

Vandrad the Viking

J. Storer Clouston

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Vandrad the Viking

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VANDRAD THE VIKING

or

The Feud and the Spell

CHAPTER I. THE WEST SEA SAILING.

Long after King Estein had joined his fathers on the little holm beyond HERNERSFIORD, and Helgi, Earl of Askland, had become but a warlike memory, the skalds of Sogn still sang this tale of Vandrad the Viking. It contained much wonderful magic, and some astonishingly hard strokes, as they told it; but reading between their lines, the magic bears a strong resemblance to many spells cast even at this day, and as for the sword strokes, there was need for them to be hard in Norway then. For that was the age of the making of many kingdoms, and the North was beginning to do its share.

One May morning, more than a thousand years ago, so the story runs, an old man came slowly along a woodland track that uncoiled itself from the mountain passes and snow-crowned inlands of Norway. Presently the trees grew thinner, and grass and wild flowers spread on either hand, and at last, just where the path dipped down to the water-side at HERNERSFIORD, the traveller stopped. For a while he remained there in the morning sunshine, watching the scene below, and now and then speaking out his thoughts absently in the rapt manner of a visionary.

Though his clothes were old and weather-stained, and bare of any ornament, his face and bearing were such as strike the mind at once and stay in the memory. He was tall and powerfully framed, and bore his years and the white volume of his beard in an altogether stately fashion; but his eyes were most indelible, pale blue and singularly cold in repose, very bright and keen and searching when his face was animated.

They saw much to stir them that morning. On the slope above HERNERSFIORD stood the royal hall of Hakonstad, the seat of the kings of Sogn; and all about the house, and right down to the water's edge, there was a great bustle and movement of men. From the upland valley at the fiord head, warriors trooped down to the ships that lay by the long stone pier. The morning sun glanced on their helmets and coats of mail, and in the still air the clash of preparation rang far up the pine-clad hillside. He could see some bringing weapons and provisions down to the shore, and others busily lading the ships. Women mingled in the crowd, and every here and there a gay cloak and gilded helm marked a leader of rank.

"Ay, the season has come for Vikings to put to sea again," he said. "Brave and gay are the warriors of Sogn, and lightly they leave. When a man is young, all roads are pleasant, and all lead home again. Many have I seen set sail these last sixty years, and their sailing led them—where?"

And then again, as the stir increased, and he could see the men beginning to troop on board the long ships,—
"This voyage shall be as the falling of snowflakes into the sea; but what man can escape his fate?"

Meanwhile a party of men had just left the woods, and were coming down the path to the fiord, ten or twelve in all, headed by an exceedingly broad, black-bearded man, clad in a leather coat closely covered all over with steel scales, and bearing on his shoulder a ponderous halberd.

The path was very narrow at that point, and he of the black beard called out gruffly,—
"Make way, old man! Give room to pass."

Roused abruptly from his reverie, the dreamer turned quietly, but made no movement to the side. The party by this time were so close that they had perforce to halt, with some clash of armour, and again their captain cried,—
"Are you deaf? Make way!"

Yet there was something daunting in the other's pale eye, and though the Viking moved the halberd uneasily on his shoulder, his own glance shifted. With the slightest intonation of contempt, the traveller asked,—
"Who bids me make way?"

The black-bearded man looked at him with an air of some astonishment, and then answered shortly,—
"They call me Ketill; but what is that to you?"

Without heeding the other's gruffness, the old man asked,—
"Does King Hakon sail from HERNERSFIORD to-day?"

"King Hakon has not sailed for many a day. His son leads this force."

"Ay, I had forgotten, we are both old men now. Then Estein sails to-day?"

"Ay, and I sail with him. My ship awaits me, so make way, old man," replied Ketill.

"Whither do ye sail?"

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"To the west seas. I have no time for talking more. Do you hear?"

"Go on then," replied the old man, stepping to one side; "something tells me that Estein will have need of all his men before this voyage is over."

Without stopping for further words, the black-bearded captain and his men pushed past and continued their way to the fiord, while the old man slowly followed them.

As he went down the hillside he talked again aloud to himself:—

"Ay, this then is the meaning of my warning dreams—danger in the south lands, danger on the seas. Little heed will Estein Hakonson pay to the words of an old man, yet I am fain to see the youth again, and what the gods reveal to me I must speak."

Down below, near the foot of the path that led from the pier up to the hall of Hakonstad, a cluster of chiefs stood talking. In the midst of them, Hakon, King of Sogn, one of the independent kinglings who reigned in the then chaotic Norway, watched the departure of his son.

He was a venerable figure, conspicuous by his long, wintry locks and embroidered cloak of blue, straight as a spear-shaft, but grown too old for warfare. His hand rested on the shoulder of Earl Sigvald of Askland, a bluff old warrior, long the king's most faithful counsellor and companion in arms. Before them stood his son Estein, a tall, auburn-haired, bright-eyed young man, gaily dressed, after the fashion of the times, in red kirtle and cloak, and armed as yet only with a gilded helmet, surmounted with a pair of hawk's wings, and a sword girt to his side. His face, though regular and handsome, would have been rather too grave and reserved but for the keenness of his eyes, and a very pleasant smile which at times lit up his features when he spoke.

After they had talked for a while, he glanced round him, and saw that the bustle was subsiding, and most of the men had gone aboard.

"All is ready now," he said.

"Ay," replied Thorkel Sigurdson, one of his ship captains, "they wait but for us."

"Farewell then, Estein!" cried the earl. "Thor speed you, and send you worthy foemen!"

"My son, I can ill spare you," said the king. "But it becomes a king's son to see the world, and prove his valour in distant lands. Warfare in the Baltic seas is but a pastime for common Vikings. England and Valland, [Footnote: France] the countries of the black man and the flat lands of the rivers, lie before you. There Estein Hakonson must feed the wolves."

"And yet, Estein," he added in a lower tone, as he embraced him, "I would that Yule were here again and you with it. I am growing old, and my dreams last night were sorrow-laden."

"Farewell, son of Hakon!" shouted a loud-mouthed chieftain. "I would that I too were sailing to the southern lands. Spare not, Estein; fire and sword in England, sword and fire in Valland!"

The group had broken up, and Estein was about to go on board when he heard himself hailed by name. He looked round, and saw the same old man who had accosted Ketill coming down the pier after him.

"Hail, Estein Hakonson!" he cried; "I have come far to see thee."

"Hail, old man!" replied Estein courteously; "what errand brings you here?"

"You know me not?" said the old man, looking at him keenly.

"Nay, I cannot call your face to mind."

"My name is Atli, and if my features are strange to thee, much stranger must my name be."

He took Estein's hand, looked closely into his eyes for a minute, and then said solemnly,—

"Estein Hakonson, this voyage will have an ending other than ye deem. Troubles I see before ye—fishes feeding on warriors, and winds that blow as they list, and not as ye."

"That is likely enough," replied Estein. "We are not sailing on a trading voyage, and in the west seas the winds often blow high. But what luck shall I have?"

"Strange luck, Estein, I see before thee. Thou shalt be warned and heed not. More shall be left undone than shall be done. There shall come a change in thee that I cannot fathom. Many that set out shall not return, but thine own fate is dim to me."

A young man of barely twenty, very gaily dressed and martial-looking, had come up to them while they were talking. He had a reckless, merry look on his handsome face, and bore himself as though he was aware of his personal attractions.

"And what is my fate, old man?" he asked, more as if he were in jest than in earnest. "Shall I feed the fishes,

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or make this strange change with Estein into a troll, [Footnote: A kind of goblin] or werewolf, or whatsoever form he is to take?"

"Thy fate is naught to me, Helgi Sigvaldson," replied the seer; "yet I think thou wilt never be far from Estein."

"That was easily answered," said Helgi with a laugh. "And I can read my fate yet further. When I part from my foster-brother Estein, then shall a man go to Valhalla. What say you to that?"

Atli's face darkened.

"Darest thou mock me?" he cried.

"Not so," interposed Estein. "'Bare is back without brother behind it,' and Helgi means that death only can part us. Farewell, Atli! If your prophecy comes true, and I return alive, you may choose what gift you please from among my spoils."

"Little spoil there will be, Estein!" answered the old man, as the foster-brothers turned from him down the pier.

The last man sprang on board, the oars dipped in the still water, and as the little fleet moved slowly down the fiord the crowd on shore gradually dispersed.

Out at sea, beyond the high headlands that guarded Hernalsfjord, a fresh breeze was blowing briskly from the north-east, and past the rocky islets of the coast white caps gleamed in the sunshine. As the ships drew clear of the fiord, and the boom of the outer sea breaking on the skerries rose louder and nearer, sails were spread and oars shipped. Slowly at first, and then more quickly as they caught the deep-sea wind, the vessels cut the open water. Past the islands they heeled to the breeze, and over a wake of foam the men watched the mountains of Norway sink slowly into the wilderness of waters.

On the decked poop of an open boat, sailing over an ocean unknown to him, towards countries of whose whereabouts he was only vaguely informed, Estein Hakonson stood lost in stirring fancies. He was the only surviving son of the King of Sogn. Three brothers had fallen in battle, one had perished at sea, and another, the eldest, had died beneath a burning roof-tree. His education had been conducted according to the only standard known in Scandinavia. At fourteen he had slain his first man in fair fight; at seventeen he was a Viking captain on the Baltic; and now, at two-and-twenty—old far beyond his years and hardened in varied experience—he was setting forth on the Viking path that led to the wonderful countries of the south.

The tide of Norse energy was not yet at the full, the fury and the terror were waxing fast, and the fever of unrest was ever spreading through the North. Men were always coming back with tales of monasteries filled with untold wealth, and rich provinces to be won by the sword. Skalds sang of the deeds done in the south, and shiploads of spoil confirmed their lays. Little wonder then that Estein should feel his heart beat high as he stood by the great tiller.

That night, long after the sun was set, he still sat on deck watching the stars. By-and-by his foster-brother Helgi came up to him, wrapped in a long sea cloak, and humming softly to himself.

"The night is fair, Estein. If Thor is kind, and this wind speeds us, we shall soon reach England."

"Ay, if the gods are with us," answered Estein. "I am trying to read the stars. Methinks they are unfavourable."

Helgi laughed. "What know you of the stars?" he said, "and what does Estein Hakonson want with white magic? Will it make his life one day longer? Will it make mine, if I too read the stars?"

"Not one day, Helgi, not one instant of time. We are in the hands of the gods. This serves but to while away a long night."

"Norsemen should not read the stars," said Helgi. "These things are for Finns and Lapps, and the poor peoples who fear us."

"I wished to know what Odin thought of Helgi Sigvaldson," said Estein with a smile.

Helgi laughed lightly as he answered,—

"I know what Odin thinks of you, Estein—a foolish man and fey."

Estein stepped forward a pace, and leaning over the side gazed for a while into the darkness. Helgi too was silent, but his blue eyes danced and his heart beat high as his thoughts flew ahead of the ship to the clash of arms and the shout of victory.

"There remains but me," said Estein at length. "Hakon has no other son."

"And you have five brothers to avenge; the sword should not rust long in your scabbard, Estein."

"Twice I have made the Danes pay a dear atonement for Eric. I cannot punish Thor because he suffered

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Harald to drown, but if ever in my life it be my fate to meet Thord the Tall, Snaekol Gunnarson, or Thorfin of Skapstead, there shall be but one man left to tell of our meeting."

"The burners of Olaf have long gone out of Norway, have they not?"

"I was but a child when my brother was burned like a fox in his hole at Laxafiord. The burners knew my father too well to bide at home and welcome him; and since then no man has told aught of them, save that Thord the Tall at one time raided much in England, and boasted widely of the burning. He perchance forgot that Hakon had other sons.

"But now, Helgi, we must sleep while we may; nights may come when we shall want it."

For six days and six nights they sailed with a favouring wind over an empty ocean. On the seventh day land was sighted on the starboard bow.

"Can that be England?" asked old Ulf, Estein's forecandle man, a hairy, hugely muscular Viking from the far northern fiords.

"The coast of Scotland more likely," said Helgi. "Shall we try our luck, Estein?"

"I should like to spill a little Scottish blood, and mayhap carry off a maid or two," said Thorolf Hauskoldson, a young giant from the upland dales.

"It may be but a waste of time," Estein replied. "We had best make for England while this wind holds."

"I like not the look of the sky," said Ulf, gazing round him with a frowning brow.

The wind had been dropping off for some time, and along the eastern horizon the settled sky was giving place to heavy clouds. For a short time Estein hesitated, but as the outlook grew more threatening and the wind beat in flaws and gusts, now from one quarter, now from another, the Vikings changed their course and ran under oars and sails for the shelter of the land. Little shelter it promised as they drew nearer: a dark, inhospitable line of precipices stretched north and south as far as the eye could reach, and even from a long distance they could see white flashes breaking at the cliff foot. Again they changed their course; and then, with a dull hum of approaching rain, a south-easterly storm broke over them, and there was nothing for it but to turn and run before the gale.

"I read the stars too well," said Estein grimly between his teeth, clinging to the straining tiller, and watching the rollers rising higher. "And the first part of Atli's prophecy has come true."

"Winds, war, and women make a Viking's luck," replied Helgi; "this is but the first part of the rede."

At night the gale increased, the fleet was scattered over the North Sea, and next morning from Estein's ship only two other black hulls could be seen running before the tempest. Another wild day passed, and it was not till the evening that the weather moderated. Little by little the great seas began to calm, and the drifts of stinging rain ceased. In their wake the stars struggled through the cloud wrack, and towards morning the wind sank altogether.

CHAPTER II. THE BAIRN-SLAYERS.

At earliest dawn eyes were strained to catch a glimpse of something that might tell them where they were. None of the men on Estein's ship had been in those seas more than two or three times at most, and the vaguest conjectures were rife when, as the light was slowly gaining, Ulf raised a cry of land ahead.

"Land to the right!" cried Helgi, a moment later.

"Land to the left!" exclaimed Estein; "and we are close on it, methinks."

When the morning fully broke they found themselves lying off a wide-mouthed sound, that bent and narrowed among low, lonely-looking islands. Only on the more distant land to the right were heather hills of any height to be seen, and those, so far as they could judge, were uninhabited. A heavy swell was running in from the open sea, and a canopy of grey clouds hung over all.

"I like not this country," said Ulf. "What think you is it?"

"The Hjaltland islands, I should think, from what men tell of them," Estein suggested.

"The Orkneys more likely," said Thorolf, who had sailed in those seas before.

Far astern one other vessel was making towards them.

"Which ship is that, Ulf?" asked Estein. "One of our fleet, think you?"

"Ay, it is Thorkel Sigurdson's," replied the shaggy fore-castle man, after a long, frowning look.

"By the hammer of Thor, she seems in haste," said Helgi. "They must have broached the ale over-night."

"Perchance Thorkel feels cold," suggested Thorolf with a laugh.

"They have taken the shields from the sides," Estein exclaimed as the ship drew nearer. "Can there be an enemy, think you?"

Again Ulf's hairy face gathered into a heavy frown. "No man can say I fear a foeman," he said, "but I should like ill to fight after two sleepless nights."

"Bah! Thorkel is drunk as usual, and thinks we are chapmen," [Footnote: Merchants.] said Helgi. "They are doubtless making ready to board us."

The ship drew so near that they could plainly see the men on board, and conspicuous among them the tall form of Thorkel appeared in the bow.

"He waves to us; there is something behind this," said Estein.

"Drunk," muttered Helgi. "I wager my gold-handled sword he is drunk. They have ale enough on board to float the ship."

"A sail!" Estein exclaimed, pointing to a promontory to seaward round which the low black hull and coloured sail of a warship were just appearing.

"Ay, and another!" said Ulf.

"Three-four-seven-eight!" Helgi cried.

"There come nine, and ten!" added Estein. "How many more?"

They watched the strange fleet in silence as one by one they turned and bore down upon them, ten ships in all, their oars rhythmically churning the sea, the strange monsters on the prows creeping gradually nearer.

"Orkney Vikings," muttered Ulf. "If I know one long ship from another, they are Orkney Vikings."

Meantime Thorkel's ship had drawn close alongside, and its captain hailed Estein.

"There is little time for talking now, son of Hakon!" he shouted. "What think you we should do?—run into the islands, or go to Odin where we are? These men, methinks, will show us little mercy."

"I seek mercy from no man," answered Estein. "We will bide where we are. We could not escape them if we would, and I would not if I could. Have you seen aught of the other ships?"

"We parted from Ketill yesterday, and I fear me he has gone to feed the fishes. I have seen nothing of Asgrim and the rest. I think with you, Estein, that the bottom here will make as soft a resting-place for us as elsewhere. Fill the beakers and serve the men! It is ill that a man should die thirsty."

The stout sea-rover turned with a gleam of grim humour in his eyes to the enjoyment of what he fully expected would be his last drink on earth, and on both ships men buckled on their armour and bestirred themselves for fight.

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Vikings in those days preyed on one another as freely as on men of alien blood. They came out to fight, and better sport could generally be had from a crew of seasoned warriors like themselves than from the softer peoples of the south. Particularly were the Orkney and Shetland islands the stations for the freest of free lances, men so hostile to all semblance of law and order that the son of a Norwegian king would seem in their eyes a most desirable quarry. Many a load of hard-won spoil changed hands on its way home; and the shores of Norway itself were so harried by these island Vikings that some time later King Harald Harfagri descended and made a clean sweep of them in the interests of what he probably considered society.

The two vessels floated close together, the oars were shipped, and there, in the grey prosaic early morning light, they heaved gently on the North Sea swell, and awaited the approach of the ten. A few sea-birds circled and screamed above them; a faint pillar of smoke rose from some homestead on a distant shore; elsewhere there was no sign of life save in the ships to seaward.

Thorkel, leaning over the side of his vessel, told a tale of buffetings by night and day such as Estein and his crew had undergone. That morning he said they had descried Estein's ship just as the day broke, and almost immediately afterwards ten long ships were spied lying at anchor in an island bay. For a time they hoped to slip by them unseen. The fates, however, were against them. They were observed, and the strange Vikings awoke and gave chase like a swarm of bees incautiously aroused.

Apparently the strangers considered themselves hardly yet prepared for battle; for they slackened speed as they advanced, and those on Estein's ships could see that a hasty bustle of preparation was going on.

"What think you—friends or foes?" asked Helgi.

"To the Orkney Vikings all men are foes," replied Estein.

"Ay," said Thorkel with a laugh, "particularly when they are but two to ten."

By this time the strangers were within hailing distance, and in the leading ship a man in a red cloak came from the poop and stood before the others in the bow. In a loud tone he bade his men cease rowing, and then, clapping his hand to his mouth, asked in a voice that had a ring of scornful command what name the captain bore.

"Estein, the son of Hakon, King of Sogn; and who are you who ask my name?" came the reply across the water.

"Liot, the son of Skuli," answered the man in the red cloak. "With me sails Osmund Hooknose, the son of Hallward. We have here ten warships, as you see. Yield to us, Estein Hakonson, or we will take by force what you will not give us."

The man threw his left hand on his hip, drew himself up, and said something to his crew, accompanying the words by gestures with a spear. They answered with a loud shout, and then struck up a wild and monotonous chorus, the words of which were a refrain descriptive of the usual fate of those who ventured to stand in Liot Skulison's way. At the same time their oars churned the water, and their vessel was brought into line with the others.

"It is easily seen that our friend Liot is a valiant man," said Helgi with a short laugh. "He and his ill-looking crew make a mighty noise. Has any man heard of Liot Skulison or Osmund Hooknose before?"

"Ay," answered Ulf. "They call them the bairn-slayers, because they show no mercy even to children."

"They will meet with other than bairns to-day," said Helgi.

Estein and Thorkel had been employed in binding the two vessels together with grapnels. Then Estein turned to his men and said,—

"We are of one mind, are we not? We fight while we may, and then let Odin do with us what he wills."

Without waiting for the shout of approval that followed his words, he sprang to the bow, and raising his voice, cried,—

"We are ready for you, Liot and Osmund. When you get on board you can take what you find here."

From another ship a man shouted,—

"Then you will fight, little Estein? Remember that we are called the bairn-slayers."

Instantly Thorkel took up the challenge. Three beakers of ale had made him in his happiest and most warlike mood, and his eyes gleamed almost merrily as he answered,—

"I know you, Osmund the ugly, by that nose whereon men say you hang the bairns you catch. Little need have you to do aught save look at them. Here is a gift for you," and with that he hurled a spear with so true an aim that, if Osmund had not stooped like a flash, his share in the fight would have come to an end there and then. As it was,

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the missile struck another man between the shoulders and laid him on the deck.

"Forward! forward!" cried Liot. "Forward, Vikings! forward, the men of Liot and Osmund!"

The oars struck the water, the wild chorus swelled into a terrible and tuneless roar, and the ten ships bore down on the two. With a crash the bows met, and metal rang on metal with the noise of a hundred smithies; the unequal contest had begun.

Overpowering as such odds could hardly fail to prove in the long run, they told more slowly in a sea-fight. Till the men who manned the bulwarks were thinned, the sides were practically equal, and at first many of the Orkney Vikings were perforce mere spectators.

Gradually, as the men in front were thinned, they poured in from the other ships, fresh men always being pitted against tired, and keen swords meeting hacked.

Liot laid his own ship alongside Estein's, Osmund attacked Thorkel's, and the other vessels forced their bows forward wherever they saw an opening. The Norwegians manned their bulwarks shield to shield, and fought with the courage of despair. Twice Liot, backed by his boldest men, tried by a headlong rush to force himself on board, and twice he was beaten back. A third time he charged, and selecting a place where the defenders seemed thinnest, struck down a couple of men with two swinging blows of his axe, and sprang on to the deck. Three or four men had already followed him, a cry of victory rose from the Orkney Vikings, and for a moment the fate of the battle seemed decided, when a huge stone hurtled through the air, and falling on Liot's shield forced it down on his helmet and him to his knees. It was the work of Ulf, captain of the forecastle; and roaring like a bull, the old Viking followed his stone. Estein sprang from the poop and clove one man to the shoulders. Another fell to Ulf's sword. The half-stunned Liot was seized by one of his followers, and bundled back on board his ship; and for the time the day was saved.

"After them! after them, Ulf!" shouted Estein, and twenty bold Norwegians followed their leader in the wake of Liot's retreating boarding party. Their foes gave way right and left, the gangways round the sides were cleared, and, despite the threats of Liot, his men began to spring from forecastle and quarter-deck into the ships behind.

"Forward, king's men! forward, men of Estein!" roared Ulf.

"Wait for me, Liot!" cried Estein, charging the poop with his red shield before him. "A bairn is after thee!" Helgi, who had kept at his shoulder throughout, seized his arm.

"They are giving way on Thorkel's ship. Osmund is on board. If we return not, the ship is cleared."

With a gesture of despair Estein turned.

"Back, men, back! Thorkel needs all his friends, I fear," he cried; and to Helgi he said, "The day is lost. We can but sell our lives dearly now."

They came back too late. Already Thorkel's men were pouring on board Estein's ship, with Osmund of the Hooknose at their heels. Thorkel himself lay stark across the bulwarks, his face to his foes, and a great spear-head standing out of his back.

It was now but a question of time. With a single ship, surrounded on all sides, and weary with storm and battle, there could be only one fate for Estein's diminished band. Nevertheless, they stood their ground as stoutly and cheerfully as if the fray were just beginning. Finding that all efforts to board were useless, the Orkney Vikings confined themselves for some time to keeping up an incessant fire of darts and stones. One by one the defenders dropped at their posts, and at last, when widening gaps appeared in the line of shields, Liot and Osmund boarded together, each from his own side.

"Back to the poop, Helgi!" Estein cried. "To the poop, men! we cannot hold the gangways. One tired man cannot fight with five fresh."

