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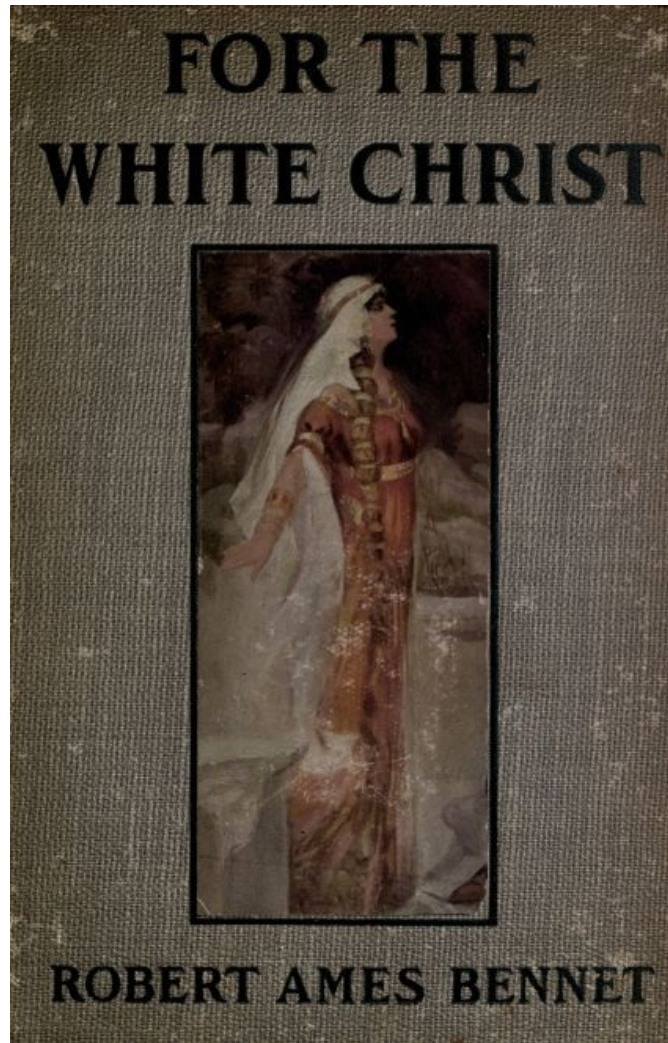
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Cover



"Bend lower, king's daughter—little vala with eyes
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FOR THE
WHITE CHRIST
A Story
of
The Days of Charlemagne

BY
Robert Ames Bennet

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When Alcuin taught the sons of Charlemagne,
In the free schools of Aix, how kings should rule.
LONGFELLOW.

To the Memory
of
My Mother

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

All the chapter headings of this story are taken from lays which were sung by harpers and skalds before the high-seats of heathen Norse chiefs and in the halls of the Anglo-Saxon kings, while England was yet a heptarchy and the name of Mohammed but little known to men even on the shores of the far-distant Bosphorus.

In most instances the selections are from Magnusson and Morris's beautiful translations of "The Volsunga Saga, and Certain Songs from the Elder Edda." The spirited lines from "Beowulf," "Maldon," "Finnesburh," and "Andreas" were found in Gummerle's "Germanic Origins." The translation of "Brunanburh" is by Tennyson.

Apology is due for occasional alterations and elisions, all of which will readily be detected by

students of the wonderful poetic fragments which have come down to us from our Norse and Teutonic forefathers.

R. A. B.

Denver, January 1, 1905.

ILLUSTRATIONS

"Bend lower, king's daughter--little vala with eyes like dewy violets!" Frontispiece

"White to the lips, the young sea-king turned to his enemy"

"Love!" she cried, half hissing the word. 'You speak of love,--you, the heathen outlander!'"

"Go, Olvir!" muttered the king, thickly; 'go--before I forget that I once loved you'"

FOR THE WHITE CHRIST

BOOK ONE

Now death has seized--
Bale and terror--my trusty people,
Laid down life have my liegemen all.
 BEOWULF.

CHAPTER I

Swans of the Dane-folk--
The ships of Sigmund--
Heads all gilt over,
And prows fair graven.
 LAY OF GUDRUN.

Early of an April morning of the year 778, a broad-beamed Frisian trade-ship was drifting with the ebb-tide down the Seine estuary. Wrapped about by the morning vapors, the deeply laden little craft floated on the stream like a dreamship. The mists shut out all view of sky and land and sea. From the quarter-deck, the two men beside the steer-oar could scarcely see across the open cargo-heaped waist to where, gathered silently about the mast, a dozen or so drowsy sailors stood waiting for the morning breeze.

The remainder of the crew lay sprawled upon the casks and bales of merchandise, side by side with a score of Frankish warriors. All alike were heavy with drunken slumber. The shipmaster, a squat red-haired man of great girth, regarded the overcome wassailers with an indifferent eye; but the tall warrior beside him appeared far from pleased by the sight.

"Is it so you rule your ship, Frisian?" he demanded. "You should have stopped the wassail by midnight. Here we swim on the treacherous sea, while our men lie in drunken stupor."

"We are yet in the stream, lord count," replied the shipmaster. "As to my Frisians, a dash of salt water will soon rouse them. If your landsmen are farther gone, what odds? Drunk or sober, they'll be alike useless when we strike rough seas."

The Frank's face lit with a smile as quick as its frown.

"There you are mistaken, Frisian," he said. "A man may bear the wild waters no love, yet owe them no fear. Twice I have crossed this narrow sea, as envoy of our Lord Karl to the kings of the Anglo-Saxons, and my henchmen sailed with me."

"Yours are king's men, lord count,--all busked like chiefs."

"Man for man, I would pit them against the followers of any leader. Better a few picked warriors, so armed, than twice their number of common freemen."

"Well said!" muttered the Frisian; "a choice following. I 'd wager on them, even against Dane steel--except the sea-wolves of Olvir Elfkin."

"Olvir Elfkin? You speak of a liegeman of Sigfrid, King of the Nordmannian Danes?"

"No, lord count; Earl Olvir is far too proud to let himself be called the man of any king. I sail far on my trade-farings. At the fair of Gardariki, across the great gulf from the Swedes, I saw the Norse hero. His father was one-time king of the Trondir, a folk who dwell beneath the very eaves of the ice-giants. His mother was an elf-maiden from the far Eastland. Another time I will tell you that tale, lord count. I had it from Floki the Crane, my Norse sword-brother. But now I speak of Earl Olvir's following. He is so famed in the North that the greatest heroes think it honor to fight beneath his banner; and he rules the mail-clad giants as our great King Karl rules his counts. Six seasons in all he has come swooping south from his ice-cliffs to harry the coasts of Jutland and Nordmannia; and though even now he is little more than a bairn in years, each time that he steered about for his home fiord he left a war-trail of sunken longships to mark his outbound course."

"I heard much of such sea-fights from that mighty Dane hero Otkar,--he who went over to King Desiderius and fought against our Lord Karl in the Lombard war."

"Ay; who has not heard of Otkar Jotuntop,--Otkar the Dane? This very Earl Olvir of whom I spoke is of kin to the hero."

"Even I have heard of Lord Otkar," called out a childish voice, and the speaker sprang lightly up the deck ladder. She was a lissome little maiden, barely out of childhood, yet possessed of an unconscious dignity of look and bearing that well matched her rich costume.

The warrior bowed low to her half-shy, half-gay greeting, and smiling down into her violet eyes, he replied in a tone of tender deference, "The Princess Rothada is early awake. Shall I not call the tiring-woman?"

The girl put up her hand to touch the coronet which bound her chestnut hair, and her glance passed in naive admiration down the gold-embroidered border of her loose-sleeved overdress.

"Princess! princess!" she cried gayly. "To think that only four days have gone since with Gisela and the other maidens I waited upon the blessed sisters! And now I wear a ring and silken dresses, and the greatest war-count of the king my father--but are you not my kinsman, lord count?"

"Your cousin, little princess. My mother was a sister of our lord king."

"Then you shall no longer call me princess, but Rothada, and I shall call you Roland. Few maidens can own kinsmen so tall and grand!" and Rothada stared up in half-awed admiration at the count's war-dinted helmet and shining scale-hauberk.

The warrior's blue eyes glowed, but there was no vanity with his frank pleasure.

"Saint Michael give me skill to shield you from all harm!" he said.

"Surely he has already strengthened your arm. In all the land you stand second only to the king my father!--But you spoke of Otkar the Dane. Tell me more about him, cousin. Already I know that he was a heathen count from the far North, more learned than any monk or priest, and in battle mightier even than my father. Two winters ago there came to Chelles a maiden who knew many tales of the Saxon and Lombard wars,--Fastrada--"

Roland's cheeks flushed, and he stooped forward eagerly.

"Fastrada!" he exclaimed. "You knew her?"

"For a winter's time--"

"You will meet her again. She is now one of the queen's maidens,--the fairest of them all."

"Then you like her, cousin," replied Rothada, with innocent candor. "It was different with Gisela and me. Many of the maidens feared her, and she broke the holy rules and talked so much of warriors that the good abbess sent her away. Yet that is long since--she may have changed."

"None could but like her now, child," replied Roland, softly. Yet even as he spoke, some unwelcome thought blotted the smile from his face. He frowned and stared moodily out into the wavering mists.

The girl followed his look, and the sight of the water alongside recalled her to the present.

"See, kinsman," she said, with a sudden return of gayety, "the sailors spread the sail. How long shall we be upon the sea until we reach the Garonne?"

"Were we travelling by land, I could tell you, little princess. But I am no sea-count. Our shipmaster can best answer you."

The Frisian turned to the daughter of the great king with an uncouth attempt at a bow.

"Wind and wave are fickle, maiden, and no sea is rougher than the Vascon Bay," he grumbled. "But with fair wind I land you at Casseneuil while the lord count's horsemen yet ride in Aquitania."

"That I doubt, man," said Roland. "Yet here is promise of fair sailing. The sun melts the mists, and with it comes the breeze to sweep them away."

"Ay; the fog breaks. Between sun and wind we 'll see both shores before the ship gains full headway."

"I already see-- Look, man! Can we be so close inshore? What flashes so brightly?"

The Frisian wheeled about, an anxious frown lowering beneath his shaggy forelock. His alarm was only too well founded. A puff of the freshening breeze swept before it the last bank of vapor, and revealed with startling clearness two grim black hulls, along whose sweeping bulwarks hung rows of yellow shields. On the lofty prows shone the gilded dragon-heads whose glitter had first caught Roland's eye. The single masts were bare of yard and sail; but along each side a dozen or more great sweeps thrust out beneath the scaly shield-row like the legs of a dragon.

"Danes!" gasped the Frisian, and from the grimly beautiful viking ships, every line of which spoke of grace and speed, he turned a despairing eye upon his clumsy trade-ship.

"Lost! lost!" he cried. "Already they come about to give chase--Garpike and the lame duck! Paul seize all vikings!"

"No, Frisian," rejoined Roland. "These, in truth, are war-ships; yet they come in peace. Dane or other, they dare not attack us on the coast of Neustria."

As though in retort to this proud boast, a red shield swung up to each Danish masthead, and across the water rolled a fierce war-cry. Roused by the wild shout, all the sleepers in the trade-ship's waist sprang to their feet. But while the Frisians huddled about the mast like frightened sheep, the Franks met the sudden danger with the steadiness of seasoned warriors. At a sign from their lord, they crept aft, sword and axe in hand, and crouched on the deck behind the bulwarks. As they made ready for battle, Roland caught up the hand of Rothada, who stood gazing at the viking ships in mingled terror and admiration.

"Princess," he said, "the heathen shoot far with bow and sling. It is time you sought shelter below. For a while you can there lie in safety."

"But you, cousin? The Dane ships swarm with warriors. You and your men will all be slain! Do not fight them, Roland! Let there be no bloodshed."

"A wise maiden!" cried the shipmaster. "Mark the odds,--one stroke brings death to us all. Yield, lord Frank! What if they give two or three to Odin? The rest they 'll spare for thralls or set free for wergild."

"Ah, Roland, yield, then! Do not anger the terrible heathen. My father will soon ransom us."

"And what will he say to his daughter's faithless warder,--to the coward who, without a blow, yielded a king's child into heathen thralldom?--By my sword, the Danes take you only over the corpse of the last Frank in this ship!"

But proudly as he spoke, when he swung the girl down from the deck, the count's heart sickened at thought of her helplessness. How would the little cloister-maiden fare in the hands of the fierce sea-thieves? The anguish of the thought filled him with renewed rage. He gripped his sword-hilt.

"Now to die, with a score of Danes for death-bed," he muttered.

Then a sudden hope flashed from his blue eyes. He seized the steersman by the shoulder, and shouted joyfully: "Ho, Frisian; we may yet go free! Cast over the cargo! The breeze freshens; we 'll outsail the thieves!"

"Only another viking could do that--yet the cloth bales will float--the Danes may linger to pick them up. A good trick, if old-- But what-- Curse of the foul fiend! Look to seaward--three more longships--across our course!"

"The race is run! Strike sail, man, and go forward to your sailors. You and they may so save your skins. I and my men die here."

"I, too, can die," answered the shipmaster, stolidly, and he drew a curved sword-knife from his belt.

"Go; you wear no war-gear," commanded Roland.

"I will fight berserk, as they say in the North."

"Then take my shield, and with it the thanks of a Frankish count. No braver man ever fought beside me."

The Frisian took the shield, unmoved by the praise.

"Once I had a Northman for sword-fellow. They called him Floki the Crane. From him I

learned the ways of vikings. They know how to die."

"No less do my henchmen," rejoined Roland, and he shook the great mane of tawny hair which fell about his shoulders. Here was no Romanized Neustrian, tainted and weakened by the vices of a corrupt civilization, but a German warrior,--an Austrasian of pure blood. He watched the approaching Danes, eager for battle.

The Frisian, as he slipped the shield upon his arm, stared at the Frank with a look of dull admiration. But when an arrow whistled close overhead, he wheeled hastily about and shouted command to strike sail. The order was obeyed with zeal, for the crew stood trembling in dread of the Danish missiles. Down rushed the great wool sheet, and an exultant shout rolled out from the pursuing longships. Count Roland smiled grimly.

"Hearken, men!" he said; "the heathen think we yield. They lay aside bow and sling. All will be axe and sword play. They shall learn the taste of Frankish steel!"

The Frisian shook his head: "No, no, lord count. They 'll board on either quarter, and overwhelm us. Your men are too scattered. The Danes--"

"No, by my sword! The leading craft sheers off."

"She steers to meet the seaward ships! The Norns smile upon us, Frank. We are doomed; but many a Dane goes before us to Hel's Land!"

"Brave words, man, though strange on the lips of a Christian," replied Roland, and he drew his short-hafted battle-axe. "Now, men, make ready. The Dane ship closes like a hound on the deer's flank. It will find the stag at bay! When I cast my axe, leap up and strike for Christ and king."

A low murmur came back from the crouching Franks, and they gripped their weapons with added firmness. They were picked men, who had fought in all the wars of Karl and of Pepin his father. One, a hoary giant of sixty, could even boast that as a boy he had swung a sword in the fateful battle of Tours, when Karl the Hammer had shattered the conquering hosts of Mohammed. Death had no terrors for such iron-hearted warriors. All they asked was the chance to sell their lives dearly. Like hunted wolves, they lay in wait, while the shouting Danes rowed up to seize their prize.

CHAPTER II

Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
Mood shall be the more, as our might lessens.
Grief and sorrow forever
On the man that leaves this sword-play!

SONG OF MALDON.

Already the longship lay close astern. A harsh command sent the oars rattling in through their ports; and as the dragon prow overlapped the flank of the quarry, a dozen grappling-hooks fell clanking across the bulwark. Half the longship's crew swarmed in the bows,--a wild-eyed, skin-clad band, staring with fierce greed at the casks and bales with which the trade-ship was laden. None of them looked twice at the two men standing so quietly in the middle of the deck. In their eagerness for loot, all pressed forward to board the trade-ship, and so little did they dream of resistance that many bore their weapons sheathed.

They were soon to learn their mistake. As the first Dane leaped upon the bulwark, Roland swept his axe overhead and hurled it at the luckless viking. Across the front the Dane's wolfskin serk was thickly sewn with iron rings; but the axe-blade shore through iron and hide like cloth, and buried itself in the viking's breast.

The surprise could not have been more complete. As the axe flashed over their heads, the hidden warriors sprang up and fell upon the Danes with all the fury of despair. Their lord and the Frisian sprang forward beside them, and the Frankish blades threshed across the bulwarks in swift strokes that cut down a dozen vikings before they could guard themselves. More in astonishment than dismay, the foremost Danes recoiled upon their fellows, causing a jam and confusion that prolonged the vantage of the Franks. Like flails the weapons of the grey warriors

beat upon the round shields of the heathen.

"Strike! strike!" they shouted in the fierce joy of battle. "Christ and king! Down with the pagans! death to the sea-thieves!"

On the right the shipmaster thrust his pointed sword-knife into the faces of the enemy; on the left the axe of the hoary giant of Tours fell like Thor's hammer; while between the two, Roland, wielding his sword in both hands, cut down a Dane with every blow. His eyes flashed with the fire of battle, and as he struck he shouted tauntingly: "Ho, Danes! ho, sea-thieves! here is sword-play! Run, cast your spears from shelter! Frank steel bites deep!"

The answer was a roar of fury. The death of their fellows only roused the Danes to wild rage. Their huge bodies quivered, and eyes yet more fiery than Roland's flamed with the battle-light. The air rang with the clash of weapons, and the terrible war-cry swelled into a deafening roar,-- "Thor aid! Thor aid! Death to the Frank dogs!"

In a mass the vikings surged forward and leaped at the bulwark. Vainly the Franks sought to withstand the shock. The crashing strokes of Roland's sword kept clear all the space within its sweep; but on either side the vikings burst across the bulwark in overwhelming numbers. Shield clashed against shield, and blades beat upon helmet and hauberk with the clang of a hundred smithies. No warriors could long withstand such odds. Down went the Frisian under the blade of a berserk axe, and after him fell the old giant of Tours, a throttled Dane in his grip. Then four more Franks fell, all together, and the whole line reeled back across the deck. The defence was broken. The Danes yelled in fierce triumph and surged forward to thrust their handful of foes over into the sea. Many warriors so hard pressed would have flung down their weapons and begged for quarter. Not so the henchmen of the king's kin.

"Back to back!" called their count, and for a moment he checked the Danish rush by the sweep of his single sword. Brief as was the respite, it gave his followers time to rally. They sprang together and ringed about their leader in a shieldburg that all the wild fury of the vikings could not break. Like their lord, these grey warriors were Rhinemmen of pure German blood. Between them and their foes was slight difference other than the veneer of a nominal Christianity. Drunk with the wine of battle, they whirled their reddened blades and rejoiced to slay and be slain in Odin's game. One by one, they staggered and fell, striking even in the death-agony. Those who were left only narrowed their ring to close the gaps, and fought on.

Of all the virtues, Northman and Teuton alike gave first place to courage. Wonder seized the Danes at the very height of their blood-fury. Never before had even they, the fierce sea-wolves, witnessed such sword-play. Overcome by admiration, many drew back as the last few Franks fell dying. When Roland stood alone within their circle, by common impulse they lowered their weapons and shouted to spare the hero. Only one voice dissented--but it was the voice of the Danish chief.

The sea-king had been steering his ship, and so unexpected and furious was the fight that its end came before he could force a way through the press of his own men. Enraged that he had failed to come to blows, he now pushed to the front, a grand and imposing figure in his scale hauberk and gold-winged helmet. But beneath the helmet's bright rim lowered a face more brutal and ferocious than a Saxon outlaw's.

"Way!" he shouted; and as the vikings parted, he stepped over the slain to where Roland leaned heavily upon his sword.

"So-ho!" he jeered, and he eyed the gasping Frank with cruel satisfaction. "They breed bears in the South worth the baiting."

Roland's eyes flashed as he answered: "Heathen boar! you may well talk of baiting. Count your men who have fallen. Had I half my strength, I 'd send you with them to burn in Tartarus!"

"Had you all your strength, Frank, I should strike off your hands with Ironbiter my sword, and cast you overboard to the sea-god. As it is, I 'll take you thrall and break your back on Thor's Stone at the Winter Sacrifice. Next Yule the followers of Hroar the Cruel shall drink to Thor and Frey from the skull of Earl Roland, the kin of the Frank king."

The count started in astonishment.

"Tell me, Dane!" he cried; "how do you know my name? Not by chance did you lie in the Seine Mouth!"

"True, thrall; I can swear to that," answered Hroar, and he laughed. "Be certain I would not risk King Sigfrid's longships thus far south without sure gain. It is no harm to speak truth to a man who is doomed,--dead men tell no tales. May you have joy of your answer!"

"I laugh at death. Now tell me, Dane!"

"Know then, my merry thrall, that tidings of your sailing flew to Nordmannia straight from

the hall of your king. Sigfrid had word from Wittikind the Saxon, and he from well-wishers across the Rhine. Not all your king's foes dwell without his borders. Some speak Frankish for mother-tongue--"

"You lie! No Frank is traitor."

Hroar only laughed and answered jeeringly: "Maybe a little bird told how Earl Roland should sail south from the Seine with the Frank king's daughter,--a little bird in Frankish plumage. He sang a golden song for me. Your ship rides deep with her cargo, and Frisian thralls fetch a good price at the Gardariki fair.--But I would see your princess. If she is young and comely, I may have other use for her than to grind meal."

At the brutal words, fury seized upon Roland. His eyes blazed, and rage lent sudden strength to his tottering frame.

"Heathen dog!" he gasped; "never shall your eyes look on Rothada!"

Before Hroar could guard or leap aside, the Frank's sword swung overhead and whirled down upon his helmet like a sledge. Had the casque been of common make, Hroar would have met his fate on the spot. As it was, the blow beat a great dint in the gilded steel and sent the sea-king reeling backward, stunned and blinded. A dozen vikings sprang between to shield him, but Roland's sword dropped at their feet. Faint from loss of blood, and utterly spent by that last great blow, the count swayed forward. Darkness shut out from him the ring of shouting heathen. He fell swooning upon the heap of corpses.

"A champion! a champion! The Frank has won his freedom!" cried the vikings, and they pressed about to raise the fallen warrior. Heedless of their own wounds, they sought to bind up his injuries. Their warlike but generous natures yielded homage to the hero who had met overwhelming odds without dismay and had struck a berserk blow even when falling. They forgot the boasted cruelty of their leader.

Never before had the sea-king suffered such a helmet stroke. For several moments he stood dazed, blinking at the stars which flashed before his eyes, while his head hummed like a kettle. Then his vision cleared, and he saw what his men were about. Into their midst he sprang, gnashing his teeth like a wolf.

"Aside, dogs!" he yelled. "Give me my thrall. I will tear out his lying tongue!"

The Danes gave back before the threatening dagger of their chief, and he sprang upon his victim with a yell of triumph. The Frank should pay dearly for that blow!

Some of the milder vikings muttered against the deed. This Frank was no whining coward, no low-born outlander, but a fair-haired hero, such as the Sigurds and Beowulfs of the olden days.

At the best, the Danes bore little love for the cruel Jutland champion whom King Sigfrid had set over them. So now they murmured openly. But Hroar was no less fearless than he was cruel. Regardless of their protests, he turned the fallen Frank upon his back. No wolf ever fell upon his prey with fiercer greed.

Already he had set about his deed, when a cry of surprise from his followers caused him to look up. The crowd had opened, and through the midst of the warriors came a little child-maid, the like of whom the brutal Dane had never seen. Utterly lost to self in her fear for her kinsman, the girl advanced with outstretched arms, her tender eyes full of reproach, her pure young face aglow with spiritual light. Had she been Skuld, youngest of the Norns, the Dane could not have been more astonished. He glared at the child in dull wonder. Could this be Freya's maid,--Gifion, Goddess of Innocence and Maidenhood? At the thought, he started back, a superstitious dread clutching at his heart. But when the first shock of surprise had passed, he perceived the Frankish fashion of the girl's double tunic and the circlet that marked her rank.

"Spawn of Loki!" he snarled. "It's only the Frank king's daughter."

"I am Rothada, and Karl the King is my father," said the girl, with simple dignity. "Are you not the Dane count?"

Hroar scowled assent.

"Speak," he said.

The girl's courage began to falter before the ferocity of the sea-king's stare, and, shuddering, she gazed about her at the heaps of dead and wounded warriors. But she saw friendly looks upon many of the viking faces, and forgot her fears once more in the thought of her fellow-captives.

"I come to offer ransom," she said,--"wergild for all who yet live. My father will pay for every one,--Frank and Frisian alike."

"Doubtless!" sneered Hroar. "But we will talk of that in Nordmannia before King Sigfrid. Wittikind may have a word to say in the matter. One thrall at least I keep as my share of the loot. Stand aside while I put my mark on him."

For the second time the Dane turned to his victim. But Rothada was quicker than he. With a piteous cry for mercy, she flung herself upon Roland and sought to shield him from the knife with her own slender body. The sight would have melted any heart that held the slightest trace of nobleness. It stirred the vikings to open mutiny. They renewed their protests, with deeper menace in their tones, and when Hroar bent and grasped the maiden roughly by the shoulder, one of the foremost swung up his sword.

"Stay, Hroar!" he commanded. "I am not used to looking on at foul deeds. You must first pluck out my eyes before you take the Frank's tongue."

"Ay, and mine!" growled a second viking.

Hroar stood erect and glared at the daring men. But neither gave way before his terrible look. They had the backing of their fellows. The sea-king saw this, yet his hand went to the hilt of his heavy sword. The fight was averted, none too soon, by a scarred old berserk.

"Bear wisdom to Urd!" he called scoffingly. "Hroar bickers with his wolves, while the Norse hawks swoop upon him."

At the warning, every Dane aboard the trade-ship wheeled about and stared seaward. The harsh alarm of a war-horn, braying over the water, was not needed to explain the situation. A bowshot away they saw their second longship surging at full speed up the estuary. A fountain of white spray spouted from under its forefoot, and the boiling sea alongside, threshed to foam by the oar-blades, told that every bench was full, every rower pulling to the utmost of his strength. Not without cause! Close in the Dane's wake the three longships of the outer estuary came gliding over the water in swift pursuit. Each lay far over under the pressure of its great square sail, and from the mail-clad crews packed along the fighting gangway behind the weather bulwarks, rose jeers and grim laughter at the efforts of the Danes to escape.

"Norse!" shouted Hroar. "Thor! they mean to attack us! Aboard ship and man the oars--yet stay! First scuttle the trader. We leave no booty for the fiordmen!"

"They strike sail!" cried the old berserk. "Wait a little. They do not swing the red shield. It may be a jest."

"A bitter jest-- Ho! the foremost comes on alone. Aboard ship, all, and stand ready to cast off. I wait the Norse earl here."

CHAPTER III

Thou the bane of thy brothers wast,
The chief of thy kin,--whence curse of Hel
Awaits thee, good as thy wits may be!

BEOWULF.

At the alarm of the Danes, the trembling heart of the little princess leaped with joy. But the sudden hope gave way as quickly to renewed terror. Why should the cruel sea-count linger on the trade-ship alone if not to carry out his ferocious revenge? Closer than ever the girl clasped the senseless warrior in her arms, until the blood from his wounded head seeped warm through her silken kirtle, and the bell-like rim of his helmet bruised her tender bosom.

Breathless, she listened to the rush and outcry of the vikings as with their wounded fellows they poured back into the longship. Then, in the lull which followed, she could hear the smothered wail of her tiring-woman, crouched in the cubby beneath her. Gaining courage from the silence, she at last ventured to raise her head. She saw Hroar at the farther bulwark, gazing intently down the estuary. He did not move, and Rothada rose timidly to look around.

The second Dane ship was coming about only a few yards astern; but its crew, like the crew of its consort, were far too intent on watching the Norse ship to give heed to the little maiden. Even the Frisian sailors had ceased to cower, and were lined along the bulwarks forward, full of eager hope that the approaching longship might bring them a change of masters. Hroar's cruelty was only too well known throughout Frisia.

Rothada also gazed at the stately prow of the stranger and joined in the longing of her fellow-captives that the new-comers would seize the trade-ship for their own. But the little maiden's

faith gave her still fairer hopes than those cherished by the Frisians. To her girlish innocence, deliverance now seemed certain. She had only to appeal to the Norse count, and he would accept ransom for all. Tears of gratitude shone in her violet eyes as she stooped to bind up with deft fingers such of Roland's wounds as the Danes had failed to stanch.

Her task ended, the girl started up again to gaze over into the Norse ship as it glided alongside. The vessel swarmed with huge warriors, whose superiority to the Danes both in discipline and armor was so striking that even the convent-bred maiden could not but perceive the difference. Against such men, even had the odds been reversed, the Danes could not have hoped to hold their own.

When Rothada comprehended this, she clasped her hands in joy and looked eagerly about for the Norse leader. A small blue banner, emblazoned with a gold star, fluttered on the longship's stern, and Rothada's first thought was that the blond viking at the helm beneath it must be the sea-king. But then, standing alone in the vessel's prow, she saw a warrior whom even she could not but recognize as the Norse leader. His round casque, though wingless, was of blue steel and rimmed with a gold band in whose front sparkled a garnet star. Even more beautiful was the young sea-king's serk, or coat, of ring-mail, which shimmered in the sun like ice. His small round shield differed from the usual Norse and Frankish patterns both in the greater convexity of its shape and in the material of its face,--a disc of hammered steel. Its bluish surface, polished like a mirror, was traced with gold damascening both on the boss and on the thickened rim.

Yet with all the young sea-king's splendid war-gear, so slight and boyish did he appear in contrast to his followers that Rothada at first thought he could be little older than herself. But when he stepped forward and answered Hroar's hail, it was with a haughtiness of tone and bearing far other than childlike.

Even as he spoke, the Northman sprang upon the bulwark of his ship and, great as was the distance which yet separated the vessels, leaped for the trade-ship's deck. With a cry of astonishment, Hroar sprang sideways from before him, down upon the smooth surface of the bales of goods in the after hold; while high above the water the leaper's bright figure flashed through the air and shot in over the bulwark. Lightly as a panther, the Northman struck the deck and turned instantly to confront the Dane. But Hroar stood motionless, overcome with wonder at the daring leap, and did not seek to regain the deck.

Seeing that there was no danger of immediate attack, the Northman lowered his shield and looked about with keen glances at the slaughtered Franks and Danes.

"Thor!" he cried, "these Rhinemen fought well. Would that I had led the heroes! But what's this?--a Frank yet alive, and beside him a child-maid!"

Now entirely heedless of the Danish sea-king, the Northman advanced to stare at the forlorn survivors of Hroar's attack. Had Rothada possessed her cousin's knowledge of men and customs, she would have stared back at the sea-king in bewilderment. The haughty face which so coldly confronted her was dark and oval, with arched nose, lofty brow, and black eyes of intense brightness,--features part Arab, part Greek in character, but in no respect Norse. Yet the young chief's hair proved quite as fully that his leadership must be founded on kingly Norse blood. It was of silky fineness and curled down beneath his helmet rim in locks like burnished red gold. His dress also was that of a king's son. The cloak of sable, clasped by a jewelled brooch, was lined with cloth of gold, while money-rings coiled their yellow spirals around the ring-mail sleeves which extended to his wrists.

Abashed by the extreme brightness of the sea-king's gaze, Rothada lowered her admiring eyes to the splendid recurved sword which swung at his belt. Roland could have told her that the weapon was a sword of the Saracen folk,--a Damascus blade, which would bend to the hilt without snapping and, like the Wrath of Sigurd, cut alike through iron bars and floating wool. With the peace-thongs knotted, even that far-famed blade of Regin's forging could not have compared with this magnificent weapon, whose sheath sparkled with gems, and upon whose pommel blazed the splendor of a priceless ruby.

The glint of gold and jewels recalled to Rothada's mind her own high rank, and gave her courage to glance up again. At sight of the milder light in the dark eyes of the sea-king, she raised her arms to him appealingly.

"Bright count of the sea!" she cried, "the dear Christ has sent you to save us. The cruel Dane's knife shall not harm my kinsman!"

The Northman glanced down at the wounded Frank.

"Who is this warrior?" he demanded.

"My kinsman, Count Roland. He is a high lord of King Karl, my father--"

"Your father,--the Frank king!" cried the Northman, and his eyes flashed a look at the girl that made her tremble. But again their keenness softened, and he pointed to her bosom.

"There's blood upon your kirtle," he muttered. "Do these Danes war upon babes and bairns?"

"It is my kinsman's blood. The Dane count would have harmed him as he lay helpless. I tried to shield him."

"Bravely done, little maiden! Though twice over the daughter of King Karl, the deed shall count you good weight in the balance. Take heart! Not all vikings are swine. Olvir Thorbiornson does not war upon maids and stricken heroes. Now I go to settle with this Dane boar who rends fallen foes."

"It is time to cease prattle," Hroar called up jeeringly. "Come, talk with a warrior. What says the bairn with outland face? Will he meet a sea-king singly in sword-play, and stake the trade-ship as prize?"

At the challenge a strange smile lit up the Northman's dark face; but he replied gravely: "A shrewd bargain, Dane! You would have me fight for what I need only reach out my hand to take. First tell me your name."

"You 're late from your mother's bower, bairn. Few vikings ask the name of Hroar the Cruel."

"Hroar! Hroar the Cruel!" repeated the Northman, in a smothered voice. His hand closed on the hilt of his sword, and his face went white with anger. Had Hroar seen the look in his eyes, he would not have grinned at his pallor or at the soft lisping voice in which the Northman answered: "Go, bid your other ship make fast. All craft shall lie quiet while I make an end of Hroar the Cruel."

The Dane laughed derisively, yet turned to repeat to his own crew the command which the Northman shouted over the opposite bulwark. Soon all six ships were drifting abreast on the stream,--the two Danes on one side of the trader, the three Norse craft on the other. The Danish crews kept warily aboard their ships, ready either for fight or flight. But as the first Norse ship grappled, from its prow a blond young giant leaped, axe in hand, sheer over Hroar's head, and down upon the cargo beyond him.

"Loki!" cried Hroar, starting back. "Erling Fairhair! The dead come to life!"

"Your guilt stings you, murderer," rejoined Olvir. "This is only Liutrad, son of Erling--but he bears his father's axe; and now comes one--"

"Ha, Floki--Floki the Crane!" gasped Hroar; and he glared like a trapped wolf at the strange viking who sprang down over the bulwark after young Liutrad. Though little broader than his fellow-Northmen, the man towered up a good span above seven feet in height, and the long-shafted halberd which he bore on his shoulder did not tend to lessen the effect of his giant stature.

At sight of the Dane chief a ferocious smile distorted the wry face of the giant, and he bent to him mockingly.

"Heya, old shipmate!" he croaked. "Many winters have sped since we parted on the Rhine bank."

Hroar licked his dry lips and answered thickly: "Those were good old days when we followed Thorbiorn and Otkar over sea and land. I call to mind the loot of Kars, when Thorbiorn bore off the emir's daughter for bride. You were not so mean in those days as to sail under a boy whose outland swartness--"

"--Proves the blood of the emir's daughter."

"How!--this elf the son of Thorbiorn Viking?"

"Ay," murmured Olvir; "the son of the lord you betrayed. Ho, Danes! now shall the murderer pay his blood-debt. Many times I have harried your dune coasts in search of this foul traitor, who, one and twenty winters gone, sold his sword-fellows and his earl into the ambush of the boy Karl."

"That is a lie!" shouted Hroar. "Only to save my own life--"

"Be still!" commanded Olvir. "The Crane shall bear witness for me. State the charge, Floki."

The lofty Northman stepped upon a cask, and his grey eyes swept their gaze over the Danish ships and back to the Danish sea-king, cold and hard as steel.

"Hearken, Danes," he began in a dry croak; "Floki the Crane is not given to lying. He can strike his bill straight to the mark, and his tongue thrusts as straight. Doubtless this murderer has told you how in days gone by Thorbiorn Viking fell in the Frankish ambush on Rhine Stream. I, too, was there. Like the earl, I was struck down by the Frankish spears. I saw the boy Karl rush out upon our fallen leader; then a war-hammer stretched me witless. When I saw again, before me stood the traitor Hroar. In his hand was the sword of his lord, and he was making blood-play

of his own shipmate, Hauk Otterson, whom men called Longarm. When Hauk was dead, his slayer came to me. He was minded first to cut off my feet, because, as he said, I was too tall. But then came the son of Pepin, and, casting at the traitor the gold for which he had sold his fellows, bade him begone from Frank Land. When, after many years, I broke from the Frankish thrall-bonds, I searched long and fruitlessly for the murderer. He had hid his shame in the Saxon forests."

"He lies--the croaking stork lies! There is no proof!" cried Hroar, loudly; but his eyes fell before the look of his grim accuser, and glanced uneasily over the bloody deck, until a dry chuckle from Floki stung him out of his caution.

"At the least, you will grant that the charge is somewhat stale," he sneered.

"The fouler the deed's stench," retorted Floki, thrusting forward his sharp face with a look of deadly menace. "We have run you down at last, coward, and you shall pay your share of the blood-debt. Hearken, Danes! The viking's son is not hunting this boar alone; he hunts bigger game! When I, hopeless of finding the traitor singly, after many winters fared home to Trondheim to gain aid, I found this unknown son of Thorbiorn dwelling outlaw in Starkad's grave-mound with Otkar, his foster-father. Since then each season we have scoured your dune coasts for the traitor. But the great wielder of Starkad's axe set foot on the trail of mightier game. Who of the North has not heard how, in the hall of King Carloman the Frank, and in the realm of Desiderius the Lombard, Otkar Jotuntop, wisest and strongest of warriors, fought and plotted against King Karl with all the craft of his wit and lore and the terror of his axe? Yet the grey bear failed to wreak vengeance against Thorbiorn's slayer, and his ashes lie in Starkad's mound. But here above me stands his bright fosterling, and when Olvir Thorbiornson has slain Hroar the traitor, he shall sail on to bring to an end the task of Otkar."

"Otkar--Otkar!" echoed a feeble voice. "Who speaks of the Dane hero?"

As the viking leaders wheeled about in surprise, Roland, aided by Rothada, sat up and stared at them with dazed eyes.

"The Frank earl!" muttered Olvir. "You 've heard of him, Floki,--Count Roland, the Frank king's kinsman."

"Ay, ring-breaker; I remember how, when he returned, Otkar spoke much of this brave Frank."

"Even when he lay dying--"

"Saint Michael! he is not dead,---Otkar the Dane, who, all but single-handed, cut his way from Pavia through the thick of our host! I stood in his battle-path, thinking, in my boyish folly, to check the rush of the grey bear. But he was high-minded; he struck with the flat. Would that he had not fled to the Greeks! When the king saw his battle-path, he swore to make him Count of the Saxon Mark."

"How! Otkar his foe?" exclaimed Olvir.

The Frank stared up at him and nodded faintly as he sank back upon the heap of bodies. The Northman gazed back at him for a little with a puzzled look. But an impatient growl from Hroar recalled his attention to the Dane.

"Hark, my Frank hero," he said; "we will talk of this later. Now my sword sings the death of Hroar the betrayer. Run, maiden; fetch drink for the hero, that he may have strength to watch the sword-game."

"So the laggard at last draws sword," sneered Hroar. "He has had his pleasure; now I claim mine. Ironbiter thirsts; yet before he tastes the warm blood the pledge of the fight shall be made known. Speak out, bairn! If I win I go hence with trade-ship and all, unhindered,--let the charge against me be what it may."

"Such are the terms,--all men bear witness!"

A grin of cunning triumph broadened the Dane's ferocious face.

"Then now is Hroar ready," he called loudly. "Now will Ironbiter split the skull of this base-born changeling as it split the skull of the man he calls father."

A terrible oath burst from the lips of Floki; but Olvir silenced him with a look. Then, white to the lips, the young sea-king turned again to his enemy.

"Dare you repeat that lie?" he asked in the soft lisp that betrayed to his steersmen how deadly was his anger.

"So the bairn begins to quake," jeered the Dane, deceived by the Northman's seeming mildness. "Even so quaked that braggart Thorbiorn when I swung Ironbiter his own sword above his head."

"That is a double lie," rejoined Olvir, in the same quiet voice. "If you met Thorbiorn, son of Starkad, in battle, it was not he who quaked. Nor did you slay the hero. When he lay dying,

pierced by the darts of hidden foes, the boy Karl ran from behind and thrust him in the back. Floki is no liar."

"No, by Odin," boasted Hroar. "Floki did not see all. Pepin's son sought to stay me when I ran to end the snared wolf. Would that I had broken the back of the meddlesome bairn! Floki has told how he drove me from his camp before I was half done my play with the thralls."

"Enough, murderer!" cried Olvir. "Now are you doomed; look on your bane!"

With the words, the young sea-king's hand gripped the hilt of his curved sword. The blade flashed from its sheath like a tongue of blue flame. Proudly its wielder held the weapon up before him and gazed at the play of iridescent light on its mirror surface.

"Al-hatif, the Priceless! the Beautiful!" he half whispered. Then suddenly his black eyes flamed with a terrible joy. He flung off his cloak and leaped down before Hroar, whirling the blade about his head.

"Come, Dane! come, coward!" he shouted. "Long have I sought you. Come to the serpent's kiss! come to your bane! Hel's blue hand outstretches; Fenir shall rend you!"

At the biting taunts the Dane's massive figure quivered with passion, and all the malevolence of his nature showed in his brutal face. Up swung his ponderous sword, and he advanced upon his foe like an aurochs bull.

"Leap, bairn!" he yelled. "Ironbiter swings; he will split your swart face!"

But the Northman did not leap.

"Strike and see," he called tauntingly.

Even more scornful than his words was the Northman's bearing as he lowered his sword and stood with the little shield raised overhead. To thus set himself in the way of his huge opponent seemed little short of madness alike to the Danish vikings and to Roland. The Frank could not restrain a groan of despair, while Rothada, darting back to his side with a flask of wine, cried out in terror. Already the great sword whirled overhead to cut down their champion.

A glance at the Norse steersmen might have reassured the captives. The blond young giant and his lofty companion were waiting the outcome of Hroar's attack no less calmly than their slender leader. Cool and quiet, Olvir faced the savage Dane, his lip curled in a haughty smile; but his eyes glittered like an angry snake's. Stung by the scorn of the smile, Hroar put all his strength into the sweep of his sword.

"Thor aid!" he roared, and the sword whirled down with terrific force. But the Northman only smiled the more scornfully and caught the blow on his tilted shield with such consummate skill that the blade glanced harmlessly aside from the steel surface.

A deafening uproar greeted the feat, the Danes on the one side crying out their wonder, while the Northmen across answered with shouts of triumph. The noise ceased as abruptly as it burst out. Olvir had raised his curved sword and tapped the hauberk of the Dane in warning. Had he wished it, he could have slain his enemy then; for Hroar was so astonished by the turning of the blow that he stood with lowered shield.

"Ward yourself, Dane!" cried the Northman; and as Hroar started back, the Damascus sword began to dart forward like the beak of a striking heron. Up whirled Ironbiter for a second stroke; but Olvir did not wait its fall. With a wild cry he hurled himself upon the Dane like a maddened wolf. Above, below, on all sides, his sword flashed around Hroar's shield in thrusts so swift that no eye could follow. In vain Hroar sought to cut down with sweeping strokes the bright figure that leaped in upon him till the two shields clashed; in vain he sought to avoid the lightning sword-thrusts that dazzled his eyes.

Bleeding from a dozen stabs, his shield-arm pierced and cheek laid open, the ferocious Dane drew back appalled. His glaring eyes no longer saw a human foe before him; that shimmering, leaping figure was Thor, the Danish Thor, terrible in his youth and beauty.

Step by step the Dane retreated, until his back struck the bulwark. The touch spurred him to desperate fury. But he sprang forward, only to reel back again before the stabs of the pitiless sword. The end was now come. Half dazed, he dropped his shield to meet a leg feint, and the blade lunged through his unguarded neck, so that the point stood out a span behind.

CHAPTER IV

There the King, the wise-hearted,

... the mighty king.

LAMENT OF ODDRUN.

On the picturesque Garonne bank, beneath the Roman walls of Casseneuil, lay the camp of the Frankish host. Since Easter the levies of blue-eyed Allemanni and dark-eyed Aquitanians and Bretons had been pouring in to swell the ranks.

For a mile around, the fertile hills were dotted with tents and booths. Overhead stretched a canopy of blue haze, the smoke of the countless fires. Long lines of ox-wains trailed in from all parts of the land; great droves of cattle browsed in the meadows; and water craft of all sizes sailed to and fro on the Lot and the Garonne, or lay moored along the banks while busy sailors shifted cargo. The larger vessels were from Bordeaux and the sea; others plied between Casseneuil and Toulouse, where a smaller host--Burgundians and Lombards, and the Goths and Gallo-Romans of Septimania and Provincia--were being mustered by Barnard, the king's uncle, to invade the Saracen country by way of Narbonne. The grandson of Karl the Hammer was gathering his might to strike the pagans such another blow as had shattered their host on the plains of Touraine.

The royal pavilion stood in the heart of the camp, close to the river's bank. Above its peak floated the gold-bright folds of the three-forked standard, and the scores of messengers that came and went told that Karl the King was busied with the affairs of his vast realm. Those who passed in saw first a striking assemblage of the king's liegemen--long-robed priests, counts in full war-gear, and court officials, ornate with silks and jewels. Here were warriors who had seen the fall of Pavia and helped to hew down the Irminsul; bishops and abbots who ruled ecclesiastical estates, the revenues of which were little less than princely; *missi dominici*--those trusty liegemen who bore the king's will to outland lords, or journeyed through their appointed ridings to bring justice for all against the petty tyrannies of count and bishop and judge.

Yet though the pavilion held within it many of the most famous men of the greatest realm since the fall of the Western Empire, the new-comer would have been certain to pass by all alike with a hasty glance and turn half reverently to the low dais where Karl the King sat on his oaken throne. Aside from his jewelled sword-belt, there was little of gold or gems about the massive figure; but beneath the sapphires and holy nail of the Lombard crown the grey eyes of the great Frank gazed out with calm power. War-counts and priests alike bowed before that glance; for in mind, as in body, Karl was master of them all.

The last of the *missi* called into service had been despatched to inspect the four quarters of the realm, and the king was now in earnest consultation with two Moslem envoys. The contrast between the lean figure and patriarchal beard of the older Saracen and the blond, massive-limbed Frank was as great as that between the king's jerkin and cross-thonged stockings and the envoy's green turban and flowing white burnous. Yet such of the bystanders as were accustomed to look beneath mere outward appearance saw in the Arab sheik's dark face an expression strikingly like that which gave such dignity to the fresh ruddy countenance of the king. Not all the wide difference in race and dress and years could hide the stamp of power with which Nature had marked the features of the two.

The other Saracen, who, like the king, appeared to be scarcely three or four years past thirty, showed warrior training in every pose and feature; but a covert sneer lurked beneath his impassive smile, and from eyes that blinked like those of a bird of prey he shot quick, evil glances at the surrounding Franks.

Presently there entered the pavilion a thick-set, tow-haired warrior, with red, beer-bloated features, who jostled his way to the front without wasting breath in apologies for his rudeness. As he approached the dais the younger Saracen glanced at him, and, with a seemingly careless gesture, touched the hilt of his scimitar. He turned away at once to join in the parting salaams to the king, while the boorish warrior returned to the pavilion's entrance. As he came to a halt near the Grand Doorward, he pointed outside, his low forehead creased in a savage scowl.

"Here comes the duke now, and in choice company," he grumbled. "The Merwing shall learn that Rudulf's daughter is not for a Vascon, though he be twice over the rightful heir of Clovis."

"Does Count Hardrat speak of the Vascon Wolf?" inquired the doorward, half heeding.

"Vascon fox!" rejoined Hardrat. The jest seemed to ease his ill-humor, and he turned his gaze to the duke's beautiful companion.

The girl was young,--certainly not more than seventeen,--but of all the queen's maidens, none could lay claim to so many suitors. Among her own people and the other blond Germans beyond

the Rhine she would have been considered too dark for perfect beauty; but, North Rhine or South Rhine, few men could have looked at her without a quickened pulse-beat. There was allurements in every line of her softly moulded features, in the rich bloom of her olive cheeks, and in the silky meshes of her gold-brown hair. Envious rivals might say that her eyes were over-narrow for beauty, and her lips of too vivid a scarlet. None the less, the ardent warriors and courtiers, and more than one mitred churchman, longed for the kiss of that enticing mouth, and willingly gave themselves over to the spell of the bewitching eyes with their strangely shifting tints of blue and green.

Such was Fastrada, the daughter of Count Rudulf, youngest, fairest, and most sought for among the queen's bower-maidens.

It was not to be wondered, therefore, that as he strolled with her up to the pavilion Duke Lupus kept his small eyes fixed upon the girl in an amorous stare. Near the entrance he paused and sighed regretfully.

"Here is the king's tent, maiden," he said. "I wish it had been more distant. At your side the way was all too short. I am more than repaid that I left my horse at the villa gate for my suite to bring after."

The girl looked up, open-eyed, into the Vascon's sensual face, and replied with a simplicity that to a casual observer would have appeared almost naive: "The noble Lupus has done me great honor by his escort. Our gracious queen will not soon forget such a favor."

"And the queen's most charming maiden--?"

Fastrada bent her head to hide a smile, but her voice was very soft: "Who could forget a kindness from the Duke of the Vascons,--from the rightful heir of Clovis?"

Lupus started, and glanced hastily before him into the pavilion. He had often boasted of his descent from that long line of lustful, bloody, indolent Merwing kings, the last of whom had been deposed and his crown seized by Pepin the Short; but all of those boasts had been uttered when the usurper's son held court on the farther side of Aquitania. His relief was heartfelt when he perceived that only one other than himself had heard the dangerous compliment. Hardrat met his furtive glance with a meaning smile and came forward to bow before Fastrada.

"Saints grant I may be of service to our dame's fairest maiden," he said.

The girl lowered her eyes demurely.

"I bear a message to our lord king," she replied.

"Then the Christian maiden must wait for heathen dogs."

Fastrada looked up at her two suitors with an arch smile, but only Lupus perceived the trace of malice that lurked in the corners of the scarlet lips.

"Do not be angry for me, Count Hardrat," she said. "It is a pleasure to wait in company such as that with which I am favored."

Both lords smiled at the flattery; but while the duke repaid the compliment in graceful phrases, Hardrat glared at his rival with jealous suspicion. From beneath her modestly drooping lashes Fastrada watched how the Thuringian's brow lowered under the arrogant stare of the duke. Her pulse quickened, and the shifting tints deepened in her downcast eyes. But the war-count checked his threatened outburst, and so put an end to the sport.

Petulantly the girl turned to the entrance, only to look about in appeal to the Vascon.

"*Ai*, lord duke," she exclaimed; "who are these heathen? I can see only their strange headgear."

"They are Saracen counts, the pagan allies of our Most Christian King," answered Hardrat, and he smiled ironically. "But look,--their audience comes to an end. I can now lead you in before his Majesty."

"I give thanks," murmured Fastrada, but her eyes were fixed upon the envoys. The officials near the entrance had drawn apart, and the white-robed Saracens, having salaamed themselves to a respectful distance from the dais of the mighty Afranj sultan, were completing their exit in a more dignified manner. The tall leader came out like a veritable Sheik el Islam, his firm tread, erect frame, and eagle glance giving the lie to the whiteness of his hair and flowing beard.

Fastrada slipped in front for a closer view of the grand old warrior, but was met by the leering gaze of the younger envoy behind him. Before his stare the girl shrank back, blushing with offended pride. Yet she looked eagerly around after the Saracen leader, and her changeful eyes sparkled as she exclaimed: "There goes a hero! Would that he were young! We 'd see a warrior such as few Franks could withstand."

"Strange words for a daughter of Thuringia," replied Lupus; "yet, none the less, they are very fitting. Al Arabi is a count of great fame among his people. He has held many high offices, and

though no longer Count of Saragossa, he is friend and chief councillor of Al Huseyn, the vali who succeeded him. Old as he is, even now he can strike a heavy blow."

"He is a raven-feeder!" growled Count Hardrat. "Nor is Vali Kasim a babe. The old man has a stout son-in-law. Also, he owns a silent tongue and does not bicker with his friends. Come now, maiden, if you would see the king."

The girl smiled, and bowed both to Lupus and to her red-faced countryman. Then, with hands clasped before her and eyes demurely downcast, she followed the latter through the brilliant assemblage to the royal presence. Karl, though dictating a memorandum to Abbot Fulrad, the white-haired Keeper of the Great Seal, paused at once and nodded pleasantly to Hardrat.

"You bring a maiden from Hildegarde," he observed in a voice clear and strong but strangely shrill for so massive a body. "I am mistaken if it is not the daughter of our faithful Rudulf. I trust that she bears good tidings."

Fastrada bowed low before the dais. "Our gracious dame bade me bring word to your Majesty that her pain has eased. She enjoys good health again, though she put away the leech's drugs."

"As well--as well! I 'd wager a little fasting against the best of leeches. But, indeed, these are good tidings, and they come by the mouth of a fair emissary," replied Karl, his gaze lingering on the soft beauty of the girl's face and form. "It is a dusty path to the gates, and the herald of our queen should be spared the pains of walking it twice in a day. Let her delay her return. There will be a seat in our barge when we go to the noon-meal."

Fastrada bowed and withdrew, half awed, into the midst of the assemblage. Yet the admiration in the king's glance had by no means escaped her. Her cheeks glowed with pride at thought of the look and of his kindly tone. After royalty, the homage of lesser men lacked flavor, and the girl listened to the eager greetings of the court officials with an indifferent bearing. Of what value the blandishments of these sleek courtiers and petty counts when heroes such as the famous Roland and Hardrat were no less eager for her favor? And now the king himself had looked at her with far other than a cold eye, though Queen Hildegarde was yet held to be the most beautiful woman in the realm.

With true feminine perversity, the girl turned from all others and set about the task of pleasing a lank, dour-faced official, the only one in the pavilion who seemed altogether indifferent to her charms. The man met her advances with a sardonic smile, and gave a curt response to her greeting; while his pale-blue eyes turned away from her soft beauty to fix their cold stare on the approaching figure of Duke Lupus.

"The Merwing is ill named," he muttered in his beard, struck by the same thought that had prompted Hardrat's jest. "He should be called Fox, not Wolf,--a cunning fox! He will bear watching."

"What is my Lord Anselm pleased to say?" asked Fastrada. "He has the look which he wears when he sits on the judgment-seat, dooming the luckless offenders."

"Maidens should chatter and spin, and leave weightier matters to those who have wit," answered the judge, dryly.

"Alas, then, for the maidens, if all men agree with the Count of the Palace!" sighed Fastrada; and she drew back in mock sorrow.

Anselm paid no heed to the alluring play. His attention was fixed upon the Duke of the Vascons.

Lupus advanced with an arrogance that won him little favor among the proud Franks. But Karl smiled, and even extended his hand for the salute when the duke would have bent to kiss his knee.

"With joy we see again our faithful friend," he said. "Not satisfied with swearing allegiance the second time, he brings us needed supplies with a bountiful hand. It is well this fair Southland is held for us by so trusty a liegeman."

"My lord king is pleased to be gracious," replied Lupus, quickly. "If I have won his indulgence, I now beg leave to ask a favor."

"Speak. Anything I can rightfully give shall be allowed you."

"It is no small matter, your Majesty; the insolent Bishop of Rome has stricken the mitre from the head of my kinsman Thierry."

Karl started and frowned.

"Alter your asking, lord duke," he answered. "I cannot set aside so just a judgment. There were charges and a fair trial for the Bishop of Bordeaux. He has failed to clear himself on a single count; drunkenness, strife, licentiousness,--all were proved."

"Slander, sire!--malicious slander!" cried the duke, his passion overleaping all caution. "My

kinsman is persecuted for his lineage! Few priests of his rank but wassail and brawl unrebuked. As for the third charge, strangest of all in a realm whose king--"

"Silence!" roared Karl; and he towered up on the dais like an angry lion. "Has the kinsman of Hunold and Waifre twice sworn allegiance to doubt the justice of his king and Holy Church? I, the king, sent Pope Hadrian command for the trial. It is enough that dukes and counts trample the common folk and wallow in the troughs of their sodden vices. At the least, I will scourge the swine from God's Church. By the King of Heaven! when I have swept the pagan Saracens into the sea I will cleanse the household of my kingdom,--from duke to deacon! Thierry has lost his mitre; let him repent and walk upright, lest worse come upon him."

Stunned, humiliated, livid with impotent anger, the haughty Merwing shrank back from before the son of Pepin, and hastened to quit the assemblage that had witnessed his shame. Most of the Franks met his black glances with ready frowns; but Hardrat, the Thuringian count, could not conceal his pleasure at the turn of events.

"All goes well!" he chuckled. "The fox is shrewdly nipped. He 'll stop at nothing now. Rage will melt all his frosty caution. The others are with us, heart and hand, and that missive to Saxon Land by this time should have rid us--"

The conclusion of the Thuringian's half-muttered words was lost in a terrific blare of trumpets and war-horns that sent the alarm ringing to every corner of the Frankish camp.

Within the pavilion all was instantly struggle and confusion. Swords flashed overhead, and the assemblage surged from side to side as the war-counts sought to push out from the press of officials and priests. But Karl the King walked swiftly through the parting crowd, his face serene, his sword unsheathed. The warriors rushed after him, weapon in hand.

CHAPTER V

What are ye, then, of armed men,
Mailed folk who the foaming keel
Have urged thus over the ocean ways,
Over water-ridges the ringed prow?

BEOWULF.

Most women at such a time would have covered behind the empty throne; Fastrada sought to pass out with the war-counts. She was caught, however, in the press which closed behind them, and even with Abbot Fulrad's aid could not gain the entrance for some time. When at last the sturdy old Keeper of the Seal drew her into the open, the horns had ceased braying, and a strange hush lay upon the camp. But the river-banks were lined with armed men, and Fastrada saw hundreds of other warriors running to join them.

"What can it mean?" she exclaimed. "Have the Aquitanians revolted? Look how every man stares down the river."

"Let us go yonder to the knoll where the king stands. There the view is clear," suggested Fulrad.

"I see masts already,--five of them," exclaimed Fastrada, as they hurried forward. "Each bears a white shield at its peak. It cannot be they are Greek ships. They must be Frisian traders, or an embassy from Alfwold, King of Northumbria."

"Neither one nor the other, maiden," rejoined Fulrad. "Years since, in the days of Pepin, I saw the like,--once upon the Seine, and again upon the Rhine, in the Frisian Mark. It was there Karl fought his first battle,--a lad of twelve."

"But these ships--of what land are they? See how stately they surge up the river with their glittering prows; and hark to the oar-song of their crews,--a lay of the old gods! I 've heard it in the forest when no priest was near."

"Ay, maiden; these are heathen craft, and they bear warriors more terrible than the Saxon wolves. You've heard of Lord Otkar. These are his countrymen."

"Danes?"

"Truly; from Sigfrid's realm, or from Jutland, which is beyond. Otkar was of a land yet more

distant. He told me much of the Norse folk; of their great wealth and fierce war-spirit. God grant that Wittikind the Westphalian lies quiet in Nordmannia and does not march back with the host of his wife's brother. The Saxons and Frisians are hard enough nuts to crack, without the Danes."

"But how come these heathen on the Garonne?"

"We shall soon learn," answered the abbot, pointing with his staff. "Here is the first ship abreast. Mark the mail-clad crew."

"The ship turns," observed Fastrada.

"And the others follow. They will moor before the king."

Even as Fulrad spoke, the oars of the longships rattled inboard, and the five beautiful craft glided toward the bank. They might have been dragons wheeling in salute to the royal standard. Spellbound by the sight, warriors and courtiers and king alike stood silently waiting while the stately prows swept inshore. First the leader and then, in quick succession, the four others ran aground, and the hush was broken by the thud of grapnels cast upon the bank. As the sterns of the vessels swung downstream with the current, a gangplank was thrust ashore from the prow of the leader.

The first to leap down the plank was a gallant young warrior in Frankish armor, at sight of whom the king cried out in astonishment: "Gerold!--with these Danes!"

"The Northmen come in peace, sire," observed Abbot Fulrad. "If not, how is it the queen's brother bears them company?"

"Peaceful or not, lord abbot," rejoined Hardrat, "these are insolent pagans to sing forbidden lays in the midst of a Christian host. Shall I not take horse, sire, and bring down the galleys from Casseneuil? Look, your Majesty! Count Roland follows Gerold; and he totters from recent wounds!"

But Karl made no answer. He was staring intently at the lithe warrior in shimmering mail who had leaped up to help Roland across the gangway.

"Ho, Fulrad," he called; "look close at the Dane count's war-gear, and call to mind that old Norse bear Otkar. His mail was the same in every point as this bright falcon's. Can they be kinsmen?"

"Old oak and young ash,--they 're little more alike, sire. But the lad will shortly tell us," remarked Fulrad, as Gerold hastened forward.

The queen's brother mounted the knoll, and knelt to kiss the extended hand of the king.

"Greeting, lad! You return in strange fellowship," remarked Karl, his gaze fixed upon the bright Northman, who was supporting Roland up the bank.

"They are shipmates whom I know your Majesty will gladly welcome," replied Gerold, with fervor. "Never have I seen such warriors! I fell in with them at Bordeaux."

"Bordeaux?"

"I journeyed to the Vascon burg from Fronsac, thinking that my lord would wish to know more of the new walls which Duke Lupus is building."

"Well done! But these Danes?"

"I can thank their count for a quick journey! He comes to you on a strange mission-- But let Roland speak, sire. He owes the Northman freedom and life."

"More, sire!--more!" cried Roland, as he sprang forward from the supporting arm of his companion.

The king met him halfway, and drew him up as he sought to kneel.

"You 're wounded, kinsman!" he exclaimed. "You have fought at sea! Where are your followers--and the child?"

"I have lost my henchmen, sire; but all else is well--thanks to Lord Olvir, my noble sword-brother."

"This Dane?"

"Ay, sire; leader of half a thousand sea-wolves,--the pick of the North. He has saved me from torture and the princess from shame."

"By my father's soul, he has earned the good-will of one who can repay! Stand forward, my bright Dane, that Karl the King may give you thanks."

At such a bidding from the lord of half Europe, most men would have run to kneel at the king's feet. Such, however, was not the manner of vikings, and Olvir Thorbiornson was not only a leader of vikings, but, throughout the heathen North, could have laid claim without dispute to a descent direct from Odin. Instead of hastening forward, with glowing face and ready bows, he advanced proudly erect, as one sea-king would meet another.

Karl and his lords gazed at the young heathen in wondering admiration, no less impressed by

the grace and pride of his bearing than by his rich dress and the beauty of his sword and war-gear. Beside his lithe figure and dark, masterful face even Gerold of Bussen appeared rough and uncouth.

Olvir neither bowed nor knelt, but raised his shield overhead in salute, and returned Karl's gaze with the unflinching look of an equal. It was a novel meeting for the warrior-king, before whom even the wild Saxons trembled. He frowned and said shortly: "It would seem that the Danes are stiff of knee."

"Then set us in your battle-front, lord king," replied Olvir.

"Well answered!" cried Abbot Fulrad.

"You wish to join my standard, young Dane, and seek the post of danger?" said Karl, now smiling.

"Where else should a king's son stand? For this war the foster-son of Otkar Jotuntop seeks place with his sea-wolves in the fore of your host."

"Otkar the Dane!--you his fosterling?"

"And blood kinsman."

"Where, then, is the hero?"

"His ashes lie in the mound where he reared me."

"Dead?--that giant warrior! But he sent you to make peace with the foe whom without cause he sought so mightily to harm."

"No, by Thor," rejoined Olvir, his black eyes glittering. "To the end Otkar thought only of vengeance. He gave over the task into my hand. I sailed out of the North to harry your coasts with fire and steel."

"Saint Michael! you dare tell me that!" cried Karl, and his grey eyes flamed with anger at the Northman's audacity.

"My tale is not all told," said Olvir, unmoved.

"I have heard enough! You have slain Count Roland's henchmen, stolen my wares, and now you come to mock--"

"No, sire! no!" cried Roland, and he sprang before the Northman, who was turning haughtily away, his dark face no less angry than the king's. "Hold, brother! One word, sire! It was not he who slew my followers; he saved us from the clutches of Wittikind's man, a terrible Dane count, whom he slew in single combat. While I lay witless from my wounds, he granted the prayer of the little princess that we be brought to you; he won over the warriors of the Dane count to join his banner; yet more, he plighted brotherhood with me, after the old custom."

"As to your wares, Frank king," broke in Olvir, hotly, "bale and cask lie in my longships, untouched. Now I cast them ashore, and weigh anchor."

"No, by my sword; that you shall not!" cried Karl, and in a stride he was beside the young Northman. "Hold, kin of Otkar. I have done wrong; I will repay."

"Hold, brother, for my sake!" urged Roland, his arm about Olvir's shoulder.

The sea-king half turned, his nostrils quivering with passion, and stared fiercely about from the astonished Frank lords to their king. But before the look on Karl's grand face his anger broke and subsided as quickly as it had flared out.

"Have your will, lord king," he muttered. "I will listen, though that is not our custom in the North after words such as have been spoken here."

"Then I eat those words, my bold Dane. Wait; that is not enough! My hot anger has done you wrong. I will pay in full. Yet first, tell me why you sought vengeance against me,--you and Otkar. Why did your foster-father stir up strife between me and my brother Carolman? Why did he spur Desiderius, the weak Lombard, to war?"

Olvir's breast heaved, and his nostrils quivered; but he answered steadily: "It was thus, lord king: in your youth you laid an ambush near the Rhine mouth for a band of vikings."

"It was my first battle. The Danes had a famous hero for leader."

"He was my father."

"So--now I understand," muttered Karl, and his brows met in deep thought. "You have been generous, young count. Name what blood-fine you would have. I will pay it over without dispute."

"I do not come for wergild, lord king. While I thought you my father's slayer, nothing but blood could have paid for the wrong. And the debt is paid in blood; for before I slew that vile Dane, I learned from his own lips that he, who had betrayed my father, also was his bane,--that you sought to save the stricken hero."

"He thrust me aside; I was yet a child. I wish now that I had hung the blood-eager boar."

"Not so, king; else I might never have learned that I had no cause to hate you. I owe thanks to

the braggart. But for his boasts, I doubt if I should have yielded to the little maid's entreaty."

"It was a Christian deed!" exclaimed Karl.

Olvir smiled: "Say rather, a Christly deed. I have read the runes of the White Christ; but, also, I have heard what Otkar had to say of your Christian priests and their flocks. By Thor! beneath the fleece, if Otkar spoke truth, they differ little from those whom you call heathen wolves."

"True--true! though the charge is bitter from the lips of a pagan. Yet Holy Church is the only fold, however much defiled by evil men. Already I have set about the cleansing of the sacred cloisters. Before I have ended that task, I hope that you and all your followers will have come within the pale."

"But now, lord king, all my men are sons of Thor and Odin; and I, like Otkar, trust neither in the old gods nor the new,--only in my own might. Can you welcome us so? I have heard how you force baptism upon the Saxons."

"As a nation of savage pagans, they menace my kingdom. I must bend them to Holy Church, or in time to come they will sweep across the Rhine and lay desolate the work I seek to upbuild. It is otherwise with your following, my Dane hawk. You are free to choose or reject Christ, as you are free to come and go. It is my trust that you will see the Truth and stay with me always."

"For this war, at least, we shall fight beneath your standard. Your foe will not easily break the shieldburg of my sea-wolves."

"That I can well believe if they are worthy of their leader."

"You shall view them now, lord king!" exclaimed Olvir, and, wheeling about, he sent a clear command ringing down the bank.

Hardly was the word uttered when from all five longships the armed crews poured overboard and swarmed up the shore like a storming party. So fierce, indeed, was their rush that many of the Frankish warriors mistook it for a real attack. When three or four counts, with Hardrat at their head, raised the cry of treachery, a thousand loyal men ran, shouting, to throw themselves between their king and the heathen.

But Karl sprang before his warriors, with angry commands to halt, and the movement was checked as suddenly as it had started. Yet, prompt as was the king's action, there was one sword which swung before he could utter his first command.

The moment Hardrat saw the Franks come running, he ceased his shouts and wheeled upon Olvir, with upraised sword, thinking to cut him down unawares. He might easier have surprised a hungry leopard. Before the blow could fall, the Northman had thrust Roland out of danger and leaped in under the descending blade. His arms closed about the burly Thuringian like steel bands. There was no time given Hardrat to break loose or to strike. He was flung up bodily and cast headlong over Olvir's shoulder.

The Thuringian's astonishment was exceeded only by his rage. Half stunned, he sat up, staring wide-eyed, and groped for his sword-hilt. But Olvir caught up the weapon, and, snapping the broad blade on his knee, tossed the fragments back to their owner with careless scorn.

"Ho! the red pig has a tumble!" roared Liutrad, at the head of the vikings, and the grim warriors burst into jeering laughter.

"Saint Michael! who jests at so ill a time?" demanded Karl; and he wheeled about, his face flushed, and his great figure quivering with anger.

Olvir answered him, smiling, "My sea-wolves, lord king. This fair-haired hero and I have played a merry game behind your back."

"A game for which Hardrat should hang, sire!" exclaimed Roland. "He sought to cut down Count Olvir unawares."

The angry flush on the king's face deepened, and he confronted Hardrat with a look before which the stout warrior visibly trembled.

"Well for you, Thuringian, your sword did no harm!" he cried. "Lightly as the young hero takes it, I am yet minded to ride you on the nearest tree."

"Forgive the deed, sire! I was over-hasty,--I thought the heathen were about to attack your Majesty," stammered Hardrat.

"We will allow the plea; the thought was loyal, however ill-advised. Your broken sword shall be the punishment for your rashness."

Had Karl been less keenly intent on the movements of the vikings, the affair might not have passed so lightly for the Thuringian. But as Olvir made no demand for redress, the king turned away, to watch with a kindling eye the manoeuvres of the Northmen.

At the first threat of attack, those members of the crews already ashore had lined up so as to present to the menacing Franks an unbroken wall of shields. Then their close ranks formed

swiftly in a steel-faced wedge, with the towering figure of Floki the Crane at the point. Behind him stood Liutrad Erlingson with the sea-king's banner, while in the centre of the wedge the poorer armed Danes surrounded the Frisian sailors and Rothada. The discipline was perfect. Not even at the moment of wildest flurry, when the Franks were charging to the attack, had a single viking spear been cast or bow been drawn.

The king's powerful face glowed with pleasure and admiration at sight of such warriors.

"By my sword!" he swore, "this is a fair day for me! Never before has such a band been seen south of the Rhine."

"Or north of it, lord king," added Olvir. "All the champions among the Trondir sailed with me, and with them many other great warriors from Norway and Sweden; nor did Hroar number cowards in his crews."

"They may well be named the pick of the North. I should search all my kingdom to find their like. Would that their leader had pledged himself to me for a lifetime!"

The speaker's eyes glowed, and he laid a hand on Olvir's shoulder, as though eager to take full possession of such a liegeman. The Northman would have shrunk from the familiar touch, had he not perceived the earnest friendliness of the king's look. But his reply only half satisfied the great Frank.

"The Norns weave the future," he said. "When this war is ended I may yet wish to remain your man. But I cannot speak for my followers. They are free vikings."

"If you stay, they will stay. And now they shall not find me lacking in gifts. To begin, I name as yours all the wares which you saved from the Frisian ship. But did I not see women in the midst of your warriors? Where is the daughter of Himiltrude?"

Olvir turned and beckoned to his followers.

"The king awaits his daughter," he called. "Bring forward the little vala."

"She comes," answered Floki; and the wedge behind him split open to the centre.

When Rothada advanced to the front, with her broad-shouldered Frisian maid, Floki and Liutrad seated her on a shield between them and moved forward at a swinging stride.

"Farewell to our vala!" called out an old berserk, as he took the leader's post at the point of the wedge.

"Farewell! Come again to us soon, little maid!" shouted the vikings.

The girl waved her hand to the grim heathen, who in all things had honored her as they would have honored a daughter of their own kings. She could almost have wished to stay with them. But it was not to be. Even now the king, her father, awaited her,—that grand crowned warrior. Would he be kind to her, the daughter of the wife whom he had thrust aside so causelessly to wed the Lombard princess? Half hoping, half dismayed, the girl clasped her hands and gazed at her father with startled eyes.

Karl stared in wonder at the two viking leaders and the maiden they bore between them. Could this be Himiltrude's daughter,—a child of the cloisters,—this little heathen princess, clad in rarest furs and loaded down with glittering ornaments?

But the moment of doubt was brief. As the saluting vikings placed the girl before her father and drew back, she raised her head, which fear had caused her to droop, and looked up at him again with wide-open, appealing eyes.

"Himiltrude!" he cried, and he drew the trembling girl into his arms.

"All's well with the maiden," muttered Floki.

"All is well," repeated Olvir, and he waved the steersmen back to the wedge.

CHAPTER VI

He who alone there was deemed best of all,
The War-lord of the Danes, well worthy of men.

HEL-RIDE OF BRYNHILD.

While Floki and Liutrad returned to their posts, their leader sprang again to where Roland stood leaning upon Gerold's shoulder.

"You 're weary, sword-brother," he exclaimed. "Come with me--"

"Wait, friend," replied Roland. "Yonder is the maiden of whom I spoke."

"Fastrada--?"

"She stands apart with Count Hardrat, whom you threw, and Lupus, Duke of the Vascons."

"Lead on. I am eager to know the maiden who has so fast bound a warrior's heart," replied Olvir, smiling.

Gerold glanced about at the king. "We 're free to go," he said. "Our lord king has thought only for the princess."

Roland nodded impatiently and advanced at once, a hand on the shoulder of either friend. But the gaunt figure of Count Anselm blocked the way.

"Stay a little, Roland," he said. "Here are two who fought both with and against Otkar the Dane, and would grip hands with his foster-son."

"Both as friends and as foes, my kinsman loved the high lords of King Karl," replied Olvir.

The judge's severe face softened as Olvir clasped his bony hand, and he smiled as he turned with him to the serene-faced churchman.

"Here, hero," he said, "is one of the shepherds of the Christian fold who is neither wolf nor boar."

"I have eyes," replied Olvir, simply. "When I see a good man, I know him."

"There is none good save God," quoted the abbot, piously; but he smiled at the sincerity in the young Northman's look and tone.

"Be ye perfect even as God is perfect," quoted Olvir, in turn.

The Franks stared in amazement.

"By all the saints!" cried Anselm; "the lad knows Holy Writ,--a heathen monk!"

"We shall make of him a Christian layman, at the least," rejoined Fulrad, his broad, kindly face aglow.

"Best leave me heathen," said Olvir. "If I become anything else, it will be an Arian, whom, according to Otkar, you name heretic, and hold to be more accursed than the unbelievers."

"We will trust the grace of our Lord Christ to lead you into the true fold," replied Fulrad.

"Meantime, Roland waits to greet his *may*," suggested Gerold.

All smiled at the hint, and the two high councillors hastened to make way for the lover, with hearty God-speeds.

The approach of the three friends had by no means passed unobserved by the queen's maiden; and when presently they stood before her, there was an added depth of color in her cheeks, and her bosom rose and fell to a quickened heart-beat. While the great Count Roland bent to kiss her hand, she stared with glowing eyes at the sea-king. Here was a warrior such as must have been that grand old Saracen,--a hero with a soul of fire, proud as a king, who would laugh at death as at a jest.

