnt the good of honesty. The hermits saw us to the shore, and so we left them, and the ships hoisted sail to a fair breeze, and were away for Norway and what lay before Hakon when he came thither. And if the blessings and prayers of the hermits availed aught, he would do well.

Now, we had to gather men for this warfare that might be to come. There were Norsemen in the Scottish islands everywhere who would join him, for thither had fled many who were not friendly with Eric, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands held more still. So we sailed up the narrow seas among the isles, finding here one man, and here a dozen, until the ships were fully manned, and that with such a force as any leader might go far with, for the men served, not for pay alone, but also for hope in Hakon, and to regain their old homes in the old land. Moreover, two chiefs joined him with their ships and crews in Hebrides, and there we heard news of Eric, and how that men hated him, and would rise for Hakon everywhere when once they knew that he was in the land.



So that was a long voyage and pleasant to me, nor did I seem to care how long it lasted. Maybe the reason for that is not far to seek, for I could not tell what more I might see of Gerda when it ended. For I knew only too well that I had naught to offer her, being but a landless man, with nothing but my sword for heritage. And as the days passed, it seemed to me that in some way Gerda kept herself afar from me, being more ready to speak with Hakon and Bertric than myself, though again at times she was as ever with myself in all ways.



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Now I did not altogether wonder at this, and made the best thereof, being minded to pass from her ken with Hakon when the time came. I supposed that we should all go together with the young king to that place which he should choose for his first landing, and thereafter she would bide in his court until Eric had fled the land and the power of Arnkel had ended with his fall. Then she would go to her own place and be once more as a queen, while I would fare with Hakon, and see what honour I might win.

Still, it was pleasant to sit on the deck in the soft, summer weather, and talk with Thoralf's wife and daughter, Ortrud, and watch Gerda as she forgot the hard things she had passed through, and grew cheerful and happy once more. These two ladies were most kind to her, and grew to be great friends in those long days at sea.

One day, after we had left the Shetland Islands, and it wore toward the end of the voyage, and we began to talk of where we might best land and call on men to rise for Hakon, the elder lady, Thoralf's wife, had been talking to me, and I think my mind had wandered a little as I watched Gerda, who was on the after deck with Bertric and Dalfin. The men were all clustered forward, and no one was near for the moment.

"You two well bore the care of Gerda," she said in a low voice. "See, she might never have passed through aught of peril or hardship. Yet she will never forget those days of trial."

"She was very brave through them," I said. "The care was naught but pleasure."

"Yet most heavy to you," she said. "I know you will make the least of it all, but she knows well what she owes to you. Now, I would have you think of what I say. It pleases you to call yourself her courtman—well, that may be no bad way of putting your readiness to serve her. But I would not have you forget that you are Malcolm the Jarl."

I laughed, for the title never had meant much, even when my father held it. Now it was altogether barren to me.

"So I am," I said; "but of no more use to Hakon for all that. If I had a jarl's following now —"

"You are not needed by Hakon so much as by another, Malcolm," she said. "To him you are one among many, and that is all."

"He has my first fealty," I answered. "He was the first who has ever claimed it, and he has it, for good or ill."

"There was one who claimed your fealty before ever he saw you," she said slowly, and smiling at me meaningly. "Will you forget that?"



I could not pretend not to understand what she meant, and I answered her with the thought which troubled me.

“Lady, I cannot forget it. But now it does not seem possible that she should care to remember. There is no reason why she should.”

“Every reason, Malcolm,” she said, as if angry with me. “Do you think that all the care you had for her before Hakon came is to go for naught?”

“Bertric and Dalfin are to be remembered in that matter also.”



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“Of course. But Asa Thor, who was only Malcolm the Jarl after all, being a fellow countryman, has had the first place.”

“You seem to have heard all the story,” I said, smiling.

“From the beginning,” she answered, “else had I not spoken to you thus. Now, I will not sit by and see Gerda, whom I love, made wretched because you are somewhat too thoughtful for her, if I may put it so. And I will tell you one thing which she fears more than aught.”

There she stayed her words and looked at me somewhat doubtfully. I suppose that what she saw in my face told her that she might go on, for she did so.

“Presently Hakon must needs find a protector for her, if her own lands are to be won back for her. She fears who that may be.”

Then she rose up and left me with some new matter for thought, not altogether unpleasant. And thereafter, for the few days that were left of the voyage, I did my best to be the same in all companionship to our charge as I had been in the days on the island.

Hakon made up his mind to sail north to Thrandheim {2}, where men loved his father, and where the strength of Norway lay. With the Thrandheimers behind him there would be every hope of winning in the end, if there must needs be some fighting here and there before the land was quiet. So he steered for the islands which lie outside the great fjord whereon the town lies, and there found a berth for the ships, while he sent men to find out how the minds of the folk were turned toward Eric. Thoralf went, and two others who were known in the district.

When they had gone, he sent for me to speak with him privately, in the little house on the island where he was lodged with some friend of his father's. He sat alone when I came in, and he smiled when he saw me. I would have it remembered that Hakon was far older than his years, and that we forgot what his age was, for, indeed, he was wiser than most men even then.

“Malcolm,” he said, “I want you to do somewhat for me. You will have to leave me, and maybe it is not an easy matter which I have in hand for you. Yet it is likely that you are the only man whom I can set to do it.”

“If that is so, King Hakon, needs must I undertake it,” I answered, lightly enough.

“It is a matter which was forced on you once; but now you shall have your choice whether you will undertake it with your free will or not.”

He spoke gravely, but his eyes had the light of a jest in them, and I had to smile.



“This sounds a terrible matter, King Hakon,” said I. “Let me know the worst of it.”

“Someone has to take Gerda back to her own place and turn out Arnel for me. Thereafter, he will have to hold the land for me quietly, and make ready for a rising for me if need is. I think there will be little trouble, but I do not know what men of his own this Arnel may have. Will you do it?”

“Seeing that the care of a lady is in the matter, I will not, for shame’s sake, say that I will do it with a light heart,” I answered. “But you could have asked me nothing more after my own mind. But what of the lady?”



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“If you do not know that by this time,” he said gaily, “I am mistaken. Maybe you had better ask her.”

“Am I to take her with me?”