Last of all his men, he stepped from the gangway that ran round the low and open waist of the ship, up to the decked poop, his red shield stuck with darts like a pincushion with pins.

In the forecastle, old Ulf still held his own, backed by some half-dozen stout survivors out of all those who had gone into battle with him in the morning.

"My hour is come at last, Thorolf," he said to the upland giant, who seemed to be disengaging something from his coat of ring-mail. "I shall have tales of a merry fight to tell to Odin tonight. But before I fall I shall slay me one of those two Vikings. Wilt thou follow me, Thorolf, to the gangways, and then to Valhalla?"

With a violent wrench the giant drew a spearhead from his side, and his blood spurted over Ulf, as he swayed on his feet.

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"I go before," he said, and fell on the deck with a clatter of steel.

"There died a brave man! Now, comrades, after him to Odin!"

And with that the forecastle captain sprang down on the gangway, and knocking men off into the waist in his impetuous rush, swung his battle-axe round his head and aimed a terrific blow at Osmund Hooknose. Quick as lightning Osmund raised his shield and thrust at his foe with his sword. The point of the blade passed in at his breast and out between his shoulders, and at the same instant the battle-axe fell. The edge of the shield was cut through like paper, and the blade coming fair on the nape of the Hooknose's neck, the bodies of the two champions rolled together off the gangway.

Round the poop the last struggle raged. Spent and wounded as they were, Estein's little band showed a bold front to their foes, and around the red shield of their leader their lives were dearly sold.

Then for a few minutes came a lull in the fight, and men could breathe for a space.

"The next onset will be the last," said Estein grimly.

"Their ships are sheering off!" exclaimed one.

"'Tis we who are leaving them," said another.

"Look ahead!" cried Helgi; "we shall cheat them yet."

The men looked round them with astonished faces, for a strange thing had happened. They had drifted into one of the dreaded Orkney tideways, and all the time the fight was raging they were being borne at increasing speed past islands, holms, and skerries. The scene had completely changed; they were in a narrower sound, swinging like sea-fowl, helpless on the tide. Heather hills were close at hand, and right ahead was a great frothing and bubbling, out of which rose the black heads of sunken rocks.

The other vessels had been twisted off by the whirling eddies, and were now rapidly scattering, each striving to clear the reef. Only the four vessels bound together—Estein's, Thorkel's, Liot's, Osmund's—swept in an unresisting cluster towards the rocks.

Liot too saw the danger, and raised his voice in a great shout:—

"Let not man of mine touch an oar till Estein Hakonson lie dead on yonder deck. We have yet time to slay them. Forward, Liot's men!"

There was a wild and furious rush of men towards the poop. Down went man after man of the battle-worn defenders. Liot and Estein met sword to sword and face to face. The red shield was ripped from top to bottom by a sweep of the bairn-slayer's blade, and at the same moment Estein's descending sword was met by a Viking's battle-axe, and snapped at the hilt.

"Now, Estein, I have thee!" shouted his foe; but ere the words were well out of his mouth, Estein had hurled himself at his waist, dagger in hand, and brought him headlong to the deck. As they fell, the ships struck with a mighty crash that threw friend and foe alike on the bloody planks. Two vessels stuck fast; the other two broke loose, and plunging over the first line of reefs, settled down by the bows.

There was a rush to the bulwarks, a splashing of bodies in the water, and then the doomed and deserted ships, the attacker and the attacked, sank in the turmoil of the tide. Estein himself had been pitched clear of his foe into the waist, where he had fallen head first and half-stunned.

He felt a friendly hand dragging him to the side, and heard Helgi's voice saying,—

"Art thou able to swim for it?"

Then he had a confused recollection of being swept along by an irresistible current, clinging the while to what he afterwards found to be a friendly plank, and after that came oblivion.

CHAPTER III. THE HOLY ISLE.

With the first glimmer of consciousness, Estein became aware of an aching head and a bruised body. Next he felt that he was very wet and cold; and then he discovered that he was not alone. His head rested on something soft, and two hands chafed his temples.

"Helgi," he said.

A voice that was not Helgi's replied, "Thanks be to the saints! he is alive."

Estein started up, and his gaze met a pair of dark blue eyes. They and the hands belonged to a fair young girl, a maid of some seventeen summers, on whose knees his aching head had just been resting.

They were sitting on a shelving rock that jutted into the tideway, and at his feet his kindly plank bumped gently in an eddy of the current.

He looked at her so silently and intently that the blue eyes drooped and a faint blush rose to the maiden's cheeks.

"Are you wounded?" she asked. She spoke in the Norse tongue, but with a pretty, foreign accent, and she looked so fair and so kind that thoughts of sirens and mermaids passed through the Viking's mind.

"Wounded? Well, methinks I ought to be," he answered; "and yet I feel rather bruised than pierced. If I can stand—" and as he spoke he rose to his feet, and slipping on the seaweed, slid quietly into the water.

The girl screamed; and then, as he scrambled out none the worse and only a little the wetter, an irresistible inclination to laugh overcame her. Forgetful of his head, he laughed with her.

"Forgive me," she said; "I could not help laughing, though, to be sure, you seem in no laughing plight. I thought at first that you were drowned."

"'Tis your doing, I think, that I am not. Did you find me in the water?"

"Half in and half out; and it took much pulling to get you wholly out."

Estein impulsively drew a massive gold ring off his finger, and in the gift-giving spirit of the times handed it to his preserver.

"I know not your name, fair maiden," he said, "but this I know, that you have saved my life. Will you accept this Viking's gift from me? It is all that the sea has left me."

"Nay, keep such gifts for those who deserve them. It would have been an unchristian act to let you drown."

"You use a word that is strange to me; but I would that you might take this ring."

"No, no!" she cried decidedly; "it will be time enough to talk of gifts when I have earned them. Not," she added, a little proudly, "that it is my wish to earn gifts. But you are wet and wounded; come where I can give you shelter, poor though it be."

"Any shelter will seem good to me. Yet, ere I go, I would fain learn something of my comrades' fate."

He scanned the sound narrowly, and in all its long stretch there was not a sign of friend or foe. About a mile back the fatal reef, bared by the ebbing tide, showed its line of black heads high out of the water, but of ships there was no vestige to be seen. It was long past mid-day by the sun, and he knew that he must have been unconscious for some hours. In that time, such of the Vikings as had escaped the rocks had evidently sailed away, leaving only the dead in the sound.

"They are gone," he said, turning away, "friends and foes—gone, or drowned, as I should have been, fair maid, but for you."

They scrambled together up the rocks, and then struck a winding sheep-path that led them over the shoulder of a heath-clad hill.

At first they walked in silence, the girl in front, going at a great speed up the narrow track; and Estein watched the wind blow her fair hair about her neck in a waving tangle, and he saw that she was tall and slender. By-and-by, when they had crossed the hill and reached a less broken tract of ground, he came up to her side.

"How did you come to be down where you found me?" he asked.

"I was on the hill," she answered, "when I saw ships in the sound rowing hard to escape the current, and then I saw that some had been wrecked. Wreckage was floating by, and I espied, for my eyes are good, a man clinging to a plank; and presently he drifted upon a rock, and I thought that perhaps I might save a life. So I went down to

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the shore—and you yourself know the rest."

"I know, indeed, that I have to thank you for my life, such as it is. And I know further that every girl would not have been so kind."

She smiled, and her smile was one of those that illuminate a face.

"Thank rather the tide, which so kindly brought you ashore, for I had done little if you had been in the middle of the sound. But you have not yet told me how you came to be wrecked."

Estein told her of the storm at sea and the fight with the Vikings; how they had fallen man by man, and how he too would have been numbered amongst the dead but for the tideway and the rocks.

As she listened, her eyes betrayed her interest in the tale, and when he had finished, she said,—

"I have heard of Liot and Osmund. They are the most pitiless of all the robbers in these seas. Give thanks that you escaped them."

He asked her name, and she told him it was Osla, daughter of a Norse leader who had fought in the Irish seas, and had finally settled in Ireland. There his daughter was born and passed her early girlhood; and it was a trace of the Irish accent that Estein had noticed in her speech. In one fatal battle her two brothers fell, her father was forced to fly from the land, and Osla had left her Irish home with him and come to reside in Orkney.

"He is a holy Christian man," she said. "Once he was a famous Viking, and his name was well known in the west seas. Now, he would even have his name forgotten, and he is only known as Andreas, which was the name of one of the blessed apostles; and here we two live in a little lonely island, keeping aloof from all men, and striving to live as did the early fathers."

"That must be a quiet life for you," said Estein.

"I sometimes think so myself," she answered with a smile. "And what do men call you?"

For an instant Estein hesitated. The thought passed through his mind, "She must not know me as son to the King of Sogn till I have done some deed more worthy of a prince of Yngve's line than lose a battle with two Orkney Vikings." Then he said, "I am called Vandrad; [Footnote: The Unlucky.] from my youth up I have been a sea-rover, and I fear I may prove ill suited to your father's company."

"My father has met sea-rovers before," she said, with a smile in her eye.

By this time they had nearly crossed the island, and Estein saw before them another long sound. On the far side of this lay a large and hilly island that stretched to his left hand as far as his eye could reach, and on the right broke down at the end of the strait into a precipitous headland, beyond which sparkled the open sea. In the middle of the sound a small green islet basked like a sea monster in the evening sunshine.

As they stood on the top of the descent that ran steeply to the sea, he cast his eyes around for any signs of life on sea or on shore. Below him, and much to the left, a cluster of small houses round a larger drinking-hall marked the residence of a chieftain of position; on the island across the water lay a few scattered farms; and on the little islet his eye could just discern a faint wreath of smoke. The seas were deserted, and the atmosphere seemed charged with an air of calm loneliness.

"That is my home," said Osla, pointing to the little green island. "The early fathers called it the Holy Isle. Our house is an anchorite's cell, and our lands, as you see, are of the smallest. Are you content to come to such a place?"

Estein smiled. "If you dwell there, I am content," he said.

Osla tossed her head with what quite failed to be an air of impatience.

"Such things are easy to say now," she said. "If you say them again after you have lived on a hermit's fare for one whole day, I may begin to believe you."

They descended the hill, and in a little creek on the shore came upon a skiff.

"This is our long ship," said Osla. "If you wish to show your gratitude, you may assist me to launch her."

"Now," she said, when Estein had run the boat into the water, "you can rest while I row you across."

"It has never been my custom to let a girl row me," he replied, taking the oars.

"But your wounds?"

"If I have any I have forgotten them."

"Well, I will let you row, for the tide is at the turn, and you will not need to watch the currents. There is a great roost here when the tide is running."

Estein laughed. "I see that I am with a skilful helmsman," he said.

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"And I, that I am with an over-confident crew," she answered.

Only a distant corncrake broke the silence of the lonely channel, its note sounding more faintly as they left the land behind. The sun set slowly between the headlands to seaward, and by the time they reached the shore of the islet the stillness was absolute, and the northern air was growing chill. Osla led the Viking up a slope of short sea-turf, and presently crossing the crest of the land, they came upon a settlement so strange and primitive that it could scarcely, he thought, have been designed by mortal men.

Facing the land-locked end of the sound, and looking upon a little bay, a cluster of monastic cells marked the northern limits of the Christian church. From this outpost it had for the time receded, and all save two of the rude stone dwellings looked deserted and forlorn. A thin thread of smoke rose straight heavenward in the still air, and before the entrance of the cell whence it issued stood an old and venerable man. Despite a slight stoop, he was still much beyond the common height of men. His brows were shaggy, and his grey beard reached well down over his breast; a long and voluminous cloak, much discoloured by the weather, was bound round his waist by a rope, and in his hand he carried a great staff.

As Estein approached, his brows bent in an expression of displeased surprise, but he waited in silence till his daughter spoke.

"I have brought a shipwrecked seafarer, father," she said. "He is wounded, I fear, and certainly he is both wet and hungry. I have told him we would give him shelter and food, and such tending as his wounds may require."

"Whence came he?" asked the old man.

"From the sound beyond the island; at least, he was in the sound when I first saw him."

"And I have to thank your daughter that I am not there now," Estein added.

"What is your name?"

"I am known as Vandrad, the son of a noble landowner in Norway."

The old man looked for a moment as though he would have questioned him further on his family. Instead, he asked,—

"And why came you to these islands?"

"For that, the wind and not I is answerable. Orkney was the last place I had thought of visiting."

"You were wrecked?"

"Wrecked, and wellnigh drowned."

In a more courteous tone the old man said, "While you are here you are welcome to such cheer as we can give you. This cell is all my dwelling, but since you have come to this island, enter and rest you in peace."

Stooping low in the doorway, Estein entered the abode of Andreas the hermit. Lit only by a small window and the gleam of a driftwood fire, the rude apartment was dusky and dim; yet there seemed nothing there that should make the sea-king pause at the threshold. Was it but a smoke wreath that he saw, and did the wind rise with a sudden gust out of the stillness of the evening? It seemed to him a face that appeared and then vanished, and a far-off voice that whispered a warning in his ear.

"Be not dismayed at our poverty; there is no worse foeman within," said Osla, with a touch of raillery, as he stood for a moment irresolute.

Estein made no answer, but stepped quickly into the room. Had he indeed heard a voice from beyond the grave, or was it but the fancy of a wounded head? The impression lingered so vividly that he stood in a reverie, and the words of his hosts fell unheeded on his ears. He knew the face, he had heard the voice of old, but in the kaleidoscope of memory he could see no name to fit them, no incident wherewith they might be linked.

He was aroused by the voice of Osla.

"Let us give him food and drink quickly, father. He is faint, and hears us not."

The tumultuous stir of battle was forgotten as they brought him supper and gently bound his wounds. A kettle sang a drowsy song and seemed to lay a languid spell upon him, and, as in a dream, he heard the hermit offer up an evening prayer. The petitions, eloquent and brief in his northern tongue, rose above the throbbing of the roost outside, and died away into a prayerful silence; and then, in the pleasant nicker of the firelight, they parted till the morrow.

Estein and the hermit stepped out into the cool night.

"They who visit the Holy Isle must rest content with hard pillows," said Andreas. "Here in this cell you will find a blanket and a couch of stone. May Christ be with you through the night;" and as he spoke he turned into his

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own bare apartment.

Estein looked upward at the stars shining as calmly on him here as on the sea-king who lately paced his long ship's deck; he listened for a moment to the roost rising higher and moaning more uneasily; and then above both he saw a pair of dark blue eyes, and heard a voice with just a touch of raillery in it. As he bent his head and entered his cell, he smiled to himself at the pleasantness of the vision.

CHAPTER IV. THE ISLAND SPELL.

The Holy Isle was bathed in morning sunshine, shadows of light clouds chased each other over the hills across the sound, and out beyond the headlands the blue sea glimmered restfully.

On a bank of turf sloping to the rocks Estein sat with Osla, drinking in the freshness of the air. She had milked their solitary cow, baked cakes enough for the day's fare, and now, her simple housekeeping over, she was free to entertain her guest.

"My father, I fear, is in a black mood," she said. "His moods come and go, I know not why or when. To-day and perhaps to-morrow, and it may be for four days or more, he will sit in his cell or on the grass before the door, speaking never a word, and hardly answering when I talk to him. Pay no heed to him; he means no inhospitality."

"I fear he likes me not," said Estein. "He came here to escape men, you say, and now he has to entertain a stranger and a Viking."

"It is not that," she said. "The black moods come when we are alone; they come sometimes with the rising storm, sometimes when the sun shines brightest. I cannot tell when the gloom will fall, nor when he will be himself again. When his mind is well, he will talk to me for hours, and instruct me in many things."

"Has he instructed you in this religion he professes? Know you what gods he worships?"

Osla opened her eyes in perplexed surprise; she hardly felt herself equal to the task of converting this pagan, and yet it were a pity not to try. So she told him, with a woman's enthusiastic inaccuracy, of this new creed of love, then being so strikingly illustrated in troubled, warlike Christian Europe.

"And what of the gods I and my ancestors have worshipped for so long? What place have they in the Valhalla of the white Christ?"

"There are no other gods."

"No Odin, no Thor, no Freya of the fair seasons, no Valhalla for the souls of the brave? Nay, Osla, leave me my gods, and I will leave you yours. Mine is the religion of my kinsmen, of my father, of my ancestors. And," he continued, "would you say that Christian men are better than worshippers of Odin? Are they braver, are their swords keener, are they more faithful to their friends?"

"We want not keen swords. Warfare is your only thought. You live but to pillage and to fight. Have you known what it is to lose home and brothers all in one battle? Have you fled from a smoking roof-tree? Have you had mercy refused you? Have you had wife or child borne away to slavery? That is your creed—tell me, is it not?"

"I have thought of these things, Osla," said Estein gravely. "I have thought of them at night when the stars shone and the wind sighed in the trees. When I look upon my home and see the reapers in the fields, and hear the maidens singing at their work, I would sometimes be willing to turn hermit like your father, and sit in the sun for ever."

"But," he went on, and his voice rose to a clear, stirring note, "I could not rest long so. The sea calls us Northmen, and we cannot bide at home. Unrest seizes us like a giant and hurls us forth. We must be men; we must seek adventure on sea or on shore; there are foemen to be met, and we long to meet them; and if we bear us bravely, never striking sail though the wind blow high, and never flinching from the greatest odds, we know that the gods will smile, and, if they will, we die happy. We are not all bairn-slayers. I have been taught to spare where there was nothing worthy of my steel, and no maid or mother has yet suffered wrong at my hands. Yet must I sail the seas, Osla, and fight where I find a foe; for I feel that the gods bid me, and a man cannot struggle with his fate."

While he spoke Osla's gaze was fixed on the turning tide, but her eyes, had he seen them, were lit by the fire of his words. She sprang to her feet as he finished, and said,—

"I, too, have the Norse blood in me; the sea calls me as it calls you; and if I were a man, I fear I should make a bad hermit. Yet"—and she held up a warning finger to stay the impetuous words on Estein's tongue—"yet I know I should be wrong. What is this feeling but the hunger of wolves, and what are your gods but names for it? Wolves, too, go out to slay; and if they had speech, doubtless they would say that Thor called them."

"Is a Viking not different from a wolf, then, in your eyes?"

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"By too little," she answered, "if they hold the same creed."

"A wolf, then, I am," he replied; "and I can but try to keep my lips drawn over my fangs and bit on my hind legs, and practise manliness as best I may."

"A very hungry manliness," she retorted. But despite herself she smiled, and then lightly turned the talk to other things.

From day to day the quiet island life went on with few incidents and pleasant monotony. With only one family was there any intercourse, and that almost entirely on Osla's part. On the shore of the great island to the west, which men called Hrossey, dwelt a large farmer, named Margad, and from his household such supplies as they needed were obtained. He was an honest, peaceable man, as the times went, with a kindly wife, Gudrun by name, and they both took a friendly interest in the hermit's daughter. Estein would fain have lived in her society all day, listening to her talk and watching the wind play with her hair, and every day he noticed, with a sense of growing disappointment, that he saw her more seldom. Sometimes they would have long talks, and then, abruptly as it seemed to him, she would have to leave him, and he would spend his time in fishing from a boat, or would cross with her to Hrossey, and while she went to see Dame Gudrun he pursued the roe—deer and moor—fowl.

With bow and arrow, and by dint of long and arduous stalks, he brought home scanty but well—earned spoil, and then, either by himself, or more often with Osla in the stern, he would cross the sound as the day faded, to a welcome supper and an evening spent in the firelit cell, or to a peaceful night beside the swirl of the tideway under a sky so pale and clear that only the brightest stars were ever seen.

He knew that he was in love, hopelessly in love. Why else should he stay in the Holy Isle after his wounds were healed, and when nothing bade him remain? Far away and faint sounded the echoes of war and the shouts of revelry. Like memories of another life, thoughts of his father, of Helgi, of friends and kinsmen, came to him, pricked him for a moment, and faded into a pair of dark—blue eyes and a tall and slender figure. He still talked to Osla of voyages and battles, and caught her sometimes taking more interest than she would own in some old tale of derring—do, or a story of his own adventures. Yet the actual memories of these things grew fainter, and he talked like an old man telling of his youth.

"I am under a spell," he would say to himself, and stride more quickly over the heather, and then catch himself smiling at the thought of some word or look of Osla's.

The hermit's black mood passed away, and was followed by an attitude of grave distance towards his guest. He spoke little, but always courteously, and seemed to treat him at first merely as an addition to the live stock of the island.

One night Estein, after the manner of the skalds, sang a poem of his own as they sat round the fire. He called it the "King's War Song."

"On high the raven banner Invites the hungry kites,
Red glares the sun at noon—tide,
Wild gleam the Northern lights;
The war—horn brays its summons,
And from each rock—bound fiord
Come the sea—kings of Norway,
To follow Norway's lord.

"The cloven arrow speeding, Fraught with war's alarms, Calls the ravens to their feast, The Udallers to arms. See that your helms be burnished, See that your blades be ground, When he of Yngve's kindred Sends the war token round!"

"Skoal, [Footnote: The Norse drinking salutation.] Vandrad! skoal!" cried the hermit.

His hearers looked at him in amazement. His eyes flashed, his lips twitched, the whole man was transformed for the moment into the Viking of the western seas.

"Once I was a skald myself," he said. "You have quickened what I thought was dead." And he rose and walked out into the night.

For a minute they were too surprised to speak. Then Osla said softly,—

"Your magic is too strong, Vandrad." She threw him one glance that lived long in his memory, and quickly followed her father.

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For more than an hour afterwards he could dimly see them pacing the shore in silence, her arm within the hermit's.

Next day the old man was more silent and reserved than before, but every now and then Estein saw that his eyes followed him, and the few words he spoke were couched in a kindlier manner.

"Sing to him again," whispered Osla in the evening, and night after night the young skald sang and the hermit and his daughter listened. Sometimes when he was finished the old Viking would talk on various themes. Brief glimpses of his earlier days, snatches of religious converse, his travels, and the strange peoples he had seen, he would touch upon before the evening prayer.

And so the time passed away, till Estein had spent six weeks in the Holy Isle. All the while he had made no open love to Osla. She seemed merely friendly, and he was distracted between a wild desire to break down the barriers between them and a strange and numbing feeling of warning that held him back, he knew not why. So strong was it at times that he fancied two spells cast upon him, one by the island maiden, the other by some unknown spirit.

One morning he found her wandering by the cliffs that formed the seaward barrier of the isle.

"Let us sit here, Osla," he said. "I have a new song to sing you."

"I must bake my cakes," she answered. "Can you not sing it to us to-night?"

"It concerns only you. Sit here but for a moment; it is not long, and you can escape from me when I have done."

"Very well," she said, with a smile and an air of resignation. "I will listen, but do not keep me long."

"If it will tire you, I can wait."

"You can try me."

"I must leave the Holy Isle soon, Osla; I have been too long away from my kinsfolk and my country. It is hard to part, but it must come some day, and these verses are my parting song."

She was silent, and seemed intently plucking sea pinks.

"I cannot tell you why," he went on, "but to-day I feel that my hour has come to rove again. I would that I might live here for ever, but I know it is not fated so."

Then he sang his farewell song:—

"Canst thou spare a sigh, fair Osla?

It is fated I must go.

Wilt thou think of Vandrad ever

When the sea winds hoarsely blow,

Or will the memory of my love With absence fainter grow?

"Canst thou spare a tear, sweet Osla,

When I sail from this fair land?

Wilt thou dream of Vandrad sometimes

When the waves boom on the strand?

Can visions of a pleasant hour

The march of time withstand?

"Osla, when I bear me bravely, 'Midst the lightning of the sword, And the armies meet like torrents When the mountain snows have thawed The thought of thine approving smile Shall be my sole reward.