Unable to meet the piercing brightness of Olvir's black eyes, she lowered her gaze and bowed as she had bowed to the king. Many a lord had gazed at her with the same admiring look, but never one who had roused a response in her own heart strong enough to over-ride her cool and purposeful coquetry. The blue tints in her eyes deepened, and she stood thrilling with a delicious fear. Only by a strong effort did she succeed in raising her lashes to meet the expected love-message in the stranger's eyes. To her astonishment and chagrin, the calm, full gaze that met her glance told only of frank admiration.

Not that Olvir was unmoved. He had seen many beautiful maidens among the blond daughters of the Northern earls and bondir, but never one whose loveliness was as the loveliness of this dark daughter of Thuringia. Half bewildered, he drank in her rich beauty with eager delight. Yet he did not forget that this was the maiden whom his sword-brother loved.

"So I stand before the daughter of the brave Count Rudulf," he said quietly. "No longer, Roland, do I wonder that the maiden holds your heart in leash. I trust that she will accept this trinket, which I offer in token of friendship."

Great as had been Fastrada's disappointment, she took with eagerness the gold brooch which Olvir unclasped from his cloak. At the touch of his fingers she blushed rosier than before.

"A gift with true friendship is doubly gracious," she murmured.

"I could not give less to the maiden whom my brother loves," answered Olvir, and he drew Roland to his side.

"Satan seize the pagan!" muttered Duke Lupus. "He woos the girl openly for his friend."

"More harm should he speak for himself," replied Count Hardrat. "The girl's eye is caught by his glitter. We must break in on the talk. Bid him and the counts to your feast. I have a plot in

mind."

"I trust to your counsel," replied Lupus, and he thrust himself half between Fastrada and Olvir.

"Greeting, lord count," he said. "I am Lupus, Duke of Vasconia, a child of kings."

"Greeting, lord duke," replied Olvir, coldly. "I am Olvir Thorbiornson, heir to the King of Lade."

"I gladly welcome a king's son to my south country. In two days I give a feast to our Lord Karl. I trust that you will be present with your companions."

"I give thanks. I will come, and so, doubtless, will my friends."

"Farewell, then, for a time," said Lupus. Unable to witness any longer Fastrada's preference for the new-comers, he bowed to the party and turned away, dragging with him the unwilling Hardrat.

As Fastrada sought to catch again the eye of the perverse stranger, a barge came sweeping downstream and headed in for a small wharf, just above the viking ships. As the craft made fast to the landing, the high-pitched imperious voice of Karl rang out above the loud talk of his retainers: "Lord Olvir! Where is Lord Olvir?"

Olvir glanced at Roland, and hesitated. But Fastrada said quickly: "Go! Gerold and I will see Count Roland aboard the barge."

As the Northman drew near, Karl smiled and hailed him with more friendliness than ever in his voice: "Here comes my Dane hawk,--truly, a king's son, no less in deed than in bearing! But you are no spokesman, Olvir. This little maid has told in full how you saved herself and my sister's son from the savage Hroar, and, at her bidding, loosed the thrall-bonds of the Frisians."

"That was the doing of Floki, lord king,--yonder tall man at the fore of my crews. In past years he had been a sword-brother to the Frisian shipmaster, and so had the disposal both of ship and thralls. They should all have burned together, had not this little vala--this little seeress--offered him her head-ring for ransom."

"Yet she still wears the circlet."

"There are few men more grim than Floki the Crane; but he is no greedy trader. When he yielded to the maiden's wish it was not to rob her glossy tresses of their ring. As to the rest, I 'll not say that the fate of any in the trade-ship would have been easy to bear had Hroar prospered."

"Truly so! You call yourself an unbeliever; but surely some saint guided your ships into the Seine Mouth."

"No saint steered Hroar's keels, but a traitor's evil counsel. Roland can better tell you how the Dane boar made boast of tidings from your hall. There are false hearts near your high-seat, lord king. Had they their will, even now this child would be grinding meal in Nordmannia, and Roland waiting his doom on Thor's Stone."

Karl pressed his daughter to him with a quick movement.

"Why should they seek to harm my little cloister-dove?" he demanded.

"Has Wittikind the Saxon no cause to strike at the heart of the Frank king?"

"However much a rebel and traitor, the Westphalian is not so mean as to seek vengeance in the thralldom of a maid-child."

"Yet what if he sought to have a hostage in safe keeping, should he venture again Rhineward and be taken thrall? What better safeguard then than the first-born child of King Karl--even though that child be a daughter?"

"My sword! a shrewd guess. Would to Heaven the crafty Saxon had won his seven feet of ground! And yet, he is a brave man, fighting for his fatherland. Rather do I curse the traitors in my hall."

The king looked about at the surrounding lords, his grey eyes aflame. But their glance rested on none whom he had cause to doubt, and his genial humor quickly returned.

"My thanks for your warning, Dane hawk. I shall bear it in mind. And now, if such is your wish, you will pledge yourself my man for this war."

"I stand ready to pledge myself, lord king; but, man or not, I am a king's son, and will not bend knee to any one, living or dead."

"Be assured. I owe you too much to hold to the knee-kissing. You shall be to me as the son of a brother king, come to aid me for a season,--many seasons, I hope."

Fairly overcome by such an answer from the ruler of half Europe, Olvir at once clasped his hands together and placed them between the king's.

"Witness all," he called aloud; "now do I, Olvir, son of Thorbiorn, pledge myself loyal man to Karl, King of the Franks, so long as he wars upon the Saracen folk."

"It is well, my Dane hawk," replied the king, instantly releasing his clasp. "I now have a bird of mettle to fly at the swart pagans,--ay, and a wolf-pack to follow him. Saint Michael! those are stout heroes! With all your birth and spirit, lad, I wonder to see such warriors under the banner of a count so young and slight."

"There's no cause to wonder, lord king. In all my following stands no man to outmatch me in weapon-play, in running, or in swimming. Of runes I know all that Otkar knew, and that is not little. In his wander-years he gathered many writings,--Greek and Roman and Arabic. Each and all, I copied them on parchment of my own make when, a child, I dwelt outlaw with my kinsman in the mound of my father's father."

"In the mound! How came you to dwell in a tomb?"

Olvir half frowned, and looked at his questioner with a sombre light in his dark eyes. But then Rothada's upturned face met his gaze. At once his brow cleared, and he answered with no trace of the bitterness which had welled up from his heart,--

"It was thus, lord king. When tidings of Thorbiorn's death came north, my mother, the emir's daughter, died in her bed; and while they bound on her hel-shoes, I was laid, an unsprinkled babe, at the feet of Skuli, my father's brother. But he would not take me up. He bade them bear me out upon the fell-side. Then Otkar slew many of Skuli's men, and would have slain Skuli, had he not fled. When Otkar stood alone in Trondheim Hall, he took me up and bore me by sea, through darkness and storm, to the wife of Koll the Outlaw. But Otkar was himself outlawed for the slaying, and, when a winter was gone, he brought me to Starkad's grave-mound, where he had made himself a dwelling. Most daring of all his deeds was that breaking of his uncle's mound, for not even he might have matched the Hero of Bravallahede. Yet the fearless champion made his abode with the ashes of the king, on the wild cliffs; and there he reared me, his fosterling, training me in all games of skill and in runes of many tongues, until my fourteenth year. It was a hard training, for Otkar tried me in all things to the utmost of my strength."

"Even as Sigmund tried Sinfiotli."

"Truly so, lord king, and with like purpose. He intended that I should hurl Skuli from the high-seat of Lade, and then aid him to avenge my father."

"God alone could have stayed the crafty grey bear from his purpose! You were not with him when he came to the court of Carloman, my brother."

"The Norns--or your God--willed otherwise; for Skuli, my uncle, stepped into the shoe with me, and so, though lawful heir, I am not yet on the high-seat of Lade. Otkar was still in outlawry, and by our compact with Skuli I could not join him when he fared south to pay what we wrongly thought to be the greater of the blood-debts. But my training was not wasted. With Floki yonder, I swept the Dane shores for the traitor Hroar, and the bairn whose shield could ward a half-stroke of Otkar's axe proved the bane of many a champion. Though Otkar met his fate before vengeance was done, the sword which he whetted has at last sought out the murderer and paid the blood-debt of my father."

Karl gazed down into the sternly joyful face of the young sea-king.

"No more do I wonder that you lead men," he exclaimed. "It is a fair day which brings me such a liegeman!"

"Not the day should be praised, lord king, but this little maiden."

"She's very near my heart, Olvir, and I bear her to one who will greet her with a mother's love. The barge waits, and I am eager to place the child in Hildegard's arms. Farewell until tomorrow. Eggihard, my steward, has gone to choose your camp. You have only to sail a few bowshots downstream. Eggihard will see to it that you receive food and drink as you may need."

"I give thanks, lord king," answered Olvir, and, stooping, he kissed Rothada on the forehead.

"Farewell, Earl Olvir!" cried the girl, in a merry voice; and, clasping the hand of her father, she turned away down the river-bank. Olvir's face softened as he watched them go,--the mighty King of the Franks and Lombards hand in hand with the little convent maiden. His eyes glistened as he saw how Karl bent to caress the child's tresses. Truly, here was a royal friend,--a hero whom even the Blood of Odin might serve with honor.

Fastrada sat among the war-counts chosen to accompany the king, with Roland between herself and Gerold. As Olvir looked from the king to his wounded foster-brother, his glance chanced to fall upon the queen's maiden. He turned quickly away, then looked again. After all, so long as he did not give way to desire, was there any reason why he should not enjoy the maiden's beauty? For what purpose was sight given but to see?

Silent and motionless as a statue, he stood gazing after the barge, until the bony hand of Floki the Crane fell upon his shoulder.

"You look over-closely at the dark maiden, earl," he said bluntly.

Olvir frowned, but answered coldly, "Be assured. My sword-brother loves the maiden."

"The more cause to heed me. Listen, son of Thorbiorn. The gerfalcon should fly high. Were Otkar here with his grey wit, I know what quarry he would name for your love quest,--no common bride--"

"What! that child? You 're mad--"

"Not I. If you but use shrewdly your nimble wit, your wedding-seat shall be on the bench of a world-king. As to the maiden, she is an opening bud, whose blossom will prove far fairer than that slant-eyed werwolf."

"Werwolf!"

"Ay," went on Floki, unchecked by the hissing menace in his earl's voice; "I am not blind. That maiden's lips are red as blood; and if ever I saw wolf's eyes in human being--"

Olvir burst into hearty laughter.

"Ho, Floki, you 're dogwise!" he cried. "Not even our little vala owns milder eyes or purer look than my sword-brother's *may*. Go now; take the ships downstream to the camp where the king's steward waits our coming. I go afoot."

Floki glowered down upon his earl, a wry look on his long, sharp face.

"Good mead in a hoopless cask,--wise words in a loath ear," he croaked; and turning on his heel, he stalked back to the viking wedge.

A word sent the crews leaping aboard their ships, and quickly all five craft were headed downstream.

CHAPTER VII

As he sat on the high-seat,
That man of the Southland.

SONG OF ATLI.

Left alone on the knoll, Olvir turned his gaze back to the now distant barge, and watched it musingly until it disappeared beyond a clump of woods. Floki's warning had moved him more than he had cared to acknowledge. Though far from being as profound as had been Otkar, the man was possessed of exceptional shrewdness, and the knowledge of this now compelled the young sea-king to pause and ponder his words. Could they be true? He smiled at the absurdity of the question. But then he remembered the noble Frank whom he had chosen for foster-brother, and the smile left his face. However pure and innocent, what was this maiden to him?

"It is I who am dogwise, not Floki," he muttered, and he turned his back on Casseneuil.

Within a bow-shot of the king's pavilion he came upon Count Hardrat, and his quick eye noted that the man's first impulse was to avoid him. But as the Northman approached, the Thuringian advanced to meet him.

"I would make my peace," he said with a gruff show of cordiality. "Heroes should not bear malice,--and more, you had the best of it."

"Say no more of the wrangle," replied Olvir, quickly. "I heard your name, but it slips my memory."

"Hardrat, a count of Thuringia,--count of a little shire, when I should hold the Sorb Mark, if right were done me," grumbled the Thuringian. "But old Rudulf has a pretty daughter in the king's hall; and when was Karl ever known--"

Olvir turned upon the speaker, his eyes ablaze.

"How!" he demanded; "do you say anything against the maiden?"

The Thuringian recoiled as though struck.

"I--I--no!" he stammered.

"Then ward your tongue."

The count sought to meet his gaze, but failed.

"My lord Dane," he protested half sullenly, "are you not over-hasty? Surely, to speak without offence of a maiden whom you have met but once--"

"To me she is as a sister. She is all but betrothed to my foster-brother. But no more. I mistook your tone. And now I should hold it a favor to be told whose are yonder tents. They differ from all others I see about."

"Well they may. It is the camp of the Saracen envoys,--Al Arabi and--"

"Al Arabi--Al Arabi! How else is he called?"

"He is named after the wise King of the Hebrews, though his people give it a strange sound,--Sul--Suleyman."

"Thor smite me!" cried Olvir, his eyes glittering. "My thanks for the word. Farewell, earl."

Before the astonished count could answer, the Northman was walking swiftly toward the Saracen camp. Very soon he came to an open-fronted pavilion, in whose recess a venerable figure reclined on a low divan, droning out a passage of the Koran. Olvir halted a moment to stare at the patriarch, then stepped quietly within the entrance.

"Peace be with you, O emir," he said in Arabic.

"And with you peace," answered the Saracen, as he lifted his eyes. Their hawk-like glance rested wonderingly upon the bright figure of the Northman; but then it was drawn by the glow of the great ruby on the pommel of Al-hatif, and in an instant the Arab's wonder had given place to fury.

"Dog of a kaffir!" he cried, and he leaped to his feet. A taboret, set with dishes, stood before him. Spurning it aside, he advanced with a rush, till his claw-like hands threatened the smooth cheek of the Northman.

"Al-hatif! Al-hatif! The sword of the Prophet!" he shrieked. "What kaffir dog bears the khalif's gift? Eblis take the thief! May his arm wither--"

"Stay!" commanded Olvir. "Would you curse your own blood?"

The Arab paused, transfixed, and Olvir gazed unwavering into his glaring eyes. A dozen or more Moslems, weapons in hand, came flocking about the pavilion, drawn by the outcry of their sheik. But Olvir, heedless of their bared scimitars, continued gravely: "Many winters, O sheik, have whitened the mountains of Armenia since my father and Otkar, whom you called El Jinni, gave oath to you and left you lying bound on the river's bank. Both Thorbiorn and his bride, who was my mother, long since passed over the bridge of the dead, and El Jinni has now followed; but the oath has ever been kept. None other than your blood has borne the khalif's gift."

The sheik made no reply. He was gazing searchingly into Olvir's dark face, his own stern features softened by a look of deepest yearning. His doubts were soon ended. With joy as impetuous and unmeasured as had been his anger, he sprang forward and seized the young man in his arms.

"Son of Gulnare! Seed of my House!" he cried. "Allah is good! You come to cheer my age with your youth and beauty."

Olvir reverently returned the embrace of his mother's father, but answered quickly and with decision: "Deny not the justice of Allah, O sheik! Into the North He sent my mother,--and I am a son of the North. While this war lasts we shall together fight the Omyyad beneath your black banners. Afterwards I must return here among the Afranj, if not to my father's people."

"Allah's will be done! We shall see when the time is at hand. Now, at least, you will eat my salt and abide with me this night."

"Be it as you desire. Yet, first, I would see to my men."

"Go; but return quickly. My eyes yearn to feast upon the son of my daughter."

Reluctantly the sheik's arms released their clasp, and Olvir darted away along the river-bank. Al Arabi, with a curt command to his swarthy followers to withdraw, stood gazing after his grandson until he vanished behind a group of booths.

"Allah be praised this day!" he murmured fervently as he returned to his cushioned seat. "Kasim, my son-in-law, is a thorn in the flesh; but this bright child of Gulnare renews my youth. His eye is as the soaring falcon's; his step as the fleet gazelle's."

Nor was the sheik's praise unmerited. No runner in the Frankish camp could have covered the mile downstream and back with near the swiftness of the young Northman; yet when he stood again at the door of the pavilion and stepped in upon the costly Persian rugs, he betrayed no other signs of the race than a slight flush in his dark cheeks and an added depth of breathing.

"By the Beard!" exclaimed Al Arabi; "as Zora among coursers, so is the son of Gulnare among runners."

"I have run down the grey wolf in fair chase," replied Olvir, simply, and at the beckoning gesture of the sheik, he seated himself beside the old man in the same Oriental posture. Al Arabi smiled and clapped his hands. Almost immediately an Arab attendant, in loose shirt and baggy

trousers, appeared at the entrance and salaamed to the ground.

"Bring food," said Al Arabi.

The man salaamed again and sprang away. As he disappeared, Olvir turned gravely to the sheik.

"What says the Prophet, O kinsman?--'Better is it to do justice than to sit at meat.' Before I taste your salt, it is well that right should be done between us. It seems to me just that I should now return to my mother's father the sword which my father took by force. Here, then, is Al-hatif. I restore it willingly, though I cannot say that the deed is a joyful one."

Olvir was not long kept waiting to see how Al Arabi would meet this act of generous pride. With a quick movement the old Moslem seized the sword and sprang to his feet. The beautiful blade whipped from its sheath and flashed around the sheik's head in bright circles.

"Allah acbar!" he cried. "The sword of the Prophet returns! Once again my hand grasps the khalif's gift!"

Olvir turned his head away, unable longer to hide his anguish at the loss of the sword. He thought of the day in Starkad's mound, when Otkar first put the coveted plaything in his childish hands. Since then it had never lain beyond his reach, night or day, and now--!

In the midst of his rejoicing, Al Arabi paused and turned his head to glance at his grandson. A moment later sword and scabbard were lying across Olvir's feet.

"Look, my son!" cried the old man. "The khalif's gift is my gift. For a little the light of the blade blinded me. But how could I take from my daughter's son the only inheritance she left him? Once the sword was forced from my grasp; now my heart rejoices to part with it to the son of Gulnare."

Olvir sought to answer, but the words choked in his throat. An eye far less keen than the sheik's, however, could have seen the gratitude which lighted the young viking's face. His eyes were shining through a mist of tears. Al Arabi gravely seated himself beside his grandson, and, sheathing the sword, clasped it once more to Olvir's belt.

The first attendant and another now entered the tent, bearing between them a taboret set with food. The second attendant withdrew at once; but his fellow waited for further orders.

"Where is Vali Kasim?" asked Al Arabi.

"He goes with the herd to the river, O sheik."

"When they return, bid him come this way."

The man bowed and slipped noiselessly away, while the host, having first tasted each dish on the table, urged his guest to eat. He had no need to repeat the bidding. Olvir's youth and health would have given relish to the plainest fare, and the mutton stew was very savory. When the last drop of gravy had been sopped up, Olvir turned with good-will to the dates and candied fruit, which the sheik was attacking with the zest of an Oriental. Hearty, however, as was the younger man's appetite, his palate, unaccustomed to such confections, soon cloyed with their spicy sweetness. Al Arabi gravely shook his head at this sign of foreign taste, and then he smiled in recollection of the past.

"It is clear that you were not raised in the land of the faithful, son of my daughter," he observed. "You lack the sweet tooth."

"I will not turn from honey in the comb; but these sweets--"

"The spices of the Far East. You will in time become used to their flavor," explained the sheik, and he held up a slice of candied pomegranate between thumb and finger. But the sweetmeat did not reach his mouth. Struck by a sudden thought, he dropped the titbit to clutch Olvir's shoulder. His eyes were ablaze with intense feeling.

"*Hei*, by the Prophet's Beard, you shall in truth learn the taste of Moslem sweets! Who is Kasim, that he should stand first with the Beni Al Abbas? My word is yet weightiest in the council of the sheiks. When this lion of the Afranj has broken the might of that dog Abd-er-Rahman, my daughter's son--my daughter's son shall be Emir of Andalus!"

Olvir's cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkled at the alluring prospect; but his clear intellect was quick to perceive the wildness of the scheme.

"Hearken a little, father of my mother," He said. "I give thanks for the good thought; but how can such be? Did Allah uprear me a kaffir, that I might rule over the faithful?"

"The mission of Islam is to bring unbelievers into the faith."

"I hold to no faith but my own. No priest or prophet shall set the bounds of my thought. I see much good in the words of the Son of Mary; but little has Mohammed added to them. I believe that God is in all men alike, and that each man is good, not according as he is Moslem or Jew, Christian or heathen, but as he does in his deeds the will of the Spirit within him. But enough! I

give you pain."

"*Hei!* you speak in a strange tongue, son of Gulnare. Yet the tongue can be bridled. You believe in the One God. For the rest, there need be--"

"Stay, father. What is the creed of Islam, which the proselyte must cry aloud? No; it cannot be. Even my hair would betray me."

"*Bismillah!* The All-powerful One will disclose his decrees in due time. If yours is the Afranj hair, is not Abd-er-Rahman's the Afranj eye? 'Blue of eye, and foul of face,' the saying is against the Omyyad; but there is nothing in men's mouths against hair of golden flame. We shall see what Allah has decreed. Now tell me how you come here to the host of the Sultan Karolah; tell me of my Gulnare, and of your life in the frozen North."

Olvir bowed; but he had hardly made a beginning of the tale of how Thorbiorn Viking brought home his elf bride from the Land of the Asiamen, when he was interrupted by the sound of quick hoof-beats, and a score of beautiful horses, wine-red in color, came crowding around the front of the tent. As Olvir stopped short with a cry of delight, Al Arabi smiled and lifted his hand. A mare at once pushed from among her companions and advanced quietly into the tent, the tip of her flowing tail brushing the costly rugs, upon which she planted her small hoofs with the daintiness of a woman. Al Arabi held out for her a stoned date, and as she nibbled at it he stroked her bony cheek.

"So, Zora," he said, "you must have your sweetmeats, like all women. But I do not begrudge them to my swift one. You look at the guest, daughter of Rustem. It is well. He is not such a one as these Afranj jinn, who must get them to battle or the chase on ox-like steeds. No, Wind-racer; this is one with whom you could course the gazelle from dawn even to sunset. Look closely at the young man, for he is of the Household,--he is the Heir."

Zora stretched out her graceful neck to nuzzle the Heir's strange attire with the tip of her projecting lip. The attention was appreciated at its full value. Never before had Olvir seen the like of this beautiful mare, and her friendliness greatly pleased him. He was stroking the broad forehead between her soft black eyes when the younger Saracen envoy entered the tent.

Kasim did not wait to examine the guest, but perceiving at the first glance that the stranger's dress was not of Saracen fashion, he exclaimed petulantly: "How now, father of my bride; has your dowar become a lounging-place for kaffirs? I did not look to find you breaking bread with an Afranj dog."

Great was the vali's surprise when the despised kaffir answered him in his own tongue: "Friend, what says the wise king, the emir's namesake?--'Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is accounted wise; and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.'"

Though not a little humiliated by the apt rebuke, Kasim advanced closer to examine the guest with his blinking gaze. If his thought was to strike fear into the heart of the stranger by the fierceness of his look, he was never so mistaken. Olvir met him with a gaze so steady and so full of calm indifference that the Saracen, to cover the sudden confusion which fell upon him, shifted his glance to the stranger's dress.

The body armor of the guest was familiar to his sight; for only in its rich finish and in the threefold thickness of its mesh did it differ from his own. Yet it had an odd appearance, worn with the cross-thonged stockings, close breeches, and fur-trimmed cloak of the Norse dress. And, notwithstanding the ruddy yellow hair of the son of Gulnare, never had Kasim Ibn Yusuf seen a warrior who in figure, face, and bearing so nearly approached the Arab ideal of princeliness and beauty.

"May it please the father of my sultana to make known the guest who sits at meat with him," he said.

Al Arabi rose, and Olvir imitated the movement. When both were standing, the sheik laid his hand on Olvir's shoulder, and answered the vali: "You have heard of El Jinni, Ibn Yusuf,--that Samson of the Far North--"

"I have heard of El Jinni," retorted Kasim. "So this is his son. Had another than yourself told me that you would hold friendship with any kin of the robber who despoiled your city and bore off your daughter, I should name the teller a liar."

"Do not marvel, Ibn Yusuf. This is not the son of El Jinni, but the son of that daughter,--my Gulnare. Rejoice with me, Kasim! The lost is found! Come forward and greet your kinsman."

At the appeal, which was half a command, Kasim advanced and embraced Olvir, muttering formal words of pleasure. His protestations of friendship did not, however, deceive the young Northman. He read the hostility in the Arab's eyes, and met the feigned warmth of his greeting with cold disdain.

"You bear a sword of price, kinsman," remarked the vali, as the glow of the great ruby on Al-hatif's hilt caught his eye.

"It is a sword beyond price," answered Olvir. "The Prophet himself once bore it. When your wife's father aided Khalif Abdullah to overthrow the House of Omar, the khalif did more than make him Emir of Kars,--he gave to him Al-hatif."

"Al-hatif!" cried Kasim; "the Prophet's sword in the hand of an unbeliever!"

"I believe in the One God," replied Olvir. "There is good in all faiths. I accept the Truth wherever I find it; the error I reject."

The vali threw out his hands in pious horror.

"La I'laha ilia Allah; Mohammed resoul Allah!" he cried. "Within Islam alone is salvation."

"So say the Jews; so say the Christians; and so say the Magians,--each for his own creed," retorted Olvir.

Kasim frowned and shook his fist at the unbeliever, in sudden heat.

"What saying's this?" he exclaimed. "Who dares name the creeds of kaffir dogs in the same breath with the true faith? Who--"

"Enough, vali!" commanded Al Arabi. "There shall be no railing and contention in my House. The son of Gulnare does not come to bring strife, but to strengthen our hands in the struggle against Abd-er-Rahman. You saw his warriors in the strange ships which rowed past before our dower. When Karolah comes south, with him will march your kinsman and his steel-clad warriors, to fight beneath our banners. And now, that the son of Gulnare may not find the way toilsome, I give him the choicest of my desert-fliers. The daughter of Rustem is fitting gift to the son of Gulnare."

"Zora!" stammered Kasim,--"Zora!"

"I have spoken. Lead the herd away, and make ready full equipment, that the fleet one may come to her master with adornment worthy of her lineage."

With his hand clutched convulsively in Zora's flowing mane, Kasim led her from the tent without a word.

Al Arabi watched his departure with a frown of displeasure, his lean hand tugging at his beard.

"He goes in anger," he muttered.

"I fear I bring you sorrow, father," said Olvir. "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

"The Son of Mary spoke truth. Yet be at peace. It is not you who bring contention to my House. Kasim Ibn Yusuf is a man of unruly spirit. He has long been a thorn in my flesh. Your coming has rejoiced my soul."

"Allah grant it may never be otherwise!" responded Olvir.

"*Amin--amin!*" said Al Arabi; and motioning Olvir to resume his seat, he added: "Now, my son, tell me fully of your mother and of your fearful uprearing by El Jinni in the tomb."

CHAPTER VIII

Unwound from arm winding-rings
Of Kaiser gold wrought--
LAY OF HILDEBRAND.

The seed of gold
Sowed the swan-bright woman,
Rings of red-gold.
SONG OF ATLI.

Morning put an end to Sheik Suleyman's hospitality. Shortly after sunrise his retainers began striking the tents of the dower, in preparation for the journey back across the Pyrenees. To ferry the envoys over the Garonne, Olvir manned one of his longships, and made ready to embark with his new-found kinsmen. His purpose was to accompany the sheik half a day on the march, as a mark of the respect and affection due his mother's father. He also had in view the return to the

Garonne, when, unhampered by companions, he could test the speed of the beautiful red mare.

At the last moment, however, as Zora was being led aboard ship, young Gerold of Busson came galloping down the bank, and hailed the Norse chief loudly: "Hold, Lord Olvir! The king bids you to his presence."

Olvir turned, frowning, to the sheik, who stood with Kasim in the vessel's stern.

"Eblis!" he exclaimed in Arabic. "Am I a hound, to leap to another's bidding? Karolah sends command for my presence. Let him command; I go with you."

"Allah forbid!" rejoined Al Arabi. "Have you not chosen the service of the Afranj sultan? Why, then, should he not command? Bend to his wish. It may be that he sends to honor you."

"Yours are words of wisdom, father of my mother. My freedom is in the hands of my lord. Farewell, therefore,--and peace be with you till we meet in Andalus," replied Olvir, and he beckoned the groom who held Zora to bring the mare to him.

Al Arabi leaned over the ship's side and extended his arms in a yearning gesture.

"My peace with you, son of Gulnare! I shall suffer many nights of longing before I see your face on the Ebro's bank."

"The days of our meeting will blot out the memory of the parting," answered Olvir; and a smile drove the lingering frown from his brow. Still smiling, he glanced aside at Kasim, with a pleasant word of parting on his lips; but neither look nor word won a responsive smile from the impassive face of the younger Saracen.

A moment later, as the ship's bows swung clear of the bank, Count Gerold rode down beside Olvir and cried out eagerly: "Tell me, hero, is not that your rune-friend Liutrad at the helm?"

"Ay."

"Then may he not come with us? Our lord king will be glad to see him also."

Olvir made a sign to the young giant, who calmly gave the tiller into Floki's hand, and turned to pick up his ponderous axe.

"The hero should move more briskly if he would come ashore dry shod," remarked Gerold, and he pointed to the quickly widening space between the bank and the longship's stern.

"The stag leaps high. I alone can out spring the son of Erling. Watch!"

As Olvir spoke, Liutrad bounded up on the high stern-piece of the ship. For an instant he stood poised on the gilded dragon-tail, gathering force for the wide leap; then he came flying above the water, clear to the side of his earl.

"Well done, Dane!" exclaimed Gerold; and he sprang from his horse.

Liutrad caught the extended hand of the queen's brother in his powerful grip, and met his smile with a look no less friendly. Though the Northman overtopped the Swabian by a head, the two were so well matched in years and nature that their hearts warmed in friendship on the spot.

For a while, as the boyish warriors exchanged pledges of friendship, Olvir watched the white-bearded figure in the stern of the receding ship. At last, with a gesture of farewell, he turned and looked at the new-made friends. His face lighted at sight of their smiles, and with a quick movement he unwound one of the double spirals of gold coiled about his arm. Another twist in his sinewy fingers broke the spiral into two equal parts. Handing one to each of the young men, he explained to the Swabian: "In the North a leader who is not close-fisted is called the 'ring-breaker,' because he gives the red gold of his rings to his true friends and followers. Here, then, I give you each a ring to wear, as a token of the bond between you."

Both sought to thank him; but he cut short their words with a gesture. His face had darkened as though a shadow had fallen across it.

"May the Norns weave you good luck!" he muttered. "Not all friends lack gall in their mead."

"Surely there shall be none in the sweet mead that I'll drink with Liutrad the loreful!" replied Gerold. "But come now. Our lord king is eager to talk with such wise heroes. It is wonderful that warriors should be so learned. Few even among monks and priests can mark fair letters. Were you and Lord Olvir baptized, his Majesty would make bishops of you both."

"As it is," rejoined Olvir, ironically, "we are benighted heathen,--sons of the fiend-god Thor. And now, as you well say, we had best be moving if we would not keep the great king waiting."

"I will walk to the villa beside my Frank friend," remarked Liutrad, as Olvir placed a hand on Zora's withers and vaulted lightly into the saddle. But Gerold would not agree.

"Yonder is the camp of one who owes me favor," he said. "I will soon have a horse for you."

With Liutrad mounted, the three quickly covered the ride to Casseneuil. Grooms of the king's stables took charge of the horses in the courtyard of the villa, and Gerold, waving aside the Grand Doorward, himself ushered his companions to the royal apartments.

Olvir and Liutrad, staring wonderingly about them at the Roman architecture and Gallo-

Roman decorations of the villa, followed Gerold in half-awed silence through the flower-perfumed courts and the marble-tessellated passages. At each turn they looked to find themselves on the threshold of some grand rush-strewn hall, crowded with war-counts and the Frank king's councillors. When, however, Gerold at last led them through a curtained archway, a glance at the tapestried chamber within showed them their mistake.

"The queen's bower!" muttered Olvir, and his black eyes flashed their glance along the line of busily sewing maidens on the right to Rothada, playing with her sister and brothers at the edge of the dais that extended across the farther end of the chamber. Upon the dais sat Hildegarde herself, side by side with her royal spouse.

With all his haughty pride, Olvir was quick to realize the honor paid him, stranger and outlander as he was, by such an introduction into the bosom of the Frank king's family. When he perceived the queen's extended hand beckoning him to approach, he advanced at once down the chamber, without pausing to look about. In his eagerness he failed to see Count Roland and Fastrada, who had drawn apart into one of the recessed windows of the bower. Liutrad, however, chancing to glance that way, turned aside to inquire the health of the wounded count; and Fastrada took instant advantage of the interruption to glide out beside Gerold. If her intention was to overtake Olvir, she was too late. He was already kneeling at the edge of the dais, to kiss the queen's hand.

As the Northman's knee touched the dais step, the great Frank in the oaken seat struck his thigh, and cried loudly: "By my sweet dame's spindle! hereafter I swear by that token! The Dane bows neither to sword nor crown, yet stoops low to a woman's hand."

Olvir stood erect and looked straight into the gracious face of the queen. Hair of golden floss, a skin of dazzling fairness,--neither was new to him; but the mild blue eyes beamed with spiritual light such as was seldom seen even in the lands of Christendom. The daughter of Childebrand, despite her seven years of wedlock, was a dame very lovely to the eye, no less in expression than in feature.

Olvir smiled at her as he would have smiled at Rothada, and, without turning, he answered the king steadily: "I come of high blood, lord king; also, I am a free Northman,--I bow to no man. But the greatest of all may well bow to holiness. We have a saying in the North, 'A good woman is near the gods.'"

"That is a wise saw, however heathenish. But give heed to our queen; she has something to say to you."

"I would give thanks for the safe bringing of this little maiden," remarked Hildegarde. "Only a warrior of noblest heart could have done such a deed."

Olvir shook his head smilingly.

"I freed the Dane's thralls for my own pleasure, which you now double," he said.

"But you shall also accept this ring, as mark of our gratitude," rejoined the queen, and she drew a bracelet of twisted gold wires from her white wrist. When she held out the ornament, Olvir, instead of grasping it, thrust his left hand through the opening.

"How! is the ring on?" exclaimed Karl, in surprise. "The lad has no need to talk of high birth,--a warrior with hands womanly slender!"

"Yet fit to grasp spear or sword," added Hildegarde, gazing curiously at the young sea-king's hard palms and sinewy wrists.

"Before I could walk I played with weapons," replied Olvir, and he glanced aside at the royal children. The king looked also, and at once beckoned to the little group. The sturdy boy Karl sprang forward at the signal, followed by his imperious little sister Rotrude and the toddling Carloman. After the children of Hildegarde came their unfortunate half-brother, the crook-backed Pepin. All were soon perched upon the massive knees of majesty.

There was space left for Rothada at her father's side; but she had lingered to greet Olvir. She came to him, her face beaming with delight and gay welcome, which yet could not altogether hide the shyness of budding maidenhood. Olvir did not wait for her faltering speech. He caught her hands in his and bent to kiss her white forehead.

"Health to you, maiden!" he said. "My sea-wolves send greeting to their little seeress. Already they howl for a glimpse of her bright face."

"I pray they may not howl so loud as when Liutrad, yonder, and the lofty Floki upraised us on the shield. My heart turned to water for fear of their roaring," replied Rothada; and even the awe of her father's presence could not restrain a burst of merry laughter at the memory.

Olvir smiled down into the girl's sparkling eyes.

"Ay, king's daughter," he said; "but you soon lost your dread of the grim hailers. Did you not

cry back greeting to them? Small wonder they hailed the little valkyrie who stood so boldly on the shield with their earl; small wonder they choose for vala the wise little leech-maid who went among the stricken warriors with soft words and healing balm."

Karl stared at his daughter in wonder.

"Do you jest, Count Olvir?" he demanded. "This is a part of the tale I had not yet heard. Surely, for a nun-child--"

"She was no nun-child, then, but the child of the great Frank king. Already she had turned away Floki from the burning of the thralls. Then she stood with me on the swaying shield. But not until we crossed the river bar and held war-council on the Garonne bank did the crews choose her for their vala,--their little seeress-maiden. The stricken Danes whom she had nursed aboard my Raven set her in the midst of the gathering, and the king's daughter won all alike by her sweet wisdom and lore. She holds the fierce hearts of my sea-wolves by a bond subtle and strong as the fetter of the Fenris-wolf. We have sworn to carve the blood-eagle on the back of whoever does her harm."

"The Holy Mother bless you!" cried Hildegarde; and the king, flushing with pleasure, added heartily, "Amen to the good wish! You have well earned it, my bright Dane,--you and all your followers, though you be twice over heathen. Before sunset the grim warriors shall see the maiden in their midst. Now come to my side, child, and let a seat be brought for our guests."

CHAPTER IX

As fair as thou seest
Brides on the bench abiding.
Let not love's silver
Rule over thy dreams;
Draw no woman to kind kisses.

LAY OF SIGRDRIFA.

As Rothada sprang up the step of the dais to nestle close to her father, Gerold drew out a bench from the nearest wall. On this Olvir seated himself, and the king beckoned to Liutrad and Roland.

"Come forward, heroes," he said; "and you, Gerold."

The quick advance of her companions left Fastrada alone in the midst of the bower. She hesitated and looked appealingly to the king. Karl had bent over the children clasped in his great arms; but Hildegarde saw the girl's look, and signed to her to take the place on the bench beside Roland.

Crimson with shamefaced delight, the girl glided forward. Near the bench, however, she began to falter, seemingly overcome by diffidence. A very audible tittering from the other bower-maidens sent her edging around the end of the bench farthest from Roland. Then the king, drawn by the note of merriment, looked up and fixed his gaze upon her. Was it to be wondered that, between her diffidence and the awe of the royal presence, the girl shrank back to the bench in such confusion as to thrust herself between Liutrad Erlingson and his lord?

Karl burst into a hearty laugh.

"Holy Mother!" he exclaimed, "it is our herald maiden. She plays her own part more ill than another's. Did you not tell me, sweetheart, that Roland--ay, it was Roland! We will mend matters if this young Dane bear will barter seats on the bench with a stricken hero."

Liutrad sprang up at the word. But Count Roland sat firmly in his place.

"The maiden has good eyesight, and there is space beside me," he said.

A second and louder titter ran down the row of bower-maidens, and even Hildegarde could not suppress a smile. Fastrada only blushed the more, and sat with downcast eyes, not even venturing a glance at the young sea-king beside her. Her drooping shoulder pressed lightly against the gold spirals on the Norse hero's mailed arm. She sat very quiet.

Again Karl laughed, this time at the frowning face of his nephew.

"Ha, kinsman," he admonished in a jesting tone, "the maiden seems coy. Your wooing has been over-hearty."

"That could not be, dear lord, if the maiden loves him," observed Hildegarde, softly.

"Which is to say--"

"Nothing, sire, nothing!" broke in Roland. "We were merely talking of my sword-brother."

"A choice subject," rejoined Karl; "yet had I worn the buskins of Count Roland, I should have talked more of the maiden herself, and of Count Roland's thoughts of her."

Roland's frown deepened, and Fastrada's blushing face bent still farther forward. Olvir sat rigidly erect, striving to resist his desire to gaze down on the drooping maiden. He had caught one glimpse of her face as she stood between him and the king,--a glimpse that of itself was enough to set his pulses wildly throbbing; and now there was added to it the warmth and perfume of her person close against his side. The temptation was almost greater than he could bear. Only by the strongest effort could he hold in mind his duty to his foster-brother. Of all present, he perhaps felt most keenly the constraint of the silence which followed the king's well-meant raillery.

The pause was broken by Hildegarde, with the kindly thought of diverting attention from the lovers.

"Dear lord, you told me that Count Olvir was the foster-son of Otkar the Dane. Have I not also heard you say that Lord Otkar was the craftiest as well as the strongest of warriors?"

"He was a foe worthy a king," answered Karl. "Would that the hero were now beside my throne, with his grey wit and mighty axe! Yet I should not complain. Here is one whom he has reared in all his lore and wisdom."

"The lore, but not the wisdom, lord king," replied Olvir. "He could give me the one; the other no man may impart."

"True; and the saying tells me you have found wisdom for yourself. Beware, for now I shall put your wit to the test. I would ask your counsel on this Saracen war. All my other borders are pacified. Even the Saxon Mark--"

"Count nothing on the Saxons, lord king," interrupted Olvir.

"How! already a difference from my councillors? Not one in my hall but will tell you those wolves are at last tamed. I have planted their wild land with fortresses and chapels."

"Your church tithes and the preaching of your priests will soon stir the sons of Odin to renewed anger. I speak words from Otkar's lips. There will be blood on priestly robes. Your burgs and your chapels will see the torch. Look for no sure peace in Saxon Land so long as Wittikind the Westphalian bears his head upon his shoulders."

"He dwells with Sigfrid the Dane, as you yourself bring word."

"Scant cheer! When he comes again, it will be with a following of Dane warriors. If he is content to dwell always with the Nordmannian king, why should he send the murderer Hroar to bear off this little maiden by your knee?"

The king laid his hand on Rothada's head, and his face grew stern with a look of majesty and power before which even Olvir sat half awed.

"Dane and Saxon,--sea-wolf and forest-wolf,--let the wild hordes come! They shall find other than lambs to greet them!"

"Yet now you 'd lay open the Mark to them, lord king," persisted Olvir. "You plan to lead your host still farther from the Rhineland."

"By Thor, Olvir," broke in Liutrad, with Norse freedom, "why seek to mar such fair chance of sword-play? The more of war, the merrier for heroes. And would you turn aid from your Saracen kin?"

"Saracen kin; how's that, my Norse hawk? Is the boy mad?"

"No, lord king," replied Olvir; "my face should tell otherwise. Because of it, men in the North call me Elfkin; but this is the truth,--in my mother's veins Greek and Arab blood were mingled. Her father, Sheik Suleyman, is known to you as Al Arabi,--leader of the Saracen envoys."

"Al Arabi!"

"One-time Emir of Armenia. The wife who bore him my mother was of kin to the Emperor Leo, whom men call the Isaurian."

"By my crown! no longer do I wonder at your unbending knee! I have done well to honor you. What is your knowledge of the Saracen folk?"

"As to those in the Eastland, I learned much from Otkar and from Arabic writings; but of these in Andalus, I know only what came to me last night from the lips of my mother's father."

"And what did he say of Abd-er-Rahman? The Saracen king has the name of a great warrior."

"True, lord king; yet the Beni Al Abbas cherish undying hatred against the Omyyad."

"These Saracen pagans are loath to take oath; but the envoys swore to the fealty of their

faction. I count no less on aid from the Christian folk in that land."

"And Duke Lupus, your Majesty," added Roland, with a sudden show of interest. "He brings us safe passage of the Pyrenees."

"I have heard Otkar speak of the Vascons," rejoined Olvir, dryly. "It is said they do not love outlanders. As to this duke, is he not of Merwing blood?"

"True,--and therefore lacks boldness to break his allegiance," answered Karl.

Olvir's lip curled in a slow smile.

"A fox will snap in his own den, and, at the best, the mountain-cats are hard to hold. You may look for aid to the Beni Al Abbas; but count neither on Christian Vascon nor Christian Goth."

"What! do you hold that the Christian folk would choose their pagan oppressors before a ruler of their own faith? Our Holy Father Hadrian numbers them among the truest of Christians."

"And yet, lord king, the Moslem yoke is lighter on their necks than is your own upon the folk of Aquitania."

At the bold assertion, Karl's heavy brows met in a frown, and an angry light shone from his grey eyes.

"My yoke,--my yoke!" he repeated slowly. "By my sword, young Dane, you are no court-man. Otkar himself would scarce have ventured so bitter a jeer."

"Jeer! The king asked my counsel, and I gave it. I believe what I spoke; it came to me from Otkar. Why, then, should I not speak it?"

"Why not?" rejoined Karl; and he burst into hearty laughter. Then, falling grave again, he nodded, and called out approvingly, "Here, in truth, is a king's son! Harken, my Dane hawk; though I have bold counts as well as sleek flatterers, my ears are not used to such biting truths. It shall be otherwise hereafter. I will not willingly part with so straight-tongued a counsellor."

The great Frank paused to pat the heads of the three boys astride his knees.

"May these bairns prove as bold," he added. "And now, enough of such matters. I had intended, Olvir, to test your learning, and that of your ruddy-cheeked follower; but that must now wait. After the feast of Lupus, we will have you both come of an evening to feast us on your book-lore."

"The feast of Lupus!" sighed Hildegarde, pausing in her needlework. "I wish that I might attend it with you, dear lord."

"And why, sweetheart?"

"Fastrada, tell his Majesty of the feast."

Thus called upon by her royal mistress, Fastrada raised her eyes with a timid glance, which, as she spoke, faltered and turned appealingly aside toward Olvir.

"Your Majesty," she murmured, "it is said that the Vascon duke has planned his feast after the manner of the old-time Romans. Instead of seats, he will place couches for the guests to recline upon while they dine."

"What!--to lie and sup together? The Vascon proves his Merwing blood. None other would think of mating bed and board. Yet he is host; we must make the best of it."

"Surely no harm will follow, sire," said Gerold. "Abbot Fulrad and other churchmen will be there, and thus to act out an ancient custom will give play for much merriment."

"Joy works no harm," replied Karl, nodding. "At the least, we shall give the duke's hospitality fair trial. Meantime, there is much else to demand our care. Farewell for the present, my Dane hawk, and you, young Samson."

All on the bench rose at the word of dismissal. Olvir, with a bow to the queen and a kindly glance for Rothada, turned quickly away after Gerold and Liutrad, resolutely refraining from a single glance at the lovely bench-mate whom he thus suddenly deserted.

In vain Fastrada gazed longingly after the Northman; while, no less vainly, Roland lingered for a parting look from the girl. Both were alike disappointed.

As the bower-maiden glided silently back among her companions, the wounded count followed Olvir from the chamber with a heavy tread.

CHAPTER X

Bids she not to be wary?
For a wolf's hair I found.

Wolf-beset shall be the way
If we fare on this errand.

SONG OF ATLI.

Evening of the following day found Olvir and Gerold returning to the viking camp from a successful hunt. Zora had fully justified the praises of her giver, and bore her rider into camp without a sign of fatigue. But the heavier Frankish horse was so spent by the chase that he could hardly carry his rider to Olvir's tent.

At the sound of their approach the tent was opened from within, and Count Roland came out to greet the hunters.

"Ho, brother!" called Olvir, as he leaped to the ground. "It is well; you keep tryst."

"Better than some," replied Roland. "Already we should be on our way to the Vascon's hall; yet Gerold is as good as horseless."

"We shall go more quickly by boat. Ho, there, Floki! man the Raven's barki. While we wait, brother, Gerold and I will change chase-gear for hall-dress."

"Stay; first see to this. A palace slave handed it to me for you. He claimed to know nothing of the giver, but said that the matter was urgent."

"A maiden's gift," ventured Gerold, at sight of the little ivory vial which Roland held out to the Northman.

Olvir took the gift and examined it keenly. There was yet ample light for him to discern a faint "F" traced on the cover of the vial. At the discovery every nerve of his body thrilled with sudden uncontrollable delight. But he shook his head at Gerold's suggestion, and said almost harshly, "I know of no maiden who should so honor me."

"Look within, brother; let us see what is sent," said Roland.

Olvir at once opened the little vessel and held it up to view. The sight brought out a merry shout from Gerold.

"Saint Petronella!" he cried; "the maiden loves you, hero. She has sent a lock of hair."

"But a sparse tress, as suits a grey spinster," added Roland, who had looked closer.

"Grey spinster!" muttered Olvir, and he held out to his smiling companions the one grey bristle which had lain coiled in the vial. "Here is hair, but no woman's," he added significantly.

"A wolf's hair!" exclaimed Roland. "But why--"

"A warning!" broke in Gerold. "I 've heard of the like in Saxon Land; and did not Gudrun, in the old lay, send such to her kinsmen? Am I not right, hero?"

"Ay; come within, Roland. Hroar's scale hauberk will hang well on your shoulders. You, Gerold, shall go borrow a mail-serk from a man your size. Bid Floki see to it that the boatmen also arm themselves. None shall go to the feast naked."

"You fear an attack?" questioned Roland as Gerold darted away.

"There are lonely copses on the way to Casseneuil," answered Olvir.

"If men lie in wait, they will not look for us in the boat. We will pass them by."

"And if not? Besides, it may be that the danger waits us at the villa--even in the feast hall. A dagger from behind--"

"True; Lupus is a Merwing. God forbid he put poison in our flagons!"

"That we must chance. But the good mail beneath our jerkins will do no harm."

Roland's response was to unbuckle the belt from which swung the heavy blade of Ironbiter. Olvir then unrolled Hroar's scale hauberk from its fur wrappings, and, having adjusted the bandages on the Frank's half-healed wounds, he buckled the armor about the massive body of his friend. The count's silk-embroidered tunic followed, entirely covering the gilded steel. Last of all, Olvir replaced Ironbiter with a lighter sword. Roland yet lacked strength to wield that great Norse blade.

Olvir's own mail was on in a trice, followed as quickly by his gala jerkin. Unlike Roland's tunic, however, the jerkin failed to hide his armor. Its gold collar might have passed as an ornament; but the long sleeves of ring-mail glinting beneath the cloth at the wearer's wrists could be mistaken by none.

"Thor! what care I for the Merwing?" exclaimed Olvir; and stripping off the jerkin, he belted Al-hatif on the shimmering mail. As he flung his gay cloak about his shoulders, he added grimly, "If the Vascon question my feast-dress, I have my answer. More than one tale did Otkar tell as he lay dying."

"Bear in mind, brother, the duke will be our host; so ward your tongue," cautioned Roland.

"Let him look to his own, then, and mine will wag little," replied Olvir. "Ah, here comes Gerold, with a good mail-serk on his back. On with your hall-dress, lad. We wait for you."

"The boat also. I was seeking Liutrad, to care for my horse," explained Gerold, as he drew on the garments tossed him by Olvir.

A little later the three friends were seated in the stern of the Raven's boat, and six mail-clad vikings were rowing them upstream, through the twilight, with long, steady strokes. Floki himself pulled bow-oar.

For a while Olvir skirted the shore; then he steered out into midstream.

"Ho, earl! swing in again," called Floki, sharply. "The stream might well run slower."

"Also your tongue, Crane!" retorted Olvir. "In this dusk watchers might doubt our looks; but Thor smite me if they could doubt your croak."

"What of that?" growled Floki.

"Have you so soon forgot?" demanded Gerold. "In this wood is the camp of Count Hardrat, whom two days since your ring-breaker flung on the turf."

"Liutrad's red pig!" said Floki, contemptuously.

"But even the meanest foe--"

Roland stopped short. An arrow had whistled past, not a span before his face.

"Saint Michael! an attack!" cried Gerold. "Put about, hero. We 'll land, and slay the murderers!"

"They shall hang! Put about, brother!" shouted Roland, as a second arrow flew out of the gloom, to shiver on his shoulder, and another fell blunted from Olvir's side.

The sea-king's nostrils quivered, and his black eyes flashed eagerly, as, thrusting over the steer-oar, he stooped for the arrow at his feet. For a moment he stood peering at the missile in the dim light, and a fourth arrow struck quivering in the boat's upcurved stern. Then, with a stifled cry, he thrust back the steer-oar so forcefully that the turning boat surged round again and headed for the opposite shore.

"Ho, look to your tiller!" protested Roland. "You sheer off."

"Give way, men," commanded Olvir. "Who hungers for venom shafts?"

"Venomed?" cried Gerold.

"Look for yourselves," answered Olvir, as he handed the arrow to Roland. "Beware the point, brother."

"This is no Frank shaft," said Roland, the instant he felt the arrow.

"No," replied Olvir, bitterly; "nor is the steel glazed for rust guard. Otkar brought the like from Saracen Land. They are more deadly than the adder."

"But who--"

"My Saracen kinsman, the younger envoy. Have I not won the old sheik's love and taken Zora from him?"

"The foul pagan!" muttered Roland. "But we have passed him. No more arrows whistle."

"And the snake crawls away unscathed!" spluttered Gerold, boiling with righteous anger.

But Olvir stood silent. Not until the boat swung in beside the villa landing did he speak a word, and then only a curt command: "Moor offshore, Floki, and wait."

"A dreary watch," remarked Gerold. "I could send wine--"

"Thanks, lad; but we have mead aboard," replied Floki. "A merry feast to you!"

"That is a notable henchman, brother," observed Roland.

Olvir made no reply. Silent as before, he followed his companions to the Vascon's hall. In the light of passing torches they saw his face livid with grief and anger.

In the Roman portico Roland paused and laid a hand on the Northman's shoulder.

"Guests--even armed guests--should come to the feast smiling," he said.

"True; yet my mouth tastes of gall,--my own kinsman!"

"There is that within will sweeten the taste, hero," replied Gerold. "Do not shame us with your frown."

"Lead in, then," said Olvir, and he smothered down the rage and grief which distorted his face. Before the three had passed the threshold of the banquet-chamber, the Northman's look, though stern, no longer showed a trace of passion.

A fair may know I,
Fair of all the fairest,
Girt about with gold,
Good for thy getting.

LAY OF REGIN.

The feast was already begun when the doorward came forward to show the belated guests to their places. They followed him, gazing about with keenest curiosity. The apartment was one of ordinary size, hung with tapestries of a fashion familiar even to the Northman,--purple and blue silks, embroidered in gold and brilliant colors with peacocks and lions, griffins and unicorns. But, notwithstanding what they had heard from Fastrada in the queen's bower, all three, as they went forward, stared half bewildered at the sight of the guests on the pillowed couches.

The table, shaped like a horseshoe greatly elongated, gave room for thirty guests. It was a gay company,--stately dames and merry-faced bower-maidens, high court officials, war-counts, and pompous bishops, all alike gorgeous with silks and jewels.

The king himself reclined on a raised couch at the head of the board, with Duke Lupus at his right. On his left was the genial white-haired Abbot Fulrad; next to whom a high court-dame sat in a chair, severely erect, her eyes fixed watchfully upon the bower-maidens. Two places below the old dame Roland's eager gaze instantly singled out Fastrada.

One couch above and two below the maiden were vacant; and when the doorward waved Gerold and Roland to the latter, the Count of the Breton Mark flung himself down beside Fastrada, without a thought as to why the Vascon should have arranged such an opportunity for his most earnest rival. Gerold, little less hasty, took the second place and fell into gay chatter with the laughing bower-maiden on his left.

Olvir, however, was not to be diverted from his sombre mood either by love or by merriment. He advanced to his place above Fastrada with no sign of surprise at the high honor rendered him by its nearness to the head of the board. Heedless of the maiden, heedless even of the king, he flung back his cloak and stood with the light shimmering on his bared mail, his piercing gaze fixed upon Duke Lupus.

Almost instantly the laughter of the guests died away, and they stared at the Northman in wondering silence. But the king half rose on his couch.

"What does this mean, Dane?" he demanded. "Do guests in the North dine in full war-gear?"

"Not so, lord king; in the North there is no need."

"Saint Michael! what need here?"

"This is good answer," replied Olvir; and plucking the poisoned arrow from beneath his cloak, he darted it into the table directly before Duke Lupus. The Vascon's startled cry and deathly pallor, as he flung himself back, fully justified the test.

"The viper!" muttered Olvir. "Others than my kinsman shared in the murderous deed. Only for a blind were the high places at the feast kept for us."

The king had bent forward, and was reaching to draw the arrow from the wood. As he grasped the black shaft, Gerold cried warningly: "Beware, sire; the dart is venomous!"

Karl sat upright, the arrow raised before his eyes.

"I see," he said sternly, "this is no clean point; but it is blunted."

"On my mail," replied Olvir.

"Thank God the mail was proof! A foul deed! Name the wretches, Count Olvir. They shall meet death in the slime."

"That I may not do, lord king. Would such foul ones as they stand in the open?"

"This is no Frankish arrow."

"Nor Vascon!" stammered Lupus.

Olvir smiled darkly. "Lay it to some chance band of outland thieves, lord king. No others would be so base. And now, enough of treachery and bitterness! May all turn again to the merrymaking. I would not be a mar-joy."

Karl nodded gravely and rolled the poisoned arrow in his kerchief. Then he sank back again upon his couch, and gave command: "The count says well. Let the feast go on."

But Olvir stood waiting beside his place.

"What more?" demanded Karl.

"Does the host question my feast-dress?"

"I? No! What does my lord count mean?" exclaimed Lupus. "I welcome you gladly, in steel or

in silk. Feast and be merry!"

"As you bid, lord duke," replied Olvir, smiling; but as he stretched out on the couch his eyes sparkled with another look than friendship.

"So; the wily snake! Not my cup alone shall taste of gall."



*"White to the lips, the young sea-king turned to his enemy."
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The comforting thought was diverted by a soft whisper at his ear,--"Do not be deceived, lord count. The Merwing lies."

In the tense strain of his test with the arrow, Olvir had lost all consciousness of Fastrada's presence. Now, however, he turned about, and his gaze rested upon the maiden's exquisite figure. At the sight, all his bitter thoughts of treachery and revenge were forgotten. He had no time to recall his sword-brother to mind before the girl raised her head, and, smiling and blushing with undisguised pleasure, turned upon him a look that set his heart to throbbing with mad delight.

"So my lord count is at last pleased to greet me," she half whispered.

"I had first to greet the host, maiden," rejoined Olvir, with a flash of grim humor.

"*Ai!* it was grandly done! But I shudder to think of your peril!" and the girl's bosom heaved with emotion.

Olvir gazed straight into her eyes, blue as sapphires and melting with love. Again his heart leaped wildly and sent the hot blood surging through his veins. All the Oriental in his nature was aroused. But it held control only for a moment. Over the graceful head of the maiden he caught sight of his foster-brother's face, clouded with doubt and bewilderment. One glance was enough to sober the viking. Not even youth and Eastern blood could withstand the Northern loyalty. Olvir

tore his gaze from the spell of the sapphire eyes and stared out across the silver-laden table, his face stern almost to fierceness.

Fastrada, her blushes fast paling, watched him from beneath lowered lashes with a startled look. Roland also watched him, his blue eyes still troubled. Presently a change lit up the Northman's face. He turned about, with a frank smile for Roland, and met Fastrada's glance with a look of calm resolve.

"Drink with me, maiden," he said. "I pledge one who is the truest friend, the boldest hero in all Frank Land."

"I drink to that hero," replied Fastrada; and over the brim of her crystal goblet her eyes again beamed upon Olvir.

Great as was his self-control, the young man looked hastily away. But then his lip curled in scorn of his weakness, and he exclaimed, "We drink to my sword-brother. May he find favor in the eyes of the queen's fairest maiden!"

"The fair to the fair," rejoined Fastrada, with adroit play on the word. "The fair count will win a flaxen bride. But among the dark maidens I know one who has made choice of a dark-faced hero."

At the open confession Olvir panted, and his eyes glistened with the love which he could no longer restrain. Yet he held firm to his purpose.

"The dark maiden is a foolish maiden," he answered. "She should choose the blue-eyed hero,--a warrior of kingly blood. His great heart overflows with love for the maiden,--he, the king's kin, who need but speak, and honors will be heaped upon him. But the dark warrior, who is he?--a heathen outlander; a stranger in the land; a wanderer!"

"No, Olvir!" interrupted Roland, hoarsely; "you are no stranger, but my true brother. Listen, Fastrada! For no short day you have known that I loved you, and you have never frowned upon my wooing. Yet now I see that you turn to my brother. May the Holy Mother grant that you do not scorn his love the same! Give him the happiness which I thought should be mine."

"And which I 'll not take from you," rejoined Olvir. "Shall I cut the heart from the breast of my brother?"

"That the maiden already has done. I blame neither her nor my loyal brother. You have wooed for me, and failed; now you can woo for yourself without blame."

"He may win the same answer, lord count," said Fastrada, proudly.

The retort passed unheeded. The foster-brothers were gazing into each other's eyes. Soon, however, Roland turned away, that his friend might not perceive the grief which he could no longer hide. Olvir divined the cause of the movement, and he also sank back on his couch, to stare moodily before him.

For a while Fastrada held to her pretence of coldness, waiting for Olvir to begin his wooing. But he maintained his moody stare, and gave no sign. His silence and the sternness of his look puzzled and alarmed the girl. Clearly, this was a very different kind of lover from the sighing swains who trembled if she but withheld her smiles. Not even Roland would have so fought against his love when freed from the bond of foster-duty. One who could put honor before desire was indeed rare among suitors. Woman-like, Fastrada grew all the more eager at the seeming indifference. Unable longer to simulate coyness, she leaned toward her chosen hero and whispered softly: "Olvir,--Olvir, I wait to hear you speak."

Without turning or lifting his head, the Northman answered coldly: "Why should you wait, daughter of Rudulf? I have stamped my heel on the heart of my brother; I have stolen from him what he cherished more than life. The thief's loot is the thief's curse."

"Yet what have you stolen, Olvir? Surely, nothing that Lord Roland possessed, or any other Frank. Until you came, I had never loved any man--and now--and now--"

The pleading whisper died away in silence; but Olvir had turned, flushed and bright-eyed, no longer able to resist the love which filled his whole being. He saw how the girl leaned toward him, her bosom heaving, her scarlet lips half parted. Her cheeks were again crimson with blushes, and her eyes met his gaze with the open confession of her love.

"Thou art Freya!" he exclaimed adoringly, and the girl quivered with joy to see how his face softened and his eyes shone with rapture. Half unconsciously they drew nearer together and murmured their love over and over again.

They exchanged rings and whispered the betrothal vows, regardless alike of the unheeding revellers and of the far from friendly glances of their host. If Hardrat the Thuringian felt displeased at the success of the Dane intruder, no trace of the feeling was perceptible on his wine-flushed features. Lupus, however, took no pains to repress his jealous scowl.

For a time the Vascon was required to devote his attention to the royal guest at his side; but when Karl fell to jesting with Abbot Fulrad, Lupus could watch the lovers, undiverted. As he looked, a fit of jealous rage seized upon him. Though they hardly touched hands, the sight was more than he could bear. His first thought was to sign to his steward to put poison in the Northman's wine. A seemingly careless gesture and nod, and the crafty slave would know the chosen victim. But the sign was not given. At the last moment the duke perceived that Olvir's silver tankard stood brimming beside his trencher. What little wine the young man drank was sipped from Fastrada's cup.

Barred of his simplest and most certain means of removing his rival, the Vascon sat gnawing his lip, his face distorted with the look of a baffled fiend. Count Hardrat, failing to attract the duke's attention by his warning glances, spoke to the steward. But the mischief was already past mending. Drawn by the intensity of the duke's look, Olvir and Fastrada raised their heads, and for an instant both saw the malignant stare of the Vascon. Quickly as he looked away, neither failed to divine his jealous rage. Fastrada clasped her lover's hand in sudden dread.

"Ai! how he hates you!" she whispered.

"No new tidings," rejoined Olvir. Then he put his hand to his breast and turned smilingly to the maiden. "Dear one, here is hidden a bit of hollowed ivory of which you may have knowledge."

"The hollow was not empty," replied the girl. "I feared for you--I fear more now."

"You feared?"

Fastrada hesitated and glanced across the table at Hardrat. The war-count was intent on his trencher. She drew a deep breath, and, with eyes downcast, murmured her answer to Olvir's question: "My lord should know that others than Roland wooed me before his coming, and so there are those--"

"--Who do not wish me well," said Olvir, as the girl faltered. "Still, that is not cause enough for your wolf's hair."

"True, Olvir; and yet the token was sent at a venture. I know nothing certain. I chanced to see Lupus talking with my drunken countryman Hardrat. As I came upon them, Hardrat growled out your name, and repeated it with a curse. Then they saw me, and the drunkard hurried away like a guilty man. But Lupus stayed to greet me. I could not rid myself of him until I was bidden to the queen's bower."

"He saw that you thought to send a warning."

"No serpent is more subtle. But if he thinks to come between us, let him beware!"

Surprised by the hissing note in the softly murmured threat, Olvir glanced up from the hand he was fondling. He was too late to catch the cruel expression which for a moment had marred the girl's beauty; but he wondered to see how the color of her eyes had altered to a greenish grey. As he looked, her gaze met his, and the greenish tints quickly gave place again to the blue.

"By Freya, sweetheart," he said, "your eyes change their hue."

"My heart will never change."

"Nor mine, by my sword! But what hushes the merrymaking? Ah! the host rises to speak."

Standing on his couch, Lupus smiled down condescendingly upon his guests, and, to draw attention, waved a hand whose every finger was burdened with gem-rings.

"Brave counts and holy priests, chaste dames and beautiful maidens," he began, "fill your goblets to the brim, and drink with me to the health of the great ruler who honors us with his presence."

A chorus of shouts greeted the toast, and every man sprang to his feet, Olvir first of all.

"Long live the king!" cried Hardrat, his bloodshot eyes fixed upon Lupus.

"The king! the king!--long live the king!" shouted the guests in chorus, and the war-counts brandished their bared swords overhead while all present drained their wine-cups to the bottom.

As Olvir sheathed Al-hatif, he looked down, eager to rejoin Fastrada. In this, however, he was to be disappointed. The duenna dame had risen from her chair and was leaving the table. Immediately all the women present, dames and maidens alike, rose to follow their leader. None longed more to stay than did Fastrada, and she lingered beside Olvir to the very last. Already the women had drawn aside. Olvir looked at the girl ruefully.

"So we must part, sweetheart," he sighed.

Fastrada gazed into his dark face, and half whispered her answer: "Ah, my hero, would that the time had come when we need never part!"

"That, I trust, may soon be," replied Olvir, and he drew aside for the girl to pass. She would still have lingered beside him, but the old dame beckoned to her, and she glided away to join the other bower-maidens.

As the women swept after their leader through a private passage, Duke Lupus reached out to refill the king's gold flagon. He was met by a quick gesture of refusal, and Karl turned his empty cup brim down upon the table.

"Enough of wine," he said. "I am not over-fond of wassail, and the feast is dull without our fair ones to grace the board."

Lupus opened his lips to protest, but caught a glance from Hardrat, and changed at once to bowing compliance: "Your Majesty, dancing and juggling were to have followed. Yet whatever may be your pleasure--"

"You are a kind host, and we give thanks for the feast. Another time we may enjoy the mountebanks. Farewell, lord duke. God keep you! Anselm, a word in private; and you, Fulrad. Farewell, my bright Dane."

Olvir wheeled about to salute the king. As his hand fell, his eye met Karl's smiling gaze, and he glanced down at the royal couch. The king looked, and saw the arrow wrapped in his kerchief. He nodded gravely to Olvir, and, arrow in hand, left the chamber, between Anselm and Fulrad.

Released from restraint by the departure of the king, the remaining guests gathered about the head of the table, and many accepted the duke's invitation to join in a wassail bout. Most of the priests, however, and a few of the counts at once withdrew from the banquet-chamber. In their midst went Olvir, so intent on the vision of Fastrada's loveliness that he had no thought for his foster-brother.

Still musing, he passed the door, and found himself standing in the torchlight, face to face with Gerold and Roland. His eyes fell, and he would have passed by the two with flushed cheeks, had not Roland laid a hand on his shoulder and turned to walk beside him.

"Our horses are at your camp, gossip," calmly remarked the Frank. "We shall return with you for the night."

"The murderers may yet linger," added Gerold, from the rear.

Olvir halted and stepped back from Roland.

"Thor!" he muttered. "This--after what has happened!"

"Are you not my brother?" demanded Roland. "*Heu!* I know now she did not love me. If she had, I should hate you. But you have robbed me of nothing. How, then, can I grudge you your good fortune?"

"Brother!" cried Olvir.

CHAPTER XII

Look on thy loved one,

Lay lips to his lips.

LAY OF GUDRUN.

On the morning after the feast, the first to greet Roland as he stepped from Olvir's tent was a stocky, bow-legged warrior, whose unkempt red beard and travel-stained dress of coarse wool and leather spoke far more strongly of the camp than of kings' halls. But Roland answered the new-comer's hearty shout with a greeting no less cordial.

"Ho, Amalwin!" he cried; "I did not look to see your Saxon face this far south. What of your fellows in the Sorb Mark,--Count Rudulf?"

"Worad and I came with our levies, the few that Rudulf would spare us. The little birds twitter on the green boughs; but the crafty Grey Wolf scents war in the spring breezes. He will not venture Rhineward from his mark a step beyond Fulda."

"How is that, friend?" called Olvir, from the entrance of the tent. "Will not Count Rudulf attend the Mayfields?"

The Saxon stared at the Norse earl in mingled surprise and admiration until Roland repeated the question, "Then Rudulf will not come to the assembly?"

"Not he! I half wish I were myself back over Rhine Stream, in the deep forest. But who is this young hero?"

"Greet him as my sword-brother. He is a Northman from beyond the Danes,--a fosterling of

Otkar."

"Of Otkar!" shouted Amalwin; and he ran to grasp Olvir's hand. "The Dane himself took me thrall at the fall of the Irminsul; yet he gave me freedom, and won for me the good-will of Carloman."

Olvir nodded: "Be sure the hero spoke no ill to me of Amalwin the Saxon. But Count Rudulf--I must speak with him."

"Then you must fare over Rhine Stream, hero," rejoined Amalwin.

"I know the Grey Wolf," added Roland, nodding in assent. "If he scents forest-war, he will not stir out of his mark for all the Saracens in the old Goth realm."

"It is well I have Zora, brother. I shall start without delay. The time of your Folk-meet is not over-long."

"That is true, Northman," remarked Amalwin. "Two fortnights will see the close of the Mayfields. Though you ride the fleetest of horses, your return will find Karl the King across the Pyrenees, and the Saracens already broken."

Olvir shook his head; but Roland broke in quickly: "Come, brother; let us bear Amalwin company to our lord king. He should know at once of your wish."

"I had forgotten. I am now only a henchman," said Olvir, and he frowned.

For a little while, as they walked along the river's bank to the royal pavilion, his anger kept him moody and silent. But then he began to question Amalwin on the course and condition of the roads along the main route to the Rhine.

Though Karl was deep in the affairs of his immense realm, he was none too busy to turn immediately at sight of the Saxon.

"Ho, my forest-bear!--greeting to you! Where is Rudulf?"

"Lying in lair, lord king. He scents blood near by," answered Amalwin, and he bent awkwardly to kiss the royal knee.

"How? Stand up, man. Are the Sorbs harrying?"

"Neither Sorb nor Saxon; yet the old wolf will not fare far from his mark. His wife, the Wend woman, has been at her witchery. She forebodes evil from the west. So he lies in his mark, sniffing the Saxon breezes."

"Witchcraft--witchcraft!" muttered Karl, frowning. "We must again warn Rudulf to keep his outland dame within our law. But as to the boding,--the fiends may read the future! Rudulf has a grey head, and you, my bright Dane, brought added warning. Rudulf shall have our arrow-bode, to levy at will all the land-host of Thuringia and Austrasia."

"Give me leave to bear the message, lord king," said Olvir.

"You, my Dane hawk? I counted on you to lead the host into Spain."

"My kinsman Al Arabi gave me an Arab mare. I will go and come before the ending of the Mayfields."

"Then your mare must be winged! Why should you go?"

Olvir glanced at Roland, flushing darkly.

The Frank met the look with a grave smile, and answered for his sword-brother: "It is a simple matter, sire. Olvir would ask Count Rudulf for the hand of his daughter. The Thuringian will not come south; so the suitor must go north."

"Still, is a long journey."

"I will return before you march, lord king," repeated Olvir.

Karl gazed steadily into the haughty face of the Northman. What he saw there soon satisfied his doubts. He nodded, and said briefly: "Fulrad will have the writings drawn up within an hour. Make ready--Stay! here is my ring. It may speed your faring."

Olvir's eyes glistened as he took the royal signet.

"Thor!" he cried. "Here is a king whom a king's son may serve without shame!"

"Then fly, king's son. We 'll be looking for your return."

Olvir saluted, and hastened out through the crowds of envious lords. He was springing away from the pavilion, when Roland's voice brought him to a stand: "Hold, brother! a word. I go first to the villa, to make ready for your farewell."

"Brother--ay, brother!" muttered Olvir; and he stood hesitating, overcome by the insistent generosity of the Frank. But time pressed. He waved his hand to Roland and darted away again.

The hour had hardly passed when Olvir sprang down from Zora's back, beside Gerold and Roland, at the main gateway of the villa. The older count promptly took the bridle-rein, while Gerold turned and led Olvir to the queen's apartments.

There was little change within the bower since Olvir's first visit. As before, Hildegarde sat on

the dais, with the children grouped about her feet, and the row of busy maidens on her left. Only the king was absent.

At Olvir's entrance, the maidens dropped their needlework, to glance at him from beneath their lashes and exchange softly murmured comments on his appearance. But Olvir's gaze was already fixed upon the graceful form of Fastrada, among the children on the dais edge. Heedless of the chattering maidens, he hastened forward, his ardor so keen that he could hardly conceal his impatience when Rothada came running to meet him.

"You leave us, Lord Olvir!" she exclaimed.

"Ay, little maid; the time is short. Farewell," he answered, and, with a hasty kiss on her forehead, he passed by. For a moment he knelt to kiss the queen's hand, and then he was beside Fastrada, drinking in the loveliness of her blushing face. The look in her eyes as she gazed at his lithe figure and resplendent war-gear filled him with such an intoxicating delight that for a little he failed to comprehend Hildegarde's remark: "I know nothing of your Norse customs, Lord Olvir. Here we are somewhat strict with unbetrothed maidens. You must say your farewells in our presence."

Fastrada drooped her head to hide a look of resentment, and her dainty foot tapped the floor ominously. Olvir, however, the moment he sensed the queen's meaning, smiled up at her and answered gaily, "Why speak of strictness, dear dame? True love has nothing to hide."

As he spoke, he took Fastrada's hands, and bent to kiss her, thrilling with all the love and reverence of the Northern heart for a pure woman. But as their lips met, the girl, unable to restrain the impulse of her wild Wendish blood, threw herself upon his breast, and flung her arms about his neck. He could feel the throbbing of her heart through his mail.

"Farewell, my lord--my hero!" she whispered brokenly. "Hasten back again. If you linger, I shall die!"

"Never has man gone that journey swifter than I shall go, dear one. If you have need of service, ask for Liutrad Erlingson. All my sea-wolves are at your command. Now, farewell, for a little time!"

Tearing himself from the girl's embrace, Olvir turned and walked quickly away. Rothada and her brothers joined the queen in a chorus of *God-speeds*; but Olvir waved his hand and leaped out through the doorway, without a single glance even for Fastrada.

He found Roland with one hand on Zora's neck and the other caressing the mare's bony cheek. The Frank turned at once at the sound of Olvir's light step, and caught his outstretched hands. For a moment the two gazed at each other with eyes aglow. Then Olvir leaped into the saddle and called to the mare in Arabic. Wheeling at the word, she leaped through the gateway and shot away down the road like an arrow.

CHAPTER XIII

Riding swift on his errands
On the bit-gripping steed.
SONG OF ATLI.

Though reared on the iron coast of Northern Norway, Olvir Thorbiornson had coursed more than one good horse over the flat shores of Jutland and Frisia. What was no less to his present advantage, he held clearly in mind all that Otkar Jotuntop had told him, in his childhood, of the emir's red racers of the desert. Yet, confident as he felt of Zora's endurance, throughout the first day's ride he restrained his desire to course at full speed, and held the willing mare in check. Even a Frankish horse, if spurred, might have kept the road with them to the first night's rest,--at a Gothic farmstede just beyond Périgueux.