“Yes,” he said, gravely enough. “There may be fighting here, and she is best out of the way. Her folk will hail her, and she will be safe with them, Arnkel notwithstanding. Thoralf will send his wife and daughter with her that they, too, may be safe.”

Then he laughed at me again, and said that if all his followers were so ready to leave him, he would be a lonely man shortly, and so on. Yet I knew that for him to have one loyal haven in the south lands would be no little gain, so that I was serving him as well as Gerda.

“That is well,” he said at last. “And I wonder how long I may be able to jest thus. Now, I will give you the ship we took from Heidrek, and Bertric will be shipmaster, for this is his affair also. You shall have crew enough, at least, to make sure that Gerda’s men will join you without fear. And you shall sail tomorrow, before ever Arnkel hears that I am in the land. Take him, if you can, and deal with him as you will. Maybe a rope at the end of the yardarm is what he deserves. But, anyway, do not let him get to Eric if you can help it.”

Then I had to fetch Bertric, and thereafter we arranged all that was needful as to ship and crew. We were to have thirty men, and that would be as many as we should want, seeing that Gerda’s folk would join us so soon as they knew that she had returned. Also we must find a pilot, for Gerda’s place lay some four days’ sail down the coast, at the head of the fjord which men call Hvinfjord, or Flekkefjord, which lies among the mountains south of Stavanger, in a land of lakes and forests and bright streams, of which she had told me much.

Presently Hakon spoke to me of another matter wherein I might help him. It was his hope that he might win Norway to the Christian faith, and, indeed, I think that he cared little for the crown if it might not give him power to that end. He knew that in the long days of the homeward cruise both Gerda and I had been talking much with Father Phelim and the two English clergy, so that we could not be aught but friendly toward the faith, if not more.

“Stubborn are our Norse folk,” he said, “and the work will be hard. Maybe I shall do little, but someone else may take up the task which I mean to begin. It must needs be begun at some time. In that quiet place of Gerda’s it is likely that men may listen peacefully, and so will be a centre whence one may hope much.”

Then I said, “So may it be, King Hakon; for this will be what Gerda wishes most of all things.”



“What of yourself then?” he asked.

Bertric answered for me, and I was glad.

“Malcolm thinks likewise, for so he has told me. But he will do nothing in haste. This is a matter which is weighty, and in no wise to be lightly gone into. But have no fear for him, Hakon.”



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Thereat Hakon smiled as if well pleased, and said no more. Bertric did but speak the truth concerning me. But most of all, it seemed to me that the new things I had learned were so wondrous that I thought myself unfitted for them. I think that, if I tell the truth, I must needs say that I was afraid thereof, in ways which I cannot set into words.

Bertric and I went out to look for men when all was said that needed saying, and the first person we found was Dalfin. The prince was learning to be a very Norseman, and was in favour with all.

“Ho, Dalfin,” I said, “are you minded to sail for another cruise with the queen and us two?”

“Why,” he asked, “what of Hakon and his warfare?”

We told him what we were to be about, and his face fell. I think he deemed at first that he was in some way bound in honour to go with us and see Gerda righted. But it was plain that he would rather follow Hakon and meet with the adventure which must needs be before him ere he came to the throne of his fathers.

So we played with him for a while, until he said that he would sail with us if we needed him so sorely, and then let him go. There was no honour to be won with us, and here he might end by standing high in the court, and we had no need of him. Then we went and chose men who were ready for a chance of speedy adventure, rather than the waiting which matters of policy required here for the moment. Presently Bertric would bring the ship back to Hakon with them, if all went well. So we had no trouble in raising a very willing crew. Moreover, the men who knew her were glad to serve Gerda.

So word went about quickly of what we wanted, and we might have had twice the number we asked for. Presently Asbiorn heard it, and came up from the ships and sought us.

“So you are going to try conclusions with my friend Arnkel?” he said. “Let me come with you. You need a pilot.”

Now, we liked Asbiorn well enough, for all the way in which we had met him, and the company whence he came to us. He was quiet and fearless, keeping himself to himself, but pleasant in his ways, troubling more over the thought of the ill repute of his father than need have been, perhaps, for none blamed him for that. We had already thought of him as likely to be useful to us; but he, again, might do well with the king, for he had place and name to win, as had Dalfin. We were glad that he would help us therefore, and hailed his coming accordingly, to his content.

This island where we lay was hilly, and forest clad. The ships were at anchor in the little sound between it and a smaller island, hidden and safe, and the ladies were lodged in a



house among the woods on the south side of the hill, near the lodging of Hakon. The woods were pleasant at this time, with the first touch of autumn on the leaves of the birches, and the ripe berries of the Norseland were everywhere.

So it happened that presently, as I went to Hakon's lodging with some question which I had for him, I must take the nearest way from the ships by the woodland paths, having to cross the island from east to south, and leaving Bertric and Asbiorn on board. I had it in my mind to find Thoralf's good wife presently, and talk to her, for it seemed to me that this cruise might have much in store for me. Hakon had told her of our sailing with the morning's tide.



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But I heard someone singing in the wood, and knew the voice well. It was Gerda who was wandering, and gathering the red raspberries, and I had half a mind to turn aside and keep beyond her sight. That thought came too late, however, for the path turned, and I came on her suddenly, and she looked up from the ripe berries she had found alongside the path and saw me.

A flush went across her fair face, and then she greeted me brightly. I did not know what she had been told of tomorrow as yet, and could not tell from her face whether she knew or not. So I thought it best to ask.

“Have you heard aught from the king as to your going back to the old home yet, Gerda?”

“Yes,” she said, standing still and looking somewhat pitifully at me. “And he says that it shall be at once. But I fear how he may send me back.”

“He will give you ship and men, and so see that there is no chance of any great trouble with Arnkel.”

“Aye—but—but, Malcolm, he says that he needs must find someone who will help me hold the land. Who will that be, for he can spare so few?”

“I think that he will let you make your own choice,” I answered.

“If I might—” she said, and there stopped, seeming troubled.

Then I said, “And if you might, who would be the choice?”

She looked at me and paled, and then looked away at the berries again. She stooped to pick one, and her face was away from me.

“I think it is cruel to ask that,” she said in a low voice. “I have no one here whom I know—save you, and Bertric.”