"Fare thee well, sweet blue-eyed Osla! The sea-king must not stay, E'en for tresses rich as summer And for smile as bright as May; But one hope I cannot part from—We may meet again some day!"

"Then are you going?" she said, more softly than he had ever heard her speak before.

"Do you wish me to stay?"

"Not if you wish to rove the seas again, and fight and plunder, as a brave man should," she cried with a flash of raillery. "If it is your fate to go, why should I stand in the way? Am I anything to you?"

She gave him no time to answer, but rose and ran lightly away.

CHAPTER V. ANDREAS THE HERMIT.

The same day Estein rowed across alone to Hrossey, and started over the hills with his bow and arrows. He walked for some miles through moorland ground, and paused at length on the top of a range of hills, whence he had a wide view over the inland country. There he sat down and mused for long. Below him he saw a valley opening out into a sweep of low-lying land, watered by many lochs, and bounded by heather hills. All round, in glimpses between the highest hill-tops, and in wide, unbroken stretches over the lower ranges, the open sea girdled the island. Gradually the stillness of the place and the freshness of the air told upon him, and at length he fell asleep. He began to dream, at first of confused events and hurrying faces, and then more distinctly and vividly. He had landed, he thought, on the Holy Isle. It was dark, but he seemed to see plainly a figure, wrapped in a long cloak, walking before him towards the cells. It was neither Andreas nor his daughter, and with some wonder he quickened his steps and overtook it just as it was about to enter the hermit's cell. Then all at once it seemed to flash upon him that this was no mortal visitor, and with a sudden thrill of fear he stopped. At that instant the figure turned a shrouded face on him, and said sternly, and so clearly that the words were ringing in his ears when he woke,—

"What doest THOU here, Estein Hakonson?"

He came to himself with a start, the sweat standing on his forehead. It was the second time he had heard the voice. Once before it had warned him when he first entered the hermit's cell, but now as then he could find neither name nor circumstance to fit it.

All at once the prophecy of Atli came into his mind—"You will be warned, but you will heed not," and in spite of himself a feeling of gloom settled over his mind.

A herd of deer browsed unheeded on a distant slope, the hours passed, and the sun sank low in the west, while he sat there alone.

At last he rose and retraced his steps back to the shore. The tide was running strongly, he had a long and stiff pull to win his way across, and the summer dusk that never reaches darkness in the north was gathering when he landed.

He looked round as though he expected to see a cloaked figure start up out of the gloaming, but the island was deserted and still. Before the cell he paused for an instant. "You will not heed the warning," he repeated. "Yet what is fated must be," and then he entered.

The hermit was alone. Farmer Margad had come for Osla, for his wife was unwell, and the credulous people thought the daughter of the wizard, as they deemed Father Andreas, might have some healing influence. Estein sat down and took his supper; and all the time he was eating, Andreas paced the floor saying nothing aloud, but muttering continually under his breath. Legends of shape-changing and black magic came into the young Viking's mind. As he watched the old man pass to and fro in the firelight, and the huge, distorted shadow sweep across and across the cell, he fancied once or twice that he could see the beginnings of some horrid transformation.

All of a sudden the hermit stopped and looked at him earnestly.

"Sing to me a song of battle!" he cried; and Estein saw that a change had indeed taken place. A fit of gloom had given way to a period of strange excitement, and the spirit of the sea-rover was returned.

Estein composed his mind, and sang the song of the Battle of Dunheath, beginning:—

"Many the chiefs who drank the mead

As the sun rose over the plain,

But small the band who bound their wounds

When the heath was dark again."

As the last words died away the hermit began to talk excitedly and volubly, and in a strain new to his guest.

"I once sang such songs," he said. "I sailed the seas in my long ship, and men feared my name—feared me, Andreas, the man of God. I was a heathen then, as thou art; I worshipped the gods of the North, and the hammer of Thor was my symbol on the ocean. I spared none who stood in my way. These hands have dripped with the blood of my foes, and many a widow have I left desolate."

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He paused, and a tongue of flame shot suddenly from the fire and cast a bright light in the cell.

"Fire!" cried the old man—"fire like that have I brought on my foes! I have burned them like rats; I have left their homesteads smouldering! Listen, Vandrad, and I shall tell thee of a deed that made my name known throughout all the Northland. Now," he added, "I am a Christian man, and my soul is safe with Christ.

"Once I received an injury I swore I should avenge. Hakon, King of Sogn, a proud man and a stern, banished my brother Kolskegg for manslaughter. The deed was but an act of justice on one who had beguiled our kinswoman; but the dead man had many friends, and the king hearkened neither to Kolskegg's offers of atonement nor to my petitions—to mine, who had never asked aught of mortal man before! My brother was a dear friend of the king, foster-father even to his eldest son Olaf, and he weakly bowed his head and left the land. When I heard that he had gone, I pressed my sword-hilt so tightly in my rage that the blood dripped from my nails, and I cursed him aloud for idly suffering such insult to our house to pass without revenge. Our race is as old and proud as the kings of Sogn themselves, and I vowed that Hakon should rue that day. I was a heathen then, Vandrad."

He said these last words with a gleam in his eyes and a tightening of his lips, as if he gloated over the memory of his bygone faith. With the same grim reminiscent pleasure, he went on: "I and two others sent the cloven arrow through the dales, and gathered armed men enough to fill three ships. Ay, the sailing of Thord the Tall, Snaekol Gunnarson, and Thorfin of Skapstead is not forgotten yet in Norway. We went to Laxafjord, for there dwelt Olaf, son of Hakon. You have heard the tale?" he cried suddenly, "you know of the burning?"

"Go on," said Estein, in a hard, dry voice; "I am listening," and all the while his right hand sought his side.

"It was a deed," said the hermit, "that made all Norway ring. We landed in the night time, and saw the lights of the hall between the pine trees. They were feasting, and they heard not our approach. We made a ring round the house and heaped faggots against the walls, and still they heard us not. It was a dark night, Vandrad, very dark, till we lit a fire that was seen by men in the outer islands. Then they heard us, they smelt the smoke, and they ran to the doors. The first man who came out I clove to the waist, for none in Norway had greater skill at arms than I. Then we drove them in and closed the door. Sometimes at night I hear them shriek even now. There was never such a burning in Norway; we spared not one soul, not one.

"They asked us to let the women out, but we had come there to slay and not to spare. They shrieked, Vandrad; they cried till the roof fell in, and then they died. My soul is safe with God, and they are in outer darkness. There they will shriek for ever."

He paused for a moment, and then went on in the same strain of high excitement,—

"Now you know me. I am Thord the Tall, the burner of Olaf Hakonson."

"And where are Snaekol Gunnarson and Thorfin of Skapstead?" Estein spoke with difficulty, and his right hand had closed on something in his belt.

"Both are dead. They died heathens, and their souls are as hopelessly lost as the soul of Olaf Hakonson. I am the last of the burners."

The voice of Thord the Tall died away. Estein bent forward, his hand left his side, and something in it gleamed in the firelight.

Suddenly the hermit started.

"Osla! I hear Osla!" he said.

Estein thrust his dagger into its sheath, and bending in the doorway stepped out into the night. Below the cell he saw a boat leaving the land, and right before him, in the clear, cool twilight, the form of Osla.

"Have you tired of my father's company?" she asked, with a smile.

"I would be alone," he answered, and walked quickly past her.

Now he knew the twice-heard voice, and remembered the fleeting face.

"You came to warn me, Olaf, and I knew you not!" he cried. "I know you now—too late!"

He paced the turf with hurried steps. The sacred duty of revenge called him with a vehemence we cannot now realize. He had sworn to let slip no chance of taking vengeance on the burners of his brother. Often he had sought news of them, and often renewed his resolution; and now that he had found his foe, was he to idly suffer him to escape?

Yet he had been this man's guest; he had eaten of his bread, and slept in his dwelling. And his hands were tied by a stronger chain. "Osla, Osla," he cried, "for your sake I am faithless to my vows, and forgetful of my duty to my kindred!"

Vandrad the Viking

Then the memory of Thord the Tall, telling of the burning, rose fresh and strong, and again his hand sought his side, and his breath came fast, till the vision of Osla swept aside all other thoughts.

The time went by until the hour was hard on midnight. Gradually his mind grew more composed.

"I am in the hands of destiny," he said to himself. "Let fate do with me what it will."

All the northern sky was still red with the afterglow of sunset, creeping slowly eastwards against the dawn; land and sea lay clear and yet dim, for the light was ghostly as a phosphorescent chamber; the tide was slack, and lapped softly on the rocks; and everything in the world seemed tranquil.

"The end has come," he said.

All at once, on the sheen of the sound, he spied a curious black mark, far out and vague. Gradually it seemed to steal nearer, till Estein, looking at it keenly, forgot his thoughts in a rising curiosity. Then it took shape, and faintly across the water came the splash of oars and the voices of men. As they drew nearer, he crouched below a bank and watched their approach with growing wonder and something too of awe.

"The gods have sent for me," he thought.

They were being carried by the current towards the place where he stood, and presently they made a landing on the rocks. There followed a consultation in low tones, and then one man left the boat and came up the bank. He stood out clearly in the transparent dusk—a tall, mail-clad figure, walking with a confident carriage.

Estein waited till he was opposite him, and then sprang up, dagger in hand.

"Who art thou?" he demanded.

The man's hand went straight to his sword, but at the sound of Estein's voice it fell again.

"Estein, my foster-brother!" he cried.

"Helgi!"

Helgi opened his arms and embraced him tenderly, speaking with an emotion he made no effort to control. "Estein, my brother, I thought thou wert in truth in Valhalla. I have wept for thee, Estein; I have mourned thee as dead. Tell me that this is thy very self, and not some island ghost come to mock me."

The friendly voice and grasp, coming in this his hour of trouble, touched Estein to the heart.

"It is I, indeed, Helgi," he said; "and never have I felt more glad to see a face and clasp a hand. How came you here? I thought I had parted from my friends for ever. I have been so long alone that they had begun to seem like dream-men."

Helgi told him briefly how he had swum ashore to another island, and there been picked up by Ketill, the black-bearded captain of one of Estein's scattered ships; how, giving up all hope, they had sailed for the south, and after meeting head winds and little luck, returned to the Orkneys, where, from a man who had been with Margad, news of the stranger on the Holy Isle had reached their ears.

"They say, Estein, that your hermit has a fair daughter. Methinks she would like to see your foster-brother; would she not?"

"Nay, Helgi, ask me no more questions, but take me quickly away. I am spell-bound here, and I dare not trust myself to stay one moment longer."

"I know these spells, Estein; they have been cast on men by other maids before now. Better take your sorceress with you. It is unlucky to break such spells so rudely."

"Laugh not, Helgi," said Estein, taking his arm and hurrying him down to the shore. "This spell has meant more to me than you can guess."

"By the hammer of Thor!" exclaimed Helgi, stopping suddenly, "there surely is the witch herself."

Estein looked round, and standing against the sky he saw the slender form he knew so well.

"Wait for me, Helgi," he said, "the spell is on me still," and starting away suddenly he ran up the bank again.

"Osla!" he cried, and stopped abruptly.

"What means this, Vandrad?" she asked.

Her eyes were wide open with troubled surprise, and looking into her upturned face he thought she never was so fair before.

"They have come for me, Osla, and I must go. Farewell! remember me not."

"Do you leave us in this way—without saying farewell, or telling us you were going?"

"I knew not myself when they would come. I told you I must leave you and seek the sea again. It has come true sooner than I expected."

Vandrad the Viking

He took her hands.

"Farewell!" he said again.

She turned her face away.

"I feared you would tire of us," she said, her voice sinking very low.

"Never, Osla, never! but fate has been too strong for me. They wait for me now, and I must leave you."

"Farewell, Vandrad!" she said, looking up, and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Osla!" he cried, drawing her towards him. She yielded an instant, and then suddenly broke free and started away.

"Farewell!" she said again, and her voice sounded like a sob.

He did not trust himself to answer, but turned and hurried to the boat.

They pushed off in silence, the oars dipped in the quiet sound, and Estein left the Holy Isle.

CHAPTER VI. THE HALL OF LIOT.

All through the small hours of the morning Estein sat on the poop in silence. Helgi, wrapped in his cloak, threw himself on the deck beside him and fell asleep with a lightened heart, while the long ship, slipping down the sound with the tide, turned westwards into the swell of the Atlantic.

Gloom had settled over Estein's mind. The pleasantest memories were distorted by the ghost of that old blood feud; his murdered brother called aloud for vengeance; in the wash of the waves and the creaking of the timbers he heard the hermit recite again the story of the burning, and through it all a voice cried, "Farewell! farewell!"

The sun at that season rises early. With it the breeze freshened, and one by one the sleeping figures in the waist woke, and began to stir about the ship. Still their leader sat silent.

Helgi at length sat up with a start, and rubbed his eyes. He looked at Estein, and smiled.

"Very much in love methinks," he said to himself.

At last Estein saw he was observed, and passing his hand across his brow as if to sweep away his thoughts, asked wearily,—

"Where do we go now, Helgi?"

"Your spell needs a violent remedy, and I have that on my mind that may cure it. What say you to letting Liot Skulison know that he did not slay us all? There are here two others besides ourselves who escaped the fate of Thorkel and our comrades, and they think they owe Liot something. Does revenge seem sweet?"

"Then Liot is alive?"

"Ay, Thor has spared him for us. The Orkney-man who led us to you has an ancient feud against the bairn-slayers, and he tells me Liot and his men are feasting at his dwelling. Shall we fall upon them to-night?"

"You are a good physician, Helgi. Battle and storm are the best cures for such as I."

"I cannot give you a storm, I fear," laughed Helgi, "but you can have fighting enough to-night. Liot keeps two hundred men and more about him, and we have here some seventy all told."

"We have faced greater odds together, Helgi. Life does not seem so fair to me now that I should shrink from odds of three to one. Let us seek Liot wherever he is, and when we have found him, tell him to arm as many men as he can muster. Then let our destiny weave its web for us."

Helgi laughed again.

"That would be a good revenge—to let Liot slay the men of Estein, a shipload at a time. If Odin wishes us to die, I shall try to meet my fate stoutly, but I shall not help him in the slaying. Nay, Estein, I can devise a better plan than yours."

Estein smiled for the first time since he had come on board.

"So long as it gives me a good fight with stout foes, and with you at my side, I care not what plan you propose."

"There speaks yourself again!" cried Helgi; "and I think that ere long you will meddle with my schemes. I will call Ketill and the Orkneyman, and we four will hold council here."

Ketill, the broad-beamed captain of the ship—the same whose path had been stopped by Atli—a man of few words and stout deeds, and Grim, the Orkneyman, came up to the poop. There they deliberated for long. Helgi was all for fire.

"Let us hear how the men of Liot will sing when they are warm."

Ketill gave a short laugh.

"I, too, am for burning," he said.

"We must catch them when they are drinking," said Grim. "When Liot's feasts are over many men go to sleep in outhouses round the hall, and we have not force enough here to surround them all at once."

"I will have no more burnings," said Estein.

"When had we our last?" asked Helgi. "You speak as though we had done naught but burn foes all our lives. We have never had a burning before, Estein, and it is better to begin as the burners than the burned."

"I have lately heard tell of another. It is no work for brave men."

Helgi shrugged his shoulders.

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"Let us drown them then," he said.

Ketill gave another short, gruff laugh.

"Nay, Ketill, I am not jesting; in truth I am in little humour for that. If seventy brave men cannot clear a hall of two hundred drinkers, what virtue lies in stout hearts and sharp swords? We will enter the hall, you from one end and I from the other, and I think the men of Liot Skulison will not have to complain of too peaceful an evening."

"We must catch them, then, while they are feasting. Afterwards it will be too late, with only seventy men," the wary Grim replied.

"We can choose our hour," said Estein; "and whatever plan we fall on, it seems we must be in time."

Helgi laughed lightly.

"I thought you would leave us little say, Estein, when once you were aroused," he said. "'Tis all the same to me. Fire, sword, or water—choose what you will, you will always find me by your side; and if you must go to Valhalla, why, I will blithely bear you company."

"Fire were better," said Ketill, shaking his head.

The day was still young when the council of war came to an end, and as they had more than sufficient time to reach the hall of Liot before night, the bows were turned to the open sea, that they might better escape observation. Once they had got some miles from land they turned southwards, and striking the sail, to make as little mark as they could, moved slowly under oars alone. All day the long ship rolled in a great ground-swell, the western cliffs of Orkney now hidden by a wall of water, and now glinting in the sunshine as they rose from trough to crest, and right ahead the distant Scottish coast drawing gradually nearer. As the afternoon wore on they turned landwards again, and towards evening found themselves coasting a mountainous island lying to the south of Hrossey.

"What do men call this?" asked Helgi.

"They call it Haey, the high island, and it is on a bay to the south of it that Liot Skulison dwells," answered Grim, their pilot for the time.

They drew closer and closer to the land, until a towering line of cliffs rose for more than a thousand feet right above their heads. It was a stern and sombre coast, unbroken by any bays or inland glimpses, and gloomy and terrible in the fading light. The great oily swell broke into spouts of foam at the cliff-foot, and all along the face of the precipice they could see innumerable sea-fowl clinging to the rock.

Gradually, as they sailed along this hostile land, a light sea-fog began to gather. The leaders of the hazardous expedition watched it closing in upon them with growing apprehension.

"What say you, Grim?" said Helgi; "can you take us to Liot in this mist?"

Grim looked round him doubtfully.

"Methinks I can take you there," he said, "but I fear we shall be too late, we can move but slowly; and with only seventy men, I doubt we shall do little when the men of Liot have left the feast."

Estein had been standing in silence near the tiller. At these words he turned and cried fiercely,—

"Who talks of doing little? Liot or I shall fall to-night, though the blackness of death were round us. Think you I have come to sit here idly in a fog? Tell your men to row like valiant Vikings, Ketill, and not like timorous women."

The respect due to rank in Norway was little more than the proud Norseman chose to pay, and it was with small deference to his prince that Ketill answered,—

"You are fey, I think, Estein. I shall not lose my ship that you may the sooner feed the fishes."

"Are you, too, afraid? By the hammer of Thor! I think you are in league with Liot. I shall make these cravens row."

"That you will not," replied Ketill.

In an instant both swords were half-drawn. The men within earshot were too much surprised at this sudden change from Estein's usual manner to his followers to do more than look in astonishment at the dispute, and in another instant the blades would have clashed, when Helgi rushed between them.

"What is this?" he cried. "Are you possessed of evil spirits, that you would quarrel on the eve of battle? Remember, Ketill, that Estein is your prince; and Estein, my brother, what ails you? You are under a spell indeed. Would that I had slain the witch ere you parted. You can gain nothing by wrecking the ship, and this fog is too dense to row a race off such a coast as this."

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Perhaps it was the allusion to the "witch" that brought Estein to his senses, for his eyes suddenly softened. "I was wrong, Ketill," he said. "The wrath of the gods is upon me, and I am not myself."

He turned away abruptly, and gazed moodily into the fog; while Ketill, with the look of one who is dealing with a madman, left the poop.

"It is ill sailing with a bewitched leader," he muttered.

The idea that Estein was under a spell took rapid hold of the superstitious crew. They told each other that this was no earthly mist that had fallen on them, and listening to the break of the sea on the cliffs, they talked low of wizards and sea-monsters, and heard strange voices in the sound of the surge. Then they became afraid to row at more than a snail's pace, and sometimes almost stopped altogether. In vain Helgi went amongst them, and urged that Grim knew these waters so well that there was little danger, in vain he pointed to the hope of booty and revenge ahead; even as he spoke there was a momentary break in the mist, and they saw the towering cliff so close above them that his words were wasted.

"There is witchcraft here," they said; and Ketill was as obstinate as the rest. The ship crept under the cliffs with hardly any way on at all, and Helgi, in despair, saw the golden hour slipping by.

"Oh, for two more good ships," he thought: "then we could wait till daylight, and fall upon them when we pleased."

Estein had again fallen a prey to his thoughts. In his gloomy fatalism he thought that the wrath of the gods pursued him for the neglect of his duty to his murdered brother, and he submitted to the failure of this adventure as the beginning of his punishment. The fighting fire died out, the longing for action was choked, and in their place what was as nearly a spell as can fall on mortal men had fallen on him. His devoted friend fumed impatiently beside him as the fog grew denser and the hours went slowly by, and bitterly he cursed the enchantress of the Holy Isle.

"He talks of the gods," he said to himself. "This is no work of theirs; it is the magic of that island witch, may the trolls take her!"

"The fog lifts!" cried Grim from his post at the tiller.

The men heard the cry, and ceasing their awestruck talk, looked eagerly at the fast-widening rifts in the white shroud. Ghost-like wreaths detached themselves, flitted by the ship, and then dissipated in thin air. The summer night sky with its pale stars appeared in lakes above, and below, the fog rose from the water like steam. Presently the great cliffs came out clear and terrible in the midnight dusk, and the men cried that the spell was broken.

Over Estein came the greatest change. As the fog lifted, the light returned to his eye, and he turned eagerly to Grim.

"Where are we now? Have we yet time to catch Liot at his feast?"

The pilot shook his head.

"It will take us full two hours to reach the bay where Liot dwells, and the feast, I fear, will have ended even now, for the hour is late."

Helgi's face fell, and he muttered a deep imprecation as he turned to Estein.

"What think you?" he asked; "shall we run for some distant bay, and return to-morrow night?"

"I have come to meet Liot to-night," Estein replied, and turning away he paced the deck in deep thought.

Helgi's cheerfulness returned in an instant. He hummed an air, and leaning against the bulwark awaited the march of events with his usual careless philosophy.

"The men were right," he thought; "it was a magic mist. The spell has lifted with the fog. It wants but a brisk fight now to cure him."

A grim smile stole over Estein's face, and presently he stopped beside Grim, and said,—

"Know you where Liot sleeps in this hall of his?"

"Ay; I was forced to follow him for two years, and I know well his sleeping chamber."

"Can you lead us to it in the dark?"

Grim looked at him doubtfully before answering.

"I think so," he said at length.

"But are you sure?"

The pilot looked round him.

"The night is light," said he, "and there will still be some fire in the hall. But it will be a dangerous venture."

Vandrad the Viking

Estein turned impatiently.

"Methinks you have little feud with Liot," he said, and went over to where Helgi stood.

"Well?" asked Helgi.

"I have a plan."

"Have you resolved on a burning? This cursed fog has made me cold, and a fire would like me well."

"You have heard my rede on burnings, Helgi. My scheme is to carry off Liot in his sleep. They will keep no watch. The very dogs will be drunk, and I think it will not be so difficult as it seems. Will you come with me into Liot's hall?"

Helgi's blue eyes opened wide, and he laughed as he said,—

"There has never been your match for enterprise in the north, Estein. Your plans seem all so chosen that your foes may have the greatest chance to slay you. Are we to leave you in Liot's place?"

"I asked if you would follow me."

"You know the answer to that already. But why trouble with Liot's carcass? Surely it were easier to slay him where he lies."

"I like not a midnight murder, and Liot and I have not yet decided who is the better man. That is a trial which I would fain make, and then we can see what the gods would do with me."

"To fight an enemy and capture him afterwards is common enough, but to capture him first and then fight him seems the act of a madman," answered Helgi.

"Then I am a madman," replied Estein, and with that he turned away and walked forward to consult Ketill.

He was impelled by his creed of morbid fatalism to seek this test, whereby his fate might be sharply decided. He longed, too, for action, and the idea, once held, fascinated him. But to all others on board he seemed merely the victim of some insidious magic. That he was under a spell Helgi had no manner of doubt.

"A fair fight," he thought, "is always manlier than a secret slaying, but not Odin himself would fly away with the foe who had slain two shiploads of his followers, and afterwards challenge him to single combat. It is as if he should catch a thief who had stolen half his goods, and then throw dice with him for the rest. But all spells act most banefully at night, they say; doubtless in the morning Estein will rest content with giving him a fitting burial—if he catches him."