On the second day, however, Olvir held a looser rein, and Zora's long stride swept him forward through the fertile country of mid-Aquitania at a pace to astonish the dark-featured Gallo-Roman serfs toiling in the fields beside the road. Even the occasional Frankish noble and pompous bishop faring along the ancient highway could not but halt to stare, with gaping mouth, as the bright Northman shot past them on the red mare.

It might be that they would first catch sight of the rider in the distance, attracted by the sun-rays glittering on his mail and helmet. Then he would be rushing upon them, and they would draw aside to see him pass. Scarcely a glance would they have as horse and rider dashed by; but it was a glance not soon to be forgotten,—the rider, with the sun glinting on his war-gear and jewelled sword, staring eagerly ahead along the road; the red mare, with outstretched head and trumpet nostrils, sweeping over the ground with long, easy strides.

But not all saw the king's messenger so. Now and then Olvir leaped from the small Arab saddle and ran beside Zora, lightly as a deer, his hand upon her withers. The change rested both mare and rider, and slackened the pace but little. A hunter who could boast of having run down the grey wolf afoot in fair chase was not apt to lag in the pace with a hand on his horse. Another aid to Zora was the fair condition of the main route across the rich province. Before the king had marched south, the counts of Aquitania, spurred to unwonted activity by the prospect of his coming, had put both highroad and bridges in moderately good repair.

So it chanced that, shortly before sunset, Olvir halted for the night at a monastery a round ninety miles from where he had mounted at dawn. The sight of the warlike rider as he rode through their gates brought the black-robed Benedictines flocking about him with hospitable greetings; and when Olvir showed the king's signet, the abbot himself sought the privilege of kissing the royal ring.

But Olvir declined the wassail-feast with which the silk-clad priest would have honored him. Instead, he groomed Zora with his own hands, and, having eaten as plain and scanty a meal as he had doled out for the mare, he withdrew at once to a common bed in the hospice.

Dawn found Zora munching the last of her measure of barley from the stone manger, while her master, his hunger already satisfied by a share of the porter's breakfast, paced up and down the monastery court to rid himself of the stiffness yet lingering in his joints. At the first ray of sunrise, master and mare were passing out through the gates, leaving the porter to mumble his blessing over the handful of silver pennies which had fallen from the rider's hand.

The morning was yet early when, without stopping, Olvir rode past beneath the turreted walls of Poitiers, and noon found the red mare racing over the plains of Touraine. From both Otkar and Roland, Olvir had heard the tale of the fateful battle in which the Hammer of the Franks had shattered the victorious hordes of Saracen invaders. Only forty-six years had passed since that terrible slaughter of the Moslemah, and as Zora coursed along the smooth highway which stretched across the wide scene of the struggle, her rider's glance rested on luxuriant fields where the serfs yet ploughed up fragments of outland war-gear from the blood-drenched soil.

The young Northman was, however, less impressed by the thought of the great battle than by the grand monuments of the ancient Roman occupancy,—the lofty towers and walls, massive arched bridges and aqueducts which, where uninjured by man, still stood about the land, huge and uncrumbling after centuries of use. Often as Otkar had described to him the buildings of the old Romans, Olvir found himself staring at them in no little astonishment and wonder. His learning, however, spared him the awe which would have been felt by his simpler countrymen or the forest-dwelling Saxons, among whom the mighty stone burghs and aqueducts were commonly regarded as the works of giants.

The interest of the king's messenger was at last drawn from these Roman structures to the rapidly increasing numbers of wayfarers, journeying like himself to the north. Every class of society was represented, from counts and mitred bishops, travelling with princely retinues, to wretched poor folk, forced into a life of wandering and beggary by the ever-increasing oppression of brutal lords.

In the well-tilled fields which bordered the highway, Olvir could see numbers of toiling husbandmen, part of the fifteen thousand and odd serfs owned by the Abbey of Saint Martin. Here was Christianity exemplified,—the priests of the rueful White Christ sitting in purple and cloth of gold, while their fellowmen sweated and slaved to bring them wealth! The thought filled Olvir with such loathing that when he crossed the Cher and approached Tours, in the thick of the crowd, it was all he could do to bring himself to accept the hospitality of the famous abbey. Nor was his aversion to his monkish hosts lessened when the almoner, overflowing with pride for his monastery, insisted upon showing the king's messenger all the treasures of the church and shrine.

The gold-wrought hangings and the screens of brass and precious metals, the silver candelabra and the gemmed images, at first half dazzled the unaccustomed eyes of the Northman. But while those black eyes glistened with wonder and admiration of so many precious

and beautiful things, the lip beneath curled in scorn of the manner in which the hoard had been gathered, and of the images, to which devout worshippers were offering praise and adoration, alike sanctioned and commended by the Bishop of Rome.

"By the Beard!" muttered Olvir, in Arabic; "and these folk call the Saracens pagans!"

The outlying buildings of the monastery, where monks in short-skirted working frocks plied various trades and handicrafts, tended somewhat to lessen the Northman's scorn of the woman-clad priests. But in the morning he gave to the almoner the exact amount which he thought his lodging was worth, and rode on his way, glad to leave behind him the shuffling black figures, the tinkling bells, and the melancholy chants.

Once on the road again, all bitterness soon passed from Olvir's mind. The day was fair, the road smooth, and already Zora's steel limbs had borne him far on his journey. He cried aloud in sheer gladness of heart, and from the pouch which the king's own hand had fastened to his saddle he flung a fistful of pennies to the rabble of pilgrims by the wayside. Then Zora lengthened her stride; and the wind whistled in his ears a song of hope and love.

And so Aquitania was left to the south, and the king's messenger rode up the Loire's right bank into Neustria, where were to be seen more Franks and no Goths, but still a vast body of subject Gallo-Romans. Swiftly as he passed, Olvir saw much of the beautiful land, whose tilled fields were interspersed with woodlands and meadows. Yet pleasant as was the land to the eye, Olvir observed that the few Frankish husbandmen whom he passed differed little in dress and bearing from the dark-haired serfs. What hope for the future could the free Franks hold, when even the iron rule of their mightiest king could not shield them from the greed and rapacity of their lords?

But Olvir had little commiseration to waste on Christian freemen. Why did they not stand to their ancient rights, like the Norse commonfolk, and cut off the heads of all lawbreakers, whether thralls or kings? With a scornful smile he put the weaklings from his thoughts, and sped on across Neustria as he had sped across Aquitania.

As he approached Paris, Olvir began to fear that Zora's hoofs would soon crack from the continual beating on the hard roads. So he sought out the most noted ironsmith in the city, and he and Zora lodged that night in the hovel of the low-born sledge-wielder.

Never had Zora been groomed as she was groomed by the smith that night and in the morning; and when it came to the shoeing, one would have thought the mare a queen, with such care and delicacy did the man fit on the light iron running shoes. While he then spent the forenoon in yet more grooming, Olvir took a stroll into the city. He found gardens and convents, hovels and palaces, spread over all the Island of Notre Dame and along both banks of the Seine opposite. Undeterred by the narrowness and filth of the streets, he crossed the ancient Roman bridge to the island, and visited the palaces of Clovis and Julian the Apostate, and the great domchurches of Saint Genevieve and Saint Merdicus.

Noon, however, saw the king's messenger not only back at the hut, but ready for the road. He had found Zora sleek as silk and bright-eyed, eager to start. When he mounted he said nothing of pay; but the smith bowed and smiled, and wished the princely king's rider a hearty *God-speed*. Smiling in turn, Olvir put his hand to one of the gold spirals on his left arm; and when the smith, who had not heeded the quick movement, grasped the Northman's hand, he felt an angular piece of heavy metal pressed into his palm. The giver's hand was withdrawn, and the smith stood gaping at the lump of yellow gold that was worth more than his forge and his home and all else he possessed, though he threw in the very shirt upon his back.

Before the man could recover wit enough to cry out his thanks, Olvir was riding away down the crooked street. It was the hour when most of the Franks were seeking the customary noon-rest, and there were few folk abroad to admire and wonder at the king's messenger as he threaded the narrow ways and passed over the Roman bridges to the north bank. Before long Zora bore him through the main gate of the suburban walls, and galloped away on the road to Mayence.

A short ride to the Convent of Chelles on the Marne, where Olvir delivered a message to the abbess for young Gisela, the king's sister; then Zora was given free rein. The Frankish smith had shod the mare so skilfully that she at once fell into her stride, and the race swept on across Neustria, north and east into Austrasia.

Day after day Zora held on at coursing speed, never faltering, her steel limbs seemingly tireless. But now the roads were rougher, and more than one bridge was missing. Twice horse and rider were carried down from treacherous fords, and once Zora sank in a bog. Neither master nor mare, however, met with injury; and, despite all hindrance, the long miles melted

swiftly away before the mare's easy swinging stride.

And so the king's messenger sped through Austrasia, where corners of ancient forest yet stood unhewn, and few men tilled the fields who could not show visible proof of Germanic blood. From Rheims to Treves, Treves to Mayence, thence across the Rhine, and along the Thuringian trade-route which led up the Main and on into the primeval forest,--these were the last stages of the great race.

But the king's messenger was spared at least one day of his expected journeying. At Mayence he learned that Count Rudulf had lately been staying at the Monastery of Fulda, and that it was possible the old hero had not yet returned to his mark.

When, midmorning of the next day, Olvir came at last to Fulda, he found that great centre of civilization in the heart of the beech-wood vastly different from the gilded abbey of Tours, with its slaves and precious hoard. The rude mass of log structures was a very beehive of skilled workers,--sturdy brothers of Northern blood, who found it more to their liking to toil at husbandry and the handicrafts, or to practise with the pen and study the seven liberal arts, than to chant the dirge-like hymns of Holy Church.

Above all was Olvir drawn to Abbot Sturm, whose manly and dignified welcome of the king's messenger all but conquered the young man's aversion to Christian priests. Not all the bluff old abbot's urgings, however, could hold Olvir over the day, when he learned that Rudulf and his Wend wife had gone to the count's homestead in the adjoining shire.

Again Zora stretched out her lean neck, and raced away down the forest road. By midday she had reached the journey's end. On a rocky knoll, close by the Fulda's bank, stood Rudulf's burg,--a walled enclosure in which were grouped the hall and bower and outbuildings familiar to the Norse eye, and, beside all these, the rude stone keep of the Franks and Southern Saxons, adopted centuries since in imitation of the Roman tower.

CHAPTER XIV

When a wolf thou wert
Out in the wildwood.

LAY OF HELGI.

When Olvir entered the open gateway of the burg, no sign of life was to be seen within, other than the thin streamers of smoke rising through the roof-hole of the hall and the high narrow windows of the keep. Not even a hound ran forward to bay at the stranger. Olvir felt little surprise, however, as it was the hour for the Frankish noon-rest. Seeing that the great red and blue mottled door of the keep was ajar, he sprang off before it, and entered, Zora at his heels.

The intruder at once found himself within a gloomy apartment, only half lighted by the flickering of a small fire. Close by the hearth, on the side nearest to the entrance, crouched a woman, at play with several weasels. She was chanting to them in a tongue unknown to Olvir; and as she droned the refrain, the weasels ran up and down her extended arms.

Olvir caught only a glimpse of the strange play. Before he had ceased blinking from the sudden change out of the sun-glare into the dim-lit interior, the woman had become aware of his presence. A low hiss brought the weasels clustering about her neck, and she glided silently away into the gloom beyond the fire.

"I have known warmer guest-cheer," muttered Olvir; and he advanced to seat himself on the bench beside which the woman had been crouching. As he took the seat he heard a dull grinding on his left, and, looking closer, saw the outlines of a man. He touched the fire with his foot, and the upleaping flames lighted the room with a ruddy flare. It showed to Olvir a grisly warrior, bending over a newly forged sword-blade.

The worker was not unusually big as men went in the North; but he was lean and sinewy, and his bristling grey hair and beard well matched the wolf-hide slung across his shoulders. Except for the fleshy but pointed nose, his face was covered to the eyes by its shaggy beard, and the grey bristles grew low down on his forehead, close upon the overhanging brows. Most startling of all were the man's eyes, long and narrow, and set in oblique sockets. One glance at them was

enough to tell Olvir why Count Amalwin had called Rudulf of Thuringia the "Grey Wolf." As he looked and wondered, Olvir's thoughts flew even farther afield, and there came into his mind the memory of Floki's bitter words against this forest hero's daughter. If the father so clearly looked the werewolf, might not the maiden--? But he put the disquieting thought from him, and sat calmly facing the fire.

For a while the silence continued unbroken. Then Count Rudulf flung the sword-blade aside, and turned his slit eyes upon the stranger.

"Guest, or tidings-bearer?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"No guest," replied Olvir.

"What tidings?"

"Word from the king--and more."

"*Heu!*" growled Rudulf; "I thought as much,--a court-man; and yet such mail-- You ride a shapely mare."

"There are worse."

"She is lean. You rode hard."

"Twelve days since, she drank from the Garonne at Casseneuil."

The Thuringian shifted on his bench and peered at Olvir with narrowing eyes.

"Liars are abhorred alike by Odin and the White Christ."

"Here is the king's message, sealed with his great seal. Doubtless Fulrad, Keeper of the Seal, noted the date of sending," replied Olvir, coolly; and he held out the folded parchment.

Rudulf took the message in a hairy fist, and stared at the barbarous Latin of the address.

"Open and read," said Olvir.

"How--am I a monk? That shall wait a while. You spoke of other tidings."

"I come as your daughter's wooer."

Rudulf laughed derisively, and surveyed Olvir from helmet to buskin.

"A gay bird of the South," he sneered. "He had best wing it home again. The North is cold for such."

"The gerfalcon soars over the ice-fells," rejoined Olvir.

"Gerfalcon--gerfalcon!" muttered Rudulf, in an altered tone. "It may be! But hearken, my gay king's rider. Falcon or sparrow, you had best be winging southward. I have broken the backs of two Saxon and three Sorb champions, and my strength is still with me. Fastrada, my daughter, goes to no man who cannot best me at my chosen game."

Olvir silently laid aside his helmet and unclasped his mail-serk.

"I am ready," he said.

But Rudulf shook his grisly head.

"It were a pity to mar so shapely a child," he muttered. "Do not be rash, boy. I have never but once been thrown, and that by the greatest of heroes, Otkar the Dane."

At that name, the terrible weariness which deadened Olvir's nerves fell away, and left him a-tingle with life and power.

"Come, then, braggart," he jeered. "Now shall you bite the dust the second time."

Stung by the taunt, Rudulf dropped his wolf-skin, and advanced, half crouching, upon the audacious challenger. His eyes were narrowed to a line, and his grey hair stood up like the bristles of a wolf. His gaunt figure, creeping forward in the dying firelight, was a sight to appall any but the stoutest hearted.

Olvir, though he held himself with seeming carelessness, waited the attack with every faculty alert. He had no doubt that Rudulf's boasts were based in truth, and yet, though the strain of his long ride was against him, he did not shrink. He was resolved to win the old hero's daughter, or die in the attempt.

Zora thrust her head past her master's shoulder. Without averting his gaze from the Thuringian, he uttered a word of command that sent the mare about to the door of the apartment. As she wheeled, Olvir feigned to glance away, and on the instant Rudulf made his leap. Olvir dropped forward, and the leaper stumbled and fell headlong over him into the rushes. Both men were up again, Olvir only a moment quicker than his grey opponent.

"*Heu!* a child's trick," growled Rudulf, and he advanced again. This time Olvir sprang to meet him, and in a moment the two were locked fast in each other's arms. Olvir at once realized that the old count was far stronger than himself and very quick. But he had not been trained in all kingly games by Otkar Jotuntop, that he should fail at such a time.

Up and down the room the wrestlers trampled and reeled in desperate struggle, overturning benches and tables, and scattering the firebrands among the green rushes. Acrid smoke rose

from the floor to choke the wrestlers; but they staggered to and fro across the room, heedless of all else than their furious strife. Time and again the Grey Wolf lifted Olvir sheer off his feet, yet always the Northman regained his foothold. The Thuringian could neither smother him in his terrible hug nor loosen the younger man's grip. His every effort to shift the hold, so as to break Olvir's back, was foiled by movements yet more adroit. The crafty old wrestler had met one whose skill outmatched his own at every turn.

At last age began to tell against the Thuringian. His gasps told of failing breath. For a little he strained his utmost, his teeth gnashing like a wolf's. Still Olvir held fast, biding his time. Suddenly the Grey Wolf's grip relaxed. In a twinkling, Olvir had shifted his hold. One arm closed about the count's hairy throat. The man was at his mercy.

"Enough! do not--throttle--" gasped Rudulf.

"The back-breaker is not yet upon his back," rejoined Olvir. But he eased his grip, and Rudulf answered him quickly: "No need to thrust the falling tree. You have won."

"Well said!" cried Olvir, and he supported the exhausted count to a bench. Then he flung wide open the great door, and gathered together the scattered brands of the fire. As he put on again his bright mail and helmet, and sat down in the crossing rays of flame and sunlight, he saw old Rudulf watching him with a bewildered stare, muttering, "Have I met my match in a bairn?"

"I was taught the game by him whom you Rhinefolk call the Dane,--Otkar Jotuntop," said Olvir, quietly.

"Otkar--Otkar! Ha! I thought the mail-- And Otkar himself trained you?"

"I was his fosterling and blood-kin."

"Was?"

"He has gone hence."

"*Heu!* the North has lost a king of heroes. But he has left a bold foster-son. I ought to have known by your eye, if not by the mail; but the gold and the pretty stones threw me from the slot. Your bairn's sword--"

"Bairn's! With this blade I took vengeance on my father's slayer, and many another Dane has felt its point," rejoined Olvir, as he handed the sword to Rudulf.

The Thuringian examined closely the beautiful recurved blade, and shook his head. "This may be good steel. I have never seen its like. Yet the weapon lacks weight."

"I have known worse blades," answered Olvir; and, drawing a ring from his finger, he tossed it into the air. As it fell, he thrust out and caught the little circlet on Al-hatif's point.

Old Rudulf's green eyes widened in a look of approval.

"By Thor and the White Christ!" he swore; "no maiden need fear to wed so deft a sword-wielder. Say the word, hero. Whenever you wish, I ride with you to old Sturm, and make my mark on the betrothal scroll."

"Hold a little," interrupted a softly sibilant voice, so like Fastrada's that Olvir turned about with a throbbing heart. He saw the tall figure of a woman, wrapped about in a cloak of grey wool. The woman's face was hidden in the depths of the hood, but back in the shadow he saw, or rather felt, a pair of cold eyes fixed upon him. He had no doubt that this was the woman of the weasels,--the mother of his chosen bride. As he remembered her repute for witchery, he felt what he had never known since early childhood,--a thrill of real fear. But the spell passed in a moment, and he watched the Wend woman's stealthy approach, calm alike in seeming and in reality.

"What would the dame ask?" he inquired gravely.

The woman stared at him from the depths of her hood, and made no reply.

Olvir stared back at her until at last he grew weary of the delay.

"Let the mother of Fastrada speak," he said in a tone more of command than entreaty.

"Do you not fear the fiends, son of Thorbiorn?" demanded the woman, in a hollow voice.

Olvir's lip curled. "The grave-mound was my dwelling, and I have ever drunk to Thor."

"Foolish bairn! Do you not know that I can blast you with the curse of your own gods,--that I can wither your limbs like the boughs of the stricken linden?"

Olvir drew up his lithe form, and his black eyes flashed defiantly.

"Now, by Loki!" he cried; "here we stand, witch-dame. Let us test the power of your spells."

"Not so, hero. I have tested what I would test, even as the Grey Wolf has tested you. Yet there is more. Answer me with a straight tongue. Can you name yourself a king?"

"Sea-king,--no land-king. Yet my father, whose name you divined, was King of Lade, and I am now heir to the high-seat."

The woman bent her head, and muttered to herself in her strange tongue. Rudulf stood waiting, as though spellbound; but Olvir, grown impatient, stepped about to go.

"Farewell, dame," he said briskly.

"Go, king's son-- Yet listen! I doubt. It should be *king*; not *king's son*--and *grey of eye*. *He!* all is misty. The fiend-gods are angered. Stay with us this night. I will make sacrifice and sing the fate-songs."

Olvir laughed. "I ask no aid from gods I scorn."

"Then I leave you to your fate."

"What the Norns weave will come to pass. Again I say, farewell, dame. Come, Rudulf, if your word is true."

Rudulf turned to his wife, and, meeting a gesture of assent, hurried out after Olvir and the red mare. At his whistle, a powerful black horse came running from the meadow, and the count mounted without saddle or bridle. Side by side, Thuringian and Northman rode through the wild beech-wood to Fulda; and, on the way, the old count plied his daughter's suitor with many shrewd questions. To all alike Olvir made satisfactory answer; and the Thuringian raised no objections even when he learned that the young sea-king might soon bear off his bride to his far Northern home. It was enough for the Grey Wolf that the suitor was a tried warrior of good birth.

At Fulda he refused the urgent hospitality of Abbot Sturm, and waited only while Olvir, quicker than any of the monastery scribes, drew up the betrothal agreement in beautiful Irish script. Then he made his rude mark upon the parchment, and, with a word of farewell to Olvir, gruff but hearty, he mounted his horse and rode away homeward through the gathering night.

But Olvir gladly accepted the abbot's hospitality, not only for the night, but for two more days to come. Though the pick of a breed that could claim greater speed and endurance than perhaps any other stock known in all Arabia, even Zora had been too severely taxed by the strain of the long race from the Southland; and Olvir himself, with all his lifelong training, had to own the need of rest before undertaking the return journey.

To the monks of Fulda the brief visit of the king's messenger afforded material for gossip during many a dull month to follow. Young and old, they were eager to serve him; while Zora had no lack of frocked grooms who took joy in tending and caressing the wonderful mare. But what appealed strongest to Sturm and the more studious of the brothers was the marvellous learning of their guest. Though their school was already famed beyond the borders of the kingdom and could number its pupils by hundreds, so greatly had learning dwindled throughout Europe that Olvir, who had benefited by the fruit of Otkar's wander-years, far outmatched the scholars of the monastery in all branches of knowledge except only the writings of the Christian fathers.

Nor did Olvir detract from his reputation at the close of his visit. One of his last acts was to visit the monastery school, where, with quick discernment, he singled out and rewarded with a handful of silver pennies the brightest among the younger students,--Eginhard, son of Eginhard, a nimble-witted child of eight, whom history was to know as the son-in-law and biographer of Karl the King.

CHAPTER XV

At the Thing,
Where folk throng.

LAY OF SIGRDRIFA.

Once more Zora's round hoofs beat quick time on the roadway, and the ease of her stride was proof that the rest had fully restored her strength. With quick intelligence, she felt and responded to the joyful mood of her rider, who, with the betrothal lines safe in his bosom, raced away southwards, full of song and gladness.

Over Rhine and through Austrasia, back across the Seine at Paris, and so again to Tours and down into fair Aquitania rode the king's messenger, ever bright-eyed and smiling. At Paris he had stopped again half a day with the smith, so that Zora had had no cause to feel neglected; while, throughout the long ride, he had lightened the journey-toil both for himself and for the mare by humming Northern love-songs and Arab chants of the desert.

So the king's messenger rushed out of the North. The royal signet opened for him all doors,

and no wayside thief dared attack so well armed a rider.

Morning of the twelfth day found him leaving the gate of a little town south of Périgueux. It was the commencement of the journey's last stage,--so Olvir whispered joyfully in Zora's ear; and the red mare responded by stretching out her neck for the half-day's race that should bring them to the Garonne. At first the faithful beast showed a little stiffness; but she soon fell into her stride, and the long miles melted away from before her no less swiftly than when she first left Fulda.

As mare and rider sped along the highway, a stranger, judging by their appearance, would have thought that they had just burst away from the tedium of camp life. Only by their leanness did either betray to the casual glance the tremendous strain of the long race against time.

Twice during the morning's ride Olvir dismounted and ran beside the mare, to ease his stiffened limbs. When, the second time, he swung back into the saddle, his eye was caught by the battlement on one of the towers of Casseneuil. Then the full view of the Garonne's valley burst upon him, and he uttered a joyful shout. The banks of the stream were still dotted with tents and booths. The Frankish host had not yet marched south.

Assured of this welcome fact, Olvir turned the mare aside to a spring, where he groomed her carefully, and burnished the silver fittings of her saddle and bridle. After that he burnished his war-gear, and did what he could to cleanse his dress of dust and travel-stain. Last of all, he bathed in the pool of the spring and combed out his red-gold hair.

"So, Wind of the Desert, now we are fit and seemly for Karolah's presence," he said, and he kissed the mare's broad forehead.

A little later he was cantering down the road which wound through the Frankish camps. The first tents to which he came were deserted; but it was not hard to divine that their owners were to be found in the vast crowd on the river-bank, near the king's pavilion. Evidently the Frankish folk-council was holding one of its meetings.

A touch of the rein sent Zora off to the right across a long stretch of meadow where great herds of cattle were grazing; then around the corner of a little wood, and they dashed into the midst of the viking camp.

Suddenly as steed and rider rushed into view, they had hardly gained Olvir's tent, when the air rang with shouts of welcome, and the Northmen came running from all sides to greet their earl. In the lead came Floki the Crane, bounding like an elk. Yet he was not the first to welcome the sea-king. The flap of Olvir's tent was flung aside, and Rothada sprang out, radiant with pleasure. Close after the girl ran Karl, her sturdy little half-brother.

"Lord Olvir! Lord Olvir! how joyous it is to see you!"

"And you, king's daughter! Put your foot upon the stirrup--so!"

Drawing the girl up to him, Olvir kissed her ruddy cheek.

"Hold, little vala," he added, as Rothada would have sprung down. "I have a question to ask. Where is your father? and how came you here alone?"

"The king, my father, is near his tent. I came with Roland and Gerold and the others. But Liutrad was sent for by Abbot Fulrad, and Fastrada returned to our sweet Dame Hildegarde. Pepin would not stay with me; but Karl--"

"Fastrada!--And they have gone? Ah, well, then, we 'll go to the king, and you shall sit behind me, sweetheart."

"On the beautiful mare! But Karl--"

"He shall sit in front, if he be a man. So; there you are. Now, king's son!"

The boy ran forward, delighted, and was swung up by Floki, astride Zora's neck.

Then the jam of vikings closed in around their leader, and the shouting broke out again.

"Hold your noise, fools!" cried Floki. "The ring-breaker has no mind to be deafened."

"How--not cheer?" roared back a scarred old berserk, his ferocious face beaming. "Ho! Thor smite the silent ones! Howl your joy, sea-wolves! Our earl has come again--*Hao!*"

"Howl! howl, wolves of Hild!

He, our hersir,

He, our hero,

Have we here!"

rang out the mellow voice of a skald from the thick of the crowd, and the quickly turned verse was echoed by a roar to be heard even at Casseneuil.

Olvir's eyes sparkled, and he wheeled Zora slowly around, that he might see all. As the

shouting died away, he lifted his hand, and answered the boisterous welcome: "Greeting to you, sons of Thor! My heart leaps at the sight of viking faces! But now I must go to the Frank king. I will come again before nightfall. Arm yourselves as for battle, that I may see if the camp-sloth has overtaken you."

"If one man shows a rust-speck on mail or helmet, strike off my hand," said Floki.

"The Crane has looked to it!" grumbled the old berserk. "There are softer-spoken leaders. But he has kept all well in hand, even as against Liutrad's red pig."

"I will hear of that later; now I must be going. Farewell," replied Olvir, and Zora passed with her triple burden through the opening crowd.

The mare's gentle canter soon covered the distance to the assembling-ground of the national council. But when she left the last bit of coppice, young Karl, who held the reins, turned her away from the immense gathering of freemen to a little grove that shaded a company of priests, court-officials, and war-counts. The royal standard, planted before the grove, marked the presence of the king. Here, in fact, was the inner council of the Frankish national assembly, whence the sovereign, surrounded by his high liegemen, both lay and ecclesiastical, sent over his decrees to be confirmed by the voice of the freemen.

When Zora approached the grove, the king was reading from a long scroll, and his audience had eye and ear only for the royal speaker. Not until Zora thrust her head over Count Amalwin's heavy shoulder, were the new-comers perceived. The Saxon turned with a frown, to start back and stare at the Northman, open-mouthed. Olvir leaned toward him, smiling.

"So, Saxon," he said quietly, "what do you now say of my mare, and what of her master? We crossed Rhine Stream, and more--I held your Grey Wolf by the throat."

"How--Rudulf!" shouted Amalwin, forgetting all else in his surprise.

The cry rang through the grove like an alarm, and king, counts, and priests alike turned to stare at the intruders. The first look on many faces was one of resentment; but then, just beyond the oaken throne, Roland sprang up and came running with a cry of greeting: "Olvir! Olvir! Welcome back again!"

Close after him ran Liutrad and Gerold, while from all sides the liegemen pressed forward with excited shouts: "The Dane! It is the Dane count! He cannot have gone and come already! Saint Michael, what a mare!"

Then Gerold caught Zora's bridle, while behind him Roland and Liutrad clasped Olvir by the hands. So escorted, with the king's son before him and the king's daughter at his back, the young Northman rode forward to the very edge of the dais. There his friends stepped aside, and Olvir would have dismounted. But Karl stayed him with a gesture, and came forward to lay his great palm on Zora's forehead.

"By the King of Heaven," he muttered, "well did I name you my Dane hawk! Six and twenty days ago you rode northward. Have you, in truth, crossed the Rhine?"

"To Fulda and beyond, lord king," replied Olvir; "to the lair of the Grey Wolf."

"Beyond Fulda! And how did the old count greet you?"

"We played at back-breaking till I throttled him. Then we rode to Fulda, and he made his mark on what I asked him."

"How, Dane," demanded the purple-faced Count Hardrat; "do you claim to have outwrestled Rudulf of the Sorb Mark? I cannot swallow that boast."

Olvir's lip curled, and he bent over toward the speaker.

"Shall I prove the boast--now?" he asked softly.

"Ay; now!" retorted the Thuringian. But then the soft hand of Duke Lupus fell upon his shoulder: "Go easy, friend. Count Olvir has already tossed you over his head; he will toss you again."

"Enough!" interrupted Karl, imperiously. "We will have no brawling. I answer for Lord Olvir's truth."

"A word, lord king," called out Amalwin. "I know that Rudulf vowed never to give his daughter to one who could not best him at his own game."

"And here is Rudulf's mark to my betrothal lines," added Olvir.

"I need no such proof of the deed, my gerdalgon. Put up your scroll, and dismount. Give me the child."

At the bidding, Olvir tossed young Karl into his father's arms, and Roland swung down Rothada. Then Olvir leaped from the saddle. As the foster-brothers parted, Liutrad touched his earl's shoulder.

"Have no thought for the mare, ring-breaker," he said. "Gerold and I will groom her with our

own hands."

Among the first of the company to congratulate the Northman on his wonderful ride was Duke Lupus.

"I rejoice, hero, that you are here to be with us on the morrow," he concluded. "Count Roland and your learned young Liutrad have planned a boating party up the Lot. The queen herself will attend, and also one whom I need not name."

"My thanks for the good tidings," replied Olvir, and his hand closed with cordial firmness about the Vascon's soft palm.

Then Lupus glided away, and Count Amalwin thrust forward a slim, hazel-eyed young warrior, whose firm-set jaw alone saved his delicate face from girlish softness.

"Here, hero," called out the Saxon; "you have wrestled with Rudulf; here now is one, half a monk, who will strive to match you in book-craft,--Worad, Count of Metz."

"Not I, hero!" protested the young man. "Already Liutrad has worsted me. If the man be so learned, how dare I meet the master? Rather, measure your lore with Abbot Fulrad."

"You would set me against all the learning of Frank Land," said Olvir, smiling.

"That we shall, lad," replied the king. "For what should we gain learning, if not to impart it? My war-counts, alas, give little heed to letters."

"The greater heed we give to our swords, lord king," mumbled Amalwin.

"To your trenchers, rather!" laughed Karl. "And now I myself would give heed to the same. Here comes my cupbearer, to tell us that the meat cools on the spits."

Giving over Rothada and her brother into the charge of the page, the king led the way to the table with a hastiness that betrayed a hunter's appetite.

Olvir soon found himself seated at a rustic board, between Roland and Worad. Overhead the breeze sighed through the green foliage; but the birds of the grove had flown away, frightened by the clamor. After no little confusion, seats were found for all the company, and a crowd of attendants served the guests. Very shortly the loud talk of the warriors lulled, and little else was to be heard than the click of knives and spoons.

In the midst of the feast the air shook with a great rolling outcry that sent Olvir's hand to the hilt of Al-hatif. But the Franks went on with their eating as though nothing had happened. Roland, however, observed Olvir's movement, and hastened to explain.

"It is the assembly," he said. "The freemen have brought their deliberations to an end."

Olvir smiled ironically: "Otkar had somewhat to say of your Frankish *folk-thing*. Your warriors meet to shout for what the king bids them. In the North at the *thing* all alike--kings, earls, and common freemen--stand on the same footing. So it is in Saxon Land, and so it was once among the free Franks."

"You speak boldly, Count Olvir," rejoined young Worad of Metz. "I might answer that we free Franks have passed the stage of the barbarous Saxons. The Romans were very wise; we have learned from them."

"And Rome to-day is a grave-mound of dead might. Its folk bent knee to the foul kaisers as to gods, and their realm crumbled away. Kings alone cannot long uphold kingdoms. The strength of a land lies in its freemen."

"You jest, Olvir," protested Roland. "See how our folk have become bound together and our strength been magnified since Karl the Hammer seized the reins of power in his single grasp."

"But why were you weak before? Your freemen then had as little part in the making of your laws as they have now. Already they were falling into slavery and serfdom. Even during my few weeks in your land, I have heard how your freemen, to save themselves from pillage and starvation, are fast pledging themselves as followers of the counts. Lucky for you so great a one as yonder world-hero sits on the throne! When he is gone, I foresee evil for Frank Land."

"You speak words of ill-omen, lord Dane," said Worad, flushing. "The Franks have never been stronger. All outland folk tremble before Karl our King."

"Not all! I know of one folk--"

"Hold, Olvir, for my sake, if not for your own," broke in Roland. "Nothing but bitterness can come of wrangling. Look! there comes the folk-herald to tell the findings of the assembly."

"That is he," assented Worad, "the small man on the grey horse."

The herald leaned from his saddle to speak with the king, and then, at a nod from Karl, he rose in his stirrups and shouted down the long table: "Ho, lords of the Franks' king! learn that the freemen of the realm have confirmed all laws sent before them by his Majesty, and they give their full voice for war against the pagan Saracens."

As the shout which greeted this announcement died away, the herald's voice again rang

through the grove; "Hearken, all, lords of the king! He who is not prepared let him make ready. Two days hence the host will march."

At this command the war-counts filled the grove with their shouts, and their zeal was so great that many rushed off leaving half-filled trenchers.

No Frank was more pleased than was Olvir.

"Come, brother!" he cried. "I must see to my vikings. They will be armed for my return."

"You will find them brisk in action. Floki has not let them lie about idle."

"That I can well believe. Farewell for the time, Count Worad."

"Until the morning, lord count, if nearness to the time of marching does not prevent our boating trip."

"It may chance that Lupus cannot come; but that would be small loss," said Roland, bluntly. "There is nothing to stay the others. Are your men ready for the road?"

"Amalwin has seen to that."

"And Floki to mine, I could swear, brother," said Olvir. "Yet we should go and see. Again, farewell."

Worad waved his slender hand, and the sword-brothers joined the crowds of departing warriors.

CHAPTER XVI

But about and between
Went baleful fate.

LAY OF SIGURD.

As Roland had predicted, nothing arose to interfere with the plans of the maying party. Even Lupus found means to slip away from the king's presence. His excuse was that he wished to attend the queen. With the utmost show of deference, he and a pair of young pages had escorted her to the landing-stage, where she was sitting at ease in the midst of the royal children and half-a-dozen favorite bower-maidens, when the Norse ship-boats came racing up from the viking camp. The craft were steered by Olvir and Roland, Gerold of Bussen, and Count Worad.

Olvir's oarsmen were not the best among his vikings. Floki himself pulled bow-oar in Roland's boat. Yet the greater skill of the sea-king more than offset this disadvantage, and he steered in to the wharf foremost of all.

Forgetful of sore muscles and stiffened joints, the heritage of his ride, Olvir did not wait for his boat to make fast, but while it was yet turning, leaped out upon the landing-stage. Though he hastened at once to bow before Hildegarde, his eyes were fixed upon the glowing face which regarded him over the queen's shoulder. He had thought for none else. Hildegarde saw and understood. She met his half-stammered greeting with a smile, and motioned him to step behind her.

"Greet the maiden, Olvir," she said. "No wooer ever rode so far and so fast to win his true-love. I would not keep you waiting now."

Olvir thanked the kindly queen with a glance, and then he was beside Fastrada. It was the moment to which both had looked forward during all the six and twenty days of separation. For a time they stood with clasped hands, gazing into each other's eyes, too full of love and happiness to speak. They were so lost in mutual delight they did not heed that all the others had embarked and were waiting for them, until Rothada called out.

"Ah, sweetheart, we must go," sighed Olvir. "Yet, first, a word,--I bring good tidings."

Fastrada's eyes shone still brighter.

"I know, my hero," she murmured. "Yesterday my heart burned that you should have first seen Rothada; but I forgave her because of the joyful word she brought. Oh, my lord, how my heart leaps to see you once more! And you have ridden over Rhine and back again, with scarce a trace of the long journey! Who else in Christendom could do the like?"

"Who else would not do it for the loveliest among maidens?" replied Olvir; and with that, fearful of losing his self-control, he led the girl aboard his boat.

Hildegarde had intrusted herself to Roland, along with the children. All others had chosen places in the remaining boats, except only Rothada. Though begged by Worad to come with him, the girl had placed herself aboard Olvir's boat. Even Fastrada could not ask the little princess to leave; but her ready wit suggested how to make the best of the situation. At a word from her, Olvir told one of the pages to join them. The boy was only too pleased to gain such a merry companion as the king's daughter, and so, with much laughter and excitement, all was agreeably arranged, and the five boats sheered off into the stream.

Accustomed as were most of the party to the river scenery, all found much to delight the eye in the picturesque hills, the woods, and the flower-strewn dales, now in the full green of early summer. Nature added her share to the merry maying. There was no cloud to be seen, either in the sky or on the faces of the pleasure-seekers. Even Roland joined freely in the merriment, and unbent so far as to tell the king's children a wonderful tale,--all about wood-sprites and werwolves.

Of all the party, two alone had no thought to give to jest or laughter, and yet they were the happiest couple in the boats. Faint with blissful languor, Fastrada sat beside her lover, too overjoyed for words; while instinct alone guided Olvir's steer-oar, as his boat, leaping to the strokes of the big-armed oarsmen, raced upstream in company with the others.

All too soon, Gerold, in the lead, steered ashore to the crumbling stone quay of an old-time Roman estate. Through the trees could be seen the shattered walls of an immense villa, which, Lupus said, had been looted and burned by the Saracens on their way to Tours. But on landing, in place of proceeding to the ruins, the party turned aside to a nook in the abandoned garden, where a stream of pure water gushed from the mouth of a monstrous bronze dolphin.

Here a cloth was spread on the grass, and the bower-maidens played at housewife, while the younger men ran races to the boat for forgotten articles. After the meal a half-circle was formed before Hildegarde and the children, and each member of the party was called upon for a tale.

So with stories of dragons and saints, heroes and sprites, the hour of noon-rest was passed, and young Karl and Rotrude and Carloman slept with their heads on their mother's lap. But the other youngsters at last wearied of inaction, and Pepin begged to see the ruined villa. The idea was at once caught up by Worad and Gerold, and met with approval on all sides.

The villa had evidently been the country-seat of a Roman of great wealth. In size it was little less than a palace. The party rambled about the ruins during most of the afternoon, with no slackening of interest. From the ash-heaps beneath the fire-scarred walls the young men dug out pretty fragments of statuary and many whole tiles.

Fatigue and thirst, however, finally moved Hildegarde to call for a return to the fountain. When she started, supported between Roland and Lupus, her maidens and the younger men ran ahead to gather flowers with the children. Olvir and Fastrada, however, walked behind, and slow as was the queen's pace, theirs was yet slower. Lupus was quick to note their loitering, and when presently they were lost to view behind a turn of the wild-grown hedge, he sought to bring his royal mistress to a halt.

"Pardon me, gracious dame," he said; "is it seemly that Lord Olvir and the maiden--"

"What harm?" interrupted Hildegarde, smiling. "Are they not all but betrothed? This very evening Fulrad will hear them plight their troth. Come; one would think you had never loved."

Lupus looked quickly away, and drew in his breath with a softly hissing sound. Nor was he the only one hurt. Roland groaned aloud and struck his fist upon his broad chest.

"Ah, Roland--I had forgot!" exclaimed Hildegarde.

The warrior's stern-set face relaxed, and he smiled sadly.

"God double my brother's joy!" he said.

And so the three passed on to where the young folk were playing May games around the fountain.

Meantime, the lovers had more than loitered on the way,--they had come to a full stop.

The moment Fastrada perceived that the queen and her companions were hidden by the foliage, she put a hand to her bosom, and exclaimed: "Hold, Olvir. I have dropped the brooch you gave me. It must have been at the last, when we started."

"I will run fetch it, sweetheart," replied Olvir, readily.

"And leave me here alone! I would sooner lose the clasp. Let us return together. I have good tidings, which the queen left for me to tell you."

"Come, then; we'll go back. Now, dear one, what are your good tidings?"

"Wait a little, my hero. Tell me first of your meeting with Count Rudulf, my father, and with my--my mother."

Olvir half frowned, and drew a little apart, as he recalled his encounter in the wild beech forest.

"What are your tidings?" he insisted.

The girl glanced up at him with a look which, though of but a moment's duration, brought out with startling distinctness her resemblance to the grisly old forest count. Then her scarlet lips parted in a smile that showed her strong white teeth, and she replied slowly: "I bend to the bidding of my lord. Know, then, that our lord king desires the company of his daughter on his southward war-faring, and, that the princess may not be lonely, he has asked the queen to choose her a journey-mate from among the bower-maidens."

"The king takes the little vala on such a war-faring! and you, of all the queen's maidens, are chosen to go-- By Loki, there are tales of Pepin's son! Were I sure-- Ah! that boding of the witch,-- her own mother!"

"You speak in riddles," said Fastrada, sharply. "What of my mother's boding?"

"No good word to you and me," replied Olvir; and he told briefly of the meeting with the old count and his witch wife. As he spoke, his scorn of spells and evil bodings came back to him, and he cast off the doubt which had fallen upon his heart. But when, smiling at his foolish fear and jealousy, he glanced down at the maiden, he caught a glimpse of her eyes, green and narrow-lidded as her father's. They were still green when the girl met his look full-faced, and asked in a sibilant voice: "You are sure--my mother--she said a king--one grey of eye?"

"And I am neither!" muttered Olvir. "Yet were she twice your mother, I 'd laugh at such witchery."

But Fastrada turned from her lover's smiling look. She paused, and gazed down at the weed-grown ash-heap at her feet, her eyes again narrowed to a line.

A sudden chill fell upon Olvir. If the maiden truly loved him, why should she stand pondering that wild foretelling? Half angered, he glanced away, and his eye was caught by a glinting in the grass. He went ahead, and found the missing brooch.

"Here is your clasp, daughter of Rudulf," he said coldly.

Heedless of his tone, Fastrada took the ornament, and stared fixedly at the garnets with which it was studded.

"The queen's gems are far more precious," she murmured, half aloud.

"I will win you the like, maiden," answered Olvir, quickly, but his frown deepened.

For a while Fastrada made no response. Her eyes were still downcast, and her face was dark with doubt and inward struggle.

"*Ai*--my mother," she at last whispered; "not often do her bodings fall amiss! Yet once I knew the fiends to fail her-- Ah, if--"

The words faltered on the girl's lips, and she glanced up furtively at her lover. But at sight of his look she started back with a stifled cry.

Olvir's face was white as new ivory, and his eyes glittered like an angry snake's.

"So, witch-daughter," he lisped softly as a young child, "this is your Frank love. It is a merry game to play fast and loose,--a merry game! It seems that I fared to Rhine Stream on my lord king's errand,--both as to father and daughter. 'A king, grey of eye'--and he has chosen you to go as mate for--his daughter. So; the game is played! We will accept your mother's boding; we will trust to her fiends."

"Olvir, Olvir!--my hero! What is this? Why do you speak so cruelly? Ah, do not shrink from me! I was mad--mad! Truly, I love you, Olvir! I will never love another. Take me back--into your heart!"

"You mistake, daughter of Rudulf," replied Olvir, a harder note in his lisping voice. "My heart held the image of a maiden pure and true; you have shattered that holy image. How can I hold love in my heart, when you have thrust in doubt? Love! You say you love me, when you could stand for an instant weighing my love against a queen's crown--love!"

His voice cut like a lash. The girl winced, and looked appealingly into his face. But she saw only contempt and anger. Then her own eyes hardened. The daughter of grey Rudulf and the Wend witch was not one to repay scorn with a smile. The very excess of her passion for the Northman served now to heighten her fury and hatred. As she turned upon him, her beautiful features were distorted with a look more startling than the wolfish visage of her father.

"Love!" she cried, half hissing the word. "You speak of love,--you, the heathen outlander! This stone beneath my feet knows more of love than you! Your blood is but ice,--salty ice! Take your ring, and begone!"

"Now do I see the werwolf!" muttered Olvir, and, flinging down Fastrada's ring, he trod his

own into the ashes and turned away, proud and angry-eyed.

CHAPTER XVII

What hath wrought Sigurd
Of any wrong-doing
That the life of the famed one
Thou art fain of taking?

LAY OF BRYNHILD.

White with fury, Fastrada yet stood glaring at the spot where Olvir had disappeared, when she heard a firm tread on the other side. As she looked about, she caught a glimpse of Roland approaching through the coppice. Her first impulse was to spring away before the king's kinsman could come upon her. But almost at the first step she paused and turned again, with a smile of wolfish joy.

When Roland burst from the thicket, the girl came running to meet him, her silken dress torn, her hair capless and dishevelled, her face blotched with earth.

"Save me! Save me, lord count!" she gasped. "In the name of your mother, do not let him harm me!"

"What is it? Who would harm you?" demanded Roland, in amazement.

But the girl flung herself on the ground before him, sobbing and moaning, and for a while it seemed as though she could not speak. The sight of her at his feet stirred to the depths all the love and pity of the Frank's heart. He stooped and sought to lift her; but she shrank from his touch, and hid her face in her hands.

"Leave me!" she moaned. "I had forgotten; not to you can I look to avenge my wrong."

"Wrong!" he repeated, and his blue eyes flared. "By my sword, I swear, daughter of Rudulf, I will avenge your wrong. Name the man."

Fastrada ceased her sobbing, and half raised herself. With one hand still across her face, she whispered brokenly: "He sought to-- Ah, I cannot name it! but you came, and he fled. He is--he was the man I loved--I trusted."

"Olvir!--my brother?" cried Roland, and he staggered as though struck. For a moment he stood, white and rigid, in an agony of doubt. But Fastrada's keen wits were sharpened by hate.

"O my hero! my dark-eyed hero!" she moaned. "Why should you wrong your betrothed? Why seek to harm the maiden who loved you so?"

"Where did he go?" gasped Roland. A terrible anger had seized upon him. His face was crimson with rage, his eyes bloodshot. Even as he spoke, he drew the heavy Norse sword at his side, and when, with head averted, the girl pointed behind her, he rushed away like a berserk in the fury.

Instantly Fastrada sat up to listen, her narrowed eyes dry and hot, her face white, her lips drawn away from the teeth in two blood-red lines. She was so intent on following Roland's headlong flight that Duke Lupus glided out of the coppice and gained her side unheeded. With all his subtlety, the Vascon did not lack courage; but he could not restrain a shudder when he saw the look on the girl's face. He crossed himself hastily, and would have slipped back to the coppice, had not Fastrada turned and perceived him. For a little the two glared at each other. Fastrada was first to speak.

"Spy!" she hissed.

But Lupus had recovered from his first superstitious dread. Unheeding the scornful term, he bent eagerly forward and half whispered: "I am not blind, maiden. You burn for vengeance. Who has wronged you? Tell me! I can aid."

Fastrada shook her head sullenly; but her fury was too great to be repressed.

"Vengeance!" she cried fiercely. "You speak truth; I thirst for vengeance! Nothing will quench my thirst but the heart's blood of that false heathen. The base outlander sought my shame."

"Holy saints!" cried Lupus, in affected horror. But Fastrada saw the ironical smile which flitted across his face, and she knew that he had not been deceived. She drew back her head and

watched him, like a snake whose way is barred. The duke's face instantly assumed a look of deepest significance, and he extended a white hand.

"Let me be your friend," he urged. "I also have wrongs to avenge. Join with me and my friends. We will aid you gladly."

"Already my wolf-hound follows the warm trail," rejoined Fastrada, and she laughed shrilly.

"Roland?"

The girl rocked to and fro, her hands clasped about her knee.

"The sword-brothers meet with bared swords!" she cried, and again she broke into the terrible laugh.

"And if the Frank falls?" demanded Lupus.

"May each prove the other's bane!"

"My heart to that! Yet the Dane is quick. Roland alone may fall; then you will need aid. Join us. If we succeed, I know a duke who will give you a queen's crown.

"A queen's crown--a queen's crown," muttered Fastrada, and she pressed a hand over her eyes. "What was the word--my mother's word? Ay; a king--"

"How's that, maiden? What has your mother foretold?"

"I shall wed a king--a king grey of eye."

The pale-grey eyes of Lupus sparkled.

"A true boding! The Merwing shall win back the throne of his forefathers, and you shall be his queen. I shall rule. Throne and queen, the alruna--the witch-wife--forebodes it!"

"Let that be as it may," muttered Fastrada; "only show me the corpse of that cold-blooded outlander, and I do your bidding."

"Then we should see how your hound has fared," replied Lupus, and the girl sprang up to follow him into the thicket.

CHAPTER XVIII

Such doings for us
Are naught seemly to do;
To rend with sword
Oaths once sworn
And troth once plighted.

LAY OF SIGURD.

Even in the heat of battle, never had Roland known the wild fury that raged in his breast as he crashed through the thickets in search of his foster-brother. His headlong rush failed to soothe the anguish of Fastrada's poisoned shaft; and with the pain his anger grew more terrible. The thought of the maiden lying before him in piteous abasement, and a savage fear that the betrayer of her love might escape, alike spurred him on. The outlander was fleet of foot; he must run swiftly if he would overtake him. But, no! there was the wretch, beyond the wild-grown hedge.

Olvir stood in a little glade. His face was bowed, and his dark eyes were dull and glazed with agony. Grief and despair almost beyond endurance distorted his face and shook his body with racking sobs. He had loved the beautiful Thuringian with all the passion of his fiery Eastern nature, with all the tender reverence of his Norse blood and rearing. Had death torn her from him, he could have bowed to the will of the Norns. But that his betrothed should have proved false!

"I cannot bear this longer!" he muttered, and his hand grasped the dagger in his belt. But he hesitated, the weapon half drawn.

"Woman's love is not all of life--I have yet my brother," he said; and the dagger clicked back in its sheath.

It was then that Roland burst from the thicket.

"Ward yourself, wretch!" he roared; and the great Norse sword whirled about his head.

With the instinctive readiness of his outlaw uprearing, Olvir sprang aside and tore Al-hatif from its sheath. As swiftly, he wheeled to confront his maddened assailant; and then he realized

who that assailant was.

"Roland!" he cried, and he flung his sword to the ground.

The act checked the Frank's attack. Even at the height of his rage, he could not strike down his foe unarmed.

"Ward yourself! ward yourself, that I may slay you in fair fight!" he cried hoarsely.

Olvir only folded his arms and gazed unflinchingly into the Frank's face.

"The troth of a woman,--the oath of a Frank!" he said coldly. "To my sword-brother I gave my father's sword to cleave my own head. It would seem that Ironbiter is fated to prove my bane."

Roland lowered his sword, and leaned heavily upon it, his great body trembling.

"Take up your blade; defend yourself!" he gasped.

Olvir saw how his face whitened with anguish; but his own only grew the more bitter, and his voice stung with relentless irony: "What hinders the Christian from smiting the heathen,--the Frank from stabbing his friend? He is but an outlander. Strike, and have done."

"O my God, my God!" cried Roland, and the scalding tears ran down his cheeks. The Northman trembled, yet his face lost none of its hardness.

"How is this?" he said, "My friend is weary. He would have me do the deed myself. Say the word, foster-brother, and I fall on my own sword."

Roland opened his lips; but the only sound that came from them was a groan. With slow and awkward fingers he put back his great blade into its sheath. Vainly he tried again to speak; his tongue refused to obey. He could no longer endure the Northman's look. He turned and went away like one in a daze, staggering in his walk.

Olvir watched him go, without a shade of softening in his hard stare; nor did he move until the bowed figure of the Frank was lost to view in the coppice. Then he lifted his sword from the ground; a kiss for its mirror blade, and the point was at his breast. Already he was bending to fall upon it, when a smothered cry in the thicket caught his quick ear.

"What's that?" he muttered, and he stood listening. All was silence. His eye returned to the sword. How the bright hues played on the polished steel! The red stone burned like a gout of blood from the heart of fiery Surt. How fiercely its red light had shone in battle--in battle! Thor! he could hear the arrows whistling, the joyous clash of swords!

The black eyes flashed. He whirled the sword about and grasped its hilt in fierce delight.

"There's joy yet in Manheim,--wild play in Odin's game!" he cried; and again he kissed the blade. "Al-hatif! Al-hatif! king of swords! You would have slain me,--even as that other friend; yet you shall still be my friend,--henceforth my only friend and love!"

But the words choked in the utterance. Grief and bitterness poured back into his heart in full flood. He threw himself upon the ground, and lay face down. An hour passed before he rose again. His face was calm, but there were new lines on it. The last trace of boyhood was gone. He sheathed Al-hatif, and stood for a little while, staring moodily before him.

"So," he murmured, "love and friendship are dead; and I--I had my part in the slaying. Would that I had been less harsh with him--ay, and with--her! Ah, well; what is past is past. Let Urd hold the bitter; I 'll look to Skuld. And now to go. I cannot face those merry ones."

Half sighing, the Northman turned into the coppice and disappeared. A little later he stepped out on the river's bank into the midst of the wassailing oarsmen, and spoke a word in Floki's ear: "Take joy! I 've seen your werwolf's teeth. I go downstream afoot."

Before Floki could reply, Olvir stepped back into the thicket, and was gone. The other vikings, intent upon their black mead, had scarcely glanced up at their earl. But Floki for some time sat staring at the spot where Olvir had vanished, his brows bent in deep thought. At last his frown relaxed, and he smiled grimly.

"All's well," he muttered. "Grief will pass. I see a fairer bride."

As though the words had been a spell, hardly were they uttered when Rothada appeared before the speaker. Floki's jaw dropped. But then he caught sight of Gerold behind the girl, and rose to meet them. The young count looked at him gravely, and pointed to the boats.

"Make ready at once," he said. "The queen would return. She comes now."

Floki uttered a word of command; and while the grumbling wassailers manned the oars he kept a sharp eye on the approaching party. There was no more merriment to be heard among the young Franks. Even the royal children were sobered. Hildegarde, who was leaning heavily upon Roland's arm, looked both grieved and harassed. Close after, between Lupus and young Worad, walked Fastrada, with drooping body and pale, downcast face. Last of all, behind the whispering pages and bower-maidens, came Liutrad, apart from the others.

Roland seated the queen and the children, as before, in his boat; but Fastrada passed by

Olvir's boat with a shudder. As she accepted Worad's silent invitation, Hildegarde looked up and spoke half hesitatingly: "How of--Lord Olvir?"

"Let his boat wait," suggested her brother.

"No," put in Floki, curtly.

"Why not?" demanded Roland, and he leaned toward the tall giant, frowning.

"What use, when he has gone?" rejoined Floki.

"You 've seen him!" exclaimed Liutrad.

"Ay, lad."

"What did he say, man?" asked Worad, sharply.

Floki eyed the questioner with a cold stare; but then, smiling in a peculiar way, he answered dryly: "The earl bade me take joy."

"Take joy!--why take joy?" asked the queen.

Floki fixed his stare upon Lupus and the drooping Fastrada, and stood muttering to himself. But he made no response until Roland repeated the inquiry. When he turned and saw the anxiety of both queen and count, his look lost its coldness; but he shook his head.

"There are others here who can best answer that," he said. "If they will not speak, go ask the earl. Ho, all! to your benches! Cast off, men!"

Roland's troubled face darkened yet more; but, without protest, he grasped the steer-oar of his boat. Floki stepped into the place of his absent leader, and the boats thrust out from the shore with the saddened merrymakers.

CHAPTER XIX

Manful they march by mountain dales,
Stout of heart o'er the stony cliffs,
As far as run the roads before them,
Once built by giants.

ANDREAS.

Dawn of the day of marching found the vikings drawn up on the south bank of the Garonne; but Zora stood at the head of their column, without a rider. Olvir had lingered for a last word with the Frisians and disabled Danes who had been left as ship-watch. With the first glimpse of the sun, he was stepping aboard his waiting boat, when Gerold rode down the bank in company with Amalwin the Saxon.

Both eyed the sea-king coldly, and Gerold hastened to be done with his message: "Count Hardrat has advanced with the horse; after him march the Austrasian levies. You will follow."

Olvir's dark face, which at first had warmed with a smile of welcome, hardened at the curt command.

"Your king gave me pledge of the front," he said. "I should at least follow the horsemen."

"You will follow where his Majesty commands," rejoined Count Amalwin.

Olvir glanced from the Saxon to his dragon-ships, moored along the bank, and drew himself up haughtily.

"Will!" he retorted. "By Thor, I go where I choose, fellow! If it please me, I take ship and leave Frank Land; let your Frank king command!"

"Do so!" growled Amalwin. "The land were well rid of such an outland wooer! Men call my forest folk barbarous; but, heathen though they be, they hold pure maidens in honor."

"No less do I!" cried Olvir, hotly. "He who says else, lies!"

"It is well, Dane, I fare Rhineward, and you to Saracen Land. Would that Rudulf had broken your heathen back!" cried the Saxon, and he shook his clenched fist at Olvir.

The Northman's eyes glittered, and he smiled.

"Come," he lisped. "There is no better time than now. I will meet you singly, or together."

"Holy Mother!" protested Gerold. "Why should we fight, Olvir? The maiden weeps, and Roland is like a bear in the springtime; but--"

"But all listen to the tale of the Wend witch's daughter," added Olvir, bitterly.

"We would hear you speak, hero. The maiden says nothing. Only, Lupus--"

"Lupus! Let that fox look to his crooked tongue! When the daughter of Rudulf speaks, I will answer. Until then my sword speaks for me."

Count Amalwin bent forward, with an altered look.

"You speak rashly, young man," he said; "but your eye is clear, and--Lupus has a crafty wit. I doubt if you are so greatly in the wrong as he hints in his twisted talk."

"Believe as you choose," said Olvir. "I have had enough of Frank love and Frank troth. In the North we are not so hasty to put shame upon a man. Now, if you are not minded to sword-play, I have only to weigh anchor."

"By the fiend Odin!" growled Amalwin; "you are a proud blade, even for Otkar's fostering. Hear me; I am of a mind with Gerold, and--a friend's word in your ear,--if you come Rhineward, look that you shun the Grey Wolf and his mate."

"My thanks for the warning," said Olvir, coldly. "Yet it is needless. I sail homewards. Your king has broken troth."

"No, Olvir," interrupted Gerold; "the king keeps troth. I myself heard the command given. Your band is chosen for the king's shieldburg. At the Pyrenees you will be called to the front."

"So! by the King of Skalds, that is another tune," replied Olvir, and he turned to the Saxon with a quick smile. "Sharp words have passed,--it may be mine were sharpest; but none should look for other than snarls from a baited bear."

Amalwin's scarred face unbent in an answering smile, and he extended his hand.

"If wrong has been done," he said, "you are not the one at fault. I trust we may meet again as battle-mates. We are used to duller feathers over Rhine; yet I stand ever ready to welcome one who could throttle the Grey Wolf, whether he wear silk or hide."

"It may be I shall again see your forests. Until then farewell, lord counts."

"Farewell," replied Amalwin, and he rode off up the bank. But Gerold, instead of following, sprang to the ground.

"What now, lad?" asked Olvir.

"I have yet to see Liutrad. Abbot Fulrad wishes him to aid Worad with the lettering. The abbot's scribe is to stay behind with Hildegarde. But first, I would ask your pardon for my coldness."

"Say no more. Older heads have been misled. As to Liutrad, if he wish it, he is free to aid Fulrad until there is need of his axe. I will send him soon. Now, farewell."

"Stay a little, hero!" exclaimed Gerold, and he caught the Northman's arm. "Before you go, will you not tell me what came between you and the maiden? Your sword-brother goes about heavily. Give me a word to lighten his trouble."

Olvir gazed into the pleading face of the queen's brother, and seemed about to speak. But then his look hardened, and he stepped aboard the waiting boat, cold and haughty.

"I have no word to send the Count of the Breton Mark," he said. "Let him come and ask for himself. Thrust off, men."

Gerold mounted and rode off to Casseneuil, greatly disappointed that his appeal had failed. Yet his heart was far lighter than when he came, for, like Amalwin, he was convinced that the subtle insinuations of Duke Lupus had no foundation in truth. His greatest desire was to tell all to Roland; but when he reached Casseneuil he found that the count had just left by boat for Bordeaux, in company with Lupus. So he had to content himself with telling his convictions to his sister.

All was confusion at the villa. The king had already taken leave of wife and children, and was riding off, with half the court in his train, Rothada and Fastrada among the others. Gerold could have wished to join the gay company; but he had to ride in hot haste to overtake his command,--the contingent of wild mountaineers sent by the haughty but weak Tassilo, Duke of Bavaria.

Like a swarm of giant locusts, the Frankish host had risen from about Casseneuil and passed over the Garonne. Before midday the rearguard had left the valley, and the entire host was sweeping across Vascon Land toward the Pyrenees.

The march over the thorny sand-plains of the Landes and down the valley of the Adour was so directed as to intersect the old Roman way which ran from Bordeaux across the mountains to Astorga, in the little kingdom of Alfonzo the Goth. Profiting by this useful relic of the one-time world-rulers, the thousands of Northern buskins trod the ancient road with quickened step, and rapidly drew near the outlying spurs of the Pyrenees.

The last halt made before the attempt to cross the barrier was in the valley of the Little Nive, where, after the cork forests and sterile marshes of the Landes, the intense verdure appeared

like a carpet of green velvet flung over upland and meadow.

Horse and foot alike made the most of their rest in the pleasant dale, for the morning promised a march that would try the strength of the sturdiest. Many gazed upon the wild rampart, the shadow of whose peaks fell early across their camp, with thoughts which boded greater misfortune than mere journey toil, and around the fires that night the old tale was told, how, in days gone by, the host of King Dagobert the Merwing was beset in this very pass by the fierce mountain Vascons, and routed with great slaughter.

But when the bluff-spoken Hardrat ventured to remind Karl of his predecessor's disaster, the king passed off the omen with a laugh, and, in turn, reminded the Thuringian how Roland had come fresh from Lupus, bearing heartiest assurances of the duke's service and friendship. Anselm, the astute judge, noted the furtive look which passed between Fastrada and Hardrat at this; but the others gathered no more from the incident than the knowledge of the king's confidence. They spread the story throughout the camp, and by break of day the faintest-hearted in the host was strong for the advance.

In the delightful freshness of early morning, while the first sun-rays sparkled on the dewdrops, Hardrat's horn brayed the marching note. From all sides of the royal pavilion the heavy Frankish horse gathered and formed in column, five thousand strong,--ponderous steeds, backed by riders whose leathern cuirasses were banded with long iron plates. Some wore rude armlets and thigh-pieces. Slow and unwieldy in their massive strength, these horsemen were none the less formidable. So, at least, the Saracens had found, when on the plains of Touraine wave after wave of the swift-rushing Moslemah had dashed forward, to shatter on the rock-like wall of the Franks.

The king, mounted upon a powerful white stallion and backed by the brightly clad retinue, surveyed the horsemen with his clear gaze, and nodded to their waiting commander. At once Count Hardrat spurred to the front of the riders, and the long column, breaking into a trot, thundered away up the valley. As the rearmost troop passed the pavilion, the king turned to Count Worad with a half-frown.

"Where are the Danes?" he demanded. "You had word to bid them be at hand."

The young man's delicate face paled, but he answered steadily: "Count Gerold bore the command, your Majesty, when he rode to join his Bavarians."

"And I had need of my scribe, sire," explained Fulrad.

"But the Danes? We wait."

"They come, lord king," said Liutrad; and, as he spoke, the viking band, half a thousand strong, wheeled into view around a coppice, to the accompaniment of merrily clinking steel and the flashing of sunlight on polished war-gear. Their appearance was met by shouts of admiration from the Frankish lords; but, without an answering cry, they swung into the dusty road and formed into column, grim and silent. Then Olvir, all steel and gold from head to thigh, rode forward on Zora, and raised his burnished shield in salute.

"Greeting, my Dane hawk," said Karl. "You come busked as for battle."

"We think it time for war-gear, lord king," replied Olvir; and he glanced from the group of silken-vestured officials to the heights of the Pyrenees.

Karl nodded approvingly. "It is well. Our safety is now in your keeping. Hereafter, the Austrasians follow us."

Olvir flushed, and his eyes sparkled. He saluted again with upraised shield, and answered earnestly: "By my sword, lord king, you shall not rue your choice of shieldburg!"

"That I can well believe. I have not forgotten how your fierce sea-wolves bend to my little maid."

"She holds them with a fetter strong as the bond of the Fenris-wolf," replied Olvir, and he looked across to where Rothada, in her mule-litter, was assuring herself as to the comfort of Fastrada's tiring-woman and of her own maid, both of whom were perched upon a heap of baggage in a rude cart.

Two gaudily attired pages were fluttering about the little princess, eager to render her service. Olvir smiled, then set his jaw sternly. A second mule-litter had appeared from behind the cart, and its occupant was gazing at him with a strange look of shame and aversion, and yet of entreaty. Though love lay dead in Olvir's heart, the Thuringian's look moved him deeply. Already his eyes were softening, when their side-glance caught the moody gaze of Roland. He stared back at the count, and drew himself up with a haughty smile. As he turned again to Fastrada, he found her glaring at him with all the hatred that had distorted her face in the garden. She had mistaken his scornful movement as meant for herself.

The swift exchange of glances passed in the few moments that Karl was speaking to Abbot Fulrad. Before Olvir had time for second thought, the king turned back to him, smiling: "Now, my Dane hawk, Abbot Fulrad takes the child into the midst of your warriors. We lend her to them in place of yourself. For a while you will ride at my side."

"You honor both leader and men, lord king," replied Olvir; and he wheeled Zora to the side of the white stallion.

Instantly Roland lifted the royal standard, and the silver trumpet of Eggihard the High Steward sounded the advance. Into the road, behind Karl and the Northman, flocked the throng of priests and officials, with no small degree of bustle and confusion. But the noise of their starting was soon drowned in the roars of delight with which the vikings greeted their little vala. The king looked down at his road-mate, and nodded approvingly.

"That is a welcome shout," he said. "I have not done ill to choose your heathen wolves."

"Otkar would have named them trustworthy in that they are heathen."

"And what would he have said of Kasim, your Saracen kinsman?" rejoined Karl. "Is not he, too, a pagan? Yet how of the arrow you gave me? I have cleared the mystery. It is a Saracen shaft."

"May Hel grip the poisoner!" muttered Olvir, fiercely. But he restrained his anger, and continued in a calm tone, "Let my lord king say what is in his mind."

"You are keen, lad! This, then--you have just cause for anger against your younger kinsman. Yet I have need of him. He is ruler of Pampeluna, which, I am told, is the strongest burg in the land of the Navarrese; and more,--he shares, in a measure, the influence of his wife's father over the Count of Saragossa."

Olvir glanced up at the expectant face of the king.

"Your Majesty would have me forgo my vengeance," he said.

"For a time, at least. Such a man is but a sprung stave to lean upon; but, if it be to his own gain, he may give good service. Until Barnard, my uncle, joins us at Saragossa with the second host, much hangs on the friendliness of this poisoner."

"Let the dog go to Hel, Loki's daughter, his own way; only, give me the forefront of battle!" cried Olvir, his eyes bright and nostrils quivering.

The king smiled in approval.

"Saint Michael!" he exclaimed; "I long to see you in sword-play, kin of Otkar! The fosterling lacks nothing of the hero's fire, yet none could differ more in body. You must favor your mother's kin; your hair alone is of the North. *Heu!* I remember your father, as of yesterday,--a grand warrior, leaping upon us through the alders. Though bigger, he was much such a man as Roland."

"Roland!" echoed Olvir; and involuntarily he glanced about.

Karl noticed the movement, and a question sprang to his lips: "You 're at outs with your sword-brother. Why have you wrangled? The quarrel grieves me."

"Not you alone, lord king! Yet am I a hare? He came upon me with bared sword--"

"You fought?"

"No. He was raging; but I cast down my sword."

"And he would not strike,--my sister's son! But his anger--?"

"The daughter of Rudulf and I broke troth; why, I will not tell,--let men think what they may. Roland met her. I do not know what she told him; but he came upon me like a berserk."

"No doubt the maiden was angry, and in her anger may have overstepped the truth. A word may set Roland right and heal your quarrel."

"Let him ask, then! He has broken blood-troth. He is the one to salve the hurt."

For some moments Karl regarded the young Northman's haughty face with impassive gravity. When at length he broke the silence, his gaze shifted to the jewelled Al-hatif.

"Yours is a gay sword," he observed.

"No less a keen blade," muttered Olvir.

"It shall soon test the Saracen mail. May it spur Abd-er-Rahman into the sea! Christ conquers; the heathen hosts shall flee before his warriors."

The king paused, and looked upwards into the blue sky, his face aglow. After some little time his gaze returned to Olvir.

"Listen, kin of Otkar," he said; "this is my war-scheme: Barnard, my uncle, marches around by way of Narbonne. He will leave men to hold the burgs of our allies in the northeast quarter of the old Goth realm, thus hedging in Septimania from counter-attack. At Saragossa we join hosts, cross the Ebro with our Saracen allies, and march south against the great burg called Toledo. If that burg falls before Abd-er-Rahman comes to battle for his kingdom, we strike yet farther south

at Cordova, his chief burg and royal seat; while Ibn Habib, the kinsman of Kasim, crosses over from Africa to harry in the rear of the Saracen lion,--so Al Arabi and Kasim have given pledge. Now, what does my Dane hawk say? The Saracen folk cannot stand before us in battle. That was proven by my father's father. It is a fiery land; yet the war will be brief. Behind us is the support of our pagan allies and the Christian mountaineers; what can defeat us?"

"Treachery."

"True. But of that I have no fear,--even from Count Kasim. The Saracen king has hunted him like a wolf and slain his kinfolk."

"There is yet the Vascon," remarked Olvir, dryly.

"Him!" rejoined Karl. "The Merwing hound dare not yap at my cold shoe. In the early years of my kingship he gave over to me his own kinsman, Hunold of Aquitania, at the first threat. Enough of such! Now I would speak with Roland; afterwards with Abbot Fulrad."

Olvir saluted, and wheeled Zora about. The act brought him face to face with Roland, riding alone at the head of the retinue. The count met his glance with a troubled look; but Olvir passed by, and signed to Liutrad.

"Tell Lord Roland the king would speak with him," he said.

The merry young giant nodded, and, without a blink of surprise at the transference of the message, spurred forward on Gerold's last gift,--a heavy horse of Frankish breed.

Olvir reined Zora aside and waited for the retinue to pass. His intention was to fall back among his own men, as far away as possible from his one-time brother and his one-time love. But while he rode with the king, Abbot Fulrad had brought Rothada forward to rejoin her maiden companion. A glimpse of the little princess staring at him from her litter in round-eyed wonderment altered Olvir's purpose.

Regardless alike of the cold-eyed courtiers and Fastrada's hateful smile, he guided Zora in among the retinue until she paced beside Rothada's litter. He met the dubious look of Abbot Fulrad with an easy smile.

"The king would speak with you, lord priest," he said, and as the white-haired churchman urged his mule forward, Olvir bent gravely over Rothada.

"How is the little vala?" he asked.

"Very well, Lord Olvir. Is it not joyous to be on our way to the crest of those mighty fells? But I forget. They tell me I should not speak with you. Are you so very wicked, Lord Olvir?"

The Northman turned like a panther suddenly attacked, and cast at Fastrada a glance of such terrible anger that all her hate could not withstand its menace. But as she shrank from him, Olvir burst into a laugh of careless scorn.

"This is a wicked world, little cloister-dove," he said. "Yet be assured,--you can trust your heathen friends, though I cannot say as much for those who call themselves followers of the White Christ."

"I'm glad, Lord Olvir! I could hardly believe you'd harm me. Of my dear vikings I had no fear at all, though some mock at them as heathen. If only they were not! Yet they are very good to me, and I love them all."

"Even me!" suggested Olvir, and, with a boyish laugh, he tossed a small ring into the girl's lap. "You shall be my may."

"But I 've no ring to give in turn," she replied seriously.

"A lock of your hair will be as welcome."

Rothada took the dagger which he held out, and cut a thick tress from her chestnut hair.

"Braid it," said Olvir; and the girl obediently plaited the tress in a broad strand. Olvir took the gift solemnly, and, winding it twice about his neck, over the gold collar of his mail, secured the ends together with a double clasp.

"Now I'm your thrall, king's daughter; for I wear your bond," he said.

"A collar, earl, that should not chafe even the pride of a sea-king," remarked Liutrad, who had fallen back to the opposite side of Rothada's litter. Olvir smiled into his honest, ruddy face.

"Well said, lad; for it's the gift of a true heart," he replied, and he cast a piercing glance at Fastrada. But the Thuringian, though within ear-shot, gave no sign that she either saw or heard. She was surrounded by a group of favorite admirers, who crowded about her litter, enjoying at the same time her beauty and her subtle wit. In wholesome dread of Olvir's quick ear, the maiden said nothing against him; but the hostile feeling of her companions was apparent in their shrugs and glances.

To this Olvir did not pay the slightest heed. Liutrad, however, took the matter more to heart. With boys like the pages such unfriendliness might be excusable. But Worad, notwithstanding his

girlish face, was a learned count and skilled warrior, and during Olvir's Rhine journey he had not only enjoyed the hospitality of the viking camp, but had pledged friendship with Gerold and Liutrad. Of all which Liutrad grumbled to his earl across the litter, until Rothada and Olvir joined in laughing him into his usual good-humor.

The road had now plunged into a vast forest of beech and oak, and through the vistas Olvir pointed out to his companions the glittering white crest of Mount Altobiscar, toward which they were steadily ascending.

Gradually the wooded spurs of the great barrier closed in. The way became narrow and steep. Lofty cliffs, whose crannies were green with hardy box, towered above the invaders. Oaks and beeches were giving place to firs. High in the genial, sunny air other peaks than Altobiscar thrust up their jagged snow-crests.