I moved a pace nearer to her, but still she did not look up. The crimson berries she bent over were no excuse for the colour of her face at that moment, and I feared I had angered her.

“Gerda,” I said, “have you forgotten how that in the holy island I was wont to say that I should not rest until your were back in your home?”

“I thought that you had forgotten,” she said in a low voice. “I had not.”

“I seemed to forget it, because I deemed it best that I should do so. I am but a landless warrior, with naught to offer. And you—”



Then she turned quickly on me, and there was a smile on her face and a new light in her eyes.

“And I,” she said. “And I am naught but the girl who was found by Asa Thor in the burning ship.

“O Malcolm, let it be so still, and take me to the end of the voyage and bide there always. For I fear naught as long as you are with me.”

She held out her hands to me, and then she was in the shelter of my arms, and no more was needed to be said. We were both content, and more than content.

Chapter 17: Homeward Bound.

Mayhap I need not say that I forgot the message which took me to this place, seeing that it was of no great account. Gerda and I had much to say to one another of matters which would be of note to none but ourselves, and the time fled unheeded by us.



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Whereby it came to pass that presently came footsteps through the woods, and here were Hakon and Bertric smiling at us, and Gerda was blushing, though she would not leave my side. Bertric laughed lightly when he met us.

“Hakon,” he said, “I told you that there would be no trouble in this matter. Now, Lady Gerda, and you, comrade, I am going to be the first to wish you all happiness. And I will say that thus our voyage ends even as it ought.”

“It is not ended yet,” said Hakon. “Still it remains for Malcolm to win her home back for his bride that shall be, though that may be easy.”

Then he, too, spoke words of kindness to us both, and they were good to hear; until at last he would tell us news which had come from Thrandheim for himself, and that also was of the best.

The land had risen for him at the first sound of his name. Eric was far away to the south and east, in the Wick, fighting with men who would not bow to him, and all went well. The ships would go up to the ancient town on the morning’s tide.

“But now,” he said, “I have no one to send with Gerda, for Thoralf will take his wife and daughter with us. Will she wait here for the winter, or will she sail, as once before, with you two to serve and guard her?”

“Let us sail at once, King Hakon,” she said, laughing. “It would be impossible for me to wish for better care than that I have learned to value most of all.”

“Nay, but you shall be better attended at this time,” Hakon said, smiling.

And so in the end we learned that the matter had already been arranged in all haste, for they had found two maidens to attend Gerda, and the rough after cabin of the ship had been made somewhat more fitting for her by the time we sailed in the morning.

Now we took Gerda back to Thoralf’s wife, and thence I fled with Bertric to the ship, there being more to say than I cared to listen to. Dalfin sat on the deck, and he rose up sadly to greet us, with a half groan.

“Good luck to you,” he said, gripping my hand. “I have heard the news. On my word, it was as well that we had no chance to get to my father’s court, or I should have been your rival, and there would have been a fight. I will not say that it might not be a relief to break the head of someone even now—but that may pass. The luck of the torque has left me.”

“Come with us after all,” I said. “No doubt Arnkel will be willing to give you just that chance.”



But he shook his head. "No, I bide with Hakon. But there is Asbiorn yonder who will see to Arnkel. And I am sorry for Arnkel if they meet."

Now, whether it was true that Dalfin had his own thoughts concerning the companion of our dangers I cannot say; but he bided with Hakon, and thereafter won honour enough from him, and, indeed, from all with whom he had to do. Princelike, and in all ways a good comrade, was Dalfin.



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So it came to pass that very early in the next dawning the ship slid away from under the lee of the islands and headed southward on her voyage, with cheers and good wishes to set her forth. The last message we had from shore came from Dalfin the Prince, and that was an Irish brogue of untanned deerskin, laced with gold, which flew through the dusk like a bat to Gerda's feet from the deck of one of Hakon's ships as we passed her. Words in the Erse came also from the dim figure who cast it, whereat Phelim and I laughed. Gerda asked what they were, and we had to tell her.

"Good luck to you for the thief of my heart," he cried. "If I had not got one, and may never set eyes on your sweet face more, I would wish you the same today and tomorrow."

"Not much heart-broken is Dalfin," said Bertric, laughing.

Thereafter is little which need be told of that voyage in the still, autumn weather of the north. We passed, at times sailing, and now and then with the oars going easily, and always in bright weather, through the countless islands which fringe the Norway shores, some bare and rocky, and some clad with birch and fir even to the edge of the waves. Far inland the great mountains rose, snow-capped now, and shone golden and white and purple in the evening sun; and everywhere the forests climbed to meet the snow, and the sound of the cattle horns came at the homing hour to tell of the saeters hidden in the valleys.

Once we met a ship passing swiftly northward under oars, and were not so sure that we might not have to fight or fly. But her crew were flying from the south, and hailed us to know if it were true that Hakon had come from England to claim his own. And when we hailed in answer that so it was, and that we were of his force, the men roared and cheered while we might hear them. Eric's day was done.

I think that it was on the fifth day that we came at last to the break in the line of fringing islands which marks the opening of the Stavanger Fjord. There we met the long heave and swell of the open sea, and it was good to feel the lift and quiver of the staunch ship as she swung over the rollers again.

Across the open stretch of sea we sailed, and the land along which we coasted was flat and sandy, all unlike that which we had passed for so many days. But beyond that the mountains were not far, though in no wise so high as those farther north. And at last Gerda showed us the place where she had thought to lay Thorwald, her grandfather, to rest in his ship. We could see the timber slipway, which still had been left where it was made for that last beaching, and we could see, too, that here and there the land was turned up into heaps, where the place for the mound had been prepared. There was a little village also, and a hut or two had been burnt.

"Our doing," said Asbiorn. "Forgive us, Queen Gerda."

“You at least had no part therein,” she said gently. “The rest is forgotten. Now we have no long way to go before I am again at home.”



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Now the land rose again from the level of the Jederen marshes we had passed, and we had high black cliffs to port and ahead of us. Along their feet the great rollers of the open sea broke, thundering, even in this quiet weather, and the spray shot up and fell in white clouds unceasingly. It was wonderful even now, and what it would be like in a day of gale and heavy seas might be guessed. And still we held on, with Asbiorn at the helm, though I could see as yet no opening in the mighty walls that barred our way onward. Gerda at my side laughed at me, in all pride in her homecoming, and in the wild coast at which I was wondering.