And at the thought he laughed aloud.

"May I die in bed like a woman," he said to himself, "if this be not the strangest way of fishing for a Viking!"

Ketill was at first for stoutly refusing the adventure; but Helgi, whose convictions sat lightly on him compared with his attachment to Estein, persuaded him to consent.

"Are you afraid?" he asked, and that question left no room for the proud Viking to hesitate.

It was about two hours after midnight when the long ship, stealing under the shadow of the cliffs, turned into a small bay. It lay open to the south, guarded on either side by a precipitous headland, and withdrawn from the tideway and the swell of the western ocean. In the weird grey light of that June night the men could see a valley opening out of great inland hills on to a more level strip of moorland at the head of the bay. On a spit of sandy beach lay three warships, and on the slope of the hill to the left stood a small township of low buildings, clustering round the higher drinking-hall of Liot Skulison.

In dead silence they hugged the shore as closely as their pilot dared.

"We are as close inshore as we can win," he said at length in a low voice.

The boat was stealthily launched, and into it as many men as it would hold were crowded.

"Keep the rowers on their benches, we may have little time to get away," said Ketill in a gruff whisper to his fore-castle man, whom he left in command of the ship.

"We have little wish to be caught."

"Push off, men, and remember he who speaks above a whisper I shall think is tired of life."

The oars dipped and the boat crept slowly landwards.

"You know the landing, Grim?"

Grim, who sat at the tiller, merely nodded; and presently the bows grated on a strip of gravel beach.

"The trolls take you!" muttered Ketill. "Could you not have told us to slacken speed? The dead could hear a landing like this."

"'Tis all right yet, Ketill," whispered Estein. "We are too far from the hall."

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"By the hammer of Thor!" growled the black-bearded captain, whose temper was ever of the shortest, "these men splash like cattle."

One by one they stepped ashore, and then the party was divided. One man was left in charge of the boat; Ketill with three others went round to where the long ships lay; while Estein, Helgi, and Grim, with six picked men, cautiously approached the hall.

They crossed a strip of rising heather and struck a sharp slope of turf. Close above them loomed a dark mass of building, and the silence was unbroken save by the stealthy fall of their footsteps. Grim led the way, then came Estein, then Helgi, and the others followed in single file.

Warily they came up to the end of the hall, and under the door there was a brief pause. Estein gave his final instructions in a whisper, and then quickly pushing open the door, he stepped in. Helgi, Grim, and one man followed, while the other five waited outside with their weapons in their hands.

These old Norse drinking-halls were long and high rooms, with great fires down the middle, and beside them long lines of benches for the guests. All down the sides the sleeping chambers opened, and over these hung the arms of the warriors.

The hall of Liot was very dark and still. A ghostly flicker of light struggled through the narrow windows, and on the fires the embers slowly died. Beside the benches slumbered the forms of some of the heaviest drinkers, and once or twice they nearly stumbled over these. Grim came up beside Estein and led him about half-way down the hall. There he stopped and pointed to a door. There were no words; the others closed up and loosened their daggers in their sheaths. Estein stepped back softly to the fire and lifted up a log, one end of which still glowed brightly, and then he pushed open the door. The chamber was dark as a wolf's mouth as he groped for the bed. So cautiously he stepped that the heavy breathing of the sleeper only broke the silence, and very carefully he went forward and thrust the log so close to the unconscious slumberer that he could clearly read his features. Then he placed it against the wall, and gave one whispered order. In an instant a mantle was twisted round Liot's mouth, his hands and feet were bound, and ere he was thoroughly awake, he was mounted on the shoulders of his foes, forming one of a singular procession that hurried through the hall of Liot Skulison.

Grim, who walked first, had almost reached the door, when from the blackest of the shadows a man stepped suddenly across his path. For an instant the pilot's heart stood still. Then he saw that he had only to deal with a half-awakened drinker, and as his mouth was framing a question, Grim's dagger flashed, and with a cry the man fell heavily on the floor. Instantly there arose such a chorus of barking as might have wakened the dead.

"The dogs are sobering," said Helgi.

"Hasten!" cried Estein. "The men will be on us."

They hurried through the door, and bearing their captive on their shoulders, the whole party broke into a run.

"The dogs are after us!" cried one.

"Turn and kill them," said Estein.

Three men stopped, and with a few sweeping sword slashes scattered the yelping crowd; but even as they were driving them off, they could see that men were coming out of the hall and outhouses.

"Where is Ketill?" cried Estein, as they reached the boat.

The man in charge had seen nothing of him.

"May werewolves seize him!" exclaimed Helgi. "He has had time enough to tear the long ships plank from plank."

"We have no time to wait for him; it is his fault if he be left," said Grim.

"That knowledge would doubtless comfort him," replied Estein; "but nevertheless I shall wait."

"Here they come!" cried Helgi.

"And here come those who will reach us before them," said another man.

He was right. A swarm of men were already running down the slope, and it was clear that they must reach the boat first.

Estein sprang on board.

"Push off!" he cried; "we will row along the shore to meet them."

"Well thought of," said Helgi; "'tis lucky we have one cool head with us."

The pursuers at first either failed to see Ketill's party, or mistook them for their own men, for they continued their headlong rush straight to the water, firing arrows and darts as they ran. Then they saw the manoeuvre, and

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turned with loud cries along the shore. The boat had got a start by this time; the rowers bent their backs and made her spring like a live thing, and the still water rose in oily waves from the bow. But fast as they pulled, the men on shore ran faster.

"By all the gods, we are too late!" cried Helgi.

"They take to the water!" said Estein. "Pull, men, pull! Oh, 'tis a night worth living for!"

The four swimmers stoutly struck out for dear life, to a splashing accompaniment of darts and stones.

"By the hammer of Thor! they will be struck as we take them on board," exclaimed Helgi. "Friend Ketill makes a generous mark."

"Round them!" said Estein. "Get between them and the shore."

Grim pressed the tiller hard down, and circling round the swimmers they were presently hauling them in on the sheltered side. Then the crowd on shore set off for their ships. Ketill, dripping with water, and bleeding from an arrow wound on the shoulder, watched them with a grim smile.

"They will find their ships ready for sea," he said.

As he spoke a tongue of flame shot up from one of the long ships, and Estein turned to him in surprise.

"Then you set them on fire?"

"Ay," replied Ketill; "we slew some guards—who thereby learned not to sleep at their posts—and made such holes in the ships as will take them two days to patch. Then I bethought me it were well to have a burning, if it were only of a long ship; so we kindled three great fires, one for each vessel, and if the men of Liot feel cold to-night, it will not be my fault. But have you got Liot?"

"Here he is," said Estein, pointing to the pinioned captive.

Ketill laughed loud and long.

"Estein," he cried, "I ask your pardon. You may be under a spell, but you have given us a merry night's work. We have earned a long drink."

CHAPTER VII. THE VERDICT OF THE SWORD.

A shout of congratulation rose from the ship as the boat drew near and the anxious watchers counted the fourteen men returned again with their prisoner. Drink was served round in huge beakers, and the superstitious fears vanished like the fog as they rowed in triumph out of the bay.

They could see behind them the flames and smoke rising ever higher from the burning vessels, and as the ale mounted to their heads they shouted derisive defiance across the water.

"Where shall we go now?" asked Grim.

"Do you know of any uninhabited holm where we could land by daybreak?" said Estein.

"There are many such about the Orkneys; one I know well, which methinks we should reach soon after sunrise. There I shall take you."

Ketill came up at that moment with a great horn of ale, and cried, with a joviality only shown when drink flowed freely,—

"Drink, Estein, drink!—drink to the soul of Liot Skulison, which shall shortly speed to Valhalla. Shall we slay him now, or keep that sport till we have better light to see him die?"

"I have other work on hand than drinking. Liot and I have an account to settle at daybreak."

Ketill stared at him in astonishment.

"You mean then in very truth to fight?" he cried. "Well, do as you wish; but it is a strange spell."

He left the poop with his horn, and Estein seated himself on a stool, and leaning back against the bulwarks, tried to rest.

His face was set, his mind made up, and he only waited impatiently for the hour of his trial. Sleep came to him in uneasy snatches, during which he seemed to pass years of wild adventure, haunted all the time by strangely distorted Oslas. He woke at last to the chill of a grey morning and the roll of a Viking ship. With a little shiver he started to his feet, and began to pace the deck.

Presently Helgi joined him, and laid his hand on his arm.

"Estein," he said, "tempt not your fate too far. Never before have I seen witchcraft such as this. Why should you fear the wrath of the gods? I tell you, my brother, you are under a spell; let us seek some magician who will cure you, and not rashly look for death when you are wearied with sleepless nights and black magic. If the wrath of the gods is really on you, it will fall were you to flee from men and seek refuge in the loneliest cave on all these coasts. I will slay Liot Skulison for you; in fair fight if you will, though I think not he deserves such a chance. Was it a fair fight when he fell on our two ships with his ten?"

"I would slay him, Helgi, like a dog, were it not that something within me bids me ask in this wise the wishes of Odin."

"'Tis the voice of yon witch."

"She is no witch, Helgi, only the fairest girl in all the North. Listen, and I will tell you the story of this spell; but remember it is to you alone I tell it, and never must another know of my shame."

"Have you ever known me betray your trust?"

"Never, Helgi, my brother, or you would not hear this tale. To me it seems the story of six years of my life, though it was scarcely as many weeks; but I shall make it as brief as I may."

"The hour is yet early."

"After the battle, Helgi, I should have been drowned but for that maid you saw. She saved my life, and that at least I owe her. She brought me to the abode of her father, the hermit of the Holy Isle; and there I learned to love her. For six weeks I was no Viking. I forgot my kinsfolk and my country, forgot all but Osla."

"Call you not that a spell?"

"Did you not say yourself that you had known many spells like that, cast on men by maids? It was the magic of love that entangled me."

"Men said the hermit was a wizard."

"No wizard, Helgi, or he had never let me come there. He was a moody and fitful old man. I pleased him with my songs, talked to him of the strange religion he professes—for he is what men call a Christian—and grew in

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time to think of him as a friend. (Verily, I think there must have been magic!) All this while I spoke no word of love to Osla, though I think she was not indifferent to me."

"It was easy to see that."

"Twice on that island a voice I could not name warned me from beyond the grave, but I heeded it not. (Can the man have been a wizard?) One night—it was the night you landed, Helgi—I sat alone with the hermit. Something had moved him to talk. I remember now! it was a song I sung myself. He told me a tale of a burning.

"Helgi, he had hardly begun ere I knew the end, and could name my warning voice. The tale was the burning of Laxafiord, and the voice was my brother Olaf's."

"And the hermit?"

"Is Thord the Tall, the last of the burners."

"Is! Then you slew him not?"

"My dagger was drawn, I was bending towards him, when I heard without the steps of Osla. I fled—ask me not what I thought or what I did. Thord the Tall and I both live, and I would know whether the gods would have it so. Wherefore I meet Liot this morning."

"Then you have spared Olaf's burner for the sake of the burner's daughter?"

"I had eaten his bread and shared his dwelling for six weeks, and but for that daughter I had never lived to meet him."

"He slew your brother, Estein."

"There is no need to remind me of that."

"Methinks there is; he still lives."

"And I still love his daughter."

Estein turned away as he spoke, and gazed with folded arms over the grey waters.

Helgi looked at him in silence; then he went up to his side.

"Forgive me, Estein," he said, "and let Odin judge you. I love you too well to be aught but a friend whatever you may do."

"Helgi! but for you I think I should fall upon my sword."

His friend tried to force a laugh, but it came hard.

"Nay, rather seek a sword for Liot Skulison, for I see we are nearing the holm."

"I had forgotten Liot," said Estein. "We will loose his bonds, and let him choose his weapons."

He found Liot sitting in the waist bound hand and foot. His eye was as firm as if he had been in his own hall, and he looked up indifferently as Estein approached.

"Do you remember me, Liot?" asked his captor.

"Ay, Estein. You, methinks, are one of the bairns I thought I had slain. Well was it for you that the Orkney tides run strong. But the luck has changed, I see; and you were a bold man, Estein Hakonson, to change it as you did. Why did you not burn us out?"

"Because I wanted you alone."

"Ay, torture is a pleasant game for the torturers. How do you intend that I shall die?"

"By my sword, if the gods will it. In an hour, Liot, we fight to the death. Our battle-ground is yonder holm, the weapons you may choose yourself; and meanwhile I shall loose your bonds, and if you wish to eat or drink you may."

A look of blank astonishment came over the Viking captain's face.

"This is a merry jest, Estein," he said.

"It is no jest.—Loose his bonds, men."

Liot gave a shout of joy.

"Estein," he cried, "you are a brave man, but I think you are fey."

"That will soon be seen."

The Viking's cool indifference gave place to the most exuberant excitement. Like everybody else he thought that Estein was either mad or the victim of some enchantment; but so long as he was going to strike a good blow for life, he cared not how the chance had come. He called for ale and meat, and with the eye of an old soldier carefully picked his weapons; while the men around him muttered to each other that Estein was surely fey.

All this time they had been sailing eastwards before a light breeze. The sun had long been up, but the whole

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sky was obscured by light clouds, and there was an early morning feel in the air. Nearly the whole length of the wide and lonely firth that divides Orkney from the Scottish coast lay behind them, and close ahead they saw the little island that Grim had chosen for the meeting—place. When they had reached the holm they anchored the ship close inshore, and two boat-loads of men were first sent to prepare the field of battle. Then when all was ready the two combatants, attended by Helgi and Ketill, were rowed ashore.

Liot was gay and cheerful as a man going to a feast; while Estein sat silent in the stern, his thoughts busy with a landing at another island.

"You need ale, Estein," said his opponent; "a man going to fight should be gay."

"It is more fitting," replied Helgi, "for the man who comes back to be cheerful."

"Well said," said Ketill.

Liot only laughed, and springing ashore before the boat had touched the rocks, cried,—

"I had little thought to have such a pleasant morning. We will finish what we began before, Estein."

"Ay, we will finish," said Estein.

They found a wide ring marked off with stones, and in this the two champions took their stand. Each was armed with a helmet and a coat of ring-mail, and bore in his right hand a sword, and in his left a long, heart-shaped shield. Round their waists another sword was girded, though there was likely to be little time to draw this. In height and build they were very equally matched, but men noticed that Estein moved more lightly on his feet.

In a loud voice Ketill proclaimed that whoever should withdraw outside the ring of stones should ever after bear the name of dastard.

Then all went outside the circle, and with a shout Liot sprang at his foe. Estein caught the sword on his shield, and in return delivered such a storm of blows that Liot got no chance for a blow in return. He began to give ground, Estein pressing him hotly, his blade flashing so fast that men could not follow it. It was easily seen that in quickness and dexterity with his weapon Liot was inferior to his foe; but with wary eye and cool head he kept well covered with his shield, shifting his ground all the time. Twice he was nearly driven over the line, but each time saved himself by a rapid side movement.

"I fear that Estein will tire," muttered Helgi.

"Ay; he has started too hard," replied Ketill.

It seemed as if they were right. Estein's blows became less frequent, and Liot in turn attacked hotly. He made as little impression, however, as Estein, and then by mutual consent both men stopped for a minute's breathing-space.

"You seem tired, Estein," said Liot.

"Guard yourself," was the reply, and the fight began again. As before, Estein attacked hotly, Liot steadily giving ground.

"Too hard, too hard! after two sleepless nights he cannot fight long like this," exclaimed Helgi.

So thought Liot, and he bided his time with patience. He was opposed, however, by one of the best and most determined swordsmen in Norway, and Estein as well as any one knew the risk he ran. He rained in his blows like a hailstorm; but fast though they came, he was sparing his strength, and there was less vigour in his attack than there seemed. He bent all his energies on driving Liot back on the ring, shifting his ground as fast as his foe, heading off his attempts to move round, and all the while watching keenly for an opening.

"He wins, Ketill! he wins!" cried Helgi.

"Ay," said the black-bearded captain; "there is little skill we can teach Estein."

As they neared the stones, Estein's onset became more furious than ever; sword and shield had to shift up and down, right and left, to guard his storm of blows, and all the while Liot was being driven back the faster towards one place where larger stones than usual had been used to make the ring. In vain he sprang suddenly to one side; Estein was before him, and his blade nearly found its way home. Two paces more Liot gave way, and then his heel struck a boulder. For an instant he lost his balance, and that moment was his last on earth. As the shield shifted, Estein's sword came full on his neck, and it was only the bairn-slayer's body that fell without the ring.

"Bring the spades!" cried Ketill—"a fitting enough epitaph for Liot Skulison."

His conqueror was already in Helgi's arms.

"I thought I should have had to avenge you, Estein. My heart is light again."

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"Odin has answered me, Helgi."

"And the spell is broken?"

"No; that spell, I fear, will break only with my death-wound."

Helgi laughed out of pure light-heartedness.

"There are fair maids in the south lands," he said.

"I go to Norway," replied Estein. "I would fain see the pine woods again."

That evening they saw the Orkneys faint and far away astern, and Estein, as he watched them fade into the dusk, would have given all Norway to hear again the roost run clamorous off the Holy Isle.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE CELL BY THE ROOST.

On the rocky shore of the Holy Isle, Osla sat alone. The spell of summer weather had passed from the islands, and in its wake the wind blew keenly from the north, and the grey cloud-drift hurried low overhead. All colour had died out of land and sea; the hills looked naked and the waters cold.

And Vandrad, the sea-rover, had gone with the sunshine—had gone, never so Osla said to herself, to return again.

She rose and tried to give her thoughts a lighter turn, but the note of the north wind smote drearily upon her ears, and she left the sea-shore with a sigh. For seven uneventful years she had found in the sea a friend of whom she never tired, and on the little island duties enough to make the days pass swiftly by. Why should the time now hang heavy on her hands?

She walked slowly to the wind-swept cells. Her father sat within, the blackness of night upon his soul, the Viking fire now burned completely out.

She tried to rouse him, but he answered only in absent monosyllables. Again she sought the solace of the sea, but never, it seemed to her, had it looked so cold and so unfriendly.

"Why did he ever come at all?" she said.

And so the days went by; summer changed to autumn, and autumn gave place to winter. For week after week one gale followed another. For days on end the spin-drift flew in clouds across the island, salt and unceasing.

The sea was never silent, the gulls flew inland and the cormorants sat storm-bound in their caves; brief glimpses of cold and sunny weather passed as abruptly as they came, and in the smoke of a driftwood fire Osla plied her needle and followed the wanderings of her thoughts.

During all these months the hermit spoke little. So engrossed was Osla in herself that she hardly noticed how seldom the cloud seemed to lift from his mind. Never as before did he talk with her at length, or instruct her from the curious scraps of knowledge his once acute mind had picked up from sources Christian and pagan, from the wise men of the North and the monasteries of southern lands. He never once alluded to their guest, never even apparently observed his departure, and in her heart his daughter thanked him for his silence.

The lingering winter passed at length, and one morning, in the first freshness of spring, Osla stood without the cell. Presently her father joined her, and she noticed, though her thoughts were busy elsewhere, that he wore a strange expression. He looked at her doubtfully, and then said,—

"Where is Vandrad? I would hear him sing."

Then Osla started, and her heart smote her.

"Vandrad, father?" she said gently. "He has been gone these eight months. Did you not know?"

The hermit seemed hardly to comprehend her words.

"Gone!" he repeated. "Why did you not tell me?"

"Surely you knew," she said.

"Why went he away? I would hear him sing. He used to sing to me of war. He sang last night. Last night," he repeated doubtfully; "methinks it was last night. Bring him to me."

She turned his questions as best she could, and strove to make him think of other things. With her arm through his they paced the turf along the shore, and all the while her heart sank lower and lower. She was in the presence of something so mysterious that even wise men in those days shrank from it in fear. It was the finger of God alone, they said, that laid a blight on human minds, and there before her was His handiwork.

Yet, had she but known it, this blight had been the slow work of years. Her father's mind, always dark and superstitious, and tinged with morbid melancholy, had gradually in these long solitary years given way more and more before sombre underminings, till now, with old age at the gates, it had at last succumbed. Some few bright moments there were at rare intervals, but in all the months that followed it was but the shattered hull of Thord the Tall, once the terror of the western seas, that lingered on the Holy Isle.

The care of him had at least the effect of turning Osla's thoughts away from herself. Than sunshine and another's troubles there are no better tonics.

Yet it was a dreary summer for the hermit's daughter, and it grew all the drearier and more lonesome when the

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long, fresh days began to shorten, and the sea was more seldom still and the wind more often high. All the time, the old man grew slowly worse. He sat continually in his cell; and though Osla would not acknowledge her fears even to herself, she knew that death could not be far away. Yet he lingered through the winter storms, and the end came upon a February evening. All the afternoon the hermit had lain with shut eyes, never speaking a word or giving a sign. It fell wet and gusty at night, and Osla, bending over the couch, could hear nothing but the wind and the roost she knew so well.

At length he raised his head and asked,—

"Are we alone, Osla?"

"There is no one here but me, father."

"Listen then," he said. "I have that on my mind that you must hear before I die. My end is close at hand. I seem to have been long asleep, and now I know that this wakefulness you see is but the clearness of a man before he dies."

He took her hand as he spoke, and she tried to stifle a sob.

"Not so," she said, while the tears rose so fast that she could only dimly see his face; "you are better, far better, to-night."

"I am death-doomed, Osla. Thord the Tall shall die in his bed to-night, an old and worthless wreck. Once I had little thought of such a death; and even now, though I die a Christian man, and my hope is in Christ Jesus, and St. Andaman the holy, I would like well to hear the clash of swords around me. But the doom of a man is fated from his birth."

His daughter was silent, and the old Viking, seeming to gather strength as he talked, went on in a strong, clear voice.

"I have heavy sins at my door. I have burned, I have slain in battle, I have pillaged towns and devastated corn-lands. May the Lord have mercy on my soul!

"He shall have mercy, Osla! I am saved, and the heathen I slew are lost for ever. For the souls of the Christians who fell by this hand I have done penance and given great gifts, and to-night these things shall be remembered. To-night we part, Osla."

She held his great hand in both of hers, and pressed it against her lips, and in a broken voice she said,—

"No, not to-night, not to-night."

"Ay, to-night," he said. "But before we part you must hear of one deed that haunts me even now, though they were but heathens whom I slew."

"The burning at Laxafiord?" she whispered.

"Who has not heard of that burning?" he cried. "The flames leapt higher than the pine trees, the women shrieked—I hear them now!" He paused, and she pressed his hand the tighter.

"Father!" she said softly, "father!" But he paid no heed to her, for his mind had begun to wander, and he talked wildly to himself.

"Death-doomed I am. Have mercy upon my soul!Ay, the wind blows, a stormy day for fishing, and the flames are leaping—I see them leap! St. Ringan save me!.....A Christian man, I tell thee..... spare not, spare not! Smite them to the last man!"

Then he fell silent, and she laid her free hand upon his brow, while outside the wind eddied and sang mournfully round the cell. At last his mind cleared again, and he spoke coherently though very feebly.

"I am dying, Osla; fare thee well! The box—you know the box?"

"The steel-bound box?" she answered.

"Ay, steel-bound, 'tis steel-bound indeed. I took it—"

He had begun to wander again, but with a last effort he collected his thoughts and went on,—

"Open it. There is a writing. Read, it will tell—promise—I can speak no more."

"I promise," she replied, hardly knowing what she said, her heart was so full.

There was another brief silence, and then loudly and clearly he cried,—

"Bring up my banner! Forward, Thord's men! Forward!.....They fly!.....They fly!"

The voice died away, and Osla was left alone.

CHAPTER IX. THE MESSAGE OF THE RUNES.