Nearer and nearer the mountain towered above the narrow road, until the vanguard of the invaders could look directly up at the glittering summit, five thousand feet above them. Slowly horsemen and footmen wound through the wild gorges of Ibañeta, whose savage grandeur overawed all others than the Bavarians and the mountain-bred warriors of the North. For them the dizzy cliffs and crags served only to stir pleasant memories of their own rugged lands. But the Frankish dwellers of forest and plain gazed about them half fearfully, well assured that such gloomy cliffs and jagged heights must be the abode of malevolent kobolds and scrats, if not of dragons.

No trace of man other than the old Roman way was to be seen in the pass. Nature here ruled alone in one of her wildest moods. From their eyries on the crags of Altobiscar, eagles swooped down to view the invaders, and their screams echoed weirdly through the gorge, above the dull tramp of hoofs and buskins and the clink and ring of war-gear.

All Rothada's delight had now given place to dread of the echoes and the savage scenery, and she would have wished herself back on the peaceful Garonne, had not Olvir set about diverting her attention by jests and droll tales.

So, without sign of opposition or danger, the host poured down through the ominous gorge, to enjoy the well-earned rest in the dewy valley below.

CHAPTER XX

Lest they fare thither
With whistling spears,
War to wake 'gainst the king.

SONG OF ATLI.

From their camp among the beech and chestnut woods of Roncesvalles, the invaders directed their march across the mountain spurs and down the valley of the Zubiri, between hills clad to the summit with beech and ash. The land was grandly beautiful; yet, with all its magnificence, even the vikings hailed with joy the distant walls and towers of Pampeluna.

Word was passed back along the great serpent line of warriors winding down out of the mountains, and all pressed forward with renewed vigor, that they might pitch camp near the burg of the Navarrese. The rearguard had need of haste to win this end, for the sun was already half down the sky when Hardrat's horsemen deployed on the bank of the Arga, opposite Pampeluna.

Close at the heels of the horse came the royal guard of vikings, whose long limbs kept them with ease in the wake of the riders. They did not halt upon the river's bank, but followed the king and his retinue across the stream to the foot of the height upon which rose the walls of the burg.

The battlements were crowded with a swarm of Christian townfolk, interspersed with groups of swarthy warriors, whose chain-mail and wide turbans told of the Saracen domination. All were gazing across at the ingathering host of Northerners,--the dreaded Franks, famed alike among Christian Navarrese and Moslem Moors for rapacity and fierceness. It was as though the sheep had called in the wolf-pack against the shepherd. In profound silence the townfolk stared at the horde of their skin-clad allies, and from the depths of their hearts sent up a wordless prayer that

the peril might pass them by.

Karl gazed up steadily at the closed gate of the burg and at the silent watchers above.

"By my father's sword, this is cold greeting," he muttered.

"We have marched swiftly, sire," suggested Count Anselm. "May it not be that Count Kasim is taken unawares by your coming?"

"He will do well not to wait for our knock," said Karl, grimly. "So! here is ground more level. Halt! Raise the standard."

Roland unfolded the banner, and pushed forward to the left of the king, while behind the two the courtiers spread out in line to right and left, all eager to see and hear what should follow.

At the word to halt Liutrad had wheeled about, bearing a command from Olvir; and the vikings, as they came up, opened out their ranks wider than the line of the Franks. Karl turned in his saddle and looked inquiringly from the warriors to their leader. But the expression of the Northman's face cleared away his doubt. There was a smouldering fire in Olvir's eyes as he watched for the appearance of his kinsman, but the stern lines of his mouth told of perfect self-control.

The king turned to Eggihard.

"Wind your horn," he commanded. "We shall see if these Southland folk are dumb."

But as the steward raised his silver trumpet, a great mass of Saracen spearmen, with Vali Kasim in the lead, burst from a grove not two bow-shots away, and swooped down upon the royal party in wild disarray, screaming and yelling like madmen, and urging their swift horses to the utmost speed.

Karl, who had been forewarned as to the Saracen custom of honoring a superior by feigned attacks, wheeled his horse, and gazed calmly at the approaching whirlwind of riders. But there was one among his liegemen who lacked his faith in the blinking vali.

Hardly had the Moslems burst from their covert when Olvir stood up in his stirrups and made a sign to his vikings. The response was a deep muttering roar, that merged into the clash and tread of rushing warriors. Before the Franks could comprehend the movement, they found themselves in the heart of the viking wedge, fenced about by a sevenfold line of warriors. At the point of the wedge they could see the Norse sea-king on his red mare, calmly facing the charge of the turbaned spearmen; while beside him stood Floki the Crane, smiling in grim anticipation as he balanced his terrible halberd. Behind them, Liutrad loosened the great axe in his belt, and plucked a dart from the sheaf which he grasped with the staff of his earl's banner.

The Saracens were within a bow-shot, and coming like the wind,--lances levelled, scimeters brandished, and burnouses flying,--when Olvir drew Al-hatif and raised the blade overhead. Instantly a rustling, tinkling sound swept over the wedge behind him. Slingers raised their slings; bowmen notched their arrows.

Then the king's voice rang out like a trumpet: "Hold, men, on your lives! Down with your weapons!"

But the vikings looked to their earl. The blade still glittered above his bright figure, and they stood waiting, heedless of the Frank.

"By the King of Heaven!" swore Karl; only to pause and stare with his courtiers. At a word from Olvir, Liutrad had sent a dart curving high through the air. The missile flashed down and stuck upright in the dry ground, over a hundred paces distant. Fifty yards farther, it would have fallen upon the head of Kasim Ibn Yusuf.

Whatever had been the purpose of the Arab, he saw how fully the Northern giants were prepared to meet him, and he understood on the instant the menace of the dart. The shaft was yet quivering from its fall when he flung up his hand and uttered a piercing cry.

A hundred voices caught up the wild note and shrieked it back to their owner's swiftly following fellows. Up went the levelled lance-tips, sinewy hands drew hard on the bridle-reins, and the mass of flying horsemen came to a halt within the space of a few yards.

As the Saracens came to a stand, Karl forced a way through the close-set ranks of the vikings, his cheeks flushed and eyes flashing angrily.

"Way!" he commanded. "Ho; aside, men! Give heed, Lord Olvir!"

Olvir half wheeled Zora and faced the angry king as the white stallion leaped clear of the foremost vikings. For a moment Karl glared down on the Northman, his powerful features stern with the dark menace of offended majesty. Olvir, who had looked only for praise of his ready defence, drew himself up, and met the king's stare with a bitter smile.

Look and bearing alike goaded Karl to fury. He grasped the hilt of his sword, and his great body quivered. But the spasm passed. He bent forward and said coldly: "How is this, Dane?"

Neither you nor your followers give ear to my command."

"Does the stooping hawk heed the lure?" rejoined Olvir, as coldly. "You chose us for shieldburg, lord king. As such--"

"Answer me, by Saint Michael! Would you have struck my ally?"

Olvir's black eyes flashed defiance straight into the eyes of the king.

"By Thor!" he cried. "By Thor and the White Christ! Had Kasim my kinsman charged past yonder spear, he and a host of his swart hounds should have fared hence to Loki's daughter!"

Karl's brows met over the long, arched nose, and his nostrils quivered. But the last word rang in his ear,--*daughter! daughter!* Suddenly he found himself regarding the affair from an entirely different point of view. Had not the young Dane good cause to mistrust the Saracen? Was he not charged with the safety of his king and of all the royal party,--officials and unarmed priests,--above all, the maidens?

Olvir was not slow to heed the sudden return of friendliness which lighted the king's face; but his own retained its gloom. He was sore to the heart with the injustice which had been done him. Karl perceived his bitter look, yet reached out his hand, and the Northman could not do other than take it. Holding fast the slender fingers in his great palm, the king turned in his saddle and called aloud: "Hearken, my liegemen! Before all, I give thanks to Lord Olvir, who most ably has proved his charge. If any had doubt as to the trueness of our guard, they may now feel assured."

"No longer may any doubt!" cried Roland, spurring forward through the viking ranks.

Olvir glanced about; but at the moment the royal standard dipped to the breeze, and he failed to see Roland's face. He turned back to the king with a look that was grave without bitterness, and met the Frank's parting grip with a responsive clasp.

CHAPTER XXI

O, for my Sigurd
I shall have death,
Or my fair, my lovely
Laid in mine arms.

LAY OF SIGURD.

At a sign from their earl the vikings opened their ranks for the Frank lords, who came pushing to the front, followed by the curious maidens. As Olvir made a place for Rothada's litter close in the rear of her father, Vali Kasim rode forward in advance of his band, with half-a-dozen attendants.

"Look, Lord Olvir!" exclaimed the girl. "What strange, gay warriors; and the beautiful horses! The chief's is like your Zora."

"Her blood-kin,--the swiftest breed in all Arabia," replied Olvir, his eyes fixed upon Kasim Ibn Yusuf.

But the Franks were more interested in the vali's attendants. In their midst the Berbers led three mules, two of which were burdened with packs, while the third bore an unarmed greybeard, whose yellow gown marked him out as a leech.

At a dozen paces from the great Karolah the vali and his followers sprang off and salaamed to the dust; and Kasim, advancing, cried out in broken Frankish: "Blessed be the day that I behold the mighty Karolah! The mountains shake at the tread of his coming; all men rejoice to see his glorious face!"

"We fail to hear them," replied Karl, dryly; and he glanced up at the silent folk on the battlements of the burg.

The edge of Kasim's green turban again swept the ground, and he answered readily: "Mute with awe, the men of Pampeluna gaze upon the mighty Sultan of the Afranj. They wait for him to speak in kindness. Then will his faithful slaves rejoice."

The king's face relaxed its sternness. "It is well. What have you here?"

"The lowly gifts of a slave, who would lay them at the feet of his glorious lord."

"Saint John the Meek!" muttered Karl, and he made an impatient gesture. "Have your will, man."

The leech spoke a word to his fellows, who led the pack-mules forward. From one they unloaded and set out before the king a number of finely wrought silver vases, packed to the brim with precious spices. Costly as were these gifts, they met with little comment from the Franks; but when from the pack of the second mule the Berbers drew off roll after roll of gorgeous silks, none could restrain an expression of admiration.

Among the most eager to view the silks was Fastrada; and her cries of delight as Worad led her litter-mules farther forward instantly drew upon her the blinking gaze of Vali Kasim. Though the Arab had seen her but once before,--at the royal pavilion on the Garonne,--he remembered her perfectly. He now stared with lustful eyes at her soft beauty.

"Look, earl. One might say the swart kite sees quarry; he has ceased blinking," observed Liutrad, in Olvir's ear.

"Let him beware, then. Once a kite caught up a weasel,--you know the tale. But this kite's plumage is not to my liking."

"How so?"

"With an Arab, red bodes anger. I had it from Otkar."

"You look for treachery?"

"For all evil from one who shoots viper shafts. This red cloak is no good omen. Yet I am pledged to the king to hold the poisoner in peace."

"Floki might pick a quarrel with him. I myself would as lief try my axe on his swaddled skull. If these swart folk fight in single combat, one of us will soon make an end of him."

"No, lad; he is a haughty man. He might fight me, but not my follower; and I am bound by my word."

"Then we must wait and watch."

"Ay," muttered Olvir; and he stared hard at Kasim, who, being addressed by the king, was reluctantly turning away his gaze from the Afranj maiden.

When, with friendly dignity, Karl had acknowledged the vali's gifts, he turned to his daughter and her companion.

"The Saracen shall see how we of the North honor women," he said. "Take up the silken rolls and bring them before the maidens. When the child has made her choice, the daughter of Rudulf may take what she will."

Both girls cried out their delight, and Fastrada met the king's smiling look with a glance that stirred his ardent nature to the depths. A subtle change shadowed his stately features, and for a little he gazed at the girl as Kasim had gazed. Her eyes fell before his; and while she yet held them demurely downcast, Rothada's voice rang out again in childish delight. Olvir had chosen for her a white silk, embroidered in violet and gold.

At his daughter's cry, Karl turned suddenly about in his saddle and stared, frowning, at the walls of Pampeluna. The blinking vali before him saw his lips move, and caught the words which he muttered; but only Fulrad, that abbot learned in Holy Writ, might have divined his meaning,--"He that ruleth himself is greater--is greater--!"

Olvir, though so watchful of his Saracen kinsman, noted the strange look on the king's face. But then, in common with the greater number of the Franks, his attention was drawn by Fastrada. Two rolls of scarlet silk already lay in the girl's litter; yet, not content with these, she had seized upon a gorgeous purple. Her cry of gratified vanity fixed upon her the looks of all around.

Most maidens would have drooped their heads in modest shame at thus being made the centre of observation; not so the Thuringian. The rich coloring of her cheeks heightened, though not with shame, and her eyes sparkled like sapphires. Waving aside the attendants, she unrolled the purple silk, and, with a daring glance at the king, wrapped herself about in the folds of the imperial color.

Many of the Franks cried out their admiration of the maiden's gracefulness; but the few who were quick enough to perceive the audacious allusion of her act took good care to preserve silence. Karl, however, maintained his stern observation of the city battlements, and the girl, foiled of her expected triumph, shifted her attack to Olvir. Here again she was to meet with disappointment. The young Northman returned her half-defiant, half-alluring look with an indifferent glance, and recalled his attention to Rothada.

The Thuringian's cheek paled. She let the folds of the purple silk slip from about her, and bowed forward in the litter, with hot eyes and thin-drawn lips, deaf to the murmured compliments of the courtiers. The strong white teeth gleamed between her tightened lips, and soon another look than suffering stole into her face.

In her sudden fury, the girl raised her head to transfix the Northman with her glance; and, instead, she met the solemn gaze of Roland's blue eyes.

From the giving of the silks to this decisive moment, the count had been watching her every look and action with closest attention. Until she bent her head, not even the slightest change in her expression had escaped him. And now, his gaze sharpened to the utmost keenness by the intensity of his feeling, he saw, as it were, the girl's dark troubled soul stand out bare before its lovely mask. The Frank shuddered, and crossed himself hastily.

At this moment the king suddenly recalled to mind Vali Kasim, who still stood bowing before him with Oriental obsequiousness. He smiled, and raised his hand. "Again we render thanks for your gifts, Count Kasim."

"*Bismillah!* I rejoice that my glorious lord is pleased. It is for me to serve him in all things. Therefore, I have brought my learned geber, Kosru the Magian, to make certain that your Majesty shall enjoy health and full strength while you honor our land with your gracious presence."

"Health!" repeated Karl, and he smiled as he drew up his massive figure. But then his glance chanced to rest on Rothada, and he signed to the Magian to join the royal suite. "It is well. The maidens may have need of leechcraft in a strange land. Our chamberlain will have command to make fitting return for your gifts, lord count."

"It is not for gifts I ask, most gracious sultan."

"What, then?" demanded Karl, his keen grey eyes fixed upon the Saracen's impassive face.

Kasim salaamed to the ground before replying. "My lord and sultan is gracious; he opens my lips. Let him not be offended. I have said that the people of my city are consumed with fear of the mighty Afranj; they tremble lest the fierce giants of the North be loosed in their midst."

"So--you would have me forego the placing of my wardens in your burg. How shall it be held when all your warriors are withdrawn?"

"The walls are high, O sultan. The townfolk will bar out my lord's foes and my foes. Can my lord doubt that they will hold fast for the sultan of their own faith?"

"How, lord vali," demanded Anselm, the Count Palatine; "if your folk are so friendly, why should they seek to be rid of us? I would not be the one to speak of mishap; yet here is bitter truth, sire: Should not God and the holy saints give your Majesty victory; should we fare homeward, a war-broken host; would these timorous Navarrese then open their gates to give succor; or would they not rather seek our harm, to gain favor with the pagan king?"

Kasim smiled blandly, and would have spoken again, had not Karl held up his hand for silence. For a little, the king gazed at the thousand and more Saracen horsemen massed together in dense ranks on the spot where they had been halted by the cry of their chief. Then he glanced up at the burg on the height and back to the little maiden behind him.

"O sultan of sultans--" began Kasim; but again Karl held up a restraining hand.

"I cannot grant your wish, lord count," he said. "I must hold to the compact. Count Olvir, you will guard this stronghold with your vikings, and Rothada and her companion shall remain here in your care. It had been wiser to have left the maidens at Casseneuil."

Olvir frowned with disappointment at this unexpected turn of events.

"It was not to sit behind stone walls, lord king, that I joined your host," he protested.

"Yet I ask it of you, my Dane hawk," replied Karl, gravely. "For a time, at least, I ask you to shield this little maid, who is more precious to me than all the old Goth realm."

"For her sake," muttered Olvir, half reluctantly.

Karl spoke in a lowered voice: "For her sake, lad! I would not ask the service but for her. Would that I had not brought her across the mountains! I look for treason from this fawning hound. I must safeguard the maiden and this stronghold at all cost."

"Enough, lord king!" exclaimed Olvir. "I give you willing service."

CHAPTER XXII

Blithe then grew the breaker of rings.

BEOWULF.

Early two months had passed since from the loftiest tower of Pampeluna's citadel Olvir had watched the Frankish warriors wind away across the green plateau, on their southward march to the Ebro. In all the dreary weeks of waiting no tidings had come back from the invading host,-- not a word to tell whether Karl was battling for the old Goth realm on the Ebro's banks, or, finding Abd-er-Rahman too cautious to encounter him near Saragossa, had ventured on south to Toledo or to Cordova itself, in search of the fierce but wily old Emir of Andalus.

Whatever might be the truth as to the movements of the host, there could be no doubt that trickery was rife in its rear; for Karl most certainly had sent more than one messenger northward, and death or capture at the hands of the king's Saracen allies could alone account for their failure to bring tidings to Pampeluna.

At the end of the first month Floki was for taking a score or so of men, and going in search of the Franks; but Olvir told him that he would not risk one man, much less a score, to fall into the traitors' snare. Instead, he set about strengthening the defences of the citadel, and levied on the townfolk for food, until the storerooms were filled to overflowing. The old Roman cisterns already held enough water to last out a six months' siege.

That he could hold the citadel against all comers Olvir had no doubt; but his warriors were far too few for him to man the burg walls. He had to content himself with a watch at each gate of half a hundred warriors, who, he planned, could hold their posts secure against any chance band of the enemy, or, in the event of an attack in force, could check the first assault, and so save the citadel from the possibility of a surprise.

In his vigilant watch over the safety of the citadel, the young Northman found little time to spend in the society of Rothada's miniature court. Yet it was not seldom that he saw the little princess; for she often sought him out with the complaint that Fastrada was closeted with the wizened old Magian leech whom the king her father had left to care for her, and that she was weary of playing with the pages and the tiring-women.

On the morning of the day which opened the ninth week of waiting, Olvir came riding up to the great door of the citadel, after his round of the burg gates, and as he dismounted in the shadow of the archway, smilingly unslashed a roll of cloth from his saddle. Then he beckoned to one of the door wardens and said briefly: "The mare frets with so much stall-standing. Take her for a run across the Arga."

Overjoyed at the chance, the man sprang into the saddle, and Zora started down the steep path, picking her steps daintily but with a quickness that showed her impatience at the restraints on coursing within the burg.

A little later Olvir climbed out upon the roof of the citadel's main tower, the roll of cloth still in his hand. For a while he swept with his glance the neighboring heights and the broad harvest fields on the plain below the burg. All lay calm and peaceful in the hot sunshine, and his gaze turned with his thoughts to the cloth in his hand. Half smiling, he peered within its folds, and began to pace slowly to and fro across the narrow space of the roof.

"By the hair of Sif!" he chuckled, "I 'll wager it's a gift to delight any maid!"

But his pleasant musing was cut short by the sound of a sibilant voice in the upper room of an adjoining tower.

"Loki!" he muttered. "Can I never get beyond earshot of that woman?"

Frowning, he moved over to the farther battlement, and turned his face away toward the barren fells which lay between him and the mysterious South. But though he sought to fix his thoughts on the host which had vanished behind those desolate hills and crags, he could not shut out the sound of that sibilant voice or the shrill, cackling answers of Kosru, the old Magian leech.

"Of a surety, man,"--Fastrada was speaking,--"you are a warlock of note. Strange you have already wandered over Rhine! You must come again, and farther,--to my Thuringian home. My mother will give you fair welcome. Though a woman of the roving Wends, she is skilled in herbs and magic spells. At her bidding the storm-wind rises. She rules the forest sprites,--kobolds and nixies,--even the fiend-gods of the Saxons."

"I do not claim to rule the storm-wind, maiden." The leech's voice was raised in shrill protest.

"Yet you do not lack knowledge of powerful spells," came back the quick response. "Tell me again of that which saved you from the wolves in Fulda Wood."

"It was a little thing, maiden, for a geber whose learning has saved the lives of princes. Yet the most learned might well have perished in the fangs of those fierce children of Ahriman. Only by chance did I have the magic drug to throw behind me and stay them, while the Jew and I fled on to the Christian monastery."

"But the drug? You did not tell me--"

"A foul-smelling resin from Arabia. Others than I have tested its charm over the grey demons of the forest. It will stay the wolf-pack on a hot trail, or draw them from so far as they may scent its odor. But as to black magic--" The voice of the leech sank to a whisper.

For a time the words of neither speaker were audible. Then Fastrada's voice vibrated on the air, sharp and distinct: "How! Even the Magian chief? Listen, leech; stand my friend, and I pledge you sure gain in the king's court. My word carries favor among his lords."

"A bargain, maiden! Help me to a fair standing in the court of Karolah, and I give you a talisman of greatest potency,--a ring set with the magic stone whose hues shift and change even as the tints of your eyes."

"Its powers--?"

"To the weak it brings destruction; to the strong, honors--"

"And love?"

"Love, if already he does not love another."

"Another? Then I am safe! He will come back--he will come back to me! Give me the spell-stone, leech--now! A day may lose all! I swear to befriend you!"

"I do not doubt, maiden. But the ring is in your own land,--at Metz on the Moselle, pledged to a Jew trader, Yusuf Ben Israel. It is a heavy debt,--four ounces of gold."

"I will pay it gladly for such a ring. Here is what will win the spell-stone from the greedy Jew. *Ai!* you may well eye the bright clasp. It was my first gift from *him!*"

Olvir sprang up from his seat on the battlement as though stung.

"Loki!" he muttered. "The witch's daughter thinks to creep back into my heart with the aid of spells and evil craft. I have wasted my pity. Sooner would I cherish an adder than that fair-faced werwolf."

He turned to descend out of ear-shot of the sibilant voice, only to pause as it pierced the air in a hissing whisper: "Hist, leech! Some one mounts the other tower. Let us go down."

"The trolls flee before the light-elf!" murmured Olvir, and he stepped forward, smiling, as Rothada sprang gaily into view up the last steps of the narrow stairway. In a moment she was beside him, her face raised for his greeting. But when, instead of kissing her forehead, Olvir bent to her lips, she drew back with a startled look, and a faint blush crept into her cheeks.

Never had the little maiden appeared so winsome as when she stood thus, half shrinking before him, overcome by a shyness whose source was a mystery to her child mind. In her play with the pages, she had dressed herself in a Saracen woman's street costume, several of which had been found in the citadel. Swathed from head to foot in the uncouth gown, with her face framed about by the brown folds, she appeared for all the world like a spring blossom just bursting from its dull husk. Olvir was quick to see the resemblance.

"By Ostara, little maid!" he exclaimed; "had I come upon you so out in the woodland, I 'd have fancied you the elf of the violets. Surely no flower-elf could be more winsome!"

"Oh, Olvir!" protested the girl, and her blushing face bent yet lower. Her bosom rose and fell quickly, and she glanced shyly at the smiling Northman. But then, overcome by wonder at her strange emotion, she looked up at him in bewilderment.

"What is this, dear hero?" she murmured. "When you speak kindly to me, my very heart sings with gladness, and yet I fear--I am ashamed."

The eyes of the young sea-king sparkled like black gems, and he bent to kiss her again. But as his gaze met hers, he paused, checked by her trustful innocence, and a quick flush reddened his dark cheeks.

"I am not worthy!" he said, half aloud. "Who am I to open life's mysteries to this little dove?"

"What is it, Olvir?" persisted Rothada. "Will you not speak out and answer me? Why do I not feel so when Dame Hildegard and my father, who are no less kind--"

"Why--ah, why?" repeated Olvir. "But wait, child. Do not fret your little heart over such mysteries. Wait and ask your questions of the gracious queen who has shown to you a mother's love. We 'll be merry and care-free while we may. See; here is a gift I 've brought you from the booths of the Saracen tradefolk."

Flinging open the roll in his hand, Olvir drew out from its wrappings a silken bodice, worthy even a king's daughter. Strange as was its shape, Rothada forgot all her shyness and bewilderment as she gazed at its beautiful embroidery, wrought in pearls and gold-thread. Never before had she set eyes on such graceful designs. She needed little urging to fling aside her brown cloak and slip on the gay blue kirtle.

"Saint Petronella bless you, dear hero!" she cried in her delight. "Truly, it is a king's gift! I feel as beautiful as the bower-maidens. If you like, you can kiss me again--on the mouth."

"Like!" echoed Olvir, almost in a whisper, and he thrust out a gentle finger to lift her chin. Yet before he could stoop to meet her pouting lips, she sprang aside and pointed out over the battlements.

"The horses! the beautiful horses!" she shrieked. "Oh, look, Olvir,--thousands of horsemen racing!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Feeder of foul deeds,
Fey do I deem thee.

LAY OF SIGURD.

Even as the Northman spun about at the cry of the little maiden, his hands were loosening the horn at his belt. His glance rested but a moment on the torrent of Saracen spearmen which was pouring out across the green plain from behind the nearest hill.

"By Thor! three thousand and more, if a man!" he cried, and with the words the horn was raised to his lips. As its warning note blared down to the very donjons of the citadel, he bent out over the battlements, and stared across the roofs of the Saracen quarter to the open space about the Ebro Gate. Even as he looked, a shrill battle-cry rent the air,--"*Allah acbar! Allah acbar!*"--and in a twinkling all the space about the distant gateway was swarming with armed Saracens, the turbaned warriors surging in a wild mob into the great arch of the gateway.

Olvir's nostrils dilated. "Thor!" he muttered. "The Crane will do well to close the gate with those stinging gnats behind him."

"Oh, Olvir! are they fighting--all those fierce warriors?--and Floki has so few! He will be slain! Hasten--"

"He must fare for himself, king's daughter. But never fear! The horsemen have yet a bow-shot to race, and--*heya!* look; there's proof the gate is barred."

Great as was the distance, the dry, smokeless air was so clear that Rothada could see with startling distinctness the battle-ebb of the attacking mob as they fell back before the counter-charge of the vikings in the archway. Suddenly the little band rushed into view, their weapons flashing in fierce strokes. The deep viking battle-shout rolled out above the shrill yells of the Moslems, and the giant warriors, forming swiftly in a wedge, hurled themselves like a huge barbed spear-point straight through the thick of the mob.

"*Haoi!* there's fighting, king's daughter!" shouted Olvir, his eyes aflame. But Rothada shrank back, and pressed her hands upon her eyes, to shut out the cruel sight.

"What! So fearful of a little bloodshed?" he exclaimed. "But I forget. You 're still a cloister-dove. Come down and hide with your pages. I must look to the door when Floki comes knocking."

"Holy Mother! Why must there be so much of war and slaying?" wailed the girl.

"Ask the priests of your White Christ," retorted Olvir, and taking her hand, he led her quickly down the tower stair.

Having left the little princess in the care of her tiring-woman, he ran from post to post of the citadel's defences, that he might see with his own eyes whether every man was in his appointed position. Last of all, he mounted the great arch above the entrance, whose oaken doors stood ajar to welcome the retreating gate wardens.

At sight of his earl, a watchman who had climbed the main tower shouted down to him: "Ho, ring-breaker! Floki's gate swings open. The Asiamen ride into the burg."

"What of Floki?" demanded Olvir.

"I cannot see. But the other wardens gather in the great square. Ho! there come the Crane and his men, a horde of swart curs yelping at their heels. The bands join, and the Asiamen run to shelter. Now the Crane turns this way."

"Good!" said Olvir. "They have little more than a bow-shot to come, and the crooked lanes will check the horsemen."

It was none too soon, however, that the men of the gate watches swung up the steep path after Floki and Liutrad, and poured through the archway into the citadel court. As the ponderous

doors swung to behind them, the vanguard of the Saracen host came racing into view, hot on their trail. But when they saw that their quarry had reached cover, the swarthy riders contented themselves with a derisive yell, and wheeled swiftly about to seek shelter from the arrows of the vikings.

Olvir hastened down into the court.

"Well done! well done, vikings!" he greeted the returned warriors. "You had brisk play for a time, old Crane. What of the slain?"

"Go ask the Asiamen, earl," replied Floki, with a dry chuckle. "We have none to name, though you can see enough of scratches among my men. The black cats do not lack claws."

"I give thanks they are no sharper. Had your gate been opened when you first left it--"

"The traitors did well to open it at all. I clenched the chain-hooks with a sledge. For all their treachery, the curs gained nothing but scathe."

"Yet we can count one man fated. Tell me, Liutrad; did not Ottar pass out your gate upon my mare, to ride across the Arga?"

"He passed the gate, earl, but not to cross the river. I heard him say that he was minded to ride around the burg to the Ebro Gate."

"Loki! my Zora,--my matchless mare!"

"Ho, earl!" called down a warrior on the wall; "here comes one waving a green branch. Shall I loose an arrow at the swart hound? He is like Earl Kasim as two peas."

"Hold!" commanded Olvir, and he ascended quickly to the parapet, Floki and Liutrad at his heels. As they gained the top and leaned with him over the battlements, they saw Kasim Ibn Yusuf, branch in hand, riding up the steep ascent. Poisoner or not, there could be no doubt as to the man's boldness.

"Thor smite me!" gasped Liutrad. "Zora!--he rides Zora!"

"It is a taunt," croaked Floki. "None but a fated man would venture such a deed. Let me drive an arrow through his hide, and the mare is yours again, ring-breaker."

Olvir was white with anger; but he shook his head.

"No," he lisped; "he bears a peace-branch,--he is a herald, and peace-holy,--the foul poisoner!"

"May Hel's hand soon grip him!" growled Floki; and then all three stood silent, glaring down on the approaching rider.

As he came within speaking distance, the Moslem peered up at the Norse chiefs, and waved his green branch in mocking salute.

"Greeting, kinsman!" he called. "I have returned to my city with a few friends, and so I am here to beg your hospitality for the night. Come down, I pray you, and join us in the market-place. What! you are silent? Is it thus you greet a guest? How speaks the Koran: 'For the weary guest, food and a bed; for the stranger in your gates, a wife and the queen of your drove.' Already you have made gift of the choice mare. The groom who brought her you will find, arrow-pierced, beyond the hill. He rode heedless into our very midst. I have besought you for food and shelter; for wife, I might name that fair houri who rode with Karolah's daughter--"

"Stay a little, dog," lisped Olvir, in a voice ominously gentle. "First, tell me whether you come as envoy."

The vali raised his branch, and answered jeeringly: "I, Kasim Ibn Yusuf, envoy of the Beni Al Abbas, come riding from Saragossa, to tell you how I have outwitted the great Karolah and ridden over his camp."

"That is a lie, adder!"

"No; by the beard of the Prophet! In the dusk of evening we rode over Karolah's tent and trampled his bright banner in the dust. Now will you come forth with your braggart giants and meet my friends in the game of swords?"

"I am content to lie at ease for the night," rejoined Olvir, quietly, though his eyes were blazing.

"What! is my kinsman so backward when it comes to blows? I have heard that he besought Karolah for the forefront in battle. Yet it may be he is chilled by so long sitting behind the stone. I will try a last word to stir his cold blood. When I rode over Karolah's camp, Vali Al Huseyn opened to me the gates of Saragossa and shut them in the face of the Afranj. But when Karolah named the city's ransom, he demanded that I also should be delivered over to him. Urged to the treachery by my own wife's father, the false vali assented. I was forewarned none too soon to escape from Saragossa in the night. And yet, with all my haste, let it be known to you, son of Gulnare, that I found time to force the gate of the Balatt Al Arabi and bestow on your mother's father a scratch which all the skill of Kosru my geber could not heal."

"Enough, poisoner!" lisped Olvir, almost in a whisper. "If you value life, go--go quickly!"

Though the softly uttered words barely reached his ear, the Arab could see the look on the Northman's white face. Without a word, he wheeled Zora, and clattered down the slope at headlong speed.

"Ho, the murderous nithing!" jeered Liutrad. "He flees as from the Fenris-wolf."

"None too fast to outstrip an arrow," growled Floki. "Give the word, earl! My fingers itch to drive a dart into his swart back."

"No!" gasped Olvir; and he stood glaring after the fugitive, while the cold sweat gathered and ran down his white face. "Hel seize the foul murderer! He--he, my blood kin's slayer--has named me nithing!--and I cannot leave this cursed rock heap!"

"Thor! Must we then lie idle for the sake of a Roman keep?"

"And for the vala's sake!" added Liutrad, quickly.

"I am not one to forget the maid," grumbled Floki. "But a hundred men can hold the keep while we go out to the blood-game."

"No," broke in Olvir, harshly. "Far rather would I meet death than swallow the taunts of that poisoner. Yet Karl the Frank gave over this keep into my charge, and I hold the hard stones fast till Karl the Frank comes again. Wait till he knocks at the burg gates. It will then be for us to go out and open them to him."

A smile of terrible joy lit up the face of the sea-king, and he turned eagerly to the southward, as though he already saw the vanguard of the Frankish host.

CHAPTER XXIV

With guile the great one

Would they beguile.

SONG OF ATLI.

When it became known through the citadel that there would be no sorties against the Asiamen until the coming of the Frankish host, the towers at once were crowded with watchers, all gazing southward along the Ebro road. But a bitter disappointment lay before the war-eager vikings.

Toward mid-afternoon there was a great stir in the Saracen quarters, and soon all the Moslem folk of the burg--mounted and afoot, or drawn in their heavy-laden ox-carts--began to move in a steady stream along the streets and out through the Arga Gate. Before nightfall the last cart had creaked over the Arga bridge, and was trailing away on the Astorga road.

Floki was like a baited bear.

"*Hei!* ring-breaker," he grumbled; "the dogs seek a new kennel. It must be they know the Franks are coming. Now is the time to strike the poisoner,--now, before he slips through our fingers. He will flee to-night on the trail of these slow-moving tradefolk."

"And what if it be a lure to draw us into the open? No, old Crane! If the swart dogs linger till the Franks come, we will make blood-play for them. Not now."

The last drop in the bitter cup was drained when at dawn the Saracen spearmen were seen leisurely riding westward on the Astorga road. Astride their swift desert coursers, they well knew their safety from the pursuit of any kaffir force.

An hour or so after their rearguard had disappeared four thousand Frankish horsemen came plodding north upon the Ebro road, their heavy war-chargers so weary that they could not be spurred out of a walk.

"They have done their best," admitted Olvir, half reluctantly, and choosing the first hundred men in the courtyard, he marched out to meet the Franks. There was none to bar the way. The Saracens were all gone, taking with them the Jews, and the Navarrese townfolk wisely kept out of the path of the fierce Northerners.

But there was some delay in the Saracen quarter, where the vikings scattered to see whether any loot was to be found in the deserted houses. As it proved, nearly everywhere the owners had fled in such haste that all manner of rich plunder lay ready to the hand of the first comer.

In vain Olvir sought to recall the eager looters from their search. Hardly a score appeared

after repeated blasts of his horn; but, spurred on by his desire to hear the tidings of the Frankish host, he advanced with this scant following.

The delay had been considerable, and before Olvir could reach the great archway of the burg gate a horseman on a black Arab stallion came racing through the dark tunnel. In two leaps the splendid courser was beside him, and Count Roland was springing from the saddle, to grasp his shoulders.

"Brother!" the Frank almost shouted. "Brother!--you 're safe--the poisoner did not take you unawares! We rode night and day to overtake the traitors; but the horses of my men--Thank God, I find you safe!"

There was no resisting the heartfelt joy of the Frank. It swept away at a breath every trace of the grievance between the friends. Olvir gazed earnestly into the radiant eyes of his captor.

"No less am I glad to see you, brother," he said. But even at that moment his face clouded: "I thirst for your tidings, king's kin! No word have I heard since the host fared south,--only, the poisoner mocked me with evil tales. What of my mother's father? Is it true he met his fate--?"

"True, Olvir! The wretch struck him with a poisoned blade. We came with Al Huseyn to hunt out the traitor, but found only the dying count."

"And none stopped the murderer?"

"He was already gone, brother. It was at twilight. He and his following rode out of Saragossa before Al Huseyn could send word to the gates, and the swart hounds burst through our beleaguering lines in the darkness. I could not leave your dying kinsman,--and it was well. He intrusted me with your inheritance,--this pouch of gem-stones, and a book in Arabic script, which he said contained the wisdom of Plato, the old Greek sage. The book is on my saddle; the gems have not left my bosom since the noble count gave them into my charge."

Olvir took the heavy pouch, and, thrusting in his fist, drew out a handful of flashing gems,--- rubies and emeralds and sapphires.

"Here's honor to the dead!" he exclaimed, as he held out the precious stones to Roland.

"In his honor!" replied the Frank, gravely, and he took the gift as freely as it was offered. But as the gems rolled into his palm, he picked out a great pearl, and handed it back to the giver.

"Keep this for the little princess, brother," he said.

"It is a gift for a bride, if it has mates," murmured Olvir.

"A fitting betrothal gift from a sea-king to a princess! Now that our bitterness is past, only one thing is lacking to round out my happiness. Two more years or so, and your little may--"

"Say no more, brother. That pure snow-blossom,--and I, the bloody-fanged wolf! Not a day has gone by since I saw in her eyes-- But tell me! Is it true the poisoner rode over the king's camp?"

"I must own he told you truth. We were watching for treachery, and yet the wily fox caught us unawares. When our smaller host came faring from Barcelona, Count Barnard rode across the Ebro half a day in the lead, and the king was holding war-council with him, when, in the twilight, the pagan spearmen burst upon the royal guard. Only by good chance did I bring up the horsemen in time to save our lord king."

"Thor! You 've not lacked sword-play. But what of Abd-er-Rahman, that old Omyyad lion?"

"Ask the South Wind; it alone may tell you. He proved too wary a lion to show himself within hail of the Ebro; while, for our part, with treachery in our rear, we would have been mad to fare south into the enemy's country."

"Treachery?"

"When we marched down the Ebro valley to Saragossa, the false vali of the burg closed the gates against us, though the noble Al Arabi sought to hold him to his compact. So we laid siege to the burg until Count Barnard came with the eastern host, and the poisoner sought to slay the king. Before that, messengers had come, by way of Narbonne and Barnard's host, with word from Count Rudulf that the Saxons threatened an uprising. The king at once sent Gerold and Worad Rhineward at the head of a thousand horsemen. They took the longer but safer road by way of Narbonne; for the whole land swarmed with the bands of our treacherous allies."

"That I foreboded," said Olvir. "No messenger came through with tidings."

"Small wonder! Of all our Saracen allies, your noble kinsman Al Arabi alone kept troth. We had had enough to sicken us of the Southland without old Rudulf's warnings. Already our host was wasting from fever and famine, and so, as Abd-er-Rahman would not come to give us battle, there was naught to do but to take the wergild which Vali Al Huseyn had offered to ransom his burg. The host is already following my trail."

Olvir flung out a hand toward the south: "By Loki! a bitter warfaring has it been for more than one. I have drunk a cup of gall; no less the great king--"

"Gall would have been honey to him beside that bitter draught. But see; here come my laggard riders."

"Your riders! Halt them, brother; let them camp outside the walls. They've already had their share of war-loot, while my men have not fingered a penny. Ours should be the plunder of the Saracen houses."

"But the Christian townfolk--?"

"King Karl shall levy their wergild. We will not break a Christian door. I can trust my sea-wolves even in the looting."

"It is well, brother. The horsemen shall camp outside the burg. They shall guard the gates, but not enter," replied Roland, and, raising his horn, he blew a ringing call to halt.

So the weary weeks of war-vigil came to an end, and few other than the townfolk of Pampeluna grumbled at the half-week which lapsed before the main host of the Franks, with its huge over-burdened ox-train, came trailing out of the South.

Throughout the days of waiting the weary horsemen were well content to lie about their camps and feast on the good fare sent out by the luckless townfolk; while up in the citadel the vikings made exact allotment of their Moslem loot, and in the heat of the reckless gaming which followed forgot how they had been cooped up for months like nun-women, and cheated of the merry sword-play.

The days of idleness, of wassail and gaming, were soon cut short. On the morning that the main host reached Pampeluna, King Karl called the councillors of the city before him, and told them that their burg should no longer serve as an eyry for the treacherous Saracen hawks. He would exact no wergild,--no ransom; but the citadel and walls of the burg should be razed to the ground.

There was no appeal from the hard decree. Within an hour the city walls swarmed with thousands of Frankish warriors, armed with mattock and battering-ram. Soon the battlements were crashing down, to shatter one upon the other.

But the task was not one to be accomplished in a day, even by hordes of brawny Northerners. While the greater number toiled at battering down the walls and casting the loosened stones into the Arga, others scoured the country for miles around, levying tribute and hostages wherever they went.

Among the first of these forays was one led by Count Hardrat in the direction of Astorga. When he returned, he reported that no trace of the Moslems had been found. Yet, for such a fruitless faring, he seemed highly satisfied over its outcome, and he had no little to say apart with the beautiful daughter of the Grey Wolf.

The nearer the time set for the homeward faring approached, the more frequently was Hardrat to be seen with Fastrada; but as he was well known to be a suitor for the maiden's hand, his attention aroused no comment other than pleasant raillery.

When at last the plunder-burdened host trailed away from the dismantled city, up the valley of the Arga, Hardrat had no other choice than to join his command. But Kosru the Magian rode in closest attendance upon Fastrada, up the Zubiri, and across the wooded hills, into the glen of Roncesvalles.

That evening, as Fastrada rested with others of the court on the turf before the royal pavilion, Hardrat approached the king's seat and knelt haltingly to kiss his lord's knee. Karl smiled, and reached out his hand instead.

"What would our brave count ask?" he said.

"No great favor to grant, sire, yet one upon which I have set my heart," answered the Thuringian, hurriedly. "Since Count Gerold left, the men of Duke Tassilo's levy have marched at random. Among them is a warrior who fought beside me at Pavia--"

"A small favor," replied Karl, carelessly. "You wish to command the Bavarians. If that is all--"

"I take heart to ask a greater favor, sire. Since your Majesty put me over the Austrasians, my command has not led the host. I have swung sword for your Majesty in more than one hard fight."

"Your service is not forgotten. If such is your wish, you shall lead the host back across the mountains."

Hardrat bowed, but stood hesitating.

"What more?" asked Karl. "What other favor can I grant my bold hero?"

"None other to me, sire, but one to a maiden. The daughter of Rudulf wishes to be among the first to look out upon the northern slopes."

"There is nothing to hinder. The maiden shall have her wish."

"I thank your Majesty doubly," said the Thuringian, and he withdrew hastily, as though he

feared that the king might recall the lightly spoken favors.

"A gruff man, but trusty," muttered Karl to Anselm, the Count Palatine, who stood by his seat. "For all his drunkenness, there are few bolder than my forest hero."

"That may well be, sire," rejoined Anselm, dryly. He was about to add more, when Roland and Olvir came racing down the valley through the twilight, Olvir mounted on a black Arab courser, the gift of his sword-brother. The hoofs of the horses ploughed up the turf before the king as the riders drew rein. Roland leaped off at once.

"Tidings, sire!" he cried. "I bring tidings, both good and bad. A messenger has come through the pass; he follows with the written word."

"Speak your tidings,--the ill first. The good may sweeten the bitter."

"This, then, sire: The Saxon wolves harry the Rhine bank from Cologne to the Moselle,--Wittikind and his wild followers. No burg or host has checked their advance across the country of the Hessians. It is feared that Fulda may already lie in ashes. The heathen ravage with fire and sword, slaughtering all, even to the women and babes."

Those nearest the king heard the grinding of his teeth, and caught the flash of his eye through the gloom. Yet he spoke in a calm voice: "Truly, you bear bitter tidings! Give us now the sweet."

"In a word, sire, the queen is safe past her time. Two strong-limbed king's sons await your Majesty at Casseneuil."

"And will wait long!" whispered Hardrat in the ear of Fastrada. The girl clutched his sleeve.

"Hark to the king's answer!" she hissed.

But there was no need to strain the ear. Through the gathering night the king's voice rang out, clear and joyful: "Ho, my liegemen, here is honey to sweeten the sour wine! We shall taste of both. We will not linger in the morning for the plodding oxen to overtake us. The sooner the host crosses the pass, the quicker the wains can follow. Hardrat, with the Austrasians and Bavarians, will march an hour before dawn. Roland, with the horse, will wait as foreguard for the treasure and baggage."

"With Roland before and Steward Eggihard in the rear, sire, the treasure could not well be safer," observed Abbot Fulrad.

"There is no question of danger. It is speed we should bear in mind," said Karl.

"Then they must sharpen the goads, sire," remarked Roland. "The host will be lolling about camp in the Nive valley even before Eggihard brings his oxen within view of my waiting riders."

"There will be need, sire, to urge on the drovers," said Count Anselm. "Give me leave to so lend aid."

"A good service, lord judge. Look to it that no pilferers lay hand on goods or gold, to slip away into the forest. Many of the drovers are of Vascon blood. Choose whom you wish to aid in your watch. Who comes?"

"The tidings-bearer, lord king," replied Olvir.

"So. Bring lights."

A dozen courtiers ran to fetch brands from the nearest fire. As they returned, a gnarl-faced Vascon stepped forward in the light of their torches, and knelt to present to the king a sealed parchment. Fulrad took the message, and, at a sign from Karl, broke the seal. But the king turned to the messenger, who had risen and was about to slip away.

"Hold, man," he said. "Where do you come from?"

The Vascon halted, and stood hesitating, as though he but partly understood the question. Then he answered in a harsh voice: "Casseneuil, Frank king."

"You have rendered good service," said Karl. "Our steward shall see to it that you have fitting reward."

A strange smile passed across the Vascon's stolid face, like a flicker of the torchlight, and he turned quietly away into the darkness. Olvir caught the man's look, but then his attention was drawn by Abbot Fulrad.

"Here are three several messages, sire," observed the priest. "The first is from Count Teutoric, who sends word that Rudulf is gone against the Sorbs; that the Saxons are ravaging in the Rhinegau, and that he is marching against them with all speed from the Frisian Mark. Below, in Worad's hand, is word that he and Gerold had met the messenger near Soissones, and would press on with utmost haste to levy warriors and attack the rebels. Last of all, word noted at Casseneuil, that the queen is safely delivered of twin sons, alike unblemished and vigorous."

"Praised be the Holy Mother!" murmured Karl, and for a while he sat musing, his face aglow with love and tender pride.

The songs of his distant warriors, who were celebrating their last night on the southern slope of the mountains by a wassail-feast, presently aroused the king. He glanced up at the waiting ring of lords, and signed to Anselm and Abbot Fulrad.

"Come within," he said. "Let wax tapers be brought, and send for my Dane scribe Liutrad."

Roland sprang back into the saddle and rode with Olvir across the valley to where Rothada sat in a ring of torches, surrounded by a little court of the younger courtiers. Liutrad, though by no means willing, ran to do the king's bidding, while the merry companions he left behind fell suddenly silent with the coming of the high-counts. But Rothada welcomed with delight both her kinsman and Olvir, and when the war-famed heroes showed a willingness to lay aside their dignity and join in the games, all was soon merry again with the court of the king's daughter.

CHAPTER XXV

There lay many a man
Marr'd by the javelins,
Men of the Northland
Shot over shield.

BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH.

Noon found Roland and his horsemen still waiting for the ox-train at the head of the valley. Hours since, the last files of the main host had wound away up the wild gorges of Ibañeta.

From the bank where he was sitting with Olvir, Roland sprang up for the twentieth time, to peer down the valley.

"By my sword, brother," he said, "you 'll soon be wishing you had gone on with your sea-wolves. By now they are resting over in the Nive valley."

"What odds? Are you not here with me? I might wish for the little vala also; yet this is not unpleasant," replied Olvir; and he called the black Arab courser which Roland had given him, to stroke the beast's starred forehead. But Roland walked to and fro restlessly.

"We cannot pass the fells in the dark," he said.

"True; yet there is still good time, and--the wains come now!"

"That creaking? One can hear them creak a mile or more."

"Not from where we stand. They 'll soon wheel into view."

"A true seer! There comes the first ox-span, and Anselm waving to us. It is well he rides with the train, else we should never have seen them. None but oxen could have come at all with wains so laden."

"Tribute gold of a dozen burgs and all the plunder of the Ebro valley!" muttered Olvir.

"Not all, brother. Your sea-wolves bear theirs upon their own shoulders."

"Where it is safest. They 'll yield it with life,--no sooner."

"One and all, they 're welcome to their loot, and welcome to bear it. I trust mine in Anselm's care."

"Mine is yet safer. My Saracen gems lie in Floki's bosom. What thief would risk the bill of the Crane?"

"Only one utterly reckless of life. But why do we talk of safety? We have put even Kasim behind us. Would to Heaven we 'd first met the traitor! Yet now all that is past. We go home to enjoy our war-loot."

"Rather, to push on to wilder war-fields."

"Ah, brother, if only we may ride together! Yet I fear that his Majesty may leave me on the Garonne, or send me back to my Breton Mark."

"You shall go Rhineward with us, though I bend knee for the favor."

"We shall soon see. Now to horse. The oxen press upon us."

"To horse, and forward!" the command passed down the waiting ranks. Four thousand heavy-armed Franks swung into the saddle; four thousand war-steeds wheeled into column. The ancient Roman way shook with the tread of hoofs. At the head of the column the black Arabs pranced and curvetted, no less pleased than their riders to be off, after the long wait.

"Now we fare homeward!" exclaimed Roland, and he gazed up joyfully at the towering peaks and precipices. But a sudden shadow fell on Olvir's face.

"Homeward!" he echoed. "I trust it may not yet be the homeward faring for me."

"Saint Michael, no! Surely, there is nothing now to draw you back into your frozen North. As to your ships, we 'll sail them around into the Rhine."

"My ships will soon be sailing the North Sea; but they may steer for another haven than Rhine Mouth. My sea-wolves are fairly glutted with plunder, and I dread lest these fells recall too well the cliffs of our Trondir fiords."

"But what if the little vala bids her warriors stay? Never doubt, brother; we 'll sail to the North as we sailed to the South,--unless the king sails with us."

"Not he. You Franks are not fond of brine. But with Rothada aboard, we could hold fast all the crews,--Dane and Norse alike."

"I could swear to that. And we shall soon put her power to the test. By nightfall we will overtake the host, and can tell the little maiden of our wish."

"Before nightfall! Already we scale the pass, and Anselm urges on the ox-drovers. Their beasts follow close upon our rear."

"Yet, at the best, they 'll drag their wains all too slowly up these steep gorges," grumbled Roland. "How the grim cliffs tower above us! Here is fitting abode for fiends and evil sprites."

"Rather, for evil-minded Vascons! Look above in the cleft. I saw the glint of steel."

"The spear of a bear-hunter. The sullen mountaineer halts in the chase to watch us pass."

"I saw more spears than one! By Thor! I'm minded to scale the cliff."

"To what end? At the worst, it is only a band of Vascon thieves lying in wait to cut off stragglers."

"Were my vikings here, we 'd not pass by this wasp nest."

"Ride on. The gnarl-faced thieves will not even fall upon the tail of the rearguard, if the men keep close. It would not mend matters should we seek to climb the cleft. My horsemen are no more crag-bred than am I. In their heavy war-gear--"

"Come, then. But first, send back warning to Eggihard and Anselm."

Roland turned and gave the command to the first of his horsemen. Then his black stallion clattered on up the steep ascent, side by side with the black courser.

For some time the sword-brothers rode in silence. Olvir, with the delight of one bred among fells, was drinking in eagerly the wild and rugged beauty of the pass. The Frank, however, was depressed in spirit, half awed by that which most pleased his Norse mate. He sighed with relief when the road began to wind about the towering mass of Altobiscar.

"Saint Michael!" he cried; "here's a landmark to pass with joy! Now we shall soon be looking down upon the gentle valley of the Nive."

"I said true. Even at this pace twilight will see the last of Eggihard's Neustrians trailing into camp."

"Ah, brother, that will be a merrier return to the north slopes than I could hope for when we marched from the Garonne. Those were bitter days--"

"Speak no more of that ill time, Roland,--nor of the maiden. Never again shall doubt come between us. Our hearts are now one."

"Even to the end of all things."

"In life!--in death!" cried Olvir, so fervently that the echoing cliffs rang with the words: "*life in death!--in death!--death!*"

Roland shuddered.

"God's mercy!" he cried. "Hark how the crag-fiends mock!"

"*Hark--fiends mock!--fiends mock!--mock!*" called back the echoes.

"It is nothing," laughed Olvir. "Whoever the rock-dwellers may be,--kobold or scrat, troll or dwarf,--they never do harm. In my bairnhood I would often linger in the glens where they dwelt, to jeer at them."

"Truly, yours was a wild boyhood, Olvir. You have yet told me little of it."

"A merry bairnhood, though Otkar's was a heavy hand."

"That I can well believe. Tell me more of your tomb life."

"Tell me, rather, of your swart Bretons, and of the Frisian vikings, who, you say, settled along the coast of southern Neustria in the olden days."

"Such is the tale. But I am not in the mood for talk. I would rather hear of your wild Norse land."

"Then look well at these crags and heights,--most of all at the great snow-peak. Let this rough

way be instead the smooth ship-path,--the fiord; and on either hand the foam-white torrents leaping from the heights. Such is my home."

"I choose, then, the oak forest, with quiet hill and dale, where, if you come upon sprites, the worst will be some gentle swan-maiden, combing her hair by the brookside."

"Or a werwolf lurking in the gloom to seize the unwary hunter."

"Well cast! But I 've yet to see either swan-maiden or werwolf; whereas your crag-fiends that mock with witless mimicry--ay! and peer down from the cliff brink-- Look, brother!"

"Thor! that's no fiend. A Saracen without turban!"

"Saracen? How should they--"

"An onfall! Look ahead!"

"A wall--the gorge is walled!"

"And beyond--black banners! By Loki, the poisoner has snared us! Now are we fated, brother! From the heights men will cast down rocks."

"God help us! We cannot stand; nor, with foes on the cliff, can we cross that wall."

"Sound your horn. To turn back may alone save us."

"Not even that, if there are many of the traitors," replied Roland; yet he raised his horn. The gorge re-echoed to the blast.

From end to end the long line of horsemen wavered and halted, amazed at the note. But a second blast sent them wheeling back to the rear. Cries of alarm and bewilderment burst out all along their scattered ranks. Those nearest the ox-wains shouted to the drovers to turn back. But the Vascons goaded their beasts on into the jam of backward-wheeling Franks.

Then, when all in the gorge was wildest flurry and confusion, high up the steep slopes and along the cliff crests a thousand horns brayed out the battle-note, and in a twinkling the heights swarmed with armed Vascons.

"Lost! all is lost!" cried Roland.

"Thor aid! We die, brother; but we die as men. Ho, Rhine wolves! turn! turn again! We cross the wall!"

The wild cry roused the great war-count from his despair. Out flashed Ironbiter, and the black stallion bounded after his fellow.

"Christ and king! Christ and king! Upon the pagans! Follow me, Franks!"

A hundred or more riders wheeled at the call, to charge after their leader. And as they charged, the gorge behind them darkened with clouds of spears and arrows, with avalanches of rocks and tree-trunks. From van to rear a shriek went up from the host,--a wail of despair, soon lost in the screams and groans of mangled victims.

Little did the heavy Northern armor avail its bearers. Neither shield nor hauberk nor helmet of bronze or iron could withstand the ponderous Vascon missiles. The very completeness of the Frankish war-gear was fatal, for its weight impeded the efforts of the warriors to escape the trap. Pinned in the gorge like sheep for the slaughter, the Franks charged back, to trample their fellows behind, or vainly sought to scale the heights after the nimble Vascon drovers.

Pierced through by arrows and darts, mangled by logs and stones, the doomed warriors fought and trampled one upon another, in frenzied struggles to escape that terrible downpour. But above them the Vascons mocked their cries for mercy with yells of triumph, and drowned their pitiful shrieks with the crash of the war-hail.

Summoned by Anselm's horn to guard the treasure from the pilfering drovers, Eggihard and his Neustrians rushed forward among the ox-wains, only to share in the fate of the Frankish horse. When they turned again to fly, they found the way behind them bristling with pikes and spears. The laggard Asturians and Navarrese, silently trailing the host, had closed upon the rear, eager to share the Moslem plunder and to avenge the ruined walls of Pampeluna.

In the heart of that steel-leaved thicket fell Eggihard the High Steward, valiantly striving to cut a way for his Neustrians out of the shambles.

But the greater number of the footmen shrank back before the advancing spear-points, to perish on the heaps of slaughtered beasts and men. Soon Anselm and a score of followers fled alone before the advance of the Hispano-Goths; while from every mountain cleft and slope the Vascons clambered down to snatch their blood-drenched booty from beneath the mass of torn and shattered victims.

We have fought; if we die to-day,
If we die to-morrow, there is little
To choose. No man may speak
When once the Norns have spoken.

LAY OF HAMDIR.

But not all the Frankish host perished by the Vascon missiles. As Roland and his hundred horsemen charged after Olvir upon the wall which barred the gorge, the fiery Moslems answered the Northern battle-shouts with shrill yells, and the foremost among them leaped their coursers over the barrier, to rush upon the Franks. A hundred or more had crossed the wall before the slower Frankish horses could meet them; and the treacherous Vascons above, only too willing that their allies should win more of wounds than plunder, hastened away to share in the looting of the baggage-train. Of all the riders who had turned to follow their count, two only were slain by Vascon arrows. The others, stung to desperate fury by the shrieks of those behind them in the gorge, thundered after their leader with brandished blades.

"On, men! on!" cried Roland. "The dogs leap to meet us! On, and strike them down!"

"*Heu! heu!* Christ and king! Down with the pagans!" roared back the Franks, and they crashed at full gallop into the mass of charging Saracens. The shock was frightful. Hurling back by the massive strength of the Frankish horses, the graceful desert coursers were either overthrown and trampled underfoot with their riders, or crushed back upon the barrier.

In a twinkling Franks and Saracens were mingled in the death-grapple,--a furious hand-to-hand struggle, where all the vantage lay with the heavy-armed Northerners. Only the closeness of the jam kept the Franks from at once shattering the whole Saracen band. Vengeance lent double force to their blows.

Side by side on their black Arabs, the foster-brothers thrust in among the yelling Moslems. Roland, high in his stirrups, was wielding his ponderous Norse sword in both hands. Where Ironbiter fell, shields and iron casques were shattered like glass, and their bearers hurled down as though struck by a sledge. The Frank's blue eyes flamed with white fire, his face was flushed, and his powerful frame quivered with rage. As he struck, he ground his teeth savagely.

But Olvir's fury was of another kind. In his black eyes was the bright, cold glitter of the striking snake's. Unlike the Frank count, he crouched low in the saddle; and from beneath his little steel shield Al-hatif darted out incessantly, like the beak of a heron. The Frank's sword-play was more appalling to the eye, but the Northman's was the deadlier. So swift and fatal was Al-hatif's thrust that many were slain before they were aware of the danger.

Close on the sword-brothers came the Frankish horsemen, hewing and slashing with sword and double-bladed axe. Twice the number of the Saracens could not have withstood such an attack. The slender-limbed Arabs and Berbers were fairly crushed by their big foes. Less than a score in the rear managed to free themselves from the jam and escape the slaughter by leaping back over the barrier.

The Franks, recking little of their own loss, trampled forward over the slain, in hot pursuit of the fugitives. The rout drew from them a roar of triumph, and they rushed forward, only to recoil in rage and despair. The barrier was far too high for their heavy horses to leap, and its timbers had been too firmly knit together to be easily torn apart. But the main body of the Saracens, hindered by their retreating fellows of the van, had not yet closed upon the farther side of the wall. Olvir was quick to see the vantage.

"Ho, Franks!" he called. "Your horses cannot leap; afoot and follow me! Behind pours the Vascon hail; before lies the sword-path. Let us die like men!"

"Lead on!" roared the horsemen, and they sprang from their saddles to rush upon the barrier. Olvir turned to Roland, his look strangely soft.

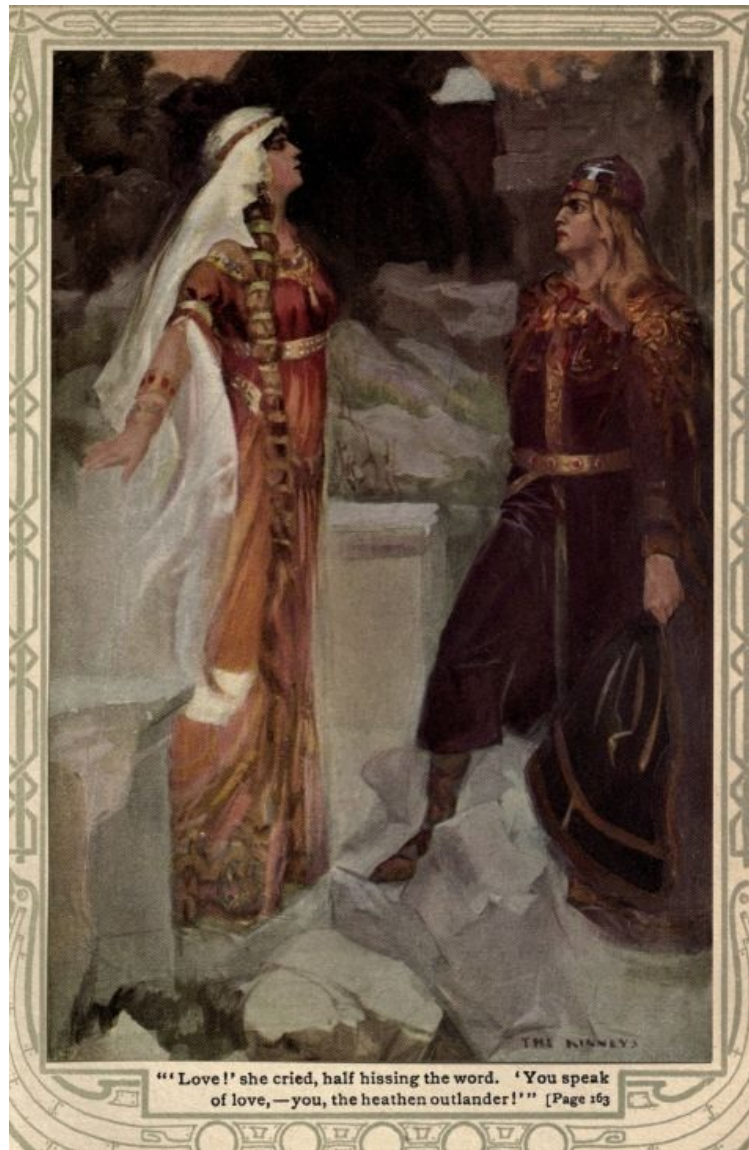
"Farewell for a little while, brother," he said. "We are fated; the valkyries call us."

But Roland smiled grimly, and reined back his black stallion for the leap.

"Saint Michael!" he cried. "Life, not death, is before us! We 'll cut our way through the midst of the pagans. *Heu! heu!* Christ and king! Follow me, men!"

Already Olvir's courser was leaping the barrier, clean and light as a gazehound. No less gallantly the stallion sprang forward and leaped in turn. But the feat was beyond his power. Borne down by the weight of his rider, he failed to clear the wall. His forelegs struck against the

crest, and he fell headlong on the farther side. Roland, though hurled violently to the ground, sprang up at once; but the stallion lay where he fell.



"Love!" she cried, half hissing the word. "You speak of love,—you, the heathen outlander!" (Page [163](#))

Olvir wheeled his horse before the count, to shield him from the flights of Saracen darts and arrows which came whistling about them.

"Forward, men! forward, and wedge!" he cried; and the Franks, with a wild shout, came swarming over the wall.

"Wedge, men! wedge!" shouted Roland, as he sprang out in the lead. But the dismounted horsemen, unused to the movement, were slow in forming. Before their ranks could lock shields, the Saracens charged upon them. Line after line, the Moslem horse came leaping along the gorge in close order, three hundred swift coursers, three hundred turbaned riders shrieking their war-cries.

Before the fierce attack the half-formed line of Franks wavered, and more than one warrior glanced about at the wall. But Roland clashed Ironbiter against his shield and cried cheerily: "Stand fast, my Rhine wolves,—stand, and strike for Christ and king!"

"Christ aid! Christ and king! *Heu! heu!*" came back the deep roar of the Franks.

No longer did any look about at the barrier. All bent forward in their places, and as the flying mass of Saracens crashed upon their half-formed wedge, they met the enemy with mighty blows of axe and sword and war-hammer. Down went the foremost line of horses, and their riders fell slain with them; down went the second line, the third. Yet relentlessly the Moslems thrust forward, trampling over the bodies of their fallen leaders, to hurl themselves against the Frankish shieldwall.

Soon the Northern warriors began to give ground before the incessant shocks. Arrows and darts whirred into their midst from the Saracen rear, and many fell, pierced in throat or face. Others were crushed by the plunging horses, or thrust with lances through the joints of their rude armor; but most of all met their fate under the keen-edged scimitars.

The first impetus of the Saracen charge was quickly lost; but the dark riders gave the hated Afranj not a moment's time to gain breath. Their massed ranks closed up against the Franks, and overbore them with the sheer weight of the horses.

In vain Roland fought with a strength and skill such as no other Frank than Karl himself might have equalled; in vain Olvir, his face white to the lips and rigid with cold fury, spurred his courser forward into the mass of the Saracens, and struck down warriors to right and left with his lightning stabs.

Had there been room for retreat, the foremost Moslems would have shrunk away from the attack of the sword-brothers; but they had no choice. Penned between the cliffs, they were forced on by their fellows behind, without hope of escape other than in victory. In their rear rode Kasim Ibn Yusuf and a score of chosen men, threatening with instant death any who should turn. So, yelling with desperate rage, the Moslems continued to fling themselves upon the Afranj, each fiercely striving to cut down at least one unbeliever before he himself fell beneath the trampling hoofs.

At last the blows of the Franks began to lessen in force. Wearied by the furious struggle, and spent by wounds and blood-loss, increasing numbers sank beneath the steadily advancing hoofs. Only with the utmost effort could those who were left close the many gaps in their thinning ranks.

"The end draws near, brother!" cried Roland; and he drew back with his men, undaunted, but so wearied that he could hardly swing Ironbiter.

"Oh, for two score of my sea-wolves, with Floki at their head!" called back Olvir, bitterly. "We should soon rend our path through the midst of these swart hounds. Thor! Yonder rides the poisoner! I 'll cut my way to him, or die!"

But as the Northman sought to spur his horse farther into the dense jam of Saracens, Roland's voice rang out in a despairing cry: "Brother--brother! Farewell!"

Then berserk rage seized upon the Northman. He wrenched his horse about, and turned straight across the fore of the Saracens, his eyes glaring and the froth dripping from his lips. For the moment he was a madman, and had all the madman's strength. Al-hatif no longer thrust out, but glittered in wide strokes that slashed through the firmest mail. The viking's attack was so terrible that the bravest of the Moslems sought to avoid him; and though he fought utterly heedless of guard, fear so weakened their arms that their blows fell without harm on his helmet and mail-serk.

Striking down all in his path, Olvir cut his way without check to the spot where Roland, shieldless and utterly spent, reeled back under the blows of the enemy. Warned by the shrieks of their fellows, the count's assailants turned to meet the raving Northman. But already Olvir was upon them, and Al-hatif whistled in vengeful strokes.

Then the blood-mist cleared from the Northman's eyes, and he wheeled his horse around beside Roland.

"Close, men! close!" he cried. "One more rally, and we die together! Ho, brother; I come! stand back!"

But the dying Frank glared past his sword-brother. With a terrible cry he swung up Ironbiter and hurled the blade into the midst of the Saracens. It was the last deed of the hero. As the great sword whirled from his grasp, he reeled and would have fallen, had not Olvir bent to catch him.

Putting out all his strength, the Northman drew the great Frank up before him on the saddle. Then the black courser leaped with his double burden to the barrier, while behind him the bare score of Franks yet standing formed in shieldburg to guard their dying count.

Tenderly Olvir laid his friend on the crest of the wall, and drew the broken helmet from the tawny hair, already clotted with blood. The hero's eyes were fast dimming; but his cold hand closed on Olvir's fingers, and he murmured brokenly: "Ha, brother--Christ and king!--We 've fought--a good fight!"

"We have fought!" cried Olvir. "Now we die. Wait here for me, brother; I will soon join you!"

But Roland clutched at the turning Northman, and his voice rang out clear and strong above the Saracen yells and the clash of weapons: "Stay, Olvir! Not death to you, but life,--life and vengeance! To the king, brother! You alone may scale the cliff!"

"Go-go, lord count!" shouted the horsemen. "We die; but the king shall avenge! Go, tell him

of the traitors!"

"While my brother breathes I will not leave him," replied Olvir, and he bent from the saddle to embrace the count. Then sudden grief fell upon him. The blue eyes were glazed, the noble face ghastly with the death-pallor. Olvir stared down upon the torn and bloody corpse, his heart wrung with bitter grief.

But it was no time for mourning. Thicker than ever, the arrows came whistling overhead and upon the barrier, and one struck the black courser through the neck. Roused by the beast's wild bound, Olvir sat up and gazed alertly about him. Already the Saracens were thrusting back the Frankish shieldwall.

"*Ai*, my fleet one!" cried Olvir. "Even you are stricken. But you have yet to save your rider. Bear me over the wall and back through the death-gorge."

Though quivering with pain, the black courser heeded instantly the voice and touch of his master. Lightly as a gazelle he bounded up and over the barrier, and fled along the bloody gorge at racing speed.

Though the way was heaped with rocks and logs and the bodies of men and horses, the black courser raced on unchecked until, swinging around a sharp bend, he all but ran upon a Frankish horse coming up the gorge.

"Anselm!" shouted Olvir--"you live? Thor! We shall both go free! Turn back! Yonder's a cranny in the cliff--turn back!"

"No, Olvir; I could not climb!" gasped the count, and he pointed to the splintered shaft of a javelin, fast in his side.

"You 're wounded, friend!"

"Where's Roland?"

"Slain,--slain by the swart dogs! His body lies on the wall crest. Before it fall the last of the horsemen. I alone have fled."

"And I alone come from the Vascon hail. I alone live; and now-- But you, hero; you 're yet unharmed; hasten up out of the bloody pit. To the king--to the king!"

"I have fled once. I stay here till you die."

"No, Holy Mother, no! Fly, hero! You alone may bear the evil word. The Vascons turn to loot the slain,--I hear yells behind you. Fly!"

"Let them come. Fenir tear me if I leave you, living!"

"Then shall your stay be brief!" cried Anselm.

With one hand he tore loose the clasps of his hauberk; with the other he grasped his dagger. Before Olvir could cry out or grasp his arm, he had struck himself to the heart.

A groan burst from Olvir's lips as he sprang off to catch the body of the count. Gently he drew it from the saddle and stooped to the ground. But as he bent, the horses snorted in terror. Loosening his hold of the Frank, Olvir rose up just as a boulder, hurtling from the cliff, shattered upon an outjutting ledge and flew about him in a hundred fragments. He heard his courser scream, and felt himself hurled back as though struck by the axe of Otkar Jotuntop.

In a moment he was up again, the blood spurting from a terrible wound just below the collar of his mail-serk. The sharp point of a whirling rock had torn through his threefold mail, snapped the bone beneath, and laid open his chest. But for the thick strand of Rothada's hair, he would never again have risen. Though severed by the sharp-edged stone, the strand had helped to break its blow. As he rose, the loosened plait came slipping down his breast, and, half dazed, he thrust it in through the rent in his mail.

Then his eye fell upon the black courser, standing in dumb anguish. Other fragments of the fatal rock had struck down Anselm's horse and broken the Arab's foreleg. Forgetful of his own wound, Olvir sprang to the faithful beast and kissed his white-starred forehead.

"Farewell, fleet one! You have served me true. May we meet again in Paradise!" he said, and then, swift and sure, the point of Al-hatif pierced the courser's heart.

A burst of triumphant yells re-echoed down the gorge. The last Frank had fallen. At the warning, Olvir thrust the scarlet blade back in its sheath and ran swiftly across the gorge.

"Now do all lie slain," he muttered; "and I--I go to bear the tidings, if so the Norns will. Here is a cleft,--I can yet climb; but if the feeblest of foes lies in wait on the crest, he may cast me down."

Thrusting the corner of his cloak in upon his wound, Olvir sprang up the cliff foot and began the ascent of its all but perpendicular face. Though every movement of his injured shoulder cost him terrible agony, he climbed with the utmost haste; for on the one side he could see advancing parties of the plunder-laden Vascons, while on the other, Moslem yells of victory rang near

around the turn. So swiftly did he scale the cliff that he had gained a side ledge which sloped up to its crest before the Saracens raced into view.

Overcome by exertion and the anguish of his wound, he paused for a time at the top of the cranny, too faint and giddy to attempt the narrow ledge. But the pursuers, far below in the gorge bottom, never thought to look up for their quarry where all along was sheer precipice. For a little they circled about the bodies of the black courser and the Frank count, like hounds which have over-shot the scent; then they raced on through the gorge. Not until they came upon the advancing Vascons and learned that the fugitive had not passed that way, did they turn back to scan the cliffs. But they saw no warrior clinging to the dizzy ledges.

Urged on by the peril of discovery, Olvir had crept sideways up the ledge, even as the Saracens galloped away. The rock, as he slipped along its face, seemed to reel and thrust out against him, so that at each slow step he thought to hurl down into the chasm. It was well for him that in his boyhood he had climbed for the nests of sea-fowl on cliffs yet dizzier. The rock was swaying before his darkened gaze. Instinctively he drew himself upward. At last he was bending over the cliff's edge. Then darkness fell upon him, and he sank forward in a death-like swoon.

But life lay strong in the breast of the sea-king. In a little he sighed and half turned. His opening eyes gazed sideways along the cliff's edge. A hundred paces or so distant, over a projection of the rock, he saw the tops of a pair of turbans. Stung to instant action by the sight, he drew himself up from the brink of the cliff, and crept over the rocks toward a little fir wood on the slope above. Within a spear's length the heads and shoulders of the two Saracens came into view; but both men were leaning over the brink of the precipice, staring down at the wild scene in the gorge bottom.

"Odin blind the Asiamen!" he muttered, and he glided like a wounded weasel over the bare space which lay between him and safety.

At last he gained the first tree. He was safe from the swart watchers. But then something stirred in the midst of the young firs, a few feet before him. A groan rose to his lips. He sank down, only to grip his sword-hilt and rise again, the bared blade ready to strike. His lips pressed together in a smile of grim despair, and he crept forward again. Something showed through the fir twigs. He peered under the branches into a tiny glade. There, within half-a-dozen steps, stood Zora his red mare, tethered beside two other coursers, and no man was in sight.

CHAPTER XXVII

Then Brynhild laughed
Till the walls rang again:
"Good luck
To your hands and swords
That have felled
The goodly prince!"
LAY OF SIGURD.