The cliffs seemed to part us as we neared those before us, and I saw a deep and narrow cleft between them into which we steered. The sail was lowered now, and the oars manned, and so we passed from the open into the shadow of the mighty cliffs which rose higher and higher as we rowed between them. For half a mile the swell of the sea came with us, and then it died away, and we were on still, deep water, clear as glass, but black in the shadow of the grim and sheer rock walls. The rhythm of the leisurely swing and creak and splash of the long oars came back to us from either side as if we rowed amid an unseen fleet, and when the men broke into the rowing song they were fain to cease, laughing, for the echoes spoiled the tune.

The fjord opened out before long, and there was another passage to the sea, up which came a little swell from the open. The cliffs to our right had been those of a great island which lies across the mouth of the fjord itself, which we were but now entering. And then again the cliffs closed in, and we were in the silence. On the verge of the cliffs here were poised great stones, as if set to roll down on those who would try to force a passage, but they were more than man might lift. They might have been hove here by Jotuns at play, so great were they, in truth.

Now, it was Asbiorn's plan that we should try to reach the upper end of the fjord, where the hall and village lay, in the dusk of evening, if we could do so, unseen. Gerda knew that it was unlikely that we should be spied until we had passed higher yet; or, at least, were we seen, that none would wonder at the return of a ship which was known to be that of Heidrek. The brown sail which had been our terror might help us here and now.

Far up its reaches the fjord branched, one arm running on toward the east, and the other, which was our course, northward. Here, at the meeting of these branches, there was a wider stretch of water, ringed around with mountains which sloped, forest clad, to the shores, and dotted with rocky islets round which the tide swirled and eddied in the meeting of the two currents, for it was falling.

We had timed our passage well, and would wait here until we might find our way to the hall as the men were gathered for the evening meal. Our plan was to land and surround the building, and so take Arnkel if we could without any fighting.



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Hidden away at the foot of a valley here was a little village, but at first we saw no signs that we were noticed. Presently, however, when Asbiorn had taken the ship into a berth between two of the islets, and the men were getting her shore lines fast to mooring posts which seemed to be used only now and then, a boat with two men in it came off to us thence, and we were hailed to know what we needed in these waters.

Asbiorn answered, saying that we were friends, waiting for tide up the fjord, and they went ashore on the islet next them, and came across it to us. Then Gerda rose up from where she sat watching them and called them by name, and they started as if they had seen a ghost, so that she laughed at them. At that they took courage, and came nearer.

The stern of the ship was not more than a couple of fathoms from the rock, and there they stood, and it was good to hear their welcome of the lady whom they had deemed lost. Then they came on board, and there was rejoicing enough, both in the finding, and in the peace which would come with Gerda's return. They told us how that Arnkel was carrying on his mastership here with a high hand, being in no wise loved. They said that men blamed him for bringing Heidrek on the land, seeing that he had made terms with him when it would have been as well to fight; and that, moreover, there were not a few who believed that in some way he had a hand in the loss of Gerda. Now, he was trying to gather the men in order to go to the help of Eric the King, who was fighting in the Wick, as we had heard, and that was not at all to the mind of those who had followed Thorwald. War in the Wick, beyond their ken altogether, was no affair of theirs.

Whereby it was plain that here we were likely to do a very good turn to Hakon at once, and we were just in time. Our ship, which Heidrek had left here, was ready for sailing, as it seemed, and if we had come a day or two later we should have lost Arnkel, and maybe had trouble to follow.

Now, these two men were the pilots of the fjord, as we had guessed from their coming off to us. At first they were for going straightway and telling the men at the hall and town that Gerda had come, but we thought it best to take that news ourselves. They would steer us up the fjord in the dusk presently, and would answer any hail from watchers who would spy our coming.

So we waited for the turn of the tide, and armed ourselves in all bravery of gold and steel and scarlet as befitted the men of Hakon and of Gerda the Queen, for she should go back to her own as a queen should. And then a thought came to me, and I spoke of it to Bertric, and so went and stood at the door of the cabin where Gerda waited, and asked her to do somewhat for me.

"Will you not come back even as you went?" I asked. "Let the men see you stand before them as you were wont, in your mail and helm and weapons, the very daughter of warriors."



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But she shook her head, smiling.

“No, Malcolm, it is foolishness. What need to put on the gear which seems to make me what I am not?”

“Nothing will make you less than a sea queen, my Gerda,” I said. “Maybe I might say more than that, but you would think me only flattering. I would have you wear the arms as surety to your folk at first sight that you are indeed here again. It may save words, and time.”

So I persuaded her, and she left me to don the war gear for the last time, as she told me. She would dress herself even as she had been clad for the funeral and as we had found her.

Then the tide turned, and slowly the current from the sea found its way up the fjord and reached us, and we warped out of the narrow berth between the rocks, and manned the oars and set out on the last stage of our voyage. The mast was lowered and housed by this time, and the ship ready for aught. Only we did not hang the war boards along the gunwales, and we had no dragon head on the stem, for that Heidrek had not carried at any time. We had no mind to set all men against the ship at first sight as an enemy who came prepared for battle.

We entered the northern branch of the fjord, and at once the high cliffs rose above us again, for the waterway narrowed until we were in a deep cleft of the mountains. The water was still as glass in the evening quiet, and as the stars came out overhead, we seemed to be sailing under one deep sky and on another. But the oar blades broke the water into brighter stars than those which were reflected, and after us stretched a wake of white light between the black cliffs, for the strange sea fires burnt in the broken waters brightly, coming and going as the waves swirled around the ship's path.

So we went steadily for a long way, and then we came to a place where the rocky walls of the channel nearly met, so that one could have thrown a stone from the deck on either as we passed. High up on the left cliffside a little light glimmered, for a cottage hung as it were on a shelf of the mountain above us. The measured beat of the oars sounded hollow here as the sheer cliffs doubled their sounds. Some man heard it, and a door opened by the little light, like a square patch of brightness on the shadow of the hillside.