The story must now come back to Norway. Though Estein had returned with neither spoil nor captives, the tale of Liot's capture and the combat on the holm added much to his renown, and no fewer than six skalds composed lengthy poems on the adventure. There seemed no reason why the hero of these lays should shrink from talking of his expedition, and avoid, so far as he could, the company of men. Gradually strange rumours began to spread. Helgi, who alone knew the truth, held his peace for Estein's sake, even when the ale flowed most freely. The others who had sailed with them laid no such restraint on their tongues, and stories of a spell and an Orkney witch, vague and contradictory, but none the less eagerly listened to and often repeated, went the round of the country. The king at last began to take alarm, and one day he called Earl Sigvald to him and talked with him alone.

"What rede can you give, jarl?" he said; "a strange witchcraft I fear has been at work. When a young man smiles but seldom, broods often by himself, and shuns the flagon and the feast, there is something more to be looked for than a loss of men and ships, or the changefulness of youth."

"Get him a wife," replied the earl. "He has been single too long. There is no cure for spells like a pair of bright eyes."

But when the king spoke to his son, he found him resolutely opposed to marriage. Hakon loved him so dearly that he forbore to press the matter, and again he consulted Earl Sigvald.

"If he will not marry, let him fight," answered the earl. "For a prince of the race of Yngve, the clash of arms cures melancholy better than a maid."

So with the coming of spring Estein cruised in the Baltic, and carried the terror of his arms far into Finland and Russia. Yet he returned as moody as before.

At feasts his spirits sometimes rose to an extraordinary pitch. For the time he would be carried away as he had never been before. He would sing, jest, and quarrel; but his jests were often bitter, and his quarrels gave rise to more talk than his gloom, for before he had been of an even and generous temper. And when the fit passed away he was quieter than ever.

One day he was out hunting on the fells with Helgi. They were oftener together than ever, and his foster-brother had far more influence with him than any other man.

They stood on a desolate hillside a little above the highest pine woods, examining the tracks of a bear, when Helgi suddenly turned to him and said,—

"Do you not think, Estein, you have moped and mourned long enough?"

"They whom the gods have cursed," replied Estein, "have little cause for laughter. What is there left for me on this earth?"

"To prove yourself a man; to accept the destiny you cannot alter; and in time, Estein, to be a king. Are these things nothing?"

Helgi seldom spoke so gravely, and Estein for a time stood silent. Then he exclaimed,—

"You are right, Helgi; I have acted as a beaten child. Henceforth I shall try to look on my fate, I cannot say merrily, but at least with a steady eye."

As another winter passed, he gradually seemed to come to himself. He was sadder and more reserved than of yore, but the king saw with joy that the gloom was lifting. One day in the season when spring and winter overlap, and the snow melts by day and hardens again over-night, Earl Sigvald returned to Hakonstad from his seat by a northern fiord. King Hakon greeted him cheerfully.

"The spell is lifting, jarl," he said; "Estein is becoming himself again."

"That is well, sire," replied the earl; "and my old heart lightens at the news. But I have other tidings that need your attention. I have brought with me Arne the Slim, your scatt-gatherer in Jemtland. The people there have slain some of his followers, forced him to fly for his life, and refused to pay scatt to a Norse king. There is work ahead for some of our young blades."

"They shall see that my arm is longer than they deem," replied the king grimly.

Arne told his tale in the great hall before all the assembled chiefs, and the king's face darkened with anger as

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he listened. Every now and then, as he spoke of some particular act of treachery, or of his hardships and hurried flight, an angry murmur rose from his audience, and a weapon here and there clashed sternly. Estein alone seemed unmoved. He stood listlessly at the back, apparently hardly hearing what was going on, his thoughts returning despite himself to their melancholy groove. All at once he heard himself addressed, and turning round saw a stranger at his side. The man was holding out something towards him, and when he had caught Estein's eye, he said respectfully,—

"I was charged to give this token to you, sire." Estein looked at him in surprise, and taking the token from his hand, glanced at it curiously.

It was a stave of oak, about two feet long, and shaped with some care. Along one side an inscription was carved in Runes, and as he read the first words his expression changed and he spelt it keenly through. The whole writing ran: "An old man, a maiden, and a spell. Come hither to Jemtland."

He turned sharply to the man and asked,—

"How came you by this? Who sent it to me?"

"That last I cannot answer," replied the man. "This only I know, that the night before the Jemtland people attacked us, a man came to the door of the house where I lodged, and giving me this said, 'Fly, war is afoot,' and with that he left as suddenly as he came. I aroused my master Arne, and one or two more, and thanks to the warning, we escaped the fate of our comrades. That is all I can tell you."

The message made a sharp impression on Estein's mind. "An old man, a maiden, and a spell," he repeated to himself. He racked his brains, but he could think of no one in that remote country who would be likely to send such a message. It seemed to him to have an almost supernatural import, and again he said to himself, "An old man, a maiden, and a spell." Then suddenly he took a resolution, and turning from the messenger stepped into the crowd who surrounded the king.

Arne had just finished his tale. There was a moment's angry silence, and then the king glanced round the host of weather-beaten Vikings and high-born chiefs and cried,—

"Who will punish these cowardly rebels of mine?"

A dozen voices instantly claimed the service. Loudest of them all was that of Ketill, now married to a wealthy widow and a person of considerable importance, and the black-bearded Viking stepped forward as he spoke.

"Give me this service, king," he said. "I have lived at mine ease too long of late. Laziness begets fat."

There was a laugh at Ketill's words, for his person had never been noted for its spareness.

The Viking frowned and exclaimed,—

"Let those laugh who have tested my steel."

"Well I know your bravery, Ketill," began the king, "and there is no man—"

At that instant the ring of men round him suddenly opened and Estein stood before his father. His face was more animated than any had seen it for many a long day, and in a firm voice he said,—

"I will lead this expedition."

Steel rang on steel as every armed warrior there clashed his approval. By all the gods whose names he could remember Earl Sigvald swore that the true Estein was come back, and King Hakon exclaimed joyfully,—

"There speaks my son at last. Prepare yourself then, Estein. Ill tidings have been changed to good."

"And you, Ketill," said Estein, turning to his former companion, "will you come with me?"

"That will I," answered Ketill. "I want no braver leader. But the gods curse me if we roast not a few score men this time, Estein."

For two days there was a turmoil of preparation round Hakonstad, and on the third Estein's two warships sailed down the fiord. He had with him Helgi, Ketill, and a picked force; and as he stood on deck and watched the towering precipices slip by, and the white clouds drift over their rough rim of pines, his heart beat high. The message of the Runes was ringing in his mind, and the spirit of roving and adventure boiling up again.

They sailed far up the coast, and then, leaving their ship in a northern fiord, struck inland across the mountains. The country they were going to lay among the lakes of North Sweden. Its people were more barbarous than the Norwegians, and had long been in a state of half-subjection to the Norse kings. There was not likely to be hard fighting; for small as Estein's force was, the natives were badly armed and little esteemed as warriors. The country, however, was difficult, so the men marched warily, their arms ready for instant use, and a sharp watch kept all the time. The sun came out hot by day, but at nights it felt very cold and frosty. With all the haste they

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could make them pushed on by the least frequented routes and the most desolate places. During the first day after they had crossed the mountains, they only saw one farmhouse, in a forest clearing, and that, when they came up to it, was still and deserted. On the following day they passed a small hamlet on the banks of a river, and a little later another farm. In neither was there a sign of an inhabitant to be seen, and they seemed for all the world like dwellings of the dead.

"This is passing strange," said Helgi. "Unless, perhaps, the Jemtlanders spend the winter in holes and caves, like the bears they resemble in all but courage."

"The alarm has spread, I fear," answered Estein. "We must make the more haste."

"Ay," said Ketill; "on, on!"

Towards evening the head of the column emerged into a small clearing, and the foster-brothers, who were marching in the middle, heard a cry from the van. Then Ketill's gruff voice called out,—

"After him! Nay, slay him not! Have you got him? Ay, bring the knave to Estein."

The little army came to a halt, and a poor-looking man, clad in a skin coat, and trembling violently as they dragged him along, was brought before Estein.

"Spare my life, noble captain!" he pleaded, casting himself on his knees. "I am but a poor man, I beseech you."

"Silence, rascal!" thundered Ketill, "or we will have your coward's tongue out by the root."

"Tell me, if you value your life, what means this solitude?" Estein demanded sternly. "Nay, shake not like an old man with palsy, but speak the truth—if by chance a Jemtlander knows what truth is. Where are the people?"

"Noble earl, they have heard of your coming, and fled. No man will await you; you will see none in the country."

"Do none mean to fight?" asked Helgi.

"Great prince," replied the fellow, "the Jemtlanders were never a warlike race. Even the king, I hear, is prepared to fly."

A contemptuous murmur rose from the Norsemen.

"Let us begin by hanging this man," said Ketill, "and then fire, fire through the country!"

"I shall see first whether he has spoken the truth," answered Estein. "Bind him, and bring him on."

The man was bound and guarded, and the march was continued. Early the next morning two men were found together in a cottage, and they told the same tale.

"Little glory is there in marching against such a people," said Estein. "Bind them, and hasten on."

About an hour later the little army emerged from a hillside forest, and saw below them a small merchant town. The rude wooden houses straggled along the edge of a great frozen lake, whose snow-powdered surface stretched for miles and miles in an unbroken sheet of dazzling whiteness. Between the shores and the outskirts of the woodlands lay a wide sweep of cultivated country. Everywhere a thin coating of snow covered the ground, and the air was sharp enough to make the breath of the men rise like a cloud of steam as they marched in battle order down the slope.

"There are men in the town!" cried Helgi suddenly. "I see the glint of the sun on weapons. Thanks be to the gods, we shall have a fight!"

"Ay, they are coming out," said Estein. "Halt! we shall take advantage of the slope, and await them here."

The men halted, and grasped their weapons, and in expectant silence their leaders watched a small troop defile out of the town.

"Call you that an army?" growled Ketill. "There are barely a score of them."

"Ay," said Helgi, with a sigh, "there will be no fighting to-day."

About twenty men, dressed in skins and fur coats and wooden helmets, and slenderly armed, had left the town, and now came slowly up the hill. Their leader alone wore a burnished steel helmet, and carried a long halberd over his shoulder. Immediately behind him walked two boys, and at the sight of them Helgi asked,—

"What mean they by bringing boys against us?"

"Hostages," suggested Estein laconically.

When this motley company had come within a hundred yards of them, they stopped, and their leader advanced alone.

As he drew near to the Norsemen, Estein stepped out a pace or two to meet him, but they stood so close that

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Helgi and Ketill could hear all that passed. They saw that the stranger was a tall, elderly man with a clever face and a dignified bearing.

"Hail, Estein Hakonson!" he said.

"You know my name, it seems," replied Estein, "and therein have the advantage of me."

"My name is Thorar," said the chief, speaking gravely and very courteously, "lawman of this region of Jemtland"—he made a sweeping gesture with his hand as he said this—"and a friend hitherto to the Northmen."

"I know you by repute as a chief of high birth, and one who has long been faithful to my father. Yet, methinks, it was something less than faithful to drive his scatt-gatherer from the country and slay his followers."

"Blame not me for that, Estein," answered Thorar. "It was done with neither my knowledge nor consent, and none grieved at such an outrage more than I. Now, as you see, you have the land at your mercy; and as an ancient friend of your family and a faithful servant of my master King Bue, I am come to intercede between King Hakon and him. Give us peace, Estein; and as you have a grey-haired father, spare my master the sorrow and the shame you would bring upon him. What can he do against you? The old spirit of my countrymen has died out," he added sadly, "and no man dare meet your force in the field."

"Is King Bue in the town?" Estein asked.

"Nay, he could not travel so far; but in his name I bid you welcome to his feast, if you will accept peace instead of war. If you will not, then I can only mourn the devastation of my country. It will be a bloodless victory, Estein."

"And what compensation does the king intend to make?"

"What you will; he is powerless."

"Shall we then march to King Bue?"

"Alas!" said Thorar, "in these evil days he cannot entertain you all. Many of his people have fled to the woods already, and—to tell the truth—he, too, would feel ill at ease if he saw so brave a force come nigh him; for he is old, and his spirit is broken. But a following of twenty men or so he will gladly entertain. The others I shall have feasted here in the town at my own cost, and with them I shall leave my two young sons"—he indicated, as he spoke, the two lads. "They are my only children, and them I shall willingly give you as hostages till your return, that I may save my country from fire and sword. Though," he added, with a grave smile, "if men speak truth, Estein Hakonson can make good his coming or going against most."

"Be it as you will," replied Estein; "but if—" He paused, and looked sternly at Thorar.

"If a king's word and mine are not sufficient, and my only sons satisfy you not, I can but add my oath—though most men would deem it needless."

Thorar spoke with dignity and a touch of haughtiness, and Estein replied simply and courteously,—

"I shall come."

He turned to Helgi and said,—

"No fighting will there be, Helgi; but I have known you welcome even a feast. What say you?"

"This snow work and marching call for feasting," replied Helgi, with a laugh.

"Then Ketill shall stay here with the rest of our troop, and you and I, with twenty more, will to the king. Forward, men!"

"Spare not the ale," added Ketill.

"A courteous and gallant man is Thorar, for a Jemtlander," said Helgi to Ketill, as they marched down to the town.

"Dogs and women are his people," replied Ketill. "They are fit neither to be friends nor enemies."

Estein liberated the prisoners they had taken on the march, and leaving Ketill in charge of the main force and the hostages, he and Helgi set forth about noon for the seat of King Bue.

CHAPTER X. KING BUE'S FEAST.

Their way at first took them over a flat, white waste by the shores of the lake. Estein fell back and let Helgi walk in front with Thorar; behind those two marched the small band of wild, skin-coated followers of the lawman; and after them came the mail-clad twenty, the shields which hung from their backs clanking now and again as they struck their harness. Last of all walked their leader.

Now that the tension of forced marches and weary journeyings through forest paths was off his mind, his thoughts ran continually on the Runes. "Come hither to Jemtland," he said to himself. He had come, and what was to follow? Something he felt must happen, and though he was curious, he cared singularly little what it might be. The sun hung high overhead, under foot the snow crunched pleasantly, and the air was clear and bracing—a day to inspire an adventurer and a skald. His thoughts began to take a rhyming turn, and he caught himself repeating his own verses:—

"Fare thee well, sweet blue-eyed Osla!
The sea-king must not stay,
E'en for tresses rich as summer
And for smile as bright as May;
But one hope I cannot part from—
We may meet again some day!"

"And we shall, Osla!" he exclaimed half aloud.

He was aroused by hearing the voices of Helgi and Thorar come back to him clear and cheerfully. A thought struck him. Could Thorar have sent the message? A moment's reflection assured him that it was out of the question, but, to convince himself, he went forward and joined the lawman.

"Is it far to King Bue's hall?" he asked.

"The marshes are firm and frozen, and the snow lies nowhere very deep. We should reach it by nightfall."

Helgi laughed, and said,—

"A flight of wild ducks passed overhead just now, and called to mind their kinsmen cooked; their kinsmen cooked called to mind the wherewithal to wash them down; and, in brief, I, for one, shall be glad to meet King Bue."

"We have a saying that the king loves a guest who loves his cheer," replied Thorar with a smile.

"Know you one of an old man," Estein asked, "and—but I forget it—something of a maiden too? I saw it somewhere written in Runes."

In obedience to an indefinable instinct, he had said nothing of the token to Helgi, and his foster-brother looked at him in surprise. The mention of the Runes brought no look of recognition to Thorar's face. With his grave smile he answered,—

"There are many sayings concerning maids, and some concerning old men; also, if I mistake not, one or two about young men and maids."

"Spare Estein those last," cried Helgi lightly. "He thinks himself old, and never gives maids a thought at all."

Evidently Thorar knew nothing of the message, and Estein became silent again.

They were gradually approaching a dark forest, which stretched from the edge of the lake inland, and latish in the afternoon they entered it by a narrow, rutty road. Darkness closed in fast as they wound their way through the wood. The air grew colder and colder, till their hands and faces tingled with the frost. Silence fell upon them, and for some time nothing could be heard but the occasional clash of steel and the continual creaking of snow and breaking of dead branches under foot. Then a hum of voices came to them fitfully, and at last the path opened into a wide glade.

"We are almost there," said Thorar. "Smile not, Estein, at our rude hospitality; or, if you do, let our welcome make amends."

A young moon had just risen above the trees, and by its pale light they saw a small village at the end of the glade. Many lights flashed, and a babel of voices chattered and shouted as they approached.

"All King Bue's men have not fled, it seems," Helgi said in a low voice.

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Estein made no reply, but the two foster-brothers fell back, and placing themselves at the head of their twenty followers, entered the little village. They found that it consisted of a few mean houses clustered outside a high wooden stockade. Thorar led them up to a gateway in this fence, and crying, "Welcome, Estein!" stood aside to let the Norsemen file in.

The scene as they entered was strange and stirring. Immediately before them lay a wide courtyard, in the centre of which stood King Bue's hall, high and long, and studded with bright windows. Men were ranged in a line from the gateway to the hall, bearing great torches. The smoky flames flashed on snow-covered ground and wild faces, and the branches of black pines outside, making the night above seem dark as a great vault. All round them rose a clamour of voices, and a throng of skin-coated figures crowded the gate to catch a glimpse of the strangers.

Estein walked first, and just as he came into the court a man, pushed apparently by the surging crowd, stumbled against him.

"Make way, there!" cried Thorar sternly, from behind; "give room for the king's guests to pass!"

The man hastily stepped back, but not before he had found time to whisper,—

"Beware, Estein! Drink not too deep!"

As he walked along the line of torch-bearers to the door of the king's hall, the peril of their situation, supposing treachery were really intended, came suddenly home to Estein's mind. It was too late to turn back, even had his pride allowed him to think of taking such a course. He could only resolve to warn his men, and, so far as he could, keep them together and near him. Even as he was still turning the matter over in his mind, he found himself at the hall door, where an officer of the court, dressed with barbaric splendour, ushered him into the drinking-room. A discordant chorus of outlandish voices, raised by a hundred guests or more, bade him welcome. He walked up to his seat by the king, and on the spur of the moment could hit on no plan of communicating with his men. Helgi followed him to the dais, and with him he just found time to exchange a word.

"Drink little, and watch!" he whispered.

"Have you then seen him too?" Helgi replied, in the same anxious tone. Estein looked at him in surprise, and Helgi, coming close beside him, added rapidly,—

"The last torch-bearer but one was the man we captured in the forest and freed this morning, and methinks I see another of our prisoners even now. King Bue's hird-men [Footnote: Bodyguard.] both, sent—" he had to turn away abruptly, and Estein finished the sentence under his breath,—

"Sent to trap us."

He took his seat, and glancing round the hall saw his twenty followers scattered here and there among the crowd of guests.

"Fool!" he thought, "I have walked into the trap like a child in arms. The whole country has been prepared against our coming, the people told to leave their houses, and the king's own hird-men set as decoys in our path. Can this be the meaning of the Runes?"

Yet there was no actual proof of treachery, and he could only watch and listen. And certainly there was noise enough to be heard. Never among the most hardened drinkers of their own country had the foster-brothers seen such an orgie. The king, a foolish-looking old man, evidently completely under Thorar's influence, became very soon in a maudlin condition; man after man around them grew rapidly more and more drunk; and all the time they themselves were plied with ale so assiduously that their suspicions grew stronger. So far as his followers were concerned, Estein was helpless. He glanced round the hall now and then, and could see them quickly succumbing to the Jemtland hospitality. Personally he found it hard to refuse to pledge the frequent toasts shouted at him, but at last, when the men near him had got in such a state that their observation was dulled, he placed his drinking-horn on his lap and thrust his dagger through the bottom. Then, by keeping it always off the table, he was able to let the liquor run through as fast as it was filled, and always drain an empty cup. Helgi had adopted a different device. His head lay on his arms, and in reply to all calls to drink he merely uttered incoherent shouts, while every now and then Estein could see that he would shake with laughter.

Suspicious though he was, it came as a shock to Estein to hear his worst fears suddenly confirmed. Tongues had been freely loosed, and listening carefully to what was said, he heard the mutterings of the chief next him take a coherent form.

"Ay, little they know," he was saying to himself. "Let them drink, let them drink. Dogs of Norsemen, they

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came hither to harry our country, and here they shall stay. Ay, they shall never drink again, and King Hakon shall look for his son in vain."

Then the man lost his balance, and rolled off his seat under the board. He had been placed between Estein and Helgi, and now Estein was able to lean over to his foster-brother, and, under pretence of trying to make him drink, whispered in his ear,—

"Go out by the far door, and await me outside the court on the farthest side from the entrance."

Helgi lay still for a minute, and then rising to his feet, muttered something about "strong ale and fresh air," and staggered down the hall with a well-feigned semblance of drunkenness.

Thorar was sitting opposite, touched with drink a little, but still alert and sober enough. He glanced sharply at Estein; but the Viking, looking him full in the face, laughed noisily and cried,—

"Helgi's head seems hardly so strong as his hand, Thorar!"

For once the lawman was overreached, and with a laugh he drained his horn and answered,—

"I had thought better of you Norsemen."

The hardest part of the business now remained. To go out in the same way he knew would excite suspicion; if he delayed too long, search would be made for Helgi; and there sat Thorar facing him. He knew that if he could once get rid of him, he had little to fear from any of the others; and as he thought hard for a plan, the king, who had for some time been fast asleep, suddenly solved the difficulty. He woke with a start, saw that the drink was coming to an end, and cried with drunken ardour,—

"More ale, more ale, Thorar! Estein drinks not!"

Thorar glanced round and saw that no one but himself was capable of going on the errand. Twice he called aloud on servants by their names, but there came no answer. Then with a frown he rose and walked down the hall.

The high table at which they sat was lit by two great torches set on stands. While Thorar was still going down the room, Estein, with a deliberately clumsy movement, upset and extinguished the one nearest him. Casting a look over his shoulder, he saw the lawman leave the hall at the far end; and then he rose to his feet, and making an affectation of relighting the extinguished torch from the other, put the second out, and in the sudden half-darkness that ensued, slipped under the board, and ran on his hands and feet for the door at that end of the hall. No one about seemed to notice his departure, but just as he carefully opened the door he thought he saw with the corner of his eye a man slip out at the far end.

CHAPTER XI. THE HOUSE IN THE FOREST.

Coming from the warmth and light of the hall, the night outside struck sharp and bitterly cold. A thin cloud hid the moon, but there was quite light enough to see that the snow-covered court was deserted. Only in the shadows of the paling and the end of the house was it possible for a man to be concealed, and before he stepped away from the door Estein ran his eye carefully along both. He could see nothing, and had just stepped forward a pace, when noiselessly as a phantom a dark form appeared round the corner of the hall, and without pausing an instant came straight up to him. He saw only that the man was small, and wrapped in a cloak of fur; his sword flashed, and he was almost in the act of striking when the figure held up a hand and stopped.

"Who art thou?" said Estein in a low voice, coming forward a step as he spoke, and holding his sword ready to smite on the instant.

"Estein Hakonson," replied the other in the same tone, "waste not your blows on friends. Remember the Runes, and follow me. There is little time for words now."

He turned as he spoke, and looking over his shoulder to see that Estein followed him, started for the stockade. For an instant Estein hesitated.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed the man; "or do you wish to die here like a dog?"

"Lead on," replied Estein, and still holding his naked sword he followed him across the court.

The man went swiftly up to the paling, and taking an axe from under his cloak drove it hard into the wood as high above his head as he could reach. Then with the agility of a cat he drew himself up by it, seized the top of the fence, and sat there astride.

"Quick! quick!" he whispered. "Sheathe that sword, and stand not like a fool looking at me."