Midway down the valley of the Little Nive the warriors of the Frankish host lay at ease about their fires, while across the camp fell the shadow of the early mountain twilight. All alike were merry; for now the rugged fells were passed; the sun-scorched Saracen Land lay behind. In the morning the great train of plunder-laden carts and wains would be allotted, and each folk-levy would journey home by its own way, to enjoy the war-loot.

Not the least merry in the host were the king's "men," gathered about the royal pavilion. Messengers had come from Casseneuil with confirmation of the queen's good health, and the welcome tidings that old Rudulf, the Grey Wolf, had come leaping out of the Sorb Mark in the nick of time, to save Fulda from the ravaging Saxons. With Teutoric, Count of the Frisian Mark, sweeping across Westphalia toward Paderborn, and Gerold and Worad making for the harried Rhinegau by forced marches through Austrasia, none might doubt that the wolves of Odin would soon be fleeing back to their forests with aching teeth.

In celebration of the fair tidings, Karl had relaxed his usual abstemiousness, and was drinking

freely with his lords at the door of his tent. All about the royal seat the Franks stood laughing and jesting. The king himself sat smiling in careless amusement at one of the gay groups where Rothada and Liutrad played at tag with the pages about Abbot Fulrad.

But back in the dark recess of the pavilion was another group, whose members gulped their wine from shaking goblets, and peered out at the wassailers with little merriment in their looks. Crouched in the corner behind the others was Kosru, the Magian leech, muttering plaintive invocations to his sun-god.

"It cannot now be long. The word will soon come," growled Hardrat, who, though drinking even more immoderately than usual, was kept sober by the intense strain. The Magian edged a little nearer the thickset Thuringian.

"The word will soon come," he echoed in a trembling voice.

"And we crouch here like witless oafs," rejoined Fastrada. "Come; there's nothing to betray us but our own faces. Let us go out and make merry with the others."

"Well spoken, daughter of Rudulf! This time our great plot has failed; yet our enemy will soon have cause enough for grief. We will go out and rejoice at the tidings which shall soon blacken his merrymaking. Come. The good wine has put heart into me," answered Hardrat, and he stooped to grasp Kosru by the arm. But the Magian was palsied with terror; and while Fastrada lingered beside him, in a vain attempt to overcome his fear, Hardrat came springing back from behind the king's seat.

"Stay!" he cried. "Here comes a rider, fleeing down the valley."

"*The word!*" Seized with a second panic, the plotters drew back again into the depths of the tent.

A sudden hush had fallen upon the merry-makers about the king. All had turned, with paling cheeks, to gaze up the road. Down the valley a red Arab courser was racing as for life, and upon the flying beast sat a blood-stained figure which swayed and reeled in the saddle like a drunken man.

The king sprang up beside Fulrad.

"God's wounds!" he cried. "What mummerly is this?"

But then from the viking camp in the rear burst out a terrible shout, and the lofty figure of Floki the Crane came rushing through the midst of the Franks.

"Olvir! Olvir!--my earl--my bright one!" he cried; and as Liutrad sprang in and halted the red mare at the edge of the gathering, Floki's long arm caught her rider from the saddle. But it was Rothada who took the king's flagon out of the cupbearer's hand and ran to place it at the lips of the Northman.

The fiery wine lent new strength to the fainting messenger. He drew away from Floki and faced the king.

"Vengeance!--vengeance, lord king!" he gasped. "Slain is the Hero--my brother--and all his host! I alone come forth alive--I alone--to call for vengeance!"

Karl's eyes blazed with terrible anger.

"Whose is the guilt?" he demanded.

But Olvir was reeling. Blood gushed from his mouth. He fell back into Floki's arms like one dead.

Quivering with rage and grief, the giant raised his earl as though a child, and turned upon the king.

"Thor!" he roared. "Do you still stand idle? Who rules the fell-folk?"

"Ha! Lupus,--that bastard fox!" cried Karl. "Where's Hardrat? Stay; 'tis a deed for his own men; they will not fail. You shall lead them yourself, Crane,--you and Liutrad. Those who have horses, let them ride; the rest follow as best they may. Five thousand of my Austrasians shall come after. Here is my seal-ring. Go swiftly to Bordeaux, and seize the Vascon Wolf!"

Without a word, Floki laid his earl upon the ground and ran to turn back the wild rush of vikings who came seething around the pavilion. Liutrad paused to lay his hand on Olvir's bloody breast and mutter a vow. Then, leading Zora by the bridle, he ran after Floki.

As the crowd parted before the Norse leaders, Karl knelt down beside their stricken earl.

"The leech,--where's the outland leech?" he demanded.

Back in the pavilion the plotters dragged Kosru to his feet.

"Hist, Magian!" cried Hardrat. "The king calls; I know that tone. Woe to you if you fail to heed!"

"*Ai*, God of Light! I cannot, noble lords. My limbs fail--"

"Here's the spur, dotard," said Hardrat, brutally, and he shook his dagger in the leech's face.

"Go, friend," urged Fastrada.

Reassured by her look, Kosru threw his cloak about his head, and ran, tottering, out beside the king.

But the fear-stricken Magian left behind him others little less overcome. As he passed through the entrance, Fastrada turned upon Hardrat.

"Oaf! sluggard!" she hissed. "You loiter here, and the chance is gone. Others ride first to Bordeaux. Lupus will be taken."

The Thuringian turned, snarling; but Fastrada was already calm again.

"Why wrangle, count?" she said. "What is done is done. Lupus is lost."

"And we with him! He will tell all to save his own skin. Who trusts a Merwing?"

"No, no," insisted Fastrada. "His is too crafty a nature. He could not speak straightforward if he wished. There may be danger if his trial is kept waiting; but if that happens my knowledge of the king is at fault."

"You are right, maiden," muttered Hardrat, and he drew a deep breath.

Fastrada laughed low and softly,--a laugh at sound of which her fellow-plotter drew away from her, shuddering.

"What do we care for Lupus?" she said. "We shall yet win success; and--and him whom I hated I have slain!"

Hardrat crossed himself hastily.

"Saints shield us from werwolves!" he mumbled.

But Fastrada flung herself face down upon the earth.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Of fourteen winters was I,
If thou listeth to wot,
When I swore to the young lord
Oaths of love.

HEL-RIDE OF BRYNHILD.

"Ho, there! Can this be Niflheim? Why is my voice so weak? I cannot lift my arm. If this is the under-world, I would look upon the blue and white face of Hel. Ho, there! Who hearkens to Olvir, son of Thorbiorn?"

"Peace, ring-breaker! You 're yet in Manheim," croaked a well-known voice. "When Olvir Elfkin goes hence, Odin, not Hel, shall claim his spirit. Now lie still, for a blood-fire has burned within your skull these twelve days gone."

"Faul! I 've dreamt dreams of ill omen. What tidings of the Wolf Duke?"

"He hangs in chains with his namesake. Before the Frank could strike, Asiamen and fell-folk had fled to safety with their bloody spoil. But Liutrad and I took the traitor earl even as he was flying from his burg. Short shrift did the Frank give him. Eight nights he has ridden on the tree."

Olvir uttered a hollow laugh: "Then this night he should be wise as Odin."

"Thor!" cried Floki; "that is a welcome laugh. Now shall you surely live."

"I laugh with a sore heart. What of my brother?"

"They build him a hero's mound in the dewy valley."

"Would that I might see it!"

"That you shall, ring-breaker, when your strength comes again. Yours is the right to ward the hero's mound and to seek vengeance upon his slayers. For listen, son of Thorbiorn: When the king fared north, though you yet lay as a dying man, he named you Earl of the Vascon Mark. From Toulouse to Bordeaux, from the Garonne to the Pyrenees, you are earl and hersir. The sons of Lupus are borne off to the king's hall. Where the Wolf Duke ruled, you rule."

"Earl--of the Vascon Mark!" muttered Olvir. "Now, by Thor, if the men stay by me--"

"All stay but Liutrad."

"Liutrad! I 'd have thought him the last after you--"

"The king's will, earl. The Frank is minded to do well by the lad. For his good and the

pleasure of the king, you will not forbid. The king looks only to your welfare. While we raced away to take thrall the Wolf Duke, the king put you in the care of Kosru, that outland warlock. The man's own head was in pledge against your death. Between his wizardry and the care of the little vala, Hel's hand was thrust back from you. But now that you grasp firmly at life again, Liutrad should be faring away north, to return the old warlock to the king's household, and to bear back the little vala to the nun-women at Chelles, whence she came."

"To the cloister,--to the pale nun-women! By Loki! that shall not be; she shall not become one of that crew--I--"

"Settle that with the maiden," rejoined Floki, and he slipped softly from the room.

"He has gone--he has left me alone!" exclaimed Olvir, and, in his great weakness, he could have wept. But then a little maiden came darting across the room and knelt to clasp his wasted hands.

"Rothada--little may!" he cried. "What's this I hear? You go to the cloister?"

"Back to Gisela and the blessed sisters, Lord Olvir. My heart aches with this terrible world-life. I cannot bear the hatred and cruelties of it all. I seek peace where my mother died."

"You shall not stay,--you shall not stay for all time! Bend lower, king's daughter--little vala with eyes like dewy violets!--lower yet, till your lips press upon mine. So; bravely done, sweetheart! Now lay your arm about my neck, and promise me--by your tress which I wore, by my ring on your hand--you will not take the cloister vows, but will wait--let the time be long or brief--you will wait my coming!"

Obediently Rothada clasped her arms about the young sea-king's neck, and with her face hidden close against his tangled red-gold hair she answered him softly: "I promise, Olvir."

BOOK TWO

Surely know I
No love like your love
Among all men
On the mould abiding!
LAY OF GUDRUN.

CHAPTER I

He waxed under welkin in worth and honor
till the folk around him, far and near,
... hearkened to him.
BEOWULF.

Four long years had come and gone, and at last the dreaded loss had fallen upon the common folk of Vascon Land. The rule of the young Dane count, who from the first had dispensed a justice throughout his mark as keen and as bright as his Saracen sword, had come to an end. The king had at last given way to the request of Olvir, whose followers had become unutterably wearied of the small pleasure to be gained in hunting out thieves and lawless lords; and that he might do honor to his loyal liegemen, Karl had sent as special *missi* Abbot Fulrad and Count Gerold to take over the mark.

After the ceremony the *missi* had journeyed on to Toulouse to place the rulership in the hands of Count William, for he was the guardian of Louis, the survivor of the royal twins born at Casseneuil, whom Karl, a year since, had caused the Pope to anoint as King of Aquitania.

When they came sailing back down the Garonne from Toulouse, the *missi* found the five longships of the Norse fleet lying moored at Bordeaux, all newly refitted and scraped and painted, in readiness for the voyage north. So it chanced that the two Franks had clear proof of the nature of Olvir's rule; for the quays of the city swarmed with townfolk who had come to

bewail the departure of their just count.

"Ah, Olvir," cried Abbot Fulrad, as they boarded the Raven, "our lord king did well to keep you here in the South all these years. I doubt if the *missi* will bring such satisfying reports of William's rule."

"There will be some who will not grieve at my going," answered Olvir, meaningly. But the smile left his firm lips as he turned to gaze at the sorrowful crowds on the quays. Gerold, who came and stood beside the Northman, had lost little of his old-time boyishness; but Olvir's dark face was marked by the lines of rulership and shadowed by habitual thought. Floki could have told the curious guests that during the past two years his earl had spent no small part of his time in poring over the runes of the White Christ and the strange book of the Asiamen which Count Roland had brought to his foster-brother with the gem-pouch, out of Saragossa.

As the Raven at last cast off from the moorings and glided away down the Gironde in stately lead of the fleet, Olvir waved his hand to the weeping townfolk, and turned quietly to Abbot Fulrad.

"Liutrad has written fully of your bitter Saxon war," he said. "The heroes have met on the stricken field. Again you have beaten Wittikind back into the North, and men say that the war has been fought to a glorious end. Yet I have lain here in the South with sheathed sword, and--do not grieve."

"You may well say that, my son!" exclaimed Fulrad. "Far nobler are the victories of peace than war-won fame. If you have lost the wild joy of battle, you have gained the love of the folk you ruled, and a happiness--"

"Love and happiness? Ay; but not the love and happiness for which I long," sighed Olvir, and his hand went to the double strand of chestnut hair clasped around his throat. "Listen, Father Fulrad. Liutrad once wrote that he had told you of my betrothal. It was a secret which promised me joy; but it has brought me sorrow instead. Through all these years I have sent message after message to my little may, ever faithful to my pledge, ever longing for a word of love in answer. But she is silent,--she has forgotten me in your cold cloisters."

"Forgotten!" cried Gerold, in protest. But Fulrad made a hasty sign to him to be silent, and answered Olvir gravely: "Be patient, my son. Much may chance in so long a time. The maiden was yet a child. None can say whether or not she has forgotten you. However that may be, bear in mind that you have won high favor in the king's eye. That alone should give you joy."

"Nor have you altogether lacked the joy of battle, Olvir," added Gerold. "Liutrad has told me how, at the very first, you searched out the mountain Vascons in their fastnesses, and avenged the death of Roland."

"Vengeance? I found little joy in that. There was more in the finding of Ironbiter, my brother's sword, which he flung among the swart Saracens, and which Floki took from a dying Vascon. I 'd had enough of blood."

"No need to tell us, my son, how you turned to the arts of peace. You have ruled with wisdom; you have tempered justice with mercy. Few counts give heed to the welfare of those they rule. You, not content with the administration of justice, have aided the landfolk out of your own treasure. The Lombards whom you brought in have shown the folk better methods of tillage, and I hear that our own men have sought to teach the rude shipwrights of Bordeaux your Norse art of shipbuilding. Our lord king will not soon forget such deeds."

"If he approve them, why, then, does he deal so harshly with the Saxons?" demanded Olvir, with sudden heat. "No Frank pays the tithe he has put upon the forest-folk. He has taken away their cherished freedom, and saddled them with stern laws that will goad them to revolt."

"No, no, lad; only to crush out their stubborn heathenism."

"A sight for the heathen fiend-gods!--a world-hero priest-ridden!"

"Saint Michael, no, Olvir!" cried Gerold, and he burst into a boyish laugh. "You 'd not say that had you been with us in Rome. Listen! It is now some five years since one of the learned deacons found a parchment, under seal by the Kaiser Constantine, whom men call the Great, giving to the Holy Father the title to Rome and all Italy. Yet our lord king set aside the claim, and, as you know, caused the Holy Father to crown little Carloman as King of Italy, under the name of Pepin."

"By Thor! those are good tidings. I had not heard that part of the tale, though I heard of the crowning of the bairns. William of Toulouse saw to that. The short-nosed count wrote to me, in the name of King Louis of Aquitania, demanding aid in his war against the Saracens. I sent back word that the Count of the Vascon Mark was not the man of any bairn or of any bairn's nurse."

"We heard of that sending, Olvir, even in the Saxon Mark," said Gerold. "William did not trouble you the second time."

"No; but the shrewd Neustrian waited his chance, as you know. And now, by Thor, I'm done with all that. Like my sea-wolves, I 've sickened of this mild Southland. Ho for the gritting snow and the icy breath of the frost-giant!" and the sea-king thrust over the Raven's tiller to steer out into the open sea.

The voyage Rhineward was very boisterous for the season, and Abbot Fulrad spent much of his time on a cot beneath the Raven's quarter-deck. But Gerold proved himself a better sailor, and after the second day was able to keep his place with Olvir beside the tiller. Standing thus, with the noble ship beneath him racing at the head of the fleet, Gerold could not only comprehend, but could share in the Northman's keen enjoyment of the whistling gale and the high-leaping waves. He felt, as few landsmen might, the wild fascination of the viking life.

But when Olvir began to talk of Trondheim Fiord and the joys of a home visit, Gerold quickly sought to turn his thoughts back to the honors and friendships he had won in Frank Land. The king was eager to see his Dane hawk, and it was not right for Olvir to delay for even a short visit in the North. What might he not expect of the king's favor, when Worad, who was not half so learned, had been raised to the judgment-seat of the Count Palatine? Then there was Liutrad, beloved of all in the king's hall, and one of the foremost pupils in Alcuin's School of the Palace,--ah, yes, Alcuin! Surely Olvir would be eager to meet the famed Anglo-Saxon scholar, whom the king had at last induced to come to his court.

To all this Olvir listened with a cold ear. But when, having vainly tried to arouse interest by tales of Fastrada's unsuccessful suitors, and of her reputed dabbings in witchcraft with the Magian leech Kosru, Gerold at last gained leave of Fulrad to tell how the king had finally yielded to the wish of Hildegarde, and bidden Rothada to leave the Convent of Chelles, in which she had so long secluded herself, he struck the right note to stir his companion. He had then only to add the rumor that the king's purpose in compelling the presence of the daughter of Himiltrude was to betroth her to some outland king.

Here were tidings which touched Olvir to the quick. From the moment he heard them he was aflame to reach the Rhine and the hall of Karl. He might have been willing to forgo the king's favor; but the possibility of Rothada--the little vala--being betrothed to another roused all the tender love and affection which he felt toward the maiden, and intensified that love tenfold by a single touch of jealousy.

His should be the king's daughter, if it were within the power of man to win her! The thought that the king planned to give her to another stirred him to deepest anger, which, when it left his heart, gave place to a great longing to see again the little maiden's violet eyes and pure young face.

And so, while the Raven drove on up the stormy channel, the sea-king no longer saw rising before him the iron cliffs of old Norway. In his thoughts were now pictured the quiet convent garden of Chelles, and in that garden, walking among the roses with Gisela, his little may, sweeter than ever, and no longer a child.

CHAPTER II

It is marvel
And the red blood
Runs not as the rain
Runs in the street.

FINNESBURH.

When at last the gale-driven fleet sighted the dune shores of the old Rhine Mouth, and the ships steered in across the bar, no time was lost in beginning the ascent of the river. From a passing Frisian trader, the crews learned that war had broken out anew in Saxon Land; and after such tidings there was no need to urge the viking oarsmen to their benches whenever, in rounding the wide bends of the stream, the breeze chanced to come ahead. Olvir was not more eager than were they to reach Mayence, where both Abbot Fulrad and Gerold thought they might now look to find Karl and the court. When the *missi* started south, the king was about to leave for Aix, to

enjoy the warm baths, and plan the building of the grand palace and the domchurch, which were so long to commemorate his reign. By this time, however, he should have returned to the Rhinegau, to urge on the construction of the new palace of Ingleheim.

But as the fleet lay to for provisions at the great stone bridge of Constantine, which spanned the Rhine at Cologne, the monks of Saint Martin of the Isle brought full account of the bloody disaster at Sunthal, to avenge which Karl the King had a month since gathered a great host and swept north into Saxon Land.

The various stories of the battle, though contradictory on many points, all agreed as to the main outline. The Sorbs, taking advantage of the fact that the grim Count Rudulf lay at Fulda helpless from the goring of a wild boar, had stirred up trouble in their mark. To quiet them, Karl had levied a host, under the command of Count Worad, the High Marshal Gilo, and Adalgis the Chamberlain, and had unwisely added to the host a contingent of Saxons.

In the midst of the forest these Saxons had deserted and fled across Eastphalia, to join the great war-earl Wittikind, who had once more returned from Denmark with fire and sword. Following the deserters to the Weser, the Franks came upon a small host under the command of Count Teutoric of the Frisian Mark, who had counselled that all should join in a united attack on the Saxon camp.

But the jealous counts planned secretly to make the attack without the famed kinsman of the king. Thinking to overwhelm the Saxons by the impetuosity of their assault, they had rushed upon the Saxon war-hedges in wildest disorder; only to be caught by the crafty Wittikind as Herman, his great predecessor, had trapped the Roman Varus. The greater part of the Frankish host, including Adalgis, Gilo, and twenty counts, had been slaughtered, and Count Worad had barely managed to bring three hundred warriors out of the ambush.

After such tidings there was no longer holding the vikings in check. The ships were at once left in charge of a scanty ship-watch, and with the swiftness of a mounted levy the vikings swept north from the Rhine toward the Saxon Mark.

But near the Ruhr a rumor reached the eager band that the king was now at Fulda; and Olvir, at the urgent request of Abbot Fulrad, turned aside toward the monastery.

The march to Fulda across the war-trampled fields of Hesse was taken far more leisurely than the rush from the Rhine. The vikings had little heart for turning aside, and there was much grumbling among them at being cheated of the merry sword-play. Even at their slower pace, however, the third day found them close upon their journey's end, where they were fated to hear that which should cool the blood-fever of the grimmest berserk in their number.

Marching through the wild beech forest, the Norse band came upon Fulda late in the day. They found the half-cleared groves around the monastery filled with the booths of the Frankish host, and everywhere, by scores and by hundreds, the leathern-jerkined warriors were to be seen cooking their evening meal, or seated in groups to eat.

It was the time of day when the men of a victorious host should have broken into song and merriment. But a hush lay upon the Frankish camp, and the faces of the less brutal among the warriors bore the gloomy look of defeated men.

Uneasy with forebodings of evil, Abbot Fulrad spurred on to the monastery to see the king, and Gerold rode with him. Confident in the speed of Zora to overtake them, Olvir waited to direct the arrangement of the viking camp; but a quarrel between two berserks delayed him longer than he had intended. He had at last pacified the angry men, and was about to spring upon Zora, when Liutrad Erlingson came galloping through the wood, afire with eagerness to greet his beloved earl. Leaping from the saddle, he flung his arms about Olvir and held him fast, too overjoyed to speak.

Olvir met the bear-like hug with a grip that forced the breath from the broad chest of his captor, and then, slipping eel-like from the massive arms, he stepped back to view the young giant.

Like Gerold, Liutrad had not yet lost all his boyishness of look and bearing. His blue eyes lacked none of their old-time frankness, and his ruddy face still showed to the world the kindly spirit which dwelt within. Yet across his forehead was drawn a newly creased line, and there was a look in his eyes which even his joy at the meeting could not altogether hide.

"How now, son of Erling?" demanded Olvir. "Have the Christian priests taken the heart from your breast? You look as do these moody Franks. Has the whole Christian host seen a bloody guardian-sprite?"

"Ah, Christ! do not speak of blood!" cried Liutrad, and he threw up his arm before his eyes.

"Read me the riddle, then," rejoined Olvir. "I wait."

"Would that another might tell that tale, ring-breaker! Holy Mother! I see all again,--the bloody swords, the headless slain splashing into the Aller!"

"Thor!" muttered Olvir. "I had yet to learn that Christians could sicken at thought of sword-play."

"Sword-play! sword-play!" echoed Liutrad. "It was no sword-play, earl; it was slaughter."

"Out with it, lad. You speak in riddles."

"Yet it seems to me, earl, that the wide world must have thundered with the tidings. But listen. When the king in his wrath swept north through Saxon Land, Wittikind fled back again to Nordmannia, and all the forest-dwellers stooped beneath the heel of the Frank. At Verden, on the Aller, the king called before him the earls and elders of the Saxon folk. They came in a multitude, crying out against Wittikind, who had stirred them to take up the sword, and submitted themselves humbly to the will of the king. Some were thrust forward by their fellows, and many more stood out of themselves to meet, as leaders of the revolt, the expected doom. But the king was in no mood to content himself with so small a vengeance. The blood-mist was before his eyes,--he was maddened by the harrying of the forest-wolves. Of all the high-born Saxons,--four thousand and more earls and elders,--not one was spared. In a single day the heads of all were hewn off and their bodies cast into the Aller. The stream flowed red into the Weser,--God grant I soon forget that sight!"

Again Liutrad flung up his arm before his eyes, and stood shuddering. Olvir waited, silent and seemingly calm; but the lines about his mouth drew tense, and his dark eyes gazed past Liutrad into vacancy.

When the son of Erling dropped his arm, Olvir turned on his heel, without a word, and started to lead Zora back to his tent.

"Stay, earl!" exclaimed Liutrad. "The king will be waiting to welcome you."

"He may wait," answered Olvir, very quietly, and he kept on until lost to view beneath the striped viking tilt from which fluttered his starred banner.

When Liutrad, after greeting Floki and the crews, presently ventured to peer into Olvir's tent, he saw him seated beside a torch, alternately reading marked passages in a pair of use-worn books. One of the books was new to Liutrad, both in binding and script; but the other he at once recognized as Otkar Jotuntop's Greek Gospels. At his cry of surprise, Olvir bade him enter and be seated, and then resumed his reading; but now he read aloud.

CHAPTER III

Too baleful vengeance

Wroughtest thou.

WHETTING OF GUDRUN.

Vainly did Karl the King look that night for the coming of his Dane hawk. Neither Olvir nor Liutrad stirred from the viking camp. Nor did they go out in the morning until the king sent Gerold to call Olvir before him.

Though the bidding was worded in terms of heartiest praise, and though Gerold spoke it with the delight of one who sees a beloved friend about to attain the highest honors, Floki alone heard the message with pleasure. Liutrad turned quickly to his earl, with a troubled look, as though he dreaded some rash outburst. But his dread was baseless. Olvir showed neither delight nor anger. As quietly as he had led Zora back to the tent the evening before, he now called for the mare, and rode off to do the king's bidding.

Very shortly the three riders came to the monastery gates and entered the great courtyard. At the door of the hospice they leaped off, and, without pausing to exchange greeting with the counts who stood about the yard, turned at once to enter. As they passed through the doorway, Olvir stepped before his companions and gazed up the long guest-hall. Beyond the square of white light which poured down through the roof-hole, he perceived a group of men in the semi-gloom at the far end of the room. The king stood with his back to the entrance; but Olvir knew him at once by his powerful figure and the stateliness of his bearing.

Then, in turn, he made out Abbot Fulrad and Count Hardrat, old Rudulf of the Sorb Mark, and Baugulf, who had been chosen abbot in the year 780, when the venerable Sturm departed this life. There was one other present,--a stooped, thin-faced priest, unknown to Olvir.

The three young warriors had hardly crossed the threshold when Rudulf's slit eyes caught sight of them. At his guttural exclamation, Karl faced about and peered down the hall. In a moment he had recognized Olvir by the brightness of his mail, and was advancing with swift strides to meet him. The counts and priests followed, Rudulf supported between the two abbots.

Olvir and the king met in the full light beneath the roof-hole. The Northman's face was pale and stern, and as he halted, he raised his hand in formal salute. But Karl gave no heed to this coldness. His great hands clasped Olvir by the shoulders, and he stood beaming down into the young man's hard-set face.

"Greeting! greeting to my just steward,--to my bright Dane!" he cried. "We grieve that you no longer rule over the folk of Vascon Land; but greater is our joy to welcome you in our presence."

Olvir quivered beneath the royal praise as though he had been struck, and his face flushed hotly. But, curbing his anger, he gazed direct into the king's eyes and answered with cold deliberation: "For whatever I have done, lord king, I have been repaid in full. Once the praise of the King of the Franks would have tasted sweet in my mouth; now gall is not more bitter."

A cry of amazement burst from the lips of the priests and counts, and Karl himself stepped back, frowning and bewildered.

"How now, Olvir?" he demanded. "What riddle is this?"

"A simple one, lord king. I've had my fill of Christian ways. I would be faring over the whale-road, to a land where even the mad berserk slaughters only in the heat of battle."

"*Heu! heu!* down with the traitor!" shouted Rudulf and Hardrat in a breath, and the red-faced count tore his sword from its sheath. But Karl, with a sweeping side-stroke, like the blow of a lion's paw, met Hardrat's forward spring, and flung him sprawling upon the rushes.

For a little, while the others stood staring, some flushed and indignant, others pale with anxiety for their outland friend, Karl gazed down upon the Northman, his broad chest slowly heaving beneath his folded arms. Presently the look of half-angry wonderment which had seamed his face with deep lines gave place to a calm like that of his daring reproacher. He extended his hand, and replied to Olvir, not as the over-lord of half Europe to his retainer, but as man to man.

"Friend," he said with simple dignity, "you charge me with cold slaughter. God judge if I was cold! Had I not looked upon a harried land,--upon desecrated churches, upon priests and monks of God, helpless women and babes tortured with fiendish cruelty? Cold! My reproach is that I doomed the murderous traitors while wrath inflamed my soul. However stern the judgment, the judge should not speak in anger. That alone I regret."

"Whether the sword fell in anger or in coldness, what Christian can justify such a slaying?" rejoined Olvir.

"Upon my head be it!" answered Karl, firmly. "If I have done wrong, mine is the retribution. But by the King of Heaven, I swear, I stand here with a clear conscience. Listen, Olvir. Your wits are keen as your sword; you have eyes. You shall look into my heart and see what I have set before me as the aim of my lifework. If when you have looked, you would still be faring, I shall not urge you to stay."

"Beware, lord king," growled Rudulf. "Would you tell the riddles of your kingcraft into the ears of this heathen Dane?"

"Silence, old wolf!" commanded Karl. "Who has better proved his trustiness than the Count of Vascon Land? But your warning comes in good season. I speak with Count Olvir alone."

Hushed by the rebuke, all silently withdrew with the Grey Wolf to where Hardrat stood brooding over his humiliation. When they were beyond ear-shot, Karl turned to the Northman, his face aglow with inward light.

"Again, Olvir, I call you friend," he began. "It is a precious word in the heart of a king; for it is seldom he can so name any man. I bear in mind how even at the first, at Casseneuil, you uttered words that were bitter, yet wholesome. I were a witling if I failed to value at the full one who has proved himself a just ruler,--one who dares speak his heart's thought in the face of a king, recking nothing of the king's disfavor. In all my realm I can name only two such men,--yonder deacon, whom men call Alcuin the Scholar, and yourself."

"He--Alcuin of York?"

"The Northumbrian. Why have I drawn the pale student from his island home, and made him gift of abbeys and lands? Be sure it is not alone that he is learned and the priests of my realm are unlearned,--not alone that he shall be a light to illumine the night of our ignorance. Rather is it

that he, like yourself, Olvir, is a man who puts truth first and the king second. Therefore I have honored him, and therefore I shall honor you. I shall do for you that which tears my very heart-strings. The day when you bow to our Lord Christ in baptism, that day I will betroth to you Rothada, my daughter."

Abruptly Karl paused and looked at the Northman. Olvir stood staring, half-dazed. He had steeled himself to meet reproach, anger, even flattery; but this mode of attack was unforeseen. All too clearly he realized the full meaning of the king's words; he had only to comply, and honors, power, riches, love, the little vala,--all were his. A deep flush reddened his dark face; his eyes sank before the king's kindly smile, and for a while he stood speechless. But then the flush faded from his cheeks, and he looked up, calm as before, and his eyes glowing with a strange light.

"My lord king has honored me with his praise," he said. "Yet he bids me stay, not because he has justified the bloody deed of Verden, but because by staying I may win a bride. It is a tempting offer. Were the maiden here before me, I doubt if I should have strength to withstand it; and then your Majesty would be certain loser. Should I sell my truth, even at such a price, the king's truthful friend would be farther away than Trondheim Fiord."

Karl studied the speaker with a steady gaze, and at the end smiled in keenest satisfaction.

"I have not wittingly tempted you, Olvir," he replied. "It was in no sense as a bargain that I spoke of Rothada. Yet I rejoice at this added proof of your worth. Listen now to the aim of my statecraft. If I do not justify my ways in your sight, I bid you God-speed."

"Do not believe, sire, that I long to go. I can value at its true worth the friendship of one whom I know to be a world-hero, and--and I have not forgotten my little may."

"Friendship and maiden,--both shall be yours, Olvir, if my tongue can make clear what is in my heart. You charge me with slaughter. The King of Heaven is my witness whether I wage war for blood. If I seek dominion, I seek it for the good of men and the fulfilment of God's will. Were you not a heathen, I would bid you read that grand writing,--Augustine's 'City of God.'"

"As to Christian writings, sire, I am content with the words of the White Christ," replied Olvir.

Karl gazed fixedly at the Northman, his brows gathered in deep thought.

"I wish that you had read Augustine's 'City,'" he repeated. "It would make plain to you the course of my statecraft. But it seems that I must light the way myself. First, I would have you look at the world through my eyes. If yours then see a difference, I ask you to tell me. Now let us gaze out upon the wide world, Olvir. What do we see in the East?--that vast giant of the past, the Empire of the East Romans, within a hundred years shorn of Egypt and Africa, of Armenia and Syria, by the fiery Saracens, before whose attacks the Christian Marks still crumble and wane. Look to the South,--that same pagan horde, winners and still fast holders of nine parts of the Christian Goth realm. Look to the Northeast,--hordes of savage Wends and Avars, waiting only a new Attila to sweep Europe with a second Hunnic harrying. Does my Dane hawk see?"

"I see, lord king."

"Then look beyond Rhine Stream, into the forests whence came Burgundians and Lombards, Allemanni and Bavarians, and my own folk, the tribes of the Franks. I have heard told the great story of the past,--how, one and then another, the wild hordes of the North came swarming from their forests, to crush and trample the Western Empire. They slew the priests of Holy Church, and trampled under foot all learning and goodness and art, until God, in His grace, bent Clovis the Merwing to His will."

"A word, lord king. I, too, have heard how the free forest-folk broke the sway of the subtle Romans. Who looks for praise on the lips of his foe? Bear in mind, sire, those who wrote the tale. Were not the scribes Romans? And what destruction of good could there be, when their own scribes who went before told how the realm was tainted throughout with utter foulness? The heathen warriors of the forest at least honored women and truth, and were free men. If, through contact with the Christian Romans, they forgot those traits--"

"Stay a little, lad. Is the Frank more false, more impure than the Saxon?"

"If Otkar spoke truth, lord king, the Saxons are purer than the Franks, and they are free; while in Frank Land I see a race of free men fast sinking into thralldom. As to the falseness of the Saxon, has not the forest-dweller learned the use of lies from across Rhine Stream?"

"My faith, you strike hard! But whether or no I give assent to that, it matters little. At the least, the heathen hosts of old-time shattered the peace and order of Rome. Where was peace, came war; where was safety, came peril. Order was swept away, and confusion reigned; and still it reigns throughout the Western World. But--listen, Olvir--I have set for myself the task of bringing again the old-time peace and order. Within my kingdom and upon my borders, where

men are now given over to brute lust and murder, they shall learn to bend to just laws. Count and bishop, abbot and judge, free man and slave,--all hearts shall enshrine the image of our Lord Christ!"

Flushed with self-aroused ardor, Karl looked inquiringly at his stern-faced listener.

Olvir was staring straight before him, intent on the words of the royal speaker. It was evident that his doubts were not yet satisfied, and so, after a moment's pause, Karl spoke on: "What more need I say, Olvir? You have seen how the heathen hedge in my kingdom on three sides,--how within my borders the mass of my own folk drag upon my skirts with the weight of their ignorance and sinful living. Even I must at times bend and smile,--must swallow the gibe, and stoop to some landed lordling whose benefice was bestowed upon his father by my father, yet which he now makes pretence of holding by the new and unlawful claim of heritage. Does the son of Thorbiorn believe that I am one to eat with pleasure a dish so seasoned? Yet I smile and bide my time. My thought is other than of kingly dignity. Before all else I have set my task to bring about peace and order and enlightenment; and there, by God's grace, shall it stand, until my realm has passed out of the night of ignorance into the full day of bright learning,--until justice reigns throughout my kingdom, as for these four years past it has reigned in Vascon Land."

"By Thor!" cried Olvir, "now do I see! You, sire, are even such a king as was sought by Socrates the Greek,--a golden king, a king who loves wisdom."

"I have heard of that Greek. You shall tell me of his words another time. Now I seek to justify my deeds. Already you give praise, yet I will speak further. Weigh well what I have said,--the task I would work out; the dangers I must withstand. I have not named all which threaten my realm. There is yet another looming in the future,--one which I should have no need to name to you. Beyond the forests and fens of Saxon Land I see rising a cloud black with menace to Christendom. Am I blind, my Dane hawk? Have I not watched with a heedful eye the bearing of your sea-wolves? Have I not measured in battle the shock of those fierce warriors who follow Wittikind from Sigfrid's realm? Your folk are at home both on land and sea. Where your own ships have come, others will follow, and there will not always be king's daughters to turn their crews from harrying. I foresee a great peril in the North. My sons will have enough to defend the long coast lines of Neustria and Frisia, without the open door of a heathen Saxon land for your wild Dane folk to enter. Therefore I press upon the rebellious Saxons with my whole power, that I may crush out the last spark of their savagery and heathenism. I have been mild,--I have sought to win them by kindness. But they have rebelled many times, and, not content with bowing to their fiend-gods, they have harried my borders with fire and sword. Must I then forgo vengeance because the oath-breakers come before me to seek pardon, their hands yet red with the blood of priests and babes? No, by the King of Heaven! I have wreaked fitting vengeance upon the murderers. Once for all time I have crushed the forest-wolves. Now, what says my bright Dane?"

Olvir stood silent for a while, tapping the jewelled hilt of Al-hatif. Then he answered deliberately: "I have weighed well your words, sire, and now wish to remain your liegeman. Already I knew you a world-hero; you have proved yourself yet more,--a king who seeks first the welfare of his people. Yet do not mistake me, lord king. Though, in the eyes of men, your task and the ruthless harrying by your foe may justify that bloody deed, I still hold that nowhere can you find justification in the words of the White Christ. Yet more, I hold that by this deed you have also failed in kingcraft."

"How then?" demanded Karl. "If it cow the forest-wolves, there will be more saved in blood and woe--"

"But will it daunt those sons of Odin?" broke in Olvir. "The Saxon is no soft Aquitanian or Romanized Lombard. Does the she-wolf run when her young are struck? Rather, she turns and rends the hunter. So shall the forest-dwellers rush to attack you."

"God forbid! If such be the fruit of Verden, I will freely own myself at fault. But such shall not be. The stiff-necked heathen are broken. And now, enough of that which is past. I again hold you to be what you have proved yourself these four years gone,--a friend and a helper in my lifework."

"I cannot pledge my followers, lord king. They are free vikings, not henchmen. They may go, or they may stay. But I can pledge myself. In the days to come, it will be fair cause for boasting that one has had a hand with Karl the King in the uplifting of men."

"True, lad; and I welcome your learning and keen wit even as I welcome the wisdom of yonder scholar. Ho, Brother Alcuin, come forward with your fellows! Come, greet my bright Dane!"

At the bidding, the thin-faced deacon advanced before the counts and abbots and saluted Olvir gravely.

"In the name of our Lord Christ," he said, "I greet joyfully the high earl who in deed, if not in word, has ruled his earldom as a true Christian."

"Yet I am no Christian," answered Olvir. "The sayings of the White Christ are hard to live. I follow such as lie within my strength. In time I may gain strength to follow more; but he who has been reared to manhood with a bared sword in his hand is slow to forget the joy of battle. At the least, I shall never fetter the wit which God has given me, nor stoop from my freedom to the yoke of your church. If you Christian priests can read the words of the White Christ, so can I. But I would not contend. You have come with the lamp of learning to lighten the gloom of our lord king's broad realm. I rejoice with him at your coming, and whatever of power lies within me, I give it freely and gladly in aid of the good work."

"Young man," interposed Abbot Baugulf, "before you offer your aid, you should first seek to know whether such would be acceptable in the sight of God. Has He need of heretics to do His holy work? We hope the charge may prove untrue; but I grieve to say that many times word has come from the Southland of how you made a scoff of Holy Church, and of the first bishop of Christ's fold, His Holiness the Pope; how, with sacrilegious force, you went so far as to drag from holy sanctuary--from the very altar of God's temple--one who had thrown himself upon the mercy of our Heavenly Father."

"That is a lie, lord abbot," answered Olvir, coolly. "I and my men sat down around the church, and after a time the slayer crept out to meet his doom. If one may not enter a wrongdoer's house to force out the guilty owner, much less should one force the nothing from God's house. I did not break sanctuary; you have given ear to a lie."

"Lie or not, it would be fitting for you first to bow to the vicar of our Lord Christ before you thrust yourself into Christ's service."

"Brother," interposed Fulrad, "what do we eat,--the kernel or the husk? The learned Alcuin has spoken of Count Olvir's righteous deeds in Vascon Land; you speak of the false tales sent out by those who sought to withstand the justice of their lawful ruler. Count Gerold and myself have searched closely into the affairs of the Vascon Mark. I need only mention the year of famine, when Count Olvir sold a fourth of the gems of his Saracen treasure, and gave the price in alms to the poor of his mark. He may be unorthodox in name, but his deeds were surely Christian."

"If Father Fulrad speaks for peace, I will also seek to curb my tongue," said Olvir.

"And none shall goad you, my son. We will stand together in good acts, and avoid the strife of tongues."

"My bright Dane is free to speak at all times," interposed Karl, quickly. "None the less, the thought is good. Our searchings for truth shall be without bitterness. The land is now at peace, and we go to Thionville, to set about the great task of order and learning."

"God speed the good work!" cried Abbot Baugulf, and all around echoed the prayer.

CHAPTER IV

Green go the ways
Toward the hall of Guiki,
That the fates show forth
To those who fare thither;
There the rich king
Reareth a daughter.

LAY OF REGIN.

The most subtle courtiership could not have gained for Olvir half the honors which his bold stand for truth had won for him by confirming the esteem and friendship of the king. But Karl, like all great leaders, looked for unstinted service in turn for unstinted honors. And so it was that even before the Frankish host moved Rhineward, he singled out the young Northman to go with Gerold and Abbot Fulrad as special *missi* to Italy.

To Rome and back was no short journey. After a tedious delay over the affairs of Pope Hadrian, there were months to be spent aiding old Barnard in settling the administration of the

new Kingdom of Italy. So that summer and autumn had passed, and the December snows lay white on the banks of the Moselle, when at last the three came back from the Southland.

They had lain over-night at Metz, and as the roads were fair, the sixteen miles which made up the last stage of their long journey was covered with ease during the forenoon. A little short of Thionville, they stopped at an inn for the noon meal. Then, after Olvir had groomed Zora, and all three had looked to their dress, they rode on quietly toward the villa.

The first to greet the wayfarers were a party of vikings who had been hunting up the Moselle. At their head stalked Floki the Crane, and beside him rode Pepin Hunchback and young Karl, to whom the tall giant had been teaching woodcraft.

It was a question who were most delighted over the unexpected meeting,—the king's sons or their Norse guard. All crowded around the *missi*, with shouts of welcome, so that it was some little time before the party could move on. Then Gerold and Abbot Fulrad rode ahead with the king's sons, and Olvir followed in the midst of his overjoyed warriors. The young earl's own face was aglow; but, true leader as he was, he lost no time in learning the condition of his men. He had no need to ask twice. At the first question, Floki pointed down the Moselle bank to the ship-sheds and the high-peaked Norse hall in the midst of the viking huts.

"All's well with your sea-wolves, ring-breaker," he croaked. "We have thatched enough roofs to shelter every head, and the Frank king gives with an open hand."

"Good! Now I will ride on with my fellow heralds, to speak our tidings to the king. But I will be with you by nightfall, old Crane," replied Olvir; and, at a word, Zora leaped forward to the side of Abbot Fulrad's ambling mule.

There were none but house-slaves at the villa gate to greet the *missi*. The greater number of the courtiers were sleeping after the noon meal. Gerold would have called the doorward; but Pepin and young Karl ran ahead to their father's chamber, and themselves announced the wayfarers. As the three paused at the curtained doorway, the king's voice, clear and resonant with pleasure, called upon them to enter.

Fulrad at once thrust aside the curtains and stepped within the chamber, followed closely by his journey mates. Karl, who had been lying upon a fur-heaped couch, was already on his feet, gathering his long cloak about his half-clad shoulders. As Fulrad and Gerold advanced to kiss his extended hand, Liutrad, who had been alone with him in the room, reading from Augustine, flung down the book, and ran to meet Olvir.

"Welcome, ring-breaker!" he cried; "thrice welcome, in the name of our Lord Christ!"

"Greeting, lad, in the name of Truth and Life," rejoined Olvir, and, gripping the young giant in his arms, he lifted him clean off his feet, in the sheer joy of friendship. As they parted, an eager question as to Rothada sprang to his lips; but the answer was interrupted by the king's imperious call: "You, too, my bright Dane! I would look again into those eyes of starlit darkness."

"It would seem that your Majesty has been studying skald-craft," replied Olvir, and he sprang forward, his black eyes sparkling.

Karl's powerful hands closed upon his shoulders, and the clear grey eyes gazed down into his face, aglow with friendliness.

"Welcome, Olvir, in the words of Liutrad," he said. "Christ is Truth and Life, and you have both in good share. What says Father Fulrad?"

"His deeds, sire, abound in the spirit of Christ. If only he would bend his stiff knee to Christ's vicar!" murmured Fulrad, regretfully. "Even the very presence of the Holy Father failed to move him to reverence."

A slight cloud shadowed the king's face; but soon a smile again brightened it, and he answered confidently: "Give him time,—give the lad time, father. He has found the true kernel; the rest will follow. I look for yourself and Alcuin to win him over before the springtime. And now to the matters of your mission. The school hour is drawing near. Go, my sons; hold watch in the hall to warn us, lest we keep the learned deacon waiting."

"First, a word to the bairns, lord king," interposed Olvir, and he sprang to catch young Karl as the active boy was darting past, in lead of his crook-backed brother.

"Say out," answered the king, smiling in response to the gleeful shout of the boy as Olvir swung him arm's length overhead. Olvir lowered the boy, to place one hand on his tawny head. The other he rested on Pepin's glossy locks, so like the chestnut tresses of his sister.

"Listen, lads," he said. "Yule-tide draws near, and my vikings will be having games. It is fitting that the king's sons should prove themselves skilled in weapon-play. Come to me in the morning, that I may see how well the grey Crane has trained you in our Norse games."

"We have not lacked willingness to learn, Lord Olvir," replied Pepin, and his pale face flushed

with pleasure as he caught the approving smile of his hero-count.

"Not we, by Thor!" cried young Karl, and he thumped his sturdy little chest with a red-knuckled fist. "I shot a roebuck, and Pepin a stag of ten tynes; and we--we trailed a boar."

"Which, I am minded, would have ended in two king's sons the less, little boaster, had not Floki and I trailed you in turn," broke in Liutrad.

"But we 'd already struck the quarry, Lord Olvir! My spear--"

"Go; go, lads," interposed the king, with kindly impatience. "Another time you can tell of your deadly fray. Now we have matters of state before us."

Pepin immediately ran from the chamber; but young Karl lingered for a moment to whisper in Olvir's ear: "Wait for me to tell of the boar. I want to tell."

"There goes a king's son," observed Olvir, as the boy darted away.

Karl nodded: "You say well, Olvir. He is my main hope; he shall be first among his brothers. My people would not stomach the luckless son of Himiltrude. Though the eldest, Pepin is not fitted in mind to stand before the others. Yet he shall have his fair portion. I trust to you four, above all others, to see that the son through whom Heaven has afflicted me for my sins shall not suffer loss in the allotting of my realm."

"We give heedful ear to your Majesty's wish," replied Fulrad. "And now let me deliver the last letter of His Holiness."

With the words, he turned to fumble among the scrolls which crowded his scrip; but before he could pick out the Pope's missive, Pepin and young Karl came running back, with word that Deacon Alcuin was in waiting.

Their father rose at once and signed to the abbot.

"Another time, Fulrad," he said. "Come now and see our school."

CHAPTER V

Out then went Sigurd,
The great king's well-loved,
From the speech and the sorrow,
Sore drooping, sore grieving.
VOLSUNGA SAGA.

As the king passed down the main corridor of the villa with Fulrad, Liutrad touched the arm of his earl, and Olvir, giving instant heed to the sign, dropped behind Gerold and the chattering young Franks.

"What now, lad?" he asked, as the others hastened on.

For several paces Liutrad walked along beside him without replying. Then, his eyes fixed upon the stone pavement, he stammered slowly: "Ring-breaker,--friend,--I must speak out! You yourself first taught me runes, and so--and so--but already you 're aware how I 've been drawn to the White Christ. I know you 'll not be harsh. There are Alcuin and Deacon Paul and many others,--they speak powerfully. I am almost persuaded to become a monk."

"A monk!" cried Olvir. "Has it come to this? Would that long since I had called you aboard ship and sailed away to Trondheim Fiord! The son of Erling a monk!--a beggarly, wifeless, kinless, childless *thing!* By Thor, sooner would I strike you dead! Can you not yourself read and put into deed the runes of the White Christ? Did He not take part in the wedding feast at Cana?"

"True, Olvir; and I know well your horror of the cloisters. I, too, have felt that loathing."

"You may well say loathing! Man is here on earth to live,--to live in fulness of life, abounding in health and strength for the joy and uplifting alike of himself and of others. What, then, is more holy than wedlock and the rearing of strong sons and pure daughters for the welfare of the land?"

"Enough, earl," replied Liutrad, in a low voice. "I shall never become a monk. But I long to give myself to Christ. The secular clergy--"

"Rather, to the Bishop of Rome. You 'd shear off your long locks to become the thrall of a woman-clad Roman. But the evil is less than I dreaded. Fulrad has told me of the king's friendship for you. Before many years we may look to see Karl name you a bishop. As such, you 'd

hold no small measure of power and wealth,--a mitred priest-earl, with all the gold and wares and lands of your bishopric to give or take according to your own will. You could do no little good among the downtrodden poor folk. So; it might be worse. When I sail home again to Lade, I shall not have to speak of the son of Erling with face downcast, but can name him in full voice a high liegeman of the Frank king,--an earl of the White Christ."

"May it be long before you leave us, Olvir!" exclaimed Liutrad, and he paused to clasp the hands of his gravely smiling companion. Then together they followed the Franks into the great hall of the villa.

After the ornate magnificence of the Roman basilicas, the audience-chamber appeared far less imposing to Olvir than would have been the case before his Italian mission. Interesting as were the hunting trophies and the rich tapestries which decorated the wall, he was more attracted by the gaily clad group of lords and clergy about the dais.

As the courtiers parted before the king, Olvir's gaze fell upon the crafty, shrivelled face of Kosru, the Magian leech, side by side with Count Hardrat's bloated visage. Though more sober in look than of old, the Thuringian's eyes had acquired a furtive glance, and his features had grown much harsher in outline.

"There stand an odd pair of scholars for the Engleman," muttered Olvir.

"You mean Hardrat and the Asiaman. The old leech has long been known as a searcher for lore; but that such a one as my red pig should show, little less hunger for knowledge than the king himself is, to say the least, very strange. It is even said that he takes part with the leech and Fastrada in their study of the black art. Heaven forfend, ring-breaker, that the daughter of Rudulf seek to weave again the spell which she cast on you in the Southland!"

"Never fear, lad; I 've seen the werwolf's teeth once. There is no need for a second sight."

"Yet I beg you to beware, Olvir. From Kosru, the maiden has had the gift of a ring set with magic opal. The hues of the wonderful gem shift and change like the tints of the maiden's eyes. Few can withstand the power of that spell; nor has the maiden lost the charm of her beauty. In face, as in form, she is lovelier than ever."

"Forewarned, forearmed," rejoined Olvir. "And I bear a charm to withstand all the spells of the Thuringian,--the memory of a little child-maid."

"Rothada! She came again from Chelles not a fortnight since. Our lord king gave her leave to go back when you fared away to Italy. But see; the king beckons to us. No; it is to Abbot Fulrad. Yet we should be seeking our places; the others draw up their benches. And here comes the queen. The school will soon open."

"Lead on," said Olvir, eager to draw nearer the private passage by which Hildegarde and her maidens were entering the hall. Liutrad advanced at once; but the move failed to bring his earl that which he sought. Hildegarde had paused just across the threshold, to meet the boisterous welcome of Gerold; and while brother and sister exchanged greetings, Olvir looked in vain for the face he longed to see among the half-score of maidens who slipped into the hall behind the queen. While he yet stood there, disappointed and hesitating, the queen turned to him from Gerold.

"Welcome to my lord's bright Dane!" she said. "I see, Olvir, that your wrist is still burdened with my ring."

"I have never ceased to wear it, dear dame, with reverence and gratitude for the giver," replied Olvir, as he bowed to kiss the queen's extended hand.

Hildegarde gazed graciously into his dark face, and answered him with quiet earnestness: "We seek to make you a gift, Olvir, far more precious than any ring,--a pearl beyond price. There is now but one thing in the way,--your resistance to the voice of Holy Church. You have won a warm place in our hearts, Olvir. Consider well, and do not let your pride bar your way into Christ's fold."

"I shall weigh the matter with utmost care," said Olvir; and the answer brought a glow to the anxious face of the queen. But while Liutrad and her brother escorted the royal dame to the dais, he stood lost in thought, his eyes fixed upon the rushes at his feet.

He was aroused by a well-remembered voice, whose soft murmur would have been inaudible but for its sibilance: "Welcome to Count Olvir! Will he not let bygones be bygones, and swear the peace-oath?"

Olvir started and stared keenly about him. On his right, framed as it were by the curtained doorway, and almost within arm's length, stood the daughter of Rudulf, gazing at him from beneath her drooping lashes with an indescribable look,--a half-smile, full of insolence and dread, of love and hate. For the moment all the wild whirl of conflicting emotions which the unexpected

sight of her former lover had aroused in the Thuringian's breast stood out plain to view on her face, through its court-mask of dissimulation.

Olvir had no need to look twice to assure himself that Liutrad was not mistaken when he spoke of the maiden's ripened beauty. She had certainly lost none of her former loveliness, and art had added no little to her charms. The purple dress, cut low after the latest Frankish fashion, suggested every soft curve of the girl's rounded form; her brown hair, with its gleams of gold, was bound by a diadem of all but queenly splendor; while the fingers of her right hand were covered with gem-rings half to the tips. But on her left hand, which she held out to the Northman, there was only one ornament,—the ring whose reputed magical powers had caused Liutrad so much uneasiness. It was fashioned of two miniature serpents, one black, the other red, which held in their jaws an opal of great size and peculiar fire.

For a moment Olvir stood hesitating; then he took the girl's hand, and answered her gravely: "I take the peace offered by Count Rudulf's daughter. There is a saying that those who have broken betrothal bonds can never join in friendship. I trust that with us it may prove otherwise. At the least, I shall seek to heal the wrong which I wrought against you."

"And I, Olvir!" murmured the girl, the rich blood leaping to her cheeks. "I give thanks for your—friendship. We were not fated to meet under the same roof with cold hearts."

"True, maiden. The past is past. I rejoice that you would now bury it, and accept friendship instead of bitterness."

A look too subtle even for the Northman's eyes flitted across the girl's face, and she tightened the handclasp which he was relaxing.

"It is then peace and—friendship," she said. "Come; the questions begin,—Deacon Alcuin fingers his scrolls. Yonder is a bench behind the others. You shall sit beside me and enlighten my dull wit."

"As you will," replied Olvir, and he turned at once to comply.

As the couple seated themselves on a bench in the rear of the main group of students, Alcuin selected one of the scrolls handed him by his pupils, and bowed to the king.

"Your Majesty, all is in readiness," he said.

At the word, Karl glanced about the hall. All present except Alcuin were now seated; but the king gazed up and down the benches until he caught sight of Olvir. Then he nodded and replied: "It is well; the lesson will now begin. Summon all your lore, my dear teacher. We have with us to-day a new-comer whose wits are keen as his sword."

"Such learning, sire, as I have gained from the Holy Fathers, I stand ready to impart. But who may say that he knows all of wisdom? Not even Solomon, son of David, could so claim."

"What is wisdom?" queried Karl.

"The fruit of knowledge,—the soul of learning."

"And learning?"

"The inscribed knowledge of the ancients."

"What says my bright Dane to that?"

Olvir started up at the question, and saluted the king.

"I am over-new in this game to take active part, sire," he said. "I do not even know its rules."

"Another time, then, lad. You will soon learn our ways. We will now follow the lessons set for the day. Worad was to question Alcuin on dialectics."

As the young Frank rose to confront the master, Olvir sat down again beside Fastrada, and fell to musing, heedless alike of the learned disputants and of his fair benchmate.

In the midst of his reverie, he was roused by Fastrada, who, under cover of Alcuin's voice, leaned over and whispered softly: "Look, my hero friend. Here comes one whom I doubt if you can name. Though she has not yet taken the veil, Gisela has all but made a nun of her."

"How? Ah!"

Rothada had come in by the queen's entrance, and was already close at hand, gliding silently over the rushes. It was little wonder that Olvir, after the first quick start of recognition, sat staring at the king's daughter, with lips parted and black eyes glistening. He did not see the Rothada for whom he had looked. That gay, bright-eyed child-maid was gone, and in her stead was a maiden no less lissome than the little vala, but taller, and grave with habitual meditation. The slight pallor of her face, together with the spirituality of its look, gave to her features an ethereal—almost unearthly—beauty.

As she was about to pass by, unconscious of his presence, Olvir uttered a stifled cry. Rothada looked down, and met his eager gaze. At sight of him she halted, as though struck, and he could see her eyes widen and darken with doubt and vague dread. Her first impulse apparently was to

hasten on; but she checked herself, and was about to speak, when she chanced to catch Fastrada's look of insolent triumph. At that a flush rose in her white cheeks, and without a word of greeting she passed quickly by to her stool, on the dais beside Hildegarde.

For a moment Olvir sat staring in utter bewilderment. Then the hot blood leaped into his face, and he sprang to his feet. Heedless of the disputing scholars, of the Thuringian, with her short-lived triumph, of the king himself, he stalked down the hall, his head high, and his eyes flashing.

CHAPTER VI

One I loved,
One and none other,
The gold-decked may.

LAY OF SIGURD.

For several days Olvir avoided the villa, pleading the need of overlooking the affairs of his men. At last, however, Karl himself, chancing to pass through the viking camp from a hunt down the Moselle, stopped to bid Olvir attend the mass in the royal chapel on Christmas Day. There could be no excuse for failing to obey the direct command of the king, and Olvir came to the service in his gayest dress. But with him for fellow he brought the grim Floki.

The gloomy chapel exhibited a sepulchral magnificence well in keeping with the ascetic spirit of priest and monk. The few and broken sun-rays which struggled in through the narrow windows glistened brightly on the screens and gates of polished brass and the jewelled images of kings and saints in the wall niches. The nave, crowded with courtly worshippers, was further brightened by the glint of polished steel, the rich colors of precious fabrics, and a bewildering display of gold and gems.

Yet the magnificence of the nave was nothing to the splendor of the chancel. There, from giant silver candelabra, hundreds of tapers shed their radiance over the sumptuous decorations of the altar, the gold crucifix, the tapestries of white silk, emblazoned with griffins and peacocks, the gold vessels of the officiating priests, and the white cassocks of the Italian choir.

But notwithstanding the presence of king and court, the solemn harmony of the Gregorian chants, and the impressiveness of the ceremony as conducted by the venerable Fulrad, there were two onlookers present who stood throughout the mass unbending and irreverent.

"By the hair of Sif, ring-breaker," muttered Floki, in the midst, "here is enough of gold to stock a dozen godi-houses."

"It is nothing to the hoard in the temple of the godi of Rome. That is all but sheathed with gold, wrung by Holy Church from the sweat and blood of slaves! But I will not give way to bitterness. This is a merry day to the Christian folk; we also will be light of heart. Look how the beams sparkle among the gem-stones. I choose those before your dull gold. See their bright hues,--blue and green and purple,--ay! and red as the life-blood of white biorn gushing upon the snow."

"I have eyes, son of Thorbiorn. There is one flagon which alone is worth a king's wergild,--the jewelled cup that the Godi Fulrad holds aloft. By Thor! that is a wassail-bowl worth the having. Not Otkar himself could have drained it at a draught."

"True, old Crane; and it may hold even more than our eyes show us. Tell me,--you have now dwelt many seasons in Frank Land,--what is your thought of the White Christ?"

Floki scratched his long nose, and glanced shrewdly about the chapel before replying.

"You ask a hard riddle, earl," he muttered. "I should answer that He is Odin and Balder--and more--in One. Yet why should I bend knee to Him? I have seen how His runes have drawn the temper of your keen spirit and marred your old-time joy of battle. What greater loss could befall a viking? So I will yet drink to Thor, trusting in my own craft and the sweep of my halberd."

"I will not say you are wrong," replied Olvir. "At the least, one cannot do the will of the White Christ and take joy in sword-play; that I see clearly, though these Christian priests teach otherwise. Some day I must make my choice, either to ungirt Al-hatif from my side, or to burn my

Christ-runes."

"Thor!" croaked Floki; "it is time for a little sword-play to stir your kingly blood. With the springtime, earl, there 'll be call for your heron beak."

"How? To peck the Saxon wolves?"

"They 'll be afoot in full pack, else I 've lost my scent for blood. Nor is that the whole saga. I smell blood on another trail,--one which leads from the king's hall."

"Treason again! I had thought that with the subtle Lupus gone--"

"Gone--ay; but he left one behind him little less subtle. The Grey Wolf's daughter might teach cunning to Odin, and she does not lack of crafty mates. More than once I have seen her in the forest border, waiting for Earl Hardrat and that wizened warlock Kosru."

"I have heard of that from Liutrad. They go to practise witchcraft."

"Then I am dull at riddles, earl. It is treason the three brew in the woodland, not spell-herbs."

"A fearsome brewing," said Olvir, smiling, "an old man, a maiden, and a drunkard."

"The fox, the adder, and the full-tushed boar," rejoined Floki. "Craft cuts sharper than any sword. As to Liutrad's red pig, he has put away the wassail-bowl. I name the Thuringian no mean foe. He has the strength of a bull, and far more of wit than in the past, now that the beer seeps from his brain."

"Yet I see in all this nothing more than a love tryst, with witchery for a blind. Even granting that the red pig has grown tushes, we will have our boar-spears at hand when there is need. As to your fox and adder-- But see; the mass is at an end. The king turns to withdraw."

Floki stared down at his earl with a wry look; but as Karl, in all the stateliness of his majesty and manhood, came down the aisle, side by side with his beautiful queen, the grim viking drew himself up to his full height, and sought to imitate his earl's easy salute. The upswing of the giant's arm drew upon him Hildegard's glance. At a word from her, Karl turned to smile at the Northmen, and spoke briefly with Worad. Immediately the Count Palatine slipped aside, and informed Floki that the queen wished to inquire about the training of the king's sons.

Floki pushed out among the courtiers. But Olvir, muttering a hasty response to Worad's greeting, drew back into a niche behind a pillar. As he did so, his eyes rested for an instant upon Fastrada. The girl was gazing directly at him, her head thrown back, her eyes narrowed to a line. When she caught his glance, she smiled and passed on, looking down at the rings on her clasped hands.

Olvir's face clouded, and his hand went unwittingly to the hilt of his dagger. A moment, and the dark mood was past; for his gaze fell upon Rothada in her simple novice's dress. She had lingered at her devotions after the benediction, and now came slowly down the aisle behind the other worshippers. Her head was bent, and her lips moved with the prayers which her white fingers told off on the rosary of pearls about her throat.

The girl was so absorbed in her devotions that she failed to see Olvir even when he stepped out beside her. Restraining his eagerness, he silently followed her down the aisle and out of the chapel. But at the first lateral passage which opened into the main corridor, he took her by the arm and drew her within the doorway.

"Stay a moment, little vala," he said quietly. "I would speak with you."

"Olvir!" exclaimed the girl, in a startled voice. Her hands pressed tightly together on her bosom, and she stared at him, her eyes dark with fear.

"How is this?" demanded Olvir, almost angrily. "Have I grown tushes that the maiden whose troth I hold cannot look at me without dread?"

"Do not be harsh, Lord Olvir!" murmured the girl. "Truly, I have sought to avoid you; on my knees I begged my father that I might stay at Chelles. Oh, why cannot I, like Gisela, win the peace and holy joy of the cloister?"

"Because you are too true of heart to break troth, little may," replied Olvir. "See; this passage leads to a room which opens on the garden-court. Come within, where the light is clear, and we can look into each other's eyes."

A faint blush crept into Rothada's cheeks, and her gaze fell before Olvir's; but, bowing her head submissively, she led the way down the passage. Close behind her followed Olvir, his eyes fixed upon the dainty head beneath its white wimple.

In the middle of the postern-room, where the white light of the winter's sun streamed through the narrow window, Olvir stopped the girl with a touch, and placed himself so that he could look directly into her face.

"Little vala," he said, "I must first ask you to make clear the meaning of your long silence. Whether your answer brings me joy or pain, I cannot wait longer; I must know the truth now."

Four years and more have passed since you gave me your troth."

Rothada glanced up at him quickly, and then her eyes fell to her novice's dress.

"Lord Olvir speaks of my troth," she answered in a low but clear voice. "If he doubts it, let him look at these pearls about my throat,--the pearls which he gave me in the Southland."

"And yet, Rothada, many as were my messages to you, never once through all those years did you send answer."

"You remembered me, Lord Olvir!" cried the girl, and she gazed up into her lover's eyes, her face radiant.

"Remember!" repeated Olvir. "And, could I have forgotten, were not my sea-wolves at hand to keep me in mind? I never once sent you greeting and pledge of my faith but your grim worshippers begged leave to add their gifts. Yet when year after year passed by without answering word from you, they, like myself, grew weary of sending. If the little vala's heart had been so chilled by her cloister-dwelling that she chose to forget those who loved her, we could not love her the less, but we would cease to fret her with the tokens of our love."

"Which never came! Oh, Olvir, there's been a bitter mistake! I never once had word or token that you or those grim warriors held me in kind memory. The months dragged by,--the weary years,--and no word from Vascon Land. Then I thought you 'd all forgotten me, and in my sorrow I turned for comfort to our Lord Christ. In Him I found peace, and I longed to give myself to Him, as Gisela begged me; but I could not, for I had promised to wait your coming."

"Loki!" muttered Olvir, and he struck his thigh. "Not all my sendings could have gone astray by chance. There's been a plot against me! Your holy Abbess Gisela-- But what odds? Little vala, little may, if you still doubt my troth, look at what lies about my throat."

Rothada raised her eyes to the strand of glossy hair, whose ends, severed by the rock in the gorge of Roncesvalles, had been rejoined by a golden clasp. At sight of the token, she uttered a cry of naive delight, and her eyes beamed up into Olvir's full of tender trust. Her beauty, pearl-like in its soft, pure lustre, filled him with such longing that he could no longer restrain himself.

"Dearest!" he cried, and, kneeling to her, he clasped her hand and held it to his lips.

Smiling and blushing, Rothada sought to draw away. But when she found she could not escape, she thrust her fingers into her lover's hair, and, tugging playfully at the bright locks, burst out in her old-time, merry laugh.

"Free me! free me, Lord Olvir!" she protested in mock severity. "Am I not the king's daughter? By what right do you hold me in thralldom?"

"See, then, dear heart; I free you," replied Olvir, as he sprang up. "You have but to speak, and I bend to your wish, sweet princess. Yet I have double right to hold you fast,--the will of your father and your own love."

"My love!" murmured the girl, and she blushed. Her eyes sank, and she drew back shyly.

"Your love, dearest one," repeated Olvir, and he held out his arms.

But then a sudden coldness fell upon her. The color faded from her cheeks, and the happy light died out of her eyes.

"Lord Christ forgive me!" she cried. "Oh, I did not mean to give way, Olvir. Truly I do love you,--I am so weak and wicked I cannot but tell it,--I do love you, Olvir, my bright hero! And yet--and yet, what is there for us but grief and parting? Even did my father assent, how could I wed one who will not bend knee to Christ,--a--a heathen?"

Olvir caught up the girl's hand, and, clasping it between his own, gazed steadily into her tearful eyes.

"Listen to me, dear heart," he said. "You have listened to the idle tales of others; you shall now judge for yourself. I render no worship to the heathen gods; but each week, as it passes around, I meditate upon the words and deeds of the White Christ. With my whole heart I strive to worship the almighty, all-good God, His Father and our Father. Answer me, then, little vala; am I to be named among the heathen?"

"Ah, the blessed saints be praised!" cried Rothada. "Then all that they tell of you is false. You do not mock at His Holiness the Pope, nor deride Holy Church?"

"I no longer mock, dear one; yet I bend knee only to the will of God in my own heart. What one among your Christian priests and monks, the most learned of whom can hardly spell out Holy Writ, shall say that I am wicked and heathen? I accept fully the sayings of the White Christ, and strive to live them. Enough, Rothada; I will say no more. Choose whether you will give yourself to me as I am."

"What shall I say, Olvir?" replied the girl. "I know now you are no heathen. But I cannot understand,--I do not see how you bend to our Lord Christ, and yet do not give reverence to those

who stand in His stead."

"Let your heart speak for you, dearest. If I am wrong, leave it to Alcuin and his fellows to show me my mistake."

Rothada clasped her hands together, and sighed with heartfelt relief.

"Surely, Olvir, if you are wrong, they will show it to you," she said. Trustful as a little child, she clasped the outstretched hands of her lover, and raised her lips for his kiss, her eyes shining with happiness. The touch of her lips, tender and fragrant as a briar-rose, sent a thrill through Olvir's whole being. But he did not take her in his arms. As he gazed into her eyes, a sudden sense of unworthiness came upon him. For the second time, he sank down before her, humbly and reverently as a worshipper at the shrine of a beloved saint.

"This day has God my Father blessed me with a great blessing," he murmured. "He has given into my keeping the heart of a pure maiden. May He give me strength and wisdom to prove myself worthy of so great a trust!"

"Do not be foolish, dearest," answered Rothada. "If our Lord God has given you my heart, He has given me your love. How, then, can there be room for doubt?"

"My princess! Who am I that I should win the Pearl of Great Price?"

"Hush! oh, hush, my hero! You take in vain the words of Holy Writ. It grieves me."

"I speak the truth. In the eyes of God there can be nothing holier than a pure maiden. More than all else I hate and despise the teaching of your Christian priests that women are the chief cause of sins. That is a lie. But for women, men would be as wolves,--ravenous wolves! And so, darling--"

"Spare me, Olvir! Truly, you grieve my heart. I am very wicked."

"So wicked that your soul would gleam white on new-fallen snow! Beware, wicked maiden! For your naughtiness, you shall be given in marriage--"

"To a foolish prattler," interrupted Rothada, with a quick return of gaiety, and, half stooping, she clasped Olvir's head between her white hands. "What a hero is this for a king's daughter to wed,--a thrall bound by the collar of a maiden!"

"Many a king would gladly kneel where I kneel, dear heart."

"No, no, you foolish hero. Few are so blind as to see beauty where there is none. I am very happy that you love me, dearest; yet I wonder at your love when I think of the many beautiful maidens with Hildegarde. Do you think it strange that I longed to go back to Chelles, when, after all those weary years of waiting, I came upon you in the hall, side by side with that maiden--"

"--Whose very name is unfit for your pure lips," muttered Olvir. "As you love me, darling, have nothing to do with her."

"I will do as you wish, Olvir. Because my heart shrank from her, I had felt it my duty to seek her friendship. But if you bid me shun her--"

"Thank God for your willingness! May we never have need to mention her name again! So now, dear one-- Hark! What is the shouting?"

"The call of the stewards. We linger over-long. The feast is ready; and, oh, dear hero, how shall we come before the king my father?"

"Have no fear, darling. The king has already pledged me your hand. There are terms to be first met; but trust me to see that in good time they be fulfilled or set aside. Until then it seems to me wise that we should keep silent."

"Olvir, I should like to at least tell Hildegarde. She is so gracious and kindly."

"As well tell the king himself, simple heart! No, dearest, we had best wait. It will not be for long, I trust. And now, remember, should I not see you sooner, the counts are to join my vikings in the Yule games. The king himself will take part. Be sure to come. There will be merry play, and the Moselle is like a burnished shield. I will teach you to skate."

"I was taught long since, Olvir. Berga, my maid, is a Frisian. So I shall soon learn again. And I shall not fail to attend the games,--to--to see the deeds of the king, my father."

For a moment the violet eyes were upraised in a look of tender mockery, and then their owner was darting off to join the queen's following.

CHAPTER VII

Never had Frank or viking known fairer weather for the Yule games. Each day the sun shone bright through the frosty air; the snow lay hard and firm on field and river-bank, and the Moselle offered to the feet of the skaters its broad street of glassy ice.

In the meadows before the villa, hazel rings for the wrestling had been enclosed, racing-courses marked out, and targets set up for the contests with spear and bow. Northmen and Danes, skilled in their own sports, burned to outmatch the king's men in the games of Frank Land, and the proud counts, whether East Frank or West Frank, Saxon, Goth, or Lombard, were no less zealous to prove their superiority over the outlanders. Yet, keen as was the rivalry, good-humor prevailed in all contests.

Each day great crowds gathered to watch the games, and to skate on the Moselle. Not a viking was to be found in the high-peaked huts, and such inmates of the villa as failed to troop out after the king to the field of games did not stay behind from choice. Aside from the house-slaves, few were left in the villa. The chapel was deserted by its priests and choristers, and the hall of state saw little of the sleek courtiers. In the bower only a maiden or two and the queen's tiring-women lingered in attendance on their mistress.

The morning after Christmas, Hildegarde, complaining of a headache, had sent Fastrada to summon Kosru the leech to her bedside. The Magian had at once pronounced her sickness to be of a nature which, while not dangerous, would require the utmost of rest and quiet. So the chattering workers were sent from the chamber, and Kosru took up his quarters in the anteroom, to overlook the queen's service and administer her sleeping-draught with his own hand.

Full of yearning for his beautiful queen, Karl would have chosen to watch at her bedside; but the Magian's assurance of her safety, and his plea for absolute quiet, sent the king out into the meadows to share in the games. With the same plea and assurance, the leech also turned Rothada away, and the girl, no longer dressed as a novice, went gaily out across the snow-fields to meet her lover.

Behind, in the silent bower, Hildegarde lay in a feverish sleep, waking only to sip her broth and to drink the sweetish potion which was to lull her again to sleep. But without, in the merry crowds, was one who took good care that the king did not lack company.

From morning till evening the daughter of Count Rudulf found occasion to be always within reach of the king's eye. When Karl won in the axe-throwing, neither the loud applause of the Franks and the vikings, nor even Olvir's gift of the great sword Ironbiter as prize, was so gratifying to him as the silent and half-awed admiration of the Thuringian maiden. The readiness with which she joined in the praise of Olvir's archery showed him how utterly her gentle nature had been misjudged; and when, skimming beside him over the ice, she shyly confided her love for Rothada, and her longing to see Olvir accept baptism so that the little princess might wed her bright hero, the heart of the great Frank went out to the girl in tender sympathy.

At every turn she was ready to please and amuse him. Now it was a gentle jest; now a murmured phrase whose flattery was too subtle to startle his honest Teuton heart; and always accompanying the words would be a look whose faint suggestion of allurements ever gave way to shy confusion. Soon Karl began to give heed as never before to the many charms of the lovely Thuringian. Often as he had remarked her beauty, he now wondered at the perfection of her supple, rounded form and the rich bloom of her cheeks. Others might own greater regularity of features, but none could surpass her in grace of movement or charm of expression.

But most of all the king was pleased and his heart touched by the girl's words of endearment for Rothada and Hildegarde. Her inquiries about the queen's health often ended in a sigh, and a naive exclamation of how happy must be the lot of one wedded to a world-hero.

So the days of Yuletide slipped by, each bringing with it new games on the Moselle bank, and merry play for the onlookers. Even young Karl and Pepin Hunchback took part, and in many ways proved by their boyish skill the efficiency of Floki's training. Both were afield from dawn to sunset, and when not testing their skill at the butts with bow or spear, or watching some hotly contested race or wrestling match, they were to be found skimming over the Moselle, in vain efforts to follow Olvir and their sister.

Dawn of the last day of Yule brought with it a threat of a weather change. But Franks and vikings gathered as usual on the river-bank, and the fact that this day was to see an end of the festivities gave added zest to the games.