Then he hailed us in a great voice which echoed back to us, and one of the pilots answered him cheerily with some homely password, and we saw his form stand black against his door for a moment before he closed it, and he waved his hand to the friend whose voice he knew. The pilot told me that it was his duty to listen for passing ships thus and hail them. Beside his hut was piled a beacon ready to light if all was not well,

and in the hut hung a great, wooden cattle lure wherewith to alarm the town. We were close to it now.



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By this time it was as if I knew the place well, so often had Gerda told me of it. The fjord opened out from this narrow channel into a wide lake from which the mountains fell back, seamed and laced with bright streams and waterfalls, and clad with forests, amid which the cornfields were scattered wherever the rocks gave way to deeper soil. At the head of this lake, where a swift salmon river entered the fjord, was the hall, set on rising ground above the clustering houses of the town, and looking down over them to the anchorage and the wharf for which we were making. Behind the hall rose a sheer cliff, sheltering it and the other houses from the north and east.

All this I was to see plainly hereafter. Before me now in the dusk, which was almost darkness, as the ship slid from the narrows into the open, was the wide ring of mountains and the still lake, and across that the twinkling lights of the town, doubled in the water below them, and above them all the long row of high-set openings under the eaves of the hall itself, glowing red with the flame of fire and torches, and flickering as the smoke curled across and through them.

I wondered what welcome was waiting for us from those who were gathered there, as I stood with Gerda on my arm beside our comrades, who watched the pilots as they steered. Bertric was there, and Phelim, who by this time spoke the Norse well enough, besides Asbiorn.

There was some spur of hill between us and part of the town, for the light seemed to glide from behind it as we held on, but its mass was lost in the shadows. I was watching the lights as they came, one by one, to view, and then of a sudden, on the blackness of the cliff above the hall, shone out a cross of light, tall and bright and clear, as it were a portent, or as set there to guard the place. So suddenly did it come that I started, and I heard Father Phelim draw in his breath with some words which I could not catch.

“What is that?” I asked Gerda, under my breath and pointing.

She laughed gently, and her hand tightened on my arm.

“We were wont to call it Thor’s hammer,” she said. “We see it from time to time, and it brings luck. Now it greets me and you—but it is not the old sign to me any longer.”

“It is strange,” said Bertric. “Once you called on Asa Thor—and here is that one to whom you called, and yonder—”

“No, no,” she said, clinging to me, “it is no longer Thor’s hammer.”

“It is the sign which shall be held dear here,” said Phelim. “It is the sign that all good has come to this place.”



“So may it be,” said Gerda softly, and I thought that the reflection of the cross made a glimmering pathway from the hall to the ship which bore her homeward.



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But I had no time to wonder how and why that sign was there, for now we were seen, and torches began to flicker along the wharf. Our pilots spoke to Asbiorn, and he passed the word for men to go forward with the shore warps, and the oar strokes slowed down. I thought I saw the broad gleam of light as the doors of the hall opened and closed again, and then a hail or two went back and forth from the shore and us. The oars were laid in and we were alongside the wharf, and quietly the rowers took their arms and sat in their places, waiting, as they had been bidden. There were not more than a score of men waiting us ashore, for it was supper time.

Then came a man from out of the town toward us, and by the time we were moored he was on the wharf opposite the stern. He had on helm and sword, but no mail, and his shield hung over his shoulder. The men made way for him, and in the torchlight I saw that he was gray-bearded and strong.

"It is Gorm the Steward," said Gerda to me, "He is my friend. Let me speak to him."

"Ho, shipmaster!" cried Gorm. "Welcome, if you come in friendship, as I suppose. Whence are you, and what would you?"

"Friends," said Asbiorn; "friends with a cargo some of you will be glad to see."

"Aye, aye," answered the steward. "You traders always say that. Well, that will wait for daylight. Meanwhile come up to the hall and sup."

Then his eyes lit on the silent, mail-clad men at the oar benches, and he started.

"Ho!" he cried sternly, "what is the meaning of all this show of weapons?"

"Speak to him, Gerda," I said then, seeing that it was time.

She went to the rail and leaned over it. The red flares shone on her mail and white dress and sparkling helm.

"Gorm," she cried softly; "Gorm, old friend—I have come home!"

He stood for a moment as if turned to stone there on the wharf. Then he shaded his eyes with his hand as if in broad daylight, and stared at Gerda for but a moment, for she spoke his name once more.

"Odin," he cried, "this is a good day—if my ears and eyes do not play me false—yet it is hardly to be believed. Let me come on board."

He hurried to the gangway, and there Gerda met him. One close look was enough for him, and he bent his knee and kissed her hand with words of welcome, and so would be



made known to Bertric and myself. He looked us up and down with a sharp glance and smiled, and Gerda told her tale in a few words.

“True enough,” he said; “for you wear the arms of the house, and wear them well. I never thought to see one in the war gear of the young master again and not to resent it—but Gerda will have made no mistake. Now, what will you do? Arnkel sits in the hall, and with him men who have come from Eric Bloodaxe the King.”

“Hakon, Athelstane’s foster son, is king,” said Bertric. “There is news for you. He is at Thrandheim, and the north has risen for him. We are his men.”



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Gorm's eyes shone, and he whistled softly. "News indeed! This is a day of wonders. What next?"

"How many of the men in the hall will stand by Arnkel when Gerda is known?" I asked. "She would have no fighting if it can be avoided."

Maybe a dozen—men who never knew her. That is of no account, for there are two score of our folk supping there."

"Well, then," I said, "we will surround the hall and walk in quietly and call on Arnkel to surrender. If he does not, we must make him do so; but first Gerda's tale shall be told of him."

Then Gerda said: "Let me go into the hall first and speak with Arnkel face to face. I have no fear of him, and I think that my folk will stand by me."

Just for a moment we doubted if that was safe for her, but Gorm the Steward had the last word.

"Let it be so," he said. "Gerda shall call to her men, and they will not hang back. Then Arnkel must needs give in. Now, the sooner the better for all concerned."

Chapter 18: A Sea Queen's Welcome.

The folk ashore had made fast the ship by this time, and were idly waiting while Gorm spoke to us. As yet they had paid no heed to the lady with whom he talked, but wondered more at the quiet of the men than aught else. I felt that they were growing uneasy, though that Gorm found us friendly kept them from showing it. I dare say they thought we were more messengers from Eric.