Estein, though a much heavier man, was active and lithe, and his guide, as he watched him mount, muttered,—

"That is better; we have a chance yet."

They dropped on the other side, and whispering to Estein to follow, the man turned to the wood and was about to plunge in, when his companion seized his arm, and said,—

"I trysted here with my foster brother. Till he comes I must wait."

The Jemtlander turned on him savagely and answered,—

"Think you I have to succour you of my own pleasure? Never had I less joy in doing anything. If your brother be not here now he will never come at all. I was not told to risk my life for him. Come on!"

"Go, then," said Estein; "here will I bide."

The man stamped his foot wrathfully, and turned sharply away as though he would leave him. Then he turned back and answered,—

"The gods curse you and him! See you this path opening ahead of us? Follow that with all the speed you can make, and I, fool that I am for my pains, shall turn back and bring him after you if he is to be found. Stare not at me, but hasten! I shall overtake you ere long."

With that he started off under the shadow of the stockade, and Estein, after a moment's deliberation, turned into the path. Never before had he felt himself so completely the football of fortune. Destiny seemed to kick him here and there in no gentle manner, and to no purpose that he could fathom. As he stumbled through the blackness of the tortuous forest path, he tried to connect one thing with another, and find some meaning in the token that had brought him here. Evidently the sender was so far from being in league with his foes that he made a kind of contrary current, eddying him one way just when fate seemed to have driven him another. To add to his perplexities, the disappearance of Helgi had now come to trouble his mind; he had heard no outcry or alarm, his foster-brother had time enough to have easily reached the rendezvous before him, and he felt as he walked like a man in a maze.

Suddenly there came a crash of branches at his side, a man stepped out of the trees, and before he had time to draw a weapon, the sharp, impatient voice of his guide exclaimed,—

"Is this all the way you have made? Your foster-brother has escaped, or has by this time been captured, I care not which. I saw him not."

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"But supposing I were more careful of his safety?" Estein demanded, with a note of anger in his voice.

"Push on!" replied the other. "The alarm is raised, and neither you nor Helgi can be found, so perchance he has not yet suffered for his folly. I came not out to hear you talk."

He started off as he spoke, and Estein, perceiving the hopelessness of further search, followed him with a heart little lightened.

"If they have not found him yet," he thought, "he has perhaps escaped. But why did he not wait for me? If he had been alive, he surely would have met me."

For some time he followed his mysterious guide in melancholy silence. There was only room for them to walk in single file, and it took him some trouble to keep up. Sometimes it seemed to him that they would leave the path and go straight through the trackless depths of the wood, with a quickness and assurance that astonished him. Then again they would apparently fall upon a path for a time, and perhaps break into a trot while the ground was clear.

At last they came into a long, open glade, where a stream brawled between snow-clad banks, and the vague form of some frightened animal flitted silently towards the shade. The moon had come out of the clouds, and by its light Estein tried to scan the features of his companion. So far as a fur cap would let his face be seen, he seemed dark, unkempt, and singularly wild of aspect, but there was nothing in his look to catch the Viking's memory. He said not a word, but, with a swinging stride, hastened down the glade, Estein close at his shoulder.

"Where do we go?" Estein asked once.

"You shall see what you shall see. Waste not your breath," replied the other impatiently.

Again they turned into the wood, and went for some considerable distance down a choked and rugged path which all at once ended in a clearing. In the middle stood a small house of wood. The frosted roof sparkled in the moonlight, and a thin stream of smoke rose from a wide chimney at one end, but there was never a ray of light from door or window to be seen. The man went straight up to the door and knocked.

"This then is the end of our walk," said Estein.

"It would seem so indeed," replied the other, striking the door again impatiently.

This time there came sounds of a bolt being shot back. Then the door swung open, and Estein saw on the threshold an old man holding in his hand a lighted torch. For an instant there passed through his mind, like a prospect shown by a flash of lightning, a sharp memory of the hermit Andreas. Instinctively he drew back, but the first words spoken dispelled the thought.

"I have waited for thee, Estein."

"Atli!" he exclaimed.

"Ay," said the old man. "I see thou knewest not where thy way would lead thee. But enter, Estein, if indeed after a king's feast thou wilt deign to receive my welcome."

He added the last words with a touch of irony that hardly tended to propitiate his guest.

"I have to thank you, methinks," replied Estein, as he entered, "for bringing me to that same banquet."

He found himself in a room that seemed to occupy most of the small house. One half of it was covered with a wooden ceiling which served as the floor of a loft, while for the rest of the way there was nothing beneath the sloping rafters of the roof. A ladder reached from the floor to the loft, and at one end, that nearest the outer door, a fire of logs burned brightly.

All round the walls hung the skins of many bears and wolves, with here and there a spear or a bow.

Atli left the other man to close the door, and followed Estein up to the fire.

He replied, either not noticing or disregarding the dryness of Estein's retort,—

"I knew well, Estein, thou wouldst come. Something told me thou wouldst not linger on my summons."

"Did you then send for me to lead me into this snare?" said Estein, his brows knitting darkly.

"Does one eagle betray another to the kites and crows?" replied the old man loftily.

Estein burst out hotly,—

"Speak plainly, old man! Keep mysteries for Rune-carved staves and kindred tricks. What mean this message and this plot and this rescue? I have left my truest friend and twenty stout followers besides in yonder hall. I myself have had to flee for my life from a yelping pack of Jemtland dogs; and for aught I know, Ketill and the rest of my force may be drugged with drink and burned in their beds even while I talk with you. Give me some plain answer?"

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Atli looked at him for a minute, and then replied gravely,—

"I have heard, indeed, that some strange change had befallen Estein Hakonson. There was a time when he who had just saved thy life would have had fairer thanks than this."

With a strong effort Estein controlled his temper and answered more quietly,—

"You are right. It was another Estein whom you saw before. Bear with me, and go on."

He sat down on a bench as he spoke and gazed into the fire.

"The gods indeed have dealt heavily with thee," said Atli, "and it is at their bidding that I called thee here."

"Spoke they with King Bue also?" said Estein, with a slight curl of his lip, looking all the time at the fire.

"Nay; hear me out, Estein. I knew that King Hakon would send, ere long, an avenging force to Jemtland."

"He was never the man to forgive an injury," he added, apparently to himself.

"So, as thou knowest, I sent that token to thee. Then unquiet rumours reached mine ears; for though I live apart from men here in this forest, little passes in the country—ay, and in Norway too—that comes not to Atli's knowledge. I learned of the plot to treacherously entrap thy force, and though I have long lived out of Norway my Norse blood boiled within me."

"Could you not have warned us sooner?" said Estein.

"Thorar kept his plans secret so long that it was too late to do aught save what I have done. I sent Jomar to the feast, as thou knowest."

Estein's guide had been sitting before the fire, consuming a supper of cold meat, and paying little heed to the talk, but at the last words he rose, and throwing the bones on to the flames, said,—

"It was by no will of mine; I bear no love to the Norsemen."

"Peace!" exclaimed Atli sternly. "Art thou too ungrateful for what I have done for thee, and fearless of what I can do?"

"Babble on with this Norseman. I am tired," replied Jomar, and leaving the fire, he rolled himself in a bear-skin, lay down on the floor, and in a trice was fast asleep.

"Say now to me, Estein," continued the old man, "that thou holdest me guiltless of all blame."

"Of all, save the snatching of me away from the fate of Helgi," replied Estein sadly. "Yet I remember that you yourself said that our ends should not be far apart, so I think you have but delayed my death a little while."

"Nay, rather," cried Atli enthusiastically, "believe that Helgi lives since thy life is safe! I tell thee, Estein, many fair years lie before thee. By my mouth, even by old Atli, the gods send a message to thee!"

His exalted tone, the animation of his face, and the flash of his pale eyes, impressed Estein strongly.

"By you?" he inquired with some wonder; "what then have you to do with me?"

With the same ringing voice the old man went on,—

"Even as over the windows of this poor house there hang those skins, so over my life hangs a curtain which may not yet be fully lifted—perchance the fates may decree that it shall ever hide me. A little, however, I may venture to raise it. Listen, Estein!"

CHAPTER XII. THE MAGICIAN.

As he said the last words Atli stooped, and lifting two large logs cast them on the fire. For a minute he watched them crackle and spit sparks, bending his brows as he deliberated how he should begin.

Then he turned to Estein and said,—

"When I saw thee by the shore at HERNERSFIORD, now some two years gone, didst thou think then that Atli was a stranger?"

"I thought so indeed," replied Estein, "though some words you let fall pointed otherwise."

"Yet, Estein," the old man said, "when thou wert no higher than that bench whereon thou sittest, I dandled thee in mine arms, and those fingers that now clasp a sword hilt, and, if men say true, clasp it right firmly, played once with my beard. Less snow had fallen on it then, Estein. Thou canst not remember me?"

Estein looked at him closely before replying.

"Nay, Atli, my memory carries me not so far back."

"So it was," Atli continued; "but chiefly was I the friend of thine ill-fated brother Olaf."

"Of Olaf?" exclaimed Estein, with a slight start.

"Ay, of Olaf. Often have I fought by his side on sea and shore, and dearly, more dearly than I ever loved man or woman since, I loved the youth. Thou even as a child wert strangely like him in features, and as I look upon thee now, there comes back memories of blither days. Wonder not then that I long was fain to see thee."

"Then why came you not to my father's house?" said Estein. "A friend of his son's would ever be welcome."

"Thy father and I fell out," replied Atli, "the wherefore I must still keep behind the shrouding-curtain, but for my present purpose it matters little. I could not visit Hakonstad; I could not even stay in the land of my birth. Olaf fell."

His voice trembled a little, and he paused. Estein said nothing, but waited for him to go on. Then in a brisker tone he continued,—

"For some years I sailed the west seas; but I was growing old and my strength was wearing away with the wet work and the fighting, so I hied me home again."

"And my father?" asked Estein. "Knew not of my coming," Atli replied. "Of friends and kinsmen I had few left in the land, but I had long had other thoughts for myself than the tilling of fields and the emptying of horns at Yule. Often at night had I sat out. [Footnote: To "sit out" was a method of reading the future practised by sorcerers, in which the magician spent the night under the open sky, and summoned the dead to converse with him.] I had read the stars, and talked with divers magicians and men skilled in the wisdom of things unseen. I wandered for long among the Finns, I dwelt with the Lapps, and learned the lore of those folks. Then I came to Jemtland, where cunning men were said to live."

"Cunning!" exclaimed Estein furiously; "treacherous hounds call them."

"Cunning, indeed, they are," said the old man, "but not wise. This Jomar here is held a spaeman by the people."

He glanced contemptuously at the sleeping figure on the floor.

"Since I came," he went on, "I have taught him more than he could have learned in a lifetime here and now, as thou hast seen, he fears and obeys me as a master. With him I took up my abode, living in a spot known only to few. Yet my thoughts turned continually to Norway, and chiefly flew to thee, Estein. I dreamt of thee often, and at last a voice"—his own sank almost to a whisper as he spoke—"a voice bade me seek thee. How I fared thou knowest."

"I would that I had given more heed to your warning," said Estein gloomily.

"It all came true then?" cried Atli. "Nay, there is no need to answer. Truth I tell, and truth must happen."

"Have you, then, further rede to give me?"

"Ay, I have heard of this spell and the sore change that has befallen thee, and in my dreams and outsittings I have seen many things—an old man habited in a strange garb, and a maid by his side. Ha! flew the shaft true?"

So carried away was Estein by the seer's earnestness, and so suddenly did his last words strike home, that the thought never occurred to him that this might only be the gossip of his followers come in time to Atli's ears. It

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seemed to him an inspired insight into his past, and he started suddenly, and then said slowly,—

"The shaft indeed flew true."

"For thy brother's sake I owe thee something," the old man went on; "I might give weighty reason, but I may not. For thine own I wish to heal thee, and if I cannot cure this spell there is no man who can.

"Wilt thou trust me with the story?" he added, a little dubiously.

"Ask not that of me," replied Estein. "Tell me what to do, and I promise I shall follow the rede."

As if afraid that to ask further questions might weaken the force of his words, Atli fell at once into his mystic manner again.

"For long I wrestled with the visions. The faces of the wizard and the witch" (Estein's look darkened for an instant), "I could not see, but at last, in the still night-time, there spoke a voice to me, and I knew it came from the gods. For three nights it spoke. On the fourth I sat out, and called to me from far beyond the mountains and the lakes, even from beyond the grave, thy brother Olaf. He too spoke to me, and every time the purport of the message was the same."

"What said the voice?"

"A ship must cross the seas again."

The old man repeated the last words low and slowly, and then, for a little, silence fell upon the pair. Vague and meagre though the message was, it accorded exactly with Estein's long-suppressed desires. So entirely did Atli believe in himself and the virtue of his counsel, that the young Viking was thoroughly infected with his faith; and then, too, it was that early and suggestive hour when a man is quickly stirred.

Estein was the first to speak.

"I accept the counsel, Atli," he cried, springing to his feet. "With the melting of the snow I shall take to the sea again, and steer for the setting of the sun."

The old seer laid his hand affectionately upon his shoulder.

"There spoke the brother of Olaf," he said. "And now to sleep. In the morning I shall send Jomar to warn Ketill, so trouble not thyself further."

"If I but knew Helgi's fate," Estein began.

"Doubt not my words," said Atli. "His fate is too closely linked with thine."

He showed the Viking to a pallet bed in the loft, where, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, he quickly fell asleep.

It was nearly noon when he awoke, and the sun was streaming through the attic window. He found Atli in the room below.

"I have turned sluggard, it seems," he said.

"Young heads need sleep," replied the old man. "There was no need to rise before, or I should have roused thee. Jomar has been gone since daybreak, and till he returns thou canst do naught."

"Naught?" said Estein. "Have I not got my foster-brother to seek for? Give me but a meal to carry me till nightfall and I will away."

At first the old man endeavoured to dissuade him, but finding he was obdurate, he finally gave him a cap and coat of wolf-skin to be worn over his mail lest he should be seen by any natives, a good bow and arrows, and copious but perplexing directions regarding the forest paths. As he sallied forth, and followed the track by which he had come the night before, his plans were vague enough. To make for King Bue's hall, and, taking advantage of the woods that covered all the country, spy out what might be seen, was the hazardous scheme he proposed. Perhaps, he thought, Helgi might be wandering the country too, and if fate was kind they might meet. In any case he could not rest in his state of uncertainty, and he pushed boldly on. He smiled as he glanced at his garb: the long wolf-skin coat reached almost to his knees, over his legs he had drawn thick-knitted hose to keep out the cold, his helmet was hidden by the furry cap, and the only part of his original equipment to be seen were the sword girt round his waist and the long shield that hung upon his back. He had been in two minds about taking this last, but ere the day was done he had reason to congratulate himself that it was with him.

Before long he struck the open glade they had gone down by moonlight, and following it to the end, he found, after a little search, the opening of another path. This at last divided into two divergent tracks, and he had to confess himself completely puzzled.

"I seem to be the plaything of fate," he exclaimed, after he had tried in vain to recall Atli's directions; "let fate

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decide, life is but made up of the castings of a die," and with that he threw his dagger into the air, crying, "Point right, haft left!" It landed on its point and sunk almost out of sight in the snow. "Right let it be then," he said, and turned down the right-hand path.

It had been so dark and their flight so hurried that nothing remained in his memory of the night before, to show him whither the way was leading. He only knew that he had wandered for some time, when a prospect of white, open country began to show in peeps through the trees ahead. Presently he came to the edge of the forest, and saw that the cast of his dagger had led him wide of his mark. A long stretch of treeless country opened out before him, getting wider and wider in the distance. Near at hand a narrow lake began, and stretched for a mile or two down the snow-fields, and, like the greater lake they had passed, it was frozen and shining white. Less than a hundred yards from him, between the forest and the water, there lay a small village. A number of men stood about among the houses, and from their movements and the presence of two or three sledges he judged that a party must either have lately arrived, or be on the point of departing. As nothing further seemed to happen, he made up his mind that they must be arrivals; and then, seeing little to be gained by waiting further, he was about to retrace his steps when his attention was arrested by the appearance of two women. They came out of a house, and one, the taller of the two, went up to a group of men standing near, while the other, who looked like a peasant's wife, hung behind. The look of the first figure caught Estein's eye at once, and he felt his heart suddenly beat quickly. He could only see her back as she talked with the men, but every gesture she made, slight though they were, brought sharply and clearly before his mind memories of the Holy Isle.

"By the hammer of Thor and the horse of Odin, this country is surely bewitched," he muttered. His fancy, he told himself, was playing him a pleasant trick: he had seen Osla so continually in his mind's eye, that this girl, for girl she seemed, shaped herself after his thoughts. That it could be she he loved, there in the flesh, was almost laughably impossible; yet as she talked, apparently with an air of some authority, to the men beside her, the resemblance became at moments stronger, and then again he would say to himself, "Nay, that is not like her." As the men gesticulated and answered her their voices came to him indistinctly, while hers, strain his hearing as he might, he could not catch. There seemed to be a dispute about something which the whole party were engrossed in, when suddenly one man gave a cry and pointed at Estein. Then he saw that in his curiosity he had stepped outside the shelter of the wood and stood in a space between the trees.

At the man's cry they all looked round, and he saw the girl's face.

"It is she or her spirit," he exclaimed.

Instinctively he stepped behind a tree, and at this sign of flight there was a shout from the men. One shot an arrow, which passed harmlessly to the side, and then they all came at him. He had only time to see that more villagers were coming out of the houses, and that the girl had turned away to join the other woman, when his wits came back to him, and turning into the path he set off as fast as he could put his feet to the ground.

For a time the chase was hot: he could hear the men scattering so as to cover the wood behind him, and once or twice the leaders seemed near. Estein was fleet of foot, however, and the wood so dense that it was hard to follow a man for far, and at last the sound of his pursuers died away, and he felt that, for the time at least, he was safe. But he had long left the path, and there was nothing to guide him save glimpses of the sinking sun, the ice that showed the north side of twigs and stems, and in more open spaces the lie of the branches to the prevalent wind. And as he wandered on, his mind hardly grasped the bearing and significance of forest clues. Twenty times, at least, he dismissed the resemblance he had seen as the work of fancy. The girl had been too far off to read her features, her figure was not really like, and, most weighty argument, it was out of all reason that she should be in this land of forests, so distant from her island home. Still each time he dismissed it the resemblance came back fresh and strong, to be sent away again. He had lost all idea of where he was, and the sun had already set, when more by good luck than by good guidance, the trees grew thinner in front, and he found himself once more in the glade of the stream.

CHAPTER XIII. ARROW AND SHIELD.

It seemed strangely still and fresh in the open glade. The blood-red glamour of a frosty sunset was fading from the sky as the daylight died away; all round the wood was populous with shadows; and over its ragged edge the moon hung pale and faint.

Estein walked down a little way, and then stopped and listened. He could hear the stream rumbling over the stones, but not another sound. Then the far-off howl of a wolf struck dismally on his ear. Twice it sounded and passed away, leaving the silence more intense, while all the time the air grew colder. All at once a dead branch snapped sharply. Estein looked round keenly, but in the dusk of the pine stems his eye could pick out nothing. For a minute everything was still, and then a twig cracked again. This time he could see plainly a man come from behind a tree and stand in the outskirts of the wood. For a minute they stood looking at each other. The man, so far as he could discern in the waning light, wore the native skin coat and cap, and seemed to hold in his hands a bow ready to shoot.

Estein quietly drew an arrow from his quiver and laid it on his bow. Just as he cast his eye down to fit the notch to the string, there was a twang from the wood; an arrow whizzed, and stuck hard in his fur cap, stopping only at the steel of his helmet.

"This archer will deem my fur is of singular proof," he said to himself, with the flicker of a smile, as he let a shaft fly in return. He could see his foe move to one side, and heard his arrow strike a branch. Instantly the man fired again, and this time struck him on the breast, and the arrow, checked by the ring-mail beneath, hung from his wolf-skin coat.

He smiled to himself again, and thought, "Never, surely, has that bowman shot at so stout a garment. Yet he shoots hard and straight. I wish not to meet with a stronger archer, and could do well with a worse one now." And with that he took his shield from his back.

His situation was indeed far from safe, and he had to come to some instant decision. Standing in the open against the snow, he offered a fair mark, while his opponent among the trees was hard to see and harder to hit. To try to rush so good an archer, though risky, would certainly have been his scheme, had he not strongly suspected that this one man was set as a decoy to tempt him into an ambush. His blood was up, and he vowed that run he would not at any cost; and, in fact, flight was far from easy, for behind him lay the stream, and in crossing he must expose himself.

It took him but a moment to turn the alternatives over in his mind, and then he suddenly hit upon a plan. His shield was one of the long, heart-shaped kind, coming to a point at the lower end, and covering him down to the knee as he stood upright. He raised it high, and driving the point hard into the ground, dropped on one knee behind it. As he stooped a third arrow sang close above his head and sped into the gloaming. Leaning to one side he fired again, and an instant later a fourth shaft rang on his shield. Then came a brief pause in the hostilities, and, looking round the edge of his fort, Estein could see his foe standing motionless close under a tree. He soon tired of waiting, however, and presently an arrow, aimed evidently at what he could see of Estein's legs, passed within six inches of one knee and buried itself in the snow beside him.

"He shoots too well," muttered Estein. "If this goes on I must try a desperate ruse. I shall have one other shot."

He rose almost to his full height, fired his arrow, and quickly stooped again. His enemy was evidently on the watch for such an opening, for the two bowstrings twanged together, and while Estein's shaft struck something with a soft thud, the other hit the Viking hard on the headpiece.

Throwing up his arms, he reeled and fell flat upon his back. Yet, as he lay for all the world like a man struck dead, a smile stole over his face, and he quietly and gently drew his sword.

"Can my shaft have gone home?" he wondered. Apparently not, for his foeman left the shelter of the wood, and he could see him walk slowly across the open. He was clad in a loose and almost grotesquely ill-fitting garment, seemingly of sheep-skin, and held an arrow on his bow ready to shoot on a sign of movement. When he had come within ten or fifteen yards, he suddenly dropped his bow, drew his sword, and stepped quickly forward. At the same instant Estein jumped to his feet, and with a shout sprang at him. The blades were on the point of crossing, when his enemy stopped short, dropped his point, and then burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

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"Estein, by the beard of Thor!" he gasped.

"Helgi!" cried his quondam foe.

They looked each other in the face for an instant, and then simultaneously broke out into another fit of mirth.

"By my faith, Estein, that was a plan worthy of yourself!" cried Helgi. "But 'tis lucky I fired not at you on the ground, as I had some thoughts of doing, knowing the trickery of these Jemtlanders."

"Two things I feared," replied Estein. "One that you might do that; the other, that a troop of as villainous-looking knaves as you now are yourself might hive out of the wood behind you. But how did you escape last night, and how came you here?"

"Those are the questions I would ask of you," said Helgi; "but one story at a time, and shortly this is mine—a tale, Estein, that for credit to its teller, yoked with truthfulness, I will freely back against yours or ever I hear it."

"I doubt it not," replied his friend, with a smile; "you have the look of one who is high in favour with himself."

"As I ought!" cried Helgi. "But hear me, and gibe not before the end. I left that hall, accursed of the gods, and over full, I fear, of drunken men, in the manner you witnessed. My counterfeit of drunkenness was so exceedingly lifelike, that even when I got outside I felt my head buzz round in the fresh air and my legs sway more than is their wont. 'Friend Helgi,' I said to myself, 'you have drunk not one horn too few if you value your life at its proper worth.' Upon that I applied a handful of snow to my face, and thereupon, on counting my fingers, was able to get within one of the customary number—erring, if I remember rightly, upon the generous side, as befitted my disposition. But to get on to the moving part of my adventures—Where do you take me now?"