None hurried afield with greater eagerness than Pepin Hunchback and the boy Karl, whom Olvir had promised to take with Rothada down the Moselle. Gerold and Liutrad were also to be of the party, and the failure of the latter to appear at the set time kept the others waiting on the bank for an hour or more.

When at last the young giant did arrive, with the excuse that Abbot Fulrad had needed him, Olvir, who had been studying the sky, urged that the trip be given over. But at this the king's sons cried out in bitter disappointment. Liutrad and Gerold good-naturedly yielded to their appeals to plead for them, and Olvir finally consented to go part way on the intended course. Yet before he would give the word to start, he first sought out Floki in the midst of the wrestlers, and while the lofty viking was stripping to enter the ring spoke a brief command in his ear.

As he approached the ring, Olvir had passed a tall and graceful woman, who was gazing intently across to where the king stood bandying jests with Fastrada. The gazer's face had been muffled in her scarf and hood, and when Olvir, after speaking to Floki, turned with casual curiosity to observe her more closely, she had disappeared in the crowd. But a little later, as he was binding on Rothada's skates, the same woman came down the river-bank, and, half running to young Karl, caught him in her embrace.

"Mother!" cried the boy, clinging to her neck.

"Hildegarde!" echoed Gerold, in amazement, as the hood fell back from the queen's pale face. "How is this, sister? You 're mad to venture out--"

"Hush, Gerold; be silent!" rejoined the queen. "I was stifling in the bower. I woke when all were gone but the leech. He lay asleep, outworn with watching; so I dressed myself and passed out quietly, that his rest might not be broken. Have no fear; my strength has come again, and every breath of the wintry air fills me with new life. See; I have brought my skates. I will join you on the ice."

Rothada came and put her arms about the queen.

"We had thought to go down the river, mother," she said; "but now that you are with us--"

"I 'll run tell the good tidings to our lord king," broke in Liutrad.

"No, lad; stay!" exclaimed Hildegarde, and she drew the hood out over her face again. "It would mar the games should his Majesty withdraw from the field, and--and there would be great outcry were my presence known. I wish quiet--peace and quiet--while I skim about on the smooth ice and breathe in the pure air. Now I am cold and sad. When the blood leaps freely in my veins, I can join the folk without fear of marring their play. Take me with you down the Moselle. Bind on my skates, brother!"

"The storm-light is in the sky, Dame Hildegarde," protested Olvir. "Is it wise that you should venture beyond sight of the villa?"

"I have spoken," replied Hildegarde, with unwonted sharpness. "Gerold, lead on with the boys. I will trust to Liutrad's arm."

When the queen spoke in such a tone, even Gerold could not venture a remonstrance. He lashed the skate-thongs over his sister's slender buskins, and sprang up, boar-spear in hand, to join the king's sons. The boys were circling about, wild with delight at the thought that some stray wolf or bear might give them opportunity to prove their prowess to their beloved mother. As they darted off before Gerold, Hildegarde rested her gloved hand lightly on Liutrad's massive forearm and glided out beside him with the graceful stroke of a practised skater.

Olvir slung his war-bow with its full quiver upon his back, and caught up Rothada's hand, to follow the queen.

"All's well with our gracious dame, dearest," he said. "She skims over the ice-street with the ease of a swallow's flight. I wager she can cover many long miles without wearying."

"True, dear hero; and already I see the bloom creeping back into her cheeks."

"As it has crept into yours, little nun, day by day, since the first of Yule. The cloister pallor is all but gone. Once more you are the vala of my sea-wolves."

"Their morning greeting still roars in my ears. Yet they are heathen,--only heathen! How beautiful the world is, Olvir!"

"To those whose hearts are filled with beauty and love, dearest."

Rothada's fingers tightened in the firm palm of her hero, and for a long time the lovers skimmed over the ice in happy silence.

As the little party shot out from among the other skaters, to sweep away down the river, a shrivelled old man crept out of an alder thicket near the bank, and called to a passing boy. The sight of a silver penny lent wings to the lad's feet, and he ran nimbly through the crowds on the snowy field, repeating to himself the two simple words which he was to whisper in the ear of Fastrada, the queen's maiden. Chance favored him. The king had drawn apart with Abbot Fulrad, and the Franks were moving across the meadow to see the wrestling. In the confusion, the boy was able to gain Fastrada's side and tell his message, unheeded by those around.

With all her years of court training, Fastrada was unable to hide her vexation when the boy muttered his two words in her ear. She stopped short and stamped her jewelled buskin deep into the snow, and her eyes blazed with angry light. Count Amalwin, who chanced to be near, inquired with uncouth sympathy what might be troubling the Grey Wolf's daughter. But Fastrada turned from him without answer, to hasten after Kosru's messenger.

The boy, eager to finger his promised reward, reached the alder thicket far in advance of the queen's maiden. But Kosru was so reluctant to part with a single penny that the boy was still begging for his due when Fastrada came up. Snatching the leech's pouch, she pressed not one but four pennies into the hand of the astonished boy, and told him to go and watch the Danish slingers. As he raced off, half mad with delight at his treasure, Fastrada turned upon the Magian with a look that made him cringe to the snow.

"Dog!" she hissed; "you 've let the Swabian escape you! Enough of your false promises! This very day I counted on for triumph; and now--"

"Pardon! grant me pardon, maiden! Have I not served you well all these days? Is it my fault that the drug loses its power when so constantly given? I am aged and weak. Overcome by weariness, I slept--"

"Where is she now?"

The leech rose a little way, and thrust out a crooked finger from his robe.

"She came here to the river-bank. Hurrying out in search of her, I spied her in the midst of the crowd. But then she followed after Count Olvir to this place, where the king's children were waiting with Count Gerold and Liutrad the Scribe."

"She made herself known to them?"

"But to none other. They disputed a little, and then all glided away down the river on the ice-shoes. The warriors carried spear and bow, as though they went to the chase."

"The king himself told me of the skating-party; only, one is gone of whom he is not aware. A lucky going for you, Magian! I may yet have time to win; she forgets all else when the ice-blades are on her feet. She may go far before turning. Would that she might never come back! *Ai!* and why should she? In the bleak forest are my mother's fiends and many hungry mouths!"

The girl turned panting upon the leech, her eyes gleaming green between the narrowed lids, her scarlet lips drawn back from the strong white teeth in a cruel smile.

"Go!" she cried. "Fetch me quickly all you have of that drug which saved you from the wolf-pack in Fulda Wood."

"By the blessed Sun, maiden! what would you do?" gasped the Magian.

"I 'd win for myself power and honors, and for you, gold without stint," rejoined Fastrada, and her face hardened to a still more cruel look. But the leech no longer faltered and cringed. Before his greedy eyes glittered a yellow heap,--gold without stint! gold without stint! Very humbly he salaamed to the witch's daughter, and then, bending to her gesture, limped away on his unholy sending.

An hour or so later, Count Hardrat, chancing to pass along the river-bank, suddenly found himself face to face with Fastrada. It was his first sober day since the Christmas feast, and he shrank from meeting the daughter of Rudulf after his relapse into drunkenness. Greatly to his surprise, she greeted him not only without reproach, but even smilingly, and he readily accepted her proposal that they skate together on the river. The girl's skates already swung at her girdle, and for balancing-staff she carried a pretty silver and ivory dart, with flint tip.

Skates were soon found for Hardrat, and the couple darted out among the ice-skimmers. As they swept in a long loop beyond the regular racing-course, Fastrada drew her companion's

attention to the tracks leading down the river, and dared him to attempt the overtaking of the party. Hardrat, who was a skilled skater, accepted the challenge with eagerness, and very shortly the couple were flying past the viking settlement and around the first bend of the river into the black borders of the ancient forest.

For two leagues and more the Thuringian count and the Thuringian maiden raced side by side at utmost speed, each straining with every nerve and muscle to outdo the other. At last the man, weakened by his excesses at wassail, began to lose breath. Heedless of his growing distress, the girl drove on, her eyes fixed on the narrow trail of skate-marks which she followed.

"Stay!" gasped Hardrat at last, as they swept down upon yet another bend of the river. "Slack--your pace, maiden! I can--go--no farther!"

Fastrada glanced about, frowning, at the purple-blotched face of her mate; but suddenly she seemed to slip, and a cry of pain burst from her lips. Leaning with all her weight upon one foot, she turned sharply and glided inshore, borne on by the momentum of her swift flight. Taken by surprise, Hardrat shot past for half-a-dozen strokes. Before he could circle about and rejoin the girl, she had limped part way up the snow-covered bank, to lean against a giant oak. As Hardrat scrambled after her, she met his look of concern with a rueful face.

"Satan spit the false wood-minnes!" she cried. "They 've wrought me ill,--my ankle is wrenched."

"Holy saints! and we three leagues from aid!"

"Not so; less than two. The hut--"

"--If *she* still lingers."

"Shelter, anyway. Yet there may be no need. Chafing and a fire might ease my hurt."

Hardrat's bloodshot eyes lighted dully.

"There are less welcome tasks than to chafe the foot of Rudulf's daughter. As to the fire, however, I carry neither flint nor tinder."

"Ah, then, yet stay! Here's the tip of my staff-spear, and for tinder, my kerchief, whose end I scorched on the coals this morning."

"A lucky chance," muttered Hardrat, and he set to gathering twigs and dry leaves from along the bank. As he bent to heap the fuel together for lighting, Fastrada crouched upon the snow, and drew from her bosom a large pouch, whose contents gave out a fetid odor. Laying the pouch openly on the snow beside her, she stared over the broad back of her companion into the depths of the leafless forest, and her face darkened with the fearful look that had terrified the Magian.

Having piled his fuel, Hardrat drew the broad knife which swung at his belt, and with the back of the blade struck a shower of sparks from the flint spear-tip into the linen kerchief. Quickly the tinder caught the sparks, and a few puffs set the smouldering cloth aflame. Fanned by a light breeze from up the river, the blaze spread with a cheerful snapping through the heap of dead limbs and pieces of driftwood. Hardrat took note how the smoke, instead of rising, drifted away between the tree-trunks and over the ice, like morning mist.

"See how the smoke lies on the snow," he said. "One needs scant knowledge of woodcraft to tell that a storm is near."

"Then we should soon be hastening back," replied Fastrada, who, instead of looking at the ankle which he was chafing, was staring at the low-eddying smoke with fierce exultance. "*Ai!*" she sighed complainingly, "that was a luckless wrench! Stay your hand, though. It may chance there 'll be no need to chafe the hurt. Am I not my mother's daughter? Here is a charm stronger than the power of elf or nixie. If, in truth, my hurt is the work of some evil wood-minne, I shall soon heal it. In this scrip is a drug whose burning will force out the worst of fiends. Cast it into the midst of the flames while I speak the needed spell."

Hardrat drew away, his cheeks suddenly gone ashen.

"No! by all the saints, no!" he cried. "I 'll have no hand in your witchery. I 've seen enough of black spells in *her* hut."

"Hero!" jeered Fastrada; and with her own hand she lifted the pouch, to scatter half its contents around her in the snow. As she threw the rest into the flames, her red lips muttered soft hissing words of the Wendish tongue, and her beautiful face was distorted with a look that sent a shudder of superstitious fear through Hardrat's thick-set frame. The pungent odor sent out by the burning drug added yet more to his terror. He stood cowering beside the fire, unable to fly, his bloated cheeks grey and mottled, and his limbs trembling visibly, as he watched the look of awful expectancy that crept into the face of the witch's daughter.

Moment after moment, the girl sat staring out after the drifting smoke-wreaths, her lips softly muttering the sibilant Wend words. Though Karl himself had marked the Thuringian's boldness

on the battlefield, the man was now like a frightened child in the dark. The strain was almost more than he could bear. His tow-white hair bristled beneath his cap; his very blood was curdling in his veins. He was on the point of crying aloud when the silence was broken by the lone howl of a wolf. Wild with terror, Hardrat sprang, about to fly. But Fastrada leaped up as he passed and caught him by the shoulder. Her eyes gleamed with fierce joy.

"*Hei!*" she cried. "The fiend-gods are with us! Down the wind with the smoke the evil sprite has passed, and my hurt is healed! my hurt is healed!"

"Saints shield me!" stammered Hardrat, and he crossed himself. That the girl should scramble with him down the bank and out across the rough ice-edge without a trace of her sprain, by no means tended to lessen his dread.

When they gained the smooth ice, Fastrada would have paused; but Hardrat struck out at once in the face of the freshening breeze, feverishly eager to put the long leagues between him and the fumes of the magic drug. As Fastrada darted to his side, and they swept away over the level ice, they heard once more, far back in the forest behind them, that long-drawn, dismal howl; and this time the cry was caught up and repeated from the farther depths of the forest.

"Holy Mother!" gasped Hardrat. "Your spell has roused the werwolves from their lairs!"

Fastrada only smiled, and lengthened her stroke to meet the frantic rush of her companion.

Presently a bend of the river brought the wind into a more favorable quarter, and the couple raced homeward up the ice-street yet more swiftly than they had come. For a while they could hear howls in the forest depths; but as the leagues melted away beneath their skate-strokes, the dreadful sounds died out in the distance.

Still Hardrat kept on, spurred by mad terror; nor would he slacken the pace until they swept into full view of the viking settlement. At sight of the steep-roofed buildings and the shouting merrymakers in the meadows beyond, he uttered a hoarse cry, and ceased his frantic strokes. Borne on by his momentum, he glided forward until opposite the viking hall. Then, utterly spent, he sank down upon the ice, wheezing as though he would choke.

Fastrada circled about and came to a stand beside the over-wearied man, eying him with cold indifference. When he had gained breath a little and could listen, she bent forward and said significantly: "Let there be no talk of this skating, friend Hardrat."

"Trust me for that, witch-daughter! I 'll drown the memory at the cask's bottom!"

"It is well that your tongue does not wag with the wine. Here's gold for your wassail-fee," replied Fastrada, and, flinging a coin to him, she glided on up the river.

CHAPTER IX

Unto all bale
And all hate whetted.

LAY OF BRYNHILD

In the centre of the skating-course the girl threw back her hood and gazed about at the circling skaters. Being now easily recognized, she at once became a focus of attraction for the younger Franks, who darted forward from all sides to offer themselves as partners. But the girl stood coyly in their midst, seemingly undecided whom to choose. She had spied the king sweeping out from the bank, and so contrived that when he wheeled past the cluster of eager suitors he caught her gaze fixed upon him in a look of tender longing. Instantly his eyes kindled, and, driving in among the young warriors, he bore off the prize from their midst.

With the girl's arm locked fast in his powerful clasp, Karl swept her along at whirlwind speed, his skates ringing loudly on the ice with the force of his strokes. His face glowed with the fierce delight of the captor, and the half-frightened, half-pleased look of his lovely captive sent the hot blood leaping through his veins.

Unresisting but unassisting, Fastrada clung to his supporting arm while he bore her around the skating-course at a speed no other skater born in Frank Land might have hoped to equal. As he swept back through the thick of the shouting onlookers, he wheeled, seized by some fresh impulse, and drove away down the river, with no slackening in his headlong rush.

The Franks discreetly refrained from following their king; and Floki the Crane, who alone of those present could have overtaken the flying couple, headed back such of the younger Northmen as chose to consider the manner of the king's leaving a challenge to race.

So, followed neither by Frank nor viking, Karl drove on with his fair prize into the forest. As the gnarled trunks of the giant oaks shut out from view the last glimpse of field and dwelling, Fastrada's downcast eyes shone with sapphire tints, and though far from wearied by her mad race with Hardrat, she leaned more heavily upon the arm of the king.

A little later, the two were standing face to face in the centre of the river, a league beyond the viking camp. Karl was staring at the maiden with a bewildered look as he listened to her pleading words: "Ah, stay, my lord! You break my heart! I thought--I thought you 'd take me to wife."

Karl smiled, half incredulously.

"How then, silly maiden," he said; "have you forgotten who sits beside me on the throne?"

Fastrada's drooping eyelids quivered, and her face whitened; but she betrayed no sign of anger or jealousy.

"I 've not forgotten, dear lord," she whispered. "Yet I thought-- I 've heard of kingly rights. Is there--was there not a custom that the king might take to himself two wives?"

"By my sword, fair one, you 'd make a Merwing of me! Is it not enough that you have won my love?"

"No, sire, no! It is not enough for me!" cried the girl.

"Then what would you have?" asked Karl, wonderingly.

Before she answered, the girl raised her eyes to his, and flung out her arms.

"Ah, how I love you, dear lord!" she half whispered. "But you forgo your ancient right,--you 'll not seat two with you on your throne. I see only one way that joy may come to me,--ay, and why not? Why should not I have my turn?"

"How then?" demanded Karl. "Speak out."

"Ah, dear lord, do not be harsh! It is my love that forces my lips to speak, and so--and so--I will say it, though it kill me! Dear lord, if you will not make me joint sharer of your throne with the one who now sits beside you, I would--I would that she might give place to me,--as the Lombard's daughter gave way to her--as Himiltrude gave way to the princess--"

"Ha!" cried Karl. He drew back a step, and stood staring at her, overcome with amazement at her audacity.

For a moment the girl straightened before his angry wonder with a gesture almost of defiance. But then her eyes sank, and her whole body drooped forward.

"Pardon me, dear sire!" she pleaded faintly. "Forgive the love which carried me beyond reason. I could not stay my tongue, dear lord. I was mad!"

Softened by the girl's words and timid look, Karl relaxed his frown.

"Daughter of Rudulf," he said, "it is I who am at fault. You are far other than I thought,--I own it with shame! Here, then, is an end; for as to your foolish dream, that may never be. No woman lives who can thrust from my heart the daughter of Childebrand."

"Then all is over, dear lord; I may not hope?"

"All is over, maiden."

For a while the girl stood silent, one of her skate-runners tapping gently on the ice. But then, forcing as it were the words from her lips, she murmured hurriedly: "Your Majesty, is it not best I should be returning?"

"Not you alone, maiden! Whoever's afield should be seeking shelter. Already the oak-tops moan with the coming storm. But fear nothing. We shall soon be warming our knees by the cheery hall-fire."

"But how, sire, of those who-- Ah, Holy Mother forgive me! I forgot; in my love and joy, I forgot! Kosru the leech-- Oh, hasten, sire! The lads and Rothada,--they are on the river, and with them our gracious dame!"

"Hildegarde!" roared Karl, in angry alarm.

"The queen," echoed Fastrada, and she shrank back in real fear of the king's threatening gesture. But he advanced, only to motion her up the river.

"To the villa!" he commanded. "Tell the Danes their vala is in peril! Bid the counts join with them! I go to meet the skaters."

With the words, Karl wheeled past the cowering girl, and drove away down the river at headlong speed.

Instantly Fastrada sprang erect and glared after him.

"*Hai!*" she hissed. "Let him go; let him rush to share the fate of the others! The hungry fangs await him! Merry's the feast I 've set for Odin's dogs!--king's kin and king; ay, and my false hero! All's merry in the bleak wood! Hark to the moaning oaks! My mother's spell has roused the storm-fiends,--the sky darkens. Soon the gnawed bones will lie wrapped in a snowy shroud! And now I shall go to *her*. She shall unriddle that old foretelling,--'a king, grey of eye.' The Merwing Wolf rode the tree; Pepin's son rushes to meet his bane; who, then, may it be? Adelchis the Lombard, idling in the Kaiser's hall, or that drunken Hardrat? More likely he,--the white-bristled boar! I had thought to crush him when the time came; but now-- Ah, would that Pepin's son had lent a willing ear! He at least was a world-hero, with whom might be named no warrior other than my sea-king. And now they are death-doomed. *Ai!* my bright hero bleeds! Olvir! Oh, Olvir!"

Writhing in tearless anguish, the girl stumbled to the river's edge. With feverish haste she tore loose the skate-thongs from her buskins, and, leaping up the bank, fled wildly into the heart of the forest.

CHAPTER X

Thou shalt hear the wolves howling.
LAY OF GUDRUN.

When the little party, whose leader he had considered himself, glided away into the forest, Olvir had thought to limit the trip to three leagues at the utmost. But he failed to consider the queen's humor.

After her long confinement within the bower, Hildegarde's fair face glowed with almost feverish delight as she felt the ice glide away beneath her feet, and she swayed her body to the skate-stroke with the grace of a Greek dancer. Upborne by Liutrad's powerful grasp, she soon lost all thought of fatigue and distance, and floated on--on--through the white sunlight, her face serene with dreamy contentment. Her enjoyment was at its height when Olvir, hand in hand with Rothada, glided up beside her, a troubled look in his dark eyes.

"Stay, Dame Hildegarde," he called out. "I beg you to turn back before it is too late. The storm-light is boding, and we 're already too far from hearth and roof-tree."

Hildegarde threw out her hand in a gesture of vexation very unlike her usual gentle bearing.

"Leave croaking to the ravens!" she cried. "How soon will your storm sweep upon us?"

"That I cannot say, dear dame. I know nothing of your Rhineland."

"I might guess," said Liutrad, in response to the queen's glance. "Yet why not ask Gerold? None should know better than he."

"Brother!" called Hildegarde; and when the young Swabian came circling back to her side, she pointed skywards. "It seems that our Norse hero is fearful of the storm-boding. He would have it that we wander too far afield."

"Ah, Olvir; so you still fret at the storm-light," laughed Gerold, and he cast a careless glance at the sky.

"In old Norway such a boding would bring the wind howling about our ears within an hour," rejoined Olvir.

"Here it will come with the sundown," said Gerold. "There is yet no moaning in the oak-tops."

"Enough!" cried his sister. "Rejoin the lads. We 'll fare on."

Though far from satisfied, Olvir made no further protest. Saluting the queen, he at once fell back with Rothada to their former position in the rear. Surely Gerold should know. If he gave assurance of safety, why need an outlander doubt? And it was very pleasant to glide on into the forest depths, side by side with the little vala. Having done his part, he could now put away all thought of mishap, and give himself over to joy.

Constant practice with Olvir through all the happy days of Yule had gained for Rothada a skate-stroke which in lightness and grace all but equalled that of Hildegarde herself. With the light staff-spear balanced in her left hand, and scarf and cloak floating back from her shoulders, the king's daughter skimmed over the ice-street with all the airy freedom of a bird. But for the glint of the upcurving skate-runners as her slender foot peeped from beneath her skirt, Olvir

might well have fancied that her flight was winged. Life and love had driven the last trace of cloister pallor from her rounding cheeks, and beamed from her eyes with the tender radiance of perfect trust and joy.

The loveliness of his princess set every fibre of Olvir's being atingle with rapture. His black eyes gazed down adoringly upon her lissome body and dainty foot; upon the glossy braids which lay entwined with bright ribbons down her heaving bosom; upon the flower-like face beneath its jewelled cap; most of all, upon the soft eyes, half-veiled by the tresses wind-blown across the white forehead.

Mile after mile, the forest glided past in an endless maze of gnarled trunks and leafless branches; but, like the queen, the lovers were lost to all sense of time and distance. Gradually the space between them had lessened. Now Rothada's hand was upon Olvir's shoulder; his arm was clasped about her waist, and he was softly chanting to her of the fells and fiords, of the salmon leaping in the torrents, and the crimson glow of the midnight sun.

When at last Hildegarde gave the word to turn, the lovers halted with the others, and stood before them without altering their pose. Neither would have become aware of Hildegarde's look of surprise or of Liutrad's and Gerold's smiles, had not young Karl cried out in boyish glee: "See, mother, Rothada and Count Olvir! Sister will wed our lord father's bright Dane hawk, and he 'll never fly away to his frost-white eyry."

"The dear Christ grant that such may be the outcome, child," replied Hildegarde; and she gazed, with a tender smile, at Rothada's downbent head. "Now that your sister gives proof of her love, all should go well. Count Olvir has only to accept baptism."

"Baptism, dear dame! Should you not rather say, the yoke of priestly rule?"

"Olvir, Olvir! put aside your stubborn pride! You little know how hard it is for our lord to give his sweet maiden into another's keeping. If, then, he holds you in such friendship, should you not be willing to bend to Christ?"

"That I already do, Dame Hildegarde," replied Olvir, gravely. "But let us spare ourselves now. We are afield, and should give ourselves over to joy."

"Lord Olvir speaks well, mother," exclaimed Pepin, flourishing his javelin. "Lead on again! We may yet chance upon an elk or bear."

"No, sister; about and homeward!" cried Gerold, in sudden alarm. "Hear the moaning in the oak-tops! How can I ever forgive myself? The storm's upon us, and we so far from shelter!"

"I alone am at fault," said Hildegarde. "Had I given heed to Olvir's warning, by now we should have been within sight of home. Lend your aid to the lads, brother. If you tire, Liutrad will take your place."

"Beside me, lads!" cried Gerold, impatiently.

The boys darted in to grasp the ends of the Swabian's crossed spear, and with a shout all three struck out on the homeward race. After them glided Hildegarde and Liutrad with long, easy strokes, while Olvir, his arm still clasped about his little princess, swept her along in the wake of the others like a cluster of thistledown upborne by the breeze.

Spurred on by his alarm, Gerold steadily increased the pace, until the air whistled in the ears of the skaters, and the long miles melted away beneath their flashing ice-blades in swift succession. Few skaters, however, could long sustain so rapid a stroke, and Gerold at last found that he had overestimated his strength. Unhampered, he might have held on without slackening to the very end of the course; but his strength and training were now offset by the weight of the two boys. Little more than half the homeward course had been covered when his strokes began to flag, and he found himself compelled to ease the pace. Liutrad was quick to heed his friend's distress.

"Ho, gossip!" he called; "you 're all but winded. Leave Pepin to me, and fall behind. I 'll lead for a while."

"Lead, then! I must give way," panted Gerold, and reluctantly he slackened speed for the Northman to pass. At the moment, however, Pepin uttered a wild view-haloo, and dashed aside toward the river-bank, followed hotly by young Karl.

"A wolf!" sang out Liutrad, at sight of the gaunt black beast bounding silently along the bank among the alders.

"Ho! see the cowardly brute make off!" shouted Gerold, as the wolf leaped away into the forest.

"Cowardly?" repeated Hildegarde. "It seems to me very bold of the lone beast to follow an armed party in midday."

"Greyleg fares ill in the winter woods," answered Liutrad, in a careless tone, and he beckoned

to the disappointed young hunters. "Hasten, lads! If we find ourselves within a league of the villa before the storm bursts, we shall be doing well."

"God grant no worse befall us!" muttered Olvir, half aloud, and as the boys circled back to their new places in the party, he drew his war-bow from its case and strung it, ready for instant use. But at Rothada's startled look, he smiled, and said lightly: "Now I dare Greyleg to peer out the second time. He shall find his bane without waiting for the spears of bairns."

"He will do well to overtake us again, Olvir, now that Liutrad leads."

"True, dear heart. Few even in the North can out-ride Liutrad on the ice-steeds, and his bigness breaks the wind for those of us who follow. Lean more to the stroke, dear one, and waste no breath in words."

Obediently Rothada bent forward on his supporting arm, while Olvir, freed from her inquiring gaze, searched the river-banks with his glance, and turned his head as though straining to catch the first note of some distant cry. He had not long to wait.

So faint that at first even the listening ear could scarcely tell it from the moaning of the oak boughs, down the wind came floating that most dismal of all sounds,—the long-drawn howl of a wolf. Olvir's face grew tense, and his grip on the war-bow tightened as he glanced down at Rothada. But he held on after the others, without a word, though howl after howl was borne to his ears by the freshening breeze.

CHAPTER XI

--Oft Wyrd preserveth

Undoomed earl--if he doughty be.

BEOWULF.

At first none other than Olvir gave heed to the dreary cry; for now the storm's forerunners came soughing through the leafless treetops. A half-mile, however, and the howls had merged into one continuous note that rose and fell on the breeze like the wail of fiends in torment. Even Rothada's untrained ear caught the appalling sound as it swelled out with a sudden flaw of the wind. The girl cowered and pressed closer to her companion. Nor was she alone in her fear. With all their boyish pride, her brothers cried out in dread, and Gerold turned as pale as his sister. Liutrad slackened speed, and looked instinctively to Olvir.

"Hearken, earl!" he called. "The wolf-pack is before us! Should we not turn back?"

"*Heu!*" shouted Gerold; "turn--turn and fly while there's yet time!"

"Where?" rejoined Olvir,—"to perish in the forest? The storm lowers. Our only hope is ahead. Let us only sweep by the pack, and we may yet gain safety. At the worst, we can mount an oak till Floki brings aid. Lead on, son of Erling! Already we glide through the midst of the horde. Look back!"

A cry of terror burst from all others than Liutrad as they stared back over their shoulders. From the point of the last bend, not a hundred paces behind them, a dozen gaunt beasts were breaking cover to leap out upon the ice. Even as the skaters looked about, other bands of the silent pursuers sprang into the open from either bank, and a dry snapping in the alders drew the eye to half-hidden forms flitting through the thickets abreast of the party.

Suddenly a huge grey wolf leaped out from the left bank, several yards in the lead of the skaters. The beast made no attempt to attack the quarry. Hardly even did he look at them, but bounded along on the ice-edge, whining like a young dog. The strange actions of the beast, coupled with the silence of the gathering pack, struck Liutrad's stout heart with a fear little less intense than that of his companions.

"Tyr! the beasts are upon us!" he shouted, and, gripping Hildegarde and Pepin fast in his giant grasp, he bent far over and drove into the teeth of the freshening wind at racing speed. At his heels followed Gerold with young Karl, keen to hold the vantage of the wind-break offered by the great body of the Northman.

Olvir, however, did not join in the mad rush. With a word of assurance to Rothada, he freed his hold of her and plucked an arrow from his quiver. With the twang of the bow the grey leader

of the wolf-pack uttered a yell and leaped high in the air, pierced through and through by the Norse arrow. Even as the beast fell dying, Olvir was back at Rothada's side, and his arm linked in hers with a grip of steel.

"Ho, dear heart!" he cried cheerily; "now will Odin's dogs whet their fangs on the bones of their leader, while we race away up the ice-street. Bend now--yet farther! The others outstrip us."

"Christ save us!" gasped Rothada, despairingly.

Olvir's face contracted with a pang of keenest anguish; but his voice rang out almost gaily: "How now, king's daughter; where is your trust? No wolf should overtake us though we had ten leagues to cover."

"I trust my hero!" replied the girl, and the words gave added force to the Northman's swift strokes. But as he whirled his precious charge away from the silent pursuers, the dismal howling in the forest ahead swelled out with fearful distinctness.

Louder and yet louder resounded the yelling chorus, until the air quivered with the hideous din, and even Liutrad faltered, half fearing to advance. But then Olvir shot forward in the lead, and his call rang out bold and clear: "On! on, wolf-racers! We outstrip the chase! At yonder bend we 'll know the worst,--beyond is the howling pack. If we cannot pass, turn in to the cleft oak on the point. Its boughs will house us safe from Greyleg."

"We follow, ring-breaker!" shouted Liutrad, and all dashed on at racing speed, their hearts leaping with renewed hope. Every stroke left the grim pursuers farther to the rear.

But now they were sweeping around the river's bend, and the outcry before them rose to a deafening clamor. Dreadful as was the sound, it yet failed to prepare them for the scene that burst upon their startled gaze. Even Olvir's face whitened, and his lips moved in quick prayer. A little way beyond the bend, the river's bank and the ice-edge was black with a dense mass of wolves, yelling and fighting and tearing at the snow in mad frenzy.

"God save us! they 're werwolves!" cried Gerold.

Hildegarde turned her despairing gaze about till it rested on young Karl.

"To the oak! to the oak, brother!" she screamed. "Save my boy!"

But Olvir pointed ahead with a forceful gesture: "Hold, fools! Follow me on! We'll dash by the mad fiends. Beyond is safety!"

Again the sea-king's words brought hope to his companions. Swifter than ever their skate-blades spurned the glassy surface, and they swept on around the bend at their utmost speed.

Such was the frenzy of the wolves in their weird saturnalia that at first they failed to heed the swiftly approaching skaters. But as the fugitives came flying past, the young wolves on the edge of the pack sighted the quarry, and yelled out the view-cry. Another moment, and the whole pack was swarming down the bank and out upon the ice, to head off the quarry.

So swiftly, however, were the skaters skimming past that all but a few of the foremost wolves were hopelessly outdistanced. Only a dozen or so of those farthest upstream succeeded in coming near the fugitives, and even of these the leader alone came within fair distance for the quarry leap. With a yell, the beast crouched, and flung himself at Hildegarde; but at the same instant Liutrad swerved aside with his charges, and Gerold, driving along a few paces behind the Northman, straightened up and cast his heavy boar-spear through the body of the leaping beast.

In a twinkling the Swabian had whirled young Karl past the writhing, snarling brute, and all were echoing the boy's shrill cry of triumph. Though the wolf-pack yelled at their very heels, every hungry fang was now behind them.

"God be praised!" gasped Hildegarde. "The worst is past."

"We go free!" echoed Gerold, panting yet joyful; "we go free, out of their very jaws! Let the cheated fiends follow in their place!"

But Olvir was silent, and his glance shifted uneasily from the horde of yelling pursuers to the maiden at his side. There was little exultation in his tense white face. One peril had been passed, but another now threatened. Rothada was gasping for breath. Notwithstanding his aid, she was almost outdone. Her strokes faltered, and Olvir could feel the wild throbbing of her heart. Though she made no complaint, he saw that the strain was more than she could bear. His despairing gaze glanced from the oak-tops to the lowering sky.

"Not that! not that!" he muttered. "Already the storm is upon us. She would perish of cold on the shelterless boughs before Floki comes. By Thor, we hold our own with the wood-fiends! Could we keep to the pace a little longer-- Yet I cannot bear her up alone!"

"Ah, Olvir!" gasped Rothada, "my strength fails; I can go no farther. Loose me; loose me, and save the others, dearest! I but drag you back--to death!"

Olvir gazed down upon the girl, his dark eyes misty with infinite love and tenderness; and

with the soul-calm came sudden clearness. A flush rose in his pale cheeks, and his eyes flashed with hopeful fire.

"Liutrad! Gerold!" he shouted; "the princess faints! Skate abreast, that you may bear her up between you. Soon you may ease your stroke. I go to play with the dogs of Odin."

"God forbid!" cried Liutrad. "Let me be the one to stay them."

"And gorge their jaws! No, lad; you own the greater strength; I the greater fleetness. Each to his part!"

"Let Pepin come beside me," said Hildegarde. "He can hold to my hand."

"I 'll drag little, dear mother," replied the boy. "I 'm still strong."

"And I, mother," echoed Karl, with boyish pride.

"You 're brave lads, both," answered Gerold. "Slacken more, Liutrad. Now, Pepin, cross over to your mother--so; well done! We 're ready, Olvir."

"None too soon!" rejoined Olvir, and he fell back until Liutrad caught the fainting maiden from his grasp.

Borne up between the two young warriors, Rothada had now only to lean her weight upon their strong arms, and glide onwards, swept along by their powerful strokes. The pace was still swift enough to hold the hundred strokes gained over the horde at the first. Olvir was quick to heed the fact, and his face shone as he circled about the others for a farewell view.

"All's well!" he called cheerily. "Hold on only a little longer, and you may ease the pace."

Still smiling, he plucked an arrow from his quiver, and swept around on his daring mission. In another moment he was skimming at arrowy speed straight into the face of the pack, his gold-red hair streaming, his face bright and eager with the joy of battle.

Once and again the war-bow twanged, and two of the grey leaders sprang high in the death-leap. But, heedless of their dead, the pack swept on over the writhing bodies to meet the slayer. Already the rash skater was upon them. Another instant, and he would be struggling in their midst. But even as the lolling tongues drew in for the leap-bite, and the fiery eyes gleamed red with baleful joy, the mad quarry wheeled like a striking hawk, and shot away to the right from under their very jaws. In their eagerness, many of the foremost wolves leaped at the Northman; but their jaws clashed together through empty air, and they fell sprawling upon the ice, to be overrun by their fellows.

Wild with baffled fury, the whole pack swerved to follow the fleeing quarry as he swept slantingly across the broad expanse of the river. Olvir could have asked no more. Skimming along just beyond reach of the foam-dripping jaws, he gazed back at his ferocious pursuers with a mocking smile.

"Follow! follow me, dogs of Odin!" he jeered. "I 'll lead you a merry dance; to and fro,--a game of ice-tag. So; we near the bank. Now across to the other side; and as we go, I 'll play on my one-stringed harp. You shall have music to your singing!"

Circling on the very edge of the ice-rim, Olvir swept obliquely back across the river. But as he turned, his smile gave way to sudden grimness, and he raised his hand to his quiver. Then the war-bow began to twang its answer to the yelling beasts, and arrow after arrow drove into their midst with vengeful force. Hardly a shaft flew wide of its mark; yet they followed so swiftly one upon the other that the quiver was emptied and the last shaft whirring from the string before the flying bowman had crossed the channel.

"Thor!" he shouted in fierce joy. "We 've played a merry game, white-fangs; now for a merrier!"

Deftly the bow was unstrung and slipped into its case, and then the bared blade of Al-hatif glittered in the sea-king's upraised hand. But as he swerved out again from the alder thickets, he first glanced up the river after his fleeing companions. Briefly as the terrible play had lasted, the others had already gained many more yards over the horde. While their peril, however, was lessening, his had suddenly doubled. Not all the wolves had followed him in his second turn across the river. A hundred or more, running straight onward, had put themselves in advance of the doubling quarry. The foremost were already circling around to hedge him in.

It was no time to falter. Putting out the very utmost of his skill and strength, Olvir dashed toward the fast-closing line at a speed that dropped the following wolves to the rear as though they had been at a stand.

"Ho, dogs!" he shouted. "Skate to paw; sword to fang! I come; I come to your blood-game!"

An outburst of ferocious yells answered the boastful shout, and from right and left the beasts sprang in to meet him. But again Olvir wheeled with hawk-like quickness. Two strokes, and he was before a gap in the line guarded by a single grey leader. Once again he wheeled, to dart

through the gap. Swiftly as he came, the old wolf saw his purpose, and crouched low. But, even as the beast leaped, Olvir swerved and shot safely past him; and, in the passing, Al-hatif whistled in a slashing upstroke. Greyleg fell upon the ice, never to leap again.

With a wild shout, Olvir dashed out from the death-trap, and, undaunted by his close escape, turned for a third race across the river. But as he wheeled, a great gust of wind came roaring through the oaks, and the air suddenly grew thick with driven snow. Instantly Olvir sheathed his reddened blade, and, with his shoulder to the quartering gale, drove straight up the river at a speed which Floki himself might not have equalled.

Soon the baffled pursuers fell to the rear. Their yells died away in the roaring of the storm, and the snow swept between in a swirling, blinding mist. But if the white storm-veil hid the Northman from his pursuers, it blotted out no less completely all view of his companions. For a while he kept on at racing speed, until he thought he should be upon them. Then he slackened his stroke, and shouted into the white gloom. No answer came back but the loud complaint of the straining oaks and the shriek and roar of the blast through the lashing boughs.

Again Olvir shouted, his face dark with sudden misgiving; still no answer. With a bitter cry, he wheeled to circle about in the dense whirl. But then the air quivered with the blast of a hunting-horn, so clear and loud that it might have been blown within arm's length.

"None bore horns! It must be Floki!" he cried, and he drove straight into the teeth of the gale. The fierce-driving snow blinded him; but he kept on, groping with outstretched hands. Suddenly a white figure swept past before him, so near that he could almost touch it. He wheeled to follow, and at once saw that it was linked in line with other figures. His heart leaped with thanksgiving. Here were all six,--maid and dame, bairns and warriors,--all safe; ay, and with one added to their number! Not even Liutrad was so big and strong as the skater who drove along at the far end of their line, his massive shoulder braced against the wind.

"The king!" shouted Olvir, as he swung in to join himself to the near end of the line.

A welcoming hail burst from the lips of the skaters, and as they felt the thrust of Olvir's tireless stroke, they swept on with added speed. Even Rothada found new strength in the joy of her hero's presence, and, no longer contented with gliding, she joined in the swinging stroke of the others.

CHAPTER XII

Now behold the fourth rede:
If ill witch thee bideth,
Woe-begetting by the way,
Good going farther
Rather than guesting,
Though thick night be upon thee.

LAY OF SIGRDRIFA.

Though the blast struck quartering in the faces of the skaters, the brunt of its force was broken by the king's body; so that the others, dragged on by his bull-strength and Olvir's wiry vigor, held to a pace which lost none of the distance they had gained on the wolf-pack before the storm burst.

"Thor!" shouted Liutrad, hoarse but joyful. "We cheat both werwolves and storm-fiends! We shall soon be sitting by the glowing hearth!"

"God grant it!" replied Karl. "Yet you crow too soon, lad. There's a turn ahead will bring us into the teeth of the wind. Even now we should be swerving."

"Saint Michael!" gasped Gerold. "We can never drive against this blast!"

"No, by Thor!" called back Olvir. "Even now we can scarce hold our own--and behind comes the horde! We are doomed if we linger on the ice. To the bank, lord king! There's no other way!"

"A hard truth, Dane hawk! Yet it is better to freeze than to be torn by ravening beasts. *Heu!* I know of a hut among the oaks. To the forest! The pack runs blind, with neither sight nor scent. They 'll follow the river and pass us by."

"To the bank!" shouted Liutrad and Gerold; and the line of skaters swung around to glide inshore. Blinded by the whirling flakes, they drove upon the low bank before aware of its nearness. Staggering and half falling, they stumbled across the rough ice-rim, and flung themselves down upon the bank to tear at their skate-thongs.

Olvir did not wait to untie knots. Even as he loosed his grip on young Karl, he drew his silver-hilted dagger. In a twinkling he had freed both himself and the boy, and was springing to the side of Rothada. Thrusting her skates with his own and young Karl's into his empty quiver, he drew the maiden to her feet. The others had all freed themselves, and sprang up together.

"Leave no scent for the wood-fiends! Hold to your skates, and follow me!" commanded Karl. Flinging his younger son upon his shoulder, he grasped Hildegarde by the hand, and rushed headlong in among the oaks.

Liutrad caught up Pepin as the king had taken his brother, and dashed away after their leader. Olvir and Gerold, with Rothada between them, followed as closely upon his heels. They were none too quick. Hardly had they covered a hundred paces, when behind them a sudden burst of fierce yells rang out across the wind.

"God save us! they 've turned!" gasped Rothada; while Gerold gripped his sword-hilt and loosened the blade in its sheath, in readiness for his last fight. But the yelling cry died away as quickly as it had swelled out. The wolf-pack had overshot the snow-swept trail, and were racing on around the river-bend. For many minutes, however, the king led on into the forest without slackening his swift stride. He did not check himself until Hildegarde stumbled and half fell.

"Dear lord, I am very weary," she sighed.

Halting so abruptly that Liutrad almost ran upon him, Karl caught his queen in his free arm, and drew her close.

"Rest, sweetheart," he said gently. "We are safe for a time."

"A long time, lord king," added Liutrad. "Even should the pack turn, they 'd do well to hunt us out in this wild flurry."

All the party drew close together, and stood panting, while the shrieking storm-fiends swirled the snow about them in dizzy eddies. Soon, however, Olvir felt Rothada shiver beneath his cloak.

"Lead on, lord king," he said. "To linger here is death! Lead on to your hut."

Karl raised his head, and peered around through the driving snow.

"By my sword, Olvir," he muttered; "you ask what is beyond my skill. Here among the trees the blast swirls down from every quarter. Who could guide through such a storm?"

"Then we must wander blindly. If we stand, we shall perish of cold."

"Follow, then. We 'll try at a venture."

"Stay, sire!" warned Gerold. "What comes behind you?"

Karl turned sharply to stare at the huge form which loomed up out of the snow-mist and drifted by within a spear-length. As it passed, the great shape swung about its steaming muzzle to sniff at the party, and then it lumbered on at the same leisurely gait.

"A bear!" muttered Karl; and he drew back to shield his helpless charges.

Liutrad sprang before him with brandished spear.

"White biorn!" he cried,--"white biorn! What does the berg-rider in Frank Land?"

"Were I yet heathen," rejoined Olvir, "I 'd say we look upon the king's sprite."

"It is--it is, ear!! No beast could pass so quietly. Follow your guardian sprite, sire! It leads you to safety!"

"Would you have me follow a forest fiend? And yet, beast or sprite, we can do no better! Come, then; our guide vanishes."

"Lead on, sire," answered Olvir; and all hurried in pursuit of the dim white figure. Once close upon it, they slackened their pace, and silently followed the wraith-like guide as it lumbered steadily onward into the forest.

Half a league or more had been passed, and both Hildegarde and Rothada were nearly outspent, when the strange guide swerved suddenly and disappeared. At the same moment a dark object, broader than any oak, loomed before the wanderers. They advanced, turning a little to one side, and there, only a few paces before them, they saw a red spot glowing in the dark barrier.

"The hut!" cried Karl.

Gerold sprang ahead, and, thrusting open a loose corner of the window parchment, peered into the hut. The others would have hurried past him to the rude door just beyond; but he uttered a low cry, and stepped before the king with outstretched hands.

"Stay, sire, stay!" he muttered in a hushed tone. "Better wolf and storm than witch-cheer!"

Look within!"

Startled by the warning, Karl and then Liutrad peered through the broken parchment, and each in turn drew back with the same look which distended the eyes of the Swabian. Last of all, Olvir put his eye to the hole. The first glance showed him a squalid little room whose walls of rotting logs stood out grimy and bare in the glow of the driftwood fire. The rafters of the low thatch were veiled by the smoke, indriven by the wind, which eddied through the roof-hole and sent little whirls of snowflakes hissing into the flames.

Crouched upon the rude hearth, across the fire from each other, were two women; and Olvir instantly recognized the one on the left as Fastrada. She sat with her head thrust forward, gazing keenly across at her hearth-mate.

After the maiden, Olvir felt little surprise when his glance turned to the tall woman who sat rocking to and fro on the edge of the hearth and crooning a strange song, while weasels played about her feet and ran up and down her outstretched arms. It was the girl's mother, the Wend mate of the old Grey Wolf.

The woman's head was uncovered, and Olvir stared with keen curiosity at her black hair and aquiline features. Her dark oval face still showed traces of great beauty; but age and witch-deeds had stained and withered her cheeks and caused the once beautiful eyes to sink deep into their sockets. Even without the weasels, the look of malignant joy on the witch's face would have set most hearts to quaking. But Olvir was smiling, half pityingly, at the dread which even the king had betrayed, when the witch chanced to turn so that the firelight struck upon her cheek. At the sight he started and almost cried out. It seemed to him that a red adder had thrust up from beneath the woman's neckband and laid its venomous head upon her cheek. When he stared more closely, however, he saw that the snake-head, though perfect in outline, was only a crimson blotch upon the witch's skin. He drew back with a grim laugh.

"No wonder she hid her face," he muttered. "What woman would not, with such a mark? But now--ho, lord king; why do we linger? Let us hasten in."

"In!" rejoined Gerold,--"a witch den!"

"She is Fastrada's mother,--the wife of Count Rudulf. She will gladly give hearth-cheer to her husband's lord. Come."

"Hold, Olvir. If we go, I lead," said Karl; and he thrust ahead to the hut door. He found the latch-string in and the door fast barred. His knock must have resounded through the narrow room like the beating of a hammer; but though he waited for an answer, all was silence within.

The king did not knock again. Setting down the half-frozen boy from his shoulder, he threw his weight against the door. Before the shock, it flew violently inwards, its bar snapped short in the socket. Having thus cleared the way, the king drew Hildegarde and the boy to him, and stooped to pass beneath the lintel. As the others pushed after him into the warm interior, they saw Fastrada start up and stand glaring at them with the horror of one who looks upon some grisly spectre.

The Wend woman had shrouded herself about in her grey cloak, and sat quietly in her place, staring at the forceful guests from the depths of her hood. Of the weasels nothing was to be seen but a pair of fiery little eyes peering out from the folds of the cloak upon her bosom. The witch was the first to speak.

"Odin bear witness," she said in a tone of quiet scorn. "It is very fitting that he who thus breaks in on helpless women calls himself King of the Franks."

"And over-lord of your lord, Wend wife. Make way by the fire for us."

"I make way for no one,--much less for Pepin's son," came back the hissing retort.

The king's brows met in a stern frown.

"That we shall soon see, woman," he said. "Liutrad, put this hag from the hearth."

"I, lord king!" muttered the young giant, and his ruddy face whitened. But then, crossing himself, he advanced resolutely upon the dreaded alruna. None the less, his relief was plain to be seen when the Wend woman rose and withdrew to the far end of the hut, without waiting to be forced.

Then at last, as the shivering guests crowded about the fire, Fastrada found her tongue. Springing forward, she threw herself at Hildegarde's feet, and loudly protested her delight: "My gracious dame--sweet queen! You're safe! safe! and the bairns and the little maiden--all alike have escaped the cruel--the cruel storm!"

"And the wolf-pack!" rejoined Pepin, proudly.

"Holy Mother!--wolves?"

"Nor was aid sent us, maiden," said Karl, sternly.

Fastrada half rose, and flung out her hands.

"Forgive me, sire!" she murmured. "I, too, was lost; I, too, wandered in the storm. Only a little while since I came upon this unholy den. Blessed be the saints who brought you to end my fears!"

"Why fears, maiden? Should any mother, however much a witch, harm her own child?"

Fastrada hung her head, visibly disconcerted by the answer. Her reply came haltingly, and in a tone almost too low to be heard: "Your Majesty, should I bear--should I suffer for her deeds? It is too much! Even my horror-- Ah, let her witchcraft meet with the just dooming of the king's law! She is no mother to me!"

"Ay, girl, no longer am I mother to you!" hissed out the Wend woman, and she glided around to the open door. At the threshold she turned, and, flinging back her hood, faced all openly. The twitching muscles of her sallow cheek gave to the crimson adder-head a fearful semblance of life, and the horror lost nothing by the malignant fury of her look and the sibilance in her low-pitched voice.

"So," she hissed; "the sly trull is bent upon saving herself. Having been caught in company with the Wend witch, she seeks to cast off the mother who bore her! Let her be content; she has proved herself a changeling. The daughter of the Snake could not be mother to a child so base and cowardly as to deny the bond of kinship. No longer is she blood of my blood or bone of my bone. I go; but, as parting gift, I leave her my curse,--the curse of one who was a mother. She shall taste of power, and it shall be as ashes in her mouth; she shall hunger for love, and hate shall wither her heart. Woe to her!"

Pausing, with upraised hand, the witch shifted her hateful gaze from her cowering daughter to the startled group about the fire.

"As for you, storm-guests," she went on, "learn that the witch-wife has gifts for all. To Pepin's son I give toil and sweat and bloody victory. Joy to the crusher of free folk! None may withstand the world-hero. Hoary-headed, he dies in the straw; for no longer are there foes to withstand him in battle. And then I see the storm gather in the frozen North. The dragons swim the salt waves; they fall upon Frank Land, ravening with fangs of steel and with flaming breath. The kin of Pepin's son flee as hares. Thor smites the White Christ! The Frank realm shatters in fragments!"

"Hold, fiend-wife!" roared Karl; and he turned threateningly upon the woman, all dread of her witchcraft forgotten in his deep anger. But she met him with a look which even his imperious will could not withstand. He stood spellbound, transfixed by the cold glitter of her sunken eyes. For a little she held him powerless,--him, the world-hero, king of half Europe. Then her thin white lips curled scornfully, and she turned from him to the others.

"Enough of Pepin's son," she scoffed. "As to these Norse curs, false alike to their folk and their gods, my curse is needless. The gods whom they have betrayed will exact full vengeance. But I put my curse on the brood of the bloody Frank,--maiden, bairns, and bed-mate,--all who stand before me. May the king's sons never wear crown; may the nun-maid lose her bright hero; may the fair queen know beforetime--"

The woman paused, and looked darkly from Hildegarde to her daughter. She was yet gloating upon the two when Rothada rose and came to her with outstretched arms.

"Ah, dame, good dame, be still!" she cried. "Christ forgive you the evil words! Turn to Him; cast out the hatred from your heart before your own curses creep in to wither it!"

"*Hei!* what is this?" muttered the woman; and she drew back in bewilderment. Her eyes glared into the pleading eyes of the king's daughter with a look almost of terror. Suddenly, without a word, she turned and rushed out into the storm.

CHAPTER XIII

Until that Guiki
With gold arrayed me
And gave me to Sigurd.

LAY OF GUDRUN.

For a while the deserted guests stood staring at one another, and there was dread in the eyes of

even Liutrad and the king. Olvir alone showed no fear. If he had dared the power of the Wend witch in the depths of Fulda Wood, he would not yield awe to her now. Presently he burst into a scornful laugh.

"Thor!" he jeered. "The witch-wife flees before a child,--a fearsome witch!"

"By the rood!" muttered Karl, and he drew in a deep breath; "they say true who name Rudulf's wife a heathen alruna."

But Hildegarde gathered the two trembling boys in her arms, and looked across at Olvir with a grateful smile.

"Dear lord," she said, "our bright Dane speaks truth. Witch or no, the Wend woman has fled before our little maiden. What need have we to fear the curse of one so powerless?"

"Here is yet more comfort for those who have faith in spells," added Olvir. "At the king's belt swings Ironbiter, my father's sword, upon whose blade are magic runes, cut by Otkar himself. They are pledged to guard the wielder against all witchcraft and evil."

Gerold shook his head doubtfully, and drew closer to the fire. "I have more faith in Christian signs. Yet though I marked the cross while she spoke, and twice since, I say freely that I would sooner face an aurochs bull naked-handed than stand again before that witch. Thank God, she is gone!"

"Into the storm, brother!" murmured Hildegarde, pityingly. "May the dear Christ save her body from wolf and cold, and her soul from hatred!"

At the fervent prayer, Fastrada stared up at the queen as her mother had stared at Rothada. But when she met Hildegarde's mild eyes, radiant with spiritual light, her gaze sank again to the hearth at her feet, and a dark flush overspread her face. Karl, who alone gave heed to the girl's shame, mistook its cause, and his own face reddened with a guilty flush.

"God bless you, dear wife!" he muttered. "What curse can bring harm upon so gracious a soul? But as to that Wend witch, should she escape the storm and wolf-pack, let her beware the law. Though twice over the wife of Rudulf and mother of this maiden, I will enforce against her to the utmost the just doom for evil spells and witcheries. Enough for the time of the hag and her curses. She has gone out among her storm-fiends; let them cherish her. We will warm our knees by her hearth. Fetch wood for the fire!"

As Gerold and Liutrad sprang up to bring fagots from the far end of the hut, Olvir led Rothada about to the fire, and sought a new bar for the door, which was swaying to and fro with the eddying draught. Before making it fast, however, he peered out in search of the Wend woman. He might as well have sought to look through a fog on the narrow seas.

Though the first fury of the wind had spent its force, the snow was now falling with greater thickness than ever. For all Olvir could tell, their grim hostess might have been lurking within a dozen yards of the doorway. He hesitated on the threshold, and was about to shout, when his quick ear caught another note than the creak and soughing of the oak-tops.

"Floki!--The laggard comes at last!" he said, and he faced about to the steaming group around the fire. "Listen, lord king! I hear horns. My vikings come in search of their vala."

Horn in hand, Karl sprang out beside the Northman, and blew the trysting-note. Three times he repeated the call, and then at last an answering note came blaring down the wind. Off toward the river other horns caught up and re-echoed the call. The searchers were beating through the forest. Guided by frequent blasts of the king's horn, they gathered quickly through the white snow-mist.

Soon the nearest horn resounded within a spear-throw, and Olvir flung open the door, that the red firelight might glow out into the storm. Hardly had he done so, when a gigantic white figure leaped out of the swirling snow-mist, and halted within two paces of the doorway, to lean, panting, upon the long shaft of a halberd.

"Greeting, Floki," said Olvir, in a very quiet tone. "You come over-late to the skating."

"Forgive, earl!" replied the tall viking. "Let the king say if the storm did not burst before the signs boded; and, more, we 've had a game on the way."

"Saint Michael!" cried Karl; "you 're torn, man,--you bleed! The wolves!"

"They had their chase, lord king; now they rest on the ice. Only a few turned back before us. After the blood-game, we spread out from either bank. A witling could have guessed that you 'd tricked the grey dogs in the flurry."

"Come within," said Olvir. "The others draw near. I 'll bind up your shoulder while they gather."

"Let be, ring-breaker. I would not bring blood before the queen and our little vala. It is only a flesh nip, and can wait. Here come those whom I outran. Make ready the women and bairns, and

we 'll bear all to the king's burg."

"Better for them to linger by the warm hearth till the storm is spent," said Olvir.

But Karl struck his fist into his open palm.

"No! by all the fiends, no!" he swore. "We linger no longer under this unholy roof. Ho! within there,--Liutrad--Gerold! Cast the brands among the fagots, and let all come out. Guests arrive; we should have hearth-cheer for all."

Obedient to the king's command, the young men swept the blazing brands from the hearthstone across to the high-heaped stack of fuel. Quickly the flames licked in among the dry fagots, and spread to right and left. Then, puzzled, but satisfied that they had done the king's will, the young men followed the others from the hut. As they passed the threshold, a dozen vikings came leaping out of the white swirl, wild with delight at sight of their little vala.

In the midst of the rejoicings, the fire within the hut burst hissing through the sodden thatch, and poured out overhead in a torrent of smoke and flames. Then the red tongues began to thrust between the half-rotted logs of the wall; for the hut within was dry as tinder. The leeward wall soon became a solid sheet of flame.

As all drew back from the blazing hut, a second band of vikings came shouting through the forest, guided by the horns. Hot after these ran half a hundred Franks and Northmen, with Fulrad, the valiant old churchman, at their head, brandishing a boar-spear.

At sight of the abbot, Karl beckoned to him, and called imperiously for the shouting to cease. When both Franks and vikings had gathered in a ring of wondering listeners, he laid his hand on Olvir's shoulder, and raised his voice high and clear above the uproar of the storm.

"Listen, liegemen and vikings! It is fitting that friends should return gift for gift. This day my Dane hawk has given to me a gift beyond price,--the lives of my queen and children. Had not the hero turned back to play with death in the teeth of the wolf-pack, all my loved ones would have met their fate on the frozen stream. Now, therefore, I pledge to the son of Thorbiorn the hand of my daughter Rothada, and, that none may doubt my faith, the maiden shall plight her troth with the hero. Whenever he has fulfilled the terms I have set for him, they shall wed. Fulrad will receive their vows."

A great shout of mingled astonishment and delight burst from the lips of the snow-shrouded onlookers. But all fell silent again as Olvir and Rothada clasped hands.

So, their hearts brimming over with love and joy, sea-king and king's daughter plighted their troth before the priest, in the midst of the swirling storm. Out of the jaws of the wolf-pack, they had won not only life, but joy.

When the vows were spoken, and the abbot had blessed the betrothed, the Franks joined full-voiced in the shouts of the vikings. For the time at least there was only one among all present who did not share in the joy of the lovers. While all others pressed forward about them, Fastrada alone drew back, cold and silent, and with another look than friendliness in her narrow-lidded gaze.

Deft hands had already lashed together spear-shafts and branches for litters to bear the women; and now Hildegarde and the two maidens were placed on the swaying seats. Brawny warriors perched the king's sons on their shoulders; and all marched away through the whirling snow, to the accompaniment of blaring horns and the wild shouts of the vikings.

CHAPTER XIV

An ill day, an ill woman,
And most ill hap!

LAY OF GUDRUN.

Never had Olvir or Rothada known a happier winter. As betrothed lovers they were allowed much greater freedom than would otherwise have been held seemly. Hildegarde often invited the Northman, with Gerold and Liutrad, to her bower, and there the lovers would sit by the hour in a quiet window-nook, watching the games of the king's children. Sometimes the young men and the bower-maidens joined in the play, and there was wild merriment in the bower. At other times the

presence of the king restrained the roisterers to more sedate amusements.

But Olvir was not always left in peace with his betrothed. The many churchmen at Thionville, with Alcuin at their head, were untiring in their efforts to convince him of the divine right of the Pope and Holy Church. Over and over again, Olvir stated the high ideals of life which he had gathered from the Gospels by his own reading, but the pious churchmen had no ears for such heresy. Who so sacrilegious as to dispute the dogmas of the wise and holy Augustine? Even Karl was puzzled and annoyed by Olvir's failure to accept the argument of "authority."

But though Olvir found it no great task to withstand the priests, his position was not so easy when he came to the well-wishers who appealed to his heart instead of his head. Hildegarde had masses sung for his conversion, so great was her concern. Between his wish to gratify both king and queen and his desire to win his bride, Olvir came far nearer to losing the struggle than through any arguing of the priests. Yet through it all he held fast to his first stand, even at the times when Karl himself, roused by the failures of his churchmen, took part in the dispute and sought to sweep away the defences of the Northman by the sheer force of his giant will.

So the winter months slipped by, and at last in sunny nooks the earth began to peer through the holes in its white coverlet. Then the Moselle burst its fetters and rolled free in the sunshine, while Ostara of the Saxons came sauntering up from the Southlands, blowing open the leaf-buds with her fragrant breath and strewing behind her a trail of early blossoms.

Never had the outer conditions of the land seemed more in keeping with the quiet joy and peace of the Pascal season. The plans of Alcuin and Karl for a general educational movement throughout the kingdom were well under way, and gave promise of speedy fruition,--to the glory of the king and the uplifting of his subjects.

Into the midst of this peace and quiet the war-storm burst from the Saxon forests without forewarning. On the very eve of Easter Sunday, a messenger from Count Rudulf came riding in hot haste, with word that Wittikind was back again from the North, followed by a host of Nordalbingians.

Further tidings of disaster were not long delayed. From all parts of Saxon Land messengers came flying, with report of fire and sword, bloodshed and sacrilege. The wild forest-folk, Eastphalians, Westphalians, and Engern, had risen to a man, and, under the leadership of Hessi and Alf and Bruno, were rushing to join the standard of the indomitable Wittikind. Last of all came riders from Teutonic, Count of the Frisian Mark. The Frisians were marching eastwards across their fenlands, everywhere slaying and burning, like their Saxon kinsmen. All beyond the Rhine, from Thuringia to the North Sea, the land was aflame.

Such were the fearful tidings which were to bring sorrow to many a Frankish hearthside and shatter the great king's fond dream of peace. Olvir's forebodings of what Verden should bring forth had been verified even more fully than he had expected. It was the hour of promise for Wittikind, son of Wanekind. All the internecine bitterness and jealousies of the tribes had melted away in the heat of their common fury against the Frank. For the first time in the long struggle, the utterly free forest-dwellers had forgotten the narrow boundaries of their shires, and placed themselves willingly under a common leader.

Yet, bitter as was his disappointment, Karl took up the renewal of the war with unflinching resolve to bend the stiff-necked heathen to his will. Riders were sent flying with the arrow-bode to all parts of the kingdom, while the king and his war-counts set about the planning of a campaign in the North greater than any that had ever gone before.

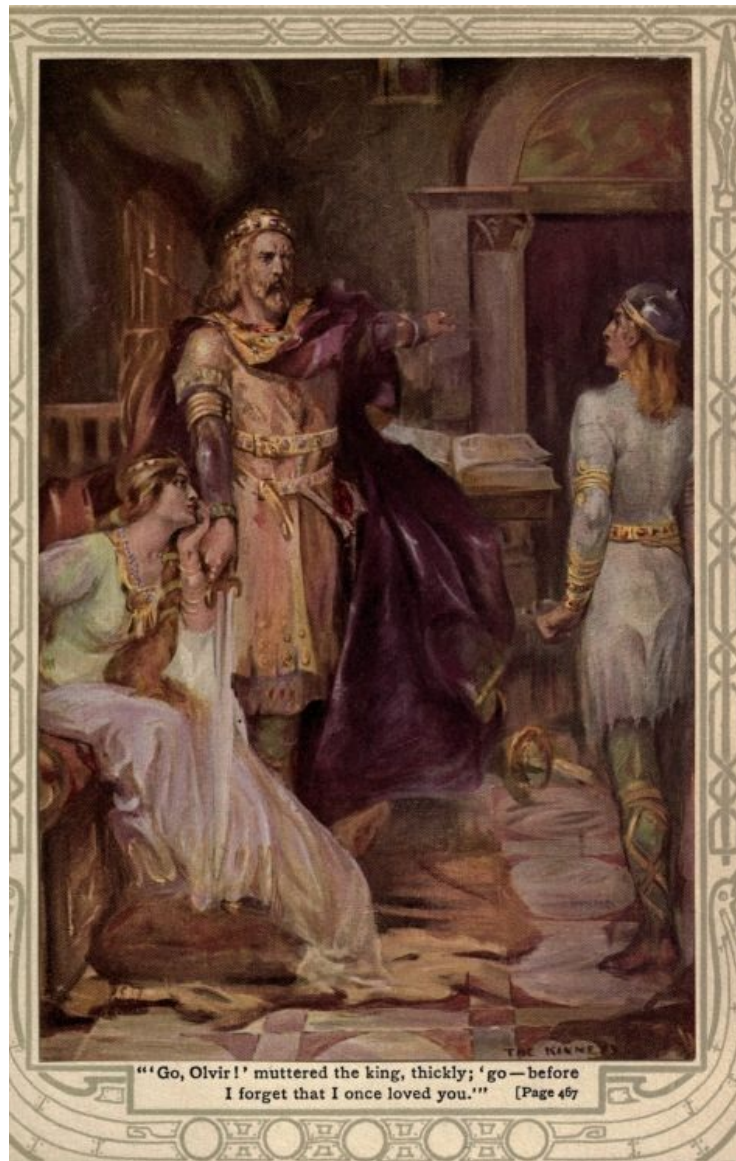
By the end of April the first of the war-levies had gathered at Cologne, where they were to be joined by the king. The first of May had been fixed as the day for the start, and on the evening before, all the high counts sat down to a farewell supper with the royal family. It was only the king's customary meal of four dishes and the roast, yet the occasion gave to it a distinction lacked by many a state feast.

Among the greater number of the guests the talk was all of the coming warfare,--of the long marches through the forests and over the broad heaths of Saxon Land; of possible battles, and the certain speedy overthrow of Wittikind. The gay Franks, many of whom were to find bloody death-beds under the Saxon beeches or in the yellow gorse, jested away the fears of their fair benchmates, and boasted how they would return, covered with glory and laden with the loot of the heathen.

But while most of the guests spent the meal-time in jests and boasting, there were a few who had little desire for merriment. Karl himself, though far other than disheartened that he was on the eve of the death-grapple with the fiercest and most stubborn of his many foes, was in no mood for gaiety. Had not the ravaging of the Saxons been enough to sober his thoughts, there

were rumors of fresh plots against him at the court of Duke Tassilo of Bavaria, while old Barnard, his uncle, had sent word from Italy of renewed attempts by Adelchis the Lombard to obtain a fleet and host at Constantinople from the Empress Irene.

But the king was affected most of all by the coming separation from his wife and children. Though it was intended that they should rejoin him in Saxon Land so soon as the full gathering of the Frankish host safeguarded the mark from Saxon raiders, his affection would not suffer him to part from his family without great reluctance.



"Go, Olvir!" muttered the king, thickly; 'go--before I forget that I once loved you.'" (Page 467)

Saddened as were Karl and Hildegarde by the thought of parting, their grief could not compare with that of Olvir and his little princess. Though the king left love behind, before him he saw glory and power; and even Hildegarde could look forward with pleasure to the success of her dear lord. Olvir, however, in leaving love, left all that he held dear. The expected battles, which lured on so many others with their promise of blood-stained honors, meant no more to him than an unwilling rendering of his duty to the king.

"God grant, dear heart, that we meet the Saxons at once!" he burst out after a long silence. "A single great battle may shatter their war-earl's power, and end the bloody strife. With Wittikind crushed, the most stubborn of the forest-folk may well give up the struggle as hopeless."

"If only they might bend to our Lord Christ without so much as one battle!" sighed Rothada.

"If only they might, little vala!" echoed Olvir. "But the best we can look for is a pitched battle, and the more terrible the slaughter, the more hope for peace to follow."

"That is a fearful saying, Olvir!"

"The truth of sword-rule. But this is no time, dearest, to fret our spirits with such thoughts. We have enough to sadden us in our parting."

"Oh, my hero! If I were not so selfish, I would seek to lighten your heart. But I sit here, heavy with sorrow, while all others are gay. See; even Fastrada has put away her brooding, and makes merry with Gerold and the pages, as once I used to do."

"She may well rejoice! War is as welcome to her as to my vikings; and no doubt she is merry that we are to be parted."

"Dear hero, you should speak evil of no one."

"True, sweetheart; I should not judge even the witch's daughter. Yet her laughter lacks the ring of that which springs from a kindly heart. Nor do I like the manner in which she looks at the king."

"Surely, Olvir, you misjudge the maiden. All during Lent she has been very kind and gentle. Look; here are the mushrooms which she told Pepin and Karl to gather for our mother."

"Loki,--a Roman dish! Yet the act was to be praised," admitted Olvir, and he stared curiously at the salver borne past by one of the pages. "I see it was not enough of honor to the ugly elf-stools that they should be gathered by a king's sons. They must be served in a golden bowl with a spoon of silver."

"Do not mock, dear. The cook is from Ravenna, and very skilled in his art. He bakes the spoon with the food, and if there should chance to be any poisonous mushroom with the others, he knows that the spoon will blacken."

"Better trust to good flesh and grain, and leave such dishes to the Romans and Greeks," rejoined Olvir, and he turned with sudden remembrance to his neglected trencher.

But his appetite, always moderate, was soon satisfied, and he was turning again to Rothada, when, startling as a thunderbolt from a clear sky, the king's voice broke in upon the laughter of the guests, harsh and strained with alarm: "Bring water! bring water quickly! The queen is ill! Mother of God, she swoons!"

In the sudden hush which followed, all heard the sibilant voice of Fastrada echoing the king's cry: "The queen swoons! Run, fetch the leech!--Kosru, the leech!"

Then all at the table sprang up together, and Liutrad and Worad rushed away in search of the Magian. With his own hands Karl had laid his queen upon the dais. About his stooping form gathered the dames and maidens; while the lords, grave and silent with anxiety, drew together at the far end of the hall. Olvir followed Rothada to the outer line of the women; but Gerold alone pushed in through their midst.

As the Swabian knelt beside his sister, Liutrad came thrusting Kosru before him into the hall. The Magian was deathly pale, and trembled visibly as Liutrad and Worad bore him forward between them. Yet he had not lost his power of speech.

"Stay!" he interposed in a quavering voice, as, at a sign from the king, Fastrada and the other bower-maidens sought to raise the queen. "Stay, maidens! I would first learn what our gracious dame has eaten."

"What we have all eaten," replied Karl, quickly.

"But more, lord king," called out Olvir. "How of the elf-stools?"

"The mushrooms!" muttered Gerold, and he sprang up to point out the little golden bowl, still on the board beside his sister's trencher.

Kosru tottered forward and clutched the bowl in his claw-like fingers. Breathlessly the onlookers watched while he sniffed at the shreds in the bottom of the dish and placed one of them upon his tongue. Almost instantly he spewed it out again.

"Ahriman!" he cried, and he turned to the king, his face a sickly yellow.

"Speak out!" commanded Karl, sternly.

"A! I feared it, lord king. Queen Hildegarde has eaten poisonous fungi."

"Yet the silver was untarnished. I saw it myself."

"But listen, lord king," replied the leech, so huskily that few could follow his words; "the test is not certain. There is a most deadly fungus, so like the harmless kind--"

"Who gathered the venomous mess?" demanded Karl, harshly.

"Your two eldest sons, sire," replied Fastrada.

"King of Heaven!" The great Frank's head bent forward, and he signed to the bower-maidens: "Bear her hence."

Out of the great hall and through the long corridors to her bower, they bore the swooning queen. The guests, following at a respectful distance, waited without the door, where they could soonest hear any word sent out from the sick-chamber.

Within the bower, husband and brother knelt side by side at the foot of Hildegarde's couch, wrestling in agonized prayer; while around them the maidens and tiring-women stood silently weeping, or, at the bidding of the leech, glided hastily about in the service of their beloved mistress.

But though Kosru made trial of drug after drug, all alike failed to rouse Hildegarde from her death-like stupor. Hour by hour the night dragged through its dreary length, and Kosru began to shake his head.

With all but infinite slowness, the grey dawn came stealing in upon the silent watchers,--the dawn of the last day that Hildegarde, the beloved queen, should abide with her dear lord. As the first red arrows of sunrise shot up the eastern sky, Rothada glided out from the bower and came to place her hand in Olvir's. Her face was very sad, and tears shone in the violet eyes.

"All is over!" murmured Olvir, in a broken whisper. But Rothada shook her head.

"No, no; she still breathes. Yet the leech has given up all hope. He promises only to rouse her before the end. He has already given the drug. I come to call Abbot Fulrad for the last offices of Holy Church."

Groans of despair burst from the lips of the waiting liegeman; but Olvir turned silently, and went with Rothada to the chapel. They halted in the doorway, and gazed out over the kneeling congregation to the high altar. There was no need of word or sign. Very solemnly Fulrad took up the vessel of sacred oil, and came down from the chancel. As he passed from among them the soft-voiced choristers sobbed out the wailing notes of the *Miserere*, and the grief-stricken congregation prostrated themselves in hopeless sorrow. But only Rothada and Olvir followed the abbot along the silent passages and in through the entrance to the bower.

Within the sick-room there had been a change. Beside the couch were gathered all the king's children, and Hildegarde, very faint, but fully conscious, was taking the last farewell of her dear ones. The end was very near.

Fulrad raised his tear-stained face, and advanced, with all the solemnity of his office, to administer the last rites of Holy Church. Tremulous but clear, his voice pronounced the words of the sacrament, and with the holy oil he anointed the head and hands and feet of the dying queen. Then, the holy rite ended, he turned and went back to the chapel. As the slow, heavy tread of his sandals died away down the passage, Karl rose up and signed to the sobbing attendants.

"Let all go out but those of kin," he said.

Obediently the maidens and women took a last look at their mistress, and crept away to seek comfort for their grief in the chapel. Behind them followed Fastrada and Kosru the leech, with downcast eyes; while last of all came Olvir, his dark face aglow with the spiritual light that shone in the eyes of Hildegarde. He paused at the door, overcome with yearning to linger inside; and as Fastrada and the cowering leech glided out before him, his wish was answered by the king: "Turn again, Olvir. She speaks your name."

In a moment the Northman was back beside Rothada. Hildegarde had kissed her own children for the last time, and, at a sign from Karl, they were being led from the bower. She now turned her gaze to the grief-stricken figure of Pepin Hunchback, and all bent forward to catch her faintly murmured words: "Son of Himiltrude,--no less my son. Cherish him, dear lord!"

"As God gives me wisdom, beloved," answered Karl.

The boy bent and kissed the lips of the gentle dame who had been to him as his own mother; then, sobbing bitterly, he ran from the bower. In his place knelt Rothada, and on either side of her Gerold and Olvir. Already Hildegarde's mild eyes were darkening; but she turned her gaze to the three, and a smile shone on her pallid cheeks.

"Gerold--brother," she whispered, "God has blessed you. Yours shall ever be a life of honor. Rothada--Olvir, my daughter--my son,--love is yours. Be happy, as I have been happy with my dear lord. Karl--come to me--"

Silently the three rose and gave place to the king. He knelt and drew his beloved into his great arms, and she nestled to him with the sigh of a tired child.

Then the others went softly out of the bower, and left the king alone with his dead.

CHAPTER XV

Flowed, from whence first the great
Sun-star of morning-tide,
Lamp of the Lord God,
Lord everlasting,
Glode over earth, till the glorious creature
Sunk to her setting.

BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH.

With all the solemn pomp of church and state they bore the dead queen through the budding woods to Metz, and there laid her to rest in the crypt of the great domchurch,--the Basilica of Saint Arnulf her forefather. The beggar crouching on the steps saw the great king pass in with bowed head and fingers tugging at his beard, and knew that there is a grief which comes to both high and low, which enters alike palace halls and the hovel of the serf.

But deep as was Karl's sorrow, once that he had turned away from the tomb of his beloved queen, he set about the opening of the Saxon campaign with added determination. Used as were his liegemen to the tremendous energy of his movements, never before had they seen him bend all to his will with such resistless force. To put away the anguish of his grief, he threw himself headlong into the war-game, and welcomed the fresh tidings of ravages which served to inflame his wrath against the forest-dwellers.

He did not return to the ill-omened villa, but moved the court direct to Mayence. Leaving there the royal household in the charge of Queen Bertrada his mother, who came from Saint Denis at his asking, he embarked with his war-counts for Cologne in Olvir's long-ships.

Yet with all his eagerness to meet and crush the harrying forest-wolves, the first day of summer found him encamped at the Lippespring with but thirty thousand warriors,--only a few more than those with whom he had set out from Cologne. The greater part of the expected levies had been delayed by lack of forage and by the all but impassable morasses which covered the land during the heavy spring rains.

Far from damping his ardor, however, the delay and disappointment had served only to harden his resolve and call out his energy. Already he had swept across the mark from the Ems to the Weser, and back again to Paderborn, devastating all the southern shires of Westphalia. Where he had passed, the Saxon hamlets, scattered through the vast woods and on the broad heaths, were left as heaps of smouldering ruins. Their defenders lay slain among the ashes; while all others of their inhabitants whom the Franks could take thrall--man and woman and child--were being dragged away to exile and slavery in the South.

Had the forces of Wittikind been united, even so great a leader as Karl could not have thus harried the land unchecked. But the Frisians were yet making their way around the north of the Teutoburger Wald, and Bruno and Hessi had marched with their tribesmen, the Eastphalians and Engern, to foray along the northern borders of Thuringia. So, with only his Westphalians and Nordalbingians, Wittikind, no less wily than intrepid, had withdrawn into the hills which form the southern termination of the Teutoburger Wald, and awaited attack near where the Roman Varus perished with his legions. Though his host was smaller than the Frank's, it held the vantage of position.

Before he learned of the delayed levies, the king had sent Olvir into Thuringia, to aid Count Rudulf against the harrying Engern and Eastphalians. But when the vikings had marched clear across the forest land to the Saale, they found that the Grey Wolf and his little host of five thousand Thuringians had gone north and west into Eastphalia, worrying the rearguard of the retreating Saxons.

Eager to bring word to the king before Hessi and Bruno could join their large host to that of the war-earl, Olvir marched straight across country to Paderborn. But he reached the Lippespring with even his iron followers outspent, only to learn that Karl had met the war-earl on his chosen ground, and forced the passage of the mountains. Stubbornly as the Westphalians and their Nordalbingian allies had fought, the Franks had driven them back through their sacred forests, and wrested the holy Burg of Teu from their grasp.

Defeated but unrouted, Wittikind had withdrawn with his host along the farther slope of the mountains, to meet his Frisian allies on the Haze bank; and there, upon the arrival of his belated levies, Karl had followed, to give him battle the second time.

Such were the tidings that were poured into the ears of the eager sea-wolves as they lay panting after their long chase. Nor had they rested two days before Count Gerold came racing to

the Lippespring with word of the first great battle on the Haze bank. By forced marches, the king had come upon the Saxon host before the juncture of Hessi and Bruno. The forest-dwellers, surprised in their camp, had been driven across the Haze, with great slaughter. But the outworn Franks were unable to follow up their victory, and Karl, learning in the night that Hessi and Bruno were about to join the war-earl, at once set to replacing and strengthening the broken war-hedges of the captured camp.

The immense host of the united Saxons now outnumbered the Franks by ten thousand men. The Grey Wolf had not yet come up with his Thuringians when Gerold left the Haze, and his whereabouts were unknown. There was pressing need for every man who could swing sword. But Gerold might have spared himself the urging. The vikings were wild to take part in the blood-game. There were no laggards when, at dawn, Olvir gave the word to start.

Freshened by their rest, they swept over the hills, past the Teutoburg and through the wooded valley country along the base of the Teutoburger Wald, like wolves on a blood-trail. Even horsemen could not have outdistanced them on that first day's march. Night fell upon them, but the beams of the rising moon glinted on the bright steel of their war-gear as they trailed across the open glades. When at last they flung themselves down among the alders, to gnaw at their cold food and stretch out for a half-night's rest, Gerold sprang from his horse, with the welcome call that the Frankish camp could not be distant over three hours' march.

But when, at dawn, the vikings would have rushed on swifter than ever, Olvir checked them. If the hosts had again joined battle, it was well he should bring his sea-wolves into the field unwearied. So, chafing at the restraint, like hounds in leash, yet bending to the will of their earl, the vikings swung on at the pace he set, until through the oak forest there came rumbling a sound like the bellow of angry bulls. It was the deep battle-note of the Saxons, roaring in the hollow of their shields.

After that, Olvir no longer thought to hold his followers. Silent, but with eyes gleaming and blades bared, the sea-wolves broke into a run, and charged hotly after Gerold and their earl. It was not long before they had burst out from the oak forest and were rushing across a stretch of yellow gorse toward the war-hedges of the Frankish camp, on the nearer bank of the Haze.

A belt of trees shut out all view of the battle which raged on the farther side of the stream; but above the dull rumble of the Saxon shield-roar sounded the furious shouts of the Franks, the harsh braying of horns, the shrilling of the Saxon fifes, and the terrific clash of shields and helmets struck by the whirling blades.

The Frankish host had left the shelter of the war-hedges to meet the Saxons in the open field; but the ghastly heaps of Saxon slain which half choked the bed of the Haze showed that the Franks had not been the first to attempt the crossing.

"Look, lad!" shouted Olvir. "It must be old Rudulf has come before us. The king has driven back the attacking foe, and followed after, across the stream."

"If such has-- Saint Michael! Who are those come flying from the field?--the Neustrians! God grant we 're not too late--"

"None too late for the sword-play!" answered the Northman, his nostrils quivering, and then, silent as his men, he led the way past the Frankish camp. As they skirted the war-hedges, the charging warriors were greeted by a welcoming hail from the frightened camp-followers within, and Pepin Hunchback came racing out to meet Olvir and Gerold.

"Turn back, king's son! We go into battle," commanded Gerold. But Pepin urged his horse close in beside Zora, and rode along with Olvir.

"Hero," he pleaded, "let me go with you. My father left me to hold the camp. What place is that for a king's son?"

"Come, then, king's son," answered Olvir, and the boy's face flushed with joy. Then his horse leaped with Zora into the Haze, and close after dashed the vikings, panting with eagerness for the blood-game. As they floundered across the stream, the glimpse which they caught of the retreating Neustrians down the bank served only to whet their temper the keener.

But on the farther side, Olvir wheeled the red mare, and sprang to the ground.

"Hold, men!" he commanded. "Form wedge. Afoot, Gerold. You 'll stand behind me at the fore, with Floki and Liutrad. The king's son rides beside the 'Gleam'--stay! he himself shall bear the banner. Put Zora and the count's horse in the midst. So; well done! Now for Odin's game. Keep close, all. When my wedge strikes, it should be with the weight of every man linked to his fellows."

"Lead on, son of Thorbiorn!" croaked Floki, and the men burst into a roar: "Lead on! Lead on, ring-breaker! *Haoi!*"

Al-hatif glittered above the sea-king's head, and he sprang about, to lead his band at a half run through the screening coppice. A few swift strides, and he burst from the thickets into full view of the battle. Before him on the trampled gorse heath stretched out the vast disordered mass of the battling hosts, locked fast in the death-grapple and reeling to and fro with the stress of their mighty struggles.

The Saxon warriors--Eastphalian, Westphalian, Nordalbingian, and Engern--were mingled in a shapeless horde, which sought to thrust back and overthrow the equally disarrayed mass of the Frankish footmen. But to the left, the Frisians, most stubborn of all fighters, stood firm in orderly array against the ferocious attack of the Grey Wolf and his Thuringians, while across on the far side of the battlefield, where the left wing of the Saxons had been thrust back, could be seen the Frankish horse, with Karl himself in command, vainly striving to break the ranks of the mail-clad Danes in Wittikind's shieldburg.

Here was the key to the battle-scheme. None need tell Olvir where to strike. The first glance had shown him how the battle went. He must strike, and strike quickly. Already the Franks were giving back before the Saxon wolf-horde, and even as the vikings burst from the coppice after their leader, from the willows on their right a Frankish horn sounded the retreat, and Count Hardrat came leaping into the open, to fall headlong among the yellow gorse.

Bewildered and dismayed by the call to flight, the last ranks of the Neustrians wavered and broke, and the yelling Saxons leaped forward to slay the fugitives. But at sight of the band of mailed warriors who came charging from the thicket not a spearthrow distant, they halted and closed up their ranks to meet the coming shock. As well might they have thought to check the mad rush of an aurochs herd. The vikings, though still locked in solid ranks, were now charging at full run.

As they swept down upon the Saxons, arrows streamed from their midst into the thick of the enemy; but they cast no spears until their leader was within twenty paces of the Saxon line. Then at last Al-hatif swung up, and a deadly flight of darts and javelins whirred into the dense mass of the Saxons. Pierced through their half-mailed war-jerkins of wolf and boar hide, scores of the forest-men fell dead or wounded, and the wedge hurled forward to strike the line where weakened by their fall.

"Thor aid! Thor aid!" roared out the viking battle-shout, and then, with a frightful rending crash, the wedge smashed in among the Saxons. Fiercely as the forest-men leaped to meet the attack, they were like children before the mailed vikings, who numbered in their midst many of the most famous champions of the North. Through the rift opened by Olvir and Floki, the Northmen followed hotly, roaring in grim delight as they hewed wider the battle-path.

To the very heart of the Saxon host the wedge charged without a check in its terrible course, and the ground behind it was covered with fallen warriors. Here and there a steel-mailed figure lay among the trampled corpses, but for every such one there was to be counted a dozen of slain Saxons. Even the savage Nordalbingians were appalled by such slaughter, and sought to give way before the vikings, thinking that they would swerve and pass through to the Frankish lines, where Worad and Amalwin were bending every effort to hold their own. But the Norse wedge crashed on its way straight for the rear of the Danish shieldburg.

A few more brief moments of bloody slaughter, and then Northman was face to face with Northman. Here was no longer the formless horde of half-armed berserks, to be hewn down like cattle by the viking blades, but Danes trained in shieldburg and armed like their assailants in scale-hauberks or mail-serks.

As the Danes faced about to meet the rear attack, Olvir thrust forward through the last ranks of the Saxons, smiling like a guest newly come to the feast. Protected alike against point and edge by his threefold mail, the blue steel of his helmet, and the little blade-glancing shield, he had come through the midst of the Saxons without a wound.

At either flank of their earl, Floki and Liutrad swung their great weapons with unflagging vigor. At every stroke of the young giant's axe, a man went down, cleft through shield and helmet; while the long-shafted blade of the strutting Crane rose and fell with still more deadly effect. Floki did not strike downwards, but whirled his halberd with a peculiar backhanded stroke, as erratic as the man's nature.

Unlike their earl, neither had come scatheless from amongst the Saxons, nor had Gerold. The young Swabian was gashed in the shoulder and thigh by thrusting spears, and the bell-like rim of his casque had been broken by a sling-stone, which, had it been aimed a handsbreadth lower, would have beaten in his face. Liutrad's serk beneath his axe-arm showed a long rent, where a sword had bitten through to the bone,--the blow of a berserk-mad Nordalbingian. But the look of

Floki was most terrible of all. His cheek had been laid open by a glancing sword-stroke, and the wound gave to his long wry face an aspect of ghastly grotesqueness. As yet, however, none of the three felt his wounds, and all alike sprang eagerly after Olvir, as he rushed upon the Danish shieldwall.

"*Hei*, vikings, follow!" croaked Floki. "Leave the cattle. Here are men!"

"Men--Danes--sons of Thor!" echoed Olvir. "After me, sea-wolves! Here are players. Hail, Danes--folk of Sigfrid! Odin calls you!"

"Hail, bairn! Get thee to Godheim!" shouted a Dane of vast girth, and he leaped forward from the shieldburg to meet the Norse earl.

"Lead me! I follow--in good time," rejoined Olvir, tauntingly.

The Dane whirled up his two-bladed axe, and struck with all his might. Even Olvir's skill could not have warded such a blow. It was a shield-smashing stroke, such as Liutrad was swinging. But it whirled down through empty air, and the great blade buried itself deep in the turf. Olvir had flung himself forward beneath the descending weapon and on past the massive figure of the wielder. As he darted by, Al-hatif stabbed up beneath the Dane's shield. The champion fell groaning upon his axe. Without a backward glance, Olvir sprang forward to break the Danish shieldwall. Before they could comprehend his deadly mode of attack, two more Danes went down from the blinding stabs of Al-hatif, and then Liutrad and Gerold and Floki were again at his back.

On one side a little space had been left clear by the opening out of the Saxons. This was a rare chance for the sharp-eyed Crane, who leaped sideways, and, with a full-armed sweep, sent his halberd whistling low among the legs of the foremost Danes. It was like a scythe in the wheat. The one blow crippled in its sweep no less than four warriors, whose sudden fall left a gap in the wall of interlocked shields. Before the gap could be closed, Olvir had leaped into the opening, and was putting forth his utmost effort to pierce the second rank of the Danes.

Close at his shoulders pressed Liutrad and Gerold, while Floki stood back for a second leg-shearing. But, though locked so closely in their ranks that they could not leap above the terrible halberd, the Danes were too crafty to be caught as at first. Three or four instantly crouched to catch the stroke on their shields, and one, a skilled swordsman, thrust out his blade to meet the haft of the halberd. Neither his parry nor the intervening shields could entirely break the blow. The swordsman's blade was dashed aside, his shield shattered into fragments, and he himself hurled back among his fellows, a mangled corpse. But his skill was not without avail to those beside him. The halberd shaft, notched by his sword-edge, broke short off with the force of the blow.

"Faul!" croaked Floki, and, hurling the splintered shaft into the midst of the shieldburg, he drew his sword--a blade half a span longer than Ironbiter and little less weighty. He sprang forward none too soon. Gerold had thrust himself in the way of a stroke aimed from the side at Olvir, and the fierce blow, cleaving through his shield, had dented his helmet, and sent him reeling backwards, half-stunned.

"Way, lad, way!" growled the Northman. Plucking the Swabian back, he leaped upon the Danes in a berserk rage.

Closing upon their leaders, the vikings now struck the shieldburg with the full weight of their charge, and the force of the shock drove the wedge's point well into the opening cleft by Olvir and his shoulder-mates. Gerold, still dazed, was dragged back beside the "Gleam" just in time to see young Pepin struck down by a sling-stone which burst the lad's helmet. As a warrior caught the gold-starred banner from the opening hand of the king's son, Gerold gave command that the boy be lashed to his horse and taken back into the midst of the wedge. He himself thrust forward again, that he might not lose his share of the fighting. He found the wedge-leaders steadily cutting their way deeper toward the heart of the shieldburg.

But it was steel biting steel. Once the impetus of the viking charge was lost, the advance became very slow. Even at the wedge's point, the movement, though sure, meant for every step gained a matter of fiercest struggle. Olvir and Floki yet fought as at first; but Liutrad, for all his massive young strength, was glad enough for a time to give place to Gerold.

If, however, the viking wedge failed to burst open the shieldburg at once, the slaughter they had wrought among the Saxons and their presence in the Danish rear were not without effect on both friend and foe. The fleeing Neustrians had turned again, and the Saxons, disconcerted by the viking charge, no longer pressed so fiercely upon the Franks, who immediately followed up the slight show of weakness by renewed efforts to regain their lost ground.

With the attack of the vikings, Wittikind, who had been trying to single out his royal opponent, on the farther side of the shieldburg, quickly heeded the greater danger of the fresh

attack, and hastened to the rear to aid in checking the in-thrusting wedge.

Slowly but steadily, Olvir was piercing a rift for his followers into the steel core of the shieldburg, when the Danish ranks before him opened, and in the gap towered up the terrible figure of the Saxon war-earl. He had time only for a glimpse of the Saxon's bearded face and glaring blue eyes; then a blade more ponderous than Ironbiter whirled down upon him.

Unable to avoid the blow, Olvir raised his shield to meet it. Never had he tilted the little buckler with greater skill. But his arm was somewhat wearied, and the Saxon struck with a force that only Otakar Jotuntop himself might have exceeded. Though the blow glanced aside, it beat the shield down upon Olvir's helmet with stunning violence. As he stood there, dazed and blinking, Liutrad thrust a protecting shield above his head, while Gerold flung himself upon the Saxon. As the Swabian leaped, he cut fiercely at Wittikind's neck. But the Saxon caught the blow on his sword, and as Gerold's shield clashed upon his own, he hurled the leaper backwards.

"*Teu! Teu!*" he roared, and he whirled his great blade to cut down the reeling Swabian. But then Liutrad swung up his axe, and dealt the war-earl a crashing two-handed blow. Driven by all the massive strength of the wielder, the heavy blade split the Saxon's shield, and sent him staggering back as though struck by Thor's hammer.

Even as the Danes pressed in before their war-earl, their close-set ranks heaved and staggered with the force of a tremendous shock from beyond. The Frankish horsemen had withdrawn from the battle-line, and, led by the king himself, had hurled upon the shieldburg in a charge more impetuous than any that had gone before.

Galloping in the lead of his heavy horsemen, Karl spurred his charger full against the wall of locked shields. A dozen spear-points glanced from his shield or splintered upon his scale hauberk. Then his heavy stallion struck the shieldwall like a war-ram, and burst through, trampling upon the overthrown Danes. From all sides ready blades were brandished to cut down the royal leader. But not even the halberds could beat through the king's guard. His grey eyes flamed with white fire, and he shouted joyfully, as Ironbiter swirled down to right and left: "*Heu! heu!* Christ reigns! Down with the fiend-gods! Follow me, Franks!"

"*Heu! heu!* Christ and king!" shouted the horsemen, and, fired by the example of their leader, they burst through the Dane wall in a dozen places. In a twinkling, the close ranks of the shieldburg were rent asunder, and Danes and Franks were mingled in a wildly furious struggle.

Berserk-mad, Wittikind turned again from the Northmen, and rushed to meet the Frank king as he came plunging through the heart of the shieldburg.

"The king!" he roared; "about him, men!"

With a fierce shout, the Danes rallied and thrust in behind Karl with such desperate valor that he was cut off from the horsemen, with scarce a dozen followers. At once the mailed champions closed in on the handful of riders, and hewed them down with axe and halberd. Karl alone sat his saddle when the Danish ranks opened, and the war-earl came leaping for his vengeance. The first blow of his sword split the skull of the king's stallion, and Karl was hurled forward at the feet of the Saxon.

In the fall, the hilt of Ironbiter, slippery with blood, was wrenched from his grasp. He saw Wittikind's whirling sword, and sprang up to grip him fast about the body. Unable to strike, the Saxon in turn gripped the king. For a little, the Danes held back, while the giant leaders bent and strained to overthrow one another. But the Frank had the vantage of the hold. A bear would have smothered in that hug. Already Wittikind's face was blackening, when a Dane sprang in and struck the crowned helmet of the king with his war-hammer.

Instantly the king's grip broke. The war-earl thrust him away, and he fell senseless upon the bloody ground. Half-smothered, the Saxon stood gasping, unable to raise his sword. Then he was plucked aside by his henchmen, as Olvir and Floki came leaping into the midst and thrust out their shields to guard the fallen king.

Back to back, the two Northmen stood alone in the midst of the Danes, and so furiously did the champions of King Sigfrid press upon them, that even Floki, in all his many battles, had never been put to such straits to hold his own. Well was it the war-earl yet lacked breath to leap upon them. While he stood gasping, Liutrad and Gerold burst through, at the head of the wedge.

Ground mercilessly between the Frankish horsemen on the one side and the in-thrusting wedge, the Danes at last drew back from about the king, and sought to form another shieldwall.

"They break!" cried Gerold, and springing upon a riderless horse, he wheeled about in the lead of the horsemen. "*Heu! heu!* Follow me, Franks! Give the wolves no time to turn!"

Rallying to the call, the Franks spurred their horses upon the disarrayed ranks of the Danes, and for a while all Wittikind's efforts could not make the beaten warriors stand and face the

attack. Luckily for them, they were rid of the Norse champions, else their retreat would soon have broken into a rout. But Olvir had called upon his sea-wolves to stand while he and Liutrad sought to restore the king to consciousness.

Fearful of the worst, the two stooped over the great Frank, and were chafing his wrists, when his grey eyes opened in a fierce stare, and he sat up, to grope eagerly about.

"My sword--Ironbiter!" he muttered.

"Here, sire," replied Olvir, and he thrust the gold hilt into the king's hand.

"Good! The battle--"

Floki stepped upon a slain horse, and swept the wild battlefield with his glance: "Yonder, lord king, I see Wittikind's shieldburg. The Danes have faced about, and again withstand your riders. But everywhere the Saxons give ground--even the stubborn Frisians!"

"Saint Michael! we win! Why do your wolves stand idle, Dane hawk?"

"We wait for you, lord king, and the Saxons are not minded to press upon us," replied Olvir, grimly. "Lead us now against them, king! *Heya!* men; lead forward Count Gerold's horse."

"The lad, also," added Floki. "How does the king's son fare?"

"Look for yourself, Crane," rejoined the viking who led forward Gerold's and Pepin's horses.

The luckless boy, who had been lashed fast in his saddle by the vikings, was crouched low over his horse's withers, and his delicate face, as he gazed vacantly about among the vikings, was white and drawn. At the pitiable sight Karl leaped up, his look dark with chagrin.

"King of Heaven!" he cried, "have I lived to see my first-born fear-stricken--my son a coward?"

"Hold, king!" broke in an old berserk, with generous boldness. "You do both yourself and the bairn a wrong. The lad's now witless. Till the luckless stone struck him down, he rode beside me, blithe of heart in the midst of the battle-din. No man in all our wedge cast a dart with truer aim. I myself saw him pierce two Saxons. He's yet witless."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Karl, and he sprang to fling his arm about the boy. "Heed me, child--my brave child! Rouse up and draw sword--the battle's not ended!"

But Pepin stared vacantly into the glowing face of his father, and pointed to the blood-reddened figures of the vikings with a foolish smile. "They that are clothed in scarlet dwell in king's houses--clothed in scarlet--scarlet and crimson," he babbled.

"Mother of God!" muttered Karl, and his eyes fell before the meaningless stare of the boy. But then Olvir sprang forward, his face pale, and his brows meeting in a stern frown.

"Here's a horse, king," he said almost harshly, "Mount, and lead us on again."

"But the lad--"

"Liutrad shall take him in charge. We can do no more for him till this scarlet play is ended."

"Scarlet play--you speak truth, Dane hawk! But see! Ho, Christ triumphs! My Grey Wolf rends his way into the midst of the fen-dwellers. They break--the host itself! Ho, sea-wolves, after me--after me, and burst the Danish shieldwall!"

With a shout that rolled out above all the wild din and uproar, the vikings closed their ranks again in wedge, and wheeled to follow their crowned leader into the thick of the withdrawing Saxons.

As yet only half beaten, the forest-wolves were giving ground with stubborn slowness, and Wittikind was seeking to swing his shieldburg around, that he might shake off the horsemen and rally the tribes in a last furious charge upon the Frankish footmen. Even yet the tide of battle might have been turned against the Franks.

But then the viking wedge crashed into the heart of the Saxon host from the one side, while from the other came sweeping a torrent of routed Frisians, old Rudulf and his grey-armored warriors raging in their midst. The yells of the fen-dwellers quavered with superstitious dread: "The werwolf!--the werwolf! Fly, Saxons!--Fenir 's free!"

Thousands of voices caught up the despairing cry, and the whole Saxon host faced about and broke into utter rout. Wild with fear, they swept across the bloody battlefield in a whirling flood that all but overwhelmed the vikings. Like a ship adrift among the storm-waves, the wedge was carried along in the midst of the flying thousands, clear to the farthest edge of the battlefield. There, at last, they made a stand, and the horsemen came plunging through the flood to join their royal leader.

As Gerold rode up at their head, Karl signed to him: "Plant the standard; send the horsemen on. To my side! I reel with blood-loss."

Again the vikings gathered about the king, while the horsemen joined the fierce pursuit of the Saxons. But hardly had Gerold and Liutrad bound up his wounds, when the last of the flying host came rushing past, intermingled with the Frankish footmen.

"Ho, lord king!" called Olvir. "My wolves strain at the leash. Bid us go. Yonder comes Amalwin. Let him guard the standard. It cannot be he thirsts to slay his fleeing countrymen."

"Go, then. But leave my luckless Pepin and these bold lads--"

"I'm spent--I stay!" gasped Liutrad.

"I go. My wounds are stanchd," said Gerold, and as Olvir sprang upon Zora, the Swabian mounted his own horse little less nimbly.

CHAPTER XVI

Many a man is brave
Who still does not thrust the blade
Into another man's heart.

LAY OF REGIN.

The sun was far down the western sky when the vikings swung away from the corpse-strewn battlefield and joined the fierce chase of the broken host. Already the foremost of the pursued and the pursuers were beyond view, and for a time Northmen followed after the scattering Saxon bands, in vain search for Wittikind and his Danes.

But at last, off to the northward, Olvir caught sight of a distant glimmering along the skyline, and he had no need to look twice to know that it was the last rays of the sunlight glinting on burnished steel.

"Look, lad, our quarry!" he called to Gerold. "No Saxon war-gear would gleam so bright."

"Wittikind and his Danes!" cried Gerold. "Saint Michael--this has been a glorious day! Let us but kill their earl, and the war is at an end!"

After this, those of the Saxons who turned aside out of the way of the vikings were safe from their dreaded blades. The sea-wolves were on the trail of bigger game. Yet swift as was their pursuit, night fell, and they had not overtaken the Danes. Coming to a little brook, they halted to bathe their wounds in the cool stream and to eat the last fragments of the coarse fare which they had brought from the Lippespring.

When, after a little, they clamored to be led on again, Gerold spoke of a stronghold to which the war-earl might be fleeing, and at Olvir's assent, guided the band by moonlight on that blind trail. But the moon at last set and left them in darkness, without view of their quarry. It was well, for even their iron strength was broken. Many had lagged behind in the last hour's march.

Yet at dawn, stiff from their wounds and half famished, they gathered about their earl, and called upon him to lead them on across the woodlands.

When at last, bursting out on the edge of a broad meadow, the vikings sighted the Danes fording a little stream, they uttered a roar, and rushed forward to close with the foe. But even Gerold and Floki were left far behind by Olvir, who raced ahead on Zora as though to ride down singly the whole Danish band. His followers were nearly a bow-shot to the rear when he drew rein just beyond sweep of the Danish swords.

The greater number of the Danes were already across the stream; but a few of the more resolute had halted to hold the passage against the pursuers. Olvir, however, stared over the heads of the desperate champions, to the little islet upon which Wittikind, striding up out of the water, had paused to glance back at the Norse wedge. As the Saxon's eye fell upon the viking earl, the latter raised his hand, and sent a challenge ringing over the stream.

"Ho, hero!" he shouted; "stand and wait--I would meet you in single fight."

"Faul seize you, dog of the Frank!" retorted the Saxon. "Am I a witling to linger while your bloody wolves come up?"

"Listen, son of Wanekind," said Olvir, very earnestly. "Odin bear witness--I swear that no man in my following shall cross the stream, if you fight with me. Let these men follow over to their mates. Mine will stand here."

"And if you fall, bairn?"

"My pledge shall hold good nevertheless. But if you falter and fail to meet me, I shall name you nothing from Rhine Stream to Trondheim Fiord."

"*Teu!* It is a bold cockerel!" cried Wittikind. But the flush which reddened his bearded cheek showed that the taunt had gone home. Only blood could wipe out that threat of coward-naming. He signed impatiently to the Danish rearguard.

"Across, men!" he shouted. "I 'll soon trim the comb of this loud-crowing cock, and then we shall see how the sons of Thor keep faith."

Olvir smiled, well pleased, and, as the Danes sprang into the stream, he turned about, with upraised hand, to check the wild charge of his vikings.

"Hold, men!" he called. "I meet the war-earl singly. Whether scathe come to me or to him, none among you shall cross over the stream."

"How, Olvir?" demanded Gerold. "Would you then let the Danes escape us?"

"My word is pledged; the Danes go free. As to the war-earl, it is as it was with that traitor Hroar."

"You would trust everything to your own sword, Olvir; and yet the war-earl all but struck you down."

"In the press of the battle," answered Floki, sharply. "Here the ring-breaker will have room to avoid the Saxon's sword."

"I have given my word. See that you keep it," added Olvir, and, leaping from Zora, he advanced out into the water.

Wittikind calmly awaited the attack, leaning upon the hilt of his terrible longsword. There was no feeling visible in his bearded face, but his blue eyes were fixed upon the Northman in a vengeful look. Had it not been for the Norse wedge, the battle would have surely gone against the hated Franks before Rudulf, that werwolf Thuringian, could break the Frisians.

With a rush, Olvir passed, waist-deep, across the narrow channel, and sprang out upon the lower end of the islet. Between him and the Saxon lay a level stretch of sedge-grown sand, a dozen paces wide and twice as long. With the water still dripping from the border of his mailserk, Olvir advanced quietly upon his great enemy. Wittikind swung up his sword, and stepped forward to meet the Northman.

"Come, bairn, come!" he jeered. "We linger too long. I would make an end of the matter, and be gone."

"The gerfalcon strikes the stork!" retorted Olvir, and he ran in upon the war-earl so closely that his little steel shield clashed upon the spiked boss of the Saxon's linden-wood buckler. Down came the longsword with a vicious swirl,--a stroke that few among the greatest champions might have warded. Olvir made no attempt to meet it. Wide as was the blade's sweep, he sprang back into safety as the blow fell.

Gerold and the vikings shouted in approval of the adroit play; but the Danes laughed and called out jeeringly: "Stay a little, dogs of the Franks! Wait till the hero's blood warms!"

"The more freely will it flow!" croaked back Floki the Crane, and the vikings laughed in turn.

Then all on either bank stood staring in silence at the oddly matched swordsmen. Olvir, lithe and active as a panther, was circling round and round his foe, every nerve and thew and sinew tense to take him unawares. For a while he was content to spring in and out, avoiding the terrible sweep of the war-earl's sword. Once his opponent had wearied, he would lay himself open sooner or later to a disabling thrust from Al-hatif.

But the Westphalian was not easily wearied. Far from flagging, his blows fell with steadily increasing quickness and force. The hero's blood was warming, as the scoffing Danes had foretold. He no longer stood in one spot, wheeling to face the attack of the Northman, but began to press upon him, in a fierce attempt to pen him into a corner of the islet, and make an end. Even when he stood over the king Olvir had not been so hard pressed. The Saxon's attack combined all the savage fury of a berserk in the rage with the cold craft of a host-leader.

Twice Olvir's leaps barely saved him from the scythe-like leg-blows of the great blade, and once, as he dropped beneath a backhanded sweep, the keen edge shore a lock from his hair. Nothing daunted, however, by the swirl of the longsword, his black eyes sparkled and wild joy filled his heart. Difficult as it was to avoid Wittikind's fierce rushes, he leaped and thrust and darted from side to side, always just a hairbreadth ahead of destruction, without a thought of fear or weakness. Had he given way to either, though only for a single instant, death would surely have overtaken him. But always the great blade whirled through empty air, and the elf leaped unharmed about the furious giant.

Twice Olvir had retreated from end to end of the islet, and for the third time was giving back before the war-earl's savage rushes, when suddenly his eyes sparkled with a new purpose. Smiling as one who greets a friend, he sprang aside to avoid the down-whirling longsword, and

then, heedless of the return stroke, stepped forward to aim a swift blow at the Saxon's sword-arm. The utmost of his skill and sinewy strength was behind the stroke. It fell upon the massive forearm midway above the wrist, and the Danish mail parted like cloth beneath the edge of Al-hatif. Through steel and flesh and tendon, the Damascus blade shore its way, until it gritted on the very bone. Wittikind's sword fell to the ground.

The fight was won. The war-earl of all the Saxons stood before the slender Northman, helpless. Olvir had only to raise his sword and strike another blow, and the son of Wanekind would have met his fate.

The Saxon lowered his shield, and stood waiting for the death-stroke, his broad chest still heaving with the violence of his exertions, but his face suddenly stilled from anger to calm scorn.

"Strike--strike, and have done with your shame, false son of Odin!" he called in a deep voice. "But for you this day the free Saxons should have rid themselves of the Frank. You, a Northman, false to your folk and your gods, have set the heel of a king upon the necks of a free people. It is fit that you should slay the leader of a broken host. Strike quickly, else Thor will smite you with his hammer."

But Olvir stepped back, and met the scornful look of the Saxon with a grave smile.

"Hear me, son of Wanekind!" he rejoined. "In the North we listen to witness on both sides before the dooming. You have yet to learn what is in my mind."

"I had rather talk with Odin! We of the forest have but one tongue with which to speak to traitors; it is of steel."

"Wittikind is dogwise," replied Olvir, and he raised Al-hatif to thrust the blade into its sheath. "Here is my answer to the taunts of the war-earl. Odin bids us slay our foe by guile or by force; but, in the name of the White Christ, I now tell you to go free."

"*Teu!* Is it not enough shame that a viking should sell his sword? Must he mock an unarmed foe?"

"Odin bear witness--the son of Wanekind is free."

Wittikind stared down intently into the grave, almost solemn face of the Northman, and his look softened.

"How is this, viking?" he demanded. "Would you undo the scathe you have wrought upon my forest-folk?"

"The blood of your warriors brings me no joy, hero. Yet I am the man of Pepin's son, and so must do his bidding. A year since I should have broken the bond, had not Karl shown to me the need for this bloody war. Many could tell you what little love I bear the Christian priests, and I am not one to rejoice at the growing serfdom among the Franks; yet I see that both Frank priest and Frank king would bring to your land more than they would take away,--your boasted freedom is the freedom of the wolf-pack, without order or true bond. This bitter day has proved that all the forces of your forest tribes cannot hope to check the power of the Frank. Why, then, drag on with a hopeless war?--why bring upon your land fire and steel and famine?"

"I would rather choose death than thralldom," rejoined Wittikind.

"Who speaks for thralldom? For a time there would be a double yoke on the necks of your people; but the son of Pepin will not reign for all time, and who so dog-wise as to hold that one as mighty as he will sit in the high-seat after he has gone? I foresee that the yoke of kingship will then be light, and the Saxon folk can choose for themselves whether they will any longer bear the yoke of the priests."

"So--now I see. I am to go free, if I will sell my folk into thralldom."

Olvir's face clouded.

"You do not understand," he replied. "Christ grant that wisdom may come to you! Now go. Your wound bleeds. Yet one more word. Bear in mind, should you ever wish to treat with Karl, I stand pledged as hostage for your safety."

Without a word, the Saxon turned away across the islet. But at the water's edge he wheeled and came striding back.

"Listen, viking," he said. "I have misjudged you. Though you fight for the bloody Frank, I must own that at heart you are a true man. May the Allfather soon lead you back to your own!"

"Rather, may the White Christ, to whom I bend knee,--I, who despise the Christian priests,--may He bring you to the joy and freedom of His love!"

"His priests have brought us nothing but a clamoring for tithes and the sword of their king. I am content with the gods of my fathers. Again I say, may you soon return to your own folk and the old gods of the North. I could wish you no better fortune."

"I pray that wisdom come to you, hero, before more blood is spilt," replied Olvir, earnestly.

For a moment after the Saxon turned away, he stood gazing at him; then he also turned and plunged into the stream.

Midway across the narrow channel Gerold came riding to meet him, amazed and angry.

"Ho, Olvir!" he cried; "you 're mad, stark mad, to set the Saxon free! A stroke would have put an end to him and his evil plots. At the least, he should be brought thrall to the king. Turn back! There's yet time to take him--"

"No, lad. Draw rein. My word is pledged--Wittikind is free."

"You 're mad!--mad! What will the king say? There 'll be no bounds to his anger! We must tell him nothing of this."

"The king shall know all," replied Olvir, and he waded on across to his waiting band.

When, late in the afternoon,--well fed from the loot of a farmstede, but very weary,--the Northmen came dragging back across the borders of the battlefield, their earl commanded them to make camp and gather in their dead and wounded. He himself rode on with Gerold, over the Haze and into the Frankish camp. The Swabian's face was clouded with fear for his friend; but Olvir went to the meeting, calm almost to indifference.

As they approached the royal pavilion, before which a group of war-counts were gathered about the king, Olvir was astonished to perceive in their midst the kindly face of Abbot Fulrad. He saw the old councillor nod and smile at him, and then the high war-counts, of whom only Rudulf was missing, rushed to greet him and Gerold. All others than Amalwin were fairly drunken with the wine of victory.

"Hail, heroes!" shouted Worad. "What tidings of the beaten wolves? We were too far spent to follow for long, but your iron vikings--"

"Would that we had stopped as well," replied Gerold, moodily.

"How then?" demanded Karl, rising from a heap of furs. "Did the rebels turn and beat you off? Where is Rudulf?"

"Each went his own way, lord king," replied Olvir, quietly. "We followed the Danes--"

"And they outran you?"

"No, lord king; we overtook them, and I fought with Wittikind."

"And won!" shouted Gerold.

"Where's the rebel's head?" rejoined Count Hardrat. "Were I a slayer, his skull should serve me for mead-bowl. Satan seize the traitors! They all but broke my own skull with their sling-stones."

"The hero's head is on his shoulders,--where Count Hardrat is free to seek it," said Olvir, coldly.

"Speak out!" exclaimed the king. "You fought the Westphalian, and won; yet he still lives. Do you then bring him back in thrall-bonds?"

"No, sire. When the hero's sword fell from his grasp, I spoke with him a little while, and then told him to go free."

"Free! King of Heaven!"

In an instant the king's smiling face was ablaze. He sprang up, and stood towering above the Northman in speechless anger, his hand gripped hard on the hilt of Ironbiter. There were few among the war-counts who did not whiten with dread as they saw the great blade half drawn from its sheath.

But Olvir stood quietly in his place, and faced the king with a look of calm friendliness that bordered on pity. As he met the look, Karl's hand fell away from the sword-hilt, and he turned to pace across the front of the tent. Twice he repeated the swift movement, and when he paused to again face the Northman, all his anger was gone, and in its place only bewilderment.

"Lord Christ!" he muttered; "a little more, and I 'd have struck my heart's friend. Ah, Olvir, why try me so? You were mad to set that traitor free,--him, the head and front of all the heathen cause!"

"Is there then no end to what you would ask of me, sire? The Saxon reproached me as the one who had turned his victory into bitter defeat. Have I not waded in blood for you,--the blood of my brothers? I could not strike down that hero when he stood before me bare-handed, and death were far less bitter than the shame of thralldom. The thought came to me, sire, how he was a brave man, fighting for his country. He at least is no forsworn traitor, however many of his fellows may be."

"You forget that at Casseneuil you placed your hands between my hands. As liegeman, you should have held my service above all else."

"Not so, lord king. I own to a service above your service,--the will of Christ."

"Was it His will to free that heathen duke, who, more than any other man, withstands the spreading of the Gospel?"

"I and mine have slain many warriors in your service, lord king; I am not yet Christian enough to slay one in the name of Christ."

"The more shame to own it, Dane," muttered Hardrat. "But for what else could one look from a heathen?"

"Curb your scoffing tongue, drunkard," commanded Karl. "Prudence should counsel you to silence. There are those who say that the false horn which, in the midst of the battle, called your Neustrians to retreat, is the horn which hangs at your belt."

"It is a lie, lord king!--a foul lie! I am no coward!"

"I know that well, Thuringian; yet I have known of brave traitors. Enough. You will return to your shire when Count Rudulf marches homeward. See to it that neither he nor the *missi* have cause to report drunkenness or ill deeds against you, if you do not wish to lose your countship as well."

As the Thuringian shrank back before the stern rebuke, Karl turned again to Olvir, and his face softened.

"I have been harsh, lad. I even failed to hear you out. You said that you talked with Wittikind before you set him free?"

"I sought to show him the hopelessness of this bloody struggle, and to win him over to surrender."

"But he would not listen?"

"At the least, I stand pledged as his hostage, should he wish to treat with your Majesty. I trust that I have sown seed in his heart that in the end will bear fruit."

"Ah, Olvir, were it not for your pride of spirit, I should look to see you barter sword and helmet for the cowled robe, as have more than one of my war-counts. But enough, lad. It is not fair to keep you longer; go within the tent."

CHAPTER XVII

A may of all mays--

Bright in bower.

LAY OF GUDRUN.

Olvir caught the look in the king's eyes, and hastened to the pavilion, without waiting to ask questions. A moment, and he had darted through the loose-hanging curtains of the entrance and stood staring about in the gloom of the great canopy. Then, almost at his shoulder, there came a cry of glad surprise, and Rothada sprang up from her father's couch, blushing with delight and sweet confusion. Wearied by the long journey from the Rhine, she had lain down to rest after the noon meal and had fallen asleep.

Before the little princess could even smooth her ruffled tresses, Olvir had his arm about her shoulders and was bending to kiss her. At first, overcome by shyness, she hid her face upon his shoulder; but the ring-mail was cold and hard, and love bade her look up.

"So, that is better, darling," said Olvir, as the violet eyes, beaming with love and happiness, were raised to his own. "Now you gaze up bravely, like a true king's daughter."

"Dear hero! Surely I should be a little brave, when you have had to undergo such fearful dangers--that terrible battle! I shall live in constant dread lest next time--"

"Foolish maiden! Fear slays far greater numbers than the sword. Where is your faith in the White Christ? See now; He has given us this great happiness."

"It is hard to be always trusting, Olvir. But you renew my faith. Here is joy to repay me for my dread."

"Sweet joy, sweetheart! I had given over all thought of seeing you until the host returned Rhineward."

"If only it had been a happier cause that brought me! Dame Bertrada, my father's mother, was stricken down with a sickness which none of the leeches could ease, and when Abbot Fulrad,

compelled by matters of state, decided that he must come north, under guard of the Burgundian levy, the queen-mother gave command that I should go with him, to bear her message to my father. The good abbot has lost none of his liking for you, dear hero. He was only too well pleased to bring me in his following."

"He has brought me joy!--But the queen-mother? God grant that the old dame may yet find health!"

"Kosru the leech will return to Mayence with Abbot Fulrad. His magic drugs heal where others fail. Of all whom he has attended, only Hildegarde, my beloved mother--"

A sob choked Rothada's utterance, and tears sprang into her eyes.

Olvir caught her face between his hands, and, stooping quickly, kissed away the tears.

"Do not grieve, dear heart," he said. "She rests in the joy and peace of God's presence, where we shall meet again with her when we, too, go hence. Tell me now of Dame Bertrada. By what lucky chance could you be spared from her bedside?"

"Another cares for her, Olvir, with greater skill than I can give--Fastrada--"

"Fastrada!"

"Be just, dearest. The maiden has surely changed. Before Hildegarde--passed on--she was softened, and now she gives all her time to good deeds. Even Dame Bertrada has no word against her. If only I might so rid myself of vanity and selfishness!"

"That were impossible, sweetheart,--you have nothing of either."

"Olvir! But tell me of my warriors. Oh, this terrible battle! I weep at the thought of the slain."

"Never weep for a viking who falls in battle, little vala. He goes hence rejoicing."

"That is no Christian joy."

"Christian, but far from Christ-like. I have now seen your father's Christian warriors in battle. They rejoiced in the bloody play even as did my grim heathen and--myself."

"Dear hero, I know that you fought only that you might aid in the coming of Christ's kingdom."

"No, Rothada--God forgive me! I came to the battlefield with nothing in my heart but goodwill toward the forest-dwellers, and then I thrust my sword among them with wolfish delight."

"Yet you gave assent, Olvir, when my father said that there was no other way to bring about the highest good to the stubborn heathen."

"For the better way was closed long since! Ah, well; let us put the unwelcome thought behind us."

"I, too, might give way to grief, dearest. My brother--"

"The luckless bairn! How is he now?"

"He lies on the couch across; but do not go near. The leech has given him a sleeping draught, and he must not be wakened before dawn. He is still dazed from the blow on his head, and though Kosru gives promise that in time he will recover, he must now have the utmost of care. That is why I must also go when Father Fulrad takes him and Kosru back to Mayence."

"So soon--but I will not complain. Though but for a day or two, Father Fulrad has surely brought me joy!"

"I am glad that you are pleased, dear hero. Now free me, that I may make ready for the evening meal."

Olvir ran his fingers through the girl's tangled tresses, and laughed with a sudden outburst of boyish delight.

"Be seated, king's daughter," he exclaimed. "Yonder is a stool. Seat yourself, and I shall be your tiring-woman."

"No, no, you foolish hero!" protested Rothada, blushing.

But Olvir caught up from a bench an ivory comb and smilingly led the girl to the seat.

When, a little later, Karl entered the pavilion, he saw the boldest of his war-counts on his knees before the daughter of Himiltrude, carefully plaiting the long tresses of chestnut hair which fell down her bosom.

Rothada dropped her head before the astonished look of her father, overcome with shame; but Olvir continued his braiding with quiet unconcern. The king stood where he had first paused, silently watching the lovers. Soon surprise gave way to other emotions, and he smiled half sadly. Very patiently he waited until the last gay ribbon had been knotted, and then, when Olvir would have risen to salute him, he held up a restraining hand, and went and fetched a stool to seat himself beside the blushing girl.

"You do well to be happy while you may, children," he said gently. "The world is harsh and full of trials."

"But love is heaven upon earth," replied Olvir.

"True love; though earth cannot hold it long. But I did not come to mar your happiness. Only, I would sit with you while they prepare the meal. At dawn I ride over the fells."

"At dawn!" exclaimed Rothada, and she lifted her head quickly to look at Olvir.

Karl drew her to him, and patted her glossy tresses.

"Look rather at me, child," he said. "I go at dawn to bear the Magian leech to the bedside of my mother; he stays here. I see plainly, Olvir, that you have had your fill of bloodshed, and so I give you the command which I had set aside for another. We have taken great booty and a multitude of thralls, and in turn have suffered many wounded among our bold warriors. Yours shall be the charge to guard all to the Rhine."

"My lord king!" cried Olvir, and he sprang up to put his gratitude into words. But Karl motioned him to fetch a stool instead.

"Be seated, kinsman," he said gravely. "You owe me no thanks. It is little enough for what you have done. In a few weeks I may call you into the field again--and here I come thrusting myself in, to take from you a portion of your brief season of happiness."

"You do not take, sire, you add," replied Olvir, his face glowing. To be named as kinsman by Karl, son of Pepin,--Karl, the world-hero,--meant more to him than words could express.

Karl smiled, and turned from the happy lover to his betrothed.

"What is your word, child?" he demanded, half playfully.

Rothada raised his great hand to her lips and kissed it, as she murmured her answer: "Our Lord Christ is very good to me to give me such a father and--and--"

"Such a wooer!"

"Such a wooer!"

"God grant you fulness of joy, dear children,--wedded bliss for a lifetime such as was mine for the few brief years."

The broad chest of the speaker rose and fell with a heavy sigh, and he bent forward upon his sword-hilt, to stare out into the gathering twilight.

CHAPTER XVIII

For wrong and hatred
Shall rest them never,
Nay, nor sore sorrow.

LAY OF SIGRDRIFA.

The king spoke very truly when he predicted that Olvir's journey Rhineward would be slow. But at Cologne, the monks of Saint Martin of the Isle took charge of the wounded Franks, and Count Amalwin came to receive the king's share of the war-loot. He brought word of the queen-mother's death and her interment beside King Pepin in the Basilica of Saint Denis. After the burial, Karl moved the court to Worms, and returned into Saxon Land by way of Fulda. It was his command that Olvir should at once join the court, with Rothada and her brother.

So the longships were hauled from their sheds, and raced away up Rhine Stream, through the fair Rhinegau and past Mayence, on along the winding streams to Worms.

Old Fulrad greeted the king's Dane hawk with the embrace of a father, and Fastrada welcomed the lovers with such sweet humility that their hearts went out to her. Olvir himself could not withhold his friendship when he came upon the maiden in the midst of the royal children, and saw how even the boy Karl turned to her as to a mother. Only the most malicious of the court gossips failed to praise the girl for her devoted care of Queen Bertrada and the solicitude she had shown for the orphaned children of Hildegarde.

So it happened that when, in the autumn, the king returned from his planting of fortresses and missions in Saxon Land, he found waiting him a merry family group, of whom Fastrada was the life and centre. To this little group Karl at once joined himself, and, in the pleasant days which followed, he frequently put aside the affairs of state for a sail on the Rhine in Olvir's Raven.

Blind to all else in the happiness of his own wooing, Olvir knew nothing of the report that was fast growing from court gossip to widespread rumor, as to the king's intentions toward the daughter of Rudulf. The awakening came to him and to Rothada without warning.

Gerold and Liutrad, who had had in charge the building of the burg and mission-church on the Haze for the newly founded Bishopric of Osnabruk, returned to report their work complete. Neither had cause to complain of the king's praise for their good service; yet the very next day Olvir met them wandering moodily along the Rhine bank, and Gerold's face was clouded with grief.

"What is this, lad?" asked Olvir, with ready sympathy. "You grieve when all others are merry."

"All are merry, Olvir, even our lord king, and yet--and yet not half a year has passed--"

Sobs choked the young Swabian's utterance. He flung himself face down on the turf, and lay quivering.

Olvir flashed a look of inquiry at Liutrad, who shrugged his broad shoulders and muttered tersely: "The king and the witch's daughter, earl."

"It would be more fitting to say 'Count Rudulf's daughter.' But what of her and our lord king?"

"Do you not know, ring-breaker?"

"Why my question?"

"Worad says that it has been rumored for a fortnight, and now it is given out by authority, within a week our lord king weds the daughter of Rudulf."

"Weds--Fastrada!"

"And why not, ring-breaker? Once I scoffed at the maiden's magic ring. I was dog-wise. I know she hoped it would win back your love to her. In that it failed. Yet see now--it has gained her a queen's crown."

Olvir shook his head incredulously.

"I see you still put faith in foolish charms and spells," he said. "It was no bright stone that drew the king's heart. Though I wish that his Majesty had been less hasty, I cannot grudge the maiden her success. She has won it fairly,--not by spell or magic stone, nor altogether by her beauty; but most of all by the kindness of her deeds and the modesty of her bearing. Do not grieve, Gerold. Our lord king has not forgotten your gracious sister. He is giving to her children another mother."

"A stepmother--the witch's daughter!" muttered Liutrad.

"Hildegarde! Hildegarde!" sobbed Gerold.

"Ah, lads!" exclaimed Olvir, "you are unjust to the maiden. I myself have seen how her heart has changed."

"Changed?" retorted Liutrad. "Have you forgotten the past?--what of your werwolf? Do not frown, earl. I lived the four years in the king's hall with the witch's daughter, while you ruled Vascon Land. I saw much of what you seem to have forgotten."

"Enough. I believe that her heart has altered. At the least, she is now the betrothed of our lord king."

"The king has spoken. It is for us to honor his bride," said Gerold, and he rose up, dry-eyed, to return into the burg.

* * * * *

Often as the king was accustomed to visit that city, Worms could never remember so gay a festival as the wedding of the new queen. The narrow streets had been cleaned of excessive filth; bright cloths and banners hung from all the larger buildings, and the townfolk, heedless of the autumn breeze, gaped from window and doorway at the gaily attired lords who filled the streets with their armed henchmen. All Speyer and Mayence and Frankfurt and the country-side for miles around had come to see the royal wedding. The tradefolk had cause to rejoice in a surfeit of custom; and many a year passed before the beggars and slaves forgot the royal bounty doled out to them at the gate of every church and cloister in the burg.

Yet the giving was not all on the part of royalty. Lords and tradefolk vied with each other in their gifts to the king's bride, until Fastrada's bower overflowed with the finest of silks and woollens, coffers of jewels, and the richest garments of women's wear.

But in the midst of her abundance, the daughter of Rudulf sat cold and still, taking no part in the gay chatter and delighted outcry of the bower-maidens. There was a change, however, when, on the morning of the wedding, Rothada came running to her with the gift sent by Olvir,--a necklace of sapphires, the largest in the hoard of Sheik Al Arabi. At sight of the gift, Fastrada's

eyes shone with the hue of the all but priceless gems, and she hastened to fasten the necklace about her rounded throat in place of the river pearls sent by her father.

The press of counts and officials in the burg was so great that when they thronged with their retainers into the domchurch, on the heels of the palace lords and the embassies from outland courts, they filled the great edifice to the very doors. As to the common folk, they had to stop outside in the church court and in the street. While they waited in the frosty air, those more favored by birth or fortune stood massed in dense ranks in the nave and feasted their eyes on the royal ceremony. Priests and officials were clad in their most ornate raiment, and the king himself had laid aside his plain dress for a costume unrivalled in magnificence by the most extravagant among his lords.

Very different was the appearance of the bride and her maidens. All were dressed in white silk, and, with their white wimples, looked far more like novices than bridesmaids. Even Rothada, who walked beside the bride, wore no gold or gems. As the girlish procession passed softly around into the chancel, the only jewel to be seen among them was the great opal on the hand which the bride held clasped to her bosom.

But when Fastrada advanced past her maidens to kneel before the high altar, she raised her head, with a sudden upwelling of exultant pride, and Olvir, gazing from his post behind the king, saw with wonder that his sapphire necklace lay about her throat. Then, as he stood staring, he met her glance, which had passed by the splendid figure of the king to fix upon himself. The look flashed upon him like a stab out of the darkness. In a moment it had come and gone, leaving him astounded and full of dread. As the lightning reveals the storm-swept landscape, so that instant's glance had opened to him a glimpse of the girl's inmost soul, torn between triumph and despairing hate and the old love for her lost hero.

Shocked and humiliated, Olvir stood in a half-daze, heeding neither the chanting of the choir nor the solemn words of Fulrad. His heart was numb with a vague foreboding of evil, and his mind whirled with a chaos of wild fancies. For a time he pictured himself as one entangled in the dreadful deeds and bitter fate of the Nibelung heroes.

But when at last Abbot Fulrad had pronounced the benediction, and Karl, placing the diadem upon the brow of his queen, rose up from the altar steps to lead her away, Olvir regained his calmness. He told himself that the queen's strange glance was only an illusion,—that the false light of the waxen tapers had deceived his eyes, and he was a vain fool to have imagined that any thought of himself could have come to the king's bride at the very steps of the altar.

In his revulsion of feeling, he joined heartily in the outcry of the Franks, and, side by side with Rothada, followed the royal couple from the church. But during the wedding feast, while all others stared constantly at the glittering figure of the king and the calm white face of his bride, Olvir was fully satisfied with the sight of his little princess. Though he had overcome the dread which had chilled his heart, he had no wish to meet such another look from the new queen.

The next day, however, Olvir heard with pleasure the summons to appear before the king and the queen in the bower. Even when, having saluted the king, he bent to kiss the slender hand on which glowed the many-hued opal, no thought of doubt or distrust entered his mind.

"All joy to my lord king and his bride!" he cried.

"All joy is ours, Olvir," replied Karl, and he beamed down upon his queen with the fond look of the newly wedded lover. Fastrada sat motionless, her eyes downcast and her face wrapped in an inscrutable calm. As Olvir released her hand and drew aside to where Rothada waited him on their accustomed seat, the queen-bride bent over her opal, and murmured softly: "Tell him of his fortune, dear lord. When one's heart is full of joy or sorrow, it is good to see those around grieve or rejoice with us."

"Such is the nature of man, sweetheart. Listen, Olvir. As part of the morning-gift of my bride, I have granted her kindly wish to do you honor, and so name you Count of the Frisian Mark. Count Teutoric lies wounded at Fitzlar, and Gerold is too young for so grave a charge. But this dear one at my side has called to mind your good service in Vascon Land, and though my selfishness urges the pleasure of your company, I wish to render you the honor which is your due. My ungenerous love would have had me regard my own pleasure before your advancement,—the more so as you should hasten at once to your mark. I will see you again before you sail. Now I go to advise with Alcuin."

"My lord king!" cried Olvir, springing up. But Karl, mistaking his purpose, stepped down from the dais and passed by, with a good-natured shake of the head.

"Render your thanks to your queen, to whom they are due," he called back, as he left the bower.

Olvir took a step or two after the king, only to turn again to Fastrada.

"Dear dame," he said, "I am not one to value lightly the honor put upon me; yet I wish that Gerold or Amalwin had been chosen instead. Let another be given the countship. I am content here beside my betrothed."

"Truly, it is a long way to Frisia," sighed Rothada, and she drew close to the side of her hero.

"A long way!" repeated Olvir, clasping her hand.

For a while Fastrada sat calm and silent as before, fingering the opal on her hand. Then, without raising her eyes or altering her look, she said quietly: "Take the word of a well-wisher, Olvir. It is not pleasing to kings to have their favors cast back upon them. Trust me. My dear lord has chosen you to honor and power above all others of his counts except Barnard, his uncle. Render him the service which lies in you to render, and you may look for more welcome favors to follow."

"I wish one only. Tell me, little vala, would you say no if the king, your father, gave you leave to sail down Rhine Stream with your sea-wolves?"

"If my father bade me go, dear hero--"

"Only one way could you go, child,--as bride of their count," broke in Fastrada, sharply.

"And so it shall be," rejoined Olvir.

Fastrada did not raise her eyes, but her jewelled buskin tapped softly on the dais.

"Foolish children!" she murmured. "You will spoil all when the future is brightest with promise. Would it not seem ungracious, Olvir, to so soon beg another favor? You have yet to fulfil the terms of your betrothal."

"But for this countship, I would go to him and ask that those terms be set aside. Yet you say true; I cannot tax his friendship. My mouth is closed."

"Trust me, Olvir. You will have a friend close to the king's ear. But bear in mind my dear lord's unwillingness to part with his little maid. It may be I can soon overcome that. If not, what is another year of waiting to true lovers? Have I not waited all these years for my king,--my king, 'grey of eye'? Rothada is still very young. I have seen two and twenty summers; she cannot count a score."

"She is none too young to wed, even by Northern custom," answered Olvir.

"True, and we will all pray that your betrothal may have a quick ending. Now send in the maidens from the antechamber, and say your farewells when there is none left to chatter over your parting. You shall have until the turn of the glass for your parting. No, Olvir; give me no thanks. Go quickly; the sweet moments are winged. But bear in mind, if it come to the worst, what is a year of waiting to true lovers?"

"A year!" muttered Olvir, as he drew Rothada's hand through his arm and led her from the bower, "a year! Doubtless, the queen's words are well meant, but already, dear heart, our betrothal year is far gone; and did I not love you all those long years before?"

Rothada made no reply until the curious maidens had hurried into the bower and she stood alone with her lover in the anteroom. Then she placed her arms on his shoulders, and gazed up, clear-eyed, into his troubled face.

"Dear hero," she said, "Fastrada has spoken wisely. We must have patience. In His own good time, God will grant us the fulness of joy."

"Ah, darling, you forget the longing--the hunger of love! How shall I sit at peace among the dreary fens, while my heart is with you in the Rhinegau? Day and night I shall hunger for the sight of your sweet face. By false Loki, would that our lord king might do me a wrong! I should seize you, though it were from the very cloister, and bear you away to Trondheim Fiord!"

"Olvir! It grieves me you should hold such thoughts!" cried Rothada, and she burst into tears. Olvir caught her to him in an agony of contrition.

"Would to Heaven I 'd never been a sea-king!" he muttered. "Dearest heart--little princess, forgive me--do not weep!"

"See, then; I have ceased already," whispered Rothada, and she looked up through her tears, with a brave smile. "Yet I am very sad, my hero. Oh, if only you could go to my father and tell him that your heart was free to fulfil those conditions! Then I would--I would myself beg of him that I might fare down Rhine Stream--with you."

"Little vala! How the longships would fly, winged by the bowing oars of your merry sea-wolves!"--and Olvir strained the girl to him. But then he freed her, and his face grew stern.

"Christ aid us!" he muttered. "My spirit is torn between love and truth. Odin bear witness how I love you, dear; yet even for your sake I cannot bend to the yoke of priestcraft. It would be a lie--a lie!"

"The more do I love you, my hero, for your true heart! If you are mistaken, our Lord Christ will give you light. Trust to His guidance, and however you may be led, I have faith that all will come well in the end."

"In the end--ay, in the end; but I'm weary of waiting. Five long winters have dragged by since we first plighted troth, there in the Southland."

"I was only a child; yet see, Olvir, my collar--the tress which saved you at Roncesvalles--still lies clasped about your throat. It is not a year since my father betrothed us. We must trust in Christ and in the good-will of--of the queen."

"The witch's daughter!" replied Olvir, and his face clouded yet more. "Why did she not look up as she spoke? My mind is not at ease. Her words were so kindly; but still, it seemed to me her meaning--"

"Such doubts are unworthy of you, Olvir. Could a sister--a mother--show greater tenderness than she has shown since Hildegarde left us?"

"The bitterness of parting poisons my thought. Forgive me, dear, if I give way to doubt. Yet there is one in the court whom I can trust to watch over you. Trust Liutrad in all things. He would strike off his sword-hand to give you joy. Wait; a word more, darling. Here is my silver-hilted knife, the work of my own hands."

"What--I bear a dagger?" cried Rothada, and she shrank from the gift.

"Call it a bodkin; only, take and keep it in memory of our parting."

"As you wish, then, dear; yet it is a large bodkin to carry in my bosom, and if I sling it at my girdle, the maidens will mock me for a warrior."

"A terrible hero! Tie the sheath with ribbons, and let the silly maidens laugh."

"No; I will hang it about my neck. It shall lie upon my heart, in pledge of your love and protection. I will cherish it, dear; for it comes from my hero."

Olvir smiled, half sadly, and turned away, while the girl looped a ribbon about her neck to suspend the dagger in her bosom. The movement brought his gaze about to the doorway of the bower, in which stood the withered form of old Kosru the leech, draped about with a gorgeous robe of yellow silk. The moment Olvir's eyes fell upon him, the Magian bent to the rushes, as in former years he had salaamed before the stern Vali Kasim. The servile obeisance irritated the Northman quite as much as the interruption.

"Withdraw, leech!" he said almost harshly.

"I go, lord count. But--may my lord forgive me the bearing!--the gracious queen bids me say that the sand is nearly run."

"Could she not give the glass another turning?"

"*Ai*, lord; but our mighty protector Karolah has gone to the water-side to see you take ship," replied the leech, and, with a dry cackling of toothless laughter, he shuffled about into the bower. As he turned, he thrust his hand beneath his robe, and a soft, metallic clink chimed with his mirthless chuckle.

"*At--ai!*" he muttered; "youth and love are soon sped; but the shining gold is ever a joy and a comfort."

Then his ill-omened figure disappeared from view, and Olvir clasped his little princess to him for the last bitter-sweet moments of parting.

CHAPTER XIX

Why are ye sitting there?

Why sleep ye life away?

Why does it grieve you not?

WHETTING OF GUDRUN.

Bitterly was Olvir to regret that he had bent to the subtle taunt of the witch's daughter. Had he taken Rothada before her father in the first flush of his wedding joy, Karl could have refused them nothing. But he had let himself be lured away to the fen-lands, far from king and court; while the new queen was ever at the side of the world-ruler, free at all times to whisper her

guileful words into his willing ear. Olvir had no need of Liutrad's gloomy letters to tell him of the evil spell which the witch's daughter had laid on the great Frank. Before the year was out, it was commonly known, even in Frisia, how the king's bride, who never smiled, had driven Count Hardrat and others of her countrymen from the court with scoffs and biting jests, had poisoned the king's mind with evil thoughts of his most devoted liegemen, and had hardened his heart to bloodshed and cruelty.

After many dreary months of waiting, it was with a feeling almost of joy that Olvir received the curt command which bade him join young Karl and Gerold at the Sigiburg. The king had gone north to hunt out the wary Engern and Eastphalians, and had left the Frankish horsemen under the nominal command of his sturdy son, to meet the mounted forces of the Westphalians.

Even war was preferable to the torment of inaction, and in the great battle of horsemen which was fought on the Lippe, Olvir proved that if he had lost his old-time zest for fighting, he had by no means lost his daring and quickness. The Saxons were defeated with great slaughter, though not until Olvir had twice saved the life of young Karl.

For such a service, Olvir might well have looked for some special mark of the king's favor. But the queen had gone north with the court, to join Karl on the Weser, and not even a word of praise came from the gay camp near Sunthal, where Karl lingered until after Yuletide.

Then came the command signed by Angilram, the new Keeper of the Seal, saying that young Karl should join his father at the Eresburg, leaving the horsemen under Gerold's charge; while Count Olvir should march into Thuringia, to give aid to Rudulf, Count of the Sorb Mark.

The tidings of Abbot Fulrad's death were very grievous to Olvir; for the kindly old councillor had been his strongest friend at court. And to this cup of sorrow was added the gall of Teutoric's reinstatement as Count of the Frisian Mark. This, however, Karl himself sought to excuse by a scroll in his own rude, bold handwriting. Teutoric had at last recovered from his long illness, and had asked for his old countship. In giving it to him again, he, Karl, had meant nothing against his Dane hawk, but thought to honor him by sending him into the Sorb Mark, where there was need of his sword. Sometime in the spring, if the Sorbs had become quiet, he should call his bright falcon to him.

Filled with renewed hope by this promise, Olvir bade Gerold farewell, and marched swiftly across Westphalia with his vikings. At the Eresburg, he left young Karl to await his father, who had stopped at Paderborn; but he himself marched on with his vikings, over the Fulda and Werra, into the great forest of the Thuringians.

Not until they reached the banks of the Saale did the vikings come upon the Grey Wolf's lair,- a great fenced camp on the farthest border of the Sorb Mark. But if their journey was long, their welcome was hearty enough to make amends. Morose and savage as was his nature, old Rudulf greeted Olvir with the open friendliness of one fearless man for another. He had long since put away the grudge which he had once cherished against the Northman, and now he could even speak of the spurning of his daughter without bitterness. Half jestingly, he called to mind that all but forgotten event, and pointed out how that which had seemed so ill a happening had, in the end, turned out well omened for all. Was not his daughter the king's wedded wife, and Olvir plighted to the king's daughter?

But Rudulf had other cause than his admiration for the Northman to give warmth to his greetings. When alone with Olvir, he complained that, for the first time in a score of years, the young men of his folk showed a lack of willingness to respond to the king's bode. This was all the more marked, he said, because of the spirit of unrest which moved through the forests. Men sat uneasily at the hearthside, their thoughts clouded with forebodings of evil. It was not that the Sorbs were astir and threatened a harrying of the mark. That should have brought the wild forest warriors with a rush to join the banner of their old-time leader. Yet his war-ring was all but empty. Those who should have crowded the hedges loitered about their farmstedes.

The coming of Olvir and his sea-wolves was, therefore, a very welcome event to the grim old Count of the mark. Though time and war had lessened the number of the vikings to a scant four hundred, they were picked warriors, mailed like chiefs, and trained as no band had been trained since the days of the Romans. With such men at his call, the Grey Wolf lay at ease in his lair, confident that should the Sorbs dare raid his mark, they would ride back across the Saale far faster than they came. It would seem that the crafty heathen were themselves aware of this; for the arrival of the vikings was followed by signs that the menacing Slavs had thought better of their purpose. All along the border the account of how the giant Danes of Karl the Frank had turned the Saxon Wittikind's victories into bloody disaster was now a well-known tale.

So the Slav folk kept across the Saale, biding a fairer season for their raid; while the

warriors, whose presence had put the curb on their lust for blood and loot, lay about the Thuringian camp, grumbling at the lack of merry sword-play. It was in vain that on the accustomed day for the spring sacrifice they honored Odin with many choice victims. Neither Floki, nor such others of their number as were skilled in signs and omens, could foretell anything from the casting of the blood-chips. At the least, no war was to be read in the boding, and the Sorbs did not give the lie to the omens.

May came and went, and then June, and Olvir was beginning to doubt the king's faith, when word was brought to the forest fastness,--another scroll in Karl's rough handwriting,--saying that he had gone north to invade the land beyond the Elbe, but had not forgotten his Dane hawk. With this assurance of the king's troth, Olvir rested fairly content. Yet it was no easy task to wait through the long summer-time.

Autumn was already at hand when the vikings began to talk of a weird apparition, in appearance like a dead woman swathed in her shroud, which wandered through their camp in the darkness. The manner in which the Thuringians scoffed at the "grey walker" of their heathen fellows soon convinced Olvir that the fancied wraith was none other than old Rudulf's Wend wife. To test the matter, he expressed to the count his wonder that the dame should see fit to act so mysteriously.

The next night, as he sat by the Grey Wolf's hearth listening to a grim tale of life in the mark, the Wend woman glided into the hut, and sat down opposite the two men. Rudulf nodded carelessly to his wife, and would have gone on with his tale. But Olvir turned to greet her.

"Welcome, dame," he said. "I did not think to see you again in this life, when at our last meeting you fared out into the storm and night."

"And what if I am not now in the flesh-life, son of Thorbiorn?" asked the witch, in a hollow voice.

"The heartier should be my welcome, dame," rejoined Olvir. "I 've ever longed to meet a farer from Hel's Land. But though I have seen many go that journey, I have never seen one come again."

"Not so the daughter of the Snake, bold mocker. In the midnight, when the wolves feasted upon the bodies of the slain, I have walked on the battlefield, gathering the death-dew for my spells, and my eyes have seen the blood-reddened souls rising from the mangled flesh."

"Your souls were going hence, daughter of the Snake; they as yet knew only the earth-life. I spoke of those who have crossed over the glittering way, and then come again to Manheim. Hel holds with a firm grip those who go to her. Not many fare back who have set foot beyond the wall of Loki's daughter."

"The son of Thorbiorn would have his hostess tell of deeds forbidden under the laws of Karl. Does not the Christian king doom to the mire-death those who practise spells? *Ai!* not all have forgotten my hut in the Moselle Wood, and the curse which I put upon those whom I left behind."

"By the fiend Odin!" broke in Rudulf; "that was an ill-doing, wife. Yet if the good queen has gone hence, and Pepin Crookback become a witling, our guest will tell you that young Karl bids fair to fill his father's sword-belt, and our daughter, the queen, goes clad in silk and gold."

"Your daughter,--the false trull,--not mine!" hissed the woman. "As to her luck, good or ill, have you forgotten my boding when this bright gerfalcon flew out of the South to seek our leave for his wooing? 'A king, grey of eye,' was my foretelling, and so it has chanced. But again I gave my boding, as I fared from the hut into the storm, and again my word has come true. The queen your daughter sits in her silken bower, and her heart lies as a stone in her breast. With a touch she bends the iron Karl to her bidding; yet power and wealth are become as ashes in her mouth. There is wormwood in her drink, and gall in her dainty fare. Do I speak truth, gerfalcon?"

"I would say nothing against the dame of my lord," answered Olvir.

"Yet she has brought you little else than sorrow and evil."

"She has not turned the king's heart against me. I hold his pledge. Each day I look for his bidding to come to him."

"You have not heard, son of Thorbiorn! Your ears are duller than I thought. Karl went north from Paderborn, not Rhineward. He is now upon the Elbe bank."

"I have heard, dame. It seems that my wait is to be a little longer."

"You take the ill tidings calmly, hero. Will you laugh in joy when I tell you that Karl is minded to break his pledge to you?"

"That is not true," said Olvir, staring intently at the grey-shrouded figure of the woman.

"The hero talks foolishly. She who was my daughter lies in the king's arms; Count Olvir lies on the Saale bank."

"It is easy to speak bold words when the face is hidden," rejoined Olvir.

At the taunt, the witch flung back her cloak, exposing fully to the red firelight the ghastly adder mark upon her cheek and the weasels nestling in her bosom. Roused by the movement, the little beasts crawled upon her shoulders, and stared, fiery-eyed, at the stranger.

"Now I see the face of the alruna," said Olvir, quietly. "Let her speak."

"What more should I say, Dane hawk? Go through the Frank's realm; ask of the king's men if their lord keeps troth with them; ask of the harried Saxons whose is the bitter tongue that is ever inflaming the king's mind to bloodshed."

"Enough of ill talk, wife," growled Rudulf. "King Karl will do right by our guest-friend."

"Well said, old Grey Dog!" rejoined the woman, scoffingly. "Your teeth have worn blunt on the bones of Karl's foemen, and now you 'd whine and lick your master's foot, lest he beat you from the kennel."

"Your tongue is keen, wife, but your speech dull," replied Rudulf, unmoved. "There's little wit to be found in your jeering talk."

"It may prove a biting jest when the queen's hound comes to lie in the kennel of the king's dog. *Ai*, my Grey Wolf! your ears are keen for the footfall of sword-foes, but you do not hear the tread of those who come creeping from the king's hall."

"How, then; what charges--"

"Does the Count of the mark ask that, when he who should be most zealous of all in doing the king's will harbors in his very bed one accused of heathen witchery,--one who has put her curse upon the king himself and upon his hearth-kin?"

"A hero so great as Karl has little to fear from the curse of a Wend woman. He will not think it ill that I cherish my wife, the mother of his queen."

"No mother--nor father, Grey Wolf! It is the king's bed-mate who stirs him to strike those who gave her life."

"That I do not believe."

"Come, then, and hear it from one who can swear to the tale. Many are to meet at Hardrat's hall, to talk of this, among other matters. Would it not be well for Count Olvir and yourself to join them?"

"That is a half-day's ride to the north, wife."

"The Sorbs lie quiet, and you need take none of your followers from the war-ring. It will be no council, calling for a show of henchmen; so, unless you fear treachery from your own folk--"

"Silence, woman! I 've had enough of jeering. Neither the Dane hawk nor the Grey Wolf fears to roam alone in the forest. When does the beer-sot look for his guests?"

"The drunkard has again given over his bowl. You will find a sober host. Come in time for the noon meal. Yet stay! There may be horse-flesh in the trenchers. Is the Dane hawk so zealous a Christian that the meat of sacrifice--"

"How of the Christian host and this my hearth-friend?" laughed Olvir. "I pledge myself to eat of the same dish, if the fare is savory."

"It is well. There will be room for all at Hardrat's board. Now I go before you," replied the woman, and, wrapping her grey cloak about her, she glided out into the night.

Olvir watched her go, and then he turned gravely to his companion.

"I would speak out my inmost thought," he said. "Could youth come again to my host, would he choose for the second time to wed with a worker of spells?"

"It is five and twenty years since, in the land beyond the Sorb country, the Wend chief's daughter cut free the withes which bound me, and fled away at my side. I have never since had cause to grieve that we plighted troth on the Saale bank. I do not lay it upon her that she has now brought us an ill boding."

"Nor I. She is but the tidings-bearer."

"Bitter tidings!" growled Rudulf, and he began to whet his sword.

CHAPTER XX

Strife and din in the hall,
Cups smitten asunder;
Men lay low in blood--

But with the morning the Grey Wolf's thoughts had lightened. Side by side, he and Olvir rode through the ancient forest, as, years before, they had ridden through the beech-wood to Fulda. The black stallion was dead, pierced by a Saxon spear. In his stead, the Thuringian rode a long-limbed horse of coursing blood, the gift of the king. Even Zora had to lengthen her stride when the big roan raced across the meadows.