Now, Gorm bade us choose our men quickly and follow him, lest some word should go to Arnkel of the armed ship which had come instead of the peaceful trader which the pilots should have brought. So I went down the starboard side and named a dozen men, while Asbiorn did the same from the other bank of rowers, and as we named them, they leapt up and fell in behind us. Then Asbiorn said:

"Better that I am not seen unless wanted. I will go to the back of the hall and see that none get away thence. What shall you do if all goes well?"

"Take Arnkel and send him back to Hakon in the ship," I answered. "That is the only thing possible. If he is foolish enough to fight—well, he must take his chance."

Asbiorn nodded, and we went ashore, leaving that old courtman of mine, Sidroc, in charge of the ship and the dozen men left with her. The folk of the place thronged



round to see us pass up the town, and saw Gerda plainly for the first time. In another moment I heard her name pass among them, and Gorm spoke to them, for there was a growing noise of welcome.

“Steady, friends!” he said sternly, “steady! No need to tell Arnkel that his time has come yet. Let us get to the hall quietly, and thereafter shout as you like—

“Ho! stop that man!”

One had broken away from the crowd and was off toward the hall at full speed, meaning, as I have no doubt, to warn Arnkel and win reward. But he did not get far. A dozen men were after him, and had him fast, and no other cared to follow his example.



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There was a stockade round the hall and its outbuildings which stood to right and left of it. The guest house was to the right, and the bower, which was Gerda's own place, stood on the left, both handsome timber buildings, with high-pitched roofs and carved gables and doorways. The hall itself was like them, but larger, with low, wide eaves that made, as it were, a gallery all round, raised a little from the ground. Daylight showed that every timber that could be seen was carved most wonderfully, but one could not heed that now in the torchlight.

A man stood on guard in the stockade gate, and Gorm the Steward spoke to him, bidding him salute the queen who had returned. He gave one look at Gerda, and tossed his leathern helm in the air, and so fell in with us as we crossed the courtyard to the great door. From the hall came the pleasant sounds of song and laughter from the courtmen within.

Gorm knocked and the doors flew open. The shipmen had been expected to return with him for supper. I saw the whole place as we stood there for the moment in the broad light of the torches on the walls.

We entered at the end of the hall, and right over against us was the high seat, where sat Arnkel and half a dozen other men. There were no ladies with them, and for that I was glad. Two great fires burnt on hearths on either side of the hall, halfway down its length, and at this end sat at their trestle tables the thralls and herdsmen and fishers of the house. Beyond the fires and below the high place were the courtmen on either hand, so that from end to end of the hall ran a clear way for the serving. With them were their wives and daughters here and there, and there were many women with the lesser folk nearer us as we entered. Some were carrying round the ale jugs, and stood still to see us enter.

Asbiorn and his men left us even as the door opened, and went quickly to the rear of the hall. I could see only one other door, and that opened behind the high seat, being meant for the ladies of the house, so that they could pass to the bower without going down the noisy hall. It led to the open gallery round the building, whence it was but a step to the bower.

Very bright and pleasant it all was, with the light flashing red on the courtmen's arms on the walls behind them, and the glow of the two great pine-log fires on the gay dresses of the women. And Arnkel himself, a big man with long, reddish hair and bristling beard, looked at his ease altogether, as he turned a laughing face to see the guests who came.

There was a little hush as we came out of the shadow of the great doorway, and everyone turned, of course, to see us. Gerda was between Bertric and myself, and for the moment behind Gorm the Steward, who ushered us in with all ceremony. She had her dark cloak over her mail, and the hood of it hid her bright helm, and we two were

cloaked also. Behind us was Phelim, and then the men followed. I waited until they were all inside the hall, and then Gorm stepped aside, and Gerda stood forward.



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“Ha!” said Arnkel, smiling broadly, “a lady. Welcome to our hall, friends. It may be more to your liking than the sea, so late in the year.”

Gerda shook her long cloak from her, and stood before him at the length of the hall, plain to be known, even as he had last set eyes on her.

“Am I welcome, Arnkel?” she said in a cold voice, which had no sign of a quiver in it. “I have come from the sea to which you sent me.”

Arnkel’s red face went white and ghastly of a sudden, and he sprang back from the table as if he had been smitten. The guests with him stared at us and at him, speechless, for they were Eric’s men and knew nothing of Arnkel’s ways. But the courtmen rose to their feet with a wild medley of voices, for this thing seemed to them beyond belief for the moment. Round us, amid the lesser folk, was a silence, save for the rustle as they shifted and craned to look at their young mistress. But there was a whisper growing among them.

Now Arnkel came back to the table and set his hands on it, for they shook, and stared at Gerda without finding a word in answer. The courtmen were looking at him now, and her name was passing among them in undertones. It was in Arnkel’s power to make the best of the return if he would.

“Friends,” said Gerda, “yonder man sent me to what he deemed my death in the ship which bore Thorwald to sea. Will you welcome me back, if he will not?”

Then there was a great shout from the men who loved her, and I thought that all was well. But suddenly that shout stilled, for Arnkel’s voice came loud over it all.

“Hold, you fools,” he cried. “Look at yon armed men. This is a trick of theirs. They have your lady captive, and now will win the place if you suffer them.

“Here, you great warrior, who are you?”

He pointed to me, and the colour was coming back to his face, while his eyes were fierce. He would make one bid for his power yet.

“I am Malcolm of Caithness, the jarl,” I answered. “I am the champion of Queen Gerda, whom I and my comrade here saved from the ship in which you would have burned her.

“Listen, Thorwald’s men. We took her, well nigh dead, from the chamber where your king was laid. See, what are these arms I wear? They will prove it, for they came thence, and are her gift.”

“Aye,” he sneered in a harsh voice, “you took them at the same time you took the girl.



“To your arms, men, and see that these robbers do not escape.”

The courtmen sprang at their weapons, and there was uproar enough. For a moment I could not tell what might come, and my hand was on my sword hilt, though I would not draw the weapon yet. Then came Gerda’s clear voice again.

“To me, Gerda’s men,” she cried, and her sword flashed out. “He lies, and you know it.”