"'Tis all right," replied Estein, "I take you to supper and a fire. They come in my story."

"Lead on then," said Helgi. "To continue my tale: I walked with much assurance up to the gateway, singing, I remember, the song of Odin and the Jotun to prove the clearness of my head. There I found a sentinel who, it seemed, had lately been sharing in the hospitality of King Bue. Certain it is that he was more than half drunk, and so fast asleep that he woke not even at my singing, and I had to prod him with the hilt of my sword to arouse the sluggard."

"Then you woke him!" exclaimed Estein, between amusement and surprise.

"How else could I pass? The man leaned so heavily upon the gate, that wake him I must, for I liked not to slay a sleeping man, even though he stood upon his feet. He looked upon me like a startled cow, and said, 'You are a cursed Norseman.' 'It would seem so, indeed,' I replied, and thereupon ran him through with my blade and opened the gate. Then a plan both humorous and ingenious came upon my mind, for my wits were strangely sharp. I laid the man out under the shadow of the fence, where he could not well be seen save by such as had more clearness of vision than becomes the guests of so hospitable a monarch as King Bue, and having stripped him of his coat and put it round mine own shoulders, I took his place and awaited your coming."

"Singing all the while?" said Estein.

"Softly and to myself," replied Helgi; "for what is becoming enough in a guest is not always so well suited to a sentinel. There I stood, stamping my feet and beating my arms upon my breast to keep the cold away, till I began to think that something was amiss."

"Then while I was scaling the wall at one end of the court, you were guarding the gate at the other!" exclaimed Estein.

"So it would appear now, though I pledge you my word I had no thought of such a thing as I watched that gate last night. In truth, what I had done began to seem to me so plainly the best thing to do, that I thought you would surely follow my movements in your mind—so far as drink allowed you, and come straightway to the gate in full confidence of finding me on duty. I see now that your plan had its merits, though I still maintain that mine was the better."

"Saving only in so far as it left me at the trysting-place alone," said Estein.

"And me to shiver at the gate," answered Helgi, with a laugh. "Well, after a time, which seemed long enough, though doubtless a shorter space than I thought, the hall door opened, and men rushed out with much needless uproar. Then, I must confess, I e'en left my post with all the haste I could, and concealed me in the outbuildings of a small house close without the gate. The door was open, but it was so pitch black inside that I knew they could not see me, though them I saw plainly enough as they stopped at the gate."

"Who were they?" asked Estein.

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"The black traitor Thorar, and with him some ten or twelve others, doubtless all the sober men at the feast. It took them but a short space to find the dead sentinel; and thereupon Thorar, who seemed almost beside himself with anger, sent the others off in haste to intercept our road to Ketill, while he himself ran to collect a force from the village. Then I bethought me it was well to have company on the road, so I even joined myself to my pursuers. Luckily they went not by the open glade, but kept a path well shaded and very dark, and for the best part of an hour we must have run together through the wood.

"At last we reached a solitary woodman's house, and there for a brief space we paused to inquire of the good man whether he had seen us pass that way. It was a wise inquiry, and the answer was such as an entirely sober man might have reasonably expected. The woodman was in the village at the feast, and his wife, good woman, had been in bed for the last two hours, and strangely enough had not seen us. So our brisk lads started off at the run again. But there we parted company, for I was tired of chasing myself, and the woman had a pleasant voice, and, so far as I could see, a comely countenance."

Estein laughed aloud. "My story will seem a tame narrative after this," he exclaimed.

"Did not I say so," said Helgi. "Well, I fell behind, and presently was knocking up the good woman again, for I said to myself, 'These dogs will not surely come to this house a second time, and a night in the cold woods is not to my liking.' So to make a long story short, I wrought so upon the tender heart of the woodman's wife that, Norseman as I was, she gave me shelter and bed, and promised to send me off in the morning before her husband returned."

"As most wives would," interposed Estein.

Helgi laughed. "Fate had decided otherwise," he continued. "Even as I was eating my morning meal, the goodwife waiting on me most courteously, the door opened and the husband entered. I saw from the man's ugly look that all his wife's wiles were lost upon him; but the dog was a cowardly dog, and feared the game he thirsted to fix his treacherous teeth in. He had nothing for it but to equip me with this great sheep-skin coat and cap, and a stout bow and sheaf of arrows; and then, after a most kindly parting with his goodwife, I made him set me on my way to Ketill. He liked not the job over much, yet he dared not refuse, and so we started. I shrewdly suspected, from my memory of the way I had come overnight, that he was leading me back to King Bue's hall, and meant on our parting to put a horde of his rascally fellows in my way. I cared little, however, for I had mine own ending for our walk. When we had gone a little way I stopped and said to him,—

"'My friend, I am loth to lose your company, but here is the parting of our ways. Mine I need not trouble you with, but yours for a space will lead you little further in any direction.' And with that I bound him firmly to a tree, and left him to think upon his misdeeds. Since then, Estein, I have wandered through these forests like a man in a fog, cursing roundly the land and all its inhabitants."

"Yet it would seem that it is they who have most reason to complain of your dealings with them," said Estein, smiling.

"I would I were well quit of the land," replied his friend. "My heart felt glad when I saw in the glade a man habited after the fashion of the natives. 'There will be one less Jemtlander to-night,' I said, as I laid an arrow on my bow. 'By all the gods, Estein, I shall laugh whenever I think of it!'

"But tell me your adventures."

Estein told him shortly what had befallen him, excepting only his seeing the girl in the village. He had made up his mind that the resemblance must have been the work of fancy, yet as soon as they had reached the house of Atli, he took the old man aside, and asked him,—

"Shall I then sail when the snows have melted?"

"Assuredly," replied the seer; "wouldst thou delay what the gods and the dead enjoin?"

CHAPTER XIV. THE MIDNIGHT GUEST.

Jomar had returned early in the day, and they found him already wrapped up in his bear-skin fast asleep before the fire.

"Gave he my warning to Ketill?" Estein asked Atli.

"Assuredly," replied the old man; "I have never known him fail me, little though he may have liked the errand."

"And what said Ketill? Had they been attacked? What news brought Jomar back?"

"Let us wake the knave, and ask him," said Helgi; and suiting the action to the word, he drove one foot sufficiently hard into the sleeper's side to rouse him with a start.

"What said friend Ketill?" Helgi went on, careless of the man's ugly look; "sent he back any message?"

Jomar answered with a dark scowl, regarding him steadily for a minute as if to make sure who he was, and then he snapped back shortly,—

"He said he had lost a dog that answered to the name of Helgi, and would be well pleased if the beast had died of the mange in the wood," and without another word he rolled over and closed his eyes again.

"Dog!" cried Helgi. "Hound, I will beat one dog as it deserves!"

In another instant the Jemtlander would have suffered for his temerity, had not Atli seized the angry Norseman's arm, exclaiming,—

"Peace, Helgi Sigvaldson! Wouldst thou strike my servant in mine own house? The man loves not Norsemen, yet has he saved thy foster-brother's life, and likely, too, those of Ketill and all his company."

"Tell us, Atli," interposed Estein, "what he said on his return."

"Little he told even me," replied Atli, "save that he had seen Ketill for the briefest possible space, and then returned straightway home."

"Did he hear aught of the twenty good men who followed us to King Bue's hall?"

It was Jomar himself who replied, though without turning over or looking at the speaker.

"Would you have me save them, too, from their fate? I heard naught of them, and wish only to hear of their deaths. Too many enemies have I helped already."

Helgi was about to reply hotly, but Atli checked him with a gesture, whispering,—

"Will not his deeds atone for his words?"

Low as he spoke, Jomar caught the words, and muttered loud enough to be heard,—

"Would that my words might become my deeds."

Nothing about the mysterious old man had impressed Estein more than his extraordinary influence over this strange disciple or servant, for he seemed to be partly both; and that one who so loathed and hated the Norsemen could be made to serve his enemies at a word, seemed to point to a power beyond the ken of ordinary man. Helgi, too, was evidently struck, for he looked askance from one to the other, and then fell silent.

By sunrise next morning, the foster-brothers arranged to start for Ketill under Jomar's guidance, and little time was lost in getting to bed. They went up to the loft by the ladder, heard Atli open a door and evidently enter some inner room, then being very drowsy after the cold air, shortly fell asleep.

Yet the night was not to pass without incident. Helgi knew not how long he had been asleep, when he woke with a shiver, to find that his blankets had slipped off him. He gathered them over him again, and then lay for a few minutes listening to the rising wind. As it beat up in mournful gusts and souged through the pines, he said to himself, "The frost has left at last, and thankful am I for that." He was just dropping off to sleep again, when his attention was startled into wakefulness by a knock at the outer door. It was repeated twice, and then he heard Jomar rise with much growling, and go softly across the floor. There followed a parley apparently through a closed door, which ended in a bolt shooting back, and the door opening with a whistle of wind. So far he had been in that half-waking state when things produce a confused and almost monstrous impression, but suddenly his wits were startled into quickness. Among several voices that seemed to talk with Jomar, his ear all at once caught a woman's. Even the approach of an enemy could not have made him more alert. He listened keenly and, with a sensible feeling of disappointment, heard the door close, the noise cease, and Jomar's steps quietly cross the floor

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again. This time, however, they went right to the other end of the room, and an inner door opened. He thought he caught Atli's tones answering his sullen servant, and presently he heard two men come out and go to the outer door. Again, with a blast of cold draught, it opened, and the talk began a second time. His curiosity was keenly excited; he could pick out a woman's voice most unmistakably, and at last he heard the conference come to an end. The door closed, the party seemed to go away, and then whispering began in the room below him.

"The woman has come in!" he said to himself, with a start of excitement. "Helgi, this matter needs your attention."

His bed, the outermost of the two, consisted merely of a coarse mattress laid so far back in the loft that the edge of the flooring hid all view of the room below. Very softly he proceeded to throw off the blankets and crawl quietly towards the edge, till he had gone far enough to get a clear sight of the fire. There he lay, and smiled to himself at the prospect below.

The fire had been raked up to burn brightly, and Jomar, as before, lay fast asleep beside it; but between Helgi and the blaze stood the old seer and the hooded and cloaked form of a woman. Her face was hidden, but her back, the watcher thought, promised well. She was tall, and seemed young, and her movements, as she held out her hands to the flames, or half turned to address the old man, had grace and the marks of good birth. They talked so low that Helgi could catch nothing they said, and even the quality of the girl's voice only reached him in snatches.

"A pleasant voice, methinks," he said to himself. "Atli, this booty must be shared."

She seemed to be telling a narrative to Atli, who, with folded arms and deep attention that sometimes passed into suppressed emotion, looked intently at her, and frequently broke in with some whispered question.

The Viking had not been watching very long when the girl's voice rose a little as she said something earnestly, and Atli, with a slight movement and a warning frown, glanced up at the loft and pointed with one finger straight at where Helgi lay. Instantly he dropped his head, and as quickly as he dared crawled back to bed again. There was silence for a moment, but apparently they suspected nothing, for the whispered talk went on again.

"By valour or guile I shall see that maiden's face," he said to himself, as he lay revolving possible schemes in his mind.

At last the whispering stopped, and Atli's step crossed the room and passed into the inner apartment. The door closed behind him, and then saying to himself, "Now or never, my friend," Helgi quietly slipped into his sheep-skin coat, and stepping softly so as not to disturb Estein or the seer, came boldly down the ladder.

The girl's look, as he turned at the foot and faced her, stuck in his mind for long after. Consternation and her sense of the ludicrous were having such an obvious struggle in every feature, that after looking straight into her face for a moment, he fairly burst into a silent convulsion of laughter that shook him till he had to steady himself by a rung of the ladder. So infectious was it, that after the briefest conflict, consternation fled the field, a little smile appeared, and then a merrier, and in a moment she was laughing with him. And certainly for a man commonly most careful of his appearance, he cut a comical enough figure, with his shoeless feet and tangled hair, and the great ill-fitting sheep-skin coat huddled round him to hide the poverty beneath.

"I fear my habit pleases not your eye," he said at last, striving to control his countenance.

"It is—" she began, and then her gravity for an instant forsook her again. "It is highly befitting," she said, more soberly and a little shyly.

"In truth, a garb to win a maiden's heart; but I recked not of my clothing, I was in such haste to see the maid," said Helgi boldly.

She looked at him with some surprise, and just a sufficient touch of dignity to check the dash of his advances. He saw the change, and quickly added,—

"To be quite honest with you, I knew not indeed that you were here, and feeling cold I came down to warm me. I should ask your pardon."

"Not so," she said; "how could you know that I was here? I have only just arrived."

"And I," replied Helgi, "leave early in the morning, though now I would fain stay longer. So you will soon forget the man in the sheepskin coat who so alarmed you."

"But not the coat," she said demurely, her blue eyes lighting up again. Helgi's vanity was a little stung, but he answered gaily,—

"I then will remember your face, and you—"

At that instant a door opened, and turning suddenly he saw Atli come from behind a great bearskin that

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concealed the entrance to his inner chamber. The old man's face grew dark with displeased surprise, yet he hesitated for an instant, as if uncertain what to do. Then he came up to the girl and said,—

"Thy chamber is ready for thee." To Helgi he added, "I would speak with thee, Helgi."

The girl at once left the fire, and followed him back to the other room. As she turned away, Helgi said,—
"Farewell, lady."

"Farewell," she answered frankly, with a smile, and went out with Atli.

"A bold raid and a lucky one," said the Viking complacently to himself. "A fairer face and brighter eyes I never saw before. Who can she be? Like enough some lady come to hear the spaeman's mystic jargon, and swallow potions or mutter spells at his bidding. I am in two minds about turning wizard myself, if such visitors be common. Methinks I could give her as wise a rede as Atli. But it is strange how she came here; she is not of this country, I'll be sworn."

His reflections were cut short by the entrance of Atli.

"Helgi," said the old man, still speaking very low, "thou hast seen that which ought to have remained hidden from thee."

"But which was well worthy of the seeing," said Helgi.

"Speak not so lightly," replied the old man sternly, and with that air of mystery he could make so impressive. "Thou knowest not what things are behind the veil, or how much may hang upon a word. I charge thee strictly that thou sayest no word of this to Estein; there are matters that should not come to the ears of kings."

"I shall say nothing to any one," Helgi answered more soberly.

"That is well said," replied Atli. "Sleep now, for the dawn draws nigh, and the way is long."

Helgi had just got back to the loft and was throwing off his coat again, when Estein suddenly rose on his elbow and looked at him, and for a minute he felt like a criminal caught in the act.

"Have I been dreaming, Helgi?" said his foster-brother, "or—or— where have you been?"

"To warm myself at the fire," replied Helgi readily.

"Spoke you with any one?"

"Ay; Atli heard me and came to see whether perchance a thief had come in to carry away his two Norsemen."

"Then I only dreamt," said Estein, passing his hand across his eyes. "I thought I heard the voice of a girl; but when I woke more fully, it was gone, indeed. It sounded like—but it was my dream;" and lying down again, he closed his eyes.

"Should I tell him?" thought Helgi; "nay, I promised Atli, and after all this is mine own adventure."

By the time the day had fairly broken, they were away under Jomar's guidance.

"Remember, Estein, my rede," said Atli, as they departed.

"When the snows melt," cried Estein in reply; "and I think I shall not have long to wait."

It was a raw, grey, blustering morning, with no smell of frost in the air, but rather every sign of thaw, and the old man, after watching the two tall mail-clad figures stride off with their dwarfish guide hastening in front, closed the door, and turned with a grave and weary look back to the fire.

Hardly had he come in when the inner door opened, and the girl entered hastily.

"Who was that other man?" she asked. "I saw but his back, and yet— —" she stopped with a little confusion, for Atli was regarding her with a look of keen surprise.

"Knowest thou him?" he asked. "Where hast thou seen him before?"

"Nay," she answered, with an affectation of indifference, as if ashamed of her curiosity, "I only wondered who he might be."

"He is a certain trader from Norway, whom men call Estein," said Atli, still looking at her curiously.

"I know not the name," she said; and then adding with a slight shiver, "How cold this country is," she turned abruptly and left the room again.

The old man remained lost in thought. "Strange, passing strange," he muttered, pressing his hand to his forehead. "Can she have seen him? Or can it be—"

His eyes suddenly brightened, and he began to pace the room.

CHAPTER XV. THE LAST OF THE LAWMAN.

In silence and haste the three men pursued their way. A thaw had set in, chill and cloudy; underfoot the snow was soft and melting, and all through the forest they heard the drip of a thousand trees and the creaking and swinging of boughs in the wind. As the morning wore on and they warmed to their work, the two Norsemen talked a little with each other, but contrary to their wont of late, it was Estein who spoke oftenest and seemed in the better spirits. Helgi, for him, was quiet and thoughtful, and at last Estein exclaimed,—

"How run your thoughts, Helgi? on the next feast, or the last maid, or the man you left bound to the tree? Men will think we have changed natures if our talk goes as it has this morning."

"I had a strange dream last night," replied Helgi.

"Tell it to me, and I will expound it to a flagon or an eyelash, as the theme may chance to be."

"Nay," cried Helgi, with a sudden return to his usual buoyancy, "now that I have my old Estein back with me, I will not turn him again into a reader of dreams and omens. I am rejoiced to see you in so bright a humour. Had you a pleasant dream?"

"Action lies before me," said Estein—"the open sea and the lands of the south again; and the very prospect is medicine."

After a time Estein came up to their guide's side, and said,—

"It will take us surely longer than you said. We had to travel for long through open country when we left the town, and we have never reached the beginning of it yet."

Jomar gave a quick, contemptuous laugh, and answered shortly,—

"Think you then that Thorar brought you by the shortest route? Those prisoners whom you set free reached King Bue's hall many hours before you. You are not wise, you Northmen."

Estein looked for a moment as though he would have retorted sharply, but biting his lip he fell back again, nor did he exchange another word with the man.

It was about mid-day, when, as they were coming down a wooded slope, Helgi exclaimed,—

"Hark! what is that clamour?"

Jomar too heard the shouts, for he stopped for a moment and listened keenly, and then started off faster than before. With every step they took the distant sounds grew louder and the shouts of men, and even it seemed the clash of steel, could be distinguished.

"The attack is made," cried Helgi. "Pray the gods they scatter not the dogs before we come up."

Jomar heard him, and looked over his shoulder with a savage glance.

"Sometimes dogs bite and rend," he said.

"Why have they waited so long?" said Estein, half to himself. "The fools should have fallen on Ketill that very night. I thank them for their folly."

They had now broken into a run, and the uproar sounded so loud that they knew they must be close upon the town.

"Some one comes," exclaimed Helgi, and just as he spoke a man dashed past them in the opposite direction, and throwing them only a startled glance, disappeared among the trees behind. A minute later two others ran by to one side, and a fourth stopped and turned when he came upon them. All were Jemtlanders, and Jomar, when he saw them, cursed aloud, while the Norsemen pressed the more excitedly forward.

Thirty yards further and they were at the edge of the wood, stopping at a spot not far from where the expedition first came out upon the town. The great lake and the open country lay below them, white still, but with all the sheen and sparkle off them, and overhung now by a grey, wet-weather sky. But they took little note of sky or snow-fields, for their eyes were enthralled by a more stirring spectacle.

Over the little town rolled a dense and smoky canopy, and from each doomed house the flames leapt and danced. All around it the plain was alive with the signs and terrors of war they saw, black against the snow, men flying over the open country, turning sometimes for the woods, or sometimes sliding and running across the frozen lake, the shouts of the pursuers came to them in a confusion of uproar, and here and there out over the waste, and more thickly near the town, the dead lay scattered. The battle was at an end. Small parties of Norsemen

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were still driving the vanquished Jemtlanders before them cutting them down as they fled; but the main force seemed already to be devoting itself to the burning and sacking of the town, and Helgi sighed as he exclaimed,—

"Too late after all! the cowardly rabble could not even fight till we had come to join in the sport."

Like an infuriated animal Jomar turned upon him.

"Whelp of a Norseman!" he cried, drawing his dagger and springing forward, "never more—"

As he spoke, Estein, who stood between them, had just time to throw out one foot and bring the Jemtlander flat on his face, his dagger flying from his hand. After looking for a moment in astonishment at their fallen guide, his would-be victim burst out laughing, and picking up the dagger, handed it back to him, saying,—

"I forgot, friend Jomar, that you were so nigh me. You owed me something, indeed, but try not to pay it like that again, for your own sake."

The man took the dagger sullenly and answered,—

"I hope never more to see either of you. Go down to the town now, if you can reach it without losing your way again, and my curse go with you."

Without waiting for reply or reward, he left them abruptly, and disappeared in the wood. "That is a man I am glad to see the last of," said Helgi, as they started for the town. "It can only be by black magic that Atli made him serve us."

"It is strange indeed," replied Estein, thoughtfully. "I have noted before that a powerful mind has a strong influence on men of less wisdom, yet like enough there is something more besides."

When they had come near enough to be recognized, a loud and joyful shout went up from their men; one after another of the victors ran out to meet them, and it was with quite a company at their back that they entered the burning town. In the open market-place, round which most of the houses stood, they found Ketill, his armour dented and smeared with blood, and his eyes gleaming with stern excitement. At last he had got his burning, and he was enjoying it to the full. A batch of captives had just been pitilessly decapitated, their gory heads and trunks were strewn on the crimson snow, and beside them lay five or six more, their legs bound by ropes, awaiting their turn.

Inured though he was to spectacles of blood and carnage, Estein's mind recoiled from such a scene of butchery as this, and he replied to Ketill's shout of astonishment and welcome,—

"Right glad I am to see this victory, Ketill, and gallantly you must have fought, but when has it become our custom to slay our prisoners?"

"Ay," answered Helgi, "we could well have missed this part."

"Know you not that the Jemtlanders slew the twenty who followed you to King Bue?" answered the black-bearded captain. "They slew them like cattle, Estein; and shall we spare the murderers now? I knew not also whether you and Helgi had fallen into their hands, and in case ill had happened to you, it seemed best to take vengeance on the chance."

"Then since I need no revenge, let the slaying cease," said Estein, "though in truth the treacherous dogs ill deserve mercy."

"As you list," replied Ketill; "yet there is one here who would be better out of the world than in it."

As he spoke he went up to one prisoner who was lying on his side, with his face pressed down into the snow, like one sorely wounded, and in no gentle fashion turned him over with his foot.

"Can you not let me die?" said the man, looking up coldly and proudly at his captors, though he was evidently at death's door. "It will not take long now."

"Thorar!" exclaimed Estein.

"You have named me, Estein," replied the wounded lawman. "I had hoped to witness thy death, now thou canst witness mine."

"Tracherous foe and faithless friend," said Estein, sternly, "well have you deserved this death."

"Faithless to whom?" replied Thorar. "To my king and master Bue I alone owed allegiance. Long have I planned how to rid us of your proud and cruel race, and I thought the time had come. Witless and confident ye walked into my snare, like men blindfolded; and it was the doing of the gods, and not of you, that my plan miscarried."

"Witless and confident?" answered Estein. "Say rather trustful of pledges that only a dastard would break."

"The strong and foolish fight with weapons suited to their hands," said Thorar; "the weak and wise with

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weapons suited to their heads."

"So hands, it seems, are better than heads," put in Helgi.

"Know this at least," exclaimed Ketill, "your sons have perished before you. I slew them in the outset of the battle."

The dying man laughed a ghastly laugh.

"My sons!" he cried. "Think you I would trust my sons with Norsemen? Those boys were thralls. They died for their country as I die," and his head fell back upon the snow.

"Dastard!" cried Ketill, "you die indeed."

He raised his sword as he spoke; but Estein caught his arm before it could descend, saying,—

"You cannot slay the dead, Ketill."

"Has he balked me then?" said Ketill, bending over his fallen foe.