As it chanced, however, the roan cast a shoe and went lame, so that the journey, which began so briskly, ended in a walk. When the two counts rode into the yard of Hardrat's burg, the horses of their fellow-guests were already standing in their stalls, and their riders were within the feast-hall, sitting before half-emptied trenchers. But the host himself came out to do the last guests honor, and they returned his greetings with heartiness when they saw that his face, though harsh and morose, had lost the purple flush and bloated look of the drunkard.

"Again I welcome our Grey Wolf and that Dane hawk whose fame is in the mouth of every hero," the host repeated. "Let them enter and sit at meat with those who bear them good-will. My head groom shall see to their horses. He is a skilled smith, and the forge is red. The Count of the mark will find his roan shod again for the homeward riding."

"A good deed,—for which I give thanks," answered Rudulf.

"Stay a moment," said Olvir, as Hardrat turned to lead the way into the hall. "Bid your groom leave my mare free in the yard. She is not used to being stall-tied."

"As you wish, hero. I do not wonder that you give thought to a steed that has borne you through two pitched battles and countless frays. Men say you care for the beast as one of kin to you."

"They say true. More than once she has borne me out of the closing hand of Loki's daughter. It may be that she will again carry me through battle, though at heart I now long for peace. Her strength has at last come again, and though the years lie heavily upon her, she can yet outrace any courser other than one of her own blood."

"That I can well believe, hero," replied Hardrat, and he led in his guests.

Within the skin-hung feast-hall the late-comers found that the seats of honor, on the right and left hand of the host, had been kept waiting for them. Next below Rudulf's place on the bench sat a huge Wend warrior, beside whom was the Wend witch in her grey cloak.

Upon the entrance of the counts, many of the guests had risen, with brimming horn or bowl, to drink health to them, and Rudulf, as he passed up the table, greeted many by name. But the black-bearded Wend giant was bent over his trencher, and the old count took his seat on the bench beside him, with a puzzled shake of his grisly, bristling head.

"By the fiend Odin!" he muttered; "have I come here to sit with Karl's foes?"

"Be at ease, my lord!" entreated his wife. "Would I have asked you to this feast had not all been well?"

"All sit here as friends, hero," added Hardrat, earnestly. "We meet like kinsmen, to talk upon weighty matters. Only give us fair hearing, and I pledge myself you will not rue your coming."

"Let be, then. I will listen," replied Rudulf.

"Well said!" called out one of the guests, and many echoed the words.

Hardrat rose, smiling, and addressed Olvir. "The guests sit in their grey iron coats, and you in your linked mail, hero, as is fitting for warriors gathered in council. Yet all heads other than your own are bare of helmet. Uncover your sunbright locks, and sit at ease."

"The war-cap rests lightly upon the head of a viking," replied Olvir.

"Count Olvir doubts the faith of his host," sneered Hardrat. "Let him sit with naked sword across his trencher. We ask only that, with the Grey Wolf, he hear out whatever his fellow-guests would say."

"I will listen till all is said," replied Olvir, coldly. "But, instead of the sword, I would have meat upon my trencher."

"Bring mead and the mead-horns for my high guests," called Hardrat.

"I pledge the host in the black mead," said Rudulf, as a Sorb thrall handed him the drink.

"I pledge the Grey Wolf on my sword," answered Hardrat. "No longer does the wassail-bowl touch my lips. I take thought of higher matters."

"Well said, hero!" exclaimed the Wend woman. "And now, men of the forest land, give heed while our host tells what happened on the Moselle, before the passing away of the good Queen Hildegarde."

Hardrat rose heavily, his face flushed and forbidding.

"It is hard for a man to speak of his shame," he began in a harsh voice. "The shame of my drunkenness is the greater because it has blurred that which I would now recall. I owe it to the crafty wit of the alruna that I have at last fished up the memory from the bottom of the wine-jar, where I sought to drown it. Count Olvir will remember the wolf-chase on the frozen Moselle, since it was then he won Karl's pledge for his daughter's hand."

"I remember," replied Olvir; and his eyes glowed as he saw again the burning witch-hut in the midst of the storm-swirl, and his princess, standing with him before the good abbot to plight their troth.

But the harsh voice of Liutrad's red pig broke in on the pleasant musing,--"Give heed, then, Dane hawk, and you, Grey Wolf of the mark. To all that I now say, I take oath on my sword--by the holy cross--by all the fiend-gods of the Saxons and our own heathen fathers! At Thionville, when the Yule games were closing, Fastrada, daughter of Rudulf, lured me to race down the frozen Moselle on the track of certain skaters. Count Olvir will tell Count Rudulf that those skaters were himself, the queen, the king's daughter, and others."

"So far the tale is true," assented Olvir.

"No less what follows," retorted Hardrat; "only, I wish it were clearer to the eye of my memory. I see the gnarled oak stems race past on either side as we sweep down the blue road of the frost-giant. Borne up by the spell of her witch-ring, the maiden at my side skims along with magic swiftness. Hardly can I, a skilled ice-runner, keep the pace. But when we glide in the depths of the winter forest, the maiden makes pretence of a sprain. I see a fire burning on the river-bank. The maiden sits before it, muttering spells to drive away the nixie that has seized her ankle,--such is her claim; but she has lied. She utters the fearful spell of the werwolf, and from the pouch casts pieces of an evil charm upon the snow and in the flames. Foul with the stench of the burning drug, the smoke rolls low beneath the naked boughs. Grisly shapes peer out from among the alder stems; the wood resounds with the yelling of the werwolves--"

Panting heavily, the speaker paused to wipe away the great drops which had gathered on his forehead. In his glaring eyes and the sweat of fear, the guests saw full proof that their host did not lie. Many shuddered in the bright sunlight, and there was a hush in the hall as Hardrat resumed his seat. All turned silently to old Rudulf, who, with his grisly head bent forward between his shoulders, sat glaring at the guests from his narrow slant eyes, more like one of the evil beings of whom Hardrat had spoken than a natural man. But the Grey Wolf restrained the fury which raged in his savage breast, and the silence was broken only by the heavy breathing of the guests. Then the Wend woman rose up.

"I read the faces of the heroes," she said. "None here doubts the truth of our host's tale."

"Hold, dame; do not speak for all," broke in Olvir. "I believe that Count Hardrat has told what to him is the truth; yet I doubt his tale. He has himself spoken of the wine-jar--the mead-cask were enough! Men in drink often see beasts unknown to sober eyes. What is more, I see no cause for your daughter to dabble in black magic."

"My daughter, ay; she was then my daughter,--an apt daughter of the Wend witch! Shall I tell how the witch's daughter whispered in the ears of her mother the tale of her wild vengeance?--of the drawing of the wolf-pack; of the luring of Pepin's son, and how, when Karl would have given her love without the queen's crown, she sent him on down the ice-street, to find his bairns and his bed-mate in the jaws of the grey ones? She told all to her mother while the storm-fiends howled about the forest hut. And then Karl and his Dane hawk came faring safe with the others to the witch's hearth, and that false trull fawned upon those whom she had sought to destroy. The fiend-gods bear me witness; she fawned upon her foe, and forswore the mother who bare her!"

Old Rudulf's fist fell upon the table in a blow that split the oaken board.

"God in Heaven!" he yelled; "would that my child had come into the world still-born! Hate and vengeance,--such befitted the Grey Wolf's daughter; but lying--lying and fawning!"

"Withhold your fury, lair-mate," said the woman; and even Olvir shuddered to hear her mocking laughter.

The Grey Wolf glared at his scoffing wife; but she threw back her cloak, and withstood his look with the cold glitter of her sunken eyes. The menacing light died out of the count's green eyes. He cast a crafty glance about the hall, and said sullenly: "Take joy of your deed, wife! My heart is now cold and hard like the flint-rock. I listen."

"Listen, then, childless man! Shall I tell more of that maiden who was fated to wed the grey-eyed king? The little birds have twittered many tales in my ears. But no; our host shall speak again. He fared to Paderborn when Karl held the assembly of his lordlings,--wretched mockery of

the day when the free folk of the shires gathered together under the holy oaks, to make and unmake their own laws. The red boar has come from the king's hall, and now I know that neither yourself nor the Dane hawk will scoff at his tidings."

"The lie is most subtle which is mingled with truth," said Olvir.

Hardrat rose to face the Northman with a heavy frown. "Enough of jeering, Dane," he said. "I do not ask yourself or Count Rudulf to believe what I say of the king's ill-will toward you both. That you will know shortly, when Worad comes faring to the Sorb Mark. It will be joyous for the Grey Wolf when he sees the Wend king's daughter trampled in the mire; joyous for the Dane hawk when, fleeing down Rhine Stream, he hears the wedding bell of Worad and the king's daughter."

"Beware!" lisped Olvir, softly, and his face went white.

The Thuringian turned quickly to his fellow-plotters.

"Listen to me, heroes of the forest land!" he called. "If those who sit beside me are men, I have said enough to rouse them. We will talk now of that which concerns all,—of how the fierce werwolf at the side of Pepin's son has hardened his heart to fire and slaughter, has inflamed his wrath against all free-minded men. He turns from those who uphold his throne; he dooms without cause the faithful counts. Men say he is great,—that none may withstand him. The bear is king of beasts; yet I have seen him baited by the hounds. We shall not stand alone. How is minded the noble Lombard Adelchis, whose father, Desiderius, shorn and uncrowned, lies cooped among the meek brothers at Corbie, praying for vengeance? Ask the heart's wish of Tassilo, Duke of Bavaria, and of his Lombard wife. The haughty Agilofingian has little cause to bless Pepin's son. All goes well! The whole of Italy will welcome the son of Desiderius and his Greek host. Old Barnard grows dull with his fatness. Count William of Toulouse fares far into Saracen Land, and the fierce King Abd-er-Rahman will keep him busied; while here in the North all the heroes of Thuringia are with us. Then, too, Wittikind—"

"*Hei!* the Saxon hero waits in Sigfrid's hall, ever ready!" cried the Wend woman. "He will come again with a Dane host. Bid his blood-sprinkled folk take heart! Yet another host shall aid them to strike the cruel Frank. My father's warriors shall ride to join in the baiting of the Frank bear. In Wend Land men have not yet forgotten the daughter of the Snake."

"Never shall Karl return across the Rhine!" cried Hardrat; and he rose to pass down the hall.

At once the guests shouted their approval: "The pledge! the pledge! Let all taste the red drink of sacrifice!"

Olvir stared at the shouting plotters, and then his gaze fixed on Count Hardrat, returning up the hall with a copper bowl whose rim was streaked with dark red.

"Count of the mark," he asked, a strange smile on his lips, "have you ever heard sung the Lay of Hamdir? It ends somewhat after this fashion:

"At the hall's gable-end
Fell Sorli to earth,
But Hamdir lay low
At the end of the house."

Rudulf made no reply. His slit eyes were fixed in a hungry stare upon the bulky form of his black-bearded bench-mate. The Wend had been drinking steadily of the mead, and the powerful drink was already rising to his head. Drawn by the look of the old count, he turned his bloodshot eyes upon him in an insolent leer.

"Ho, Karl's dog," he jeered; "when the bear is baited, mine shall be his bed-mate; nor shall I trouble your priests."

Rudulf rose up quietly, as one who would address the company. The guests on either side of the table stilled their loud talk, and turned expectantly to the Count of the mark. For a little, he stood silent before them, his bristling face thrust forward, his narrow-lidded eyes blinking. Then, suddenly, he bared his corded arms, and his voice roared through the hall: "Traitors to Karl! thus the Grey Wolf pledges you friendship!"

Swiftly the old wrestler stooped, and his terrible grip closed about the giant Wend. The man had no time to call upon his bull-strength. Caught fast in the fatal hold, he was bent backward; there came a snapping as of a dry twig.—The Grey Wolf loosed his hold of the quivering corpse, to spring at another victim. But his wife stood between, and before he could pass her, the man had flung himself beneath the table.

Then the hall resounded with wild shouts and the clang of swords torn from their sheaths. The terrified house-slaves fled screaming into the open, or crouched against the wall, as the Thuringians rushed forward to avenge their fellow-plotter. Olvir leaped around beside Rudulf, and thrust him forward.

"To the door! to the door!" he cried.

"I go--for your sake," growled the old count, and his sword circled about his grisly head.

"We go in peace," said the Wend woman. She flung the cloak from her head, and glided, with upraised hand, between her lord and the threatening Thuringians. "Make way, heroes! Bear in mind your pledge to me."

"Stand aside, Wend-wife!" commanded the foremost guest.

"Make way yourself, dog! I see a bloody sprite beside you."

The Thuringian flung up his arm to ward off the woman's evil glance. "That for your boding, witch!" he cried, and she fell to his stabbing sword. The frightened weasels scurried, squeaking, from the cloak of their mistress, to hide beneath the table. Upon the slain witch fell the body of her slayer, struck down by Rudulf.

About the two friends the grey-armored Thuringians closed fast in the doom-ring. Fierce blows rained down,--blade rang upon blade or clashed against war-gear. Within the ring, the two, standing back to back, fought their way steadily toward the door. The Thuringians could not withstand the mad rage of Rudulf's attack or Olvir's cold white fury. They fell back continually before the counts; but, from side and rear, they thrust and struck as at maddened wolves.

Now and again one of their number fell to Al-hatif's stabs or the fierce downsweep of the Grey Wolf's sword. In turn, their blades beat like flails upon the doomed men. Not even Olvir's triple mail was proof against their blows. Soon blood was seeping through the netted rings. Only the blue steel of his helmet saved his head from a splitting; Al-hatif was far too light to ward off the heavy longswords. Already Rudulf was bleeding from many gashes; his head was a mass of wounds. Still he fought on like a mad beast. He fell at the very threshold of the open door, pierced through by Hardrat's boar-spear.

At the death-cry of the hero, Olvir sprang about, and his sword clipped the point of the thrusting lance. Hardrat shrank back to draw his sword. The Northman leaped through the doorway, calling loudly in Arabic.

Across the courtyard Zora came plunging to meet her master, and her hoof struck down the groom who sought to hold her. Olvir vaulted into the saddle; he bent forward on the mare's neck, and a sharp hiss burst from his lips. Zora leaped away like an arrow. The fierce Thuringians, bursting out from the hall, called upon the grooms to close the gate. But before the nearest man could act, the red mare and her terrible rider were upon him. He flung himself flat before them, and Zora leaped over the man, out upon the open hillside.

CHAPTER XXI

Black deeds and ill

Have they been a-doing,

Evil rede

Have they wrought at last.

LAY OF SIGURD.

Not from fear of pursuit, but because of that which he bore with him, Olvir urged the red mare to her utmost speed. Never even in her prime had Zora coursed over hill and meadow at a swifter pace. But the way was long, and even her easy, swinging gait was agony to the wounded man. When at last she leaped into the war-ring on the Saale bank, her red coat was wet with the blood of her rider. He lay upon her neck, clutching at the silky mane, so far gone that, when Floki caught him from the saddle, he could gasp out but a few brief words: "To the little vala! I 've fought my last fight!"

Then darkness fell upon him, and he lay in Floki's arms as one dead.

Deftly the grim vikings stanchd the wounds of their earl and applied healing salves.

"It is but blood-loss," said Floki. "In a day, I wager, he calls for his mare. But now we do his bidding. Bring a litter."

So it was that when Olvir awoke from his swoon, he found himself swinging along on the shoulders of four stout litter-bearers, well on the road to Erfurt, the great market of the Thuringians. As Floki had foretold, he at once called for Zora, and rode into Erfurt. There, hearing that Karl had left Saxon Land and was already at Cologne, on his way to Attigny, he turned and rode Rhineward. But though he sat his saddle all the way to Fulda, and gave his followers little rest, when he reached the monastery he was so utterly spent with weariness and pain that he had to lie over a full week before he could push on.

The bluff Northern monks spared themselves no pains to justify their fame for hospitality; but Olvir's thanks, though sincere, were briefly worded, and he had little to say to any one. When, rested and almost healed, he made ready to push on Rhineward, he handed to Abbot Baugulf a gold arm-ring, in kingly payment for his keep, and stood with unbent head while the priest poured out his fervent blessing.

From Fulda, Olvir rode steadily Rhineward on the old Roman highway, though his face spoke of doubt and indecision. But at Mayence he called Floki aside, and said briefly: "I ride alone to King Karl. Take the men down Rhine to Cologne, and make all ready aboard the longships. Fit them as for a race, and for the North Sea. I will join you in a few days, and, with Freya's aid, I shall not come alone. Another shall ride with me, whether Karl the King is loath or willing."

"Ho, ring-breaker!" croaked Floki, smiling with crafty triumph. "So we at last fare back to old Norway, and you are minded to take with you a bride. There will be joyous howling when your sea-wolves sight their vala. Yet I am minded of another matter. King Karl owes no small fee for the long service of the hero's son and his ready champions. Though we may leave somewhat hastily, on our path to Cologne stands Ingleheim, the king's new burg, which men say is filled with gold and all manner of loot."

"By Thor!" cried Olvir, his eyes flaming; "were I sure the Frank had broken his pledge, not Ingleheim alone should see sword and torch. As it is, he may yet--Christ grant he keep troth! ... No, old Crane. You must fare your way, with the peace-thongs firm knotted. If the Norns have so woven, Zora will bear me to the Rhine far in the lead of the following Franks; and there's rich loot between Cologne and Rhine Mouth."

"And what if the werwolf snare you? Let me ride with you, earl."

"I ride alone. No horse in Frank Land could bear up your weight in the flight from Attigny to Cologne. Yet again, I need you to hold the men in hand. Do not tell them over-much. They will be nimble enough if they but know it is for the little vala. Farewell."

With the word, Zora wheeled and sprang away on the long ride to Treves and across Eastern Neustria to Attigny.

For all her age and the roughness of the way, the red mare could still have covered the journey in four days. But Olvir, mindful that he might have need later of the utmost of her speed and strength, kept a tight rein on the willing mare, and was well content to double the time of the journey.

So it was that when they came to the Aisne bank, a little before nightfall of the eighth day, neither man nor rider was any the worse for the long faring. After bathing in the stream, Olvir rode into Attigny, under cover of the darkness. The little town was swarming with people; but Olvir avoided such of the streets as were torchlit, and, having secured a small room at an inn, presently found a messenger who would go to the king's palace with a token for Liutrad the scribe.

He was seated alone in his room, reading from his Greek Gospels by the light of a torch, when a deep voice sounded without the door, and a moment later the heavy panel had opened and swung to behind a huge figure in sombre priest robes. Olvir caught a glimpse of a white tonsure in the midst of the curly yellow hair, as the new-comer turned to bar the door, and then he was gazing up into Liutrad's honest, smiling face.

"Ring-breaker! Earl!"--how the joyously uttered words called up the care-free past, when the longships rode the storm waves, or they two stood side by side in the sword-game! For the moment, at least, it was not Liutrad the priest, but Liutrad Erlingson, who put his great hands on the shoulders of his friend, and met his keen glance with a look of boyish delight.

"Luck to you, earl!" he cried. "You come in good time. It is but three days since Wittikind and Alf entered Attigny, with a long following of Saxon athelings; and Deacon Alcuin has won over the heroes to peace."

"It would seem that the bloody struggle is at last ended," replied Olvir. "I give God praise,

both for the forest-dwellers and for those who have crushed them."

"And for yourself, earl! Our lord king's face bears more of its old-time cheerfulness."

"It well may! I had thought the Saxons unyielding. For two years and more he has harried their land in summer and in winter. How came the great war-earl--"

"He is broken at last; I pray that it may be for good. As you doubtless have heard, after the Mayfields at Paderborn last spring, the king, egged on by his werwolf, once more set to ravaging beyond the Westphalian Gate. We had already marched to the Elbe and were encamped on its banks, when word came of a plot between the Lombards and the Duke of Bavaria, and the king thought better of his plan to cross the Elbe. But Wittikind and Alf, thinking that he was about to come over and lay waste all of Saxon Land yet unharried, sent to him, asking terms of surrender. The king chose out Amalwin to go to them with hostages suitable to their rank, that they might come to him in person. Then, leaving the greater part of the host in the North, he came Rhineward by swift marches, and here at Attigny made ready palace and court, that the wild forest-men might see the greatness of his might and kingship. So it has come about that Wittikind, following after with Amalwin, has seen and wondered, and at last bent to the will of Pepin's son. Soon the war-earl and all those who came with him will bow beside the holy font and receive baptism. Two days more will see the heathen become Christian."

"Christian! By Loki, I grieve for the Christian werwolf, who 'll now famish for lack of her Saxon blood!"

Liutrad drew back, and his face darkened with dread and anger.

"God's curse on that evil woman!" he cried; and then a sudden question sprang from his lips: "How come you here, earl?"

"You may well ask," replied Olvir, and he told of the plotters and the fight in Hardrat's hall.

As he listened, Liutrad's face cleared somewhat.

"By Thor, earl," he exclaimed, "that was sword-play! But the best is that you bring tidings of the plot. It may stand you in good stead." His face darkened again. "God knows you need every vantage. I could swear by the rood the werwolf has never forgotten how you scorned her, there on the Garonne bank. Not for your good did she cause the king to send Worad into Thuringia, when she met them at the Eresburg. It is common talk in the palace that she is putting out her utmost craft to sever your betrothal bond and wed Rothada to the Count of Metz."

"Loki!" gasped Olvir, white with anger. Years had passed since he had last given way to such passion; but now the cold fury came upon him with all its old-time force. Liutrad shrank back before the look in his earl's face.

"Calm yourself, ring-breaker," he muttered. "All may yet go well. In the morning I will bring you to the king."

"The king," repeated Olvir, and then his face flushed with a sudden resolve, and his eyes lost their deadly menace. "Who asks for the king? I would speak with my betrothed."

"But our lord king,--would he not be angered?"

"I would speak to my betrothed, alone."

"Holy Mother! Do not be rash, earl; you 'll ruin all!"

"There is nothing to lose; something may be gained. I 've had enough of waiting. The king himself shall no longer bar my way. Now I would speak with my betrothed. She will know best where we may meet."

"You 're mad, Olvir! What would you do?"

"I do not yet know; only, I must speak with Rothada. As you call me friend, seek out Berga her maid without delay. I must see the little maiden soon; else I cannot answer for what may follow. The fiend clutches at my heart."

"I will go, Olvir; though it is no light task."

"Then go and tell all to your grateful king."

"Why reproach me, earl? Is he not my lord? And yet, I risk his good-will to do you favor."

"Forgive me, lad! Faul tears my heart-strings. Go now, and Freya aid you."

"I go, earl. Yet first, a wolf's-hair. You had best lie close this night. In the morning I will bring you one of Deacon Alcuin's robes. With sandals, you can then fare at will about the burg."

"I 'll wear no priestly footgear; but the gown is well thought of. Hasten now. You may yet see her to-night."

But we in no wise
Might love withstand,
And mine head must I lay
On my love, the ring-breaker.

LAMENT OF ODDRUN.

Liutrad did not return to the inn until mid-morning of the next day, and then it was to fling himself down with a sigh of discouragement.

"The werewolf is keen of eye and ear," he muttered.

"Rest easy, lad. You've done your best. Another day will see fairer luck."

"If only Father Fulrad were here to aid us! Had he lived, all would have been well."

"I could ask no more from any friend, son of Erling, than what you will do for me. Now I will eat, that my full strength may come to me."

"You have not rested much this night, Olvir. Your war-gear shimmers like starlit ice."

"A bride might use the shield as mirror, for all its dints. Eat now. Here is plain fare, but toothsome."

"May Worad eat bitter herbs when he sits at board! The base wretch, to covet a friend's betrothed!"

"Waste no thought on him, lad. The werewolf alone--"

"True; her ring holds him with its magic glamour, even as it has cast its spell over our lord king."

"Ring or no, she is at the root of all the trouble. The world-hero is as wax in her white hands. I have talked much with the Franks since you left me. It is she who has turned away the king's heart from mercy. Not the Saxons alone, but the nearest of his liegemen have suffered from his harshness; and I must have my share, though the dints in my shield and helmet should read me title to fairer reward. Ah, well, better luck in Skuld's hand! Another day may bring a rift in the clouds."

"Saints grant it!" muttered Liutrad; and the two fell to eating in moody silence.

Yet Olvir's confidence in the future was not mistaken. Before evening Berga found Liutrad a chance to speak with her mistress; and he prevailed upon Rothada to set a meeting for that very night.

Immediately after nightfall Olvir, cowed and wrapped about in the Benedictine gown brought to him by Liutrad, strolled with his friend across the burg and around the great bulk of the palace to a shadowy recess between the queen's apartments and the quarters of the court-officials. Here they found Berga waiting for them beside a small door used by the servants, and Liutrad addressed her openly: "Here is my brother priest for your sick friend."

"Let him follow," answered the woman, and she led the way into the foul-odored passage. Olvir silently entered at her heels, leaving Liutrad to watch at the door.

Within was pitchy darkness, broken only by an occasional gleam from the rooms where the house-slaves chattered over their evening meal or lay about on their straw pallets, easing the toil of the day with broad jests and coarse raillery. A flight of steps, steep and narrow, took Olvir and his guide beyond the servants' quarters, and in the utter blackness the Northman had need of his quick ear to follow the woman's lead. She glided softly from passage to passage without a word, stopping only for a touch of warning when the silence was broken by the muffled clink of Olvir's mail beneath his monk's robe. Some little time passed before the woman paused beside a curtained doorway.

"The princess waits within, hero," she whispered. "Enter, and comfort her. I must watch over the bairns, lest they waken and call for their sister. May Freya soften the king's heart, that your love run smooth!"

"My thanks to the good wisher," replied Olvir, and he stepped between the curtains.

He found himself in a large chamber, half lighted by the moonbeams which streamed through the high, casemented window. Where the rays struck upon the opposite wall, the grotesque figures of the tapestry-hangings stood out with such startling distinctness that Olvir stepped back and grasped the hilt of Al-hatif beneath his robe. But then a slender figure glided out into the moonlight from the shadow beside the window, and he ran forward to clasp his betrothed in his arms.

"Little vala,--little vala!" was all he could say, for the words choked in his throat at sight of her tears.

For a while she leaned her head upon his shoulder, and wept as though her heart would break; and he held her to him, unable to put into words the tenderness and compassion which filled his whole being. At last, however, she dried her tear-wet face on his robe, and looked up with a pitiable attempt to be brave.

"My hero, my hero!" she whispered.

"Little vala! Has the witch's daughter sucked your blood, that you look so white and wasted? May Hel, Loki's daughter, wither the red lips of that werewolf! May she--"

"Cease--oh, cease, Olvir! Curses ever come home to the sender. This may be the last time we shall meet here on earth. Let there be no wormwood with the bitter-sweet."

"No, Rothada, this is not our last meeting here on the fair earth."

"Will you then give way to my father? Liutrad said--"

"He said aright. I will not sell my soul, though it be for your father's kingdom. Yet, before God and man, you are my betrothed wife. I have won you by service such as few have given the king, and--we love each other. Your father gave pledge he would send for me, and he broke troth. It is hopeless--nothing can turn his course while the witch's daughter drives--it is hopeless to appeal to him."

"What then, Olvir? Your words fill me with dread; you cherish the thought of some wild deed."

"Should it fill you with dread, darling, that I would have you wed me?"

"No, dear one; my heart sings with gladness at the word. If only it might come true!"

"You have but to say it, king's daughter."

"Would you have me wed you without the banns, Olvir,--in secret? It could not be, dear hero! When the truth became known, the anger of my father would pass all measure. He would never forgive us."

"I look to your father for nothing. He has paid me ill for loyal service. I shall now break the bond which has held me to him. Beneath the priest-robe you feel the war-gear, king's daughter. Zora is saddled for the road. Come! the night is before us. Dawn will see us far on our way to the Rhine."

"O Christ! O Holy Mother, save me!" cried the girl; and she shrank away from her lover, wide-eyed and trembling.

"Listen, darling; listen to me!" he protested. "I would not force you. Only, I beseech you, by the love you bear me, come! At Cologne lie my longships,--my ocean-racers. Who may overtake us when we sail down Rhine Stream? *Haoi!* how the ships spring to the bowing of the long oars! Behind us lie the flat shores of Frisia; we ride the wild North Sea; before us tower the iron cliffs of old Norway; up Trondheim Fiord we glide, where the free men of Lade wait to welcome their earl and his bride!"

The Northman's black eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and he held out his arms. But still Rothada shrank away.

"It cannot be, dear hero!" she sighed. "It cannot be!"

"Where, then, is the love of my betrothed?"

"I love you none the less, dear, that I cannot go with you."

An agony of grief distorted Olvir's face. He flung himself down before the girl and clasped her feet.

"Come with me,--come with me!" he begged. "Here is only sorrow and parting. The king is iron."

"Yet I am his daughter. There is still hope for us, Olvir. I will plead with my father."

"And if he deny you?"

"God forbid! I can then only return to Chelles."

"To the cloisters! My curse on them! Listen, king's daughter. You are not fated for the nun's veil. That would not fill in fullest measure the spite-cup of the witch's daughter. She will wed you to our girl-faced Count of Metz."

"That is no new tale to me, Olvir; yet I can promise you this much,--I shall never be the bride of another than yourself. If I may not choose the cloister, I will choose that which lies in my bosom."

"You bear my knife?"

"Always--ever ready for use against the bearer."

Rothada put her hand to her breast, and the blue steel of the dagger gleamed in the moonlight. Olvir took the blade from her, and pressed it to his lips.

"Be true, knife of my forging!" he muttered. "There is yet one hope--if it fail, strike true; and when you pierce her heart, I will plunge Al-hatif into my breast."

"Olvir!--you grieve me; I cannot bear it!"

"Why grieve, king's daughter? If we may not wed in this life, we shall be united forever in the life beyond."

"There is still hope; I will go to my father when he is alone, and implore him to grant us happiness."

"It may be he will yield to you--Loki! What's that? The hangings--"

Hampered though he was by the priest's gown, Olvir sprang across the room with the quickness of a leaping wolf. The tapestry, torn from its fastenings by his fierce grasp, fell apart and exposed the withered form of Kosru the leech, crouched against the wall.

"So--it is the werwolf's dotard," said Olvir, and his lip curled with a smile of utter contempt. But the spy was already grovelling on his face, terrified by the dagger and the terrible look of the Northman as he tore apart the tapestry.

"Lord--lord!--spare the aged!" he babbled. "God of Light, soften his heart! Spare me, noble count! I will tell all. I will pay you wergild for my life,--shining gold,--all the scant hoard I 've saved and put away for my helpless age!"

Olvir touched the Magian's head with his buskin, and answered coldly: "Odin bear witness--the hoarder's heart is touched! He 'd give away his gold."

"All--all, to the last penny--only spare my life! I will serve you; I 'll be your slave! Do not thrust into the grave one who already totters on the brink!"

"The greyer the viper, the deadlier its venom," rejoined the Northman, in an ominous tone. "That man is dog-wise who passes by the evil worm because it lies in his path torpid."

"Olvir--Olvir, do not slay the old man!" cried Rothada, and she darted across the chamber, to cling to her lover's arm. "He has been good to me, and--and he has saved many lives."

"Ai! the king's daughter pleads for me; the maiden pleads! I have never sought to do her hurt--by the God of my fathers, I swear it, noble count! Even now I was but coming to fetch the queen's sampler. How could I know you from a priest, lord? If I hid behind the hangings, thinking to creep near and listen, I meant no evil. Only forgive me, and I will serve you; I 'll make confession how, with the witch in the Moselle Wood, I brewed love potions for her daughter to give the Lord Karolah, and how I bound the queen in slumber with my drugs, that the dark maiden might be free to lure the king with her enticements. Spare me, lord, and I 'll even tell--"

"Go to the priests with your witchery and spells," broke in Olvir, with impatient contempt. "As to your lying pledges, I ask nothing of a miserly dotard; nor will I take your oath for silence. This knife is better pledge. Do not forget its keen point, and learn that every man among my blood-eager warriors bears such another blade. If you betray me, by word or by sign, they will search you out, though it be from under the very seat of the throne. I have spoken. Now rise up and guide me back by the way I came, to the door of the slaves."

"Ai! the shadow of Azrael is upon me! The wrathful youth seeks to lure me from the presence of the king's daughter, to shed my blood in secret!"

"Grey fool! That is a lie born of your own treachery. The knife is the maiden's; I give it back into her own hand. Rise up; I would be going. Farewell, little may! It is ill luck that our parting must be said before such a one; yet I trust to the blue steel that he blots all from his memory. Come now, darling, draw near my heart."

"God forbid it be for the last time!" sobbed the girl, overcome by the thought. The knife fell unheeded from her hand upon the wolfskin beside her as she sank, half fainting, into Olvir's arms. Many moments passed while she lay on his breast, quivering with grief. Then Olvir kissed her forehead, and put her gently from him, to spurn the shoulder of the leech.

"Up, dog!" he muttered harshly. "Lead me out."

Kosru shrank back, and huddled in a shapeless heap against the wall.

"I cannot--I cannot go!" he gasped. "A palsy has stricken my limbs. I cannot rise--I swear to you, lord count--"

"Liar! Stand up or I--"

"Stay; do not force him, Olvir. I will guide you myself."

"To the king, then."

"My father!"

"Do you dream that this coward could withhold his secret from the werwolf? He fears my vengeance; he will fear hers more. We will go to the king, and make an end, either for good or for ill."

"It is well, dear hero. Come; my father is in the cell of Deacon Alcuin."

CHAPTER XXIII

Nor shall I leave life
Ere the keen lord,
The eager in sword-play,
My hand shall make end of.
LAY OF GUDRUN.

For a while the Magian waited as the lovers had left him, appearing more like a careless heap of yellow robes than a living man. At last, gaining a little courage from the silence, he thrust out his hooked nose and bald head, like an old vulture peering over a carcass. The glint of the forgotten dagger drew his bleared gaze, and he glared at the cold blade in a fascination of terror. Soon, however, the silver hilt caught his eye, and his fear gave way to greed. A scrawny hand followed the head from the yellow heap, reaching out to clutch the treasure. But then a soft step sounded in the doorway, and the leech drew back into his robes, livid with abject fear.

The curtains of the doorway parted, and Fastrada, radiant in the splendor of her jewels and her voluptuous beauty, advanced slowly into the room. A little way from the entrance, she paused to glance carelessly across the chamber, and then she stretched her arms above her head with the lazy gracefulness of a cat.

"*Ai*, Hertha," she purred, "you 'll lack service this night. The laggard wizard has been called to dose some filthy slave, and I 've waited till sleep weighs down my eyelids. Would that I were less drowsy! The king is pleased that I ply needle with such industry. It would give me double pleasure to sit by and watch the harlot's daughter finish the piece. But it's pleasant these chilly nights to creep beneath the silken coverlets. I 'll go now. Faul! Who's been at my tapestries? Ah, Kosru! Is that you?"

"Pity, gracious queen! have compassion on your slave!" whined the leech. "A palsy has stricken my limbs. As I entered, the stroke came upon me. The hangings tore in my grasp as I fell."

"Ah--and how came this here?" demanded the queen, pointing to the dagger on the wolfskin rug before the Magian.

"That knife? I had not seen it, gracious dame."

"You lie, Kosru," replied Fastrada, and, stooping for the dagger, she held it up before her in the moonlight. As she looked at it, her lips drew apart in a cruel smile, and her eyes sparkled.

"This is no Frank blade, nor is it of Saracen forging," she said softly. "On the hilt are Norse runes. I 've seen it before--at the belt of that false Dane! It is well for you that you should speak out, Kosru."

"Gracious dame--light of Karolah's eyes!" stammered the leech. "I have lied; but, in truth, I am stricken with a palsy. I feared your anger, and so I lied."

"Speak out! The Dane was here to keep tryst with that sly trull!"

"*Ai--ai!* They were here, sultana,--he and the king's daughter. I sought to creep around behind the hangings; but the dust set me to coughing. My throat--"

"And then he came upon you! I can see him leap--the bright hero! Yet you live. There's no blood on the blade. How came he to spare you?"

"I--I know not, gracious queen. The king's daughter pleaded for me--and I gave promise--"

"Ah, I had not thought him so foolish. And to leave the knife to tell the tale. Where were his keen wits? He might as well have left the knife in your heart. *Hei!* The Dane left his knife in the heart of the king's leech,--murder at the door of the king's chamber! Magian, that was a luckless cough for you--Magian!"

A swift movement of the supple, gem-flashing hand, and the loose end of the tapestry was wrapped close about the head of the wretched leech. All the frantic beating of his feeble arms could not stay the stroke for a moment.

When the frail body lay limp and still in her grasp, the queen rose and went across the

chamber to hold up her hands where the moon poured in its brightest light. They were white and spotless. She looked them over with careful scrutiny, and, having satisfied herself that they were unsoiled, gazed down, wide-eyed, at the one on which the opal glowed mysteriously in the cold light.

"All honor to my witch-stone!" she exclaimed. "We 've snared our wolf at last. Now to fetch the forester."

She turned quickly away to the door, but paused on the threshold, to step back and glance out through the window.

"The night is clear; yet a cloud may drift across. It is well to make certain," she muttered, and she drew the huddled form along the wall, until it lay across the doorway. Then, fully satisfied, she slipped out and glided swiftly down the dark passages until she gained the bower-chamber. Within, lighted by a row of waxen tapers, the bower-maidens sat about a long table, plying needle and bodkin on the garments of the king and their mistress, while an old priest droned a homily for the edification of their manners.

Fastrada beckoned the nearest girl to approach, and spoke to her in the doorway: "I go to sit with our lord and Deacon Alcuin in the East Tower. You will find Count Gerold playing at chess. Go, bid him bring my sampler from my morning-room and fetch it after me."

"I beg pardon, my dame, am I to fetch it, or Count Gerold?"

"The count, you silly trull! Could I trust such as you to wander at night when young men are about? Go, and see that you return quickly under the eye of the good deacon."

As the maiden hurried away, her cheeks aflame, and her blue eyes wet with the starting tears, her mistress paced calmly back by the way she had come. It was some little distance around to the East Tower, and she was not yet certain whether it would be best for Gerold or for herself to arrive first. There was time to decide at leisure; for the young count, presuming on the king's favor, would probably play out his match before he came to do her bidding. All the better! What greater joy than to stroll along the dark passages, where one was at liberty to give outward play to all the bitter-sweet thoughts of revenge?

But while the witch's daughter glided like a trailing weasel from wing to wing of the great Merwing palace, there was happening in the East Tower that which, had she known of it, would have lent wings to her jewelled buskins.

CHAPTER XXIV

From a heart full of hate
Shall come heavy vengeance.
LAW OF BRYNHILD.

Within a small turret room, that was warmed by a charcoal brazier and lighted by the glow of his own hour-candles, Karl sat on a low bench beside the book-strewn table, while before him knelt Rothada, clasping his sword-hand to her bosom, as she pleaded for love and happiness. His free hand lay upon her glossy head, but his eyes were raised in a troubled look to where Olvir, in his burnished mail, stood calm and beautiful as Forseti, son of Balder. Beside the Northman, with slender fingers clasped upon his glinting shoulder-plate, waited Alcuin, the gentle-hearted scholar, eager to add his appeal to the maiden's.

But when the little princess ceased, and bowed her tear-wet face upon her father's knee, he held up his hand for silence, and sat for many moments, his brows bent in deep thought. Olvir waited the outcome, his eyes fixed upon the king's face in a calm and steady gaze, neither defiant nor imploring.

Then Karl looked up at him, and spoke: "So, Dane hawk, after all the honors I have heaped upon you, not content to defy Holy Church, you come to steal my daughter from me,--a thief in the night! And yet you drew back from the deed; you came before me--"

"For that I claim nothing, lord king. Had not Rothada been loath--"

"And why--why as a thief--"

"Do you ask, lord king? Many weary months have passed since you gave pledge to call me to

your side,--to the presence of my betrothed. I come at last, an unwelcome guest, to hear on every lip the bitter tale that your queen is plotting to break my betrothal bonds and wed Count Worad with my bride."

"My queen plotting! Ward your tongue, Dane!"

"It is not I who say that the queen is plotting. Whether she is or is not, I do not know; but I know that your liegemen so say."

"You do wrong to heed the ungrateful slanderers. The court is full of gossip and evil tales, the offspring of envy and malice."

"Then my lord king has not yet broken the betrothal tie between myself and his daughter?"

"Not yet, Olvir," replied Karl, and the severity of his look relaxed in a half-smile. "The bond still holds. Yet tell me, you who talk of ill faith--I speak no more of your plot to lure away the maiden; but how of your loyal service? You are far from the Sorb Mark."

"I bear tidings from the forest land, lord king,--ill tidings," answered Olvir, and he told over again the plotting of the Thuringians and the slaying of Rudulf and his witch-wife.

Neither Alcuin nor Rothada could restrain their cries at the terse recital; but Karl sat through it all, stern and silent, and gave no sign, even when, in a dozen words, Olvir told how the grim old count had fallen to the thrust of Hardrat's spear. When, however, the account was ended, the king nodded, and said: "Years gone, I lost my trust in that drunkard. Name his fellow-plotters."

"Would that I might, lord king! Yet I knew only Hardrat and the witch-wife, and I heard no names spoken."

"You would know their faces again?"

"Some of them in a thousand."

"It is well. You have rendered me good service; and so, if you will bend to Holy Church--"

"I cannot--it would be a lie!"

"Rather it is your pride, your haughty pride of spirit which bars your way to all happiness. Do not tax my patience too far."

"For the sake of the maiden, sire--" ventured Alcuin.

Karl threw out his hand impatiently.

"Is not the child also in my thoughts?" he demanded. "Ah, little maiden, your pleading tears my heart-strings! For your sake, I give your hero one more trial. I name him Count of the Sorb Mark, in the stead of my slain Grey Wolf. Two days I give him at Attigny; then he goes to snare those forest plotters. If when he drags the guilty men before me for the dooming, he has brought himself to bow to Holy Church, he will find yet other honors waiting him; if, however, he cannot in truth bend his stubborn pride, then, nevertheless, I will give him his bride. Such is my will. I have let mercy set aside my justice. Be content. Now, child, rise and go to your chamber. The good deacon will see you safe. I would speak with Olvir of the commands he bears back to Thuringia."

"My father!" cried Rothada, rising; and the heart of the king softened yet more as he saw the light which shone from the violet eyes. She kissed his hand, and then, with the cry of a happy child, turned quickly from him and ran to fling her arms about Olvir's neck.

"Joy, joy, dear one! The Lord Christ has answered my prayer!" she sang.

"I hear once more the voice of the little vala," said Olvir, softly. "Keep your heart merry, beloved. The days of waiting will soon be ended, and when we meet again, I wish to see those cheeks rounded,--their roses once more blooming to shame the sweetbriar. Go, now, darling. The king waits."

Very tenderly he pressed her face between his hands and bent to kiss her eyes and lips. Then he gave her over into the keeping of the scholar, and turned resolutely away. As he looked around, a drop, bright as a gem, was rolling down the king's bearded cheek.

Silently Karl turned to the table, to grasp Alcuin's quill in his unskilled hand; but the words which he sought to write were ill formed. Throwing aside the blotched parchment, he signed to Olvir to take the quill. Under the Northman's deft strokes, the beautiful letters of the Irish script flowed from the quill's point as by magic. The king, as he spoke the message, watched the nimble scribe with half-envious admiration. When the missive was ended, he took wax and stamped it with his signet, in lieu of the great seal.

"So--that is done," he said shortly. "You are a ready scribe. Not even Liutrad is as quick and sure in forming the letters. Now take the scroll, and go."

"I would first render thanks to my lord king."

"Go! My heart misgives me, that I have let the weakness of a father and friend stand in the way of God's service. Go quickly! I would be alone."

"I go, my heart singing with the praises of the golden king!" replied Olvir.

"I ask no thanks. Go," answered Karl, without any sign of response to the young man's smile. As Olvir darted away, too overjoyed to be disheartened by the cold parting, the great Frank's head bent forward, and his brows gathered.

He still sat there, tugging at his beard and gazing moodily at the spot where Rothada had knelt, when the queen glided softly into the chamber. At sight of her graceful figure, his frown gave way to a fond smile; but she had seen his moody look.

"What troubles my dear lord?" she murmured, nestling beside him on the bench. Karl put his great arm about her and drew her to him, before he answered, "It is nothing, sweetheart. I 've had enough of bitter thoughts. Now I would woo my gentle wife."

"Dear lord! Mine is the greater joy! When I dwell on my happiness, my heart goes out to all mankind. I could love even the heathen and the heretics, condemned of God to endless torment. What pity that men should so bring upon themselves the fires of the nether world! One could almost wish to give them good gifts here, to offset their sufferings to come."

"They are perverse and godless men, dear one. Do not trouble your heart for their wickedness. There is enough of sin in Holy Church."

"Yet my thoughts go astray, dear lord. Sometimes I think of our little maiden. I doubt if your Dane hawk's proud spirit will yield. Yet, dear lord, if your judgment hold in all its firm justice, she will ever live in grief, torn from the arms of her hero. Always before I have given heed only to the good of Holy Church; yet now--"

"Take joy, then, kind heart! They were here only a little since, and I gave pledge that they should wed."

"Should wed!--Olvir here!"

"You may well gaze in bewilderment. I wonder at myself. Yet what father could withstand the heart's pleading of his maid-child?"

"My lord, I--rejoice at their joy. I will go--"

"Stay! Who comes leaping upon the stair?"

Rising swiftly, Karl set his great form before the queen, and loosened Ironbiter in its sheath. The half-drawn blade flashed out its full length, when Gerold, pale and glaring with horror, rushed wildly into the room, a bared dagger in his hand. Checked by the threatening sword-point, the Swabian stopped short and sank to his knee, panting.

"Murder, dear lord!" he gasped,--"murder beneath the king's roof! In the queen's morning-room Kosru the leech lies stark, a knife-thrust through his heart!"

Karl lowered his sword, and stared down at the young count.

"Murder?" he repeated. "Whose knife do you bear?"

"The slayer's, sire! I drew it out, and ran to show it you."

"Well done! Hold up the blade, that we may see-- So; it is of Danish make-- And the owner?"

"I do not know, sire."

"He does not know!" hissed Fastrada. "His memory is strangely short. I know the blade."

"You, wife? Name the murderer!"

"Count Olvir, sire."

"Olvir!"

"He, dear lord."

"You know the knife?"

"I could swear to it in a thousand. He once carried it at his belt. Many of the court will remember the blade."

Karl made no answer, but turned and paced slowly to and fro across the room, his gaze fixed on the floor before him. He did not pause until Fastrada looked up with white, drawn face and narrow-lidded eyes, and cried sharply to Gerold: "*Hei*, king's man! why do you loiter? Go, call warriors, and search out the slayer. It will be no light task to take him, should he have warning. Go!"

"Hold!" commanded Karl. "Am I the king, that a woman speaks for me?"

"*Ai!* forgive me, dear lord! I thought only of my leech,--my luckless, murdered Kosru!" wailed Fastrada, and she flung herself at his feet.

"Rise, dear one," he said gently.

"Not until the warriors go to take the slayer of that helpless greybeard! Ah, the good old leech! Many's the bitter pang he has eased for me. Only the bloodiest of wretches could have slain so helpless a one! How came the cruel Dane in my morning-room--beside Rothada's chamber? Oh, my lord, could it be that the base outlander came skulking in the darkness to--to--"

And Kosru, the luckless greybeard, sought to dissuade him from his evil deed! Send warriors, dear lord! Let the bloody slayer be dragged before your judgment-seat! The mire-death were light doom for such a foul slaying!"

The queen's voice, quivering with agony and horror, broke into wild sobs. Karl stooped over, as though to raise her; only to tower up again and stare about in angry indecision. It was a luckless moment for the sea-king and his betrothed. Before the memory of the Northman's calm face and the little maiden's pleading could blunt and turn aside the poisoned shafts of the witch's daughter, other feet came leaping upon the stair. Again Karl's hand went to the hilt of Ironbiter, and his frown deepened as Worad of Metz rushed into the room, covered from helmet to buskin with travel-grime.

"Lord king!" he gasped--"I could not wait--my horse fell at the gate, outspent--but I--"

"Another bearer of ill tidings," muttered Karl.

"What? I do not understand, sire. I--"

"You come late. Already I have word of Rudulf's death and of the Thuringian plot--from Olvir's lips."

"Plot--Thuringian plot!--and from him!"

"I have said it, dolt."

"And he told you? Saint Michael! there was no plot, lord king,--no plot but his own when he lured Count Rudulf and his Wend wife into the ambush of the Sorbs. I myself found the arrow-pierced bodies on the Saale bank,--I myself, in the lead of the Thuringian searchers. Then many counts who had been feasting at Hardrat's hall told how the Dane had passed by, riding with his chosen victims."

"Hold!" commanded Karl, and he bent forward to fix his keen eyes on the young Frank. "You say they passed by Hardrat's hall?"

Worad drew a large scroll from his breast and held it out to the king. "Here, sire, is the tale, to which all the feasters took oath. I called upon them for it, when, having brought up my warriors, I marched to the warring to take the betrayer, and found that he had fled. Thank God, I find you safe, dear lord! Days had passed since the foul deed, and men said he had gone Rhineward. I rode fast, fearful of the worst--"

"Your fear was needless. Traitor or true man, he came before me with a calm face."

"For you gave him all that he asked, dear lord!" cried Fastrada. "*Ai*, Holy Mother--to think how near you 've been to his murderous blade!--the bloody Dane, foul betrayer of my father--my mother!--red-handed from the slaying of that helpless greybeard--*Ai!* the mire-death were light doom for such a treacherous slayer! Justice--justice, son of Pepin! I demand vengeance on the slayer of my kin!"

Even Gerold quivered at the grief and horror in the queen's voice. The shrill appeal pierced to the heart like a knife-thrust. The king's face was terrible to look upon in its deadly anger; and yet he still hesitated.

"It cannot be--it cannot be!" he muttered. "He, my bright Dane--"

"Bright Dane!" screamed Fastrada--"heathen outlander--heretic--scoffer at Holy Church! What lying tale has he told you, that you stand in doubt? Look--look on the scroll which tells of my kin's betrayal--at this knife from the heart of the greybeard! *Ai!* they shall trample him in the mire!"

"King of Heaven!--that battle-leader! He is no coward to be flung in the fen. You ask too much, wife."

"Too much! *Ai*, too much for the slayer of my kin! But the king speaks-- Let him, then, be torn asunder by the plunging horses--the murderous wretch! *Hei!* I can hear the snapping bones!"

Karl stared down into the upraised eyes of his queen, and they were as the eyes of a wolf, glaring green with exultant hate. He turned to stride across the room, and as he turned, he saw again before him the gentle eyes of his daughter,--the pleading face of Himiltrude's child. Twice he paced across the room, the angry flush slowly receding from his face.

Then he paused before his queen, and said coldly, "Seek your bed, wife. This is no place for grieving dames. As to my Dane hawk, rest content. He shall fare from my realm, an outlaw."

"How!--the murderer? Are you mad, son of Pepin? Free to go?--that traitor!"

"No traitor, dame; and he may have had cause for vengeance against your kin. As to the leech, he was but an outlander,--a wizened dotard, already on the grave's edge,--and the Dane is the bravest of all my counts. I have loved him as a kinsman. Enough! His doom is spoken. I give him this night. Then Gerold shall bid him go, under pain of death if he linger an hour after sunrise. Here, Worad, is my signet. After the baptizing of the Saxons, the High Marshal and his

horsemen will ride with you to Cologne, on the trail of the outlaw,--to drive him and his wolf-pack from my kingdom."

CHAPTER XXV

I will fare back thither
From whence I came,
To my nighest kin
And those who know me.
LAY OF SIGURD.

All night long Gerold searched Attigny for his outlawed friend, but found no trace of him. At dawn he returned to the palace, weary and all but overcome with the burden of his grief. He was too disheartened even to speak to Rothada's Frisian maid, who stood by the outer gate. He would have passed by her, had she not signed to him.

"What is it, Berga?" he asked dully, when he had followed her into a secluded nook.

"You droop like an outspent hound, lord count. Take cheer. I can put you on the trail."

"How! you know--"

"They slipped out, only a little since,--she and your mate, the big Dane priest."

"To meet Count Olvir!"

"It is merry for lovers to ride in the greenwood."

"My thanks!" muttered Gerold, and he rushed into the palace courtyard.

His horse was dripping with sweat when, a mile up the Aisne bank, he raced to meet the three riders who came cantering through the groves. It was a happy little party. He could see the blush of love and joy which had brought back the roses to Rothada's white cheeks, and her joyous laughter rang clear in the still air. How could he mar their happiness?

But now they were racing forward to meet him, Zora in the lead. A little more, and he was on the dewy turf beside Olvir, gripping his arms. After the first outburst of gladness, however, his face darkened with the shadow of his message.

"How's this, lad?" demanded Olvir. "You stand gaping, doleful as a bee-stung cub. God forbid that you bear ill tidings of our lord king!"

"I bear ill tidings, not of our lord king, but from him," answered Gerold; and he turned appealingly to Liutrad. "I cannot tell them! I cannot say it!"

"Speak! Speak out, man!" commanded Olvir, fiercely.

"Sea-king,--king's son! here is fit ending for your seven years of service. Now are you wolfshead throughout the length and breadth of the Frank realm,--you and all your following! You shall sail down Rhine Stream so soon as you can ride to Cologne. Worad rides after, to hunt you from the realm. If within an hour you have not left Attigny, your head shall pay for the loitering. Such is the command of Karl, King of the Franks, to the hero who has served him as a king's son--a king's son!"

Gerold paused, the words choking in his throat with grief and anger, and Olvir and Liutrad stood before him speechless, stunned by his message. But Rothada slipped from her horse and ran to Olvir.

"Ah, Christ!" she moaned. "My hero outlawed!"

"The king your father has named him wolfshead, maiden," answered Gerold, and then his voice broke into plaintive appeal. "Why did you slay the old leech, Olvir? Why strike the greybeard? At the least, you should have taken your knife with you. Where were your nimble wits? But for the witness of the reddened blade--"

"Hold! Are you mad?" cried Olvir. "You babble of knives and slain men like a fool."

"Would that it were so, friend! But your knife, the ill-omened blade! With my own hand I plucked it from the heart of the luckless Magian."

"How--my knife? None the less, it is a foul lie. I gave the blade long since to this dear one on my breast, and last night I placed it again in her hand, unused, when I spurned the cowering leech. Why should I slay the spy, when I was even then going with my betrothed to stand before

her father? There would be nothing to betray."

"Thor's hammer!" roared Liutrad. "The werwolf has snared you, earl--"

"No, by Odin! The falcon bursts through the limed twigs. I 'll go to the king--"

"Too late--too late!" groaned Gerold. "She has shot her venomed shafts too well. After I, wretched man that I am, had brought the blade that sprung the werwolf's snare, Worad came also, with lies yet worse. The Thuringians have spared no pains. A score of high-counts have sworn that you lured old Rudulf to his death in an ambush of the Sorbs. It was then the werwolf triumphed. The king is filled with her venom; and yet--and yet even then he denied her and doomed you only to outlawry."

Olvir struck his thigh. "Thor! I thank him little for that, when I must go faring, and leave my bride to wed the werwolf's nursling."

"I have another knife," said Rothada, and she looked up at Olvir, her sweet lips straight and tense.

"No, king's daughter!" he answered her sternly; "it shall not come to that. I have the right to take you with me into my banishment. Now what is the vala's word?"

"Oh, my hero, I pray for light! If you must truly go-- But first, there is yet hope. My father does not know the truth."

"Would he listen were it told him? No, darling; come with me, that there may be an end of doubt."

"I cannot, Olvir--I cannot go yet. First see my father. He is just; he will right the wrong he has put upon you."

"And if not?"

"He will, dear hero!"

"And if not?"

"Then--ah, Christ forgive me! I must break the will of the king my father. I must leave home and friends and father--unblessed!"

"No, little vala; not unblessed," broke in Liutrad, his deep voice trembling. "You shall be wed by a priest of God, who will shrive you of all sin in doing what is just and right."

"Enough," said Olvir. "I hold the pledge of my betrothed. Gerold will lead her back to the palace, and Liutrad will fetch my priest-robe. He will bring me in before the king during the noon rest. If I fail, but get free, I 'll ride straight across the Ardennes to Cologne. At nightfall, Liutrad will ride with the king's daughter; but they shall go by another way, down the Meuse to Nimeguen. There I will meet them with my longships. What says Count Gerold to the theft of the king's daughter?"

"Saint Michael! Could you think me so cruel as to hold her here in the power of that werwolf? Yet a word: there will be swift pursuit."

"They will follow me to Cologne."

"And a priest has his cowl," added Liutrad.

Rothada pressed her blushing face against Olvir's shoulder.

"They shall not find our trail, dear hero," she whispered. "Berga in a forester's dress, and I as a page--"

"Freya guide you, my bride!" cried Olvir, and he pressed his lips to her downbent head.

CHAPTER XXVI

Unmeet we should do
As the doings of wolves are,
Raising wrongs 'gainst each other
As the dogs of the Norns,
The greedy ones nourished
In waste steads of the earth.

LAY OF HAMDIR.

When Liutrad returned with the sombre Benedictine robe for his earl, he found Olvir pacing

restlessly up and down the Aisne bank.

"You 're slow, lad," he said impatiently; and flinging on the gown, he at once called to Zora. But Liutrad had more knowledge of the king's humor.

"Curb your eagerness, earl," he said. "Wait until after the baptizing, and our lord king has eaten and eased himself with the noon rest. When he awakens, his mood will be fairest."

"Yours is the better judgment, lad," assented Olvir. "My hour of grace is already past, and it will matter little--Loki! We 've forgotten that I cannot ride Zora into the burg. Worad will soon be searching me out, and the mare is as well known as I."

"We must leave her hid in the wood nearest the burg. My horse shall stand in waiting for you by the palace gate. He is heavy, but can race that far at good speed."

"Well schemed, lad! I shall swoop among the limed twigs of the werwolf, and they shall not hold me! Do you call to mind, lad, that day among the sand dunes, when we outrode the angry Danes?"

"Remember! Thor's hammer, but those were merry days!" cried Liutrad; and with that he and Olvir fell to recalling the stirring scenes of their hunts and their fights on land and sea since the day when Olvir Thorbiornson came to Lade, with his grim foster-father, and won the heirship of the high-seat.

Noon came and passed, and the two still talked on with the care-free tones of men at a feast. None might have dreamt from their manner that they were desperate men, prepared, if need were, to defy the might of the great king.

At last, noting by the fall of the sun-rays through the foliage how the time passed, Liutrad gave the word, and they made ready to enter Attigny.

Worms during the wedding of Fastrada was not more gay than was now the little burg on the Aisne. All the court and all the townfolk rejoiced with their king in the fond belief that the bloody Saxon struggle had at last come to an end. The streets were thronged with revellers, through whose midst Olvir, muffled in his cowl, walked unnoted behind Liutrad's horse, straight to the great palace built by the second Clovis.

No official would have thought to bar the entrance of the king's favorite scribe into the most private apartments of the king, without Karl's express command, and where Liutrad went, he had no difficulty in gaining admittance for his priestly fellow. But when they came near the door of the king's chamber, Liutrad thought it best that he should wait outside in the passage. While they stood talking, they heard within the sibilant, purring voice of the queen, and at the same time the Grand Doorward approached, to inquire their purpose. Olvir's gaze grew stern, and he drew Liutrad away, with quick decision.

"Go, bring your horse into the courtyard--to the steps of the palace doorway," he said. "Should I come out in haste, do not wonder if I take the beast from you with a show of force. The Franks should know of nothing against you till you 've fled with their king's daughter."

"Olvir! You mean our lord king no harm?"

"God forbid--greatly as he has wronged me! Only, I 'd not linger in the werwolf's power should all go ill."

"Saint Michael grant you have no need of flight!"

"My thanks. Go quickly!"

Liutrad hurried away, and Olvir stepped forward to meet the doorward, his head bent beneath the cowl, and his lips muttering a Latin phrase.

"Hold," commanded the pompous official. "What is the priest's purpose at the door of our lord king?"

"To enter it, fool!" muttered Olvir, in Latin, and, as the Frank bowed to the blessing, he spoke in a tone of authority: "Lead me to his Majesty. I come from Fulda and--"

"Ah, the wise Abbot Baugulf. Follow me, priest, and pray for grace that you do not stammer and stand dumfounded when you enter the presence of majesty."

Olvir made no answer, and the doorward, judging that he had sufficiently impressed the humble priest, flung aside the curtains, and announced his entrance. "A messenger, your Majesty, from Abbot Baugulf."

"Let him stand and enjoy with us the verses of our Albinus," replied Karl, without turning his gaze from Alcuin, at the foot of the royal couch.

Olvir stopped short, and, from the depths of his cowl, swept the room with his glance. Evidently the king had thought the morning's ceremony sufficient work accomplished for the day, even for his all but tireless energy. In place of the usual crowd of counts and court-officials, pressing about the royal couch to report their actions and receive fresh orders from the king,

there were present only Alcuin and Fastrada the queen, who was seated beside her lord on the edge of the massive couch.

At a nod from Karl, Alcuin raised his gold-illuminated scroll, and recited his Latin rhymes in a voice that went far toward easing the waywardness of the feet. The king was very hearty in his praise of the poet's efforts; but Fastrada murmured an ironical criticism: "A fair song, my lord,--for children and priests. I myself would rather hear the heart-stirring lays of our fathers."

"They are the fierce songs of heathen warriors, my dame, ill fitted for the lips of God's children," protested Alcuin.

Karl nodded to him, smiling. "Ah, my Albinus, you speak true; I, as head of God's church, must agree with you. It is well that our subjects should not sing the heathen lays. Yet they are the songs of our fathers, and I would not have them wholly lost to our children. But I keep waiting the good abbot's messenger. Stand forward, my son, and deliver over the scroll sent by your superior."

"I bear no scroll, Frank king. The message is on the tongue of the wolfshead," answered Olvir, in a clear voice, and he flung aside the priest's robe, to stand before the king in full war-gear.

"How? Olvir! King of Heaven!" cried Karl, and he sprang up to confront the Northman as he had confronted Gerold in the East Tower,--with bared sword. But Olvir gazed fearlessly into his angry eyes.

"Twice before has my father's sword been brandished to strike down his son," he said. "The edge of Ironbiter in a king's hand is fair fate for a warrior."

"Wretched man! why do you force me to anger? I have yielded to mercy,--I gave you full time to quit my realm. Yet now you stand before me, threatening."

"My sword hangs in its sheath. Had I come to avenge myself for the outlaw's doom, I could have leaped upon the son of Pepin while the priest murmured his verses. Is the king answered?"

Karl lowered his Norse sword, and gazed down moodily at the outlaw.

"By my faith, Dane," he muttered, "I had thought you bold beyond most; but this passes belief."

"A man will do much for his honor and his love, King of the Franks. I am no longer your liegeman; you have broken the fetter which bound us. I have been named wolfshead. Without my knowledge, I have been doomed to outlawry. Now I come to ask a hearing."

"You come too late, murderous Northman!" exclaimed Fastrada. "Our lord king has rendered judgment. Your doom is sealed. Go quickly, outlaw, before the scullions beat you from the palace with their spits."

Olvir looked into the beautiful evil face, smiling with malignant triumph, and the white fury seized upon him.

"I do not speak to the witch's offcast daughter. My appeal is to the King of the Franks," he lisped.

The king gasped in sheer amazement; then the blood leaped into his face, and his eyes flamed. He turned to thrust out his fist at the gaping doorward, and commanded harshly: "Away, fool! Bid the High Marshal and his riders lead this Dane wolf Rhineward, in bonds. The bloody outlaw shall not fare at will about my realm. Go!"

"My lord,--dear sire!" cried Alcuin, as the doorward sprang away; "hear the youth--"

"Silence, priest! None shall pule over this false Dane! Doubly has he earned the tree,--the mire-death. Yet I have spared his life; I have shown mercy."

"It is not for mercy, but for justice that I ask, King of the Franks," replied Olvir; and then, as the thought of his little princess came upon him, his voice broke into despairing appeal: "Hear me, lord king! Be just to the liegeman whom you once honored. Do not send me from your realm wolfshead, that those who hate me may jeer my name, and my friends listen to the scoffing with sealed lips. I will go; I will go gladly, lord king; only, take from me the shame of your dooming, and bless the parting liegeman with a king's gift,--the hand of his betrothed."

"By the King--"

"Hear me, dear lord, I beg you! by the sword in your hand, by this ring on my wrist, gift of Hildegarde--of Hildegarde who so loved my little princess!--I swear to you, dear lord, that I had no part--"

"Do not heed him, King of the Franks!" hissed Fastrada. "Look upon this cruel blade, my lord,--the knife which pierced the feeble greybeard! What justice for the murderer? What mercy for the traitor? I demand vengeance upon my father's betrayer. He shall sink in the slime, or the plunging horses rend him asunder! Vengeance!"

"Go, Olvir!" muttered the king, thickly; "go--before I forget that I once loved you."

A gasping sob burst from the Northman. Karl could not have struck a blow more cruel. The stricken man turned slowly about and passed from the chamber, groping his way as though blinded. The king and the scholar stared after him, hushed and motionless. Not until he was gone did they heed that the queen had glided out by the bower doorway. Then Alcuin began to pray aloud, and the king bent while the priest implored the blessing of Heaven upon the soul of the outlaw.

But Olvir, passing slowly from the doorway along the shadowy corridor, felt a hand thrust out from another curtained entrance to draw him within. Still half dazed, he yielded to the grasp. The hangings fell to behind him, and he found himself face to face with the queen. For a little they stood staring at each other, the queen's face still and cold as a mask. Olvir looked quietly into her dilating eyes, and then, without a word, he turned to go. But Fastrada put out the hand on which glowed her magic opal, and caught his shoulder in an eager grasp.

"Stay, Olvir!" she said. "Give heed, and learn that all is not lost to you."

"The king has spoken, witch's daughter."

"But not the queen. Listen, my gerfalcon. The famished bird wings back to the wrist of its keeper; the well-lashed steed comes to the call of the master. Your spirit is broken, proud Dane, and now my vengeance is slaked. There is gall in the cup. I wish to drink of a sweeter draught, which you shall give at my asking; for in my hand I hold for you good fortune,--honors and riches and power; the king's friendship again for his Dane hawk."

"And the price, werwolf?"

"Take heed of your tongue, Olvir! I have yet a score to settle with your puling nun-bride."

"She has another knife--"

"Take joy of the thought! Listen to me: I offer for her so much as the veil, and that at Chelles, where she will be with Gisela. Weigh it well, Olvir; on the one hand, peace for her; on the other, the knife--or Worad."

"The price?"

A deep blush suffused the queen's cheeks, and her eyes, blue and soft, gazed at the Northman from beneath their long lashes with an alluring glance.

"Surely the price is not too heavy," she murmured. "Men still hold me not uncomely--"

"Lord Christ--and to think! Ah, my world-hero, father of my betrothed! Far better the outlaw's lot! And in my anger I would have left you--beguiled by the plotters!"

"Olvir--Olvir! my hero,--my gerfalcon! Do not shrink from me--do not go--stay with me, Olvir! All the night I sat watching your ships sail away into the cold North. I cannot bear it! Men say the Norse maidens are fair-- My heart! another will lie in your arms. Stay--stay with me, bright hero! See; I beg--I, the queen, on my knees to you. My God--he goes! Turn again, Olvir, only turn. You shall have that also,--I pledge it on your knife,--the girl also,--everything! only turn!"

But Olvir neither paused nor turned about to the frantic woman. His eyes, clear and luminous with inward light, were upraised as though he looked into the blue sky, and his lips smiled as they murmured the hard sayings of the Carpenter's Son: "'Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely.... Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.'"

"He is mad--mad! I have stung him to madness!" cried the kneeling woman; and she struggled up to peer out through the hangings after the Northman. But when she saw him returning directly to the door of the king's chamber, she clutched at her bosom, and glided swiftly out after him. A blow between the helmet-rim and the gold collar of the hauberk--

But already the outlaw was at the other door. The doorward had not returned. He parted the curtains, and stepped within, unchallenged, even as the stealthy follower was upon him. The chance was lost.

With a soft rustle of silken robes the queen darted past the Northman, to fling herself into the king's arms.

"He is mad, dear lord,--mad!" she cried. "He entered my bower, and I alone! None but one crazed--"

"Peace, dame. It is you have lost your wit; I have come into wisdom," replied Olvir. "Peace to you and to your lord. I turn back, that, before I go, I may take oath to my tidings of how Hardrat and his fellows plot with Duke Tassilo and Adelchis the Lombard against the life and throne of the son of Pepin."

"So, outlaw," cried Karl, "you hold to that lie! Murderer and traitor--and now--"

"Peace, world-hero; do not speak the word you will ever rue," said Olvir, so quietly that, as the king answered, his voice sank to a mutter.

"My Grey Wolf fell on the Saale bank, pierced by the arrows of the Sorbs."

"Bid men go look upon the count's riven hauberk and the wounds which split his hard skull," rejoined Olvir. "Even Sorbs would not notch their swords on bone and iron, when the foe lay arrow-pierced. Yet more,--no crooked blade cuts like the sweeping longsword. My mail was proof; but the weals still show where the blows struck across my back. As to the slaying of the leech, does the king name me a witling, that I should strike, and leave the knife to tell the tale? Let your daughter bear witness. I gave the blade back into her hand when I turned from the cowering dotard to come before you. It must be she let it fall as I caught her to me. Another came, and found it lying ready for the foul deed--"

"Gerold!"

"No, lord king. What could the brother of Hildegarde gain by the slaying? No; it was another,--whom I could name. But I do not come for vengeance, dear lord; I come only to open your eyes to the truth, that the Thuringians may not take you unawares. Well was it you journeyed so swiftly out of Saxon Land. I call to mind the words of that red boar Hardrat: 'Never shall Karl cross again over Rhine Stream.'"

The king flung out his hand.

"God forgive me, Olvir!" he muttered. "The scroll which maddened me--"

"In seeking my death, lord king, they have sealed their own doom. I could not name them, so they have themselves sent their names to the lord whom they would have betrayed. It is God's will. My counsel to the King of the Franks: In the name of Christ, there has been much to rouse hatred and enmity against your rule,--harshness and cruelty. You have listened to the ill counsel of this misguided daughter of God. Therefore I say to you, bear in mind your own deeds, and be merciful to the wrongdoers. Now I go. The outlaw will not again trouble the son of Pepin. God be with you!"

"Stay, Olvir! You shall not go!" cried Karl, and, freeing himself from Fastrada, he came with a rush to seize the Northman's shoulders in his iron grasp. "Now I hold you fast, kinsman. You shall not go from me. No longer are you outlaw. You shall wed your betrothed, and stay in my hall, Count Palatine, in the stead of Worad of Metz. He whom the king has wrongfully doomed to shame shall sit on the king's judgment-seat."

"My lord! my lord!"--the queen's voice rose to a scream--"what would you do? My father! Kosru! See the bloody knife. You 'd take the murderer's word against a score--"

"Silence, woman! I have given heed long enough to your ill counsel; long enough have I, the king, turned a harsh face against my loyal liegemen, at the bidding of a woman. My folly has borne bitter fruit,--heart-burnings and strife. Go, hide your shame in the bower. Prepare yourself to live at peace with my high judge, else I--"

"Lord king!" protested Olvir, "is this time for harsh words? Listen, dear lord! Wisdom has come to me. I see how my own anger has brought my own sorrow. When, on the Garonne bank, I broke troth with the daughter of Rudulf, the outcome might have been far different had I curbed my tongue from scorn. If the maiden was at fault, my fault was the greater."

"O God!" moaned Fastrada, and she flung herself on the marble pavement.

But Karl did not look about from the serene face of the Northman.

"The Count Palatine has spoken," he said, gravely smiling.

"Would that it might so be!" answered Olvir, and his dark eyes grew dim.

"How then?" demanded Karl. But even as the words left his lips, the door-hangings parted, and Rothada darted across the room, blind to all else than her lover.

"Fly, hero!" she cried. "The courtyard swarms with the warriors; they come to take you! Fly! In the passage wait those who 'll lead you to freedom. Ah, Holy Mother!--too late!"

The passage without resounded with the tread and din of armed men jostling together in their haste. All eyes were fixed on the doorway as Gerold and Liutrad sprang into view. The Swabian paused at once, and stood hesitating, his face white and drawn with despair. But Liutrad strode across the room, tucking up his robe as he went. On the wall hung his great axe. He plucked it down, and turned about, with flaming eyes, as Count Worad rushed into the king's chamber, in the lead of a score of warriors.

But then the king's voice rang out, clear and joyful: "Stay your hand, viking-priest! And you, Count of Metz, take away your men. There's now no need of them."

"Father!" cried Rothada. "You smile! He is no longer outlaw!"

Karl drew her to him, and stood stroking her soft tresses, while the wondering warriors filed

out of the king's chamber. When Worad, crestfallen and bewildered, had followed his men, Karl bent over his daughter.

"Do you, then, love him so much?" he murmured.

"More than life! God be praised, you 've listened to him!"

"I shall not soon forget how near I came to losing my Dane hawk,--and he flown hither to warn me of deadly peril! Let the traitors give thanks to Heaven for unmerited mercy. They will have a mild judge."

Olvir shook his head. "My heart leaps with joy that I have won again the friendship of the world-hero. Yet I ask two things only,--let my lord king give me my betrothed to wife, and bid me God-speed on my homeward faring."

"The maiden is yours, kinsman. But we cannot part either with her or you."

"Dear lord, I speak with clear vision. The heretic cannot sit in peace among those who bend to the Bishop of Rome; and more, it is best that we should go, both for ourselves and for the queen. I am weary of strife. My heart longs for the iron cliffs of my home land, for the salt billows roaring among the skerries, for the still waters of the fiord. The viking stifles in this sea-less land."

"Can nothing stay you, Olvir? Think what you ask! You tear at my very heart-strings. How can I send my child into the frozen North?"

"Not all is rime and frost with us, lord king. The summer is fair in our North land, and the Trondir are warm of heart. In time, I shall sit on the high-seat of my father. The king's daughter shall not lack either in honor or in love."

"I will gladly give you whatever else you ask, Olvir. But to part with my child--"

Gently Olvir put Rothada from him, and half turned. He spoke with the calm of utter despair: "It would seem the Norns have woven ill for me. I go into the North, and--I go without my bride."

"Ah, no!" gasped Fastrada. Struggling to her feet, she tore from about her throat the necklace of sapphires which the Northman had given her for wedding gift, and pressed it upon Rothada. "Take it, king's daughter; take it--even that!--only, bid him stay!"

Rothada thrust the blue stones from her, and drew herself up with a haughtiness which the king, her father, had never equalled. There was no grief in her white face as she made answer: "Am I such a one as you that I should bid my hero bend his will? He goes--"

"And you go with him!" The words burst from Karl's lips like a cry of anguish.

For a moment, Olvir stood as though dazed; then Rothada was locked fast in his arms. "My bride! Joy is ours, king's daughter!"

To them sprang their friends, with glad words,--Liutrad, Gerold, even the calm scholar Alcuin. In the midst, Olvir thrust them aside with friendly force, and Rothada and he stood forward, radiant, to return thanks to the great king.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOR THE WHITE CHRIST ***

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOR THE WHITE CHRIST: A STORY OF THE
DAYS OF CHARLEMAGNE ***

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