Three men led a rush down the hall to us, and one was lame. They were my Caithness men who had escaped from Asbiorn here. After and with them were a dozen older courtmen of Thorwald’s. The women screamed and shrank back against the walls of the hall, hiding behind the tables. We had naught to fear from the thralls here, for they were shouting for Gerda.



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One of Eric's men leaned over to Arnkel and spoke to him. Then he shook his head and scowled at him, and stood up and raised his hand.

"Here," he said, when a silence fell, "I am a stranger, and it seems to me that there is matter for a fight, unless somewhat is set straight. What is this tale brought up against your lord? I have heard how Thorwald was set to sea in his ship."

Then old Gorm answered in a voice which shook with wrath: "And with him, bound in the funeral chamber, with burning peat piled round it, Arnkel set the Lady Gerda to burn at sea, even as you see her. But for chance she had never stood in Arnkel's way more. She is Thorwald's heiress."

In the silence which followed Gerda spoke again. Men were doubting yet, and Arnkel's men had no mind to begin a fight which would be fell enough.

"You have said that I am a captive, Arnkel," she said calmly.

"Listen, friends, and say if so I am."

She half turned to me, and took my hand before them all, smiling.

"This is my promised husband," she said proudly, "Jarl Malcolm, who saved me. If I am captive, it is willingly.

"Now, Arnkel, I will let bygones be bygones. It shall be as it was before the day when the ship was set adrift. Only you shall go your way to the king, to be judged by him."

"Fair speech, Arnkel," said Eric's courtier. "Better listen to it. You have to deal with yon Scots jarl—and I ken the Scotsmen."

He sat down, watching the throng. He would take no hand in the matter, wherein he was wise. But those words of his came to Arnkel as a taunt, and his look at me was terrible.

"Ho, men," he shouted, "will you own an outland lord?"

"Aye, we will," said Gorm the Steward sturdily. "Sooner than listen to a coward and would-be murderer of women."

That ended the matter. The courtmen yelled, and one or two who tried to get to Arnkel's side were seized and hurled to the ground by the men who cheered for Gerda, and I knew that the day was won. But I watched Arnkel, for there was somewhat of madness in his look. His hand stole down to the long dirk in his belt, and then clutched it.



Like a flash the keen blade fled across the hall, straight at Gerda as she stood fearless before him, and I was only just in time. I stood on her right, and my left arm caught it. The blade went through the muscles of the forearm, and stayed there, but that was of no account. Gerda's light mail would hardly have stopped it.

She gave a little cry, and I set my arm behind me, smiling. But the men saw and roared, and there was not one on the side of the man who would do so evil a deed. They made a rush for the dais, overturning the tables, and hustling aside Eric's men, who were in their way, else there would have been an end of Arnel.

Maybe in the long run it had been as well for him, but in the scuffle he opened the door behind him and rushed out. I heard a shout from outside, and then a trampling, and thereafter a silence.



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Asbiorn was not far off. Afterwards I found that he had a ladder against the wall, and a man was watching through a high window all that went on, in case we needed help. Whereby it happened that Arnkel ran into his arms.

Some of Asbiorn's men came in as soon as that was done, and the courtmen huddled back at the sight of these newcomers, whose swords were out. Gerda called to them that these were friends, and bade our men sheathe their weapons.

There was quiet then, and Gerda looked round to me. Phelim had taken charge of my arm at once, and the long blade was out, and a scarf, which some girl who had not lost her senses had handed him, was round the wound.

"Not much harm done," he said, smiling at Gerda, who thanked him in words and me with a look.

Now the folk crowded round us with great shouts of welcome, and the men came to thrust forward the hilts of their weapons that she should touch them, in token of homage given and accepted. The women were trying to reach her also, with words of joy and praise. So I took her through them all to the high place, and set her there in Thorwald's chair, and Gorm the Steward passed round some word, and came himself with a silver cup full of mead, and set it in her hand, and whispered to her.

Whereon she smiled and rose up, and held the cup high, and cried to her folk:

"Skoal, friends, and thanks!"

And all down the hall, from her own folk and from Hakon's, and even from those strangers, Eric's men, came the answer:

"Skoal to Gerda the Queen, and welcome!"

And then one lifted his voice and cried:

"Skoal to Jarl Malcolm!"

Men took that up, and it was good to hear them.

Gerda gave me the cup her lips had just touched, and I drank "skoal" to them in turn, and so Gerda the Queen had come home.

Gerda passed to the bower presently, and left us in the hall. The men still made merry with shout and song, and Gorm was preparing the guest hall for us. Asbiorn had come in with the rest of his men, grim and silent, and I asked him if he had Arnkel safe. He nodded and reached for a horn of ale, and sat down at the end of the high place, for at



the time Bertric and I were talking with Eric's men, and trying to settle matters with them, for we could not let them go back to their master.

One was a jarl from the south, and the others men of less note, and they had looked to gather men to Eric hence. Now they were fairly thunderstruck to hear of the coming of Hakon, and as it seemed to us not altogether displeased. There would be nothing but turmoil in the land so long as Eric reigned.

In the end these men passed their word not to try to escape, or to plot here for Eric, until they went back with the ship to Thrandheim, and so we had no more trouble with them. Thereafter two joined Hakon, as I have heard, and the others were glad to bide quietly and at least not hinder him; so we did well for the young king.



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When we had arranged thus with these men, I went to Asbiorn to learn how he had bestowed Arnkel.

“He is down at the wharf,” he answered. “Aye, on board the ship. Maybe you had better come and see him.”

“I do not know that I have aught to say to him,” said I. “The man is not worth a word. What do the townfolk say of him?”

“They had a good deal to say,” he answered. “Not what one would call good words, either. There is no party on his side here, and you will have naught but welcome on all hands. Nevertheless, come down to the ship before you go to the guest house for the night. I sleep on board.”

“The people cannot hold you as in league with Arnkel now,” I said. “They will not molest you.”

“They know that there is no league between us now, at all events,” he answered, with a short laugh. “No, there will be no trouble of any kind.”

Bertric and I rose up and bade Eric’s men go to the guest hall, and so we two went out of the great door with Asbiorn. With us came Phelim and my Caithness men, and Gorm the Steward, and a dozen of the others of the place. It was a still, frosty night, and overhead wavered and flickered across the stars the red and golden shafts and waves of the northern lights, very brightly, so that all the sky seemed to burn with them, and it was well nigh as light as day with their weird brightness. Under them the still fjord glowed in answer, silent and peaceful, as the fires burned up and faded.