It was even so. The lawman had gone to his last account, his bolt impotently shot, and his enemies standing triumphantly over him.

"He at least died well," said Helgi; "when my turn comes may it be my luck to look as proudly on my foes. But tell us, Ketill, what befell you here since our parting."

The burly captain frowned and scratched his head, as though deliberating how to do a thing so foreign to his genius as the telling of a narrative.

"On a certain day you left us," he began.

"Well told indeed," cried Helgi, laughing, "an excellent beginning—no skald could do it better."

"Nay," replied Ketill, frowning angrily, "if you want matter for a jest, tell a tale yourself. Mine have been no boy's deeds."

"Take no offence," replied Helgi, still laughing; "tell your deeds of derring—do, and let Thor himself envy, I will undertake to make you laugh at mine own adventures afterwards."

"I will warrant your doings will make me laugh rather than envy," said Ketill. "But, as I said, you left us, and so we were left here without you."

"Nay, Ketill," interposed his tormentor, very seriously, "this story passes belief, impose not on my youth."

"How mean you?" exclaimed the black-bearded captain, wrathfully, his hand seeking his sword hilt.

"Peace, Helgi," cried Estein, who saw that his good offices were needed; "and you, Ketill, heed not his jests. He is but young and foolish."

"And slender," added the irrepressible Helgi, though not loud enough for Ketill to hear, and the stout Viking resumed his story, sulkily enough.

"So were we left here in this town. Cold it was, with little to do, so we even broached Thorar's ale forthwith. Presently a man who had been in the woods came in hastily to tell me he had disturbed two of these hounds of Jemtlanders spying on the town. It behoved me then to be careful, and I set guards, and was not too drunk myself that night. Upon the next morning one came in with tidings of a man who had left a message for me, though he would not say who sent him."

"That would be friend Jomar," said Helgi.

"I know not his name, but treachery, he said, was determined; and I stopped all drink thereafter, and there was nothing at all left then but to play with dice and sleep. A little later this Thorar came to the town, and would have persuaded me to follow you to the king; and when I asked for some token he showed me a ring he said was yours. Mine own mind is not attentive to these gew-gaws, but a man whose eyes were sharp before a Jemtland axe clove his head this morning knew it for none of yours."

"Did you not seize him at once?" said Estein.

"I was for taking him on the spot, but we spoke without the town, and he had such a company along with him that after a sharp bout he got off, though he left three of his lads on the snow.

"May werewolves seize me if this be not dry work! Ho' there, bring me a horn of ale."

As soon as he had quenched his thirst in a long draught, and wiped his hairy lips with much relish, the narrator went on:—

"So at night, as you may think, we kept a strict and sober guard, and rested in our harness. And well it was; for I had not slept an hour, it seemed, before the cry arose that the enemy were upon us. But when they saw we were ready for them, the vermin withdrew to the woods to gather more force, and it was not till day had well broken

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that they ventured out and offered battle. Thereupon I slew the hostages, set fire to the town, and fell upon them straightway, and a braver fire and a brisker fight while it lasted I wish not to see. They were seven to one, at the least, but never an inch of ground did we give, and never a stroke did we spare. Methinks," he concluded with a chuckle, "they will remember their welcome."

CHAPTER XVI. KING ESTEIN.

It was on a breezy April morning that the mountains of Sogn came into view again. A strong slant of south-east wind had driven the two ships out to sea; and now, as they raced landwards before a favouring breeze, they saw low down on the horizon one glittering hill-top after another pierce the morning mist bank. Helgi for the time had charge of the tiller, while Estein leant against the weather bulwark, busy with his new resolves.

"A ship must cross the sea again," he repeated to himself. "The time for action is at hand, and we shall see what new freak fortune will play with me. Yet, after all," he reflected, "though she has pressed my head beneath the tide before, she has always suffered me to rise and gasp ere she drowned me quite. It all comes to this: the purposes of the gods are too deep for me to fathom, so I must e'en hold my peace and bide the passage of events."

Helgi had been watching him with a half-smile on his frank face, and at last he cried,—

"What counsel hold you with the seamews? Sometimes I see a smile, and sometimes I hear a sigh; and then, again, there is a look of the eye as if Liot Skulison were standing before you."

"I was filling twenty long ships with enough stout lads to man them, and sailing the western main again," replied Estein.

"And whither were you sailing?" asked Helgi.

"Westward first," said Estein.

"With perchance a point or so of south—such a direction as would bring us to the Hjaltland Isles, or, it may be, the Orkneys?"

"Aided by a wayward wind," replied Estein with a smile.

"Where, doubtless, it would be well to slay another sea-rover," Helgi went on, "since they cause much trouble to peaceable seafarers from Norway. Witches, too, and warlocks dwell in the isles, men say, and it were well to rid the land of such."

At this last speech Estein first frowned and flushed, and then meeting his foster-brother's look, all outward gaiety and lurking mirth, he laughed defiantly, and exclaimed,—

"It may be so, Helgi. Everything I do is ordained already, and it matters not whither I turn the prow of my ship or what I plan. To Orkney I go!"

"Then run your thoughts still on this maiden?"

"They have run, they are still running, and while I live I see not what is to stop their course."

"Remember, my brother, what stands between you," said Helgi, more gravely.

"I have not forgotten."

"And yet you sail to Orkney?"

"The gods have bidden me cross the seas," replied Estein, "and they will steer my ship, whatever haven I choose."

"Go, then," said Helgi, "and while that shrewd counsellor whom men call Helgi Sigvaldson sails with you, at least you will not lack sage advice."

Estein laughed.

"Helgi hinn frode' [Footnote: The wise.] shall you be called henceforth, and Vandrad I shall be no longer."

They were silent for a time, and then Estein exclaimed,—

"We are well quit of that country of Jemtland! Saw you ever so many trees and so few true men before?"

"Yet was it not quite bare of good things," replied his friend.

"What, mean you the woodman's wife?"

"What else?" said Helgi, and then he fell silent again.

They reached HERNERSFIORD towards nightfall, and as they crept up the still, narrow waters darkness gathered fast. One by one, and then in tens and hundreds and myriads, the stars came out and hung like a gay awning between the pine-crowned walls. Ahead they saw lights and a looming bank of land, and hails passed from ship to shore and back again. Presently they were gently slipping by the stone pier, where one or two men stood awaiting them.

"What news?" asked Helgi.

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The men made no reply, but seemed to whisper among themselves, and Helgi repeated his question. Just then a man came hurrying to the end of the pier and shouted,—

"Is it then Estein returned?"

"My father!" exclaimed Helgi.

"What can bring the jarl here at this hour?" said Estein, springing ashore.

He met Earl Sigvald on the pier, and by the light of a lantern he saw that the old man's face was grave and sad.

"Steel your heart to hear ill tidings, King Estein," he said.

The "King" smote upon Estein's ears like a knell, and he guessed the earl's news before he heard it.

"King Hakon joined his fathers three days past," said the earl. "Welcome indeed is your return, for the law says that the dead must not linger in the house more than five days, and it were ill seeming to hold the funeral rites with his son away."

Estein stood like a man struck dumb, and then muttering, "I will join you again," he started quickly up the pier, and was shortly lost to view in the darkness.

"Dear was Estein to his father, and dear the old king to his son. Deep and burning, I fear, will his sorrow be," said the earl.

"Fain would I comfort him," replied Helgi. "But I know well Estein's humours, and now he is best alone for a time."

They walked slowly up to Hakonstad, the old earl leaning upon his son's arm, and as they went Helgi told him the tale of the Jemtland journey. In his interest the earl forgot even the present gloom, and swore lustily or roared loudly and heartily as the story went on.

"May they lie in darkness for ever as dastards and traitors!" he would cry, or "A shrewd scheme, by the hammer of Thor! An I were fifty years younger I would have done the same myself, Helgi!" and then again, "Trolls take me, if this be not enough to make a bear laugh! What next, Helgi?"

When his son had finished his relation of the visit to the old seer, he seemed lost in thought.

"Atli, Atli," he repeated. "Call you him Atli? I cannot remember the name. A friend of Olaf Hakonson, said he? I knew of no such friend. Yet it seems that he spoke indeed as one who had taken counsel with the gods; and if his words acted, as you say, like medicine on Estein, his name matters little. Yet it is passing strange."

When they reached Hakonstad, Helgi found that many chiefs had already arrived to take part in the funeral rites and, more particularly, in the feast with which they always ended. It was not till almost all had gone to rest that Estein returned, and then he went straight to his bed-chamber without exchanging more than the barest greetings with those he found still talking low over their ale around the fires.

The next day was spent in preparations for the solemn ceremonies of pyre and mound, and the great feast which should mark the reigning of another king in Sogn. The young king himself went about bravely, seeing to everything but speaking little. Helgi watched him anxiously, for he feared greatly that this new sorrow might cloud his mind afresh. In the evening he noticed him slip from the hall by himself, and rising at once he followed him out and came to his side as he paced slowly up the night-hushed valley.

"Is my company unwelcome?" he asked.

"More welcome than my thoughts," said Estein, taking his arm.

"Have the black thoughts returned?"

"Do what I will, they are with me again," replied Estein. "My father has died with Olaf unavenged, and now it is too late to keep my sacred word to him that I would ever follow up the feud. King Hakon already sits in Valhalla, and knows his son for a dastard and a breaker of his oaths. While he lived I always told myself that I would find some way even yet by which I might fulfil my promise, but now it is too late. It is hard, Helgi, to lose at once both a father and a father's regard."

"King Hakon is with Odin," said Helgi, "and knows what he has ordained. Odin has not told you to cross the seas for naught, and doubtless King Hakon even now awaits the issue. Never did man do much with a downcast mind; so first dismiss your thoughts, and then for the Viking path again."

"Helgi hinn frode," said Estein, pressing his arm, "you are indeed a good counsellor. As soon as I can gather force enough we start."

"And now for a horn of ale, and then to bed," responded Helgi, cheerful as ever again.

Ever since the first wild Northmen, pushing westwards to the sea, had settled in the land of Sogn, its kings had

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been interred on a certain barren islet hard by the mouth of Hernalsfjord, and on the morning of the fifth day after King Hakon's death they bore him out to his last resting-place by the surge of the northern ocean. His body, clad in full armour and decked in robes of state, was laid upon a bier on the poop of the long ship that had last carried him to battle. A picked crew of chiefs and highborn vassals rowed him slowly down the fjord, while in their wake a fleet of vessels followed. Estein, arrayed in the full panoply of war, as though he were sailing to meet his foes, stood out alone upon the poop like a graven figure, only the hand that held the tiller ever moving. When they reached the little holm looking out over the sea, they discovered the foundations of a mound already prepared, and great heaps of earth beside them, ready to be built upon the top. All the chiefs and greater men landed with a sufficient number of spademen to assist them with the work, while the others lay off in the ships and watched in silence. First, the vessel in which the dead king lay was drawn up and laid upon the mound; each chief who had taken an oar hung his shield in turn upon the bulwarks; the sail, gay with coloured cloths, was hoisted; the king's standard raised and set in the bows; and then Estein lit a torch and held it to a heap of fagots underneath. As the flames mounted higher and the smoke streamed out to sea the chiefs cast gifts aboard—rings and bracelets of gold and silver, sharp swords and inlaid axes—that the king in his far-off home among the gods of the North might think kindly of his friends on earth. One after another they wished his soul fair speed. Estein's words were few and unsteady with emotion, and those who heard them wondered at their meaning.

"Fare thee well, my father! I will yet keep my promise to thee!"

Loudest of all cried Earl Sigvald,—

"May Odin be as good a friend to thee as thou hast been to me! Keep me a place beside thee, Hakon. All through life I have been at thy side, in sunshine and frost, feast and battle—storm, and soon I hope to follow thee home!"

At last the flames died down and left but the blackened remnants of the ship and the ashes of its royal captain. The ashes they reverently gathered up and placed within a copper bowl, a lid they made of twelve shield bosses, the gifts were gathered and placed all round, and then the spademen heaped the mound above Hakon, King of Sogn.

With a quicker stroke and tongues unloosed the fleet returned to Hakonstad.

"A noble funeral, Ketill," said one chief to the black-bearded Viking.

"Ay," replied Ketill, "a burial worthy of King Estein, and a royal feast we shall have to follow it."

"Men say he means to set out on a Viking foray, and that before many days are past," said the other.

"They speak truth," answered Ketill. "Many a man will he give to the wolves, and eager am I to sail with him. There never was a bolder captain than Estein."

For the next two days the talk was all of the voyage to the south. Guests were coming in all the time for Estein's inheritance feast, and many of them—warriors thirsting for adventure and sea-roving—declared their intention of following his banner. A braver force men said had never followed a king of Sogn to war. For three days the feasting was to reign, and then, so soon as they were ready to sail, the host should take the Viking path.

The first night of the feast arrived. The hall was brightly lit and gaily hung with tapestries and cloths, rich and many-coloured, and men bravely dressed poured into their places all down the long rows of benches. The young king sat in his father's high seat, the highest-born and most honoured guests ranged beside him, and those of humbler standing in the farther places. First, they drank to the dead King Hakon, to his various great kinsmen in Valhalla, and to each of the gods in turn. Then as horns emptied faster toast after toast was called across the fires, and honoured with shouts of "Skoal!" that reached far into the night outside.

Estein, as was his usual custom, drank lightly, and often he would find his thoughts wandering among the most incongruous events—starlight nights in a far-off islet, tossings on distant seas, and over and over again they would stray to that glimpse of a maiden in the Jemtland forests. Helgi, in whose blue eyes there danced a light that was never kindled by water, rallied him on his absence of mind.

"Drink deeper, Estein!" he cried. "Laugh, O king! Look, there sits Ketill, the married man; methinks he looks thirsty. Ketill! drink with me to your wife."

"The trolls take my wife!" thundered Ketill, who, it may be remembered, had espoused a wealthy widow. "That is only a toast for single men!"

When the shout of laughter that greeted this speech had subsided, Helgi turned again to Estein, and exclaimed,—

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"Then that is the toast for us, King Estein. I drink to your bride!"

"Who is she, Helgi?" cried his father jovially. "Name her. I would that I might see another king married before I die. I saw your mother married, Estein, and a fair maid she was. The girls must be less fair now, or a gallant king will not stay single long."

"I could name one fair maid," said Helgi, glancing at the king, but in Estein's eye he saw a warning look.

"I have sterner things to think of, jarl," said Estein. "Five days from this I hope to be upon the sea."

As he spoke, one of his hird-men came up to the high seat and stopped close beside him.

"What ho, Kari!" cried Helgi, "you are strangely sober."

"I have a message for the king," replied the man.

CHAPTER XVII. THE END OF THE STORY.

"A boon! a boon!" exclaimed Helgi. "Kari seeks a boon. A wife, or a farm, or a pair of pigskin trousers; which is it, Kari? Before you win it you must sing us a stave. Strike up, man!"

"No boon I seek," replied Kari. "A maiden stands without who seeks King Estein, and will not come inside."

"Aha!" laughed Helgi. "Blows the wind that way?"

"What does she want?" asked Estein.

"I know not; she would not tell."

"Tell her to come in," said Earl Sigvald. "Do you think it is fitting that the king should go out at every woman's pleasure?"

"That is what I told her, but she said she would see the king outside or go away."

"Bid her come in or go away!" cried the earl.

"Nay, rather ask her what her errand is about," said Estein.

"And tell her," added Helgi as the bird-man turned away, "that here sits the king's foster-brother, a most proper person at all times to hear a maiden's tale, and now most persuasively charged with ale."

The man went down the hall again, and Earl Sigvald exclaimed testily,—

"Some thrall's sweetheart doubtless, come to babble her complaints."

"Or perhaps the bride come to claim King Estein's hand," suggested his son. In a minute Kari returned.

"She will not tell her business," he said, "but begs earnestly to see the king."

"Bid her begone!" cried the earl. "The king is feasting with his guests."

"Did not her eyes sparkle and her trouble seem to leave her when she heard the king's foster-brother was here?" asked Helgi.

"I shall press his claims myself," said Estein, rising from his seat.

"Will you see her then?" asked the earl.

"Why not?" replied Estein. "Perchance she brings tidings of importance."

"If you rise at every strange woman's bidding you will have many suitors," said the earl.

"That is the lot of a king," replied Estein, with a smile.

The smile died quickly from his face as he walked down the hall, and men noticed that he looked grave and preoccupied again. It was not that his thoughts were running on this unusual summons; as he passed through the dark vestibule he felt only a little curiosity, and at the door he paused and looked out idly enough.

It was a fine starlight night, and down below he could see the glimmer of the sea, and across the fiord the black outline of the hills, and nearer at hand he heard the sough of the night breeze in the pines. Close outside, the tall, hooded figure of a woman stood clearly outlined, while he himself was obscured in shadow. At the second glance, something in the pose of his strange visitor struck his memory sharply. She seemed at first afraid to speak, and, with rising interest, he said courteously,—

"You wish to see me?"

The girl seemed to start a little, and then she said in a low voice,—

"Are you King Estein?"

The words were almost lost in the hood that shrouded her head. They died away to a low whisper; but ere they were gone Estein had caught the slight flavour of a foreign accent, and for an instant he was on the Holy Isle again. With a sharp effort he controlled the sudden rush of emotion they called up, and even altered his voice to a low, guarded pitch as he answered,—

"I am the king." The girl paused for a moment as if to collect her thoughts, and then she said,—

"You had a brother, King Estein—Olaf Hakonson—"

She stopped again, and seemed to look hesitatingly at him.

"What of him?" said Estein.

"He fell, alas, long since. Forgive me for calling him to mind now, but he is in my story."

"Well?"

"Three men were at his death," said the girl, gaining confidence a little. "Thord the Tall, Snaekol Gunnarson,

Vandrad the Viking

and Thorfin of Skapstead. Snaekol and Thorfin are dead long since—may God forgive them! but Thord the Tall lived to repent of the burning."

"It was an ill deed," said Estein.

"He was a heathen man then, King Estein—but I forget, you know not of Christians."

"I have heard of them," said Estein, half to himself.

"As the years drew on he became a Christian, and followed another God and another creed, and left the world and Viking forays, and came to a little island of the Orkneys with me, his only child. For both my brothers fell in battle, King Estein, and now there are none others left in the feud."

"How do men call you?" said Estein, asking only that he might hear her name again.

"I am Osla, the daughter of Thord the Tall," she answered, drawing herself up with a touch of half defiant pride. "He was the enemy of your family, but a lender-man [Footnote: Nobleman.] of high birth, and a good and noble man."

"Ay?"

"He lived in the island," she went on, "for many years, all alone save for me."

Estein could not keep himself from asking,—

"Alone all the time?"

"All—save once indeed, when a Viking came by chance, but he left shortly," and then she continued hastily: "My father thought often of the burning. Many deeds he had done which he repented of there in the solitude of the Holy Isle. Yet was he not worse than others, only he became a Christian, and so they seemed ill deeds to him."

"Even this burning?" said Estein, a little dryly.

"Think not so harshly of him!" she cried. "He was—he was my father!"

"I ask your pardon, Mistress Osla. Go on."

"At length he fell sick, and in the last of the winter storms he died."

So far Estein had been listening most curiously, wondering much what the upshot of it all would be, and keeping a severe restraint on his tongue. But at Osla's last words he had nearly betrayed himself. He was on the verge of crying out in his natural voice, and when he did speak, it was like a man who is choking over something.

"Then Thord the Tall is dead?"

"He died penitent, King Estein," said Osla. "And he left me a writing—for he had taught me the art of reading on the island—and with it much silver, or at least it seemed much to me. The writing bade me seek King Hakon."

"Knew he not then of my father's death?"

"He was then alive," she answered; "for the writing further told me what I knew not before, that I had an uncle still alive, or rather whom my father thought was still alive, and first of all I had to seek him. Else should I have come to Sogn in time to see King Hakon."

"What is this uncle's name?"

"He is called Atli, now," she replied, "but—"

"Atli, a brother of Thord the Tall!"

"Know you him?"

"I have seen him," he answered evasively. "Once he came here. But how did you find him? He dwells in distant parts, so men say."

"The writing gave me the direction of one who knew where he could be found, and so I travelled to a far country—Jemtland it is, many days from Sogn. Thus it was that when I came here King Hakon had died."

"And now you seek me?"

"You are his son, and my errand deals with you, for the feuds which were his are now yours," she answered.

For a moment she paused, and seemed to Estein to look doubtfully at him, as if half afraid to go on. Then she drew a bag from under her cloak, held it out to him, and said simply, but not as one who craved a boon or sought a favour,—

"This silver is the price of atonement for the death of Olaf—will you take it?"

He took the bag, weighed it in his hand, and answered slowly,—

"This is a small atonement for a brother's death."

She gave a little start back, her pride stung to the quick, and he heard her breath come fast.

Suddenly he dropped the bag, stepped from under the shadow of the door, and cried in his natural voice,—

Vandrad the Viking

"I must have you too, Osla!"

She started this time indeed, and for an instant the shock of surprise took thoughts and words away.

"Vandrad!" she cried faintly, and then she was trembling in King Estein's arms.

"Nay," he said, "no longer Vandrad, but rather Estein the Lucky! Forgive me, Osla, for deceiving you before; but then, in truth, fate had treated me so ill that I cared not to have it known that I was son to the King of Sogn."

A little later he said,—

"So the feud is at an end, and I have found a queen."

"A queen, Estein?" she whispered.

"Ay, a queen, worthy of the proudest King of Sogn. And, Osla, do you know I have seen you since we parted on the Holy Isle? Can you call to mind a Jemtland village where you halted on your journey, and a man whom the villagers pursued?"

"And that—" she cried in astonishment.

"Was Vandrad; and Atli—"

"Is Kolskegg, foster-father of thy brother Olaf," said a voice behind them, and looking quickly round the lovers saw the venerable form of the seer standing within five paces of them.

For a moment they were too surprised to speak, and the old man went on with kindling enthusiasm,—

"Ay, Osla, I followed thee up from the ship, and awaited under the shadow of Hakonstad itself the issue ordained by the gods. King Estein, when thou wert with me I knew not who were the wizard and the witch of the Orkneys. My dreams revealed them not. When Osla came to me that night ye slept in the loft, I hid her coming from thee, for I knew the race of Yngve forget not the injuries of their kin. Nor when I knew all did I tell anything to Osla, for I wished the fates to bring matters to an end as they willed."

"But why did you tell me nothing of yourself?" asked Estein.

"I have said the reason. Thy race have long and bitter memories, and I knew full well that I could not serve thee hadst thou known. Ay, King Estein, long have I wished to come into atonement with thee, but my brother's rash deed—done to avenge what he thought my injuries—brought the blood feud on me. I was banished for mine own fault, thenceforth Thord exiled me for his."

Then raising his voice till it rang through the night, he cried,—

"But now, King Estein, the ship has crossed the seas!"

There was a minute's silence after he had finished, and then the king took Osla by the hand and drew her towards the door, saying,—

"I wish them to see my queen to-night."

"Let me come to-morrow," she whispered.

"Go in, Osla," said her uncle, "I bid thee," and so she went in with Estein to the hall.

As he led her up to the high seat, dead silence fell on the guests, and all men gazed in growing wonder. Opposite Earl Sigvald he stopped, and throwing back her hood, cried,—

"You will live to see me married yet, jarl. My southern voyage shall be changed into my wedding feast. Behold Osla, Queen of Sogn!"

Before his father had time to reply, Helgi sprang from his seat with a shout, and saluting Osla on the cheek, exclaimed,—

"First of all King Estein's friends I wish you joy! Do you remember the sheep-skin coat? I have not forgotten the maiden. Skoal to Queen Osla!"

Instantly the shout was taken up till the smoky rafters rang and rang again; and so the feud ended, though the spell, they say, was never broken.

THE END.