We went to the stockade gate, and down the little street to the wharf. Only a few men were about, but they were not armed, and the houses were dark now. There was no sign of unrest in all the place, as there well might have been had things gone awry for us.

“Have a care, Asbiorn,” said Bertric. “There may be some gathering to rescue Arnkel, for all the quiet.”

He laughed again, and his laugh was hard.

“There will be none,” he said, and pointed.

The mast of the ship had been stepped again, but the sail was still on deck. Only a spare yard had been hoisted half-mast high across the ship. And at the outboard end of it swung, black against the red fires of the sky, the body of the man who had wrought the trouble. He had found the death which he deserved.



“Hakon’s word,” said Asbiorn quietly. “You mind what he said.”

I remembered, and it came to me that Asbiorn had done right. I do not know what else could have been done with such a man. And in this matter neither I nor Gerda had any hand.

“The townsfolk judged him,” said Asbiorn again, “and we did Hakon’s bidding. Else they had hewn him in pieces.”

Suddenly the red wildfires sank, and it was very dark. In the darkness there came from seaward a sound which swelled up, nearer and nearer, as it were the cry of some mighty pack of hounds, and with the wild baying, the yell of hunters and the clang of their horns. It swept over us, and passed toward the mountains while we stood motionless, listening.



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“It is the wild hunt,” said old Gorm, gripping my arm. “It is Odin who chases the wraith of Arnkel hence.”

But Phelim looked up to where against the dark cliff the cross stood out bright above the hall.

“If it is Odin,” he said, “he flies before the might of yonder sign. This place is his no longer.”

The others did not heed him, but I would that what he said was the very truth. I had ever heard that one who died as did Arnkel was the quarry of Odin’s hunters for evermore, and the sounds scared me.

The clamour of that wild hunt died away, and we breathed more freely. Soon the wild lights burned up across the north again, and then Bertric spoke.

“Sink yonder thing in the fjord, Asbiorn. Gerda should not see it thus.”

Therewith we went back to the guest hall, and there was naught to disturb the quiet of the night. Asbiorn saw to that matter straightway.

Men say now that when the northern fires light the sky, across the fjord drifts the wraith of Arnkel, and that ever the wild hunt comes up from the sea and hounds him hence. I have heard the bay of those terrible hounds more than once indeed, but I have seen naught, and round our hall is no unrest.

In the sunshine of next day Gerda would hear what had become of Arnkel, supposing that he was kept safely somewhere. I think that the hurt to me, small as it was, angered her against him more than the wrongs he had done to herself.

“He is dead,” I told her. “He died at the hand of Asbiorn and the men of the place, in all justice. He may be forgotten.”

She did not ask more, for the way in which he ended she would not wish to hear. Only she sighed, and said:

“Let us forget him then. I would have forgiven him. He tried to take even my life from me indeed, but instead he has given me all I could long for. He sent me to meet you, Malcolm, on the sea.”

Then she laid her hand on my bound arm gently, and smiled at me.

“This is the second time you have saved my life,” she said. “Nor was there one to share the deed this time. You cannot bring in Bertric and Dalfin now.”



Which seemed to please her in a way which I will not try to fathom. That sort of thing makes a man feel how little worth he is in truth.

Then on that morning she must needs take me to see all the place and the folk. My father's old ship lay in the fjord, ready to sail to Eric, and she must hear how we escaped from her again. There were more pleasant doings also, but I need not tell of them.

For now it seems to me that the story is done, if there must be told one or two more things, seeing that Gerda had come home, and all was well. I have no words to tell of the wedding that was before Bertric must needs go back to Hakon, for none but a lady could compass that. But I will say that it was a goodly gathering thereat, for word went quickly round, and the good people came in to grace it from far and wide. Bertric gave away the bride, as the friend of Hakon, who was her guardian; and after the wedding in the old Norse way, Phelim blessed us after the manner of the new faith which he and his had taught us to love, though he might not do more for us, as yet unbaptized.



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Thereafter was feasting and rejoicing enough to please all, if the notice had been short; and then Bertric must go his way, promising to see us again as soon as might be. So we watched the ship pass down the fjord and into the narrow seaward channel, and he waved to us, and we to him, and the men cheered for Hakon, and so we turned back to the new life of peace that lay before us.

There was not much fighting ere Hakon came to the throne in earnest. Eric fled the land as man after man rose for his rival, and at last took to the Viking path, and thereafter made friends with Athelstane of England, and held Northumbria for him as under-king. So he troubled Norway no more.

But for the spreading of the new faith Hakon would have had no man against him; but therein he had unrest enough. Maybe it was to be expected, as he went to work with too high a hand in that matter in his zeal; for here we had no trouble. Phelim and Gerda won the folk with ways and words of love, and before two years had passed all were working to frame a church here with much pride in the building, giving time and labour for naught but the honour of the faith.

Hakon came to the consecrating of that church, and with him were Bertric and Dalfin, and then those good friends of ours stood sponsors for us at the first christenings that were therein.

Thereafter Bertric went home to England, and we have seen him no more. Only we know that he is high in honour with his king, and happily wedded in his Dorset home. Dalfin is still in Norway, and high in honour with Hakon, and here he will bide, being wedded, and holding himself to be a very Norseman. There might be worse than he, in all truth. And Asbiorn is with Hakon, as the head of his courtmen, silent and ready, and well liked by all. Those two we see when Hakon goes on progress through the land, and comes in turn to us, as he ever will, or else when we go to the court, when that is near us.

Still over the hall against the black cliff glows the bright cross at times, clear and steady. Men say that it does but come from some unseen openings in the roof of the hall when the lights are set in some unheeded way—but I cannot tell. However it comes, it has been a portent of good, and minds me of that night when we brought home at last my sea queen, Gerda. Surely it is a token of the peace which has come to us and to her folk, under the wise rule of Norway's first Christian king, Hakon the Good.

Notes.

1. The Norns were the Fates of the old Norse mythology.
2. Thrandheim, now Trondhjem, the ancient capital of Norway.